

The Pink Slip And A Lifesaver

By

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“We are not here to fire you,” Michael Pinkston stated. His voice was soothing and full of confidence. Michael wore the deep blue power suit, white shirt, and a navy blue tie. It resonated confidence and placed the idea that people could trust him. To a group of middle management leaders and executives from Gordon-Hirschel, this was far from the truth. “Only to evaluate the best way to get Gordon-Hirschel to increase profits.”

Rumors spread that their jobs might be cut. Layoffs were eminent and no one was happy to see Michael “the pink-slip” Pinkston. Many people gave Michael this nickname, although he never fired anyone. He worked as a human resource and finance specialist for large companies. They would hire him to evaluate the company to see how they could improve their employment situation and bottom line. In Michael’s ten years of experience, he never suggested a company to hire more people. Many of Gordon-Hirschel workers knew this, so no one was happy to see him.

“Isn’t this the same guy who was responsible for Omaha being downsized,” Itzal said into Henry’s ear. Both men were supervisors in the Gordon-Hirschel company. They came in around the same time and promoted to lead their own team of reservationists.

Gordon-Hirschel was a company that took reservations for a variety of hotel chains across America and Canada. They took these jobs so hotels wouldn’t worry about paying a staff to deal with reservations. The key success for Gordon-Hirschel is to make sure that the customers did not know they’re calling another company. Most of the reservation teams deal with a specific hotel chain so customers would think it’s all one company.

Some reservation teams worked with online sales as the internet became a hotbed for hotel customers. Henry Hall and Itzal Watkins’ teams worked under Pedro Fuentes. They dealt with the three-star hotels and often competed to see whose group could close the most deals.

“Yeap,” Henry responded.

“Hmm,” Itzal muttered. They both looked at one another then at Pinkston.

The 200-seat auditorium filled with Gordon-Hirschel leaders and supervisors at the headquarters in Columbus, Ohio. The company started in the Midwest and spread to cities across America. Columbus was chosen as headquarters due to the growing white-collar job growth in

the area. To increase profits, regional sites were closed and sent to central Ohio. Omaha was the last office outside of Columbus to remain open until Pinkston came in to evaluate how the company was being run.

“Once my evaluation process is complete, then I will return with my findings. You will of course be informed, and I know the transition will be best for all,” Pinkston said.

“I’m sure,” Itzal muttered.

There were some light applause and chattering within the crowd. Pinkston nodded to his audience and left the stage. Henry kept his eye on the man and sighed. He could feel that something was not right.

“He’s not from here, is he,” Henry asked. The two men got up from their chairs and meandered their way through the crowd.

“No,” Itzal answered. “He’s from a company whose business is to evaluate how large corporations can make more money.

“Greed,” Henry stated.

“It’s how the system works,” Itzal responded.

Three months after the evaluation process, Pinkston’s gave his report. Henry had an ominous feeling about the process and Itzal tried not to think about it. They knew Pinkston’s report would be upon them. There was a possibility that Pinkston would find that the company was excellent and did not need to be downsized. After all, this was the last office for Gordon-Hirschel.

A similar meeting was set up like the one where Gordon-Hirschel leaders were first introduced to Michael Pinkston. Henry decided to make an extra strong cup of coffee in the break room. There were two canisters and one had the regular mix and was half-full. The other was empty so he prepared that one for his special blend. He was a recovering alcoholic and tried his best to stay focus as well as keep his nerves at ease. The extra strength coffee would help with both.

Josh Hammels, longtime reservationist, walked into the break room while Henry poured the second bag of coffee in the filter. His sudden presence startled Henry. Josh wasn’t on Henry

or Itzal's team, but his group was near Pedro's department. Josh was a team lead for a group that handled five star hotels. However, a nervous breakdown caused Gordon-Hirschel to send him down to the one star motel reservations to help ease his mind.

"Hey Josh," Henry said.

"Hey," Josh responded. "I heard Pink-slip is here."

Henry chuckled. "Yeah, Michael is here. I'm hoping for good news."

