

## ***Chapter Twelve***

We finished at the graveyard near midnight. Long-lost memories from my childhood kept coming back to my memory, and I saw ghosts in every shadow. The fact that the only ghost I'd ever seen there was Cousin Clarice didn't make me feel any better.

After George left, and drew the Security Police away from the caves, Miriam and I decided to retrieve the guns she had hidden. This time, no one in our family group had any objections to our arming ourselves.

"You'll never guess where I did them." Miriam had a mischievous glint in her eyes, like the one I remembered from many years before.

"I'm afraid to ask."

"I buried them in a grave."

"Whose grave?"

"Mine, of course." She laughed out loud then, with the same girlish glee I had seen in her eyes.

"Wasn't your death a bit premature?"

"Papa had tombstones made for all of us, years ago. You've got one in a shed at the house, too, if it hasn't been stolen. It took a while to carve the year of my death on the stone, but I actually died late last year. The guns are under my coffin, which is empty. It occurred to me that someone might dig up the grave."

"I never realized you were so devious, Sis." I smiled, to let her know I was teasing.

"Family trait, I guess. Anyway, we shouldn't try to go down there until dark. It's too risky. We'll have to keep the light to a minimum. The moon will be out, but it doesn't give as much light now as it used to."

We took one of the boys with us, along with one of the guns, and left Lisa in charge. Homer was still in no shape to make decisions.

It was an odd feeling to see the church again, but I appreciated it a lot more than the last time I'd seen it. The church building was intact. We couldn't tell it had even been bothered, which was strange. Thieves had broken into and wrecked just about every other building left standing.

Miriam's grave was well away from the church, in the newer section of the graveyard, right next to the ones for Mama and Papa. I had to stop for a few minutes when I saw my parents' graves, weeping not only for the loss but for all the pain I knew I had caused them.

"We need to get started," Miriam said gently, after a few minutes. "I know how hard it must be for you."

I wiped the tears away from my eyes with my sleeve, and began helping the others dig out the grave. The ground was soft, and the digging went quickly. Before long, we were standing inside the hole of the grave, tossing dirt up and out. The coffin wasn't as deep as some, for which I was glad. Once we reached it, we still had to dig out around it enough to free it. Even empty, it was heavy and hard to manage. Rather than trying to lift it out, which would have tested our strength, we set it on its end, leaning it against the side of the grave. The top end extended a couple of feet into the air, but if someone came along just the sight of an open grave would be enough to attract attention.

The guns were a couple of feet below the coffin, wrapped in plastic. We ripped away the plastic to make them easier to retrieve. There were seven rifles, three shotguns, four pistols, and several boxes of ammo. Each of us would have to carry several weapons and several boxes of ammo. It would be hard to manage everything on the return trip.

"If they're still there, we used to have some boxes and string inside the church," Miriam offered. We had just filled the grave back in. The ground had the look of being freshly dug; we spread grass and weeds over it, but that wouldn't fool anyone for long. Since there was nothing there but an empty coffin, we weren't too concerned.

"Let's check it out," I agreed. "We probably can lug everything over to the church. Randy here can be our lookout, and you and I will go inside and see what we can find."

Miriam still had a key to the front door, which had been changed to one with a deadbolt lock. The inside of the building was just as I remembered it. The aisle between the double row of ancient pews led straight to the raised platform of the altar, scene of both tragedy and triumph in my childhood days. Altar rail, pulpit, open Bible – none of it had changed. One thing that surprised me a bit was there was no trace of dust; everything looked as neat and clean as it did after being freshly cleaned on a Saturday afternoon.

As if to echo my thoughts, Miriam said, in the same hushed tones we'd used all evening long, "That's strange."

"You noticed, too."

"Somebody's been here, keeping the place clean."

At just that moment, the door leading back to the classrooms opened, up at the front of the sanctuary. Miriam and I both jumped, and she let out an involuntary "Yip," sounding for all the world like a Chihuahua.

"Hi, Miriam."

"Betty? Is that you? What on earth..."

"Old habits are hard to break, Dearie. I cleaned this church for thirty years, and when everyone else left, I couldn't bring myself to stop."

"But – how did you survive? Where are you living?"

"I sleep downstairs, in the youth classroom. I spend hours on my knees in prayer every day. The Lord has been kind to me. I've been using the same food now for months, and it never runs out. I brought enough with me to last a week, and I've been here for over six months. By the way, who's that with you?"

"Let me catch my breath, Betty. This is all a bit much to take in. You remember my talking about my brother, Henry?"

"The black sheep of the family? We've been praying for him for as long as I've been here. Did he finally get saved?"

“He did, indeed, and in a glorious way. Henry, this is Betty Mason. She’s one of the few people in the church not related to the Camps. She’s been our church custodian for a long, long time.”

The woman came close to get a better look. Our flashlights didn’t illuminate things much, but evidently she saw enough to satisfy her.

“Yep, he’s a Camp alright. Looks like Walter, don’t you think?”

She grabbed my free hand, and shook it vigorously. She had an iron grip.

“It’s a blessing to finally meet you, Henry, and to be able to call you my brother in Christ.”

We exchanged pleasantries, and Miriam let her know what we needed.

“I saw you all coming into the graveyard. At first, I thought you were grave robbers, but the Lord assured me I had nothing to fear. I figured you would eventually come here, if you were brethren. Come downstairs with me; I’ll fix you right up.”

“I’ll go let Randy know everything’s okay,” Miriam said. “Henry, you go with Betty, and get a couple of boxes and some twine.”

I liked Betty immediately. She spoke with a slow country drawl, but there was nothing slow about her mind. Her eyes had a look of keen intelligence about them, and there was sense of serenity about her I had seen in no one else since I left home. She reminded me of Mama.

