

## CHAPTER FOUR

Pam's face showed mixed emotions. Relief flooded over her features immediately, followed by shock, disbelief, and a sudden rush of shame and guilt. She buried her face in her hands, and great sobs racked her body. She kept wailing over and over again, "It's all my fault, it's all my fault."

I looked at Auntie Mae and the sheriff, uncertain what I should do. Mae Mae nodded slightly, almost imperceptibly, and I put my arm around Pam. She buried her face in my shoulder, still moaning her confession in muffled tones against my shirt. Sheriff Scranton walked over to the window, looking absently at the snow, and waited patiently until she grew quiet.

When she drew away from me, and began wiping her tears on my handkerchief, Brett came back to his chair and sat down. "I know this is a rough time for you, ma'am, but I have to ask you to come with me. There's a few formalities we have to attend to."

"Of course," she responded, in a hoarse whisper. I went to the hall closet and brought her coat to her. As I helped her into it, the sheriff continued speaking, in that same quiet, kind tone. "We'll have to leave your car for the time being, Ms. Bullitt. We'll send for it later, or bring you back here. I think we ought to pray before we leave."

He added this last statement in such a natural, matter of fact tone that it seemed a normal progression from what he said before. "Let's all bow our heads. Father, thank you for a safe trip here. Please comfort this young woman in the loss of her husband, and be with her in the difficult times ahead. Bless Miss Mae and Hank, this house, and all of this beautiful valley. Be with us as we travel back to town. Amen."

Minutes later, they were gone. I had time to examine my own tumbled emotions. Bennie had tormented me for so long that I couldn't remember life before I knew him. I prayed for him regularly through my junior high and high school years, and again since he came back into my life the summer before. Now that he had died, I couldn't deny my own feelings of relief, and immediate sensations of guilt for my relief. I talked it over with Auntie Mae, and we had a prayer together. I felt somewhat less guilty, but still immensely relieved.

The funeral took place two days later, at the family cemetery. I felt obliged to go both for Pam's sake, and because Bennie was a fellow teacher. Auntie Mae found a ride with one of her sisters from the church. Only a few people braved the cold to attend the ceremonies. Principal Darker was conspicuous by his absence. Bennie had a sister in New Jersey, but she hadn't bothered to see him for years, and this day was no exception. His alcoholic father had died years before, and no one knew where his mother lived. One ancient aunt came, cursing the cold all the way through the funeral. Three of the teachers, none of them in Bennie's circle of admirers, came, and Sheriff Scranton as well. Pam stood alone, bundled against the cold, dry-eyed now.

I managed to talk with Brett after the service ended. He told me what I suspected already; Bennie had gone off after Pam in a blind, drunken rage when he discovered she had left. He didn't make it very far; judging by how far away from the bottom of cliff his car lay, he left the road at a very high rate of speed. His car caught fire and burned on impact, but his body landed well clear of the wreckage. "He was a violent man, and he died a violent death. May the Lord have mercy on his soul."

Those words made up Bennie's epitaph, as pronounced by Brett Scranton; I found no reason to dispute it. Three week later, we attended Brett's own funeral; the official report stated that he had been killed by an accidental discharge of his own gun. Not even his enemies really believed that.

In January, I went back to my teaching job at the school. Some of Bennie's friends muttered about my being responsible for his death, but for the most part they left me alone. I managed to find tires for my jeep, but drove without glass all through the winter. My insurance didn't cover vandalism, and I couldn't afford the repairs.

I developed a real rapport with my students. I avoided witnessing to them openly at school, but I found ways to see several of them outside the classroom. I visited several at their homes, and witnessed to their parents, too. Some of them threw me out, and others told me they didn't want to hear it. Three of the families, though, not only listened willingly, but accepted Jesus as their Savior and Lord. All three families attended church with Mae Mae and I. Principal Darker looked with distinct displeasure on my extracurricular activities.

Among the new converts, I liked the Majors most – Fred, Pat, Liz and Carmen. Liz, the older of the two girls, was a raven-haired, dark-eyed beauty of 12, and the lone hold-out in her family. She reminded me a lot of Pam in earlier and happier days. I taught Carmen, the youngest, a curly-headed, rosy-cheeked fireball of uncontrolled energy. The classroom lit up when she entered, and she never failed to do or say something to make my day. She talked enough to make up for her sister's dread of talking. Liz said barely ten words for the first year I knew her. That's an exaggeration, but not by much.

