

## Chapter 4 – Chili Dog Surprise

Walking to The Dog House Deli which is only one block north of our office, my cell phone rings. It's a number I don't recognize, but what the hell things have already gotten all screwed up. Maybe I won the lottery – that's if it can be done without buying a ticket.

"Mr. Holmes, this is Clarence Wilson. The family wants to see you. Come to their house tomorrow around noon."

"Clarence, call me Walker. Yes, I will come and bring my editor, Dennis Grantham. He's the best investigative reporter in this area."

"Several of the family members read your paper and blog regularly. You have a fan club in the African-American community."

My great-grandmother, who hid the family silver in the woods when Sherman marched through Alabama to Atlanta, would be so proud. Another reason for that side of the Holmes family to disown me.

"They are angry, frustrated and ready to tell their story, Walker. The attorney wants them to avoid the media, but the Polks think you can help."

"Clarence, let's take this one step at a time. Everybody thinks that they have story that needs to be published. I do think there's a story here, but I'm not committing to anything just yet. We will be there tomorrow."

I get the address and directions and hang up. The Polk house is within walking distance of the office.

It's hot. The sidewalk is crowded with lawyers, secretaries and government workers going and coming from lunch. There are a few runners. Show offs. I hate those bastards.

I'm sweating as I enter the Dog House. The owner is behind the counter in his white apron. The place is packed as people seek refuge from the heat. There are even a few reporters from the Pensacola Herald with their name tags hanging from their necks. They sheepishly glance my way, avoiding eye contact. I have no idea who they are.

At first, I don't see Jim Gordon. He just blends in so well into the room, which is why he's so good as a private investigator. He is sitting at a two-person table with his back to the wall. Gordon can see both the street and the entire restaurant crowd from his seat. No one takes any notice of him. He is virtually invisible to them until I sit down at the table. It's like he goes from being black and white to full color.

Gordon is ex-FBI agent that is quiet legend among local attorneys and law enforcement. He can dig up the dirt on anyone. He is nondescript which makes him incredibly hard to describe. He is five-ten, not too skinny or too fat. He has brown hair and eyes. Sometimes he wears wire-rimmed glasses. Today, like always, he is wearing a short sleeved light blue shirt and black slacks. He is odorless. Your eyes naturally pass over him in a crowd.

Gordon and I haven't always been on the same side of a story. We have taken different sides on a few elections and referendums. You never know quite for whom Gordon is working. Most of the information that he passes on is accurate, but you still need to check it out. He has given us information that Dennis just wasn't comfortable using. Although he denies it, there have been times I think he was paid to follow and report on me. Trust is not part of our relationship, but it always pays to listen to Jim Gordon.

Gordon nods as I approach with my Cole Slaw Hound, a foot-long hot dog smothered in chili, cheese and slaw.

"How was your meeting with Wilson?" Gordon says as I sit down. I have to sit in chair with my back to front door because Gordon beat me to deli. I hate not knowing who is coming up behind me. I try to angle my chair so I'm seating at the corner of the table.

I stare hard at Gordon when he mentions Wilson . My staff tells me that my stares can burn wholes in steel. Grown men have wilted under my gaze, just as Gordon is doing now.

"Calm down, Holmes. Clarence called me after your meeting at Evans' office," Gordon says trying to get me to settle down. "He was very impressed with you. Are you going to take on the story?"

I take a deep breath. "Too early to tell. What do you know about the Polk death?"

My cell phone rings. It's the office.

Summer is in a panic. "Walker, the bank called. You forgot to include the late fees in with the last note payment. They want a check for \$1485.35 before two or they are calling Mr. Manchester and the other investors."

It's just what I need. Gordon is watching me. I can't let him know what's going on.

"Summer, I will take care of it when I get back to the office. We will be fine."

"There's more, Walker. The printer wants a check, too, for \$4,000 or he won't print this week's issue."

Gordon is eating his dog pretending that he is not listening. He almost has me fooled. I don't have time for this. Saving the world is hard work...and expensive.

"Summer, tell them that I will have for them by three. We can talk more when we I get back from lunch. Bye."

"Sorry, Jim. I will put my phone on vibrate."

"Wilson gave you the file on Polk that I helped put together for the family's attorney," Gordon says in between bites. "The Shocker Brothers are bad news."

I remember Ed Tucker and Juice Allen. The reason that they are working in the Escambia County Jail is because of the stink after an Insider cover story on Taser-related lawsuits against the sheriff's office. Tucker and Allen, AKA "Shocker Brothers," were the ones doing the tasing in most of the cases. Black,

white, male, female, old, young, it didn't matter to Tucker and Allen. They were equal opportunity shockers. The worst case involved a pregnant lady being shocked in the WalMart parking lot while calling 9-1-1. Her offense? She was parked in the no-parking zone. The heat over that incident came down so hard on Frost that he had to transfer Tucker and Allen to detention duty.

Needless to say, I watched my back for a few weeks after that, but I hadn't thought much about them in months.

"The medical examiner is doing a full autopsy," Gordon continues. "I might be able to get my hands on it before it's released to the media."

Now that would be helpful. "Call me when you get it, Jim. We set this lunch date a week ago. Why did you want to have lunch?"

Gordon pushes away his paper plate, takes a sip of his Diet Coke and tosses his napkin on the table.

"Walker, somebody is buying up the land around the Main Street Sewage Treatment Plant. The black families that aren't cooperating are being harassed. No cross burnings yet. Just late night phone calls and a few dead pets."

The Emerald Coast Utility Authority announced six months ago that it was relocating the smelly, dilapidated sewage facility to the middle of the county. A year ago the voters had approved a \$70-million community maritime park to be built across the street from the plant on Pensacola Bay. The park would include a minor league baseball park, maritime museum, conference center and several retail shops and office buildings.

For decades, only African-Americans lived around the Main Street Sewage Treatment Plant because of the constant odor from the decaying sewage. Although it was only four blocks west of Palafox Street, no business or respectable white person lived in that area.

The maritime park and the relocation of the plant would change that. It looks like somebody thinks its time to move the black folks elsewhere.

"What are the cops doing about it?" I ask as I eat my dog and artfully avoid spilling chili on my now wrinkled white shirt.

"Not a damn thing. The Pensacola City Council doesn't want to get involved either. Several of them already own property nearby. They don't want to rock the boat."

"Why come to us, Jim? The Herald has the reporters to do this investigation. Some of them are in this room. Surely, you've talked to them."

"I did, but the editors refused to let any of the reporters cover it. Besides, they are all too busy blogging and creating webcasts to do real news. Idiots."

I nod in agreement and finish off my lunch. “Jim, what can you give me to get Dennis started on this story?”

Gordon pushes back his plate and takes the last sip of his drink. He gives me a knowing smile.

“Well, Walker. My best witness was George Polk.”

Crap.