

Chapter Twenty-one

Monday morning Patty was even more upbeat than usual... She let Kevin go into the office and waited a few minutes before she was at the front of his desk with a fresh cup of coffee. "I got a hold of one attorney and left a message for the other. I'll set up vetting interviews for them this week."

"Thanks Patty," replied Kevin while taking the coffee cup. "What's this?" Kevin asked about a post-it stuck to the side of the cup.

"It's the address for the Poinsettia Rec-Center. CP said the team will be there by eleven this next Sunday."

Kevin put the post-it in his shirt pocket. "What do you think about the two candidates?"

"Both lawyer's look good, but you really can't tell anything from a few pieces of paper," Patty answered.

"Yeah no kidding," Kevin replied.

"Maybe we should run background checks on them before they interview?" Patty suggested. "It's an added expense but then you and Mr. Robert Trask wouldn't have to have that many vetting sessions. You could weed out the bad ones right off the bat."

Kevin took a sip of coffee and thought for a moment. "Could you run background checks on both those new candidates' before they interview?"

"I'll get on it right now." Patty left the office

Kevin got up from his desk and walked to the window. Gus was walking toward the corporate entrance with Nick Icorn at his side. *Crap, I got to get out of here.* Kevin headed toward Patty's desk and practically tripped over an old olive green footlocker. "What's this?" Kevin asked.

"I don't know it was here this morning. I thought it was some of your stuff." Patty replied.

Kevin knelt down in front of the perfectly preserved footlocker and ran his finger over the US emblem—it felt magical. He unclasp the right side brass latch and then the left side, his fingers tingled when they turned the key. Kevin lifted the lid and it felt like a spirit was released. Patty was now standing over Kevin; her eyes immediately took note of the old navy clothes and personal items. Kevin lifted the old navy blue wool jacket and underneath sealed in individual plastic sleeves were the first ten Captain America super-hero books.

"Those look valuable," Patty stated while looking over Kevin's shoulder.

Kevin carefully picked up the top copy and scrutinized the cover of Captain America hitting Adolf Hitler on the jaw. "These might be fun to read," Kevin said.

"I don't know if I'd call it fun," Patty stated. "That was a period when evil prevailed."

Gus and Nick Icorn had just made it to the top of the stairs and immediately saw Kevin and Patty snooping through the Navy locker. Gus released his grip from Nick's arm and handed Nick his cane; they walked side by side down the hallway.

Kevin stood up and asked, "Gus did you leave this here?"

"Yes I did. Mr. Kevin Trask. It has been here since 1941 so it is probably Trask property now but could Mr. Nick Icorn have it?"

Patty and Kevin looked back down at the perfectly preserved trunk; stuff that looked like it should be on a display in a WWII museum or sold to a collector.

Mr. Icorn saw the concern on both of their faces. "I would like to ship the entire trunk and contents to the Philippines, to Bayani's parents," Nick said in a fragile voice.

Kevin knelt back down and put the copy of Captain America back on top of the pile. He picked up old brush that still had some strands of smooth black hairs in it. Kevin looked at the name Bayani Bianchi that was scribed into the lid. Kevin looked up at Nick. "Any person that would drive over a thousand mile to return a watch is someone I trust to return this stuff to the appropriate owner's."

"Thank you son." Nick replied.

"Mr. Kevin Trask! I told Mr. Nick Icorn that the Trask shipping department could ship the Navy Locker. I meant, maybe ship the footlocker, Mr. Kevin Trask." Gus spoke up anxious and worried that he volunteered something he should not have.

"That should not be a problem," Kevin replied. "Does Mr. Icorn have a shipping address?"

"Yes I do," Nick answered, then reached into his back pocket and pulled out an envelope. "The Bianchi's send me a Christmas card every year." Nick pulled the Christmas card out and handed the envelope to Kevin.

Kevin handed the envelope to Patty. "Have someone from shipping pack this up and get it shipped. Tell them to build a special shipping box and to be extra careful."

"I'll do that right away Mr. Trask." Patty replied in her firm assuring voice.

At the top of the stairs Nick handed Gus the Christmas card and said. "I want you to keep this, so to remember Bayani Bianchi."