Just through the door, she retrieved a candle she had set inside an empty flowerpot. I followed her downstairs to what had once been my Sunday school classroom. She had a sleeping bag neatly rolled up in one corner, and a makeshift kitchen where the teacher used to sit. In the far corner of the room was a closet, which she went to immediately.

“The boxes are broken down, but I have duct tape for them. Here’s the twine. Let me get a knife, and you can cut what you need.”

She went to a desk that served as her kitchen cabinet, and retrieved a knife from a drawer. Miriam rejoined us as I began measuring out twine.

“What do you think, Sis? Is that enough?”

“Should be, but you’ll need to cut it into three pieces, one for each of us.”

“I’m glad one of us has brains in this family! Betty says the boxes will need to be taped together.”

“One should be enough for the ammo. We’ll put the pistols in another. You and Randy can each carry one, big strong men that you are.”

We were ready to leave in a couple of minutes. Miriam asked Betty to come with us, but she said her place was there, and she wouldn’t leave.

“By the way, Miriam, have you been by your house?”

“Why, no, I just assumed it was trashed by now, along with all of the other houses. We were surprised to see the church in one piece.”

“It’s still standing. I was over there this morning. I like to walk around in the morning, to keep fit. Anyway, I can’t tell anyone has bothered it. Alphonse’s house is gone, as you probably noticed, and so is Milo’s. Yours is the only one.”

“We’ll have to come back and check it out. It’s about time we moved out of those caves anyway. Right now, we’d better head back up the hill.”

We said our goodbyes, and went outside to bundle up the guns. It was still a bit clumsy carrying all of the weapons, but it was much easier than it would have been. We were almost out of the graveyard, at the lower end, when we heard blood-chilling howl. It sounded a little like a wolf, only we didn’t have any wolves in West Virginia.

All of us stopped dead, and turned to look toward the direction of the sound. Up the hill, at the far edge of the graveyard, we saw a massive, hulking form. As we watched, the creature raised his head toward the sky and let out another savage howl. My first thought was that it was after Betty, but it made no move to enter the graveyard. After a few minutes, during which we stood glued to the spot, it turned, and lumbered away into the dark shadows of the trees.

“What *was* that?” Miriam whispered, after moments of silence.

“I was hoping you would know. Any ideas, Randy?”

The teenager shook his head and shrugged, with his usual talkativeness.

We stood a few minutes more, and turned to go, wondering if we would see the thing again on our way home. Every shadow was ominous, and we jumped at every noise, but nothing else happened on the trip home. The only good part about the experience was that it made us forget about the loads we carried.

One of our young scouts met us as we neared the caves again. He was nervous, and came close to shooting first and asking questions after. A quick word from Randy reassured him, and he helped us carry the weapons into the caves.

The next day passed with no word from George. We prayed for him around the clock, dividing the day up into two-hour segments. At least one person was praying at all times. We determined to keep that going until George returned, or until the Lord told us to stop.

During the quiet hours of waiting, I continued to get reacquainted with my family, especially my daughter and my sister. The hard, bitter edge I had known for so long in Lisa was gone. She had a sweetness about her that raised a lump in my throat whenever I was around her. I had trouble accepting that this was the same person I had known just days before. It occurred to me, finally, that she really wasn't the same person, and neither was I. Miriam had talked about that when we first came, but it came home to me just then.

“That’s scripture, Brother mine. Second Corinthians 5:17 says, ‘If any man is in Christ, he is a new creation. Old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.’ Both of you are new creations. It warms my heart every time I see the two of you together, especially when she wraps her arms around you.

“That does bring something up, though. Both of you are new Christians, and you need to be grounded in the Word. We’ll start our own Bible study meeting, tonight before we go to bed.”

That evening, I opened a Bible for the first time in almost forty years. I was amazed at some of the things I read. I couldn’t remember ever seeing them before, though I had read the Scriptures extensively when I was young. That was a requirement in our home. Lisa had never seen a Bible until

she came to the caves; we were both like kids in a proverbial candy store. Miriam had difficulty in getting us to focus on one passage. Finally, she decided just to give us some pointers about Bible study.

“The truths of the Word are spiritually discerned. That’s why you’re seeing things you never saw in the Bible before, Henry. Don’t just read the Bible like it’s a book. Ask the Lord to show you something from each passage you can use to apply to your own life. Every time you read a certain passage, you’ll find something different and new. If you do have a question about something, I’m here. I’m no Bible scholar, but I’ve been in the Word for a long time. If I don’t know the answer, don’t worry; some things we won’t understand this side of glory. We just have to accept and trust that our God knows what he’s doing.”

It was late when Lisa and I left the campfire. She went to take her turn in our prayer vigil, and I went inside the cave to get a few hours of sleep before my turn came again. Some time later, I didn’t know exactly how, I woke up with a start, sitting bolt upright. I heard someone else stir close by.

“Did you sense something, too?” Miriam’s whisper sounded loud in my ears.

“Something’s going on, and I think it involves George. Let’s go see who’s praying right now.”

I grabbed my flashlight, and we slipped out of the cave, trying not to wake the others. The cook fire was banked for the night, and afforded no light. I flicked on my flashlight once we made it outside. Hearing a soft rustling behind us, I turned to see Lisa coming out behind us, rubbing sleep from her eyes.

“Who’s in the prayer closet,” I asked, stepping toward her to give her a hug.

“Missy. I just got to sleep when something woke me up. Evidently, whatever it was woke you all up, too.”

“Let’s go join her.”

The four of us prayed together for about an hour, our hands clasped together in a tight circle. When the release came, we all felt it at once. An almost physical weight lifted off of me.

“It’s okay now, whatever the problem was,” Miriam said. “We can all sleep now, including you, Missy. George will be coming back to us soon.”