

A Dose of Nice

A DOSE OF NICE

A Parker Bell Crime Novel



CHAPTER ONE

Po'thole, Florida

It was the hottest day of the year... so far. Two hundred thousand hot, sweaty, stinky bodies were packed into a ten-block area in the small river town of Po'thole, Florida. They came to enjoy a vast array of handcrafted, not necessarily *handmade*, products found only at the Full Moon Crappie Festival held every Memorial Day weekend.

I'm Parker Bell, a Po'thole native, owner of a computer security consulting firm and national bestselling crime author, and, if you believe some of the locals, a turncoat who left Po'thole and River County for some twenty-seven years. Of course, I am now somewhat forgiven because I "had the good sense to come back home."

Uh, huh. I'm actually in Po'thole on business. Homeland Security apparently thinks there might be terrorists in the area and wants me to monitor a couple of businesses. My cover is that I'm here on vacation and just visiting friends.

Anyway, Main Street was lined with colorful popup tents filled with jams, homemade pickles, honey, and T-shirts in all shapes, sizes, and colors, straw hats with colorful bands, paintings exhibited by proud artists, and unusual, inexpensive products from Mexico and China. Each vendor had taken great care to arrange their wares so people could step into their tent, see everything, and then, hopefully, buy something.

Walking down the stretch of hotter-than-Hades asphalt, the smells of grilled sausage and peppers, kettle corn, fried fish, and, of course, steamed crab was so pervasive one was almost driven to buy something to eat.

Barbecue was not what came to mind for this particular weekend *nor* a murder. Po'thole hadn't had a murder in five years and why they had to have one the minute I arrived back in town is beyond me.

This particular weekend the devil apparently had taken his due and gave the good people of Po'thole a taste of what hell must be like. People were chugging fresh squeezed lemonade by the gallon and old people were fainting right and left. Wanna-be paramedics from the local community college used the Full Moon Crappie Festival as their required hands-on training class. The adult students were practically begging festival goers to have something happen to them. Faint, heart attack, heat stroke, they didn't care—they had credits they had to fulfill before graduation. The more accidents that happened, the more experience they received and the more they filled up their experience books for their classes.

It was bad enough that the little town of Po'thole was unfortunate enough to have

a virtually unpronounceable name by anyone other than a native but to hear others struggle to say it was enough to cause gales of laughter from the townspeople. It was pronounced Po Ho by the natives or Pothole by those who lived north of Georgia. It was correctly pronounced *Poat Hole*, like goat hole, and was rumored to be an undefined Seminole Indian word with no apparent meaning. If you have ever driven through Po'thole, you would discover that it is truly full of potholes.

There wasn't one truly fit or healthy-looking person on the street. Fat women waddled down Main Street decked out in tank tops stretched over their protruding bellies, shorts that disappeared in the folds of loose flesh, and flip-flops. Most of the men had the dreaded Dunlop disease... their belly's done lopped over their belt. Unshaven, with a wad of chew in their cheeks, the men exuded the sexual attractiveness of pigs wallowing in the mud. And to think people didn't understand why I left this little piece of paradise.

Although the brochure produced by the local Chamber of Commerce showed a beautiful couple on the Victory Bridge gazing off into the haze (also known as the electric plant emissions from the power plant's cooling towers,) the beautiful people apparently didn't bother coming to the Full Moon Crappie Festival.

As River County's citizenry strolled by the plate glass windows of where the Old Fashion Antique Show and Sale was being held, one of the out-of-town dealers commented it "was like watching a Sally-the-Swine parade."

A rather enthusiastic discussion of whether it was it really a Sally the Swine show or a Sally the Souse show ensued between the dealers. While the original comment was made near the noon hour, things escalated and continued through the cocktail hour which began at four o'clock in the afternoon. Obviously, the dealers were bored, and the antique sales were always slow on Sunday but picked up again on Monday, however, they were beyond thrilled that they actually got to look out onto an open street as opposed to being cooped up in a smelly school gymnasium or some other structure that wouldn't allow fresh air or light in.

After living in big cities during that time "away from home," I have a somewhat jaded and cynical view of what denotes progress. Po'thole, contrary to the official view espoused by the aforementioned Chamber, isn't progressing very fast. In fact, you could say the turtle *died* in this race.

Downtown still had a few stores open. Many of the stores hadn't had a fresh coat of paint since the Civil War, and the old-timers insisted, rather loudly, that it was the gigantic super store on the outskirts of town that killed the shopping. However, when you see these mouthy old-timers about that, where do you think *they* shop? Yep, you guessed it; at the gigantic super store they were complaining about.

The town is just as colorful as the folks who live there. I was happy to move away

from Po'thole yet it seems like I got sucked back in for the Full Moon Crappie Festival.

I'm helping out Gracie Blanche, my best friend since fourth grade, in hosting the Old Fashion Antique Show and Sale. She heads it up and has been trying for years to get me to help her with it. I've always managed to stay far away during Memorial Day weekend. My idea of a vacation isn't to spend it in Po'thole during the hottest weekend of the year; however, when Homeland Security calls and requests that you visit hell in the summertime on a consulting assignment—and you need a plausible cover story—you don't have much choice in the matter.

