

1 CHAPTER ONE

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Pastor Tom walked between the twenty plus rows of green painted benches and over the cracked and blistered concrete floor. He then stepped up onto the stage. This was a sharp contrast to his budding mega church back in Texas. At least he was exiled to a country in Africa that patterned its government after a republic; similar to the United States. With just over half of Nigeria being Muslim there was good opportunity to evangelize and preach Christianity.

The stolen valor news article back home destroyed Pastor Tom's credibility and he was given a chance to redeem himself. Once his wife sold their million dollar home in Dallas she would join him in Lagos. Surprisingly, the most populated city in Africa wasn't what Tom had expected — serving out a two year mission stint might not be that dreadful.

The double doors swung wide open and a thin black man with luggage in hands and a backpack swung over one shoulder hurried in. "Pastor Sir, would you like me to take these items to your hostel?"

Pastor Tom was caught off guard. He stepped off the carpeted plywood platform and walked down the aisle. "You speak English?"

"Yes sir, all my life. English has been our official language since 1947."

"That's good to know. So I won't need an interpreter when I preach."

"No sir, not in Lagos. Some Hausa is spoken up North at our all girl's school in Chibok." The Nigerian paused and looked over his shoulder, out toward the street. "It is getting dangerous up there with the Boko Haram protesting girls getting western education. Those Militants have been coming over the border from Niger causing unrest."

"I'm use to danger. I'm a decorated war hero in the United States." Pastor Tom said and was now focused past the opened doors. There was a seasoned Caucasian mercenary with wavy blond hair standing at the parking lot gate. "Is that a security guard?"

35 "Yes it is. Paul and I will show you around for the next few weeks."

36 "What's your name?"

37 "My name is Idogbe."

38 "Idogbe? That's a different name."

39 "It means the second twin," the Nigerian replied.

40 "Oh, so you have a twin brother."

41 "No, I have a twin sister."

42 "Oh..." Pastor Tom pointed at what looked like a metal animal
43 trough. "Is that what you used for Baptism's?"

44 "Yes, more than one African pastor has drown doing river
45 Baptisms. Many Africans don't know how to swim!"

46 "That's interesting. I did see lots of people swimming and surfing in
47 the travel magazines on my flight over."

48 "The tourists like to party on our beaches. They sometimes drink
49 too much of the Palm wine and get foolish. The ocean current is strong
50 at Lekki Beach and drugs and prostitutes at Bar Beach are out of
51 control. It's not safe at either beach."

52 "Palm wine? I never heard of it." Pastor Tom looked back at
53 Idogbe. "You know Jesus wants us to love the prostitutes and addicts."

54 Not looking for a debate on the New Testament Idogbe asked for
55 the second time. "Would you like me to put these bags in your room?"

56 "Put them in my office if you could." Pastor Tom pulled three
57 dollars from his gold money clip. "Go buy yourself some of that Palm
58 wine," he said with a wink.

59 "I'm more of an IPA person," Idogbe replied and tucked the three
60 dollars into his black dress pants and then exited through the door,
61 behind and left of the pulpit.

62 Tom did a quick look around for an air conditioning thermostat; he
63 found three switches on a ganged switch plate. Two of the switches
64 turned on the overhead lights and one caused a pop when a PA system
65 came on. There were some folding chairs stacked up next to the
66 double entrance doors; there was no thermostat behind them. Both
67 sidewalls were blank and the only semblance of a Christian icon was a
68 plain wooden Crucifix hanging in the center of the front wall. On one
69 side of the cross was a replica of the Ten Commandments and on the

70 other side was a brass dedication plaque to Praise and Glory Ministries
71 in Los Angeles, California.

72 It slowly got dark and rain on the metal roof quickly turned into
73 what sounded like a Texas downpour. Tom opened one of the front
74 doors and watched the water sheet off the awning onto the cobble
75 stone parking lot. He walked to one corner of the covered porch and
76 looked around the corner. There was a small storage building that
77 must have been converted into an office. Idogbe got soaked when he
78 darted down the alley and unlocked the door.

