

River to Redemption by Ann H. Gabhart

Chapter 1

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Adria Starr didn't want her mother and little brother to stop breathing the way her father had. She wanted to take care of them.

She was seven. That was old enough to do things. She could draw water from the well and carry wood to the stove. She could even run for the doctor, like she did after Adria's daddy came home sick, but a woman answered the door at the doctor's house to say he couldn't come. He was sick too. That it wouldn't matter anyway. Not with the cholera.

Adria had heard her father whisper that word to her mother. Adria didn't know what it meant, but her mother clutched the back of a chair and made a sound like somebody had hit her in the stomach. Then with her eyes too wide, she looked at Adria, and it was like somebody was squeezing Adria's heart.

"Leave." Adria's father told her mother. "Get away from the bad air here in town."

Even before her father quit breathing, her mother started packing a bag to go somewhere after Adria came back without the doctor. But how could they leave Daddy? Then Eddie got sick. Just like their father. He was only two and he cried until Adria wanted to put her hands over her ears. But when he stopped, everything was too quiet.

They didn't leave. Her mother couldn't stop shaking and she was very sick. Like her insides wanted to come out of her body. She leaned on Adria while she sat on the pot. She told Adria to go away, but if Adria hadn't held her, her mother would have fallen to the floor.

After Mama got through being sick, Adria helped her to the couch and laid Eddie down beside her. Adria kissed his cheek, but it didn't feel right. She didn't look at his chest. She didn't want to know if it had stopped moving up and down. She didn't look at her mother's chest either. Instead she carried the slop jar and basin into the sitting room in case her mother needed them again. Then she got a blanket and curled up on the floor beside the couch.

Her mother didn't need the basin, but Adria did. She must have breathed in that bad air too. After she was through being sick, she lay back down on the floor. The only sounds were the mantel clock ticking and more bad air ruffling the window curtains.

She fell asleep for a while. When she woke up, the clock wasn't ticking anymore. Her father was the one who always wound it. The air had stopped moving too. Maybe the bad air had moved away to another town. But Adria's stomach still hurt. She needed a drink of water, but she didn't think she could get up to go to the kitchen.

Adria reached up toward her mother but stayed her hand without touching her. Everything was so still. Nothing was moving. Usually their house was filled with sound. Eddie jabbering or crying. Her mother singing while she clattered pans in the kitchen. Her father coming in the door from work and grabbing Adria to swing her up in the air and then giving Eddie a turn. She didn't know which of them squealed the loudest.

But now silence wrapped around her. Nothing but her heart beating in her ears. She wanted to ask her mother if the bad air killed everybody, but she clamped her lips together and didn't let the words out. She was scared her mother wouldn't answer.

Adria squeezed her eyes shut. Where she'd been sick smelled bad. Really bad. She pinched her nose to block the odor, but then her breathing sounded too loud, like she'd been running or something. She pulled a pillow over her face.

She hoped it wouldn't hurt if the bad air killed her. Maybe her heart would just stop the way the clock had stopping ticking. She tried to remember whether the preacher ever said anything in his sermons about dying. But most of the stories she could remember were about Jesus feeding people or making them well. Maybe if she prayed, he would make her well, and Eddie and her parents too.

"Please," she whispered into the pillow. She tried to think of more words, but she was tired. So she just said the bedtime prayer her mother taught her. "Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. And if I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take."

She prayed that all the time, but she had never worried about not waking up. Not until now. What would happen if the Lord took her soul? Would it be silent like now, or noisy? Angels singing maybe. No, that was when Jesus was born. But heaven might be noisy. Lots of people there, and didn't they say something about crossing a river? She'd seen a river. The water was noisy. She really needed a drink.

The knock on the door made her jump. Her father had said something once about a person knocking on heaven's door, but this sounded more like their own front door. Maybe it was the doctor coming after all. When she pushed up off the floor, the room started spinning and she cried out and fell back with a thump.

The door swung open and a deep voice called out, "Somebody in here needin' help?"

When the big man stepped around the couch, Adria let out another shriek, but her mother didn't make the first sound. The man stared down at Adria. Sweat made tracks down his black face and he looked like a giant looming over her. She scrambled away from him, but moving made her sick again. She tried to get to the basin, but she didn't make it.

Big gentle hands reached down to hold her. "There, there, missy. It's done gonna be all right." He stroked her hair sort of the way her daddy did sometimes when he was telling her good night.

When she was through being sick, the man wiped her mouth off with a handkerchief and gathered her up in his arms as though she wasn't any bigger than Eddie. She forgot about being afraid and laid her head against his chest. His heart was beating, steady and sure. It was a good sound, and even his sweaty smell was better than the smell from her being sick.

"What's your name, child?" he asked.

