

Chapter Two

The Garden Within



according to their kind: patches of daisies, rounds of columbine, stripes of petunias wove in and out of a line of young trees bordering the path as it traveled ahead of her.

Over to the left, a dozen topiary couples portrayed the various poses of a waltz on a dance floor of creeping phlox. The nearest man's suit of clothes looked alive with navy speedwell for a jacket, high collar and tails. Grey dusty miller formed his trousers while tiny, white button-mums snuggled together, forming collar, cuffs and gloves. Shiny brown mushroom caps spread over his knee-length boots and a long, flowing cape of rosy spirea attached to his shoulders.

His partner's gown was also formed by the rosy spirea, her skirt flowing out gracefully around her. White mum cuffs and gloves completed her arms, and a wide, white mum collar encircled her neck.

Faces were formed from tiny pale-pink roses, and larger yellow and amber mums dotted their heads for hair. The man's left hand was raised to hold the lady's, while the other gently held her waist. Each couple had their own color scheme, carried out by different varieties of colorful flowers and greenery.

Immediately to Hanna's right stood a towering gorilla, made entirely out of flowing, draping Spanish moss! Arms lifted high in the air, eventually he would appear to be grabbing for a branch of the rising oak tree behind him—but the tree was only five feet tall at this point. As if to give reason for his current pose, one foot was held aloft, and he seemed to be mimicking the dancers across the way—in his own fashion.

A galloping line of topiary ponies made their way along the path ahead of them—pink, purple, blue, red and yellow—all running down towards a distant stream and walking bridge.

Lastly, a colorful chameleon lay along the lower branch of a nearby leggy bush. Hanna looked closer at this one, just to see what kind of tiny, tiny flowers it was made of, and found a dozen more tucked among the leaves.

The Rose Bowl Parade floats on New Year's Day couldn't hold a candle to this!

It was all so life-like, so intricate; any moment you expected the music to begin and the dancers to twirl away in each other's arms, the monkey to scratch himself, the ponies to take off trotting or the chameleons to change colors like flashing Christmas lights.

"How do the flowers...?"

"I had an idea of what I wanted them to do, to look like, and they arranged themselves. I provided the framework; they provided the color," he answered. "They are enjoying the finished effect as much as we are."

Another question bubbled to the surface.

"But won't they...?"

Hanna's hesitation barely lasted a heartbeat.

She took his arm, and together they walked through the gate. It had swung inward as it opened, and quietly shut again as they walked beyond its edges.

Her wildest imagination couldn't have dreamed this—it was so incredible it took her breath away! Surely every flower in the world had come to party on the lawn, wandering freely everywhere she looked. Many had gathered into groups

"No, dear one. Nothing dies here. Nothing gets destroyed or harmed or broken. Not if you are doing your job."

MY job? Alarmed, Hanna looked up into his face, but at least for the moment, he seemed completely unconcerned.

"Have you noticed the waterfall yet? Look, just beyond the Dancers."

He pointed just over the shoulder of the nearest topiary woman, and Hanna sidestepped to follow his finger with her eyes. Not far from where they stood, the ground began to rise into a hill. At the top was set a wall of large rocks, alive with flowing greenery and more flowers. A narrow veil of water fell over the wall, down into a deep basin. The basin would fill, then flow over, falling and pooling the same way into four or five different levels on its way back down the hill—until the water finally rested in a pond below.

Everywhere around and amidst the pools and rocks grew tall spires of fireweed and fuzzy thistle heads. Tall, stately lupine poked up above flowing beds of elephant ear leaves. Various creeping mosses and greens wove in and around an inviting little white gazebo that nestled among a grouping of large boulders.

Hanna and her mother had once delighted in looking through the gardening magazines at the front of the grocery stores, laughing and pointing from one to the other, nodding heads and shaking them until they finally decided which one to take home with them. Then they would cozy together on the couch and look through the pages, dreaming out loud about the beautiful flower gardens and lovely creations within the book, trying to recreate them around their own home.

