

Young woman discovers God's love while in Africa.

**The Unlikely Missionary**

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## *Prologue*

I never wanted to be a missionary. I just wanted to go to Africa.

In my northern Virginia Episcopal church background I could recall one missionary couple visit our church. They stood in the communal coffee hall between services next to their slide projector patiently waiting to be introduced by Father Jarvis. I remember thinking, in my teen estimation, that they exuded an incongruous confidence for a couple so poorly dressed and coifed. But, I watched the slide show and enjoyed the photos of their Land Cruiser and the woman wearing an African dress looking tanned and windblown and somehow freer in the bush than in suburbia, and I decided that I wanted to do that, too. It was not a burden to share the Gospel, but an intense desire to *be* there. I knew that someday, somehow I would have my own windblown picture taken in Africa.

Many years later my spiritual life had been deadened by too much alcohol and unhealthy living. It dawned on me late one sober night during my senior year of college that I would actually have to leave the safe confines of college hedonism and do something. It was during these late nights that I began to pray again and the thoughts of Africa returned to me stronger than ever. I phoned Father Jarvis out of the blue one fall day from my college apartment in North Carolina and shared my thoughts of Africa with him. He astounded me by taking me seriously and acted as if he had expected my call. But he also challenged me to search my heart because some might think that Africa was an escape, a way of further delaying having to grow up. He committed to pray for me and recommended that I apply to a non-denominational missionary group called Protestant Mission International because he was familiar with their short-term missions program designed for people to serve for a year or less. He promised that if the mission agency accepted me the church would find a way to fund my mission trip.

I have often wondered if Father Jarvis thought that was the last he would hear of Katherine Tierney's "call" to Africa and simply checked my name off a list of pastoral phone calls and moved on. But our phone call changed my life.

After I had applied to PMI and had to consider the possibility of becoming a missionary, I accepted the invitation of a friend and began attending a large charismatic church on the outskirts of town. The congregation was diverse and the live band that played every Sunday was full of college students I recognized but we had run in different circles. On a crisp October evening Pastor Jay invited people to the altar. I had never gone forward because I had been baptized and confirmed in the Episcopal church, which confessed Jesus as my Lord. But for some reasons I understand, and others I probably never will, I heard the Gospel message from Pastor Jay like I had never done before. I felt physically propelled toward the front and made a public confession of my faith. After the service several classmates came up and hugged me and told me they had been praying for me. And, John Gruber invited me for coffee.

John was in his mid-thirties and handsome. He was a divorcé with no children and owned a successful insurance business. He began picking me up on campus and taking me to lunch with the business crowd. We began attending church together on Wednesday evenings and Sundays followed by delicious food and lingering conversation. We fell in love and everything was wonderful except for the fact that Africa still beckoned. He asked me to marry him and I said I would, after I got back from Africa.

Before Thanksgiving I received a slim letter from PMI provisionally accepting me, pending funding and attending missionary training the following summer, as a short term missionary. I was to assigned to a far-away place called Fada N'Gourma, Burkina Faso, for one year beginning in July. I was to serve in the office there as an Administrative Assistant to the Director of PMI for that region. I went to the library and pulled out an atlas to look up Burkina Faso, a sub-Saharan landlocked country in West Africa of 2.5 million souls.

A few weeks later a letter arrived directly from Burkina Faso. I stood at the mailbox and stared at the envelope. The stamps were brightly colored and seemed curiously upbeat for a continent so full of famine and strife. One of the stamps had an intricate line drawing of a scorpion that was exotic and yet spooky. The other stamps were drawings of pink flowering trees. The letter was from Malcolm Falk, the director I would be reporting to in Burkina Faso. He included a list of things I should bring and said that he and his wife, Anna, were looking forward to my summer arrival. I tucked the letter in my purse and carried it everywhere. And sometimes when I was sad or confused I would take the letter out and re-read every word and stare at the stamps and know in my heart that God was calling me there.

John drove me home to Fairfax, Virginia, to spend the Thanksgiving holiday with my family. My Mom had outdone herself and the table was overflowing with lovely decorations and food but the conversation was strained. My parents didn't know whether to be more concerned about the engagement to the divorcé from small town North Carolina or the upcoming year as a missionary in West Africa. John was tense because he was getting tired of hearing about Africa. And, I was conflicted because I loved John in Beauville but sitting at my parents' table I suddenly felt embarrassed to be with him and then felt sad that I felt that way. My younger siblings didn't help by calling him John Boober under their breath and stifling their laughter when John talked of an upcoming revival at the church in Beauville.

Graduation arrived in May and in June John drove me to Raleigh for missionary training. Things had become more strained between us, I think he thought when I saw the pear shaped caret diamond that Africa would melt away in the promise of a nice home and gifts, but it didn't. He carried my two trunks to the room and I walked him back to the car. We stood in silence watching the other families arrive. He started to ask me something and then stopped. I didn't ask him what was on his mind because I already knew and I was tired of trying to assure him that I loved him even though I was leaving. He held my hand and twirled the engagement ring around my finger between his thumb and forefinger. We kissed and hugged and he left. I watched him pull away and I felt relieved.

And so I spent the next three weeks being shuttled back and forth between the unairconditioned dormitories to the rolling hills and tidy buildings that made up the PMI campus. We attended lectures, had psychological evaluations, signed “healthy lifestyle” pledges, and shared our testimonies. It was a very positive experience and frankly it was a crash course in missions for me as I had very little understanding of what modern missionaries actually did. Like any other sector, missions had evolved over the years and had become very vocational. I met teachers, doctors, nurses, engineers, linguists and other professionals who would fill specific roles. They were serious people and that was an adjustment for me, who was used to people for whom all of life was potential fodder for caustic comment and humor. Many of them had hard edges, their hearts made heavy by the suffering they had witnessed around the world. My edges were hardened, too, but the wall of ice that had separated my heart and conscience until this past year had begun to melt in slow drips.

“You’re an unlikely candidate,” the short-term coordinator, Henry, said to me in his office when I went to pick up my airplane tickets on the last day of training. His office was covered with photos of him on the beaches of Liberia and now he was behind an empty desk looking slightly uncomfortable in a tie. He leaned back in his chair and regarded me. “Your application kind of came out of left field. To be honest, I didn’t know what to make of it when I received it. But, I’ve been at this long enough to know that God works in surprising ways.” He handed me the plane tickets. “I try not to get in the way.”

“I feel like I kind of stand out in this group,” I admitted to him.

“You do,” he smiled. “But it’s good for us to be reminded that God calls His servants, we don’t.”

I took the shuttle back to the dorm for the last time and packed my trunks. My roommate had left a note saying that John had phoned three times. I crumpled it and threw it in the trash. The shuttle dropped me and another trainee named Sarah off at the airport where we were taking the same domestic flight to JFK airport in New York.

“I can only check your luggage through to Paris, you’ll have to pick it up and recheck it before your flight to Burkina Faso,” the check-in attendant informed me.

“Okay,” I shrugged. I had know way of knowing that would pose a problem.

In JFK I parted ways with Sarah. We didn’t know each other very well, but suddenly we were the only people in the world we knew. We hugged and wished one another good luck. I boarded a TWA flight bound for Paris.



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## *Left Baggage*

My flight landed in Paris at the Charles De Gaulle airport before dawn, but my connecting flight to Burkina Faso wasn't scheduled to leave until ten that night. Even though I had plenty of time, I had rushed to load my two trunks and cosmetics case onto a Smarte Carte and took the elevator downstairs to find UTA, my connecting airline. I parked myself in front of the UTA desk as if it might disappear at some point throughout the day. The sign was dark, apparently I was the only person traveling on the flight who had arrived 15 hours before check in time. I put my feet up on my trunks and looked at my watch: it was still only 7:10 a.m. local time but it felt like I had been there for hours.

The cleaning lady wheeled her cart past me and gave me a sharp nod. It was unsettling to be alone. I would take another overnight flight tonight to where? I had been so confident of my call to Africa, but suddenly alone in the airport I felt deeply vulnerable. I leaned my head back and closed my eyes.

I pictured John. John Gruber. John Caleb Gruber. *God-fearing hick*, my mother called him. Sometimes I felt she was right and other times her attitude offended me. I must've dozed off very quickly for suddenly I was jolted awake. The cleaning lady was standing directly in front of me tap, tap, tapping the handle of her feathered brush on my trunk.

"Non, Madame! Do not sleep. There are thieves," she whisked her brush around with dramatic flair. "People will take your belongings, you must watch," she said to me in English.

I looked around for the potential villains but saw no one. "Merci," I said.

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She dropped her brush back into her cart and moved on. But, the area was completely deserted so every few minutes she wheeled her cart past my aisle to check on me. I looked at my watch again: More than 14 hours to go. Clearly I needed a diversion.

I wheeled my cumbersome Smarte Carte back into the elevator from which I had come and took it up to the main level. With the trunks stacked one on top of the other I could barely see over them so I navigated by peering around the side. There were cafés and duty free shops surrounding an area of white bistro tables where I parked myself once again.

I exchanged my last \$20 for French francs in a nearby machine. After the fee, it gave me about \$12 worth of francs. So I wheeled myself over to a food counter and ordered a ham baguette and coffee. I didn't realize how hungry I was until I began eating. I wheeled back and ordered a fresh chocolate croissant. I finished my food and sat at the white tables. I watched all the different people and tried to listen in on their conversations to figure out which languages they spoke.

I watched as a group of Africans approached the tables and sat down. There was one man, three women and several small children. They were all draped in fantastically colored robes and the women's gold bracelets jingled when they moved. I watched the group talking and laughing and one of the women looked my way and smiled a gorgeous smile. They were beautiful, confident women. And suddenly, without warning, my confidence crumpled and I was completely overwhelmed with the realization that I had nothing to offer these women. What had I been thinking? I had been so focused on the call, on preparing to leave that I had thought little about where I was actually going. I felt young and naïve.

I threw away my trash and wheeled away from the table and circled around the concourse. Every possible fear about my upcoming mission washed over me and I felt as if I had made the biggest mistake of my life. I had a man at home who wanted nothing more than to marry me but no! I had to pack myself off to the bush to do what? Who did I think I was? And, a thought that had never occurred to me before was death. What if I contracted some strange tropical

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disease or was bit by a poisonous spider in my sleep? What if I never made it home again?

And then I spotted a newsstand with my old friends *Marlboro Lights* in a neat row behind the cash register. I spent the rest of my cash on a pack of cigarettes and quickly wheeled myself to the elevators and back down to my hovel. I ripped open the pack and could barely light the cigarette my hand was shaking so badly. I took a long drag and slowly exhaled. I closed my eyes, “I’m sorry, Lord, I know I’m not supposed to smoke but it feels so good.” I tucked the gold cross necklace my Mom had loaned me into my sweater and smoked one cigarette after another.

I looked at the glacier of cigarette butts in the ashtray and then at my watch. It was now almost 11:00 a.m. in Paris. I counted back six hours on my fingers. It was 5:00 a.m. in Beauville. I wheeled my *Smarte Carte* over to the nearby payphones. I dialed the international operator and placed a collect call to John. I needed to hear a familiar voice; I needed to feel needed.

“Hello?” the familiar, yet groggy, voice came through after he accepted the charges.

“It’s me,” I burst into tears. “I’m sorry to wake you up.”

“Oh, darlin’ it’s okay,” he comforted me. “Where are you?”

“In Paris.”

“You sound so close.”

“I’m scared.”

“Hey, God has called you to do great things. Don’t be afraid now, ya hear?”

“Tell me you love me?” I tried to control my sobs.

“Of course I love you,” he assured me.

“Only 384 days until our wedding,” I snorted and wiped my nose with the back of my shirtsleeve.

“Yes, and it will be wonderful.”

I couldn’t think of anything else to say, I just needed to hear his voice.

“Are you going to be alright?”

“Yes.”

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“Okay, baby, write soon—I’ve got a busy day so I need to get some more sleep.”

“Okay.”

“Bye, now.”

“Pray for me?” but he had hung up. The line went dead. I reluctantly replaced my receiver.

I wheeled my *Smarte Carte* back to the orange seats and slumped back down. Since when was John so strong? Could it be that he was as eager to be away from me as I was he? Why couldn’t we admit that to one another? And what was the matter with me anyway? A scant 24 hours ago I couldn’t wait to get away from him. Now here I had only made it to France and I phoned him collect and in tears! Did this mean I actually did love him and was denying it because he wasn’t what I expected my life long partner to be? I pondered this thought for a moment and decided that I was just needy. “Idiot.” I chastised myself and lit another cigarette and propped my feet up on my trunks.

By the late afternoon the UTA area began to fill up. Two employees flipped on the sign illuminating *UTA* above the counters and milled around in the back organizing papers and typing on their computers. A few people were dotted around the seating area including an African man dressed in a powder blue button up shirt and polyester brown pants. He sat with his briefcase opened on his lap a few seats down from me and read over some notes on a legal pad.

I had now smoked more than half of the pack of cigarettes and had a fierce headache. I wheeled to the bathroom and water fountain and returned.

The man in the blue shirt slid three seats toward me and asked me in French where I was going with all those trunks. I told him Burkina Faso and he asked what I would be doing in his country. I answered in English, “I’m going to be a missionary.”

He smiled, “So, you’re going there to convert us heathens, yes?”

His comment pierced me and I felt embarrassed. I had thought of Africa as some far away place of lost and hungry souls but the people I had seen and met this morning were quite the opposite. “I don’t know what I’m doing,” I admitted and he laughed appreciating my honesty.

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“That’s a very beautiful ring on your finger,” he nodded towards my engagement ring.

“Thanks,” I smiled but felt uncomfortable.

“Is it an engagement ring?”

“Yes.”

“Someone loves you very much indeed.”

“Merci,” I smiled. Eventually he slid back down the row of seats and went back to his work. I held out my left hand and regarded the ring. It was a beautiful diamond. But, I felt self-conscious about it. It was supposed to represent a commitment and overwhelming love that I wasn’t sure I felt. And people were overly impressed with its size and that made me even more uneasy.

I opened my cosmetic case and took out the velvet box. I slid off the ring and placed it carefully inside the box and tucked it deep inside the case. John would’ve been apoplectic to know I wasn’t wearing the ring, but I needed to distance myself from the assumptions that it represented. I looked at my naked hand, there was a small wrinkle of skin and tan line where it had been but those would quickly fade.

I wheeled my cart into the elevator and took it one flight up to the main concourse where I had eaten earlier. I wheeled outside and leaned against a large iron flowerpot. It felt good to get some fresh air. I was in the departures area and watched the various travelers being dropped off. A gray Citroen pulled up and the parents got out and retrieved their luggage from the trunk. Their teenaged daughter kissed both of them and called, “Bon Voyage,” and hopped into the driver’s seat and zoomed off into the traffic leaving her parents on the curb. They looked at one another with what must be universal parental concern.

“She’ll be fine,” Dad assured Mom and nudged her into the airport with his suitcase.

I thought of my own parents and brothers and sister who came down from northern Virginia to visit me during missionary training. Mom wanted to meet on her turf: the champagne brunch at a downtown hotel in Raleigh, not at the inner-city dorm where I was temporarily living for training. Things had been strained between us

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for many years. I had been the wild child, the teenage rebel and suddenly I switched my colors to missionary candidate engaged to a charismatic Christian. It was hard to keep up.

