

Chapter 1

David Padgett's success haunted him. A deep-seated fear gripped his heart. He felt as if he were teetering on the edge of a bottomless chasm. One step in the wrong direction and he would plunge into a darkness so deep he could never return. A sense of loneliness and despair besieged him.

Last night Jeff Berry had phoned from New York. "I gotta tell you, David, I've been your agent for a long time. This book? It's your best yet. Are you ready for this? The publisher's sales arm has sold fifty thousand advance copies of *Love Unlimited*." David smiled at the news and Jeff's breathless conveyance of it. "You mark my words; you're headed for the best seller list again."

This morning David sighed, rose from his antique desk and circled his office aimlessly. The opulent golden oak wainscoting gleamed under the crystal Art Deco chandelier, reflecting the rich leather couch and chairs. Luxurious as they were, his surroundings held no pleasure for him. Even the lofty strains of Beethoven struck his ears discordantly. He turned off the Bose.

His eyes drifted across the photos and commendations from Ronald Reagan, Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton, Pope John Paul and other persons of note that lined the walls, along with honorary doctorates from several Christian Colleges. Always before their words of praise had cheered and inspired him. He turned to gaze through the full glass that comprised both exterior walls of his office. His ghostly reflection stared back at him. His heart felt cold and indifferent to the plight of the world.

At 50, plastic surgery and a pricey colorist gave him the appearance of a man in his late 30s. Only the graying hair at his temples betrayed him. The PR Department insisted he leave the touch of silver, saying it gave him an air of distinction. Studying his image in the glass, he smoothed his hair and stood ramrod straight as he brushed a speck of imaginary dust from his Kiton suit. He straightened his silk Jacquard tie. Then he relaxed and let his shoulders slump. There were no cameras around, at least he hoped not.

David's third-story office afforded him a sweeping view of Grace Tabernacle's 150-acre estate, the tranquil village of Grafton and the White River meandering in the distance. He watched as an exquisite red June sunrise ushered in a perfect late spring day. A light mist rose lazily from the river. Dew on the grass sparkled like a billion gems. "My acres of diamonds," David whispered, "are filled with fool's gold."

He returned to the desk and opened his scheduling book. The day was full of meetings and promotional filming. Global Outreach currently reached 80 countries via broadband internet. Podcasting his sermons and promoting his books, the website generated thousands of hits a day. The order department was kept constantly busy shipping his books, CDs and sermon notes.

David slammed the book closed. When was the last time he and Anne were able to take a vacation? Not a four-day trip with a speaking engagement sandwiched in, but some time together away from everything. He was the envy of every minister in the world, yet he would trade places with the pastor of a small country church in a heartbeat.

Shoving back his chair, David jumped to his feet and went to the far side of the office. The floor-to-ceiling bookcase concealed the door to David's secret room. He, Anne and Robert were the only ones privy to it.

Searching the shelves, he pulled out a signed copy of Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Life*. Among the more than 1,000 books he owned, many of them autographed, this book held a special place in his heart. He breathed in the smell of the custom leather as he ran his fingers over the cover. David loved the smell of fine leather.

As in his high school years, he could still lose himself in a good book. It was easier for him to be mesmerized by the characters in a novel than to deal with real people in real life. Today, however, neither the rows of best sellers nor his tony office afforded him a scintilla of joy.

"Tell me, Rick, didn't you ever want to just walk away?" he murmured. He thought about calling the author but quickly rejected the idea.

Except for the foundation and electrical work, David built the original Grace Tabernacle virtually singlehandedly. As such, it was a painfully primitive structure. He spent two years trying to convince the Grafton city leaders that the church was an asset, not an eyesore. Grafton's oak-lined streets, stately homes and manicured lawns were right out of the pages of *Ideal* magazine. The crime rate in Grafton was among the lowest in the state, in great contrast to Indianapolis. Mothers felt safe letting their children go off alone to play in the park with their friends. At night, couples still ventured out to stroll unafraid hand-in-hand along the streets.

Resisting encroachment by Walmart and other big chains, the residents cherished their downtown. Individuals, not corporations, owned the pharmacy, hardware, and grocery stores. On Friday and Saturday nights, the old Grand Theater did a thriving business. The Grafton High Lions boasted three state championships in the last 10 years. Bucking the popular trend, Grafton's business district was closed on Sundays. The store owners joked it would be pointless to open as everyone, including them, would be attending services at Grace Tabernacle. David had hoped the jest would someday be fact.

