FROM

BRIEF ENCOUNTERS WITH

CHE GUEVARA

by Ben Fountain

2006

The Lion's Mouth

Jill arrived at the Royal Sierra every evening around six, took a stool in front of the TV at the open-air bar, and passed the time watching the news and quietly drinking herself stupid while Starkey did deals out on the terrace. In the last few weeks this had become her favorite thing to do, watching cable news and drinking while the day faded out, feeling Starkey at her back like a snug bedfellow. She had a theory about this, a half-serious notion that she could sense his presence without turning to look, as if he gave off a subtle heat or smell to which she'd grown peculiarly attuned.

"Kushay-o, Miss." Bazzy was dressing a tray of drinks with

pineapple and cherries, smiling as Jill slid onto the stool. She was a good customer—patient, soft-spoken, pretty, white. A friend of Starkey's. It was like being a member of a club.

"How's the body, padi?"

"Not so bad. Way you-sef, Miss?"

"Not so bad. Can I get a rum-cola?"

"No problem, Miss."

A breeze like moist velvet blew off the ocean, and for several minutes after sunset the sky filled with brilliant silver blue light, as if rinsing itself of the day's corrosive glare. The Royal sat on one of the peninsula's remotest points, a cheap concrete shell with a nice beach and a crumbling veneer of tropical luxury. No one touched the pool for fear of cholera; weeds and debris were overtaking the neglected grounds, and mold billowed over the walls in complex swirls like countries on a sprawling fantasy map. The Royal was, however, possibly the safest place in Freetown, and certainly, to Jill's mind, the most degenerate, the hotel of choice for the louche community of foreigners who viewed Sierra Leone as an opportunity. A clutch of coal black whores sat on a couch near the bar, boldly eyeing every white man who walked through the door, while a few more girls were trolling the terrace. Last year the front line had been a few miles south, and though the rebels had been driven out months ago shooting could still be heard at night, the U.N. skirmishing with the holdouts or freelance gangs. In the mornings bodies occasionally washed up on the Royal's postcard-perfect beach.

"Rum-cola, Miss."

"Thanks, padi."

The news segued from the American presidential campaign into a story on the wealth effect, the triumphant affluence that the U.S. was enjoying thanks to its high-tech genius and the long bull market. Jill felt discouraged, if only briefly; she'd let the greatest money-grab in history pass her by, though even if she'd been living in the States all this time, she would have done her best to ignore it. She had a congenital distrust of money and luxury, her militant asceticism further aggravated by a very low tolerance for boredom. How did you get the money from there to here? First of all you had to care, and caring, as far as Jill could see, was an accident of birth, just as her own predilection was an accident, a random number that came up. Her father cared about money, very much so; she'd grown up more than comfortably on Connecticut's gold coast. She had a brother at Salomon Brothers who apparently cared, and an entrepreneur sister who was getting rich off the software she cooked up in a Tribeca loft. So much on the one hand, so little on the other; often she wondered what kept the world from going up in flames. *Do you think they'd cut my funding if white people were dropping dead?* She'd written that to her mother, who'd written back: *Come home. We have hungry people in America too.*

She turned on her stool and caught Starkey's eye; he was deep in conversation with a glistening black man, but not so deep that he couldn't manage a little irony for Jill, a smug shadowing around the corners of his lips. They were talking diamonds, probably, though it could be anything, palm oil, bauxite, shrimp, titanium, rubber—for a country with a ruined economy, there were an awful lot of deals around, and Starkey, who'd lived here on and off for years, seemed to have a paying role in most of them. And he made it look so easy, a revelation for Jill, who'd always viewed the getting of money in terms of hassle and guilt. "Don't work hard, work smart," he told her in his plummy English voice, and that was part of it, the mellow, cheerful voice that made the things he said sound so reasonable. He gave people hope, he made them feel close to something real, this in a place that kept threatening to slide past zero.

Presently he excused himself and came over to the bar. Physi-

cally he wasn't much, a short, thick-legged man with a blunt, fleshy face and thinning hair dyed an improbable midnight black. He had an embarrassing taste for gold accessories, and most days dressed for business in shorts, espadrilles, Hugo Boss golf shirts—resortwear, here in one of the world's genuine hellholes. Shed of his clothes he was worse than she'd expected, his body pale and soft as a mitt of dough, shot through with a vestigial stringiness. What had surprised Jill as much as anything was how little all this mattered to her.

"How's the time, Bazzy?"

"Eh boss, I manage small-small. You want Sassman's?"

"As long as you're pouring." Starkey brushed Jill's hand, a gesture that managed to be both casual and intimate. "So what's the news at home, love?"

This was a running tease, his insistence on seeing her devotion to the news as a bright girl's interest in current events. They both knew she watched mainly for the sedative effect.

"Oh, they're still getting rich," she said. "And wondering which Third World country they need to bomb next. Being an American these days, that's sort of like being a walking joke, right?"

"Come now, no one holds you responsible. Have you had anything to eat?"

She shook her head.

"Then join us. Come have dinner and forget the news."

"I would," she said in mock distress, "but I never know what to say to your friends."

"Nonsense, you're perfectly charming. All of my friends adore you."

Adored, sure; white women of any description were in short supply. "Who's that black man you were talking to?"

Starkey accepted the drink from Bazzy; his hands around the glass were like plump beef filets. "That's Kamora. The diamond officer at the heliport."

"I knew I'd seen him somewhere. So he's a friend too?"

"After a fashion. He dropped by with a bit of news."

"Good or bad?"

"Well, you'll probably be pleased. Though it's not so nice for me." Starkey cut her a look; in the dim light of the bar his eyes were wine-dark. "They arrested a man in Antwerp today, someone from Ferrin's outfit. Trying to pass a batch of Salone diamonds, apparently."

"You're kidding."

"I am not." Starkey's face was grave. "Rather a shock, isn't it? Everyone knew the ban was good PR, but nobody thought they'd actually try to enforce the damn thing."

For months pressure had been building for an industry embargo on unregistered diamonds out of Sierra Leone, the "blood diamonds" that kept the rebels in operation. Years ago the RUF had charged out of Liberia pushing some vague Marxist rhetoric about liberating the country, their rationale for an agenda that mainly involved robbing, raping, and murdering every peasant they could get their hands on. They kept their columns well-stocked with ganja and coke, and it was the rebel foot soldiers—most of them teenagers, some no older than ten or twelve—who'd filled the DP camps with amputees. "Chopping," they called it, their signature practice of hacking off one or both of their victims' arms. "Short sleeves or long?" they were said to taunt as they raised their machetes.

