

## Prologue:

### *A House Boarded Shut*

The flies had been swarming around the house for days. As he walked the exterior, he tried to peer into the boarded windows where flies crawled through starbursts of broken glass. Shielding his eyes with cupped hands, he could not see anything through the black splinters of darkness but a gray, dim light. He had no name, at least not one that survived in the family records; he was an old slave who continued to live with the Angevine family as a servant long after he had been legally freed. The family owned a 4,000-acre farm outside of Grenada, Mississippi, where Mrs. Angevine had been born and raised before marrying a New York attorney and moving to Memphis. A graduate of Harvard Law, Mr. Angevine worked in the Memphis offices of Harris, McKissick and Turley. When the Civil War broke out, he fought for the south against his brothers fighting for the north.

The family left Memphis and boarded themselves inside of the plantation house when the 1878 yellow fever epidemic struck. The measure may have seemed drastic to others, but Mr. Angevine understood the toll of yellow fever better than most; his wife had died of the fever the previous summer.

As far as the servant could see, the front door was locked, and the flies seemed to have the only access to the house. He pried open the shutters and broke the glass, letting loose a plume of repugnant air. In the stale, dark rooms he saw the corpses of the Angevine family, many in advanced stages of decomposition. Even in the darkness, he

could see their yellow skin, the color of unpolished brass. Mary Louisa, the eldest, had been the first to go, and five others had followed. Mr. Angevine lay dead among his children.

No one can really imagine those final days in the fever-ridden house. The fever attacked each person in the Angevine family, one after the other, until none were well enough to help the others. It hit suddenly in the form of a piercing headache and painful sensitivity to light, like looking into a winter sun. At that point, the patient could still hope that it was not yellow fever, maybe just a headache from the heat. But the pain worsened, crippling movement and burning the skin. The fever rose to 104, maybe 105 degrees, and bones felt as though they had been cracked. The kidneys stopped functioning, poisoning the body. Abdominal cramps began in the final days of illness as the patient vomited black blood brought on by internal hemorrhaging. The victim became a palate of hideous color: Red blood ran from the gums, eyes and nose. The tongue swelled, turning purple. Black vomit roiled. And the skin grew a deep gold, the whites of the eyes turning brilliant yellow.

The servant climbed through the window and made his way through the rooms where other servants and guests had died. Finally, he found a body not yet rotting; it was the youngest daughter, 9-year-old Lena. He knelt down, brushing away flies and maggots. Lifting her weightless frame, he carried her out of the family mansion that had now become a tomb, into the fresh air. He placed her body in a nearby house, resting a piece of raw bacon across her lips, and watched as Lena began to suck on the first bite of

food she had had in days. It was then that Lena, more dead than alive, began to make her way back.

In the coming weeks, she would recover and tell of the horrors trapped inside of the house. Men from the countryside came into the city robbing the dead and stepping over the bodies of the dying. *My own father, while ill with the fever, was choked, robbed and left alone to die: I was too ill to even cry out for help, but witnessed the entire affair.*

With no surviving family, Lena went to live with her grandparents in Memphis to attend the St. Mary's School. After graduation, and against the wishes of her grandparents, she enrolled in a nursing school at the Maury and Mitchell Infirmary, where she worked under the tutelage of Dr. Robert Wood Mitchell.

The remainder of Lena Angevine's time in the south was a patchwork of nursing, ambition and marriage to a St. Louis man by the name of E.C. Warner. Warner, whose name Lena Angevine would take from that point forward, died of a heart attack just four months after the marriage. At least that was the generally accepted story; family rumors also alluded to a divorce. As it was far better to be a widow than a divorcee in the 1890s, Lena Warner would naturally opt for a dead husband over an estranged one.

Lena Angevine Warner's experience with yellow fever would continue to sear her, and in 1898, with the outbreak of the Spanish-American War, she answered an ad in the newspaper. The surgeon general of the United States Army was looking for nurses immune to yellow fever. Warner would receive \$50 per month, and in 1900, she was stationed in Cuba as chief nurse under a doctor of some distinction, Major Walter Reed.