

**MURDER IN  
CROOKED CREEK**

**“WHO’S NEXT?”**



# **MURDER IN CROOKED CREEK**

**“WHO’S NEXT?”**

**BY**

**JAMES PAUL ELLISON**



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## CHAPTER

### 1

**Tuesday, May 12**

Delta Airlines Flight 64 departs Orlando, Florida on time. Two men, Ralph Thompson and Bill Waterman, are sitting side by side in business class.

They both are headed for Chicago. One calls the windy city home and the other is going to attend his daughter's graduation later that afternoon.

As the stewardess pours Ralph a glass of 2 amigo wine he asks the passenger next to him, "How many children do you have?"

"Two. Donna is twenty four and Joe will soon be twenty two. She graduates in five hours and Joe is unemployed."

"What is Donna obtaining her degree in?"

"Journalism," says Bill while eating his bag of chips.

"Any job offers yet?"

"I think she has a few."

"Here is my business card. Please have her contact me. I just bought a closed, small town community newspaper in Crooked Creek, Mississippi and when it opens next month I will need a reporter."

"That is a funny name. Where is Crooked Creek located?"

"Thirty miles north of Gulfport. There was a crooked creek running through the town when it was founded in 1889. The creek has since dried up but the town kept the name."

James Paul Ellison

“Why did you buy a closed, community newspaper in Crooked Creek?”

“On my last trip, I also bought an open, one man barber shop, a semi-closed 60 room motel called CC and an open, but small café that serves the best pies. More casinos are being built along the Gulf Coast and I feel with time the small town will come back.”

“You really do believe the town will come back?”

“It is slowly dying right now because a paper mill closed three years ago and interstate 54 opened recently bypassing the town by ten miles. If I can help the population grow back to 20,000 from the current 6,000 I will make money on my investments”

“Why hasn’t it grown? I believe there are at least eight casinos on the coast by now.”

“There are ten casinos and two new ones are about to open. Why drive the slow, curvy, thirty mile scenic route on Old Highway 54 when you can travel at seventy five miles an hour on the new interstate and lose your money faster.”

“Sounds like Crooked Creek will soon be a ghost town.”

“You are right, Bill. It has been slowly dying. This is why I am investing. Every trip I buy property. The population is way down because most of the younger folks leave for the higher paying casino jobs on the Gulf Coast.”

“How old are you and what is your day job?”

“I am fifty three. I am a defense lawyer. And you?”

“I am an insurance agent.”

“There are many antebellum homes in and around Crooked Creek. I bought a motel and after I refurbish the place I plan to invite tourists to stay. My future tour buses will then drive my guests to and from the casinos and the antebellum homes.”

“We are from Miami. My wife Peggy is hoping my daughter finds a job there.”



MURDER IN CROOKED CREEK: "Who's Next?"

"Give Donna my business card please. Tell her to contact me if she wants a good paying job. I plan to open soon and I will need a lot of articles written."

"Have you invested before in a small town?"

"No. I was issued a speeding ticket by a Crooked Creek police officer and he admitted his chief makes him hide behind trees and billboards to ambush the tourists passing through."

"Why?"

"The cops do this to raise revenue for the town. The young patrolman, Officer Jackson, told me about Crooked Creek slowly dying. I made some low ball offers on some open and closed properties and to my surprise they were all accepted."

"Being a lawyer I bet you won on your speeding ticket."

"Nope. I didn't have a chance."

"Why not?"

"It was a speed trap."

"You're kidding."

"Nope. Judge Morris found me guilty. The town barber, a nice old man named Jake, whom I spent hours with said the town issues tickets to raise revenue and you can never win in front of Judge Morris. The visitors arrive in town and get sucked up in the speed trap."

Bill flips Ralph's business card over and reads, 'Thompson Enterprises' with a Chicago address and telephone number.

"What university is your daughter graduating from?"

"DePaul. They have a great journalism program."

"They sure do. One of the best. I graduated from the same university thirty years ago. I got my degree in business administration."

