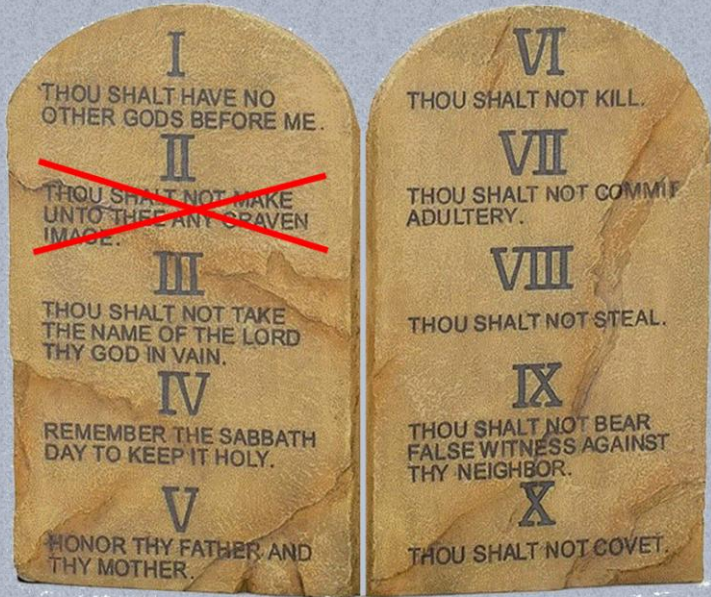


THE NINE COMMANDMENTS



James Andrew Edske



BOOKPLOT

A book plot about the greater good...

THE NINE COMMANDMENTS

...



A Book/Plot that enlightens and inspires

By

Charles James Lesowske

AKA

James Andrew Edske

Contents

| | |
|---|-----|
| Chap 1... Exiled to Africa | 1 |
| Chap 2... Wheeler—Dealer..... | 13 |
| Chap 3... Shaitan = Satan | 24 |
| Chap 4... Reward Money..... | 35 |
| Chap 5... Broken Arm..... | 50 |
| CHAP 6... Pick & Choose | 62 |
| CHAP 7... Thou shalt not lie..... | 76 |
| CHAP 8... Peacekeeper~Peacemaker..... | 83 |
| CHAP 9... Raise more pigs..... | 95 |
| CHAP 10... Saved by grace..... | 104 |
| CHAP 11... Thirty-second clip | 112 |
| CHAP 12... Fruit of the womb | 123 |
| CHAP 13... To confess or not..... | 130 |
| CHAP 14... Sign of the cross | 142 |
| CHAP 15... No perfect marriage..... | 150 |
| CHAP 16... Geo - Tracking..... | 158 |
| CHAP 17... Swap vehicles | 168 |
| CHAP 18... W or V V | 176 |
| CHAP 19... Stronger than Kevlar..... | 184 |
| CHAP 20... Back road to Hell..... | 193 |
| CHAP 21... To murder or kill? | 201 |
| CHAP 22... A hardened heart..... | 209 |
| CHAP 23 ... Satan roams the world | 217 |
| CHAP 24 ... A child's trust | 226 |
| CHAP 25 ... TSA or FANN..... | 235 |
| CHAP 26 ... Disobedient Wife | 243 |

| | |
|---------------------------------------|-----|
| CHAP 27 ... Communion of Saints | 253 |
| CHAP 28 ... Ugliness of Battle | 263 |
| CHAP 29... Service over family | 271 |
| CHAP 30 ... Out of Africa..... | 279 |
| CHAP 31 ... Back in the USA..... | 287 |
| CHAP 32 ... Without any words | 294 |

BOOKPLOT™

Publishing

Sisters, Oregon

www.BookPlot.com

Copyright © 2024 Charles James Lesowske

All rights reserved.

Copyright # 1-14248747041

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or are used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or events is coincidental.

© 2024 Charles James Lesowske

All rights reserved

DEDICATION

For the special children and adults that have touched my soul in many ways. I feel their love in the silence and evaluate my joy and thankfulness. These unique individuals enlighten lives and display eternal hope. Some of them become special characters in my books.

May the Holy Spirit send strength and support to their families now and forever.

Amen



PROLOGUE

After Pastor Tom got exposed as a Stolen Valor imposter, he had to step away from his budding mega-church in Texas. Glory and Praise headquarters arranged a sabbatical to preach in Africa's largest city and oversee a small girls' outreach school in central Nigeria. The plan was for him to return to the United States after his embellishment about his military service faded from the media. During his first month in Lagos, the church got robbed, and his apartment almost burned down. This was nothing compared to his first trip to the school in Zangam Village, where three of the school girls were slaughtered by Boko Haram militants for just wanting to get an education past sixth grade. Tom set a new goal to return to the USA to teach fundamental Christian theology at the university level ASAP. His progressive Bible knowledge was popular in Texas.

Since Africa had almost equal Muslims to Christians, Tom would need to adapt his preaching to appeal to a more diverse congregation in Lagos, Nigeria. Tom took note of the incorrect Decalogue Plaques on the vacant church's front wall. They were the version that had one of the commandments removed and replaced. Back home, Tom often preached about how Catholic's only practiced nine Commandments when his wife wasn't in attendance.

The plan was for Beth to stay home to sell their million-dollar country club home and put his classic red 1967 Corvette into storage. Not being able to conceive children had chipped away at Elizabeth's heart for most of twenty years. Tom shrugged it off as God putting them to the test. A faculty position would require lots of travel and offer the opportunity to write books.

A second attack at Zangam village on a mother who let her only child be a foreign exchange student had Tom discerning killing over murder. He was now preaching on the difference between a Peacekeeper and a Peacemaker.

Blessed are the peacemakers —for they
shall be called the children of God

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My wife Mary, Harry, my father-in-law, and older brother, who passed halfway through this fourth novel. Andy passed on April 4, 2022, and read the last chapters from above.

Harry, you gently nudged me by always asking, "How's the book coming?" Without your continual prompting, this novel would still reside on my hard drive and not in print.

All the beta-readers and reviewers. Your comments, suggestions, and corrections made me realize I'm a better storyteller than a wordsmith. Not picking the plot apart was much appreciated.

To the women and mentors in the writers' group in Sisters, Oregon. Hearing your stories, written and spoken, has opened my heart. May all of your endeavors fill your days with joy and love.

Mary, thank you for supporting me and listening to completed chapters, even after you worked all day and wanted to go to bed. Love you.

Infinite Peace to all of you,

Thanks to God's disciples.

I pray for the hallowed men from Ireland, Kenya, Tanzania, Poland, India, Mexico, the USA, and other places that have preached the Word to me for over seventy years. I thank them for assisting me in reconciling my failing and wrongdoing through a confession of sins. Having the weight of guilt lifted off my shoulders makes for peace of mind. Most importantly, for celebrating the body and blood of Christ even in the small town of Sisters, Oregon.

A special thanks to Fr. Jude Onogbosele, a dear friend and priest, who is the primary reason for this book. It was on a camping trip to Crater Lake in 2014 at the time that 276 mostly Christian Chibok school girls were kidnapped in Nigeria by the Islamic terrorist group Boko Haram. Laying in an old canvas tent at night, Jude and I would muse over God's workings.

I have yet to get my head around why the Nigerian President didn't take the offer of having the United States Special Forces assist in freeing these girls. I have followed this sad event for ten years and am more at a loss for how things have transpired.

Chap 1... **Exiled to Africa**

Pastor Tom walked between the twenty-plus rows of green-painted benches across the cracked and blistered concrete floor. He then stepped up onto the stage. This small room sharply contrasted with his budding megachurch back in Texas. At least he was exiled to an African country that patterned its government after a republic, similar to the United States. With just over half of Nigeria being Muslim, there was an excellent opportunity to evangelize and preach Christianity.

Back home, the Stolen Valor newspaper article destroyed Pastor Tom's credibility. He now had a chance to redeem himself. Once his wife sold their million-dollar home in Texas, she would join him in Lagos. Surprisingly, the most populated city in Africa wasn't what Tom had expected; serving a two-year mission stint might not be that dreadful.

The double doors opened wide, and a thin black man with luggage in his hands and a backpack slung over one shoulder hurried in. "Pastor, would you like me to take these items to your hostel?" Tom got caught off guard. He stepped off the carpeted plywood platform and walked down the aisle. "You speak English?"

"Yes, sir, all my life. English has been our official language since 1947."

"That's good to know. So, I won't need an interpreter when I preach?"

"No, not here in Lagos. Some Hausa is spoken up North at our all-girls school near Chibok." The Nigerian paused and looked over his shoulder, out the doors toward the street. "It is

getting dangerous up there. The Boko Haram are upset about girls getting a Western education. Militants have been coming over the border from Niger, causing unrest and spreading fear."

"I'm used to danger. I'm a decorated war hero in the United States," Pastor Tom replied and then focused out through the opened doors. There was a seasoned Caucasian mercenary type with wavy blond hair standing at the parking lot gate. "Is that a security guard?"

"Yes, it is. Paul and I will show you around for the next few weeks."

"What's your name?"

"My name is Idogbe."

"Idogbe? That's a different name."

"It means the second twin," the Nigerian replied.

"Oh, so you have a twin brother?"

"No, I have a twin sister."

"Oh..." Pastor Tom pointed at what looked like a metal animal trough. "Is that what you use for a Baptism font?"

"Yes, more than one African pastor has drowned doing river Baptisms. Many Africans don't know how to swim!"

"That's interesting. On my flight, I saw many people swimming and surfing in the travel magazines."

"The tourists like to party on our beaches. They sometimes drink too much of our palm wine and get foolish. The ocean current is strong at Lekki Beach. Drugs and prostitutes at Bar Bay are out of control. It's not safe at either place."

"Palm wine? I've never heard of it." Pastor Tom looked back at Idogbe. "You know Jesus wants us to love the prostitutes and addicts."

Not looking for a debate on the New Testament, Idogbe asked for the second time. "Would you like me to put these bags in the hostel?"

"Put them in my office, if you would." Pastor Tom pulled three dollars from his gold money clip. "Go buy yourself some of that palm wine," he winked.

"I'm more of an IPA person," Idogbe replied. He tucked the three dollars into his black dress pants and exited through the side door behind and to the left of the pulpit.

Tom quickly looked for an air conditioning thermostat; he found three switches on a ganged plate. Two turned on the overhead lights, and one caused a pop when a PA system came on. Some folding chairs were stacked next to the double entrance doors; no AC thermostat was behind them. Both

sidewalls were blank, and the only semblance of Christian icons was a plain wooden Crucifix hanging in the center of the front wall. On one side of the cross was a replica of the Ten Commandments; on the other was a brass dedication plaque from Praise and Glory Ministries in Los Angeles, California.

Slowly, it grew dark. Gentle rain on the metal roof quickly turned into what sounded like a Texas downpour. Tom stood at the opened front doors and watched the water sheet off the awning onto the cobblestone parking lot. He walked to one corner of the covered porch and peered around the corner. A small storage building looked to have been converted into an office. Idogbe got soaked when he darted down the alley and unlocked the door.

The outside of Glory and Praise Church resembled a Texas-style horse barn, but it was not as big. Even the simple bell tower could fit into a Texas landscape, looking something like a small grain silo. The covered porch out front worked for rain or sun—which Lagos had no shortage of.

Lagos, the most populated city in Africa with fourteen million residents, sits on the north shore of the Gulf of Guinea and is west of a thirty-mile-long marsh. Tin Can Island is in the south metro district, the proposed site for a new international shipping port to be operated and funded by China.

Almost as fast as the sky had closed up, it reopened. Out of nowhere, Frontage Road filled with at least a dozen yellow three-wheeled motorized taxis. Tom's shirt got soaked by rain and the 80% tropical humidity. From around the opposite corner of the church, an old military troop transport pulled out onto the road. Pastor Tom could only make out a forearm and hand resting on the windowsill. A large through-and-through scar was on the top of the left hand, likely an old battle wound. A cold chill went up Pastor Tom's sweaty back.

Idogbe approached and pointed. "Your things are in the hostel."

"That little shack is my apartment?"

"Yes, I just repainted and sprayed for bugs."

Pastor Tom pulled out a handkerchief and wiped his entire face. The sweat kept coming. "My wife won't go for staying in that little building. Do I have a car so that I can go find a nice apartment to stay at?"

"No car, but you could take a Keke." Idogbe pointed at one of the yellow motorized tricycles passing by out front.

"Are those things safe?"

"They can't go on the main highway, so they mostly stay on side roads. Slower travel is safer."

"What about Paul? You said he was going to show me around."

"Paul is taking supplies up to the Zangam girl's school. He will not be back for five days. Hopefully, he doesn't get attacked."

"Attacked!" Tom wiped more beads of sweat off his forehead. "Is that how he got that big stab wound in his hand?"

"No, he got that injury in the United States Army. Paul was a war hero like you. He was in the green hat special forces."

"Do you mean Paul was a Green Beret?"

"Yes, that's it, he was a Green Beret. Now you and Paul can tell war stories."

Pastor Tom was at a loss for words, as he thought. *I got transferred halfway around the world for embellishing a war story. Now, a decorated Green Beret will be driving and guarding me.*

"Paul has a big motorcycle, nothing like an Okada." Idogbe pointed at a small motorbike with three people jammed together on a single seat. "Heavenly Glide is painted on the gas tank. He can ride on the major routes because it is so powerful and can go fast."

"Are you telling me those small motorbikes and those three-wheeled yellow taxis are not allowed on major roads?"

"Yes, they are not allowed. The kekes and the okadas are too slow. Our government has changed the law, and drivers don't make much money now."

"Can't they lobby the city officials or form a union?"

Idogbe flashed a slight grin followed by a frown. "This is Nigeria. The people don't control the government like in your country."

"In the United States, it's the lobbyists that control the government, not the people," Tom remarked snidely and returned a frown.

While they talked outside under the awning, the sun came out, and the traffic out front increased tenfold. Idogbe gave Pastor Tom some do's and don'ts for getting around in Lagos. He pointed out an open market and internet café so that Tom could call home to his wife. The only phone at the church did not have long-distance service. Idogbe said they could shop around for a cell phone in the morning. When Idogbe headed home, he told Tom to dial 112 if he needed the police.

Tom leaned his shoulder into the freshly painted door. The smell of disinfectant immediately filled his nostrils. His luggage was on a double bed, and his backpack was on a small green table the same color as the benches in the church. A Casablanca fan in the center of the room was spinning, and a pull string hanging from the fan was dancing in the moving air. There was another pull string on a light over the sink in the kitchenette area. There was a small bathroom in the corner adjacent to the bed. The shower was smaller than the one in his motorhome back in Fort Worth, Texas.

The heat, humidity, and living conditions were worse than Tom had imagined. His brain was under siege by the jet lag and ten-hour time zone change. He moved his luggage off the bed and plopped down on his back. The wet heat mixing with a strong disinfectant smell forced Tom to the only window. There were at least ten dead flies in the window's track. When he slid the window open, the dried flies crunched while the outside noise roared in. Back on the bed, the high-pitched horns from all the traffic were relentless. The clatter of tires on cobblestone went up and down as each car and truck passed by the church.

The morning rumble and honking started up before the sun rose. Tom rolled over on the bed and pushed the two pillows against each ear. He lied, still hoping to somehow fall back to sleep. Jet lag was still taking its toll. Two hours later, the loud knocking on the door pulled Tom out of bed. He stubbed his toe on one of the four chairs pushed under each side of the small green table. "Son-of-bitch, that hurts like hell," Tom screamed out, hobbled over, and then opened the door.

"You okay? Idogbe asked with a cup of coffee and a small white bag. I picked up some Akara and Pap for you. I hope you like your coffee black."

"Yeah, black coffee would be great." They both took a chair at the small square table.

"Akara is like a deep-fried bean fritter, and Pap is a corn paste for dipping." Idogbe ripped open the white bag.

"These are good, or I'm starving," Tom said, taking another bite and drinking coffee.

"How'd you rest?" Idogbe asked.

"Not well. If we honked our horns in Texas like you do over here, you'd be getting a gun stuck in your face." Tom dipped the Akara into the Pap spread.

"We can't own handguns in Nigeria."

"What? I have a concealed weapons permit. I thought I'd

pick up a gun today when I get a cell phone."

"You can maybe get a permit for a shotgun. But only the police can carry handguns."

"Maybe I need to stop by the police station and tell them I'm US military."

"Probably won't do any good," Idogbe warned.

"I noticed that guard had a gun strapped to his side."

"That is a stun gun. Paul wears it when he travels up north to the Chibok region."

"Yesterday, you mentioned that the girls' outreach school up north is more dangerous these days."

"It is probably best you don't travel there. It is a long drive and not a favorable place to Christian preachers."

"Well, that's probably best. I'm getting too old for a firefight. My days of battling the enemy are in the past." Tom ate another Akara, drank some more coffee, and stood up. "Let's go find me a cell phone. The last time I talked to my wife was my departure from the Dallas, Fort Worth airport."

"Do you think your wife will like this apartment?"

"No, she won't like it at all." Pastor Tom went over, sat on the edge of the bed, and pulled his shoes on.

Idogbe was offended; he had repainted and prepared the small apartment himself. He did not say a word until they were on the street in front of the church. "We can walk or take a Keke to the computer marketplace."

"How far of a walk is it?"

"About three kilometers," Idogbe snipped, still hurt that Pastor Tom did not like the apartment.

"Let's walk." Tom regretted his words within two minutes. The streets were packed, and the crowd did not move leisurely. Most of the Nigerians were fit and fast walkers. Idogbe weaved between pedestrians, yellow Kekes, and motorbikes like navigating an obstacle course. Most women wore long, colorful dresses extending below the knee. It was like running through a kaleidoscope; all the different fabrics and bright colors against smooth black skin were mesmerizing and awe-taking at the same time.

The computer market had indoor and outdoor vendors selling new and used electronic equipment. Several places advertised untraceable VPN internet access. If spamming was your thing, you could buy a USB stick with thousands of verified emails for 7600 Naira.

Idogbe knew which cell phone plan worked best for calling

to the United States. The vendor let Tom call Beth to check international service. There was some wheeling and dealing about a new phone over a used phone. Idogbe pointed out that most of the newer smartphones were Chinese knock-offs. He showed Tom that the counterfeit phones got errors or were slow connecting to the GPS app. Getting lost could be dangerous in a city of almost 15 million people. Tom opted for a used Galaxy 10, with limited talk time to the United States — but it had accurate GPS.

As they left, Tom set a GPS waypoint in the Galaxy 10. He would be back to get a burner phone. Something Idogbe or Beth needed to know. Nevertheless, first, he needed to find a window air conditioner. Halfway back to the church, Tom's hamstring was on fire. He yelled, "Idogbe, I need to rest for a minute!"

Idogbe stopped, turned, and hurried back five lengthy strides. "Pastor, are you okay?"

"It's an old war injury acting up." Tom bent over and rubbed the back of his upper leg.

"Should we get a Keke?"

"No, if I can sit down for a few minutes, I'll be fine."

Idogbe pointed down and across the street. "If you can make it to that Holiday Inn, they will have a relaxation room."

Tom did not have a chance to reply. Idogbe ducked his head under the Pastor's arm and assisted him toward Oyins Holiday Inn. A Caucasian being assisted by a local didn't draw any sympathy, but the horn honking increased until that got out of the way and crossed the cobblestone road.

The relaxation room looked like a typical Holiday Inn hospitality area and was air-conditioned. They took a table before a varnished wood bar that ran diagonally across the far corner of a mostly empty room.

"What could I get you, gentlemen?" The tall bartender asked as she shot a gleaming smile of white teeth at Pastor Tom.

"Do you have any of that palm wine I've been hearing about?"

"Yes, we do," she replied, bending over to place a drink coaster. Tom looked at the bright-colored scarf wrapped around and across her chest. A gold rope necklace accented against her smooth brown skin, as did the fake gold wristwatch. Regardless, she could pass as royalty.

"That's a beautiful blouse. Does an African tribe make that

print?" Tom asked.

"You are aware of African Culture?"

"A little. I'm on a sabbatical and hope to learn a lot more while I'm here."

Idogbe knew better; no respectable tribe in Nigeria would sell a skimpy top made from polyester. "I'll have an extra stout Guinness in the bottle," Idogbe injected while Tom was getting played for a big tip.

"I never realized how beautiful African women dress." Tom looked back over at Idogbe.

"My twin sister is a fashion designer. I'll take you by her shop if you want to see authentic African clothing."

"Maybe when my wife gets here. Beth likes learning about different cultures."

"When is your wife planning to arrive?"

"I'm not exactly sure. We need to sell our house in Texas and put my Corvette into storage. Then Beth needs to find a nurse for some elders she looks after."

"Does she look after her parents?"

"No, Beth's parents disowned her because she didn't get married in the church. That is when she got caught up in the women's movement and started doing her own thing. She recently became a Eucharistic Minister and a Hospice volunteer. Hopefully, Africa will be her time to think, get back on a more submissive track, and listen to my preaching."

Idogbe frowned, "I can't wait to meet Beth. She sounds a lot like my Mum."

"Your Mom is one of those women that think they can do anything a man can do?"

"Yes, my father died early. She has done everything he did, along with being a good mother," Idogbe replied defensively.

The conversation lagged for a time. "Hopefully, I can find an apartment this week."

"I thought you knew the contract was for the minister to live on site. That's how it's written."

"Two of us can't stay in that small flat. My college dorm room was bigger."

The waitress brought the drinks. "I overheard you. We rent rooms by the month. I can have the manager call you." She placed a three-by-five card and pen on the table.

"Thank you, young lady." Pastor Tom picked up the pen.

"Is there anything else, Mr. Tom?" Tanny asked.

"We're good." Idogbe waited, snatched the card, and put it

in his front pocket. He leaned over and whispered. "Don't randomly give out your personal information."

"She seems nice; she's local and could be a new parishioner and good contact."

Idogbe took a long drink from the green bottle and thought. *I bet this new preacher will not last two months.*

"Before my wife moves here, there must be different living arrangements." Tom took a drink of the palm wine. "Wow, this is sweet and dry. It's not that bad."

"I never have cared for it. Even in high school when we would ferment it ourselves." Idogbe took another drink of his beer. "How's your leg feeling?"

"It's doing better." Tom squeezed lime into the Palm wine.

"How'd you injure your leg?"

"Jumping out of a helicopter!" Tom gulped down about half the wine and said. "The lime helped cut the sweetness."

"You'll have to share your war story with Paul. He jumped out of a helicopter into a blown-out rice paddy and almost drowned. His platoon leader saved him."

Tom finished off the rest of the wine. "I don't like talking about war. Let's go. My leg is feeling better."

When they got outside, Tom opened his phone and set a waypoint on the GPS map. *I will come back here later this week*, he told himself.

Idogbe was about half a block ahead and waited next to a large pile of rubbish. In the center of the pile were two garbage cans. The green one said RECYCLE, and the brown one said GARBAGE. The stench was vomit rising.

"Are the trash collectors on strike?" Tom asked as he caught up to Idogbe.

"On strike, what do you mean?"

"You know. When the garbage collectors refused to pick up the trash until they get a pay increase or more paid days off."

Idogbe laughed. "I'll have to tell Constable Ayoola. He's the one who takes care of trash collection. Is your leg doing better?"

"It's better; the rest and drink have helped." Tom took off first and fast. The head start only lasted half a block.

Idogbe pulled out the 3x5 card at the church gate and wrote 22-06-34. "Here's the combination. Always lock the gate when you leave. We have lost folding chairs and tools since the last service six months ago."

"I've been meaning to ask. What happened to your last

pastor?"

"That pastor appointed an assistant and wanted her called 'Most Reverend Mother.' She didn't work out!"

"How many people were coming to Sunday morning service?"

"Toward the end, maybe fifteen to twenty. Plus, the choir. The preacher before those two had ten times as many followers."

"Well, I'll turn that around. Having a female pastor is not biblical. Even your Muslim neighbors would agree with that."

"I agree, too." Idogbe knew this was not the time to tell Tom he was a Catholic deacon.

"Praise God that fundamental scripture is not gaining strength in the world," Tom proclaimed.

Idogbe did not have a response. Using Allah's name to promote fundamentalism was what most Muslim sects do. He wished he knew more about the three major religions but quit theology training after his father died. Idogbe handed the 3x5 card to Pastor Tom. "You try to open the lock."

On the first attempt, the lock did not open; the second time, it did. "That works!" Tom pulled the lock out of the fence latch and opened the gate. "I'll go call my wife, and then I need to work on my first sermon for Sunday. When will you be back?"

"I will be back next week but not on the weekend. I'll be helping my mother on her strawberry farm for a few days."

"Fresh strawberries, those sound good."

"They are," Idogbe said with a selfless smile. "Mum dips them in chocolate and sells them at market."

"Your mother sounds like a resourceful woman. Will I meet her at my Sunday service?"

"Not this Sunday. She lives almost four hours away and attends Saint Jude's Church."

"Oh..." Pastor Tom walked through the gate. "I'll see you next week."

The cell phone didn't connect the first time. "Beth, sorry I woke you up in the middle of the night."

"That's okay... Now I have your new cell number." Beth moved the phone to her other ear. "I can hardly hear you."

"Wait a second." Tom walked outside down the fenced-off alley. "Is this better?"

"Yes, a lot better."

"There are metal roofs on both the church and the

apartment. All the metal could be blocking the signal."

"Do you have internet? You could send an email if need be."

"I'm not sure, but the store I bought this phone from has all kinds of electronic stuff. I'm going to go back there tomorrow. I'll take my laptop and see about getting a modem."

"You'll need the internet to check out the listing."

"Did the realtor give you any dates for an open house?"

"Leroy is planning an open house next weekend. He suggested a price reduction to stir some interest."

"How much of a price reduction?" Tom was annoyed.

"He suggested fifty thousand dollars or more. I told him that I'd run it by you."

"Tell Leroy he can make a twenty-five thousand dollar reduction. He can take it out of his commission if he wants more."

"I'll tell him." The cell service started to cut out. "What are the living arrangements like?" Beth spoke louder.

"It's not good. I'm going to check on a suite at the Holiday Inn. They offer monthly rental, and it's within walking distance of the church."

"I will check on having the motorhome shipped over and park it next to the church. Remember, my niece went to work for a huge shipping company in Long Beach, California."

"Are you talking about that tramp, Tina? Didn't she get in trouble for stalking that millionaire's son, Kevin Trask?"

"All that's in her past. Beth, it would be best if you learned to forgive people for their mistakes. You have always been jealous of her. Call my brother today and get Tina's work phone number. I'll call you back later."

"Tom, I'm not jealous of some bimbo twenty years younger than me. I don't trust her. You should stay away from her." Beth warned with force.

"Beth, just get me her phone number and tell Leroy he can reduce the price if he cuts his commission."

"I will," Beth's tone changed. "Your brother and that entire family is weird. Who gives his daughter a breast job for a high school graduation gift?"

"Tina is his stepdaughter! Let it go, Beth."

"I'm working on it, Tom. But it's not that easy."

"Beth, we need to get out from under a mortgage with which we're almost upside down. You are the one that needed to have a big showpiece home on the golf course. You better hope we can unload your dream home."

"Okay, I'm sorry. I know it's all my fault." Beth apologized.

"I'll call you later." Tom slipped the phone into his front pocket, unlocked the side door of the church, and walked through a small room. The twenty rows of green benches might hold a hundred people.

Idogbe mentioned that folding chairs got stolen. Hopefully, there are some stored in the closet in the back. Tom stepped out of the sanctuary onto the stage and stomped on the carpet. *This stage feels well-built. That crucifix will have to go.*

Now, the Ten Commandments tablets to the right of the cross caught Tom's attention. He immediately rushed toward the front wall. *These have to go right now!*

Tom often preached about bible hypocrisy and the reformation of protest. He knew that the Ten Commandments are enumerated differently in different places in the Bible. On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther posted his Ninety-five Theses on the church door at Wittenberg, Germany. Barely four years later, the Catholic Church would brand him a heretic, and the Holy Roman Empire would condemn him as an outlaw.

Tom tried to remove the Decalogue replica plaques, but they wouldn't budge! He examined around the plaster edges for hooks or screws—nothing. *I'll get a hammer and break these tablets into small pieces. After all, that is what Moses did when he cast the stone tablets beneath Mount Sinai—what other man has looked upon these original stones written by God's finger—*

Chap 2... **Wheeler—Dealer**

Sunday morning was about what Idogbe had told Pastor Tom to expect. At least thirty people wandered through the doors or peeked in. Twenty minutes after an afternoon downpour, two young boys with a red bucket and some old rags offered to clean the church and mop the floor for 750 Naira. Pastor Tom roughly knew what Nigerian Naira to United States dollar converted to and offered them one dollar each. They accepted and spent at least two hours cleaning and mopping. Pastor Tom had bigger plans for these young boys. It would be similar to what he did in college to entice 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 when they met last week. Tanny looked around more than any of the other visitors.

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

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

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

"Good luck. This church has been closed more than it has been open." Tanny walked between the benches and then up to the front wall of the stage. She examined the brass dedication plaque. "Wow! Your church headquarters are in Los Angeles. My boyfriend wants to move there to get a recording contract."

"Has he ever been to LA? It's a massive 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 pulled and pushed at the brass plaque like she wanted to take it off the wall. Her head was cloudy from THC and alcohol.

"I hope the dedication plaque is not attached like the Ten Commandments." Pastor Tom motioned to the right side of the large wood cross toward the tablets while watching Tanny fuss with the brass plaque.

There was a scuffling sound at the church entrance. "Tanny, we need to go!" ordered a swank-looking man who had multiple gold chains hanging around his neck. He stayed just outside the entrance doors, rocking from side to side.

As ordered, Tanny popped to attention. "I got to go!" She jumped off the carpeted stage platform and ran down between the benches and out the double front doors. Tom caught a glimpse of her jumping into an old grey step van. Two young boys were wringing out their wet rags in the street gutter and had to jump to the side when the box van sped off.

On the porch, Tom pulled a money clip from his pocket and motioned for the boys to come to him. A strong detergent smell was apparent when Pastor Tom pulled off two bills. "I only have American money."

"That's okay!" The bigger boy snatched both dollars.

"You need to share. You should not steal; it is one of God's commandments. Even from your brother." Pastor Tom used the incident to preach.

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

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

"He drives a truck from a fueling port to a China dam project up North. He is gone most of the time."

"Is he gone now?"

"Yes, until next week."

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

"I got school tomorrow. Jacob stays home and helps Mum."

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

Ekon wind-milled the red bucket in a full circle, unsure about a tall Caucasian with greasy combed through dark brown hair. However, he could not pass up an opportunity to earn American money. "What is a commission?"

"Ask your teacher. Come by after school tomorrow if it sounds like something you and your brother want to do."

"Okay, Mr. Preacher," Ekon grabbed Jacob's hand, and they hurried down the alley adjacent to the church. They ducked

through a hole in the fence and darted across a field. A fourth grader and a younger brother with an after-school job is better than playing soccer with neighborhood friends.

A few more people meandered through. Pastor Tom told them the first church service would be in one or two weeks. He requested they only bring a King James Version of the bible. He also told them there would be free coffee and donuts afterward. Tom took the OPEN HOUSE banner down and put it in the storage closet.

The afternoon traffic seemed light; at least the horn honking was less. Tom flagged down a Keke. Today would be his first ride in a keke, a yellow three-wheeler. "I need to go to an office supply store that can do photocopies."

"Okay, I know a good one." The driver first put the motor-powered cart into gear, honked his horn, and darted into traffic. The exhaust and heat from the engine barreled up under the canvas cover. The driver passed by at least three shops that had photocopy signs displayed. Finally, he pulled up to what looked like a reputable office supply business. "Should I wait here, Sir?"

"I need some flyers made. I don't know how long that will take." Tom slipped off the small vinyl bench seat and reached for his money clip in his pocket.

The keke driver uncoiled a cable wrapped around one handlebar. He fed it through the front wheel and frame, then connected them with a lock. "I'll wait."

"I'm not paying you to wait," Tom warned.

Sunday afternoons were the slowest time for picking up rides, and this driver would not lose a Caucasian with a pocket full of cash. "We can see how long flyers take to print." The driver led the way to a counter in the rear of the store.

Tom handed a USB stick to the teenage boy behind the counter. "I need some copies of the Glory and Praise file."

Tom was surprised that his driver bartered a better price per copy than advertised on the wall. Color copies were necessary; unlike Tom's college days, an artsy black and white poster would do the trick to get models. The agreement was for two hundred and fifty tricolor copies ready in two hours.

Outside, the keke driver unlocked the three-wheeled taxi, "Do you know where I can get a window air conditioner?"

"Purchased from a store, or do you want one off the black market?" The driver wrapped the lock and cable around the

handlebars.

"I don't know, what do you think? You just saved me money for photocopies."

"Sunday night is slow, and traffic down to the shipyard will be light. We can check Tin Can Island. It's about seven kilometers."

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

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

The more they drove south toward the coast, the cooler the weather got. Tom was having second thoughts. *Buying something off the black market is, but this is Africa. Plus, I'm not breaking one of the commandments.*

The motor noise from the keke made it impossible to converse with the driver. Tom was anxious to see the harbor; he sat back and experienced the smell of salted air.

The shipping docks of Lagos were inefficient and run by corrupt government authorities. It was not unusual for ships to anchor in the Gulf of Guinea for twenty days or more, waiting to get unloaded. Paying a bribe fee to the Port Authority to be moved up on the docking schedule could be as much as a thousand dollars per container.

The (CCP) Chinese Communist Party kept offering to modernize Tin Can Island port. Their negotiations promised that ships would get unloaded within a week. In the small print, if Nigeria defaulted on this infrastructure loan, Tin Can Island would become Chinese property.

The smell from shipping containers filled with rotting perishables along both sides of Harbor Drive was horrific. The road had deep potholes that the keke bottomed out more than a couple of times. They passed rows of cars that insurance companies had totaled out. The water-damaged vehicles were cleaned, and error codes were erased. They were ready to ship back to North America with bogus Car-Fax reports.

Further, down Harbor Drive, between the ships and storage area, there were about a dozen popup canopies. Under the blue or white canvas squares, black-market sellers employed two or three teenage boys known as merchandise runners.

The keke driver stopped and asked about window air conditioners. The merchant thumbed through a spiral-bound notepad and found a container location. His merch-runner wrote the area on his hand and took off with a digital camera. In about ten minutes, the merch-runner returned with digital pictures to

show Tom. The Fence and Tom then agreed on a cash price of \$50, which was about 20,000 naira.

While waiting for his air conditioner, Tom asked about a flat-screen TV. The process started over but with a different teenage boy taking off. Both transactions took less than forty minutes and cost Tom \$100. He got sandwiched between two large boxes inside the yellow three-wheeler and was glad to learn how the bartering system worked.

It took two trips for the keke driver to unload the merchandise and carry the boxes to the front door of the tiny apartment. Tom brought the two reams of announcement flyers. The eight-dollar fare was a steal. A taxi and guide service in Texas would have been at least a hundred dollars.

The air conditioner fit loose in the window. Tom used some cardboard to seal off the top and sides of the AC unit. The installation looked cheesy, but it worked. The new flat-screen HDTV could wait until Tuesday when Idogbe would return from helping his mom.

Tom checked the world clock on his phone; it was almost noon in Texas. He called home. "Beth, I'm glad you haven't started your Sunday rounds yet."

"I'm not going to see Deacon Dave till later today. Hospice is trying to get his pain medication under control. Father Murphy is going with me."

"Is your priest going to give him Last Rites?"

"Not yet. Father Murphy will keep bringing the Holy Eucharist to David after I leave."

"Maybe David will be at rest before you come over here? Being bedridden and on dialysis can't be fun."

"God willing! Deacon Dave has been ready to meet up with his wife in heaven. His son is flying on a private jet down from Colorado on Wednesday. His daughter will come as soon as she can clear her surgery schedule."

"His son flies on a private jet?"

"Yes, Dan is big into internet security and something called Bitcoin. He flies all over the world to different countries to protect against fraud and to build firewalls. Dave got Dan started way back when data started to be encrypted. A few times, Dave talked about a Clipper-Chip. It's all Greek to me."

Tom paused; he had a brief understanding of skipjack encryption and crypto-currency. That was how he lost the church

secretary's money back home in Fort Worth. Finally, Tom asked, "Did you get a hold of my niece Tina?"

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

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

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

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

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

"I will do that." Tom walked over to the air conditioner and turned it off to hear better. "Are they showing the house today?"

"Yes, they are." Beth looked at her diamond wristwatch. "Tom, why don't I call you later today after I return from my Eucharist ministry rounds?"

Tom glanced at the world clock on his phone again. "Beth, it could be midnight over here by the time you get done calling on dying Catholics at nursing homes. Call me tomorrow unless we get an offer on the house."

"I'll do that," Beth quipped and hung up.

Tom never did take Beth's faith seriously. Living an interfaith marriage was hard. Maybe it was divine providence that they never were able to have children. Tom would have never allowed their children not to be raised Protestant. All the sexual abuse and lawsuits in her faith—reinforced his position. Tom reminded Beth about the abuse and coverup often.

Air conditioning not only cools the air but also reduces humidity. Tom turned the window unit back on. He would have had a good night's rest without the noisy AC fan. During the night, a text message from Beth with Tina's phone number came over to Tom's phone, which he didn't hear.

First thing in the morning, Tom dialed the number. "Hello, you know what to do," came out of the speaker.

"Tina, this is your Uncle Tom. I'm working on an assignment in Nigeria and was wondering if you could help me. That is if you are still working for that shipping company. Please call me back when you have time." After Tom finished leaving a message, he

switched the AC unit to the maximum.

The cool, dry air quit about an hour later, followed by a hot electrical smell. The air conditioner temperature light was off. Nothing happened when Tom pushed the buttons. The light over the green table was not working either. He opened the refrigerator door; the interior light was off.

Outside, at the rear of the building, he located a small gray circuit panel box. There were four breakers, and one was tripped. Tom closed the breaker and heard the window AC unit start. *Thank God, it was only a tripped breaker.*

Back inside, the cell phone vibrated on the green table. Tom picked up the phone and, with the other hand, found the pull cord for the overhead light. When he pulled the white string, the light bulb flashed briefly and then went off, as did the air conditioner.

"Hello!" Tom yipped into the phone.

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

The charming voice immediately shifted Tom's disposition. "Tina, thanks for calling back. It's been a while. What have you been up to?"

"I'm working for a big recruiting company. I fix up bigwigs, celebrities, and even politicians. A famous family from San Francisco is mentoring me."

Tom was disappointed; this information wasn't what he wanted to hear. "Good for you."

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

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

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

"I'm not on a Safari and have not seen any camels. Yes, it is hot and muggy. Lagos is a city of over fifteen million people."

"Fifteen million people! That sounds bigger than LA."

"Lagos is a lot bigger. I was hoping you still worked for that international shipping company."

"I do, but when they closed the shipping office in Long Beach. They offered me a work-from-home position. I now work for Zsa Zsa Meng, a Hollywood scout."

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

"I don't think so. Zsa Zsa has tickets to the Golden Globes. I might get to go if Mr. Chen gives the okay. I love hanging out

with famous people. Like, I'm so..."

Tom yawned. "Tina, I called because I hoped to get my motorhome shipped from Texas to Africa. It sounds like you're not even involved in that part of the business."

"I'm sorry, Uncle Tom. I'm escorting a CCP guy around San Francisco next week. He runs shipping and building big projects worldwide."

"Tina, if you mention my request to ship a motorhome to Tin Can Island in Nigeria, I'd owe you."

"Tin man, like the man in Wizard of Oz?"

"Sort of Tina. But it is Tin Can Island, not Tin Man Island."

"I get it. I'll ask Zsa Zsa, who works directly for Mr. Chen."

Tom pulled the chain on the ceiling fixture again, then went outside to reset the breaker. The window AC unit came on. A coffee pot was on the counter, and then Tom found a bag of coffee in the cupboard. When he started the coffee pot, the circuit breaker tripped. He unplugged the AC unit and went outside to the circuit panel box.

The Kenya Volcanic Coffee was the best coffee he had ever tasted. Hot coffee now outweighed the cool, conditioned air. The rest of Tom's morning was scattered between prayer and trips outside in wet heat to the electrical panel.

Famished mentally and physically, Tom needed to find someplace to have an early lunch. He grabbed a handful of flyers, tape, and tacks and left the apartment. He also wanted to find water bottles, key chains, and other cheap items to give away next Sunday. A staple gun to hang the church posters on wood poles and fences would help. About a mile away, Tom found a discount store called Massmart. It was like a Walmart, not as big, but more crowded. It had groceries, household items, and a pharmacy. Tom looked around for lunch at the outside food court; he wanted to find more of the Kenya Volcanic Coffee.

Some women carried bags in each hand while they balanced baskets on their heads. A few of them also had a baby on their back or strapped to their chest in a colorful, sling-type carrier. A realization hit Tom. *The church doesn't have a cry room. I must add 'No Children' to the flyers.*

The meat and veggie on a wood skewer hit the spot; the off-brand coffee was lukewarm and disappointing. Massmart had an excellent hardware section. He found a stapler, staples, felt markers, and more tape. Outside, Tom marked a GPS waypoint

on his phone and loaded the stapler with staples. He tossed the plastic shell wrapper in a parking lot dumpster and stapled two fliers on the fence surrounding the metal containers. He used a felt pen to draw a circle with a diagonal line through it and then wrote **No Children**.

On his way back, Tom stapled or taped up at least twenty-five posters before a seasoned man in uniform with a red armband approached. "Do you have a permit to display your signs?"

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

"Yes, you do." The old man reached into his pocket.

"Even for a church reopening?" Tom forced his point.

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

Tom did not want nor have time to preach to an old rent-a-cop. "Okay, where do I go to get a permit?"

"I can issue you one right here."

Tom was suspicious. The elderly, seasoned man did not even have a gun strapped to his hip. "Who are you anyway?"

"I'm the neighborhood constable. I work for the Lagos Police Force". He pointed at the armband.

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

The Nigerian pointed at a patch on the sleeve of his dark green shirt. The patch with a red bird perched on the back of an elephant did not look official. The officer pulled out what looked like a receipt book from the left pocket of his dark green shirt and flipped it open. "Now, I'll need to see your identification." He pulled a pen from behind his ear. "I'm writing you a ticket."

"How much is the ticket?"

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

"Yeah, I came over here to build the church back up. You're welcome next Sunday. I'm going to have door prizes."

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

"No, just me. My wife will be here in about a month; she's not a preacher."

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

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

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

"Okay, how much is a permit?" Tom knew he was getting scammed.

"Two thousand Nairas."

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

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

For sure, he got played. Tom reluctantly handed over the five-dollar bill. Idogbe warned him about pay-to-play and corruption with some city officials.

The constable tore off a carbon receipt. "This is only good for a week. Make sure you take your signs down by next Monday. I want my precinct kept rubbish-free."

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

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

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

"Then let me ask this..." The elder drew in a deep breath. "Do you preach that the wrath of Shaitan is real? Do you preach that one's actions will be measured? Most Christians preach that the Quran does not list what is chiseled on the stone tablets given to the prophet Moses. What say you?"

"I say, Jesus, the begotten Son of God, added another law to the first ten."

"Jesus was a prophet, same as Ishmael, the son of Abram," Ayoola said with one hundred percent confidence.

Tom immediately became defensive. "The Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are all God."

Constable Ayoola fired back. The word trinity appears nowhere in the bible. It's made up dogma written around 325AD.

Now Tom fired back, "Ishmael was the bastard son of Abram. He was no prophet." Tom would have usually used the word illegitimate, but he was on fire.

"You Christians still fight each other over the order and the number of Decalogue laws."

Tom turned away. He did not like getting preached to. He'd earned his master's of divinity degree from the best theology university in the United States. He knew the correct order of the Ten Commandments and which one got removed by the Universal Catholic Church.

Chap 3... **Shaitan = Satan**

The wrath of Shaitan is what Muslims refer to as Satan and his evildoers. Pastor Tom had a long-term plan to preach salvation by grace, but building a large following came first. The Ten Commandments were the old covenant. The new covenant was that through the crucifixion of Jesus, all sins got absolved, and only those born-again believers would get swept up at the Rapture. Hence, the Islamic faith does not claim that Jesus is God. Teaching that only the righteous will rise to join Jesus in the clouds would not work well in Africa. Tom would need to switch up the narrative to appease his fresh flock.

"Too bad there is not a thou shalt not scam commandment," Tom said under his breath. He shoved the 'okay to post' permit in his pocket and started down the sidewalk. At the next telephone pole, he looked back. The old bowlegged man was likely running a scam or just had it out for Christians. If the Constable was the official litter police, he wasn't doing a good job. As Tom stapled up another flyer, his phone rang. He yanked the new cell phone from his pocket. "Hello!"

"Mr. Pastor Man, this is Tanny. I can show you one of our air-conditioned rooms if you come by this afternoon."

"Tanny, I think I got my air conditioning issue figured out. But thanks for the call." In the background, it sounded like someone was whispering on her end of the call.

"Are you sure? I could give you a personal tour of the master suite. It has a king bed and a wet bar."

The offer was too persuasive. Tom often preached on how to avoid temptation. "Tanny, I appreciate your offer, but I got our living arrangements worked out."

"Our? I didn't know you had someone with you?"

"Not yet. My wife will be moving over soon, and I'm working to get our motorhome shipped here through Tin Can Island Port."

Parked behind the Oyins Holiday Inn and from inside the music step van, Tanny breathed a sigh. Scamming tourists was one thing — sleeping with them was out of bounds. "Okay, I'm glad your wife will have a motorhome to stay in." Tanny ended the call and handed the phone back to Victor Vee.

"You stupid Ho!" Victor Vee backhanded Tanny so hard that it knocked her off the five-gallon plastic bucket she was sitting on. "I need you to get him away from that church. Call him back and offer him a free dinner, drinks, or maybe a little weed to smoke. Do what you must to get him away from that church!"

Victor Vee hit redial and then pushed the speaker icon. He held the phone next to her bleeding nose and swelling cheek.

"Mr. Tom, we have happy hour drinks and a complimentary dinner in the relaxation room tonight. Would you like to come by and see me?"

"A good meal and a drink sound great. What time is happy hour?"

Victor Vee held up his left hand with all his fingers and thumb extended; only the index finger on his other hand was up.

"Six o'clock would be a good time."

"Thanks, I'll be there."

"Okay, I'll see you at six." Tanny wiped at the blood under her nose. Her left eye was swelling.

Victor Vee put his phone back in his pocket. "See how easy that was. Just use your head and follow my instructions, and things will be fine."

"I love you. But I don't particularly appreciate getting involved in your shady business stuff. What would my kids do if I went to jail?"

Victor Vee pulled a small tin from his shirt pocket. "Let's smoke a little wee wee before you have to go back. Then maybe you should take care of me?"

"Not now. But if you come over after work tonight, we can play king of the bedroom." The left side of Tanny's face felt hot—as did her soul.

Victor lit up the hand-rolled cannabis and inhaled a deep, long drag. He then handed it over to Tanny. Hanging around with Victor Vee and all his music fans seemed to legitimize drugs; for sure, it improved the band's music and creativity. Victor just

needed one break, and he'd be heading to stardom and fame.

About a block away, Pastor Tom spotted two boys kicking a ball back and forth. They ran to meet him when he walked through the gate. "School's out. We're here to earn a commission," Ekon yelled with excitement. Jacob took up a protected position behind his big brother.

"Can you use a stapler?" Tom was having second thoughts. "I need the flyers up high at adult's eye level."

"Jacob can stand on my shoulders." Ekon was not going to let anything stop them from earning money.

Tom bent over, reached around Ekon, and handed the stapler to Jacob. "Show me how strong you are."

Jacob took the stapler, squeezed with all his might, and gritted his teeth. Finally, he used both hands and fired a staple.

"That won't work! Your brother will need one hand to hold the paper and one hand to staple with," Tom said with a slight scowl.

Jacob wiped at a tear. He sensed he was too weak to fire the stapler with only one hand. "A boc a box," Jacob rambled with muted grunts. He then used his hands and fingers to sign so that only Ekon could see.

Ekon turned back toward Pastor Tom. "We can go get a box from home to stand on."

It was apparent how badly the brothers wanted to work. Tom walked up the steps, opened the church doors, and grabbed one of the folding chairs. Back outside, he pointed at a telephone pole down the block. "Show me that you two can hang a poster at eye level on that pole down there."

Ekon grabbed the top of the folding chair and took a flyer from Tom. Next, Jacob latched on the bottom of the chair. They carried the folded chair between themselves like a ladder. When they reached the telephone pole, Ekon unfolded the chair and stood on it. Jacob handed him the stapler. Ekon made sure the flyer was higher than other advertisements on the telephone pole. The brothers were a team. They rushed back, leaned the chair against the church gate, and waited for approval.

"Okay, let me get more flyers," Tom said.

Inside the warm, musty apartment, Tom's irritation turned full-on. The window AC unit had quit working again! He grabbed the pile of flyers marked with the words, **No Kids**. He also grabbed two rolls of masking tape and some felt markers.

Ekon and Jacob were patiently waiting outside the apartment

door. "How much commission will we earn?" Ekon asked with eagerness.

"You both will earn a penny each for every poster put up. Here is the tape for the places you can't use the staple gun."

Ekon slipped his small hand through one roll of blue masking tape. Jacob pulled the stack of flyers from Tom and put them in the red bucket, the box of staples, and an extra roll of tape.

"Here is a felt marker for the flyers. I didn't get them all marked. You do know how to write?"

"Yes, I'm good at English." Ekon shoved the felt marker into a rear pocket on his soccer shorts.

Tom pulled out the gold money clip and peeled off two dollars. "Here you go. I'm paying both of you to get a hundred flyers posted. I'm going out to dinner and might not be here when you get done."

Ekon snatched the two bills. He had prayed all night and all during school for this job. "Where should we leave the chair and stuff when we get done?"

Tom pointed to the center of the apartment. "Just open the door and put the stuff on the green table." Next, he pointed across the parking lot. "Put the folding chair back in the storage room at the back of the church. I'll leave the doors unlocked."

"What if we hang more than a hundred flyers?" Ekon asked.

"I'll pay you the difference." Tom reached into a shirt pocket and pulled out the posting permit. "If anyone should stop you from putting up posters, show them this permit."

"Did Mr. Bowleg's make you buy a permit?" Ekon asked.

"Yes, he did. The Constable also said that seven-year-old boys should pray five times daily. What do you think about that?"

"I pray, but not that much. Jacob is eight. He don't know many words. But we hold hands, and I pray for us. We prayed at bedtime last night to make a commission." Ekon stuffed both dollars and the permit deep into the rear pocket of his tattered yellow soccer shorts.

"Do you think kids should come into church if adult stuff is being talked about?"

"No, I'd rather play outside with my friends." Ekon fidgeted with the roll of tape around his wrist. He was anxious to start earning a commission and felt uneasy talking about praying.

"Okay, that's what I thought." Now, Tom knew he was making the right decision not to have kids in attendance, especially if

they'd rather be outside playing. "Go hang my flyers!"

Jacob followed Ekon with the red bucket in hand. They both latched onto opposite ends of the folding chair. They were thrilled that the harder they worked, the more they would earn. They liked earning a commission and were glad their prayer got answered.

Tom started searching for some type of wedge. He found a paint stir stick in a cabinet next to a can of green paint. *This should work*, Tom told himself. On a different shelf, he found duct tape and a utility knife. He grabbed the tools and headed to the electrical panel on the rear wall of the apartment.

Tom reset the circuit breaker, cut off a piece of the stir stick, and wedged it against it. Duct tape held the piece of wood snug and tight. Now, the circuit breaker could not trip. The ceiling fan, lights, and, most importantly, the AC unit were operating. At the small green table, Tom pulled his laptop from a backpack and started working on his sermon for Sunday. He had not decided on 'Fire and Brimstone' or 'Grace not Works' for next Sunday's service. Preaching for over an hour would be hard without a dramatic visual and audio presentation. Tom always saved the trinkets for last — the free stuff kept people from leaving early.

Forty minutes later, the apartment had cooled down. Tom had only typed 'Meet, greet and deliver the 'Word.' He folded the laptop, packed it, and headed out. *Hopefully, a stiff drink and a good dinner will flow the inspiration. I need to put on a rock star performance my first go around.* Tom left the light on, closed the door, and swung the computer backpack over one shoulder.

The five o'clock work traffic was almost at a standstill. Horns were blasting, and middle finger gesturing was full on. Okada scooters were the only vehicles that could weave in and out of traffic. Tom flagged over a driver and threw his leg over the extended seat. "I need to go to Oyins Holiday Inn." Riding on the back of a small motorcycle and holding on to another man felt awkward. This okada driver was good at weaving in and out and knew the back roads. They were at the Holiday Inn within fifteen minutes.

Tanny saw Tom when he walked in and waved. Tom sat at the same table as he had last week. He put his backpack in the chair where Idogbe had sat.

"I'm glad you came in. Do you want a palm wine again?" Tanny placed a coaster on the table.

"No, I think I'll start with a beer."

"Would you like to try a Star Lager?" Tanny asked.

"That sounds good." Tom pulled his laptop from the backpack. "I need to work on my delivery for Sunday. I hope dinner and a drink can help break my writer's block."

"When we stopped by yesterday, you said your first preaching service wouldn't happen for two weeks."

"I know, but God spoke to me. He wants me to start spreading the 'Word' ASAP."

"ASAP, what do you mean?"

"As soon as possible," Tom quipped and then noticed Tanny's swollen left cheek. "What happened to your face?"

Tanny put her hand over her left eye. "Oh, nothing... I just accidentally ran into the corner of the swinging kitchen door."

"Wow, you better be more careful. Looks like you might be getting one heck of a shiner."

"What do you mean a shiner?" Tanny asked.

"Back home in Texas, we call it a black eye."

"Oh," Tanny replied, now more confused. "Do you want to see a menu?"

"On the phone, you said the hours for a free meal were between five and seven. Is that still on?"

"It's mainly for our guests, but I'll make an exception for you." Tanny tried to wink, but her eye was almost swollen shut. "I'll be right back with your Star Lager."

"Okay, thanks." Tom wasn't sure about Tanny's story of running into the door.

Behind the bar, she looked at herself in the display mirror behind two rows of hard liquor bottles. This was not the first time Tanny got slapped around. At least this time, she didn't have to go to the ER.

Tom opened his laptop and then searched a folder named **Past Sermons**. Maybe he could find something that would work for Sunday. Fundamental Christianity was a lot like Islam. What worked in Texas might not work in Nigeria. Tom was a skilled orator. Tom's skill set was to preach what the congregation wanted to hear, not necessarily what they needed to hear.

Tanny carefully set the beer and menu a fair distance from the laptop. "Would you like the password for the motel router?"

Tom looked up from the LCD screen. "Sure, maybe if I surf the web, I'll find something to preach about for Sunday," Tom

ordered the Flank steak cooked on pineapple rind and covered with cumin seeds.

The pepperiness and smokiness of cumin seasoning set his mouth on fire. Three Star Lagers helped cool down the taste buds. Nigerian beer has twice the alcohol content of most American craft beers. Tanny cleared off the food plate and salad bowl and then returned with a fourth beer. "Any luck with your Sunday discourse?"

Tom put his hand up. "I'd better back off on the alcohol. I've had no luck with a sermon. Even surfing the web hasn't helped."

"I'll set the Star Lager here. Just in case the cumin spice hasn't cooled off." Tanny smiled. She had been super attentive to Tom all night. "I'm going on break in a few minutes. Maybe a little wee wee would help?"

Tom had a brain freeze and then a rush of testosterone. It was not the beer; it was about being away from Elizabeth. He'd given plenty of sermons on adultery and knew all about avoiding temptation. "Thanks, but I'll have to take a pass."

"Wee wee always helps my boyfriend to write songs. I just thought it might help you develop something to write."

Tom had another brain freeze and then asked. "Is Wee Wee cannabis?"

"Yes, homegrown in Africa. Victor said it is legal in Los Angeles, California, if you smoke it for medical use."

Tom steadied himself and then approached the bar.

Tanny approached on the other side. "Did you change your mind?"

"I smoked a little marijuana in college for headaches. It did help me during finials." The next twelve hours went from a blur to a blackout!

Mid-morning, a desk phone rang out in the draped-off darkened room. Tom lifted his head enough to see a slit of light coming in from under a door. His ankles were tied, and his undershirt pulled up under his armpits. He kicked and kicked and finally got his feet free. The ringing quit in the room but not inside his skull. The shadow from two feet was now evident in the crack of light under the door.

Tom tried to rewind the night. All he could remember was laughing and then yelling at a gray step van that almost ran him over in an alley. He got shoved into a big white canvas container and then wheeled between several oversized washing machines.

The smell of bleach was heavy and made it hard to breathe. Someone stripped off his shirt and pants, and everything went very black.

The door bolt snapped open, and the crack of light turned into a burst of light. "Oh! I'm so sorry. I need to clean this room."

Tom put his hand up to his face. Through his fingers, he made out a housemaid. "Ah... Could you give me about thirty minutes?"

Tom found a twist switch on the nightstand; it snapped, and a light came on. He stood, walked to the window, and opened the heavy double drapes. Immediately, he scanned the room for his backpack and laptop.

The nightstand had nothing but a pen and notepad in it. Inside the armoire—nothing but hangers. Only complementary soap and shampoo bottles are in the bathroom. Tom felt for his wallet as he got dressed. He looked at the room number on the door in the hall and then navigated his way down to the front desk.

"Good day, Chap." The receptionist spoke with a British accent. "How may I help you?"

"I was in room 209 and can't find my laptop."

"One moment, I'll check in the office."

Tom's heart raced! There was private information on the hard drive—financial records of donors and bank information from Glory and Praise headquarters.

The well-groomed red-haired man returned with Tom's backpack and set it up on the counter.

Through the heavy nylon material, Tom could feel the laptop. He unzipped it to double-check. "That's a relief." Tom took a deep breath.

"I'm going to hurry and check you out so you don't have to pay for another night."

Tom reached into his front pocket for his money clip. "I'll have to use a credit card if I don't have enough cash."

"We have a Bitcoin ATM if you need cash." The British-accented man pointed at a side hallway.

"Don't you take American Express?"

"We can do that. Let me get your total."

Tom ended up paying cash. The total bill, including room tax, was less than thirty-eight dollars. Tom pulled two twenties from his money clip and set them on the counter.

"I'll get your change."

"No, keep it. I'm just happy you had my laptop." Tom grabbed onto the backpack.

"Thank you," A *ding* rang out when the cash drawer sprang open. "Cheers, most reverend Thomas Seton."

Without hesitation, Tom exited the lobby and hurried back toward the church. The exercise and fresh air helped to clear his pounding head. The honesty and hospitality of the Holiday Inn staff added zeal to his trek. Maybe he would use the free dinner, followed by the return of his laptop for his first sermon. *Thou shalt not steal will be an excellent commandment to preach about.*

From two blocks away, Tom saw Idogbe standing outside the gate, looking up and down Frontage Road. A white preacher dressed in slacks and a long-sleeved dress shirt was easy to spot. Tom moved the backpack from one shoulder to the other and waved.

Idogbe approached Tom about a block away from the church. Panicked, he asked, "Did you leave because of the smell?"

"What?" Tom looked puzzled.

"The apartment window is wide open. There's a burning smell of burnt plastic. Somethings wrong!"

"What do you mean?" Tom asked and hurried up the pace.

"The smell is like overheated wires! Like when an electrical circuit failed or motor."

Tom immediately thought about the paint stick he wedged in the electrical panel. Their fast pace picked up to a jog. From half a block away, Tom saw that the window AC unit was gone. "It was a good thing you got here in time," Tom told Idogbe.

Idogbe sniffed at the air. "There could be overheated wires in the walls. I'll have to call an electrician."

"Let me look at things first." Tom hoped Idogbe had not looked in the panel box and seen how he had jammed the circuit breaker.

"Okay." Idogbe had gotten to the church just a few minutes before spotting Pastor Tom on Frontage Road.

"Let's go have a cup of that delicious Kenya Volcanic Coffee I found in the apartment."

"I'm glad you like it. I brought you some fresh strawberries from my Mum's farm." Idogbe walked toward his beat-up truck.

When Tom opened the apartment door, he immediately noticed the missing window AC unit. "Where did you move the air

conditioner to?" He yelled across the parking lot

"What air conditioner?" Idogbe yelled back.

"The one that was in that window!" Tom pointed to his left.

Idogbe approached with a container of strawberries and looked inside the apartment. The wide open drawers and tossed-around clothes had an explanation. "It looks like you got ransacked." Idogbe handed the berries to Tom and went over to the church.

Tom discovered that an expensive pair of tennis shoes and his gold cufflinks and tiepins were missing. He was still looking through his suitcase when Idogbe came into the apartment. "All the folding chairs are gone; the sound equipment and the brass church dedication plaque. I called the police!"

Almost an hour later, the old bowlegged constable drove into the parking lot and started talking to Idogbe. While they spoke, Tom went behind the apartment and removed the paint stick from the circuit breaker box. If the AC unit had not been stolen, the overheated wiring almost certainly would have started a fire.

Tom joined up with Idogbe and the constable, who are now inside the church. "I remember you. I had to purchase a permit to hang my flyers."

"That's right. Don't forget the invitations need to come down this week."

"I might have the boys take them down tomorrow. Without chairs and door prizes, there's no reason to have a church service."

"The church dedication plaque is also gone." Idogbe pointed at the front wall.

"Why would they steal that?" Pastor Tom looked at the faded spot on the wall where the plaque was mounted.

"Brass is worth many nairas at the scrap yard." Ayoola jotted the information down. "Is there anything else missing?"

"Yes, a brand new window air conditioner. A flat-screen TV is still in the box. Plus a bunch of door prizes for Sunday service."

"I can take down the numbers off your sales invoices."

"Do you have the receipts?" Ayoola asked.

"Not for the window AC unit or the HDTV. I got those two things at Tin Can Island Port."

"Were those two items bought off the black market?"

From behind the constable, Idogbe motioned with his head from side to side. Tom froze mentally and physically!

"Ah—I don't think so."

"Were the church and apartment locked?" The constable glared directly at Tom over the top of his eyeglasses.

"I think we should list missing stuff, and I can bring it down to the station." Idogbe put his hand on the seasoned detective's shoulder. They started speaking in Hausa and left through the church side door.

Except for the Holy Spirit, Tom was alone. He noted that the thieves had left the rickety old wooden benches. The replica stone tablets of the Ten Commandments were still secure on the front wall.

Chap 4... **Reward Money**

Every afternoon, Jacob was there to meet his big brother. In some mystical way, Jacob was like the school mascot, different yet loved by all. Hand in hand, the two brothers ran at full speed to get home. Ekon tossed his homework on the table and told Fifi they had the rest of a commission to earn. The shortcut was across a couple of fields, down an alley, and through a hole in a fence. They both were breathing hard when Ekon knocked on the apartment door.

"Who is it?" Tom put his hand over the phone and yelled.

"It's me and Jacob. We are here for the rest of our commission!" Ekon put his arm around Jacob, just in case.

"Tina, I got some boys pounding at my door to earn a commission. I'll call you late tonight or tomorrow."

"What time is it where you are at Uncle Tom?"

Tom looked at his watch. "Almost three in the afternoon."

"Like, it's not even six in the morning here." Tina was still in bed when Tom called.

"I know Tina; there's a nine-hour time difference."

