

CHAPTER 1

KADUNA, NIGERIA

Mark Reynolds arrived in Lagos, Nigeria within 48 hours of hearing about the disaster. He was on assignment from his newspaper, the New York Daily Press, researching a story about African corruption when reports of a major chemical accident became public. He was early onto the scene since he was already in the nearby Republic of Congo at the time. Nigeria was a short plane trip north to the city of Lagos.

With an introduction from a Congolese colleague he quickly forged a friendship with a local Nigerian journalist. Reports were sketchy. Rumors identified a chemical plant located near the northern city of Kaduna. The Nigerian Government had no official comment. However, the airport in Kaduna was reported closed. The official reason was an unexplained security alert.

Reynolds and his new Nigerian colleague decided to hire a vehicle and driver to take them the 300 miles north from Lagos to Kaduna. It proved an uncomfortable drive. The old Land Rover was a rough ride, long overdue for a suspension overhaul. With no air conditioner, the 100 degree heat and 90 percent humidity added to the unpleasantness.

After a few hours, they stopped at a small town along the way for beer and sandwiches. The place advertised itself as a bar

but it consisted of only a few derelict tables protected by a sheet metal roof. The beer was lukewarm. There were plenty of flies.

“What do you think we are going to find when we get there, Abejide?” Reynolds asked his Nigerian associate Abejide Ojukwu.

Ojukwu was a small man in his forties. His still crisply starched white shirt suggested he was immune to the oppressive heat.

“Hard to say. Inquiries made to the operating company are not answered. The Military has sealed the area. My inquiries to various contacts in Kaduna have not proved enlightening,” Abejide Ojukwu said in perfect British accented English. “There are rumors that there have been casualties at a village not far from the pesticide factory.”

Reynolds had just received a brief research report by e-mail from his New York newspaper. The factory was owned by a company named Nigerian Agriproducts Limited. It was a wholly owned subsidiary of a London firm, Pan Africa Holdings Limited. Pan Africa Holdings was traded on the London Stock Exchange. Sixty percent of its common stock was owned by various Cayman Islands registered corporations. The research stopped there since Cayman Islands laws do not require public financial reporting, or any corporate organization information. The Government further protected the secrecy of its client companies against all inquiries.

The ownership particulars were for the moment secondary to the events of the disaster. The principle product at the plant was a carbaryl classification pesticide called Tricarb. According to various scientific articles it was economical to produce and highly profitable. Carbaryl is a general use pesticide used throughout the world. Tricarb is a particular type of carbaryl formulation. Unfortunately, Tricarb carries enough toxicological effects, such that it was not licensed for use in the United States

or Europe. Of more interest was the speculation that methyl isocyanate was used in the manufacturing process at this plant.

Methyl isocyanate is a highly toxic gas that attacks the respiratory system. It is best known as the source of thousands of fatalities in Bhopal, India in 1984. A Union Carbide pesticide manufacturing plant leaked tons of the gas in the worse industrial accident in history. Had another such accident occurred twenty-five years later in Nigeria?

They arrived in Kaduna eleven hours after leaving Lagos. Ojukwu directed the driver to a small bar and hotel. Reynolds collapsed into a chair in the bar. His shirt and shorts were soaked with perspiration. Ojukwu excused himself to use a payphone to attempt to contact a local Kaduna journalist. The driver sat down with Reynolds. His dirty shirt was dryer than Reynolds', but he still welcomed the cold beer.

"You are American, Mr. Reynolds? A newspaper reporter like Mr. Ojukwu?" the driver asked. He had a British influenced accent to his English, not as polished as Ojukwu but still better than the common pidgin English. Where Ojukwu was well groomed with handsome features, the driver clearly had lived a different life. His cheeks had a three-day growth of gray beard. His teeth were a cigarette yellowed nasty display with several missing, accented by one gold one.

"That's right. Do you know why we came all the way here?"

The driver's face turned grim. "I have heard things. Don't need newspapers for news to travel."

"What have you heard?"

"They say something bad has happened in Mobatu."

"Well that's what Mr. Ojukwu and I have heard."

Reynolds ordered another round of beers. Ojukwu returned and sat down. He asked the driver to go check out the best restaurant nearby.

After the driver left, Ojukwu said, "We will take rooms here for the night. It's not luxurious but we will not be noticed. My

local newspaper contact here thinks the Military closed the airport to impede access by foreign journalists. He was denied any information from the local military headquarters. They have also blocked access to the plant. But we will see for ourselves tomorrow.”

