

**THE
POIGNANT
SACRIFICE**

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AN UNEXPECTED RESTORATION

PATRICK HANSEN



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Unless otherwise noted, all Scriptures are taken from the *King James Version* of the Bible.

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PROLOGUE

JASON HERNANDEZ EXPERIENCED a youth that might have ended his life before it really had begun. Involvement with drugs and gangs in Texas had him moving in all the wrong directions. Only the friendship – and prayers – of his lifelong companion, Felix, had kept him from destruction. Eventually, the persistence of Felix had broken through Jason’s hard heart and he surrendered his life to Jesus Christ. Early on, it was Felix who served as a strong mentor to the young believer.

Sadly, less than two years following Jason’s salvation experience Felix developed leukemia. In spite of fervent prayers by many in the young men’s fellowship group, Felix succumbed following a very difficult struggle with the illness. The loss of Felix hit Jason hard, and what began as doubt about God’s goodness deteriorated into a certain degree of rejection of his new faith. His life in general and his job in particular suffered significantly as his overall disposition spiraled steadily downward. The change in the quality of his work did not go unnoticed at his office. The twenty-eight-year-old Jason was aware of the trend and decided resigning his position was the solution.



CHAPTER 1

I TOOK A deep breath as I opened the door into Mr. Fenton's office, expecting the worst.

"Come in, Hernandez my boy!" the flamboyant vice president called out as I entered his office. "Have a seat. Always good to see you. How is everything going?"

"Well, sir, uh ..." I started out.

"I know why you're here," he interrupted. "You're struggling over the loss of your friend. What was his name?"

"Felix," I responded.

"Yes, of course. Everyone has noticed how hard that has been on you. No need to fret, my boy. Anyone would react the same way. What you need is a change of scenery, fresh surroundings. You are a valuable employee to this company, so tell you what we've done. The rest of the management team—well, at least most of them—and I have decided to create a new position and sort of a branch office arrangement with you as the, ah, manager. It's in Oklahoma City. Do you think that might be a place that would suit you?"

"I, uh, I think that might work for me." I only knew I had to get away from Dallas-Fort Worth and the recent painful memories. I really didn't care where.

“Good, good. You can continue your work in marketing strategy there,” he continued, flicking an ash from what had to be the worst smelling cigar ever made. “Of course, this isn’t actually a promotion; your salary will be the same, and I would be remiss if I didn’t point out you will be missing out on certain fringe benefits by not working in the home office.” He cleared his throat before thinking of a specific example. “Like cafeteria privileges.”

“I understand that, sir.” Right then the company cafeteria was not high on my list of concerns.

“Excellent. Then it’s all settled. I believe we can have you up and running in an office we have arranged in Oklahoma City by, ah, let’s say, a week from next Monday.”

The surprised look on my face must have shown I didn’t expect such a transition could be done so soon. “Don’t worry, my boy, we will make sure you have a place to live in your new town. Check with the receptionist on the way out; she has the name of a property agent in Oklahoma City who will have you a place in no time. Do you have anything else?”

“No, sir.”

I wasn’t sure whether to be relieved or more worried than ever as I left the spacious office, but sensed perhaps my hopes were being more than fulfilled. As I stopped at the receptionist’s desk I was still processing what had just transpired.

“How did it go, Jason?” Mrs. Rodgers asked with genuine concern. She was as kindly as Albert Fenton was blustery, and she knew everyone in the company by name.

“Fine, I think. I went in there determined that I have to leave these parts and figured that would probably mean quitting the company. But Mr. Fenton said a position has been set up for me in Oklahoma, so I guess I won’t be needing this after all.” I took the letter of resignation I had agonized over for an hour and a half the night before from my pocket, crumpled it, and tossed it in the waste basket. Immediately I realized it was relief I felt.

“We’re going to miss you around here, Jason. You always bring a ray of sunshine into the room when you come by. But I’m very

happy it is working out for you to stay with the company. No doubt you will be back from time to time for staff meetings.”

“I’m sure,” I responded with little enthusiasm.

“Anyway, I need to give you a business card for a woman where you are moving who deals in rental property,” Mrs. Rodgers said. She reached into her desk, which was adorned with no fewer than three photographs of her new granddaughter. “Here.”

“Thanks.”

“Keep in touch.”

“Yeah,” I replied but wasn’t really thinking about what she said.