I smoked my last cigarette and threw the pack away in a nearby trashcan. I had a headache and I was hungry but I didn't have any more cash. I figured I would eat on the plane later. I prayed for peace and courage and eventually made my way back downstairs to the UTA gate.

Two hours before flight time, just before eight p.m., I was the first person in line to check in. I heaved my two trunks onto the scales and the UTA attendant laughed. "You would have to pay thousands of Francs in excess baggage to take both trunks," she said in French.

"Excuse me?" I asked in my survival French.

"You are almost triple the 35 kilos weight allotment," she switched to English.

"But, I need all this stuff," I explained. "I'm going there to live for a year. This is not a holiday."

She shook her head, "Non. There is no way you can take all of this baggage without paying excess."

I was on the verge of tears. I had no francs to pay excess baggage. I didn't have any credit cards. All I had was an envelope full of green paper "Monopoly" money that the mission had given me to exchange for the local currency.

"You should've had your baggage tagged for Ouagadougou in America. The European weight allotment is much lower than the American."

"I didn't know that," I gave her my best pleading look but she wouldn't budge. I relented and asked, "How much weight do I have to get rid of so that I don't have to pay any excess?"

She looked at her computer screen and then at my trunks on the scale, "You need to get rid of one whole trunk." She nodded her head towards the elevator; "Left Baggage is downstairs."

I wheeled my cart onto the elevator and took it another level down to Left Baggage. I maneuvered the cart into the bowels of the airport through a maze of lockers. I entered the Left Baggage area to find two men sitting behind the counter playing cards. They looked up and

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gave me a quick nod and went back to their card game. There were shelves behind them stacked with backpacks, suitcases, guitars and a variety of other travel things.

I pulled both trunks off my *Smarte Carte* and opened them. They were both so neatly packed! They represented months of preparation and not to mention expense. What could I possibly leave? Tears brimmed in my eyes as I looked at all the gifts of good wishes and Wal-Mart runs. I quickly decided clothes and toiletries had to be the priority.

I removed all the contents of both trunks and stacked them on the floor to the amusement of the bored Left Baggage attendants. They had stopped their card game and stood up to watch me. I quickly made my choices. In the first trunk I put priority items: clothes, underwear, pajamas, and shoes. I also tossed in my address books, Bible, journals, stationery, super-sized Pepto Bismal and anti-malarial tablets. In the trunk that would be left I packed linens, throw rugs, miniature lamps and pre-packaged curtains. The floor was left scattered with boxes of granola bars, miniature chocolates in seasonal wrapping, moisturized tissues, and paper towels with 4<sup>th</sup> of July décor. I scooped them up in my arms and stuffed them in the second trunk on top of the curtains. I simply had no room for them.

The final choice: my little brother's electric keyboard. He had given it to me in a moment of tenderness and I hated to disappoint him. I tried to fit it in the trunk but could not latch the buckles unless I took out half of my clothes. My daydream of sitting under a tree "tickling the ivories", as my Dad always said, entertaining new friends mocked me. I took out the keyboard and smashed it in on top of the granola bar boxes and slammed the trunk shut. Now sobbing, I heaved it onto the counter.

The attendant helped me with the trunk and then handed me a ticket. "You know there is a 24 hour limit?"

"I know."

"And then we have to destroy it."

"I know."

I had no choice. I closed my remaining trunk and heaved it onto my *Smarte Carte*. I picked up my cosmetic case and put it on top of

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the trunk. I took the elevator up one flight and went to the other attendant at UTA. She weighed my trunk.

“You are still over,” she glanced at the first attendant I had tried.

I looked at her. I pleaded with my puffy red eyes. “Please, I have already left one whole trunk downstairs.”

She took the trunk and wrapped the boarding stickers around the handle. She looked at me, “Go. But do not say who assisted you.”

“Thank you!” I wanted to kiss her. “Thank you.”

I followed a group of Africans who had checked in before me up and down through a maze of escalators that connected us to our far-reaching satellite. I found one empty seat and sat down. I was exhausted. I admired the exotic clothes and hairstyles of the Indian and African women crowded in the boarding area. I was the only white freckled face and felt strangely vulnerable, I had never been in the minority before.

The same Burkinabé man I had spoken with earlier stepped through the crowd and approached me. “I thought you were going to Ouaga?” he asked me in French.

“I am.”

“Our loading area is over there,” he pointed over his shoulder. “This flight is headed to Singapore.”

I burst into laughter in spite of myself. What would I have done if I had disembarked in Singapore! Could this day get any worse?

He picked up my cosmetic case and led me over to the proper boarding area.

“Thank you,” I said as he handed me back my case. We held out our tickets for the attendant and I followed him on to UTA Flight 202 bound for Ouagadougou.

I watched from my window seat as we lifted up over the mercury-vapor lights that turned Paris into an endless yellow mirage. I felt so out of place; I was sure I had a neon badge on me that read, “Hello, I have never traveled internationally.”

“Madame?” The flight attendant offered me a piece of French bread suspended by salad tongs. “Baguette?”

“Merci,” I took the bread and broke off a piece and ate it.

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It was now pitch black outside. I would finally be in Africa in the morning, a place to which I felt sure that God had called me, as strange as it seemed to everyone else. I recalled the other single women missionaries I had met in the past weeks. They were obsessed with their singleness and yet few of them had ever dated. I wanted them to pray for my singleness, but that would've been insensitive with a diamond on my finger. I was edgy having quite drinking and smoking cold turkey at the beginning of survival training. The cigarettes were the hardest, I kept picking at not-yet formed sleep in my eye in the little mirror in my cosmetics case causing my roommate at one point to wonder about the state of my eyeball. "My eye is fine," I said. But, I wanted to say, "it's just a side affect of my addiction to nicotine and alcohol that is causing me to want to rip my eyes out!"

The flight attendant returned with miniature bottles of red and white wines. "Madame?" she held up both.

"Non, merci," I turned down the wine. I looked back out the window but could only see my tired reflection.

She returned again with dinner that was very tasty. I wasn't sure what the meat was, I thought I heard someone say 'goat' but my French was dubious and I was too hungry to worry about it. The meat was covered in a yummy white sauce and with the vegetables and several different cheeses I became contentedly full. I handed my tray back to the flight attendant and settled back into my seat. I was tired.

I fingered my Mom's cross necklace as I watched the activity in the cabin from the reflection in the window. I thought about the great missionaries who stepped off boats onto undiscovered shores and commanded the attention of all they met with the Gospel message. And then there was me who sat alone in the basement of the airport inhaling a pack of cigarettes. But, I didn't have a great burden to share the Gospel because I was still trying to figure out the message myself. I was just willing to answer a call. "Lord, be with me this year," I prayed. I leaned my forehead against the cool window and fell asleep.

The final leg of the journey flew us throughout the night south across the Mediterranean Sea and over the Sahara Desert to Niamey,

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Niger, where more than half of the passengers disembarked in the dead of night. From there we headed west to Burkina Faso where the plane touched down at Ouagadougou International at 6:35 a.m. local time.

It was misty so I couldn't see very far but I did spot the grounds crew roll the mobile stairs across the grassy runway towards the plane. Two flight attendants opened the cabin door and seconds later the earthy smell of leather, barn animals, and urine all baked together in the morning sun welcomed me.

I opened my cosmetic case and regarded myself in the little mirror. The man sitting next to me had slept the whole time so we had not spoken. He glanced at me and smiled, "I thought that was a tackle box," he said in a British accent.

"No, it looks like one though." My case was a plastic fluorescent green box with two collapsing layers that I had completely filled with makeup, hair combs, razors, lotions, and all manner of colorful, travel sized bottles that I would probably never use but they're fun to buy. I brushed my hair and put some face powder on and lipstick but it was hopeless, really. I had not bathed for two days, or eaten properly, and smoked too much, so I was dirty and I figured the mystery meat was to blame for making me constipated. Never have I longed for a hot shower so badly.

I walked down the mobile stairs onto the dusty grass runway and followed the single file line of passengers about an eighth of a mile through the hazy morning sunshine to the two-story cement block airport. It was very humid. Security guards in camouflage leaned against the walls with AK-47's strapped over their chests. The guards wore black berets that they took off to swat flies or wipe the beads of sweat off their brows and then toss them casually back on their heads.

We stopped and waited to be admitted through customs. Men were waved behind a black curtain on the right, women to the left. I stood for 45 minutes before my passport was checked and stamped and I was then waved into a cavernous booth. A woman security guard nodded at me as I slipped in and placed my carry-ons on the card table. She opened my cosmetic case and pulled up the drawers

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creating a bouquet of color. She seemed delighted by the discovery. She looked at me and smiled. I smiled back.

She lifted my Maybelline mascara out, “Ca?” she asked.

“Mascara,” I said and fingered my eyelashes like I was applying mascara.

“Ca?” she lifted out a banana comb and I took it and showed her how it fit in my hair.

“Ah,” she made a clicking sound from the back of her throat and nodded. She took it back from me and examined it further. She rifled through my case again.

“Ca?” she held up my powder compact. I took it and opened it and showed her how I powdered my nose. I clicked it closed and replaced it in the box.

She laughed and made that clicking sound again. We stood there in silence for a moment. I noticed she was still holding my banana comb.

“Do you want that?” I asked her.

She looked away from me and smiled. “Oui,” she admitted softly.

“Okay.” I closed my tackle box and draped my purse across my chest again. She was already waving the next woman in. I slipped out the other side of the curtain and joined the other passengers in front of the luggage carousel. There was some confusion and I overheard someone say that the carousel was broken.

Suddenly, through another black drape leading outside, a blue suitcase was unceremoniously tossed onto the cement floor. Then a black duffel bag, pink cosmetics bag, and so the luggage was delivered while we all scrambled to find our own.

I lugged my trunk outside, placed my cosmetic case and purse on top of it and looked around. Mopeds whizzed by with women in colorful dresses. Men wore navy blue polyester pants with pastel button-up shirts. Hundreds of mopeds grouped together at the stoplight and when it flashed yellow and then turned green they zoomed off leaving clouds of dust swirling behind them. Apparently I had hit morning rush hour in Ouagadougou.

I watched the light change to red again and the mopeds all slowed to stop at the light. The women were beautiful. Their hair was braided

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with beads and piled elaborately on top of their heads. Their dresses were tailored with big poofy shoulders and long skirts each with different designs in primary colors. The light flickered green and off they went in another swirl of dust.

The road was lined with corrugated tin market stalls as far as the eye could see. Men sat in the shade watching over their wares. Women brushed flies from their fruit baskets and many had babies strapped to their backs by a swath of fabric. Chickens and dogs wandered through the streets dodging bikes and mopeds. There was a buzz of life, of purpose, that surprised me.

A group of young boys approached me with several baguettes wrapped in a piece of brown paper. “Baguette?” They all asked me in unison and shoved it under my nose. “Baguette?”

I looked around hoping someone would come to my rescue. All I had with me were vouchers like Monopoly money that the mission agency had given me. I would be able to give the vouchers to my Director in exchange for the local currency. I shook my head and said, “No.”

One boy cocked his head to the side and made a sad face. “S’il vous plait, Madame,” he rubbed his tummy.

I shook my head again. They moved on. The Director and his wife were supposed to pick me up. Maybe they had forgotten about me?

Two younger boys approached me. They circled around me, “Cadeau?” They held out their hands. “Cadeau?”

“I don’t have a gift for you,” I said in French.

“Cadeau?” The younger boy rubbed his tummy and dropped his chin to his chest. He looked up at me with a mischievous grin. I couldn’t help but smile at his pluckiness.

A four-door white Nissan pick-up truck pulled up in front of me. A petite woman leaned out of the passenger’s side window.

“Katherine?” she asked.

“Yes!” I exclaimed.

“Welcome to Ouaga!” she opened her door and hopped out. She shooed the boys away and said something to them in a language I had never heard.

“What did you say?” I asked her.

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“I told them to move on in Gourmantché,” she explained. “It always surprises them that a white person knows their native language.”

“Oh.” It surprised me, too.

“Normally they would be spoken to in French.” She looked at me; “I’m Anna Falk, by the way.”

“Yes, I’m Katherine Tierney,” I held out my right hand. She shook it.

“Burkina should be a real shock for an American,” she had a gentle laugh, it was more of a smile with a slight chuckle behind it.

“You’re not American?”

“No, no, dear. We’re proud western Canadians.”

“Where are you from?”

“You wouldn’t know it if I told you,” she looked past me and smiled.

A deeply tanned man walked around the truck and stood next to Anna. He wasn’t much taller than I. “I’m Malcolm Falk.” He held out his hand and I took it. “Welcome to Burkina.” He bent his head back and studied me through the bifocals of his glasses.

“Thanks,” I smiled. “I’m glad I don’t have to get on another plane.”

“Yes, it was much easier when we took ships because it gave your body time to adjust to the time change and the climate.” Malcolm was still looking at me. He didn’t look *that* old to me. He smiled slightly as if he had read my mind.

“How are you feeling?” Anna asked.

“I’m tired but I think I’m okay.”

“Did you have any trouble?” Malcolm asked me.

“Well, I had to leave one trunk in Left Baggage in Charles De Gaulle airport, but other than that it was fine.” I reddened thinking of what an idiot I must’ve looked like in the airport yesterday—not to mention the fact that I might be in Singapore right now.

“Didn’t you check your trunks all the way through to Ouaga?”

“No, I didn’t know I could do that.”

“Oh,” Malcolm furrowed his eyebrows and looked very concerned. “The North American weight allotment is much higher

*Left Baggage*

than the European so normally you make sure to check the luggage all the way through to Ouaga to avoid that.”

“I’m aware of that now, but it’s okay,” I just wanted to erase yesterday from my memory. “I still have one trunk and I think I managed to keep everything I really need.”

“Well, we’re going back to the Guest House where you can shower and we’ll have an early lunch,” Anna said kindly.

“That sounds good,” I said wearily.

“We’ll take it easy today and then tomorrow morning we’ll pick up some food and supplies here in Ouaga. Tomorrow afternoon we will head home to Fada N’Gourma, it’s about two hours east of here. So, tomorrow night you will be in your own bed, in your own house.”

Malcolm lifted my trunk and slid it in to the flatbed. I climbed in the back seat of the four-door cab and Anna settled herself in the passenger’s seat. A chorus of bleating moped horns greeted us when pulled onto the road and made our way across the rambling city to the mission’s Guest House. Lean-to market stalls with corrugated tin roofs stood next to newer square cement buildings.

“What’s with all the cement?” I asked Malcolm.

“Termites,” he nodded. “They swarm and eat everything except cement.”

At one point we turned down a mahogany tree lined street dotted with colonial homes that were obviously very grand in their day. They looked weathered and some were riddled with bullet holes.

“The French tried to recreate Paris when they colonized,” Malcolm yelled over his right shoulder to me. “Senior officials and the President live in these homes now.”

We stopped at a large intersection when suddenly a group of young boys appeared at all four open windows shoving long sticks of French bread into the windows. “Baguette!” they yelled in French, “Fresh baguette!” I watched Malcolm and Anna who just smiled and waved them away. Several people stopped their mopeds so close to us I could’ve reached out and touched their shoulders, they all nodded and greeted us. The light flicked green but traffic was delayed while a man tried to coax a large steer across the intersection. The mopeds

*Chapter 1*

swerved around him and the animal and finally Malcolm did the same. We continued on to the Guest House.

