

*Say what you will,  
Tis better to be left  
Than never to have been loved.*

*William Congreve*

## *Introduction*

Although it was nearing the end of September, the land area known as Ohio country was in the throes of an Indian summer. In fact, the entire summer of 1793 was marked by excessive drought and unbearable heat.

Nonetheless, a determined young woman began traipsing in the sweltering heat and humidity across a parched meadow. She was headed to the woods near her father's log cabin. The scorching sunshine had managed to pierce through a thickening cloud cover and cause an entire field to be sprinkled with wilted white dots of tiny flowers. *What an odd sight*, she thought. *It is like a mass grave of prairie clover.*

After finally reaching the dense forest, it was surprising to find the trees draped in foreboding shadows. It was as if a storm might be brewing for the afternoon. The damp, heavy air among the boughs was stifling, and the moss-covered tree trunks smelled of mold. In spite of the woman's desire for solitude, it was a struggle to catch her breath in the oppressive air.

Knowing the lay of the land since childhood, she confidently threaded a path along the rocky edge of a swiftly flowing creek and then stealthily trekked into the heart of the tallest timbers.

It was an unusually quiet, secluded spot, even eerie in the shade, but the troubled woman needed time alone to make an important decision. The ebb and flow of life had erupted into turmoil, and she was determined to stay in the forest until finding some resolution. Even after spreading out a woolen blanket on the rocky ground, it was impossible to feel content. When the rough bark of a cottonwood tree unexpectedly dug into her back, it was but a painful reminder of life's frailties and disillusionments. Ignoring her discomfort, the woman doggedly began to review the mistakes in her life.

All at once, an owl hooted, which was an odd occurrence in the daytime. It was disquieting, and goosebumps sprinkled over her arms like a sudden spring shower. *I should have paid more attention to Father's warnings about dangers in the woods*, the woman regretfully thought while beginning to reflect on how muddled life had become...

Since the age of nine, seventeen-year-old Hannah Anderson had lived with her family in a tiny wooded portion of land in eastern Ohio. It was a small part of a massive land region officially known as the Northwest Territory, which included Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, and other land areas bordering the Great Lakes. All of the region was ceded to the United States after the Revolutionary War ended. Where Hannah lived was originally named *ohi-yo* by the Iroquois for the great Ohio River, and the name stuck.

A few years earlier when Hannah was fifteen, her mother and baby brother died, leaving the young girl devastated and lonely. Since that time, nothing felt right. Hannah was determined to honor her mother's memory by steadfastly doing the same work she had done. For the next few years, the teenager cooked and cleaned for her widowed father at their isolated log cabin and also prepared the rustic log cabin church for Sunday gatherings.

Once a Methodist preacher in Philadelphia, Hannah's father now felt called to be a missionary. At the time of his decision, there were very few missions because of the continuing violence on the frontier. For that reason, her father established an unaffiliated mission, which primarily served as an outpost for settlers heading west.

With its success, the mission had finally begun to receive financial support. As a compromise to Hannah's mother, the location was close to the Pennsylvania border, which was usually safe from Native American troubles.

Working for her exacting father proved to be both exhausting and time-consuming for Hannah, and his criticisms far outweighed any praise. Since the death of her mother, the attention the young girl craved was nowhere to be found.

Hannah began spending way too much time alone, which gave her the opportunity to reflect on the isolation and loneliness of a pioneer settlement. More often than not, the confused teenager wondered what the future would hold. One day, she concluded it was important to explore the possibilities for her own life, not relive her mother's life by doing chores from sunrise to sunset.

*But what opportunities are there for a young woman?* Hannah honestly did not know the answer. Knowing that only she could make a positive change in her circumstances, the teenager began paying closer attention to the fluid political situation in Ohio. Although she lacked a formal education, Hannah had been homeschooled by her well-educated mother, whose motto was to always keep eyes and ears open about current events. The young woman was proud to be able to both read and write, which was far better than most in the late 1700s.

While quietly assisting her father after worship services, Hannah began to eavesdrop, especially when small groups of men discussed the threat of war. Though at first it was only a game to ease boredom, her secretive actions later became a source of valuable information. Hannah discovered that Native American

tribes indigenous to the area were on the prowl, and many were not friendly to the westward spreading immigrants populating the new country.

In an attempt to uncover why the problem was worsening, Hannah overheard the men agree that Native Americans had been ignored in the Treaty of Paris, which officially ended the war between Great Britain and the United States. Many tribes were determined to regain control of what they considered to be their rightful homelands, which were given away in the treaty.

It was Hannah's observation that most settlers had an active interest in the history of their new country, mainly because they were living it. Though the American Revolutionary War had ended ten years earlier in 1783, those who lost the war had not necessarily accepted the outcome or the resulting peace treaty.

