

5. CHAPTER FIVE

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The emergency ward was packed. Ekon, Jacob and Fifi were sitting on a hospital bench with another distraught family. Fifi had a clipboard in her lap. Ekon had an ice pack on his forearm. Jacob was sandwiched between them, frightened by all the emergency room commotion. The lumbering big white Texan in a sport coat and dress slacks seemed to have a calming effect, Jacob slid out from between his protected zone and hugged Pastor Tom's leg.

Tom rubbed Jacob's head and asked Fifi, "What happened?"

"Ekon fell off the bucket putting up your wanted posters."

"Wanted poster's what do you mean?" Bowlegged Ayoola Ashiru asked as he pulled a notepad from his pocket."

"The boy's were putting up posters about the three men that robbed my church. Important information that you didn't take down or even care about!"

"You left the church and apartment unlocked. I told you to not get involved."

"Number one, one eight," Blasted over the loud speaker and the red display over the reception window changed to **118**.

"What number are you?" Tom asked Fifi.

She flipped the clipboard over and read off the number on the back, "We are number one, two, five."

"You hired the Onukwulu brothers. So you are responsible for the hospital bill." Constable Ayoola Ashiru said with force.

Tom reached into his back pocket and opened his wallet. He handed an insurance card to Fifi. "Use this information. Please get me copies of the hospital bill so I can send it to my insurance agent."

There was a silent sigh of relief. Fifi had mixed feelings about Pastor Tom from the very first open house. But he did hire her boys that day to mop and clean the church. Now he stepped right in to pay a medical bill that they could not afford; especially with a new baby on the way.

34 Constable Ayoola was content with the way Tom handed over the
35 insurance card. "I'm on shift until midnight. I'll check back tomorrow
36 to finish up my report."

37 As bowlegged Ayoola Ashiru exited thru the emergency room
38 sliding glass doors a teenage motorcycle accident victim was being
39 rushed in. This child had been using a dried out pumpkin shell for a
40 helmet. Many poor riders skated around the helmet law with inferior
41 safety equipment — unfortunately this one paid with a crushed skull.
42 The emergency room resembled a warzone triage site with the endless
43 flow of wounded.

44 Tom had never experienced waiting with a child to see a doctor.
45 "I'm going to go find a cup of coffee. Could I bring back a cup for
46 you?"

47 "No thank you Pastor," Fifi answered as she turned Jacob's head so
48 that he didn't see the motorcycle driver being carried thru the lobby to
49 the morgue.

50 Tom exited out the sliding glass doors and took a deep breath. The
51 sun was down and so was the temperature. He walked by a couple of
52 convenience stores before he found one that sold Kenya AA coffee.
53 One thing Tom liked about Africa was they served coffee the old
54 fashion way — strong. There was none of the steamed almond milk,
55 skinny light with nutmeg jargon as in the US. "I'll have two coffees,"
56 Tom told the cashier as he headed toward the soda cooler.

57 The red display had advanced to 120 when Tom came back thru
58 the emergency room door. "I got you a coffee anyway. You might be
59 here awhile."

60 "Thank you." Fifi took the hot cup from Tom.

61 Tom handed a brown paper bag to Jacob. Delight appeared on both
62 brothers' faces when they dug out the plastic bottles of orange soda.
63 The bag of chips made up for a missed dinner. The two candy bars at
64 the bottom of the bag was a treat they rarely had at home.

65 It wasn't much more than an hour before Ekon was taken back for
66 an x-ray. Shortly after that the doctor came out to the lobby. He said
67 that it was a clean break. He also said that the bruising was more
68 consistent with Ekon being hit with a stick or bat — not a break from

69 falling off a bucket. He wanted to hear Jacob's account of the accident.
70 Fifi told the Doctor Jacob was mute. He made a note across the top of
71 the x-ray and went back to cast Ekon's forearm. It was after midnight
72 before they all left the emergency room.