“Before trying to go to the plant site, what about trying to get an interview with someone from the Company? Reynolds asked. “Maybe they have offices other than at the plant, especially if they’re trying to isolate things there.”

Nigerian Agriproducts Limited did have offices in downtown Kaduna. Ojukwu’s local contact provided the name of the managing director. The local Kaduna journalist also warned Ojukwu that he had tried unsuccessfully to talk to anyone representing the Company. More than that, the journalist was warned off pursuing any further inquiries by the Military.

Reynolds suggested they first approach Nigerian Agriproducts management. Maybe his being an American journalist with a major newspaper might at least gain some sort of interview. After that they would approach the Military command.

Ojukwu agreed with the plan, but felt compelled to educate Reynolds in the realities of Nigeria. “Mark, do not forget that this is a Third World country. It is not like a Western democracy. The Government controls all things with the threat of the Military. It is my country; a country with a rich culture and a warm people. But it is a country with entrenched political corruption, enforced through the Military. Being an American is leverage only so far.”

The next morning, their driver delivered Reynolds and Ojukwu to the Nigerian Agriproducts offices located at a modest, nondescript business address. Two police officers however guarded the entrance.

With Reynolds in the background, Ojukwu attempted to negotiate entry to the offices, but the police officers rejected his arguments.

“These police have been ordered to refuse entry to anyone. Their pretext is that this is a security situation,” Ojukwu told Reynolds.

“Do they speak English?” Reynolds asked Ojukwu. He answered that they did.

Reynolds approached the police officers. “Officers, I believe my colleague told you we are journalists. We need to talk with someone from Nigerian Agriproducts management. I believe he also told you I am an American journalist. What that means is that I will publish a story throughout the world that will not be good for Nigerian Agriproducts. I will say that the local police prevented the Company from providing correct information. If you don’t want that to happen, I suggest you place that decision on someone in that office.” Reynolds pointed to the office, and then gave one of the officers a business card.

The two officers conferred in Swahili. After a heated exchange, one officer entered the building. The remaining officer glared at Reynolds. Reynolds glared back with as much feigned arrogance as he could muster.

It was ten minutes before the police officer returned. “Mr. Mbala has agreed to meet with you briefly. Follow me, please.”

Reynolds and Ojukwu were ushered into a palatial office, in sharp contrast to the building exterior.

Managing Director Oliver Mbala’s large office was appointed with exquisite furnishings, but in a tasteless display of wealth. A Waterford crystal bar set on an antique colonial-era Africa sideboard. African art hung along side an original impressionist oil. A heavy Henry XIV style desk sat on a Persian carpet.

Mbala was dressed in a light gray Armani suit, gold-colored knit shirt, and Rolex watch. With much exaggerated politeness

and shaking of hands, Reynolds and Ojukwu were offered seats. Reynolds thanked Mbala for seeing them.

“Can I offer you gentlemen tea? Perhaps a good Scotch?”

Reynolds and Ojukwu declined.

“There are many rumors about a major accident at your plant, Mr. Mbala. We understand the Military has secured the area against any entry. Can you tell us what has happened?” Reynolds asked.

“I am not at liberty to discuss details, Mr. Reynolds. You see it has not yet been established that the problem was the result of an accident,” Mbala said.

“I ‘m not sure what you mean, Sir.”

“I believe I can tell you gentlemen of the press this much. There is reason to believe this may be an act of terrorism. That is why the Military is involved. You see, Agriproducts is very important to the Nigerian economy. Its products boost agricultural yields throughout Africa. Being an American, Mr. Reynolds, I am sure you can appreciate the sensitivity of the situation.”

Ojukwu asked, “Can you tell us what happened? There have been reports of casualties. Specifically, has there been a release of toxic gas the same as in Bhopal, India?”

Mbala was obviously displeased with Ojukwu’s question. “Mr. Ojukwu that would be speculation at this time. I would further caution against printing any such speculation here in Nigeria. You may find yourself in conflict with certain laws. You, Mr. Reynolds, are bound by no such laws; however I would appeal to your journalistic integrity against wild speculation. I would expect that the Government will issue information soon. I too am bound not to discuss details of the investigation.”

“Can you comment on another report we have? According to a number of witnesses from a village southeast of your plant, there has been a constant polluting of a stream that runs through that village. They trace those pollutants to your factory.

Witnesses say that many people have recently been suffering from a range of medical problems. Domestic animals are also experiencing problems.”