A gazebo had been their fondest wish; a promise broken by life events... and then forgotten. The memory gave her a sudden pang in her heart, a furrowing of her brows. They hadn't so much as gone to the grocery store together in such a long time, and gardening together had certainly become a thing of the past.

"It's all so lovely..." she said, smoothing her face and hoping he hadn't seen. "Kamali said you had just started the garden this morning, though. How—"

"—did I do so much, so quickly?" He finished her question. "It's part of the secret of the Garden, of all that exists in this dimension. Everything here responds to Love. A seed can be planted, watered, and grown all within moments. A tree can be planted with a kind thought, watered by a loving deed, and flourish and bloom within an afternoon."

"It's all connected to Love.

"Here, let me show you."

He bent down and stirred a patch of bare dirt with his finger, right in the center of a circle of buttercups. Taking a small packet from his tunic, He held it out to her.

"Open this and take the seed out."

Hanna did as she was instructed, and soon held a tiny, burred seed, something like a miniature chestnut pod. It was adorable!

If a seed could BE adorable.

"Yes, they can." He smiled. "And this one surely is."

He pointed to the patch of dirt. "Now, dig a little hole with your finger, drop the seed in and cover it up gently. Remember: these aren't seeds like on Earth. You need to treat them very kindly."

She wasn't so sure about that one; it sounded weird. But she did as she was told, then looked up for further instruction. Still smiling, he stood looking down at her, his blue eyes sparkling with some secret—and suddenly her heart began to fill with emotion that nearly overwhelmed her.

Hanna sat back on her haunches, both hands drawn to her chest.

It's all connected to Love. His words echoed in her mind even as her heart felt like it was overflowing now.

Was he...? Hanna's thoughts whirled. No! How in the world could he do that? People can't do that. People love each other; they don't *make* feelings. They sure don't *send* feelings—not literally! Not from one heart to another.

It must just be part of the dream.

One thing was sure—she wasn't doing it to herself. The strong, sweet sensation made her heart ache to hold onto it as it flowed through her. Memories of a time long ago began to flash on the screen of her mind.

"Okay," she spoke out loud suddenly, breaking the flow. *Time to get back to real.* "Now what?"

He cupped his hands, one over the other, then drew them apart again. In the space between, a tiny, white cloud began forming. As he concentrated on it, the little puff grew larger... then a little grey, then bigger and darker still.

He looked up at her with a grin. "Okay, it's ready. Take this and hold it over the seed."

"Hurry, now," he laughed, and held it out to her.

Hanna would tell this story over and over again to Evan in the months to come, and he never stopped giggling when she did.

She'd hesitated, so he finally took her right hand and held it up, then moved the now shoebox-sized cloud over to her.

"Hold it over the seed and let go. Quickly now!"

She did as she was instructed, but apparently, she'd waited a little long. The cloud slid from her hand to hang over the dirt. But by then, impatient little thunderings and lightning bolts had started to move around in the middle of it. Before she could remove her hand all the way, the tiniest ray of lightning shot out and just nipped her thumb. She yelped in surprise and stuck the offended digit in her mouth, until she realized it hadn't hurt, after all. Not really.

One glance at those sparkling eyes told her he'd had something to do with all of that, too—and together they burst out laughing.

"Swift Obedience is highly prized around here," he commented pointedly, then dropped his eyes back to the cloud.

"Now. Watch what happens."

The cloud had turned a deep grey now, and soon water started pouring down from it. It rained out, thoroughly saturating the soil, growing smaller and smaller like a deflating balloon until a single, last drop was released and it disappeared with a little 'pop'. Where the rain had fallen, the barest of green could be seen poking up.

"That's *so cool!* How did you do that? How long will it take to grow?"