Gus took the card and stared at the Icon of the baby in swaddling clothes being held by Mother Mary. He then took old Nick, white beard, white hair and all by the arm and helped him down the stairs and out to his motor home.

After lunch Patty was standing in front of Kevin's desk again, Kevin was looking over the profit and loss spreadsheet. "What is it Patty?"

"Lilly Saxton called; her Dad got the highway clearing contract." Patty answered in her usual upbeat tone.

"That's good news," Kevin replied. "When do they start clearing trees?"

"About ten days from now, maybe sooner. Lilly is going to call me back to let me know when CP and Richard Johnson need to be up there."

"Thanks Patty, I know that I can count on you getting every little detail taken care of."

"No problem," Patty replied. "Lilly keeps asking about you and if you are still planning on going Steelhead fishing."

"I won't be doing any fishing if we don't get production up and expenses down." Kevin said while holding up the profit and loss spreadsheet.

"Would getting the workers to take some concessions in the new union contract help?" Lilly asked.

"It would help but production levels have to increase at the same time. Asking employees to work harder for less money is not a sustainable plan."

"That's probably why so many American companies are outsourcing." Lilly replied in a gloomy tone.

"Yeah, and the fact is that a deal with Mr. Hung Meng is probably the only way to survive. I don't like the guy and I don't trust him but we can't continue on this path without going bankrupt."

"I don't like him either but..." Patty's words were interrupted by her desk phone ringing. She left Kevin's office and transferred the call to Kevin.

"Kevin, I'm sorry! Like, I was so abrupt the other night. I still want you to come down to San Diego and all." Tina spoke somewhat timidly "Like, I bought something special that I wanted to put on for you at the Hyatt Regency."

"Oh crap! I forgot to cancel that hotel suite." Kevin inadvertently said out loud. This time no one was listening in, because Kevin wasn't on the mobile car phone.

"Sorry Kevin, I wanted to make our night special and all, but I had a splitting headache and my stomach hurt," Tina should have said that Tim slapped her and then punched her in the stomach, but she knew better.

"Like, my parents are gone, if you want to come down this week. You can stay here. They're on a cruise for ten days."

"Sure, whatever Tina. I'm playing basketball this next weekend... But maybe I can get away during the week.

"What's the matter Kevin?" Tina sensed hesitation in Kevin's voice. "Like, you don't want me to show you a night that you'll never forget?"

"Tina it's just at your parents house and all, it just doesn't feel right." Kevin looked up when Patty appeared in the doorway with a post-it stuck to her finger; she turned

around and left. "Tina, I'll call you later I got a lot of important stuff here at work to deal with."

I can't wait for your return call, Mr. important, Vice President and all." Tina replied in a seductive voice.

Kevin went out to Patty's desk. "Did you have something for me?"

"Oh it's not that important. I just have Lilly Saxton's phone number; she asked if you could call when you have some free time."

"Can't you call her back and take care of it?" Kevin asked.

I can... But I think she really wanted to talk to you about something private or about her mom or something... Maybe it was about her dog?" Patty was getting lost in her all the deception.

"Crap!" Kevin snatched the post-it from Patty's finger.

"Kevin, we should also talk about Gus before this next weekend, If you invited him to watch the game at the Poinsettia Rec-Center, I could talk some more to him about Moving off-site."

Kevin didn't respond; he stomped back to his office like a kid with too much homework. He immediately dialed the phone and snapped into the handset, "This is Kevin Trask. You needed to talk to me!"

"Oh, Kevin, I'm surprised to hear from you." Lilly replied

"I thought you had something important to talk about," Kevin said while backing down his disgruntled tone. "Something about your mom or your dog."

"No my mom is doing great. Her hip is doing a lot better since she finally went to the doctor. Thank you so much for getting the medical coverage for our family."

"Don't thank me. Thank Patty, she is the one that sets everything up."

"So there is nothing else?" Kevin questioned Lilly, puzzled about the urgency for the return call. "And your dog is okay?" Kevin asked.

"Oh, Tucker misses his spooning buddy, but outside of that everything is going great."

Kevin laughed. "That name for a dog is wrong. Like the words spooning and forking, those are words that you better not get mixed up."