79 The outside of Praise and Glory Church resembled a Texas style
80 horse barn but not as big. Even the simple bell tower could fit into a
81 Texas landscape looking something like a small grain silo. The covered
82 porch out front worked for rain or sun; Lagos had no shortage of
83 either. Lagos the most populated city in Africa with fourteen million
84 residents sits on the north shore of the Gulf of Guinea and is west of a
85 thirty mile long gulf. Tin Can Island is in the south metro district and
86 was the proposed site for a new international shipping port — operated
87 and funded by China.

88 Almost as fast as the sky had closed up it reopened. Out of
89 nowhere the frontage street filled up with at least a dozen yellow three
90 wheeled motorized taxis. Tom's shirt was soaked; not by rain but by
91 the 80% tropical humidity. From around the opposite corner of the
92 church an old military troop transport pulled out onto the frontage
93 road. The only thing Pastor Tom could make out was a forearm and
94 hand resting on the window sill. On the top of the left hand was a large
95 thru and thru scar. Most likely an old battle wound — a cold chill went
96 up Pastor Tom's sweaty back.

97 "Your things are in the hostel," Idogbe said as he came out the
98 church front doors.

99 "That little shack is my apartment?"

100 "Yep, I just repainted and sprayed for bed bugs."

101 Pastor Tom pulled out a handkerchief and wiped his entire face.
102 The sweat kept coming. "My wife won't go for staying in that little
103 building. Do I have a car so that I can go find a nice apartment to live
104 in?"

105 “No car but you could take a Kekes.” Idogbe pointed at one of the
106 yellow motorized tricycles passing by out front.

107 “Are those things safe?”

108 “Yes, they can’t go on the main highway so they stay mostly on
109 side roads. Slower travel is more safe.”

110 “What about Paul? You said he was going to show me around.”

111 “Paul is taking supplies up to the Chibok girl’s school. He won’t be
112 back for five days. Hopefully he doesn’t get attacked again.”

113 “Attacked!” Tom wiped more beads of sweat off his forehead. “Is
114 that how he got that stab wound in his hand?”

115 “No, he got that injury in the United States. Paul was a war hero
116 like you. He was in the green hat special forces.”

117 “Do you mean Paul was a Green Beret?”

118 “Yes that’s it. Paul was a Green Beret. Now you and he can tell war
119 stories.”

120 Pastor Tom was at a loss for words but he thought. *I got*
121 *transferred halfway around the world for embellishing a war story and*
122 *now a decorated Green Beret is going to be driving and guarding me?*

123 “Paul has a big motorcycle, nothing like the Okadas. It says
124 Heavenly Glide on the gas tank and he can ride it on all the major
125 routes because it goes fast.”

126 “Are you telling me that those small motor bikes and those three
127 wheeled yellow taxis are not allowed on major highways?”

128 “Yes, they are not allowed. The Keke’s and the Okada’s are too
129 slow. The government changed the law and the drivers don’t make
130 much money now. It is not good for our people. Not good for the
131 church either.”

132 “Can’t they lobby the city officials or form a union?”

133 Idogbe flashed a slight grin followed by a frown. “This is Nigeria.
134 The people don’t control the government like in the USA.”

135 “In the United States, it’s the lobbyists that control the government
136 not the people,” Tom remarked snidely and returned a frown.

137 While they talked outside under the awning the sun came out and
138 the traffic out front increased tenfold. Idogbe gave Pastor Tom some of
139 the Do’s and Don’ts of getting around in Lagos. He pointed out an

140 open market and internet café so that Tom could call home to his wife.
141 The only phone at the church did not have long distance service.
142 Idogbe said that in the morning they could shop around for a cell
143 phone. When Idogbe headed for home he told Tom to dial 112 if he
144 needed the police.

145 Tom leaned his shoulder into the heavy metal door. The smell of
146 disinfectant immediately filled his nostrils. His luggage was on a double
147 bed and his backpack on a small green table, it was the same color
148 green as the benches in the church. A Casablanca fan in the center of
149 the room was spinning and a pull string hanging from the fan was
150 dancing in the moving air. There was another pull string on a light
151 over the sink in the kitchenette area. There was a small bathroom in
152 the corner adjacent to the bed. The shower inside was smaller than
153 the one in his class A motor home back in Texas.

