

23 Key Lime Pie

It was a symphony concocted in the depths of hell and Tiffany struggled to determine which clatter competed most for her attention: the clunky rattling of the AC unit or the deep roars of the snoring Horse Johnson.

Quietly, she slipped into the room and with guarded eyes on Johnson, undressed and stepped into the bathtub, pulled the curtain around the tub and showered. When she finished, she dried, wringing out her hair, and wrapped the towel tight around herself, covering her breasts, and opened the curtain. Johnson was still snoring. She bounced on the bed with her knees while throwing a pillow at Johnson.

“We’ve got to go get Key Lime Pie-on-a-stick. You ever had it before?”

Johnson sat straight up and his eyes flew open like shutters blowing in a hurricane. Tiffany saw in his brown eyes that the lights were on but no one was home. Johnson quickly grabbed his left shoulder still smarting from being shot the night before. “Son of a bitch!”

“Oh, did that hurt? Hey listen; it’s the best thing in the world. They take a big piece of Key Lime pie, put it on a stick, dip it in chocolate and then freeze it. Damn, I’m getting goose bumps just thinking about it.”

Johnson took in the exuberant woman at the end of his bed and, at that brief moment in time, wanted to punch her face. “Stop whistling Zip-a-dee-doo-dah out your ass. Can I wake up first?” he said, still holding his arm.

“Sure, but let’s get going. I’m starved and I want a burger and then I want Key Lime Pie-on-a-stick.”

“What time is it?” he asked, rubbing his eyes.

“Twelve-thirty. We’ve been asleep for five hours. Time to get up and get this day going.”

She retreated from the bedroom and while Johnson showered and dressed she readied her knapsack, removing her personal items but keeping Johnson’s cuffs and the gun she’d liberated from the man she had killed the night before. When Johnson came out of the bedroom, Tiffany handed him her .38. “A peace offering,” she said. Then she examined his outfit; it was the same as the night before. “And we’ve got to do something about your outfit. Kind of a ninja meets the hood thing going on.”

They walked through the streets until they arrived at a wharf on the far side of town. “You’ve got to try these burgers,” she declared and so they went into a small burger stand with air-conditioning, which was a requirement at that time in the afternoon. “Get the Porky. Trust me, it’s damned good.”

Johnson followed suite and when the burgers were served, he realized that the name of the burger was true to form; it was ground pork, which was dry, with barbecue sauce and pickles served with fries. It was edible which was all Johnson needed. After eating, she dragged him to a corner shop, Kermit’s that was world famous for their Key Lime Pie. This time, though, Tiffany was correct. The Key Lime Pie-on-a-stick was damned good and in the heat of the day, it was refreshing. They walked midway down a pier, devouring their frozen concoction, trying to keep ahead of its melting chocolate.

The frozen treat seemed to drag the little girl in Tiffany Marks out into the brilliant Florida sunshine. She delicately nibbled around the edges and then would break a big chunk of chocolate off and crunch it in her mouth. Then she would take a tentative bite of the Key Lime pie until all that was exposed was chocolate and she would start the process all over again. Johnson, too, liked the sundry but he took large bites of his and was finished before she was even half through. As they walked down the pier in silence, he tossed his stick off the edge and watched it bob on the seawater.

“Tell me how Jack looked?” she finally asked.

“I don’t know. He looked like a guy scared shitless.”

A piece of the chocolate slid down the side of the pie and landed on the boardwalk. Johnson watched her lower lip quiver and he wasn’t sure whether she was actually reacting to the loss of the chocolate or for her part in making Jack Whitte a fugitive.

“He didn’t look like a guy who was going to off himself or anything, did he?”

Johnson shook his head. “I don’t know what a suicidal guy looks like.”

She stared at her melting treat for a moment and then, inexplicably, tossed it into the water and began to walk quickly down the pier away from the meandering tourists.

By the time he caught up to her, she was leaning on the railing at the end of the pier, staring out at a shrimp boat leading a flock of gulls into the bay. He bent down and glanced sideways at her face. She was crying. After spending the past twelve plus hours with her, he didn’t think it was possible for her to cry. He reached into his pocket but didn’t find anything to hand her to wipe her eyes so he leaned next to her and watched the boat as well.

“It wasn’t supposed to go down that way,” she finally said, seemingly gaining

control of her emotions. “The hardest thing I have ever done in my life was slip Jack the Rohypnol and leave him in his room alone.” She sniffled and wiped her nose on the side of her shirt.