“Mr. Ojukwu,” Mbala paused. “I granted this interview believing you and Mr. Reynolds were responsible journalists. I will answer your question, but then must terminate our discussion since it appears to be going down avenues of irresponsible rumor. I have no time to respond to such nonsense. As to your question, Agriproducts does not release harmful chemicals into the water. Furthermore, there has been no such formal accusation from anyone.”

“Mr. Mbala....” Reynolds started to say, but was interrupted by Mbala.

“Pardon me, Mr. Reynolds, but I really must terminate this interview. It is unfortunate that you journalists continually seek to demonize business.”

Mbala rose from his chair and opened the door. “Good day gentlemen,” he said without shaking hands.

Returning to their car, Reynolds asked the driver to take them as close to the plant as the Military would permit.

It was a forty-minute drive on a paved road. At the roadblock they were turned away with no information. The driver then took them on another route that would access the village near to the plant from another direction. Again, they were prevented from going further by the Military.

Several two and a half ton military vehicles passed them going toward the village while they argued with the young officer commanding the roadblock. In the rear of one of the trucks, there were men in full contamination suits. Reynolds started to take a photograph with his digital.

“No!” The officer yelled holding his hand in front of Reynolds camera. “No pictures. Let me see your papers.”

Several soldiers brought their assault rifles to a ready position when the officer yelled. They surrounded Reynolds and Ojukwu.

After inspecting their documents, the officer said, "Turn back. Do not return. This is a restricted military area. If you return you will be arrested."

After retreating a couple of miles back up the road, Reynolds ordered the driver to pull over in order to study the map.

"Abejide, it appears that the village is maybe three kilometers to the east of here. Can we walk there?"

Ojukwu considered what Reynolds was suggesting before answering. "That is possible, but you must consider that if we are found out we could be arrested, perhaps even shot."

"I understand, Abejide, but I think this is something big. Worth the risk. The Military is not going to expect someone trekking into the area from the bush. We get close, take some photos and get back within a couple of hours."

Ojukwu nodded in agreement then instructed the driver to return in five hours. The driver became agitated, shaking his head negatively. Reynolds produced a hundred dollar U.S. bill to appease his concerns. Another one hundred dollars was promised upon his return in five hours.

Reynolds and Ojukwu started off into the high grass as the driver drove off. They were dressed in cotton slacks and white shirts with only two bottles of water. Even though the terrain was fairly easy walking, his shirt was soon soaked in sweat. This was an impossible climate for anyone foreign to equatorial Africa.

Within an hour they came over a slight hill that looked down over the village of Mobatu. It was a typical impoverished Nigerian village. Mud-brick structures with corrugated metal roofs. A few beat-up trucks shared the area with rusted automobile carcasses and assorted debris.

This scene however was unique. It could have been a film set for a science fiction movie. White-clan men in contamination suits were moving about the village. Several could be seen carrying bodies to a central area. There were as many as one hundred bodies laid out in rows. At some distance, there were Nigerian military vehicles and several eighteen-wheel tractor-trailers. The trailers had Agriproducts logos. Standing next to the trucks were several soldiers looking none to happy. They were not wearing decontamination gear which gave Reynolds some comfort.

Reynolds captured the scene in digital photographs but wanted closer shots. Over Ojukwu's objections they moved to a concealed place within a hundred meters of a crew bringing out bodies from some sort of public building. Reynolds subjugated his concerns over his proximity to whatever caused these widespread deaths. If it was a toxic gas release he assumed it was now contained and the residual effects dissipated. But the fact that the rescue personnel were in emergency gear still gave him and Ojukwu concern for their own safety.

They were perhaps at the scene for only thirty minutes before starting back to meet their driver. Reynolds had captured photographs of the bodies, the contamination hazard suits, the trucks, and the presence of the Nigerian army. With their adrenalin high, Reynolds and Ojukwu returned to the road in half the time. Their driver was not due back for at least a half an hour. They concealed themselves in a dense thicket of scrub trees twenty meters from the road. It would be turning dark in another hour.

"What do you think happened, Abejide?" Reynolds asked.

"I think it is the same disaster that happened in Bhopal, India." Abejide said. "I researched this Agriproducts plant and their manufacturing processes. Most assuredly they generated the same intermediate product that caused the Bhopal disaster. It is known as methyl isocyanate. It is denser than air, so if there

is a discharge, it will not dissipate into the atmosphere. It will collect near the ground and pool in low areas. Mobatu is at the end of a valley sloping downward from the plant. If there was a release and the wind was from the west, it would have pushed the gas down into the village.”

