

7. CHAPTER SEVEN

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On fire was the only way to describe the way Pastor Tom had delivered his Sunday sermon. The seventh commandment was straight forward; one that everyone could understand. There had been more noise and more kids in the side alley during the morning service. Even with the additional two dozen deep fried Texan style Akara they ran out. The Kenya AA coffee ran dry too. The band played more gospel and less rap which seemed a better fit for the mostly millennial congregante. Most importantly was that the collection plate had almost doubled. *Maybe I can lay the foundation for another mega church here in Lagos?* Tom told himself

Earlier Tom had preached about one of the errors on the replica of the Ten Commandments tablets hanging on the front wall. 'Thou shalt not steal' was the eighth commandment in his KJV bible, not the seventh as per the fake replica tablets. Jacob had listened intently. What order the commandments were in was confusing for a ten year old. The fact that there was no 'Thou shalt not lie,' commandment was even more confusing. Maybe his parents were wrong since there was no 'Thou shalt not lie' commandment?

The way Pastor Tom ran around on the stage and shook the bible overhead was frightening — especially for a fourth grader. If it weren't for the cast on his forearm Ekon would had been outside playing with other children. There is a fine line between evangelization and entertainment. Tom was skilled at both and could switch his delivery style depending on the reactions from the congregation. His measuring tool was how many 'Amen's and 'Praise the Lord' jeers came from the pews.

The ninety minute full blast, on fire stage performance had been exhausting. Tom earned and deserved an afternoon nap. Resting on the Sabbath was the third or fourth commandment; depending on which religion. Some Jews observed Friday and Saturday as their time for rest and call it Shabbat.

34 The nap turned into more nightmare than deserved rest with Tom
35 waking in a cold sweat. That guardian soldier type guy that was always
36 showing up near the back of the church was now showing up in Tom's
37 dreams. Why the white ghost looking man had a knife stuck thru his
38 left hand didn't make sense. This man named Paul delivered supplies
39 up north to the outreach all girls' school, Paul had yet to introduce
40 himself to Tom. Maybe he was an American mercenary and working
41 undercover on special ops? Tom made a mental note to find out more
42 about Paul. Some ex military special force fighters can't get killing out
43 of their blood and go rogue. Maybe Paul had exiled himself to Africa?
44 Trafficking of the Chibok girls had been in the news recently; maybe
45 Paul was in Africa for them?

46 Tom sat up and took a deep breath. It was late enough that Beth
47 would have completed her Eucharistic ministry rounds back home in
48 Texas. Tom pushed the first number in his contact list. Beth's cell
49 phone went to voice mail.

50 Tom went over to the church and rattled the front doors to make
51 sure they were locked. He looked down the side alley. There were
52 chalked out boxes on the concrete where the children had played
53 hopscotch and hot box. Tom's heart went heavy, a child of their own
54 never happened. Tom's cell phone vibrated. "Hey Beth, I was just
55 thinking about you."

56 "Sorry, I was on the phone with Dan when you called."

57 "Who's Dan?" Tom walked under the front roof to be in the shade.

58 "Dan is David's son. He's the internet security expert that flies all
59 over the world in a private jet."

60 "Oh yeah. You were going to ask him to fly Cain and Able over here
61 to Lagos." Tom said in a half joking manner.

62 Danny has a contract in Abuja and he said if we get the paper work
63 in order he will get the dogs to the airport in Abuja."

64 You're kidding! That would be wonderful to have the dogs here.
65 They could guard the church. Jacob and Ekon have all ready
66 volunteered to walk them. I'll need to get a hole in the fence repaired.
67 Tom's voice rattled with excitement.

68 "Tom, you sound more excited to see the dogs than me."

69 "Now that's not fair Beth. You love Cain and Able as much as I do."

70 "You're right Tom. But I'm just wondering if you miss me."

71 "Of course I do! When you get over here I'm going to show you

72 how much I really really miss you. We'll have to turn the new air

73 conditioning on high so we don't soak the mattress with sweat."

74 "You know how much I like my man sweaty," Beth responded in a
75 low sexual tone."

76 "Well then afterwards I'll just have to take you again in the
77 shower." Tom played along, knowing that there was no way two
78 people could fit in the tiny apartment shower.

79 "I guess you do miss me," Beth replied.

80 "Oh, more than you know my sensual Elizabethan queen," Tom
81 answered.

82 "My bounty is as boundless as the sea. My love as deep; the more
83 I give to thee..." Beth quoted her favorite line from Romeo and Juliet.

84 "Beth you're getting me worked up. I so hope that you like it over
85 here. We need to keep praying that the house sells so that we can be
86 man and wife again," Tom said in his usual matter of fact tone.

87 "I am praying!" Beth quipped. She liked it when Tom was firm and
88 spoke what he desired. It was his weak attempt at dirty talk over the
89 phone. Even at home Tom's sexual backwardness always ended with
90 no more than five minutes of missionary style sex. Then it was back to
91 preacher business and their ho hum sex life. In college Beth had dated
92 one bad boy and always yearned that Tom had a little rough and tuff
93 in his DNA.