"You got boys wanting to see you?" Tina recalled how Tom always told her she could earn a commission as an art class model at college. "How old are the boys?"

"I think the small mute boy is about seven or eight. His older brother is in fourth grade."

"Oh? Call me after work today or tomorrow. But, like, not so early. I will double-check about shipping your motorhome to the Tin Can Island Resort."

"Tina, it's not a resort. It's a huge port for importing and exporting all kinds of goods to and from West Africa."

"Like, sure, Uncle Tom, talk later." Tina put the phone back on her nightstand, and her head sank into a down pillow.

Tom yanked open the apartment door. "I don't need any

more signs put up!"

Jacob cowered behind Ekon. He felt the disdain of the bigger-than-life pale-faced tyrant.

"We put up one hundred and forty posters. You only paid us for one hundred." Ekon said and then held his hand out.

Tom reached into his pocket and then paused. "I'll need all those flyers taken down. I'll pay you three dollars to do that. That should cover what I owe you from yesterday, too."

Ekon was good at math and mentally calculated that they would earn less than a penny each to take down the hundred and forty posters. "Our commission should still be two pennies for each flyer."

Tom pulled out a five-dollar bill from his gold money clip. "Here, this should cover all of it."

Ekon snatched the five-dollar bill. "Are there any folding chairs left for me to stand on?"

"No, they took them all," Tom quipped.

"Okay, we need to go home and get a box." Ekon turned and signed to Jacob.

"Why did you ask if any chairs were left? How do you know that chairs are missing?" Pastor Tom quizzed.

"Last night, when we headed home, the moving men started putting the folding chairs into a big grey truck."

"What are you talking about?" Tom asked.

"We saw them from the field." Ekon pointed down the alley beside the church.

"You saw who?" Tom shifted into interrogation mode.

"Three men and their big gray box truck!"

"Can you describe the men or the truck?"

"The boss man had a lot of gold. Just like your flashy money holder and big watch."

"What do you mean?"

"He had gold chains and gold wristbands. The stuff that people show off with. You know, show that they are important."

"Were they white or black?"

"The leader was like me and Jacob. The other two were like you, and they looked alike."

"Could you describe these men and the truck to the police?"

"Jacob could draw you a picture." Ekon turned around. He signed to Jacob and pulled a small notepad and half a pencil out of his pocket.

Tom watched Jacob draw a square and then pencil in a W on the side of the box. Then, he drew three stick men and circled one to indicate a pendant around a neck.

"Ask your brother if he could work with a sketch artist at the police station."

"What's a sketch artist?"

"He's a person that draws like your brother but on a bigger paper pad." Pastor Tom winked over Ekon's head at Jacob

Ekon signed, but Jacob did not respond. The police were scary for Jacob. He always felt the sirens and vibrations of their horns when they were chasing after people. He did not want to be in trouble.

"Tell your brother I'll give him a five-dollar reward if he helps me find the men that robbed the church."

Ekon yanked his head back around. He looked up and questioned Tom. "Those men were robbers?"

"Yes, they were bad men. They stole some of my stuff, too."

Ekon was an average student for a fourth grader, but being streetwise, he would earn an A plus. "We need to go home and get something to stand on to take down the flyers." Ekon shoved the pad and pencil in his rear pocket and grabbed Jacob by the hand. They were down the alley before Tom could up the reward money.

Tom pulled the laptop from the backpack; it shifted out of standby mode to the last file opened. *That's odd. When did I look at the spreadsheet for Glory and Praise contributors? I remember looking through my past sermons in the bar, but not church member's financial information.*

Tom strained to think of why he'd be looking at donations, social security numbers, and bank information of parishioners back in Texas. The furthest back he could remember was following Tanny through the motel laundry room to behind the motel. They stood between two trucks with the cook and smoked some weed. Then things got fuzzy—

Over an hour passed, and Tom only had a few bullet points typed. He had no mindset to forgive the three robbers—revenge was what he desired. Now that the bag of door prizes was gone, he'd need to double up on the charismatic charm to keep everyone coming back and bringing their friends.

Tanny had talked up her boyfriend Victor Vee of being a great musician. *I wonder if Victor Vee can play gospel rock*

music. Tom folded up the laptop and went over to the church.

Idogbe was patching the wall where the brass dedication plaque had been. Tom approached and asked, "Did the old bowlegged constable take a report?"

"He took the information I gave him. However, without any invoices, I didn't report your new TV or the window air conditioner. Ayoola didn't list the door prizes since they totaled less than eight thousand Naira."

"I'll have to go shopping on Tin Can Island again," Tom said under his breath to himself.

Idogbe made a couple more swipes with the paintbrush on the wall. "Ayoola did list the folding chairs, the PA system, your sports shoes, and brass metal on a report about stolen items."

"Those two boys doing odd jobs for me saw three men loading the chairs in a truck. The constable might want to talk to them."

"Probably not... In this slice of Lagos, people don't offer up much. It could bring on unwanted trouble." Idogbe dipped the paintbrush for more paint.

"The youngest boy drew a picture of a box truck with a big W on the side. He's the one the police need to talk to."

Idogbe did not respond. He placed the paintbrush into the paint bucket and then balled up the plastic tarp.

Tom looked over the patch area; the paint did not match. He started to say something but held back. *I'll hang a portrait of myself over the patch job. Maybe wear a Kenta cloth over a white suit. That should help me fit in with the locals.*

Idogbe was the handyman for the Glory and Praise headquarters based out of Los Angeles. Every white pastor he worked for made it a mission to educate Africans on the American way. They all burned out in less than two years. *Pastor Tom will be lucky to make it a year.*

It was dusk when Tom heard a light knock on the door. He saved the 'Thou shalt not steal' sermon he was working on. Jacob held out a garbage bag full of taken-down flyers at the door. "Here, we got them all. We need to get home. I have school tomorrow."

"What about your brother? Doesn't he have school?"

"Jacob, don't go to school. He can't hear good enough."

"So that is why Jacob draws on the paper pad you keep in your pocket?"

"Yes, and we also have our hand signals to talk."

"Would Jacob like to come by here tomorrow? He can draw pictures of the men in the truck who took the folding chairs. I'm going to offer a big, big reward."

"How much of a big reward?"

"I'm going to give ten thousand nairas to anyone who helps me convict those robbers who stole my stuff."

"That is a big reward." Ekon was pennywise when it came to money. "That would be about twenty-five American dollars."

"That's what I calculate. I watched your brother draw the truck with the W on the side. If his information helps to get these robbers in jail, I will give Jacob ten thousand naira or twenty-five dollars, whichever he would like."

Somewhat reading Pastor Tom's lips, Jacob stepped out from behind Ekon. He understood the words ten thousand naira. Jacob pulled on Ekon's arm and then moved his head up and down in the affirmative motion.

"It's past supper, and we need to get home. Our mum will be afraid something happened." Ekon dropped the garbage bag of **Open House** flyers and then grabbed Jacob by his hand. They ran down the alley and around the rear corner of the church.

Back home and out of breath, Ekon told Fifi about the 10,000 naira reward. She was cautiously concerned. At the church open house, she had scrutinized Tom. He looked and sounded like a satisfactory white preacher from America. Twenty-five dollars would be a nice bump to the family's budget. Nevertheless, turning in three neighborhood thugs would be asking for too much trouble. She was okay with the boys doing odd jobs around the church — but was definitely against her boys getting involved in police matters.

* * *

It rained all night. The field where Jacob often kicked his soccer ball while other kids were in school was muddy. Jacob crawled through the hole in the fence and kicked the ball up the alley alongside the church. He kicked the ball against the concrete church steps and counted each return. Tom came out of the apartment at the kick count of more than fifty. A young

child playing by himself troubled the pastor.

Tom motioned for Jacob to kick the ball to him. They kicked the ball back and forth for about ten minutes; trust was starting to build. Tom rarely got involved with the children back home at his church in Texas. He had a staff of Sunday school teachers who took care of them.

Since Beth had yet to conceive a child, they both focused on their careers and followed different faith journeys. Beth was a firm Catholic and abided by the (IVF) In-Vetro-Fertilization canon. Over the years, Tom argued that they should see a fertility doctor. He cited the ever-changing Catholic dogma, such as cremation, infant baptism, and evolution, as recent examples of progressive change.

By Tom's design, he was earning Jacob's trust and invited him inside. Tom sat in one of the chairs and pulled Jacob onto his leg. He drew a stick man, a second stick man, and a third. He shaded in one of the faces. Jacob watched intently. After Tom had drawn a square with a **W** inside, he drew two circles under that square for wheels. He then handed the pencil to Jacob and placed a clean piece of paper. Jacob knew what Pastor Tom wanted. He mimicked the three stick men and shaded in one of the three faces. He then drew a box and put a **V** and a second **V** inside. Tom pointed at the drawing and carefully mouthed, "Are you sure two men were white, like me?"

Jacob hopped off Pastor Tom's lap and nodded his head up and down. Then he crawled up onto the other chair and knelt to lean across the green table. Tom put a dollar on the table and loudly mouthed, "Draw more."

Jacob started on a new piece of paper; he added a circle around the neck of the shaded stickman, then a goatee and flattop. After about twenty minutes, two more dollars lay on the table. Tom was now sure two of the robbers were white and that they might be twins or at least brothers.

Tom had already claimed the stolen property from the church insurance company back home. Stealing from a church needed Old Testament repercussion! 'Eye for an eye' was a good message to send out. The New Testament 'turn the other cheek' decree did not feel warranted for this neighborhood.

The hard knock on the door was loud enough that even Jacob felt it. A pregnant woman in sweats and running shoes

stuck her head inside. "What's my son doing in your flat?"

Tom opened the door all the way. "Jacob is drawing stuff for me. I want to hire your boys to hang more posters for me. I always pay them a commission."

Fifi stepped through the door and did a quick scan of the apartment. The bed in the far corner was neat and made. On the counter, the red indicator on the coffee pot was lit. Steam was coming off a cup of coffee close to the edge of the green table. A large pad of drawing paper lay in front of Jacob. A Mum's intuition told her things were in order. "Jacob knows he's not to come this far from home unless he is with his brother."

Jacob looked at Fifi and then let his head slump. He knew he was in trouble. He grabbed the three dollars off the table, slid off the chair, rushed over, and put the three dollars into Fifi's hand.

"What is this for?" She looked up at Pastor Tom.

"I'm paying Jacob to help draw a new flyer. He's a good artist."

"Yes, he is." Fifi tucked the money into her bra. "Are you changing your flyer to allow children at church?"

"Ah, maybe—" Tom haphazardly answered.

"We need to get home. Lunch is ready." Fifi still had mixed feelings about Pastor Tom. He seemed to like children—and paid them to do odd jobs.

For the next hour, Tom used the old way of cut and paste using scissors and tape. He made two large **V**'s with black tape inside the box truck to make a big **W**. With a thick red marker, he added **25,000 Naira Reward** across the bottom.

On the way to the printing shop, his cell phone vibrated. "Hello!"

"Uncle Tom, what time is it there? I talked to the big boss in China. I think it was nighttime over there."

"Tina, it's almost noon here in Lagos."

"Mr. Kenny Chen said okay to shipping your motorhome. He wants me to ride along to ensure it gets there."

"What do you mean ride along?" Tom stopped and stepped back from the curb; the noon traffic was full-on blaring.

"Ride along, you know, like a working vacation."

"Won't they be shipping the motorhome on a container ship?"

"Geez, Uncle Tom. I don't know all the details. Like, I

thought you would be excited to hear the news and to see me.”

“I am Tina! But— I’m having second thoughts about my church over here. I don’t want to spend thousands of dollars to ship my motorhome and then have to ship it back to Texas.”

“Mr. Chen said he would ship it for free. He’s paying me my salary plus giving me vacation money. I have a number to call so you can get everything set up.”

“Oh, that sounds like a great deal. Plus, it would be fun to see you,” Tom replied with an upbeat voice. “Maybe Beth could come over with you?”

“There won’t be room for Aunt Beth to come with us.”

Tom sensed the reluctance. Beth and Tina never did get along. “Okay, text me the number, and I’ll call your contact tomorrow during normal business hours. It’s the middle of the morning in China.”

“Wow, Uncle Tom, you are so smart about the time zone and stuff like that. I can’t wait to see you.”

Tom knew the minimum time a container ship could get from Texas to the Port of Nigeria was at least three weeks. “I’ll get back to you after I talk to Mr Chen.”

On the way back from the print shop, Tom thought about hanging wanted posters but would need a permit first. In addition, Ekon and Jacob could earn money after school or on the weekend. Tom stopped at a Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet and ordered takeout.

After eating good old fast food and getting greasy fingerprints on the stack of new flyers, Tom called home.

“Is everything okay?” Beth asked groggily.

“Yeah, everything is okay.” Tom swatted at flies, landing on chicken bones. “Sorry to call so late, but Mr. Kenny Chen will call you to arrange to pick up the motorhome.”

“So what do I need to do?” Beth scooted to the edge of the king bed and then put her feet on the floor. “I made the insurance payment on it last week.”

“Good, that’s what I wanted to know. I might have you park the motorhome in the Catholic Church or a Kmart parking lot. That way, nobody has to come by the house and know where we live.”

“Ah, okay—” Beth was slowly waking up. She was used to Tom getting good deals— But why park it at her church? Why not his old church?

"Do you know where the vehicle registration is?"

"It should be in the safe."

"When you find it, also get my gun and some ammunition. I want you to hide those things in the motorhome."

"Hide where?" Beth was still waking up.

"Hide the gun and ammunition in the bench seat under the fold-down table. You might need a screwdriver to pry the side panel off the magnets."

"Tom, are you in trouble? I thought you told me guns are illegal in Nigeria?"

"Not when you are traveling in an RV," Tom lied.

"I thought you just wanted to park our motorhome on the side of the church to sleep in for the air conditioner?"

"The church insurance company is installing a new air conditioner in the apartment."

"Insurance! What happened?" Beth was now fully awake and sensed something was off, which was not unusual for Tom.

"Someone stole the window AC unit I just bought. I'll explain it to you later. How is your friend David doing?" Tom tried to change the subject.

"He's on hospice care now. His son Danny and daughter Ann flew down here on a private jet. It was good for them to be here when Fr. Murphy administered Last Rites." Beth paused to gather her composure. "Deacon David is preparing to be called home. He's ready."

"Private jet! Who paid for that?"

"I've told you before that his son Dan is an expert data security consultant with clients worldwide. He even offered to fly me to Nigeria on one of his business trips."

"You should take him up on it. I miss sleeping with you."

"I miss you too, Tom."

They talked about reducing the price of their home. Tom was okay with Beth having an estate sale. The only thing he did not want to get sold was his vintage red 1967 Chevy Corvette L88. Beth had sentimental feelings for this car, too. It was the car Tom drove on their first date—the car they took on their honeymoon to Mt. Rushmore and then up to Yellowstone Park.

* * *

The growing morning traffic and increasing city noise woke Tom before dawn. He made a pot of coffee and then tried the number Tina had given him. The prerecorded message stated, "Your phone cannot call this area code." Tom tried the number again and got the same message. It was a couple of hours before the electronic market and other gadget stores would open. Tom poured himself a cup of coffee and sat down at his computer. Only four words made it from Tom's fingers onto the screen, 'Tooth for a tooth.'

The clerk that sold Tom his first cell phone went into the backroom to alter a burner phone that could call almost anywhere. Tom had a burner phone in Texas to arrange special hunting trips, scalp tickets, or call his bookmaker. After about twenty minutes, the clerk returned and set the jacked phone on the glass display case. "You know that the phone number you want to call is in Zhongnanhai, China?"

"What is so bad about Zhong-nan-hai?" Tom carefully repeated to enunciate the city name correctly.

"It is where the headquarters of the CCP operates from."

"CCP, what is that? Is it like AT&T?" Tom asked.

"CCP is for the Chinese Communist Party." The clerk looked around and then wrote a URL down on the back of a scrap of paper. "Look at this AI website on the dark web. Search out the number that you gave me," the storeowner whispered.

Tom looked around. He noticed there were security cameras in every corner of the small shop. A cold chill ran up his back! "Okay, what do I owe you?"

"One hundred and fifty thousand Naira, and there is no bill of sale or warranty." The clerk walked to the far corner of the display case out of view of the security cameras.

Tom peeled off five twenties. "That should cover it."

He walked from the Electronic Market to the Holiday Inn. It would be weeks, but he wanted to check on reserving a room for Tina. It was already ninety degrees with seventy-five percent humidity. "How can I help?" The desk clerk's throat knotted when he looked up. Phillip wore the blue and green tennis shoes he'd stolen from the apartment. If he walked away from the counter, Tom would surely notice them.

"I need to check on renting a room for my niece."

"When will your niece be in Lagos?" The Brit readied his fingers on a keyboard. "How long will the lass be staying?"

"Tina should be here next month. She probably won't be here more than a week." Tom chicken-winged, trying to dry out his sweaty armpits.

"Let me check." The clerk looked at reservations thirty days out and casually mentioned, "That one-room flat next to your church is not big enough for two people."

"How do you know about the apartment?" Tom quipped.

"Oh, a... I heard that from Tanny, our hostess, in the bar."

"How do you know I'm that pastor?" Tom was suspicious.

"All your information is right here in our reservation system. From the other night when you stayed here."

"Did I fill out a reservation card? I want to see my signature on the card!" Tom demanded.

Victor Vee had been listening in and watching via the security camera mounted above the front desk. He pushed the line button for the front desk phone.

"Excuse me. I got to get this." Phillip picked up the phone.

"Tell Pastor Tom I filled out the reservation and told you about the apartment."

Phillip put the desk phone on hold. "I'm sorry about that. You asked me about what?"

"I asked how you know about the small apartment next to the church."

"Oh? That's right, mate. Victor Vee filled out the reservation card. That's when he told me about the apartment. He's a friend of Tanny."

Tom looked over his shoulder across the lobby at the entrance to the Relaxation Lounge. "Is Tanny working?"

"I think she just came on shift. Why don't you go check?"

"I'm going to do that right now." Tom pushed off from the front desk and headed toward the lounge.

An opening deadbolt sound came from the hallway where the restrooms, video security room, business office, and ATM were. From the end of the hallway, Victor Vee motioned Phillip to come over. He immediately noticed Phillip was wearing the stolen green and blue sports shoes. "I told you to throw those away. I'm not going to warn you again!"

"Mate, these are at least two hundred Euros in the UK. How about I sell them or send them home to some poor lad?"

Victor Vee was not the person to disobey. He pulled a custom Rungu baton from a deep pocket specifically sewn into

his baggy pants and snapped the ball-head end across Phillip's forearm. Phillip grabbed his lower arm and gritted his teeth; it took all his strength not to scream!

Maasai warriors use the hand-carved ebony as a throwing stick or a club. Victor used the Rungu to break up bar fights. A rap to the back of the neck could drop the biggest and meanest drunk. Rubbing his bruised and swelling forearm, Phillip hobbled back behind the counter. He kicked off the designer tennis shoes.

Victor Vee slipped the Rungu baton back into the slot pocket on his baggy pants. He meandered into the lounge and approached Pastor Tom from behind. "I hear you're looking for me?"

Pastor Tom turned away from Tanny. "I'm wondering how Tanny knew about my small apartment?"

"I was the one that took Tanny by your church the day you had the open house. I waited outside. I looked through the window with the air-conditioner. Why?"

"Because my church got robbed, I'm doing some investigative work myself. The police aren't much help."

"Are you accusing me because I'm a black man?"

Tom was now on systemic racist defense. "No, not at all. I have two witnesses that say it was white men, possible brothers, that robbed the church." Tom left out anything about a black suspect with a goatee and flattop.

The words 'two witnesses' put Victor Vee on alert. "Have your witnesses been to the police?"

"Not yet. The boys will be hanging wanted posters around the neighborhood tonight. I'm offering a reward."

"So your witnesses haven't been to the police?"

"No. I reported it to this old bowlegged constable. He came out and took the information but didn't do much."

"Just take the loss. Putting up posters could be dangerous for you and the witnesses. Locals in this part of Lagos, don't snitch on each other."

"Yeah, you're probably right. I've already filed a claim with the insurance company, and they're replacing all the stolen items with better stuff."

"That's cool. Like, you must have good insurance?"

"The insurance coverage comes out of our head office in Los Angeles. The agent is an old college friend."

"Los Angeles! That's where I need to go to cut a recording. Your college friend know anyone in the music business?"

Tanny returned with two Star Lagers. Tom and Victor took up tall bar stools. They hit it off. Tom was a skilled orator from the pulpit. Victor Vee was talented on stage with his Juju-style rap and hip-hop music.

Victor insisted Tom try some authentic West African food. He called a local street cart vendor and placed an order. The food arrived in grease-stained brown paper bags and two white Styrofoam quart-size cups. The goat meat pepper soup was more like a stew and delicious. The yams were so tender that they broke apart with the plastic utensils. The bush meat jerky was spicy and hot and required more beer.

When Tanny brought back two more Star Lagers, she whispered to Tom, "You might be eating monkey or rat jerky." Tom's stomach knotted, and he felt ill.

Tom excused himself and hurried out of the lounge across the lobby toward the bathrooms. *Monkey or rat jerky, that's as bad as the rednecks back home who make sausage from wild feral hogs. I could get mad cow disease*—Tom forced himself to puke.

Ten minutes later, he emerged from the hallway with water splashed all over his face. He peered into the lounge. Victor Vee was gone. Back at the front desk, he noticed something odd. "What the heck did you do to your arm?" Tom pointed at a bulging purple welt running across Phillip's forearm.

"Oh, a filing cabinet tipped and smashed my arm."

"You might want to get an x-ray. That looks serious."

"I'll be fine, old chap. Thanks for your concern. I worked up some room prices for your niece. I'll go get the paperwork."

When Phillip moved away from the chest-high reservation counter, Tom noticed he was barefoot. Phillip returned and handed Tom a printout of room prices with dates. "Tourists from the UK come here when it gets cold up home. You're getting off-season rates plus a discount because you are in our reservation system."

"Thanks," Tom stuffed the price sheet into his pocket and left. *A filing cabinet tips over, and the guy isn't wearing shoes. I don't recall if I had air conditioning on the day of the church open house. Things don't add up.*

Tom spotted a van in the church parking lot a few blocks

down Frontage Road. He could read Lagos AC and Electrical off the side as he got closer.

Idogbe was moving new stackable chairs from his rusty old truck into the church, which were better quality than the old folding chairs. Idogbe returned for another stack. "Looks like being robbed was a good thing for you."

"Yeah, I guess so," Tom replied, scratching his head.

"Looks like you are getting a high-efficiency air conditioner too." Idogbe motioned with his arm toward the technician, cutting a hole in the apartment's wall.

"I didn't expect the stuff to get replaced so quickly."

"Nigeria has high unemployment. People will often start work the same day they get hired. Just like those young boys who came by looking for you. Cash in hand means a lot in most of Nigeria."

"The brothers have been by already?" Tom quizzed.

Idogbe shoved a dolly under a stack of chairs. "Yes, about thirty minutes ago. They said they'd be back."

Tom moved on to the AC installer. "I'm the new Pastor. Are you going to install a separate circuit for the air conditioner?"

"Yes, Sir. I told your insurance man that the AC unit needed a separate circuit or a fire could occur. I didn't tell him about the wood jammed against the circuit breaker."

"Oh wow... That sounds dangerous."

"It was! I'm running a separate branch circuit tomorrow."

"Great, so I'll plan to have air-conditioning tomorrow night."

"You should if all goes as planned."

Tom went inside to call Tina but had to leave a voicemail. "Tina, I won't need my motorhome shipped to Tin Can Harbor. Call back when you get a chance."

At the small table, Tom focused. *Putting things into God's hands might be something I can preach about. Things are working out for the best. The church got new padded chairs and an upgraded PA system. I might upgrade the 32-inch HDTV to something more significant; it could hide the patch job on the front wall. Maybe Victor Vee can hook me up with his band. Music always draws in a crowd. Coffee and donuts, along with door prizes, are always—*

Tom's brain was burst-firing ideas. He sat at the laptop and started typing. A couple of hundred words got pounded on the keyboard before a knock on the door. "Who is it?" Tom yelled.

"It's Idogbe, I'm done for the day. The home office wants me to call them about a new church dedication plaque."

Tom stood up, took three steps, and then pulled open the door. "What does the home office want you to do?"

"They suggest using something different than brass. Something that's not so tempting to steal for scrap metal."

"Okay, I'll get in touch with headquarters. I'm considering having a portrait painted with a Kente Cloth around my neck or hanging a large monitor over that patch job."

"You do know that the origin of the Kente can be traced back to Ghana, not Nigeria. Its oral history is that royalty and African slave traders wore the colorful weaved cloth like a toga."

"Oh? I might have to ditch that idea."

Ekon and Jacob ran up the alley with a plastic crate and the red bucket. They fidgeted patiently behind Idogbe.

"Whatever." Idogbe turned, rubbed Jacob's full head of hair, and walked toward his truck. *That idiot preacher won't make it three months.*

Tom gave the boys the stapler, a roll of blue tape, and a handful of **Wanted Posters**. Ekon agreed to the commission of two cents a flyer; Jacob affirmed by nodding. Then ran toward Frontage Road with a bucket and box in hand. Then, the AC installer came around the rear corner of the apartment. "I'll be back in the morning to finish."

"Sounds good. So, I'll have air-conditioning tomorrow by this time, with a separate circuit?"

"That's the plan." The technician loaded his tools into his van and waved. *This micromanager won't make it six months.*

A couple of hours later, Tom had over a thousand words typed. A thunderous pounding on the apartment door halted Sunday's discourse. Tom jumped up, rushed over, and yanked open the door.

"Mr. Tomas Seton, there's been a serious accident! One of the boys you hired to hang unsanctioned wanted posters is in the emergency room. You need to come with me now!" ordered the precinct deputy while reaching for handcuffs.

Chap 5... **Broken Arm...**

The emergency ward was packed. Ekon, Jacob, and Fifi sat 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 and frightened by all the emergency room commotion. A lumbering white preacher in handcuffs, followed by a local deputy, added to the chaotic scene. Jacob slid out from his sandwiched protection zone and hugged Pastor Tom's leg. Constable Ayoola casually approached the Pastor and, without much to do, undid the handcuffs behind Tom's back.

Tom rubbed Jacob's head while asking, "What happened?"

"I fell off the bucket putting up flyers. It's all my fault." Ekon owned up immediately.

"More church flyers?" Bowlegged Ayoola Ashiru proclaimed as he pulled a notepad from his pocket.

"No, the boys were putting up posters about the three men who robbed my church. Important information that you don't care about!"

"You didn't get my permission to hang wanted posters!" Ayoola jotted on his notepad. "I told you my men will look into the church robbery."

"Number one, one, eight," blasted over the loudspeaker. The red display over the reception window changed to **118**.

"What number are you?" Tom asked Fifi.

"We are number one, two, five." Fifi filled in the accident report as best she could, but she was not sure about the

mishap, according to Ekon's explanation.

"You hired the Onukwulu brothers. So you are responsible for the hospital bill." Constable Ayoola forcibly implied.

Tom reached into his back pocket and opened his wallet. He handed an insurance card to Fifi. "Put down this information. I'll need copies of the hospital bill to send to my insurance agent."

Fifi sighed in relief. She had put the accident and all the aftermath into God's hands. Yet, she still had mixed feelings about Pastor Tom. He did hire her boys at that first open house to mop and clean the church. The commission jobs taught Ekon and Jacob the harder they worked, the more they could earn.

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

As bowlegged Ayoola exited through the ER sliding glass doors, a teenage motorcycle accident victim got pushed in. This boy had been using a dried-out pumpkin shell for a helmet. Many dirt-poor riders skated around the recent helmet law with inferior safety equipment—this child paid with a crushed skull. The ER resembled a warzone triage site with an endless flow of wounded and departed.

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

"No, thank you," Fifi turned Jacob's head so he could not see the motorcycle rider wheeled through the lobby directly to the morgue.

Tom exited the sliding glass doors and took a deep breath. The sun was down, along with the temperature. He walked by a couple of convenience stores before he found one that sold Kenya AA coffee. The only thing Tom liked about Africa was that they served coffee the old-fashioned way—strong and hot. There was none of the steamed almond milk, skinny light with nutmeg jargon as in the US. "I'll have two coffees," Tom told the cashier and headed toward the soda and snacks aisles.

The display counter had advanced to **120** when Tom returned through the emergency room doors. "I got you a coffee anyway. Looks like you might be here awhile."

"Thank you." Fifi took the hot cup of coffee from Tom.

Tom handed a brown paper bag to Jacob. Delight appeared on both brothers' faces when they dug out the plastic bottles of

orange soda—two bags of chips, four candy bars, and individually plastic-wrapped pastries. Fifi wanted to frown at Tom—but didn't.

Ninety minutes later, Ekon got wheeled back for an x-ray. Half an hour after that, a doctor came out to the lobby. He said that it was a clean break. The fracture was more consistent with Ekon being hit with a stick or bat, not a break from falling off a bucket. He wanted to hear Jacob's account of the accident. When Fifi told the doctor Jacob was mute, he made a note across the top of the x-ray and went back to cast Ekon's forearm. It was after midnight before they all left the emergency room.

* * *

Tom stood at the gate and pondered, putting up a big **GET SAVED** banner across the front of the church. The boys were out of commission jobs since Ayoola had ended hanging more wanted posters. He needed something to draw a crowd. Tom's, nobody is perfect, everyone is a sinner discourse always sets the hook. Half asleep, Tom wandered to his go-to street vendor for deep-fried akara, pap, and Kenya coffee. The bean fritter became his favorite breakfast food, especially with garlic dipping sauce.

This morning, the baker suggested that Tom dip an akara in honey. It soothed Tom's stomach and brain like comfort food does. *I will have free coffee and donuts like they do at Beth's church. It drags those Catholics in.* Tom had a few more honey-dipped akara and then headed back.

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

Tom walked across the parking lot. "One of those boys helping with odd jobs broke his arm last night."

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

"Ekon, the older one, fell off a bucket while putting up wanted posters."

"Wanted posters? I thought we talked about letting the robbery go. You are the one that left the church and apartment

unlocked.”

“I thought about it. However, as the new preacher in town, I need to exemplify what is right and wrong with people. Plus, I can’t let those evil doers slide.”

“You mean like having the insurance company replace a TV and air conditioner TV you purchased off the black market.”

“That’s different.” Tom didn’t like getting called out,

“How’s it different? That TV and window AC you bought off Tin Can Island was stolen merchandise off ships.”

“That’s not what someone led me to believe. The keke driver said it was where everyone gets a good deal.”

“Did you ask him if the stuff was stolen?” Idogbe put his toolbox back in the bed of the rusty truck. “I’m going to head up to my mum’s early. There’s a new crop of strawberries that need to get picked.”

“What about the incorrect Ten Commandments? Are you going to remove them?”

“Not this week. You might give Paul a call. He’s the one that put them up in the first place.”

“Paul, that ex-military guy who hauls supplies up north to the girls’ outreach school.”

“Yep, the guy with the knife scar through his hand.” Idogbe returned to his pickup and headed for Plateau State—a long, grueling drive into Central Nigeria.

Removing the Catholic version of the Ten Commandments was not that important on Tom’s list. Nor was schooling Idogbe on the evils of insurance monopolies in the US.

Tom did an about-face and returned to the street vendor for a refill of Kenya coffee. The vendor mentioned something to Tom about ‘African Puff Puffs’ and told Tom to come back in the morning.

About halfway back, Tom’s burner phone vibrated. The street noise was so loud he could not hear the ringtone. “Tom here! Who’s this?”

“Kenny Chen, returning your call.”

Tom pressed the phone against his ear and put his hand over his other ear. “Mr. Chen, I can hardly hear you! I’m walking back to my church. Can I call you back?”

“Yes, call me back. Call me back soon. We need shipping instructions before the weekend.”

“I left you a message! I don’t need anything shipped,” Tom

yelled above the street noise.

"Too late! Must ship or Ms. Tina in trouble," Mr. Chen yelled back and ended the call from Zhongnanhai, China.

Tom noted that the HVAC installer was now working inside the apartment. He entered the church, sat on one of the new stackable chairs, and hit redial. "Mr. Chen, I'm inside a building. We can talk now."

"Okay, I can hear better, Mr. Tomas Seton. Please deliver the motorhome to terminal five at Port of Houston, Texas. Must be delivered there by next Friday."

"Mr. Chen, I left you a message that I don't need to ship it now. Please take my name off your manifest."

"You can't cancel. We rerouted a container ship out of New York. It will be at the Port of Houston in nine days."

"Don't give me that crap. No way you would reroute a super-sized ship to pick up a motorhome."

"The Kong Fang is a small, one-hundred-sixty meter ship. We make special conditions for your niece to travel. We pick her and motorhome up at Texas port next week."

Tom was sure that he was being lied to. "Listen to me, Mr. Chen! Cancel the shipping order and take my name off your manifest."

"No worry, your name not on the manifest. We take care of all that for Ms. Tina Williams."

"Listen up! I'm calling my niece to let her know the trip is off!" Tom ended the call.

Aggravated, Tom looked at the cross on the front wall. *God, you don't know how much I miss Texas. I did not deserve to be exiled to Nigeria. All this is because of one embellished war story. Your wrath is too harsh.* Tom continued to reflect and discern while challenging and taking God's name in vain.

Finally, Tom stood up, walked to the front, and stepped up on the stage to examine the two Decalogue plaques. *These tablets must be glued to the wall. If Idogbe can't get them off, I'll try. No way do I want to call that military, biker-looking guy. If Paul hung them, he's probably one of those Rad-Trad Catholics. Dealing with Beth's extended family is bad enough. Practically disowning her because we did not have a Holy Matrimony service was ridiculous.*

A second phone vibrated in a different pocket. "Hello."

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

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

"But, then, I won't get to go on a Caribbean cruise, and I won't get to see you."

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

"No, that's not true! Mr. Chen said they have a special room for elite guests like me." Tina loved the word 'elite'. To her, it was a status expression equal to 'movie star' or 'rockstar.'

"Tina, we'll discuss this later. I need to talk to the air-conditioner tech. He's finishing up."

By evening, the apartment was comfortable. Surprisingly, the new circuit breaker tripped sometime after midnight, and the air conditioner quit.

Tom swore in a mid-morning rant, "Damn it, God, can't you cut me a break!" Before any other words flowed from Tom's mouth on this new day, he'd already broken the third commandment.

Groggy, sweating, and barefoot, Tom cut off another piece of the paint stick and used duct tape to keep the new breaker from tripping. *God, I could use some help here.*

Back inside, sprawled out on the bed, under the blasting stream of dry, cool air. Tom rethought his conversation with Mr. Chen. *Maybe I should have the motorhome shipped over here? Having a backup place to get a good night's sleep would be good. Plus, it's not going to cost me anything.*

The room cooled off, and Tom slept hard until the message alert on his phone woke him. It took a while to focus on the text message.

Uncle Tom, I'm in big trouble! Plez don't break the shipping deal. It will be fun to see you. We could hit the beach and hot spots. I bought a new swimsuit to wear on the beach. What do you think? Hugs and kisses, Tina

Tom clicked on the attached JPG file, and slowly, a photo of Tina came through. The selfie of Tina in a red G-string and skimpy top exposed more of her than it covered. Tom was never keen on the fact that his brother and sister-in-law had

given Tina breast augmentation as a high school graduation gift. Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD) was something Tom didn't have a clue about—as do most men.

Tom examined the digital download for the longest time. Tina was one of those stunning human elements that most men yearned to covet that most women envied.

In middle school, Tina learned to play the queen of hearts card. By high school, she nominated herself to be the captain of the cheering squad—no one dared go against her. When the lead role in the annual school play was up for an audition, Tina convinced the drama teacher to privately coach her through the rope ladder scene in *Romeo and Juliet*. Tina got cast as Juliet.

Tom forwarded the risqué photo to his burner phone and then texted Tina.

**Okay, young lady. Let your boss know
I'm okay shipping the motorhome to Tin Can
Harbor. Keep me in the loop. It will be fun
seeing you, Tom.**

The AC unit kept running. Tom fell back to sleep and had a lucid dream. Like most men, he often had lust in his heart but had never taken it any further. *That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already*—now jammed up Tom's vivid dream. He sprang from the bed and then headed out on a brisk walk. Hot coffee usually pushes out dreams and desires to the reality of a new day.

"Try this, Mr. Preacher man. I sweetened the akara up."

Tom took the sizzling hot akara. "Did you sweeten it like I suggested?"

"Yes, sir! I added honey to the batter."

Tom popped the hot akara into his mouth. "Ouch!" he yelled, carefully chewed and then swallowed. "That's good. It's almost as good as Texas-sweetened cornbread."

"That's what I'm calling it. Texas-style akara." The vendor boosted with Nigerian street pride.

"I got an offer for you. Cook up five dozen of this sweetened akara and bring five dozen regular with your garlic pap sauce to my Sunday church service. I'll advertise the hell out of these for you."

The street vendor was busy with another customer but

heard the offer. He was a streetwise negotiator. "How much do you pay for the ten dozen? I'll throw in the pap for free."

"I'm offering you free advertising. It would be a quid-pro-quo deal."

"We do Tit-for-tat in Lagos." The Nigerian vendor started helping another customer. "I'll supply hot coffee, too. I'll have to buy a food serving permit from Ayoola."

Tom had not even thought about a food handling permit. He had already paid a fee to hang his flyers. The less he had to deal with the bow-legged constable, the better. "Okay, make me an offer."

The vendor refilled Tom's cup of AA Kenya blend coffee. "Do you want me to supply a server?"

"Yeah, I guess so." Tom was getting frustrated. Quid-pro-quo was not going his way.

"How about I supply the sweetened akara plus regular akara with pap, coffee, and a food handler? I'll pay all the fees."

"Okay, for how much?"

"I'll do it all for one hundred and fifty thousand Naira."

"That's too much! A hundred thousand."

"Deal." They shook hands.

Through the gate, Tom spotted four people sitting on the church stairs. The white forearm cast was a dead giveaway. Jacob spotted the Pastor first and pulled on his dad's arm. The family stood up and zoomed in on Tom. Jude towered over his family. His deep black complexion contrasted with his missing front tooth when he smiled.

When Tom opened the gate, Jacob ran to him and wrapped his arms around Tom's left leg. Steadfast on the church steps, Ekon lifted his arm to show off his cast. He stood firm at his Dad's side. The lie he was holding inside hurt more than what the Rungu stick across his forearm had.

"Are you here for me to sign your cast?" Pastor Tom asked, confusing the Onukwulu family.

"We brought by the medical records and bill for your insurance company." Jude held out a large brown envelope, hopeful there would not be a problem with the hospital bills.

Pastor Tom took the brown envelope. "Thanks. I'll get these sent off to the insurance company's main office."

"Thank you, Sir. We don't have insurance."

"Not a problem," Tom replied in a reassuring tone. "Ekon was working for me; technically, he was on the church payroll."

"Thank you, Mr. Pastor. I worried about this all night. We have a new one to save money for." Fifi sighed a tranquil breath as she rubbed circles over the baby bump.

"Don't take any less than ten thousand for pain and suffering. You need to watch out for insurance companies. They'll shoot a low-ball offer right off the bat."

"Low-ball offer, off the bat, what do you mean?" Now, Jude rubbed his hand on Fifi's pouched belly.

"Are you saying Ekon should get ten thousand Naira for pain?" Fifi asked.

"Yes, and for suffering too. Ekon will miss out on soccer and doing work for me. You should put some money in the bank in case of any future problem with his arm."

"The emergency room doctor said it was a clean break, and Ekon will only have the cast for five weeks. Ten thousand Naira won't be necessary. We are thankful for your insurance. You are a good man, Mr. Tom Seton."

"I didn't say ask for ten thousand Naira. I'm talking ten thousand in US dollars."

All six foot-five of Mr. Onukwulu froze—ten thousand US dollars converted to millions of Naira—a lot of money for this middle-class neighborhood.

Fifi felt the baby kick. "Mr. Tom, we will wait until the doctor says it is okay for Ekon to play sports again. If he can't, then we can make an insurance offer."

"I respect your pride and all..."

Jude interrupted. "My wife is correct. We'll be okay."

"Listen, you two. I'm a good negotiator. Let me deal with the insurance people. A good personal injury lawyer is going to charge thirty or forty percent. I'll make it right for the Onukwulu family."

Make it right, rang inside Ekon's head. He had lied about how his arm got broken. His entire family was now caught up in getting sham money. At least Jacob could not hear the conversation. He knew the whole story—Ekon didn't fall off a bucket.

* * *

The banner over the church doors read: **Free Texas-style Akara and door prizes.** It could have been the three musicians playing hip-hop music on the front steps. Whatever, the turnout was more than Pastor Tom had expected. Behind the podium, Tom's finger tapped the new microphone. The benches and half the new stackable chairs were filled. The sound of children playing outside was coming in through the open side windows.

Tom cleared his throat. "I'm pleased to see all of you here this morning. Unfortunately, after the church got robbed, the two main door prizes, a window air conditioner and a new HDTV, were stolen. But I have key chains and water bottles from Glory and Praise headquarters."

"Hardly anybody in this neighborhood owns a car. Keep your key chains," yelled out a voice in the crowd. "We are not rice bag Christians!"

"Okay, at least take a water bottle," Tom replied.

"I hope they didn't steal your recipe for Texas-style akara. It smells like honey-sweetened acarajé," someone else jeered.

Tom never had a congregation yell out more than an occasional amen, alleluia, or praise Jesus.

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

"Did you know Jesus told fiction? Many of His stories were parables. He used them to get true-to-life situations across."

"Maybe there were no big door prizes? Maybe you are telling a parable." The crowd laughed.

"You are sitting on the evidence. Those are brand-new replacement chairs. And look behind me!" Tom motioned back over his shoulder where Idogbe had patched the wall. "A gold dedication plaque was stolen right off of that wall."

"That plaque wasn't gold; it was brass. I've been coming to Glory and Praise church since the day it was dedicated."

"My mistake! I thought it was at least gold-plated." Tom's face turned red-hot.

All six foot-five of Jude Onukwulu stood up from the first row and faced the crowd. "Let the man talk! He paid the hospital bill for my son's broken arm."

Tom pointed at the Decalogue tablets. "I wish the thieves could have pried those off." Tom walked toward the plaster tablets adhered firmly to the front wall. "These are not even the correct Ten Commandments!"

The bold conviction with certainty in Tom's voice ushered in the fear of God and quieted the crowd. The laughter of children playing outside hushed in through the open windows. Skilled apologists know they only have a moment to draw in the congregation. Authority of voice was vital. Proselytizing was illegal in many African countries; Tom was not sure about Nigeria. He didn't care—it was his way to convert.

He returned to the podium, grabbed a KJV Bible, and held it overhead. "Any man amongst us that has not broken one of the commandments, please come forward and take my place!" With his other hand, he pointed and scanned the congregants. Intimidation, fear, and confusing quotes were fundamental mechanisms of proselytizing—not love or forgiveness. Pointing out with cleric authority that these particular Ten Commandments were not the valid laws of Moses had the attendees spellbound. The entire assembly now sat speechless, mentally awakened, and shaking with trepidation.

Tom's often spewed soap-box rant was ready to be received. "I was sent here to Africa not because I'm a perfect man." He moved to center stage and shook a bible overhead—toward heaven. "Thou shalt not embellish is not a commandment. So don't condemn the deliverer." Tom let the menacing words settle.

"I'm calling out your misrepresentation of The Decalogue," avowed a bigger-than-life silhouetted figure standing in the doorway of the church. Most of the congregation turned around. They knew Paul to be more of a guardian type and supply driver than a verbal warrior. Most had never heard him speak about THE WORD. Now, he was calling out the new preacher in town. Tom felt compelled to intrude—but fell silent.

For the last half of the 20th century, progressive faiths in the US, UK, and other first-world countries began throwing out whatever commandment that was not conciliating or a good fit for their worshippers. Political parties, church leaders, and Hollywood elites turned acceptance into approval.

Nigeria, a country of almost equal Christians to Muslims, was akin to a ticking time bomb. Using the God of Moses to

confuse or change parts of the old covenant went way beyond evangelizing—it could fuel the start of a Ninth Crusade—

CHAP 6... **Pick & Choose**

After Paul's rebuttal, Tom's preaching got received with mixed feelings. The new congregates liked the fact that he didn't come across as the my-way or else, faultless, white preacher from America—Tom was different. He admitted that he had a shady past and needed forgiveness. 'Love the sinner, hate the sin' seemed to be a message that this meager Lagos neighborhood needed to hear.

Pointing out the bogus Ten Commandments set solid on the front wall worked to Tom's advantage. Afterward, during the coffee and donut social, several guests wanted to know if they could choose what commandment they could toss out. Now Tom had subject matter for the next ten Sundays. His original plan was to preach the prosperity gospel about how a ten percent tithing would return a hundredfold. Mixing Old Testament scripture with gospel passages helped to build his mega-church back home in Texas.

Monday mornings on the golf course, Tom usually reflected on a Sunday discourse. He'd yet to find any golfing pawns in this neighborhood. Tom checked the AC thermostat and double-checked that the church and apartment were locked. Frontage Road was already loaded with horn-honking yellow kekes and smoke-belching okada scooters.

"Your Texas-style akara was a hit," Tom bellowed above traffic noise as he handed the street vendor a white envelope with naira and kobo coins.

The vendor handed Tom a fresh cup of AA Kenya coffee. "They were! I should bring three dozen more sugary fritters and additional coffee for next Sunday."

"We'll see. The collection basket barely covered the cost of the coffee and akara." Tom took a sip from the white Styrofoam cup. "Now, I need to go pay the musicians." Tom missed out on playing golf. He loved the exhilaration of betting on eighteen holes and winning.

Standing at the Holiday Inn front desk, Tom held out an envelope. "Give this to Victor. It's payment for the musicians."

"I heard you had a good turnout," Phillip said.

"Yeah, we did." Tom pointed at the dark purple oblong bruise on the Brit's arm. "Tell me again how you injured your arm?"

"I don't remember telling you how I hurt my arm in the first place." Phillip suspected Victor was listening and watching through the camera mounted over the check-in desk.

"You said a filing cabinet fell on your arm."

"That's right, chap. I slipped and caught myself on an opened drawer. That's when the filing cabinet smashed my arm."

"You might want to get an X-ray. One of the boys helping me hang wanted posters had a similar bruise. His arm got broken when he slipped off a bucket."

Victor accepted the plausible filing cabinet story from inside the video security room. However, he was not aware of the broken arm. He had used the Rungu baton on Tanny's kids several times without lasting harm.

"I need to reserve a room for my niece in a few weeks. When I know the exact dates, I'll get back to you."

"Sounds good. Is your niece going to help out at your church?"

"No, Tina's not the church type."

Tom was a few blocks from the motel when the burner phone vibrated in his pocket. The caller ID showed Zhongnanhai, China. Tom let the call go to voice mail.

The blast of cool air when he opened the apartment door was refreshing. Now, he was ready to deal with the voice message from Zhongnanhai. Tom listened to the message. "Mr. Tom Seton, there has been a change of plans. A crew will be at your home in Dallas early Wednesday to load up the motor van. Call back if you can't follow orders."

Nobody told Tom what to do! He hit #4 to call back the sender. A female voice answered in Chinese, which pissed off

Tom. He ended the call and tossed the burner phone on the green table.

He called Beth on his other phone. "Sorry to call so early, but a crew will be picking up the motorhome Wednesday morning at our house."

"So I don't have to drive the Sprinter to the port in Houston?"

"No, you don't. I got a voicemail from China. They are taking care of everything."

"You think it is safe to have someone pick it up?"

"Yeah, I'm not that worried. We owe more than what it is worth. If something happens, I'll turn it into insurance."

"Okay. Is there anything else I should have ready by tomorrow?" Beth asked.

"Yes, we have a couple of boxes of KJV Bibles in the basement. Could you load them inside the motorhome?"

"Sure, no problem. I'll get Billy next door to help me. Anything else?"

"Beth, in the closet in my office, there is an old laptop. Load that up, too."

"What are you going to do with that old computer?"

"This neighborhood kid keeps coming around when the other kids are in school. I thought he could play solitaire or computer games."

"Is that Jacob, the deaf child you keep talking about?"

"Yeah, that's him." Tom paused; he had an alternative motive. "Beth, could you load one of your interactive sign language programs on that laptop? I could use it to communicate better with Jacob."

"Tom, sign language is not universal. You could mess up a young child if you tried to introduce him to a different sign language at an early age. What grade is Jacob?"

"I think he should be in second grade."

"Why isn't he in school?"

"Because he's deaf," Tom exclaimed, expecting Beth to have known. "Don't sweat your software program. We'll keep drawing pictures to communicate with each other."

"Tom, I'm so proud of you for helping and protecting those two brothers. I can't wait to meet them!"

Their extended separation was already challenging both of them. Early on, they committed to separate career paths. Tom

with preaching, 'The Word', and fundraising. Beth's passion was working with special needs adults. They had also agreed to keep their religious beliefs separate. Tom was a progressive protestant, and Beth a devout catholic. Raising children in an interfaith marriage could have led to marital problems—an issue Tom and Beth did not have to worry about.

* * *

Cain and Able barked and jumped against the kennel wire fence when they heard the sound of air brakes out front. Beth yelled, "Sitz!" Both German Shepherds sat with ears perked upward. Beth put the dog food down and said, "Platz." Both guard dogs followed her command and took the prone position beside the raw meat.

"Hey, Aunt Beth, we're here to pick up the motorhome!" Tina yelled as she bounced down the driveway toward the RV storage building and kennel.

Beth was miffed. Tom never mentioned Tina would be part of the shipping crew. In German, Beth yelled, "Blieb." Both dogs remained prone as commanded to 'stay' in German.

"I'll raise the door." Beth reached in through the side door of the outbuilding and pushed a red button. The heavy, oversized door groaned upward. The Mercedes Sprinter RV and a rare L88 Red Corvette had yellow lines painted on the concrete floor for individually marked-off parking spots. On the back wall were several of Tom's hunting trophies. The most recent was a 440-pound feral hog he shot from a helicopter on a private ranch with a burst-fire assault rifle.

"Like, you guys still have your old car from college?" Tina opened the driver's door and plopped down behind the steering wheel. "I'd look good driving around Hollywood in this old antique Stingray."

Beth was beyond miffed. She had never driven the 580-horsepower muscle car. An inexperienced driver could quickly lose control by pushing too hard on the gas pedal. There were only 216 of this model ever built. Beth backed the RV out of the shop and handed Tina the keys and paperwork. "I wasn't sure what paperwork they'd need. Here are copies of the registration and insurance."

"Like, I don't know if they need this stuff Aunt Beth. This old people van is getting shipped in a big metal box."

"Tina, just take the documents. The border agents will search the motorhome if you don't have the proper paperwork."

"Like, what would they be searching for?"

"Illegal contraband, drugs, guns, most anything."

"Like what else would illegal contraband be?"

"Unlicensed software, counterfeit pharmaceuticals, stolen car parts, things like that. The list is endless!" Beth never cared for uninformed people, especially the ones who had partied for five years at college. "Just take this paperwork so that they don't have to perform a search."

"Would my counterfeit diet pills be contraband?"

"I'd get rid of any drugs that a doctor didn't prescribe." Tina strutted down the driveway with the paperwork.

The Chinese driver let some air out of the tires so that the solar panels on the RV roof would fit into the oversized shipping container. It took about thirty minutes before Tina climbed into the cab with a CCP Loyalist. The loud **shiss** when the air brake released set Cain and Able into a barking frenzy. They headed for the port of Huston to get loaded onto the KONG FANG.

"Heir," Beth yelped the German command to come. Cain and Able left the kennel and followed her into the house. She knew it would be the evening in Africa. She got Tom's voicemail and left a message: "The Sprinter is on the way. Your old laptop is in the cabinet under the sink. You'll find the other stuff we talked about," Beth paused. "Why didn't you tell me about Tina coming over with the Motorhome?"

* * *

It took not more than two days at sea in skimpy swimwear when Tina got moved into the captain quarters guest room. Unashamed, flaunting could be a risky at-sea distraction for a twenty-three all-male crew. Kenney Chen, a staunch Communist Party loyalist, stayed in the motorhome inside an oversized steel container.

After five days at sea, the first stop was the Port of Cancun. Tina's passport was not current for Mexico. No matter what Tina offered the captain, he would not let her off-board a billion-dollar ship for which he was solely responsible.

Americans were not allowed shore leave in the Port of Havana the following week. Cuba had outdated unloading and tracking software that extended for an extra day at port. It was the same at port in Puerto Rico. Tina was going stir-crazy! This smaller 162-meter container ship had zero amenities and international restrictions different than a cruise ship.

While docked at Saint Thomas Island, the captain gave in to Tina's seductive persuasion and personally took her to shore. The rest of the crew was on a twelve-hour leave. Only the Second Officer and CCP loyalist were on the ship.

Tina was unaware that Saint Thomas Island was a US territory and that US citizens did not need passports. The few minutes of on-board pleasure for the captain was radioed back to China by his subordinate. Disloyalty or disrespect to the Communist Chinese Party carried a minimum sentence of ten years in a rehabilitation camp—sometimes death.

After the Second Officer opened the doors on the oversized metal container, Kenny Chen jumped out and pointed under the rear of the Mercedes Sprinter. They both started pulling ropes, nylon bags, and sacks of concrete shoved up against the rear axle of the motorhome. They spoke a few sentences in Mandarin and then went mum. This mission was of the highest priority—unlike anything previously.

The Second Officer and Mr. Chen moved the supplies to the seaward beam of the ship. The Officer tied one end of a rope to the railing while the CCP Loyalist put two 60-pound sacks of concrete into a heavy black bag and zipped it shut. They each grabbed an end of the black bag, lifted it over the railing, and let it drop. The rope uncoiled, snapped taut, and then went limp. The nylon strap on the bag could not take a 120-pound load and tore off. They pulled the rope and tied it on another black bag with only one sack of concrete inside; the sudden jerk tore off one of the hand straps.

The Second Officer broke the silence and suggested slowly lowering the weighted nylon bags. Previous drug drops had been less than fifty pounds per container. He suspected that Fentanyl must be heavier but knew not to ask—knowing too much could be dangerous.

Mr. Chen moved his head up and down in agreement; he knew that delivering damaged merchandise would not be acceptable. They attached a third bag with only one sack of

concrete and then lowered it slowly. The bag hung about five feet above the water. They pulled up the rope and loaded a second sack of concrete into the long nylon bag. A slow lowering was the solution for this mission scheduled on the return trip from Africa. The Second Officer started to think that drugs were not the only bounty on this trip.

The Captain, Tina, and the crew were back on the ship by midnight. It was still dark when two tugs pushed the KONG FANG out to the Caribbean Sea. The Second Officer was now relaying the shenanigans back home, wanting to demonstrate his loyalty to the CCP.

A dull blue and gray, low profile boat was approaching fast from the stern, east, and outside the US territory border of the Virgin Islands. The boat driver pushed the throttle forward to full power! The long extended bow rose. It looked something like what Somalia's pirates used to hijack freighters in the Indian Ocean. However, this was not a retrofitted netting boat. It was a million-dollar cigarette boat made mostly of carbon fiber to avoid radar detection. It could outrun anything the Coast Guard had in their fleet. The Cartels, elitists, and some Hollywood types owned these speed machines that were hidden and unlicensed among the eighty or more Virgin Islands in private lagoons.

The dull blue and gray paint blended into the mile-long wake of the KONG FANG. Kenny Chen was ready at the beam on the starboard side with four ropes and weighted bags tied to the metal railing. He hand lowered the first nylon body bag with only one 60-pound sack of concrete inside. One speed boat crew snagged the rope with a long-handled hook. He cut the bag free and gave the thumbs up.

The next bag had two sixty-pound bags of concrete. It took all Ken's strength to hand lower 120 pounds. It got snagged and then cut loose. Blood and skin were peeling off the CCP loyalists's hands! The next bag got lowered about halfway when Chen had to let go. ***Snap, Snap,*** both nylon straps broke off, and the two sacks of concrete hit the port side and burst open. Cement powder and sand spread outward—it looked like a bomb had exploded on the deck of the cigarette boat.

The carbon fiber speed boat made a U-turn and then disappeared back into the white foam and wake of the Kong Fang. A fifty percent success for this mission would not be

acceptable. However, the drugs were way more valuable than peasant African girls. The Elite World Order (EWO) leaders would not allow CCP representation at the World Table forum if the promised payload got lost at sea.

* * *

Pastor Tom had finished preaching; a few children were still playing in the backfield. The musicians finished loading their equipment; Tanny and her children crowded into the back of the box van and sat on buckets. The Texan-style Akara and AA Kenya coffee were gone. Tom would need more of the Lagos upper class in the pews to build up an adequate church treasury. He needed contributors who could drop a million naira in a collection basket. Tom planned to scout a few country clubs and golf courses to proselytize the more affluent.

After counting the collection, Tom returned to the apartment for a nap. Resting on the Sabbath was one commandment Tom never preached about. The debate on which day of the week was the Sabbath did not matter to Tom. Keeping a congregation on fire with forgiveness and grace and saying that no man is perfect was exhausting, so Tom needed to rest. He had just nodded off when the phone vibrated on the nightstand.

"Hello!" Tom pressed the phone against his head.

"How did the service go today?"

"It went okay. There was an increase in the collection, so that is always a good sign. We ran short of coffee and donuts."

"You're having coffee and donuts?"

"Sure thing, you've always told me coffee and donuts were the only reason Catholics come to church."

"That's not nice!"

"Beth, you know I'm kidding." But Tom was not kidding; he often preached about Catholics worshiping false idols—especially Mary, the mother of God.

"Well, okay." Beth said and then added, "Tom, remember Sally Slenski?"

"Yeah, of course!" Tom sat up on the edge of the bed. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, she stopped by here last night," Beth paused for a

second time. "She is due to have a baby any day."

"That's wonderful news," Tom replied and then asked. "Is that all that Sally wanted?"

"No—She also told me that the FBI is reviewing all the accounts at your old church. Many of the large contributors at your old church had their deposits hacked and converted to Bitcoin."

"You're joking?" Tom jumped to attention and then paced back and forth between the green table and bed. "So, Sally wanted you to tell me about the FBI?"

"I think so. Sally said that she wishes you well in building another mega-church."

"I don't think I will be building as wealthy of church over here. Most of the people are just common folk. There won't be any thousand dollar bills in the collection basket."

"I know how good you are at fundraising. I wouldn't give up that easily," Beth replied.

Tom stopped pacing. For sure, he was good at bringing in cash and cutting deals. "What else, Beth?"

"I hid that old notebook computer under the bench where you store your hunting guns. I'm sorry, but leaving it where Tina or anybody could find it wasn't wise."

When the motorhome got picked up, Tom was unaware that Tina had come with Mr. Chen. One of his long guns was more concerning, an unregistered AR-15 hidden under the seat.

After the call ended, Tom started searching for gun laws in Nigeria. It was not good news! He found and wrote down the address for the Tincan Island Port Authority. He only had a few weeks to put a plan into action. In the United States, bribes are safer than going forward with a government agency.

First thing Monday morning, with the port authority address in hand, Tom was about to leave when a light knocked on the apartment door. Jacob was there with his red bucket, mop, and rags, looking for work. Tom rubbed Jacob's soft, nappy head of black hair and let him in. He drew a picture of a chair and then an **X** crossing over the chair.

Jacob understood that the new chairs did not need to get wiped down. He took Tom's pencil and drew a broom and dustpan. Tom gave in, took Jacob to the church, got a broom from the storage room, and handed it to Jacob. Within a few minutes, Jacob was sweeping the floor. Tom went back to the

apartment.

Less than a half hour passed, and there was louder knocking; Tom opened the door. "I've got my tools and patching material to pull off those Ten Commandments tablets. I'll be over in the church." Idogbe held up a handsaw and drywall knife.

"Jacob's over there. Have him clean up. I'm paying him by the job." Tom pulled a paper from his pocket. "Hey, can you give me directions to the Tincan Port Authority office?"

Idogbe didn't care much about Pastor Tom's sketchy ways, but he always found odd jobs for Jacob to do. "I don't know that part of Lagos."

Tom shut down his laptop and locked the apartment. He entered the church through the side door. Idogbe had just climbed up on the ladder with the saw. "Hold up for a minute!"

Idogbe climbed down. "What do you need?"

"I'm wondering if you can build a false wall to hide stuff?" Tom stepped off the stage and walked toward the back of the church.

Idogbe followed—so did Jacob.

Tom opened the utility closet door. "Maybe back in that corner?" Tom pointed to the left. "Something about the size that Jacob could hide in." Tom now pointed at Jacob sweeping under chairs.

"You mean a hiding place like in the Anne Frank diaries?"

"You've read Anne Frank's work?"

"Yes, in school. Many of the girls up north keep diaries after they read about her struggle in the slave camp."

"You mean concentration camp." Tom corrected Idogbe.

"They are the same!" Idogbe corrected Pastor Tom, walked over to the left wall, and pulled a drywall knife from his tool belt. "Do you think twenty millimeters is deep enough?"

"I don't know. How many inches is that?"

Idogbe did a quick conversion in his head. "That would be about three-quarters of an inch."

"That should work," Tom replied. "I'm going to get a cup of coffee. Would you like one?"

"No thanks. I drank plenty of coffee on the drive down from the State of Plateau."

"How is your Mom's strawberry farm doing?"

"It is going well. I have some strawberries in my truck if

you want to try them."

"I'd like that. Are you sure you don't want coffee?"

"I'm sure, no coffee. I'll get started on the secret hiding place."

The goto coffee vendor suggested at least three dozen more Texas-style Akara for Sunday service. Tom did some finagling; if the order size increased, the price needed to decrease. They agreed on 400 naira per dozen and 50 naira per cup of coffee. The street vendor suggested Bobo apple juice or milk for the children. Tom declined; he didn't want to encourage more children than those already coming.

The next stop was to settle up with the musicians and pay Tanny to watch the children during the church service. It wasn't so much that Tom didn't like children; it was more that they were an expense that a budding church couldn't afford, especially when Tom noticed that some children had a Texan-style Akarsas in each hand.

After a large AA Kenya coffee and settling debts, Tom returned to church and stuck his head into the closet. "Wow, you work fast."

"If you want to keep this a secret, I should get this done before your service next Sunday."

"Think of it more like a safe than a secret hiding place." Tom stopped himself. If Idogbe knew that he was planning to store guns and ammunition between the walls, there could be a big problem, especially after reading up about the gun laws in Nigeria.

Tom stomped his feet on the wood floor to get Jacob's attention. Jacob stopped mopping and saw the grease-stained bag Tom was holding out. Jacob came over and politely only took one of the deep-fried sweet flour balls.

"Idogbe, try one of these Texan-style akaras that I'm helping one of the street vendors turn into a favorite snack."

Idogbe reached into the bag and popped the dough ball into his mouth. "This is a Yum Yum, not an Akara."

"What?" Pastor Tom thought he was bringing a new food to Africa.

"Akara is made from beans. Yum Yums are made with flour and sugar. You call them donut holes in the states." Idogbe walked in front of Tom and out the church's front doors.

Tom realized the street vendor had played him. Tom rolled

the top of the bag, handed Jacob the rest of the donut holes, and carefully mouthed. "Share these with Ekon."

Jacob moved his head up and down to say he understood.

Idogbe came back into the church door with a container of strawberries. "Try one of these African-style berries."

