Author's Note

This story has lived inside me for more than 25 years.

I became a teenager carrying the weight of memories too heavy for a child. I survived war, hunger, silence, and the kind of heartbreak that doesn't show on your face—but lives in your body forever.

For years, I couldn't speak it. And when I finally did, I cried with every sentence. I cried because I had survived. I cried for the ones who didn't. But now, as I write these words, the tears are beginning to fall onto the page—not just from grief, but from release.

This book is not just about what happened. It's about how we kept going. How we made it through. How I made it through.

There were moments I felt like I was in a jail cell… but I was out at the same time. When your soul carries so much, you start to feel confused by it all. I questioned so many times—why me? Why did I survive and others didn't? I can put myself in their place… the pain they must have felt. The fear, until the heart finally gave up.

My heart today is soft because of everything I've lived. Because I've seen people's pain. And now—I feel it, too.

This book is for every survivor who's still trying to breathe. For every girl or boy who never got the chance to tell their story. And for the teenage version of me—the one who always knew:

"One day, the world will hear me."

I hope this book helps you feel less alone. I hope it helps you remember what love can do. And I hope it reminds you that even in the darkest night, someone's light survives.

"Ndabwira abatarabashije kuvuga. Nibyo byatumye nandika iyi nkuru."
I speak for those who could not. That's why I wrote this.

—Claudine Umuhoza Kayitare

When the World Looked Away

by Claudine Umuhoza Kayitare

To my aunt Yolanda Fatuma Mukakazana:
This story wouldn't exist without you.
You worked so hard, saved every coin, and carried all of us on your back across oceans and borders.
Now that I'm a mother, I understand what you gave up for us. I understand the sleepless nights, the prayers, the stress, and the pain you carried alone.

"The hate of people tried to clear all of us from the earth, but your love and prayers were stronger—because some of us are still here. And now we have children who will live on and carry the legacy."

"Urwango rw'abantu rwashatse kudukuraho ku isi yose, ariko urukundo rwawe n'amasengesho yawe byatsinze—kuko bamwe muri twe turacyariho. None dufite abana bazakomereza ku rugendo."

You didn't just save our lives. You gave us a second one. And your love… will echo for generations.

To my children—Alex, Jeremiah, Jahziah, Belyse, Fab, and Kamikazi (Tahiri): You are my heartbeat. You are the reason I chose life again and again.

To my brother, Intare—thank you for protecting me when we were children. Your courage gave me the will to keep moving forward.

To my sister Claire, and to all those we buried: Your absence is felt in every word. I carry your memory in everything I do.

To Mama Andrew, my white mother, my angel—thank you for being there from the day I arrived in Portland. You have no idea how many times your love saved me.

To the brave woman sent by my aunt to guide us across borders—you risked your life for children you didn't even know. You were a stranger, but you became our bridge to safety.

To my cousin Inkuba, and every friend who became family—thank you for standing with me, even when I had nothing but a story to tell.

To Rwanda—my beginning. To America—my second chance. And to God—who I cried to in silence when no one else could hear.

And finally… to the ones who never had the chance to speak—this is for you. I am your voice now.

Acknowledgments

Dedication

To all the children who survived, and to those who never got the chance. To my children—Alex, Jeremiah, Jahziah, Belyse, Fab, and Kamikazi (Tahiri). You are my reason. I hope you all are looking down at me and proud of what I'm becoming and the missions I have ahead of me.

Chapter 1 – Before the Storm

Back when life was simple…

Chapter 2 – The Day the Sky Broke

We heard the screams before we saw the flames...

Chapter 3 – Fleeing into Shadows

We almost stepped into the Nyabarongo River...

Chapter 4 – Refugee Camp Hunger

There were no fences. The UN had left...

Chapter 5 – Escape to Kenya

We hid in the back of a bus without papers...

Chapter 6 – Apartment Gale: Seeking Faith

I searched for something new. Something peaceful...

Chapter 7 – Arrival in America

I stepped off the plane and into a new life...

Chapter 8 – Becoming a Mother

Bringing life into a world that tried to take mine...

Chapter 9 – Starting Over in Maine

We were cold, but we weren't running anymore...

Chapter 10 – Miracle in the Time of COVID

They said she wouldn't make it. I said she would...

Chapter 11 – Returning Home to Say Goodbye

With Miracle in my arms, I carried grief back home...

Chapter 12 – Honoring Those We Lost

I laid petals for the ones we buried, and the ones we never found...

Chapter 13 – When the World Looked Away

They tried to silence us. Now I'm speaking for all of them.

About the Author

Claudine Umuhoza Kayitare is a survivor of the Genocide Against the Tutsi in Rwanda. Born in Rwamagana and raised through tragedy and resilience, she now lives in Portland, Maine, where she continues to raise her children, speak her truth, and honor those who were lost. This is her first memoir, a voice for the silenced, and a legacy for the living.