154 The heat, humidity and living conditions were more than Tom could
155 have imagined. The jet lag and ten hour time zone change had his
156 brain under siege. He moved his luggage off the bed and plopped
157 down on his back. The wet heat mixed with disinfectant smell forced
158 Tom back off the bed to the one and only window. In the track of the
159 window there must have been fifty dead flies. When he slid the window
160 open the dried flies crunched as the outside noise roared in. Back on
161 the bed the high pitch horns from all the traffic was relentless. The
162 rumble of tires on cobblestone was constant, until way past midnight.
163 It was odd that there was little chatter or yelling from all the people —
164 it was almost like they were robots.

165 The morning rumble and honking started up again before the sun
166 rose. Tom rolled over on the bed and pushed the two pillows against
167 each ear. He lied still hoping to somehow fall back to sleep; four hours
168 of sleep in thirty six hours was taking its toll.

169 Two hours later the pounding on the metal door pulled Tom off the
170 bed. He stubbed his toe on one of the chairs pushed up to the green
171 table. "Son-of-bitch that hurts like hell," Tom screamed out and then
172 opened the door.

173 "You okay? Idogbe asked with a cup of coffee and small white bag
174 in hand. I picked you up some Akara and Pap. I hope you like your
175 coffee Black."

176 "Yeah, black coffee would be great." They both took a chair at the
177 table.

178 "Akara is like a deep fried bean fritter and Pap is deep fried corn
179 paste." Idogbe ripped open the white bag.

180 "That's really good," Tom said and then took a drink of coffee.

181 "How'd you rest?" Idogbe asked.

182 "Well if we honked our horns in Texas like you do over here you'd
183 be getting a gun stuck in your face." Tom stuffed a whole Pap in his
184 mouth.

185 "We can't own handguns in Nigeria."

186 "What? I have a concealed weapons permit. I thought I'd pick up a
187 gun today when I get a cell phone."

188 "You can maybe get a permit for a shotgun. But only the police can
189 carry handguns."

190 "Well maybe I need to stop by the police station and let them know
191 who I am."

192 "I noticed that guard Paul had a gun strapped to his side."

193 "That is a stun gun. He wears it when he travels up north to
194 Chibok."

195 "Yesterday you did say there was a girl's school up there and that
196 it was dangerous."

197 "Yes, but you probably won't have to travel there. It is a twenty
198 four hour drive and not favorable to Christians."

199 "Well, that's probably best. I'm getting too old for a fire fight. My
200 days of battling the enemy are in the past." Tom ate another Akara,
201 drank some more coffee and stood up. "Let's go find me a cell phone.
202 The last time I talked to my wife was from the airport."

203 "Do you think your wife will like the apartment?"

204 "No, she won't like it." Pastor Tom went over and sat on the edge
205 of the bed and pulled his shoes on.

206 Idogbe was offended; he had repainted and prepared the hostel
207 himself. He didn't say a word until they were on the street in front of
208 the church. "We can walk or take a Keke to Computer Village."

209 "How far of a walk is it?"

210 "About three kilometers," Idogbe snipped, still hurt that Pastor
211 Tom didn't like the apartment.

212 "Let's walk." Tom regretted his words within two minutes. The
213 streets were packed and the crowd didn't move at a leisure pace. Most
214 of the Nigerians were fit and fast walkers. Idogbe weaved between
215 bodies, cars, Keke's or whatever, almost like he was running an
216 obstacle course. Most all the women wore long colorful dress's that
217 extended below the knee. It was like running through the center of a
218 kaleidoscope, all the different fabric and bright colors against black
219 smooth skin was mesmerizing and beautiful.

220 The Computer Market store was a combination of indoor and
221 outdoor vendors selling new and used electronic equipment. The entire
222 block was filled with most anything electronic. There were several
223 internet cafés that advertized untraceable IP connections. If spamming
224 was your thing you could buy a USB stick with a hundred thousand
225 verified emails for \$20.00 which converted to 7600 Naira.

