

Muddy Fingerprints

CHAPTER 25

The rental jeep got topped off with fuel; there was a bag of junk food on the passenger seat and a new dog chew inside the travel crate. Tom had the blinker on when he noticed a police car backed up to the church steps with the trunk open. One of the church doors was open too; he switched off the turn signal and drove on by! Tom went around the block and parked on the far side of the field. The church blocked the view of the front parking lot. Yet he did see a police officer cross the alley and then post something on the front door of the apartment — probably a summons.

After the police car pulled out on to Frontage Road Tom hurried across the field ducked under the fence and pulled the yellow paper off the door. **Come down to the police station. Constable Ayoola has more questions.** Tom wadded up the yellow paper and headed back across the field and started the rental car.

A few minutes later he backed up to the church steps and then propped open the door. He pulled the dog crate out of the back of the jeep and exchanged it for the bedding and mattress in the closet. When he closed the door he noticed something leaned against the front stage. He got closer and saw the muddy church dedication plaque. *Ayoola said he was going to try to pull finger prints off the brass for evidence. Looks like the case is closed or he's still trying to pin the burglary on me...*

Back in the apartment Tom scribbled a note: **Adogbe is going to preach tomorrow. I'm headed to the outreach school, a strawberry farm and then to that big monolith tourist attraction I've been telling you about. Take Abidemi shopping for some work clothes and boots. Please contact your friend Dan McIntosh and tell him, same time, same place but on**

31 **Wednesday. I should be back before next weekend. Love you,**
32 **Tom**

33 Ever since the unexpected visit by Beth, Tom's mind was split — so
34 was his heart. Abidemi had mentioned that she and her schoolmates
35 would be traveling by sea. She didn't know the final destination; but
36 said that Tina and Victor talked about Hollywood and New York. Mr.
37 Chen had mentioned the Virgin Islands a few times.

38 After six hours of nonstop driving and constant flip-flop
39 discernment Tom finally had a plan: *I bet that Dan could tap into the*
40 *Tin Can Island Port Authority computer system? Then we would know*
41 *what ports the Hong Fang is chartered for. Beth could fly to one of the*
42 *ports and get Abidemi hooked back up with her friends. A white man*
43 *traveling with an African girl would set off too many airport alarms.*
44 *Traveling on a container ship could be my ticket out of Africa? Tina*
45 *said she was in a stateroom when she came over and was treated like*
46 *royalty.*

47 The Jeep's low fuel warning indicator chimed. *Damn it! Can't I ever*
48 *get a break?* Tom slammed both hands on the steering wheel. Every
49 time he thought he had a solid plan it fell apart! He'd hoped that he
50 could get at least ten gallons of gas at the cutoff road, petrol station.
51 The plywood tent sign pitched next to the road read: **NO FUEL**

52 His spirit was lifted when he noticed the army transport truck
53 parked behind the outdoor latrine. Tom backed in so that he was
54 tailgate to tailgate with the M35 - deuce and a half. The familiar slap of
55 the screen door closing rang out across the gravel lot. Jamal, the tall
56 skinny attendant approached with a Rungu stick. Without saying a
57 word he tapped on each fifty gallon barrel on the trailer, every tap
58 rang hollow.

59 "Sir Paul told us you might join the COS team and that you would
60 be our new fuel transport driver."

61 "What?" Tom looked over the truck and trailer. "This is more bomb
62 than transport. I'm not interested in being a suicide driver."

63 The screen door squeaked and then slapped shut again. The
64 grandfather walked up to Tom and held out a cold beer. "Thank you
65 for joining the COS squad."

66 Somehow Tom got talked into driving the M35 Army truck and
67 trailer to a black market fueling site. His grandson would ride shotgun.
68 More correctly he'd ride in the passenger seat with his new rifle.

69 "Where'd you get that rifle?" Tom asked as the tall teenager
70 jumped up into the truck.

71 "I found it on the back cutoff road."

72 "Oh," Tom flashed back to when he scooped up Abidemi. When she
73 was delirious from heat exhaustion and curled up on the side of the
74 road. In the rescue haste to get her out of the sun he left the hog
75 hunting rifle beside the flat tire and rim.

76 "Do you have any ammunition?" Tom asked. He remembered that
77 he'd taken out the clip to use the long gun as a crutch.

78 "No, but it will scare the black marketers."

79 "It could also get us killed. Battles are lost because of lack of
80 ammunition, not weapons. You should read about the battle at Bunker
81 Hill on June 17, 1775 when Col. William Prescott's order to reserve fire
82 and aim low because powder was scarce. "That's where the quote,
83 'Don't shoot until you see the whites of their eyes' came from."