## 2

### *Ouagadougou (Waga-doo-woo)*

“Ouagadougou seems to be a work in progress,” I observed to Malcolm and Anna as we turned right onto an unpaved two-lane street that was sandwiched on both sides with high walls and iron gates.

“Yes, you could put it that way, Katherine,” Malcolm chuckled.

“There are not a lot of zoning laws or regulations in Burkina.”

“Where are we now?”

“This is a residential area of ex-pats. Most of the embassies and international organizations are located in this section of town.”

“Lots of high walls and iron gates,” I noted.

“Lots of thieves,” Anna stated.

We pulled up to a metal gate and Malcolm put the truck in park and hopped out and opened it. He got back in the truck and pulled into a gravel courtyard and parked the truck. The Guest House was a single story cement square with a flat roof. It had cobalt blue metal shutters that added a touch of pizzazz to the monotonous cement. We all got out of the truck and Malcolm walked back to shut the gate behind us. Anna waved away a small flock of black chicken-like birds.

“What are those?” I asked.

“Guinea fowl,” Anna said. “They are all over the place and they are silly, squawking birds.”

“This is a new Guest House, Katherine,” Malcolm explained. He pointed next door to an older two-story house with a large wrap-around porch on the second floor. It was cement brick as well but an abundance of vines covered the walls and stately trees shaded it. “Ellen and Charles Simpson live on the second floor and the mission

## Chapter 2

has administrative offices on the first floor. Charles practiced law in Canada and then began a second career as a missionary after he retired.”

“Ellen runs the Guest House and Charles deals with all of the real estate, taxes, visas, and other governmental issues on behalf of the mission. I tell you, it takes a certain kind of person to deal with the bureaucracy in Ouaga on a regular basis, and he does an excellent job.”

“I’m sure,” I said and grabbed my cosmetics case and purse and followed Anna. Malcolm followed with my trunk. Anna opened the outside door with a silver skeleton key. We walked through a kitchen and eating area into a hallway with four closed doors. She opened the first door and we walked into my room. The only furnishings were a single bed, a nightstand and a Kelly green woven chair. A screened window covered in black iron thief-proofing looked out over the driveway. I could see the top of Malcolm’s truck.

“It’s simple but clean,” Anna said. Malcolm put my trunk down at the foot of the bed.

“It’s very nice.” I knew it was a lame response but I had no idea what to expect.

Malcolm laughed, “This is luxury compared to where you’ll live in Fada, Katherine.”

“Malcolm,” Anna waved him off. “Don’t mind him.” Malcolm was still chuckling when he left the room.

Anna showed me the bathroom adjacent to the room. It was completely tiled on the floor and walls. She showed me how to work the shower.

“It’s actually part of the bathroom,” she pulled the curtain around. “You stand in the area where it dips down into the drain and shoot the showerhead in that direction.”

“Okay,” I walked over to the door and held it open for her, “I don’t mean to be rude, but I’m absolutely dying to take a shower.”

She laughed. “See you at eleven-thirty for lunch.”

I bundled my toiletries in my arms and shut the door behind me in the bathroom. I took off my clothes and dumped them in a pile on the floor. I pulled a starched towel off the rack and wrapped it around me.

*Ouagadougou*

My hair was greasy and I smelled. I felt giddy thinking of how glorious a long, hot shower would feel.

I turned on the water and it trickled out of the showerhead. It was brown and ice cold. I turned the knob around as high as it would go and the trickle became a stream of brown ice water. I shut my eyes, took a deep breath and stepped full body under the stream. My body convulsed in shivers as I reached for the soap. I spit the rusty tasting water out of my mouth as I shampooed my hair. I had goose bumps the size of mosquito bites but I was clean. I turned off the water and wrapped three towels around me to warm up. I bit the towel to stop my teeth from chattering. If I had known I would not have a warm shower for a year I would not have come, it was torture!

I quickly dressed and brushed my wet hair. There was no mirror in my room so I had to use the little one inside my cosmetic case. It didn't feel like I had washed all the soap out of my hair and my skin didn't feel soft or smell fragrant like it normally did after a shower. I knew in my head that things would feel differently away from home, but I didn't expect to be affected in such an intimately physical way and it unsettled me.

We gathered for lunch on Ellen and Charles's second floor porch. It was shaded by leafy Flamboyant trees and had flowering plants and Elephant Ear planted in pots around the porch for additional shade. I walked to the edge of the porch and looked down at the Guest House where we were staying next door, the roof was completely flat and covered with pebbles. Beyond the compound wall there was a large open area where a group of boys were playing an intense game of soccer.

"My sons became quite good soccer players learning to play with the Africans," Malcolm came and stood next to me. "Some of the American missionary kids have even won scholarships to university."

"Really? What makes them so good?" I asked.

"The Africans are much faster, so the boys learned to play the game at a much quicker pace."

"How many children do you have?" I asked him, prompted by the mention of his sons.

"Two boys first and then two girls," he smiled.

## Chapter 2

“I’m the eldest of two girls first and then two boys,” I said.

“You’re from a large family then, Katherine?”

“Yes, in fact, it was my brother McKenzie’s keyboard that I left in the other trunk in Paris. I’ll need to write him a letter soon and explain what happened.”

“Yes, yes, I believe you will.”

“Did you say there was a Guest House in Fada N’Gourma, too?” I asked.

“Yes, ours was built a few years ago. The hospitality ministry is very important in missions work. There are very few hotels outside the capital cities so the mission has Guest Houses set up in most compounds around the country where colleague missionaries, or any one, can stay for a nominal fee.”

Ellen emerged from the house carrying a large platter of fruit and cheese. “Please, sit down,” she put the platter down and hurried back into the house.

“All of the Guest Houses are equipped with kitchens because you’re supposed to cook your own food but Ellen and Charles are especially kind to cook for us today,” Malcolm explained as we sat down at the table.

“No, no,” Charles waved a long, bony hand. He was very tall and thin with only a few stubborn strands of wispy gray hair remaining on the top of his head. His nose and chin were pointy and his eyes were sharp giving him a hawkish presence. “It is the Falk’s that have set the example for the rest of us in the art of welcoming loved ones and strangers equally.” He looked at me, “You don’t realize it yet, but the Lord has put you in the company of angels for this next year.” Malcolm and Anna both protested but he waved them off again. He looked at me, “What is your goal for this year?”

“On paper I am assigned to be Malcolm’s Administrative Assistant in the church office, but I think at this point my goal is to survive.”

Malcolm and Anna both laughed, “Oh, Katherine.” Malcolm shook his head and took off his glasses, he wiped each lens with his napkin and put them back on.

*Ouagadougou*

Charles seemed irritated by my response. “Well, it’s good that our American friend didn’t arrive 20 years earlier by boat. There would’ve been no one to greet her, feed her, or drive her to her home. Not to mention the fact that her home is already built for her, furnished, and knowing our fair Anna, stocked with food. To top it all off she has indoor plumbing and electricity for most of the day. This is not survival, it is comparative luxury, young lady.”

I wasn’t entirely sure what to make of Charles, but what concerned me more at that moment was partial electricity. “Most of the day?” I asked Malcolm.

“The generator on the compound runs for 16 hours a day. From six a.m. to ten p.m.” he winked at me and it reassured me. I was very thankful to be going with the Falks and not staying with Charles.

Ellen returned to the table carrying a large Dutch oven pot by its handles, her thumbs were stretched over a stack of bowls turned upside-down balanced on the top. She put the pot down in front of her plate and sat down. “Let’s pray before my stew gets cold,” she said and bowed her head and quickly prayed. She then passed the platter of fresh fruit and cheese around and then ladled a large portion of chicken stew into each bowl and passed them around. She surveyed the table to make sure everyone was eating and, looking visibly relieved that her task was accomplished, wiped her brow with a napkin and finally took a bite herself.

“Where did you get your cheese, Ellen?” Anna asked our hostess.

“A new grocery store opened up near the French Embassy. It’s a little pricey, but I was really craving some cheese.”

“Cheese?” I asked Anna.

“Oh, yes, Katherine, dairy products are very scarce and very expensive.”

Clearly the adage “learn something new everyday” was to be my mission motto.

After lunch Charles brought out his guitar. He sang “Great is Thy Faithfulness” in a booming tenor while the rest of us listened. I tried to absorb the fact that I was actually here. Did it look the way I expected? Not really. And yet it was familiar. I watched the boys play soccer on the field. I looked at Ellen’s little pots of herbs and

## Chapter 2

flowering plants dotted around the porch and decided that the familiarity was in the living: working, playing, eating, universal tasks that we were all engaged in no matter where we lived.

Malcolm and Anna stood up. "It's time for rest hour, Katherine."

I looked at them, "Rest hour?"

"Well, it's called rest hour but it's actually three hours," Anna explained.

"You rest for three hours every afternoon?"

"Yes, Katherine." Malcolm smiled at me. "You don't have to rest, but the rest of the country does."

"It just seems like an awfully long time."

"You'll get used to it, trust me," Anna winked at me.

We all said thank you to Ellen and walked downstairs and next door to the Guest House. I retreated to my room laid down on my bed. The guinea fowl squawked incessantly outside my window and mopeds whizzed past bleating their wimpy horns. All of the smells and sounds were exotic and yet familiar at the same time. "Shouldn't I be feeling this amazing cross-cultural awakening or something profound? When do I start feeling like a missionary?" I asked myself. But I was simply exhausted. I slept until Anna woke me. It was dark and I felt disoriented.

"Come and sit with us in the kitchen for a little while," she said.

I followed her out and squinted in the fluorescent light. Malcolm sat in a woven love seat reading. "I guess the rest hour isn't long enough for you, eh?" he laughed.

I sat down in a chair. "I guess not."

"You need to stay up for a while to try to get on this time zone," he went back to his book.

"I didn't want Ellen to have to cook for us again so I'm just putting a light dinner together for us. I hope you'll eat something, Katherine?" Anna said to me from the kitchen.

"Oh, sure, thank you." What would I have done without Anna's help, I wondered.

We ate some soup and fresh baguette. I was quiet and barely ate. Anna watched me.

*Ouagadougou*

“You need to try to stay up at least another hour or so,” she said to me.

“I don’t know if I can make it. I think my two day travel extravaganza is catching up with me.” I smiled at her, “I’m afraid I’m not much company tonight.” I stood up to go back to my room.

“Tomorrow morning we need to buy some supplies and then I’d like to head out to Fada before rest hour,” Malcolm said.

“Okay, goodnight.” It took every ounce of energy I had to change into my sweats and a t-shirt before crawling in bed.

I was awake by 3:30 a.m. I lay there until dawn when I prepped myself by memory as the only mirror I had was the little one in my cosmetics case. The jetlag made me feel hung-over.

I pulled out my “missionary” wardrobe that my Mom had bought me from Sears. As it turned out they had a Safari line of clothes featuring a variety of African animals embroidered on the breast pocket of their polo shirts. She also bought me a selection of long cotton skirts because I was explicitly told women were still not to wear pants in the bush. I arrived at the breakfast table and sat down with everyone else.

I couldn’t help but feel everyone kept looking at me. Maybe I was too self-conscious.

Ellen was the first to say anything, “Did you eat Mango yesterday at lunch?”

“Maybe. What is it?”

To which everyone at the table looked at me and laughed.

“What?”

“You have Mango rash!” Anna exclaimed.

“What is Mango rash?”

“Oh, it’s just a red rash that you get on your face and neck. It’s probably from eating local tropical fruit for the first time. It will go away in a few days and you shouldn’t get it again,” Ellen explained.

Everyone kept looking at me and smiling.

“What now?”

It was Malcolm who spoke up. “I’m sorry, I just have to ask, where did you get that shirt?”

“My shirt?”

## Chapter 2

“Yes. Did you sew that elephant on it?”

“Me? No!” I looked down at my breast pocket, “No, my Mom bought me these at Sears.”

“Sears?” They asked in unison.

“Yeah, I have five or six. They each have a different animal on the shirt pocket.”

“Why would they sell shirts with African animals on them?” Malcolm asked.

“I don’t know,” I shrugged. “I guess all things African have become kind of trendy.” Everyone stared at my left breast. “Is there something wrong with it?”

“It just seems so *American*, doesn’t it?” Charles condescended.

“Why?” I asked.

“I don’t know, just frivolous and silly. Sort of O-T-T, if you know what I mean.”

“No, I don’t. What’s O-T-T?”

“Over-The-Top.”

“Well, I guess when I’m here longer I’ll start buying my clothes second hand and I’ll fit in a little better.” It was a smart comment and I shouldn’t have said it, but Charles annoyed me.

“Perhaps so,” he said and regarded me under his uni-brow.

And so I sat. My face sprinkled with Mango rash and everyone snickering at the lonely elephant on my breast. I slinked away after breakfast to hibernate in my monkish room. I lay down on the bed and stared up at the ceiling. Well, it wasn’t the welcome I had expected, but what did I expect? I felt out of place. I tried to think on things that would give me courage. And suddenly I remembered John. His memory washed over me and I closed my eyes and remembered him holding me and wanting me. He seemed stronger, taller and generally more appealing at a distance. I held that picture in my mind and drifted off to sleep.

“Katherine?” I thought I heard. “Katherine?”

I opened my eyes and looked around. It was Anna outside my door. “Yes?”

“We need to go to the market now, we’ll meet you out at the truck, okay?”

*Ouagadougou*

"I'll be right there." I glanced at my watch, it was almost 10 a.m. I got up and brushed my hair and teeth and met them outside.

"You look tired," Anna opened the passenger's door and climbed in the truck.

"I am," I said and got in the back seat behind her.

Malcolm exchanged a few of my vouchers the mission had given me for CFA, the local currency, or "Franc" of West Africa, to buy some groceries. We pulled out of the compound and I noticed someone in the flatbed out of the corner of my eye. I slowly turned around and realized that he had a gun. I leaned forward and said to Malcolm and Anna, "You all are aware that there is a man with a gun in the flatbed?"

Malcolm looked in the rear view mirror and Anna looked at me and smiled. "That's our guard."

"What do we need a guard for?" I sat back in my seat.

"We're going to be filling up the truck with all sorts of supplies and we have a lot of cash. It's just a precautionary measure."

I turned around and watched him. He waved and greeted every other person we passed while the AK-47 strapped across his chest occasionally clanked against the back window of the cab.

We stopped at the rambling outdoor market of thatched and corrugated tin roofed lean-tos and walked from stall to stall.

"You'll need to buy some fruit and vegetables here, Katherine," Anna explained. "They are much harder to get in Fada."

I spotted some lovely tomatoes and asked the woman how much she was charging. She blurted out, "800 Francs."

I looked at Anna, "Is that a good price?"

"No, and she doesn't expect you to pay that price. She wants you to haggle with her."

"500 Francs." I said to the woman in French.

She shook her head and looked thoroughly offended. "600."

I looked at Anna.

"Keep going."

"550," I countered.

The vendor shook her head again.

"Now, let's turn and walk away," Anna nudged me.

## Chapter 2

We headed for the next stall when the woman yelled out behind us. “Madame!”

I turned around and she held up a plastic bag brimming with tomatoes, “550!”

