

Chapter 1

NORA AND ABIGAIL



THE WAR TO end all wars had been fought and won, and the Great Depression was still two years away. Hitler was a penny-ante politician licking his wounds in the Bavarian Alps after his failed attempt to seize Munich. There was not a single nuclear weapon on the face of the earth. It was a propitious time to enter the world, and in late August of that year, an unborn child slowly, inexorably twisted and turned until its tiny body was upside down in preparation to do just that.

The child kicked. Hard. High up under Abby's heart. It was her fourth, so she knew those were tiny feet, not hands or elbows. The baby had turned. It was almost time.

Abigail Knightley stroked her extended abdomen and shook her head in Nora Waldron's direction.

"It's another boy, for sure."

She was not happy about it.

"No, it ain't. You carrying high. I done told you twenty times, that baby's a girl."

Abby pursed her lips in disagreement as she poured out more tepid tea from the pressed glass pitcher into two jelly glasses. The wrap-around tin porch roof and two large pecan trees shaded them from the early afternoon sun, but the air was stagnant and heavy with the heat.

Nora had walked from home with her son Joshua, hired by Abby's husband Nate to help water and hoe cotton that

day. Many of the bolls were beginning to ripen, but it was still too early for the first of two or even three pickings needed to harvest all the crop. Two of the Knightley children, seven-year-old Bryce and six-year-old Letty, were working in the field as well. Nora had brought her granddaughter Theora along, and the toddler was playing in the yard.

Nora welcomed the chance to chat, and she was helping Abby snap beans and shell peas. It was a second-nature activity for them both, performed since early childhood. When had they not snapped beans and shelled peas? In the womb.

They stirred a faint breeze as they rocked in cane-bottom chairs, the snapped and shelled pile steadily growing higher in the blue-speckled enamel bowl on the small wooden table between them. Abby brushed a strand of her board-straight, pale brown hair out of her eyes, reached for a folded newspaper, and fanned herself. They both took a moment to sip the lukewarm tea.

"Sorry we're out of ice," Abby said. "Sweet enough?"

Nora nodded.

"Just right."

Theora was pulling a small red wagon in circles near the porch. Her hair was neatly plaited into multiple tiny braids that stood up all over her head. She wore a short, blue-flowered grain-sack dress and was barefooted. A kitten caught her eye, and she headed for it.

Brilliant patches of goldenrod and deep purple morning glories draping a fence relieved the austerity of the hard clay yard. It was swept clean, but stubborn blades of crabgrass stood in spiky patches where Bryce's fingers could not pry them loose.

"Looka yonder at all them weeds. I cain't bend over to pull them up and my oldest's not strong enough to get them all, and Nate's too busy to pay a mind to it."

"My yard be the same way, Miz Abby. Tee love his flowers, but sometimes he let the yard go."

Nora was nineteen years older than Abby, the wife of a pastor, Reverend Theodore Waldron, known to family and

friends as Tee. The Waldrons owned fifty acres of land in the farming community of Chinkapin, nearly five miles west of Dothan, Alabama, and had once owned even more. Tee had sold ninety-seven acres to fund their thriving nursery business, which did not require nearly as much acreage as a cotton farm. Abby's husband was a tenant farmer struggling to purchase the house and 142 acres he was now renting, with little likelihood of achieving this for several more harvests. But Abby's fair-skinned caste trumped Nora's higher social status. Thus Abby was "Miz," while Nora was simply "Nora." Neither of them questioned this pecking order, and it did not in the least affect their cordial relationship or their willingness over the years to help one another.

"Theora's walking real good," Abby observed. "My Toby was slow to walk, but now I have to watch him like a hawk."

Four-year-old Toby was napping in the house. Nate, Joshua, and Abby's older children had just gone back to work after eating the large noon meal she had cooked for them with Nora's help. But for her advanced pregnancy, she would have been in the fields working with them, keeping Toby near by, until time to return home and cook supper.

Theora was trying to force an orange kitten to sit in the wagon while she pulled it around. Every time she started off, the kitten bolted.

"Now you leave that cat alone, baby. You might hurt it," Nora cautioned.

"She cain't hurt that cat," Abby said. "I'm more worried it might scratch her."

