

## Chapter 18 The Warehouse

The walk to the BM3 warehouse covers three blocks. The night is hot, humid. There is a full moon, but no breeze. It would be so easy to turn the other direction and meet Dare and Amy at Hopjacks. A cold beer and two beautiful women to share pizza with really sounds good.

I continue walking towards the bay. I try calling the girls to let them know where I'm headed, but my battery is dead. Idiot.

Sunday nights are quiet downtown. The only action is around New York Nick's and Hopjacks. There is no traffic. Even the bums take the night off.

Bruce Manchester. Mr. Pensacola Chamber of Commerce, Mr. Republican who sat on the stage with President George W. Bush when he campaigned in the Pensacola Civic Center. Could he really be behind all this? Polk's property would hamper any redevelopment plan, if it wasn't included. Everyone was expecting millions to be made as downtown Pensacola expanded westward when the treatment plant is demolished.

Manchester likes money. No, he loves money. Such a grand project would win him favor and publicity for revitalizing Pensacola. It would put him in position to run for Congress in two years if Jeff Miller retires as he promises.

Congressman Bruce Manchester. My stomach aches just thinking about it.

Where is Sheriff Frost in all this? A land grab and murder, even accidental, isn't his style. Too many chances it would backfire on him. Manchester is a big Frost supporter, but how much does it cost to have someone tazed and beaten to death? I'm starting to sound like the conspiracy nuts who send in letters to editor on the Trilateral Commission, the Masons and UFOs. I'll need to be fitted for a tinfoil helmet if I keep this up.

The warehouse is a two-story brick building that covers an entire block. Painted on the side are the faded words "Pensacola Mercantile Company." The first floor is a series of bricked in loading bays that during the 1800s handled wagons of merchandise loaded off the ships. An abandoned rail spur runs on the east side of the building. The only windows are on the south side where I see a window A/C unit that's running. There is a light on upstairs. A Volvo and Dodge Ram pick-up are parked by a side door.

I have no idea what model car Manchester drives, but I assume the Volvo is his. I walk over and check to see if the car or truck doors are unlocked. On the seat of the pick-up I see what looks like a Taser stun gun. As I reach for the door handle, something hits my head hard, and a beefy arm flings a strap around my chest pinning my arms to my side.

I try to fight back and got another vicious thump on the head. My body goes limp and I barely hold onto to consciousness. "Your ass is mine," I hear him growl as he lifts me over his shoulder and carries me into the building.

I am aware of being toted up stairs like a 50-lb. bag of dog food. I am aware of having my ankles bond together with thick plastic cable ties and of being dragged across a shag carpet and dropped in a metal chair with arms, something you'd see in an office on a military base.

“Strap ‘em down,” a tinny, red neck voice says, and a large strap is tightened across my chest that pins him to the chair. Cable ties tie my arms down on the arms of the chair. I can't hold my head up or focus. There's a blurry blob standing between me and a desk. Someone is sitting behind the desk. My ears are ringing, and I feel myself fading. The blob slaps me.

“No, you don't. We need your full attention,” the blob says. It's a squeaky voice. I almost smile, but catch myself. “Tucker, well done. Leave the wrench on the desk. Go back downstairs and see if he brought any company with him.”

“Sure.” If that's Tucker, then blob must be Sgt. Allen. The temporary mist clears, I wake to a head full of curses and near immobility. I am at the mercy of the man who killed George Polk. I'm marooned on a desert island with killers. There is someone else in the room, at the desk, but I can't see who he is. Allen and a computer monitor are blocking my line of sight.

Allen is squealing at me. He's angry, very angry, but inexplicably he also seems frightened.

“What are you doing here, Holmes?” he demands. He looms over me. I still can't hold my head up, but I can smell his Brut after-shave and cigarettes on his breathe. He has a big bald head that is nearly touching my forehead. All his features are slightly oversized—big nose, big eyes, wide forehead, square jaws, big mouth and huge neck. My guess is he's at forty, maybe a little younger.

“Answer,” he screams. “What are you doing here?” He pulls by head back by my hair. “You are one big pain in the ass.”

I don't reply. Not sure I can put a complete sentence together yet. Allen reaches behind him and snatches up the wrench and makes as if to hit me again. He stops short of taking another swing at my noggin. We both realize connecting again with my skull won't likely yield any answers. Allen throws the wrench back on the desk. I hear its thud and wonder how much more damage it could do to me. I resist a shudder.

The straps around my chest, arms and legs have no give. They are the same straps and ties the SWAT team uses on its raids to subdue suspects. I see more ties on the edge of the desk. Still can't recognize who is watching all this from the other side of the desk.

Allen is wearing a short-sleeved blue shirt, several buttons undone, displaying a hairy chest, gold chain and medallion. The shirt is untucked over pair of dirty jeans.

I really want to talk. People who suffer mild concession can prattle off incessantly, according to my doctor friends. It takes an effort to suppress this impulse. It's essential I fight off the urge to vomit out everything in my head. Allen doesn't know how to handle me. I silently count the buttons on his shirt and blank him out so as not to blurt out anything.

