

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 blood-bath 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.”