"Oh, don't worry Kevin; I know the difference between spooning and forking." Now Lilly was laughing... Eventually, she asked when Kevin was coming up to Oregon to go Steelhead fishing. Their laid-back conversation went on for over an hour; Kevin hadn't laughed or felt so comfortable on the phone since middle-school. It felt like he just found a new best friend—maybe even a fishing buddy.

At the top of the stairs Kevin shouted down the short hallway. "I'm going to lunch. Do you want me to bring you back anything?"

"No," answered Patty and shouted back. "Don't forget we need to talk about Gus about watching city league basketball."

When the gate opened Kevin didn't drive through. "Gus how would you like to come up to the Poinsettia Rec-Center this Sunday and watch CP play basketball?"

Gus froze up! Sunday was the day he went to church. Plus he didn't know where the Poinsettia Rec-Center was. He would be totally outside the realm of his weekend routine!

"I hear that sometimes one or two of the LA Lakers show up at the Rec Center." Kevin offered as enticement.

What Kevin thought was enticement only put Gus further into lock down mode. The past weekend Gus spent with Nick Icorn went okay; he still made church and they even finished the tunnel plans. An unknown motive or an influence from above was pushing him out and away from his comfort zone.

"Let me know when I come back from lunch." Kevin accelerated directly out on to Navy Way Road without stopping. The SL600 was doing over ninety mph in less than 6 seconds; he wanted to beat the lunch hour patrons to the Mexican restaurant. Kevin let up on the accelerator; an influence came over him telling him observe the speed zone.

Kevin ordered food to go and was back at the guard shack in less than twenty minutes. Gus came out and nervously asked. "Mr. Kevin Trask, what time do they play basketball at the Rec-Center on Sunday?"

"I'd have to pick you up about ten-forty-five or so," Kevin replied.

"That will work, Mr. Kevin Trask. I get back from church at ten-thirty," Gus replied and forced a nervous smile. "I can be your brakeman, like Danny. You always drive to fast."

"Sounds good Gus. We'll talk later; I don't want my lunch to get cold." Kevin took note that the brakes felt mushy when he parked in front of the loading dock and made a mental note. *I need to get our feet mechanic to check the zerk fitting...*

With two white bags and two drinks in hand Kevin couldn't take the stairs two at a time. "I bought you a veggie burger and diet coke, just in case." Kevin sat the drink and one bag on Patty's desk. "By the way, Lilly didn't say it was important that I call her."

"I didn't say it was important. I just said that she would like you to call." Patty replied while looking into the white bag.

"Well we talked for over an hour. Somehow, I'm going to have to get up to Oregon and go fishing with her."

"I can adjust your schedule and setup a fishing trip for you." Patty offered.

"Not right now." Kevin replied. "And, I just spoke with Gus. He's coming to the Rec-

Center to watch basketball. So you can to work on him moving off-site and into a new condo or apartment."

"That sounds like a good plan... Thanks for lunch."

"There's something else I wanted you to do or have checked..." Kevin paused to think.

The phone on Patty's desk rang; Kevin turned away and went to his office. Patty did a good job at disguising who was calling—it was Lilly and she wanted to girl-talk.

The rest of the week at Trask Inc. went on without even one attorney making it to a second interview. The union negotiations were breaking down and production numbers continued to drop. There was a meeting with Hung Meng and his demands to get back on track with the land-sale contract were beyond intense. The only positive note was that every time Kevin went through the security gate Gus told him he was ready to watch basketball on Sunday after church.

Three-hundred and sixty three miles northwest of Long Beach in the heart of Silicon Valley--business was booming. Just this week Tim signed his third college contract to install anti-virus software on campus dormitory email servers. It would take a while for him to gain access to main-frame college computers. Tim was already playing the college athlete, elite-all-star card; he promised tickets to the NCAA championship game to one of the alumni fund raising facilitators. He also made the same bogus ticket promised to two different girls on the Stanford Rally Team.

Tina liked the looks of the new office space and was receptive to selling anti-virus protection contracts to large corporations. Her looks, low cut blouses and flirtatious personality would be her tools to get to the geeky-IT types. Tim even suggested sexual favors might be in play for any signed contract for over ten-thousand dollars. Tina told Tim that she wasn't a whore—Tim came back with the words 'deal-maker' along with a fifty per cent commission offer. Tina added the conditions of no pimple faced smelly nerd types and at the most maybe a hand-job. Tina knew how to get her way with men—she'd been doing it since age thirteen. She accepted Tim's offer and the title of VP of acquisitions for the Tim Baylor anti-virus and on-site maintenance Inc.

