

ABSOLUTES

A NOVEL

BY

ROGER K. BRAUN

© 2005

Seen on a bumper Sticker:

LORD, SAVE US FROM YOUR FOLLOWERS

“ . . . and it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called ‘Christians.’ ”

Acts 11:26b

**“ . . . they dragged Jason and some believers before the city authorities, shouting,
‘These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here
also. . . ’ ”**

Acts 17:6b

**All quotes are from The New Revised Standard Version Bible,
Copyright © 1989, Thomas Nelson, Inc., Publishers**

CANADA

Chapter One

The first thing that Sam noticed about this prison was the softness on his ears. When the door closed behind him he didn't hear the loud, harsh, solid clap of steel slamming against steel and locking shut. That was a sound he was familiar with. Instead he heard the soft closing of a wood door upon a wood frame, much like the door he closes each night at his home in Chevy Chase, Maryland. His hearing told him that this was not a door for security as much as a door for serenity. Not what he expected from a maximum security facility built for the use of the government of Canada to house and rehabilitate hardened, violent criminals.

Sam is Samuel H. Burkeheart, PhD., who holds degrees in sociology and criminology from such diverse places as the University of Arkansas and Stanford University. Married with two children, he stands about five foot, eleven inches, with short brown hair. His body is trim but showing the natural affects of age because he is, after all, going on forty-nine. Sam looks fit and proper in a suit and tie and he doesn't mind dressing that way as a way to emphasis his physique. When other people are in his presence his pleasant smile and affable laugh put them right at ease. As a supervisor he uses this talent exceptionally well in order to get a great deal of work accomplished from his employees. He works for the United States government in the Bureau of Prisons and Rehabilitation and that is how he came across the progress reports from the Canadian Office of Corrections Prison Number 102. What started out as a helpful informational search for one of his colleagues turned into a curious obsession to find out what Prison

102 was doing to have such glowing progress reports. Nothing, he assumed, could be as good as all the reports he received about the workings of this facility.

As a criminologist with responsibility for dozens of federal penitentiaries, his world had suddenly been turned upside down since September 11, 2001. What was being allowed in the area of interrogations with people identified as “combatants” at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, was now being looked at for use with the civilian criminal justice system. Could other means be applied to obtain information during police investigations? Was it worth the extra effort and expense? Would the information obtained be useful? Are there more expedient ways to rehabilitate the United States prison population? These and other questions he was supposed to answer as he speculated upon the theory of what would happen if the same techniques now being used by the military were available to the civilian authorities. His report was due to be finished soon and it was his investigation for his friend that led him to the discovery of this facility in Canada and the discovery of new techniques that were being used.

Now, here he was in the Province of Saskatchewan, Canada, just outside the city limits of Saskatoon, standing within the entitled Canadian Prison 102 itself. He noted to himself when all of them first drove into the driveway that the outside looked like any typical jail. There were brick barracks spread out in military-style lines with a chain-link fence running around the entire perimeter and what is referred to as razor-wire intertwined both at the bottom and at the top of the fence. There were two guard stations, one at the front with a gate to let people in or out, and one at the back to watch over the surrounding area. That was all that was familiar to him. Inside it was completely different.

In addition to the sound of the closing of the door he heard other gentle noises. The sound of a buffer waxing the floors. The sound of the muffled, rubber soles of the guards' shoes and, what was it he heard? Someone was whistling. Through a glass pane in another door he saw a young, thin man wiping down tables with soapy water, wiping the tables clean with a cloth and whistling a tune that was light and airy.

He has to be one of the prisoners, Sam thought to himself. Sam peeked into the room and watched as the man continued his labor. The man wore a clean, white uniform with two black stripes around the chest area. He walked rather unsteadily around each table, feeling the edges of the tables with his hands, but the walk was also straight and tall, neither defiant, nor cowered, like so many prisoners he had experienced in the past. Just a casual observation of this one man gave Sam the impression that something different was being done to change behavior and attitudes in this institution. He turned to join his colleagues.

