

BLOOD BEFORE DAWN by Daniel Meier

EXCERPT

CHAPTER 1

April 1979

I'd always known that one could get into trouble just standing on a street corner, but never like this. We had just finished a late breakfast at a new Lebanese restaurant on Gurley Street in center city Monrovia and were actually standing on the corner of Gurley and Benson when a crowd—more of a roaring mob—swept down the street like a tidal bore. Judging from the signs and posters coming toward us, the throng seemed to be heading in the direction of the Executive Mansion. We watched for a moment, fascinated, just as one might stare at a growing flood, then realized, too late, that we were caught up in this human deluge. We tried to run, but we were already submerged in the tumbling waters of human flesh and the roar of human voices.

Sam and I glanced at each other. “What the hell?” All we could do is lock arms and flow with the mob.

I had returned to Liberia because I needed to raise a lot of cash quickly, and the best way I could do that was to drop in on some of my old friends in the diamond business. It was the beginning of the wet season in West Africa—not the best time to arrive or, in fact, to do anything there. My wife, Sam, had insisted on coming with me. I told her I didn't think it was a good idea—Sam is one of the toughest people I know. You just don't say no to her, not even a maybe. Then, too, I knew she was better at this sort of thing than I was.

It had been twelve years since Sam and I were in Africa, but Sam appeared not to have aged a single day. She still had the same thick red hair that she had cut short for the trip. It would be easier to manage in the heat and humidity of Liberia. Her eyes were still clear and green with the same laugh wrinkles at the corners, and the attractive bridge of freckles across her nose and upper cheeks had not faded. I knew that with her intelligence and insight we had a much better chance of succeeding.

The flights to Liberia had been long and arduous despite Pan Am's latest jet transport airplanes. Sam and I learned a new term on this trip: “jet lag.” We experienced it by first falling asleep during

the taxi ride to the Ambassador Hotel. Then, after a surreal check-in at the hotel, we went up to our room in a dreamlike state and, without removing our clothes or taking a shower or any of the normal things people do before retiring for the night, collapsed onto the bed and immediately fell deeply asleep until early the next morning when our unexpected adventure began.

The noisy mob, brandishing posters reading, “Out with Tolbert!” “Stop Oppression Now!” “We Want Rice!” swept us up into their superheated midst, and carried us along like two pieces of entwined flotsam. We tried but could not move against the flow. Sam and I began to move laterally through the crowd like two small animals trying to swim across a rushing river.

The noise was deafening until I heard the gunshots in the distance, and the crowd grew silent for a very brief moment. Then screaming started, drowning out all other sounds except the staccato rhythm of automatic gunfire. Sam and I fell facedown onto the pavement, making ourselves as flat as possible. A man, an older man with gray hair, fell on his back in front of us, blood spurting from the front of his head like a small red fountain. As his blood pressure dropped, the gushing slowed to a trickle and the man lay dead. Blood covered his face, slowly filling his right ear. A woman tripped over us and fell, shrieking, still holding on to her protest sign.

Finally, the firing stopped. Soldiers ran toward us, rifles in hand. I couldn’t make out what they were saying. They stopped along the edge of the street and shouted at us. They seemed to want us to leave, and made aggressive waving motions with their free hands. Several people stood up, hesitated as though waiting for something to happen, then started to run. There was no more firing. I looked over at Sam. Her red hair was disheveled and her face was contorted into a snarl, and through gritted teeth she shouted, “I wish I had my goddamn Uzi!”

“I think they want us to go!” I hissed back to her. “I’m making a run for it. Are you ready?”

She nodded. We stood up slowly. The soldiers, now nearby, were motioning for us to move. I took Sam’s hand and we started running. By this time, most people had gotten to their feet; that is, those who were not dead or badly injured. We ran with the crowd, stopping only once to help someone who had fallen. After that, we didn’t stop running until we got to the Ambassador Hotel several blocks away. The front doors were locked, but people were inside, crouching behind chairs and flowerpots.

“Let’s try the back!” I shouted.

We ran around to the beach bar. The patio was deserted. The entrance to the interior bar was also locked—of course it would be. I picked up a barstool and raised it to smash the glass door. Just as

I got the stool over my head, the back door opened slightly and Joe, the bartender, peeked out from inside.

“Mr. Ken,” he said quietly from the partially opened door, “please don’ do dat. Ya know, it be expensive to get glass.”

I pulled the door fully open with a jerk, nearly yanking Joe out onto the pavement. Sam and I rushed in and closed the door behind us. Joe stayed next to me the whole time and quickly locked it.

“Well, if it isn’t ‘Set-em-up Joe!’” I exclaimed. “I’ve never been happier to see anyone in my life! But you don’t think these locked doors will keep them out, do you?”

“Yah ah do. For dhey is notin’ fo’ dem here. Dhey after food. Dhey starving and dhey after Tolbert’s head on a stick. Dhey don’t wan notin’ else. So, why you hee, Mr. Ken. It be almos’ ten yee now. You come to fly again?”

“Long story, Joe. Long story.”