

21 Tequila Sunrise

They drove silently through Miami along U.S. 1 heading to Key West. Horse Johnson was lost in thought about the man who had come close to ending his life. Tiffany Marks, too, seemed to be drifting but she stayed alert by continually checking her mirrors for trailing vehicles. Then they drove onto the Overseas Highway, its metronome thump-thump on the concrete sections lulling both into a trance. His arm burned.

He queried Tiffany about the events he seemed to have stumbled into. With a sideways glance, she told him, "You first." He had nothing to hide and maybe giving her his story first would loosen her up to come clean. So he told her everything from the moment he touched down in Nassau to the phone call from Ralph Simmons, the Bahamian cop.

"So, now that we're chummy and all, who the fuck tried to put a round into my head?"

"I told you, I don't know." Her tone was anxious enough that it rang true.

"Then you have to tell me about this operation you're on. I appreciate you saving my life and all but I'm not sure that what I'm trying to do coincides with what you're all about."

"What is it exactly, Ranger, that you're trying to do?"

"Find out who killed Abigail Spencer and bring the son of a bitch to justice."

She shook her head. "What's justice?"

Johnson rubbed his shaved head and eyed the .38 she kept on her lap. Justice sometimes came at the end of a snub nose, he thought. What kind of justice was she seeking?

Marks glanced over to the man and empathized with him. She had been on the run since Bennetti had crashed into their room. *Change of plan*, he had said. She trusted Bennetti more than any other in OIC—even considering his one disloyal moment—but his elusiveness had frightened her. In all the years she had known him, he had never been spooked before. Maybe if she talked it out with Johnson she might remember something as inane as a forgotten word placed in a sentence a certain way that would shine light on her current predicament. So, she began to tell him a story by starting, of course, at the beginning.

The beginning was a line item in the USA PATRIOT Act of 2001 and wasn't even noticed by the 435 representatives and 100 senators in the U.S. Congress. Hell the president probably didn't know about it either. The Office of International Cooperation was created within the Department of Commerce as a feel good measure to extend a hand to displaced Afghans and, later, Iraqis to start new businesses, "but if a dime from its budget ever made it to Iraq or Afghanistan, it was certainly by accident," Tiffany admitted.

The intelligence apparatus' failings at picking up the signs of 9-11 were well documented. The Patriot Act had streamlined much of the intelligence sharing needed—prior to which had been spotty at best—but what had been lacking was the ability to be proactive. OIC was designed as a personnel cooperative for all of the intelligence agencies to use to develop and share intelligence, with the emphasis on development. Once a target

had been identified, it was decided that in many instances, throwing massive amounts of people at the problem through brute force could develop the needed intelligence that months or even years of careful planning and execution could only hope to achieve. *De facto*, however, it allowed the CIA to run surveillance operations domestically. At least that's how Tiffany Marks explained it to Horse Johnson.

“So you're implying that this OIC is a cooperative between CIA and FBI...”

“And others.”

“And others,” he amended, “so that assets can be shared and CIA can operate domestically?”

“Correct-a-mundo, cowboy,” she answered; feeling more relaxed as she spoke.

Johnson rubbed his baldhead and closed his eyes. The highway doglegged right onto Big Pine Key. They were still a ways from Key West.

“How long have you been with OIC?”

“Five years,” she answered.

“What was your first assignment?”

“You've seen the TV show *Miami Vice*,” she asked rhetorically, “with the never ending battle with drug kingpins?”

He nodded.

Then she drove off into a tangent: “Which reminds me of Prohibition. You're on the front lines of that war in Texas. I think we've got to just legalize drugs and be done with it.”

“You're fucking kidding me, right?” Horse said with a mock smile. “Maybe you've

never been at the street level. I can give you horror stories over the complete and utter destruction of families that shit brings. It was one of the main reasons I went into law enforcement.”

“Yeah, and if you completely shut down crank or dope or cocaine, they would gravitate back to the bottle. We can’t protect people from their need to escape reality but in the open we can treat it. And, by the way, drive the crime rate down to near zero.”

“You’re fucked in the head, girl.”

She glanced over at him and smiled. It was a probe, of sorts. Could she push his buttons if she needed to? The answer was a resounding *yes*. “Look, we’re getting off the point and you’re acting like a child.”

