

CHAPTER 3

ONE GOOD DEED

*I*t was just after dusk when the Bud Lite delivery truck quietly drifted up to the curb of 16th and National. Its driver jumped down and rolled up several of the side-loading doors. Transporting humans instead of beer was unconventional, but Henry Ackerman had reluctantly agreed to do it. He was known to be friendly toward the 16th Street street-dwellers, and was willing to help, but only during non-working hours.

“Hurry up guys, we’re leaving in a few minutes,” yelled Lefty to the nearby volunteers.

“If it wasn’t for Clayton, I never would have agreed to do this,” one admitted.

“Me neither,” said another.

“I know, but we said we would. So, let’s go, everybody,” said Lefty.

The group meandered toward the truck, where Ackerman guided the nineteen homeless men into the side-loading refrigerated bays and rolled down the doors. They were soon underway to the worksite.

“God, it’s freezing in here!” could be heard from inside the bays. “Whose idea was it to do this?”

Sitting in the rarely used passenger seat, Clayton directed Ackerman along the route that he and Lefty had scouted on their bikes a few days earlier. Any witnesses must have mused at the unusual sight of a Bud Lite beer

wagon bumping along a rocky trail next to a railroad track, or at the muffled sounds emanating from it. Fortunately, the complaining would end in twenty minutes or so, which it did as they arrived at the site of Clayton's inspiration, the graffiti work project.

Climbing out of the cold trailer bays, the volunteers were surprised to see an area fully illuminated with portable flood lights revealing a pair of graffiti-covered buildings. A wooden pallet containing several one-gallon cans of paint and a box of paint brushes had been staged between two of the flood lights. Extension ladders lay nearby.

Clayton barked out instructions to his reluctant workforce, as the beer truck drove away. "Over here, gentlemen. A quick meeting, before we get started."

Reaching into a cardboard box, Clayton grabbed several t-shirts like the one that he had on and threw them to each of the volunteers.

"Put these shirts on so that if someone asks, they'll be able to see that we're all working on a *Community Improvement Activity*. If anyone wants more information, tell them to talk to the 'boss.' That would be me. I'll handle it from there."

The troops mumbled incoherently as they struggled to pull their new t-shirts over their existing clothes. The all-black tees had bold white letters across the back that read *CIA*. Several were heard saying, "Where does it say Community?"

Lefty explained, "It's just an abbreviation, guys. They charge by the letter in making these shirts. Three letters was cheaper than fifteen. Now, everyone grab some paint and a brush and move into position. I want nice, clean paint strokes covering the sides of each of these buildings. If the graffiti shows through the first coat, go back and give it another. We've got to get these buildings painted before daylight when Ackerman picks us up."

On into the late night, the workers applied neutral-colored paint on the sides of the buildings directly exposed to the railroad tracks. Motivated by Clayton and encouraged by Lefty, the painters toiled with incidental bitching about sleep or sore muscles. Around 2 am, they were interrupted by the blinking headlights and honking horn of an SUV with a glowing *Lyft* logo on its windshield. They turned around to see an animated Clara

Barrington spring from the vehicle and announce, “Break time! Time for coffee and donuts.”

Without hesitation, the painting crew dashed over to where Clara was happily handing out hot cups of coffee and glazed donuts. The morale of the late-night laborers soared with Clara’s timely gesture. Finishing the project by daybreak was now virtually guaranteed.

Long after Clara had left and as dawn was breaking, the need for lighting waned. Lefty turned the lights off and staged them near the wooden pallet. A few of the workers were tasked to walk around the project and gather up the empty paint cans, discarded coffee cups, and any other trash in the area, while the others finished up the last section of painting.

Just then a KUSI TV *action news* van bounced its way onto the scene, followed by a sedan with a Union/Tribune logo on its doors. Clayton turned and was surprised to see the visitors. Accompanying the news vehicles was a familiar *Lyft* taxi bringing Clara back to the scene.

A popular *Breaking News* reporter from channel 9 stepped out of the van to assess the situation. The female newspaper reporter got out, too, and watched to see what the TV reporter would do. Clara jumped from her *Lyft* taxi and frantically motioned to Clayton to head off the reporters in order to have some say in the news teams’ narrative. He quickly moved to greet the investigators.

Sunlight was just breaking as the camera crew hastily measured the best angles for background and exposure to facilitate a live, on-scene report.

Holding a microphone in one hand and running her other hand through her long dark hair, the TV reporter asked the cameraman to make sure the buildings in the background were visible. The newspaper reporter shuffled through her note cards but continued to wait for the TV reporter to begin her interview. Clara looked on as Clayton greeted the reporter in front of the camera. Moments later, they were live.

“We’ve located the source of the reported suspicious activity along the railroad tracks leading into our fair city. I’m Cynthia Guzmán and this is KUSI live in San Diego.” She turned and pointed to the freshly painted buildings.

“Yesterday, these buildings were covered with gang-related graffiti, an unsightly welcome to anyone riding the passenger train to or from downtown. But, as you can now see, there’s a fresh coat of paint covering over the graffiti, thanks to this group of men around me.”