226 Idogbe knew a lot about which cell phone plan worked best for
227 calling to the United States. The vendor even let Tom call home to his
228 wife in Texas to check the service. There was some wheeling and
229 dealing about buying a new phone over a used phone. Idogbe pointed
230 out that most all the newer smart phones where Chinese knock-offs.
231 He showed Pastor Tom that the counterfeit phones got errors or were
232 slow connecting up to the GPS app. In a city of almost 15 million
233 people getting lost could be dangerous. Pastor Tom opted for a used
234 Galaxy 10, with unlimited talk time.

235 As they left, Tom set a GPS waypoint in the Galaxy 10. He would
236 come back here to get a burner phone after he got settled in. But first
237 things first; he needed to order a window air conditioner. They didn't
238 even get halfway back to the church when Tom's hamstring felt like it
239 was on fire. He yelled ahead, "Idogbe, I need to rest for a minute!"

240 "Idogbe stopped, turned and came back about three steps. "Pastor,
241 are you okay?"

242 "It's an old war injury acting up." Tom was bent over rubbing the
243 back of his leg.

244 "Should we get a Keke?"

245 "No, if I can sit down for a few minutes then I'll be fine."

246 Idogbe pointed down the street. "If you can make it down to that
247 Holiday Inn they will have a relaxation room."

248 Tom didn't have a chance to reply. Idogbe ducked his head under
249 the Pastor's arm and assisted him diagonally and down toward Oyins
250 Holiday Inn. A Caucasian being assisted by a local didn't draw any
251 sympathy; in fact the horn honking increased until that went to the
252 side of the road.

253 The relaxion room was nothing more than the normal Holiday Inn
254 hospitality area and it was air conditioned. They took a table in front of
255 a bar that ran diagonally across the far corner of the lobby.

256 "What could I get you gentlemen?" The tall black bartender asked
257 as she shot a large pearly white smile at Pastor Tom.

258 "Do you have any of that Palm Wine I've been hearing about?"

259 "Yes we do," she replied and bent over to place a drink coaster.
260 Tom's eyes took a long look at her bright colored bandana scarf top.
261 An elegant gold rope necklace accented a gold wristwatch, she looked
262 like royalty.

263 "That's a beautiful blouse. Is that print made by an African tribe?
264 Tom asked and smiled back.

265 "It is. You are so aware of our African Culture."

266 "I'm on a two year sabbatical. I hope to learn a lot while I'm here."

267 Idogbe knew better, no respectable fashion shop in Nigeria would
268 make a skimpy top out of a bandana. "I'll have an extra stout
269 Guinness in the bottle," Idogbe injected while Tom was being played
270 for a sucker and hopefully a big tip.

271 "I never realized how beautiful African women dress themselves."
272 Tom looked back over at Idogbe.

273 "My twin sister is a fashion designer if you really want to see
274 authentic Nigerian clothing."

275 "Maybe when my wife get's here we'll take you up on that offer.
276 Beth likes learning about different cultures."

277 "When is your wife planning to arrive?"

278 "I'm not exactly sure. We need to sell a house in Texas, put stuff
279 into storage and Beth needs to find a replacement for some elders that
280 she looks after."

281 "Does she look after her parents?"

282 "No, Beth's parents were killed by a drunk driver when she was in
283 college. That's when she got caught up in the women's movement and
284 started doing her own thing. She became a Eucharistic Minister at a
285 different church. I'm hoping that her coming to Africa will get her head
286 back on track."

287 "I can't wait to meet Beth. She sounds a lot like my mother."

288 "What! Your Mom is one of those women that think they can do
289 anything a man can do?"

290 "Yes she is like that. My father died early. She has done everything
291 that he did along with being a good mother," Idogbe replied in a
292 defensive firm tone.

293 The conversation lagged for a time. "Hopefully, I can find an
294 apartment this week!" Pastor Tom wanted to get away from his
295 submissive declaration about women.

296 "I thought you knew that the contract was for the minister to live
297 on site. That's how it's written."

298 "Two of us couldn't stay in that small flat. My college dorm room
299 was bigger."

300 The waitress brought the drinks. "I overheard you. We rent rooms
301 by the month. I can have the manager call you." She placed a three
302 by five card and pen on the table.

303 "Thank you." Pastor Tom picked up the pen.