Never would I have believed Gracie Blanche, a cute, petite, tiny thing of 4'10", could turn into Attila the Hun. While sweet to the antique dealers, she was a wee bit of a challenge to work with behind the scenes.

As head go-fer, my job was to help keep the dealers happy and do anything they needed to get done. Because I was bored silly, I started telling the dealers stories about Po'hole.

Gracie Blanche wasn't too thrilled that I was sharing the local gossip with out-of-towners. "After all," she sniffed, "we want them to come back. We don't need to be airing our dirty laundry."

That's one of the advantages and disadvantages of growing up in a small town. We all remember each other from way back when; the good, the bad, and the ugly. Personally, I've often wondered why no one ever sells errors and omission insurance for those outlandish stories from childhood. Most of the stories have been embellished so much that the truth, whatever version you choose to believe, is a mere wisp in the wind.

My mentioning to one of the dealers that the local minister's wife was having a fifth baby was an unpardonable sin. Apparently, Baptists don't have sex. Their babies are conceived by an appointment with the Divine and it's an immaculate conception.

Gracie Blanche moved me by the front door, hoping I wouldn't do any more damage to Po'thole's pristine reputation in the world.

As the owner of a computer security consulting firm, I was more than intimately acquainted with computers. I offered to help my friend by using my laptop to enter all of the potential customers' email addresses so they could receive antique email newsletters during the year. Never once did it occur to me that so many people visiting the Old Fashioned Sale and Antique Show would be on a first name basis with Moses, and that they didn't have a computer.

Holding my laptop on my knees, I turned to speak to an old friend, and somehow, I swear I have no idea how it happened, a soft drink leapt up off the floor and spilled all over my laptop. My computer wasn't happy and decided it apparently no longer wanted anything to do with me. After much hissing, it died.

“Nooooooooooooooooo,” I screamed, jumping to my feet.

Gracie Blanche came running over when she heard my blood-curdling cry. Her dark brown eyes had the look of Attila the Hun on a mission.

“Parker, what did you do?”

“Ah, um, ah, my drink spilled all over my laptop and it died. I can’t flipping believe it! I mean...”

“Stop! You didn’t hurt anyone, did you?”

“Well, no, but I...”

“Forget about it. Pay attention to what the dealers want and don’t annoy the customers.”

Gracie Blanche can be mean.

Sulking from her remark, I called my office on my cell phone. I figured what the heck, they could just overnight me a new one.

“Triple T.”

Good, it was Missy who answered the phone.

“Missy, hi, it’s Parker and...”

“Let me guess.” I heard a snicker in her voice. “You need a laptop overnighted?”

“Well, yes, but it wasn’t my fault this time.” I can’t explain why I feel compelled to explain my computer accidents to my employees.

“Humph.” Barely containing her giggles, Missy asked, “And how many laptops is that so far this year?”

This call was definitely not going in the direction I had planned.

“Um, I don’t know. Three?” Sometimes things just happen.

“Parker...” My heart dropped at the mirth in my secretary’s voice. “This is the fourth one this year and the second one in thirty days.

“You know, I think we could just put you in the Laptop-of-the-Month Club. You would receive a new one every thirty days and that way it would save you the *embarrassment* of having to call in.”

I felt hot breath on the back of my head just before a solid *thunk* rattled my brains.

“Parker, all you have to do is pay attention to the dealers! Just do it!” I don’t think that’s what Nike had in mind when they came up with that slogan. Gracie Blanche just didn’t understand how important computers are to our daily life.

Jimmy, the local town gossip, came barreling through the doors bypassing Miss

Edna who was collecting the obligatory donation for the battered women's house. Miss Edna who was, to put it kindly, older than Methuselah, didn't appreciate this incredible lack of manners on his part.

Being the Southern lady that she was, she immediately sugar-coated her displeasure by drawling out, "Darlin', I'm sure you meant to pay the three-dollar donation on your way in."

Jimmy, who was tall, red-headed, skinny as a rail, and not the brightest bulb in the box, turned and focused his one straight eye at her.

"I ain't paying no donation to see old furniture and stuff!" Looking around to find an audience for his big announcement, he blurted, "Bobby's dead! The deputy said he's been murdered and I thought ya'll might like to know about it!"

"Bobby" had once been the youngest mayor in the history of Po'thole and after two terms had decided to forego any future aspirations of climbing the political ladder. He had already built the largest beer store chain in Northeast Florida. The Beer Barn chain was a rousing success, particularly the local store.

Po'thole, located about halfway between the University of Florida in Gainesville and Crescent Beach, well, let's just say it was a natural stopping spot to tank up on a frothy liquid libation on that incredibly long and thirsty drive...all thirty-five minutes of it. The Beer Barn was set up so that one never had to leave their vehicle. Yep, you guessed it; it was a drive-through barn. All the customer had to do was place their beer order on one of those god-awful speaker phones like at any fast food restaurant, drive up to the first window, pay the cashier who was standing behind bullet-proof glass, pull forward to the next window and collect their beer. Bobby was immensely proud that he had streamlined the entire process of getting beer to the customer faster and, more importantly as a business owner, a way to cut down on beer being illegally adopted by both customers and employees.

