

 CHAPTER ONE

Old habits die harder than roaches in a kitchen.. I remember reaching to my shirt pocket for that phantom pack of cigarettes for years after I stopped smoking. We always occupied the same pew in church on Sunday morning; our behavior toward someone who took “our” seat bordered on un-Christian. To this day, I brush my teeth before I shave, and drink my morning coffee while I read the Bible. After all, the world needs at least *some* order to it, especially in times like these.

One of my favorite habits remains the celebration of Auntie Mae’s birthday. Never mind that she died over thirty years ago, because she never really died for me. On September 19 every year, we have a birthday cake for her with a single white candle in the center. We sing happy birthday for her, then a verse of her favorite song: *Amazing love, how can it be; That thou, my God, shouldst die for me.*

Auntie Mae – Mae Mae, I always called her – replaced the mother I never had, and this boy's best friend. Everybody called her Auntie Mae, but only I could call her Mae Mae. Since I never knew my Mama, I used to say, I had to call her Mae Mae. My real mother I couldn’t remember, which was a blessing. Auntie Mae pieced together part of my story, which she wouldn’t share until years later, and then only when I pressed her. Eventually I discovered that my mother’s name was Alice Pratt, and that she gave birth to me at age fifteen.. I almost didn’t make it into the world at all; my mother tried to abort me with a coat hanger, and both she and I almost bled to death. Rather than question whether Alice was a fit mother, the good folks at the hospital kicked us both out on the street as soon as my mother could stagger away with me.

For the next three years we disappeared from the pages of history, a blank spot in my life I can fill in only on the other side of eternity. The police discovered the two of us in a filthy apartment after the neighbors complained of the smell. They found Alice so strung out on coke she didn’t know or care if I lived or died. I lay on top of a pile of filthy rags in a corner, covered with excrement, flies and cockroaches. I was dehydrated and very near death, unable even to open my mouth to cry. My mother wound up in jail for a while, then disappeared: I spent the next several weeks in a hospital. From then on, the state took me under its benevolent wing..

A blur of foster homes filled the next three years of my life. Some of the people treated me kindly; others beat me, and one of my friendly foster mothers raped me. No one, it seemed, wanted me, maybe because I spent all of my time in deserted corners or darkened rooms, afraid of everyone and everything. I never stayed more than a few months in any one place. When I turned five, they put me in kindergarten, but the teachers there had no more success drawing me out of my shell than my foster parents. I heard words like “hopeless case,” accompanied by much shaking of heads and clucking of tongues.

When kindergarten finally ended, I rejoiced. The next month, I met my first love. It happened on the day I reached birthday number six, on June 16. I’ve had other memorable birthdays, but that one remains my favorite. Early in the morning, my latest “fosters,” the Clements’s, got me out of bed, and told me to get my things together. I knew the routine; the time had come to move again.

We drove north out of Pikeville for what seemed like a very long time, actually about an hour. Leaving the four lane finally, we kept driving out into the country. The roads narrowed progressively, and the steep wooded hills crowded in ever closer the further we drove. Neither of my foster parents spoke during the long trip, and none of the children had come along as they often did on our drives. I grew increasingly uneasy, afraid that they had decided to just drop me somewhere so I could never find my way back – or worse.

We topped a rise, and a lovely little valley opened below us. As we descended toward the valley floor, Karen Clements finally spoke, not in an unkindly way at all.

“Hankie, I know we never really got along. We tried, but you just need something we can’t give; I don’t even know what. We’re taking you to live with my aunt, Mae Crandall. I think you’ll like her, and she loves children. She’s a widow,, and has no children of her own. All of the foster children she’s cared for really love her. Everybody calls her Auntie Mae, and that’s what she’ll want you to call her. Fred and I hope you’ll be happy with her.”

Elizabeth Mae Scranton Crandall – simply the most beautiful woman I ever knew. Her brown eyes twinkled whenever they saw me, and the first time proved no exception. Even when she got angry with me, which

seldom happened, those eyes still twinkled. Oh, she might not rate as beautiful by worldly standards, I suppose, but I don't care for a lot of the world's standards anyway. She had a round, pleasant face, framed by lovely gray curls, and a smile as wide as the night sky in the flat lands.

I remember Mae Mae's strong, gentle hands more than anything else. Those hands – they comforted me when I cried, cradled me when I got sick, punished me reluctantly when I acted bad. That first day, there on the front porch of that big farmhouse, those hands, rough and callused, picked me up very gently right off the floor. Auntie Mae looked me straight in the eye, all a-twinkle, and said four words she repeated many times a day to me until the day she died: “I love you, Hank!”

And she gave me a big kiss to prove it.

Karen Clements cried when she kissed me good-bye. Fred just shuffled his feet and looked embarrassed as he shook my hand. He didn't say a word. I still remember every detail of that day, from the sight of the Clements's car driving away, to the fried chicken we had for dinner, to my first night in my very own bed. Mae Mae tucked me in, before she turned out the light. As she did every night for as long as we lived together, she sat on the corner of my bed, took my hand, and prayed with me.

No one, that I remember, ever prayed with me, or for me, before. I had only the vaguest idea what prayer meant. In spite of my ignorance, I knew those words made me feel all warm, safe, and *loved* for the first time in my short life. In the days that followed, I also learned about a book called the Bible. Auntie Mae said it was the most important book ever written. I accepted her statement without question, though at the time I couldn't read the words. Even when she read to me, and that happened every day, I couldn't grasp the meaning of all the big words, and all the “Thee's” and “Thou's.” The story about Daniel and the lions caught my attention, though, and I made her read it over and over. It became a game for me to insist on “The Lion Story,” and for her to protest in mock anger that I should be telling it to her.

