

Chapter 1

*October 4, 1858*

*Off the coast of Africa*

*Captain William C. Corrie*

*Today we arrived at the port of Benjuela on the Congo River. The Wanderer will not be loaded with passengers of wealth for this sail. There will be no cruising about on a pleasure voyage. Today the pit of this once impressive amusement craft will be filled with the souls of 487 men, women, and children from this godforsaken country of Africa. The stewards of this trip will be serving no wine or fancy food for the guests. The passengers on this trip will be lucky to survive the next six weeks on our journey across the Atlantic. I simply am charged with keeping enough moldy bread and water in them to keep them alive. Every head I have to throw overboard costs me money!*

\* \* \*

*October 1858*

*Atlantic Ocean off the coast of Benjuela, Africa*

*I wake with my head against Momma's shoulder. It is too dark in the belly of this ship to see her, but I know it's Momma. Nobody else smells like her, momma-sweet.*

*I hear the waves crash, and I shiver again. It sounds like the ship is going to break into pieces. It's so scary. Why did those white men grab us and trap us here? And why are they so mean? I want to be off this rocking boat and back home with my poppa.*

*If he had not been away hunting, he would have knocked those mean men down. Poppa is strong.*

*I'm trying not to, but I think I'm going to be seasick again. I swallow and squeeze my stomach hard until the sick goes away. But then I cry. Momma said I have to be a big girl, and that big girls don't cry. Did she forget that I'm only five?*

*Momma hears my crying and rubs my back with her hand. It feels good, but I can't go back to sleep because someone else is throwing up. And a baby somewhere in all this nighttime is crying real loud, a whole lot louder than I am.*

*Momma wipes the tears from my eyes and whispers to me. "Zessia, shush now. All shall be well."*

*"But my belly hurts and I'm cold. Why won't that baby hush?" Some of the other people lying all around me fuss about the noise too.*

*Before it got dark I remember watching that woman called Simone with her little boy propped against the other wall. That young'un looks about half a year, just old enough to be cutting his first tooth. That could make him sort of fitful. But how can a baby have so many tears in it?*

*Then the hatch door up over our heads flings open, and one of the mean men leans down with a lantern. "Shut your bilge-sucking mouths up," he says. "Silence that brat or I'll throw'em to the sharks." Everyone is awake now.*

*I've never heard such mean talk. It makes me squall even harder but still not as loud as that baby boy.*

*Then a woman in front of me gasps, and I know right off what she sees, for I see it myself in the glow of that man's light. It's two rats, and one is coming right at my*

*momma and me. Momma quick as lightning pulls me into her arms and stands up. The rat runs under Momma's long skirt and disappears behind the stinking buckets we use for latrines. "Varmint!" someone says. Everyone is now standing up and fretting. I don't know where the other rat went.*

*With his lantern, the mean man scrambles down the ladder. "What's all this commotion?" he says. He creeps toward that wailing baby, the flames of his light dancing all around the people's faces. Everyone looks sad and scared like me.*

*Then I see the blood. The rats gnawed the ends right off the little young'un's foot! When Simone sees the real reason he's been screaming so hard, she sits into crying too. All the people are turning their backs to that poor boy and his momma. I hide my face in my momma's dress front.*

*The mean man swears again when he sees that baby's foot. "Might as well toss that young'un overboard," he says. "He won't make it. Rats are full of disease. Give him to me before he infects the whole blimey ship." This makes that woman named Simone bawl even louder.*

*Then Momma speaks to the mean man. "No, I can doctor him," she says. She puts me down and picks her way through the women and young'uns over to the screaming child. Momma takes him, goes over to the water bucket, and scoops with the dipper. She pours a lot of water over the nubs. The blood makes a little bright red creek that swirls around our feet. All the people push back away from the bloody mess, including the mean man. They back up against the boards in this black hole, into the sticky webs where the bugs and spiders live. I think I am more scared of spiders than blood, so I go stand beside Momma and that young'un.*

*The mean man acts like he won't dare touch that baby and he looks real strange at Momma. He backs away from us and climbs the ladder, mumbling, "Spirit conjuring voodoo woman."*

*The door above slams shut, and it's black in the hole again. But that black don't stop my Momma. She squats and starts ripping pieces off her dress or petticoat. It's too dark to tell which one. She says, "Zessia, hum one of the songs I taught you. I think the baby will like it."*

*I surely don't feel like singing, but if it will make that poor little boy stop hurting, I will. Some of the other people hum with me. We sing for a long time until finally the baby stops bawling. Might be our song made him quit, or maybe that baby cried till there was no crying left in him.*

