

Chapter Seventeen

Kevin was standing at the one-way mirror when Patty knocked on the half opened door. "The bike shop called, Gus's three-wheeler is in."

Kevin turned and replied, "That's great, are they going to deliver it?"

"No CP is going to pick it up and we're bringing it into work Tuesday morning."

"Sounds like you and CP have the three-wheeler task all taken care of."

"We do..." Patty answered with confidence. "Condi scheduled a safety training meeting tomorrow afternoon to present it to Gus. Your Dad said to get a cake and he's okay with shutting down the assembly line fifteen minutes early."

"By the way, how's it going with Gus? Do you think that you can convince him to move off site?" Kevin asked with a worrisome tone.

"It might take longer than I thought, but I have been adding it to our conversations."

"Well, since Mike crashed his car and Sam vanished, it will probably take longer than I hoped to be out of this Vice President position. This is not the right fit for me."

"I understand, Kevin. I have always felt that way with the men in my life. None of them have ever felt like the right fit for me. I never get respect, I always feel used."

"I don't believe that." Kevin turned and looked back down into the plant. "The way you have been around here. I've watched you down on the floor dealing with the union rep. Most all those men in the plant respect you."

"Thanks." Patty replied and knowing that Kevin didn't understand her feeling. "Did Lilly Saxton enjoy Disneyland?"

"Yeah, we both had fun until I made her mad," Kevin answered.

"How did you do that?" Patty quickly asked.

"Well, after I called you about changing the airplane ticket and all, we stopped by the 'Walk of Fame' and some guy on a bike stole her camera right out of her hand. I thought it was funny and couldn't stop laughing." Kevin started laughing to himself, thinking about the Saturday midnight episode again. "Lilly, hardly said ten words to me after that."

"I don't blame her!" Patty replied, disgusted with and somewhat disappointed with Kevin's sick sense of humor.

"Patty, you don't get it either. It was an old instamatic film camera, only worth a couple of dollars. Can you imagine that punk thief trying to sell that old film camera to his Fence?" Kevin laughed again.

"Kevin, I don't think it's funny. Lilly could have been hurt or worse yet shot."

"Patty, you would have had to be there," Kevin replied in his own defense. "Maybe I should have not laughed, but the way it went down and all, it was funny."

"Kevin, wasn't Condi's brother killed by a botched robbery at a convenience store?"

There was a long pause. "Maybe I should have thought it through... My mistake!"

"Kevin, we all say and do things that we regret later." Patty replied.

Kevin sat down at his desk. "Not to change the subject; but do you know any minorities that would go up to Oregon and help clear and cut trees along the side of the Mt. Hood Highway?"

"Not really. Why?" Patty looked confused.

"You know how you helped set up that firewood contract and all."

"Yeah, I think that was one of the first tasks you had for me,"

"Lilly's dad has that firewood contract about completed. Now there is another job to clear dead trees along the side of the highway. The State of Oregon put the contract out for bid and from what I understand it will probably go to the bidder that has a high minority work ratio."

"Do you have a contact number, or where I should look for some information?"

"Maybe you could call Lilly. Make it sound like they'll be helping us out with some of our laid-off workers or something like that."

"Not a problem," Patty replied. "I talked to Lilly a couple times making the arrangement to get you car down here. I'll call her this morning, she's cool."

"Great, I mentioned the work to Richard Johnson when I stopped by. He said he'd be up to going up to Oregon for a few months. He and his wife are having problems."

"So Condi's Dad would be another minority to go up to Oregon to log. Is he good with being the token black?"

"I didn't present the work to him like that." Kevin replied. "I'm thinking it's more like affirmative action. Plus, Richard wants to work and to move out of his house for awhile."

"Whatever you say," Patty replied.

"Don't let Condi know that I talked to her Dad. Also, remember not to let the Saxton's know that I'm the silent partner in Bull Elk logging operation."

"I got this." Lilly replied and pointed at a clipboard and the safety equipment on a chair in front of Kevin's desk. "You need to do a plant walk around before tomorrow's safety meeting before we can give Gus the three-wheeler."

"Can't we just give it to him just before everyone goes home and skip the safety meeting?"

"That's pretty much the plan. But Trask Inc. is behind on safety training so we thought this would be a good time to catch up some mandatory safety hours."

"Who are we?" Kevin asked in a perturbed voice.

