

Chapter X

El Colonel

The strange thing about Santo Domingo traffic is this: No matter how fast you're driving, someone is always driving faster than you; and no matter how slow you're driving, someone is always driving slower than you.

It was about 11:00 on a Sunday night and I was driving through Santo Domingo on my back to La Victoria. With me in the car were four of my favorite people: Aaron, Henry, Kristen and Yudie. Aaron Walling worked for Healing Waters out of our Dominican office. By office, I mean the corner of a room in *La Solanita*, the run-down house in La Victoria where Aaron lived. Henry and Kristen were two college students from our church back in Denver who had moved to La Victoria for a year. Like Dana and I had been, Henry and Kristen were also there on "a mission from God." Their hope was to initiate some kind of fun weekly activity for the youth of La Victoria who had an interest in Jesus but wanted nothing to do with any of the churches in La Victoria. As far as I could tell, that was a pretty sizable demographic.

The church in Denver had rented La Solanita primarily for the big yard and patio, which made for a great location for Henry and Kristen to hold their youth activities. Henry generously allowed Aaron to room with him at La Solanita, something which probably saved Healing Waters about \$50 a month in expenses, which was actually double what a Dominican would probably have paid to rent a room like Aaron's. Kristen lived a few blocks away from La Solanita in a nicely decorated apartment which she shared with Pastor Bello's daughter, Mercedes.

We were coming back from a night in the city. First, we had attended an English-language church service at Miguel's church, the International Baptist Church. After that we had gone out and grabbed some food and a beer. I should clarify. Aaron and I each had a couple beers; the rest did not. So don't worry, Mr. and Mrs. Hendrickson; Henry stayed with lemonade.

I was driving along in my white Nissan rental car, grateful to have the company. Many times I found myself driving through Santo Domingo alone late at night, coming from the airport after landing. While I'd gotten somewhat used to it, I'd come across enough late-night military checkpoints or violent accidents to always be a little on edge when I was alone.

That wasn't an issue on this night. Laughter was ricocheting around the inside of the car, the natural by-product of five highly sarcastic people enjoying one another's company.

The section of road we were on, a main thoroughfare through the "suburb" of Sabana Perdida, was a mess, and had been for the five years I'd been traveling over it. Best I could tell, some kind of groundwater drainage problem made it impossible to keep asphalt in place, so the government gave up trying. Left unmaintained, the road was chronically riddled with potholes the size of suitcases, looking like they'd been created by someone dropping cast-iron bathtubs out of a low-flying Cessna.

I knew this section of road well. It was the main road everyone took to get from the city to La Victoria. I'd driven it hundreds of times. Maybe thousands.

We were slowly weaving our way through the potholes when all of a sudden CRASH!, we were jolted from behind with such an impact that the car lurched forward a good ten feet without any input from either of my two left feet. We'd been hit.

"Oh, shit," I griped, to no one in particular. This is not what I needed. Having an accident anywhere is no fun; having one as a foreigner in the Dominican Republic had the potential to be a nightmare.

I looked in the rearview mirror to see who the idiot was who just rear-ended me. I was expecting to see one of the beat up publicos that drove up and down the streets constantly, pushing off necessary repairs and maintenance as long as possible so as to not miss the opportunity of making a few pesos. Instead of a rusty 1980's-era Toyota with no bumpers or working headlights, I was surprised to see a rather nice vehicle in my mirror. It was an almost new Mitsubishi pickup truck, with a hefty metal bumper guard protruding from the front of the truck. In spite of having just rammed me, both headlights were still shining brightly in my rearview mirror. Before I could see much more than that the driver of the truck drove slowly past us, looking at us as he went by. Gee, thanks for your concern.

"I can't believe it," I complained, getting out of the car to check out the damage. I looked down the street, and saw that the pickup had stopped about a block up the road. The driver was looking in his mirror and watching me.

The damage was pretty bad. The taillights were smashed, and the rear bumper and trunk were pushed in about a foot or so, making the back of the car look like the end of a cereal box that had been dropped and then put back on the shelf at the grocery store. I did a quick mental estimate based on the, well, relatively high number of accidents I'd been in over the years. Looking at the back of the Nissan, I guessed it would be about \$3000 of damage back in the States.

