CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

She came walking into the valley on a Sunday afternoon. Even after the years that had passed since I last saw her, I recognized her immediately. An adult now, she still bore some of that air of a cherub about her, but without that childish innocence and joy I remembered. Emily and I walked toward the end of the valley, as we often did now on Sunday afternoons. When we rounded a curve in a road, there she was, walking toward us.

All three of us stopped dead. She frowned for a second, then recognition came to her face. She smiled in that way I remembered, walked the remaining distance to where we stood, and stopped in front of me. Her voice sounded raspy, but strong.

"Hankie, my first love and my favorite teacher. So, you've come back to the valley, too. If I had to pick anyone to meet on the way, it would be you. Emily, you are as lovely as I always remembered."

"Carmen – the Imp, we used to call you. We've been praying for you ever since your Mom told us what happened. Can I give you a hug?"

"You have to ask? I'd be insulted if you didn't."

When we pulled away, she said, "And Mom, how is she? Did she go over the edge, too?"

"She came very close to it. When we arrived, she was angry, hurt, and bitter. She blamed God for everything that happened to her and her family."

"Sounds familiar. I guess I should go see her."

"Before you go, there's something you should know," Emily said, putting her hand on the other woman's arm.

"Which is?"

"Your mother and Rick Bloomington recently got married?"

"Married! But why? How could she? How could she ever share a bed with another man after being my father's wife all of those years?"

"Rick lost his companion, too; they both ended up all alone. Rick helped your mother regain her sanity, and because of him she's almost her old self again. She'll always love Fred; no one can change that, just as Rick will always love Alberta. But, Carmen, they both desperately needed someone to share the rest of their lives with, and the Lord gave them each other. Don't deny them that."

"Okay, but it won't be easy. I suppose if I had to pick a second father, and it couldn't be Hank, Rick's as good as any other, and better than most. "She sighed. "Let's go see Mom and my new Dad."

Pat all but fainted at the sight of her youngest child. As it was, she screamed "CARMEN!" at the top of her voice, and literally threw herself on her daughter. If I hadn't caught them, they would have fallen to the street together. Both women laughed and cried at once. Rick stood quietly by until they calmed down. Pat finally turned toward her new husband, and said, "Carmen, I, we . . . ." Words failed her.

Carmen kissed her mother and said, "It's okay, Mom, Emily told me." She walked over to Rick and gave him a hug, which he responded to immediately. She looked up at him with laughing eyes, and said, "Hi Dad." Tears came to the big man's eyes, but he made no effort to brush them away.

Eventually, when all the greeting finished, Carmen shared her story with us.

"I really don't remember much from the point I found Mom in that ditch until I woke up over in West Virginia some time later; I have no real idea how much time passed in between. A man I didn't know lay next to me in bed, and both of us were naked. I got out of bed, found my clothes, got dressed, and walked out. There was a car parked outside the house, and I found keys in my pocket, so I drove away. To this day I don't know who owned the car, or how I got the keys. Most likely, it belonged to the man, but I don't know that. I never saw him again.

"I looked for signs, and eventually figured I was near Huntington, West Virginia. I couldn't remember what happened at home, but the thought of going back there frightened me. I knew something very bad had happened; I remembered finding my mother, but nothing after that. For all I knew, she was dead, along with my whole family and everybody else I loved. I found my way to Interstate 64, and headed west, simply because I came to that entrance first. When the interstate crossed U.S. 23, I took the exit and drove north, again for no particular reason. I wound up in Columbus, Ohio.

"I spent the next three years there and in Cleveland. I worked at whatever jobs I could find, waiting on tables, cleaning floors, or tending bar. It seemed my faith in God had deserted me, and I no longer much cared what I did. I hate to confess this in front of you, Mama, but I sold my body many times just to put food in my mouth. I'm not proud of that, but the Lord has forgiven me; I hope you will, too. Please, Mama, don't cry anymore; that's all over.