"Go on, Jill. I give you permission to gloat."

Jill was staring stonefaced at the TV. To feel conflicted at this point was impossible—there was no conflict, not when she thought about the suffering she'd seen.

"I'm not gloating. I just don't see how they can do it."

"They can't," Starkey agreed, "but they could definitely slow it down. And trade's been sketchy enough as it is the last few months."

Jill sipped her rum. "So what are you going to do?"

"Oh," he said easily, "no sense running off in a panic. I'll stick around a bit, see if they're serious."

"And if they are?"

He consulted his drink. "Suppose I'd have to follow the trade in that case. Mono or Guinea, that's where you'll see the stones turning up."

"Gee, Starkey, you'd actually cut out on us? Think of all the great fun you'd miss around here."

His laugh was phlegmy, coarse, as raw as Bazzy's blender pulverizing ice. "Well yes, I really should think about that. All the fun one might miss in dear old Salone." He turned fond as his laughter trailed off, his eyes tender, fixed on hers as if he meant to coax out some sort of therapeutic truth. Jill turned back to the TV—she felt, rather than heard, the faint break of his sigh, his feathery chuckle as he leaned in close.

"Do you know how good you look right now? You're a gift, Jill, that's what you are to me. You're just amazing, love."

She felt warm, slack; her eyes went slightly out of focus. Was this what it felt like to be loved? Before Starkey she'd never let anyone talk to her this way, and lately she had trouble remembering why.

I want the hardest place—she'd actually said that when she signed her contract. She'd spent two years in Guatemala with the Peace Corps, then three years in Haiti with Save the Children, and after that she wouldn't be satisfied with anything but the very worst. *I want the hardest place*—on any given day that was usually Sierra Leone, "the mountain of the lion," a small, obscure West African country known mainly for its top-quality kimberlite diamonds and the breathtaking cruelty of its civil war. She'd signed on as country project director for World Aid Ministries, a Protestant umbrella group that specialized in long-term food relief; a religious vocation wasn't necessary for the job, only a tolerance for what might be charitably called spartan living and a masochistic attitude toward work. So here was the joke: she'd come to Salone determined to lead an authentic life and instead had discovered all the clichés in herself. She wanted to be stupid. She wanted to be rich. She wanted to be lazy, kept, indulged—this was where her fantasies took her lately, mental explorations of the guiltless life. Starkey was rich, and old enough to be her father, a package of clichés that neatly fit her own. She'd tried to pick a fight with him at the Embassy party where they met; anyone in diamonds should have been her natural enemy, but something benign in his eyes, the patient sag of his face, seemed to express a basic decency. She felt calm in his presence, she felt safe; without much fuss she'd gone back to the Royal Sierra with him that night, and it had quickly developed into a standing thing, Jill driving over every evening and staying the night. Her friends in the NGO community thought she'd lost her mind. Maybe I have, she told herself, maybe that's what crazy is. Despising precisely those things you're most attracted to.

"So Jill, you really like this guy?"

She was sitting on the cinderblock porch outside her office, skimming the registration binder that Dennis Hatch had brought over from USAID. Sometime in the next few weeks she would be leading a small convoy through the southeast, delivering resettlement packages in advance of the planned repatriation of refugees. That is if the situation held—if the RUF honored the Lomé Ac-

cords, if the U.N. peacekeepers could hang onto their weapons, if the rainy season held off and her drivers stayed sober. If a hundred different things she couldn't control came together at a single moment in time.

"I suppose," she said absently, flipping pages. Each sheet contained the vital statistics for a single family. Age, height, weight, arm circumference—numerical stick figures.

"He sure must like you." Dennis was looking through the door to her office, admiring the electrical inverter that Starkey had donated. "Is it possible the word 'whipped' could apply here?"

"I'm not clear how much seed rice is going into the package."

"Well, we're still elaborating our information on that." After ten years in the development field, Dennis had mastered a sardonic form of bureaucratese that Jill found alternately funny and maddening.

"Can you even give me a definite date?"

"Negative."

Dennis folded himself into the straw-bottomed chair beside Jill's. He had the lean, near-haggard body of a fanatic runner, and was good-looking in a nerdy sort of way, which was more or less Jill's type. His intelligence and contempt for authority made him her natural ally inside the system, and since he'd arrived in-country a year ago their friendship kept threatening to be something more. But their timing was off, their rhythm, the intangible whatever; all those late nights they'd sat up talking and drinking, and he could never bring himself to make a pass. She knew he wasn't gay, so what did that make him? Barely relevant, that's how it struck her lately.

She turned to the budget at the front of the binder. "One-forty per ton for transport."

"Can you live with that?"

"You offering better?"

"Nah."

Jill shut the binder. "Then I guess I'll have to live with it."

Several women from the sewing co-op passed by with snacks they'd bought from the street vendors outside, the women greeting Jill and Dennis with shy hellos. The co-op was housed in a building at the back of the compound, a sideline to the project's core food-relief mission. A year ago, in an absurd expense of time and energy, Jill had followed an inspiration and put the co-op together, converting the warehouse space, cadging basic supplies, plucking forty women from the refugee camps and putting them to work making skirtlike *lapas*. The project's main warehouse faced the office, a large cinderblock structure with a sheet-metal roof and rolling metal doors at either end. Everything in sight reflected Jill's rage for order: the stone paths, the neatly thatched baffas and sheds, the flame trees she'd planted about the grounds for shade. Beyond the walls lay a world of squalor and chaos, but here she'd managed to carve out a small island of control.

"So how's your beau these days?" Dennis asked in a chipper voice.

"He's fine."

"What's he say about the embargo?"

"It's bad for business."

Dennis laughed. "Duh, Jill. But good for the country. Hopefully."

"He doesn't deny it."

"You know the U.N.'s set up checkpoints on all the roads out of Kono. And anybody flying in from the interior is basically subject to a strip search."

"It's still a joke, there's no way they can stop it. You can hide a million dollars' worth of stones in a tube of toothpaste and still have room for most of the toothpaste."

"Well, I guess you'd be the expert now."

"That's just common sense, Dennis, it doesn't take any expertise."

He flashed her a vicious look, out of all proportion to what she'd said. She had to check an impulse to apologize.

"Christ, Jill, what do you see in this guy? I'm saying this as a friend—"

She turned away.