She turned toward Clayton and the camera followed.

“I’m speaking with the organizer of this project who requested to remain anonymous. “First of all, sir, can you verify that you are not an intelligence gathering organization?”

Clayton furrowed his eyes and cast a questioning look. “Ah, what kind of an organization?”

“Intelligence. You know, like the Central Intelligence Agency?”

“I-I-I don’t know. I have no idea where you got that idea.”

“Can you turn around for our cameras, sir?”

“Ah-a-a I guess so.” Clayton turned around with his back to the camera.

“Okay. Thank you. You can turn back now.” She waited a few seconds for Clayton to recover. “Your t-shirt has the letters *CIA* which is the abbreviation for the nation’s premier intelligence agency, the Central Intelligence Agency.”

“G-G-gosh. I-I-I...”

“We spotted some of your men wearing those t-shirts at this site last night and quite reasonably assumed...you know, nighttime, secretive work, and of course the initials CIA. We thought that you might be connected with some covert, government operation. Anyway, that’s what it seemed like to us.”

“I-I-I can assure you; we are not connected with any government agency.”

“So, tell us, what *are* you connected with? What does your organization represent? What do those letters on your shirts mean?”

The fog in Clayton’s head was clearing as he finally figured out the reason for her line of questioning. He motioned to Lefty to come over, then humbly started to explain the group’s activities to the reporter. Clayton spoke directly to the camera and confidently avoided any reference to the CIA or the group’s homeless status. While talking, he covertly instructed Lefty to gather the men for a group photo in front of one of the buildings. And without further hesitation, he continued.

“You see, I had a coach one time who inspired me to *look for ways to improve: personally, spiritually, and environmentally*. ‘Do good and make a difference in the world,’ he said. I’ve tried to put his words into practice. I convinced these friends of mine to help paint over the ugly graffiti along the train tracks that bring passengers as they come into our beautiful city. And we wanted to do it without recognition or praise.” He paused, then continued. “We did this at night so as not to draw attention to ourselves, but rather to our finished work — a pair of graffiti-free buildings.”

The reporter was obviously impressed. *We’ve got a real story here*, she thought, as the cameras rolled. She barraged Clayton with questions, causing him to pull back and refocus.

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to show the real focus of this project.” Turning and gesturing toward the freshly painted buildings, Clayton said, “that’s our work, a clean new look for our city, by a group of anonymous volunteers.”

The reporter and camera crew were astonished by Clayton’s bold explanation playing out *on camera*. They were charmed by the group’s spokesman, and quickly followed his lead as they directed the camera towards Lefty and the crew posed in front of the newly painted buildings.

Careful not to define the everyday activities of his workforce, Clayton continued, “These selfless volunteers are trying to *do good and make a difference*, just like my coach once told me. They’ve sacrificed the comforts of one night’s rest to tackle this project.” He gulped to hide the unspoken backstory. “And in an hour or so, they’ll be back at their regular, daily routines, without complaint.”

Clayton’s convincing delivery was all the news team needed to dispel any cloak-and-dagger intelligence report, and to put a bow on the *feel-good* story of the day. A thumbs up from the cameraman signaled the reporter to wrap up the broadcast with a positive word. Moments later they left the worksite.

However, the Union/Tribune representative then stepped forward.

“If you don’t mind, sir, I’d like to delve a little deeper into your story.”

Clayton smiled and replied, “No problem.”

“Going back to the CIA non-affiliation, exactly who are you affiliated with? Do you all live here?”

Clayton sensed a more serious probe for information, but with a disarming smile, he suggested that they had no affiliation. “We’re all just local citizens and volunteers.”

“Who provided the equipment: the lights, generators, paint, etc.?”

“They were all donated. Home Depot, Ace Hardware, and United Equipment Rentals.”

“Do you have other projects like this pending? What might they be?”

“We prefer not to disclose at this time, thank you.”

“I heard you address one of your men, you called him ‘Lefty.’ Is he a veteran or something? Is that his real name?”

“No,” Clayton smiled. “He’s my assistant. I call him ‘Lefty’ because he has no righty.”

The reporter misinterpreted Clayton’s innocent spoof as dry sarcasm, and abruptly ended the interview. She coldly thanked him for his time, returned to her car, and drove away.

Clara remained and congratulated Clayton for his masterful interviews.

It was perfect timing, as the Bud Lite truck crept back onto the scene and its driver started to reload his passengers to deliver them back to 16th Street. But before they all left, Clayton asked Lefty to have some of the men make one last walk around the project site to ensure that all of the painting materials and equipment were returned to the area near the wooden pallet. “All good,” declared Lefty as he hopped aboard the beer wagon with the workers.

“Good job!” yelled Clayton into the loaded cargo bays. “Now, everyone take off your t-shirts, but hang on to them for next time.”

Ackerman rolled down the last of the compartment doors and climbed up behind the steering wheel. Clayton and Clara joined him on the passenger side. Then the truck with its hidden passengers slowly drove away from what would be the first of many *Community Improvement Activity* projects.