"On one of my periods in Cleveland, the last one, I started getting mixed up with a really bad crowd. They were Satan worshippers, maybe same bunch that kidnapped Brother Hank. One of them picked me up on the street, and started pressing me to come to their 'worship services,' as he called them. I finally agreed to go with him, but that afternoon I ran into Emily's brother, Drew, on the street, downtown. That had to be the Lord's doing, because I had never once seen him all the other times I was there.

"Anyway, Drew stopped me, and asked me to come back to his apartment with him to talk. He told me Mama was still alive, and that she was in very bad shape. He told me to go on home, but I couldn't bear the idea, even after three years. Then he suggested I go see my sister, Liz. I had never really considered that seriously, because I knew about Bandy's death and all the trouble with Brett Halcomb. I figured she had enough pain, but he insisted she would be delighted to see me, and that my coming might be just what she needed just then.

""Drew has his own problems, by the way. He lost his job, and his pastor and several members of his church have been killed, or just disappeared. I told him he should go back to Kentucky, too, but he said the Lord still has work for him there. He sends his love to you all, especially to Emily, though he didn't know she had come back here. It's almost impossible for a Christian to send or receive mail up there anymore, and you all no longer have a phone." Phone service to the valley had been disconnected the year before our return.

""I left Cleveland that day, and headed for Bentown. I felt like one of those moonshine runners in the old movies on my way down; I had to run through road blocks, and run away from several cars driven by men who didn't look at all nice. I'm not that great a driver, so the Lord had to be at the wheel. The sight of Bentown was a real relief, although things there aren't much better than in Cleveland; maybe worse.

"As you all probably know, Liz has a little grand daughter, Julie, who's about three or four years old now. She loves her 'Gran' more than she does Mary, I think, and Liz watched her most of the time I was there. Mary and Jack have joined Brett Halcomb's Satanic cult, but I don't think they really believe that stuff. Liz

thinks a deliverer will come to the place some time in the future, but she doesn't expect to see it.

"In spite of all her troubles, she welcomed me with open arms, literally. I hadn't been loved so unconditionally for so long I forgot what a joy it was. She worked with me and prayed with me for months, and all the time she had to deal with constant persecution from Halcomb and his maniac son. Mary and Jack want to raise little Julie in their cult, but Liz won't hear of it. She has a very strong will, and she has faith solid as a rock.. No matter what the Devil throws at her, she meets him head on, and the Lord always brings her through. I wish I had her faith, but I don't envy her the place the Lord's called her to.

"Most of the rest you know. I finally reached the point where I thought I could face coming home, so I set out early this morning. My old clunker gave up the ghost just before I reached the top of the hill outside the valley; I guess those 100 mile an hour chases did it in. I'm just so very *glad* to be home again, and I trust the Lord will make this home for me, with Mama and my second Dad."

The year following our return to Misty Valley ranks as one of the happiest of my life. We still faced persecution from the outside, and we still had problems keeping the school going, but we had our family and best friends all around us. We made regular trips around the perimeter of the valley, anointing and praising, though I was concerned we again put too much faith in the Process and not the Protector. No further Satanic attacks came against us inside the valley, except for those connected with our own pride and selfishness.

Shortly after Carmen returned, Max Trundle came to visit. Unlike that other time he had come, he wore no badge and carried no sidearm or arrest warrant. We welcomed him, and he shared our table and our home for three days. He formally rededicated his life to the Lord, and returned to Louise with our blessing and prayers. A few weeks later, he returned with Louise, but this time they were only passing through. Louise felt an urgent need to visit her best friend, Liz Leighton. We figured Liz could use any and all support she could get, so we hurried them on their way.

