

## 38 Bush Pilot

His name was Art Muller and all he said to Johnson and Marks as they climbed aboard the Cessna Caravan was, “Buckle your belts. It’ll be bumpy.” Any attempt at small talk, or even enquiry to their destination was rebuffed with a grunt.

“Friendly enough,” Johnson stated sarcastically.

The drive from Bubba’s to the private airstrip far north of Ft. Lauderdale had been uneventful. After driving down a side street, just as a cop car careened into the oyster shell parking lot next to Bubba’s, Horse pulled over and Tiffany had wiped the blood from his forehead; most of the damage were minor abrasions from the disintegrated safety glass of the deceased Chariot of Fire. The bleeding had stopped on its own. Later, after a shower that evening, Johnson’s forehead would look nothing more severe than an outbreak of acne.

Humphries had preprogrammed the Crown Vic’s nav system to take them directly to the airstrip south of Cape Canaveral—a three-hour drive from where they had been and, in Hanger 26 they found the green and yellow Cessna complete with weathered bush pilot. Now they were banking out over the Atlantic, the setting sun attacking the plane’s interior. Below them stood a lonely NASA launch tower pointed toward the heavens, attesting to America’s once proud goals and the fading glory of what was.

“And why the hell did we have to drive all the way up north to catch a southbound plane?” Johnson complained.

“Fewer complications,” the bush pilot grumbled over the loud turbo prop sucking them out over the sea.

Tiffany smirked and settled into her seat. She sat next to a window, facing the cockpit because her ear still clanged from the shot that had hit Humphries. Her left ear was fine and could take in what Johnson was saying but after his whining he snuggled into his reclined seat and began to sleep. Sleep when you can, thought Tiffany but she wasn't tired. Even with the monotonous drive from north of Ft. Lauderdale, her mind had raced through the shock of the shootout and what seemed to be the disintegration of the agency for which she had worked. Why would anybody try to kill Humphries? It just didn't make sense. He was no harm to anyone.

She pulled his briefcase from the seat in front of her and opened it up. They had already inventoried it once. There were manila folders with notes, printed files, a few spreadsheets, pictures, and transcripts of taped conversations. In a large, brown legal size envelope they found two passport cards—all that was needed to get into the Caribbean—and supporting documentation like business cards and, most importantly, matching credit cards.

Horse was—courtesy of Antonio Sanchez—Franklin Lewis from Mississippi. Now, he was also Reggie Upton from Henderson, Nevada, a freelance photojournalist. She had the name of Bobette Lewis from Clovis, New Mexico but now she could also be Ann Bolton, a travel and culture blogger from Ulen, Minnesota. You could never have too many identities, she mused. Humphries had also included Tiffany's old, expired FBI identification from a time before she had been recruited by OIC, before she had to change

her name.

In the seat in front of Horse was a large camera bag. Beneath the expensive looking camera and assorted lens was a false bottom with two matching .40 Beretta Px4 Storms with an extra magazine apiece, giving them twenty-eight shots without having to reload a clip. All four magazines were loaded and there were two boxes of replacement shells. Did Humphries expect this kind of trouble or was he just being precautionous? Tiffany hopped for the latter.

With Horse beginning to snore, she examined the files. It would take her hours to absorb everything that was contained but Muller had told them it was about a four and a half hour flight so she had the time. Why he was being cagey about their destination, she didn't know but figured by the time they landed, the information Humphries had provided would tell her where and why.

After an hour of reading, the sun began to fade and she reached up and pushed the light button. She was hungry and needed something to drink—and water wasn't going to cut it—so she moved forward and kneeled down behind Muller.

“So, still secretive about where we're going?”

“Castries.”

“St. Lucia?”

“Yep.”

“Good.” Tiffany wasn't crazy about flying; she liked her ground solid beneath her feet. All the same, the darkening whitecaps below were beautiful, spread out into infinity.

“Why did we have to meet you so far north? You said something about complications?”

Muller scrunched his face. “Too lazy to fly down to Ft. Lauderdale.”

Tiffany chuckled. “Say, you got something to eat? Drink? Adult beverages are preferable.”

“Sandwiches and cokes in an ice cooler behind the last seat to the left.” He reached beneath his seat and pulled out a half empty bottle of Jack Daniels. “This is all I’ve got on your last request. There’s some cups back there with the sandwiches.”

Tiffany made her way to the back of the plane and found the ice cooler as well as a package of plastic cups. She grabbed one, opened the ice chest and pulled a couple of cubes out and tossed them into the cup and headed back to the front. She took the bottle of Jack and poured herself a healthy measure. The drink was like Gatorade to a marathoner.

“Much needed,” she said with a gasp.

Muller nodded.

“What’s your story, Art?”

“Who says I got a story?”

“Everybody’s got a story.”

Muller grumbled. He was lean. His skin was leathery with age spots tattooing his neck. The unkempt beard pulled hard at his dark cheeks and over his throat. His eyes were glassy, bloodshot and Tiffany knew, had seen a lot of pain. They echoed a disgust he must have with the human condition. “Choppers in Nam. Got a Purple Heart and spent the remainder of my enlistment behind a desk at Ft. Hood.” He took the bottle from Tiffany and took a long swig. “Flew thirty-five years for the CIA. Retired. Now pick up freelance gigs for different federal agencies. Been working with OIC for the past three years. Like

the work okay.”

Tiffany smiled. “Married?”

“Same girl. Forty years. Got five kids. All hate me.”

“I doubt that.”

The glare he gave her in return pretty much confirmed his last assessment.

“So, you’re a real son of a bitch?”

At that, Muller laughed. With a smile, he said, “Pretty much.”

It was an opening. “So, what can you tell me about your assignment?” Tiffany asked him.

“Not much to tell. Fly you to Castries. Get you through immigration and hang out on the government’s dime till you’re ready to leave.”

The sky had now turned black. Ahead, a spider web of light played out. The instruments illuminated the only features of Muller’s face that Tiffany could now see. Muller checked a couple of them and then increased throttle and made the still plane thingy in front of the black and white globe—that’s the only thing Tiffany knew to call it—turn.

“I told you guys it’ll get rough. There’s a squall line pushing up from the Atlantic. Some heavy bursts of wind will be hitting us in about thirty minutes. Shake us up a bit. Hope you’ve got a strong stomach. I don’t clean up barf.”

Tiffany showed him an uneasy smile.

High above the *Calpine Explorer*, a green and yellow Cessna banked west to avoid

the incoming storm. The mid-sized cargo ship didn't have that luxury. It began to sway side to side, unnerving Jack Whitte. Then, without warning, the ship climbed, like taking on a hill on a roller coaster, and at the apex, it dove. Whitte experienced zero Gs for the briefest of moments as his forehead smacked into an overhead iron beam and he was thrust back into his bunk. A Portuguese crewman sitting across from the bunks chuckled at Whitte's acrobatics and returned to reading a paperback beneath a single light bulb extended from the bulkhead.

Jack pushed himself out of the bunk and out of the tight cabin and straight to the head where he balanced his mouth just inches above the seat and expelled Hidalgo's wife's cooking from his stomach over and over again. He would never eat beans and plantains again.