

A close-up photograph of a woman's face in profile, looking down and smelling a cluster of purple flowers. Her eyes are closed, and her expression is peaceful. The background is a soft-focus field of similar purple flowers.

SMOKE IN THE KITCHEN

A NOVEL ABOUT SECOND CHANCES

GLORIA S N ALLEN

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IN THE
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AuthorHouse™
1663 Liberty Drive
Bloomington, IN 47403
www.authorhouse.com
Phone: 1-800-839-8640

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Disclaimer

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Chapter 1

Sierra Leone, February 1983

Sara Moses was not unlike most West African women. She had a long-accumulated storehouse of fortitude. It was a good thing, too, because she was struggling with the obstacles created by three very different but equally testing issues. She was determined to prevail over all three. She had a few years behind her; in her forty-three years, she had already encountered and overcome a long list of challenges. Each victory had given her increased strength and courage.

Troubled by one of her newer problems, she slammed the door of her beautifully equipped, modern kitchen and marched resolutely across the yard to her beloved outdoor kitchen, a relic from the days of the home's original architecture. No one was going to stop her from cooking with firewood on the *three-fireside-stone* she treasured. Not even her new husband, Ben, who enjoyed the food she prepared on it and had never once made a negative comment about the quality or taste of any dish. She had listened to his arguments against using wood for cooking. She had listened objectively and with respect and fully understood his strong viewpoint about conservation of Sierra Leone's natural resources, but she felt no guilt over it. She was a wise woman, and her mind was constantly working on how she could still keep her outdoor kitchen fueled with wood while participating in Ben's passion. Secretly, she was working on a plan—how to keep Ben happy and keep her outdoor kitchen fueled with wood.

With hands on her hips, Sara examined her well-organized outdoor facility. She loved this kitchen—as much as she loved

children. Everyone else's children, that is. She would not be able to give Ben a child of their own. That was her second challenge. She was determined to bring children into their extra-large home. They had three empty bedrooms crying out for occupants. And quite frankly, she wanted to cook for more than one person. She had presented Ben with a solution to this dilemma, but he wasn't ready to commit.

Rubbing her face with her hands, Sara sighed. While she felt quite confident about the outcomes of her first two problems, she wasn't at all sure about the third. Because of a feud, her father, rather than his older brother, had inherited the family's auctioneer business. After her father's death, she had inherited the business. Now she had been informed that her cousin Thomas was resolute about recapturing what he felt was his birthright. Sara had worked beside her father as a young girl and had grown to love the auctioneer business. She would not turn it over to Thomas without a fight. The days were long over when men were considered more suited to own property or run a business because of birthrights. Even in Sierra Leone.

Sara trudged across the yard again and sank into the comfort of a chair under the spreading branches of a mango tree that was older than her great-grandfather. Leaning her head back and closing her eyes, she allowed her thoughts to drift back in time. Soon, a twirling montage of memories held her captive for much of the remaining hours of the afternoon.

Two years ago, she had been Sara John, single, lonely, and still grieving. She had dragged herself home from church every Sunday and slumped onto a chair on the top step of her porch, unable to keep herself from wallowing in self-pity. As her mind's eye drifted across the expansive ocean stretching out to the surrounding seaside villages, she had been reminded of the permanence of some things, regardless of the battering waves

of storms. Very little in her life held permanence, and she had longed for it with every fiber of her being—the permanence that comes with creating a family that would carry on name and heritage.

Yes, Sunday afternoons had been the worst for such a long, long time. Other church members left for home with their loved ones to enjoy a midday spread, lazy hours of idle chatter, and long, cool drinks of ginger beer or cold beer. But such delightful pastimes were not hers to share. Most Sunday afternoons, she was on her own.

And then, something unexpected happened to change her life, for the better.

* * *

Freetown, Sierra Leone, March 1981

Sara dabbed at her moist face with her best Sunday handkerchief, knowing it was a useless exercise. Tucking it into the bodice of her dress, she rested her elbows on the dining table and stared at the wall in front of her, wishing she could magically transport herself to some part of the world she'd only enjoyed in pictures. But wishes didn't solve problems. She was stuck in Freetown.

