

FFD >>> *Thirty + Days*

CHAPTER 29

Tom had been home for thirty days and had not yet told Beth about his gambling addiction. Having four young girls in their home was a good excuse; plus any private time with Beth was next to impossible. On Sunday Tom played an early round of golf and then picked Beth up after mass at St. Mary's church. "I thought that you and I could go for a little drive this afternoon," Tom said holding open the door of the 67 Split Window Corvette.

"That would be nice. We haven't been able to talk much with our house guests." Beth hiked up her dress so to slip down into the white leather bucket seat.

"Looks like your legs are getting back into shape."

"I'm training to get to run the Abuja marathon next summer with Fifi."

"That sounds fun, I guess..." Running wasn't Tom's thing.

"It will be. The girls will be on summer break so they can cheer us on." Beth consciously didn't push her dress down.

"Beth, I need to confess one thing to you, plus we need to talk." Tom's mouth grew dry. "I packed a lunch and some wine. We can go to the Dallas Botanical Gardens."

The roar of the 427 cubic inch V8 out the side exhaust made having any conversation difficult. Tom inserted a Beach Boy's CD and turned up the stereo. Beth let her hand fly up and down in the wind outside the window. She prayed that Tom's solemn mood for the last few weeks wasn't something that they couldn't work through. In some bizarre way she was praying for Tina also. From what the girls told her if Tina didn't follow orders she'd be raped by the entire crew.

Tom circled the lot several times not only to draw attention to his pride and joy but to find two side by side parking spots where he could

32 park in the center. He rushed around the stingray shaped backend and
33 opened the door for Beth and again stared hard at her long legs.

34 "Are you okay sitting on the lawn? I brought a blanket." Tom
35 pointed at a sloping section of manicured grass.

36 "Sure Tom." It was hard for Beth to admit, but she liked Tom's
37 showboating; especial when she was the recipient.

38 Beth laid out the blanket. Tom uncorked and then poured the wine.
39 They laughed as they fed each other bits of cheese and grapes. "We
40 must look cheesy to all other visitors." Beth said with a forced grin.

41 Finally Tom got serious. "Beth, I'm sorry to have to tell you this.
42 But it started in college and has continued through our entire
43 marriage."

44 Beth took a drink of wine to prepared herself. Her eyes focused on
45 a family feeding ducks in a pond and then to a jogger pushing a two
46 child stroller. She had grown content with being just Tom and Beth.

47 "Elizabeth, I'm an addict. I'm addicted to gambling!"

48 "What!" Beth's eyes darted back to Tom. "What are you saying?"

49 "Beth my mother's diamonds, which I was going to have made into
50 earrings for you on our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary." Tom took a
51 drink of wine. "I lost them playing golf."

52 "You lost them on a golf course?" Beth was confused and ecstatic
53 at the same time. She finished her wine in two gulps.

54 "No, I lost them on a gambling bet." Tom poured more wine and
55 then went on to explain that over the years he'd lost over three
56 hundred thousand dollars. It was more like four hundred thousand
57 with about half drawn off his retirement account and the other half out
58 of a church building fund.

59 Now Beth was concerned knowing that his old church accountant
60 was serving jail time for embezzling and then converting accounts into
61 bitcoin. The accountant had also convinced Tom that he was entitled to
62 two-hundred thousand dollars as a 5% fundraising fee. It seemed
63 reasonable since Tom personally raised over four million dollars to
64 remodel and enlarge the fitness center at Glory and Praise
65 headquarters in Los Angeles, California.

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Fast forward thirty more days and the girls were already on summer break. Dan offered to fly the four of them and Beth into Nigeria's capital's airport. He was negotiating an extension to his internet security contract with federal agents. Dan was thrilled to finally be face to face with the three girls he helped the Special OP's team rescue and to see Abidemi again.

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The village had a welcome home party in the old school house. The very next day the four girls were canning Abena's jams so to fulfill old customer contracts. Ben Okri the village elder, who let Abidemi use his last name so that she could get a student visa, knew not to force his lineage. It was just the right thing to do. Ben also knew the importance of removing the Glory and Praise School House name over the front door.

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Tom had to step in when Abidemi offered to split the profits equally four ways. He explained to all of them that the owner had to make more than the employees in order to grow the business. If not, no one would have a job next summer. Some of the mothers volunteered not expecting anything. They just wanted to show their gratitude for their girls getting an education in a safe place.

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On this first workday on the front step Tom had everyone hold hands to form a prayer circle. "Our heavenly Father we ask for your protection today and going forward as the Zangam Village starts up Abena's jam business. May she watch over all of them, and we pray that this endeavor is blessed by you. In Jesus name we pray."