James Paul Ellison

Ralph starts to yawn.

“Sorry, but I must take a nap now. Make sure your daughter speaks with me before taking any journalism job. Besides, I have connections in every state regarding employment.”

Ralph grabs a small pillow and turns the other way.

Bill tucks Ralph’s business card in his pocket.

“I will have my daughter give you a call. Enjoy your nap.”

After the flight lands in Chicago both men continue their conversation.

“You talk in your sleep did you know that?”

“Yes. What did I say?”

“Something about your heart and a café.”

“I recently found out I have very high blood pressure which I now take medication for. The café I bought in Crooked Creek was called Joan’s Café. She sold it to me so I must have been thinking of a new name.”

“I would call it ‘The Antebellum Café’.”

“Good name. Thanks, Bill, I will.”

Both men continue to talk while they wait for their luggage.

“Is your daughter picking you up?”

“No. Donna thinks I am in Orlando at a trade convention.”

“What type trade convention?”

“Florida Insurance Adjusters Association. My partner wants us to branch out to other parts of the state.”

“And you?”

MURDER IN CROOKED CREEK: "Who's Next?"

"No. I am too busy selling insurance as it is. I am using this trip to sneak away for a few days to be with my daughter."

Both men grab their luggage off the conveyer belt.

"Can I drop you off somewhere?"

"Thanks, but no thanks. I need to rent-a-car."

Bill hands Ralph his own business card.

Ralph looks at the card before placing it in his shirt pocket.

Catchy name, 'One Call Does it All'."

"Our phone number in Miami is '305-One Call' as well."

"Make sure your daughter speaks to me before she accepts any journalism assignment. I pay all my employees very well."

"Will do."

Both men shake hands and depart in separate directions.

Bill walks a short distance to the Avis Rent-A-Car counter.

While waiting, he calls the Downtown Hilton Hotel and confirms his reservation for two nights.

He then looks at his watch.

The agent says, "Next in line."

Bill steps up to the counter and asks, "How long will it take me to drive to the Chicago Convention Center?"

The female agent with 'Donna' on her name tag replies, "About an hour, Sir."

"Good. I don't want to miss my daughter's college graduation. Her name is Donna as well."

The clerk is all business.

“Lucky you called ahead, Sir.”

“Why is that?”

“I have the paperwork already filled out. I just need a major credit card, your signature and then you will be free to catch the shuttle bus to parking stall five.”

As Bill rides the crowded shuttle bus he thinks of his recent separation and wonders if Peggy will also be attending their daughter’s graduation.

Looking out the bus window he wonders what went wrong in his thirty years of marriage. He knows in his heart he is a good father and he thinks a great husband as well. He truly still loves his wife.

Donna is in her dorm room getting ready for her big day when there is a loud knock on the door.

The pretty girl with long blonde hair opens to see her mother standing there with her younger brother.

“Mom. Joe. What are you both doing here?”

She quickly gives them a big hug.

“Is Dad here too?”

“No. Your father told me he has to attend an insurance convention in Orlando.”

Joe asks, “Do you have any sweets?” as he buzzes pass his older sister and enters her dorm room.

“Under my pillow are a few candy bars. I have to hide them from my roommates.”

Joe goes straight to her treasure as Peggy speaks, “Do you have a journalism job yet?”

“No. I do have a few offers.”

MURDER IN CROOKED CREEK: "Who's Next?"

"Any in Florida?"

"No, Mom."

"Why not?"

"I told you a while back why not. I want to make it on my own. If I am nearby or even in the same state you will be spying on me and...."

"I won't be spying. I just will be concerned for your safety that's all."

"Mom. You raised me right. I will not do anything stupid, like take drugs, attend wild parties or date the wrong guys."

"Why did you and Jake break up?"

"Why are you and dad separated?"

"We are separated because we just argue too much on a daily basis."

"What do you two argue about?"

"I want to sell the house and downsize to a condo on the beach. I want to travel more, I want to take cruises, buy a new car, and..."