Of course, she'd never cool off if she remained dressed up. She should get herself together and change into something cooler. Still, Sara hesitated, dreading to pull open the bedroom door and hear the absence of voices and laughter. On weekdays, she looked forward to returning to her house and didn't mind the silence that greeted her, but it was different on Sundays. On weekdays, she could embrace her empty house and her solitude at the end of each day she spent at her business, but never on Sundays.

“Deal with it, Sara!” she said aloud, admonishing herself for succumbing to what had become a weekly ritual. Pushing herself to her feet, she pulled open the door into her bedroom. Her church shoes clicked on the floral terrazzo, sounding much like the annoying woodpecker that awakened her every morning when it hammered on the mango tree outside her bedroom window. She tossed her red hat and green handbag onto the bed. Desperate for some relief from the smothering humidity, she yanked the cord on the ceiling fan and lifted her face to feel its cool breeze. Then, pushing her hat and handbag to the side with a sweep of her hand, she perched on the edge of her bed while unbuttoning her dress. Suddenly she broke into a smile as she stared at the bright red hat and emerald green bag. *They look like someone cut up a ripe watermelon into two halves, she thought. I must have been the subject of many a conversation this morning.*

Quickly peeling off the floral cotton dress that hugged her hourglass frame, she rose from the bed to drape it over the back of her vanity chair. She expected no visitors, so she might as well be comfortable. Unexpectedly, a few tears trickled down her cheeks. Giving in to them, she sighed and threw herself onto the rumpled bed.

Snuggling a pillow in her arms, she let the tears flow at will. There was no sense in quashing the memories; they’d come unbidden before the day was over anyway. There was no running from them. Memories came and went of their own volition. For ten years, they had put down deep roots into her psyche, regardless of her efforts to stifle them. Her fiancé, Willy West, had died unexpectedly only three months before their nuptials. She was unable to attend the funeral because she had been in the hospital, where the medical staff battled in vain to save their unborn child. A precious, tiny daughter.

As the painful memories intensified, Sara drifted into a restless sleep. She was awakened half an hour later by the ringing of her telephone. She almost ignored it. Then, leaping from the bed, she dashed to the parlor to snatch the receiver off the hook because the bedroom phone extension was damaged. “Yes, hello,” she said, hearing the breathlessness of her voice.

“Sara John?” The deep baritone voice was that of a stranger.

“Yes, this is Sara.”

“This is Ben. Ben Moses.”

Her mind raced to fit the name with a face. “Oh, Benjamin Moses. Your cousin introduced you to me this morning. Near the entrance of the Ebenezer Methodist Church? That Ben?”

“The one and only. Hope I didn’t catch you at a bad time. You sound surprised. I told you I would call this afternoon.”

“Yes, but—”

“You didn’t believe me!”

“To tell you the truth, Mr. Moses, I didn’t.”

“Ben. Call me Ben, Sara. I would have called even earlier, but wanted to give you time to relax after church. Are you still on the line?”

“Yes, I am. What is it that you wished to speak with me about, Mr... . Ben?”

“If you are free this evening, I would very much enjoy your company. I thought we could have an early dinner at one of the new restaurants along the beach.”

Every Sunday during the dry season, Sierra Leoneans enjoyed

the cool breezes blowing inland from the Atlantic Ocean while picnicking under the tall coconut palm trees that line the shore. Many also took to swimming in the salty ocean. Sara had tried to join them from time to time after Willy's death, deciding she could simply sit and people-watch, but she could seldom stay for more than a few minutes. It was too painful to observe and hear the happiness of other couples when her heart was still breaking. "It is so very kind of you to extend such an invitation, Ben... but I will not be able to accept."

"You've made other plans. Why would I expect otherwise?"

"I, uh, it's my sister. She was planning to stop by later."

"I'd like to meet your sister. If she is as lovely as you are, I would be doubly blessed. She's welcome to come with us, Sara."

