

ONE-PATCH ISAAC

The room in the basement serving as a strategy center had no one to impress, so it consisted of plywood atop wooden sawhorses. Such a layout provided plenty of space to spread out papers, maps, blueprints, pictures, and other planning spreadsheets. It also required little effort to break down and move if evacuation became necessary.

Opening the door to their sanctum, Travis saw Bill and Jason Cortz poring over the plans for something.

“Good morning, gentlemen,” said Travis.

“Morning, Travis,” replied Bill.

Jason just nodded.

Then bursting through the door in her usual quiet, demure manner, Sherry McCall greeted the gentlemen already in the room, “What’s happening, guys?”

“Travis,” said Bill. “Meet your new sister-in-law.”

“And a most beautiful sister-in-law you are.”
offered Travis.

“I’ll take it, even though you married my sister. What was her name again?”

“To what do I owe this addition to my family?” asked Travis.

“In due time,” said Bill. Handing photos to Travis and Sherry, he asked, “Do you remember this guy?”

“I don’t recognize him,” answered Sherry.

“One-Patch Isaac,” said Travis.

“Right you are. Our sources indicate he has gone active and should be considered a potential threat.”

“How did we get involved, Bill?” asked Travis. “It seems different from the projects we’ve been doing.”

“It is on the surface, but the human element is there. The feds have been tailing One-Patch for a while, but he hasn’t done anything suspicious yet. So, with personnel stretched, they’ve backed off. My primary source still feels like something is

imminent. He believes Isaac is heading to a small farming town in Nebraska.”

“Any place I know?” asked Travis.

“Yes, my friend. It is Elnora.”

“I deduce that’s why I’m on this little project,” said Travis.

“Yes ... You could easily go there under the guise of visiting your old hometown, family, or just long-lost friends. If Isaac is still there, I don’t think you’d raise any red flags. Although you recognized him, he never met you.”

“What about this one?” asked Travis, pointing to Sherry.

“Miss McCall’s ability to extract information in the most innocuous way is extraordinary. I thought about setting her up as your wife, but I knew that might be too risky with someone knowing differently there.”

“Besides, who would ever believe I’d be a good match for him?” questioned Sherry. “I’m stuck with him as a brother-in-law without any choice.”

“I haven’t suffered such serious rejection in years,” replied Travis.

“Jason’s research leads him to believe that Isaac may try to use Elnora as a practice run, feeling it to be an unlikely place to draw any suspicion. As with many places, water and electricity would probably be the most effective targets. You guys need to confirm those suspicions, pick up Isaac’s trail again, prevent him from acting, and get the evidence that the feds can use to put him away for good.”

“Is that all?” asked Sherry.

“You’ve got two rooms reserved at the Elnora Hotel in town for a week. You can amend the time as necessary. The flight to Omaha departs at 8:00 am tomorrow. A car is reserved at the airport for your journey from there. Spend a couple of hours with Jason and absorb everything he has learned, especially what might seem new about Elnora to you, Travis.”

The flight to Omaha and the drive to Elnora were uneventful for Travis and his new sister-in-law. Settling into their rooms at the old, but quaint, Elnora Hotel, the partners went over their general strategy before taking a welcome sleep. The next day was Sunday, so Travis felt it would be a good time to visit the old church where he grew up to see if they could get a feel for anything among the locals. A power substation for Henry County lay on five acres of old man Bradley's farm two miles down the road from the church. Scouting the substation would be a logical stop after church.

The red morning sun added strange variations to the old brick buildings surrounding the Elnora Hotel. No greeter stood waiting to welcome them to the worship service at St. Paul Lutheran Church, so Travis opened the heavy wooden doors to the church and let Sherry go in. Travis looked at his watch to make sure they weren't unduly early because the sanctuary stood nearly empty.

"Didn't that sign say the service was at 9:30 am?" asked Sherry.

“Yes, it did.”

By the time the organist began playing intro music, twenty people sat in the pews – all old enough to be grandparents to the visitors.

“Kind of makes you feel a little strange, Travis.”

“Strange and sad.”

The liturgy or perhaps as Sherry drolly whispered to Travis, the ‘Lethargy’, featured a near solo performance by the pastor. The sermon seemed tired and lifeless. A brief sparkle did appear in the pastor’s eye when he saw someone new in the pews. After a brief bio at the door, Pastor Collins thanked them for coming. The tone of his voice rang with a ghostly “Can you rescue me?”.

“What went wrong, Travis?” asked Sherry.

“I don’t know for sure, Sherry, but it’s usually a combination of factors in a case like this.”