"This is a reticulated Marnin tree." He helped her back to her feet. "Its growth depends a lot on the person who planted it. The fruit is very special, something very useful at times." He reached out to brush a little dirt from her hand. "Another time, once it's grown and bearing, I'll explain more about it."

She wanted to stay and watch, convinced it would grow right before her eyes if she did, but He turned in the direction of the hedge wall again and pointed.

"There's something special over this way I'd like to show you, if you don't mind."

She hadn't noticed before that the path divided off in that direction, but now it stretched along in a graceful curve. No longer composed of small pebbles, this pathway was made of large, flat, dove-grey stones forming giant-step places to walk on, and inter-grown with tiny, purple campanula flowers between the cracks.

A short stone wall bordered one side of the path, and waves and waves of heart-shaped clumps of flowers spilled over the top. Hundreds of pale pink butterflies, no bigger than the size of her thumbnail, gathered on the flower hearts, adding a splash of contrast to the color, like shading from an artist's brush.

Everywhere she looked was more wonderful than the last.

Hannah closed her eyes and breathed in the indescribable fragrance that seemed to change with each breath. Sweet; pungent. Woodsy; minty. Piney; wispy. No one description could capture the bouquet of scents that came drifting by on a constant but gentle breeze.

The two walked silently side-by-side until soon she could hear the tumbling splash of a water fountain somewhere ahead of them. A few steps more, and the path rounded the end of the wall. Before them lay a smooth little clearing in the middle of dozens of flowering dogwoods.

"Here we are, dear one," he said as they came to a stop.

So far, the garden had been lovely.

Now it had become magical.

To their left, a snow-white wrought-iron bench snuggled up inside a tall arbor covered with multi-colored roses. To their right, a vine-covered gazebo with a double swing suspended from the ceiling beckoned invitingly. Both were charming. But Hanna couldn't pull her eyes away from what lay between them.

In the very center of the clearing spread out a massive fountain, easily 30 feet across, with a retaining wall that came up just below her waist. The more she looked, the more amazing it was.

"Truly beautiful, isn't it?" the Man said softly. "I think this is my favorite part of this Garden, so far." He stood there watching, arms crossed, and gave a pleased sigh. "Don't you think, Hannah?"

Hannah was too lost in watching to answer... She'd never dreamed anything like this before.

Suspended right in the center, high above her head, was an enormous heart, completely formed of water. '*How does it hold its shape like that? How does it STAY there like that?*' No matter how she looked, there was no support for it. No pipe running up to it. It just *was*. Droplets would form on the surface, slide down towards the bottom—growing and growing and growing, until finally...one would burst open and 'birth'...

Well, all sorts of things!

One was forming now—and out popped a fat purple fish! The droplet poured out, down to the pool, and the fish swam right along in it until it plunged into the water. Immediately, it was surrounded by OTHER fish, like a welcoming party! And then several would swim away with it. She watched a dozen or more swell, burst, and land into the pool and be led away. There seemed to be holes, or tunnels maybe, in the walls of the fountain. But where could *they* lead to??

"Transportation tunnels, Little One. This fountain is the birthing station for all the waters in your Garden. Watch now! This one will really surprise you!"

A HUGE droplet was hanging from the bottom point of the heart now. '*This must be a tuna or something!*' she thought—then let out a squeal of delight as a baby otter burst out and slid down into the pool. "Oh! Oh! He's so adorable!" Other otters had already surrounded it, fussing over it, smoothing its hair and lifting it up to the surface to float.

"Would you like to say hello?" With a wave, he beckoned the newborn creature over to where they were standing. "Sit here on the ledge, Hannah." He helped her up until she sat facing the water. "Put your feet right into the water," he smiled. As she did, the otter lifted his head up from the water, and wiggled his whiskers at her, just as though he was wondering what in the world SHE was.

"She's safe," he spoke softly. "Don't be afraid. You can come say hello."

