

Chapter 17 Demons and Deeds

I'm not alone on my ride back from the hospital. My demons fill the Jeep Grand Cherokee— despair, defeat and doubt. The unholy, but all too familiar, trinity gnaws at my soul as I drive back to office. Dennis' resignation has penetrated my armor and the trio has found its opening.

I am truly alone. There is no safety net. Without Dennis, the full weight of the Pensacola Insider sits on my shoulders. Everything I have is in this damn paper and what does it matter? How can I compete with the Herald and its billions? Hell, my own board is ready to shut me down. For what? An old black man that no cares about...except his family.

Cadaverous Frost can't be beaten. He has all the power, all the money. Why do I keep beating my head against a wall? How many more people will be hurt?

Am I a masochist or sadist? Roxy blames me for Dennis' beating. I put him at risk. She should hate me. Strangely, I don't feel fear. Maybe I really wish it was me, instead of my editor.

In high school, I was the brainy kid on the football team that get beat up by the seniors because I refused to bend and play along with hazing. My parents never knew how I got that black-eye my sophomore year. Entire season being the seniors tackling dummy can either make or break you. I didn't quit and have a lifelong hatred for bullies.

Why do I do this? If I don't, no one will. I'm nearly penniless, but I matter because of this stupid paper. By standing when all others sit on their hands, I can change this place. Frost, Peck and the other politicians would be free to pillage and destroy with impunity.

I am that rock that the waves constantly batter but it refuses to move or break. Eventually the waves may wear me down to nothing, but until then, I am the resolute man. If I retreat or sit down, all is lost. There would be more George Polks.

My cell phone vibrates. It's a text message from Amy: "Dare and I are waiting for you at the office. We've got to meet asap."

Dare is my landlord and has a key. I hope she explained that to Amy. When I pull up to the office, Dare's Bentley is parked in front, next to Amy's Saturn. I leave the demons in the Jeep and walk up the stairs.

Dare is sitting on the couch with a mug of coffee. Big Boy has his head in her lap and looks upset that I've interrupted them. Amy is sitting at the conference table with papers spread out before her.

"Why the tag team visit?" I ask as I pour myself a cup of coffee.

Amy and Dare exchange glances. Dare gets up and walks over to the conference table.

“Betsy found some very interesting land deals when she researched the property around the Main Street Sewage Treatment Plant,” Dare starts. “The more she dug, the more layers she found.”

“Walker, Betsy and I were to have breakfast this morning after church,” Amy chimes in. “Dare joined us and we agreed that we needed to bring all this to you. Betsy already had a commitment to visit her mother at the nursing home.”

I take a deep sip of coffee and decide not to say anything about the board meeting or Dennis’ resignation. I can hear the demon blowing the horn of the Jeep. They want me back.

“Okay, Dare, walk me through what Betsy found.”

“Well, Walker, this is really some of what all three of us have discovered approaching this from three different angles. Amy did a great deal of this research, too.” Amy’s cheeks turn a light rosy color.

“About a year before the Emerald Coast Utility Authority announced its intent to relocate the sewage plant, there were a series of mortgage foreclosures. Not all the homes, but about half a dozen. The bank was Crystal Community Bank.

“Those properties and the other lots around the Polk’s residence were bought by three Florida LLCs....limited liability corporations.”

“Who are the shareholders of the LLCs?”

“That’s the big question, Walker. In Florida, corporations have to file annual reports that list their officers and directors. However, LLCs don’t. They only have to state who their registered agent is.”

“Who are the registered agents, Dare?” I realize that she can hear the impatience in my voice, but she ignores it. No one rushes Dare.

“Walker, they all have the same registered agent, Braxton Greene from Tallahassee.” Dare says as she hands me copies of the annual reports for the three LLCs.

Amy steps in. “I then started searching the Florida Secretary of State’s database for other corporations and LLCs for which Greene serves as the registered agent.”

That had to be thousands, I think. Reading my mind, Amy says, “I found 363. Then I drilled down even further and searched to see if there were any corporations that might have Pensacola addresses. I found one corporation, BM3 Corporation.” Amy hand me a folder. “See who the president of BM3 is.”

I open the folder and read “President: Bruce Manchester.” Damn.

Dare can see the wheels turning in my head. “Walker, guess who was the originator of the mortgages that were foreclosed? Sunset Bank, Manchester’s bank that he sold to Crystal Community Bank.”

Damn. Both Dare and Amy are beaming. I have them walk me through all the documents, showing me the chain of ownership for all the properties. George Polk really was the lone holdout. It’s not as obvious on the surface, because Manchester was letting some of the families stay in their homes and pay rent.

After two hours, Dare and Amy are hungry. It’s dark outside. The two newfound friends walk up to Hopjacks for beer and pizza. I stay back to write up what they’ve told me and to figure out how I’m going to deal with this. They promise to bring back some pizza for Big Boy and me. I can hear them laughing as they head towards Hopjacks.

Buying property isn’t illegal. Neither is using shell companies. Manchester is a jackass, but not some mob boss who pays to have people killed.

Sitting at the computer, I start to wonder what other properties does BM3 own in Escambia County? I search on the Property Appraiser’s website. Several properties appear on the screen. One stands out—101 Cedar Street, an old warehouse one block off of Pensacola Bay. Big Boy and I jog by the boarded-up building every morning.

Was that where Dennis was taken? There’s only one way to find out. The warehouse is only a ten-minute walk away from here. I can walk over and be back before Dare and Amy return.

I grab my digital camera and head out, forgetting that bad things happen in threes and I was due one more mishap.