*I can't sleep for wondering where them rats are. I can feel Momma rocking that baby back and forth. When the morning light starts to shine through the deck cracks up above, I try to look at that boy's toes, but pieces of Momma's torn white petticoat are wrapped all around that baby's foot. The white cloth has turned dark red. I know what's under the blood-soaked rags. I close my eyes and try not to see, but I know I won't ever forget what gnawed up baby toes look like!*

*From that night on, Momma tucks my feet between her legs and holds my hands all night long. If I wake up, I feel warm and safe lying there with her. I can drift back off to sleep listening to the sounds that this big, old ship makes. I'm used to the creaks and splashing that sound sort of like one of Momma's lullabies. So most of the time I sleep real fine except for when I miss my poppa. Oh, Poppa! Will I ever see you again?*

Summer 2004

Iredell County, North Carolina

Tam sat silently riding shotgun in the diesel truck beside his father. The washboard ruts of the logging road shook his insides. Was it the motion or what he just took part in that made the bile rise in his throat?

It was so easy. Why were people so careless? The abduction had been simple. One of the men had watched the boy for days. Ten o'clock at night, the gang always split, going their separate ways.

Sweat soaked Tam's gray t-shirt, turning it as dark as his cotton pants. This night before Independence Day felt like the earth had already exploded, the heat setting the air on fire.

Neither Tam nor his father spoke. It was as it had always been, lodged in Tam's forty-eight years of memory. He'd been in this same position numerous times. Was it justified, the things they did? Right, wrong, good, bad? Justified? Tam knew it wasn't. But what if she had been one of his own daughters? The boy would live, but he'd remember this night forever. Tonight he took the beating of his life, all because he looked at the wrong girl.

Tam's father spun from the makeshift road through the soybean field onto the highway. The noise of the motor muffled the late night sounds of summer. Tam wished he were home listening to the soft breathing sounds of Laura. Anything would be better

than hearing the growling of the truck's motor, reminding him of where it had just taken him.

Tam looked ahead out the windshield. The deer crossing sign up ahead reminded him of the doe they had hit here in this very spot on the last run. Blood from the speckled fawn splattered the windshield and spotted his hand propped on the window. The thought made Tam pull his arm back into the truck. Blood. The deer's blood, the boy's blood—it was all smearing together. It wasn't good enough just to scare the boy. No, Monroe Carter and his buddies thought they had to pound the want right out of that boy. Tam wondered if they would have killed him if he hadn't, as always, been there to stop them.

The thought made Tam feel a bit better about himself. Yes. He was actually doing these victims a favor by going along with his father on these attacks. No, he wasn't doing anything wrong. He was their saving grace! Sometimes Tam wished a new sheriff would be elected. Then his father and the brethren might not get away with what they were doing. It amazed Tam who and what could be bought for a few dollars.

What would Tam do when the old man died? Would he still make the random trips? Would he do it when the old man wasn't there, when there was no one shaming him into it? If he didn't go, who would save the boys?

Thirty minutes after letting the other two comrades out, Monroe stopped at Tam's house on Monument Drive. As always, not a word was spoken. What was there to say? The men had a job to do, and they did it. Someone must take control of these situations, right?

Tam picked up the hooded mask lying in the seat beside him, pulled the door handle, and stepped out. Slowly, he made his way to the back porch door. No farewells were issued between the man and his father.

Monroe Carter, still strong for a man past seventy, watched his son walk toward the house and wondered just how he had ever sired such a lily-livered coward. He didn't have a clue why he always insisted Tam come. All he ever did was stand and watch, chin on his chest, looking all pale and sickly. A bunch of pansy men was all there was today. They just went along with anything—even let their wives tell them what to do. This whole world was turning into one big, stinking cesspool of bullcrap. Ain't nobody got the guts to stand up for what's right, Monroe always said. Monroe tried to teach Tam just like his daddy taught him, but he just couldn't make him a real man. Now, even middle-aged, all Tam was, was a spineless, yellow-bellied coward!

## Chapter 2

As always, Laura left the porch light on. Just like all the times before, Tam unlocked the door, stepped into the mudroom, and stripped naked, throwing all his clothes into the laundry basket. He balled up his face mask into a tight knot, reached high up on the shelf, and pulled down a box. Opening the lid, he moved some papers to the side and placed the mask under them.

The white linen sheets of yesteryear... the ones made from pure ivory cloth with crazed eyes glowing through the slits... had been replaced. The local brethren had their own way of doing things and made their own set of rules.

