

Hannah's Heart



You are my hidden garden, My treasure, My Bride, a secluded spring, a fountain sealed. Song of Songs 4:12

Book One of The Garden of the Heart series

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Dedication

To Clare, who introduced me to 'her' Jesus. And to Jesus, who guided me through writing these chapters, encouraging me to show the world who He really is to all of us who truly want to know...

Table of contents

1	Kamali and the Garden Without	1
2	The Garden Within	15
3	Derision	33
4	The Longing for Peace	47
5	Forgiven, Forgotten	54
6	Fish Stories	64
7	Picnic, Anyone?	75
8	The Office and the Book	86
9	Prayer Changes Things	96
10	Chosen	108
11	Two Roads Diverge	122
12	The Storm Without, The Storm Within	134
13	Positively Negative	145
14	A Song of Praise	157
15	Reconciliation	166

FOREWORD

My heart in writing this book is to introduce the reader to who Jesus, Holy Spirit and Father God REALLY are—as I and many thousands have found them to be. Not somewhere ‘up there’, disconnected from us and unreachable. But HERE. Calling to their Children, wanting to draw each soul back to their Creator’s Heart. Ever loving. Ever teaching and helping us with even the smallest of worries and details in our lives. Wanting to be intimately connected to our lives. Wanting to be fully engaged with our lives.

This book is listed as a fiction novel, yet so much of it is *real*. Much of what happens to the women characters is taken directly from my own life, both in the natural and in the spirit. I really do know my guardian angel. I really do talk with Jesus this way and walk with Him in the Garden of my heart. These things are *real*. And He wants so much for all His children to understand this!

Five years ago, He introduced me to Clare du Bois, who had just started a ministry on YouTube called Still Small Voice. SHE had been walking and talking with Jesus—literally—for over 30 years. And He had asked her to begin teaching others what she and her husband, Ezekiel, had learned.

And then He introduced us three to each other...

The ministry has grown from a handful of viewers to over 20,000 people from all over the world visiting our website, Heartdwellers.org. Our visitors are people hungry for a close, intimate relationship with the God who loves them beyond all understanding. It is my heart that you might come there too and visit with us as a result of reading this book. We would so welcome you! And He would be so pleased that your spirit was touched and was hoping to find Him in the very same way that Hannah has.

Oh, and by the way? There are two separate sections near the end of the book marked with an *. Both of these were taken directly from a teaching that Jesus gave to Clare.

I knew He wouldn’t mind my sharing them with you:0)



Chapter One

Kamali and the Garden Without

“I wish you were real.”

Hannalee lay back against the pillows mounded at the head of her bed, facing the window across the room. Most of her view was blocked by the branches of a towering, old chestnut tree. Even so, a single beam of sunlight made its way between them, squeezed through a gap in the curtains, traced a bright path along her quilt and stopped to highlight the book she held on her lap.

Her forefinger stroked the illuminated lion’s face, while the events of the story played through her mind over and over again.

“I wish I could *really* talk to you, Aslan. There’s so much I would ask you.”

She and little brother Evan had been reading *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* with Nana Anne during several visits to her home now. And today they had reached a crucial point in the story.

Aslan. The Lion who died cruelly at the hands of the White Witch and her minions in the land of Narnia. He had offered up his own life for the life of one of the human characters. The wicked ones had tied him up and tortured him, cut his beautiful mane off and hit him with sticks and stones and their fists. They laughed and mocked and spit on him, until finally, the Witch had plunged her horrible knife into his great heart and killed him.

None of the three readers could hold back the tears through that! Even Nana had been dabbing at her eyes, though she told the children she’d read the book a dozen times already.

Then came the part where Aslan was alive again!

“The White Witch would have known,” Aslan explained to the children. “That when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor’s stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backwards.” When she heard those words—everything came together in Hanna’s mind. She clearly saw who C. S. Lewis had been really writing about, and finally understood what Nana had been sharing with her every Sunday about Jesus. And all HE had done for her by dying on the Cross, and then coming back to life.

She had believed in Him, and invited Him into her heart, like Nana told her to. But He was invisible. And seemed so distant. *Was He anything like how Lewis had written?*

She continued to trace the face of the Great Lion with her finger. Dreaming. Aslan... He was so wonderful! Loving and kind and gentle—she just wanted to be with him. She wanted him to be real. Here, in this life!

“How fortunate for Lucy! To sink her face into your fur, to ride on your back. To know you like a dear, dear Friend,” she sighed. She focused on the book cover, this time her eyes drawn to a bold, red cross emblazoned on King Peter’s shield.

“If only ...”

Angry voices drifted up from the kitchen below. One set of footsteps ended in a slammed door. A kitchen chair scraped along the linoleum floor, and the second set quieted. Another fight. Another reason to stay secluded here, to hide away here, in a book, where no-one would find her.



The song of a sparrow hopping through the branches outside caught her attention. Hannah smiled and went to peer through the curtains until she found the tiny bird, perched on the birdfeeder hung centered in the window frame.

“Well, at least someone has something to sing and be happy about,” she called softly to her newfound companion. “Have you brought any of your friends along? I just filled the feeder this morning.”

Hanna loved the birds that flocked to the old tree. Often there would be dozens, singing away at the top of their little lungs. Sometimes she thought she could even understand what they were saying.

But that was silly.

Or was it? It was so hard sometimes: loving her books and their adventures, living with her father and his “logic”—and trying to fit them both into her life and thinking.

“Keep your feet on the ground, head about you!” Her father’s words echoed in her head. “Nonsense is just that. Nonsense! Not worth the energy it took to think it.”

Needless to say, he’d have no love for the Narnian tales. In fact, he’d been so angry, so quick to condemn anyone who talked about God since Keith died...

Well, she wasn’t about to try and explain anything to him!

There was always Mom, she supposed.

But no ... No, there wasn’t. Not anymore.

Hanna placed the book carefully on her nightstand, rolled over and hugged her pillows. Thinking DID take a lot of energy, and she’d been busy at it all day. Her eyes grew heavy in the warm, spring air drifting through the room, and soon her head lay softly on her bed again.

If I lived in Narnia, I’d know what she was singing about.



The pillow under Hanna’s head rustled as she rolled over on her back.

Rustle?

She stretched and drew one bare foot up close to her body. It felt like she was dragging her toes over soft, sandy particles. Some were even sticking to the bottoms of her feet.

Has Evan been playing in my bed with his dirty shoes on again?

Oh, that boy!

The noise from the birds had gotten louder than she’d ever heard them. Twitter, twitter, twee—a whole chorus of birds must be singing now.

They must have found the bird food, she thought. I must have fallen asleep.

She lay quietly listening to them, wondering what time it was. Wondering if she should be getting up to help her mother downstairs yet.

“Twitter twitter twee, twitter twee see.”

She had always loved those blurred few moments between sleeping and waking; all sorts of things lingered from her dreams. Smiling to herself over the imagined birds' message, she flung one arm across her bedcover—only to have her fingers land in a nest of tall, silky strands of something standing upright, bunched tightly together.

Almost like ... grass.

What in the world?

Still half asleep, she entwined her fingers in the strands and pulled, and away came a handful. Sniffing them only confused her more (it had a nutty, green scent) and she opened her eyes. A fistful of beautiful, emerald-green grass blades poked out in all directions from her grip.

Now fully awake, her hand flew open again and she shook the strands free. They floated gently down across her cheeks and drifted away.

WHERE AM I? I must still be dreaming.

“No, not dreaming,” a voice came from her left side. “Very real. Sit up and you’ll see.”

Caught between a little fear and her incurable curiosity, Hanna squinched her eyes shut again, tighter than before. She rubbed her eyes with balled fists, trying to think.

I know if I just wake up, I'll be back in my room.

Won't I?

The birds continued to sing; now a lilting, flutish tune joined in with them.

“Keep your feet on the ground” just plain wasn't working.

She opened her eyes again, rolled towards the music and worked herself up to a sitting position. Not five feet beyond her, a long-limbed, skinny boy perched cross-legged on a mossy boulder, holding a reed-like flute to his lips. Behind him, an enormous tree spread its branches high into the sky, with dozens of birds of every color imaginable lined all along the lower out-stretched limbs.

Green, red, blue, brown. Orange with white chests. Yellow with purple wings. Purple? And—what was that color anyway? Hanna stared, trying to find a name in her memory. It had to be some crazy name like they called the crayons in her box.

Mauvelous, she remembered. That was one of the purple ones.

The music drew her attention to the boy again. White shirt. White shorts. White flute. White hair. Colorful picture-patches ranged across his

chest like tiny stamps on a well-traveled suitcase. Bare toes wiggled and danced to the sound of his composition, and his head bobbed to the playful tune, while eyes the color of the morning sky stared back at her. He looked to be around cousin Martin's age—16 or so.

All except for those eyes.

"I'm Kamali," the boy's voice broke into her musings. "Welcome to the Garden Without." He tucked his flute up over one ear like an oversized pencil and slid down to the ground, reaching one hand out to shake hers.

"Would you like to look around? I've been appointed your Guide for today. Well, for all Deep days." He frowned. "Forgive me, for All Days in General. No, that's not right, either—" He seemed to be tripping over his thoughts as quickly as his tongue could form them.

"Oh, never mind." He gave up with a crooked smile. "We can talk about that later."

Hanna scrambled to her feet, making sure she still wasn't very close. There was just something ... Well, just something about this boy-person. He was certainly the oddest-looking boy she'd ever seen. His long hair reminded her of dandelion floaties, or the lighter-than-air strands that formed her stuffed lion's mane—so soft and light, the barest movement of air made them dance and wave. An irresistible urge to touch it made her suddenly blush, and she tried in vain to find her jeans pockets to hide her hands. After a few fruitless swipes, she finally tucked them behind her back and wove her fingers together.

"Won't find a pocket on that outfit," he informed her belatedly. "Needs to get more advanced for extra stuff. He always starts things out really, really simple. Says it's so you can see how far you've come, advancing the Garden. All things work together around here—it's all linked."

Does the boy ever make any sense? she thought. Now what can he mean? And how does he always know what I'm thinking!

Her fingers let go of each other the same time she looked down. Just moments ago, she had been wearing her favorite black jeans and Mr. D's Ice Cream t-shirt. Now she was dressed in a simple white shift, like an old-fashioned nightgown, only somewhat shorter. It had no trim at all, not even a button, all except for a deep-red, heart-shaped patch sewn on the front, right above her belly button. It was as large as her open hand and attached so seamlessly she couldn't feel the edges where it met the white

fabric; like they were one piece. But the heart was slightly puffy, standing out just a little from the gown.

“Like I said, no pockets. But you can ask for some if you go meet Him.” His eyebrows rose at the suggestion.

Girls like pockets? Good idea, Adonai!

His knees were knobby, and his legs seemed too long for him. And he stood there swaying at the top of them as if this were a new experience. She would have laughed, but she had the feeling he was being completely serious. About everything.

And that he was always serious.

About everything.

She giggled anyway and sighed. *What to do?*

She looked up at the boy. And the rock, the tree and the birds. Nothing more than what she had in her own backyard, really. Life had taught her very well—dreams were just that. Dreams. They were nice while they lasted, but the hard bump back into real life was enough lately to discourage her from wanting to continue.

“Nooo,” Hanna finally replied. Remembering her manners, she added, “Thank you so much, though. But I believe I’d like to just go home now.”

Another thought occurred to her. “Will my clothes be on my bed when I get there?” Dresses were okay in their place, but that shirt and pair of jeans were her favorites; she hated to think they might have somehow disappeared!

It didn’t seem likely.

This *was* just a dream.

Right?

She steeled herself for the inevitable—the waking up again. This was all very fascinating, but Mom would be making supper soon, and her older-than-her-years side realized there’d be no patience or interest from anyone in hearing about yet another world she’d made up or lived in while she read.

Real life.

Real life was hard.

Real life made her feel alone and confused.

Real life was full of pain and disappointment and abandonment.

Reading and dreaming were wonderful escapes, but when you finished the book, you closed the cover. When you woke up from a beautiful dream, you got out of bed.

Real life was what looked you in the face every day, all the time.
She'd been taught that lesson abundantly well.



Hanna's thoughts drifted back into the perpetual circle of the past two years. She had seen what happened when real life had shattered her parent's lives. Unconsciously, **she'd known that she had had nothing to do with it all; yet her life had turned upside down in the wake of disaster.**

Baby Keith was her mother's last child, but Hannah and Evan never had the chance to know him; he'd been kept in the hospital his entire eight months of life, always in and out of Intensive Care. When his emergency care was suddenly moved out of state, Karen and Mike James had essentially dumped twelve-year-old Hanna and seven-year-old Evan on Karen's mother, whose home was a couple hours away from Philly.

The parents had chosen to live close to the baby and the hospital.

The children had never met this grandparent before. Pennsylvania was a long, long way from Tennessee, both in distance and in character, but it had been the best solution in the worst of circumstances. Nana Anne had been patient and kind, and the children had eventually adjusted. But the sudden separation from their parents, and the slow eroding of the relationship between the four of them took its toll.

Hanna grew up very fast. Evan began to see his sister more like a mother than a sibling. Nana was good for stories, cookies, and hugs. But Sister was the one to snuggle up to in the middle of a violent storm, or after a nightmare. Sister had the strength and agility to clean up his messes and cater to his little boy needs. She had the endurance to spend endless hours outside in the yard, amusing him. Sister would lie in bed at night and answer all his questions about Mom and Dad, as his young memory began fading with the months, forming gaps.

He never saw her tears in the dark. He had no idea about the hard, cold spot forming in her heart as she talked, remembering things he never knew. **Missing a life that was familiar, and therefore ... better somehow.**

Bit by bit, consumed with their tragedy, Karen and Mike had stopped talking personally with the children, choosing to send "I love

you's" through Nana after very brief phone conversations—usually received after the children were already in bed. Anne could see what was happening but was powerless to help the children understand so deeply into an adult's mind. Their mother had buried her heart; their father had become too bitter and angry to think of anyone but himself.

For nearly a year and a half now, ever since Keith's death and the physical reunion of the family, Hanna had longed for her mother to be normal, for her father to laugh and smile again. She dreamed of her family returning to how she remembered.

But it never did. They just drifted further and further away from each other and their children.

Now Dad's hot, quick temper taught the children to avoid him at all cost; and Mom? Her body was there, but she paid no more attention to the children than she did the dishes.

Now Hannah knew that dreams never changed anything.



Kamali had been quietly watching Hanna as she re-processed her life for the thousandth time, and his face filled with compassion for her.

"Really," he said gently, finally breaking into her thoughts. "Really. He'd like to see you. He'd like to help you now."

His quiet voice brought her eyes back up to his. She cocked her head to one side, searching this unusual face, still considering. This was by far the wildest dream she had ever had, and she couldn't understand why it just kept going on and on.

Hope and Logic began circling her mind.

Hope whispered first, *'As long as you ARE still asleep, why not play along? What could hurt?'* She continued, *'Truly—where could this place be? What were we just thinking about when you fell asleep? What if ... ?'*

Fear—her constant companion, touched her mind, and a cold chill swept through her.

'No.' Hanna shook her head firmly, trying to push it all away. *'No!'* She heard Hope begin to whisper and stopped her. *'No. I can't go there. I shouldn't...'*

This last protest tried to linger, pulling Hope a little closer. But the cold swept over her again until finally, Hope fled ... with a deep sigh.

Fear had won. Again.

Hannah **didn't** have the faintest idea about any of this place, or this dream. Where it came from or how it was continuing. But once her mind had pushed Hope back down into place, it all began to feel like what her father called 'Nonsense'.

Responsible was calling to her. *'Get back to something sensible!'*

Logic stepped up, trying to sort between dream, nonsense, or 'real'—whatever that was, anymore. *'Best to just get out of here! Hurry up!'*

But how was she to do that? Where had she come into this place?

She cast her eyes around a little. She seemed to be standing on a path of some sort.

Well, that would explain the sandy feel on my feet. Poor innocent Evan. Here I am accusing you of being naughty again!

A slight movement behind her caught the corner of her eye. She turned to see what was happening. And there, just where she had been lying, a pillow-shaped pile of brightly colored leaves began to disassemble and fly off into the sky. One especially handsome, cardinal-red one came to brush against her cheek like a soft kiss. Hanna startled at its touch and the leaf flew away, looking ever so much like a tiny, heart-shaped balloon rising in the sky.

"No, it's not impossible," Kamali's voice broke into her amazed wonderings. "And you didn't just imagine that," he raced ahead of her thoughts.

"Everything here acts like that; it's the Love. That's what the Garden is made from. That's what holds it all together. Love. From Adonai's heart." Kamali swept both arms up and around, pointing out their surroundings. "He just started this Garden this morning, but it's growing pretty fast."

He leaned in conspiratorially. "I've seen Gardens grow much slower, ya know." Raised eyebrows in an earnest face sealed his declaration to her.

Hanna's head had been arching backwards a little with each sentence, and now she took a full step back away from him.

He can't possibly be reading my mind!

Can he?

Convinced now that this boy couldn't be real, and that she was indeed still dreaming, she eased one leg across the path, and pivoted her

body a little to search for the way she must have come through. Tiny, soft stones scattered away from her feet. Others sank further down, as if arranging themselves for the most comfort they could offer her. Her foot finally landed in the grass—the same soft, silky strands she'd pulled, and still clung to her shift here and there. The gentle fragrance of violets wafting up caught her attention. A single bunch of violets had been flattened out by her wandering foot, and she quickly jerked it back up again.

“Poor little things,” she murmured, bending over to see the damage. Violets were her favorite flowers. “I didn't mean to hurt you!”

But the violets sprang back up, arranging themselves again as though she had never taken the step. Their little flower heads waved back and forth, their faces smiling up at her, as violets seem to do.

“I suppose you also dance and sing?” she chuckled. Her eyes searched Kamali's for an explanation, but his attention seemed to be somewhere else for the moment.

“Yes. Well.” She straightened back up. “I'll just be finding my way back home. But ...”

She felt for her pockets again, remembered, then crossed her arms—not sure what to do with her hands anymore.

“But I'd appreciate it if you'd tell me how to do that, please?”

This question seemed to truly puzzle the boy. He mirrored her arms, one finger rapidly tapping on his left arm. Soon, his right foot followed suit, vigorously causing the pebbles to flee for their lives.

“Mmmm. Well, I *suppose* you could go back home.” He cocked his head to one side. “If you really wanted.”

Perhaps she was showing humor of a sort he didn't understand yet. A “jest.” No, a “fast one.” That's what he'd heard her cousin call it a while ago.

The hopeful look on her face surprised him still further.

No—I think she really means this!

A frown wandered around Kamali's mouth, as though it couldn't quite decide whether to stay or not. He had never considered that she might not WANT to be here! Perhaps one more appeal—

“But He was really looking forward to having a little talk with you. I know He'll be along any minute now.”

Hanna's mind was churning in another direction.

The boy keeps talking about another 'He.' I wonder just how many people ARE here? The idea that there were even more in this place both fascinated and alarmed Hanna. What would Dad think if he were to find out where she'd been? What would Mom? Anyone??

Well ... Nana would understand.

“You don’t have to be afraid.” Kamali was giving this his best effort now. “And you don’t have to tell anyone, either. Not right away. He’ll understand.” He gave her his brightest smile and forged on. “You’re new to this. You’ll get stronger. Really! Soon you’ll have to stop telling the others!”

Do they STAY this stubborn, Elohim? I know this is my first assignment to humans in centuries, but still! I thought once You planted their Garden, they became—well, pliable. This sure is some different!

He pulled the tiny flute from behind his ear again and started twice to put it to his lips, but it didn’t seem the right thing for right now. Not knowing what else to do, what else to say, he just stood there, his body paying attention to her, his eyes roving everywhere else.

She frowned.

Now what is he doing? Maybe he’s waiting for the other people?

Her eyes began to mimic his, and she tentatively backed up another step, thinking she may have to just take off in one direction or another. But as she turned and scanned a full circle—she realized that she was in a very strange place, indeed.

She’d been so close to Kamali’s boulder and the enormous Tree Full of Birds (as she’d begun to think of it), she had no idea what the rest of the scenery looked like. Now she discovered that a very tall, very dense line of bushes blocked her way not fifty feet to the left of her. She turned to face it, and indeed—it spread as far as she could see both to her left and then right. Joining the hedge at points equally as far away were two apparently impenetrable lines of cedar trees, full of branches, ground to the very top. Hedge and trees together formed a semi-circle around three sides of where she stood.

And there weren’t any gaps in any of the greenery that she could make out.

Departure didn’t look very promising. The path she stood on traveled along beside and behind the boulder, cut a swath through a field of violets and headed towards the cedars, but it seemed to stop dead in the

middle of the field. Strangely, right there the path made a sharp 90° turn to parallel the tree line.

Her eyes followed the turn and she was even more dismayed—the trees (and path) ran along another 50 feet or more to join...

Nothing.

Mist perhaps, if you had to name it something. But certainly nothing of any substance. The trees grew fainter and fainter and then were gone. Even the grass that spread in that direction seemed to just peter out, fading and fading until you could no longer see anything more than just the color green. It was like an artist who paints the center of a canvas with fine detail, and then washes the scene out to the sides, at last blending it with the white of the edges.

There was no dread feeling about it.

There was really no *sense* at all.

It was just—a place that ‘wasn’t’ yet.

Now what was she going to do?

Just as she was beginning to panic, the hearty sound of a Man’s laughter rang through the mist.

“Ha! She’s made the best of you, Kamali, now hasn’t she?”

A bearded face preceded a broad, muscular chest through the parting nothingness.

“And only 12, at that. Think of it!”

Fully emerged now, the robust figure stood at least six feet tall. He was dressed very much like Kamali: long white pants, tunic-type top with the bottom of his sleeves bound in a thin band of gold. The difference was his hair. He had it pulled together behind his head with something, but she could tell it was long—maybe to his shoulders—dark brown and slightly wavy, considering the strands that hung free here and there around his face.

His deep chuckle made her want to laugh along.

“Are you still so sure this will be as easy as you tried to convince Palamin just a while ago?” he addressed the boy beside her.

With a few strong strides, the Man had reached the pair on the path. He appeared young and kind and very alive. Hanna’s heart was drawn to him immediately, and all thoughts of leaving or going home began to fade like the mist he’d just emerged from.

If this was ‘he,’ she wanted to find out more.

The Man turned to Hanna with a broad smile. “Welcome to Our Garden, Hannalee Grisandole James. Oh, you are *most* welcome here!” Overflowing with enthusiasm, he clapped his hands together—and made a courtly bow (which unexpectedly caused her to blush).

She couldn’t help but smile and caught herself wanting to curtsy in return.

She didn’t.

“Indeed, as Kamali here has said, I have longed to meet with you, and would love to spend some time talking with you.

“Are you willing?”

Amused by something, He grinned again, and pointed towards the long line of bushes.

“Let’s walk this way, towards the Gate over there.”

She was sure it hadn’t been there before. She would have seen it—right? But there, centered within the length of the massive hedge stood a small wooden door. Nondescript, it blended in so well with the shrubbery it almost seemed a part of it. And while it surely hadn’t before, (had it?) the path they stood on now led directly to this gate.

The eager, hopeful look on his face somehow reminded her of Bobbie Jackson’s massive Golden Retriever—which made her giggle. And then his eyes seemed to twinkle along with the picture it made in her mind. This was getting more bizarre by the moment! Could HE read her mind, too?

He seems safe, I guess, she mused. Or at least happy. Besides, what else am I going to do?

Hesitantly, Hanna slid her hand under his proffered elbow, and they set off. They walked the first steps in silence, the Man quietly humming a little tune.

“I have something I’d like to give to you,” he spoke suddenly.

Pleasant humming followed the question.

“It’s your turn first, Hannah. Ask me a question, whatever you’d like.”

More pleasant humming.

“Are we going too fast? Would you like to do something else first?”

He stopped suddenly and smiled down at her. *Trust Me*, his eyes asked. Swinging his opened hand around him, he presented the length of the hedge, the perimeter of the trees, even taking in the misty places.

“There will be many, many wonders to explore here—in time. Eventually, the trees will move further back, this path will separate into many trails. Even the mist will retreat more and more. But to begin, a Garden needs to grow slowly. This is just the Garden Without, though. What I really want to show you is beyond this entryway.”

Her voice was shyly hiding somewhere down in her throat. But she nodded ‘yes,’ and they walked on until they were standing just before the door. It looked a little different up close. Vines and the tiniest flowers traced their way over the surface of it. As her eyes traced along the patterns, she thought for a moment that they spelled out her name, way up over the top of the lintel.

But that’s just silly...

Where the handle should have been, a bright-red heart was embedded into the wood.

That looks familiar, she puzzled a moment. *Oh! It’s just like the one on this dress!*

The Man smiled at her again.

“Would you like to go in?”

Without waiting for a reply, he brought his right hand up and drew from the heart on her gown a very tiny, very old-fashioned key. One red, heart-shaped stone blinked at her from where it was embedded in the shaft of the key. Attached to a small ring at the top was a golden strand, braided in and out with two scarlet red ones. Together, they made a sort of lanyard loop about two feet long.

He placed the cord around her neck and laid the key in her hand.

“Keep it tucked into the pocket until you open the door, Hannah. This is your key. This is your Garden, and this is the only door.” He showed her how to insert the key into a tiny opening in the door’s heart. At the same time, the door swung open before them. “There are other doors in the Garden this key will open. Keep it around your neck while you are inside, they key tucked into the heart. This way, it will be ready for use at any moment.”

“Shall we?” He asked and gave her another courtly bow. His left arm followed the path of the door, inviting her to go first.





Chapter Two

The Garden Within

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 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 greeneries.

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...?"

"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 surprised 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 Hannah 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 sniffles, 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.





Chapter T hree

Derision

June 15, Monday

It's been a little more than 2 weeks since I first went to the Garden. Nana told me this morning that it would be a good idea to start journaling when I go. I thought it was a good idea, too. I kinda like to write, anyways. And it's nice to talk to... well, who AM I talking to, anyway? This is going to take some getting used to!! On the other hand, I can say whatever I want to—and who's gonna correct me?

So, anyway, I started writing something today. This stuff.

Yours Sincerely,

Hanna

There actually were two more “cool” things that had happened since her journey but writing all this out by hand was frustrating her.

Hanna flipped shut the cover of the notebook she'd been writing in and sat tapping her pen on the cover.

This'd be a whole lot easier if I had a computer of my own ... DAD, she sighed. He's just so paranoid. Won't let me use HIS half the time because he's working. And when I can use it, he's always around anyway. He's so afraid I'll watch something he thinks I shouldn't on YouTube or something.

I just want some privacy. He'd FLIP if he ever found out what Nana and I talk about!

Whining wasn't getting her anywhere, and the quest to record in privacy trumped using a keyboard. At least for the moment.

She opened the notebook up again.

PS: There are two cool things that happened since then. Jesus told me that *I should start looking for signs of His love and joy. I didn't have a clue what He was talking about. But two days after I'd been there, I was walking by the playground, down by the creek, and kicking around in the stones there. And I found one—a stone—that looked EXACTLY like a white heart! Love! That was cool.*

And then after church yesterday *when we were at Nana's, you'll never believe what she gave me. It's like she knew!* She told me she had been cleaning out one of her china closet shelves, (you should see all the stuff she has crammed in there!) and she found something she wanted to give me. And then she handed me this little, ceramic BLUEBIRD!!!! How cool was THAT???

Anyway, I guess that's all for now.

Sincerely

Hannalee Grisandole James



Mike impatiently hung the phone back in its cradle after four rings.

He didn't have time for this.

Karen should have called these people—I told her I had important things take care of today. I don't have time to be calling around to find something for them to do.

He took the Summer Day camp flyer she'd given him and crumpled it into a ball.

Why should I waste money so they can play? Hannah can take care of him, and it's free.

Reality whispered that he didn't need to be willing to make time for it. And Pride raised its ugly head up high inside him again. Nothing mattered right now but their agenda: keep the man busy. Keep him self-focused. Keep him separated from his family. NEVER allow any talk to wander into the enemy's direction.

"Your work is all that matters, all that has any worth," the voices in his head continued. "They'll have to cope with their own problems. This is more important. Look how much money this job will bring in? You deserve their admiration—get it! You're the King of this castle—make sure they understand that!"

Pride sneered as it projected these thoughts into Mike's unconsciousness, finding him an easy mark now that they'd managed to

build the latest wall of Anger Against Jehovah within him. Manipulating this human away from the things he really needed, things the Ones of Light kept trying to make him see was taking-candy-from-a-baby simple. And the added bonus of the internal, angry rebellion that ensued in Mike only fed their energy.

Mike turned back to his computer and jiggled the mouse, refreshing the screen that lay before him. Yes. This is going to work. This bunch will make us rich again—if I'm careful.

He had no idea what he was about to agree to. Or where it was going to lead him.

At the moment, he didn't care.



Zindel stood silent in the far corner, arms crossed against his powerful chest, sword sheathed and hanging at his side. Forbidden to interfere, he watched, eyes blazing at the wicked work of his foes.

He spoke quietly to a Messenger, "Give your report to the Scribe of El Olam."

The enemy prevails. Intercession is needed. Incite the others to continue praying.

"I have my orders. Go now."



She must have missed the first part of the diatribe, she'd been so absorbed in her journal. But suddenly she heard the words "Evan Ronald James—WHAT have you been doing!?" come piling up the stairs and through her door.

"What are you doing! You're traipsing mud all through the kitchen. Stop. Stop! STOP!! Right there. Don't move. Just STAND there!" Dad's voice was getting louder and louder.

Uh, oh. Hanna slapped the notebook shut again and jumped up. / wonder what the Squirt got into this time. She knew she was going to get it, too. She was supposed to have been watching him but got interested in her journal instead.

"HANNALEE!"

"Coming, Dad. Hold on!"

She ran down the stairs, avoiding her father's anything-but-happy face, and ducked around him. "I'm really, really, really sorry, Dad. I thought he was playing in the sand box. I'll clean it up, don't worry. I've got it."

Grovel. He never keeps it up when I grovel a little.

"I've warned you about this, Hannalee. Your mother has to work. I have to work. Just because I'm home working doesn't mean I can jump up every ten minutes and find out what kind of trouble your brother is getting into."