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It was solemn inside the school house as bloodstains were scrubbed off the floor and old school benches were stacked three high to be used for storage shelving. The silence was broken by somebody prying and then pounding outside above the front doors.

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A flashback came over a mother that saw her oldest daughter slaughtered by the Boko Haram the previous year. She broke the mop

98 off of the wood handle. She gripped it like a spear and charged out the
99 back door.

100 Out front Ben Okri had just removed the school house name plaque
101 and replaced it with a new one. The sign read: **Abena's fine Jam.**

102 Ben's wisdom was profound. Letting the militant Boko Haram see
103 that Zangam Village no longer had a school was his way to protect the
104 village. Ben also had made a white cross grave marker for Abidemi's
105 Mum and the three girls buried between his home and the old school
106 house. If anybody questioned the Christian connotation of the white
107 crosses he would take all the blame. Tom felt a need to show Beth the
108 grave he'd made for Abel.

109 The next morning Tom pointed as he steered along the river bank.
110 He stopped the rental car in front of a stack of rocks. "This is the place
111 Abel was killed by Hyenas. He was protecting me."

112 "Is it safe to get out?" Beth asked and noticed the tire and rim up
113 on the road."

114 "I knocked down about twenty Hyenas that day, including the
115 matriarch. It will take years before a clan that size establishes in this
116 area again." Tom got out of the rental jeep.

117 Beth cautiously stepped out and then pointed at the tire and rim up
118 on the road. "Is that where you found Abidemi?"

119 "Yes." Tom refrained but then finally admitted, "I think that it was
120 divine intervention."

121 "Tom, it was a miracle. Most likely it was Saint Nicholas protector
122 of children. Or maybe Thomas Aquinas patron saint of school
123 children?" Beth had a whole litany of saints to suggest.

124 Near the top of the road out of the Zangam river canyon Tom's
125 burner phone chirped and started downloading messages. He stopped
126 next to the rock outcropping where he knew he could get a stronger
127 signal and climbed up and around massive boulders.

128 Tom listened to the first message. "Mr. Preacher man, I got that
129 load of Kerosene you wanted. I'll be at the cutoff road petro stop in
130 about an hour. I got Jacob with me. He wants to know if you'll take
131 him to see that Abidemi girl."

132 Beth had just hiked up the rock outcropping and overheard the
133 voice message. "Oh that's cute. Abidemi and Jacob have been texting
134 every day." She wrapped her arms around Tom's waist and looked
135 over the miles of open grazing land. "It sure is beautiful country out
136 there."

137 "It sure is," Tom replied and then hit #7 to call back the sender.
138 "Jude, I'll be hauling that kerosene with an old Army Vietnam M35
139 deuce and a half.

140 It won't be safe for Jacob to ride along, sorry."

141 Beth held out her hand for the phone. "Mr. Onukwulu this is Beth. I
142 can follow Tom back to the village in the rental jeep. Jacob can ride
143 with me if that is okay with you."

144 "Oh yes, that would be good. They message every day."

145 Tom took back the phone. "Jude, see you in a while."

146 Then Tom listened to the next message. "Hey, Arnold Palmer. I
147 heard your back in town. How about playing a game? I'll give you a
148 chance to win those diamonds back." Tom didn't return Hon. Simon
149 Bako Lalong call — yet.

150 Tom turned into the gravel parking lot and pulled around back.
151 There had been an uncomfortable silence ever since the last voice
152 message. Beth spotted Jacob and hopped out.

153 Jude already had the 1000 gallon pony tank and trailer unhooked
154 from his cab-over semi tractor. The plan didn't change much. Tom was
155 going to use the vintage M35 deuce and a half to pull the Kerosene
156 back to the village. It would be enough fuel all summer for canning
157 Abena's Jam.

158 Mohammed Jamal, grandson of the gas stop owner was going to
159 now ride shot gun with Jude Onukwulu back to the BP oil yard and pick
160 up a two transport trailers. One with 3000 gallons of 87 octane gas
161 and the other with 1500 gallons of 95 octane grade. This was the first
162 gas run not purchasing black market fuel. Tom had to put a lien
163 against his split window corvette to make this deal happen.
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Fast forward three more years plus ninety days. All four girls were in high school, two were already applying to get into the University of Ibadan. One of the girls was going to apprentice under Dan McIntosh, hopefully to be an IT security specialist for the State Security Service of Nigeria. Abidemi was taking advance classes so to graduate early. Abena's fine jams had grown fourfold with the consistence supply of kerosene and strawberries and most importantly loyal employee. Jude was the all round supply and jam delivery driver. Most importantly Jude was the way she and Jacob were able to see each other. A wedding was in the future—God willing.

