

Chapter Twenty-two

Thank you God were the words Patty said every day before she sat down at her small desk in the hallway. Just a few months ago she was filling out job applications at fast food restaurants and now she was the executive assistant for the Vice President of Trask Inc. She hardly got through her morning prayer when the button flashed on the desk phone; it was from Condi's extension. Patty pushed the flashing button and picked up the phone. "Good morning, Condi."

"Patty, could you come down here when you get a chance?"

"Is it important or can I go through my inbox and check phone messages first?"

"No, when you get a chance. I got you an American Express card that you can charge up to ten-thousand dollars without having to go through the hassle of getting a check cut or a purchase order number."

"Thanks Condi." Patty replied while looking at her yellow notepad. "I don't think I'll need that high a credit limit."

"You will if CP flies home every other weekend from Oregon. It's the amount Kevin said to do."

"Okay, I'll be down when I get some of the items checked off my list." Patty replied and somewhat distracted by the post-it stuck to her desk lamp.

"Patty, you could pick up the credit card this afternoon. We have to go over a bunch of background checks for potential attorneys at two. I left a note on your lamp."

"I'm reading it right now." Patty replied. "I'll see you at two." Patty hung up and picked up her notepad.

Getting a few more chairs filled for Senator Byron Sheppard's fund raiser was high on her list. The union contract negotiations and the need to address the lawsuit about brake light failure on two models of trailers were also crucial. CP had shared privately what he thought about the wiring harnesses imported from China and now Patty was secretly putting together a reliability spreadsheet to present to Kevin.

Condi was clandestinely helping Patty with gathering the reliability data. One of the brake light accidents crippled a child that was the same age of Condi's son. When she heard the words 'Collateral Damage' made by the Trask Insurance company adjuster, it made her sick to her stomach. Deep down Condi hoped that Trask Inc. lost the lawsuit.

Taking the stairs two at a time was a dead giveaway; Patty was working on waiting five minutes before she headed for Kevin's office. The morning fresh cup of coffee wasn't in her job description; but it was a tool that kept Kevin silent as she went

down her to do list.

Kevin took the steaming cup of coffee, leaned back in his chair and said. "Okay, let me have it."

Patty started reading off her yellow notepad. "Production numbers are down. I think the slowdown is going to continue until the union contract is settled."

"I wish we could prove that." Kevin replied as he sipped coffee.

"Well, you could make a case that the three days after you conducted your safety meeting were the highest production numbers for the month."

"Why would a safety meeting cause that?" Kevin asked.

"It could be because the workers saw that you were concerned about their health and well being." Patty answered.

"Or maybe it was because we gave them cake and Gus the new three wheeler." Kevin spoke off the top of his head.

"Not sure, but we could have another meeting and see if the numbers go up," Patty suggested. "I'm taking the Abram Maslow, hierarchy of needs course this semester. I see a lot of basic needs not being addressed in the current union contract."

"And what needs would those be?" Kevin asked.

"The basic need to be needed. Unlike you Kevin; every man and woman down in the plant needs work. The news everyday has another story about outsourcing. They're afraid of losing their jobs!"

"Hey, I get it Patty! But what can I do? I'll be standing in the unemployment line with all of them if production continues to go down. Mr. Hung Meng put my family in a bad spot with the deal he made with my Dad before I came on board."

"Kevin, your family will never be broke! Maybe you'll only get ten million after the land sale but you'll never be in an unemployment line." Patty immediately wished she hadn't made the comment.

"A... Whatever," Kevin replied.

"The second big item that we need to get out in front of is the pending lawsuit for that family that crashed into the back of one of newer cargo trailers. I checked and that model has the imported wiring harness from China."

"Is there any connection between Hung Meng's import business and those wiring harnesses?" Kevin asked.

"I don't think so but I can look into it." Patty answered. "CP knows a little more about the aluminum wiring and crimp connection. I can ask him when he calls from Oregon tonight."

"Thanks," Kevin sat the coffee cup down. "That accident caused a child to end up

paralyzed didn't it?"

"I'm not sure about the exact details. Condi would know more than me about that, she has the insurance claims folder on that accident."

Kevin was silent for an extended period. "How do you know Condi has a folder?"

Now Patty was silent for an extended period, before she answered. "Condi is helping me put together a reliability spreadsheet on the imported wiring harnesses."

Kevin didn't reply. He set down his coffee and walked by Patty, then went down the stairs and asked for the folder. At first, Condi acted dumbfounded about collecting any data; finally she pulled the plain manila folder from the way back of her lower desk drawer. Back up in his office Kevin looked over the report and pictures from a private eye showing the Father of the crippled girl carrying out beer from a convenience store. Kevin put two and two together. He never wanted the VP position and now he hated the Trask insurance company even more!