Before Europeans began settling America, independent Native American tribes, many of them enemies of each other, were scattered throughout the land. After the Revolutionary War, many tribes that were previously enemies sought to resolve their grievances. That began a major unification movement by Native Americans to join forces against the westward spreading American settlers.

Regarding the large land grant called the Northwest Territory, the most frightening revelation Hannah found was that many tribes after the Revolutionary War were connected in a secret organization called the Western Confederacy, and this organization was allied with Great Britain.

Simply put, it gave credence to the thought that Great Britain had never given up its desire to reclaim the colonies. It also showed that many Native Americans saw Great Britain as the hope for restoring their lands.

Hannah was stunned by what was uncovered in a little eavesdropping. Learning that the true rebellion of Native America was only beginning meant the entire area called Ohio was in danger of increasing violence. Because women had little influence in the political arena, Hannah felt utterly hopeless about her future survival.

Without the calming influence and guidance of her mother's strong faith, the teenager grew increasingly depressed. Realizing the only things that could be changed were the daily personal choices in her life, Hannah slowly began a one-woman, silent rebellion. It started by quietly skipping chores and searching for more time alone in the forest.

Early in the spring of her seventeenth year, Hannah felt so downcast and worried about the future that she began actively praying for help and even constructive changes in her life. It was difficult structuring a prayer without her mother's assistance, but the attempt still gave a small sense of comfort.

A few days later, however, Hannah's home situation took a radical and abrupt turn for the worst. As if her father had discovered the teenager's secret rebellion and

new lack of enthusiasm for chores, Pastor Anderson began punishing his daughter with the dreaded silent treatment.

Not only was she ignored in the daytime, but during the evening meals she had faithfully prepared, he refused to acknowledge Hannah. In bewilderment, the troubled young woman wondered if something had been wrong with her original prayer for help.

After yet another silent meal, the obstinate man would simply stalk to his desk and either work on a sermon or read a book. His daughter, of course, would silently clean up after the meal and obediently go to bed. Hannah was devastated that her only role in the household was as a servant, not a daughter.

Over and over, Hannah wondered if Jesus had heard her petitions or not. Expecting to find peace and acceptance through prayer, the once happy life with her mother had disintegrated into silent ruins with a stubborn father. Then a curious explanation came to mind. *Is my old life being uprooted to make way for a new life? Perhaps that is His answer to my prayers*, she thought to herself.

Several tedious weeks passed, and Hannah was still getting the cold shoulder. One night, however, he mysteriously brought a stranger to the cabin and introduced him as the new assistant preacher at the mission. It took only a few days for Hannah to figure out there was a plot afoot to arrange a courtship between an unwanted daughter and the new assistant.

Hannah's anger at the underhanded plan had nothing to do with the new minister, who appeared to be a godly man and was not unattractive. It was the thought of such a plan being concocted without her permission that made Hannah furious.

Confused even more about her uncertain future, Hannah had no recourse but to pray again in the forest. *Surely, He will answer me this time and bring me peace*, Hannah optimistically thought. *Things cannot get any worse*.

Within a week, Hannah found out how wrong it was to think answers to prayer would be predictable or simple. Not only did her problems worsen at home, but she discovered there would be no more solace in the forest.

On an afternoon in late April, while hurrying along a familiar shortcut through the woods, Hannah was preoccupied with misgivings. Later that day, there was to be an important meeting at the mission church, and her father had left a lengthy list of preparations to be completed.

All at once, Hannah's eyes lost track of the uneven trail, and the distracted woman took a nasty tumble. To her alarm, a leather boot became painfully wedged between two granite boulders. The more she pushed and pulled at the smaller boulder, the more her foot became stuck.

Hannah was so feverishly absorbed with freeing the wedged foot that an enigmatic stranger was able to sprint unnoticed out of the underbrush at full speed. Within moments, the unknown man hovered like a massive shadow, and without a word, he quickly set to work on releasing the woman's trapped foot. Hannah inadvertently gasped out loud. She not only feared the phantom rescuer but was in awe of his stark beauty.

Never had the young woman seen anyone who even remotely resembled the stranger. The man was unusually tall and lean, yet muscular, and his raven black hair wildly cascaded like a shining waterfall to his waist. Because he wore golden deerskin pants and a tunic, Hannah guessed it was her first close encounter with a Native American.

While watching him struggle to free her foot, Hannah began noticing the fair coloring of his skin and astonishing pale eyes, which eventually stared back at her. The stranger's eyes were unnerving and unusually light blue in color. In one spellbinding glance, any theories about the stranger's Native American heritage were instantly shattered.