Tom stemmed one of the berries and popped it into his mouth. "Wow, these are good."

"They are from my Mum's berry farm," Idogbe replied, stomping on the floor and motioning for Jacob to come over.

Jacob held up three fingers. Idogbe answered by flashing his own three fingers twice, meaning six. Jacob smiled and picked off six of the big red strawberries. Jacob now had Yum Yums and strawberries to share with Ekon and his mom.

His cell phone vibrated as Tom put the strawberries into the apartment refrigerator. Caller ID showed **SPIRIT INSURANCE.**

"Tom, no way in hell we can do ten thousand dollars for pain and suffering for a kid that supposedly fell off a bucket. Our doctors looked at the x-ray, and they say a buckle fracture near the elbow is more likely from a child getting hit across the forearm, not from falling off a bucket. Plus, that boy wasn't on the church property. We'll pay the medical bills, but that is all?"

"Mike, slow down! Your insurance company paid out a hundred and fifty thousand to that brat who sprained his wrist at my old church, and you can't do ten grand for a broken arm?"

"Tom, that kid was on an All-Star baseball team. He had the potential to go on to play in the majors. What's some poor kid in Africa going to become?"

"Mike, don't be such a prick! Tell me right now what's the best you can do for the Onukwulu family."

"We'll pay the medical bills and fifteen hundred for pain and suffering. Plus, I want to close this claim by tomorrow."

"Mike, you can multiply that pain and suffering offer by ten. That African kid you think won't amount to anything is a straight-A student and a skilled soccer player. His name is Ekon, and his name means strong in Africa. He didn't even shed a tear at the hospital."

"So if the boy is strong, he can deal with the pain. At the very least, I might get the company to do two grand for pain but nothing for long-term suffering."

"Mike, I remember all the emotional pain and suffering that

poor girl you knocked up in college must have gone through. I don't remember her name. Was it Rose? She worked in the cafeteria. Didn't your father pay her off with twenty-five grand?"

"Hey Tom, you don't have to go there. You don't have an unscathed past with all your war hero lies and bullshit."

"Mike, I've come clean with my stolen valor claim. Have you and your Father come clean about Rose?"

Mike paused. "Five thousand, and that's our final offer. Tom, you don't want to go against my Dad. I'm warning you as an old frat, buddy. My Father has connections worldwide, including powerful people in Africa."

"I'll let you know in the morning." Tom understood Mike's position. Over the years, he'd sent a lot of business to Spirit Insurance—Quid pro quo works both ways.

Tom locked up the apartment and went back into the church. Jacob was watching Idogbe build the false wall in the closet. Tom looked squarely at Jacob and mouthed, "Take me to your house."

Jacob grunted out what sounded like, "OK."

They were in a neighborhood of mostly single-story homes made of cinder blocks and metal roofs across a field, through a hole in a fence, and down a few dirt roads. Some had carports; there were no homes with triple garages, but the neighborhood was well cared for and had no litter.

Jacob pushed open the unlocked screen door, stomped his feet, and scanned around the neatly kept room. Next, he led Pastor Tom into the kitchen and then pushed open the rear screen door. Fifi was taking laundry off a clothesline. Jacob ran to her, pulled her arm, and pointed at Pastor Tom.

Fifi dropped a white shirt and a handful of clothespins into a plastic basket and walked toward Tom. "What brings you to our home?"

"Is your husband home? I should talk to both of you."

"Jude is up north delivering fuel. He won't be home until the weekend."

The conversation was interrupted by the sound of the front door opening and closing and then the sound of feet stamping on the floor. Ekon came out the backdoor, and Jacob held up the greasy bag with donut balls and strawberries.

"Is it possible to get a hold of Mr. Onukwulu by tomorrow?"

"Not up north. There is no good phone service, and he never stays in one place for too long. It's not safe."

Ekon signed with Jacob and said, "Thanks for the treats."

"How's the arm? Do you think it's healing okay?" Tom asked.

"It itches underneath the cast, but it feels fine. I fell playing soccer at school. Everything is okay." Ekon raised his arm and moved his fingers. "You probably should hold off on the soccer until the cast is off," Tom said.

"I told you Ekon! You need to listen to Preacher Tom."

Ekon handed his mum the bag with the remaining yum yums as a peace offering. She knew no eleven-year-old boy could sit on the sidelines at middle school soccer.

Tom looked directly at Fifi. "The insurance company wants to settle for five thousand dollars. That is only half of what I told you. They need to have an answer by tomorrow."

Five thousand USD would be a nice bump for the Onukwulu's bank account. She was speechless with a new baby on the way—unsure how to answer.

Ekon was speechless, also. He had been interviewed twice about falling off the bucket. Now, his family was being offered five thousand dollars for his lie. He knew all about being paid off with dark money; his Dad talked about it often when he'd return from trips up north. Lying to a preacher made it worse.

CHAP 7... **Thou shalt not lie**

On-fire was the only way to describe how Tom delivered his sermon. There is a fine line between evangelizing and entertaining. How he jeered and shook the bible overhead was frightening—especially for a fourth grader. Ekon had to sit through the morning service with a broken arm and could not play outside. Tom had pointed out the errors 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 like the fake tablets on the front wall.

Ekon listened intently. The commandments' order was confusing to an eleven-year-old and some adults. His brain shifted into overdrive. *Thou shalt not lie is not on the tablets. It must not be wrong that I didn't tell Mum and Papa how I broke my arm.* With a fresh zeal, Ekon was the first out of the church.

Even with the additional three dozen deep-fried Texan-style Akara, they ran out. The Kenya AA coffee ran dry, too. The band played more gospel and less hip-hop, which seemed a better fit for the primarily millennial-aged congregante. Most notably, the collection plate had almost doubled. Tom told himself, *Maybe I can lay the foundation for another mega-church in Lagos?*

The ninety-minute on-fire stage performance had been exhausting. Tom's measuring tool of how many Amen and Praise the Lord affirmations came from the pews was good. Tom earned an afternoon nap. Resting on the Sabbath was the third or fourth commandment, depending on which Christian sect. Judaism also observed a weekly day of rest, from sundown on Friday until the appearance of three stars in the sky on Saturday night. Tom sometimes had the Jews in his crosshairs, too.

The nap turned into more of a nightmare than a deserved

rest. Tom woke up in a cold sweat. The guardian soldier-type guy who showed up near the back of the church was now in Tom's dreams. Why the white ghost-looking man had a knife stuck through his left hand didn't make sense.

I think this guy delivers supplies up north to the all-girls schools. He has yet to introduce himself to me. Maybe he's an American mercenary working undercover on special ops? Tom made a mental note to find out more about Paul. Some ex-military special force types cannot get killing out of their blood—and go rogue. Maybe Paul exiled himself to Africa? Kidnapping of the Chibok girls had been in the news recently.

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

Tom went to the church and rattled the front doors to ensure they were locked. He looked down the side alley. There were chalked-out boxes on the concrete where the children played hopscotch and hotbox. Tom's heart went heavy; children of their own never happened. Tom's cell phone vibrated. "Hey Beth, I was just thinking about you."

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

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

"Dan is David's son. The internet security expert that flies worldwide in a private jet."

"Oh yeah. You will ask Dan to fly Cain and Able to Lagos." Tom said in a joking manner.

"Danny has a contract in Abuja, and he said if we get the paperwork in order, he will get the dogs to that airport."

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

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

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

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

"Of course I do! When you get over here, I will show you how much I miss you. We'll have to turn the new air

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

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

"Well, afterward, I'll just have to retake you in the shower." Tom played along, knowing that there was no way two people could fit in the tiny apartment shower.

"I guess you do miss me."

"Oh, more than you know, my sensual Elizabethan queen."

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

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

"I am praying!" Beth quipped. She liked it when Tom was firm and spoke what he desired. It was his weak attempt at dirty talk over the phone. Even at home, Tom's sexual backwardness always ended with no more than five minutes of missionary-style sex. Then it was back to preacher business and their ho-hum sex life. In college, Beth dated a bad boy; she yearned for Tom to have a little rough and tough in his DNA.

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

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

"It's hard to tell what is legit and what isn't on the web. Thou shalt not covet is one of my planned sermons. Scammers can work from any place in the world these days."

"You should have preached that commandment to your old friend, the church treasurer. I heard he transferred some of the parishioner's money into a Bitcoin account in the United Kingdom."

"That should be all cleared up. The credit union got the Slenski's money back."

"Tom, something else is going on. Since you left, several church accounts have been hacked. Bernie was the only one with access to the major contributor's account numbers. At least that's what Sally Slenski told me in private."

"Are you and Sally becoming best friends?" Tom had never mentioned that he and Sally went to brunch a few times when she was the church secretary.

"Kind of, I guess. She misses your Sunday morning preaching. She hopes you'll be back after your sabbatical."

Tom's ego got pumped. "I never thought about going back to my old church. But I guess I shouldn't rule it out."

"Tom, you built that church. Why wouldn't you want to come back to it?"

"After the newspaper did the stolen valor piece on me, I don't think I could make a comeback."

"Tom, that's old news. Look at the new President. Everything from his mouth is a huge exaggeration or an outright lie. What about that senator who said she took gunfire in a helicopter in Iraq? Later, she had to retract her story."

"Beth, maybe we should hold off on selling our home?"

"That would probably be a smarter move," Beth affirmed.

Tom's brain flip-flopped. "Maybe we could rent it out?"

"We'd probably have better luck doing that. And we wouldn't have to keep reducing the selling price."

"Let me rethink this. I'll call Hank. He'll have a good feel for the rental market. Hell, he owns half of Dallas."

"Sound's good. I'll mention it to his wife if I see her tomorrow afternoon at your church."

"At my church, what are you going there for?"

"The women's prayer group is having a baby shower for Sally," Beth replied softly.

"Oh..." Beth and Tom had yet to conceive a child. Baby showers were bitter-sweet. Tom silently shared in Beth's anguish. He knew Beth's full-ride scholarship to run track came with an unseen price. During the entire track season, Beth might only menstruate once, maybe twice. After college, her womb never returned to regular cycles. Beth took ownership for not being able to grow the Seton family tree.

* * *

"My smaller round Akara was a big hit," the vendor said as he scooped lard into a metal vat.

"Yeah, the kids liked them. Especially the ones dipped in chocolate."

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

"Maybe, but I learned that those akara balls are made from flour and sugar, not bean paste. Someone told me that they are Yum Yums or what we call donut holes back home."

"Who says that? Give me their name. I'll fix them."

"I'm not giving you any name. I don't like getting played."

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

"I've studied the Islam faith. Muhammad had twenty-two rules. That number is now twenty or less. Religions must adapt and change with the times to accommodate."

The customer is always right is one business rule some African vendors do not live by. "You are the same as me! I hear you brag about building your big church back home from the parking lot. We both do it for money!"

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

"Okay, if you say so!" The vendor spooned more hunks of white lard into the metal vat. "I should bring half Akara and half Yum Yums next week."

Tom pulled a blue envelope from his front pocket. "Okay, do a half-and-half order. Since your volume has increased, you must take five percent off."

"Five percent is too much... Two percent."

"Deal..." Tom handed over the payment envelope. "Make sure you don't run out of coffee next Sunday."

The vendor handed back a steaming cup of coffee. "Preacher man, I hear you say break a commandment, and all is still good. In Islam, that message is not true."

"I am right! Anyone can get saved by grace. If I stayed longer in Africa, I would rededicate the Glory and Praise church to the church of the Nine Commandments."

From the backseat of a Keke, Tom saw a group of people outside the gate into the church lot. The tallest man towered

over the three people sitting on the curb. Jude was an east mark, as was the bowlegged elder. *Maybe the neighborhood constable finally caught the thieves?* He handed the driver a thousand Naira and stepped out onto the street. Tom put his hand up to block the setting sun. "What brings everyone to church this evening?"

"My son has a confession to make!" Mr. Onukwulu said while he held out a white envelope.

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

Thou shalt not lie is not on the plaques, Ekon mused.

"The Onukwulu family asked me to come with them to be a witness." Constable Ayoola said with disdain toward Tom for endangering Ekon and Jacob.

"Mr. Preacher, I lied about how my arm got broken. I didn't fall off a bucket putting up the wanted posters."

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

"I was afraid because the gang said they would hurt Jacob if we didn't stop." Ekon's voice trembled. Jacob tightly gripped Fifi's hand. Extrasensory perception told Tom how much danger the Onukwulu family was in.

"Who are they?" Tom asked firmly.

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

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

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

Tom had equal disdain toward the bowlegged constable and how he ran the neighborhood. Who was he to compare Lagos to big cities in the US? Tom was done with any effort to find justice. When Tom opened the white envelope, he saw an insurance check made out to the Onukwulu family. "What's this?" Tom focused on the five thousand dollar amount. It was only half of what he wanted.

"We can't take money for a lie, Mr. Onukwulu," replied with head of the household authority.

"This insurance check is not for a lie. Your boys were my employees when Ekon's arm got broken. It should be for a lot

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

All six foot-five of Mr. Onukwulu felt relief. “Thank you so much! We still owe you a twenty-five percent fee for dealing with the insurance company.”

“You don’t owe me anything. I’ll get my fee from my insurance agent.”

“Well, it looks like we got this worked out.” Ayoola still didn’t trust Tom. Out of respect for what he witnessed, Ayoola extended his hand to Tom.

Jacob had different mixed feelings about Tom. Why a man of God had Idogbe build a hiding space in the church closet was out of the ordinary—it didn’t make sense. Then, there was the grown-up game Pastor Tom privately taught him that only two people could play. It wasn’t straightforward, but Tom treated him like an adult. Tom even used the computer to show how different men made different moves.

Pastor Tom would touch his head, stomach, and shoulders. At first, it felt strange, but the more they did it in unison, the more spiritual it felt. It was their private secret—Jacob trusted Tom.

CHAP 8... **Peacekeeper~Peacemaker**

Thou shalt not commit adultery was one of the easy commandments to preach. In Tom's scripted theatrical rant, he pointed out that the stone tablets on the front wall were wrong. The Commandment against sexual misconduct was the sixth Commandment, not the seventh. Tom made sure no children were in the church. Ekon got excused and thrilled at the same time. It was the first Sunday in over a month that he was allowed to play with the other children; his cast was due to come off in a week.

When Tom learned that Nigeria had the second-largest HIV epidemic in the world, he used that fact as part of his sermon. Preaching about the sin against the temple of the body never went well in Texas. With almost two million Nigerians living with HIV, Tom hoped that the adultery commandment would be well received. In the silence amongst the congregation, it was hard to tell if his spiritual message was getting through. There had not been one amen or alleluia from the crowd.

During his college days, Tom was called out for his chaste lifestyle and was referred to as the dorm prude. Tom did not respect the friends-with-benefits campus lifestyle, especially since his older sister quit college to follow a band around the country in an old VW van. Carefree, living in the fast-lane lifestyle left her a full-blown alcoholic by the age of twenty-five and referred to as the 'good old group slut'.

The smell of Kenya AA coffee wrapped its way in from the covered porch to the podium. Tom took it as a sign to pass the collection basket. He concluded that the Greek word *Porneia* was used twenty-five times in the New Testament. Tom finished by saying that *Porneia* meant adultery, fornication, sodomy, immorality, and even soft

porn.

The congregation exited the church faster than expected after this Sunday service. No different than back home. Consenting adults do not like being told what they could or should not do in the privacy of a bedroom. At about the same time the last couple left the church, a thunder-like rumble vibrated the glass on the side windows opposite where the children played. Tom hurried out of the church and looked around the corner. There was a loud *clunk* when the rider put the 80-inch motor into first gear.

Tom hurried down the concrete steps and stood at the front of the custom sky-blue and white Harley Davidson. He swiped his open hand across the front of his neck, the universal sign for decapitation or to cut something off. The Harley rider turned the chrome key switch off, and the chest-thumping rumbling ceased.

Tom extended his hand between the high-rise handlebars. "We've not formally met. I'm Tom."

The seasoned rider took off his leather riding gloves, "I'm Paul."

"Yeah, I know. Idogbe told me you are the driver for the girls' school up north."

After they shook hands, Tom stepped to the side—awed by the motorcycle. "I always wanted to ride one of these bad boys."

"It's never too late to learn. Twenty years after the war, an old army buddy taught me how to ride."

"What branch were you in?" Tom asked.

"United States Army, Special Forces. I was a frontline interpreter trained to be a peacemaker."

"You were an Army Green Beret?" Tom got over come. It was his false claim of being a Green Beret that had exposed his stolen valor lie. If Tom had known that to become a Green Beret, you needed to speak a second language, he would still be preaching back in Texas. "What second language did you learn?"

"Vietnamese," Paul replied, pulling on the black leather riding gloves.

Tom noticed the scar on Paul's hand, lined up with a scar in his palm. It looked like blood had started to weep. Belief in the Stigmata was a form of Idolatry. Tom's knees

felt weak, and a cold chill ran up his spine to the back of his mouth. "I'm so sorry for my deception about being a Green Beret. I did serve in the Army but never saw any action." Tom's head slumped forward as he could not look Paul in the eyes.

"My fellow brethren, a peacemaker sometimes has to take a life. It is not in line with being a peacekeeper. The almighty Father forgives your deception as he forgave me for the lives I halted during war. Go in Peace."

Tom felt a spiritual washing followed by a lifting of guilt. Paul rode off, and the thunder rumbled off the church's side. Tom aimlessly wandered into the backfield where the kids played. He understood that a peacemaker fights for peace through battle and that a peacekeeper avoids conflict through negotiation and diplomacy. *Next Sunday, I'll preach on the Thou shalt not kill Commandment and how the Catholics changed it to Thou shalt not murder—*

After meandering for at least an hour, Tom needed to share what he had just experienced. Beth wouldn't be home for several hours due to the time difference between Nigeria and Texas. She had her Eucharistic ministry rounds and had a baby shower to attend.

Tom wandered into the neatly kept neighborhood in which the Onukwulu family lived. The homes were smaller than most homes in middle-class America. One thing that stood out was that there were no old cars or junk in the yards. No garages were on any of the roughly one thousand square foot homes. Maybe one out of ten houses had window air conditioners, and about the same percentage had carports. The squeak of a screen door opening and then slapping shut was followed by laughter and screaming from children playing.

It was Jacob's sixth sense that spotted Pastor Tom in the distance. Jacob pulled Ekon down the block, and they stopped before Tom. From across the street, a set of eyes followed the boys. Ayoola raised the binoculars and stepped back from the glass to avoid being seen.

Ekon and Jacob each took a hand and pulled Pastor Tom toward their home. The lean six-foot-five Jude Onukwulu emerged from the rear corner of the house with a canvas bag in one hand and a machete in the other. He had just

sharpened the entire edge of the thirty-inch-long hunk of steel. The heavy tool was protection from hyenas or the Black Mamba when he hauled fuel up north. Jude had just reworked the steel edge to hack through an arm with just one swing.

Jude climbed up the side steps and tossed the duffle bag behind the passenger seat onto the mattress in the sleeper cab. He slipped the machete into a sheath between the driver's seat and console. Coming down out of the cab, he spotted the trio and waved.

"Are you headed out in the morning?" Tom yelled.

"Not in the morning. Tonight, I will pick up dual fuel tanks in Port Harcourt. Then, I deliver them to the China Dam project on the Benue River. I'll be gone three or four days."

"Where about is this China Dam?" Tom lowered his voice when he was at the waist-high rear wheels of the tractor.

"It's not built yet. There will be four dams. Villagers will get flooded out of their homes. Spawning fish will get blocked from swimming upriver to spawn in Cameroon. Every trip transporting oil to the Mambila hydroelectric power project is getting more dangerous." Jude cut the conversation short, not wanting to frighten Ekon about the danger of hauling fuel. Jacob sensed the conversation was serious— even though he couldn't hear.

"The Chinese have had multiple problems with the Three Rivers Dam in Northern China. Why would they want to build one here in Nigeria?" Tom asked.

"The Communist Chinese Party wants to colonize Africa! They also want to buy Tin Can Island to control imports and exports," Jude replied.

"Is that a bad thing? I've been on Tin Can Island. That port needs help."

"Help is one thing. Buying up our land and natural resources is another. Nigeria finally escaped the stronghold of British colonization in 1960. We don't want to be slaves again!"

"Wow, you are passionate about Nigeria's sovereignty!"

"Ekon, tell your Mum to set an extra plate for Pastor Tom. We need to have a dinner conversation."

At first, Tom declined the offer but thought Jude's

conversation might work into one of his sermons, most likely when he preached on 'Thou shalt not covet.'

The pepper goat soup, Jollof rice, and pounded yam were as good as any pot roast and potato Texas comfort food. Meat pie for dessert was not an American custom; it was a spicy, sweet filling in a flour crust shaped like a turnover.

After dinner, Jude walked halfway back to the church with Tom. According to the Bible, he wanted to know if an arm for an arm would be the same as an eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth. When they parted, Tom promised he would preach on the retribution of wrongs, as in the Old Testament— that Jesus preached to turn the other cheek.

On his walk back, Ayoola Ashiru exited his house and confronted Jude. They talked, and Ayoola agreed to go through old police reports to find out if any gang members had used a Runga. Jude didn't like Pastor Tom's answer of forgiveness over revenge.

Tom ducked through the hole in the fence and felt a mystical presence in the alley where Paul had taken off on his motorcycle. He knew Beth would be at home by now. He pulled the cell phone from his pocket. "Beth, I need to share something with you."

"Tom, are you okay? Your voice sounds shaky."

"I'm okay." Tom circled the spot where he had shaken Paul's hand. "I had a spiritual experience after the service this morning!"

"Oh, what was the experience?"

"Well, it was after I preached on the seventh commandment this morning."

"Okay, so you preached not to steal?"

"No, Beth! I preached about adultery. The correct seventh Commandment! I've repeatedly explained that the Catholic version of the Ten Commandments is wrong."

Beth told herself to watch her words. Years ago, her parents warned her that interfaith marriages often fail, especially if one of the partners was a fundamentalist. "I'm sorry for my mistake," Beth said.

"Anyway, after coffee and doughnuts this morning, I met this biker guy who rides a big motorcycle."

"Oh?" Beth wasn't sure where Tom was going. Her first

serious boyfriend rode a Harley. She knew Tom knew she was not a virgin when they got married.

"On both sides of the church, there are alleys. Almost everyone walks to church, so there is no need for a big parking lot."

"That's odd; didn't your old church have parking for over a thousand cars?"

"Actually, for almost two thousand cars, if you count the softball parking area," Tom boasted.

"You really could draw them in."

"Yes, I could!" Paul gloated from his end of the phone.

"Anyway, when this Paul guy pulled off his gloves to shake hands, I noticed a big scar on his left hand. Just like if he'd been stabbed or maybe nailed to a beam."

"Are you saying this man has the stigmata sign?"

"You know, I don't believe in that stuff. But, I'm going to do some investigation. Paul was a Green Beret who spoke Vietnamese. He said he was once a Peacemaker and is now a Peacekeeper—whatever that means."

"How old is the rider? He might be as old as my mentor, who just passed. David had served in the Vietnam War as an electronic communication specialist and spoke a few words of Vietnamese."

"I don't know. But I confessed to Paul about my stolen valor embellishing. He told me that the almighty Father forgives you as he forgave me and to go in peace. It felt like a weight got lifted off my back."

Beth could feel a new spiritual change in Tom's voice and tone. "I hope I meet Paul when I come over there."

"Paul's quite elusive. I've been here five weeks, and today was the first time we had a conversation."

"You know, you have been gone for over three months. I miss you."

"I know I miss you too. How is that offer by that internet specialist to fly you over here with Cain and Abel?"

"I'm meeting Danny this week to give him some of David's things. I'll see if his offer still stands."

"I can pick you and the dogs up in Abuja."

"God's in control. If it's meant to happen, it will." Beth repeated the words that David had spoken on his deathbed.

"Your words are spot on, especially after my heart-to-heart

with Paul this morning.”

That night, Tom slept solid and peacefully. Like clockwork, there was a light knocking on the door. It was nine am, and Jacob was ready to clean the church floor with his red bucket, mop, and rags. Tom rubbed Jacob’s soft head of curly hair, and Jacob wrapped his arms around Tom’s upper thighs and hugged hard. Tom pushed Jacob inside the apartment for a cup of hot chocolate. There was a bond of mentorship and trust developing.

The next knock was Idogbe. “My Mum sent you more strawberries.” Idogbe saw Jacob sitting at the green table.

Tom yanked the door all the way open. “Come in and have a cup of coffee or hot chocolate with us.”

Idogbe sniffed the inside air through his wide nostrils. The sweet smell of chocolate mixed with the aroma of Kenya coffee made for an invitation he couldn’t turn down. Idogbe took a chair across from Jacob. He took note of the drawings of three men and a truck that Jacob had been sketching on a tablet. Only the black stick man had a club in his hand.

Tom made a thick chocolate sauce from a hot chocolate mix at the sink. He approached the table with a small dish and then showed Jacob how to dip a strawberry into the chocolate. Jacob mimicked Tom and smiled with delight when he bit into the chocolate-coated strawberry.

“Nigeria is the Cocoa capital of the world,” Idogbe said as he took a strawberry.

“I didn’t know that. I’d think Belgium or Switzerland would claim the title of chocolate capital. Beth and I have been to both places, and they both boast about their chocolates.”

“Those countries bear false witness against Nigeria. The Cocoa House was the first skyscraper in all of West Africa. We grow over half the world’s Cocoa beans here.”

“That’s interesting. Beth will want to visit the Cocoa House. She loves chocolate.”

“When is Mrs. Seton coming over to join you?” Idogbe asked as he drank coffee.

“She hopes to hitch a ride with an internet security expert who has business in Abuja. On a private jet along with our dogs.”

“Weak internet security is giving Nigeria a bad reputation. The scammers are hurting hard-working, honest Nigerians.”

Idogbe replied with conviction.

"Blaming Nigeria's scamming reputation on weak internet security is like blaming me for leaving the church unlocked. The thieves are the bad guys, not you or me. Laws without consequences are when kayos take over justice."

"Are you saying that internet security is not important?" Idogbe asked as he wiped a strawberry through the thick chocolate sauce."

"The internet is for younger people like you to deal with. But if we can get our dogs flown over here, I won't have to worry about locking things up. Cain and Able will be my security."

Jacob touched Tom on the arm and then knocked his fists together. It was the universal sign asking for more. Tom pushed the strawberries before Jacob and held up three fingers. Jacob carefully selected three of the most giant and reddest strawberries.

Tom pulled the notepad across the green table and flipped to a new page. He sketched out how he wanted Idogbe to add a cover to the dog kennel. They went outside after about fifteen minutes of back and forth; Jacob tagged along. Tom pointed out where he wanted the kennel constructed against the apartment's back wall, stating that German Sheppard guard dogs needed to be out of sight. Jacob sensed that both men had safety concerns.

Idogbe pointed out that they should not block the electrical panel box in case of an emergency. He reminded Tom that the circuit the air conditioner had been on had overheated and almost caused a fire. They agreed to build the kennel behind the church adjacent to the vacant field with a small loafing shed.

After Tom had gone to take care of business, Idogbe had a second thought about the kennel location. *Children often play soccer on the vacant field. Maybe outside security cameras would be a better way to protect the church. Bowlegged Ayoola already gave me a miniature wireless camera. That camera is to be installed in the apartment to spy on Tom. What if—*

Tom made the usual Monday rounds to pay off the coffee vendor, the musicians, and Tanny for daycare. Although Victor Vee didn't perform at the church, he collected the money for the VV band members. Victor was a Gangsta Rapper and refused to play any semblance of gospel music or to step inside

a church. Along with natural talent, Victor had the mindset to do whatever was necessary to become a superstar.

When Tom entered the bar, Tanny lowered the wet cloth from her split lower lip. She needed rent money.

Tom took a stool at the bar and pointed at her swollen lip. "What happened?"

"Oh, ah— One of the whisky bottles fell off the shelf."

"Wow! You're lucky it didn't knock out a tooth." Tom stood up and leaned over the counter to get a closer look. "When did it happen?"

"This morning, when I was opening up."

"You should go see a doctor and maybe a dentist."

"I can't afford to do that," Tanny replied.

"It's an on-the-job injury. Your employer will cover your medical bills."

"I don't think so." Tanny needed to change the subject, as she knew Victor Vee was probably watching her on the security cameras. "You should try the lunch special. The deep-fried yams and black beans are delicious."

"I'm thinking maybe the fish and chips. My wife loves seafood. I'll try the Tilapia fish and chips and tell her how it is."

"You miss your wife. You mention her all the time."

I do miss Beth. We started dating in college. Beth might be here in a couple of weeks. If the fish and chips are good, I'll bring her here for her first dinner. I'd like you to meet her.

"Wouldn't you want a romantic dinner in your little apartment her first night here?" Tanny winked at Pastor Tom and then went into the kitchen. Like Beth, Tanny was a romantic at heart. Tanny thought that she had married the perfect man until he beat her unconscious when she was pregnant with their fourth child. She lost the baby, and her husband vanished all in that same week. A few months later, Victor came into her life—the beatings resumed.

"Hey, big man, Pastor Tom," came a loud call from the swinging entrance doors.

Tanny darted into the kitchen. Tom placed the envelope for church daycare on the counter and pulled the envelope for the musicians out of his pocket. He turned one hundred and eighty degrees on the barstool and then fist-bumped Victor. "I have the band's money?"

"Good." Victor took the stool next to Tom. "I hear you are

growing the crowd with the music and teaching that nine commandments are enough; it sounds like a cool message."

"You should come and listen. We all need forgiveness."

"Tanny was all mixed up about that adultery commandment you preached on. While watching the children, she didn't get the entire message."

"I'm glad I'm getting through to the congregation and that they are spreading my sermons."

"I had to straighten Tanny out! I told her about how Jesus forgave the Samaritan whore drawing water at the well."

"I didn't preach that the woman at the well was a whore! Photine of Samaria didn't sleep around for money. She was looking for a husband."

"Preacher Tom, all men twist the word to fit their agenda. Let me ask you this. What commandment would you throw out?" Tom sat silent. It was something he had never thought about.

Tanny came out of the kitchen and put the basket of fish and chips in front of Tom. "Would you like a beer with your lunch?"

"No, I'll just have water. Too much alcohol is one of the deadly sins," Tom boasted with a self-righteous tone. "It is the sin of gluttony, also known as the sin of excessiveness."

"What sin is for the weed you smoked behind the Hotel when you first got to Africa?" Victor Vee asked. "Better yet, what commandment says thou shalt not drink alcohol or smoke marijuana?"

Tom fell silent. How did Victor Vee know about the weed he smoked? He always was discreet about anything that could ruin his reputation. Tom remembered ducking behind a dumpster and taking a couple of hits. The next thing he was waking up in a hotel room about noon, and someone had turned in his laptop. He'd yet to meet or even talk to Victor Vee!

Tanny was also discreet as she casually slid the white envelope with DAYCARE over the bar's edge. She knew all about Victor's control tactics. He called her worse names than whore and slapped her around in front of her kids. Breaking down any semblance of the family unit kept Victor in charge.

"I'll take my fifty percent!" Victor laid his hand on the counter, palm up.

Tom was dismayed to see an open cut across Victor's hand. It didn't look like the thru and thru stigmata he'd seen earlier. Tanny placed the envelope in Victor's hand. "Take your share. But I do need to buy milk for my kids."

"Your kids can go without milk for a day or two. How else will they learn that suffering is part of life?"

"Jesus suffered on the cross so man doesn't have to. Through faith and prayer, we don't have to suffer. You should let Tanny keep all the money; she earned it."

"It's different in Nigeria. We're not like your old Glory and Praise church in Los Angeles that raised \$12,750 just for food for an animal shelter." Victor ripped off the top of the envelope, took out the Naira bills, and dumped the coins in his hand.

"What are you talking about? My church was in Dallas, Texas, not Los Angeles."

"That's not what the brass plaque says on it."

"What plaque?" Tom yelled. "I've been a Pastor for Glory and Praise ministries at two churches. My first assignment was in Tyler, Texas, and then I was moved to Dallas, Texas."

Victor threw the Naira currency and Kobo coins at Tanny. A few coins ricocheted off the liquor bottles, and a few traveled further and hit the bar mirror. "You stupid bitch! You told me Pastor Tom was from Los Angeles. Keep your money and your tips. I'm done with you."

Tanny immediately started collecting the money. She wished and had prayed to somehow get out of the toxic relationship she was in. She knew why Victor had created this distraction; he'd just put his foot in his mouth. The brass dedication plaque was still on the floor in the Vivtor Vee music box truck.

"Victor sure has a temper!" Tom said after Victor Vee exited the relaxation lounge.

"He and Phillip have a lot going on with the government crackdown on Bitcoin," Tanny replied.

"Don't you mean Bitcoin?" Tom asked. At least he knew the correct name for crypto-currency.

"Maybe? But this morning, Phillip, his twin brother Tyler, and Victor were moving the Bitcoin terminal out of the hall and into the security room. The twins dropped their end, and the metal on the Crypto machine's bottom cut Victor's palm."

"That's too bad," Tom replied, thinking of the crypto-

currency scam that caused the church treasurer to lose his securities license.

Tanny turned toward the shelves of liquor bottles so that her back was to the security cameras. She stuffed most of the Naira into her bra and thought. *Lucky for the Brit twins, the cut was across V V's swinging hand, or else he would have unleashed the Runga.*

Victor's Runga stick was a gift from his grandfather. It had a flexible shaft with an Ebony ball head and a custom left-handed grip. Victor had trained under his grandfather, a fetish priest who practiced Trokosi in Ghana until it got banned in 1995. The village elders revolted and burned down the Trokosi shrine after Victor's grandfather paralyzed one of his ten-year-old sex slaves with too hard of a rap to the middle of her back for not performing a sex act properly.

The Trokosi system had invoked imperious fear in villagers with daughters. Knowing a second virgin child could be demanded if the fetish priest grows tired of the first or she takes ill, or he wants a new younger child. The child slaves are banned from seeing or communicating with their birth family.

The real cruelty is that the alleged sin or misdeed any family member may have made against a Trokosi priest is rarely forgiven. In the rare case when a child gets released from the Trokosi shrine, the immediate family won't welcome her back—she is alone without even a name to be called by.

CHAP 9... **Raise more pigs...**

Ship-to-Shore appeared for the third time on Tom's phone. This time, he moved the number to his block-sender list. Nigeria is tied with India for Robo-calling, SPAM, and email fraud. Ransomware was more destructive to big businesses and municipalities and came mainly from Russia or the United States. Having a reputation for a country that didn't combat illicit internet scams hurt your standing within the World Trade Organization. The Nigerian government recently banned cryptocurrency trading to show they were serious about internet fraud.

Jacob had finished mopping the church floor and sat beside his red bucket and wet rags on the church stairs. Odogbe had locked up and was picking up supplies for the dog kennel. When the yellow Kekes stopped out front of the church gate, Jacob stood and crossed his arms like a big X across his chest. It was the international sign that deaf communities used worldwide—it meant to love.

The man-to-boy bond got stronger each time they played their game. Hopefully, someday, Jacob will learn about promotion. Tom glanced at the clock display on his phone. There was plenty of time to show Jacob a few basic moves. Using hand movements made it easier to coach Jacob than verbal instruction.

Tom put his hand over Jacob's small hand and showed him how to move. The move had to be repeated at least eight times to get promoted. Jacob already showed signs that he could become a master player. Learning all the moves would take time, and Tom knew not to push a young boy too hard.

Jacob couldn't hear the phone but felt it vibrating on the green table. The display blinked: **Dallas, Texas.** Words that he'd never seen before; Jacob memorized the letters on the sly.

Jacob was mute, so Tom put the phone on speaker without worries. "Good morning, my Elizabethan love."

"It was a good morning until your niece called at 5 am. She was calling from a ship in the Gulf of Guinea. Tina said you won't answer your phone!"

"I thought those ship-to-shore calls were SPAM. That's why I didn't answer them."

"The motorhome is going to be offloaded this week. You need to take the ship-to-shore call. Don't go to the Port Authorities, is what Tina said. That's all I know."

"Okay, I'll take the number off the block-sender list." Tom noticed Jacob had taken the paper pad from his rear pocket, sketched a woman with a phone to her ear, and had an apron on. Jacob then made two interlocking circles and printed the words Dallas, Texas.

"Tom, are you listening to me?" Beth asked firmly.

"Sorry. Did you remember to pack that old notebook computer?"

"It's in the cupboard under the sink," Beth answered.

"Good, I'm going to give it to Jacob. The deaf boy I've been telling you about. It will give him something to do when his brother is in school."

"Tom, you better ask his parents first! They might not want him playing on a computer."

"I'm teaching him to play chess. That old laptop has a chess game on it." Tom rubbed Jacob's nappy head of hair. "I'll run it by his parents."

"What about his brother? Are you going to give him something?"

"I didn't think about it. Do you think I should get something for Ekon?"

"Yes! Often, families with a unique child will overcompensate for that child, which builds resentment among the siblings."

"All I want to do is give Jacob an old computer to learn to play chess. Why make it so complicated?"

"I know Tom. But run it by his parents first. You don't know their family dynamic."

"I will, but either way, I will help Jacob become a good chess player. As we speak, I'm teaching him how to promote a pawn."

They'd been married long enough, and Beth knew Tom had his mindset. Jacob would soon be playing computer games. "

I'd forgotten that Hank, your hog hunter friend, sent you a gift. I hid it under the bench seat in the motorhome with your other stuff."

"That was nice of big old Hank."

"Hank said he assembled it himself, and you can knock down a hog from a thousand yards."

"That's cool. I bet Hank built me an AR-15 from a kit."

"I don't know. It was in a case, and I just shoved it into the cubby hole under the bench seat. Hank also said when you get back home, he knows a new place to helicopter hunt."

Tom sensed the resentment of doing guy's stuff in Beth's tone. "Honey, don't worry; before I run off on a hog hunting trip with Hank, we'll do that Italy trip you've always wanted."

"Okay." Beth felt better. Rome, Vatican City, and seeing Michael Angelo's artwork has been a deep spiritual desire since catholic school.

"Italy is half the distance from here in Lagos. After you get here, maybe we can fly up there for a weekend?"

A weekend rush through Italy was not Beth's lifelong dream. "Just take Tina's call. Please make sure you talk with the parents of those boys before you do any gift-giving!"

"Yeah, I will," Tom replied off the cuff. "Jacob might be old enough for one of my old target rifles. I'll talk to his dad first. Women don't get that gun ownership teaches responsibility."

Beth had enough! "I'm going to take Cain and Able for a run. I might do ten K since I got woken up so early by Tina."

Back in college, Beth's boyfriend forced her to play the docile role and reminded her the place on his motorcycle was behind him. Being a preacher's wife wasn't much different—Tom preached more than once that wives are to be submissive.

* * *

This time, when the **Ship-to-Shore** message appeared, Tom answered.

"Like, where have you been, Uncle Tom?"

"Sorry Tina, I thought your calls were SPAM."

"You need to pick me up on Thursday. When are we porting?"

"Not a problem. Do you know what terminal you will be

docking at?"

"No, I know we will land on Tin Can Island. I want off this stinking ship, and you need to pick me up!"

"Not a problem. Tina, find out from the Captain what terminal you will dock at. What is the name of the container ship you are on?" Tom pulled the pencil from between Jacob's fingers.

"It's the Kong Fang. It's black on top and red down by the water. Like there is Chinese writing after the name on the front part of the boat." Tom wrote Kong Fang on a blank page on Jacob's pocket-sized tablet

"That helps. I'll get you a room for Thursday night."

"That will be good. Make sure to get me a room at the beach on Tin Can Island?"

"Tina, you'll stay near my church, about six miles from the coastline. I know a guy that knows his way around Lagos. Victor Vee will know a safe beach for a tourist. He's a musician and works security."

"That sounds cool. Maybe Victor can show me some clubs to hang at."

"He has a girlfriend."

"Like that's okay. She can come along, too." A girlfriend or even a wife was never an issue with Tina. Sex was more of an unclean and sometimes painful act for Tina. At fourteen, her mother taught her how to seduce men and practice safe sex at the same time.

"Tina, call me back after you get the terminal and docking information." Tom hesitated; he knew there could be a problem. "Tina, if any custom agents start searching the motorhome, get away from the ship and give me a call."

"That won't happen. Kenny Chen has been sleeping in your motorhome. He's the big boss. Nobody goes up against Kenny Chen!"

There was a pounding sound on the back wall of the apartment. "Tina, I've got to see what's going on."

Jacob followed Tom out of the apartment and jumped over a roll of wire fencing. Then he tight-roped on a metal post lying on the ground.

"Be careful. You don't want to end up with a broken arm like your brother!" Tom forgot that Jacob couldn't hear. Jacob sixth-sensed the warning and stopped playing on the metal post.

"I thought you would build the dog kennel behind the church."

"I was, but kids play in the field back there, and it is not worth the risk of a dog bite."

"That's what I was telling you." Tom liked being right.

Idogbe did a casual up-and-down look over Jacob. Ever since the constable asked him to place a hidden camera in the apartment, he noticed the friendship between an adult man and a young boy seemed off. "I'll put a peephole through the back wall so you can see into the kennel."

"That's a great idea. Something that I can watch, Cain and Abel, would be great. My dogs are German Shepherds, so maybe three to five feet off the ground."

"I'll figure out something." Idogbe now had a reason to work inside the apartment, making it possible to hide a wireless spy camera.

Tom reached into his pocket, pulled out a few kobo coins, put them in Jacob's hand, and then pushed Jacob toward the hole in the fence behind the church.

Jacob pointed at himself and then at the apartment door. He made a few simple hand signals up and down and then back and forth. Idogbe took the hand signals to mean they would play-act in the apartment again. Tom moved his head up and down, affirming yes. Jacob ran to the church steps, retrieved the red bucket and mop, and headed home.

"You and Jacob are getting to be good friends," Idogbe said as he measured the back wall for the dog door.

"I want to be more like a coach than a friend," Tom replied in a none-of-your-business tone and walked toward the side door of the apartment.

Idogbe was getting less reluctant to constable Ayoola's telling him to install the mini camera. Something about Tom was sketchy. *The old bowlegged constable must have done a background check or pulled Tom's rap sheet*, Idogbe rationalized.

From inside, cutting a hole through the wall was ear-splitting loud. Tom headed to Olyin's Holiday Inn to reserve a room for Tina.

"How's the arm doing?" Tom asked as the Brit came up to the reception desk.

"I still don't have all my strength back. I dropped my end of

the Britcoin machine this morning.”

Tom rubbed his forehead. “I’m confused. Is it Bitcoin or Bitcoin?”

“That particular machine was an old Britcoin machine that we had shipped down from the UK. But you can trade most crypto-currencies on it. We are moving it into a private room for the élite class. Do you want to use it?”

“No thanks. My accountant and the church treasurer back in Texas got involved with Bitcoin, and the FBI came looking for him.”

“Our machine is programmed to convert US currency to Naira or Euros Pounds. Similar to how voting machines change votes. The FBI, CIA, and most intelligence agencies don’t know how to hack simple code.”

The unlocking *snap* of a deadbolt echoed off the hallway walls. Next, Victor exited the security room and strutted down the hallway to the reception desk. “What can we do for the big pastor man today?”

“I’m finding out about getting a room.”

“We now take crypto-currency. If you want to set up an account, I can do that for you.”

“No thanks. But I need a room on Thursday for a week or so.” Tom turned away from Victor; he always suspected that Victor had used the front desk security camera to listen to conversations.

“So, I’m finally going to meet the wife.” Victor Vee patted Tom on the shoulder with his right hand. His left hand was wrapped with gauze.

“I don’t need a room for my wife. The room is for my niece, Tina.”

“Oh, what brings Tina to Lagos?”

“She is helping get my motorhome shipped into Tin Can Port. Tina wants to see a few places while she is here. Maybe you can help?”

“Oh, what kind of places does Tina want to see?”

“The Lufasi Nature Center, the beach, and museums. Idogbe, the church handyman, offered to take her to his Mom’s strawberry farm, but that’s not her thing.”

“What about a Safari? The hotel has a few tour guides that we work with.” The nature center and museums weren’t places Victor Vee wanted to show anybody.

"Probably not for my niece. Tina's more the animal-rights, tree-hugger type." Tom looked back over his shoulder at Phillip. "But when my friend Hank visits, I'll check in with you. Hank's a big helicopter hog hunter back home in Texas."

Hank was more than a feral game hunter. He owned North America's third-largest cattle ranch, enclosed with a single border fence. Down in Mexico, Hank was known as the Flying Coyote Killer. Smuggling immigrants, drugs, or anything illegal across his ranch didn't end well for the cartel smugglers. Hank had a presence of atrocities only Old Testament Peacemakers had the stomach for.

* * *

Thursday morning, Tom was expecting a call to find out what terminal the motorhome was at. He had checked and found out that customs rarely opened vehicle containers—he felt less nervous. He didn't know that Tina hadn't renewed her passport, which would trigger an inspection, detainment, and deportation.

Jacob was already there, kneeling in a chair and being mentored by Tom. Before they started their game, Tom had Jacob touch his forehead and stomach, and then Jacob felt mechanical sound vibrations. Tom heard the air horn, stood up, and looked out the window. "What the hell?"

Outside, Tom unlocked the gate and pushed one panel open. Jacob used all his weight to force open the other panel. The Asian driver followed Tom's hand signals and pulled the motorhome over the curb into the small parking lot between the apartment and the church. Fingers flying, yelling, and blasting horns from Frontage Road subsided as traffic started to move again.

Tina jumped out of the passenger door and did a 360 twirl. "Like wow! This place is more crammed up than LA."

"Almost twenty million people live in Lagos." Tom guardedly watched the Asian driver get out from behind the wheel.

Tina pointed at Jacob milling around the motorhome. "Like, is that your little slave boy?" Usually, Tom would have reprimanded anybody who referred to Africans as slaves, but

this was Tina.

"That's Jacob; he's my mentee and helper."

Tina didn't have a reply. She thought a mentee was a big sea animal at the zoo—so much for five years of college.

The driver came around the front of the Sprinter. "I'm Kenny Chen from Zhongnanhai, China. We spoke on the phone."

"Thanks for delivering my motorhome. I wasn't looking forward to navigating Tin Can Island's potholes and muddy roads."

"The People's Chinese Party wants to clean up and modernize Tin Can Island." Kenny Chen was not supposed to discuss the goals and desire for CCP world dominance. But he'd been a true loyalist since the age of eight.

Jacob slowly worked around the motorhome and latched onto Tom's hand. "Jacob is mute."

"Oh, so that means Jacob can't talk?" Tina asked.

"Jacob lost his hearing from Malaria drugs. He can make verbal sounds but can't communicate with most people."

"Malaria has been eradicated from China. That is another thing we can do for Africa," Kenny Chen proudly spoke.

"That would be wonderful. But have you asked the hard-working Nigerians if they want China to re-colonize their country? You should talk to Jacob's Dad about the CPC's proposed four dams on the Benue River." Tom rubbed Jacob's full head of hair and then massaged the back of his neck.

"Like, could I do that? I've never felt an afro before." Tina reached out toward Jacob's head.

Tom swatted her hand back. "Maybe after you get to know Jacob, he will say it's okay."

"But he can't talk," Tina rebutted.

"Jacob has curly hair, not an Afro!"

Tom pulled Jacob back. Tina's stereotyping and Mr. Meng's arrogant pride were too much. Tom opened the rear doors of the Mercedes Sprinter and immediately had to hold his breath when a pungent stench rolled out. Twenty-six days of survival in less than 320 cubic feet of living space was disgusting.

There were dirty dishes, greasy pots, and a wok piled in the sink. About a dozen black flies circled a pile of damp bath towels in front of the bathroom door. The grey water tank had backed up into the shower. Fortunately, the black water tank

had not overflowed. The CCP had planned for that problem and had placed two chemical toilets at the front of the container.

Tom slammed the door and looked at Tina. "Grab your stuff. I got a hotel room reserved for you."

Tina opened the side compartment and unloaded three pieces of matching Gucci luggage. "I hope this hotel has a spa. The salty sea air has been tough on my skin."

Tom looked at Kenny Chen. "Grab your stuff! We'll have to get you a room."

"No, I will stay with the motorhome."

"Like hell, you will. I'm going to get it cleaned and detailed. I didn't know anybody would be living in it."

Mr. Chen opened the side compartment and grabbed a military duffel bag. He didn't argue; unlike Tina, he'd spent the entire trip in the motorhome inside an altered forty-foot shipping container. At night, he'd come out and amble among the maze of steel boxes for fresh air and to exercise. Solitary training started just before his eighth birthday when his parents sent him off to the Republic of China Military Academy in the Fengshan District on the island of Taiwan.

The CCP slogan to have fewer children and raise more pigs affected Kenny greatly. It meant a pig's life had more value than his. Kenny never celebrated any more birthdays or had contact with his mother or father. From that time forward, he was a child of the State. Honor the CCP— not thy father or thy mother was his life.

CHAP 10... **Saved by grace**

"Phillip!" Tom said as he approached the reservation desk.

Harry turned around. "My twin brother Phillip had the midnight shift. How can I help?"

"You two are hard to tell apart." Tom motioned over his shoulder at Tina with a Gucci bag in hand. Mr. Chen was toting her two other pieces of luggage, plus his army green duffel bag.

"We are identical twins and..." Harry paused when a red LED flashed on the overhead security camera, reflecting off the glass countertop. Harry knew that he was being watched.

"My niece has a reservation. It's under Tina Williams."

The clerk typed in the information and then said. "Yes, we have her room with two twin beds and free Wi-Fi."

"A twin bed! I need a queen bed, at least." Tina piped in as she looked over the lobby. "What is this place like a one-star hotel?"

"Could you upgrade Ms. Tina to a suite and give her room to Mr. Chen?" Tom pointed back toward the Chinese loyalist.

After a minute of typing and several mouse clicks, they got the bad news. A photography club booked the hotel; no extra rooms were available until Monday.

Mr. Chen placed Tina's luggage and repositioned the duffel bag on his shoulder. Being raised at cadet boarding school prepared him for long periods of isolation; no family contact since childhood built inner strength, but traveling solo halfway around the world inside a metal shipping container had Kenny on the verge of a mental breakdown. Although his assignment was only half completed, Chen hoped that the human interaction of staying in a motel would push out the black cloud of five weeks of solitary confinement crossing oceans. That reprieve looked to be off the table.

"Give the room with twin beds to Mr. Chen. Then book a room with a king bed for my niece after the photography club

checks out."

Kenny Chen dropped Tina's bags, snapped up the motel room key, and hurried off.

Crammed between Tom and her Gucci luggage on the trip back to the church, Tina said, "I like the smell of your cologne. What is it?"

"Old Spice," Tom replied as he leaned over and sniffed Tina's head of blond hair. "You smell good, too." Tom reflected on how terrible the motorhome smelled.

"No, I don't. I need a shower ASAP."

"There is a shower in my apartment. That's where you can stay until Monday."

"Like, does that mean I'm going to have a sleepover with you?" Tina wiggled tighter against Tom.

"No, I'll sleep in the motorhome after airing it out. It smells like dirty grease and dirty underwear."

"Mr. Chen used a Wok to cook mostly fish and rice."

"It smells worse than fish and rice!"

"If your cottage has a king bed, we can share it." Tina put her hand on Tom's thigh.

Tom moved her hand away. "Tina, let's not play games!"

"Oh, come on, Uncle Tom. I remember how you used to bounce me in your lap. What am I too old now?"

"Tina quit fooling around. We are adults, and you need to act like one."

"I'm only kidding with you." She was not used to men pushing her away. Tom strained to keep his animalistic emotions under control.

Jacob ran from the church porch to the yellow keke and grabbed a piece of luggage. Tina followed the two across the parking area and into the apartment.

"There's the shower," Tom said as he reached into a small linen closet. "Here are some clean towels."

Tina held up two African print towels. "These bright colors better not fade onto my blond hair. Do you have shampoo and conditioner?"

"No, but here's a fresh bar of soap." Tom reached back into the linen closet. "It's only a ten-gallon water heater, so get wet, soap up, and then rinse off."

Jacob's young eyes fixated on Tina as she unbuttoned her blouse. Flawless white skin and straight blond hair had an

eight-year-old captured by her queen-like beauty. Jacob never experienced a lack of modesty from the few white women he had encountered.

Tom dug under the sink for cleaning supplies. He handed a spray bottle of yellow-green concentrate to Jacob. They exited the apartment to clean and air out the motorhome. Idogbe was busy working on the kennel behind the flat. Ekon showed up after school and joined in with the deep cleaning of the motorhome.

Tom used an oversized hose to empty the gray water tank into the field behind the church. There was brown rice in a large white cloth bag, about half a dozen eggs in the refrigerator, and an almost full five-gallon barrel of rancid-smelling cooking oil. The eggs and rice got set to the side for the boys. Tom set the oil barrel out by a rear tire. He would dispose of the smelly used brown sludge after dark.

Ekon was kneeling and mopping the floor when he figured out the hidden door on the side of the bench seat. After he saw the guns and ammunition, he quickly put the plywood back in place. It snapped hard onto the four super-strong magnets. Ekon jumped up and then put dirty bed linen into the red bucket. He told Tom they would wash the stuff and return the linen after it dried on the clothesline.

Tom gave each brother a thousand Naira, eggs, and rice. Then he unrolled a sleeping bag. He now had a place to sleep for a few nights with AC. His next moves would have to wait until after dark. The used cooking grease would get dumped in the street gutter. The guns and ammunition would get hidden in the church closet.

Curiosity got the best of Tom. He pried the plywood side panel away from the rare-earth magnets. Stuffed in the cubbyhole was a gift from Hank, the hog hunter. Tom set the gun case on top of the table and opened it. His hunch was correct! It was a fully assembled AR-15 built from internet parts with no serial number. Ghost firearms are legal in the United States. Not so in Nigeria. Ever since the Nigerian Explosives Act of 1964, anyone caught with any unregistered gun could end up in prison for a minimum of five years.

The electronic red-dot optic sight was better than a barrel scope. Target acquisition was twice as fast. Hollow-point ammunition had been banned in the US for warfare but is more

humane for hunting viral hogs. One shot anywhere to the torso was an internal explosion and instant death. In West Africa, wild hogs are called forest pigs. No matter what continent—hogs or pigs will eat flesh and bone.

Hank held the gun club record for knocking down a dozen Texas viral hogs in less than two minutes from a helicopter. Tom might have a chance to beat Hank's record with this new AR-15 fitted with red-dot optic sights. A magnet-to-magnet sound could be heard outside through an open six-inch hole above the cubbyhole when the plywood end panel snapped back into place.

Tom did an outside perimeter inspection of the Sprinter. Someone had removed a protruding vent cover, which explained the open hole. All the tires were underinflated; Tom speculated that the reason for these oddities was to let someone squeeze between the steel walls of the shipping container and the Sprinter. The low tires were so that the air conditioning compressor on the roof would clear the shipping container top. Everything else seemed to be in place. Tom locked up the motorhome and then made a reservation at an authentic Nigerian restaurant.

Over a month at sea, Tina was more than ready to experience some nightlife. Tom should have stopped with his second glass of palm wine, but Tina insisted they order another bottle. They laughed and shared old memories. There was a profound moment when Tina talked about her stepfather. She spoke about how Tom's brother was lucky to only get five years for his part in the Purdue Pharmacy Oxycodone kickback scheme.

It was dark when the keke driver dropped them off in front of the church. Tom unlocked the apartment for Tina. Unexpected, she stood on her toes and gave him a quick kiss on the lips. Tom's spinning mind went to a place he fought back for years—lust.

Tom found the old notebook computer in the cupboard under the sink inside the motorhome. The battery still showed over half a charge. His main concern was that the chess game worked. Tom had just lost his queen to the computer at the fold-down table when there was a knock on the motorhome door.

"Uncle Tom, could you show me how to get more water

pressure? My hair has a cigarette smell from that restaurant."

Tom fumbled with the side door screen. "You need a shower again?"

"I do. Why do they allow smoking in restaurants over here?"

Tom stepped out of the motorhome. "I didn't see anybody smoking. But they do use an open fire pit to cook on."

"Gross!" Tina grabbed Tom's hand as they walked back toward the apartment.

"Don't forget you only have ten gallons of hot water."

"That's not enough water for showering with someone."

"Tina, two people would get stuck. Ah, But then they'd get a cold shower," Tom replied jokingly. The palm wine was still collapsing his guard; its effect was more like 75-proof Chevis Scotch.

"Tom, you are so funny."

"The shower in the motorhome is even smaller. That shower is not built for two either," Tom slurred more nonsense.

"I don't know how small the shower in that motorhome is. I stayed in the captain's guest quarters, which had a big shower. Kenny Chen stayed the entire trip in your motorhome. He only came out at night. He stayed to himself and kept daily records," Tina babbled as they walked into the apartment.

Tom showed Tina how the shower spray head twisted to save water, "What did Mr. Chen keep records of?"

"CO levels and scurvy? Whatever those things are?."

"They are things that kill sailors living in tight-dark quarters."

"Oh..." Tina unbuttoned her blouse and let it drop.

Wide-eyed, Tom gazed at her rounded shoulders and dark tan. "I can see you get plenty of sun. The UV rays help to prevent scurvy."

Tina pushed her skirt down, stepped out of it, and pinned Tom against the sink.

The scent in her hair was more intoxicating than the two bottles of palm wine had been. Tom covered his eyes.

"It's okay, you've seen my boobs before. Remember at my high school party when I was showing off the graduation gift your brother gave me?"

"Yeah, sure, I remember. You wanted to know if, uhm, they look natural."

Tina pulled Tom's hand down and stepped back. "After all

these years, do you still think they look good?"

"Yes, they do. Your breasts still look good." Tom clamped his eyes closed.

"Don't be such a prude. They're called tits." Tina took Tom's hand and put it over her right boob. "Do they feel normal to you?"

"Um... It feels more firm compared to Beth. But Beth's a lot older than you." Tom lifted his other hand and put it over Tina's other boob.

Tina unhooked Tom's belt and unzipped his slacks. Her skill set was mental stimulation, followed by a quick massage. Tom lost it in less than a few minutes—a new record for Tina.

Many times, Tom had preached about gouging out an eye and throwing it on the ground to avoid lust and coveting. He rushed out of the apartment and barricaded himself in the motorhome. He'd been chaste in high school and was never unfaithful in college or his marriage. The guilt and the thought of Beth finding out were wrenching between his gut and soul. Self-hatred for not being strong and not living in the image of God was overbearing. After two minutes of pleasure, Tom had just destroyed a twenty-year marriage.

After smoking some weed, Tina crashed on the bed, not at all bothered by what had happened. She slept better now that she had good blackmail material. She had Tom by the balls.

Around 3:00 AM, Tom stared through the uncovered vent hole toward the apartment; all the lights were off. *It's about noon in Texas. Beth is probably away. Some things are best not shared. After all, Elizabeth has a past with shaded immorality.*

Discernment continued to boil over in Tom's head. Ever since the Garden of Eden, temptress women have attracted powerful men like a Praying Mantis looking to snap off the head of her mate. Eliminating Tina kept crossing Tom's mind. He needed to find out where all this back-and-forth discernment was coming from. Then, like a tornado had touched down between his ears, 'Thou shalt not kill' was spun and tossed out of the gray funnel cloud. Tom knew what he could or should do.

He shinned the flashlight on the apartment door and taped an envelope over the peephole. He hurried back into the motorhome. Delivery trucks were starting to move up and down Frontage Road. He found an all-night service station for fuel and airing the tires. Then, he set the in-dash GPS for

Plateau State. There was a tourist attraction near Abuja, the capital of Nigeria, that Idogbe insisted would make sense as to why he got exiled to Africa.

After a few hours of driving, the rising sun was beating through the windshield. Tom was nodding off. He'd been up for twenty-four hours and consumed too much palm wine. Tom turned off Highway 121 onto an unmarked road spur and saw a cell tower poking above the trees. He parked between the radio equipment building and a propane tank enclosed by wire fencing.

Tom moved from the driver's seat to the bed and closed his eyes. Not fifteen minutes passed before he heard animal calls that he had never heard before. Tom rolled over on his stomach and peered through the 6-inch vent opening. Guenon monkeys were swinging and jumping from the wire fencing, the communication cables, and back and forth to a nearby tree. Tom pulled pillows up against both sides of his head. A long furry arm reaches into the vent open hole and grabs Tom by the hair. Startled, Tom sprang from the bed, hustled upfront, and grabbed a Walther PP automatic hidden under the passenger seat. A 32 caliber is marginal for personal protection in a road rage confrontation. However, it could kill a monkey with a spot-on shot.

Tom jumped out the passenger door and fired at the primate, still reaching into the motorhome. It ran, jumped on, and climbed over the wire fence. Tom shot again and again! He heard the bullets ricocheting off a car-sized white propane tank. So did the family of Guenons; they scattered out from harm's way.

Back inside, Tom rolled onto his back. It took twenty minutes before the loud bullet **pops** hitting metal quit ringing in his ears. A dark dream began to seep in. Tom tried waking himself from a nightmare that felt real.

Beth was in an orange jumpsuit in a courtroom. The prosecutor was accusing her of falsely filing a million-dollar life insurance claim. Tom saw himself floating above the burned-up motorhome and investigators pointing at bullet holes in the burnt propane tank. Then Tom was yanked back to one of the many arguments Beth and he had early in their interfaith marriage. Catholic dogma states that taking a life can be justified—like a killing on the battlefield or defending a family.

The nightmare ended with Beth being found guilty of knowing that Tom had committed suicide, yet she filed for his death benefit. After six months in jail, giving back the insurance money, along with attorney fees—Beth was broke and homeless. Tom woke shivering in a cold sweat!

While recklessly driving back toward Highway 121, Tom's discernment flip-flopped. *Beth is innocent in all of this. Tina is the one who brought this all on. King David committed adultery with eight different wives and then arranged for Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, to be killed in battle. Everything worked out for King David. It should for me also—I've been saved by Grace.*

CHAP 11... **Thirty-second clip**

Daylight shining through the unfinished dog door, horns honking, and bustling street noise made it impossible for Tina to sleep in. The fourth time someone lightly tapped on the apartment door, Tina yanked the pillow off her head, got out of bed, and walked across the damp concrete. She stood on her toes to peek out the peephole, but it was blocked. The tapping started again!

Tina had vacationed abroad with her mother as a teenager and learned how to stay safe and protect herself in a foreign country. She found a butcher knife in a drawer next to the sink. She tried the peephole again, but it was still blocked. The tapping turned to knocking. Tina gripped the wooden knife handle as tightly as she could. *Thrust first and then scream is what Mom taught me.*

Tina barely cracked open the door, looked down, and saw a black curly head of hair, a green tee shirt, and a boy with a red bucket in hand. "What do you want?"

Jacob pointed into the apartment and then held his other hand as high as he could over his head so to indicate a taller person.

Tina understood what Jacob wanted. "Pastor Tom slept in the motorhome! Go knock on that door!" She slammed the door in Jacob's face, tossed the knife on the table, then crawled back into bed and buried her head into one of the pillows.

Barely five minutes had passed when the knocking became hard-pounding. Tina pushed the pillow to the side, stepped on the floor, and determinedly headed toward the door. Her big toe hit the leg of one of the green chairs. "God Damn it! Jesus Christ, that hurts!" Tina yelled while bouncing on one leg and rubbing at her swelling big toe.

