

Horse Johnson was getting antsy. Things were being said that didn't jibe with what Tiffany had told him. He desperately wanted to get into the discussion and march up to the deck but he stayed. He had to have patience. He had to remain dedicated to the surveillance even though absolutely nothing was happening.

Then something did happen. Johnson glanced in the rearview mirror and saw the Hispanic male with the baggy jeans walking back up the street, toward the Chariot of Fire, with a knap sack thrown over his shoulder. His gait was matter-of-fact, like he had no care in the world. He watched him closely as he drew near. The man approached the side of Johnson's car but then kept walking. He turned right on the cross street and continued, disappearing down a side street a block away.

"The communiqué I received informed me I was selected," explained Tiffany. "I was sent files on Abigail Spencer, Ryan Richardson, and Jack Whitte. I had a week to prepare to look like Abigail and join a team that was already in the field, consisting of Melody Williams and Audrey Peterson. I'd worked with both of them before so there was nothing to concern me."

"Except Whitte," Humphries interjected. Tiffany frowned at him and he took the hint. "Go on."

“What about Whitte?” Horse asked.

Tiffany ignored him. “Mark was listed as the controller but he wasn’t on site when I arrived. Melody said he’d been there earlier in the week looking at logistics but was called away on another assignment. Again, this wasn’t anything too out of the ordinary. It was a set-up for a future mission. I was to stand-in as Abigail Spencer, get Jack interested in me, and then leave. If I were needed in the future, I would reappear in Jack’s life. Connecting the dots, I believed that intel could be gained in the future because as Abigail, I was a party to a lawsuit against him. I could use charm and that position to get what would be required.”

“This is where I get confused,” Horse jumped in. “What if in the future, Whitte meets the real Abigail Spencer? Then you’re screwed.”

“That was a chance we were having to take,” she said into the Bluetooth device. “I never told Jack who I was. I let him assume my name. He overheard a staged encounter between Audrey and me where Audrey called me Abby. When he pushed on my last name, the next day, I stalled and simply confirmed my alleged first name. Not once did I allow myself to be identified as Abigail Spencer. Plausible deniability.”

“Okay,” Johnson said. “I guess.”

“We weren’t too worried about the real Abigail,” Tiffany said, redirecting her comments to Humphries. “I looked like her but no one would ever connect us if we stood next to each other. Once she was killed, I realize now that witnesses see what they want to see so if they were shown real pictures of Abigail and they had seen me with Jack, they would instantly see her in my place. So someone set this up perfectly.” She took a swig of

beer and continued. “Melody was tasked with keeping tabs on her while Audrey took pictures of my encounters with Jack. When Ranger Johnson showed up, Melody was also tasked with keeping him occupied.”

Johnson said nothing; a twinge of guilt rose up from his stomach and settled uncomfortably in his throat.

“There were no instances of anything out of the ordinary during the operation. When I wasn’t with Jack, Audrey tailed him. He had gone into Nassau the second morning—nothing out of the ordinary, sightseeing for the most part—and we arranged an encounter for that afternoon when he returned. After that encounter, I returned to our room to find Mark.”

“You hadn’t heard from him before that time?”

“No,” Tiffany responded to Humphries.

“I received an email on the secure server from Mark,” Humphries explained, “that stated he was concerned with this operation and he wanted me to close it.”

“So, you ordered the fire drill?” Tiffany asked him.

“No. I didn’t receive the email until after Abigail Spencer was found murdered.” Humphries patted his chest. “My fault for not checking but if it were such an emergency, there were other channels of communication that he could have pursued.” Humphries lowered his head in thought. “Did you get a sense of what spooked him?”

“No,” Tiffany said. “He stated that a fire drill had been ordered. I was to drug Jack and we were going to leave him in his room and then evacuate; return to our individual bases of operations. We were to be debriefed via video the next day but, as you know, that

never happened. Obviously, I learned later, through Horse, that Mark had taken Abigail Spencer and, as far as either of us can guess, he was the last one to see her alive.”

Johnson fucked up and he knew it instantly. He screamed into the phone, “Shooter at your six!”