He was following her back into the kitchen, building up steam with every step.

"I've told you both. This goes for you, too, Buster!" He began poking one long, hard finger in Evan's scrawny chest. "If there is ONE more incident where I find you're in trouble—and YOU aren't around." Mike James swung his finger around to his daughter. "That's IT!"

At the last second, the thought occurred to him that poking her in the chest wouldn't work. An even more surprising thought flickered through his mind.

Good grief... Doggone it! She's just plain growing up too fast.

He dropped his hand to his side, swung around and started back towards his office doorway. "And I don't want to see ONE SPECK of mud on that floor when you're finished!"

Slam!

Hanna gave Evan the hairy eyeball for a moment, and then walked over to start the faucet. "Get the shoes off. The mop out. Get the bucket. YOU get to mop—I'll get the mud out of your shoes," she ordered as she tested the water temperature with one hand. "Here, give me the bucket."

She knew tears were streaming down the little boy's cheeks. Up to this point, her voice had been anything but loving and kind. She wondered what Jesus would think of her now? A pang went through her heart like a knife, but she was too angry at her father's temper tantrum to care yet.

Evan, shoes still on, walked over to the broom closet, grabbed the mop and bucket and began walking back to his sister.

"No! Don't!" She closed her eyes at the now bigger mess.

"Oh... never mind."

"Love is patient, Love is kind, Love will always help you mind." The birds' twittering voices began singing in her mind. Hanna stopped what she was doing at the sink and turned around to face him.

“Hey,” her voice softened. “I’ve got a better idea.” She never could watch him cry. He picked his eyes up to meet hers for the first time. “You take your shoes and lay them on the back steps in the sun—that mud will need to dry off a while. I’ll mop the floor. Just sit there on the stoop until I can get done.

“And *don’t go anywhere!*”

She dabbed at his eyes with a napkin and handed it to him.

“Blow.”

“And put it in the garbage on the way out!” she called after his retreating back.

It took a good half hour to finish cleaning up the mess to what she knew would be Dad’s expectations. She returned the mop to the closet and walked out the kitchen door to dump the dirty water.

Evan had obeyed. He sat there on the bottom step tracing a pattern in the dirt with a long, thin stick.

She took his shoes and walked out on the lawn, clapped them together good a few times and handed them back.

“What do you say we get permission to go to the school yard and swing a while?” Her little brother’s grateful expression said it all.

“Okay. Let me go tell Dad where we’re going. Put your shoes on while you’re waiting.”



Mike stood with his back to his office door, frowning. He had listened all the while Hanna busily cleaned up her brother’s mess, trying to cool back down. They didn’t deserve this kind of treatment—but he couldn’t seem to control his temper anymore. Feeling guilty, he had answered her timid knock on his door once Hanna was finished. And in an attempt to make it up to her had told her what a good job she’d done. And had given the children permission to go to the playground.

Michael James had never felt so lost, so burdened, so defeated in his life as he did now, living in what he termed a “crackerbox house in a deplorable town.” Over the past four years, everything he’d ever worked for, gained and sweated over, had been stripped of him like a full bathtub someone pulled the plug on.

It was easy to blame God.

So, he did.

Even though it started long before, Mike pinpointed his third son's birth as the beginning. After the flurry of Keith's arrival, diagnosis, and initial stay in the hospital, the baby had bounced in and out of Intensive Care non-stop. He had stabilized several times, and they had attempted some corrective surgeries, but those would only prove to land him back in the ICU.

Finally, the decision was made to fly him to the huge Children's Hospital in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Mike and Karen had holed up in a Ronald McDonald's house with no privacy, no space, nowhere to get away. Mike hated being trapped in the City—unable to enjoy and explore; trapped in a hospital room, pacing, while his wife wandered further and further away from them all in her mind.

His mother-in-law's house was a two-hour drive north from there. Putting the children with her got them out of his hair and shortening temper—and kept them from seeing their mother's non-stop tears. It was the best he could think of; the best he could do.

He'd tried to keep his business going through the phone, but a man just can't do it all that way—not without a computer handy, not without space to work.

Karen wouldn't let him leave her side, and he'd feared she was on the verge of a mental breakdown. The kids were... kids.

But she was his heart, his life.

So, he'd watched his life go slowly down the drain, in spite of his posturings, pleadings, and promises to the God he'd settled into a nice, solid box years ago.

One horrible, cold February day the news had come: baby Keith had lost the battle and passed away. By this time, Mike had lost his job, their savings, and eventually—their home. They'd had no recourse. Ever the fighter, Mike had started his own IT business, but they had been forced to move. There had been strained feelings between him and his Tennessee family for years, and he wanted to escape. So, they moved the children out of a bustling, highly academic school district near Nashville, to a one-school-fits-all Pennsylvanian village with a population of only 1,029 citizens.

Breinigsburg.

The very sound of the name made Mike scoff in derision.

The Dump (as Mike thought of it) they now lived in was barely half the size of their Tennessee home, and three times as old—but it was

only two blocks away from Nana's. The bungalow had belonged to Nana's best friend, former owner of the local Brundt's Bake Shop. Mrs. Brundt had passed away, and her children were more than pleased to sell the home to the James' family for a song—as they were the first buyers to even look at it in over a year.

Mike was sure he knew every reason why.

"Their mother ought to be here doing these things," he muttered to himself. For the ten-thousandth time, he glared up at the ceiling.

"IF You were there, YOU wouldn't have let all this happen. We'd still be in our home; happy. Plenty of money, so Karen COULD be home with a baby and her children. All she ever wanted was to be a mother. All! And You even took most of that away!"

His eyes fell on the family portrait they'd had done before the baby had been born. Happy smiles wreathed their faces as they cuddled together in front of a gaily-decorated Christmas tree.

Karen had been 6 months pregnant—six long months filled with endless doctor visits and tests. Hope was on her lips, but the shadows in Karen's eyes burned out at him. The two previous miscarriages had defeated her, robbed her soul of life. She'd been barely hanging on to the hope of the new baby when that picture was taken.

For the Church Directory, of all things!

"But then, You're NOT there, are You? At least not for me. Not for us.

"Not for US."

Unbeknownst to him, the dark shadow that encircled his heart grew just a little darker—deeper—as though whatever was there somehow increased.

Bitterly, he flung himself away from the door and strode to his desk, knocking the receiver from the phone. It clattered along the desktop, slid off and lay hanging by its curlicue cord—a vacant dial tone obnoxiously filling the air. His frustration over the failed call turned on his wife.

Is that all she thinks they should do? PLAY? What they need is more chores around here. Hannah's old enough to be mowing the lawn. Evan's old enough to ... well, to do something.

Yesterday's mail lay unopened on the corner of his desk.

Bills, bills, bills and more bills.

His mood turning thunderous, he flipped through the envelopes.

What's this now?

The colorful brochure of a church flyer lay tucked in the middle of the mail. It was announcing the soon coming of the summer Vacation Bible School week from First Church in town—the church Nana Anne took the children to. The day it had been announced, the children had pleaded with him to **let them attend, but he hadn't answered them yet. He wasn't ready to give in—yet.**

Is this supposed to be some kind of a hint, Karen? Or did your mother stop by to annoy me?

Nana Anne. Oh, she had been a picture when they had moved here. He could still see her at the door that one Saturday, like a little Banty hen standing there in all her four-foot-ten inches, head held high and bright blue eyes piercing into his.

She had come into the living room, sat down with them and after a few pleasantries, quietly demanded that she be allowed to have the **children on Sundays “for their own good.”**

“This community is small and tight, Michael. You've known this from the day you started dating Karen, fifteen years ago. I know you are angry with God. I know you won't listen to what I'm saying, either. But the children will need to be accepted into the community, the school. With the other children. And if you forbid them to be a part of the only community gathering place we have, they will be shunned by the children AND the parents. Trust me in this—I've lived here all my life; my family has been here since the 1700's.”

At this point, she had turned to plead with her daughter.

“Karen? You know what I'm saying is true. Yes, it's a backwoods, clique-driven village, but it is what I say.”

Karen had stood up for her. With her. In spite of his protests. And eventually, **he'd conceded that what they were saying was true.**

It was hard to believe that such a place still existed in this modern time, but the families that populated this village had lived here for over 200 years, passing down farms and homes and properties from parent to child **all that time. The James' had been accepted warmly into the community** because of Anne and Karen (a daughter come home!), and even because they remembered Mike from years ago.

But he was beginning to feel a distance brewing between the people and himself; he knew that, too. And all because he wasn't there at the church steps bright and early Sunday mornings.

He'd used the excuse of his work up until now: getting settled into his computer business, nationwide phone meetings, and time zone differences—but it was growing very, very thin. He realized that. And as angry as he was with the church and God as a whole, he couldn't fight the whole community.

Bitterly, he crumpled the paper up in his hand and tossed it towards the wastebasket.

It missed.

He stood and stared at it for a while.

There's my life, he thought. *Nothing but a wadded-up has-been, tossed at the trash.*

And I even missed that.

He bent to retrieve the paper and toss it where it belonged.

"No," he swore to himself. "I WILL NOT fall back into the lies from those people!" Two strides took him to his office chair, and he fell into it. Hard.

"Not in Tennessee, and certainly not here.

"Lies. All of it: lies. About prayer. About healing. About 'how much He cares for you.' And where did it all get us? Where did all my hours at that church and tithing and 'toeing the line' and even being a blasted Deacon, for crying out loud... Where did it get us when trouble came? Here! In NoWhere, with a dead bank account, a dead baby, a broken-down old house and a wife that's never here.

"Not for the children. Not for ME."

He shook his fist at the ceiling, then cringed and drew it back.

Just in case....

"No. No more nonsense; no more fantasies and lies. Not in MY house. Not while they're under MY roof.

He thought back to the agreement he'd just signed, the path he'd just decided to take.

These were the real people. This was the real world. This wasn't a Fairytale.



Built in 1798, Breinigsburg had historically accommodated its wealthier families centrally, circling their mansions around the old stone **First Church, and allowing servant's quarters to be built out and beyond** the Centre Square of Old Town. This resulted in a modern-day, hodge-podge of aging mansions and tiny, crumbling bungalows on the east side of the village proper. It was in these smaller homes that both the James family and Nana lived.

The majority of houses were found in this part of town, although some were beginning to be built on the other side of the River. And a new apartment building was going up near the high school. The strangers and newcomers who moved into these newer establishments were generally frowned on, having no family ties or history to boast of. Most who did try to shoehorn into the population found themselves leaving again within a few years.

The Village District boasted a total of four streets running north-south through the center, and another three streets running east-west. The middle one of these three, commonly known as Main Street, (although the actual road was called **Freidrich's Drive**) was comprised of **Mr. Schmidt's General and Grocery Store**, a few Mom & Pop stores, **Napoliano's Pizza**, a used-book store and a tiny, one-room Library. And a bank.

The opposite side of the street had a Realtor's office, Spinky's Bar and Pub (with rooms to rent on the upper floor). A newspaper office and the Quality Thrift store that spread out the entire rest of the block. The police station and firehouse were situated not far from the school, one block south of Main, on Cowpath Road

Tippery Elementary School, which was where the children were heading, was conveniently less than a block away from the James' house, preventing them from crossing traffic—should there be any. Its playground wasn't much, but it was somewhere, anywhere, outside of Mike's direct sphere of influence.

"Why is Daddy so angry all the time, Hanna?" Evan dragged the toes of his shoes, each in turn, as they walked along the sidewalk, making a really cool sound. She didn't have the heart to bring up the damage it was doing to them. He'd already had a rough day.

"I think he's still sad, Squirt."

"Sad about what, Hanna?"

Sigh.

She ticked the reasons off on her fingers, at least the ones she'd figured out. "The move. The money. The house. The Village. The car. His job. Mom's job. The bills. Lots about the bills." That's what he complained the most about, anyway.

"Oh. And baby Keith."

The dragging sound had been replaced by the tap, tap, tap of a stick he'd picked up along the curb.

"Do you think he'll ever be happy again, Hanna?"

"I don't know, Squirt."

"He doesn't like me anymore." This last came with a trembly voice again.

"Does he like you?"

"He likes you, Evan. He just... has a hard time keeping his temper these days."

She turned to him and knelt down eye-to-eye.

"He loves you, Squirt. Don't you ever forget that."

Now if I can only convince myself ...

"Did you ever get to see baby Keith, Hanna?"

"Once."

"How 'cum only once? Didn't you like him?"

"Yes, I liked him. I just—didn't get to go back."

She reached over and scrubbed his head with her knuckles, smiling at him. Well. Grimacing, anyway.

"I had to take care of you, didn't I?"

Tears started to spring up, and she stood up, fiercely chasing them away again.

Oh, yes—she remembered that one visit to Keith.



It had been a long ride, and then a scary drive down the Surekill Expressway. Hanna wasn't sure that was what Nana had called it, but that's what Daddy did. Cars drove so fast, and they'd weave in and out and all around them so suddenly, Dad was swearing the whole time. And shaking his fist at the windshield. She'd closed her eyes at that part of the ride and held onto her seat belt for dear life, until they finally got off the exit and entered the slower traffic to the hospital.

Even there, everything was scary. It was such an enormous, cold building. They got lost finding the right elevator. Then they got lost finding the right hallway on the floor they did get off on. Dad had come for her by himself, leaving Mom with the baby. **And by the time he'd finally found the right place to dump Hanna off, he'd disappeared again almost immediately.**

Said he needed a coffee to calm back down.

Hanna herself was trembling, but he didn't seem to notice.

The room was filled with nurses frowning at her, holding a finger to their lips to make sure she stayed quiet. One finally smiled and took her hand, leading her over to where Mom was sitting quietly beside a clear-sided bassinet.

She had never seen her mother look like this before. Her face was gaunt and white; her eyes had dark circles under them and were all red. When she stood up to greet her daughter, her clothes hung on her, and she almost looked like the bag ladies that used to beg for money on the street corners in Tennessee.

Karen had smiled a little at Hanna, and given her a weak hug, but **her mother's voice seemed so far away**—like she was speaking from somewhere else. **It only added to Hanna's fear.**

When she took a peek into the bassinet, she'd almost cried out! There were tubes and wires attached to the baby everywhere, hooked up to beeping and blinking lights on strange-looking machines. He was the **tiniest thing she'd ever seen, looking more like a baby monkey than the chubby infants Mom used to play with at her daycare job in Jackson.**

The nurses had only allowed her to stay with Mom for fifteen minutes. Dad paced the waiting room in front of her after that, never really talking to her. **Just dumb stuff. Questions he didn't want answers to. And his phone kept ringing, so most of the time he wasn't talking to her anyway.**

He'd gotten really mad when she'd begged to go home after only an hour or so. He'd been allowed back into the ICU room for his hourly visit, and it had taken her the entire fifteen minutes to work up the nerve to ask. But the whole experience had terrified her.

She just wanted to go back to Nana.

And comfort.

And peace.

Who were these two people who said they were her parents? She **didn't know them**, not anymore. They were nothing like they used to be. These were strangers, who talked differently, acted differently, treated her differently.

She'd cried all the way back home. Dad had stopped in front of Nana's house and **yelled at her to "get out."** Then **driven off again.**

Mike and Karen had stopped talking to their children on the phone after that, too. The phone would ring, and they could hear Nana **talking for just a few minutes. Then she'd hang up and stand still for a little** while with her eyes closed. Her lips would move like she was praying, only the words never made any sense when Hanna heard them.

If Hanna had come to the phone before they'd hung up, hoping to hear her mother's voice, Nana would just smile down at her. She'd hold her until she was finished, then give her a big hug. Always telling her how much her mother and father loved them.

Really.

Really. They did.



"Race you to the playground!" Hanna suddenly shouted, taking off at a run. She needed to stop thinking, stop remembering.

Squeals of laughter followed her, and she finally smiled, relieved that **he'd forgotten the fight and was thinking about the good things to play** with ahead of him.

If she'd looked behind her, she'd have realized that wasn't exactly what had happened.

Twenty feet behind her now, Evan stood holding both hands to his mouth, so Hanna wouldn't turn around. **Giggling more quietly**, he waved at the little boy peering out at him from the middle of a bush across the street. The boy stepped out, waved back with a huge grin, looked up at the tall, white figure towering next to him for a moment. Then they both **stepped back into where they'd come from.**

Smiling in delight at the secret sighting, Evan prayed happily, **"Thank You, Jesus. Oh! I forgot to tell Keith I love him—would You tell him for me, please?"**

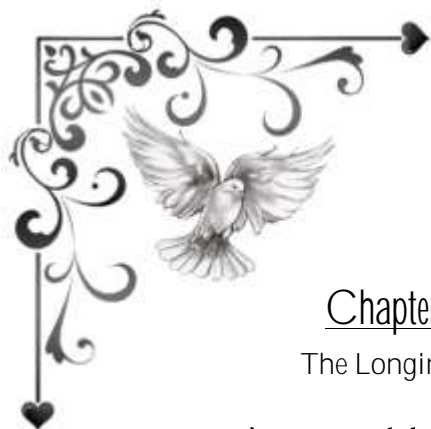
A second thought came.

"And tell Sophie and Isaac, too—okay?"

A Garden Enclosed

He took off at a dead run after his sister, holding a special secret
in his heart from the Lord. Maybe tomorrow she'd find out, too?
Well, maybe the next time she talked to Him, anyway.





Chapter Four

The Longing for Peace

Karen James' car entered the driveway with a sigh. It was late. She hadn't had time to plan a meal this morning and no money to go buy something quick. John's 'I'm too sick' call-out at the Store had kept her two hours longer than she wanted, but it didn't seem to matter why anymore... Just that she was coming home past supper time.

She was sure her husband hadn't taken the time to do anything about it, either.

The smell of macaroni and cheese met her at the door, and the pot simmering on the stove signaled hot dogs cooking. Poor kid. As if she didn't already do most of my jobs around here.

"Hanna! Is that stuff ready yet?" Mike's voice came barreling out the window. "I've got a phone conference in ten minutes." He came busting through the office door the same time that Karen entered the kitchen—and the look on his face told her everything she'd feared.

Yes, there would be Mike to pay for her tardiness ...



The adults' argument had opened dozens of doors in the spirit world, and it had taken a true battle to bring safety back into the house.

"Thank you, my friends." Kamali thudded his fist once against his chest, his days of warfare coming back to the surface. "The King is calling her to His Garden, and I must go."

He turned to Aylward. "He has appointed Rustom, Thrythwig, and Kimble to stand guard over the house with you. I don't believe the Enemy will attempt another attack while they are here. All portals have

been closed now and covered in His blood—Adonai has assigned a small contingent around the yard perimeter, as well.”

He turned his gaze to the east, two blocks down from where they stood. There, in a tiny bedroom filled with shelves crammed every which way with books, an elderly woman sat bent over a small corner desk. She held her hands folded together at her forehead and spoke intensely in a language only the angels understood. A brilliant glow surrounded her, and angels were rapidly filling bowls with the spoken prayers and traveling, swift as lightning, straight up to the Throne Room.

“She has covered us well, Kamali,” a massive angel replied. “There will be no lack. He will see to it.”

Each of the four Warriors slid their swords into intricately crafted scabbards at their sides, folded their arms, and took up positions of watchfulness as Kamali slipped into Hanna’s room.



Hanna could hear the quiet click of the numbers changing on her alarm clock again.

“I think it’s safe to go back to bed, now, Squirt. I heard Dad go back in his office, and Mom’s going to be coming upstairs soon. You don’t want to be in here if she goes to check on you—you’ll hurt her feelings.”

She gave him a quick squeeze and pushed a little on his back.

“It’s okay. Really. They aren’t mad at you ...”

Evan’s little body heaved one last, shuddering sigh.

“Okay, Hanna.”

He swung his legs off the side of her bed and padded softly to the bedroom door.

“I wish they’d stop yelling, Hanna. Don’t you?”

She didn’t dare let any of the hot words that came boiling up in her mouth spill out, so she just smiled at him and nodded at the door again. With another sigh, he left, closing it with a squeaky ‘click.’



The quick tap, tap of her mother’s work shoes marched up the stairs. Hannah heard Evan’s bedroom door creaking open, and after a few moments, shut again. She knew her mother was hesitating, knowing that

the children had heard them arguing. How could they help it in this house? Suddenly, like a little child, Hanna wanted her to check in on her, too. Wanted to connect again somehow.

But Mom never did anymore.
Nor did she tonight.

Hanna wasn't sure if her mother had just stopped caring? Her heart told her she hadn't. Or if she was just ... what? Not willing to even try to talk to her about the changes in their lives? Too afraid to look in Hanna's eyes and see the stored-up anger in them? Whatever the case was, the squeak of a floorboard announced that Mom had made her decision, and the tap, tap, tap went in the direction of her parent's bedroom.

Hanna relaxed her shoulders back into place and lay down. They'd been sitting in the near dark while their parents fought, with only the nightlight glowing under the door to see by.

She lay facing the thin, golden strip of light, exhausted by the tensions of yet another day. And fell asleep.



Safe in her bedroom, Karen carefully unfolded the crumpled flyer she'd rescued from the office trashcan and smoothed it out on her lap. Her mother had given it to her, and she'd stuck it into her handful of mail as they'd talked, forgetting what she had done. Mike had found it lying between the grocery store ads and the electric bill and had flown into the air over it after supper.

"Your mother just never gives up, does she?" he'd blasted her. "I've told her, and I've told you—there's no need to keep filling these kid's heads with stories about a God who could care less about them when the going gets rough, and you need some real help."

Tears were forming in her eyes as they'd appealed to him to stop.
Please.

Just stop.

It wasn't like she hadn't had her heart raked over these same coals a hundred times before.

He was just so bitter. And angry. Always so angry.

Yes, she was still crushed that God allowed her children to die. She'd cut herself off from Him, too, living in a suffocating void of apathy for months now. Years, really. Her heart still carried the barely covered-

over scars from the two miscarriages, not to mention the horror of losing Keith.

Newly married, they'd expected to have children one after another. Karen's sisters all had large families, new babies born on a regular schedule. Hanna had raised their hopes by coming before their first year together was out.

Waiting for five long years after Hanna was born had dashed them again—but the Lord had finally blessed them with Evan.

The next child came quickly but barely made it to three months in her womb. Mike had been the only one she'd told.

But she knew.

Every day she knew.

Hanna had just been entering First Grade at the time, and Karen had tried to relieve some of her pain by volunteering to read to her classmates every Friday afternoon. Still just a baby himself, Evan tagged along, sitting quietly by her side as she read, playing with a variety of toys she kept tucked in her purse for that purpose. After the story, the children doted on him, lugging him around, nearly too heavy for most of them, but proud as peacocks that he cooed and giggled with their attentions.

Waiting another three years for the hope of their next child had made her anxious; losing that child after a difficult, five-month pregnancy had driven her nearly to despair. Her heart torn again, she withdrew inside herself even farther, now working for a local day-care where she could **salve her broken heart holding other people's babies**. Evan had been in his own class, compliant again with his mother's choices, content to romp and play with the other preschoolers.

Karen had virtually given up hope by the time Keith was conceived. The loss of the first two babies hadn't touched Mike's heart like it had hers; there had been nothing yet for him to see, to experience, to miss once they were gone. He had been rising in his company at the time, and now he was truly making progress—and his attention was being eaten up in places other than his home.

Within the year after the second baby died, Mike hit the financial jackpot, and they'd moved into an expensive, restored antebellum home in Jackson, Tennessee situated on a parcel of four acres, just beyond where the railroad crossed the tall viaduct over Market Street. Both were driving new cars and spoiled by the turn of events in their lives; Karen began

wearing the latest fashions and dressing their children like magazine models.

As their income increased, so had the attention of certain well-placed men in the church hierarchy. The couple had been invited to join more and more of the programs and church-life functions. For Karen, a place with those elite singers in the Choir, and a supervisory role in the **Children's Ministry**. For Mike, a prized place among the Deacons.

Life was good. The ugly past was being compensated. God was smiling on them now, so they must be doing something right. The news of her pregnancy swept through the church, everyone congratulating them and promising to pray.

"Look at all you're doing for the Lord, Mike," Emmett Finch had roared in his ear one day. Head of the Board of Finances, he'd been standing in the massive vestibule of the building with the young couple, listening to Mike voice worries about this newest child on the way.

"Look at all the time you two youngin's are putting in here at the church. Don't worry, Man. You're getting your reward for all the hard work you've been doing for the Lord God Almighty!"

The day the baby had been born, and the heart-wrenching news of his illness made known, the church had placed Baby Keith on the prayer chain. News of his progress was always first on the list of Announcements Pastor made before the sermon every Sunday. But the weeks dragged on. Prayers didn't seem to be accomplishing anything, and some had started whispering that there must be some hidden sin in Karen or Mike's life, or God wouldn't be ignoring them this way.

Did you know she'd lost two babies already? Maybe there was trouble somewhere. Maybe there was trouble between them. Oh! You don't suppose there's anything funny going on between Karen and the choirmaster, do you? I've heard ... And the whisperings grew more furtive. And the distance between the young couple and the popular congregants wider.

The day Keith died, Pastor Davenport had called the hospital from his church office in Tennessee and offered a long, formal prayer for God's help. But Mike's heart had already been sealed against God and His apparent lack of concern and was untouched by the flowery phrases and the rise and fall of the intonation droning on and on over his speakerphone. He eventually lay the phone on the care-worn, waiting room seat he and his wife had taken refuge on and walked away.

Karen had simply stared down at her hands, clenched around a white lace handkerchief someone had thrust at her, and tuned out the monotone of **Davenport's** voice, counting the scuff marks on the vinyl floor to keep her mind occupied with anything but what was before her.

The God she had known as a child had been slowly becoming a **distant stranger**. She realized she didn't know Who He was anymore, now. Not at all.

And the God that her husband had begun to worship had been cruel.

Again.



The sound of Mike moving around the downstairs rooms brought Karen's attention back to the paper in her hand. She wasn't ready to throw it away yet. She'd been having some pleasant talks over tea with her mother lately, and the pair had been slowly reconnecting. And although she wasn't in any way prepared to forgive God and talk to Him again at this point, she did feel the children would benefit from the good people at her old church, here in town. She had fond memories of many of them. Some had even come to the house when they had first moved back. Mostly friends of **Mom's**, to be sure. All of her close friends had married and moved to larger cities, just as she had.

But these older saints had watched her grow up from a baby, taught her in Sunday School, sang in the choir with her, come to her wedding, and gathered around the whole family when Dad died.

These were good people. Simple people. Most of them were living **on Social Security, without a penny extra to their names, but it didn't seem to matter to them**. They all acted as though somehow there was some reserve of treasure they dipped in to meet their needs. Some hidden bank account that never ran dry. You never heard a peep from them about not having this or that, even though they all dressed straight out of Walmart and the Goodwill Store—that was easy to tell.

She'd forgotten how to live like that.

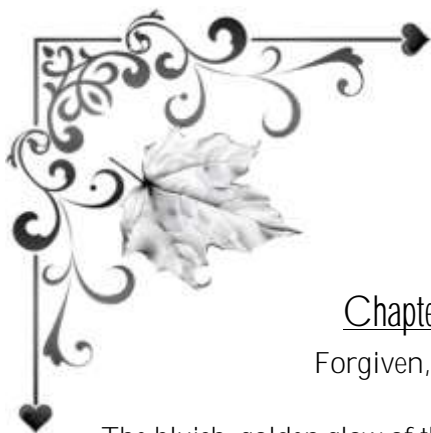
Simple. As though there was no one in the world you needed to impress with yourself.

No, she wasn't ready to dismiss these dear old souls she had grown up with, just because of what had happened down in Tennessee.

A Garden Enclosed

A pang of homesickness stirred in her belly, and she hugged the flyer to herself, wondering how she was going to pave the way for this.





Chapter Five

Forgiven, Forgotten

The bluish, golden glow of the Gate grew stronger and stronger, and soon pierced Hannah’s eyelids enough to draw her attention. She opened her eyes, expecting that her mother had let the hall light into her room and come to see her after all—and was overjoyed to find, instead, that she lay just before the Garden itself.

Kamali smiled at her and offered one long arm to help her up. He stood at his full, seven-foot-tall stature, his expression friendly—except for the way his eyebrows peaked together in concern. The battle at her home had been fierce, and he wondered just how much she understood of it.

If any.

The past twelve hours of struggle with her parents were swiftly forgotten in her delight at seeing him. Hanna smiled, all fear and hesitation of being in this place gone.

“Hello, again! Kamali, right?”

As she rose to her feet, she realized she was dressed again in the white shift. It seemed just a little longer this time, and there was a pretty ruffle running around the hem. The red heart was still there, and the key was around her neck.

She looked up into Kamali’s face and a mischievous thought crossed her mind.

“So ... when are you going to tell me the ‘story?’”

“Story of what, young one?” he dodged her question.

It was embarrassing to remember the efforts he had gone through trying to craft an appearance he felt would be more approachable to her. He had assumed three or four different body types,

questioning whichever angels were near him about their opinions. The others had insisted that he was fine, just as he was, but he hadn't listened to them.

After eons of other, more war-like assignments, El Elyon had approached him nearly fifteen Earth years ago for a "special assignment," as he had put it. Kamali had been honored and agreed immediately. But it was his great surprise to find out just what had been in the Creator's mind: he'd been assigned to a tiny, human girl-baby as a Guardian angel!

Even so, knowing the Master's ways were higher even than the angels', he had become content to leave his former post.

"There must be more to this assignment than first meets the eye, Oh Yah." Kamali soon realized. "I accept with eagerness to see what is in Your Great Heart."

He'd been watching over her all these years, doing his best to protect her from the evil ones' arrows, petitioning Yah for any needs that he knew could be fulfilled. It had pained him to see the mighty battles that her family had gotten embroiled in lately. At times, it had literally pained him, as he gathered Warrior angels to help him fight off vicious attacks on the humans, allowed to act because of Hanna's or her parent's sin.

Didn't they know what they were doing? Didn't they understand the action/reaction laws Yahweh had established firmly, even before He formed the Earth and its inhabitants?

Apparently not.

He still hadn't the foggiest idea about humans, really—not inside, not in their heads. Many were the times he'd fondly remembered comparative *easy*: the General Warrior Ranks and battle in the Second Heavens!