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74 The HVAC tech was out first thing in the morning and woke Tom
75 while installing conduit for the new branch circuit for the air
76 conditioner. Tom wandered out to the local street vendor for some
77 deep fried Akara. The bean made fritter was becoming his favorite
78 breakfast food, especially with the yellow, garlic smelling dipping
79 sauce.

80 Tom stood at the front gate to the church and pondered about
81 putting up a big banner to announce his first Sunday service. The boys
82 would be out of commission for hanging posters. He needed something
83 to draw a crowd. Once he got people inside his dynamic progressive
84 preaching would hook anyone, at least it did in Texas. When he dipped
85 the hot Akara into the yellow dipping sauce it hit him. *I'll have free*
86 *coffee and donuts like they do at Beth's church. It really drags those*
87 *Catholics in.*

88 Idogbe beeped the horn on the old rusty Datsun pickup and then
89 parked next to the HVAC van. He got out and grabbed a tool box out
90 of the back. He yelled, "I'm going to get those stone tablets pulled off
91 the wall before I head up north to my Mum's for the weekend."

92 Tom walked across the parking lot. "One of those boys that have
93 been helping me broke his arm last night."

94 "Which one? What happened? Idogbe looked shocked.

95 "Jacob the older boy fell off a bucket while putting up wanted
96 posters for me."

97 "Wanted posters? I thought we talked about letting the theft go,
98 since you left the church and apartment unlocked."

99 "I thought about it. But as the new preacher I need to preach right
100 from wrong, no matter how other people discern the situation."

101 "You mean like having the insurance company replace and wire in
102 a high end air conditioner for something you purchased off the black
103 market."

104 "That's different." Tom hated being called out.
105 "How's it different? That TV and window AC you bought off Tin Can
106 Island was stolen merchandise."
107 "That's not what I was led to believe. The Kekes driver said it was
108 where everyone goes to get a good deal."
109 "Did you ask him if the stuff was stolen?" Idogbe put his toolbox
110 back in the bed of the rusty truck. "I'm going to head up to my mum's
111 early. She has a new crop of strawberries that need to be picked."
112 "What about the incorrect Ten Commandments? Are you going to
113 remove them?"
114 "Not this week. Give Paul a call. He's the one that put them up."
115 "Paul, that military guy that takes supplies up North to the girl's
116 school?"
117 "Yes, the guy with the scar thru his hand." Idogbe got back in the
118 rusty pickup and headed for Plateau State. It was over a four hour
119 drive toward central Nigeria.
120 Removing the Catholic version of the Ten Commandments wasn't
121 that high on Toms list. Nor was schooling Idogbe on the evils of
122 insurance monopolies' in the US. He had just over a week to prepare
123 for his first church service. Tom did an about-face and returned to the
124 street vendor he'd been buying his breakfast Akara from. They talked
125 about sweetening Akara to taste more like a donut. The vendor
126 suggested African Puff Puff's and for Tom to come back tomorrow
127 morning.
128 On the way back to Praise and Glory church Tom's burner phone
129 vibrated in his pocket. The traffic noise was so loud he barely heard
130 the ring tone. "This is Tom," he yelled into the phone.
131 "This is Kenny Chen returning your call."
132 Tom pressed the phone hard against his ear and put his hand over
133 his other ear. "Mr. Chen I can hardly hear you I'm walking back to my
134 church can I call you back in a few minutes."
135 "Call me back. Call me back soon. Need shipping instructions
136 before weekend."
137 "I left you a message! I don't need anything shipped," Tom yelled
138 into the phone.

139 “Too late! Too late! Must ship,” Mr. Chen yelled back and then
140 ended the call from Zhongnanhai, China.

141 The HVAC installer was now working inside the apartment. Tom
142 unlocked the church and went inside. He sat down in one of the new
143 stackable chairs and then hit redial. “Mr. Chen, I’m inside a building.
144 We can talk now.”

145 “Okay, I can hear better Mr. Seton. Please deliver the motorhome
146 to terminal five at Port of Houston, Texas. Must be delivered on
147 weekend next Sunday.”

