

## 18 Dead Ends

Melody Williams was dead. Johnson should have felt something but he didn't and so he felt guilt instead. Emptiness in a bed. And a dead end. Johnson flipped the cell phone shut, stuck it into his pocket and tore up the one-way ticket to Vegas. Outside of the airport, he hailed a cab and was rewarded with beads of sweat and the God awfulness stickiness of tropical heat. It was time for option two, Tiffany Marks. He should have gone after her first, since she lived in nearby Fort Lauderdale but he didn't have a clean picture of her. He knew Melody and so she had been the best option.

What Johnson witnessed on the surveillance video was a fire drill, no doubt about it. The Rangers have a broad experience in law enforcement, from investigating penny-ante drug deals to murder to bribery and everything in between. Sting operations are run at the local and state levels and he had either been a participant or observer in several operations during his career in law enforcement. Johnson had never been involved with a sting gone bad but they trained for that moment when cover had been blown and the safety of the law enforcement personnel was paramount and so, it was like a fire drill—everyone out fast!

Johnson also had vast experience in tracking down fugitives. Tracking these girls had been easy, almost too easy. They had used their real names and credit cards and it had been as simple as a few phone calls and a search in several law enforcement databases.

He was now firmly off reservation but that was nothing new to a Texas Ranger

whose very first qualification was the ability to operate alone and without instruction from superiors. His boss let him know he was on his own since the governor had said he wanted Johnson dead—obviously figurative—but maybe not. But he was now low on cash. The money the governor had given him had been used on bribes and the non-refundable plane ticket to Vegas. He didn't have a state credit card—most costs incurred by a Ranger while on duty were reimbursed through monthly expense reports. His own checking account was low; any cash he did not need to live off of was wired into a retirement account each month so he would have to live off his rainy day fund. It was, however, tied into his checking account and if he used his debit card, he, too, could be easily tracked. At this point, he didn't know if it was a good idea to leave breadcrumbs or not.

He had the cabby drop him off a block and a half down from the listed address on Tiffany Marks' credit card account. The oak-shaded lane dropped the temperature by five degrees but sweat still beaded on his forehead as he handed the cabby a \$50 traveler's check for the ride from the airport and to then check his luggage with the Fort Lauderdale Embassy Suites ten blocks away. He only had a hundred and ten bucks left—all of it going to pay for his night at the hotel—so he'd have to hoof it in the heat when he was done here.

As the cabby drove off, he began his walk. The units had different façades to give the appearance of separate townhouses but it was just a glorified apartment complex. Marks' flat was on the first floor. He rang the doorbell with no answer. Then he rapped hard on the door. No answer. He peered through a partially shaded window but saw few details.

As he retreated to the sidewalk, a blue Ford Focus emerged from an alley 30 yards

away and turned toward him. He glanced at the woman with stark black hair—who was fiddling with her car stereo—as she drove away and then to the driveway from where she had just emerged. It led into a service alley behind the units. He glanced left and right and then walked toward the back of Marks' apartment.

The units had small backyards next to a double garage with short hurricane fencing surrounding them. He came to Marks' apartment and glanced back and forth, seeing no one; he opened the gate with a slight clank and approached a sliding glass door on the patio. It was dark inside with only the sun glimpsing through a window in the front. He knocked on the door but there was, again, no answer. He wished he had a pocketknife to jimmy the door. Hell, he wished he had a gun in case he did find a way in. Luck, however, was on his side—at least in this instance—as the sliding door gave way with a slight pull.

“Hey, anyone home? Tiffany? Tiffany Marks?” There was no answer. He gave a cursory glance around the alley and seeing no one, slipped into the kitchen and slid the door closed behind him. The sink was wet and the dishrag damp and the dishwasher was silently whirring. An old-style percolator had been washed and was sitting upside down on the counter. Otherwise, there was nothing in the kitchen that seemed out of place.

Every home has a distinguishing scent but not this one and it was, for all intents and purposes, a generic apartment. He thought back to the Escape and wondered if that had been Tiffany Marks but the only person who had gotten off the elevator with dark hair had been Melody.

