

## Chapter 12 FRIDAY FALLOUT

Thursday and Friday are blurs. I haul Dennis to the Gulf Breeze Hospital Emergency Room and spend four hours answering questions from doctors, nurses, police officers and a glaring Roxanne.

Two broken ribs, a fractured left arm and a ruptured spleen. Dennis looks like he was somebody's punching bag. He mumbles a few times while I'm sitting with him, "No more," but he is unconscious most of the time. The doctors and nurses keep him sedated. Eventually by late Thursday afternoon, the nurses and Roxanne push me out of the room. The nurses want him to rest. Roxanne wishes it was me in that bed, not Dennis.

I feel like crap and barely sleep Thursday night. While listening to Big Boy snore from the couch, I end up watching "To Kill A Mockingbird," two episodes of "The Sopranos" and an infomercial about enhancing that certain part of the male anatomy.

Friday is nothing but one phone after another. I try to call Roxanne for updates on Dennis' condition, but all the calls go straight to voice mail. I quit trying. Mal and Summer send flowers from the paper, but can't get any information on Dennis from the hospital operator.

The Frost press conference gets favorable coverage, of course, in the Pensacola Herald. George Polk is made out to be a mentally unstable prisoner with a health conditions. There is very little mention of the Tasers or previous deaths at the jail.

I post a very different version on my blog and immediately get an angry phone call from Bruce Manchester, accusing me of having a grudge against Frost. I can almost hear Frost in the background telling him what to say.

"Holmes, you have got to stop this damn vendetta against Sheriff Frost. Nobody wins against the sheriff."

"I didn't know anyone was keeping score. So back off, Bruce."

"You're not bulletproof, Holmes. If this madness doesn't stop, I'm calling a board meeting on your management of the paper. We can't afford to be sued by Frost."

"Let him sue. He has no grounds and the St. Pete Times would love the story."

This catches Manchester off guard. He stumbles, mumbles and hangs up. I don't think this will be the last I hear on the issue.

Is Frost upset about the blog post or is he trying to stop our cover story on George Polk from ever being published? We keep the cover stories top secret, but Frost knows me well enough to realize that I won't-can't-stay away from this story.

Manchester didn't mention Dennis so he must not know about it. If Frost was really in the room with him, then why didn't the sheriff tell Manchester about Dennis?

The Polk family is pissed about the front-page article in the daily newspaper. Rachel Sonnet, Polk's niece, calls and is in tears.

"I don't understand, Mr. Holmes. Why would the Sheriff and the newspaper say such cruel things about Uncle George? He doesn't deserve this."

"No, Rachel, he doesn't. Lawsuits make people go on the defensive and Pensacola Herald has always been a big supporter of Frost. We are working on a story that should balance out the coverage."

"Uncle George had his moments, but he never hurt no one. Aunt Bette was always there to calm him down. This just ain't right, Mr. Holmes."

"Rachel, please call me, 'Walker.' I will do everything I can to get your side of the story out in front of the public. This may get a little rough before it gets better."

"Walker, I am a 42-year-old black woman living in Pensacola, Florida. You don't have to tell me about things being rough."

Rachel gives me her cell phone number and hangs up. I get that feeling in my gut that this Polk story is going to be a huge pain in the ass. One of those stories I can't turn my back on, but will definitely hurt my popularity ratings in certain circles.

Jim Gordon calls after lunch to tell me that the missing Mr. Murray will meet with me Saturday evening.

"You have got the Polk family believing you're a miracle worker, the next Edward R. Murrow. Against my advice and that of their attorney, the Polks are pushing Franklin Murray to meet with you."

"Gordon, never doubt the power of the pen. When and where do we meet?"

"I'll pick you up Saturday around 7 p.m. No cameras and no recorders."

We get a fax from Change Now announcing that it will hold a march in front of the Escambia County Jail on Saturday morning. Clarence Wilson calls to personally invite me to come. Wilson loves marches, rallies and fish fries. He's hoping for a lot of press coverage.

I think he will be disappointed. Based on Manchester's call, I suspect that Frost is working the phone lines hard. The Insider may be the only media there on Saturday. I do get Teddy and Mal to agree attend and take pictures. Amy will be there, too, to interview some of the marchers.

