

Chapter One

I'm alone in the office of Bateman's Eternal Light Funeral Services. It's early Monday morning and Mr. Bateman is busy with a new shipment of coffins.

"I'll get to you as soon as I can," he told me. "Meanwhile, you can go into my office and look at my fish. They're in an aquarium on the far wall. If you get bored, there're magazines on the coffee table. By the way, I'm sorry about your sister."

I don't want to look at Mr. Bateman's fish. And I certainly don't want to read. I just want to get this meeting over with before I cry and make a fool of myself.

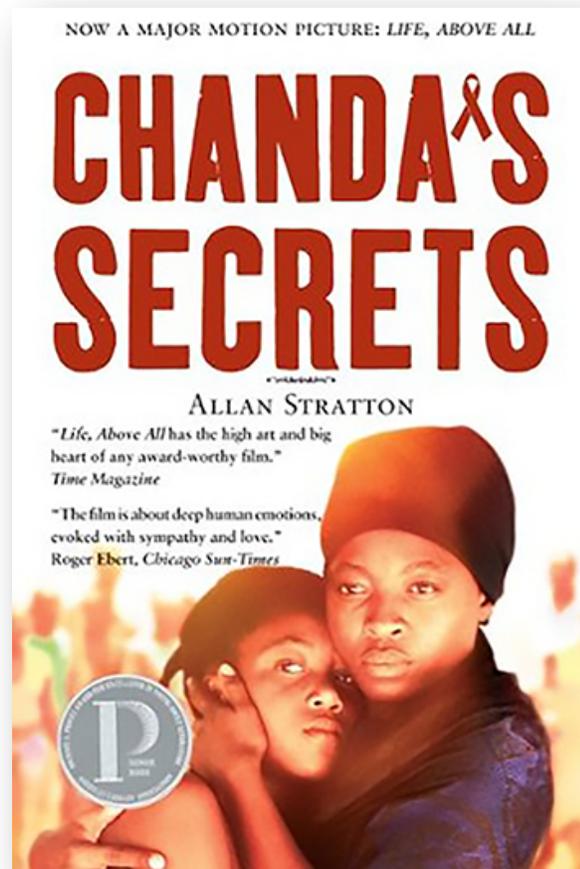
"Never let them see you cry," mama says. So far I never have, and I never will.

Mr. Bateman's office is huge. It's also dark. The blinds are closed and half the fluorescent lights are burned out. Aside from the lamp on his desk, most of the light in the room comes from the aquarium. That's fine, I guess. The darkness hides the junk piled in the corners: hammers, boards, paint cans, saws, boxes of nails and a step ladder. Mr. Bateman renovated the place six months ago, but he hasn't tidied up yet.

Before the renovations, Bateman's Eternal Light didn't do funerals. It was a building supply center. That's why it's located between a lumber yard and a place that rents cement mixers. Mr. Bateman opened it when he arrived from England eight years ago. It was always busy, but these days, despite the building boom, there's more money in death than construction.

The day of the grand re-opening, Mr. Bateman announced plans to have a chain of Eternal Lights across the country within two years. When reporters asked if he had any training in embalming, he said no, but he was completing a correspondence course from some college in the States. He also promised to hire the best hair stylists in town, and to offer discount rates. "No matter how poor, there's a place for everyone at Bateman's."

That's why I'm here. When Mr. Bateman finally comes in, I don't notice. Somehow I've ended up on a folding chair in front of his aquarium staring at an angelfish. It's staring back. I wonder what it's thinking. I wonder if it knows it's trapped in a tank for the rest of its life. Or maybe it's



happy swimming back and forth between the plastic grasses, nibbling algae from the turquoise pebbles and investigating the little pirate chest with the lid that blows air bubbles. I've loved angelfish ever since I saw pictures of them in a collection of National Geographics some missionaries donated to my school.

"So sorry to have kept you," Mr. Bateman says. I leap to my feet.

"Sit, sit. Please," he smiles.

We shake hands and I sink back into the folding chair. He sits opposite me in an old leather recliner. There's a tear on the armrest with grey stuffing poking out. Mr. Bateman picks at it.

"Are we expecting your father?"

"No," I say. "My stepfather's working." That's a lie. My stepfather is dead drunk at the neighborhood shebeen.