I paid her and walked with Anna to the next stall. “That’s a bit laborious for a bag of tomatoes, isn’t it?”

“It’s important to barter for everything.” Anna picked up several cabbages and inspected them. “Africans say it’s the western equivalent of arriving at a friend’s home uninvited and asking, ‘What’s for dinner?’”

Anna handed the vendor three cabbages. I watched her barter back and forth. We walked away and the vendor yelled out behind us, “Madame!” Anna turned around and paid her with a 500-CFA note. And so it went through the entire market.

“I feel silly squabbling over what amounts to less than a dollar.” I told Anna as we loaded our goods into the truck.

“Listen, I’ve been here 30 years and I still don’t understand it, but I respect it and that’s all you have to do.”

We stopped at the new grocery store near the French Embassy that Ellen had mentioned. It was a simple cement building but there were shelves and refrigerated sections just like at home. And, every item had a price stamped on it so I was relieved not to barter. There were French cheeses and a large selection of European chocolates and biscuits.

Anna leaned over to me, “It’s expensive, but buy a few nice things. You won’t see anything like this for several months.”

I purchased some Viennese cookies and several blocks of cheese. I also purchased several sticks of Tobelrone figuring I had three or four PMS’s to endure before I would see chocolate again. We loaded back into the truck and pulled into the fray of mopeds and bikes.

“Do you have everything you need, Mother?” Malcolm asked Anna.

“Yep, I think we’re set.” Anna had purchased a lot of staples like flour, sugar and canned goods that were all stacked up in the flatbed. Our guard sat on top of three layers of canned peas.

*Ouagadougou*

“I need to stop at the bank and then we can head back to the Guest House.”

Anna and I sat in the truck while Malcolm went into the bank. I rolled my window down all the way and watched the colorful bustle of activity. A legless man dragged his torso past our truck with his two strong arms. He looked up at me and flashed a disarmingly pearly smile as he made his way into the bank.

Every other truck parked at the bank was a Toyota pick up or a Land Cruiser. All of them were white and had an agency or mission logo painted on the doors and a guard either sitting in the flatbed or standing next to the truck.

“There aren’t many ex-pats in Burkina.” Anna followed my gaze. “If they’re here they are with a mission or development agency or they are researchers.”

I noticed the street sign at the corner of the bank’s parking lot. “Does that say Jimmy Carter Boulevard?” I read the sign out loud as I spoke.

“Oh, yes, we’re sitting at the intersection of Jimmy Carter Boulevard and Pope Paul IV.”

“Why would the Burkinabé honor Jimmy Carter?”

“His organization has been helpful in assisting the government adopt democratic practices since it took over in 1983. That’s when the name was changed from Upper Volta to Burkina Faso. The first democratic election is supposed to occur next summer.”

“Does Burkina Faso mean something?”

“It means Land of the Upright Men in Mooré, the language of the Mossi tribe, the largest tribe in the country. We work and live with the Gourma tribe, a much smaller tribe in the East. Of course, they took over by staging a coup, but they have tried to implement some positive changes in education and health care,” she rolled down her window further. “And, of course, the John Paul IV is to honor a visit made by the Pope a few years ago. When the French colonized they brought Catholicism with them. The French left in the 60’s but the Catholics are still here and they have done terrific work in both education and health care, especially for disabled children.”

## *Chapter 2*

We watched Malcolm jog down the stairs in front of the bank and over to our truck. He said something to the guard, paid him and the guard hopped out of the flatbed and headed towards a different truck. Malcolm swung his leather bag through the window onto the seat next to Anna and then opened the door and settled behind the wheel.

“I saw James from SIL in there. I told him I’d leave our guard for him because we’re heading back to the Guest House now and he’s loaded with cash to pay for some construction they are doing.”

I watched Anna tuck his bag on the floor between her legs and the passenger door.

Malcolm backed the truck out into the road and we were on our way. There were several mopeds around us as we stopped at our first traffic light. I noticed Malcolm glance in the rear view mirror. The light turned green and we took off. I noticed one moped pull up next to the left back quarter panel of the truck. I looked through the cab window and there was another on the right. I looked at Malcolm. He looked furtively in the rear view mirror. He couldn’t speed up because of three mopeds directly in front of us. Suddenly the two mopeds sped off from behind us and the truck slowed. Malcolm pulled off to the right side of the road.

He got out of the truck and walked around the back. He appeared next to Anna. “They slashed our tires.” He rubbed his chin and looked around.

“You’re not serious?” She leaned out the window to look for herself. “Do you have some spares?”

“We’ve got one but I’ll need to go buy another.”

Anna got out and they both inspected the back right tire. I got out of my side and walked around the back of the truck to join them. There was a deep gash about four inches long. Malcolm knelt down and stuck his Swiss Army knife in the knurly gash while we watched. We looked up and saw a man lean into the passenger’s side window and grab Malcolm’s leather bag. He ran and hopped on the back of a waiting moped and the two zoomed off into the fray.

I looked at Malcolm, “Your bag!”

He watched the thieves disappear into the traffic.

*Ouagadougou*

I waited for him to explode. To yell! To cuss! To hop up and down and say how miserable life was and how unfair! How he'd dedicated his life to helping these people and they turn around and do that to him!

I looked at Anna. Surely she would be mad? Certainly she would blame him for releasing the guard? Would she tell him what a stupid idea that was? Now look at what happened?

"But," I looked back at Malcolm. "Shouldn't you call the police? Chase after them?" I looked to Anna; "Do *something*?"

"I need to go buy another tire so we can get back to the Guest House." Malcolm said to Anna. "You all stay here." He turned and jogged back towards the shops.

"How will he pay for the tire?" I asked Anna.

"The mission has a credit with the auto supplies store." She opened the door and climbed in her seat.

I joined her in the truck. She pulled out her thermos and filled up a plastic cup with hot tea and offered it to me. "Tea?"

I took it from her. "Thanks."

She filled one up for herself and sipped it. I felt edgy.

"Anna, what just happened?"

"Oh, thieves work in gangs. They probably watched us release our guard at the bank and followed us. They slashed our tires to distract us and it worked." She shrugged. "We had heard of it happening but it's never happened to us before."

We sipped our tea in silence.

"Shouldn't you call the police or something?"

"Malcolm probably will when we get back to the Guest House. But, we won't see the money again and they won't try to catch the thieves."

"Why not?"

"Because it's not really considered a crime to be a thief. It's not respected, mind you, but it's kind of expected that if you can't do anything else you'll become a thief."

"Why?"

"It's just survival," she sipped her tea. "Everyone is expected to do what ever they can to help their families and people survive."

## Chapter 2

“Will you be reimbursed?”

“We’ll talk to Charles when we get back to the Guest House,” she nodded mostly to herself. “We’ll take care of it.”

I finished my tea and put the cup down on the seat next to me. I looked out the window again. Suddenly I felt all the smiles and the greetings from the Burkinabé were sinister: that they were really laughing at us naive white people, waiting to take advantage of us. I quickly rolled up the window and crossed my arms over my chest.

Anna looked at me over her teacup. “It’s not easy, Katherine,” she sighed. “It’s a complex place with sets of rules we don’t always understand. But, the Africans are strong survivors. Most of the people are gentle and gracious because life is so hard for them.” She sipped her tea and gazed out the window.

I looked at her profile. The sun had wrinkled her face. Her hair was probably a soft red before the gray began to conquer. She didn’t wear any makeup but her almond eyes lit up when she smiled. She seemed to me completely, utterly unflappable.

She looked at me again and smiled her kind smile. “A year seems like a long time right now.”

I nodded, “Yeah, it does.” I quickly looked away from her so she couldn’t see the tears well up in my eyes.

“You won’t want to leave,” she whispered to me.

We sat in silence the next 92 minutes waiting for Malcolm to return.

Malcolm changed the tires on the truck and we returned to the Guest House. We unloaded our goods while Anna fixed us a snack in the Guest House kitchen. The three of us sat down at the table.

I looked at the slices of fresh tomatoes, three bottles of Fanta and ever-present baguette. I smiled thinking of how meager it would look at home.

“I know we’ve almost missed rest hour today, Mother, but I would like to depart after our snack,” Malcolm looked at Anna. I glanced at my watch: it was almost two p.m.

“I don’t mind missing my rest, I would like to get home, too,” she said.

“May we hold hands to pray, please?” Malcolm asked us.

*Ouagadougou*

Anna took my hand and his.

“Lord, we thank you for your provision. We thank you for always taking care of us. And, we pray for those who need to take from others. Have mercy on us all.”

I looked at Malcolm’s leathery hand holding mine. It was deeply tanned with brown spots all over the knuckles. I looked at Anna’s. Hers was fair but also deeply wrinkled and her nubby nails seemed to tell their own story. I wasn’t sure if they had finished praying. I looked up to see that their heads were still bowed and their eyes were closed. I waited in silence.

Malcolm looked up, “Well, it’s not much of a welcome to Burkina—but don’t let it put you off.” He broke off a piece of bread from the baguette and salted it. He looked me in the eye. “You know, Katherine, we need you here.”

I was relieved to hear him say that after feeling so awkward. But then I felt uneasy being ‘needed.’ What did that mean? What if I couldn’t meet their expectations? He watched me with his milk chocolate eyes; they were perfectly round like a Teddy Bear’s and studied me with the same steady warmth. He popped the last of his bread into his mouth.

“I’m glad to be here,” I admitted at last.

“Good,” he said. And that settled it.

After our snack Malcolm went to speak with Charles while we loaded the truck. It was almost three p.m. by the time we pulled out of the gates and headed east out of Ouagadougou as the city was waking up from rest hour. Malcolm had tied a blue tarp over the flatbed that was full of food and building materials. “Fada N’Gourma means ‘market of the Gourma’s,’” Malcolm explained as we came to a stop to allow a herd of miniature goats and a large steer cross the road. Two young boys waved sticks and hollered directions at them to coerce them across the road. “The Gourma’s are a peaceful tribe.” We left the last baguette seller and the bustle of the rambling capitol city behind as Malcolm zoomed into the bush countryside.

Every few miles we passed a compound of mud huts with thatched roofs built in a large circle. “The government has asked everyone to move closer to the main roads so that they can reach the people in

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times of famine or if they need medical assistance.” Malcolm explained over his shoulder to me.

I nodded and continued to look out the window. “Who lives in these compounds?”

“It’s normally a large extended family with a patriarch and all his wives, children and parents.”

I watched a woman pumping water into a large tin bucket with an infant strapped onto her back by a swath of green and yellow fabric. A young boy ran waving a stick at two miniature goats as they disappeared around the side of a hut.

The sun baked land stretched on as brown and cracked as far as the eye could see. Baobab trees added texture to the landscape. Their knotted branches seemed to be confused as to which way they wanted to grow. One tree’s branches had grown into the shape of a ‘W’ that resembled my Grandma’s shaky cursive writing. Another we passed had decided to favor one side so the trunk bent to support its lopsidedness. There were also thorny trees without foliage that seemed to me to be downright cruel in this needy sub-Saharan climate.

Mud hut compounds lined the road as we headed into the suburbs of Fada N’Gourma two hours later. The traffic of women and children walking along the road increased so Malcolm slowed the truck and they both rolled down their windows. The air was warm and humid. Women nodded gracefully as we passed and Anna and Malcolm waved and nodded to everyone we drove by. “Choin-choin-chene,” they said.

“Is that a greeting?” I asked.

“Yes, it’s Gourmantché,” Anna explained: “It means how are you, your husband, your wives, children, grandparents—everyone,” she explained. “They will still greet you that way even though you’re single.”

“And I have no children?”

She smiled, “Yes, this society doesn’t exactly know what to do with single women—we’re seeing more in the cities now—but out in the bush there has really been no role for them.”

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I pondered this idea. Anna continued, “It’s slowly changing, but a barren woman in this society has no place—it is justification for the man to take another wife or send her back to her father’s home—the pressure is enormous.” She nodded to herself. “In Niamey, which is a much larger city,”

“We had a lay over there yesterday morning,” I interjected.

“Yes,” she nodded. “The mission built a four-plex apartment building. One married couple and three single women lived in it,” she smiled and shook her head remembering. “Well, during a church meeting the issue of polygamy came up and one of the local church leaders said, ‘But that missionary lives in the new building with his first wife and three other wives.’”

“Really?”

“There are different cultural assumptions, ones that still surprise even us.”

Malcolm slowed the truck, turned left and stopped in front of a burgundy colored metal gate with a sun-bleached sign that read, “Mission Protestante.”

“We’re home!” Anna exclaimed. Immediately a man popped his head out and then swung open the gate. He jumped up and down waving his machete in the air. Both Malcolm and Anna laughed and waved.

“That’s Danjou,” Anna enthused. “He lives on the compound with his family and helps us out with just about everything.”

I watched Danjou pull the gate all the way back to let the truck through. His brown T-shirt hung on him barely attached over the shoulders by stubborn threads and his shorts, that were once pants, were cut off at the shin and he was barefoot. His outfit was reminiscent of Mr. Hulk’s, post mutation. Danjou set about his work with the confidence that comes from being appreciated.

Danjou leaned into the driver’s window to speak with Malcolm. His eyes startled me: they were brilliant blue. I tried to catch his eye to smile at him but he didn’t look at me. We continued into the compound and he closed the gates behind us.

“His eyes are blue,” I said to Anna.

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“Occasionally you will see a blue-eyed African. It could be a freak of genes or maybe Danjou has some white ancestors,” Anna nodded. Whenever Anna spoke she nodded in the affirmative as if agreeing with the words once they reached her own ears.

Malcolm parked the truck in the shade of an expansive Flamboyant tree: its arms reached out welcoming us into its regal court, its wax-green leaves rustled in the breeze. I got out and stretched my legs and looked around at the collection of white mud-brick houses that made up the compound. The compound was about the size of a football field. The smell of open fires filled my nose.

“That’s your house.” Anna pointed back across the compound to a small, rectangular white mud brick house sitting next to the gate through which we had just come. All the windows were covered with iron thief-proofing.

I had never had a whole house to myself. “The whole thing?”

“Yes, until we have visitors. Then you may have to share a room if our Guest House fills up.”

“Sure.”

“Let me get the key and I’ll show you your new home.”

“I’ll put Katherine’s trunk on her stoop, Mother,” Malcolm called to us.

I followed Anna to her house where we entered through a screened door with a ruffled yellow curtain into the kitchen, the door clapped gently shut behind us. I looked around while Anna rummaged through several different keys hanging on a hook. The kitchen was square but separated into two sections by a bar covered with orange Formica. There was a doorway in the opposite corner leading into the rest of the house and a large window over the kitchen sink that looked back over the parking area. Potatoes and onions dangled in netted bags from the ceiling and a gas lighter nestled in its own custom holder to the left of the oven. The appliances were circa 1940’s America but everything was well ordered and absolutely pristine.

“Okay, I think I’ve got the correct key,” she announced.

“Your kitchen is spotless,” I commented as I looked at the sink with two sponges standing at attention on their sides.

*Ouagadougou*

“I spend a lot of time in here,” she nodded and I followed her back out the door and across the dusty compound to my house. She waved a flock of guinea fowl out of the way and they responded with shrieks and squawks.

“They’re so loud.” I said. I was amused to notice that the black chicken-like bird actually had little white polka-dots that seemed an incongruous touch of whimsy on God’s part. “Polka-dotted, too?”

