

Chapter One



Sarah Payson Willis, Outskirts of Boston, Saturday, June 29th, 1816

Who but God can comfort like a mother?

—Fanny Fern, *A New Story Book for Children*, 1864

Sarah would soon be five years old. Old enough, her father said, to start doing a few more chores and to learn that the world wasn't all whimsy and fun; it was work and effort and had to be taken seriously. It was a warm, sunny day. A few wispy clouds floated high in the bluebird sky and the yellow ball of sun warmed Sarah's back as she crouched among the waist-high plants in her mother's garden behind the house. Sarah's bonnet slipped down the back of her head, as it often did, and she knew she should take a moment to readjust it, yet she didn't. She broke off the tops of some daisies in the garden. There were so many daisies; surely a few wouldn't be missed. She looked around, and seeing that Louisa and Julia occupied little Mary, and Nat grubbed for fishing worms at the other end of the yard and seemed to pay her no attention, Sarah pinched the blooms off a few soft pink roses and one glorious blue hydrangea. She was making a little church, a church where all the good ants and crickets could come and worship. She stuck the hydrangea elegantly into a small puddle of mud. It would serve as the focal point—a lovely, soft statue surrounded by a shimmering moat. Sarah arranged the daisies in a circle around the hydrangea and imagined them to be cushions the insect worshippers could recline upon.

She sprinkled a few bread crumbs from her pocket near the daisy lounge—to serve as both communion and lunch, she supposed. Sarah smelled each rose, then stuck the fragrant beauties at spaced intervals to provide shade for the more delicate bugs, or for the ones who might have forgotten their bonnets or hats.

A shadow fell upon her church scene, and looking up, Sarah saw the very pregnant form of her mother silhouetted against the dazzling sun. Sarah grinned broadly at the smile she knew would be on her mother's face, even though it took her several blinks in the new light to make it out.

"I see you're making good use of the flowers," Hannah Willis said.

"Yes, Mother. It's a church," Sarah said and proceeded to explain her composition.

Hannah wiped her forehead with a small lacy handkerchief. "It's certainly nothing like Park Street Church, is it?"

"No, Mother. And the Sexton won't find us here, either." The Sexton had an eye out for Sarah, she knew. He and every other pastor that came near the family. Sarah's father adored pastors. He had spoken with all of them about his worries for her, about her wickedness. Sarah wiggled during prayers, interrupted conversations, asked too many questions for a girl growing so big. What could be done to inject modesty, humility, and piety into her—quickly, before her bad habits took root? Most of the pastors (except for Reverend Payson) eyed Sarah gravely and whispered gruff advice to her father, advice for punishment or deprivation sure to smooth her rough edges. Despite all the fuss, Sarah didn't *feel* wicked, and, so, avoided clergymen, and their lectures, as much as possible, running from the table as soon as dinner was over, if they were visiting, looking sheepishly at her shoes if Father stopped the family to talk to a minister after a sermon.

Hannah set the basket she was carrying (it smelled full of blueberry muffins) on the ground beside the flower church and gently straightened Sarah's bonnet. "How would you like to come with me this afternoon, my pet, and see a grown-up lady's flower church?"

With five siblings (the eldest, Lucy, was in the parlor learning sewing), Sarah never missed a chance to be alone with her mother, and so, the two walked for what seemed an eternity beneath a great many trees along a grassy path. They were mostly quiet as they walked, enjoying the dappling sunshine, listening to bird twitter, and watching the bushes as they passed to see if a rabbit might run out. Just as Sarah's legs grew tired, they came to a little wooden house almost engulfed by lilac bushes. The bushes weren't blooming, but in front of them, in great profusion, were hundreds of opened posies of every color and scent. Sarah wanted to pull the flower fragrance deep inside, and so she inhaled slowly and smiled up at her mother. But her mother wasn't looking at her. She was calling a greeting into the open door of the dwelling. "Hello, Fanny Miller," Hannah said, absentmindedly touching the wild fern leaf she'd

placed, as was her habit, in the bodice of her dress.

“Hello, dear Hannah,” came a voice in reply as Hannah and Sarah entered the little house through a low doorway, climbed two immaculate wooden steps, and found themselves in a tall, cool room where a half dozen women were arranging a variety of chairs in a circle near the gaping mouth of an enormous blackened fireplace.

“I’ve brought my little Sarah,” Hannah said. “She’ll be good and will sit quietly near me, won’t you, Sweetheart?”

Sarah nodded at her mother and at the brown, wrinkled face of the person she thought might be Fanny Miller.

“The darling is certainly welcome,” the old woman said and gave Sarah a brown-toothed smile.

The other women Sarah knew from the neighborhood and from church—all friends of her parents and good members of Park Street Church. They had removed their bonnets and hung them on nails near the door, then sat on the chairs, arranging their skirts to allow for a little air circulation. Hannah removed Sarah’s bonnet, brushed back her damp, golden curls with her fingers, and indicated that Sarah should sit on a little stool that Fanny Miller placed near Hannah’s feet. Fanny took both Sarah’s and Hannah’s bonnets and hung them on nails near the fireplace and Sarah thought them quite decorative against the quaint paper with so many pink shepherdesses and green dogs.

