

CHAPTER THREE

Like all bad news, word that Hank Crandall was a Christian spread fast. Before classes even started, every teacher at the school, the principal, and the entire Pike County Board, knew. Some of the movers and shakers wanted me to move on out the door, immediately if not yesterday. After much animated discussion, though, they decided it might be useful to keep me around as a scapegoat and a kicking post. I didn't find that out until much later; the days and weeks just stretched on, and so did my tenuous hold on the rope to tenure.

Principal Darker called me into his office the Friday before school started. The sweat beaded on his bald head, and he swiped at his puffy face with a dingy handkerchief as he motioned me to sit. The air conditioning now functioned properly, but Darker's three hundred pound frame didn't dispose of heat efficiently. During his twenty-three year tenure he had done nothing to displease the powers in Pikeville or Frankfort, and he had no intention of starting now.

"Now, Hankie," his voice carried the same annoying whine I remembered from algebra class, "we don't want any trouble here. Pikeville didn't know you had gone back to being a Christian again, or they never would have hired you. We don't want any preaching to the students, no praying, and no references to that, uh, Bible, in your classes. You just stick to your job while they decide what to do, and maybe you'll have a job for a little while."

I put on my most proper smile. "Why, Lane, when did I ever cause you any trouble? You surely don't think I would ever violate the separation of church and state. Heaven forbid – OOPS, I'm not supposed to use that word."

Darker's face grew darker still, a deeper shade of red. "Don't play games with me, Crandall, or I'll send you on home without waiting on the Board."

Not wanting to press my luck, or Darker's foul temper, any further, I smiled, saluted, and left the office. On the way out, I passed Bennie coming in. He gave me a deliberate shoulder butt as he passed, and mumbled some obscenity which amounted to a reflection on my parentage and a comment on my total lack of coordination. I peeled myself off of the wall and kept going.

The first day of school, Darker came to my third grade classroom, and conducted a meeting with the class in my presence. He sweated more than usual.

"Now, young people, we just want to remind you of a few rules and regulations that apply here at the school. Your teachers can't talk to you about the Bible, or Christianity, or God, or any of that stuff like that. They're *never* supposed to pray anywhere around the school. They also can't teach against scientific facts like evolution, or say bad things about people different from them, like homosexuals or people who use drugs. If you see or hear any teachers who say anything like that, you come see me right away. We like to reward students who let us know when bad things happen. Study hard, and one day you'll go out and make lots of money."

Having planted his seeds, Darker left the room. As he walked out the door, he stopped, pointed to me, and winked at the class. Several of the students twittered nervously.

I followed my instructions just closely enough to stay out of trouble. I taught my classes from a Christian perspective as much as I could, without ever mentioning God or the Bible. I didn't specifically teach against evolution.; I just didn't teach for it. My students were a rowdy lot, many of them from broken homes or with abusive parents. For the first weeks I had trouble getting their attention or maintaining discipline, but that

didn't last. They knew I loved them, and that I wanted them to be as excited about the world around them as I was.

One little boy disturbed me greatly, because I saw so much of myself in him from my own childhood. He rarely spoke, never smiled, and never mixed with the other children. As children invariably do with outsiders, the others in the class, and most of the rest of the school, tormented him relentlessly. I protected him as best I could, but I couldn't watch him all day every day.

His name was Jack Baker, and his family had moved to Pike County from Bentown, West Virginia. After the first few weeks of torment, Jack stayed inside; I knew the feeling. Not very welcome in the school's social circles myself, I began eating my lunch in my room with Jack. At first, he just sat dumbly in his seat, munching on the inevitable peanut butter and jelly sandwich. When I spoke to him, he just mumbled and looked away. When he finally spoke a full, intelligible sentence one bright fall day, I almost choked on my baloney sandwich in astonishment.

"I have a dog."

"Great! I love dogs! What's yours called?"

"LSD."

My heart stood still.

"That's a strange name, but I bet you love him."

"Mommy kicks him. I cry."

Tears started coursing down his cheeks even as he spoke. I couldn't stop myself; I walked over to him, put my arms around him, and just let sob against my shoulder. After he quieted, I told him I loved him, and that I would pray for him and his dog. I had broken a cardinal rule, but I really didn't care. No one ever knew at the school but Jack, God and me, and none of us ever tattled.

Jack moved back to Bentown a few months later with his family. At the time I didn't know if I had made any real difference in that young life, but I prayed for him for years. I trusted that God would one day work a miracle in his life.

Bennie took every opportunity to torment me, just as he had in school. Now, though, his methods grew much more sophisticated. He delighted in reminding anyone who would listen, when I could hear, how his wife, Pam, had come to her senses and dumped that loser, Hanky, in high school.