"What does dad want to do?"

"He wants to just keep working. I feel he loves his job more than me. He wants to stay in our old house and will not allow me to remodel. We can't agree on anything anymore."

"Really! After thirty years you two should be tight as a drum."

"Well, we are not tight anymore. We just argue on the phone. Two weeks ago your father moved out and has his own apartment."

"Jake wanted children right away if we got married. I said no. I told him I wanted a career first. I came back to my dorm one day after class to find a good-bye note taped to my door."

"After two years of dating he just leaves you a note!"

James Paul Ellison

“Yep. A short note at that. He said, ‘Donna I will always love you but I want kids’. He drew a picture of us on the note with six stick figures as children.”

“Joe. Don’t eat all of your sister’s candy. I plan to take us to a fancy restaurant to celebrate her graduation.”

“Yes, Mom,” says Joe as he places a candy bar into his shirt pocket.

Peggy parks her rent-a-car at the convention center.

Joe starts to eat the candy bar he took earlier without his mother’s knowledge.

Donna wants her picture taken and hands her graduation gift to her mother. Peggy snaps three photos.

They then head toward the entrance to the convention center.

Standing at the main entrance to the building is Bill. He is trying to spot his daughter in the large crowd. He finally spots her. He does not see his wife and son following a few yards behind.

“Donna, Donna,” shouts Bill as he waves his arms and walks closer.

“Dad,” says Donna as she rushes to his side.

“What a surprise. Mom says you are in Orlando at a convention.”

“My partner also thinks I am in Orlando at the convention. I wouldn’t miss this for the whole world.”

Peggy and Joe walk up.

“Hi, Dad. I didn’t know you were coming. Mom says you are attending a convention in Orlando.”

Bill turns to his wife.

“Hello, Peg.”

“Hi, Bill. Thought you were in Orlando at one of your insurance conventions.”

MURDER IN CROOKED CREEK: "Who's Next?"

"I am not going to miss our daughter receiving her college diploma."

Donna and Joe walk ahead, stopping now and then to snap photos.

"Bill, has Donna mentioned to you about her employment plans?"

"No, Peg, not a word. Has she spoken to you about it?"

"She only says Florida is out."

Donna is busy meeting her fellow classmates.

Joe is busy taking photos of her friends.

Bill turns to his wife and says, "First chance I get I will ask her about her future work plans."

"Tell her to find a journalism job in Miami."

"Our daughter is an adult. I can only suggest."

Bill pulls out the business card of Ralph that is in his shirt pocket and shows it to Peggy.

"I met a man on the flight from Orlando. He just bought a closed, community newspaper in a small town in Mississippi. He has plans to reopen soon and asks that our daughter give him a call. He says he will pay her well."

"Is it in Biloxi where the casinos are?"

"No. About thirty miles north in a small town called Crooked Creek. I looked it up on my smart phone. The population is like six thousand."

"Don't mention this offer to our daughter. I want her to find employment in Miami," replies Peggy as she returns Ralph's business card to her husband.

"I won't mention it to her," lies Bill as he sticks the business card back into his shirt pocket.

James Paul Ellison

Joe stands in front of the stage and snaps a dozen photos of his sister walking up, shaking hands with the Dean and accepting her journalism diploma.

That evening at dinner Peggy turns to her daughter and asks, "What are your plans now that you have your diploma?"

Donna just smiles and says, "I may travel for a year in Europe with friends. I do have a few job offers so I really do not know what I will do yet."

Peggy looks at her daughter.

"I spoke with the editor at the Miami Herald. He says they are always looking for fresh faces."

"I can tell you right now Miami is out. I grew up there but I want to explore the world."

Bill wastes no time and pulls out Ralph's business card and hands it to his daughter.

"I met this nice man on the flight today and he is offering you a journalism job in Crooked Creek, Mississippi at the closed, community newspaper he just bought. He says he pays well too."

"Where?"

"Crooked Creek. The population is about six thousand. He needs a reporter badly as he wants to reopen soon."

