

ROGUE SHEPHERD

By Marcus Meyer

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IT'S NOT WHAT YOU SAY, IT'S WHAT YOU DO

The morning dew had settled thickly upon the vehicles parked outside his motel room. He walked back into his room and grabbed a towel to wipe down the windows of his rental car. A seemingly innocuous activity that provided him with a clear view of the parking lot. Little things always caught his eye—the angle of the sun, the number of vacant parking spots, the cycle of the traffic light at the exit of the motel. Things that had little meaning to the average motel room occupant so early in the morning became an integral part of Travis Sawyer's surroundings. Those who knew him admired his vigilance in always knowing his surroundings, always looking for an out, and always knowing his options. Some days his very life depended on those observations.

On this day, though, such concerns had little bearing, for no one could have followed him. No one knew he had come to town. A quick walk to the office to check out and he would be on his way.

He drove out of the motel parking lot and headed west on Highway 19. He kept his eyes peeled for an old warehouse about ten miles down the road on the right. Travis had built a reputation within the agency for being able to see things that others couldn't. According to his source, the owner just wanted to get rid of the building. With a detailed description of the building exterior in hand, he immediately recognized it sitting amidst overgrown vegetation and a potholed parking lot surrounded by well-groomed farmland. He saw no real estate signs anywhere, so he waited back at the corner of the road where he could have a view of the whole setup.

About fifteen minutes passed when a dark-colored limo pulled up in front of the old warehouse. He watched for a few minutes, studying those who got out of the car. Then he pulled his car into the parking lot and parked next to the limo. He got out of his car and walked over to the three men standing outside the limo.

The huge chauffeur stopped him and told him to turn around.

“I’m gonna have to pat you down, sir,” said the man.

“Okay, no problem,” said Travis.

“He’s clean, Mr. Benson,” the chauffeur said to the man who had gotten out of the back of the limo.

“Mr. Sawyer, our friend spoke very highly of you,” said Mr. Benson. “I’m glad you could meet with us today.”

“Thank you, sir. Can we look inside?”

“I like this guy, William,” Mr. Benson said to the other gentleman. “He doesn’t want to waste my time. You got the key, William?”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Benson,” answered William.

William walked over to the door and inserted the key when the door creaked open by itself.

“It appears to be open already, sir,” said William.

“I can see that, William. You and Henry check it out.”

William and Henry entered the building and after about five minutes came back out.

“It appears to be clear, boss,” said William.

“Good. Good. Let’s go inside. Henry, you stay outside and keep an eye on things.”

The three men walked around the first floor without saying a word. Travis studied every corner and every doorway. Finally, Mr. Benson broke the silence.

“I see you have a strong power of observation, Mr. Sawyer. Our friend said you did. Look, here’s the deal. This old building has been in the family for fifty years. It had its heyday, but now I’ve got no use for it. You’ve got two acres of ground with it and very flexible zoning. Fifty G’s takes it all.”

“Well, the price is certainly doable. I ...”

Before Travis could finish, a shot rang out. Then two more shots came, and the three men ducked behind some crates with more bullets slamming into the wall behind them. Henry came into the building with his gun drawn, but the

fireworks drove him to a position behind a short wall.

Travis scanned the second floor and got a visual on three shooters positioned to keep them pinned down indefinitely. He saw a set of stairs to his right and two piles of old pallets between him and the stairs. When the shooter on the right took a moment to reload, Travis made a dash to the first pile of pallets. He could just see that shooter through the slats of the pallets. When the shooter paused again, Travis ran behind the second pile of pallets. Since no bullets slammed into the pallet piles, he felt he had gone unnoticed in his position. The second-floor overhang covered the stairs, so a couple of quick steps and he would be able to climb the stairs and get onto the second floor without being seen. When he reached the second floor, he saw that he had about thirty feet between him and the shooter. He could safely get about ten feet closer unseen, but the last twenty feet stood wide open. Grabbing a short section of an old board at his feet, he took aim and threw it like a tomahawk. His throw hit the shooter's left elbow dead on, and the shooter dropped his gun. Traversing the last twenty feet quickly, he immediately applied a

choke hold on the shooter and felt him go limp in his arms. He picked up the gun and checked the shooter's pockets for more clips.

Travis had to move to his right behind an old desk to see the second shooter. Apparently so focused on firing below, the second shooter had not noticed the disabling of his comrade. Taking aim at a point just in front of that shooter's bent knee, Travis let loose three rounds. The shooter became so startled by the bullets whizzing in front of him that he dropped his gun to the first floor below. Travis found a short section of old mechanics wire in the corner and used it to bind the guy's hands behind his back. He then pushed the second shooter along the rail until he stood about twenty feet from the third shooter. Firing two rounds at the shooter's gun barrel proved enough to get his attention.

"Lay your weapon down or say a prayer that my aim is a little off," said Travis. "What's it gonna be?"

"Okay, man," answered the shooter. "I'm dropping it."

With the shooting stopped, Mr. Benson and William peeked out from behind their cover.

“It’s all clear, Mr. Benson,” yelled Travis from above.

William and Henry ran up the stairs and collected the shooters, while Travis went back down to Mr. Benson.

“Friends of yours, Mr. Benson?” asked Travis.

“Noooo ... I’m impressed, Mr. Sawyer, but not surprised.”

“What do you mean?” asked Travis.

“Highly decorated Green Beret. Then the CIA. Now a preacher.”

“Ah ... I see you’ve done your homework.”

“I like to know who I’m dealing with,” replied Mr. Benson.

“About the warehouse ...”

“Here’s the deal, Travis. First, you call me Frank. No more Mr. Benson.”

“Okay.”

“Second, with what just went down, I’m giving you the warehouse, free and clear. Third,

I'm kicking in a 100 G's to help you renovate. Again, free and clear."

"Uh ... that's very generous ... uh ... Frank. Are you sure?"

"I'm sure as I'm standing here, which I wouldn't be if you hadn't put your life on the line."

"Well, thank you very much, Frank. I'll make sure we spend the money wisely."

"I know you will, Travis. When you're done, I might even come and visit on Christmas."

"Well, you know you'll always be welcome. What about these guys? Are we calling the cops?"

"No, we'll take care of them, but relax, we're not gonna kill 'em or anything. We'll find out where they came from and send them back alive and well."

"Good."

"Of course, they may suffer a little embarrassment in the process," said Mr. Benson, with a sly grin.

"I appreciate that, Frank. In the end, God will deal the final hand."

“Another thing. I’ll put the word out that I no longer have any interest in this building, so you shouldn’t have any more of their kind on the premises. Unless, of course, you put the fear of God in them, they mend their ways, and they join your flock.”

“You never know, Frank. You never know.”

With all the legalities and permitting finished, the building for Epiphany Lutheran Church began its journey. The people who made up Epiphany Lutheran had been meeting for almost a year prior to the start of construction. Travis emphasized the point often that Epiphany Lutheran Church was the people and not the building. One of his early flock happened to be Jason Harris, a fellow Green Beret and now owner of a construction company. With what they had faced together as teammates, Jason and Travis had no problem working the plans down to only what they needed for the people to follow Christ and the Spirit to grow within them. It was much like what they carried with them when they went into the jungle—only what they needed to survive and accomplish their mission.

Jason's construction company did all the heavy work to make the building structurally sound. The flock of Epiphany got together every Saturday for six months to finish the cosmetic work on the building, restore the parking lot, and landscape the grounds. At one of the last work parties, someone who had made deliveries to the old warehouse when it was operational made a comment to Travis. He thought it somewhat prophetic that if the history of the concrete and wood from the old warehouse could be personified, they could say that the building had its own epiphany when it became Epiphany Lutheran Church.

Though the interior of the building still had lots of room for construction projects in the future, the third Sunday of May allowed the doors to officially open. Even with the lavish expenditure of extra thick padding on the folding chairs, they still had a couple of thousand dollars left over from the anonymous (at least to everyone but Travis) seed-money donor. Of course, there weren't any stained-glass windows, any gold communion ware or collection plates, any elegant carvings, or an expensive pipe organ, but there was the word of

God and a group of people who believed following Jesus should be a way of life. The people knew who sat next to them on those folding chairs, and they cared about each other. They had no fear or reticence in welcoming anyone that came through the door. The flock were indeed a most fortunate lot. Not only did they have a shepherd who taught them to know and understand their mission, helped them to keep their priorities in order, and survive in a sometimes-hostile world, but they also had an old warehouse that gave them the wherewithal to do many things where others could only offer the words of a noble mission statement.

As with most undertakings of this nature, mistakes are inevitable. Epiphany Lutheran Church made one very serious one that required them to dip into their contingency fund. They were forced to buy another hundred folding chairs. The ones they had were always filled.

PIZZA

“Hello. This is Rick Paulson.”

“Hey, Rick. This is Tom.”

“Not Tom Peterson!” said Rick. “How are you, old buddy? What a pleasure. I haven’t talked to you in what ... years.”

“We talked last month, Rick,” said Tom.

“Oh yeah. I know you probably don’t understand, but when you get to my age, you can get a little forgetful.”

“We’re the same age, Rick. And that’s not old.”

“Well, you were always smarter than me,” said Rick.

“You graduated Summa cum laude, Rick. I just graduated cum laude.”

“You’re going to shoot down everything I say, aren’t you?”

“It’s about the only thing that’s even remotely kept you in line.”

“Okay, so what do you want with me, Tom?”

“I’m taking a couple of weeks off and heading to the mountains. I wanted to know if you would like to get together for lunch on Friday.”

“Friday? This coming Friday?”

“Yes,” answered Tom.

“I don’t know, Tom. They keep me running pretty ragged around here. My boss is a bear, you know. I’m just not sure I can make that.”

“You are the boss, Rick. And you’ve always set your own agenda.”

“Okay, well, if you’re going to put it like that. Friday for lunch is quite acceptable. Corky’s Pizza, then?”

“Yes. 12 o’clock noon?”

“Yessir. See you then, Tom.”

“Bye, Rick.”

Late Friday morning, driving through a light rain, Tom soon reached the world-famous eating

establishment called ‘Corky’s Pizza’. Now some may say that “world-famous” stretches the market just a little. But if you consider all the college graduates who dined there for four or more years and then went off to careers all around the world, then perhaps “world-famous” wouldn’t violate any truth in advertising law.

Walking through the front door that was covered with all kinds of college news, Tom first saw good old Hazel at the reception podium.

“Well, land sakes alive, if you aren’t a sight for sore eyes,” said Hazel. “Come and give old Hazel a hug.”

“Hello, Hazel,” said Tom. “Are you still running the place, unofficially, of course?”

“What do you think, Tom?”

“I imagine so.”

“Somebody’s got to keep you young people in line.”

“Well, it certainly worked for me, Hazel.”

“Now, Tom, if everybody had behaved like you, I wouldn’t have gone home tired every night.

It was that buddy of yours ... Rick ... uh, what was his last name?"

"Paulson," answered Tom.

"Yeah, Paulson. Has the law caught up with him yet?" asked Hazel.

"Now, Hazel. Be kind. Rick's doing all right. He's become a very successful businessman."

"I know, Tom. I'm just pulling your leg a little. Rick owns this place now. Did you know that?"

"No ... no wonder he wanted me to meet him here for lunch. Create a sale whenever he can. Sounds like Rick."

"Despite all the grief he gave me many years ago, Rick is really a good boss. He treats everybody here with respect and gives a hand when needed."

"Ah, here comes the pizza tycoon now," said Tom. "Look busy, Hazel."

As Rick approached the table where Tom sat, Hazel said to Tom, "Thank you, sir. We appreciate you coming to Corky's. I'll get you a menu and be back in a minute."

“Hey, Rick,” said Tom. “That is a fine lady. She’s a valuable asset to this place.”

“Hey, Tom ... yes, old Hazel’s been around a long time. I’m kind of surprised she didn’t recognize you, though.”

“You should give her a raise, Rick.”

“Now, why would I ... ah, she happened to mention that I own this place, didn’t she?”

“Yes,” answered Tom. “And I think your buying this place is due penance for all the trouble you caused here.”

“Actually, it has rewarded me beyond measure, especially when you consider all the competition in the pizza business. I’m glad to see you found our table. Brings back a lot of memories, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, though, I can’t help but wonder if you don’t have your own VIP table in the back now.”

“No, Tom. I like it just fine out here.”

Hazel returned with a menu for Tom and greeted her boss, “Good day, Mr. Paulson. I’m so glad to see you here today.”

“Hello, Hazel. I’ll just have my usual with a pitcher of Coke. And if I might take the liberty to suggest the house super special for my client here ... Tom?”

“How could I refuse a kind and thoughtful gesture like that,” replied Tom.

“Very good, sir,” said Hazel. “Two house super specials and a pitcher of coke. Thank you, gentlemen.”

“Fine lady,” commented Rick. “I should give her a raise, but it might put her in a higher tax bracket. Then, with the way the progressive tax system works, she might actually have less money to take home, and then she could lose her house and be out on the street. I just don’t think I could do that to her.”

“No, no, we wouldn’t want to do that,” said Tom.

“Maybe I could give her a free pizza every week, you know, no cash involved kind of thing. What do you think, Tom?”

“I think God will provide you with all the wisdom you’ll need in that decision,” answered Tom.

“Well, that was certainly a political answer. Are you running for office now?”

“No ... I just meant ...”

“I know what you meant. So, is this your annual get away from it all thing to the mountains? What do you want with me?”

“I’ve been doing some thinking, Rick. I ...”

“What are you looking at, Tom?”

“That lady at the door talking to Hazel ... she looks kind of down.”

“Yeah, you’re right, man. Something’s going on. Hazel is coming over here.”

“I’m sorry to interrupt, Mr. Paulson,” said Hazel. “That lady needs some help. Her son has cancer, and the doctors have only given him a few weeks to live. He apparently loves pizza and wants a pizza party as one of his last wishes. She wants to know if we ever have any leftover pizza that we might be able to spare.”

“Have her come over, Hazel,” said Rick.

As the lady approached their table, Rick and Tom stood up.

“Welcome to Corky’s,” said Rick. “I’m Rick, and this is my buddy, Tom. Please, sit.”

“Rachel, sirs,” said the lady.

“So, your son wants to have a pizza party?” asked Rick.

“Yes, sir. I was just wondering if you ever have any leftover pizza, you know, like a cancelled order or something, that you might be willing to give away.”