"—somebody who really cares about you. These are not good people you're hanging around with, okay? They're into a lot of nasty stuff, they're basically bleeding the country dry and that's against everything we're working for. It just makes me wonder where your head is at."

Jill was calm; she felt as if she was floating above the argument. "So who do you want me to hang around?"

"Look, all I'm saying is I'm worried about you. It doesn't fit, you and this guy, every time I try to picture it I come up blank. I just think you being with him is a symptom of something."

"Well, yes. Sex is usually a symptom of something."

Dennis winced. "All right, okay, I'll shut up now. I know I'm way out of line." He ran a hand through his hair. "Not that anything I've said matters anyway."

Jill acknowledged this with a half-smile; she realized that Dennis mostly made her sad these days.

"You know," he said, "as long as you've got this guy wrapped around your little finger, you might hit him up for a contribution to the co-op."

"Nope. It just doesn't work that way."

"Has anything come through?"

"Handicap International turned us down last week—I guess they don't believe there's such a thing as one-armed seamstresses. CRS said no, Global Relief, everybody. They're sending all their money to Kosovo now."

"Well, Kosovo's hot these days. And a lot of people have pretty much written off Salone." He stretched a leg, gingerly popped the knee. "How much longer can you keep it going?"

"A couple of weeks. Maybe a month if we really string it out."

"If you give me the numbers I'll try to get something for you. Enough to keep it going till some real money comes through."

"Aisha's got the books," Jill said, rising at once. "Come on."

The co-op was housed in a narrow concrete building with barred windows along one side and rough wooden tables arranged in rows. Wicker baskets full of country cloth and *gara* were placed at each row, and the women worked in teams of two, one woman stitching while the other held the cloth; in a matter of weeks they'd grown so proficient that each team could sew as fast as any able-bodied seamstress. On a good day the co-op turned out over two hundred garments, but the stuff sold too slowly piecemeal, and the Lebanese traders wouldn't buy in bulk until they were satisfied the peace was going to hold.

Jill always felt a kind of compression when she stepped into the co-op, a crowding of awareness that made her hushed and anxious while at the same time lifting her out of herself. How believers might feel when they entered a church—it had something to do with suffering, she suspected, but beyond that she lacked the energy to analyze it. While Dennis and Aisha went through the books Jill tallied and stacked the morning's output of clothes, looking over the room while she worked. Her gaze inevitably lingered on the women's stumps; on some level she never really stopped thinking about that,

though for a long time she'd tried to deny her obsession, this thing she had—which seemed shameful, vaguely pornographic—for visualizing her own mutilation. "It go red when you chopped," one of the women had told her. "Everyt'ing go red, red, like your mind on fire." Jill was sure she would die of horror if it happened to her; most did, ostensibly from shock or loss of blood, and how these women had survived was beyond her comprehension. Not just survived—how they seemed capable at times of quite genuine joy. Lately Jill had seen them laughing and chatting as they worked, edging back toward something like normal life. They had no idea that she was a couple of weeks away from shutting them down.

"I can't make any promises," Dennis said as she walked him across the compound to his jeep. The street noise beyond the walls roared like a slow avalanche.

"You know I appreciate it," she said, and felt hopeful enough to try a joke: "Feel free to puff up the numbers all you want."

"Well, you know that's never a good idea." He didn't smile—did he think she was serious? At the jeep he turned and studied her so intently that she feared some sort of ridiculous scene.

"Jill."

"What." She avoided his eye.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine, Dennis."

"I don't know, you just seem awfully tired lately. Frankly I think you're depressed, not that it's any of my business. But a lot of us are concerned."

This affected her more than she might have expected. She had to swallow, then consciously smooth out her breathing, but even so the irony didn't sound quite right. "Well, I may be having a normal reaction to this place."

"It's still depression, Jill. If I were you I'd be putting some thought into that."

Sometimes at night, when they were alone in his room, Starkey would take out a batch of diamonds and instruct her on the finer points of valuation. He seemed to enjoy the ego-boost of mentoring her, the role-playing and not-so-subtle sexual subtext, and Jill went along with it, amused, not uninterested, though the diamonds themselves were disappointing. In their rough state they were such chalky little nubs, airy nothings that rattled around your palm like baby teeth, and yet they put him at the center of something vital. At night she watched him empty his pockets as he undressed, spilling out scraps of paper, cocktail napkins, matchbook covers, all with names and phone numbers scribbled on them. By eight the next morning his cell phone was going, and by nine he was meeting people downstairs, receiving them on the terrace like a little king. She was starting to see the point of it, how making money might actually be interesting, and how the more you made the more interesting it could be. And lately another revelation had come to her: Starkey was responsible only for himself. This was, she thought, the great luxury of business, of a life devoted solely to making money; it seemed strange to her, exotic in the way of forbidden things, until she remembered that this was how most people lived.

Yet in his way he took care of so many people—or was that simply part of working smart? He was extravagant with gifts and favors, a soft touch for beggars, and he tipped as if bent on keeping the whole staff afloat. He had a trade-school education—mechanical drafting, he'd confessed—and talked enough about his past for Jill to get the sense of a hardscrabble childhood, so different from

her own. He wasn't at all touchy or bitter about it; he seemed to take real pleasure in the narrative of what he called her "American" life, the big house, the horse stables, good schools, college. In bed he had definite ideas about what he wanted, though he never pressed, never insisted. He didn't have to, Jill reflected, laughing to herself, feeling the heat rising into her neck and face. She supposed that's what a nice man did for you.

"Look at those bastards."

She was at the bar, sipping her third drink of the evening. Dennis Hatch slid onto the stool next to her, jutting his chin at the TV; CNN was running a story on the latest crop of tech billionaires.

"What are you doing here?"

"Meeting." His eyes stayed fixed on the TV. "Kind of makes you want to puke, doesn't it."

"In a way you've got to hand it to them. They had the energy, they went for it. They pulled it off."

"You got any money in the market?"

"Not a cent."

"Me either." He laughed. "I can't wait for the damn thing to crash."

Jill supposed she sympathized; supposed she even agreed. "So who are you meeting?"

"Some WFP honchos from Conakry, we're tightening up the strategic stocks plan. Just in case."

"Could be a good move."

"Star beer," Dennis said to Bazzy, then he turned on his stool to look over the terrace. The tables were packed with an ecumenical mix of whites and Africans. Thrashing, bass-heavy music played on the sound system, while waiters hustled up and down the steps with drinks. A stunning hooker with blond cornrows passed two feet in front of Dennis, raking him out of the corner of her eye. He turned to Jill with a smirk.