84 "I know that quote. I've read up on your American Revolution."
85 Jamal jumped out of the truck and ran around the back of the tar
86 papered building with rifle in hand. He appeared about three minutes
87 later empty handed. "Okay we can go now. I hid that war weapon
88 between the walls in the latrine."

89 "You have a secret hiding place?" Tom asked and then put the M35
90 deuce and a half into first gear.

91 "Yes, it's where I hide my bible." The boy pointed to turn left.

92 Tom pulled out on to the road. "I'm an expert on the bible. I can
93 answer any questions you have."

94 "Okay." Jamal waited for Tom to shift thru the gears. "In the book
95 of Isaiah it reads that they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
96 and their spears into pruning hooks. That nation's shall not lift up

97 sword against nation; neither shall they learn war any more. When is
98 this going to happen?"

99 "A, well..." Tom paused; he was more of a historical-truth than
100 seeker-sensitive pastor. "That passage is alluding to the Rapture.
101 Some Christians believe that we are in the end times right now."

102 "How can that be? The Hausa/Fulani and the Berom/Anaguta have
103 always been fighting. I don't think they will ever sign a seven year
104 peace treaty as in the books of Daniel and Isaiah."

105 "That seven year peace treaty is to happen in Israel."

106 "Why is that? Doesn't God want Africa to have peace?"

107 For the rest of the trip Tom avoided discussing religion. They talked
108 about how Jamal's ethnic Anaguta family had been selling black
109 market petroleum since 1959. Tom asked some hard questions about
110 the legality and environmental impact of storing fuel above ground. He
111 found out that it was mostly red tape and lack of money that was
112 holding back Jamal's grandfather from installing underground fuel
113 tanks and expanding his roadside store.

114 The eight hour round trip was a needed reality check. Tom learned
115 about the need for economic development in that remote NE corner of
116 Plateau State. He saw a similarity between ethnic tribes in Nigeria and
117 Native Americans meager existence on reservations in the US.

118 When they got back they had goat stew, yams and honey corn
119 bread for a late dinner. Tom was given a full tank of fuel before he
120 crawled into the back of Harry's jeep and got needed sleep.

121 Monday morning his plans were shifted back on Zangam Village
122 and the grave yard. He prayed that what he thought was true was not.
123 Driving along the Zangam river and then the mound of rocks were he
124 had buried Abel was not easy. He prayed for better news ahead.

125 Tom parked behind the boarded up school and walked into the field
126 toward a newly dug grave. He dropped to his knees when he saw a
127 grave marker with **ABENA** on it. No last name, no birth date not even
128 a cross scribed into the small concrete pad — Tom wept...

129 After a respectful period of time the village elder meandered across
130 the field. "I knew you would be back. I have gathered up Abena's
131 possessions for you to pass on to Abidemi."

132 Tom had no words — he so wanted all of this to be done. It felt like
133 he was walking in deep sand with a strong wind blowing in his face.
134 Inside the two room farm shack the elder moved a cardboard box from
135 the floor and sat it on a table. The first thing Tom picked up was a
136 photo memory book. The first page was a picture of Abena breast
137 feeding Abidemi. Her hazel eyes gazing down on a suckling child could
138 have passed for one of those old museum sepia tone photos. Tom
139 closed the memory book.

140 There was a goat skin bag setting on top a tattered pair of sandals.
141 Tom learned they were the shoes that Abena walked from her village
142 in Benin, after she'd been raped by a diplomat's son. Inside the
143 goatskin bag was a snow Christmas globe of the Holy Family. When
144 Tom turned it upside down the small white flecks started to fall on the
145 roof of the manger. Abena had promised Abidemi that someday they'd
146 play in snow — that they'd fall on their backs move their arms up and
147 down and make snow angels.

148 Later that afternoon Tom talked with the parents of the girls that
149 were selected to be foreign exchange students. None of them had
150 been given any paperwork. Mr. Chen told them that the Communist
151 Party had the best schools in the world. That they would buy a large
152 piece of farmland and put each girl's name on the deed after they
153 graduated. This all sounded sketchy. Tom was aware of the Chinese
154 Communist Party and its thirst to own farmland, airports and all the
155 seaports around the world. Worse yet the CCP still endorsed Eugenics
156 and mass sterilization. Tom wrote down and fact checked information
157 about the school girls while trying not to alarm their parents.

158 With his notes and the lone box of Abena's keepsakes in the back
159 of the jeep Tom headed for the district of Dwoi. He soon found out that
160 the Ten Commandments monument in Jos South, Plateau State was
161 surrounded by a large Catholic community and that there were at least

162 ten churches to stop at to ask for direction. Tom discerned skipping
163 the monolith — it now sounded like more false idolatry.