Idogbe heard the profanity through the dog door opening that he was about to finish. Fortunately, Jacob could not hear the taking of God's name in vain. Tina hobbled to the door and yanked it all the way open. "I told you! Tom slept in the motorhome!"

Jacob shook his head from side to side and then pointed down the side alley. Tina stepped out of the apartment, looked right, and then left. "What the F__k! Where's the motorhome?"

Idogbe came around the rear corner of the apartment. With the sun shining through Tina's camisole, she might as well have been naked. "Pastor Tom left you a note." Idogbe pointed at the door with a screwdriver in his hand.

Tina looked over her shoulder and then snatched the envelope hanging over the peephole. "What the f__k is this?"

"You curse so much!" Idogbe said, slipping the screwdriver into his toolbelt.

"Like, sorry that I dropped the F-bomb in front of the black boy."

"Jacob can't hear. I heard you take the Lord's name in vain."

"So what! It's better than the F-bomb."

"No, it's not," Idogbe scowled and added, "You should cover up, especially when you are next to a house of worship and a young child."

"I stubbed my toe, and it hurt like an M-F." Tina held back the words she sometimes used and tore open the envelope. She walked into the apartment and slammed the door! She detested the better-than-thou types like Idogbe.

Jealously even affects eight-year-olds. Jacob took up his usual waiting spot on the church steps with his bucket and cleaning supplies. He wondered if Tina would also be playing games with Pastor Tom. After a few minutes, Tina came out of the apartment with skimpy shorts and a half-buttoned sleeveless shirt. She strutted around to the back of the apartment and confronted Idogbe. "You are supposed to help me!"

Idogbe stopped attaching the dog door trim. "What?"

"My uncle Tom wrote that you must be my driver and take me to some good spots," Tina lied. The note stated that Tom would be gone for a day and that she should ask the church handyman if she had any questions.

"Okay, let me pick up my stuff."

Jacob leaped from the steps and helped Idogbe gather his tools and put them in the back of the worn-out Datsun pickup. Idogbe had to pull hard to open the passenger door. The rusty hinge squawked like a hungry seagull. The half-inch of mud on

the floorboard put Tina on a different plan. Riding around in the rust bucket of an old truck would not be her way to see the largest city in Nigeria.

Idogbe started up the old pickup, and a gray cloud of smoke belched out from underneath. He leaned over and yelled, "Where would you like to go?"

Tina had yet to get in. "My uncle took me to a Holiday Inn yesterday. A British-speaking man was working the front desk. There was a lounge and a swimming pool out back."

"That must be Oyins Holiday Inn and Relaxation Lounge. It is less than two kilometers from here. I'll take you."

Tina looked at the bench seat with dirty foam rubber pushing out of two or three slits in the vinyl. "How far is that in miles?"

"Not far, just over a mile."

"Like, I need to get some more things." Tina strolled back into the apartment to put on sunblock, pack a pool bag, and get different sunglasses and walking shoes.

After five minutes, Idogbe shut off the rusted-out work truck and stepped out. *Do all American women take this long? I must finish the door before Pastor Tom's dogs arrive.*

When Tina finally came out of the apartment, Idogbe and Jacob were sitting on the church steps, passing a writing notepad back and forth. Jacob glanced down at the pad and shook his head from side to side. He did not like the sketch of two big dogs inside a jail-like fence.

Tina approached and said, "Let's walk to the Holiday Inn. I don't want my stuff to get dirty in your old truck."

"Should I call you Pastor Tom's niece or Mrs. _____?" Idogbe extended his hand to help Tina with her oversized bag.

"Yikes, your hands are dirty! This is a Louis Vuitton! I'll carry it myself."

Idogbe scrutinized the beach bag. "It looks fake to me. I can take you to a market that sells all kinds of sham stuff. Your uncle bought a phone there."

The insinuation that Tina was phony did not set well. "Call me Ms. Williams!" She made a beeline toward Frontage Road.

Idogbe locked the church gate and then caught up with Tina. "I know street vendors that sell knock-off stuff like your sunglasses. Want me to take you there? Tourists like those kinds of places."

"Can you walk a few steps behind?" The honking and catcalls as Tina chassed through the crowd felt good. She was a skilled temptress who knew how to get what she wanted.

From an early age, Tina's mom often embellished the story of how Princess Salome danced for her uncle and stepfather. About how Salome's natural beauty and seductive body movements were so seducing that King Herod promised her anything, even up to half of his kingdom. Solomon's mother told her to test her stepfather's promise by asking for the head of John the Baptist on a platter — Salome did so without hesitation. Tina vowed to have the same kind of control over men as Princess Salome had. Seducing her stepfather in high school paid off when she wanted a brand new car — now she had her uncle in her grasp.

Idogbe followed a few steps behind and paid zero notice to Tina's skimpy white shorts and bareback. Tina blasted across the hotel lobby toward the front desk. Phillip gave Tina the once over and then gave her the okay to hang around the pool and use the other hotel amenities. Technically, she is a guest on Monday. Tina's mother had taught her the do's and don'ts while traveling abroad. She chose a one-piece swimsuit instead of the thong and crop top she packed in her beach bag. She rubbed on sunscreen and pulled on her Versace gold-tinted sunglasses before she left the changing room.

The ten-foot-high cinder block wall with multiple security cameras made the outdoor pool area feel more like a prison yard. She positioned a chaise lounge chair so that her head would be in the shade and her body would be in the sun. She was going through her music playlist on her phone when a tall Nigerian dressed in a long-sleeved white pullover and white cotton slacks came out from a sliding glass door.

Victor Vee turned at the pool's shallow end and then made a beeline toward Tina. He balanced a frosted pink drink on a round serving platter and a bag of Chin-chin from the bar kitchen. "Oyins would like to treat you to one of their super chilled drinks."

Tina quickly stared over the top of her Versace sunglasses; she could tell that most of the gold bling on the waiter was fake. The large pendant against his brown chest did look real. The white pullover with an open V-cut neck and long sleeves was somewhat cheesy, but Victor's perfect teeth and smile

pulled it off.

"Thank you," Tina replied, taking the tall frosted glass off the platter.

"You must be Tom's niece?" Victor asked as he tossed the complimentary bag of Chin-Chin's on Tina's flat stomach.

"Like, how did you know that?" Tina asked as she took a sip.

"Your uncle asked me to show you the Lufasi Nature Park, the Lekki Conservation Centre, and some of our museums."

Tina took a firm drink and then sniffed at the pink froth. "What kind of alcohol is in this?"

"There's a shot of vanilla vodka and rum blended with strawberries. It's a favorite of our younger guests."

"Bitter Chinese Baijiu is the only alcohol I had to drink at sea. It tasted like shit."

"Whatever you have to drink today is on me." Victor flashed a full smile. "I can have the bar make anything you desire."

"Like, thank you for that." Tina laid back and pushed her sunglasses up as Victor walked away. *That waiter seems nice. I wonder if he'd show me where the action is.*

Victor ordered Tanny to serve Tina whatever she wanted and left. From the security office, he focused two pool area cameras on Tina. *The Pastor's niece is a fine-looking lady. I need to play this one carefully. She's from Los Angeles and could be my ticket to Hollywood.*

Victor left the security office and entered the storage room directly across the hall. He made a withdrawal from the Bitcoin ATM. That cryptocurrency transaction flashed on an eighty-inch screen halfway around the world and three floors underground in Pueblo, Colorado.

Tanny knew how Victor played most of the do-gooder white women who came to Lagos to save the Western Cheetah or the endangered Dama Gazelle. Tanny always enjoyed informing a table of well-decked-out, earth-baby activists that Cheetahs eat Gazelles. However, only some activists were as gorgeous and put together as Tina.

Tanny spit in the bottom of a glass and added rum, strawberries, and a double shot of vodka. It was the only bit of power an unwed mother raising three children had over a wealthy white American who looked to be on the make.

"Here's another drink," Tanny said as she bent over and set

the drink on the concrete. *Wow*, Tanny said to herself. *Her natural beauty is even more striking up close.*

"Thanks, but one drink is my limit. I need to take my Zovirax medication, and it doesn't mix well with alcohol." Tina was laying out a falsehood that worked to protect her from any unwanted advances.

"Oh ... What do you take Zov-a-wrap for?"

"Zovirax is for a flare-up, like a UTI, but worse. You know, safe sex stuff. It's very contagious."

"Oh?" Tanny was confused and concerned. "I'll go get you a glass of water so you can take your Zov-a-wrap."

"That would be great." Tina rolled over onto her side. "I'm taking Z-O-V-I-R-A-X, not Zov-a-wrap," Tina wanted to be sure Tanny had the correct spelling.

Inside the bar, Tanny did an internet search for Zovirax. She found out that it was the latest drug for the herpes virus! This information helped to knock a stunning beauty off the high horse men always put good-looking women on. Tanny could not wait to tell Victor. Before she had a chance, Victor offered Tina a ride in the band's van to show her around the neighborhood.

Victor drove an hour or so, wandering through a neatly kept middle-class neighborhood, pointing out stores and street vendors that Tina might need. Eventually, he pulled into some trees and pointed across a vacant field. "That is the back of Glory and Praise Church. Do you want to smoke some weed? It's the middle of the day, and you can always walk to the apartment if you want to."

Tina's brain shifted into protection mode. A square piece of brown metal on the floor looked heavy enough to use like an old cast iron skillet to knock Victor out if need be. "Do you have any cocaine?"

"No, but one of the guys in my band can keep you supplied."

"Okay, I'll take a couple of hits."

"We should move to the back." Victor flipped over two buckets.

African weed was more potent than what Tina was used to. In addition, she had not eaten much all day. After a few hits, her head started to throb and spin. She gagged, coughed, and felt sick. Victor slid the side door open. Hunched over, Tina puked up chin-chin chips and pink strawberry froth out the side

door onto the wet grass and mud.

Victor held her blond hair away from her mouth. The vomit smell was overwhelming! Victor climbed in through the sliding door into the driver's seat to move the van closer to the rear of the church. The bumpy field and tight turns caused the square piece of brass metal to bounce and slide out the open side door. The embossed Gloria and Praise Church, dedicated on June 16, 1991, side of the dedication plaque, landed face down in a mud puddle. The chain link fence prevented Victor from driving up the alley between the church and the apartment. He jumped out and crossed behind the truck box to get Tina out.

Idogbe heard the commotion of Tina getting pushed down the alley. "What did you give her?" He yelled.

"We smoked some wee-wee, and she got sick!" Victor felt for the Rungu stick in his milk-white pants. If Idogbe got threatening, he'd use it.

"Let's put her in the apartment." Idogbe ducked under her other arm.

A set of eyes observed the two men carrying the white woman into the apartment from trees on the field's far edge. *Something is wrong!*

"Lay her on the bed," Idogbe said.

Even with pink puke around Tina's mouth, Victor thought about rolling Tina onto her stomach and teaching her a lesson.

"I will take it from here!" Idogbe affirmed.

"Let the blond babe know how I came to the rescue and brought her home," Victor boasted.

"Sure thing; I'll also let her know about the tainted marijuana that you probably gave to her."

Victor gripped the Rungu stick. Idogbe might also need to learn a lesson, too.

Tina rolled onto her side and curled up into the fetal position. She was fading in and out; her arms and legs felt heavy. Physically helpless, Tina needed some psychological control over the two men standing over her. She forced herself to puke.

"Do you need some water? You have vomit around your mouth." Idogbe stepped back.

Tina pulled the bed sheet over her head. "I need my medication. I'm in a breakout. I take, I take Zovirax for VD."

"I don't know what she's talking about," Idogbe looked over

at Victor on the other side of the bed.

"This woman came across the Atlantic on a Chinese freighter and stayed in the Captain's room. She just told us she has a venereal disease. Let the Ashawo know that I saved her. She owes me."

"She's no prostitute! She's Pastor Tom's niece," Idogbe rebutted.

Halfway out the door, Victor turned and said, "She's my Ho now." He trotted down the alley. There was musical and sound equipment, plus marijuana, inside the wide-open oversized van.

Jacob was crouched in the woods, unsure what to do or who to tell. When Victor slid the side door closed. The V V on the side of the truck were letters he wanted to forget. That day, he was hanging wanted posters when his brother's arm got broken with a club-like stick. Ekon warned him never to tell anybody about what happened to his arm. The big van bounced back across the field. Jacob ducked behind a tree, clamped his eyes closed, and, in deafness—peed himself.

Victor Vee drove through the patch of trees and then meandered into the meager neighborhood. Jacob hid in the trees and watched until the V V music van turned and was out of sight. The front of his red shorts was soaked with pee. Jacob rushed into the field; tromping in mud puddles would cover the wet spot on the front of his shorts and the urine running down his legs.

Jacob took three huge strides like a long jumper and went airborne before a giant mud puddle. There was a solid thump instead of a splash. Just below the murky water's surface, he landed directly on the dedication plaque. He stepped back, bent over, and raised one end of the bronze metal square. The embossed words and numbers meant nothing. However, he knew where the plaque came from!

Ekon had warned Jacob not to notepad about anything stolen from the church and never to draw a truck with two V's on the side. Being deaf, Jacob was conflicted about not being truthful. Pastor Tom wanted him to draw what he saw. If he communicated the truth, the VV man would hurt his family or Ekon again.

The brass was cold, wet, and heavy. The embossed letters pushed into Jacob's chest as he carried the heavy metal to the base of a Ube tree. Jacob used his bucket to dig a shallow hole

in the dirt. Next, he covered the plaque and spread leaves and sticks on top. Jacob was dirt-covered and wet from head to toe. Fifi would be upset, but Jacob was unique; she rarely yelled at him. It had to be face-to-face when she did—hurting her worse than Jacob.

* * *

Back across the field, up the alley, and inside the apartment, Idogbe scanned a note he had spotted on the table.

Tina, I'm so sorry for what happened. I lost self-control. I'm traveling north to the Glory and Praise outreach school to contemplate my marriage. I will be back late Saturday. The church handyman, Idogbe, will be working on the dog kennel. Ask him if you need something. Please don't talk to Beth about what happened. I will do whatever you want. I will even—

Without finishing the letter, Idogbe placed the stationary back on the table. He knew it was wrong to read a message addressed to someone else. However, he had read enough to know that something had happened between Tom and Tina! *Pastor Tom's wife should know about it, especially since he got exposed to a venereal disease. Thank God I live a celibate life.*

Idogbe drew a glass of water and set it on the nightstand beside the bed. Then he went to his truck to get some organic Kola tablets from the glove box. "Here, take two of these," Idogbe said, standing over Tina.

"Get away from me! I know about date rape drugs! I grew up around Hollywood people and..." The dry heaving started again.

Idogbe set the bottle of Kola tablets on the nightstand and then stepped outside to call Pastor Tom. The call went to voicemail, and Idogbe hung up; he knew better than to leave such a sensitive message.

With all the drama and chaos, Idogbe figured it would be an

excellent time to install the mini spy camera Constable Ayoola asked him to hide in the apartment. Something he was not going to do, but under these circumstances, he changed his mind.

He drilled a small hole in the aluminum trim above the door flap on the new dog door and inserted the tiny camera. The point of view was low and mostly obscured by the green table and four chairs. Idogbe did not care! Building a hidden closet for a Christian pastor seemed wrong. Now, installing a spy camera for a Muslim elder was not what Idogbe wanted to be part of. He detested these sanctimonious requests by men in positions of power.

Idogbe kept calling Pastor Tom's phone without any luck. It started raining hard after the sun went down. He got soaked picking up his tools, and the old yellow truck would not start. It looked like he was going to have to spend the night. He pushed two church benches together, laid on his back, crossed his arms across his chest, and prayed. There was no heat inside the church or anything to cover up under; cold chills were setting in.

The church of the Nine Commandments banner Pastor Tom hung over the Decalogue tablets was made of cloth. It could work as a blanket. His fingers went numb. He could not feel the rosary beads as he prayed that the Mother of Mercy would advocate for him to be made worthy of the promise of Christ.

A malaria relapse was what Idogbe needed to take immediate action to prevent. The shivering, shaking, headache, and joint pain were all symptoms from the past when he'd been hospitalized. He needed to get dry and warm.

Rainwater had run under the apartment's front door and covered about half of the concrete floor. Idogbe kicked off his soaked shoes and stripped off his wet clothes. He took one of the blankets, rolled up in it like a mummy, and then plopped down on the far side of the mattress.

Tina pulled the sheet over her head and deliriously yelled, "Rape, rape. Help me!"

Idogbe curled up on the edge of the mattress. It wasn't comfortable, but he was dry and wrapped tight in a blanket. All the commotion and Tina's delusional outburst turned on the mini spy camera for its first recording. A thirty-second audio/video clip was sent to Constable Ayoola Ashiru's police

phone.

CHAP 12... **Fruit of the womb**

Thou shalt not kill was the Commandment Tom had planned to preach on for Sunday. He knew that the fifteenth-century reformers changed the word from murder to kill and the Fifth Commandment to the Sixth Commandment. Murder was a better word, especially in Africa, where over 6500 Nigerians are killed on two and three-wheeled vehicles annually. Preaching that an Okada or Keke murdered thousands of Nigerians would not be an accurate narrative.

Conversely, Tom agreed with Beth's catholic catechism. It stated that **Thou shalt not murder** is the intentional act of an unlawful slaying—not a death by an accident or even a war. Her catechism stated that killing under certain circumstances was justified.

At the moment, it did not matter. Tom would not make it back to Lagos by Sunday morning. The road trip to the Glory and Praise girls' school was an excellent break to discern the ending of a twenty-plus-year marriage. Their interfaith bond had never been solid. A sabbatical from pastor duties and preaching was long overdue.

The drive to the northeast part of Plateau State was about equal distance from the Benin and Niger borders, two countries that he did not have a passport to enter. He last fueled up in Jos, also called J-town; the gas gauge was less than an eighth tank.

The Zangam Village is tucked into a remote valley along the Gongola River at more than 3000 feet. The fertile basin is suitable for grazing cattle, goats, sheep, horses, and donkeys. The nomadic Fulani herders are considered illegal aliens. Fulani pastoralists started migrating into north central Nigeria around the thirteenth or fourteenth century. They still are not

considered an indigenous tribe in West Africa. If it were not for the fact that the Fulani people supplied most of the beef and milk to Abuja, the capital of Nigeria, they would have been eradicated centuries ago.

Oddly, the village looked like a ghost town—it felt malevolent. Chickens were pecking at corn spread out in a side alley. At the end of the alley, silhouetted by the fading daylight, a lone herdsman was walking behind about half a dozen white cows with engorged udders. Tom knew dairy cows needed to get milked two or three times daily; their milking schedule was not his concern. Tom drove around, looking for a fuel station and a place to get dinner. There was an eerie specter feeling of being watched. He needed to quit wasting fuel.

On the outskirts of town, a cinder block building with a corrugated metal roof resembled a barn more than a school. Behind the one-room building were two outbuildings. One was an outhouse, and the other was a storage shed that looked like its heavy door had been chopped open with an ax. Tom crept by and parked in a clump of trees at the far end of a field. He tapped the gas gauge, but it did not help. The needle almost touched the **E**. Tom shut off the motorhome and got out. The outside air was brisk and dry. He peed while looking at his phone, and the display showed **NO SERVICE**.

Planted in the center of a dirt and grass field was a makeshift flagpole with a black flag. Tom was about twenty yards into the field when a snake hissed and slithered off from a sun-warmed flat rock. A cold chill shot down his spine. Tom high stepped backward from the tall grass; if there was one snake, there were more.

Inside the motorhome, Tom found binoculars and peered from the open backdoor. The flagpole was nothing more than a branch off a tree. There was a white Arabic script across the top of the black fabric; in the center was a white filled-in circle indicating the world. *No God but God will again rule over the darkness of the world* was Tom's rough understanding of the ISIS flag. He was not aware that the Islamic State had a presence in or around this part of Nigeria. Glory and Praise headquarters verbally agreed with the governor of Plateau State that religion could not be taught at the outreach school. With over forty different ethnic tribes in this part of Nigeria, evangelizing was discouraged.

Tom found some soda crackers, opened a can of sardines, and boiled water to make rice for dinner. He rechecked his phone, **NO SERVICE**. An eerie darkness settled over the school grounds. Any after-dinner investigating would have to wait until daylight. Tom didn't last but ten minutes on the foldout memory foam mattress. The 32 cal revolver had slipped under the edge of the bed. It was a small weapon that was more about concealment than killing.

On most Sunday mornings, Tom usually had coffee and reviewed his discourse for the 9:00 am church service. While making coffee on the small propane stove and looking out the motorhome side window, Tom observed a lone woman hanging large, colorful blankets on a clothesline. He slid the window open and yelled, "Hey there." She looked back! Somebody had burned the straw roofs on three tiny round huts—something was awry!

Tom retrieved the small revolver from under the mattress, opened the side door, and shot one round into the air. The long-limbed woman didn't even look back. She pulled the three African burial cloths from the clothesline in one swoop of her slim arms and dashed into the trees.

Tom sensed her fear. The fact that he didn't have enough fuel to get out of town made him nervous. He checked for cell phone service on his phone and the burner phone, and there was NO SERVICE on either.

Far down the road, through binoculars, Tom saw a few dim incandescent lights. *Those lights must be in the center of town. I'll hike down there to see if they have internet or a landline. I need to contact Idogbe and tell him to post a sign that there will be no church today.*

In case of snakes, Tom dressed into his hunting gear and tucked the camo pants into his high-top boots. He dug far under the bench seat and felt the leather holster with a Colt 45 Peacemaker. *It's good I didn't have this when I shot at those monkeys. That propane tank would have blown up.*

He chambered six mag rounds and then strapped on the leather holster. There was no answer at the first house he visited nor at the second and third homes. Before he knocked at the fourth house, he put his ear to the door and could hear a baby crying. When he knocked, there were sounds behind the door. The crying ceased. Tom tried opening the door, but

someone on the other side pushed the door closed. "Go away! Go away! No girls in here."

When Tom heard the distressed baby again, he pulled the gun and shot one round into the dirt. He heard footsteps, pattering feet, and then silence. He jolted the door with his shoulder, and in the dim morning light, his eyes locked on a woman breastfeeding a child.

She pulled down the front of a cloth diaper. "See, my baby is a boy, not a girl."

The rear screen door slapped shut. Tom saw three children holding hands running into the woods. He shoved the sizeable stainless steel revolver back into the holster. A pair of tiny, blinking eyes gazed up and returned to suckling. "I need fuel and food," Tom said as he looked around the kitchen.

"Our village is short on supplies since the rebels attacked us." The woman used her finger to break the hold the baby had on her nipple and then turned him to feed on the other side.

"Don't shoot again! You have frightened everyone," a hoarse and deep voice at the front door ordered.

Paul turned. "I heard the baby whimpering through the door. I thought something bad was happening. It was a warning shot."

"Side arms aren't allowed in Plateau State." The village elder stepped inside and leaned a top-weighted club against the wall. It was hard to distinguish features on the well-seasoned face in the dim room light. The few brown teeth left an impression of age and a hard life.

"I need to get something to eat and some diesel fuel," Tom demanded.

"So would those children that you frightened into the woods."

Tom went into the kitchen and looked out the tattered screen door. "Are any of those kids enrolled at the outreach school?"

The old man moved between the front room and the kitchen. "Are you the new priest?"

"I'm not a priest. I'm the new Pastor for Glory and Praise Ministries in Lagos."

"Can you do an obsequies service so we can bury our dead?"

The old man pushed open the screen door and then led Tom

out to the backyard and around the perimeter of the two-room house to the dirt road. Tom kept looking down, making sure not to step in a pile of cow manure or on a snake. He hoped the worn-out man was taking him someplace to get breakfast.

They started walking back toward the school. A teenage boy came running after them with the old man's Rungu stick, used more for a cane than a weapon.

Slowly, out of the brush and from several huts, Fulani villagers with farming tools and some with planks of wood fell in behind. One man with a rifle strapped across his chest hurried to the front of the mob. The rusty Russian AK47 didn't have a clip or magazine in it. Tom surmised he couldn't get shot. Oddly, it didn't feel like he was in danger or surrounded by an angry mob. It felt more like he was leading a procession.

For this remote Fulani village, a white man in military camo with a gun on his side was more of a spiritual sign. The American flag on Tom's left shoulder was a sign that a Peacekeeper had been sent. Tom was ex-military but never deployed to the frontline; his calling was Peacemaker.

As the crowd grew, so did the native Hausa singing. One of the elders unlocked the school door, and Tom stepped inside. There was a pungent smell of burnt incense—white sheets were draped over three corpses. The door got pushed shut and latched. The low beating of a drum turned the Hausa singing into a chant. Tom went to one of the small screened side windows. At the far end of the field, a group of men used shovels, picks, and other tools to dig.

Within a few minutes, Tom could tell that graves were being dug and wooden coffins were being built. He moved out of sight from the window to the center of the room. There was a pile of palm branches and a wok-shaped metal vessel with glowing orange embers. Tom added more palm branches and then pulled back one of the white sheets. His heart felt heavy as he gazed down on the pure innocence of a young girl. Her hair and body had been washed; blood seeped through the white gauze wrapped around her neck. Tom fell to his knees and prayed.

The Hausa singing carried a soothing and tranquil harmony as Tom prayed for each girl. All three had gauze wrapped around their slit throats. They had bled out like cattle slaughtered for market.

Tom reflected on his darkest day when Beth delivered their

stillborn child. Not knowing what to do or how to react was overwhelming. They left their lifeless baby at the hospital without a funeral or a name.

As Tom meditated over the bodies, he wove three crosses from palm branches and placed the iconic Christian symbols on each girl's stomach. He used his thumb to swipe ashes from the incense bowl and made a cross on each child's forehead before he pulled the sheets back over each angelic face. Burial of the dead is a corporal work of mercy that honors the children of God, who are temples of the Holy Spirit.

When he pushed the door open, a grey incense smoke rolled out like dew fog and floated among the people. Seasoned villagers entered the one-room school building. Tom's pastoral services were not finished. He hurried outside, past the three freshly dug graves, to the motorhome to retrieve a Bible. People were coming up the main road, some from the bush and others from the cutoff road.

The singing intensified as the townspeople swayed side to side. Each girl got put in a simple wooden box, and then mothers draped African burial blankets over each coffin.

Tom stood firm and recited, "By the sweat of your brow, you will eat your food until you return to the ground since from it you were taken, for dust you are and to dust you will return." He used this passage from Genesis many times back home at funerals.

Everyone watched as the three coffins got lowered with ropes into the earth. The bright colors and montage of African patterns now six feet down left a calm over most everyone. The singing turned to a low hum, and the procession line circled the three graves.

Tom raised the Bible over his head, then lowered it and read. "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you and have called you by your name."

Several "Amens" came from the crowd as tears flowed.

Tom continued, "The names of these three children I did not know. But God knows their names, always did, and always will."

Tom's part was over. After the celebration of life, the Fulani pastoralists put five gallons of diesel into the Mercedes Sprinter. He then used his rungu stick to draw directions in the dirt. The cutoff road would shave off thirty miles back to Jos

Town. He drew an X in the dirt where the road was booby-trapped.

Lastly, the patriarch told how the school girls were forced to kneel. They were blindfolded and told to denounce Jesus. The three that didn't submit had their throats slit.

"What the hell," Tom looked across the field at three women filling in the graves. *God—How can the fruit of a womb be laid in the womb of the earth before they can love and multiply?*

Tom was appalled by what he witnessed but needed to make Jos Town before dark. "Should I call the Nigerian Police when I get phone service?"

"No, don't do that!" The old man looked up from the map he had scribed into the dirt. "This northeastern section of Nigeria has been under siege by a volatile mix of Sharia Law and Tribal customs since before our independence from the British in 1960."

"You still have to report the murder of three girls to someone," Tom said, sensing he was sticking his nose somewhere he shouldn't.

"The solution for the Nigerian government for this type of tribal fighting would be to come into our small village and bulldoze everything. We are nomadic herdsman. There are only a few places left to move. We are like the homeless in your country. No place to call our own."

Tom saw a tall Fulani woman walking toward them out of the corner of his eye. She had the cross Tom had weaved out of a palm branch in her right hand. On the other was a colorful, triangular-shaped head scarf.

She stood eye to eye with Tom. "My daughter's name was Cecelia, and we called her Cece. Please take her Gele; she always wore it in church." Tom took the Gele, and then the lean woman wrapped her arm around Tom and whispered, "Thank you for the words you spoke. I now know that Cecelia is with her savior, Jesus. I'm so proud of Cece for not denying the Lord's name."

CHAP 13... **To confess or not**

A road trip north to Zangam village was not what Tom had hoped for. A highway to heaven turned into a road to hell. His faith got stretched to a point of no return. Traveling south back toward Lagos, he had a new worry—the buried steel rebar with sharpened tips that could puncture tires on military equipment. Breaking down on this back road wouldn't be good. At least he had the Colt 45 still strapped to his side.

With caution, after he crossed the second cattle guard, he steered down into the shallow water and drove for the next mile. The Fulani elder warned him that a section of the road was booby-trapped with buried rebar spikes. Twice, he steered around single barbed wire stands stretched between trees. Those wires were not meant for animals; they were strung neck high to slice through anyone riding a motorbike or ATV.

The low gas indicator flashed red while steering out of the riverbed. Eventually, the narrow river canyon opened onto grassland filled with Billy-goat weed. After five more miles on the scarcely traveled back road, Tom finally ran into a paved main road. The GPS showed a fueling icon to the west. Tom breathed a sigh of relief when his phone got a signal and started downloading messages and voice mail. More good news was a foldable tent sign on the shoulder of the road that read: **Petrol 2km ahead.**

Fuel from 5-gallon Jerry cans indicated that he was buying illegal black-market gas. Tom didn't care as long as it would get him to Jos Town. The attendant told Tom he had some local beef on the grill. The barbecue was a fifty-gallon barrel with a grill made from crisscrossed rebar. Tom hadn't seen cuts of meat like these since leaving Texas. He pointed at a two-inch thick T-bone and asked if potatoes were in the aluminum foil. The attendant didn't reply; he just placed one aluminum wrap on a paper plate beside the sizzling steak.

Sitting at a table made from a giant cable spool, Tom devoured the hunk of beef. The honey-buttered yam was delicious but made him homesick. Beth often asked for a sweet potato when they went out to dinner. She'd wink at Tom and say, "I want to be all sweetened up for you later."

Tom knew that the real reason she ordered sweet potato

was because it was a more healthy choice. Beth was a health nut introvert; she didn't preach what someone should or should not eat—one of the many reasons Tom married her.

When a motorcycle rider pulled in, the attendant had emptied the third Jerry-can of fuel into the Mercedes Sprinter. The leathered-up rider used the heel on his black boot to flip out the kickstand. *It is good to see a Nigerian wearing a helmet after seeing that young man at the hospital dying from using a carved-out pumpkin. Helmet laws are a good thing,* Tom said to himself.

The attendant pointed directly at Tom. The rider pulled off a full-face helmet. Tom didn't expect to see a white face. *I think that Paul. What's he doing way up here?*

Paul headed directly for Tom. Ten feet away, he said, "I was hoping I could catch up with you."

Tom swallowed a mouthful of yam and then said. "I just came from the Zangam village girl's school."

"I know." Paul stopped on the other side of the makeshift table. "You witnessed a horrific event. There is no earthly justification for that attack."

"What the hell happened? Shouldn't the authorities be notified?"

"It's probably best that the government not get involved."

"That's what one of the elders in the village said—"

Paul went on to explain that the slaughter of the three school girls was most likely by a splinter group of Boko Haram or ISIS. He explained that if the Nigerian government were to get involved, they might order the military to bulldoze the entire village. Fulani herders are semi-nomadic, and their primary occupation is raising livestock. Their wandering lifestyle in Nigeria goes back to the seventeenth century, yet they are still considered illegal immigrants in most of West Africa.

The African history lesson was interrupted by a vibration. "Excuse me. It's probably my wife." Tom pulled a phone from his pocket and put it to his ear.

"Tom, where have you been?" Beth sounded mad and relieved at the same time. "Your church handyman called yesterday looking for you. I've been calling your phone day and night."

"Beth, I'm sorry. I traveled up north to the girl's school. There was no cell service up there on the high plateau. I'm

talking to one of the school supply drivers right now. I'll call you back."

"Promise that you call me back ASAP. Your niece texted a message saying she had something important to share with me. You know how I feel about Tina. I'm sure she's up to something!"

"I promise I'll call you back." Tom shoved the phone back into his pocket. "I'll be right back."

The small store had living quarters in the back. A middle-aged Fulani woman in a blue Hijab parted through a curtain hanging in the doorway. She intentionally kept her eyes cast downward.

Tom grabbed a six-pack from the cooler. "Put this on my gas bill," Tom told her while looking at some pie slices in a glass display case.

When Paul heard the screen door slap shut, he turned away from the reddish-orange sky in the west. "I should go. It will be dark soon. Don't forget, you promised to call your wife back."

"I will call her back. But I need to have a beer first. It's not going to be an easy call." Tom cast his eyes downward in shame as he handed a beer to Paul.

"You must have something serious to discuss with her?" Paul twisted off the top of the ice-cold beer.

"I do." Tom opened his beer and took a long, hard pull. "I messed up and committed adultery. I'd been faithful all during a twenty-some year marriage. I was chaste before that, unlike my wife."

"You want to confess your relationship to me?" Paul asked.

"Sure, I'd like to run this by someone before I call Beth back,"

"I'll listen, but I don't need to hear about your wife's past."

"Okay, not seeing Beth for the last six weeks is part of it. But there's no excuse for my actions."

"I understand how powerful temptation is. The sins against the flesh have taken down many prominent men."

"The sins of the flesh! Do you think that there is more than one sin for adultery?"

"I do. Fornication, impurity, pedophilia, sorcery, pornography, carousing orgies, and all temptations that stain a pure soul are examples. "

"What about homosexuality?" Tom asked.

"Of course. Some religions define adultery as any lewd sexual act outside of marriage. That is true, but..." Paul stopped. He had this discussion once with his best friend and Vietnam War comrade—it did not end well.

"I think you're wrong!" Tom took a long drink of his beer.

"Why's that?" Paul asked and then added, "I once thought the sixth commandment only applied to heterosexual married couples."

"You mean the seventh commandment." Tom was a legalist, and he went on theological defense. It was a tool he learned at seminary.

Paul also spent years in seminary study; he learned that fundamental religious debates were rarely concerned about the love of neighbor.

"Gays can't be saved. They're an abomination," Tom spoke with authority and disdain.

"What about the other abominations in the Bible, like bestiality, incest, prostitution, child sacrifice, and so on? Homosexual sex is not singled out as the only Toevah act that is sinful," Paul rebutted.

Caught off guard, Tom paused. He hadn't heard the word 'Toevah' since his seminary days while studying the book of Leviticus. "You sound like all the new age, progressive preachers and Catholic priests. The ones that have brainwashed the flock since the Declaration of Religious Liberties promulgated by some liberal Pope in 1965." Tom spewed out his facts with authority and finished the rest of the beer bottle.

"Why's a fundamental pastor reading Vatican Two doctrine?"

"My wife is a devout Catholic. I've studied her faith since they wouldn't let us marry in her church. The very place she was baptized and confirmed at."

"Oh?" Paul took a drink from his beer. "Didn't the church offer to do a civil marriage? I understand that we should not perform Holy Matrimony for an interfaith couple. There are workarounds that her parish priest should have explained to you."

Tom opened another beer. "I told Beth to screw her church! We went to a justice of the peace and got married."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I bet it hurt your wife deeply."

"It did. Her parents haven't talked to her since."

"Oh, that's terrible."

"It is, but..." Tom took a drink from a fresh beer. "In the long run, it will work out for the better. Beth won't have to go through that lengthy annulment process that the Catholic Church has."

The intellectual narrative went back and forth until all six beers were gone. Tom spoke about Dr. John Rock—the Roman Catholic obstetrician who was responsible for the birth control pill. Tom blamed 'The Pill' as another reason Beth could never conceive a child.

Paul was serving in the Vietnam War during that period of history when free love, drugs, rock 'n' roll, and protesting were reshaping the world. Out with the old, in with the new was transforming many progressive Christian religions back in the sixties and seventies. Their civility continued as they buddy walked toward the motorhome. Tom insisted that Paul not ride off into the night, especially after drinking. Paul took one side of the memory foam queen bed.

Tom crawled onto the other side, "Truthfully, I don't know whom God will forgive and call home. I'll leave that call up to Him."

"Amen to that," Paul replied, then rested.

At dawn's light, Tom's mouth was dry, and his head throbbed. He pushed the back door open and spat phlegm onto the dirt. The cool morning dew fog took a bite of his bare arms and chest. In the distance, animals yelped, and birds announced a new day.

The sky-blue Harley-Davidson was gone. The store owner was carrying a plywood **OPEN** sign down the road, silhouetted by the rising sun. Tom shielded his bloodshot eyes and then went back inside. Four words were on a piece of paper stuck on a cabinet door: **Confess to your wife.**

Tom retrieved both phones from the dash of the motorhome. There were seven voice messages: Two from Idogbe, one from Hank the hog hunter, and four from Elizabeth.

First message: "Pastor Tom, I just locked up. I need to help my Mum on the farm for a few days. I'll be back to finish up the dog kennel next week."

The second message from the same phone number: "Don't worry about your niece, she got hooked up with Victor Vee. He

is showing her around." Tom deleted both voice messages from Idogbe.

Third message: "Tom, I'm sending you some 223 hollow point ammo for that ghost gun I built. These new plastic-tipped rounds are more accurate than full metal jacket ammo. Hope to get over there soon to shoot hyenas and knock down some African swine." Tom deleted Hank's message.

The following four messages were from Beth. First message: "Tom, call me ASAP."

Second message from Beth: "Why haven't you called back? What is going on over there? Call me even if it's the middle of the night."

Beth's third message: "The FBI is looking into financial records at your old church. Something about a crypto-currency scam coming from Nigeria."

The last message: "Tom, are you okay? My checking account got hacked. I asked Danny to help me. Please call back!"

Tom immediately tapped the call-back icon on his phone. After four rings, he got the 'leave a message' prerecorded script. "Beth, the cell service is spotty in the Plateau State. I'll call you from Abuja in a couple of hours. I'm okay!" Tom shoved one phone into his pants pocket and set the other on the dash.

The store owner was walking back across the gravel parking lot and waved. Tom followed the store owner into the store. The smell of fresh brewing coffee was the morning fix he needed. Tom slapped three kobo coins on the counter. "I'll take a cup of hot java. What do I owe you for camping overnight?"

"Nothing. It was a good thing you didn't drive drunk last night." The merchant swept the coins to the counter's edge and into his hand.

"Do you know when the guy on the big motorcycle pulled out this morning?"

"Father Paul left on his big okada before dawn." The merchant set a Styrofoam cup of hot java on the counter.

"Why are you calling him Father Paul?"

"He's a priest that brings the holy bread to the sick and dying in the Gongola River Valley."

"Excuse me," Tom pulled the phone from his pocket and went outside.

"Tom, you are in big trouble! I don't want to talk about what happened over the phone."

"I'm sorry, Beth. I didn't expect anything to happen, but it just did." Tom felt relieved that Beth knew about Tina—at least, that was what he thought.

"We can't talk about this over the phone. I will be coming to Abuja on a private jet this week. I've made arrangements to fly with Cain and Able." Beth was picking her words carefully, as per Danny's instructions.

In a face-to-face conversation, Dan had informed Beth that two months after the 9/11 terrorist attack, President George W. Bush authorized the National Security Agency to spy on ordinary Americans. Espionage on US citizens was now political football and weaponized to destroy Americans.

"Beth, I'm not sure you should go through all the trouble to get the dogs over here. I doubt I will keep to my two-year contract over here." Tom paused. His throat was dry. "I'll stop in Texas on my trip to headquarters to Los Angeles next month."

"Tom, I had to use Bitcoin to vaccinate the dogs and pay for therapy dogs' papers."

"I didn't know you had a Bitcoin account?" Tom was confused, especially after what had happened to the church treasurer back home in Dallas.

"Tom, I'll text you the flight information." Beth kept the conversation short—the call might be surveilled per Dan.

The Abuja International Airport was on the route back to Lagos. Tom set a new waypoint on the GPS. Finding a hotel that allowed big dogs could be a problem. After he confessed to Beth, he wanted her to be in at least a four-star hotel.

Abuja was the only planned city in Nigeria. It became the nation's capital in 1991. It looked like most metropolitan cities in the United States. There were several international hotel chains and restaurants around the airport. The Sheraton Hotel was five-star and allowed pets. The revelation that Beth had a crypto account got Tom thinking. It looks like *our marriage hasn't ever been solid. This whole thing about not talking over the phone is weird. Tina must not have told her, or at least—?*

The parking lot gate, the church, and the apartment were all locked up. Tom did a quick look over the dog kennel. Inside the apartment, the motion-activated spy camera recorded him

stripping off his camo hunting pants and then crashing face-first onto the twin bed. The three days up to and returning from Plateau State felt more like a week.

Tom could have slept longer, but the persistent tapping was more annoying than a repetitious snooze alarm. He stepped on a pile of damp towels, and mildew reeked on his foot. He bent over and looked out the peephole. Across the alley, Jacob was sitting on the church steps, moving his finger on the touchpad of the outdated laptop. Tom opened the door and sidestepped toward the coffee pot. Ants crawled on dirty dishes and several half-empty food cartons in the sink. *This is disgusting! Tina should've cleaned up after herself.*

Jacob darted into the apartment, hugged Tom's upper leg, and then took up a chair at the green table. Tom started a pot of coffee, washed off the plates, and cleaned the sink. After he picked up mildewed towels, he stood over Jacob's shoulder. Jacob was already playing at Chess level six against the computer. When Jacob castled his king to Queenside, Tom was impressed. He rubbed Jacob's full head of nappy black hair and got Akara and Pap out of the fridge.

Jacob couldn't hear the parking lot gate being pushed open but could feel the beating of a blown-out muffler on his chest. Tom listened to both sounds and hastily pulled on his camo hunting pants. He rubbed Jacob's head again and then opened the door for the second time.

Idogbe steered between the apartment and church while staring at Tom's unzipped hunting pants and bare chest. He mentally noted the red bucket, mop, and cleaning supplies on the church porch. *I wonder what else the Pastor is paying Jacob for?*

"How about a cup of coffee?" Tom yelled as Idogbe stepped out of the truck.

"Sure," Idogbe yelled back.

"Come on in." Tom backtracked to the bed and pulled on a tee shirt.

Idogbe moved toward the table. Jacob looked up, smiled, and quickly looked back down. He only had nine seconds to move, or the computer chess game would penalize him.

"Did you give Jacob this computer?"

"I did. It was gathering dust in our basement back home. I'm glad that Jacob could use it."

"Speaking about back home, did you call your wife?"

"I did." Tom handed Idogbe a cup of steaming coffee. "I'm sorry about leaving you hanging for three days."

"That was not a problem." Idogbe blew across the surface of the Kenya coffee.

"How did my parishioners do with no Sunday service?"

"I took care of it. I filled in with a gather, proclaim, and send version of a service when you didn't show up. Since I can't consecrate bread or wine, I left that out. Your baker friend brought coffee and the Texas-style Akara."

"Are you saying you conducted the Sunday service?"

"What did you want me to do?" Idogbe rebutted.

"I sent a message to cancel the Sunday service. I also sent the message to Tina."

"Well, I didn't get the message. I heard nothing about canceling the Sunday service from Ms. Williams." Idogbe paused and reflected on the last time he'd spoken to or seen Tina. The night was cold and rained hard. He got soaked and was on the verge of a Malaria flare-up.

"I'm going to call Tina and see if she got the message!"

"You don't believe me!" Idogbe set the coffee cup on the green table and abruptly left the apartment.

Tom hoped Idogbe didn't honor graven images during the service or pray a Rosary. This type of idolatry would be a direct violation of the Second Commandment.

Although Jacob could not hear, he sensed tension.

A groggy "Hello" came from the cell phone.

"Tina, did you get my message?" Tom asked and then walked over behind Jacob.

"What? Like, where have you been, Tom?"

"I traveled up to the Glory and Praise outreach school."

"Oh." Tina rolled over in the king-size bed. Victor Vee was getting out of the shower. "That all girl's school?"

"Yes, it's a school young for girls." Tom quipped, not wanting to re-digest anything of what he had witnessed. "Tina, did you get my message that there would be no church for Sunday?"

"No." Tina motioned to Victor Vee that she was on the phone and to be quiet. "I got the note you left me on the apartment door. It didn't say anything about the church."

"Okay, that's all I needed to know. We should talk before I

travel up to Abuja next week."

"Abuja! Maybe I can go with you. I hear that it is the hot spot for the elite people."

"Tina, we'll talk later."

Tom went outside and walked to the back of the apartment. "My niece didn't get the message about canceling Sunday service either. It must be the poor cell service in the Gongola River Valley."

"Okay." Idogbe didn't look up from installing the gate latch. A sincere apology was what he expected—not an excuse.

"I'm glad that the kennel got finished. Cain and Abel should be here next week."

Idogbe glanced up and replied, "Why did you name your dogs after the first conflict between nomadic shepherds and settled farmers?"

"What are you talking about?" Tom knew everything about the first murder in the Bible. "That passage is not about a conflict between farmers and ranchers."

"Okay, if you say so." Idogbe turned back to finish installing the kennel latch.

"Don't you want to learn the true meaning behind the murder of Abel by Cain?" Tom asked.

"Not really." Idogbe kept working on the latch. "I'm way behind helping my Mum on her strawberry farm."

The realization that Idogbe stayed over the weekend for the good of his church sank in. "Take the rest of the week off to help your Mum get caught up on the family farm."

When Tom returned, Jacob had set out the chess board and placed the chess pieces. Tom held one finger up to indicate that he could only play one game. The game ended in a stalemate. Jacob headed over to the church to mop and wipe down the pews. Tom called Tina and told her they had to talk.

As Tom walked across the lobby of Oyins Holiday Inn, he noticed a **CLOSED** sign on the door of the relaxation room. He approached the reservation counter and asked. "Would you ring Ms. Williams' room and tell her I'm here."

"She's in the lounge." Phillip pointed toward the double doors. "Just go in."

When Tom pulled open one of the doors, Tina, Victor Vee, and Kenny Chen were bent over a map. There was no one else in the lounge. "Didn't Tanny open up this morning?" Tom asked

as he approached the trio.

"She quit," Victor piped up.

"Quit! Doesn't she have three kids to feed?" Tom asked as he glanced at Mr. Chen's notebook with dates and action items circled.

Victor gestured toward Tina. "Tanny was spreading lies about our most excellent guest. She won't be back."

"Tom, we need your motorhome. Victor is going to show us a place where his great grandpa was a Trokosi Priest." Tina gestured toward Mr. Chen.

"You can't use it this week. Beth is flying into Abuja, and I'm using it to pick up her and the dogs."

Victor pointed at the map. "Is this the village where the church girls' school is?"

Tom bent over the map; pinpointing the school took him a few minutes. "Tina, don't travel to the outskirts of Jos City." Tom abruptly paused. *If this trio of evildoers throats got slit, that would solve my problem. Damn, why am I thinking something like this—but what if?*

"Why shouldn't we check out your church girls' school?" Tina asked and said, "Mr. Chen wants to tell them about a scholarship program he is in charge of."

Tom left Oyins Holiday Inn with darkness banging inside his skull. He should have been more forthcoming about the murders.

Mr. Chen reminded Tina that she had an obligation to the CCP. Her contract was for four girls under fifty kilograms, not over fourteen—being a virgin was a give me.

When Tina caught up with him, Tom wasn't even two blocks from the motel. From behind, she grabbed Tom's arm and, out of breath, said, "Mr. Chen won't take no for an answer! He wants to use your motorhome tomorrow."

Tom yanked his arm away. "I don't give a crap about what Mr. Chen wants. I told you you can use the motorhome after I pick up Beth and the dogs from the airport."

A dark malice spewed out Tina's mouth, "Aunt Beth would not like to hear about what happened between us." Tom turned and walked away. There was no other option—he had to confess.

When Tom entered the gate, Jacob was rinsing out the red bucket and mop. Idogbe was doing a final inspection of the

dog door. Jacob ran and hugged Tom and felt tension in Tom's thigh. He let loose, crossed his arms across his chest with clenched hands, the sign of love, and headed home.

Idogbe showed Tom how to lock the dog door from inside the apartment. He also sensed that something was off with Tom. After loading up his tools, Idogbe came back into the apartment. "Although we have different doctrines and rituals, we are brothers in our Lord's name, Jesus Christ."

Tom responded with, "Amen, brother."

CHAP 14... **Sign of the cross**

The private hangar at the Abuja airport had security that was different from that at the international public terminal. Tom stood behind a yellow barrier rope and watched the Gulfstream G550 taxi to a stop. The extra wide ramp got pushed against the fuselage, and the side door swung upward. A slender middle-aged man with arm crutches appeared at the top of the walkway and gingerly worked himself down the aluminum incline. Two uniformed Nigerian TSA personnel were waiting at the bottom. An armed mercenary opened a carbon fiber wheelchair, and Dan sat.

Beth appeared in the Gulfstream hatch door and waved. Tom's stomach knotted. He forced a smile and partly waved back. Dan got pushed across the tarmac to a small screening tent, and Beth followed. The TSA agent did a quick up-down with a scanning wand while two agents went through her purse. Dan's laptop and a bottle of Beth's hand lotion were confiscated.

Beth emerged from the screening tent and bolted toward Tom. Danny was now pushing himself with long arm strides. Tom avoided eye contact from behind the security rope but caught a wisp of Beth's perfume. "Tom, I'd like you to meet Danny."

"Call me Dan. Your wife told me a lot about you and your dedication to the Lord." Danny extended his hand.

"I'm not sure if I call it a dedication," Tom replied as they shook hands.

"Well, her stories reminded me a lot of my step-father. He wasn't much of a man of the cloth but was dedicated to exposing false information. These days, they call it fake news. David was why I started my internet fraud and cyber security

business.”

“I know baby boomers are a great mark with the hopes of growing crypto-currency retirement accounts,” Tom offered.

“Not only baby boomers. The entire world is moving toward cashless banking. That won’t benefit anyone except rogue rulers, dictators, and the elitists.”

Beth leaned over the rope barrier and hugged Tom. “I have missed you, and remember not to talk Bitcoin stuff.”

Tom stiffened and stood tall. He focused on the dog carriers being unloaded from the rear cargo door. “I hope Cain and Abel are okay.”

“Hank gave them some animal tranquilizer. Something he uses when he ships breeding stock.” Beth rubbed Tom’s hand. She sensed something was wrong.

“Nice meeting you.” The armed agent pushed Dan into a private room where his carbon fiber wheelchair would get x-rayed.

Cain and Abel got pushed opposite the private quarantine building. It would be three more days before Tom could even touch them.

“I’ll take those,” Tom grabbed Beth’s luggage. There was a chilling silence as they exited the private hangar at Nnamdi Azikiwe International Airport.

“What’s wrong, Tom?” Beth finally asked as she climbed up into the passenger side of the Sprinter motorhome.

“Ah— A lot of things have happened over the past couple of weeks.” Tom started the motorhome and backed out of the airport parking space. “We need to get on the road; it’s almost eight hours back to Lagos.”

Tom kept looking for the right time to confess his adultery. But the slaying of the three school girls dominated their conversation. Tom said he was reluctant to get Glory and Praise headquarters involved. Beth insisted that he needed to reach out to local law enforcement. She asserted that not doing anything would be worse than the child abuse cover-up in the Catholic Church.

Tom vehemently set Beth straight. With over two decades of the Catholic Church covering and moving pedophile clergy to different parishes—the deaths of three Fulani girls in a remote village in the middle of Nigeria was not a good analogy.

Beth fought back and rattled off some Prosperity Preachers

that were sketchy. More recently, an elder at Glory and Praise Ministries got photographed landing on a private Caribbean island known to sex traffic children. Tom knew that when collection baskets exceeded the ten percent tithing benchmark, men of the cloth were not held accountable—like college presidents and coaches.

Beth shifted to how the FBI looked into a cyber attack on bank accounts. "Sally Slenski stopped by the house to inform me that an investigation of mega-donors was underway at Glory and Praise, main office. She said we shouldn't talk, text, or email over our phones."

"You didn't care much for Sally when she was my secretary. What gives now?"

"There's church gossip that Sally's baby is not her husband's. I invited her to start attending my church. She didn't know that Catholics recognize all baptisms."

The more Beth unloaded on Tom, the more he discerned that the real root of Beth's problem was their interfaith marriage. The last two hundred miles back to Lagos was indoctrination about all the good Martin Luther brought to Christianity. Beth didn't take pleasure in this self-righteous side of Tom; she was no match for all his years of theology training.

It was dark, and traffic was light when Tom stood in the beam of the headlights so he could unlock the church gate. He pulled the motorhome between the apartment and church. "What do you think?"

Beth looked at the small building on her left and then the church on the right through the lowered passenger window. "This reminds me of your first church in Round Rock, Texas."

Tom reflected on his first assignment when their marriage was new and adventurous. "I guess it sort of does." Tom jumped out of the motorhome and walked to the apartment. There was a note on the front door. He snatched it, stuffed it into his front pocket, and unlocked the door.

Beth walked in and looked to the right at the small kitchen and door to the bathroom. To her left, she saw the double bed. "That's cute, about the same size bed I had at college."

"I don't think I saw that apartment," Tom replied, setting Beth's luggage next to the green table. There was an awkward silence. Tom knew that Beth had a male roommate in college.

Beth opened the bathroom door. "This shower is not built

for two.”

“I’m going to sleep in the motorhome. That bed is too small for both of us.” Tom quipped.

“We can make it work.” Beth took both of his hands.

Tom yanked his hands away. “I’m sleeping in the motorhome. I’m beat from the drive up and back.”

“To get me! What the hell? I thought you missed me and would want to be with me?”

They were both exhausted. Now was not the time to have a couple’s dispute. “We’ll talk in the morning.”

When Tom entered the motorhome, he pulled the note out of his pocket.

We must use your Mercedes van for our road trip. There is no way you can say not now. Call me or Victor Vee at the hotel ASAP. Mr. Chen said to remind you of your contract with the CCP.

Your fun niece, Tina

The drive to Abuja airport and then back to Lagos had been grueling. Tom didn’t even make it five minutes before he was fast asleep. The motorhome was the least of his worries, let alone any threats by a rogue Chinese Communist Party member. In the worst-case scenario, he’d let Mr. Chen take the motorhome and then turn it in as stolen to insurance—maybe the police, too.

An intense fragrance trickled out when Beth fluffed the pillows. It was not the flowery smell from scented laundry detergent. She buried her head into the second pillow—Chanel#5 was the perfume Tina always wore. Beth tossed and turned, praying her woman’s intuition was off base.

After the early morning, Lagos traffic started a new day, and Beth finally dozed off. A persistent knock on the door made it feel like three a.m. on Beth’s internal clock, still—on Texas time. Groggy and disorientated, Beth slowly pulled open the door. She immediately recognized Jacob, the deaf boy from the endless JPG images Tom continually emailed her. Beth signed, “How are you?”

Jacob was surprised to see a strange woman in the apartment. He was overjoyed that she knew sign language!

Jacob signed back, "*Who are you?*"

Beth signed, "*Tom's wife,*" then leaned out the door and pointed at the motorhome. Next, she put her open hand near her forehead and lowered it below her chin while closing her eyes.

Jacob now understood that Tom was asleep in the motorhome. He looked downward, paused, and then back at Beth and signed, "*Can you play?*"

Beth moved her head up and down to affirm that she could. Renewed with joy, Jacob set his bucket, mop, and supplies to the side of the door. He rubbed up against Beth as he burst into the apartment. He got the chess game from a cupboard and competently arranged the chess pieces. Beth looked over the chessboard and signed, "*Who goes first?*"

Jacob pointed at Beth and then made the sign-of-the-cross. She knew that signing himself was Tom's doing. Tom would do the same thing when he played golf with his betting buddies. She wished Tom would have taught rubbing a rabbit's foot or something different to psych out an opponent.

It had been years since she played chess—she didn't expect to lose in nine moves. In the second game, when Tom enters the apartment, Beth concentrates on the chess pieces. Jacob jumped off the green chair, ran over, and hugged Tom's leg.

"Jacob's becoming a good chess player."

"No kidding!" Beth said, then walked over to Tom and kissed him. Jacob grabbed her hand and pulled her back to the table.

Tom made coffee and hot cocoa, then put Akara and Pap in the microwave. He stood behind Jacob, gently massaging Jacob's small shoulders, and observed. When Jacob sacrificed his queen, Tom knew Beth would be in checkmate within two moves.

Tom was right. Beth signed, "Thank you." Jacob smiled and drank the cocoa.

Tom showed Beth the new dog kennel and the side alley where children played during Sunday service. Jacob stood patiently at the church's front doors, ready to work. Beth now understood Tom's bragging about how mature the Onukwulu boys were. She couldn't wait to meet Ekon.

While Tom was unlocking the church, his cell phone vibrated. Jacob grabbed Beth's hand and led her inside.

Tom noted the caller ID. He stepped back and down the stairs so as not to be overheard. "What do you need?"

"Uncle Tom, Mr. Chen wants your motorhome ASAP. The Chinese have a plan that supports the Red Nobility scholarships."

"Tina, tell Mr. Chen I have to pick up my dogs. They are in quarantine. Also, tell him that we do not have a written agreement!"

"I don't know anything about your agreement with Mr. Chen. But he's got strict orders from China. If you can't help, Victor said he will."

"I'll call you back in a couple of days after Beth returns to Texas."

"Like wow! Aunt Beth is here now. We should all go out. Victor Vee knows some live music hot spots in Lagos."

"Tina, I have to go. I'll call you on my way back from the Abuja airport." Tom shoved his phone into his pocket, walked up the stairs, and pulled open one of the church doors. Jacob and Beth were gone—it was as though they had vanished!

Tom let go of the door, walked to the right corner of the church, and looked down the side alley. No, Beth or Jacob? He walked down the alley and gazed over the vacant field. Tom cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled, "Beth, where are you?" Yelling for Jacob would fall on deaf ears.

Tom ran to the other rear corner of the church and yelled toward the trees in the vacant lot, "Elizabeth, are you two over there in the trees?" Tom then put his thumbs into his mouth and blew an ear-piercing whistle. The side door of the church sprang open. Tom hurried around the back corner and demanded an answer, "Where were you two hiding?"

"Jacob was showing me the false wall panel you have in the closet," Beth replied concernedly. "You need to get a gun safe!"

"Nigeria doesn't have the right to bear arms in their constitution. Getting a gun safe would send up a red flag. I'm already on the local constable's list. He spies on everyone in the neighborhood."

"At least keep the ammunition someplace else. Guns and small boys are not a good mix!"

"I didn't think that Jacob knew about the false wall. I'll move the stuff into the motorhome later." Tom was fully aware that the untraceable ghost gun that Hank gave to him could get

him imprisoned for up to ten years.

"Do you want me to help you do that now?" Beth asked anxiously. "Remember about the young altar server at my church who committed suicide? It was with a gun his father kept on a nightstand."

"Beth, I'll move the stuff after dark. The nosy neighborhood constable could be spying on us right now. He's a devout Muslim who hates Christian preachers. Credence to Allah is all that he knows."

"Okay." Beth squatted down and signed, "*Thanks for showing me the secret hiding place.*" Jacob hurried to the front steps, retrieved his red bucket and mop, then darted home.

"Let's go get some coffee. I need to pay the baker for Sunday." Tom said as they walked up the alley toward the apartment.

Over a boiling vat of palm oil, Tom introduced Beth to his baker partner and settled the church bill. They found a small table under a blue tarp awning. "This coffee is delicious."

"It's from Kenya." Tom sipped from the paper cup. "Akara is a deep-fried bean puree, and Pap is a porridge made from corn."

"Sounds healthier than sugary donuts." Beth broke the Akara in half, dipped it in the pap, and popped a chunk into her mouth.

Tom's impromptu small talk about mentoring the baker and helping him grow his business was deflection discourse—he was not ready to confess. Tom flagged down a keke and told the driver to take them to Tin Can Island. He planned to show Beth the corrupt side of commerce in Nigeria. He wanted to discourage Beth from coming back to Africa.

The next day, the church women had a tea social for Beth. Some wore colorful African dresses with coordinating head scarves. Beth felt welcomed—the love was genuine.

"Some of our husbands call this a Tea and Strumpet social," Jacob's Mum said with a frown.

"I wouldn't mind being called a lady of the night by my husband," Beth replied. They both laughed.

The next day, Tom arranged a tour of Makoko, a slum built over water. Makoko is known as the 'Venice of Africa.' It's a fishing community of over a quarter million residents. Beth instantly fell in love with the people—especially the children

who paddled alongside the tour boat. The plan to discourage Beth backfired. She purchased handmade trinkets, a sunhat woven from reeds, a bracelet, and three colorful scarves.

Late that evening, Beth helped Tom move a 22-caliber long rifle, two handguns, and Hank's ghost AR15 from the church to the motorhome. There were four loud **snaps** when the corner magnets pulled the plywood into place. Tom got off his knees and proclaimed, "That makes me feel better." Ironically, neither Tom nor Beth knew Ekon had discovered the hiding spot under the bench seat while cleaning the motorhome.

"Let's get you to the Lagos International Airport for that direct red-eye flight into Houston." Tom pulled the keys from his pocket. Traffic was light, and the drive only took twenty-five minutes from the church to the departure terminal.

Tom reiterated the horrific slaying of the three school girls and doubled down that now wasn't the time for Beth to be in Africa. Beth rebutted Tom's concerns with the fact that there are more school shootings in the United States than in any other country in the world. She also cited the recent senseless shooting of nine black women by a white supremacist. The murders happened while they held a Bible study class at the historic Emanuel African Church in Charleston, South Carolina.

Tom was not in the mood to debate gun violence, statistical school shootings, or the Second Amendment. The real reason for sending Beth home was—Tina.

Beth felt something was off. Tom had barely touched her—it was more than the slaying of the innocent. Beth's flight number finally rang out over the airport PA system. After Beth's ticket got scanned at the top of the jet bridge, Tom pulled an envelope from his pocket and placed it in Beth's hand. "I'm so sorry for breaking the Seventh Commandment."

CHAP 15... **No perfect marriage**

The wide-body Airbus A310 banked west and started climbing to thirty-five thousand feet. Beth took a deep breath and then opened the plain white envelope. The protestant's seventh commandment differed from the one she learned throughout Catholic school. It didn't matter. The Chanel#5 *perfume* that had been on Tom's pillow was still lingering in her head. She did not want to read the letter.

Beth, I'm so sorry for the adulteress act that I committed. Until last week, you were the only one I've been intimate with. I was the elder. I should have been stronger. It just happened. Maybe if Tina were my biological niece, my desires and thoughts toward her would have been different. I'm not making excuses for my actions. I let you down. I let myself down, and most of all, I let God down. Don't bother coming back to Africa. I'm contacting the home office to hopefully get transferred to a staff position at Glory and Praise University in Kansas.
Tom

Tears dropped from Beth's chin onto her blouse. She closed her eyes and pushed her head back into the seat. Tom's rude actions for the last three days now made sense. *I hate Tina! She's always flirted with Tom. Why her? It's probably partly my fault. I was not chaste when we got married, unlike Tom. I lived with someone for a few months in college. I've never been*

up to Tom's standards.

