THE ASSIGNMENT SERIES

THE ASSIGNMENT: JOURNEY TO THE EXTREME



KARL HARGESTAM

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JOURNEY TO THE EXTREME

BY

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DEDICATION

To all pioneers whom God has called!
Be strong, do great exploits, go where no one has gone. Give one chance for every person!

PREFACE

Looking back at the events that transpired on the mission fields, I often wonder if they really occurred because they seem surreal with the passage of time. Yet, I know they did. My feet were on the soil of tribes unaware of our way of life. I was often the first messenger to reach remote tribes with the Gospel, discovering that while on God's assignment, the impossible became possible.

The way events have unfolded in my life is a testimony to the amazing blessing of connecting to God's assignment. How events work together for good is a puzzle until you start seeing the full picture in perspective after the pieces have fallen in place.

Those events make for a good story to share in friendly company but I have been encouraged through the years to share them with the public. The stories are the basis for this book, hopefully inspiring you to find God's assignment for your life.

The Church recognizes that the only "assignment" given it is to make disciples of all nations. According to God's word, Jesus Christ will not return until the Gospel is preached to all the world as a witness to all nations. (Matt 24:14) Every nation, tribe, people and language will be represented in the blood-washed Church of Jesus Christ. (Rev 7:9)

I believe it should be a birthright for every person to hear the Gospel at least one time in their life. "One Chance for Every Person" is what our mission work calls this assignment!

Nothing demonstrates the journey of spreading the Gospel better than the faces and footpaths I've encountered in my missionary work. While, the names, places, and events have been altered for the purpose of publication, this book represents real life toils I've had on the mission field.

When you finish reading what we went through yesterday, check us out at https://joshuacampaign.com or http://mission111.com to see what we're striving

to do today. Also visit our TV show for listing at http://theassignmentshow.tv

KARL HARGESTAM
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CHAPTER ONE

Unexpected Turns

"Do you prefer ice coffee?" Monique asked, slipping her feet into her shoes.

She noticed that scuff marks on one heel had almost wiped out the original shade of blue. A piece of cheaply manufactured brass trimming, originally a shiny invitation to the buyer's eye, now tarnished the image even further. A pair of new shoes weren't in the budget, but Monique might have to fandangle a way to purchase them.

"You know I hate ice coffee. Why would you ask me that, Mo?" Cole feigned being insulted that his wife didn't know him better, if for no other reason than to conceal the fact his mind was unfocused.

"Ice coffee's little more than frozen caffeine.
Why not just streamline an IV into your arm and skip the middleman? There's no taste to it."

Monique quickly ran a tube of chapstick across her thread-like lips. "Well, you've been staring at that cup for 10 minutes. It'll be ice, if it isn't already, by the time you get around to taking the first sip. I thought maybe you'd acquired new tastes."

Her terseness was just enough to match his. Surprisingly, she regretted that

truth, for as she watched her husband run his hand through his thinning hair she became aware of how sleep deprived he was.

Quietly sighing out of frustration, she scanned the kitchen counter until she spotted a metal globe keychain atop a recipe book.

She snatched up her keys and wondered to herself why she kept those recipe books. She hadn't had time to actually cook a dish listed in them for several months—or had it been a year already? The holidays weren't the last time she'd cracked those books open, was it? Had it been that long? Another sigh passed over her lips.

"Mom!" a blonde boy sporting black and blue Adidas shoes impatiently fidgeted in the doorway with his hands clinched around the straps of a backpack he was lumbering around on his back. Eric flashed a glare of anxiety, an expression Monique knew he'd inherited from his father.

"I'm going to be late!" His volume punctuated his point before he turned to dash for the car.

"Can't keep a 10-year-old waiting," Monique noted leaning over to kiss her husband on the forehead.

"Don't you be late either," her authoritative air always made her appear larger than her trim five-foot, five-inch frame.

"Don't worry, Mo," Cole assured her, "my first hour is study hall. I'm just the chaperone. I only play a teacher on my resume."

Cole sat staring blankly into the blackness of his coffee as he listened to the garage door close behind Monique's car backing out of the driveway.

The murky coffee stared back at him as though taunting him. He took a sip and nearly spit it back out. Mo had been right; ice cold.

Disgusted with himself, he didn't even dump it into the sink. In fact, he didn't bother with breakfast at all. Telling himself he could afford to lose a few pounds, even though a true diet was weeks away, he grabbed his backpack with his work papers jammed in it and a jean jacket hanging on a hook behind the garage door, before heading for the high school that was home to the St. Clair Rams.

The town of St. Clair, founded among the rolling corn and soybean farm fields of Indiana, couldn't exactly be deemed ambitious by nature.

Looking out across the students in his study hall, Cole accepted the reality, accented by the number of books still lingering in their backpacks that his students were typical in their lack of aspiration while in contrast holding expectations of living out the American middle class dream.

One of the cheerleaders, makeup perfectly applied, was on top of her flirt game

even this early in the morning. He watched her slowly reeling in one of the football players with a perfected facade of innocence. There was even a shallow laugh accompanying the performance.

A clique huddled in the back was cutting up over some escapade that had gone awry the prior night. Cole should have told them to quiet down and break out their books to at least give the pretense they cared about their grades. Instead, he pulled out a stack of history papers requiring grading by third period.

"No, they weren't protesting the Iraq War at Kent State," Cole heard himself mumble as he placed an exaggerated red mark on the paper.

He rubbed his eyes. He should've called in sick so he could've got some sleep. At the very least, he should've stolen the pot of coffee out of the teacher's lounge.

A fluorescent light above him flickered intermittently, irritating the fatigue headache gaining steam inside his skull. The strobe light effect didn't bother Randy Shipp, though, whose sleepy drool was landing on an old gum wrapper on his desk.

Presumably, the gum was still lodged in his mouth. Cole hoped the kid didn't choke on it. At least he wasn't snoring.

Cole wondered if it were booze or drugs Randy was sleeping off this morning. Then he chuckled when he spotted the long-haired kid was sporting a blue sock on his left foot and no sock at all on his right.

Most of the teachers wrote Randy off as a lost cause, but Cole liked him, although he acknowledged the other teachers were probably on target with their assessment. Man, it was going to be a long, long day.

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"I totally understand, Mr. Haynesworth. If you decide to reschedule the trip in the future, you'll call again, won't you?"

Monique comprehended all too well why companies were postponing booking trips with her travel agency, and she didn't have to stare long at the calculator to grasp the devastating impact to her bottom line. These days, everybody's wallet was on life support. She was a good money manager so she'd survive, but mad money had grown scarce.

"Did they cancel?" Monique's assistant asked, pretending there was suspense.

In her late twenties, Lydia had been working as Monique's assistant for three years. She enjoyed the job, but was becoming increasingly concerned with the fall off in business.

“Oui,” speaking even a word in her native tongue boosted Monique’s self-confidence. A strand of her brunette hair flopped down into her big brown eyes. She swept it back.

“Is everything ok, Mrs. Tarkington?” Lydia asked.

Monique gathered herself with a deep breath, “Oui, bien sur. Tout va bien. Yes, yes, it’s fine.”

“And at home? I mean, things ok with Mr. Tarkington and little Eric? You know you can talk to me if they aren’t. After all, I think of us as friends first.”

Monique wished she could spill her fears. What a relief it’d be just to open up and let all her worries about Cole hang out there for someone else to share. At least then, if someone else saw what she saw, she wouldn’t feel like she was being paranoid about phantom problems.

It couldn’t be labeled a phantom, though, when she witnessed Cole crying out in his sleep, sweating as though he’d run a marathon, and waking up with his heart racing just as hard.

This—this—whatever it was plaguing Cole—had been going on for a week straight now. Every night was a repeat of the night before. The terrible part? Cole wasn’t talking. Whatever was disrupting his sleep was stuck inside his head, and he was determined to keep it locked up there. Being shut out from the depths of his mind made her heart a playground for fear.

Lydia pressed the issue harder as she laid a fax down on Monique’s desk, “You’d tell me if something wasn’t right, wouldn’t you?”

“Absolutely,” Monique inherited her ability to hide things close to her vest from her father, who’d had half a decade of incorporating the trait as a kid surviving the war back in his French village.

She wondered if her mother, whom she was named after, also possessed that ability. Monique’s mother had been fatally injured in an automobile accident days after her birth. Outside of her name and a few old photos, Monique had gleaned little knowledge of her mother. It’d always been too painful for her father to speak of her, and Monique learned at an early age not to bring up the topic.

Her assistant was one of the business cuts Monique was considering making if the business downturn persisted. Best not to get any closer than they already were. Monique thought maybe she would leave early this afternoon and buy some new shoes after all. Forget what the checkbook balance read.

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“Will you follow me?” The muffled voice sounded as though it were attempting to break through a dampening haze. Cole choked off his answer with a hard swallow, unable to bring himself to lift his gaze up off the river flowing in front of him.

“Will you follow me?” the voice repeated. The tone was stronger and yet simultaneously more faint. Still, Cole didn’t lift his head.

He’d become preoccupied searching for his reflection. In an apparent act of defiance to the laws of physics, the river never projected his image back. The water appeared crystal clear, but reflections were absent.

“You won’t discover your face in there,” the voice informed him with a tone of authority that made Cole quake.

“But—”

“It’s a river of living waters. All men are part of it; therefore mankind reflects a part of it not the reverse. Now, follow me.”

Cole finally shifted his gaze upward and was startled by a figure hovering inches above the water. His hair—and Cole simply made the assumption the figure was a *he* but that couldn’t positively be ascertained—was combed straight back. The arms were covered by some sort of long piece of clothing resembling oversized judge’s robes, which the more Cole stared at, the more it blurred.

This was the premiere appearance for this figure in his dreams. But the voice didn’t that sound familiar?

Cole wondered if he were witnessing an angel, but there weren’t wings. Cole supposed if you were an angel, wings might be optional.

The face seemed peaceful; determined but peaceful. Cole noticed the features were wrinkle free. He didn’t know why he fixated on that detail but he couldn’t get it out of his mind.

Suddenly, the figure turned sharply and began effortlessly gliding downstream. Cole felt a gravitational pull to follow.

He looked back down at the river. There were no rapids to speak of and the speed of the current didn’t appear particularly dangerous. He wasn’t the best swimmer but the urge to take the risk was overpowering.

The water temperature was mild, almost as though it’d been tailor-made to suit him. The fact it was only knee deep allayed any frets he held about having to possibly freestyle his way out of this situation.

For the first time, Cole became aware he was barefoot and wiggled his big toes to prove the point. He never went anywhere without his shoes. When did he take

them off?

There was no time for all that now. The figure was moving ahead without him. Cole pushed forward. The water offered no resistance and he cut through it effortlessly. Cole struggled to keep the figure within shouting distance.

His toes were wrapping themselves around pebbles along the riverbed. Noticing that the sandy texture underneath his feet didn't slow up his pace, Cole smiled.

Seconds later, the grin transformed into a frantic grimace. He'd taken a step only to feel the bottom disappear and have a current running below the surface knock him off balance, propelling him downstream at an increasingly rapid speed.

He was flailing his arms, but couldn't get his body positioned for even a split second to recover his footing or make a break to swim his way toward shore.

The river tasted sweet as it slipped over his lips and onto his tongue. Spitting it back out, he swung his head to gain a glimpse of the figure who'd insisted Cole follow him. Now, he was nowhere in sight. Had all this been a trap?

There was no time to contemplate the answer as the current yanked him under for the first time. Cole held his breath until he broke the surface.

Gasping for air, he noticed the scenery had changed across the way on the opposite bank. Mountains and wild animals now dominated the scenery. Was that a lion drinking from the river?

The beast looked up, the gaze from its hungry eyes confirming its desperate nature. Cole was temporarily gratified that he was in the water and not on shore. That satisfaction was short-lived as a low humming roar emitted from the beast, and Cole was pulled under for a second time.

Under water, Cole attempted to kick his way back to the top, but it was as though the current wrapped an arm around his legs and was actually trying to drag him further down. Just as he thought he couldn't hold his breath another moment, water splashed his face and fresh oxygen flooded his nostrils as he resurfaced.

He opened his eyes only to find a staff being held out to him. A man, a stranger he'd never seen before, dressed in a primitive covering made of animal skin, was trying to reach him. Cole lurched toward the help but all he grabbed on to was air.

The man withdrew the staff to steady himself for a second try, but at that very instant the surface of the water broke and a giant python reared its muscular body from beneath, slithered its way onto the man, and immobilized his body

with its thick trunk.

With each squeeze of its muscles, the snake methodically tightened its grip. Cole could see the man clearly being crushed to death, with his very last breath being literally squeezed out of him.

The man collapsed onto the ground. His body lay still on the riverbank as the stream continued its onward rush undisturbed.

With snake eyes gleaming in victory, flicks of the tongue hissed at Cole as the creepy creature loosened its grip on its prey and slowly slid back into the water.

A dreaded tug came from beneath, and Cole didn't have time to get his mouth totally closed before swallowing water.

This is going to be it, he thought. How could it end like this? What about Mo and Eric? What will happen to them?

"Will you follow me?" Even in the depth of the river the amplified voice had clear diction.

Cole saw the figure hovering above him. "I did, and look what happened."

"Mr. Tarkington, you gotta wake up."

Cole recognized a new voice. The river, the figure, the snake, the man — it all vanished.

"I don't know what happened but if it involved your wife, I'd be willing to listen," Randy smirked as he tugged on his White Stripes T-shirt and chomped on the now flavorless gum rolling around in his mouth.

Cole straightened himself up in his chair. He struggled through a mental fog to regain his bearings. Wiping his mouth he cautioned, "Better leave my wife out of this."

"Just joking, Dr. Time."

Cole grimaced. He rued the day he was tagged with that nickname. "How are your grades?"

"Passing across the board."

Randy demonstrated an exuberance Cole knew was warranted.

"Passing means?"

"Three 'D's, two 'C's and one 'B','' Randy recited.

Surprised, Cole asked, "You got a 'B'?"

"Gym. You pretty much get that if you show up and run a lap."

"What about French?" Cole knew that was a weak subject area.

Randy hesitated. "That's kind of a different story like I'll ever go to France anyway."

Cole pressed, "Meaning?"

“Meaning, I probably need to take my book home some night.”

Cole asked, “Need me to help?”

Randy thought Mr. Tarkington was all right for a teacher. Still, he was reluctant to ask for help unless there was no other choice. It made him uncomfortable. Teachers had their place.
Students had their own. Even in a chaotic world, Randy knew the two weren’t really designed to mix.

“No, that’s ok. I’ll get it,” Randy answered.

“Excuse me.” The sarcastic interruption was the same greeting that welcomed them each school day over the intercom.

“Principal Giles. What an honor.” Sincerity vacated Cole’s voice.

“I’ll see you later, Dr. Time.”

“Call me if you need help,” Cole said as Randy hustled out of the room without ever looking up directly at Principal Giles.

“Dr. Time?” Giles inquired.

“A nickname the students have labeled me with. I’m sure it could be worse.”

“Not exactly a sign of respect though is it?” Giles pointed out.

Cole retorted, “I suppose in their own way it is.”

Giles was a recently divorced husky gentleman who spent most of his days divided between paperwork for the school district and patrolling the hallways. As far as Cole could tell, Giles played no favorites. He aimed to police both the students and faculty equally. Consequently, he was resented by both groups.

“Do they call you this for your history teaching skills or for, as I hear, your love of Dr. Who?”

Cole replied, “I hope a little of both.”

“Personally, I don’t see what people get out of television shows like that. Pure fantasy. A corruption of the brain cells,” Giles stated.

“Then I would think you’d rather enjoy it,” Cole shot back.

“I just passed one of the students who said I could find you in here taking a nap,” Giles leaned over Cole’s desk like a bulldog anxious for his bark to turn into a bite, “and from your blurry reaction when I walked in here, I’m assuming they were for once telling me the truth.”

Cole shrugged, “I fell asleep. Sue me. It happens.”

“A word of caution Mr. Tarkington, never use the word ‘sue’ around a principal.”

“Sorry.” Cole stood to begin gathering his papers together.

“It’s been a rough week.”

“That may be, but you get paid to endure rough weeks, not to come in and sleep it off.”

Cole resented the implication. “I wasn’t sleeping anything off. It wasn’t like that.”

“I wish I could say I was surprised, Mr. Tarkington, but frankly, I think we both know your heart hasn’t been in your job, lately, don’t we?” A smirk crept onto Giles’ face.

“What are you talking about? I love my job!” The mental clog had momentarily dissipated and now Cole was plainly irritated.

“Maybe, so,” Giles wasn’t convinced, “still, go home.”

“What?”

“You heard me. Go home. It’s Friday, so we can survive the rest of the day without you. Go home, take a long nap there. Sleep in tomorrow morning. Do something relaxing. But on
Monday I want to see you back in here full of vigor like it were your first day on the job and not possibly your last.”

“But—”

“Would you prefer I mark this incident in your permanent jacket?”

Cole felt himself resigning to the fact he’d lost this skirmish.

“I didn’t think so. Have a nice weekend.” Cole swore he heard Giles snicker on the way out the door.

CHAPTER TWO

Teguash

STRAIGHTENING THE ANIMAL SKIN GARB he was wearing, the Ethiopian man lingered for a last look around the hut. He grabbed the hand-carved walking staff from the dirt floor then paused briefly for despite the impoverished nature of the dwelling memories resided here.

The value of a memory is solely set by the one possessing it. The man recalled his wife, deceased now some three years.

The image of her in her prime was as real as if she'd actually been standing in front of him wishing success. Then he grimaced, reliving the excruciating feverish pain that had seized her body. She'd succumbed to the virus a month later.

Their baby had crossed the river of eternity a week earlier, but his soul mate had been too delirious to realize it.

He was well rested for this journey. That was a small blessing, for he'd initially feared the haunting dreams had drained his essence. The reappearing python was fierce, but at this point he'd taught himself not to fret over it.

The beast symbolized fear. The best way to defeat that intangible enemy was by ignoring it.

The man, whom the Ethiopian had witnessed being trapped by the river current, remained a mystery. The voice, though, was compelling, and he inevitably realized the only way to put the issue to rest was to pursue it. Where that pursuit would lead him remained unclear. The Ethiopian man believed the key lay with the Horro Tribe, for he'd recognized their countryside in his dream.

The yellow-orange glow of the sun had cracked the mountainous horizon within the past hour, but most of the small Ethiopian village was already waiting for the man as he exited the hut. Children, eyes wide with larger than life puzzlement, clutched their parents while emotional anticipation engulfed the grownups around them.

All 6 foot of the man stood proud in his doorway. The stern jaw spoke of determination, and the deep time lines cut into his face served as badges of honor from the battle of everyday life preoccupying his people.

A flask of water was slung over one shoulder. He'd managed to scrape up a fistful of meager morsels to take with him. They were safely tucked away inside a handful of leaves.

It'd take him weeks navigating the terrain to reach the Horro tribe. The rest of his planning he'd improvise, taking on faith that it'd work out.

A rush of whispers rippled through the crowd as he strolled forward. He could make out the Amarinja word "Teguash" being bantered about. "Teguash … Teguash … Teguash."

People had tagged him with this name shortly after he'd decided to start the journey, hoping to end the monthlong persistent dreams.

Now people were repeating the name almost as a way of support. The word

meant “Wanderer,” and his journey had become theirs. A legend was being born. It was a tale that’d be passed down in the oral history of his people for generations.

As he strolled out of the village compound, he never considered it’d be months before he saw his people again.

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Two brothers were hunched beside the hillside campfire. The overhead moon illuminated the shadowy world they’d entered. Seyum chanted for the presence of the god Atern to enlighten their way. In ritualistic fashion, Seyum commanded the guidance he required to be at his beck and call.

Seyum grounded a small mallet into a wooden bowl of paste concocted earlier in the day from plants possessing magical properties.

It was a formula secretly passed down over the centuries by tribal Shamans before being learned by him upon assuming the mantle of witchdoctor.

After dipping his finger, he spread the paste on each cheek while reciting the spell to enhance his visionary capabilities.

Finished, Seyum passed the paste over to his brother, Besufukad, who dutifully repeated the process.

There was a trance-inspired dance, one conjured to a musical beat attracting spirits from another realm whom Seyum was sure were dancing around the fire with him.

He felt his spirit join theirs. His body transformed to a temporary shell being left behind as he connected with them.

Besufukad tossed a handful of paste into the fire. The two brothers stared into the flames. Time became existential.

They stared until they fixated on what they were looking for, which turned out to be a lone figure working his way from over unfamiliar hills into the vision.

The stranger had a stride that could only be interpreted as one with purpose. The face was strong and determined, and the eyes never wavered from the path.

Besufukad spoke first, “We have failed. Our spells have not deterred this threat.”

“We haven’t failed totally,” Seyum pointed out.

“There is only one. The python has worked.”

“If the python was successful, then both of them would be gone. The python must not have been fierce enough to handle this dual threat. We should’ve made

it stronger or picked a beast with more fortitude," Besufukad argued.

"And what beast would that be? What one possesses more fortitude and cleverness than the python, which can slither undetected on land or swim hidden in the water?"

"We must take action. We must strike now," a tinge of desperation in Besufukad's voice struck a chord.

Seyum understood the anxiety. In all their years, this was the first time a perceived threat had forged its way through their magic.

Seyum reassured his brother, "If we got rid of one then there is still time to destroy the other."

Seyum motioned to Besufukad, who withdrew carved bone fragments from a pouch tied around his waist. The men crouched before the fire as Besufukad shook them, then rolled the pieces on the ground.

