

2. CHAPTER TWO

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Sunday morning the church open house was about what Idogbe told Pastor Tom to expect. Maybe thirty people wandered through the doors or peeked in. Twenty minutes after an afternoon down pour two young boys with a red bucket and some old rags offered to clean the church and mop the floors for 750 Naira. Pastor Tom roughly knew what Nigerian Naira to United States dollar converted too and offered them one dollar each. They accepted and spent at least two hours cleaning and moping. Pastor Tom had bigger plans for these young boys. It would be something similar to what he did in college to get under aged girls to pose and model for art class subjects.

An unexpected caller was the bartender from the Holiday Inn. She had on the same African print top as when they met last week. Tanny looked around more than any of the other visitors had.

"I'm glad you stopped by." Pastor Tom extended his hand.

"I've been by this church a thousand times. Since you have that **OPEN HOUSE** banner out front, I thought I'd take a look inside." The smell of marijuana reeked off Tanny.

"Well you can see there's not much here right now, but I'll change that." Tom motioned with his arm around the mostly empty church.

"Good luck. This church has been closed more than it has been open." Tanny walked to the front wall and examined the brass dedication plaque. "Wow! This church headquarters is located in Los Angeles. My boyfriend really, really wants to move there to get a record deal."

"Has he ever been to LA? It's a very big city of over four million people and certain areas are dangerous."

"Lagos has almost twenty million people. Victor Vee and his crew can get around any place. No one would dare mess with them." Tanny pushed at the brass plaque almost like she wanted to take it off the wall. Her head was cloudy from THC and alcohol.

33 "I hope that dedication plate isn't attached like the Decalogue
34 replica over there is." Pastor Tom motioned to the right side of the
35 large wood cross at the Ten Commandment tablets.

36 There was a scuffling sound at the church entrance. "Tanny, we
37 need to go!" Barked out an order from a swank looking man with
38 multiple gold chains hanging around his neck. He stood just outside
39 the entrance doors, rocking from side to side.

40 Tanny jumped to, as ordered. "I got to go!" She practically ran
41 down between the green benches and out the double front doors. Tom
42 caught a glimpse of her jumping into an old grey step van. The two
43 young boys were wringing out their wet rags in the street gutter and
44 had to jump to the side when the van sped off.

45 On the porch Tom pulled a money clip from his pocket and
46 motioned for the boys to come to him. The smell of a strong detergent
47 was apparent when Pastor Tom pulled off two, one dollar bills. "I only
48 have American money."

49 "That's okay sir!" The bigger boy snatched both dollar bills.

50 "You need to share. It's a sin to steal, even from your brother."
51 Pastor Tom used the incident to preach.

52 "I don't steal. Jacob will lose his money. We give all our money to
53 our mom."

54 "Okay, that sounds good. What about your Dad?"

55 "He drives truck from the Lagos port to up North to our old village.
56 He is gone most of the time."

57 "Is he gone now?"

58 "Yes, until next week."

59 "Would you and Jacob like to earn some more money?"

60 "We got school."

61 "What about after school? I'll pay you both on commission. You
62 could earn more than a dollar each."

63 Ekon swung the red bucket in a full circle; not exactly sure how to
64 react. A tall Caucasian with combed thru straight light brown hair
65 looked trust worthy. An opportunity to earn American money was
66 something he couldn't pass up. "What is a commission?"

67 “Why don’t you ask at school and if it sounds like something you
68 and Jacob would like to do for me then come by after school
69 tomorrow.”

70 “Okay Mr. Preacher, we come by after school.” Ekon grabbed
71 Jacob’s hand and they hurried down the alley adjacent to the church.
72 They ducked thru a hole in the fence and darted across a field. A
73 fourth grader and a younger brother with an after school job was
74 better than playing soccer with friends.

75 A few more people meandered thru. Pastor Tom told them the first
76 church service would be in one or two weeks. He requested they bring
77 a King James Version of the bible; if they had one. He also told them
78 there would be free coffee and donuts afterwards; something he
79 learned from Beth’s church. Tom took the banner down and locked up.

80 The afternoon traffic on frontage road seemed down, at least the
81 horn honking was less. Tom flagged down a Kekes. This would be his
82 first ride in a yellow three wheeler. “I need to go to an office supply
83 store that can do photocopies.”

84 “Okay, I know a good one.” The driver dropped the motorcycle cart
85 into first gear and honked his horn then darted out into traffic. The
86 exhaust and heat from the engine barreled up under the canvas cover.
87 The driver passed by at least three shops that had photocopy signs
88 displayed. Finally he pulled up to what looked like a reputable office
89 supply business. “Should I wait here, Sir?”

