

25 Slippery Slope

It was reported that Ryan Richardson, governor of Texas, had shot himself in the head with a ceremonial pistol given to him by the Texas Rangers. Both Lieutenant Governor Dan McClatchy and FBI Special Agent Frank Wright witnessed the shooting and both were in shock, according to reports. McClatchy would be sworn in as the new governor the next day.

“The governor was too much of a narcissist to kill himself. That fucker Wright did it. I hope they’re grilling the son of a bitch.” But he couldn’t believe that Wright would have done it in front of the LG.

“You think you should call in?”

“To who?” Johnson asked.

“Your head Ranger or whatever the hell you guys call the man in charge.”

Johnson nodded his head. “Yeah, I guess I ought to.” Texas Ranger Horace “Horse” Johnson felt like he had pulled the trigger. Despite the subterfuge, at the end of the day, he hadn’t stuck close enough to the man’s stepdaughter. She was dead. He was dead. Regardless the dysfunction, an American family had been wiped off the face of the earth.

He followed Tiffany Marks, stumbling through the cloistered streets of Key West, his destination unknown. She, however, knew where she was going. First she went into a Bank of America branch and withdrew fifteen thousand from her newly funded bank account. Then, she dragged Horse to cellular phone store. She stopped and glanced inside

and then turned back to Horse. “You okay?”

“Yeah. I will be. Just got to work through some things.”

She nodded. “Okay, I’ll be just a bit.”

Inside, she bought two smart phones, a mini-laptop with 2 gigabits of system memory and 300GB hard drive, and several 32GB USB flash drives. When finished, she found Johnson sitting on a bench, eating a Key Lime pie-on-a-stick.

“You’re right,” he announced as he picked off a sliver of chocolate with his tongue.

“These things are addictive.”

Tiffany smiled and asked, again, “Are you okay?”

He nodded. “I need to get a hold of someone.”

She handed him his new phone. “It’s ready to go.”

“Why don’t you go back to the apartment and get on with whatever you’re up to.

I’m going to call Jose Antonio Sanchez.”

“Is he the Grand Pooh-Bah?”

Horse shook his head. “Cash?”

She handed him five thousand dollars in hundreds.

She scrunched up her face. “Then who the hell is he?”

“A forger.”

There was one small detail that Tiffany had not told Horse about the Mirage/Magic software: It had been broken two months before by a CIA hacker. Tiffany didn’t

understand the nuts and bolts but by using Mirage platform to attack Mirage, the hacker had been able to sneak in a side door and “merge” the two servers into one. Once done, the hacker could then look at anything—completely undetected—that was on the protected server as if he were the administrator on location.

Despite the need by OIC for a new system, the CIA and the rest of the intelligence apparatus were not interested in protecting their data via Mirage. Their current systems had proven to be more than adequate. Mirage, however, offered them much more; it was a completely undetectable way of moving through the Internet and with the ability to design applications—like the *money distributor* that Tiffany had used the night before to secure untraceable funds—it became a formidable tool.

As far as Tiffany knew, there had been only a handful of intrusions into WI’s servers: once in the actual hack and the others for demonstrations to higher ups. It was believed that WI’s IT people had not detected the hack. Now she would test this assumption.

If she could find out whether Whitte had transferred funds to an offshore bank for his use as a fugitive, she might be able to find out where he was going to collect those funds. At least that was the theory.

But first she needed tools for her break-in.

Setting up a new computer is such a pain in the ass. You have to register everything and the kitchen sink and then download all the recent updates so after thirty minutes, she was ready to throw the damned thing against the wall. Finally, it was ready to go. She installed the Devil Box she had taken from her own computer the night before and then

downloaded the needed firmware that was embedded in the box. Concerned her ID had been compromised, she logged onto the CIA server, using Mark Bennetti's access ID and PIN. She prayed like hell that he wasn't currently signed in. He wasn't.

She next went to the shared server and was ecstatic that the hacker that had cracked Mirage had been vain enough to leave his program out there on the server. She downloaded that and then went into the applications menu. It was like a kid in a candy store. She started downloading everything she might possibly need, like facial recognition software, an immigration tool that allowed the user to change or even invent passport information on the State Department server, and, of course the fund distribution application that she had used the night before—never knew when they'd need more cash. There were many more and after an hour, she was spent and ready to move on.

Now she needed to test it out before going to the Whitte Industries server. She tried it out on the University of Oslo's server. Why the University of Oslo? Why not? Completely random. Despite the fact she didn't know Norwegian, she was able to move freely through their English language pages and, just for fun, she changed the name of a link from *Master's Degree Programmes* to *Masturbator's Degree Programmes*. She chuckled so much that she snorted. She wondered how long it would take for someone to catch that? Okay, enough of the geeky juvenile antics.