94 "Maybe you could fly over with Cain and Able on that chartered jet
95 of Dan's. Do you know how long he'll be in Nigeria?"

96 "I'm not sure what Dan's travel plans are. All that I know is that he
97 cracks internet scams. Remember that Nigerian Prince email that was
98 going around. Danny traced it back to a fat toothless, sixty seven year
99 old white guy living in Alabama. Nigeria took all the heat for that email
100 scam that originated in some white trash trailer park in the US."

101 "Beth, it's hard to tell what is legit and what isn't on the web. Thou
102 shalt not covet is one of my planned sermons. Scammers can work
103 from anyplace in the world these days."

104 “You should have preached that commandment to your old friend
105 the church treasurer. I heard he transferred some of the parishioners’
106 money into a Bitcoin account in the United Kingdom.”

107 “That should be all cleared up. The credit union got the Slenski’s
108 money back.” Tom replied.

109 “There is something different going on. This past month several
110 members’ accounts got hacked. Bernie was the only one that had
111 access to the major contributor’s account numbers. At least that’s
112 what Sally Slenski told me.”

113 “What are you and Sally Slenski becoming best friends?” Zach had
114 never mentioned that he and Sally went to brunch sometimes when
115 she was the church secretary.

116 “Kind of, I guess. She really misses your Sunday morning
117 preaching. She hopes you’ll be back after your two year sabbatical.”

118 Tom’s ego got pumped. “I never thought about going back to my
119 old church. But I guess I shouldn’t rule it out.”

120 “Tom you built that church. Why wouldn’t you want to come back
121 to it?”

122 “After the newspaper did the Stolen Valor piece on me I don’t think
123 I could make a comeback.”

124 “Tom, that’s old news. Look at the new President every other thing
125 that comes out of his mouth is a huge exaggeration or an outright lie.
126 What about that news reporter that said she took gunfire in a
127 helicopter in Iraq. Later she had to retract her story.

128 “Beth, maybe we should hold off on selling our home?”

129 “That would probably be a smarter move,” Beth affirmed.

130 Tom’s brain flip flopped. “Maybe we should rent our home out for
131 two years?”

132 “Tom, we’d have better luck renting out our house. We wouldn’t
133 have to keep reducing the price because home sales are slow.”

134 “Let me rethink this for a week or so. I’ll call one of the church
135 elders that was born and raised in Texas. Hank the hog hunter will
136 have a good feel on the rental market around Dallas.”

137 “Sound’s good Tom. I’ll tell his wife if I see her this afternoon when
138 I’m at your church.”

139 "At my old church, what are you going to be there for?

140 "The women's prayer group is having a baby shower for Sally
141 Slenski," Beth replied at an undertone level.

142 "Oh..." The deep hurt could be felt from Texas to Africa and then
143 back. Beth and Tom never had conceived a child. They had never
144 delved into the exact reasons why. Every baby shower Beth attended
145 brought up more hurt than joy.

146 Tom silently shared in Beth's pain. He rarely preached on the New
147 Testament passage when John the Baptist jumped for joy in
148 Elizabeth's womb.

149 Beth's full ride scholarship to run track came with an unseen price.
150 During track season Beth might only menstruate once maybe twice.
151 After college her womb never returned to normal cycles. Beth took
152 ownership for not being able to grow the Seaton family tree. She often
153 thought about the Old Testament when Sarah gave Abraham
154 permission to sleep with their servants so that they could continue the
155 family lineage. Beth loved Tom so much she would be willing to give
156 the same permission some four thousand years later with a surrogate.

157 After a few prayers asking for a fertility miracle and comfort for
158 Beth at the baby shower, Tom flagged down a Kekes. He needed to
159 settle up with the Akara and Pap vendor and cut a better deal. The
160 thought that maybe he could return to his mega-church in Dallas,
161 Texas bounced around his head like he had on the bench seat in the
162 rear of the yellow three wheeler.

163 "The Texas style Akara was a big hit this morning," the vendor said
164 as he dumped out a big vat of hot oil."

165 "Yeah the kids really ate up the round ones!"

166 "They sure did. Do you want to increase your order for next week?"

167 "Maybe? But from what I learned this morning is that some of your
168 Akara are made from flour and sugar, not bean paste. Someone
169 informed me that they are Yum Yums or what we call donuts in the
170 United States. All that sugar is not good for children."

171 "Who say that? Give me their names. I'll talk to them."

172 "I'm not giving you any names. I just don't like to be played."

173 "You mean like how you play the people in your church. I listen to
174 you feeding the people with what they want to hear. You dismiss some
175 of Allah's commandments so people come back and put more money
176 in the basket."

177 "I studied the Islam faith. Muhammad had twenty-two rules. That
178 number is now twenty or less. Religion's have to adapt and change
179 with the times so to accommodate."