Kevin rushed down the stairs, hurried by Condi and went directly into the huge office. "What the fuck!" Kevin screamed at Robert Trask and then slammed the door. Condi heard the screaming through the two solid wood doors and heard her name mentioned when Robert asked where Kevin had gotten the private eye report. The closed door shouting match and family dispute lasted for over an hour. Kevin finally bolted out on the massive office doors, tossed the manila folder to Condi and went straight to the parking lot.

Gus swiftly raised the gate. From Kevin's facial expression he knew that this was not the time to engage Kevin in any sort of conversation. Driving over one hundred miles an hour on interstate five was as irresponsible as not addressing the trailer brake light failures. Kevin's mind was raging just as hard as the V12 under the hood of the SL600... *God for whatever reason a child would end up maimed because of a Trask please show me how I can make this right. I'll do right for the rest of my life if you will help make that child walk again. I'm so sorry for all of this and I promise...*

Traffic ahead was at a stop! Kevin hit the brake pedal hard; clunking, shaking and smoke came from all four tires. The anti-lock brake system worked as designed; the Mercedes came to a controlled stopped inches from the back of a semi truck. After ten minutes of being stuck in traffic, Kevin grabbed the car phone from the bag and dialed; he needed to talk to someone...

"Tina, I'd like to share some upsetting news..." Kevin started off.

"Kevin, like I'm so glad that you called," Tina immediately started with her story.

"Like, I'm moving up to San Jose. I got a high up position at a Y2K anti-virus company."

"Oh... I thought you were looking for work around San Diego?"

"Yeah, but like, San Diego is so boring and like all the action is up in Silicon Valley."

"What's the name of the company? Kevin asked. "Did you say Y2K?"

"A like... It's a new startup company. There's no name yet." Tina lied.

"The Y2K acronym, I have heard that before."

"Yeah, like it's the big computer virus coming January first, year two thousand."

"How do you know all this?" Kevin asked perplexed.

"Mr. Chan told me; he knows a lot about a lot of stuff." Tina didn't want to offer Kevin anything more, especially about Tim Baylor. She always played the side of the fence with greener grass.

"So like, you said something about upsetting news?" Tina asked so to change the subject and not bring up Tim Baylor.

"Yeah, I just found out today that one of our trailers might have caused serious injury to a child."

"The Trask family has insurance and all... Don't you?"

"Of course we have insurance. But, our insurance company is fighting the claim. They hired a private eye up in Michigan to prove that the girl's father has a drinking problem. They're also claiming something about a child booster seat."

"Like, shit happens. You just need to grow up." Tina replied.

"How can you say that?" Kevin asked in an incensed tone.

"Kevin, there are winners and losers in this world. A big part of your problem is you don't associate yourself with the winners. I'm a winner..."

"Tina I got to go!" Kevin threw the handset on the passenger seat and picked up the manila folder; he looked over more of the evidence. Traffic inched ahead a few feet and then stopped again. No way was he going down to San Diego now...

It was almost closing time when Patty heard the Italian dress shoes taking the stairs two at a time. Kevin rounded the corner and made a beeline for her. "Patty, could you get me airline tickets and a room overnight in Lansing, Michigan."

"When and for how long?" Patty asked as she slipped off her jacket and sat back down.

"How about for Tuesday and Wednesday next week?" Kevin answered. "Make the arrangements on Monday when you get into work." Kevin went to his office and stood at the one way glass and watched all the workers closing up toolboxes, grabbing lunch pails and high-fiving each other as they exited the building. *Maybe Tina is right, 'shit happens'. I need to work harder at being a winner... If the plant get's shut down I can't worry about it. I just need to be done with all of this and move on...*

There was a knock on the door glass and Patty read from her notepad. "Kevin, I can

get you a flight departing LAX at 7:20 am on Tuesday and arriving in Detroit at 2:50 pm. The latest return flight out of Detroit is on Wednesday is 8:02 pm."

Kevin turned and walked over to the window overlooking the parking. "Book those flights and upgrade them to first class."

Patty immediately returned to her desk; she took the travel agent off hold and booked the flights in first class. She waited for the itinerary and tickets to come over the fax. The newly issued American Express card worked without a problem.

Kevin was sitting at his desk and looked up. "You didn't have to work late; you could have waited to make the travel arrangements."

"That's not a good idea; I waited too long to book CP's flight so he's staying up in Oregon over the weekend."

"What?" Kevin instantly jerked his head up. "So we're not playing basketball on Sunday."