“I’m sorry, Rachel. We can’t do that because of government regulations, but we might be able to work something else out. Tell us a little about your son, Rachel.”

“His name is Scott, and he’s nine years-old and he loves pizza, especially Corky’s pizza.”

“Tell us a little about Scott’s illness,” said Rick.

“It’s cancer, sir. The doctors at the hospital say they’ve done all they can do. They’ve given

him only a few weeks to live. The doctors and the hospital have been really good about the money. I owe them a bunch.”

“Which hospital?” asked Rick. “Medville?”

“Yes, sir,” answered Rachel.

“Did they have any other recommendations, Rachel?” asked Tom.

“They did give me the name of a specialist, but he’s so overwhelmed it would be four weeks before we could get an appointment. And I don’t have any money.”

Tom looked at Rick and said, “St. Matthews?”

“St. Matthews,” said Rick.

“When did you want to have this pizza party, Rachel?” asked Tom.

“I was hoping for tomorrow. It’s Saturday and some of his cousins and friends from school would be able to come then. That’s why I stopped by today to see if you had any leftover pizza I could warm up tomorrow.”

“Rachel, you tell Scott to invite everyone he wants,” said Rick. “We’re going to have a party. Noon, okay?”

Fighting back tears, Rachel said, “Oh, thank you. That seems so ...”

“It will be our overwhelming pleasure, Rachel,” said Rick. “We’re gonna have a ball.”

“It ... it sounds so wonderful, but I don’t ... I don’t have any money to pay for such a party.”

“Open your purse, Rachel,” said Rick. “Take out your wallet and tell me how much money you have in it.”

“Okay, I only have some coin ... it comes to one dollar.”

“That’s really a coincidence. I just finished calculating your bill here for the pizza, assorted party goods, and other miscellaneous things and it comes to exactly one dollar.”

Rachel emptied out her coin purse and handed the money to Rick.

“I’m sorry, Rachel,” said Rick. “I forgot to tell you that you don’t pay until we’re done with the party. Can Scott get out to come here?”

“Yes, he’ll make it,” replied Rachel. “I’ll see you here tomorrow at noon, then.”

“On your way out, give Hazel your address and phone number, okay?”

“Yes, sir. And ... thank ... thank you, sir.”

“You bet, Rachel,” replied Rick.

When the lady left their table, Rick looked at Tom and asked, “Can you hang around tomorrow?”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

“Hazel will take care of the pizza. You and I, buddy, are going to make this kid’s day.”

“Do you happen to own any hotels in this town where I could get a room for a reasonable price?”

“Hotel, schmotel, my friend. You are coming home with me. Nancy will love to see you again.”

“Are you sure you have the room, Rick? ... no, wait, you just built a new home, didn’t you? Probably a mansion with twenty rooms, huh?”

“No, Tom. It’s just a cozy four bedroom and two bath in a nice little gated community. Nothing fancy. You will have to be fingerprinted and give some blood to get in the gate, though.”

“Will I get a written copy of that report?”

“Absolutely. John, the gatekeeper on Friday night, will handle the whole thing, if he’s awake.”

The two gentlemen finished their world-famous house super special pizzas and laid out a plan for the party and for getting Scott further medical care. They decided to split up and get more done for the afternoon. Tom took care of all the work in getting Scott into St. Matthews, and Rick worked on getting ready for the party. They met back at Corky’s at 5 o’clock.

“Hey, Tom,” said Rick. “Mission accomplished?”

“Yes, I spoke with Dr. Frederick Peterson at St. Matthews, and he’ll be seeing Scott on Tuesday.”

“Great. It helps to have connections sometimes, doesn’t it? How is your brother anyway?”

“He’s fine, Rick. He wanted me to thank you again for that million-dollar donation last month.”

“Peanuts, Tom. Peanuts.”

“I don’t know, man. A cool million isn’t exactly peanuts.”

“No, I mean, we had a bumper crop of peanuts on a farm I own in Georgia. Prices remained high, and I made a tidy sum from it, which allowed me to donate it to St. Matthews.”

“He says you’ve established a fund to help pay the cost of medical care for those who are desperate.”

“Yeah, it’s worked well. Your brother has been great to work with.”

“Yes, he’s a good guy, even if he is my brother. I do think God gave him a few extra brains and shorted me.”

“It takes a big man to admit that. It’s just a shame it took you so long to figure that out ... you ready to go?”

“You’ve got the lead, Rick.”

“We’re not too far away. You got your cell phone on in case we get separated in traffic?”

“Yeah, man.”

“I’ll give John at the gate a little bribe and we should be able to skip the fingerprinting and blood work.”

“You are so wise, my friend. I still don’t know what Nancy saw in you.”

“You wear your jealousy well, Tom ... see you later, Hazel.”

“Bye, boss,” said Hazel. “You and your client have a good evening.”

Fifteen minutes later, they arrived at Rick’s house. Tom turned off the engine to his car and walked toward Rick.

“Listen, Tom, I had better call Nancy and let her know you’re going to be spending the night.”

“Nothing like a little short notice, huh.”

“Nonsense ... Hello, Nance. I just wanted to give you a heads up. I’m bringing a guest home tonight.”

Rick opened the front door to his house and continued talking with his wife on the phone, “Yeah, yeah, I know. I should have called you earlier, but this guy just kind of wormed his way in, if you know what I mean.”

Walking down the hall and entering the kitchen, Rick met his wife and gave her a kiss while still talking to her on the phone. When Nancy saw Tom, she ran over and gave him a big hug.

“Hello ... hello... I lost her, Tom. She hung up on me.”

“How are you, Tom?” asked Nancy.

“I’m doing well. How’ve you been?”

“I’m doing great, despite my ball and chain over there,” answered Nancy.

“Hey, hey, I heard that,” said Rick.

“Let me look at you,” said Nancy. Holding his hands, she continued, “No ring, hmm. Just forget to put it on or not married yet?”

“Now, Nancy, don’t you think if I had gotten married, you’d be one of the first to know?”

“I’d hope so. Seeing anyone steady?”

“Look out, man!” exclaimed Rick. “Look at that gleam in her eye, Tom. You’re dead meat if you don’t stay totally vigilant.”

“Married life that bad, hon?” asked Nancy.

“Of course not. That’s not what I meant. I ... I, uh ... just look out, Tom.”

“Follow me and I’ll show you your room,” said Nancy. “It’s just down the hall. I may need to do a couple of things with such short notice. Well, you know how it is.”

When Nancy opened the door, it became apparent that there weren’t any “couple of things” she needed to do. The room looked better than any hotel Tom had ever stayed at.

“You can put your suitcase over there and the bathroom is well stocked with toiletries.”

“What did you do, wiggle your nose, Samantha?”

“Hazel called me this afternoon and gave me a heads up,” whispered Nancy.

“Good old Hazel,” said Tom.

“Dinner will be ready in about 30 minutes.”

“Thanks again for having me, Nancy.”

“You’ll always be welcome here, Tom. Besides, I love seeing how you and Rick interact. It shows a little different side to him.”

“Well, I appreciate that, Nancy.”

Nancy and Tom walked back into the living room where Rick was talking on the phone.

“So, you think you’d be able to make that, Jerry?” asked Rick. “One-thirty tomorrow. Thanks a lot, Jerry. We’ll see you then.”

“Who was that?” asked Nancy. “Jerry Poindexter?”

“Yes,” answered Rick. “His band is coming down to Corky’s tomorrow to play some music, but I’ll explain it all to you after dinner when we lay

out the plan for tomorrow. By the way, what's for dinner anyway?"

"I ordered a couple of house super special pizzas from Corky's," said Nancy.

"Ugh," moaned Rick. "That's what we had for lunch."

"Okay, then," said Nancy. "You're just going to have to settle for the meatloaf, mashed potatoes, and green beans I have cooking in the kitchen."

Walking over to give her a kiss, Rick said, "I love you, babe."

"It's going to be about 30 minutes still," said Nancy. "Why don't we come sit down and talk for a little while."

Looking at the coffee table, Rick asked, "Why is our wedding album sitting there?"

"I just felt like reminiscing a little," answered Nancy.

Rick looked at Tom, pointed to his eyes, and mouthed the words, "be vigilant".

“Oh, look, Tom, there’s you and Nichole coming down the aisle behind Rick and me. You remember Nichole, don’t you, Tom?”

“Of course I do, Nancy. She’s an absolutely gorgeous woman, but then how could she not be with a gorgeous big sister like you.”

“She’s in her last year of nursing school at the college and she just lives down the street ... and she’s not married either.”

Rick buried his head in his hands and sort of groaned.

After another fifteen minutes of such reminiscing, Nancy got up and said, “Why don’t you two come help me set the table. It’s getting close.”

When they got into the kitchen, Nancy opened the cupboard door and handed Rick four plates and glasses.

“Why are you handing me four settings, Nancy? You didn’t ...”

Before Rick could finish his question, the front doorbell rang.

“Would you get that, Rick?”

“Uh, sure.”

Opening the front door, Rick said, “Hi, Nichole. Fancy meeting you here tonight.”

“Hi, Rick ... well, are you going to let me in?”

“Oh, sure ... where are my manners? I guess I was off in some other world ... Nancy, oh Nancy. Your sister is here.”

Coming out of the kitchen, Nancy said, “Well, hi, Nichole. I’m glad you could drop by. You’re just in time; can you stay for dinner?”

“You, uh ... ca ...” When Nichole noticed Nancy with that gleam in her eye, she used sisterly deduction and said, “Of course, I’d be glad to stay for dinner.”

“Oh, Nichole, you remember Tom Peterson, don’t you?”

“Of course. How are you, Tom?”

“I’m good, Nichole. How are you? Nancy said you were in your last year at nursing school?”

“Yes, and I’m fine.”

With their wedding album open on the coffee table to the picture of Tom and Nichole coming down the church aisle behind them, Nancy said, “Oh, we were just reminiscing a little before you came, Nichole. I found this picture of you and Tom coming down the aisle behind Rick and me. You looked so young then. Sit down for a couple of minutes while I finish in the kitchen.”

“Can I help you with anything, Nance?” asked Nichole.

“No, I’m almost done.”

Sitting next to Nichole on the couch, Tom turned to her and asked, “So, Nichole, when are we getting married?”

“I was thinking June 12th. Is that okay with you?”

“I’ll try to clear my schedule,” answered Tom.

“Of course, I’ll have to have my dog approve of you first.”

“I’d love to meet your dog, Nichole.”

“Dinner’s ready,” hollered Nancy.

As they stood up to go into the dining room, Rick approached Tom and said, “I tried to warn you, buddy. Didn’t I?” Stretching out his hand, Rick added, “Welcome to the family, son.”

After a delicious meal filled with lively conversation, Nancy said, “Well, if we all pitch in with the dishes, we can get out to the living room and talk about tomorrow. Rick, why don’t you clear the table and Tom, you can rinse while Nichole, you can put the dishes into the dishwasher. I’ll get the leftovers put away.”

With clean up accomplished, they moved into the living room. Rick looked around and said, “It would probably be better if we went back to the dining room table where I can spread things out.”

“Do you guys need some help tomorrow?” asked Nichole. “I’ve got a free day.”

“That would be great, Nichole,” said Rick. “Okay, I’ll give you the outline of the plan first and then we can fill in the details of who does what. Here’s the timetable. Tomorrow at eleven in the morning, Corky’s will shut down to the public for

2 ½ hours. At noon, we will start the pizza party for Scott. At 1:30, we will reopen to the public with a special event offering free pizza. The special event will last until five ... I've got a whole checklist of things we have to get done, so we'll have to get an early start in the morning to get them all done. Hazel and the gang at Corky's are going to take care of all the food and service work. I've called our materials supplier and they're going to have provisions available on a minute's notice, because I have no idea what kind of a turnout we'll get. I've got a checklist for each of you, so we can divvy up the chores and so we'll know who's doing what. Any questions so far?"

"Nancy told me about Scott," said Nichole. "But what is this special event? I assume it's associated with what you're doing for Scott."

"Yeah, Rick," said Nancy. "You forgot to tell me about that."

"I know, I know. I apologize. The idea just came to me late this afternoon and you know me, the wheels get to spinning and my brain gets so focused internally that I fail to communicate properly to others, at least at first. We could just

give more money to our fund at St. Matthew's and leave it at that, but what if we could get the community involved. There are all kinds of things that could come up for this family besides medical costs. If we could get other people to pitch in where needed, then we could have a much bigger impact. We've never approached anything quite from that angle before so I know there might be a lot of improvising as we go ... on such notice, what could we do that would attract people, especially the college crowd? ... free pizza! ... we've got the apparatus at hand—Corky's Pizza.”

“I like it,” said Tom. “There are several points that might help in getting people involved. First, we need to keep the pitch low key, yet moving. Tell them about the family and Scott's condition and let that soak in. Second, we should keep whatever help we need broken down into small increments that are simple so someone that volunteers for a need isn't tied up for a long period of time. Third, continued incentives, like maybe more free pizza when they complete a chore, might prolong the interest and enthusiasm. I will supply the funds to keep the pizza rolling.”

“Nancy, Nichole, what do you think?” asked Rick.

“It sounds great, Rick,” answered Nancy. “We’ve all had various levels of experience at improvisation, so I think we can swing that. Just always keep focused on Scott.”

“I’m on board, Rick,” replied Nichole. “It sounds challenging, but exciting.”

“Okay. Here are your checklists. Nancy, you and Nichole should stay near Rachel and Scott. You can answer any questions people might have about his condition. If Scott gets tired, we’ll have a bed set up in the office where he can rest. Tom, I’m thinking you should man a booth that introduces people to what we’re trying to do and how they could help. I will try to stay on top of things overall with the facilities, staff, crowd control, and pitch in where needed with you guys. I’ve got some students passing out fliers all over the campus and I’ve gotten us a couple of spots on the radio.”

“Nichole and I will get with Rachel in the morning to learn all that we can about Scott and his condition,” said Nancy.

“I already talked with Rachel about what we would like to do, so she’s a little bit prepared and you won’t be springing something on her,” said Rick.

“I’m going to focus on getting people signed up for future volunteer work when I can,” said Tom. “That will include explaining exactly what we are going to do, what kind of volunteer work might be needed in the future, and how they can plug in. I’m also going to give information on St. Matthew’s and what all they do to help people, including that special fund for those who can’t afford the medical costs.”

“I know it’s getting late, so I think we should let this soak in, get some rest, and hit it hard in the morning,” said Rick.

