

CHAPTER 1

Ishmael

“Mr. Pilot! Oh, Mr. Pilot! Where are you, Mr. Pilot?” the nuns called as I squatted in the tall grass that grew around the airstrip. I had been on a trip up country to an area known as the Bomi Hills, which is about ninety miles north of Monrovia. On my way back from the diamond mines with an empty airplane, I felt it—the unmistakable cramping of an attack of diarrhea. Most whites developed intestinal problems if they stay in West Africa long enough. It is accepted the way getting a sunburn is accepted.

“Not here, not now,” I muttered to myself. I knew from experience that when it hit you like that, you had maybe ten minutes.

I frantically looked around for a place to land. A large mission run by Catholic nuns should have been close by, and they had an airfield. Like some miraculous apparition, I saw the airstrip through a parting of the clouds—and I dove for it. I flew the airplane straight onto the runway with a couple of hard bounces, pulled it to a dusty stop and set the parking brake. Leaving the engine idling with the prop turning over slowly, I bailed out of the cabin. I ran to the bush, which was mostly grass and weeds about chest high, and, with only moments to spare, relieved myself.

While this relief was occurring, I heard the distinctive *wuush, wuush, wuush* of dung beetles crawling through the grass. I had been told that they could hear a mouse break wind from five miles away and could follow the scent. With my pants around my ankles and the sun beating down on my head, I started a little hippy hop, hippy hop movement to keep away from them. And here came the good sisters in their Land Rover.

“Oh, Mr. Pilot! Mr. Pilot, Mr. Pilot! Where are you?”

I crouched lower, but now the dung beetles were visible, beelining toward me. I had hoped to spare the good sisters the sight of my naked bottom while trying to clean myself with my handkerchief, but then the dung beetles were upon me, crawling around my feet, and I didn’t want them to start up my legs.

“Mr. Pilot! Oh Mr. Pi—!”

The nuns must have figured out what was happening because there was a pause then they all waved like a car load of school girls and drove off. I got my pants up, shook a cluster of dung beetles off my boots, and got out of there as quickly as I could. Once airborne, I gave the nuns a wing wag (a Dutch roll) as I climbed away.

On the flight back to Monrovia I thought about how I had gotten here. Not long ago, I had been a clean-shaven, ambitious college student at Cornell. Now I sported a three-day stubble, was badly in need of a shower, and had just finished scuttling around the bush with my pants around my ankles trying to avoid bugs and nuns.