"CP told me to tell you to go on up there and meet the guys without him. He said that you probably won't get any game time but that you could meet his boys."

"I'm not going up there alone," Kevin mumbled. "Gus was really counting on watching a basketball game."

"I know," Patty replied while slipping on her jacket. "I'll explain the situation to him before I catch the bus." Patty left the building.

Back at the window Kevin watched Patty walking across the parking lot toward the guard shack. Immediately he grabbed his keys and bolted down the stairs! Patty was talking with Gus by the time he pulled up to the guard shack. Gus was rocking side to side saying, "Okay no basketball. Okay no basketball. Okay no basketball."

Kevin got out of the car and approached them both. "Gus, I'm sorry for the confusion. Let's still plan on watching basketball. I'll pick you at noon just like we planned."

Gus quit listing from side to side and replied. "Yes, Mr. Kevin Trask, I'll be ready. Church is over at ten forty five. I'll be ready at noon."

"Hop in, I'll give you a ride home." Kevin said to Patty.

"Thanks," Patty said and walked around to the passenger door.

Gus went into the guard shack and lifted the gate and waved as they exited the parking lot.

"Let's see you live up in Inglewood." Kevin said as they started down Navy Way road.

"Yeah, but I'm staying at CP's place when he's up in Oregon." Patty replied. "You can drop me off at my parents, then one of them can run me up to Glendale."

"No, I can take you to Glendale it's just across the I-5 from my parents place." It was the usual Friday night bumper to bumper traffic; the conversation went from work stuff, to the on again off again relationship with Tina, to getting Gus to move off site. By time they got to Cap's townhouse, Patty agreed to go watch basketball and talk with Gus about moving.

Saturday morning Kevin intentionally avoided going to the main house or to the back patio by the pool. The whole insurance, private eye episode up in Michigan turned his stomach and seemed wrong, even for his father. A plan to drive down to San Diego and go to lunch with Tina wasn't going to happen either; she hadn't returned his calls. Kevin decided to do one thing that he rarely did—visit Grandpa Trask's gravesite.

Sunday morning Patty was watching through the blinds; the Land Rover pulled into CP's parking spot directly in front of townhouse, she grabbed the jersey and headed out the door. "I remembered driving this SUV," Patty said when she pulled herself into the passenger seat.

"Yeah, that was the night I drank too many Margaritas and you drove me home." Kevin answered. "I hope that Gus is home from church."

Patty tossed the Jersey onto the center console. "CP said to wear his Sparks jersey. He said that you probably won't get to play but if you do, you'll need a Jersey."

"How's CP and Richard Johnson doing up there clearing trees and all?"

CP loves it. He's been running heavy equipment and logs to a mill in Warm Springs. Next week someone named Bull Elk Whitefoot is helping him get certified to operate a self-loader and a CDL for Oregon. Whatever all that stuff means."

"Bull Whitefoot is a state police officer. A CDL is commercial driver's license. The log truck must have a self loading crane on it. That's probably what CP needs a certification for."

"Well anyway CP said that it reminds him of building air strips during Desert Storm." Patty pulled the seatbelt across her waist and chest. Kevin noticed how it parted her firm breasts; the pink athletic shorts showed off her muscular legs.

"You smell good this morning." Kevin said as he merged into traffic.

"Thanks," Patty replied.

"What about Richard Johnson, did CP say anything about how he was doing?"

"I think the first day Mr. Johnson wanted to kick Mr. Saxton's ass or something. But Mr. Johnson's back hurt so bad from nubbing logs that never happened. I guess Richard can hardly stand straight up, he moans every day he gets out of the bunk."

"Wow, I wonder what that is all about?"

"I can find out from Lilly if you want. She's really close to her dad." Patty offered to

do some investigating and was curious herself.

"Yeah, why don't you touch base with Lilly. I don't want to be responsible for a big brawl between Richard and Kenneth!" Kevin replied in a concerned tone.

Gus jogged from the southwest corner of the building toward the guard shack. Kevin put the Range Rover in reverse, made a 180 and parked on the outside of the gate. Gus got into the backseat, opened and shut the door twice just to be safe.

"Fasten your seatbelt Gus," Patty said looking over her shoulder at Gus. She noticed Gus didn't have on his security cap; he had on a LA Lakers ball cap.

Kevin waited until he heard the click of the seat belt before he put the Range Rover in gear. There was a long silence. Kevin looked at Gus in the rearview mirror and then asked, "How was church this morning?"

"Oh, it was good, Mr. Kevin Trask. The Pastor talked about how Jesus forgave the man on the cross and told him he would be in paradise that day."

"And where do you think paradise is Gus?" Kevin asked.

