

## CHAPTER 9 VISITING THE POLKS

I woke up with Big Boy's paws on my chest. He has his leash in his mouth. I must have fallen asleep in dad's leather chair and Gordon's papers are strewn everywhere.

I hate waking up to an empty apartment. I hate dogs. I hate jogging. This morning I don't even try to look like I'm an athlete. I slip on my Topsiders, put on my Dodgers cap and sunglasses and take Big Boy out wearing the wrinkled starched shirt and khakis that I had slept in.

The real runners avoid me like the plague. They cross their skinny butts to other side of Jefferson and Palafox streets to avoid any contact. Big Boy ignores everything and does his business.

My head is buzzing with "To do" lists for Dennis, me, everyone. The George Polk story is big, and I still haven't figured out the Main Street Sewage Treatment plant angle. This could upset Frost's efforts to get the pay raises, not to mention any chances of a third term as sheriff.

Tons of people need to be interviewed. We will need to put in a half dozen public records to the Escambia County Sheriff's Office. I need to confirm our meeting with the Polk family is still on.

When we get back to the loft, I check my cell phone and see that Dennis had called around 1 a.m. He must have needed a designated driver. I take my phone off vibrate just in case he calls while I'm in the shower.

Sure enough, the phone rings just as I'm stepping out of the shower.

"Walker, do you know where Dennis is?" It's Roxanne, Dennis' fiancée. Her voice is loud and anxious.

"No, Roxie. He called me late last night, but I missed it. I wouldn't worry he probably crashed on somebody's couch."

"Something's not right. Dennis was supposed to work out with me this morning like we do every Wednesday. He never misses."

I'm starting to think. Dennis has found a companion, and I don't want to be in the middle of this.

"Walker, his cell phone is going straight to voicemail. I drove by his house and his car isn't in the driveway. Something's wrong." She starts to cry.

Crying women. I don't have time for this. Dennis needs to clean up his own messes.

“Roxie, let’s give some more time. I’m sure he will walk in soon and have a great excuse. I will have him call you.”

I hang up and finish getting dressed. There’s no time to read any papers online. I need to arrange Gordon’s papers in order and figure how to pursue this story.

We can’t sit on it long because the Pensacola Herald may jump on it before our next issue. Frost will deploy the spin doctors, once we start asking questions. But I think we can pull this off, although I’m not sure we can cover all the angles. I need Dennis’ input. We’ve got six days to do this.

As the morning progress, it’s obvious there is no “we.” Dennis still hasn’t showed up. I have Summer dialing him every 20 minutes. His cell phone must be dead. I also turn Roxanne over to Summer so that they can bond.

I call my buddies in the Pensacola Police Department and ask if they can quietly get their guys to keep their eyes open for a red Saturn Vue with a “Dyslexics Untie!” bumper sticker. There’s not point in calling the ECSO.

Mal walks the five blocks west with me to the Polk home. She is a decent writer and I can’t do this alone. I fill her in on George Polk and give her some pointers on what to ask Mrs. Polk. She will focus on learning as much as possible about who George Polk was.

The Polk home is in the shadow of the Main Street Sewage Treatment Plant, an aging facility that smells of raw sewage most of the time especially today. The Emerald Coast Utility Authority has begun the process of relocating the obsolete plant that pumps 15 million gallons of treated effluent into Pensacola Bay. They are paying for with a Federal Emergency Management Agency grant, state funds and by blackmailing the city and county to help.

The paper fought ECUA for years to get them to move the plant. It blocks any growth from downtown Pensacola towards the west. The plant was built in the 1930’s as part of Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s Civilian Conservation Corps. All of Pensacola slopes towards the bay so it was easy to lay the sewer lines without having to use many pumps to get the sewage to the plant. Pumping it into Pensacola Bay made perfect sense, too, until the volume grew out of control.

Besides, only black folk lived around the treatment plan. Who cares what they have to smell every day? Not one of the city fathers worried about downtown Pensacola ever growing beyond Palafox Street. And it hasn’t. Thinking big has never been problem with Pensacola politicians.