The two men studied the ancient hieroglyphics carved on the bone. These were ancient runes set to aid them in deciphering the future. The pieces possessed hidden wisdom they respected.

"Look," Seyum muttered.

Besufukad was confused by what he read as well, "It mentions a threat by two but we only saw one. How can this be?"

"I don't know," Seyum confessed.

"We stopped one of the two, for the foreigner has vanished from our vision. So what is the second threat?" Besufukad asked.

"Maybe there's a third person," Seyum reasoned.

A perplexed Besufukad asked, "Why have we not seen him?"

"I don't know."

Besufukad was insistent, "If we can't see him then how can we stop him? Maybe we should call on a falcon to hunt our adversary. From eyes in the sky he cannot hide."

"No. If he is cloaked from our vision there is a reason. Maybe, he wields magic we have not encountered before that is concealing his presence." The possibility something rivaling their power was headed in their direction startled Seyum.

"Either way," he concluded, "we would be wise to seek counsel before acting again."

Besufukad paused. "If we do this, then we must keep it to ourselves. If word leaks out, our stature among our people will be damaged."

Seyum nodded in agreement. Standing up, he beckoned to a figure sitting in

the darkness several yards away. A teenager obediently jogged toward them.

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"The Powerful One," as Seyum referred to him, had his respect girded in fear, a fear held by weaker beings who opted to follow the dictates of survival. He shared his warmth when need be, but never was truly intimate with anyone less than equal. So far, he hadn't met an equal.

Those questioning or challenging his power quickly discovered their destiny reversed. Their fortunes dried up, drifting away like the unfertile winds on the plains. For those who persisted, illness struck them down, tormenting their bodies with the ravages of disease. Excruciating pain lingered in their limbs until they begged death to enter their hut and bring relief.

"Niguse, we have a mission for you. Go to the powerful one, tell him—," Seyum looked at his brother, "tell him a threat approaches. His assistance is required. Do what the powerful one tells you, ok?"

Niguse nodded. The instructions were clear.

"Listen." Seyum jerked Niguse's head up so their eyes locked onto one another.

Even by the firelight, Niguse felt the stare piercing his mind, "You do exactly what he tells you to do, and you stay there until he gives you permission to leave, understood?"

Niguse's voice trembled, "Yes sir."

"Go," Seyum commanded.

Niguse did an about-face and set off into the night for a village that he knew it would take him at least half a day to reach.

No one knew for sure how old the Powerful One was, only that the bald man with the dark eyes had been wielding his magic for as long as anyone could remember from his village on the mountain.

He sat on a stool at the doorway to his hut. Only the brave — or the desperate —approached. Those who entered the abode were never the same when they left.

Fathers of the Horro, seeking special favor, would bring a daughter to him. She'd still have the makeshift metal lock hanging from her waist to signify her chastity hadn't been claimed yet by another. When the witchdoctor was through with her, he'd dispose of her to someone less deserving, almost as a spiteful act of pity or mocking charity.

The Powerful One had a name. It was Tamrat. When it came to true power

among the Horro, Tamrat ruled as far as his eye could see from his mountain perch.

Niguse entered the village shortly after the sun reached its pinnacle in the sky. With trepidation, a villager pointed him in Tamrat's direction. By the time he reached Tamrat sitting on his stool, Niguse got the vibe from the burst of sudden activity in the village that his presence was already the topic of major conversation.

"Sir, my name is Niguse," he was fatigued, out of breath, and thirsty so the words weren't fluent.

Tamrat held up his hand motioning for silence. He studied Niguse for a moment. He was a willing apprentice. Tamrat sensed that.

Niguse was startled when Tamrat stood, then entered his hut. Was he supposed to follow?

Niguse looked around for a sign of direction but all he received were the eyes of villagers staring back at him from a safe distance.

After a few moments, Tamrat reemerged carrying a bowl with a small knife inside it.

Tamrat grabbed Niguse's arm. Niguse instinctively tried pulling back but Tamrat gave a violent tug and glared deep into Niguse's eyes. Resistance ceased at that point.

Holding the bowl underneath, Tamrat sliced the hand. Niguse winced as the blade slid across his skin and his nerve links cringed from an overload of pain. Niguse positioned himself so the blood would trickle down into the bowl.

"I know the message sent to me by your masters," Tamrat explained.

Niguse felt queasiness rumbling through his stomach.

"Tell them to concentrate on what they see. I will destroy the others."

Niguse shook his head that he understood.

"You are a vassal now. Tell your masters that their victory rests in your blood and what I can do with it." Tamrat withdrew the bowl. "Don't worry; the wound will heal within two sundowns. Now go."

Niguse wished he could rest but he didn't dare suggest it. Instead, he slowly turned back toward the path he'd come and began the trek back to his village.

CHAPTER THREE

Mulu

HER HEAVY BREATHING MINGLED AMIDST chirping crickets as her long muscular legs kept up the pace. Glancing behind, she saw two jocks in the distance miserably laboring to keep up.

Mulu smiled. She hadn't experienced freedom to run like this since leaving Ethiopia, where the rocky hills, razor-thin altitude and generations of long-distance tradition trained her well. Endurance and speed. That's what her brother always told her.

"Dude, let her go," one of the jocks stammered while downshifting his body to pull up and catch his breath. This girl was more trouble than football sprints.

His buddy countered, "We … we … we can't let her get away." Secretly, he was glad to have any excuse to stop for a moment.

"Why, not?" the first jock questioned while clutching his letter jacket.

"We'll never hear the end of it at school. By Monday, she'll have told everybody." Who knew some foreign college student could create so much hassle? "Besides, it's 20 bucks!"

"We'll never have to pay." The statement solicited a look of confusion from his buddy.

"Who's going to believe her? Come on man, think about it. She's got no friends. She barely even speaks American." He gave his partner a reassuring slap on the shoulder.

"Yeah, guess you're right."

"Of course, I'm right," he declared zipping up his jacket.

"Forget you!" his friend shouted in a sham of defiance but the girl was already a moving dot down the street.

"Come on. Let's head back to the party." The two were ready to resume their funtastic ways. After all, football and chasing the girls is why they'd enrolled in college.

For her part, Mulu was thinking this race was one of the easier bets she'd ever won. The fact it was against two jocks constantly running her down made victory sweeter. Twenty bucks each — suckers.

She hurdled a small hedgerow growing at the edge of a yard almost landing on a fire hydrant positioned on the opposite side.

A startled mutt yelped as his private business was interrupted.

As she felt the sidewalk underneath her feet, Mulu glanced back and saw the jocks were walking in the opposite direction.

"What?" she heard herself exclaim in disgust as she grinded to a stop.

Randy's aged Pontiac Sunbird with flakes of peeling paint clinging to the hood courtesy of a factory chemical defect rumbled past the suburban houses where most residents were lounging in front of their television sets watching reruns of shows just as mindless the second time around as they were the first.

He'd just clocked out of his part-time grease burger job and was cruising over to Dante's house where he was hoping to score something more substantial than the cigarette dangling haphazardly between his lips.

The interior lining of the car hung down slightly. The seats, color faded from years of misuse, had little cushion left in the springs.

The Yeah Yeahs "Zero" reverberated over the stereo while the back window thumped with the beat, threatening to extend its crack even further.

Randy hummed partially off-key between puffs. Turning his head, he flicked the butt out the window then scooted in his seat looking for that comfort spot.

Randy's eyes refocused on the road just in time to see a lanky girl jog out into the street without looking and then stop for no apparent reason.

"Arrrgggggghhhhh!" he screamed as the brakes squealed.

The girl locked her eyes on his a split second before he heard a thud and Randy watched dumbfounded as her body disappeared in front of the car.

Randy sat still behind the wheel pondering what he'd just witnessed. He wasn't sure how long his actions were paralyzed only that enough time elapsed for his heart to return to a normal beating rhythm. His fingers were gripped so firmly around the steering wheel that it took a conscious effort by his brain to convince them to let loose.

Stepping out of the car, he noticed porch lights flick on. He tentatively approached the front of the car preparing himself for a scene of slasher movie worthy gore.

Reaching the front of the car, he was relieved to see a lack of body parts strewn around the street. The girl was intact but Randy's stomach suddenly sunk. She wasn't moving and her open eyes appeared lifeless. There wasn't even a blink.

Bending down to check for a pulse, he reached for her wrist. Suddenly, there was a jolt through her body almost as though someone had hooked on a set of jumper cables to revitalize her. Randy jumped back.

"Ouch!" the girl yelled out.

“Ouch?” a shocked Randy repeated.

Mulu opened her eyes, “Yes ouch. You hit me with a car, Mister.”

“Sorry, it was an accident.” Randy reached down to help her up.

She waved him off, “I think I should lay here a moment.”

“Yeah sure, look, I’m sorry but you just ran out into the middle of the street. You shouldn’t do that!” He was disgusted with himself for not finding a stronger way to scold her.

Recomposed, Randy asked, “Are you going to be ok?”

“I do not know. Do you always talk to your victims this way?” Mulu sounded perturbed.

“Hey, you’re the idiot who doesn’t look where she’s going.” Randy didn’t appreciate the scorn of a woman who’d underestimated the stopping potential of refurbished brakes.

“What’s happened?” He bent down to examine Mulu.

Randy shouted, “She ran out in front of me, man! That’s what happened.”

“Stay calm,” Cole told him.

“Easy for you to say.” Randy turned his pockets inside-out searching for another cigarette. Then it dawned on him, “What are you doing here?”

“This is my street,” Cole informed him while keeping his attention on Mulu. “Are you, ok?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Randy stated.

“That’s good, but I was talking to her,” Cole shot back.

“I’ll be all right, sir.” Mulu started sitting up.

“You’d better lie there until the ambulance arrives,” Cole advised.

“Ambulance?” she was surprised by the fuss.

“Yeah, I had my wife call them. What’s your name?”

“Mulu.”

Sirens wailing in the background grew closer.

“Well, Mulu. Hang tight. Help’s on the way. Better to be safe than sorry as they say.”

“Who says?” The phrase didn’t translate well especially in all the excitement.

The paramedics arrived and, after checking Mulu out, determined it was best to transport her to the hospital for further tests. She’d impacted her head pretty hard on the pavement and stitches were required to close the wound.

“You know pedestrians have the right of way, right?” the officer asked Randy.

“That was in the driver’s manual when I took the exam, right? Of course, I know that,” Randy shot back.

“Well, I’ve got to issue you a ticket,” the officer informed him.

Randy grew incredulous, “A ticket? What for, man?”

“Stay calm, son,” the officer warned. “You can tell the judge your side of the story at your court hearing.”

“Court?” Randy stepped toward the officer but found Cole’s hand wisely warning him to hold back.

Cole asked, “It’s a minor infraction, right officer?”

The officer looked at Cole for a second, “He could lose his license.”

“What?” Randy threw up his arms. This was his worst nightmare. Well, one of them anyway.

The officer smirked, “But you’ll probably just end up with a fine and a court-ordered refresher course.”

“How am I gonna pay a fine?” Randy demanded to know.

“That’s your problem. Just don’t miss the court date,” the officer advised as he passed Randy the ticket to sign.

“He’ll be there,” Cole assured the officer.

“Court? Mr. Tarkington, I can’t afford to go to court.” Randy stared at the ticket as though it were a death notice.

“Deal with one thing at a time, ok? We’ll get it worked out when the time comes,” Cole told him.

. . . . . .

Rev. Hasbro’s cellphone blared out the Notre Dame fight song when Monique called. He didn’t mind late night interruptions especially from church members. Normally, he’d be readying for the typical canned banter and dryly written monologues of late night talk shows, but this evening he was inexplicably restless. His spirit felt troubled, and he was uncertain why.

Feeling uncomfortable, he’d made an excuse to his wife before going back over to the church where he had served as senior pastor the last five years. The darkened sanctuary seemed more like a desolate cave without people. The moonlight seeped in through the windows complementing the royal blue carpet, but the lively atmosphere that encompassed the facility during the day had vanished in the darkness.

In his office, Rev. Hasbro opened his Bible in a vain attempt to study. Instead, his mind wandered off on its own. The reverend at first blamed his failure to concentrate on fatigue but eventually admitted to himself the truth that he just wasn’t tired. Still, he couldn’t focus on any one thing for more than 30 seconds.

He began questioning himself, assuming some unforeseen guilt lay at the bottom of his troubles and a tough interrogation of himself would force the true culprit to the surface.

Then again, could it be as simple as him growing complacent with his congregation? Did the church need a new spark to fire up their spirits?

Leaning back in his office chair, Rev. Hasbro couldn't guess what that would be or why he was even thinking along those lines. There'd been no real complaints from any members.

Parishioners weren't squabbling. Finances had dipped slightly but he attributed that to the economic times.

Had they all grown complacent? Possibly, although, he wasn't totally sure what that meant. He never got the chance to figure it out, as Monique's call pulled him from his deep pondering. She rambled about an accident. Rev. Hasbro never grasped all the details but did conclude that Cole was all right.

The reverend promised to meet Cole at the hospital. Rev. Hasbro was sure to gain a clearer picture of events once he arrived. Besides, a shepherd must tend to his flock at all hours and not just nine to five.

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"Hello, Cole."

"Hello, Reverend." The two men shook hands.

"I'm relieved it isn't you who's been admitted here," Rev. Hasbro declared as he looked down at Mulu. She was looking back up at him equally hard. He noticed part of her head had been shaved for what looked like a fresh set of stitches.

"That makes two of us. Reverend, this is Mulu."

Hasbro nodded his head, "Nice to meet you."

Mulu did a half-wave back to him.

Cole continued, "Mulu this is Reverend Hasbro. He's my pastor."

"As you can see I'm always on call." Pointing to the stitches, Rev. Hasbro noted, "That's a beaut."

Cole explained, "She's the reason you're here."

"He is the reason we are here," a slightly numbed Mulu corrected motioning toward Randy, who was leaning against the far wall.

"Give me a break. Don't forget who stopped in the middle of the street." Randy was still defensive.

“Well, let’s just assume I’m here for all of you, shall we?” Rev. Hasbro suggested.

Cole explained by way of introduction, “Randy - he hit Mulu with his car.”

“Oh, my,” Hasbro said. “Nothing serious, I hope?”

“Possible — possible —” Mulu stumbled searching for the word which was on the tip of her tongue.

Cole filled in the blank, “Concussion. So, they want to keep her in here overnight. You know she’s a college student from —”

“Ethiopia,” Mulu said.

“No family?” Hasbro asked.

Mulu winced. If her family saw her now, they’d be crushed that she allowed this predicament to occur, especially under the circumstances it did.

Her father would lecture her then probably hunt down Randy and the two jocks for revenge. Her mother’s frown would convey the disappointment in her heart and prompt Mulu to recognize that she was in St. Clair to learn and not to race for $20 like some child vendor at the bus station back in Addis Ababa nipping at the heels of businessmen and tourists.

Her six brothers and two sisters definitely would keep the insults hurling so that every waking hour Mulu would be regaled by the story of how those stitches got placed in her head, as though the throbbing wasn’t reminder enough.

It wasn’t the worst event to transpire in Mulu’s life, and she possessed the fortitude to plough past this point. Mulu’s inner strength was forged on the streets of Addis Ababa, where only the tough survived and the weak found their corpses being stepped over by strangers.

As a child, she gophered her way through city dumps to root out rotten morsels of food to sustain her and the rest of the family. She recalled waking up in the morning soaking wet after a torrential downfall because there wasn’t enough tin or plastic to keep her dry while she slept in an alleyway.

Her mother protected her from the advances of strangers while her father worked shady deal after shady deal to begin building a more stable life. There were consequences since not every deal went according to plan.

Mulu’s parents had discovered two of her brothers slashed to death. Their bodies, nose down in the gutter, had the last moments of agony etched on their faces.

Another brother had become warped by the drugs so predominate in their neighborhood. Eventually his addiction became so consuming that her father had banished him. They never heard from him again.

One sister grew fascinated by fancier clothes and nurtured a taste for her own bankroll. Secretly, she started working the bars in the capital bringing in a tidy sum from customers who willingly put down their hard-earned cash to satisfy an unrelenting sexual desire.

Mulu's sister increased her bankroll but all the currency in the world couldn't prevent her body from wasting away with AIDS. There were no medicines to heal the lesions or pills to halt the vomiting. Mulu watched as her vibrant sister become an unrecognizable shell that one afternoon passed away into oblivion.

Yet, for all her travails, Mulu's story wasn't unusual for someone from Ethiopia. Life didn't come easy, but infectious turmoil did. Mulu was lucky. She'd finally managed to find a way out.

Mulu had all this flashing through her mind when she suddenly became aware that she was vocalizing her thoughts.

She focused in on the group standing around her bedside. The horrific expressions on their faces looked as though they'd come face to face with a universe they didn't know existed.

She hadn't been aware she was babbling her life story. It had to be the pills and the IV propelling her to put her past on display. She didn't know how long she'd been speaking but now she was tiring.

When Mulu paused, Rev. Hasbro, and Cole for that matter, was speechless. The clergyman hadn't prepared himself for the onslaught of Mulu's background. He had to damper his emotions and chose to do so by changing the subject.

"And you?" Hasbro asked turning to Randy, "Are you a college student as well?"

"Me? Right now, don't I wish. Dr. Time here …"

Cole grabbed Randy by the scruff of his neck. "That's Mr. Tarkington to you, understood?"

"Mr. Tarkington can tell you I'm one of his students."

Cole released him. "With some sorrow, I have to admit this truth."

"I see." The situations a shepherd finds himself in, Rev. Hasbro thought.

"Do you mind if I ask are you Muslim, Christian or something else, Mulu?" Rev. Hasbro thought he sounded more official than he really needed to at this moment.

"Muslim?" Mulu seemed almost offended.

"They have Muslims in Ethiopia, right?" Rev. Hasbro asked suddenly a little unsure of himself. Cole nodded letting him know that they did.

Mulu continued, "My family would kill me if I ever converted to Islam."

“Well, we’ll try not to let that happen then,” Rev. Hasbro said smiling.

“No fear, Father,” Mulu reassured him.

“Oh no, I’m not a Father,” Rev. Hasbro corrected.

“What Father … I mean Rev. Hasbro is saying is that he’s not Catholic. He is a Protestant so you don’t need to call him Father,” Cole explained.

“Oh.” Mulu concealed her befuddlement. The pain killers coursing through her veins were inducing drowsiness. It was all she could do to keep her eyelids open.

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“Was everything all right?” Mrs. Hasbro inquired as she watched her husband prepare for bed.

“Yes, it’s fine,” Rev. Hasbro said, almost too distracted to answer.

“Well, Cole wasn’t hurt was he?”

Rev. Hasbro looked up from his thoughts, “Cole? No, he’s fine. He wasn’t even involved really.”

“Then what was he doing at the hospital?” Mrs. Hasbro asked.

“Some student of his ran over another student, a college student from Ethiopia. Happened right near their house actually.”

“Oh my, no one was seriously hurt, I hope?”

“Bump on the head, slight concussion. That’s all,” he explained.

“That’s all? Sounds serious to me,” Mrs. Hasbro said, sitting further up in the bed.

“It could’ve been much worse,” the reverend’s voice trailed off.

“Then what is it?” she inquired.

He focused on her for the first time.

She examined his expression. “I know that look, Bill. You have something on your mind.”

“It’s the girl.”

“She’s not a Muslim or something, is she?” Alice Hasbro didn’t trust “those alien religions” as she put it. Trouble always seemed to be in their wake.

“No, she’s Christian,” he assured her.

Alice found herself a little surprised by that fact. “Oh, so you got to pray with her?”

“Yes, yes, we prayed. She seemed to be happy we did actually.” He recalled how skepticism appeared to have left the girl’s face when they joined hands.

Alice knew him well enough to see by the way he was recalling the moment that the satisfaction was lacking. “What is it, Bill?”

“I wish I knew. I’ve been troubled all night. And when I went to pray with this girl … it wasn’t the prayer. No, that wasn’t it. Something about what she was telling us beforehand, about her home. The poverty she came from.” He could feel himself tensing up as though a sermon was about to come pouring out of his mouth.

“Those people have such sad stories over there. You can’t let her misery bring you down,” Alice assured him.

“That’s just it,” Rev. Hasbro replied turning toward her.

“It didn’t bring me down because she wasn’t down.” He was genuinely surprised to suddenly pinpoint that kernel of truth.

“Here was this girl from some village, I don’t know where, who in spite of her circumstances managed to foster the desire to come here and get an education. To do something that might open up a future she didn’t have before.”

“Millions of people do that,” his wife stated.

He could see his point wasn’t coming across.

“Maybe. But what I don’t understand is how one can find such hope in a swamp of hopelessness? Where does that come from?” Rev. Hasbro was at a loss.

Alice knew she wasn’t supposed to answer the question. Her husband, a thoughtful person who took his job to heart, was piecing a puzzle together for himself.

“More importantly,” he continued, “is there something I need to do to nurture it?”

“You can’t save the world, dear,” Alice reminded him.

“Maybe. But aren’t we supposed to try? Isn’t that what we believe?”

“This girl must’ve made some impression. Did Cole leave feeling this way?” Alice inquired.

Rev. Hasbro shrugged, “I don’t know.”

“Well, you should’ve talked to him about it,” she suggested.

Cole had left shortly after the prayer to take his student home so the opportunity had never arisen for them to discuss their impressions of Mulu. Rev. Hasbro didn’t know what Cole was thinking if anything. Maybe fatigue was warping his logic after all. Besides, what were the odds he’d ever see the girl again?