"It is where my Mom is! Jesus took her to paradise on the day I was born." Gus's sure and sincere answer put a solemn mood inside the Range Rover for the ride up to the rec-center.

The Poinsettia Rec-Center was not as bad as CP had made it sound. Although it was in the older section of LA, there were no signs of gang activity and only a few building had been tagged with graffiti. The inside basketball court was small. The bleachers were only three rows deep and backed up to cinder block walls. The out of place trio spotted the team with the **Sparks** jersey's on and walked over to that side of the court.

The tallest player on the team ran over just as the three of them sat down on the third bleacher directly behind the team. "CP told me to look out for you," the six foot six lanky black player said.

"You must be Sonny," Kevin replied and extended his hand.

"Yeah, or call me coach. You can shoot around with us before the game. I doubt that you will get any game time."

"That would be great." Kevin jumped from the third row and ran out onto the court.

It took some time before one of the players passed Kevin the ball; he drove the key and did an easy layup. The pregame shoot around turned into a dim resentment toward Kevin. Maybe it was because he was white, maybe it was his Duke Basketball jersey, or maybe it was that he had so many years of professional coaching and it showed. Kevin's intensity level was up a few notches because he was still pissed about the way Trask Inc was dealing with the brake light problem and couldn't get it off his mind.

The game started and Kevin returned to the third row and leaned back against the cool cinder block wall. Gus was zoned, rocking forward and backward between Kevin and Patty. Every time the Sparks took a shot and missed Gus would say, "No-share, no-look or no-pass." His voice was loud and annoying. It would have been better if Gus spoke when the Sparks scored, but he was only verbal when they missed—it was getting on everybody's nerves.

By halftime the Sparks were down by sixteen points! Sonny had caught onto what Gus was doing and told Kevin to put on the jersey that Patty had draped over her bare legs. Kevin pulled off his Duke jersey, put on CP's jersey and jumped from the bench onto the floor. Sonny sat down next to Gus, looked at Patty's tanned muscular legs and smiled at her. Patty used the Duke Jersey to cover her legs.

No one would pass the ball to Kevin; this only added to the rage inside his gut. Kevin watched for an opportunity; stole the ball, drove the entire court for a layup. Gus didn't say a word. Patty was the only one to let out a small cheer. The next opportunity came from a rebound; Kevin drove the court and passed the ball around his back. The Sparks player pulled up and shot for a three pointer. The ball missed the rim and backboard. Gus said, "No share".

Kevin's passing and assists became a huge asset; by the third period the Sparks were only down by ten. Sonny wasn't paying that much attention to Kevin; he was catching on to Gus's basketball formula and realized that it wasn't about the players making points it was about their actions that caused the team to miss a shot. Sonny retrieved his clipboard and asked Gus to start charting the statistics.

Gus drew out four columns; then wrote down each player's number from his memory. In the second column he wrote no-share, the third column for no-look and the last column for no-pass. Gus then started checking off every missed shot. With less than a minute left in the game the Sparks were within four points. Kevin stole the ball and drove the entire court for a slam dunk. The ball bounced high off the back of the rim and went out of bounds. Gus marked Kevin down for a no-share. The other team inbounded, worked the clock down to ten seconds and shot a three pointer. The Sparks inbounded; passed the ball back and forth and then missed the final shot with 2 seconds left on the clock. Gus charted that player in the no-look column

Dejected and angrier Kevin trotted to the bench and pulled off the Sparks jersey and threw it up against the cinder wall. Sonny looked up from the clipboard and said, "What the hell are you upset about. We have never come within fifteen points of beating that team."

"We should have won!" Kevin spouted back at Sonny, sitting up in the third row with Patty and Gus.

"Yes sir, Mr. Kevin Trask." You had four no-shares and two no-looks that's why the Sparks lost." Gus spoke up and then pointed at the chart he had made.

Some of the players approached and started high-fiving Kevin, slapping him on the back, calling him Bro and giving Kevin the white-guys can't play ball rhetoric. Sonny nonchalantly took the clipboard from Gus and turned it over. It was obvious that Gus had a formula that could change the way of coaching. The formula was simple, it had nothing to do about winning—it was about learning from your mistakes.

"It was a close game." Patty said while reaching way over to retrieve the sweaty Jersey off the floor from behind the third row bleacher.

Kevin's head poked out from the Duke athletic shirt and took note of how fit and in shape Patty was. "Sorry about throwing the shirt against the wall. I just needed to vent out some anger."

"No problem. I know how frustrated you must be." Patty smiled.

Kevin looked directly into Patty's light brown eyes and asked, "Would you like to stop at my favorite fish and chips place on the way home?"