Miss Edna, Gracie Blanche, and I all gasped at the same time. The antique dealers, not knowing who Bobby was and, honestly, not giving a rat's pa-tootie about him, were, however, curious about the circumstances of his death.

Worth Earlington, (what could possibly be a better name for a gay antique dealer than that,) asked the obvious. "Who did it and what for? Was it a love triangle?"

Jimmy, eyeing Worth quizzically, said, "Well, he wasn't...I don't know what you mean by that."

We all stifled snickers.

"Honey, would you like a cup of tea to calm your nerves?" Bless Miss Edna's heart, she was sure that a cup of hot tea would cure almost any problem or social ill.

I whispered to Gracie Blanche, "He needs to shake hands with Jack Daniels, I bet."

Gracie Blanche, although vertically challenged, could still reach the back of my head and swatted it this time with an open hand. “You are going to get me in trouble.” I felt a headache coming on. Being popped in the back of the head twice before noon didn’t help matters any.

Jimmy looked at Miss Edna as if she had lost her marbles.

“Listen, here, I came in to tell ya’ll about Bobby.” Jimmy was a little indignant he had been interrupted. “You know Bobby’s weekend getaway place upta Bostwick on the river? Well, Dewitt got a phone call, someone asked for him personally, saying that he might want to check out Bobby’s place ‘cas he might find something interesting up there. And, oh, yeah, he needed to be out there by 10 a.m. As I understand it, Dewitt wasn’t any too happy about having to miss going fishing and all.

“Anyway, Dewitt took one of the new deputies with him up there. The gate was already opened and the pit was smoking. Apparently, whoever did Bobby in decided he needed to be barbequed.”

Before Gracie Blanche could stop me, my mouth opened and the words flew out all on their own. “I hope they used the smoking sweet sauce.”

Well, the dealers almost fell on the floor, they were laughing so hard. Miss Edna did not appear to be amused by my remark and Gracie Blanche, well, let’s just say I probably won’t be working the Old Fashion Antique Show and Sale next year. *Thank you, Lord! Thank you, Jesus!*

Jimmy, on the other hand, said, “Well, Parker, I’m not sure what kind of sauce they had on him but I do know it wasn’t any of that Carolina mustard crap.”

Of course, that just made me and the dealers laugh all the louder. Tears were streaming down our faces. Gracie Blanche couldn’t hold her laughter in any more. Miss Edna finally cracked a smile.

“Jimmy, tell us what Dewitt found out,” Gracie Blanche finally spluttered between her tears.

He nodded knowingly. “Dewitt said the new deputy probably wasn’t going to make it much longer. He threw up. Bobby apparently had been shot in the back of the head and then had been trussed up on a spit over the fire.”

“Oh, mercy, mercy,” murmured Miss Edna. “His mama does not need to know that.”

“Jimmy, who does Dewitt think did it?”

“Well, Gracie Blanche, he don’t know. In fact, he’s real upset. He had just seen Bobby on Thursday night. They had been exercising together.”

Worth, catching on quickly to the ways of River County and with a twinkle in his

eye, asked, “Bending elbows?”

Jimmy shook his head. “They was drinking.”

“How long has Bobby been dead?”

“Gracie Blanche,” Jimmy said, obviously starting to get a wee bit annoyed. “I have done told you everything I know except that it will probably be in the mullet wrapper tomorrow.”

“Today is Sunday and the paper won’t come out again until Tuesday,” I said.

The local newspaper several years ago had decided in its infinite wisdom to discontinue printing the paper Monday through Friday. Why? Because they had hired a consulting group out of Jacksonville to conduct a survey to see how many folks wanted to read about how the local football team did on Friday night and they wanted to read about it Saturday morning.

In short, they didn’t want to wait until Monday morning to see how the county teams fared. While it was heavily rumored that only one-hundred people had participated in the survey, and all of those were former local football players, the paper changed its publishing schedule. Those guys were probably trying to hang onto their glory days, I surmised. Nevertheless, the paper now was printed Tuesday through Saturday.

Gracie Blanche turned to me. “Regardless, it’s still going to be in the newspaper.”

“Well, Jimmy, what are the details?”

Jimmy, bless his heart, didn’t have the sense God gave a goose. “They had women upta the camp! Dewitt’s trying to figure out who they was and where they got off to.”

Gracie Blanche fixed those dark brown eyes on me, drew up to her full 4’10” self, and said, “Parker, since you’re on *vacation*, you don’t need to get involved.”

“What would make you think I want to get involved in a local murder?” I was indignant that she would even think I wanted to be part this. “Since I’ve been gone forever and three days and I only know Bobby from way back in the day, I can’t imagine any reason why I would be remotely involved with this.”

Jimmy blurted out, “Yeah, but you know a lot. You been writing about those true crime stories.”

I blushed. Heck, I was impressed that Jimmy could read, what with his having only one eye and all. He had me there. However, I didn’t think a single murder in a small, sleepy Southern town would have much national interest. I was wrong.

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