As he did, his sense of sight caught other abnormalities. The furniture in the reception room was also soft. Gone were the hard, cold chairs and benches of metal or plastic that are status-quo with all the other prisons. In this prison there were leather and cloth covered chairs and couches. The only thing that was different was that they were bolted to the floor. Not in a heavy-handed fashion, though. Each piece of furniture could be easily moved by unfastening two or four small bolts screwed into the floor. The intent was to have furniture that was inviting; but furniture that could not to be re-arranged at anyone's convenience or whims.

There were flowers in a vase on one of the coffee tables. "Nice touch," he said to himself. A little feminine addition to an overbearing situation. Not many people would

appreciate the sentiment, but he did, for he knew that the little touches can have profound effects on people. Visitors to this reception area would immediately be put at ease surrounded as they were by the gentleness. His thought was, Who was the warden trying to impress?

He used his nose to investigate the literal atmosphere of the room. Normally, a prison smelled like an institution. A whiff in the prisons he oversaw would give Sam the smell of bleach and detergent mingled with dust, mildew and perspiration. It was a smell that invoked the feelings of fear and intimidation. Today he smelled food. That was natural, he thought, for it appears we are right next to the kitchen and cafeteria. But the smell of food was not coming from that direction. It was coming from the hallway where they would be entering the prison. Hence, he assumed, the rest of the facilities also smelled the odor of food being cooked. It evoked feelings in Sam of hope and security.

Sam's mind immediately went to work analyzing and formulating explanations for what his senses told him. He prided himself on his awareness of situations and his ability to assess people and their psyches. His thought was, This can't be right. Things are so out of place. There are so many unusual sights, sounds and smells. The impression that he felt, as an administrator of prisons, was fear. Not a superficial fear, but a gut-level fear that something is so askew that it has to be induced by some unorthodox, violent means. His feelings fluctuated between flight and astonishment. Soon his overwhelming curiosity and rational mind overcame his feelings. He was here to find explanations and as soon as he gained control of his fearful emotions he began to feel excitement. He was in a twenty-first century rehabilitation center that was producing remarkable results with prisoners. He focused his mind upon his work and the reason for this visit. Within these

prison walls there was a key to the mystery of prison failure and one prisoner who might change the entire system.

In the reception room along with Sam were four other representatives of the United States government. Together these five people make up the Committee for Special Strategy to Combat Global Terrorism which is a small part of the Division of Homeland Security. Indeed, it was because his friend was a member of the Department of Homeland Security that Sam had become involved at all. It was his friend, standing next to him now, who had asked Sam to help him find a specific prisoner and that search led him to discover the extraordinary Prison 102.

The friend is Ernst Walker. A holder of several degrees and doctorates, Ernie is the perfect government employee for he is a recluse who enjoys his privacy and keeps all his secrets to himself. He has often dated but has never married. In fact he says he never will since there is no wife in the world that can compete with his work schedule. And Ernie loves his work schedule. He never complains and he often works overtime when it is not required. The Department of Homeland Security was the fulfillment of Ernie's dreams. Now he can get paid for what he loves to do and still maintain a magnanimous feeling that he is making a great contribution to future generations. He is allowed to carry a revolver, which makes him feel important, and apply all his intellectual skills, which makes him feel appreciated. His Doctorate in comparative cultures makes him invaluable for diplomacy and for understanding any enemy in this complex and multi-cultural world.

"Ernie, come here and look at this," said Sam as he pointed to furniture bolted to the floor. "What do you make of all this?"

It's not Guantanamo Bay, that's for sure" he replied. "I've had the pleasure of

visiting there once, and they don't even treat their visiting guests to as good of comfort as this place does."

"I can't believe that this is the greeting that families of hardened criminals are treated to," remarked Sam. "It must be different here in Canada."

Ernie laughed to himself and said to Sam, "If I ever decide to take up crime, remind me to do it in Canada. Are you sure our man is in this place?"

"As I said when we left," assured Sam, "this is the place we will find him. The records are very clear."