The small, white clapboard church building at the far end of the property seemed desolate now and woefully out of place. Starkly unadorned, it stood in mean contrast to its opulent surroundings. Several narrow walking paths led to the building's entrance and side doors. Their half-buried, faded gray slate stepping stones did nothing to enhance the tiny house of worship's appeal.

David pictured the hand-carved and lettered wooden plaque beside the front door:

Grace Tabernacle, built by the two hands

of our beloved pastor, Dr. David Padgett.

From his humble beginnings

he built a worldwide ministry.

—Donated by Youth Aglow

The inside of the building was numbingly plain. The rough-hewn wooden pews were bought at auction from an abandoned Methodist church. The boxy pulpit was inelegantly fashioned out of plywood. The two-man maintenance crew touched up the exterior paint every spring and did what they could to repair any damage caused by age or weather. As more property was acquired and buildings sprang up to accommodate the growing congregation, David

wondered if the small church building should be demolished. The members protested, saying they wanted to preserve Grace Tabernacle's beginning.

Thinking back, David smiled remembering how happy he and Anne had been then. Their first Christmas in Grafton, the young parents had limited themselves to exchanging only cards so Bobby could have a real Christmas. The following spring David spent the last of his inheritance to lay the foundation of the church. He took a job as a sacker at John's Super Value. Anne stood behind his decision, working three days a week at the Hair Place Beauty Shop.

David shivered thinking of the endless hours he had spent combing the streets for building fund donations. Each morning at 8:30 he was out of the house and knocking on doors. Braving the worst blizzard in 20 years, he made five calls before frostbite threatened. All that winter into the spring and summer, he kept knocking until he had visited every home and business in Grafton and the surrounding countryside. Winding up his rounds at 11:45, he would rush home for a quick bite and to rest awhile. At 2 PM, he'd be sacking groceries at the Super Value, then back home by nine. Exhausted, he would spend an hour with Anne and drop into bed to start all over again the next day.

On the church's inaugural Sunday morning, he arrived at 9:15 to welcome his congregation. That first Lord's Day, and every Sunday for 45 weeks thereafter, he preached to a congregation of two. Anne would smile and nod her head each time he made a point. Their only distraction was Bobby, who squirmed in the pew while his mother tried in vain to keep him still.

On more Monday mornings than he could count, David quit the ministry. Before the end of the week, Anne would persuade him to try one more time. On the 46th Sunday, halfway through the service, in walked Ed Harden and his wife, Ada. David stopped in mid-sentence and stepped down from the pulpit to welcome them.

"Sorry for being late, Preacher," Ed said, "but the hogs got out just as we was a-leavin." David nodded and shook Ed and Ada's hands enthusiastically. Stepping back to the pulpit, he started the sermon from the beginning. Ten years later, Ed sold his hog farm to become head groundskeeper of the new Grace Tabernacle.

Today, the trappings of 25-year-old Robert's office rivaled those of his father's. As Executive Associate Pastor, the young preacher formerly known as Bobby was poised to take over when David retired or died.

Seven days a week, Global Outreach carried David's messages throughout the world. Every Sunday three shifts of attendants ushered 2,000 people in and out of the cavernous sanctuary. Three services, the first at 8:00 the last at 11:30, wore him out. By the end of the day, David could repeat his sermon in his sleep. Anne complained he often did. Week after week, letters and emails poured in from every corner of the globe. All correspondence was read and answered by a response team secluded in a small back room. David rarely saw any of it.

Preacher David was a prolific author. Time after time his books topped the New York Times Best Seller List, making his name a household word. His publisher offered his latest book signed and gift-boxed for \$100. Sales skyrocketed. David had to be content with the promotional aspect; his cut was nominal.

Every day, calls from ministries and corporations flooded the receptionist's desk. Jenny Macklin ran her station like a battleship's bridge. She knew how to handle small ministries, start-up companies and anyone else lacking deep pockets. She did so with a perpetual smile in her voice. "Preacher David's fee is forty thousand a day plus expenses. Please hold, I'll connect you with our finance department. They will discuss payment arrangements and his schedule with

you." If there was a mumbled response about having to call back, Jenny would hit the disconnect button like a general launching a nuclear strike.