When they returned almost two weeks later, they related what happened. Liz had reached the point of near despair. Brett Halcomb and his cronies had forcibly taken the child, Julie, from her parents, and he announced his intention to raise her as a ward of the Satanist Church. Max and Louise found Liz crying, near the point of hysteria, in her home. After they had prayer together, Max walked alone over to the place where her captors held Julie, despite the vehement protests of both women. He had worn his old uniform to West Virginia, minus the badge, in hopes of intimidating any would-be attackers. He simply walked up to the door, demanded entry, and told the girl's flustered attendants they would be charged with kidnapping if they didn't release Julie to him immediately. No one in authority in the cult was there, and he intimidated the keepers sufficiently that they let Julie go with him. He then rounded up Jack and Mary Baker, and had them sign an official-sounding document awarding custody of the child to her grandmother.

Halcomb didn't wait long before he retaliated. That night, he and a band of his followers surrounded Liz's house, and demanded she release the child to them. If not, Brett thundered, they would burn down the house and everyone in it. Max went out to meet them, and faced them down single-handed (though he insisted that the Lord did it, not him). He told them that the blood of Jesus covered the house and everyone in it, and that they should do their worst. Brett ranted and fumed for an hour, but no one touched the house, then or later. Max and Louise finally left for Kentucky, convinced that the Lord had the situation in Bentown well in hand for the time being.

The bad news I had secretly dreaded during the good times began coming almost a year to the day after we returned to Misty Valley. Kay and Phillip left home one day for a shopping trip in Pikeville, and never returned. One of the searchers found their car near Bent Mountain, but no sign of either of them. A group of us returned to the scene, but we found no bodies, no signs of a struggle, and no clues as to what might have happened. Bonnie and Hammond both went into deep shock at the news, and a dark shadow fell over our happy valley. Neither of the Rathwells ever fully recovered from the blow, and Kacee became more and more unruly. He finally followed many of the other young people away from Shady Grove and out of our

lives. The last we heard of him, he was bound for California. Bonnie did not follow, as she had with Kay years before. Though barely past 50, she aged within months to the point where she looked seventy. Hammond withdrew into himself, and neither associated with, nor spoke to, any of the rest of us.

More and more members left our of the church, either out of fear or because they were killed or driven from their homes. A few more people moved into the valley; we turned no one away. More and more, though, we felt like prisoners there, afraid to venture out except in large groups. We did our shopping together, in a large caravan, and we mad no personal visits alone. For a time, this seemed to work; the bandits left us alone, and individual Satanists did not dare attack us. As had happened so often before, we developed a sense of complacency that ultimately proved disastrous. We stopped offering up more than a cursory, rote prayer before we left, and blithely assumed the Lord would never let anything befall such a large group of us.

That day, that awful day, we organized the most ambitious outing ever. Almost everyone one in the Valley, both children and adults, went along. Even the Rathwells went, coming out of their shell this one time. We had a glorious trip to Pikeville that morning, with a lot of laughter and singing, Once in town, we visited every store and shopping center, stocking up for the months to come. This would be our last trip outside the Valley for some time to come. We stayed longer in Pikeville than we had planned, much longer. Instead of arriving home before dark, we had covered only about half the distance home by nightfall. After all, what could possibly go wrong?

Everything. I still don't know what we hit, or what hit us. We had reached an empty stretch of U.S. 119 that skirts Bent Mountain, cutting off what had once been a steep climb up one side of the mountain and down the other. By this time, the night had turned pitch black, save the stretch of road in the beams of our headlights.

Emily and I traveled in our car, with Rick and Pat Bloomington in the back seat. We heard two loud noises, "BOOM! BOOM!" in rapid succession. I barely had chance to hit the brakes before an explosion of some kind caught us as well. I felt a violent, swelling pain, then we flew through the air, like so may match sticks. I lost consciousness before we hit the ground.

I don't know how much time passed before I regained a measure of consciousness, in a red fog of pain. Vaguely I realized the groans and screams I heard came from my own mouth, but I could think of no way of putting s stop to the noise. Gradually, I distinguished the sound of another voice, a familiar one, also crying out in pain. After some time of just lying there, unable even to force my eyes open, I felt a strong pair of hands slip under my body, and gently lift me from the ground. the hands carried me for some distance, and laid me down. Close by, I could still hear that other voice, but still could not force my brain to remember whose voice it was.