Tom's addiction was mostly under control. This day two cases of Abena's, fine jam was the wager. Hon. Simon Bako Lalong was now more than a golf buddy; he respected Tom for the way Tom cut deals, no matter who it was.

Simon Bako hugged Tom and then started mentally playing the long game. "I already got the planning commissioner to okay burying fuel tanks at the cutoff road store. So we can just have a casual round of golf today."

"Sounds good. I guess I'll take back that case of apricot-pineapple jam; it's turning out to be a favorite." Tom could play the mental game equally well.

"Apricot-Pineapple that sound delicious." Simon Bako licked his lips. "Okay what do I have to put up for my bet?"

"Idogbe and I have raised almost ten million naira for a new outreach school at Zangam Village. I'd like help with the permits and have the ground breaking before I start teaching at Notre Dame."

"Remind me again what you will be teaching."

"Ecumenicalism in today's world. Plus a course about, tithing and fundraising."

"You will be good at both of them." Simon replied with sadness.

198 "After I get settled in I want you to come over to South Bend,
199 Indiana on a golf vacation. Tom unzipped a pouch on his golf bag and
200 pulled out an envelope. "Here are two tickets into Chicago O'Hare
201 airport and back."

202 Simon was stunned. "I can't take these tickets. It's too much."

203 "I have so many air-miles from flying back and forth for the last
204 four years these tickets didn't cost me anything." Tom forced the
205 tickets into Simon's hand."

206 "Thank you Rev Tom. I treasure your friendship."

207 "Maybe you won't, after you check to make sure the tickets are
208 real." Tom grinned. "Let's play golf."

209 Simon was so rattled he lost by five strokes. Tom still gave him the
210 two cases of Abena's fine Jams. The tickets were real.

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213 With the help of Jacob; Idogbe had learned sign language and
214 added it to his Sunday church service for the past last year and a half.
215 The blaring praise and worship music had to be turned down a few
216 notches so not to blast out the semi-deaf that wore hearing aids.

217 When Idogbe added a 6 AM High Mass on Holy Days of Obligations
218 that didn't fall on a Sunday it should not have been a problem — but it
219 did. Fundamentalism raised its ugly head! Tom received a certified
220 letter from Glory and Praise headquarters:

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222 **Cease & Desist**

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224 **Pastor Tomas Joseph Seton it has been brought**
225 **to our attention that you are allowing catholic**
226 **masses to be celebrated in our worship facility**
227 **in Lagos, Nigeria by a defrocked homosexual**
228 **priest. Please cease this action immediately.**
229 **Also cease all other community activities**
230 **including the Chess Club.**

Respectfully, the Glory & Praise legal team.

Tom called Idogbe and set a private meeting at the strawberry farm; away from any influencer's in Lagos. Over the past year there had been some pushback with the less music and more liturgies on Sundays that Idogbe was initiating. During this time the Guardian newspaper had been running articles about homosexuals priest's hiding behind cleric collars. Idogbe wasn't a priest; he was a deacon and he could marry if he chose to.

The screen door slapped closed and Idogbe met Tom on the front porch. Their usual manly embrace didn't feel right; Tom stood rigid and pushed off quickly. "Here. I got a letter from headquarters that I need to ask you about."

Idogbe read the one paragraph letter and started to cry. He walked off the porch and into a field where his Mum was weeding. She read the letter and then hugged her son. From early childhood Idogbe was special; he chose to live a chaste, prayer filled life near the heart of the beast. Sin and chaos spews from most large cities everywhere in the world. It only a matter of time before the beast snaps off the heads of the righteous.

Tom deadheaded to Lagos. He needed to post a public meeting notice. Some four years ago he had hired Ekon and Jacob to post reward posters when the church was robbed. This would probably be the last time he hired the brothers to do odd jobs. Jacob was still cleaning the church when he wasn't up north helping in the cannery.

Constable Ayoola didn't pull down any of the meeting notices; in fact he offered his assistance. He had joined the chess club and often pointed the wayward toward the growing church. He knew that vacant buildings don't build communities, they hinder them.

Idogbe and Tom had turned the field behind the church into a soccer field and they had started a fundraiser to put in a basketball court. Tom was teaching Idogbe how to turn tithing and the prosperity gospel into successful fundraisers. Now all that was on hold...

264 *Thy will be done... Thy will be done... Thy will be done,* were the
265 words Tom was repeating over and over to himself as the church filled
266 up. Tom didn't feel nor believe that Idogbe was homosexual. But how
267 else did the gay porn get onto the churches audio video projection
268 equipment. Regardless, Tom loved Idogbe all the same.

