

35 Operational Blunders

The black Crown Victoria approached from the direction of the Fort Lauderdale International Airport and rolled onto the oyster shell parking lot next to Bubba's Burger Shack. This was Tiffany Marks' neck of the woods—at least for the past year—and she knew the traffic flow and where she could run and blend into the surrounding neighborhood of rotting, aging stucco homes with overgrown gardens. This was an area in retreat and a place most people would not venture into at night but during the day, Bubba's was the favorite hole-in-the-wall for those who liked slumming it.

The man who got out of the car had bureaucracy written all over him: dark suit, starched white shirt with dark tie, black leather belt—with appropriate gut sneaking over it—and a pair of Ray Ban aviator sunglasses perched haphazardly on his nose. His hair had long ago receded into the sunset that left a crown of bushy salt and pepper mess lapping onto his ears.

The Chariot of Fire was parked along a small street next to a boarded-up shack. Johnson had a clear line of sight to the burger joint's wood deck where Tiffany sat on a picnic bench next to the railing, her back to the wall of the restaurant. The patio was stuffed full of yuppie-wanna-be's which provided ample cover for the meeting. Across the street to his left was an Hispanic male, 25 to 30, wearing a wife-beater and jeans five-times too big, tucked under his ass and held there with a thick leather belt. He was leaning on a telephone pole. Johnson, slunk low in the driver's seat, watched him conduct two separate drug deals.

He thought about flashing his badge when the guy came up to solicit but kept a cell phone nestled to his ear while gripping the silenced weapon tucked beneath his right thigh. Horse nodded him off.

“Yo loss, man,” he said as he shuffled back to his corner, his pants threatening to fall the rest of the way off.

Horse took the phone away from his ear. He didn’t need it, he had a Bluetooth crammed in his right ear.

“He’s here,” announced Tiffany into her Bluetooth earpiece hidden beneath her hair.

Horse craned his neck to get a better view of the parking lot. “Keep your cool.”

“You keep your fucking cool.” She turned and entered Bubba’s to order a couple of burgers and beers.

Inside the rotting shack was Bubba, sweat pouring from his greasy long gray hair and streaming into his unkempt grey beard as he toiled in front of a spattering griddle, tossing burgers onto the counter where he had set up buns. His burgers were made one way—mustard, all the way. You could vary with cheese or jalapeños but if you tried to add something like, say, alfalfa sprouts, Bubba would tell you to, “Get da fuck outta of my bidness. Next.” He claimed that he lost ten pounds a day through sweat—he could stand to lose about a hundred—but replenished it every night with a twelve-pack of Miller. He would die of a massive coronary one day soon and his burgers would be terribly missed for years to come but for now, he was still huffing and puffing.

Tiffany smiled, ordered the food and beers and paid in cash.

“Here you go, sweetheart,” Bubba said. He handed her the change, two beers and

gave her the order ticket and eyed her butt as she walked onto the rickety wood deck that surrounded the Burger Shack.

When she had arrived, she eyed a table next to the railing so if the shit hit the fan, she could slide off and hit the ground running. As she made her way to the table, a woman, who looked very much like her fifth grade teacher, Mrs. Parkington, slid into the table before she could get there. She had big hair, welded together with probably a whole can of hair spray, and a fluffy wide floral dress that covered her spongy girth. A plastic smile was plastered on her face.

“Excuse me,” Tiffany said to her, “would you mind if I take that table?”

“Why, yes I would,” she replied in that pathetically manufactured soothing voice meant to disarm students and parents alike.

“It doesn’t look like your eating.”

“I’m waiting for someone.” Another plastic smile.

Bitch, Tiffany mumbled, so she took the next best table, a large unstable picnic bench with deep cut graffiti institutionalized on the sticky top that was in front of Mrs. Bitch Parkington.