"I might not work for a while. I may travel by backpack around Europe."

"I think the job will be perfect since you like to write."

"I love to write."

"The State of Mississippi recently built an interstate that bypasses this small town. The tourists avoid the scenic route and take the faster interstate to Gulfport and the ten casinos."

"People need to slow down."



MURDER IN CROOKED CREEK: "Who's Next?"

"Ralph plans to get the tourists to stay at his motel, then ride in his tour buses to the casinos and explore the antebellum homes on their way back."

"How far is Crooked Creek from the casinos?"

"About thirty miles. The Gulf Coast also offers you the beaches."

"I can't promise you anything Dad at this time. I will call the man and see what his offer is."

Peggy looks over at her husband with a mad look on her face.

He just smiles back at her.

"Please let me know what Ralph says to you. He bought a few other businesses as well. His growth plan for the town sounds like it will work."

"If I take the job, how far is Miami from there?"

"I googled mapped it. Close to eight hundred miles."

"Sounds like a good fit, Dad. Being a reporter in a small town close to the casinos and the beaches. You and mom can then visit, play the slot machines and relax on the beach."

Peggy speaks next.

"I want you in Miami."

Bill looks over at his wife and daughter and says, "Ralph is a nice man. He is a lawyer. He needs a good reporter. He must be talking to others about the position so do not wait too long to call him."

"I will call him in the morning to say hi. I still might not take the job even if he offers me one as I am thinking of traveling around Europe with friends."

"Just keep an open mind. Your diploma is just a diploma at this time," says Bill as he sips on his glass of white wine.

James Paul Ellison

“My professor tells me the same thing. He says ‘The secret to being attractive to employers is to stop doing non-productive things and start creating value’.”

“Good advice,” says Bill as he looks over at Peggy.

“Honey, journalism is a demanding job. It takes dedication. I just hope the field you selected for a career is the right one. Jack, your Cousin, is forty one years old and on his fifth career.”

“What job is he into now?”

“He is a surveillance investigator for Espy-Group. When he comes to visit us he has so many stories to tell.”

“Mom and Dad, I know I selected the right career.”

The family have a nice relaxing dinner.

A waiter rolls over a cart full of desserts.

Joe smiles and says, “I love this part of the meal.”

The young man wraps four cookies into a napkin and removes two slices of apple pie.

Donna looks at her slim and trim younger brother and replies, “How you are not fat I will never know. You are always eating something.”

“Yep”, says Joe as he takes a bite of his hot apple pie.

## CHAPTER

### 2

**Wednesday, May 13**

The next morning in her dorm room Donna calls Ralph at the number listed on his business card.

He answers on the second ring.

"Hello?"

"This is Donna Waterman. May I speak with Ralph Thompson please?"

"This is Ralph."

"Morning, Sir. My father met you yesterday on a flight from Orlando to Chicago and ...."

"Yes he did. You are the student from DePaul University. You just obtained your degree in journalism."

"That's right. I hope my father spoke highly of me."

"Bill did. I guess he told you I bought a closed, community newspaper in Crooked Creek, Mississippi and that I need to hire a reporter."

"Yes. We spoke about it over dinner last night. Can you please fill me in about the position and is it still open?"

"It is available. I want to open the community newspaper soon and increase the circulation. To do that, my reporter will have to write many articles on tourism, town events and what is happening in the surrounding areas."

"I love to write. I have a 4.0 grade average."

James Paul Ellison

“I know you love to write. I checked you out. You mentioned to your professors about traveling with backpacks around Europe with your friends. I am surprised to hear from you as that trip sounds like a lot of fun.”

“Someday it will be but your job position may be what I am looking for as I love to write. Your plans to open soon and increase the circulation is right up my alley. Can you tell me what my pay and medical benefits will be?”

“I like positive people. You assume the job is already yours.”

Ralph laughs over the telephone.

“I checked out the small town of Crooked Creek over the internet. Not much there to attract a young person to stay for a long period of time.”

