

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Supper passes quietly that evening. Everyone has spent the afternoon in prayer and some do not bother to come to eat at all, preferring to fast for the rest of the day. George is one of those who choose not to eat. He does, however, leave the room where he has been praying to fellowship with those who gather back in the living area of the big house.

Martha faces the promised trouble with great faith and calm. It is she, as much as George, who ministers to the fearful. Marvin continues in prayer. Max and Bob go about their business of checking on things around the farm and give no hint of any concern.

Bedtime comes early that evening. No one wants to stay up long, even though the air of gloom has lifted somewhat. George alone stays to talk with Martha on into the late hours of the evening, though Marvin joins them later. Either Max or Bob always patrols around the boundaries of the farm at night. This night Max is out.

The old clock on the living room wall ticks away, its sounds unnoticed by the people in the room who take its presence for granted. At the hour of ten its chimes begin tolling out the hour. Max bursts into the room at that very moment, his face flushed with unaccustomed exertion.

“George, get Bob. Come quick!”

“What’s wrong Max? Are the Security Police coming?”

“No, no. Nothing like that, but it’s bad. Hurry up. Meet me outside.”

With a puzzled look on his face, George goes down the hall to get Bob, who sleeps in the pantry. Bob awakens instantly when George calls, and hurriedly puts on his shoes. He remains fully dressed.

When they get outside, they hear voices coming toward them. Moments later the light of torches picks up some of the faces. One of them is Max.

“Martin? Marcia? What are *you* doing here?”

They show no joy at the meeting. Marcia is weeping. Martin responds.

“Someone took Jennifer from us. Max said it sounds like Satan worshipers. Please, George, hurry. Marcia is going to the house. The rest of us are going to try to find Jennifer.”

They let Marcia find her own way to the house. Max speaks to the other men in his usual calm manner as they head back into the trees.

“This is the time of the month the Satanists around here hold their rituals. We’ve heard stories that they practice human sacrifice, and I don’t doubt it. I found their altar not far from here and there are all kinds of bones around. Some of them sure do look like human bones.”

They walk a little faster hearing that; nobody says anything else. As they approach the site of the altar they can hear what sounds like a pagan chant, rising and falling rhythmically. Max cautions them with a hand signal to slow down, so they approach the place carefully. Soon they can see the flickering light of a large

fire, and make out some of the sounds of the chant.

“Hail Lord Satan! Satan is Lord. Cursed be Jesus. Satan is Lord.”

The very sound of the words tears at the core of my being, and the effect on the other guardians and on the men is the same. A fierce anger burns in Max Trundle’s face. We come to the edge of the clearing that holds the altar.

What we see causes Martin’s face to blanch with terror, and he almost cries out. Bob clamps his hand over the other man’s mouth. At the far end of the clearing sits a stone altar, like the one at Bentown. In front of the altar, with a knife in his right hand, stands a robed priest. The knife is poised high above his head.

As the men watch in horror the knife begins to fall toward the bared chest of a young girl tied to the altar. Her mouth has been gagged but her eyes are wide open, staring upward in hopeless terror.

Max raises his gun even as the knife starts to fall. The sound of the gun’s report is all but lost in the frenzied chanting, but when the knife falls, it falls alone and misses the girl. The Satanic priest yells in pain and grabs his shattered hand. Max and Bob are already running forward, making their own noise and firing into the air. George and Martin are close behind. In a matter of seconds, before the startled onlookers have a chance to respond, Max knocks the priest to the ground, Bob cuts the girl free and scoops her up, and the four men are running back into the woods on the far side of the altar. Max sends the others on with the girl and stays behind to discourage any pursuit.

When they finally slow down to a walk, Martin takes his daughter from Bob, removes her gag, and hugs her close to him. He shakes with relief and pent-up emotion and he cries unashamedly. Jennifer cries, too, as she clings to her father, saying “Daddy, Daddy!” over and over.

They hear a few shots behind them as Max does his work, then silence. After a few minutes walking, they reach the farm. The Satanic altar is not more than a mile away.

Marcia sees their lights coming well before they reach the house and she runs toward them. “My baby! Is she okay?”

Martin calls reassuringly. “She’s fine, Hon. We got her away from them. They didn’t have a chance to hurt her.”

As they walk on toward Marcia, who is running, George says, “Brother, it’s good to see you, but are you sure coming here was such a good idea?”

“I’ll tell you about it inside. Let’s get Marcia calmed down first, not to mention me.”

Everyone in the house is stirring as they come inside. The day has been an exciting one for the flock here, which has gone for months with almost nothing happening. Those who were asleep sleep no more. There is another flurry of excited talk and greeting, just as there was the morning before. This time Marvin doesn’t try to restrain them.

