

CHAPTER ONE

*H*ANNAH SUFFERED the sting of the whip. Her trouble had come just a few months after her sixteenth birthday. The first strike across her legs felt like hot coals flung against her flesh, pressing in, searing, burning. She had felt nauseated. Queasiness filled the back of her throat. She heaved but wished desperately not to be sick. “Breathe, just breathe,” her mind’s little voice whispered. She remembered gasping and her fists clenching white on the brass bed frame in front of her. She had not cried. Her eyes stared into the quilt that covered her bed, but she did not see. With every muscle tightening in anticipation of the next lash, only survival filled her senses.

Lifting her stare from the quilt, she found herself looking across the room at her father’s reflection in the dresser mirror. His face was red, his jaw clinched. His neck veins protruded and small beads of perspiration glistened sanctimoniously on his forehead. His fist had turned a splotchy red and white from his crushing grip on the whip’s handle. She then closed her eyes and wondered how her sister, Katherine, had endured and prayed for the courage to accept the next blow. It never came. A restraint, not before seen in her father, held back his big frame. He walked slowly from the room without speaking. Hannah, relieved to escape a second lash, sank to the floor, buried her face in

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the comfort of the quilt and questioned if she would ever be free of the anguish she felt.

Was it, she wondered, her condition that dissuaded him?

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WATER SPLASHED on Hannah's feet. The cold wetness startled her consciousness and forced it into the present. It was a hot and humid summer afternoon in 1919 Mississippi, and it seemed to Hannah that the heat of the current summer was trying to out-heat all the summers that had come and gone before. She sighed deeply and shook her head in an attempt to shake free of the plunge her soul had taken. "Go. Please go away!" her heart said to the unwanted memory. The cold splash felt good and helped push away unpleasant thoughts from her mind. With all the internal resolve she could muster, she shifted her focus to the pleasantness that surrounded her. The sun was shining, and the leaves were green, and the water was clear. The dark shadows that crowded her mind gradually faded. She sat quietly on her moss-covered knoll, oblivious to Lost, the frisky, young and lovable family dog that was at that moment creating a storm of vegetation in the woods nearby.

LOST HAD left Hannah's side a short time ago to ramble through thick underbrush in the woods that surrounded the creek. The area was almost impassable for humans. He explored and romped through the thousands of weeds and scrub bushes that grew and thrived there as if they knew that corner of the world was theirs for the taking. Twigs snapped and tall grass separated as he pushed through like a big wall of water. Bright yellow and black wings fluttered rapidly up and down as a host of butterflies lit first on one branch and then on another before quickly lifting up and away from the havoc the invader was creating in their world.

Lost sniffed first here and then there as he frolicked in all directions and stopped only occasionally to give brief attention to the various scents left by critters that had recently slithered or scampered along the way. A wealth of life called the woods and bushes home. He found it all fascinating, and on occasion he unwisely investigated gopher

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holes where resident snakes lifted their heads, faced him squarely, and hissed displeasure. Even though he was only a puppy, he knew at those times it was best to back up and move on.

Mice scurried along, making their way to the corner and hoping to find remnants of grain left from years past. Brown, shiny bugs crawled over partially rotten stumps and along secret paths under the weeds. Grasshoppers jumped in every direction to avoid Lost's big paws, and a bevy of birds flew upward from the bushes while chirping strong frustration at the intruder. The rabbits wisely and quickly moved deeper into the woods to get away from the activity.

Lost was enjoying sharing life with all these creatures when suddenly his attention was drawn to one particular spot. He was energized almost as if he had discovered a gigantic bone buried just for him. His ears stood straight and his tail wagged rapidly, beating the weeds on either side—whap-whap, whap-whap, his mind on the target. Lost was strong. With all his strength, his front paws flew immediately into repetitive motion: left, right, left, right, fast, fast, faster! He was determined. He dug with powerful force. The thick vegetation was no match for him. Dirt, sticks, roots, and weeds were all airborne. Whap-whap, his tail continued to beat against the grasses, and his paws continued to dig. He was determined; determined as if his life depended on it, determined to uncover whatever was buried beneath the dark gray dirt.

With unbridled glee Lost recklessly unearthed what—to him—was a great treasure. To Hannah it would be a battering ram against the protective barrier that shielded her from a memory she tried desperately to keep buried deep inside. With the battering, she would be reminded that the past is always with us.

