

FALSE RIVER

A NOVEL



H.G. Reed

Blessed is the one
Who does not walk in step with the wicked
But whose delight is in the Law of the Lord,
And who meditates on his Law day and night.
That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,
Which yields its fruit in season
And whose leaf does not wither—
Whatever they do prospers

- PSALM 1

1

JOE

There is more than one kind of death: death of the mind, death of the body, and death of the spirit. Joe Lawson was doomed to suffer all three.

Dust billowed on the road, choking out the clear blue April sky as Joe bounced along in a green pickup truck. Its worn serpentine belt squealed into the fallow fields like a cry for help, making even the lazy vulture, picking at a long dead squirrel, stir and take to the air. With the windows down and classic bluegrass in his ears, Joe tried to put his

worries from his mind.

Joe's wife, Catherine, sat on the other end of the bench seat, the worn and cracked upholstery pricking her skin. Their daughter sat between them, kicking her short legs and swishing her dark hair back and forth. She looked just like her mother, and Joe smiled as she hummed along with the song on the radio.

The embossed Chevrolet on the tailgate was worn and faded, the chipped white paint clinging to the groove of every letter in hopes of recognition. Flecks of red orange decay crept along the hood, spreading like the rash of some contagious disease. Though it was now on death's door, it was once a great beauty, and its driver could not part with it. The pick-up had belonged to Joe's father and his father before him, and so it has passed from generation to generation until it was his.

"Did you remember the cider?" Catherine asked for the seventh time.

"Yep," Joe grumbled, trying not to let his mood darken the afternoon. "But I don't know why we're going to this stupid picnic."

Mrs. Leonard, an old woman from the church congregation, had passed away just over a week ago. Her great niece had moved into the house to put her affairs in order, and everyone in Chickamauga thought it would be a grand idea to host a town-wide picnic in Mrs. Leonard's memory. All Joe could think about was the impending

social obligation, over-salted casseroles, and heavily perfumed bodies that stood too close and asked too many prying questions about why the farm wasn't doing as well as it had when Joe's father had been alive.

"Daddy, don't say 'stupid'." His three-year-old daughter had a knack for pointing out his mistakes. She got it from her mother.

"You're right, Maddy, we don't say that word." Catherine redirected her attention back to Joe. "Mrs. Leonard just passed away last week. The least we can do is honor her memory by going to the church picnic." Her tired voice sagged around her words. "Everyone in town will be there."

"That's exactly why I don't wanna go."

Catherine rolled her eyes.

She didn't seem fazed by Joe's usual hermit-like routine. He preferred to keep to himself. Mrs. Leonard's funeral had drawn some characters out of the woodwork, and he had no desire to engage in small talk over bowls of potato salad.

The people of Chickamauga were kind, but not immune to gossip. Rumors flew like ash from fire when Mrs. Leonard's children abruptly disowned her and her husband, and moved to California. It was a family argument, an abusive upbringing, a torrid affair. Whatever the reason, it was enough to drive Mr. Leonard to an early grave, leaving his wife alone. She hadn't spoken to her

children in over twenty years. They didn't care enough to stick around, so this congregation was the only family she had left. Joe understood his wife's desire to go, but he hated being dragged along with them when there was so much work to be done on the orchard.

He stared out the open window, acre after acre blending into a muddled blur as his truck whirled past. His gaze settled on family plots that dotted the landscape, situated near the road for easy access. In the days before asphalt, the old Indian trails would wash out with each rain, making it impossible for a family to get their loved one from their parlor room to the church cemetery, so families laid them to rest at home. Generations were born, raised, and buried there, and Joe wondered what secrets were buried with them.

With the population settling around three thousand, Chickamauga, Georgia was the perfect place to hide a family. Joe had grown up here on the family apple farm, and took over the business when his father had died. Joe had only been eighteen. After Catherine graduated college, she'd shown up on his doorstep, suitcase in hand, demanding a marriage proposal. Joe had kissed her hard and they'd been married the next month. She'd only grown more headstrong in the six years since, and Joe treasured that about her.

Financial hardship had struck their little farm like it did everyone else's. Crops suffered, but most farms

bounced back within the past two years. The Lawson farm did not, and Joe watched their marriage suffer with it. Things hadn't been what they once were, and attending today's picnic was Catherine's way of forcing a family outing and keeping up appearances.

