



CHAPTER THREE

George calms the girl sufficiently to persuade her to sit by herself for a while. He then puts her on the far side of a tree, still able to see the light of the fire but blocked from the body of the dead woman. With a mixture of tears, pity and disgust, he lifts the dead woman's body and carries it into the bushes. Quietly he puts the corpse down near a fallen tree and covers it with rocks and brush. All the while he talks to the girl, so she knows he is not far away. He keeps his voice cheery for the girl's sake, but his face is a study of emotions crowding in on each other. The girl knows what he is doing, but remains silent. She has faced such an overwhelming torrent of fear and terror that she is all but in total shock.

His grisly chore finished, George gathers more wood for the fire and covers the dried patch of blood. Only then does he bring back the girl. For long hours he sits with her, talking mostly nonsense, just so she can hear his voice. Several times he prays with her. Finally, she sleeps, a deep dreamless sleep free of pain. Then, and only then, George prays for the demon-possessed man. He prays into the early hours of the morning, oblivious to cramped muscles and a new chill in the air. He prays in his own tongue and in others, and the Lord hears him through it all.

The child wakes when the sun, hidden by the trees, is well up into the sky. She looks around as if in a daze until the sudden shock of remembering clouds her clear eyes. She stares up at George, her face a troubled question.

"You saved me, didn't you? Who are you? Where's Gran?"

"The Lord saved you, child, not me. My name is George. What's yours?"

"My name's Julie. Where's Gran?"

George's face mirrors his pain for an instant, but he slips on his mask of determined cheerfulness again. "Your Gran is dead, child," he says gently. "You know that, don't you."

"I don't *want* her to be dead," she with fierce anger. "She's all I have. She *can't* die."

With that insistent plea, for that's what it really is, she begins to cry again. It is only after repeated denials that she finally, apparently, accepts the fact her dear Gran has left her.

Gran, she says, is her Grandmother Leighton, her mother's mother. It was Gran who taught her about Jesus from her earliest memories, in spite of the Godless town she grew up in. All around her lived Satan worshipers, including, at least nominally, her own parents. "But they don't really mean it," she insists. "They're just afraid of the others. They wanted to make me a priestess of Satan in that place. That's why Gran took me and ran away. We have family over the mountain. But that mean old Green Halcomb found us and – I *hate* him, I *hate* him, I *hate* him."

He doesn't rebuke her. The feelings are too raw to talk with her about forgiveness yet. That will come later. Her guardian winces with each declaration of hate, but he understands. She is, after all, a child of innocence.

George will not eat today; I know he fasts. The girl, however, obviously has not eaten for a while. When things have calmed down, George has her sit on a rock near the remains of the fire.

"Stay here for a while, Julie. I have to find something for you to eat."

“But I’m afraid. Can’t I go with you?”

“You’ll be fine here, in the daylight. The Lord is with you and I won’t go far.”

She doesn’t look too convinced but sets her face with a look of dogged determination and prepares to wait alone. George appears satisfied with this response and sets out into the surrounding woods. The Lord has prepared something for him.

A few minutes from camp we hear a rustling sound in a nearby bush. George’s face registers alarm; he thinks some other kind of beast lurks in the woods. He turns slowly in the direction of the sound. At first he doesn’t see what has disturbed the peace of the place, but when the sound comes again, he spots the source.

A slow smile travels across his face. A rabbit crouches in the mound of brush, apparently paralyzed with fear. Ever so slowly, George looks down around his feet until he sees a rock. Just as slowly, he stoops and picks it up. The rabbit still has not moved. With one swift motion he throws the stone, which catches the rabbit squarely on the head. It drops like the rock that killed it. I know the Lord has placed it there for George’s use; he seemingly takes no thought about it.

Retrieving the rabbit, he sits on a fallen tree and, with his pocket knife, proceeds with the bloody work of skinning and gutting the animal. Other than a few snakes, he has never killed another living thing and used to criticize those who hunted poor defenseless woodland creatures. He has forgotten those past qualms.

The task consumes several minutes. Finished, he takes his prize by its hind legs, blood and all, and heads for the camp. He has hardly gone a hundred yards when he hears yet another scream of terror.