The teacher almost took Tiffany’s head clean off with her beefy arm and sharp elbow to her right temple. Her gun cleared her purse in the same movement. Humphries saw it coming a split second sooner than Horse and was already beginning to duck while reaching for his service Glock 23 nestled in his shoulder holster. It was the millisecond before the explosion deafened her when Tiffany felt an object fleeing the muzzle of a gun moving at an incomprehensible speed that created an air vacuum around her unprotected ear. The shot from the teacher tore into Humphries right lower abdomen and the gun dropped from his hand and landed beneath the picnic bench. He fell backward, his right leg trapped awkwardly between the table and the connected bench. Adrenalin pumping and sprawled on his back, he tried to reach for the gun as the teacher moved closer, but his arm was trapped in place and all he could do was wiggle his fingers in its general direction. Tiffany’s head was screaming at her but the adrenalin was pumping now and she saw Humphries’ gun lying just below her. With one swooping motion designed to carry her momentum down and help her to spin back, she flipped through the opening between the bench and tabletop and grabbed the gun and brought it to bear as the teacher pulled the trigger for the second time. Tiffany pulled her trigger and the teacher no longer had much of

a head as the slug entered below her chin and traveled up through her cranium.

Johnson reacted fast, silently cursing himself for missing the ambush. He threw open the Chariot of Fire's door as his windshield exploded, catapulting shards of glass in every direction. Slugs tore into the Chariot as Horse dropped and rolled away from the gunfire. He glanced up and saw the drug pusher, now standing between him and Bubba's Burger Shack, open up with a MAC-11 machine pistol fitted with a reflex baffle, smoothly tearing up the asphalt around him. As he rolled once more he steadied his Ruger with the suppressor still screwed in. One pull of the trigger and the drug pusher's head snapped back and then he fell to his knees and crashed face first onto the asphalt pavement.

There was a screech of tires beside his head and he rolled coming to a rest in a drainage ditch beside the road. A late model Kia, painted neon purple with air baffle on the trunk was now between him and Bubba's, covering the spot for the downed shooter. A slight Asian man rolled from the door and crouched on a knee and began to fire toward Johnson now stuck in a ditch. He sneaked a peak and saw a black male charging from the car toward the porch surrounding the burger joint. Then the ground around him erupted.

"Fuck," yelled Horse's excited voice tore through Tiffany's Bluetooth into her ear. "Shooter, black male, on your ten o'clock high." Tiffany raised her weapon as she tried to move to shield her fallen boss.

She glanced up and a serious-looking man was taking aim with a Remington .357 Magnum. All she could think was Dirty Harry and making someone's day and that she wouldn't get her gun raised in time. And then the man flew backwards, purple red exploding from his chest.

"Sum bitch drug pushers," screamed Bubba as he recovered from the recoil of a Super Shorty 12 gage shotgun.

Rounds tore into the side of the shack; the shattering wood chased Bubba down to the floor. Tiffany saw a short man that looked like a Chinese gymnast with a MAC-11 moving toward her and the driver's side of the car. He then turned his attention to where she believed Horse to be. "Horse, another shooter!" she screamed into her headset.

"No shit," was the reply. She pulled her arm from beneath the bench and aimed the best she could toward the Kia. She pulled the trigger of the Glock a couple of times, the slight recoil causing the gun to pop up and then back down onto the tabletop. The shooter turned back toward her, grimaced and dove into the car. The tires squealed and the car shot forward. Johnson leapt from the ditch and aimed at the car but by now, patrons of Bubba's were dashing from the battle zone, screaming and searching for refuge. Many crossed into his line of sight. He held the gun up, muzzle pointed at the bright sky and ran toward the deck.

"Damn it, Jay. You okay?" cried out Tiffany Marks. She saw a bloody mass where his appendix would be.

“No,” he grunted, trying to reach to his stomach, “not really.”

Tiffany gingerly pushed her hand beneath Humphries’ back; Humphries squirmed with pain.

“It went through.”

Humphries offered a weak smile; the bullet didn’t disintegrate and tear up other vital organs inside. He would probably survive the wound.

Johnson hopped over the railing and charged toward the crouching Tiffany, checking his perimeter with his gun in both hands as he moved. “Call nine-one-one!” he shouted to anyone who had his or her wits about them. “Tell them officer down.” He saw Bubba standing with the shotgun pointed at his chest. “I’m one of the good guys. Make the call.” Bubba dropped the gun to his side, waddled into his shredded shack, and picked up the receiver off an old rotary phone and started dialing.

“They must have followed me.” Humphries tried to sit up but flopped back to the bench as Tiffany reached across his chest to keep him down.

“Stay still, Jay.”

“I’m just a fucking desk jockey,” he groaned. “Not supposed to get shot.” He glanced up at the towering Johnson. “Good to finally see you in person, Ranger.”