“You want to talk about it now?” Johnson asked.

“Yeah, sure,” she sniffled. “Why the hell not.”

Johnson nodded and smiled gently in her direction. “You saved my life last night. I know you came in to cover my back.” He glanced over and she was about to say something. “Nah, don’t say it. I’m starting to get you. You saved my life. Thanks.”

She sniffled again and smiled. “Don’t mention it.”

He nodded in her direction and then returned his gaze to a shrimp boat coming back to port, dragging a line of seagulls. “Someone tried to kill me last night. I want to know why.”

“You got in the way,” she replied, sniffing. “The governor had agreed to use his stepdaughter as bait. I slip in, take her place, and no one the wiser. He wasn’t supposed to send an escort.”

“But why would the governor agree to this?” Johnson asked. “I mean, I guess I don’t understand. You said the governor filed a lawsuit against Whitte and then you said last night that you were going to warm up to Whitte in return for possibly dropping the lawsuit.”

Tiffany shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t know why his former wife’s trust filed a lawsuit. I don’t know whether the governor was behind it, whether he’s working with OIC or OIC is pressuring him to play ball. Or if there is an FBI or CIA tie-in.”

“The governor is a close friend to a Special Agent. Frank Wright. You ever heard of him.”

Tiffany sniffled and shook her head. “He may work with OIC and I know him under another name.”

“Okay.” Johnson stood up straight. “Let’s forget about the governor’s angle in this for now. Tell me about Whitte.”

“Well, I told you last night about our assignment and the reasons behind it. And like I said, I don’t buy the terrorism link nor do I buy the money laundering charge.”

Johnson nodded. “Okay, let’s get past your faith in Whitte. He’s a target of an investigation or sting. That’s what we know, right?”

She nodded. “Wrong. All we know is what my assignment was. I’m a cog in the machine. Just because I’m given a story doesn’t make it true.” She thought for a moment, her anguish washed away. “You said that the Bahamian cop told you Whitte was missing. That they had gone to bring him in and that he was staying at another hotel under the name of a known smuggler and they believed he was on the run.”

“Yeah. And for all we know, Whitte’s dead.”

“I can guarantee you that he’s not.”

“You’ve got dead people all over the place. Anyone even remotely related to this so called operation is dead.” He hesitated for a moment and then added, “except us.”

She shook her head in disagreement. “But why set all this up just to kill Jack? They could hit him while he’s crossing a street in Houston. Why bring him all the way to the Caribbean and then set him up on a murder rap and then kill him?” She held Johnson’s

eyes for a moment and then glanced back out to sea. “You don’t kill someone for fun, at least not in this instance. You kill to cover up something. You run an operation like this to get something and whatever they want, it’s Jack that’s going to provide it.”

“But you won’t tell me who *they* are.”

“I don’t know who they are but I can guarantee you that whoever *they* are, they don’t work for the government.”

“And how do you know that?”

“Really? You think people in the FBI or CIA go around killing our own citizens?” she asked rhetorically.

Johnson shrugged. “It’s easier to kill a citizen outside of the country. Simmons told me he thought the guy pressuring his boss was CIA, maybe Bennetti.”

She squinted into the sun and looked back out to the ocean. “I do not believe that Mark killed Spencer; if it was him, he was there to keep the operation moving.” She thought for a moment. “We may be looking at two sides of the same coin. There are some involved who believe they are running a government operation and there are probably some who have infiltrated OIC and are using this operation to accomplish something entirely different.”

“Look, this whole OIC thing is fucked up. There’s absolutely no accountability. You said so yourself: The strength of OIC is that anonymity allows CIA to do operations that spill over into domestic fronts.”

“I misspoke a little. If CIA is running a domestic operation, they must have a FBI liaison to work the operation with them.”

“And enter Frank Wright.”

Tiffany thought on this for a moment. Whoever this Wright was, he could very well be the key. The question was: Whose side is he on?

“I know I told you an anonymous case officer in any of the intelligence agencies can call in an order for personnel from OIC. We had problems in the past...”

“What kind of problems?” Johnson interdicted.

“We’re getting off topic here. Let’s just say problems. Jay Humphries, director of OIC, decided that there needed to be a software system to track personnel going into operations as well as the operations themselves. A guy by the name of Simon Patel is the best enterprise and security software developer in the country. He also happens to be business partners with Robert Whitte. OIC contracted with PW to provide the system we call Magic; Whitte Industries calls it Mirage and Triage. OIC and WI are the only entities using this software. Obviously OIC’s version is a lot more sophisticated.”