She typed in the IP for Whitte servers and was able to gain access by following the CIA infiltration application. She navigated through different partitions until she found the accounting database. She had taken a class on forensic accounting while at the Academy and hoped that it would serve her here. She was looking for a list of bank accounts that WI

and WO&G used for transactions—hoping like hell she could find a thread that led to Jack. There were over twenty. She eliminated all of the domestic ones first; he wouldn't park money where the federal government could easily seize it. There were a couple of Swiss accounts and a couple in The Caymans; these were certainly candidates. Glancing through these there seemed to be a lot of activity: Too public. She continued on. Finally one stood out like a sore thumb: a recent transfer to Scotiabank in the sum of two million dollars.

Okay, now we're rolling!

Tiffany then hacked into Scotiabank—another handy little tool courtesy of the CIA—and pulled up the account information. *Huh. This wasn't right.* The account was for an entity called La Araña, Ltd., with a sole signatory for a man named Salvador Cordero. She glanced over at the deposit from Whitte. The account number was different from the WI corporate account so she flipped back to WI. There. Two different accounts for Jack: one was for corporate expenditures and the second, she realized, was Jack Whitte's personal account. Bingo!

Now she burrowed into his account. Moments after the transfer to Scotiabank, there had been a transfer from what appeared as a brokerage account of three million into his personal account and then a transfer into an anonymous account. She clicked on it. *Access Denied.* She tried again, this time using a utility from the CIA. *Access Denied.* Damn it!

She continued to scan through corporate accounts until she found a company, WOG-Tex that was labeled as in-suspension. She opened the company spreadsheets and found reference to an account at Banco de Mercantil Petróleo. She backtracked and low and behold, she had missed this bank when scanning through the original accounts.

She now hacked into BMP. She knew only enough Spanish to sound cool when ordering Mexican food but numbers were an international language. *Whoa!* Over three million had been transferred into this account in equal amounts from five different banks, none of them listed in WI's banking registers. *He's not running away, he's disappearing.*

There is always that brief hesitation in all of us when integrity seems to fade away like a distant memory. It's the old good-angel/bad-angel on your shoulders thing. She would be lying if she said she hadn't thought about taking the cash. Here it was, sitting all alone in a foreign bank, a bank that would not cooperate with U.S. authorities. She wouldn't even have to take it all. She could take one and a half and leave Jack the remainder. She wouldn't even have to tell Horse.

But it was, after all, just a brief hesitation.

There was a balance of over four million with monthly withdrawals at a teller window at the St. Lucia branch averaging ten thousand over the past three years. There were no other withdrawals, even from electronic transfers, at any of the branches or over the internet. But why would there only be activity at this branch? Maybe there was a WI business unit located there. Maybe some relative of Whitte's lived there. Maybe it was someone siphoning off cash. Maybe Jack kept a woman down there. Maybe he had a child. Maybe...

Keep it simple, stupid, she thought. With nothing else to go on and time running out, she had to believe that Jack was running to St. Lucia.

She glanced at the clock on her new computer. It was closing in on six. He had been gone for three hours. It wasn't that she was worried; she was just hungry. There

wasn't anything in the apartment but a can of Spam and, appetizing as that was, she didn't want to leave until Horse returned. She had a lot to show him. So to pass the time, she decided to play around with WI's books some more.

It was curious how the money from Jack's account was dispersed through the five banks ending up in the BMP account; it was just like the *OIC money distributor* application. She began to wonder if there were more set up like that so she began to look into accounts to see if there were similarities in transactions to the BMP connection, smaller, equal amounts flowing through a system to land in a specific account. After an hour of research, she sat back and started to doubt her initial assumptions concerning Jack's integrity.

It was a river of fifty million dollars annually flowing through twenty European banks into five investment accounts in the Cayman Islands and then into various business ventures within WI and WO&G. And it was all in the open. If she could find it, anyone with a modicum of accounting acumen could as well. Now she understood why there was a federal investigation into Whitte's activities. No doubt when the CIA technician had hacked into WI to show it could be done, this whole spider web had been laid bare.

At first glance, the fifty million appeared to be outside investments into various projects. Once the money found its way into WI and WO&G, it was dispersed through various companies and departments with exactly twenty-five million going through royalty accounts paid quarterly into institutional investment accounts in the U.S. Who knew where that money eventually landed? The other twenty-five million flowed into The Robert Whitte Charitable Trust. That money was a hell of a lot easier to track. All of it went into charities

that in turn gave money to various political causes. It was obvious to her that someone in Europe was circumventing U.S. laws that disallowed foreign campaign contributions: They were buying American politicians and political causes.

One in particular stood out: The Charitable Trust donated, each year, two million dollars to the Environmental Wildlife Fund Political Action Committee. She did quick research on EWF-PAC. Its chair was one Charles “Chuck” Cottler, CEO of SynTex, the one implicated in the investigation that Horse had just told her about. She Googled Cottler and EWF-PAC; it contributed millions to well-placed politicians, regardless of political stripe, at all levels of government, including both the lieutenant governor and governor of Texas.