Ernie Walker stands tall at six feet, three inches. He has broad shoulders and large feet which make him look like he swaggers when he walks. He is self-conscious of this trait and tries to avoid looking more threatening than he is. He is soft spoken, except when angered, but this doesn't happen very often. With a crew-cut hair style and wire-rimmed glasses he looks very much the stereotypical incompetent, self-important government agent. Don't, however, underestimate this man. Behind the soft façade, the blue eyes, and the sedate smile there lies a sharp mind with the ability for crystal clear astuteness and a spirit of passion that won't let him let go of a problem until he has found a solution. His one pleasure is fishing, preferably alone, but every now and then he asks Sam to join him. And that is how they became good friends.

He was feeling something he didn't like to feel, anxiety. This whole trip, in fact the whole reason for the committee, was his idea. He had formed it and presented it to his superiors. He was given the approval for the assignment with the stipulation that if anything went wrong, it was his fault alone. He was taking chances that could ruin his career, so anxiety was a normal, human response. He let the feeling marinate in his

stomach for a while and then in his mind he listed all the assets he brought with him. His worries soon began to subside and be replaced with confidence. This plan was worked and re-worked until all the flaws had been ironed out. He had with him some of the greatest minds in their fields of expertise and they had agreed to accompany him on this experiment. If just a few more obstacles could be removed, then this brain-child of his might succeed beyond all his wildest imaginations. He thought, It is the human element I fear the most, but we can compensate for that, can't we? Confidence is what he needed now. He said once again to himself, "We can compensate for that, yes, we can."

"Sam?" he asked. "Will you be able to make a fair assessment of our man from just today's interview?"

"Don't worry," Sam replied. "I will be permitted to look at his files from here and that will give me a pretty good idea of his rehabilitation."

"About the only thing I worry about," Ernie said, "is our ability to manage our subject."

"That is what this prison seems to have figured out," Sam said back. "We also have some specialties of our own, like our own Dr. Nease."

Walking behind them was Dr. Alicia Nease, surgeon and research analyst for Micro-Biology Corporation, New York City, NY. Fifty-five years of age, mother of two, both doctors, and wife to a corporate vice-president, Dr. Nease was at the head of her class of medicine when she graduated from The Ohio State University. After her internship she found the then fledgling stem-cell research appealing to her personality and took a gamble on investing her time and money in a new firm, Micro-Biology Corp. It was the best gamble of her life. The company was on the ground floor of research and

development when the field of stem-cells exploded. Now a “brave new world” of human potential existed and she was not just a passenger. She was the pilot. Out of the group now assembled she was the only one that found them. The other three Ernie had hand-picked, but Alicia had been doing research, so she implied, and discovered their need for her expertise, so she had volunteered her services. Ernie couldn’t believe his luck when she had stepped forward and agreed to be part of the team.

She had a round face with perky auburn hair. Always neat and proper, Alicia was part scientist and part lady. She took both roles very seriously. She had a presence about her that people described as hospitable. She made people feel important and comfortable even though she was unequalled in mental gymnastics. When she worked she was utterly focused on the task at hand which made some colleagues feel like she was ignoring them. But they soon got over their feelings when they discovered how correct she usually was and how easy she was to share the glory with others. Her large hazel eyes wore contact lenses so nothing could hide the other features of her face: like smooth cheeks, an Irish nose, and succulent lips. Even though she was in her fifties she looked much younger. She was beautiful, intelligent, personable, and seductively charming.

“At least when you talk about me it’s not behind my back,” she quipped.

“Never,” said Sam, “would I mumble a disparaging word about you, doctor.” And he gave her a gallantly posed bow.

“Knock it off,” she said with a smile. “I know you guys and you never change. Is my specialty surgery or sex?”

“Doctor Nease,” Ernie bantered back, “only once in my life was I ever truly disappointed and that was when I found out you were married. Once I knew that, I have

only thought of you as a professional.”

“Really? Well, when you first met me, Ernie,” she asked with an impish grin, “what impressed you more--my brains or my bust?”

“Alicia, what got you thinking along these lines? Have we done anything to insult you?” inquired Sam.

“No, Sam,” she said. “I’m just highly nervous. I’ve never been inside a prison before and I feel like the only mouse in room full of cats.”

“Point taken,” said Sam. “I’m nervous with excitement to be here and, in a way, my feelings are heightened, also.”