Amy is working hard on the Polk story. She calls to tell me that she has pretty full picture of who George Polk was and is convinced that he shouldn't been in the jail. She is also certain that the late night phone threats to Polk aren't connected to the land investment trust that has been buying up the houses on Polk's street.

Dare helped her reach the managers of the trust and they had already figured out how to do their project without Polk's lot. They even emailed her the drawings.

I tell Amy to continue working quietly and not come by the office. After I told her about Dennis, she doesn't argue with me.

The Gulf Breeze Police come by to ask questions about Dennis' injuries. They scold me for not calling 9-1-1 when I found Dennis at my backdoor. I almost laugh when they ask if he had any enemies or is there anyone who would want to hurt him.

I don't mention the Polk story, but do share what we had learned about his Tuesday night pub crawl. They cut off the interview when I tell them that the guys following Dennis sound like they may be the Shocker Brothers. The cops leave their business cards and tell me that they hand this investigation over to the Pensacola PD.

Twenty minutes later, I get a phone call from Peck.

"Holmes, if you try to tie any of my deputies to your editor's unfortunate accident, I will have you arrested."

"For what, Peck? Typos?"

"We can prove that you have malice towards Sheriff Frost and the entire ECSO. I will not let you smear the names of these good men. You will hear from our attorneys, if you dare to write anything accusing any law enforcement officer of hurting your drunken friend. Your investors don't want to pay for a lawsuit."

Peck then slams down the phone. I'm not liking this lawsuit theme that seems to be running among my enemies. Frost may really be up to something.

Through all this, we still have to get next week's paper done. Chloe is excited about the sales. The advertisers appear to be taking us seriously and aren't slamming doors in her face. Jeremy has turned in most of this A&E articles and has been less combative, a nice by-product of Dennis' mishap. Ted has most of the artwork and has the basic layout of the cover story designed.

The finances of the paper aren't as rosy. The Thursday and Friday deposits are miniscule. The staff agrees to hold their paychecks until next week. I pass out some of the trade gift certificates so everybody can have a good meal and a few drinks on the paper. I put off paying the print bill and hope the printer doesn't notice for a few days.

Through all this Big Boy stays close. The mutt knows when things aren't quite right. He isn't demanding, just sits under my table and occasionally rounds on the rest of the staff.

At 6 o'clock, everyone heads home. I walk Big Boy and listen to the band warming up at Seville Quarter. The bums in Ferdinand Plaza are heading towards the Waterfront Mission for dinner. It's hot, humid and I wish I had changed into shorts.

We walk all the way to Pensacola Bay and watch the sunset.

An old black man who is fishing nearby sets his pole down on the rail that borders the park at the end of Palafox and walks over. I fumble in my pocket to see if I have any change. You can't walk downtown without giving somebody your pocket change. Dennis calls it paying the toll.

"You Walker Holmes?" he asks.

I nod. Big Boy just looks up, sneezes and acts like he doesn't me. Some protector he is.

"The Polks are counting on you. Lots of black folks are watching you."

I remember the face. He was at the Polk's house when Mal and I visited.

"You were with the family when I visited."

It's his turn to nod. "I'm Pastor Lewis." He doesn't extend his hand, just stands there looking directly into my eyes.

"We know about your editor friend. That's message to you and the Polks."

"What is the message?"

"Don't fight us."

"Who's us?"

"That's what you suppose to find out, Mr. Holmes. You are the investigator. Our black papers aren't going to cover this. It's up to you."

"Do you know who hurt my editor?" Lewis shakes his head.

"Do you know anything that can help me find who kidnapped and beat him? Anything on the threatening phone calls?"

Lewis shrugs his shoulders. "Money makes folks do bad things."

“I’m only a publisher of a little newspaper. There are limits to what I can do.”

“But you write the truth and people do read your paper. Black and white people.”

“Pastor Lewis, we will do the story. I doubt it will have the impact that you expect, but I shy away from this.”

“We’ll be praying for you.” And with that, Pastor Lewis walks back to the rail and picks up his pole to fish some more.

Big Boy stands up and starts heading back to the office. I only think I am in charge of my life.

It takes us thirty minutes to get back to the office. The dog needs to sniff every tree, bush and weed along the way. As we approach the door, there’s a note taped to it.

The message is simple and straight-forward: “You’ve been warned.”

Pastor Lewis was right....maybe I should start going to church.