

## ***Chapter Eleven***

“We thought we were invincible. At one point we had a hundred men and women carrying guns. We fought pitched battles with the Leander outlaw gang, and won. God, we thought, was with us, but it wouldn’t hurt to help him out.

“Now look at us. A dozen adults, counting you and Lisa, and the only guns we have are the one’s Hector’s goons carried. Instead of defending our homes, we’re hiding out in these miserable caves, like rabbits running to their hole.”

“What happened,” I asked, though I had seen part of the answer already.

She sighed again. “Part of it was attrition. Even our people got tired of the constant pressure, and the harassment from the Security Police. Our neighbors turned against us, and we couldn’t show our faces in town unless we traveled in groups, armed to the teeth. Once a new outlaw band moved into the area, the Boss Richards gang, things got steadily worse.

“The older members started dying of natural causes, or got killed. Milo, Alphonse, Carter – all dead. Papa died three years ago –“

“I didn’t find out until he was already buried.”

“I know, Henry, that was my fault. I was angry at you for years, more for your teasing me than anything else. I pray you can forgive me.”

I gave her a hug, and a kiss on the cheek. “Of course I can. Go on, Sis.”

“Well, Papa died, and Mama lost her desire to live after that. She kept saying she just wanted to go home to be with Papa. A few months later, she did. It was all very quiet and peaceful.

“The earthquake, the hail, and the fire, finally brought an end to it all, though our pride was the main cause. Our house was undamaged, but many others were destroyed by the quake, and by the horrible fires. Those of us who were left had a family council. It was a disaster.

“Over half of those of us who were left had had enough; they were leaving, and nothing the rest of us said could change their minds. Sister Missy was one of them; she and her husband headed to

Charleston, and we never heard from her after that. Others were headed for Beckley, or points further south. Kermit and Mikey, your old buddies, said they were going to try Columbus, where we have some long-lost relatives.

“That left about thirty of us. Someone, Homer, I think, had the bright idea of hiding out in the hills. I pointed out that the outlaws were already hiding out in the hills somewhere, and we might be moving into their front yard. The rest sided with Homer; that was bad enough, but I still can’t believe I agreed to the rest of it.

“They said that the reason why we had failed was because we had relied on our own strength, instead of the Lord’s. That was hard to argue with, but then they totally lost it. Someone suggested we put away our guns, hidden so no one else could use them, and rely totally on the Lord’s protection. Again, I was the only one who objected.

“So – we packed up a few personal items, stocked one of the caves with grain and canned goods, and moved up here a few months ago. We saw repeated signs of the outlaws, but for a while no one bothered us. I’m still not sure how Hector found us, but he showed up one day professing to be another Christian looking for shelter. I never trusted him, but Homer and the others insisted we couldn’t turn away our fellow believers.

“It didn’t take long for him to find out we were defenseless. The next few months we really descended into Hell. That’s as close as I ever want to be. We finally came up with a plan among ourselves to cause some kind of distraction at mealtime, and overpower them then. We didn’t plan on killing them, but things got totally out of hand when Brother George arrived. That wasn’t the distraction we planned, but when I gave the nod, everything happened at once.

“That’s where I came in. What about all the years before, though, Miriam? All those years I missed.”

“I had a happy childhood; I really did. I was saved when I was eleven, like so many of us were. Papa was the real joy of my life, after the Lord, and I never found a man who could measure up to him. I did date this boy named Charlie when I was a teenager, but I chased him away.”

That didn't sound like something she would ever do. "Chased him away? How?"

"When I turned fifteen, I heard a sermon about I Corinthians 7, about how marriage would distract us from serving the Lord. I decided then and there I would never get married. I told that to Charlie; he got really angry with me. He dropped out of school, and joined up with some outlaw band or another, the last I heard.

"His leaving hurt me deeply, but I eventually got over it. I was young, and life was too exciting to stay down for long. I finished school, with the idea of going to get a degree in agriculture, so I could help Papa on the farm. That never quite happened; because things were so bad around I us, I decided Papa and Mama needed me more at home.

"One evening, I got a call from a friend of ours, Liz Creighton, who lives over in Bentown. Her favorite teacher, Hank Crandall, and his wife, Emily, were in serious trouble with the law over in Kentucky, and needed a place to stay. Hank had done nothing wrong but start a Christian academy. He was jailed on a trumped-up charge of child sex abuse, then shipped off to a Satanist mind control center. Some of his friends rescued him, against his will at the time, and he was on the run. Liz asked us to take him and Emily into our home. We all agreed we could hardly turn them away.

"I wish you could have met Hank and Emily, Henry. They were both precious, and real saints of God. They stayed with us for twelve years. Papa and the others made them a little cottage down on the flat below the house. The last I checked it was still standing.

"Clint left during those years, and we lost touch with him like we did with you. Liz's husband was murdered several years after Hank and Emily arrived, and they made a special trip down there to see her. I don't know if you ever met cousin Bessie or not, but she married a real monster, Brett Halcomb. We were certain he was the one who killed Bandy Creighton, or that he had him killed.

"Anyway, Hank and Emily finally returned to Kentucky to pray for the sheriff who had arrested Hank years before. The man was on the point of death, but he recovered, and became a really strong Christian. He's still sheriff over there in Pike County, Kentucky.

“The Crandalls returned to their home in Misty Valley, surrounded by all of their friends and family. Everything was going well for them, until they made one trip to many to Pikeville. Most of them went, in a big caravan. A few stayed behind, including a young friend and former student of theirs, Carmen. Hank wasn’t sure whether they ran into landmines, or if they were attacked by some kind of rockets or mortars. All of them were killed, all but Hank and Emily. The young woman came along the next morning, and took them back in her car. Then she went out and drove her car off a cliff. The others left, and Hank and Emily were alone. Their only son and his family were among the ones who were murdered.”

