

Chapter 9

Pandora Childs, the missing executive director of the now-defunct Arts Council of the Florida Panhandle, had been hiding out at friend's condo in Pigeon Forge, Tenn. She will drive back to Pensacola tomorrow and meet me around 9 p.m. at O'Riley's Pub, a dive bar near Interstate 10, where no one has any idea who Childs and I are.

Upstairs the Insider staff is fuming, my "ace" reporter Yoste hasn't shown up for work. Chloe is still getting phone calls from angry advertisers wanting to cancel their ads. Jeremy is talking about moving to Austin, Texas and is checking job listings on Craigslist. Teddy has his headphones on, oblivious to the world, photo-shopping photos for the next issue. Mal is pissed at everyone, especially the missing Yoste.

"Boss, he's too immature for his job," Mal says as the burrito-free Big Boy nozzles her leg. "You can go on your crusades, but somebody has to write the news. This paper can't be only long rant from you."

"Yeah, it can't all be me either," Jeremy pipes in. His trash can is filled to the brim with Starbucks cups. I don't know how many are from this morning. Why did I have to hire the sloppiest gay A&E writer in the world?

"Shut up, Jeremy," Mal snaps at him and Jeremy storms out for a smoke.

"Mal, I will deal with it."

Chloe yells with her hand over the receiver on her phone, "When are you going to deal with this Hines-Wittman crap? You're killing me."

"Offer them free upgrades, Chloe," I tell her. "This will pass."

Everyone turns away from me, even Big Boy. I walk over to my desk and there's note to call Stan Daniels. I reach his secretary who asks me to drop by at 11 a.m.....about an hour from now.

When I check my blog, I've already had 35 comments—none flattering. It's worse on the Herald website. Most hope that Hines will sue me. Some assert the note is a fake. Few claim Kettler put me up to it in order to discredit Wittman. Anyone defending me is ripped to shreds.

Clark Spencer calls again. "My boss wants to know who gave you the suicide note."

"A fat lady in bar."

"Holmes, this is serious," Spencer says. "The cops didn't find any note at the scene. Suddenly you have it the day Bo Hines attacks you in the newspaper. You have to admit it looks bad."

“I know, I know, but even if I knew who gave it to me, I couldn’t tell you who without their permission. Just check out the handwriting and verify if Sue wrote it.”

“We are, but I can tell you that unless you can come up with more on how you got the note, you can expect a subpoena...maybe even a search warrant.”

“Do whatever you have to do.”

Dammit. I decide to not call Gravy again. Let’s see what happens next. I’ve got a couple days before they send anybody after me.

My cell phone vibrates. A reporter from Mobile television wants to know if I will be going to the press conference this afternoon and will I be available for comments afterwards.

“What press conference? Why would I want to comment?”

The reporter says, “Bowman Hines and Jace Wittman are holding the press conference today at 3 p.m. on the courthouse steps. Walker, they are telling us they will have their attorney there and they will expose you for the tabloid hack writer that you are.”

Guess I better call Gravy. He doesn’t answer. I leave a detailed message and beg him to call me back. Then I walk over to Daniels’ office.

During the park referendum debate, Daniels and I became acquainted. We don’t have a lot in common. He is a defense attorney who represents mostly corporations. Daniels has made nearly as much defending Big Tobacco as the trial attorneys who won the multi-billion dollar statewide settlement. Whether he wins or loses, Daniels always gets paid.

For that reason, I don’t think I could ever really like him. His idea of making a better Pensacola means making his friends richer. Me? I think of that single mom holding down two jobs trying to feed her five kids. I don’t begrudge him and realize he goes to bed every night thinking what great job he is doing for the community.

He sleeps. I rarely do.

Daniels towers over me when I’m escorted into this office. He’s still slim and athletic. On the wall are pictures of him crossing the finish line at Boston and New York City marathons...just another reason for me to dislike him.

“A.J. wanted me to meet with you about this new petition drive,” Daniels starts. He is charming and sincere when he speaks, with a bright, winning smile. Okay, I like him a little.

“He wants your take on it. Will they get enough signatures to force another referendum? How will Bo Hines impact it?”

“Tell A.J. that it’s too early to tell. They have 90 days to present 5,000 signatures to the city council. If Hines bankrolls the effort, Wittman might get them in time.”

“Should I try to meet with Bo?” Daniels asks. “We’ve served on a few boards together. A.J. made a pretty big donation to one his fundraisers two years ago.”

“That’s your call,” I say. “If you do, don’t mention my name.”

Daniels just nods. I’m not sure he really knows how to use a computer so he probably hasn’t ever read the blog. He doesn’t know about the suicide note or possible press conference.

I continue, “Stan, we will be battling the same misinformation as before, the same lies. Only difference this time is the push to create this nature reserve in Sue’s memory. I can’t be sure how that might impact people.”

“The suicide note might make a difference.” He does know how to use a computer after all, and he reads my blog.

I change the subject slightly. “I thought Hines’ company was doing the site work for the park.”

“At first, it looked like the city council would award the business to him, but then he was arrested, thanks to you, and they went with the next lowest bidder. Hines protested but the council wouldn’t budge.”

We talk twenty or so more minutes about the petition drive. Oddly Daniels rarely mentions Wittman. He wants to talk only about the petition and Hines.

“My reporter is working on a story about the petition drive. Can he interview you and Kettler?”

“Have him call my secretary to set it up,” he says as he walks me to the elevator. “I’m sure A.J. will at least do a phone interview. I think he is traveling in Canada with his family this week.”

Must be nice.

Gravy calls me as I walk back to the Insider offices. “I can’t make the press conference. Maybe you shouldn’t either.”

I tell him, “I really don’t have a choice. I need to stare them down.”

“I expect nothing less from the fearless Walker Holmes,” Gravy says. “Call after work and we can meet somewhere for drinks. Remember any publicity is good publicity.”

“Spoken like a true trial attorney,” I say as I hang up.