

Chapter Thirteen

George came back to us late the following morning. Randy found him walking up an old logging road near the caves. We smothered him with hugs and kisses. I could hardly believe it was really him, in spite of our prayers the night before. I just had to touch him to make sure he was real, and not some apparition. Miriam waited until the excitement died down some, then came to give him her own quiet greeting.

We could hardly wait to hear his story. When he mentioned the outlaws who had captured him, Miriam said, with her usual talent for understatement, “We heard stories about them. We knew they were somewhere in the area. We think Hector and his bunch were part of that outfit.”

George had been captured when his curiosity drew him too close to the outlaw encampment, a small village to hear him describe it. He had actually hit one of the outlaws over the head with a block of firewood, but was caught again as he tried to escape.

“I didn’t realize it, but the Lord did have a purpose for my being there. The boss of that bunch is a white-haired African-American woman. She called me a brother, because we both have the same color of skin, but she’s no sister of mine. The only reason I’m still alive is that she has some sort of superstitious belief in the power of prayer. Her son, Robbie, was mistakenly shot by the same Security Police patrol that chased me. A case of mistaken identity, I suspect, since she’s in tight with the local authorities.

“Anyway, she ordered me to pray for him, and told me that, if he died, so would I. If he survived, she would let me go. I was glad to pray for him, and I had no doubt the Lord was doing a work there. I could sense the Lord at work when I laid my hands on him, and prayed. He was in bad shape.

They sent me to spend the night in some kind of tool shed, guarded by a surly sort named Hicks. Late at night, I woke up hearing some sort of commotion outside, including a lot of screaming, yelling, and cursing. It got quiet after that, but I was sure I could hear something moving around outside.

“A really bad smell came through the door of the shed, and I immediately recognized what it was. Seconds later, something splintered the door like it was paper, and Green came crashing into the shed. He was very much alive, and looked worse than every nightmare I’ve ever had. He told me I was going to die, and I believed him.

“I still have trouble believing what happened next. A huge angel materialized right there in front of me, between me and Green. He didn’t speak to Green, but to the demon who possesses him. The thing was afraid; Green made all kinds of threats, telling me it wasn’t over, but he turned around and left. The angel disappeared.

“The next morning, they told me Robbie had survived the night. Not only had he survived, but he was doing remarkably well. Boss Richards, as she calls herself, said it was just coincidence he had survived, but she kept her word about letting me go. The boy’s wife did stop me before I left, to thank me, and it wouldn’t surprise me if both she and Robbie come to know the Lord.”

We told him about being awakened the night before, and all of us agreed that must have been the time Green had attacked him. We also agreed that the apparition we saw in the graveyard must have been Green. The idea of what he could have done to us chilled me to the bone, and I wondered what had stopped him.

That night was a pleasant one. George shared more with us about his home in Pikeville, Kentucky. After his wife’s death, and the burning of his house by hoodlums, he had taken shelter with his pastor, Marvin Reynolds, and his wife, Martha. The neighborhood where they lived had been spared the destruction of the earthquake, and the hail and fire that followed after.

The little church body Marvin pastured commissioned him as a missionary. He didn’t know exactly where he was supposed to go, but he did know it was somewhere to the north. The first night out, he had prayed for and ministered to a man that had been beaten and left for dead. Not only did the man recover, but he was saved, and went back to help in whatever way he could with Marvin’s congregation. Miriam was especially thrilled to learn that the man was Bob McCrattick, who had falsely accused Hank Crandall of molesting him years before.

“I’m afraid for my brethren there. The sheriff, Max Trundle, is a Christian, but he won’t be in office for long. He and his son-in-law, Bob McCrattick, are the only real protection, in a human sense, that the little church there has. I know the Lord is their real protection, but I feel like I should be back there, too.”

The mention of Max Trundle brought back more memories of Hank Crandall. Miriam shared a bit of Hank’s story with George. He thought he may have met him years before, but wasn’t sure.

The next morning, one of our scouts came running breathlessly into the clearing. A band of outlaws was nearby. They appeared to be searching for someone or something, very deliberately. Once again, George volunteered to go out and draw them off. This time I was determined he wouldn’t go alone.

“These are my people. It’s not right for you to take all the risks while we do nothing.”

“But your prayer support is the main thing I need. It was because of your prayers I made it back here.”

“Don’t argue with me, because it won’t do you any good and we’re wasting time. Let’s go.”