Oddly, Beth felt relief. Now, Tom wasn't that pure, perfect half of their marriage. For at least twenty years, she carried remorse for a promiscuous start at college. St Mary's all-girls high school left her a bit naïve. The first month away at state college, when the star linebacker took an interest in a shy Christian girl, made her feel loved and wanted. It felt like all the romance novels with alpha-male characters that she passionately read over so many lonely weekends and summer breaks.

Before football season was over, Rex had moved into her tiny studio apartment. It wasn't a good relationship from the start. The dominated relationship turned violent after Rex tested positive for steroids. Before the last game of the season, the coach pulled his scholarship and cut him from the team. Thankfully, a college resource officer helped Beth with a restraining order and posted that Rex wasn't allowed on campus. Rex moved to California.

Over that winter, Beth poured her heart and soul into distance running and tried out for the track team. By her third collegiate track year, she had earned the anchor spot on the 1500-meter relay team and was competitive at the 3000-meter steeplechase. Kenyan and Ethiopian athletes dominated long-distance running, and Beth often ran with them for solitude and safety in numbers.

"Madam, when you finish, extinguishing your reading lamp will make it easier for other passengers to sleep."

Beth wiped at the tears running down her face. "Sorry, I just wanted to read this letter."

"You look upset. Can I get you anything?"

"Yes, a glass of wine to help me sleep." Beth turned off the reading light and then folded up Tom's letter. She pushed her head back into the headrest and closed her eyes. *Hail Holy Queen Mother of Mercy, in my weeping and tears, I'm asking for your prayers and intercession.*

"Cabernet Sauvignon has more melatonin than white wine. It should help you sleep." The attendant spoke just above a whisper and handed Beth a plastic glass and a bag of peanuts.

"Thank you," Beth replied. As she consumed the red wine, the blame game started up again. For a moment, it was Tom's fault. For sure, it was Tina's fault. But then, Beth blamed

herself for not being able to conceive. Tom loved children. He coached Little League in Texas and always talked about the importance of family.

Way back before Tom was in Beth's life, the college nurse suggested backing off endurance running and maybe even giving up track to see if her menstrual cycles got regular again. That was a big ask, plus it was just a suggestion. By her senior year, with Beth running at anchor position, the women set a record for the 1500-meter relay. Her alma mater still holds that track record.

In graduate school, Tom became a full-time womanizer in Beth's life—a womanizer but in a different way than a football star or basketball player. Tom was sophisticated, confident, and had connections. Like Beth, he thought a master's in education would be a good degree and might lead to a middle school coaching position.

On their first official date, Tom picked Beth up in an official Army Hummer, wearing a dark blue Army uniform. He had made reservations at a famous all-American steak house. The owner seated them at his best table and gave them complimentary drinks to appreciate Tom's service to the country. After dinner, Tom ditched the blue Army dress jacket and white shirt for a sports shirt and windbreaker. He had front-row tickets at an outdoor Hank Williams concert.

Tom dropped Beth off at her tiny apartment at twenty-three hundred military time. He took her hand, walked her to the door, and after a gentle kiss on the cheek, said, "Ms. Elizabeth Ann, if you are not busy tomorrow, maybe we could have a picnic lunch." Tom barely got the Hummer back to the National Guard motor pool before midnight.

Beth hand-washed a pair of running shorts and steamed her best blouse. Going to bed to sleep was useless. She didn't get but thirty minutes of solid sleep. From daybreak until eleven o'clock, Beth peeked out the curtains at least fifty times.

Finally, a red convertible pulled into the parking spot before her apartment door. Tom still had on golf attire from an earlier tee-off. He grabbed a bouquet from the passenger seat. Dinner, a concert, and a Sunday picnic with a soldier were stuff to desire and covet. Yet, it felt too mushy, even phony. Deep down, Beth's heart swooned.

In the beginning, Tom seemed like a showoff and a big flirt.

It was their eighth date before he stepped inside the tiny apartment. During their entire dating period, Tom never stayed overnight. Tom did embellish and liked being around affluence and money. It hurt when her Dad called out Tom as a big bullshitter. Living a chaste life was something Tom was committed to— this bothered Beth.

When Tom was in sixth grade, his older sister got pregnant during her first year of high school. Their parents decided that the baby should be up for adoption. Shortly after the newborn was out of sight but not out of mind, his sister started sniffing glue and other inhalants. Two and a half years later, Tom found her dead in the basement on the night of her senior prom. It was the night the father of her baby was crowned king. Beth's once best friend got crowned queen of the prom.

Alcohol was how his parents coped with that family decision gone awry. During summer break, Tom's junior year, he decided to join the military—his escape from flipping burgers at a fast food joint.

Beth's family had issues, too. Coming from a family of eight, everyone had personal problems. It was not honoring thy father and mother—it was obey Mom or deal with Dad when he got home from work. If you wanted something, you would have to earn it for yourself. When Beth wanted a bicycle, she picked berries for an entire summer to pay for it. Beth also paid for her college education. Her father didn't speak much to her after Rex moved in. He didn't care much for Tom's better-than-thou demeanor. The deal breaker was when she did not get married in the Catholic Church.

"Madam, may I take the empty wine glass?" The flight attendant gently asked.

Beth refocused her eyes. "Sure, go right ahead."

"Could I offer you a pillow?" The attendant put her hand on an overhead compartment latch.

"Yes." Beth reclined her seat and barely moved her lips. "God, please help me, show me a sign or..."

"Here's a pillow." The flight attendant handed a pillow to Beth over the back of the seat. "You can rest peacefully. This pilot always flies way south of the Devil's Triangle."

"What?" Beth's brain snapped from praying to angst.

"I heard you praying. Many travelers get nervous if we fly over the Devil's Triangle."

It took a moment for Beth's brain to catch up. "People still believe in that Bermuda Triangle stuff?"

"I do. Satan has always roamed the world." The attendant picked up the plastic glass and bag of peanuts and worked toward the back of the plane.

The second glass of Cabernet Sauvignon helped to relax her heart and eyes. She drifted off and dreamed about a verse in the bible. *Here is Bilhah, my servant, have intercourse with her and let her give birth on my knees, so that I too may have children through her.* This invasion felt more real than a dream. Beth twisted her head from side to side but couldn't wake herself.

Another Old Testament narrative invaded Beth's gray space. *When Abraham had been living in Canaan, Sarah, his wife, took her Egyptian maidservant Hagar and gave her to her husband as a surrogate. Abraham slept with Hagar, and she conceived.* Beth was now moaning. These were not dreams—they were messages from afar.

A cold sensation smothered over Beth's hand. She moaned louder. The coldness moved to her forehead. "It's okay. You can wake up now. It's okay. Jesus loves you."

Beth's eyes slowly opened. Blue was all she saw. The outside five-hundred miles per hour fuselage wind filled Beth's ears. "Where am I? What happened? I can't see!"

"You're okay." The flight attendant pulled the blue ice pack back from Beth's forehead. "There you go. It's okay. Those nasty night tremors are hard to wake up from."

"Those were the most vivid dreams I've ever had."

"You've been sleeping hard for at least two hours. You were clenching your hands so tight that you broke a fingernail."

Beth put her hand over her heart. It was still racing. "It must have been the wine."

"Or maybe a divination from above."

"A divination, what do you mean?"

"You know a calling. A supernatural message." The attendant paused. "Or a false message from the dark side. Did you buy any Juju souvenirs while in Africa?"

"No," Beth shook her head from side to side. "Why?"

"That is a big issue for tourists from the United States, so few believe evil exists like us Africans."

A cold chill ran down Beth's spine when she remembered

the small trinket doll she bought from the dock vendor at the Makoko slums. He instructed her to hang the fertility icon in the master bedroom. She packed that doll in her carry-on bag!

Beth didn't dare sleep for the rest of the flight. The tires bumping down on the Dallas Fort Worth runway knotted her stomach. She hurried up the jet bridge and stopped at a garbage container. She put her carry-on bag on a chair, quickly dug out the straw and burlap doll, and thrust it into the garbage. She rushed toward a restroom to wash off what felt like dusty grit on her hands.

As she washed her hands, a spiritual warfare prayer came to mind. *Saint Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle. Be our protection against the wickedness and snares of the devil; May God rebuke him, we humbly pray; And do thou, O Prince of the Heavenly Host, by the power of God, thrust into hell Satan and all evil spirits who wander through the world for the ruin of souls, Amen.*

* * *

Tom was rushing across the parking lot and stopped to take the call. "Beth, I'm so sorry about what happened. However, whenever you want to handle our property and assets, you must wait until I return home."

"Tom, wait and listen to me! I had a vision on the plane. It was so vivid and all biblical. Now, I know for sure that God has a plan for us. He wants Tina to be our surrogate! Just like Hagar was for Abraham when she had Ishmael. Sarah was okay with all of it." Beth was almost out of breath with enthusiasm.

Tom was out of breath, huffing it to get their dogs. "Beth, you are misunderstanding that story in Genesis. Sarah and Abraham did have a son of their own, Issac! They should have trusted God to bring about His promise of a son between them. Did you know Isaac was born when Abraham was eighty-six years old?"

"Tom, I know the story. Hagar bore Abraham's first son Ishmael," Beth answered with determination.

"So you know that Abraham banished Hagar and Ishmael to Mecca and never had contact with them after Isaac was born?"

Ishmael is a prophet of—”

Beth wasn't listening, she quipped back. "What will you say if Tina is pregnant right now?"

"I'm going to say that is impossible!"

"Why are you saying this stuff? Maybe it's my calling to raise Tina's unwanted baby. Maybe—just maybe, we could pay her to be our surrogate."

"Beth, I'm telling you this because I didn't have intercourse with Tina. It didn't go that far."

"What? Your letter said you committed adultery."

"I did." Tom looked across the parking lot at the cargo pickup area for the quarantine entrance. "When Tina came out of the shower, her towel fell off. I got aroused. Tina rubbed up against me and then—"

"And then what?"

"She gave me a massage. There was no intercourse."

"What! That's not adultery." Beth felt anger and relief.

"It is, too. I touched Tina's breasts and orgasmed. I'm sorry, that's the truth. I should have had more self-control."

"You're telling me you didn't screw that bitch? That's not how I understood your letter!"

"Beth, adultery, infidelity, and just looking at women with lust are all sins against the flesh. Thou shalt not commit adultery is one of the commandments."

Beth hated it when Tom used the Ten Commandments or his in-depth knowledge of scripture. "So now what? Where do we go from here? We need to talk face to face."

Tom looked at his Rolex. He only had twenty minutes before the quarantine pickup department closed for the day. "After I get Cain and Able loaded up, I'm meeting up with your friend Dan. I'll call you afterward."

"I'll be waiting for your call. We have a lot to discuss."

"We do. I'm sorry for everything. If you want, you can start the paperwork."

"Paperwork for what?"

"Our divorce! At least we didn't get married in your church, so you won't have to undergo the annulment process."

Elizabeth could not wrap her head around Tom's insistence on starting the divorce proceedings. For twenty years, they had dealt with the reality that, most likely, no baby would ever stir in her womb. Not to grow old with Tom had never crossed her

mind. Now, he was pushing her away—

CHAP 16... Geo - Tracking

Cain and Abel were skittish when Tom entered the quarantine pickup area. The agent looked at the wall clock, ready to tell Tom to return in the morning. That is when both dogs started barking frantically, a warning not to leave them overnight. The agent quickly opened a brown accordion file, pulled out some paperwork, and had Tom sign four documents. He then handed Tom two dog tags. "Put these quarantine tags on your dogs before you leave the airport parking area!"

Tom pushed a cargo cart with the two crates out the doors to the short-term parking area. Both dogs were spinning circles in their crates, reeling with excitement. It had been weeks since they smelled Tom's scent. Tom started to attach the tags. *These are not our training collars. Beth adamantly disapproves of all shock collars. The quarantine department must have put them on.*

After removing the second collar, Tom locked Cain and Able in the back of the Sprinter. He headed back toward the cargo pickup office with the training collars. The door had a **CLOSED** sign, and the blinds got shut. Tom stopped and told himself. *I'll mail these back on Monday from Lagos.*

"Sitz," Tom ordered when he got into the motorhome. Cain and Abel sat. Sitz is the German command for sit. Tom opened the glove box and dropped the training collars between some maps and service records.

When Tom paid the parking lot attendant, he asked about an off-leash dog park. The lanky attendant leaned out of the guard shack and handed Tom a points of interest brochure. "Gudu Park allows dogs. Keep your van locked and electronic stuff out of sight. The recreation area is only a few miles away."

An iron fence surrounded the city park. The road through the park was lined on both sides by old tires buried halfway into the dirt and painted white. There were food carts and trinket vendors. Signs and posters covered telephone poles and any wall that could take a staple. Tom reflected on his first week in Africa. *If this were Constable's Ayoola jurisdiction, he'd have a field day writing fines for all the outdated signs posted.*

At a far corner in the park, Tom let Cain and Able out the side of the van. He pointed across a clearing and yelled, "Voraus," The German command for 'Go.' The dogs ran a beeline toward some Ube trees. Tom whistled and then yelled, "Hier." The dogs came back. Cain and Able had not exercised for days.

A modified transport bus backed into a parking space one over from the Sprinter. A bi-fold door opened, and a side ramp lowered outward. Dan let his hands off the wheels of the carbon-fiber wheelchair. At the bottom of the ramp, the dogs sniffed Dan and re-logged his scent from the flight to Africa.

"Hier," Tom ordered. Both dogs came back to Tom. "Sitz," Tom yelled. Cain and Abel sat.

Dan dug jerky out of a vest pocket. "Can they have a treat?"

"Sure, I just picked them up. I'm not sure when they ate last."

"You cut it close getting to the cargo pickup building."

"How do you know that?" Tom was puzzled

"By my satellite tracking dongles. I geo-tracked them from the airport to here."

"You did what?" Tom watched Dan pull jerky from a zip-loc bag and yelled, "Voraus." Cain and Abel went to Dan.

"When your wife told me Cain and Able were police K9 trained, I wanted to ensure they didn't go missing while in the cargo hold area. So I had Liz put my GPS trackers on them after we landed. My trackers are disguised as training shock collars. They don't shock; they only track."

"I wasn't sure what those were. I thought bark collars."

"Not correct; they are satellite GEO trackers. David designed them for my Belgian Malinois a few years back. I keep a GEO tracker on Brutus twenty-four-seven when I travel abroad."

"You bring your dog with you?"

"Yes, sir. Brutus guards all my electronic equipment when I'm away from my hotel suite. Most importantly, the Clipper Chip decoder with skipjack algorithm code."

"The what?"

"Never mind," Dan realized he had slipped with too much information. The Clipper Chip MYK78T IC with skipjack algorithm still worked to decode encrypted messages. Only a

handful of people worldwide even know about the Clipper Chip.

"I know all about algorithms and decoders. Kids use those fancy chips to hack X-box games. And download movies for free."

"You got it," Dan replied, pulling tri-folded papers from an inside vest pocket. "Look over the dates and then circle the ones you are sure you sent email from Lagos."

"What?" Tom snatched the papers from Dan's grip.

"Your church email account is being used to open new Bitcoin accounts, starting about six weeks ago."

Tom unfolded the papers. It was two and a half pages of spreadsheet lines and columns. "I no longer use this church account."

"That's what I suspected." Dan patted Cain on the head. "Look at the first few lines. That activity occurred around three in the morning during the second week of March. Does that mean anything to you?"

Tom squinted. "This spreadsheet font is tiny."

"Here, try these." Dan pulled a pair of reading glasses from his vest and pulled out more jerky.

Tom scrutinized the first couple of lines. "These activities took place the first week I was in Lagos."

"Did anyone else have access to your old church account?"

"My secretary knew my password and sometimes would sign on from the church office in Dallas."

"Would that be Sally Slenski?"

"Yes! How do you know all this stuff?" Tom was getting perturbed.

"That's what I do." Dan was perturbed also. "When I say memorized what I send you, do it. I will always delete my emails or messages within a few minutes."

"Why should I do that? I haven't done anything wrong!"

"Well then, why is the Reverend Thomas Joseph Seton on the FBI cyber-watch list? There is a tap on the church office phone, most likely because of Bitcoin trades. Your home phone has a tap on it, too."

"I don't even have a clue how Bitcoin works. The treasurer at the church in Texas did some cyber trading, but I didn't. I know of a Bitcoin ATM in a hotel lobby I've been to."

"Is that restaurant in Dallas?" Dan pulled a notepad and pencil out of his vest.

"It's not in Dallas. It's in Lagos."

"Really?" Dan replied with an uptick. Locating an illegal Bitcoin terminal in Lagos would be a significant find.

"I think it is gone now. I don't remember seeing it in the side hall. Last week, the hotel Relaxation Bar and Grill closed."

"Oh?" Dan held back his investigative skills. Displaying too much interest might cause Tom to quit giving out information. "Anyhow, like I told Liz, don't talk about financial stuff over your phones. You might want to get a burner phone."

"Liz, nobody ever calls Elizabeth by that nickname."

"My Dad did all the time. Many Sundays, he'd tell me how grateful he was that Liz had brought Holy Communion to him at the nursing home."

"Oh," Tom replied despondently. Beth had also warned him about talking over the phone.

"Well, anyway. Your dogs are safe and sound. I'm glad that I could return a favor." Dan sensed that Tom had something else on his mind and had yet to determine if he was friend or foe.

Tom opened the passenger door of the Sprinter and gripped the nylon strap on the computer carrying case.

Dan tore off small pieces of jerky and then spun his wheelchair ninety degrees to be face-to-face with Tom. "What's this?"

"It's my laptop. You can see that I've never done any Bitcoin stuff with it." Tom held out the computer travel case.

"It's not my business. But to be safe, you should perform a low-level format. Better yet, replace the hard drive."

"I don't even know what a low-level format is." Tom sensed the mistrust; he lowered the nylon case onto Dan's lap.

"You trust me with this? If I find something illegal, my contract with the Nigerian SSS requires me to hand over that information."

"The what?" Tom tightened his grip on the computer case strap. "What or who is the SSS?"

"The State Security Service of Nigeria is the government office I work with as a contractor. I will not work for any agencies in the United States, especially the FBI."

"Oh—" Tom made direct eye contact with Dan and asked, "Is the FBI corrupt?"

"More like compromised. An elitist group has infiltrated

them and other intelligence agencies in the United States."

"Are you talking about the EWO?"

Dan immediately looked from side to side. *Is Tom one of them?*

Tom released his grip. "I trusted you to bring my wife and dogs to Africa. I trust you with my laptop. Do that low-format thing you talked about. The password is GOD123, which is all upper case."

"That's not a very secure password," Dan replied.

"Yeah, everybody tells me that. I'll be coming through Abuja next Friday. Can we meet up then?"

"I plan to return to the States next Saturday. I miss not seeing my kids."

"What about your wife?" Tom asked.

"Her too," Dan shot a grin up toward Tom. "We need to be careful with how we communicate. Next Friday at noon. Now I need to go."

"Okay, sounds good."

"Remember, no communication over phones." After Dan pulled away, Tom dug out a ball and threw it until his arm ached.

He then walked around looking for the park rules. There was nothing about overnight parking not being allowed. With two guard dogs, a handgun, plus a modified hog-hunting rifle, Tom had no worries about sleeping overnight.

While Cain and Able ate, Tom's phone rang and vibrated. "Tom, we need to talk." There was urgency in Beth's voice. "Beth, we should wait until I come home," Tom replied, heeding Dan's warning about their phones being tapped.

"We should talk now! Tina probably had the whole thing planned. Is she still staying in the church apartment?"

"No, she's staying at a Holiday Inn. FYI, Tina is working to help Nigerian girls get an education abroad."

"No way," Beth yelled into her phone. "Tina could care less about anybody but herself. You should not trust her."

"You don't know that. Tina's working with a Chinese company to offer scholarships," Tom replied with a defensive tone.

"I've stated this before." Beth paused and then forced out the words, "Tina is beautiful, but I don't trust her."

"Beth, you've constantly told me how bad Tina is since she

was in middle school. I think you are the one with the jealous girl-loathing syndrome."

A hurtful silence caused every muscle in Beth's back and neck to tighten. The time wasn't right to talk about offering Tina a hundred thousand dollars to be their surrogate. "I know it's late over there. Will you please call me in the morning?"

"I understand you are angry, but it was my fault too. Some time apart will be good for us."

"I don't know about that. We have been apart for less than two months. Now look at us! We're not even a couple anymore."

Usually, Tom would have replied with how much he wanted to take his Elizabethan queen to bed. Instead, he replied, "I'll text you this week. Just give me some time to wrap things up over here." Tom heeded Dan's warning again about the taps on their phones. "Maybe we should do things the old-fashioned way and write to each other."

Beth reflected on all the heartfelt letters and cards they exchanged while dating. "That would be nice."

It felt safe having Cain and Able in the motorhome. Tom was snoring in less than ten minutes. The plan was to be on the road early and home by midday to prepare a discourse on one of the commandments for Sunday. Tom had yet to preach on Bearing False Witness.

At daybreak, Cain and Able started milling around in their crates. Tom rolled onto his side and peered out the missing side vent hole. The yellow handicapped van was backing into the same spot it had parked in yesterday. The bi-fold doors opened, and the ramp lowered like a drawbridge. Tom hustled into his camo pants and a hooded pullover. He pushed the 357 Mag revolver under the corner of the mattress and went out the back door.

Dan zipped down the ramp. Cain and Abel heard the wheels rolling on metal noise and barked. "Why are you back? I thought our rendezvous was next week?"

"My Geo-tracking software showed that you were still here. There's stuff on your hard drive that needs attention ASAP." Dan reached back for the computer case hanging from the wheelchair handle.

"Okay, but didn't we agree that you would get rid of that stuff and I'd pick it up this next week?" Cain and Abel started

whining in their crates when hearing Dan's voice.

"It can't wait! It would be best if you did something with the cryptocurrency accounts. If I delete the blockchain account numbers, you could lose all your NTF assets."

"NFT assets, what are those?" Tom opened the side door of the motorhome and ordered, "Stille." Cain and Abel hushed.

Dan answered, "Non-fungible tokens. You know, artwork and collectible items with an inflated value that can not get appraised accurately. Money-laundering big time."

"Sounds about normal," Tom observed a van turn into the food vendor area with **FRESH CATFISH** painted on the side.

Dan wondered if Tom was playing dumb and was an undisclosed member of the Elite World Order. He finally uttered, "I know all about your Stolen Valor history back in Texas."

"Yes, I did embellish when and where I served in the Army National Guard. There is no excuse for what I did. That's part of the reason I'm here in Africa."

When Dan had background-checked Tom, he saw some insurance claims that bordered on fraud. "Why the big hole there in the side of your motor home? Looks like something you should turn into insurance."

"The shipping company had to pull the vent cover off to get the Sprinter into a shipping container."

"That makes sense." Dan was still not sure about Tom. "Okay, here's the deal. I found an IP server in Lagos that opened some Bitcoin accounts with the Social Security numbers of Texans. Some of those SS numbers are already doing crypto-fund trading."

Tom gazed at the printout. "These SS numbers and names are from the IRS charitable contributions forms we send to our parishioner's each tax season."

"That kind of information should be on a secure server." Dan rebutted Tom's nonchalant answer.

"I don't know anything about that. My secretary put the church directory on my laptop. That way, I could look up phone numbers and addresses."

"Would that be Sally Slenski?"

"Yes. But Sally wouldn't do anything illegal. Her husband is an environmental engineer. Plus, her son just joined up to be an Army Ranger."

"My Dad's best friend and my Godfather was a Green Beret," Dan said with pride.

"That's cool. Hank, one of my best friends, served for twenty years as a Navy Seal."

"Is Hank the one that called you out about your Stolen Valor claim?" "No," Tom's shoulders and head slumped. "Some busybody reporter at Wolf & Hound News ran the story. Anything that makes Christians look bad, that news agency will run with it."

"They run anti-Hindu and anti-Israel stories also." Dan wished he had more time to feel out Tom, but he didn't. He pulled a USB thumb drive from his vest pocket. "You can use this to low-level format your hard drive, and then it will restore to factory settings." Dan handed the USB stick to Tom.

"Factory settings! Would I lose my past orations, pictures, and the book I've been working on since college?"

Dan looked Tom directly in the eyes. "Yes, plus you will lose all the cryptocurrency trades and the blockchain account numbers. They'd be gone!"

"Dan, I keep telling you! I have never heard of a blockchain or those un-fundable tokens. I don't care about that stuff."

"NFT stands for non-fungible tokens," Dan corrected Tom.

"Couldn't you put all my sermons and pictures on this USB stick? There is a folder with my book called Infinite Peace. Please keep that." Tom handed the thumb drive back. "I'll pay you for all your work. My orations, my pictures, and the folder called Infinite Peace are all that I care about."

Dan was more confused; maybe Tom was truthful about not knowing about Bitcoin. "Okay, I'll do it. Meet me back here in exactly one week at six am. Don't ever try to contact me! Don't tell anyone about us meeting back here, especially Liz."

"Okay, but after you left yesterday, I talked to Beth. I didn't mention our meeting or anything. I heeded your warning about the FBI tap on our home phone."

"Good, you don't want this to turn into the laptop from hell. The news media would front page a story about a white Christian pastor banished to Africa who is now trading Bitcoin." Dan flashed a warning frown at Tom—his gut was telling him not to take the laptop.

"That's for sure," Tom replied, adding, "When the News Babblers turn on you, you are guilty no matter what."

"That's the main reason I'm over here. The Nigerian government wants me to help clean up their scamming reputation that is now spreading like wildfire in the cloud."

"I don't know anything about the cloud. Computer network stuff is not my thing. Thank God that there are electronic whiz guys like you."

"That's a nice way to put it. Most people think I'm a vitamin D-deficient nerd living in an underground bunker playing video games day and night."

"Yeah, I get that. I'm good at hunting and fishing, and I'm an above-average golfer. The outdoors has always been my thing. The only video game I ever play is chess."

Dan slapped his left hand on the wheelchair armrest! "Damn, you are lucky. I can do some outdoor activities but can't swing a golf club. However, I play chess and have played a game or two of Tetris."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like I'm a great golfer. Actually, I should give up the game. It has caused me more grief than pleasure."

Dan cast his eyes upward toward heaven. "David would take me to do outdoor stuff all the time. He'd strap me on the back of his Harley, and we'd glide around old country roads for days on end. I miss the wind in my face, the motor's thumping, and the thrill of accelerating out of the corners."

"I never was a motorcycle guy, Beth talks about them. In her college days, she had a boyfriend who rode."

"I do miss the adrenaline rush," Dan replied.

"Sounds a lot like when I hunt hogs out of a helicopter. Being strapped in and feeling the thumping of the rotors, the side-to-side rolling followed by acceleration is so exhilarating."

"That sounds fun! Helicopters are an awesome machine."

"Feral hogs have overrun a friend's ranch. Maybe I could hook you up with Hank for a hunt."

"I recall seeing a news clip of those feral hogs being hunted with night vision equipment. That stirs up the animal activists."

"Yeah, whatever, there's always two sides to a story." Tom didn't want to get another controversy going. "Would loading my documents and photos onto a new computer be easier?"

"That would probably be the safest thing to do. These days, bleach and a hammer might not eliminate all the data on your hard drive."

"No kidding," Tom affirmed. "I'll pay you for a new computer and your time." Tom pointed at the nylon case and said, "I trust you for making it right."

Dan's gut was telling him not to get more involved. "How about we trade for a hog hunting excursion."

"I'd be glad to hook you up with Hank. He's kind of an under-the-radar type of guy. You'd like him."

"Okay, no checks, no bill of sales, nothing. We don't want a paper trail. Set me up with your friend Hank, and we'll call it even."

There were a few more details exchanged. The plan was to rendezvous back at that exact spot at the same time in exactly a week. Dan drove off in the modified van. *I know I should not be getting involved. I sure hope this trade doesn't turn into the laptop from hell.*

CHAP 17... **Swap vehicles**

Traffic back to Lagos had been heavy. Tom was almost two hours behind what he had told Ekon and Jacob. They were kicking a ball in the field behind the church—waiting. He had barely parked when the brothers ducked through the fence and came running up the side alley. Tom hopped out and then over-enunciated short, clear sentences. “These are big dogs. Cain and Abel are guard dogs. Go slow!”

Ekon signed Tom’s instructions for Jacob, and they backed up. Tom opened the rear door of the Sprinter and yelled, “Bieib.” The dogs crammed side by side in the doorway and stayed. Four big brown eyes locked onto the boys and readied for the next command. Jacob stepped behind Ekon to a safer zone to avoid the two penetrating stares.

Tom muzzled the dogs and then clipped a leash onto Abel. He jerked on the leash and said, “Fuss.” Abel heeled tight to Tom’s side as they circled the boys several times. Tom said, “Sitz.” Abel sat directly in front of Jacob. They were head to head. Tom dropped the leash. Jacob made his hands into fists, and X crossed his forearms across his chest—the universal sign of love. Abel nuzzled Jacob’s stomach just below his crossed arms.

Tom followed the same process with Cain. Within the hour, the boys ran the dogs in the field and around the church several times. They took turns crawling through the new dog door. Then, they would huddle inside the oversized dog house that Idogbe had built. It was their new fort, a place for only boys—and dogs to hang out.

The fun was about to end when Mrs. Onukwulu hurried across the field, ducked through the fence opening, and cupped her hands around her mouth. “Where are you boys? Ekon, you’d better be with your baby brother! Where are you two?” Fifi could compete with any worried mother calling her kids home for dinner.

Tom was at the green table working on his Sunday sermon when he heard frantic hollering. Ekon and Jacob crawled out of

the dog house as he opened the apartment door.

Fifi halted outside the woven wire fence. She was alarmed by how large Cain and Abel were yet relieved they had muzzles on. "You two were supposed to be home an hour ago! How would you two like no dinner tonight?"

Tom approached from around the corner. "It's my fault. I was late getting back from Abuja."

"No, the boys know when they should be home!" Fifi put her hands on her hips and glared at them through the fence.

Jacob unlatched the kennel gate, and then hand motioned. Cain came out and nuzzled against her thigh. "Your dogs are so big."

"They both are around seventy pounds," Tom answered.

"They must eat a lot and make big messes." Fifi was trying hard to ignore Cain rubbing against her.

"They do make big piles. If it's okay, I'd like to hire your boys to help me feed and clean up after them."

"Of course, they'll help you." Fifi finally broke her rigid, straight-up posture and started petting Cain. "Pastor Tom, would you like to join us for dinner?"

"I would, but I must prepare for the service tomorrow." They all walked down the alley and back to the fence opening.

Petting and some head rubs were followed by Fifi saying, "See you tomorrow. I always look forward to your preaching."

Jacob handed the leash to Tom and then signed—Love.

Tom watched a mother hand and hand her sons across the field. He reflected on all the barren womb scripture passages in the Bible—Often, life seems unfair.

Without his laptop, which held all his musings and sermons, Tom was at a loss for which commandment to preach. He'd yet to sermonize on **Thou shalt not kill**. He valued the Catholic version **Thou shalt not murder** as a better interpretation. It seemed to justify non-intentional death.

An hour later, pen to paper hadn't happened, so Tom took the dogs for an evening walk, hoping to shake something out. Constable Ayoola Ashiru watched through binoculars. Just one dog pile not being cleaned up would be a fine of ten thousand naira. Ayoola ran a tight ship; litter was one issue—dog piles would not be tolerated.

Nature happened. Ayoola rushed up two blocks with his ticket book out. "You know the rules."

"My dogs just got here. Can't you give me a break?"

"If I give you a break, everyone expects a break. Then what would the neighborhood look like?"

Tom looked up and down the dirt road. Ayoola was right. He held reign over one of the cleanest neighborhoods in south Lagos. Abel started turning in circles and then squatted. "You might as well give me two tickets."

Ayoola reached into his pocket and pulled out poop bags. "Clean up both dog piles, and you'll get off with just one ticket."

Tom took the bags. "Thanks."

"Don't forget about the barking regulations. Do you want one of my neighborhood rules and regulations pamphlets?"

"No, I still got the one you gave me when I was hanging church posters," Tom replied sarcastically.

"What would the neighborhood look like if I let just one law slide? I don't want this neighborhood to become like all the trendy nine-commandment churches I see today." Constable Ayoola returned the sarcasm.

"I'm sure all mosques display and adhere to every one of the seventy-five good manner commandments in the Quran," Tom replied and snatched the ticket from Ayoola's fingers. "It seems you forgot the Don't-Spy-Commandment."

Ayoola was intimidated by Pastor Tom's knowledge of Islam. "Just follow the rules, and there won't be any problems."

"I'm glad I will be done with your goon-like rules soon," Tom shoved the ticket into his pocket.

"It's not spying if you are doing it for the government," Ayoola turned and walked off.

Back in the apartment without his laptop, Tom was at a loss for what to preach. He had yet to let the budding congregation know of his plan to take a position in academia back in the United States. Letting out information like that would only get a rumor mill spinning. Maybe he'd post a notice that the church was for sale. Shifting the blame toward a home office business decision would be a good strategy. Tom went to bed unprepared for Sunday service.

* * *

Cain and Abel were leashed and muzzled. Ekon and Jacob

had them outside the kennel and sitting at their sides. Tom's instructions were to keep everyone at arm's length. They learned that guard dogs are not pets and should not get petted by strangers. Cain and Abel knew seven German commands to obey. They translated to Sit, Down, Stay, Come, Heel, Off, and Attack in English. The German word Angreifen was the command that German Shepherds are bred for. Attack was the one command Tom didn't teach to Ekon.

Tom entered through the vestibule door. The blank spot where the church dedication plaque once hung wasn't necessary any longer. If the church got sold to a different denomination or converted to a mosque, it would get scrapped. He looked over the packed church, cleared his throat, and started. "Brothers and Sisters, last evening, while walking my dogs, I was stopped and informed about another neighborhood rule by Constable Ayoola." Tom held up the yellow ticket.

"Ayoola is a thief. He gave me a ticket for my overflowing garbage can," came a rant from the congregation.

"The constable makes up fines and then keeps the money," a second outburst from a different person.

"He's a Muslim and hates Christians. Ayoola works and collects money on the Sabbath," burst out a voice from one of the church elders.

"I'm aware that Ayoola is Muslim. I don't know how involved he is in his Islamic faith. Muslims don't observe the fourth commandment." Pastor Tom turned and pointed at the Decalogue plaques.

"You mean the third commandment!" The elderly congregant walked forward and pointed at the plaque on the left side with the first five commandments.

"Those are not the right commandments. They are the Catholic version," Tom instructed the church elder and congregation.

"Then we should put them in the trash where they belong!" The congregation went silent.

"Maybe the new owners will hang the correct ones." Tom let slip out the probable sale of the church.

"What's going on with our church?" asked the congregant standing up front.

During his first year of theology training, Tom learned never to ad-lib from the pulpit and always to be prepared. Things

quickly became more like a school board meeting of angry parents demanding answers. A new, corrected set of Ten Commandment plaques wasn't the issue—selling the church was.

Tom explained how the slaying of the three girls at the outreach school was the reason headquarters was reconsidering their outreach mission. About a dozen village girls could get an education but not beyond sixth grade—the risk outweighed the benefit. Also, the local government officials didn't want to start a war between the Hausa and Yoruba ethnic groups. The equal balance between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria was an additional concern. Another reason that Tom didn't speak was that he wanted out of Africa.

Cain and Abel became the most recent issue. That morning, one of the church's busy-bodies complained and said she would contact the head office on Monday. She would report that vicious guard dogs were on the church grounds—around children.

Nobody listened to Tom preach about keeping the Sabbath holy. He got shunned during coffee and donuts. Constable Ayoola Ashiru hid across the field in a patch of Ube trees. Finally, the church was locked, and everybody, including the Onukwulu boys, headed for home. Tom locked himself with the dogs inside the apartment. He did a face-first flop on the bed. Resting on the Sabbath was a commandment that he planned to honor.

Barely an hour passed before Cain and Abel were alerted to some noise in the front parking lot. There was a light knock. Tom tossed the pillow across the room. A loud pounding followed. Tom got off of bed and looked out the peephole. He groggily opened the door. "Tina, what do you want?"

"Uncle Tom, you promised you'd loan us your motorhome. Kenny Chen's container ship will be in Tin Can Harbor next week. You have to let us use it."

Victor Vee stepped in front of Tina. "Hey, preacher man, you must deliver on your promise." Victor puffed his chest out and stepped a few inches closer to Tom.

Cain and Abel moved to Tom's side, growled, and showed teeth. Victor drew his Rungu baton from his sleeved pants pocket. "Back those dogs up, or I will spinal jack them!"

"Sitz," Tom ordered in a commanding voice.

Tina squeezed through the door and went directly to the dogs. "Like wow, Victor. Cain or Abel wouldn't hurt a fly." Tina was wrong! The German word *angriefen* repeated twice would put the dogs into a full-on attack.

Tom rubbed at his eyes. "I need the motorhome for a trip back to Abuja next weekend. It's all yours until Friday."

"What do you think, Victor?" Tina looked up, still petting the dogs.

"I think you should go ask the Chinaman! He's the one running the operation. I know that Mr. Chen has a strict plan to follow."

Tina darted outside to Victor's music box truck.

Ken Chen was on a half-filled air mattress. His health had been on a decline since the trip to Africa. He was cooped up in a damp cargo container for twenty-three days, which brought on a respiratory infection. The mission was to get four virgins to rendezvous with a pickup boat south of Little Saint James Island. Between coughing spells, Kenny Chen replied, "Okay, we take motorhome now."

Tom told them to come back in thirty minutes. Ken couldn't quit coughing and was out of breath. Victor took Mr. Chen back to the holiday inn. Tom removed his hunting camo, 357 Mag revolver, and modified long gun. He put them under the bed in the apartment.

Ayoola headed down Frontage Road toward the apartment.

"What do you want now?" Tom yelled when he heard knocking.

Ayoola didn't reply. He knocked again.

Tom yanked open the door!

From the doorway, Ayoola noted the plastic case under the bed. "I heard you talked about me during the morning church service."

Tom stepped outside and pulled the door shut. "We did. Some parishioners think you make up new rules to collect more fine money."

"That's not true." Ayoola rebutted.

"I've been fined three times. I thought it was just because you didn't like white preachers. My congregation proved me wrong."

"Did you tell them that bearing false witness is against the eighth commandment?"

Tom paused. "No, I've yet to preach on the ninth commandment."

"You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor is the eighth commandment," Ayoola replied resolutely.

"That depends on what Christian faith you follow," Tom rebutted.

Ayoola looked directly at Tom. "I was watching your dogs around the children today. Keep them muzzled all the time."

"Is that going to be another one of your local rules that comes with a fine?"

"Your dogs are bigger than most children. So yes, there will be a fine! You're the one preaching accountably to only nine of the Commandments. "

Tom sensed the insult. "Do what you want! I'll have my dogs back in the United States in less than a month!"

Tom got the door half closed before Ayoola stopped it with his boot. "I'll be back with a search warrant." Ayoola threatened.

"Do what you need to do! I have to contact my wife, who is back in Texas. The sooner I get out of Africa, the better!"

Ayoola pulled a business card from his shirt pocket. "Give this number to your wife. It's the number for the station." Ayoola then pulled his boot from the doorway.

"What are you going to do, arrest me?"

"Maybe?" Ayoola glanced back at the long case under the bed. "I don't need a church in my jurisdiction that followers can pick and choose what laws to follow?"

Tom wasn't up for any more civic or religious discourse—he slammed the door.

Tom sat at the green table and texted:

I'm getting things wrapped up over here.

One last trip up to the outreach school.

Call this number if you can't reach me:

0-802-664-224. Ask for Ayoola.

It was after midnight when a vivid dream stirred Tom. In a slumber, he rolled out of bed onto his hands and knees. He latched onto the hard plastic gun case. Outside, a thick dew fog had rolled in. In the dark and damp air, Tom opened the **VV** music van's side door and placed the gun case that also held a

Colt 45 onto a half-inflated air mattress. The weight of both guns caused the air mattress to wrap around them. They got tucked in—out of sight.

CHAP 18... **W or V V**

Tom rolled over and looked at the alarm clock—4:10 AM. *Wow, that dream felt real.* He tossed back the bed sheet, crept across the cool concrete floor, and cracked open the door. The Victor Vee music truck got parked down the side alley, and the Sprinter motorhome was gone. *That's right, they went up to Yelwa Zangam Village. I hope Ken Chen's scholarship program can help. Good timing since Glory and Praise will be pulling out of Nigeria.*

A new work week had begun on Frontage Road, and the honking and hustle had already started. Tom itched to return home to his gated community's quiet, peaceful mornings and private golf course.

Tom started a pot of coffee and then scooped dog food into stainless steel bowls. He checked his phone.

I passed your message on to Hank.

Our home is off the market.

Why would I not be able to reach you?

Tom started to text back but stopped. He remembered Dan's warning about the FBI eavesdropping. The FBI was not the only agency spying. The tiny WIFI camera angle was low, yet Ayoola could see Tom in boxer shorts and a sleeveless undershirt. The dogs were scurrying around, intermittently blocking his field of view. Ayoola hoped to have a search warrant before noon.

Something felt wrong. It was past nine, and the usual chess game with Jacob hadn't transpired. Again, Tom stuck his head out the door and looked down the side alley. The music truck partly blocked the opening in the back fence where everybody ducked through. Tom shrugged off Jacob's no-show to a mother's concern about not wanting her child around guard dogs.

Just before noon, a loud pounding on the door was too forceful to be Jacob. "Open up! We have a search warrant!"

Tom looked out the peephole and saw three men with light blue shirts contrasting their navy blue berets and armbands. Constable Ayoola held up a search warrant. "Give me a minute! I'm not dressed."

A minute did not happen. The bulky Lagos Police Officer rammed his shoulder into the door. The metal latch split the wood door casing.

"Over there under the bed!" Ayoola pointed.

A more petite officer dropped to his knees and reached under the bed, "There's nothing under here."

"Check the bathroom!" Ayoola ordered.

The bulkier officer pulled back the shower curtain and yelled, "No guns in here!"

"Let's go check the church."

Tom's heart was pounding! He knew the gun laws in Nigeria held a possibility of up to ten years in prison. "Does your search warrant include a place of worship?" Tom tried to yank the search warrant from Ayoola's fingers.

Gawkers gathered around the police cars in the front parking lot. Traffic slowed as street gossip increased to full speed. A white man in underwear wasn't a regular occurrence in this neighborhood. Phones were out and recording.

"Unlock the church doors, or I will arrest you for obstruction!" Tom patted himself—boxer shorts do not have pockets.

Cain and Abel were ferociously barking from the kennel. One of the officers retrieved a shotgun from the trunk of the police cruiser. The crowd was growing exponentially. Tom quickly assessed the situation and yelled, "Platz," both dogs lay down.

The small pricked officer shoved the gun barrel through the wire fence. Tom rushed back through the busted apartment door and yelled, "Hier." Cain and Abel came into the apartment via the dog door.

Ayoola appeared in the doorway. "Get some pants on so you can unlock the church."

It wasn't long before one of the officers found the false wall in the storeroom. "I found something in here!" he yelled, then returned to tapping the wall with his baton.

"What's behind that wall?" Ayoola demanded.

Tom walked to the false wall and pushed at the edge. A

click sound echoed inside the storeroom when the false wall panel opened. Audio/video cords were hanging on hooks, a video projector, and a couple of microphones, all neatly organized in the small space.

"Why this hiding place?" Ayoola asked while looking over Tom's shoulder.

"After the church got robbed, my handyman built this hiding place. Out of sight, out of mind is my thinking."

"Check the perimeter of the church," Constable Ayoola ordered. Out front, the crowd was already fabricating a false narrative about the white preacher from Texas. Someone in the crowd sent a photo of Tom in his boxer shorts and sleeveless tee shirt to Lagos News channel 21.

One of the officers yelled from the side of the church. "I found something!"

Ayoola pushed Tom down the alley to the grill of the box truck. "What did you find?"

"Behind the truck, there's a red bucket and cleaning supplies."

"That's my little helper's cleaning stuff," Tom replied.

"The mop smells like pee. That seems suspicious."

"I'm paying Jacob to clean up after my dogs. He probably misunderstood my instructions. Jacob is deaf."

"The pastor is right. I know the Onukwulu boys. They do odd jobs around the church." Ayoola stepped up on the rear bumper and looked through a small round window. "Why's Victor's music truck here?"

"He's headed to Plateau State for a few days. We swapped vehicles."

"That's right. Victor is showing your niece Tina around."

"How do you know Tina? How do you know that she's my niece?"

Ayoola jumped down off the bumper. "There are no guns here! Let's wrap this search up, Squad."

* * *

After Jacob had walked with Ekon to school, he was anxious to play with the dogs, even more so than play chess or clean the church. His heart raced when he spotted the VV logo

lettering on the Victor Vee music truck. Unable to hear the crowd commotion from the front parking lot, Jacob approached the vehicle timidly. Peering from the rear bumper, he saw a uniformed man point a rifle into the dog kennel.

A flashback of three men taking stuff out of the church and the tall black man with a Rungu baton caused Jacob to wet himself. Jacob ran back home. Victor's threat of more than a broken arm overwhelmed the nine-year-old.

The crowd had faded by the time Idogbe showed up. "What happened? Was there another break-in?" Idogbe asked as he looked over the split door casing.

"No! Constable Ayoola and his goon squad kicked the door in."

"What!" Idogbe immediately thought about the spy camera hidden above the dog door. "Did Constable Ayoola see you do something with Jacob?"

"What the f__k are you accusing me of?" Tom clenched his fists.

"I've heard rumors about you grooming Jacob by paying him to do church stuff and playing adult games inside the apartment."

"I'm not a Catholic priest," was how Tom responded to the pedophile insinuation, then added, "Glory and Praise Ministries doesn't recruit young boys to be altar servers like your church."

Idogbe felt compelled to defend his faith. "So showering with a family member is okay? I do believe that Ms. Tina is your niece."

Tom's fist just missed Idogbe's jaw. "You nosey little bastard! I didn't shower with her. Who told you that?"

Idogbe bolted to his truck, jumped in, and cranked over the dilapidated old Datsun. Grey smoke barreled out.

Tom pounded both fists on the dented yellow roof. "Listen to me! Tina ruined my marriage. Let's not let her ruin our friendship too."

Idogbe turned the ignition off. "Okay, I'll fix the door. It's my job."

"Thank you. I'll take the dogs for a walk to avoid bothering you." Tom muzzled Cain and Abel while Idogbe unloaded his tools. The trio went down the side alley to the box truck. Tom picked up the red bucket and mop. At the Onukwulu's house, Tom noticed a pair of boy's shorts and underpants hanging on a

clothesline.

Fifi came out the screen door. "Good afternoon, Pastor Tom."

Tom walked toward Fifi. "Jacob didn't come by to play chess this morning. I found his bucket and mop beside the church and got worried."

"He had an accident." Fifi pointed at the clothesline.

Jacob appeared in the doorway. Immeasurable joy came over him when he saw Cain and Abel.

"Jacob thought something bad had happened to your dogs. I think that is why he had an accident and wet himself."

"Jacob must have seen what happened this morning."

"Yes, he thought something bad happened to the dogs."

Tom waved at Jacob. "Can I release Cain and Abel?"

"Sure, he'd like that."

Tom yelled, "Voraus," and Jacob opened the screen door. "Sorry, I didn't mean for them to go inside." Tom had not thought about how much he would miss the Onukwulu boys.

"It's okay." She turned back and said, "I'm praying you change your mind and stay in Lagos. You have been so good for my boys. They like commission and now your dogs."

"Maybe I could buy them a puppy."

Fifi needed to shift the puppy narrative. "Mrs. Seton told me running the Ile-Ife Heritage Marathon is on her bucket list. Whatever a bucket list is?"

"It is a list of things you want to do before you get too old."

"Oh my, I have a lot on that list," Fifi replied with a frown.

Tom thought to himself. *I only got one thing on my bucket list. Get back to the United States.*

"Is your wife coming back? She is the first elegant woman to sign with Jacob. He thinks she is a queen."

Tom did not answer. He asked, "Is it okay if Jacob finishes walking the dogs with me?"

Fifi held back many emotions as her youngest, a man and two dogs, walked away. Outside of family, Tom was the only adult to play games and be a mentor for Jacob. Fifi had already seen changes with Jacob. Today was a setback—she had thought the wetting was over.

"Damn it." Tom ranted as they approached the field. Constable Ayoola was watching one of the police officers swing a metal detector back and forth a few inches above the grass.

"Steh," Tom yelled. Cain and Abel stopped in place.

Ayoola rushed toward them. The officer with a shovel was in lock-step as they crossed the field. "I know that you have a gun someplace! I'm going to find it."

Cain growled and showed his teeth. Jacob held his open palm in front of Cain's nose and used his other hand to lift his snout. Cain sat without hearing a verbal command.

"I could use a trained dog like that," Ayoola said in amazement.

I should command Angreifen so they can attack and take you down. Tom thought.

"I found something!" an officer yelled. The newly turned dirt looked like something got buried at the base of this Ube tree. The officer scanned over the loose dirt while the metal detector's chirping turned to a solid squeal.

A second officer pushed on a shovel with his foot. It stopped when he hit something hard. He moved dirt to the side, exposing a metal corner. The officer bent over and pulled and unearthed a square piece of bronze! The embossed **Gloria and Praise** was easy to make out when it flipped over, even through the dried mud.

"Wow, how'd that get there?" Tom exclaimed.

"You probably staged that robbery the first week you were here." Constable Ayoola answered.

"Why the hell would I do that?" Tom resented the accusation.

"Insurance money! Typical of white Christian preachers."

"You're a prejudiced prick! I'll be gone in a month. You will need to find a new Christian to single out."

"You all come over to convert Africans. How many Muslims travel to the United States to evangelize white folk?"

"I didn't choose to come over here. I got caught!" Tom stopped. He did not need to re-visit the stolen valor embellishment.

As the plaque got unearthed, Jacob recalled Ekon's instructions never to inform anybody what they observed the night the church got robbed. Jacob lost control again.

Constable Ayoola pointed at Jacob's pants. "Look, you scared the kid so bad he's peeing himself."

"Not me, it's your goon squad." Tom squatted down. "His mom will be mad; this is the second time today." Tom whisked

Jacob across the field, through the fence, and into the apartment.

Jacob trusted Tom more than any other adult. He took off his shorts and underpants and handed them to Tom. Tom carefully ensured the shower wasn't too hot and motioned for Jacob to rinse off. There was pounding on the door! Tom handed Jacob a towel, left the bathroom, and went to the door.

"I suspect you have another ticket for me?" Tom snapped.

"No!" Ayoola stuck his head inside the door. "Is the boy okay?"

"Yeah, I will wash out and dry his shorts and underpants. This is the second time today that he had an accident."

"Do you think our arguing is why he lost control?"

"Jacob couldn't hear us."

"That's right, he's deaf and dumb."

"How about deaf and brilliant?" Tom poker-faced Ayoola. "I'll bet you twenty-thousand Naira that Jacob can beat you in chess."

"I'll take that bet." It didn't take more than ten minutes for Ayoola to lose. "It's illegal for children to gamble in this neighborhood."

"Are you kidding?" Tom was standing behind Jacob. "I'll pay him."

"That will work." Ayoola stood up from the green table and handed twenty thousand Naira to Tom. "A rumor of me paying off a child could be a career-ender."

"I hear you about that. I'll give the money to Fifi. I think Jacob knows who broke into the church and stole that plague. Fifi says he started having accidents when Ekon broke his arm."

"Maybe I should take him to the station and interrogate him."

"There's no reason to frighten Jacob again?"

"Don't you want to get your stuff back?"

"No! Insurance paid for everything that got stolen."

"I knew it was an insurance job," Ayoola mumbled.

"Let's just let sleeping dogs lie," Tom replied.

"There are muddy handprints and probably DNA on that plaque. I will take it to the station and have our lab technician try to lift a fingerprint or test for DNA."

"Do what you want. I don't need it back. Glory and Praise headquarters are going to sell the church and property. Their

return on investment has never been good at this location.”

Ayoola was stunned. “How soon is this going to happen?”

“After I board up our outreach school in Zangam Village.” Tom slammed the door on Ayoola. It felt good that Africa would soon be no more than a bad memory.

Jacob was at the table sketching. He had drawn a box truck with a big **W** on the side. Tom looked closer. It was double **V**’s, like the Victor Vee music truck logo.

It was Victor and the twin Brits who robbed the church. I bet that is what’s causing Jacob to have accidents.

Someone was trying to open the door. Tom looked out the peephole. Idogbe was leaning against the door with his shoulder. Tom yanked open the door, and Idogbe stumbled into the apartment. “What the hell are you doing? Why are you back?”

“I’m testing the door jam to ensure I reinforced it enough.”

“It’s fine!” Tom wondered why Idogbe was back.

“I should reinforce the dog door too. You could get robbed again.” Idogbe was making up an excuse so that he could remove the spy camera. When he noticed Jacob with only a towel around his waist—Idogbe changed his mind.

CHAP 19... **Stronger than Kevlar**

The drive from sea level to the mile-high Jos Plateau stressed Kenny Chen's breathing even more. After his solo trip across the Atlantic Ocean inside the motorhome stuffed into a poorly ventilated shipping container, he got a respiratory infection that he couldn't shake. On the return trip, he would have four additional sets of lungs competing for the same air. They'd be sharing food, water, beds, and personal hygiene stuff from Tin Can Harbor to the Northeast of the US Virgin Islands drop-off point.

The pubescent Fulani girls had natural solid immune systems and hopefully would not catch the SAR/COV mutated virus. If anyone did develop a cough with a fever above 100 degrees, the CCP's order was to dispose of tainted cargo at sea. The all-male crew on the Kong Fang understood that the order to abandon ship would get called if an infection spread to more than three merchant marines.

In good weather, the smaller and faster 162-meter container ship could make the drop-off point in 15 days. One miscalculation the CCP coordinator made was that the cargo on the Kong Fang was less than half on the return trip, making the draft on the container ship 6 meters higher off the water. When Ken Chen used bags of rice to cut the drop ropes to the correct length, the Kong Fang was at total tonnage and sat at its lowest draft.

* * *

After the slaughter of the three schoolchildren, the offer of getting an education past middle school was a yearning that the Yelwa Zangam Village parents were now unsure of. But Victor's swag, gold, and African lineage had four girls ready to leave by the second morning. Victor's grandfather had been a Trokosi priest in Ghana; forcing prepubescent girls into religious shrines as sex slaves was embedded DNA in Victor's family. Weak men always try to rule over young girls and women—no matter what continent or Island.

What Tina lacked in physical strength, she made up in natural beauty. Her blond hair, painted nails, and trendy

clothes mesmerized the schoolgirls. Ken Chen had a mature, trusting demeanor and fake paperwork that helped seal the scholarships for phony schooling abroad.

Three adults and four children were crammed in the Sprinter and on the road Wednesday morning. Two hours from the village, one of the girls started feeling ill; her head felt warm, and she had stomach cramps. Just past the cutoff road junction, Victor stopped at a closed-up petrol station. There was a hand-dug toilet behind the store. When Abidemi entered the tarpaper outhouse, Victor rolled a big wood cable spool against the door. He ran around to the front of the store and drove off. There was no way a seventy-five-pound girl would jeopardize his opportunity to become a Hip Hop Rapper in the United States.

* * *

Tom had been assured that the motorhome would be returned on Thursday. Tina's phone kept going to voicemail. He felt uneasy about the Saturday morning meetup for the new laptop. Dan's instructions not to call or text left Tom with limited options. He called Idogbe. "Tom here. Could I borrow your truck for a couple of days?"

"Sure, when do you need it?"

"Saturday morning. I need to pick up a new computer in Abuja."

"I could drive you up there if you'd like. My mum lives in Plateau State. "

"No thanks. I'm going on to the outreach school after that."

"You'll probably need my truck for more than a couple of days if you do go on to Zangam Village."

Tom hesitated, rubbed his forehead, and then said. "I probably won't return until late Sunday. Could you fill in for the noon service?"

Idogbe was confused. "After our disagreement over the correct Ten Commandments, you want me to preach?"

"Sure, maybe preach on bearing false witness."

"Ah... A, okay, I'll have my truck there in the morning."

At dawn, Tom heard the metal wheels on the gate rolling across the cobblestones. He looked out the peephole. *I don't believe it. They brought back the Sprinter.* Tina waved from the passenger seat.

Tom quickly pulled on sweats and headed down the side alley to the music van. His hand gripped the handle of the gun case. Halfway up the alley, Victor met him head-on and asked. "What do you have there, Preacher Man."

"Some new golf clubs. There are some nice courses around Abuja. I'm hoping to hit a few." Tom didn't stop. He went directly to the Sprinter to hide the guns. From his hands and knees, he heard the rumble of another vehicle entering the church parking lot.

Idogbe hung his Rosary around the rearview mirror. *Holy Mary, Mother of God—what the heck? This must be a trap. Ms. Williams probably told everyone that I slept with her. I indeed shared her bed. But I never had sex with that woman.*

Pastor Tom rested his hands on the yellow rooftop. "Looks like I won't need your work truck. They just showed up with the Sprinter."

Tina approached and eyeballed Idogbe. "I remember this old rusty truck but forgot your handyman's name."

"His name is Idogbe," Tom replied.

"That's a weird name. Is it a jungle name?" Victor stopped his truck and honked. "Ho, we got to go." Tina hustled and got in.

"Sorry about that. My niece is not that bright."

"No worries. It looks like you will be traveling in luxury. I'll see you next week." Idogbe moved the floor linkage, the gears ground, and finally, he shifted into reverse.

"Next week? Tom got alarmed. You're still going to do the Sunday service, right?"

"Sure, if you want me to."

* * *

Dan had parked in the same spot as the previous week. The wheelchair ramp was out. Tom left space between the Sprinter and the ramp. Cain and Able leaped out the back doors. "Bleib," Tom commanded, the dogs stayed in place.

"How was your flight?" Tom asked, extending his hand to Dan.

"Like usual, never on time. I came directly from the airport." Dan had a new laptop on his lap. "I installed all your photos, videos, and documents."

"That sounds promising." Tom then yelped Platz; the dogs lay.

Dan dropped their handshake and looked directly at Tom. "You need to be completely honest with me! Do you own any Bitcoin or deal on the Cryptocurrency exchange?"

"No! I told you that I'm not into that stuff. My skill set is bringing in money from the pulpit. Why do you keep asking?"

"Because some blockchain transactions got deleted from your old computer. I traced those accounts back to some of your church members in Dallas. The same ones that are on your IRS contributors spreadsheet."

"I don't know what you are talking about," Tom answered, rubbing his forehead. "If those accounts got deleted, how did you find them?"

Any grade school hack knows how to find deleted files or check internet history. Dan now trusted that Tom had limited computer skills. His voice turned serious as he methodically shared how his stepfather, an ET (Electronic Technician) during the Vietnam conflict, came into possession of some decoding hardware. A black box that David used to decrypt and change wire services facts. Dan somewhat alluded that he now possessed an original Clipper Chip MYK78T IC upgraded decoder.

This information made Tom uneasy. "What do I owe you for the new computer and your time? I can write you a check."

"I can't take a check!" Dan quipped.

"Why not? Computers are a legit church expense."

"Because that would leave a paper trail that you and I did business together. Remember, we never met!"

"So what?" Tom wasn't buying all Dan's secret agent, crypto, dark web lingo. "I'm going to write you a check from the church account. I do it for my cell phones, travel expenses, and almost everything. It's a perk of being a pastor."

Tom was numb and dumb to all the high-tech technical electronics in the world. Back home, he'd have to call out a technician to program the remotes for his entertainment center. It took better than an hour for Dan to get through to Tom that once he gave the Nigerian Federal Police (NFP) the blockchain files, billions of dollars would be lost on the crypto stock exchange overnight.

Dan's a nice guy but might be more of an embellisher than I

am. Tom said to himself before he said. "I have a couple hundred dollars and maybe about ninety thousand naira. I'll pay you with cash."

"Don't worry about paying me for the laptop. The information I got from you is like finding a pot of gold. With a bust like this, the NFP could extend my contract. Be warned. I will dump a Bitcoin story about VPN accounts bouncing off an IP address in Lagos. It will be interesting if fake news runs it for over a week."

Tom damn near rolled his eyes. The fake news anecdote was pushing it. "Well then, at least let me buy you lunch." Tom's head motioned toward the food carts.

"Sounds good," Dan handed the new laptop to Tom.

Tom put the new laptop on the passenger seat and left the doors on Cain and Abel's kennels unlatched—only a fool would try to break in. "Should we drive over to the food carts?"

"No, I need the exercise. Whenever I travel, I put on a few pounds." Dan had tremendous upper arm strength. He'd swing both legs together and then use the arm crutches to push forward. He was like a walking tripod that had adapted well to the challenge of Multiple Sclerosis. They sat at a picnic bench and talked at length about the spreading of misinformation. Tom substantiated the conversation with the example of how Catholics changed the commandments so that they could worship idols.

Dan took offense to the discordant narrative. He listened respectfully and then pulled a laminated card from his vest pocket. "So, if I recite the words written on this plastic card, do you think I'm committing idolatry?" Dan pushed the Saint Michael prayer card across the table toward Tom.

"Yes, I do. You should be praying directly to God, not a graven image! It is the same as when my wife prays her holy beads." Tom said with conviction.

"Your wife prayed the Rosary with my stepdad when he was on his deathbed."

"I'm sure she did. Beth is a strong traditional Catholic. She always reminds me she is praying with a Rosary, not to the Rosary."

"Hank, our retired Navy Seal friend, is a Rad-Trad catholic, too. He's kind of an incognito, spy-type like you."

"What do you mean by incognito spy-type?" Dan asked,

using the arm braces to stand up.

"I'll show you back at the Sprinter." Tom picked up and disposed of their trash.

Cain and Able ran out the side door when Tom went inside and dug in a drawer next to the sink. Back outside, Tom held out an old-style flip phone. "I use this as a burner phone to call Hank on. As I said, he's an incognito type who likes to live under the radar."

Dan flipped open the phone. "Do you know that even older phones can be tracked, regardless of whether they have GPS? Every time they hit a cell tower, a PING gets recorded."

"What's a PING?" Tom asked.

"A PING is a millisecond electronic blip to determine and log any cell phone's location. It is accomplished via GPS satellite or by using cell tower triangulation. Gathering or obtaining cell phone ping data is valuable for emergencies like 911 calls."

"Here in Africa, they have terrible cell phone service. They could not triangulate anybody. I was camped next to a cell phone tower and couldn't even send a text or call my wife."

"That's because that tower was probably overloading your phone with an AI-5G signal."

"What is that?" Tom was already sorry he had asked.

"Artificial Intelligence in the five-gigabit band," Dan rattled off. "Intelligence agencies worldwide are starting to use AI-5G technology to spy on their citizens. There is a group of social media billionaires working with pharmaceutical companies, compromised politicians, and even religious leaders that want to turn the entire world into one global common class."

"Wow, you sound just like Hank." Tom rubbed at his forehead. "Hank's into the One World Power, Illuminati, Bohemian Grove cult stuff. I'm more into saving souls through the Word."

Dan felt the pushback—the typical reaction from numb conspiracy deniers. "Well, if China continues to buy up Africa, you won't have any souls to save. The CCP espouses atheism!"

"I don't know about that." Tom wanted to end this discussion.

"Do a little homework. Fact check all the airports, roads, and dams China has their hands wrapped around on this continent. Some poorer African countries will never be able to

pay China back. They have their eye on Tin Can Island Port now!"