“Polka-dotted, loud, and stupid,” she agreed. We walked through the opened gate of a simple wire fence around the house that made a yard. It was overgrown with bush grass in parts and other spots were bare. “I’m afraid the yard has been neglected since Elinor left—she was a keen gardener and built the fence to try and keep the animals from grazing on her herbs and vegetables,” she said. “Danjou was going to cut back some of this bush grass for you.” We stepped up on the stoop where my trunk sat with my cosmetic case and purse on top of it and Anna unlocked the padlock to the corrugated tin door with the second key. She pulled that open revealing a screened door. The tin door opened all the way and leaned against the house. “You only need to shut the tin door at night.”

I followed Anna inside to a small pantry with shelves on two sides of the wall and a doorway leading into the kitchen. She hung the padlock key on a nail next to the door. “Keep the padlock key there, or you’ll lose it.

“It’s not very grand to walk right into your pantry but the house was designed for efficiency, not really for show.” She waved her hand around, “It’s a place to store your dry ingredients and other bulky items.”

She turned left and I followed her into the long, narrow galley style kitchen. The retro refrigerator and the gas stove stood on either side of the kitchen sink that had a large window looking back over the whole compound. “Malcolm built some shelves for you.” The cabinets didn’t have doors but simple green curtains covered a variety of canned foods.

“Did you make the curtains, Anna?”

She inspected the stitches on the hem and dropped them back into place, “It was just a quickie job,” she shrugged.

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She pulled open the fridge; “I put several bottles of Coke and Fanta in here for you and some cinnamon buns for breakfast.”

“Thanks. Did you make those, too?”

“I have to make everything here, Katherine.” She patted a tall plastic contraption on the counter next to the refrigerator. “This is your water filter. Just dump the water in the top and it filters down to the bottom.”

I followed her into a sitting room. Several Gecko lizards looked at us from the walls and scampered behind curtains. There were two single beds pushed against the wall shaped in an “L” with wool blankets on top of them for decoration. There was a table with four folding chairs in front of the kitchen and then a small desk under the window of the far wall. “They are beds but they can act as couches until they are needed for guests.” Plastic woven mats with designs of mosques covered the cement floors. Anna caught my eye. “They are Muslim prayer mats, they are the only type of floor covering we can find in the market here.”

“It all looks very nice.”

“We put some books in here for you as well,” she waved her arm towards the hand made bookcase. “Someone sent us Louis Lamour’s entire collection last year so that will start you off. Once you finish those we have most of the classics in our shed.”

I walked over and examined the desk. It sat under the window that faced the compound wall and the Fada Road beyond.

“I still think of this as Elinor’s house.”

“How long did she live here?”

“She lived here for 20 some years until she retired back to Canada a few years ago. She was very frail and died last year. She wanted to die out here but Malcolm, her supporters, and the mission all wanted her to go home. She was sick and needed assistance. It’s very sad, actually, when missionaries retire after spending their lives out here. When they return home they find many of their contemporaries are either dead or in Florida and it can be very lonely.”

She sighed and continued, “Elinor sat at this desk many hours a day translating the New Testament into Gourmantché, the language of the Gourma’s, she said it was the best spot in the house to write.”

*Ouagadougou*

Anna looked at me, “The New Testament was printed last year just before her death.”

“She lived in this house for more than 20 years?”

“Yes, we’ve had some visitors but you’re the first one to live in it since she retired. The Geckos have really taken over in here and there are bats above your ceiling that flop around at night, so consider yourself forewarned. We found something like 80 Gecko eggs when we cleaned your house out a few weeks ago and I’m sure there are more we didn’t find. But, they won’t hurt you, and they do eat a lot of bugs, but they leave a lot of droppings in their wake.”

Anna walked up to Elinor’s writing table and adjusted the piece of orange and green cloth that served as a tablecloth. She smoothed the corners, “It’s strange to think about, really.”

“What’s that?” I wondered.

“That Elinor did the work the Lord wanted her to do in this life and now she’s with Him in a new life.” She looked at me, “I’m sure He welcomed her as a good and faithful servant.”

I wasn’t sure how to respond to Anna. I had never heard anyone talk about death, or heaven, in such a matter of fact way. But she wasn’t looking for a response from me.

“Let me show you the rest of the house,” she said.

I followed her down the narrow hallway that ran behind the kitchen and turned left into the bathroom. Anna kicked the door open, stood a moment and then walked inside.

“Is karate chopping the door a necessary exercise?” I teased.

“Well, it is if you don’t like lizards falling on your head.”

“Falling on your head?”

“I don’t know why, but they seem to like to rest on top of the doors.” She looked at me; “they’re not very cuddly animals.” Anna smiled, “We were dedicating the new church last year and one missed a step and fell off the ceiling and right down Gritty’s dress!” She laughed mischievously, “Boy, did that surprise her!”

“Gritty?”

She waved her hand. “Gertrude—she goes by Gritty—and Stan Wauken live over there across the compound. You can’t miss all of Stan’s rusty water drums stacked on top of one another from some

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cockeyed invention of his that he never finished, but they're on holiday." She pursed her lips together. "They are due back any time now."

Her whole demeanor had changed. "Are they missionaries?"

"Oh yes, they've been out here as long as we have. They met out here as single missionaries." She softened. "They're Americans, too, so you'll have something in common."

She waved her arm around. "Anyway, here's the bathroom."

"It's huge!" I said.

"It was built as a second bedroom before it was a bathroom. I think indoor plumbing was installed about 15 years ago," she nodded.

A French style toilet sat in the corner with a knob that you pull from the top to flush. There was a standing sink with a fresh bar of pink soap and a shower in the corner. "Danjou will pump your water every morning from the ground well into a metal drum that sits on top of your house."

"Okay," I looked around.

"The water sits up on top of the house in the sun all day, so if you want a warm shower the best time to take one is during rest hour."

"That's good advice," I remembered my torturous shower yesterday in Ouaga.

She completed a circle ending in the bedroom that had a doorway leading back into the kitchen. A single bed stood in the middle of the room with a ballet pink mosquito net hanging above it from the ceiling. "We thought you might want to use this." Anna reached up and pulled the sides down to show me how to use the netting.

"Don't you use mosquito nets?" I asked her.

"No, we haven't used them in years."

"What about anti-malarial tablets?"

"Nope," she said. "Some of the medication is worse than getting malaria."

"I'm taking Chloroquine and it gives me terrible headaches."

"I know, but you need to take it," she tucked the netting in under the mattress. "Once you get in bed you tuck the sides in under your mattress, but during the day just keep it bundled on top of itself."

I watched her toss the sides back up.

*Ouagadougou*

A chest of drawers sat next to the wall. “These are empty,” she pulled some of the drawers open to show me. “All four of my kids used this dresser,” she patted the top and sighed. A neatly ironed embroidered cloth decorated the top.

“Where are your kids?”

“Well, three are back in Canada. But our eldest son, Daniel, his wife, and their kids are missionaries in Mahadaga.”

“Where’s Mah-dogga?”

“It’s a bush outpost in the southern part of the country, near the border of Benin,” she explained. “Actually, you’ll visit Mahadaga in a few days.”

“Really?”

“Yes, Janet, one of our colleague missionaries, purchased a car from another couple who just left on furlough and left the car with us. So, I think Malcolm wants you to drive her car, following us in our truck full of supplies, to deliver it to Mahadaga where they are all stationed. They are expanding the dispensary so we’re going to deliver them some much-needed building supplies that Malcolm purchased in Ouaga. They are all extremely busy.” She smoothed the cloth. “We were just waiting until you and Fiona arrived.”

“Fiona?”

“Fiona Keys is a dear old friend. She served as a nurse here with us for many years before retiring back to Scotland. I think her flight comes in today and she insisted on taking a bush taxi out to Fada. She’ll be staying with us here in Fada for a few weeks.”

“Sounds good,” I smiled.

I followed her back into the kitchen and spotted a neatly printed calendar nailed to the wall next to the stove. “You have made me feel very welcome,” I waved my arm around the kitchen. “I really had no idea what to expect.”

Anna looked around with satisfaction, “Well, I’m glad you like it.” She headed towards the screened door. “Our colleague Philippe Godido, he is the President of the local church, and his wife Miriam have invited us all over to their home tonight for dinner.”

“I didn’t expect a social engagement my first night here.”

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She chuckled, “We do stay busy with the Guest House and many visitors. It’s an important courtesy for us to introduce you to Philippe.”

I followed Anna out the door. We stood on the cement stoop and looked around. “The dinner fires are going strong,” she breathed in deeply. It was after five. “Well, you’ll want to take a few minutes to unpack and settle in. We will come back for you and walk to the Godido’s together in about an hour.”

“Thanks,” I watched her walk across the compound to her house. I lugged my stuff into the bedroom when suddenly someone *clap clapped* their hands outside my door. I walked to the screened door to find a man standing there.

“Madame!” he exclaimed as I unlatched and pushed open the door.

“Oui?” I looked down to find a pig with its body sliced completely open and its muddy hooves and head still attached lay sprawled over his wheelbarrow. He waved swarming flies away from the bloody mess and smiled a toothless grin.

I held one hand over my mouth and nose and with the other I held up my index finger, “Un moment.” I darted out of my gate, across the compound and banged on Anna’s kitchen door.

“Yes, come in.” she called from behind the ruffled curtain on her screened door. I pushed open the door.

“Anna, there is a man with a dead pig in a wheelbarrow at my door.” I tried to catch my breath.

“Oh, it’s the meat man.”

“It’s definitely a man with meat.”

“Don’t you want any meat?”

“It’s covered in flies and disgusting!”

“Oh,” she waved her hand, “it will be fine once you cook it.”

“Well, I don’t know what to order.” I held up my hands, “I mean, the only meat I’ve ever had is from a store... it comes on these little pink Styrofoam plates wrapped in Saran wrap.” She pulled off her apron and headed out the door. I followed her across the compound trying to defend myself, “I mean, I know what a *leg* is. That much I could figure out but I’m not sure where chops come from, you

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know?" I had to jog to keep up with her, "What does 'chop' mean anyway, when you stop and think about it." I shrugged. She shot me a glance. I shut up.

We arrived at the meat man who was standing patiently next to his pig. He took off his baseball cap and bowed deeply as Anna approached. She looked over the beast.

She pointed to a red band on a back leg of the pig. "If the pig has a red band it means it was killed and inspected in the market today. If it doesn't have a band then don't buy it."

I nodded trying to hold my breath. She waved the flies away and gave the meat man instructions in Gourmantché. He made a clicking sound in the back of his throat and rolled the wheelbarrow away.

"I told him you wanted some chops and some ground pork. He will give it to Danjou to prep for you, okay?"

"Thank you very much."

"It's not going to be on pink Styrofoam."

I laughed uncomfortably. "I'm...I...well...I have a lot to learn."

She looked at me closely. "This is all really new to you, isn't it?"

"It is."

"Many of the short-termers that come through here are from Canadian farming families. It's just been in the last ten years or so that we're getting more from the cities. We find the adjustment to bush living for the city folks is much tougher," she mused. "The agrarian communities live much closer to the land, like the Africans. Instinctively they have much more in common than the city people."

"Well, than I'm even worse because I'm not from the city either! I'm from the D.C. suburbs of residential neighborhoods and strip malls. The only time I saw a farm was driving by in a car on family vacations."

She walked towards my gate and stopped and bent over a plant with long slender grass-like leaves. "This is mint, by the way," she pulled a couple leaves and handed them to me. "It makes lovely tea."

"Neat." I took the leaves from her and rubbed them together. A fresh spearmint smell tingled in my nose.

"You can make tea, can't you?" she smiled.

"That's water—in a kettle—boiled. Right?"

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She headed back to her kitchen.

I returned to my bedroom and unlocked my trunk. I organized my clothes in the dresser drawers and hung my skirts in the closet. It didn't take very long. I placed my cosmetic case on top of the dresser and left it open as a make-shift vanity table. I placed my purse with my passport, open-ended plane ticket and money in the empty trunk and locked it. I slid it into the bottom of the closet. There was a full-length mirror next to the closet. It was slightly warped so it made my head look enlarged; very unflattering.

I went back into the kitchen and poked around. I took out a Coke and opened it on the bottle opener conveniently hanging on a nail to the right of the sink. I could see Malcolm and Anna's house and the Guest House from my kitchen window. I sipped my Coke and watched Malcolm and Anna walk across the compound towards my house, Malcolm grabbed Anna's hand and squeezed it and she smiled at him. I met them on my stoop.

"Do you have your torch, Katherine?" Malcolm asked.

"My torch?"

"Your flashlight," he translated for me.

"Oh, let me go and get that," I darted to my room and retrieved the lime green flashlight, another Wal-Mart purchase.

"Is everything you own fluorescent green?" Malcolm asked as I joined them on the stoop.

"It's silly, isn't it? But, it seemed everything was either green or purple right now."

Both Malcolm and Anna looked at me with complete astonishment. "Why?" Anna asked.

"I don't know," and suddenly it seemed ridiculous to me, too. "I don't know."

"You always want to carry your torch at night, Katherine. When there is no moon it is extremely dark and there are no streetlights. Also, animals will generally run away from the light so it's good to carry it with you."

I stepped off the stoop behind them and followed them out of my yard and turned left. "Ah, what kind of animals?"

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Both of them laughed, “Just don’t look too closely, dear,” Anna said.

We walked past the church and then into a section of round mud-brick huts with thatched roofs. Every home had an open fire with dinner bubbling away in pots above the small flames. Little kids peered out from the hut doorways and women looked up and nodded as we meandered through. The ground was mud and various liquids pooled along the uneven path. Chickens pecked here and there while the more expensive goats were tied up. The familiar and yet mingling smells of urine, barn animals, burning wood, and leather all filled my senses. The compound was alive with chatter, with purpose, after all it was dinner time.

“What are they cooking?” I asked.

“Saabu,” Anna nodded. “It’s a heavy, gray mush made from millet. It’s their staple and they eat it with a variety of sauces. It takes all day long to cook to achieve that consistency,” she nodded. “We’ll probably eat it tonight. The best advice I can give you is to swallow the Saabu, savor the sauce.”

I followed Malcolm and Anna out of the residential section into an open field where a blue adobe structure stood near the back gate. “We’ve basically cut diagonally through the compound,” Malcolm explained. “The Wauken’s run this pharmacy.”

“I didn’t think they were back from holiday yet,” Anna said. “But, the door to the pharmacy is open.”

I followed Malcolm and Anna inside the round structure. A Gourma man stood behind the counter with a white lab coat on with *Bob* embroidered in red on the breast pocket. He smiled broadly and greeted us. Malcolm introduced me to Etienne, a full time employee in the pharmacy.

“I didn’t think his name would be Bob,” I said to Anna.

She smiled, “No, it’s Etienne. But, we get so many things second-hand I don’t even notice it anymore.”

Gritty shuffled out from a back room and Stan came out behind her and scurried around her to beat her to the counter. Malcolm introduced us and I shook their hands.

“Where’ya from in the States?” Stan asked.

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“I’m from Virginia, outside Washington, D.C.,” he headed back to the back room. “Good to have you here,” he called over his shoulder.

Gritty propped herself up against the counter. “So, how long are you here for?” she asked.

“A year.”

“That’s just a long vacation, you’ll have just unpacked,” she waved her hand.