But Hanna had been his delight to serve, and this was going to be his first time plainly appearing to her—so, he had been anxious to put Hanna at ease. He had thought appearing more her own age, just in the beginning, would be a good way to do that.

Palamin had tried to warn him. Even Yeshua had chuckled a bit when he flew past Him, nervous to keep his first appointment with her.

Obviously, his attempt hadn't made the impression he'd been aiming for.

"Of what do you speak, young one?" he repeated, trying to make a better one now. "Did you have a question for me?"

Hanna grinned again and pointed back to the mossy rock where they had first met.

“You. Pretending to be a boy. I knew something wasn’t right, right from the beginning. You did look like you were trying to walk on stilts there for a while,” she shot back cheekily. “But then, most boys look ridiculous at that age. Look at my dumb cousin, Martin.”

She wasn’t paying attention to the color moving up his cheeks.

“Boys.” She chattered on. “I make it a point never to bother with the pests.”

She wasn’t naturally unkind. But a few years ago, Hanna and her friends had deemed teasing a useful “cool tool.” Tease. Even make fun of someone; but do it laughing, and you don’t have to believe you’re hurting them. That had been the game.

It had started in Tennessee, where she and her school chums found great delight in watching the results of their sharp words and quick wit. Even the church kids had joined in on the game. At least, the ones she’d hung out with. The DK’s—Deacons’ Kids.

Lately, though, she’d been noticing that it didn’t work so well on the kids around here, especially the First Church kids. They DID tend to take it seriously, and she’d seen it even drive away a friend or two in the last months.

Something inside of her started to feel uncomfortable.

Kamali’s expression never changed, but now she could see a faint red creeping into his cheeks.

Uh, oh—what’s this? He actually looks like he’s blushing!

She got a little worried now. Maybe teasing wasn’t such a good idea here, either.

I wonder what I said?

I didn’t know angels COULD blush!

She started thinking back about what she’d just said, and looked down at the ground, wishing she’d kept quiet. Wishing he’d at least say something ...

“I see,” Kamali spoke finally, making a deep bow to her. “I will remember from now on. Please forgive me for resembling a ‘pest,’ as you say.”

His words stung her, unexpectedly, and she felt heat rising in her cheeks. She searched his eyes to make sure he wasn’t mocking her back. (He wasn’t.) And licked her lips nervously.

“Well,” she ducked her head and muttered. “I accept your apology. Of course. And I’m sorry if I made you feel bad, too.”

Wanting to escape the whole exchange, she grabbed the key from around her neck and pressed it into the heart on her frock. The Garden gate began to swing open.



Hanna wasn’t really surprised when Kamali didn’t follow her this time, and some of the joy of being back in the Garden again faded away. It was even a little eerie being alone, at least in her mind.

She followed the path straight ahead, looking for the circle of buttercups again. She wanted to see if the tree had grown, and how much. Soon, she found what she thought was the correct place. But the flowers weren’t bright yellow anymore; they were a rather sickly shade of green. The tree had grown—it was nearly as tall as she was—but there was something definitely wrong with it. The leaves were about the size of her hand in places, each with five “fingers” of leaf with veins running through them. She’d seen leaves like this before on a maple tree, but she’d never seen one that looked like this.

Not everywhere, but here and there, a leaf had lost its green, and was now clear. She held one up (she was afraid to pick it) and could see her hand right through it. The veins that ran inside the leaf were black, and the edges were a little crumpled looking. In this place of beauty and perfection, it all stood out like a tiny nightmare in the middle of a wonderful dream.

Hanna was so shocked, she sat down cross-legged on the path in front of the tree and cupped her head in her hands, just staring. The leaf she’d just handled came floating down and landed in front of her on the path.

She’d almost started to cry when a soft bump nudged her left elbow, and another tapped her right—and when she took her hands away, she saw that a family of doe-eyed bunnies had encircled her. They looked up at her with sad eyes, cocked their heads, and twizzled their whiskers back and forth. Once she’d picked her head up and cleared her lap, they proceeded to fill it, and snuggle down with her, bringing her a living blanket of wriggling bodies. One baby stood as high on his hind legs as he could reach, and sniffed and snuffed at her chin until, no

longer able to contain it, she broke out in laughter in spite of the sorry sight in front of her.

This was crazy!

“But I’m still confused, Lord,” she spoke aloud.

“Where are You, anyway?”

“Standing here, waiting for you to invite Me in,” came the soft reply. With a single movement, He scooped up one of the largest bunnies and sat down beside her, then reached over to pick up the fallen leaf.

“They don’t do this very often here.” He began. “Fall, I mean. Looks like a disease of some sort. I don’t allow that here, you know.” He turned to look her in the face.

“Seems to be a problem. Can you think what might have happened?”

For the second time that morning, a blush began to creep up her face. He was being kind—and she didn’t deserve it.

“I ... I think ... ” Her hands suddenly got very busy stroking the fur of the bunnies.

“Yes,” she sighed, but kept her eyes focused on her lap.

“I know.”

“Mhmmm?” He prodded softly.

“I didn’t mean to hurt him; I was just playing with him.”

Silence.

“Well, he *did* look silly, wobbling around on his legs!” Her embarrassment started to give way to self-defense. “Why didn’t he just come like he really looks, anyway?”

“What did I tell you sustains this Garden, Hanna?” the soft answer came.

She knew. But she wouldn’t swallow her pride and form the word.

“I see...” came his soft voice.

He held the leaf up in front of her and blew. It grew larger and larger, until it was the size of a small television screen. And when He took his hand away again, it hung suspended in the air.

“Watch.”

On the screen she could see a fierce battle going on, like something out of an old Roman gladiator movie. Angels dressed in armor, complete with helmets and metallic shoes were wielding long, heavy-looking swords that sliced through the middles of ugly, dark

creatures. The creatures right around them didn't have weapons, but instead, spit and did other more unspeakable things to the angels. Most of it bounced off their armor. But sometimes it would land, and a gash would appear where it touched them.

Other, larger creatures stood farther back; these were shooting arrows at whatever they could hit. Again, most of these were warded off with shields, but once in a while, one would strike, and that angel would fall.

The battle was hard to watch, even though she'd seen TV movies like this. She knew the TV scenes were just actors and could laugh it off because of that. But the more she watched this, the more her stomach hurt every time an arrow pierced, or a blow landed.

Suddenly, one figure rose tall in the middle of the fiercest fighting—tall and white-haired, he had half a dozen creatures hanging from him, spitting and sliming him. One creature was hanging from the back of his head, pulling it back to expose the angel's neck—and in the distance, she could see another one taking aim with his enormous, black bow ...

"NOOOO!!" she cried out loud. "No, No, NO!"

The screen went dark. The leaf fell and lay on the ground again, leaf-sized.

Silence rose up around the two. And as though a signal had been given, the bunnies slowly jumped back onto the path and hopped away. The baby reached up and gave her chin a little kiss before leaving, but soon it followed the rest.

Tears were streaming down Hanna's face by this time, and there was a terrible, tight feeling in her chest. She had no idea what she had just watched or why it happened, but something inside of her knew it had been her fault.

"That was him." Her voice sounded dull and tired. "Wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"Was this before he became my guardian angel?" Hope stirred just a little. He *was* a military angel before; didn't she remember that?

The silence waited for this answer... Then, "No."

The tightness in her heart shot a pang through her.

"Did it strike him?" The whisper barely came—but she had to know.

Jesus picked up the leaf and arranged it to viewing size again.

“Watch.”

The view resumed from a different angle; now they were looking down from above. What she hadn't seen before were two slender figures, dressed in modern-day clothes, standing. And facing each other. One seemed to be oblivious to what was going on around her and was blithely chattering non-stop at the second one. The other one seemed *very* aware—but wasn't paying any attention to the first one's blathering. Instead, streams of color were rising from her heart, soaring high into the sky and even farther.

Soon, other streams of color came flowing in from outside the battle circle. And as they all joined into a heavier flood, the battle began to slow, slower now... and stop. The ugly creature dropped from Kamali's head. The archer was split in half by an undetected sword. And the rest fled in terror. Within moments, there remained nothing to be seen but a band of angels and the two small girls.

The view came back around, and soon all that could be seen on the tiny screen was Hanna's face—and one of the children from First Church. They were students in the same school, although the other girl was barely older than Evan. Hanna had been flinging “teasing” remarks at her one day and had been puzzled why the kid didn't respond at all. She'd never even spoken back to her.

Now she knew why.

A thousand questions flew through her mind, but she couldn't grab one long enough to ask it.

“If you'll remember,” he came to her rescue. “This was just weeks before you accepted Me into your heart, Hanna. That's why Kamali was there. Even in that condition, he was always there protecting you in your innocence and ignorance. You are, just now, learning the depths of right and wrong according to My Kingdom. And the Father was showing you Grace.

“Little Pattie has been Mine nearly since she could talk—and her parents both understand the unseen world that surrounds you. She knew enough to start asking for My and Father's help; thus, the band of angels that joined Kamali.

“Innocent, ignorant—or not. It was you that opened the portal for that battle.”

She felt him looking at her now, even though her face was buried back in her hands. In her mind, **her father's figure overshadowed his**—and she assumed his **demeanor would be identical...**

She knew there was nowhere to hide or run to avoid it.

So—taking a deep breath Hanna raised her head and turned it in His direction.

And steeled herself.

Her father's eyes would have been boring through her; narrowed and angry in the middle of a hard, cold face.

What met her brought instant tears back to her eyes. In spite of her expectations and fears, all she saw was a face filled with sweet, unbounded, overwhelming acceptance and eyes that poured out into her own.

A face of Love.

There was that word again. There was that idea that formed his Garden, motivated his actions, and was displayed in full abundance all over him and this place.

Love.

He smiled, and tenderly pushed a few stray strands of hair from her eyes. “You were once loved this way, Dear. And least, to the extent that human parents can give.” He **cupped her chin in his hand.** “It’s My desire to teach it to you again. And to teach you how to give it to others.” His voice was soft and kind and gentle. “Particularly your Mom and Dad.”

“You were once the sunshine of the Day Care, you know.”

That was far away, long ago—and a million tears in the past. And Hanna wasn’t ready to go back there. Not yet. Not today, at least.

She pushed it away, looked up into his face and asked, “What do I do now?”

“Tell him you’re sorry again.” He smiled, having planted at least a seed. “And really mean it this time.”

“Will You forgive me?”

“Of course. I was only waiting for you to ask.”

Out of nowhere, the powerful snort of a horse met Hanna’s ears, and she jerked her head around to find it. A few feet behind them stood Kamali, head held high, a slight waver plucking at the corner of his mouth as he suppressed a grin of pleasure. Beside him, bobbing its head up and down like it understood the entire situation, was the most

enormous, magnificent stallion she had ever seen—even in the colorful pages of her *Horses of All the World* book.

Her mouth dropped open as she looked way, way up to meet its eyes. The white giant nodded once more to greet her and started to walk towards where she and Adonai were rising from the path.

He knew. The horse *knew*—Hanna was sure of it. She glanced over her shoulder to see if she could wheedle an answer.

“Forgiven is forgotten in My world.” Jesus seemed to be suddenly busy with the leaves of the tree beside them.

“Just don’t forget Kamali.”

Humor restored, she laughed out loud at his evasion.

“Go ahead.” He waved her on. “Don’t be afraid of him. He’d like to say hello.”

Encouraged by his words, she stood still while the huge beast approached.

“His name is Regemmelech.” Kamali finally spoke. “Scratch his forehead, right above his eyes—he really likes that.”

The huge creature lowered his head to her and closed his eyes in anticipation of the special attention. With a giggle, Hanna reached up and scratched vigorously.

“He’s soooo beautiful!” she breathed to the others. “Is he yours, Jesus?”

“M-hmmm. He and I have been friends for a very, very long time.” Jesus stepped to her side and patted the horse’s neck affectionately.

“Shall we take her for a ride, Old Friend?”

With one swift move, He mounted up on Regemmelech’s back and smiled down at Hanna. “As soon as you’re finished, that is.”

She was never sure afterward which one of them was the more shy and awkward, but she turned to Kamali then, flung her arms around his waist and asked him in her most earnest voice, “Oh, Kamali! I’m so, so, so sorry! *Will you please forgive me?*”

Certainly not accustomed to such a display of emotion, Kamali patted her a few times on the arm, murmuring, “Of course, Little One, of course.”

Adonai’s deep, hearty laugh saved the day.

“Pax et caritas restituerentur!” Another delighted belly laugh rang through the air. “Hanna, you can look that one up later.

“Come, give me your hand.”

With a strong pull, she was mounted astride with Him, seated just in front. A sudden thought made her look down—and she saw that he had added a pair of wide-legged pants to her outfit and shrunk the shift to the length of a top.

A top with pockets!

She plunged both hands into them, grinning from ear to ear.

She started to notice other things, too.

“There’re no reins, no saddle. What do you hang on to?” She panicked a little. “What do I hang on to?!”

She could feel Adonai’s warm, sweet breath on her hair as He circled his arms around her. “Hold on like this,” He said, showing her where in the horse’s mane to grip.

“Don’t worry about falling off. I’ll be holding you, too. Besides,” his voice smiled. “A horse from My country would never be so careless as to let a rider fall off.”

“Onward!” he called, and immediately they were moving down the path. Soon, the pace quickened until it nearly took Hanna’s breath away, and she could feel swathes of her hair streaming behind her. For a moment, she was tempted to be frightened, until she realized that she was resting on the animal’s back in complete calm. As easily as sitting in an over-stuffed chair, she sat and watched the land fly past. Massive muscles tensed and relaxed beneath her, but there was never a dip, jolt, or stumble in Regemmelech’s stride.

“Are you enjoying the ride?” the Lord’s voice broke into her amazed thoughts. “We’ll be heading over in that direction now.” He lifted his right arm and pointed to the east. “There’s something I’d like to show you over that way. I think you’ll really enjoy it.”

The last time she’d heard those words from Him, she had indeed “enjoyed it”—a concert from the animals and that wonderful fountain!

She nodded her head and sighed.

Who would have ever thought such a wonderful place could exist?

Who would have ever thought that I could find it?

She leaned back against Adonai’s chest and tried guessing what he might have in store for them this time.





Chapter Six

Fish Stories

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 snuggled 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' yourn, 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.





Chapter Seven

Picnic, Anyone?

Oh, he caught her all right—and immediately the two of them sank straight to the bed of the river! Down, down, below the bottom of the boat, below the current. Straight down until Adonai's feet rested on the rock-strewn floor. He was holding her wrapped tightly in His arms, her head pressed to his chest, eyes closed tight. As Hanna's mind caught up to the fact that they were *under* water, she started to gasp—and remembered just in time not to draw liquid into her lungs.

Violently, she pushed away from his chest, panicking all over again—only to meet his smile and calm.

Wait a minute! she suddenly realized. *HE isn't struggling to breathe. He's just standing there, relaxed. Like he'd stopped for a rest on the path in the Garden.*

Plewww! The air she'd been holding in her lungs escaped with a blast—and suddenly she realized that she was breathing, too.

In and out.

In and out.

Just as though she were back in the boat.

“Fun, isn't it?”

His eyes sparkled with delight as he bent over, blowing towards her. She could see a wavy pool heading away from his mouth, and then something (*If we're breathing it, how can it be real water??*) tickled her nose, split in two and wrapped around her face.

“If you practice,” he informed her, “you can talk to the whales like this. Ones that are miles and miles away. You just have to add sounds to it,” and He proceeded to demonstrate. When these bubbles reached her,

they held the long, moaning cries of a baleen whale that washed in and out of her ears as they floated past.

About then, the wicker picnic basket came floating down alongside them. (She'd dropped it in the jump) And Jesus reached out and snagged the handle with his arm.

"Are you hungry yet?" he asked. "There's a nice little rock formation over that way—looks just like a table and two benches." He unwrapped her legs from around his waist and set her down.

Without looking at her, he replied, "Yes, I know. 'This can't be happening.'" He turned to grin at her again. "But it is." He held his hand out to her then. "I'll explain as we walk."

"Come."

He explained a lot of things as they walked. How they were again in a different dimension than her world. That nothing could harm her here, no matter what happened. That water in this place was made of different elements, and had many more properties, than the water on Earth.

Most of the time, she didn't have a clue what he meant, but the fascination of being able to walk on the bottom of a river was enough to keep her satisfied, and soon they reached the rocky settee.

"I've invited a few friends to come join us," he said. "I hope you don't mind." He set the basket down and pulled from it a red-and-white checkered tablecloth, two plates, a small loaf of bread and several pieces of fruit. There was another container, filled with an assortment of some kind of grainy cracker, but that wasn't put on the table.

The rocky bench wasn't cold, clammy or hard—but more like she was sitting on a soft sponge. Hanna had just seated herself when something hard and pointy ran into her arm. It didn't hurt, but it startled her. She pulled away from the pressure, and found herself looking into the large, black eyes of a huge fish. It had a long, slender, olive-green body with yellow-white dots in neat little rows, all down its body. Fully as long as her entire arm, the fish looked at her like an expectant puppy.

From the corner of her eye, she noticed more of the dark-bodied creatures gathering around them in a semi-circle, each sporting a pair of small fins just below a gaping mouth, moving back and forth like twitchy rabbit ears.

"Oh, my!" she squealed. "Are *these* your friends?"

Hanna wasn't so sure she liked the company. She could see into those huge jaws, and nothing but row upon row of tiny, very sharp-looking teeth met her gaze.

"Hmmm, more like pan-handlers, actually." Jesus seemed awfully busy with something on his side of the rocks. "But there's plenty here for all. Reach in for that other container."

Nodding, Hanna drew it out of the basket and opened it. Taking out one of the small bits of food, she hesitated, not wanting to get her fingers anywhere near those dangerous looking mouths.

"Go ahead," he began. "He won't—"

"—hurt me, right?" Hanna grinned at him. She was beginning to like this game.

"Are you sure?"

He just raised his eyebrows at her and slowly nodded in the fish's direction.

Cautiously, she held the treat between her thumb and forefinger and extended it towards the beast. Without warning, the fish dove forward, grabbed the cracker from her hand, and swam off. In its lunge, its mouth encompassed her entire hand, and several of its teeth scraped along her fingers as it backed away.

"Ahhh!" she squealed again, flinging her hand up in the 'air.'

"It bit me!"

"Really?" He looked up with concern on his face. "How unusual! Are you sure?"

Hanna was indignant by this time. "Of course, I'm sure! Look!" and she thrust the offended part towards Him, fully expecting to see blood pouring out of a dozen cuts. Only... the skin was intact, and not a mark could be seen.

Jesus took her hand, examined it carefully, gave it a soft pat and turned back to whatever he'd been doing.

"Trust."

His voice came floating out around his shoulder. "It's an awesome thing. Once you've established that you can really, truly trust someone, why... you can follow them anywhere. Believe anything they tell you."

He twisted his head around and looked at her face, his eyes searching hers for something she didn't quite understand.

"Hanna. Do you trust me?"

The question hung between them, a door that could be opened or locked up tight.

She'd stood before this door with Him before.

Without answering, but also without looking away again, she dipped her fingers back into the container and pulled out another cracker. One more long, thoughtful look, and she turned to the next waiting fish. **It had the same response as the first one, but she didn't scream. And hardly even jumped this time. Now that she was expecting it, its teeth weren't sharp at all. They felt more like pointy, rubber spikes on her hand, like the pliant, rubber bristles of a child's hairbrush. Going down the line, one by one she handed out the favors and watched until the last one was fed and swam out of sight.**

"Yes, Lord," she turned and finally answered him. Her face was solemn, her eyes still a little bit worried. Inside, she was trembling like a leaf, willing herself to extend to her Savior what He was asking of her—to let down her guard. Walk away from the betrayals of her past. And embrace NOW.

"Jesus," she stilled her trembling and drew confidence from his gaze. "I do.

"I do trust You."



The refreshments had been tasty, and the company delightful. As soon as the last of the huge pike had swam away, another school of fish came swimming by.

Well, it was more like a *cloud* of fish. Thousands of tiny, silvery minnows came, and for the picnicker's enjoyment, **swam like miniature ballerinas floating across a vast stage, forming themselves into dozens of lovely shapes: hearts, flowers, swirling ribbons that streamed and intertwined with each other. The light filtering down from the sky above shimmered across their scales as they moved, sending flashes of color this way and that, like bursts of fireworks going off amidst the display.**

Hanna watched them in amazement, wondering how they all knew where to go, how to stay together in such a way that they could make all these designs.

Who told them how to do this?

As usual, Jesus just grinned at her unspoken question.

Next came a pair of graceful river otters. They sat at (or rather on) the table, asking politely for a treat. Then turned on their backs, clutching their biscuit between hand-like paws to nibble away on them.

One came to Hanna and hovered in front of her face, chattering away in some weasel-ish language. Hanna reached out and stroked the creature's smooth fur and handed it one more cracker. With another stream of chitty-chatters, it swam off and the other soon followed.

"She was telling you, 'You are a lovely girl, and I was so glad to meet you. And thank you very much for the food.' She has several young ones at home, and was going off to share it with them," Jesus spoke up.

He looked around in both directions, then told her, "I believe that's all the company we'll have for a while. Are you tired of being under the water? Or shall we continue on exploring?"

By this time, Hanna had forgotten that they *were* under the river surface. She thought a moment.

"I think I saw a deer up along the banks before we—well, before you— Well, you know!" she said. "Do you suppose we could find her? Would she stand and let me pet her, too?"

Before he could answer, another thought struck her, "So, how do we get out of here, anyway? Is the boat still up there? I can't see it anymore." She had seen the bottom of their craft once, when she was watching the minnows dance. But now there was no sight of anything above them, anywhere.

Jesus stood up and started folding the cloth that had covered the table. "We had no need of it anymore, and so I sent it away. Let's clean up here and move on to dry ground. So to speak," and she heard that now familiar chuckle coming from him.

She picked up the basket, and he took her arm, and soon they had floated up to break the surface of the water. He paused long enough to show her a few swimming motions for her arms and legs, and together they moved towards the shoreline. The river bottom made a gradual rise, and before long they were standing up and wading in, stepping now on tiny stones and sand until they reached the bank.

Of course, by this time she expected to be dribbling water everywhere, and she'd always hated walking around with wet clothes on.

Yuck, she thought as they emerged from the water into the air again. *This part is going to be gross*. She expected the familiar, clammy feeling of cloth sticking to her body and stringy, heavy hair clinging to her

arms and face. But things never acted the way you'd expect here, did they? In fact, it soon became apparent that whatever part of her was still under water was indeed wet—but as soon as it rose out of the water, it was immediately dry!

"I think I see her over there, Hanna," Jesus pointed off to the right of them. "Let's go find out."

He began to head off in that direction at a brisk walk, not waiting to see if she were following. When she hesitated, again musing on this strange-but-wonderful place they were exploring, he called over his shoulder, "You don't like to be wet, right? So, come on!"

Giggling, she picked up the last foot that she had drawn out of the river and shook it. A few thin streams of sand fell out of her sandals, and a pebble.

Dry as a bone.



Karen thrashed from one side to the other, moaning and groaning, caught in a recurring nightmare—unable to escape. Her out-flung arm finally struck the nightstand with a hard *thunk*—and she was freed. The images dispelled like cockroaches scattering in the light and her consciousness returned with a jolt.

She lay there panting, and finding nothing else available, used the bed sheet to wipe the sweat and tears from her face. The smell of the fabric softener helped soothe her heart, and she let the fragrant lilac scent draw in and out of her lungs for a while—until her heartbeat slowed to normal.

Why this torment still? After all this time?

The nightmare was always as vivid as the real event.

It began the night she'd woken to use the bathroom—and filled the toilet with her blood.

Miscarriage—again.

Time had started to blur what followed next. The frantic phone calls to find someone willing to come watch Hanna and Evan in the middle of the night. The careening drive to the hospital. The bustle of wheelchairs, nurses, charts, questions. The wild dash to an ER room to try to stop what was happening.

All to no effect.

Mercifully, the anesthesiologist had put her under, once it was over. “To complete the procedure,” she’d assured her.

It was here the nightmare recalled the events in absolute clarity.

She’d begun to wake up from the drugs, and as she did, her thoughts were drawn to her right arm.

I’m holding something? I can feel the weight. The baby! The baby is here, and I’m holding it now in my arm!

She had forgotten all the rest, even the reason she was there in the hospital. Filled with joy, she’d struggled to open her eyes to gaze on the precious newborn—only to be met by an empty space.

Laughter that could only be described as evil met her ears and rang on and on over her until it was finally choked off.

Her heart had exploded in pain, and she lay sobbing. So distraught, in fact, that the nurses finally gave up trying to talk to her, to comfort her, and left her alone again.

It had taken her six months to quell the real event from every waking moment.

She still hadn’t managed to kill the nightmares.

Karen knew something had followed afterward, but it had been blocked from her mind, as though a veil had been brought down over the memory, a wall had been built around it.

She knew it had been wonderful, though...

How do you forget something like that?

If only I could remember—I know it would stop the nightmares. I know I’d be free of this!

Mike’s footsteps could be heard ascending the steps. She quickly brushed the last of her tears away and re-arranged herself in the bed. She never let him know when these dreams happened, afraid that he’d explode even more, get even more worried about her. He just didn’t know how to cope with her pain.

For cryin’ out loud—he didn’t know how to cope with *his* pain.

The fights? They didn’t mean anything to either of them. It had just become a way to let off steam. A bad habit—she knew that. Even though the words they threw back and forth stung, it never destroyed what was in their hearts for each other.

Not entirely, at least.

Neither of them understood what it had been doing to the two children, however...

“Kids are resilient.” Mike would insist. “So what if we fight and yell? We always make up. They don’t have to see what goes on in private between us, do they? They’re just kids.”

They *were* too young, weren’t they?

Well, at least Evan was. She was sure of that.

She never questioned Mike directly, but there was always a quiet niggling in the back of her mind about it all. As a kid growing up, she and her siblings had fought and yelled and screamed—and then made up again. So, what’s the big deal? And so, she’d blindly followed his words and avoided the children’s sad faces, never trying to help them understand anything.

Somewhere, she’d forgotten that her parents had never, ever done such a thing, but had always explained the reasons for their occasional spats. And had always welcomed questions and challenges from the children with open arms and consciences.

But that was long, long ago, Karen tried to rationalize. A whole different generation ago. They wouldn’t understand today’s pressures. Life was so much easier for her parents!

She lay in bed quietly, waiting for him to finish his bedtime routine; to settle himself and hear his breathing slow, his snoring to begin. More thoughts had begun pouring through her mind and she needed to get away, to be alone for a while. She slid back out of the bed, eased through the door and headed back down the stairs.

In the living room was still her one, last comfort from their life before—a two-seater, soft easy chair that lay back far enough, comfortably enough, to fall asleep in. It was piled with pillows and blankets, and everyone else was forbidden to sit there or rearrange anything.

It was calling to her now.

Her heart had to find solace. Somewhere.



They had been walking for quite a long time. And under normal circumstances, Hanna would have been watching the sun setting, or at least moving. But even though there was light everywhere they went, (and no shadows, she’d noticed. Strange, that. No shadows.) it never seemed to come from any one source, and it never lessened or increased.

They had found the deer—several of them, in fact. The doe was grazing with twin fawns, spotted little youngsters that frolicked around Hanna, circling her and playing their own form of Tag and Catch Me if You Can. They had been more than friendly, and when they had eventually tired of their games, she had sat on the ground holding their little bodies, stroking their fine, soft fur.

“There is one more place I’d like to take you before we send you home again, Hanna,” Jesus finally said, helping her to disentangle from them. “Time seems to stand still here, I know. There actually IS no time here; that’s a discussion for another day. But you are still expending energy, and there will be a ‘tomorrow morning’ for you, and a day to walk through with Evan.”

They watched the little family pick through the underbrush, the mother moving with stately grace weaving through the trees, leading her young ones forward. Gradually they ascended a grassy mound rising out of the landscape and disappeared behind a tree, the quick twitch of a tiny white tail the last thing to be seen.

Barely twice as wide as it was tall, the mound looked like it had been put there intentionally, not naturally formed. As Hanna looked closer, she realized there was something flat and brown centered in the middle, facing them—nearly covered with flowering vines, but still visible with a careful eye. Without asking if he wanted to go there, she started making her own way through the underbrush, weaving in and out of the small saplings that stood between her and the mound.

Yes. It was a door, quite a large door. It looked old, like something out of a Hobbit village. And there were pictures of things, people doing things, marching all across the front of it from the top to the very bottom, like the hieroglyphs in ancient Egyptian pyramids.

Only—no. These looked like *her*. She could see her own likeness in one of the figures. And as she examined it all, she found everyone who had been important to her in her family and life from the time she was born up to today.

“This is a special place, built just for you, Hanna.”

He had come up behind her and now spoke softly, seriously. “Inside, you will find a very special book—several of them, in fact. I’d like you to go in and see for yourself. It’s important. There are some things you need to see and learn there.”

She turned, looking up at him. Not at all sure that she wanted to do any such thing. She'd spent a good deal of time, up until the past few weeks, shoving feelings down, way down inside. Not wanting to deal with them; not knowing how to get rid of them.

But she had declared to him just a while ago that she trusted him. And she did.

Nothing here will ever hurt you, rang through her memory. Did that apply to emotions, as well as body?

There was nothing in his face that frightened her. Indeed, nothing had ever truly frightened her here. Anything negative always turned out to be her own insecurity, not reality. And the expectant, loving look on his face was giving her courage.

"Trust me, Hanna. You've already begun."

She didn't understand all the feelings that had come rushing through her when he'd said that, but she was keenly aware of one. Deep inside, in a place that had just recently been awakened lay a stirring of Hope.

She barely recognized it for what it was. In fact, if the thought and actual word "hope" hadn't just then come floating through her mind, she wouldn't have. But she longed for it. There was a promise there that drew her.

With her heart fluttering like a release of doves, she reached forward and grabbed the oversized handle to the door—and pushed.



"Good for you, Hanna!" Kamali danced and sang out. He and Shimrath linked arms and performed a short do-si-do in celebration. They'd been cheering her on the entire time she and Adonai had been here, doing what angels do to encourage a human they have been assigned to.

