

FOURTEEN



The heat and humidity assault my senses. As I stumble off the Airbus, I'm struck by the darkness around me. "Welcome to Freetown," the dimly lit sign says. There is no electricity outside of the airport. The terminal building and single runway are the only sources of light.

The inside of Lungi Airport hasn't changed much—jostling porters, urine-coloured lighting, a single functioning baggage carousel, exhausted passengers trying to figure out the options for getting across the estuary into Freetown: a seven-minute helicopter to Aberdeen for eighty dollars; a "speedboat" into the darkness for forty-five; a ferry that is notorious for being overcrowded. In the past few years, the helicopter has crashed

and various boats have sunk. *Welcome to Freetown*. I decide to take a chance on the helicopter.

Passport control runs smoothly enough, but luggage retrieval is another story. Bags fall off the overloaded carousel. A drunken passenger yells at a porter, demanding to see someone in charge. I shove my way to the carousel and arrive just in time for my duffel. A sweaty fellow approaches and demands his “fee” for unloading the baggage. I ignore him, my eyes fixed on the carousel, watching for a wooden crate. If curious hands have opened it, I’ll have a lot of explaining to do.

A porter grabs my bag, but then another man, smaller, and showing no sign of fatigue, barks something in Krio and takes it from his hand. “I am Ussef,” he says confidently. “How many bags, sir?” Ussef has the physique of a bureaucrat who spends his time behind a desk.

“Just one more, a crate,” I say. “Oh, here it comes.”

“Uh, you do not travel light,” he says, eyeing the crate. He whips it onto a cart, piles the duffel bag on top and hesitates. “What is in this box?” he asks. Written in bold letters on all four sides are labels reading “Echo-Diagnostic Equipment for the People of Sierra Leone.”

“An ultrasound machine,” I say, irritated that the man would make it his business. “Which way to the helicopter?”

“Stay close to Ussef, it is crazy here,” he says.

My new best friend manoeuvres us to the front of the line for baggage clearance. The uniformed officer ignores the people ahead of us and checks my luggage tags. Next is another hand-luggage check—again Ussef takes us to the front of the line. “Next we go through Customs,” he says, still keeping his eyes on the crate. “Do not worry, just follow Ussef.”

Too embarrassed to make eye contact with any of my fellow travellers, I wonder if I should hire Ussef as a fixer for the duration of my stay. He leads me through the dim light to the Customs line and seems to make a point of picking out the inspector on the end even though one closer to us is available. He pushes the cart toward the inspector and looks at his watch—he doesn't have all night. The inspector places both hands possessively on the crate and looks me in the eye. "Your mission in Sierra Leone, sir?" he asks. His uniform cap is askew and his officious tone is comical.

"I'm a tourist," I say.

"No NGO, no sponsor?" he parries. Tourists to Sierra Leone are as rare as lions and elephants.

"No. I was here during the war. I'm visiting some friends."

He stares at the packing crate at my feet. I consider offering him some leones, but play a pretentious card instead: "One of my friends is a medical doctor. I'm bringing this as a gift to the people of Sierra Leone."

Ussef is already picking up my other bag, smiling at the Customs inspector, brother to brother.

"Welcome to Sierra Leone," the man says.

As we walk away, Ussef and I exchange glances. "Good work, Ussef, I—"

Another glut of passengers is pushing and shoving in front of a man holding a sign with the word *helicopter* on it. My heart sinks.

"No problem, no problem, give me one hundred and fifteen US dollars," says Ussef.

"I thought it was eighty."

"The price went up yesterday," he says, not blinking an eye.

I hand him the money and Ussef takes my gear and drops it at the head of the line. Yelling, “Ticket! Ticket!” he reaches toward a man who is dealing with five other people, all pushing, all yelling at once. A slip of paper and the money pass between them. I feel a tug at my arm, a money-changer with a wad of leones fanned across his fingertips. I offer him fifty US dollars. The man hands me 215,000 leones in greasy five- and ten-thousand-leone notes.