His face filled with dread and fear, he races toward the place where he left the girl, praying as he goes. Recklessly he bursts into the clearing, with me beside him. The girl is cringing against a tree, still screaming, her face covered with her hands as in the night before. Dropping the rabbit on the ground, he rushes to her and takes her once more into his arms. There is nothing around to explain the source of her terror.

“What’s wrong? What happened, Hon? It’s okay, I’m here now.”

“A snake!” she sobs. “I was sitting here waiting for you and praying and I felt something on my feet. I looked down and a big old black snake was crawling across my feet.”

“Did it bite you?”

“No, it just crawled off into the woods, but – I was so frightened. I couldn’t help it. I just had to scream.”

“It’s okay,” he says, giving her a hug. “I used to be afraid of snakes, too. I brought you something to eat, but I’ll have to cook it first.”

“What is it?”

“A rabbit. I hope you like rabbit.”

“Did you kill it?” she asked, unnecessarily.

“Yes. It was kind of strange. Usually rabbits are hard to get close to, but this one just kind of sat there. I killed it with a rock.”

“Can I see it?”

“I don’t think you need to look at it too close. I skinned it and it’s all bloody.”

“Oh, I’ve seen *lots* of dead animals. They use them for sacrifices all the time. I used to get upset about it when I was a kid, but it doesn’t bother me anymore.”

George smiles when she talks about when she was a kid, but his eyes show concern, too. This young girl has seen far too much of life already for her ten or so years. He busies himself making a fire, ignoring Julie’s request to see the rabbit. He makes a makeshift spit to roast the animal, talking with the girl all the while.

Her parents raised her in a town of Satan worshipers, to the north in West Virginia. Her grandmother provided her only contact with Christianity. The old woman, a saint of the Lord, stood fast in her faith even when all those around her deserted it. The other Christians in the town died or were driven away or murdered. Determined that her grandchild, at least, would not grow up an enemy of Christ, she taught her about Jesus from the child’s earliest years. Julie’s best memories were of sitting in her Gran’s lap while the old woman read to her about Joseph, Moses, David and the other giants of faith. Julie accepted Christ as her Savior when she was only six, but her parents still forced her to attend satanic rites. Her parents did not truly believe, but went through the motions of worshipping Satan out of fear for their lives. Liz Leighton, Julie’s Gran, never ceased praying for her daughter and son-in-law, and for the others in the town.

The day came when the high priest of the cult called on Julie’s parents and told them he wanted to induct Julie into the cult as an apprentice priestess. It was then that the girl’s grandmother took the child and fled. She tried desperately to reach some of Julie’s father’s family. They lived on the far side of the mountains in Kentucky. The high priest’s maniac son roamed far and wide in the hills around the Big Sandy River. He came upon them as they sat huddled around the fire Gran had built. The old woman’s last act, terrified as she was, was to pray the blood of Jesus over her beloved Julie.

“Your Gran was quite a lady,” George says, when the child has finished her painful tale. “I know she’s with the Lord now. I lost someone I really loved not long ago.”

“Who was it? Did you have someone like Gran, too?”

“I had a Christian mother, but that’s not who I was talking about. I was married for fifteen years to the most wonderful woman God ever made. At least that’s what I thought. Her name was Betsey. We grew up together, on the same street. Because she was white we weren’t supposed to be sweethearts in the town where I lived, but we were. When we were kids I had to stick up for her with the other boys on the street, because she was a little bit overweight. When we got older, I started seeing her in a different way, as a woman. Well, anyway, when we got out of high school we got married.”

The girl listens intently, studying George’s face as he talks. She smiles when he tells of defending Betsey from the taunts of other boys. When he pauses to begin the process of attaching the rabbit to the skewer stick, she asks, “What happened to her?”

George doesn’t answer immediately. Talking about Betsey’s death is still difficult for him. With a visible effort to control his voice, which still sounds choked, he relates the story of Betsey’s cancer and the slow agony of her death. As he describes the moment she died and the flight from his house, tears flow from the girl’s eye in sympathy.

“They burned her? That’s *awful*. Why are people so mean? Don’t they know the Devil is just using them? Well, a lot of houses burned in our town, too, right before we left. I was with Gran, though, and the fire didn’t bother us. She said the fire and the hail were God’s judgment on our town, just like the earthquake.”

