

### Chapter 3

I walk out of Jackson Tower into a bright, sunny world. There is a nice breeze coming off Pensacola Bay. There's laughter and shrieks of delight from children playing in the fountain across the street. Their mothers are gossiping on a nearby bench. They watch their kids play and the sailboats racing in the bay. It is so tempting to find a place to just sit and absorb the scene.

"Holmes, the Sheriff wants to see you."

I look away from the water and see Deputy Peck Krager leaning against the hood of his car that's parked in a loading zone. Peter "Peck" Krager is the stereotypical Sheriff Frost henchman. He is five six and weighs about 210. The buttons on his shirt are screaming for relief. You can see his white t-shirt peaking through the gaps.

Krager is that former third-string offensive lineman in high school that never got to play, but brags about his championship football team. His grades weren't good enough for college and the Navy rejected him because they knew he is a sociopath. Peck is short for speck.

Krager keeps his hand on his Taser while he talks to me. His belt looks like Batman's utility belt— not the Christian Bale "Batman" belt, more like the Adam West version. It's filled with gadgets— cuffs, pistol, two cell phones, night stick, flashlight and Taser stun gun. One attachment vaguely looks like a small microwave oven, but it must be my overactive imagination.

The rumor is that Krager was working as a mall security guard eight years ago. He worked hard on Frost's first campaign putting up signs and handing out flyers. He was rewarded with a shiny badge, uniform, a pistol with real bullets and his very own patrol car.

The diminutive deputy has a toothpick in his mouth that he rolls from one side of his mouth to the other. He is a redneck version of the Pillsbury Doughboy — something I actually wrote once in a column. For some reason, he didn't find it funny. Big Boy still chuckles about it.

I casually put Clarence Wilson's manila folder behind my back.

"Hi, Peck. Sorry to hear you didn't get the role of Cartman in the South Park movie."

Krager knows he has been insulted but he has no idea who Cartman is or that South Park is a cartoon. I almost feel sorry for the asshole. Almost.

"Sheriff wants you to talk to you. Get in the car," Peck growls. His hand never leaves his Taser. He stands up straight and tall as possible and tries to block my path. He must be wearing lifts because his head almost reaches my chin. Almost.

I give Krager the Walker Holmes stare. He backs off a little. While my temper is more legend than fact, it's helpful for people to be a little worried around me.

“Not a chance. Got places to be and things to do. Tell Frost I will meet him at the Garden Street Deli at 3 for coffee.”

I walk past Krager and head up Palafox Street towards my office knowing Krager would love to use his Taser on me. Did I push him too far this time?

I hear the car door slam and Deputy Krager speeds past me with his siren blaring. I make a mental note to not drink outside of the city limits for the next few weeks.

The tension in Pensacola Insider is only slightly tolerable. It's 11:30 and we should have most of this week's issue complete. Of course, we don't.

Dennis has his head phones on and either is writing the cover story, which should have been finished two days ago, or he is emailing some photo of a big bosom blonde to his buddies. He is snickering so it must be another photo. I don't think it's a crime to kill your editor on publication day. I need to check with our attorney.

Jeremy has three Starbuck coffee cups on his desk. All Venti size. He is editing the freelance A&E articles and mumbling, while drinking a Red Bull, about how he needs to get out of this hell hole. Jeremy went to college at Northwestern and moved here when his cash ran out to live with his mother and her retired Navy husband. He hates Pensacola and wants to go back to Chicago. And he reminds us of it every day. The Pensacola Insider is never alt enough for him, although he never quite defines what “alt” is.

Jeremy is a good writer, not as good as he thinks he is, but does a decent job of covering the local music scene. He has a love-hate relationship with most of the local bands. They all vie for his attention and then criticize his writing when the article isn't about them. Jeremy lets it get to him more than he should. We started using more freelance writers to take some of the pressure off of him. I expect Jeremy will last about another six months.

The married production team, Teddy and Mal Taulbert, are working furiously laying out the paper on their Macs. Teddy is the tattooed and pierced art director that exudes cool. Mal is a Goth that handles all the advertisers while hurling insults towards Dennis and Jeremy. She is the production manager and is never happy because she has to gather all the stories, all the ads and all the pages and send them to the printer before 6 p.m. every Tuesday. Unfortunately, we rarely make that deadline, and she is constantly begging the printer for extensions. If Mal didn't believe in the paper, she would have left us long ago.

Teddy and Mal are another in a long line of creative designers that have given the Pensacola Insider its edge in the market. Being a free publication, we have to catch the reader's eye. While our website attracts more viewers every day, the print version still flies off the racks. The keys are the content and the design. From the very beginning, I've hired designers with little or no newspaper experience. They had no preconceived limits on how to layout the paper.