"Always a party at the Royal."

"Somebody's gotta do it."

"How come you're sitting up here?"

She followed the line of his gaze to Starkey's table, where the people and chairs were stacked three deep. "He's having office hours."

"So?"

So—she felt like a whore when she sat at his table? "I'd just rather sit up here."

Dennis turned back to the bar; they talked shop, traded gossip about their fellow expats, speculated on the political situation. Jill didn't mention the co-op; she made herself wait for Dennis to bring it up, and when he didn't she was gradually given to understand that there would be no money from the government. Despairing as she nodded and sipped her drink, maintaining, minimizing the personal side; by now it was second nature. Presently Starkey walked over to the bar, giving Dennis a bland smile as he ordered a Sassman's. Jill introduced the two men.

"Ah, USAID," said Starkey. They shook hands around Jill. "Still a growth industry, what?"

"Unfortunately yes."

"I should think the only one in Salone at the moment."

"I don't know, I understand you diamond guys are doing pretty well."

"On the contrary, they've put a ban on our product. Or haven't you heard."

"I didn't think a little thing like the law slowed you guys down."

Jill kept her eyes on the television, one hand on her drink. She

wasn't especially shocked that they'd gotten into it, just surprised that it happened so quickly.

"Please," said Starkey, "let me enlighten you. My man's sitting up in Koidu with six months' worth of stones and I can't get to him even if I wanted to. And everyone here is in the same boat, we're all slowly bleeding to death. Another month or two of this and we'll be closing up shop."

"Cry me a river," Dennis said through his teeth.

"Beg your pardon?"

"Cry me a river, it's an expression. Basically it means all you guys can go fuck yourselves."

"Oh. Well. That's awfully sentimental of you."

Dennis snorted into his beer.

"You think I'm being facetious? I'm quite serious actually, the whole embargo concept is a sentimental crock. It gets the human-rights chaps all warm and fuzzy, but what it's really about is De Beers keeping a lock on the market. Seems so righteous of them, lobbying for the ban and all that—they'll shut down the juniors in the name of good citizenship, then they'll move in and open up the tap again. It's all a farce, son, a sham. I shouldn't think a smart fella like you would need me to explain."

"It's never clean," Dennis said. "I sure as hell don't need the likes of you to tell me that."

"Yes, well said, it's never clean. But you're wrong if you think things are actually going to change. People will buy and sell diamonds as always, my friend. They'll just be different people. Well," he hoisted his drink at Dennis, "cheers."

Starkey turned to leave, but Jill caught his arm.

"Stay," she murmured, tightening her grip. "Don't mind him. Just stay."

Dennis blanched; Jill wondered what it meant that for once she felt no pity for him. He turned away, then looked back as if he couldn't help himself. "Screw you guys," he finally muttered, and left.

"Oh dear," Starkey fretted, watching Dennis make his way across the terrace. "I do hope I didn't spoil anything for you."

"It doesn't matter." Jill smiled and pulled him onto the stool next to her. She almost laughed; for the first time in months she felt clear about things.

"If you can get your guy down to Bomi," she said, "I'll bring those diamonds in for you."

"Get out. How would you manage that?"

"We've got some trucks going up-line next week, we'll be in Bomi one of those days. If your guy can meet me there I'll get your diamonds."

"Really, Jill, you have no idea—how would you get past the checkpoints?"

"You think they ever mess with me?"

He acknowledged this with a thoughtful nod. "You know the U.N.'s not the only risk."

"So pay me. Pay me for my trouble."

He looked at his drink.

"This is business, just treat it like a business deal. What's the going rate for something like this?"

Starkey hesitated. "Three percent."

"Which comes to?"

"Quite a bit, if Petrik's got what he says he's got." He looked up from his drink. "This is for your project, isn't it, your sewing shop. For Christ's sake, just let me give you the money."

"If you had it to spare, but you don't. And I wouldn't take it anyway."

"Say I agreed to let you go—what would you do for security?"

"I'll have the trucks and crews, just like always. Anything else I'd just draw attention to myself."

Starkey looked bleak, like a man imagining his own funeral. "What about your moral objection to all this?"

"Like the man said, it's never clean."

Starkey chewed the inside of his cheek for a moment. It occurred to her that he must be desperate to consider this; either that, or the challenge appealed to him, the sheer balls of letting her go alone.

"I'll need to hop down to Joburg for the cash, which you'd have to ferry in. So you see, you'd be on the spot both ways. With no security to speak of."

"I'll be under the radar, look at it that way." She laughed and squeezed his hand, wondering how much the rum had stoked her mood. "I can handle it, okay? I've done lots and lots of really hard things in my life, I don't see why I can't do this too."

"Well," he said a bit sadly, lifting the glass to his lips, "no one ever said you lacked potential."

It began, as it always did, with rumors—they started several days before she left Freetown, hints of movement, something stirring upcountry, the stories rippling through the capital in barely perceptible waves. The rumors swelled and took shape as the trucks began their swing through the southeast, and soon she was hearing it on the radio news: the RUF had surrounded peacekeepers in Magburaka and Makeni, effectively holding the towns hostage, and more peacekeepers were turned back on the road to Bendu, faced down by a bunch of kids with automatic weapons. Testing, prodding, seeing how far they could push before the U.N. pushed back—that was Jill's rationalist take on the situation, though at the depot in Kabili the Irish priest's explanation was like a slap in the face: "The devil is hungry again." The devil, or whatever psychopathic gods lived out there—Jill was beginning to hate them all. The news became something else she was responsible for, along with her drivers' morale, the insane logistics, the neverending drama of flats and breakdowns. The strategy she'd developed over dozens of these trips was simply to keep going until something made her stop, and when the Ghanian officer confronted her at the Falla depot she thought that perhaps the time had come. She thought she was busted—he was that formal, that menacing with his small squad in tow, and Jill was spacey from the heat and four nights of short sleep. He got off on a tangent about rogue kammajohs and disarmament centers and reports of "demonstrations" in the area, and it took her a while to realize that he was talking about the rebels. She almost laughed—oh, them? In that same formal shout he asked if she would accept an armed escort to Makela.