She closed her eyes and pushed her left index finger into the bridge of her nose, applying pressure in an attempt to stem the tide of a massive headache building behind her eyes. *Say it ain't so, Jack.*

She stood and walked over to the window facing the street and peaked over the struggling window AC unit. It was hot out there and the rattling air conditioner was savagely beating back the heat. As she began to turn there was another throaty noise competing with the AC. On the street below, stopped at the corner was a God-awful mess of a car. To Tiffany it looked as if the two-door monster from somewhere in the seventies was held together by bailing wire, Bondo, and quite possibly luck. It had a lovely shade of rust around the wheel wells and it gurgled in neutral and when the gas was applied to turn the corner, there was a cough, a sputter, and then the gear caught and it lurched forward. As it made the turn she noticed a black arm hanging from the opened window.

“Horse? What the hell.” She rushed through the door and bounded down the creaking stairs to meet the disaster on wheels as it pulled into the alley behind their apartment. It made one final cough and died. Johnson pushed open the squeaky door, held tight by rusting hinges and slammed the door shut.

“I’ve bought you a chariot my fine princess.”

A Chariot of Fire might be more like it, as in you’d be damned lucky if the damned thing didn’t catch on fire the moment you started it up.

“What the hell is it?” she asked, afraid to find out; it really did look like it should be up on cinderblocks in front of a trailer house.

“A nineteen seventy Plymouth Duster three-forty. Two hundred and seventy-five horses and even with two hundred thousand miles, can kick up a trail of dust.”

“You mean exhaust.”

Johnsons smiled. “It’s the perfect car for what we need.”

“I don’t need to be *seen* in that,” she said brushing her hand toward it, “thing.”

“That’s exactly right. We won’t be seen in this. We’ll blend into the seedier parts of towns where people aren’t out to kill us.”

“And they certainly won’t be out trying to steal this fine example of the American automotive industry,” she deadpanned, shaking her head.

“That’s the beauty of this car. No one will see us and if they do, it can still do the quarter mile in fifteen flat.”

Tiffany chuckled. “Only if I get out and push.”

“Go for a spin?”

The interior smelled like dead fish and marijuana and she prayed like hell they didn't get pulled over. She wasn't surprised when Horse told her he had bought it for a thousand bucks and a bag of weed.

"I thought you were a fanatic about the War on Drugs."

He smiled. "Sometimes you've got to adjust."

She didn't bother asking him where he got the weed.

The restaurant he picked out was more of a shack nestled along the bay on the backside of the island. It served crabs and shrimp right off the boat and with a Heineken to wash it down, it turned out to be a tasty meal. She told him about what she had discovered through her research into Whitte's books and Horse did a, "I told you he was a crook." She didn't bother with a rebuttal. She thought she knew everything about Jack Whitte; she was now wondering if she truly did.

"So, how'd you fair with your forger?"

"Well, it's good news and bad news," he said, after a swig of beer. "The good news is that Sanchez can help us out. The bad news is that it might take a week or so."

"Horse, we don't have that much time."

"He's got to find a couple of clean passports of recently deceased who have not been cleared from the State Department database. It's harder because he's going to have to find a black man at six-foot six and a white girl at five-foot four with corresponding approximate ages."

“No, he doesn’t. We just need a clean passport with assumed names. I can fill in the history myself,” she smiled devilishly. “Courtesy of the CIA.”

“Well okay then,” Horse exulted with a grin. “I guess it will only take a couple of days. We need pictures to send him for the passports and drivers licenses. Sooner we get them to him the sooner we can be on our way.”

On the way back to the apartment, they stopped at a discount store and bought new clothes and a couple of suitcases. Horse slipped into a pawnshop down the street and purchased a used cornet. Tiffany strolled into a drug store and bought a couple of books and various hygienic products as well as a surprise for Horse. Once back at the apartment, they strung up a sheet on a wall and took pictures of each other to send on to the forger. Tiffany disappeared into the back bedroom and returned with her surprise; it was an Afro costume wig.

“What the hell are you going to do with that?”

“I think we need some pictures of you with some hair, just so your ID doesn’t look too current.”

“I’m not wearing that.”

“I think the jive-ass mofo look is you.”

He shook his head.

“Relax. Put it on and I’ll trim it down closer to your skull.”

The end result wasn’t too bad. “Your friend should be able to air brush it a bit.”

After they had taken all of the pictures they thought they might need Horse sent them via email to Sanchez along with the explanation that they just needed passports and

licenses. He also provided him with names, birthplaces and dates, and a brief legacy of who they were and why they would be going to the Caribbean on business so he could provide business cards and other paraphernalia to help them become new people. As Horse typed, Tiffany pulled out a novel from a shopping bag.

“What’s the book?”

“Harlan Coben. You ever read Myron Bolitar stories?” she asked.

Horse rolled his eyes and grabbed the cornet and retreated into the back bedroom.

Tiffany logged into her email account. There were no new messages and so she logged out and slipped onto the couch and began to read. After a few minutes a sweet melody began to drift from beneath the closed door and, before long, it pulled Tiffany into a deep sleep.