The other two families consisted of Clark and Randi Albertson, with little Andrew, and the Bloomingtons. A real, old-fashioned clan; that was the Bloomingtons. Along with Rick and Alberta and their brood of nine, the Lord got Grandma Melanie, Cousin Drew, Cousin Emily, and brother Mike. It was a package deal, you understand. Our little church burst at the seams when the Bloomingtons appeared; it gave me a great feeling.

In the first week of May, two weeks before school ended, the principal called me into his office. He wore a smirk that made his face look like a cross between the Cheshire Cat and the Mad Hatter. He bore good news, which meant no good for me.

"Hanky, I have bad news for you." He actually snickered. "The Board decided not to renew your appointment. We will no longer require your, uh, services, after this term. Tough bonkers, Crandall."

I turned and left without saying a word. I heard him cackle as I closed the door behind me. Anger or relief – which should I feel? Both at once, maybe. I couldn't bear to tell my class I wouldn't be back next year, even if I wouldn't have been their teacher. I planned to tell them the next day, but they already knew by then. Carmen took it hard; she cried and sniffled all day long, no matter how much I tried to comfort her.

"It's for the best, Hanky. The Lord knows what He's doing. He'll turn this for His glory; you'll see." Auntie Mae was probably right, but I lacked her total confidence. I began casting about in my mind for possibilities, but there just wasn't much work in this part of the county. If you didn't work for the government in some way, you worked in the mines or drew welfare – work-fare they called it, but the people who took part in the program just did busy work.

The Saturday after the last day of school, Fred and Pat Major came to call. That often came to see us, but they usually brought the girls, and they usually came by on Sunday afternoon after church.

"Hello, Brother Fred, and Sister Pat. What brings out to the Valley this fine spring day? Come sit here on the porch. Auntie Mae's cleaning house, Pat, if you want to speak at her."

"Well, right now we want to talk to you. We've talked everything over with the Albertsons and the Bloomingtons, and none of us wants to send our kids to public school next fall. There's just too much influence of the devil in that place. You know that, Brother Hank, better than we do. Liz still isn't a Christian yet, and Carmen's too young to face what the world will throw at her"

"I know what you mean, Sister, but you don't have many choices. There's that Christian school over near

Pikeville, on Buckley's Creek, and one in Williamson, but they're both far away from here."

"You're a teacher, Hank," Fred interjected in his blunt, direct way. "Why don't you start a school? We can guarantee you eight students from our three families, and I'm sure we can find more."

I rubbed my chin, trying to get my thoughts organized. None of this had even occurred to me. "The State could buck on issuing us a license as a private school. They can throw all kinds of road blocks in your way if they want to. Our Superintendent will make *sure* they want to."

"We thought about that. We can get all the red tape started on that, and have a lawyer friend of ours draw up a charter, but, meantime, there's another way. The courts still haven't changed the rules for home schools. We could have a home school right here in your house, provided Sister Mae will go along with it, of course.

"Sister Mae thinks it's a *great* idea," Mae Mae said as she walked out on the porch." Let's do it!"

They still hadn't convinced me, but I agreed to pray about it and give them my decision within a few days. We wouldn't have much time to put it all together if we hoped to begin by September. We had to give the Board thirty days' advance notice for each child. As I was a licensed teacher, they couldn't do much legally, but they could still make life hard for me and for the families of the children. I spent the last school year deeply embroiled in spiritual warfare, and the thought of battling the enemy again didn't appeal much to me.

Auntie Mae had already decided, which made it hard to say no. Nonetheless, she told me it was between me and the Lord. She didn't want to put herself in the middle. Fred and Pat stayed on into the afternoon, anxious that I would make the right decision. No sooner had they left than Chad and Randi came to see us, followed fifteen minutes later by the entire Bloomington clan. Our house, the yard outside, and the nearby orchard, buzzed with activity. Screaming Bloomington children competed with their elders for attention, and we could understand very little of what the parents said. Clearly, though, they wanted us to know that they agreed wholeheartedly with the idea of a Christian school in Auntie Mae's home.

