

Chapter 16

In Theo's kitchen office there is a huge flatscreen monitor on the wall. On the screen are six boxes that show different views of inside and outside of Etta's, taken from the video surveillance system. While working on my laptop, I find myself occasionally glancing at the screen, seeing what's happening in the parking lot, kitchen, dining area and at the bar, hostess station and cashier. There's no sound.

Two uniformed cops walk in and apparently demand to see Theo. Their stance is combative and confrontational, which means they must have found my car hidden behind the restaurant. Outside, I can see another patrol car pull up, cutting off any chance of slipping out the back door.

As I start to pack up my laptop, Jamicce rushes into the office. "We need to get you in the tunnel," she says while pulling back a throw rug on the floor and opening a trap door that fits seamlessly into the wood floor. "Here's a flashlight. This leads to Miss Bonnie's house across the street. Uncle Theo wanted you to talk with her anyway about your story. She will let you use her car until this dies down."

I don't have any quips to fire back. All I can manage is "Thank you" as she closes the door behind while I climb down the ladder to the tunnel. I can hear her moving chairs on top of the rug.

The tunnel is narrow, only about five feet wide. The floor is dirt and walls are cinder block. The flashlight is just bright enough to shine five yards in front of me. I expect a rat to run in front of me any minute. None do.

I had heard stories about how the Prohibition raids of Etta's rarely had any arrests of politicians. There were rumors of a tunnel, but I could never get Theo to admit to anything. He would only smile, buy a beer and change the subject. I thought the tale was another Pensacola urban legend.

When I climb up the ladder at the end of the tunnel and open the trapdoor, I'm in a food pantry. There's a little black boy wearing a Lakers jersey seating at an island in the middle of kitchen. He looks up from his bowl of tomato soup. Not saying a word, he motions his head towards the living room.

There's a little woman sitting on the edge of worn couch. She's wearing a thin paisley robe over a white night gown. Her skin is nearly translucent. It's difficult to tell if she's African-American, Caucasian or Asian.

"Miss Bonnie, I'm Walker Holmes," I say. "Thank you for letting use your tunnel." I feel like an ass. What do you say when you pop up suddenly in someone's pantry?

"I know who you... you're that crazy white man ...who owns that little paper that stirs up all that trouble," says Miss Bonnie. She gasps to catch her breath as she completes her

sentence. "Don't ever smoke. I used my inhaler an hour ago and can't use it again for another two hours."

"Can I get you some water or anything?"

"Do have a cigarette?" she cackles, coughs and points for me to sit down in a worn armchair. "I'm just pulling your leg. That's Theo's grandson in the kitchen. His job is to make sure I don't smoke and only drink one glass of sherry before I go to bed. I pay the little hustler a dollar to get a second glass without him telling his grandfather."

She sighs as she tries to get comfortable on the couch. "Don't ever get old, Mr. Holmes."

"Yes, ma'am." I can still see the cop cars down the street. Checking my watch, I have about 45 minutes before I meet Pandora Child at O'Riley's.

"I'll let you use my car," she says. It appears she's caught her breath. Her voice is steady. "Theo thinks you're some kind of hero. Heroes are destroyed in this town. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Why did they kill my baby?" She's holding back tears.

"Ma'am?"

"My baby, Sue, why did they kill her?"

"Miss Bonnie, are you talking about Sue Hines?" She pulls out a crumpled tissue from the pocket of her robe and nods her head as she wipes the tears from her cheeks. "No one killed her, Miss Bonnie."

"Those boys did it. As sure as you and I are sitting here, those boys killed my baby. I raised her from the crib until she married. Those boys might not have done the deed, but they drove her to it."

The hustler peeks in from the kitchen. He brings her a box of Kleenex and a glass of sherry. I give him a dollar as he heads to another room. I can hear him turn on the television.

"My baby still visited me. She never forgot her Momma Bonnie, bought me that TV in the other room. My Sue loved me and she told me what was going on."

"What boys are you talking about? Bo and Jace?" She takes a long sip of her sherry and nods her head.

“She was disgusted with both of them. Something was wrong, but she couldn’t figure out what it was,” says Miss Bonnie. “I think when she finally discovered what it was. The burden was too much for her to bear.”

“I thought those two were always rivals, until recently.”

“No.” She shakes her head. “No, those two competed for everything, but they always wound up back together. They found ways to make each other money when they got older, according to my Sue.”

“Did Sue ever mention the park that they’re building on the water across from City Hall?”

She shakes her head no. “What do you know about Celeste Daniel?”

“White girl that died when all of them were in high school?” It’s my turn to nod. “That was a bad time. Jace was sent off to live with a relative for the summer. Bo starting dating Sue about that time. Nobody wanted to talk about it.”

Miss Bonnie finishes her sherry. “It’s time for me to sleep. The keys are by the backdoor. Don’t race the engine.”

And with that, Miss Bonnie shuts her eyes. I’ve been dismissed.

When I get to O’Riley’s Pub, the bar is packed with Navy and Marine types and bleach blonde, silicone-enhanced drunk women. It’s karaoke night. Guys and girls are pouring over the list of songs available, each looking for that big break to win the heart of someone. Most of the guys pick Country songs because they can kind of talk their way through them. The girls choose Pink or Miranda Lambert.

I drink my second PBR, keeping an eye on the door for Child and fight off the urge to drive my pen through my eardrums. My phone vibrates. It’s a text from Child: “Come out to parking lot.”

She must be spooked. When I walk out, a set of car lights flash near the edge of the parking. I can see her silhouette in the front seat. This is getting a little ridiculous I think as I head her way.

My cell vibrates again. This time the text message is from Jim Gordon: “Avoid Child. Just found out she was staying in a condo owned by Wittman.”

Then I feel a thud on my skull. My last thought before I pass out is “There go my stitches.”