“Aren’t you two playing racquetball tomorrow?” Alice asked.

“Yes, we are,” he answered.

“Well?”

“Well? Well—well, I guess I could talk to him then. Just to feel out what his impression was.”

Alice smiled. “Good thinking.”

Hasbro grabbed his robe.

“Where you going?” Alice asked noticing that her husband seemed to be drifting back into his thoughts.

“Something I need to do. Don’t wait up,” he told her leaving the room. She took him at his word and switched off the light.

Downstairs, Rev. Hasbro did what he always did when he was confused or had an issue grab hold of his spirit that wouldn’t let go. With the curtains drawn in the family room to the point even the street lights didn’t penetrate, he knelt down on his knees to pray.

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“Ok, that’s it!” Monique scooted up against the headboard before reaching over to flip on the light.

“What are you doing?” Cole looked over at the clock. The blue neon light read 2 a.m. “Do you know what time it is?”

“Si je sais quelle heure il est? Ah ça oui, Dr. Time!” She pointed to the clock which by now flashed 2:01.

“That’s what I’m saying.” He sounded more authoritative than wisdom advised him was prudent.

There! There was that look. Cole learned long ago to recognize it. The look where Monique’s eyes glanced down, the lips tightened up, her arms instinctively folded and yes, there they went—the fingers tapping as though some internal jeopardy clock he couldn’t hear was ticking away. The look that simply said, “Do you realize how dangerous your life has just become?”

“What?” Cole protested, sitting himself up in preparation for what was about to come.

“That was the third time you’ve kicked me when turning yourself over.” She sounded more like a school teacher than he did at this moment.

Cole apologized, “Sorry, I didn’t mean to.”

“That’s not the point,” Monique stated.

“It isn’t?” Retreat seemed like the wisest course of action.

“No, it’s not. Pourquoi les hommes sont si obtus?”

“I know what you just said and …”

Monique slapped the mattress between them. “Pay attention. This is serious.”

“I am paying attention. I’m sitting here at two in the morning having this conversation. How much more attention do you want?” he asked.

“I want you to tell me what is going on with you,” she demanded in a worried tone.

Cole fidgeted. He wasn’t sure he was prepared for this conversation even though he’d sensed it coming for the last few days. Now that it was here, a total cloud of unpreparedness crept over his body.

“Have you even slept any at all tonight?” she asked.

Cole shook his head “no.”

“I didn’t think so,” Monique said. “Something’s going on. You know we always face things together. Let’s not start making exceptions.”

Cole acknowledged his wife was right. Whatever was occurring, it wasn’t proper for him to shut her out. Their marriage was a partnership too important to allow being weakened by his nightmarish fears.

For the first time since the dreams started, he opened up to her. Keeping his fingers crossed that he didn’t sound too crazy, he started from the beginning. He shared in detail about the river, the voice, the angel, the snake, and the strange man always appearing on the opposite bank whom Cole was beginning to accept was the key to this whole puzzle.

Cole laid out the whole insanity that had confiscated his sleeping hours. He bared his mind and prayed his wife wouldn’t call for a shrink first thing in the morning.

. . . . . .

Eric heard a noise near the base of his bed. It was ever so slight but just enough to make him open his eyes.

At first, he thought it was his mom. She had a habit of popping her head in before she went to bed, but the door to the room remained shut.

He started closing his eyes to drift back to sleep but then the distinct sound of something bumping his skateboard sitting on the floor across the room made them pop back open.

He tugged gingerly on the cover clutched between his fingers until the blanket overlapped his chin. The whites of his eyes shone in the darkness over his covering as he scanned the room seeing if he could spot the intruder he feared was lurking.

A shadow brushed across the plush carpet in his room almost like someone was skidding across the floor in their socks. Eric dropped the cover from his fingers and sat up. The darkness seemed suddenly still.

Eric leaned over the side of the bed, peeking underneath, half expecting a monster to pop out. Outside of a pair of muddy socks his mom hadn't spotted yet and a soccer ball that'd rolled under there after practice yesterday, life was quiet beneath the place where he slept.

He slid out of bed, gingerly walking toward the end of it.

There was nothing there. He made his way over to the door to his room and cracked it open. Nothing was hiding on the other side waiting to jump at him and yell "Boo!" In fact, the rest of the house was eerily quiet, as though he were alone in the place.

Shutting the door, he scratched his head, yawned, and started back toward bed. Just before climbing into it, he jumped. Something slid across his toes! He made out a form scurrying toward the closet, where it disappeared through the crack beneath the door.

Holding his breath, afraid to cry for help, he wondered if he should run toward his parents' room. Just about the time he'd convinced his legs to move, a thump from inside the closet startled him. A few seconds later, it was followed by another thump then another. Within a gasp or two, there'd been several thumps against the door itself.

He raced to grab a baseball bat leaning up against the dresser and slide on the catcher's mask hanging on its handle.

Armed, he tiptoed toward the closet. With his first step, the thumps ceased. Raising the bat, he maintained his approach.

Reaching for the handle, he took a deep breath, raised the bat, and flung open the door so hard it banged the wall.

From out of the darkness, as though darkness itself shaped it, a giant python lurched forward at him. He screamed—for how long he wasn't sure—but it was the loudest gut-wrenching scream he'd produced since being a baby with a dirty diaper hankering for a bottle.

The python's gapping mouth enveloped him whole. His scream disappeared into the vacuum of the python's insides. Eric went to swing the bat but it no longer seemed to be in his hand.

"Mom! Mom! Dad!" he cried out. Opening his eyes he realized he was still lying in his bed. There was no bat. The closet door was even shut. The whole thing had been a nightmare.

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Cole awaited Monique's reaction. She knew everything now.

"Come on, Mo. Say something," he pleaded.

"Sssh. I'm thinking," she said.

"Yeah, but what are you thinking?" he asked.

"And you think the Ethiopian girl, this one in the hospital—"

"Mulu."

"Mulu," she repeated.

"Yeah, I think she's connected. I can't explain it. But when she was talking about her village, and the life she came from, and what she had to go through to get here, I kept thinking of that river in the dream and the old man—"

"Do you think he could be Ethiopian? I mean the man in your dreams?"

Cole shrugged, "Could be. I've never been to Ethiopia so I couldn't know for sure. But there was definitely an African theme to the whole scene. Python and all."

"Did you mention any of this to Rev. Hasbro?" Monique asked.

"Are you kidding? Look how long it took me to mention it to you." Cole was uneasy with other people knowing the chaos unfolding inside his head.

"Yes, but he was there with the girl, too. How did he feel about her?" Monique asked.

Cole threw up his hands. "How do I know?"

"All I'm saying, if she made an impression on you, maybe she did on Rev. Hasbro as well."

She shot him a look that said, "You know I'm right on this one."

"Maybe," he reluctantly acknowledged.

"And the other stuff, maybe it has spiritual meaning," she summarized.

"He's going to think I'm nuts," Cole retorted.

"That's his job to handle stuff like this. He might surprise you. Besides, you're friends." Monique wished Cole would have more trust in people.

"What's that got to do with anything?" he asked.

"Talk to him—how do you say—talk to him man to man."

She was rather satisfied now with the way she'd handled the whole situation and relieved that finally she understood what was wrong with her husband.

"Man to man …" Cole mumbled.

"It's worth a try," Monique replied.

“Mom! Mom! Dad!” The voice came from down the hallway and both parents instinctively looked at each other.

“Eric!” they said simultaneously, yanking back the covers and hitting the floor. Cole was first to reach the bedroom door, and when he opened it, Eric barreled straight into him.

“Whoa, son! Hold up.” The last instruction wasn’t necessary as Eric already had his arms around his waist and was holding on for dear life.

Cole picked him up, which was becoming an increasingly difficult task with each passing day.

“What’s the problem guy?” Cole felt the genuine tremble in his son’s body.

Monique brushed Eric’s hair back and planted a kiss on the forehead. “Did you have a bad dream?”

Eric shook his head, “Very bad.”

“Snakes!” Monique screamed out, aghast after Eric related the dream to them. “Is that all the men in this family dream about?”

“Settle down, Mo,” Cole said.

“I’m calm. I’m calm. Tomorrow though, you’re talking to Rev. Hasbro. Make him earn his pay.” Monique jabbed her finger into Cole’s arm to emphasize her command.

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Smack. The ball sailed off the racket up against the front wall then ricocheted in a downward spin that forced Cole to sprint forward.

Leaning as much as he could without toppling over, Cole put his racket out, hoping to get underneath the ball but there was too much dead spin, and he couldn’t get there in time. Point. Set. Match.

For a moment, Cole stood there staring at the wall, gasping for air. A slap on the back confirmed his defeat.

“Don’t worry, someday you’ll win one,” Rev. Hasbro grinned.

“Not in this lifetime I’m afraid. What do you give my chances in the next life?” Cole joked.

“Not very good. It’s sorta like a home court advantage for me although, being in Heaven might increase your speed.” Rev. Hasbro didn’t limit his competitiveness to the pulpit.

“What happened to the last shall be first?” Cole chuckled.

“Not sure racquetball is what God had in mind when he said that.”

Cole had been joking, but Rev. Hasbro sensed an opening. “But speaking of the last being first, did you stop and see Mulu this morning?”

“Sure. She’s being discharged today. She’ll be in class on Monday although possibly with the worse headache she’s ever had.” Cole had been sincerely relieved that the injuries hadn’t been worse.

“What did you think of her?” Rev. Hasbro asked.

“I don’t know.” Cole sensed he was being maneuvered. He’d shared his personal problems before their match and guessed the subject was resurfacing. “She’s a determined young lady. Why? What’s on your mind, Bill?”

Rev. Hasbro knew he was about to feed Cole a horse pill to swallow. “Do you ever think about those people over there? You know, people like Mulu.

Cole rolled his eyes. “Just because something African like shows up in my dreams—”

“I’m just saying maybe there’s a reason you have these nightmares. Mulu is run over by one of your students. Do you see a common thread? It so happens that I’ve been looking for an opportunity to get the church involved in missions work.”

Cole stepped back. “Whoa, now, Reverend. I mean having category one Stephen King dreams is one thing, but I’m no missionary.”

“Tell me you weren’t moved by her story and the life she described back there?”

Cole hadn’t learned to lie to a minister yet. He hated when honesty went against him. “Ok, I was moved and you’re right, yes, she is probably connected. But look, I’m no missionary. Seriously not.”

“What is a missionary?” Rev. Hasbro asked. “I’ll tell you. It’s someone who doesn’t just talk about making things happen but dedicates themselves to guaranteeing changes occur. They come from all walks of life. Ministers, doctors, store clerks, even teachers. A history teacher should already know that.”

Cole felt like he should be arguing back, standing his ground. There were plenty of reasons not to dive into this insanity beginning with Monique and Eric. Yet, for all the excuses rushing through his mind right at this moment, he remained intrigued by what Rev. Hasbro was laying out.

“All I’m saying is think about it this weekend. Pray about it. Talk to Monique.”

“You talk to Monique,” Cole suggested, “There’s less likely to be a corpse at the end of the conversation if you do the talking.”

“The church will sponsor a trip. We’ll make it happen. You’re spiritually

mature enough to handle this," Rev. Hasbro told Cole.

"All I've ever done is just teach Sunday School," and Cole wasn't sure he did it that well.

"So, spread the same message in Ethiopia that you do here. Let God do the rest. There is such a thing as a higher calling," Rev. Hasbro pointed out.

"The angel in my dream?" Cole wondered.

"Only you can find out for sure," Rev. Hasbro surmised.

"It's a long way to go to keep from getting beat at racquetball," Cole joked.

"Don't worry," Rev. Hasbro assured him, "I'll find some other young pup to housebreak."

CHAPTER FOUR

Monique Encounters Dr. Time

ERIC LOOKED UP FROM HIS CEREAL, the kind with the berry-tasting crunchies mixed in, and with his eye off the spoon most of the milk missed his mouth and dumped back into the bowl.

Eric's eyes grew larger for he recognized his mother's voice hitting a familiar pitch that always signaled serious trouble was only seconds away.

"Are you crazy?" Monique repeated in a half scream. With hands on hips, her gaze wasn't directly on Cole but more into mid-space as though searching for the common sense she felt had fled her husband.

Cole motioned with his eyes for Monique to remember Eric sitting only a foot away. "Mo -"

"Oh, don't give me that," Monique warned. "Besides, the boy has a right to know his father is an idiot."

"Why are you an idiot, Daddy?" Eric asked, rather bemused.

"Don't talk to your father that way," Monique scolded, grabbing Eric's bowl to set in the sink.

"Hey, I wasn't done," Eric complained.

“Yes, you are,” Monique declared. “Go get your shoes on or we’ll be late for church.”

“But I wasn’t done,” Eric argued.

“Go while you can,” Cole advised his son.

“It’s not my fault she’s mad at you,” Eric said, storming out of the room.

There was an uncomfortable pause interrupted only by the flow from the tap as Monique washed Eric’s bowl out.

“How could you make a decision like this without talking to me first? How?” Monique asked.

“You’re the one who told me, no, practically ordered me to talk to Rev. Hasbro,” Cole reminded her.

“Talk to him about your dreams, not about trotting off to the Congo,” she shot back.

“Ethiopia. It’s Ethiopia not the Congo,” Cole corrected.

“Ethiopia. The Congo. What’s the difference?” Monique practically yelled, causing Cole to refrain from explaining the difference which he was aware she already knew.

Then as an afterthought, Monique calmly added, “Think we should try out another church one Sunday?”

“Come on, Mo.”

“Come on, yourself. You should’ve talked to me about this.” First the dreams and now this. Talk about feeling out of the loop, she thought.

“I am talking to you first. Isn’t this talking?” Cole pointed out.

There was another uncomfortable pause as Monique stared out the kitchen window. The yard needed so much work. The rose bush she’d planted when they first moved here only produced a couple blooms this past summer. The grass was more brown than green. A lot of it was the warming climate but still, she’d prefer a sight more lush.

“When are you going to do something with the backyard?” Monique asked Cole.

“What?” Cole got lost in the transition.

Monique, her anger now in check, looked at Cole. “I’m just wondering when we’re going to get something done with the weed patch we call our backyard. But, I guess there’s no need for you to worry about that since you’ll be 10 thousand miles away.”

Cole threw up his hands. “Come on, give me a break. Don’t have that attitude. Not while we’re talking this out.”

Monique let loose a sarcastic laugh. “This is not ‘talking it out.’ No, this is you telling me after you have already made up your mind. Talking it out would imply trying to reach a consensus. We can’t mutually agree when you’ve unilaterally decided the issue.”

“Look, if you don’t want me to do it then say so. I’ll tell Rev. Hasbro when we get to church, and it’ll be no big deal,” Cole explained.

Monique hated when Cole simplified issues in their marriage like it was a set of instructions for one of his students.
Life didn’t come with simple instructions—more like badly drawn diagrams with details in a foreign language.

“So, I’m suppose to decide right this moment?” she asked.

“Well, I didn’t mean—”

Monique cut him off, “What about Eric? What am I suppose to do with him while you’re racking up frequent flier miles?”

“Eric will be fine. He’s always fine, and you have your job.”

“Which I must point out is not doing that well. Things are tight, Cole,” she reminded him.

“I know, I know. But we have savings,” Cole said.

“Right, savings meant to be for our retirement or an emergency. That money is for something important.” The thought of tapping into those funds only reinforced her concept of how desperate Cole’s plan was.

Cole justified his thinking, “This is something important.”

“I’m just saying we might need that money later if the business doesn’t make it.” Worry was etched on Monique’s face.

Cole walked over to her. “It’ll make it.”

“I hope you’re right,” she said, not sharing in his total confidence.

“You’ll make it work. Eric will go to school and be the adventurous school kid he is. I’ll be gone a couple of months but I’ll be back. Just don’t get too comfortable with me being gone,
ok?” Cole hugged her. While she didn’t resist she didn’t reciprocate either.

“I need to think about it,” she told him pulling away.

“I’m ready!” Eric exclaimed only to be greeted by stares from his parents.

“Are you two still fighting?”

“Let’s go. You drive,” Monique told Cole. “Maybe angels with trumpets will show up during Rev. Hasbro’s sermon and tell us what to do.”

“I wouldn’t count on it,” Cole replied, “those angels stay pretty booked up.”

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Monique sat on the Metro, half asleep, heading from Charles De Gaulle airport into Paris. The lowered commuter tones customary in France did nothing to assist in rousing her energy level.

The last 10 days in Morocco had been exhausting. The tour group she'd led there was a weird mix. Normally, groups have something in common, e.g., age or social groups, but this one was a snapshot away from constituting an international threat.

Merging from all different walks of life for the tour, the group was at each other's throats from day one. Age differences influenced the type of activities and schedules everyone could handle. For starters, a couple people weren't too open to the culture, which made Monique wonder why they booked passage to Morocco. Others wanted to see everything, pushing to cram 20 days worth of travel into the 10.

The bargains weren't cheap enough, or the wares themselves were too cheap. The food wasn't up to Parisian par, or it was so exotic they wanted a recipe to take back home.

The music was too strange a beat to engage their spirit, or it conjured up an atmosphere worthy of the forgotten adventurer. Either way, it was a memory of a lifetime. As far as Monique was concerned, someone else's lifetime.

Now, all she wanted to do was get back to her Paris flat and fall asleep. Laundry could wait until tomorrow. She'd call her father and let him know she'd arrived back home just fine but the rest of the world would have to be put on hold.

The speaker in the Metro car announced the arrival at the St. Denis platform, and even though her eyes were shut she heard the familiar whoosh as doors opened then shut again before the train continued down its route.

A loud scream, followed by a hysterical laugh, pierced the tranquility. Monique opened her eyes to a couple teenagers acting strangely at the far end.

"I hope it isn't like this everywhere," a teenage girl said from across the aisle.

"Weird. Should we be scared?" a friend next to her asked.

"Don't be frightened. This is a rare exception," Monique assured them. "The Metro's very safe. I just think those kids had something to drink."

"Oh, thanks," the girls said. "It's our first day here."

"From the U.S.A.?" Monique asked.

"That obvious?" one of the girls inquired.

“Yes.” A teacher lowered the map he’d been engrossed in since boarding the train.

“Come on, Dr. Time,” one of the girls moaned.

“Dr. Time? Did she just call you …”

“Yes, she did.” Cole gave the girls a hard look. They just grinned back.

“That’s not your name is it?” Monique asked.

Cole squirmed. “No.”

“Whew. I mean that would be hard to live with if it were.”

“Yes, I suppose it would be.” What a strange lady, he thought.

“Why Dr. Time?” she prompted.

“From the show *Dr. Who*. He loves it!” one of the girls chirped before giggling with her friend.

“Are you two expecting to get passing grades this trip?” Cole asked aware he’d lost control of the situation.

Monique asked the girls, “Does he have a real name?”

“Mr. Tarkington,” the girls chimed in unison.

“Cole Tarkington.” Cole reached across and shook Monique’s hand.

The sleep Monique sought somehow got pushed aside, and the girls, perhaps sensing the sparkage teenagers sense so well, insisted she come with them to Notre Dame Cathedral.

Then Cole got her to agree to meet for breakfast the next morning, and the next thing Monique knew, instead of the week’s rest and catch-up she’d planned, she was showing Cole’s class around France. Six months later Monique was moving to America.

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The argument caused the Tarkington clan to arrive late at church. Rev. Hasbro smiled slightly from his seat on the platform where the Praise Team was belting out their version of a chorus Monique really didn’t recognize at first listen.

Cole was a bundle of nerves. His stomach was knotted up. The suit jacket felt stifling on him, and he reached up to loosen the tie to help him breathe. His world was about to pivot, but to what he remained clueless.

He smiled at Monique, who managed returning the gesture. The happy couple on display. Cole watched Eric kicking his leg back and forth a half beat slower than the drummer. Cole thought that life was good, but it was demanding more from him.

“Do you mind if I sit here?” a young lady asked. Monique instinctively scooted both her and Eric over without answering. The girl, settling in like she belonged there, was in a simple but pretty blue dress and sported a scarf over her hair, which from Monique’s vantage point, she could tell was hiding a really bad haircut and an injury of some nature.

Right behind her, looking sheepish and dressed in faded jeans and a buttoned blue shirt that he’d bought on a trip to Wal-Mart once just to please his mother, was Randy. Embarrassed by being seen in a house of worship, he gave a weak wave and tapped his Converse nervously against the pew in front of him.

“Hello, Mr. Tarkington,” the young lady said with a short wave.

Cole looked over. “Oh hello, Mulu. Randy?”

Randy kind of flipped his hands up as to say I don’t know what I’m doing here either.

Caught off guard, Cole turned his attention back to Mulu.

“Feeling better I hope?”

Cole thought he heard a low *shush* from the pew behind them but it didn’t stop Mulu from answering, “I will live. Thank you for your help.”

“It was no problem,” Cole replied.

Monique leaned over and whispered, “You know her?”

“Mulu, my wife, Monique. Monique, Mulu. The Ethiopian girl from the accident.”

“Ooooh.” Monique shook her hand wondering if the archangels hadn’t bothered with the trumpets and just gone straight to the point.

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Monique watched Mulu during the service. The way she carried herself showed a dignity woven into her character that demanded she stand proud. Her bearing spoke of a maturity brought on by experiences alien to most people her age.