The kitten solved the problem by scampering off and climbing a chinaberry tree. To the amusement of her elders, Theora plopped down in the wagon, crossed her arms and scowled, clearly disgusted, and pondered her next move.

Abby lifted the bowl of peas and beans and shook it around a bit, satisfied with the heft of it.

"That'll do for supper, I guess. I've got some boiled rutabaga ready to dice, and there's ham from last night."

The new baby kicked again, and she grimaced.

"By durn it, Nora, that's a boy! Letty never kicked that hard, I know she didn't. I treasure my boys, but I need me another girl."

Then, remembering, she said, "Well, *you* know."

Nora nodded ruefully. Because didn't she have four hard-headed boys and just one sweet girl? Her eldest, James Henry, they had not seen in eight long years, all because of that foolishness in Dothan. And he swore he was never coming back south. Sometimes it seemed he was punishing her and Tee for things that weren't their fault.

The twins had never been as worrisome as James Henry. Solomon assisted Tee in the nursery business, and Samuel was settled with a decent job as a barber in Dothan. But lord, they'd been a handful to raise. And now Joshua, with that horn of his, begrudged every minute of honest work that kept him from that devil's instrument and the rowdy company that went with it. Why today, if he hadn't needed money to buy some sheet music, no amount of nudging could have gotten him over to the Knightley farm to hoe cotton. Not that she wanted any of her children to be farm laborers, but it didn't hurt for him to spend a couple of days in the field. Make him appreciate the soft life he'd led. While Josh frequently worked alongside Tee and Solomon in Waldron's Gardens, tending the flowers, shrubs, and fruit trees that comprised their livelihood, nursery work was nowhere near as grueling as the backbreaking stoop labor required of the average farmer. Tee had stopped farming and become a nurseryman before Josh was born. The nursery business, the modest income from Divine Truth Church, and the money Nora's midwifery skills earned supported them just fine.

Between James Henry and the twins, the Lord had blessed them with Jerusha, their soft-spoken, sweet-acting daughter. To her parents' dismay, after graduating from high school she had set aside her ambition to attend college and become a music teacher to marry, Edison Phelps, a smooth-talking man who

could not keep a job. He went north before Theora was even born, promising to send for Jerusha. But he never did. Nora suspected he had taken another wife up there. She knew it was perhaps a selfish feeling, but she was glad he'd left her daughter and granddaughter behind. After the first sadness and distress, as the infrequent letters from the North stopped coming, Jerusha simply loved her baby girl the more, knowing she had to be mother and father both.

She had combined her parents' names to form the name Theora, which pleased them.

Then Jerusha had begun to grow weak for no reason they could see. She was always tired, no matter how much she slept, and was often dizzy. Her face and limbs were swollen, and she complained of a strange metallic taste in her mouth – as if she had swallowed iron, she told them.

Abby broke into Nora's thoughts. "Is Jerusha better?"

Nora shook her head. "She still doing poorly. She don't get better."

Abby touched her arm. "I'm sorry. I wish I could do something."

Suddenly she half raised up from her chair, pushing herself up awkwardly by leaning on the table.

"Theora!" she shouted. "You come away from that chicken coop. You come back here right now!"

"Saw a snake down there this morning," she explained as she eased herself back into the chair. "Probably just a rat snake, but best to be careful."

Theora obediently turned the wagon and started back to the house.

Nora got up and carried the brimming bowl into the kitchen, setting it next to the rutabaga, then returned to the porch. She squeezed Abby's shoulder and cautioned, "Now don't overdo, honey. And be sure you sends for me soon as you needs me."

"You know I will."

Nora had delivered each of the Knightley children. Once Nate had tried to get a doctor for her, but Letty was already

born by the time he arrived, out of breath, apologizing and explaining that he had just delivered a baby at a neighboring farm.

Abby reluctantly watched Nora and her grandbaby leave, the little girl sitting in the small wagon, Nora stooping slightly to pull it. Nora's presence was a comfort. Abby was blessed with a caring husband and children who were about as well behaved as anyone else's. But in Nora's presence she somehow felt better able to cope, a bit stronger, more inured to pain and discomfort than she otherwise was. Nora had that effect on many people.

