

Chapter 5

Most people avoid conflict. They turn away from confrontations. Few ever walk into a room knowing that everyone there wants to stone them. I did it once today and I'm about to do it again.

The days after I left Dare's offices were routine for the Insider. However, outside our doors, Pensacola was caught up with the death of Sue Eaton Hines. The daily newspaper did a double-truck on her life. Friends speculated how the pending trial of her husband may have contributed to her state of mind.

Reporters, print and television, had begun digging into my life. I suspect they will profile me, warts and all, before the Hines trial. I can't complain. There's a lot of pent up frustration and anger towards me among our competitors. This will be their shot to go after me.

The medical examiner ruled the death was an accidental drug overdose, since no suicide note was found. I was blocked at every turn trying to find out if there were any other possibilities. Sources either didn't talk to me or hinted that I was trying to cover my ass and deflect any blame for her death. Gordon disappeared and wouldn't return calls or answer text messages. Dare quit talking to me entirely.

The funeral was at St. Joseph Catholic Church, the downtown church that was founded in 1891 as a place of worship for Pensacola's Creoles and blacks. Sue had been one of the parish's biggest benefactors and sang in their choir. In the rain, I stood with hundreds that filed in for the service. When I got inside, I was drenched and stood in back with other drowned rats that saw the funeral as a chance to get out of the rain. I didn't deserve to sit with the decent folks.

When I left my clump whose members were pretending to sing the hymns so the ushers wouldn't remove them, I felt the eyes of the congregation on me as I stood at the end of the communion line. Fittingly, the bishop ran out of host as I reached him. He didn't even offer me a blessing, just a nod.

As I walked to the back, un-blessed, without grace, I imagined Sue popping up from her casket and shouting, "Tackle that son-of-bitch, he put me here." Bo and his grandparents stared straight ahead as I passed them. Jace however didn't take his eyes off me. He snickered when the bishop didn't give me communion and whispered something to the cow in the big black hat with a veil sitting next to him.

The bums must have held a conference while I was gone, because they gave me a wide berth when I returned to my place. I had apparently been voted off the Amen choir.

I didn't walk over to the parish hall after the service. Martyrdom doesn't suit my personality. Instead I strolled across Government Street to the State Attorney's office to

meet with the guys handling the Hines case. The buzz was the prosecution was getting cold feet, and I needed to be sure they stayed with this case.

“Walker,” said Clark Spencer, assistant state attorney who specializes in white collar crimes and loves wearing sweater vests, even in the summer. He came straight at me. Humor isn’t one of his strong suits. His breath smelled of chili and onions, which meant he had eaten lunch at the Dog House Deli. Looking down, the mustard stain on his tie confirmed my deduction. “Bowman Hines is changing his plea from not guilty to guilty by reason of diminished capacity.”

“Diminished capacity? For stealing a half a million dollars? You’ve got to be kidding.”

“The defense attorneys also say their client will testify against the Arts Council executive director,” Spencer said. “The death of Mrs. Hines has gotten them to be more creative. I think they fear her death points to his guilt and they’re scrambling.”

“This is bull, Clark. Bo is the big fish. He is the mastermind. The only thing that is diminished is the Art Council’s bank account. Besides, no one knows where Pandora Childs is.”

Clark kept his cool. “Walker, the judge will delay the trial for a week to allow expert psychiatric witnesses to be briefed. It gives us time to negotiate with the defense. I will push to go to trial, but if he pays back the money, the political pressure will be on to accept a plea bargain.”

“Dammit, Clark. The press is vilifying me. The trial is how to prove what we reported is the truth.”

“You’re making this too personal, Walker. You’re a big boy.”

“Screw you, this is personal.” And I walked back into the rain and to my office. I had to find Childs. She had last been seen when the investigators confiscated her computer and all the checkbooks. The 26-year-old Emory University graduate had only been the executive director for fifteen months.

Childs did let me interview her for the Hines article, but it was before I started connecting the dots. Later when the questions began to turn negative, “No Comment” was her only reply. She was attractive in a bookworm sort of way. Dressed well, liked Apple Martini’s and an occasional joint and had no visible tattoos, although I suspected there was a rose or butterfly somewhere on her body.