Patty looked deep into Kevin's hazel eyes and replied, "Sure that sounds great."

Kevin turned toward Gus. "How about you Gus, are you up for Fish and Chips?"

"A... Would they have orange pop to drink?" Gus was still focused on the player efficiency report that Sonny now had.

Sonny had his hand tight on the flipped over clipboard. "You three all go have some dinner. I'll see you next week." Sonny immediately headed for the locker room.

"Gus, if they don't have orange I'm sure they have root beer." Kevin looked back at Patty and smiled.

"Okay, Mr. Kevin Trask. My Dad took me to Fish and Chips after church sometimes. They always had orange pop."

Patty darted out ahead. "I noticed a vending machine in the lobby when we came in. Maybe they have orange pop in it."

Patty was digging in her purse when Gus and Kevin approached from behind. "Hey look Gus, they have orange Gatorade." She put in some coins and the plastic bottle made a loud thump when it dropped into the catch tray.

"Thank you Ms. Patty Kelly," Gus said with genuine appreciation.

Kevin reached out for Patty's hand; he took it and tenderly squeezed it. He loved Patty for more than just being like mother hen. Patty squeezed back, it felt good to make Gus happy and she was hoping that somehow she could help Kevin feel less anger and frustrated.

The restaurant was not as crowded as the last time Kevin was there with Lilly. There was no live country music blaring out from the bar. Sunday was family night, quieter than the no cover charge for cowgirls Friday night live music blast. Kevin asked Gus

why Sonny wanted him to write down the player statistics. Gus didn't have an answer but he did go back through all of Kevin's basketball stats including high school. Kevin didn't even know that he was the third highest player for assisted shots at Duke. Patty worked into the one sided basketball conversation about moving to a place closer to the LA Staples Center, where it might be possible to go to LA Lakers game. Kevin even offered up the Trask's season tickets. Gus paused and thought for a long time; then went back to explaining his player efficiency formula.

The restaurant was closer to the townhouse but Patty suggested that Kevin drop off Gus first. After months of working for Kevin she knew it was time to share the most intimate thing with Kevin. It had taken a long time but Tuesday Kevin was flying to Michigan and it just felt like the right time. When they pulled into the parking spot in front of the townhouse she reached over and put her hand on Kevin's hand. "Kevin, I think it's time that we share something with each other."

Kevin looked over at Patty and quietly said, "Okay."

"Kevin, I know how all of your life you have been sheltered. You don't like it when I say privileged but I think it is part of who you are. Maybe you are a little shy and we come from different backgrounds but I want to share something with you that is very personal."

"Okay," Kevin said for a second time.

"When my twin sister Cecilia died from cancer I think I was sort of where you are at right now. I was angry at my parents for not having good medical insurance. I was angry at the doctors and the hospital because they wouldn't try the latest experimental cancer treatments. But... most of all I was angry at God."

"Patty, you are so right on... I am angry! My dad thinks a little girl that get's crippled is just the price of doing business. The insurance company calls it collateral damage and when I talked to Tina about it, she just said, 'shit happens' ".

Patty tensed up; she didn't care much for Tina and to think about Cecelia's life being defined in the two words 'shit happens' made her like Tina even less. "Kevin things happen for a reason."

"Well, I don't like it and the sooner I'm out of this whole Trask family fiasco the better." Kevin took a deep breath. "As for God, where was he when Danny died up at Shasta Lake. What about Gus's mother? She died giving birth! When Gus talked about being in paradise I couldn't believe what I was hearing."

"Kevin, I know how you feel. I was so mad at my parents about the lame insurance coverage they had that I didn't talk to them for over a year. Then I went on this self-destructive course blaming God for everything. If God wouldn't even heal my twin sister, I didn't want anything to do with him."

"Well what changed you? I see you praying at your desk in the morning all the time."

Kevin that trip up to Shasta Lake. That night on the top deck of the Stargazer something just came over me and I just put everything in God's hands. I was so tired of being a tramp, drinking, not caring and everything else."

"I have never ever thought of you that way," Kevin replied with sincerity.

"I know Kevin and after that night; that I put it all into His hands, was when you came into my life.

"That's so cool... That is exactly how I feel about you," Kevin immediately replied.

"The mother-hen thing is really meant to be a compliment. You always have my back and I love you for that."

Patty was lost for words. She unfastened her seatbelt and leaned way over and kissed Kevin on the cheek. "I love you too."

When Patty climbed down out of the Land Rover Kevin said. "I'm not coming into work tomorrow. I need to get ready to fly to Michigan. I'll call you when I land on Tuesday."

"Godspeed," Patty said and shut the passenger door.