

Chapter 19

The Save Our Pensacola meeting has a packed house. People are standing along the walls of the side room at 600 South. They are hanging on to every word of Jace Wittman, who in the past 20 minutes has evoked the memory of his dear dead wife, the 450-year history of the his beloved hometown and why the citizens have the right to access to their waterfront. He quotes the Bible, Thomas Paine, Ayn Rand and Rush Limbaugh to make his points. The crowd cheers and shouts his praises at all the right moments. Then Bo Hines takes the podium.

“I see several new faces in the room,” Hines says. “Welcome. One face we do not see tonight is that of your friend, Jace’s sister and my wife. We all miss Sue and her cheerful spirit. A few days ago, community leaders spoke movingly at her memorial. Still, there are no words that can lift the sorrow that now engulfs all of us. In the words of the Psalmist, the Lord heals the broken hearted and binds up their wounds; and that over time grace will replace grief.”

He chokes up for a three-second count, wipes away an imaginary tear and reconnects to his audience. Hines believes all his problems have been solved. The referendum is only a momentary obstacle. He now has bigger ambitions.

“Tonight, the Pensacola City Council is meeting a few blocks trying to balance its budget and build a ballpark of an out-of-towner. As a life-long native and community leader, I assure you that I want to work with the City Council to restrain its spending. As the contractor for the maritime, I found ways to cut costs and preserve our waterfront. And the biggest way to do that is not build the ballpark.”

He stops for the applause and “amens.” Loosening his \$125 tie, Hines moves ahead.

“That’s when that rag, the Pensacola Insider, went after my personally–creating trumped up charges regarding our arts council. Charges that my attorney assured me that any judge will dismiss. Heck, the state attorney is already talking about dropping the case entirely.”

More applause. “The burden of dealing with the lies from a dubious publisher was too much for my dear wife. I understand law enforcement is now searching for Mr. Holmes. He will have to answer for his libelous words. If not here, then with our maker. I can’t imagine what Sue might do to him if he’s standing at the ‘Pearly Gates.’”

Crowd laughs at my expense. They love Hines. A hint of jealousy crosses Wittman’s face as he listens, but he doesn’t let his smile drop. Hines continues. “We are here to stop the ballpark. I’ve vowed to not let our wayward city government proceed with this folly. I will speak the truth regardless of the consequences. I will not let our next generation inherit a stagnant city buried in debt. For what? A ballpark!”

Hines' voice gets louder with each sentence. His cadence quickens. "We will get the signatures for the petition to stop the ballpark. The referendum will pass and next year I will run for mayor to be sure those rascals at city hall don't back on their word."

Everyone stands applauding. Hines and Wittman let the adoration go on for a few minutes and finally wave for the crowd to sit back down. The group believes in the right of their cause and their political might. They will not lose this time. Hines and Wittman are glowing, basking in their glory.

Then I walk into the room, wearing shorts and one of Gravy's Hawaiian shirts. My face is beet red, my lips are swollen and blistered. Gravy is standing next to me, ready to prop me up if I falter. I hope I look much steadier than I feel. On my left is Assistant State Attorney Clark Spencer.

Hines stops in mid-sentence and just points at me. "You...you...you..." is all he says as he stumbles back from the podium. All the color has left his face. He is seeing a ghost—a red, tired, pissed off ghost.

"Bo, you made me a promise. If I made it to this meeting, you would tell these folks about how you and Wittman killed Celeste Daniels and buried her on the park site," I say, surprised at how forceful my voice sounds.

"The sharks should have eaten you," Hines says. "You can't be here."

"It's over, Bo. Tell these fine people how you've used them and their money. Tell them!"

The audience is in shock. You could hear the oxygen tanks flowing and pacemakers beating a little faster. They keep looking at me and back at Hines, as if they are watching a tennis match. The ball is in Hines' court and he stands there, perplexed, not wanting to believe I'm standing there.

Wittman tries to slip out a side door, but is brought back into the room by two Pensacola cops. He's not shocked. Wittman is angry.

"I told you we should have shot him," Wittman shouts as the cops handcuff him. "Just like with the Daniels girl, you didn't want to get your hands dirty. You thought the sharks would get him. Dammit, Bo, not even sharks will touch a bastard like Holmes."

"Stop, Mr. Wittman," shouts Spencer. I had forgotten he was beside me. "I advise you to not say another word without your attorney present. The same goes for you, Mr. Hines. The police officers will read both of you your rights."

"Wittman, they will start searching for the grave in the morning," I say, wanting to get another dig in. I've always been a kid with a stick, poking at the bear until he tries to bite me. "If you help them, Bo, they might give you a break. No one likes your brother-in-law."

“Shut up, Holmes,” shouts Wittman, almost as red-faced as me, struggling to get away from the cops. “I’ll kill you.”

“I’m not some 15-year-old girl.”

“I want to talk with my attorney,” Hines says. Spencer and the cops escort Hines and Wittman to county jail.

Save Our Pensacola dissolves—literally. The packed room is empty before two police cruisers drive out of the parking lot. I think we’ve seen the last of the park referendum.

“We need to get you to the hospital, Walker,” says Gravy with more than a little concern in his voice. “You didn’t have to come here. Spencer and the cops would have taken care of the arrest without your presence or theatrics.”

“Yes, I did,” I say sipping my PBR. By now, we’ve moved to the bar. I spent too much time in the water dreaming about a cold beer to walk out of 600 South without one. “Spencer and those wingnuts needed to see the look on Hines and Wittman’s faces. They won’t forget it and the word will travel fast.”

“You’ve got one helluva mean streak, Walker,” says Gravy. “You are a sadistic son of a bitch.”

I take a long sip, finishing the beer and motion for the bartender to get me another one. Self-medication. “I have no malice towards Mr. Hines or Mr. Wittman. Just not to partial to how they entertain on their boat.”

“What drove you when you were in the water?”

“What you just witnessed, Gravy. I had to see their faces when I walked into their meeting.”

Gravy stares at me, shaking his head. I look straight ahead. My mind has already begun crafting the cover story for our next issue, but before I go to hospital or write even one word, I need to make a phone call. Stan Daniels deserves to know what happened to his sister.

At least one grudge ended today.

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The next Walker Holmes novel is “Redemption.” It’s election season. Sheriff Ron Frost is facing a novice candidate, who refuses to play nice. Couple that with races involving a young African-American running for the Florida House and a wide-open school superintendent race and Holmes and the Insider staff have their hands full.