

One

BLACK FRIDAY

● He looked up and saw the light.

Then he checked for injuries.

From his position, lying flat on his back in the First Church parking lot, Chris Seal grimaced and gingerly rubbed his ribs, testing to see if his fall on the ice did any real damage beyond embarrassment. With his other hand, he felt blindly for his keys. The way this day had gone, he wouldn't have been surprised if they had been flung into a passing truck and were now headed to Mexico.

Staring up into the glare of one of the parking lot lights, he couldn't help but wonder whether it would be best if he just stayed right there, slowly morphed by the falling snow into a white wet lump in the pavement.

Fifteen hours earlier he had been in that same position but in his warm bed watching shadows slide across the ceiling, anticipating the whine of his clock radio, listening to his wife's soft breathing, and praying that the Lord would help him prepare his Sunday School lesson early. He wanted to avoid the usual Saturday night cram session that seemed to create more stress than satisfaction.

"Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7) read the text for the next lesson. His favorite paraphrase of that text read, "Live carefree before God; he is most careful with you" (TM). An older version read, "Casting all your care . . ."

Casting all your care.

Care. Free. Because he knew there were several in the class who really needed that message, he thought through how he might communicate that clearly—in a way they would remember. He was amazed at how harried some had allowed their lives to become. The negative effects of stress seemed to be an epidemic. He closed his eyes and prayed.

But instead of wondrous words of wisdom or quiet advice from God butterflying into his mind, the face of Daniel Wooten appeared instead.

Wooten was the new president of St. Pio's College, the small, private liberal arts school where Chris worked as Vice President of Organizational Development, a catch-all title that had him responsible for a wide array of administrative responsibilities that included a teaching assignment in the field of leadership, one of his passions.

"St. Po's," as most called it, saving a syllable, was, in many ways a small town in and of itself. Everyone knew everyone else, and each worked hard to maintain the culture that gave the school both brains and personality. Everyone loved the little community of students and educators. No one had looked forward to getting a new president.

Wooten replaced Charles Mumphrey, the man who had nurtured, cajoled, and coaxed St. Po's into becoming one of the bright lights on the small college landscape for the last twenty years. Mumphrey wasn't that much older than Chris, but he had decided to step down "while I still have the energy and passion to tend to the important things," he had said.

He certainly went out on top. The school had a solid national reputation, received three times more applicants than it could admit each year, and, shockingly, showed a healthy bottom line. Other small private schools were justifiably envious. Chris had heard Mumphrey's reasoning for walking away but wasn't sure he understood completely.

No matter. Daniel Wooten was in charge now.

"Big day today, right?" Chris turned to see his wife, Allie, leaning on an elbow and looking intently at him. She hadn't been herself for the past few days but this morning looked beautifully normal through a sleepy smile.

"I hope it's not too big," he said.

"You're meeting with Dr. Wooten? Maybe you're worried for nothing. Maybe he's going to promote you." She reached across and squeezed his arm the way she did, always searching out the best in anyone and anything.

"I guess so. But the truth is, Pip, most new college presidents want to bring in their own VP. Sometimes new presidents mean big changes. I have to be prepared to lose the best job I've ever had."

"Well, we've prayed about it. You've prayed about it, haven't you?"

He *had* prayed. Not as much as Allie, and not as much he should have, but he genuinely was trying to give this to God. Still, the tightness in his chest and sinking sensation in his stomach were raw and real. "Well, yeah, of course. But with Amy starting college and Jake three years away from starting college, I can't help worrying a little about the prospect of being on the street, résumé in hand. I mean, I'm this close to foraging for nuts and berries along the median of the Interstate."

She smiled and pushed at him. "That's pretty good for six o'clock in the morning," she laughed as they both rolled out of bed at once. "I'll have to remember that one. Hey, don't forget you're picking up Uncle Ted at the airport tonight at ten. I'm looking forward to seeing him again. I think we'll have a nice few days together."

"I'm on it. Ten."

Allie could tell that her dutiful husband's mind was drifting far from this conversation. "Babe, the fact is, God has never once let us

down,” she said matter-of-factly. “Never. It’s what you teach all the time. I mean, have you ever regretted trusting Him in any situation?”

“No, I know,” he mumbled.

“No, really,” she pleaded.

He turned and looked across the bedroom at her, finding her eyes, knowing she was right and wondering what he had ever done to deserve such a gift.

...

Daniel Wooten deserved the president’s post at St. Pio. He had a strong academic pedigree featuring an Ivy League Ph.D., and he had just finished five years as president at a mid-sized public university in the Midwest. Wooten had become known for vision and innovation. He had a national reputation. It was a very positive sign when he pursued the St. Po’s position with vigor. When he was a candidate for president, he spoke fondly—and, Chris believed, sincerely—in interviews about admiring St. Pio’s from afar and wanting to be part of “something really special.”