Summer 2004

Davie County, North Carolina

Inesta Calhoun sat in her wooden rocking chair gazing out into the evening sky. The wide oak floorboards squeaked under the weight of her mere one hundred pounds. The humid, hazy day had set the western sky aglow. Bright orange was the backdrop behind the Brushy Mountains. A streak of blue and pink was mingled in, adding more hues to the panorama. After ninety-nine years and almost eleven months, Inesta felt the pictures nature painted were still the most spectacular of all, more so than any Picasso or Rembrandt she ever saw. No one else had the stroke of the Master's hand.

How much longer God would keep her alive was a mystery to her, but Inesta knew deep down her days left were few. Still, a mother should not have to outlive her child and certainly not outlive a grandchild. How long since dear daughter Lillian's passing? Thirteen, fourteen years? Inesta's body had degenerated to sagging skin and thin bones, but her mind was still sharp and clear. Yes, Lillian passed in 1990. It would be fourteen years come November.

Inesta's gaze left the open window and turned toward the creaking steps. Granddaughter Nelda was coming up with supper. When the door pushed open, Inesta's eyes were drawn to her only grandchild's bald head: sixty-two-years-old but dying.

Why Lord? Why not take Inesta instead? Inesta wondered for the millionth time. She felt like Mary and Martha in the Bible when they asked Jesus why he'd come after Lazarus was already dead. Inesta had a lot of whys for the Lord. She prayed, begged, and pleaded with Him, but here near the end, she was wise enough to know she couldn't bargain with God.

Nelda should be still young enough to enjoy life. Though she never married, her days had been productive and rewarding. She taught school for almost forty years. Probably still would be teaching if she hadn't quit to take care of Inesta. When it became clear that it wasn't safe for Inesta to be alone, Nelda didn't hesitate to retire. Nelda and her me-maw Inesta had always been very close.

When Nelda's daddy died when she was a baby, she and Lillian had moved in with Inesta. They all shared the old homeplace at the foot of the Brushies until Nelda started teaching and saved enough money for a down payment on her very own house, the one they were in now. Me-maw had offered Nelda money to purchase the house, but

Nelda refused. She wanted to make her own way, to know down deep inside that it had been bought and paid for by no one but herself.

The old, two-story farm-style structure on the outskirts of downtown Mocksville was definitely a fixer-upper so, over the years, fix is what Nelda had done. She worked all day at school and then came home to work on her house.

Only one disagreement ever arose between Nelda and Inesta: the baby. Nelda remembered well the speeches she'd gotten from her me-maw. She would go on and on, trying to convince Nelda that she was making a mistake. In the end, Inesta knew Nelda had made her decision, and there was nothing she could say to change her mind. So Inesta had just turned it over to God and supported Nelda's decision.

"Hey, Me-maw. I've got your supper ready. I had that leftover chicken, so I made us a bit of soup." Setting the tray on the folding table beside Inesta, Nelda smiled, revealing a faint glimpse of the beautiful woman she once was. "I'll be right back. I'm going to bring my soup up and eat with you."

Inesta sat patiently waiting for her granddaughter to return. Nelda came to her me-maw last year—after she found the lump. They had always been open with each other. Inesta suspected Nelda probably had just a few months left. She was failing fast. It wasn't just the vibrant violet kerchief tied around her smooth, slick head. It was the emptiness in her eyes and the shade of death ever so slowly sapping the glow from her once pretty olive skin.

Inesta didn't want Nelda taking care of her. She wanted Nelda to go on a trip or lounge around all day resting. She wished for Nelda's last few weeks to be spent doing exactly what she wanted to do, not slaving over Inesta's old bones. This dilemma

weighed heavily on Inesta. Should she insist Nelda take her back to the homeplace, to her small cottage that sat in the shadow of the Brushies?

Two weeks ago when Nelda could barely climb the stairs, she decided to stop receiving chemo. She was now feeling pretty well...the calm before the storm. The raging demon inside her had spread from a tiny pea into a bone-eating monster.

The stairs squeaked again, and Nelda appeared. "Here, Me-maw. Let me fix your table." Setting the tray down, Nelda positioned Inesta's food in front of her. "Do you need help with your crackers?"

"No. I think I can still crush a few saltines, and I can come down to take my meals. I don't know why you insist on climbing those awful stairs all day long. No wonder you're all worn out." Inesta didn't want to sound angry; she was only trying to save Nelda a few steps.

From the looks of Inesta's hands, Nelda didn't know how she could do anything with them. Me-maw's fingers were twisted and knotted. Arthritis had settled into her once hard-working hands, leaving them as contorted as a wicked old witch's. Inesta Calhoun was far from a witch, though. She was the most amazing woman Nelda had ever known. Her life was like a history book full of dramas. Defeat or accomplishment, no matter what, her me-maw took whatever life threw at her and made good with it. From her ancestors, Inesta inherited a strong will, quick mind, a good, pure heart, and a sweet spirit. Nelda wanted to do all she could for her me-maw while she was able, even if it meant climbing the twenty-seven stairs to Me-maw's room to eat while gazing out the window at the mountains that Inesta loved so much.