I knew the rental car accident policy well, thanks to the dozens of times over the years I'd rented vehicles for my trips to the DR. I knew that if I returned the rental car without a police report, they'd make me pay for the damage. If I had a police report, the insurance on the rental car would cover the damage.

I knew what I needed to do. I needed to ask the driver of the pickup to go with me to a police station to file a report. If he refused, I would just have to go by myself.

I asked Yudie to go with me to speak with the driver, in case I needed some translation help. My Spanish had gotten a lot better since our year living in La Victoria, thanks in part to the many trips I'd made to La Victoria but also to the month of intensive training that Aaron, Henry, Kristen and I all went through at the Berlitz school in Santo Domingo. In spite of the progress I'd made, I knew when I might still need a translator. Usually it was when the matter to be discussed was important enough that I couldn't afford to screw it up. I figured that this qualified as one of those moments.

Yudie and I started walking toward the pickup. The driver was watching us approach in his mirrors, and got out of the truck as we got close.

"Uh oh," Yudie said as soon as she saw him. "This is not good."

The driver was a big, barrel-chested man, probably in his early fifties. He was a big guy for a Dominican, an inch or two taller than me and outweighing me by a good fifty pounds. His short black hair was tight and curly, and was spotted with gray around his temples. I recognized the gray shirt he was wearing as being part of the uniform of the *Policía Nacional*, the national police. He had more shiny pins and official-looking emblems on his uniform than I was used to seeing, but I had no idea what they were supposed to mean. Protruding out of the waistband of his pants was the grip end of a semiautomatic handgun, most likely a 9mm.

The passenger in the pickup got out from the other side, and casually made his way around the front of the truck, looking it over as he walked. He was smaller and didn't have a police uniform on, but looked almost as surly as the driver.

I stretched out my hand to offer it to the driver, but he crossed his arms and refused to shake it. Como se dice "jerk"?

"Ay, que peina," I said, trying to diffuse the tension and show that I was going to be lighthearted about it. Bummer, huh? I was careful to show respect, and to try and make it seem like the accident was no big deal. I told him that it was unfortunate, but all we had to do was go to the nearest police station and have them write up a report and then we could both be on our way.

Up until this point, the driver had been silent and detached. However, at my suggestion that we go to the police station, he snapped.

“We’re not going to a police station!” he screamed at me. “I am the police! We’re going to settle this right here!”

That’s about as much as I understood, and the rest was just a furious rant that I couldn’t keep up with given my limited grasp of Dominican cursing. I couldn’t tell if he was drunk or just extremely angry, but he yelled for a good minute or more before he finally stopped. It was not lost on me that he had touched his hand on his gun a time or two during his rant. He glared at me, waiting for my next move.

I felt a gentle tugging on my sleeve. Yudie was pulling me off to the side, obviously wanting to say something in private.

“Tom, we need to just go,” she pleaded. “This guy is a bad guy. You don’t want to mess with him. He’s a colonel in the national police.” She looked at me as if that were all she needed to say. When I shrugged like I didn’t know why that should matter, she gave me more information. “He’s not just any colonel. He said he’s the comandante of the prison in La Victoria. Do you understand? Trust me, you do not want to mess with this guy.”

I looked back at El Colonel. He’d made a call on his cellphone and was yelling at whoever was on the other end of the line, obviously telling him about the gringo asshole that had had the nerve to have been in his way as he barreled down the street.

“Yudie, I have to get a police report,” I explained matter-of-factly. “If I don’t get a police report, I have to pay for the damage myself. If I can’t talk him into going with us, then we’ll go to the police station without him.”

“It’s not worth it,” Yudie pleaded. “You’re better off just paying for the damage. You don’t realize who you’re dealing with here. You don’t want to piss this guy off. Trust me, Tom. I know my country better than you.”

I looked again at El Colonel, who was still screaming into the telephone, shooting a glance at me every once in a while.

I rubbed the side of my face with my palm.

Why do I fucking bother? Why do I put up with this shit? Why do I come to this stinking country and try and help these people? What difference is it going to make in the long run? We could work here for twenty years and hardly make a dent in the problem. Why do I leave my family and my easy life in Colorado for weeks on end to come to this God-forsaken place where I have to put up with this kind of bullshit?