Hannah was *sure* she saw the creature smile. Then it dove down into the water to gain momentum and leapt up on the ledge right in front of the Man. It stood up on his hind legs and gave a little bow to him...and then turned to look Hannah over one more time.

Hannah patted the place next to her, and the next thing she knew the otter had crawled up into her lap and curled up to sleep.

"There's something wonderful and innocent about new life, isn't there?" His voice came over her shoulder as he peered down. "Pure and innocent—hard not to give your heart to it, I always find."

She'd never held anything this 'new'...but it was stirring up other memories she didn't want to look at. Tears were forming, but she didn't want him to see and kept her head ducked down, stroking the fur of the tiny being on her lap, watching its little chest rise and fall with each breath.

"Time to let it go again, dear one."

But... it's only been a few minutes...

"Here come the others to take it."

She didn't understand the pang in her heart as she heard the older otters chattering to the baby. She'd never held so sweet a creature. Never had a pet, or anything else that was just *hers*. As much as she longed to keep it, she knew she had to let go. As the baby woke and yawned, flashes of her mother's face kept coming into her mind.

There are no accidents in My world, Little One. No coincidences. Letting go of Love is very, very hard. Keep this tucked into your own heart, dear one. Remember this time and these feelings...

The baby otter slipped off her lap and plunged into the water. One last time his little head emerged from the water, just in front of her. With a mischievous glint in his eye, he winked at her—and spit a stream of warm water up into her face. Then ducked down and swam away with the others.

The Man's laughter rang out as he held out a pocket handkerchief to her. "Maybe it's time to explore what else the Garden holds, yes? Let's see. The gazebo? Or the path over there?"

A simple, white square of parchment appeared before their eyes as he spoke. "*Refreshments will now be served in the gazebo, as requested,*" read the words on the paper. As soon as he had studied it and nodded, it disappeared again.

"Looks like the choice has been made for us." His ready smile spread over his face again; more twinkles shone from his eyes. "Shall we go sit in the gazebo?"

The scent of chocolate and a sweet, nutty smell came drifting on the air, and soon they were seated with a table and tray of hot cocoa mugs and cookies. The splashing of the fountain was a pleasant background sound while he poured out a cup for each and urged her to choose from a variety of sweets. It occurred to Hanna, as she thought about the fountain: up to this point, it *had* seemed unnaturally quiet in the Garden—as though something was missing.

Animals! Hanna suddenly thought. There were birds outside. And fish and water animals in the fountain. But she had not seen a single bunny or squirrel... or anything. Not anywhere. In the fields or paths or... anywhere.

I wonder why? It would be nice ...

The thoughts had no sooner formed than a high-pitched *chitter, chitter, chit* began to run along the railing beside them. A chipmunk! No, a *family* of chipmunks was making their way towards them. Hop, hop, hop—as they reached the little table, one, two, three they all leaped onto it and sat up prettily, hands folded before them, little faces looking to see if they could "Share, please?"

Hannah burst out laughing at their comical little heads, cocking back and forth with the question. She took a few crumbs and tentatively held them, wondering.

"They won't bite, don't worry. If you hold out your hand, they're more than likely to climb right on," he told her.

She reached out one palm, and the smallest of the trio climbed aboard, ran straight up her arm, and sat chirping into her ear. It sounded like the tiny animal was humming a little tune! To her astonishment, it began to sing:

"The King is here,
Come hear my cry!
Rejoice with me,
The King is here."

Finished with its song, the baby chipmunk ran back down her arm and joined its family, picking up crumbs and stuffing them into its cheeks.

I wonder if... I wonder what else—?

Boldly, she directed her thoughts towards a dozen different animals she was fond of—and out of the trees, down from the roof of the gazebo, and springing out from below the swing came her reward.

