

Chapter 13 March on the Jail

Saturday morning comes early. My lack of sleep catches up to me and I don't wake up until 6:12.

Big Boy and I make our run/jog/walk along Jefferson Street dodging the empty beer bottles, broken glass and vomit from the nearby bottle club. The dog picks up his pace just get to Pensacola Bay and some fresh air.

When we get back to loft, I shower and change quickly. I head to Waffle House to meet with Mal, Teddy and Amy so that we can get our game plan for the Change Now march. Waffle House is a Southern thing—greasy food, waitresses named “Kim” and endless cups of coffee. Their waffles and hash browns, covered, smothered and chunked, are in my blood. Every two weeks I must have a dosage or I really become mean.

The Waffle House that we chose is on the corner of Ninth Avenue and Gregory Street, across from the backside of the Pensacola Civic Center. Waitress Kim greets me as I walk in. Two Pensacola cops are at the counter talking up the other waitresses. There are two high schoolers asleep in one booth with half-eaten omelets covered with ketchup on plates in front of them. The other booths and seats are filled with some of Pensacola's finest in all shapes, sizes and classes. Waffle House is Pensacola's melting pot.

Amy is sitting in a corner booth where she can watch the room and the parking lot—smart girl. She's got her blonde hair pulled back and wearing a Florida Gators visor. When she looks up, I notice that she's wearing a faded black Rolling Stone's t-shirt.

“Nice shirt,” I say as I sit down.

Amy smiles and pulls back her shoulders to show off her shirt, among other things.

“Thanks, it's the real thing. I got in 1978 when I saw the in the New Orleans Superdome.” Damn, she has great eyes. Something I never noticed before.

I'm wearing an old Insider t-shirt that says “I get every Thursday” on the back. Don't ever think I don't have class.

Waitress Kim brings me coffee, waffle and hash browns without me having to order them. Amy looks a little bemused. She orders a bowl of oatmeal.

“You come here often?” Amy asks.

“Nope. I think the waitress is a mind reader.” Amy laughs. She's got a great laugh, too.

Time to change the subject.

“I appreciate you helping out while Dennis is out, Amy. Did you get all you needed on the land deals from Bette in Dare’s office?”

“Yes, she knows her stuff. She kept asking questions about you every time we talked.”

“Bette is part of the very selective Walker Holmes fan club. I’m very popular with 60 year olds.”

Amy laughs again, just as Mal and Teddy walk in. I move to sit by Amy so that the couple and sit together. Amy doesn’t seem to mind.

The pair looks like they only slept a few hours. Mal is excited and talking a mile a minute. Teddy’s barely alive. His eyes are bloodshot. Obviously being awake at 8:30 a.m. is not his normal Saturday morning. The cops give him a hard look until they see me in the booth with him. They just shrug their shoulders and walk out the door.

“What’s the plan, guys?” Mal says as she’s gulping down her coffee. “The last march I went to was in Tallahassee for gay marriage. People yelled and screamed at us the whole time.”

“I don’t expect any trouble, Mal.” She is clearly disappointed. “But I want us to have a systematic approach to this.

“Amy, you interview the marchers. Find out why they are there, who told him about the march and what do they want to see happen.

“Mal, you do the same thing, but focus on the Polk family, the college kids and anyone that looks a little out of place. Most are going to think you’re a college student working on a paper. I do think Sheriff Frost or his henchman Peck may try to plant a few phony protesters. “

“Do think Frost will create any trouble, Walker?” Amy asks with a touch of concern in her voice.

“No, not really. I will be the lightning rod and talk to Clarence and any other politicians or big wigs there. And Ted –Mal, wake him up. Ted, you take photos and be sure to get their names.”

Ted nods.

We talk over coffee for another 30 minutes. Amy and Mal hit it off. Everybody likes Mal. Amy shares what she has learned about Polk, his family, the threats and his death. Ted starts to wake up and pays attention as Amy walks through the facts. I can see the wheels turning in his head as he pictures how he might lay this story out.