Josh poured himself some of the regular coffee. "You think," he asked. Josh's blue eyes had a dead look to them. It was as if he was looking at Henry but was lost in some other thought. Henry could tell something was weighing on him but didn't know what. Since the man had a nervous breakdown ten months before, he really didn't want to stress him out.

"I'm sure, I hope," Henry responded.

"You're a supervisor, so you should know."

"They don't let us know everything," Henry said and grinned. Josh didn't crack a smile. "But I can't see them doing to us like they did Omaha. We're the last U.S. place left."

"There's always the world," Josh stated. Henry didn't think about that and Josh left the break room. For some reason, the thought that they would move all of the offices away never crossed Henry's mind.

"There's no way, they would do that," Henry said.

"Talking to yourself again," Itzal said. Henry jumped but caught himself. He started the coffee machine to make his blend of coffee. "What didn't you think of?"

"Smells good," Henry began. "Think they would move all our jobs, or most of them, away from America. I figured they would keep something here."

"True." Itzal stared at the stream of coffee being made. "This looks extra dark," Itzal commented.

"Yeah, I needed the extra strength."

Three hours after drinking coffee in the break room, Henry received the news from Michael Pinkston. It was in the same room as the first time with the same group of leaders. Three months ago the people had a chance of hope that they would be saved, but when Pinkston returned, the mood was completely different.

Michael Pinkston had a few armed officers and guards on the stage with him this time. This wasn't his first time delivering bad news and has seen people get violent. Gordon-Hirschel

set up protection and Pinkston gladly took it. As usual, he was in a deep blue suit and matching tie.

Pinkston started his speech with praise for the leaders and officers of the company. He knew to get people warmed up before giving them bad news. After seven minutes of flatteries and encouragement, he knew it was time to get to what he was being paid for. "It has been my recommendation that Gordon-Hirschel downsizes its Columbus office and move to a more financial viable situation for the continued growth and welfare of the company," Pinkston stated. There was no emotion or kindness in his words. He said it as if he just told the room that black panthers are dark or the sun is hot. It was a matter of fact. He didn't care about the people's lives that would be affected. Only that Gordon-Hirschel was paying him to find ways to make them more money.

The audience, Pinkston's peers, booed and jeered him. Not common for a business meeting, but then it wasn't common to hear that their jobs would be downsized. Many were visibly upset, others crying, and some had a blank look on their face. Pinkston didn't give any indicating if everyone had to go, or if a few departments.

"Greed," Itzal stated. Henry agreed silently.

Henry left the meeting like all the others visibly distressed. Not only was he concerned for his own job, but for the welfare of his team. He had a teen who was pregnant, others where saving for a new house and some needed medical bills paid. Henry was close to them, and treated them like family at work. He didn't know how he would break it to them that the department could be laid off. He didn't know if everyone would come under the axe but should prepare them just in case.

To gather his head he went to the bathroom and splashed water on his face. The cream-colored walls and silver plated sink never looked so good. He used to complain about coming to his job sometimes. The pay was good, people friendly, but sometimes work got to him. He didn't realized how great he had it until the possibility of it being gone came to fruition.

The power of wanting a drink was growing. He slipped a few times, him and his wife, but usually they where strong. The urge grew within him to quell those anxieties with a nice sip of beer or rum. Saliva began building and the overall taste for a nice cold beverage grew in his mind. Henry splashed another round of water on his face and took a deep breath. "Pull it together," he whispered.

Like many of his workers, he too had to help pay for some family business. His wife was dealing with kidney disease she inherited from family genes and binge drinking. Now he's hoping for a cure, which seemed unlikely or a transplant. Dialysis was out of the question for her. Not that she couldn't have it, but had experience of seeing her family go through the process. Dialysis was something she did not want to do.

"Could you keep it down a little bit," a voice from the stall said. Henry whipped his around to see where the voice was coming from.

"Hello," Henry asked puzzled.

"Yeah, I'm here," the voice said, and I was hoping you could keep it down a little bit."

"Okay," Henry said. His voice oozed with confusion.

"I've been taking some pills to help my bowels move easier, and I want to concentrate on that."