Saturday night came as a relief, after everyone had left and the two of us sat alone on the front porch. I thought of Pam, who had also trained as a teacher, but she just wanted to be left alone right now. She battled her feelings of guilt even as she struggled to recover from years of mental, spiritual and physical abuse. Maybe one day she might join us, but not now. If I decided to do it, I could handle ten or fifteen students without too much trouble, especially if the parents helped.

Mae Mae and I spent hours that night in my room, talking about the idea from every angle, then praying through. About two o'clock that morning, peace came to me. I went to sleep knowing that the Misty Valley Home School would be a reality. The next morning, in church, I shared the good news with my brethren in the church. No one in the three families seemed particularly surprised. Rick Bloomington gave me a big bear hug; the Bloomingtons did *everything* big.

I saw someone enter the building even while Rick had me in his death hold. I stared over his big shoulders at the black-robed figure making her way slowly down the aisle of the church. Her eyes cast about for a place to sit, but Auntie Mae spotted her almost immediately.

"Pam, dear! What a lovely blessing to see you. Come sit here with me. We'll make room for you." She walked immediately to Pam, grabbed her elbow, and guided her firmly to the pew where she sat with some of the older women of the church. I found it hard to believe that I now saw the same woman I had seen at the funeral only six months before. She had her hair neatly combed and styled, her face looked fuller and bore no bruises, and she wore a very attractive outfit which she occupied very well. Only those haunted eyes showed no signs of change.

Rick released his hold on me as he turned to see who arrived. Everyone crowded around the newcomer, all

trying to greet her at once, until the pastor interrupted. "Let the poor woman breathe, folks," Brother Parkman said firmly, bodily removing some of the press of the crowd. "After all, we don't want to scare her away after all of these years. Welcome, Pam. God has brought you to us, and we don't want to drive you away. Everyone take your seats. It's time to start Sunday School."

The adult lesson that morning dealt with guilt and forgiveness. I've never believed in coincidence when it comes to God's work, and we didn't just "happen" to study that lesson in our quarterly the very Sunday Pam returned to the flock. After church finished, she spoke to me briefly, as she did to everyone else, but her attitude remained cool and distant. I couldn't tell if our service had had any impact on her or not.

Busy weeks followed hard on my decision to begin the school. We set the necessary paperwork in motion with the State and the Internal Revenue Service to make Misty Valley Christian School and Academy an official entity. Meantime, I set about ordering books and materials and preparing lessons for the home school, a more immediate concern. I also had to scrounge equipment; Mae Mae had neither phone nor computer; we needed both. The children's families had computers at home, as most people did, but they would need those.

Chad Albertson worked at the office for a large mining company. As it turned out, in the Lord's perfect timing, they were in the midst of upgrading their computer system, and needed to dispose of the old ones. Chad persuaded them to direct half a dozen our way, though we had outlets for only three or four in the rooms we planned to use. The telephone proved a tougher sell; Mae Crandall had never owned a phone, almost alone in all of Pike County, and didn't like the idea of being pestered by one now, to use her terminology. It took some concentrated effort from all the adults involved to get her to finally change her mind. We strung cable all the way to the nearest phone line at the top of the hill. That saved waiting several weeks for the phone company to do the same thing.

Space wouldn't be a problem, for a while at least. The Crandall's built their home place in a time when big families were the rule, not the exception. The house boasted six bedrooms upstairs, most now sitting empty. The large corner room on the first floor that would be our main classroom had once been a fancy dining room, where the Crandall clan gathered with their family and friends to celebrate life. It sat almost empty now; long ago, the table in the kitchen had become the preferred place to share meals. Next to it came a sitting room which would serve as the classroom for the older kids, who needed more specialized instruction.

By the end of the summer, two other families with a total of five school-age children had joined our original group. With the seven Bloomington children who still attended school, ranging from age seven to seventeen, and the other three from the Albertsons and the Majors, that made fifteen. They would certainly keep me busy, but with the help of their parents, I felt certain we could manage.