What's weird is I've never had to place an ad for graphic designers. Each art director and production manager has found his or her own replacement. They know what it takes and don't want to see the paper suffer. We've had three art directors and three production managers over the past six years. Each has been better than their predecessors.

The missing full-time staff member is Chloe Hendricks, our sales director. She's out on appointments and trying to collect on a few past due accounts. I don't expect to see her in the office today.

When most people visit the offices of the Pensacola Insider, they are amazed at how small our staff is. They look around the open air space, count the desks and marvel that we publish an edition every week. This office is the informational nexus for Pensacola. Few things happen without us hearing about it. Well, that might not be completely true, but it's important that people believe it. It adds to the mystique of the paper.

Only Summer Kay, our intern, looks up when I walk in. "Hi, Boss." Summer is tall, skinny and blonde. She wears jeans and t-shirts of rock bands from the eighties. Today, it's Culture Club.

She hands me my phone messages, tells me that today's deposit is \$4,485 (hooray!) and reminds me that I have a lunch appointment with Jim Gordon, a shady private investigator that has been a good news source in the past, at The Dog House Deli in 20 minutes. Summer is helping Mal by checking off the ads on her run sheet with the actual layout. We can't afford to miss placing any ads.

The first two messages are to call Sheriff Frost. Both were received while I was at Dare's office. Coincidence? I don't look at the other ones just yet. I walk over to Dennis's desk instead.

"How is the cover story coming, Dennis?"

He takes off his head phones as I approach. "I will have it finished by two."

Mal huffs and rolls her eyes.

"Dennis, I don't want to miss deadline again. We can't afford to piss off the printer. We owe them for the past four issues and I'm trying to keep them happy and distracted from looking at our account."

The cover story is on the deplorable state of the downtown Pensacola library. The story almost writes itself. Dennis can't ever seem to start writing until right before the deadline. What he writes is brilliant, but we all have ulcers from him holding us hostage every week.

"I just heard about a scheme by some developers to move the new downtown library to the proposed Technology Park," he explains. "It will make an interesting sidebar, if I can get anyone to go on record. This idea is flying way below the radar."

On the positive side, Jeremy chimes in that the back half of the paper, the A&E portion, will be edited and ready to be sent to the printer by 3. Mal has only two ads out. Teddy has most of the paper laid out and is working on the cover design.

I love this paper.

I toss Wilson's manila folder on my desk and sit down at my computer. I look at the window and see the Palafox Street secretaries and administrative assistants stroll out to lunch. Their dresses aren't quite as crisp as they were this morning, but the view is inspiring. Big Boy comes over and begs to be petted. Big Boy had been sitting under Summer's desk. Didn't realize he was such a Boy George fan.

I've got fifteen minutes before I have to meet Gordon. I quickly type up my notes on my conversation with Dare and Wilson. There's not enough time for all the details, but I write enough to jog my memory for later when I discuss it with Dennis. I draft a public records request for Escambia County Sheriff's Office for all the reports on George Polk and ask Summer to fax it over. That will stir things up.

The phone rings. It's Bruce Manchester, one of my investors. Bruce is a millionaire who made his fortune in banking. He sold his little bank to a huge player and made millions. He invested in the Pensacola Insider on a lark and has never understood why I won't take his story ideas seriously. We tolerate each other. Twice he has tried to get the paper's board of directors to remove me as publisher only to fall short by one vote. Bruce is a big supporter of Sheriff Frost. They're hunting buddies.

"Walker, my phone is ringing off the hook about your column on Beak Family Charitable Trust. What the hell were you thinking? You know I play golf with Jan Beak."

I have been expecting this call. Bruce knows nothing about newspapers, but has never let that keep him from trying to run the paper.

"Good morning, Bruce. No, I don't know or care who you play golf with at the Pensacola Country Club. The Beak Family Charitable Trust hasn't paid out more than \$5,000 over the past three years to local causes. However the trust is paying its board, that just so happens to be made up entirely of Beak family members, six-figure salaries. There is nothing charitable about the Beak family or its trust."

"Walker, I will call another board meeting on this. You have got to stop this bullshit."

"Bruce, tell Beak to write a letter to the editor. We'll publish it. He can tell his side of the story. Otherwise, drop it, Bruce. Ad sales are up. Collections are steady. You and the rest of the investors haven't had a cash call in two years. So calm down. You know my contract says I have complete control over the editorial content of the paper. You remove me and there is no paper."

"I can ruin you. You will be a pariah in this town."

"Bruce, take a trip on your jet. Maybe spend a week or two at your Aspen condo. This, too, will pass."

I hang up on him. He will be calling the other investors. Thank God, none of them like the Beaks or really care for Bruce. I email Dare about having a drink after work. She can help me work the other investors and keep them off my back.

I head off for lunch with Gordon. I am already five minutes late. My day won't be getting any better.

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