"Condi and I," Patty replied in an influential and determined tone.

"Okay, what do I need to do?" Kevin reluctantly asked.

"Just take the clipboard and walk around the plant. Mark down any violations!"

Kevin pointed at the hard hat, safety glasses, back belt and ear plugs on the chair. "I know what safety equipment is, you didn't need to round up this stuff."

"Kevin, you need to wear that stuff when you're down in the plant."

"You're kidding." Kevin picked up the yellow hard hat and put it on. "I feel like a dork."

"Safety glasses also." Patty insisted. "You can probably get away without wearing the back belt."

Kevin put on the safety glasses and picked up the clipboard. "There must be fifty different things to check off on this list."

"Thirty two to be exact, and don't get too gung-ho." Patty replied. "Mark down more than twelve violations and you could generate a ten-thousand dollar fine from OSHA."

"You're kidding?" Kevin started going down the checklist.

"No, I have been going through the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's Laws. Just in 1996, OSHA has edited or changed over 645 pages of regulations. Self auditing is one thing that they are still allowing, but they will still impose the same fines."

"Government overreach. Another reason to outsource," Kevin replied.

"True, but no one should have to sacrifice their life for their livelihood." Patty rebutted.

Kevin didn't feel like a debate; he left his office rushed down the stairs and busted through the double swinging doors into the plant. The noise level had to be over a hundred decibel; Kevin remembered seeing ear protection on the checklist. The next item he remembered was steel-toed boots. Kevin didn't even make it halfway down the outside of the U shaped assembly line before he had more than twenty violations checked.

Within thirty minutes his thin-sole dress shoes on the plant concrete floor let him know his own feet would not feel good after an eight hour shift. This explained all the workers wearing tennis shoes. Kevin systematic marked every violation down. Some of the workers peeked out of the corner of the eye and others stared directly at Kevin-- as though he was the enemy.

A large floor embedded chain ran four-hundred feet down the front of the plant and then made a one-hundred and eighty degree bend and ran another four-hundred feet up the backside of the plant. In under a thousand feet a piece of channel iron hooked to the chain would become a Trask custom trailer. Grandpa Trask had fought Robert Trask over the assembly line, but toward the end of his battle with lung disease agreed with Robert, that it was the only way to stay competitive. Now, outsourcing was the way to stay competitive and it was probably time to move Trask Inc. overseas.

With sore feet and clipboard in hand Kevin hurried up the stairs and rounded the corner. Patty stuffed the rest of her sandwich into her mouth. "Here's the safety check off sheet."

Patty took the clipboard, finished chewing and swallowed. "I see you found a whole lot more than twelve violations."

"Yeah, probably one quarter of the workers are wearing tennis shoes. Even when my grandfather was building trailers by hand he insisted on steel toed boots."

"You will have to bring that up at the safety meeting tomorrow." Patty said as she was looking down the list.

"I'm not the person to conduct a meeting. Get Condi, or why don't you do it." Kevin immediately replied.

"The auditor that signs off on the safety checklist has to conduct the safety meeting within forty-eight hours. It's in the OSHA regulation." Patty fired back at Kevin.

"I'm going to lunch. We'll discuss this when I get back." Kevin didn't like managerial tasks like facilitating a safety meeting; especially to a large group. The decision

making behind closed doors was more than enough and that task would hopefully become minimal in the near future.

Gus sensed Kevin's stress and lifted the security gate without engaging in any conversation. Kevin didn't even get a mile away from work when the mobile phone rang. It was Tina and she was crying. An hour of cell phone usage of what-if and it's nobody's fault put Kevin in more of a stressed-out-testy mood. At his new favorite outside bar; the four Margaritas didn't help with the anxiety of conducting a safety meeting to five-hundred or more employees.

With binoculars Gus watched Kevin coming back down Navy Way Road. Kevin pulled up to the orange barricade gate and got out of the car. "Gus there is a safety meeting tomorrow at four-forty-five that I need you to attend."

Gus looked confused. "But, Mr. Kevin Trask who will open the security gate?"

"I'll send out Patty Kelly and she will operate the gate during the safety meeting."

"I don't know Mr. Kevin Trask... I don't know Mr. Kevin Trask... I don't know Mr. Kevin Trask." Gus started to rock side to side; his routine was being changed. "Ms. Patty Kelly might not know how to open and close the gate."