*If the man is from a local tribe, Hannah reasoned, he probably would be shorter with dark brown eyes and deeply tanned skin along with his black hair.* Yet the stranger was fair-skinned and had the palest shade of crystalline blue eyes Hannah had ever seen. They resembled a mountain lake glazed with sparkling ice shards, and their mesmerizing gaze was just as sharp.

Ignoring the injured woman's constant stares, the slender man, who had surprising strength, finally maneuvered the lighter boulder off the swollen ankle. As Hannah helplessly watched his efficient actions, the stranger swiftly unlaced and removed her boot and stocking. Then the man's fingertips began examining a ghoulis green bump for any broken bones.

When he accidentally pressed the ankle too hard, Hannah spontaneously gave a bloodcurdling yelp of protest. Embarrassed by the skittish reaction, her face flushed beet red. No one except her mother had ever dared to touch the woman's bare ankle, and the observant man knew it.

After the awkward outburst, Hannah self-consciously wondered what the man was thinking. Though neither one had spoken, the unexpected rescuer captivated Hannah's interest. Unhappily, she concluded that those sharp, crystalline shards in the man's eyes were mocking her. The stranger probably viewed the hapless victim as nothing more than a clumsy teenager with wild red hair tumbling in messy tangles over a splotchy freckled face.

All at once, Hannah became angry that her vulnerability and lack of self-confidence had been exposed. Possessively, she yanked the swelling ankle away from the man's competent hands and glared at him. At that moment, it was somehow

important to show the man that darker blue eyes like hers could have equally icy shards.

Amused by the woman's edginess when touching her ankle, the stranger lazily stood up and crossed his arms. He towered over the fidgety woman, who was still half-crumpled, half-seated on the ground. It was a struggle not to laugh out loud at her obvious show of anger. Finally, the man could not help himself, and he grinned mischievously. *What I heard about redheads having a temper must be true*, the stranger silently thought.

*The nerve of the man smiling at me like that*, Hannah blustered inside. Not knowing whether to trust her rescuer, the young woman stubbornly remained silent and focused on the stranger's distinctive appearance, which was dramatically different from the stocky farmers in the nearby village.

Although the man looked youthful, she guessed him to be about ten years older than she was. The most annoying thing about the stranger was his smug behavior. He acted way too self-confident and comfortable around her.

"Has thou seen enough?" he suddenly asked in very proper English. Not expecting him to know any English at all, Hannah was truly taken aback at the succinct words. The mocking question about her slow perusal of his appearance shot the final holes in the original theory that the stranger was a Native American. The man's awareness of her actions only furthered Hannah's humiliation, and she was eager for the encounter to be over.

Politely ignoring the woman's flushed face, which nearly matched the color of her sun-streaked red hair, the well-groomed man leaned forward and offered his hand. "Where are my manners? May I help thee up?"

Completely dumbfounded that the words were so grammatically perfect, Hannah nodded in silence like a clumsy oaf. Though she was rather tall for a female, the stranger was much taller and pulled Hannah up to a standing position with ease.

With one arm steadfastly supporting the woman around the waist, the man's free hand disarmingly brushed some thistles from her long, serviceable linen dress. The orbs of crystals in his pale eyes stared with intensity, but their secrets were quickly shuttered.

"May I help thee walk?" the stranger finally asked.

Gingerly, Hannah tested her weight on the injured foot. It throbbed so badly that she winced, but Hannah was tenaciously determined to make it to the mission alone, even if it meant crawling on the ground. Still speechless, she gave the stranger a curt nod of dismissal and mumbled, "No thanks."

"Then I must be off," the man said cheerily. All at once, he picked up a lightweight tree limb off the ground and knocked off a few straggly branches.

“Use this as a walking stick. It is fairly smooth,” her rescuer advised. “Thine ankle should mend soon. There are no broken bones. Upon reaching thy destination, I would wrap it in a tight cloth.”

As the man helped the woman recover her balance and showed her how to use the walking stick, Hannah was completely unnerved. It was embarrassing to be so tongue-tied, and she finally forced herself to say, “Thanks for helping me.”

With an indifferent shrug of his shoulders, the stranger began to walk away but suddenly turned back. “I *will* see thee again, *Red!* It is a promise. By the way,” the man continued with a self-assured smile, “I like thine appearance *too*, especially the red hair.” It was as if he said *touché* to her previous staring.

*Insufferable cad*, Hannah thought irritably, though underneath the woman’s fierce glare was the tiniest of smiles. Any compliments in her world were few and far between.

After having the pleasure of seeing the self-conscious woman blush one last time, the stranger chuckled to himself and took off at a loping run. *This is going to be fun*, the man thought before vanishing like an apparition into the tangled underbrush.