“C’mon, Gertrude, it’s a good amount of time.” Malcolm chastised her. “Anyway, I need the help.”

She snorted and looked around.

“Did you have a good holiday?” Anna asked.

“I’m glad to be back in my own bed. But, we’ve got lots of catching up to do,” it was hard for me to read her, I couldn’t tell if she were rude or just indifferent.

“We’ll be heading off to Mahadaga in a couple days. Fiona Keys is coming and Katherine is going to drive the Corolla for us.”

Gritty nodded. “Good.”

Malcolm and Anna said good-bye and we stepped out of the pharmacy and continued our journey to Philippe’s house.

“She was friendly,” I joked.

Anna waved her hand, “Gritty is put upon. Don’t worry about her.”

We walked through the back gate of the compound and out onto a paved road. Mud brick huts were interspersed with square cement houses with completely flat roofs. We stepped up to the opened front door of one of the newer cement homes. Malcolm clapped twice. A tall, Gourma man with a salt and pepper beard filled the doorway, he wore a long kaftan with intricate embroidery around the neck. He and Malcolm clasped hands and exchanged greetings in Gourma, bowing their heads back and forth to one another. There was great warmth between the two men.

Philippe greeted Anna with equal genuineness and then turned to me. Malcolm explained to him in French that I had come to help him organize the office.

“Welcome,” he said to me in English and bowed his head.

“Thank you,” I said and bowed my head instinctively.

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Malcolm and Anna slid off their shoes and left them on the stoop. I followed suit. We sat down on Muslim prayer mats arranged around a low wood table. It was a large open room with one chair and a single light bulb hanging from the ceiling. Philippe's wife Miriam and his two daughters came through a back doorway and served everyone a small white tin pot decorated with orange and red painted flowers. Miriam joined us on the floor but the girls disappeared through the back door again.

The conversation ensued in Gourmantché. I smiled and tried to participate but truly I had no idea what was being said. Occasionally Anna would look to me from her mat, her legs tucked neatly underneath her left side, and enlighten me.

"The new school building will be ready for classes in September," she said.

"Oh, good," I nodded.

The two teenage girls returned from the back of the house carrying two oversized tin bowls. They were also white with orange and blue flowers painted around them. They put them down near Miriam and left.

"Her daughters," Anna said.

One of the bowls was piled high with cooked spaghetti. It had a reddish tint to it as if it had some kind of sauce on it. The other bowl had a brothy sauce with pieces of white meat in it. Miriam worked her way around the table. She took the tops off of our little pots that contained Saabu and ladled the broth on top of it. She pulled two spoons out of her pocket and handed one to me.

"Merci," I smiled. Miriam smiled at me with that African smile that is hard to discern whether they are charmed or think you're a complete moron.

"Use the spoon to scoop some Saabu and sauce," Anna explained as she took her spoon from Miriam. "Just remember: swallow the Saabu and savor the sauce."

I followed Anna's direction. The Saabu was like eating tasteless oatmeal but the sauce was quite spicy. After we finished our Saabu Miriam carried the pot of spaghetti around. I watched everyone scoop out a portion with his or her right hand and eat it from their hand.

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After the meal was complete the daughters appeared again with a large pot of water and two towels. We dipped and dried our hands.

Malcolm and Philippe were engaged in a deep, and by all appearances, enthralling conversation. Suddenly there was a loud creak from the tin roof. I looked at Anna.

“What was that?” I asked.

She shrugged, “Sounds like the house is settling, it’s relatively new.”

Miriam clapped her hands together and leaned to the side. She said something in Gourma that sounded more like a song.

I looked at Anna, “She said the house gods are active tonight. They must know we have visitors.”

Miriam clapped her hands again.

“Is she serious?” I asked Anna again.

“Oh, yes,” she said and smiled at Miriam.

The daughters returned to collect the last bowls. Miriam stood up to signal that dinner was over. They walked us out into the night.

“Merci,” I said and bowed my head like Malcolm and Anna. I flipped on my flashlight and waited for Malcolm and Anna to finish their goodbyes.

“There is a lot of activity out here,” I commented to no one in particular as we walked home.

“Oh, yes, Katherine,” Malcolm said. “It’s much cooler at night and especially when there is a moon a lot of business is accomplished. The Africans don’t keep a nine to five schedule, at least not in the bush.”

We walked down the street along the outside of the compound wall and then turned left on the Fada Road and walked until we came upon the burgundy gates.

Men and women on bicycles rang their bells and called out, “Bonsoir!” Moped lights illuminated our path and then they scooted past leaving us in darkness again. As we reached the main gates the ground began to rumble.

“What is that?”

“Probably a convoy of trucks,” Malcolm explained as we all stepped off the road and stood next to the gates. We could see other

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people move off the road and hop off of their bicycles. The rumble intensified when three semi-tractor trailer trucks came barreling down the narrow street flinging small pebbles and dust in their wake. They were heading East towards Ouagadougou. The noise was deafening. Once they passed we brushed the dust off ourselves and Malcolm opened the gates for us.

“Who were they?” I asked Malcolm.

Malcolm fumbled to close the gate behind us. I looked at the large fluorescent light that stood above Anna’s kitchen and lit a path towards their house. My house was completely dark, I had not thought to turn on an outside light.

“Probably convoys of illegal arms or mercenaries traveling late at night. They service any rebel group or government willing to pay them,” the gravel crunched under our feet towards their house. “The problem is they travel at night on unlit roads much too fast and end up killing themselves or other people. The roads are littered with burned out shells of trucks—there is nothing left of them—but the government has no money or mechanism to dispose of them. It’s all very secretive.”

Malcolm stopped supposedly to drop me off at my house. It looked gray and spooky in the night. Anna didn’t miss a beat, “Would you like me to walk you to your house?”

“Would you?” I asked. “Thank you.”

“Goodnight, Katherine,” Malcolm hurried on. “I need to do a little work in the office and then I’ll be in, Mother.”

“Goodnight,” I called to Malcolm.

I followed Anna to my gate and up onto the stoop. I fumbled to find the key in my pocket. “It’s bringing back a lot of memories having you here,” she said. “When we arrived we had to build the houses—no one had come before us—and there was no electricity—it was much harder than it is now.”

“I’m sure I seem like a complete wimp to you,” I finally got the padlock opened and pulled open the tin door. We stepped inside to the dark pantry and Anna turned on the light for me.

“No, it’s not you. It just puts the lack of progress here into relief. Change is very slow here, and things at home are moving forward all

## *Chapter 2*

the time. I'm not sure which one is better, but it's fascinating to me." Anna turned on the light in the kitchen. "Here's the outdoor light, too," she showed me.

"Was Miriam serious about her house god tonight?" I asked Anna.

Anna searched my face and then stopped at my eyes. I could almost see her wondering how much to tell me. "This is a very spiritual place and I mean all kinds of spirits.

"Legend credits this area as the birthplace of Voodoo which was exported with the slaves to the Caribbean. The witch doctors in the villages still wield extraordinary powers over the tribes," she nodded as she spoke. I leaned against the counter and she did, too. I was glad she was staying. "This is a very spiritual place, it's good to be aware of that. But, don't dwell on it. Always remember that God is stronger and in control."

I looked at her, "Now you have me spooked."

She waved her hand, "Don't be spooked. Just remember where your strength comes from if you need it." She headed towards the door. "Lock up behind me. We'll see you in the morning."

I pulled the tin door closed and then let the screened door shut. I stood at the kitchen window and watched her flashlight bob across the compound and disappear around the corner of her house. I changed into my sweats and a t-shirt and pulled the sides of the net down before crawling into bed. I moved around the entire bed meticulously tucking in every inch of netting. I watched all manner of insects land on the net but I was secure in my pink cocoon, until I rolled over and realized that I had left the lights on.

### 3

### *Drive Me to Mahadaga*

“Have you ever driven manual before, dear?” Fiona asked me in her Glaswegian accent from the passenger’s seat.

I looked at her, “You mean stick?”

To which she brought her hands to her mouth like a small mouse and giggled behind them, “Stick?”

“This,” I wiggled the gear shift, “is a stick.”

“Oh, of course, dear,” she giggled. I rolled my eyes and shook my head.

Malcolm walked across the driveway towards our car that was parked under the Flamboyant tree. I rolled down the window. It was overcast and extremely humid.

“Are you all ready?” he asked.

“I’m ready.” I said. He leaned down and looked passed me to Fiona.

“Fiona?”

“Oh, I’m fine dear. I’m just a wee passenger.”

“Now, you do have your International driver’s license?”

“Yes.” I was mystified by the importance he placed on this \$5 jobbie I had picked up at the Triple A. I bought it because it was on the list the mission agency sent me, but it seemed a bit of a joke with my passport picture stapled haphazardly on the inside of the flimsy green tri-fold. I pulled it out. “You do mean this, right?”

“Ah, yes. Please keep it with your passport at all times.” He pulled two letters out of his shirt pocket and handed them to me. I immediately recognized the sprawling writing and my face reddened. “And, these arrived for you this morning.”

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I looked at the postmark and realized John had mailed them two weeks before I left! I tucked them under my leg. “Thanks.” Fiona and Malcolm glanced at one another.

“Well, just follow me then,” Malcolm continued. “I’m worried that it might rain and wash out some of the roads or bridges closer to Mahadaga. But, if we don’t take it now it will be three months before we can reach them again.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because once rainy season really sets in none of the roads near Mahadaga will be passable until they dry up.” He tapped on the roof of Janet’s Toyota Corolla. “Plus, they need these supplies to finish the construction before the rains set in.”

We watched Anna close the padlock on her kitchen door and lug an oversized picnic basket to the passenger’s side of the truck. She turned and waved at us before crawling in. We waved back.

“Anna is so lovely,” Fiona murmured to herself.

“Let’s get going then,” Malcolm gave a final tap on the roof and jogged to his truck. He tightened the ropes holding a tarp in place across the flatbed and climbed in behind the wheel.

I pulled the Corolla out of the compound’s gated entrance behind the white pick-up truck. Danjou waved us through and closed the compound gate behind us. I stalled and quickly restarted the Corolla’s engine and lurched forward to catch up with Malcolm on the Fada Road. I glanced at Fiona who quickly pulled her seat belt on. She caught my eye.

“Nothing personal, dear,” she clicked her belt into place and neatly rearranged her skirt. She cracked her window allowing some much-needed breeze into the stuffy car. The wind lifted wispy white curls on top of her head and gently laid them down. She breathed in deeply and out again.

“Oh, the smell of Africa,” she explained, “I have missed it.”

I cracked my window and sniffed. “All I smell is pee with a dying campfire thrown in.”

“You’ll smell it soon enough, dear,” she gazed out the window. “And it will stay with you forever.”

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Black clouds rose up from the horizon as if God were filling up a cup of coffee. We were eventually drowned in darkness when the sky opened and dumped rain and hail with such force I struggled to see the taillights of Malcolm's truck.

The windshield fogged. Fiona produced a monogrammed hankie from her shirt and wiped the windshield for me.

"Thank you," I said.

"I think he's pulling over, dear." Fiona wiped the screen again.

I shifted down and pumped the brakes as a seasoned veteran of icy D.C. winters. I stopped the car behind Malcolm's truck off to the right side of the road. Malcolm shielded his face as he ran towards our car. I rolled the window down further. Rain pounded my arm and face but it felt good.

"We're going to sit this one out," he had to yell over the rain and pelting hail.

"Okay!" I yelled back.

"Keep the engine running and your lights on," he instructed.

"Fine, will do," I rolled the window back up and then down again an inch. I pulled up the emergency brake and moved the stick into neutral.

Fiona sat with her hands primly resting on her wool skirt and her legs crossed. Two little pink pom-poms peeked out over the heels of her bleached white Keds.

"So, Katherine?" Fiona asked, "How long will you be in Burkina?"

"For a year."

"Oh, that's a good amount of time."

I stomped my Doc Marten boots on the floor mats to keep my feet from falling asleep. "It already seems like I've been here longer than three days though," I laughed. "Anna said you served as a nurse when you lived out here?"

"Yes, for ten years," she wiped the windshield again, "I delivered hundreds of babies—too many to count."

Fiona's glasses magnified her eyes making them look like two plump blueberries. I turned on the wipers and let them swish twice and turned them off again. "So what do you do back in Scotland?"

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“I am a nurse at Glasgow Memorial.”

“Are you married?”

“No.”

“Really?”

“I came close a few times but it just never happened.”

“Oh, so, you don’t have any children?”

She looked at me and shook her head, “No.”

“Do you regret that? I mean, are you okay with that?”

“Why, I think so, yes, dear,” she was amused.

“I just thought that everyone wanted a family.”

“I have lots of family,” she assured me.

I watched Fiona’s petite hands adjust her Peter Pan collar and gently push a stray curl from her forehead. She seemed so nice. Certainly someone would’ve wanted to marry her?

She rolled her window down further. The rain was letting up.

I rolled down my window, too. I watched Malcolm step out of his truck. He adjusted the straps of the tarp again. He tightened the last strap and approached our car.

“The rain is letting up so I want to push on,” he took out his handkerchief and wiped his forehead and stuffed it back in his shirt pocket. “We will be pulling off the paved road in a few miles to head south to Mahadaga. I’m hoping the road isn’t washed out, but we’ll see.”

“Will we take another route if it’s washed out?”

Malcolm laughed, “No, Katherine. Like I said, there is only one road to Mahadaga. If we can’t travel on it we’ll have to wait until after the rainy season is over.”

“When will that be?”

“About three months from now—late September or so.”

“Oh, right,” I smiled, trying not to seem a complete ignoramus.

“Well, I’ll stick close behind.”

I started up the car again and set off behind Malcolm.

“So, are you from Glasgow?”

“Actually my family is from the area around Loch Ness, which might be familiar to you. But, I have lived in Glasgow most of my adult life.”

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“So, what’s the real truth about the Loch Ness monster?” I wondered.

She brought her hands to her mouth and giggled, “Oh, dear, Katherine, you Americans are so lovely.”

“I mean, is it all made up?”

“Of course it is dear,” she giggled. “Although some people have made a lot of money getting Americans to come and visit Loch Ness.”

“C’mon, not just Americans?”

“I’m afraid so, dear,” she wiped the windshield again. “Well, and maybe a few Irish.”

I shifted up to fourth gear. “But what about the videos?” I looked at her.

She shook her head, “No.”

“The eyewitnesses?”

“No.”

Malcolm signaled right and we turned south onto the mud road towards Mahadaga. The dirt road was primitive: Pot-holed and uneven. We zigzagged back and forth across the width of the road picking our way through the surest spots. It was painstaking. Some holes had filled with water and others were muddy lagoons. I shifted the Corolla up and back between second and third gear. Fiona kept the windshield clear of steam for me. I opened my window all the way. The air was like pea soup.

Beads of sweat trickled down my forehead and nose. I swiped my nose to knock a bead off and grabbed the steering wheel again.

After more than two hours Malcolm signaled right and pulled over to the side of the mud road. I followed and stopped the car and turned off the engine. Malcolm and Anna got out so we did the same.

“I’m going to run ahead and see if the bridge is washed out,” Malcolm announced. “I’ll be back soon.”

“I need to go to the bathroom.” I announced to Fiona and Anna. “Any suggestions?”