Ussef returns with what looks like a luggage tag. He boldly scrawls “#1” on the paper. He smiles, his job done. “See, you the number-one passenger, you de go first! You need a driver in Freetown?”

“What, you drive too?” I have no more queues to wait in, so I take a moment. Ussef’s eyes are friendly enough, but there is something else—a familiarity or breeziness about him. He seems out of place in the noise and chaos of Lungi terminal.

“My older brother, sir. Hussein. He has reliable transport. In Allah We Trust Taxi Co. Take this,” he says, forcing a business card into my hand. “You de call Hussein for sure. Say Ussef send you. Now di helicopter is waiting. Make sure you call Hussein!”



As the rotors gain momentum, the body of the lumbering Russian-built Mi-8 helicopter shudders so badly I wonder if the thing is going to fall to pieces. Ten years ago, we took off in an Mi-8 from the Aberdeen side, three doctors and four nurses from six countries and a crew of Ukrainian mercenaries. None of us spoke—we were still in shock from the horror unfolding below. As the helicopter lifted off, an empty vodka bottle clanked

down the aisle from the cockpit. They can have their vodka, I thought at the time—they're staying.

Times have changed, in an odd sort of way. The crew is from an Eastern European country, and they wear crisp white shirts with epaulettes. They seem sober enough. We are invited to wear headsets and watch a brief video—it extols the beauty of the women and beaches of Freetown. The message is all about going forward—invest your money here, fun to be had, deals to be made.

I feel weary. The last ten days have been a jumble of preparation, explanations and self-doubt. Dr. Smith-Charles was gracious. "Take the time you need, get your affairs in order and come back ready to work," he said. I suspect he felt he had little choice in the matter; it doesn't do for the department head to have his psychiatrists succumbing to panic attacks.

Bonnie was her mystical self—trying without success to get me to "prepare" by attending a sweat lodge with her and some of her two-spirit friends. Bonnie is convinced that looking for Mariama and returning the mask are somehow part of the same journey. And it was she who convinced me to disguise the mask in a crate labelled Echo-Diagnostic Equipment. "If you don't find your friend Momodu, you can't just give a mask like that to anybody," she instructed me. "Keep it hidden until you *know* the time is right." When I asked her how I would know, she shrugged and said, "You'll know."

At the airport, Nadia and I held each other forever. She seemed strong. When we finally separated, she put her hand on her tummy and smiled. "Well, I'm at eight weeks now, and the kicking is supposed to happen between sixteen and twenty-two. But don't wait that long, John."

“I’ll be back before the baby kicks,” I promised.

When I turned toward the departure gates, I felt like I was walking in my sleep. Numb. Her pregnancy isn’t a theoretical thing anymore.

“I’ll be fine with Finnegan,” she said. “Now it’s your turn. Find the answers you need. Come back to me.”

The ancient helicopter descends into the Aberdeen peninsula. I realize, yet again, that I have little else apart from Mariama’s diary to guide me. The diary describes her journey as a captive with the RUF and then stops, *in medias res*, in a backwater I’d never heard of—Buedu. I doubt there are any detailed maps to where I’m going.

We hover, and the darkness gives way to the pale yellow lights off Lumley Beach. The pilot switches on the landing lights and the helicopter starts its shuddering descent. The woman beside me, who told me earlier she works for a Christian NGO that specializes in “sustainable water wells,” grabs my arm, her eyes closed as if in prayer. The wheels touch down with a twist and a crunch that reminds me of setting a dislocated shoulder. I touch the woman’s hand. “We’re down,” I say. “Good luck with the water wells.”

Something in the seat pocket catches my eye, a book, *James and the Giant Peach*. “A little boy embarks on the fantastical journey of a lifetime,” the jacket reads. I drop the book into my backpack, a light companion for Mariama’s diary.