Two-hundred and fifty five miles north of Silicon Valley business was slow; house boats were being winterized and repaired for the next summer of fun and family memories on Shasta Lake. Hank had just fiberglass in the new section of railing on the Stargazer while reflecting back on Danny's short life. On a positive note Conrad; Danny's older brother was off drugs and was working on getting his GED. Hank put the fifteen hundred dollar repair bill in an envelope and put that into the accordion folder under the counter in the rental boat shack. Trask Inc. had overpaid the repair by thirty-five hundred dollars--money that was spent on the funeral.

Two-hundred and twenty-two miles north of Shasts Lake, Nick Icorn was signing the Myrtle Creek Motel over to the two Dick-heads. Joe Burke and Randy Goody, were the legal names on the deed for a grand total of two dollar. Nicks old motor home

was running so go with the new battery and tune-up he was headed to Baja for the winter.

Two hundred and twenty-seven mile miles northwest of Myrtle Creek, Kenneth Saxton was out back of the small fishing guide shop sharpening and fine tuning chainsaws. It felt good to not be cutting burly Juniper trees for firewood. He'd be falling the real stuff, Douglas fir! The shop was close enough to the Zigzag River that the cold mountain water running over rocks and under logs sounded like music—hiding places for Steelhead.

Senators Byron Sherpard's fundraiser was coming up within the month. Tina was first and foremost on Kevin's mind; he'd even reserved a honeymoon suite for after the event. She was a ten plus in the looks department and her body was off the scale. Tina turned heads no matter if it was on a houseboat or in line at a department store—she had it all.

Tina's was dragging her feet and wouldn't commit to attending the fund raiser up in Sacramento. Not taking the opportunity to meet important and influential socialites' seemed odd; this was so not like Tina. Kevin was sensing that he'd probably be attending the gala event by himself. After four years of side-stepping Tina's advances, the shoe was on the other foot—Kevin didn't like it.

What Richard Johnson didn't like was riding shotgun all night and day up to Oregon and then shown a three sided log lean-to to sleep in. Kenneth Saxton didn't say more than twenty words to CP and Richard; he pointed to an outhouse and warned them not to go into the two story A-Frame cabin up the hill. Kenneth Saxton hurried off to his truck; a big cloud of diesel smoke floated into the open side of the bunkhouse and mixed into the musty air.

"I'll bet that, white assed, racist has a sign posted in that cabin up there that say's, **no niggers allowed to sleep here!**"

"I don't know Rich, why don't you hike up there and check it out." CP replied as he unrolled a sleeping bag on the lower bunk.

"I bet he's got booby traps up on the deck. Those white supremacist types love their guns and weapons. I'll probably kick his ass before our first day of work is over."

"Whatever Rich, I'm going to bed." CP tool off his shoes and crawled onto the lower bunk. "Mr. Saxton said he'd be back up here at zero-six-hundred."

"How the hell can you sleep when some redneck white guy tells you to shit in an outhouse?"

"Hey Rich I just spent sixteen hours driving and listening to you preaching about the Islam faith, I'm exhausted." CP fluffed up the pillow rolled over on his side and said. "Don't tell Mr. Saxton you're a Muslim."

Richard didn't have a response. He pulled the flask from his pocket took a couple of shots then unrolled the sleeping bag on the top bunk. These days the whiskey was the only thing that helped Richard get needed rest and numb his pain.

CP was sleeping like a rock when something pulling on the sleeping bag awoke him. It was almost daybreak but still dark in the windowless log lean-to. All of a sudden a big black beast jumped up on the bunk and started pushing and clawing at his arms. The smell of wild animal fur filled his nostrils'. "Black bear!" CP yelled out. The big animal jumped off and scampered out into the dim morning light

Richard Johnson moaned from the top bunk and then the snoring started again. CP jumped from lower bunk and started shaking Richard and yelling. "There's a bear out there! I just scared it off from my bunk."

They both were standing at the open side of the cabin at the edge of the wooden planks. "I hear something..." Richard whispered and then cupped his hand behind his ear to listen.

