

## DEADLINE

### Chapter 1

The first sound Franklin Murray hears while he sleeping in his cell is the shower running.

"Who would be in the shower at 1 a.m., dammit?" Murray thinks. Then he remembers this is the Escambia County jail. It must be time for someone's attitude adjustment. After all, the Shocker Brothers, those assholes Allen and Tucker, are on duty tonight.

"Who's their victim this time?" he wonders. He hopes it isn't that old trucker George Polk. Polk couldn't take much more "special treatment" from Allen and Tucker. The elderly black man had almost completely shutdown since his last go around with those two jail supervisors. Polk now spends most of this time mumbling to himself.

Then flashes of light come from the shower area - almost as bright as lightning. Each is followed by screams and Allen's high-pitched laughter. Two, three, four times.

Then the screams stop.

"Oh, shit!" Murray hears Allen shout. Then Allen yells, "Ed, go get a chair and some straps."

The water is cut off. Murray hears Allen cursing under his breathe, but no other sounds come from the showers.

Murray is scared to look up from his jail bunk. He hears Tucker return with the emergency restraint chair. The chair is favorite tool of the jail infirmary. It's intended to help control combative, self destructive or potentially violent detainees, but here it is just another form of punishment. Murray had taken his turn in the ER chair.

A few minutes after Tucker passes his cell, Murray peers over the edge of his bunk and out into the hallway. He sees Allen and Tucker dragging a chair with a wet, naked black man strapped to it. A white towel is draped over the Polk's head. The head is flopping sideways. The body is lifeless.

Murray squeezes his eyes shut, not making a sound. He doesn't want Allen or Tucker to know he's awake. He hears the door to Polk's cell open and then shut.

The next morning when Murray marches past Polk's cell on his way to breakfast. He peaks in. Polk sits naked, strapped to a chair, his back to the hallway. His head is slumped forward. The guards don't seem to notice anything out of the ordinary. No one says anything.

---

A week after Franklin Murray was peaking into George Polk's cell, I wake to the sound of trash haulers banging the dumpsters behind the office as they empty them.

I lift my head off the pillow. The bedside clock says "4:58." ESPN Sports Center is blaring on the television at the foot of the bed. Since the funeral, I haven't slept well. When I lie down, my head fills with problems, guilt, lies I've told, lies I'm going to have tell, and how am I going to keep this paper afloat another week. I tried listening to music but I would start to sing along or just lie there waiting for the next tune to play. ESPN seems to work the best. No infomercials for weight loss, acne creams or videos of drunken girls baring their chests. Just sports and talking heads.

I find the remote under the sheets, turn off the tube and stumble down the stairs from my loft apartment to my office area on the second floor.

One of the perks of being the publisher of an alternative weekly newspaper, Pensacola Insider, is I get to live above the offices of the paper. One of the negatives is I'm never that far from my work. Publishing a weekly newspaper is like dancing with a six ton elephant on crack - you never stop dancing.

The paper is in my blood. I don't mind the pace. Tried to vacation once. Ended up fighting with the hotel management over my trying to interview the housekeepers. I just can't turn it off.

This morning is no different. I fire up my computer and pour myself a cup of coffee from the coffeemaker that's on a timer. Big Boy, my six-year-old chocolate brown mutt plops himself on the couch next across from desk.

I crank up Les Miserables on the CD player. I sip my coffee and surf the web on computer perusing the top Florida papers - Miami Herald, St. Petersburg Times, South Florida Sun-Sentinel, Florida Times Union, Orlando Sentinel and Tallahassee Democrat. I save articles that catch my interest or email them to Dennis Grantham, our news editor, for later discussion. Sometimes I can spend over an hour reading online, but this is Monday -traditionally a slow news day.

I finish my coffee and my reading and put on my running shoes. Big Boy goes crazy - darting back and forth. He can't wait to go outside. He retrieves his leash from a basket in the corner and drops it at my feet. As soon as I attach the leash to his collar he drags me downstairs to the back door of the office.

Once the door is open, Big Boy is pulling me down Jefferson Street toward Pensacola Bay. I'm forced to run. The only saving grace is that he stops every two minutes to sniff a weed in the sidewalk or wiz on a tree. There's no traffic, except for a few skinny shirt-less runners. They either ignore me or snicker as they pass Big Boy and me.

I'm dressed in ripped old khaki shorts, my Trader Jon t-shirt and my LA Dodger baseball cap. I'm not wheezing, but it doesn't take much to get me breathing hard. I ignore the real runners and imagine Big Boy taking a bite out of their bony asses.

The sun is breaking on the horizon. It's so humid that my t-shirt is soaked after two blocks. The air is heavy. I fill like I have a plastic bag over my head. There is no breeze coming off the bay. All you can hear is the hum of air conditioner units and that damn trash hauler emptying dumpsters, now thankfully in the distance. I smell the saltwater as we near Pensacola Bay.

We race, walk, jog and stagger along the bay takes about forty minutes. When we get back to offices, we climb to my loft. I pour Big Boy his food and water. I jump into the shower and plan my morning under the hot water.