304 "We are good." Idogbe waited and then snatched the card and put
305 it in his front pocket. He leaned over and whispered. "Don't randomly
306 give out your phone number."

307 "She seems nice and she's a locale."

308 Idogbe took a long drink off the green bottle and thought. *I bet*
309 *this preacher won't last two months.*

310 "Before my wife moves here, there will have to be different living
311 arrangements." Tom took a drink of the Palm wine. "Wow this is really
312 sweet."

313 "I never have cared for it. Even in high school when we would
314 ferment it ourselves." Idogbe took another drink off his beer. "How's
315 your leg feeling?"

316 "Its doing better." Tom squeezed some lime into the Palm wine.

317 "How'd you injure your leg?"

318 "Jumping out of a helicopter." Tom gulped down about half the
319 wine and said. "The lime helped cut the sweetness."

320 "You'll have to share your war story with Paul. He jumped out of a
321 helicopter into a blown out rice paddy and almost drowned. His platoon
322 leader saved him."

323 Tom finished off the rest of the wine. "I don't like talking about the
324 war. Let's go, my leg is feeling better."

325 When they got outside Tom opened up his phone and set a
326 waypoint on the GPS app. *I'll be back here later this week*, he told
327 himself.

328 Idogbe was already about half a block ahead, he waited next to a
329 large pile of rubbish. In the center of the pile were two garbage cans.
330 The green one said RECYCLE, the brown one GARBAGE. The stench
331 was vomit rising.

332 "The trash collectors must be on strike," Tom offered when he
333 caught up.

334 "On strike, what do you mean?"

335 "The garbage collectors are refusing to pick up the trash until they
336 get an increase in pay or more paid days off."

337 Idogbe laughed. "This is Nigeria. Is your leg still doing okay?"

338 "Yeah its fine. Let's get out of here." This time Tom took off first;
339 this only lasted about a block.

340 Standing at the gate of the church Idogbe pulled out the 3x5 card
341 and a pen and wrote 22-06-34. "Lock this gate when you leave.
342 Anything that is not bolted down could end up missing. We have lost
343 most of the folding chairs since the last Sunday service six months
344 ago."

345 "I've been meaning to ask, what happened to your last pastor?"

346 "That church appointed a pastoreess. I think they called her 'Most
347 Reverend Mother'. It didn't work out!"

348 "So how many people were coming to her Sunday morning
349 service?"

350 "Toward the end maybe forty to fifty people were coming. The
351 preacher before her had twice as many followers."

352 "Well, I'll turn that around. The first mistake was having a female
353 pastor. That's not Biblical. Even your Muslim neighbors would agree
354 with that."

355 "I agree. Nigerians are not ready for women running everything.

356 "Praise God that fundamental bible teaching is gaining strength in
357 the world again," Pastor Tom said resolutely.

358 Idogbe didn't have a response. Using God's name to invoke
359 fundamentalism was what some Muslims sects were doing. He wished
360 that he had more knowledge about the three major religions but he
361 quit school after his father died. Idogbe handed the card to Pastor
362 Tom. "Why don't you try to open the lock?"

363 The first attempt the lock didn't open; the second time it did. "That
364 works!" Tom pulled the lock out of the fence latch and opened the
365 gate. "I'll go call my wife and then I need to work on my first sermon
366 for next Sunday or the following week. When will you be back?"

367 "I will be back next week but not on the weekend. I'm going to
368 help my mother on her strawberry farm for a few days."

369 "Fresh strawberries sound great right now."

370 "They are," Idogbe said with a respectful smile. "Mom dips them in
371 chocolate and sells them at market."

372 "Your mother sounds like a resourceful woman. Will I meet her at
373 Sunday service?"

374 "Oh no, she lives almost three hours away and goes to church at
375 Saint Jude's Catholic Church."

376 "Oh..." Pastor Tom walked through the gate. "Ok, I'll see you on
377 during the week."

378 # # #

379 It was still early morning in Texas and the used cell phone worked
380 without a problem. "Beth, sorry I woke you up earlier."

381 "That was fine, now I have your new cell number." Beth moved the
382 phone to her other ear. "I can hardly hear you."