As if I were receiving an answer to those questions, I suddenly felt this wave of truth roll into and over my being. I was being spoken to by the wave, by something other than my own thoughts.

Tom, you’re here because I brought you here. You know that. This man is part of the reason why I brought you here. People like this are a big reason the poverty here is so oppressive. It’s these corrupt, abusive people who prolong the misery in this place. Trust

me. This guy is nothing that I can't handle. Be strong. All I want you to do is what you know is fair and just and right. That's all. Trust me to take care of the rest.

I looked back toward the car. Aaron, Henry and Kristen had gotten out of the car, and were standing on the sidewalk having a discussion. They saw me look their way, and shook their heads with empathy. I shrugged and made a face. *What can I do?*

I looked around and saw there was a growing number of people around us that were watching the incident unfold. Some had come out of their homes and were standing in the street, while others who'd been sitting in their plastic chairs drinking Presidente at the colmado across the street were now watching attentively and apparently discussing the situation they were observing. Two motoconcho drivers were sitting on their motorcycles just behind us, watching Yudie and me and whispering to one another.

El Colonel hung up his cellphone and looked at me defiantly. His look said, *Do you dare?*

"Di me," he said with great force, as if it were an order. *Tell me. What's it going to be?*

I inhaled deeply, wishing I had some special kind of air to breathe that would give me more power, like the funny cars that can get down the drag strip much quicker with nitrous than they can with regular air.

"Sir," I began, trying to be as polite as possible and trying to do my best, given my limited Spanish, to communicate clearly and rationally. *"My car is a rental car. The rules with the agency of rental car say that if I don't have a report from police, I have to pay for the wounds myself. I need to go to a police station, and it would please me if you go also."* I knew that I was butchering the Spanish, but I hoped I was at least saying it well enough for him to understand me.

He didn't reply, but just stood there staring at me. Then, without any premeditation, I did something I would never have done if I had thought about it first. I reached into my pocket and pulled out a pen and a piece of paper. I didn't even realize I was doing it. I walked to where I could see the license plate on the back of his truck. I began to jot the number down, and I could see out of the corner of my eye that what I was doing was making Yudie extremely uncomfortable.

El Colonel flew into a rage. He started screaming at me with the most violent, murderous tone in which anyone had ever spoken to me in my life. Even in his rage, he was lucid enough to understand that I wasn't following what he was saying, so he began directing his tirade at Yudie, but was obviously yelling about me and not her. Now I was getting scared, for myself and for Yudie. I had never experienced this kind of raw rage in my entire life.

His phone rang.

He picked it up and answered it, and jumped right back into what seemed like the same heated conversation he'd been having before.

"Tom, really, it's NOT WORTH IT," Yudie said to me with great conviction, as if her life depended on it. "You're pushing him too far. This is not going to end well if you keep going in this direction. The money is not worth it. We need to just go. Can we please just go?"

"Yudie, all I'm doing is telling him I need a police report..."

El Colonel hung up his phone again, so I stopped in midsentence. He picked up where he left off and continued yelling. His tone had come down a notch or two. He was still extremely obnoxious, but the rage had subsided.

He asked Yudie where we were going. She explained who we were, and that the four of them lived in La Victoria, and that I was here for work. She said we were on our way back to La Victoria from the city.

El Colonel looked at me again, and looked as if he'd settled down a little. "Ok," he said, as if he'd come to his senses. "We can go to the police station in La Victoria. You guys follow me. They can give you a police report there."

I looked at Yudie. This seemed to be a good solution. The police station in La Victoria was right across the street from the church, and no doubt the policemen who worked there had seen us around the church a lot. Pastor Bello's house was only a block away from the police station, so I figured the solution El Colonel was proposing was a good compromise.

El Colonel's phone rang again. He answered it and turned his back to us, speaking in subdued tones for once. Maybe this was going to turn out ok after all.

"Ssst," I heard from behind us, the universal Dominican signal for "Hey you."

I turned and saw the two motoconcho drivers. They were waving Yudie and me to come to them. We walked over to them, and they spoke to us in very quiet voices.

"Look," one told me, "you're lucky you're an American. If you were a Dominican and were standing up for your rights like this, it would already be over. He'd either throw you in jail, beat you up, or maybe even kill you. The only reason he's being as cooperative as he's being is that you're American."

