

## **Hannah's Heart Chapter Six - Fish Stories**

December 29, 2019



They had traveled a long time without speaking—up hills, over and down again. But now the land lay flat and smooth again. They entered what looked to be a vast forest, and the path narrowed to a slender, brown ribbon through the trees. The silence was immediately broken by the twittering of small nuthatches and sparrows, the chatter of squirrels, the great flapping of falcon's wings and eagles—even the huff, huff of a bear a short distance away. All

greeting their Maker as He rode past.

A majestic stag, antlers splayed and magnificent, stood to one side in the distance. And as they drew near, he paced regally forward until he could bow his great head on one extended foreleg and hold that pose until the riders had gone on.

Hanna watched these acts of honor with wide-eyed wonder.

*Even the animals know Who He is. It's like He's their King, too. He called it His country.*

*Did we leave the Garden?*

The trees along the path began to thin. Soon, they could hear the quiet rush of water tumbling and came to the edge of a wide, tree-lined river—its waters a clear, pale blue with white swirls of foam bubbling in and around large boulders that lay snugged up along the banks.

Moored to the near bank was a small, red, wooden rowboat with two oars propped against the side. Several plump, colorful cushions were piled on the seats, and a wicker basket sat in between them.

“Oh, I LOVE to go boating!” Hanna clapped her hands in pleasure. “Oh, thank you, thank you!”

She thought a minute and asked, “Can we fish, too? Are we allowed to fish here?”

Hanna had gone out fishing on a boat only once before—on slow-moving, bayou-ridden Reelfoot Lake, way up in the northwest corner of Tennessee. She'd been barely seven at the time, but Uncle Ben had invited little Hanna to go out in his family fishing boat after church one Sunday. Ben James was like that. Always trying to include her in with his family, always trying to make up the gap between what her own parents had time for... and what he thought she might need.

Even when he came down to visit them in Jackson, (which he had made a monthly habit after that weekend) he would always come, scoop her up and invite her along to whatever he and his wife had come to do or see. Sometimes they'd even stay in a hotel for a whole weekend and travel longer distances—like to Nashville.

Even Evan got to go once he was old enough. That was SO fun!

On this particular occasion, Hanna's family was visiting her Daddy's parents over the three-day Memorial holiday. It was early afternoon, and they'd all just finished a big Sunday dinner after attending Granddaddy and Maw Maw's tiny, country chapel for a church service.

Mike dominated the meal's conversation, proudly comparing the differences between that house of worship and the “big one” in the city his family belonged to. Loudly, he boasted to his

parents about how many programs and projects he was in charge of at the mega-church they attended, and how many nights a week he and Karen “put in” there.

All of a sudden, Granddaddy Eli invited Mike and his wife out on the porch for a “glass of refreshment,” stood up—and walked out of the dining room.

Talk around the table came to a screeching halt. Maw Maw shot a look to Uncle Ben and scurried off to the kitchen, where Hanna could hear glasses tinkling against each other. Mom rose from the table, eyebrows arched, and eyes seeking her husband’s as she slowly pushed her chair back into its place. And Uncle Ben quietly asked Aunt Janet if she’d be willing to take little Evan down to feed the ducks at the edge of the Lake for a while.

Uncle Ben smiled at Hanna and told her to give him just a little bit to get changed and then they’d head down to the boathouse.

And that she should change, too.

Upstairs.

Now.



Elijah Benjamin James came from a litter of ten siblings: five hard-working girls and five strapping boys. Schooling had been the vehicle for those children to rise out of the poverty they’d been born into, and he’d never held that fact lightly. According to him, girl or boy, God blessed those who put their best foot forward. And in his eyes, getting a solid education was one way of doing that.

In spite of his father’s nefarious start in the area, Eli had managed to establish his own, honest, fishing business and a better reputation for the James’ name. As time went by, and life got more expensive, he’d joined Maw Maw’s natural gift for cooking to the fishing business and started a family restaurant along the Lakeshores, too. It had required a great deal of sweat, struggle, and long hours—but in the end, the combined endeavors had fed and kept his family quite nicely over the years.

Mike’s older brother, Ben, had labored beside Granddaddy from the time he was a boy, never wanting to leave the small town he had grown up in. He remained one of the few fishermen who were still allowed to fish for crappies on the Lake and sell them to the shoreline restaurants (although there were rumors of that ending soon). And at the proper time, some years ago, Eli had been more than pleased to pass it all on to Ben’s oversight.

But Mike had been different. He’d always wanted... more. So, Granddaddy Eli had sacrificed and scrimped to put his younger son through college, glad that he could aid in his further education, and pleased with the fine career that Mike had started on.