383 "Wait a second." Tom walked outside into the fenced off court yard
384 then asked. "Is this better?"

385 "Yes, a lot better."

386 "They have metal roofs on both the church and my room. I think
387 the metal could be blocking the signal."

388 "Oh, do you have internet? You could send email if need be."

389 "I'm not sure, but the place I bought this phone from has all kinds
390 of electronic stuff. I'm going to go back there tomorrow. I'll take my
391 laptop and see about getting a modem."

392 "Any news about our house? Did Leroy give you any dates for an
393 open house?"

394 "Next weekend Leroy is planning a pre-open house. He's
395 suggesting we have a price reduction if we don't get an offer before
396 then."

397 "How much of a price reduction?" Tom was annoyed.

398 "He suggested fifty thousand. I told him that I'd run it by you."

399 "Tell Leroy he can do a temporary twenty-five thousand dollar
400 reduction if he reduces his commission by ten thousand dollars."

401 "I'll tell him." The cell service started to cutout again. "What are
402 the living arrangements like?" Beth spoke louder.

403 "It's not good. I'm going to check on a suite at the Holiday Inn.
404 They offer month to month rental and its close to the church."

405 "I'm also going to check on having the motor home shipped over
406 and park it next to the church. Remember my niece went to work for a
407 huge shipping company in Long Beach, California."

408 "Are you talking about Tina? Didn't she get in trouble for stalking
409 that millionaire, Kevin Trask?"

410 "All that's in her past. Beth you need to learn to forgive people for
411 their mistakes. You have always been jealous of her. Call my brother
412 today and get a phone number for Tina. I'll call you back later today!"

413 "I'm not jealous of someone fifteen years younger than me. I don't
414 trust her. You should stay away from her." Beth said with force.

415 "Beth just get me her phone number and tell Leroy he can reduce
416 the price if he cuts his commission."

417 "I will," Beth's tone changed. "But your brother and that entire
418 family is weird. Who gives his daughter a breast job for a high school
419 graduation gift?"

420 "Tina is his stepdaughter! We need to get out from under a
421 mortgage that we're almost upside down with. You are the one that
422 needed to have a big showpiece home on the golf course. You better
423 hope we can unload your dream home."

424 "Okay, I'm sorry. I know it's my fault." Beth apologized.

425 "I'll call you later." Tom slipped the phone into his front pocket
426 then unlocked the side door of the church. Looking at the congregation
427 area with the twenty or so rows of green benches he knew fifty to
428 sixty people in attendance wouldn't work. The place could easily hold
429 three hundred guests.

430 Tom stepped up onto the carpeted plywood platform. *This will have*
431 *to be raised up by at least four feet. When I'm on fire preaching*
432 *people need to see all of me bear witness.* Tom stomped his foot on
433 the carpeted wood. *This feels well built. Maybe part of this stage can*
434 *be used for a rock band and this center section built up. The cross will*
435 *have to be raised or maybe replaced or even removed.*

436 The pair of Ten Commandments tablets on the wall right of the
437 cross caught his eye. When he noticed that the second commandment
438 was written incorrectly he froze. "These will have to go!" Pastor Tom
439 called out loud while standing at the foot of the wood cross.

440 He had preached about hypocrisy many many times. He knew that
441 the commandments were enumerated differently in different places in
442 the Bible. But Catholic's, Lutheran's and other progressives faiths
443 threw out the idolatry verses. This way they could build magnificent
444 churches so to worship statues, saints and especially Mother Mary.

445 For the first time since he'd been called out on the stolen valor
446 charge he felt his calling. It took a simple nothing of a church halfway
447 around the world for Pastor Tom to feel the power of the Spirit again.

448 He stepped behind the pulpit and raised his arms and imagined an
449 overflowing church with rock music and dancing. Again, there would be
450 a studio of audio video equipment so that he could start evangelizing
451 all of Africa. But for now Lagos, Nigeria was his place to tame.

452 The Ten Commands had to go. He tried to lift the Decalogue
453 replica upward but they weren't hung on hooks. He examined around
454 the front edge for screws, but there weren't any. He used the palm of
455 his hand to see if he could knock the tablets loose from either side—
456 they didn't budge.

457