“Do you want to spend the night here, Nichole?” asked Nancy.

“No, I should get home and take care of Hans.”

“Oh, that’s right,” said Nancy. “I forgot about him.”

“Well, good night, all,” said Nichole. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

“I’ll walk you to your car, Nichole,” said Tom.

After Tom and Nichole walked out the door, Nancy turned to Rick and asked, “Well, what do you think?”

“I think this is going to be a great event.”

“No, I mean about Tom and Nichole,” said Nancy.

“Honestly, Nance, I do think they’d make a great couple, but just give it time and don’t get too pushy.”

When Tom came back into the house, Rick handed him a small piece of paper with the words “Bongo’s Beef Sticks for Dogs” written on it.

“Bongo’s Beef Sticks for Dogs? What is this, Rick?”

“That, my friend, will get you instant approval from Hans, the German Shepherd.”

Saturday came and went like it normally does for people all over the world. At that small grain of sand called Corky's Pizza, they played games, won prizes, garnered smiles, listened to a band, watched a magician, introduced a young boy to a community, and most of all, they ate lots and lots and lots of pizza.

As Rachel got Scott ready to go home, Nancy walked over to her and noticed the tears flowing down her cheeks.

"Are those tears of joy or sadness, Rachel?" asked Nancy.

"Some of both, I guess."

"What are you thinking, Rachel?"

"I'm tired, but amazed. Amazed that all these people would come out today for Scott ... he is my precious son, Nancy, and I have had him for so little time. Sometimes I don't understand why God has allowed this cancer to happen to him."

"That is a tough question, Rachel. I do know that God intervenes sometimes in the lives of his people. We don't know why, when, or how. Only

God knows that. In His wisdom, he created humanity with a free will. If nothing bad ever happened to us, we would most likely start thinking we don't need God and that would be far more deadly than anything we experience here on earth. If you have taught Scott about the Lord, then I am absolutely sure you will be with him in eternity. As far as the time he has left with you here ... well, I probably don't need to tell you ... love him every day you can. And if anybody ever tries to tell you they know why Scott got cancer and somehow, you are at fault, don't believe them. They don't know what they are talking about. When God calls your little boy home, know that Jesus is waiting there to take him up in His arms and he will no longer have cancer. In the meantime, Rick and Tom are going to do everything they can to get you the best medical help possible. Tom's brother is a great Pediatric Cancer Doctor, and they've got a fund to take care of the expense. Be with your son and know that we are standing right beside you as God would want us to do. If St. Matthew's can give your son longer to live, thank God for them, and continue loving him every day you have with him."

Burying her head in Nancy's shoulder, Rachel sobbed. Nancy just held her for as long as she needed.

"Thank ... thank you, Nancy ... I love you guys, and I am so grateful for all you've done."

"Okay, Rachel. James, the driver who works for Rick, will take you home. Rick, Tom, and I will pick you and Scott up on Tuesday and take you to St. Matthew's. Make sure you have everything with you from that list I gave you. If you have any questions or just want to talk, give me a call, okay?"

Joining Tom who was sitting at a table, Rick said, "Well, my friend, can I buy you a pizza?"

"You're buying?" asked Tom.

"Yes, I am."

"House super special?"

"You got it, my friend," answered Rick. "Hey, girls, you want some pizza?"

"House super special?" asked Nichole.

“Yes, sister of my love.” Walking into the kitchen, Rick saw Hazel and asked her, “Miss Hazel, do you think you could round us up four house super specials?”

“Oh, I think I could persuade Jason to keep the oven hot, boss.”

Going back to the table where the others now sat, Rick sat down and said, “It’s kind of funny. Pizza surrounded us all day and we never had time to eat any.”

“How many pizzas did we give away, Rick,” asked Tom.

“The final total came to five-hundred thirty-four, not counting these last four. How did we do with volunteers?”

“Two-hundred fifteen gave us their names and contact information,” answered Tom. “I really didn’t think we would get quite that many, but people seemed to be moved.”

“Well, I think it was great,” said Nichole. “A moment to remember.”

“I agree, Nichole, but right now I need to visit the little girl’s room,” said Nancy. “Do you want to come, Nichole.”

“I’m right behind you.”

“Rick, I had started to ask you something the other day before all this came up with Scott and Rachel.”

“Go ahead. Ask away.”

“We’ve done a few of these charitable things over the years and it’s always seemed to click. I was wondering if you would consider ...”

“I’m sorry, Tom,” said Rick. “I’ve got to get something out of my briefcase. I’ll be right back.”

When Rick got back, he laid out some paperwork in front of Tom.

Tom looked at the top page and said, “Peterson and Paulson, Incorporated? What, uh ... how did you know I was going to say this?”

“I’ve been carrying these incorporation papers around in my briefcase for over two years. I figured you’d eventually get around to it.”

“You’re incredible, my friend. But why Peterson and Paulson? Why not Paulson and Peterson?”

“Peterson and Paulson just rolls off the tongue easier.”

“You’re sure?”

“Absolutely. We can hammer out the details later and then I’ll get my attorney to file them next week ... welcome back, ladies. Tom and I have just entered into a business venture this very night in the hallowed grounds of Corky’s World Famous Pizza Emporium. It’s called Peterson and Paulson, Incorporated. Would either of you two lovely ladies care to join us in this venture?”

“What exactly will this venture be doing?” asked Nancy.

“Exactly the type of things like we did this afternoon. Helping people, but on a little more formal basis.”

“I’d love to, Rick,” replied Nancy.

“I would be honored to join you guys,” said Nichole. “Hmm, but ... I ...”

“Why the hesitation, Miss Nichole?” asked Rick.

“Well, uh, it’s just that your venture is named Peterson and Paulson, Inc. and my name is Forester.”

“That won’t be a problem, Nichole,” said Rick. “Once you and Tom get married, it will be two Petersons and two Paulsons.”

Everyone looked at Tom and he said, “June 12th, right?”

“Oh, you remembered, Tom,” said Nichole. “How romantic!”

“Of course, we haven’t talked about a dowry yet, Nichole,” said Rick. “What do you have of value?”

“A dog.”

“That’s a good start, Nichole,” said Rick.

“What about that red Ford Mustang you drive?” asked Tom.

“Oh, of course, Tom,” said Rick. “We’d have to include the mustang.”

“It’s sounding better all the time,” said Tom.

“Do I get a say in this?” asked Nichole.

“No,” said Rick. “This is man-stuff.”

“Only thing is, I haven’t been approved by Hans yet,” said Tom.

“Piece of cake, my friend,” said Rick. “Just remember what I told you.”

“What did you tell him, Rick,” probed Nancy.

“I’m not at liberty to discuss that,” said Rick.

“Oh, he probably told him to buy some Bongo’s Beef Sticks for Dogs,” said Nichole. “He knows that Hans loves them.”

“What about it, Tom?” asked Nancy. “Is that what he told you?”

“I, uh ...”

Already keeping secrets from your future wife, Tom?” asked Nichole.

“I, uh ...” Looking at Rick, Tom said, “Counselor?”

“I am advising my client to change the subject ... quickly,” answered Rick.

“All right, then,” said Tom. “A toast to Peterson and Paulson, Incorporated.”

“Peterson and Paulson, Incorporated,” said the group, in unison.

THE SHEPHERD

Peterson & Paulson, Inc. opened their first office on the third floor of Sunset Towers in the middle of downtown Lexington. The landlord, RP Holdings, Inc., offered the space at an exceptionally good price that met their budgetary monthly allotment. I suppose it should be noted that the shareholders of RP Holdings, Inc. are Richard and Nancy Paulson. The arrangement did fit like a well-worn glove, as all five floors of Sunset Towers held all the offices of the dozen companies under the umbrella of RP Holdings, Inc.

On one of the early days of their occupancy, Rick and Tom met to lay out an overall strategy for their new company.

“This all looks good, Rick,” said Tom. “I totally agree with you that the organization of contacts and services is the first thing we should do. Such a database would give us the most flexibility to help people in most situations.”

“Yeah, with everything and everybody you and I know, it’s going to be a mountain of work to

get it all categorized and entered,” said Rick. “I made an executive decision on getting someone to help us. I hope you don’t mind, but I put on a lady as an administrative assistant. Rachel has been exceptionally good at getting things started. She is a whiz on the computer.”

“Rachel? Our Rachel?”

“That’s her.”

“I think that’s great, Rick. I didn’t realize she had those skills.”

“Obviously, that wasn’t our focus when we first met.”

“How’s Scott doing?”

“He’s doing about as well as we can expect. The treatment he’s receiving seems to be working to a certain extent. It’s tough on him physically. Very draining with not a lot left to drain, but Rachel sounds hopeful.”

“I’ll have to call my brother and get an update.”

“She still has to be with him a lot at the hospital, but I’ve gotten her a good laptop, so she’s been able to do a lot of work from a distance.”

“The marvel of the computer age.”

“I’ve also got Lenny working on the business math so we can keep the doors open.”

“Lenny?” asked Tom. “Lenny the Bookie?”

“Yeah. You probably didn’t know that Leonard Schosselman is my chief accountant and the best guy I know with a head for numbers. Last week he put the odds at 100 to 1 that we would ever get audited.”

“If Lenny’s your chief accountant, and I know you pay your people well, he must make a bundle. Why is he running book on the side?”

“You like to follow baseball as a hobby; Lenny likes to make book. Besides, he just does penny-ante stuff with people he knows now for the thrill of the numbers. Legally, he could be walking a fine line, but I trust him to do right with my companies.”

“I’ve always liked Lenny, Rick. I guess it just shocked me at first, because of his renown, sort of, in the past.”

“Well, you know, you and I walked a fine line sometimes back in college. Remember that time we hired Greta Olson, who was studying for her doctorate in psychology. We got her to study Professor Higgins and give us an analysis on his tendencies. We then used that analysis and plotted out which areas he was most likely to focus on with his tests. It was a required class and so boring that we didn’t want to have to study everything if we could get by some other way. Well, it worked, and we got good test scores. Of course, we didn’t sell our formula to anyone else, and it wasn’t really cheating, because we didn’t know what the questions were going to be beforehand or anything. We didn’t do anything illegal, but some might have considered it unethical. I just thought it to be a cool way to play the system, though admittedly walking that fine line.”

“Okay, okay, Rick. I get it. Age and life give us clearer perspectives sometimes. If you’re happy with Lenny, I’m happy with Lenny.”

“What time is it, anyway? Five o’clock. Are you ready to head home? No, wait, Nancy is working a late shift tonight, so she won’t be there. We’ll have to stop someplace and grab dinner. I know a great little ...”

“Pizza place?”

“Why, yes, Tom. How intuitive of you ... Besides, I can check up on things and sell you a pizza at the same time.”

“Yes ... Rick.”

The boys arrived at Corky’s to find an almost full house, which, of course, brought a smile to Rick’s face.

“Do we even have a table, Rick?”

“Hazel. Where’s Hazel? ... Ah, there she is.”

“Good evening, Mr. Paulson ... Mr. Peterson. Are you dining with us tonight?”

“Yes, we are, Hazel. I see you’ve got someone else sitting at our table. Just a couple of college kids. Well, I can certainly get rid of them.”

Rick walked briskly towards the table he and Tom usually sat at. He looked intense.

“Rick ... wait. You don’t have ...”

The two kids at the table and Rick talked briefly and the two boys got up and moved to the two remaining seats at the counter. Rick signaled for Tom to come over and sit down.

“Rick, you didn’t have to kick them off the table. We could have waited.”

“Relax, Tom. I know those two. We’re always messing with each other. Our negotiations always end up with them getting free pizzas. Sometimes I think they always ask for this table in hopes I’ll come in and want it so they can eat for free. It’s something I certainly would have done.”

Rick just gave Hazel a couple of hand signals that relayed the gratis meals for the lads and then added a few hand signals completing our order.

“So, are you heading home tomorrow?”

“Yeah, I’ve got some things that I need to take care of in person. Then I’m flying to New York to negotiate a couple of contracts and then back home by next weekend.”

“Given any thought to moving up here?”

“Yeah, I have. In fact, I have already started the process.”

“Ah, ha! To get closer to me or someone else I might know?”

“Nichole and I talk every night, and I see her every time I come here. She is actually flying to New York with me and we’re going to catch a few sights.”

“Hmm ... this sounds like it could be getting serious.”

“I’ve already got my apartment sold and a month-to-month lease signed on one here in town that Nancy’s realtor friend, Gina, found for me. I’ve also got my eye on a little place on the west side of town that Gina said will probably come on the market in a month or two.”

“What about your businesses?”

“I’ve actually sold six of the seven that I owned. All six are now employee-owned.”

“Did you get what you wanted out of them?” asked Rick.

“More than I ever expected. The employees that now own them are the ones who made them successful. Maybe in the back of my mind that’s why I formed those particular businesses, you know, to turn them over eventually. Who knows? At any rate, they made me a ton of money, and it felt good to give them back to the employees at a reasonable price everybody could live with. As part of the contract with each, I’ll be available for a one-year period for any consultation they feel they need.”

“What about the last business? I’ll bet you kept the publishing company.”

“Yeah, it’s my favorite and the one that I feel like I could keep a hand in for the rest of my life.”

“Are you going to continue writing yourself?”

“Absolutely. I just had my third book hit the one-million mark. What I especially like about the publishing company, though, is working with new authors who have unique ideas or stories but obviously don’t have the name or the wherewithal to get a major’s interest. Every new project with every new author is like a mini partnership. We

keep things very flexible with them. One of the interesting things that we get a lot of positive feedback from is our 6-week editor's class that we require each new author to take before we nail down a final product. Because we look for a certain range of topics that are rarely looked at by others, we can develop our own unique marketing system that increases the author's possibility for success. While we have a few rules because of our initial investment, we don't charge anything up front. If we find a major that's interested in the work later, we don't do anything to stop the author from moving up. We have a partnership royalty program in those cases where the author can catch on with one of the big boys, and it is a reduction formula according to the number of years we work together. Everyone has seemed happy with their deals so far."

"You about ready to go?" asked Rick.

"I think so," answered Tom.

"Just let me tell Hazel a couple of things and then we can head back to the house."

Rick and Tom left the restaurant in a light mist. Just as they went through the last light before

their turnoff, Rick pulled the car off onto the shoulder of the road.

“Something wrong, Rick?” asked Tom.