90 “I don’t know? I need a few hundred flyers made. I don’t know how
91 long that will take.” Tom slipped off the small vinyl bench seat and
92 reached in his pocket for his money clip.

93 The Kekes driver uncoiled a cable that was wrapped around one
94 handle bar and then feed it thru the front wheel and frame. He hooked
95 them together with a lock and said, “I’ll wait.”

96 “I’m not paying you to wait.” Tom said.

97 Sunday afternoons were the slowest time for picking up rides and
98 this driver was not going to lose a Caucasian with a pocket full of cash.
99 “We can go in and see how long flyers take to print.” The driver led the
100 way to a counter in the rear of the store.

101 Tom handed a USB stick to the teenage boy behind the counter
102 and told him to open the **Praise and Glory** file. Tom was surprised
103 that his driver bartered a better price per copy than what was
104 advertized on the wall. Color copies were a must; unlike Tom's college
105 days when a witty black & white poster would do the trick to get
106 models. The agreement was for two hundred and fifty tricolor copies
107 ready in two hours.

108 Back outside while the driver unlocked the Kekes Tom asked, "Do
109 you know where I can get a window air conditioner?"

110 "From a store or do you want one from the black market." The
111 driver didn't even bat an eye when he replied. It was a normal
112 everyday question for a port city that received eighty percent of its
113 imports via ocean tankers.

114 "I don't know what do you think? You just saved me half off for
115 photocopies."

116 "Sunday night is slow traffic down to the shipyard. We can go
117 check Tin Can Inland, it's about seven kilometers."

118 "I'd like to get an air conditioner for tonight."

119 "Okay, we will go find a merchandise runner."

120 The more they drove south toward the coast the cooler the
121 weather got. Pastor Tom was having second thoughts about buying
122 something off the black market. Granted he had embellished about his
123 military career but buying stolen property was more serious. The
124 motor noise from the Kekes made it impossible to converse with the
125 driver. Tom wanted to see the beach anyway, so he sat back and
126 enjoyed the open air ride.

127 Neighborhoods around shipping ports are often rough and occupied
128 by union dock workers. When at port the first thing pirates and sailors
129 do is to seek out booze and loose women. At the Port of Lagos this
130 problem had been compounded tenfold by corruption inside the
131 government ran Port Authorities. It wasn't unusual for ships to be at
132 anchor in the Gulf of Guinea for twenty days or more just to get
133 unloaded. Paying a **Spot Fee** to be moved up on the unloading
134 schedule could be as much as a thousand dollars per container. Pay to

135 unload was the Port Authority's hold. An overseas interest wanted to
136 break the shipping union and take over Tin Can Island.

137 The smell from refrigerated container filled with rotting perishables
138 stacked six high along both sides of Harbor Drive was horrific. The
139 road had potholes so deep that the Kekes bottomed out more than a
140 couple times. Finally they passed some dirt lots filled with newer
141 luxury cars that had been totaled out in Europe. The high end cars
142 would be repaired and shipped to North America to be sold as like
143 new. A Car Fax service in Nigeria would issues a one owner, never
144 wrecked report after they were cosmetically patched up.

145 Past the junk cars and parts yards were about a dozen pop up
146 canopies that were manned by one adult and two to three teenage
147 boys known as **Merch Runners**. The Kekes driver stopped and started
148 asking about window air conditioners. The boss man thumbed thru a
149 spiral bound note pad and found a container location. A young runner
150 wrote the location on his hand and took off with a digital camera. In
151 less than eight minutes the Merch Runner returned with photos to
152 show Tom on the back of the digital camera. The boss man and Tom
153 agreed on a USD cash price.

154 While waiting for his air conditioner Tom asked about a flat screen
155 TV. The same process started all over with a different teenage boy
156 taking off. Within forty minutes they were headed off of Tin Can
157 Island. Tom was sandwiched between two boxes on the bench seat of
158 the yellow three wheeler.

159 It took two trips for the driver to unload the merchandise and carry
160 the large boxes to the front door of the tiny apartment. Tom carried
161 the two-hundred and fifty flyers in one trip. A twenty dollar fare was a
162 steal; a taxi in Texas would run at least a hundred dollars an hour.

163 The air conditioner fit loose in the window. Tom had to use some of
164 the cardboard box to seal off the top part of the window. The
165 installation looked cheesy but it worked. The new flat screen HDTV
166 could wait until Tuesday when Idogbe would be back from helping his
167 mom. Tom checked the world clock on his phone; it wasn't even noon
168 in Texas. He called home."Beth, I'm glad you're still there."