Max returns a few minutes later. He reassures them that the Satanists are now running in the direction of town and probably won’t be back any time soon. George doesn’t look convinced, but he says nothing. Max goes back outside to resume his patrol.

When calm returns, Martin explains the reason for their visit. “We heard about your group here from Myrtle after she came back over into our area. Since you were home folks, I really have had a burden for you.

Brother Phillip said you were in great danger, and I wanted to do something. We prayed about it and finally we agreed Marcia and I should come and see if some of you wanted to come back with us. Jennifer was crazy to go with us and we finally gave in. I know now we shouldn't have.

"We made it okay until we were almost here. Jennifer had to use the bathroom and she was gone for a long time. When we finally went looking for her we couldn't find her. I knew we'd have to have help so we ran all the way here. Max found us near the farm."

"You've come at a bad time, Brother. This place is swarming with Security Police. We expect them to break in on us at any time. Some of them are known Satan worshiper, and I'm concerned that our little exploit tonight might speed things up."

"Then we don't have much time. At most we can take three or four with us; any more would make it hard to escape discovery. The trip is a hard one, so we need people who are healthy enough to make the trip."

Marvin speaks up for the first time. "The invitation is open, brethren. Any of you who aren't sure you can face what lies ahead should leave with our brother now. There's no time to think it over."

The people of the flock look at each other, and one by one they slowly shake their heads. "This is our home," one said. "I've lived here all of my life and I want to die here. It's been a long, good life and I'm ready to go be with the Lord."

At that moment comes the sound of shots from outside. Bob races out the door, gun in hand, yelling at the rest of them to stay put. The gunfire increases, and they hear the sound of automatic weapons firing. The child Jennifer whimpers in fear, and her mother holds her against her, but the others remain calm. They have made their decision and the rest doesn't matter.

Now comes a steady drumbeat of sound, the rapid pulse of automatic weapons interspersed with the bark of the rifles from Bob and Max. It is over in minutes. A knot of armed men comes bursting into the house, firing their weapons into the air. They systematically club everybody to the floor, sparing no one. The floor is slippery with blood, the yells of the Security Police mixing with the cries of their victims as a new din takes the place of gunfire.

The police handcuff the people on the floor and leave them where they lie. Some lose consciousness, out of pain or shock. One of the officers knocks George to the floor with the others and then kicks him until he lies still. A van pulls up outside and the captors drag their prisoners outside and throw them into the back of the van like so many carcasses. Two of them, who are very old, are already dead; I see their spirits leave their bodies. The Devil has his hour; the Lord will not permit us to interfere.

George and Marvin are two of the last to be thrown into the van. The guards beat Martin repeatedly as he tries to locate his wife and child; both of them have disappeared and are not with those in the van. He calls for them in vain.

The trip to town takes half an hour, over badly paved roads. With every jolt several people cry out in pain. Marvin has blood in his eye which he cannot remove because his hands are tied behind his back. When George finds out he positions himself so Marvin can rub his face against his shirt. Martha sits toward the front of the van and she and Marvin assure each other they are all right. Martin continues to call for his family, delirious in his pain and fear.

The new jail is a gray concrete box sitting on a spot cleared by the earthquake and fire. The words "World Security Police" appear in large letters across the front of the building. The guards order the prisoners out of the van; dragging some of them who cannot walk. Without ceremony they herd the little knot of Christians into the building and shove them into small windowless cells.

The cells are monstrous in themselves. They are tiny boxes, only four feet wide by five feet deep and five feet high. There is no room either to stand up or to lie down, except for a few short people in the group. Three or four people are shoved into some of the cells. They are unlighted and have no furnishings of any kind.

One of the guards throws George into a cell with Martin, though both of them are fairly large men. They have no room to turn about once they are jammed into the cell. Martin still raves about Marcia and Jennifer, but George prays for him and manages to calm him down. They sit on the floor at the back of the cell after that. Martin tries to stand up at one point and bangs his head solidly on the top of the cell. He grunts in pain as he sits back down.

George resorts to singing. A few others join him until a guard comes in and yells at them to shut up. Those who keep singing are beaten into silence, George among them.

It is impossible to tell whether it is daylight or dark, for there are no windows. The hallway is lit by a single naked light bulb, which glows dimly in the darkness to little effect.

Time passes in silence. George dozes, wakes again. He and Martin talk in low tones. George holds out hope that Marcia and Jennifer have somehow escaped, as they were not with the other prisoners. The thought cheers Martin and he begins talking more rationally. They talk about childhood days, about school, about anything but what is happening around them.

