

20 Lost Keys

The woman placed the flashlight on a counter across from him and held the gun with her right hand and positioned the muzzle firmly against his skull. She reached to his hands to make sure they were firmly bound and when satisfied, she backed away and turned off the flashlight.

“Are you Audrey Peterson?” the drooping Ranger asked.

“How do you know her name?”

“I know all about the three who worked at the Atlantis. There was Melody Williams. There was Tiffany Marks. And there was Audrey Peterson. Since the first two are dead, there’s one left standing.”

“Melody’s dead?”

“Uh-huh.” He remained quite after that. She needed to think, to calm down and to plan to stay alive.

Finally after minutes had passed: “Okay, Ranger Johnson...”

“How’d you know my name?” Johnson interrupted.

“Just do. Anything else I need to know?”

Sure, there were a million things she probably needed to know but nothing right this instant so he shook his head. “Obviously I missed you so I wasn’t that good. What’s your name?”

“Tiffany Marks,” she said matter-of-factly.

“Impossible. A Florida cop killed her this evening,” he announced.

Behind the darkness, he heard her fumbling with a piece of paper and then she tossed it down on the floor in front of him. “I guess your sleuthing isn’t as good as you think. I found this next to the coffee pot.” She shined the light on it. It was a handwritten note on a piece of stationary. He had to gingerly turn his head to read it.

Tiff,

Borrowed the car. Have gone to Tallahassee to see Bill,

Chloe

Johnson read. “Oh, man, your roommate?”

“Yeah.”

“Who’s Bill?”

“Her boyfriend,” she answered.

“I found hair dye in the bathroom.”

“What can I say? She was Goth in high school and decided to keep her hair midnight black.”

Johnson thought for a moment. “Can I see your face?” he finally asked.

She stood to his left, gun still in her left hand, and knelt ten feet away and shined the light on her face from below so he could see. Ghostly as it was, she wasn’t a dead

ringer. Tiffany Marks' face was that of a blank canvass. Her beauty was unmistakable. Her facial structure was very similar to Abigail Spencer's but not enough to look like a twin.

Show a witness a picture and that's whom they want to see.

Thoughts began shooting through Johnson's mind. His suspicions grew exponentially and this woman in front of him was a party to the murder of the real Abigail Spencer. He was having difficulty letting his mind grow content but he had to push the anger that was building inside away, at least for the time being. "Hey, listen, Ms. Marks, can I get some help with my wound?"

She inched toward him and placed the gun on the floor behind her and to her left so it was snugly against a kitchen cabinet where she could reach it if Johnson grabbed her with his legs; then shined the light on his left arm; it was blood soaked. She pulled his arm toward her gingerly and examined both sides.

"It's a scratch. It nicked your triceps. It's going to hurt like hell for a while but you'll live. I can get it cleaned up and get a dressing on it. I've got stuff in my bathroom."

She returned with supplies and began to clean the wound with a wet towel and then poured hydrogen peroxide over it. There was bleeding but not alarmingly. She took several pads of gauze and packed them firmly against the wound, which elicited a heavy grunt from Johnson, and then wrapped the area with a large flexible wrap.

"You're such a wimp," she declared.

"Yeah, you've ever been shot before?"

"Yes I have. In the calf. Training exercise."

"Training for what?"

“The Olympics,” she spat out sarcastically. She picked up the gun and moved away. She turned off the flashlight and after a few seconds, he could see details of her and the room around.

“You were on her detail,” she stated as fact.

“Yes.”

“You weren’t supposed to be there.”

“Was Abigail supposed to die?”

“No. She wasn’t supposed to be killed.” There was a pause. “But you weren’t supposed to be there. We tried to manipulate the engagements when we could guarantee you wouldn’t be around but we couldn’t take the chance so Melody had to distract you.”

“She did a damned good job.”

“Yeah, and now she’s dead.”

Johnson wondered whether he would have mistaken this woman for Abigail had he seen her in the casino that night but he didn’t ponder this too long. His legs were starting to ache from being on the floor. “Can you let me go now?”

“Not yet, cowboy,” she said. “You’re pretty good. You found us too quickly.”

“It wasn’t too hard. Surveillance video, front desk records, credit cards. For someone who tried to pull off whatever the hell this is, you *weren’t* too good.” Johnson turned slightly to relieve the pressure on his arm.

“It’s too difficult to create complete personas at a drop of the hat so we travel under our own names and use alternate identification for the job. I couldn’t very well register under the name of Abigail Spencer, could I?”

“Who was the man?”

“Mark Bennetti.”

“Why did he kill her?”

She paused for a moment and then said softly, “I don’t know.” Then she stood.

“The last I saw of him was when we were putting Jack in his room. Bennetti told me it was a code nine, or fire drill. We don’t ask questions then. We follow preset procedures.”

“You’re an accessory to murder,” Johnson said.

“I know.” She paused. “All I can do is find out why.”

Johnson motioned with his head to the body in the living room. “Who’s that guy?”

