

Chapter 14

Jacob Solomon lives in a little gingerbread house on a little side street in North Hill. In front of his house is a historic marker that declares this is the site of the Queen's Redoubt, a British fortification that was blown up by the Spanish artillery during the Battle of Pensacola in 1781. The Spanish rebuilt it and named it Fort San Bernardo. When the United States government took over Pensacola in 1821, the British residents convinced Gov. Andrew Jackson to allow the fort to deteriorate, out of pure spite. Nothing now remains of it, except the marker.

Jacob and Ruth Solomon raised two sons and a daughter in this three-bedroom, one-bath cottage. Ruth passed away two years ago, dying in her sleep. The two sons are doctors. One lives in Atlanta, the other in Miami. The daughter, Sarah, lives in Pensacola and is an attorney for the American Civil Liberties Union.

I park in the driveway under a huge hundred-year oak. Before I follow the stepping stones to the front door, Mr. Solomon opens a side door and waves me in.

"Mr. Holmes, it is such a privilege to have you in our home," says Mr. Solomon as he motions for me to sit in a leather lounge chair. "I told my older brother Caleb you were coming for lunch and he was so jealous. We're big fans, Mr. Holmes. What is it about Mississippi that it produces such great writers—William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Willie Morris, John Grisham and you?"

"Mr. Solomon, please call me Walker. I only know 500 words and my goal is to put them in a different order every week and some how tell a story."

He laughs and excuses himself to get our sandwiches and glasses of iced tea with fresh mint. The room where I'm sitting must be his study. It's filled with books, not only in the bookcase that covers an entire wall, but also on the tables and stacked on the floor. Mr. Solomon must have given me his favorite chair. On the table beside it is a book of crossword puzzles written in German. Under it is a well-worn copy of Caesar's Commentaries written in Latin, of course.

I shut my eyes for a few minutes as I hear Mr. Solomon whistling in the kitchen. I can feel the love in this place. I can picture Ruth and Jacob sitting here with classical music on the stereo, reading and sharing tales of their days. I like this house.

"I'm a writer, too, Walker," says Mr. Solomon as he returns with a tray of tuna fish sandwiches and our tea. He is barrel-chested with shoulders even broader than mine, but the past 92 years have stooped him over and shrunken him to less than five feet tall. There is still vitality in his walk and a spark in his eyes. It's not difficult imagining him as a teacher.

"Ruth and I traveled all over the South visiting the childhood homes of great Southern authors. We wrote about them and were fortunate to have our book published."

“I would love to read it,” I say, really meaning it.

We take our time eating. He asks questions about some of my past articles—deaths in the county jail, relocation of the downtown sewage plant and the maritime park. I ask about his children, who are close to my age. He brings me a photo album of his grandchildren and great grandchildren. He sighs when he sees a picture of his Ruth holding one of Sarah’s babies.

After the dishes are rinsed and put in the dishwasher, we talk about CeCe Daniels.

“Celeste Daniels was a gifted student. She was in my first year Latin class,” says Mr. Solomon. “She was smart and wasn’t afraid to show it. She reminded me of Katherine Hepburn, very athletic, sort of a tom boy, but still attractive to the boys—whom she bedeviled on a regular basis.”

Mr. Solomon shuts his eyes and chuckles to himself. “I remember her bringing a banana to the cafeteria. How she unpeeled and ate that banana had every boy in that lunchroom squirming in their seats. I finally had to tell to please eat the darn thing before she caused a riot.”

He taught both at Catholic and Washington. Later he would head the language department at Washington, before becoming the principal of the school. But in the 1960s, he was part-time at both schools. When Dare called him about Bo Hines, Mr. Solomon remembered there was link between Hines and Jace Wittman that pre-dated Bo marrying Sue.

“Celeste liked to pit the two boys against each other,” says Mr. Solomon. “I taught both them. Neither of them was as good a student as she was. Bo worked hard it, but didn’t have the brain power. Jace had the brains, but was too spoiled and too lazy.”

“Was she dating both of them at the same time?”

“Yes, sort of.” He pauses for a second, trying to remember something. With his eyes still shut, he says, “Ruth and I chaperoned the proms for both schools. Usually freshmen girls don’t go to those dances, at least not back then. Ruth felt that Celeste did it to show off to her older brother and the underclassmen.”

“How did Stan Daniels react to his baby sister dancing with his rivals?”

“Stan Daniels had no rivals. He operated on a different level than everyone else, but he watched Hines and Wittman like a hawk, never letting Celeste out of his sight at either dance. And, yes, Stan was so popular that he was invited to both dances, too.”

“Tell about the day Celeste Daniels disappeared.”

Mr. Solomon gets up and walks over to the big bay window that overlooks his rose garden. I don't rush him. He will speak when he is ready. He touches a framed picture of Ruth in her wedding dress, she's smiling and in love.

When he turns to face me, he says, "I think she might have been pregnant."

"Why?"

"She had been distressed all week, asking to leave class several times. When she came back to the classroom, I could tell she had been crying. Something was wrong. When she first disappeared, I thought she had run off to have the baby and would show back up a year later."

"Who was the father?"

"Had to be either Bo or Jace," says Mr. Solomon, who looks even smaller than when I first walked into his house. "I confronted both the boys after she went missing. Both acted like I was crazy...but they weren't shocked that I brought up the pregnancy."

"Did you talk with Mr. or Mrs. Daniels about your suspicion?"

Shaking his head, he says, "No, I went to the principal, Sister Mary Thaddeus. She thought it best I keep my theories to myself and leave the family alone. We had three children and I needed the job. I kept my mouth shut."

There are tears in his eyes. "You had little choice," I tell him. "I'm not sure how telling the parents that their missing daughter might be pregnant would have helped anything."

"Really, Walker?"

"Celeste never returned. The thought of losing both a daughter and possibly a grandchild would have driven them mad. Not every story has to be told."

Thanking him for the lunch and the interview, I get up and head for the door.

"Walker, would you ever be available to come speak to our book club?" says Mr. Solomon as he's shaking my hand. "Caleb would be so happy to meet you. You can talk about whatever you like."

"Sure, it would be an honor," I reply, thinking if I'm not in jail.

While I was visiting with Mr. Solomon, another of my scheduled blog posts went live:

BUZZ: HINES CASE TO GO TO TRIAL

Sources inside the courthouse tell The Insider the grand theft case of Bowman Hines is back on track and the State Attorney will be ready for

trial next week, despite earlier rumors it would be delayed in order for Hines to work out a plea agreement.

Assistant State Attorney Clark Spencer won't be happy. Neither will Hines. I should be in his head right about now, which is exactly where I want to be.

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