180 'The customer is always right' was one universal rule this street
181 vendor didn't live by. "You are the same as me! I hear you brag about
182 building your big church back home. We both do it for money!"

183 "I can assure you that I don't preach for the money!"

184 "Okay, if you say so..." The vendor spooned big hunks of white lard
185 into the big metal vat. "So why don't I bring half Akara and half Yum
186 Yums next week."

187 Tom thought for a moment. "Okay do half and half. Increase the
188 order to what you think is needed and then take five percent off. Make
189 sure we don't run out of coffee."

190 "Preacher man, I hear you keep preaching that all trespassers' are
191 to be forgiven. Break a commandment, then ask for forgiveness and
192 all is good? In Islam that message doesn't sound right. You will need a
193 bigger church if you keep preaching there is no accountability for
194 breaking commandments."

195 "I am right! Anyone can be saved by grace thru Jesus. Maybe my
196 next church will be called the church of the nine commandments. We
197 are all guilty of one or two indiscretions. Just like calling sugary Yum
198 Yums, Akara. That was giving false witness for financial gain."

199 From the backseat of the Kekes Tom was already thinking about
200 returning to Texas and how he would need to rebrand himself. Just
201 ahead he spotted a small group of people outside the gate into the
202 church lot. The tallest man towered over the three people sitting on
203 the curb. The bowlegged older man standing guard was the giveaway.
204 Maybe the neighborhood constable Ayoola Ashiru finally caught the
205 thieves who had robbed the church.

206 Pastor Tom's feelings of justice being served quickly vanished when
207 he saw that the woman was pregnant and noticed the cast on Ekon's

208 forearm. He handed the driver a thousand Naira and stepped out onto
209 the street. Tom put his hand up to block the setting sun. "What brings
210 everyone back to church this evening?"

211 "My son has confession to make!" Mr. Onukwulu said at the same
212 time held out a white envelope.

213 "Your preaching about not telling lies is why we are here. Our
214 oldest son is very sorry for not telling the truth," Fifi said softly.

215 "The Onukwulu family asked me to come with them to see if any
216 laws have been broken." Constable Ayoola said with distain toward
217 Tom for using young boys.

218 "Mr. Preacher Tom, I lied about how my arm got broke. I didn't fall
219 off a bucket putting up your posters."

220 "I don't understand Ekon? Why would you lie about how you broke
221 your arm?"

222 "I... I was afraid because they said they will break Jacob's arm
223 next." Ekon's voice trembled. Jacob tightly gripped Fifi's hand, his
224 extra sensory perception told him of the danger the Onukwulu family
225 was in.

226 "Who are they?" Tom asked firmly.

227 "Don't answer that!" Constable Ayoola ordered.

228 "Why don't you want Jacob to tell me who broke his arm?" That
229 way you can go out and do your job and make an arrest."

230 "Do people in Chicago, Los Angeles or New York rat out gang
231 members? There are almost twenty million people in Lagos. You need
232 to move back to one of those big cities and start a church in a rough
233 neighborhood."

234 Tom had equal distain toward the bowlegged constable. He was
235 done with any effort to find justice. Tom opened the white envelope;
236 inside was an insurance check made out to the Onukwulu family.

237 "What's this?" Tom focused on the five thousand dollar, dot matrix
238 amount." I'm sorry you only got half of what I thought you deserved."

239 "We can't take money for a lie Mr. Onukwulu," said with a father's
240 authority.

241 "The insurance money is not for a lie. Your boys were my
242 employees when Jacob's arm got broken. That money is for pain and

243 suffering. I had a kid get bullied and pushed into the mud at my
244 church in Texas and that family got over fifty thousand dollars.”

245 All six foot five of Mr. Onukwulu felt a huge release of anguish and
246 financial burden. With some extra money he could buy a long gun from
247 one of the peacemakers when he hauled gas up north. “Thank you so
248 much! We still owe you twenty-five percent fee for dealing with
249 insurance company for us.”

250 “You don’t owe me anything. I feel bad I couldn’t get more.
251 Unfortunately, it looks like I can’t pay the boys under the table
252 anymore per the insurance agent.”

253 Ekon wasn’t sure what under the table meant. He didn’t care! The
254 all knowing Pastor Tom said he hadn’t told a lie. He wasn’t going to
255 hell. No ten year old should ever have to live under the fire and
256 brimstone idiomatic expression of damnation.

257 “Well it looks like we got this worked out.” Ayoola never cared for
258 Tom since the first time they met when Tom was hanging church
259 invitation posters. Out of respect for what he just witnessed Ayoola
260 extended his hand to Tom.

261 It was Jacob that wasn’t sure about Pastor Tom. He liked doing odd
262 jobs around the church to earn money. What he didn’t understand was
263 the hiding space that Idogbe was told to build in the church closet. The
264 game Pastor Tom was privately teaching him was complicated. For
265 sure, the one thing Jacob didn’t want to do was to draw more detailed
266 pictures of men.