Later at my apartment I sat down on the couch for a long time before realizing I was actually moving from the place I had called home for nearly four years. The thought of packing was unpleasant at best and it wasn’t made any easier when I started boxing up the photo albums. The pictures spanned most of my life, and it seemed in many of them I was either in school or playing soccer—and usually Felix was right there, too. It had been less than three months since his funeral. Before that I had watched helplessly for half a year as the leukemia relentlessly sucked away his life. The doctors were confident a bone marrow transplant could have saved his life, but no suitable match ever was found. All of us who were his friends were tested, and for a while I had entertained the noble fantasy that I was going to be the one to provide the life-saving substance for Felix, but it was not to be. Several of his own relatives, who may have provided the best prospect for a compatible match, seemed to disappear rather than be tested. In my mind I knew it was because of fear and ignorance, but in my heart I still had not forgiven them for letting Felix down.

After the funeral the sense of futility and discouragement over losing my lifelong best friend—and really my only close friend in adulthood—just deepened. I had quit attending church, the very one Felix had led me to at the beginning of my quest for God. The quality of my work at the office had suffered, too, and soon there was no escaping the fact that if I were to move on with my life it would have to be in another place.

At length, I shook off the melancholy musings and asking, for the thousandth time, “Why?” and began the tedious process of fitting some of my belongings I wouldn’t be needing soon into various-sized boxes. I actually made pretty good progress before deciding to call it a night. There was going to be plenty of time to pack the rest of my possessions over the next few days.

The final few days in the Fort Worth office dragged by slowly. I accomplished little except clearing out my work station and assuring everyone this wasn’t “goodbye,” I was only moving three hours away and still would be working for the same company. Why, I expected to be in touch with many of them on the phone or fax machine weekly if not daily. Still, there was a pall over the office; what no one needed to say yet everyone understood was that “Jason Hernandez is moving to try to preserve his sanity.” It made me feel even more of a basket case than I really was. It made me feel as though my co-workers considered me emotionally weak, and I hated that.

Almost as bad was having to tell the owners of the apartment complex I lived in that I was leaving. Bob and Betina Perez were high-profile members of the Hispanic community, and they had taken Felix’s death as hard as I had. Even before his passing, but especially afterward, they looked out for me as a son and I often felt I didn’t let them know I really appreciated them. I feared they may take it personally when I told them I was moving.

“Jason! Come in, sit down. I have some cookies, fresh out of the oven. You have some!” Betina was always the model of hospitality and more of a “mother hen” than anyone I had known. She made it hard to say no, especially to her cinnamon apple-bit cookies.

“Oh, no thanks, Betina. I’m not hungry,” I replied.

“What! Are you all right, Jason? You never turn down cookies.”

“I just dropped by to give you my notice that I’m moving. Sorry it isn’t two weeks’ notice like you prefer.”

“You’re leaving us?” Bob asked as he entered the kitchen from the living room. “Is it something we did? Or didn’t do?” Both of the Perezes tended to assume whenever something went wrong that it was their fault.

“No, no, not at all,” I quickly tried to assure them. “I am being transferred in my job. To Oklahoma.”

“I didn’t know your company was getting so big. Oklahoma now?” I could tell Bob was skeptical; he knew that the company mainly did business within the greater Dallas-Fort Worth area.

“They are starting up a small office in Oklahoma City, sort of on a trial basis.”

“Is this a, how do you say it?, a promotion for you, Jason?” Betina wondered.

“Uh, kind of—it’s an expansion of responsibilities. Something new for me to take on.” I found myself automatically reaching for a cookie from the plate in front of me without thinking. It was delicious.

“So you will be making more money then,” Bob half stated and half asked.

“Well, no, at least not at first. It’s mainly a chance for me to practice more administrative skills. Then I should be more ready to move up the corporate ladder, so to speak, later on.” I really didn’t want to bring up the subject of Felix. Bob might think I was running away from one of life’s trials.

After a few minutes of interrogation, which I had fully expected, Bob and Betina were satisfied my leaving was not a reflection on them but for my professional benefit. We worked out the details concerning the apartment keys, the deposit, and a variety of other procedural matters before I returned to my abode on the second floor. It occurred to me how nice it would be for me to give them a small gift for their kindness before I left. But with so many tasks to complete in a short period of time, when could I go shopping? Then I noticed the attractive plaque on the wall with the inscription “I AM THE WAY, THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE”; Felix had given it to me after the first time I attended church with him and professed faith in the Lord. But now it merely reminded me that Felix was gone. Maybe that would be something the Perezes could appreciate more than I did now.