"Adria," she whispered, a little surprised the sound came out of her dry lips.

"Adria," he echoed her. "That's a fine name. I'm gonna take you back to Mr. George's hotel where we can see to you."

"What about Eddie?"

“That yo’r little brother there?” The man’s voice was soft. “You don’t have to worry about him. I’ll come back and do what needs doing.”

Adria didn’t want to, but she couldn’t keep her eyes from peeking away from the man’s chest toward Eddie beside her mother. He wasn’t moving and her mother’s eyes were staring up at the ceiling. “What needs doing?”

“Well, it ain’t an easy thing for a little missy like you to know, but yo’r mama and li’l brother done gone on to glory. All’s can be done for them now is a proper burial. I been doing it for all them that got took by the cholera.” He rubbed his hand up and down Adria’s back and turned so she couldn’t see her mother anymore. “What about your pappy?”

“He died first.” Adria pointed toward the bedroom.

The man nodded. “It’s a sorrowful thing.”

“Am I going to go to glory too?” Glory seemed easier to say than die.

“Only the good Lord knows our appointed time to leave this old world, but I’m thinkin’ that you might have to wait a while to see glory. Could be the Lord has more for you to do down here like he has for me.”

“What’s that?”

“Hard to say. But time will tell, missy. Time will tell. Now you just rest your head down on my shoulder and let ol’ Louis take you on up the street. Matilda, she ain’t bothered by the cholera same as me, and she’s got a healin’ hand. Me and her, we’ll do for you and chase that old cholera out of you.”

“I want my mama.” Adria was crying inside, but her tears had all dried up. Her eyes felt scratchy when she blinked.

“Ain’t that the way of us all. To want our mammies.” He carried her out the door.

Night was falling, or maybe day was breaking. Adria didn’t know how long she had lain there by the couch afraid to look at her mother. And now she would never see her again. Not unless she went to glory.

She ought to want to go to glory along with her mother and father and Eddie. They were a family. Her mother said that all the time, and then she would pick up Eddie and pull Adria close to her in a hug at the same time. If Daddy was there, he’d put his arms around them all and make what he called a family sandwich with his children in the middle. That always made Adria giggle. She liked being in a family sandwich, and now that was gone. Unless she went back and lay down beside her mother to let the bad air get her too..

But she didn’t want to do that. She was glad the big man was carrying her away from her house. Away from the bad air. She thought she ought to be sorry about that, and she was sorry. Very sorry and sad her family was gone, but she wasn’t sorry she was still breathing. She wanted to believe it was like the big man said. That the Lord wasn’t ready for her yet.

She thought she should tell the man she could walk. She was way past carrying age, but the man wasn’t breathing hard and it felt good to let him take care of her.

“I prayed,” she said. “Did God send you to my house?” That wasn’t what she’d prayed for, but she heard the preacher say once that sometimes the Lord knew what you needed better than you did.

“That could be.” The man’s chest rumbled under Adria’s ear as he chuckled at her words. “I reckon the good Lord has his ways of makin’ things happen, but fact is, the doctor’s wife told me you’d been there to get the doctor.”

“She wouldn’t let him come.”

“Well, he couldn’t rightly make it, child. The cholera has done laid him low too. Could be he’ll make it through, but he can’t be no use to nobody else till he does.” The man’s voice was soft and deep, with nothing scary about it.

“Are you an angel?” Adria had never thought about angels having black skin and smelling sweaty. She always thought about them floating around with wings and white robes, but could be that was all wrong.

The man’s chest rumbled again. “That’s something I never expected anybody to say about me. But no, missy, I ain’t no angel. I reckon I should’ve tol’ you who I is to rest yo’r mind a bit. I’m Louis Sanderson, Mr. George Sanderson’s man. He owns the hotel here on Main Street, and when the cholera come to call, he give me his keys and told me to carry on with things best I could. He aimed to get as far from the cholera as he could and I’m supposin’ he did.”

“Daddy wanted Mama to go, but Eddie got sick and then she got sick too.”

“The cholera is a terrible thing.”

“Why didn’t you go too?”

“There’s some wonderin’ ’bout that, but whilst I ain’t no angel, the good Lord had a job here for me to do. Folks to take care of. He somehow kept the bad air from bothering ol’ Louis and seemed to me he must have had a reason for that. Somethin’ he expected me to do. The Lord gives you a job to do, then I reckon you’d best do it. Ain’t that right, missy?”

She tried to listen and understand what he was saying, but she couldn’t hold all his words in her ears. “I don’t know.”

Louis patted her back as he carried her up some steps to a door with painted glass. “Well, don’t you never mind about that. Right now you just think on gettin’ better. Matilda and me, we’re gonna take good care of you.”