

Chapter 15 Boardroom Hell

When I get back to the office, I make a pot of coffee, put Cowboy Mouth in the CD player and start typing everything I can remember that Murray said. One talent that I have is nearly perfect memory when I focus on a conversation. Of course, the trick is staying focused.

I end up with about ten pages of notes. Then I pull out the folder that Gordon had given me earlier on Polk's death and start making comparisons. Most of what Murray said matches the reports. He may have embellished some, but not much.

Taking the notes and the reports, I write a rough draft of the opening of the cover story. You have to lead with the arrest and the hours up to George Polk's death. The lead almost writes itself. I'll give it to Amy to edit and add any quotes or facts she has gathered about the death.

My writing is a copy editor's nightmare. My mind and my typing skills are never in sync. I can read the same sentence 15 times and not realize that I've left out a word. Also, I've learned over the years that omitting the word "not" can change the whole meaning of a sentence.

Once I finish the draft I save it to our backup server and email the opening to Amy. I also drop a note to Mal and Ted to let them I made it back home. I'll map out the outline for the rest of the article with Amy when we meet Sunday afternoon.

This cover story will get the town buzzing. I just don't know what to do with threats and the land purchases. The article will be long as it is, especially if we can get some quotes from Tucker and Allen. We will need to decide if we hold the possible land conspiracy for a later issue or make it a sidebar to the article.

There are still dozens of questions to be answered. Why was Dennis beat up? What are we missing with this story? What would Dennis do that I'm missing?

I hit the bed around 2:30 a.m. The movie "Streets of Fire" is playing on the TV. As I doze off, Michael Pare's character, Tom Cody, is beating up the Roadmasters with a coat rack.

My cell phone wakes 6 hours later. The caller id says, "Manchester." And while it's very tempting to let it ring or go to voice mail, I answer the phone.

"Good morning, Bruce."

"Holmes, I've called a board meeting for today at 1:30 p.m. at my office." Manchester says smugly. This isn't going to be good.

"What's on the agenda? Staff bonuses?"

“You’ve really screwed up this time. I told them that one day you would go too far. We can’t put with your crap any longer.” Manchester hangs up.

The Insider board has four members, including me. To vote me out, Manchester will need two other votes and he doesn’t have mine. The two other board members are Will Garrison and Robert Mosley.

Garrison is old Pensacola. His family made its money in lumber. His father squandered it, and Garrison built back the family fortune with his technology company, which I think owns the space bar on all computer keyboards or something like that. Garrison has been a solid supporter over the years, although he doesn’t like to upset people. He is a nice guy.

Mosley is a retired attorney that represented banks, insurance companies and doctors. He’s very conservative and originally invested in the paper because he thought it be conservative, too. He’s not a big Walker Holmes fan, but his wife, age 63, loves me. He will be the unknown at the meeting. Depending on what Manchester presents, he could vote me out.

So instead of working on the issue, I spend my morning preparing for the meeting. I leave voice messages on Roxanne and Amy’s phones. I tell Roxanne that it will be around 3:30 before I can get to hospital. Amy will have to wait to around dinner time so I ask she will grab some wings at New York Nick’s about 7 p.m.

My schedule is getting too complicated.

For the board meeting, I pull together the financial reports, which aren’t too bad. They show steady sales growth and the expenses are under control. I make a list of all the cover stories that we’ve published in the last three months and give a synopsis of each. I pull the statistics for the website and my blog to show we have increased online readership. And I make a list of all the charities that we helped.

I print out four copies and place them in green folders with the latest issue of the paper. I may or may not hand out the folders, but I will have them ready.

I’m tempted to call Dare and ask for advice or hints on what is on Manchester’s mind, but realizing that she’s at church, I pass.

Bruce Manchester’s office is the Blount Building on the corner of Palafox and Garden streets, in the same block as New York Nick’s and The Global Grill. The Blount Building is where corporations go to die and retired businessmen go to still act important. It’s the oldest office building in Pensacola and overlooks the new Federal Courthouse.

When I step on the elevator, I see Sheriff Frost and Peck walking out of the other one. They smile when they see me, but don’t say a word.

Dammit, I wonder if I should just head to Nick's and blow this off. Unfortunately, I don't.

