

A Penny for Your Thoughts

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The organization was legit. After three weeks of investigating, that was my final conclusion, the final report I faxed to my boss. After he reviewed my summary and gave me the go-ahead, I wrote out a check for \$300,000, locked it in my briefcase, and headed for downtown Chicago. I had already reserved a flight home for later in the afternoon; now all that remained was to meet with these people and do what I had come here to do.

The place was called Transition Resources, and it was run by a friendly mother-and-son team. I had called for an “emergency” appointment, and they had readily agreed to see me, even though they didn’t know who I was or the real reason I was there. All I had told them was that my name was Callie Webber and that I needed to have a meeting with both of them.

I’m sure they thought I was just another client wanting their agency’s help. My showing up in a taxi, wearing a suit, did seem to throw them a little—probably because most of their clientele usually come by bus, wearing sweat pants or torn jeans. Nevertheless, they shook my hand and invited me down the hall of their cramped, somewhat shabby office building and into a room lined with stacks of papers and folding metal chairs.

“You’ll have to excuse the mess,” the woman said, motioning for me to have a seat. “There’s a leak in the ceiling of the back room where we keep the files. We had to move everything in here.”

“Quite alright,” I said, smoothing a piece of hair back into the chignon at my neck. I always wore my long brown hair pulled straight back despite the nagging of my friend Harriet, who was forever urging me to visit her hairdresser. He’ll work a miracle on you! she would say, insisting that my look was too severe and old-

fashioned, that the right cut would bring out my blue eyes, my cheekbones. But I liked myself the way I was. The hairstyle that had served me for the last three years would continue to suffice.

“So how can we help you today?” the young man across from me asked, and I turned my attention to him. He was rather short and plain, but there was a sweetness to his face, a gentleness to his expression that reminded me of my brother. “Do you have a parent with a situation that needs our services?” he continued. “Because we do have to consider cases based on financial need...”

His voice trailed off as I placed my phenomenally expensive ostrich-skin briefcase on my knees and began working the gold-plated combination lock. The case had been a gift from my boss, who was generous to a fault and always spent far too much money on gifts. A thrifty person myself, I had never been comfortable with the briefcase, but I didn't return it for fear of hurting his feelings, knowing that somehow he would eventually find out.

“Tell me about your organization,” I said as I clicked the first number into place. “I understand you're in three states now?”

“Four, as of last week,” the woman answered. “We set up a little satellite office in Detroit, and already it's being swamped with applications.”

She went on to tell me how their company was a nonprofit organization that specialized in the relocation of the elderly. Specifically, they helped older people with limited financial resources make the difficult transition from independent to assisted living, from their own homes into retirement villages or nursing homes. This organization helped find housing, do the paperwork, pack possessions, sell extraneous belongings—they even offered psychological counseling to guide their clients through the emotional experience of letting go and saying goodbye.

Of course, everything the woman told me I already knew. I knew that and much more.

It was my job to know. “So are you a reporter or something?” the son asked, still eyeing my briefcase. “Cause we've been trying to

get some more exposure. We think we might stir up a few donations if we could get on the local news.”

I finally got the lock undone. I opened the lid and reached inside the front pocket for the familiar rectangle of paper that was waiting there.

“Actually, I’m not a reporter,” I said. “I’m from the J.O.S.H.U.A. Foundation.”

It took a moment for that to sink in, but when it did the mother and son looked at each other in surprise.

“The grant!” the woman said. “I nearly forgot we applied for that. Are you here to get some more information?”

I shook my head and allowed myself a small smile. “I’m here to present you with this check,” I said, “from the J.O.S.H.U.A. Foundation to Transition Resources in the amount of \$300,000.”

I held out the check, and neither of them moved for a moment. Then suddenly they began jumping up and down and hugging each other and screaming and cheering and embracing me. It was one of the more jubilant reactions I had gotten in the last few months, and I allowed myself to relax and go with it, silently thanking the Lord for good people like these, people who had a gift for taking God’s resources and using them in wonderful ways.

“We can buy a truck,” the son said. “That’ll cut our moving costs by 38 percent!”