“Yeah, it’s that woman with the broken-down car back there. I think that’s Henrietta Baker. I’m going to go down a little bit and make a U-turn to see if she needs any help.”

As they came up behind the broken-down car, it began to rain harder. The woman had gotten back into her car and Rick and Tom had to sit in their car for a good ten minutes to wait for it to slow down enough that they could get out and talk to the woman.

“Is that you, Henrietta?” asked Rick.

“Oh, Mr. Paulson, am I glad to see you. Yes, my car just quit.”

“Henrietta, this is my friend, Tom Peterson.”

“Nice to meet you, Henrietta,” said Tom.

“Turn the engine over, Henrietta, and let me hear what it sounds like.”

Rick instructed Henrietta to do a couple more things, but nothing got the car running.

“It’s hard to say,” said Rick. “I don’t hear or see anything obvious. We should probably get it towed into the dealership, or do you have someone who has worked on it for you?”

“No, sir,” replied Henrietta.

Rick made a couple of phone calls and then said, “Zeke from Zeke’s Towing will be here in a few minutes. He’ll be taking it back to his yard for the evening and then to the dealership in the morning. We’ll wait until he gets here, and then we’ll take you home.”

“I appreciate that very much, Mr. Paulson.”

“Tom, Henrietta works in our accounting department. You’ve been there what, four or five years?”

“Five years this Friday,” said Henrietta.

“Where are you from, Henrietta?” asked Tom.

“Chicago, Mr. Peterson,” she answered.

Pulling into a parking garage, Rick grabbed the first spot he found. They walked Henrietta up

to her apartment on the third floor and said goodnight.

“In the morning, call your supervisor and tell them what happened, and that I said it’s okay you may be a little late. If you can’t get a hold of your supervisor, call Mr. Schosselman. Here’s Henry Nilson’s card with his cell number. Call him and he’ll get you to work one way or the other, and then he’ll help you get your car straightened out.”

“Thank you so much, Mr. Paulson. You’re a lifesaver.”

As Rick and Tom walked back toward the elevator, Tom said, “Henry Nilson, why does that name sound familiar? No, wait, Henry the Enforcer ... Seven-foot tall, three hundred fifty pounds—that Henry Nilson? ... Henry the Enforcer works for you now?”

“Yes, Henry is my chief of security. It’s a long story, but let’s just say; he got into a jam, I helped him out with the provision that he work for me, and he’s taken a different path in life.”

“You’re amazing, Rick,” said Tom. “But he’s still an imposing figure, even in a different light.”

“Occasionally, his size proves quite useful for special projects.”

“And what about Henrietta? What’s her story?”

“Another long story. A case of perpetual abuse. We got her out of Chicago, helped her through school, and put her to work.”

As they stepped off the elevator and started walking into the parking garage, Tom noticed an old gray van moving very slowly through the garage.

“Does that look a little strange to you, Rick?” asked Tom.

“Yeah, maybe we should stop and wait to let them pass.”

The van did not pass, though. When it got close to Tom and Rick, it stopped. Seven men got out of the van and surrounded them. Armed with baseball bats and iron pipes, the men demanded money.

“Here, take it,” said Tom, handing over his wallet. “Take it all.”

Rick handed his wallet over at the same time, but the apparent leader did not look happy.

“Is that all you got?” demanded the man. “Well, maybe we should just put you down and then see what else you got.”

Tom turned to Rick and whispered, “Are you packing?”

“Packing what?”

“A gun.”

“No, man. Up until now, I didn’t think I needed one.”

In one of those moments of time that seemed like a blur, a figure appeared from near the elevator. Before Tom or Rick could say anything, four of the gang were on the ground. The new man on the scene then tossed a baseball bat to Tom and a pipe to Rick.

“Okay, guys,” said the new man to the remaining gang still standing. “Anybody want to rethink where this is going to go next?”

The other three men ran back to the van, jumped in, and drove away.

“Uh ... thanks, my friend,” said Tom. “If you hadn’t come along, I don’t think we’d be standing right now.”

“You’re welcome,” said the man. “Get your valuables back there and call 911. I’ll make sure these others are secure.”

Pulling out some plastic ties from a leather bag he carried over his shoulder, the man bound the unhappy men on the ground.

“The cops are on their way,” said Rick.

“You’re pretty handy with that ... shepherd’s staff?” said Tom to the man.

The man reached into his pocket, pulled out a couple of business cards, and gave them to Tom and Rick. Stretching out his hand, he said, “Travis Sawyer.”

“Tom Peterson and Rick Paulson,” said Tom.

“You’re a ... a pastor?” stammered Rick after reading his card.

“Yeah, I’m the shepherd over at Epiphany Lutheran Church,” answered Travis. “Oh, and the shepherd’s staff, well it’s just a little something I

picked up at another time in life. It is kind of a funny coincidence tonight, though. I hold a little class, called The Shepherd's Chronicles, in the rec hall of the building once a month. This class is based on Jesus and all the references to him as a shepherd and as the Lamb of God. I try to explain what a shepherd meant to the life of the community and why Jesus frequently spoke of sheep and lambs. Then I try to put some perspective into what it means for us, today. Tonight, I talked about the shepherd's staff and all the functions it served for the shepherd. I gave some visual demonstrations on how the shepherd's staff could be a formidable weapon in the experienced shepherd's hands. I didn't think I would be continuing the demonstration outside after class."

"Well, I'm certainly glad you gave that demonstration," said Rick. "It looks like the police are here."

Three cars arrived with the driver of the first car the first to get out. He walked over to Rick, Tom, and Travis.

"Hi, Sarge," said Travis.

“Good evening, Pastor,” said Sergeant Williams. “Out doing some more evangelizing this evening?”

“I’m not sure they’ve seen the light ... yet,” answered Pastor Sawyer.

“Is everybody, well everybody besides them, okay?” asked Sergeant Williams.

“Yeah, we’re good,” said the three men in unison.

“You know any of them, Sarge?” asked Pastor Sawyer.

“I’ve seen the one on the left before, but none of the others. It’s a revolving door over at Juvenile ... Officer Smith will be over in a minute to take your statements. You gentlemen take care of what’s left of your evening.”

“Thanks, Sarge,” said Pastor Sawyer.

Officer Smith finished taking the three men’s statements and said, “Okay, you’re free to go. If I have any other questions, I’ll call you.”

“See you Sunday, Smitty,” said Pastor Sawyer.

“See ya, Pastor,” answered Officer Smith.

“Well, gentlemen,” said Pastor Sawyer. “It’s been an exhilarating evening. Don’t you think? ... Come visit us, anytime.”

“Exhilarating ... yeah, exhilarating,” mumbled Rick to himself.

“Who is that guy, Officer?” asked Tom. “I mean, I know his card says he is the pastor at Epiphany Lutheran Church, but who is he really?”

“He is a great guy to have around,” replied Officer Smith. “Take care, gentlemen.”

“I suppose we should tell the girls what happened, Rick.”

“Of course, we’d never be able to keep it from them.”

“I’ve got to learn more about this shepherd, Rick.”

“I figured you would, Tom.”

“Do you think the girls would like to accompany us to Epiphany Lutheran on Sunday? We should be back from New York by then.”

“I’m sure they would come,” answered Rick.
“But do I need to be packing?”

“Packing what?”

“A gun.”

“Nah, I don’t think so. Pastor Sawyer will probably have his shepherd’s staff with him.”

EPIPHANY

“I told Nichole we would pick her up at 8 o’clock,” said Tom. “It’s only about 5 minutes to Epiphany from her house, so that should give us time to get oriented.”

“Are you about ready, Nancy?” asked Rick.

“Just have to put my shoes on.”

“Remind me to tell you later something about Pastor Sawyer, Tom,” said Rick. “Henry actually knows him, and I’ve got a story to tell you.”

“Okay.”

“All ready,” said Nancy.

They headed out the door and drove to Nichole’s house to pick her up. Nichole stood on her front porch waiting for them.

“Gloves, Nichole?” asked Nancy. “I guess I didn’t think about that.”

“They just feel right this morning,” replied Nichole, as she winked at Tom.

“Well, here we are already,” said Rick. “Interesting structure, is it not?”

“Didn’t this used to be an old warehouse?” asked Tom.

“Yes, and that’s part of the story I’m going to tell you later,” answered Rick.

“I haven’t had a chance to talk to you since you got back from New York, Nichole,” said Nancy. “After church, I want to hear the whole story.”

As they walked towards the church, three people greeted and welcomed them in the parking lot. When they reached the front walkway, two more couples welcomed them and asked where they were from. Those two couples then called two other couples over and they greeted the visitors.

“Rick, is that you?” asked another man.

“Well, hi, Harry,” answered Rick. “I didn’t know you went to this church.”

“Yeah, we’ve been coming here for a couple of years. Rick, this is my wife, Michelle.”

“My wife, Nancy, and her sister, Nichole. And that’s Tom, an old friend and business partner.”

“Well, we’re glad you could be with us today,” said Harry.

“Harry?” whispered Nancy to Rick.

“He’s one of my suppliers,” said Rick. “Good guy.”

Before they reached the front door, numerous other people shook their hands and welcomed them. No official greeter stood at the door, but then they hardly seemed to need one. The usher at the door handed them bulletins and welcomed them. He told them they could sit wherever they liked. When they got seated, the people behind them welcomed them and asked where they were from. The people in front of them heard them talking and turned around to greet them. Tom passed a note to Rick with the number forty-three written on it.

“Forty-three?” asked Rick, quietly. “What does that mean?”

Before Tom could answer, a couple with two children sat down at the end of their row. The father

stood up after getting the kids settled and shook Tom's hand and then Rick's. The mother greeted Nancy and Nichole. Tom passed Rick another note with forty-five written on it.

“Ah ...,” said Rick, quietly. “That's how many have greeted us so far.”

Tom gave him a thumbs up.

Pastor Sawyer walked in front of the congregation from his chair on the side and welcomed all present.

“Rejoice in another day to gather with your brothers and sisters, my friends,” said Pastor Sawyer. “Let's begin with a hymn of praise.”

After the hymn, Pastor Sawyer read from the Old Testament, Judges 3:7-12:

“And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, forgetting the Lord their God, and serving the Sith and the Asheroth. Therefore, the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he sold them into the hand of Jabba the Hutt ruler of Tatooine; and the people of Israel served Jabba the Hutt eight years. But when the people of Israel cried to the Lord, the Lord

raised up a deliverer for the people of Israel, who delivered them, Obi-Wan Kenobi. The Spirit of the Lord came upon him, and he judged Israel; he went to war, and the Lord gave Jabba the Hutt into his hand, and his hand prevailed over Jabba the Hutt. So, the land had rest forty years. Then Obi-Wan Kenobi died.

And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord; and the Lord strengthened Emperor Darth Sidious of Naboo against Israel, because they had done what was evil in the sight of the Lord.”

Pastor Sawyer paused and looked out at the congregation. “Does any of what I just read sound strange? Some of you may have noticed that I inserted names and places from Star Wars. Why?” Pastor Sawyer smiled and continued, “First of all, I just wanted to see if you were really listening. Second, I wanted to illustrate how difficult it can be wading through all the strange sounding names and places given in the Old Testament. For someone who knows little about Star Wars, the reading from Judges could have sounded just like the real thing. The comparison ends there, though. Star Wars has epic battles, lightsabers and blasters,

classic confrontations between good and evil, ruthless emperors, heroes and heroines, Jedi masters with wise sayings and power over the natural laws ... uh ... wait ... come to think of it, the Old Testament has epic battles, Joshua blasting down the walls of Jericho with trumpets and shouting, Aaron's rod that became a serpent, classic confrontations between good and evil all the way from Genesis to Malachi, a shepherd felling the mighty giant Goliath, Solomon and his wisdom, the strength of Samson, the miraculous parting of the waters of a sea, angels that shut the mouths of lions to keep Daniel safe ... yes, it is all in there, but it's also easy to get bogged down with all the strange names and places. It takes practice to work through those things and get to the point of the story. And you get that practice by reading what all those old prophets had to say. Hopefully, those of us who call ourselves shepherds can help to shed some light on that path occasionally, too.

Okay, so here's the real reading from Judges. 'And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, forgetting the Lord their God, and serving the Baals and the Asheroth. Therefore, the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and

he sold them into the hand of Cushanrishathaim king of Mesopotamia; and the people of Israel served Cushanrishathaim eight years. But when the people of Israel cried to the Lord, the Lord raised up a deliverer for the people of Israel, who delivered them, Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother. The Spirit of the Lord came upon him, and he judged Israel; he went out to war, and the Lord gave Cushanrishathaim king of Mesopotamia into his hand; and his hand prevailed over Cushanrishathaim. So the land had rest forty years. Then Othniel the son of Kenaz died. And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord; and the Lord strengthened Eglon the king of Moab against Israel, because they had done what was evil in the sight of the Lord.'.

The passage begins with Israel doing evil and ends with Israel still doing evil. In between, though, God sent a deliverer who freed the people of Israel, albeit temporarily. And that is a mirror for us to look into today. Mankind has been doing evil in the sight of the Lord since Adam and Eve and will continue doing evil until Judgement Day. The good news is that God has sent us a deliverer, his own Son, Jesus Christ, to free us from the bondage

of sin. The freedom that Christ has given us is not temporary, but permanent. It's up to us to live our lives like that really means something every day and not just on Sunday for a couple of hours."

The father that sat next to Tom passed him a card and a pen. The 'get well' card was addressed to Sam Waters and everyone in the pews ahead of them had signed it. Tom added his name and passed it to Nichole.

"Brothers and sisters, let us join in with all Christendom and profess our faith with the Apostles' Creed. Before we do that, though, how many of you know where we got the Apostles' Creed? ... only a few. That's okay. The apostles wrote the Apostles' Creed, right? ... actually, no—at least not in the exact form that you see in front of you. There is a legend that the Creed can be broken down into 12 parts, with each part having been written by one of the apostles. Most scholars do not think the legend to be true, but they do believe it is a solid statement of our Christian faith and certainly represents the teachings of the apostles at the time. The earliest historical evidence of the creed, which was also called the 'Symbol of the Apostles', came in the late fourth century. It has

appeared in various forms since then, until this commonly used one today. So, were the apostles standing in front of you today, I'm sure they would be reciting this creed right along with us."