At least he *had* been glad; he’d never intended to aid and abet the path his youngest son had ultimately taken—far from the simple, Godly teachings Eli and his wife had tried to instill in him.

Rising high in the lucrative computer industry, Mike had lately seemed to prefer what he proudly called “the good life”: fancy cars, a big fancy home and a high “position” at a church that had thousands of people attending.

And now, Eli was determined to try to set his son's mind straight.



"Seems you two are mighty caught up with that church o' yours, Michael," Granddaddy began.

He'd brought the couple out on the large wrap-around porch of the home, and the three sat side by side in the big, white-wicker lounge chairs, looking out over the water. It was warm and peaceful, with a breeze blowing slightly, and Maw Maw had opened all the windows that morning to let the air through the house.

Unbeknownst to any of them, Hanna had been sitting just the other side of that window, curled up on the couch reading Laura Ingalls Wilder's Farmer Boy. Still waiting for Uncle Ben to get ready to go out on the boat.

"Hanna tells me that she's over there three, four nights a week with your goin's on," Eli continued.

He took a long, slow draught from his glass of sweet tea and stared out over the water awhile. Granddaddy never hurried what he had to say, and certainly nothing important.

Hearing his voice speak her name caught Hanna's attention, and she lay her book down on her lap, listening.

"Said she fell asleep under the basketball bleachers last week. She thought it was mighty fun. But it seems to me," another slow savoring of the cool drink, "that's a bit much for a child that has to get up and go to school the next day."

He set his glass carefully on the small table to his right and turned to look Mike directly in the eye.

"Don'tcha think?"

He'd raised one shaggy eyebrow as he spoke, and after a beat added another concern.

"Not to mention little Evan."

Uncle Ben had walked into the room at that point and called her to go. She'd wondered at Granddaddy's tone of voice. It almost sounded like he'd been scolding her parents about something. At least, that was the tone they always used when *she* was in trouble. But it skipped back out of her mind again as she jumped up to join her Uncle and have fun.

She never did understand why they never went back to that house again. She got birthday cards and Easter cards and Christmas cards. And gifts from her paternal grandparents every year since then. But her parents and the two children never trekked back up to the Lake, even though Hanna had tried to hint at it.

The first time, she'd been told the older couple "weren't doing well." And that they shouldn't "bother them."

Another time, thinking surely they would be better by now, she'd simply been shushed, and the subject was changed.

And then... all the trouble with Keith began—until finally, they'd moved away altogether.



“We’re here, dear one.”

Adonai broke the silence between them. “Our ride is over for now.”

Regemmelech came to a halt next to the water and bent his head to drink. Satisfied, he lifted his dripping muzzle again and looked around at his Master. If a horse could raise its eyebrows, his would have asked, “Shall I stay?”

“Slide down here,” Jesus spoke quietly, taking Hanna’s hand. “And to answer your question: yes. We can fish. Only we do it a little differently here than what you are used to.”

An amused grin tugged at the corners of His mouth as he, too, slid down from Regemmelech’s back.

“No, thank you, my great Friend,” he addressed the beast, reaching up to stroke its soft, pink nose. “We shall see each other again soon, though, shall we not?”

The horse tucked into His chest for a final caress, shook its head, and with a snort headed back towards the forest.

The quiet lap, lap of the water against the shore belied the noisy swirl of memories still flooding Hannah’s mind.

“Uncle Ben used to take me fishing with him,” she began in a whisper. “Well... he took me once, anyway. Do you know Uncle Ben? It was so much fun! I caught two. One was this long,” and she spread her hands apart the width of her waist as they began to walk towards the moored shallop. “And one was this big,” her arms spread out a little further. “He said he was *so proud* of me.”

Her feet slowed to a stop, her mind caught up again in the happier times of days past, memories springing up to the surface that hadn’t seen the light of day in years.



“Little girls your size, Pip,” Ben had laughingly insisted that day, “don’t always do so good. Why, my Aunt Betty once tol’t me? When she was just a mite, she’d a-got a fish on her line and got so excited, she’d stood straight up in the boat—and that ol’ crappie just about pulled her right in the Lake! If Granddaddy hadn’t a-grabbed her knickers, she’d a-landed smack in that water. These crappies can put up quite a fight for a little ‘un like you. Good for you, Pip. Good for you!”

She’d had a lot of fun with Uncle Ben that day. He’d told her wild stories about his grandfather, Aron Ezekiel James—one of the infamous Night Riders who had fought with the Land Company over who owned what property on the Lake. (With real whips, guns, and even burning houses!) He’d told her stories of all the great-aunts and great-uncles and their growing up antics, and gotten himself laughing so hard, he nearly dropped his own pole in the water.