"God, can you imagine going to bed with someone like that! I hear sex is against his religion. Poor Pam would have gone through life as a virgin. Well, *I* took care of that the right after I met her. She begged me to marry her so everyone wouldn't think she was a common whore. Well, I made an *honest* whore out of her. She doesn't mind if I have a little on the side, 'cause there's plenty to go around."

That kind of talk made me so angry that I saw everything through a red haze. My stomach knotted up, and the blood pounded in my head like a hammer. I always hurried away, but Bennie knew very well the effect his taunts had on me. His stories grew more obscene and disgusting each time he told them, and they always centered on Pam. Whenever possible, I avoided him and his circle of admirers. Avoiding some of his other tactics proved more difficult.

One morning, when I opened my desk drawer, a horribly mutilated animal, probably a rat, greeted me. Soon

after, I arrived to find a pentagram painted on my desk, in black paint. That kind of thing continued unabated for months; finally, failing to get any visible reaction, Bennie changed his tactics.

Unbelievably nasty rumors about me began circulating. According to one story, I had sex with little Jack Baker, which caused his family to move away. Since everyone knew that Jack spent his lunch and recess periods with me, often alone, and since he wasn't around to say otherwise, the rumor took on the force of fact. So great was the perversion of the place that no one considered the supposed behavior basis for dismissal or discipline, but merely ridicule. Bennie added the label "Hypocrite" to the many epithets he attached to me. Whenever he or his cohorts tried to bait me about it, like asking who I had picked for my current lover, I ignored them. Inside, though, my gut wrenched and my anger seethed.

God always preserved my place of refuge. I knew when I went home I could count on a sympathetic ear not only from Auntie Mae, but from my Father. Many times I would walk out to the yard and pray under my favorite tree. The old maple seemed to me as solid as the hills that surrounded us. The breeze that whispered through its grizzled limbs carried with it the gentle assurance that God, after all, had made all things, and ruled both the turbulent present and the uncertain future. Time passed like water through my fingers, and often I would walk back inside the house as the shadows stretched out long across the valley. Auntie Mae never disturbed my solitude, but sat alone on the front porch, rocking as she knitted and talked with the Lord.

Misty Valley, they called it. I often marveled at the white shrouds that wrapped around the trees and covered the crevasses almost every morning of the year. Mae Crandall owned the whole expanse, from hilltop to hilltop, the legacy of her husband's father and generations of Crandall's going back to the mid nineteenth century. Her land, a vast estate by local standards, stretched for three miles from end to end, and a half to three quarters of a mile from side to side. Some said a fortune in coal lay under the valley and the rim of hills around it, but the Crandalls had steadfastly refused to sell the mineral rights to the coal operators, no matter how hard the times they faced.

During my childhood, I roamed over the whole width and breadth of Auntie Mae's domain. I knew every glen, every forest meadow, every rock cliff and animal den. One of my summer delights was to sit on a bank by the burbling stream that coursed through the valley, and let my bare feet dangle in the cold water. Other times, I would pretend I was Tarzan, and let out a jungle yell as I swung on a grapevine out over a pool, and dropped in. Pam and I took long walks through the woods during our innocent years, and had long conversations about nothing important.

That childhood innocence left me, but I still enjoyed walking by myself along the familiar paths. Auntie Mae couldn't come with me, but we still walked around the yard of the big house, out to the apple orchard or along the worn path to the barn. The meadows were overgrown now, and the apple orchard untended, but I planned to restore some of the farm to its former state come the next summer.

Auntie Mae's faith stayed as solid as the steep hills around us. I had put her faith to its most severe test, but it survived and grew even stronger. Her body looked frail, but I knew what amazing strength this apparent weakness hid. She kept her house spotlessly clean, and tended her yard and garden as diligently as she had for over 50 years. Every day when I got out of bed, and every evening when I arrived home, she had a hot meal waiting for me. Every night before I went to sleep, she came to my room, sat on a chair by my bed, and talked quietly with me about whatever the day had brought our way. When we talked about whatever troubled us, we prayed through. Often, our time together with the Lord lasted well into the night, but early next morning, she rose, had her own prayer time, and fixed my breakfast. She always looked refreshed, even with only four or five hours of sleep.

The snows arrived early that year. I bought an old jeep from one of my church brothers in the fall, and it served me well that November. The road leading from our valley to the outside world, a rutted nuisance most of the time, turned into a nightmare demon during bad weather. After a heavy rain, water rushed down the

steep grade in torrents, and the clay mud turned to the consistency of wet dough. In winter, the water in the ruts froze solid, and layers of packed snow created more layers of ice on top. My old red Cherokee, built in some by-gone days when men took pride in their work, chugged on up the hill through the worst days of ice, mud and snow. I arrived at school more than once to find school had been canceled, because the buses couldn't make their runs.

