

WEDNESDAY.

After reviewing the dossiers, Dada and I drove west on Boulevard du 30 Juin. I didn't know where to go. Someone had a bull's eye on my chest, and I had to figure out why. Experience told me, a sitting target was easier to hit, so we kept moving. I stopped at a traffic light, glanced into my rearview: nothing. Instead the sun appeared like a big orange explosion in the east.

A throng of people waited on the boulevard for transports to work or the market. My gas tank was low. In Kinshasa gas prices were high and my American dollars were depleted. Ordinarily, I'd use my embassy credit cards, but feared that that would bring attention. Someone at STAR was monitoring my movements. We needed somewhere to stay and rest, so I could think. I'd two-hundred US dollars, not enough to eat, find shelter, and gas the Rover.

"Dada, do you have any more Congolese francs?" I asked.

"Yes, just thirty-one-thousand-two-hundred francs," she replied. "No American."

"Twenty dollars, okay," I said. "A total of three-hundred-and-twenty-dollars combined. We need to exchange some American money."

Dada pointed down the street. "Turn right at the light."

I turned into *Bon Marche*, a business district in Kinshasa, crammed with shops, bars, banks, and money-changers. The banks exchanged money at the standard rate. In Bon Marche money-changers worked the streets twenty-four-seven trading US dollars like Wall Street brokers but on wooden tables set up under large brightly colored umbrellas.

The value of the Congolese franc depended on a strong US dollar. The DRC's entire monetary system was based on it, and explained why the Congolese were obsessed with

Benjamin Franklins and were often referred to as the "Super-dollar" or "Super-note."

A money-changer approached the Rover and whispered, "*Pennies to the dollar, Patron.*"

I rolled down my window and flashed him a Ben Franklin.

"Merde...shit! Patron, what do you expect with that dirty money?" he said. "Have you no respect for Americain dollars? I'll give you 117 Congolese. You should be ashamed."

"117 thousand that's only seventy-five dollars," I said, converting it in my head.

"Patron, I'm being kind, the bill is dirty and dog-eared."

Dada spoke up. "No thanks, we'll take our business elsewhere. DC let's go."

Apologetically the old man replied, "*Mademoiselle*, look at this bill. It's dirty, you see."

Dada sucked her tongue between her teeth as I pulled off. Not a nice response.

"Give me your US to iron out. US dollars must be crisp and clean. A dirty, crinkled or dog-eared bill, the money-changer will devalue on the spot." She then placed my bills over her thigh, rubbing them lengthwise to flatten the paper.

Dada was right. The money-changers controlled the street rate and tried to under-cut the bank-rate by margins. The consumer received more 'pennies-on-the-dollar.' No US coins were handled in the DRC. I doubt most Congolese had ever seen a real US penny. I showed Dada one once. She took the shiny copper coin and stared at its face.

“What is this?” She studied the portrait of Lincoln.

“A penny,” I said. “We use coins in the US too.”

“Who is this person on it?”

“Oh, Abraham Lincoln, a former US President, who emancipated the slaves.”

“Emancipated?” she asked.

“I’m sorry, freed the African-American slaves.”

“Are all coins this color?” She held the penny out.

“No, others are silver or gold.”

“Was he African-American?” she asked. “He’s copper, the color of the people he freed.”

“No, white.” I smiled.

Dada grasped the coin as if she held gold. “This Lincoln must be a great man if he freed the African-American slaves. This coin must be worth a lot!”

“Nah, it’s not worth even a penny nowadays.”

“Combien...How much is a penny worth?” she asked.

“One cent,” I replied.

“Ugh,” Dada exclaimed. “How can this be? A US President’s face on a coin worth nothing. This Lincoln did a great thing to free the slaves. No wonder they made him the color of dark people. He’s being punished by putting him on a worthless coin!” Was it symbolism or somebody’s idea of a bad joke in the US Treasury? Dada made sense.

Two loud knocks on my window interrupted my thoughts. Outside, an old dark skinned man grinned from ear to ear, his hands clasped in a monkey's fist against the glass.

"Pennies on the dollar, Patron." His dark pupils had gray circles and he whispered, "Got that "Super-note," Patron. Super-dollar *ici*, Super-note, here."

I stared at the old money-changer. His eyes seemed sincere, so I took the bait.

"Where?" I asked.

"Follow me into the alley." I wasn't sure about this. It could be a set-up, or an ambush. Dada assessed the situation too. I looked in the alley, meters behind us.

Curious, I asked, "You've the "Super-note" back there?" Dada grabbed my arm as if to say, 'don't', and the money-changer sensed my hesitance.

"Come, it's safe, Patron," he said, reassuringly. He beckoned with his hand still cupped like a monkey's fist. "Come, I got the "Super-note."

Suddenly, my cell buzzed from a number I didn't recognize. The last time I received a call from an unrecognizable number my house was attacked.

I stared at the number as the phone buzzed. It stopped. Seconds later, it buzzed again. I ignored it. It stopped, and then buzzed again.

The old money-changer stared back silently, and waited.

Dada lightly touched my arm. "DC, it won't stop unless you answer it." She was right. It buzzed and stopped, and buzzed again. I cringed and answered.

“Hello, DC here.”

“DC, you’re alive! Man, you’re hot property! Everybody’s searching for you, and I can’t say it’s because they want you alive!”

“Yeah, I bet.”

“I drove past your house, it’s like a bomb shelter. What the hell happened?”

“Ivan, where are you?” I asked.

The money-changer waited.

“Don’t worry, I’m on a burner. I’ve the forensics info. You using the STAR-issued cell?”

I stared at my phone.

“Shit!” I whispered. “Yeah, I am.”

The money-changer pointed, “Patron, “the Super-dollar” in the alley.”

I ignored the old money-changer. “Ivan, do you have any money?”

“Yeah, what do ya need?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe a couple of thousand, and a burner phone.”

“A couple of thousand...US?” I wanted to tell Ivan this wasn’t the time to be cheap.

“Of course. A couple thousand Congolese wouldn’t even add up to twenty US dollars.”

“Okay, okay. I’ll see what I can do. Let’s meet.”

“Where, and what time?”

“An hour, but where?” he asked.