

## Chapter 15

Checking my cell phone which I had left in the car while I was having lunch, I see I have missed a dozen or so calls—Dare, Gravy, Spencer, Hines’s attorney and numbers I don’t recognize. Several left voice messages, which I never intend hearing. I check my emails and see that the city clerk has the documents regarding the sitework for the maritime park. That will be my next stop after I type up my notes on meeting with Jacob Solomon.

Finding a table at the Whataburger near the Pensacola Civic Center, I write up what I can recall from the conversation. Remembering what I hear is never the issue, but not letting my slow typing skills hamper the flow of words and thoughts is. I spent half of the second semester of my sophomore year in Mrs. Stanbacher typing class at St. Joseph High School with a broken left hand (who knew there was a stud behind that sheetrock in exact spot I chose to punch the wall in my bedroom?). Still somehow got an A, but never learned the basics. In college, Chi O’s and Tri-Delts typed my papers. God has a sick sense of humor making me a writer in the digital age.

Accessing the diner’s WiFi, I post a new article to the blog, one that will further push this insane plan of mine:

### **BUZZ: MISSING GIRL PREGNANT?**

Friends of Celeste Daniels, who has been missing since 1967 and is presumed dead, tell The Insider that the 16 year old was pregnant at the time of her disappearance. Who was the father? No one has come forward with that information...yet.

At Pensacola City Hall, my reception is formal, but not hostile. Florida has one of the most liberal Public Records laws in the country. All state, county, and municipal records are open for personal inspection and copying by any person. Some officials, like Sheriff Frost, may try to play games in releasing information, but in the end they have to release just about anything you ask for.

The secretary escorts me to a conference room where the proposals for the sitework at the maritime park are stacked in neat piles, each about two inches thick. The only one I want to read is Bo Hines’s bid. The staff recommendation had been originally to award the \$9.5 million contract to Hines, but the arrest for the Arts Council theft forced the recommendation to be changed at the last minute.

The maritime park is on Pensacola Bay, on land that a gas and diesel storage facility once occupied, so it has some environmental “challenges.” The naysayers complained about it being in the flood plain and could be susceptible to hurricanes so dirt had to be trucked in to raise the site fifteen feet.

All the bidders listed their subcontractors. Reading through Hines’s proposal, I find \$200,000 for JW Safety Consultants. I had never heard of the company. Its address is a

Pensacola post office. I pay for a copy of Hines's bid and go find a place to hide out until my meeting with Pandora Chjld, the former executive director of the Arts Council.

It's almost 4:48. The State Attorney will figure out in a few minutes that I'm a no-show. He will have the police look for me downtown. I need to hide out in the open, but away from the happy hour crowds....Etta's Blues Café.

Etta's sits in the old "colored downtown." When Jim Crow laws swept across the South and finally hit Pensacola, a coastal town that had a population that rivaled the diversity of New Orleans, African-American businesses and customers were forced off of Palafox Street to West Hill, which eventually became Belmont Devilliers.

The neighborhood's heyday was in the late 1920s and early 1930s during Prohibition. Belmont Devilliers had a carnival atmosphere, booming nightclubs, restaurants, stores, pawnshops and hot music thrived alongside gambling, drinking and prostitution. Whites mixed with blacks once the sun set, and the cops looked the other way as long as the payoffs were made.

Etta's Blues Café opened during the roaring 20's and has survived recessions, depressions, the Klan, the Baptist churches and the new wave of street thugs. Etta Mae's great grandson, Theodore Ware, runs it today. Theodore ducks through every doorway he enters. His callused hands swallow up mine when we shake. His face nearly always has a smile. When he isn't smiling, you run.

Theodore and I became friends with his uncle, George Polk, was killed three years ago by detention deputies in the county jail. I refused to let the death go unnoticed and eventually, after a few more busted ribs, I exposed the bad guys.

I don't visit Theodore and Etta's much, because he won't let me pay for anything. Today I need to be in a place outside my regular hangouts with an electrical outlet for my laptop and wireless internet service. Theodore will take care of me.

Etta's is slow. An elderly black couple is eating fried chicken, collard greens, black-eyed peas and cornbread. Two skinny white girls are drinking white wines at the bar and texting on their cell phones more than talking. Every three minutes they show each other their screens, giggle, sip of their wine and type more with their thumbs. Joan Armatrading's "Love and Affection" is playing, filling the room.

Theodore is out, but his niece sits a corner table near the bar so I can keep an eye on the room. She brings me a bucket of longneck Buds and ice and a basket of sweet potato chips.

"Uncle Theo says you don't pay and I'm to keep the bucket full until you say otherwise," she tells me.

"No, I'll pay," I say, pulling a worn twenty out of my jeans.

“Put it up. My uncle won’t even let us take a tip from you, Mr. Holmes,” She’s not angry or rude, just matter of fact. “Let me know if you want to eat. Fried chicken is the special,” she says as goes back to man the front door.

Firing up my laptop, I first check my blog. The comments have piled up, awaiting moderation. I approve all of them, even one from Hines’s attorney stating that he will be filing suit for defamation, libel and anything else he can think up. My cell phone keeps vibrating. I don’t look at it.

The flatscreen TV over the bar is broadcasting the local news without sound. Nobody’s paying attention, which is a good thing since the video is of the Save Our Pensacola protesters marching outside my office. Assistant State Attorney Clark Spencer is being interviewed, too. My photo is a small box in the upper right-hand corner. I don’t think they are announcing I’ve won a Pulitzer.

I go back to my laptop. A shadow crosses my table and Theodore Ware sits across from me.

“Mr. Walker, did my niece take good care of you?” says Theodore.

“Yes, she has given me everything I need,” I say pointing to the half empty bucket of beer. “Please drop the mister and let me pay for the beer.”

He ignores my request. “I saw the news report on the television in the kitchen.”

I shrug my shoulders. “Nothing that I haven’t handled before.”

“Who cracked your skull?”

“Unhappy readers.”

Theo smiles showing the whitest, brightest teeth I’ve ever seen. He makes me want to go brush mine. Instead, I swish the Bud around in my mouth. “Mr. Walker, there must be some black in you. You can’t stay out of trouble.”

“Theo, life isn’t a popularity contest. I’ll be fine, just need some time to collect my thoughts before my next interview.”

“And you need somewhere to hide out for a couple hours,” says Theodore as he waves for his niece to refill my bucket. Talking to her, “Have Jamicce fix a big bowl of red beans and rice for Mr. Walker. Bring him a plate of collards and cornbread, too.”

Theo turns back to me. His smile has vanished. “No one will mess with you here. Give me your keys and I’ll move your car behind back.”

“Thanks, Theo.”

“Let’s move you to my office off the kitchen. You can stay there as long as you need.”

For the next few hours, I write, monitor the blog and ignore my cell phone which is vibrating constantly now. Of course, the food is fantastic. I even sample the fried chicken and apple cobbler. To keep myself from falling asleep, I reread the bid Hines gave the city for the maritime park.

I start searching on the internet for JW Safety Consultants. Nothing. None of the proposals had even listed a safety consultant. I google the post office box and zip code. There are the same as Jace Wittman’s real estate company.

“JW” stand for Jace Wittman.

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