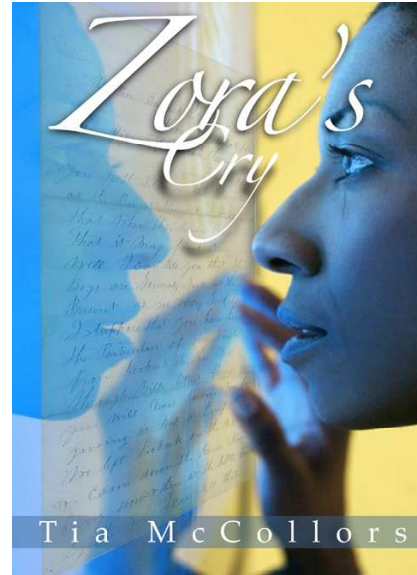


Zora's Cry

Prologue

Zora Bridgeforth eased open the door of her childhood home. The crisp March morning wind beat against her back as she pulled her key out of the latch. She couldn't believe her parents were dead. How could a drunken New Year's reveler take her parents? How could this happen when they were on the verge of planning one of the biggest days of her life?



Every morning when she awakened, Zora prayed that God would teach her how to breathe again. It had been a struggle to remember even the most natural things. Inhale. Exhale.

It was only six thirty in the morning, but Zora wanted to come early before her parents' circle of friends and the volunteer members from her church arrived to help her pack. She needed to remember the house one more time like it had always been—before they would begin to haul her parents' belongings away. It was too much trouble to have a yard sale, and Zora would feel funny if she profited from the situation. She wanted her parents to be a blessing to someone else, even in their deaths, and had opted to have most of the items donated to local shelters and group homes.

Zora sat down in the middle of the blue cotton twill couch. Although the furniture designs changed in the living room over the years, the layout always stayed the same. And whenever they shared a family movie night together, Zora always had the center seat, tucked in between the arms of her parents. Sitting here with nothing but cold space around her, she wished she would've cherished the last time. From this day on, she'd relish every moment in her life.

Zora stood up when she noticed the stack of cardboard boxes leaning against the bookcase. She'd set them aside to pack some of the sentimental items she wanted to

keep. There was a particular one she wanted to find before she started sifting through the memories.

It was the other reason she'd arrive early—to find her mother's wedding veil and tiara.

Yesterday, Zora had visited the wedding boutiques with her best friend, Monét, and Mama Jo—her mother's best friend who also happened to be Monét's mother. After one boutique, Zora was convinced she'd found the perfect dress for the perfect day. She was quick to turn down the consultant's offer for a coordinating headpiece and veil. Her parents' wedding photograph had a permanent home on her dresser, and she knew exactly what her mother's veil with the pearl and rhinestone tiara looked like. It was the only choice.

It took most of Zora's strength to push and pull the wooden hope chest from the back of her parents' closet. An ache settled in her heart when she remembered again that her mother wouldn't share her wedding day. Her father wouldn't be there to tighten his heavy hand around her fingers as they rested in the groove of his arm. He would've led her down the aisle, then released her from his care and responsibility, into the hands of the man who would vow to be her covering forever.

Zora eased open the chest that held her mother's precious wedding memorabilia, among other sentimental items like Zora's favorite childhood blanket. She found and opened the sealed bag, then unfolded the delicate veil that would adorn her head on her wedding day.

That blessed night, Zora would unveil her womanhood for the first time. Many a heart-to-heart talk with her mother had been about the importance of preserving her chastity until she became a bride. But above even her parents, Zora had promised God first that she'd present her virginity to her husband. It was a gift she'd vowed to sustain. Virginity in these times may have been hard, but it wasn't impossible. Wearing her mother's veil would be a dedication to her parents.

There's no way I'll be able to move this chest any farther on my own, Zora thought, bending down on her knees in front of it. She lifted out another box that she hadn't seen since her late teens.

On Zora's sixteenth birthday, her mother had walked into her room with the box lovingly tucked under her arm. That night, Sonja Bridgeforth shared the romantic love letters that she and her boyfriend had written to each other when they were dating while he was stationed overseas.

Albert Bridgeforth's love had grown so deep for his beloved, and his heart so anxious, that he hadn't been able to bear waiting until they saw each other again to ask for her hand in marriage. He'd penned the proposal on a piece of wrinkled brown paper that looked as if it had been salvaged from the trash. Her mother had found a special frame for the letter and glued it to the front of a piece of white lace. As another special touch, she surrounded the letter with pink rose appliqués. Zora thought it would be special to incorporate it somehow into her wedding.

Zora set the veil, tiara, and framed letter on her parents' four-poster bed. She remembered that she had to find the rest of her parents' insurance policies, and needed to do it before it slipped her mind again.

She walked to her father's side of the bed and opened the top drawer of the metal file cabinet. Despite her mother's request, he'd refused to move his files to the back room they'd converted to an office and sitting area. He needed to keep his important information at his fingertips in case he needed to get to it in an emergency, he'd rationalized.

Zora laughed at the thought. It was impossible to make Albert Bridgeforth change once his mind was set.

Zora almost felt as if she'd get a scolding once she'd found the insurance papers and continued to look through the files. She'd been reared as a child not to touch an adult's personal belongings without permission. Well, she wasn't a child anymore. It was a possibility that the cabinet held more information that she needed to know.

Zora flipped past the folders tabbed for the household utility bills and car insurance. She came across an unmarked manila folder and pulled out the single sheet of paper inside. Zora panicked as she read the words that followed. She was sure that her eyes had deceived her. She read the paragraph again. And again. And again. She could feel the blood rush to her face and the aching like bile in her stomach already beginning to swirl. Her fingers gripped the letter, and for a moment

she considered ripping it to shreds along with any evidence of the secret it held. Tears rolled down her cheek and salted her lips. How could she be adopted?

Zora found herself too shaken to stand and, with trembling hands, finally managed to call her fiancé, Preston Fields. She could barely understand her own words through her sobs.

It couldn't be true.

Every imaginable emotion fought to push itself to the surface. She succumbed to her agony and balled herself into a fetal position on the plush tan carpet of her parents' bedroom floor. She didn't move until she heard Preston ringing the doorbell and banging on the front door. She opened the door, handed him the letter, then slipped into the arms of the only truth she'd known.

And Zora cried.