"I don't know about all the high-tech, clandestine stuff you think is happening. My battles are from the pulpit. Tom bragged."

"That sounds noble. But sometimes God calls you to buck up and battle in the trenches." Dan declared.

"Are you what God has called you to be?" Tom rebutted.

"I believe so. As a young boy who couldn't play most sports, I became a computer nerd. This skill and expertise that God blessed me with has taken me worldwide," Dan affirmed. "So yes, I'm pleased with how God called me into action."

"Wow, that's a great story. When I get a faculty position back in the States, it would be great to have you come and give your testimony."

"What?" Dan was stunned. "For sure you are leaving Africa?"

"Yep!" Tom welcomed the subject change. "After this, I'm driving to the outreach school to let the villagers know their school is closing permanently."

"That's how you do battle, by just abandoning people?"

"The school there is not in a good location. On the way back, maybe we can meet, and I'll fill you in on a scholarship program my niece and I are working on," Tom fabricated.

"Tom, I'm serious about what I have told you. We can never meet again! After I released the Lagos Crypto scam on Monday, many elite globalists will lose billions in their Bitcoin blockchain accounts. The biggest investors have the FBI in their back pocket and will want the source of the leak identified."

"Maybe we could connect using Hank's burner phone?"

Dan flipped the phone open; the battery was dead. "When was the last time you talked with Hank on this phone?"

"Ah... Last fall when we helicopter hunted hogs."

Dan didn't say a word. He wheeled himself up the ramp. The metal ramp draw-bridged upward; two heavy door latches snapped closed. Tom stood on his toes and tried to look through the square vertical sliding windows, but they were all blacked out. There was a ratcheting noise coming from the roof. Cain and Abel were alerted to the noise.

"Rahig," Tom ordered while walking back to the motorhome. The dogs went quiet. Tom could now see the white hatbox-

shaped satellite dome on the roof of the modified short school bus. The ratcheting started again, and so did the barking. "Rahig," Tom yelped again. Cain and Abel quieted for the second time.

What seemed like an hour was less than twenty minutes. Two loud *snaps* and the ramp started to lower. "Hier," Tom yelled toward the off-leash field. The big German Shepherds came galloping back. "Hopp," they jumped into the motorhome. "Bleip," and they followed the command to lay and stay.

Dan hand braked after he zipped down the metal ramp. A black and grey checkered-looking zip-lock sandwich bag was on his lap. "Here, take this." Dan held the dark grey bag out

"What is this?" Tom was surprised at the weight of the bag.

"It is a signal-blocking bag made from Graphene. Only take Hank's burner phone out when you make a call. Keep the call short, then put it into the pouch. I boost-charged the flip phone; it was dead."

"So what is this, some special kind of carbon fiber?" Tom was now tossing the sealable bag from hand to hand like a beanbag.

"No, it's made of carbon atoms bonded in a repeating pattern of hexagons. Graphene is so thin that it is considered two-dimensional, but when bonded in layers, it is stronger than Kevlar. Graphene is considered the strongest material in the world and is conductive to electricity and heat. Graphene blocks all radio frequencies, infrared red, blue tooth, 4G, and 5G digital signals. It has endless applications in almost every industry."

"Okay... Okay, I got it." Tom rubbed at his forehead. Dan was in too much information (TMI) mode, like when Hank talked about helicopters and military clandestine stuff.

"It always takes me overnight to charge a phone." Tom couldn't see the burner phone but could feel it through the Graphene. "So this thin bag is stronger than Kevlar?"

"I don't know if it would stop a bullet, but it stops analog and digital signals and AM and FM radio."

"Thanks," Tom put the Graphene bag into his back pocket. "Where can I get one of those boost chargers?"

"Ah... It's something my stepdad put together. It's one of a kind—" Dan abruptly stopped. He didn't want to say that David had incorporated the boost charger onto the top of the Clipper

Chip black box.

CHAP 20... **Back road to Hell**

Tom had planned to fill up at the barbeque and fuel depot just before the shortcut road. From a quarter mile away, he could read **NO GAS** off the plywood tent sign on the shoulder of the road. Seeing the **CLOSED** sign on the screen door of the dilapidated building, Tom continued driving. He pulled over a few miles further and stared at the fuel gauge. *If I turn here, It will shave off 35 miles.* A cattle truck roared by on the main paved road to Zangam Village.

Tom turned on the right blinker, then off the pavement onto dirt, "Make a U-turn—Make a U-turn," blared the GPS. On the eighth warning, Tom reached to the dash and turned off the GPS. He hoped he could remember the section of road that was booby-trapped. After the cattle guard, he needed to drive along the river bank for three-quarters of a mile. Then, the twelve miles of road into the village would be safe.

After an hour, the bumpy dirt road swept hard to the left and started down a steep grade. A buried piece of sharpened rebar penetrated the right front tire. When Tom jumped out, he could hear the sound of air escaping and a roaring river. He walked around the bend in the road. Three-quarters of a mile ahead, he spotted the cattle guard. His first trip on the cutoff road was out from Zangam Village—not into. There would be no roadside assistance or towing service to call with no cell phone service.

Cain and Able circled, sniffed, and marked territory. They worked upstream to the rapids and started drinking from water pools between rocks. Tom opened the side compartment to get the jack and lug wrench and heard weird laughter downstream. He retrieved the AR15 from under the bench seat. From the side door, he scanned through the fast-acquisition sights. "What the hell," Tom said aloud. A brown, black-spotted, big-eared dog had scented Cain and Abel from the other side of the river. Tom looked closer at the carnivore. The puff of fur on the end of the tail sent a cold chill down his spine. "That's a hyena. If there's one, there's more!"

He scanned farther down the riverbank. There was a clan of at least twenty hyenas with their snouts upward, sniffing the air! "Hier, hier," Tom yelled for Cain and Abel to return.

The clan paced back and forth on the other side of the river. The water running over the rocks in the rapids suppressed their

yipping from Cain and Abel. Tom leaned the rifle against the motorhome and picked up a baseball-sized stone. The rock splashed into the water. Cain looked up and immediately started toward Tom.

Abel was still drinking from the river when the matriarch skirted across the rapids and jumped on Abel's back. They both rolled. A second carnivore chomped down on a rear leg. Abel got pinned on the ground. A third hyena bit into Abel's rectum and started to pull. The three merciless scavengers disemboweled Abel.

At least two feet of intestines got pulled out of the German shepherd. Abel squealed louder than the clan's laughter-type yipping. Tom took the safety off, chambered a round, raised the AR15 to his shoulder, and squeezed. **Bam, Bam, Bam—** The first shot hit the dirt, the second shot hit Abel's chest, and the third shot was directly to the head—Abel was now out of pain.

Tom inhaled and then held his breath. He took a low bead on the clan's leader and squeezed. **Bam, Bam, Bam—** The bump stock recoiled on his shoulder three times and then stopped. The prominent matriarch dropped on top of Abel. The AR15 bump stock modification had gunsmithing that burst-fired three rounds with each squeeze of the trigger.

Four hyenas waded across the river. Tom quarter-turned and steadied himself. The first hyena came up the river's bank. **Bam, Bam, Bam—** The carnivore did a complete front flip and flopped with its four legs twitching upward. Three others beeline toward Cain. The AR15 clip only held ten rounds. He had one shot left. *Don't fire till you see the white of their eyes* came to mind, the words didn't apply. Hyenas have blood-red vertical slit eyes. One hyena got Cain by the ear, the other poised to disembowel. Tom walked toward the river. **Bam—** was followed by a **click**. The hyena that ripped off Cain's ear got gutshot—the others ran off.

Half of Cain's left ear was dangling—the other half was gone. Tom yelled, "Hier." Cain came to Tom's side, and they went back to the motorhome. Tom shut the door and then looked out a window. The rest of the clan was in disarray. Their matriarch was dead, splayed out on top of Abel. Tom sighted in on the eyes of another large female, most likely the next in line to become leader of the clan.

There were two clips left with ten rounds each. There was half a box of bullets for the Colt 45. Tom loaded the powerful revolver and then opened the side door. He aimed at the clan, feasting on Abel. **Boom**—echoed down the river valley, and the clan scattered. Wasting ammunition would be a mistake—the flat tire still had to be changed.

Tom pushed the dog training collars to the side and retrieved a first aid kit from the glove box. It had nothing to support the flopped over-ear. He remembered a brown bag of hygiene items under the sink. After rubbing alcohol and cleaning cartilage, Tom placed tampons on each side of Cain's ear and used white medical tape to splint his half ear.

Tom strapped on the custom leather holster and inserted the large revolver. Outside, Cain stood guard as Tom got the flat tire off. Oddly, the outside storage compartment had four underinflated air mattresses and unrolled sleeping bags in front of the spare. Tom yanked the stuff out and quickly got the spare tire on. He didn't have time to clear a space and repack. The flat tire and some of the sleeping gear got piled on the side of the road. Vultures were already circling overhead. Tom backed the motorhome to the river's edge. He pulled adjacent to Abel, parked, and then used one air mattress to cover the German Sheppard. Under the beating sun, he piled heavy river rocks and heard air wheezing as the air mattress deflated.

Drenched in sweat, Tom was placing the last rock when Cain growled. Like an old western gunfighter, Tom turned and drew the Colt 45. **Boom**—a big hunk of lead entered the mouth of the next-in-line matriarch. She dropped in place. Cain sniffed at the carcass and then lifted his leg and peed. They drove along the river's edge to the fence and cattle guard. Cain was in the passenger seat and looked back at the travel kennels. He was sorry for Abel.

The sun was setting when Tom parked at the same spot he had stayed overnight his first time at the village. It was by a group of trees on the far side of a grass field at least a hundred yards from the outreach school. Through the vent opening, he could see the three graves where the girls were buried—a day he wanted to forget.

* * *

Cain was digging and pushing his paws into the mattress,

waking Tom. The sun was low and shining through the open vent. Tom let Cain out the side door and returned to make coffee. Setting out a lone dog bowl felt surreal. He was dreading the walk to the town center to inform the villagers about no longer supporting the girl's school.

A rumbling motor and loud male voices got Tom's attention. He lay on the bed and looked out the vent hole. Ragtag soldiers swinging machetes overhead were pushing four women from town up the dirt road. All their hands were tied in front. One of the women had a baby on her back. Two soldiers, who looked to be no older than fourteen, were barefoot and had no military hardware except for bayonet-sized knives.

Where are all the village men? What is going on? This doesn't look good. Tom thought before he went on autopilot. He grabbed the AR15, slapped in a clip, and reloaded the Colt 45. Tom covered both guns with blankets. He grabbed a broom from the closet, tied on a white towel, and started across the field while waving the surrender flag overhead. Cain was at his side. They both had Peacekeeper training—negotiating was always the starting point.

On the porch of the schoolhouse, the soldier in full uniform kicked the back of the legs of one of the women. She fell to her knees. He put his knife against her throat and yelled, "Boko Haram," Tom knew the words meant that Western education was forbidden. The woman fell forward with blood gushing from her neck. One of the young boys was supposed to mimic their leader. With his knife held overhead, he kicked at the back of the knees of the second woman.

Tom shouted, "Angrifen," Cain took off at full speed and latched on the boy's arm. The knife got knocked to the ground. The boy froze and did not resist, which kept Cain calm. Tom also froze.

"Shoot the dog. Shoot that damn dog," the commander yelled.

The soldier driving the machine gun truck jumped out and pulled his sidearm. **Bam**—The lone shot was off-target. It entered the boy's stomach and exited his back. Cain released his hold, and the child dropped to his knees. The boy cupped his hands over his stomach. The commander kicked the boy over onto the slain woman. Cain attacked the commander's leg and tore flesh.

"Aus," Tom yelled at the top of his lungs. Cain let go and took off with the taste of bad blood in his mouth.

The commander saw Tom in the field, "Go kill that God damn dog,"

The driver spun the truck around, and the gunner readied the 50-cal machine gun.

Tom yelled, "Voraus," Cain took off in the opposite direction to draw fire away from Tom.

With the bite to the bone, the commander hobbled toward Tom, pulled a 9mm, and chambered a round. "Die for your dog's actions." **Bam—**

It felt like his feet were in cement. Both his guns were in the Sprinter. **Bam, Bam—** Tom heard both bullets whiz by. He turned and ran, **Bam, Bam, Bam, Bam—** One of the shots hit bone. It felt like a mule had kicked the hip out of the socket. Tom fell sideways into the tall, wet grass.

Boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom—came from far down the road, the two soldiers had caught up with Cain. The commander was bent over, nursing his bleeding leg.

Some feeling had returned to Tom's right hip as he crawled behind the three recent grave mounds. The still-standing women's hands were tied. They were terrified, yet passive, standing next to the mother, face down in a pool of blood. The gutshot child cadet was sitting. His childhood friend was on his knees, trying to stop the bleeding. The full-dressed combat commander lifted the boy off his knees and forced a knife into the boy's hand. Nothing grooms a child to be a militant and committed soldier like beheading a baby.

The commander cut the knapsack from the woman's back and laid the baby in front of the youngest recruit. The woman made the sign of the cross as best she could with tied hands—all she could do was ask for the intervention of saints.

"What I do to this woman, you will do to her baby, or I will gutshot you. Allah hates cowards."

Tom could not hear the order but knew this situation was beyond prayer. He got to his feet and hobbled away.

The commander held the beheading knife overhead. "Watch and learn. Someday, your reward will be seventy Virgins. Allah will reward you and—" **Bam, Bam, Bam—** megaphoned out the vent hole. The first hollow point was in the chest, the next in the neck, and the last through the right eye.

The senior officer dropped on the schoolhouse steps like a piece of shit. The other two soldiers heard the three burst fire shots and turned back. The frightened boy stood with a knife in hand, walked to the three women, and cut the ropes from their hands.

Tom's earlier assessment of the truck-mounted 50-cal machine gun was that the bullets would slice through the motorhome like a knife through butter. *I need a better vantage point.* He grabbed the Colt 45 and AR15 and hobbled to the intersection of the main and cutoff roads. There was a shallow road ditch. A snake slithered out of the grass toward him when he crawled down the ditch. Tom fired the Colt 45. **Boom**—he missed. **Boom**—this time, the snake was no more. The machine gunner heard the two shots and then yelled through the sunroof to the driver. "Those shots came from the intersection."

The driver stepped out with binoculars. "I see something up there in the ditch."

Tom lay on top of the snake. Its blood was soaking into his shirt. The adrenaline shakes were full on. Tom prayed *I could use the communion of all the saints right now.*

The pickup was weaving side to side, coming toward Tom. Standing up and hitting a moving target would be a miracle. Tom was not able to draw a shallow or a deep breath. He got to his knees and squeezed—**Bam, Bam, Bam**—The three shots hit nothing. Tom realized he only had four rounds left, and the extra clip was in the motorhome—

Boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom—The machine gun started scraping the road with 50mm lead. Some bullets ricocheted and spun off rocks; some whirled over the top of the ditch. Tom pressed his face down against the snake's smooth skin. The firing stopped. The sound of the pickup was roaring closer. "Saint Michael, I could use your intercession," was Tom's prayer.

With divine inspiration, he jumped up and shot from the hip. **Bam, Bam, Bam**—Shards of windshield imploded into the driver's face. He opened the door and bailed out. The left rear truck tire rolled over his left leg. The sound of crushing bones was followed by metal crunching when the truck hit a tree and came to a dead stop. The gunner was flipped head-first onto the hood, and his neck broke.

Tom stepped out of the ditch, walked down the road, and put the barrel of the Colt 45 against the soldier's head who had the crushed leg. "How many are in your group? Where is your weapon?"

"Three men and two boys, that is all. I dropped my weapon after I shot at the dog and missed. I killed my son."

Tom cocked the hammer and placed his finger on the trigger. He took a deep breath—*Eye for an eye is not human for a dog*, rang in his head. Tom reset the hammer and limped to the Sprinter.

He leaned against the bathroom door and started to violently shake uncontrollably. He'd never been in a battle—let alone killed someone. His whole life, he'd been a Peacemaker, not a Peacekeeper. Embellishing this day would never happen.

* * *

A well-seasoned man with a broken giddy-up tapped on the motorhome with his cane. Tom pulled the blanket over the guns and opened the small door window.

"We talked a few weeks ago after you had prayed over our three school girls."

"I remember," Tom replied. "I can't talk now. I've been shot."

"Open the door. I can help."

Tom's shaking hand unlatched the door. The old man's tired eyes locked on the blood on Tom's chest and stomach. "Hurry, take off your shirt."

"No, I've been shot in my right hip." Tom stepped back.

The elder used his cane to climb the metal steps. "I don't see any blood. Drop your pants."

Tom undid his belt and let his camo pants drop. The old man pulled down Tom's boxer shorts. There was a square purple bruise and a small amount of blood on the right side of Tom's butt.

"How bad is it?" Tom asked

"I'm not sure." The elder used his cane to snag up Tom's pants. He dug into the rear pocket and pulled out the gray and black cell phone pouch. "Whatever this is made out of, it stopped the bullet."

"Graphene or some word like that. It's made of conductive carbon atoms to block cell phone signals. At least that's what a

computer expert told me!" Tom rattled off, super-glad that he had the Graphene case in his rear pocket.

"Feels like black rhino hide to me. Looks like the phone didn't survive." The old man handed Tom the Graphene bag. "You should leave now."

"I need fuel first."

"Let's go to my barn," the villager got onto the passenger seat.

Tom pulled up his pants and started the motorhome. About four hundred yards down the back road, the villager said, "Stop here."

They pulled off in front of a lean-to-type garage with farm implements and a well-used tractor inside. The old man helped Tom dump diesel from five brown glass jugs into the Sprinter. "That's enough to get you out to the cutoff junction. Now get out of here!"

"Thank you." Tom had only pulled ahead about ten feet when the villager spotted something coming down the road. He slapped the side of the Sprinter with his cane. Tom backed up.

"Over here, big guy." The elder opened the passenger door, and Cain jumped onto the passenger seat.

The village patriarch rubbed Cain's head. "You two heroes need to get out of here—Godspeed."

CHAP 21... **To murder or kill?**

A mind expanded by a horrific experience will never return to its original state. What Tom had experienced was not planned or intentional—definitely not sinful. An hour away from the village, Tom was reliving every detail of the killings and pointless murders of a woman and a child. Running into battle and not away from it was never a second thought.

Tom checked for service on his cell phone. Calling the authorities was what he needed to do. The seasoned villager told him to keep quiet. The warning was well intended, but Tom would take his chances with the state police.

Still no signal bars! Tom set his cell phone back on the dash. *Maybe I should call the news media anonymously? I need to tell someone. Three school girls got murdered a couple of weeks ago, then a mother this morning—the public needs to know. I'll shout the truth out to the news media! Thank God, three women, a young boy, and a baby were spared.*

After crossing the cattle guard and plenty of murder versus killing discernment, Tom shut off the motorhome. He looked at his tire tracks from the day before. He'd get stuck in the middle of nowhere running over a buried rebar bobby trap without a spare tire. With his head out the window, he steered along the river bank and followed the old tire tracks. He navigated around the newly stacked river rocks—Abel's grave.

Ahead, the sleeping bags and air mattresses heaped next to the flat tire would be a safe place to get back on the road. The rear tires spun on the clay bank when Tom tried to get up on the road. He drove another hundred feet along the river to a less steep place and made a run at the bank. He drew a deep breath and thanked God when he was on the road again. In the rearview mirror, vultures were feasting on hyena carcasses. It was eerie, like a scene from hell.

Tom rounded a corner and was up on the flat plateau. He stopped to check his phone. There was one bar of signal. Cain started whining, so Tom let him out and rechecked for a

stronger signal.

As more vultures circled overhead, Tom hobbled around, searching for a stronger signal. Cain ran to a knoll. From the higher vantage point, an air mattress flapping below caused scavengers to fly off and Cain to bark frantically. Tom got the long gun, hiked up the knoll, and sighted through the scope at the pile of sleeping gear. Something poked out from the heap of sleeping bags to flush away the cleaning birds of death. Tom looked closer—he saw a tiny brown arm!

Tom's hip gave out a few times rushing down the hill, so he started using the AR15 as a makeshift crutch. From about a hundred feet back, he stopped and fired into the air—**Bam, bam, bam**—the raptors scattered. Cain ran ahead, pulled back the blue Mudukare weaved cloth, and started licking a small girl's face. "Sitz," Tom ordered, and Cain sat.

"Why did they leave me?" It hurt for her to speak with dry, blistered, and split lips. She went limp, and her breathing was shallow.

Tom laid the rifle on the flat tire, then knelt on one knee and felt her head. She was burning up! He scooped her into his arms. The child was no more than seventy pounds. "God, give me the strength and help us make it to the motorhome."

After he laid the girl on the bed, he helped her to sip water. She asked again, "Why did they lock me up and leave?"

"Who are they?" Tom replied as he placed a sleeve of soda crackers on the bed. Tom pointed to some blood on the full-length, blue Kaftan pullover. "Are you okay?" he asked.

"Yes, my month time," The girl replied and sat up.

"Oh?" Tom realized it was her time of the month and was unsure how to handle it. "What's your name?"

"My name is Abidemi. I have a boy's name."

Tom thought to ask if her parents wanted a boy as he opened a can of soup. After heating it, he placed it on the small table and said, "Come and sit over here."

Abidemi had a few chicken bits and noodles and said, "You should have soup too." She pushed the bowl toward Tom

"No, I'm good." Abidemi's sincerity in sharing food sparked Tom's heart while his gut told him not to get involved. "I need to go outside and make a call."

There was a bluff of round boulders, some bigger than a car. Tom inched himself to the highest spot, and his phone

displayed two signal bars. He dialed 911—nothing. The emergency number in Nigeria is 211. Tom hit the first number on his speed dial list.

"Tom, are you okay? It's two in the morning!" Beth asked, anxious and scared at the same time.

"I'm okay. What do I do if a gi-l is on her p-riod?"

"Ah—I don't think I heard you." Beth switched the phone to her other ear.

"What can I do for a girl when it is h-r tim- of mon-th?" Tom looked at his phone, and now there was half of one signal bar.

"Tom, a-a girl having her per-od will know what to do. Unless it's the fir-t t-time."

"Bet-h, I migh-t ne-d your h-lp." Now, the call went silent! A no-service icon flashed on the phone display.

When Tom unzipped the seal on the Graphene bag, a plastic holy card that Dan had slipped into the signal-blocking case—fell out. Tom bent over and picked it up. He rubbed his thumb over the dimpled plastic. *If this wasn't a miracle, I don't know what it would be.*

Returning, Tom opened the back door and pointed, "There's some personal stuff under the sink. My wife said you will know what to do."

Abidemi got up from the table and looked under the sink. "This is my stuff."

Tom was forcing himself not to connect the dots—not asking was not knowing. "You can clean yourself up in there." Tom pointed at the bathroom and yipped, "Cain, Heir," Cain came out of his kennel. "Let's go for a walk."

They hiked over to the rock outcropping. Tom leaned against one of the car-sized boulders and read the words on the plastic laminated card.

Saint Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle. Be our protection against the wickedness and snares of the devil; May God rebuke him, we humbly pray; And do thou, O Prince of the Heavenly Host, by the power of God, thrust into hell Satan and all evil spirits who wander through the world for the ruin of souls. Amen.

Tom kept reading the prayer over and over. With every repetition, he paused to discern the battle he had fought. After twenty minutes, he returned to the motorhome and knocked. He knocked again—nothing. He went around to the missing vent cover. Gunshot Residue was all over the opening and impregnated into the mattress. Abidemi's black hair got sprawled over the white pillow she was sleeping on. The colorful blue Mudukare pullover was in the sink to soak out the blood.

Cain jumped in, went between the seats, and crawled onto the bed beside Abidemni. Tom quickly pulled himself into the driver's seat and started the Sprinter. It was twenty-plus miles to the main highway. Off in the distance were men pushing a herd of cattle across an open prairie. *I should flag those men down and see if they know why this girl was out in the middle of no place. But I'm so low on fuel*—something told Tom to keep driving.

Tom did not see a CLOSED sign from the corner where gravel transitioned to the pavement. *Thank God I didn't run out of gas.* He stopped a short distance away, walked over, and knocked on an opened window.

"No gas. Maybe later." The merchant yelled from the other side of the wire mesh.

"Any amount will help. I need to get to a hospital."

The merchant quickly came out the back door. "You okay?"

"I'm okay. I need to get to a hospital for..." Something told Tom to stop talking. A white man with a half-naked child would be impossible to explain.

"You aren't okay!" The merchant pointed at all the blood on Tom's stomach and chest.

"This blood is from when hyenas killed one of my dogs." Telling about the White Mamba when he took a fighting position in a ditch would require too much explanation.

The merchant's son remembered Tom getting gas a few weeks back, especially the large tip. He explained that they would get a load of black market fuel after dark. He pointed for Tom to park next to the cable spool table. Tom had no option. He moved the motorhome and woke up Abidemi.

She rubbed at her eyes, sat up, and pulled the pillow against her chest as though it were a big Teddy Bear. "What's

your name?" she asked.

"My name is Tom. I will drop you off at a hospital when we get to Jos Town."

"I don't want to go to a hospital. I want to go to school." Abidemi started to cry.

Tom's heart tugged. "We can talk later." He got down on one knee to be eye to eye. "Can we play a little game?"

"Yes, I like games," Abidemi smiled at Tom.

"Okay, this is an important game you and I will play. It's a game for big girls."

"I'm a big girl," Abidemi replied with enthusiasm.

"The game goes like this. Whenever we stop driving, or you hear me talking to somebody outside. Sneak quietly into the bathroom and hide. Don't say anything until I tell you to come out."

"I like that game! It's like hide-and-seek."

"Remember. If you hear me talking outside, hide in the bathroom."

"I won't forget Mr. Tom." Abidemi leaned forward and hugged him.

Tom returned to the screened window and ordered three skewers of Suya beef. While waiting for the meat to cook, Tom contemplated. *Dropping a child off at a hospital could be problematic if there are security cameras. Guda Recreation Park was fenced and gated. It will be my second option. If need be, I'll leave her near the food vendors.*

An Army deuce and a half pulling a flatbed trailer with six red fifty-gallon drums standing on end turned on its blinker. It plowed through the loose gravel and headed directly toward Tom. A cloud of dust and black diesel fumes engulfed him.

Paul shut off the thunderous Army transport truck and rolled down the greenish bulletproof window. "I was hoping that I would catch up with you."

"Why's that?" Tom recalled that Paul hauled supplies to the school.

"I heard you were low on fuel." Paul opened the door and stepped out onto the diamond plate step.

"Your skewers' are ready." A woman's voice rang out from the screened window.

"Excuse me. I got to feed my dog. Cain has had a couple of rough days."

"I heard." Paul stepped back on the side-saddle gas tank and grabbed a bag off the bench seat. "The village elder wants you to rub this liniment on your hip and take two Kola pills in the morning and night."

Tom carried the bag and paper plate of skewers to the motorhome, talking loudly to himself as he approached. He opened and closed the back door. "You can come out now," Paul said while setting the paper plate and bag on the table.

"Did I hide good?" Abidemi asked as she came out of the bathroom.

"You did good." Tom pointed at the table. "Those are for Cain. Help yourself to anything in the fridge. Just be super quiet."

Tom returned to the cable spool table and pointed at Paul's hand. "I forgot, was that from a gunshot?"

"Nope, that was from a knife," Paul uttered.

"Wow, was that during hand-to-hand combat?"

"No, I was tied to a chair." Paul didn't want to dwell in the past—it had taken years to heal mentally. Selective Mutism (SM) is a severe anxiety disorder from traumatic experiences, like witnessing a shooting of a child or horrifying battlefield events, that can trap an individual into a false sense of guilt, self-destructive lifestyle, or result in suicide.

"Why did you want to catch up with me?" Tom asked.

"To give you the medicine and ensure you didn't run out of gas on the cutoff road. A clan of hyenas is running amuck by the river, killing cattle and two herdsman just last month."

"I'll rub that salve on and take the kola pills later." One thing Tom had learned about Africa was that they brew great coffee and have good home remedies.

They both heard the slap of a screen door. The merchant kid walked over with two beers and an oil-blotted bag of pork rinds. "This is on the house from my Mum."

"Thanks, Thanks," Tom and Paul replied in unison.

Tom twisted off the bottle cap. "If I get things wrapped up here, I can be back in Texas by the end of the month."

"I might be leaving Africa, too," Paul replied, opening his beer.

"What about the Yelwa Zangam villagers? Who is going to run supplies for them?" "You should do it." Paul swigged his beer.

"Not me!" Tom resented being told what to do. "I only came here to tell them Glory and Praise will no longer support their girls' school. We will also be closing the church in Lagos."

"How are you planning to do that? Hang a sign on the door and then leave," Paul replied sarcastically.

"I was planning to make the school closing announcement yesterday." Tom paused, "But that didn't work out."

"I know most of what happened." Paul looked toward the motorhome. "If you close the school, the Boka Haram militants win."

"It's not my fight. I'm done with Africa!" Tom exclaimed.

"Why don't you let the Fulani people decide about the school?"

"You can't be serious! After what happened, would they even want to risk having a school within fifty miles of their village?"

"I don't know. Ask them! Better yet, ask the school girls." Paul's voice didn't waver. "The way you know how to cut deals, you could at least get a satellite dish installed so they could do Zoom classes."

Tom drank from his beer. "I know an engineer in Texas who sets up solar satellite feeds worldwide. I'll put you in contact with him," Tom offered.

"That won't work. The boss wants me to go to the Philippines."

"The Philippines?" Tom reached for the greasy bag. "Why there?"

"Because there's been an upsurge of cults that are using the Bible to promote and justify cannibalism. You know the evil spirits wander all through the world for the ruin of souls."

"What?" Tom released his grip on the bag of pork rinds.

"The Word calls out that unless you eat the flesh of the Son and drink His blood, you have no life in you," Paul declared.

"Not all of the Word is to be taken literally," Tom rebuffed Paul's claim of Transubstantiation.

"Isn't your wife a Catholic? What does she—" Paul's questions were interrupted by airbrakes from a water tender truck slowing down. The right blinker came on.

"I hope he brought diesel too." Paul waved at the driver.

"Diesel? That's a water truck, not a fuel tanker," Tom rebutted.

"Don't believe everything you hear or read!" Paul yelled as the loud tanker truck rumbled across the gravel. An ear-splitting blast spewed out when the air brakes were applied.

Tom swished away the dust, drank his beer, and poured the rest on the dry ground. The merchant exited the back door and instructed his son to gas up the Sprinter first.

About ten miles down the road, Tom pulled over and looked back. Abidemi and Cain were on the bed, curled up and sound asleep. Tom turned back around and punched H-O-S-P-I-T-A-L into the GPS. Before this day was over, Abidemi would be in safe hands. And he'd be one day closer to returning home to the United States.

CHAP 22... **A hardened heart**

Tom drove on past Jos Town toward Abuja with more than half a tank of fuel. He was rethinking where and how to drop off Abidemi. Too many questions from an admission nurse or a visual from security cameras could mess up his plans to return home. The multiple warnings about Gudu Recreation Park not being a safe place set off a mental alarm. An orphanage or foster home would be best. Glory and Praise in Fort Worth worked directly with the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services. Tom had volunteers who covered that ministry.

It was dark when he parked next to the cinder block, cell phone building, a familiar place he'd rested previously. He moved to the passenger seat and leaned against the window. The next thing Tom heard was the early morning Tantalus Monkey chatter. Through the windshield, he saw Abidemi walking Cain back toward the motorhome. Some white bearded monkeys were climbing and ranting from the fence surrounding the propane tank. Abidemi was not fazed. She was thankful that it was not a clan of hyenas and that she had a big dog beside her.

Tom stepped out. His hip felt less stiff. "Is everything okay?"

"Cain had to poop and pee. His ear is good. Blood got on the bed. It cleaned up good."

"You cleaned up his ear, or did you mean the bed?"

"Both." Abidemi pointed at new tampons on Cain's ear.

"Well, thank you, young lady. Let's round up something for breakfast. I need coffee first."

"Mr. Tom, could I have coffee too?" Abidemi reached up and grabbed Tom's hand.

Tom tensed up. *I need to find out if this child has parents. Family Services will want to know. I'll quiz her at breakfast.* Tom had a bad feeling about the mother whose throat had been

slit. He pushed that senseless murder out of his mind—he focused on meeting his deadline.

"Do you want me to make the coffee, Mr. Tom?"

"You know how to make coffee? How old are you?"

"Yes, I make coffee every morning for my Mum before she starts canning food and jam. I am thirteen. I'm small for my age."

"You said you have a boy's name. Did your father want a boy?" Abidemi stopped in place and let loose of Tom's hand. "A man in Ghana, from the Akan tribe, did a real bad thing to my Mum. She hated him. Then she forgave him because of me."

"I'm so sorry. I should not have asked."

"It's okay. The Akan tribe people say it was my Mum's fault. That is why she left when I was in her belly."

"Maybe we should skip coffee. I have a deadline to meet." Tom had gained a few answers. Seminary training had taught him not to get too close to orphans or suffering children. Orphanage workers often burn out when trying to place children—especially teenagers.

Tom changed his plans again. *I'll leave this girl at a shopping mall. Someone will surely notice that she is lost and put her in the hands of the authorities.*

Abidemi moved up to the passenger seat; she was a real chatterbox. Tom got spared the repetitive, 'Are we there yet? Are we there yet?' Abidemi didn't know where she was going but trusted that Tom was the way to becoming a foreign exchange student. She would return to her village, maybe as a teacher or nurse, and her Mum would be so proud.

A GPS search pinpointed the Novare Gateway Mall near the airport in Abuja, which wasn't far off the route back to Lagos. Tom set that location as the new waypoint. The arrival time was displayed as 11:45 AM.

Abidemi had never been this far from her village. A SHOPRITE grocery outlet was on one end of the mall. Tom parked a reasonable distance from the store and rubbed more African medicinal *saue* into his hip. He made it across the parking lot into the mall entrance with little discomfort.

Abidemi stared out the side window; she'd seen large malls in magazines. *These must be the stores Mum always talks about, where she wants to sell her jelly and fruit. She wants me to learn business stuff so I can help.*

Tom entered a department store and picked out a school pack, a blue exercise outfit, and underwear. At the checkout counter, there was a bin of stuffed animals. He paid for the items and then pushed a brown teddy bear into the pack. A food court and a movie house were in the middle of the mall. *Either of these places will work. We can see a movie, and then I'll go to buy popcorn and leave. Or we can get lunch, and then I'll say, "I'm going to the bathroom."*

Tom backtracked to the motorhome. "Let's go inside the mall. You can try these new clothes on to make sure they fit."

Abidemi's hazel eyes were wide open as they entered the mall. She'd often prayed about venturing off the Jos Plateau and away from the Zangam River. Overwhelmed and anxious, Abidemi's hand gripped Tom's baggy camo pants. "Would you like something to eat?" Tom asked.

"Could I have ice cream?" Abidemi pointed at the menu board over the Cold Stone Creamery counter.

"Let's have pizza first." Tom pointed at the Domino's booth.

Abidemi's childhood prayers were being answered—*pizza, ice cream, new clothes—not old hand-me-downs. I love you, Jesus.*

Tom mostly stayed quiet to avoid her affection. As they ate pizza, Tom looked over the movie times. The next showing was over an hour away. "Why don't you try on these new clothes in the restroom?" Tom pointed to the corner of the food court.

Abidemi latched onto the backpack and shopping bag and zigzagged through the cafeteria tables and chairs. When she disappeared down a short hallway—Tom headed to the parking lot.

* * *

Victor Vee, Kenny Chen, and Tina also had deadlines. Nothing would stand in the way of Victor's opportunity to hitch a ride on the Kong Fang container ship to enter the United States illegally via Little Saint James Island. This could be his connection to Hollywood elites and a conduit to Los Angeles, the world's music capital. Helping round-up virgin girls from Zangam village wasn't even a second thought. After all, his great-grandfather was a Trokosi priest and had taken more than one ten-year-old virgin for a life of servitude in a Trokosi shrine.

Tina's Hollywood and music connections would be Victor's path to a recording contract. She knew a good-looking African Hip Hop artist would have more opportunities in the United States. Her entire life amounted to doing whatever it took to be part of the in-crowd and to hang with the rich and famous.

The CCP had indoctrinated Mr. Chen since age six. Social engineering always worked on the common-class, hard-working Chinese citizens. 'Raise a pig, not a child,' is one example. Africa's average family size was over six and was ripe for the picking.

The deal between the Chinese Communist Party commander and the EWO coordinator was four young African girls unloaded in international waters south of the US Virgin Islands. If this at-sea human trafficking delivery could not be adhered to, there was zero chance that the CCP would get a chair at the Elite World Order round table. This plan was already off track.

Victor screwed up when he used a cable spool to block Abidemi inside the outhouse. Now, they were short one virgin. Victor proposed a pubescent boy as a replacement. Ken Chen texted a picture of Jacob to the EWO party coordinator, and her response was: **If this little guy has no health issues and is clean and fresh, he can be the replacement.**

Victor didn't mention a word about Jacob being deaf from Malaria treatment.

A mid-week departure from Tin Can Harbor was a go. Victor's deadline now included kidnapping Jacob and getting him onto the Kong Fang. He needed Tina's help.

Tina was a great manipulator and bald-faced liar. "Mrs. Onukwulu, this is Pastor Tom's niece. I need to tell you that Jacob should mop and clean the church early Wednesday morning because Tom is bringing some girls down from the outreach school, and he wants the church super clean."

Victor Vee left several threatening messages for Tom to live up to his end of the bargain, or he would go to the police with incriminating photos of Jacob and him. Tina's messages were more pleading, and one had an erotic photo attached. Beth's message went to a blank voicemail. After twenty years of marriage, Beth had a gut feeling that Tom got in some trouble helping a young girl. It was challenging, but she heeded Dan's warning about the FBI eavesdropping. She sent a coded text

message: **Tom, I got a cash offer on your Corvette. I'll take the ten thousand dollars if I don't hear back from you. They want your 67 split-window Corvette.**

Fueling up, Tom asked the attendant, "Do you know where some large Ten Commandments plaques are located? I've always wanted to see them."

The attendant inserted Tom's credit card into the gas pump. "That Ten Commandments monument is located near Doi Village. It is not what most of us Nigerians believe."

"Why's that?" Tom took back his credit card.

"The Ten Commandments are for you Christian tourists. Every person should practice the seventy-five good manners in the Quran!"

"Maybe so. Many Christians don't even abide by nine of our commandments."

"Same thing for Muslims." The attendant put the nozzle into the Sprinter. "Don't lie, don't spread gossip, and keep your trust and promise, are three examples of the Good Manners in the Quran that many of my brothers do not follow."

Tom pulled away from the gas pumps into a parking space and grabbed the RF signal-blocking bag. When he unzipped the seal, the cell phone downloaded new messages. As Tom read and deleted messages, he thought about Dan's warning about the FBI eavesdropping on anybody they wanted to. Tom knew that Dan had warned Beth about the FBI. He returned the phone to the Graphene bag and tossed it onto the empty passenger seat.

Something is going on with Mr. Chen's scholarship program. I don't get why Victor Vee is in such a rush for the Sprinter. Tom hit the home button on the in-dash GPS to see when he'd return to the church. Good, it will be late Tuesday if I drive straight through.

For some odd reason, when Tom started to pull away from the fuel station, he touched the last saved waypoint on the GPS. *I noticed some sketchy people at that food court—* He turned off the right blinker to go south and turned on the left to head back North. Cain jumped onto the passenger seat, stuck his snout out the window, and wagged his tail.

The thirty-acre Novare Gateway Mall parking lot was now less than a quarter filled. It took only five minutes for Cain to spot and point at Abidemi sitting on a concrete bench outside of

SHOPRITE. Her head was slumped forward. She had the brown teddy bear in one hand and the new pack in the other. Tom pulled alongside the curb, and Cain barked. Abidemi looked up. The eye-to-eye contact with Cain got followed by Tom's hardened heart—turning soft. "Cain, get in the back" was a command he did not not obey.

"Where did you go?" Abidemi asked as she put her pack on the floorboard, moved the Graphene phone bag, and then hiked into the passenger seat beside Cain.

"I had to fill up and look for a spare tire," Tom told a half-truth. The eight-hour trip back to Lagos turned into ten hours, with trying to find the largest Ten Commandments in Africa, extra potty stops, and road trip snacks. There were some brief silent periods of discernment for Tom.

Not so for Abidemi, who was in full-speed chatterbox mode. Tom did surmise that Boko Haram had been harassing the outreach school for the last six months. The Nigerian government was no longer endorsing Christian organizations for fear that a religious war could break out, especially in heavily populated Muslim territory.

Tom backed the motorhome against the concrete steps in the darkness and unlocked the church. He pulled the mattress and linen out of the motorhome and made a bed for Abidemi in the storage room. Overly tired, she watched Tom open the hidden wall panel. Tom's instructions were if she heard anybody outside the church, she should get behind the false wall. Similar to the hide-and-seek game they played in the motorhome earlier. Cain lay down beside her, and both soon dozed off.

Tom locked up and backed the motorhome down the alley opposite the apartment. It was past midnight when he called and left a message. "Tina, the church gate is unlocked. The keys to the motorhome are up in the visor. Please don't wake me. I'm dead tired."

Inside the apartment, Tom flopped face-first on the bed. He had barely slept in three days. He entered REM-level sleep an hour later. A nightmare vision of the young woman with hazel eyes, the same as Abidemi getting murdered at the outreach school, stole his rest and hardened his mind.

Before dawn, Ken Chen and Tina picked up the motorhome from the alley. An hour later, Victor backed into the same spot—out of sight from the apartment. He reclined in the

passenger seat to wait for Jacob to show up to clean and mop. As soon as Jacob opened the church, it would be a snatch-and-grab. He'd use ether on a cloth to sedate Jacob. Damaged goods would not be acceptable to the EWO party coordinator. Lucky for Jacob, a slap with the Rungu baton could blow the deal.

Jacob followed instructions from his Mum via Tina to clean the church early on Wednesday. He was already on his way.

The beeping and morning traffic noise was something Abidemi had never experienced. She turned on a light, exited the closet, walked across the church tile floor, and peeked through the crack between the two doors. She was amazed at how many cars, trucks, kekes, and okadas were on Frontage Road.

Victor noticed the closet light go on and spoke to himself. "That mute kid must have entered through the side door!" Victor gathered the duplicate key, the bottle of ether, gauze pads, and an N95 mask. He exited the music van and poured ether over gauze and a white washcloth. He nonchalantly crept up the steps to the front door.

Jacob was on the far side of the field with the red bucket swinging on the mop handle.

Abidemi heard people talking from the sidewalk, returned to the storage room, and got behind the false wall with Cain, as instructed.

The duplicate key fit. Victor turned the key, and the bolt gave off a loud **snap**. Cain alerted to the noise, his hackle rose, and he leaned into Abidemi. The anesthesia fumes wisped up into Victor's hefty nostrils. *Wow, that shit is potent, I don't want to kill the kid.* He rung out the ether-soaked washcloth, slithered between the church doors, and pulled them closed. He waited for his eyes to adjust to the dimness and listened for movement.

Jacob had just ducked through the hole in the fence and then rounded the corner. When he set his bucket and mop in front of the doors, he immediately smelled the anesthesia and followed the drip stains to the other corner of the church. When Jacob saw the double V's on the box of the music van hidden in the alley—he wet himself. Then leaped off the porch in silent fear and ran out to Frontage Road.

Victor heard Cain's growl and tiptoed to the storage closet.

He'd been trained by a Maasai Warrior how to put down large animals with a Rungu. Supernatural shock overcame Victor Vee when he heard the growl, but there was no dog. He walked backward to the front doors.

Abidemi pushed open the panel and moved to the doorway with Cain at her side. Victor's heart turned stone cold— *I should have never entered this house of God. The ghost of the girl I had left to die—has followed me.* In fear and haste, Victor backed out the front doors. He tripped over the mop and red bucket. The back of his head hit squarely on the middle concrete step.

Two pedestrians saw the washrag and rungu stick fly from Victor's hands. They ran into the parking lot and saw his eyes rolled up and quivering. "Somebody call 211."

When Abidemi heard people and the commotion, she returned to the secret panel in the storage room. Tom listened to the commotion also. He got out of bed and looked out the peephole. *Saint Michael, I need another intercession.*

CHAP 23 ... **Satan roams the world**

With no urgency, EMTs loaded Victor Vee without even a neck brace. There was a pool of blood under his head. It was after nine before the crowd dispersed. One pesky reporter knocked on the apartment door for another thirty minutes. Finally, Tom was able to sneak some food over to the church. Abidemi was sitting with Cain behind the false wall. She thought Victor was the janitor when she saw the silhouette of the mop and bucket behind him in the doorway. That was when she darted back to the hiding spot.

"You did good, little girl," Tom said, sliding the panel open.

Tom took Cain to the kennel while Abidemi ate the akara and pap. A patrol car with two of Ayoola officers pulled up out front. One officer got out, got into the V V music truck, started it, and pulled out onto Frontage Road. The other officer used a long cotton swab to take a DNA sample from the puddle of blood, nodded at Tom, got back in the patrol car, and left. *At least they don't have a search warrant*, Tom surmised.

He came back into the church with a small bottle of pineapple juice. "Here you go, young lady."

Abidemi was on the tip of her toes, peeking out one of the windows. "How many people and automobiles are in this village?"

"Lagos has a population of over twenty million people. I don't know how many vehicles, but it is a lot."

Abidemi turned from the window, walked over to Tom, and took the plastic bottle of pineapple juice. "Thank you."

There was a discerning silence as Abidemi drank the juice and ate another akara. She sensed that the secret wall in the storage room plus the big cage behind the apartment were for safety and protection, like when rebels raided her village. Tom warned Abidemi to stay away from the windows and then started to pace down the center aisle. Abidemi always followed instructions from an elder. She climbed up on one of the chairs

in the back row, crossed her hands on her lap, and bowed her head.

When Tom did an about-face at the altar, the sun shining on Abidemi through a side window made her seem angelic. The options for this innocent child were limited, as was the case for Tom. *Getting this girl to a school in the United States is not an option. Idogbe could drop her back in her village when he goes up to work on the strawberry farm. I will set up a monthly account so she and her mum have something.* Tom knew that all the money in the world could not buy an intact family. In his gut, he knew that her mum was dead—

Midway up the aisle, Tom asked, "Are you okay?"

Abidemi lifted her head. "Yes, I'm okay. I was asking Jesus to protect you and for Cain to heal up good and for my mum to be safe in our village when I'm gone."

Tom's throat tightened. He could only get out two words, "That's nice." He hurried past Abidemi and went out the front doors. He picked up the red bucket and mop and put them inside the kennel. Back in the apartment, he fed Cain and texted Beth: **Are the buyers aware it is a SPLIT WINDOW CORVETTE?**

Beth had just dozed off when she heard the phone trilling. She reached for it on the nightstand and fumbled for her reading glasses. Years ago, they had an action plan when they traveled to Mexico. Danger lurked if either relayed or spoke the three words SPLIT WINDOW CORVETTE. Beth knew Tom's attempt to escape Africa was spinning out of control. She was unaware that the internet had circulated a picture of Tom in boxer shorts next to Jacob with a towel wrapped around his small waist. The final millstone around his neck would be a girl sleeping on a mattress in the back of Glory and Praise church.

Tom grabbed the new laptop, Cain's water bowl, and a stack of Nigerian Tribune newspapers inside the apartment. He yelled the command, "Fuss," Cain heeled at his side up the concrete steps.

Cain slipped between the doors first and went directly to Abidemi, who was still sitting in the back row. "Maybe I can take you for a walk," Abidemi said aloud.

"Probably not today," Tom answered while setting the laptop and newspapers on the chair next to her. "Here's his water bowl. You two must play our hide-and-seek game until I

get back.”

“Okay.” All of her life, Abidemi had been an outcast or left out. After her mom got raped, Zangam Village was the only place Abena found refuge. “Girls can’t use computers.”

“Why not?” Tom set the water bowl on the floor.

Abidemi explained how Mohammed Yusuf, the leader of a fundamentalist Islamist sect known as Boko Haram, tried to impose strict Islamic law in the Muslim-dominated northern section of Nigeria. Girls were only allowed a rudimentary education, and computer learning was forbidden. Tom better understood why the Glory and Praise board wanted to close the school.

“Can you read the newspaper?” Tom pointed at copies of the Nigerian Tribune.

“Yes,” Abidemi picked up a copy. “I can read to you as I do for Abena, my mum.”

“Sure, go for it,” Tom replied.

“Crypt-toe bust at local Hol-a-day Inn.” Abidemi carefully sounded out the headline.

“What?” Tom snatched back the three-day-old newspaper. The photo under the headline was of the State Security Service (SSS) of Nigeria moving a Bitcoin ATM out of Oyins Holiday Inn. The name Tanny Chukwuemeka popped out in the article, and so did the Brit twins. Tanny was the first friend he’d made after landing in Lagos. They hadn’t talked since Tina moved in with Victor Vee. “I need to go check on someone.” Tom handed the newspaper back to Abidemi.

“Okay, Papa Tom.” Abidemi watched Tom dart out of the church.

He weaved and dodged through the crowd, then halted about half a block from Oyins Holiday Inn. There was yellow crime scene tape over the entrance and an orange **NO VACANCY** sign was blinking. The white SUVs with dark tinted windows were unmarked SSS vehicles. Tom remembered Dan’s warning about the State Security Service’s mission to clean up fraud, scams, and crypto. Since the Prince of Nigeria email scam, Nigeria’s reputation has taken over a billion-dollar hit in tourism and trade.

Tom scrolled through his contact list; he had a number for Tanny. He put his thumb on the **CALL** icon. “Hello, can I speak to Tanny?”

"My mommy is not home." A child's voice came over the phone.

"Okay. When will she be back?" Tom asked.

"I don't know. I get my sister." An older-sounding child got on the phone. Tom could ascertain that Tanny got taken by men in uniform with lime green and yellow badges and an owl in the center.

He recalled Dan warning him that all hell would break loose if he exposed internet fraud inside Lagos. Tom deleted Tanny's contact information. He remembered that Tanny was raising three children without a father. Victor Vee had been her live-in boyfriend until Tina ended that relationship. *Tanny talked about opening a daycare. I could pay her to take care of Abidemi*—Tom tried to undelete Tanny's contact information, but it was gone. Now, he had sleuth work to do.

* * *

The hospital was as crowded as that night when Ekon was there with a broken arm. "Can I help you, sir?" The receptionist asked.

"Yes, one of my church members was admitted here this morning. I came by to pray with him."

"What is your parishioner's name?"

"I'm not sure about his real name. But his stage name is Victor Vee. He's a well-known musician."

The receptionist typed on the keyboard. She looked over the top of her glasses and quietly said. "You won't be able to pray with Victor. He's in a coma."

"All he did was fall down a few steps."

The receptionist typed on the keyboard and continued to whisper, "The accident report states that he hit the back of his head on a concrete step."

"That's odd to fall down three stairs backward," Tom replied.

"The report says he tripped over a mop and bucket."

"Do you have his home address? I want to send flowers."

"I can't give out that information." The receptionist coyly jotted on a notepad. "I keep calling, and only kids pick up the phone. I think they are home all alone." She slipped the paper

to Tom and whispered, "Maybe someone can go by and check. If I call the police and they are home alone, they will get taken to a detention center."

* * *

Briefly, Tom thought about checking on Tanny's children. Latch-key children are more prone to accidental deaths. Some get baked in cars or drowned in a bathtub when adults have limited options—not unlike the difference between murdering or killing. It's best not to pass judgment unless all the facts are known.

Tom opened the church side door. It was dead quiet. He hurried to the storage closet and slid the panel open.

"I read the newspapers. When I tried the computer, it needed a password. Cain needs to go potty."

"Okay." Tom petted Cain.

"Two yellow men knocked on your door and then the church doors." Abidemi pointed at the window from which she had looked.

"What do you mean, yellow men?" Tom asked.

"The Ivory-Takers. One reason so few elephants are in Africa. They also kill Rhinos just for their horns." Abidemi spoke matter of factly.

"You mean Chinese men?"

"Yes, like Mr. Chen. But they looked like sailors. He's the same as those stealing fish from African oceans. We read about them at school. They do it all over the world."

Tom was impressed. "You learned all that stuff at school?"

"Our teacher studied political and environmental stuff at the University of Ibadan College."

"Good for her. Did your teacher tell you that most Chinese people are hard-working- peasants controlled by a small communist party?"

"No," Abidemi wasn't concerned. Why should she be? Her entire life consisted of living day to day.

Tom pointed out the side door. "There's a hole in the fence. Stay out of site behind the church with Cain. I need to make a phone call."

"Okay, Papa Tom," Abidemi replied and walked toward the

opening in the fence. Tom tensed. It was the second time he'd been called Papa. He closed the side door and walked toward the apartment.

Tina's number went directly to voicemail. "Tina, give me a call. Not sure if you know that Victor Vee had a bad fall." Unbeknownst to Tom, the Kong Fang had left port a few hours before. Tom stuck his head out the apartment door. Abidemi and Cain were coming up the alley. He motioned with his arm for them to hurry.

Abidemi looked around the apartment and noticed the black and white game board on the counter. "I know how to play checkers."

"That board is for playing chess," Tom replied.

"Oh?" Abidemi got up on her toes to look into the box of chess pieces. "Can girls play this game, or is it for boys only?"

"Sure, girls can play chess the same as boys."

Abidemi dropped down off her toes and turned toward Tom. "Ms. Tina said we'd learn new games too. She said we learn to perform play acting for famous people."

"What! What are you talking about?"

Abidemi explained that when Tina, Victor Vee, and Mr. Chen came to her village, they offered scholarships to girls who would get to act in movies. Tina said she was a Hollywood scout and had friends in high places. Tears filled Abidemi's eyes when she talked about how her mum didn't want her to leave the village. But, if her only child could somehow get an education and maybe someday walk through Zangam village with her head held high—it would all be worth the risk.

* * *

Idogbe discerned his future as he drove from the strawberry farm. Hoping somehow he could fill in until Glory and Praise sent over a new preacher. On the prior Sunday, after preaching on the ninth commandment, Idogbe took advantage of Tom's trip up north and removed the mini spy camera. He understood Ayoola's intent to protect children from a suspected pedophile. But all the false witnessing and rumors he'd heard didn't add up. Granted, he found internet reports about Tom and the Stolen Valor deception. But there was absolutely nothing about

Tom being a child predator.

Tom heard the rumble from Idogbe's old work truck turning into the church parking lot. He pushed the church side door open and rushed up the alley into the apartment. Abidemi was zonked out. Tom shook her; she opened and rubbed at her Hazel eyes. "We need to play our hide and be quiet game again." Abidemi groggily watched Tom open the bathroom door and pull back the shower curtain. She hobbled into the shower. Then Cain stood in front of the bathroom door, prepared and on guard.

Abidemi drew a deep breath when she heard knocking on the apartment door. Hiding was one thing she was good at ever since the attacks by Boko Haram in her village.

She heard Tom through the bathroom door. "Good morning Idogbe. I thought you needed to be at the strawberry farm."

"I do, but we need to talk." Idogbe's voice crackled.

"I was about to settle up with the pap and akara vendor. Why don't we talk over a cup of hot coffee?" Tom pulled the door closed. Abidemi exhaled and stepped out of the shower. All the hiding was imprinting childhood memories that would affect the rest of her life.

After Tom tallied the church's account, he and Idogbe sat under a blue tarp awning at a small plastic table. "The Texas style akara has become a big hit at church."

"You mean the sugar-glazed donut puffs." Idogbe frowned at Tom

"Well, your Mom's strawberries are a hit and healthy."

"Yeah, thanks for that. Mom appreciates the business." Idogbe's frown turned to a forced smile. "I don't understand why you immediately need to leave. You are going to hurt a lot of people." Idogbe blew steam across the top of the white Styrofoam cup.

"How so?" Tom sipped at the freshly brewed Kenya AA coffee, the only thing he'd miss about Africa.

"Just up and leave after you got so many things rolling. The Onukwulu boys and I appreciate the work at the church. This coffee vendor is going to feel the pinch when the church closes. The fundraisers and the meetings that you open the church for are things that build community. What about the chess team you promised and the soccer field out back?"

"So what are you proposing?" Tom took another drink of

coffee.

"I think you should let me do Sunday services and watch over the church until they find another pastor."

"I doubt if headquarters would go for that since you're a Catholic deacon."

"Your wife is Catholic. Didn't she help at your church in Texas?"

"Not at all. Early on, we agreed not to talk about politics or religion if we wanted a strong and healthy marriage."

"So you must not know about the ecumenical movement and empowerment of laity in the Catholic church in the sixties." Idogbe intentionally quizzed.

"Oh, I have studied that Vatican-two document. In my opinion, all that second council did was usher in less respect for the body and blood that the Son of God shed on the cross. It was the beginning of modernism that destroyed tradition in your church."

"That's not true!" Idogbe was prepared with a rebuttal. "The sixties was the time of free love; if it feels good, do it and drugs. Those world-changing events were ushered in along with the birth control pill. My church opposed these things then and still does to this day."

Tom always had a pre-rehearsed rebuttal. "When I attend mass with Beth, I always observe the parishioners take the Eucharist from the priest, turn toward the crucifix, and make the cross sign."

"Yes, they do that out of respect for the consecrated host." Idogbe was quick to defend that Catholic practice.

Tom was knowledgeable and proficient at heretical doctrine. "I don't see it that way. If I had just received the body and blood of our Savior, I would not stand before a plaster crucifix and sign myself."

"Oh?" Idogbe was taken aback.

Tom intentionally paused to let it sink in. "By the way, taking any graven image onto thyself is a sin against the second commandment."

Idogbe was at a loss for a rebuttal. Tom's belief in the real presence had stunned him. Most other Christian denominations and the majority of Catholics do not accept transubstantiation. This subject can get as heated as Satan roaming the world to ruin souls.

An interrogative question is a debating trick to change the subject and win a debate. Tom was a skilled orator. "Do you know where Victor Vee's old girlfriend lives? I need to see if she would be interested in babysitting. Victor fired her, and she probably could use the income."

Idogbe took the bait. "Why don't you ask Victor?"

"You didn't hear? Victor fell down the church steps. He's in the hospital—in a coma."

* * *

Beth was also uninformed, some seven thousand miles due west, across the Atlantic Ocean. She didn't know Victor Vee and only met Mr. Chen when he and Tina picked up the motorhome. She'd never heard about the battle at Zangam Village—where Tom's killings followed the murders of women and children.

All that she knew was the words **Split Window Corvette** meant that Tom was in serious trouble. She removed five troy ounces of gold, a two-carat diamond, and a Rosary made from Tiffany pearls from a wall safe. She placed the gold, flawless diamond, and pure white pearl Rosary inside the unique bag Dan gave her for her cell phone. Graphene blocks cell phone signals and can also block airport X-ray scanners.

She dared to ask only one person for a ride to the airport. Hank had been her best friend ever since first grade. He was the first boy that she kissed in fifth grade. Hank was the one that no woman could tame. The one that never married. Hank was rugged and more fit than any superhero. He would never run from an honorable battle—no matter the enemy or the odds.

CHAP 24 ... **A child's trust**

On the way back from coffee, Tom noted that the red bucket and mop were missing from the kennel. Idogbe also noticed, "Looks like your under-aged worker is already cleaning the church."

"We are bartering! So he's not my under-aged worker or slave or whatever you are trying to imply." Tom's voice was unyielding.

Idogbe pulled his truck keys from his pocket. "I know that. I'm just fooling with you." The rusty old truck door squawked. Idogbe got in and looked up at Tom. "Jacob is going to miss you. You're the first adult who treated him like he was just like anyone else. Playing chess, handling guard dogs, and not having a job will crush that poor child when you leave. He trusts you one hundred percent."

"Yeah, I guess," Tom replied, casting his eyes toward the front doors.

Blue smoke rolled out from under the old truck as Idogbe pushed on the gas pedal. "I'll go talk to Ayoola. He should have an address for Tanny." Idogbe gave a thumbs up out the driver-side window.

Tom yanked open the church doors. The red bucket and mop were leaning against the stage. *Jacob, where are you?* Tom thought as he rushed into the closet. The bedding was neatly folded on the motorhome mattress. He slid the hidden wall panel open—no Jacob. Out the side door, he scanned the alley and backfield. Yelling for a deaf child was useless. "Jacob must have gone back home," Tom said aloud.

Cain heard and came out the dog door and barked. Tom jogged up the alley and leaned into the apartment door. Abidemi looked up from the chessboard! Jacob noticed and

looked at Tom, too. It was now double-trouble for Tom. A young girl and Jacob, a mattress, and a secret hiding place in the church. *Jesus, can't I get a break?*

Jacob came from around the green table, wrapped his arms around Tom's thigh, and hugged. Tom rubbed Jacob's head and then looked toward Abidemi. "Did anyone else come by?"

"No, Papa Tom. Is he your son?"

Tom chuckled, then quickly shut the door. "Jacob's my little helper. He can't hear or talk."

"I know," Abidemi held up the paper pad they had been drawing and jotting on. Cain came through the dog door and nuzzled Tom's other thigh. Jacob returned to the table, drew a heart on the pad, and pointed at Tom. Abidemi moved her head up and down—she loved and trusted Tom, too.

Jacob acted as grown up as he could, synchronizing the chess game on the old laptop screen with the chess board and pieces. He would cup his hand over Abidemi's hand to move a chess piece. If such a thing as instant childhood bonding existed, it would unfold right there at that small green table in that tiny apartment. Tom didn't notice; he kept looking out the peephole. *A search warrant from Ayoola will end this special moment for these kids and be hell for me.*

Vanilla ice cream was Jacob's favorite treat. Abidemi giggled as they squeezed chocolate sauce on each other's frozen dessert.

Tom's phone vibrated. "I talked with Ayoola. He has an apartment number for Tanny but wants to talk to you first."

"Talk to me, why?" Tom opened the apartment door and walked outside.

"Have you been reading the newspaper about the Bitcoin operation that Victor Vee and the Brit twins were running out of Oyins Holiday Inn?"

"Kind of. I thought the State Security Service was investigating that. Why would a local constable get involved?"

"The SSS is like the FBI and CIA in your country. They have jurisdiction over everyone and wallow in the power. Constable Ayoola probably wants to be in the loop and make a name for himself. You know how he runs this neighborhood with an iron fist. Nothing gets by him!"

"So what are you telling me?" Tom walked in circles.

"I'm telling you that maybe Tanny was involved. She

worked at the Holiday Inn until your niece showed up.”

“I’ve been trying to get a hold of Tina. Her phone goes directly to voicemail. I hope she wasn’t involved in that Bitcoin scam. I’m sure that the Nigerian government goes especially hard on foreigners.”

“Yes, they do.” Idogbe thought about how he helped spy on Tom. At least he had removed the mini camera. “Pastor, it might be best to hang low or get out of town for a few weeks.”

“You are right. Could I work at your mom’s farm for a few days? I picked strawberries when I was a kid.”

“My mum always needs extra help on the farm. I’ll let her know you’re coming. I’ll text directions.”