One dark day, just before Christmas break – a secular feast for most – I came out from the school building to the school parking lot as I had for the past two months, ready to crank up the Red Monster and head on home. The weather people had predicted a blizzard, and the snow had already started to fall in wind-driven squalls. As soon as I saw the jeep, my heart fell to the bottom of my shoes.

Someone, and I had no doubt who, had smashed every window in the vehicle, and slashed all four tires to ribbons. Black pentagrams were spray painted all over the body of the car. Surely someone must have noticed; maybe it had been a group effort. Tucked away in the opposite corner of the building, grading semester tests, I heard nothing.

The parking lot sat deserted; even the janitor had gone home ahead of the storm. I had a six mile walk ahead of me. I retrieved the blankets and flashlight which, thank God, were still in the car. Breathing a prayer for God's help in facing the storm, I set out grimly for Misty Valley.

The beam of the flashlight played catch with the swirling waves of snow. Gradually, the night gathered around me as the snow thickened in the howling of the wind. Outside the thin beam in front of me, which penetrated only a few feet of the darkness, I could see nothing at all. I prayed with every step into the face of the storm that God would direct my steps. The route home hid sheer embankments and hairpin curves that could end my trip in a missing heartbeat.

A brighter light stabbed from behind me, revealing to my shocked horror one of the very drop-offs I worried about. Immediately after the light came the rumbling growl of a car's motor. Unsure whether I would be rescued or run down, I stopped dead in my frozen tracks.

“Need a lift?”

A once-familiar voice, hoarser now, but still unmistakable. A voice I hadn't heard in over four years.

Pam never came around the school, never attended any of the get-togethers. I heard she was very thin, and that she seldom came out in public, but most of what I heard about her came from Bennie. I had no doubt that whatever he said about her was a lie. The idea that I would ever meet her, much less under these circumstances, never crossed my mind. I convinced myself that I would never read again in the chapter of my life that included Pam Strader.

I stumbled over to the car door she held open for me. The sight of her face lit up by the inside light of the car added shock to shock. Her hair, once so neatly combed and styled, hung like a ragged mop atop a thin face. She looked almost skeletal, with eyes little more than black sockets, and bruises covered her gaunt face.

She noticed my expression, but chose to ignore it. “Well, get in before we both freeze to death.”

After I climbed in, and closed the door, I asked, stupidly in light of the painfully obvious, “How have you been, Pam?”

“Oh, not so great, thanks, Hank, but it does no good to complain. How about you?”

“Well, life is tough, but I wasn't doing too bad until somebody trashed my Cherokee.”

She sobbed involuntarily in the darkness, then quickly stifled the sound. For a few minutes, she said nothing, then said weakly, "I hate the things he's done to you. He describes them all to me in detail, then laughs when I tried to tell him how wrong it all is. I've prayed for him for years, Hanky, ever since our wedding night. He promised me before our wedding that he would change. He even went to church with me, and went forward at a revival service, claiming the Lord saved his soul. Once we got married, though, he dropped all of the big act. He knew I didn't believe in divorce, so he figured he could do as he pleased again. I thought I could change him, that the *Lord* would change him, but I've lied to myself.

"When he came home this evening, and bragged about what he had done to your car, something snapped inside me. I knew you might never make it home in this blizzard, on foot. He went out with some of his buddies to a blizzard party, they called it, and as soon as he left I jumped in my car and came looking for you. Looks like I came just in time, or you would have ended up at the bottom of that cliff."

"What will he do when he finds out? He's a very dangerous man, Pam."

"He'll beat me senseless, like he's done a lot of times before. Maybe he'll finish me off this time. I'll be a lot happier with the Lord than I am here."

"But, what about the police? Can't you bring charges against him?"

"I tried that. They just laugh at me."

"You should try the new Sheriff. I hear the Lord saved him after he got elected, and he's a Christian now."

"Maybe," she said doubtfully, "but he's in Pikeville, and that's a long way from here."

Even in the car, we found the going slow and dangerous. This part of Pike County boasts of spectacular landscape, but it never boasts about its good roads. The road from Shady Grove to Misty Valley, bad in the best of times, rates as a real nightmare in winter. Pam's car had winter tires, but it wasn't made for winter driving, particularly not in a blizzard. It took us over an hour just to drive the three miles to the top of the hill above the valley.

"Why don't you let me out here? The snow keeps getting worse and worse, and you'll never make it back to the top of the hill."

"No, I brought you this far; I'll take you on to the house. If I can't make it home, Auntie Mae will let me use a bed for the night."

I started to argue with her, but she wouldn't let me start,

"Shh, now, Hankie. You always did want to argue a point after it was all settled."

We pushed snow for quite some distance, and I got out more than once to clear the snow pack away.. Half an hour after topping the hill, we plowed to a stop at Mae Mae's front gate.

The front door opened before we even got out of the car. Auntie Mae stood framed in the light of the doorway, frantically beckoning us into the house.