“It feels like death is imminent.”

“Yeah ... I just hope that our mission doesn’t uncover the same feeling for the town of Elnora.”

A short drive brought the power station into sight. It sat at the end of a lonely driveway, surrounded by corn stubble.

“Anybody coming out here wouldn’t be hard to miss, Travis.”

“No, they wouldn’t ... And what would they hope to accomplish? A town blackout? For certain, but it’s fall. There is no extreme temperature that might endanger the people if they don’t have power. The county hospital has generators. There would be inconvenience for the population for sure, but I can’t see any potential human toll. Tactically, it would be way too easy. I can’t see where Isaac would learn much of significance with a dry run.”

“On to the water plant, then?”

“I’d say so. It’s on the east side of town, surrounded by homes and businesses. Elnora has never had many zoning laws.”

“Whoa ... Look at that sky,” said Sherry. “Nasty.”

“Yeah. I think we need to head back to the hotel instead.”

Torrential rain and heavy wind postponed their surveillance of the water plant for the afternoon. When they got back to the hotel, they studied the town street map and the layout of the water plant. The plant sat at the corner of Elm and Dodge Street, so it had two sides with road frontage.

“I see nothing unusual about the layout, Travis.”

“No, it seems simple. Two-dimensionally, I don’t see any red flags.”

A bright flash of light lit up their room and the sharp snap of thunder made the walls shutter. It startled Sherry so that she fell into Travis’s arms.

“Did I ever tell you that I’m not crazy about lightning?” asked Sherry.

“Sometimes, it can be a wakeup call from God, Sherry. I know we just got started here, but I believe that Isaac is going after the water plant. I don’t think he’s going to blow it up or anything. I think he’s going biologically. Hundreds of people dying are a small price for him, if he can make the concept work for something larger. It’s the human element Bill talked about.”

As the hour came when the sun normally lit up the western sky with glorious reds and oranges, the sky remained dark. The rain did eventually stop, though.

“Let’s at least make a pass by the plant while we still have a little light.”

“I’m ready,” said Sherry. “I’ve got the camera.”

On the opposite side of the street from the water plant gate sat a row of houses. The corner side consisted of small repair shops. Vacant land finished the border in the rear and interior side.

“I wonder ... ,” said Travis.

“You wonder what?”

“I wonder who lives in those houses opposite the gate. Do you suppose you could use your amazing investigative skills and find some names?”

“I should hope so,” replied Sherry.

In the morning, Sherry handed Travis a list of the homeowners in question.

“Bingo,” said Travis. “Number 312 is what we want.”

“And ... That number means something?”

“Randolph Hastings ... Randy was in my circle of friends in high school. I suggest we pay him a visit.”

After confirming that Randy would be home, Travis and Sherry made the three-minute drive to his house. An hour of typical conversation filled with a lot of reminiscing left few gaps in the old friends' history.

“If you will excuse me for a minute,” said Sherry. “I left my medicine in the car. I'll be right back.” She whispered in her partner's ear, “There's a man walking by the plant entrance gate, and he appears to be blind. I just want to have a closer look.”

Travis nodded. Then he got up from his seat and walked over to the area near the big front window. He looked at all the mementoes Randy and his wife had on the shelves near the window. The hosts seemed to relish talking about each and every one.

“Do you know that blind man out there, Randy?”

“No. I can’t say that I do.”

“Somebody new in town?” asked Travis.

“Must be, Travis. The only blind person I know around here is old Harriet Watson, and she always has her guide dog with her.”

Sherry walked back into the house. She, again, whispered into her partner’s ear, “I have some suspicions. Can you come outside?”

“Sure. I’m sorry, guys, but Sherry can’t seem to find her medicine. I’m going to go out and see if I can help her look around in the car. We’ll be back in a few minutes.”

As they walked back to the car, Sherry said, “Watch what he does when he stops walking. He raises his cane ever so slightly while facing the plant. Then he moves his thumb and index finger on the cane’s grip. He’s done that at least a dozen times since I’ve been watching him.”

“A camera?”

“I think so,” said Sherry.

“And dark wrap-around sunglasses. It’s an effective way to hide the eyes, as if one of your eyes had a patch on it.”

“Yeah.”

“Okay, we need to end our visit and continue our surveillance from a different angle.”

They bid adieu to Randy and Harriet, got in their car, and drove down the block to the first intersection. Making a U-turn, they parked where they still had a visual on the blind man.

“He’s on the move,” said Sherry. “He’s going around the corner.”

