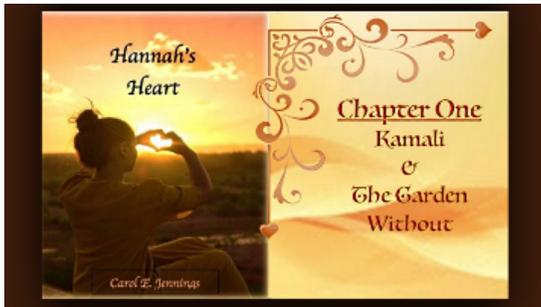


Hannah's Heart Chapter One



August 29, 2019

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 over-sized 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.