He opened the refrigerator. Nothing unusual. A carton of Half and Half, a half eaten sandwich wrapped in cellophane, a bottle of Chardonnay, and the miscellaneous

condiments and salad dressings. He opened the pantry: cans of tuna, Spam, soup, baked beans, vegetables, two flash lights and bottled water—all necessities for hurricane preparedness in this part of the country.

As he had seen from outside, there wasn't much to the living room. A couch and love seat arranged around a small TV with no artwork on the walls. On either side of the living room were bedrooms. He chose the one to the left first.

Whoever this broad was, she was a fucking slob. There were discarded panties on the floor, shoes lying haphazardly wherever they may and a thick pallor of dust on the bedside table and lamp and the headboard. The sheets were rumpled and unmade. Across from the bed was a computer on a small desk in front of a wooden chair. To the left was a small hallway with a closet on the left and the bathroom straight ahead. The closet was spacious with a shelf running atop the hangers that were nearly empty. There were piles of dirty laundry in front of the door and in a corner and shoes haphazardly tossed like a tornado had struck.

The bathroom was no cleaner. Toothpaste residue and soap scum marked the sink. There was a dark circle at the waterline in the toilet bowl and the shower hadn't been cleaned in months, if even then. The room was nasty and he retreated quickly to the second room.

In stark contrast, this room belonged to an anal-retentive bitch. Anal-retentive was the trait of discipline and that was needed to run such an operation as he had uncovered so logically, this had to be Marks' room. There was no hint of dust in the room. The bed was made to military standards and when he walked into the bathroom he was treated to a scent

of lilac. He liked lilac. The trashcan beneath the sink was full and he pulled it out. Besides the discarded feminine products was a used squeeze bottle of black hair dye and stained plastic gloves. Damn it!

He walked into the closet. Everything was neat and orderly; the shirts, pants, and skirts sorted by clothing type. He walked back into the bedroom. Just as in the first, there was a small desk across from the bed with a computer and chair. He pushed the power button on the computer and while it was booting, he searched the room. There was a wastebasket to the right of the desk; it was empty except for a wadded piece of paper. It was an expired State Farm auto insurance form with the name of Tiffany Marks and the Ford Focus as the insured vehicle identifying the VIN number and license plate. That was the cincher; he had just missed her by minutes. Fuck.

He opened the Internet browser on the computer and clicked on history. The last site she had visited was Bank of America. Then Google Maps. He clicked on it. A road map of Florida came up, centered on Tallahassee. The next site was the Department of Commerce so he clicked on it and a screen appeared with the Department Of Commerce logo in the left hand and a montage of images of commerce such as ships, cranes, buildings, and such. Under the Commerce logo was a small heading—*Office of International Cooperation*—and a form to enter a user name and password. Johnson typed in “TMARKS,” and then her birth date—as listed in the credit card information he had obtained—as a password. A red-letter display appeared—*Not Authorized*—and then the screen went blank and was redirected to the main page of the U.S. Department of Commerce. This was a waste of time.

The past twenty-four hours were catching up. He had been on the phone and searching records from his laptop most of the night and had fallen asleep, missing the first flight to Miami from Nassau, and so had to wait for the ten o'clock flight. Then he had waited for two hours for the Vegas flight. Then he got the call from Captain Cantu, his boss, informing him that Melody had been found dead. All for naught. Now the only thing he could do was walk to the hotel and check in, take a shower, and catch some sleep but first, he Googled the Florida Department of Law Enforcement and quickly found the number for a friend, Mike Chambers, and gave him a call.

He swam hard, fighting its pull. The girl was down there, somewhere. He saw her dive and sink but he couldn't find the bottom. He could die down here. Yes, somewhere in the darkness, he knew, there was a good enough reason to simply open his mouth and allow the warm water—comforting around his cold body—to bleed into his struggling lungs. Yes, it would be electrifying like a jolt of lightning but it would soon be over and he could join the girl on the bottom of the lake and life would be peace and peace would be finality.