148 “Mr. Chen, I left you a message that I don’t need to ship anything
149 now. Please take my name off your manifest.”

150 “You can’t cancel. Our container ship out of Port of New York has
151 been rerouted. It will be at Port of Houston in nine days.”

152 “What? Don’t give me that lie. No way in hell you would reroute a
153 container ship to pick up a motorhome.”

154 “Yes we make special container for your niece to travel in also.” We
155 pick her up at Port of Houston with motorhome.”

156 “Listen to me Mr. Chen! Cancel the shipping order and take my
157 name off the manifest.”

158 “Don’t worry your name is not on manifest. We take care of all that
159 for Ms. Tina Williams”

160 It felt like Tom was talking to an overseas call center. “Cancel
161 everything! I’ll call my niece and let her know the trip is off!” Tom
162 ended the call and then checked the world clock on his phone. It was
163 3:12 am in Los Angeles, way too early to call Tina.

164 Tom looked toward the cross to the right of the podium. *Oh God I*
165 *miss Texas. I don’t understand why you moved me to the poor section*
166 *of Lagos. Please make my mission here short. I can build you another*
167 *mega-church back home. Just for one embellished war story your*
168 *wrath seems harsh. I pray that in your infinite wisdom you send me*
169 *back to Texas early. In Your name I pray.*

170 Tom meditated, reflected and discerned inside the church for
171 several more minutes. Then he stood up, walked to the front, stepped
172 up on the stage and examined the Ten Commandments. *These tablets*
173 *must be glugged to the wall? I hope Idogbe can get them off next*

174 *week before my first Sunday discourse. No way do I want to call that*
175 *military, biker looking guy. If he put them up he might be a redneck*
176 *Catholic. Dealing with Beth and her family is bad enough.*

177 Tom no sooner got the front door of the church locked when the
178 phone in his right pocket vibrated. "Hello."

179 "Uncle Tom I'm in bad trouble. They can't stop a ship."

180 "Tina, I didn't tell Mr. Chen to stop a ship. I told him to cancel a
181 shipping order and take my name off the manifest."

182 "But like then I won't get to go on a cruise and like I won't get to
183 see you."

184 "Tina you won't be on a cruise ship. You will be on a container ship.
185 You will be bored out of your mind."

186 "Mr. Chin said they have a special room for elite guests like me."

187 Tina loved the word elite. To her it was status almost equal to a movie
188 star or rock star.

189 The HVAC tech spotted Tom on the front steps of the church and
190 headed that way. "Tina I'll call you back. I need to talk to one of my
191 workers."

192 "Sir, I got concerning news. The electrical panel box on the back of
193 the building has been overheated. It should be replaced."

194 "Okay, I'll let headquarters know that the apartment needs more
195 electrical work." As Tom worked on his discourse the efficient air
196 conditioner churned away during the hottest part of the day. Several
197 times he went out back and put his hand on the gray metal panel box;
198 it felt warm but not too hot. A backup plan would be wise.

199 Tom called Tina back and told her he changed his mind about
200 having the motorhome shipped. Tina was thrilled and promised that
201 she would make it worth his while when she got to Lagos.

202 Idogbe worked part time at several churches and saw firsthand
203 how different clergy and elders ran the business end of preaching.
204 Every extra amount of income helped to support Idogbe's Mum's
205 strawberry farm; he just put up with the deception. At least he didn't
206 work full time for the Glory and Praise church.

207 Lieutenant Paul volunteered at the outreach girl's school up north
208 and refused monetary payment. He was more like a ghost driver who

209 appeared now and then to transport supplies. The buzz was that Paul
210 was a martial arts expert that taught Dambe fighters up on the north
211 boarder of Nigeria. Paul was the one that replaced the stone tablets
212 laws after an elder cleric broke them in disgust after his followers
213 started worshipping idols.