WHILE LOST roamed, Hannah was spending a short respite on the bank of the creek that ran through the woods behind her house. For as long as she could remember, the creek and surrounding woods had been her place of refuge. The water eased her mind by taking with it the anxiety that sometimes lingered in her consciousness, and the trees, like guardians, provided a haven completely hidden by the dense forest.

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A breeze blew softly. It crossed Hannah's face with welcomed coolness. Strands of her hair lifted slightly as if following the gentle wind. A little wisp caught between her lips and stuck in the corner of her mouth. She freed the strands with her fingertips and pushed them behind her ear. She sat quietly, reflective and lost deep within her thoughts.

The many shades of green that surrounded her were reminiscent of new leaves budding in springtime. The ground was soft and felt to Hannah almost like fine velvet as she absentmindedly stroked the surface with her fingers. The knoll was just high enough that she could easily dangle her feet into the icy-cold water of the spring-fed creek, or lean against a giant old bay that had for years served as the perfect backrest. She bent her knees and gave her toes and the soles of her feet the pleasure of the moss-covered earth. She loved that particular part of the woods and the special memories that had been created there.

A FOOTPATH STRETCHED from the house, across the yard, through the trees and right down to the edge of where the creek runs through. Hannah, along with her older sister, Katherine, her little brother, Samuel, and her mother, Kate, had traveled the path many times on their way to spend fun afternoons playing in the water or relaxing on the bank.

Samuel, quiet and timid, usually stayed close to Kate—he played in shallow areas near the bank where Kate sat nearby. Occasionally the girls coaxed him out into the deep and held his middle while he kicked his feet and paddled with his hands. “Look, Mama, I’m swimming!” he yelled to Kate. His sisters laughed and giggled as they pulled him from one side to the other.

Katherine was the spirited one. She was never inhibited in word or deed. Whether they were alone or surrounded by lots of other people made no difference to her. She was daring, ever the leader. Unlike Hannah or Samuel, she never minded that the water was cold. She was the first one in. She would run the last several feet of the path and jump in, holding her legs folded tightly under her. She landed in the water like a great big ball and pushed water upward in a grand circular spray.

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Hannah always hesitated and watched the water drops pepper back onto the surface of the creek. Katherine's head would pop back up, and through wet hair plastered down across her nose and mouth, she yelled, "Hannah, come on. You're slow as Christmas." Almost before she got the words out, she was bending over and disappearing underwater again. Katherine never badgered Hannah further. She might splash a tiny bit of water toward Samuel, but mostly she contented and amused herself swimming back and forth while she waited for Hannah to get wet.

Hannah's approach was different. She tiptoed in, shivering, keeping her arms folded across her chest as if that would help keep her warm while the coldness crept up to her neck. Occasionally, she cupped a little water in the palm of her hand and trickled it down ever so slowly over her legs. There might be a second handful sprinkled over her shoulders, but either way it was a slow process. Hugging herself, Hannah inched into the water little by little. After both girls were wet, the fun would begin. They spent hours searching for treasure, playing with Samuel, and swimming.

KATHERINE WAS TEN and Hannah eight at the time when there was a most memorable change in their swimming afternoons. It was then that they were unexpectedly allowed to go to the creek alone. It was hot. It was summer. It was a perfect day for swimming. The girls assumed that—as always on hot summer days—they would soon be heading to the creek. Then, out of the blue, their mother announced, "Janie's making dumplings this afternoon. I'm going to help her, hopefully learn how to make them myself."

Janie was the McMolison's cook, and both girls knew she had a reputation for making good dumplings because people were always asking their mother to bring them for church dinners. However, nothing (especially not dumplings) was important enough to stand in the way of going swimming. They were shocked and more than a little disappointed. This news was not welcome.

Katherine, frowning, turned to Hannah and whispered, "Did somebody die or something? This isn't right. I wanna go swimming."

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“Don’t think so,” Hannah said, shaking her head and leaning close to Katherine’s ear.

Their mother had always made herself available to take them swimming except on the rare occasion of something extreme like sickness or death. Since neither girl was aware of a death or sickness, they did not move. They stood there side by side looking intently at Kate. Their brows slightly furrowed and their lips parted in disbelief as they waited for her to correct her mistake.

“Come on,” said Hannah after maybe a minute had passed. “Mama wants to cook with Janie. Let’s just go. We’ll figure out something else to do.” Hannah spoke so softly that Katherine could barely hear her.