"Look," Shimrath drew Kamali's attention. "Look at my robe!"

He'd been looking downward, but now flung both arms up waist high for the other angel's inspection. Creeping up the fabric, from the hem of each sleeve and the bottom hem, were spikes of brilliant red. Not a lot. Not terribly far, maybe only an inch or so from the edge to where it stopped. Yet—oh, so apparent.

"Trust and Obedience grows! She's getting it, Kamali. My robe has begun!"

Shimrath, whose very name meant Obedience to God, was just that—an angel assigned to Hanna at her salvation to monitor, encourage and measure her growth in Obedience to Yahweh. All through her life **from now on, as she made choices of following the Lord’s directions—or choosing to walk the other way in her own will—his robe would be a visual testament to her progress.**

He and Kamali were so jubilant at the path Hanna was choosing **they couldn’t restrain themselves. Calling to a dozen other angels that watched nearby, together they raised hands and heads and voices to the Almighty Yah, lifting Him up with Praise and Worship and Glory.** The sound of worship resonated all throughout the air around them, and travelled swiftly, until it reached the very Throne itself. The Redeemed on the Sea of Glass felt its vibrations, and together with the Host that surrounds the Throne, a spontaneous celebration of Praise broke out.

Adonai smiled to Himself as He watched it all. Knowing, of course, what was occurring in all realms, in all the lives of all of His Children, at all times. The Father and He shared the moment of Joy, and then He turned His attention back to His little charge and her journey.





Chapter Eight

The Office and the Book

Hanna fully expected to be met with a dark, gloomy space as she pushed open the wide door—but that was anything but what actually met her. The mound had been the size of perhaps an oversized thatched hut, or a cold-storage cave dug into the side of a much larger mountain.

But inside, she stood at the top of a short flight of steps descending into a bright, clean room lit from some unknown source. (There wasn't a lamp or ceiling light to be seen). As she walked down the steps, she sensed the room was merely an anteroom to a much larger space beyond it. Perhaps behind the enormous, clear-enough-to-see-through desk that sat directly in front of her? A single door with a small square of glass at eye level pierced the center of a solid wall just behind it and gave promise that there was much more to explore here, if you could only go beyond this smaller place.

The desk was piled with an assortment of books, trays, papers and all sorts of library-counter type things. An angel, (surely that's what he was?) garbed in a dark green robe snugged around the waist with a braided white rope, was seated in a rolling chair pulled tight to the desk. He had a remarkable lack of hair just in the center of his bent head. But what he had gently framed his face in soft, chocolate waves. One ear sported a large red pencil. He was writing furiously with a black one.

A long, eagle-quill pen and a reservoir of ink perched on a soft grey pad to his right. There were pages disarrayed at all angles covering that side of the workstation, with chicken-scratch writing filling the entire surface of each sheet.

A machine similar to a computer rested on the corner of the desk to his left. Each time the angel finished writing whatever it was he was

doing, he would hold the page up near the front of the monitor-looking part and it would disappear. The computer-machine would quietly whirl and make rapid tapping sounds in between, obviously doing something to the work the angel was completing—and soon a new page would appear on the desk in front of him.

While this was curious enough, what caught Hanna's immediate attention was that there were no wires to be seen. Anywhere.

Wow! she thought. *Dad's computer has wires all over the place. Geez, how many times has he complained about us trippin' over them? He even duct-taped the printer cable to the rug last week, after Evan almost knocked it off the stand.*

But not on this desk. No cords. No plugs. No sockets in the wall, for that matter.

The angel was oblivious to her presence. This work he was doing was an absolute clash between medieval days and the present! Or the future? Because she couldn't see anything that looked like a mouse, a keyboard or a printer.

She must be imagining that those papers were appearing out of thin air. There had to be a connection there somewhere...? She stood in front of the desk, furtively looking around. Waiting. Beginning to wonder what to do next.

"Dear, oh dear, oh dear. Great Mekoddishkem," the figure at the desk began to talk to himself in great good humor. "You truly do know how to stretch an angel, don't you? Who would have thought You'd assign me to such a thing..." His voice trailed off to a chuckling mutter.

Another piece of paper slid in place and he began writing again.

"Always learning. Always growing. That's my motto. You sure took me at my word this time, Oh Yah!"

He grabbed another piece of paper and had just readied his hand to continue writing when he realized he was not alone in the room.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, slapping the pencil down on the desk. It rolled and dropped to the floor, bounced twice on the eraser head, and disappeared like a diver hitting deep water.

"Well, well, well! I've been expecting you, dear." He smiled at her quickly, then leaned over to search for the pencil.

Talking to the floor now, he rambled on, "Just trying to keep up with a little bookwork while we're waiting—a little scribing, so to speak.

Notes all over the place here. Notes for this one, notes for that one ... oh, I just have to keep it all in order.”

“That’s the main thing, keeping it all in order,” he jabbered more quietly now, to no one in particular. He wasn’t looking at Hanna, nor was there anyone else in the room. She suspected he’d forgotten she was even there, but he was so sweet and endearing, Hanna couldn’t help the smile gathering in one corner of her mouth.

The pencil on his ear began to slip forwards as he moved his head, still searching.

“You’re losing your—” she pointed out about the same time he grabbed for it.

Unsuccessful, he straightened and watched this one roll under the door into the next room.

“Yes. Well.”

Remembering his guest, he gave her a small, apologetic smile.

“They keep telling me I need to learn more about this machine, here.” He eyed the computer with a suspicious glance. “I just don’t know. I just don’t know! I tend to be a little old-fashioned, then, don’t I?”

One eyebrow rose while he scanned once more for the first pencil, followed by a quick grunt. “Francis never wanted any of this stuff, either. Well, not that he had it available when he was in his Earth body, you know? But even now, he’s not for all this *fast* stuff. I must say, I can’t agree with him more.”

Giving up the search, he looked fondly over at the quill and ink, reaching over to draw it just a little closer to the paperwork. “I slip together more easily with his kind than you modern ones.”

Clutter apparently disturbed him. He began to gather up all the scattered papers mounded in front of him, and tapped their edges against the desktop, straightening the strays and lining them all up perfectly.

“Things are a good bit slower there. Not so much rush, rush, and rush to get the job done.” He smiled up at her and took a deep breath.

He had apparently arrived at his point of introduction.

He sat back in his chair, clapping both hands down on his knees.

“So! You’re little Hanna.” He wasn’t wearing glasses, yet he peered up at her as though squinting through tiny twin lenses.

She waited a few moments, assuming he’d have more to say. But now he just sat there with a slowly fading, glad-to-meet-you smile on his face and his eyes began to wander.

“Yes!” she finally jumped to answer, perhaps a bit too loudly.

“I’m Hanna.”

She reached out to shake the curious creature’s hand.

“You say you’ve been waiting for me?”

Her answer perked up his attention, but he ignored her hand. She pulled it back again, tucking it into one of her newly earned pockets.

“Yes, yes, yes,” he answered absentmindedly, and suddenly stood, looking around for something. “It was right here a moment ago ... Now where ...?”

His eyes fell on a small table just beyond the desk.

“Ah! Here it is.”

He walked over to retrieve a large, thick book covered with a deep scarlet, leather-like material with gold embossing all along the edges. Decorating the cover were swirls and flowers and birds and bars in blue and green, orange, purple and yellow.

Her full name was printed directly in the center, in letters as tall as her fingers—Hannalee Grisandole James. And then a space was left empty next to it. The surprised look on her face coached him to lean in and whisper conspiratorially, “That’s for when you get married, dear. Nothing to worry about now.”

He had been holding the book out for her to examine. It appeared heavy, and his hands started sinking towards the floor.

“Adonai would like you to look at the first part of this book.”

“If you would.”

“Please.”

He presented the idea to her rapidly, (*when will she take it?*) with a solemn smile. The heavy tome continued to drop, and with a sigh he hoisted it up into both arms, freeing one long arm to point.

“You can take a seat right over there and open it.”

As before, Hanna just stood there, wondering if he was finished yet. He still held the book, and his eyes had started to drift back towards the desk again.

I have work to do. I have work to do! What DO these human creatures think, anyway?

A thought niggled at him. There was something else he was supposed to say to her—wasn’t there?

“Oh, bless me! I’m so sorry. What you must think of me! Dear, dear. What you must think ... I meant to tell you: ‘You will know what to

do after that.' That's the last thing. Yes, yes." Having discharged his duty, he smiled at her, made a short, polite bow and thrust the book at her—then turned and wandered away.

"I knew there was just a little more," he continued to mutter. A little chuckle burst from him every other word or so. "Adonai, Adonai, your instructions were perfect, as always." Having reached his desk, he re-seated himself and became absorbed once more in his work.

Know what to do after I open a book? Hanna quizzed herself.

Shrugging, she settled the volume more securely in her arms and started to walk the way he'd pointed. *Whatever can he mean by that?* It was so silly a thing to say to her, of all people. She rolled her eyes and kept walking, not wanted to befuddle the poor dear any more with questions.

He's not exactly a fountain of information anyway, she giggled to herself.

She reached the corner of the room, where a straight-backed loveseat had been placed behind a low, long table. The book looked like it would extend nearly to the same width when it was opened, so she placed it carefully in the center of the polished top. Taking a seat, she glanced up at the angel.

He never did tell me his name, though, she thought. *Huh. I wonder what it is.*

Immediately, a tiny paper with the word "Sofer" lay on the cover of the book.

"Oh!" she blinked. As soon as she had read the note, it disappeared again.

"I see," she spoke quietly. "Thank you." She looked up, but Sofer's head was intent on the work before him.

"Whoever sent that—"

Her eyes sparkled now as she considered what lay before her. Just opening the massive book felt like an adventure, and a thrill ran up inside of her, she was so curious about what might be inside.

She held her breath a little, savoring the moment. It was always this way with a new book. She knew that she held in her hands a myriad of things. Adventure. Danger. Happy things. Heart-rending things. Scary things, maybe. Whatever was inside any particular book had the potential of taking her years and miles and countries away from where she was as she sat to read it.

That was always a wonderful thing.

The cover soon lay open, and before her was the title page, “The Life and Times of Hannalee Grisandole James _____.” Drawn on the page were tiny scenes, little vignettes of her life so far.

First was a scene of Mom holding her, wrapped in a baby blanket, obviously newborn. Dad was hovering over her shoulder, with a look of ... joy? There was a smile on his face like Hanna had never seen before.

Well, I'm not interested in THAT one, that's for sure.

The picture next showed her (presumably) taking her first steps. Mom was kneeling a few paces away, arms held out to her. Daddy was standing behind Hanna, capturing the entire event with a video camera.

I've never seen a home movie like that, she frowned. We don't even HAVE home movies.

This was getting uncomfortable.

A little bitter, now. *I'll bet they threw them away when we moved, she thought sarcastically. So—why is it still in this book? What are these, anyway? Chapters? There're no page numbers anywhere.*

Hanna searched for a picture she might want to... do. Whatever she was supposed to do with it.

On they went through all of her twelve years. One, sometimes more, for each year. Her face lit up as she recognized one in particular.

Uncle Ben and the fishing trip. Wow!

Like this one, some of the scenes were beautiful memories. Some of the scenes she didn't remember at all. A few were a little puzzling as she looked at them, because she didn't seem to be in the picture.

She decided the Uncle Ben chapter would be the best one to look at and tried to turn to the second page—but the book resisted. Remembering the “proper” way to turn a page, she tried to slide her right hand beneath the top corner, but nothing would respond. She placed her left thumb halfway up the bulk of the pages and squeezed backwards with her hand—still nothing happened. The entire book acted like it was all glued together.

She looked up and started to call out a question to Sofer, but his attention was focused intently on yet more papers. Having lost the second pencil, he was happily dipping the long quill pen into the inkbottle, carefully scraping it on the opening and dabbing just a time or two on the felt pad before he resumed his writing.

He appeared to be in—she laughed out loud as this thought—7th Heaven!

Hanna looked down at the page again and blinked in surprise. Where before the pictures had lain flat on the page, now they were raised like broad buttons.

Rather gingerly, she reached with her right forefinger and pressed down on the Uncle Ben scene. No response. She tried one that showed **both her and Evan on a trip they'd taken with Uncle Ben and Aunt Janet**, but again—nothing happened. One by one, she pressed on the scenes, avoiding the ones where her parents were in the pictures, until finally only those and a scene of herself as a young child playing on a sun-lit beach were left.

Frustrated, she chose the beach one—and the book sprang open. A puff of colored smoke rose from the pages, and a 3-D hologram of the scene formed in the air above it, leaving clean, white paper underneath—as though a page had been emptied and brought to life above the surface of the book.

COOL... she breathed.

Before she could think any further, the scene appeared to grow. And grow. And grow—up and around her—until soon she found herself no longer watching a tiny display, but surrounded full-sized by the scene, standing amidst the participants.

She vaguely remembered the occasion, although it lay deep in her memory; a treasure once enjoyed but buried under an avalanche of misery. **She'd been about four. Evan hadn't been born just yet. Weeks before, Mom had gotten a book from the library about going to the seashore, and Hanna had been coaxing to "go there, Mommy. Daddy? Please, we go there, too?"**

Early one morning, Daddy had announced to her that **"he and his favorite princess were going on a special outing," and after breakfast they had led her to the car.** As they rode, he explained that he had planned a whole week for them to spend together—just Hanna, Mommy and Daddy. They were going to a faraway place called Virginia Beach, where they could see all the things she and Mommy had been reading about in her book.

Hanna did remember the long car ride. To keep her occupied and content, **they'd stopped at a small petting zoo, and visited several other local attractions along the way.** It had taken two days of traveling, but **finally they'd settled into an apartment right on the oceanfront.**

The beach lay just the other side of a huge, sliding-glass door. And they had spent this particular afternoon playing in the sand, “burying” Daddy and making a sand castle with a wide moat of water Mommy filled with her little buckets.

“Come on, Sweetheart,” she could hear her hologram mother coaxing. Her memory returned as though it had been freed from a cage, and suddenly Hanna-in-the-office found herself immersed in the experience.

She was standing just at the edge of where the water met the sand. She could feel the heat of the sun on her back, hear the waves crash and the *huoh-huoh-huoh* of the sea gulls overhead as they searched for a clam to swoop down and snatch away.

Little Hanna was afraid of the roar of the ocean, of watching the pull of the receding water drag things down, into and under the waves. She **didn’t want to even touch it with her toes, much less walk in to where her mother kneeled in the foamy water.**

“You can do it! You can do it, come on!” Mommy reached one hand towards her, not three feet away. “Don’t be afraid,” her mother continued to coax. “I’m right here, Sweetie—I’ll catch you.”

A sharp pang of sweetness, a long-forgotten memory of her mother’s tender love hit Hanna—it actually made her heart hurt. Before she could think more about it, she heard her father chime in from behind her, “Hanna, Love! Take my hand. I’ve got you!”

Love. That word again.

An air of love swirled around her like a warm blanket. She was four again. Safe. Innocent. Beloved. Becoming one with the scene, Hanna reached out both arms towards her waiting mother and welcomed the joyous celebration as she dared the tiny waves to fall into Mommy’s arms; felt the warmth from Daddy patting her back in pride and approval. Eyes closed, she smelled anew the familiar fragrance of her mother’s skin, reveled in the loving touch of her father’s hand, warm and sandy from the shoreline.

She began to sway a little with the motion of the waves striking against her mother’s body. *THIS is what love feels like*, she smiled. Her heart hadn’t forgotten, even though her mind had blocked it away.

She longed to stay there forever...

Without warning, the old, familiar voices of Suspicion and Mistrust thrust into Hanna’s mind.

“No!” one screamed to her. *“This isn’t real. Not anymore. It’s all a game being played on you. You know how your parents feel about you. It’s all lies! Lies, all lies.”*

A different voice took on a smug growl. *“It’s GONE! You aren’t really doing any of the things you’ve just imagined. Don’t you see? That was then. THIS IS NOW. They don’t care about you anymore—”*

Immediately, in response to the dark whispers that had exploded in her mind, the scene whisked away, the writing returned to the page again and the book slammed shut, jerking itself out of her hands. She could feel the warmth, the deep love that had been washing over her slowly sliding back out of her heart... until all that remained was a cold shiver deep in her soul, and the gentle tap, tap, tapping of the machine across the room. It was so massive a sucker-punch, she couldn’t even think, couldn’t process the swiftness with which one thing fled into the other. Mindlessly, she stared at the closed book, trying to breathe again.



What she didn’t know, and couldn’t see, was Kamali. Hidden from her eyes, he was pulling very firmly on a leash and choker chain attached to an ugly, dog-like creature that crouched on her shoulder. His pull had stopped it from spewing any more lies—but the damage had already been done.

It had been allowed—Kamali knew it.

For the sake of the Teaching.

For the sake of His Healing.

Still, he hated it—for her sake.

With another powerful jerk, he flung the creature out of the dimension they were in, back into its own—and it flew howling through the air.



Tears welled up in Hanna’s eyes. Something within her yearned for it all to come back. A still, quiet feeling inside urged her to consider letting it.

Something else inside was hot and burning, sharp and prickly.

More out of habit than real conviction, she shook her head hard and made her decision.

No. I don't care what happened years ago. NOW is what matters.

She spoke to herself fiercely, hands clenched into fists, her mouth drawn up to stop it from quivering. With a bitter laugh, she ranted on, needing to convince herself of the righteousness of her wrath.

LOVE? They NEVER loved me! I don't care what happened to them. You don't just stop loving someone. You don't start treating someone you love like... like... like THEY do.

She'd cast off her chance to think clearly now. Her decision to roll with the bitterness deepened.

No! Look how they treat Evan and I! LOVE? They've taken AWAY everyone who really loved me. Really loved us. Sent them away. Drove them away. What does it matter what happened forever ago?

One last glimmer of a thought, that maybe she was being too harsh, floated through her thinking. But Reason pushed it aside and took over again.

Even if they did then, they don't now.

So, what does any of it matter?

Like a piece of softened clay left carelessly out in the sun—what had been a slowly opening heart shrank back to became hard and unmalleable once more.

So far, everyone she'd met seemed to be able to read her mind—and there was no way she wanted that to happen now! Afraid Sofer would look up and see her face, sense her distress and anger, she flung herself up from the chair and rushed for the steps, stumbling up the first one and nearly landing on her face. A swift push with her knees got her moving again, and she grabbed the door handle, jerked it open and stepped out.

She needed to find Jesus and make Him explain.

She needed to make Him understand that it was all oh, so very nice, thank You.

But *this?*

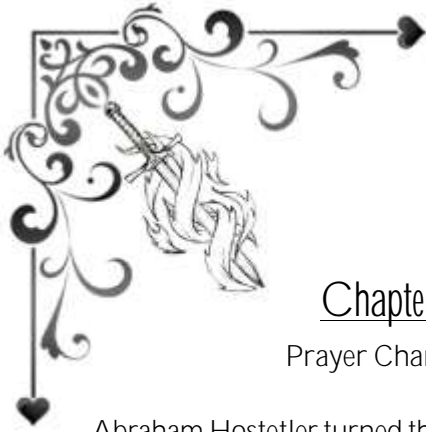
This was impossible.

This couldn't be true.

She wouldn't accept it, wouldn't allow some magic book to soften her heart.

She was fully back in Reality now.





Chapter Nine

Prayer Changes Things

Abraham Hostetler turned the over-sized key in the aging lock and pulled once, twice, on the long, brass handle. With a sudden moan, the over-sized front door of the old church gave in to his coaxing, and a rush of cool air met him from the interior. A slightly musty smell came with it.

Need to get Mrs. Toothill to order more of that spray again. Carpet's sucking up the moisture with all this rain we've had lately. His mind started a checklist of things to do before he even set foot in the ancient narthex.

Abram flipped on the nearest light switch and padded his way to his office. Another blast of air met him, this time overly warm.

All praise to You, Lord, that we even have heat, he prayed, eyes closing in the effort to suppress any bit of the frustration that rose so easily in him.

I'll have to put a sign on that thermostat again. People are forgetting to turn it back down before they leave. He added another item to the never-ending inventory. No matter the time of year, the building had a penchant for being damp and cold. One of the many mixed blessings of a mid-19th century, stone-covered edifice, he realized.

His job as combination Pastor, counselor, and quasi-janitor to the church seemed to encompass more hats lately. Thankfully, the church congregation was small, as some churches go. And he still had the strength to minister first and pay attention to the physical plant problems later. They had a man who volunteered to clean and upkeep the building, but he worked a full-time job and wasn't able to be available as much as Abram might have wished.

Good man, though. Good man. Works hard with the time he has to give, Abram assented as he entered the small room.

He sighed a little as he entered his workspace.

Thirty-six years now, Lord. Nostalgia swarmed over him for a moment as he remembered the day's date. *You've had me here for more than half my life.*

He gazed around fondly at the crammed, tiny office. A testimony to those years, the room hosted floor-to-ceiling bookshelves filled with Truth, wisdom—and a little conjecture. Most of the books were well-read, yet a few still waited to be explored. A file cabinet stuffed with records and sermons and stray office supplies stood positioned too near the steam radiator, silently rusting away around the edges. The requisite Spider plant hung from the nine-foot ceiling by a macramé cord—a handcrafted gift from one of the women given to him many, many years ago.

“Dear Sadie Mae. She and I were quite a pair back in the 60’s, weren’t we, Lord?” He chuckled to himself, reminiscing his earlier Jesus Freak days and the folks who had joined him to start his first Bible study.

“If only we’d known back then.” He shook his head a moment. “But I’m afraid we had a little too much ‘freak’ and not enough ‘Jesus’ in us at the time, didn’t we, dear?” He addressed the now-deceased woman as he picked up a watering can to care for the plant. His eyes grew soft with the memories.

“We learned, though. We learned. Didn’t we, Lord?”

A short, saggy couch slouched along one paneled wall, and a few folding chairs were stored neatly in the corner behind the door. Two tall, stained glass windows rose up behind the wide oak desk he occupied for hours at a time, letting in just enough light to keep the room from being swathed in darkness. A selection of family photos, as well as his Certificate of Ordination, hung proudly (albeit, just a tad crooked) on the opposite wall from where he entered. And an oscillating fan hid behind the far arm of the couch.

He ran his hand along the wall until it reached the light and flipped the switch. An ancient ceiling fan sprang to life, whirring its blades like a flock of startled turkeys. He hurried to turn the new dimmer attachment Horace had installed the other day to ‘low’.

“Oh, Lord, my Lord,” he prayed out loud this time. “Thank You that I have helpers. That I have *willing hands when I need them.*”

Truly thankful this time, as any sense of irritation had flowed away with the first attitude adjustment of the day, he smiled to himself. Joyed that the Lord was so near, so ready to help him any time he called.

The Core would be arriving in another hour or two. Well, at least the older, retired members; they were the ones that were available on an early weekday. It was Wednesday. And every Wednesday just a tiny portion of his beloved flock would meet with him to lift up the others in the congregation to the very Throne Room of God. All the needs, the lacks, the sicknesses, the hard times would be given up in earnest supplication; all the prayers and yearnings for these dear souls spoken with firm expectancy that they were being heard and answered.

And then the praise.

The worship.

One-on-one with the Lover of their Hearts, Jesus.

How many times had they brought Heaven itself down to walk among them—or perhaps it was the other way around? Abram wasn't always sure. He just knew that the relationship he and these precious few had found with the King of the Universe was something he wouldn't trade for all the wonders of the Earth. How he longed for all the dear souls under his shepherding to find this place, this union! How he longed to open the eyes of the whole church to the intimate, loving Savior they knew—yet still didn't know.

Not yet. Not really.

“We’re working on ‘em though, aren’t we, Lord? I see softening. I see more love growing here.”

Thankfully, the younger ones were starting to wake up again.

He rubbed his forehead with one hand, thinking about the last upheaval the congregation had gone through some years back; a horrible time in their history.

“Satan sure thought he was going to have a victory there, didn’t he? Sure glad You’re my King, not him.

“Sure glad, Lord.”

He moved around the room setting up the folding chairs, measuring out grinds for a pot of coffee, laying out cups and white plastic spoons.

Mrs. Wilcox will be sure to bring a treat of some sort. He smiled ruefully to himself. I’m afraid I’m probably more thankful for them than I should be, Lord. Maybe You could be helping me today to remember restraint? After all, I don’t have my precious Nancy here anymore to keep an eye on my sweet tooth.

His smile fell just a little at the thought. *Not that I'd want her here instead of with You, Lord!* He hurried to amend his prayer. *No, no. She'd done her share of suffering for the Kingdom by the time You sent for her. I'm glad she's up there, dancing in the streets and singing with the angels.*

A deep sigh swept through him.

It's just ...

Well, life is what it is, now. He wouldn't change things for his own selfishness.

All the preparations in place, he hurried to walk the steps downstairs to the tiny bathrooms, making sure there were sufficient supplies there as well and to get water for the coffee.

It's just, he continued his soliloquy, *for a while there I thought us old folks were going to just die off and the whole church would collapse back into... Well.*

He shook his head and sighed again.

Just “church”.

He stood and reflected on that a while. He'd been there, long ago. But “church” had never been enough for him. And as he grew into manhood, away from the teachings of the chapel he'd grown up in, he sought to know: IS there more? IS it possible to know the Lord the way David spoke of in the Psalms? The way the Disciples did? The way Paul told the Ephesians? The way Jesus knew the Father?

“And I pray that Christ will be more and more at home in your hearts, living within you as you trust in Him. May your roots go down deep into the soil of God's marvelous love; and may you be able to feel and understand, as all God's children should, how long, how wide, how deep, and how high His love really is; and to experience this love for yourselves, though it is so great that you will never see the end of it or fully know or understand it. And so, at last you will be filled up with God Himself.” He quoted the beloved Scripture words back to His Redeemer.

Yes, it was possible. Not only possible, but the Lord had been leading him and his Core deeper and deeper into that very understanding, just as Paul had said He would. It had been a fight over the years. Satan had tried to divide, destroy, distort, and deceive his people over and over again—and had succeeded several times. New people would come in with their own ideas, their own agendas. Murmurings would start, critical judging, gossip—those sins whose vast proportions most Christians never

fully understand. Sides would be taken, “He’s right, you’re wrong.” And so on. The church had literally split three times now over the past 36 years.

Once just as he had started seeing things blossom.

That had been a very hard blow, nearly knocking the wind of Hope out of him. Nearly tempting him to walk away, **hardly before he’d gotten** started. Not a whole year after he and Nancy had taken the position at the church, the naysayers finished their job of dividing the people and left, taking a whole chunk of the congregation away.

The Lord helped him understand that it had been essentially a **spiritual spring cleaning, actually orchestrated by Yahweh Himself**. He’d wanted to give Abram a good running start.

In spite of the fluctuations of the congregation at large, the Lord had always been faithful to the Core. It was as though He had wrapped them **‘round with a powerful angelic protection that could not be** breeched. Not as long as they stood firm against sin and pressed in with the Lord, relying on His will to spare them the brunt of the vicious spiritual attacks—for that was truly what these things were.

And each time, once the dust settled and they could take a clear look at what had happened, they found that it was always the naysayers and the weak ones that were gone. Tragic, yes. More reason to pray, certainly. But Jesus had always, always picked it all up again from there and started building His church with people who were seeking Him. Not power. Not amusement. Not status, or position, or attention.

No. In every renewal of members coming in, there were always the few that had really found the Kingdom. And these, like iron drawn to a magnet, had joined to the Core and swelled the heart of the church even more.

Finished with his preparations, Abram sat at the old desk with head bowed and hands over his face in reverence, now preparing his heart even more carefully than he had the room.

“Welcome to Your home within my heart today, my precious Lord.”

In the quiet, the clock sang out a mechanical version of In the Garden, announcing the hour.

Thank You, Lord. He smiled to himself. *How like You. How very, very like You.*

He began his time of prayer.

“Come now into the Garden of my Heart, oh my Lord and King.”

With arms lifted to the Heavens, he continued to pray.

“May You find it filled with fragrant blooms, pleasant resting places and the scent of cinnamon and myrrh, sweet smelling spices ascending to Your Throne.

“I welcome You today, Beloved Savior of my Soul. Help me each moment as I walk with You, please.

“Just as You are mine... I am Yours.”



Karen awoke to the sound of a dresser drawer closing. Metal hangers *screeeked* as they were slid along a metal rod. The tiny clink, clink, cling-cling-cling-cling of one dropped and rocking to its final rest on the wooden floor stirred her to open her eyes.

Mike was standing in front of an opened suitcase on the other side of the bed, folding a shirt that was obviously destined to join half a dozen others already there.

“What are you doing?” she asked sleepily. She hadn’t come back to bed until nearly 3:00, having cuddled up in her chair and cried as much of the tension and pain away as she could. For a reason she didn’t understand, she had found solace in the stillness last night. At one point, it had felt as if an unseen blanket had been placed around her; a warming tenderness floating in the air of the deserted room.

Strange things like that been happening lately. Peace coming over her unexpectedly. Comfort coming from a source she thought she should recognize but lay too far back in her memory for her to bring back except in the dim, fuzzy world between waking and sleeping.

She picked her head up far enough to peer at the alarm clock’s numbers and blinked a few times to clear her blurry eyes. 6:00 a.m. She was sure that’s what the readout said.

Mike never got up this early.

“I was gonna tell you last night,” he began explaining. “But then you brought up that church thing again, and I got mad, and...”

“Tell me what?” She closed her eyes again, annoyed to be woken up so early. The lack of sleep and reminder of their latest fight wasn’t helping any.

“Tell me what??” she repeated, a little more stridently. “What are you packing clothes for? What are you doing?”

Now he was annoyed, too—he'd thought he was being super quiet. He shoved the last shirt in the suitcase, flopped the lid over, and started feeling for the zipper pull.

"I got a job."

"What do you mean? You have a job."

"No, no, not that. That's for suckers. I got a job, a real one."

The zipper stuck halfway around. He ripped at it, it advanced to the last corner and the pull came off in his hand. Miraculously, he didn't throw it against the wall.

"I got a job, Karen—you won't believe this one!"

Karen sighed and rolled to sit on her side of the bed.

"I didn't believe the last one, if you remember."

"Well, this one is gonna prove me right. You wait. You'll see."