Henry was completely shocked that someone would be so honest. Then again, he could tell by his voice that the man was close to retirement age and did not care. He could probably care less if the department, company, or anyone was being let go. As far as he was concerned, he was on his way out anyway. Right now, the most important thing for him was to relieve himself in the bathroom.

"Okay, I'm on my way out," Henry started, "sorry about that."

"Thank you."

Henry was about to respond when three gunshots rang-out not far from the bathroom. He paused and looked around. Henry instinctively checked his body and was glad to know that nothing came through the walls. For a moment, he assumed it was his imagination and thought it was probably someone dropping office supplies off their desk.

"Did you hear that gunfire," the man in the stall asked.

"Yes," Henry grimly said. He was going to say something else when a loud bang on the front of the bathroom door startled him. He whipped his head around and Josh was wrestling with Pinkston through the door.

"There's more of that if you follow me," Josh yelled.

"Josh," Henry exclaimed. He looked at Josh's vibrant eyes and the terrified look on Pinkston. Josh held his victim with a strong arm under Pinkston's shoulder and around his neck.

A 9mm black handle gun in the other. Henry wasn't worried about type but knew that Josh was serious.

"Watch the door Henry," Josh ordered. Henry stared at the gun but couldn't move. "Henry, the door!" Henry heard him the second time and walked to the bathroom door. He could hear people on the other side. Some with panic in their voices others had an authoritative sound to it. Henry figured these were the guards.

"You're going to get our jobs back," Josh said to Pinkston.

"Could you keep it down," the man in the stall said, "I'm trying to take care of business."

"Who said that," Josh yelled. He was unstable and Henry knew Josh could end the stranger's life.

"It's okay Josh; it's just an old guy trying to use the bathroom."

Josh paused for a while his eyes flaring but his grip strong on Pinkston. "Tell him to keep it down."

"Okay," Henry said.

"Tell him!"

"Sir," Henry started. "Right now, would be a good time to let me, and the man with the gun, handle this."

"Okay," the man said. There was fear in his voice. The word gun put fright in his mind and Henry could tell from the quiver in his voice.

"Tell 'em not to come in," Josh said.

"Who," Henry asked.

"His bodyguards," Josh said grabbing Pinkston harder.

"Don't come in," Henry yelled at the door.

"He needs to let the hostage go," one of the guards said.

"I know, just don't come in right now," Henry said.

"Tell 'em I have a grenade and will kill us all."

"He has a," Henry paused for a moment. "You have a what," Henry asked.

"Grenade."

Henry paused again and stared at Josh. He couldn't tell if he was serious or not. Josh urged Henry on by waiving the gun to tell them.

“He has a grenade,” Henry said. He didn’t say with confidence but with concern in his voice. He was hoping Josh was bluffing. “Please don’t come in,” Henry said. He knew if Josh was right, then there was no place to go in such a confined area.

“You will not get away with this,” Pinkston stuttered.

“I don’t care. I’ve already tried to kill myself, once,” Josh said. He wasn’t lying. During the nervous breakdown, Josh tried to take as many aspirins as possible. He was sick, but the doctors were able to pump his stomach before it killed him. He now has problems with certain foods and drinks due to ulcers. At that moment, Henry knew Josh didn’t mind killing himself. The large amount of aspirins caused his stomach to bleed and be sensitive to coffee. He should have known something was up once Josh got a cup of coffee.

“Don’t get us killed,” Henry muttered. Pinkston was silent. Defiant. But silent. “Josh, what are you doing?”

“I don’t know, I just saw him and snapped.

“You have a grenade and a gun,” Henry said.

Josh bent his head. “You’re right.” Josh shook his head and a small tear began to start in his eye. “I knew he would have bad news. I’m tired of this mess.”

“This is bad, but what you’re doing is so much worst,” Henry said.

“Is it? Our lives, as we know it is over. You know it’s tough to get a job like this back again. Sure Gordon-Hirschel can always make more money, but what are we going to do,” Josh asked. He really didn’t mean that as a question, more of a statement.

“Survive,” Henry answered. “Bad things happen all the time. So we survive.”