Monique listened as Mulu shared with other church members how her father ran a black market money exchange and used the profits to pay for her schooling. He’d wrangled the visas to come to the States from an Ethiopian government minister who was busy building himself a financial nest egg on a different continent by whisking cash out of the country as fast as possible.

There was no specific word Mulu uttered that Monique would later point to and say that was the moment she was swayed. In fact, she and Mulu exchanged

only a few words. Rev. Hasbro kept ushering Mulu from member to member introducing her.

By now, most of the congregation had heard about the wreck which made the morning all the more uncomfortable for Randy because every time Mulu met a parishioner, she was welcomed with a smile. The introduction of Randy's name though got him a polite but stiff handshake and a disparaging once over. After the first couple introductions, Randy hovered against the wall and watched Mulu work the crowd from afar.

Monique could see now how Cole had been talked into making this trip. Even though it wasn't official, Rev. Hasbro kept dropping little inside comments during their conversations.

Leaning over to Cole, Monique reluctantly said, "Ok."

"Ok?" There was a brief pause as the true meaning sunk in.

Cole repeated the message as way of confirmation, "Ok?"

"Yes, ok," Monique said. "We'll make it work somehow. Not sure how yet, but we'll work it out."

"Ok, then," Cole repeated with newfound enthusiasm.

CHAPTER FIVE

Hunger

TEGUASH HAD BEEN HIKING FOR DAYS. His steps lacked the tenacious stride that had persisted at the beginning of his journey, for his strength had been whittled down by illness.

His mind drifted as though leaving his body and taking off up the path alone. He suffered mirages, usually reaching the point where he expected to find something before discovering disappointment in an illusion. His mind was being torturously teased.

Food wasn't staying down, and his appetite diminished with each passing day.

He took to conserving what food remained, hoping his hunger would return. If he wasted food now, when he couldn't digest it, he might not be able to resupply before reaching his destination.

Along the path, he passed fellow travelers who'd glance at him as they walked on. He discerned they wondered why a member of his tribe had ventured so far, especially when obviously very ill. Some strangers might say a greeting in passing but most travelers continued their journey unabated, each seeking an unseen destination.

The rocks held their ground against the soles of his feet. The hills rolled along undisturbed by his presence. He listened to nocturnal creatures following their instincts in the moonlight and found freshness that the wind carried in its breath.

Birds cackled, piercing the peacefulness of hot blue skies. Their songs were meaningless to him. He was tone deaf to their beauty. Occasionally, vultures were spotted circling above a decaying carcass, scavengers looking to clean up mortality's mess.

"Where are you going friend?" a voice asked.

Momentarily, Teguash paused. Was this the start to another hallucination?

"I asked where you're going, friend? What's a matter? Don't you have a tongue to answer with?"

Teguash looked at a skinny younger man with two hangers-on lurking at arm's length behind him. Dusk, settling on the horizon, shadowed the outlines of dwellings ahead.

Nodding in the direction of the village, Teguash answered, "There for the night."

"Now what you want to go there for?" the man inquired, looking around with half a smile. His two compadres glimpsed from side to side as well.

"Just for the night," an exhausted Teguash explained.

"Well, maybe they don't want you hanging around their village even for a night. I mean, look at you. Those villagers have some pride. They're fools but proud fools," the man said with a menacing tone.

Teguash ignored him, struggling a few steps forward. But the young man grabbed him from behind while his two cronies cut off the path.

"How about you give us your money and we'll arrange a place to make you comfortable for a long night?" the man suggested forcefully.

Ignoring him, Teguash turned to walk on but this time the man vigorously restrained him.

Teguash, now focused in a moment of clarity brought on by a rush of

adrenaline, quickly used his staff to deliver a blow to the young man's ribs, which brought out a yelp.

The two accomplices were quickly on top of Teguash and despite his best effort to resist, Teguash quickly found himself on the ground being the recipient of body blows. Trying to fend off the flurry of fists proved futile. He was outnumbered. Several punches to the face sapped the rest of his energy.

"Where is your money?" the young man demanded while searching Teguash for a hiding spot.

One of the accomplices shouted in Teguash's face, "Do you want to live?"

A scream from down the path caused the attackers to jerk their heads up. With blood dripping down into his eye, Teguash saw a man and his two sons sprinting toward the fracas.

The attackers hesitated attempting to judge if Teguash was worth further risk. "He has no money anyway," one of them said. The robbers fled in the opposite direction.

Teguash was trying to pick himself up off the ground when he felt an arm give him a boost.

"You look rough," the elder of the rescuers observed.

"No, I am ok," Teguash replied although whom he was speaking to wasn't clear because his sight was blurry.

"I think you are injured, friend." The elder, a father from the village, motioned for his sons to assist Teguash. They each guided him from one side up the path into the village.

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"I'm Aberra," the father said.

"I'm …"

"Teguash. We know," Aberra revealed.

One of the sons spoke, "Everyone knows including those men who tried to rob you. They figured you had lots of money on you for such a trip."

"You know them?" Teguash asked.

The second son replied, "They are bandits."

"They have a camp near a hill a couple of miles from here," Aberra explained.

A woman entered with a pail full of water that she'd fetched from a well on the edge of the village. She set it down near Teguash.

"My wife," Aberra said.

The woman only flashed a half smile as she took a rag that looked like it'd once been part of a shirt with a print pattern and dipped it into the water. Gently, she wiped the rag over Teguash's face where the blood had been the worst. Then she ran it over his shoulder where there was another cut and a glob of dried blood.

"How did you know I was coming?" Teguash asked.

One of the sons excitedly replied, "Are you joking? Word of Teguash has spread."

"My son, Hirku, who has a habit, I am afraid, of interrupting his elders when they speak. My other son, Tariku. But what they say is true."

Teguash was taken aback. "But how?"

"A word here. A passed message there. How does any news spread? Women gossip at the well. Herders pass each other in the fields. A trader tells a tale. The point is we have been anticipating your arrival. For your sake, it was good that we were."

Aberra instructed his wife, "Fix us something to eat."

"No, I can't impose," Teguash explained.

Aberra looked at him with surprise. "You can't what, eat? We all can eat."

"I know I can. The encounter made me hungry," Hirku said.

Tariku declared, "You're always hungry."

Teguash started rising from the floor but was too weak to do so under his own power. He reached for his staff but Aberra's foot scooted the staff a few inches so that it was just out of reach.

"There will be a time to resume your journey. You must rest.

You must recover your strength." Aberra looked into Teguash's eyes. "You are not well."

"I appreciate the hospitality, but why?" Teguash asked.

Aberra explained, "We have selfish reasons. The most important matter is that if we know you are here so do the Horro. The shaman of the Horro have been trying to force their influence on our village. We do not want to be under their control. Do you understand?"

Teguash understood all too well. In his dreams, the reach of the Horro had continuously grown unchecked. It was just not his village he was saving but the people who'd been kind enough to save him as well. Teguash intended to return the favor.

CHAPTER SIX

The Mulu Rendezvous

MULU WAS STRETCHED OUT IN her dorm room on a mattress that should've been replaced two years earlier judging by its lumpy nature.

A book for Communications 101, a required core she found a total bore, was open to page 128 on her lap. Unfortunately, her pillow was beginning to grab more attention than the textbook. Mulu swore the only reason every single student was mandated to sit through this nonsensical snooze of a class was because the professor authored the textbook, which earned him a tidy kickback.

At least Mulu's roommate was absent. The air between them had grown stale over the last couple of weeks.

For starters, Mulu wasn't sure her roommate was keen on foreigners. That trait was a shared commonality among a majority of the student body. Combined with cultural differences she was only now learning to navigate, Mulu pretty much resembled a social pariah on campus. Her only other real friends were fellow foreign students discovering themselves in the same boat.

"Bring us your poor, your tired, your weary" might be inscribed on the Statue of Liberty, but Mulu was pretty sure they should've added a line at the end that said, "As long as you're like us."

The issue wasn't all about Mulu either. Her roommate stayed gone for days at a time. The best Mulu could gather was that the roomie shuffled among friends from apartment to apartment making Mulu wonder why she just didn't move off campus.

Having thought that, Mulu wished the roommate would make at least one more appearance long enough to rid the room of the pile of laundry

accumulating at the foot of her bed. The pile of dirty clothes, which had continuously grown taller, constituted an environmental hazard.

A knock at the door offered Mulu an excuse to toss the textbook aside. Instead of someone searching for her roommate, she was greeted by the presence of Randy. He had a well-worn, well-patched, leather jacket on. His hair hadn't been combed in twenty-four hours and a lit cigarette was emanating toxic smoke from the corner of his mouth.

She clearly wasn't impressed. "Oh, it's you."

"I know you're not thrilled to see me. I don't know if I'm thrilled to be here," Randy stated.

"Then why are you here?" Mulu inquired.

"I don't know. I thought maybe we could talk," he explained.

There was a pause as though she was waiting for more reasoning to be dosed out. Finally, he asked, "Can I come in?"

Mulu reached out, grabbing the cigarette from his mouth before he could even flinch. She dropped it on the hallway carpet and squashed it with her tennis shoe.

"It's a no-smoking building," she informed him. "Now you can come in."

Randy entered feeling edgy. He'd never been in a college dorm room before. The blandness made it come off a little drearier than he expected.

"What's the matter? Run out of quarters?" he joked pointing to the roommate's pile.

She corrected his misperception, "It's not mine."

"Oh." He couldn't seem to find the right words now that he was here.

"How many pedestrians did you hit on the way over here?" Mulu asked.

"Very funny," Randy replied without smiling.

"Not really," she shot back.

Randy glanced at her head, "Looks like the swelling is going down."

"Doesn't really feel like it. I think I've downed a whole bottle of aspirin since being discharged," Mulu told him.

"No side effects?" Randy asked.

"From the aspirin?" she asked.

Randy pointed to her head, "From the concussion."

"No, it will be fine. Although I think it may take longer than I'd like for my hair to grow back." She snatched a quick peek in the mirror above her dresser. Her meticulously kept hair appeared as though a butcher had set in on it.

"Did you come here just to check on me?" She was a little astonished it'd taken her this long to figure that out. Maybe the injury had slowed her brain up.

“Well, actually, yes,” he confessed. “Look, I just felt really bad about hitting you. I didn’t mean to and no matter whose fault it was—”

She shot him a hard glare. “Whose fault it was?”

“I’m just saying. I was concerned is all. I didn’t mean to hurt you. I’m sorry, ok?” He abruptly stopped. That conceptualized his thought, and he had nothing to add to it.

“Maybe, I underestimated you,” Mulu stated.

“That happens a lot. I’m use to it,” Randy quipped.

Mulu gave Randy the once over. She could tell he was still a little uncomfortable and imagined it took a great effort for him to muster up the courage to venture here and apologize.

“So, you know Mr. Tarkington, well?” she inquired.

Randy shrugged, “Mainly from school. He’s an ok guy.”

“For a teacher, you mean?”

“Yeah that’s pretty much what I mean,” Randy stated.

“No offense, but you don’t exactly strike me as the academic type,” Mulu told him.

Randy waved off the comment. “No offense taken. I’m not.”

“So what type are you?” she asked.

“Pretty much the type that likes to spend his time on Guitar Hero.”

“Oh, I like that game,” Mulu revealed more enthusiasm in her voice than she intended.

“Yeah? Cool. I like to spend my time on that and party, but mostly I’m shuffling between school and work.” He was a little disappointed by how pathetic that sounded coming out of his mouth.

“We all get stuck doing things we prefer not to,” she pointed out.

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“What are you doing Sunday?” she asked.

Randy thought for a second as though there actually might be something planned. “Nothing, I guess.”

“Why don’t you pick me up around 9:30?” she suggested.

“Ok. That’s not too late for you?” he asked, slightly surprised.

She corrected him, “9:30 Sunday morning.”

“Whoa! That’s kind of early.” Then he saw Mulu’s reaction to his response. “No, 9:30 Sunday morning is fine. I’m sure I’ll be up anyway. The football pregame shows. I’m a big fan.” He made a mental note to set the alarm.

Mulu smiled. “Good.”

“Where we going anyway?” he asked.

“To church,” she answered.

“Church?” He was caught off guard.

“Yes, Rev. Hasbro invited me to come. You know him, right?”

Randy replied, “Just from the other night. It’s not like I hang out with Mr. Tarkington and his friends.”

“He seemed like a nice man,” Mulu observed.

“I’m sure he is, but church?” Randy couldn’t remember the last time he’d set foot inside one, although he had found himself spacing out to the Catholic television channel at four a.m. one night. He’d awaken to an old nun reciting a ritual. He had no clue what she was chanting.

“What’s the matter, don’t you go to church?” Mulu asked.

“As a general rule, no. I had an aunt drag me once when I was like 6 years old, but I don’t remember much about it except that we went to McDonalds afterward and I thought that was cool,” Randy answered.

“Well, I need a ride. The doctor says I am not supposed to walk long distances and we know whose fault that is,” Mulu flashed him a knowing look.

“9:30 it is then,” Randy said.

“Good. As I believe it is customary to say here, we have a date,” Mulu declared.

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Mulu was nervous walking up the courthouse steps. Back in her home country, encounters with the authorities were normally draped in corruption and totalitarian exercises in power. Back home, you might enter a police station or a minister’s office, but it doesn’t mean you were leaving anytime soon or in the same condition as when you came.

She glimpsed down at the piece of paper on which she’d scribbled the room number and found her way to the third floor courtroom where she discovered a room full of people waiting their turn to face the judge on a variety of offences ranging from speeding tickets to minor assault.

Mulu watched as names were shouted by a bailiff from a stack of manila folders. One by one people made their way to the front.

Occasionally, there was a story behind the incident, although Mulu noticed the stories didn’t change the outcome much. Mostly, the defendants just pled out and accepted their sentence, which seemed perfectly fine with both the public

defender and prosecutor.

Finally, after enduring an hour of the cattle call, the name she was anticipating was announced. She watched Randy stand in front of the judge with his public defender whom, from the way he was scanning the case file, might've been acquainting himself with the facts of the case for the first time.

"Where is she?" the judge asked.

Randy turned and motioned for Mulu to come forward.

"I hear you have something to add to this proceeding," the judge said.

"Yes, your honor," Mulu said.

The judge instructed her to proceed so she started her story emphasizing along the way how the accident was really her fault—although secretly she still believed there was shared blame—and that she should've looked before stopping in the middle of the street.

The judge cut her off. "I think I've heard enough."

The prosecutor objected, "Your honor, the people insist … "

"Save your breath, counselor. The victim says she wasn't a victim. What do you want me to do? Case dismissed. Next one on the docket, bailiff."

Outside both Randy and Mulu were relieved he'd gotten off; Randy because he couldn't afford any incurring fines or higher insurance rates and Mulu because she was glad to have the incident behind them once and for all. Now officially, it was history.

Randy stood on the court steps for a second and flashbacked to when he broke the news about the accident to his father. "What? No, DUI?" was all his father mumbled in his stupor. The beating he'd anticipated didn't occur until his dad sobered up and saw the damage to the car the next day.

Randy gave Mulu a hug of thanks. The hug lasted a little longer than they both intended, but she really didn't mind.

They'd been spending large amounts of their free time with one another since the Sunday they attended service together. She calculated that wasn't going to change anytime soon.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Lightning Bolts

COLE NEVER WAS CRAZY about flying. Riding within a hunk of metal as it hurled hundreds of miles an hour through the air seemed, in the terminology of Mr. Spock, illogical.

He preferred American road trips any day of the week. In his case though, a carefree highway spree was out of the question since he was destined cross-ocean.

Back home, Monique had used her connections to snatch up a discounted ticket. This had saved the church hundreds of dollars, money the Missions Board added to the “Buy a Bible” fund.

Monique still held reservations about the whole venture but kept them to herself, opting instead to jump headlong into helping Cole plan every detail of the trip as though she was leading a tour of 50 to Ethiopia herself.

Cramped in his airline seat, Cole found himself squirming for comfort every 10 minutes. He was feeling a bit like a piece of cargo being shipped round the world and kept looking in the mirror to see if any barcodes were slapped to his forehead.

Once the journey was underway, he switched from plane to plane like a piece of cargo as well. There was Detroit where he’d grabbed the one last coney dog, loaded with the trimmings, including onions he figured he’d was going to taste for a few weeks.

After crossing the big blue Atlantic, which he never really saw since the flight crew made them keep all the window shades shut, he landed in Amsterdam where Cole swore the terminal was packed with more people than if the whole town of St. Clair had congregated in one spot.

He’d never witnessed so many nationalities mingling in one place since his trip to Paris. For a brief moment he felt like a kid on a huge adventure wandering some strange woods he’d been forbidden to enter, except instead of trees this

forest was filled with people.

In Dubai, West met the Near East. People sat on the ground in the Bedouin tradition that had ignored the passage of time. Women draped in a full burqa brushed up against females sporting short skirts and pant suits scurrying to catch their connection.

How women moved in those burqas Cole didn't know. He tried picturing Monique taking Eric to school dressed in one. Nah that image didn't work. Then he smiled. He could picture what Monique would say about those outfits.

By the time he boarded his final plane for Addis Ababa, a flight-weary Cole felt as though he'd already seen the world when in fact he hadn't been out of a terminal in 24 hours. He was looking forward to a soft mattress where he could legitimately use the excuse of jetlag to sleep for 10 - 12 hours.

Cole was already halfway dozing off in seat 16F when a shimmy startled him awake. Other passengers murmured among themselves, and the lady next to him trembled as she swiftly fastened her seatbelt ahead of a ding announcing the captain had turned on the 'fasten seatbelt' sign.

"I think it was a bolt of lightning," a gentleman with a heavy British accent said from the row in front of Cole.

"Lightning?" a companion asked with surprised confusion.

The lady next to Cole turned to him asking in a half whisper, "Lightning? How'd that happen?"

"I assure you, I don't know," Cole answered.

He looked out the window to spot any damage but he didn't even know where to start looking.

A crackle announced the pilot taking the intercom.

"Ladies and gentlemen …" Cole heard before feeling his stomach drop as the plane descended sharply from its current altitude.

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Rather suddenly rolling clouds wiped the blue from the sky. Villagers sought shelter as thunder rumbled, echoing off the Ethiopian hills. The inhabitants ducked into their dwellings, some glancing up for one last peek at the hill located on the edge of the village where three figures huddled around a fire.

Besufukad, along with his brother Seyum, were engaged in working their shamanistic skills next to the fire. The flames flickered in the wind while sporadic droplets of moisture falling from the sky threatened to extinguish the fire altogether.

Standing behind them in an obedient fashion, Niguse looked on. He struggled to keep his knees from locking up or his body from swaying ever so slightly, for that would be enough to reveal the fatigue in his bones. To give in to the fatigue would invite the wrath of his mentors.

"Atern has heard us," Besufukad proclaimed.

Seyum confirmed the assessment. "The sky shouts his announcement."

"We will use fire from the sky to strike down our enemy," Besufukad boasted.

Staring into the fire, Seyum seemed perplexed by what the flames were saying.

"Why does our enemy seem to fly?"

Besufukad beamed with confidence. "It's an illusion. But it does not matter. He will be cast from the sky for as he flies into Atern's mouth, Atern will spit him out."

Seyum took a potion made out of natural ingredients gathered from ground belonging to the Horro and tossed a fistful into the flames.

"Niguse!" Seyum barked.

Niguse hustled over to Seyum without a second thought.

"Tamrat has anointed you as the vassal," Seyum proclaimed although Niguse felt he didn't need to be reminded.

Seyum grabbed Niguse's arm, forcing open the hand to expose the scar created by the cut Tamrat inflicted on him.

Seyum held the hand there in that position as he and Besufukad closed their eyes to reach a meditative state.

In his neighboring village, the solitary Tamrat was also performing a ritual where his mind's eye could witness the others as they set out to destroy an alien way of life before it reached them.

Niguse's arm was growing sore when Seyum's eyes opened and he whipped out a small piece of thorny wood. Seyum nicked Niguse's wound so that it started to bleed once again.

With blood flowing, Seyum flipped the hand over so the red juice of life dripped into the fire.

Whatever Seyum expected to occur was not what transpired. A whiff of smoke rose from the ambers but that was all.

The thunder grew louder and Besufukad scanned the clouds looking for a sign not forthcoming.

Niguse winced from the pain. He gritted his teeth, determined not to allow Seyum to sense weakness on his part.

It wasn't only fear of Seyum prompting this stoic posturing. Niguse knew that

as a vassal any demonstration of weakness on his part hindered their ritual.

The blood flowed with steady regularity now in a persistent drip—drip—drip beat. But Niguse's mind wasn't solely on the blood flow. Heat from the fire scorched his skin, and he wondered how long Seyum would expose him to this precarious position.

A flash lit up the sky. Besufukad instinctively ducked to shield himself, almost tripping over his own two feet and falling to the ground in the process.

Seyum dropped Niguse's arm and pushed him backward. Niguse, for whom the flash had totally messed up his orientation, was glad to have his hand away from the fire.

The ground vibrated and a boom rocked the village as though a mortar round had landed in the vicinity.

As the trio regained their bearings, they glanced back toward the village where two pillars of smoke spiraling upward from the center created a haze above the dwellings.

From their vantage point, there was no need to rush down. They could survey the damage from where they stood. What they saw stunned them. Two dwellings were ablaze. Screams of fear and shouts for action carried in the wind.

Besufukad was pale. Even in the moonlight one could see the change in his complexion. For a second, Niguse wasn't so sure Besufukad wasn't on the verge of fainting.

Seyum, still stunned, stumbled more than walked his way over to his brother. "What does it mean?" he asked.