Other firsts came that summer as well. I milked a cow for the first time, got stung by a yellow jacket for the first time, and got my first taste of stewed rabbit. The part about the rabbit really disturbed me, and when I found out what it was, I ran outside and threw up everything I'd eaten. I just couldn't see killing one of the poor little things. Auntie Mae's neighbor laughed uproariously at my reaction, but Mae Mae just picked me up, vomit and all, and hugged me close.

I arrived at Auntie Mae's home on a Thursday. The following Sunday, she took me to my first church service, at the Maple Fork Free Will Baptist Church. All of the shouting and gesturing frightened me, and I thought sure the preachers must be mad at me. They seemed to look right at me when they made a point, and I felt even smaller than I was. Had it not been for Mae Mae's comforting grip on my shoulder, I would have run out of the place. We talked about it later, and she assured me they weren't angry with me. “After all,” she said with her brightest twinkle, “you're my little angel.”

After a happy, care-free summer, I started to school. Soon I had all but forgotten how good life could be. The reason for the end of my happiness can be summed up in three words: Bennie the Bruiser. At nine years old, with a body like a tank, Bennie reigned as the terror of the school yard. And me? I played the unwilling role of Bennie's favorite victim.

I knew no one at Shady Grove Elementary, and no one made an effort to befriend me. The teachers cared little about me, so far as I could tell, and I suspected none of them liked me either. I kept quiet in class, and tried to find a place on the playground no one else used during recess and lunch. One day, not long after school started, I found an empty swing, and began swinging in a half-hearted sort of way. Suddenly, I felt someone grab the swing from behind, and rough hands jerked me to a stop.

When I looked behind me, the first thing I saw was a bare belly bulging over a pair of jeans. Straining to look back and up, I saw a ragged T-shirt. Still higher, I craned my neck to look at the meanest, ugliest face I'd ever seen. The face wore a scowl and a sneer together, both directed down at me.

“Whatcha doin' there, punk, in my personal swing?”

I started to mumble a “Sorry,” and get up, but Bennie slammed me back down again.

“You speak when I tell you to. What's your name, anyway, dog face?”

“Hankie.”

Bennie roared with laughter. Without loosening the grip he had on my shoulder, he turned to the growing crowd of onlookers and sneered, “Look, I've got a hanky! Now I can blow my nose.!”

He proceeded to do that on top of my head. Everyone laughed. Another funny thing occurred to him as he warmed up to the crowd. He picked me up from the swing with little effort, then dropped me. “OOPS, I

dropped my hanky!”

As I fell, my back scraped the front of the swing, then I hit it with the back of my head. I told Auntie Mae that I had fallen while running. I felt ashamed to admit I acted like a coward; never mind that Bennie made two of me.

I considered the next year the worst of my young life. I dreaded getting up each morning to go to school. When I got there, I stayed inside. Bennie still took every opportunity to torment me, and more often than not I ended up crying. The other children invented various nicknames for me, one of the nicer ones being “crybaby.” Even the teachers laughed when they called me their “hanky.” Through all of this, I never said a word to Mae Mae, though she surely knew about it. As soon as I walked through the front door of the house, everything seemed fine again. I could always flee there to my safe haven, my shelter in a time of storm. With the summer came the joy of freedom and release. It tasted sweeter than my first summer with Auntie Mae, because I felt such relief in not having to face school anymore. The closer the next school year approached, though, the greater became my dread. On the first day of school, I felt so physically ill that I had to go to the bathroom to throw up. By the end of that day, however, my whole life had changed.

“Class, I want you to meet a new student. This is Pamela Strader. Her family just moved into the community.”

I fell instantly and hopelessly in love; at least, that’s what I thought it must be. Pamela was the prettiest girl I had ever seen, and when she smiled she made the birds sing. She had long hair, black as the coal seams above our house, a face like an angel, and flashing black eyes. When the teacher told her to find a seat, she came straight to the one beside me. As she sat down, she flashed that dazzling smile in my direction; I thought the gates of Heaven had opened. My heart pounded so loudly in my ears that I believed everyone must hear it.

The rest of that day passed in a daze. When time came for recess, she asked why I didn't go out. I mumbled something about not feeling well, and she went on. At lunch time, though, after we finished eating in the cafeteria, she returned to the classroom with me. I can’t remember anything we talked about; just that I was so tongue-tied, I had trouble getting two words out together.

When the final bell rang that day, I all but ran to the front door, eager to tell Mae Mae about this pretty new friend. I forgot that Bennie and his gang always hung around the front of the building looking for victims. He spotted me right away.

“Hey, Hanky, come here so I can blow my nose. Don’t you run away from me; I’ll pound you to a pulp!”

I looked around fearfully; I didn't see a teacher anywhere.. Someone else saw what happened, though. Pam stepped in front of me without the least hint of fear or hesitation.

“Leave him alone, you creep. Are you such a coward you have to pick on someone half your size?”

Bennie shrank back in mock horror. “Woo, I’m so *scared*. Hanky is hiding behind girls now.”

Pam wore pointed shoes; they were all the rage for girls that year. With all the force in her wiry frame, she kicked Bennie in the shin. I could hear the “pop” if the impact. Bennie howled like a wounded wolf, holding his leg as he hopped around on one foot. This time, the crowd laughed at him, not with him; some even applauded and cheered. Humiliated, Bennie went hopping away. He hurled insults at me after that, but otherwise he left me alone. He himself became a laughingstock, humiliated by a little skip of a girl only a fraction of his size. I gained no glory from it all, but I gained something far better. I had a new best friend.