As my feet touched the front steps, she came out and grabbed me by the arm. "It's about time you came dragging in, young man. I was beginning to wonder if you'd stayed over somewhere. Where's the jeep? And who's that with you? Pam? Pam Strader? Is that you? Mercy, child, come on in out of this blizzard! Let me take a good look at you — Ohhhh."

My Mae Mae stood at a loss for words, for once. She only rattled on when she got worried or upset, but she always had something to say. This time, she just gave Pam a big hug, ignoring me for once, and took her inside.

I told the story of the broken Cherokee, and Pam added her part of the story, while Auntie Mae bustled about adding another place to the table. She refused to eat herself until I arrived safely home, so the three of us sat down together.

"I just knew something was wrong," Auntie Mae said as she passed around the bread. "About five o'clock, the Spirit began troubling me, and I knew I had to get off to my prayer closet and pray."

"That's about when I came out to the parking lot. If Pam hadn't come along when she did, I would have walked right off the side of Falling Rock Mountain."

"Thank you, Pam. I just knew we'd see you again one day. You were always so dear to me. I'm so sorry your Dad passed away last year."

"He was a good Christian man," Pam replied, ignoring the first statement. "He really pined for my mother after she died. In a way, I wish they could have gone to be with the Lord together, instead of three years apart."

The two of them talked on through dinner, content with an occasional remark from me. Mae Mae wouldn't hear of Pam's attempting to drive back home, as I knew she wouldn't, and that was that.

As it turned out, she spent the next two days with us, unable to budge even after the snow stopped, because of blowing and drifting snow. We spoke little to each other, burdened by both the past and the present. I could see worry in her eyes, but she wouldn't talk about what she expected to happen. Auntie Mae, being Mae Crandall, kept her guest well occupied with conversation, often one way. I shoveled snow out to the car a couple of times, but the wind promptly replaced all the heavy mass of snow I had diligently moved to the side. I finally listened to Mae Mae and Pam, and gave up.

The third day, the wind died down, and a dense silence replaced the howling wind demons. There still seemed little chance of getting Pam to the top of the hill, but she was determined to try. As I put my boots on, preparing to help however I could, we heard the rumble of a car motor coming toward the house. Pam's already pale face drained of all blood, and she swayed where she stood. Mae caught her, and steadied her with a firm hand.

"Don't you worry, child. The Lord is with us. We won't let anything happen to you."

I looked out the front window as the vehicle drew near, to see if Bennie really was angry. Instead of his black Chevy van, though, I saw an unfamiliar four-wheel drive Venerator with Pike County Sheriff markings on the side. I was immensely relieved, but somewhat puzzled, when Sheriff Brett Scranton himself stepped out of the car.

Brett was a distant cousin on Mae's father's side of the family, from way over on the south side of the county, near Dorton. Mae Mae had told me about him, but I knew him only from his picture in the paper. He had grown up with a reputation as a trouble maker, familiar with the wrong side of a jail cell from an early age. He attached himself to one of the former sheriffs, and served as a deputy for several years, either in spite of or because of his criminal record.

His big break came when the County Judge Executive, Burnfield Mahoney, appointed him as Assistant County Judge. When the Sheriff's office came vacant suddenly, due to the untimely death of the old sheriff in

a barroom brawl, Burnfield appointed his protégé to fill the unexpired term. Brett lived up to his bad reputation for those two years, and he won election in his own right. Unfortunately for the county machine, however, he had an encounter with the Risen Lord on a dark county highway one Thanksgiving night. He didn't share much in the way of details, but come that Friday, Brett Scranton was a totally changed man. Ever since, the powers-that-be in the county had cast about for a way to get rid of him.

Brett stepped out of the car in his official green uniform. I turned to the two anxious women, when I finally remembered they had no idea who had arrived. "It's Sheriff Scranton. I don't know what's going on."

Mae went to the door, and opened it as Scranton lifted his fist to knock. Brett politely tipped his hat. "Afternoon, ma'am. Good to see you after all these years."

"Good afternoon, Brett. Won't you come in?"

"Can't stay long, ma'am, but I'll sit a spell."

"This is my son, Hank, and our friend Pam Strader – uh, Bullitt. Have a seat over here. Can I offer you a hot cup of coffee?"

"That sounds real good, Miss Mae. It's a mite cold out there." His use of the name helped break some of the official ice. This was family, and he would get to the reason for his visit soon enough.

"That sure warms a fellow up, Miss Mae," he said several moments later, setting aside his cup. The time had finally come to share the reason for his visit. He turned to Pam, who sat anxiously next to me on the couch, wringing her hands and constantly brushing back her stringy hair.

"I'm afraid I have bad news for you, Ms. Bullitt. There's been an accident – your husband is dead, ma'am. He drove off of Falling Rock Mountain; missed the curve at Devil's Corner."