Fanny then presented each seated woman in turn with the same tin cup, which she kept filling with water from a heavy blue pitcher. After all had had a drink, even Sarah, Fanny took the basket of muffins and placed them in the center of the circle. She put the blue pitcher and the tin cup next to the basket. She lit a gnarly-looking mud-colored candle that was stuck into another tin cup and placed it in front of the empty fireplace. Buckets of asparagus branches, clustered with little red berries, stood to the left and right of the candle. Fanny sat in a chair next to the fireplace, opened a worn-looking Bible on her lap, and read.

Sarah leaned against her mother’s knee. She liked Fanny’s voice. It was like a song. The Bible sounded completely different coming from Fanny Miller than it ever had coming from any of the pastors Sarah had heard. It certainly was different from the way Father made it sound. Fanny made the Bible feel warm and welcoming and she didn’t read any parts about hell and damnation. Sarah looked up at her mother. Hannah’s eyes were closed as she listened. Sarah looked at the other women. Some of their eyes were closed, too. She noticed the cabin had only one window—wide open, though, and serving as the entry of many a lazily buzzing bee. Sarah’s thoughts soon drifted like the bees around the room. She thought the house very old-fashioned with its rough ceiling trestles, hung with bunches of drying herbs, and with the high-post bedstead in the corner, the bright patchwork quilt covering it, the little washing stand, the few dishes

and pans stacked on a wooden shelf, the green china parrot taking the place of honor on the mantle, the abundance of flowers gathered in jars and mugs and arranged around the room. Yet, she liked it here, in this circle of women slowly fanning themselves and listening to Fanny Miller's intoxicating voice. Birds chirped. The bees buzzed a fuzzy undertone. A fragrant breeze swept regularly through the window and door and stirred the tendrils on the feminine foreheads. Sarah couldn't think of a better place to be than here in this flower church, listening to love come from the throat of brown and wrinkled Fanny Miller and leaning against the solid strength of her mother.

After what seemed like a long, delicious interval, Fanny softly closed the book and asked Hannah to pray. Sarah's mother prayed without opening her eyes. She spoke in a low and sweet voice asking God to care for them, for their families and friends, for all the world. She sounded like she was talking with a good friend, Sarah thought. Her mother's prayer was nothing like the kingly prayers Sarah and her mother normally recited with the family under her father's direction. Flashes of those moments appeared in Sarah's thoughts—whole agonizing Sundays practically tied to a hard stool, listening to her father or one of his minister friends reading about hell and sin, yelling fear into their hearts, nearly always picking out Sarah and her fidgeting as evidence of the devil. Sarah tried to keep still Sundays, in order to be respectful of her elders, as her mother had explained, but she never believed she was the sinner they professed her to be. She felt good and happy and loved. She couldn't help laughing when things seemed funny and couldn't, as Reverend Payson had said, "turn off the twinkle" in her eye. And that was fine with her. She'd taken Mother's suggestion about looking at the fireplace tiles and making up her own stories to go along with the blue and white pictures of Elijah, Daniel, and old Nebuchadnezzar.

Hannah Willis finished her prayer and heaved her pregnant body out of the chair to kneel on the clean-swept wooden floor. Sarah and the other women joined Hannah on their knees and they all prayed silently for a few minutes, their hearts filling with the fragrance of Fanny Miller's flowers and with the buzz of the circling bees and the distant chirping of the birds. Fanny Miller finally stood and broke Hannah's blueberry muffins in half, then passed the basket for each to take a piece. They ate the muffins, then took another sip from the tin cup Fanny passed to her left. Slowly, each woman stood in time, reclaimed her bonnet from its nail, and walked outside. Sarah's mother was the last to stand and Sarah was glad Fanny Miller helped her mother to her feet and presented them with their bonnets.

"Sarah," Fanny Miller said, tying Sarah's bonnet under her chin for her. "What a pretty name for a pretty girl. Did you enjoy our prayer meeting?"

Sarah nodded. "It seemed just like church," she said, "only nicer."

Fanny and Hannah laughed.

"Nicer," Fanny repeated as they walked out the door to Fanny Miller's garden.

Outside, some of the other women lingered among the flowers—red, pink, yellow, white, and a striking spiky deep purple blossom the group kept naming as blue, much to Sarah's confusion. She knew blue. It was the color of Mother's eyes, the color of the sky. This blossom mirrored the royal ribbon Father used to mark his place in his prayer book. It was purple if it was anything. The women grinned at Sarah's assertion and tutted to Hannah over her head. Hannah smiled warmly at Sarah. "You are not to be deceived, my darling," she said and brushed a knuckle over Sarah's cheek.

Talk soon turned to Hannah's pregnancy and the naming of the soon-to-arrive baby. When Hannah told them how her husband wished to name this new one, like Sarah, after the Reverend Edward Payson, some of the women shook their heads. Deacon Willis was a firm Calvinist and his sober preoccupation with everlasting salvation cast a pall on both Sunday services and the rest of the week. How sweet Hannah remained so cheerful was anybody's guess.

"It didn't harm this one any," Fanny said, patting Sarah on the back.

"No, indeed," Hannah said. "Sarah has her own ideas."

"I like *her* name. Fanny," Sarah suddenly said.

"See?" Hannah said.

The group of women laughed.

"She's just right," Fanny said and gave Sarah a wink.

The women talked above Sarah's head for another little while and Sarah held her mother's soft, strong hand. Before long, Sarah and her mother walked home along the grassy path under the trees. They spoke about a kind and loving God, about how God's creations—the flowers, bees, birds, trees, and people—all exist to support one another, and about how they liked old Fanny Miller.