After the Apostles' Creed, the hymn of the day followed. As the hymn was being sung, those in the pews passed along another card to sign addressed to Becky and Tom Smith. Becky had just had a baby boy, and the congregation offered their thoughts and prayers with the congratulatory card. Pastor Sawyer then read the Gospel for the day.

"The Gospel reading is from Matthew 22:34-40 - But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they came together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question, to test him. 'Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?' And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets."

Pastor Sawyer continued, “In the Old Testament, God gave us a simplified, condensed form of what it takes to obey and please Him, with the Ten Commandments. Here, Jesus simplifies and condenses it further to just two commandments. This text is the basis for today’s message, so I will be expounding on it in more detail with my take on the practical application of it.”

In his message, Pastor Sawyer emphasized, “Loving God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind means that our relationship to God should affect every aspect of our daily lives—our family, our work, how we are entertained, politics—everything should be influenced by it. If we are doing something that fails to be influenced by our love for God, then in all probability, it will not be pleasing to Him. It is a serious charge by Christ (for His grace did not come cheap), yet a life that is pleasing to God is not a burden dragging us down. It is a life filled with the uplifting joy of being close to the Creator of everything that there is. And loving God with our entire essence naturally follows with the second great commandment of loving our neighbor. Jesus

also said, ‘for the tree is known by its fruit.’ How will other people see your fruit?

Something that many of us do every day is driving. How we drive our cars in traffic can be a simple witness or fruit. I met a man at a restaurant last week from Wisconsin who had visited Epiphany last Sunday, so he recognized me. He told me about this experience with another church he and his wife had recently. They were on the road heading to church when a car came barreling up behind them with the driver honking their horn. The car then blew by them, passing in a no-passing zone. Tad, the man’s name, said they kept catching up to the other car at every red light, but the driver floored the gas and continued their erratic driving of weaving from one lane to another. They made a left turn, as did Tad. His wife said, ‘wouldn’t it be funny if that car was going to the same church that we are.’ Yes, the car pulled into the church parking lot with the driver frantically looking for the closest parking place to the sanctuary that they could find. The car door opened and a little old lady about 4 and a half feet tall climbed out, adjusted her flower hat, and proceeded to majestically walk into church ... A tree is known by its fruit.

How we treat the cashiers we face and how we can make or break their day with our attitude, even when they get the order wrong, is another case of loving your neighbor. From the doctor's office to the Department of Motor Vehicles, in all cases, I give you this question, do we share the joy of the life that Christ has given us from the cross or do we give a different impression altogether?"

Pastor Sawyer gave numerous other examples of our daily witness and then closed with a quote from Lionel Blue, "The real evidence for Jesus and Christianity is in how Jesus and the Christianity based on him manifest themselves in the lives of practicing Christians."

There was no passing of the collection plates during the service. There was a simple basket at the front of the aisle and one at the rear.

Prayers were short and to the point—for the Christians in the Middle East who were under constant threat, for our neighbor across the street, First Baptist Church, who were breaking ground on a central food pantry for the area, and for all those in the parish sick or in need (he reminded everyone to put the list on their refrigerators, pray for them

every day, and send a card or make a phone call if possible).

Communion was pretty traditional. He spoke the words that Christ spoke, gave a brief statement as to what Lutherans believe, and left it at that.

Before they sang the last hymn, Pastor Sawyer stood up and said, “My friends, this last hymn, ‘Lo, How a Rose E’er Blooming’ originated in Germany in the late 15th century, so it has been around for a long time. The author is unknown and there have been a number of different translations made. Most all the hymnals of mainstream Christianity include it. I’m going to read the words for you, so we can think about them before we sing them with the music.

Lo, how a Rose e’er blooming
From tender stem hath
sprung!
Of Jesse’s lineage coming
As men of old have sung.
It came, a flower
bright,
Amid the cold of winter
When half-gone was the night.

Isaiah ‘twas foretold it,
The Rose I have in mind:
With Mary we behold it,
The virgin mother kind.

To show God’s love aright
She bore to men a Savior
When half-gone was the night.

This flower, whose fragrance tender
With sweetness fills the air
Dispels with glorious
splendor
The darkness everywhere.

True man, yet very God.
From sin and death He saves
us
And lightens every load.

“Yes, it is ripe with symbolism—from the reference of the rose to Virgin Mary to Isaiah’s prophetic words to the reference of the lineage of Jesus from Jesse. ‘From sin and death He saves us and lightens every load’ fits well with the message

of today and how loving God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind is a joy and not a burden.”

After the hymn, Pastor Sawyer made a quick announcement before the benediction.

“We didn’t have time to get this in the bulletin, so I just wanted to tell you that Tim Rogers, who served here as a vicar three years ago, has accepted the call as an associate pastor at Nativity. We will, of course, be working closely with Tim as we spread the Good News and identify the paths we should take. We’ll let you know when Tim and his lovely bride will be moving back so you can give them a hearty welcome.”

When the service concluded, numerous other people came up to Tom, Rick, Nancy, and Nichole, welcomed them, and said they hoped to see them again. They finally made it up to where Pastor Sawyer was shaking hands with people.

“Well, greetings, Tom and Rick,” said Pastor Sawyer. “It’s good to see you under better circumstances. I’m glad you could join us today.”

“Pastor, this is my wife, Nancy,” said Rick. “And her sister, Nichole.”

“And my fiancé,” added Tom, as Nichole took off her gloves, showing the ring on her finger.

“Nichole ... why didn’t you tell me sooner?” asked Nancy, as she gave her sister a big hug. “I ... I’m ... so happy for you guys ... the gloves ... clever.”

“A surprise, I take it?” asked Pastor Sawyer.

“Not to me,” said Rick, calmly, as Nancy still held onto her sister. “I could have told you this was going to happen six weeks ago. Once we got Hans’ approval, it became inevitable.”

“Hans her father?” asked Pastor Sawyer.

“German Shepherd,” answered Rick.

“I can certainly understand that,” said Pastor Sawyer. “Well, congratulations, Tom and Nichole. If there is anything we can do for you, please let me know.”

“Nichole and I will probably be getting in touch with you sometime in the near future,” said Tom. “In the meantime, I’d like to sit down

sometime and talk with you about your background and what all is happening in this church.”

“We can certainly do that. Give me a call on Tuesday and we’ll find a time. I try to keep a lighter schedule on Tuesdays and Thursdays for unscheduled things that come up.”

“Thanks, Pastor,” said Tom.

“You guys take care and come back anytime,” said Pastor Sawyer.

As they walked back to the parking lot, three more couples came up to them, shook their hands, and told them how good it was that they were with them today.

“Why did you want to talk to Pastor Sawyer about his background, Tom?” asked Nichole.

“I think he’s a fascinating guy. I’ve liked everything I’ve seen about him, and you never know, I could write a book about him.”

“Well, what did you think about the service, girls?” asked Rick.

“I liked the way he explained the scripture instead of it being, well, what sometimes seems

like an obligatory or token reading,” answered Nancy. “And the same with the Apostles’ Creed and the last hymn.”

“It’s funny, because sometimes when I’m out on the road, there’s always somebody speeding and tailgating and cutting in and out of lanes,” said Nichole. “I’ve often thought, when I see them go by and they have a crucifix hanging from their mirror or a bumper sticker from some church, what do other drivers think when they see that? With Pastor Sawyer reinforcing what I’ve thought, I’m going to make sure I don’t get in a hurry and start making moves that aren’t a good witness to what Jesus meant about loving your neighbor, even if it is just in your car on the highway.”

“I hear you, Nichole,” commented Rick. “That does strike home sometimes.”

They arrived back at their car and when everybody had gotten in, Tom handed Rick a note with seventy-seven on it.

“The final total on how many people welcomed us?” asked Rick.

“Yeah,” replied Tom. “Do you know when I started going to the church back down south, and it was a big church with a big school, that I attended almost every service for eight months and not one person ever greeted me like those people did today. Oh, sure, the official greeter at the door shook my hand, but never asked who I was or where I was from. Then, of course, you had the official time during the service when the pastor told you to greet your neighbors around you ... Oh, I take that back. One person did come up and greet me and ask where I was from, but the funny part was, he was a visitor from Minnesota.”

“Okay, so where are we going for lunch?” asked Nancy.

“I know a great little ...” said Rick, before being interrupted.

“Don’t you dare say a great little pizza place,” demanded Nancy.

“Why the thought never entered my mind, dear,” replied Rick. “What I was going to say is, I know a great little steakhouse at the other end of town.”

“Okay, Rick,” said his wife. “That will work. We’ve got celebrating to do and you are going to pay for it all, honey.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” answered Rick. He then turned to Tom and Nichole and whispered, “Okay, you guys are potential investors, and this is a business lunch to try to convince you to ...”

“I heard that, Rick,” said Nancy.

“Just kidding, Nance.”

ABANDONED

Though it was the same sky that any other resident of the city could see, it seemed darker from the nest of wires, junction boxes, and switches. The luxurious green of distant trees had been stripped to a hundred menacing arms, reaching to the heavens in some hideous plea. Of course, the abandoned buildings and desolate sidewalks beneath him gave little indication of life in the rundown neighborhood. Still, his position of surveillance required him to look for life—any sign of it. The camera in his cell phone longed for an image beyond the gray, mildewed stucco, and the oil-stained street.

Travis labored through mind-numbing surveillance sometimes by recalling the details of more exciting missions abroad. When his body

began to ache against the leather harness of his climbing gear, he climbed down the pole and went to his truck to pick up some tools and make an imaginary adjustment in the junction box back at the top of the pole. The sound of an approaching vehicle reinvigorated his senses. When the vehicle became fully visible, he could see that it was another City Communications van. The driver pulled in behind Travis's truck, put out emergency cones, and came over to the pole where Travis worked.

Pointing to the next pole down the street, the driver said, "What do you think, Travis?"

"Hard to say, J.D. You're the first life, other than some rats and a stray cat, that I've seen in the last three hours. Of course, you and I both know that sometimes it takes a while for the intel to play out."

"I've installed cameras on both of the side streets and the back alley, so we've got that covered. We should go ahead and put one on this pole, so we've got the front door covered, too. Then we should probably get on out of here, so it doesn't look too suspicious."

“Okay, let me have the camera and I’ll get it up.”

J.D. gave Travis the camera and went back to his van.

“We need it to go about twenty degrees to your right, Travis ... a little more ... That’s good. I’m feeding back to you, Jamie. Have you got it yet?”

“Copy that, J.D.,” answered Jamie. “Everything looks good.”

“Travis, I’m ready to grab a sandwich back in civilization and head to the motel,” said J.D. “We rendezvous at six in the morning back at the warehouse, so we should try to get a little shuteye if we can.”

“I’m with you there, J.D.”

When Travis and J.D. arrived at the warehouse the next morning, they found Bill Adams laying out building plans on a makeshift table of plywood and sawhorses. Jamie sat to his right in front of three computer monitors. The other team members were engaged in various activities from pouring coffee to checking weapons.

“Okay, everybody, gather round,” said Bill. “Intel says to expect a lot of movement tonight. So, we’re going to have to adjust our timetable. I would have liked a little more recon time, but ...”

“Sorry to interrupt, Bill,” said Jamie. “We’ve got some movement. A dark van has pulled up to the front door. It’s too dark to see much of anything, but infrareds show a driver in the front and ... that’s it.”

“Okay, stay on it, Jamie,” said Bill. “And let us know of any changes. Okay, where was I? Yeah, I would have liked a little more recon time, but we need to make our move tonight. I’ve got the plans from the original construction, which will give us a basic layout, but it’s hard to know what changes they have made inside without permits. You guys have been in situations like this before, so you know you’ll have to improvise at some point. I know it’s probably not necessary to say, but communicate with your team members at all times, so we don’t have any friendly fire casualties.”

“Has our mission changed, Bill?” asked Hank Tapis, an ex-Navy Seal.

“No, Hank, it hasn’t, but I do need to go over some rules of engagement and reinforce our priorities. First and foremost, our job is to find Jessica and Sarah Watkins, the wife and daughter of Harrison Watkins, our client. From what we know of this operation, there will probably be others in there. So, we find Jessica and Sarah first and still get everybody else out of there. We don’t have any idea how many we are talking about, but we’ll have two good-sized vans we can fill.”

“Are we working with local law enforcement?” asked Roger Thomas, a former FBI agent.

“No, Roger. Unfortunately, all the charges on the guy that runs this have been dismissed because witnesses were scared off or evidence disappeared. A judge has issued a warning to the police to stop harassing the guy. My contact in the department told me he doesn’t want to know anything about what we might do, so we are on our own. Now that doesn’t mean, if we find something solid, that we can’t give it to the locals, anonymously, of course.”

“Any limits on our response?” asked Hank.

“Since this is not a government-sanctioned mission, we do have to exercise a little more care. We are not trying to take down this guy’s organization, but from what we know about it, there will probably be some resistance. I’m relying on each and every one of you to use discretion in handling whatever you face. Hopefully, we’ll have enough firepower going in to discourage serious defiance by the thugs doing the grunt work inside. A bloodbath is the last thing we want, but you do what you must do to protect yourself, a team member, or any of those we are trying to rescue. Travis, have you got everything lined up for when we get the victims out? It’s hard to know how long they have held some of these women.”

“Yeah, Bill. Father Flanagan, who is the priest at the Catholic church where the Watkins worship, has agreed to provide a temporary safe house for those we rescue. He will have six nuns standing by to assist, on our call, whether Jessica and Sarah are with us or not. Father Flanagan is sworn to secrecy and will do everything he can to help us get the women reunited with their families. He understands that he will have to get the

authorities involved immediately, but he can truthfully say that he doesn't know who we are."

"Good. Okay, we've got the rest of today to do a dry run of the plan and continue surveillance. Fortunately, the city is doing some street work in the area, so our presence outside the building shouldn't look out of place."

"Any idea on a time for this to go down, Bill?" asked Hank.

"Not precisely, but our best guess is near midnight. They prefer movement with the deserted streets of darkness. Okay, you all know your assignments for the day. Let's review our positions when the cover of darkness comes. Jamie, you will, of course, remain here and monitor everything from the cameras and sensors. Dusty, Jim, and Frank will be in position with the trash truck on the side street to the east. Malcolm and Renee will wait with the vans one street over. Bob and Nathan have the rear door. Travis, Hank, Roger, Tommie, Betsy, J.D., and I will hole up in the abandoned building across the street. My bet is that any vehicle will come from the west because that gives them cover when opening the side door of a van in

front of the building. What we don't know is whether a vehicle will have passengers coming in or whether it will be taking passengers away, so we'll have to make a split-second decision. Jamie, as soon as you can, tell us what signatures you get with the infrared of any approaching vehicle."

