

The three teenagers boarding the 747 were victims of an international human trafficking ring, but they didn't know that yet. Accompanied by an older woman, the girls didn't appear to be sisters, and the woman with them wasn't their mother. The escort was Asian, petite, and fit with the darting eyes of a fox seeking prey. She kept any womanly shape she might have possessed concealed beneath a plain business jacket and loose slacks.

The teens were well dressed and seemed shy, even nervous. Those observing the small group board the large aircraft might assume the girls were students, perhaps traveling with a teacher on an educational excursion to the United States. They would be terribly wrong.

"Keep your eyes down," the woman hissed. Her name was Mei Feng, and she didn't teach. She worked for a Chinese criminal organization, the Santu, and her role on this trip was to deliver the three teenagers to a United States destination. The girls came from Moldova, a small independent country formerly part of the Soviet Union.

Bordered by Ukraine to the north and Romania to the south, Moldova ranked as one of the poorest countries in Northern Europe. Desperate parents in the region often left children with grandparents or 2

other relatives as they crossed their country's borders, searching for work. In many cases, these children resorted to begging on the streets for money or food to survive, and they became easy targets for human traffickers.

An employment agency specializing in placing Moldovan women into domestic-service positions in the United States recruited the girls. In return for passports and travel accommodations, the agency required recruits to reimburse the company for such expenses with a portion of earned income from United States employment. The business maintained just enough legitimate domestic-service relationships in the United States to assure a stream of success stories back to Moldova. Tragically, most of the agency's clients did not end up in domestic service.

On the previous day, the group had flown from Iasi, Moldova, to Frankfurt, Germany, staying at an economy hotel on the airport property. Ms. Feng instructed the three girls to wash their clothes in the room's bathtub and hang them to dry overnight. The teens had slept in one double bed and Ms. Feng in the other. After using the iron that came with the room to remove wrinkles from the hanging clothes, the girls dressed the following day and repacked their backpacks. They ate a loaf of bread with some cheese Ms. Feng purchased from the convenience store next to the hotel. Then they caught the shuttle for the airport. Ms. Feng warned the girls the flight to Dulles would be long, over nine hours; she also told the three not to talk to anyone.

As the aircraft began the boarding process, a pastor in the waiting area completed a short call on his cell phone. "Package on board. Three plus escort. They checked no luggage, and each carries a single backpack." An average-sized man, the pastor's friendly face featured eyes that danced with an untold joke. His clerical collar and tunic might present a comforting sight to any who sat near him on the flight, but the pastor's toned physique could have as easily fit into the uniform of a soldier.

"Roger," replied the Diplomatic Service Security agent. "Homeland Security will ensure the group passes through a specified passport checkpoint, and we'll follow them from the airport. Four agents will be 3

in place inside the airport and six outside. Medical personnel will stand by to transfer the girls to a safe place for examinations and any treatment required. We plan to intercept the four females as they approach the vehicle sent to pick them up—but before they enter it.”

“Okay,” said the pastor, “but I thought you wanted to discover where Feng would take the girls.”

“Yes, sir. We did, but the FBI’s Human Trafficking Division folks convinced us that plan might cause unnecessary danger for the three girls. The escort will almost certainly be unarmed to pass through the security at several airports. However, the driver of the vehicle picking up Feng and her party will likely carry a gun. Therefore, arresting the escort and the driver of the car separately would be safer for the girls. With two gang members to interrogate, we hope to obtain almost as much information as we might have by following the vehicle to its first destination.”

“I guess that makes sense, and our priority has always been to retrieve the girls safely.”

“Yes, sir. We appreciate your assistance in this exercise but ask that you remain out of sight for its remaining execution.”

“I understand. I’ll call this number when we land at Dulles.”

“Roger.” The agent disconnected.

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The pastor boarded and proceeded to a seat four rows behind Feng and her party. Placing the cell phone in airplane mode, he slid the specially equipped, encryption-enhanced secure device into his front tunic pocket. He removed from his briefcase one of the three paperback novels he’d purchased before boarding and mentally prepared for the grueling transatlantic flight ahead. Within two chapters, he realized he remembered nothing from the preceding pages and closed the book.

