

## **Chapter Ten**

We followed her to the back of the cave. She turned, with her back to the wall, and spoke to me for the first time in many years. Darkness shadowed her face. “Henry, I’m glad to see you again, but I wish you hadn’t come. I didn’t have a chance to warn you yesterday. Those three men are nothing but hoodlums. They moved in here six months ago and took over, when they found we didn’t have any guns. We moved up here to hide from the Security Police, but we’re worse off than we were at home.

“Hector thinks he’s a preacher of some kind, and he forces us to listen to what he calls ‘sermons’ every evening. He took one of our girls to be his private whore, but I’m afraid he’s going to take this new girl to replace her. Honey, you’re far too pretty for your own good in this place. He meant for you to hear what he said to Missy before. The poor thing is probably looking forward to getting out of there.”

“This is my sister, Miriam,” I told her the others. “She’s been a Christian for most of her life. The others here are all family, and I think all of them are Christians.”

George and Lisa each shook Miriam’s hand in turn, but there was no joy in the greeting. She told us to try to get some rest, as Hector expected us to begin work early. No one asked just what kind of work it might be.

Lisa went to the back of the cave with Miriam. George and I found an empty space along the wall of the cave, and leaned against it. We no longer had blankets, and creature comforts were in short supply here. My new friend was exhausted, and went to sleep right away. I sat for a while, thinking things over and praying. Somehow it was going to work out tomorrow, but I knew we were in for a rough day. The energy that had brought me all the way here twice, from Beckley, still coursed through me. I hadn’t finished the work the Lord had given me; that was the only reason I could think of.

Hector came to the entrance of the cave calling for us just after daybreak. “Time for another day’s work, children. Idle hands are the devil’s workshop.” The only ones of us who weren’t dragging themselves out of the cave were George, Lisa, and I. The night’s rest had done wonders for George.

“You new people, listen up. Here are the rules. You work hard all day, you eat in the evening. If you don’t work, you don’t eat. If you don’t follow orders, you will be punished. We believe that godly discipline makes for a happy community. Brother Leon here will assign you your tasks. I need Lisa, though, inside my cave to clean it out. She’ll be ministering to my needs from this day on. Missy will join the rest of you. Lisa, come with me.”

Lisa followed him into his cave, smiling bravely back at me over her shoulder. The idea of what might happen to her broke my heart. I opened my mouth to protest, but Miriam grabbed my arm and I said nothing. We waited for orders from Leon, who was strutting about like a rooster.

“All right, you lazy bums! Here’s where you earn your keep! See that big pile of rocks over there? I want you to carry them down to the south wall, the inside one, and pile them up against the logs. We’re going to turn this place into a fortress. Now, get to work!”

Miriam told me in whispers that they had just spent several days moving the rocks to the caves from the wall. Hector’s men had ordered them to pile the rocks near the caves although they had to walk outside the wall to get them. That was part of Hector’s strategy of control; he kept them all too tired to start any trouble. He fed them just enough to keep them going. He didn’t realize that the work had toughened them to the point that they were much stronger than when they started. I watched them lifting and carrying some huge boulders. I think a lot of their problem wasn’t so much physical fatigue, but a sense of helplessness.

George told me at one point how stupid it was carrying rocks from place to place and Leon overheard us. We didn’t realize that until later. I glanced around quickly, but Leon appeared to be looking the other way.

The rock pile grew steadily smaller as the day progressed. Most of our people walked back and forth like robots between the rock pile and the wall. George was still weak and had to rest from time to time. At midday, the guards gave each of us a small cup of water, but no food.

When Hector called us all to eat, George almost fell down. He could hardly put one foot in front of another. His troubles had just begun.

“All of you form a line to eat, except the nigger. Brother George has shirked in his responsibility today and will not eat. He has also criticized our way of life, which is ordained by God. Later, he will be punished at a public meeting. The rest of you enjoy your meal. Oh, I almost forgot. Lord, bless this food. Amen.”

Leon herded George to a tree and forced him to put his hands around the trunk. He tied George’s hands together and left him standing there. The rest of us lined up for a bowl of cornmeal mush and a cup of water. We were even allowed a refill if we wanted one, which most did.