By then she already had the diamonds. They were in a cloth pouch stuffed at the bottom of her daypack; she'd gotten them the day before, while the trucks were unloading at the Bomi depot. She'd slipped away on the pretext of delivering some letters, crossed the square by a small cinderblock mosque, and followed the street past rows of mud-brick houses and sludgy garden plots. Except for a few pot-bellied children she was alone on the street—people, dogs, goats, every other living thing had sought shelter from the sun, and peering out from under the bill of her baseball cap Jill watched the street vibrate under the onslaught of light, its outlines shimmering like a half-formed mirage. In two minutes her blouse was soaked through with sweat. No one could handle sun like this for long, and she concentrated on her breathing and the motion of her legs, pulling awareness into herself as a way of saving strength. She was not, she noticed with some satisfaction, very afraid; the dense bricks of

cash in the daypack gave her a sense of purpose, their heaviness pleasant on her shoulder, somehow steadying. Presently she saw what she was looking for, a hand-painted sign announcing the CHAZ=3 BAR wired to a tamarind tree by the street. She passed through a gap in the palm-thatch fence and followed the path up to the bar, a small wood-frame structure with a rusting metal roof and bushpoles supporting the porch overhang. The door stood open, the interior a bruise of shadows; she didn't falter until she heard voices inside, and then she was scared in spite of all the guarantees, in spite of Starkey's calm coaching and her own resolve. Afraid, and suddenly weary to the point of despair; this was part of the deal now, the drag-weight of fear. Another thing she'd have to carry for the rest of the trip.

She kept going because she couldn't think of anything else to do. Petrik was there, a wild-haired Russian for whom the payoff seemed to be a mere sideline, a distraction from the main business of the day, which was convincing Jill to go back to Koidu with him. "I'm rich," he declared, slouching against her—they were sitting thigh-to-thigh on a plank bench. Four Leonean soldiers sat at the table with them, dark, strapping men in camouflage fatigues who fell out laughing at everything Petrik said. His security, Jill guessed, the hired help; Petrik scowled but otherwise ignored their hazing.

"I'm rich," he insisted as the soldiers cracked up. "I know it looks not possible but is true, seven years I do nothing but work! Seven years in this shithole, one more year I take my money and I go home."

"Good," said Jill. She'd accepted a warm orange Fanta. The soldiers and Petrik were pouring gin from a filthy plastic jug, everyone sluggish and greasy-looking in the heat. The old lady who ran the place sat at the next table over, a tiny, frizzle-headed woman with immense earlobes. From time to time she reached for the jug and poured herself a drink.

"You tell Starkey, I do one more year for him."

"I'll tell him," Jill said.

"Stay with me," the Russian said, begging her with puppy eyes. "I go crazy for you baby, I take care of you. When you with me you don't worry for nothing, okay?"

"I have to go back. I'm sorry."

"I give you everything baby, you know it's true!"

"I'm sorry. I promised Starkey I'd be back in two days."

"Fuck Starkey, he's not the boss around here!" The Africans howled and slapped the table. "Me! Only Petrik is the boss in Kono! Just stay one night baby, I go nuts for you. Only one night Petrik asks you for."

"I can't," Jill said, wondering how much choice she had in the matter.

"Just one night. Please baby."

"I'm sorry. I have people waiting for me."

To Jill's horror he slumped over and started sobbing, which inspired a fresh surge of laughter from the Africans. The old lady chattered happily in Sherbro; she and the soldiers regarded Petrik and Jill with no more worry than they'd show a couple of dogs by the road. When it became clear that nothing was going to happen soon, Jill turned to the soldier with the most stripes.

"Please," she said, "talk to him. Tell him I need to go."

The soldier eyed her a moment, then leaned over and thrust his hand into the white man's pocket with a brusque, almost sexual familiarity. He pulled out a blue cloth pouch and handed it to Jill over Petrik's head; she pulled out the shrink-wrapped bricks of American currency and passed them back, then stuffed the pouch into the

bottom of her daypack. She started to rise but the Russian grabbed her arm.

"Please baby." His face wrecked, pathetic; strings of dry, cottony spittle stuck to his cracked lips. "Give me one kiss and I let you go. Just one kiss baby, it's not so much."

It seemed the fastest, easiest way to go, but when she bent to kiss him it wasn't without some shading of mercy. As her lips met his she reflected that she'd never kissed a crying man before. She shuddered, but didn't rush; the Africans hooted and clapped. They were still laughing when she started down the path.

They left Falla at two in the afternoon, traveling west through a lush, monotonous country of remnant rain forest and abandoned rice paddies. Jill rode in the Mazda doublecab with Pa Conteh, while Pa's son Edmund followed in an ancient Mercedes flatbed. Jill had left Freetown with nine trucks, sending them back to the capital on successive days as their loads were delivered. After Falla the Mercedes and Mazda were empty as well; this was the first leg of the homeward trip, and as the potholes and gullies slung her around Jill considered the crude irony of the situation. Up ahead, the U.N. escort; down by her feet, blood diamonds. To gloat on it, even to think it, seemed like bad luck, though she knew that Starkey, a fearless collector of Third World ironies, would relish the story. In this she supposed she would always fail him as a student.

Pa kept riding the bumper of the U.N. jeep, trying to hurry it along. The Ghanian soldiers stared back with scathing indolence.

"These guys," Pa said in a disgusted voice, "what's the problem with these guys?"

"Take it easy, Pa. We don't want to run over the U.N."

Pa grunted; like most Leoneans he was scared of the dark and loathed the prospect of traveling at night. He was a small, wiry man with a flat-nosed Mende face, easily the best in Jill's spotty talent pool of drivers. A good mechanic, fluent in Mende and English, and so ferociously loyal that he embarrassed her at times; if Pa had a fault it was his tendency toward pessimism, though Jill reasoned that in most situations he was merely advocating the realist point of view.

"We going to Makela?" he asked for the third time.

"That's the plan."

"Lots of soldiers in Makela."

"According to the officer."

"We stay the night."

"I think that would be the smart thing to do."

He eased off the accelerator, momentarily reassured. Jill kept the daypack on the floor, half-consciously nudging it with her shoe from time to time. They gradually passed into a series of gently rolling hills, the peaks as round and mossy green as turtles' backs. The rich mineral smell of wet earth filled the cab; dense stands of fetid jungle alternated with grassy fields, the country almost oppressive in its luxuriance. Clusters of mud-wattle huts punctuated the route, their roofs freshly thatched, with staked fields beyond, but Jill could count the human beings she saw on one hand. They'd heard about the trouble and taken off, either to the towns or deep bush; the loneliness of the country, its still, desolate air, set off a hum in her head like a blank tape, and she was glad when the Ghanians passed them off to a detachment of Indian peacekeepers. There were two jeeps now, eight soldiers in all, and the Indians were considered the most professional contingent in the U.N. force. The lead jeep swung around and pulled even with the Mazda, the heat rising off their engines in cellophane waves.