Two plump, soft brown bunnies came from under an azalea bush and hopped up on the table to join the chipmunks, twitching their long ears and sniffing at the cocoa pot. A squirrel, bushy tail whisking back and forth, climbed down one of the posts at the front of the gazebo and clung there, chattering at them and eyeing the cookies. A doe and its fawn came walking around the corner and poked their heads into the opening, gazing at them with soft, brown eyes. Soon, a fat baby skunk waddled out from beneath the swing, and a pair of tiny field mice circled their way down the chains that held it to the roof.

She stared in amazement, wondering if she had thought *too* much—when a silvery, grey wolf came loping across the lawn. Beside the wolf, a giant brown bear lumbered along, trying to keep up. Once the unlikely pair reached the front railing of the gazebo, the duo sat down quietly and politely, waiting for a sign from their Master's hand.

One more celebrant came. A large, completely white eagle floated down from the sky and perched regally on a railing, directly to the right of the Man.

Now that the animals were gathered, together they took up the song the baby chipmunk had begun.

"The King is here,
For this we cheer,
Rejoice with me,
The King is here."

All fell silent, allowing the tiniest member to repeat his stanza.

"The King is here,
Come hear my cry!
Rejoice with me,
The King is here."

Now all joined together again, the bear's deep grumbly voice providing bass, while the wolf ended the song with a yip and a drawn-out howl.

"The King has come,
His Love comes near.
Rejoice with me,
The King has come."

"Well! Thank you very much," the Man stood and bowed his thanks to the choir. "I am so appreciative of your song. Thank you."

At his words, the animals nodded their heads and chattered in their own way for a bit, then began to wander back to where they had come from. One by one they slipped away, until only the white eagle was left, golden eyes blinking solemnly at Hanna as though it were sizing her up, deciding her character.

"I don't know how you did that!" Hanna broke out excitedly. "No. Maybe I don't know how / did that? But now I have a million and one questions, and I just have to ask!"

Hanna had been a little tongue-tied this whole time; answering him, yes, but sparingly. But the appearance of the animals, their song, the comfort of being in his presence finally loosened it, and out poured everything she'd been wondering up to this point.

"We really *are* here, aren't we?" she breathed quietly, looking again at the magnificent eagle. "I mean, I'm not dreaming. I'm really sitting—somewhere—and you are really *real*. Seriously, a real, live person is sitting next to me, in a very real gazebo."

She grabbed the swing's chain and shook it a little.

"This is *real* metal. The seat is really holding us up. The flowers feel real; they smell real. The water is wet, the grass is ... Well, the grass is soft." Her lips pursed at that statement. "That's a question right there."

Deciding to ponder that some other time, she looked out over the clearing, hoping to see one of the animals lingering somewhere.

"I don't know how you got the animals to come," her eyes fell to her lap. "And I'm still not at all sure that I really heard them singing." She was sitting bolt upright in the swing now, hands clasped together, tensed in case one of her statements turned out to be a fantasy after all.

"I think I did."

She concluded. "I'm sure it wasn't my imagination."

Finally, she turned to him, looking him full in the face.

"*IS this all my imagination?*"

The Question of Questions hung in the air.

Hanna looked at him with such vulnerable eyes, hoping against hope that she was right—that she had somehow found her own world-beyond-the-world, just like Lucy and Peter had found their Aslan. She knew that she knew that it was impossible... But the stress and tension of her life for the past two years had bottled up a thousand emotions in her heart and soul, and suddenly it all just became too much. Too much to think that she was merely dreaming. Too much to believe that life didn't hold more than day-by-day loneliness and pain and sorrow.

There had to be more. *There had to be.*

She held his eyes with her own, took a deep breath and finally asked.

"Who *ARE* you?"

He had waited quietly beside her, just watching, up until now. At this final question, he closed his eyes and solemnly nodded his head. The now familiar, deep chuckle rumbled in his throat, then his entire face seemed to smile down at her.

"You invited Me here," he answered, bringing both palms up flat to the sky, in a gesture to fit the words.

"Don't you remember?"