Katherine was not ready to give up quite so easily, however. She turned her head slightly toward Hannah, and through pursed lips she hurriedly whispered back, “Making dumplings on a perfectly good summer afternoon makes no sense. She can do that any old time—wintertime, raining, storming. Anytime.”

Hannah wanted to plead their case against dumpling-making as bad as Katherine did, but their mother had been emphatic about her plan for the afternoon and was already pulling pots and pans from the cupboard and flour from the pantry. Hannah turned to leave the kitchen, but Katherine grabbed a handful of her dress. “Don’t you dare leave. Just wait a minute,” Katherine said through barely-parted lips. Her tone was low and commanding.

Hannah stood back beside her sister. They were both quiet as they looked at their mother, thinking she would surely come to her senses. Katherine and Hannah—Katherine to a greater degree—became more and more frustrated as they listened to Kate and Janie chat like two old friends. They were disappointed, and they were ignored.

“Chickens already picked off tha bone, broths ready. We in good shape,” Janie said. She seemed to be enjoying having a student on hand as much as Kate was enjoying being there. Both pair of hands were white with a covering of flour dust. “Lemme get lard and some milk,” Janie almost sang, as she swished the tail of her apron back into the pantry. The girls could see her backside bounce through the thin gray fabric of her dress.

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Kate looked up at her daughters, who were still standing in the door of the kitchen. “Want to join us?”

“No, ma’am.” both girls said in unison.

“That’s *not* what we wanted to do,” Katherine added, shaking her head from side to side. Her words were stronger and more sarcastic than she intended.

Kate’s smile vanished. “Katherine, don’t be haughty. That kind of tone is never acceptable.” Then came the surprise. “But tell you what—you can go on down to the creek. If we get finished here I’ll come, but otherwise, y’all watch out for each other.”

The furrows in Katherine and Hannah’s brows deepened, their eyes brightened, and their chins dropped. Still quiet, they stood with their mouths open.

“Now, girls, I’m putting you in God’s hands. He takes care of all of us all the time, anyway, and you’re old enough to be responsible.”

Kate was sure about God being in control of all things, even though she was often guilty of running things her own way without checking in with Him first. Kate’s Presbyterian logic was, on occasion, a little skewed—which didn’t matter since she could trace her family tree directly back to Scotland. She had a heritage to be proud of, one that made her really and truly Presbyterian. Kate, the girls knew, could spring God and His sovereignty into any conversation. They had heard her. They also knew her eleventh commandment: Worrying is the responsibility of every good mother.

“Oh, thank you. We’ll be fine.” Katherine’s words lingered in the air as she raced toward the backdoor.

“Yes ma’am, we’ll be fine. Creek, here we come!” Hannah’s words blended with Katherine’s.

“I didn’t expect her to let us go by ourselves,” Katherine said as they hurried down the steps.

“Me neither,” said Hannah. “Glad she’s trusting today. Probably need to hurry before she changes her mind.” As the girls raced toward the edge of the woods, Hannah added between giggles, “This is exciting. I mean, you know, getting to go by ourselves.”

“Quit giggling and come on. We need to get clear of the yard before

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she thinks of some reason not to let us go.” Katherine glanced back at Hannah, who was several steps behind her. “Hurry up, Hannah. Run.”

As the girls reached the point where the yard turned to woods, their mother’s voice rang out, “Not only is God in control of all things, but remember He sees all things as well. So behave yourselves, and if I don’t get there, be home before suppertime.” What they could possibly do at the creek that would constitute misbehaving was a mystery to them, but *behave yourselves* was a frequent caution from their mother so hearing it again had little significance.

“Yes ma’am,” the girls yelled back. They merrily scooted down the path, glad they had escaped without having to recite questions from the Catechism that would have reinforced Kate’s point on who, what, and where God was. They were soon sharing what would be the first of many wonderful unsupervised afternoons. Hannah laughed out loud at the memory.

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YEARS HAD PASSED since those days of wild and innocent play at the creekside. Katherine wasn’t there to add her spark to the afternoon. She had married and moved to Hattiesburg with her husband, and the girls had lost their sweet Samuel well before then. Yet the creek and woods remained much the same, a place of escape, adventure, and beauty.