After our one and only meal of the day, Hector ordered us to sit in two rows in front of the caves. We first had to endure his “sermon,” which was a rambling discourse about the virtues of hard work and discipline. He threw in a little misquoted Scripture here and there to make it all sound religious, though none of it related to anything he was saying. He ended with a sanctimonious prayer thanking God for his (Hector’s) little children and for his own wisdom and strength. I was certain the Lord heard none of it.

Finished with his great sermon (he thought it was great, anyway), Hector turned his attention to George. “We can’t have a happy community unless everyone does his duty. Brother George has not done his duty today. Worse than that, he has seen fit to criticize our way of doing things, which God Himself has ordained. To restore our dear brother to the right path we must administer discipline. Since this is his first offense, we will only sentence him to bear twenty lashes. The next offense will bring forty lashes.”

My heart fell through my stomach. George would never make it through another brutal beating. I prayed fervently that God would deliver us all from this monster.

“I have asked Brother Mac to join us from his guard duties so that we may all witness and learn. Brother Leon, remove Brother George’s shirt and bring me the rope.”

Leon tried to do that while George was still tied to the tree. Discovering that the shirt couldn’t be removed because of the tied hands, he undid the knot, threw the shirt to the ground and tied the knot again. It would have been funny under different circumstances. Leon then brought out a knotted rope from Hector’s cave, with wicked-looking barbs embedded along its length. Leon grinned wickedly as he

brought the thing to Hector, and so did Mac. Hector didn't see the humor, and they immediately stopped smiling; he really thought he was doing a great thing.

George's back still had partly healed wounds from his beating in Beckley. Hector put all of his weight and strength into the first blow. The whip drew blood in several places and ripped skin off when the briars were buried in the flesh and torn back out again. When Hector drew back for a second blow, it never fell.

Things happened all at once. Hector fell backward, the back of his head crushed with a heavy rock. Others of our number jumped the two guards. Mac tried to retrieve his gun but it went off with the barrel pointed the wrong way, killing him. One woman who scuffled with him picked up the gun and walked calmly over to Leon, who was still trying to free himself. She pressed the gun against his skull, and emptied it. There was a ghastly pool of blood, bone, and brains, much of it spattered on those around. She kept pulling the trigger like a robot long after it was empty. One of the others tried to take the gun from her, but she wouldn't let go. They had to take it from her forcibly. Even then she kept pulling an invisible trigger. She was the one they called Missy, but she was far too young to be my sister of the same name.

The whole scene looked like a slaughterhouse, with blood and gore all around the clearing. Several people vomited, and when nothing was left to vomit they still retched. The three small children and some of the women were screaming hysterically. George called my name for several minutes before I finally came out of my trance, and took a knife from Leon's body to cut his ropes.

Besides George and me, the only person with her wits about her was Miriam. Lisa was standing near Hector's cave, with a blank staring look on her face. I followed George over to Miriam, who was trying to calm one of the children. George took charge of the disaster, and spoke quietly to my sister.

"Leave her alone for a minute and go to Lisa. If you can snap her out of it, she can help you with the others. Work with the adults first, so they can help with the children. Henry and I will get rid of the bodies and try to clear up some of this mess. The Lord is here; be brave."

She nodded and went to talk with Lisa. I saw her put her arm around my daughter, then turned to join George. We dragged the bodies out of the camp and placed them together some distance away. We covered the corpses with rocks and went to rejoin the others. By the time we began sweeping away the blood and gore, Lisa was helping Miriam with the others. They succeeded with all of them to some degree, except for Missy and Homer, who had killed Hector. George had us join in prayer for the two of them, and we managed to get them inside one of the caves. My own sweet Lisa stayed with them, holding a hand of each and talking softly to them.

Night had fallen again. The cook fire, the only source of light outside the caves, gradually died down. It was a relief not to see the remnants of the carnage. As if awakening from a long nightmare, the rest of the clan gradually went back inside to rejoin Homer, Missy, and Lisa. Only Miriam, George and I were left outside. Miriam cleaned and bandaged George's back. He pulled his only other shirt from his pack, and gingerly put it on.