“So that’s what this is all about? Someone is trying to steal this software system?”

Tiffany shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe. Maybe someone is trying to gain access to it and they think Jack can help but then why not just kidnap him or, better yet, Simon Patel?”

“Maybe it is Patel,” Johnson said with a smirk.

“Now we’re getting into the realm of the absurd.” She turned away from the ocean and leaned against the railing, the red in her eyes fading. “Mirage or Magic has nothing to do with this. Or at least if it does, it’s peripheral. It comes back to someone wanting to apply enough pressure to Jack to get him to run. And if he’s running, they hope to gain

something from that,” she said, shaking her head. “Who the fuck knows what?”

“Okay, let’s say I buy into all of this,” Horse began. “And let’s say there are just a whole hell of a lot of coincidences happening here. Let’s peel back a layer. The lawsuit by this trust seems to have begun this whole odyssey. What if it’s the governor behind all of this?”

“He wouldn’t have killed his own stepchild.”

“Maybe it went bad. If Frank Wright was involved, that could very well have happened.”

“What’s your story on Wright?”

“Nothing in particular. We’ve crossed paths a few times in the past.”

“Like what?” Tiffany asked.

Okay, here’s an example,” he began, leaning his butt against the railing. “An ethics complaint was filed against the Dallas zoning board in regard to a controversial vote to allow a synthetic fuel plant to be built next to low income housing. The deciding vote was by a commissioner who had been known, in the past, to be sympathetic to environmental causes. It just didn’t pass the smell test so I began by looking at this particular zoning commissioner. The zoning commissioner just so happened to also be the board chairwoman of a charity that just so happened to receive a sizable contribution from the company building the plant. I also found that she had turned in an expense report to the charity for fifteen thousand dollars.

“I was building a case when all of a sudden, I was pulled off. My boss said the FBI intervened. Seems they were investigating the same case. A year later, all parties were

cleared.” He smiled. “Special Agent Frank Wright was the FBI lead.” Then he shook his head. “That was just the last one. He’s known for stepping into state investigations and killing them.”

“So, you think he’s dirty?”

“A hose down from a fire hydrant would clean that mofo.”

Tiffany smiled. “Okay, we’ve got a dirty Fed. Then you’ve got a sitting governor of Texas shaking down an oil company through his former wife’s trust fund. The owner of this oil company just so happens to be wanted in connection to the murder of the governor’s stepdaughter. And thrown into all of this is a clandestine federal government organization running a sting operation against said oilman for money laundering and potential ties to terrorism.” She slapped Johnson on the back. “Sounds like fun to me.”

“And add to that, everybody is dying and we’re on the run.” Horse shook his head, wincing from the pain in his shoulder. “Yeah, we’re having a blast now.”

They both turned and began the walk back toward shore. At the pier’s entrance was a small bar shielded from the sun by a palm frond canopy. They sat at the end of the bar and both ordered beers.

“Okay,” Johnson said, as he squeezed a lime into the open neck of the bottle. “Let’s work this through. Walk me through the operation a little.”

“It was a cluster fuck from the start. Like I explained, operations are slow and methodical. Usually, the bare minimum time between the assignment and going live is a month, giving all involved an opportunity to acclimate to the individual roles and objectives and then train, as a team, for their part, no matter how small. But I was brought in less than

a week ago. I went into the field the same day you, Abigail, and Jack got to Nassau. Melody had only been there the week before. She had to get the job in the nightclub and practice with the band. I don't know when Audrey got there. Mark, who was case manager, came in the day after the operation started."

"And that would be unusual?"

"Oh, hell yes. The manager is usually the first on the ground and last one to leave."

"So why was he late to the party?"

A seagull dipped down toward canopy, cawing as it turned and headed back over the bay. "He told me he was working another operation and got pulled in last minute." She shook her head and Johnson could tell this was beginning to upset her. "We didn't have any time together so I only got snippets of what the true objective of the operation was. Melody and Audrey were told that it was this terrorist link and had no reason to question it. Humphries contacted me as I was waiting for the plane to Nassau and said there was a chance that this was a smoke operation."

"Smoke operation?"

"An operation run to cover another."

"And why would he say that?"

She shrugged.