"Okay."

"I'm tellin' you, this one is gonna make us rich again, Karen."

"Okay, Mike. Okay. But what's the suitcase about?"

He didn't answer, so she turned to face him now. His face was fighting to keep his mouth shut, while his mind raced to decide how much to spill right now.

"I have to meet with these men in New York City. To train with them. They've promised me good money, Karen. They even put a deposit in our bank last night. You'll see! It's enough for you guys to live on the whole time I'm gone."

That last part got her attention.

"What do you mean 'the whole time'? Just how long *is* this training?"

He'd better make this good. "Only a couple weeks, from what they said."

He lifted the suitcase from the bed, and turned to the closet again, pulling out his one good suit jacket.

"They're gonna take me to J. Press and buy me some real clothes, too. What do you think of that? I'll be meeting with some real important men in some high swanky offices..."

He stopped and looked at her, pleading.

"I'm good at what I do, Karen. I'm good. It's about time I get back what's mine. What's ours. This is gonna be it, Karen. I know it. I just know it."

She didn't have an answer to that. She'd been slowly seeing him for what he was, what he'd become over the years, ever since they'd moved back to Pa. And she just wasn't sure if she liked it. Who knew if this would be a good thing—or a bad one?

He turned back to the suitcase. Hoisting it off the floor, he looked at her one last time.

“I knew you wouldn't want to drive me to the train station this early. I asked Jimmy Hechts to drive me over. See? I do care about you. I was even gonna let you sleep.”

His heart ran to her. His pride clamped his feet tight to where he was standing.

She got up from the bed, walked around and put her arms around him, hugging him with as much as she could muster.

“I love you, too, Mike. Thanks for thinking of me. I would have taken you—I would have.” She looked up and smiled.

“I hope this really is what you want. I hope you'll be happy.”

Victory! Smiling now, he assured her, “I'll call your cell every night—make sure you keep it plugged in! You'll see, Karen. I'll make good again, and this time I won't need any phony religion garbage, either. I can do this on my own. You'll see.”

A horn tapped outside, and they could hear the chugging motor through the window. He gave her a quick squeeze and a short kiss, then walked out of the room.

Karen sank down on the bed confused, wondering at the queer feelings inside of her. Part of her was hurt—like a finger had gone missing all of a sudden. But then, this wasn't forever, after all? That's what he'd said. And he wasn't leaving her. This would be good—a good thing.

A more startling thought rose up.

Now what was she going to do with the kids?

She started to panic—until she remembered something else he'd said.

“They even put a deposit in the bank last night.”

Now she wondered just how much this deposit was. She wondered if she could get away with quitting her job. That's what they'd fought about, too. She didn't want to work. She wanted to be home, to be a mother again. She hadn't been much of one lately—she didn't deny that. But she wanted to be.

She could still remember the sweet, tender days of Hanna's childhood. Of Evan's. They pulled at her, ripping her heart apart when she gave them enough time. Pain had consumed her for more than half of Hanna's life, and Death had nearly taken her along with it.

But there was something about being back Home. Back where her roots were. **Back among the people she'd grown up with. Back with her own mother.** It had renewed a spark in her heart, and when she allowed it, it flamed and grew, little bit by little bit. She wanted to stay home and be a mother, just like she'd dreamed of being as a child. Just like her mother had been.

Pale, pink light came suddenly into the room. The sun was beginning to rise. She stood to part the curtains, to look out at the brightening sky. She was so tired. So worn out. But she had no idea how to do even the next thing. Numbly, she watched the sun climb over the tree line, trying to make at least one thought come into focus.

She didn't like the one that did.

He was trying to sneak out of the house.

The realization dropped her into the rocking chair beside her.

He didn't want to say goodbye, to tell me where he was going. He had no intention of telling me anything!

What if? How—? Why? What about—? Like a spinning top, her thoughts twirled around and around; never landing, never forming well enough to ponder.

Until they landed on one that had once been her strength.

God! My God!

If You're there anywhere...

Dear GOD, can You still hear me?

She was too exhausted emotionally to even cry.

I don't know what to do. What am I going to do?

She lay her head back against the high back of the chair and moaned.

Are You there, God? Please. Please take this pain away. I can't stand it anymore.

What am I going to do...?



Adonai looked up at Ikaia, one hand still tenderly on Karen's forehead. He had put her back to sleep in preparation for the removal. Ikaia nodded once to him and stood back, ready for his part.

The order had been given: it was to come out today.

One long pull and Adonai handed it to him now—a long, black-handled, wicked-looking spear. It had been thrown six Earth years ago piercing the spiritual heart of Ikaia's charge, wounding and crippling her, reducing her capacity to accept love and love in return. There were others there as well—one even larger than this one. But more work needed to be done before they could be touched.

It would happen. The Father had ordained it.

Rafal and his assistants moved to lay cloths soaked in a bright red substance over the wounded place and pour a clear ointment from a beautiful crystal bottle. Almost immediately in response to these administrations, the wound lost its angry appearance, the edges lost their jaggedness and became smooth again.

“Jehovah Rapha, Almighty God Who Heals. We have covered this lesion with Your Son's Blood and washed it with Adonai's tears. All honor and glory and praise unto You, El Elyon, for You alone are Holy and Powerful.”

Ikaia's cries of praise and worship resounded through the heavens, reaching the Throne of He Who sits there, rising as a pleasing incense that flowed throughout His sanctuary.

Light flowed through Rafal's hands now and spiritual tissue knit back together, reformed, and closed the gaping hole the spear had made. Further ointments of healing were smoothed on the place carefully until, finally satisfied with his work, he moved back and away from Karen's body.

Ikaia continued his petition.

“Banish now, O Jah, the evil minion that would reopen this wound, that it never be freed to do harm to one of Your children again.”

With one swift, smooth motion, Ikaia cast the spear deep into the bowels of the Earth. He drew his sword and slashed through the body of the demon that had just been expelled, severing it from the ability to continue its work against her—consigning it to the Abyss until its master would, perhaps, release it to find a new body to indwell.

His eyes flamed at the group of evil ones that remained, cowering.

“You are forbidden to touch her again this day. You are chained from casting any additional weapons against her. Do not defy the Great and Powerful Jehovah in this—or you will rue the decision.”

Ikaia drew himself up to his full nine-foot height, his eyes boring into them until they hid their eyes from his.

“Decide now. Obey—or be thrown into the Lake of Fire immediately, eternally.”

A series of sounds, ranging from high-pitched squeals to guttural growls, was his answer. Satisfied, he sheathed his sword again and turned to Rafal.

“Thank you, Friend, for your fine work here. We will continue our watch over her now.”

His eyes roamed over the four other angels that accompanied him on this most important mission. They solemnly nodded their heads, ever watchful, ever ready to spring into action should Yahweh’s orders be breeched in any measure.



“The Lord has her in His hands, Anne.”

Abram’s shaggy eyebrows drew together, emphasizing his words. “He has all of them. You know that.” The soothing words were like droplets of rain on her heart. “Press in with Him. Press in today in prayer—we’ll all join you. He has a magnificent plan in the works here.”

Yes. She knew all those things. And most of the time, she was at rest in that knowing. But the warfare in and around her home had been fierce lately. Backlash, she supposed. Retaliation from the enemy of her soul for the non-stop petitions ascending from her little prayer room over her daughter, her grandchildren, and her stubborn, blind son-in-law.

She blinked back warm tears as she gratefully accepted the cup of coffee from her Pastor. He’d been her mentor through many, many trials over the years. And his words again took the pain from her heart and pointed her towards the True answer she’d been seeking.

Faith. Hope. Trust. In the only One Who sees all and could make the tangled threads of their lives weave the most brilliant tapestry!

Even though the only side she could see right now was the confusing back side.

In time, it would turn over and reveal all its beauty. She had a lifetime of experience with the Lord's goodness and mercy to firmly believe that.

"Yes. Thank you, dear Abram."

Her eyes spoke the volumes of gratitude her words couldn't express.

"We'll all press in together. Thank God for His children gathering here ..."

The *snaap*, creak of the front door opening and quiet voices approaching turned their attention to the rest of the group arriving.

"Here, they're coming now." Her smile had returned, bathing her face with peace again. "Let's see what Margaret has baked for us today, shall we?"





Chapter Ten

Chosen

The numbers on Hanna's clock clicked over to read 7:37 as Karen stood over her children, watching them sleep. She'd be late for work (as an attendant for the Gas & Quick Mart at the far end of town) if she didn't leave. But she wouldn't shake her self-imposed ritual. Not for that. Not even for Mike, who had demanded they needed the money when she had applied—protesting.

Mike. Well, that really didn't matter right now, now did it?

She had woken again an hour ago, with a stiff neck and a sore back, propped sideways in the rocker. The events of earlier rushed back in on her, and she'd fought herself to even get out of the chair. But she'd realized she needed to look at her bank account. That would help her make some decisions.

It suddenly seemed that she had an awful lot of them to make.

A review of their money showed that Mike had told her the truth, at least about this one thing. It must have been a sign-on bonus. There were several thousand dollars in the account that hadn't been there the day before; more than enough to keep them going for a few weeks, if she chose to quit.

What else could she do, anyway? Who would watch the children? Mama was getting too old for such a long, daily responsibility.

Nothing Mike can do about it, now is there? she reassured herself.

She taped the note in her hand to Hannah's dresser mirror, where she'd be sure to see it. She didn't want to say much yet, so she'd kept it to something short.

"Your father had to leave town for a meeting. Feed Evan and take him to the park today. Then you can go to Nana's for the afternoon if you

like,” read the note. Her hand had hovered at the end, tempted to sign it with “Love you, Mom.” But she hadn’t written that to Hanna in months. And it seemed wrong, somehow. Phony.

She pressed on the tape once more, making sure the paper wouldn’t fall to the floor. She needed to get going. If nothing else, she still had a strong sense of responsibility when it came to an employer.

That thought made her frown.

You care more about a podunk job with an absentee employer than you do your own children. She looked down once more at the sleeping children.

What a fool you’ve become.

She had such confused, mixed-up feelings about her only daughter these days. Hannalee was far more mature for her age than Karen had ever been. She was also far more protective over Evan than her own sisters and brother had ever been towards her.

And now... to find that her only remaining son preferred to curl up in *Hanna’s* arms, not her own, was galling.

Evan was different than other children, too. He was still very much a little boy, a needy one that looked for help with things he could have, should have, **been doing for himself.** In fact, as much as Hanna’s quiet independence grieved Karen, his dependence on Hanna was like a constant knife, thrust through and turning in her heart.

She knew she’d driven away her firstborn, her princess. Karen had ignored her. Asked everyone else to take care of her. Been so caught up in her own private world of misery for so long—any idea as to how to walk back over the bridge of reconciliation to Hanna was lost to her.

The sight of Evan snuggled up against Hanna’s chest, her arm draped protectively over him, ripped at her heart. He must have crawled into Hanna’s room sometime in the night. Another bad dream, she supposed. Another lost time where she would have gladly gone to comfort him, to gather at least one of her children to her bosom and find solace from his sweet little soul.

But once again, it was robbed from her.

How had it ever gone this far? How had she gotten replaced?

When did they form an island unto themselves; separated, isolated from her, their mother?

Didn’t they know—

“How much I long for them?” Karen whispered bitterly.

No, of course not. How could they? Mike and I spent years pushing them on other people to “watch”, and then abandoned them in favor of a dying sibling. What else could I expect?

She saw it all again with the clarity that had been forming in her mind over the past few weeks—ever since she and her mother had re-connected. It was almost as though a veil had been lifting from over her eyes, a chisel had been chipping away at the tall, formidable wall she had so carefully built around her heart.

She tucked the stuffed dinosaur she’d been clutching under the covers, next to Evan’s hand. They’d be waking up soon, and Hanna would uncomplainingly assume her enforced role as Karen’s surrogate—feeding, caring for, and amusing Evan. School had let out nearly a month ago and they’d had no other recourse.

She could never be home.

Mike could never be bothered.

Not with babysitting. Not with nurturing. He was too busy.

And now it didn’t even matter—

She pushed the searing pain from her heart again at the thought of his morning departure.

Money. It’s always about the money. Or—she let out an exasperated huff, *the lack of it.* She knew in her heart that she should have said “no” to the job. They could have made it on his income, small as it was. She knew they could. She’d grown up in a family of seven that barely had two nickels to rub together, but somehow, they’d made it.

And they had been happy, too.

That thought chased her around the age-old tree for the hundredth time: *had they ever been happy?* She and Mike? It had seemed so in the beginning. At college. The early years. And when Hannalee was born it had been the fulfillment of a lifetime. All she’d ever wanted was a family. Children. LOTS of children.

So, what happened?

Why does God hate me? She groaned inwardly.

The question was on the tip of her tongue day and night: *Why did You take my precious babies away??*

Knowing there’d be no answer coming—there never was—she turned to go, her hip bumping against the small end table that held

Hanna's clock and lamp. A black, hardcover notebook fell from the table and flipped open as it landed. Karen bent to retrieve it and her eyes fell on the top of one page.

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...

A yearning sprang up within her so suddenly, from so deep inside it made her gasp. *What in the world? This is Hanna's handwriting, but where did she get THIS song?*

Mama?

Is this what you are teaching my children on these long Sunday afternoons—Papa's songs?

She gently closed the book and held it cross-armed to her chest. A world of lost memories swirled and wrapped around her like a warm, wooly blanket. She closed her eyes and could almost hear the melodic thrum of her father's guitar, the beautiful tenor of his voice as he sang another new song to the children.

Songs he'd written to teach them the Bible.

To teach them how to live with and treat each other.

To teach them how to live in the world—without staining themselves WITH the world.

To teach them about the God he loved and served and lived for with every moment of every day—and may the whole world know about it, too!

When she'd ask him where the song came from, he'd always get that twinkle in his eye and tell her, "Why, from Heaven, Sweet Pea. Direct from Heaven!"

As a child, she'd actually believed him. She'd crawl up on his lap, lay her head on his shoulder and listen to him sing her soft songs when she'd had a bad dream, had a fall, or was sad the other children wouldn't play. Papa and God were once totally intermingled in her mind; kind and soft-spoken and always waiting with arms wide open.

She reveled now in the sweet memories, wondering if she could ever find her way back to that kind of place—one of safety, security, and peace.

When had that all been driven away? her aching heart began to demand with each sorrowing beat. What stole it all from me?

God, if You're still there. If You really still care about me, like Mama keeps insisting—what happened?

Worry, ever-present in her eyes, deepened. She'd asked the questions so often. With a heavy sigh, she leaned over and tugged the covers a little higher over Evan's arm. **Indeed, she did know when and how it happened, on the rare occasions she was able to be bluntly honest with herself.**

Oh, she was well aware.

But like everything else in her life, she kept it firmly chained within the dark castle of despair that dominated her soul—and the key was nowhere to be found.

Once her siblings had grown and left home (there'd been a five-year gap between her and next sister Betsy) she and her parents faced her last few high school years, just the three of them together. Papa had been growing ill. His cheerful songs and influence had lessened more and more until eventually Mama's time was consumed with caring for him. Karen began fending for herself, skipping time with God in favor of sleep and friends. Dreams of exploring more "modern" places than this tiny village of Breinigsburg began to call to her.

And her heart grew restless.

All of a sudden, her parents had seemed older than she ever remembered—and terribly old-fashioned.

Flashy brochures of a particular University came to her attention. It was huge and modern, offering dozens and dozens of course choices—including things she'd never had the opportunity to experience: Theatre. Art. Music. Film. She'd dreamed of being involved in these things one day—a thought not ever entertained by her parents, as they'd shunned the movies and concerts for the most part; preferring older, more traditional entertainments, like books and board games.

Finally, she'd left for college. The very same she'd dreamed about. She'd hounded and pestered them, presenting it to Mama and Papa in the best of light, always bringing the conversation around to the facts. "It's a Christian college, Papa. What could be better than that?"

Once there, she found that the title “Christian” didn’t necessarily match the hearts of the students, nor even the professors—particularly the ones in the Arts Department. The thrust was more to “Be shining Lights in the World using your own ideas and methods” instead of “Be separated from the world and holy, letting that Light within you shine before men.” It was only a matter of time before she found it easier and easier to relegate her growing up experiences and thoughts about God to... before.

Now, she’d wanted New Experiences. And Freedom. And Think-On-Her-Own time.

And then she’d met Mike.

Papa hadn’t wanted her to marry Mike. He’d been against it from the beginning, telling her that Mike would “pull her away from her roots.” She’d been so in love at the time she wouldn’t listen. She couldn’t bear to listen. They’d already pledged their lives to each other, and she’d given her heart away. Besides, he’d sworn he was a Christian. He went to church, didn’t he? And said all the right things.

What could be wrong?

Except... there *were* some things she’d wondered about. Things about him she’d suspected weren’t quite the way her rose-colored glasses were seeing.

He’d started to pull her away more and more from her family, luring her away from times they would otherwise have gone home from college to visit. He thought Papa’s songs were childish. Thought the ‘quaint little chapel’ they’d attended too... something. He never would really say what bothered him about First Church. He always had his sights set on the huge campus of the mega-church near college, the one pulling 3,000 people in at a time.

She’d heard his and Papa’s animated discussions about it at the time, but always left to go help Mama with the dishes or take a walk once they’d “gotten into it”. What did it matter, anyway? It was still church.

Suddenly, the bleakness of her world descended on her.

Maybe Mike had never known God in the first place.

Maybe that’s why it’s all fallen apart—why he’s left. He’s sick of me, sick of the kids. He wants to live in the world without the weight of us dragging him down.

What once seemed good had become so far away and long ago. And now had surely been swallowed up in the bad. She barely remembered anything about those years.

The past several years she did remember—and would give anything to stop. Her solution? Live in a carefully controlled, self-imposed exile from her feelings.

Unfortunately, her family had gotten dragged into the same banishment.

She reached over and gently replaced the notebook, wondering what could be happening in her daughter's life that she would be writing down Papa's songs in what looked to be a journal of some kind.

Mama has to have something to do with this.

She turned to leave. There was nothing to be done standing here, and she at least had to make an appearance at the Mart.



Mama.

If there were anyone in the world that could convince her God was still good, it would be Mama. And for the oddest reason, something felt different inside her since she'd woken up the second time. Life was worse than before, and she was devastated. Yet, there was a part of her inside that just kept feeling—stronger, somehow.

She couldn't sort it out, but to her own surprise, she found herself addressing Someone she hadn't talked to in years.

God?

"I know You probably hate me by now," she looked to the sky and whispered. "I've done everything wrong—right from the very beginning. Papa tried to warn me, and I wouldn't listen.

"I'm very, very sorry for that."

She knew that she might as well be honest. She knew He heard it all anyway.

"I'm still so hurt that You took away my babies. I can't deny that. You know it, anyway. I can't help but wonder if you did it to punish me? Would You really DO that? I don't know. I just don't know anything anymore.

"But God?"

"I think I need to try to find You again. I'm all alone now. And these two deserve a whole lot more than either Mike or I have given them, not for a long time."

She'd reached the car and opened the door. The sun was bright this morning, shining on the dew lingering on the grass. It looked like a field of green diamonds, glittering all the way down to the river.

"Can You ever forgive me? WILL You ever forgive me?"

"I don't deserve for You to forgive me—

"But I guess it won't hurt for me to ask..."

"Will it?"

She didn't know if Anyone had heard her or not.

No matter. She'd tried.



The click of a door closing confused Hanna; it should have slammed, not closed gently. Her consciousness arousing, she opened her eyes. Not to the forest, or even to the Office door. Not to the sight of the Lord waiting for her—but to the gentle, yellow walls of her room and the feel of Evan's little body pressed tight against hers.

"No! I have questions! Don't go, not yet!" She spoke the words out loud, then flinched when Evan moaned and started to roll away from her.

Shhh... she whispered fervently to him. She needed time to think her way through it all. *Shhh. It's okay. Go back to sleep.* His breathing grew deeper again, and she relaxed onto her back.

Everything. Everything that had just happened was so clearly imbedded in her mind's eye, she could still re-create it down to the tiniest detail. The feel of Regemmelech's muscles moving beneath her body. The sensation of the water-that-wasn't-water on her body. The sound of Jesus' voice beside her to the sight of His grin and how His eyes crinkled when He laughed...

The Office.

And the Book.

At the thought of the Book, her eyes searched the ceiling and her mind began to swirl.

Just like the first time, she wanted to believe it all. But the thought lingered: could it be real—or not? She'd been constantly flip-flopping between those two options. Even though her first adventure was still firmly ingrained in her mind, the time that had elapsed, the "life" that had happened since had been making her wonder. And sometimes doubt.

Nana had been so excited for her, had told her that the Lord was

showing her great love and favor. She wasn't entirely sure what "favor" even was—but she was pretty sure it wasn't something anyone else wanted to give her.

Not her parents, anyway.

And now there was a thorn amid the roses.

You promised nothing was going to hurt me, her mind raged.

So, what was that Book all about?

Didn't You know that was going to hurt??

She wanted desperately to hang on, believing the good in spite of the bad. But no matter how she tried, she just couldn't reconcile it all. Those last few moments had left a gaping wound, and the joy and wonder of the entire—whatever it had been—was slowly oozing out of it.

Dreams.

Maybe that's all it was. Just a dream.

Not God, not Jesus.

Just my own imagination forming an incredible dream. Who ever heard of having Jesus show up, anyway? Didn't He live in Heaven and just take care of the important people?

The thought had barely formed before a flash of brilliant light appeared to her left. And Kamali, in all his angelic glory, stood beside her. She didn't know how—since her bed was shoved tight up against that wall, and there wasn't an inch of space between them.

But stand there he did!

"I have something for you, dear Hanna. You seemed to have left the Office before He was done showing you all He had intended." His face quizzed her with a furrow between his eyes. Before she could answer, from within his garment he drew a white paper, rolled up into a scroll and tied with a deep purple ribbon.

"If you would, take this and read it. He said He has explained it all to you in here. And that any questions you still had, He would answer the next time you are together."

Handing the scroll to her with a polite bow, he smiled and disappeared again as suddenly as he had come, as though he'd stepped out of a hidden doorway and back again.

She eased her arm out from under Evan, slowly pulled the ribbon's bow and it fell away. The scroll didn't feel—right somehow, not at all like

she expected. It wasn't like paper she'd ever felt before. It didn't feel quite—solid, maybe.

Curious. Like everything else she'd experienced with Jesus and all of this.

She found the edge of the paper, and started to unroll it, holding it up over her eyes to read.

“Dear Hanna,” the words began.

“You asked Me into your heart just a short while ago—and so I have come! We have had many lovely adventures already now, haven't we? I have enjoyed every moment I have spent with you. I know you have enjoyed My presence as well. You have learned much, grown much, and are truly on the path to becoming a faithful Servant of God.

“As you know, I have planted a Garden. This is given to you so that there will always be a place especially set aside for us to meet together in. You have seen how beautiful it is already! This reveals the beauty and purity of your soul, bathed with My Blood from the Cross, all sins forgiven and washed away. It will grow and expand and become even more beautiful as your spirit and soul grow and expand in Love and Obedience to Me.

“Oh, My Sweet Little One, I want to assure you. Do not fear what you have seen or heard or experienced here in the Garden—or in My country, to which it is connected. Do not allow the Evil One to rob you of the joy, to tempt you to dismiss it all as simply long, wonderful dreams. For it has not been fantasy, or dreams, or nonsense—as Kamali explained to you in the very beginning.

“No, Dear Hanna—this is all very, very real. More real, in fact, than the world you are aware of each day. This is the world of My Spirit that we explore together. My world, which speaks and interacts with your spirit.

“It is NOT ‘just your imagination.’

“And it is all ultimately for your Good.”

The paper had been drooping lower and lower as she read, her arms tiring of the position, but her mind was oblivious to it as she tried to process what she was reading. Trying to understand how—if it were NOT

real—how He could possibly know what she had JUST been thinking and put it all down in this paper?

She scooted up into a sitting position and continued reading.

“You see,” the message continued, “I designed your imagination for this purpose: to have a place for My Spirit to meet and interact with yours. You can use this imagination to make lovely things, compose sweet songs, draw beautiful pictures—all inspired by Me, whether you realize it or not. ‘Every good and lovely thing comes from above,’ as I have written in My Scriptures. Your imagination touches My world, Heaven, and brings back with it Heavenly-inspired things to bless the world with. This is as My Father desired and intended it to be used.”

Up until this point she had been reading the scroll to herself, the words resonating within her own mind. Now, however, she was sure she heard someone draw a deep breath—then let it slowly out again.

A voice, almost as familiar as her own by now, picked up the reading from here on.

“It is early in our walk together. But because of the times you are living in, it is necessary that I tell you about the ‘other side’, too. You are surrounded with things that are *not* lovely—movies, TV shows, books, video games. Yes, these things grow in someone’s imagination, too. But the thoughts planted in their minds, the imaginations that they experience are not from Me. Nor are they always from within themselves.

“You have an enemy, Dear. You may remember Me telling you that the first time we met. Everyone who loves Me does. We will talk more about him and who he is, what he does, as time progresses.

“He is MY enemy, and so hates everyone who gives their hearts to Me, too. He cannot hurt Me personally, so he attacks those who love Me instead, which brings Me great pain.

“And just as I am able, in the spirit, to meet and walk and talk with you, HE is able to talk and plant ideas and thoughts into a person’s mind, into their imaginations. Much of what is seen in the movies, in the books, in the video games is not ‘made up,’ either. No, it too is real—but unseen.

Coming from the world of the spirit. Because this world is unseen people in general dismiss it, and the dangers of it, and think nothing of allowing it all to enter their minds and hearts, not knowing the dangers they are exposing themselves to.

“Even though you are young, My Beloved One, you have already been exposed to a great deal of these things, although I have been diligently protecting you from their harm for many years.

“I have chosen you from the Beginning—for this time, this place, this family.”

Hanna had been following the text with interest, but some detachment—like reading a well-written science or history lesson in school. But THIS line caught her up short.

The voice stopped as her eyes did.

Chosen me? How? Why? From the beginning of what? And what does it all have to do with my messed-up family?

Her hands dropped to the bed, crumpling the scroll and tearing a portion of one corner. She fingered the tear, wondering what to do with these thoughts, these new ideas that made her heart pound.

The Voice began again, quietly.

“My dear child, do not be afraid. I desire that you grow with Me and learn of Me, and about the ways of My Kingdom. There is much I have planned for your life, if you are willing. Part of the reason I have chosen to come to you is to alert you to these dangers I have spoken of. We will talk about these things in time, as well.

“I call every person who loves Me to come to this place, to their own beautiful Garden—but very few hear Me. Very few are willing to set aside the noise and busyness of their lives to listen for My still, small voice within them. The older a person gets, the harder it can become to hear because of these things. This is another reason I have called you now—your youth.

“Always listen for Me, Hanna. Listen for My call. If you desire Me, go to the Garden Gate in your imagination and call to Me—I will always, always come. That is My most solemn promise: I will always be there for you. Know that, when you do not see Me, when we are not together in My

world, I am walking right beside you, here in your world. Never be afraid to call out for Me, no matter the circumstance.

“I will always come. I will always bring help. ‘No weapon formed against you will prosper’.”

The voice grew intense at these words. Not stern. Not frightening. But very, very intentional. In nearly the same tone, He finished His message.

“I have a warning for you now, My dear Hanna: be careful with this Garden. Tend to it with great care! Together we can keep it always a glorious place to be. But if you become careless and wander from My path for you, the Garden too will feel the effects of your wandering.

“I am calling you now to stay close to My side. Read My words in your Bible. Talk to Me and the Father in prayer about everything and everyone that concerns you. Talk to Me all day long, about anything you like. Treat Me now as your closest Friend, for that is indeed Who I will be if you choose. Walk with Me. Meet with Me often in our Garden. Let the Light of My Love for others shine through you as you grow in Me—and it will be a strong force for your own healing, and the healing of your family.

“I love you with an everlasting Love, My Sweet Hannalee. I will see you again soon.”

As the Voice ended, the scroll dissolved in her hands and disappeared. She didn’t know it just yet, but every word had been engraved on her heart, the very seat of her Conscience, ready to be retrieved in a moment’s notice. She sat still—hands in her lap, no longer holding anything, eyes focusing on nothing in particular.

“What’cha doing, Hanna?” a sleepy voice crawled into her thoughts. “I’m hungry. Can we have waffles today? Mom bought some from the store yesterday.”

Evan finished with a noisy *yawwwnnnn* and an outstretched arm. Suddenly, he flung the covers back, scrambled off the bed and dashed for the door. A little dance accompanied his efforts to open the ancient lockset,

and success sent him flying down the hallway. The slam of another door announced his destination—accomplished!

With a thud, Hanna’s mind was fully ‘back to Earth’.

Well, that was a rude awakening! she complained ruefully, rolling to the edge of the bed and sitting up. Stretching, she gathered her unruly hair up into a knot at the top of her head, then let it fall again, cascading over her shoulders. Her mind drifted once more to the nebulous ‘somewhere’.

“It’s real,” she breathed to herself. “Really, really *real*.”

“I believe You, Jesus. I don’t know how You’re going to make anything good out of this family, but somehow... I believe You.”

This ought to be some circus to watch, she thought, rolling her eyes as she heard Evan’s feet trotting down the stairs.

Well—bring on the clowns!

She padded across the room, and reached to close and lock the door, preparing to change her clothes. Something fluttered against her mirror with the suction of pushing the door shut.

What’s this? A note? Mom never leaves notes up here.

The note was cryptic but surprising.

Wow! Dad’s GONE? He never leaves like that.

Wondering what was up now, she just shook her head.

Like I said, Lord. Welcome to the circus!





Chapter Eleven

Two Roads Diverge

Karen turned the key for the third time in the ancient Volkswagen, holding it there with determination—and the engine coughed to life. She managed to coax the vehicle away from the curb and head it down Bridge Street, hypochondriacally complaining all the way.

Oh, what I wouldn't give to have my BMW back, she sighed, gripping the wheel hard now, making the slow turn up and onto the paved concrete that coated the surface of the road's namesake. Traveler's Bridge spanned about fifty feet of grassy bank and water, arching over a small tributary that ran through the woods behind her house as well as the children's school. It was the only road leading out to the main highway that connected Breinigsburg to the rest of the world. All other roads wound around and in and out of pleasant-to-look-at places—but got you nowhere in particular in a hurry.