Although Hannah never expected to see her rescuer again, she was proven wrong. Over the remainder of the spring and summer, whenever the woman took any shortcuts through the forest, the man unexplainably seemed to appear.

It was likely the stranger was stalking her, but his friendship and engaging conversations won the day. Hannah no longer feared the man, who always acted respectfully. If the truth were known, she feared her father’s reaction to a secret friendship with a stranger more than she feared the stranger himself.

At their first encounters, the man, in a nonthreatening way, would simply come into view and walk alongside for a while. Sometimes they would chat about ordinary topics, such as the coolness of the spring. At other times, before jauntily disappearing into the woods again, he would pick a few wildflowers along the trail. Hannah never had a male friend before, so she had no idea if his behavior was normal.

Later on, when Hannah grew more comfortable with the stranger, they spent one afternoon catching open-mouthed bass with birch branch poles. As Hannah had never fished before, the experience was hilarious, and more fish fell back into the rocky creek than she caught. Her new companion, however, seemed proficient at anything in the outdoors and eager to show Hannah his skills.

Although she was somewhat suspicious of the man’s intentions, the woman he regularly called Red began to enjoy the innocent outings. There was finally something to look forward to other than the silence of her father and painful situation at home. One day, Hannah noticed she was no longer depressed and had

regained an enthusiasm for life. Silently, Hannah gave all the credit to her new companion.

Though the seemingly *chance* encounters with the enigmatic stranger were few in number, they regularly continued through August. In late August and early September, however, the man abruptly stopped showing up in their usual places. His disappearance worried Hannah but also made her angry. *It is really rude my friend vanished without saying good-bye*, she thought.

To pass the time during the man's lengthy absence, Hannah began scrutinizing their platonic relationship. That was when it became apparent the stranger was nearly as secretive as she was. She had finally learned his nickname was Hutch and full name was Miles Hutchinson. He claimed to be of British heritage and was supposedly staying with an uncle and working with him in a trapping business in a nearby village. Temporarily, Hutch's job was to sell pelts throughout the territory, or so the story went.

In spite of learning the sparse information, Hannah still experienced nagging doubts about her new friend's truthfulness. Too much about the charismatic stranger remained a mystery. *Is Hutch really a trapper?* She had never seen him check any traps or carry pelts. *Does the man really have an uncle in the area? If so, what is the name of the uncle's village?* He never said.

Cautiously, Hannah made a few private inquiries around her own village. No one had ever heard of a British man named Hutchinson or even knew of his log cabin. Hutch's entire story was suspect, and the lack of candor concerned her. *Why would he lie? Is Hutch toying with me?* There was an even more alarming question. *Am I in danger?*

While silently doubting Hutch's veracity, the woman's home situation abruptly deteriorated. In the late morning on a Wednesday in mid-September, Hannah's father made an earth-shattering ultimatum. He demanded that his daughter immediately consent to be courted by the new preacher. If she dared to refuse, her father vowed to publicly punish her.

Though Hannah was stunned and appalled at the threat, she had no recourse but to remain silent. Her father, however, interpreted his daughter's stoic reaction as insolence, which made him enraged. With her father's irate voice booming in the background, Hannah slammed out of the cabin for the solace of the forest. After hiking a good half-hour, the miserable young woman found a favorite hideaway in a thicket near an enormously wide creek, which meandered through the sprawling forest near the cabin.

*Here I sit again. It has been another unbearable week and argument with my father, Hannah bemoaned in a half-whisper. How long will it take me to find the right course of action?*

The first time Hannah slammed out of the cabin had been a week earlier. Ashamed of her disobedience, the teenager had immediately returned and apologized, but the silence in the cabin during the ensuing week was deafening.

This reprehensible day, which was only a week later, was the second time there had been an intense altercation, and her father's temper had been in full force. Not only had Hannah slammed out the door, but she had no intention of groveling and giving in to his unreasonable demands.

The confused woman had no idea how to find the answers to her problems or even how to effectively pray for a solution. Her mother was always the strong one and helped with spiritual struggles in the past. *Maybe Hutch's disappearance is a good thing*, she thought. *I have no choice but to be courted by the new preacher.*

The truth was that Hannah was uncomfortable speaking with her father about not being ready for marriage. She felt too young to be in a permanent relationship. The threat of punishment for disobeying made Hannah feel anxious, especially the thought of being thrown out of the cabin or being publicly shamed.

Though fearing homelessness was real, Hannah's worst nightmare was her father finding out about Hutch. If he suspected his only daughter was leading a secret life and meeting a stranger in the woods, how harsh would the punishment be?