"You are going to Makela?" the officer called up to Pa. He was

fit, in early middle age, with alert, hawkish features and a trim mustache. His face and khakis were powdered with rose-colored dust.

"That's right."

The officer smiled when he spotted Jill in the cab; his next words seemed directed at her. "We're going to pull over for a bit, there's some business near Makela we need to sort out." His starched, precise English made her think of Starkey. "Nothing to worry about. I shouldn't think we'll be long."

They followed the jeep off the road and parked under a stand of locust trees. So here you are, Jill thought, slowly jamming the daypack under the seat with her feet. Stuck here with your head in the lion's mouth, and nothing to do but sit still and wait. Edmund walked up to bum a cigarette and get the news; they passed the water jug around, then he went back to his truck to nap. Jill settled her head against the seat and tried to relax. A dull, dry ache had taken root behind her eyes, and amid the full-body throb of general soreness there were pockets of quite specific pain, as if she'd been struck here and there with a baseball bat. She wanted to sleep but her eyes kept flipping open, gazing past the umbrella of trees to the field beyond, then the low forested hills in the distance. The arc of the horizon, the glaring, empty sky, gave her the sense of being trapped in a vast bowl of light.

"Eh, Miss Jill, how long we going to sit?" Pa was fingering the juju bundle around his neck and staring at the soldiers, who didn't seem to be in any rush. The officer and sergeant were looking through a stack of maps, the officer speaking occasionally into the jeep radio. The other soldiers stood around with their helmets off, smoking and slapping at flies.

"No idea, Pa. It's their call."

"What they doing?"

"Scoping out the situation, I guess."

"Time to go," Pa muttered gloomily, squinting at the sun. "Too many killing man out here. You just sit, after a while they gonna find you for sure."

Jill reflected that riding with her number-one driver could be downright depressing sometimes. She rested her head against the seat and watched a flock of herons turning loops above the field, their bodies startling white against the background of green. Their elegance, the serene, fluent curves of their flight, seemed to merge into the ongoing stream of her longing, the desire—only lately admitted—that she very much wanted to go home. She'd chosen this life because she couldn't imagine any other way, but over time, without her strictly being aware of it, the dead stares of the thousands of amputees had served to drain all the purpose out of her work. Those stares, the aura of hopelessness that always settled over the camps, implied that they knew something Jill didn't, a basic fact that had taken her years to understand. They were finished, their lives were over—if not now, then soon, and this applied to virtually every other Leonean as well. Her work was a delaying action at best, a brief comfort and hope to a very small few—she was handing them a glass of water through the window while the house burned down around their heads. She couldn't save them, she couldn't save anyone but herself, which made her presence here the worst sort of self-indulgence, her mission a long-running fantasy. In this light Starkey began to seem pure to her, his career an ideal she might aspire to. There was truth in that kind of life, a black-edged clarity; more than anyone else she'd ever met, he seemed to operate with a firm understanding of what was and was not possible. Such knowledge seemed to her the key to happiness, or failing that, a way of being that might be plausible, and for a time, sitting there in the sweltering truck, Jill felt as if this version was within her reach.

She could have it, but she would have to quit this kind of life,

and the co-op was the deal that would let her walk away. That was the sequence she worked out sitting there in the truck, as if one couldn't happen without the other—as if the whole moral concept could be bought off with a bribe. She'd take her payoff from Starkey and turn it over to the co-op, and only then would she be allowed to leave.

She had no memory of dozing off; there was only a blank, then the thing that shouldered her out of sleep, wakefulness a half-beat behind the fear. She opened her eyes to see the herons flapping toward the treeline.

"Shhh!" hissed Pa Conteh. "You hear that?"

A faint clattering in the distance, bursts of automatic fire like nails raining down on a sheet-metal roof. With a word from their sergeant, the soldiers pulled their rifles from the jeeps and formed a loose perimeter around the stand of trees. The officer was talking steadily into the radio now, taking notes, shuffling through his stack of maps. No one seemed rattled or panicked, Jill noticed; they'd simply gotten extremely efficient in their movements.

"Rocket," Pa murmured when the explosions started. RPGs, standard with the rebels—Jill had learned about rockets the year before, while she sat out the fighting in the basement of the Cape Hotel.

"It's getting closer?" Pa asked.

"I think it is."

For the next twenty minutes they sat and listened while the gunfire grew more distinct, an excruciating exercise in self-control. Pa groaned and shook his head; Jill jammed the daypack farther underneath the seat and made herself sit completely still. Finally the officer climbed out of his jeep and walked toward the truck. His name was stenciled over his right breast pocket, *Sawhey;* he was folding a map as he came, bending it back along the creases as he approached Jill's door.

"So sorry for the delay." His voice was calm, matter-of-fact; Jill felt herself release a breath.

"That's all right."

"Apparently the situation is quite serious," he continued in the same conversational tone. "I'm afraid that Makela is out of the question today. We have a sizeable garrison in Guendu, however," he laid the map on her windowsill and pointed to a town, "and we believe the roads are clear. I strongly recommend that we proceed there."

"Could we just go back to Falla?"

"No. Apparently the situation has deteriorated there as well."

"Wow." Jill laughed without exactly meaning to. "That was fast."

"Yes," Sawhey said briskly. "So it's Guendu, then?"

"Guendu's fine. Whatever you say."

"We would like to make a detour, here," he went back to the map, "we've been asked to evacuate a small NGO group in this location. Would you be willing to carry them in your lorries?"

"Of course."

"That would be most helpful. Let's proceed then."

They followed Sawhey's jeep as it turned and headed east, back the way they'd come; as the Mazda made its lumbering U-turn, Jill could see columns of smoke rising to the west. They drove for several miles, then turned south and took a trail through the deserted countryside, their route little more than a confluence of dry streambeds and overlapping ruts. After an hour of crawling along in low gear they came to a highway, the road littered with chunks of macadam and broken rock. They turned west, the low sun blinding them now, an orange ball raging just above the horizon; after several miles they followed Sawhey's jeep onto a dirt road marked by crumbling stone gates. The road wound through a narrow belt of grassland, the jungle framing the margins like sheer canyon walls.