“I don’t know.”

“He knew who I was and he was going to kill me,” Johnson wanted to kick out at the body. “Racist son of a bitch.” Then he turned his attention back to her. “Thanks.”

Tiffany lowered the Ruger. “Their muscle is all redneck.”

“Their muscle? Who are they?”

“I don’t know? Thugs are us?” Then she straightened up. “Enough talk.” With the glow of the moonlight behind her, she removed the bobby pins holding her hair tight and allowed it to fall onto her shoulders. “You know how to get out of those things?” she said, pointing to the handcuffs.

“Sure.”

She placed one of the bobby pins in his mouth. “If you can, join me in my bedroom. If you can’t, I’ll be seeing you in another life somewhere down the road.”

With the pain, it took Johnson a few fumbling minutes to gain freedom and then he

sat against the refrigerator for a couple more before struggling to his feet. There was a glow from a computer screen coming from the bedroom to the left.

“You’re the slob?” he remarked as he kicked a pair of underwear from his path. “I would have thought you were the anal retentive one

The screen on the computer appeared to be an internal email system with the heading *Office of International Cooperation*.

“You guys some sort of Commerce organization that plays with guns?”

She didn’t respond. She mumbled something under her breath and then logged off and the Yahoo start page appeared. She signed into Yahoo mail. There was one message and she opened it.

Ford Mustang G T

Love

Love Mustang

I Love Mustang

Hate

“What the fuck?” Johnson asked rhetorically.

“It says we’ve got to leave.”

“Really? It looks like someone on LSD or with the IQ of a slug who likes Mustangs and then had second thoughts.”

“It’s Morse Code. One-syllable words are the dots, multi-syllable words are the

dashes. It's L-E-A-V-E. Not that fucking sophisticated. So, in other words, it's time to get the fuck out of here. The operation's been compromised."

"No shit," commented Johnson.

She logged off Yahoo and went to Bookmarks and clicked on one that said *Main*.

A black screen appeared with a password-protected login box. She signed in and another screen came up for yet another password. She logged in there and another black screen appeared with various logos on the left. One was a capital letter M. She clicked on it and yet one more password protected screen appeared. After she signed in the whole screen went blank and the computer went into reboot mode. "I'm into the system now."

"What system?"

She did not respond and Johnson didn't push.

When the screen reappeared, she signed into yet another password-protected application and a list of options appeared. She clicked on *Funds*. She selected *Available* and \$75,000 appeared. She then clicked on a link that said *Disperse*. Another screen appeared and she typed in a 16-digit number and hit return. The screen flashed and then the message *Completed* appeared. She clicked on the *Log Off* option and then shut down the system.

As the screen dimmed, she clicked on the flashlight and grabbed it in her mouth and then crawled under the desk, shinning the light underneath. Lying on her back, she began working on something out of his sight. After a minute's worth of struggle, she removed a black box—about the size of a pack of cigarettes—from a phone line and then passed it to Johnson. "Put that in the bag on my bed."

In the glow of the flashlight, Johnson examined the box. He held it back to read the

letters.

Devil's Box

Patel+Whitte

Texas, U.S.A.

“You know the irony of all this don't you?” she asked.

He shook his head.

“Whitte owns this technology.”

“What technology?”

She rolled onto her back and inched her way under her bed. “It's pretty cool,” she said, tearing at the black mesh covering the box springs beneath her bed. “It attacks data integrity from a different perspective than what is currently being used. It goes beyond a chaos-based stream cipher algorithm for encryption and public-key cryptology ... you know what that is?”

“Yeah. I'm not the backwoods hick you probably think I am,” Johnson responded.

“Anyway, it's next generation stuff. Basically it creates a mirage of a server so your server exists in the shadow; it's like you never exist on the Internet. If no one knows you're there, they can't hack into your system. He who controls this system controls the flow of information. It's a pretty valuable little tool I just used the system to disperse untraceable money to an untraceable bank account. I now have \$75,000 to play with.”

Johnson looked at her with trepidation. “Who the hell are you?”

She struggled to her feet, holding a snub-nose Smith and Wesson .38 and said, “We need to go.” She dropped the confiscated pistol into her bag and then leveraged her new gun into the small of her back inside her jeans.

“Where?” asked Johnson.

“To the Keys.”

“Why?”

“I have access to an apartment in Key West that’s untraceable to me. I set it up as a safe house for a rainy day and I think it’s fucking storming, don’t you?”

“How are we getting there?”

“I stole a car at Miami International from the valet service,” she told him as she was slinging her knapsack over her shoulder, “and drove to the Hard Rock Casino and stole plates from another car. I figured no one would miss the car at the airport until they returned.”

“Who the fuck are you?”

“No more questions.” The girl from the masquerade patted her left pocket and then showed a look of panic on her face.

Johnson held up a key ring. “You looking for these? Found them by the coffee pot.”

She glared at him and then snatched them from his hand and led him from the apartment into the uncertain darkness.