“Not just on your town; on the whole world. We had the same thing where I lived, and we all believed it was God’s prophecy coming true.”

Before long, as they talk of lighter things, the rabbit sizzles over the fire. George glances longingly at the meat from time to time, but looks away again with determination. He will not eat today.

Julie is ravenously hungry, and can hardly wait for the meat to cool. She burns her tongue in her haste, but is too hungry to wait. Eventually she notices that George isn't eating.

"Aren't you going to eat? There's plenty left. I can't eat it all."

"I'm fasting today. It smells awful good, but I can't."

"Okay. My Gran used to fast a lot, too. I'm sorry you have to go hungry, though. Thank you for getting the rabbit. It's the best meat I've ever tasted."

As evening drew near George thinks about what to do with the child. I know that because the Lord is talking with him about it. He seems disturbed at what the Spirit tells him.

"You must go with the girl back to where her parents live. Don't be afraid. I will be with you even in the very camp of the enemy. There is great danger in that place, but I will do a work in the people there, using you as my instrument. You must tell the child."

George does not speak with Julie right away. They continue to talk of the good times of days gone by, all of Julie's connected with her grandmother. She seems to sense that something is wrong.

"George, you aren't telling me something. You look sad. Can I cheer you up some way? Gran always said we should always have the joy of the Lord, no matter what."

He hugs her again. "Your Gran was a very wise lady. There's something I have to tell you, and it's not easy."

"What? What's wrong? Is it something I said?"

"Of course not," hugging her again. "It's just – I have to take you back to your parents."

"No! I won't go back there. Gran died to get me out of there. How could you say that?"

"I know, I know. I don't understand it either, but the Lord told me we have to go there. Maybe he wants to save your parents, I don't know, but He told me we have to go. Please try to understand."

The Lord whispers to her as well. Her face, so full of anger and determination, melts suddenly into tender acceptance. She throws both arms around George's neck and rests her head against his shoulder. George is taken aback by the sudden reversal, but clasps the girl tightly against him. When she looks up into his face, she smiles through her tears.

"The Lord just told me that you are the man Gran and I have been praying about for a long, long time. We prayed for someone to come and change our town. He says I should go with you and that He'll be with us no matter what happens."

The two of them pray together for her parents, for her town, even for poor Green Halcomb, the beast-man. She can forgive him now, less than a day after he killed the one person she loved most. Afterwards they sing old hymns together that her grandmother taught her. Her Gran's favorite was *Amazing Grace*; George likes that one, too, he says.

When darkness falls over the forest, they set out together, hand in hand. As I have done every night, I take

George's hand, while Julie's guardian takes her free hand. Together we walk in the Lord's light, first up the side of a steep hill, then along its crest for a while before descending again. From time to time we hear an angry growl in the distance. Green and the demon that controls him have not yet surrendered their intended victim. Julie clutches George's hand a little tighter, but walks on unafraid through the darkness. George is less at peace with the sounds in the night; I can tell he fears the night, ashamed to admit it to himself. Sensing her friend's discomfort, Julie begins softly humming *Amazing Grace* again. George smiles and the tension leaves him as he joins her with his deep baritone.

Dawn finds them in a particularly fire-blasted area with no place for shelter. Half of the morning passes before they find a place to stop, exhausted. Julie falls asleep in George's arms, just as she did that first night. George stays awake for a while praying, but soon he, too, is sound asleep. He has not slept in two days.

When they awaken, Julie eats the remnants of the rabbit, which George had wrapped in his only handkerchief. They find water nearby, according to the Lord's plan, and wash away some of the grease, blood, and dirt that still cling to them. Julie, by nature a laughing, cheerful child, delights in splashing water on George, who rebukes her in mock protest. In response she throws her wet arms around his neck and kisses him impulsively on the cheek. He turns away briefly so she cannot see the tear that traces down his cheek. I can tell that she makes him think of the child he never had; Betsey was barren. All of the years of prayer and medical treatment had no result. They had even talked of adopting a child at one point, but they had no money.