“Sure.” Anna opened the back door of the four-door cab and leaned inside. She pulled out a roll of toilet paper and handed it to me.

“Thanks,” I took the roll. “Do either of you need to go?”

“Fiona?” Anna asked.

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“No.”

“You’re on your own,” Anna smiled. “You’ll be fine.”

I went behind the Corolla and squatted. I would rather be seen by some passerby than have a snake bite my rear-end. I finished peeing and returned to the Corolla to pick up my letters. I tucked them in the pocket of my skirt and walked over to the truck to find all four doors open to the cab and Anna sitting in the passenger’s seat in front and Fiona in the back.

“Donut?” Anna proffered a Tupperware brimming with homemade donuts. Some were plain and others had sprinkles.

I wiped my hands on my skirt and took one, “Thanks.” I sat down on the edge of the back seat near Fiona.

“Tea?” Anna handed me a plastic teacup and saucer.

“Oh, thanks,” I accepted the cup and saucer and took a sip. “Are we planning on camping here or something?”

Anna shrugged. “It depends on what Malcolm finds down at the river.”

I took a bite of my donut. “Okay, I was joking when I said that. Is that really a possibility?”

“Sure, if the bridge is gone and the roads are flooded we won’t be able to go anywhere. But, let’s wait to hear what Malcolm finds.”

Anna turned to Fiona and resumed the conversation I had interrupted. “So, I told Mary that if she wanted to send the kids to the Missionary School in Niamey, maybe she should consider home schooling Zack this year so both boys can attend together next year.”

“Yes, it’s much better if the boys can go together,” Fiona agreed and nibbled on her donut.

I set my tea down on the floor and pulled out both letters. I decided to read one now and slipped the other one back in my pocket to read later. I looked for a moment at the handwriting and felt mixed emotions. I took a deep breath and opened the letter. It was only front and back of a loose-leaf page. John had an amazing ability to fill up paper and yet say nothing. The one note of substance was that he had already talked to PMI about a two-week mini-mission over Christmas and had already begun raising funds. At the bottom he signed it, “I can’t wait for our wedding night!” and underlined it three times. My

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heart sank and my stomach felt queasy. I crumpled up the letter and stuffed it back into my pocket.

I looked up to find both Fiona and Anna watching me.

“Bad news?” Anna asked.

“No.”

“You seem upset.”

“No, I’m okay.”

“Who was that from?”

“My fiancé.”

Fiona and Anna looked at one another. “What!” Anna was stunned. “You’re engaged?”

“But, you’re so young!” Fiona gushed.

“You haven’t even mentioned him!” Anna added.

I sighed, “I know.”

“What’s his name?”

“John Gruber.”

“Do you have an engagement ring?” Anna asked.

“Yes, it’s in my cosmetic case.”

Anna cocked her head to the side, “Why?”

“I don’t know—I guess I just needed some time to think.”

Fiona and Anna looked at one another again.

“So, when is this celebration to take place?” Fiona asked.

“When I get back.”

“Oh.” They both said.

“He wants to visit for two weeks over Christmas.”

“Here?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh, well, we need to talk to Malcolm about it but I’m sure that would be fine.”

I nodded.

“You don’t seem too excited about all this,” Anna continued. “I mean, you haven’t even mentioned him.”

“I know.” I tried to explain, “I have so many voices telling me what to do.”

“Marriage is a big decision, even if you’re confident about it.” Anna agreed.

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Fiona was smiling at me. “What?” I asked her.

“How old are you, dear?”

“I’m twenty-three, but I’ll be twenty-four before the wedding.”

She brought her hands up and giggled behind them. “But, that’s still so young, dear.”

“You sound like my Mother.” I said and looked up to see Malcolm approach the truck. I stood up and asked him, “What’s the deal?”

He slid in behind the wheel of the truck. “The bridge is washed out.”

“Donut?” Anna offered him the Tupperware.

“Oh, thanks, Mother,” he took a donut. Anna poured a cup of coffee from his special thermos and handed it to him. “Now that’s a good cup of coffee.” He slurped again.

“Excuse me, but didn’t you just say,” I started to ask him but Anna interrupted me.

“Katherine has some interesting news for us.” Anna smiled. I sat back down.

He turned in his seat to look at me. “Oh, yeah? What’s that?”

But before I could say it Anna blurted out, “She’s engaged and her fiancé wants to come and visit over Christmas for two weeks.”

Malcolm raised his eyebrows, “Really?”

“I’m sorry I didn’t mention it earlier. I’ve just needed some time to think about things on my own.”

“And, what is this young gentleman’s name?”

“John. But, he’s not so young.”

All three raised their collective eyebrows.

“He’s thirty-five.”

They nodded their heads slowly. “Really?”

“Yes, but didn’t you just say that the bridge was washed out?” I was ready to change the subject.

Malcolm was still looking at me, “Yes, yes it is.”

“So, shouldn’t we be doing something?” Anna and Fiona looked at me. “You know, proactivity and all that?”

“Is this his first marriage?” Anna couldn’t leave it alone.

“No.”

“Does he have children?”

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“No.”

“Oh, well, that’s good.” Anna nodded to herself.

“What about the bridge, folks?” I didn’t want to discuss John any longer.

Malcolm dropped his head back and looked at me through his bifocals. Fiona and Anna shot glances to one another.

“The bridge?”

“Oh right, well, it’s washed out, Katherine.”

“You mentioned that. But, it does seem that we could be doing more than just sitting here eating donuts!”

They shook their heads in dismay as if I was being unreasonable! “What?” I demanded. “Look, the bridge is washed out and we don’t know how long we’re going to be here unless you’ve got some supplies in the truck and we’re supposed to rebuild the stupid thing! It’s going to be dark soon and I’m not looking forward to bunking down in the Corolla in the middle of nowhere. But you all seem perfectly content to sit here and have a tea party!”

Their looks were blank for an instant and then they erupted into hysterics. I threw my hands up in frustration.

Malcolm calmed himself, “Katherine, we just have to wait.”

“For what?”

“For help, for the water to go down. I don’t know yet,” he shrugged.

I looked at the mass of untamed foliage outside the truck. I glanced back to find them all still looking at me.

“I’m sorry. I’m just dying to know,” Anna asked conspiratorially, “Is there a wedding being planned in your absence?”

“Yes.” I sighed. “But, I really don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

“Okay,” Anna held up her hands in surrender. “Mum’s the word.”

Anna and Fiona picked up their conversation where they left off about the challenge of schooling teens in the bush. This spilled into the revolution of 1983 when Upper Volta became Burkina Faso, culminating in the high cost of paper napkins in Ouaga. I nodded off for a while and woke up in time to hear the conclusion: cloth was better anyway. I swallowed the last of my cold tea and glanced at my

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watch. We had been sitting there three hours. Malcolm got out of the truck and headed back down the road without a word. I looked at Anna but she seemed unconcerned so I watched him disappear around the bend.

“Where’s that roll of toilet paper, dear?” Fiona asked me.

I handed it to her and she slipped out of the truck and disappeared into the bush.

I looked at Anna and blurted out, “Fiona is single.”

Anna raised her eyebrows, “So?”

“I just don’t think I’ve ever met an older person who chose to be single. Normally they are widows or divorced or something.”

Anna nodded her head; “Fiona’s special. Most of us couldn’t handle the loneliness, especially out here.”

“I guess so.”

She took another donut, examined it and popped it into her mouth. “That’s what happened with Gritty and Stan, you know?” She spit little crumbs on the back of the seat and wiped them off. “I bet you had they both been back in the States they never would’ve married.”

Fiona returned to the truck and slid inside. I watched her rearrange her skirt and dab her nose with her monogrammed hankie.

I glanced at my watch as Malcolm reappeared with a group of young African men. He had been gone about forty minutes. They came to the truck and circled around it while Malcolm spoke to them in Gourmantché. I looked again to Anna for my cue but she seemed completely non-plussed. I sat and watched.

The group left and Malcolm slid behind the wheel of the truck. “Ready, Mother?”

“Sure,” she screwed the cap on both thermoses and sealed the Tupperware.

“Uh, what’s going on?” I asked Malcolm from the backseat.

Malcolm looked at me in the rear view mirror and smiled. “Well, we’re going to drive to the river and that group of men is going to carry this truck and the Corolla across the river.”

“Oh, I see.” I nodded. “And, you just happened to come across this group of men who volunteered to do this?”

“They were waiting near the river.”

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I nodded my head slowly, “So, you’re telling me groups of men wait near washed out bridges to carry cars across the river?”

“Something like that. It’s their way of making some money during rainy season.”

I nodded and looked around seemingly the only one phased by the course of events. “I suppose this is something State Farm recommends when you can’t get in touch with a regular tow?”

“Who?” Malcolm asked.

“Never mind.” I waved my hand. “So, where will we be during this adventure?”

“In the car.”

“And what do you recommend if they drop the car, with us in it, into the river?”

Malcolm looked at me in the rear view mirror again, “I would roll down the window and get out as quickly as I could.”

“Thank you, that is very helpful.”

“We have a saying here, Katherine: ‘That’s Africa’, and it covers a multitude of things.” Anna lifted both hands to prove her point.

“That’s Africa.”

I got out of the truck and headed back to the Corolla. Fiona joined me in the passenger’s seat.

“I suppose this is old hat to you, huh?” I asked her.

“Well, dear.” She buckled her seatbelt.

I started up the car and followed Malcolm around the bend and down toward the river. If there had been a bridge there was no sign of it now. The water was moving fast carrying a lot of debris but it wasn’t very wide. Our carriers casually stood around smoking waiting for us to approach.

Malcolm stopped his truck and got out again. He spoke with one of the men who wore a ski hat with a large rainbow colored pom-pom on top, as if to identify him as chief negotiator. Malcolm motioned to me so I got out and joined him.

“Keep the engine off and the steering wheel straight,” Malcolm explained, “once they set the car down on the opposite bank I want you to give a few moments for the water to run off and then start up the car.”

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“Okay,” I looked at the motley crew. One smiled at me. I smiled back.

“Êtes-vous Americaines?”

“Oui.” I answered and they all laughed. I looked at Malcolm, “Is that funny?”

“I think the embroidered Giraffe on your shirt gave you away.”

I rolled my eyes, “Would you leave me alone about the clothes?”

He smiled reassuringly. “Let’s get going. I think they’re eager to spend the cash on some more beer.”

I hurried back to the Toyota.

“Is everything okay dear?” Fiona asked as I settled back in to the driver’s seat and buckled my seat belt.

I started the engine, “Malcolm just wants to get going before the guys drink anymore.”

I followed Malcolm another 20 feet to the bank of the gushing river. We watched as twelve men surrounded the truck, bent their knees and with a collective heave lifted the truck onto their shoulders. Most of the men were barefoot but those that did have shoes wore flimsy boardwalk flip-flops. The pom-pommed one hollered and they took slow baby steps together into the river. The river was chest high on the shortest man and about 15 feet wide. The truck looked as though it was skimming across the gushing water. Once they arrived on the opposite bank they let the front of the truck down with a “clump” and then scurried around to the back and pushed the truck up the bank until it was on solid ground. They turned and ran back into the river whooping and splashing.

I looked at Fiona, “Are you ready?”

“Oh, yes, dear.”

I released the emergency brake and double-checked we were in neutral. The Corolla was much lighter. I rolled the car down as close to the bank as possible. The rainbow pom-pommed man held up his hand and the group surrounded the Corolla. It was a strange sensation seeing the tops of the men’s heads and the water rushing below. The men walked the car up the bank and placed us down behind Malcolm’s truck with a thud. Malcolm walked over and leaned in the window.

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“Are you alright?!”

“I’m fine. Fiona?”

“Oh, yes. I’m fine, thank you.”

“Go ahead and start up the car.”

I did as instructed and the car started right up. “Great.” Malcolm exclaimed, clearly relieved. He haggled with the crew for a while and finally settled on a payment. We were on our way.

The last leg of our trip to Mahadaga led us south out of the dense bush and into arid countryside. Scrub brush rolled past thorny trees and a few hills dotted the horizon. Young boy shepherds shooed their herds of miniature goats and sheep off the road to let us pass and then stood and waved at us as we zoomed by. Every few miles we passed by groups of women walking with bundles of firewood on their heads and babies strapped to their backs. They nonchalantly stepped off the side of the road to let us pass and gracefully bowed their heads to greet us.

“Where are they getting the firewood?” I wondered out loud. “I’ve seen about 5 trees in the past 20 miles and they’re huge Flamboyant trees, they’re far too big to cut down!”

“Oh, the women work very hard. They walk for miles a day to collect firewood and then the next day for water. It’s an extraordinary amount of work to live off this land,” Fiona waved and smiled to everyone we passed.

Malcolm slowed in front of me so I followed suit. We came to a stop in front of a rusted gate that blocked a portion of the road. Just off to the right side of the road was a small mud hut with a thatched roof. Malcolm honked his horn. Eventually a gendarmie in fatigues walked around the side of the hut and approached Malcolm’s window. They talked. And talked.

“Do you think there is a problem?” I asked. They had been chatting for more than five minutes.

Fiona chuckled, “I imagine it can be very lonely sitting in that hut waiting for traffic. He’s probably enjoying a wee chat, Katherine.”

Finally we pulled away and the guard waved us past. I glanced at my watch, it was almost 4:30 p.m., and we had been at the guard gate for almost 20 minutes.

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“You might want to consider storing your watch, Katherine.”  
Fiona spoke over the engine noise.

“Why?” I glanced at her and continued roughly two paces behind Malcolm’s truck.

“The African’s say, ‘Westerners have the watches, but we have the time.’ You will save yourself some frustration by packing away your watch, or at least ignoring it,” Fiona looked at me expectantly with her two blueberries. “You will miss the lessons of Africa if you are constantly frustrated with her ways.”

I glanced at her again and nodded. She rubbed her hands on her skirt and smiled again. The moment had passed. “Now, if I remember correctly, Mahadaga is in that clump of mountains,” Fiona pointed through the windshield. “It’s one of the last outposts in Burkina.”

We pulled into the mission compound at dusk. I followed Malcolm’s truck through the gates and up the drive to park in the middle of several mud-brick homes surrounded by Acacia trees. No sooner had we turned off our engines then families streamed out of all the homes to greet us. There were hugs and greetings and introductions all around.

Malcolm and Anna’s daughter-in-law, Mary, was the compound’s very pregnant hostess and her three young children helped Fiona and me unload our bags from the trunk of the Corolla.

“Let me show you all to your room,” Mary said and heaved my duffel bag off the ground and slung it over her back.

“I can carry that, Mary,” I tried to take it from her but she wouldn’t let me.

“I hope it’s okay if you two share a room?” she looked at Fiona and me.

“That’s fine with me. Katherine?” Fiona looked at me.

“Sure, that’s no problem.” I followed Mary and the kids and Fiona up the path to the compound’s Guest House. It was a typical bush house: mud brick with a corrugated tin roof, screened windows with thief proofing and a tin door with a padlock.

“It’s simple, but clean.” Mary explained after showing us into the room. “And, there is a bathroom inside.” The kids scrambled onto one of the beds and bounced.

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“This is lovely, Mary,” Fiona set down her bag. “Thank you.”

“Yes,” I chimed in. I was searching the room for mosquito nets but did not see one.

“Would you prefer a mosquito net, Katherine?” Mary asked.