Jay Humphries was a wide man and as he squeezed between competing tables, he didn’t like the seating arrangement. He would prefer to have his back to the shack, instead of Tiffany, facing the parking lot and surrounding neighborhood but he realized that the Ranger was probably out there somewhere, watching so he’d have to trust him to watch his back. He also didn’t like having to squeeze into the picnic table. All the same, he smiled at Tiffany. “It’s been a rough couple of days on you, kid.”

“Yeah,” Tiffany admitted, “not the most fun I’ve ever had.”

“Ranger Johnson is listening in, I’m assuming?”

Tiffany nodded.

“Well, Ranger Johnson,” he said leaning in toward Tiffany, “on behalf of the Office of International Cooperation and the fucked up federal government, I extend my deepest and sincerest apologies for what has transpired over the past week and the danger in which you were unwittingly placed.” Humphries paused for a moment and Tiffany saw anger flash in his eyes before he regained composure. “I intend,” he said glaring at Tiffany, “to get to the bottom of this cluster fuck, A-sap.” He shifted in his seat and he calmed some. “I can order you off this right now but I’m not going to. I’m going to leave it up to you.”

Tiffany took one of the beers and handed it to her boss. His eyes twinkled at her. He knew he wasn’t going to succeed in getting her to come in. Still, he had to try.

“Ranger Johnson I have absolutely no say in what you do. I’ve spoken to Captain Jorge Cantu and he says, as always, you do what you need to. I had a frank discussion with him and we both agree you’re a damn fine peace officer—one of the best he has—and that’s a reasonable facsimile of what he said.”

“Tell him to stop blowing smoke up our ass and get to the point,” Horse said into his phone.

Tiffany chuckled, “That’s just his way, Horse.

“What?” Humphries said with his eyebrow cocked, “He wants me to cut the crap?”

Tiffany nodded, “In so many words, yes.”

Humphries laughed. “Okay, Johnson, this is how I see your options: You can take

a paid leave, courtesy the state of Texas, and go to one of the FBI's protected areas and wait to see what shakes out. Whoever came after you wanted your mouth shut. I've got a U.S. Marshall who'll take your testimony. You can pass on copies of all evidence you've accumulated—and notice I said copies so you don't have to worry about evidence disappearing—and go on one mother of a vacation on the fed's dime. Give us a chance to clean this shit up. You can take anyone you'd like and any amount of weaponry you deem necessary that would make Rambo blush.”

“Tempting,” Horse said.

“I'll give you another option for your consideration in a moment. As for you, young lady,” he motioned at Tiffany, “You've been in the cold too long. I don't want to lose you on this damned fool's errand so I recommend option number one along with the Ranger. Go work on your tan—though you look like you've already had too much sun—and let me bring this one in for a landing.”

“Order twenty-six,” bellowed Bubba.

Tiffany glanced down at her ticket. “I'll get it. You want ketchup?”

“Affirmative,” Humphries said.

As she got up, Horse said to her over the phone, “You hear that?” he said. “That's my damn stomach growling.”

Tiffany laughed. “I'll bring you a burger when we're done.”

“You know, I'd like to know what Humphries has behind curtain number two.”

“Yeah, me too.”

With Tiffany gone, Humphries took a moment to recon the area with casual eyes. With a slight turn of his head he saw a beat-up piece of shit rust bucket parked on the corner of the cross street and saw a black man slouched low in the driver's seat: Johnson. Before he came, he had reviewed all of the pertinent case and operational files and had seen that Tiffany had emptied the emergency fund. Maybe they should have gotten a better car. But it blended in. Probably a good choice.

He spied the punk across from Johnson's car. He didn't like the looks of him but according to Jorge Cantu, Johnson's boss, the Ranger was one of the best so Humphries would just have to trust his back was covered. If something happened, he was a bit too large and old to slip under the railing so he'd have to move towards Bubba's shack, straight in front of him.

