

Chapter 17

Slap. “Wake up.” Slap. “Wake up.” Slap.

The voice is a feminine, vaguely familiar. Each hit is a little harder. Trying to will my eyes open, I brace myself for the big one. She doesn’t disappoint me.

Shaking my head, I open my eyes to see Pandora Child standing over me. For such a little woman, Child packs a punch. Gone are the glasses and mousy outfits. She might even be attractive after a few drinks. I smell dope and diesel fuel. Her eyes have the marijuana droop.

“That’s enough, Panda,” says Wittman. “Mr. Holmes is now awake. Go get Bo.”

We are in the cabin of nice size boat. I sit up from the cushioned shelf I was laying on. It doubles as a couch and bed. The boat is rocking, forcing me to brace myself and swallow the red beans and rice that wants so badly to make a reappearance.

“You don’t look so good,” says Wittman chuckling. He is standing at the door of the cabin with a gun in his left hand. Fighting the urge to vomit and still trying to clear my head, I reach up and feel the stitches on my head. They are thankfully fine. I steel myself and just stare at Wittman. Maybe he will burst into flames. I smile at the thought.

Wittman rushes me and backhands me. I feel his ring rip my cheek. “You think this is funny, you son of bitch?”

Knocking me back down on the couch, he presses the handgun to the side of my head, burrowing the muzzle into my skull. Maybe it’s the secondhand smoke from the pot, but I start laughing.

“Jace, back off. Walker is trying to get your goat,” says Bo Hines as he enters the cabin. Child is like a little bird perched just behind him on the stairs. She has a bong in her hand.

Red-faced, Wittman shoves me and sits opposite me, pointing the gun at my chest. “I hate this prick,” he says. “He never lets up.”

“That’s what you like to hear, isn’t it, Walker?” says Hines as he sits next to Wittman. “You love being in people’s heads, don’t you?”

“I have no malice towards your brother-in-law,” I say, hoping my voice sounds steady. My Mississippi drawl gets more pronounced when I’m under pressure so each word gets an extra syllable. Maybe they won’t notice. “I hate your politics, not you, Wittman.”

“Yeah, right. I am my politics,” Wittman yells. “We would have stopped this goddamn park if you and your blog didn’t exist.”

“Is this what (touching my cheek, then looking at the blood on my finger) this is all about, guys?” Turning to Hines, “This is a little overkill. Isn’t it, Bo?”

“This is all your fault, Walker,” say Hines. His eyes are a little glazed over, too. Dammit, all these people are high. I’ve got to talk them out of whatever they have planned. “It’s your fault that Sue killed herself.”

“Yeah, yeah, you killed my sister,” Wittman chimes in.

“Shut up, Wittman,” I say. “The adults are talking.”

“You don’t think I will pull the trigger. I will. I will. You don’t know who you’re messing with and what you’ve screwed up. Nobody knows anything.”

“Are you talking about how you killed Celeste Daniels?”

Wittman laughs.

“I killed Celeste,” says Hines.

Well, I missed that one and my surprise must show on my face. “The great Walker Holmes doesn’t know everything,” laughs Child from the stairs. “Look at his face, it’s priceless.”

Hines isn’t laughing. He stares down at the floor and speaks in a monotone. “It was a stupid accident. Jace, Celeste and I were headed to the beach. Smoking pot, drinking beer, listening to the Stones, feeling the hot sun on our skin and riding in my Jeep daring the cops to stop us. We owned the town. We were invincible. Celeste rode shotgun, looking too beautiful for words....I...I hit a pothole and she went flying...broke her neck.” He puts his head in his hands.

Wittman finishes the tale. “We weren’t going to let that accident ruin our futures. It was her fault. She didn’t hold on to something. She killed herself, not us. Back then, girls were running away from home all the time. Nobody saw her get into the Jeep. She didn’t tell anybody where she was.”

The whole time Wittman never says her name.

“We buried her among the weeds and scrub oaks across from sewer plant. Nobody ever went near the area because of the odors from the plant.” Wittman is talking about the site where the maritime park is being built.

“So that’s why you opposed the maritime park,” I interrupt. “You didn’t want anybody to find Daniels’ body.”

“No shit, Sherlock,” says Wittman, still pointing the gun at my chest. He isn’t overcome with remorse like Hines. He seems to be enjoying telling the story, like it’s proof of his genius. “I only fooled around with her to screw with her brother Stan. It drove him crazy. The one thing he couldn’t beat me at.”

Hines lifts his head. “Even when the referendum passed, we still thought we had it under control, because I had won the contract to do the site work. I underbid it to make sure I got it, left hundreds of thousands on the table. I made sure we stayed away from the part of the property where we buried Celeste. I had it set aside for a nature reserve. Then you published the story on the arts council and I lost the work.”

With pure hatred, he looks at me, “You ruined everything.”

“It’s the cover up and greed that always ruins the best laid plans,” I say, matching his stare. “You never should have expected to keep her death a secret.”

“You’re wrong, Walker,” says Hines. “We had it under control.”

“Your secrets killed your wife. Sue must have overheard you and Wittman discussing how to keep the grave from being discovered. Secrets and knowing that her brother is a psychotic, greedy dumbass killed her.”

Wittman reaches across to backhand me again. I grab his wrist before he can unleash his fury. “Enough with the hitting,” I say.

“Let go of him, Walker,” says Hines. He has a gun, too, which I hadn’t noticed earlier. Damn, NRA.

“Bo, you’ve always carried your brother-in-law. None of this is fatal to your career. Nobody like Wittman.”

“Shut up, Holmes,” Wittman says.

“He stole the money from the arts council.”

“Shut up, Holmes.”

“He’s blackmailed you all your life. It’s why you had to hire his dummy consulting firm as a subcontractor. He was blackmailing you.”

“Shut up. Shut up. Shut up.” This time I’m not quick enough to block him. Manically he’s on top of me beating the crap out of me. Curling up I wait for him to wear himself out.

“ENOUGH, JACE,” yells Hines. Breathing heavy, Wittman pulls back. He picks up his gun again.

I touch my lips. There are now bleeding, too. Hines is my only hope to get out of this. I have to get him to be rational.

“Bo, you need to put your pet monkey on a leash,” I say ignoring Wittman and focusing solely on Hines. “It’s time to end the lies. The blackmail and covers ups can stop here. You’ve carried this burden too long.”

I see doubt in his eyes...but only for a moment.

“No, Walker, this ends tonight with you. Eliminate you and there is no paper, no blog and no problem.”

“You’re going to shoot me? What would Sue think, Bo? You’re not a murderer.”

“You were right when you said I killed my wife. I am murderer. I didn’t force her to take the pills, but I drove her to it. The only family I have left is Jace and family sticks together.”

“Let me shoot him, Bo,” Wittman chimes in. “This son of bitch is asking for it. Hell, we might even get the park stopped with him out of the picture.”

“No, Walker let’s go topside.” On the back of the boat, there is nothing but water surrounding us. The only lights are the boat’s and the stars.

“We’re going to give you a fighting chance, Walker,” says Hines.

“What are you talking about?”

“Jump. We’re about ten miles off shore. If you make it back to Pensacola, I will turn myself in.”

Wittman and Child are laughing. “Watch out for sharks.”

“Jump.”

Seeing no other choice, I comply. The water isn’t too cold, but the saltwater stings all my cuts.

Hines starts the motor and drives away. I watch the boats lights fade. Their laughter is still ringing in my ears.

I am alone.