Cooperative? This was cooperative? I thought about it, and tried to tell myself I should be grateful.

"There's a problem, though," the *motoconchista* continued quietly. "You can't go to the police station in La Victoria. Those guys are probably in cahoots with him, and you won't get a fair treatment there. Besides, the law says that you're supposed to get a police report from the nearest police station. La

Victoria's not even in the same precinct. You have to get a police report from the station here, in Sabana Perdida."

That was good information to know.

El Colonel hung up again, looked at me and again said "Di me."

I turned to Yudie. "Tell him I'm sorry, but we need to go to the station here, in Sabana Perdida. Tell him I need to go to the station in the same place where the accident happened."

Yudie looked at me with disbelief, shaking her head. She then turned and told El Colonel, as politely as she could, what I'd just said.

El Colonel glared at me. He turned to his sidekick, who I think said something like, "Technically, the guy's right."

"Ok," the colonel said. "We'll go to the station here. I know where it is. Follow me."

Yudie and I looked at each other and nodded. "Ok," she told him.

El Colonel and his sidekick climbed back in his truck. Yudie and I walked back to the car. "We're following him to a police station," I announced to Aaron, Henry and Kristen.

I pulled forward behind El Colonel, waiting for him to lead the way. He did a U-turn, and I did the same.

I shot a glance at the motoconchistas, who were looking at me with worried looks on their faces.

I had an idea. I stopped the car and turned to Yudie in the back seat.

"Ask them if they'll follow us to the police station," I told Yudie. "I need them to be witnesses. I also want to make sure he really takes us to the police station and not down some dark alley."

I looked out my windshield while Yudie was speaking to the motoconchistas. El Colonel had stopped about half a block in front of me, and was looking in his mirror, waiting.

"They said they'll follow us to the police station, but they won't go inside and be witnesses," Yudie said. "They don't want to get involved with this guy."

Just then, the unthinkable happened. I saw the back-up lights on El Colonel's pickup light up, and then the pickup started backing toward us at a very high speed. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. *He's actually going to ram us from the front now!*

At the very last minute he slammed on his brakes, skidding to a stop just a couple of feet in front of us. He got out of his truck and stormed toward us, shaking his fists and screaming at me. He pounded his fists on the roof of my car, and the noise of fist on metal above our heads was a terrifying one. I was sure he was going to pull me out of the car and start beating the shit out of me. I'd only been in one fight in my life, in sixth grade, and I wasn't about to make

this number two. There was no way I would try to fight back with a guy like this.

“Ok, ok, we’re coming,” Yudie pleaded with him. “We’re sorry. We’ll follow you. We just needed to talk to these guys.”

El Colonel stormed back to his truck and started to drive, watching me in his mirror. I followed, and the two motoconchistas followed me on their motorcycles.

It was a short drive to the police station, and as soon as we pulled in front of it, the motoconchistas rode off, yelling “Suerte!” as they sped away. *Good luck!*

El Colonel’s demeanor changed significantly upon arrival at the police station. He walked calmly and confidently into the station, a small cinder-block building with a lobby about the size of a bedroom. The inside of the station was painted the same bright green as the outside, as if it had been too much trouble to buy a second color for the inside.

The policemen inside jumped to attention, standing erect and pulling their hands up to their foreheads in a very serious salute.

“Colonel!” I heard one of them say. I assumed that he was the one in charge. “To what do we owe this honor?”

El Colonel told the guy, who I think was a sergeant, that he’d had a little accident with me, at which point he turned and pointed to me with contempt.

We were informed that it was too late for them to draft a police report, and that we’d have to return in the morning. El Colonel was asked if he could return at 9:00 am, and he agreed. I wasn’t asked; I was simply told to return at 9:00.

Before we left, I was told that I needed to leave the insurance and registration documents from the rental car, as well as my driver’s license and passport. El Colonel was asked for nothing.

I went out to the car and got the documents from the glovebox, and handed them to the sergeant along with my driver’s license. He asked me for my passport, and I was grateful I didn’t have it with me. I was worried enough that I wouldn’t get my driver’s license back, but at least I could get that replaced back home with a whole lot less headache than if I lost my passport.