"Will do, Bill."

"Just like old times, huh, Travis?" said Bill.

"Anybody ever told you that you have a wry sense of humor, Bill?" asked Travis.

"Yes ... I believe someone did the other day, but I didn't pay any attention to them. I know you've been away from it for a while, Travis, but this business hasn't changed that much. We can do all the preparation possible and still, up until it actually happens, be filled with nervous energy."

"I'm good, Bill," replied Travis. "There are some things you just don't forget."

The team finished the day with all the preparation work they could do. Now it came down to waiting and watching. The brilliant orange, red, and purple sky reflected the glories of light, yet the

light faded long ago for those inside the warehouse, or so it appeared.

Just before the hour of midnight, Roger said, “We’ve got a vehicle approaching from the west.”

“Any read on it, Jamie?” asked Bill.

“Nothing clear, Bill.”

“We’ve got a Code 7,” said Bill. “Repeat, Code 7.”

“It’s a van, and it’s stopping in front of the door,” said Roger. “We’ve lost visual on the front door.”

“I’ve got it,” said Frank. “Driver and shotgun have opened the van’s side door. Nobody is getting out that door and they are headed into the building.”

“Confirming, van is empty,” said Jamie.

“This is it, guys,” said Bill. “It’s got to be a pickup. Frank, get ready to go in the side door on my mark.”

“Copy that,” said Frank.

“Bob, secure the rear door. Renee, bring the vehicles to the rear door. Let’s go. Tommie, disable the van.”

“Copy that,” said Tommie.

“Front door is not locked, Bill,” said J.D.

“Okay, on three. One, two, three. Frank, breach the side door. Bob, come in the back door, but hold there.”

The team coming in the front door immediately encountered two men sitting at a table. They started to go for their weapons, when J.D. said, “Go ahead, you haven’t got a prayer.”

The men changed their minds when staring down seven automatic weapons. Jim secured them with duct tape around their hands and feet and across their mouths. Travis took out his handgun, ripped off the duct tape from the one man’s mouth, and stuck the barrel into his mouth.

“Where are they?” demanded Travis.

“Where are who?” answered the man.

“You know who,” said Travis. “A bullet through the mouth can be tricky. It will either kill

you immediately if the angle is too high and it enters your brain, or it could be a much slower, painful death if the angle is too low and it goes through the throat. You might want to scream in agony, but you won't be able to. Now, one more time, where are they?"

"Okay, okay," said the man. "Turn left down the side hall and then go down the stairs. They are in the basement."

"We've disabled one bogey coming up the stairs," said Frank. "We're going down, now."

"Hard core, Travis," said J.D. "Would you have squeezed the trigger?"

"Of course not, but he didn't know that, did he?"

"Apparently not."

"Bingo, I say bingo," said Frank. "We've got eight women, including the targets, coming up the stairs."

Holstering his gun and putting the duct tape back over the man's mouth, Travis said, "I guess this is your lucky day, friend."

“You’ve got another vehicle pulling up, guys,” warned Jamie. “Looks like four men headed for the front door.”

“Copy that,” responded Bill. “Make sure to lock that front door, Betsy. Frank, we’re going out the back door. It should be to your left at the end of the hall.”

“I’m grabbing these two laptops,” said Travis. “You never know what might be on them.”

“Bob, we’re headed your way.”

“Come on. We’ve got your back when you get here.”

Everyone made it out the back door and into the waiting vans. Bob was the last man out, and he sprayed the frame of the doorway into the back room with a dozen rounds to slow down the four men chasing them. Then he slammed the door and secured it. A few smoke bombs thrown at the rear door gave them cover to get away.

Travis, J.D., and Renee rode in the front van with the rescued women, while the rest of the team followed in the second van.

“Ladies, we are taking you to a secure location,” said Travis. “We will get you reunited with your families as soon as possible. You are safe now. There will be people to talk to and help you with anything you need.”

Several of the women said thank you under muffled cries. Travis nodded his head in acknowledgement. He took off his jacket and his vest, revealing his clerical collar. He hoped it would help to ease the tension.

“Jessica, your husband is waiting with Father Flanagan at the safe house. Sarah, your sister is there, as well.”

“Thank you, Father,” said Jessica, quietly.

Travis offered no denominational correction. It did not matter.

“I’m sorry, Father,” said Jessica. “I prayed every day, but ... but ... I didn’t think God was going to answer my prayers. I ... I ... felt abandoned, Father ... Why did God abandon us?”

Travis searched his mind for the right words to say. Finally, he put his hands on Jessica’s

shoulders and said, “He didn’t abandon you, Jessica. He sent us.”

She managed a weak smile and, again, said, “Thank you.”

Travis replayed Jessica’s words of abandonment over and over in his mind on the flight home. He confessed ignorance to his friend Bill about how widespread the problem has become in the United States alone, much less the rest of the world. It raised questions in his mind. Have the decent, courageous people in America really abandoned these women and children, or are they as uninformed as he was? What has the church done? Isn’t this something that should unite all of Christendom?

“Travis, we did good last night,” said Bill. “We saved eight. Unfortunately, today, fifty more will go missing in America.”

“What’s the answer, Bill?”

“I don’t know. You and I both know that it starts with the simple roots of evil, and it gradually gets more complex. Scumbags create a demand, and criminals are only too happy to supply the

marketplace. I could naively believe that if you could only change the heart, there would be no demand and thus no business for the criminals. But that's never going to happen, at least not until God says enough. From there, inconsistencies in law enforcement and the judicial system add to the problem. Until the good people demand that the legal system put these people out of business, well ... there is no conclusive answer. You would probably be more knowledgeable in why that doesn't happen than I am. One day, they will have to answer to God, but for now ... for now, we can only do what we can do, even if it's just eight at a time."

"I can't ever recall any of my clergy brothers talking about this form of slavery. Why there isn't more of an uprising in the general Christian community, I'm not sure. Maybe the decent people are so overwhelmed with the evil around them they just block it out, or maybe they just don't know enough about it. There is a tendency to make the worship service a positive, uplifting experience. I can fully understand that, and I do that as much as everyone else. You can pick up a newspaper or turn

on the TV or surf the internet and find all the evil you want every day.”

“That’s part of the problem, too, Travis. Most of this activity is underground and not well publicized.”

“Well, I’m going to do everything I can to shine some light on the problem in our hometown.”

“It’s a start, as far as where we live, Travis.”

“And, if you ever find that you have to turn a project down because of a lack of money, let me know. I believe I have some people who would be glad to fund such a mission.”

“That’s good to know.”

“At the very least, Bill, their story has to be told.”

THE TRAP OF SILENCE

“Maybe you can get through to her, Travis,” said Bill. “It’s kind of your forte.”

Travis opened her file and began reading. After a while, he said, “Nancy has surely entered a moral jungle, so to speak, fraught with all kinds of danger. Her actions have an admirable objective, but it doesn’t appear as though she understands the path she has taken to get there.”

“Hank’s wife works with Nancy at the library and has grown concerned. She says Nancy is a

sweet, caring person, and she wanted to know if we could resolve the situation without engaging the law.”

“I don’t know, Bill. How do you feel about it?”

“Actions always have consequences, of course. Somewhere along the way, Nancy will have to accept the gravity of what she is doing and take responsibility. I’m just not sure, given everything Hank’s wife has said, that she really knows the ramifications of her seemingly harmless actions.”

“I agree, Bill,” said Travis. “Okay, let’s assume she isn’t aware. What do we have here? She works in a library—an honest, though probably less than lucrative job. Both of her parents have cancer and are struggling financially, falling way behind on their mortgage. Nancy has found a way to bring in extra money and help them keep their house and survive. How did she fall into this trap?”

“She was approached one day in the library. Undoubtedly, they had been studying her for a while. When they found out about her parents, they

must have thought it was the opening they were looking for.”

“So, as far as we know,” said Travis. “She is acting as a go-between, passing along a sealed envelope that we believe contains information of some sort on an illegal activity—probably drugs ... Do we know who ‘they’ are?”

“It could very well be drugs, Travis. But here again, as far as we know, she is not privy to what’s in the envelope. I think she’s merely a part of the information conduit. Unfortunately, we don’t know who ‘they’ are. Hopefully, somewhere in the plan’s implementation, we’ll find out.”

“Her link in the chain—how does it typically go down?” asked Travis.

“Someone gives her an envelope, and she slips it into a specific volume that she then hides so no one else can check it out. Later, a courier comes along and requests that book. They pay her a healthy sum to keep her mouth shut. You and I would, obviously, know that to be suspicious, but maybe the combination of naiveté and desperation justifies the cost of her silence. So, we need to confront her and offer her a different path.”

“That path requires confession and forgiveness, as well as a solution, to gain her confidence and cooperation. True repentance, of course, means abandoning everything along the previous path and not going down it again.”

“If I might be permitted to enter the theological sphere for a minute,” said Bill. “I think it also should include some tangible proof of complete repentance.”

“Did you have something in mind, Bill?”

“I was thinking about Jakarta.”

“Hmm ... ah, yes, Jakarta. Works for me.”

Two days later, the team took their positions in the library. A couple of hours went by with no viable suspects.

“Wait, guys,” said Nathan. “There’s a guy coming in now, who is way too slick for a book nerd. It’s either comical or I’m wrong.”

“I’ve got him,” said Hank. “He’s going up to the desk now. Tommie, I would go ahead and move

into position. Yeah, man, she's reaching under the desk and pulling out a book. It's a go, Tommie."

Tommie stepped in behind the man at the desk. Frank walked beside Tommie and jostled him, causing Tommie to spill his coffee on the man's shoes.

"Hey, watch it, buddy," said Tommie. "Clumsy fool." Pulling out his handkerchief, Tommie apologized profusely to the man in front of him, "I'm sorry, man. Let me get that off your shoes." While bending down to clean the man's shoes, he attached a tracking device to the man's pants cuff.

As he stood up, Tommie said again, "I'm really sorry, man. I think I got it all."

"Is he live, Jamie?" asked Bill.

"Got him," answered Jamie.

The man walked out of the library and got in a charcoal gray car. Before he left, though, he put the book into one of the library carts near the door and slipped the envelope into his coat pocket.

"He's traveling east on 5th Street and making a right turn on Frontier Avenue," said Jamie.

“We’ve got a visual on him,” said Malcolm. “We’ll stay behind him as long as we can.” A few minutes later, Malcolm said, “Now he’s stopping in front of a self-storage place. Getting out and going into the office. Looks like he’s giving the envelope to the woman behind the desk. Now walking out.”

“Hold your position, Malcolm,” said Bill. “J.D. is right behind you. He’ll follow him into the complex.”

“Copy that,” replied Malcolm. “But now he’s coming back out of the complex and leaving the facility. Wait, it looks like the lady from the office is walking outside and heading to a storage unit. She’s unlocking Unit 426 ... the unit looks empty.”

“My bet is we’ll see a shipment soon,” said J.D.

“But of what?” posed Bill. “Anything for us, Travis?”

“Working on it,” answered Travis.

When the three people ahead of him finished checking out their books, Travis approached the

library desk and said, “Nancy, I’m going to be right up front with you.”

“What do you mean?” said Nancy.

“I’m not a cop, but we do know what you’ve been doing.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Passing along the envelope that you slip into a special book.”

Nancy fell quiet, just looking at Travis. Then she said, “I always thought it was a little fishy. I suppose it was inevitable that I’d get in trouble ... So, what do we do next?”

“Like I said, I’m not a cop. I can offer you a way out. Do you want to hear it?”

Sighing heavily, she answered, “Yes ... It’s just my parents ...”

“We know about your parents, and we know these people have given you a great deal of money to do what you’re doing.”

“I’m sorry ... Go ahead.”

“First off, Nancy, you need to confess to God that you know what you’re doing is wrong and then ask for His forgiveness.”

“Are you a priest?”

“Something like that, Nancy. I can make sure your parents never have to worry about not having a place to live. I know someone who will give them jobs and who will work around their medical needs with a flexible schedule. They will also provide money for your final year of college. You can walk away and start over. But it comes with a cost. You and your parents would have to move and take on new identities. Can you handle that, Nancy?”

“You can do all that?”

“Yes, I can,” answered Travis.

She looked at Travis with tears welling up in her eyes and said, “Yes.”

“A couple of other things, Nancy. You also have to promise me that you will never go down that road again, and if you ever need help, you will call me first.”

Nancy nodded in quiet acceptance.

“Now, if you are truly sorry, God will forgive you. That is between you and God. What I need is for you to show me you are sorry, and you can do that by helping us out ... Will you help us, Nancy?”

“Yes,” she replied quietly.

“Is there anything you can tell us about these people you’ve been involved with? Anything at all? A name or address? Anything?”

“I don’t know. I never saw what was in the envelope and no one ever gave a name.”

“You’re sure?”

“Well, there was this one time that one of the guys who picked up the book wore a shirt from a trucking company ... Markham ... no, Meldrum Trucking.”

“Jamie, did you get that?”

“On it, Travis ... I have a Meldrum Trucking with an address about a mile from the storage site.”

“Betsy, you guys need to watch for any Meldrum Trucking vehicles in the vicinity,” said Bill.

“Copy that,” answered Betsy.

“I’m tapping into some of the traffic cams in the area,” said Jamie. “I’ll try to give you a heads up if I see anything coming your way, J.D.”

Nancy asked for the rest of the day off at the library. Then she and Travis went to her parents’ home and explained everything to them. Travis gave them a little time to let it all sink in. In the meantime, he called Tom Peterson and Rick Paulson and briefed them on the need. In a matter of minutes, he had a home for Nancy and her parents to move into, and a meeting set up for employment. Hank contacted a friend in the moving and storage business, and he said they’d have a moving crew out to the house in an hour or so. Rick Paulson called a realtor associate who said he’d buy the house on the spot, agreeing to keep it vacant for six months so the new owners didn’t have any problems from the ordeal.

“J.D., you’ve got a Meldrum Trucking vehicle headed your way,” said Betsy. “Single axle, red cab, and white van body.”

“Got him,” said J.D. “Yeah ... he’s stopping at the storage office. It looks like he’s got the envelope. We’ve got a driver and one helper. We’re going in behind him, so everybody get ready to move. This may be our opportunity.”