The night air had a chill on it, and we finally went back inside with others. I went to sit with Lisa, who was still holding firmly to Missy and Homer.

"Did he do anything to you?"

"No. He tried, but I've had a lot of experience handling men. I'm not proud of it, but it's knowledge I can use. I put him off with promises of something better in the night. If he had tried to make love to me, I don't know what I would have done. I think I would have killed either him or myself."

"You've changed, Lisa. I noticed that yesterday morning, when we came to bring you back."

She smiled, the most beautiful, genuine smile I'd seen from her since she was a child. "I was pretending before. I didn't really come to know the Lord in Beckley. That happened while you were gone, when I was alone with George."

I hugged her around the neck, careful not to disturb the people next to her. "I'm glad, Baby, for both of us. Now, you let me watch these two for a while and you get some rest."

She shook her head. "I'll be fine. This is something I want to do. Besides, you've been on your feet for the past three days. When they both go to sleep, so will I. Go on and rest."

I gave her a pat on the head, and went to find Miriam. My heart was all but ready to burst as I looked at her. I sit down beside her, and as she turned toward me, we held each other and cried like babies.

“My whole life, Sis,” I said as we drew away from each other. “I’ve wasted it all.”

She put her finger on my lips. “Hush, now, that’s all past. You’re a new man, so don’t worry about the old one who died. What’s been going on with that dead man these past years? Carol told me she saw you now and again, but she didn’t know any details.”

I told her the whole sad story, including details she didn’t know about my years in Fayette County. I thought she would be disgusted when I talked about Sara, but she just sat there quietly.

“Sara didn’t make me do anything I didn’t want to do, but I think that’s really what set me on the path of destruction. I was addicted to sex, and that made it easier to indulge other addictions later on. To me, girls were just a means to an end, to fill my lusts. They were no better than a bottle of whiskey, or a joint of pot. By the time Sara brought Ellen to me, I think was incapable of real love.”

Miriam knew both Sara and Ellen, though they were much older than she was. She also knew I lived with Ellen for a long time, but didn’t know how we met, or how things were in our home. When I was living with her, everything bad in our relationship was her fault in my mind, just as she blamed me for all her problems.

“The only good thing we had going for us was sex, and that wasn’t nearly enough. Ellen was a real witch, in many ways, but I can see now I was no better than she was. I never gave her anything resembling love; maybe if I had she would have responded to it. She finally decided she wanted a child. We spent years trying to make that happen. Lord forgive me, but when it finally did, I even doubted I was the father. The first time I saw our baby girl, though, I didn’t really care. She was the most beautiful baby I had ever seen, and not just because she was mine.”

When I told her about Lisa’s childhood, Miriam wept with me.

“That poor child. Satan really tried to destroy her. What happened to her as she grew older?”

It all came pouring out; I suspected, but couldn't prove, she started having sex early, like I did, and I was certain she used drugs. I described the stormy relationship she had with Ellen, and how she all but celebrated when her mother died. Finally, I described the earthquake, the hailstorm, the sad tale of Madame Sophie, and George's intervention to rescue us both.

"The night I was with George and Lisa, after the angel brought him to us, I prayed to the Lord for strength to do what needed to be done. I didn't eat from the morning we first left Beckley until we had lunch today. I've seen a lot of miracles these past few days, and that was my personal miracle. I never used to believe in them all. Lisa is one big miracle, too; if you had seen her just three days ago, you wouldn't have recognized her as the same person."

She smiled again. "That's because she's not the same person; just like you, she's brand new."

"Well, Sis, that's the whole sad tale. I've left out a lot of details, but we can fill those in later."

She sat quietly for a while after I finished, taking my hand in hers and squeezing it. After letting out a deep sigh, she said, "I know you haven't heard much from us, either. There's a lot to tell."

"You must be tired, Miriam. This can wait until tomorrow, if you want."

She shook her head. "I need to get it all out, and you need to know. We can rest another time."

Leaning back against the cave wall, she stared at the opposite wall as if looking at some distant place. Moments passed before she began her part of the story.