I wrote “Pandora Childs” on a yellow post-it that I stuck on my computer screen as I headed to my second stoning.

The press release read:

Open Meeting – Save Our Pensacola  
Tonight, 6:00 p.m.  
New World Landing

We can stop the \$100M Maritime Park.

-Refreshments served.

“Open” means open so I set out to crash Jace Wittman’s little naysayer meeting. My mood is foul enough already—why not walk straight into the den of snakes.

Pensacola—old Pensacola—loves nothing more than stopping progress, especially when a wealthy Yankee is proposing it. Wittman got involved because that wealthy Yankee, A.J. Kettler, happened to hire Stan Daniel as his attorney.

The Maritime Park began as public-private development to revitalize downtown Pensacola after Hurricane Ivan. Kettler was looking to build a new stadium for his minor league baseball team, Pensacola Pilots. The University of West Florida had benefactors willing to build a maritime museum. The city would be issue bonds to provide \$40 million to remediate the former industrial site on Pensacola Bay and build the stadium. Kettler would build a \$12 million office building. The university would build a \$20 million maritime museum. The rest of the 40 acres would be open for commercial, retail and residential development.

Brilliant plan, a wonderful mix of public and private. The build-out of the project would put over \$300 million on the tax rolls and create about 1,000 jobs. The Maritime Park was being hailed by *Florida Trend* magazine as one of the brightest developments on the horizon.

Everyone loved it...except for Wittman. Despite fifteen months of public hearings and city council debates on all aspects of the project, Wittman claimed that there wasn’t enough public input. He has started a petition drive to rescind the council’s vote on the construction contract.

And the naysayers love him. He is their champion, the one who believes all their wild conspiracies and promises them the keys to power. He is their Moses, a voice in the wilderness telling the city leaders to repent and forget their wicked progressive ways.

Then rain has stopped. The streets are wet and you can see steam rising off the hot pavement as the workday subsides. Workers pile out of the Escambia County Office Complex. Secretaries and their supervisors wander across the street to Blazzues and Intermission to commensurate over a few beers that they only get four weeks of vacation, have stupid county commissioners before heading how to their trailers.

A herd of runners thunder down Palafox Street. Downtown bars have running clubs that offer pasta and cheap beer. These runners are older than the morning crowd and about

twenty pounds heavier. Many walk in their wife-beater t-shirts and too-short shorts more than they run. Me? I'll pay the extra dollar for my PBR and skip the lasagna on a plastic plate.

When I walk into the meeting room at New World Landing, a boutique hotel one block north of Evans Tower, I expect to see a bunch of old farts wearing tin-foil hats drinking warm punch and eating soft sugar cookies. I'm not too far off. However, they did leave their hats at home, probably because the tin-foil interferes with the sound system.

I took it on the chin earlier today at Sue's funeral, not tonight. I get a sick pleasure from walking into rooms like this one—knowing that my presence changes it. This room reacts to me the second I walk in the door and sign the guestbook. There is perceptual shutter as if someone has found a fly in their punch, but is too polite to say anything.

I sit on the front row with my black notebook and recorder. Wittman and his brain trust huddle in the corner next to the punch bowl and cookies. He is trying to calm them down. I look around and don't see a pile of stones in any of the corners.

They can't ask me to leave. After all, they are the one's complaining about the lack of open meetings. The daily newspaper and the WAPW-TV 12 have reporters there, too, who are shaking their heads and grinning at me. Clearly they expect fireworks.

Two retired military types sit on both sides of me, not saying a word, but looking hard to see what I what I'm writing in my notebook. Pensacola attracts military retirees from California, Ohio and Illinois. They can complain about everything while getting their health care for free at the Navy hospital and buy cheap goods and groceries at the Corry Station PX mall.

Their days are filled with attending city council meetings, writing letters to the editor that quote Fox News and Rush Limbaugh, and trolling internet forums and blogs looking for chances to prove their brilliance. They, along with fat women with mousey husbands, are Wittman's ground troops.