It had been a game to Karen at 16, when she was first learning to drive. Head off in one direction or another, get “lost” and see if she could use her senses to find her way back to the tiny little village again. Most of the time she was successful. There had been a time or two when she'd had to find a friendly face who would point her in the right direction, draw a map for her to get out to the main route and so back home again.

She chuckled at that last thought. *What my kids don't know about what life was like, just a few years ago! No cell phones. No computers. No GPS. You were on your own—sink or swim.*

Her kids. How far away they seemed to her now. A shiver of fear ran through her at the thought.

Lord? Were You listening to anything I said this morning? Is there some way, some plan You have to fix everything I've messed up?

I hope You do.

She drove the fearful thoughts away again and buried them under the needs of the day and her present mission—getting to work on time.

Work, she scoffed. She hated this job. Hours would go by without interacting with a soul. Much of the time, the people who stopped never entered the Mart—they just swiped their cards, bought gas and went on.

Once the store had started to make money, the owners had expanded it to a 24-hour stop and found a few kids from the nearby college to fill in the over-night time she wasn't there. Apparently, they'd uncovered a gold mine—an unending stream of year-round students who were willing to work for next to nothing, finding it advantageous to use their time studying instead of cleaning. Sleeping instead of stocking shelves. And then quit at the end of a semester, leaving *her* to endure the mess of getting another one trained.

There was no appeal to anything about this. She tried to fill in the time, doing over jobs that the college boys did wrong—or not at all. Taking pride in keeping up with things, keeping it clean and orderly. But there was just no satisfaction here anywhere. Part of her envied the college kid's laissez faire attitude about actually working. But then, this wasn't what they enjoyed; this wasn't their purpose in life. It was just a means to an end for them.

She'd love to be able to get back to doing what she enjoyed—being creative. Gardening. Spending time doing little crafts with the kids, like she used to do with Hanna when she was little. Making up stories and songs, like her Papa.

Papa.

What must you think of me now?

Well, everything was different these days. She saw that nearly every day—selling illegal cigarettes to under-age kids from some unknown place in the City, because they'd stolen an ID card and postured to make her believe them. She knew they were lying—but how could she prove it? She'd never see them again, anyway. They'd move on to the next town and try again.

There was no joy, either, in stocking the shelves with over-priced snacks and candy bars—only to find that some young punks had driven through and while one paid for their gas, the others were stuffing their shirts with booty.

She was the only one there during the day.

What could she do?

Why should she even care?

Only... she did care. She saw the empty lives behind those shaggy heads and daring eyes. Worse, she saw what could happen to Hanna if she **didn't somehow** change things, fix this predicament she found herself in.

The *click, click, click* of the concrete joints jiggled the car as she passed over each one, and a loud *thump* jolted through her as she hit the latest hole in the wearing pavement.

Time was speeding by—a prophetic thought, indeed.

Maybe now, with time on her hands, and “forced” to be home she could get hold of herself again. And maybe she could cross that bridge to the children, too. Bumps, rumble strips, potholes and all.

A bright yellow detour sign met her at the far end of the bridge, pointing her to the west. She knew that road, knew it traveled for at least five miles before it looped around and led to the highway. She would be late, for sure. Her computerized time card was linked directly to the agency; **there was no hiding a late log in. She'd been warned. If she were late another time, they'd fire her. There were plenty of young kids lined up to take her place.**

Maybe that would be her salvation in this decision. In fact, the more she thought about it, the more her heart settled down in resolve instead of anxiety.

This western road wound mostly through a small forest and often **she'd had to stop to allow a mother deer and her fawn cross.**

More delays?

The more the merrier, she decided.



Achashverosh stood beside an enormous oak tree. Most of its stately branches drove high up into the sky and were covered with hundreds of fine, well-lobed leaves. One, however, hung limp and ashen—not a leaf to be found on it. He drew his sword and with a powerful slash severed the damaged limb, which then tumbled to the ground.

“Thank you for your great offering, Friend,” he spoke to the tree. “’Tis but a simple removal of a weight no longer needed, yet the Lord is grateful indeed.”

He flashed a smile at Shamira, saluted and vanished.



Two roads diverged in a yellow wood. The words echoed in Karen’s head as she drove along.

“Huh. Wonder if I can dig that whole thing out of my memory?” She’d had to memorize the Robert Frost poem one year—eighth grade, if she remembered right. And stand to recite it before the class. She’d been terrified, standing there. But she’d done it perfectly, even received an A in elocution from the teacher. Papa had been so proud of her he’d taken her out for pizza that night, just Karen and him.

What a sweet memory ...

Determined now, she thought a few moments then spoke to the windshield.

“Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;
Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,”

A bend in the road at this point halted her recitation, and the car slowed to a stop.

“Well, I never—” she whispered out loud.

Here before her lay a Y in the road. One route was the one she knew took her out to Highway 224. She didn’t know exactly where the other traveled. The first was the one that she’d intended to take, just to make an appearance at the store and relieve John Peters of his post as the overnight clerk. That is, until she could call the company and resign—should she have the nerve to really do it. After all.

But a massive tree limb lay end-to-end across the entire road. There was no hope of getting around that.

A fleeing thought drifted through her mind: *Pay attention. He calls you.* It was familiar, but very, very old. A quick swell of fear rose immediately after; it looked like this was going to happen, one way or another—she was about to be jobless. What was Mike going to do? What would he say to her?

“Well,” she turned the wheel straight again and stepped on the accelerator. “It’s not like I’m making it all up. Or trying to be late. Even Mike has to understand that.”

Continuing down the road, she took up her narration where she’d left off.

“And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.”

Will it? A mellower, contemplative mood was moving over her.

Will it make any difference?

Her frame of mind seemed to demand accompaniment, and she reached to turn on the radio. Static met every turn of the knob until it settled on a station broadcast from the local college. A quiet voice was touting the advantages of attending classes at their newest building and a variety of choices now available. The advertisement ended, and she hoped she’d found the classical time slot—but the sudden blare of a rap song and raucous voices made her jump.

She hurried to shut it off again.

“Guess that’s out. So much for being dreamy first thing in the morning ...” Her fingers tapped out their jitters on the steering wheel until her heart calmed down again.

This is a pleasant road, though, she mused. I wonder how far out of the way I'll be once I figure out where I'm going?

She was beginning to enjoy this adventure, starting to feel her shoulders relax and the ever-present knot in her stomach ease away. As a child, road trips had been a cheap, easy way to enjoy a beautiful Sunday afternoon. The family would often pile into the enormous Studebaker left them by her grandfather and just journey along, excitedly spotting wildlife and fine, lavish houses on the way.

Memory upon memory sprang up as she travelled.

Grampa would have called this a cow path, for all the twists and turns in it.

True, it had been many years since those jaunting days, but the road seemed completely unfamiliar.

I don't ever remember coming this way before. Although maybe we did. As a kid, we must have.

She smiled at a fluffy cloud above her, shaped like a fat, puffy kitten.

Funny how being a kid is so different from being an adult. So free. So little to worry about—OH!

Karen jerked the car to a stop. She'd no sooner rounded the last corner than the woods beside her opened up into a few acres of lush, green field. Nothing surprising there. But out in that field ran children—three of them. The oldest might have been six or so, but the youngest couldn't have been more than two. They had some sort of animal with them, chasing it around and squealing with delight at their antics.

There was no adult anywhere to be seen.

She pulled the car over to the side and sat watching them. **They were the most beautiful children she'd ever seen, even after all the years working at the Daycare. A tall boy with a messy shock of white-blond hair. A dainty, slender girl whose entire face lit up with her laughter. And the toddler! His little face was almost... angelic.**

Concerned that they were out there all alone, she wondered if she should do something. Help them? At least talk to them, make sure their **parents were somewhere, perhaps where she couldn't see them from this angle.** She opened the car door and turned to step out—but her foot slid on the scattered stones that were spread under her, nearly causing her to sit back down, bumping her head on the doorframe in the process.

“Ouch!”

Grimacing, a second try was successful, and she turned back towards the field and the children. But they were gone. Not running across the field, not lying in the grass—it was too short, and she would have seen them anyway.

No ... they were just gone!

Even the animal had disappeared.



Hanna scraped her feet along in the shredded black-tire mulch, slowing her motion until she finally came to a stop. She sat humped over the swing, arms looped around the chains that held it, eyes searching the ground for nothing in particular.

She was bored out of her mind.

She'd finished the book she'd brought along and spent some time on the swing, enjoying the air *whoosh* by her face, closing her eyes to the sun, feeling its heat.

But enough was enough.

Evan loved coming to the school playground. It was a good place to spend time with him, but there was nothing here for her to do. No one but the squirrels and the bunnies ever showed up. Certainly, none of the other kids from around the neighborhood came.

They probably have better play equipment in their own backyards, **she'd often thought.**

Next to her swing stood a tall, wooden structure hung with black rubber tires that lay horizontal to the ground, suspended from chains. A series of narrow steps climbed up the one side, leading to a small, railing-protected platform with a tent-like cover from the sun. The kids called it The Fort, but the space was only big enough to hold 4 small children at best.

Further away, a tall, peeling-metal set of ladder rungs ran up to a dull, silver slide that carried a child halfway down and then stopped—making them scoot on their bottoms to the end of the ride. On the other corner of the mulched space, a selection of cartoonish, heavy-bodied animals waved on top of thick springs, two feet off the ground, inviting only the youngest of children to climb aboard.

It was the elementary school playground, after all.

The play opportunities finished with a huge sandbox, covered over and screwed shut for the summer. That was it.

Well... there was also space. Acres of spottily mown grass that ran up to the edge of the woods and the boundary fence.

And trees. Lots of trees.

The thing with Evan was, he had an imagination. Not just your normal spread-your-arms-out-and-pretend-you're-an-airplane kind. The kind where imaginary friends met him. Everywhere he went. And he had no shame in talking out loud to them.

It was embarrassing, really.

Take him to one of the little stores in town, just to look around? No, **she'd rather sit here and watch him play**—keep him away from others that might make fun of him.

Because sometimes he'd come out with the **strangest things to say.**

In fact, lately he'd been acting like one of the characters in the Narnia book, pretending Aslan was there all the time...

Only Evan's name for him, from what he had excitedly told her one day, was Majesty.

Sheesh.

His first-grade teacher had sent notes home advising Mom and Dad of his “**outspoken**” behavior in class, and he'd acquiesced to being quiet there. **But he knew Hanna wouldn't stop him**—so on and on he chattered. She never really paid any attention to him, what he was saying. He was just a little kid, after all.

But now she was hot and tired, and she'd had enough of the whole place. **It was almost lunch, anyway. Mom's note had told her to go at lunch, didn't it?**

She wondered if Nana would watch Evan for a while and let her escape alone upstairs to a bedroom so she could visit the Garden. The note Kamali had given her this morning was still playing through her mind. **She'd calmed back down now, over the Book and all**—and she was just itching to find out what really was happening.

Jesus did say anytime...

I have to know what that Book was about! I have to know WHY, Lord. Please meet with me later? At Nana's—if we can?

“Evan.” Determined to leave, she turned to the fort area and found him sitting on the very top, talking away.

“Evan, we need to go!”

“In a minute, Hanna. I’m talking to Majesty.”

She rolled her eyes and started to relax, but then decided she just plain didn’t want to wait any longer. In a bit of a huff, she stood and made her way over to the wooden steps.

“No, I want to go now,” she called up to him. “Mom’s note said we need to go to Nana’s for lunch. That’s what time it is—I want to go.”

Evan’s voice started up again, droning just below her ability to hear.

“Evan, now! I mean it,” her voice betrayed her selfish boredom.

His high little voice came floating down again. This time she caught the words.

“He wants to meet you, Hanna.”

“Who? Who wants to meet me?” She was getting a little agitated. This was a cute game, but she really didn’t feel like squeezing up those stairs to the top of this thing.

“Com’on, Evan,” she said—a little louder, for emphasis, this time.

“The game’s done now. Really. I really want to leave.” Each phrase got a little quieter than the one before it. “Just come down. Please?”

She felt a wry smile curling up the side of her face. It was remarkable, really. No matter how much she was tempted, she just plain never got totally annoyed with him. Not really. It was almost like there was a Never-Get-Angry-With-Evan switch inside that wouldn’t flip, no matter the circumstance.

His sandy-brown, tousled hair poked up above the railing as he stood, his peaked little face appearing between the guardrails.

“No, really, Hanna. He really wants to meet you. He says He has something important to tell you.

“Please come up.”

Twin sky-blue eyes coaxed her over a tremulous smile, and her heart gave in.

With a sigh, she grabbed onto the arched metal bar and began to work her way up to the top. As she expected, he sat up there completely alone.

How long was this going to take, anyway?



The rumbly sound of tires on gravel brought Karen back out of her ponderings. A Ford pickup was making its way down the dirt road towards her. Maybe they knew what was going on here. She reached out to close her car door and stood looking directly at the driver, waving a little and hoping he'd get the hint.

"Having a little trouble, Ma'am?" The ancient truck drew up beside her. A portly, white-haired man, his torso leaning nearly across his wife's lap, spoke out the open window.

"Haven't got any tools here 'long with me, but I could send back some help, if you'd like. We're only goin' a mile or so up the road yet."

The woman smiled up at her, nodding her head.

"No, no—I'm fine, thank you so much," Karen answered, speaking to the bottom of his face. "I'm just wondering, though. I saw some small children playing over here on the meadow a while ago. They seemed awfully young to be out here alone. I didn't see any adults or older children around and I was a little concerned."

She bent her head down a bit more, looking directly at him now.

"Do you know where they might live? I'd like to at least let their parents know I'd seen them here."

The woman turned to look at her husband and he sat a moment—lips pursed, eyebrows drawn together. He clucked his tongue against the roof of his mouth a few times, adjusted the ratty Stetson on his head, then looked up at her.

"Noo. No. There aren't any little 'uns around here anymore. There used to be, a few years back. But the Martin's sold that house and the couple that took it never had any young'uns. No..." A slow shake of his head made it final. "There's no children anywhere's around here. We're the nearest house to this field, and it's a nuther two miles to the next one."

The silent wife faced her with another shy smile and Karen stood up straight again.

"Oh," she puzzled, speaking more to herself than them. "Oh, okay, then."

She stepped back away from the vehicle and gave them another little wave.

"Thank you so much for stopping, then! I guess I'll just be on my way."

Glad to have been of such help, he nodded to her with a broad grin, put the truck in gear and slowly pulled away. Smoke rose to greet her from the tailpipe, and dust churned up from the tires stirring the dirt road, and she turned her head from it. She stood there, wondering, when from the corner of her eye she saw a movement up on the field again.

Her head jerked up, anxious to solve this situation. The smile of the tiniest child greeted her. He was standing just up a little incline—so close, Karen could see the fine strands of his hair blowing, see tiny brown freckles crossing his cheeks. His face was somehow so familiar—she felt as if she should know who he was.

The little boy's smile bloomed, lighting up his entire face. He gave Karen a little kiss with one hand and blew it towards her—then disappeared again.



“Okay, Squirt. What do you have to show me?” Hanna’s voice preceded her face on the steps. “This better be goo—”

“Hello, Hannalee,” a deep, growly voice spoke out of the air at the same time a form appeared.

Both hands flew to her mouth and she nearly fell backwards again. Standing half-on, half-off of the tiny platform stood an enormous male lion. Two feet rested on the platform, his body went right through the railings, and the other two feet rested—on thin air?

Her mind flew around inside her head searching for a logical place to land.

“It’s so nice of you to join us!” the voice smoothed to a deep-sounding purr. “I’ve looked forward to meeting you for a very long time, now. Adonai has told me much about you, Dear One.”

The mighty beast’s hair was unlike anything Hanna had ever seen. And for one wild moment, she was reminded of Kamali’s hair the first time she’d met him. His body was a velvety, cinnamon brown but there was a good deal of black in his mane, as well. The inky color mingled with strands of pure gold and then came together in a solid ruff around his entire neck. The tips of his ears stretched up over the top of Evan’s head; his mouth was the size of the boy’s entire face.

He stood there, panting slightly, his massive head cocked curiously, as though he were waiting for her to answer.

This was the middle of the day, for crying out loud!

Right out in public?

“Are you from ...?” was all she could manage.

She’d never seen a lion smile before, but the animal’s eyes seemed to laugh in delight.

“I am,” he answered. “I am Adonai’s friend. You might say we belong together.”

He leaned close to her now.

Don’t worry, he whispered. *No-one can see me except you two.*

Hanna blushed, realizing they were the only ones there, anyway—unless you counted the squirrels.

With a roar of good-humored laughter, he shook his head like a dog shaking off water. The sun glinted off the feathery strands that framed his face, forming a halo of light for a moment.

No wonder his name was Majesty!

“Adonai requests, if you please, that you would meet with Him again this afternoon. Whenever you’re ready. But if you would be so kind as to come to the Gate and call for Him, He would like that.”

He lifted his chin just a little—his message spoken, his mission completed.

“Ah,” as if he just remembered something, he began again. This time he turned towards Evan. “I’d like to thank you for your company today. I had a pleasant time speaking with you, Little One. I will be enjoying your company again soon, I am certain. And will be sure to give Adonai your regards, as you have asked.”

Now finished, he turned and walked into the air, his body slowing fading away the further he went.

Evan stood happily watching the great beast leave, then turned to Hanna with a grin.

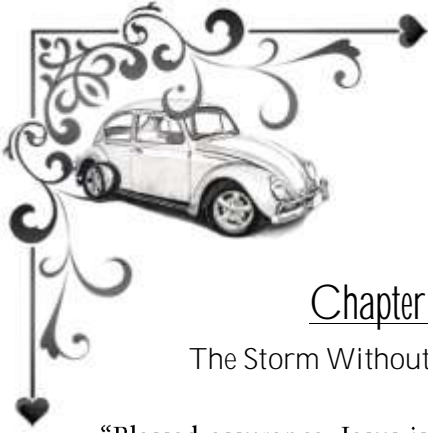
“See? I told you he had a message for you.”

Innocent as a dove, this was all just another happy event in his day; nothing out of the ordinary to be found here.

Broad daylight. It’s broad daylight!! Hanna’s mind kept repeating.

She reached out and took Evan’s hand without a word. Slowly, they made their way down the steps, one after the other, and headed across the tarmac towards the other end of the street and Nana’s house.





Chapter Twelve

The Storm Without, The Storm Within

“Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine. *Oh, what a foretaste of Glory Divine...!*”

Anne’s eyes twinkled with gladness as sang the sweet, old hymn. She placed the last plate on the table and sighed happily. The children would be arriving any minute and she was so looking forward to seeing the surprise on their young faces.

Now, what else? she wondered, putting a finger to her lips, tapping them. Listening. *Oh, that’s right—I was going to dig that special cup Evan likes from out the cupboard. He likes to dunk his cookies. Thank you, Lord—that was very kind.*

She turned and walked out of the dining room, her shoes *clip, clipping* as she moved from carpet to vinyl flooring.

“Tell me, Lord. What do people do that don’t listen to You?” she queried out loud, opening the appropriate kitchen cabinet. “How in the world do they get through a single day?” She shook her head, trying to picture such a silent, confusing way of life. “It surely is beyond me,” she finally declared. Turning back to her preparations, she found the treasured cup and decided to wait on pouring the milk until they were actually seated at the table.

There’s just nothing like iced-cold milk with a sandwich and chocolate chip cookies! she smiled, happy with the way the Lord had worked things out. Last night, He’d put the idea in her head to bake a new batch of cookies. Then, He’d whispered that He’d like the children to come for a visit and to call Mike late last night to get his permission. He’d even

made Mike agreeable to letting the children come for lunch today. How sweet of Him to cover all the bases for her!

Even if Mike did sound so very distracted last night. Even mad—as usual. *Some new account of his*, I suppose. She shook her head again, this time thoughts of her daughter and the children causing the consternation.

“I know I shouldn’t be worryin’ over them, Lord. I know You have it all figured out by now. Don’t You?” She placed the cup at Evan’s place and straightened the chair a little, out of habit. “I’m sorry. That’s one of my worst faults, I know. Trying to help You out with every little plan.”

Her hands dropped in front of her and she folded them together, a tiny display of exasperation—mostly with herself.

“I know. I know.”

She stood still, listening again for a few moments. “But they are my grandchildren—my heart. And my daughter, my baby! Special, special gifts to me—You well know that, too, Lord.”

She’d been looking down at her feet all this while, but now her head picked up and turned slightly to the right. “Forgive me, please, for the arrogance of not trusting You?”

Soft eyes appealed for grace from the unseen figure beside her, accompanied by a wry mouth. “I know You know what You’re doing and love them far better than I can. I’ll stop now. I promise. It’s all in Your hands, my precious Savior. All in Your hands.”

Peace began to fill her soul and her face glowed again.

“Aww, thank You, Lord. Always Your peace. Always.”

Humming the tune from the song again, she walked to the bay window that covered the entire front wall of her living room. Peering through filmy, sheer curtains she could just make out Hanna’s head down the end of the block, getting ready to cross the street. Up above them, dark, threatening clouds were starting to come up from the south—a front coming in and spreading rapidly across the entire sky.

“Hmmm... Now I wonder what that’s all about, Lord? The weather forecaster said it was supposed to be warm and sunny all day today. What do You have planned for this afternoon? More than just a watering of the flowers, I have a feeling.”

Not receiving an answer, she went to the door and opened the heavy inside door, preparing to greet the children.

“Well, whatever it is You have in mind, bless the ones You are dealing with, please?”

She eyed the approaching storm again as she walked to the top of the porch steps, but it seemed it would remain a mystery for now. And she had Joy to look forward to, as the children saw her and began to run towards the house.

“Hanna! Evan!” one hand on her left hip, her right waving in their direction, she called down the street to the children. “I have such good news for you today!”



A single raindrop hit the windshield, splattering wide and dribbling down a crooked path to the edge of the offside wiper blade. Karen’s eyes traced its progress, then turned back to the dirt road she’d been traveling for the past hour.

Frustrated, she stopped the car at the mouth of an overgrown lane, wondering if there was an outlet there. Speckled with potholes, she watched it wander downhill from the road, pause at the sliding door of a huge, broken-down cow barn and curl around behind it. A just-as-broken-down house stood nearby, slumping slightly to one side—a visual reminder of more prosperous times for some local farmer in a day long gone by. By all appearances, no one had travelled this road for many years.

“I guess there’s no going that way either,” she sighed, bleakly thinking about all the other options she’d tried so far.

She was lost. Not just a little lost. LOST. She couldn’t have dreamt that the winding-path roads behind her little village would take her this far away from main roads. But she didn’t have a clue where she was, where she was going, or how in the world she was going to get out of here and back to familiar places and home.

Picking up the dead cell phone from her lap again, hoping against hope that it had somehow found a tiny bit of charge, she pushed the power button a few times.

Stupid thought. It’s dead as a doorknob. I knew I should have plugged it in last night.

She tossed it towards the floor, aiming at her wide-mouthed purse, missed it entirely—and sighed.

“So,” she mumbled to herself. “Can this get any worse?”

Her eyes were drawn to the sky, looking for the random cloud that must have left that single drop. Leaning forward to see, more sky revealed

a solid, black line of angry-looking clouds high above the roof. She turned around to look out the back window—and there were more, far more, stretching side-to-side as far as she could see behind her.

“Wonderful!” she muttered, now tapping her hand against the steering wheel in agitation. Her tires were nearly worn bare, and driving on clay-filled, backcountry roads like these was bad enough when they were dry. Rain turned them to instant mud, greasy and slick to navigate, even with good tires.

Not sure just what to do, she reached to start the car. Maybe she could head out and beat the rain. With the lucky third turn of the key, the engine sputtered to life—and so did the downpour. She flipped on the headlights, flung the shift stick down into reverse, backed onto the road again and took off—but within bare minutes the storm overtook her, pouring out like a faucet until even the fastest speed on the windshield wipers couldn't keep up.

Now what? Gripping the steering wheel with both hands, she slowed the car back down, anticipating the slide of the wheels if she had to brake suddenly.

I can't see three feet in front of me, for heaven's sake!

She had slowed the car to a crawl. Tense minutes dribbled by and her heart began to pound in her ears as she searched for another place to pull off and wait out the storm. The deluge of rain beating on the metal roof became a deafening roar, filling her head and taking her to a state of near panic.

There!

Right before her, an ancient stone bridge crossed the road and she could see a little room to the right side, underneath. With a grateful sigh, she pulled under the bridge as far over as she could without scraping the paint off the passenger door. Relief swept over her, draining her head **nearly to unconsciousness as she set the gears back into Park. She hadn't** even noticed her body creeping further and further forward over the steering wheel, tense as a mountain lion waiting to spring. Karen turned off the engine and fell against the seat back again, panting.

Before her, the water fell down off the bridge in a solid sheet. Behind her—the same. It gave her the singular feeling that she had driven **inside a cave beneath a waterfall. Once she'd gotten used to it, once her** heart beat in a regular, gentle rhythm again, it was rather pleasant, really.

The roar on the roof was gone, replaced by a steady *drip, drip, drip* of a trickle falling from the overpass.

At least she could relax now, until the storm was over.

How long could it last, anyway?

She settled deeper into the seat and closed her eyes, exhausted. The turn of this day had taken her places way beyond her expectations. How could something that started out with such boring regularity turn into this craziness?



The sound of the pouring water slowly faded into the roaring crash of the ocean, wave upon wave coming up to kiss the sand and run shyly back again. Sun rays gently heated the back of her shoulders as she leaned over the castle moat she was forming, her hands pulling up sand for the sides high and firm, patting it down solid to hold the water. A piece of driftwood formed the wooden bridge over to the castle and tiny bits of shell and seaweed decorated the walls.

The high-pitched squeal of laughter cheered her on as she picked up a bucket of salty seawater and poured it around, filling the moat and sealing off the shell animals from the rest of the world. Well— **at least that’s the story she’d been telling her Princess, Princess Hannalee of the Castle Duscha, from the land of Anwyll Arvel.** The child giggled with glee at the foreign sounding names, clapping in delight at her mother’s creation.

Strong, tiny arms suddenly wrapped around Karen’s neck, a little body clinging down her back. A wet kiss landed on her ear and a lingering hug warmed her heart even more than the sun warmed her skin. Loosening herself, she twisted around and returned the hug, holding her precious little daughter’s body close to her own for long moments. Finally, she worked her way to her feet, held onto the child with one hand and picked up the bucket in her other—and together they headed back to the sea for more water.

“Do you want to go in the water awhile, Hannalee? I’ll carry you in.” She could feel the child’s grip tightening, digging into her fingers, and stopped again near the water’s edge.

“No, Mommy! No!”

The little voice pleaded, her eyes begged—and Karen relented and smiled at her. She reached out and flipped her quivering bottom lip with a

forefinger and promised, “Okay, Sweetheart. I know you don’t like the water. Maybe we’ll try again later... okay?”

A mute, tiny nod was the child’s reply and Karen waded out a bit to fill the bucket.

Oh, how she loved this child, this tiny treasure the Lord had given them! She’d reveled through every single day of her pregnancy, rejoiced at the first birth pain. It had been a long, hard labor and birth—but all of the suffering had fled away the moment the nurse had laid this precious jewel in her arms.

My baby. My child. Oh, Lord, I’ve dreamed of this day all my life. Thank You. Thank You for this precious blessing, she had blessed the Lord for this miracle He’d brought to their lives.

As if he could read her memories, the tiny babe inside her womb leapt within her. Karen laughed out loud, placing a protective hand over the place he lay.

No, Love. I haven’t forgotten you! Soon enough, you’ll be here to play with us, too!

Her life was full, complete. Her marriage was... Well. For now, they were happy again. Her Princess was here, and her Prince Charming would soon be.

Life was good.

Life was more than good.

“Come on, Mommy! I want to fill the moat way high! The alligators will get out if we don’t!” called the tiny urchin who stood behind her, not even willing to let her toes get lapped by the warm, salty water.

Yes. Life was wonderfully, marvelously good...



“Now, Adonai? Can I see her again now?” the little child peered up at His face. “I want to wave to her again. Please?”

Adonai bent down and scooped the youngster up in His strong arms and snuggled him against His shoulder. “Soon, Sweet One. Soon. Let’s give her a little more time to dream. Okay?”

The answer pleased the child and he settled down in this most treasured place. Together, they continued their watch over a soul very dear to both of them.



She hadn't been aware that she'd fallen asleep, so it was a total surprise for Karen to wake up again. Funny. She had her eyes closed, but she could swear she'd heard the ocean in her ears.

Fighting between the conscious and unconscious, she searched her mind to remember where she was, what was happening—where she'd just been. The images of the dream came rushing to the surface: Virginia Beach. Hannalee. Making castles. Playing in the sand.

A war started within—sweet, sweet memories of the past fighting against the perceived pain of the present. She lay there in the driver's seat with her eyes closed, trying to decide which path to take.

Another Y in another road. Just like earlier this morning.

Opening her eyes, staring out at the wall of water before her, Karen had the oddest sensation that remembering the dream was important. That it was more than just a dream, more than something to brush off and chain up within the dungeon where all such memories had been kept for many years.

In the midst of her struggle, a gentle thought drifted through her mind

Renew. Renew the Love. Renew the Trust.

As she warmed to the idea, mulling it around in her mind and gradually accepting it, she could actually feel a sharp pain, like a tug within her heart. In her mind's eye, she imagined something being pulled and pulled and pulled on, until finally it let go and a gush of—what? came forth and spilled out in a torrent. And remarkably, for the second time in this obscenely crazy day—she felt suddenly better. The pain vanished and a sense of lightness flowed through her.

There was nowhere to go. The rain was still beating down outside her little safe place. She closed her eyes again and concentrated on drawing back the memories without hindering any of them.



Ikaia thrust yet another spear into the depths of the Earth. More was tended to, more healed and restored. The work progressed. The will of the Woman had been bending to the wooing call of the Master's voice.

Fierce a warrior though he was, he smiled inwardly at the progress, the joy on his Creator's face as they worked.