Sara felt her bottom lip tremble and bit it hard to keep from bursting into loud sobs. She turned down so many requests to go on a date that she could hardly remember the last time she had one. She had forgotten what it felt like. If she remembered correctly, Ben was a nice-looking man. Very mannerly. But what were his intentions? Why was she second-guessing his invitation? Maybe he simply wanted to share dinner with someone. Maybe he was as lonely as she was. Maybe...

"Well, could I think about it and get back to you?" she found herself asking.

"Why don't I call you back after you've had a chance to talk with your sister?" he said.

"Thank you. You may call back in an hour." Sara replaced the handset and sank onto a chair. What had just happened? She had met this Ben Moses only a few hours ago. He had said, "I've heard many wonderful things about you from my cousin, and

it's a great pleasure to finally meet you in person." He had given her his business card, and she had hastily shoved it into her handbag. She remembered the twinkle in his eyes and his warm smile that revealed perfectly aligned white teeth. He looked like an honest man. But she knew from experience that looks can be deceiving.

The loud ring interrupted her thoughts some minutes later. This time, it was Kelitia on the other end of the phone. "I'm coming over to see you, Sara. I'll be there in half an hour. We'll drive to the beach."

Sara headed for her bedroom again. On the way, she stopped to brush her teeth in the bathroom and freshen up. While she performed this ritual, she gazed out the small window at the bees on the burgundy bougainvillea that created a fence between her yard and the back neighbor's. She found herself counting them, and then watched as they flitted from flower to flower, not settling for the nectar from only the bougainvilleas, but sipping from the roses, jasmine, and lilies as well, although snubbing the hibiscus.

Back in her bedroom, she selected a purple and white embroidered Africana outfit and laid it out on her bed. *This will be appropriate for my date with Mr. Ben, if I decide to have dinner with him*, she thought. *But I won't. Not today anyway. I'm not ready.*

Deep in thought, she didn't hear the knock on her front door.

"Are you deaf today?" Kelitia stood in the doorway watching her. "What's up with the fancy outfit? Isn't that a little dressy for the beach? Or did you wear that to church? I skipped church today."

Sara laughed. "Can't you ever stop for a breath? You chatter like

a magpie! You've got my head spinning. By the way, I like that pink jumpsuit on you. Makes you look great. I'm jealous."

"Like you have anything to be jealous about! Your curves are the envy of every woman and the object of every man's desire, I dare say, who passes you on the street. Too bad they're wasted."

"Wasted?"

"You know exactly what I mean. You've been languishing around this place for ten years, burying yourself in books and cooking for strangers, instead of finding yourself a man."

Sara expected no less from Kelitia; she was not one to hold back. In fact, she delivers the truth with brutal honesty. Sara pretended to ignore her rants as she proceeded to her wardrobe. She changed into a green tie-dyed caftan. *This is perfect for the beach*, she reassured her reflection in the mirror. "I haven't been interested in replacing Willy."

"Willy was only your *first* love, Sara. You don't know who the love of your life is yet, and you'll never find him if you keep to yourself. You've got too much to offer—"

"Guess what happened after church?" Sara folded her arms and glared at her sister.

"You know I hate guessing games. Just come out with it." Kelitia flopped onto the bed, running her hand over the patchwork quilt. "I never see this without thinking of Gramma Corinthia and the months she spent making it for you."

"Six months, to be exact. I treasure it. She let me choose the fabric from her leftovers and wasn't particularly pleased with my selection. I told her the tiny dots in each square patch reminded me of the grains of sand on the beach, while the larger one reminded me of the shells that wash ashore with the

tides. That satisfied her. She completed it just in time for my graduation.”

“That was such an important day for our family. Papa Solomon was so proud of you, Sara. He told everyone who stopped by the store that his daughter was the first girl in town to obtain a bachelor of arts degree in business administration from Fourah Bay College.”

“It had been renamed the University of Sierra Leone by then. You know that. If Papa were still living, he’d be bursting buttons over your success, too, Kelitia. It’s no small achievement to be the assistant manager of the Funkia Hotel.”

