



CHAPTER 1

Who the Hell
Goes to Liberia?

Working Title

Sisters of the Sun

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June 14, 1982

Africa was a place where people died.

I knew this truth all too well, for this was the land that raised me.

Like the sweltering heat, the presence of death hangs over the continent as one would imagine a suffocating hug. The embrace is expected. Expected and accepted like the natural order of things. First comes difficulty: malaria, tuberculosis, HIV, malnutrition, curses and wars. Then comes death. Following death, a burial.

When attendees file out of yet another funeral, a cynicism takes root—a self-preservation tactic against the overwhelming pain that comes with so much loss. A belief that whispers, “life cannot be trusted.”

After attending far too many funerals in my seventeen years of living in Africa, I developed a similar response to death. A callousness of sorts.

Daddy also must have fallen into this state of indifference. After decades of officiating so many of them, he began referring to funerals as “the business of burying bodies.”

“I’ll be back in a few hours,” he’d say, “after I take care of this ‘dead body business.’”

But this “dead body business,” the one I was headed to, was different from any other. Much different. Death had arrived as a cruel visitor to our own household, suddenly and without warning.

Any defensive walls I may have constructed around my unfeeling heart shattered the moment I heard the news, “Bertie is dead.”

My sister? How? This was not “the normal order of things.” Not the malaria-stricken infant in the local village. Or the nameless schoolmates, cursed and crushed under a truck. Not this time.

While I tried to imagine the scene, the familiar room where I sat in my aunt's house suddenly felt foreign. The noise of laundry being washed and dried faded into the background while I listened to the details. Her life violently ripped away by an ocean wave.

Bertie’s body lay in a makeshift morgue in the West African country of Ivory Coast for more than twenty-six hours before my parents even knew she had drowned. Daddy and Mommy lived one country over, in Liberia, where they had worked as missionaries. Daddy's ham radio went out the day before, so they didn’t receive the heartbreaking news until the following day.

I should have been in Africa too. In Ivory Coast at boarding school with Bertie. But I wasn’t. I was in America.

Two months prior, I stood at Robertsfield Airport at our home in Liberia, holding back tears while I said goodbye to my parents and my only biological sister. Determined to graduate a year early, I jumped at the opportunity to wrap up my remaining high school credits by enrolling in a summer semester program in America. Daddy’s sister, my Aunt Lizzy and my Uncle John, who lived in South Carolina agreed to host me.

After I left Liberia, Bertie returned to boarding school at Ivory Coast Academy, where we had been studying for the past two years. She was nearing the end of her senior year with only two more months remaining. After graduation, she planned to join me for college in America.

Over the next few months, Bertie wrote often. With each letter, her words became more and more heavy and distressed. Because she’d always been so thin, she seemed proud when she wrote, “I’ve gained five pounds since you left, can you believe it?” Tears stained the pages of

another letter when she poured her heart out over the loss of a once passionate romance. Her last correspondences bore the weight of regret for her teenage rebelliousness. She wanted to rewrite her narrative and vowed to change. And I wouldn't have objected.

When I received the news of her death, a hundred "what-ifs" raced through my mind. What if I hadn't left? What if I'd been a better sister? What if... I could turn back time? But deep down, I knew my "what-ifs" wouldn't have changed the outcome. Bertie was gone and all that mattered now was getting back to Liberia, for her funeral.

Aunt Lizzy insisted on accompanying me and I was grateful. Three days later, we flew to Washington, D.C., and scurried around the nation's capital gathering documents for travel. After a long and tiring day, we flew to New York and touched down at LaGuardia Airport. We planned to fly out of JFK Airport that evening on the only direct flight from the United States to Liberia, and we were pressed for time.

We hailed a taxi. Aunt Lizzy urged the driver to hurry. The cab raced down the highway toward JFK, weaving between lanes and dodging angry commuters. The driver's erratic maneuvers only added to my anxiety. I prayed silently for our safety. We arrived at the terminal, rattled, only to find that we were still running late.

Aunt Lizzy paid the fare and we bolted from the cab. Breathless, we lugged two eighty-pound suitcases and our carry-ons into the crowded terminal, weaved our way around travelers, and raced to the Pan-American check-in line.

At the ticket counter, we filed in behind a couple engaged in a heated argument with an airline agent. They squabbled back and forth for ten minutes before the agent waved them aside. "There's nothing else I can do," he said. "Now move aside so I can help the next in line."

Aunt Lizzy and I were the unlucky individuals next in line who stepped up to the counter.

The clerk's beady eyes peered over wire-framed glasses perched low on his nose. He furrowed his brow and asked for our tickets. Aunt Lizzy handed over the manila envelope she'd been clutching at her breast all day. Our passports, vaccination booklets, and tickets tucked neatly inside. I shifted my weight from one foot to another while the agent leafed through our documents. After a few seconds, he stacked our tickets on top of the booklets and slid them back into the envelope. "Sorry, you're late. The plane is full. You'll have to catch another flight."

Aunt Lizzy glanced at her watch. "But we have tickets."

"I understand, ma'am, but you should have been here earlier. You're out of luck. You'll need to rebook with another airline."

Aunt Lizzy pleaded with the clerk. "We can't rebook. We need to get on *this* flight."

The agent shoved the envelope across the counter and pointed in the opposite direction. "I can't help you. KLM is that way. Try rebooking with them."

Aunt Lizzy hung her head and let out an exasperated sigh. She turned to walk away, but I refused to move. We hadn't made it this far to be bumped off our flight. We didn't have time to switch airlines and lose a day of travel. Pan-American was the only carrier offering non-stop flights to Liberia. If we couldn't get on *this* flight, there must be another.

I leaned over the counter and tried to keep my voice steady. "Excuse me, sir. Aren't there any other Pan American flights going to Liberia tonight?"

The agent straightened, his face flushed. I hesitated and took a step back, worried he would scold me like he had Aunt Lizzy for our tardiness.

The words that came out of his mouth were unexpected. Cruel. Savagely so. I still remember them clearly, even after all these years.

"Who the hell goes to Liberia?"