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167 Wednesday morning Dan circled thru Gudu Recreation Park looking
168 for the Sprinter motorhome. On his third pass Tom hopped out of the
169 rental jeep and waved. This meeting was more risky than their
170 previous two — especially after Dan had exposed the Bitcoin scam in
171 the largest city in Africa.

172 "What happened to your motorhome?" Dan asked out the window.

173 "That's what I need your help with."

174 "How's that?" Dan turned off his van.

175 "I left one of the GPS dog tracking collars in the Sprinter. I was
176 hoping you'd be able to locate where it is."

177 Dan rubbed his chin. "Maybe, if the battery is still charged."

178 "I need to find out where three girls are at. I want to get a fourth
179 girl hooked back up with them. It's a foreign exchange student
180 program." Tom held out the compiled information about the girls that
181 he had jotted down.

182 "What's this?" Dan didn't want to take Tom's notes.

183 "It's the girl's legal names, birth dates and the village they live in.
184 I'm sure they had to apply for a student visa. Maybe you could tap into
185 the states records department?"

186 Dan reluctantly took the notes and then pulled out his phone. "I'll
187 take a look. Most all Nigerian record departments have weak firewalls."
188 Next Dan opened the GPS tracking app on his phone. "Wow that is
189 strange!"

190 "What's that?" Tom rose up on his toes to see what Dan was
191 looking at.

192 "My tracking app shows one of the GPS collars way out in the Gulf
193 of Guinea. Dan handed his phone out the window to Tom.

194 Tom saw the blinking waypoint icon and its trail. It showed that the
195 collar had left Tin Can Island container terminal and was now headed

196 west in the Gulf of Guinea. "That looks right. My niece, Tina and her
197 boss Mr. Chen brought the motorhome over on a container ship from
198 Houston. They are probably headed back to Texas."

199 "Oh..." Dan found a pen on the dash. "What is Tina's last name?
200 Do you know Mr. Chen's full name and his company's name?" Dan
201 added that information to the bottom of Tom's notes. Dan jotted the
202 name Hong Fang, the container ship manifest would be his first
203 search. Dan was an expert at breaking thru firewalls and finding
204 private information. Tom's tidbit of information was how he found out
205 about the Bitcoin scam operating out of Oyins Holiday Inn in Lagos.

206 Their meet up ended with the same warning Dan gave Tom at the
207 first two. "Your phone has a tap on it. Don't contact me and be careful
208 what you say to Liz."

209 "Liz... You mean my wife Beth," Tom quipped, he hated the
210 nickname Liz.

211 "Yeah, your wife. After she covered for that Stolen Valor hit piece
212 back at your old church the less she knows the better."

213 There was something about Dan that Tom trusted and equally
214 something that made Tom uneasy. Beth and Dan connected thru
215 David; Dan's stepfather who Beth brought Holy Communion to when
216 David was on his death bed. Their bond felt infinitely stronger than
217 the bond of marriage.

218 Tom felt that same way about Hank; granted that they connected
219 kindergarten thru high school at St. Mary's but there was just
220 something that Tom couldn't put his finger on. It was like they were on
221 some sort of team — something like a God squad.

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225 New Jerusalem or the town of Kwang was where Tom was told to
226 search. The Ten Commandment tablets had eluded him on both
227 previous trips north into Plateau state. *I bet like in the United States*
228 *the Christian edifice has already been removed or torn down. I'll ask at*

229 *a few more places and if not I can live with not knowing if Africa only*
230 *abides to nine commandments. This is not my concern now...*

231 What Tom did find on his search was the Rayfield golf club; the
232 oldest course in West Africa, established in 1913 as a six-hole course.
233 Back home hitting a bucket of golf balls was something Tom did often;
234 it was a good way to wind down. Too much religion can be perilous!

235 Tom was just about to tee up a golf ball when his phone vibrated,
236 the message read: **The deal on our split window Corvette looks**
237 **good. I'll take care of getting it shipped. No worries on my end.**

238 Tom was just about to message back when a group of three club
239 members asked Tom if he wanted to join them, they needed another
240 player. Tom accepted the offer. One thing about the long game — no
241 matter where you are in the world the communion and spirit among
242 players is universal. One of the players suggested a 500,000 naira bet.

243 Rayfield was one of the harder courses Tom had ever played. After
244 the game and after a round of drinks the retired General John Nanzip
245 Shagaya offered to have his driver take Tom to New Jerusalem. Tom
246 declined; he wanted to get to the strawberry farm before dark.
247 Although, he chided that next time they'd play for a million naira.

248 Tom found the strawberry farm and Idogbe's mum insisted that he
249 stay overnight. The next morning Tom hinted about Abidemi staying
250 on the farm. The small guest room was quaint and would work if need
251 be; at least until school started. Hopefully, Dan was finding out
252 information of where her three other classmates would be attending
253 school and thank God, Abidemi would be back with her friends. Beth's
254 message of, 'No worries on her end' was a positive note.