Alicia was very nervous. She wanted to finally meet her patient face-to-face and talk with him. This little trip was an important one for the life of Alicia Nease. With her in command of the biological components of the mission she could accomplish many goals, especially a personal one. For Alicia, more than anyone else in the committee, this was something that was deeply personal. How personal only she acknowledged to herself but it drove her like nothing else did. She was concerned that her personal involvement might blind her to overlook some compromising positions, but she felt that she could justify all her actions. She was committed to her course of action and who would know? The entire operation was to be so secret that if anything went wrong, it would be disavowed. She was determined to be part of this group and make sure that nothing went wrong with her experiments unless she planned it. She was finally going to talk to the man that had murdered her oldest daughter.

“Ernie,” she hesitantly asked, “what if he refuses our offer?”

“Then we go back and start again,” he answered. “I hadn’t really given it much

thought that we would really get a rejection from him. What person wouldn't grab a chance at freedom?"

And his complete freedom is what I want to make sure he never has, thought Alicia. The murder and the trial had all been in Canada and she never had the opportunity to confront her nemesis. All this time she had kept tabs on his location and punishment, hoping that someday she would have the courage to meet him and challenge him. Now she had a chance to actually sway the outcome of the situation. What bitter irony.

"You're familiar with the criminal mind, Sam," she pointed out. "What are the chances of really understanding him and assessing our chances of success with him?"

"No one will fully understand the criminal mind," replied Sam. "And believe me; I have tried my entire career. Our subject is also different in that there is a strong element of jealousy, or almost a complete singleness of mind. Maybe we can use that to our advantage. I really don't know. There are so many variables with human criminal behavior. Maybe that's why we brought along a lawyer." He laughed and gave Geoff a friendly pat on the shoulder.

The Honorable Geoffrey Holland was a complete contrast to Alicia Nease. While Alicia had finesse and personality Geoffrey Holland had, well, to be honest, none of either. Geoff is at the top of his profession in International Law. While he was still a young, practicing attorney he rose fast among his peers to become a federal judge long before it was considered proper. Then from this federal position he was asked to serve with the State Department, which he readily accepted. Because of several personality quirks, he often found that after he had accomplished some great goal that he then became bored with the new routine and quickly sought another avenue for his energies.

Therefore the young federal judge jumped at the appointment to serve within the State Department. The State Department, with its vast global responsibilities, was just what he needed to exercise his continuing ambitions.

“Yeah,” Geoff said, “everybody hates lawyers until they need one. And then, do we come in handy. If anything goes wrong with this, you will be glad you have me on your side.”

Ernie jumped in with the diplomatic reply, “That’s exactly why I asked the State Department for you, Geoff. You are the best and we will need your advice.”

Geoffrey attacked problems head-on. The law was the law and nothing else mattered. He did not have to be diplomatic or caring, all he had to do was know the law and apply it. It was in the particular area of law application that he had a gift. Whatever the State Department needed, Holland could find a law that would suffice for the time being. His thought was that there were so many laws and so many different ways to apply the laws that no nation needed to do anything illegal to accomplish some end. There were more than enough legal ways to do them. All one had to do was find which laws to accentuate and which laws to manipulate.

Needless to say Geoff had trouble with relationships. While the law is solid and concrete when it needs to be, relationships are fuzzy and obscure. Marriage did not appeal to him. Weddings did; but not marriage. Honeymoons did; but not marriage. Even though he was the youngest of the group, only in his early forties, he had been married three times already. It wasn’t that he was ever unfaithful to his wives. On the contrary, he was a man who took his vows seriously. It was just that he didn’t know how to manage the demands of something or someone that he couldn’t get a handle on. Each marriage

ended in an amicable divorce with the wives themselves sighing in relief that it was over. International law is great to direct the affairs of state but it really suffers when it comes to affairs of the heart or the bedroom.