“You are right about that. The town is dying because all the young people leave for better paying casino jobs in Biloxi. The church I attended in Crooked Creek a few weeks ago had only senior citizens. It was very sad to see.”

“I am a hard worker. I am honest and I do love to write.”

“Do you have any time today for an interview? If you do I will send my limo driver over.”

“Sure. Can I bring my younger brother with me?”

“Of course. How does one p.m. sound?”

“Perfect. I look forward to discussing the reporter position with you in more detail at that time.”

“Good. I will have my limo driver, Aaron, pick you both up. The only question is where?”

Donna laughs. “That will help. In front of my dorm. Let me give you the address.”

After speaking with Ralph she calls her younger brother.

Joe agrees not to say anything about their future meeting with Ralph to their parents and is happy his sister called him to tag along.

MURDER IN CROOKED CREEK: "Who's Next?"

Donna takes out a notepad and starts writing down questions regarding the job offer she plans to ask Ralph Thompson.

Bill and Peggy sit in the lobby of the Hilton Hotel and try to get along. They discuss their feelings toward each other. The conversation lasts less than ten minutes.

Bill departs the hotel thinking his wife will soon be filing for divorce.

Donna and Joe stand at the curb in front of her dorm.

Five minutes go by before a new, black limo pulls up.

A good looking young man exits the vehicle and approaches his two passengers.

"Hello, my name is Aaron. Are you Donna?"

"Yes, and this is Joe, my younger brother."

"Nice to meet you both."

Aaron opens the back passenger door and the two climb in.

Once behind the wheel Aaron turns and looks at Donna.

"Help yourself to a drink in the fridge. It should only take us about twenty minutes to arrive at Ralph's building."

"Why do you call him Ralph and not Mr. Thompson?"

"All his employees call him Ralph. He is a cool man to work for."

"How long have you been employed with him?"

Three years now. Three happy years I might add. Just be hard working and loyal and you will advance far. His family is very rich but it doesn't go to his head. He loves helping people. Ralph is helping me with my own limo service."

Joe asks, "How?"

James Paul Ellison

“Ralph put the down payment needed to buy this limo and paid for the auto insurance for a year.”

“That sounds like a very good deal,” says Joe looking in the small fridge.

“We split the fares down the middle and I keep all tips. With his many contacts I am very busy.”

“Will you be needing drivers soon?”

“I will. You want to apply?”

“My mom is putting pressure on me to find a job. I am from Miami. I like your city of Chicago already.”

“How old are you?”

“I am twenty two next month.”

“I am twenty six and single,” says Aaron with a smile as he makes eye contact with Donna in his rear view mirror.

“Let us find time to talk about your employment with my growing company.”

Joe asks for a business card.

Aaron gives him a few as they pull up to Thompson Law Group.

The limo driver opens the passenger door for Donna and wishes her luck with her interview.

Joe shakes Aaron’s hand and says, “I will be calling you very soon. Thanks for the ride.”

In the lobby of the thirty story office building is an information desk.

Donna walks up to an elderly man dressed in a nice suit and asks, “What floor is Attorney Ralph Thompson?”

MURDER IN CROOKED CREEK: "Who's Next?"

"This is my second day. Let me check my computer. He is on the twenty sixth floor. See the receptionist when you arrive. You can catch the express elevator to my right."

Donna smiles and replies, "Thank you."

On the fast ride up to the twenty sixth floor Joe turns to his sibling.

"I might have found a job as a limo driver, Sis."

"I hope you do. I think your future boss is real cute."

Donna and Joe stand in front of a middle-aged woman.

On her oak desk is a receptionist sign.

"Mr. Thompson is expecting you. His secretary, Jackie, will be out in a moment to escort you to your meeting."

Jackie Patterson, age thirty five, walks out and says, "Welcome to The Thompson Law Firm. I am Jackie. Can I get either of you something to drink or eat?"

Donna shakes her head no but Joe speaks up.

"Do you have Root Beer by chance?"

"Yes we do. I will bring you a can. Follow me please."