The afternoon passes in leisure, the tensions and demands of the day before all but forgotten. The Lord has granted them this time of refreshing to prepare for the hard times ahead. I can see clearly the times of testing that await them, as the Lord has granted me to see. They know little of what to expect, for the Lord is merciful.

That night they set out again, and again the hours are disturbed by animal sounds, some distant, some closer. At one point we hear a bloodcurdling yell of triumph; the monster has killed again. George and Julie walk closer together, singing and praying as before. And so the night passes.

In the fog-shrouded morning, they descend one more hill. Spots of green appear, and the land comes back to life again. Before long we see the reason for the change; far below winds a rock-ribbed river, shrunken now to a pitiful stream that threads its way wearily between the high canyon walls. George and Julie come to a stop at the edge of a high cliff, which drops down sheer to the river bed over a hundred feet below.

"Can't go down here. Where did you and your Gran come up?"

Julie looks down, studying the course of the river. She points upstream from where they are standing. "Up there. See? You can see where the path starts up the hill from the river."

"Kind of steep, isn't it?"

"Yes, but we can make it," she says, smiling up at him and squeezing his hand. "The Lord is still with us."

He smiles back. "You're sure right about that. Sometimes I think you're braver than I am, Julie Baker."

As it turns out, the path down to the river is not too bad. In a couple of spots George helps Julie down a steep grade, but otherwise they make the descent without incident. They stand looking at the river.

"How did you cross before?"

"It's shallow here. You can see the bottom where there's still water. The rocks are slick if you get careless,

but we should be okay if we're careful. We crossed at night and made it just fine.”

As before, she is right. They cross without difficulty, and a path leads up to the top on the other side. By the time they reach the top, the morning ends. George kills a snake and eats his first food in two days. Julie is reluctant to try the stringy meat, but her hunger overcomes her prejudice. By the time they finish eating the afternoon sun has dropped well down on its way to rest. They nap for a while then, too, awakening only when night has already fallen.

A night's walking will put them near her home, she says, in a tone that implies she wished it were a lot farther away. The hours of darkness are uneventful, but they still hear the sounds of the demon-possessed man from time to time. When morning comes she sees familiar landmarks, so they keep walking until they top a hill above her hometown.

It isn't much of a town, really. One unpaved street running between some ramshackle frame buildings and houses scattered out on either side, alongside narrow, twisting lanes. A derelict sawmill, long silent, stands outside town, and farther away are the remains of a coal mining tipple. Nothing tells us how the people in the town might earn their living.

There remains, though, a heavy sense of demonic oppression. From where we stand I can see clouds of demons and imps dancing about. Above the place lurks a dark presence which I know to be a satanic strongman. The demons know we are near; they have stirred up the buzz of activity, for our benefit, as a warning and a taunt.

Julie points out the house at the edge of town where her parents live, and the nearby shack her grandmother called home. “That building over there, on the main street, is the only store in town. That one, next to it, used to be the church, but now it's the temple for the Satan worshipers. They have some of their ceremonies there, but they still hold sacrifices in that grove at the edge of town. They have a big stone altar there where they kill the animals. Some people say they kill humans, too, people from some other towns, but I've never seen that. Gran never went to any of their ceremonies and my parents were afraid to talk.”

“How do they live? I mean, where do they work?”

“Except for the man who runs the store, they don't seem to do anything here. They – ”

She doesn't get to finish the sentence. I know what is coming, but the Lord instructed me not to warn them or to stop the attack. With a loud crashing and a triumphant shout, Green Halcomb rushes out of the bushes, wielding a huge ax. In one mighty blow he severs the girl's head from her shoulders and swings on toward George in the same arc. I did the only thing the Lord would allow me to do; I deflected the blade of the ax so that only the flat part hit George's head. The blow is strong enough to send him sprawling to the ground, unconscious.

Green started to swing again, to finish the job, but I stepped in front of the demon that drove him. *No more. The Lord has given me leave to protect him. You have your prize. Now be gone.*

For one brief moment it seems he will challenge me, but he turns away with a snort. The girl's spirit has been welcomed into the arms of Christ. George is not so fortunate. For a long while he lays unmoving. When he rouses himself and opens his eyes, he sees Julie's lifeless eye staring back at him. For the first time in his life, he screams in helpless terror and fury. From not too far away, the demon laughs.