

Chapter 19 Deadline

I wake up in my bed. Big Boy is snoring on the pillow next to me. His breath smells like New York Nick's chargrilled wings. Somebody has been feeding him well. I push Big Boy off the bed. He yelps as do I when I try to lift my head off the pillow.

Dare screams at me and rushes to care for Big Boy. "What did you do that for, Walker?" Dare yells at me. "He has been at your side for the past 24 hours."

Twenty-four hours? It must be Tuesday. Whatever is wrong with me mustn't be too bad. Since I have no insurance, the hospital wasn't going to keep me any longer than necessary. My head is killing me. My eyes must be swollen I can barely see through the two slits.

I have trouble focusing. "Hey, I'm the patient," I groan as I try to get up. "What time is it? Are the kids in yet?" My head is bandaged, so is my chest.

"Shut up, Walker," Dare's still angry, but there is concern in her voice. She must have stayed with me, too. She still looks perfect...at little frayed, but still perfect. "You aren't superman. The paper can wait."

"It's Tuesday, right? What time is it, Dare?"

"Nine a.m."

"Dare, I know you are worried, but we have to make deadline. You know that," As I sit on the side of the bed and try to make the room stop spinning, I ask Dare, "What's happened?"

Dare tells me that Sheriff Frost had been staking out the warehouse along with the Pensacola Police. Frost took full credit for the arrests, saving me and solving the mysterious death of Polk. Teflon Ron had struck again winning front page headlines with his picture above the fold of the Pensacola Herald, which seem to take particular joy in describing my injuries.

No one asked him why it took so long for law enforcement to bust into the warehouse. I'm sure he and Peck are laughing their butts off right now.

The Shocker brothers have been arrested and charged with murder of George Polk and the assault on Dennis. Manchester, who had initially only been charged with being an accessory, had tried to cut a deal with the State Attorney's office, but Allen and Tucker beat him to the punch. Manchester made bail quickly before Allen and Tucker had begun ratting him out.

Two hours after making bail, Manchester was found dead in his car before he could be rearrested. He had hooked up a hose from the exhaust of his Volvo, fell asleep and never woke.

The Polk family's attorney has already amended his lawsuit to go after the Manchester family fortune. The Polk grandchildren won't have to worry about paying for college.

"Your injuries look worse than they are," Dare tells me. "You refused any painkillers for your cracked ribs, mild concussion and ten stitches on your scalp. However, you did take a few sips of Cutty Sark. How do you feel now?"

"My arms feel like they are made of lead, but my hands are fine. We still have to get the issue out."

"I know, I know. The great Walker Holmes...no pain, no fear, no brains." She's crying.

"Dare, thank you. I owe you more than I can ever repay you. No one ever says it is easy being my friend."

She kisses me my swollen cheek. "They sure don't, asshole. I'll get Teddy and Jeremy up here to dress you and help you downstairs. I'm out of here." She walks out of the room. I can hear her heels on the stairs. Big Boy is following her. Traitor.

Two lives lost, George Polk and Bruce Manchester. I also lost my editor Dennis. Dare isn't going to want to see for a few weeks, maybe months, either. But I've added to legend of Walker Holmes. The myth continues. No one will ever know how close I was to caving in, begging for mercy from two sociopaths.

And all I can think of is getting out the next issue of the paper. I already have the cover story written in my head. I am sick.

Teddy and Jeremy dress me. They take bizarre pleasure in dressing me in an old "Machine Gun Kelly's" bowling shirt and my most ragged khaki shorts. "

"Boss, we've got most of the paper ready to go," Teddy tells me as they nearly carry me down the stairs. "Amy came in and gave the cover story a stab, but Mal was sure you'd want to add your touch before I lay it out. It's good to see you up, Walker."

"You like crap though," Jeremy says under his breathe.

"It feels worse than it looks."

Summer and Amy fawn over me as the boys get me to my desk. Mal brings me my coffee and tells me I have four hours to turn in cover story and my weekly column. She winks as she turns and heads back to her desk.

Amy hasn't done a bad job with the cover. Nice quotes from Frost and state attorney. Not too much on my or Dennis' beatings. All I need to add is what had happened in the warehouse—at least what I could remember—and connect the dots for the readers. Greed, corruption and racism, the story almost writes itself. We can't go wrong with this story. No matter what we print, people will pick up this issue. These types of exclusives always fly off the racks.

For the next four hours, I write. Big Boy rubs against my leg a few times, just to let me know that he has forgiven me. I must look like a plane crash victim. No one looks at me while I'm at my computer. I mumble a few things to them, as they do to me. None of us know what to say so we say little. It will take a few days for things to get back to normal.

Right now we have a deadline, and I will not miss it.