169 "I'm not going to see David till later today. They're trying to get his
170 blood sugars under control. Father Murphy is going with me after
171 Mass."

172 "Is your priest going to give David Last Rites?"

173 "Not yet. Father Murphy is going to take over bringing the Holy
174 Eucharist to David after I leave."

175 "Well, maybe he'll die before you come over here? Being bed
176 ridden can't be fun."

177 "God willing. Deacon Dave has been ready ever since his wife
178 passed. His son is flying a private jet down from Colorado on
179 Wednesday."

180 "His son has a private jet?"

181 "Yes, Danny is big into internet security and something called
182 Bitcoin. He also flies all over the world to different countries to protect
183 against election fraud. Deacon Dave got him started way back when
184 polling data had to be encrypted with something called a Clipper Chip.
185 It's all Greek to me."

186 Tom paused, he knew what encryption and digital currency was
187 about. That was how he lost the church secretary's money back in
188 Texas. If not for that, Sally probably wouldn't have taken the Stolen
189 Valor story to the news media. Finally Tom asked, "Did you get a hold
190 of my niece Tina?"

191 "Yes, I did. I gave her your new cell phone number. She didn't
192 know where Nigeria was and said she would check with her boss about
193 shipping the motorhome."

194 "Call her back and tell her to search the internet for Tin Can Island
195 shipyards. I know they ship cars and trucks in and out of there."

196 "Why don't you call her? It's not even ten in California."

197 "Doesn't that guy she lives with get mad when strange men call? I
198 think he is an abuser."

199 "That Tim character has been out of the picture for a couple years.
200 I don't think anyone even knows where he is these days. Why don't
201 you call Tina yourself?"

202 "I will do that." Tom walked over to the air conditioner and turned
203 it down. The fan was making it hard to hear. "Are they showing the
204 house today?"

205 "Yes, they are." Beth looked at her diamond wrist watch. Tom, why
206 don't I call you later today when I get back from my Eucharist ministry
207 at the nursing home?"

208 Tom glanced at the world clock on his phone again. "Beth it could
209 be midnight over here by the time you get done doing your thing at
210 the nursing home. Just call me tomorrow, unless we get an offer on
211 the house."

212 "I can do that," Beth quipped and immediately hung up.

213 Tom never did take her faith seriously. Living an interfaith
214 marriage was hard. Maybe it was divine providence that they never
215 were able to have children. Tom would have never stood for his
216 children being raised Catholic. With all the ongoing sex abuse in the
217 Catholic Church it only cemented his position and he reminded Beth
218 about it weekly.

219 Air conditioning not only cools air it reduces humidity, Tom was
220 appreciative for both. Finally, he would get a good night's rest. A text
221 message from Beth popped up with a phone number in it, he touched
222 the number.

223 "Hello, you know what to do," came out of the speaker.

224 "Tina, this is your Uncle Tom. I'm on an assignment over here in
225 Nigeria and was wondering if you might be able to help me? That is if
226 you are still working for that shipping company. Please call me back
227 when you have time." Tom finished the message and then switched
228 the AC unit back to high.

229 He remembered seeing a fast food chicken outlet about three
230 blocks east and decided to give it a try for dinner. He could also see if
231 they would let him put up one of his church flyers in the window. The
232 red and white striped motif inside and outside resembled a Kentucky
233 Fried Chicken. Tom didn't pay much attention when he ordered. The
234 #4 was for extra spicy; not for extra crispy. It took two liters of Royal
235 Crown Cola to wash down three pieces of extra spicy chicken. The
236 manager took pity on Tom's beet red face and let him put up his

237 church announcement poster in the window. Tom stopped at a few
238 more business to see if they'd let him put up a flyer; two places said
239 okay and two said no. He needed to rethink his advertizing plan.

240 Tom expected cool dry air when he pushed open the door but got a
241 hot electrical smell instead. The air conditioner had quit working! The
242 standby light was off and nothing happened when he tried pushing any
243 of the buttons. The light over the green table wasn't working either.
244 He opened the refrigerator door and the interior light was off also. On
245 the rear of the building he located a gray circuit panel box. There were
246 only six breakers; one of them was tripped. It was almost dark before
247 Tom figured out that by running the Window AC unit on the lowest
248 setting it would not cause the circuit breaker to trip. Set to low it at
249 least made the studio apartment bearable. For the first time since
250 leaving Texas he'd get a good night's rest.

