

Chapter 4

“Walker, you are killing us with this Bowman Hines crap,” Chloe Hendricks says as she throws her sales reports onto the conference table. “Three more ad cancelations for next week.”

Hendricks is the sales director, marketing head and copy editor for the Pensacola Insider. Bright, determined, opinionated and vocal. An Insider staff meeting is always a battle—few casualties, but lots of alliances, attacks, retreats and regrouping of forces.

“It’s your paper,” she adds as she sits down with Teddy and Mal Taulbert, my art director and production manager, my A&E writer Jeremy Holt and Doug Yoste, my investigator reporter. “I hope you know what you’re doing.”

The Taulberts and Yoste sit this one out. Mal is smiling while she looks down at her notes. She, our resident Goth, is a sadist...but only when it comes to watching office battles. I can’t tell if she’s picked a side yet.

Holt, who has been slamming down Starbucks in between cigarette breaks, is on such a caffeine high that he is chomping at the bit to jump in. He will take Hendricks side

“I can’t get anyone to return my calls anymore,” Holt says. “Even the art galleries don’t seem interested in getting a story in our paper.”

“Shut up, Jeremy,” I say. “Get off your ass and walk down the street to the theatre or clubs. Take Teddy with you to take photos.”

“Yeah, Jeremy, whoever heard of an A&E writer that’s afraid to listen to bands in person?” Mal interjects, looks like I have one ally, for now.

“Don’t tell me to shut up,” Jeremy tells me before he directs his bravado at our production manager. “I’m not afraid.”

“Yeah, right.” Mal has ended that discussion. We won’t hear again from Holt for the rest of the meeting. Chloe is another matter.

I tell her and the rest of the staff, “We’ve been here before, guys. The story was the right thing to do. Hines is a fake and stole half a million dollars. We can never hide from the truth.”

“But it’s my commissions,” Hendrick says, not wanting to give up just yet.

“Chloe, we have our ‘Best of the Coast’ issue next month,” I tell her. “We will make this up and besides the trial will be over by then.” We normally sell about fifty grand worth of ads in the issues that lists the best restaurants, shops and businesses in Northwest Florida. Chloe knows it.

Big Boy walks into the conference room and puts his head in her lap. She shrugs and starts petting the dog. Argument over...for now.

The staff knows about Sue Hines death. I fill them in on the details I got from Gordon, without telling them about the confrontation with Jace Wittman.

The cover story for next week will be on the petition drive against the maritime park. Yoste walks us through the other stories ideas that he and I have discussed: gang violence in the middle schools, a county commissioner getting contracts for an aide's husband, photos of nude women being forwarded between city staff and Sheriff Ron Frost's last hunting trip.

"Scott, you will have a difficult time interviewing Wittman," I say. "I'm not one of his favorite people."

"Walker, I've already got him to answer to a few questions," Yoste says, "and, yes, he hates you. Me? He likes."

Yoste is two years out of the journalism school at the University of Florida. After working for the Tampa Tribune for 18 months, he missed his hometown and its fishing. The Herald wasn't interested, but Scott has filled a huge hole in our paper.

"Will you make deadline?" Mal says. She is the gatekeeper. More of a managing editor than production manager. Her tattooed and pierced husband lays out all the articles, designs the covers and does most of the photography. Mal designs the ads, determines the space for the editorial and the ads and sends it all to the printer by 5 p.m. on Tuesday ...that is if Yoste turns in his copy on time.

Holt is never the problem. If there is a hold up, it will be Yoste. Good reporter, good writer, but slow.

Only thing that Jeremy contributes to the discussion is that he will have his articles in by noon Friday. Everyone ignores him and lets him pout.

"Ted, get with Scott on the cover. Mal, I will want more room for my column and plan on the Letters to the Editor to be longer than usual. We will print all the hate mail that is legible. Chloe, email me the list who has cancelled. I will call or visit them by Friday."

Meeting adjourned. Big Boy heads back to the couch. The rest of us go check our emails.

The Insider office is one large space with exposed. ancient bricks and lined with windows that faced Palafox and Intendencia Streets. There are two small bathrooms and a break room that doubles as a conference room. On the floor above is my and Big Boy's loft apartment. Below is Frank's Pizzeria

The building has been around since the mid-1800's. Before we moved in, it was a punk club where Green Day, The Wallflowers and numerous less memorable bands played on their way to Atlanta, New Orleans, Orlando or Austin. Before that, it was a jazz club that hosted Al Hirt and Fats Domino. Before that, my barber Eddie tells me that it was a "high class" strip club...which I think means the strippers had all their teeth. And before that, nobody remembers what it was.

I and most people who visit our office love the feel of the place. Governors, senators and anyone seeking national, state or local office have walked into this place at one time or another. There aren't any desks. Everyone, other than me, works on folding tables. Papers are spread everywhere. The covers of old issues cover the walls. The entire staff faces out towards the center of the room.

The space looks a like an office of an underdog, alt-weekly should. It's cool.

My head is killing me. The caffeine isn't helping. I leave the office and walk past Blazzues to Jackson Tower to visit with Dare. She is expecting me to tell her about Sue's death, I can't do it in an email or over the phone.

Evans Timber & Land Company owns Jackson Tower that looms at end of the Palafox Street and overlooks Pensacola Bay. In 1903, it was the tallest building in Florida. Only two taller buildings have been built in Pensacola since then. When I get off the elevator, I nod at the young receptionist and walk through a maze of cubicles filled with real estate agents back to Dare's corner office.

Dare's spacious office has a spectacular view of Pensacola Bay. You can see Pensacola Beach, the Gulf of Mexico and the Naval Air Station in the distance. There is huge Oriental rug on the floor. One wall has mahogany bookcases filled with books. Behind Dare's desk is a portrait of Rory, smiling like he owned the world...which he did.

Under the portrait are silver tray with a bottle of Jack Daniels, Cutty Sark and a set of crystal glasses and Rory's prized possession the football from Ole Miss's 1969 Sugar Bowl victory over Arkansas, autographed by Johnny Vaught and Archie Manning.

Dare looks up from her desk and smiles as I walk in. I lean over place a kiss on her pale, porcelain cheek and sit in leather chair by the bookcase. Maybe a sip of the Cutty Sark will relieve my headache.

She sits quietly as I relay what Gordon told me earlier in the morning. When I finish, Dare turns her chair away from me and stares out her window at sailboats in the bay. I sit and wait.

When she turns back to me, Dare wipes her checks with the back of right hand, holds back her head and shakes off the remaining tears.

“Do you think it was an accidental overdose?” she asks.

I shrug. “It’s possible, Dare, and maybe the Medical Examiner will even say that happened. I don’t know.”

“Walker, she was the old Sue when we were at Jackson’s (Pensacola’s fine dining spot that overlooks Ferdinand Plaza) on Monday. We didn’t talk about you, but she believed Bo would be acquitted.”

“So does much of this town,” I say.

“No, no, no...that’s not my point,” Dare says. “Sue had no reason to kill herself.”

“Maybe something changed since Monday...”

“No, dammit, Walker, Sue wouldn’t kill herself,” Dare yells. “You have got to back me on this.”

Dare starts to cry again and turns her chair away from me. She is tough. Rory had two brothers. Both let her run the family empire.

I think, but don’t ask—who would kill Sue Eaton Hines?

“Dare, I will check it out, but the family and her friends aren’t going to make it easy.”

She doesn’t turn around to face me. “No one else can find the truth. Please, Walker.”

“Okay” is all I can say, and I leave.

And my next trick will be to teach Big Boy to whistle.

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