"Didn't think so." Without missing a beat, she would punch the button for the next caller. "Grace Tabernacle, how may I help you?" Her pleasant voice held an approachable southern twang and her friendly greeting made each caller feel like the most important person in the world. Sometimes David would stand near her desk listening and marvel at her proficiency.

Twelve months a year, David crisscrossed the country giving seminars. His spiritually oriented, path-to-success presentations were highly in demand. Attendees were mainly ladder-climbers from Fortune 500 companies willing and able to pay hundreds for the privilege. At each seminar, security turned away pastors from small churches. Relying on Preacher David's largesse, they came hoping to be allowed in despite not being able to pay the entire fee, or at all. At the last meeting, held at a Hilton, a man broke through the barriers and raced toward the convention hall. A security officer took off after him and grabbed him from behind. David watched from a balcony as the guard muscled the pastor out through the glass doors.

"Please let me in. I just want to learn how to reach more people for Christ." His pleas fell on deaf ears and the seminar went on without him. That man reminded David of himself 20 years ago. He sighed. For all he had accomplished, the happiness he preached to thousands of others evaded him.

At one time, David Padgett considered himself the most fortunate man in the world. Graduating from Taylor University, he arrived in Grafton with a small inheritance from his mother's estate and an outsized dream. After a week of searching, he found a dilapidated house on 25 acres at the edge of town, not yet country, but far enough away from the city. He managed to purchase the property on a land contract. He worked on the shack for weeks, sometimes with little sleep. After two months, the house was livable. He brought Anne and Bobby to Grafton and began building the church. For months, he poured his labor into the building at night, visited house-to-house each morning and worked at the Super Value afternoons and evenings. Then his life changed, forever.

Tired but restless after his shift at the Super Value, David walked to the framed-out church. Staring at the bare two-by-fours in the tiny Sunday school room, he picked up his hammer. A small voice spoke inside him. "It'll never happen. Ten years from now you'll still be at the Super Value all day and banging nails all night, for nothing."

With hopelessness weighing on his heart, he dropped the hammer and crossed the overgrown field to his home. Entering the living room, he sank into the easy chair he had rescued from the dump. The smell of the apple pie Anne just took out of the oven wafted through the house. She didn't say a word, just brought him a cup of coffee, a piece of pie and the *Indianapolis Star*.

Flipping through the paper, he saw the answer to his prayer. Practically jumping off the page was a half-page ad for a business seminar with billionaire Tibb Russell that Saturday at the Holiday Inn. Russell had clenched and clawed his way up from poverty as a wunderkind in stocks, bonds and insurance. The seminar fee was \$200 in advance, \$250 at the door. David calculated their savings. He could make it, barely.

Calling Anne in from the kitchen, David said, "Look at this." She peered over his shoulder. He tapped the ad with his finger. "This is just what I need."

"Yes, it looks good. But dear," she said, resting her chin on his shoulder, "you're a pastor, not a salesman."

"I am a salesman, Anne. My product is the best remedy known to man, the gospel of Jesus Christ."

Unconvinced, Anne said, "Honey, I don't think this is right. But if you do, I'll help you all I can."

"I love you," David said. Pushing himself up from the sagging cushion, he took her in his arms and kissed her. "I'm sure this is just what I need to build a healthy, vital church."

At eight o'clock Saturday morning, David stood in a line extending all the way down the hall from the Holiday Inn's ballroom. Snippets of conversations among the professionally dressed men and women in front of and behind him drifted within earshot. They were discussing difficult customers, sales figures and stifling government regulations. David felt like a fish out of water. The line moved at a snail's pace toward the registration table until it was finally his turn. An attractive blonde woman in a royal blue suit took a form from the stack.

"Name please?" she said without looking up.

"Rev..., uh, David Padgett," he said, thinking quickly. He wasn't sure he wanted it known that he was a minister.

"Company name?" she asked, smiling but clearly in a hurry to move things along. He hesitated. All of these men and women were here for one reason only: to increase their sales. He wanted to learn how to lead more souls to Christ. Her smile faded. "It's perfectly acceptable if you don't want the name of your business to appear on your tag. However, I am required to list it for our records."

David's cheeks burned. He leaned over the table and whispered, "Grace Tabernacle."

"Excuse me?" she said, knitting her eyebrows.

"Grace Tabernacle church," he said a little louder.

Handing him a blank name tag, she said rather briskly, "Have a nice day."