The truck passed Unit 426 and went around the corner.

“It’s not Unit 426, guys,” said Malcolm. “Maybe he’s making a pickup instead of a delivery. He’s stopping in front of Unit 484.”

“Hang back, Malcolm,” said Bill. “Let’s see what he’s going to do.”

The helper raised the rear door of the truck while the driver opened the storage unit. They began loading boxes from the storage unit into the truck. Malcolm and Dusty watched them for a while, and then Dusty got out of the car and walked over to the men.

“Excuse me, guys,” said Dusty. “I’m a little lost. Could you tell me where Unit 512 is?”

“I think it’s that next building, lady,” said the driver.

“Okay, thanks.” Heading towards the next building, she gave the team a heads up, “Didn’t see any weapons on them, guys, but they could still have some in the truck.”

“Copy that,” said J.D.

“They’re loading the last few boxes now,” said Malcolm. “It’s now or never, Bill.”

“Okay, let’s move, guys,” said Bill.

With guns drawn, the team cornered the men inside the storage unit. They secured them and put them in the back of the truck with the cargo. Opening the last four boxes, they found auto parts on top and bags of oil absorbent below.

“Do you think we made a mistake, J.D.?” asked Malcolm.

“Well, I was just at the auto parts store last week to get some oil absorbent and the smallest bag I could buy was like fifty pounds. These bags are about ten pounds. Kind of makes me wonder about the quality of this absorbent. I think we should check it out, don’t you?”

“You mean like accidentally cut into one?” asked Malcolm.

“Precisely.”

Malcolm opened a bag with his knife and let J.D. check the quality.

“Why, Malcolm, I do believe they mislabeled these bags. I think what they have here is cocaine. Care to taste?”

“No. I’ll take your word for it.”

“We’re looking at millions here, Bill,” said J.D.

When Travis got the word, he went back into the room and told Nancy and her parents it was time to go. While they were packing a few bags, Travis opened the door and let Renee and Roger in.

“Nancy, Mr. and Mrs. Porter, I’d like you to meet Renee and Roger. They will accompany you on the trip.”

Mom, dad, and daughter walked out the door, casting a last look at the home they had known for thirty years.

“You’re driving the truck, J.D.,” said Bill. “We’ll deposit the truck in front of the police station on 6th Street. We’ll be right behind you.”

When they got to the police station, they left the key in an envelope on the passenger seat. Then they moved down the street a little, but with the truck still in sight.

“Tenth Precinct. Sergeant Johnson speaking. How can I help you?”

“Yeah, Sarge. Parked out front of the station is a little present for you. There are two men in the back of the truck and a load of boxes that contain some goodies.”

“Yeah, who is this?” asked the sergeant.

But Bill had already ditched the burner phone. They waited to make sure the police got to the truck and then they headed for the interstate.

According to the law, Nancy could have faced some serious charges. But Bill and his team didn’t always go strictly according to the law. In this case, they had delivered a serious blow to the

drug dealers. As they headed for home, J.D. turned around and asked Bill a question.

“Did we ever find out what was in the envelope?”

“What envelope?” asked Bill.

J.D. nodded and smiled.

THE GREAT RIGHT HAND OF YESTERDAY

Many in the upper echelon of the medical field considered Dr. Fletcher Adams to be the finest surgeon they had ever seen. Regularly called upon to do what others thought impossible, he always entered the operating room with dignity and an air

of supreme confidence. Every difficulty that he faced succumbed to his masterful right hand.

On July 15th, in a matter of seconds, screeching tires and crunching metal changed the world of Dr. Fletcher Adams. On July 16th, he woke up in a hospital bed and his right hand was gone.

As Travis thought about his career as a soldier, spy, and pastor, he tried to imagine how he would have coped with such a loss. Without question, some paths could not have been taken. He would have liked to think he would have the inner strength and fortitude to adapt and move on, but sometimes you just don't know unless you've been there yourself. In the hardness of battle, he saw guys run the gamut from joking about it to rarely missing a beat, but more often to the other end of the spectrum of falling prey to alcohol, drugs, or suicide.

Today, he was running solo. Already having some knowledge from newspapers and the internet, Bill gave him a file full of additional information on Dr. Adams. He looked at his watch – 8:00 am and Dr. Adams walked into Roscoe's Saloon on 5th

Street. At 8:30 am, Travis walked into the same joint. Sitting at the bar, Dr. Adams had his head down staring at a glass of whiskey. Travis ordered a beer and nursed it for a half hour studying the man at the other end of the bar. Then he got up, walked down to the doc, and sat down on the stool next to him.

“Look, Doc, I know you’re not stupid,” said Travis.

“Who are you?” asked the man.

Travis didn’t answer him. He stared into the man’s eyes, looking for some avenue into his spirit.

“What do you want?” asked Dr. Adams.

Travis leaned close to his ear and whispered, “I’m the ghost of yesterday.”

The clergyman was not sure if the doctor felt confused or shocked, but the distraction allowed him to slip a little something into the man’s drink. After taking a couple of sips, Dr. Adams slumped to the bar. Travis cradled his head and said, “Let me take you home, Doc.”

The bartender could have cared less.

The doctor's destiny required a new home; a home shrouded in secrecy – both for his sake and the team's. That new home offered no pleasantries of wealth or power. Situated on an abandoned farm fifty miles from nowhere, it could have been a very lonely place. The first phase of his isolation required a nurse or doctor by his side every day for a month. For the first week, Dr. Adams mustered all the belligerence expected. His daily swings went from anxiety to hallucinations to tremors. As time plodded its path for the man, his body and his mind gradually subdued the bitter enemy of alcohol.

The time had come for a first visit from Travis. He sat next to the doctor on an old wood bench overlooking a shallow valley of overgrown wildflowers.

“Guten Morgen, Doctor,”

“I know you,” said Dr. Adams. “You were in the bar.”

“You are correct, sir. And now I'm here.”

“What is this place?” asked the man. “And how can you get away with keeping me here against my will?”

“Well, Doctor, we don’t always play by the rules. But don’t worry, you will have all your civil rights restored in short order.”

The doctor raised a question that Travis had raised within his mind at times. It can be a slippery slope not playing by the rules. Were it not for his past friendship with Bill and many of the other team members, he might second guess some of the things they did. Bill had always been above-board with everything, and Travis always had the option to back out of a project if he had strong moral objections. So far, though, he felt that traversing that slippery slope had been the right thing to do.

“Now, tell me, Doctor, what else are you thinking?”

“What’s it like playing God?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, what gives you the right to interfere in my life? Only God has that right. How do you

know that God doesn't want to take me now? You know, maybe He's saying my time here is over."

"Ah, I see you haven't abandoned God then. Well, if God had wanted you dead from that accident, we wouldn't be having this conversation, would we? ... How do you know God didn't tell us to save you from yourself? As I said before, we work just outside the line ... In a couple of days, the bulk of your detox treatment will be complete. Then we will give you an opportunity to refill a void in your life. After listening to what we have to say, you can choose to accept the challenge or decline it and walk out the door a free man. But listen to the challenge, you will."

The doctor did not say anything, but his eyes did pierce his surroundings, searching for some understanding.

"Now, I'm going to leave you to the rest of your day. Listen and think. Think hard about what your eyes see and what your ears hear. I will talk to you again."

When the medical staff gave the all-clear, Bill introduced the doctor to Clive Armstrong and Emily McBride. The two young scientists

specialized in the field of bionics. While there were numerous projects on hand bionics out there, Clive and Emily had developed a system that held the potential for the finest motor control possible.

The doctor listened to what they had to say. He gave serious thought to the possibility their project could restore something he thought forever lost. He stayed of his own free will for a month. When Clive and Emily felt they had done everything they could from the remote location, Dr. Adams packed his bags and headed to the car where the two scientists waited to take him home. Before he stepped out the door, he turned and gave Bill and Travis a clean, crisp salute with his right hand of tomorrow.

For their own security, Clive and Emily stepped out of the picture. They gave him the name of a prominent research facility for follow up study. With his extensive medical background, they felt the doctor would provide the critical field testing necessary to validate their work.

After they left, Bill turned and asked, “Do you think he’ll make it, Travis?”

“He’s a lot smarter than me, Bill. I think we gave him a purpose ... Yes, I believe he will still do some remarkable things.”

“But sometimes you just don’t know, do you?”

“No, you don’t. Not that he was ever out of God’s hands, but now I think he realizes that he wasn’t.”

Two months later, Travis received a letter from Tom Ferguson, a teammate that lived in the area where Dr. Adams resided. Tom included a clipping from the front page of the city’s newspaper – “Local Doctor Saves Four on Scene of Horrific Crash”. It went on to say that Dr. Fletcher Adams happened to be near when a drunk driver crashed into a crowd of people. The doctor stabilized and saved the lives of four people until the ambulances arrived. The irony dripped off the pages.

Travis shook his head and smiled. Yes, the doctor would still do some remarkable things.

As missionary-at-large for the region, Travis always liked to stay abreast of what was happening at the churches in the network. On the first Sunday in May, he gave a sermon at St. Luke's, the church in the medical building. When the service was over, Pastor Reston stood with him as they greeted the parishioners filing out. Pastor Reston had something he had to do, so Travis finished with the line. He saw many old friends and quite a few that he didn't know, which he liked to see because that meant the church was growing.

The last man in line shook his hand with a firm grip and said, "I always thought there was something different about you."

"I suppose it was inevitable," said Pastor Sawyer. "That is quite a firm grip you have. How is your grip on the rest of life?"

"Shall I say that I'm no longer haunted by the ghost of yesterday?"

"I'm glad to hear that, Doctor. What brought you to St. Luke's today?"

"I recently took a position at St. Matthew's Hospital. I was talking to a colleague by the name

of Dr. Frederick Peterson, and he suggested I might like it here.”

“I like to hear that, too ... Now that you know who I am, if there is anything I can do for you, please let me know.”

“I appreciate everything that you have already done. But I do have one question for you?”

“What’s that?”

“Does the veil of secrecy ever lift long enough to let someone new in?”

“Are you speaking for yourself?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, it does from time to time, provided that person is properly vetted.”

“And what does it take to get properly vetted?”

“Well, Doctor, you are already ninety-nine percent vetted.”

The doctor smiled and said, “I should have figured.”

“I will have Bill give you a call.”

When the doctor walked out the door, Travis smiled and said to himself, “Sometimes you just don’t know.”

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 eventually stopped, 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 making 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?”

WHAT WENT WRONG?

“Okay, thanks for the update, Bill,” said Travis.

“What’s up?” asked Sherry.

“Bill says the man they grabbed as One-Patch Isaac was an imposter – a double. The DNA did not match. The feds don’t think Isaac intended for the double to get caught, but if he did get apprehended, then Isaac would learn from it.”

“Where does that leave us?” asked Sherry.

“Our mission has concluded. Bill’s intel source doesn’t believe he will try anything further in Elnora since that has been compromised. They believe Isaac will move on to another town where he’s not known.”

“So, we’re still a go on your plans?”

“Yes, if you’re still willing.”

“Where do we start?”

“The first thing we need to do is pay a visit to Pastor Collins at St. Paul’s. I want to get a list of all the confirmands going three years back and three years forward from the year I was confirmed.”

“What are you looking for?”

“I want to find them and see where they are in their spiritual life. Do they belong to a church? Why did they leave St. Paul’s? So, when we get those names, I need you to use your investigative skills and help track them down.”

“And we develop a historical sketch for background and timeline.”

“You are such a blend of intuition and reasoning, Miss Sherry.”

“I wish I could get my boyfriend to understand that.”

“Give it time ... Give it time. Us men are kind of slow about certain things.”

They had a couple of hours before Pastor Collins could see them, so Travis gave Sherry a brief tour of the town and countryside. Elnora hadn’t changed much in the way of new business or industry in the past twenty years. Gene Harris did modernize the dehydrating plant in town to handle a larger volume of alfalfa. Kaytos Grain Harvesting, which Travis didn’t recognize, built a huge, new complex of elevators on the outskirts of

town. The trip down Main Street brought many memories to Travis, but it also brought some sadness. Many of the old brick buildings needed repair and the street had its share of patched potholes.

The final leg of the tour took them by the Sawyer farmstead on County Road G. Parking outside the driveway, Travis took a long look at the place. A sign at the road read, ‘Waystock Farms’.

“So, this is it. Who is Waystock Farms?”

“I don’t know,” said Travis. “I know my uncle, who bought the farm from my parents, sold it a few years ago, but I didn’t know those to whom he sold it. I’m not familiar with the name Waystock, but from the equipment I see by the barn, they must be a big operation ... Well, it’s about time to head to St. Paul’s.”

“Thanks for meeting with us, Pastor Collins,” said Travis.

“You’re quite welcome. Thanks for giving me a heads up on what you needed. I had to do a little digging, but I found the names for those years. I can’t give you much information on the

confirmands from a personal perspective. I've been here for ten years, and I've never had a confirmation class. During the range of years that you want to look at, it appeared as though St. Paul's still had an active congregation."

"Obviously, something happened over the years. Any thoughts, Pastor Collins?"

"Given the demographics of Elnora, I believe St. Paul's has succumbed to the demise of the family farm. Most of the family farms have sold out to big conglomerates. In many cases, I don't think they wanted to, but the kids had no interest in farming and the parents just got too old to run the farm any longer. So, they sold the farm and moved to wherever their kids were."

"That tells me a lot, Pastor Collins. I appreciate that insight. Well, we won't take up any more of your time. Thank you very much for this info."

"It has been my pleasure. I have always wanted to talk about this, but I never really had anyone to talk to. Good luck on your project, Pastor Sawyer."

“Okay, Sherry, while you’re doing your run down on the names, I’m going to go into town and visit some of the other churches. Hopefully, I can talk to a few of the other pastors and try to get a sense of where their congregations are.”

“Okay, Travis.”

“I’ll make sure I’m back at 6:00 o’clock so we can get some dinner somewhere.”

Travis had a chance to visit six other churches in Elnora. He was able to speak to four other pastors and learned some interesting things. He headed back to the hotel and picked up Sherry.

“I found four of the thirty-four names on the list still living in Elnora. Six others are living in Lincoln and three have passed away. The rest are scattered across the Midwest ... What did you learn on your trip into town?”