“Should have been under better circumstances.” Then he added, “I fucked up. I didn’t see it coming.”

Humphries coughed. “I did. It was classic OIC. The woman came in and steered Tiffany to this table and set us up in a triangle. She looked out of place and I should have caught it.”

“That could have been anyone.”

Humphries shook his head. “It was the e-book. She looked too frumpy. She should have been reading a romance novel.”

“Jay, shut up and be still.”

Johnson found a man’s suit coat discarded on the ground. He handed it to Tiffany and she rolled Humphries over gingerly and tucked it beneath the exit wound and rolled him back. As she did, Johnson went into Bubba’s shack.

Bubba didn’t fix things. Crack in the window behind the grill? Duct taped. A broken handle on the fridge? Duct taped. A hole in the plaster wall? Yep. Duct taped.

“Duct tape?”

Bubba—phone cradled between his shoulder and ear—pointed to a shelf next to a rusted refrigerator. Horse followed his eyes and grabbed the roll of the gooey miracle invention of the Twentieth Century. He raced outside, tore off a foot of the tape and, after wiping off as much of the blood as possible, plastered it across the entry wound on Humphries. He did the same where the slug had exited.

“You weren’t followed,” Johnson said, patting the tape in place. “They were here before you showed up. Unless they had access to Tiffany’s email, you’ve got someone in your ranks that’s out for you.”

“They were out for us all,” Tiffany said.

“No. They had me dead to rights but fired to keep me out of the fray. Same with you Tiffany,” he explained. “The woman should have shot you first, to get you out of the way. Instead she tried to move you out of position with an elbow to get a better shot.”



Johnson knelt down by Humphries. "Someone tried to fire you."

Humphries nodded and weakly chuckled. "Quit literally."

Johnson smiled. "Yeah, double entendre intended."

"They're on their way," croaked Bubba as he rumbled into the doorway.

The head of OIC tried to use his right hand to push into his right trouser pocket but Tiffany held him down. "Keys. Get my keys and take the car."

"I'm waiting for the paramedics," Tiffany announced.

"No, your not. Too much red tape about to hit."

"Doesn't matter," Johnson said. "I can't walk away from a crime scene."

"Well, you're going to." Humphries tried to sit up again but Tiffany held him firmly in place. "My butt's numb."

"Tough. Be still."

Humphries relented and then relaxed, staring up into the brilliant sun. "In the back seat you'll find my brief case. It's not locked." He coughed. "Copies of my case notes and some new identities for you two. There's a pilot waiting at the Ft. Lauderdale Executive Airport. I've worked with him in the past so I trust him."

"Where're we going?" Johnson asked.

"I've not told you everything. You'll read it in the notes." Before Horse could interject, he said, "You'll figure it out in the notes. Go straight to the airport."

The faint sound of claxons began to drift above the screaming and excitement that remained around the scene. Tiffany glanced up at Johnson. "Go get our stuff from the car. I'll meet you at the Crown Vic."

Johnson grabbed Humphries keys then leapt over the rail and ran to the Chariot of Fire, which was now steaming from beneath the hood.

“I want you to go find Mark,” Humphries said. “He’s out on a limb.”

“Where is he?”

“Wright’s gone bad. That’s all I can come up with. I think I know where Mark will be. It’s in the notes. You know what to do?”

“Kill Wright.”

“Correct. Mark, too, if he’s with him.”

“I don’t know if I can do that.”

“I know. But it might come down to you or him. Don’t make the same mistake you made before.”

Tiffany sighed. “I just cannot believe that he would do this.”

“He was disloyal to you then he got drubbed out of the CIA. Then he disobeyed a direct order.” Humphries licked his lips. “Give me a drink of that beer.”

“Not a good idea, Jay. You’re going directly into surgery.”

He offered a weak smile. “I’ll survive the gun shot but in case I don’t survive the hospital stay, I want you to do something. I logged into your email account and sent an email to a nonexistent account. My instructions are in your *Sent* box.” He glanced toward Bubba. “I’m deputizing you,” he said with a smile. “You’re my guard till the cops get here. But if you tell them anything you just overheard, you’ll spend the remaining years of your life—which unless you lose some weight won’t be long—in a nice little cell in Gitmo.”

Bubba smiled and nodded. “I’ll get you that beer.”

Tiffany turned and gave him a stern glare. Just then, flashing lights rounded the corner.

“Goddamnit, go,” Humphries croaked. “Look in the briefcase. You’ll figure it out.”