“If it’s not too much trouble.”

“Not at all, the hooks are already on the ceiling so I’ll have Daniel put it up later.”

“Thank you.”

Mary looked around the room. “The only other thing is our generator shuts off at 8:00 p.m. So it’s candles and flashlights after that.”

I looked at my watch: 6:55 p.m.

“Now, I don’t want to scare you or anything, but we do have snakes. So, be sure to keep your flashlight with you, okay?”

Thousands of tiny pins tickled the back of my kneecaps. I put my hand on the back of the rickety wooden chair to balance myself.

Fiona giggled, “Oh, Katherine, snakes don’t like people.”

“Well, kids, why don’t we let Fiona and Katherine settle in?” She looked at us, “When you’re ready come on over to our house for a spaghetti dinner?”

“That sounds lovely,” Fiona smiled and patted the kids on the head.

“Thank you.” I added.

I threw my duffel bag on to the bed and sat down. I watched Fiona open her bag and place all her clothes in neat piles on top of a table next to her bed. I took out my flashlight and waited for her to finish.

We sat in a large circle of cobalt blue and Kelly green woven chairs in Daniel and Mary’s sitting room, the cement floors were covered with Muslim prayer mats and the walls with family photos. We balanced our plates of spaghetti on our laps and watched the kids make their rounds receiving hugs and kisses from everyone in the house.

“So, the Yanks have given Saddam an ultimatum?” Malcolm put down his plate and crossed his right leg over the left and rubbed his ankle.

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Daniel quickly swallowed, “They are already piling up their troops in Saudi Arabia.” He shook his head, “They think they rule the world.” To which many in the circle nodded in agreement and rested their eyes on me.

I surrendered my hands. “President Bush hasn’t phoned me asking my opinion on this matter.”

“Has there been much response from the Muslim community here in Mahadaga?” Malcolm looked to the others.

“Not really,” Daniel responded. “But, things may change if a war is started.”

“Why?” I asked.

Daniel looked at me, “Because Western, or American aggression, is seen as Christian aggression and a threat to all of Islam.”

“The Muslims have done a better job than the Christians in many ways of creating a sense of solidarity amongst their followers. The Christians in the Sudan have been persecuted for years by the Muslim government but the rest of the Christian world has not felt themselves threatened by that action as a Muslim would,” Malcolm added.

Daniel nodded in agreement. “That’s right. So, when the Yanks show up in Saudi Arabia to fight the Iraqis who knows what kind of reaction we will see from the Muslim community throughout the Middle East and in Africa.”

“But, Saddam kills his own people. He is no man of faith,” Francoise, a French nurse, added.

“The only reason the US is in Kuwait is to protect their oil. Anyone who believes that US foreign policy has humanitarian considerations is fooling themselves. It just makes good rhetoric,” Daniel was overheated.

“I think that’s a little harsh, Daniel. The truth must be somewhere in the middle,” I felt I had to add something, but I was shocked by his vociferousness. I thought everyone liked Americans, the friendly folks who brought the world the Big Mac.

“Look, the US is the bully of the world playground. They get away with a lot of bad policy because countries depend on their financial support and are greedy for the income potential from doing business with the US,” Daniel was emphatic.

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“There is something to be said for the existence of a benevolent superpower,” Fiona commented. “I’ll never forget after the War when America paid for Europe to get back on its feet. I have a fond memory of visiting England in the late 40’s and the US soldiers always gave us bubble gum,” she smiled. “I am of a different generation. I wouldn’t want to live there, but I have very warm feelings towards the Americans.”

Irmgard, an elderly German nurse, snorted, “Don’t get me started on American occupation and country building. Although,” she lifted her index finger, “my sister did marry a Yank and he was very nice. He took her to Disney World for their wedding anniversary last year.”

I had never pondered my “American-ness” before and looked around at the Canadians, Germans, Swiss and French assembled and felt excited to be a part of an international group but the initial feelings weren’t mutual. The discussion continued around the construction of a new addition to the overcrowded dispensary. Malcolm explained that Mahadaga was so deep in the bush it provided primary health care for people in at least a 30 mile radius.

“The dispensary has beds for the very ill but it does not serve food. So, the entire family makes the journey to the dispensary and sets up their fires for cooking and sleeps outside. Because the rainy season is upon us many people come to see us now before the roads are impassable. We had a line of around 250 people stretched down the road to see us today alone,” Daniel explained to Fiona and me. He seemed more relaxed now that the subject had moved away from American Imperialism.

“Oh, and some Fulani women arrived today,” Francoise added.

“Really?” Malcolm perked up. He turned to me, “The Fulani are a very small but elite tribe. In fact, they are the only tribe I know of where the women don’t do any domestic labor. So, they have what are called ‘black Fulani’ which basically means they take slaves from lesser tribes, like the Gourmas.”

“Yes,” Daniel added. “You can often tell a Fulani woman as well because she wears gold coins around her head. People say some coins date back to the Roman Empire via Arab traders—they are passed down from mother to daughter.” He held out his hands, “But, as

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fascinating as they are, it sometimes causes trouble because they feel they should be automatically put at the front of the line. It can be very tricky.”

The screened door opened and a stately woman walked in, “Janet!” Anna hopped up from her chair and hugged her. Her white hair was pulled into a neat bun and tied behind her head with a blue scarf.

Janet spotted Fiona, “Dear old friend,” she walked towards her with open arms. “It’s so good to see you again,” she kissed her.

“Oh, and you as well,” Fiona beamed.

“And, this is Katherine,” Malcolm introduced us, “She’s our new short-term in Fada and the one who safely brought your car to Mahadaga.”

I stood up with my plate in my left hand and held out my right to shake hers. But, she grabbed my outstretched hand and pulled me towards her for the Euro double-cheek kiss. I looked at her quick brown eyes.

“I have been desperate for an automobile. Thank you terribly for bringing it here,” she said in her British accent. She looked at me closely.

“You’re welcome.”

“Katherine is also engaged and her fiancé will be visiting us in Fada for Christmas.” Malcolm added.

Everyone in the circle looked at me. “Oh,” many of them said.

“Do you have a ring?” Mary asked. Everyone looked at my hand.

“It’s in her suitcase.” Fiona and Anna jinxed.

“Why don’t you wear it?” Mary wondered.

I was uncomfortable sharing my feelings in front of a group of complete strangers. Luckily, Anna was happy to fill in for me.

“She’s thinking about things,” she stage whispered and waved everyone off.

Thankfully Janet continued her way around the circle and the group forgot about me.

People slowly finished and took their plates to the kitchen and piled them in the sink. I looked at my watch: 7:45 p.m. I looked at Fiona, “Are you tired?”

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“No, dear, why?”

“Well, I’m tired. I think I’ll go back to the room.”

“It’s awfully early, dear.”

“I know.” I thanked Mary and said goodnight to everyone. I clicked on my flashlight and made my way up the path to the Guest House. I heard footsteps behind me and turned to find Daniel running up with a bundle in his arms.

“Mary said you might want this?” he handed me the mosquito net.

“Thanks,” I was hoping he would offer to put it up for me but he didn’t.

“Goodnight!” he called over his shoulder as he jogged back down the path.

I entered the room and turned on the bright overhead light. I stood on the rickety wooden chair and hung the mosquito net from the existing hooks. The bed was on rollers in the center of a nook and didn’t touch any walls.

I quickly changed into a sweatshirt and sweatpants and put fresh socks on and slid under the mosquito net with my flashlight and John’s second letter. I moved my way slowly around the mattress tucking the mosquito net underneath to make sure no creepy-crawlies would have an opportunity for a midnight visit. I looked at my watch: 7:58 p.m. I had made it. Like clockwork, the generator shut down two minutes later leaving me blinking into the blackness of the room. There was no moon that night and never had I known such complete darkness. I held my hand up in front of my face but I could not see it—no shadows, no silhouette, nothing.

Now that the generator was off I could clearly hear the folks enjoying themselves back at Daniel and Mary’s. I clicked on my flashlight and opened John’s letter. Again, it filled both sides of a loose-leaf paper and updated me on his family and the weather in North Carolina. He also wrote two prayer points: ‘Your spiritual maturity’, underlined three times, and ‘Our wedding night’, underlined four times. “P.S. You haven’t left yet, but I wanted some mail to greet you!”

I lay there thinking about John. It was an escape to the familiar. I was overwhelmed by all these new feelings and revelations about

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who I was and what it meant to be an American. It was all too much for me. I closed my eyes and pictured him. I felt his arms around me, his touch; his desire for me. “God, I need you,” he breathed into my ear. I caressed my stomach.

I dozed off but was easily roused by the crunch of footsteps nearing the door.

“Do you think she’s asleep?” I heard Fiona ask.

“I don’t know,” Anna answered. “We’ll find out!”

I sat up underneath the mosquito net. “I’m awake,” I called. They both entered. Anna shined her flashlight on me and they giggled. Anna shined the flashlight on the candlestick so that Fiona could light it. The candlelight gave a warm glow to the room.

“Do you have everything you need, Fiona?” Anna asked.

“Oh, yes, dear, thank you.” We watched as she slipped off her shoes and pulled two slippers out of her bag. They had bunny heads on the toes.

“Aren’t those fun!” Anna laughed.

“Oh, one of my colleagues gave me those for my birthday.”

I rolled my eyes from under the net. Geek. Fiona picked up the candlestick from the table and headed into the bathroom with her nightie in her hand.

Anna looked at me, “So, did you make it under your net in time?”

“In time for what?” I asked.

“For the generator to go off?”

I heard Fiona burst into her giggle from the bathroom. “Well, I was tired. But, yes, I did manage to make it under the net with two minutes to spare.”

Fiona re-emerged from the bathroom with a long cotton nightgown on with lacey bits across the chest and up around her neck. Her bunny heads poked out underneath as she walked by my bed with the candlestick. “I think Katherine is chicken, don’t you Anna?”

Fiona put down her candlestick and proceeded to imitate a chicken in the middle of the room. Her arms bent and flapping and knees wiggling back and forth, “Bock, bock, bock, bock,” she danced around the room, her bunnies even joined in the fun. Anna burst into a fit of laughter while I sat in my dark corner.

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“Hey!” I protested. “I’m new here! Give me a break!” Fiona extended her neck back and forth adding to the chicken imitation. Malcolm heard the commotion from their room next door.

“Mother?” he asked from outside. “Is everything okay in there?”

“Oh, yes,” she managed. “Fiona says Katherine is a chicken.” Malcolm burst into laughter outside the door. “And, Fiona is doing a startlingly good imitation of a chicken!”

They were all laughing and couldn’t stop. I sat there bundled under my net being laughed at by the geriatric crew but could say nothing. It was true. America’s suburbia had done nothing to prepare me for African bush living with these Canadian farmers and Highland women.

“Oh, I think we’ve hurt your feelings, dear?” Fiona sat down on her bed and dabbed her forehead with her hankie. Malcolm and Anna said goodnight and left in a whirl of giggles. “You know we’re just havin’ some fun, Katherine?”

“I know.” I said from under my dome.

I laid my head on my pillow and watched Fiona kneel beside her bed to pray. She rested her curly gray head on her folded hands while her nightgown fell regally around her on the floor. I dozed off and opened my eyes again. A small flame flickered on a weary lump of wax but Fiona was still on her knees. I rolled over onto my other side and fell into a peaceful sleep.

“Katherine!” I heard my Mother call my name. “Katherine!” I blinked into the darkness and looked around trying to remember where I was.

“Katherine?” I recognized Fiona’s voice.

“What?”

“Are you alright?”

“I was fine until you woke me up!”

“That’s not you, then?”

“What?”

“Listen.”

Someone was wheezing. Loudly. It sounded as though they had serious congestion.

“Maybe it’s Malcolm or Anna?” I offered.

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“No, it’s definitely in the room.”

Fiona fumbled on her nightstand and then clicked on her flashlight. I blinked adjusting my eyes to the light. She slid on her bunny slippers and bent down to shine the flashlight around the floor into each corner of the room. She stopped in the corner behind my bed.

“Oh my,” she said and shined the flashlight up into my face.

“What?” I said.

“You have a visitor.”

“A visitor?”

“Just hold on there, Katherine,” she headed for the bathroom.

“Don’t get out of your bed.”

She re-entered the room wielding the large wooden rod that Mary had installed to hang the shower curtain.

“Fiona! What are you doing?” I exclaimed.

“Shh! There’s a snake coiled behind your bed,” she laid her flashlight down on her bed and gripped the rod with both hands and lifted it over her head. “If I can whack it over the head while it’s sleeping I can stun it and then we’ll have a better chance of killing it.”

“Are you out of your mind?” I gasped. Fiona shuffled her bunnies around my bed in ready stance—there was a good two feet between my bed and the wall. She swung the rod over her head and slammed it down. It sounded like she pounded a stuffed duffel bag. She turned around and lunged onto her bed. The wheezing had stopped.

She picked up her flashlight and shined it under my bed. “Oh my,” she said.

“What now?” I snapped.

“I think I need to take another whack at it, dear.”

I watched Fiona step off the bed and lift the wooden pole over her head again. Her bunnies poked out from underneath the nightgown as she took deliberate steps back to the corner. With all her might she slammed the pole down.

“Bam!” It sounded like she had hit a piñata. Fiona took a step back. She picked up her flashlight again and shined it into the corner. “Well, that should do it for now,” she dropped the pole onto her bed.

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“Fiona?” It was Malcolm outside the door. “Is everything alright in there?”

Fiona pulled open the door. “Oh, everything is fine now, dear, we just had a little excitement.”

“Excitement?”

“There was a wee snake near Katherine’s bed so I gave it a good whack.”

“Fiona Keys!” Malcolm exclaimed. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine now but I think we need to take care of it before it wakes up.”

Malcolm shined his flashlight under my bed. “Oh, my.” He then shined it into my net. “How are you, Katherine?”

I was speechless. I sat on my haunches staring at Fiona.

Daniel and a guard arrived and bagged the beast in a burlap sack and took it outside.

“The guard chopped his head right off.” Fiona reported to me from the door.

I eyeballed Fiona from across the breakfast table the following morning. She sat innocently sipping her tea and nibbling a baguette neatly spread with butter and marmalade, but I was no longer fooled by her Peter Pan appearance. Here sat the most fearless woman in the world dressed in Grandma’s clothing. She caught my eye and smiled at me.

“How are you this morning, dear?”

“Fine.” I ignored the snickers from around the table and sipped my tea. Everyone had heard about Fiona’s heroics of the previous night and of course my contrasting paralysis.

“Well, you’ve only been in the country a few days, Katherine,” Malcolm mused, “and I dare say it will be hard to beat the excitement of last night. Cobras normally like to sleep in seclusion, the guard thought he might have been sick.”

The controlled silence erupted into laughter and I smiled, “Thank you,” I nodded, acknowledging everyone’s attention. “Thanks,” I swallowed my tea. “I guess I missed the session during missionary training on how to stun a snake with a curtain rod.”

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“That’s right,” Malcolm laughed, “maybe you should write them and tell them to include it for future training sessions.”

“I’ll remember to do that.”

“And, maybe they should include a session especially for the Yanks on baggage limits!”

“I will certainly make that recommendation.” I assured him, but he couldn’t hear me over the laughter.

Young woman discovers God's love while in Africa.

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