The water still flowed lazily along, gently weaving around and through the ferns and tree roots that graced the bank. It was clear as crystal and appeared blanketed with a thousand tiny diamonds when small ripples caught the intermittent sunrays that peeked through the swaying branches overhead. The spring that fed the creek flowed continuously. The water eased through the swimming hole and then gathered itself into the narrowed creek that stretched into the woods on the other side.

A few buttercups lingered in a small marshy area nearby. Their butter-yellow crowns joined the little clumps of purple violets that grew here and there all along the well-worn footpath. The flowers, though small in size, boasted grand but gentle beauty with every intricate

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detail and, for Hannah, they were like friends faithfully returning year after year. Their very presence added comfort and delight to her special place on this summer afternoon.

Hannah's thoughts continued to be restless, her mind jumping from one memory to another. She did not want to dwell on the past, but she was having difficulty quieting it.

She yearned for the love she had known. Her body warmed with the memory. The old and grand trees that surrounded her were privy to her secrets and to theirs, but they didn't tell. Instead, they stood quietly in all their majesty. Some were tall and stately while others were short and gnarled, but all provided asylum and refuge. They sang the song of the woods as an unseen breeze floated through the branches. Hannah enjoyed the music and imagined each tree was telling a special story. She longed for a happy ending to her own.

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HANNAH SHIFTED HER POSITION so she could put her feet and legs in the water. The coolness was refreshing. Even though she was completely shaded from the sun by the canopy of branches overhead, she was hot. Putting her feet in the creek immediately made her feel cool all over.

Hannah dipped her fingers in the water and flicked some toward Joseph. He laughed and, even though he was content playing with his little driftwood boat, was always happy to have her play with him. Joseph was several months past his third birthday. He had dark hair, blue eyes, and a fun-loving spirit—a little like his Aunt Katherine. He loved to come to the creek just like Samuel did when he was little, and like Hannah and Katherine continued to do through their early teens.

On that day Hannah and Joseph were home alone. Kate was taking her turn caring for Mrs. Epsy, one of the widows from the church. Mrs. Epsy had been sick, on her deathbed for some time now. She never had any children, so the ladies in the Women's Aide Society were taking turns seeing that she had proper food and care. Hannah had gone a few times to help out but found herself feeling scared and anxious when she thought Mrs. Epsy might actually die in her care; Hannah had

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spent most of the time sitting back a safe distance from the bed and praying for her to live until relief came. Hannah much preferred being responsible for all the chores at home while Kate took a turn.

Before Hannah went to the creek that day, she had taken a picture from her letter box. She kept it protected, hidden beneath a few sheets of yellowed writing paper. She often longed to look into the eyes of the young man in the picture. She longed to feel his touch and know the security of his embrace. The memory of his love was deeply embedded in her heart and soul. Only on days like this when she was in the house alone (except for Joseph) did she feel safe enough to face her buried emotions. Pain was always a part of loving, but the pain she felt was often heavier than she ever imagined possible. Hannah had held the picture in her hands, softly stroked it with her fingertips and, as tears filled her eyes and blurred her sight, she remembered the man who claimed her heart and introduced her to a part of herself she had not known before. Every time she took the picture from the box and gazed into the face, a sad yearning inside her rekindled. Yet she could not resist.

As she stood with the picture pressed against her heart, Joseph had called to her, “Mama, Mama, are you coming?” She blotted the tears away and put the picture quickly and carefully into to the safety of its hiding place just as Joseph ran into the room where she stood. “Come on ... pleeeeeease?” he said. “I’m ready to go swimming.”

Hannah and Joseph had now been at the creek for several hours. While she would have loved to stay safely atop her mossy knoll, she knew it was time to be starting home. Joseph had played hard. He was tired and hungry, and there were chores that had to be done before dark.

“Joseph, it’s time to go,” she said.

Joseph grabbed his boats and walked toward her. “I wanna take my boats home.”

Hannah laid them carefully on the moss. She picked up the towel she had brought to the creek and dabbed the water droplets from his face. She tousled his hair playfully and began to dry him off. She hadn’t finished when he picked up his boats and ran for the path

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saying, "I'm gonna beat you!"

Hannah fell into the game. "I'm coming. I'm right behind you." They scurried up the hill, winding around the trees, following the path, and were both out of breath when they reached the yard.