I write in my notebook for my escorts to see, "The crowd is warm and happy to see me. Their medications must be kicking in. There is a smell of Ben Gay, Talcum powder and Old Spice in the air. I hope the Depends hold out." My escorts snort, and having failed to intimidate me, get up—but not without saying "asshole" under their breaths.

A lady in red polyester and with a head of orange-tinted hair opens the meeting with a prayer to "Our Lord and Savior"—which I don't think means Wittman, but I bet he does—and the Pledge of Allegiance. The room doesn't have a flag so the pledge is done to Wittman's lapel pin.

The woman sits down at the head table with a gangly, bearded fellow, who I later learn is her husband, and Wittman. Her chair creaks as she plops down. My escorts stand behind them, staring at me. I barely suppress a laugh and keep my head down while I write.

“Ichabod” thanks his Technicolor wife and begins to outline all the sins of Kettler, Daniel and the Maritime Park. The retired UWF professor drones on. A few of the faithful in the crowd appear to be nodding off. The other reporters get restless and start checking the text messages on their cell phones. Wittman nods with a fixed phony smile and keeps looking at the door. He must be expecting someone.

Wittman checks his watch, as I do mine. It’s almost 6:30. He stands up and takes over.

“Thank you, Professor Ellis.” Looking at the Herald and WAPW reporters, he says, “It’s good to see the legitimate, non-biased press here for this very important meeting.”

Lady Orange Hair stares daggers at me. However, she doesn’t have a stone in either hand.

“The people don’t want this park.” There is clapping and a few “amens” from the crowd. “This was forced on us by the downtown crowd. You shouldn’t be paying for a baseball park for a millionaire’s hobby team.”

Wittman reminds me of William Jennings Bryan when he gave his famous “Cross of Gold” speech at the 1896 Democratic National Convention. He has the same religious fervor that I imagined the upstart Bryan had when he delivered his closing line to his speech on using silver to value the U.S. dollar: “You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns, you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold.” At that convention, the crowd went wild, rushed the stage and literally swept him in as their presidential nominee. Bryan would lose to William McKinley.

This crowd of retirees and humongous women was starting to reach that same level of hysteria. Wittman is very charismatic and a master of twisting his opponents’ words and programs. And he knows how to manipulate this audience and the media.

Wittmen shouts, “We can do better.”

“Yes, WE CAN,” I hear a familiar voice yell from the back. Bowman Hines walks into the room and is welcomed by applause and a hug from his brother-in-law.

“Jace is so right,” Hines, who is still dressed in the dark suit that he wore to his wife’s funeral, says. “which is why I’m handing Save Our Pensacola a check for \$10,000. This is our land (facing the audience with open arms) and we are the only ones who can decide what we do with it.”

More applause. I notice the reporters are lapping this up. The park project is in trouble.

“This check is just a down payment on my commitment. My late wife would have never wanted to see such valuable property handed over to some outsider. Sue would want me to stand with her brother against this boondoggle.”

I can't remember Bo or Sue ever taking a stance on the Maritime Park. Why the sudden change of heart?

"Sue loved nature. It's in her memory that I donate this money so that we can have an open waterfront park that all of the city can enjoy. Let Kettler build his ballpark elsewhere."

The crowd is almost giddy. Wittman says a few more words, thanks the crowd and walks over to the reporter with Hines. They will dominate the headlines tomorrow.

I walk out and head to the hotel's bar, 600 South. Pensacola only has a few high class bars. This is one of them. The waitresses have their teeth, wear short black dresses and are attentive to when your glass is empty. It doesn't have a running club.

I order a Jack & Coke to celebrate my surviving two near stonings. My second drink is in Sue's memory. My third is for the Maritime Park. My fourth...short black dresses. When I get up to head back to Big Boy, the bartender hands me envelope.

"One of the ladies that was at the meeting told me to hand this to you when you headed home," he says.

"What did she look like?"

He shrugs, "I don't know...fat."

I open the white envelope when I get back to the loft. A single, yellow page from a notepad falls out.

It's Sue Eaton Hine's suicide note.

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