The person who troubled him was the frumpy-looking woman facing him. She was at the table he would have selected for this meet and she kept looking over at him and Tiffany when they spoke. She was out of place. The crowd was a mix of locals and business professionals who came over from the business park five blocks away. This woman didn't look like she worked in business nor did she appear to be a local. She looked like a fucking teacher. He hated teachers. His wife had been one for twenty years. Maybe that's why he hated teachers. He was a year out from retirement; what the hell would he and his wife do then? Tiffany returned.

“We want to know what’s behind curtain number two,” Tiffany said, handing Humphries his burger and fries. She set the bottle of ketchup in front of him.

“Okay, story time. First I need another beer.” Humphries turned to the opened window that faced the porch, “Hey, Bubba, beer me.”

Bubba shot an irritated glance out the window, “Beer your fucking self. Two bucks.”

Humphries wiggled out of the table and walked over to the window. He glanced down at the teacher. She was busy with an e-book reader. He tossed a couple of bucks on the counter and Bubba handed him the beer. Again, he looked down at the teacher. She had a purse held close to her right thigh, within reach of her hand.

He sat back down.

“Once upon a time,” Humphries began as he got settled again, “there was a young ambitious man who made a pact with the devil. Robert Whitte was the young man and a fellow by the name of Ali Al-Fa’sad was the devil.”

Tiffany interrupted with a mouth full of burger, “Who’s that?”

“Egyptian financier, a real slimy son of a bitch but I’ll get to that.” He took a swig of the beer. “You know about the Spencer deal, how he set up Whitte with his oil company. Well, Spencer had ties to the CIA, did some work with their predecessor during the Second World War. During the Cold War, he fronted them cash in the fifties and sixties, a real patriot,” he said with a hint of sarcasm. “Things turned more formal when he started running money through his corporate concerns to hot spots. As time progressed, these hot

spots were increasingly oil and gas producing regions. It's one of the reasons he helped set up Whitte Oil and Gas and that was the wink-wink agreement he had with Robert Whitte. Whitte was uncomfortable with it but he was pumped up with the term 'patriot' and that seemed to keep his curiosity in check. What they were doing was technically illegal but of course everyone turned the blind eye. Now, Spencer was into some strange alliances outside of this arrangement."

"Strange as in what?" Tiffany interjected.

"Philanthropy."

"Charity?"

"Some differences. Philanthropy goes beyond just giving to the needy; it gets into the root societal causes of the less fortunate."

"Sounds good," Horse piped in.

"Now, let's say there's a small tribe in deepest, darkest Africa. Sure, you've always got some starving people there but this particular tribe is so lost in a flea bitten corner of hell that nobody has heard of them and even fewer give a shit. So, the solution is to get these people some food and then, as the Good Book says, teach them how to make bread.

"Well, that's not the type of philanthropy Spencer and his buddies did and, after his death, still do. The *good work* they do is to eliminate the scourge of humanity. They see the world as a lifeboat and these poor souls in Africa are too far gone and can't be saved; better to eject them to save the rest so they spend money to keep the people under wraps, keep food from getting to them, segregate them and wait for them to die off."

Tiffany shifted in her seat as Horse said something undecipherable. "That can't be

what Robert Whitte was involved in,” she stated.

“Absolutely not. Whitte thought what he was doing was helping the U.S. win the Cold War. He wore a U.S. flag pin in his lapel, he was helping save the world for democracy.”

“Ask him what this is all about?” Horse mumbled.

“Bottom line, Jay?”

He held up his hands to be patient. “The CIA project was shut down in the early eighties. Priorities changed, the CIA was starting to be tasked for other focal points. Spencer, and to a lesser extent WO and G, had money flowing into Europe, the Middle East, Asia, Africa, etcetera. Spencer saw an opportunity to expand upon his *charitable* work, so he reversed the flow. They had all of the channels set up so it was rather easy to do. Money does a lot of things but as was learned in Watergate, follow the money. What this set-up did was allow money to be untraceable.