Mondays and Tuesdays are our long days. Ads are designed, approved and placed on the pages. Articles are written, edited and laid out. We have to have the entire paper compiled and emailed to the printer by 9 p.m. on Tuesday. Ideally we would have a great deal of completed by the prior Friday, but never happens. The elephant dance gets more frantic as the print deadline nears.

Out of the shower, I look into the mirror and see a six-foot tall baby-boomer with thinning gray hair and what my nieces call "piercing" blue eyes. The face is still youthful and open. There are a few distinguishing faint scars on the cheek, nose and corner of the mouth...from fights long ago. The body has put on some pounds over the past year, but no man boobs, just a little thick around the belly.

I dress in my work clothes: starched button-down white shirt, khaki dress pants and my brown loafers. I cook a bowl of oatmeal in the microwave - put a hand full of raisins and a packet of Equal on top and head back to my desk by the front window that overlooks Palafox Place. Big Boy jumps back on to couch. He was my late best friend's dog. a cross between a chocolate Labrador and beagle. Big Boy is so small many mistakenly think of him as a puppy. Bob died last year of lung cancer. His wife and my nieces thought it would be good idea that I have a companion so Big Boy became mine.

After a few carpet wetting incidents, we've gotten along fine. He never barks. He just sits there and watches over the office. If a guest comes in, Big Boy perks up. He makes room for the visitor on the couch hoping to get petted. If the guest ignores him, Big Boy reaches out with his paw and taps the visitor on the leg or shoulder and flashes his adorable brown eyes. Big Boy is the star of the office, and he knows it.

I go back to the computer. I do the two things I dread every day - check the paper's bank account and read the Pensacola Herald, our town's Barnett Press-owned daily newspaper. Barnett USA is the largest newspaper chain in North America with 155 newspapers and the United States and Canada. It specializes in medium-sized markets like Pensacola that can only support one daily paper. Without competition that can set the ad rates and drain the community dry. Very little real news is reported, especially if it will impact ad sales.

The Pensacola Herald is a cash cow for Barnett Press. I hate them. I use to read the paper online fearing that they might report on one of stories before our weekly issue came out, but now they seem to have policy of ignoring anything we publish or going in the complete opposite direction. When we reported a pastor molesting girls at his boarding school for troubled teens, they responded with a Sunday feature on the growth of churches and, of course, had a special religion insert filled with church ads.

Of course, it doesn't help that Dennis and I mock them unmercifully in the paper. I check on the Herald daily to see which power groups, politicians or bureaucrat they are stroking that day and find fodder for my Winners & Losers and Walk with Walker columns. Plus, it's fun to see who got to the Herald's editor-in-chief to get their story in print. The secret is picking up his bar tab at happy hour at The Fish House.

Today's Herald has big front page story on Sheriff Ron Frost. Frost is going before the Escambia County Commission for a mid-year pay increase for his deputies. The paper outlines his case. It even throws in a few heartfelt comments from recent crime victims in support of the Sheriff's office. Frost and deputies are portrayed as selfless, underpaid crime fighters. There are no quotes from the county administrator or the commissioners. Hmmm, this type of Herald coverage will make it hard for the commissioners to vote against the pay hike. Funny, I thought Frost already had a pay increase in this budget. What did he do with those funds? I'll have Dennis check into once we get this week's issue out.

I move to the checking the paper's bank account online. Great, we've got \$1245.41 in the account. We've covered last Wednesday's payroll. All I need is another two grand and I can get a cashier's check for the print bill. Let's hope none of the banks call for payments on our notes this week. Probably ought to look at our receivables, but why get any more depressed. It's too early to start drinking.

The staff will be arriving shortly. I pour myself one more cup of coffee and put a fresh pot for them. Sitting at my desk, I can see the secretaries and administrative assistants walking along Palafox to their government, law firm and real estate agency jobs. All shapes and sizes jiggle past the window. Business world of Pensacola is slowly waking.

I hear Dennis and Jeremy Holt, arts and entertainment writer, arguing as they come up the stairs. Jay is still pissed with how Dennis edited his article on the Cher-impersonators at a local gay night club.

"You butchered it!" Jeremy shouts. A tall, lanky redhead with spike heels, a silky dress and a plunging neckline - my favorite combination - walks into the law office across the street.

"Nobody cares about how some transvestite wraps his package so it doesn't pop out during "Gypsies, tramps and thieves," retorts Grantham.

I suppress a laugh. Jay drops his backpack at his desk and storms back downstairs to smoke a cigarette on the sidewalk and bitch to our receptionist/intern about how backwards this paper is.

"If he comes back up here and starts telling me how he is this paper," Dennis mumbles as he throws his gym bag on the floor next to his paper littered desk, "I'll bitch slap him." Dennis is a former Golden Gloves state middleweight champ. He still works out three days a week at the downtown YMCA.

We exchange nods. "Let's have a staff meeting after you get some coffee and check we all check our emails," I tell him as turn back to my computer screen just in time to see a bouncy brunette amble towards the old Courthouse. "You should have the drafts of Winners & Losers and my Talk column."

Dennis still bitching about Jeremy as he walks back to the coffeemaker in the kitchen area near the stairwell. "Dare Evans jogged by the front door, peaked in and asked if you would drop by her office at 10," he shouts.

My day just got longer.

Copyright 2008 by Richard Outzen, Jr.