Niguse glanced back down on the scene in the village. The two houses burning to the ground belonged to Besufukad and Seyum. The flames lapping up the dilapidated buildings was the last clear image Niguse experienced.

Both, Besufukad and Seyum, were flattened by repercussions from the bolt of lightning striking Niguse. It took them a second to scramble back onto their feet, but when they did they raced over to Niguse's still body.

"He's dead," Seyum proclaimed almost as though he had to say it out loud to convince himself of its reality.

"The vassal is destroyed," Besufukad declared in almost as much disbelief as Seyum.

"That's unheard of. What does it mean?" Seyum asked.

"It means our power is snapped. We have no protection," Besufukad stated.

This was a fact neither one of them cherished. It was unprecedented in its scope and in the history of their tribe's shamans, an event unlike any their

forefathers had faced.

They looked down on the village realizing they might not even be safe among their own people.

Further rumbles in the sky forced the implementation of impromptu plans. If they couldn't return to the village they'd seek shelter elsewhere. They decided to hide out, at least for the night, in a nearby cave. This would buy them time to figure out their next step.

They abandoned Niguse's corpse to wild scavengers who'd race to pick it clean and at a hurried pace rushed to reach their hideout.

In his mind's eye, Tamrat witnessed all that transpired and his anger grew so fast, so unchecked that if someone else had been near him at that very moment, he would've struck them dead.

As it was, he stormed through the Horro village he basically ruled by his very presence. He stopped in front of a hut where he was greeted by a monster of a man standing six foot, 10 inches. In a Western country, the man would've been a millionaire from the sports opportunities he'd have. By Ethiopian standards, he eked out a decent living being Tamrat's cousin and doing his bidding when it came to "enforcement issues."

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The skinny man holding the sign reading "Mr. Tarkington" in big black marker letters was only about 5 feet 4 inches tall with short black hair and a dark complexion.

There was a woman with long flowing hair of equal height standing next to him. They were sizing up each passenger passing them in the terminal.

The man's eyes locked on Cole with a look common to anyone who doesn't wish to create a bad first impression by making a fool of himself in public.

"I'm Mr. Tarkington," Cole said adjusting his luggage to a better grip.

"Mr. Tarkington!" The man was relieved to have found his guest.

"You can call me Cole though. Everyone does back home."

The man stuck out his hand causing Cole to set down his luggage. "I'm Mr. Sanchez. This is my wife."

The woman had a big smile. "It is so nice to meet you. We've been looking forward to your arrival."

"I'm just staying a few weeks," Cole reminded them.

"Oh, we know," the woman assured him.

"Any visitor is a big deal. Especially when you've been here as long as we

have," Mr. Sanchez explained.

"Well, how long have you been here?" Cole inquired.

"It's been …" Sanchez seemed to be counting the days in his head, but his wife already knew the answer.

"Seven years last month."

"Seven years? Wow. That's a long time."

Cole couldn't imagine seven years here, and he hadn't even seen the place yet. When he did see the place, he marveled at the contrast. It was progress meets the chains of the past.

Modern highways turned into potholed roads constructed before traffic jams were considered in the planning.

Road rules were do as you need to do. Need to turn? By all means, turn. Doesn't matter what lane you're in or if you're at a logical place like an intersection, just work your way across the traffic and get to where you need to go. All this individualistic navigation ensnarled traffic even further.

Drivers not only had to beware each other in the congested chaos, but donkeys loaded with cargo, along with goat herds, weaved in out of the lanes adding another hazardous level to the daily commute. Drivers were as likely to collide with an animal as an automobile.

"What made you come here?" Cole asked Sanchez as they maneuvered their way through the capital city of Addis Ababa.

"You might as well know to just call me Phil," Sanchez told him.

"Oh, you're name is Phil?"

"No, actually it's Mark," Sanchez corrected.

His wife explained. "It started as a joke. Phil the Filipino. Get it?"

"Then the name stuck," he said. "Now everyone just calls me Phil."

Mrs. Sanchez continued, "To answer your question, we just felt like this is where we needed to be. We had a friend teaching here. They invited us over one summer, and we never left. This place, our work, is too compelling. Where else could we contribute so much?"

Compelling was a good way to put it. There were people dressed in sharp, colorful, business attire, and yet Cole couldn't help notice the number of people living on the street. Some resided under pieces of tin. Others weren't even that fortunate, having to make do with plastic they'd scrounged up from rubbish heaps.

A modern building was just as likely to have a lady passing by the front with a load of material straddled to her head.

Children swarmed the Sanchez Landover begging for handouts or trying to hawk goods such as newspapers and candy.

It was all a bit much to take in, so Cole was relieved to arrive at the Missionary compound where he was staying although his precarious position was accentuated when the vehicle had to wait for one of two armed security guards to open up a gate.

The Sanchez's stayed in the main house. A small dorm nearby housed some domestic employees and a couple Missionary interns from the West.

Cole received the red carpet treatment and found himself bunking in a guest bungalow that was actually very nice and well kept, if sparse on furnishings.

"I hope this is ok," Sanchez said.

"It is. Really, very nice." Cole eyed the bed.

"Get a few hours sleep if you wish. We're meeting the other missionaries tonight at dinner," Sanchez informed him.

"Tonight? That soon?"

Sanchez smiled. "I'm afraid so."

Cole hadn't even unpacked yet when his head hit the pillow and the first snore escaped his throat.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Ballestino's Café

COLE'S BODY WAS STILL DRAGGING when Phil the Filipino and Mrs. Filipino drove him to meet fellow missionaries at a dinner gathering. Like expats worldwide, the foreign community of Addis Ababa frequented Western-style restaurants safely isolated from the sea of poverty lapping on their doorstep.

On Cole's first evening in country, the group was dining at Ballestino's Café. The restaurant was a quaint Italian joint sporting a striped tile design and red cushioned seats that would've fit nicely on a '40s movie set.

Lit candles on every table provided an intimate atmosphere and emergency

lighting in case of a brownout.

Music accented the mood. On weekends, there was a lounge singer accompanied by a handful of musicians serenading the crowd with a mix of love ballads and upbeat jazz sets.

A personal crowd favorite was a cover of Dean Martin's hit, *That's Amore*. There was no orchestral accompaniment because there weren't enough string musicians in Addis Ababa to form one.

On nights when the lounge act was absent, the in-house stereo system played everything from The Godfather score to elevator music versions of the latest European hits.

There'd been a large Italian presence in Addis Ababa since the early 20th century. In the 1930s, Mussolini invaded the country in his vain attempt to reconstruct an Italian Empire. After he was eventually driven out by a coalition of Allied and African troops many families of Italian descent continued to stay. They kept their ties to the old country but never let their thriving business interests in Ethiopia dwindle.

Roberto Ballestino originated from such a family. In fact, his great-grandfather had been a personal friend of Mussolini, which had given him the leverage needed to make his family a fortune in Addis Ababa.

Ballestino was a genial man unless you crossed him, and then he morphed into a character more akin to De Niro in Raging Bull.

Stout, with a gut that for Addis Ababa really stood out, Robert Ballestino favored striped tropical shirts. A gold name bracelet, a present from his wife of 30 years, hung loosely around one wrist. A Rolex—the genuine article and not the knockoffs sold on corners around town—was fastened to the other wrist.

Robbie, as he was known among the expat community, loved greeting his customers personally. He didn't care if they were an ambassador or a merchant marine in port for a couple of days, the "Hey, how you doin'?" welcoming them was always the same.

His style comprised as much New York or Naples as Addis Ababa. He always seemed to be chomping on an unlit Cuban cigar lifted from a personal stash he arranged to be brought in each week on a passenger flight from Havana. The crew generously received a free meal in return.

Robbie greeted them upon their entrance to the café, "Hey, how you doin', Phil?"

"Good, Robbie. And you? How about the kids?" Phil inquired.

"Which one of the eight do you want to know about?" Robbie gave a hearty

half-laugh, half-cough.

"Eight kids?" Cole sounded a little astonished.

Robbie gave him the once over before Phil explained, "New missionary from the States. He'll be working with us for a few weeks."

Robbie nodded toward a table against the far wall, "The holy fathers are this way."

There were a dozen ministers and missionary workers at the table. Some had wives with them who participated actively in the work. They were all anxious to meet the new face in the community.

For Cole's part, he was just looking forward to getting a meal that didn't come microwaved and require the use of plastic utensils. When the lasagna he ordered arrived, it was so tasty it made Cole forget about his journey or the longing for Monique's cooking that he'd been experiencing since Amsterdam. And here he'd been afraid that once in Africa he'd be expected to live off soup.

"Enjoy it while you can," Mrs. Sanchez said. "I'm afraid good cooking is hard to find outside the city. Actually, anything edible is a bit scarce."

"And outside the city is where the work is. Or so they tell me." Rev. Copperfield, a Brit who ran a Bible School inside the capitol, laughed at his own joke.

"Copperfield's right," remarked Bishop Jeff Johnson, a fellow American missionary working for a major denomination.

"Tell me, what exactly are your plans here in Ethiopia?" Copperfield inquired.

Mr. Sanchez intervened to save Cole. "Well, we haven't had a chance to discuss concrete plans as yet."

"Just mill about and offer help here and there, I suppose," Copperfield summarized before taking another drink of his tea.

"They make the best tea here," he declared with satisfaction.

The table nodded their agreement.

Cole was a little taken aback that his presence had been minimized before he'd even gotten dessert.

"I hope to do more than just mill around," he stated.

"Really? Like doing what?" Jeff asked.

Sanchez interrupted, "I'm sure Cole needs some rest before starting his conquest of the world." He was hoping to speak to Cole privately first before any public proclamations.

"No it's ok," Cole assured him.

"Yes, let him answer," Jeff said in a playfully annoying way.

He was waiting for the rookie to tell them all how to do what they'd been professionally trained to accomplish here.

"The church raised money to buy some Bibles. I thought I might start there," Cole explained rather confidently.

"Bibles? Oh, yes, by all means buy a truckload," Jeff scoffed.

"I have the money," Cole reached for a money belt around his waist but Sanchez discreetly reached over and stopped him from opening it up.

"What my colleague is trying to say, my dear man, is that Bibles do no good when people can't read or write. The pages are lost on them as is any meaning the written word might convey," Copperfield explained.

"Is there a plan 'B'?" Jeff asked.

"A plan 'B'?" Cole asked.

"Yes, you know a plan in case the first plan crashes and burns, which obviously it just did. A plan 'B.'" Jeff explained.

"Come on give the guy a break." Sanchez's statement garnered some sympathy from others sitting around the table.

Jeff wasn't letting up until someone cried "uncle."

"I'm sorry. These guys come here with these naïve notions on how they're going to save the world and blow all their resources on Bibles, leaving us to struggle with the everyday realities of this place."

Uneasy at the tenor of the conversation, Sanchez busily looked around as though searching for an exit door.

"It's nothing personal, Cole," Copperfield said. "It just gets frustrating at times."

Jeff softened his tone, "So, I was just wondering if there's a backup plan."

There was an uncomfortable pause as the table waited for Cole to reply, but instead it was Sanchez who seized the moment.

"You know, he could go up to the Horro," Sanchez stated.

Jeff rolled his eyes back, "Oh, not that cockamamie idea again."

"What's the Horro?" Cole asked.

"Not what but who," Copperfield explained.

"Tell him, honey," Mrs. Sanchez encouraged her husband with a friendly nudge.

From the fidgeting that suddenly broke out at the table, Cole surmised that this wasn't the first time the group had listened to Sanchez speak of his plan.

"The Horro are a tribe." Sanchez's voice jumped a notch with excitement, "None of us have any missions set up there."

“With good reason,” Jeff injected.

“Ok, the Horro are a bit unpredictable,” Sanchez admitted.

Jeff said, “With their tendency for violence, you go up there, you just might not come back.”

“They’re ruled by some witchdoctors of some sort. It’s all quite exotic and primitive really if you think about it,” Copperfield explained.

“Yes, but our Phil the Filipino has a plan to help them. Don’t you?” Dr. Yossi Peer had been quiet up until now, listening to the banter while enjoying his spaghetti Bolognese. He enjoyed eating at Ballestino’s but sometimes with this group the conversation turned a bit trite. However, Western friends were hard to acquire in Addis Ababa, so he probably tolerated more than he would have if he were back stateside in private practice.

In his late thirties, the UCLA grad was still a bachelor and young enough to be seeking out adventure in places like Ethiopia instead of Hermosa Beach. He’d noticed lately though that the thrill was becoming harder and harder for him to come by, and what once passed for excitement now often was little more than an excuse to break the routine.

He was doing good work here. As head of a private nonprofit clinic, he treated those infected with HIV and provided medicines donated from the West while trying to teach his patients how to administer them properly.

The virus was rampant throughout the country but especially in the city. People shamed by the disease were reluctant to discuss it with anyone.

There were also other medical threats of worms, malnutrition, and diseases commonly running amok in poverty stricken societies. All this made for an exciting day at the office but still, he hungered for new challenges.

“Yes, yes, I do.” The encouragement bolstered Sanchez’s confidence.

Sanchez continued. “My plan is to take some simple humanitarian supplies—”

“Like medical supplies?” Yossi suggested.

“Like medical supplies, with the aim of creating some kind of rapport with the Horro. If we can do that, then we can open a permanent clinic or school there and build mission work off that.” Sanchez beamed at his plan, which he’d had an itch to carry out for some time now.

“And no one has done this before?” Cole asked.

Jeff interrupted, “With good reason. First is the safety issue. The witchdoctors, or whatever they are, will not take too kindly to a bunch of Western missionaries setting up shop in their backyard. “

Sanchez went on the defensive. “We don’t know that.”

“We don’t know that they won’t. Even at 50–50, the risk is too much. I’d hate to be on the wrong end of that equation,” Jeff declared.

“Then there is the logistics of the whole trip,” Copperfield said out loud as though mulling the plan over in his mind.

“Logistics?” Sanchez asked.

“Why, yes. I mean there are the supplies to round up. I suppose the doc here can help on that count. But the main problem, or so it seems to me, is just getting there. How do you propose to get there? And once you get there, how are you going to communicate with them? Do you speak their language?” Copperfield looked at Sanchez who seemed for the first time to be considering those issues.

“No, I don’t,” Sanchez conceded.

“Oddly enough, I do. Well, I come close anyway,” Yossi told them.

“One of the staff at the clinic is of the Dimi tribe and their dialect is almost identical to the Horro. She taught it to us so we can use it to communicate with one another when we don’t want the patients to fully grasp what is going on.”

“An interesting medical technique,” Cole said.

“Rude but effective,” Yossi grinned.

“That still leaves the big question of how to reach the Horro in the first place,” Copperfield pointed out.

“Can’t we just drive there?” Cole asked.

“There are no roads where the Horro live,” Jeff asserted.

“None of us are horsemen, and with those supplies you’d need a regular Caravan even if you were,” Copperfield stated.

“You could fly,” Yossi suggested.

Everyone looked at him as though he’d lost his mind.

“It’s an option,” Yossi said.

“Fly,” Sanchez repeated the word, liking the sound of it.

“Don’t be daft,” Jeff told him.

Cole broke the tension by adding to it, “I like it. Let’s do it.”

Sanchez looked at Cole like Christmas had just fallen from the sky, while Jeff gave him an incredulous glance as though he was going to put him on the plane back to the States that night.

“Well, you said we couldn’t spend the money on the Bibles, so why don’t we spend it on an airplane or helicopter or something that’ll get us there?” Cole suggested.

“Are you serious?” Sanchez yelped. Mrs. Sanchez restrained her husband from jumping out of his seat with glee.

“Where are you gonna get a helicopter?” Jeff asked.

Yossi pointed. Everyone at the table simultaneously followed the finger to a place across the room where Robbie was greeting a customer.

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Robbie’s office in the back of his café had zero African décor. The desk was of European fabrication. The wall had scenes of Naples hanging from hooks. There was a bust of Caesar in one corner and an autographed photo of Mussolini next to it.

A nephew of Robbie’s manned the door, and Cole wasn’t sure which he should be doing, kissing Robbie’s ring or giving him a salute.

“Can you arrange that?” Sanchez asked.

“Pleez. Can I arrange that?” Robbie laughed until he coughed. The nephew gave a little chuckle himself, although he was careful not to outdo his uncle.

“I know you can. I guess I should ask how much it’ll cost.” Sanchez told Robbie.

“Now you’re talking my language. Have a seat,” Robbie said as he lumbered into a chair behind his desk and pulled out a calculator. He began punching numbers at a rate unsettling to Cole.

“Throw in the Holy Father’s discount—don’t want God to say I never did him a favor—yeah that should do it.” Robbie pushed the calculator over to Sanchez, who picked it up and stared at the figure.

“That’s—that’s—”

“Steep?” Robbie retrieved the calculator. “What you ask is difficult to arrange. Not impossible, mind you, just difficult. I’ll need half of it in advance, not for me mind you, but as a deposit on the helicopter and pilot.”

Cole looked back at the nephew standing in front of the door and wondered how he was going to explain all this to the finance committee at his church back in St. Clair, Indiana.

“You know, I have a cousin,” Sanchez started.

“Families are wonderful. Isn’t that right, Vito?”

The nephew at the door nodded in agreement.

Sanchez continued, “Well, this cousin is a computer whiz. Works for a big firm in Manila.”

“Do they have laptops?” Robbie had been trying to score computers for some time in an effort to corner the burgeoning market in Addis Ababa.

“That they do. Now many would be refurbished, but the average person wouldn’t be able to tell the difference,” Sanchez explained.

“I don’t suppose a container would be able to make its way to our little Garden of Eden here?” Robbie asked.

“I might be able to persuade him. As way of a company donation,” Sanchez said.

“Of course I understand.” Robbie was punching keys on the calculator again, and this time when he pushed it over to him, Sanchez smiled.

“Deal?” Robbie asked.

“Deal.” The two men shook hands.

“Want a cigar?” Robbie asked Cole.

“I don’t smoke,” Cole said, almost scared to say no.

“Neither do I except when I make money.” Robbie lit the Cuban he’d been chomping on all evening.

“You have the deposit to me tomorrow and I will make the call,” Robbie told Sanchez.

“Oh, we’ll need to change money too,” Sanchez said.

“I’ll make two calls.” Robbie motioned to his nephew who opened the door for the gentlemen.

“Vito, make sure the Holy Fathers get free dessert.”

“Sure thing Uncle Robbie.”

CHAPTER NINE

The Back Alley

“ARE YOU SURE WE’RE HEADED in the right direction?” Cole asked.

Tagging along only steps behind Sanchez, Cole’s instincts were disturbed by the change in scenery. The pair had left Mrs. Sanchez to guard the vehicle and

was now hoofing it through a neighborhood best described as the exact opposite of the Missionary Compound.

This dilapidated neighborhood was populated by crumbling homes whose lack of sanitation produced a smell with a stomach-turning distinctive odor. The open sewers bred swarms of flies that Cole constantly swatted away from his face.

A dire concession to hopelessness reflected itself in the way the people moved about the street. They seemed to accept their surroundings as the natural order of things.

"Trust me. I've done this a few times," Sanchez said.

"Well, that's comforting." Cole couldn't hide his sarcasm.

"Look, if you want to get things done here, this is the way you have to do it," Sanchez argued.

"I know. It makes me feel dirty. I can't help it. It flies in the face of all the rules," Cole replied.

Sanchez halted.

"These are the rules. Understand? Here there is no masquerade of civility like you have back in Indiana. Here if you want to help, you must sometimes turn a blind eye, swallow the distasteful and suffer the humiliation. Do you understand what I'm driving at?"

Suddenly, to Cole, Sanchez didn't seem so short in stature.

"Yeah, I get the point," Cole assured him.

The pair stepped off the street into an alley big enough for only one person to squeeze through at a time. Hitting another turn that was half alley/half street, they made a right only to be immediately challenged by a lookout.

"What do you want?" The lookout probably wasn't old enough to drive back in the States, Cole figured. He had a WWF T-shirt that totally clashed with the green slacks he was wearing, which needed another half inch added to the length.

The tennis shoes the kid wore must've been salvaged from a dump or were an extremely bad hand-me-down, because the sole on one shoe had come undone and flapped when he walked and while one shoe was tied, the other didn't have a shoestring at all.

Sanchez explained, "We're here to change money."

"What makes you think this is where you come to do such a thing?" The lookout demanded to know.

"Because I've done it before," Sanchez replied.

The lookout sized them up for a second then nodded for them to follow at what

proved to be a rather quick pace, which Cole felt was giving him a workout in the thin mountain air.

Just ahead, Cole spotted a dwelling with people entering and exiting frequently. Each visitor appeared to be in possession of a bundle or bag. Cole suspected the bundles to be cash not unlike the bills Sanchez was carrying in the dusty burgundy backpack slung over his shoulder.

"How does Robbie know these people?" Cole asked.

"Everybody knows these people. It's just Robbie has enough connections to make an appointment. Otherwise, we might have to wait a couple of days to secure a deal," Sanchez explained.

Cole was surprised, "An appointment with black marketers?"

"They're busy guys," Sanchez smiled when he said it.

"Money's scarce. There's only so much of it floating around and we're foreigners so they're naturally suspicious.

The amount we have is a little larger than the norm. We will exchange half for birr—the local currency—which they'll be ecstatic about, and the other half for euros, which they'll want prime fees to carry out. That's just how it works here, Cole. Capitalism at its best."

"If you say so. Not exactly something the Wall Street Journal would acknowledge though," Cole jested.