“Thanks,” Tom hung up. *Finally, I might have a place to leave Abidemi. If the strawberry farm is not too far from the Abuja International Airport, I’ll sneak off and get Cain into quarantine. Worst case, I could leave Cain on the farm. Midweek overnight flights are usually the easiest to book at the counter.*

Tom returned to the apartment, got paper and pen, and told Jacob that nobody, not his mom or dad, not even Ekon, could know about Abidemi staying in the church. In the short time being with Abidemi, Jacob had never experienced what he was feeling. Call it puppy love or a crush; it was an emotion a child would never forget. On his way home, Jacob pretended that the red bucket was a shield and the mop was a sword—that he was the knight in shining armor.

Renting a vehicle that a large dog crate would fit into wasn’t a problem, but getting it dropped off at the church seemed to be. Tom switched from preacher mode to deal-maker mode. He offered a hundred-dollar tip for the driver that could have a full-sized SUV delivered to the church by the next day.

A few hours later, Tom explained to Abidemi that they needed to drop Cain off at the airport and that they would pick strawberries for a few days. He got her ready for bed, then took her to the church. He also needed a good night’s sleep to drive to Abuja and the farm.

Past midnight, Tom was awakened by a firm knocking on the door. He didn’t bother to look through the peephole, it was higher than Abidemi was tall. He groggily opened the door.

“I got here as fast as I could. After you texted Split Window Corvette, I packed and...” Before Beth finished her sentence,

Tom yanked her into the apartment.

"Beth, I didn't mean for you to come to Africa. I thought you'd contact me through your friend Dan."

"That's how I got here so fast, on Dan's chartered jet. He told me about the hotel's Bitcoin terminal and some spreadsheet files on your old computer. I'm here to help."

"Beth, it's bigger than that. There was some battle stuff that could get me put in prison. It's too dangerous for you to be with or around me. Plus, I hurt you and..."

Beth forcibly placed her hand over Tom's mouth. "Tom, let's not dwell in the past. I forgive you. I love you, and I'm here for you."

Tom pulled Beth against him. Often, the bond of marriage, when two become one, is reinforced through bad times, more so than better times. "I love you, Elizabeth. I always have and forever will."

"Tom, we'll talk in the morning. I'm exhausted from the flight." Beth locked hands with Tom and pulled him toward the bed. She let her clothes drop to the floor. Tom hadn't realized how much he missed Beth's scent, smooth skin, touch, and lips. The passion was long overdue—it helped to unwind and comfort them both.

Tom was still sleeping when Beth heard the apartment door slowly creep open. The morning sun silhouetted two children holding hands in the doorway. She pulled the bed sheet over her chest, sat up, and squinted. Without warning, Cain busted between Jacob and Abidemi, then knocked Beth back onto the pillow, licking her bare arms and shoulders.

Tom rolled over. "I tried to fill you in last night, but we got preoccupied. You already know Jacob."

Beth signed, "Good morning."

Jacob pulled Abidemi to the side of the bed, let loose of their grip, and fist-bumped Beth.

"What is your name, young lady?" Beth asked.

"My name is Abidemi. I have a boy's name."

Jacob retrieved the chess board and pieces and set up the game on the green table. Beth wrapped up in the bed sheet and got out of bed.

Abidemi picked up the bra and clothes and held them up. "You must be Elizabeth. Papa Tom told me you went to college to run long distances, teach special kids, and take Jesus to ill

people. He said you don't cook that much, but you like dogs."

"Well then, young lady, we need to talk." Beth took the bra and clothes from Abidemi. Cocooned in the linen, she tight-stepped across the apartment and into the bathroom.

In boxer shorts, Tom followed her. Beth let the sheet drop and started getting dressed. He put his hands on her bare shoulders, bent her head back, and passionately kissed her.

This forceful action was rare, almost nonexistent in their sex life. Although the dominance was well received, she couldn't help but laugh. "So I can't cook that good, Papa Tom."

Tom snatched her bra and tossed it over the shower curtain. "I'll turn off the light so we can play that high school game, seven minutes in heaven."

"I'll just have to give you a rain check on that offer." Beth put her blouse on and buttoned it up; she pulled on her slacks and then slipped out of the bathroom. She walked over to Jacob, tapped him on the shoulder, and signed. "Would you like me to make breakfast?"

Jacob moved his head up and down and smiled. He remembered Beth from her first visit and their hand conversations.

"What did you say to Jacob with your hands?" Abidemi asked.

"I asked if he wanted some breakfast," Beth answered.

"Can I help?" Abidemi slid off the chair in high hopes.

"I could probably use some help. Since I'm not a good cook."

Tom sat down across from Jacob and moved a white pawn. "Could one of you cooks make us men a hot chocolate and a coffee?" Tom stayed focused on the chess board—hoping not to be checkmated in less than ten moves.

This was one of the few times Abidemi had breakfast with a boy and never with a man. It was usually her mum and herself. Sometimes, Abena didn't eat. It was vital that Abidemi not go to school on an empty stomach. Their morning prayer was always that Abidemi get an education beyond the primary grades.

Beth made pancake batter. Abidemi got strawberries and a pineapple from the refrigerator and found a large knife to clean, core, and slice the fruit. She added water, raw sugar, and some cinnamon and boiled all the ingredients before the chess game

ended. She asked for starch or pectin, but there was none. She turned up the heat to boil off most of the liquid and helped thicken the jam.

Beth stood back, waiting for Tom to comment that Abidemi knew her way around a stove. Luckily for Tom, Jacob was about to put him in checkmate. The little green table had never been surrounded with so much joy as the young and old devoured pancakes smothered in Abidemi's cinnamon-seasoned pineapple strawberry sauce.

After breakfast, Abidemi cleared the table and washed the plates at the sink. Jacob jumped up to help. Tom finished the coffee and said, "Beth and I are going to the church to talk. You two stay inside the apartment."

Beth signed Tom's instructions to Jacob, and he moved his head in affirmation. He'd hide Abidemi in the bathroom if anyone came looking. He appointed himself her protector.

In the church, Beth noticed the motorhome mattress on the floor in the storage closet. The blankets were neatly folded, and a brown teddy bear was propped up with a pillow. Tom paced down to the front of the church, and on the way back, he exclaimed, "I think rebels killed Abidemi's mum!"

"What do you mean, you think?" Beth wanted different words.

"On a second trip to the outreach school, renegade soldiers were slitting the throats of the mothers that let their daughters be foreign exchange students."

"You know that for sure?" Beth hoped that this was one of Tom's embellished stories.

"I know for sure because I watched it through the scope of the hunting rifle Hank gifted me." Tom squeezed his eyes tight, trying to force away that horrific morning.

"Was that the gift I packed under the seat in the motorhome?"

"Yes, if it weren't for Hank's burst-fire rifle, I would have died that day." Tom unclenched his eyes. "Dan's graphene bag saved my butt—literally."

"Is that why your hip is black and blue? I noticed last night." Beth steadied herself on one of the new folding chairs. She knew this wasn't going to be one of Tom's embellishments. Tom started with the hyenas disemboweling Abel and then getting the AR-15 sighted in while killing the matriarch and

most of her den. Tom clenched his eyes again when he told more the following morning. How he witnessed a woman with hazel eyes get her throat slit and a boy soldier getting shot by his father.

Beth couldn't steady herself any longer. She drew a deep breath, let go of the chair's back, and sat. *Tom's not embellishing—*

"I did what I had to do. There was a gun battle. That three-round burst fire rifle Hank built was no match for the renegade rebels."

Beth instinctively knew that the woman with hazel eyes was most likely Abidemi's mother. "Is that the same day you called about a girl on her period?"

"Yes." Tom went on about how he picked Abidemi up on the back road, where she was sitting on the flat tire where the hyenas had attacked Abel.

When Tom started to talk about Tina, Victor Vee, and Kenny Chen using the motorhome to pick up village girls, there was honking at the parking lot gate, which created panic in the apartment and inside the church. Tom peeked between the double doors. "The rental car is here early."

Beth followed Tom out of the church and halted at the top step. She noticed the chalk outline of a body and dried blood. More storytelling Tom had yet to share. Beth entered the apartment while Tom signed the rental agreement papers and handed over a hundred-dollar tip.

Abidemi and Jacob hid in the bathroom. Wide-open eyes stared at her when she opened the bathroom door. The genetic odds of hazel eyes from the same village were conclusive enough for Beth—Abidemi was a lone survivor.

Tom came through the apartment door, rethinking how he would drop off Abidemi at the berry farm. Getting Cain through quarantine at the Abuja airport also had to be rethought. Then there was where Beth fit into the mess.

"They delivered a full-size Jeep. Maybe a road trip with Abidemi to Plateau State would be fun!" The reaction got muted, not what he'd expected. If Jacob could have heard, there would have been tears of sorrow. Beth was standing behind Abidemi, helping her with the next chess move. She heard but tuned out Tom's road trip suggestion. Beth was devising a plan—for her taking.

Tom went outside, folded down the jeep's rear seat, and loaded one of the dog crates. Then he called Idogbe. "Hey, there's been a change in plans. I'm not going to make it up to the strawberry farm today. So, if you want to do a Sunday service, go for it."

"I'd like that. Is there anything specific you'd like me to preach on?" Idogbe very much welcomed any opportunity to preach the Word.

"Why don't you preach on the first commandment? About how some of the pope's followers kiss his ring. They think he a king, maybe even a God."

"I think I can come up with something. It's appalling to see. At least this pope yanks his hand back when someone tries to do it."

"Did you see that world leader try to kiss the pope on the forehead?" Tom asked with disgust.

"No, but I'll search for it on the internet."

"By the way, my wife is here. Beth might attend your service."

"That would be great. We have a lot in common."

Beth came out of the apartment. "Jacob wants to know if he can take Abidemi to meet his mum."

"Go ahead, but be back before lunch. I'll gas up, get some snacks, and check on the first friend I met in Lagos. Hopefully, we can be on the road tonight or first thing in the morning."

"Does that mean the three of us?"

"Don't know yet. We'll talk about it later when the little girl naps."

"You mean Abidemi? She's too old for a nap. Why are you using pronouns?"

"Probably best we quit calling her by her first name."

"Why's that?" Beth's voice turned on suspicion mode.

"Beth, this is Africa. We are the foreigners here. This is her home, and we must follow their laws."

"Tom, you always have a way to cut a deal or make things happen. She has a name, and I will call her by that." Beth trudged off, knowing Tom was planning his exit. She knew not to get involved. Tom was a realist who followed all laws—especially the commandments.

The more you let someone into your heart, the harder it will be to let them go. They will always take a piece of you no

matter how hard you try to forget their name. Tom wiped a tear from his eye and watched the three stoop through the fence's opening. Then Abidemi turned around and yelled, "I love you, Papa Tom."

CHAP 25 ... **TSA or FANN**

Two bags of junk food were on the passenger seat, and a new jerky chew was inside the dog crate. Tom had the blinker on when he noticed a police car backed up to the church steps with the rear hatch up. Both the church doors were open! He switched off the turn signal and drove by. He went around the block and parked on the far side of the field. The church blocked the view of the front parking lot. Tom observed an officer cross the alley and post something on the apartment's front door.

After the police cruiser pulled onto Frontage Road, Tom hurried across the field, ducked through the fence, and pulled the yellow paper off the door.

You are summoned to appear before Constable Ayoola Ashiru at the local Lagos Police Force interrogation hall. Please make an appointment ASAP.

Tom wadded up the yellow paper, jogged across the field, and started the rental car. A few minutes later, he backed up to the church steps, pulled the dog crate out of the back of the jeep, and exchanged it for the bedding and motorhome mattress in the closet. While locking up, Tom noticed something leaning against the front wall behind the podium. He got closer and saw the dried mud on the church dedication plaque. *Ayoola said he'd try to pull fingerprints or DNA off this for evidence. He's probably still trying to pin the burglary on me as an insurance job. For sure, I need to get out of town.*

Tom scribbled a note in the apartment:

I'm traveling to the outreach school, a strawberry farm, and Africa's largest

monolith Decalogue. Take Abidemi shopping for some work clothes and boots. You must contact your friend Dan and tell him, same time, same place but on Wednesday. Destroy this note. Do not talk to the local Constable.

After six hours of nonstop driving and constant flip-flop discernment, Tom had a new plan: *If Dan could tap into the Tin Can Island Port Authority computer system and find out what ports the Kong Fang is charted for, maybe I could fly the little girl there and get her hooked up with her friends.* Tom was thinking in pronoun mode to avoid guilt.

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

His spirit lifted when he noticed the army transport truck parked behind the outdoor privy. Tom backed in so that he was tailgate to tailgate with the M-35 deuce and a half. The familiar slap of the screen door closing rang out across the dirt and gravel. Jamal, the tall, skinny attendant, approached with a bat. Not saying a word, he tapped on each fifty-gallon barrel on the trailer. Every tap rung empty.

"Paul told us you should be our new fuel transport driver."

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

The screen door squeaked and then slapped shut again. The grandfather hobbled up to Tom and held out a cold beer. "Thank you for doing this. Paul said that you would be back. He said you drove these trucks in the Military."

Somehow, Tom got talked into driving the M35 Army truck to a black market fueling site. Jamal started the truck, jumped out, and ran to the back of the store, returning with something more significant than a wrapped-up baseball bat. "I'll ride shotgun first."

"What's in the sheath?"

"It's a rifle. I found it on the back cutoff road." Jamal slid

across the bench seat to the passenger side.

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

"Do you have any ammunition?" Tom asked.

"No, there were no bullets in it."

Tom remembered taking out the clip when he used the long gun for a crutch. "An empty gun could get us killed. Battles get lost because of a lack of ammunition. You should read about the battle at Bunker Hill when Col. William Prescott's order to reserve fire because gunpowder was scarce."

"That's where the quote, 'Don't shoot until you see the whites of their eyes' came from, in June of 1775.' I've read all about your American Revolution and other wars. The United States always has the upper hand with firepower—" Jamal thought momentarily, then jumped out the passenger door and ran around the back of the tar-papered building with the sheathed rifle.

Tom looked at the floor shifter to refresh his memory of an M35 shift pattern. He also adjusted the side mirror to see the trailer.

The passenger door opened. "Okay, we can go now. I hid that war weapon between the walls in the outhouse."

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

"It's where I hide banned spiritual books and magazines."

Tom pulled the truck and trailer up to the pavement and looked both ways. "How do you know so much about American history?"

Jamal waited for Tom to shift through the gears. "Most of the books at the village school were old-school textbooks from California. We had American magazines, too. My favorites are National Geographic and Christianity Today. They have a lot of stories and beautiful pictures of Africa. Someday, I'd like to be a magazine photojournalist."

"Why don't you apply for a scholarship at a liberal arts school?"

"I couldn't leave my grandparents!" During the rest of the trip, they talked about how Jamal's ethnic Anaguta family had been selling black-market petroleum since 1959. The Anagutas

are a small ethnic group on the Jos Plateau in central Nigeria. Like other tribes of a similar size, they are virtually invisible in most historical literature.

Tom asked some hard questions about the legality and environmental impact of storing fuel above ground. He learned that red tape and lack of money kept his grandfather from installing underground fuel tanks and expanding his roadside store.

This fuel-hauling excursion was the needed break from Tom's troubles in Lagos. He learned about the need for economic development in that remote NE corner of Plateau State. He saw a similarity between ethnic tribes in Nigeria and Native Americans on reservations in the US. A lack of a reliable energy source—like electricity, fossil fuels, or even nuclear made daily existence more challenging.

They returned late to a dinner of goat stew, yams, and honey cornbread. Tom was given a full tank of fuel and then crawled into the back of the jeep and crashed on the motorhome mattress. Not taking the shorter route to Zangam village was part of the Monday morning plan. Without a weapon, it would be too dangerous, plus he had three days until his meet-up with Dan.

Tom parked behind the closed-up school and walked into the field toward a newly dug grave. He dropped to his knees when he saw a gray pad with **ABENA** inscribed: No last name, birth date, or even a cross on the gray piece of concrete. Tom wept, prayed, and wept again. With tears, he looked skyward and wailed, "How can this be fair? In your words, you knew this woman before you created the world. Is this all that she amounted to? Five letters on a grave marker in the middle of an overgrown field?"

After a respectful period, the village elder meandered across the field with a cardboard box. "I knew you would be back. I have gathered Abena's possessions for you to pass on to Abidemi."

"How do you about Abidemi?"

"She was one of the four girls chosen to be foreign exchange students. You are here praying over Abena, her mum. Isn't that why you are back?"

Tom switched into silent mode. *I don't know anything about the three other girls. I need to be careful what I say. I don't*

want to have a summons served here, too.

"You should get credit for single-handedly fighting off the Boko Haram militants, but that valor is going to Paul. He brought supplies into the village for the last ten years, and now it seems he has vanished into thin air. Some of the villagers are calling him Saint Paul." The seasoned elder set the box next to Tom.

From his knees, Tom took out the picture memory book. The first page was a picture of Abena breastfeeding Abidemi. Hazel eyes of a suckling child gazing upward with unrestricted trust was more than Tom could bear—he closed the memory book.

A goat skin bag was on top of a tattered pair of sandals. Tom learned they were the shoes that Abena wore as she walked from her village in Benin after a diplomat's son had raped her. Inside the goatskin bag was a snow Christmas globe of the Holy Family. When Tom turned it upside down and back, tiny white flecks started to fall on the manger.

Ben Okri, the seasoned elder, said softly, "Abena always promised Abidemi that someday they'd play in the snow. That they'd fall on their backs, move their arms up and down, and make snow angels,"

"I don't want to take this stuff. That girl needs to move on. These memories will only hurt Abidemi." Tom got off his knees.

Two women in colorful, full-length Kaftan clothing were headed across the field. The mothers' of the girls who were selected to be foreign exchange students wanted answers. Mr. Chen had told them that China had the best schools in the world. He also propagandized that when they were old enough, China would buy a large piece of African farmland and put each girl's name on separate deeds.

The mother of twin girls had copies of their birth certificates and handed them to Tom. The other mum handed over her daughter's baptismal record. The cardboard box of Abena's keepsakes, two birth certificates, and a baptismal record were put on the back of the jeep.

Not promising anything, Tom headed for the district of Dwoi to find Africa's largest Ten Commandment monolith. Ten miles from the village, he searched for **tourist attractions** on the GPS. The Rayfield Golf Club popped up, which is the oldest course in West Africa. *I might have to check out this course. I*

have all day Tuesday to relax and lay low.

New Jerusalem, or the town of Kwang and not the city of David in Dwoi, were all different places Tom got told to look for the monolith. Asking Nigerians for directions was as bad as asking a Texan farmer for a place to pee. Tom finally gave up and got a room at the Rayfield golf club.

Hitting a bucket of golf balls to start the day was something Tom missed. He'd got through about half the bucket when a player on a driving tee, one slot over, asked if he wanted to join a foursome. The buy-in bet was 500,000 naira, paid to the lowest score. Tom couldn't help himself and replied, "Sure, if you give me a four-stoke handicap. I'm using rental clubs, and I've never played this course."

"We'll give you two strokes." The leader of the pack answered.

Rayfield was one of the most challenging courses Tom had ever played, plus the rental clubs needed to be regripped. After 18 holes, lunch, and several drinks, the retired General John Nanzip Shagaya offered to have his driver take Tom to the giant Ten Commandments.

Tom declined the offer while writing a check. "Thanks, but I must get to a strawberry farm before dark. I'm trying to find work for someone."

General John Nanzip looked at the check. "You're paying your debt with money from Clory and Praise Ministries?"

"Yeah, don't worry, the check is good," Tom answered without a second thought.

The General folded and then slipped the blue check into a gold money clip wallet. "If someone needs work, I might be able to help." The General dropped his winning into the front pocket of green and red checkered golf pants. "Next time, we should play for a million naira."

Challenging and upping a new bet struck a nerve in Tom. "Next time, why don't we play for five million naira? It would have been a fair game if I had had my clubs!" Tom replied as his entire body tightened—even though they'd never meet again.

* * *

Via good text message directions from Idogbe, Tom quickly found the strawberry farm. Idogbe's mum insisted that he stay

overnight. Tom said he needed to leave first thing in the morning and only hinted about Abidemi working on the farm.

Tom rose with the berry pickers at twilight and got treated to Kenya AAA coffee, pancakes, and eggs. *This place is clean, and the food is good. The girl will be close to her village and around her people. If needed, I could even leave Cain here. Now I need to go meet up with Dan and get some intel for those moms—*

At 8:45 AM, Dan circled three times through Gudu Recreation Park before Tom hopped out of the rental jeep. This meeting was more risky than their previous two—especially after Dan had exposed the Bitcoin scam in the largest city in Africa.

"What happened to your motorhome?" Dan asked out the driver's window.

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

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

"I'm hoping your GPS dog tracker collar is still charged. I left one in the glove box in the Sprinter after hyenas attacked my dogs."

"Oh!" Dan rubbed his chin. "So if the collar is in your motorhome, how will that help locate your dogs?"

"I only have one dog now. I had to shoot Abel. Cain is with Beth in Lagos."

Dan stuck his head out the window and glanced around. Things were off and getting weird. Next, he pulled his cell phone out of his vest pocket and loaded a unique Air-Tag app. "Wow, that's odd."

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

"My tracking app shows one of the GPS collars in the Atlantic Ocean." Dan handed the phone out the window to Tom. "The other one is in Lagos and has not moved."

Tom saw the blinking waypoint icon and its bread-crumbs trail leaving Tin Can Harbor, crossing the Gulf of Guinea, and now bearing northwest in the Atlantic Ocean.

"That's probably right. My niece, Tina, and her boss, Mr. Chen, brought the motorhome over on a container ship from Houston. I bet they got headed back to Texas." Tom handed the phone back.

"Oh?" Dan opened notes on his phone. "What is Tina's last

name?"

"Williams," Tom answered.

Dan typed **Williams**. "Do you know Mr. Chen's full name and company name?"

"Kenny or Ken is his first name. I don't know the name of the Chinese company, but their container ship is marked Kong Fang."

Dan entered that information into notes. "So you are trying to locate your niece, Tina Williams?" Dan asked.

"Sort of," Tom paused, "and three school girls."

"Three school girls?" Dan quit inputting information.

"Wait a second." Tom darted to the jeep and retrieved the copies of the twins' birth certificates and the photo memory book.

To appease Tom, Dan used his phone to take pictures of the birth certificates, baptismal records, and a few pages from Abidemi's memory book. Their meeting ended with Dan's warning. "I cloned your phone the last time we met here. I'm positive your cellphone has a tap on it. If need be, I'll contact Liz."

"You mean Beth," Tom quipped. He hated the nickname Liz.

"Yeah, your wife. If you don't hear back from me through Elizabeth, I can't or won't do anything for you. I can't risk losing my worldwide five-star security level. I'm sorry, that's the way it has to be."

"I understand. One wrong accusation or leak can ruin a reputation for life," Tom preached.

Dan started his van and leaned out the window. "You should try getting out of Africa on one of those container ships. Constable Ayoola Ashiru notified FAAN and had them put you on their watch list."

"Who's FAAN?" Tom asked.

"Federal Airport Authority of Nigeria. Getting caught by them is tenfold what TSA would put you through. Then, no one could get you out of Africa—except for God."

CHAP 26 ... **Disobedient Wife**

Beth yelled, "Bleib," it was too late. Cain ran across the apartment, leaped onto the bed, and nussed Tom. He rolled over on his side, moaning, turning pale, and holding himself. Abidemi wasn't sure how to react. She had learned some German dog commands over the past few days and yelled, "Hier." Cain returned to her side, standing in the doorway.

"How was your trip up North?" Beth asked, trying hard not to laugh.

Tom sat up and breathed slowly. "Ah, ah... It was okay. I didn't find that Ten Commandment tourist stop, but I found a great golf course and some guys to golf with." Tom smiled at Abidemi, who was leaning hard against Beth.

"I'd like to see that tourist site. Maybe we could go together?" Beth knew better than to bring up Tom's visit to Zangam village.

"Did you see my Mum?" Abidemi asked with worry.

"No, I didn't meet Abena. I was too busy helping to fill fuel tanks at the cutoff roadside store."

"That is good. My Mum doesn't like it when she has to burn firewood to do canning. It takes longer for her to get water to boil."

"Did Abena do a lot of canning?" Tom asked.

Beth immediately heard 'did' and re-asked. "Does your Mum do a lot of canning?"

"I bet she had some secret recipes," Tom injected into the conversation, using past tense again.

"Yes, we seal and preserve food for most of the village." Abidemi was confused. How would Tom have known about the secret recipes if he had never met her Mum?

"What does your mum preserve?" Beth asked, then putting a finger to her lips, wanting Tom to shut up.

"Beets, pears, and beans this time of year. That's how we make money. Our strawberry pineapple jam is our secret blend. We always sell out."

"I bet you are a big help," Beth continued to speak in the present tense.

Tom eased to the bathroom to examine himself.

"My Mum wants me to go to college to learn more about running a business and making jobs for our village."

"That sounds wonderful. My mother did canning when I was about your age. We made orange peel apricot jelly with a hint of cinnamon for Christmas gifts." Beth worked to change the subject.

Tom came out of the bathroom and moved next to Beth. While he kissed her on the cheek, he whispered, "For sure, her mother got killed by the rebels."

Beth could not hold back tears. "I need to go outside and call someone." She turned to avoid showing her sorrow for Abidemi and exited the apartment. The confirmation made her more determined to go against Tom's proposal and implement her own plan.

"I think there are some popsicles in the freezer. Are you up for a late-night treat." Abidemi followed Tom toward the refrigerator.

Beth tapped out a message from the church steps: **Dan, I want to take Cain home ASAP. Can you help?**

Then Beth texted Hank. **Can you pick me up at the airport? I will have a big dog crate I need help with.**

Beth came back into the apartment and asked Tom to bring the motorhome mattress from the back of the rental jeep into the apartment. Although she knew it wasn't Tom's fault for all the strife and death in Zangam village, it seemed he was picking up and leaving a battle that wasn't over.

It was the first time Abidemi experienced a sleepover with a man in the same room. Tom and Cain slept on the bed, and Beth and Abidemi slept on the motorhome mattress under the table draped with a sheet—their private fort. At the crack of dawn, there was a light knock on the door. Cain alerted, and Abidemi rolled out from under Beth's arm. After Jacob opened the door, the new friends took Cain to the backfield to potty.

Beth crawled onto the bed with Tom and asked. "When do you think we should tell Abidemi?"

"Sunday, I will preach on death and how we lay at rest until Judgment Day. Then I'll explain all of it on the drive to the strawberry farm."

"Tom, she is too young to hear your rapture sermon. I don't even believe that her mother is dead in the earth. Can't you say that her Mum is in heaven?"

"Beth, you know my feeling about the Communion of Saints and all that Catholic New Testament doctrine. Why would you give that kind of false hope to that little girl."

"So when you drop Abidemi off at the strawberry farm, you'll tell her that God loves her and then drive off? " Beth slugged Tom on the chest and got off the bed. When the trio slipped into the apartment, Beth asked, "So, who will help make breakfast?"

* * *

From behind the pulpit, Tom looked up and out over the congregation. Beth was sitting in the front row, holding Abidemi's small brown hand. Jacob and the Onukwulu family were on her other side. Tom looked down at the printout and read, "The dead are not in heaven or hell."

Tom looked up. Abidemi's hazel eyes had the same look of fright as Abena's did the day he was looking through the rifle scope. To say that Abena was nothing more than a corpse in a grave until the second coming of Jesus were words Tom knew as truth—but he needed to soften his sermon. "In our country," Tom pointed at Beth and then himself. "The United States has witnessed over five hundred schoolchildren murdered since the turn of this century. The good book tells us that after the birth of Jesus, King Herod had all the boys two years and younger murdered. We know that event as the massacre of the innocent." Tom knew the Old Testament forward and backward. Most of the battles were left unfinished— back then and still are to this day.

A heavy silence fell over the congregation. Tom paused to take a drink of water. "What happens after death to innocent children and not yet saved adults is something my wife and I disagree on in our different faith backgrounds." Tom motioned toward Beth.

Beth tightened her grip on Abidemi's trembling hand. She hoped Tom would spare the 'For you are dust, and to dust you shall return' spiel they deviated over. Her argument was aligned with the mercy that Jesus showed to the rebel on his right side at the crucifixion. When Jesus said, "Today you will be with me in paradise."

Tom continued, "Since a couple of trips to the outreach school in Zangam Village, I'm now at a crossroads with my personal beliefs." Tom glanced toward the front row. "After three innocent school children, a young woman, and a soldier boy got ensnared in a century and half old conflict, I think they are at rest until the final judgment."

In dread and uncertainty, Abidemi's grip tightened on Beth's hand. Her words were broken and weak. "Is he talking about my Mum?"

Beth sadly whispered, "Yes, I'm afraid so. Your Mum is in heaven with your classmates, angels, and all the other saints."

Jacob felt Abidemi's loss and void. He sensed 'at rest' meant dead to her. Jacob climbed on the stage and pointed from right to left. He pressed his palms together with his fingers pointed upward—the sign for prayer. A few moments later, he signed to Beth.

Beth stood and then turned toward the congregation. She pulled Abidemi into the pleats of her long church dress. Abidemi's curly black hair contrasted against her starched white blouse. "Jacob would like us all to pray for Abidemi's schoolmates and her Mum. Who got called home to be with Jesus."

From behind the pulpit, Tom froze. Now, all eyes were on Jacob as he signed more words to Beth.

Beth repeated Jacob's words. "Jacob asks that we bow our heads and pray for all our family, friends, and Abel in heaven. They are the ones that get called home early to help Jesus."

Tom recalled the names of the three girls he had prayed over in the field next to the schoolhouse. Then, he eulogized Abena from what the village elder had told him, how she got impregnated and then became an outcast, and how she walked from her home village in Ghana across the countries of Togo and Benin to Plateau State, Nigeria. Tom spoke about Abena's canning business and her strawberry pineapple jam, which everyone loved. There was some closure on this Sunday.

That evening, Beth and Abidemi stayed overnight with the Onukwulu family. Tom moved the mattress from the floor in the apartment to the storeroom in the church to keep it out of sight. Before dawn, he took a keke down to the black market area on Tin Can Island. It took almost all of Monday, but Tom finally made stowaway arrangements to the Port of Grimsby,

UK.

Tom messaged Idogbe: **Bring Beth to the pap and akara vendor tomorrow morning at 9:00.**

Idogbe and Beth were early. Tom watched for ten minutes before crossing the street and joining them at one of the white plastic tables. "Thanks for being early," Tom said while glancing around.

Beth stood and hugged Tom. She didn't say a word. The vendor brought Tom a large cup of Kenya AAA coffee and the church catering bill. Tom pulled out the Glory and Praise checkbook and paid him. "Always pay your debts," Tom babbled. "By the way, are we good? Do I owe you?" Tom looked directly at Idogbe.

"Yeah, more than good." Idogbe quipped. "I owe you. I think Ayoola is summoning you because of the hidden camera I placed in the trim above the dog door." Idogbe exhaled a huge sigh of relief.

"What the hell did you do that for?" Tom grumbled and then listened to how it all started.

Idogbe told how it came about during the first week when Ayoola wanted to find out why Tom got exiled to Africa. He told Tom that he finally removed the camera and was sorry.

Beth wanted to know the exact date the camera got removed. She felt relief when she learned it was before her last visit. She still felt violated by the phone taps, Tom's hiding places, his code words, a burner phone, and not being included in Abidemi's predicament.

Tom told Idogbe that the only way to regain his trust was to take the orphan girl to the strawberry farm and put her to work. If possible, get her into a safe school. He said the Glory and Praise home office would send a monthly stipend to help cover tuition.

Beth sat quietly. She wanted to scream that the girl wasn't a pawn and that she had a name. No sooner did Tom cross the street and disappear into the crowd, Beth told Idogbe. "I will use the rental jeep to take Abidemi to the strawberry farm. Your truck is unsafe, without a front bumper or seatbelts."

* * *

Wednesday afternoon, Beth found a secluded place to park less than a mile from the Abuja airport. She backed up the rental jeep, opened the lift gate, and told Abidemi to get inside the crate with Cain. Abidemi crawled inside under a blanket as Beth zipped the travel curtain around the crate.

Dan was at the airport security station and handed the guard shipping documents and a yellow and black triangle sign that read: **Danger Rabid Animal**. The agent remembered two dogs getting quarantined about a month ago. "What happened to your other dog?"

"Abel got disemboweled by hyenas. He had to be shot," Beth replied.

"And what about this dog." The clan tore off Cain's ear; now he's frothing. We need to get him to an infectious animal hospital in Texas.

The airport agent went into his office and returned with a mask and gloves on. He carefully parted the travel curtain with a pen and saw Cain's taped-up ear. Then, he stamped the shipping manifest and handed it to Beth. His hand shook as he pointed for Beth to push the cart to the Gulfstream G550 loading ramp.

Beth had prepared Abidemi that she might have to be a stowaway for almost ten hours. However, once the Gulfstream reached cruising altitude, the copilot went to the back of the plane and brought Abidemi to the seat across from Beth and directly behind Dan. She gazed out the window in awe and wonderment.

Dan gradually turned his seat around. "Hello, young lady. Is this the first time you've been in an airplane?"

She glanced forward at Dan and then back out the oval window. "I've never been above the clouds near heaven."

"My dad is in heaven." Dan pointed up.

Abidemi's eyes darted away from the window back toward Dan. "So is my mum."

"I know that." Dan reached out and put his hand on Abidemi's shoulder. "I'm bet your mum helped us get you on the plane."

"Do you think so?" Abidemi already liked Dan.

"I do! I'm praying that David, my Dad, and your Mum can help us get you back with your school friends."

"I'm praying too," Abidemi quipped with a glimpse of hope.

From across the aisle, Beth stayed silent. She'd had disobeyed Tom's orders and tricked Idogbe. They acted like Abidemi was a ghost—that she was a nobody. What they both needed was a kick in the butt. Beth was thankful that she had followed her heart.

Dan had been tracking the Kong Fang container ship since meeting Tom at Gudu Recreation Park. He'd yet to find a legal last name for Abena. The twin girls' birth certificates were legit, and the baptismal record had signatures of godparents who checked out as Nigerian citizens. *So why were no student visa applications submitted for travel to China or the United States?* Dan kept asking himself.

What Dan had found about the Kong Fang container ship by tapping into the Port Authority Dept was mixed. The 162-meter ship was built in 1998 and registered with the CCP. It recently re-registered to sail under Iran's Islamic Republic's Shipping Line flag. Passenger portage was never allowed on Iranian ships, and most of their fleet consisted of oil transport tankers, not cargo container ships. He found nothing about the three girls from Zangam village.

Dan twisted his chair toward Beth. "I'm glad your catholic school soul mate is helping. Thank God that you had him reach out to me."

"Hank is one of those bigger-than-life types. He is the go-to guy if you like to hunt or fish," Beth replied.

"That's what Tom told me. By the way, you need to stop using 'split window corvette' for secret code words."

"Why?" Beth leaned toward Dan and whispered. "Tom is the one that picked those code words."

"I know." Dan held out a piece of paper. "Here is Tom's burner phone number. When you get home, I want you to call it and tell Tom to give his cell phone to Jacob."

"I don't know if Tom will do that. He might not even talk to me." Beth leaned back and glanced at the number on the paper. "You know Tom has preached many times on the fifth commandment. We both agree that the main reason children don't honor their parents these days is cell phones and the influence of social media."

Dan got peeved; his entire career revolved around his family and digital communications. "I understand the objection. We have four children, and my wife was adamant about our

children not having cell phones.”

“Good for her. I never allow phones in the classroom when I teach. So many kids run their parents these days. That’s also a problem.”

Dan frowned. “I installed tracking software on our thirteen-year-old daughter’s phone. Our son has a phone for sporting events.”

“Jacob is deaf. What good will Tom’s phone do for him?” Beth rattled off her rebuttal.

“I’d like to install point-to-point video software on your phone, the same as I installed on your husband’s phone. It doesn’t require a connection to the internet; it connects worldwide via satellite.”

A smile came over Beth’s face when she realized what a fantastic communication tool for Jacob and Abidemi. Not being connected to all the evil-influencing social media would be a blessing.

Dan turned back to the dual curved monitors, a joystick, a black box with flashing LEDs, and a Dvorak coding keyboard. He spent an hour changing settings, deleting contacts, and scrubbing messages and emails from Beth’s phone. He used the Clipper Chip MYK78T to get the IP and MAP addresses of the FBI server. *Got you!* Dan grinned privately. Now, the FBI would be eavesdropping on kids who never talked to each other.

Beth looked at Tom’s burner phone number several times during the flight. *Why would Tom need a burner phone in Africa? He kept one in the den and called people before football and basketball games.*

The pilot came on over the intercom, “Please bring your seat forward and fasten your seatbelt. We are on our final approach into the Dallas Forth Worth airport.”

With a white Stetson hat, cowboy boots, long-sleeved shirt, and Bolo rope tie accented by a turquoise arrowhead, Hank looked like the Texan cowboys she’d seen in National Geographic. With boots on, Hank was six-foot-six. When he took a knee, he was still taller than Abidemi. “Howdy, young lady.” Hank extended an open hand to her.

Abidemi laid her small hand on Hank’s palm. “Hello, Mr. Cowboy.”

“After y’all get settled in with Elizabeth, it would be nice to have you visit my horse ranch.”

Abidemi felt safe and secure. "Okay," was her solid response.

Then Hank stood tall, wrapped his strong arms around Beth, and pulled her into his muscular chest. The mix of aftershave and manly sweat was intoxicating. Hank was the bigger-than-life protagonist in Western romance novels. The one that can't be roped who mounts his horse and tips his white Stetson before riding into the sunset.

Dan used the jet steps handrails like they were gymnast parallel bars. At the bottom, the copilot held out two carbon fiber crutches. Dan wrapped the wide Velcro bands around his forearms and gripped the handles. There was no time for vetting.

Beth, Dan, and Hank shared the same religion—it would have to be through faith alone that they formed a bond of trust. Ironically, each one had studied Judas Iscariot and Pontius Pilot in Catholic school—they should have learned from these traitors—not everyone can be trusted.

Hank stepped out the automatic doors and met Dan halfway. "I'm glad you reached out. You messaged me to say you have some important information about three Nigerian school girls."

"I do." Dan reached into his vest pocket. "The Kong Fang is less than forty-eight hours from Little Saint James Island. All the information about the three girls and the GPS tracking software is on this USB drive."

"Will my IT guy know how to use the tracking software?" Hank took note of the dog crate getting unloaded.

"Shouldn't be a problem. It is a self-extracting ZIP file. The file is named split window corvette."

Hank grinned. "You must know, Tom."

"We've met a few times. But it's too risky for us to meet again."

"I get it," Hank replied.

"FYI, I pulled the Tin Can port entry security photos of the Kong Fang arriving at Tin Can Island. It showed a draft of a fully loaded ship. For the next three weeks, high-end cars got unloaded between 1 am and 4 am and driven off in the middle of the night. There were trucks retrofitted with weapon mounts in the truck beds. Some of the containers had Arabic markings."

"That sounds about right from what my Intel team reported." Hank shared while holding back his team's mission to seek and destroy the EWO and all evil-doers that roam the earth.

Did your team report that most shipping containers were loaded back on the Kong Fang empty? That 168-meter ship left port without much ballast and sitting at a plus 9-meter birth. A loss of headway or rough seas could capsize that underloaded ship. Those girls will be in for a dangerous ride crossing the Atlantic Ocean.

"Godspeed to them—I'll call you if my team has any questions."

CHAP 27 ... **Communion of Saints**

Everything about Hank was larger than life except for one detail—his dating life. It wasn't that he didn't love women. It was much more. Beth often kidded Hank that he was her first kiss, although no more than a peck on the cheek. After he put Abidemi's things on the floor behind the passenger seat, his massive hands wrapped from under her armpits across her small chest. He quickly boosted her into the rear seat of the two-ton flatbed with steer horns mounted on the hood. "Y'all ready to get home and sleep in your own bunk?"

Hank's question sent Abidemi into unknown territory, as did all the lights, cars, and commotion as they drove away from the fifth-largest airport in the United States. Hank didn't seem like a strawberry farmer, for what she had overheard Tom and Beth discussing. Six lanes of cars in stop-and-go traffic wasn't what she expected in the land of open ranges and spacious skies.

While waiting for the gates to open to the private golf course community, Hank asked, "Did Tom ever find anyone to golf with?"

"I think he found a general and some other public officials in Abuja to play golf."

"Oh..." Hank's response was drawn out, almost muted.

"Hank, do you know why Tom needs a burner phone?"

"Maybe... But y'all need to work that out between all, y'all."

From the backseat, Hank's Texas drawl and the rolling mounds of manicured grass out the side window were confusing. There were pockets of sand, but Abidemi didn't see any strawberry plants. The next surprise was when they turned onto a wide brick driveway. *That is the nicest barn and farmhouse I've ever seen.*

Beth showed Abidemi the guest room upstairs and put her things on the luggage stand under a window. A bed that needed a step to climb into reminded her of one of her favorite

childhood stories, 'The Princess and the Pea.' Cain took up a position in the center of the room. "I need to go make a call. Your bathroom is right there." Beth pointed at a sky-blue door.

Abidemi went to the window. The underwater pool lights lit up the night. The backyard looked like the fancy hotel advertisements where she'd always dreamed of staying. She looked down; next to some new clothes was a small box of photos, cards, and memories of her Mum and herself. She took the rustic aged box and sat in the center of the room. Cain came to her side and laid down. Abidemi lifted off the lid and cried.

Downstairs, Beth dialed the burner phone number off the scrap of paper. "Give your other phone to Jacob."

Tom was surprised. "How'd you get this number?"

"Dan gave it to me," Beth snipped.

"Oh?" Tom was sitting on a musty bed in a Tin Can Island dump of a hotel. Soon, he'd get taken to an oil tanker—his escape out of Africa. "So you found the strawberry farm? You saw that the girl will be safe and okay with Idogbe's mother?" Tom asked while rationalizing to himself.

Beth didn't answer. "Give Jacob your phone, not your burner phone." She ended the call and hurried back upstairs.

At the guestroom door, Beth froze. Abidemi was taking things from the box and reverently setting her Mum's keepsakes on the carpet. Beth approached and sat beside her and, in near silence, asked, "Would you like to tell me about your Mum?"

Abidemi stayed quiet. The last item in the box was a small purple bag made of velvet. Slowly, Abidemi untied the golden cord and pulled out the string of Tiffany pearls—fifty-nine in total. "My Mum told me that a great woman with divine intercession would protect and keep me safe when I left her—to go to school."

* * *

This particular mission for the Chinese Communist Party was to deliver virgins and fentanyl in hopes of gaining a seat at the Elite World Order table. Colonization by defaults on infrastructure loans was their long-term goal. Chinese lenders

account for 12% of Africa's private and public debt. China now dominates the world trade market, moving the United States to second place.

Ken Chen was so weak from South Asian Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) that he got isolated to the Sprinter. He had to let a few more crew know that this voyage was more than a drug drop and transporting stolen cars. Fortunately, the SARS virus got the three school girls to move into the first mate's cabin with Tina. Fate had now put Tina in charge of doping the girls. She remembered overhearing Victor cautioning Mr. Chen that since the girls were around one hundred pounds, the wrong dose of Rohypnol—could be fatal.

* * *

After dropping Beth and Abidemi off, he dispatched his special operations team to Bermuda. Next, he called his IT lead and told him he had tracking software to install on the mainframe. Hank wanted updated weather reports from the Virgin Islands, westward across the Atlantic Ocean to the United States, staying south of the Devil's Triangle.

Hank's cattle operation, horse breeding, and hog hunting were a cover for hostage and ransom victim extractions. Dug into the side of a hill was a hanger large enough to house two helicopters and an RJ-50 jet retrofitted with rear jump doors. Deep under the hanger was a special operations room with digital and analog communication equipment that could reach worldwide. Hank was most proud of a Vietnam vintage Ranger helicopter in which he took friends and clients hog hunting.

Three miles east of the command center was a boathouse disguised as a barn on the edge of a 253-acre lake, which had an underground spring 75 feet below the surface that kept the lake full year-round and was ideal for water assault and rescue practice. A prototype, battery-powered, two-person wave-runner was deployed for this mission. The advantage was that it was quiet running and had no hot exhaust, making it impossible to detect. The drawback was that battery life was limited to 20 nautical miles or less than 90 minutes.

The second watercraft deployed was a Combat Rubber Raiding Craft (CRR) with twin turbo fans. One fan pointed downward so the inflatable craft could hover on land or sea. A

second 150 HP fan was used for thrust that could skip the 36-foot boat wave-top to wave-top at over 40 knots.

There would only be a 15-minute window in international waters for the boarding and extraction. The United States Coast Guard could intervene sooner, depending on which politicians, cartels, or Elite World Order members were visiting Pedophile Island.

Most of this particular OPS team members were single, except for two. Hank extolled celibacy for service in the field—they all used an alias. Skipper was the captain of the Combat Rubber Raiding Craft. Hawkeye was in charge of the portside. Sharpshooter handled the starboard side, Frogman covered the bow, and Sponge Bob operated the battery-powered waverunner with Rock Climber riding behind.

The USB drive didn't unzip the tracking app when connected to the mainframe. All the JPG pictures got downloaded, but that was it. Hank didn't want to get Dan in deeper because he had a wife and four kids. But after seeing the Kong Fang sitting 9 meters above the safe waterline, he couldn't risk three girls' lives.

Hank dialed Dan's private business number. "Dan, I had no intention to call. I know you want to be with your family."

"Thanks for thinking about us. What do you need?"

"My IT guy couldn't unpack your tracking program. But, the pictures downloaded, and they are frightening!"

"They are. The Kong Fang sitting high in the water has been on my mind since viewing those Tin Can Harbor security photos. The ship's captain must be a skilled navigator or stupid."

"I think he was under orders and had no choice but to depart Tin Can Port, top-heavy. Also, I don't think those girls will attend schools in China or the United States." Hank was direct.

There was an extra long pause. "Hank, I can't get involved. If I were physically at a hundred percent, this would be different. Plus, I have a family."

"I understand. I only try to recruit single volunteers for special OPS missions. Probably why Jesus chose single men for his apostles and one of the reasons the church doesn't want married priests."

"Maybe I could walk your IT person through the

installation?"

"That would be great."

"I'll help the wife put the kids to bed and then call you back."

Fifteen minutes later, Dan called back. "Traffic is light. I'm on my way."

"I thought you would try fixing the problem over the phone with my IT guy."

"I can't abandon those girls. You said they might not be going to a school. I had a bad feeling about this from the beginning. I should be there in ninety-seven minutes."

"Don't you need directions?"

"Nope, when I cloned Tom's phone, I saved all his metadata."

"Metadata, how'd you do that?" Hank got concerned.

"That's what I do," Dan chuckled. "Should I enter at the front with the security shack or the back entrance with an electrified gate? I have the passwords for both entrances." Now Dan was showing off.

Hank felt vulnerable. He'd spent millions of dollars being incognito. How could someone as frail as Dan break through his security? It was concerning.

Dan was four minutes early. The security guard pointed a high-intensity flashlight beam for Dan to park under a sod-covered carport.

"Over here!" Hank motioned with his arm. He waited for Dan to wheel himself toward the underground bunker door.

Dan stopped and extended his hand up to Hank. "I checked before I left home. The Kong Fang is still heading north for Little Saint James Island."

Hank's handshake was crushing. "Makes sense. China wants a seat at the Elite World Order table."

Dan let loose of the handshake and then reached into his vest pocket and extracted a black box with five LED's and two Ethernet ports. "I need your IT guy to plug this MYK78T Clipper-Chip into your mainframe."

Hank took the electronic box about the size of a pack of cigarettes. "Follow me." They took an elevator down that opened into the operation control room. Hank waved over a pimply-faced, long-haired nerd-type standing behind the two rows of computer workstations.

The IT expert examined all six sides of the black box. "Will this black box decode Blowfish-symmetric-cipher 128-bit encryption?"

"Should not be a problem. However, the CCP still uses the 64-bit encryption they stole from Sunn-Systems. I cracked that code two years ago," Dan replied.

"Oh?" The IT expert scrutinized the input and output ports.

"I just need the Clipper-Chip inserted on an Ethernet port between the router and modem," Dan spoke with authority and then warned. "Oh, by the way, if you try to burn a copy of my Clipper-Chip code, it will infect every computer connected here and remotely with the Pi-3.14 virus."

"Wow! Do you have a copy of that virus? It collapsed an entire bitcoin server in the UK a month ago."

"I wonder how that happened." Dan winked up at Hank.

Hank wasn't sure about having the black box connected to his mainframe.

"T-Minus twenty minutes till C-O-S extraction launch," blared from speakers in the command center.

"What workstation can I connect to?"

It was too late for Hank to abort the mission. "You can connect over there in the second row." Hank pointed at a desk behind the team leader, code-named Godfather. "Here's the password. Make sure that you enter it backward."

"You mean to enter the characters right to left?" Dan already had his laptop opened and booting up. He wheeled to the center workstation in the second row and plugged into a network cable. It took longer than usual for the ENTER PASSWORD screen to pop up.

Hank leaned over the back of the wheelchair to ensure the password got entered correctly.

"T-Minus nineteen minutes till C-O-S launch," blasted out.

The CONNECTED message did not appear. Dan clicked on the Network settings Icon. "Have your IT guy try a different port. Tell him to ensure he hears a click when inserting the Ethernet cable."

Hank busted out of the operations room for the mainframe closet, and Dan refreshed the Clipper-Chip firmware.

"T-Minus eight minutes till C-O-S launch."

The bank of monitors on the front wall connected to the body and fixed cameras. The (CRRC) was hovering several feet

off the water a mile back in the wake of the Kong Fang. Monitor 1, a heat-sensing human detection camera, was mounted on the bow. Monitor 2 was a starboard side helmet view, 3 was portside, 4 was of the battery level meter, and 5 was from Rock Climber's helmet camera. It was a close-up view of broad shoulders, dark wavy hair, and a string of small bead-like sea shells, fifty-nine in total, around a thick brown neck. The team's smallest man, Rock Climber, straddled the waverunner bench seat behind Sponge Bob.

"T-Minus three minutes till C-O-S launch," blasted out when Hank reentered the mission control room. Dan had removed and reinstalled his laptop battery, and now it booted. Dan started to enter the mainframe password.

"Stop!" Hank ordered. "Enter the password backward."

"Right." Dan deleted three characters and started over. The CONNECTED message appeared. Then, a rotating world map appeared and stopped over the Caribbean Sea. Crosshairs zoomed in on the blue waters east of Puerto Rico and due south of Little Saint James Island.

"Good job, Danny. I knew you could do it," came from the mission control seat down front. Dan looked to see who called him Danny, his childhood nickname.

Hank handed Dan a headset with a microphone.

"T-Minus three minutes till C-O-S launch."

"Can I mirror my laptop screen to one of the monitors on the wall?"

"Go for it, Danny," a voice from the front row center seat called out.

"I have a special wireless game controller. Is it okay to connect it?"

"Of course, Gamer Boy. Whatever you need." Dan's high school nickname was Gamer Boy.

One of the wall monitors now showed a blue ocean section with several islands. Two moving blips appeared to be moving in on a yellow trail of dashes, which tracked the Kong Fang back to Africa. The yellow dashes were the bread-crumbl blips from the GPS dog collar inside the Sprinter.

The monitor zoomed in on two power boats coming out of the north. The offshore powerboats held 300 gallons of fuel in their extra-long bow, which allowed them to outrun the Coast Guard. It was the first mission using the battery-powered

waverunner. With two men riding on it, there would be at most 45 minutes of battery power. Sponge Bob weighed almost 300 pounds, which should have been factored into the mission, but it wasn't.

"T-Minus one minute," came through headsets and over loudspeakers. Adrenaline flowed, white knuckles formed, and breathing slowed. The AI-generated voice counted the last seconds down, "Five, four, three, two, one—.Your mission is a go."

The EV waverunner slid off the back of the 36-foot CRRC and then went airborne when it jumped the six-foot high wake behind the Kong Fang. Sponge Bob rode big waves as a child, rowing a tiny dinghy while his grandfather dove for sponges and corral off the Samoa Coast.

At 150 lbs, soaking wet Rock Climber barely moved the waverunner when he stood and turned to face backward on the bench seat. He leaned hard against the big Samoan's back. When Sponge Bob spun a one-eighty, Rock-Climber fired a shoulder-powered grappling hook. The magnesium claw hooked onto the rear deck railing. The zipline connected to the tow hook on the rear of the waverunner. As it tightened to a 45-degree angle, it slightly lifted the rear of the watercraft. Rock Climber snapped on an ascender ratchet while Sponge Bob balanced the watercraft like he was surfing a traditional island longboard.

"We got two powerboats approaching from the northeast, about four clicks away," Hawkeye spoke into his headset from the starboard side of the raiding raft.

"Team, we're flattening out!" Skipper backed off the hover turbo fan's throttle. The rubber raft lowered onto the water, partially deflated, and was out of sight.

Sharpshooter picked up three heat images inside the bags hanging from the Kong Fang through an infrared scope. With the Kong Fang at such a high draft, the bags were too high off the water for a safe drop, as

The first powerboat moved in. The two men on the bow were shouting, "Cut the ropes. Cut the ropes."

"Team, we got a problem. I'm picking up heat images inside those bags! If they cut the ropes, the extra line will get sucked into the prop and pull the body bags under the ship."

"Rock Climber, how long will it take to get on board to

engage the drop men?" Godfather asked.

"To ratchet up at this angle, maybe four minutes. I could free climb in about half that time. But the rope is wet and slippery, plus..."

"Don't chance a free climb. If you fall, it will end this evac!" As a trained Green Beret who experienced battle in Vietnam, Godfather learned that sometimes you must trust the team's newest man.

"Danny, is the Clipper Chip connected to the Kong Fang navigation system?"

"Yes, Sir, we are connected, and I can take over. But it will be risky," bellowed from the control room loudspeaker.

"Apply twenty degrees portside steering when I tell you!" Godfather ordered.

Dan removed his headset. He looked back and up over his shoulder at Hank and asked. "Does that mean to turn right or left?"

"That means you'll be turning northwest towards the Bermuda Triangle." Hank pointed at the map on Dan's laptop screen.

Dan positioned the game controller to the right of the keyboard. He rubbed his thumb and index finger together and put them on the joystick. "Ready for your order, Godfather."

"Apply twenty degrees port side, now!"

Sponge Bob and Rock Climber were the first to hear and see the massive rudder start to move. The hard turn at twelve knots on an underloaded ship caused all kinds of alarms. The three large canvas bags swung away from the ship's side as it listed toward starboard.

The CCP First Mate immediately switched off the autopilot to regain control of the Kong Fang. He trimmed the rudder, and it slowly moved back. The three bags holding the Rohypnol incapacitated girls started to swing back toward the metal hull.

"I can jam the navigation system and take complete control," Dan yelled toward the front row while placing his fingers on the keyboard.

Godfather pushed back from his workstation. "I trust that you can do this."

"I think I can," Dan replied, scared but confident. Flight Simulator was one of the first games Dan had mastered in middle school. Not able to run bases or kick a ball, video games

filled many nights and weekends during his childhood. He paid his way through college, debugging gaming software and tutoring computer science students.

"Team, Gamer Boy is now in charge. Work with him." Godfather removed his headset and stood.

"Gamer Boy, Hawkeye here. One of the powerboats is moving into position. A deck hand on the Kong Fang is preparing to cut the first drop rope."

Dan scanned the wall of monitors. "Hawkeye, I'm seeing that from your helmet camera. Don't take your eyes off that sailor on deck!"

"Copy that Gamer Boy."

"I need a wind report from someone. Is it blowing against or into the ship's right side?"

"Skipper here. The wind is blowing out of the east against the ship starboard at about eight knots, over and out."

"Roger that Skipper. Is that wind gusting or steady?"

"Gusts, up to ten knots."

"Thanks, Skipper." Dan's hand shook as he placed it back on the shop-built seven-button game controller. One miscalculation and the 162-meter ship with twenty-plus souls onboard would roll too far and capsize.

A comforting hand covered Dan's shaking hand. "You can do this. It was what you were born to do." The words were crystal clear, minus any Y'all Texan slang. Dan glanced down. The seasoned hand had a through-and-through stab wound. A memory from his past flashed briefly to the day he was saved by grace. The past got pushed to the side when Dan felt a supernatural chill from head to toe. He drew a deep breath; it felt like he was drawing in ozoned air. Someone added from the back of the control room and in the silence, "They're in good hands—Godspeed to all."

It took spiritual power to push Danny into a real battle. IN THE SILENCE, he knew that the world needed to know what some girls endure—just to go to school.

"Team, back away from the ship! The Kong Fang is about to rock and roll. This COS operation is about to get ugly. God help us."

CHAP 28 ... **Ugliness of Battle**

Dan slowly feathered the joystick and kept hitting different color-coded buttons on the game controller. The propeller sped up, the rudder inched to the left, and the Kong Fang started listing leeward. The three body bags began to pendulum away from the starboard metal wall. Centrifugal force, gravity, plus the wind, was what Dan was mentally compiling. The cartel's boat moved in, ready to have the first girl cut loose!

Dan was aware that, on average, a thousand containers fall off ships annually. It looked like dominos as the top outside row of metal boxes plinked off into the ocean. The powerboat took a forty-foot container across the extended bow. It was a brutal hit, squishing two drug runners like bugs!

"Wow, great work, Gamer boy!" Hawkeye jeered. "That's what I thought you were planning."

"It was half luck, half divine intervention?" Dan quipped while mentally planning the next move.

The container ship was righting itself with the lessened weight on the starboard side. The body bags began to pendulum inward toward the steel plate. Dan applied less rudder and decreased speed.

"Sponge Bob here. Rock Climber is halfway up the zipline. With all that rock and roll maneuvering, he lost the extra seat harness and his gun."

"Copy that. Our window for extraction is down to..." Dan looked at his watch. *Crap, I'm going to miss another soccer game.* "Team, we only have about five minutes before the Kong Fang turns broadside to the wind. At that time, I'll have to increase speed." *Country or family* was the second abnormal thought that invaded Dan's skull, followed by, *Where did Godfather go?*

The sinking powerboat and cargo containers floated by the idling rubber combat raft. The four 100-hp outboard motors were half underwater, sputtering. The two remaining crew were inflating a life raft.

"I'm on the ship." Rock Climber bellowed into the headset

while catching his breath.

"I got a shot on the drop man leaning over the starboard railing!" Sharpshooter said. The team was aware that Sharpshooter had lost his younger sister to heroin and his brother was a meth addict.

"It's a negative on taking a shot. We need to see what boat two will do," Hank said.

Radio chatter went silent for a full minute as the second powerboat went to rescue the crew in the life raft.

"Hawkeye here. Headquarters, you had better make a decision now. The ship's captain took off for the wheelhouse. That crewman at the railing has a knife and is cutting one of the ropes."

"Y'all take the shot," Hank yelled from back in Texas.

Pop, pop, pop rang from the Israeli Micro Sniper rifle. Ken Chen heard the bullets whizz by; one ricocheted off the metal railing. He jumped back, dropped the knife, and ducked out of sight behind an intake vent.

The captain hustled into the wheelhouse to take control of the Kong Fang from the first mate.

"So sorry, I missed the target," Sharpshooter said with disappointment. Most everyone has family or a friend who has fallen to the curse of Satan's Candy. Eliminating drug dealers and exterminating human traffickers would have made for a feel-good moment. The mission was moving in the wrong direction.

Rock Climber peeked around the rear starboard corner; he felt the ship slowing and correcting. Fifty feet ahead, he saw the knife sliding on the deck and asked. "Anyone have eyes on the starboard deck?"

"Hawkeye here. The ship's captain ran off. A crew member ducked out of sight."

"Roger that. I'm going down the starboard deck. Those bags are getting soaked with sea mist; it has to be like getting waterboarded inside them."

The Kong Fang was almost broadside to the wind. On his hands and knees, Ken Chen crawled from behind the air vent he used to escape Sharpshooter's crosshairs. His left hand retrieved the knife. Although weak from the SAR's virus, he had trained in martial arts for twelve years at the Zhongnanhai compound. Alliance to the CCP party, not family, shaped Ken

Chen's life from age eight.

From a crouched position, Chen switched the knife from his left hand to his right, yelled, "Kee-ai," and rushed Rock Climber. A mammoth sleeper wave hit portside! Ken Chen was tossed against the railing and somersaulted into the ocean.

"One unfriendly overboard," Hawkeye chirped into his headset.

"I'm steering back to the west. When the ship starts to upright, move in then." Dan looked at his watch. "I'll try to give you a five-minute window."

"The team trained for a fifteen-minute extraction. You need to give them more time." Hank said from behind and overhead.

Dan looked at this watch again: 9:51 AM. "Team, I'll try to give you more time. At ten straight up, you need to be off and away from the right side of that ship!"

"Team, evac of the live payload will be ten hundred hours. Stay clear of starboard; leave no one behind." Hank echoed Dan's instructions.

"Roger that." Skipper spun the 150 HP hover fan to half power, and the Combat Rubber Raiding Craft rose off the water.

Hawkeye spotted a big rooster tail of water spraying behind the second powerboat. It headed toward the two drug runners clinging onto an inflatable life-raft.

At 5 foot 5 and 150 lbs, Rock Climber was the most diminutive man on the team; pound per pound, he was the strongest. He unsnapped a carabineer from the railing, hooked it onto his safety rope, and removed the belay brake. The body bag was still six feet off the water.

Skipper moved into place and throttled the hover motor to full speed. The CRRC rose. Standing on his toes, Hawkeye snagged the rope and cut it off above the carabineer. "Package one is secure and on board."

Rock Climber pulled up the rope. There was nothing to snap the second bag into. "The rope is too short! Can you tip the ship starboard?" yelled Rock Climber.

"Not without more containers falling off," Dan yelled back. "I already turned the rudder. The ship will be correcting for two minutes."

Rock Climber untied the double figure-8 knot from his seat harness, pulled it through the belay brake, and gained about two feet of drop length. He bowline knotted the two ropes

together. He'd have to belay the second girl by hand. The rope burned the skin off his palms and fingers. "Package two is secure and on board."

Up on deck, down on the CRRC, and back in Texas, everyone heard a solid thud followed by moaning after the last body bag banged against the 1-inch steel side of the ship. They were out of time to tip the Kong Fang starboard again. Rock Climber hand-over-handed the third rope; it was like a wet tea bag being pulled up against the side of a cup.

After two grueling minutes of pulling, he finally got the bag over the railing with his last ounce of arm strength. More blood and skin got torn from his hands. In dead radio silence, he unzipped the body bag. It was evident that an arm was out of the socket—a quick yank on the upper arm and a separated shoulder popped into place.

"Rock Climber, I can't see you from down here. The cargo crane is swinging a net with yellow packages overhead."

"Skipper here. We've been spotted by the second pickup boat. I'm running up starboard and crossing over in front of the Kong Fang. Rock Climber, can you give us an update?"

More dead time. Dan looked at his watch. It was 10:15 AM. They were over the extraction time. In the silence, prayers were offered to the most high.

"Hank here. No man gets left behind."

"That includes girls," Rock Climber grunted as he hoisted package three onto his shoulder. "I'm headed to the stern."

"Sponge Bob here. I'm running low on battery power. Can you pick up the ship's speed? The zipline has to be tightened."

"I hear you." Dan pushed the joystick forward, hit buttons, looked at the map, and got the Kong Fang dead-headed on a straight Northwest course into the prevailing wind at four knots. He looked at his watch, and it was now 10:18 AM.