George Polk’s family lives in a white shotgun house. There is a waist high chain-link fence surrounding the yard, but no bars on the windows. The other houses along the street appear abandoned. There are cars lining the street, a few with out-of-state license plates. The lights are on. Mal and I are walking into a family reunion of sorts.

The front of the house is the living room and it's packed with Polk's widow, children, brothers, sisters, nephews and nieces. They look at us hungrily as we cross the threshold. Mal sits on the couch with Mrs. Bette Polk and her sisters. I head for the kitchen to talk with the nephews and nieces.

With a beer in one hand, I take notes as they unload.

"We're all shocked and under a lot of stress," Rachel Sonnet, one of Polk's nieces, says. "It doesn't seem like it's true. Our uncle was our backbone. He helped everyone. We want justice done. We don't want anyone else to lose a family member because they were incarcerated."

Her brother Paul says his uncle helped him fight a drug addiction with his encouragement and positive outlook. Although he would quote the Bible to her, he says Uncle George was never preachy or judgmental.

"He told me all I had to do was walk with Jesus," Paul says. "Uncle George would read me the Bible and tell me to leave drugs alone. I didn't believe it at first, but I see it now. He would tell me all the time that he was so proud that I got my life together."

An older man speaks up. He has been nodding his head while Rachel and Paul spoke. George Polk was his older brother. Like George, he, too, was a trucker, but had to quit after he wrenched his back lifting a bag of fertilizer at the end of one haul. His name is Raymond.

He tells he couldn't get his other brothers and sisters to visit him in Pittsburgh, where he has lived the past 18 years. But his big brother, George, dropped in last summer and spent three hours visiting.

"My other brothers and sisters would say it's too cold and that they can't stand the snow," Raymond says, choking up with tears. "But he called me last summer and says, 'Little bubba, I'm in Butler, P.A. How far is that from you?' I told him it was 20 minutes and 20 minutes later he was there. It was a very special visit to me. George gave me a lot of good advice."

George Polk is not nearly the nut that Frost, Peck and the boys would like us all to believe.

Martin hands me another Michelob and recalls his father spending a whole day with him as a child teaching him to play pool. He never beat his father at the game, until playing him a year ago. It was the last time they played.

"Pops always had an answer for me," Martin says. "He taught me so much. I remember he would say, 'Don't give what's good to the dogs.'" Martin turns away from me so that I won't see his tears.

I ask to speak with Beatrice Watkins, the niece who works in the jail. No one has seen her. I can tell that Martin is wondering how I know his first cousin, but he doesn't ask any questions. I leave him my business card and ask that he have her call me.

Mal pokes her head into the kitchen and motions that it's time for us to leave. I shake hands firmly and hug my way out of the house. I ask them to give us a few days to investigate and decide how we will proceed.

Mal and I compare notes as we walk back to the office.

"Mr. Polk hadn't been feeling well but he shouldn't have ever been taken to the Escambia County Jail," Mal starts off. There is a touch of anger in her voice. "They could have taken to the Lakeview Center or just driven him back to his house."

Mal walks through the facts that she got from Bette Polk. Polk was arrested 11 days before his death after suffering a "mental episode." She was sitting in their truck when he lost it in the Tom Thumb and started waving a toy replica gun. She had calmed him down and almost had him back in the car when Escambia County Sheriff's deputies arrived on the scene. They charged him with aggravated assault for not going easily with the arresting deputies and for criminal mischief.

"This 65-year-old trucker loved Western clothes and had more than 40 cowboy hats and big belt buckles. He collected toy cowboy pistols," Mal says. "The family never got to see him after he was arrested. Mr. Polk was deemed too dangerous for visitors. The next thing they get is phone call that their husband-father-brother-uncle is dead."

"Has the family hired an attorney?" I ask.

Mal nods. "I've got his card. I will call him tomorrow. Walker, we have got to report this."

My cell phone rings. It's my buddy in the Pensacola Police Department.

"We found Grantham's Saturn," he says. "It doesn't look good."

Before I can reply, he says, "The driver's side window is smashed and there's blood on the seat."

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