“You started it,” he said sarcastically which elicited a giggle from her.

“The point is that the drug war isn’t over and coke is still flowing into Miami and elsewhere. If coke is making it to the shores then...”

“So are people and weapons that present a greater danger,” he said, finishing her sentence.

“Correct-a-mundo, again. You’re two for two. And, it is why I made the point about legalization. You close down the need for wide scale smuggling and you shut down the avenues for smuggling undesirables.”

“So what’s your point?”

“This is the underlying story of why OIC was formed. It would take months or even years to completely infiltrate an illicit organization but by throwing massive amounts of people into the equation, one small bit of intelligence leads to a bounty of information.

Let's take my very first assignment.

“We knew there was a certain smuggler operating out of Cuba. It's easy for people who want to do us harm to fly into Havana with no opposition and then hop on the first cigarette boat northbound for Miami. We were able to lure this particular smuggler to Nassau. I don't know how. That is an isolated part of the operation. It's a left hand, right hand kind of thing. We are compartmentalized so if one aspect of the operation becomes compromised, we can shut that part down without losing the whole enchilada. Now, I was based in Houston...”

“Houston?” he interrupted.

“Yeah, I'm originally from there. Anyway I was moved into Miami in preparation for my part. After a couple of weeks training, I was sent to Nassau and placed in a tourist restaurant as a hostess with the name of Sally Sager. I don't know how it was done but a meeting between this smuggler and an operative was manipulated into my restaurant. I made sure they were seated at the perfect table that was bugged and could be seen outside so pictures taken and line of site established in case something went out of control. I sat them; the meeting took place, and the next day I quit my future in the restaurant industry and flew back home. Mission accomplished.”

“So on this assignment you were moved back to Fort Lauderdale?”

“No. I've only been based in Fort Lauderdale as Tiffany Marks for just over a year now.”

“What, your name isn't Tiffany?”

“It's complicated,” she said then deflected into another direction. “By the way, how

were you able to track Chloe?"

"It was an expired insurance card in the trashcan in her room and one of the last sites she visited on the computer was Google maps."

"But you missed her note under the coffee pot."

He knew he had blown that one and now an innocent girl was dead because of it. It had been something that was feeding into the growing guilt in the pit of his stomach, beginning with Abigail's murder and progressing toward Melody's and now Chloe. If he were to stay alive, however, he'd have to reconcile his mind and his heart or he would be conflicted when the time came to act decisively—which he figured, glancing again at her gun, could come at any moment.

"I'm taking it Chloe was OIC?"

"Yes but very low level. She was new and doing jobs like I did when I first came in but unlike me, she hadn't had much prior experience. Look," she said glancing his way, "I'm not blaming you. You didn't pull the trigger and you certainly didn't know what you were walking into," she paused, mulling over everything she had done from the time she had left Whitte incapacitated in his hotel room to this very moment.

"When I got back home I noticed a plumber's truck with a man in the front seat parked in front of our apartment. So I strolled over to the park across the street and waited. After about an hour, when I started believing that I might just be paranoid, a white paneled van showed up and parked a block down. A man got out, walked over to the plumber, spoke with him for a moment and then the plumber drove off and the guy returned to the van. Of course they never once looked across the street to see me sitting on the park bench.

Rank armatures.

“So, I left and went back to the airport and stole this car and then drove off to the casino to steal the plates. When I came back, the van was still there. It was getting dark so I broke into the Shempsky’s garage—they live on the other side of the alley and I knew they were on a cruise—and watched from there. Obviously I missed Chloe leaving or I would have intercepted her. I watched you break in and then the guy followed you in and I realized that might be the only chance I had to retrieve the Devil Box. If they killed you, cops would be all over the place. I was lucky that there was only the one Neanderthal involved with the surveillance.”

Johnson thought for a moment. “From the beginning, what was the operation?”

“It was designed as simple surveillance and manipulation. The stated reason was suspicion of money laundering for front groups sponsoring terrorism. I think the terrorism aspect was bogus.”

“Why?”

She paused. “Jack’s no terrorist and he’s not some crook.”

“Why not?”

“He doesn’t need the money.” She glanced toward Johnson. “And he’s apolitical.” He wasn’t buying it. But then again, Horse Johnson didn’t know Jack the way she did.