We headed back to La Victoria, and on the way I called Cristian to let him know what happened.

“Chocaste con un Colonel?” Cristian asked, incredulous. *You had an accident with a Colonel?* “Ay ay ay.” Just telling Cristian I’d been hit by a colonel was enough to make him understand what a difficult situation I’d been in and was still in.

I asked Cristian to come with me to the police station the next morning, and he happily agreed. Cristian’s relational skills were impressive, and I’d seen

him deflate very heated conflicts with his sense of humor on many occasions. Not only that, but his dad was a police officer, and Cristian knew how to play the suck-up game.

I hung up with Cristian and drove straight to Pastor Bello's house and told him the story. Once again, all I had to say was that I'd been in an accident with a colonel, and the response was an immediate look of disbelief followed by a pained, "Ay ay ay." I asked Pastor Bello if he'd come along the next morning as well, and he agreed to do it, although a little more reluctantly than Cristian had.

I then went back to La Solanita with Aaron and Henry, and called Dana as I climbed under the mosquito net and onto my air mattress. I explained to her what had happened, and asked her to call some friends from church and ask them to pray for me. I had no idea how this was going to turn out, but I knew that I was in way over my head and needed all of the back-up I could get.

We arrived at the police station at 9:00 am as instructed, and spent the next hour waiting for El Colonel to show up. The lieutenant at the station ended up calling El Colonel at the prison, and reminding him of the appointment. El Colonel finally arrived at about 10:00, along with his sidekick from the night before.

I figured that we were almost done with this mess, and had no clue that thinking so was just my gringo naïveté. For the next thirty minutes El Colonel played hardball with me, asking me what I was going to do for him to make it worth his while to allow the lieutenant to write the report. Cristian did a masterful job of ingratiating himself to El Colonel, but not even Cristian could convince him to let the lieutenant do his job and write the report.

The next thing out of El Colonel's mouth stunned me. I had come to see pretty clearly how arrogant, narcissistic and corrupt he was, but I was absolutely taken aback by his shamelessness.

He said that he wouldn't allow the lieutenant to write the police report until I agreed to pay for the damage to his truck. If I didn't agree, he told me, not only would I not get the police report, but he would have me detained so that I couldn't go back to the US. He said he was sure he could find room for me at the La Victoria prison. I'd never been inside the prison, but I'd seen the horrible conditions in a public hospital, and couldn't even fathom what a prison might be like.

I was speechless. I looked at Cristian, who shrugged like "what choice do you have?" I looked at Pastor Bello, who looked confused and scared enough for both of us.

Cristian, Pastor Bello and I walked over to El Colonel's truck to survey the damage in the daylight. Thanks to the big metal bumper guard that surrounded

the whole front end of the truck, there was no body damage at all. The only damage was a broken turn signal lens, and some scratches on the metal tubing of the bumper guard.

Cristian estimated that it was only a couple hundred dollars' worth of damage. He suggested I offer the colonel a hundred bucks and see what he said.

I told Cristian that there was no way I was going to pay off the guy who rear-ended me. Pastor Bello agreed, saying that it just wasn't right. Cristian nodded in acceptance, although I got the feeling he thought I was making a bad decision.

I told El Colonel that I was sorry, but I wasn't going to be able to pay for the damage to his truck. He said ok; he was going to have me locked up. He looked to the lieutenant to play along, but the lieutenant was obviously uncomfortable with being part of the Colonel's ruse.

God, what should I do? You told me to trust you. Ok, I'm trusting you. What do you want me to do?

I had a thought.

I asked El Colonel if he'd allow me to explain why I was in his country in the first place. At first he answered no, asking why he should care why I was there.

I told him that if he allowed me to explain, he would understand why I couldn't pay for the damage to his truck.

He told me to go ahead.

I explained that I was there to bring clean drinking water to poor people in his country who didn't have enough money to buy purified water. I explained that I sold my house in Colorado to get the organization started, and had been living off of the money we received from selling the house. I explained that Healing Waters was a non-profit, and that we were dependent on generous people to donate the money we needed to operate as an organization. I explained that I hadn't even been able to take a salary from the organization until just recently, and that even now I was only taking the equivalent of a part-time salary for a full-time job. Finally, I said that even though he might think that I had plenty of money simply because I was an American, the reality of the situation was that I did not have the money to pay for the damage to either of our vehicles, and certainly couldn't spend our donors' money doing that.