"Wait here," the lookout instructed upon reaching the building's doorway.

Cole wasn't sure why they were forced to wait outside the door, for it led into a small room furnished with a single table and two chairs.

One wall was painted purple and the other walls yellow—a color scheme worthy of the kid's cartoon character Barney, provided Barney had a mental meltdown.

Men milled about the room as though waiting instructions. Those inside leered at them when the lookout entered.

Behind the desk sat an Ethiopian man who obviously ran operations here. Compared to his compatriots, he was rather clean and well dressed. He listened intently as the lookout whispered into his ear then looked up and motioned for Cole and Sanchez to enter.

Cole was still thinking twice about the invitation when Sanchez strolled on inside.

"We've been expecting you!" The man stood up from the desk.

"How are you, Victor?" Sanchez shook the man's hand.

"Good, Mr. Sanchez. Good. I see you have a friend today. Most unusual,"

Victor eyed Sanchez like he was expecting an explanation but one wasn't forthcoming.

"Just an associate. You have yours," Sanchez motioned to the men around the room, "and I have mine."

Victor laughed. "Let's hope you keep better company than I do."

Sanchez put down the bag down on the desk, opened it up, and began setting the stacks of bills out.

"As you can see, we have business to transact. We would like to do a half-and-half deal. Part local and part euros. You have euros available?" Sanchez asked.

"Of course, I have euros. Plenty expensive, too," Victor assured him.

"How expensive?" Sanchez asked, beginning his negotiations.

Victor rubbed his chin. "Not so fast. There will be time for me to tell you the price. But I must inform you there is a problem, my friend."

Cole didn't like the sound of that, and from his friend's reaction, he concluded Sanchez wasn't thrilled with the turn of events either.

"Problem?" Sanchez tried concealing his worry.

"Afraid so. I do not know what nature this problem is. Maybe your associate here is not who you think he is?" Victor suggested.

"What are—" Cole started, but Sanchez held up a hand to cut him off.

"I just follow orders," Victor playfully stated.

The men in the room had straightened their stances and moved their shirts to easily reach the weapons Cole could now see were tucked in their waistbands.

Victor motioned for one of the lackeys to approach. The man brought him a cellphone that Victor immediately began to dial.

Cole looked around. The door was blocked. He and Sanchez were outnumbered. There was nowhere to run. Cole was beginning to feel that the dinner at Ballestino's Café last night may have been his last supper.

"They're here," was all Victor said before ending the call.

"I like you, Mr. Sanchez," Victor said eyeing the bundles of money sitting on his desk. "I hope you get to spend all this cash. But be assured, if you don't live to do so, I will spend it wisely for you."

The men in the room laughed. The laughter abruptly halted with a shout from outside. The men straightened up almost like they were attempting to stand at attention.

In strolled a middle-age man. His shirt was new, the pants pressed; the shoes had been shined before the day started, although now the dust of the city dulled that shine. He was in total contrast to the lackeys in the room.

Trailing behind him by no more than half a step, were two husky gentlemen. From the dark sunglasses, weapons at ready, clearly they were bodyguards. The newly arrived trio squeezed through the crowd, and Victor moved aside so that the man could take his seat.

Sanchez was a little panicky. All the times he'd been here before, he had never seen treatment like this. This man was a new player, and Sanchez didn't like changes to the game after it'd already started. The situation unnerved him, and he was looking for the first exit out of there.

"I don't know who you are, but I only do business with Victor," Sanchez declared.

"A loyal customer," Victor informed the man.

The man glared at Sanchez. "If you do business with Victor, then you are doing business with me. Understood?"

Sanchez understood clear enough. He silently took in a deep breath, crossing his fingers and hoping any trouble would subside before it got underway.

The man pointed at Cole, then looked at Victor for confirmation. For his part, Cole took a step backward when the man pointed, only to be held in check by one of the cronies behind him.

Victor nodded his head that Cole was the one.

Sanchez flashed Cole a look as to ask, "What did you do?"

The man scooted back the chair and stood. People stepped aside to make a path as he made his way to Cole where he stopped, looked him up and down then broke into a big smile. "Cole?"

"Yes." Cole thought he could feel his heart tremble ever so slightly.

The man grabbed Cole's hand, shaking it heartedly. "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you."

Cole was stunned. "I'm sorry, what did—"

He never got to finish as the man gave him a big hug. "I am Naf. I am Mulu's father. I heard what you did for my daughter and I am ever so grateful. Do you like coffee?"

Cole never got to answer as Naf ordered one of the men nearest the door to run down the street and fetch them coffee.

"As a token of my gratitude, I will waive my normal fee on the money being exchanged into Birr."

Sanchez jumped in, "What about the money being switched to euros?"

Naf looked at him and replied, "I still have a business to run."

He turned to the men around him. "You want to get paid, right?" They let out a

loud affirmative answer.

"I understand," Sanchez acknowledged. He wanted to ask Cole so badly who Mulu was, but eventually settled for the fact he was going to live. He'd ask Cole an hour from now.

"I hear you are going to the Horro," Naf said.

"How did you know that?" Sanchez asked out loud before he realized he was even speaking.

Naf looked at him. "I have my sources."

"Yes, we hope to accomplish things there," Cole informed him.

The man frowned. "The Horro not so nice."

"What do you mean 'not so nice'?" Cole asked.

"Not very hospitable. Mean," Naf explained with a scowl.

"We'll have to take our chances." Cole was wondering if the Horro had any friends at all in their own country.

"Let me help you on your journey," Naf offered.

"That's awful nice of you, but— "Cole's sentence trailed off as he watched the man motion to a lean, quiet henchman in the doorway. The henchman obediently walked over.

"This is Hondo. He is one of my best men. You take him with you on this trip," Naf instructed.

Cole was hesitant. "I don't know."

"You helped my daughter, now let me help you," Naf insisted.

Cole glanced over at Sanchez, hoping he'd have some input the locals would respect. Instead, Sanchez just shrugged.

"Ok, we accept your offer." Cole was at a loss to say anything else.

Naf smiled and gave Cole a hearty slap on the back.

"You look after these people," Naf instructed Hondo. "No harm must come to them. You understand?"

Hondo nodded he understood.

It was at that point that the runner came back with the coffee that had been ordered.

"Ah, good. We have good coffee here, Mr. Cole." The man handed Cole his cup.

"I'm sure I'll enjoy it," Cole replied. He looked out of the corner of his eye and noticed Sanchez smiling over his cup.

Taking a sip, Cole almost gagged. It was good but powerful. McDonald's coffee was like water compared to this stuff. How interesting this trip was

already proving to be.

CHAPTER TEN

Lady Marina

HER ITALIAN DESIGNER JEANS accented the slender lines in her body. The Chuck Taylors with the graffiti design etched on them had been lifted from a container stored in the dockyard the previous week. They felt comfortable. Good shoes, not the counterfeit knockoffs, were hard to come by in Addis Ababa. When you could find them, they were overpriced for most Ethiopians and outdated in design.

The shades over her eyes made her appearance more mysterious than she actually was. She'd become a fixture at the airport, which was already known for its fair share of shady characters. People generally simply referred to her as the Lady Marina.

The former Mrs. Demetrova followed a policy of sticking to her own affairs and in doing so had built a booming business based in a two-room office in the cargo/freight section of the airport. Then again, she'd had little choice in the matter.

Her ex-husband skipped the country on a chartered flight after cleaning out the accounts of two partners located back in Kiev, whom when they received the news, didn't take too kindly to being ripped-off.

The partners caught up to him in a dank hotel in Amsterdam six months later. Anyway that was the rumor floating around business circles and gossiped at parties. All Interpol knew was that bits and pieces of her ex were available to be fished out of the Dutch canals.

The gentlemen from Kiev had ushered up their condolences upon her husband's demise before increasing their stakes in the business. They'd promoted her to run the office with the understanding that if she ever made enough to relocate she'd be free to go.

Without resources of her own, the options were simple back then. Refuse the gentlemen from Kiev and end up doing God knows what to scrape out a living in Addis Ababa, or agree to their conditions and save enough until she could afford

to escape Africa. She accepted the offer.

The problem was that after a couple of years, the dream of fleeing transformed into the reality that she had nowhere to go.

Life was just as hard in Kiev as Addis Ababa and for her much stranger. She'd grown accustomed to the way things worked in
Addis Ababa. Any change constituted a hard adjustment at this stage. She was building a stash of cash, though, for the day when she would try to re-discover the rest of the world. That day just wasn't on the horizon yet.

Marina was feeding Mr. Groucho banana chips when two strangers walked into her office. Mr. Groucho showed his appreciation by clapping his paws together then grabbing a banana chip and jumping up on her shoulder.

"You two looking for something?" she inquired.

"Yes, we're looking for a lady named Marina," Sanchez explained.

"Why?" Marina pressed.

"We have business with her," Sanchez said.

Marina let her left hand drop beneath the counter. Her fingers gripped the Beretta hidden there.

"Are you, Marina?" Sanchez asked.

"And you are?" she responded.

"Mr. Sanchez," he put out his hand.

"And I'm Cole Tarkington."

Marina let loose the pistol and shook their hands.

"I'm Marina as you guessed. And this is Groucho."

The chimp let out a noise of appreciation then went back to gnawing on the banana chip.

"I've been expecting you," Marina said. "Everything is set. You guys ride with me."

The trio plus Mr. Groucho climbed into a battered jeep parked outside the office. Marina floored the pedal sending the jeep speeding around corners to the point where Sanchez and
Cole grew increasingly fearful of being flung out of the vehicle.

"You two know a lot of connected people," Marina observed. Groucho was perched right up on the front dash, holding on like this ride was an everyday occurrence.

Right now, Cole was hoping his biggest connection was looking down on him from above; otherwise, with Marina's driving he was calculating his chances of surviving this trip were dropping.

“Word is out to be very accommodating to you two. What are you up to here? Forget that. I don’t want to know. Where you going? Nah, I don’t want to know that either. Are you having fun?” Marina looked more at Sanchez than at the road, nearly running over a worker trying to move a wagon of teff.

“I guess,” Sanchez answered.

“Be truthful,” Cole said. “We always have fun.”

“That’s the spirit,” Marina said.

Sanchez played along with the charade. “We think so.”

Mr. Groucho made a strange sound voicing his disbelief.

“Are you two really missionaries? Wait, I don’t want to know,” Marina stated.

“Yes, we’re really missionaries,” Cole assured her.

“Who’d lie about a thing like that?” Sanchez said.

There was a very vocal huff from Marina like there was more than one answer to that question and that Cole and Sanchez really didn’t want to know.

Marina squealed the jeep to a halt in front of the hanger where a Bell helicopter sat dormant.

“There it is!” she exclaimed.

“Wow.” This far exceeded anything in Cole’s imagination.

“Robbie really knows how to arrange things, doesn’t he?” Sanchez said.

“Well, he knows who to call,” Marina corrected taking a portion of the credit.

“That bird’s the only one available in the whole country.”

A red-headed Irishman exited the hanger wearing oil-stained overalls. He was wiping his greasy hands with a rag so dirty it made his overalls seem spic ‘n span.

“Hey, O’Malley. These are your passengers,” Marina said as way of introduction.

“I’m Mr. Sanchez.” He stuck out his hand but O’Malley held up his to show it wasn’t a great idea.

“Yeah, Phil the Filipino. I know who you are,” O’Malley replied.

Sanchez was perplexed. “Have we met?”

“No. But I’ve seen you and your fellow ministers at Ballestino’s a couple of times. You guys aren’t the only ones who get a hankering for good pasta once in a while,” O’Malley informed him.

“I’m Cole Tarkington.”

“Good for you,” O’Malley replied.

“Be nice,” Marina ordered O’Malley.

“Right,” O’Malley said with a dismissive tone.

“So can you take us to the Horro?” Sanchez asked.

“Since the price is right, I can as long as I don’t have to venture far from the bird. I’ve heard stories about what goes on up there,” O’Malley said.

“You’ve never been yourself?” Cole just assumed a pilot here would have covered most of the country.

“No. Why would I? I’ve got no business up there and why go looking for trouble? It tends to find me well enough on its own,” O’Malley stated.

“Well, we’re not looking for trouble,” Sanchez replied.

“Yeah, well, from what I hear, the Horro equal trouble. You find one, you’ll find the other.” It was a high paying job, but O’Malley wondered if it was worth the risk with these two amateurs.

“Where’d you learn to fly?” Cole asked.

“I’ve got a license if that’s what you’re worried about,” O’Malley told him.

“I’m sure you do, but where have you flown before? I just would like to know what kind of experience you have that’s all.” Cole realized he might have pressed a little too hard.

Marina smiled. She’d been trying to pump O’Malley about his background for months now.

“Sounds like a fair question to me,” she declared.

. . . . . .

The infrared highlighted body movements on the ground. O’Malley was examining the data trying to figure out what was really happening on the desert floor. If you had a heartbeat, you showed up on his screen as a glowing figure moving about, and from the picture he was seeing there was a lot of moving about.

He was due to be discharged soon. His relationship with the British army was at an end, and it was a divorce he’d been looking forward to for quite some time now. Not that he had specific plans—he didn’t—but the fact he could get a fresh start was greatly anticipated.

O’Malley watched on his screen as two figures sprinted across the desert floor and slid under what must have been a car. He squeezed the button on the controls, and seconds later the heat glow of the heartbeats disappeared.

He turned the helicopter toward a nearby hill, landing on its far side. The sand created a whirlwind that blinded their vision.

“Thanks for the lift mate,” the leader of the three man team said as they piled onboard.

“The meter’s running,” O’Malley yelled over the noise.

“Then better skip the scenic route,” the soldier replied.

O’Malley planned to do just that with a straight flight back to base. As they took off, the bird rattled from the impact of small-arms fire, and O’Malley watched as several gauges indicated things were not right.

“Hang on. This could be a rocky ride,” he told his passengers.

He struggled with the stick, barely managing to keep it under control all the way back to base. Their path wasn’t hard to follow. All a person had to do was lock in on the trail of smoke billowing from underneath.

They arrived safely at the base, but O’Malley never figured out how exactly. He was skilled, but not that skilled.

“So you aren’t going to tell us where you learned to fly?” Cole asked.

“There’ll be time for that on the trip. I’m sure we’ll be bored to tears and that story will probably put you over the edge,” O’Malley answered.

“Don’t we have some paperwork to generate for a shipment of computers?” Marina asked Sanchez.

Gazing at the helicopter, Sanchez replied, “Yes, we do.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Cave Conversation

SEYUM LEANED AGAINST the moss-covered wall of the cave. His brother with every four exhales let loose a low humming snore from where he was curled up on an empty patch of dirt between two rocks. Neither of them had rested well since seeking refuge here.

They’d agreed to take shifts watching the entrance to the cave. If villagers searching for reprisals stumbled across them, they didn’t want to be surprised.

The cave itself offered scant protection from the outside elements. Seyum found the air inside stifling. A decaying animal carcass on the far end added an aroma he could have skipped.

Soon after entering the cave, the brothers had slain a snake by managing to pound it to death with rocks. The meat, tough as it was, provided them with nourishment to sustain them, but
Seyum’s stomach was saying there was a price to be paid for that choice.

Etchings were randomly scattered along the cave walls. They were ancient signs carved by rocks or crude knives, all of it ancient graffiti, the equivalent of

“Kilroy Was Here.”

Seyum wondered to himself if the location had ever been used for any ritual work. He doubted it, or the sacredness of the place would have been passed down through the generations. More likely, it’d been a stop off point for hunters. The place got little use these days and most tribesmen didn’t know of its existence.

Seyum convinced himself that he and his brother were safe. Still, he had no way of knowing how long that safety cushion would last. It might be forever, or it could be over if they were discovered two minutes from now.

Reaching down, he scooped up a pebble out of the dirt. With a well aimed shot, he launched it against the back of Befusukad’s head. The stone brought Befusukad out of his sleep although he was cranky and nursing a new headache.

“Is it time to switch already?” Befusukad asked while rubbing the swelling lump on the back of his head.

“No,” Seyum replied.

“Then why are you waking me?” Befusukad asked. Then as an afterthought he added, “You didn’t hear something outside did you?”

“No, it is quiet,” Seyum assured him.

“Then again, why are you waking me?”

“How long are we going to stay here?” Seyum demanded to know.

“As long as we need to,” Befusukad snapped.

“Well, how long is that? Do you have a plan to get us out of here?” Seyum wondered.

Befusukad teased, “Why? Are you feeling a bit claustrophobic?”

Seyum looked around at his surroundings, spotting the rotting carcass. “More like a cornered animal.”

“Well, we aren’t animals and we aren’t cornered,” Befusukad reminded him.

“You could fool me and I’m tired of being fooled,” Seyum said half to himself and half out loud.

“What do you suggest?” Befusukad sarcastically asked.

“The way I look at it our choices are limited. We can sit here and wait for someone to find us,” Seyum replied.

“Or starve to death if we don’t choke first on that snake meat,” Befusukad added.

“That, too,” Seyum said, feeling a new rumble in his stomach.

“And the other option you had in mind?” Befusukad asked.

“Seek out our enemy and destroy him.” Seyum’s voice trembled from the

restrained anger it contained.

"How will we find him?" Befusukad wondered.

Seyum explained, "Atern will lead us to him. When we find him, we can destroy him. Once we do that, our place among our people will be restored and we will be more powerful than ever."

Befusukad sat a moment collecting his thoughts. In this cave his clouded mind found it increasingly difficult to focus.

"What would you prefer to do? Sit around in this place until the beasts eat us or a villager finds us?"

Befusukad said, "Our enemy would never expect this."

"No."

Standing up, Befusukad declared, "Then let us seek him out and execute the will of Atern."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Forces Gather

TEGUASH FOUND HIMSELF STARING back at the familiar river that had haunted his dreams in previous weeks.

He'd learned to suppress any emotional panic that initially had automatically overwhelmed him. A natural fear of water was the culprit behind that particular panic, he reasoned.

Accepting the dream was underway again; Teguash followed his past pattern of drawing closer to the water's muddy edge. Looking toward the middle of the

stream, he spotted the mysterious man struggling to traverse the current.

He could see the stranger being pulled under, then resurfacing to struggle for air.

Teguash looked around for the python, but it was hidden as always, lurking beneath the surface, Teguash figured, waiting for the gift of opportunity.

Teguash realized the dream inevitably ended in the same result. He'd reach out only to be assailed by the python. The choking sensations squeezing his body left an impression even after he awoke. Still, he could never abandon a drowning man. It wasn't Teguash's nature.

The figure hovering above the water suddenly swooped in Teguash's direction. It startled Teguash, for that'd never occurred before.

"Have faith. Reach out," the voice instructed him.

"What?" Another first, Teguash had never questioned this divine being before. His question didn't elicit a response, though. Instead, the being continued hovering, watching Teguash, waiting for obedience. In fact that sense of expectation grew stronger to the point that Teguash suffered guilt over his inaction.

Teguash stepped closer to the water until his toes touched the edge. Holding out his staff, he probed beneath the surface.

Squinting his eyes, unable to watch himself do what he was about to do, he reached into the water.

Teguash felt a slimy creature slide across his fingers and by way of natural reflex grabbed onto it.

Teguash opened his eyes to the sight of a python wrangled by the throat. It was thrashing about trying to slither free but Teguash tightened his grip, applying all the strength he had.

The python attempted to sling its tail around Teguash's legs, but was beat off with the staff, which Teguash's free hand used as club. After a couple of minutes, the python, which had always been victor in previous dreams, was vanquished.

Teguash looked up for the hovering figure, but it was gone, disappearing downstream or back to the heavens from whence it came.

He held on to the lifeless snake for a moment, making sure it was really dead. He even poked it once with the staff before tossing its limp body into the water and watching with a sense of relief and celebration as the current carried it out of view. He didn't know why, but Teguash was aware that this vision would never occur in his sleep again.

The sun rose in the sky as Teguash glanced out across the water. The man who'd been sinking beneath the surface moments ago was now free styling toward where he was standing.

The man was fair skinned, not like anyone Teguash had seen before. As he reached the shore, the stranger was short of breath but held a big smile on his face.

"That snake nearly killed me," the man declared.

"Nearly both of us," Teguash replied astonished.

"Good point. My name is—"

Commotion outside the house woke Teguash from his slumber.

. . . . . .

Teguash slowly recovered in Aberra's village. Aberra's family cared for him in their hut, nursing him back to strength.

They shared the little amounts of food and water in their possession and provided Teguash time to recuperate.

Teguash was taken aback by how much rest he required. He slept ten hours straight the first day there. Aberra eventually woke him, insisting he eat. His body was depleted. He was fortunate to have stumbled upon the hospitality of Aberra.

With time his aches became manageable. Food started staying down. Teguash's sleep became restful. The beat down inflicted by the miles between his village and Aberra's house was slowly being overcome.

Aberra's neighbors varied in their reactions to the arrival of Teguash. People in the beginning were very distant. They'd heard so much about Teguash that they were unsure what to expect. What they didn't imagine was that he'd be staying so long in their midst.

It was akin to having a celebrity sleep over, and the reaction reflected that status. At first, the villagers were in awe, walking by Aberra's dwelling with wide-eyed fascination at who was inside. They were almost too frozen with curiosity to even approach Aberra's doorway.

After a couple of days, all that bubbling wonderment propelled Aberra's fellow tribesmen to become inquisitors.

"Why is Teguash sleeping so much?"

"Is he going to live to complete his journey?"

"Will he come out and speak to us when he is well enough to do so? When is that going to be?"