Barely fifteen feet away from the man of God sat a woman who personified evil. Between them were three young girls with innocence, if not lives, at stake. In preparation for the coming engagement, the pastor had prayed, but, taking no chances, he also enlisted the help of enforcement from the most powerful country on earth. Sleep would not be likely on this flight.⁴

Hindered by headwinds over the Atlantic, the big 747 landed about forty-five minutes late in Dulles. The magic of flying west through six time zones caused ten hours in the air to add only four hours to the day started in Frankfurt. The Lufthansa flight left Germany at about 1 p.m., and the time now in the nation's capital was a little past 4:45 p.m.

He turned on his cell phone, glancing four rows ahead to ensure the three teen girls still sat with their escort. Then, speaking in a low voice so none around him could hear, he said, "We've landed. Our group is about two-thirds of the way back on the plane, so we won't be coming off for a little while. I'll loosely follow them to Customs. If I don't hear from you, I'll assume you picked up their trail from there."

"Roger. Will you be going home from Dulles?"

"Yes. My car's in long-term parking. I live in West Virginia, about two hours away. Would you call me when the exercise today is complete and the girls are safe?"

"Yes, sir. We will. The girls will never know your name, but you helped save them from something most would believe to be worse than death. Thank you."

"I'll sleep a little better tonight," said the pastor. "Will the girls be allowed to remain in this country?"

"That depends on many things. If we can locate parents or family in their home country, we'll provide transportation back. If we can't find family, or if the victims have bona fide reasons for not wanting to return to their home country, they may stay in the United States on a special T visa. They could also have individual mental health or medical needs requiring time at a facility in Florida before entering our foster care system in the United States."

"Okay, thanks. Our rows are moving now. Good luck!"

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The pastor followed Feng and her small group to the customs area, where an agent directed passengers to six different lines to check passports. The pastor's line moved faster than the one Feng entered, but, following the Diplomatic Security Service agent's earlier instructions, the pastor didn't wait 5

for them. After receiving his stamped passport back from the Homeland Security agent, he headed toward Ground Transportation and Baggage.

Before stepping on the escalator to go down, the pastor sat on a nearby bench, pretending to look at his cell phone. Certain that other agents now trailed Ms. Feng and her group, the pastor still wanted to ensure the group passed him one last time toward the airport exit area. Within a few minutes, Feng and the three teens came in his direction. The girls walked behind Feng as the escort talked on a cell phone. They went by the pastor's bench and then proceeded toward a passageway to the C gates instead of getting on the escalator to leave the airport.

The pastor kept other pedestrians between himself and Feng's group while following them. Feng looked around several times, and the pastor feared she might be searching for him; then, she quietly greeted another person coming from the opposite direction. The man handed Feng a small package and kept moving toward the pastor. The pastor turned toward the wall, feigning a gaze at an advertisement, and the man passed without glancing in his direction.

The pastor didn't see him well, but the stranger appeared to be Asian, wearing a brown, hooded sweatshirt. Checking the area where he last saw Ms. Feng, the pastor watched her party proceed toward the C gates.

When Feng stopped at C-21, the pastor kept walking toward the next gate. He took a seat on a bench and continued to monitor Feng's gate. The teenagers and escort seated themselves near the ticketing podium, under a monitor indicating that United Flight 237 would depart in thirty-five minutes for Las Vegas, Nevada. The pastor's phone chirped, and the screen showed an incoming call from an unknown number.

"Hello."

"Pastor, our agent has eyes on both you and Feng's party. We suggest you depart the area so Feng doesn't see you. The escort may become suspicious about a minister on her last flight showing up for another one leaving from a gate adjacent to hers. She might wonder why you didn't take a direct flight from Frankfurt to La Guardia rather than connect in DC."6

“I’m sorry. I worried when Feng didn’t leave the airport as we expected she would. I should have known you had the situation under control.”

“Well, it’s far from under control, I fear. The additional flight to Las Vegas surprised us, and we aren’t set up for it. You may have witnessed the ticket transfer in the passageway. We checked with the airline, and United’s manifest lists Feng and the three girls. Someone purchased the tickets last evening.”