We heard them talking before we reached the logging road. One of them was giving orders.

“You two follow the logging road down that way; see if you see any sign of tracks. Travis, Leroy, climb up that ridge and see if there’s any smoke or other signs. Charlie and I will keep on in this direction. We’ll meet back here. Remember this is a scouting party. Unless we find easy pickings, we don’t try anything on our own.”

We hid behind a brush pile. A few minutes later, we saw two men walking toward us. Evidently George recognized them. Before I could stop him, he stepped out of our hiding place.

Their first startled reaction is to raise the guns they carry, but one of them said, in a low voice, “That’s the one who prayed for you.”

The other man immediately lowered his gun. He looked around, a bit nervously, and said, almost in a whisper, “The others are still close. Let’s go somewhere so we can talk.”

George motioned me to come and made quick introductions. One of the men was Charlie, the one he had conked on the head, and the other was Robbie, the one he had prayed for. George and I led them part way back to the caves, until George was satisfied we had gone far enough to talk.

“I’m glad to see you’re up and about so soon,” he told Robbie. “Just a couple or three days ago you almost died.”

“Well, you know the Lord healed me. He did a complete job of it. My mother may not believe it, but I know it’s true. I saw the Lord come and touch me. Libbie and I have decided we believe in Jesus as our Savior and Charlie believes, too. We’ve been praying we would find some Christians who would teach us what we need to do.”

“Well, you’ve come to the right place. The problem is, how are you going to keep your mother and the others from destroying the Christians here and killing you, too?”

“My mother is not nearly as bad as she pretends to be. She doesn’t believe in murder. She robs people, yes, but in her mind she does it to survive. Anyway, Charlie and I won’t tell. All we ask is for someone to meet us in the same place every once in a while, so we can ask questions and learn about the Lord and the Bible.”

“Have you repented of your sins?”

“Oh, yes, we did that yesterday. That much we knew. What do we do now?”

“You need to study the Word, the Bible. Do you have one?”

“Believe it or not, my mother does. She says it’s a good luck charm. The only problem is, she guards it like a hawk. The minute it’s gone, she’ll know.”

Miriam had given me a pocket New Testament. I figured they needed it more than I did. I offered it to Robbie, who took it gladly.

George spent the next hour talking with about basic Christian beliefs: God as Creator, the doctrine of original sin, the idea of atonement, God’s grace and the idea of the Trinity. Robbie had a question about the Holy Spirit.

“You mean, when we become Christians, the Holy Spirit lives inside us, and He’s actually right there all the time?”

“That’s right. He’s with us right now.”

“Wow!” He was quiet for a while. I had no doubt both of them had had genuine conversion experiences. Something inside me just felt right about them.

Robbie broke the silence finally, “We’d better get back. You all can follow us so you can tell the others we left. Can we meet again soon?”

“I’m sure Henry will come. I have to leave, because the Lord has work for me somewhere else.” That last part, about leaving, was news to me. I gave George a hard look, but his attention was on the other two men.

Robbie nodded. “I’ll miss you, but I know the Lord needs you. If there’s ever any way I can show my thanks, let me know. We won’t pick a certain day to come; just keep an eye out for us.”

We shared a hug, and George and I followed the two new converts down the hill as far as our hiding place. Robbie and Charlie went on. Two of the outlaws were waiting for them, and the other two came back about ten minutes later. They all reported finding nothing out of the ordinary.

“I could have sworn I saw smoke from somewhere in this area,” one of the men protested, “but I guess I could have been wrong.”

“We’ll try back later on,” Robbie replied. “Maybe two or three of us can come back over this way and spend more time looking for signs. We may just have to start going farther to find anything; people are all moving away from this whole area. Okay, let’s head home and tell Ma we came up dry.”

Back at the caves, I asked George about his plans to leave us.

“Did you mean what you said about leaving? You’re going?”

George nodded his head. “It’s always sad to leave people you love, but the Lord has made it clear to me that my work here is done. You all are strong enough in faith now to make it on your own. You and Miriam will lead this flock well.”

“Miriam is the strong one. I’m mostly a follower. I’m not good at making decisions.”

“You’re selling yourself short. You acted very decisively in going with me this morning. You’ll do what needs to be done. How are your food supplies holding out?”

“We have enough corn to make it through the winter and probably the spring, but after that I don’t know. The Lord will supply our need when the time comes. If He wants to call us home then, so much the better for us all.”