El Colonel looked me over from head to toe, as if he were adding up the dollar value of my cheap shoes, cheap khaki pants, and cheap shirt. He looked at Cristian, and then at Pastor Bello. Finally he looked at the lieutenant, who gave him a very subtle look that I interpreted as "sounds like a legitimate story to me."

After another five minutes or so, El Colonel pulled the lieutenant aside, said a few words, and then stepped into the shade of the police station. The lieutenant motioned for me to follow him into a small room that was entered from the outside of the building. Inside the room was an old manual typewriter on a dilapidated wooden desk.

Cristian asked the lieutenant if he was going to type up the report. The lieutenant nodded, but didn't say a word. He fed a carbon-copied report form into the typewriter and started typing, entering my driver's license information along with the information from the documents I had pulled out of the glovebox of the Nissan.

As he was typing, El Colonel's sidekick walked in and handed the lieutenant his driver's license. The lieutenant looked at the license, and then looked at the sidekick without saying a word. The sidekick nodded. It was obvious what his nod meant. El Colonel had instructed his sidekick to have his name put on the report as the driver, rather than El Colonel himself. I opened my mouth in disbelief. All three of the men in the room, Cristian, the lieutenant and the sidekick, looked at me, looked at each other, and then shrugged.

I decided it didn't matter at this point, as long as I got a police report that said I'd been hit from behind. By now I didn't really care who the report said was driving.

The lieutenant finished the report, tore off a carbon-copy, and handed it to me along with my license and the rental car documents.

"We're free to go?" Cristian asked.

"Si."

We walked back outside and saw El Colonel standing by his truck, waiting for his sidekick. Cristian walked up to him and said something that made El Colonel laugh, and the two of them shook hands. I extended my hand as well, and once again El Colonel refused to shake it. Unfazed, I thanked him for his cooperation, without the slightest hint of sarcasm in my voice. Seriously.

Three days later, we attended the inauguration of our third Healing Waters project, at a church in a community called Herrera. Among the dignitaries in attendance at the inauguration was Silverio Manuel Bello, who was Pastor Bello's older brother but also happened to be the superintendent of the Assemblies of God denomination for the whole country. The Assemblies of God was the largest Protestant denomination in the Dominican Republic, with some 1,500 churches. Silverio and I had become acquainted when Dana and I lived as missionaries in La Victoria some four or five years earlier, and we were always glad to see one another.

"I heard about your *choque* with the colonel," Silverio said as we greeted one another. "Ay ay ay."

I told him a brief version of what happened, and he and the other dignitaries standing around all shook their heads in what I thought was a combination of amazement at the nerve of El Colonel and also shame that I'd been treated that way in their country.

"The next time something like that happens," Silverio commented, "make sure you call me right away on my cellphone."

"Why?" I asked. "Is there something you could have done?"

"As I think you know," Silverio explained, "besides being the superintendent of the denomination, I also hold the title of Director of Ecumenical Affairs for the government. It's not a paid position, but I have an office in the palace. In fact, I office in the same office as José Ramón Díaz, the president's nephew, who holds the title of Special Assistant to the President. I've told him all about you, and he said that he'd like to meet you someday."

Silverio held up his finger, as if a thought had just occurred to him. He got out his cellphone and dialed a number.

"Brother José Ramón? It's Silverio. Remember Tomás, the American I was telling you about? He's right here. Would you like to say hello?"

Silverio handed me the phone, and I began speaking with the Special Assistant to the President of the Dominican Republic. He spoke to me in perfect English with very little accent, a sign that there was a good chance he was educated in the States.

"Brother Silverio has told me all about the wonderful work you're doing to help the people of my country," José Ramón said warmly. "When can you come to the palace so we can meet and share a cup of coffee together?"

We made arrangements for me to visit him at his office in the palace on my next trip. As I handed the phone back to Silverio, he looked at me with a grin that I interpreted as meaning *it pays to know people in high places*.

Upon my return to Denver, I stopped by the church office and bumped into Peter and Aram in the hallway. As I was sharing the story with them, one of the administrative assistants, Anne Thompson, heard us talking and came over to listen.

