

Chapter One

In my dream, Mama is alive and well.

We're on Granny Thela's cattle post outside Tiro. The bush land stretches farther than I can see. Cows graze freely in the grasses, cluster for shade beneath the broad-boughed acacia trees, and wander around thickets of scrub brush. Mama's sitting on a slab of rock in the shade of a termite mound. I'm by her feet. We're at the abandoned campsite where I found her dying six months ago.

It's a rainy-season dream, but the sky is clear. The sun is hot. Mama's cotton dress clings to her body. "What a glorious day to be alive," she laughs. I love her laugh; deep and rich, it lifts the day like sunshine. She fans herself with a palm leaf, and soaks her feet in a bucket of water drawn from the nearby stream. Orchids grow out of her hair.

In the clearing, my little brother and sister twirl each other in circles. Soly is five, but looks about seven. He's tall for his age, a tangle of legs, my baby giraffe. Iris is six, and tough like a nut. The combs in her hair are the size of her head. The two collapse in a dizzy squeal.

"You've kept them safe," Mama says. "I can rest easy." She smiles, and offers me a biscuit from the pocket of her apron. I'm about to say thank you, when she sniffs the air. "We have to go."

"But we just got here."

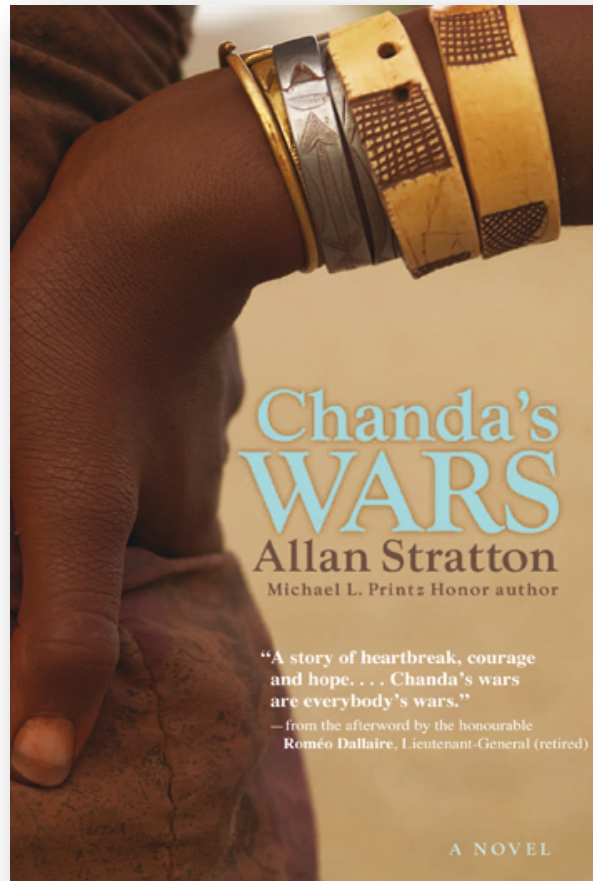
"There's going to be a storm."

She's right. Out of nowhere, clouds are rolling in.

I face the clearing. "Soly, Iris – we have to go." But the clearing has turned into savanna. Soly and Iris have disappeared in the tall grasses.

"They're playing hide-and-seek," I say. "I'll track them down."

Mama doesn't reply. I glance at her rock. She's vanished too.



“Mama?”

“Don’t worry about me,” says a stork perched on the termite mound. “Get Soly and Iris to safety.”

The sky is dark. There’s a rumble in the distance.

I plunge into the grass. It’s growing faster than I can think. In a blink, it’s over my head. Where am I? I check the treetops. I used to know them all, but everything’s mixed up. New trees are everywhere. I’m lost.

"Soly? Iris?"

A flash of lightning. The storm’s closing in. There’s a machete in my hand. I hack frantically at the grass. I hack and I hack and – I’m out of the bush, at the side of the road leading to Tiro. Soly and Iris are nearby, watching ants swarm a dung beetle.

“What took you so long?” Soly asks, with big innocent eyes.

“Don’t ever run off again,” I snap.

“We didn’t run off,” Iris taunts. “You lost us.”

“Enough of your lip. We have to go.”

Too late. Lightning strikes a nearby mango tree. Thunder booms. The sky falls. We’re thrown to the ground. Raindrops the size of melons explode around us. We take cover in a hollow baobab tree, as children flood from the bush on either side. They stream down paths out of cattle posts. Pour onto the road, ahead and behind.

The storm lets up. But the children don’t go home. They run toward Tiro.

A boy races by. “They’re coming!”

Who’s coming? Who? We try to run too, but we can’t. The road is mud. We slip, fall, get up, slip, fall, get up. Everyone’s gone. The sun goes down. We start to sink.

“Tiro,” I scream. “We have to get to Tiro.” But we can’t move. We’re up to our knees in mud.

Out of the night, a bush breaks to the right. A branch snaps to the left.

Soly and Iris cling to my waist. “It’s them! They’re here!”

WHO ARE YOU? WHAT DO YOU WANT?

“Chanda! Wake up!” Esther shakes me.

I sit bolt upright on my mat. “Esther! What -- ?”

“Iris and Soly. They ran and got me. They said you cried out.”

I see them cowering in the doorway. “It’s all right,” I say. “I’m fine.”

“Are you possessed?” Soly asks in a little voice. “Iris says you’re possessed.” Iris pokes him. “Ow.”

I glare at Iris. “Stop scaring your brother, Iris. I was just having a dream, and you know it. Now go back to bed.”

Esther shoos them to their room. Thank God for Esther. We’ve been best friends since forever. When her parents died, Esther’s family was scattered all over. She worked the streets for the money to get them back. Once night, she got raped, her face slashed. I took her in. Now she lives with her own little brother and sister, Sammy and Magda, in two rooms off the side of our house. Mrs. Tafa, our next-door neighbor, says she’s a bad influence. I don’t care. She’s Esther. If it weren’t for her, I’d never have made it through Mama’s funeral, or these past few months.

Esther returns, sits by my mat, and holds my hand. Under the light of the oil lamp, the scars from the attack cast shadows across her cheeks and chin. “It wasn’t just a dream, was it?” she says. “It’s the one about Tiro.”

I look away.

Esther rubs my palm, and takes a deep breath. “You used to get it every couple of weeks. Now, it’s almost every night. Chanda –”

“Don’t say it.”

“Why not? Pretending everything’s fine won’t make it go away.” She grips my hand tight. “Something’s wrong. You need help. Somebody older. You know I don’t like Mrs. Tafa. All the same, she was your Mama’s best friend. You should talk to her.”

“No!” I yank my hand free. “Mrs. Tafa knows what happened to Mama. She’ll try to bring in the spirit doctor.”

“So?”

“Mrs. Gulubane’s a fake.”

“Then talk to Mr. Selalame.”

“I can’t. He’s Mr. Selalame! I’d feel strange.”

Esther throws her arms in the air. “What’s more important, your pride or Soly and Iris? Nightmares have a reason, Chanda. If you don’t see Mr. Selalame, I’m going to Mrs. Tafa.”

“Is that a threat?”

“Don’t be mad. Please,” Esther begs. “I’m your friend. And you’re in trouble.”