Although fishing in the creek near the log cabin or walking through the forest with a companion were innocent pursuits, Hannah's deception was unacceptable. If the clandestine meetings were accidentally discovered, her father, as well as the villagers, might shun her, and she would become fodder for gossip. Even worse, the reckless behavior could affect her father's position as a pastor.

*I cannot let that happen*, Hannah worriedly thought. *Somehow, a simple friendship with Hutch could isolate me from both my father and the village. It is time to tell Hutch I cannot see him again!*

After resolving the complicated problem, Hannah breathed a sigh of relief. She now had to figure out a way to implement the decision. Many weeks had passed without seeing the illusive stranger, and he might have left the area for good. *Maybe that is for the best*, she concluded.

Whether Hutch ever showed up again or not, it felt as if a load had been lifted off of Hannah's shoulders. *Why waste the afternoon worrying about my father? Later on, I will appease him and be the obedient daughter*, she decided.

Though it was a sweltering humid day for mid-September, Hannah decided to have an afternoon of relaxation. After so much stress, she vowed not to give the vanishing stranger another thought. If the man suddenly showed up, Hannah would simply announce she was done seeing him and walk away.

Pleased with a new sense of determination, the young woman stood up and impulsively hiked up the heavy skirt of her unflattering linen dress. After managing

to lift the wad of fabric above the knees, it took three attempts to anchor it to a belt with a coarse rope.

The stifling hot air felt oddly cooling and somewhat decadent against bare legs, and in a sudden mood of rebelliousness, Hannah's thoughts ran rampant with objections to restrictive clothing. *Whose idea is it to confine women to heavy fabrics in hot weather? Why can men dress as freely as birds, yet women must always be covered up?*

Deciding that she, Hannah Anderson, would no longer conform to societal norms, the laughing teenager playfully slipped out of laced leather boots and thick stockings. After tucking the boots behind a knotty tree trunk, the young woman's cramped toes began gingerly tiptoeing on several smooth stones leading into the rushing creek.

In astonishment at the icy coolness of the water, Hannah gasped with delight! It was exhilarating to feel the gurgling water splashing between her unbound ankles and literally refreshing her entire body.

*I am the magical queen of the forest,* Hannah laughed with silliness while regally wading into slightly deeper waters! As if she were a carefree child again, it was enormously fun playing a game of make-believe.

With perfect posture, Hannah, the queen, began slowly marching into knee-high water to the coronation. Lining the path, her imagination provided several shiny brass trumpets playing a joyous fanfare and a throng of subjects of the kingdom shouting, *long live the queen! This is a glorious entrance,* Hannah laughed to herself.

All at once, a low male voice shattered the eerie silence of the shadowy forest. The familiar voice resonated from across a wide section of the creek, and Hannah's eyes flung upward in alarm. The silly charade as a queen dissipated in a deflated whoosh of breath.

*"I am sorry to have been gone. I missed thee, Red,"* a contrite voice said.

Hannah's heart skipped a beat. *Oh no, it is Hutch! What should I do? I will tell him the truth. I cannot see him anymore!*

The mysterious vanishing man, who frequented the young woman's thoughts day and night, seemed to bodily materialize out of the vapors of thick, muggy air congealing near the rippling water. As the tall, handsome figure emerged from the dusky shadows, Hannah speechlessly watched. Strangely enough, the lofty trees seemed to straighten at hearing the man's deep voice.

Unexpectedly, a forceful gust of wind began recklessly playing tag with a towering row of leafy boughs, and the treetops began fiercely swaying and creaking. Within moments of the man's appearance in a clearing across the broad creek, a whirlwind of shredded leaves in contrasting shades of green and yellow carpeted

the entangled forest floor. In enjoyment of the wind, Hutch heartily laughed out loud at the frenzied adulation of falling leaves encircling his feet. Hannah was mesmerized.

Although the briskly moving air should have provided some relief from the stifling heat, it had the opposite effect on Hannah, who believed Hutch was never coming back. Seeing his happiness at discovering her in the woods made the woman feel even more lightheaded than ever. At the same time, the darkening forest was growing more oppressive, even foreboding. Unable to shake an odd sense of danger, Hannah unconsciously shivered.

*Perhaps the possibility of a thunderstorm is making me anxious,* Hannah rationalized while gazing at the graceful man gliding toward the water's edge on the opposite side. Unlike some men who trudged through a forest in a manly sort of way with thudding boots and a great deal of muscular exertion, this one had a flowing gait. As though he honored nature and tried not to disturb its secrets, his approach was almost reverent.

Like a slinking mountain cat, the man agilely swayed past any bushes in the way and skillfully ducked under a few low-hanging branches. Gone were any of Hannah's previous notions about being a queen at her coronation. They were replaced by the vision of a man who was the prince of a forest which knew and embraced him in return. Hannah felt like a lowly charwoman in comparison.