There—centered in the palm of his right hand—lay a round, deep scar the size of a fifty-cent coin. She hadn't seen this before! She reached a finger out to touch it, and he closed his other hand over hers. There! In the center of this other hand was the same thing.

How could she have missed it?

She sat forward to look more closely. One of his feet poked out from beneath the swing, and there! Another scar—exactly like the ones on his hands. She was sure, if she could see the other foot, there would be one to match it.

Suddenly, the Man was clothed in a long, flowing robe of the purest of whites. It was girdled with a wide band of pure gold and fell all the way to the floor. Over this, he now wore a sleeveless outer cloak of rich, deep purple; an intricate, embellished design of gold ran from the hem, up the open edges and circled around the stand-up collar.

"Jesus?" she cried out loud, bringing her hands to her open mouth.

"Oh, JESUS!"

She flung her arms around His waist and clung to Him.

"Oh! Oh! Nana said You would come into my heart, but... But—well. *You know!* That's what they always say in church!" Her voice was a little muffled, lost in the folds of his robe. She picked her head up again to explain. "And I always thought it was just a saying—not something that was really *real!*"

He was laughing in delight now at her excited words and wrapped his arm around her, nestling her head back over his heart. Where her cheek lay, she could feel the fabric of his robe, softer than anything she'd ever felt in her life. Soft, the way a cloud should feel. Soft, like the velvety tip of a pony's nose. She brought her hand up and stroked it without thinking about what she was doing, how very bold she was being.

"Oh, My sweet, precious Hanna," He leaned down and kissed the top of her head. "This place. These events. This time with Me now is more real than the life you live in the Natural, dear one." He turned fully towards her, took her hands between His and looked deep into her eyes, seeming to search through her whole body and soul with His gaze.

"This is My world, Hanna. This is My creation and the life I now inhabit within you. It is simply another dimension, one you can only access once you've given your heart to Me."

He lifted her chin with his fingertips. "We are inside your heart, you know. Your spirit-man and Mine. I designed your spirit to be able to meet with Me this way."

Gently, He reached over and smoothed a little unbelief from between her eyebrows.

"Really."

"Truly."

"We are. Here." His eyes crinkled with an unspoken Joy.

"Your heart is a portal, as you might call it, to another dimension. Only through your spirit can you come here, for now. Though it seems we are clothed in flesh, we are truly in our spirit-man bodies. In the future, especially once the Glorious Days are come, we will be able to come here together at will, inviting all who would join us to gather here. Each and every soul who gives their life to Me has their own, unique Garden. I begin planting it the moment Holy Spirit opens the portal."

"I have much to teach you, sweet Hanna. Much. I chose you from the beginning of the world, for such a time as this. Just like Esther, I am raising up individuals in this time who will love Me completely."

Trust Me entirely. And follow Me with their whole hearts. Laying their lives down for the sake of the love for others, and for My Kingdom.”

He cocked His head to one side, considering.

“Your Nana Anne is such a one. She and I have had many lovely adventures together in her Garden, for many years now.”

“Things in the world are rapidly changing, Hanna.” His tone deepened, becoming more serious. “There are things you don’t yet understand. Time is beginning to come to a close. You have felt the touch of pain in your life, and loneliness as well. I will help you with this, to again find Joy that can never be broken.

“In time, when your own heart has found peace and wholeness, I will ask that you help Me in the healing of your parents’ hearts, too.”

At these words, her head drooped to her chest, and her eyes burned with bitter tears. She had been bottling up her emotions for what seemed like forever, but at the tender tone of his voice, the love in his eyes as He looked at her, now they just came pouring out like a smudgy, grey river.

Her shoulders began to quiver and shake with sob after sob until they burst from her with hot passion. He put his arms around her shoulders and drew her close to his heart again. They sat together that way for a very long time, until her sobs turned to quiet snuffles, her heart had stopped racing and calmed down.

Finally, she spoke to Him.

“How can I help them? I’m still just a child in their eyes. They hardly even speak to me any more....”