Ahead Jill could see a set of smaller stone portals with a cyclone fence stretching to either side, then a surreal cluster of ranch-style homes. Tennis courts, a basketball hoop, the angled stanchion of a high-dive—she'd seen such places before, self-contained bits of suburbia plopped down in the bush to house foreign logging or mining engineers. She started to ask Pa if he knew this place when a flash of movement caught her eye. A man, shirtless, in torn camouflage pants, had stepped from the trees, then fifteen, twenty, thirty wild-looking men were strung along the edge of the bush, waving rifles and machetes and screaming at the trucks.

"Shit," said Jill. Pa Conteh was grimly muttering to himself. Not just her mind but her whole being seemed to spool down—as if watching from some far remove, Jill saw one of the rebels lift his gun and fire into the air. Pa, Jill, the soldiers in the jeeps, everyone flinched, raising a howl of laughter from the rebels. In the jeeps the soldiers swung their rifles toward the rebels, barrels held at forty-five degrees. Jill braced for more shots but no one fired.

"Jesus, Pa."

He was muttering something over and over, shaking his head as if resigned to the dreadful worst. They passed through the stone portals and followed Sawhey's jeep toward the houses. Jill could see people huddled in the interior courtyard, a crowd of Africans sitting or crouching low. Something was off, she could feel it as the truck approached—the place was shabby, barely holding together, and that glimpse of the crowd had left her strangely unnerved. Pa parked in such a way that her view was blocked.

"Do you know this place?"

He shook his head, unable to speak just then. They glanced back and saw the rebels sauntering toward the fence, laughing and jeering as they crossed the field.

"I don't think I'm gonna see my wife again," Pa said.

Jill felt so wretched that she wanted to hug the old man. Sawhey and two of his men disappeared between the houses; the other soldiers formed a line among the jeeps and trucks. Soon Sawhey reappeared leading an older, heavy white woman by the arm, the woman sobbing, pleading with him in a guttural smear. She was a nun: bareheaded, dressed in men's work clothes, but a nun nevertheless—after years in the relief business, Jill could spot them at a glance. The other soldiers came behind with two more nuns, both of them weeping as messily as the first. A handful of black women followed with quick, controlled steps, looking neither left nor right as they hurried toward the truck.

The first nun stumbled and fell to her knees. Sawhey launched into a complicated slapstick routine, pulling here, gathering there, straining to manage it all; after several seconds of this Jill jumped out of the truck and jogged toward them. As she cleared the corner of the nearest house the courtyard was gradually revealed to her, the crowd seething, roiling in place like a termite mound. Some were weeping, some babbling or laughing to themselves, others rocking back and forth or wringing their hands—the process of understanding was like a slow electric shock, a gathering jolt that finally brought her up short. She had the nun under the arm by then, but she wavered, undone by all those lunatic faces.

"Come on," Sawhey gasped, "help me."

Jill heaved, the nun lurched to her feet. The three of them staggered toward the truck.

"Do you speak Dutch?" Sawhey panted. Jill shook her head.

"They're Dutch," he managed between breaths, "there were supposed to be more." The other women were climbing into the back of the Mazda. "I think everyone bolted but these." With Pa pulling from inside, they managed to hoist the nun into the Mazda's cab. Jill turned and started back toward the courtyard.

"Get in the lorry," Sawhey told her.

"What?"

"Get in the lorry," Sawhey repeated.

"What about them?" Jill motioned toward the courtyard.

"Our orders are to evacuate staff."

Jill took a step toward Sawhey. "You're going to *leave* them?"

"Our orders are to evacuate staff."

"Good God." Jill looked past the trucks—the rebels were strung along the fence like outraged crows, cawing, bending over to show their asses, rattling the steel mesh with their machetes. They knew the soldiers wouldn't shoot unless attacked.

"Don't you know what they'll do to these people?"

"It's out of my hands. Get in the lorry, please."

Jill turned and ran back to the courtyard. She stopped at the edge of the crowd and went through the motions of making a count, though she knew there were far too many for the trucks. Physically they looked fit enough—they were well-fed, and most of them had decent clothes and shoes, but below that line of thought she was struggling, unsure what kind of claim they had on her. How flawed were they, how deficient; how deep their lack of essential human stuff, and could she live with herself if she walked away and left them to this lavish butchery. There would be no limits here, she knew that in her bones. Here it would be a pure Brueghel vision of hell, cretins and lunatics left in the care of compulsive torturers. They didn't even have their reason to protect them, the scant, maybe infinitesimal shield of being able to meet their tormentor with a sane eye. Better to go ahead and shoot them, she thought. Better to have the soldiers machine-gun the lot than leave them for the rebels to carve up.

"Miss." Sawhey had appeared at her side with an enlisted man—did they mean to drag her off too? "Please, Miss, we need to leave at once."

"How far is it to Guendu?" she asked sharply.

"Fourteen kilometers," he answered with supreme patience. "Please, I insist that you come with us at once."

"We'll walk them out. We'll put as many on the trucks as we can and the rest will have to walk."

Sawhey blinked; it was as if she'd jabbed him with a pin. "My orders are to evacuate staff."

"And you'll evacuate staff, nobody's telling you not to evacuate staff. But you can bring out everybody else too."

He seemed to hold his breath as he glanced over the crowd. "It can't be done."

"Of course it can. We'll make a column, we'll put the jeeps and trucks at the front and the back and everybody else will be in the middle. It'll be slow but we can make it."

For a split second his discipline cracked, his face collapsing as if punched from inside. "Don't you think I would save them if I could?" he cried. "I can't handle these people, I don't have the men. Even if we try that mob will fire before we reach the first gate."

"They won't if they know you'll fire back."

He seemed to plead with her now. "I don't have enough men, can't you see that? Perhaps they'd wait until dark, perhaps we'd get that far. But as soon as night falls we'll be slaughtered."

It surpassed her, simply carried her along—in some clenched part of herself she registered surprise, a faint grace-note of wonder as it happened.

"No," she told Sawhey, "I can fix that. Those people aren't going to touch us."

Later, playing it back in her mind, she found that whole blocks

of memory had been lost to her. She couldn't recall getting her daypack from the Mazda, nor stepping into the open away from the trucks, away from the thin, sheltering line of soldiers. There must have been an exchange, an understanding of sorts, because she started down the road with a vague sense of assurance, a mental imprint of their rifles coming to bear. Then it was all jump cuts and pieces of things, fragments spliced one after another—the awful heat, the scything birdsong in the bush, her nausea and a sharp copper taste in her mouth. How the sun threw orange shafts of light across the road, shadow and light alternating like flattened stairs, and how the rebels fell silent when they saw her coming. Like a switch had been thrown, that sudden, then her despair when they rallied and started in again, howling, obscenely urging her on.