The unwanted thoughts were upsetting. *I must be addled in the heat,* she concluded. *Where is my focus? It is important to tell Hutch I cannot see him again!*

Suddenly, it became obvious her staring eyes had not wavered even once from the man's methodical approach. Hoping he would not notice the rapt attentiveness, the young woman tried to conceal any embarrassment by feigning anger at his intrusion on the quiet of the forest. But it was only a ruse to hide the painful truth. *I am completely besotted with this enigmatic man called Hutch,* Hannah thought.

As the captivating man kept approaching the opposite shore, a squawking sound grabbed Hannah's attention, and the reverie about Hutch abruptly ended. All at once, a magnificent white crane lightly glided into the creek not far from the curve, where Hannah was nearly knee deep in chilly water.

The distraction quickly brought Hannah's thoughts back to reality. As her panicky eyes surveyed the isolated surroundings, she found herself precariously balanced on several uneven granite boulders not far from the widest part of the rippling creek.

Quickly glancing down, Hannah realized the ankle length dress was still knotted immodestly above her pale white knees and freckled legs. To Hannah's chagrin, Hutch was on the move, and the man darted past a cluster of Buckeye trees toward the moving water.

Then with a graceful leap, his muscular body came splashing into the rushing creek, which caused the crane to give a squawk of disapproval and take flight. At the exact same moment, the playful man shouted, "I am coming to get thee, Red!"

Hannah was so flustered by the man's approach that she froze. "No, do not cross the creek," she nervously protested. But stubbornly, Hutch kept splashing forward. His approving glance and casual grin suggested he was thoroughly enjoying the woman's discomfort and determined to wholeheartedly tease her for a lack of modesty.

Comically, like an old ogre flapping through the water, Hutch began to pantomime a feeling of excitement. While pushing the raven black hair out of his eyes, he began muttering out loud about *needing to get a better look at some mighty fine knees*. Hannah was mortified and gasped.

Trying not to giggle at the bold comments, Hannah blushed instead. Providing evidence that the involuntary action was not a particularly good thing, huge patches of red began sprouting like chickweed among the young woman's ample freckles. It was definitely the most awkward moment of her usually boring life.

As the man paused in the rushing water, Hannah caught a glint of something in Hutch's translucent blue eyes. Until that moment, she was silently bemoaning her flawed appearance. But Hutch's sparkling eyes hinted that perhaps the self-assessment had been too harsh.

Ignoring all pleas to stop moving forward, the man eagerly continued to navigate the broad creek. At the same time, Hannah began feeling itchy all over her legs. She glanced downward and was horrified to see an entire army of bloodthirsty mosquitoes attacking bare knees and thighs.

"No, no..." she shrieked. Frantic hands started swatting the fat, juicy mosquitoes, but the actions were definitely too late. A string of itchy mosquito bites traced cobwebs of welts all over her legs and literally turned the webs *blood red*.

"If I am ever called *Red* again, I will be furious," Hannah shouted to the approaching man. To prove the threat was real, she pointed at the splotchy red legs, which were burning with a fiery heat!

Seeing his friend was in pain, Hutch tried to hold back any laughter. But the man had never seen anything so funny in his entire life. After thwarting a bloody mosquito attack, Red was struggling to stand up straight like a regal queen.

Matching the irate woman's frazzled disposition was her flaming red hair, which had wildly frizzed in the humidity. It resembled a crooked hat made of unraveling yarn that somehow got nonsensically perched on her head. Helplessly, Hutch began gasping and chortling.

"Quit laughing," Hannah bellowed like someone who had gone mad. "I am warning thee, Hutch!" Flashing a foul look at the snickering man, she desperately

untied the dress from the soaked belt, which released the thick cloth to drop over the blistering welts. But in the haste of her actions, Hannah forgot the cumbersome weight of linen fabric when wet. As the hem splashed into the swiftly flowing creek, the dress immediately began absorbing water. Soon it was completely soaked.

Without warning, the scene got even more bizarre. In astonishment, Hutch stopped in the middle of the creek to stare at the struggling woman. Not only was the woman's hair hanging in bedraggled ringlets from the splashing water, but the skirt of the dress began to billow like a huge tent around her legs. It became so massive that it looked as if a nest of raccoons was hiding underneath.

Tears of humiliation welled in Hannah's eyes. *I cannot do anything right*, she moaned with self-pity. While trying desperately to swipe away any tears, it became a final and dangerous scene in the comedy of errors. The poor woman stumbled and began swiftly sliding off a granite rock. To make matters worse, the dead weight of the dress began pulling her headlong into the rushing water, which was nearly shoulder high at its deepest point.