When the time came to say good-bye, George looked really depressed, and nervous. He spoke first to Miriam. “Everyone I ever loved has died. Either that or I’ve had to go off and leave them.”

I appreciated my sister’s strength even more just then. She took one of his big hands in both of hers, and leaned forward to kiss him on the cheek. “I’ve had my own share of good-byes, Brother. But, you know, the same Holy Spirit lives in us all. If He doesn’t permit us to see each other again in this flesh, I’ll meet you in the northeast corner in Heaven. We’ll spend a few million years just praising God together. The Lord has work for you elsewhere; our work is right here.

“Where are you going now?” I asked him.

“The Lord says I still have work in Beckley.”

“No!” I was astounded he would even suggest it. “They’ll kill you if you go back there. Tell him, Miriam. He just can’t.”

She didn’t help me out. “He knows the danger, but if the Lord told him to go there, he has no choice. God will watch over him until he accomplishes what he is supposed to do. Anyway, I don’t believe he’ll die in Beckley.”

I didn’t say anything more for a while. Later, I tried to persuade George to take me with him, pointing out that I knew Beckley well. Both he and Miriam discouraged that idea. When night fell, he set out alone. I didn’t sleep well that night. I couldn’t understand why Miriam was so much at peace about his leaving.

The next day, when I had settled down a bit, we had more of a chance to talk about Charlie and Robbie. A peculiar look came over Miriam’s face.

“Did Charlie tell you his last name?”

“No, he sure didn’t. Why?”

She persisted. “What did he look like?”

“Medium build, about my height, I guess. I’m not good at details.”

“What about his hair. What color was it?”

“Uh – oh, I do remember that, now that you mention it. He had red hair, pretty bright as I recall.

He was wearing a cap, but I could see his hair underneath. It was long.”

She sucked in a breath. “Charlie Hansford. It *has* to be him.”

I didn’t make the connection. “Who’s he? Is he related to us somehow?”

“No, no. Charlie – you remember, the one I chased away. I told you he joined an outlaw band. I hadn’t heard anything about him in years. I never thought I’d see him again.”

I grinned. “Well, you’re the Bible teacher in this outfit, not me. I’ll guess you’ll get a chance to see him before long.”

She stuck her tongue out at me, and blushed to the roots of her hair. I could tell she was more pleased about the idea than she cared to admit.

“Thirty years is a long time. He probably doesn’t even remember me.”

“No one could *possibly* ever forget you, Sis. I haven’t seen you turn such a shade of red since I used to tease you, when you were a kid.”

She turned on her heel and walked hurriedly away, but not before I saw her smile. She almost ran into Lisa, who was coming from the opposite direction. Lisa arched an eyebrow questioningly at me, as she approached. I stepped up to her, and whispered in her ear, “Miriam’s got a boyfriend.”

She stared at me, astonished, and I took her by the elbow and walked with her to explain. I think she was even happier about the prospect than I was. She and Miriam had become quite close over the past several days. Looking at the two of them together, you would think they had known each other for years, not for just a week.

Robbie and Charlie returned three days later. Randy brought us word that they were waiting for us. I never saw Miriam so nervous, and I never saw her pay such care to her appearance. She borrowed

Missy's mirror, something I hadn't seen her do before, and carefully brushed and combed her hair. I had to remind her that her students were waiting for her anxiously, one of them in particular. She gave me a glare of mock anger as we left the clearing. We walked down the hill rather more rapidly than necessary.

The meeting between my sister and her only true love is one of my most precious memories. The two men stood us as we approached. When Miriam and Charlie saw each other, it was if all of the intervening years had passed away. Charlie stood for an instant, his mouth working, but unable to speak. He held his arms out, and Miriam all but ran into them. For the next ten minutes, the two of them just stood there, locked in each other's arms. They were laughing and crying at once, kissing like teenagers in between rearing back to look at each other.

It was embarrassing to watch. Robbie and I looked at each other, and both of us turned away. They deserved at least that much privacy. When they finally broke their clinch, they told us we could turn around. We didn't get much Bible study done that day.

We did pick up some interesting information, though. There was a perfectly good reason no one had bothered the church or our home place.

"I've been down there scouting several times," Charlie told us. "Every time we go, we see armed guards all around both places. I mean, these guys are *big*. We have no idea who they're with, but we never wanted to mess with them. Any idea who they are?"

Miriam had a theory.