The furniture movers came the afternoon before I was to drive to Oklahoma City. They brought an enormous moving van even

though my few belongings of any size easily could have fit in the back of a large pickup truck. Most of the furniture stayed with the apartment. I could tell the movers thought such a small job was hardly worth their time and the use of so much of their equipment. But since my employer was footing the bill for this move, who was I to complain?

That final night in the apartment was bittersweet. Without most of my own personal items and knowing I was embarking the next morning on an “adventure” into the unknown, I had a clear sense of being alone and what was my usual optimistic outlook was overcome by doubt and near hopelessness. For the most part, sleep eluded me, and when I finally did drift off to sleep I was soon to be rudely awakened by my alarm clock. I stumbled from the bedroom more tired than if I had not slept at all. Somehow I managed to complete the last-minute loading of my remaining possessions into the trunk and backseat of my aged Oldsmobile and—deciding to skip breakfast—left the apartment for the last time.

Traffic was light, even for an early Saturday. The sky was depressingly gloomy and did nothing to help me be more awake. I decided to switch on the radio, as much to help me be reasonably alert as anything else. But the Saturday morning options held nothing particularly interesting. For a few minutes I listened to a children’s Bible program, but childlike faith did not appeal to me. Oddly, that same program was one I frequently listened to a year before—though I would never had admitted to anyone that I enjoyed programming directed at pre-teens. Now, however, the same show struck me as naive, or worse. Eventually, I switched the radio off.

The miles passed by as I drove north on Interstate 35. Northern Texas became southern Oklahoma with little visible evidence of the change except the “Welcome to Oklahoma” sign and a couple other signs dealing with the state’s traffic regulations. My mind was wandering to nowhere in particular when, a few miles south of the town of Ardmore, I was shaken back to reality by a sudden *thump thump thump* and a stiff jerk of the steering wheel to the left. Just what I didn’t need—a flat tire. A sport utility vehicle was

in the process of passing me and I barely prevented my car from veering directly into it.

Finally, I managed to steer the vehicle to the edge of the road. Stepping out, I immediately realized where I had parked was littered with shattered glass from someone's previous unfortunate incident. At least I hadn't worn sandals.

Soon another problem presented itself. The spare tire, while fully inflated, had even less tread than my well-worn main tires. To make matters worse, it quickly became obvious I had no idea how to operate the jack. I never had occasion to use it before and had not paid attention to my mechanic's advice to learn how it worked. I vaguely remember him saying something about this being an unusual model. I struggled for several minutes and was no closer to figuring out how to make the device work when I glanced up to see an Oklahoma state trooper drive up behind me.

"Can I help you, sir?" he offered.

"Man, I sure could use help," I replied eagerly.

As soon as I looked up, however, the look on his face changed. His smile faded and his eyebrows furrowed slightly. He didn't say anything, but I could read his thoughts: *Oh, great, a Mexican.* As he began to assemble the jack very deftly, I noticed he looked at the car's license plates. He gave an audible grumble and muttered, "Texas!" His tone clearly was not one of a fan of the Lone Star State.

Partway through changing my tire, the officer suddenly stopped and blurted, "May I see your driver's license and vehicle registration ... sir?" nearly forgetting the title of respect.

"Sure," I said as pleasantly as I could manage.

He examined the documents carefully for some time before handing them back to me without comment. He didn't utter another word till he had finished changing the tire.

"Thank you so much, officer, for your help," I told him as he closed the car trunk after replacing the jack inside and tossing the ruined tire on top of it. I really meant it and hoped he recognized my sincerity. "I would have been here a long time trying to figure that weird jack out."

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As he walked back to his vehicle he turned and tersely commented, "That spare is pretty pathetic. I wouldn't drive far on it."

"Don't worry, I won't," I assured him, but I don't think he paid any attention to my response as he climbed back into his patrol car. Before he drove off I noted that he talked into his radio mike and waited for a minute or more. No doubt he was checking on my license plate and, most likely, on me as well.

"Welcome to Oklahoma" indeed!