He maneuvered the truck into one open parking spot of many, where the engine idled and died in front of the park grounds. Music still piped through the one good speaker, making the tune sound hollow and dry. The door creaked open and Joe dragged himself from the cab. He was no stranger to humid afternoons in Georgia, but this day was particularly unforgiving.

"Keep an eye on Maddy, please," Catherine asked him when she climbed out of the truck cab, as if she were the only one who worried over their daughter. He'd never let anything happen to her.

He set his daughter's feet on the pavement and she shifted uncomfortably in her sundress that was a size too small for her now.

"Go play." He nudged her along, but she hid behind his legs, clinging to the denim version of his Sunday Best. "Go on, baby." He pointed to the playground full of swings and slides but no children.

Finally, his eyes found a lone tow-headed boy bobbing about, picking up and sucking on wood chips. Joe grimaced.

"Daddy, I wanna stay wiv you," Maddy whined as she

gave his pants a solid tug with her chubby fingers.

“I’ll be right over there with Mama. Go along now and play.” He pushed her in the direction of the playground with some reluctance. “That boy could use some socializing.”

Maddy did as she was told, looking over her shoulder at Joe only once before running toward the boy on the playground. They’d be fast friends.

“I’m taking these to the table.” Catherine’s hands were full with pie dishes. “Bring those gallons when you can.”

Joe was in no mood to argue. He’d had enough of that lately, so he watched Maddy until she made it safely to the wood-chip-eating boy, then grabbed two gallons of cider in each arm, and followed his wife to the picnic tables piled with entirely too much food. How children and little old ladies could eat this much was beyond him.

“Before you go off to talk—”

“Who would I want to go off and talk to, Catherine?”

She set her mouth in a thin line. “Just help me arrange these real quick.” She began unwrapping pies for display.

He sat down the last gallon when an all too familiar voice sounded from behind like a siren. A chill ran from his heels to the base of his neck, and he froze, unable to move or swallow.

Her laugh.

He remembered her laugh after all these years. It was never real, but forced in a way only he could recognize. To anyone else, she was beautiful and pure, but she was the

wolf in sheep's clothing. A clever disguise.

"This can't be happening," he whispered. It couldn't be here. Not here—with everyone watching. He stared blankly ahead and his heart raced, pushing against his ribs. He clutched his chest.

"Are you all right?" Catherine asked.

The girl was right behind him. He could sense it, but he couldn't bring himself to look at her. "Y-Yes," he stammered. "It has to be a mistake."

"What are you talking about? You've been around these people for five minutes, and you're already going crazy."

How could he tell her the truth? How could he say this had nothing and everything to do with these people? They weren't safe here. Not with *her* close by.

He turned around slowly, hoping for evidence that he'd been wrong, but he found none.

A young girl with dark chocolate hair stood with her back to him, holding a glass pitcher of bright red liquid.

"I'm Ellie May Beel. So nice to meet you," she drawled. "Loretta was my great aunt. I was just sick when I got the news, but I'm sure glad I was able to come and pay my respects."

The ladies nodded their heads, accepting the lie, and Joe's once coherent thoughts clouded with messy details and unjustified fears.

"Bless your heart," one of the old ladies said. "You're

just the sweetest little thing to come all this way. She would've been so proud to know that *someone* in her family cared."

It was almost a kind thing to say, and the thing named Ellie May tilted her head, saying nothing. She, too, thought this was a bit on the nose.

"Evelyn," another old lady chided.

Ellie May straightened and went on as if nothing was amiss. "I was so sad to bury her, but Aunt Loretta will live on in our memories as an extraordinary lady." The air around her stilled and all grew quiet. "And if you're smart, Joe Lawson, you'll avoid the grave yourself."

Joe lunged forward, looking from one person to the next, but not a single one of them heard the girl address him. They stood frozen and silent, as if time itself had stopped.

The girl turned over her shoulder, laid eyes on Joe Lawson, and winked. "Did you miss me?"

To read more of Joe and Ellie May, be sure to visit www.hgreed.com for announcements, updates, and links to purchase.

Thank you for reading!

False River coming May 13 2017