“Then it’s time for us to follow.”

When they got to the corner, Isaac was gone.

“There’s only one car on the road besides us,” said Travis. “And I never saw that car turn onto the side road.”

“He must have been waiting for Isaac.”

“I think so.”

They followed the car for about five miles, and then watched them turn into the parking lot of the Husker Inn.

“Did you see that, Travis?”

“What?”

“For a blind man, he managed that high curb easily without using his white cane.”

“Kind of sloppy, but Isaac has a reputation for being that way. I can’t think of any reason for him doing this, other than big money. It’s got to be financing from somebody with higher aspirations. Hopefully, somebody will squeeze Isaac hard enough to reveal the money trail.”

“It looks like we might be in for a boring stakeout chore,” said Sherry.

Just as she said that Isaac and his accomplice got back in their car and headed west on Highway M. Their pursuers followed them for another six miles when they turned onto a rock driveway leading back into the woods.

“I’m going to pass the turnoff,” said Travis. “I don’t want them to get suspicious of a tail. If I

remember correctly, that driveway is for Jake Wilson's place. I don't know if he's still around, but the property gained a reputation for illicit activity over the years. We'll turn around up the road and park out of sight."

"I guess that means I have to take off my heels and put on hiking shoes."

"Your intuition clearly matches your resume."

"There isn't any poison ivy in these woods, is there, Travis?"

"I don't remember, but if there is, you'll know soon enough."

"Thanks."

"Okay, stop. We've got an unobstructed view of the house and barn from here."

After about an hour, Isaac and three other men came out of the house. They headed for the barn. All appeared to be armed.

"Okay, Miss Sherry. Make that shutter hum."

"I'll forward these and all the others from yesterday to Bill right away," said Sherry.

“Good. I think it’s enough to get the justice system moving again with warrants.”

“Are we going to stay put until we hear back from Bill?”

“Yeah, I think we should keep watching. If they are still here, they aren’t proceeding to the next step of action ... Hold on, it’s Bill ... Yes, Bill. Did you get everything?”

“Yeah, Travis. Things are rolling, but it always takes a while as you know.”

“Right now, they are still on the farm. What do you want us to do if ... Hold on, it looks like they are carrying an insulated container of some sort from the barn to a van. They’re getting ready to move. What’s the timetable on help arriving?”

“Hang on ... State troopers are the closest and they are about fifteen minutes. Swat and HazMat about thirty and feds about an hour. You may have to get creative if that’s too long. It’s preferable to let the government handle everything they can, but you have to stop Isaac completely if necessary.”

“Okay, Sherry, I’m thinking a flat tire would delay them long enough for help to arrive. Let’s get

a little closer to the driveway with the cover of the trees. Put the suppressor on and take your best shot. I'd say go for a front tire first, and if you miss, you'd still have time to go for a rear before they get too far away."

"That's right, come to a complete stop before entering the roadway. A little more ... and the tire is flat. Well, they haven't pulled their weapons, so I don't think they suspect anything."

"Good. Now come on, boys. We've given you about fifteen minutes."

"They are almost done with the tire. What do you want to do next?"

"Do you hear, my lady. The sweet sound of sirens ... And there they are. The posse has arrived in the form of state troopers. Looks like at least five units. We should stay and provide a little extra cover should Isaac and gang decide to fight."

But One-Patch and his friends decided not to fight. The rest of the help arrived, and they wrapped up very quickly. Travis and Sherry stayed in the background, not revealing their part in the whole affair.

“It almost seemed too easy, Travis.”

“Yeah ... Too easy ... But we completed our mission. We stopped Isaac. The rest is up to the justice system. I’m hopeful they can follow the money trail.”

“The look on your face tells me you’re still thinking, Travis.”

“Yeah, but it’s not actually about this case. It’s something you said when we were at St. Paul’s. You posed the question, ‘What went wrong?’ when we saw so few people sitting in the pews.”

In the morning, they packed and loaded up the car.

“Sherry, I’m going to be taking you to Omaha for your flight. Then I’m coming back here. I need to find some answers from a pastoral position. I’ve already cleared it with Bill.”

“Do you need some help, Travis? I did block off a little more time on my schedule than what we needed for this. I don’t mind staying.”

“I can’t ask you to do that, Sherry.”

“It seems important to you, and you’re still officially my partner.”

“You know this is strictly off the clock?”

“Not if we keep our eye out for anything that may have made it appear ‘Too Easy’ with One-Patch.”

“Okay, I do appreciate it ... Are your arms as itchy as mine?”