Then a point was reached when the whispers began to rise in volume so that they were no longer whispers but a shared mumbling, mutterings preying on the fears that Teguash might rain harm down on the inhabitants of the village.

It started with someone speculating whether the gang that had laid in ambush for Teguash, bent on revenge, might be brazen enough to sneak back under cover of darkness. If they did, conventional wisdom dictated, they might not only try to finish what they started with Teguash but might proceed to attack other villagers.

"That's not going to happen," Aberra said responding to the men who'd gathered outside his door.

"How can you be sure they won't return?" one man asked.

"Consider this. If they come to this house, my sons and I will defend not just ourselves but Teguash as well. Anyone coming here will discover they've made a serious miscalculation," Aberra assured them.

"And us? What about us? We will still be exposed to these attacks," another in the group pointed out.

"What is wrong with you?" Aberra asked.

"What do you mean?" came an angry response.

"How many men are there in this village? How many of them are there? Do you think just because they don't come to my house, I will not come to your assistance when you need it? Where is your common sense? We have nothing to fear."

Aberra stood there confidently.

The crowd seemed convinced though one issue still remained.

"And what of the Horro?" someone asked.

"What of them?" Aberra shot back.

"If they hear that Teguash is here, they will act. Tamrat and the other shamans will set out to destroy us for harboring their enemy. And who among us can match the power of Tamrat?" the person argued.

It was at that moment that Teguash, still shaky in his walk, came out to join Aberra.

"I can," Teguash informed them.

"But you have been ill. You are no match for Tamrat."

"Of course he is. Why do you think the Horro are so afraid of him?" Aberra pointed out.

"When the time comes, I will be ready." Teguash had doubt his words were true.

“Do you want to live under the thumb of the Horro? Do you want Tamrat dictating what you should or should not be doing? And your daughters, do you want them offered up to
Tamrat and his priests whenever they demand?” Aberra was adamant in his convictions.

Aberra saw from the look on their faces that the men didn’t. They were scared of what would happen if Teguash failed, but Aberra knew that for the time being they were willing to stick by him and Teguash.

. . . . . .

It’d only been a couple of hours since Aberra had eased the minds of the men when two strangers strolled into the village heading for Aberra’s place.

“Look, they’re Horro,” one villager noted. Indeed, the dress of the men, although disheveled as though they’d been on the road, identified them as Horro tribesmen.

Then another person suddenly shouted, “Look! Around his neck!”

Everyone caught a glimpse of a necklace. It was no ordinary necklace. It was a marking of the god Atern made out of wood and stone. Everyone knew from their own experience only shamans were permitted to wear such a marking.

The sighting was a cue for the men, who rushed into their huts and grabbed clubs, spears and knives. By the time the two strangers had almost reached Aberra’s dwelling, a small armed mob had surrounded them.

Aberra and his sons had rushed to the sound of alarm. When they saw it was only the two men, Aberra calmed the crowd down before confronting the witchdoctors.

“All we want is something to eat,” Befusukad begged. His stomach was grumbling.

“You only want to regain your energy so you can do us harm,” Aberra stated.

“No, no,” Befusukad protested.

“We’re hungry. We’re in need, would you turn us away?” Seyum inquired.

“That depends,” a voice from behind Aberra said.

The men parted, making a way for Teguash to approach.

“Who are you?” Seyum asked.

“I am the one you have failed to destroy,” Teguash replied.

“Teguash!” Befusukad couldn’t believe the name was escaping his lips.

With a quick snatch, Teguash yanked the priest necklace from Befusukad. A

gasp came from the two brothers.

"You won't be needing this anymore," Teguash declared.

Throwing it on the ground, he smashed it with his staff.

"But it was a symbol of our power!" Seyum declared.

"Your power has evaporated," Teguash exhorted.

The brothers looked at each unable to admit the truth publicly.

Teguash continued, but loud enough so the point would not be lost on all ears listening. "Your power is gone because it was misplaced. The worship of Atern is destructive and misguided."

"You risk the wrath of Atern with this blasphemy," Seyum warned before Befusukad motioned for him to quiet down. The pair had entered the village with much nerve. Now, nerve had turned into nervousness.

"If you feel that way, then call upon his powers to strike me down," Teguash challenged.

There was a pause as the crowd waited for one of the brothers to step forward and challenge Teguash. The brothers looked at the crowd's intensity and sheepishly lowered their heads as a sign of concession.

"One is coming who will show you the way," Teguash said.

"Give them food and water but keep them under guard," Aberra instructed the villagers. The first face-to-face confrontation had gone to Teguash.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Rough Landing

“COLE. COLE!” O’MALLEY YELLED.

Cole opened his eyes and jerked straight up in his seat. It was a habit of his sleeping while flying. He couldn’t help himself.

“Sorry, just having a weird dream.” It was the first dream he’d had about the river since landing in Ethiopia. Oddly enough, it wasn’t nearly as dark or brooding as earlier dreams.

This one had even been given a happy ending.

“I’m good, though,” Cole said rubbing his eyes.

“Well, unfortunately, we’re not,” Sanchez said from the seat behind him.

“What’s up?” Cole anxiously asked.

O’Malley tapped the ship light, which from Cole’s perspective demonstrated absolutely nothing.

O’Malley explained, “Transmission problem. We won’t be able to keep it in the air.”

O’Malley jumped on the radio, relaying the team’s approximate position back to Marina’s office in case a rescue attempt had to be mounted.

“At least we have a doctor along just in case,” Sanchez said.

“A lot of good I will do you if I get in a crash,” Yossi pointed out.

“Look at him,” Sanchez said, talking about Hondo, who sitting still in his seat looked as though he experienced this sort of emergency frequently.

“He looks like he has it under control,” Yossi noted.

“Don’t you ever say anything?” Sanchez asked. Hondo hadn’t spoken a peep since departing Addis Ababa, and even now responded to Sanchez with a silent, straight face.

“O’Malley, how about that place at 10 o’clock?” Yossi suggested spotting a village with an open field on the edge of it.

After a quick gander, O’Malley said, “It’s as good as any, mate.”

He placed the rudder in that direction and privately kept his fingers crossed that nothing else with the engine would go astray. Truth was the engine could quit at any moment.

“Is this a Horro village?” Cole wondered aloud. It was a possibility no one had considered yet.

“No, I don’t think so,” O’Malley stated.

“We haven’t been flying long enough to cross into Horro territory yet.”

Everyone strapped themselves in and more than one prayer was muttered as O’Malley went about setting the bird down.

Yossi double checked the cargo including a couple boxes of basic medicines

and vitamins that had been thrown onboard to help the malnutrition they were sure to encounter.

The landing itself was smooth. It was as though O'Malley practiced it weekly.

Cole noticed a small crowd congregating at the edge of the village. The onlookers kept their distance as the group filed out of the helicopter to await the miracles of O'Malley the wonder mechanic.

. . . . . .

"Come quick. Something is falling from the sky," Aberra, who was almost out of breath, told Teguash. It was nearly too fantastic to believe what'd he'd just seen.

Teguash grabbed his staff and hurried with Aberra to join the rest of the villagers, who'd already gathered, at the edge of the field outside the village.

There it sat. The engines had wound down. Cole and his fellow passengers were disembarking.

People stepped back at the sight of O'Malley and his head gear. They stepped back further when they realized everyone was a different color than they were.

"What is this magic?" a person in the crowd shouted.

"It's no magic," Teguash responded.

O'Malley and Sanchez looked at the engine while the rest of the group quickly glanced at the increasing of numbers of onlookers and decided for the sake of peace, they'd better introduce themselves.

Hondo had originally shown up for the trip lugging an AK-47. When Cole nixed that idea, Hondo tried hiding a pistol under his shirt. Cole discovered it in mid-flight when Hondo slid in his seat by accident.

After emptying the bullets, disarming the piece where it would no longer fire, Cole tossed the armament out of the helicopter, letting it fall where it might. He figured a person would use it for scrap metal. It might even bring enough to feed someone for a week.

Now upon seeing the welcoming committee, Hondo felt unprepared. If these people turned hostile, he'd have no way to defend Cole or himself from this many adversaries. He'd have to sacrifice himself to save Cole, for if he failed, his boss would surely kill him as a reward for that failure.

Teguash watched the figure in the middle of the smiling group leisurely making their way toward them. The build appeared familiar. He wasn't certain. In his anxiety, he held his breath in anticipation.

Cole was joking with Yossi when he caught eye of a big man center stage among the villagers.

A staff in one hand, the man's posture commanded respect. But there was something else. Nah, it couldn't be. Could it?

Within yards of the group, Teguash stepped out, causing the stir among the tribesmen to cease. He fixated his stare on Cole, who reciprocated. For a second, Teguash and Cole stood silently face to face.

"I know you," Teguash stated.

Yossi cleared his throat and began his role as translator, a duty he'd carry out for the rest of the trip.

"That's funny, I was going to say the same thing," Cole replied.

"Old friends?" Yossi flashed a wry smile.

"I've been seeing this guy in my dreams off and on for months now," Cole explained.

Teguash declared, "I am that man."

"Well that explains it then," Cole said as though the fascination of the coincidence carried no weight at this particular moment.

This time when Cole stuck out his hand to introduce himself, there was no interruption. Teguash firmly grasped his hand in friendship, bringing a cheer from the villagers.

Some of the children scampered up to Cole and Yossi to touch their pale skin. They tended to giggle after touching them as though having gotten away with a mischievous act without getting nabbed.

Other children rushed toward the helicopter. The gawkers only irritated the already frustrated O'Malley. It was good fortune that the children found the Irish accent amusing, for if they'd understood his outburst, they'd have been treated for shock by Dr. Peer.

As it was, Sanchez entertained the children for a few minutes, even allowing them to climb into the helicopter itself, which enticed a more subdued rebuke from O'Malley. For the children, this was a day they'd remember all their lives.

"Why are you here?" Aberra asked Cole after introductions were made.

"Well, you see," Cole replied nodding back to the helicopter. "There wasn't much of a choice."

"No, no," Aberra said.

Teguash spoke up. "What he is asking is why you come from your home to ours?"

Cole hesitated unsure of the right words, but Yossi encouraged him on. "This is your big moment."

"We're here to tell God's story," Cole proclaimed.

“Of your God?” Aberra inquired.

“Yes. We’re here to tell our God’s story,” Cole answered then proceeded to start from the beginning since the people had no basis from which to reference what he was speaking about.

To create the proper framework in his mind, Cole imagined he was back in St. Clair speaking to children attending Sunday school for the very first time in their lives.

Cole detailed how God had created the world they lived in including the trees about them, the mountains where their villages were located, and the rivers from which they drew their water.

He pointed to the sky and spoke of the stars and how the heavens were infinite. The intricate fabric of creation proved the perfect nature of God’s plan, Cole explained.

Man had lived the life of paradise in the Garden of Eden. The garden was a place, like the heavens, of infinite abundance. However, man had discovered sin through disobedience.

Because of this sin, God provided a substitute sacrifice to wipe away those sins. The only way for the villagers to take advantage of that sacrifice was to choose good over evil.

Cole regaled his audience with the tale of the great flood and how Noah had saved mankind itself by building a gigantic ark—an ark that was designed according to the perfect specifications of God.

The children enjoyed Cole’s attempts to make animal sounds when telling the story. For his part, it was a YouTube moment, and Cole was grateful there weren’t camera phones out in the bush.

“The price of sin is death,” Cole explained as an intro into Abraham’s attempt to sacrifice Isaac. He drew a parallel to this by sharing the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus.

When Cole finished, everyone looked to Aberra and Teguash to see their reaction.

“Will this God allow my people to be free?” Aberra demanded to know.

“People are slaves to sin. If you believe, you’ll be free,” Cole answered.

“Is your God stronger than the god of the Horro?” Teguash asked.

“He is stronger than all gods because he created them,” Cole proclaimed.

“I believe,” Teguash said. “But for the people to believe you, you must prove it so they can see.”

Cole leaned over to Yossi, “How do I do that?”

“I just heal people,” Yossi replied. “Saving their souls is your problem.”

“Come.” Teguash motioned for them to follow, which they did.

The group briskly made its way to the heart of the village where two men stood guard at a door.

Aberra motioned to the guards, who brought Befusukad and Seyum outside for everyone to see.

“These two men are shaman for the Horro. They serve the god Atern,” Aberra explained.

“Why are they locked up?” Yossi asked.

“Because they are dangerous men,” Aberra answered.

Aberra challenged Cole, “Tell them of your God. If you can convince them, then my people will have proof that your God is real.”

Yossi looked at Cole, “You didn’t expect this to be a Sunday morning situation did you?”

“I was hoping for more than 30 seconds to get it done,” Cole replied.

Befusukad spoke up, “We’re not interested in your God.”

“You haven’t heard about him yet,” Cole retorted.

“It does not matter. Atern will extract his vengeance,” Befusukad shot back.

The show of defiance made Hondo stiffen up. Words were not spoken lightly among the Horro, so he stepped into closer proximity to Cole.

“Our intentions are peaceful,” Cole told Befusukad.

Suddenly, a shimmer of light reflected off a shank Seyum had forged out of bone. Hondo lunged forward but he was too late. The shank embedded itself in Cole’s chest causing him to collapse.

Hondo, angered by his being too late to save Cole, grabbed Seyum’s arm. The crack as the bone snapped was audible.

Hondo knocked Seyum to the ground where the would-be assassin rolled in the dirt screaming from the agony.

In great anger, villagers grabbed the other Atern priest and pummeled him until Yossi screamed, “Stop! Stop!”

Still, the villagers didn’t listen until Aberra let out a loud whistle. By then, a dazed Befusukad was severely bruised.

“This is the will of Atern. You won’t be able to save him,” Befusukad claimed defiantly.

Yossi had Aberra send runners to O’Malley and Sanchez with instructions to fetch his medical supplies. He bent down to examine Cole who was grasping his chest in shock.

“He stabbed me,” Cole said.

“That he did,” Yossi replied.

“He stabbed me,” Cole repeated.

“I think we’ve established that fact. Hold still so I can look at you, ok?”

“How bad is it?” Cole asked.

“You will die,” Seyum screamed.

Yossi snapped, “You be quiet!” Hondo stepped on Seyum’s broken arm to emphasize the point.

“Yossi?” Cole looked at him with pleading eyes. Yossi examined the wound. It was bleeding faster than he was comfortable with.

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The waves had been majestically brilliant as the tide rolled in from the Pacific. The reddish glow from the sun highlighted the bluish-grayness of the water as it slammed against the beach.

Yossi, wishing he had time to climb on a surfboard and enjoy the splendor of Mother Nature, had to report to work in a couple of hours. He was time deprived and wondered if the American Medical Association ever considered classifying that as a medical condition.

Instead, Yossi listened to the shutter click on his Olympus as he captured the scene. Photography was a hobby he’d forced upon himself as a counterbalance to more gory scenes witnessed daily in the E.R. It was his way of stopping to smell the roses. Then again, he’d never been much of a gardener.

He focused on two boarders grabbing a good ride by braving the thrashing of the tide. Even through the viewfinder of the lens, Yossi saw the towering wave come roaring in from behind the surfers, and before they knew it the force of the blow had plunged them into the water.

Yossi watched the first surfer surface and grab onto his board. The surfer glanced around for his partner but all he found was her board, which joined other debris being tossed aside by the tide.

Yossi thought he saw a body reach the top, and his eyes must not have been playing tricks because the other boarder immediately began paddling toward his friend.

Swimming out to help wasn’t an option. So Yossi impatiently watched as the first surfer brought his friend ashore.

Yossi was waiting for them.

Helping the surfer drag the limp blonde onto the dry sand, a pang of

recognition struck Yossi.

"Lynn?" Yossi asked with disbelief.

"Can you help her?" The other surfer asked.

Yossi ignored the question as he brushed back the hair to examine a deep gash in the side of the head that was turning the golden hair into a burnt color. He checked for a pulse.

There was one, but so faint it barely registered.

Yossi yanked off his shirt and applied it to the head.

"Hold this."

"Do you know her, man?" the man asked while applying pressure to the head.

"An ex," Yossi replied. The answer didn't do their relationship justice though. It was the girl he'd intended to marry. The one that love dictated he settle down with until she got so wrapped up in the beach party scene that she tossed her career goals aside, leaving Yossi with a relationship stuck in reverse. He had to painfully extract her from his life.

Lynn's body suddenly jerked from a convulsion then went lifeless. Yossi checked the pulse a second time. He couldn't find one.

Immediately he began CPR, but by the time paramedics hit the scene, Yossi knew from experience he was going through the motions. Life had already exited Lynn's body for good.

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In back of the crowd lingered Tamrat's cousin, who'd watched events unfold rapidly. Despite his overbearing size, the commotion made his presence go undetected. He watched

Seyum's attempt to kill Cole and was quietly relieved that the job he'd been sent here to do might be accomplished by someone else.

Tamrat wouldn't care who carried out the murder of these foreigners, only that they were dead. As long as the Horro retained their supremacy and social hierarchy, all else was inconsequential.

He lingered in the background as O'Malley and Sanchez sprinted forth with medical supplies and nearly panicked at the sight of their friend sprawled on the ground bleeding.

The cousin wasn't sure how he'd rescue Befusukad and Seyum. He was scouting possible escape routes when it occurred to him that Tamrat never mentioned them in his instructions. If the all-seeing Tamrat didn't deem them

worthy of his words then he most surely judged their lives expendable.

He was about to leave the village to report back to Tamrat when a commotion caused him to stay.

Yossi managed to extract the makeshift blade out of Cole's chest. He held up the knife to satisfy the morbid curiosity of the onlookers.

"The tool of Atern," Seyum painfully bellowed.

"Fortunately, Atern's craftsmanship is lacking. Something a little more lethal would've killed you, Cole. You were lucky,"
Yossi explained.

"Lucky isn't exactly the word that first came to my mind," Cole replied grimacing.

Yossi managed to slow the bleeding. This was essential, because blood loss out here in the bush could prove fatal in itself. There were no resources to implement a transfusion.

He reached into his supply box pulling out what he needed to sew Cole up. The villagers, along with Tamrat's cousin, crowded closer to view the operation. None of these people had ever witnessed this before, and they were fascinated by Yossi's skill.

It was at this point that Sanchez, without realizing he was doing it, showed Yossi's medical talents were no more than an extension of their mission. He leaned over and softly uttered a prayer for Cole.

Later, Sanchez would claim he didn't really think about the consequences but those consequences quickly crystallized.

When Cole stood up after swallowing a couple painkillers and antibiotics, in the eyes of the village, it was nothing less than a miracle and proof Teguash had spoken wisely that the god Atern of the Horro was no longer the reigning deity.

Braced up by Sanchez and Yossi, Cole weakly spoke to those gathered around, "its God's protection that allows me to still be standing. He wants me to tell you His story. That's why I am still alive."

Tamrat's cousin waited for these strangers to incite the crowd to execute Befusukad and Seyum, a turn of events the two priests themselves were anticipating. There was a move to carry out such an execution among the ranks of the villagers, but it was Cole who, while weak on his feet, pleaded for mercy.

"Love thy neighbor as yourself. This is the message we bring you. Show mercy toward those who would do you harm." There was a pause as Cole hoped they'd spare the lives of the priests.

The priestly brothers didn't know what to make of the plea.

Yossi had set in to create a makeshift cast for Seyum using old animal hide a villager had available.

The compassion shown the pair silenced their verbal barrage and brought about a change of heart. It was Befusukad who spoke up first.

"Your God has outshone Atern. I don't know how. But we wish, if you would spare our lives, to serve you," he told Cole.

"I don't want you to serve me," the missionary explained.

"Then what do you demand of us?" Besufukad asked.

"I want you to listen to God's story then make your own decision," Cole replied.

Besufukad glanced at Seyum. "So be it."

Tamrat's cousin couldn't believe his ears. No one had ever deserted Tamrat before or denounced Atern so publicly. For two of the priests to do so was a devastating calamity.

The cousin made his way out of the village without detection. He needed to find somewhere to digest what he'd witnessed this day.

Yossi leaned over to Cole and whispered, "We're going to get you somewhere where you can rest."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Word

UNDER THE UMBRELLA OF ABERRA and Teguash's hospitality, Cole was able to recuperate. The rest of the team urged him to return to Addis Ababa for treatment, but he felt the risk of staying was worth taking.

The team had carried enough provisions to last for a few days, which proved wise because Cole's stomach hadn't adjusted to the spicy Ethiopian cuisine. Not to mention that the villagers would have been strapped to scrape up enough to pacify the team's Western-styled appetites, although Cole had no doubt they

would've made the effort.

During their few days in the village, Cole and Sanchez took turns teaching stories found in God's book. The people didn't seem to tire of their storytelling. By shaping their message in the form of stories, the team was able to convey the faith they'd traveled so far and through so much adversity to share.

People related to the storytelling, for oral tradition was the method used among the tribesmen to pass important information and it proved far more practical than if Cole had succeeded in purchasing the Bibles as was his original plan.

Cole stressed finding a relationship with God by behaving as the children of God so that a believer would continuously learn. He told of examples, such as Moses who went from a prince to an outcast back to being the leader of his people.

Keeping a chronological order to the stories helped outline the increasing nature of God's intervention in the events of mankind and his provisions for redemption. It allowed them to see the unfolding of God's plan through the ages.

Stories of the feats of the apostles caught the interest of village elders whom Cole imagined pictured themselves as similar caretakers. The miracles of the apostles fascinated Befusukad and Seyum, who seemed relieved to learn anyone might receive power from this new God.