The door bursts open at the end of the hallway and the horror begins anew. Some of the women, most quite old, are dragged screaming out of their cells, and raped in the hallway, in front of the horrified eyes of their husbands and friends. Those who abuse the women systematically murder each in turn. They slit the throats of some and hack the others to pieces. The people watching scream in utter terror and some go insane, laughing maniacally.

The guard's attending demons have assumed gruesome guises. One presents himself as a flayed corpse, while another is a bleeding baby. The creatures they possess laugh as they go about their work. When they finish, they leave the bodies of their victims on the floor amidst pools of blood.

The Lord cannot look on the scene of murder; He turns His face away. We who are guardians must see with our eyes, but we see the work of demons, not of men. We feel only pity and compassion for both the guards and the women they killed, for both are victims of Satan's lust.

Things do not get better. For several days the captors leave their prisoners alone, without food and water. The smell of urine and feces mixes with that of rotting corpses, for an overpowering stench that would gag anyone whose sense of smell has not long since been deadened. A few more die in their cells, and those left behind pray for death. It comes for most soon enough.

When the guards return, they wear gas masks, no doubt from past experience. They remove two men from their cells and leave with them. Hours later they throw two horribly mutilated corpses back into the hallway. They repeat this process at regular intervals until the only people left living are George, Martin, Marvin and Martha. The Security Police are saving them for more special treatment.

All four of them leave together. Their captors place them in large, roomy, well-lighted cells with clean clothes, water for washing and drinking, and food. They have stayed alive only by licking off the moisture that accumulated on the cold walls of the cells, and by eating the lice and roaches that infest their prison. Dried blood and excrement cover their bodies, which are swollen from beatings. Now their cells are so far apart that they can no longer communicate with each other.

Several days pass while they recover their strength. The jailer brings food and water to them regularly and no

one beats or harasses them in any way. The reason for the apparent kindness is obvious, as George tells the Lord in his prayers: The guards want to restore them to strength so they'll be able to endure longer whatever new torture the Security Police are planning.

A week later a guard removes George from his cell and takes him into the commandant's office. The man behind the desk wears a mild expression, but his eyes are a cesspool of black evil.

"Well, well, you're Mr. George Alfred, I believe. Our Beckley, West Virginia, office would sure like to get their hands on you, but I'm afraid they'll be disappointed. You appear to have recovered from your unfortunate ordeal of recent days. Any chance you've come to your senses and decided to give up this Christianity nonsense?"

George remains silent.

"I'll take that as a no. Too bad, because our boys have something especially nasty in store for you and your buddies. Our Beckley people wanted to try the new equipment out on you, but since they lost you we get the privilege. We've already tried it out a few times and it's exquisitely painful. I'm sure I'll enjoy your reaction, once you pass your pain threshold. Everybody has one, you know, no matter how strong they think they are.

"Officer, take Mr. Alfred to the lab and wire him up. I'll be along shortly. Don't start without me!"

The guard takes George into a room full of flashing dials and lights. In the center sit three chairs with a mass of wires leading to them. A spotlight shining down on the chairs provides the only source of light other than those on the bank of machines. A man seated behind a console in the shadows turns dials, evidently testing the equipment. The chair beside him, obviously intended for the commandant, is empty.

The guard shoves George into the chair on the right and fastens him in. Electrodes are attached to various parts of his body, including his genitals, and secured by tape. When the guard finishes, the commandant enters the room on cue. He greets George pleasantly.

"This, Mr. Alfred, is a trial run, meant to test our equipment and your responses. When we find your pain threshold, we will stop the game for a while and introduce the other participants. Mr. Smith, you may proceed."

George jerks as the first jolt of electricity hits his body, but he grits his teeth and makes no sound. The commandant nods as if to a friendly acquaintance and Smith turns a dial. The next jolt is stronger, but George resists.

Two more turns of the dial and the pain is too intense to resist. George's mouth opens of its own accord and he screams in agony. The commandant nods again and touches Smith's arm.

"Note the setting, Mr. Smith, and we'll recall it later. For right now, let Mr. Alfred rest. Officer, bring in the next prisoner."

The guard leaves and returns with Martin, whom he places in the middle chair without connecting the wires. He stands by with gun drawn.

"Mr. Henry was here earlier, so we have his readings already. Somewhat lower than yours, Mr. Alfred, so you can be proud. Mr. Henry will assume the role of middleman in our little drama. I'll explain that in a few moments. For right now, suffice it to say that your friend holds the power of life and death in his hands, Mr. Alfred, or will hold it when he takes the switch.

“Mr. Henry. I see you’ve recovered well from your earlier shocking experience. Later on recovery might not be so easy, or even possible. I think you, in particular, will be interested in our third participant in our game show. Officer, if you please.”

A few minutes pass before the guard returns. Martin’s face, so serene before, suddenly goes white with dread and fear. One word tears from his throat: “NO!”