The Lord had already accomplished some amazing things, but He hadn't finished with us in that summer of miracles. Six weeks after we sent our charter to the IRS, and our charter and curriculum proposals to the state, all of the necessary agreement and approvals came back to our post office box. The rest of the people involved soared to ecstasy, filling the valley with shouts of praises to God. I praised God, too, but with what I knew of government bureaucracy in our state, I was also astounded. None of the roadblocks I expected had appeared, not yet anyway. I had to remind myself that God still reigned, even in our fallen world.

I had given no thought to romance or true love for years, certainly not in the hot, busy days of that summer. The idea that Pam and I would ever be romantically involved, though it had crossed my mind, was unthinkable. I had resigned myself, at age 23, to being a bachelor the rest of my life, dedicated to the Lord's work. I never bothered to ask the Lord if He wanted that kind of life for me, though Mae Mae did. One hot August day, my opinion on my prospects for love changed abruptly.

I had known Emily Bloomington for years, in a distant sort of way. Most people in small rural communities know most of the others who live there to some degree. Moab Bloomington, Rick's brother, owned one of the few grocery stores that survived the onslaught of the superstores and strip malls. As a child, and on into

my teenage years, I frequently visited the store, for myself or for Auntie Mae. Emily frequently worked behind the counter, and we had a friendly relationship as customer and counter help. She was much older than me, about ten years or so, and even in my puppy love years she never appealed to me in a romantic way.

When it came time to prepare the school that summer, though, particularly after we had to prepare the facilities to meet state requirements, Emily stepped in to help get things done. The others came when they could, mostly on evenings and weekends, but Emily appeared almost every morning and stayed late. She not only helped Auntie Mae with the cleaning and painting, but she helped me with the heavy moving and lifting. We found used desks and tables that had to be hauled in, stripped, and varnished; Emily did the lion's share of the refinishing work, and helped me set everything up. When the rooms had to be rewired to meet state fire marshal specs, Emily crawled up under the floors with me to string the wire and set up the circuits for approval by a certified electrician; we found no good way to run the wire inside the old house.

This particular day, we were putting the finishing touches on an outside doorway, which we had converted from a window. The rooms for the school, it seemed, needed their own exit to the outside world. I squatted on one side of the door, using a chisel to make the place where the door lock would fit into the facing. Emily worked on the opposite side of the opening, attaching the hinges. I glanced up at her, and the very sight of her all but took my breath away. I couldn't help myself; I stared at her as if I saw her for the first time; in a very real sense, I did.

Tall and slender, much like Pam, Emily had the fine bone structure of a model. Her face, even beaded with sweat, painted the loveliest picture just then that I had ever seen. Her hair had slipped down over one eye, in a rakish way, and I found that captivating too. I looked her over from top to bottom, and I loved everything I saw. She sensed I was watching her, and smiled as she turned her face toward me.

"What?"

"Huh?"

"You look like you wanted to say something – or something." She blushed a deep red to the very roots of her hair.

"I – I'm sorry, Emily, it's just – I never noticed before what a pretty woman you are."

"You silly goose. What took you so long to notice?"

"Well – I guess I just always took you for granted, ever since I used to see you in the store, when I was a kid."

"I could tell," she replied with a lop-sided grin.

"Would you like – it's a hot day, and we're almost finished. Would you like to go for a walk?"

"Are you propositioning me, Hank Crandall?"

"I – no! I just thought it would be nice to get away from the house and all of this heat for a while."

She smiled broadly then, and offered her hand to help me get up. "I thought you'd never notice. Of course I'll take a walk with you, Hankie, anywhere you want to go."

I called into the house to tell Mae Mae about our plans. She yelled back from inside the house, after a pause (I discovered later she had heard the whole thing). "Go on along. Why don't you take her out to the brook,

where it's nice and cool?"

I hadn't thought of that, but it sounded like a good idea. Together, Emily and I walked out of the yard, and toward the wooded area along the far side of the valley. We hadn't gone very far before she grabbed hold of my hand, and moved to walk close beside me. Her hand felt soft and warm, if a bit sweaty (like mine). I felt no inclination at all to remove my hand, so we walked the quarter of a mile or so to the woods for the first time together.

At the brook, we both removed our shoes and waded into the cold sparkling water. The difference in temperature between the water and our skin came as a shock at first, and we both laughed and squealed as we stepped into ankle deep water. Not content with just walking around, Emily started a water fight, and we drenched each other from head to toe. I never felt so refreshed and cleansed as I did standing on the bank later with water dripping off my hair and clothes.