214 All thru the evening the air conditioner kept the apartment cool
215 and the humidity low. Nevertheless the dry, cool comfort didn't help
216 Tom with his musing. In front of his laptop he'd yet to punch in five
217 hundred words. Maybe in the morning and after a solid night's rest
218 he'd find more inspiration.

219 Tom slept well and with a cup of microwave coffee was ready to do
220 battle at the keyboard. A message that he had new email popped up in
221 the task bar. Tom opened his email program and there was an email
222 with a .jpg attachment from Tina. Tom was fully aware that opening
223 email attachments was dangerous but he'd just talked with Tina less
224 than ten hours ago.

225 The email read:

226 **Uncle Tom, like I'm so glad that my trip is going to**
227 **work out. It will be fun to see you again. I hope**
228 **you can show me some of the tourist hot spots. I**
229 **bought me a new swimsuit to lie out on the beach.**
230 **What do you think? Your favorite Niece**

231 Tom clicked on the attached file and slowly the high definition
232 photo of Tina filled the laptop screen. The self portrait was of Tina in a
233 hot red G-string and matching bikini top that exposed more of her
234 breasts than it covered. Tom was never keen of the fact that his
235 brother and sister-in-law had given Tina breast augmentation for a
236 high school graduation gift. But as a preacher he also understood the
237 need for everyone to have a positive feeling of self-worth. Most
238 importantly being judgmental often destroyed families.

239 Tom stared at the picture for the longest time. Tina was one of
240 those stunning human elements that most men yearned to covet and
241 most women envied. Starting in middle school Tina learned to play the
242 queen of hearts card. By high school she nominated herself to be the
243 captain of the cheering squad — no one dare go against her. When the

244 lead role in the annual school play was up for audition Tina convinced
245 the drama teacher to privately coach her thru the rope ladder scene in
246 Romeo and Juliet. Tina was cast as Juliet.

247 Tom needed to walk off the covet feelings he was having. He
248 always played the cool uncle and kept the flirting to a level that was
249 boarder line inappropriate. Regardless, Ruth never liked nor trusted
250 Tina.

251 Tom's coffee vendor pulled out a sizzling Akara from the vat of
252 boiling oil. "Try this Mr. Preacher. I sweetened it up like you
253 suggested."

254 Tom took the hot ball of deep fired bean batter and blew on it so to
255 cool it down. "Did you sweeten the Pap sauce too?"

256 "Yes sir! I added a little honey." The cook reached into an ice
257 cooler and got out a small paper cup of sweetened Pap sauce.

258 Tom dipped the Akara into the Pap. "Ouch!" he yelled right after he
259 popped the bean cake into his mouth. "I burned my tongue." Tom
260 gently chewed and then swallowed the Akara. "That's really good. It's
261 almost as good as Texas cornbread and honey."

262 "That's what I'm calling it. "Texas style Akara with barbeque
263 sauce." The vendor boosted with his Nigerian street pride.

264 "I'd drop the barbeque sauce and call it honey butter dip."

265 "But then the other cooks will figure out how Texas style Pap is
266 made!"

267 "Then just call it Texas style Akara. The honey butter will speak for
268 itself."

269 "That sounds good. I'm also going to try using corn meal like you
270 told me."

271 "I got an offer for you. Cook up ten dozen of these Texas style
272 fritters and bring your sweet sauce to my first Sunday church service.
273 I'll advertize the hell out of these for you."

274 The street vendor was busy serving another customer, but he
275 heard the offer. He was a street wise negotiator. "How much you pay
276 for the ten dozen?"

277 "I'm offering you free advertizing. We'll do a quid-pro-quo deal."

278 Quid-pro-quo was an American metaphor. But Tit-for-Tat deals
279 were the number one way of doing business in most of West Africa.
280 The Nigerian vendor needed to find a starting point. "I'll supply hot
281 coffee too. I will also pay for the special food service permit fee."

282 Tom hadn't even thought about a food serving permit. He had
283 already paid fees to hang his posters. The less he had to deal with the
284 bow legged constable the better. "Okay, make me an offer."

