

Chapter 14 Murray in the Elbow Room

Driving back to the offices, I check the voice messages on my cell phone. There are two. One is from Sheriff Frost demanding that I call him. The other is from Roxanne asking that I come by the hospital tomorrow after 1 p.m. to see Dennis. Her voice is cold and flat. Boy, I can't wait for that conversation.

When I get back downtown, I have a few minutes to take Big Boy on a quick walk before everybody gets to the office. Amy brings a bag full of Whataburgers and fries. Ted and Mal contribute a case of PBR. Big Boy rushes from chair to chair begging for scraps. He finally lands under Ted's chair at the conference table, knowing Ted will drop almost as many fries as he eats.

Between bites Ted, Amy and Mal share their stories. The Polk family cried through most of the march. There was a light scuffle in the back of the crowd, but it was over nothing. Everyone noticed Peck filming. Ted got some good photos and Amy and Mal had several solid quotes for the story. Twice during our discussion my cell phone vibrated. The caller id showed "Restricted" which meant either Peck or Frost was calling. I ignored the calls.

As things wound down, the food was all eaten and the beer all gone, I shared with the groups my intention to meet with Jim Gordon and Franklin Murray. I agreed to email my notes to Amy when I finish. We agree to meet again Sunday afternoon and review the elements of the cover story.

"It's not our job to solve the mystery," I remind everyone. "We put the facts out there and let the authorities take action."

"But what if the authorities are involved?" asks Mal. "Do you honestly think Frost will arrest his own men?"

I shrug. "We still have the State Attorney's office and the Department of Justice."

I pat Mal on the back as everyone heads home. "Let's do our best to give the readers the best story possible. You never know what might happen."

When everyone leaves, I get out a fresh notepad and start making my list of what we know:

- 1) George Polk dies in the jail infirmary. He had been tasered and strapped to a chair. We need a witness to what happened. Murray????
- 2) Two guards are missing – Shocker Brothers. What do they look like? Hell, I should at least know that. Idiot.
- 3) Polk lived next to the Main Street Sewage Treatment Plant that is being moved.
- 4) Someone was pressuring Polk to sell his home. Who?
- 5) Someone kidnapped and beat up Dennis to warn me. Who? Why?
- 6) Why are Peck and Frost are really nervous about this story?

And most importantly, can we tie this all together by Tuesday night for next week's issue? The ECUA plant and the death may not even be related. Can Amy write this as well as Dennis would? And what about Dennis? What's going in his head? How long will he be out?

I shut my eyes. My vibrating cell phone awakens me. It's Gordon.

"I'll pick up in 20 minutes," he says. I check my watch. It's 8:46. Damn, I've slept for three hours.

I put on a pair of khaki's and starched white shirt. Put food in Big Boy's dish and send Mal and Ted an email just so someone knows when I left the office. I might as well err on the side of caution.

Instead of Gordon picking me up on the street in front of the Insider offices, I suggest that he give me an additional ten minutes and pick me up behind Hopjacks, a pizza pub one block north of the office that opens onto Palafox but has a back exit on Jefferson Street.

Hopjacks is crowded when I walk in. It must be \$2 PBR night. I find a table in the middle and order two Blue Moons and some Belgian fries. I act as if someone is coming to meet me. No one may be following me, but recent history tells me that I should be careful.

I drink half of the beer and slip a ten spot under the mug. When the fries are brought to the table, I get up to go to bathroom and slip out the backdoor. Not the smoothest exit in the world, but no bad for an alt-weekly publisher.

Gordon starts the car, a silver GMC Jimmy, as soon as he sees me. No one has the chance to follow us.

"Doesn't look like you were being tailed?" Gordon says. "Did you notice anybody in the bar?"

"No, it was too crowded to tell, but it was fun playing James Bond. Where are we headed?"

"The Elbow Room. We'll get their first and call Franklin when we are sure all is safe."

The Elbow Room is a West Pensacola institution, or specifically the Jimmy the bartender is the institution. Jim wears the stripped shirt, vest, string tie and uses garter belts to hold up his sleeves. Every pour of beer is a perfect pour. If he likes you, life is good. Otherwise, you won't spend five minutes in The Elbow Room.

The bar is located on West Cervantes Street in a sketchy part of town. It's between a DOIY carwash and a strip club, The Backseat Lounge, which doesn't have a VIP room

because that's too many letters for the dancers to remember. Across the street is the area's only Jewish cemetery and closed Circle K that has been boarded up since Hurricane Ivan.

There is only one entrance into The Elbow Room. The bar is dark and lit with soft red lights. It is full with regulars, mostly in their 20s and 30s who getting ready to head to Sluggo's to listen to some Punk band from Austin, Texas.

Gordon finds a table in the corner and sits with his back to wall and so that he can watch the door.

"Frost is very upset with you, Holmes" Gordon says after Jimmy hands us our beers. "I don't know what he has planned for you, but be careful."