Ralph stands up when his secretary brings Donna and Joe into his large corner office.

"Welcome. Thanks for finding the time to see me."

Ralph shakes both of their hands.

Joe walks over to the large plate glass windows that overlooks the City of Chicago's skyline.

"Wow, Sis! Look at this view."

Ralph laughs and replies, "It gets old after a while. Please have a seat."

Jackie walks back in and places Joe's can of root beer in front of him.

"Thank you," says Joe.

Jackie just smiles and quickly leaves them alone.

Ralph points to a small round table with four leather chairs and says, "Let's sit there."

Joe turns to his sister and says, "I think you two need to be alone. I will go hang out with Aaron."

Donna watches her younger brother drink his root beer and leave the office.

"Aaron Alamo my limo driver?"

"Yes, Sir. He mentions he is looking for another driver and our parents have been on Joe to find a job. He loves to drive so the job as a limo driver is right up my brother's alley."

Ralph places a notepad and pen in front of Donna and says, "Let us talk about you possibly being a journalist with me Miss Waterman. I need a reporter badly and the town can use a pretty face walking around asking questions."

"Thank you, Sir, for the compliment."

"Please, always call me Ralph. Everyone else does."

"Ok. Please call me Donna."

"If I hire you Donna when can you start?"

"In two weeks. I have to exit the dorm, visit my family in Miami and see some friends."

"Good. Now let us talk pay and benefits. I was thinking six hundred dollars a week to start, a three bedroom company apartment, a company car and a full medical package."



MURDER IN CROOKED CREEK: "Who's Next?"

"More than I was expecting to tell you the truth."

"Well, I look at it this way. You will be separated from family and friends and there isn't much to do in Crooked Creek unless you like watching the farm animals. I don't want you so bored that you soon quit and move on. I am paying for stability."

"What will be my job duties if I accept the position?"

"Simple. Just be a reporter and write as many articles as you can on any range of topics for my community newspaper."

"I love to write."

"Oh, I am providing you with a camera too. Take photographs and place them in your stories. I want the folks to be aware of what is happening in and around their town."

"What will you like my first article to be on if I take the job?"

"How about you cover all the antebellum homes that dot the area. Interview the owners, get the history of the homes, and snap some nice pictures."

Donna writes down all of Ralph's requests.

"Whom would I report to at The Crooked Creek Times community newspaper?"

"Good question. I have been so busy lately I haven't hired a manager yet. Tell you what. I will pay you one thousand dollars a week. You will be the new manager of my community newspaper and a reporter at the same time."

"Wow. Really?"

"Yes. I can draft a letter saying you are the manager and that you have complete authority. I want you to hand a copy of the letter to Tony, I forget his last name. He runs the presses and is in charge of the other employees I just brought on."

Ralph pulls out his business card and writes a phone number on the back.

“Do you want the position then?”

“I accept. Thanks for my first job.”

“You welcome. This is my special private cell number. You can call me anytime. Can I ask a personal question?”

“Yes.”

“Are you single, engaged or married?”

“I am single. What about you?”

“I was married for twenty five years. I have no children. Being a lawyer and an up and coming investor is my life.”

“I plan to make journalism my life’s work.”

Ralph and Donna have a nice conversation. He looks at his watch.

“I have a medical appointment to get to. Aaron is waiting downstairs to take you where you want to go. I suggest to a car dealership. Select your company car, then call me. I will charge it on my credit card. Any questions?”

“No questions. You work fast.”

“Time is money Donna. Talking of time. I have to get upstairs as my doctor is waiting.”

Ralph shakes Donna’s hand.

“Good luck in Crooked Creek and drive safe. Just wait in the reception area till Jackie finishes the letter you will need to give to Tony. I will try to come visit you in a few weeks. It all depends on what my doctor tells me today.”

“Anything wrong?”

“Yes. I am taking high blood pressure medication and I have to lower my stress level. I may at some point have Jackie deal with Crooked Creek. Thanks for asking. Good luck writing articles.”