285 The vendor handed Tom a cup of AA Kenya blend coffee. "Do you
286 want me to supply a server with a food handler's card?"

287 "Yeah I guess so." Tom was getting frustrated. Quid-pro-quo
288 wasn't going his way.

289 "How about I supply the food, coffee, a food handler and pay the
290 special fee for just regular price for ten dozen Texas style Akara?"

291 "That sounds good to me." Tom extended his hand so they could
292 seal the deal.

293 The street vendor was surprised. He had expected Tom to counter
294 offer. Tom left a deposit and made out somewhat of a contract on the
295 side of a white food bag. He was set next Sunday with a coffee and
296 donut social.

297 From a block away Tom spotted four people sitting on the church
298 stairs. The white forearm cast was a dead giveaway. Jacob spotted the
299 Pastor first and pulled on his dad's arm. The four bodies stood up and
300 zoomed in on Tom. Jude Onukwulu towered over his family. When he
301 smiled his deep black complexion made obvious that he was missing
302 one front tooth.

303 When Tom came thru the gate Jacob ran to him and wrapped his
304 small arms around Tom's left leg. Steadfast on the steps, Ekon lifted
305 his arm to show off his cast. He stood firm at his Dad's side. The lie he
306 was holding inside hurt more than what the slap across his forearm
307 with the Runga had.

308 "Are you here for me to sign your cast?" Pastor Tom asked. The
309 Onukwulu family looked confused. Jacob didn't because he couldn't
310 hear.

311 “No, we brought by the medical records and bill for your insurance
312 company.” Jude Onukwulu held out a large brown envelope hoping
313 that there wouldn’t be a problem with getting the hospital bills paid.

314 Pastor Tom took the brown envelope. “Thanks, I’ll get these sent
315 off to the church’s main office.”

316 “Thank you Sir. We can’t afford insurance.”

317 “Yeah no problem,” Tom replied in a reassuring tone. “Jacob was
318 doing work for me; so technically he was on the church payroll.”

319 “Thank you Mr. Pastor I worried about this all night. We have a
320 new baby to save for.” Fifi rubbed her tummy, the infant immediately
321 stirred when it felt the flow of relaxation.

322 “Don’t take any less than ten thousand for pain and suffering. You
323 need to watch out for insurance companies. They’ll shoot a low ball
324 offer right off the bat.”

325 There was more confusion for the Onukwulu family. “Low ball offer.
326 I don’t know what you mean?” Jude rubbed his hands together.

327 “They would pay Ekon ten thousand Naira for pain?” Fifi asked.

328 “Yes, Ekon will miss out on soccer and doing work for me. You
329 should put some money in the bank in case there is any future
330 problem with his arm.”

331 “The emergency room doctor said it was a clean break and Ekon
332 will only have the cast for five weeks. Ten thousand Naira won’t be
333 necessary. We are thankful. You are a good man,” Fifi said.

334 “I’m not saying ask for ten thousand Naira. I’m talking ten
335 thousand in US dollars.”

336 All six foot five of Jude froze. Ten thousand USC was well over four
337 million Naira. More money than any family in his poor neighborhood
338 ever earned.

339 “Mr. Tom, we will wait until the doctor says its okay for Ekon to
340 play again. Then we are okay with that.” Fifi replied at the same time
341 the baby kicked.

342 “Listen, I respect your family values and pride. I’m a good
343 negotiator. Let me deal with the insurance people. A good personal
344 injury lawyer is going to charge thirty or forty percent. I’ll make it
345 right for the Onukwulu family, for twenty five percent.”

346 *Make it right*, rang inside Ekon’s head. He had lied about how his
347 arm got broke. Now his family was being caught up in his lie plus
348 getting money. At least Jacob couldn’t hear the conversation. He would
349 tell the truth — that his older brother hadn’t fallen off a bucket.