I take a deep shallow. "Jim, he and I have been through this before. What makes this different?"

Gordon shakes his head. "Not sure. This isn't the first death in the jail under his administration, but he is up for re-election next year."

"How involved do you think Frost and Peck are in the Polk homicide?"

"Holmes, I don't know. It may be more of a cover-up than actual participation in the death. Frost stays away from the jail as much as he possibly can. He's a closet racist and really doesn't give a damn about what happens across the street from The Tower."

The music lovers still to pile out of the bar. No one else has come in since we arrived. Gordon calls Murray on his cell phone.

Franklin Murray arrives within 30 seconds. He must have been sitting in his car in the parking lot. The man is obese. It's a wonder that he made it through the door, but he does. He's wearing a baby blue Nike sweat suit and shoes without laces. His neck is wider than his head, and Murray is out of breath when he sits down. The chair creaks....more like screams...when he sits.

Murray is dripping with sweat from sitting in his car and his comb over is plastered to his head. His skin is pasty white and his cheeks are flush. I resist the urge to slap him. Not sure why I feel that way, but Murray is somebody that looks like he deserves to be slapped.

This guy won't hold up well on a witness stand.

We don't shake hands. Gordon nods and Murray starts to tell his story. He was in jail for passing bad checks and was in the infirmary because he had the "runs."

“Polk was way gone by the time I first saw him,” Murray says. “He cried most of the time and begged to see his family.”

I ask, “Was he ever violent? Did he threaten the nurses or guards?”

“No, but the Shocker Brothers were always pestering him, wanting him to sign something. Polk would crawl up in a ball and refuse to say or do anything.”

“Did you see him tasered?”

Murray looks around, then shakes his head “No.”

“A couple of the other prisoners told me that Allen and Tucker shocked him a couple of times, but I never saw it, until the night he died.”

Murray tells the tale of Polk’s last day. The old trucker was convinced that Allen and Tucker were trying to poison him so he refused to eat the food. Instead he stuffed the meal down the toilet in his cell. Then Polk began shouting that there was acid on his clothes that was burning his skin. He ripped off his jail uniform and through it at the nurses.

“Did he spit at the nurses?”

“I don’t think so. I couldn’t really see, but whatever he did it got the whole jail upset. Not only did Tucker and Allen come to the infirmary, but they also brought four of their buddies. All of them had “Code Red” tattooed on their forearms, like they are members of some weird fraternity.”

All hell broke loose on the floor, according to Murray, who is now draining beers by the pitcher. His voice is high-pitched, almost feminine. Polk is pounced on and dragged to the showers. He’s screaming the whole time, calling for his wife.

“Tucker and Allen are laughing. I can see flashes coming from the shower. They must have been tasing him. Then everything went quiet. The deputies scattered and I saw Polk being dragged back to his cell in one of them restraint chairs.”

“Was Polk alive?”

“I couldn’t tell. A towel was draped over his head, but his head didn’t look right. It was really loose, like his neck was broken. I can’t get the vision out of my head.”

Murray drains his mug and heads to his bathroom.

Gordon looks at me. “What do you think?”

“This creep won’t hold up on the witness stand. I believe him, but even a bad attorney will fry him.”

“Yeah, but who says this will ever go to trial?” Gordon says. “This is a civil case, not a criminal one.”

“What do you Tucker and Allen wanted Polk to sign?”

“I think it was a sales agreement for his house, but I can’t prove it,” Gordon says, but then abruptly shuts up as our fat cherub returns.

“These interviews are hard work,” Murray says as he swipes his brow. I sure hope he washed his hands.

“Did Tucker and Allen ever talk to you?”

Murray shakes his head.

“What happened when they discovered Polk was dead?”

“Sheriff Frost and somebody who looked like the Pillsbury Doughboy came on the floor. They hauled Polk’s body off and the four of us who were in the nearby cells were released in a matter of hours. I was told my charges had been dismissed.”

“Did anybody ask you what happened to Polk?”

“Only Mr. Gordon here and an attorney who says he represents the Polk family.”

I walk through the story one more time with Murray, making sure that I have the facts right. It’s getting late and The Elbow Room is filling up again. Gordon and Murray are getting more nervous every time the bar door opens.

After a few more questions, Gordon and I leave. Murray is supposed to wait five minutes before he goes to his car. I doubt that he sits their five seconds before he leaves.

When we get back in the car, I ask Gordon. “How much are your people paying Murray?”

He doesn’t even try to act hurt. “Not much, just enough to keep him from skipping town. I don’t he will ever even by deposed by Frost’s attorneys. The Sheriff will want to settle this.”

“I need to interview Tucker and Allen, or at least try to get their side. Where can I find them?”

“Don’t worry, Holmes. I think they will find you first,” Gordon says as he drops me off at my offices.

That’s what worries me.

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