“We can do a lot more than that,” the mother said, counting off on her fingers the plans they had itemized in their grant proposal. “Extended counseling, bigger facilities, more caregivers...”

They listed ideas for the money, lobbing them back and forth like a tennis ball. They asked if they should call the local newspaper to have a photographer and a reporter record this event. I told them no, that our foundation preferred to do things in a more discreet manner.

“So what was it about our little company that caught your eye?” the mother asked, finally settling down into her chair and pausing to catch her breath. “We didn’t think we stood a chance. We just did the paperwork and sent it out on faith.”

I took a deep breath, wondering how I could ever explain the way our foundation worked. I wasn’t exactly sure myself what the selection process was. I only knew how my part of it worked: I received a sealed packet from my philanthropist boss, a packet full of information about an organization or business to which he would like to make a donation. It was my job to verify the integrity of the organization as thoroughly as possible. Sometimes that meant digging around a little, examining records, talking to people—occasionally even posing as a client or infiltrating the ranks as an employee. My eclectic employment history as a private investigator and then an attorney had trained me well for my job, and I was very good at what I did. When my research was finished, I was the one who gave the red or green light, and thus far the boss had always relied completely on my recommendation. If I said the place was good, then he would commission me to write and deliver a check for amounts ranging as high as a million dollars.

The amazing part was that my boss stayed out of the picture, remaining completely anonymous. He kept such a low profile, in fact, that even I didn’t know much about him beyond the basic facts. Tom and I had spoken on the phone hundreds of times, but we had never met face-to-face, nor did we have a need to. I left him to his privacy.

“It’ll take days before this really begins to sink in,” the son was saying now, still staring at the check in wonder and grinning from ear to ear.

“Whom can we thank for this money?” the mother asked. “I know a little about the J.O.S.H.U.A. Foundation, but is there someone in particular...” She let her voice trail off, looking to me for information.

I smiled, clicked my briefcase shut, and stood. “The best way you can say thank you is to take that money and use it to further your mission as outlined in your grant proposal. The foundation believes

strongly in what you're trying to accomplish, and we just wanted to have a small part in furthering your efforts."

It was a speech I had made many times before, but it still never failed to bring a small lump into my throat. There were so many unsung heroes out in the world, people who had decided to dedicate their lives to helping others. The fact that I got to be the bearer of such good news was the very best part of what I did for a living.

I caught the next flight back to Washington, DC, reading a magazine most of the way, closing it finally as we crossed over the Ohio River. I leaned back and looked out of the window, marveling at the gorgeous streaks of purple and orange that accompanied the sunset.

I was tired. Actually, I was exhausted. This was the fifth case I'd worked in a row without a break. Now I was ready to take a few days off, putter around the house, and catch up on things that needed doing there.

The seat in front of mine held a telephone in its back, and when the man sitting next to me headed to the rest room I took the opportunity to pull out the phone and dial. My boss liked to hear from me as soon as possible after a delivery; he would be expecting my call.

The connection was surprisingly good. I had dialed Tom's private line, the one I was supposed to use in case of emergency or at prearranged times. He answered on the second ring, his voice sounding deep and resonant as usual.

"Callie?" he answered. "It's me," I said, feeling a smile creep into my voice. Though Tom and I had never met in person, we always had a certain rapport over the phone. I had an image of what I thought he looked like, though that image had evolved and shifted over time. All I knew for certain was that he was in his early 30s, like me, and that he had made his fortune in the computer industry. Otherwise, I did not use my investigative skills toward him. It was enough for me that he was my employer, that he valued his privacy above all else, and that he was a good man with a generous heart and very, very deep pockets.

“Callie, Callie, Callie,” he said now, and I could hear the click of a computer in the background. “You traded in your first-class ticket for coach again.”

“You know how I feel about flying first class,” I said, rolling my eyes. “I got over \$400 back.”

“So keep the money as a bonus and spend it on yourself, then.” “It’ll go back to the foundation,” I said, “as always.”

He exhaled slowly, but I could tell he wasn’t exasperated, merely baffled. There were things I had no qualms spending money on—such as a good suit or a nice pair of shoes, because they were essential to the image the foundation wanted me to present. But to me, it always seemed silly to fly first class when coach was available. Either one got you where you were going, and wasn’t that the point anyway?