"Are we waiting for your mother, then?"

"She can't come either. She's very sick." This part is almost true. Mama is curled up on the floor, rocking my sister. When I told her we had to find a mortuary she just kept rocking. "You go," she whispered. "You're sixteen. I know you'll do what needs doing. I have to stay with my Sara."

Mr. Bateman clears his throat. "Might there be an auntie coming, then? Or an uncle?"

"No."

"Ah." His mouth bobs open and shut. His skin is pale and scaly. He reminds me of one of his fish. "Ah," he says again. "So you've been sent to make the arrangements by yourself."

I nod and stare at the small cigarette burn on his lapel. "I'm sixteen."

"Ah." He pauses. "How old was your sister?"

"Sara's one-and-a-half," I say. "Was one-and-a-half."

"One-and-a-half. My, my." Mr. Bateman clucks his tongue. "It's always a shock when they're little more than babies."

A shock? Sara was alive two hours ago. She was cranky all night because of her rash. Mama rocked her through dawn, till she stopped whining. At first we thought she'd just fallen asleep. (God, please forgive me for being angry with her last night. I didn't mean what I prayed. Please let this not be my fault.)

I lower my eyes.

Mr. Bateman breaks the silence. "You'll be glad you chose Eternal Light," he confides. "It's more than a mortuary. We provide embalming, a hearse, two wreathes, a small chapel, funeral programmes and a mention in the local paper."

I guess this is supposed to make me feel better. It doesn't. "How much will it cost?" I ask.

"That depends," Mr. Bateman says, "What sort of funeral would you like?"

My hands flop on my lap. "Something simple, I guess."

"A good choice."

I nod. It's obvious I can't pay much. I got my dress from a rag picker at the bazaar, and I'm dusty and sweaty from my bicycle ride here.

"Would you like to start by selecting a coffin?" he asks.

"Yes please."

Mr. Bateman leads me to his showroom. The most expensive coffins are up front, but he doesn't want to insult me by whisking me to the back. Instead I get the full tour.

"We stock a full line of products" he says. "Models come in pine and mahogany, and can be fitted with a variety of brass handles and bars. We have beveled edges, or plain. As for the linings, we offer silk, satin and polyester in a range of colors. Plain pillowcases for the head rest are standard, but we can sew on a lace ribbon for free."

The more Mr. Bateman talks, the more excited he gets, giving each model a little rub with his handkerchief. He explains the difference between coffins and caskets: "Coffins have flat lids. Caskets have round lids." Not that it makes a difference. In the end, they're all boxes.

I'm a little frightened. We're getting to the back of the showroom and the price tags on the coffins are still an average year's wages. My stepfather does odd jobs, my mama keeps a few chickens and a vegetable garden, my sister is five-and-a-half, my brother is four and I'm in high school. Where is the money going to come from?

Mr. Bateman sees the look on my face. "For children's funerals, we have a less costly alternative," he says. He leads me behind a curtain into a back room and flicks on a light bulb. All around me, stacked to the ceiling, are tiny whitewashed coffins, dusted with yellow, pink and blue spray paint. Mr. Bateman opens one up. It's made of press boards, held together with a

handful of finishing nails. The lining is a plastic sheet, stapled in place. Tin handles are glued to the outside; if you tried to use them, they'd fall off.

I look away.

Mr. Bateman tries to comfort. "We wrap the children in a beautiful white shroud. Then we fluff the material over the sides of the box. All you see is the little face. Sara will look lovely."

I'm numb as he takes me back to the morgue where she'll be kept till she's ready. He points at a row of oversized filing cabinets. "They're clean as a whistle, and fully refrigerated," he assures me. "Sara will have her own compartment, unless other children are brought in, of course, in which case she'll have to share."

We return to the office and Mr. Bateman hands me a contract. "If you've got the money handy, I'll drive by for the body at 1:00. Sara will be ready for pick-up Wednesday afternoon. I'll schedule the burial for Thursday morning."

I swallow hard. "Mama would like to hold off until the weekend. Our relatives need time to come in from the country."

"I'm afraid there's no discount on weekends," Mr. Bateman says, lighting a cigarette.

"Then maybe next Monday, a week today?"

"Not possible. I'll be up to my ears in new customers. I'm sorry. There're so many deaths these days. It's not me. It's the market."