Finality. Infinite finality. A resolution or a curse he did not know which, but was there a reason to continue among the dead of the living? There were few in his world worth living for and more than likely he wouldn't be missed. And so yes, he thought, open your mouth. Let it be over. This contemplation lasted for a time and he relished the option that he had only considered a few times in his life. Give up. Let it go. Freewill at its finest hour. He

would be doing the noble thing, the right thing.

Then a sound.

Somewhere, but not near. It came from no discernable direction. It was a peaceful hum but even serene reverberation can be annoying and so he tried to close his ears but as difficult as it was to open his mouth there was no denying the sound as it intensified, slightly, sinking into his heart. He knew if he obeyed the sound—a consideration of life—then he would lose the momentum for a decision he believed had been long in coming. The sound was calling him, luring him. Into a trap? But he was already trapped and now he did not know what to do. His lungs burned, his eyes felt the pressure of the water's depth and his body was cold, shivering. He had an incredible pain emanating from his left side, near the pelvis bone. But the indescribable sound was becoming a force and he realized that his sight became cloudy and the water was dripping all over him. Wait, he thought and he let go...

The awakening did not come swift. It was gradual as painful sensations returned to his body. Beyond the throbbing on his left side, there was a crack of thunder on his forehead and temples that permeated through the core to the very base of his skull but it was dull and there was light coming from somewhere behind his closed eyes which he resisted. He heard water but it was not flowing. It was lapping against a shore and a breeze would wisp beyond his body and he could sense a gentleness of whatever situation awaited him.

His eyes opened, forced slowly and there were the light reflections of water shimmering upon dried palm leaves above. It was cold. But not the room. He was freezing

but the room was hot.

His grief from his dream was real and he lay on a pallet of sorts with a firm but comfortable mattress. He felt a well of emotions from inside that began to subside as he regained consciousness, ever so slowly. There was no immediate remembrance of anything but the dream and it slipped through his fingers like sand. He could not accept a new reality regardless of what he would or would not remember for the current setting was certainty and within his realm of where he had been and what he had done.

Suddenly an excruciating pain racked his stomach and he felt nausea swell over him and he gagged. His head was swimming and unconsciousness tugged at him once more but he held on to what he believed to be real. As suddenly as it had gripped him, it was gone leaving a hollowness.

In the distance he could hear the guttural roar of an engine accelerating and then it died. He realized that this had been the sound he had heard in his dream. He stretched and reached up to his forehead and rubbed his middle finger over the bridge of his nose. He had learned this trick after many hangovers—at which he had become an expert—and sometimes it worked and sometimes it did not. In this instance he did receive a small amount of relief.

His vision was not quite accessible and so he concentrated on who he was, where he was, and why he was there. He knew the who; where and why was a difficult proposition. He could make out a palm frond roof, dark planks of wood on the walls, a window to the left of him and a ceiling fan quietly whispering. Beside him was a table with a brass lamp, a glass pitcher full of, he guessed, water, and a glass. He grabbed the pitcher



and guzzled. He suddenly ached in every joint and he wanted to scream out in pain but all he could muster was a weak groan. The pitcher fell to the ground and he pushed his left leg to the floor and rolled over his shoulder until his knees were firmly on the ground and his torso leaning back on the bed. He heard a disembodied voice whisper behind him and he wondered if he were still in the dream. He struggled to stand. His clothing was drenched and he stammered back and forward until he turned and saw a shaded image of a black woman wearing white shorts and a navy blue blouse rush toward him. He held out his arms to her but he fell to his knees, held up by only his hands firmly grasping at the floorboards.

“Mr. Whitte. Be careful! The stitches!”

He pulled his head up and his brain collapsed and he vomited over his drenched shirt and fell face first into the contents of the hamburger and malt that he had consumed the night before.

Florida State Trooper Evan Rooster was about to call it a day. It had been a lazy shift, only having pulled over three drivers—all female and all with big ass tits and all by design. He didn't give them tickets, only warnings but the last one seemed to be unusually ditzy and so made her do a field sobriety test. Man, the sight of those monster tits when she bent down to touch her knees was just unbearable! What a cop had to do to alleviate the tedium. He'd be swinging by the Silver Slipper after his shift, that's for sure.