"Hank," I heard a strong, kind voice say, "Open your eyes." I didn't want to, and was sure I couldn't, but I did. I saw a face staring back down at me that I remembered from years before. The memory came sharp and clear; two men walking toward us at the bottom of New River Gorge.

"I am Mitrael. The Lord sent me to you. He has spared you, for you have not yet completed your work. You acted foolishly, and your brethren paid the price. They are with the Father, so have no more concern for them. You and your wife must return to the valley, and make it into a sanctuary, but by God's power, not your own. 'In yet a few years more, I will send my judgment on this world,' the Lord says, 'but I will prepare in the wilderness a place of rest and refuge. Go now, and finish the task I have given you. I call you no longer a prophet, but a steward, a caretaker. See that you do your job well.'"

He left us then, but I felt strength returning to my body. I went to help Emily; she had also regained consciousness, and her own strength quickly returned. I knew without checking to see that no one else had survived, but felt I must do it anyway. Wreckage, most of it burning or smoldering, lay strewn over a half mile stretch of the highway. The hulk of our own car had burst into flame shortly after we left, which is why the angels had moved us. Bodies, and parts of bodies, along with personal belongings and assorted items

from our shopping trip, lay between and among the cars. I felt the gorge of vomit at what I saw, and I threw up until it seemed my stomach itself must be lying on the ground.

Emily finally took hold of me firmly, and led me out of the carnage. I still couldn't help seeing familiar figures lying at crazy angles on and beside the road. Names of those we had just lost ran through my head over and over, like a litany: Patrick, Clarice, Lanesa, Felicia, Lamar, Pam, Rick, Pat, Bonnie, Hammond, Crystal, Clark and Randi (just moved into the valley after rejoining the church); others that we didn't know as well, but I knew all their names and their faces.

We walked through the night, hardly even stopping to rest. As daylight came, we saw a car coming toward us; it was Carmen. Almost alone, she had decided to stay home, saying she felt uneasy about something. She brought the car alongside us, and rolled down her window.

"My God, what's happened? I went to bed last night, thinking you all were just running a little late. Please, Hankie, Emily, tell me everything's okay."

Both of us turned pale, searching for some way of telling her. I tried to speak several times, but nothing came out but a choking sound. She got out of the car, took hold of me with both hands, and shook me. "For the love of our Lord, Hank, please tell me. Lord Jesus, loosen his tongue. One of you say something!"

Finally, I blurted our, "Dead. All dead. Bombs, explosions, don't know what. Only we survived. Dead. All dead. Oh, dear Lord Jesus, *all of them. Dead!*"

Her face turned whiter than mine, as blood fled away from it. She shook her head violently. "NO! You're LYING! I don't believe it! I WON'T believe it." She shook me again, harder than before. "It's a *lie*! Say it is, Hankie!

I shook my head in mute denial, over and over, unable to find speech again. As suddenly as she exploded, a deathly calm came over her. "You and Emily need to get home. I'll take you there."

She drove back to Misty Valley with exaggerated caution, saying not a word. She answered my repeated pleas to say something with grunts. Emily and I exchanged glances; Carmen was in shock. I shuddered to think of what would happen when she came out of it. She took us to the house, and immediately left again. We pleaded with her to wait a while, to talk, to pray, to do anything but leave, but she ignored us.

She tore out of the valley at breakneck speed. We checked on the other five people left in the valley, to let them know what had happened, and found a car left behind the day before. I drove as fast as I dared, but I couldn't even catch sight of Carmen. We found her near the scene of grisly carnage we had left the night before; she had deliberately run her car off a steep ravine; it caught fire on impact. I could hear her final screams as I started down the steep bank; it was far too late to help her now. I prayed that God would receive her to Himself, and turned away.

The next day, the remaining people in the valley, besides us, left without a farewell. Emily and I were alone, save for the Lord.