“Say a corporate interest in Britain wanted to influence something in the U.S., they send the money through the pipeline and nothing would ever be traced back to them. Regime change in a small Latin American country? Money comes in from France and distributed to American front causes. An Egyptian group wants to contribute to the annihilation of a tribe in Africa, boom.”

“So fifty million buys a lot,” Tiffany commented.

“You found the irregularities in Whitte Industries.” Humphries had a sense of pride. He’d taught her well. “That’s chump change. Try five hundred million. WI is a drop in the bucket compared to the other companies and charities set up in this system. All designed to

hide the true contributors. There are also corporate entities established in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia to facilitate the flow *from* America. And they can saturate this money ten times through to make sure it's really sanitized."

"Sounds like there has to be some centralization to all of this," Tiffany theorized.

"Nope. It's all very diluted. This is like a pipeline that any member can use."

"Members?" Horse asked.

"Who all is involved?"

"Don't know." Humphries replied. "But that's why it's been so successful. No one knows."

Johnson asked, "Didn't the CIA know?"

"What about the CIA, Jay?" Tiffany relayed.

"Out of their control. They didn't know about most of this, never took a look. Why would they? They don't do domestic law enforcement and, frankly, neither does OIC. But there were a few in the CIA that did take a look and they were pretty much laughed out of the agency."

"Mark?" Tiffany asked.

"Bennetti?" Horse chimed in.

"Later, Horse," Tiffany said into the Bluetooth.

"Yeah, Mark was one of them." Humphries confirmed.

"So what's happening now?"

"It's what you two fell into, Tiffany." Humphries took a swig of beer. "I'm struggling to get up to speed myself. A year before Robert Whitte died, he sent a friend of

mine, his right-hand man, George Croswell; knew him from college. He told me this story and I thought he was full of shit. I did my research; Robert Whitte was gaining a reputation of being a little flighty, like he was beginning to lose touch with reality—kind of Howard Hughes-ish in his final days. I advised George to keep a lid on any accusation about money laundering because they had no evidence. Sure, you could clearly see it in the financials but the only people who could be indicted would be Whitte and Croswell and anyone else within Whitte Industries who knew what was happening.

“But I did do one thing he asked: I bought their enterprise software system for OIC. I was trying to get a handle on where our assets were being used and who was using them and their Mirage and Triage system was perfect for that.”

“Then Robert died,” Tiffany said, trying to move the conversation along.

“In hindsight, I’m guessing murdered but there was no crash site, no wreckage, and no body, no investigation; all swallowed up into the Gulf of Mexico.”

“Is that when he became interested in all of this?” Horse asked.

“Obviously,” Tiffany commented.

“The answer is no if the Ranger asked when I got involved. I didn’t put anything together when he went missing. What Whitte maintained, through George, was that he knew nothing about any of this until the early eighties when the CIA started pulling out.”

“So,” Tiffany asked, “why didn’t he pull out of the arrangement?”

“He didn’t own WO and G outright. At least not then. When he confronted Spencer and Spencer did tell him the truth, Whitte told Spencer to buy him out. Spencer refused but he did tell Whitte that he’d give him a year to raise the capital to buy WO and G. Spencer

wasn't a fool. He knew that it would be almost impossible for Whitte to do so because anyone he would find to buy Spencer's share would want an independent audit and the money laundering by both Spencer's group and the CIA would be found. And you know the CIA wouldn't go with that."

Johnson was finding it difficult to keep his attention on the surrounding neighborhood while becoming engrossed in Humphries tale. The punk holding up the phone pole had received a call on his cell phone and had meandered down the street behind him. Horse had adjusted the mirrors so the whole street was visible. He also had a great vantage to spot activity on the cross street on both sides. It had all been quiet. Honestly, he didn't know why they were all paranoid. No one had followed Tiffany and him and no one had come when Humphries had arrived. All of the characters had been here when they had arrived an hour before.

"Timeline-wise," Tiffany said, "when the CIA pulled out was about the time Jack went to Belize."