“Did you follow the guy who passed the tickets to Feng?”

“No. Our assets at the airport were in the wrong places to accomplish that. With one agent in the passport checking area, two near the exit doors to transportation, and six outside, only one remained to follow the group from Customs. That agent described the male who passed the tickets to our other folks at the airport, but we decided the guy delivering the tickets to Feng was a lessor priority.”

“Can you set up a team in Las Vegas?”

“We could. The flight is over four hours long, which is plenty of time to coordinate an interception in Nevada. Our exercise would also be more valuable if we found out where the girls might end up in Las Vegas. We’re not going to do that, though. Number one, these girls have already been through enough with the four-hour flight to Frankfurt from Moldova followed by a ten-hour flight to Dulles. Number two, we aren’t risking more chances for additional surprises. We want to rescue the girls now while we can.”

“Good,” said the pastor. “I agree. Can I stay to monitor the arrest?”

“Yes, but find a more discreet location. We worry that other members of Feng’s organization are monitoring Feng at the airport. The more invisible you remain, the safer you’ll be. Our team from outside the building is on the way to C-21 as we speak.”

“Understood. Thank you.”

Within minutes, two lean and muscled young men and a fit-looking female, all with small suitcases and carry-on bags, sat in areas around Ms. Feng. Another male stationed himself just behind the agent at the entrance to the gateway. A public address announcement requested, “Passenger Mei Feng, please visit the ticketing agent at gate C-21. Mei Feng, repeat, 7

Mei Feng, if you are in the boarding area, please see the ticketing agent. Thank you.”

Feng glanced around her and then at the tickets in her hand. She said something to the three girls before she left and rose to approach the ticket counter. She didn’t notice a man and woman rise from their seats to follow her to the podium, but she did see the man near the jetway move closer to the ticketing agent.

“Is there a problem?” asked Feng, holding her four boarding passes out to the young agent. The agent didn’t answer before the man behind her moved quickly toward Feng, presenting identification to the escort.

“Yes, we do have a problem. Mei Feng, you are under arrest for violation of the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2017, for transporting minors illegally into the country for exploitation.”

Feng jolted into action, turning to run, but a man and woman blocked her exit. The man expertly locked Feng’s right arm between both of his, and the woman performed the same maneuver on the other side. Feng kicked at the two officers, and they lifted her by her arms from the floor. The arresting officer, still standing at the ticketing podium, calmly said, “You cannot escape, Ms. Feng, but if you continue to resist arrest, we will use more extreme measures to subdue you.”

Feng stopped kicking, and her captors lowered her to the floor. While the officer secured her wrists behind her, security personnel led the three teens away from the boarding area. The whole sequence lasted less than a minute, and the smooth choreography of the arrest impressed the pastor, watching from a gate away.

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The pastor didn’t follow the officers who took Feng, and he waited long enough at the adjacent gate to leave unnoticed. Back in his car after retrieving baggage, he dialed a number on his cell phone.

“How much did you witness, Pastor Burns?” asked the agent.

“Until your people took Feng. Did everything else go routinely?”

“Yes. Mei Feng is in custody but, as expected, not talking. We couldn’t find the man who transferred the tickets to her. The three girls are safe and 8

on their way to a medical facility nearby. While hungry and scared, they had so far experienced nothing more harmful than intimidation by fear.”

“Thank you for that news,” said the pastor. “I wish we could’ve gotten more from this, but we accomplished our main mission. We saved three young girls.”

“Right,” said the voice on the other end. “We may extract some information from Ms. Feng yet. She undoubtedly understands she’s now useless to her organization, and cooperation with us may offer a better alternative than the one the Santu will have for her. Also, we achieved another small piece of intelligence that could prove useful later.”

“Something you can share?”

“Yes, sir. Feng made two calls from Dulles. Her phone scrambled the numbers dialed and the voice transmissions’ content, but our software mapped the general location of the satellite tower connecting her conversation. The area is one in which, to date, we have noted no other Santu activity.”

“Where?”

“Area code 513, Hamilton County, Ohio.”

“What’s in Hamilton County?”

“Cincinnati.”