Yes, Uncle Ben had been a lot of fun. He’d been so steady in her life, so constant. His visits so regular you could set the clock by them. Well. Set the calendar, anyway...

Until Keith.

The last time she’d seen Ben James, he’d been pulling down the sliding door to a box truck, emptied now of what few belongings her parents could save from the bank. He’d been preparing to head out, to drive the moving van back down to Tennessee where he’d borrowed it for them.

She hadn’t seen the tears in his eyes as he’d wrapped her up in his warm arms for one last hug and kissed the top of her head goodbye. She hadn’t realized it was the last time she’d ever see

him again. She didn't know that yet one more person she loved would be cut from her life through bitterness and arguments that couldn't be resolved.



Jesus stood, patiently waiting, one leg in the boat holding it steady; the other foot solidly on shore until they were ready to push off. His eyes reflected the pure love he had for this child, this young one who felt so small and lost in her world.

*Not for long, Little One.* Adonai spoke to her heart. *Not for long. My Grace is about to turn your world upside down. And when the pieces all fall back together, they will slide into a far different pattern.*

The loud *honk, honk, honk* of a pair of mallards landing on the water shook Hannah back to the present. Three big steps and she'd reached His side again, took His proffered hand, and climbed into the middle of the boat. The pillows had been plumped and arranged so that they made a cozy type of nest at one end of the craft, and she took a seat and nestled in among them. Adonai took the middle seat facing her and picked up the oars. A few smooth dips in the water, and they were slowly floating with the current.



They had been riding along in near silence for some time, where only the gentle splash, draw, drip of the paddles could be heard. Hanna had been tempted to speak up several times, but the pure mellowness of this kind of quiet had started to fill her soul, and soon she had relaxed into it. She didn't really want to think about anything, anyway—and the repetitive *sploosh, creak* of the moving oars in their outriggers had become mesmerizing.

Part of her just wanted to lay back, close her eyes, and be lost in the peace of it all.

Part of her wanted to sit up and take it all in.

*No. Too much effort for right now,* she chided herself lazily.

The last part was fascinated with the Man before her. Intrigued. Puzzled by. In awe of. A little frightened by. Totally at ease with. She shuffled through every contrary emotion that came to mind but couldn't find one that truly fit.

She watched his muscles flex and relax against the pull of the water. He wore an outfit similar to hers: white tunic, white wide-legged pants that stopped just below his knees. Sandals. Although his muscles appeared to strain with this task, no sign of effort crossed his face or played across his shoulders. It was as though the appearance of a workout was there, but the reality of the endeavor was missing. She wondered if He could continue rowing for the day and night and never feel it, never grow tired, never need to stop and rest or find a bead of sweat growing on his upper lip?

**Come to think of it? It wasn't hot enough to sweat here—not even for her.** But the light around them was bright as a noontime Summer day.

How could this be?

A bright purple dragonfly drifted into the space between them and landed on the front of Adonai's shirt. It sat there gently waving its wings—a tiny greeting from a minuscule member of

this land of wonders. Soon, it was joined by a dozen more, each claiming a clear place on his garment. Each a different, brilliant color. He watched them gather with a look of joyful pleasure, eyes crinkling in delight with the impromptu greetings.

Hanna found herself watching his every expression.

She didn't know exactly why, but his face surprised her. He didn't really look like Hanna had imagined he should. She'd seen a couple of the movies: Jesus of Nazareth (The man who played Jesus' face was so long and solemn, she'd made a game of counting how many times they let him smile in that one). The Greatest Story Ever Told (it was just too old). The Visual Bible: Matthew. Well—that one was her favorite. At least Jesus smiled and laughed in that one.

But this man sitting with her didn't look like any of those men. He didn't look much different from... Well. Just an ordinary man. Not that she really paid much attention to them. Men were men, and she didn't go around comparing their faces.

But that wasn't the point of her thinking. There was something in this man's face she'd never seen before. Not in anyone's face.

When you looked at him, you didn't worry.

You were never afraid—not of him. Not of anything he might say or do.

Maybe it was that word 'Love' again ... because when she looked at him, that's all that came to mind. That he loved her. And deep inside, she knew that it was because *he wanted to*. Not that she was so *lovable*. And she felt a love for him she'd never felt for anyone before. She couldn't help it. It was just there.

Her heart told her that he was God. Her mind danced around the edges of understanding how that could be. It was impossible to put together—this mysterious-ephemeral-somehow joined to the solid-physical. But whether her mind could contain it or not, something inside of her continued to swell in his presence, filling her until at times she was sure she would burst. Into tears? Into joy? Into ... pieces?

As if he could hear her thoughts, he pulled his eyes from the shoreline he'd been scanning and smiled at her.