269 Tom switched on the podium microphone. "Thank you all for
270 coming. It is with a heavy heart that after four years between Idogbe
271 and myself working hard to build a universal church where all are
272 welcome, including sinners and our..."

273 "What kind of church doesn't want thunderous song and dance to
274 praise the one and almighty?" bellowed from the music section.

275 Tom drew a deep breath. "Most all of you know about the cease
276 and desist order. I'm sorry, that there is no other option."

277 "Wait a minute!" Ekon yelled from the supply closet doorway. He
278 then pointed back over his shoulder. Several people saw a panel move
279 and then Jacob emerge from behind the sliding wall. Ekon then hurried
280 down the aisle and leaped up on the stage; he'd grown as tall as Tom.

281 Jacob was working himself forward one row at a time air-dropping
282 photos from his Smartphone to the congregation phones. He signed for
283 the parishioners to pass the download to the next person.

284 Ekon took the microphone. "Not many people know about the
285 hidden wall in the supply room. That is where Jacob hid the day two
286 men broke into the church. Look at the pictures on your phones. One
287 of the men inserted a USB drive into the Audio Video projector. He is
288 the one that uploaded the gay porn on to the church projector. The
289 horrible stuff that Deacon Idogbe is being blamed for!"

290 "How do you know that? We can only see the man's back." refuted
291 the plump choir leader from the right side of the stage.

292 "We know that because the metadata shows the date that the
293 pictures were uploaded into the video projector. On that day Idogbe
294 was working on his Mum's strawberry farm. Constable Ayoola has
295 sworn statements from several berry pickers that Idogbe was
296 hundreds of miles from here on the metadata upload date."

297 "That doesn't prove anything. You can't see their faces!" More
298 argument from the choir director.

299 Nobody heard or noticed two men slip out the church doors — right
300 into Ayoola's trap. The deputies quickly cuffed the two brothers and
301 then hustled them into the rear of police van.

302 Ms. Jezebel sashayed out from behind her keyboard on overloaded
303 purple high heels and pushed Ekon away from the podium. She pulled
304 the microphone down and bellowed out a warning. "Are you going to
305 believe a white preacher sent over from the United States who lied
306 about being a war hero? Praise the almighty we have been warned!"

307 "All white men tell lies. You can't trust them," came from the choir.

308 "Don't trust any homosexual catholic either. Deacon Idogbe only
309 wants supple gorgerin chants. He doesn't like roof raising gospel
310 singing and praise to honor the almighty."

311 From the back of the church Constable Ayoola put in his two cents
312 worth. "I don't know about all the song and dance but the brothers are
313 singing a tune to keep themselves out of jail. They just told me that
314 they had no inkling that porn was on that USB drive."

315 The shouting turned to whispering. Constable Ayoola stood silent
316 as his deputies came through the doors. "Bring those two sisters with
317 the matching purple pumps down to the station. They just incriminated
318 themselves with false accusations."

319 The whispering turned to complete silence as the deputies pulled
320 Ms. Jezebel from behind the podium and her sister off the stage. Two
321 men came forward and grabbed each end of the electronic keyboard.
322 Another congregant grabbed the music bench, others latched up the
323 microphones, tambourines bead covered percussion gourds and lastly
324 a tribal drum. All the music instruments and equipment got moved into
325 the parking lot.

326 Tom returned to the podium, the only words that came to mind
327 were, "God's will be done."

328 Jacob couldn't hear Tom but after their thousands of chess games
329 he knew that Tom didn't have a next move. A microphone was useless
330 to Jacob. He went forward and pointed at the Ten Commandment

331 plaques hanging on the front wall and moved his head side to side. He
332 then pointed to Jesus on the cross, then raised his arms above his
333 head and slowly curled his finger. Jacob then brought his hands
334 together so his finger nails just touched. With his thumbs pointing
335 downward he touched them together to form a heart. Without spoken
336 words Jacob was communicating with Tom. Now Jacob turned all the
337 way around to sign to the deaf and hard of hearing in the front row of
338 pews. Tom spoke into the microphone.

339 "As Jacob just pointed out. Jesus did not tell us to throw out the
340 Ten Commandments. Our Savior, Jesus Christ is not telling us to throw
341 out even one of the Father's commandments and replace it with love.
342 The world is full of nine commandment churches that alter God's laws
343 so to appease their flock. These false prophets are the evil doers that
344 roam the world to ruin souls... " Tom paused so that Jacob could catch
345 up signing.

346 Then Tom continued as did Jacob. "In the silence of your soul ask
347 the Holy Spirit for the gifts of wisdom and knowledge when discerning
348 these words from Our Lord, Jesus the only Son of God..."
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351 **"I give you a new commandment: Love one**
352 **another. Just as I have loved you, you must also love**
353 **one another."**