Chris could have put his hat in the ring for the position. Mumphrey had encouraged him, and so had the other VPs. It was obvious to all that Mumphrey had considered Chris to be next in line. Chris had grown up at St. Po’s, spending most of his professional career there. While he would never acknowledge it, he was an important reason they were on the national map, recognized by several prestigious journals for their accomplishments. He just couldn’t get comfortable with the concept of *President Chris Seal*. He never could get the gut-sense that it was God’s will. The problem was that if he weren’t willing to compete for the presidency, he had to be willing to face the prospect of losing his job entirely. Nonetheless, he refused to be a candidate if the only reason was to stay employed. Nothing about that was right.

So why was he having so much trouble with this change? Beyond the fact, of course, that it could mean his loss of employment.

Sitting in the president's waiting room mindlessly reading his diplomas and wondering what was next, he urged himself to give Wooten the benefit of the doubt. Maybe he would honor the St. Po's culture. Maybe Chris's job was safe and the two of them would form the kind of relationship he had enjoyed with Chuck Mumphrey.

Maybe not.

He would know soon enough, because Wooten had emerged from his office, buttoning his jacket.

"Hey, Chris, good morning!" he greeted from behind his perfectly knotted silk tie and bright smile. "Good to see you."

Chris was six-foot-two, and Wooten was about five-ten, Chris guessed. Still, he felt as though he was looking up at the new president. He had that kind of first-impression personality that, if not larger than life, was at least larger than you. *He even smells nice.* The fact was, he didn't know Wooten. He didn't know what was behind the smile. He just knew he wasn't Mumphrey.

I'm reacting like a six year-old, Chris scolded himself as he entered the office.

Wooten had made the space his own, rearranging the mahogany furniture and adding an odd-looking plant that appeared as if it could move on its own. A photograph on the wall showed Wooten posing with the president in the Rose Garden. (Yes, *that* president and *that* Rose Garden.) Just above that, a younger Wooten was frozen forever pulling up for a jump shot in a college basketball game. And on top of that was a drawing that one of his children had obviously made in a kindergarten art class.

The large picture window presented a view of St. Pio's central campus, now dusted white. Stone buildings formed a quadrangle with a thick lawn dotted by flowering trees that in a couple of months

would give it the feeling of an orchard. Walkways crisscrossed the landscape, providing paths for the students who were now making their way to and from class. The campus was old, but not aged. It was traditional, and it was beautiful. In fact, most students who enrolled talked about the striking campus as a major influencer for them. It was stately, but it was comfortable and a place you could call home. Chris did.

At the far end of the quad, the Kennedy statue stood as a representation of one of Chris's proudest and most painful experiences.

Mary-Theresa Kennedy had struggled with an eating disorder throughout her time as a student at St. Po's. Chris worked with the Counseling Center to make sure she got all the help the staff could give her. It wasn't enough. Mary-Theresa died the summer before her senior year. When Chris heard the news, he left immediately to make the three-hour trip to the Kennedy home to be with her parents. They spent time talking about Mary-Theresa, grieving her loss and preparing for the funeral. Leafing through a scrapbook, Chris found an old picture of her holding a balloon. Five-year-old Mary-Theresa was looking up at her beautiful red floating prize with one of the brightest smiles Chris had ever seen, her hands gripping the string as if clutching hope itself. Her mother laughed through tears recounting the story of that wonderful day at the zoo. "*That* was who she was," she said.

That photo became the life-sized statue near the entrance of the quad; Mary-Theresa and her balloon. Chris was determined this was the memory he wanted St. Pio's to hold of Mary-Theresa and of all its students. There was something there that he didn't want the institution ever to forget, the buoyant spirit of a little girl, a hope out of darkness. He made it his personal passion to lead the project, raise the money, commission the sculptor, and see beauty rise from ashes.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Wooten's voice broke in.

There was something about this meeting now that seemed hollow. The more Chris thought about it, though, the more he wondered whether that was coming from Wooten or whether, instead, it was arising from within him, an anxious ache. What was happening to him? Why was he thinking this way?

Wooten pulled a chair up beside him near the window.

• • •

The new president was cordial and kind, even empathetic, but he made no guarantees about Chris's status or about the fate of any of the VPs. Bill LeVoor, the provost, had decided to step down when Mumphrey did. As a result, there would be at least one new executive officer.

But it now sounded as though there would be others. There would be change, uncertainty, and, for many, stress.