A blue Ford Focus suddenly burst by him like it was shot out of a cannon. He

pulled out from the pine forest lining the highway and accelerated to catch the speeding vehicle. He hadn't turned on his lights yet and he was really hoping that the driver would either slow when he or she saw him in their rearview or, if not, that it was a girl with big ass tits. The driver did slow but he felt the obligation to call in the tag number anyway. It had gotten dark and he hadn't seen the driver so who knew, it might be a drug dealer or a drunk-as-shit college student late to a frat party. Tallahassee was a normal mix of college kids and the weirdoes who flocked to every state capitol in the nation. It also had its fair share of drug dealers and if it was a dealer with a warrant he wouldn't mind bagging him though what a drug dealer would be doing in a Ford Focus was beyond him. After a few seconds, the radio crackled with the voice of the dispatcher, "Be advised that suspect is wanted as a material witness to murder. She may be armed. You are instructed to follow until FDLE can be dispatched."

Fuck, he'd have to deal with a Department of Law Enforcement dick head. As the Ford drew closer to Tallahassee it exited at a truck stop and pulled to a gas pump. Rooster followed her in and parked in a median just across from the filling station. A dark-haired woman emerged from the vehicle, shot a glance toward the Trooper's car and then entered the convenience store. Nope. Her tits were normal size.

Rooster called in and informed dispatch that the suspect was at the Seminole Food and Fuel on I-10 near Highway 90 east of Tallahassee. When asked to give a description of the suspect, he told dispatch that it was a Caucasian female, age 20 to 25, about five foot four or five, dark hair. Dispatch told Rooster that matched the description of the suspect.

"Hold tight. Special Agent Dan Magruder will be on site within five minutes."

A couple of minutes after Rooster replaced his mike a white Ford Crown Victoria pulled in beside him, facing the opposite direction so the drivers could see each other. The window was rolled down and a man in a button down shirt and slicked black hair stuck his head out toward Rooster.

“Howdy Trooper, Special Agent Magruder. I understand you found my witness?”

“Your witness?”

“Well, we had a report that she might be heading this way. I was put on call for her.”

“What region you out of.”

Magruder flicked his left thumb behind him. “Tallahassee, ‘course.”

“I know everyone that’s out of the Tallahassee region. I don’t know you.”

“Well, now you do. Tell me about the suspect.”

Rooster glanced back to the Ford Focus and saw that the girl had not returned from the store.

“I clocked her going at least 85 in a 65 on I-10 east of 291. I pulled up behind and called her in. She slowed to the speed limit. I was asked to follow, so I eased back and kept her in sight. What’s she wanted for?”

“She a material witness to a murder in The Bahamas.”

“You mean that Texas governor’s stepdaughter?”

“Yeah. That one.”

“Did she see it happen?”

“No, I don’t think so but I really haven’t been told much. Look, thanks for your

help. I'll take it from here."

"You sure you don't want backup? They say she might be armed."

"That's what I heard too." Magruder smiled and nodded in Rooster's direction.

"But you're about due for a break. I'm instructed to follow her for a while. We're hoping she'll be meeting up with another person wanted under the same warrant. You go on along now. I'll take her from here. Thanks for spotting her. I really didn't think we'd find her. You did a great job."

As Magruder pulled his car around the Trooper's patrol vehicle, Rooster mimicked masturbation with his right hand. "Yeah, whatever, fuck head," Rooster whispered and pulled out of the median and turned back to I-10.

Magruder pulled into the service station and up to the furthest gas pump from the suspect's car and got out and pretended to be filling up. After another five minutes, the suspect emerged from the convenience store and began pumping gas into her car. Just then an H2 Hummer pulled in between the two and Magruder couldn't watch her anymore. He replaced the pump, jumped back into his car and started his engine. After another four minutes, the Ford Focus pulled out and got back onto I-10 heading west to Tallahassee. She exited just past Tallahassee and went south on a small county road. This was good enough for Magruder. He placed the red-light globe on dashboard of the car and hit the siren. The Focus pulled over to the right onto a dirt shoulder and stopped. The occupant turned off the engine. Magruder got out of the car and slowly approached the driver's side of the vehicle, unclipping his holster and removing his revolver. The suspect had rolled down the window and was staring back at Magruder, blinded by the lights of the cop car.