Nora Freedman Waldron, a well-known midwife, came from a long line of healers, women who were knowledgeable in every aspect of folk medicine. She knew every herbal and mineral remedy the earth could offer up. She knew which barks were best gathered while the sap was running, that roots should be gathered before the sap rises, and that medicinal flowers must be gathered when fully ripe and dried in the shade. She knew how to staunch blood and stitch up a cut, which ointments to apply, when, and for how long. This knowledge had been handed down to her by her mother, Amalie, a gifted healer, who had been taught by her grandmother, Reba.

Nora's healing touch had been felt by many, black and white, in Chinkapin and the surrounding small communities. And before marrying Tee and coming to Houston County in the Alabama Wiregrass, she had ministered to folks in the rural area north of Mobile where she was born and raised. So she was no novice. But she was wise enough to know the limits of her knowledge and abilities, and she had determined that no poultice or brew would help Jerusha.

When Nora and Theora got home, the child jumped out of the wagon and ran up on the porch where Jerusha was sitting on the swing. She climbed into her lap, and Jerusha smiled and hugged her.

"Hey, baby. Did you and Granny Nora have a good walk?"

Theora nodded as Nora settled on the swing next to them.

"She try to boss a kitten around, but it run away."

"Smart kitty!" Jerusha said with a laugh, giving her feisty little girl a squeeze.

"You looking tired, baby," Nora said. "Maybe you best lie down."

"I just this minute got up, Mama. Been sleeping ever since y'all left."

"You still feeling dizzy?"

Jerusha looked down and did not immediately answer. She hated to worry her mother. But she knew Nora would see straight through her if she tried to lie.

"Yes, a little. I - I fell down in the living room on my way out here to the porch."

She turned and looked into her mother's troubled face.

"What's the matter with me, Mama?"

"I doesn't know, sugar. But us gone find out."

THE FOLLOWING DAY, Nora and Tee helped Jerusha into the nursery truck, where she insisted on holding Theora in her arms, and took her to see Dr. Pleasant Ewing in Dothan. Dr. Ewing adhered to the custom of separate waiting rooms for colored and white patients, but he saw them on a first-come, first-served basis, regardless of their skin color. He had known the Waldrons for more than a decade and through the years had earned their trust. He was familiar with Nora's midwifery practice and occasionally purchased flowers and shrubs from Waldron's Gardens.

Today he examined Jerusha, took a urine sample, and then sat the family down in his small office for a grave talk.

Theora clung to her mother as if she understood the awful words. Jerusha sat stone faced, Tee squeezed Nora's hand and blinked away tears, and Nora engaged Dr. Ewing's eyes, letting him know, *I be the strongest, you pour all the bad news into me*. It boiled down to two simple words: kidney failure. Eventually and inevitably fatal.

That evening, Tee led them in prayer, beseeching almighty God to spare Jerusha and to give all of them strength. His deep strong voice had never fit his slight body, but his family was used to it. The powerful voice that easily reached to the last pew in the Divine Truth Baptist Church, admonishing sinners, comforting mourners, praising the faithful, and uplifting the spirits of the overburdened, had also sung to his children, told them stories, commanded obedience, and explained the ways of white folks. More than his bald head, his weak, bespectacled eyes, and his polio- stiffened left arm, the voice was the essence of the man, imbuing him with a presence, a power, not evident in his physical appearance.

At supper, the twins and Josh ate a leftovers meal with Nora and Tee, solemn in the knowledge they would rather not have had. Jerusha was served a plate in her room, barely touched it, and would not let Nora take the sleeping Theora from her arms.

FOUR DAYS LATER, Nobella Knightley entered the world amid the usual stress, pain and mess of childbirth. Because this was her fourth child, Abby's travail was brief, a mere five hours, thirty-seven minutes of excruciating discomfort.

It was September 2, Theora Waldron's second birthday, but as promised Nora was there to assist at the birth. The other children were asleep when Nobella debuted at four o'clock on a Friday morning. As the child took its first breath, wailing with the newborn's outrage at being expelled from the womb, Nora triumphantly declared to Abby, "You got your girl, honey!"