"I'll send her out before quitting time today and you can teach her how to operate the gate." Kevin had drunk too many margaritas and needed to pee. "I'll send her out at four-forty-five today." Kevin hurried back to his car, purposely parked under the basketball hoop and almost ran for the first employee restroom. Standing at the urinal Kevin read some of the graffiti off the wall—the Trask's were not popular.

Getting rid of some alcohol didn't help; Kevin still couldn't take the stairs two at a time with his usual long strides. Patty yelled as Kevin steadied himself at the top landing. "The minutes from the last two safety meetings are on your desk. They should help you prepare for tomorrow!"

"Too bad that you'll miss my first public speaking event with a bunch of people that don't like the Trask family," Kevin shouted back as he staggered across the hall and into his office.

"Oh..." Patty replied to herself as her stomach knotted! Maybe for the last few weeks she'd been overstepping her position. But, it was in her DNA to get things done and take charge. Patty felt sick to her stomach; it took a lot of effort to get to the office door. "I won't be at the meeting tomorrow," she asked apprehensively.

"Yeah, you need to man the security gate tomorrow when Gus attends the safety meeting. Go out there before quitting time today and he'll show you how the gate works." Kevin leaned all the way back in the high back leather chair desk and closed his eyes—the office started to spin.

The ending day whistle rocked Kevin forward in the chair; he wiped at the alcohol tainted drool that had run down his chin. At the south window he watched Gus signaling to Patty when to push the button for the orange gate to lift. *I'm so glad that I met Patty up at Shasta Lake. Thank you God. There is no way I could have done one third of the work around here without her assistance. And she is good for Gus.*

Back at the desk Kevin looked over the minutes from previous safety meetings and started to put together an agenda. It was surprising that the steel toed shoe violation hadn't been a problem in the past. Even Grandpa Trask made him wear steel toed boots, way back in the early days of Trask Inc. The dead silence down in the plant was refreshing. Now the only sound was doors being pulled shut and locked. Kevin was still working on the agenda when he heard footsteps coming up the stairs.

Gus appeared at the door with a red binder in his hand. "I can't move from my apartment downstairs Mr. Kevin Trask. Super Hero JC has a plan and He wants me to guard the tunnel. Ms. Patty Kelly keeps talking to me about moving and she knows all about JC and how he has a plan for everyone."

Kevin knew to get Gus off the moving subject or he could be there all night. "Gus what is that red binder in your hand?"

"It is the plan book I have been working on with JC. It is how to keep mini submarines out of the tunnel. That is the tunnel Iron Man and Captain American built during the last World War. Super Hero JC helped them and now we need his help again."

"That all sounds good Gus but couldn't you work on you plan book in a brand new condominium with maybe an office or?"

"Oh no, Mr. Kevin Trask. No Mr. Kevin... That would not work." Gus moved across the office to the window. "JC put me at the end of the tunnel for a reason. I'll show you."

Kevin stood and walked over to the window next to Gus. "Okay show me."

"See how straight Navy Way Road is and then turns." Gus pointed out the window. "The tunnel keeps running straight at the corner, right out into the Pacific Ocean. That is how they are going to bring in the bombs. The entrance is out there and it is underwater."

"And they are going to use a mini-submarine to do that?" Kevin asked.

"Yes sir, a mini-sub." Gus replied with sure confidence.

"And where are they going to bring these bombs to?"

"To the exit of the tunnel that is right below us. To the old scuba training room, next to my apartment." Gus answered Kevin while he pointed down at the floor. "Super Hero JC put me there for a reason."

"Gus your super hero might be making a mistake... Maybe, he wants you to move into a new apartment that overlooks."

"No! No! No!" Super hero, Jesus Christ can never make a mistake." Gus replied in a loud agitated voice while stomping his feet. "You are wrong Mr. Kevin Trask! You should never talk about the Super Hero Savior like that!"

Kevin knew to back off their conversation. "Okay Gus, I didn't mean that Jesus made a mistake. I'm just not as smart as you are, about the super hero stuff."

"Okay, Mr. Kevin." Gus calmed down. "I will bring you some books about Super Hero's so you can study up."

"That sounds good Gus, but not tonight. I need to get home and call someone." Kevin headed for the office door. "Gus, don't forget that I need you at the safety meeting at four-forty-five tomorrow."