“But this bad thing is due to people like him,” Josh responded, “working on behalf of the company for greed.”

“I’m just doing my job,” Pinkston answered.

“You’re killing American families!”

“Whoa,” Henry said. He was a little nervous and could hear a creak towards his back. Henry turned around to see the bathroom door slightly open and the look of someone peering in. The guards were probably getting a quick surveillance to see if they could come in and take Josh down.

Josh noticed what Henry was looking at and pointed his gun at the door. “I swear I’ll do it,” Josh said.

“Go back,” Henry yelled at the door.

Josh shoved Pinkston away from him and with a quick tug from his pocket pulled out a grenade. It was slightly bigger than what Henry imagined from what he had seen on television. He never seen one in person and couldn't believe the size of it. Josh pulled the pin and grabbed the handle. “Shoot me now,” Josh yelled.

“Don't, please don't,” Henry exclaimed. “He has the grenade in his hand and it's ready to go.” The door crack closed again. Henry blew out a sigh of relief and Pinkston struggled to stand. His eyes were wide with fear. Henry realized that Pinkston thought Josh was bluffing. He knew with a slip of the hand they would all be dead or severely injured.

“For a moment,” Pinkston said, “I thought you were bluffing.”

“Not at all,” Josh said emphasizing each word.

“I know it's going to sound cliché, but you don't have to do this,” Henry said. “You think you're the only one.”

“Only one?”

“The only one with problems. I'm loaded with mess.”

“You're a top level supervisor,” Josh said. “Don't lie to me.”

“My wife is dying, and it's my fault!”

The room was silent for a span of two seconds. Only the humming florescence lights and the low raspy breathing of the man in the stall made noise.

“How,” Josh asked.

“We use to party too much in school and from there we developed our love of alcohol and each other. I knew kidney problems ran in her family, yet I pushed sometimes for us to have a good time.”

“Oh,” Josh responded.

“And now,” Henry started and began to fight the urge to cry. “She waits for a donor or some miracle cure to help her. Or else she'll be chronically ill or lose another baby. Like my other child that was miscarried.”

“You're not lying,” Josh asked, “are you?”

“You'll think I'll lie about that,” Henry said. Josh shook his head. “Of course not, that's the love my life. No, she is my life. I wouldn't lie about that.”

Josh thought for a while and then put the pin back in the grenade. He got on the ground and said, “let them in.”

“He’s giving himself up, don’t shoot,” Henry said.

The guards came into the bathroom with guns drawn. The first two immediately went to Pinkston and Josh, while the third checked Henry. They took Josh out and carried the grenade carefully.

“Good luck with your wife,” Josh said.

“Thanks,” Henry said as they carried Josh out of the bathroom. “Get well.” Josh smirked and he was gone from the bathroom. Henry heard the guards make sure Pinkston was okay and feeling good. He was fine and they checked him out thoroughly. One of the men would have gone to the guy in the stall but he was still trying to take care of business. He pushed but knew the stress would back him up for at least another day or two.

“You’re a good man,” Pinkston said to Henry.

Henry nodded. He was thinking of telling him to call off the layoffs but knew that wasn’t going to happen. “Self preservation, I do love my wife.”

Pinkston nodded.

A brief hostage situation trumped the news of layoffs for the day. No one was thinking about themselves, only if Henry was okay. Physically Henry was fine, but mentally he was a mess. As much as he was concerned for himself, he was also thinking about Josh. He knew that anyone could be like him. If pushed hard enough, people snap.

“What are you thinking about,” Itzal asked. They were on the bottom floor in a common area known as the lounge. Most people came to the spot to chill, check text messages, and sleep. Henry needed to think. Abstract paintings of green circles and red rectangles dotted the walls.

“Anyone can be like Josh.”

“He had a grenade.”

“Why not,” Henry stated. “Anyone, if pushed hard enough can do that. I feel for him.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I mean, I won’t do anything crazy like that. But, what is anyone’s breaking point.”

“Hmm, you never know,” Itzal responded.

“Exactly.”

Characters are from the novel Repeat Offender by Ricky LaVaughn

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