At a certain point she lost the sense of her feet touching the ground. Things went away, spinning off as if gravity had lost its hold—mainly it was about not showing fear at precisely those moments when you were most afraid. Eyes, mouth, voice, strict control of the pressure points, because fear was a tacit form of consent. She was close enough now to see the lumps in their skin, the juju bundles they'd sewn into themselves. They wore rags and tatters of clothes but fairly bristled with weapons; they were boys, teenagers most of them, red-eyed, heads swiveling as they drifted toward the gate. Giggling, clearly messed up on something. Several pointed their guns at her and laughed.

She stopped on a line even with the two stone portals. "Who's the head man," she called in a neutral voice, pitching it between request and command.

There was more laughter. "You a long way from home," a voice answered.

"Sure, padi. But don't you know I'm trying hard to get back there."

The youth who'd spoken waved down the road with his gun. He was tall and gaunt, bare-chested, his thin Fullah face edged with decorative scars. Bandoliers wreathed his body like a fashion statement—*gangsta*, that was the style they aspired to. Tupac Shakur was their Haile Selassie.

"Walk on," he said in a jeering voice. "Nobody stopping you."

"Yeah, that would be fine, I appreciate that. But what I'm asking is you let my friends come with me, saby? Let them pass, all these people good people here. Nobody here you need be making trouble with."

The youth laughed; she watched his eyes range past her shoulder, scanning the soldiers at her back. The rest of the mob stood slack-jawed and goggling, their stares like cigarette burns on her skin.

"You and de soldiers, I leave you go outta de goodness a my heart. Everybody else got to stay, das de order. We in charge of security in all dis place now."

"Come on padi, these people sick. Let these people go to Guendu for the doctor."

"We got doctor," he said, raising a laugh from his friends.

"Let them go, nobody but simple people here. Nobody here going to make any trouble for you." When the youth just stared, Jill added: "I'll pay."

He wasn't impressed. "What you pay," he snapped.

She pulled the cloth pouch out of her daypack, loosened the drawstring, and poured a spoonful of diamonds into her hand. "This now," she said, showing him her hand. "And this later," she lifted the pouch, "when we get to Guendu."

The youth came forward several steps, close enough for Jill to hear the asthma in his chest. When he saw what she had he went blank for a moment.

"Yah." He swallowed, came a few steps closer. "You give me everyt'ing now, you free to go. Give me everyt'ing now and all dese people free to go." When she refused he made a childish swipe at her hand, then played it for a joke when she pulled back. He was laughing, trembling slightly as he glanced from her to the soldiers, trying to solve the hard calculation they presented. The cost of taking them, and his own chances in a fight. Whether he'd be among the lucky when it was all said and done.

"Do the trade," Jill said quietly. "You're a very rich man if you do the trade."

His eyes got busy—diamonds, soldiers, then back to the diamonds. Working the numbers so hard she could hear them squeal. He licked his lips, took one last look at the soldiers, and carefully held out his hand.

Most were manageable. The nuns told them to walk and so they walked, lapsing into a one-track catatonic state in which the next step forward was the only thing. Others, though docile enough, were prone to wandering off or sitting down in the road, and it was a struggle to keep them focused and moving with the group. Those who couldn't be managed at all—the violent, the contrary, the overwrought—had to be bound and secured in the trucks, where they passed the night howling like kenneled dogs. What the column must have looked like to someone watching from the bush, Jill could only imagine—like a nightmare, an apparition some sorcerer had conjured up, a shambling caravan of demons and freaks. The rebels bought into the spirit of the thing, buzzing up and down the line in their junkheap technicals and yowling like angels of the apocalypse, singing songs, urging the walkers on, doing note-perfect imitations of the lunatics. Toward Jill and the others they assumed a pose of bluff camaraderie, shouting advice and officiously pointing out the stragglers.

The engulfing dark, the fragile beam-shafts of the trucks' headlights, made it seem as if she was walking down a tunnel or chute, a low, dust-choked space of jagged shadows and light. From time to time Sawhey would leave his jeep and drop back through the column to find her. He'd give her a drink from his canteen, and they would walk together, herding the people at the rear of the column along. The nuns and their staff were farther ahead, spaced at intervals to keep the column intact.

"They just keep going," Sawhey said during one visit.

"Yes," said Jill. Everything hurt, legs, lungs, feet. She welcomed the pain; she hoped it would fill all her interior space.

"Do you think they understand what's happening to them?"

"No."

"That's what I think too," he replied. "None of us does, not really. That's the conclusion I've come to lately." They walked in silence for a time. "Wouldn't you care to ride in the jeep?"

"No."

"You're planning to walk all the way to Guendu."

"Yes, that's what I'm planning to do."

"You know," he said after a moment, "you make me ashamed of myself. I don't think I'm a particularly bad man, but you make me ashamed of myself."

She wanted to hit him then. By now she was convinced that something was wrong with her, and that was what she planned to say to Starkey: I'm sick, I'm mentally disturbed. That's why I gave away your diamonds, I'm fucked up in the head. To the women of the co-op she couldn't imagine what she'd say—nothing, hopefully, if she could manage it. If she could resist the idiot urge to explain herself. At dawn a detachment of peacekeepers met them at the

outskirts of Guendu, and as the column filed into the waking town Jill pulled the daypack out from under Pa Conteh's seat and threw it to the Fullah youth. Tossed it carelessly, like so much dirty laundry, glad that she couldn't do any more damage with it. After that things ran together in a blur—the walk into town, the peacekeepers herding them along, everyone collapsing finally in the dusty square. Pa Conteh found Jill propped against a concrete wall; he led her back to the Mazda, got her settled in the cab, and went to find them something to eat. She was still there, dozing with the door swung open, when she heard someone approach.

"Miss. Excuse me, Miss."

She opened her eyes. Sawhey was standing there with a group of officers. Jill let her head fall back against the seat. Smoke from a hundred cooking fires was rising over the town, spindly columns drifting past the thatch and sheet-metal roofs, delicately twisting into nothing as they rose past the palms. For several moments she followed the smoke with her eyes, trying to find the exact point where it dissolved into air—there, that's where she existed, where she'd lived her whole life. Turning back to the soldiers felt like the hardest thing she would ever do.

"Please, Miss," Sawhey said. "We need to know what to do with these people now."