251 At three am almost straight up his new cell phone played the Super
252 Mario Brothers ring tone and then vibrated on the green table in the
253 center of the room. With one hand Tom picked up the phone and with
254 the other hand found the pull string for the light. When he pulled the
255 string the light bulb flashed briefly and then went off; so did the air
256 conditioner.

257 "Hello," Tom barked into the phone.

258 "Uncle Tom this is Tina. I got your message."

259 The sweet voice coming thru the phone immediately shifted Tom's
260 disposition. "Tina it's so good to hear your voice. What have you been
261 up to?"

262 "Like, I'm working for a big company recruiting bigwigs, celebrity
263 and even politicians. I'm being mentored by Zsa Zsa Hunt. Like, I'm
264 sure you have heard of her."

265 "I can't say that I have." Tom's voice turned disappointed, the
266 information wasn't what he wanted to hear.

267 "Like where is Nigeria?" Tina asked with excitement.

268 "On the west coast of Africa." Tom quipped while feeling around in
269 the dark for a chair.

270 "Wow, are you on a Safari? Do you get to ride camels? Is it hot in
271 the desert?"

272 "Tina, I'm not on a Safari. I haven't seen any camels and yes it is
273 hot and muggy over here. I'm in a town of almost twenty million
274 people."

275 "Twenty million people that sounds bigger than LA."

276 "It is a lot bigger and that's why I called you. I was hoping you still
277 worked for that international shipping company.

278 "I do, but they closed the office in Long Beach. I telecommute
279 from home with Zsa Zsa about once a month."

280 "Does Zsa Zsa have anything to do with the shipping part of the
281 business?"

282 "I don't know, but I can ask her. Like, she has tickets to the
283 Golden Globe and I might get to go if Mr. Hung Meng gives the okay.
284 I'm so excited! Like, I'd do anything to meet some famous people."

285 Tom yawned, the middle of the morning call had woken him from a
286 deep sleep. "Tina, I called because I was hoping to get my motorhome
287 shipped from Texas over to Africa. But, it sounds like you're not even
288 involved in that part of the business."

289 "Yeah, like I'm sorry Uncle Tom. There is one guy I can ask but he
290 is in China right now."

291 "Well if you see or talk to him, please ask if it is possible to ship a
292 motorhome to Tin Can Island in Lagos."

293 "Tin can, like the man in Wizard of OZ?"

294 "Sort of Tina. But its Tin Can Island not Tin Man island."

295 "Oh yeah, I get it. I'll ask Mr. Meng when I see him."

296 It was real dark around the back of the building. Tom used the
297 screen on his phone to trip the circuit breaker for the fifth time. The
298 light over the table was flickering when he got back inside. He pulled
299 the chain on the ceiling fixture and the light went off; thankfully the
300 window AC unit stayed on. Tina didn't have a clue that she had called
301 at three in the morning and that it was already Monday in Nigeria.

302 Tom's internal clock was still not caught up. The low hum of the air
303 conditioner helped put him into a much needed deep sleep. He didn't
304 even hear the traffic and beeping horns as Lagos came to life. He slept
305 till half past nine. Idogbe wouldn't be back until Tuesday so Tom was
306 on his own for meals. There was a coffee pot on the counter and he

307 found a tin of **Volcanic Coffee** from Kenya in the refrigerator. The
308 moment he started the coffee pot the circuit breaker tripped. He
309 unplugged the AC unit and took another trip outside to the circuit
310 panel box. Back inside at the small counter the coffee pot brewed
311 away. It was worth the inconvenience — Kenya Volcanic Coffee was
312 the best coffee he had ever tasted.

313 There were some eggs, bread and what looked like grits in the
314 refrigerator. Half the morning was already gone, Tom decided to find
315 something nearby for brunch. He grabbed a handful of flyers a roll of
316 masking tape and headed out. He needed to find a dollar store or
317 someplace to buy water bottles, key chains; something cheap to give
318 away next Sunday.

319 As Tom scouted around it became apparent that there were no
320 litter laws. There was a lack of garbage cans and definitely no recycle
321 bins. A staple gun to hang the church posters on poles and fences
322 would help. About a mile away he found a discount store called
323 Massmart. It was kind of like a Walmart; not as big but more crowded.
324 It had groceries, household items and a pharmacy. Tom looked around
325 for breakfast or lunch at the outside food court; what he really wanted
326 was to find more of the coffee from Kenya.