After Nora cleaned and swaddled the child, Nate lightly touched the child's face, as always awed at the sight of a newborn. He had stoically clasped Abby's hand throughout the birth, despite a strong urge to bolt from the labor room.

He always carefully put by money to pay a doctor or a midwife. The thought of delivering a baby by himself terrified him. And there was always the chance something could go

wrong for Abby or the child. Thus far, nothing had. As his pious father Jackson would say, this continued good fortune was surely by the grace of God, and Nate gave thanks for the safe delivery of his newest daughter.

Nora prepared breakfast for Nate, as well as the children, who would soon be awake. Abby reached up to hug her before she left. Nate drove her home in the newly acquired second-hand Model-T Ford, the family's first automobile. He pressed a five dollar bill into her hand and warmly thanked her again as they pulled up before her house. Tee Waldron, dozing in the living room waiting for her, was awakened by the sound of the car and came to the door with the lantern as she wearily walked in and headed for the bedroom. "It be a girl, they both fine," she told him, as he started out the door to congratulate Nate.

Back home, Nate did not offer to take the child from Abby's arms, nor did she expect him to. She knew that newborns made him nervous. Their fragility scared him, and he could never manage the confident baby-handling skills that seemed so natural to Abby and other females. His six-year-old daughter Letty would be happily holding and rocking the five-and-a-half-pound bundle in a few hours, while Nate dared only kiss the baby's face and caress her tiny hands.

NATHAN NAMED THE boys, but Abby felt it was her prerogative to name the girls, and he did not argue the point.

Nate would have preferred to call his first-born son Jackson, after his father, but his oldest brother had already bestowed that name on his son. So Nate named his boy Bryce after his youngest, favorite brother.

Abby chose Letitia for the girl born between the boys because, she said, "It's pretty," and Nate agreed.

Nate generously named his second son after a Coltayne, Abby's father Tobias, a man he liked and admired. But for obvious reasons it would never have occurred to him to name a boy after Tobias's brother Noble, who unaccountably was Abby's favorite uncle. He was also Nate's cousin, but Nate did

not claim him. Had the word been in his vocabulary, he would have dubbed the man "Ignoble," and many would have agreed with that description.

But now Abby had chosen the outrageous name of Nobella for the new baby, claiming that it was the girl version of Noble. Nate shook his head in disbelief. First of all, he had never heard of such a name. Abby had made it up. Secondly, how could she name a child after the black sheep of the family?

True, Noble Coltayne, who had died three years earlier, had been a successful cotton agent in Apalachicola and doted on his Alabama nieces and nephews. They all loved traveling by train to visit him and his family at his seaside home. Florida and the warm waters of the Gulf held enormous appeal for children bound to the flat farm land and waterless horizon of southeast Alabama.

Abby had many fond memories of Uncle Noble's place, which faced directly on the Gulf. After a morning of wading in the sea, enjoying the delicious feeling of wet sand squishing between their toes, she and the other children, mud-spattered and soaked to the skin, would dig for clams at low tide, then compete for finding the most seashells. None of them willingly submitted to being splashed with buckets of well water to wash off the brine before retiring to the house for an afternoon nap. But as the sun gloriously set over the Gulf, they enjoyed lolling around a fire on the beach while the grownups prepared a feast of freshly caught red snapper, king mackerel, and shrimp.

Abby and one of her closest cousins, Eden Coltayne, had spent many summers in Apalachicola. Eden's grandfather, Grayson Coltayne, had been another of Noble's brothers, and she and her folks still lived on the family farm up in Barbour County, worked now by her father Andrew and his children.

But there was a shameful reason Noble Coltayne had left Alabama, and there was a dark reason he had never returned. And Abby knew those reasons. Yet she still loved the old man and wanted to name their new baby girl after him.

"Why not Sophronia, after my mother?" Nate suggested.
"Or Victoria, after yours?"

"Because your family and mine have already claimed those names for their girls." It exasperated Abby to have to explain this to him. "And the thing about it is, this might be the only other girl we have. And if we only have boys after this, I know you will never name one Noble."

She stroked the baby's soft, down-covered head and hitched her up to her breast.

"So Nobella she is, my darling little Nobella." She glanced up at Nate and smiled her charming, lopsided smile. "After my dear Uncle Noble, God rest his soul."