I was horrified. Even all of the evil I had lived through these past years didn’t prepare me for this. “There are no words – I can’t even conceive of something like that. But – how did you find out about it?”

“The Lord told me, literally. I woke up one night in my room, with the strongest sense that I was not alone. A man was standing my bed, all dressed in white, and surrounded by light. Whether he was angel or the Lord himself, I can’t say, but he told me Hank needed us, and that we should go to Kentucky.

“I woke Papa up right then, and we scrounged up an old jalopy that still worked, barely. We expected to run into trouble on the way, but we made it in one piece. We stopped for a while in Bentown, and Liz told us what had happened. The car almost conked out before we arrived, but we made it to the top of the hill above Misty Valley. We saw Hank on our way down the hill; he was more depressed and defeated than I’d ever seen him before.

“We had prayer with him and Emily, and the Lord did a real work of restoration in their spirits. Misty Valley felt like paradise; I’ve never felt such an overwhelming sense of the Lord’s presence and his watch care as I did there. It was like a sanctuary, and that’s what the Lord intended it to be. I’m certain of that.”

“What ever happened to Hank and Emily after that?”

“I’m not sure. The last I heard, from Liz, they were taking care of the whole place, a small town really, all by themselves. It’s like the Lord is saving it for a place of refuge, when the need is greatest.”

She paused, lost in her recollection of things past. Finally, I decided there was something I needed to say.

“Miriam?”

“Yes, Love.”

“I need to confess something else to you, and to the Lord.”

“Whatever it is, there’s forgiveness for it, with me and with the Lord.”

“I spent forty years telling everyone that my ‘old man,’ as I called him, or ‘Pop,’ was a drunk. I wanted to hurt him, and the worst way I could think of was y destroying his reputation. I said it for so long, I even believed it myself.”

“I knew that, Henry. Both of us did; Carol told us that years ago. All of us forgave you, including Mama and Papa.”

I literally felt a load lift from my shoulders. It was a lighter one than the one the Lord lifted when I was saved, but still a load. The relief was so intense I started to cry, great racking sobs I couldn’t let out because I didn’t want to wake up the others. All of the years of debauchery, all of the lost fellowship, all of the missed opportunities, washed away with the tears. Miriam folded me to her breast, like a small child, and I cried until I could cry no more.

In the wee hours of the morning, we both went to sleep, the sweetest sleep I ever had. I doubt we slept four hours altogether, but I awoke feeling refreshed, and ravenously hungry. Miriam was already up and about. A couple of the boys had managed to snare a couple of rabbits somehow, and the smell of roasting meat made me positively drool.

There wasn’t enough meat to go around, so Miriam made a stew, throwing in some of the canned vegetables stored in the other cave. She made some johnnycakes, and we joined in a prayer circle before we ate. It was like food for the soul, as satisfying as the sleep I had enjoyed the night before.

Over the next few days, I got reacquainted with my family, especially with my daughter and my sister. I gave and received more genuine hugs and kisses than I had enjoyed in all the previous sixty years of my life.

I had actually known Homer when he was a child, when I visited Alphonse's house. He was married to Lydia, who was still with him, and they had two small boys. Once the shock of having killed a man wore off somewhat, and he found forgiveness, we talked together. Among other things, he told me that Sara eventually divorced her attorney husband. She fell into drug abuse, and ultimately died of an overdose. That knowledge gave me a measure of relief, not because she had died, but because I knew what happened with her.

The other children with us were orphans, as were all of our teenagers except Missy. She was Homer and Lydia's oldest child, named after my sister. Homer had been closed to Mama and Papa, more than I had been. He thought it was a gesture of respect to give his daughter the same name as one of theirs.

The only other married couple left in our group were Martin and Hannah Pack. The Packs had married into the Camp family not once but three times, and they had very close ties with us. Martin and Hannah were the oldest ones in our group, and their children had moved away from home years before.

George shared a few more details of his own life with us, including the death of his wife, and his call as a missionary shortly after. He described a horrifying experience with a giant man-beast, who turned out to be Brett Halcomb's son, Green. The monster had brutally murdered an old woman, but George managed to save the little girl who was with her. Just a few days later, though, in sight of her home, Green had murdered her, too.

We were horrified anew to realize that the woman was Liz Creighton, and the place the little girl wanted to return to was Bentown. George described how revival came to the place, after a fiery angel literally struck down Brett Halcomb. When he left the town, he heard gunfire behind him, and realized the Security Police were attacking the place. Only the direct intervention of his guardian angel kept him

from turning back. As he left the town behind him, Green Halcomb pursued him once more. The last George heard of him he fell bellowing off a cliff that George had turned away from at the last second.

On his way north, George had stopped in several other towns, preaching the Gospel in some places, running from the police in others. He came across our cousin Bessie in one burned-out town, and prayed with her. The Lord gave him the privilege of watching her ascend to glory.

The days of peace and rejoicing didn't last long. We retrieved some of our guns, and sent out scouts so we wouldn't be surprised again. That particular day started like the ones before; we had a leisurely breakfast, whiled away the morning, and ate lunch. The women were still cleaning up when the two boys on sentinel duty came running into camp, all breathless with excitement.

“We were two ridges over, near the old logging road. That's about as far as we ever go. We saw two security police and they had a dog with them. They didn't see us, but they broke off the road and started coming up the ridge. If the dogs pick up our tracks they'll lead 'em right here!”

George took charge immediately. “One of you boys come with me, and show me where you saw them. I'll draw them off. Henry, if they get too close, take the others and make a run for it. You know the plan. If you try to stand and fight, they could bring others here.”

We watched anxiously as the two of them headed out of sight. The baying of hounds came to our ears a few minutes later. The dogs had picked up the trail.