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353 Maybe it was the banner over the church doors that read: **Free**
354 **Kenya AA coffee & Texan style Akara with sweet sauce.** Or it
355 could have been the three musicians playing rock gospel music on the
356 front steps — whatever? The turnout was more than Pastor Tom had
357 expected. He had one chance to deliver his first sermon but had only
358 mused over **Corinthians 1 chapter 3 verse 13.**

359 Tom wasn’t prepared. At the podium he tapped the replacement
360 microphone to make sure it was on. More than half the new stackable
361 chairs were filled. The sound of children playing in the side alley of the
362 church was coming in thru the open side windows.

363 Pastor Tom cleared his throat. “I’m so glad to see all of you here
364 this morning. I had hoped to start Sunday services before this. But
365 after the church was broken into and vandalized I had to delay the
366 opening. Unfortunately, the two main door prizes, a window air
367 conditioner and a new HDTV were stolen. But I have key chains and
368 water bottles from Glory and Praise headquarters. Please grab one or
369 the other at our coffee and donuts social afterward.”

370 “Hardly anybody in this neighborhood owns a car. So you can keep
371 your key chains,” yelled out an upset voice from the crowd.

372 “Well... Okay, I didn’t know that fact. Take a water bottle.”

373 “I hope they didn’t steal your recipe for Texan style Akara. It
374 smells like donuts to us.” The crowd laughed.

375 Tom never had a congregation speak out other than an occasional
376 amen, alleluia or praise Jesus.

377 “We know you got sent over here for telling a big war story lie
378 about yourself. How do we know you will not be telling us a fiction?”

379 "Jesus often told fiction. His stories were called parables. They
380 were used to get a point across. Most everyone knows the Prodigal
381 Son Parable, also known as the story of two brothers."

382 "How do we know there were expensive door prizes or the church
383 was robbed?"

384 "You are sitting on the evidence. Those are brand new
385 replacement chairs. For the love of God, look behind me!" Tom
386 motioned back over his shoulder where Idogbe had patched the wall.
387 "A gold dedication plaque was stolen right off of that wall."

388 "That wasn't gold it was brass. I've been coming to Glory and
389 Praise church from the day it was dedicated."

390 "My mistake. I thought it was gold plated." Tom's face started
391 turning red. The crowd already turned on him.

392 All six foot five of Jude Onukwulu stood up from the first row and
393 faced the crowd. "Let the man talk! He paid for my son's broken arm
394 and is getting us a settlement." Long haul truck drivers were respected
395 all over Africa. Especially, the ones that hauled fuel to rural parts of
396 Nigeria.

397 When Pastor Tom turned back to face the hostile crowd his eyes
398 locked on the stone tablets. "The thieves should have pried those off
399 the wall." Now Tom pointed at the hand carved stone tablets. "Those
400 are not the true Ten Commandments!"

401 The fear of God came over the crowd. There was even a hush over
402 the children playing outside. Most revival tent evangelists know that
403 they only have a brief moment to pull the congregante in. More
404 important than facts, was authority of voice out of context. Extracting
405 bits and pieces from the Word while shaking the holy book overhead
406 was another learned skill. "Any man that has not broken one of these
407 commandments come forward and take my place!"

408 Confusion with fear was Satan's tool to win over souls. Pointing
409 with cleric authority that those Ten Commandments were not true and
410 then to challenge anyone to come forward to contest them worked.
411 The entire assembly sat speechless and shacking with trepidation.

412 Pastor Tom was on a roll, the soap box rant was well received. "I
413 was sent here to Africa not because I'm a perfect man. Just like the

414 prodigal son God wants me back home. Next Sunday I will let you
415 people know why and who changed those written laws” Tom hand
416 pointed at the stone tablets this time!

417 “BS to that,” quipped a lone silhouetted figure standing in the
418 doorway of the church.

419 “So before next Sunday, I want all of you to take the corrected
420 copy of the Ten Commandments under your chair. Next week, I will
421 reveal why the first tablets and the only artifacts written with God’s
422 finger were cast down by Moses.”

423 Pastor Tom concluded and looked up and over the top of the heads
424 of his new congregation. The figure in the doorway had vanished.

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