She rested both of her hands on the car door. Magruder took aim and pulled the trigger.

The round entered the suspect's frontal lobe in her forehead and what was left of her head ricocheted off of the steering wheel.

Magruder returned to his car and removed a plastic bag containing a Smith & Wesson .38 Special. He put his gun into its holster and, with a handkerchief, wiped down the throw away gun. As he approached the suspect's vehicle, he began to mentally arrange the scene so that forensics would back him up.

“Goddamnit! I knew you were fucked. Put the weapon down!” screamed Rooster.

Magruder slowly turned back and saw Rooster, his gun aimed at Magruder, walking toward him, his patrol vehicle fifty yards behind on the dark desolate road.

“Hey, hey Trooper. This ain't how it looks. This girl drew down on me...”

“Put the fucking weapon on the ground now!”

Magruder smiled and waited just a few more seconds until Trooper Rooster drew near and then with the quickness of a viper, flipped his right hand up to grab the “suspect's” gun into his palm and fired directly at the Trooper, striking him in the same spot as he had the suspect. Rooster's weapon discharged but the bullet flew off into the woods to never be found and Rooster fell dead. Magruder smiled. Now he really had a reason to shoot the girl. She just shot poor ol' Rooster.

The Pinstriped Napoleon's flaming red hair was burning as he paced his office. He

was, as was his habit, twirling the Colt .45 Peacemaker in his hand.

“I want the sum bitch hanging from the nearest coconut tree in that gawd damned Banana Republic and I want that bastard Johnson right along side him.”

“At least you now control the trust,” the pretty boy Lieutenant Governor Dan McClatchy pointed out.

Richardson stopped his pacing and slowly turned to the man sitting in front of his desk. “You think that’s compensation for that girl’s life?” he said flatly. Richardson had never considered Abigail his own daughter, only referring to her as “that girl” most of the time but still, death was meaningless and in particular her death was unusually cruel and meaningless. He walked back to his desk and collapsed into the giant leather chair that engulfed him and made him appear even smaller than he was.

“I don’t think Dan was being insensitive,” interjected Frank Wright who was standing behind the desk, looking out into the fading sunset beyond the rows of live oaks leading to the Governor’s Mansion. “I think he was reminding you that you still have obligations.”

“Fuck my obligations,” Richardson stated clearly and then he placed the gun on his desk and swung around to face Wright. “And fuck the Group. I can just take the gawd damned money and fade away.”

Wright glanced over to McClatchy who gave a brief, solemn nod.

“Come on, Ryan. You know you don’t mean that. You’re set up for the presidency. In four years you’ll be sitting in the White House, as promised,” McClatchy said.

Richardson swung around quickly to face his successor. “Have you already chosen

your successor?" he asked rhetorically.

McClatchy didn't catch the sarcasm. "Sure. Mo Boucher. Ambitious little bastard and I think we can get him to sell out his buddy Whitte. If he does that, he's ours, the governing stream is kept intact."

Richardson groaned.

Wright had killed before; sometimes in the line of duty and other times on the behalf of his other employer but this would be his highest profile execution to date. He had already loaded the pistol without Richardson's knowledge and so he quickly pulled a latex glove on his left hand and grabbed the Peacemaker from Richardson's desk. As Richardson's peripheral vision caught the movement, he turned into the gun. It was quickly jammed into his mouth and the trigger pulled. McClatchy sprung from his chair, on cue, and ran to the door, yelling for Richardson's secretary who was sitting in the anteroom just outside the closed doors.

"My God, Doris, call nine-one-one! Get the troopers in here!"

Wright quickly placed the gun in Richardson's limp left hand and pulled the glove off and stuffed it into his jacket's pocket and then grabbed at the slumped body of the Governor, making sure to cover himself with his blood to mask any splatter from the exploding head. As the trooper burst into the room, gun drawn, Wright looked up with an Academy Award winning face of shock and screamed out, "I couldn't get to him in time! My God, I can't believe he did it!"