“Now tell me why Abigail Spencer was needed?” Johnson asked.

“Her biological father was a very close business partner to Robert Whitte, Jack’s father. I was supposed to strike up a relationship with Jack, nothing more. If it was determined that he should remain under investigation, I would be used in the future in any

capacity deemed necessary. Maybe to feed him information or gain information, whatever the job dictated.”

Johnson digested this for a moment. “But, if Whitte knew Spencer’s daughter, he’d see right through you.”

“No. Whitte didn’t like Spencer and was barely cognizant that he even had a daughter.” Tiffany’s gaze merged with the yellow lines passing under the car as they dragged them toward what she hoped would be sanctuary. She shook her head to clear the cobwebs. “It’s a hell of a lot more complicated than I can go into now. Abigail Spencer’s trust fund is suing Whitte Oil and Gas concerning a business deal that happened over 45 years ago. Your boss, the governor, is the one that pushed the lawsuit. Whitte has never met her, or the governor for that matter, and it was established that if he could meet me—as her—then I could worm myself into his confidence. I would agree to help drop the lawsuit—as would the governor—in exchange for whatever I could get out of him. If he were a front for terror, we could then run an operation against those using him.”

As the story progressed, Johnson couldn’t help but get angered. He was pretty apolitical himself but one thing he hated above all was the federal government. They operated with such impunity and anyone caught up in their deceptions got burned. He had witnessed it first hand too many times. So, of course, he let his anger cloud his tactfulness. “You were running a honey pot.”

“What?”

Johnson smiled wickedly. “You know, all you spooks in the CIA do it. You show him some honey, maybe even let him taste it.” Johnson winked at her and then blew her a

mock kiss. “And then...” He clapped his hands together. When he did, however, his arm burned. He tried desperately to cover his pain with a scrunched up, badass face.

“That’s not what I was doing.”

“Sure it was. Did you let him taste the honey?”

“Up yours, Ranger.” She glanced over at him with his smirk and condescending eyes. “You’re a piece of shit.”

They drove on in silence for the next five miles. Horse knew he had put his foot in it. Still, less than five hours before, someone had tried to have him killed. He didn’t have time for niceties. However...

“Look, I don’t know anything. I don’t like what you were doing with Whitte. Maybe like you say, you weren’t out to trap him. That doesn’t matter. What does is that we work together.”

Tiffany didn’t reply.

“Look, what I’m trying to do is apologize.”

Still no response.

“Well, fuck you too.” Johnson turned, gingerly crossed his arms, and looked out of the passenger-side window, fuming. “Shit. I’m working with a spook.” Yeah, he was being childish and now he was going to pout.

As they crossed Causeway Bridge onto Key West, she turned into the parking lot of the Key West Golf Club. They abandoned the car and walked silently into town, the rising sun pushing them quickly down the road, toward refuge. Johnson was still pouting. He knew he needed sleep and that was why he had been such an ass. “Look, I’m sorry

about calling you a spook.”

Finally she spoke, “Takes one to know one.”

“Did you just go racial on me?”

“Quite definitely. You went sexist on me with the honey pot thing.”

“Bitch.”

“Yep, can be.”

Horse laughed. “Touché.”

That elicited a smile.

They followed Flagner Avenue until it dead-ended into White Street, a couple of blocks from the cruise ship pier. From there she led him down a maze of small houses, apartment/lofts, tourist businesses, and liquor stores until they arrived at a square, cinderblock two-story building that had a women’s apparel shop on the first floor. She disappeared down an alley to a brick wall under an old iron staircase that climbed to the second story. She pried at a brick with her finger until it popped out and retrieved a key. She replaced the brick and motioned for him to follow her up the stairs.

They entered a ramshackle apartment complete with wood floors, dusty furniture, insanely odd modern paintings hanging on the walls, a small kitchenette to the right—straight out of the nineteen fifties—and musty hot air. There was a set of windows across from the door with yellowed and cracked pull-down plastic blinds. A window unit sat beneath askew blinds and the first thing she did was turn it on in hopes of sucking out the mustiness. She threw her knapsack on a couch and collapsed.

“So here we be,” she announced.

Johnson glanced at a door off the kitchenette. “Bathroom?” She nodded and he disappeared. When he returned, she was spread out on the couch, close to sleep.