CP turned his ear toward the dim morning light. "Sounds like a truck."

"There's the head lights." Richard pointed out into the forest. They both watched the lights getting closer while the rumble of the diesel motor got louder.

The four-wheel drive stopped down the hill. The door opened and slammed then Ken Saxton went to the back and lowered the tail gate; he whistled and then yelled. "Come on Tucker it's time to go to work."

Richard Johnson bolted back toward his shoes next to the bunk ladder. I'm going to go kick that hillbilly's ass right now. Calling us fucker's.

It was dusk but CP made out the big ball of black fur running toward the truck and jumping up on the lowered tailgate.

CP turned and said. "I think his dog's name is Tucker. It just jumped into the bed of the truck."

Richard was sitting on the lower bunk tying his shoes. "I'm still kicking his ass for making up sleep out here in this here slave shack.

Ken Saxton approached with a picnic basket in one hand and a thermos in the other. "Come on up to the deck. The wife made you breakfast."

The smell of whatever was in the basket quickly had both apprentice loggers in pursuit up the trail and onto the deck. Ken had just poured hot coffee and placed the tray of breakfast burritos on the old cable spool retrofitted into a picnic table. There were no more ten words exchanged while CP and Richard gulped coffee and ate. The sun was just rising on Mt. Jefferson fifty miles down the Cascade mountain range to the south.

Ken poured more coffee and then dug deeper into the picnic basket. "The wife made cinmon rolls." When Ken unfolded the aluminum foil the fresh bread and cinnamon aroma mixed into the brisk morning air. The sun started hitting different mountain peaks and then painting in light below the timberline. The three men sat silent drinking coffee looking south with mixed emotions—this forced partnership would probably end in a fight before the sunset on this first new day.

Ken started off. "Either of you logged or ran heavy quipment."

"You mean heavy equipment?" CP asked.

"Yep, heavy quipment or ran a chansaw." Kenneth answered.

"Yeah, I help build airports in Kuwait during Desert Storm." CP said.

Kenneth practically stood at attention and looked CP squarely in the eyes. "Thank you for your service to our great country."

"Thanks," CP replied

"I've ran a chansaw,' Richard said mocking Ken's logger slang.

"What size bar? Was it a Husky or Stihl?" Kenneth asked

Richard thought for awhile. "I don't know. It's an electric saw that I landscaped with. I got it at the hardware store."

"Oh, good so you been a landscaper." Kenneth replied

Richard didn't respond. He had been a shop foreman with a crew of over four hundred men. It was oblivious Ken was an ignorant and an asshole—or maybe just ignorant.

"So Mr. CP. You'll run the loader, I'll fall the trees and Johnson will be my nubber."

"I'm not your nigger!" Richard jumped up and clenched his fist. "I don't care what kind of redneck slang you call me by I'm no one's nigger."

"That's okay by me." Ken yelled back. "I don't like the words Spick, Squaw, Faggot, or the hunt word that starts' with C either. Don't use those words working with my crew!"

"Richard was totally confused and looked down and over at CP. "Can you even understand this guy?"

"If you shut up and give the man a chance to speak maybe I could." CP said.

Richard plopped back down and looked away at the front of the A-frame; he took note of the broken window glass on the deck, not wanting to make eye contact with Ken he folded his hands across his chest as his blood boiled.

Richard looked at CP. "My log truck is a self loader. You think you can figure it out?"

"Yeah, shouldn't be a problem. But I don't have a CDL for Oregon."

"Don't worry. I know the Sherriff that patrols the highway. Bull won't give you a ticket if you all driving one of my rigs."

"I'm not sure about that. A black man driving a logging truck probably will get pulled over regardless."

"Ken paused and thought. Richard turned from looking at the front of the cabin to see how Ken was going to answer."

"Yep, you're right. There are some white guys that patrol the Mt. Hood Highway too. I'll give Officer Bull a call and see how to get you legal and all."

"Mr. Johnson is it okay that I just call you Johnson?" Ken asked.

"Yeah fine," Richard quipped. "I'll call you Ken."

"We got some dead trees up yonder, so we'll get'em down, nubbed up and loaded today. Tomorrow will all need to be working in the corridor. Wait here..." Ken left the deck and headed for the pickup truck.

