

1. 2012, Burkina Faso. Day 1.

In a small village in Burkina Faso, West Africa, people conducted their daily occupations. The children played in the streets, running, laughing and shouting. They were therefore celebrating, loudly, the end of school for the day. The women were supervising their offspring from the corner of their eyes while preparing the evening meal. The rare men visible at this time of the day roamed through the village square, by bicycle or by foot, going back home, or joining friends at the local bar. The sun began its long descent towards the horizon, and the surrounding atmosphere was colored with a splendid golden hue, while the shades of the human beings which were moving in front of the glowing star lengthened inordinately on the ochre-colored ground.

The daily routine was suddenly disturbed, when one of the children noticed something unusual, far above in the skies. To see better, he protected his eyes with his right hand from the intense light of this day's end, and screamed in French, with an over-excited tone: "Look, over there!". He was pointing his finger towards a direction in the air.

The villagers who followed his advice saw, far away, in the blue azure and cloudless sky, a dark point now definitely discernible in front of the sun. The form was growing bigger second after second. Soon the inhabitants, who had gathered on the village square to watch this indistinct form, heard a deafening and mechanical noise. It was a helicopter which approached: a rare vision in this place so remote from the capital of the country, Ouagadougou.

Powerful gusts of wind generated by the blades of the rotor raised a cloud of whirling dust, which pushed back the villagers at the borders of the square. They protected their eyes, while trying at the same time to not miss a second of this singular event.

The chopper at last landed. As soon as the blades stopped, the villagers came closer, with caution, curious but wary, followed by children who were way too excited to listen to the advices of their parents. The smallest ones, by far the most intrepid of the bunch, touched the vehicle without any hesitation whatsoever.

That's when the side door opened.

The first thing that struck Carl Jenkins, head on, and in the literal sense of the term, was the crushing heat which reigned outside. It was not that the temperature was really cool in the helicopter, but in the confined environment of the vehicle, a few torrid degrees had been spared to the man during his travel.

It should also be said that Carl Jenkins was absolutely not equipped to face the African climate. A dynamic thirty-five years old executive with white skin, he had not deemed necessary to modify his usual outfit, since he was, after all, in ordered service. It was thus dressed with a black suit and a tie that he had gotten out of the helicopter, a not very appropriate choice. And he was the first to recognize that as a fact, but he chose nevertheless to assume it with dignity, even as he felt large beads of sweat already starting to pour on his back. He held a suitcase, quite as incongruous as was his clothing in this place, so far from urban civilization.

Behind him, the Burkinabe bodyguard he had recruited in Ouagadougou got out of the chopper as well. It was the first requirement Jenkins had formulated to his employer upon learning that he was to go to Africa right away. From the comfort of his American life, he had represented himself, dying, beaten to death and left to die in a sordid lane, stripped at once of all his personal effects, as soon as he would have had the misfortune to set a foot on African ground. For him it was as dangerous as going at night into the Bronx, disarmed, while shouting racist insults, and agitating arms full of money, just to see what would happen next.

But fortunately nothing in that grim scenario had happened to him until now. Quite the opposite in fact, he had even found those people rather accessible and friendly. On the other hand he refused during his travel to get separated, even for one second, from his case, which however did not contain anything of value nor any object irreplaceable. He had even thought during one time to lock it to his wrist with handcuffs. But he gave up that idea, thinking that on the opposite, that measure was likely to have the adverse effect and drawing the attention of potential robbers!

In the village, Jenkins looked around him, and noticed that he had the attention of all the villagers due to his remarkable arrival. He took his mobile phone to check the GPS coordinates displayed on the screen. He was approximately in the right place, but he didn't know where to go next precisely. Orientation sense was not his main forte, and his target was perhaps in the village. So he asked the question which brought him in this far away village, in an hesitant French: "Where to be Sister Love?"

Its knowledge, even vague, of French was, as far as he knew, the one and only reason for which Jenkins, who was all but an adventurer, had been selected for this mission. Ever since he was given the entrusted mission, he had immediately regretted to have noted this detail in his resume. An elderly woman moved towards him and spoke in French:

"If you talk about the witch, she's over there. Please, make her leave. Please!"

She was agitating her arms nervously while speaking at Jenkins, indicating a direction towards the hills located to the east of the village. The man was surprised by the mixture of hatred and fear he perceived in the tone of her voice. Those feelings were apparently shared by the crowd, whose members now seemed to agree wholeheartedly. Men, women, old or young, all seemed frightened just by the evocation of this name: "Sister Love".

Carl Jenkins looked towards the direction indicated by the villager, and he had to squint due to the dazzling rays of the sun. He remembered at that moment that he carried in his pocket a pair of sunglasses, and fitted them at once. He asked the bodyguard to wait for him near the helicopter, and to make sure that the villagers don't deteriorate the vehicle while he was away. The bodyguard rolled his eyes. His employer really seemed to consider the Burkinabe as complete idiots...

The dynamic young executive started to walk towards the east. His shoes, which he had made polished the day before at the hotel, quickly took the chestnut color of the hard-packed ground. He was abundantly perspiring and suddenly realized, cursing between his teeth, that he had forgotten his bottle of water in the helicopter. He could have gone back to retrieve it, but he thought that this demeanor would have seemed ridiculous to the inhabitants and to the bodyguard. More anxious to maintain his dignity than to relieve his growing thirst, he just

decided to walk faster. Would have he gone back if he had known that his reputation was already firmly established among the residents, who would speak a long time after that day about the “small grotesque white man with the black suit”?