Horse shook his head and pursed his lips. Something didn't ring true but he wasn't sure what. "Okay, let's back track just a bit. OIC runs operations to benefit collective intelligence needs." Tiffany nodded. "They aren't dangerous by nature; just simple little parts in order to act as an orchestrated operation."

“Correct.”

“So, your director tells you he thinks this current assignment might not be the real operation; that quite possibly it is something to mask a more detailed, and potentially, more dangerous action. So, why did he let it continue?”

“Is that rhetorical?”

“No.”

She sighed. “Because we have to find out who is hijacking OIC.”

“You’re confusing the shit out of me. There seem to be too many objectives and too much ambiguity.”

“Tell me about it.” She looked back down the pier. The tourists were starting to retreat, probably back to their cruise ship. “Look, Horse. Something is happening that we don’t quite understand. The nature of this particular beast is that I operate in an organization that has very little central control. It was specifically designed that way for a plethora reasons and when a ghost in the machine turns up, who you gonna call?”

“I’m not going to answer that.”

She punched him in his right arm. “Ghost Busters,” and she laughed.

All Johnson could do is shake his head. “Who contacted you to start this operation?”

“Someone through our email system. You saw parts of it last night.”

“So, Humphries knows nothing about it and he suddenly calls you out of the blue and tells you it might be screwed?”

“Both Mark and I had already told him that we had been contacted for this particular

assignment.”

“And you have no clue who set it up?”

“No. We are given instructions via email. All contact points, all places to be, who is on the detail, etcetera, etcetera. Most are quite complex in nature. Sometimes our assignments are given underlying reasons, some aren’t. Like I said, it might be something as simple as tailing a guy on the subway, sitting behind him, and watching what they do. When they get off, you report in and you’re done. Sometimes, they involve interacting with the subject in quite complicated ways over as long as a year. When I got this assignment, the feel of it was that some other operation had gone bad and this was being run to cover it.

“I told you I met Jack the next day after our original contact. It was a good day. I was just supposed to get into his skin a bit more and then take it from there. After I left him that afternoon, Mark was in our shared suite and told me he was instructed to drug Whitte and leave him in his room. When I asked why he told me I had to trust him. I truly got the impression he didn’t know either but was having to make it up as he went along.”

“Why didn’t he tell you more?”

“He didn’t have time. He was called away.” She brushed a wayward strand of hair from her eyes. “We planned to take Jack down at the club. After we had danced for a while, I left Jack and met with Mark. He handed me drinks to take back to Jack. I knew his was drugged but then I started worrying mine might as well.”

“I thought you said you trusted Mark as far as you could trust a man.”

“I don’t trust any men, Horse.” She winked. “I ditched the drinks and replaced them from ones I ordered at the bar and brought them back. I pretended to take a pill in front of

Jack. I decided right then and there if he didn't trust me and didn't take the pill I offered him, I was going to grab his arm and leave and we'd be back on the mainland by morning."

"But he trusted you."

A tear entered her eye. "We danced more, hoping to get his heart pumping to get the roofie acting faster and when I saw his pupils begin to dilate, I led him into the woman's bathroom where Mark was waiting in one of the stalls." A single tear escaped from her left eye and she turned from Horse and wiped it away and then turned back.

Horse shook his head. "Whoever is running this operation wanted Jack Whitte under their control. I'm thinking your buddy Bennetti knew this all along. You dumping out those drinks may have saved your life."

She ran her fingers through her hair. "I don't know what to think. I can't believe that Mark would harm me." She pivoted back to Horse. "And he wouldn't kill Abigail. He just wouldn't. Are you sure the woman in the photos was her?"

"No doubt in my mind." Johnson replied. He glanced up to a silent TV over the bar and then he nudged Tiffany. "Look."

First there was a picture of Whitte, obviously taken off the WI corporate website.

"Hey," Johnson said to the bartender. "Can you turn it up?"

Just then the picture was replaced by one of Ryan Richardson. A tickertape-style banner ran below the picture. "Holly fuck," Johnson whispered.

"Heartbroken Texas governor takes own life," Tiffany read out loud. "Wow. Didn't see that one coming."

By the time the bartender reached the TV, the newscast moved on to the next story.

They both sat in silence as each digested the news. Finally, Tiffany said, “We need some tools: new cell phones, new IDs—passports and shit; some credit cards. Something that will work in the Caribbean.” She glanced up at the towering Johnson. “And a new computer,” she added.

“Why?” Johnson asked with a distant voice.

“Because I’m going to get Jack and that’s where he is.” Then she added, “And you’re going with me.”