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258 The Friday traffic was getting heavier the closer Tom got to Lagos.
259 He thought to call Beth but decided to surprise her by them going out
260 to dinner at the Ocean Basket Victoria Island restaurant. He called
261 ahead and made reservations for eight. The thought about dancing

262 late into the night with his first and only love was arousing and would
263 make for an immense and contented end to Beth's visit.

264 The special evening on the town turned into a washout when Tom
265 found a note on top a pile of new clothes on the green table.

266 **We are going out for Pizza with the Onukwulu's after Ekon's**
267 **soccer game. Constable Ayoola Ashiru has stopped by three**
268 **times! He wants you to go by the police station ASAP. It's**
269 **about the finger prints he lifted off the church dedication**
270 **plaque. We might be late. Love you.**

271 Tom thumbed through thru the pile of girl's clothes. *What the hell.*
272 *These are too nice to work in.* Next he looked in both shoe boxes. *No*
273 *boots? Beth knows my plan. Oh well there's still time over the*
274 *weekend... I'll go see what the bowlegged Constable has to say and get*
275 *that out of the way!*

276 Constable Ayoola escorted Tom down a long hallway past the jail
277 into an interrogation room. "I'm going to record our meeting for the
278 record."

279 "Is that necessary? Should I have a lawyer?"

280 "Yes, it is necessary. I keep video evidence of everything. No, you
281 don't need a lawyer." Ayoola switched on a video camera that was
282 mounted on a tripod and then pulled the blinds on the door.

283 "Are you sure I don't need a lawyer?" Tom's voice was tense.

284 "You can get one if you like. Your wife said you want to do some
285 traveling. The longer you delay your statement the longer it will take
286 me to wrap up." Ayoola dug into a white evidence box.

287 "A... Okay." Tom pulled out a metal chair and sat down.

288 "These prints were on the brass dedication plaque that was buried
289 behind the church. They belong to Victor Vee."

290 "Oh... So you think Victor robbed my church?"

291 "I know he did." Constable Ayoola pulled out more charts and slid
292 them to Tom. These are prints of Victor Vee's hospital records.

293 "How's he doing?" Tom asked while comparing the charts.

294 "Not good." Victor is still in a coma and there is brain damage."

295 "That's not good. I'll make sure to pray for his recovery."

296 Ayoola quit digging thru the evidence box and asked, "Why?"
297 "It's the Christian thing to do." Tom mechanically replied.
298 "Suit yourself." Ayoola laid a picture of Tanny down in front of
299 Tom. "This bartender helped with the robbery. She has three kids and
300 claims that Victor Vee was abusive to her and her children."
301 "I did see Tanny with a black eye and some bruises the week after
302 the robbery."
303 "Do you want to press charges against her?"
304 "No! Where would her three children end up?"
305 "I could put her on liter patrol for a year for her involvement."
306 "That would be better than jail. I'll put Tanny and her children on
307 my prayer list also."
308 Ayoola frowned, he knew the sanctimonious 'Pray for your
309 enemies' Christian phrase as nothing more than lip service. Next he
310 showed a hospital photo of a boy with a cast on. "Victor Vee broke
311 Ekon's arm with a Rungu Baton. Then he threatened the Onukwulu
312 brothers. He told them if anybody found out things would be worse.
313 That's when Jacob started peeing himself."
314 "I thought that Jacob had been traumatized. The boys were real
315 elusive after the robbery. Good detective work Constable."
316 "Are you still going to pray for Victor Vee? I have evidence that he
317 gave date rape drugs to patrons of Oyins Holiday Inn. "
318 "Christians don't believe in capital punishment. We believe in
319 forgiving our trespassers and definitely not killing infidels."
320 "So that's what you think!" Ayoola replied with anger. "That quote
321 of the Holy Quran is often mentioned to malign Islam. The verse does
322 not say infidels it says idolaters."
323 Tom felt the resentment. "I've studied the Quran. You call Jesus;
324 Isa and only claim him to be a prophet. You also claim that the Quran
325 has never been changed.
326 "Well, I've listened to you preach. You continually accuse the
327 Catholic church of throwing out the commandment of idolatry. Which
328 one of you has the correct bible? All the different Christian
329 denominations rewrite the bible to fit their narrative all the time. The

330 Quran is the same today as when written almost fourteen hundred
331 years ago.”
332 Tom was too tired to debate religion. “Ayoola, I’ve been driving all
333 day. Am I free to go?”
334 “Yeah, you are free to go. But don’t leave town! There is one other
335 thing I’m fact checking. God protect you if it proves true.”