"Yep. About a year after Spencer gave Whitte a year to come up with the money to buy him out. That's when Al-Fa'sad enters the picture. Spencer was getting old. He married a woman to get her pregnant to produce an heir but obviously it was too little too late—I hear he wasn't much of a lady's man. Al-Fa'sad was in this group and came in to

run the day-to-day of Spencer's dealings. He was behind the kidnapping and torture of Jack and ransomed him back to Robert to keep the status quo. Whitte negotiated a new deal. He would begin new companies that would be used as the laundering vehicle and WO and G would be spun off for Jack to run some day. He told them he wanted Jack completely out."

"They agreed?"

"Sure. It kept the status quo."

"Ask him where he's getting this intel from."

"Horse wants to know where you got your stories from."

"George Crosswell, as I said. There are other sources but I can't disclose them."

"So," Tiffany surmised, "Robert agrees to the new situation and everything is running along smoothly. But he still has a hit of conscious so he starts pushing; he sends Crosswell to you and then ends up dead. So why is all of this happening now, four years after Robert Whitte dies?"

"I spoke to George about two weeks ago. He told me that Jack had received some strange letter about knowing what happened in Belize. George asked me if I could check it out and I agreed. I had it analyzed. Nothing came of it. We also discussed this lawsuit the Spencer Trust filed and how he believed it was meant to keep WI from going public."

"But that doesn't make sense," Tiffany interjected. "If Crosswell knew about the money laundering then that means Jack does as well."

Humphries shook his head. "I don't know what Whitte's son knows and doesn't know. George told me that it was in Whitte's will for Jack to sell off WI, piecemeal or all

together in an IPO.”

Tiffany stated, “But Crosswell would know that would set off a shit storm.”

Humphries nodded. “Almost like it was planned,” he said with a grim face.

“So when did Humphries get involved?” Johnson asked.

Tiffany paused, then waved him off. “Why didn’t they just kill Jack?”

“I think that might be in the cards. All of this seems to be directed at Jack White, maybe to put pressure on him to step aside. But backing up for a moment, if Jack knew that others jointly owned WI, whether it is Spencer’s Trust or some other entity, why would he follow his father’s instructions? That’s the part that doesn’t make sense to me.” Humphries looked frustrated.

“So now I need to ask: Why did Mark get involved?”

“I didn’t know Mark was involved, at least not right away. It was an OIC personnel operation through the FBI. Frank Wright was running it from OIC’s perspective and he brought Mark in.”

Horse grumbled in Tiffany’s ear. She said to Humphries “There’s that name again. Horse has had problems with this man but I’ve never heard of him.”

“No?” Humphries asked.

“No,” Tiffany replied.

“He’s OIC.” Humphries eyes went glassy, as he tried to recall details. “I reviewed this case through Magic. It was stated in the pre-op plan that there was a need to solicit cooperation from Jack White concerning money laundering and potential ties to terrorism. There were two teams, one that was auditing White Industries’ financial dealings through

infiltration into the accounting systems and the other—yours—to gain his confidence. You were specifically requested because of your physical similarities to Abigail Spencer and your particular knowledge of the Whitte family. Of course I did not know the op was being run until it blew up.”

“Why the hell didn’t he know?” Horse shouted into his phone.

“Because that’s how OIC operates,” Tiffany told him. “Go on, Jay.”

Humphries cracked a slight grin, “That is the nature of this particular beast, Johnson. It’s why it needs to be shut down.” He hung his head. “The operation was instigated by a Special Agent Marcus Kerdi in a counter-terrorism unit in the FBI.” He looked back up at Tiffany. “All of the procedures were followed including the encrypted key from the FBI authorizing this operation. The problem is that there is no Marcus Kerdi that works in the FBI let alone anywhere in the government and no one at the FBI can find out who provided the encryption key to get into Magic.”

“I knew fucking Wright was bad,” Horse said.

“So, Tiffany, it’s your turn,” Humphries stated. “Tell me your end. What were your operational instructions?”