Wooten said that he had not made final decisions, but he admitted that nothing was certain and that he was still trying to get a feel for how best to build his leadership team. He wasn't making any promises one way or the other. He assured Chris that if he were replaced with a new VP, he would be given plenty of notice. He was trying to be truthful and comforting. As the meeting closed, he put his hand on Chris's shoulder, told him he knew this was difficult news, and assured him that he would always do what was best for the college.

Returning to his office, Chris replayed the meeting in his head. He appreciated Wooten's honesty and did feel respected. He had always preferred straight talk as opposed to an empty smile. Still, he had already updated his *résumé-vita* and had begun making contact with his network of colleagues at other colleges. Dread rolled in his gut, an ominous distant rumble. His mind raced with all that he would need to do to prepare to find a new job. Uneasiness began to

fight for his attention. He fought back the creeping panic and prayed that all the activity wouldn't be necessary.

As he arrived at his office suite, he noticed that his assistant, Kim, had placed a pink phone message slip on his chair. That was her habit, since she knew that if she put it on his desk it might get lost in the jungle of papers and reports. His inbox and outbox waged daily warfare against Chris and against each other. Sometimes it got vicious.

The fact that there was only one message was unusual since Chris had become used to being greeted by a stack of messages whenever he had been away from the office for more than an hour or so.

Despite his swirling emotions, he smiled when he saw that Kent Wallace had called. Kent was Chris's pastor at First Church. He was also a dear and trusted friend. He wasn't the syrupy sweet stereotype of a blindly kind "man of the cloth" one might see in movies. He was a strong and loyal leader. He hadn't become a pastor as a fallback career. In fact, he had been a very successful management consultant before entering full-time ministry. No, Kent took to the pulpit because he was simply so passionate about Jesus Christ that it made sense to him to spend the better part of his days teaching and living the gospel. He was also very funny—milk-shooting-out-of-your-nose funny. Chris loved the opportunities he had to be around Kent.

It was because of Kent that Chris had pursued a district minister's license so that he could be more involved in the work of the church. While he considered his role at St. Po's as a ministry of sorts, Chris also liked the idea of serving in the church and training to be more effective at communicating the gospel and touching people in a meaningful way. He wanted to live his life passionately. That was one of Kent's most important influences on him.

It was no surprise that Pastor Kent Wallace had led First Church to remarkable growth and community impact during his seven years there. Chris couldn't imagine going anywhere else.

Kent and Chris's phone conversation was brief. Kent wondered if Chris would have some time to stop by the church office that evening. That wasn't unusual. The two often got together for touching-base sessions to talk about leadership, church strategy, sports, bad movies, and growing closer to Christ—not necessarily in that order. They often sought each other's advice. However, it was odd that Kent wanted to meet on a Friday evening.

Chris called Allie and gave her an update on his meeting with Wooten. She was characteristically upbeat and encouraging, later texting him with 1 Peter 5:7 and a smiley-face emoticon wearing a little skirt. He then spent the rest of the day catching up on paperwork, looking at his résumé and curriculum vitae and placing some phone calls to colleagues he hadn't spoken with recently—all while trying to ignore the ugly anxiety that seemed crouched in the corner of his office ready to pounce. He couldn't clear his mind or relax the tightening in his chest.

•••

Snow began to fall as Chris navigated late rush-hour traffic toward the First Church campus. He parked his car among the few that were remaining in the lot and looked up to see Kent's office light still on as expected. He went in through the side entrance to find his pastor waiting. He hugged Chris, perhaps a little more tightly than usual, and the two walked together upstairs to Kent's office.

"Thanks for meeting on a Friday evening," the pastor started. "I hope this didn't interrupt any plans you and Allie had tonight. Candlelight dinner? Mood music? WWE on the TV?"

Chris smiled. "Nah, Allie has a meeting tonight. Besides, I have to pick up her uncle at the airport later and didn't plan to go home anyway. And I can always DVR WWE."

Normally, this kind of back-and-forth would continue until both were satisfied they had gotten their best lines out of the way. Tonight was different.

"Okay," Kent breathed, "I've got kind of a bomb to drop on you, and I want to get right to it."

Chris had no idea where this was going, but it didn't feel good. At least it was in keeping with the way his day had gone so far. It was about to become a fiesta of bad news, and he was the piñata. "Okay," he said, hesitating. "Shoot."

"Well, you know about Angela's mom."

The two had spoken often over the last few months about what Kent and his wife, Angela, were going through. She had been burning the candle at both ends, traveling more than three hundred miles to spend time with her mother, who had been diagnosed ten months earlier with Alzheimer's disease. It had been a tough go, putting a lot of stress and strain on their family.