Yes—this is what they rejoiced over! What they longed to see. Precious union between the human soul and the King as He gathered them closer and closer into His loving arms. It was a wonder the angels never tired of watching.

He folded his arms now, waiting for the signal. Yet one more shaft remained, maiming the soul of the woman he had watched over since her birth. Newer than the others, yet larger by far, it would bring him great pleasure to withdraw this one as well.



Adonai stepped over to her once again, gently putting her back into a sleep state. He smiled at Ikaia, confident now that victory would be won. Taking the child, He settled into the seat of the car and watched.



Karen thrashed from one side of the bucket seat to the other, moaning and groaning, caught in the recurring nightmare—unable to escape.

She lay on a gurney, struggling to wake up from anesthesia.

I'm holding something? Her right arm was comfortably curved around a soft, sweet-smelling bundle. *I can feel the weight. The baby! The baby is here, and I'm holding it now in my arm!*

Filled with joy, she struggled to open her eyes to gaze on the precious newborn—but there was nothing there.

Evil, horrible laughter exploded in her ear, pounded on her, swirled around her until she nearly screamed—then was cut off.

She couldn't breathe—she couldn't breathe!

A round-faced nurse came to her side, patting her mindlessly on the arm.

“What's wrong, dearie? You need something—a drink? I can give you ice to chew.”

Her heart had exploded in pain—and this woman wants to give her ice?

Karen began to cry, then lay sobbing—unable to stop, unable to stifle the embarrassing sounds that were being ripped from her throat.

Two different nurses came over to her.

“You need to get control of yourself, Honey. You’re going to scare the girls in the other room. Hush that crying now. Hush, I say!” spoke the tall skinny one with hair pulled back so tightly her eyes cocked into a slant.

“What’s all the fuss over a baby, yeh?” came the faceless voice of the second. “Babies die all day long here. You can have another—just shut up now, you see?”

She couldn’t stop. Couldn’t be obedient and gain control. They shrugged and walked away, leaving her alone and closing the door behind them.

Her eyes roamed the ceiling, trying to breathe. Trying to gain some control. Five hundred and thirty-six black dots were up there—she’d counted them before somehow. She tried counting them again. Her breathing started to slow...

My baby. Lord, where is my baby? she pleaded to the spots. *Why have You taken him away?*

The white ceiling tile just over her head had more spots than the others, and the irregular pattern captured her attention. Mindlessly, she began counting again, grasping at anything to occupy her thoughts. But as her eyes ran over and over them, they began to jiggle and move. Then grow. Then merge together into one dark splash. It flashed from dark to brilliant light—and a voice spoke to her.

“Come up here.”

She could feel herself moving upwards, obeying. *It wasn’t big enough!* she was sure. But the next thing she knew, she stood on the other side in a world so opposite the one she had just left, it took her breath away.

Before her stood a man. **Young. Maybe...** thirty or so. He was tall and blonde. Curls tousled all over his head, some dangling down over his ears, others lying on his neck to his shoulders. His skin glowed, and his clothes, while white to begin with, seemed to shine from within, as though they were lit from inside the fabric itself somehow. His eyes were the color of the ocean, moving between shades of blue and green like the waves. At the sight of her, he smiled and raised both arms out in welcome to her.

“Mother!” he cried. “Mother! I am well. It is well. There is no need to fear!”

She didn't know how to think this, how to understand this—until another Man appeared beside the first. This one was dressed very much the same, yet His hair was dark. His face bearded.

And then she knew.

She still didn't understand—but she knew.

This handsome, blond man was somehow her son. Now. In Heaven with the Lord—for Who else could that other One be???

And as *he* was whole and alive—so must be her other children.

ALL of them.



There were giggles in her ears. Little-child, high-pitched giggles! **Enchanting, inviting, Karen listened until she couldn't resist a moment** more and started giggling along with them. Immediately a deep, resonate chuckle joined in and it all rolled around and around until it broke out in tear-producing laughter.

Karen reached up with one hand and wiped the water from her still-closed eyes, amazed that a dream could sound so real. The one before had faded so swiftly away—the first part. All that was left was the image of the young man.

And he **hadn't been giggling.**

This day can't possibly get any queerer, she thought, her senses all coming around now. She sat listening for the rain, still unwilling to open her eyes and return to “real”.

From the sound of it, the rain still poured. The drip could be heard again on the roof.

Sigh ... *My son. MY SON, Lord. You brought him to me, that's the part of the dream the nightmare always drove away. Oh, thank You for bringing it back.*

Yes. I remember now. He's WITH You, isn't he? And grown so tall and beautiful! How can this be—it was only six years ago?

I don't understand. But I'm so glad. So glad!

“I allowed you a look at what he will be, for Eternity,” a voice spoke next to her.

Now her eyes flew open!

“Sometimes, what you think of as ‘real’ pales in comparison to what IS real, My dear one,” the voice continued.

She could see a hand held out to her. There was nothing left to her emotions to react with—so she passively followed it with her eyes and came to a Man sitting in the passenger seat of her car. His face was a study in compassion and love and mirth, all rolled together—His eyes proclaiming them all. He held a small child on His lap of about two years old. The child had both hands covering his mouth, but giggles now exploded from his fingers and soon his hands couldn’t contain themselves any longer and began to clap together.

“We did it, Yeshua—we did it! We surprised her!” his giggles continued, surely the greatest joke ever played.

“Yes, we did little Keith. We surely did,” He assured the child, His eyes never leaving Karen’s.

The Man. The child. The name. The field and the other children.

“Oh, Lord. How can it be? How can it be? Can I ...?”

“No, dear one. He is in his spirit body. You see him because I allow you to—but you would not feel his touch, nor his substance right now. Not with your flesh.” His eyes sparkled. “I will teach you, though. I will teach you to come in the spirit to Me. I have prepared a place for you, My dear one. If you follow My lead, I will take you there and you will begin to understand these things.”

With a sudden thought, Karen turned her face away, afraid. “How can You forgive me, Lord? I’ve been so unfaithful, so wrong. Look what I’ve done to the children—to Hanna and Evan. Oh, how can You really be here now—how can You forgive me...”

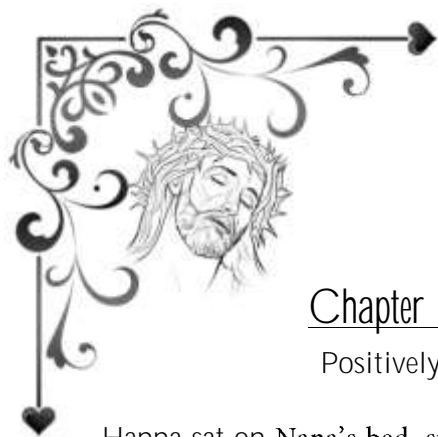
The hand came back into her vision now, palm turned up, sleeve pulled back. In the center, she could see a scar big enough to let a nail the size of a railroad spike go through.

“I forgave you 2,000 years ago, My Dove. I looked to this very day even then—knowing what this day would hold. And I took your sin upon Myself, even there at the Cross. Your sins are forgiven, Karen. Past, present, and future. All. You only have to ask Me to receive it.”

His hand moved to smooth her forehead, telling her a quiet *shhhh*.

“I have read your heart. I have seen your repentance, your pain, your desire to make things right again. I am here now in answer to those prayers. Trust Me now as we talk, dear one.

“Trust Me now.”



Chapter Thirteen

Positively Negative

Hanna sat on Nana's bed, smoothing the quilted squares of the bedspread with her hand. Each one was so different; the colors, the fabrics, the patterns. It seemed like they didn't belong together, they couldn't possibly work together to make a pleasing sight—yet they did.

Odd. She'd never thought something like that before. She wondered where the thought came from now.

Maybe I'm just avoiding the issue, here. She sighed and tucked into the oversized pillow, curling up into a ball.

Well, I'm here, Lord. Just like Majesty said You wanted. I'm not mad anymore—about the book and all. But I'm confused. Will you meet me now? Do I have to do something special, since I'm not asleep?

Instantly, Kamali stood next to her. With a smile, he reached out and laid his hand on her shoulder.

“Close your eyes, Little One, and relax. I will take you to the Garden.”

Shaking her head in amazement, she did as she was asked and in moments she stood outside the Gate. Yes! She had on the same gown, but to her delight, this time it was down to the ground and there was a very fine, scarlet thread running around the ruffle at the bottom. Something must have happened; she must have done something right, somewhere!

“He's expecting you, Hannah. Go ahead in and you'll find Him soon enough.”

She nodded her head, pressed the key to the heart on her gown and walked through the opened Gate.

It was different today. She couldn't put her finger on just what, but there was a... taste? in the air. Or was it a smell? It was, rancid though—

that was what drew her attention. Sour. Fermented. No—bitter. It made her nose wrinkle and her taste buds stand on edge.

“Lord?” she called quietly. “Lord, what is this? What’s happened?”

He neither replied nor appeared and Hannah was beginning to worry.

I thought the dress... I thought everything was okay again.

Where is He? What’s making this awful smell here?

“Lord, where are You? I’m scared now...”

She’d been walking down the path all this time and now noticed, off to the right beyond the Chameleon Tree, some sort of strange-looking, brambly bush growing.

“I don’t remember this,” she said. “It doesn’t look like anything I’ve ever seen here before, either.” Like everything else in the Garden—tree, plant, animal or even water—it seemed to be alive. But even that was somehow frightening. As she stood looking at it, it continued to grow—swiftly. Without warning, tendrils from the plant raced out and around both sides of her, encircling her in their midst and then grew higher than her head. Like a mouse lured into a trap, it surrounded and enclosed her in its midst with no way out.

“Jesus!” she panicked. “JESUS! Where are You??”

Instantly, He stood beside her. She turned to Him and threw herself at Him, burying her face in His chest, arms flung around His waist.

“Oh, Jesus! I’m so frightened! Where were You? What IS this!?”

He looked down at her with great compassion, but His voice was firm.

“You allowed it to be planted here, Dear Hanna. You allowed this in.”

“But how, Lord? What do You mean? I don’t understand...” her voice broke and she stepped back away from Him. “You keep telling me nothing here would hurt me. That everything here was Love. What? I don’t understand, Lord. What is this?”

“I am here, Dear one, and I am not leaving you alone. But you need to listen calmly now... and learn.

“No—nothing here will harm you—I will not allow it. But that doesn’t mean you yourself can’t let things in to this place that are not of My Kingdom.”

He raised His hand and immediately the layers and growth of the plant ceased. “What our Enemy meant for evil, I will always turn to Good.

He held her tightly now, His sweet breath flowing down over the top of her head.

“I will be asking you a serious question soon.

“Are you ready, Dear one?”

Hanna didn’t know what He meant by that, either, but His very presence was giving her a courage she didn’t know she had.

“When I first brought you here,” He continued. “I told you that nothing dies here. Nothing gets destroyed or harmed or broken. Not if you are doing your job. Part of your job is to tend to the attitudes of your heart and not allow any that are not motivated by Love.

“Do you remember?”

She looked up into His face. Even though this was a “scolding” of sorts, Love still poured out through His eyes on her. This wasn’t going to be pleasant—she knew it. But all of a sudden, it didn’t matter anymore.

“Yes, Lord. I remember.”

“And have you not been taught that all things negative are not of My Kingdom?”

This was a more indirect question, but as she looked into His eyes, she began to understand. Positive in the Narnian books was what she would call Good. Kind. Pleasant. Caring. Loving. Positive in the Bible was the same way—Good King David. The Good Samaritan. The Fruits of the Spirit—Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Goodness, Kindness. Positive things.

Negative would then equal Bad. Wicked. Evil. Dark. The kingdom of her Enemy. Again, the comparisons came through her mind. The wicked White Witch. The horrible creatures who surrounded her and attacked Narnia. Uncle Digory, from a different book in the series. In the Bible—Cain. King Ahab and Jezebel. Goliath. Pontius Pilate, who allowed Jesus to be taken to the Cross, even though he knew that the Lord was innocent of the crimes He was being condemned for.

It was clear as day now.

“Yes, Lord. I see. I do.” Her eyebrows drew in. “But what does that have to do with me and this awful plant?”

He smiled. “When you entered the Garden, what did you smell?”

She made a face—the smell was still all around them, even worse now that the plant surrounded them.

“Yuck! Rank. Sour!”

“Bitter?” He cocked His head with the question.

“Yes! Bitter—I can taste it, it’s all over my tongue!”

“Then let’s look at the past few days of your life and let’s see if you can figure this out.”

He waved His hand and the atmosphere seemed to part a little, just over her head. She could see colors forming, then a clear image of herself came into focus. She saw the morning two days ago, where Dad was reaming out Evan for wearing his dirty shoes in the house. As she watched, she saw in the spirit what she hadn’t known in the flesh—a small, hunched creature jumped up on her shoulder, reading her ugly thoughts towards her father. It whispered into her ear even more nasty thoughts and they mingled together in her mind. She could see an opaque copy of herself within herself, agreeing with the thoughts, both her own and the creature’s. A small “door,” an opening appeared in the copy body, near where a fleshly heart would be found—and the creature reached out, planted a small, dark seed inside and followed it in.

Hanna drew in a sharp breath. “What IS that thing? And what did it just do??” Her nose wrinkled up as she turned to ask Him. “What’s that thing that looks like me inside of me, too?”

He smiled, in spite of the seriousness of the moment.

“That thing that looks like you is your soul. You are really a Soul walking around in a body—it is your soul that feels and remembers, that makes your mind and body do the things you do. It will be your soul that comes to Me at the end of your life, to Heaven. Or before. But that’s a question for another time.

“That thing on your shoulder is a minion of the Enemy, more commonly called a demon. They are like My... policemen in the world. Totally under MY control—although both they and Satan have fooled themselves to believe that they act under their own authority. NONE of them do anything that I do not allow, control, and stop when My purpose is completed.”

Hannah looked at Him incredulously. “Then You KNEW it was there? And You LET it crawl...” she shuddered, “... inside of my *soul*?”

“*Is it still there?!*” Panic began to rise in her.

“Be calmed, Little One. I have told you that they are under My total control. And have I not told you that NOTHING will harm you, but instead I will turn all things to Good?”

“Yeeees... ” her eyes still mirrored her panic. “But I don’t want that thing around me even! Where is it now?”

“It resides in the spirit dimension, not your physical one. But it surely has been allowed to affect you in the realm of the spirit—your soul. Left there long enough, it would begin to affect your physical body, as well.”

He held her face in His hands a moment, then tenderly said, “Hanna, dear one. These things that I say are to inform you—not to frighten you. I am in total control.

“Let’s continue watching,” He waved His hand again.

The scenes changed to the night of her parent’s argument, the questions Evan asked her and the deadly bitterness she nurtured in her heart over them. She saw now that every ugly thought, every refusal to forgive them was spurred on by another demon. Every time she agreed to it and made it her own—another ugly creature slipped in through the door, and the Bramble of Bitterness grew even larger.

Finally, she saw the Office and the exchange there. It was the same thing, over and over again. Only this time, Jesus did something else to the picture and she could also see a carbon copy of Him there—without a beard.

Puzzled, she looked to Him.

“Holy Spirit, Sweetheart. My Holy Spirit.

“Watch now.”

Holy Spirit began to counter every word the demons spoke. If they said hurry up, He said wait. If they said be angry, He spoke Love. She could see her soul listening to both and her mind trying to decide between which of the voices to listen to.

It clicked. She remembered this!

“I think I understand, Lord!” she said, pleased. It felt like getting a good mark on a school paper. “I had the choice. I even had time to make the choice. I remember that, too. But I chose to go one way, even though I could feel that voice—Holy Spirit’s—urging me to go the other way. I get it!

“Only ... now how do I get them out again? Get rid of this awful plant?” she shuddered again. “And those horrible creatures?”

His eyes twinkled as He smiled at her. “You’ve already made the first step—wanting to get rid of them. This is good, Dear. This is good!

“Come, stand before Me. I have made provision for everything you need to live for My Kingdom, to resist this enemy and to drive them

away when you have fallen. Remember this! Victory is always Mine. And so, it is yours, as well.

“I wish to give you something now.”

She stood before Him and a piece of metal, Roman armor appeared in His hands.

“I place on you now My Helmet of Salvation.

*“When you are wearing it, you will know that you do not belong to the world—you are now a citizen of Heaven. You will go into battle as one who is already victorious, because you are reborn and redeemed by a power much higher than the minions of Satan. There is no question about who is going to win; your mind is protected against the wiles of the enemy.

“Now you know that I live in you—you know that I have overcome all things. You know that the enemy is on a leash, held in My own hand. But the most important knowledge of all is that you belong to Me and I have already won every battle against the darkness. No matter how it looks to you.”

Another piece of armor was held in His hands. He lifted it up and over her head, reaching to each side of her to fasten it in place.

“I now give you the Breastplate of Righteousness which protects that inner place, your heart, where I have taken up residence. Your conscience, if it is clear and clean with Me, has nothing to accuse you. The Accuser, as he is called, cannot cause you to become faint of heart.

“It is in matters of the heart—your emotions—that a person is weakened. A blow known as the Sucker Punch, which strikes at the place of the soul, where it abides. These organs affect your emotions and if they are vulnerable, you will collapse in battle—be unable to stand against the **wiles of the devil.”**

To emphasize His words now, He placed a hand both in the front and back of her abdomen, pressing slightly so that she could feel the pressure.

“That is why it is SO important to examine your conscience, confess your sins and repent before going into battle. When you have done this properly and you know you are right with Me, nothing can stop you.

“No lie, accusation, bluff, psychological weapon can penetrate these tender areas and cause you to curl up in a ball and retreat.

“The Breastplate of Being Right with God is your protection that the whole system, the whole body is able to operate at an optimum level.

You have been washed clean in My Blood and are now wearing My Righteousness.”

All this talk about armor and battles and protection was a little nerve-wracking, but Hannah wouldn't think of interrupting Him now with a question. He had taken on the demeanor of the Commander-in-Chief of the Army of Heaven, and there was an innate solemnity of this time, almost to the point of being a Holy Ceremony.

He continued, holding out to her a leather belt from which hung a large scabbard.

“I place around you the Belt of Truth, whose function is to carry the Sword of Truth. Without Truth, you will not win the ultimate battle. If truth is not on your side, no matter how ready you think you are, you are only a reed swaying in the wind.”

An enormous, rectangular shield appeared now. He handed it Hanna and showed her how to hold it. It stood on the ground and reached nearly to the top of her head, with a set of two large straps on the back for her arm to slide through. It looked like it would weigh far more than she could ever pick up, but testing it, it proved to be light and easily swung from side to side and even over her head.

“The Shield of Faith carries the emblem of the finished work of the Cross, from where all your graces come forth. It is what you defend yourself with—your faith in your Citizenship and Who your Sovereign is. Faith in the fact that you are commissioned and in good standing, and that all your actions proceed from Truth and Love.

“In Faith, you have the understanding that your feet carry the message of Peace, Forgiveness and Good Will for all men. All must be defended by Faith, understanding that each item is real and true—so true, you are willing to die for it, just as I did.

“With the Shield of Faith you are protected from the fiery darts of the enemy, who desires to cut you off from Me and isolate you. He uses underhanded tactics—lies, half-truths, twisting and manipulating you until you fall for his lies.”

A long, shining steel blade was next. He held it up vertically in front of them for a moment, then gently slid it into the scabbard at her side as He spoke.

“Now is given the Sword of the Spirit. Literally, My Words written through the Apostles and Prophets, which enables you to defeat error with My very words. There is no question of what is right and what is wrong; it

is given you in My Word. You are able to divide truth from error down to the very marrow of a bone with the help of My Holy Spirit.

“There are so many levels of truth that abundantly illustrate right from wrong. Truth is always weighed and examined through the Scriptures, but your heart must be right with Me and guided by My Spirit—or you will concoct your own truth, apart from Me. It will look and sound good to man but be full of error.

“Finally, I shod your feet with the Sandals of Brotherly Love and Peace.”

He stood back from her now, to give a final word of instruction, a summary of the purpose and importance of all He had just given to her.

“The knowledge of your salvation is protected by the Helmet.

“The assurance that your heart is right with Me—the Breastplate.

“You are sworn to Truth above all opinions, defended and divided by the Belt and Scabbard.

“And your path is one of Peace and Brotherly Love—the Sandals. If your feet are not properly shod, you will do more harm than good with the Sword. The order in which you put these things on has significance.”*

He smiled once more at her.

“Do you remember that I once told you, you were born for such a time as this, like Esther?”

Her eyes were as wide as possible and all she could do was nod solemnly.

“Now you are ready to stand with Me and fight the creatures that you have allowed a place in your soul. You have repented, the first step. I have forgiven you—the second. Now together we shall use the Authority of My Name Above All Names and go out to Victory—the same Victory I won for you and all of My children on the Cross.

“Hannah. Look.”

He pointed to the branches of the bush and suddenly she could see dozens of the ugly creatures clinging to them. In fear of His presence, they stayed as high away as they could. Yet up until now, they had received permission to be just where they were, and they would not leave unless driven away.

Some were beginning to spit in their direction; some had tiny knives and other weapons in their hands, preparing to throw them.

Her first reaction was to scream! But He stood calm and strong beside her—and she was covered all over with the Armor.

Courage flowed through her all of a sudden.

“What do I do, Lord?” she asked quietly.

“Show them no fear—this is what they feed on. Be strong. Be of courage. Call on My Name. Use the Authority of My Name to banish them. Bind them first with chains. Order them with your words, backed by My authority. Then demand they go to the Abyss, from whence they came. If they hesitate, even a fraction of time, call on My Warrior Angels and they will assist you.”

Still not sure what she was doing, she called out rather timidly, “In the Name of Jesus, I command you all bound with chains.” A few, small chains wrapped around the smaller ones.

The larger demons just laughed at her.

Before she could panic again, He said quietly to her, “Believe, Hanna. Believe and Trust.”

He bent to whisper in her ear.

“I ask you again.

“Do you Trust Me?”

He had asked her this question many times by now, and her response was getting easier each time. She had so much history with Him, she realized that nothing HAD ever harmed her in this place, in His presence. Anything she thought had—had only been a thought, not a reality.

A fear, not a Truth.

“Yes, Lord. I do trust You,” she declared now.

“Then speak boldly, with confidence that My Name will accomplish what you command.”

Hannah looked up into the brambles again and quickly set her shield over her head—a few arrows and a knife had been thrown down at her when she wasn’t looking. She swung the shield easily and heard the *thud, thud, ping* of the weapons hitting it. The attack made something swell up inside of her and she spoke out again, more loudly. More confidently.

“In the Name and Authority of Jesus the Christ, BE BOUND with chains!

“Be banished to the Abyss—NOW!”

Amid a cacophony of squeals and screams, the largest portion of the demons were wrapped ‘round and ‘round with thick, heavy chains and yanked out of the cage of branches like fish hooked and pulled from a pond. Soon, there remained only half a dozen or so of the creatures.

They weren't posturing anymore, nor were they threatening with their weapons.

But they were still there.

"What else did I say—do you remember?" He spoke quietly, never taking His eyes from the remaining minions.

Yes, she did!

"In the Authority of Jesus' Name, I send you NOW to the Abyss. And I call on the Holy Warrior Angels to get you there!" She spoke with firm determination now. She could feel the authority of His Name flowing through her, feel the power of His Name dislodging their hold and forcing them to obey.

Immediately as she finished speaking, an entire platoon of angels appeared, each dressed in flashing silver armor banded with scarlet red. They came swords held in hand, shields aloft, deadly business in their eyes. A dozen or more of them stood inside the bramble cage, the rest made a ring around the perimeter.

At the sight of them, the remaining demons fled and were seen no more. Those angels that had stayed in the perimeter flew behind to make sure they reached their destination.

The Platoon Leader came before Jesus and Hanna now, struck his chest with a powerful fist and bowed to his King and Commander. He stood straight again, looking to his Master for any further instructions.

Jesus smiled seriously (that's the only way Hanna could think of it) and addressed him.

"You have done well, Ardeshir. My thanks to you and your companions."

Ardeshir turned to look at Hanna, but the fierceness in his face caused her to draw back a little. No single thought was revealed in his face set so solid and grim, but he gave her a short bow, turned and the remainder of the platoon rapidly flew away.

'Wow' was a kid's word, not worthy of what had all just happened.

Hannah remained speechless, trying hard to absorb it all, wondering how she would ever live a 'normal' life again after this.

The Lord's chuckle seemed out of place with these thoughts and she turned to Him, a little annoyed.

"Sweet, dear Hanna." He smiled and wrapped her in her arms. The armor had vanished from her sight the moment He touched her. He addressed that, too, in anticipation of her questions.

“The armor is still with you, for now. You must learn to ask Me for it every day. Like physical armor, your battles can wear and weaken the armor in the spiritual and must be renewed often. I will always give it to you—you have only to ask.”

He leaned down and kissed the top of her head.

“I know it seems impossible to you now, that you would forget even the tiniest detail of what you have seen and done and experienced here today. Unfortunately, the World will soon confuse and rob you of much of it. You will remember—I will help you. But you will need to come to Me often to retain what I teach you, to make it a true part of your heart, your mind, and your thinking.

“It is SO important now that you spend time with Me. Read My Word often. Talk to Me often. Even when I am not beside you that you see Me, I AM always beside you. I always hear you.”

He looked around and chuckled once more.

“Now, how do you suppose we get out of this?”

He asked, and then began busying Himself with something on the other side of Him. He began to hum a little song to Himself, then turned His back on her to better pay attention to whatever He was doing. She could hear the snap of Him breaking a few of the smaller twigs, but He didn’t seem to be making any progress with the plant.

Or much of an effort, for that matter.

She hadn’t even thought of the plant, so taken up with the battle.

I guess I just figured it would go with the demons, she thought, puzzled. I KNOW He’s not going to answer me if I ask! He never does when He starts twiddling with something else.

She grinned, thinking about it. He was... the most amazing, endearing person she’d ever known, in her whole life. A rush of love filled her heart for Him, just watching Him.

Now she set her mind to the problem, determined that she should find the answer without Him telling her.

What caused the plant to grow in the first place? She understood this—a bitter heart, bitter feelings. Unforgiveness and Anger.

It caused her to pause, too. Didn’t she have a right to be angry, hurt and bitter over her parent’s treatment of her? She wondered—and got caught on that point, unable to sort it out in her mind. Her eyes roved over the plant as she pondered it, cringing at the length and sharpness of the thorns all along the branches. As she looked, she noticed that one clump

off to the far side looked different from the rest and she walked over to examine it better.

This part of the bramble seemed to have grown wrapped around and around in a circle, hanging horizontally about a foot above her head.

Odd. It almost looked like—

As soon as that thought formed, His head appeared encased in the thorny bramble, worn now as a cruel, tortuous Crown. The thorns pierced His skin in multiple places and blood ran from each one. His face was bloody and bruised, obviously beaten.

She drew back in horror and looked behind her.

He was still there, tinkering with the brambles, His back to her.

What is this? How?

She couldn't tear her eyes from the sight and the Jesus in the Crown opened His eyes and looked at her. They reflected great pain; but far more, great Love and Compassion. There was no condemnation in His eyes at all, even though she knew that somehow, He was paying for her own sins on that Cross, too. The image closed His eyes again, in obvious agony, and cried out, "Father! Forgive them. They don't understand what they are doing!"

The image faded away, leaving her again with her thoughts.

Her tears welled up and overflowed, dripping down her cheeks to the ground. *You did that for ME, Lord—I know now that You did. You let them do all of that to You ...*

Understanding came flooding through again.

But You weren't angry with them, were You? You still LOVED THEM! Even the soldiers. Even those who cried out to crucify You.

You forgave them, Lord. You've forgiven ME.

"You want me to forgive them, don't You, Lord?" she spoke, as much to herself as to Him. "And because that's what You want, that's what I will have to do."

But I don't know how! It all hurts so much...

How, Lord?





Chapter F ourteen

A Song of Praise

“I’d like to take you somewhere with Me, Karen—if you will?”

She looked at Him, amazed. She still hadn’t really absorbed the fact that He was sitting here beside her. Now He wanted to take her somewhere?

Now?

While she was awake and alert?

But she slowly nodded her head.

They didn’t actually get out of the car, but He moved His hand before Him and the car, rain, bridge—Earth—moved away with it and she found herself standing with Him to the side of an enormous throne. A Being sat there and everything in her knew Who that Being was. He was clothed in brilliant Light, and although the light didn’t hurt her eyes, neither could she see His features clearly through it—only the form and figure similar to a Man.

The Man could be seen reaching within His own bosom and withdrawing a form, somehow similar to His own, yet far smaller—the light within it less brilliant.

Now sitting on His lap was a—what?

A soul, Jesus’s mind spoke to hers. This is a soul not yet born in a human body.

The soul and the Father seemed to speak to one another for a long time. At last, the little soul smiled and nodded and with a wave of His Mighty hand, was sent off.

The image faded and again they sat in the car. The rain still poured, the drip still tapped on the roof. Karen’s mind was consumed with what she had just seen.

Jesus smiled and reached over to her hand.

“I will explain. Some, Keith can tell you.”

The child nodded his head vigorously.

“A soul is drawn from the very Bosom of the Father, literally a tiny portion of His being. As He is Light, so your own inner core is Light. That soul has the choice to forever dwell in Heaven, never experiencing being joined with a spirit and body on Earth.”

To answer her unspoken question, He added, **“Those in Heaven can be allowed to see the conditions of the Earth, the pain and turmoil and difficulty of life there. Some choose not to do this, but rather to remain an unborn soul for eternity.**

“Others, in spite of a clear understanding of this, still choose to be born. This is a very, very serious decision and the Father makes sure that each soul is completely informed as to where it will then live on Earth, what kind of body and physical limitations it will have, what kind of family it will be born to. The struggles and conditions it will be born into, and finally, the path of its life. Some are given into families that will treat them well. Some are born into poverty and squalor. Some are born into wickedness from the very beginning. NOTHING is withheld from them. Each is sent to a place and for a reason understood only by the Father and I—with understanding far above even that of the soul itself.

“You see, the Father takes a very real, very dangerous chance here. That soul will be formed in the womb pure, with full knowledge of Him. But even in the womb, and certainly afterwards, the Enemy immediately begins a war to draw that child’s mind and attention away from God and towards the Earth. And so, because each human is gifted with a free will, a will that neither the Father or I EVER force, ever transgress without its permission—We take the chance of losing that soul forever.