“There weren’t any of the six churches that I visited who had an increase in membership in the last ten years. Two had stable attendance, but the others had declining numbers in varying amounts. The four pastors that I was able to talk to differ a little in their opinions as to why, but a consensus

formed around one word – ‘apathy’. They acknowledged that the family farm situation had affected them a little, but not as much as St. Paul’s. About fifteen years ago Elnora suffered extensive damage from a tornado. The pastors all reported a revival of attendance for a while, but it waned after a couple of years. They said there was a nondenominational church in Hammitsville, the next small town down the road, which had booming growth. The untold secret, though, was that while the attendance numbers were increasing rapidly, there was the issue of a revolving door. Many would come for a while and then not go back, while other new parishioners would replace them until the cycle came around again.”

“So, what next?”

“I’d like to try and make contact with at least the four still in Elnora tomorrow. Then I think it will be time to head back to Omaha. I will have to do some long-distance contacting when we get back home.”

“Did you say you were buying dinner, Travis?”

“Of course I am, Miss Sherry.”

“Good. Then I think I will order a steak.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

The next morning, Travis and Sherry made their calls, but only found one of the four at home. Roger Taper was the last confirmand at St. Paul’s. He started a family after high school and remained active in the church for a few years. He said it got to the point where he felt lonely, and he could sense the same with his wife and kids. Eventually, they began attending a Presbyterian church in town and have been there ever since.

Travis and Sherry headed back to the hotel and packed up. They booked a flight out of Omaha for the next day. The drive back to Omaha was uneventful, and the airport seemed unusually quiet. Outside of a little turbulence over Missouri, the flight was smooth.

As Travis stood up to go to the restroom, he saw something that made him sit back down.

“We’ve got a problem, Sherry. There’s a man holding a boxcutter to the flight attendant’s neck. They’re making their way up the aisle.”

“Travis, I don’t see anyone who looks like an air marshal in the front or at least anyone who looks like they might be getting ready to make a move.”

“We’re going to have to make a split-second decision here, Sherry. If they keep heading for the cockpit door, that’s a bigger problem. That door should not be opened, but ...”

“Nobody should have gotten by security with a box cutter either, Travis.”

“We can’t let him get up to the door. It is too far away for us to make a move then. We lose the element of surprise. If no marshal is aboard this flight, then we have to make a move, and it will have to be when he gets alongside us in the aisle.”

“What do you want to do, Travis?”

“It doesn’t appear like he’s holding the cutter directly against the attendant’s neck. It looks like it is a couple of inches away. It will be tricky. We don’t want the lady to get hurt, but we can get it done. I can get one hand on the cutter and snap his elbow with the other if I don’t have to struggle with him too much. So, if you can follow right behind me and slow him down somehow, then I think it

will work. Maybe a blow to the carotid or whatever target is open to you.”

“Right.”

“Still nobody that looks like an air marshal?”

“No.”

“On three, then,” Travis whispered. He started the countdown with his fingers, and they made their move.

Travis grabbed the hand with the cutter and slammed his other hand into the man’s elbow. The blow was hard enough it made the assailant drop the boxcutter. Fortunately, the flight attendant took off when she felt the pressure gone and remained unhurt. Sherry’s blow stunned the man, and Travis followed with an uppercut to the man’s jaw, laying him out in the aisle. Another man threw Travis a strap from his bag and the attacker’s hands were bound.

“We’re not done yet, Sherry. Hopefully, this guy isn’t strapped ... He’s clean.”

When the plane landed in Omaha, a bevy of law enforcement greeted them at the plane door. With the captive carried off the plane and with

witnesses interviewed, the FBI agents slowly released the passengers. The air marshal in charge asked Travis and Sherry to hang back for a couple more questions, and then he let them go.

When they got to the plane door, the air marshal turned around and looked at Travis and Sherry one more time.

“A pastor and a customer service manager?” posed the man, with a skeptical look. “Hmmm.”

When the duo got to a quiet area in the building away from reporters and photographers, Travis turned to Sherry and said, “I suppose we should call Bill now.”

“I don’t think so,” said Sherry. “I think we should just go home and pretend we don’t know anything about this afternoon.”

“Hello, Bill. Just letting you know we are back in town.”

“I see,” said Bill. “My first question is, ‘Are you alright?’. My second question is ‘What went wrong today?’”

“I assume you mean with the flight home?”

“Yes, I normally don’t like to see my team members splashed all over the television screen on national news. It’s bad for business.”

“Tactically, as far as our actions are concerned, it was a precision strike. But we had no choice. What went wrong should be more properly addressed to airport security. How did that guy get on board with a boxcutter?”

“Oh, I figured that, Travis. Look, I’m glad you and Sherry are okay. You guys can fill me in on everything tomorrow. Go home and enjoy your families. You and Miss McCall may have to lay low for awhile until we can see how the publicity plays out. We don’t want you compromised and put in any future danger.

“I agree,” said Travis.

“I’ll see you guys tomorrow.”

THE TRAIL OF FREE PIZZA

“Hi, Tom,” said Travis. “I’m glad you could make it.”

“Well, I was just in the neighborhood, and I saw a sign that said ‘Free Pizza. Compliments of the Rev.’ The word ‘Free’ looked particularly interesting.”

“The table over there is filled with ten different kinds, but it is serve yourself. We can’t make it too easy.”

When Tom got to the table, he saw that four platters were already empty. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Fred, one of Corky’s long-time pizza chefs, bringing in two more piping hot delicacies. Loading up his plate with a sampling of six slices and pouring a glass of ice-cold soda, Tom looked for a place to sit. Travis called him over to the table where he was sitting and pulled out a chair.

“Have a seat, Tom. Gentlemen, this is Tom, an alumnus of your fine university. Tom, these lads are engineering students, and we were just discussing the design of Noah’s Ark. Wood seems to be a foreign substance to them, so I told them you were an expert, and could answer any questions they have ... If you’ll excuse me, I have something I need to do.”

Tom raised his finger to protest, but Travis was out of sight. The students laughed and tried to put Tom at ease. Apparently, the students were wise to the Rev's unorthodox ice breaking methods.

"Okay, Tom," said Jonathan. "What do you really do?"

"Oh, I've had numerous businesses in my time, but right now I'm a writer and publisher."

"You don't write about wood, do you?" asked Jonathan.

"Noo-oo."

"Wait a minute," said Nate, another student. "Your last name wouldn't be Peterson, would it?"

"Guilty as charged."

"I saw my sister reading one of your books when I went back home for the summer," said Nate. "She liked it, so I read it, too – *The Silent Lemming*. I found the illustrations of moral equivalences in our world today to be very interesting. Let's see ... That book was published by Crape Myrtle Publishing, I believe. Is that yours?"

“Yes.”

“Pardon my staring, Tom,” said Jonathan. “But I have a feeling that I know you from somewhere ... It was here with Mr. Paulson during that fundraiser for the little boy with cancer.”

“Good memory, Jonathan,” replied Tom.

“How is the little guy doing?” asked Jonathan.

“He’s making progress, but he still has an uphill battle.”

“Have you known Mr. Paulson long?” asked Nate.

“Rick and I have been friends since high school. We both went to college here. Now, we are partners in a charitable organization called Peterson and Paulson, Inc.”

“I read an article in the newspaper about you a few months ago,” said Peter, another engineering student. “Two young millionaires that like to help people.”

“Well, we’ve been very fortunate, and I believe you take the gifts God has given to you and put them to the best use.”

“Okay, gentlemen, I’m sorry for leaving so abruptly earlier, but I hope you had a chance to get to know each other a little,” said Pastor Sawyer. “Now, where were we? ... Oh, yeah, Noah’s Ark. Okay, here’s your assignment. Read Genesis, Chapter 6. The next time we get together, I want you to tell me how long a cubit is and what the structural strength of gopher wood is. Copy?”

“Copy that, Rev,” said the three students in unison.

Tom and Travis continued their stroll through the tables filled with young people.

“Hey, Rev,” said a student.

“Ah, Mr. Turner and friends. You’re looking well tonight, but I suppose free pizza can do that for gentlemen such as yourselves.”

“Can I ask you a question?” inquired Turner.

“Ask away, my friend.”

“My sister has a picture of the Last Supper hanging on her wall at home. Jesus broke bread and told the disciples to remember him. Do you think He could have used pizza instead of ordinary bread?”

“Turner, Turner, Turner,” said Pastor Sawyer. “Has this question been with you for a while? If so, then we shall have to start limiting how much pizza you can have. First of all, pizza was invented in Italy in the 18th or 19th century, which would have made it difficult to have on the table of the Last Supper. At the same time, the manufactured wafers and Mad Dog communion wine that we use in the Eucharist today would not have been there either. Most scholars believe that meal would have been a Passover meal, and a Passover meal would have probably been some combination of lamb, bean stew, olives, unleavened bread, dates, various herbs and sauces and wine.”

“What’s unleavened bread?” asked Turner.

“Bread made without yeast, usually, so that it does not rise. There is a lot of symbolism with unleavened bread and the Passover. I tell you what,

Turner. If you do a little research and tell us what that symbolism is next time you come back, I will do what I can to convince the authorities not to revoke your free pizza privileges. Deal?"

"Deal, Rev," answered Turner, smiling.

"As you can tell, Tom, this venue and crowd is a little different than what you might see in church. Sometimes, they will ask questions that might seem a little irreverent just to try and push my buttons. But we get along, and I always try to challenge them."

"Free pizza does provide a certain amount of leverage," commented Tom.

"Okay, let's find out how those two young ladies are doing tonight ... And how are you two beautiful ladies this fine evening?"

"We're doing good, Rev," answered Kelly.

"I'm sorry, I've seen you a couple of times, but I don't remember your names."

"I'm Kelly, and this is Jennifer."

"Ladies, this is Tom. He's a friend of mine."

Tom nodded and the girls smiled.

“If you will excuse me for a minute, I have somebody I need to talk to. Tom, these ladies are members of First Baptist, I believe. The one across from Epiphany. I’ll be back shortly, but in the meantime, try to convert them to Lutheranism, will you.”

“Uh ...”

“He doesn’t mean it, Tom,” said Jennifer. “So, do you work with Pastor Sawyer?”

“No, I just recently met him. But we are going to be collaborating on a project.”

“What do you do for a living, Tom?” asked Kelly.

“I’m an author and a publisher.”

“So, what’s the name of your latest book?” asked Kelly.

“I’m currently working on *Rogue Shepherd*.”

“What’s it about,” asked Jennifer.

“Well, I make it a habit to not talk about a manuscript until it’s finished.”

“*Rogue Shepherd?* ... What do you think, Jennifer?” asked Kelly.

“It sounds like it could be about Pastor Sawyer.”

“Really?” said Tom. Changing the subject, Tom inquired, “So, what are you ladies studying?”

“We’re nursing students,” answered Jennifer.

“Interesting. My fiancé is in her final year of a nursing degree at the university ... Well, I’ll tell the Rev that you thoroughly rejected my attempts at converting you to Lutheranism. You enjoy the rest of your evening.”

“Nice to meet you, Tom,” said Kelly.

Stretching out his hand, the Rev said, “Travis Sawyer. I’m sorry I don’t think we’ve ever met.”

“Bob Willetts, sir.”

“So, how did you hear about our little get together tonight?”

“I just had a hankering for some pizza, and the lady at the podium pointed me in this direction. I think her name was Hazel.”

“Good old Hazel. Are you going to school here?”

“Actually, I’m going to be studying a wide range of building construction trades at Gillespie Technical School down the street.”

“What led you in that direction?” asked Travis.

“Well, I just got out of the military, and I felt I needed some other skills to make it in civilian life. Since I’ve always been better at working with my hands as opposed to pure book learning, construction seemed a natural fit.”

“10th Mountain Division, right?”

“Right, but how did you know?”

“Your tattoo.”

“Yeah, I guess the crossed swords and the word ‘Mountain’ across the top would be an easy clue for someone experienced in the military. What branch were you with, Travis?”

“I started out with the 82nd Airborne and eventually worked up to the Special Forces.”

“Yeah, I guess you’d know.”

“Here’s my card, Bob. If there’s anything I can ever do for you, just give me a call. There’s a group of ex-military that get together from our little network of churches every month. They do all kinds of community projects and sometimes just get together around a table to talk. I also have a friend who was a fellow Green Beret that has his own construction company whenever you’re ready to get started applying what you’ve learned.”

“I appreciate that, Travis, or should I say ‘Rev’?”

“Whatever you’re comfortable with, Bob ... Good to meet you and come back anytime.”

“Well, Tom, it’s just about closing time. There’s still some pizza left if you want to take any home.”

“Thanks, Travis.”

“Remember when I invited you to come here tonight. We were talking about the many opportunities that everyone has in their daily life to be a missionary of sorts. You learned a little about being a pizza missionary here. How do you feel about it?”

“I found it to be enlightening about an area that often falls into a missionary gap. I don’t remember anything like it when these were my stomping grounds as a young man.”

“There are far too many such missionary gaps out there, Tom. I think we’ve developed a mindset with our network of churches. I mentioned how we’ve tried to come up with an answer for the needs of a wide variety of people in a wide variety of situations. And that is critical as a background for the average person in the pew to be a witness.”

“How to be a simple and effective missionary without sounding like a street corner preacher?” proposed Tom.

“Exactly. Like a pizza missionary. On my last mission with Bill, I had the opportunity to visit the old church where I grew up in Nebraska. When my partner and I walked in the door on Sunday

morning, one of the things she said was ‘What happened?’ There were maybe twenty people in attendance – all old enough to be our grandparents. The church was dying. Now, there were some valid reasons for that, but I couldn’t help but look at those in attendance and think about their role as missionaries. I know in their case; they are in the sunset of their lives and don’t have much contact with others. But there has to be a way to engage them as missionaries until their last breath. And that is a big challenge. At our next network meeting with the spiritual leaders of each congregation, I want to bring it up as a point for brainstorming. I believe it’s a place to start, but I think we need to look at every age group at every stage of life and come up with some plan.”

“I remember what you said that first Sunday that I attended Epiphany. ‘Loving God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind means that our relationship to God should affect every aspect of our daily lives—our family, our work, how we are entertained, politics—everything should be influenced by it.’ To me, that would include everything up until our dying breath. Of course, you know much better than I what is

being done now and what gaps there are. I do think the trail of free pizza can build a highway with many different crossroads.”

“Or at least a blueprint for parallel highways, Tom.”

“I’m not sure about a trail for free rutabagas or grits.”

“Trailblazers never rule anything out, my friend.”