Hutch was no longer amused by the dangerous scene, and the man swiftly swam through the rushing water. Just before the struggling woman plunged headfirst into the creek, Hutch managed to snag Red in mid-air. In shock, she collapsed against him.

*Poor Red has no idea how endearing she is*, he tenderly thought while steadying her soaked body against him in the middle of the creek. Though the water only reached to his chest, the current was so swift that Hutch could barely stand. He knew *Red* might have easily drowned had she gone under.

"Thou made me fall by mocking me," Hannah foolishly accused in a waterlogged whisper. Her blue eyes glared at the shirtless man, who somehow shed some of his clothing before entering the water.

"I did not cause thy fall," Hutch said defensively in a sweet tone of voice. "Thou should be thanking me for rescuing thee from drowning."

Realizing the plans to leave him were rapidly falling apart, Hannah tried to push away from the man. After so much humiliation, she wanted nothing to do with any apologies. At that moment, it became apparent to Hutch that redheads did indeed have fiery tempers to match their hair. Having always heard the silly rumor, this was the first time he believed it!

His strong arms, which were still keeping the sodden woman upright in the fast-moving current, did not budge. "Thou art so rattled, Red. Was it so dreadful I saw those beautiful legs? Tis a shame to always hide them. A man would die happy after seeing such a sight! And do not forget, it was never my intention to startle thee. I approached very slowly."

*I cannot believe how this man has an explanation for everything*, she mumbled to herself. In dismay, Hannah's eyes riveted to how spellbindingly Hutch's shiny black hair tumbled over his amused eyes. He seemed to be waiting for something. Finally, when her eyes trustingly locked on his, the man kept eye contact and began maneuvering them through the strong current and back onto the same bank where he had left his supplies. Hannah nearly tumbled again, and Hutch held her even closer.

"Keep looking at me and walk," her rescuer calmly ordered. "Above all, do not glance down. The swiftly moving water might make thee panic." Gradually, Hutch shifted his position and moved ahead of her. At long last, the muscular man yanked the bedraggled woman out by her soaked arms. Looking as if she were in shock, Hannah could not stop shivering.

While wrapping the woman's dripping body in a woven blanket, Hutch distracted her with more talk. "Thou never answered me, Red. Let me rephrase my previous words. What man would not enjoy seeing such a glorious sight as thy legs?" His question was posed in an unabashedly teasing tone of voice.

The brazen words achieved their purpose. Hannah's pale cheeks began to flush with color, and ever so calmly, Hutch led the flabbergasted woman to a tree trunk and motioned her to sit down. After wrapping himself in a second blanket, the man eased down beside her.

Hannah was at a loss for words. She had never been spoken to in such a bold manner by anyone, and it took some getting used to. The reserved and strained relationship with her own father was totally the opposite.

All at once, Hannah was aware that the plan to leave Hutch had completely fallen apart. *I cannot say such a hurtful thing, especially after the man saved my life*, she wearily thought. *Hutch truly means no harm. Who cares if he has secrets? I have enough secrets of my own.* Hannah's once scolding eyes softened at her companion's conciliatory smile.

There was a rumble of thunder in the distance, but both of them ignored it. Sensing a change in the woman's attitude, lines of pleasure crinkled near Hutch's pale blue eyes. For the first time, Hannah noticed there were dimples as deep as gorges on each side of the man's smooth face. *It is completely unfair for a man to be blessed with so many attributes, especially when I got the bottom of the barrel*, she complained to herself.

After becoming calm enough to speak, Hannah murmured, "Thou art a reprobate, Miles Hutchinson." She flashed him a half-smile. "I suppose it is not such a bad thing to hear one's legs are beautiful. I thank thee for the compliment."

The man's face edged closer to Hannah's face, and he affectionately tapped her freckled nose with an index finger, like a big brother might do. "Thou art welcome.

I meant every word. By the way, I am never called Miles. I go by one name only. Hutch. It is not always best to give one's full name in the trapping business, especially since I am a visitor to the area."

"Fine, Hutch," Hannah replied impertinently with a yawn. "Do not call me Red then! I prefer Hannah."

"Why not, Red? We make a good team. We can be wild vigilantes and keepers of justice, and our moniker can be *Hutch and Red*. It is very catchy!"

Hannah rolled her eyes at the man's quirkiness. "Art thou ever serious? I am teased way too much."

"I never tease, Red. I always mean my words. At least humor me with a small smile. Thou can be a little grumpy," he complained. "But I must admit thou looks endearing in thine anger."

While mulling over the combination compliment and critique, the two of them heard thunder again. It was definitely getting closer. The sky was becoming more overcast through the treetops, and the wind was picking up.