“So tell me about our friends in Chicago,” Tom said. “Were they pleased with our little contribution?”

I sat back in my seat and described their reaction, enjoying the vicarious pleasure Tom received from my description, wondering for the hundredth time why he didn’t simply show up to deliver the money himself.

“As I was leaving,” I said, “they got a phone call from a nearby hospital. Seems there was a 91-year-old woman who had been living with her son, but the son had died and the hospital didn’t know what to do with the woman.”

“Sounds like a case for social services.” “Social services was trying to locate a nursing home for her. But within five minutes Transition Resources had dispatched a counselor to go to the hospital and stay with the woman while they waited, and they even sent a volunteer worker over to her house to see about her cat.”

“Nice.” “They’re good people, Tom. You did a wonderful thing.” “As did you.”

We chatted a little longer about nothing, really, the way we did sometimes. I always pictured Tom as a Quasimodo-type, alone in a vast castle, the world at his fingertips, but his life a somberly empty place. Of course, that image was probably way off. For all I knew, he was a dashing jet-setter with a gorgeous woman on each arm and a fancy home on every continent.

“Well, now that this case is closed, I have a different sort of assignment for you,” Tom said finally. “This one is a bit of a departure from your regular routine.”

“Oh?” “The place is called Feed the Need. It’s a worldwide hunger relief organization based in Philadelphia. I want you to make a delivery there tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” I said loudly. A woman looked at me from across the aisle, and I lowered my voice. “You don’t want me to check them out first?”

“The founder is an old friend of mine,” Tom said. “Wendell Smythe. A wonderful man. I have no doubt his operation is everything it claims to be.”

“Still, it wouldn’t hurt to take a look–” “The problem is that their need is fairly pressing. Seems that they want to put a bid in on a building that’s up for auction, and they need a quick \$250,000. I see no reason to delay.”

I exhaled slowly, thinking about my immediate plans. I had been working so hard lately; I really didn’t want to jump right into another case. I had things to do. I was going to get off this plane, make my way home to my little cottage on the Chesapeake, and spend the week winding down. My plans were no more ambitious than catching up on laundry, taking out the canoe every day, and tending to my personal e-mail. I hadn’t been home for more than a few days at a time for the last month; even my poor dog, who lived with a neighbor whenever I traveled, was starting to feel like a distant memory.

“Callie,” Tom said, interrupting my thoughts, “I know you miss your little Maltese. But it’s only a one-day assignment, and the packet is already waiting for you at the apartment in the city. Spend the night

there, zip up to Philly in the morning, and you'll be home by tomorrow night. Then you can take a whole week off if you want. Paddle down those little tributaries to your heart's content."

I smiled, wondering how it was that a man I had never met could know me so well.

"Everything I need is in the city?" I asked, thinking of the corporate apartment the foundation kept near the Watergate. It was nice, if a little sterile, and I did keep a toothbrush and an extra change of clothes there. I supposed a quick trip to Philadelphia wouldn't kill me. At least I knew my way around because of an internship I had done there one summer as a law student. Though I hadn't liked the law firm enough to accept their offer once the internship was over, I had kind of liked the city. It had a certain attitude about it, a traditional yet funky dichotomy I found intriguing. Though I didn't plan to stick around town a moment longer than necessary, it would be nice to drive through Philadelphia again. "Okay, I'll do it," I said finally.

We concluded our call, and I slipped the phone back into its holder. Once I got to the apartment, I would call Lindsey, the teenager who always kept my dog, and tell her she would need to keep her just a little bit longer. Then I would go through the packet of information about the agency in Philly and call it a night.

I leaned back and looked out at the sky, which was a dark purple now, the gray clouds silhouetted against the horizon. I felt at peace, satisfied with a job well done, eager to finish this one minor errand tomorrow so I could begin my little vacation.

It's a good thing I didn't know then how the following events would unfold, that my little trip the next day was going to turn into something altogether different than either Tom or I could ever have predicted. In my years as a private investigator, I'd seen a few dead bodies, sure.

But I certainly didn't expect to run into one on this particular errand.

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