We sat on my favorite rock together, letting our feet dangle in the water, still holding hands. We talked a while, about nothing, but mostly we just sat and looked out at the brook, glancing occasionally at each other with sudden shyness. When ever we looked at the same time, we both looked quickly away. Finally, Emily removed her had from mine, took my face firmly between both her hands, and looked me squarely in the eye.

"We are so *silly*, you and I, Hank Crandall. We're acting like a couple of school children instead of grown adults. I love you; I've loved you for years, ever since you were much too young for me to love. I loved you through all the years you went away, even through all the terrible things we heard you had done. Even before I became a Christian, I prayed for you, not knowing if the Lord ever heard me or not.

"I came to help out partly because I believe so much in the school, and my cousins need it so much. Mostly, though, I came because I wanted to be near you. You treated me like a sister, but I didn't care. And now, Hank Crandall, if you don't hurry up and kiss me, I'll kiss *you*."

I could hardly take my eyes off of her, but I managed to do it long enough to put my arms around her and kiss her. For the first time, I kissed a woman besides Mae Mae for a reason other than foreplay for having sex. I found her very desirable, to be sure, but I had no thought of making love just then. It crossed my mind then that Pam lived in my past; Emily dwelt in both my present and my future.

We eventually returned to finish the door, our clothes dry once more from the heat of the evening sun. Auntie Mae served us lemonade a while later, and smiled at me with a little extra twinkle in her eyes. She knew, and approved.

I never believed in love at first sight, but I changed my mind after I first saw Emily, I mean really *saw* her. I also never believed in short courtships, but two weeks later I proposed. That is to say, I tried to propose, but I got no further than "Will you . . .," before she threw her arms around me, cried "Yes!" and kissed me.

We decided to get married on Auntie Mae's birthday, much to the dismay of the women folk. "But, Emily, that's only a month away! That's not enough time to prepare for a proper wedding. And what about a honeymoon? That's right in the middle of school!"

"We don't want a fancy wedding. We just want to be joined in the sight of our Lord, and in the presence of our family and brethren. We'll have a real honeymoon later, but there's no happier place for me than right here. This place has so much love we can't help but get started off on the right foot. Don't argue with me, Mama, it's all settled. Now, let's go see the preacher and start making arrangements."

Emily never wavered once she made her mind up, unless you could convince her beyond all doubt that she was wrong. No amount of pleading and cajoling would change her mind, and I didn't help in the matter either. The one person who made no effort to sway us in our decision was Auntie Mae; I could tell the idea

tickled her pink.

Emily's father and mother, Moab and Crystal, weren't Christians at the time we announced our wedding plans. The following Sunday, though, they both showed up in church, and both came forward to accept Christ as their Savior at the end of the service. Emily cried until I thought her eyes must surely be ready to shed blood instead of tears; I never saw her in such transports of joy except when I proposed to her. If the truth be known, though, no one had dry eyes in church that Sunday morning. Big Rick Bloomington bawled like a baby, and he and Moab cried in each others arms, pulled away, looked at each other, and started all over again.

Pam stood a little apart from the rest, but I saw her wiping her own eyes with a handkerchief when I glanced her way. Finally, she came over to Crystal, and gave her a quiet hug. She then walked over to Emily and I; Emily persisted in crying, with great enthusiasm. Pam gave her a hug , too, then looked at me and smiled.

"Hankie, I'm *so* happy for you and Emily. You caught one of the sweetest, prettiest girls in Pike County, and I know the Lord will bless your marriage.. God bless you both."

Emily looked long enough to smile and say a tearful, "Thank you, Pam." before the waterworks resumed. I finally convinced her she needed to go speak to her Mom and Dad, but she managed no more than another round of crying.

When things had calmed down somewhat, Moab announced in his gruff voice that he and Crystal wanted to be baptized that very day. He saw no reason to wait any more after sixty-one years, he said, and we certainly weren't going to argue with 250 pounds of solid muscle. Preacher Parkman was getting well along in years, though, so Moab agreed to let brother Rick help take him under. We all trekked down to baptizing pool and, of course, the baptism ceremonies offered another occasion for a healthy cry.