I finished the story, and Anne said to me, "Isn't God amazing? I wanted to hear how the story turned out."

I asked her what she meant, and she explained to me that the morning that I had gone back to the police station to get the accident report, Dana had walked over to the church office from the Healing Waters office and had asked a few of the women working in the office if they would pray with her. Anne explained that they asked God not only to deliver me from the situation unharmed, but they also asked him to show me "divine favor" in the Dominican

Republic. Three days after that miserable morning with El Colonel, I was invited to the palace.

Holy shit. Did God do that?

Together with Aaron and Cristian, we went to the palace on my next trip for our visit with the president's nephew. Silverio joined us, and we had a wonderful time visiting with José Ramón.

"On behalf of my president and my country, I thank you for what you are doing to help the people of the Dominican Republic," José Ramón told me at the end of our visit, shaking my hand. He then took a business card from his desk, and scribbled some phone numbers on the back.

"That's my home number on top, and my two cell numbers below it," he told me. "If you ever find yourself in a situation like that again, where you're being taken advantage of or being harassed by corrupt authorities, I want you to call me. Doesn't matter what time it is, day or night, I want you to call me."

"Wow, thank you," I say, unbelievably grateful. I looked down at the business card in my hand, and immediately had a thought that it was my Get-Out-of-Jail-Free card.

As if he could read my thoughts, José Ramón added a little disclaimer to his offer. "Of course, if you do something illegal, don't call me to get you out of it. But if you're being treated unjustly, please call me."

Fortunately, I never had to use the card. From that moment on, I felt almost a supernatural protection over me whenever I traveled to the DR. Maybe it was just the confidence of knowing that I had the personal phone numbers of the president's nephew in my wallet wherever I went. Or maybe it was something more than that, a kind of peace and faith and trust that came not just from knowing the president's nephew, but from being a son of the king.

Several years later, I was back in Santo Domingo with some of our senior staff from Healing Waters and we were about to start a meeting with the board of directors of our Dominican subsidiary. By this time we'd built projects in about 30 communities in the country, which cumulatively were providing more than a million gallons of clean drinking water each month.

Silverio was a member of our DR board, but I hadn't seen him in a couple of years. As he arrived at the meeting, we embraced like old friends, and went through the required small talk about how our families were doing. After getting past the small talk, Silverio looked at me and smiled.

"I still think of your choque with El Colonel," Silverio said with a great big grin on his face.

"Yeah, that was quite an experience."

"I imagine he wishes that had never happened," Silverio commented.

I didn't know what he meant. "Why do you say that?" I asked.

"Don't you know?" Silverio asked me curiously.

I shook my head. "Know what?"

Silverio began to laugh. "Wow, I thought you knew. He lost his job over that! El Colonel lost his job as the comandante of the prison in La Victoria."

I was shocked. "Seriously? I got the guy fired?"

"Si," Silverio said, stretching the word out to two or three syllables. "José Ramón took care of it."

I couldn't believe it. It hadn't even occurred to me that there was more to the story. "Si?" I asked, still not believing.

"Si," Silverio repeated, chuckling. "I imagine he wishes he never ran into you!"

I laughed, but inside I was worrying that someday I'd bump into El Colonel at some inopportune moment, like bumping into Greg Vickers at that city council meeting. Only worse. Much, much worse.

Thankfully, the worry subsided quickly, and was replaced by a good feeling. A really good feeling. For once, justice had been served. For once, in perhaps a very small way, justice and truth and freedom had triumphed, and corruption and oppression had been defeated.

As we sat down to begin our meeting, a statement by the Apostle Paul jumped into my mind. Though I'd read it or heard it many times before, for the first time in my life it had real meaning to me, and actually seemed like it could really be true.

If God is for us, who can be against us?

Hmm. Had I been somehow divinely protected, or had I been just really lucky to have had it turn out the way it had? Had I really heard from God to trust him and not back down, or had I just been foolish and stubborn? I didn't know the answer for sure. What I did know, however, was that I had thought I had heard God say "trust me", I had trusted him, and just like with my accident in Germany, it had once again turned out better than I could have imagined. So even if it was all a coincidence, the number and significance of the coincidences in my life was increasing.

Whatever it was, there was definitely something going on.
