

Chapter 1  
A Fishing Family  
1927

“Hannah, I need you. Get your little brothers dressed, please.”

Hannah heard the baby crying in the other room and sighed her agreement. She’d never complain to Mother—dear Mother worked too hard, taking care of all twelve members of the family—but it wasn’t fair that she, at only nine years old, had to work harder than thirteen-year-old Madge.

*Lazy Madge. Wish we could trade her for a maid.* As soon as the thought crossed her mind, Hannah tried to snatch it back. She wouldn’t really trade any of her family. She just wanted Madge to do her fair share.

“Gus and Freddie, let’s play a game to get you ready. We’ll pretend that Gus is a maid helping Freddie. Then Freddie will be the maid helping Gus.”

“What’s a maid?” the boys wanted to know.

Hannah told them all about how rich people have maids and other servants to help them get dressed, and do their chores, and serve their meals, and everything.

The three of them entered a kitchen warm with the aroma of fresh bread and coffee. Mother brought baby Angie from her nursing and handed her to Hannah to burp while she entertained Gus and Freddie, then started slicing loaves of bread. Madge sat idly at the table, licking a spoon of molasses. “I thought your stomach hurt,” Hannah couldn’t help saying. She hadn’t heard Madge say anything about her stomach this morning, but her sister often used that excuse to get out of work.

“Molasses helps it feel better,” Madge replied, without the least hint of guile.

“You’ll never get a husband if you don’t learn to keep house.”

“What does a little girl like you know about getting husbands?”

“More than—”

“Girls.” The one word from Mother closed the mouth of both Hannah and Madge.

Hannah's sisters Monica and Bridie brought in the milk and eggs from the farmyard. Monica poured the milk into the churn and began the laborious process of butter churning, while Bridie took out a skillet and prepared to cook the eggs for breakfast.

Hannah loved this time of day, when most of the family gathered together and weren't yet all tuckered out, and Grandma Murphy hadn't come down. Grandma Murphy was Father's mother, and a most disagreeable old woman. Mother treated her kindly and made the children act gentle and sweet to her, too. Grandma Murphy's beady eyes and perpetual scowl made Hannah nervous. She shivered. *Ugh!* She'd think about something else.

Father was out fishing, of course; he left in darkest part of morning that comes before dawn to get out to sea before the sun rose. And Mary, her oldest sister, worked in town and only came home on weekends. But Leonard should be there.

"Where's Lennie?" Hannah asked, and just then he burst in the door with a grin as big as a crescent moon, carrying something wrapped in brown paper.

"Guess what?" he asked the room, then answered before anyone could. "I just helped Uncle Will slaughter a pig, and in exchange he gave me half a pork leg and a slab of fatback." He winked at Hannah. "You'll get the biggest piece, dearest sister. I'll make sure of it, and then you'll forgive me for that Christmas, won't you?"

Hannah smiled. "It's not quite enough, Lennie. You'll need to do more."

"What C'istmas?" Gus asked.

"I've told you that story. The Christmas Lennie played a very mean prank on me." They called it a prank although it had not been done in jest.

"I don't 'member. Tell me again."

"When I was only your age—" Hannah began.

"Free?"

"Yes, three. When I was only three, I got an orange for Christmas."

"All for your own?" asked Freddie.

"All for my very own. Have you ever had an orange?"

"I had a piece at Peter Greene's party."

"That's right. So you know how good they are. Well, so I got an orange for Christmas, all for my very own, when I was three years old. Lennie was six. I wanted my orange to last and not be over right away, so I put it under my pillow. Then I went to listen to Mother read the

Christmas story from the Bible. When she finished, I went back to taste one piece of orange. But...guess what? It was all gone!"

"Like Goldilocks!"

Hannah giggled. "Well, really like the baby bear. But it wasn't a curly-haired girl that ate my orange up; it was a boy. A boy named Lennie! He was still standing there with juice running down his chin." "Now, Hannah, someday I'm going to make it up to you." A slight catch in Lennie's voice gave away his fondness for his sister.

She smiled lovingly at him once again. "I'm waiting. So where's that pork? I'm hungry." If they had breakfast on the table soon, perhaps they could eat before Grandmother Murphy came down to darken the mood.

Soon the rashers of cooking fatback sent a delicious aroma throughout the kitchen, combining with the scent of fresh bread and coffee. Hannah set the table with a growling stomach. Soon she and her siblings sat with Mother at the table. Before they ate, Mother thanked God for the bread, eggs, molasses, milk, and pork they had to eat that morning.

Breakfast had mostly disappeared by the time Grandma Murphy came downstairs. She complained about being left out, and demanded that Hannah bring her toast and tea.

While Hannah prepared the requested items, Mother and the older girls cleared the table and washed the dishes. Then Mother laid out the chores for the day.

"Monica, you and Madge do the laundry. Madge, you do your share. Bridie can clean house. The garden will be Leonard's responsibility. Hannah, please keep an eye on Angie and the little boys."

The other children disappeared to their chores, but Hannah followed Mother outside. She set the little boys to a game so she could watch Mother make fish.

Mother stopped at the well and filled two big pails with water. She lugged those down to the salt pond into the family's little shed known as a fish room. Inside, barrels and bins held all the fish Father caught all season. The fish he caught yesterday were in a special bin. Mother started her work with those.

She reached into the bin and took out a codfish. With water from the pails, she washed it well, then set it on the end of a table and sprinkled it with salt. Then she reached into the bin and

took out the next piece, which received the same treatment. She piled all the clean and salted fish one on top of the other. They would sit there until tomorrow.

Now Mother turned to the pile of fish on the other end of the table. She had washed and salted those yesterday. Today they were ready to go outside on the flake. Father had built the flake from a bunch of tree limbs tied together, like a raft but with more room between them. It stood outside the fish room next to the water.

Mother laid yesterday's fish out on the flake where the sun and air would dry them.

The other women in the village of Point Verde had flakes at the pond, too. All around, Mother's cousins, neighbors, and sisters stood at their own flakes laying their fish out, just like Mother was doing. They all talked and joked and told wild stories and laughed with each other as they put out the heavy cod.

Then Mother went back in the fish room and took all the fish out of the barrel and bins and put them on the flake, too. If there were too many fish to fit on the flake, Mother hung the extras on the clothesline. She made sure it didn't touch any laundry, though.

Every morning, Mother put all the codfish in the fish room out on the flake to dry. Each piece of fish had to dry on the flake several days to remove every last drop of water from it. If the fish got left out overnight, it might get wet and spoil. So every evening, Mother had to lug it all back into the fish room.

With all the fish stowed away for the night, Mother grabbed the pails of tongues and britches and headed back to the house to make supper for her husband and family.

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After supper Father went outside. When he returned, he brought in his whetstone and his fishing knife and hooks. He sat at the table and pulled the knife across the whetstone over and over again, until it was razor sharp. Then he sharpened the hooks the same way.

When he was finished, Leonard said, "Can I sharpen a knife? I want to try."

"Wish you'd said so before," Father answered. "You could've sharpened mine, saved me the effort."

"It ain't hard, is it?" Lennie said.

"No, it's not hard. But I'm tired."