"I know," Chris said. "We've been praying."

"And those prayers are greatly appreciated." Kent straightened himself in his chair, glancing outside at snow dancing under the lights of the parking lot, and continued.

"We really have no idea what the future holds with Mrs. Raines. Angela is determined to be by her mother's side every step of the way."

"A six-and-a-half-hour trip one-way, four times every week," Chris thought aloud.

"Yep. And, she's a trooper of course, never complains. We've talked about moving her mom here, but familiar surroundings are

very important in her care. Of course, the way things are just can't continue. So—"

At the same time that a lump caught in his throat, Chris realized what this meeting was about. He was starting to connect dots that he didn't really want to connect.

"We've decided to move to Oak Grove into Mrs. Raines' house. We'll be right there to care for her." His speech slowed, becoming more deliberate. "I'm stepping down as pastor. Other than Angela and the district superintendent, you're the only one who knows at this point. Part of me hates it. The other part knows God is in it. To cause Angela to continue to make these kinds of sacrifices would represent wildly misplaced priorities on my part."

Chris was trying to let that sink in, but the sinking was a struggle. He threw out a question just so he could continue to process.

"When?"

"Well, as soon as possible. That's kind of where you come in, buddy."

What a day this was turning out to be! Black Friday, or, since he was trying to follow Allie's model in being optimistic and hopeful, Charcoal Gray Friday.

"I would like you to pray about taking over."

Taking over? Chris felt more like falling over.

"Taking over? Taking over what?"

"The DS and I want you to pray about becoming the lead pastor of First Church—full-time ministry." If Kent had already had conversations with Dr. Daniels, the district superintendent, Chris knew this was beyond just an idea. "I've sensed for quite a while that God might be calling you. You're loved and respected by everyone in this church; you have the regard of the associate pastors, none of whom is ready for this. You're already a key leader." He had thought this through. "You're a gifted teacher with a big heart for God and His

people. You certainly have the professional credentials and the appropriate licensure. Dr. Daniels asked me to supervise the transition with the district. I've prayed about it, and I think you're the guy. The fact is, we need you."

In his earlier meeting with Wooten, Chris knew what was coming. But this was beyond out of the blue. He knew all about the situation with Mrs. Raines and the pressure that it was putting on Kent. However, he always thought that Kent would find a way to balance the church, Angela's needs, and caring for their children. These were echoes of Mumphrey—another loss.

To think about First Church without Kent was rough. Add to that the thought of Chris as pastor, and all he could do was try to figure a way to slink out of the room unseen.

First Church was big and complex. It had taken the blessing of God and the expertise of Kent Wallace to build. It was making an impact in the community and actually doing what its mission statement said it would do. Leading it wasn't easy, and it was certainly not the same as leadership in a college. Chris knew that already because he had been serving in a leadership role for several years. It was fulfilling and important, but it was also challenging. It was a great place to be, but there were times when it had a herding-cats feel to it.

Yes, Chris had thought about full-time ministry, but never seriously.

"What will you do?"

"I've already had some conversations with a few former clients. We're praying for the chance to come back eventually. But we both know there's no certainty either way with Alzheimer's. Look—I know this is sudden, but I'd like to know what you're thinking."

Chris's answer was strong and confident: "Are you crazy?"

But he knew enough about God not to just laugh it off on impulse. Kent asked him to go home, talk to Allie, and carve out some

time to meet with him again early the following week to address all the details. Chris knew Kent well enough to know that he had sought the Lord and had made a firm decision. He wasn't going to be talked out of leaving, but perhaps the two of them could brainstorm and determine a better choice for his replacement.

"I want you to really seek God on this. We'll be friends, no matter what decision you make. Of course, the church has no hope of success if you don't say yes, but—no pressure."

They both smiled, a little nervously.

After Chris had asked a few more detail questions, Kent wrapped his arms around him and prayed for quite some time. Then they walked together to the door.

As Chris approached his car, his mind was so occupied that he forgot to be careful of the thin film of ice underneath the now steadily falling snow. As he turned the corner, both of his feet flew forward, and he knew he had lost it—too late to do anything about a messy, slushy spill. He careened backward, but cushioned the impact of the wild fall with a flailing right hand. Still, his back slammed hard against the wet pavement, as if a hand were driving him downward.

And so he lay there, with the day's events swirling like the snow. In one day he found that he was probably losing a job he loved and was being offered one that he couldn't take. And in the middle of all that he had college tuition and a mortgage and a career in peril. Now, a biting pain was creeping from his lower back to the tips of his fingers and toes.

The snow began to settle on his chest, feeling heavier than it should have.

If he had known there was more to come, he might not have gotten to his feet.