"Drug boat two is moving in on the starboard side. I'm almost out of battery. Keep the Kong Fang at this speed." Sponge Bob surfed the waverunner to stay in the middle of the wake.

The Kong Fang was almost upright. The crane operator swung the boom with yellow packages over starboard. The powerboat was getting into position. Three drug runners got onto the bow.

The Kong Fang was now fully upright but off course. The

captain still couldn't get control of his ship, so he ordered the first mate to go to the rear deck to inspect the rudder.

"I have package three ready. Be advised that her shoulder was dislocated. I put my PFD and seat harness on her. She will be solo and with no descending brake. Someone needs to catch her before she rams into the waverunner."

"Hey, little man. Can't you zip down with package three?" Sponge Bob asked with concern.

"I can adjust prop speed if need be," Dan nervously offered. This OPS was more intense than any video game he'd ever played.

"Negative, big man." Rock Climber grunted as he lifted and hooked the pulley onto the zipline.

Skipper positioned the raft next to the waverunner.

"Zipline is taut. Send her down," said Sponge Bob.

Everyone heard the whine of the pulley and then a splash when Frogman dove across the zipline to keep package three from slamming into the back of the waverunner.

"Hawkeye, here. You've been spotted, Rock Climber!"

Sharpshooter was looking through the rifle scope. "The first mate made you and then went into the fireroom. Permission to take a shot when he comes out."

"Little man, what's your holdup?" Sponge Bob bellowed.

"Ah... My hands are bloody and are rope burned. I can't swim that good." With such a low body index, Rock Climber could not even float.

"Rock Climber, Skipper here. Get out on that rope now! No man on my team is going to get left behind."

"Hey, little man, I got your back. I'm Samoan. We swim like a sea lion."

Rock Climber got ten feet out on the zipline when the first mate rounded the port-side-stern corner. With a red fire ax overhead, he ran to the center railing. The razor-sharp ax struck the knot dead center. The rope and Rock Climber splashed into the prop wash. The rope floated and twisted in the churned-up white froth.

Frogman grabbed the back of the PDF and swam the frail, moaning girl to the raiding raft. Hawkeye grabbed the shoulder straps on the harness and pulled her up and over the rubber pontoon.

"All packages on board safe and sound," Skipper reported.

Bam bam bam

Against orders, Sharpshooter fired at the first mate. He didn't get a kill shot.

"Quit firing at will," Hank yelled. "We don't want to be known for the ugliness of battle. We get in and get out with the littlest involvement possible. We're Peacemaker's first, Peacekeepers second."

The first mate ducked out of sight. Sharpshooter ducked his head in disappointment.

Sponge Bob stripped off his PDF and equipment vest down to red briefs. The battery indicator was on E. He gripped the cross on the tail of the fifty-nine white puka shells around his thick brown neck. *Mary, mother of Jesus, I need an intercession.* Then he pulled on the throttle and leaned. The waverunner turned a slow one-eighty, went about sixty yards, and quit—a red indicator flashed CHARGE BATTERY.

Skipper shut down everything. Frogman back-rolled off the bow and swam to the waverunner. Sponge Bob dove into a circle of bubbles floating to the surface. Two minutes felt like two hours. Prayers, along with cursing, were said in silence.

A limp body surfaced on top of a big brown hand. Frogman grabbed Rock Climber and pulled him onto and over the wave runner's bench seat. Immediately, he started rapid compressions on Rock Climber's back. Almost two quarts of saltwater spewed from the little man's mouth; finally, there was a long gasp for air.

After a few minutes of gasping and coughing, the first thing to come into his vision was a head of wavy black hair, a thick brown neck surrounded by white pearls, and a big smile.

"Mahalo, little man, you sank like a rock," said Sponge Bob, treading water between the waverunner and rubber rescue raft.

"We are all coming home," Skipper relayed to the command center.

"Sorry that I was a hindrance to this OPS mission. I wished I would have not missed the targets." Sharpshooter apologized.

"I know how you feel. I have a niece lured into the darkness by a group known as the Grandpa Virgin Hunters. I wish I could kill them all. Frogman said," forgetting that his throat microphone picked up audio in or out of water.

"Team, our mission was a success. Three young girls will be headed to school and not some sex party, freak out." Skipper

said to pep up his team and then ramped up the motors.

"Stand down, Skipper," Hank's ordered. "Are the girls coming around yet?"

"They're still sedated. But their vitals are good. We'll get them to Bermuda safe and sound." Hawkeye said as his helmet camera captured the girls laying on floatation cushions and under survival blankets at the stern.

"Sharpshooter, do you have a shot on those yellow containers hanging from the crane?" Hank asked.

Sharpshooter went to the bow and steadied the Israeli Micro sniper long gun across the rubber pontoon. "Sir, it's over a thousand-foot shot. But the sea has calmed."

"Go for it!" Hank barked out the order.

Pop, pop, pop,

Hawkeye dialed his helmet camera to 100 X power, and now a close-up of the drug drop was live on the monitor wall. "You're on target, Sharpshooter."

Pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop,

The rapid firing continued until the hundred-round banana clip was empty. A white powder was falling like snow from the peppered yellow plastic cases. Two drug runners jumped overboard when they realized the payload was synthetic fentanyl.

The boat operator pushed the throttle forward, and white powder blew off the bow and into his face. He collapsed over the steering wheel, forcing it to turn left. The powerboat started spinning circles. One of the swimming drug runners got run over on the third pass. Even from a distance, the one hundred HP outboards slowed and sounded like a wood chipper getting fed a large branch. A forearm and hunks of flesh floated to the surface. It looked like one of the outboards had hooked a rope—it was intestines.

One other crew member frantically held his breath and went underwater with each circle of the boat. It was the fifth or sixth revolution when a foot floated to the surface, followed by a scream.

The wall of monitors started to shut down. The ugliness of battle didn't need to be on display. Video game makers do it to suck in their players, and some news media outlets do it to boost ratings. Then, they will hide behind the First Amendment, claiming the right to show horrific photos or videos.

Finally, there was a calming silence when the last monitor turned off, and the lyrics to 'When the Saints Come Marching Home' came over the loudspeaker. Dan looked at his watch and quickly folded up the laptop. Hopefully, *I can still make the game.*

CHAP 29... **Service over family**

“What’s your hurry?” Hank asked as Dan slipped his laptop into an oversized graphene case.

Dan looked at his watch. “If I hurry, hopefully, I can beat the noon traffic through Fort Worth.”

“But you’re not done here.” Hank scowled. “We need to debrief.”

“But the wall monitors shut down, and I heard ‘When the Saints Come Marching Home’ play over the speakers. Plus, your team extracted the girls, and they are headed to Bermuda.”

“I told Paul to shut off the monitors. It’s not mentally healthy to watch the blood and gore of battle. The news outlets do it to appease the war-hawk network owners. That’s why when our soldiers come home, they often are spat upon.”

Dan thought about two key men in his life. David, his stepfather, and Paul, his Godfather, who served in Vietnam and returned to a divided country. “Okay, what do you need, and how long will it take?”

“You tell me. I don’t want a rescue ship to approach the Kong Fang with all that fentanyl spewing.”

“Plotting a course around all the reefs throughout the Virgin Islands will take hours.” Dan looked at his watch again.

Hank was getting nervous about Dan’s loss of focus on the mission. “How long will it take to deadhead the Kong Fang directly into deep water.”

“Let me check.” Dan removed his watch, set it next to his laptop, and brought up depth maps of the Caribbean Ocean around the US Virgin Islands.

“You’re fixated on the time. Is there something I should know?” Hank asked.

“No, not now since you said something about the spewing fentanyl,” Dan replied and breathed a long sigh. “There are a lot of shallow reefs around the Virgin Islands. It would be better to keep the Kong Fang on its northwest heading into the deep waters of the Devil’s Triangle.” Dan slipped his watch back

on.

"You've been constantly checking the time. There's something you're not telling me."

"I haven't yet made it to one of my son's soccer games. I promised Andy that I would be there today. But this is more important."

"Unfortunately, service over family can be painful. It's one reason I try only to recruit single men."

"Hank, I get it. I came out here on my own. I'm good with completing this mission."

Hank left the control room to discern the next move from his office. One too many times, Hank had to stand on a porch and tell a family that their loved one had given everything. He was proud of his twenty years of serving his country, but too much red tape forced an early retirement. Women on the battlefield didn't work. Hank built a team where the most qualified people got slotted by their skill and expertise. After some reflection, Hank pushed the direct call button on his desk phone to the flight hanger. Then, he placed a call to the Governor's office.

Uploading a northwest course into the Kong Fang navigation system took about forty-five minutes. Next, Dan jammed the communication and emergency frequencies, but Tina's text message to Trask Trailer Inc. somehow made it to a cell tower on Little Saint James Island.

Hank slipped back into the command room and spied over Dan at the laptop screen. After about five minutes, he said, "You can wrap things up!"

Dan looked up and back over his shoulder. "The Kong Fang is low on diesel. It could run out of fuel in a couple of days."

"Let me worry about that. You're done here!"

The sun was almost at high noon when Dan wheeled from the elevator into the sod-covered parking structure. The gate guard waved him over to the guard shack. When he rolled into the open air, Dan heard a soft thump, thump, thump. He had to squint; his eyes had yet to adjust to full sunlight. Suddenly, the thumping increased tenfold! Dan had to cover his eyes from the dust and straw being wind-whirled by a four-bladed main rotor. The air thumping on his body felt like a bass drum being beaten in a parade.

The pilot touched down the Blackhawk and flattened the

rotor blades. The twin BGE-701 engines sounded like they were almost silent. Dan peeked through his fingers. He was looking directly into a cockpit at two pilots. The copilot unstrapped and climbed out with a foam dome in hand. A long blond ponytail draped out the back of her flight helmet. She hurried over to Dan. "Put this on. It will help so as not to blow out your eardrums. But it won't help if we crash." Dan felt like he was going to pee.

The sliding side door opened, and two flight crew jumped out. One looked like a bodybuilder, and the other looked like an MMA fighter. They saw the fear on Dan's face. "Looks like Emma gave you the foam helmet, which won't help if we crash, spiel."

Bodybuilder smiled and stated, "Emma and her twin sister have over three hundred evac's worldwide. They graduated top of class flying Chinooks and these big bad Hawks. Leah will probably ask if it's okay for her to winch you down on a rope."

"You got a bet, brother." The crew members shook hands.

With one on the right and one on the left, they each grabbed a wheel. Once inside the Blackhawk, Emma hitched a ratchet strap across the wheelchair armrests to the floor shackles. "Loaded and locked down, Sis." Emma climbed over Dan to the copilot seat.

"Muscleman, Fighter Boy, are you two buckled in?"

"Yes, Ma'am,"

"Roger that,"

Leah handed the check-off sheet to her twin sister, gripped the cyclic control, and got clearance to fly at five thousand feet. She increased the RPM of the twin diesel engines. "Are we clear for takeoff, Sis?"

Emma did a one-eighty scan through a mirrored and tinted face shield. "Clear!"

"Team, if we don't get clearance to land, be prepared to winch Gamer Boy down on our rope," Leah said and then snickered.

Bodybuilder pulled a twenty from his flight jacket and handed it over to Fighter. "That's our last bet. You and Leah must have something going."

"Still waiting for clearance to land," Leah grumbled into her helmet microphone when they were over the soccer field.

Dan was anxious, excited, nervous, and scared all at the

same time. But thrilled to be keeping a promise.

Below, four police vehicles with lights flashing were strategically parked and had a landing area cleared. The soccer parents didn't know what was happening. Most everyone held their breath, hoping a child hadn't got injured. The coaches circled their teams and took a knee to pray.

"Screw it! The Governor never gets back to us in time." Leah did a low-level 360 around the park and set the helicopter in the center of the four police vehicles. When the side door slid open, parents expected medics to jump out with a liter and first aid kit.

Dan's son saw the wheelchair getting lifted out. Andy broke from the prayer circle and met his Dad halfway. He'd always told his teammates that his Dad never made it to their games because he was busy saving the world. Service over family protects communities and sporting events—making it possible to take a knee in protest or prayer.

* * *

Eight time zones away, Tom was broke and exhausted in the rat-infested motel. There would be no trip out of Africa on an Iranian oil tanker. The two ounces of gold, diamond earrings, and Tiffany Pearl Rosary were gone. The dive motel wouldn't take a check; Tom had less than fifty dollars. Jacob had Tom's phone, and the charger for his burner phone was back in the apartment. He walked six miles from Tin Can Island to the akara and pap street vendor and asked to use a phone.

"Hello." A child's voice surprised Tom

"Who's this?" Tom asked.

"It's me, Mr. Tom. I'm at your farmhouse in Texas."

"Is this Abidemi?" Tom asked, recalling from a foggy memory.

"Yes, it is. I'm upstairs in that bed that has steps."

"Oh..." Tom realized it wasn't even 6 AM in Texas. "Could you get Beth on the phone?"

Tom heard a door open, then another door open. "Aunt Beth, Mr. Tom wants to talk to you." Abidemi shook Beth's shoulder

Beth rolled over and took the phone. "Tom, I was hoping

you'd call. Your burner phone goes directly to voicemail."

"You disobeyed me. You were supposed to drop Abidemi at the strawberry farm."

Beth rubbed her forehead to wake up and comprehend Tom's lecture. "Ah... Well, why did you send three more girls over here? Hanks is bringing them by tonight. One of them needs to have an x-ray on her shoulder."

"What?" Tom put his hand over his other ear to hear better. "Beth, I'm sorry. I've barely slept for the last three nights. I was supposed to be on a ship out of Africa, but I got robbed instead." "Were you supposed to have been on that ship with the girls? The one Dan told Hank about?"

"What?" There was a firm squeeze on Tom's shoulder.

The street vendor held out a steaming cup of AAA Kenya coffee and said, "You have the phone I take orders on."

"Beth, I've got to go. Are all the girls okay?"

"Yes, they are, and it's because of you."

"Not entirely. Suppose you had listened to me. Abidemi would be alone and working on a berry farm. Now she is with her schoolmates because you disobeyed me."

"Tom, I need paperwork on all four village girls to enroll them at Saint Mary's."

"I'll see what I can do. I love you. Thanks for what you did not do." Tom handed back the phone and then wrote a check from the church account for two hundred dollars over what he owed to settle for akara and donuts. From across Frontage Road, Tom saw the yellow posters hanging on the church doors. He walked on by.

At least Oyins Holiday Inn was open again. It was nice to see a familiar face. "It's so good to see you, Pastor Tom," Tanny said when she came out the door behind the reception desk.

"A lot has happened since Victor's accident."

"It sure has. I'm the manager now, and head office okayed turning the relaxation room into a daycare."

"That sounds wonderful. We can catch up later, but I need a phone charger. I lost mine."

Tanny pulled a lost and found box from under the counter. "Help yourself."

Tom found a charger for his phone. "Tanny, could I crash in one of the rooms for a few hours? I've been up for three days."

"Of course. You look like you just watched my kids for three days."

Tom slept until noon the next day. He dreamed about how to get some cash for the trip to Zangam Village and about Beth taking care of four young girls. With the fully charged cell phone, Tom called to get a rental car dropped off at Oyins Holiday Inn. He took a shower, got clean clothes from the duffle bag packed for the debunked oil tanker escape, and then went to the lobby.

"You slept more than a few hours," Tanny said from behind the reception desk.

"That's good. I'm driving to Jos Town today."

"What are your plans up there?"

"Well, I hope to play golf with some bigwigs."

"Bigwigs, what do you mean."

"I'm talking about some important people. Have you heard of the 'Honorable Simeon Bako Lagong'?"

"No. Is he a bigwig?" Tanny took Tom's credit card.

"He is a lawyer and city official who likes to gamble on golf games."

"Oh." Tanny handed back Tom's credit card. "Victor Vee gambled on all kinds of stuff. He would hit me and take my money when he lost."

"It's too bad about Victor," Tom offered condolences.

"He deserves what he got. I think it was in God's plan. My kids are safe, and now I have money at the end of the week."

"I hope it is God's plan that I win a golf bet," Tom replied.

"Is it okay to pray to win a bet?" Tanny was confused that a man of the cloth would pray about gambling.

"Sure." Tom winked at Tanny. "I'm going to wait outside for the rental car."

From the parking lot, Tom made a call. "The Hon. Simon Bako Lagong is not available. Please leave a message."

"Tom Seton, I'm calling to see if you are up for another round of golf. You said we should play for a million naira. Are you up for that bet?"

Not even thirty seconds passed, and Tom's burner phone vibrated.

"Sure, I'm up for a round of eighteen. Should we do a foursome again, two low scores win, and if anyone is five strokes under, they take the entire four million Naira." Simon

was already getting the gambler rush. He didn't need the money, but beating par golfers would be bragging rights at the club.

Tom felt the gambler rush, too; he did need the money. Worse yet, he didn't have six hundred and sixty dollars to cover the bet. The dopamine was flowing like a river. Tom hadn't felt so alive since the morning after the cutoff road trip into Zangam Village. They set a tee time for Sunday morning.

Luckily for Tom, he was able to rent a van. At least he'd get a good night's rest before tee-off. He went back into Oyins Inn. "Tanny, could I borrow a couple of pillows and a few blankets? I will be sleeping in the rental van for a few nights."

"Would you like a roll-up mattress too?"

"Yes, that would be great."

Tanny went down the hall to the storage room and returned with a rolled mattress. "Here, go lay this in the van."

Tom had just unrolled the mattress when Tanny approached with pillows and blankets. "Are you hiding out because of the notice on the church doors?" Tanny asked.

Tom got worried instantly. "Should I be?"

"I'm going down to the police station Saturday afternoon. Constable Ayoola asked me and Idogbe to be there. He said he needed to hear both sides. I don't know anything else."

"Do you think Idogbe knows more than you?"

"Probably, I've been so busy getting the motel reopened, I don't know what's going on at your church." Tanny saw a couple going into the lobby. She set the blankets and pillows on the passenger seat and headed back in.

Tom discerned back and forth whether to call Idogbe. He wanted to know but didn't, or shouldn't know. With the million naira bet on a golf game, he knew he had to get a good night's rest and have a clear head.

The rental van made for a suitable disguise. Tom slowed on Frontage Road, pulled over, put the flashers on, jumped out, ran up the church steps, and yanked one of the yellow posters off the church door. Tom told himself, *I won't read this until after the 18th hole gets played.*

Tom parked in a far corner of the Rayburn Golf Club, exhausted from the ten-hour grueling drive. Getting a good night's rest wasn't working. Not knowing was worse than knowing. At 5 AM, he tossed back the blankets, turned on the

dome light, and pulled the folded yellow poster out of the glovebox.

Dear community and Glory and Praise church members. There will be a meeting at the police station in room 101 this Saturday @ 3:00 PM to document and give witness to all or any inappropriate conduct with children in the neighborhood by Pastor Tomas Joseph Seton. Bring any hard evidence, including photos or videos. Adults only, no children. Call 81-523-9874 to testify privately. Constable Ayoola Ashiru.

Tee-off was in less than four hours. *I'll call Idogbe to find out what happened at last night's meeting.* Tom got out the sliding door and couldn't find the burner phone. "God, what else can go wrong," Tom yelled while shaking his fists toward the breaking light of a new day.

Tom bogey the first three holes, duffed his tee shot on the fourth, and ended up in two sand traps before the game ended. He didn't have a million Naira to pay the bet— but he did have the Glory and Praise checkbook.

CHAP 30 ... **Out of Africa**

Idogbe told Constable Ayoola that he would inform the congregation about the spy camera they'd put into Tom's apartment. The Constable insisted that he wait until after the community meeting. Idogbe knew that if he didn't follow the Constable's orders, he'd be held for contempt or put on litter duty for at least a year. Jail time or picking up trash were the options Ayoola offered.

Mr. and Mrs. Onukwulu didn't want to believe what they had read from the yellow poster on the church door. Parents they'd never seen at church or around the neighborhood attended. Helping parents, even from an intact home, is a grooming technique abusers will use to get access to children. A single-parent family didn't require as much grooming. A worn-down mother was thrilled to have someone help transport her child to soccer practice. The following offer would be one-on-one coaching, a sure way in for many pedophiles.

Tanny took a chair next to Idogbe, leaned in, and whispered. "Did Pastor Tom get in touch with you yesterday?"

"No. What's weird is that Jacob has his cell phone. Jacob mentioned them going to a weekend chess tournament in Abuja."

Ayoola switched on a lapel microphone and then cleared his throat. "Thank you all for coming down to the station this Saturday afternoon. From the turnout, it looks like the Pastor was involved much deeper in the community than I figured."

An IT technician pushed a large video monitor on a stand to the front center of the room and inserted a USB memory stick.

"First things first. Before I start the video." Ayoola held up four clipboards. "I only want individuals who have evidence and can give testimony to what they know about the white Pastor from Praise and Glory church off Frontage Road. Make sure you print and then sign your full legal name. Jot down what you know, who told you, or how you came upon the info."

Idogbe leaned toward Tanny. "Why'd the Constable have to

make the 'white pastor' reference? It sounds racist."

The plump choir coordinator, that displayed more cleavage than a plumber showing butt crack, was the first to snatch a clipboard. She printed her name and wrote: 'Photos of the white Pastor in his underwear.' She handed it to another choir member who wrote: 'Took pictures of Pastor with a blond coming out of the apartment. I have them on my phone.' Someone in the third row jotted down: 'Pastor Thomas has a record in Dallas, Texas.' Someone leaning against the sidewall yipped, "We need a clipboard over here."

About ten minutes later, the clipboards made it back to Constable Ayoola. "Please start the video!" A hush came over the crowd.

It took a moment for almost everyone to figure out the low camera angle and that the point of view was under a green table with a chess game on top. The pair of red shorts with a big wet spot made more sense when the small black hands hooked the elastic waistband and pushed them down. The yellow pee stain had soaked the white underpants. Next, a large white hand holding a washcloth came into view. The black boy washed himself off and wrapped a bath towel around his waist. Next, he climbed up on a chair and moved one of the chessmen. Two additional clips were from the same point of view. Tom didn't touch the boy and was always fully dressed.

All six foot five of Mr. Onukwulu shot up from his folding chair. "That's my son! I know all about those incidents. It happened maybe three or four times."

The clips of Tom in boxer shorts showed him being pushed to the church by law enforcement to unlock the doors. They had a search warrant; however, Jacob wasn't in those pictures. The young blonde going in and out of the apartment was Tina, who was of age.

"I told you," the choir leader bellowed out from the front row.

Fifi stood up. "Jacob kept wetting himself, and we couldn't figure out why. It took months, but Pastor Tom figured it out by sketching with Jacob."

"This is correct," Mr. Onukwulu inserted. "That Victor Vee rapper broke our oldest son's arm with a Rungu stick. He told our boys if they told anybody about him robbing the church, he'd do a lot worse."

Tanny jumped in. "That is true. Victor was physically abusive to my children. I've known Pastor Tom since the first week he arrived in Nigeria. He's a good guy."

Idogbe turned toward Ayoola. "Pastor Tom came here to help girls at the outreach school get an education beyond sixth grade. Now, all he wants to do is return home to Texas."

"Well, at this point, I think most of you can see that there has been a lot of bearing false witness. If anyone knows where or runs into the Pastor, please let him know that he can return to the United States if he wishes."

"This isn't right," Idogbe loudly protested, "Pastor Tom is now a marked man. We all lose! He wanted to put a playground next to the church. He wanted to add a Sunday service for the deaf. He was fine with me doing a traditional Latin service."

"Okay, we need to move on," Constable Ayoola interrupted the noisy room of finger-pointers. "Everyone who did not sign up to give testimony on a clipboard can leave. The others must stay so I can issue court dates for filing false police reports."

There was a mass exodus for the doors. Seven women and two husbands who had listed non-collaborating evidence sat in fear. The ones that left knew and respected Constable Ayoola Ashiru. He was a stern but fair man who kept a garbage-free neighborhood in South Central Lagos.

* * *

Tom drove past the fueling depot and the cutoff road. He didn't have enough cash to fill up the van. He was on a mission to get the school girls' records back home to Beth. He first noticed that someone had *replaced the **Glory & Praise** school sign with a hand-painted sign that read: **Abena's fine Jams.***

Ben Okri's wisdom was limited to eighty-six years of never leaving the Zangam River valley. He knew having the militant Boko Haram see that a school no longer existed was the way to protect the village. Ben also had made a grave marker for Abidemi's mum and buried her in the field behind his home between his parents and grandparents. If anybody questioned the white crosses, Ben would welcome the opportunity to fall on a sword before he would deny that Jesus was God. Martyrdom would bring Ben into communion with the Okri lineage on the hundred-plus-year-old homestead.

Tom blasted the horn on the rental van several times. Most

of the village people hid; some peeked from their homes. Ben, the oldest villager, was slowly working across the field. With his poor vision, it wasn't until about the thirty-fifth giddy-up across the field that he could make out friend, not foe. He waved his cane, and then a wide, brown-toothed smile appeared.

"Ben, where is everybody?"

"They're scared. Go stand out in the road, and I'll honk the horn,"

Ben honked the horn three times. Old and young villagers spotted Tom and then came from the woods, their homes, and other places toward the renamed schoolhouse.

Tom explained that St. Mary's needed copies of the girls' records to get school visas. When asked about the first copies that got handed over to the people in the motorhome, Tom coolly replied, "That paperwork got wet and destroyed at sea. That's why I'm here. This time, I'll protect the records and ensure they are delivered."

Everyone believed Tom, including Ben Okri, who was unlocking the drawbar he had installed across the front doors.

Tom walked inside the old schoolhouse. There were boxes and boxes of glass jars. Several canning pots and four kerosene burners on stands with hoods. The coils of four-inch flexible tubing were to vent carbon monoxide outside and to save lives. He knew burning kerosene or fuel inside without proper venting was a death trap.

Ben pointed at a metal lockbox. "Peacekeeper, could you carry this outside to the van?"

Tom grabbed the handle of the legal-sized lockbox, opened the van's backdoor, and set it on the floorboard. Ben pulled out a key and unlocked the strong box. Eighty-six years of not venturing more than one hundred miles from his home were inside. A Kanga cloth baby carrier that Abena carried Abidemi on her back. A Toposa smoking pipe in a leather pouch of his father's was next to baby shoes. Some old black and white silver plate photos of Ben's parents were bundled with a shoestring. Ben picked up a stack of colored Polaroid photos and undid the rubber band around them. The photos were in chronological order.

"This is Abena when she arrived in our village with a child in her tummy," Ben handed the top photo to Tom. "My mama delivered Abidemi in our home nine weeks later." Ben flipped

the picture over and read the date: September one two thousand two.

"Abidemi was born one year after the World Trade Center got attacked," Tom said while looking at the birthing picture.

"World Trade Center?" Ben replied in confusion while pulling out a manila envelope from the bottom. "This is my wish. I wanted the Okri homestead to go to Abena, but..." Tears flowed down a worn, seasoned face. An elder who might not be world-wise knew the grief of senseless killing—no matter what continent or country.

"I'll take care of your wishes, Ben. For your information, the girls will be back here for Summer breaks. Their student visas are only good through high school. They'll all be back."

Ben wrapped his frail arms around Tom. "Thank you for taking charge. Abidemi is like my only grandchild. I pray that she continues Abena's business after she gets smart in school."

The strong box worked to keep all the girls' records. The parents had more trust in Tom when he addressed where the girls would be living and the school's name they would be attending. St. Mary's had a motherly feel.

Tom wrote Beth's cell phone number and handed it to the parents. He didn't even think about the village not having cell service or Abidemi now having Beth's old phone. A few men asked if Tom was the new Peacekeeper in town to replace Paul. Tom shrugged it off while he loaded one of the four-inch flexible exhaust tubing coils and pen and paper from the old school building into the rental van. He'd forgotten all about being low on fuel and that it would be pitch black before he got to the cutoff road junction.

After he crossed over the cattle guard, he steered down along the river bank. A few miles ahead, the headlights shone on the stack of rocks under which Able lay. Tom looked hard for where he'd left the motorhome's spare tire; however, he couldn't see much in the darkness. I got to get back up on the road now! Tom told himself and yanked the steering wheel to the right. When the bottom of the van scraped on the gravel road berm, he yanked the steering wheel to the left and stomped on the brake. He was halfway up the road from the Zangam River canyon when the van stalled. The gas gauge was below the **E**.

Tom set the parking brake and stepped out. In the

darkness, he felt for the heat from the tailpipe. He opened the back, pulled the aluminum tubing out, uncoiled it, and then shut the back door. He opened the sliding side door, got inside, turned on the cargo area light, found the pen and paper, and wrote:

**To whomever reads this note.
There will be a million naira
reward for getting the content of
this box to Elizabeth Seton in
Texas, USA. Contact her via this
phone.**

1-214-727-6426

Thank you, Thomas J Seton.

Tom put the note in the metal box, the key into the lock, and set everything on the passenger seat. He opened a small ventilation window on one of the rear doors and fed about a foot of the flexible tubing inside. The other piece got pushed over the tailpipe. It was so dark that he had to hand-over-hand himself alongside the van to the driver's door. He drew in the clean night air for about five minutes. The static in the air raised the hair on the back of his neck, and he could smell the rain coming. He listened to different animals calling out into the deep, dark purple night.

When he opened the driver door, the dome light felt like an arc from a spot welder. He reclined the seat, positioned a pillow, and then kicked off his shoes. He leaned forward and felt for the key. The van started at the exact moment thunder clapped in the distance. A few drops of rain danced on the windshield. Tom leaned back and closed his eyes. The thunder was getting closer, the wind and rain increased, and lightning started striking along the crest of the Zangam River valley. A tunnel of light was manifesting. However, it wasn't bright white—it was a dark bluish-grey. Nothing was at the end of the tunnel, not even calling Tom home or telling him to return. There is a difference between being lonely and being all alone. Tom felt the latter.

During some earth-shaking thunderclaps and multiple lightning strikes, it felt like a heavy-metal band playing their final song three hours after midnight. The storm passed

overhead, and everything turned to slow motion. Tom forced his eyes open—in the side mirror and with lightning firing like a dance hall strobe light. He could see a sizeable four-legged animal running up the road toward the back of the van. Tom was frozen in time. Next, the large animal with a long curved tail was trotting back down the road carrying what looked like a large branch in its jaws. Tom was unable to come to.

Several hours later, the bright light burned Tom's eyes. He flipped down the sun visor. Wow, that dream felt real. He had a bigger problem than discerning a dream. The fuel needle was left of the **E**. Tom held his breath, started the van, and crept up the incline. When he leveled out on Zangam Plateau, the needle moved to the right of the **E**.

* * *

Jamal, the grandson of the gas stop owner, approached, "That was some storm out on the Plateau last night."

"It was," Tom replied. "Things always feel anew after a downpour." "Yes, they do," Jamal agreed and asked, "How much fuel do you need?"

"I only need enough to get to the Abuja airport. I might be short on cash." Tom reached for his wallet, which was next to the strongbox.

"Don't worry about it. We'll square up on our next fuel run." Jamal ran to help another customer.

* * *

Fear not, brain chitter repeated at least a hundred times before Tom dropped off the van at the airport rental lot. He headed into the international gate with the duffel bag in one hand and the strong box in the other. *Fear not. Fear not. Fear not* chittered away—

"What is in the metal box?" the ticket agent asked.

"Keepsakes and some important records, my wife and I need to enroll four girls from Zangam Village at St Mary's in Dallas, Texas."

"I'll need you to open the box."

Tom set the box on the counter, pulled the key from his pocket, and opened it. The agent took out the paper on top and

read:

**To whomever reads this note.
There will be a million naira
reward for getting the content of
this box to Elizabeth Seton in
Texas, USA. Contact her via this
phone.**

1-214-727-6426

Thank you, Thomas J Seton.

"I assume this is your wife's name and your name?" she asked as she typed on the ticketing terminal. She pulled the baby Kanga carrier out and saw the stack of papers at the bottom. "If these are important records and keepsakes, you probably want to keep them as carry-on and baggage check the duffle bag."

"That would be good." Tom's hand was shaking when he handed over his credit card. She swiped the American Express card, picked up the Kanga cloth, and put it to her nose. Most women can still smell the sweet scent of a baby even after thirteen years. She put the cloth back into the box of memories, locked it, and handed the key to Tom.

Tom put his duffel bag on the scale, and as she baggage tagged it, he guardedly said, "Thank you."

"No, thank you, Mr. Seton. Those girls up north have had some terrible times with the Boko Haram raiding different villages." The ticket printer spit out Tom's boarding pass, and she handed it to Tom. "I upgraded you to first class for what you and your wife are doing."

Tom was now just a few hundred yards from flying out of Africa.

CHAP 31 ... **Back in the USA**

When the airport shuttle stopped in front of his house, Tom did a double-take. He'd never seen his home with so many interior lights on. The front door was locked. He pushed the doorbell, *ring ring*. Tom heard a commotion, then a deadbolt *snap* and the door opened. Two young faces stared up. "Papa Tom!" Abidemi bolted onto the porch and grabbed the duffle bag.

Two more faces appeared from behind the door. One yelled, "Aunt Beth, an old bearded man is at the door."

Tom walked in and put the fireproof box on the hallway table. Beth appeared at the top of the stairs—tears of joy flowed. She had to steady herself against the railing.

"This is Papa Tom. Remember when he came to our village after our school closed?" Abidemi reminded the girls.

"He didn't have a grey beard then," one girl added.

"I remember he prayed over our school sisters'."

After the sad memory, one of the girls said, "We need to get our homework done. Mr. and Mrs. Seton should be alone." The four girls went back into the formal dining room that now looked more like a study hall with books, papers, pens, a calculator, and other school supplies spread over the solid pedestal table.

Tom walked up the stairs and took Beth's hands. They embraced and kissed, and then Beth said, "Well, old man, follow me. I'll just have to trim up that grey beard."

About an hour later, Tom entered the dining room with a trimmed and darkened beard, smelling like aftershave. It took a moment for the girls to grasp the new look. They giggled and then went back to doing homework.

* * *

Tom had been home for thirty days and had not told Beth about using the church checking account to pay off gambling bets. Having four young girls in their home was his excuse. Most of their private time was limited to trimming and coloring Tom's beard.

Early Sunday morning, Tom played golf while teaching the two oldest school girls how to caddy. The girls couldn't comprehend getting paid to pull around a golf bag and watch grown men yell at themselves. One girl waded into a pond to retrieve a thrown golf club and earned herself a big tip.

On rare occasions, Beth attended the Traditional Latin Mass (TLM) to see her parents from afar. Her Dad was a Knights of Columbus member and was always in attendance. After the TLM, Beth approached her parents. "Dad, I have confirmation that the FBI has tapped your phone."

"What?" Jerry stared at Beth. He ceased 'the look' when he heard the 427 cubic inch rumblings from the side exhaust. Tom parked the Red Corvette and rapped the pipes before shutting it off. "Looks like the big man on campus is here."

"Hey Jerry," Tom extended his hand.

"What's with the beard," Jerry asked while not shaking Tom's hand.

"I think it looks kind of macho." Joann offered.

"Thanks," Tom hugged her. "Did Beth tell you two about the leaked FBI memo targeting Traditional Catholic organizations like The Knights of Columbus?"

"No, she was just about to." Jerry's interest had perked, knowing the KoC had been under attack since its formation in 1882.

"I have the FBI memo on my desk. Why don't you and Joann come by for pizza tonight? We'd love you to meet the girls."

"What?" Jerry exclaimed.

"What girls?" Joann cupped her hand over her heart.

"Okay, great. We'll see you tonight around six." Tom grabbed Beth's hand and pulled her to his Corvette.

"I thought you and I should go for a little drive this afternoon," Tom said, holding the bright red fiberglass door open.

"That would be nice. We haven't been able to talk much with four house guests." Beth hiked up her dress to slip onto

the white leather bucket seat.

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

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

"She'll have a new baby by then," Tom replied.

"The girls will be on summer break and want to help with the baby." Beth consciously didn't push her dress down or say anything about the 'Tommy' name the Onukwulu's decided on for their next child—boy or girl.

"Beth, we need to talk." Tom's mouth grew dry. "I packed a lunch and some wine. Let's go to the Dallas Arboretum and Botanical Garden."

The roar of the V8 motor out the side exhaust made having a conversation difficult. Tom inserted a 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 was something they could work out.

Tom circled the lot several times, highlighting his pride and joy. He found two side-by-side parking spots so as not to get a door ding. He rushed around the stingray-shaped rear window and opened the door. "Your legs are getting into shape."

"Two of the girls are running with me; that helps." Beth's dress hiked up more when she twisted to get out of the white leather bucket seat.

"I brought a blanket." Tom reached behind the seat for a picnic basket.

Car enthusiasts were already pointing and coming their way. Tom would usually talk about the limited number of split window Corvettes. Today, he didn't say anything to anybody.

Beth pulled the blanket out of the basket and laid it out. Tom uncorked and then poured wine. They laughed as they fed each other bits of cheese and grapes as they did on one of their college dates. "Do you remember our first toast?" Beth asked while holding up a wine glass.

Tom struggled to recall and then admitted, "No. Do you?"

"No, but it must have been romantic or about golf or your car."

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

Beth took a full drink of wine to prepare herself. Her eyes

focused on a family feeding ducks in White Rock Lake and then on a jogger pushing a two-child stroller.

"Elizabeth, I'm an addict!."

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

"I'm telling you that I'm a gambling addict. I bet a million naira on a golf game and didn't have the cash to pay off the bet, so I wrote a check out of the church account."

"A million naira—how much is that?"

"About seven hundred dollars. I've already squared up with Glory and Praise. So I'm good there."

"Is that it?" Beth cautiously asked.

"Well, not exactly." Tom took a long drink of wine and then exclaimed, "I lost our gold, my mother's diamond earrings, and your rosary."

"On a bet?" Beth finished the wine in her glass.

"No, a smuggler was supposed to get me on a freighter off Tin Can Island to the UK. The asshole ripped me off."

Beth picked up the bottle of wine and filled her glass. She wanted to believe Tom. Maybe he was lying or had forgotten that her pearl rosary was in Abidemi's memory box. "Tom, if that is all you have to tell me, let's just put it in the past."

"I wish it was that easy. Some of what I experienced in Africa can't get put into the past."

Oh no, here comes the Tina story, thought Beth as she downed the entire glass of wine.

"The day after I had to shoot Able, there were more killings." Tom slowly poured his wine onto the grass, knowing that alcohol did not mix well with PTSD. He shared what felt right and concluded with the 'fear not' mantra that had been echoing in his head ever since the day Abena was slain. Beth was dazed and speechless as they folded the blanket, picked up things, and returned to the car.

Tom sped toward Red Rock, Texas. He knew where some freeway cloverleaf ramps had reinforced guard rails and were banked like a NASCAR track. Tom hit the first on-ramp at 90mph and merged onto Interstate 35 at over 130mph. He pushed the accelerator to the floor, and the speedometer quit climbing at 142. "We hit it," Tom yelled. Beth wished that Tom had a Saint Christopher dash statue.

Tom decelerated as they wound down an off-ramp. Beth

pointed and had to yell. "Stop over there. I have to use the restroom."

Tom pulled into the truck stop. Beth scooted out while pushing her dress down. When she returned, Tom had the hood up, looking and listening for odd sounds. She had two cups of coffee, thinking the hot brown liquid would force Tom to slow down. "What are you looking for?"

"I'm looking for any water leaks. These big block L88 are notorious for water pump seals leaking."

"Oh?" Beth replied while handing Tom a large cup of coffee, aware that his pride and joy didn't have cup holders.

"Looks good. We hit two miles an hour over factory spec, and everything held together." Tom took a sip of the coffee. "Ugh, this is terrible. I sure miss the AAA Kenya blend."

"One of the girl's mothers is shipping me five pounds of that brand of African coffee."

"Thanks, you always go out of your way for me. I appreciate that about you."

"On our drive back, can we go slower?"

"No problem. I just wanted to make sure everything was right and tight." Tom poured his coffee into the gutter and then opened the door. "Hop in my Elizabethan queen."

"So I've graduated. I was an Elizabethan princess the first time I rode in your chariot."

"Oops," Tom rubbed Beth's thigh before he shifted the 4-speed into reverse. After about 15 minutes on Highway 45, he turned down the stereo, reached for Beth's hand, and started lightly rubbing it. "Beth, I want to sell the Corvette and return to Africa."

Beth's head was finally out of a tailspin when the gate opened to their private community. She would support Tom in returning to Africa and investing in a roadside snack and gas stop that needed underground fuel tanks. Tom also discussed working with Ben Okri to keep Abena's jam and canning business open. He mentioned Idogbe taking over the preaching when Beth blurted out, "My parents are already here!"

Tom parked next to Jerry's pickup. "Your Dad is always early."

"Yeah, I know, he'll never change." Beth hopped out and darted to the front door.

It was a Norman Rockwell moment when Tom entered with

pizzas and salads. Jerry was leaning over the dining room table, helping two girls with their homework. Joann made strawberry banana bread pudding with Abidemi and Amanda in the kitchen. Beth was cleaning the mascara running down her face in the bathroom—tears of joy.

The homework and books got cleared, and hands joined in a prayer—a meal was shared among new friends. Jerry told fishing stories, and Joann inquired about quilting patterns from Africa. Beth was mainly quiet, knowing Tom and Jerry still needed to talk.

As the table got cleared, Tom suggested, “Jerry, why don’t we go out to the pool? I have something to share privately.”

“I’ll head out to the pool. Is it okay to smoke out there?”

“I’ll get you an ashtray, Dad.” Beth ducked into the kitchen and opened the liquor cabinet. In the back was a silly ashtray of a curled-up Rainbow trout that she’d bought twenty years ago—it had never been used.

Tom set a bottle of scotch on the counter, filled two tumblers with ice, entered his office, and got a folder labeled FBI. He crossed paths with Beth on the lawn and saw the flash of a match getting struck.

“How’s about a drink?” Tom held out a scotch on the rocks.

“What old Catholic doesn’t like a smoke and a drink after dinner?”

“Not sure about that statistic. But I do know that a bunch of traditional Catholics are on the FBI watch list. That includes your daughter.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Jerry set his cigarette in the notch of the fishtail and reached for the tumbler of scotch.

“In this folder is an FBI memo listing Catholic Americans as potential domestic terrorists. Jerry, my internet security expert, tells me that your ranking in the Knights of Columbus and your attendance at a Traditional Latin mass are why you and other KoF families are being spied on. Most of you got categorized as domestic terrorists.”

“Can I take a look at the memo?” The orange glow of the cigarette increased and dimmed then, Jerry smashed the butt out in the fish-tray.

“It too dark out here to read. Take it home, read it, then destroy it. Especially look over the number of FBI informants

that have penetrated the Knights of Columbus."

Jerry was a cradle catholic and had been through the sex abuse, pedophilia, and gay marriage scandals. The sell-off of churches to pay lawsuits and victims made him even more obstinate. "I'll look over the information."

"Jerry, the day might come when your church has to open the Knights to all Trinitarian Christian men. There is strength in numbers."

Jerry hated change. He was born a Catholic and would die a Catholic. He finished the scotch and said, "I better get the old lady home."

At the front door, Jerry handed his keys to Joann and then lightly hugged Beth. "Honey, I promised the girls I'd come by Thursday to prep them for a math test. Is that okay?"

Beth stayed silent, and then Tom uttered. "Jerry, you and Joann are always welcome in our home anytime,"

Joann hugged Tom and asked, "Is it okay to bring over Lasagna?"

Beth could not speak as tranquility and joy-filled hardened hearts.

CHAP 32 ... **Without any words**

On the many trips back and forth to Nigeria, Tom would prearrange golf games with the Honorable Simon Bako Lagong and the two other dignitaries. On this trip, he lost a million Naira, and being an easy mark, he got invited to join the Rayfield Golf Club. Many vital deals get made on golf courses. Simon Bako was instrumental in getting the permits to install underground fuel tanks at the cutoff store. He also worked with Tom on a golfing fundraiser to get a cell tower installed on the rim of the Zangam River canyon.

Tom was astounded at the minimal red tape or pushback from environmental groups or anti-economic activists. It was unlike working with his insurance company, which took over two years to prove that his Sprinter motorhome could not be found. On the upside, with the difference in exchange rates between the Naira and the US dollar, he purchased a new 4WD Land Rover camper with no out-of-pocket money.

Abena's Yummy Preserves were for sale at a dozen golf shops by the second summer break. Mr. Onukwulu hauled fuel weekly to the new in-ground tanks at the cutoff road store. After off-loading fuel, he used the old M35 deuce and a half to haul fifty-gallon drums of kerosene into the Zangam Village. Jacob and Dad would stay overnight at the Okri homestead. With cell service now in the village, Jacob would call late in the evening so that Ben Okri could keep Abidemi updated on the canning business and hear about school.

Idogbe was preaching almost full-time and bimonthly, celebrating an early morning (TLM) Traditional Latin Mass. He was responsible for mowing the new soccer field and maintaining the playground equipment. His old yellow pickup was beyond worn out, dangerous to drive, and a burden to constantly repair. The weekly five-hour drive to the strawberry

farm and back had Idogbe discerning his spiritual calling. Nobody noticed that he never got the opportunity to rest on the Sabbath. Over the years, being squeezed between preacher, handyman, and farmer, he'd slipped into a state of depression.

Tom was past his original exile date when Idogbe's Mum died unexpectedly. He was again pondering plans to teach at a university in the United States. Tom waited a few weeks to let Idogbe grieve and finally made the call.

"Hello, Pastor Tom," Idogbe spoke into his phone while letting the weeding hoe drop between two rows of strawberries.

"How are things on the farm?" Tom asked.

"Busy, I can't keep up. I don't know how my Mum did it."

"Rest her soul," Tom said, paused, and then continued, "I know how busy you are, but we need to talk."

"I could call back after dark," Idogbe offered.

"Why don't I drive up there tonight? I'll stay overnight in my camper."

"That would be easiest. I should get finished with farm chores after eight."

"Sounds great. I'll see you then." Tom was on the road by 2 PM. The five-hour drive was an excellent time to weigh the pros and cons of some difficult decisions. A discerning preacher is considered to possess wisdom and good judgment if the truth comes from the soul.

When Tom bumped down the dirt driveway, Idogbe was dozing in the rocking chair. The very handmade chair in which his Mum had breastfed eight children while watching her husband work the field. Idogbe rubbed at his eyes, eased out of the worn chair, and stepped off the porch. Chickens scattered as he ambled down stepping stones to the front gate.

Tom parked, got out, and they embraced. "So sorry about your loss. I remember sitting on that shaded porch chatting with your Mom. She was filled with wisdom and the Holy Spirit."

"She was," Idogbe affirmed.

Tom cut right to the chase. "With all the improvements

we've made at the church, Glory and Praise headquarters wants to sell the property now that a profit is possible."

Idogbe was not only physically beaten, he was mentally drained. "Ah... Okay. I get it."

"I get it, too, but I hate seeing the church sit vacant again and dwindle to disrepair. Especially after all the work you put into making so many improvements."

"Maybe you should install an air-conditioner like you did in the apartment. Then headquarters can collect on the fire insurance and not wait to sell the property." Idogbe chided.

"That's not funny. I'm not a hands-on guy like you." Tom replied.

"And I'm not a wheeler-dealer like you," Idogbe stated with a smile. Levity between friends felt good.

Someone hollered from behind the front screen door. "Mr. Preacher, would you like some fresh strawberry lemonade?"

"That would be great," Tom yelled, then turned toward Idogbe. "So your twin sister is helping you on the farm?"

"Yes, *Chika* thinks we should turn our Mum's place into a working farm, bed and breakfast for families," Idogbe answered dismayed.

"That might be a great business venture. City dwellers could bring their kids out and feed the animals, milk the cows, get the eggs, and even pick berries. I think Chika might be on to something."

"Yeah, sure," Idogbe replied with a loathing that Tom agreed with his twin's off-the-cuff business proposal. He had more work than he could handle already. Idogbe and Chika were twins who wandered down different life paths.

* * *

Tom never missed an opportunity to play the long game. He parked in the back parking lot at the Rayfield Golf Club. The new Range Rover camper had all the amenities, including an adjustable airbed. He'd be ready in the morning after a hot meal and a good night's sleep. The foursome had played fifty or more rounds of golf over the years. They often wagered a million naira but, more recently, bet on special favors. Tom

had a new Big-Birtha B-21 driver, giving him twenty-plus yards off the tee. He was feeling a big win coming his way.

He'd just finished scrambled eggs and bacon and poured a hot cup of Kenya AAA coffee. *Tap, tap, tap* on the side door got Tom's attention. He looked at the security monitor and then slid open the door. "Our tee time isn't for 45 minutes."

"I know," Simon Bako said while stepping inside. "I want to show you this new driver I picked up. I can drive a lot further off the tee." Tom poured Simon a cup of coffee.

Later, both men had the lowest scores for the foursome. The other two golfers paid up in the lounge, saying they needed new clubs. The chef approached the table and asked Tom to add a case of Abena's Yummy Sweet Potato Butter to the next delivery. Tom took out his phone to make a note. He immediately saw a strange text: **9°49'14.4 "N 8°55'29.0" E @ 5 PM.**

"This is weird," Tom said aloud, passing his phone around the table.

One of the dignitaries blurted. "That's easy. Someone wants to meet you at these GPS coordinates at five o'clock. I'd be careful. It could be an Ashawo."

"A what?" Tom asked and then thought it could be Dan.

"A prostitute." Everyone laughed except Tom.

"I think it is from my internet security guy. He's probably in Abuja." Tom couldn't say anymore, not wanting to blow Dan's cover.

After inputting the GPS coordinates, the travel time to the end destination was less than fifteen minutes. A tall gate across a short road opened into what looked like a stadium. Tom squeezed through the chained gates that had a **NO TRESPASSING** sign. Hundreds of orange plastic stadium chairs faced a massive stage with a forty-foot-tall backdrop. Tom worked between the rows to the center aisle and looked at the most extensive Ten Commandments plaques he'd ever seen. He walked down the center aisle to see if they were correct.

"Over here... Over here..." echoed off the concrete monolith.

Tom turned, and a woman in a head-to-toe African Kaftan

dress waved. Tom zig-zagged through the stadium seats toward the entrance. As he closed in, he saw that it was Idogbe's twin. "Chika, I'm at a loss. What is this all about?"

"It's about my brother. The first time you met him, you told him that the Ten Commandments on the church wall were wrong. You told him they needed to be removed and replaced. You continually use your knowledge of the Bible to intimidate and challenge his spiritual journey. Idogbe even told our Mum that you proselytize better than you evangelize."

"I don't think that is true. I respect your brother."

"If so, Why do you still call him the church handyman, not the associate pastor, after all this time?"

Tom couldn't answer. His body and mind slumped.

"I've said my piece. I do respect how you mentored that deaf child. Idogbe told me he's on the way to becoming a master chess player."

Tom noticed someone unlocking the chain between the gates. "Oh, no! Looks like we're in trouble. Here come the police."

Chika turned and looked over her shoulder. "That's my fiancé. He runs the security detail for the Plateau State Ministry of Tourism."

"Top of the day, Mr. Seton," the uniformed Brit said while extending a hand. "You are quite the legend up north in Zangam Village. Getting a steady supply of petro and cell phone service is a game changer for them."

"It was more the doing of the Honorable Simon Bako Lagong. He pushed all the permitting and plans through."

"But are you not known as the Peacemaker of the village?"

Tom didn't answer. Chika took Tom's hand and held it between her hands. "Thank you for listening to my heart. It has the same beat as my twin brother. We've shared the same sorrow and joy from the womb till this day."

"Cheers, Mr. Seton. Lock the gate chain when you leave."

* * *

Over the next three weeks, Tom had several video conferences with Glory and Praise in Los Angeles.

Headquarters wanted a clean break, and Tom had to shift into deal-making mode. The fifty-plus-year pushback on Christianity in the United States made it difficult to fill pastor positions at home, let alone worldwide.

Tom flew home to Texas before flying on to Los Angeles. Although most of their savings account was from selling his Corvette, Beth had to sign papers to close that account. They did enjoy the additional private time that usually started with Beth trimming Tom's beard. With the girls now in high school, their extracurricular activities, odd jobs, and caddying, they were at home less.

* * *

By 3:00 PM, inside Glory and Praise church was standing room only. Ayoola Ashiru, Honorable Simon Bako, and other government officials were in the back. Chika sat between her twin brother and fiancé in the row behind the entire Onukwulu family; their baby girl, Tommy, was almost three. There had not been a church service for months, nor had the soccer field been mowed. Thanks to Ayoola's litter patrol, garbage got picked up, and trash cans emptied weekly.

Tom came to the podium and switched on the microphone. "Almost four years ago, headquarters sent me here to revitalize this Glory and Praise church and keep the girls' outreach schools in Zangam Village open. Most of you know that the outreach school is now where Abena's preserves are processed. That business is thriving thanks to Ben Okri," Tom said, pointing at Ben. The applause was heard all the way out to Frontage Road.

Tom hand signaled the boys and then held out two stacks of papers. Ekon and Jacob started passing out a financial report and a business proposal. Both were at least a foot taller than when they hung flyers that first week Tom was exiled to Lagos.

"This is a contract proposal for which I hope to get approval."

"I purchased the church and surrounding property for two hundred and thirty thousand dollars and would like to sell it

back in installments at a simple interest rate of eight percent."

"How much is that in Naira," someone in the crowd asked.

"I think that works out to about 400 million Naira, which would take about twelve years to pay off at what the current collection plate brings in. Look at the spreadsheet on the back page of the financial report."

All you could hear were pages flipping. Two more questions got asked. "Why is the pastor's salary doubling, and does the church need a motorhome?"

"Well, the church has grown and requires more time. The new soccer field and playground alone take at least ten hours a week to keep up. That increase is for the pastor and groundskeeper combined."

"Do you need a motorhome? Why not just a compact car?"

"The church maintenance truck is worn out, unsafe, and continually breaking down. The motorhome will also be an overnight place for visitors since the apartment is only one room."

There was some quiet rumbling, but overall, the vote to sell the church back got approved by a wide margin.

"I need to shout out to a young woman who helped make this happen." Tom pointed. "Chika, could you please stand up."

Chika stood and turned toward the back of the church and waved. Only a few people knew that Idogbe and Chika were twins.

"Oh, by the way, Chika has opened a farm-style bed and breakfast for city folk. It's where you and the family can stay and feed the animals, collect eggs, drive a tractor, and maybe even pull a calf. You will experience farm life first hand."

"Thank you for the plug, Pastor Tom," Chika smiled and then sat.

"Without any further a do. I want to introduce your new full-time pastor of the church of The Nine Commandments, Pastor Idogbe!" Tom avowed with a tense expression. "Pastor Idogbe, step up here and let us know what's first on your agenda."

The room hushed. Thank God that Idogbe practiced all seven virtues: chastity, temperance, charity, diligence,

kindness, patience, and humility.

Tom stepped to the side, and Idogbe lowered the microphone. "The first thing we'll do is have our parishioners decide on a new church name. It won't be the Church of the Nine Commandments."

Tom smiled and moved his head up and down to affirm Idogbe's first agenda item.

"I still haven't taken down the Decalogue that Pastor Tom wanted to remove his first week he was here." Idogbe pointed at the front wall. We also disagree on whether a bible should have sixty-six books or more.

"The good book should only have sixty-six books! Anymore are man's words and not the words of Jehovah." Yelled a new member from the back.

Another outburst followed a brief moment of silence. A man in a Kittel robe stood. "Those are not the only laws. There are six hundred and thirteen laws!"

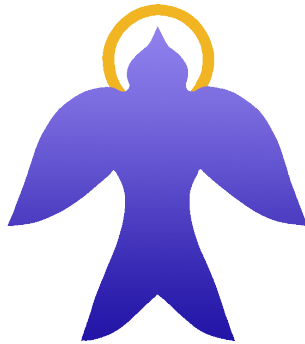
More uncomfortable silence—even Jacob felt it. The Ten Commandments have been and always will be a point of contention. While cleaning the church over the past years, Jacob observed disagreement over the Decalogue Plaques still on the front wall. The choir ladies often pointed at them during choir practice and argued. Once, one of the choir members stomped out of the church and never returned.

Jacob stood and approached the front wall, raised tall and pointed at the Decalogue. He paused on each Commandment and repeatedly moved his head up and down in affirmation. He turned around and faced the people and put one index finger over the other index finger to make the plus sign, so to say in his words—in addition. Then Jacob pointed at Jesus on the cross. Next, he made fists, crossed his arms over his chest, and twisted his shoulders like he was being hugged—the universal sign of love. He moved to the edge of the stage and pointed at neighbors, family, friends, and foes.

Everyone was playing charades in their head. Idogbe had often worked with Jacob on this message at their service for the hard of hearing. Pastor Idogbe spoke the words of Jesus into the microphone. "I give you a new commandment: Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you must also love one

another.”

Everyone heard the unspoken, silent words that a young child signed to Pastor Idogbe. Tom slipped out the side door to catch a flight home. Knowing that Idogbe would preach on all seven virtues of The Holy Spirit: Chastity Temperance, Charity, Diligence, Kindness, Patience, and Humility.



Thank you for reading my book. If you found my story inspiring and enlightening, please consider ordering a copy for a friend and leaving a review at the link below.

<https://www.amazon.com/NINE-COMMANDMENTS-James-Andrew-Edske/dp/B0DNZDFSBD>

If you would like an autographed copy, send an email with the words: **autographed copy** in the subject line and mailing info in the body of your email.

bookplot@q.com

Infinite Peace,

Charles James Lesowske

AKA: James Andrew Edske

About the Storyteller

Charles James Lesowske lives in Central Oregon and writes under the pseudonym James Andrew Edske. After trade school in 1972, Chuck started a four-year electronics and low-voltage electrical apprenticeship. When Mt Hood Community College offered courses in Integrated circuits (ICs) and microprocessors (CPUs), he jumped at the challenge to see where digital electronics was going. In the nineteen-eighties, he hard-wired personal computers (PCs) into office intranet systems, replacing mainframe systems. In 1989, the World Wide Web became public and entered homes, becoming the internet.

After Mary had their first child, they wanted less of big city life to raise their daughter. The Lesowske family moved to Sisters, Oregon. A few years later, after a second daughter was born and while building a solar home, they were saddened when two family members were called home.

Infinite Peace to the eldest, Edward Charles, father and grandfather. The youngest, Edward Harry, passed before leaving the hospital. Love you both.

IN THE SILENCE

Pending revision for Fall of 2025

COPYRIGHT © 1995
Charles James Lesowske

~ Prologue ~

David and Paul were childhood friends throughout high school, part ways for over twenty years. Both served in Vietnam, Paul as a foot soldier and David stationed out of harm's way as an electronic technician. Their lives take up again when Paul, now a priest, flies out to Colorado to confront David with some life-threatening news. It seems that prayer cannot help Paul find the forgiveness he is seeking. But David has been in harm's way since he unlawfully obtained a Clipper Chip decoder box. The little black box contained the MYK78T integrated circuit (IC), which the National Security Agency secretly developed to eavesdrop and unscramble encrypted messages over telephone lines just before the end of the Cold War in 1991.

Footnote: The US government claims to have declassified the Skipjack algorithm used in the Chipper Chip Decoder box chipset. If true, why do hackers still use an 80-bit key and a symmetric cipher algorithm when they ransom computers? Don't believe everything the government claims to be true.

DO and DIE

Pending revision, the winter of 2025

**COPYRIGHT © 2017
Charles James Lesowske**

~ Prologue ~

Two men, living over a thousand miles apart, have different ideologies— they are complete opposites. Kenneth Saxton is an unemployed logger during the Spotted Owl logging standoff. He puts a long gun to his head at the family's cabin near Zigzag, Oregon, after the unemployment checks cease.

Richard Johnson, an assembly line manager for Trask Trailers in Long Beach, California, is fired for secretly meeting with a company auditor. From the twelfth story of a hotel balcony, Richard discerns jumping to end it all.

Two things that Richard and Kenneth have in common: excessive drinking, and they both lost sons. Jabbar died from a drive-by shooting in LA, and Billy from a climbing accident on Mt. Hood. Strong men need self-worth and are always easy targets of the dark purple haze.

On that same weekend, the temporary auditor for Trask Trailers rear-ends a semi-truck after her brakes fail on a brand new, limited edition convertible sports car; she dies instantly. Kevin Trask receives a limited edition SL600 sports car as a graduation gift and is headed to Shasta Lake to meet up with friends for a houseboat graduation party. Tina, his college

girlfriend, is ready and more than willing to straighten out Kevin's distorted sexuality, all caused by what his grandfather did to him during adolescence.

After three days of drinking, drugs, sex, and Rohypnol, Kevin leaves the houseboat flotilla to climb Mt. Hood. Not only did Grandpa Trask distort his sex views, but he also gave Kevin a pocket watch with a three-word inscription: 'Do and Die.' It's not the mantra that serious mountain climbers repeat over and over. Do or die is all about being self-centered and self-achievement, unlike do and die, a term that superheroes and ordinary people often live by.

Gus Watt, the security guard at the Trask manufacturing plant, has a personal three-word mantra, "Trust in God," and continually repeats it to everybody going through his guard gate. But Gus is genuinely fixated on two letters and one number. Most people these days have forgotten what the Y2K abbreviation stood for. Without Augustine Watt's persistence, focus, prayers, and repetitive behavior, the 21st century would not be what it is today.

SON SOURCE

COPYRIGHT © 2020

Charles James Lesowske

Prologue

Son Source was a catchy business name and aligned with Zach Slenski's mission to save the planet. After Sunlyndr, a solar panel company in Oregon, bilked the federal government out of 500 million dollars, Americans had a bad taste for solar energy.

Zach was about to put the green deal back on track with his new quad solar panels, but needed venture capital. He'd spent almost five years and all his family savings on research and development. Just getting a meeting with an investment group for an upstart solar company was next to impossible.

Mr. Philip Rubin and seven members of his WWO group fully understood that good, clean, renewable energy would threaten OPEC's oil exports. A blackmail plan was put in place that could give Zach, Sally, and their two children enough money to do almost anything and repay their college funds.

Sally could help Pastor Tom grow his congregation into an online megachurch. Her natural beauty was a gift, and her calling was to be an outward example of a blessed family. She was unaware that Zach had opened a private business account named Sun Source. It was one of the conditions of doing a consulting project with a consortium of Muslim elders.

Eventually, Zach balked at the blackmail scheme, so Mr. Rubin released one of his evil associates onto Slenski's seven-year-old daughter. The perfect Christian family image was getting tested like gold to a fire.

A remarkable young lady enlightens the few remaining Son Source employees with a song and a dance after the mysterious death of her dad. Sometimes, the sins of a father don't die.

Prayers are always appreciated.

Thirty-some years ago, while searching for a publisher for my first novel, it became apparent that being direct and unknown wasn't what publishers or agents wanted. I've always refused to give up, so I refinanced our home and self-published my first novel. Along my musing journey, I committed to writing a million words before my final chapter.

One night, I awoke to a scripture passage that helped me better understand what God had put in my hands. I hope you have noticed the Word between my words. It is the only reason I continue writing. At the end of THE NINE COMMANDMENTS, I'm at 617,091 words. If you would pass my books on, it would help support my endeavor to enlighten and inspire through storytelling.

Chuck L

Corinthians 1. 3-13

Each man's work will become manifest; for the day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done.

Please join my newsletter or become a beta reader @

www.bookplot.com