Fortunately for him, Jenkins didn't have to go very far. After a five or six minutes walk, having climbed to the top of a small hill, he saw on the ground below a very simple hut, towards which he directed his steps without waiting further. It was in a confined place, and the trees around were protecting it from the sun. The rudimentary hut was not visible from the road which crossed the village, and the man was certain to have not noticed it from the helicopter.

He stumbled two or three times in the descent, because of his little adapted city shoes. Jenkins succeeded nevertheless in reaching the place where the hut was built, and miraculously, standing proudly, on his two feet.

It was at this time that he noticed the young woman, seated by the very ground at the entrance of the hut, in front of an extinct hearth. She did not have any reaction when Jenkins approached, and yet, it was impossible she hadn't heard him. The young man had shown no discretion at all during his arrival. Quite the opposite, he had spoken many swearwords aloud, when he almost fell numerous times.

Carl waited politely two long minutes to see if the young woman would react, in vain. He was looking at her, wondering whether she really was the person he was supposed to find. She was young, twenty, thirty years at most, of an apparently rather frail constitution. She wore a simple dull-colored dress, very worn. She did not wear shoes. Above her décolleté, Jenkins saw a kind of red tattooing, in the shape of heart.

The American had an odd feeling while looking at her. This woman was objectively very beautiful, but in same time she exuded an extreme feeling of coldness. It was like looking at a bronze statue. Her features were soft and regular, but her expression was neutral, empty. Her curly hair was forming a crown harmoniously laid out on her head. At this time, only her slow breathing was betraying the fact that she was indeed a living being, made of flesh and blood. Her skin was not tanned by the sun. She seemed unreal, out of place in the context of this arid country. Sister Love, if that was indeed her name, looked more like a top model directly lifted from a Vogue magazine, rather than a villager in deep rural Africa. Paradoxically, the fact that she was dressed even more poorly than all the villagers that Jenkins had seen so far only reinforced this impression of an extraordinary natural beauty, one that didn't need any artifice to be all the more striking.

And yet, there was no doubt, it was her; she appeared just the same on the few photographs the junior manager was given before his trip. But at the same time, it was simply impossible. These photographs were taken during the Sixties...

“Are you Sister Love?”, he asked, in English. “My name is Carl Jenkins.”

There was still no reaction from her. However, if the files he got were correct, she understood English perfectly and even spoke it fluently.

“You are not an easy person to find, you know”, kept on saying the man. “Most people even think you are dead.”

“I am dead”, answered the woman with a dull tone. “I’ve been dead for many years now...”

Jenkins was not in the mood to play metaphors. He was nevertheless happy to note that he had made some progress. At least she had reacted, even if just a little bit.

“You seem in a great shape for somebody that deceased. And you seem to really age very well for someone your age.”, added Jenkins.

“The black skin ages better than the white one”, she retorted. “You white people start to wrinkle as soon as you hit thirty years old”.

“Yeah, I heard that one before”, conceded the dynamic young executive. “But, according to the file I was given, you should be sixty-five years old by now. I expected to find an old woman... I even thought at one point that you were the daughter of this Sister Love. But no, it’s definitely you.”

“Why are you here?”

“Somebody wants to meet you”, revealed the man.

“And I don’t want to meet this person.”, retorted Sister Love, hoping to end the conversation at that point.

“This “somebody” is Steven Thorne.”

Carl Jenkins had pronounced this name as if its only evocation could have been enough to impress the young woman. Unfortunately for him, the silence which followed, and the complete lack of reaction of Sister Love showed the complete failure of the small maneuver he had attempted.

“Am I supposed to know this name?”, asked the young woman.

Jenkins laughed aloud. In his vision of the world, nobody on this planet could possibly ignore who Steven Thorne was!

“He’s probably one of the most powerful men to live on Earth right now”, he said ultimately.

“Oh...”, simply said Sister Love, with quite an unimpressed tone.

“OK, let’s talk straight. My job is to bring you back to America. Are you coming with me?”

“No.”

Jenkins was beginning to feel irritated. He had crossed thousands of miles to get there. He could not fail so close to his goal! “Think about the bonus”, he said to himself to give him courage and inspiration.

“What have you got here anyway?”

“I found the peace of the mind.”, answered the young woman. “And the villagers are nice to me.”

“Are you kidding me? They’re scared of you!”

A half-smile formed on Sister Love’s lips.

“As they should be. You should be scared, too.”

Jenkins watched the young woman, incredulous. He had many difficulties imagining what danger could represent this woman, whose height was approximately five foot three, and whose weight could be no more than a hundred pounds.

“Listen, Steven Thorne is not the kind of man who can take “no” for an answer.”, tried to argue Jenkins.

“Too bad for him. And what does he want from me anyway? Why me?”

“The “supers” are back into the world.”, he announced after a short beat, playing what he knew was his last and most powerful card.

After this reveal, Sister Love abruptly turned her head towards him. It was the first sign of interest she had expressed towards him since the beginning of their conversation. Jenkins was very surprised by the intensity of this dark-eyed glance, whose meaning was indecipherable. There was interest involved, without any doubt, but Jenkins believed he detected something else. Pain, perhaps? It was difficult for him to endure the glance of the young woman, but he managed to do it nevertheless at the cost of an effort he deemed almost inhuman.

All he knew for sure at that time was that he had won the game...