We all agree to meet back at the office after the march so that we can compare notes. I tip Waitress Kim, pay the tab with my last two 20s and head out the door. We all head to the march in separate cars...more for their protection. I'm the one wearing the bullseye target on his back and I don't want any collateral damage.

The staging for the march is in the parking lot of House of God Church on the corner of Leonard and H streets. Everyone is a little nervous. There are several parking lots on Leonard Street across from the Escambia County Sherriff's Administrative Center and the Central Booking and Detention Center. All of them have been barricaded and stand empty.

Frost and Peck have forced Clarence Wilson and his Change Now to start the march three blocks further east than they had originally wanted. Several of the marchers are worried that their cars will get ticketed if they park on nearby side streets.

Clarence Wilson isn't upset. He smiles when he sees me and waves me over to meet some of his team. They are all black and their ages range from 18 to 78. The younger ones shake my hand firmly and look me in the eye. The older men and women offer limp hands and look uncertain whether to trust me.

"Walker, we are going to walk past 'The Tower' (which is what the ECSO administration building is called) to the Escambia County Jail and back," he says. "Sheriff Frost has refused to provide us an escort, but we do have a county permit to march."

"Clarence, there are several elderly people here. Hell, some of them have walkers. This is an awfully long distance for them to walk in this 90 degree heat."

"They'll make it. If they have any trouble, we have a couple of volunteers who will quickly call for the Church van to pick them up. Walker, we've got this covered."

Several of the marchers are wearing special t-shirts. They have a photo of the emergency restraint chair and the words "Burn the chair." Clarence won't say who paid for the shirts, only that someone delivered them to his office on Friday.

Change Now isn't the only political group in the parking lot. We the People Action Committee, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, ACLU and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference all have people here.

Sadly, no one from the Roman Catholic or Episcopal dioceses is there. However about 55 of the 250 marchers are white or Hispanic. And that's not counting my staff.

The daily newspaper is noticeably absent, but WEAR TV and the Mobile television crews are here. Associated Press and the New York Times have some stringers in the crowd. Mal and Amy will blend in fine.

I find a place in the shade of the church, hoping that maybe a breeze will blow through. I can watch Wilson and the other civil rights leaders debate how to do this march. I'm really not sure anyone of them has organized one in over 10 years. The last one, I think, was to pressure the Pensacola City Council to rename a street for Dr. Martin Luther King.

A couple University of West Florida students walk over to introduce themselves, tell me how much they enjoy the paper and ask if we have any internships. They are carrying signs with "Burn the Chair" and "Frost must go." After a few words, they drift back to their friends.

There is a group of older black women near a church van. They are dressed in their Sunday best, except for the tennis shoes. After all, they will be walking a couple miles.

Noticeably absent are elected officials. The Pensacola City Council has three African-American members. There is one minority seat on the Escambia County Commission. None of them are standing in the parking.

I do see Mikey Head, the administrative assistant county administrator, talking with the AP reporter. He's wearing shorts that expose the whitest, hairiest, skinniest legs I've seen. His legs look they have been put on backwards. He is wearing a black Polo shirt that's tucked in. I doubt he will be marching. Head's here to do damage control.

Mal is talking with the family and exchanging hugs. She has her recorder and is getting a few quotes. Ted is close by snapping photos.

Amy is on the edge of the street interviewing a group of black teenagers. They are animated and she's laughing at their jokes. She looks my way, winks and goes back to work.

Across the street a maroon GMC van is parked. The windows are tinted. The motors running so that the a/c can stay on and the windows can stay rolled up. Wonder if they're taking photos of the crowd or trying to listen in on the conversations?

The march itself goes without a hitch. We walk past Central Booking, the "Tower" and the Escambia County Jail. I walk with a couple of rough characters that seem to be very familiar with the jail, but we keep the conversation light. Someone starts singing "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around"—a song from the civil rights movement that was sung during voter registration drives in Mississippi.

When we pass the jail, the inmates start cheering. The marchers are hot, but energized. There are no incidents, and the TV crews get some great shots for their news shows. Through the door of one of the side buildings, I see Peck and his crew videotaping the march. He's probably trying to figure out how he can turn over my name to Homeland Security.