“I begin from the very start to draw that soul back to My own.”

Here He stopped and looked forward, out of the windshield. He stayed silent for long minutes and when He finally turned His face back to hers, there were tears in His eyes.

“My Father and I love each and every soul, Karen. Each one. So many are wooed away by the world, by their own desires that they forget Us and where they came from by the lures of the Enemy. And their ultimate place for eternity becomes Satan’s abode if they do not return to Me. This is a pain that you will never understand, a woe to Us that cannot be expressed in words.”

His eyes were now concerned for her, filled with compassion.

“I didn’t steal your babies away from you, Karen. I allowed them to come back Home. Each one made an agreement with Us. Each one was chosen for a purpose in your life—your family’s life as well as their own. *You don’t have the same information I have. You don’t know what might have happened to them if I didn’t call them Home. You don’t understand the overview of why, because you are but a tiny creature and I am the One who fashions you all in your mothers’ wombs.

“My ways are not your ways, and neither will you ever come to understand them. But there is a very good reason for everything I allow, no matter how hard it seems. And some of those reasons have to do with you and your family’s own salvation.”*

The child began to wriggle on His lap now, eager to have his say.

“Go ahead, Little One.”

“Yes, Mommy! Yes! I sat on Papa’s lap and He told me all about it. I wanted to be One Redeemed, a soul that gets to live in a body on Earth and be saved by Yeshua. It’s oh, so special to be a One Redeemed! You’ll understand someday, Mommy. You’ll understand.”

Karen couldn’t help the next question. **“Did you understand how sick you would be? All that you were going to go through?”** Her face was drawn just remembering the hundreds of needle sticks, the tubes, tests and even operations his poor little body had been subjected to in those few eight months.

His little face drew together for just a brief moment.

“Yes, I did, when Papa told me. I knew it wasn’t going to be for a very long time, and that just being with you would make you very happy. I didn’t remember most of it, though. I didn’t know what pain was, or crying, or any of those things. But my Angel was always with me, and he would remind me about Papa. And sometimes I could see the Graces come out, because of the needle sticks and things.”

His face brightened and he looked up at her with love and adoration wreathing his face. **“But it was all okay, because I wanted to be in YOUR family, Mommy. I wanted to live that long for YOU. Yeshua and Papa have such a wonderful plan for you, and I wanted to be a part of it.**

“So, I came.”

His little eyes wandered off to the side for just a brief moment, then he smiled again. **“It did hurt, Mommy. Sometimes a lot. But I knew**

why and that I would be going Home again, so I tried my very best to be good. For Papa. And Yeshua. And you, Mommy.”

He looked at her, eyes older than a child a dozen years older than he had been.

“Everything is okay, now. Isaac and Sophie and I are all together, waiting for you to come Home, too. We love you, Mommy. We’re always asking Papa to take care of you, and Daddy and Hanna and Evan, too.”

He sat smiling at her so peacefully, so sweetly, it dried the tears in her eyes.

“We will go now,” Jesus concluded their time together. “I am here, Karen. Remember that. Trust that. Come to Me for all you need. Never be afraid of Me, dear one. I am never angry at a soul who is trying their best to live in My Kingdom and follow Me.”

He smiled, rather mischievously. “There are things you don’t know about your little Hanna, dear daughter. Things you will be very surprised to know.” His words were full of unspoken treasures. “She has some very interesting things to share with you, once you are both in alignment with each other’s hearts again.

“I look forward to watching you both embark on this adventure—together!”

The mystery told, but not unveiled, He and the child were gone.

The rain had slowed to a drizzle now, and within another half hour, slowed to a stop. The sun came pouring out from behind the vanishing clouds, shining under the bridge and lighting up the interior of the car.

Karen turned the key—the car started on the first turn.

How does a person go on after such a day as this, Lord?

Her phone was somehow back in its holder on the dash. The charge bar was green all the way: fully charged. Google Maps was showing and the route to her home was traced by a broad, red line wandering back and forth on the screen. Not surprised, yet filled with awe, Karen set the shift gear in place and pulled out from under the bridge, steering around the small pond that had formed on the outer side—and headed HOME.

Her life had been turned inside out, shaken down and placed upright again. She was filled with a wonder she couldn’t yet comprehend—but was determined to hang onto with all her strength.



A Garden Enclosed

He had been humming a tune from the beginning, since He had turned His back on her to fool with the brambles. Now the tune began to seem familiar and drew attention away from her confusion.

I know that song! We used to sing it in Sunday School!
She began to sing out loud with His humming,

Praise Him, praise Him
All ye little children
God is love, God is love
Praise Him, praise Him
All ye little children
God is love, God is love

He turned back to her now, smiling broadly. His full tenor voice lifted and sang with her.

Serve Him, serve Him
All ye little children
God is love, God is love
Serve Him, serve Him
All ye little children
God is love, God is love

Hanna could hear noises around them now, the sound of branches crackling as though they were in a fire. The sound intensified above her—**the brambles were on fire! But they weren't falling on her, they weren't** turning to ash; they were simply being consumed. She looked at Him, and His face shone with that incredible smile of His.

He began a new verse, motioning for her to join Him again.

Love Him, love Him
All ye little children
God is love, God is love
Love Him, love Him
All ye little children
God is love, God is love

The sticks had opened up completely above them and burned down to the height of Hanna's shoulders now. Birds flew in from every

direction and sat in the trees just beyond, taking up the chorus with them.

Thank Him, thank Him
All ye little children
God is love, God is love
Thank Him, thank Him
All ye little children
God is love, God is love

Now, they were surrounded with wildlife! Rabbits, squirrels, foxes, and wolves. A pair of fat-bellied bears, a herd of deer. Finally, Regemmelech joined them singing in a surprising bass, until the sound of their praise resounded in the air like a mighty choir.

Praise Him, praise Him
All ye little children
God is love, God is love
Praise Him, praise Him
All ye little children
God is love, God is love

The Brambles of Bitterness had been totally consumed. The air was filled with the fragrance of a thousand flowers and the light shone again with a great brilliance.

Darkness had been banished.

Victory was the Lord's!

He laughed out loud with her, gathering her again into His arms. **Holding her back at arm's length then, He nodded to the animals and they began to sing a rousing tune. Together Master and Child danced with Joy at the defeat once more of the Wicked one.**

"And what is this Garden made of, Little One?" He asked in the midst of their dance.

"Love!" she shouted out with glee.

"And what will keep the Garden clean and pristine?"

"Love!"

"And how will you conquer the evil one and his minions?"

"No Fear! And Love!"

He stopped the dance now and stood looking at her, so proud of her, so joyful that she was advancing with Him.

“Now, My little Hannalee Grisandole James, I tell you for the future. *As you find joy in the little things in life, even in nature which displays itself all around you—you will begin to sing a song of gratitude in your heart. This is the beginning of praise—which needs to be nourished, so that you may build a strong wall of honor to Me all around you.

“Then—I come to inhabit your praises! And then the demons fear to come near you, lest they be singed by the flames of Love that constantly burn the foolish things of the world away from your soul.*

“Sing to Me always, My little Hannalee. Rejoice and sing Praise to your God and King and the devils will learn not to touch you—lest they be burned.

“This will not come easily. But if you persevere and stay teachable, it will come! Oh, indeed it will come!”

He was so happy, His words so exciting.

But there still remained in her a dark shadow.

Could He have possibly forgotten? No..

But I don't think I've forgiven them, either. I don't think I can.

I'm happy again, now—but I still don't want to.

Sigh. I know how fast 'life' pours back in when I leave Him and this place. What am I going to do?

He walked over to where Regemmelech stood and leapt on his back.

“Come, Friend. We have a little more work yet to do here.”

He motioned to her and soon they were riding down the path, towards the river. They came to a place where the water was spanned by a wide, arched bridge with a railing and dismounted. Jesus took her by the hand, and they crossed the bridge to the midpoint, where He turned upstream, crossed His arms on the railing and stood looking out at the water.

“Beautiful, isn't it?” He commented to her. “This is the clear, crystal beauty of a heart totally forgiven in Me.”

He reached over and drew Hanna in front of Him, cradling her between His arms, each hand holding a railing. She realized He indeed hadn't forgotten anything.

And tensed.

“Be at Peace, dear one. We will get through this.”

Realizing He wasn't angry with her, she relaxed a little, even though she was beginning to feel all sorts of things inside.

The memory of a deep hurt from her mother came to the surface of her memory. Oh, it hurt! It built inside, boiling and burning! She was about to squirm out from His arms, to run away when she saw a huge, dark blob floating down on the surface of the water, heading towards them. As she watched, the dark was covered over by a rich, red substance hiding the blob completely. The closer it got to them, the more it hurt, the more she wanted to be released!

"Shhhh... little one. Be still. Repeat after Me: 'Lord. I release her. I forgive her. I make an act of the will to forgive her. Bless her for me.'

"I'm right here behind you.

"Release it, Hanna. Release it to Me."

She didn't want to; the pain was nearly unbearable now. But if she'd learned anything in the past two weeks, it was that she could trust Him. The pain had brought her to sobs now, but she repeated each phrase He gave her, trying to mean what she was saying.

"It's from your will, dear. You don't need to feel anything yet. Just an act of your will."

The covered-over blob had reached the railing where they stood and flowed under the bridge.

"Come, look on the other side now. Turn with Me, Hanna."

Below them, just at the edge of their vision, the river emptied out into a vast sea. They followed the path of the water's tarnish until it disappeared from sight, swallowed up into the larger body of water. Immediately, Hanna's heart was released of the pain—and the memory of the event disappeared from her mind.

"It's GONE!" she gasped. "It's GONE! I don't even remember what hurt so much!"

She turned to Him earnestly. "Can You make it all go away?"

"Yes, My Dove. I can make it all go. That blob was the event, the hurt, the memory. The red that covered it was My Blood. Together they entered the Sea of God's Mercy, forgiven and never to be seen or remembered again. It only took your willingness to let it go and forgive from your will.

"Shall we continue?" He smiled.

She'd known this whole process wouldn't be pleasant, right from the sight of the Brambles of Bitterness. But the feeling of clean and wholeness in her heart now was worth it.

"Yes," she ducked between His arms again, closed her eyes and lay back against His chest. "Yes, Lord. I am."





Chapter Fifteen

Reconciliation

Anne and the children had just finished a rousing game of Slap Bang, and laughter filled the tiny dining room. They were so taken with the game no one heard the front door open, or the sound of feet walking down the narrow hallway. Without warning, Karen stood in the doorway. She took in the happy sight for a few moments.

And then Evan spied her.

“Mommy! You’re here! Com’on and play with us—I won this time. I had the BEST cards!” He sprang up from his chair, raced around the end of the table and launched himself up against her waist.

She looks a little dazed, Anne thought, but dismissed it again with an inward smile. *I have a feeling You’ve been up to something here, Lord. I knew that storm wasn’t just an accident.*

“Karen!” She spoke aloud now. “You’re here!

“What’s the occasion?”

She stood to give her daughter a hug. “Is everything okay? I thought you worked today?”

There was just something in Karen’s face.

“You look tired, Dear. Sit down. Sit down. I’ll go make you a fresh cup of tea.” Another quick squeeze and she set off for the kitchen. A quickening in her heart set her to singing once more—the first thing that popped into her mind.

“Oh, Victory! In Jesus. My Savior, forever...” she crooned as she took up the teakettle and turned on the water faucet.

“Funny you came here, Mommy,” Evan chattered. “We’ve been here all afternoon. You should have seen it RAIN! Wow! I got to stand out on the porch for a while, but the wind started blowing and I got all wet. So,

Nana said I should come in for cocoa and then we played games for a long time ...”

Evan’s voice continued, but Karen’s attention had focused on the blond, bent head of her daughter—willing her to look up, wanting her desperately to acknowledge her.

Please, Hanna. Please.

I have so much to say to you.

So much to try to explain to you. Please ...

As though prompted, Hanna stopped counting the game cards and stilled her hands, then looked up at her mother. Like a dam opening, a stream of unspoken feelings began to pass between them, promises that something would be changed, something made better. Something healed. Part of the perpetual darkness that surrounded them, whenever they were together, lifted and was driven away. Neither were aware of what it was, but they both felt it.

They stayed that way for some time.

Anne in the kitchen, singing her heart out.

Evan clutching his mother’s waist, a wise little boy that knew something maybe the rest didn’t know.

Karen and Hanna speaking from the soul and spirit, bypassing the frail miscommunication of the tongue they had so often suffered under.

Drifting in from the living room, the Sounds of Birds clock announced the hour of five o’clock, a pert song sparrow sweetly singing the time.

Peace. That’s what it was, Karen realized suddenly. *Peace.*

Lord, her heart petitioned. *You’ve set my feet back on the Rock today. Help me walk this Path. Show me the way?*

I don’t have any idea how to cross this bridge, how to reach her. I don’t know what to do! All I know right now is: I don’t ever want to lose Your peace again. And I can’t lose my children.

Help me, Lord. Make a way for us—for all of us.

The telephone’s sharp jangle burst into the air, shattering the still of the moment. Mike sprang to mind, and Karen hurried off to answer it.

Life had come calling again.

The Battle had been won, but the War continued on.



Anne's song preceded her from the kitchen, and she entered the dining room carrying a steaming cup of tea in one hand and a tiny, porcelain cow filled with cream in the other.

"Come, sit down awhile, Karen," she called over her shoulder as she made her way to the table.

She placed the cup, then carefully turned it so the handle was in the perfect position to pick up again. She frowned at it a moment, wondering if she should go back and get a saucer.

A moment later, Karen returned to the room and stood uncomfortably between Evan and the table, not sure which direction to take. She'd been too late for the phone. She'd been afraid to pick it up and check on it.

"Who was on the phone, Dear?"

She still had that deer-in-the-headlights look in her eyes. "I don't know. The answering machine picked it up, and you don't have the sound on again," Karen tested a smile at her mother.

"Well," Anne shrugged her shoulders. "They are there, and you are here. And the children, too. What could be more important than that?" She adjusted the handle of the cup one more time, then drew it closer to her daughter. "You drink this now. It'll warm you right down to your toes!"

Karen walked to her mother and slowly drew out the chair next to Hannah's. Hannah had gone back to her counting when the phone rang, breaking the connection between them. Now she seemed to be studiously ignoring her.

"Do you think Mike would mind if I fed you all some supper?" Anne spoke to the table, still thinking about the saucer.

No. Something is definitely more wrong than normal here. She went on to more important things.

"He said on the phone last night that he was terribly busy with work. He didn't bat an eye when I asked if the children could stay here this afternoon."

Anne was constantly blamed for being over-protective, but she'd felt the atmosphere shift at least three times since Karen had walked in. She peered over at Karen with a smile more confident than she felt.

Karen took the opportunity to refocus. "No, no. It's fine that we stay. Really it is." She certainly wasn't anxious to have to explain anything about her husband.

Not just yet.

She didn't notice her own voice; the grateful tone as spoke the words. But Anne did. Her eyebrows furrowed together, and she was just about to speak again when Karen continued.

"I have a few... things to ask you about, Mama. Okay? But not now. Later. Later is fine." Suddenly, she felt His presence, strengthening her. She could do this.

"We'd be happy to stay for supper tonight."

A tiny victory won, Nana winked at Evan, who'd been quietly standing in the same place all this time "Oh, wonderful!"

"I made a big pot of my special beef stew yesterday. I was going to donate it to the church for the Bazaar table, but then they cancelled it until next month."

Setting down the creamer cup, she wiped her hands in her apron, and bustled back over to the doorway again.

"I couldn't imagine what I was going to do with all that! It'll just take a little while to heat up for us all." She placed an arm around the boy's shoulders and told him, "I could use some help in the kitchen, Dear. Would you mind?"

Evan took off for the kitchen without a backwards glance. With a final smile at her daughter for encouragement, Anne toddled behind, calling out instructions to the boy beyond her.

Hanna was seated along the far side of the walnut dining room table, just to the right and around the corner of where her mother's refreshment had been placed. Karen slid the chair the rest of the way out and sat silently. Her fingers began tapping nervously on the wooden arms that enclosed her space, looking for something to do.

Something to do...

Tea!

Both hands took up the chore and brought the steaming cup to her lips. One sip of the brew proved too hot and far too sharp, so she set the cup down again and poured in a little of the cream.

Her eyes spied the sugar bowl in the middle of the table, but it was out of her reach. And she was hesitant to break the silence, to draw attention to herself by asking for it.

Hanna had begun to assemble the game back together when her mother had first appeared in the doorway. And now her head stayed bent

over the bundle of cards, aimlessly shuffling them from one hand to the other, pretending to sort them.

She's so beautiful, Lord.

Karen's eyes took in her Princess for the first time in many months. The first real, long look. What she saw made her ache inside, realizing she had missed leaps of time in her life.

When did she grow so mature? When did she start moving from child to—this?

Surreptitiously, she took it all in. The wave of her golden blond hair drifting around her shoulders and spilling onto the edge of the table. The perky slope of her nose. The smattering of light brown freckles across it. Her eyelashes were so long! Her cheeks had lost their baby roundness, angling instead into the promise of loveliness.

But her bottom lip was caught between her teeth at the moment, chewing gently on skin that was never meant to be so battered. From the look of her lips, it wasn't the first time, either.

Karen recognized it. Worry. So familiar a pose. One she'd seen in her own mirror for years now.

She's still just a child, Lord.

This is all my fault, isn't it?

Maybe it was the quiet *clink, clink* of her spoon hitting the china sides as she stirred, but suddenly Hanna reached out, picked up the sugar and held the bowl out to her mother. Never looking up, she spoke.

“Did you want some of this?”

“Ye-es,” Karen spluttered a little, taking the proffered gift. “Why, yes. Thank you, Hannalee.”

Thank you, Hannalee? she berated herself.

Thank you, HANNALEE? Where did the “Sweetheart” go to? What DID you used to call her, anyway? Once she grew out of Princess... When did that happen, while we're on that subject?

Shaking her head, she made herself busy, carefully measuring an exact, rounded spoonful of the white sweetener and stirring it until every last particle was dissolved.

Lord, give me strength! Karen's silent plea preceded her next words. *Tell me what to do?*

The thought appeared: *Share your day.*

Of course!

“I had the strangest day today,” she began, a little too perkily. Hanna never moved— she might as well have been talking to the wall. Karen didn’t know just what she expected, but no response at all surely wasn’t it.

A little less exuberantly, she continued, “Yes, my day was really an odd one. Do you ever have days like that?”

Hanna glanced up at her mother. The look on her face made Karen feel like one of the nine-year-old’s she used to monitor in the After Care room.

“Well, yes. I suppose we all do, don’t we.”

She began a third time. “Would you like to hear about it?”

The sorting of the game cards had become even more fascinating, from all appearances.

Hannah. I’m with you. Remember the bridge. Remember, Hannah. He whispered into her heart.

Hesitation. Then a silent, brief nod met Karen’s question.

“Well. I was on my way to work this morning,” Karen went on. A nod was at least something. “And a tree had fallen across the road I usually take.” While Hanna didn’t look her way, her hands stilled a bit and Karen could tell she was at least hearing her.

Maybe listening.

She plunged on.

“So, I had to take this other road—one I’d never been on before. I couldn’t even remember seeing it from when I was a kid growing up here.”

She’d begun to prattle and stopped herself. More carefully now, she continued, “Well, the whole rest of the day was a mess—you wouldn’t believe all the trouble I had!”

A nervous laugh. She took the time to draw another, long sip from the cup.

“But at one point, it started to rain so hard I couldn’t even see to drive.”

This last statement seemed to gain Hanna’s attention. Her hands kept fiddling with the cards, but now she at least looked in Karen’s direction, looked her in the eyes.

Nodding her head, encouraged to get into at least this part of the story, Karen continued, “Yes! It was awful! I must have driven fifteen miles out of the way after seeing that downed tree limb. I didn’t have a clue where I was. Then the rain started. I finally found a place under an old bridge to

pull over and just sat there for the longest time. I was so tired at that point, so scared I'd never get home again," she gave a small laugh at that last statement. It was a story, of sorts.

"So, I just sat there, just listening to the rain after that and I finally calmed down. And after a while, well—it was kinda nice, actually. I was surrounded with the water, front and back, falling in one, huge sheet. It made me think of being inside a waterfall for a while."

She threw in those last parts, appealing for a spark of sympathy, a stirring towards her from her daughter. At least some sign of interest, knowing the image of hiding under a waterfall would spark Hanna's imagination. *She had such a fine imagination!*

Hanna's head cocked to one side.

Trying to be polite.

Trying to listen.

She hasn't wanted to talk to me about anything for as long as I can remember. Now she's telling me about her day?

She wanted to feel compassion for this woman, love for her. And the afternoon's cleansing on the bridge had taken away all the pain. But she still felt frightened to allow herself to feel.

Confused, she lowered her eyes to the cards again and began putting the game in its box. Finally, she answered, "Wow. I mean, we had a storm here, too, but it wasn't all that bad. Not sheets, anyway. The wind was, but the rain wasn't that hard."

Well, it was a start.

Karen took another sip of the tea, regrouping her thoughts.

I can't tell her about seeing the children—that'll freak her out for sure ...

A sudden inspiration came to mind.

"And then even a stranger thing happened. I fell asleep."

Another sip.

"I mean, falling asleep wasn't so strange. I really was exhausted by then," Karen looked up, vying for Hanna's attention again. "It was the dream I had. It was definitely a dream, but it was so, so clear. But then, it wasn't really a dream at all; it was more like a vivid memory of something we'd done together. You and I and Daddy. A long, long time ago."

A sudden *clatter, rattle, BANG* came from the direction of the kitchen. The conversation broken, they both froze, wondering what to do.

“It sounds like Nana needs some help out there,” Hanna began, starting to rise from her seat.

Karen’s heart fell.

No, no, Lord! I need more time!

“No worries, Dears!” Anne’s cheerful voice cut through the tension. “Just being clumsy. No worries!”

Crisis averted.

The two seated at the table grinned to themselves, then looked at each other. THIS was Nana at her best: clumsy as an ox. (As she’d readily admit herself) Cheerful in spite of anything. The knowing look they exchanged broke something in the atmosphere around them and Karen picked up with her story.

“Yes. The dream. It was about a time—you probably don’t remember it—back when you were only four. I had brought home a book from the library about a little girl and her brother’s first visit to the ocean. You were so enamored by it, you had me read it over and over and over again. You finally memorized it and started reading it to yourself!”

Karen’s voice seemed to fade a little into the background, while Hanna’s eyes were glued to her mother’s lips continuing on with the dream.

This is impossible, Lord, she queried Him. No way. No way! How did You ...?

WHY did You?

DID You?

Her mother’s voice broke back in, “—so when we left the hotel room that morning, I was so happy! We walked down to the water line and you and I built—”

“—a huge sand castle,” Hanna picked up the narration with caution to her voice. “You made me a moat and filled it with water. And there were little flags flying from the top made out of napkins and plastic straws. And I wouldn’t go in the water.”

Astonished, Karen looked at her daughter.

“You DO remember?”

Now it was Hanna’s turn to wonder just what would freak the other one out.

“Not exactly. It’s a long story...”

Karen blinked a few times, her forehead creased, contemplating.

“Well, okay. Okay. Maybe later we can talk more about what you mean.”

She wanted the moment to come back, so she continued with her own tale.

“Yes. Well, it ended with us finally coaxing you into the water with us. It was such a wonderful time, such a wonderful memory.” She searched for a way to extend it, to make it more important.

It was important! It was the way things used to be, the way they still should be.

She bent slightly over the table towards Hanna, intense now.

“Hanna,” Karen spoke so quietly, Hanna had to strain to hear her. Unconsciously, she moved her body a little closer, sensing that she needed to hear this, to ignore the red flags flying all over inside of her.

At least give this a chance.

The feelings will come, Hanna.

Trust Me.

“Hanna. I want you to know.” Her voice caught. This was so much harder than she could have ever thought.

“I wanted you to know that I’m sorry. So, so sorry.”

Hanna’s head dropped, her eyes focused back on the game, the table, her hands. Anything but her mother’s pleading eyes.

“I know you don’t believe me. I know we’ve made life awful for you and Evan.

“But ...”

Tentatively, Karen reached out and placed one hand softly on her daughter’s.

“We were wrong. Daddy and I were wrong about a lot of things. I see that now. Tennessee. The church. Keith. Oh, especially Keith! We did so many, many things wrong. And I want to change that.”

She couldn’t look at her yet. Not yet. But Hanna at least picked up her head, turned it in her mother’s direction.

“I want you to know I had a long... talk. With the Lord today. Jesus showed me. I realized what we’ve been doing wrong, how we’ve hurt you and Evan, how we should have included you so much more.”

Her voice broke at this point, tears filling her eyes and coursing down over her stress-reddened cheeks. “I want you to know how different I want things to be. How different I feel inside. I used to feel this way, when I was your age. Before...”

She stopped here, knowing there was no way, no means to convey to this yet innocent child what she had gone through, what she had supplanted her relationship to God with.

No, no—may she never know these things in person, Lord!

Karen sat up straight again, her hands plunged to her lap, twisting together as she searched for a point to re-enter the conversation. Her heart burned, knowing that she couldn't stop there. Couldn't balk at telling Hanna what had been weighing on her all during the long, long way back home again today.

"I so want you to get to know Jesus, too, Sweetheart. Not the way the church in Alabama was saying, not the stuff and the programs.

"To know Him. Really. Who He is.

"The way I knew Him at your age. The way I know Him again—now."

Even in the midst of her doubt, Hanna could feel the Lord nudging her inside.

Soften, Hanna. Soften. You can trust Me, even if you don't think you can trust her yet... spoke that still, small voice deep within her. Her heart was pounding, trying to keep up with the transformation her mother was insisting happened, but she had no real proof of yet.

Trust me, Dear One, the voice was clearly insistent now.

Unable to resist Him, she finally smiled at the sound of His voice.

A shy, quiet smile, hardly noticeable.

She turned to her mother, the secret within her growing the smile, just a little.

"I do, Mom. I do know Him now. Nana Anne has been talking to Evan and me, every Sunday. And Pastor Hostetler has been, too."

Hanna's eyes brightened now, His love starting to flow through her.

"I do know Him, Mom.

"From just a few weeks ago. I gave my life to Him.

"Evan, too."



And so, the process began. Two of His Beloved ones had found a bright new link. One that would eventually repair the chain of love that had once joined them, but which life had weakened, shattered, and broken

apart. If the pieces were carefully, skillfully placed together and just the right pressure applied, their lives would be joined even stronger than before. All that remained was to leave it to the Master Blacksmith, submitting to the perfect aim of His hammer.

It was a process begun, yes. But begun indeed.

Hope. That wonderful, elusive, necessary gift of the Lord came bursting up inside both of them—and their spirits rejoiced, even though their bruised and battered souls held back in reticence.

Karen reached out and held both of Hanna's hands in hers, locking her eyes to her own.

No more words were needed for this time.

Now it was time to just let the unseen do its job, and the seen to be quiet.



Neither of the two at the table noticed Anne watching the tender scene silently from the doorway.

Neither saw the angels gathering up **Anne's** inner shouts of praise **into vessel after vessel, ascending with them swiftly to the Father's Throne.**

They had no idea of the jubilation filling Heaven, nor the dancing and rejoicing that was taking place on the Sea of Glass before Him. Loud was the celebration in the Highest of Heavens!

The Redeemed without number sang their praise and worship to the Great Redeemer and Healer of Souls, until the colors of their praise filled the Temple.

Abba and Adonai exchanged looks of deep satisfaction. Victory had prevailed. A healing had begun. There was much danger that lie in the journey ahead of them, these two souls with still tender, freshly-healed wounds. And it would take but one unguarded blow from the enemy to reopen them, to do more damage.

But their feet were at least again on the Path.

With a wave of His hand, angels were sent to encourage, minister and protect.

These two Souls were not alone in this.

No. Never alone.



“Hellooo?” A cheerful voice came drifting through the rooms.
“Anne? Are you home tonight?”

The mood broken, Karen and Hanna parted hands.

“I don’t think Mama heard. I’ll go see who it is,” said Karen.

“It’s Pastor Hostetler! I wonder what he’s doing here?” Hanna followed her mother along the passageway to the front door.

“Come in, Pastor,” Karen called to the smiling figure standing on the porch. “Come. Come sit down and join us. We were just getting ready for some supper. Mama’s famous beef stew!”

Abram smiled broadly at the invitation and stepped through the door.

“Wonderful! Just what the doctor ordered, I’d say!” He slid his trench coat from his shoulders and lay it over a chair back. He fished around in one of the large pockets for something, finally retrieving a colorful paper. “I have something to talk to you all about. About the VBS week coming up soon.”

Anne had joined them now, as well as Evan.

“Oh! Mommy! Nana Anne! Can we go? Can we go? Mommy, did Daddy give us permission yet?”

All eyes turned to Karen.

“I... Well, he...” She stopped.

“He” didn’t matter at this point.

“Yes! Yes, it’s fine that you and Hanna go. It’s fine!”

Abram beamed at Anne, giving her a slight wink.

“Well, that’s just what I’d like to talk to you all about, Dear. Hanna is a little old for the program, and so I’d like to see her give us some help in the behind the scene jobs. And you, my dear. I’ve heard a great deal about your creative talents. I wonder if you would be interested in sharing some of them with us?”

The group made their way back towards the dining room and the pastor, Hanna, and her mother took their seats.

“I have an idea for the final night. The Lord’s put it in my head that you might have the talent to write a small play for us, Karen. Would that be something you’d be interested in doing?”

Anne had brought the stew out to the table while they had first begun talking, and now she appeared with a set of bowls and spoons.

“Will you say Grace for us tonight, Abram?” she asked, passing out the dishes.

“I’d be delighted, Anne.”

Grace. Karen thought. *Yes, Grace.*

Oh, lead us all now, Lord. Make a new life for us.

She looked up after the prayer. Hannah was smiling at her. Evan was beaming. Anne and Abram had almost comical smiles on their faces.

Karen smiled back.

New life.

New Love.

Yes, God was good.