327 Quite a few women carried bags in each hand while they balanced
328 a basket on their head. A few had a baby on their back or strapped to
329 their chest in a colorful cloth sling type carrier. It was sort of nerve
330 racking to watch; they'd probably be turned into Protective Services in
331 the United States for child endangerment.

332 A new realization hit Tom; the church didn't have a cry room. It
333 was his oversight and now he would need to add the words '**Leave**
334 **children at home**' to the flyers. Felt markers were now on his list of
335 things to purchase.

336 The meat and veggie on a wood skewer hit the spot, the coffee
337 was lukewarm and a disappointment. The store had a good hardware
338 section. He found a stapler, staples, some markers and more masking
339 tape. Back outside he marked a waypoint on his phone and loaded the
340 stapler with staples. He tossed the plastic shell wrapper in a parking
341 lot dumpster and stapled two fliers on the fence surrounding the metal

342 containers. He used a felt pen to draw a circle with a diagonal line thru
343 it and then wrote **Children**.

344 On his way back Tom stapled and or taped up at least twenty-five
345 posters before a well seasoned man with a **NPF** arm band approached.
346 "Sir, do you have a permit to display your signage?"

347 Tom shot two more staples into the black tar cover pole and then
348 turned. "No, do I need one?"

349 "Yes, you do." The elder reached into his pocket.

350 "Even for a church re-opening?" Tom forced his point.

351 "Don't matter." The gruff black bowlegged man looked over the
352 flyer and then asked, "Children are not welcome at church?"

353 Tom didn't want nor have time to preach to an old man. "Okay,
354 where do I go to get a permit?"

355 "I can issue you one right here."

356 Tom was suspicious. The elder, seasoned man didn't even have a
357 gun strapped to his hip. "Who are you anyway?"

358 "I'm the neighborhood constable. I work for the Nigerian Police
359 Force". He pointed at the **NPF** arm band.

360 "I need to see your badge?" Tom demanded.

361 The Nigerian pointed at a patch on the sleeve of his dark green
362 shirt. The patch with a red bird perched on the back of an elephant
363 didn't look official. The officer pulled out what looked like a receipt
364 book from the left pocket of his dark green shirt and flipped it open.
365 "Now, I'll need to see your identification." He pulled a pen from
366 behind his ear.

367 "How much is the ticket?"

368 "The judge determines that." The officer was again looking at the
369 poster on the pole. "You must be the replacement pastor at the Glory
370 and Praise house of worship?"

371 "Yeah, I came over here to build the church back up. You should
372 come next Sunday. I'm going to have door prizes."

373 "Are you going to have a woman preacher again?"

374 "No just me. My wife is going to be over here in about a month.
375 But she's not a preacher."

376 "Good." The constable took off his brimless green cap and used it
377 to wipe across his bald head. "Do you want a ticket or a permit?"

378 "I don't know? What would you do?"

379 "If you want to keep hanging signs you should get a permit."

380 "Okay how much is a permit?" Tom was almost sure that he was
381 being scammed.

382 "Two thousand Naira."

383 Tom did a quick conversion in his head. "Can you make change for
384 five dollars?" He pulled the gold money clip from his pocket and peeled
385 off a five dollar bill.

386 "We don't convert US currency to Naira. Five dollars US will be
387 enough for a permit."

388 Tom knew he was being played and reluctantly handed over the
389 five dollar bill. Idogbe had warned him about pay to play and
390 corruption with some of the city officials. Going before a judge for
391 even the smallest infraction could turn into a thirty day jail sentence.

392 The constable tore off a carbon receipt. "This is only good for a
393 week. Make sure you take your signs down by next Monday. We want
394 to keep Lagos rubbish free."

395 Tom shoved the impromptus written permit in his pocket. "You
396 should come Sunday and hear me preach."

397 The Nigerian elder looked Tom directly in the eyes. "I can't tread in
398 a church that forbids children. From the age of seven, pubescent
399 Muslim children are required to pray when they are at a Mosque
400 worship."

401 "That's too young to force a child to do anything. At that age it is
402 better to coach and mentor a child."

403 "Then let me ask this..." The elder drew in a deep breath. "Do you
404 preach that the wrath of **Shaitan** is real? Do you preach that actions
405 will be measured? Do you preach that the Quran does not list what
406 was written on the divine tablets given to the prophet Moses?
407 Christians still fight each other over what the Decalogue laws are!"

408 Tom turned away! He didn't need to be preached at. He earned his
409 masters of divinity degree from the best theology university in the
410 world. Pastor Tom knew the Ten Commandments word for word.