The door from the hall opens directly into Manchester's office. He's too cheap to have a receptionist. Stacks of the Wall Street Journal, USA Today and Pensacola Herald are on the floor. I don't see any copies of the Insider.

The three board members are waiting for me when I walk into the office. They're sitting at a small rectangular table by a portrait of some golf course. Manchester is at one end of the table. Garrison and Mosley flank the sides. The chair at the other end is open for me.

Wonder where Peck sat when he and Frost were here? On Frost's lap? I almost smile, but I'm not sure the board would appreciate the joke.

There's no small talk.

Garrison starts, which is an interesting move because I consider him an ally. "Walker, we just met with Sheriff Frost and frankly we're not happy with how the paper has been treating him."

"Frost gets his share of winners and losers, Will, just like everyone else."

"Bullshit!" Manchester interrupts. "He is going to sue us for libel and defamation of character. The only thing that's stopped him is his respect for the rest of us."

"This is crazy," I say looking at Will and Mosley, who is just staring at me. "Let him sue. It will make us famous. Frost has no case against us."

"What about this?" Will asks as he hands me a photo taken of me walking at the march. "What were you doing at this march? How do you think this makes the paper look?"

"Great!" I feel my temper start to flare, not a smart move. "Newspapers take stands. The Civil Rights Movement didn't gain any steam until the New York Times and the Washington Post started covering the marches. We damn well needed to be there."

Will asks, "Who are these men walking with you?" I shrug my shoulders.

"Walker, these are convicted drug dealers." Garrison starts to raise his voice, too. "Why are you laughing and associating with criminals?"

"Will, I was in a crowd of 200 people. I didn't seek these fellows out. Don't you see that Frost is playing you for suckers? He's bluffing."

Manchester looks at Garrison and Mosley. "I told you that he wouldn't listen."

Mosley speaks. His voice is a deep baritone. “Walker, we don’t want you to publish anything on Frost and the recent, unfortunate death in the jail. You will put this paper in jeopardy and only be helping some family that’s suing the county.”

“I’m supposed to ignore that a black man died in the jail?” There’s no point holding my temper any longer.

“Walker, we can’t afford a lawsuit,” Mosley says.

“My contract says that I have sole control over the staff and the editorial content of the Insider. You can’t tell me what to print.”

Manchester yells, “But we can fire you.”

“Bruce, you fire me and there is no Insider. You will lose everything that you’ve invested. If I do what you ask, the paper will lose all its credibility and you still lose everything. You don’t understand what you are asking. Give in to Frost and you kill the paper.”

“Then we will shut down the paper,” Mosley says. Manchester doesn’t seem to like that suggestion, but keeps silent.

“Why don’t you just give me all your shares, if you want to shut it down?”

“Never,” says Manchester. “I’ll lose everything before I let you misuse the paper to destroy this community.”

“Destroy the community?” I shout. “Frost is the one hiring thugs and killing people in the jail, and I’m the bad guy?”

“Walker, what’s happened to you?” Garrison asks. “You’ve changed.”

“Will, jail deaths will change anyone. I can’t turn away. If you shut me down, I’ll get investors and still print the story.”

“You will never work in this town again,” says Manchester. It’s so melodramatic that I almost laugh, but I catch myself.

Mosley speaks up. “Walker, we are serious. You write anything on the jail death and we will vote to close down the paper.”

I look at Garrison, my savior. He refuses to look back at me.

“Guys, I realize that Frost has upset you. He’s worried about this story, and I’m not sure why. He wasn’t near the jail when the death occurred. This story needs to be told.

I look at each of them. “You have to trust me on this. I will be careful in what we write. It won’t be libelous or malicious. It will be the truth.

“If I give in—no, if we give in—then every angry politician will call you every time that they are unhappy with anything in the paper. Right now, you can tell them that jackass Holmes decides what goes in the paper. You aren’t blamed for the editorial. I am.”

It wasn’t my best speech, but it was good enough to keep Garrison in my corner. Mosley and Manchester are stuck with me for now.

Frost isn’t going to be happy, but he will learn that he has to deal with me. He’ll also learn that going over my head comes with a price.

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