"Yes sir, Mr. Kevin Trask." Gus replied and held out the red binder for Kevin. "I wrote all the plans down just in case they get to me."

Kevin took the red binder and played along. "Okay Gus, I'll look it over when I get home. On the drive home Kevin had three things on his mind; conducting the safety meeting, getting Gus to move off-site so that the land-sale contract could start moving forward again and getting back together with Tina. When he glances over at the red binder on the passenger seat he started thinking about Gus's Super-Hero. *Jesus, maybe you have a plan for me. Please don't make it a life time down at the plant. That works for Gus butt I need to do my own thing... Whatever that is?*

The next day as planned, at four-forty-five Patty walked across the parking lot to relieve Gus in the Guard Shack. Kevin was standing on the dock with his clipboard in hand and all the workers were gathering below. Under a blue plastic tarp and pushed up against the concrete dock was the brand new red three-wheeler. The only thing not covered by the tarp was the American flag poking out on a six foot fiberglass pole. Condi and Patty were doing hand signals across the parking lot. They had warned Kevin about the bad mood the workers would be in with a safety meeting at the end of the midweek workday.

"If I could get your attention." Kevin said. "If I could get your attention," Kevin asked again in a louder voice. A few workers quit talking and looked up at Kevin on the dock. "Could I get you attention," Kevin yelled again. Some more workers quit bitching to listen.

One of the workers put his fingers in his mouth and sent out a shrilling whistle. "Shut up and let the kid talk! I want to go home!"

"Thank you," Kevin said. "I'll keep this safety meeting short so that you can all head home." Kevin drew a deep breath. "Yesterday, when I did a walk through there was a few of you not wearing eye protection or your hard hat." Kevin drew another deep breath. "But there were a whole lot of you not wearing steel toed boots."

The crowd was now dead silent. Kevin didn't notice Condi over by the blue tarp shaking her head from side to side and pointing at her shoes. She was hoping Kevin would see her and stop talking about safety shoes but he didn't.

Kevin continued on, "I know they are more comfortable but you can't wear athletic shoes in the plant it is a safety violation and we could be fined.

"Not even if they have a steel toe and OSHA approved," a voice in the crowd yelled.

"A, they make tennis shoes with steel toe's?" Kevin quietly questioned himself.

"Yeah, they do ass-wipe. And we all know who you are. You're just looking for reasons to outsource more work. Get your facts together before you feed us the Trask family line of crap."

A different voice came from the crowd. Hey rich-boy! I don't think those Italian dress shoes you have on are steel toed..."

"Kevin had to wait for the jeering to subside." "A, sorry! My mistake... Kevin's face had turned red and his mouth went dry. "The second safety issue is with Gus!"

Silence fell over the entire crowd. The rumor of making Gus move had made it rounds. Now you could hear traffic noise out on Navy Way Road and the squawking of seagulls out in the harbor. If Kevin was going to pin a safety violation on Gus, he would have a fight on hand. Every worker waited for Kevin's next agenda item--a revolt was on the rise.

"Gus has not been able to watch over as much of Long Beach as we would like him to do." Kevin was reading off the poorly scripted agenda. "Gus, could you come up here?"

The crowd parted and Gus very slowly moved toward the dock. Kevin did not realize how close he was on the verge of starting a riot. Everyone liked and had Gus's back. Kevin continued, "Gus you have been working security for a long time here at the Trask plant and maybe there is a bigger plan for you."

Dead silence fell over the parking lot! Patty had left the guard station and walked over and stood at the back of the crowd. She had planned to help Kevin with the safety meeting notes but Kevin passed out at his desk yesterday afternoon.

Kevin let the clipboard drop to his side. "Gus, after we talked last night your Super Hero JC wanted you to have this new patrol vehicle so that you can look over more than just the Trask manufacturing."

Condi pulled the tarp off the brand new red three-wheeler and Gus stood motionless. Finally, he started walking along the front of the dock and stopped. He examined every feature for a drawn out time. Some workers slowly started to approach and encourage Gus to try it out. Gus got on and rode it through the parking lot sitting high with a newfound sense of purpose to protect. By the time he rode down the third row of cars about a dozen workers had got on their motorcycles and were following behind. Patty lifted the gate barrier and Gus headed out onto Navy Way Road with the American flag flying behind him in the wind. It sounded like rolling thunder as the motorcycle brigade followed Gus toward Long Beach harbor.