Lost heard them coming. He was still rambling in the woods, and by that time he had made his way up near the yard. Lost was not quite two years old. At least that was the favored opinion of those people who thought they could guess. He was already a big dog, though. Joseph could easily prop his arms on Lost's back when they stood side by side. He had a brown shiny coat with some black mixed in, and had soft rounded ears and huge feet. He loved people, loved to play, and was easily Joseph's best friend. Lost had appeared at the door about a year and a half earlier. Since only Kate, Hannah, and Joseph lived there at the time, Kate decided to let him stay until somebody came looking for him. Nobody ever did. Kate had said he was lost, so Joseph started calling him Lost. Therefore, Lost became his name.

"What's Lost got?" Joseph yelled, his voice rising with the anticipation of sharing Lost's discovery.

"I don't know," Hannah answered.

Lost had come running, his feet covered with dirt. It was obvious he had been digging. He was often digging and was as energetic about the art as any other big dog anywhere. Lost had dug more than his share of holes and successfully uprooted several decent-size trees. Hannah and her mother were always less than pleased when some of their garden plants were pulled up and left to wilt on the ground (or potatoes dug prematurely, played with, and then left to rot). What he had that afternoon was not a tree or a plant or a potato, however. He was dragging a corn sack across the yard. He tried to pick it up and shake it, but it didn't shake very well. The sack was too big, and whatever was in the bottom weighed it down so that he couldn't get it into a good shaking position. The opening of the sack was tied securely with twine. Lost ran to meet them, avoided stumbling, and gripped the sack tightly in his teeth. His tail was wagging as fast as he could wag it.

"Whatcha got, boy?" Hannah asked, reaching down to pat his head. He dropped his gift at her feet.

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Hannah carried the dirty, torn, and rotting corn sack to the back steps. It had something in the bottom. She had no idea what it could be. They used sacks like it around the place from time to time, but she couldn't imagine why one was tied like this or where it had come from. While Joseph busied himself arranging his boats in a safe place on the porch, Hannah sat on a step and began to untie the twine. "Why would someone tie so many knots?" she wondered. Using a knife, she cut the twine, untied the remaining knots and cut the sack. Inside was a once-white flour sack. Rain and dirt had discolored the material to the point that the faded lavender flowers were barely visible. The flour sack was also tied in a knot; it looked familiar, but flour sacks were common. Certainly lots of people got sacks with the same design, she thought. She untied the sack and looked inside, seeing a metal box. It was old but still in good shape. Had Lost uncovered someone's buried treasure? She felt a twinge of nervousness at the thought of invading another person's privacy, but she didn't want to stop. She couldn't.

Hannah pulled the box from the sack and slowly lifted the lid. Inside was a bundle of white cloth—another flour sack that had been cut open to form a flat piece of material. It was wrapped multiple times around the still mysterious contents. She lifted the clump of cloth and began to unwrap. Even before she had completely removed the covering, Hannah knew what she was holding. As she unfolded the last layer, she gasped. Her heart ached in despair. Her throat closed so much that she had difficulty breathing. Her chest pounded; her head suddenly throbbed and she felt sick to her stomach. Before her was the device of family-shattering death. It had belonged to the one whose life had been lost. Now, suddenly, there it was in front of her, hideous in her sight and unforgiving in its history. It had been wiped clean as if innocent of its past, but in her mind's eye she could still see the wet, warm blood seeping through the chambers as it lay quietly on her sister's living room floor. The sheriff had picked it up and taken it with him. Hannah did not know he had returned it to Leaf Creek along with the body. It belonged to the dead. She wished the dead had kept it.

"I'm thirsty," Joseph called to her. Somewhere in her subconscious mind, she heard his request. She quickly replaced the white cloth,

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closed the lid, returned the box to the flour sack, and tied the opening even tighter than before. She put the flour sack in the corn sack and again tied the opening. She would get more twine later and redo the knots just like she had found them. She placed the sack under the house and out of sight by wedging it into a crevice between a floor joist and one of the brick support columns. She would come back later and figure out where to hide it. Just as, she knew, her mother had done.

Lost had gotten Joseph's attention, nudging him to play so that he forgot about the sack. Hannah was thankful. She didn't understand what was happening herself, at least not in a way she could possibly explain to a three-year-old. She and Joseph had been back from the creek only a few minutes, and it suddenly seemed like a lifetime. The peace and contentment she had managed to muster had dissolved into intense sadness. She took a long, deep breath. Joseph didn't notice she was shaking as she dipped water from the water bucket into his little cup.