"Are you feeling rested now? Would you like to talk for a while?" he asked. As though she had the capability of actually saying "no."

How could you refuse to do what this Man asked? Why would you ever think to contradict him? How could you bear to see even the shadow of disappointment form in his eyes, like she so often watched flood into Evan's?

*Well, he's certainly not Evan! But I suppose even God can be disappointed. Sometimes...* she thought.

Suddenly, she drew her face up in self-disgust. *What am I thinking? Why would HE care about what I do, anyway? He's got the entire Universe to take care of, and billions of people. What difference could I possibly make in his mind?*

Perhaps he'd been having some private, interior conversation with a friend, and the "punch line" had just been told—but Jesus suddenly burst out laughing. Without warning, he put the oars in their place, stood straight up—and dove headfirst over the side into the water.

Hanna was so shocked all she could do was stare.

The water was clear, all the way to the bottom of the river where he dove in. But she couldn't see any sign of him down there. And she waited... One. Two. Three... 12, 13, 14 counts—and he was STILL under there somewhere.

*What should she do?!*

Panic was starting to take over when he burst up out of the water on the *opposite* side of the boat, causing her to whirl around and nearly fall out herself. He was still laughing, his eyes crinkling in some hidden joke.

“Well?” He called to her. “Are you coming?” He shook wet hair out of his eyes. “You wanted to go fishing, didn't you?”

One arm waved, beckoning her to join him.

“Come on!”

His head disappeared, leaving her alone again.

*Is he crazy? What does he mean—“come on”??*

Her breath was coming hard, and she could hear her heartbeat pound in her ears. She scoured the water from one side of the boat to the other, now not seeing him on *either* side.

“What's taking you so long? Just stand up and come on in!” His voice came from just beyond the bow.

Hanna twisted again in her seat, and two of the cushions slid up and out of the boat. She went to grab for them and again lost her balance, almost falling in nose first.

“What are you talking about??!” she cried out in frustration. “I can't swim. And you can't fish IN the water!”

He swam over to her, laced both arms over the edge of the boat and nearly nose-to-nose with her, shook his wet hair out, teasing like a beloved, annoying older brother. He rested there, chin on his locked-together hands and grinned up at her.

“Hanna... Do you trust Me?” He asked, head cocked to one side, and waited to let that thought sink in a moment.

“Do you trust Me, Hanna?” His eyes locked with hers, holding her. Calming her heart and slowing her breathing back down to normal.

“Hanna.” His voice was quiet, soothing.

“Do. You. Trust. Me?”

The panic was nearly quieted now, and even though everything inside of her was screaming, *This is nuts! This is crazy! ...she slowly nodded her head.*

Trust.

Yes. She *did* trust Him. It was a step, for she'd lost her trust of nearly every other adult in her life.

But this man? This Great Friend?

Yes.

Still holding one of the pillows to her chest, she sat up again. “What do I do?”

His infectious grin flashed across his face again, pleased with her decision. Throwing his hands up off the edge of the boat, with a ‘how else?’ gesture, he instructed.

“Stand up.”

“Take a BIG breath! And...

“Jump!”

Both of her eyebrows flew up to their roof, like chickens in a henhouse.

“But I can’t swim,” she whispered, half to herself, half to him and clutched the pillow even tighter to her chest. “Uncle Ben made sure I had a life vest on.”

She suddenly realized that Jesus was now *suspended* in the water, as though He were doggie paddling.

Only... his arms and legs weren’t moving.

Or maybe standing on the bottom of the river.

Only... he wasn’t. She could still see it FAR below him...

Finally, he reached out both arms to her.

“Just stand up and jump. I’ll catch you.”

He never took his eyes from hers, encouraging her every movement.

With a deep sigh, she stood carefully. Shakily.

“Stand on the seat, so your feet will clear the side. In the middle... Good. Big breath, now. That’s it! Now... just—jump!”

She’d almost sprung, standing tightly coiled as she followed His directions, when He cried out, “Oh, no—wait! Don’t forget the wicker basket, too!” His eyes were filled with mischief as He pointed to the basket wedged between their two seats.

Hanna drooped with relief and turned to look. She’d seen the basket and thought maybe they would be having a picnic lunch *in* the boat. But now that couldn’t be.

*Bring it with me??*

*What in the world is in this basket, then?*

She ever-so-carefully got down, picked it up, and climbed back up on the seat. It was only on her second attempt to mount the wooden bench that she realized something else odd: the boat **wasn’t moving**. Not rocking with the current. Not swaying with her movements. Not even moving down the river.

It was solid, holding still, firm as a rock.

*Now I know I’m out of my mind*, she finally grinned back at him.

And sprang off the seat into his waiting arms.