Sanchez held special appeal to the children who flocked to listen to him spiel on with much animation about Zacharias climbing a tree or David killing a lion.

They reveled in his version of David versus Goliath, and the kids all made slingshots to carry with them.

In fact, the kids were often seen gathering rocks around the village and having contests to see who could sling their stone the furthest. This resulted in more than one innocent bystander being beaned by an errant aim.

At night, the tribesmen sat together discussing what they'd heard that day. As fires crackled and sparks rose upward like lost fireflies into the night air, the villagers debated the merits of this new God and his plan for redemption.

An increasingly popular opinion being reiterated around the fires was this notion of a personal relationship with God. It didn't require the power of a witchdoctor or the blessings of a shaman. Having watched what had befallen the Horro under Tamrat, and furthermore, what was in store for their own people, this lack of intermediary restraint signified new hope. With each discussion, it was a hope where the people increasingly chose to place their faith.

The mood around the village had switched from one of unsettling apprehension to that of confident joy. Cole found the people to be hard workers,

caring for their families like anyone anywhere else would've been doing. They didn't have as many tools to work with, but at least now Cole felt like he'd given them fresh hope.

After Cole regained his strength, the team gathered one morning with Teguash and Aberra in a hut to decide their next move. Cole sensed there was more to be accomplished.

"You sure you don't want to fly back to Addis?" Yossi asked.

Cole was a little agitated the subject kept coming up.

"I'm just double-checking, is all," Yossi explained.

"Ok, so back to base is not an option," Sanchez concluded to defuse the issue.

Aberra spoke up, "You must confront the Horro."

"I told you, we'd discuss it," Sanchez replied.

"But Aberra is correct. The inroads made here must be preserved," Teguash persisted.

"They will be," Cole confidently stated.

"I suppose now you want me to fly you up to the Horro?" O'Malley had found out the switch light went off after a bit of cleaning.

"It's what you're getting paid to do, right?" Cole responded.

"Yeah, but the check does me no good if no one's alive to sign it," O'Malley retorted.

"Harry, it will be fine," Cole assured him.

"So, the Horro it is," Sanchez announced.

"The question is who goes?" Cole stated.

Yossi was a little confused. "We all do of course."

Cole shook his head. "We can't. I want to take Befusukad and Seyum with us and if we do that—"

"Not everyone will fit in the bird," O'Malley summed up with resignation in his voice.

"I don't get it. Why take them?" Yossi asked.

"What better testimony could we have then two witchdoctors who've converted?" Cole pointed out.

There was a second of silence, which was eventually broken by Teguash. "One of them must stay."

"Why?" Sanchez demanded to know.

"If something happens to you, we will need them," Teguash explained.

The team looked at each other. For a second everyone was hesitant to confront the issue, although they all were thinking the same thing when it came to

Teguash's plan.

"We're not in the hostage business. They both come," Cole stated.

"Not a hostage but someone who can negotiate for you should that challenge arise," Teguash replied.

"We all can't fit in the bird anyway," O'Malley reminded Cole.

"Ok, we'll leave Seyum. He's hurt anyway," Cole decided.

"And Sanchez."

Sanchez appeared devastated by the suggestion. "What? Why? No. I'm going."

"I know it was your plan to reach the Horro. None of us would be here if it weren't for you. I don't say this lightly, but one more person has to stay behind. I'd do it, but apparently
I'm a walking miracle. If there's trouble, Hondo and Yossi need to be there. O'Malley is the pilot. I'm afraid that leaves just you," Cole said.

Sanchez was crushed by the turn of events and suddenly a part of him wished he'd never left Addis Ababa. On the verge of seeing his dream fulfilled, he was now being denied witnessing its fruition.

"I hate to admit it," Yossi told Sanchez, "but he's right."

It didn't make the disappointment any easier for Sanchez.

Then he heard Mrs. Sanchez in his head asking him, "Why are you here? Is your personal pride above your original goal?"

Sanchez looked up at the group and simply said, "Ok."

"Ok?" Yossi repeated.

"If that is what it takes to make this happen, then I guess that's the way it's got to be. I get the next trip though, all right?"

The group gave Sanchez friendly nods and slaps on the back.

"Next trip is all yours," Cole said.

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The helicopter landed on the very edge of the Horro village. Its huge blades, kicking up dirt as it set down, created a cloud that immediately engulfed the village. Between the image of the aircraft landing and the dust, a wave of fear and trepidation swept over the dwellings.

Covering their mouths, people scampered to find their families. They watched as the group of light-skinned visitors debarked from the helicopter. A couple men grabbed weapons, but most glanced in the direction of Tamrat's home.

Tamrat stepped outside at the first sound of the engines roaring overhead. He didn't know the nature of that beast, but sensed it wasn't the real threat. He put a

pouch of magical powders around his neck and hurried toward the edge of the village where a crowd was forming.

The onlookers parted to one side, allowing Tamrat to stand at the head of them assuming his role as the powerful ruler.

It only took a few seconds before Tamrat recognized Befusukad in the landing party. Tamrat hadn't foreseen this betrayal and its revelation unnerved him momentarily.

No one near him sensed his wavering over the issue, but Tamrat felt a shiver race up his spine. He shook it off telling himself that Befusukad was never at his level of power anyway. Tamrat was aware he had enough power to overcome this setback.

Tamrat put up his hand to halt the procession, which included the entire team minus O'Malley, from entering the village.

O'Malley had insisted on staying in the pilot's seat, a second away from the switch to start the helicopter back up in case there was trouble. He intended to get back alive even if everyone else was bent on completing this crazy mission.

"Leave now," Tamrat ordered.

Befusukad stepped forward. "You cannot stop these people."

"Have you forgotten to whom you are speaking? I can do what I please," Tamrat angrily responded.

"Maybe in the past but not now," Befusukad told him.

Tamrat warned Befusukad, "You will pay for helping these people."

Cole stepped up. "We mean you no harm."

"Quiet!" Tamrat demanded with such force that Cole didn't say anything else. Tamrat poured a portion of the potion from the bag around his neck into his palm then flung it in the direction of Cole.

Lifting his hands up to Atern, he proclaimed,
"Speak no more."

There was a cough from Cole, which caused a gasp in the audience and a smile to break out on Tamrat's face.

"See, I still possess the power here," Tamrat exclaimed to the people.

There was a gurgle from Cole as he spit onto the ground.

"Not really. That stuff just—just—well, yuk." Cole's sarcasm enticed another gasp from the villagers, but this time their reaction was one of disbelief. Tamrat had been bested.

Yossi and Hondo both smiled at each other, which was a mistake. It briefly took their eyes off Tamrat, who pulled out a knife and lunged at Cole. This time

though, there was intervention.

Tamrat felt his body yanked back by the strongest grip he'd ever felt. As he spun around, landing on the ground, he found himself looking up into his cousin's face.

Crawling back up, Tamrat grimaced from the rage roaring in his heart. He flashed the knife at the cousin, who seemed unimpressed.

"Stand aside," Tamrat ordered.

"These people have power you don't. I've seen it with my own eyes," his cousin said.

"Then I will carve out your eyes!" Tamrat threatened.

"It is true," Befusukad declared to the villagers.

He pointed at Cole. "I stabbed this man with an anointed knife and yet he lives."

Tamrat heard enough. He lunged again at his cousin, who sidestepped the threat.

Tamrat circled his cousin, looking for an opening. His cousin, though, was so big; he didn't stand a chance in a head to head matchup.

Tamrat again began to reach into his pouch when someone grabbed the arm with the knife. Hondo wrenched it back, causing Tamrat to drop both the knife and the contents of the pouch.

The cousin immediately rushed in to give Hondo a hand, and together the two men contained Tamrat.

Befusukad stepped up to the people who were aghast at the events, which shattered their perception of the world.

"See, Tamrat is finished. His power is broken. You are free," he said.

It took a moment for the people to realize this truth and someone yelled out "Finish him!"

Cole intervened. "No. His life must be spared."

"See, this is why these men are so different," Befusukad declared.

Hondo and the cousin dragged Tamrat out a hundred yards before turning him loose. A dejected, broken, angry, Tamrat turned his back on the village, leaving it forever in the past.

There was a festive mood in the village that evening involving food and dancing. Even O'Malley joined in, although still keeping an eye out in case treachery was afoot.

Yossi seized the opportunity to give medical checkups to the kids in the village. He found lots of malnutrition, minor disease, and neglect that came with

the harsh environment. Fortunately, the supplies he'd brought provided the care needed.

Convincing the patient to accept this care was the difficult part. Western medical practices were alien to the Horro.

A child shivering from the effects of severe diarrhea broke the barrier down. After taking the meds prescribed, the child almost immediately began doing better. After that, Yossi had people lining up to see him.

Over a fire, Befusukad asked Cole, "Do you wish to tell the stories you told me to these people now?"

Cole thought a second. For whatever reason, after all this time and trouble, he hesitated.

"No, I will wait until morning.
Let everyone rest well tonight."

"As you wish," Befusukad said.

The next morning when the group emerged from the house where they had slept on a dirt floor, they looked out past the village and were astonished at the sight.

Thousands of people had gathered. Most were from other nearby Horro villages. Word had gotten out of the events that had transpired. In fact, news spread so fast, that when Tamrat tried to enter one village to seek shelter, he was run out by the inhabitants.

Now these people had walked in the dawn hours to reach the place where Cole would speak.

Cole didn't say a word. He just kept scanning the crowds.

He watched O'Malley frantically try to run to the helicopter, which was crawling with curiosity seekers, but O'Malley couldn't get past the push of the crowd.

"I bet this is the largest Sunday school class you've ever taught," Yossi joked.

"Yeah," was all Cole could think to say.

Befusukad led them to a pile of rocks, almost on the spot where the showdown with Tamrat had transpired. Apparently, it was to serve as a platform.

Cole climbed to the top and a hush swept the crowd. Even though there was no public address system it didn't matter. His voice carried in the wind and the audience was intent on catching every word.

Cole began, "People of the Horro. Let me speak to you of my God."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Six Months Later

OUTSIDE MR. TARKINGTON'S classroom, Randy fidgeted while waiting for the bell to ring. Within seconds, jabbering students poured into the halls anxious to begin enjoying themselves now that the school day had finished.

Out of habit, Randy's hands roamed his pockets searching for a smoke. A couple of months ago heading outside at this time to light up would've been Randy's first priority but Mulu had laid down some rules including no smoking. Forced to choose between a hormonal drive and an addiction urge, Randy had gone cold turkey on the cigarettes. Now when his hands roamed the pockets, all he ever found were sticks of gum strategically placed for easy access.

Randy slid a stick of gum into his mouth, hoping the flavor would last more than five minutes. He wadded up the wrapper.

"You weren't going to toss that on the floor were you?"

"No, Mr. Tarkington," Randy slipped the wrapper into his pocket to trash later.

Cole motioned for Randy to follow him down the hall, and the pair navigated their way through the anarchy that is the end of school only to bump into Mr. Giles.

"Well, well, Mr. Stone, in trouble one last time?" Giles said with little surprise registering on his face.

"Actually, he isn't. I asked him to see me after class," Cole explained.

"A discipline matter?" Giles gleefully inquired.

"Not hardly. Just a friendly chat," Cole said.

Giles looked almost disappointed. "So you might graduate after all in a couple of weeks."

"It would appear that way," Randy replied.

"I have to admit I am surprised, Mr. Stone," Giles said.

“So am I,” Randy responded.

Giles turned his barbs toward Cole. “And I suppose you’re giving him career advice?”

“Guidance counselor is not my job description,” Cole answered.

“And there’s a reason for that, mister. A very good reason,” Giles stated.

“Which is?” Cole asked.

Giles was caught off guard by the rebuff and an uncomfortable 15-second pause ensued before he piped up and said, “Not in front of the students. That wouldn’t be proper. In due time Mr. Tarkington. In due time.”

Cole chuckled to himself as Giles proceeded to hone in on two students making out in front of a locker.

“Is he always like that?” Randy asked.

“I’m afraid so.” A tinge of sympathy accented Cole’s response.

“What did you want to talk to me about?” Randy asked.

“How is that band of yours coming along?”

With Mulu’s urging, Randy formed a band comprised of a couple musicians he met on campus and a friend of his who was also graduating. Up to now though, they’d only sounded great in the basement of one of the band members where’d they’d been practicing.

“Great. Well, I mean, I’m sure we could use more practice. Why?”

“Rev. Hasbro is looking to do a fundraiser, and I thought you might want to play at it,” Cole told him.

“Um, sure, I guess. A couple songs. Yeah, sure, we could be ready for that. I think. What’s the fundraiser for?”

“Some missions project. I’m not sure. We’re having a meeting as soon as I leave here. I just thought I might suggest your band.” Cole thought it would liven up whatever the Missions Board had in mind. It would also give Randy a good reason to be more involved.

Cole knew Randy had been attending church regularly. He’d acquired several friends among the youth group and being the guy hanging on Mulu’s arm didn’t hurt his stature. Cole was hoping that with a little prodding Randy could take a more integral role in church projects.

“Sure, why not,” Randy said.

“Good. I will let you know then,” Cole told him as they parted.

Cole glanced around at the students. He’d kept busy since returning from Ethiopia. He enjoyed teaching, but truth was a feeling of inconsequentiality had snuck over him.

The wound in his chest had healed without complications. The sights and sounds of what he'd encountered over there hadn't. Pep rallies, bubble gum romance, and episodes of CSI were no substitute for the self-worth he'd been dosed with on his trip.

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"So you have entertainment lined up for the fundraiser?" Rev. Hasbro inquired as the two other committee members looked on.

Cole was feeling a bit like one of his students called into the principal's office.

"Well, partially. I spoke to one of my students. Remember Randy?"

"Randy?" one of the committee members incredulously exclaimed in shock filled awe.

Cole defended his choice. "He's a good kid."

"And an undisciplined delinquent. I would think you've had enough of him after that incident several months ago," the committee member retorted.

Rev. Hasbro stepped into the fray. "He's been coming to church regularly and besides, it'd be unchristian of us to hold a person's past against them. Second chances are what we're about."

The committee member held his silence, and Rev. Hasbro indicated for Cole to continue.

"Randy has a band. I thought they could play. It'll boost his confidence and hopefully help get the young people involved.

It'll give people at the dinner a little variety from what they are use to," Cole explained.

"Not too much variety, I hope," the second committee member chimed in.

"It will be fine," Cole assured them.

"I'm sure it will be," Rev. Hasbro said.

"What project did you have in mind anyway?" Cole asked.

Rev. Hasbro cleared his throat while the other committee members looked in his direction.

"You see, we have a missions need. It not only involves young people as you suggest, but shall I say those our age as well. The more mature crowd," Rev. Hasbro see-sawed delicately.

"If you're open for a suggestion, I think we should organize a group of young people for a mission trip say end of next year. I think—"

Rev. Hasbro raised his hand to cut Cole off. Then clearing his throat even again, asked him, "How would you feel about going doing a trip for the board in

a couple of months?”

Cole was exuberant but before he could say anything, the image of Monique’s face when he told her flashed into his mind.

Rev. Hasbro continued, “I know it is sudden. But a need has arisen and God is not in the habit of waiting on men.”

Regaining his thoughts, Cole anxiously replied, “Oh, I understand that. I just was thinking of Monique.”

“Maybe the fact she might be able to go with you will be a selling point,” Rev. Hasbro said.

Cole smiled. “Maybe. Just maybe.”

Rev. Hasbro asked, “Don’t you want to know where you’re going?”

“Not until I’ve made the sale to Monique. Then you can tell me. I suspect selling the concept will be easier than selling the place,” Cole answered.

“Let the noble cause triumph over harsh reality,” Rev. Hasbro remarked.

“Something like that,” Cole replied.

. . . . . .

Monique looked down at her watch. She absolutely had to leave now or she’d be late in picking up Eric after ball practice.

She stood up from her office chair. She’d been staring at the blank walls for a couple of hours now. Dirty smudge lines outlined where old travel pictures had hung on the walls. A phone wire indicated where the fax machine had been.

Monique snatched up the last box of personal items sitting on the floor. They’d moved her desk the night before. She was purposely leaving the chair almost as though a piece of her would always be here. Silly, she knew but emotionally soothing.

Locking the front door, she looked through the empty glass store front. The posted hours were the only remains of her business. The economy had finally taken its toll. She’d been forced to close up before she lost her life’s savings.

What came next in her life, she didn’t know. It took more than personal purpose to succeed. As she shuffled the box in her arms and began walking toward the car, Monique trusted that a door of opportunity would open for her.

There was still so much more she could contribute to the world. There was a sense of her having an assignment—a greater purpose than she did now. She was still an uncharted soul requiring skilled navigation. The trick was searching her inner depths without flinching.

She was glad Cole and Eric were there to brace her in the days ahead.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



At the age of 21, Karl Hargestam left his home in Sweden for the mandate God gave him to reach the unreached people in Africa with the Gospel.

During his early ministry in Africa, Karl, together with his family and staff, became the reason for an enormous change amongst African tribes that never before had heard the name of Jesus. Many of the tribes now have strongly established churches.

Karl and his wife Jennifer are founders of Joshua Campaign International, a pioneering mission and evangelism movement that reaches hundreds of thousands each year and has seen more than 3 million respond to the Gospel.

At their crusade events, more than 300,000 have attended a single service. Thousands of churches have been planted as they call for a Gospel army of believers to join the great “assignment.” Millions of people in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East have been impacted by the work of Joshua Campaign International and the “assignment” continues to lead Karl and Jennifer and their team into new territory.

To contact Karl and Jennifer or discover more about the ministry of Joshua

Campaign, please visit http://JoshuaCampaign.org or call Toll Free 1-800-745-1332.

Photos from Joshua Campaign Ministry



Joshua Campaign service in Ethiopia



Karl Hargestam delivering aid in Ethiopia



Meeting in Ethiopia



Man healed at Pakistan service



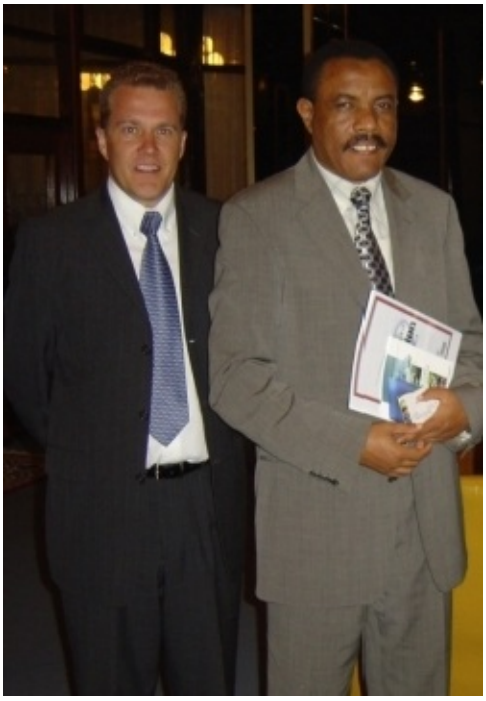
Preaching to the masses in Indonesia



View from the platform at a service in Kenya



Karl Hargestam and the President of Ethiopia



Karl Hargestam and the PM of Ethiopia



The helicopter used in Ethiopia



Makeshift cross on the platform of a service

Mission 1:11 was created by Joshua Campaign to provide a pipeline of missionaries that will continue to go spread the Gospel to people who have never heard it before now. It is an expanding program open to all, regardless of background or age, who wish to pursue missionary opportunities.

The Mission 1:11 operates a Boot Camp where enrollees are placed in a crash course to prepare them for a mission field. The course includes spiritual and physical preparation focused on the practical implications on a mission field.

At the end of the classroom and field training that occurs Stateside, the Boot Camp participants are then flown overseas to a mission field such as Ethiopia where they are sent into remote areas which have never heard the Gospel. They work these areas for approximately a month. Here, participants put their training to use and gain first-hand experience of working a mission field.

To find out more about enrolling in the Mission 1:11 program visit http://Missiononeeleven.com or call Toll Free 1-800-745-1332.

PHOTOS FROM MISSION 1:11






JSC




JOSHUA CAMPAIGN
MISSIONARY







THE MERCY PROJECT

The Mercy Project is a ministry of Joshua Campaign dealing with homeless mothers and orphans, mainly in Ethiopia.

The Mercy Project helps women with children get off the streets of Ethiopia

where they survive by any means possible and gives them a place to live along with essential on-the- job training that will provide them with the tools necessary to move out on their own and provide their family with a living.

At any given moment, The Mercy Project has at least three dozen people in the program. There are plans to expand the program in the near future.

For information on how you can help save these women and children visit http://joshuacampaign.org or phone Toll Free 1-800-745-1332.

PHOTOS FROM MERCY PROJECT



Jennifer Hargestam with participants of the Mercy Project



Jennifer Hargestam with two of the women in Mercy Project



One of the women rescued by the Mercy Project



The café and training facility operated by Mercy Project



Jennifer Hargestam with women and children of the Mercy Project



Mercy Project participants inside the café kitchen

“THE ASSIGNMENT” TV SERIES

The Assignment television series is a reality based show produced by Joshua Campaign and airing on major networks and satellite channels around the world.

The Assignment follows Mission 1:11 students as they are sent into foreign fields for the first time to spread the Gospel. It documents their struggles, successes, and how they cope with the challenges that they encounter along the way.

To find when the show will be airing in your area or to order an online Season Pass to the series visit http://JoshuaCampaign.org or call Toll Free 1-800-745-1332.