“Well, if that’s what happened, they won’t be able to hide this,” Reynolds responded.

“And why not, Mark? This is not India. I believe that India has at least a semblance of a free press. But this is Nigeria. If a toxic release happened, neither the Company nor the Government will ever acknowledge it.”

“But we have the pictures. The foreign press will make this a big story,” Reynolds said.

“For a couple of days perhaps. The Nigerian government will publicly disavow any such incident. Agriproducts will have no comment. The Government will suppress any mention in the newspapers. Behind the scenes diplomatically they might acknowledge the incident, but they will claim it was a terrorist act.”

Reynolds and Ojukwu waited in the brush for their driver to return. He was now two hours past due from the agreed upon time. It had turned dark with a half-moon casting some light. Automobile lights then became visible in the distance. The vehicle stopped. The driver got out and called out for them in a low voice.

“Let us go quickly, I was stopped by soldiers. I told them I was to pick up a priest in a village to the East. It was with much persuasion that I convinced them to let me proceed. This is not worth the money you are paying, Mr. Reynolds.”

Reynolds would have thought it was a ploy to extract a larger fee, but the driver was clearly shaken. They drove a different route back to Kaduna. It was close to midnight when they arrived at their hotel.

Reynolds gave the driver an extra hundred dollars.

“Thank you, Mr. Reynolds. It is without offense that I say that I hope not to see you again. Good luck,” the driver said.

The next day, Reynolds and Ojukwu gained a meeting with the local military commander for the area. The Colonel was a large, barrel-chested man, well over six feet tall, with close-cropped hair. He was dressed in a starched kaki uniform with a polished black leather sidearm holster.

“Mr. Mbala of Agriproducts indicated the Government was investigating this incident as a possible terrorist attack. Can you provide any information on what happened at the plant, Sir?” Ojukwu asked.

“Gentlemen, this is a matter of national security. I cannot comment on any aspects of our investigation. For that matter, Mr. Mbala should not be making such comments. I expect that we will have some information to provide to the Press soon,” the Colonel said.

“Colonel, was this a release of the toxic gas known as MIC like in Bhopal, India twenty years ago?” Reynolds asked.

The Colonel said sharply, “There has been no release of toxic gases. I am afraid I cannot comment further. There is no story here, gentlemen. I strongly suggest you return to Lagos, Mr. Ojukwu, and you Mr. Reynolds to the United States. The Kaduna Airport will open tomorrow. I trust you will take that opportunity.” He stood and like Mbala made no attempt at shaking hands.

Back at the hotel bar, Reynolds and Ojukwu ordered beers.

“The Colonel was not very subtle.”

“That my friend was an order to leave Kaduna. If not for you being a foreign journalist, I might have been arrested.”

“If the photos I took are published will you be in trouble?”

Ojukwu rubbed his temples. “Probably. But what is a journalist to do? At any rate we can discuss what to do next once we are back in Lagos.”

They spent the afternoon drinking and exchanging war stories. Reynolds had taken a genuine liking to his new found colleague.

As the Colonel said, Kaduna Airport was open the next morning. Reynolds and Ojukwu found seats on the 45 minute flight to Lagos. Ojukwu told Reynolds that Agriproducts parent company, Pan Africa Holdings, had a wide range of companies operating in Nigeria. There was Pan Africa Petroleum, probably the largest oil company in the country. Pan Africa Minerals was a major player in coal and tin. There were other operations in various agricultural products. The construction company, East Africa Construction was the largest government contractor. Relatives of the President held management positions at East Africa Construction.

“All told, Pan Africa is the largest economic entity in the country. In fact, with its political ties, you could say it controls a large part of the Nigerian economy. And considering that Nigeria is a politically corrupt county, Pan Africa might then be said to control Nigeria.”

“That’s interesting,” Reynolds said. “I only knew that Pan Africa Holdings was the parent company of Agriproducts. It will be interesting to do more research and see who runs Pan Africa.”

Reynolds and Ojukwu exited the aircraft and entered the Lagos Airport terminal. Six police officers stopped them. Ignoring their questions, the police moved Reynolds towards an office while Ojukwu was taken outside.

“Mark, you must tell the story,” Ojukwu yelled, and was then struck in the mid-section by a police officer with the butt of his assault rifle.

“What the fuck is going on?” Reynolds yelled. He was then pushed into a bare room with only a table and two chairs. A rusted ceiling fan did little to abate the stagnant heat.

It was an hour before an officer entered the room along with two larger policemen.