“So if you don’t mind me asking, whose place is this?”

“My ex-husband’s great aunt’s.”

“Whoa, you were married? You’re too young to have been married and divorced.”

“I’m a lot older than you think,” Marks replied. “I’m 35.”

“You play a young girl well.” Johnson sat in an armchair across from the couch.

“So, why did you divorce?”

“I met him at the Academy. He was an instructor.”

“The Academy?”

Tiffany looked a little put out at being interrupted but she was too exhausted to bitch about it. “Yeah, you know, FBI?”

“You’re FBI? I thought you said you worked for this OIC? That you were CIA.”

Her exhaustion, fear, and anger popped out. “I never told you I was CIA. You going to let me tell the fucking story or what?”

Johnson nodded his head and smiled. Despite his own exhaustion he remembered that patience was the virtue of a Ranger. If a suspect is allowed to ramble for a while, they usually hang themselves in the end.

“Yeah, we met at the Academy. He was an instructor from CIA. I was too young back then to know any difference and was swept off my feet,” she said with sarcasm. She sat up and turned her leg toward him. “See this,” she said, pulling up the leg of her jeans and showing him the dime-sized scars on both sides of her calf. “This is my lucky scar.”

It then became apparent to Johnson as to why Whitte had inquired about close-ups of Abigail's legs.

"I was on a weekend training exercise at Quantico," she continued, "I accidentally got shot in the leg and came home a day early. I think you can figure out that he wasn't alone in bed when I got home. And, needless to say, had I not got shot, it may have been years of wasted life before I found out he was a two-timing son-of-a-bitch. Glad it happened when it did."

She smirked at Johnson. "Anyway, I had made friends with his great aunt. She's old, maybe mid-seventies, and paints." She motioned to the paintings hanging on the walls. "A little too bizarre for me but she makes a good living. She lives in Colorado where she owns a gallery and moves here for the winters. She lets me come down when I want."

"So are we safe?"

"No one knows about it so, yeah, I think we're pretty safe."

"What about your ex-husband?"

She scrunched her face in reaction but didn't answer.

Johnson stood and walked to the kitchen where he filled a glass of water from the sink and chugged it down. He filled Tiffany a glass and put it down on a table in front of her. She nodded her appreciation and took a long gulp herself.

"Tell me why you were assigned to this role?"

"Horse, please. Can I get some sleep first?"

Johnson wanted to snap: *Patience is virtue*, he repeated in his mind as if he were delivering a mantra while mediating. He stood and cracked the blinds over the air

conditioner unit. The sun was pushing away the shadows and soon, he realized, people would be coming into the shops along the street in front of this apartment, including the shop downstairs. He worried about being seen but seriously, who would be looking for them down here? The problem is when someone almost kills you, you feel like a target has been painted on your back and they may crawl out from any shadow and put one in your head, especially since they left a dead guy behind them. Who are they? OIC. CIA. FBI. Someone else? There were so many questions that he wanted to scream. He contemplated slapping the girl around a bit, but only briefly. Damn it! He wanted to shake her into consciousness. *Why am I being targeted?*

There was a snort and Johnson turned around. Tiffany Marks was sleeping, the exhaustion finally catching up. A rivulet of drool edged from the corner of her mouth. Johnson found a cup towel in the kitchen and wiped it gently from her face.

Now, his fleeting adrenaline was leaving him hollow. He went to the kitchenette and began looking in cabinets. Like Tiffany Mark's place, there wasn't much except canned food. He remembered the cans of food and bottled water he had in his backpack and almost laughed knowing that he could have satisfied his thirst any time he had pleased. But he had a different thirst now and he found the answer when he opened a cabinet above the sink. There was a lonely bottle of tequila and so he grabbed it and took a long swig. He set it down but thought better of it and took one more. It would accomplish what he wanted: To take the edge off and to anesthetize the pain, confusion, and fear.

He glanced around the frugal apartment. Where the hell was he going to sleep? He noticed a door facing him, opposite the bathroom door that had a robe hanging on a hook.

He assumed that it was a closet but when he opened it, he found a bedroom with a large king-sized bed, a window unit, a bathtub, and a toilet. It was the best break he'd caught all morning.