With an index finger, he tenderly captured one of the last tears that threatened to breach the dam of her eyes and held it, suspended there, a perfect droplet of pain. A tiny, crystal bottle appeared next to his finger, and he carefully scraped the tear into the vessel—and it vanished again.

“With Love, Dear. Renewed Love. First from you to them, and in return, from them to you.”

Love? her mind scoffed bitterly. Where was love in HER life? Right now? Two blocks down the street, in a tiny, run-down bungalow.

A little more firmly, he continued. “Yes. Love. Your parents’ hearts have been deeply damaged with pain that you cannot understand yet, not until you are older. And the Enemy has done even more damage as they have slowly turned away from Me.”

Enemy? Her thoughts started to stream away with the idea. *What could he mean by that?*

People in this country didn’t have enemies, at least not here, not where she lived. Maybe overseas people hated the Americans. She’d heard her father talking about things like that on the phone with his friend, Dave. They talked about a lot of things she didn’t care about, didn’t care to understand. Elections. Liars. Race riots. Policemen hating people; people hating policemen. She’d heard of bad things happening way down in Philadelphia, too. But that was miles away.

Theirs was just a quiet, backwoods town. No, not even a town, a village. Tucked deep in the hills of Pennsylvania, half an hour from the nearest place that even had a Dollar Store; and 10 minutes even further to the nearest Walmart.

There were more coyotes and skunks to worry about there than whether a race riot would break out. For heavens’ sake, Sandy Hines had been the only colored girl in her whole class this year—unlike the very mixed group of students she had been used to in Tennessee.

Quietly, he broke into her thoughts again.

“You have heard of Satan before, My enemy.

"Now that you are on 'My side,' so to speak, he has become your enemy, too. But even he cannot stand against Love. Nothing can. I defeated even Death through Love. We will talk of him in more depth another day.

"Love is who I Am, Hanna. Love is the most powerful force on Earth, and in Heaven, and everywhere in between. It's not just a sweet feeling; it's not even a nice thing you do for someone. It's ME, working through you, a child now of My Kingdom. Without Me, nothing and no-one can truly Love. With Me, you can conquer anything that comes into your life that is sad, painful, hard, or even evil."

His infectious smile broke through again, and the Garden (which had begun to dim just a little with all the sad thoughts and memories) sprang back to brilliant light and color. He whistled two short notes, and soon a tiny bluebird came fluttering in through one of the openings of the gazebo and landed on his extended finger.

"These are things that we will talk about in times to come, for we will meet here as often as you wish, as often as you need to. And there will be times that I will call you here. You will see!"

"But I don't want to spoil the joy of today with too much talk. There has been joy here, hasn't there?"

He gestured to Hanna to mimic his hand, and the tiny creature hopped down his finger and over onto hers. There it sat, peering up at her with bright brown eyes that seemed to want to tell her something.

"Go ahead, Little One," He spoke encouragingly. "Tell her. She'll listen now."

The bird puffed out its little chest with a large breath, opened its beak and out came a happy, lilting song:

Love is patient, Love is kind,
Love will always help you mind.
Never wants to have its way,
Never wants to take away.
Love is what the King has given,
Love upholds the rules of Heaven.
Love is Who our King is,
Love is Who our King is.

Love is glad when Truth wins out,
Love brings cheering, never doubt.
Never puffs its chest out proud,
Never speaks mean things out loud.
Love is blind to others' faults,
Love brings evil to a halt."
Love is Who our King is,
Love is Who our King is.

Abruptly finished with its little concert, the bird bowed once to Hanna, once to its King—and away it flew, up into the nearest dogwood tree. Soon, an entire choir of birds had picked up the song, and 'round and 'round they sang, until Hanna knew the words and the tune by heart and began to sing along with them.

With a final repeat of the chorus "Love is Who our King IS!" the birds, almost as one body, lifted up into the air and flew off into the distance.