In response to his request, Hannah suddenly smiled and gazed up into Hutch's relaxed face. In spite of the thunder, they both remained on the ground after their ordeal in the creek. "I need to get back, Hutch. A storm is brewing, and if I do not return soon, my father will be upset."

Hutch immediately noticed the woman's smile and moved within inches of her face. "I really like thee, Red. I have been wanting to say those words, so I made something for thee." Hutch surprisingly reached over to a knapsack and pulled out a little cloth.

"Hold out thy palm," the man ordered. Hannah had no idea what to expect but held her hand out anyway. All at once, he tipped the cloth and out rolled a ring made of swamp grass. "I want thee to wear this. When we are apart, thou will think of me and know I am thinking of thee."

Though it was only a handmade ring, which would probably fall apart in a few months, Hannah was startled by Hutch's seriousness. As he gently lifted the woman's left hand, she watched him in silence.

"Now to show my sincerity that we are true friends," the man whispered in a secretive voice, "I place this ring upon thy finger binding us in friendship for a lifetime." As if Heaven heard the solemn proclamation, there was a loud roll of thunder.

After staring with earnestness into the woman's startled eyes, Hutch slid the coarsely made ring onto her ring finger. Then Hutch's other hand slowly brought Hannah's slender hand to his lips, and they softly lingered on her fingertips. She shivered with emotion. *Never had anyone treated her like this!*

Gently dropping her hand, Hutch took hold of the woman's slender shoulders with both hands, and he leaned forward to touch the waiting lips with his own. It was Hannah's first kiss, and her heart pounded at Hutch's tenderness.

Though Hutch's pale blue eyes were closed, Hannah Anderson's eyes were wide open. The man was so close that she could see his long black eyelashes fluttering. It was disheartening to know that any relationship between them was doomed from the start. Her father would never allow such a thing.

As if confirming their unusual vows, the ominous sounds of thunder rolled overhead. Although Hannah was mesmerized by Hutch's gentle ways and forthrightness, the thunder was getting closer and beginning to frighten her.

Confused by the sudden affection, Hannah needed time by herself to think and pray about Hutch. Adding tension to the moment, another huge clap of thunder actually made the ground vibrate, and they both nervously jumped apart and glanced upward in concern. The leafy treetops were roiling in a gusty wind, and the once gray sky had blackened. A cool wind began churning through the forest and whipping her thick red hair in a frenzy.

"Oh, my goodness," Hannah shrieked. The two exchanged anxious glances, and Hannah shouted over the wind, "I must get back to Father at once."

"Red, it is unwise to leave. We must take cover instead. It is too dangerous with the lightning..." Hutch's voice disintegrated in a gust of wind.

By this time, the woman called Red had sprung to her feet and briefly touched Hutch's arm to reassure and thank him. Without waiting for any reaction, she single-mindedly dropped the wet blanket and took off at a sprint alongside the narrowing creek, which gradually curved toward the edge of the forest.

"NO, Red!" Hutch loudly shouted. The man frantically leapt to his feet, threw the second blanket down, and took off after the running woman, who had a head start. "Come back!" Hutch's agitated voice cried out into the howling wind. Like a madman, he kept chasing her. "Thy clothes are wet. It will be dangerous..."

Though Hannah could not hear the man's frantic words over the roar of the wind, Hutch doggedly continued pursuit. All at once, a leafy branch rose up from the ground like a javelin and violently struck Hutch on the back of his head. The stunned man nosedived onto the saturated ground, yet he managed to keep the running woman in sight through the pelting rain.

The next moments were terrifying for Hutch. While the thunder roared and bellowed, the forest lit up like a thousand lanterns, and tree branches began snapping and falling like molten spears during a series of lightning strikes.

Then came the grandfather of all strikes! A searing bolt of lightning began crackling through the sky directly above the creek. Without warning, a massive bolt of lightning descended through the treetops directly toward a lone, red-haired

woman desperately trying to escape the forest. Within moments, it struck her lifeless body to the ground. The explosive boom was monstrous and shook the forest like a massive earthquake!

*“RED, NO!!!”* Hutch shouted. The helpless man frantically struggled to untangle himself from a mound of fallen branches. With an overwhelming grief, Hutch’s mud-covered face was soaked with rain and tears. *No one could have survived such a mammoth lightning bolt*, he moaned with heaviness in his chest.

All at once, an enormous rock struck the back of Hutch’s head with blunt force. Before the injured man could turn around to see what had hit him, a burlap sack was roughly thrown over his head, and Hutch’s upper body was encircled with bristly ropes. Just before blacking out, the man heard voices, and several sets of arms actively tried to subdue any attempts to fight back.

*I am being kidnapped* were Hutch’s final thoughts as his world went black.