“Okay, enough of this small talk. You’re purposely getting me off topic. We’re hardworking women and can hold our own in this complicated society. We know that. Other folks know that too. Now, what happened after church today?”

Sara ran a comb through her hair. “A fellow named Benjamin Moses asked me to have dinner tonight.”

Kelitia leaped to her feet. “Really? You’re not saying that just to shush me up? Are you going? What time? If I hang around, will I be able to meet him?”

Sara shrugged, smiling. “His cousin introduced us after the service. He called an hour or so ago to extend the invitation. Right before you called me. But I said I had to think about it.”

“*Yu crase?* What’s there to think about? Sara, look at me. You have to stop living in the past. You have so much talent, so much heart, and yet... How many times do I have to remind you that the value of any life doesn’t rest on the number of days that person is on earth; it’s based on how well we make use of them. Haven’t you heard the saying that a man may live long, yet live

very little? Don't let Willy's death define you! It's time to move forward."

Sara buried her face in her hands and turned away from the words she needed to hear, but found so difficult to accept. "I'm not crazy, I'm just hurting. Willy's death was devastating, and to later find out he was cheating on me with another woman, knowing I was pregnant with his child, ripped my heart in two. We were engaged to be married, Kelitia! How could he do that to me? Even worse, it was the loss of—"

"I know. You lost your daughter too." Kelitia wrapped her arms around Sara. "You can have more babies, if that's what you want. And think about this. If you had died during childbirth and Willy had lived, do you think he would have grieved over you for even *one* year? He would have gone to that other woman and married her. Willy isn't worth one more of your tears, especially after what he did to you."

Sara had relived the pain of Willy's betrayal so many times it affected her ability to trust anyone. She had inadvertently bumped into the woman whom Willy was seeing behind her back. She had been visiting with Willy's parents and was on her way to her car when three women gathered at the base of the house stairway. "*Lookam, lookam*, that's her, that's her!" one of the women said, nudging the heaviest one in the arm.

As Sara reached the bottom step, the woman had rolled her eyes and hissed loudly, "I told Willy I'd never let no other woman wear his ring. I'd show up at the church to stop any wedding from happening. What he saw in her is a mystery to me!"

Sara had held her head high, ignored the women, and headed straight for her car. Instead of mourning the loss of her fiancé

with dignity, she had suffered from the knowledge of his infidelity and deceit. She had endured the death of her dreams for their future and the future of their daughter. One moment, she would be crying; the next, she would feel an inner rage, mostly at herself, for being so naïve, so foolish, so stupid.

Kelitia threw her hands into the air. “Okay, I’ve had enough of your self-pitying nonsense, Sara John! Come back to earth, right now! What about this Ben? What are you going to do?”

“He invited you to go with us. Said he would be ‘doubly blessed’ to have your company.”

“Sounds like a nice guy, but you’re too old for a chaperone.”

The phone interrupted Sara’s reply. Her eyes widened, and she froze. “I can’t answer that,” she said.

“Of course you can. You’re a mature woman, and you have full control of your faculties. Answer the phone and tell Ben you’d be delighted to have dinner with him.”

Sara had the receiver over her ear on the fifth ring.

“Have I succeeded in changing your mind?” Ben asked.

She could hear the smile in his voice. Still she hesitated. “Please, can we do this some other time? . . . I really appreciate your kind invitation, Ben.”

“Not at all. I’ll call you later this week, and we’ll set up another time. I don’t intend to give up, Sara. I’ll try very hard not to become impatient.”

“I give up, Sara!” Kelitia said, heading for the door. “I can’t be with you right now. I’m too mad. I’m likely to kill you if I hang around and listen to any more of your pitiful excuses.” She stormed out of the house without waiting for a reply.

Sara wept. She wept because she knew Kelitia was right. She had given up living. She lacked courage and had given up living for a man who wasn't worth a second thought. It was time to move on. This was the last Sunday she would spend mourning over the past.