He wore contacts to compete with the slightly receding hairline. He hoped women concentrated more on his eyes than his hair. That hair was handsomely curly and along with his deep dark-brown eyes and full lips he was one who could easily attract a lady's attention. In all his marriages he had no children, and for that he was glad. He couldn't imagine how a child would grow up being parented by someone as frank as he was. At this moment in his life he was single but wasn't dating. His medium height and medium build made him blend in with other men just about anywhere (especially in boardroom meetings) until he almost became invisible. He was the "behind-the-scenes" sort of guy in the State Department which made him perfect for his job. He liked it that way. Just when some country thought they had the United States in a bind, up to the plate would step Geoffrey Holland and all hell would break loose! Like a lion springing from under cover, he would attack and win with arguments that were irrefutable. Clients left the courtroom confused and angry and vowing to appeal but even if they did, they never won.

Geoff had no scruples and he was self-aware enough to realize this was exactly why he was here and why the committee wanted him. He was here to cover their backs. However their little experiment turned out he was to make sure that everything they did was somehow lawful. His thoughts and feelings today were ones of self-preservation. From what he had been told so far about the experiment he knew he would be handling several legalities from several nations. This didn't bother him, but the new biological

aspect is a twist that has no precedent in international relationships. His thoughts kept returning to cases in law in which the actions of the committee could be substantiated. He needed the trust of everyone involved in this plan and he needed their complete disclosure of all the actions taken. Then he could plan his own defense, just in case anything went wrong.

The final companion of this entourage was Maj. Simon Flores, United States Marines, currently serving at the Pentagon in the Military Intelligence Division. Military in his bearing with close cropped hair and regulation style gray glasses, Simon Flores looked every part a Marine. Starched, pressed and tailored, his clothing fit to perfection. He had hard, cold, brownish-yellow eyes that looked like they saw every movement around him. They were eyes that seemingly could look through any person and into their soul. Even though he had smallish ears for the size of his head and he had smallish hands for a person of his bearing, no one doubted that he was all warrior. He was not completely brutal--he loved his country, his wife, his children, and his God--in that order. The surprising part is that Si made a very good husband and father. Most of that credit, though, goes to the woman he married and the way she raised their three children.

“What do you make of the place so far, Simon?” asked Geoff.

“Everything looks neat and in order,” the Major replied. “I like the fact that there is no confusion. Confusion means things have gotten out of hand. I don’t sense that in this place.”

“I haven’t known the Canadians to be anything but neat and orderly,” Geoff whispered. “They argue some of the most complex and rational cases of law that I have ever encountered. Other nations stumble and waiver, but not the Canadians.”

“Well, we’ll see,” said Simon Flores in his most non-committal tone.

Major Flores lived up to the old saying, “The most dangerous person in the world is a Marine private with a rifle and a Marine Major with a briefcase.” The Major was part of a think tank within the Pentagon’s military intelligence department. Other people thought up ideas or plans and Maj. Flores tried to implement them to ascertain whether or not they were achievable. At one time the members of the think tank came up with a plan to use endocrine disruptors. These are chemicals that intervene with normal bodily functions by mimicking or disrupting the effects of our own sex hormones. When introduced into the body they interfere with the reproductive systems causing a steep decline in sperm count or fertility. He devised a way that these endocrine disruptors could be discreetly placed into a water delivery system and be completely undetectable. He told the members, “In twenty years there will be no Iranians for us to worry about. And I can do it.” This man with the briefcase really was dangerous!

Behind his back his fellow officers refer to him as Major Si. This is a derogatory reference to his obsessive personality. Some lower ranking officer started referring to him as “Semper Si” in order to mimic him and the Marines’ motto. The Major is relentless in his pursuit for security for his nation. He has very little time for anything else, such as hobbies or inter-personal relationships with junior-grade officers.

Since the Pentagon was paying for this little excursion for these five people, and since the Pentagon was going to receive the fruits of their investigation, Maj. Simon Flores was integral to the operation. If he said it was feasible, then the project would continue as planned. Each of the five people had a stake in this operation, some professional and some personal, so it was imperative that everything go as required. Each

person was one part of the whole. All of them had been briefed together and all of them had agreed together. They knew their place in the scheme of things, they knew what was required of them, and they were willing to do their best. In other words, despite their innermost thoughts and misgivings, they were all on the same page and they were through waiting and ready to get started. Prison 102 was just the beginning.