Inesta used both hands to crumble the crackers into her soup. More than a few crumbs made it to the floor, but Nelda didn't care. She wanted her me-maw to stay as independent as a woman could be at almost one hundred. When she was gone, Nelda knew her me-maw would have to be moved to a special care facility because there was no one else to care for her. No sisters, brothers, nieces, or nephews. It was just Me-maw and herself. Nelda already looked into it and had one picked out in Forsyth County. It appeared to be a clean place with a friendly staff and lots of windows to let in the sunshine. Her me-maw liked nothing better than to sit and gaze out the clear glass. What else could she do? She didn't watch television. She read very little anymore, just her Bible and the old journals. Inesta wanted to help Nelda in the kitchen, but Nelda wouldn't hear of it. Nelda was afraid the day would soon come when she wouldn't be able to wait on her me-maw. So as long as she could make it up those stairs, she would.

Nelda made all the arrangements with the social worker. Inesta would be moved as soon as Nelda wasn't able to care for her. Possibly the center could look after them both together.

Inesta broke the silence. "Those stairs are way too hard on you. The time has come for you to move me to the home or take me back to the homeplace. You need to be taking care of yourself and not worrying over me."

"Me-maw, I feel fine. Much better since the treatments are over. They just zapped my strength."

"They weren't over. You stopped them."

"You know as well as I that the treatments made me sicker. Stage four cancer isn't going to get fixed, not without a miracle, and I'm sure not worth God wasting one

on me. All chemo did was make my last days miserable. And no, as long as I can do for us, you'll stay here with me."

Knowing Nelda was as stubborn as she was, Inesta dropped the conversation for now. "The soup's good, Nelda, real good."

"Thanks, Me-maw. Your recipe."

When they finished, Nelda placed one tray on top of the other, stacked the dishes on it, and headed back down the stairs. It was a whole lot easier going down than climbing up. Soon she'd have to move Me-maw downstairs, but for now, she left her at the window. Me-maw loved watching the sun set behind the mountains. It was one of the few pleasures she had left. Yes, Nelda would climb those steps just as long as she could. Nelda would give her grandmother the mountain view and her cherished sunsets as long as God allowed.

After the dishes were done, Nelda settled down in one of the rockers on the front porch. The sun was only half high in the sky, but the heat was stifling on the porch. For months since Nelda had known she wasn't going to beat death, she'd thought and wondered way too much. She was always a sensible woman, making smart choices, always trying to do the right thing. But with the disease eating away at her, she began second-guessing her life. Fine time now...forty years too late.

Nelda wiped the sweat from her forehead. Four decades...how could it be? Nelda touched a tissue to her upper lip and gazed out at Mr. Wood's cornfield. It had been a good year for the crops in Rowan County. Not too much rain, not too little. Finally, after several years of drought, North Carolina had been blessed.

Nelda looked about, her eyes straying to the Boston ferns hanging from the front porch rafters. They were the fullest and greenest they'd ever been. Who would water them?

Not quite one month later, Nelda knew the time had come. Ascending the steps to Me-maw's room, she now had to stop and rest at least twice. Her condition was weakening much faster than she thought it would or wanted. She knew she'd not be around for another Christmas, which was only a little over four months away. She would move Me-maw downstairs and maybe, just maybe, they'd have another month or two together.

Not see another Christmas. Some would be very sad about that, but the holidays held no good memories for Nelda. She'd not had an enchanted Christmas since 1963, the year before the baby. Christmas was the hardest time. This special holiday always made her question her decision.

Would her child come to claim the place? Nelda never thought about intruding on her daughter's life. Was there a different solution? She never wanted to complicate things for her. But now, someone had to look after Me-maw. Someone had to care about her. Maybe Laura—the name she herself had given her daughter at birth—might not come at all. Maybe Laura wouldn't be able to handle all the truth she'd have to face. After all, wasn't that the reason Nelda gave her up? Didn't she want her child to have the best of the world, not the leftovers? God knew society barely offered Nelda the scraps from the bottom of the barrel. It was 1964. She'd just finished college, a miracle in itself, earning

her teaching degree. Nelda had survived many punches from her peers in those four years, but she never gave up. She wouldn't be run off like some sorry dog.

Nelda could hear the words just as loudly as if someone were standing right there beside her: who do you think you are, you high-yellow half-breed? Think you're good enough to be my kid's teacher, do you? *Whap, whap*. The blows stung as if it were yesterday.