Jesus sat smiling to himself, quietly humming the song for just a bit as Hanna tried to absorb all that had happened over the past few—hours? She had no idea how long she'd been in this wonderful place.

She knew it couldn't last forever, and she was almost afraid to move or speak, for fear that the time was now over.

A goodbye seemed to hang in the air, somehow.

"Don't be afraid, dear Hanna." His words underlined what she'd been sensing, that this was nearly the end of this adventure. "I will always be with you, now and forever. I live inside your heart."

"I will always be there when you call to Me."

"I will be watching over you all of the time."

"Never will I leave you alone."

He looked up at the opening of the gazebo and called out, "Come!" Before them stood a tall, slender angel dressed in a full, white robe—a single, golden girdle hung at his waist with a scabbard and sword hanging from it. His eyes were the color of the sky; his hair was white as the purest snow. Parts of it looked so fine and soft, it floated on the barest of breezes, like dandelion floaties being tugged to fly away.

Across his chest ran a line of picture-patches, each one depicting what looked like a battle scene in a war of some sort. An angel with bow and arrow in hand, ready to shoot. An angel pulling a shining sword from a scabbard. Scenes of strange weapons being fired. Oddly shaped shields being raised against an unseen enemy.

Hanna looked at Jesus with one eyebrow raised: *Is this who I think it is?*

"Come, Kamali. Your charge awaits you," His eyes sparkled again. "You can explain these things to her another time."

"Hannah," He turned to her one last time.

"If you watch for Me, you will see My little love gifts to you—every day, everywhere. If you listen deep in your heart for Me, you will learn to hear My still, small voice within you, even in your natural world. And we will speak together—anytime, anywhere. Nothing will stand between us if you begin to walk in My Love and push away from the way the world thinks and does things."

"Holy Spirit is within you, too—there to guide you and help you."

He placed a finger on her lips. "We will talk about His job within you another time, too. Now it is time to return to your family."

"Kamali will be with you always, as well. He is My helper to keep you safe." He looked up fondly at the tall angel. "He has been your Guardian from the day you were born." Nodding a grateful thank you, he commented, "It is a great day to meet the one who watches over you day and night in My service."

"I bless you now with the gift of Love," he turned to her one last time. "And the gift of Joy. Watch for them—welling up within you, coming from your heart. This will be a sign that Holy Spirit is there helping you. To help you remember, I will send you tokens of these gifts for you to hold and keep for yourself in the Natural world."

"Remember. I am with you always!"

"Trust Me."



And everything faded away into the mist...



A persistent knocking began to pierce her consciousness, and Hanna realized she was lying on her back again. She flung out her arm, hoping against hope to find the pebble path and the grass, but the smooth, velvety feel of her coverlet met her hand instead.

“Hanna. Mom wants you. *Hanna*. She’s getting *mad* now.” With a deep sigh, she recognized Evan’s high little voice floating through the door. “She’s been calling you for a long time—*hours* I’ll bet!

“*Hanna, please come out!*”

A glance at the clock told her that it had been exactly 22 minutes since she had first entered her room and locked the door behind her.

Amazing ...

“Coming, Squirt. I’m coming,” she called back through the door. “Tell her I’m coming!”

“Come with me, Lord. Please?” she spoke to her unseen Friend. “I don’t want to leave this place inside—not yet.”

Twitter, twitter, tweet, tweet, tweet! came from the windowsill. Hanna looked up, and there sat a tiny bluebird, no bigger than her fist. It flicked its wings a few times, sang her a few notes, and then flew off again to join its mates.

She smiled as she rose from the bed.

Thank You, Lord.

I think I can trust You.

Real life was calling again. It made the beauty and wonder of where she had just been even more poignant. She wondered how long it would be before Life overwhelmed Joy again—she could already feel it crashing in on her.

Maybe she should take these things a little easy for now.

She amended her promise.

At least... I’ll try.