"This," Allen says with contempt as he points to me, "is Walker Holmes."

"This, Mr. Manchester," Allen continues with biting sarcasm. "is the feeble jerk you've spent months shouting about. This! You said he was dangerous! Look at 'em! All those big guns from New Orleans to frighten a mouse."

Bruce Manchester is who is sitting at the desk. Hope he is enjoying the show. Manchester pushes aside the computer monitor. I can see his little head with its small nose, mouth and sandy mustache. He pushes his large, gold framed glasses up on his noses. His eyes are blazing. He won't hesitate to take another whack at me with the wrench.

"What the hell are you doing here, Holmes?" Manchester shouts. "Why are you breaking into my warehouse?"

I have this overwhelming urge to spill out everything. I know what you're doing Manchester. I know you wanted the Polk property. These thugs killed him while trying to get him to sign over the residence. I now understand the overwhelming urge criminals have to confess. The itch to unload nearly overrules my fear of retribution.

"Answer," yells Allen. He picks up the wrench and slams down on my right leg, slightly above the knee cap. I snap back my head and bite my lip until I taste blood. "Answer, you turd."

"That's enough for godsakes," Manchester tells Allen. He turns and softly says, "Walker, we need to know what you know. My nephew is a violent man. He and his friend take their security job here seriously."

His nephew? Manchester thinks he can talk his way out of this, making this seem like some misunderstanding over trespassing. "Walker, we have had some break-ins. Tucker didn't recognize you."

"Cut off these ties." My voice is firmer, than I thought it would be. Neither Allen or Manchester take a step towards me. They aren't ready to let me go.

"Why were you snooping around our vehicles?"

Neither of these two men, listening to them, are full-blown criminals. Not yet, but Allen is on the brink. He's probably lost his job at the jail, even though I'm sure Manchester has been trying to cut a deal with Frost to find some place for his nephew.

Allen still is holding the wrench, slapping it head occasionally against his palm, as if it helps his thoughts. He's trying to decide whether to swing at my head, gut or knee caps.

"Please cut these straps," I say. Maybe I can talk my way out of this.

Manchester might have done it. He is clearly disturbed by this level of violence. I don't think he really understood how violent his nephew is. Manchester isn't a physical person, unless you count hitting a golf ball. He doesn't hunt. He doesn't fish. My guess is Allen is his nephew on his wife's side of the family.

"Shut up," Allen snaps, still slapping the wrench against his palm. I ignore him and stare at Manchester. "You were sneaking around here because you don't know nothin'. You're liberal, bleeding heart, wimp."

"A wimp!" yells Manchester.

Despite the wrench being precariously near my exposed body, I smile involuntarily at the incredulity in his voice. Manchester knows better. I'm reliving high school football career. Damn, if I will fold in front of this sack of horse manure.

"This wimp has destroyed people with his pin. He's a goddamn pit bull that never lets go. When he has nothing or no one on his side, this wimp keeps coming at you."

He steps away from the desk and walks towards me. I stop smiling. He puts his face close to mine. "Still the fearless Walker Holmes, aren't you? Cunning. Nerveless. Merciless. Refusing to back down."

There is nothing I can say. Manchester turns his back. Allen sucker punches me and knocks my chair over. Stars, I actually see stars. A heavy boot kicks the air out of me. I think he might have broken a rib. Allen is laughing. I lose count of the kicks. Through a swollen right eye, I see Allen raise the wrench above his head. I try to move away. Manchester pushes Allen away, probably saving my life.

"No more!" Tucker comes into the room. The fall and shouting must have alarmed him. He effortlessly picks my chair up and sits me up straight. Tucker stands silently behind me.

"I know about the LLCs and the land purchases," I say in a voice much stronger than I feel. The room goes dead still. Manchester slumps into the chair behind the desk. Allen just glares. Tucker is probably wondering what is on Nickelodeon.

"George Polk wasn't supposed to die. Was he, Bruce?" Manchester isn't even looking at me. He is staring blankly down at the desk and shakes his head, no. "The Shocker Brothers were to get Polk to sign over the property when he was drugged in the infirmary. You probably even offered him a fair price for it."

“The only problem was Polk wouldn’t take his meds and kept flushing the documents down the toilet,” hisses Allen. “That black sonabitch was too crazy to even sign his name.”

I don’t look at him. Instead I stay focused Manchester. “Bruce, this has gotten out of control. Your nephew is an animal. Tucker is along for the ride. You can end this.”

Allen nods at Tucker. I move my head in time to miss the wrench. I take the blow on my bicep as my chair follows over. The chair absorbs some of the blow. Allen charges forward and lands another kick in my ribs. Tucker has a clear shot at my head with the wrench.

Just then cops burst into the room shouting, “Freeze! Back away.” Tucker turns towards the officers, not lowering the wrench. He is tasered. I smile and think karma really is a bitch as I pass out.