"What a dumb ass that guy is." Richard said to CP.

"Yeah, I don't think he's had much schooling. But talk about good food."

"No kidding! Those sausage burritos were great. The homemade cinnamon rolls were over the top." CP replied while watching the big old diesel truck work itself up around the cabin. Ken waved for them to follow.

Finally the truck stopped and Kenneth jumped out and let the tailgate down. "Stay Tucker."

CP approached the back of the truck first. "Your dog jumped onto my bunk this morning. I thought it was he was a bear."

"Yep that's ole Tucker, he likes to spoon." Ken said. Tucker came to the edge of the tailgate wagging his tail. CP reached up and started petting Tucker; the dog fur smell was familiar.

Richard approached bent over put his hands on his knees and gasped at the thin mountain air. "What kind of people name their dog Tucker?" Richard said between breaths. "That could start a fight."

"My son named the dog. Billy thought it was funny." Ken pulled out a huge chainsaw from the back of the truck and set it on the ground. He then grabbed a small chainsaw and handed it to Richard. "You'll use this saw for nubbing." Ken went up to the cab then came back with some knee high leather boots and held them out. I hope these fit you, Johnson. They're Billy's boots."

Richard took the boots and immediately noticed all the sharp nail spikes on the bottom. "What the hell are these?"

"They're corks!" replied Richard then reached down and picked up the huge chainsaw. "You two men stay here with Tucker." Richard started working his way up the hill through some thick brush. The high pitch roar ended the silent of a beautiful morning and started the beginning of a hard ass workday.

By noon Richard learned what nubbing was all about. If he didn't get the limbs nubbed off flush to the tree trunk, a tree could hang up while CP was skidding them across the forest floor. A snapped choker cable could slice a man in half! Ken only had to point out two limbs that Richard hadn't nub close enough to the trunk. There was no need to explain about the corks. Without them walking up and down a fallen

tree would be dangerous—especially while nubbing with a razor sharp chainsaw.

Exactly at two o'clock Kenneth blasted the air horn on the log truck and yelled. "We got shut it down. Fire level four rules."

Back on the deck of the A-frame Richard drank water from a quart jar and gulped down an egg salad sandwich in less than a minute. He wouldn't comment on the how good potato salad was but the homemade apples pie was so good that he had to comment. "This pie is good."

"Thanks, I'll let the wife know."

"Tell your wife those sausage burrito were good also," CP added to the conversation.

"Yep, I'll tell her. She knows how to spice up venison just right."

Richard quit eating apple pie and asked. "That was deer meat in those burritos this morning?"

"Yes sir, Johnson. Wait till you get a taste of her Elk steaks!" Ken said with pride.

At that moment Richard's and CP's stomach's turned and felt uneasy. CP didn't want to know where the eggs for the eggs salad sandwiches came from.

"Were those fresh eggs?" Richard asked.

"Yep we raise Rhode Island Reds; they're good layers and good meat."

"That's what my mother raised when I was a boy. Buckeye hens are good dual purpose bird also." Richard said.

"Don't know about the Buckeyes," Ken replied

"There's glass on the deck. I noticed you got a broken window." CP said, hoping to get off all the chicken talk.

"Yep, I shot the window out." Ken looked over at the front of the A-frame. "The bees built a nest inside. That's why you can't sleep in there. I'm lergic to bees."

"You're allergic to bees and you work in the woods?" CP asked.

"Yep, logging's all I know. Got to take my chances with the bees." Ken answered.

Richard looked back over his shoulder at the broken out window and saw bee's flying in and out of the cabin. "Why did you shoot out the window?" Richard asked timidly.

"I shot at a one-eyed Eagle up in that there snag that was staring at me." Richard pointed at the old snag about twenty feet out from the deck.

"Aren't Eagles on the endanger species list?" CP asked.

"Don't know, don't care." Ken relied as he turned. "See you two at zero-six hundred tomorrow morning." Kenneth walked toward the truck with Tucker at his heels. He waved out the window and started the truck and drove off.

CP looked over at Richard. "I guess we know why we didn't sleep in the cabin."

"Yeah I know," Richard solemnly replied, looking back at the shot out window. "I was just thinking about Jabbar—he was killed by a stray bullet."