

Chapter Fourteen

We went back to the home place early one morning a few days later. It was overgrown, but otherwise it looked much as I remembered it. As we walked into the kitchen from the back porch; I could almost see Mama there at the sink, at the window, looking back up the hill.

Nothing had been touched; a layer of dust lay over the furniture and the hardwood floors, but otherwise it was as if we were coming back after a trip to town. I couldn't resist going down the hall to my old bedroom, while Miriam rummaged around in the kitchen. Things had definitely changed there; judging by the color scheme the room belonged to a female member of the family. The bed coverings were pink, and the top of the dresser was full of feminine paraphernalia.

"Lost your room, didn't you, Bro?"

I jumped a little at the sound of Miriam's voice. Smiling, I turned toward her.

"Well, it's like they always say, whoever they are: Use it or lose it. Did you take over the space?"

"Actually, Missy and I both used this one for a while, when Hank and Emily stayed here. After they went to their own house, Missy moved back to her own room. This was my room from the time I was old enough to have one."

I was silent for a few minutes, remembering. Something came back to my mind from earlier in the day.

"You mentioned on the way down here that you thought the Lord meant for all of us to come back down here to live. You think we could fit everyone in?"

"I don't see why not." She had given it some thought already. "There are eighteen of us, and several of those are small children. There are four bedrooms here, and we could put people in the living room and dining room. It would be tight fit, but we could get everyone here. There's a lot more space than we have in the caves, really."

"I guess that's right. Do you think we'll have any trouble convincing the others?"

Her jaw had a stubborn set to it I had seen a few other times lately. “I don’t plan to give in this time, like I did before. Things have changed now, but if any of them insist on staying in the caves, they can do it by themselves. I know that seems hard, but I have to do what I believe the Lord wants me to do.”

I kissed her on the cheek. “You’ll get no argument from me.” Her face relaxed, and she grinned.

“It is just so *great* to have a big brother around. You have no idea how much better that makes me feel. Anyway, there’s the church, too... I wonder if Betty would want to come over here to stay with us. She must get pretty lonely over there.”

“We could always go over and ask, before we head back up the mountain.”

A mischievous gleam came to my sister’s eyes. “She’s about your age, you know, and unattached. You’d get a chance to know her a lot better if she lived over here with us.”

It was my turn to be embarrassed; I hadn’t blushed in many years, but I could feel my face turning red. I decided the best course of action would be to play along.

“But can she cook? I could never fall for any woman who doesn’t cook like Mama did.”

She laughed, in a more relaxed way than I could remember hearing. “Well, there’s one sure way to find out. The kitchen still has all the cooking utensils we left behind. Meantime, let’s check out the rest of the house.”

We finished our quick inspection, then went outside. The outbuildings were intact as well, and the barn could be used for sleeping in a pinch. The condition of the buildings was no surprise after what we had seen in the house, but the Lord did have one more surprise in store for us outside.

As we closed the double doors of the barn, we had the sound of barking behind us. We turned to see a sleek golden Lab come bounding toward us, its tail wagging furiously.

“Lady? Is that really you?” Miriam took off running to meet the dog, which all but knocked her over in its enthusiasm.

Once she recovered, and cleaned off some of the doggy slobber from her face, Miriam turned back toward me.

“This is Lady, our last family pet. The day we left, I couldn’t find her anywhere. I thought she had either run off or been killed. Apparently, someone has been taking good care of her.”

I saw that someone over Miriam’s shoulder. Betty was walking through the yard toward us.

“I think I know who it was,” I said, pointing toward our approaching visitor. Miriam turned in that direction, and Betty threw up her hand in greeting.

“Hello, brethren! Lady here kept insisting we go out. She stayed with me until we got close, then she broke away. I forgot to mention her in all of the excitement over at the church. She’s been with me for months.”

I had a better chance to look at Betty this time. She really was a lovely woman, I thought, and didn’t look anywhere near her reported age. She had neatly arranged brown hair, with only a hint of gray. About my height, she was trim and fit, and I liked just looking at her. Realizing I was staring, I quickly looked away, feeling my face turn red again. Miriam didn’t notice, but I was sure Betty did. She just smiled, and didn’t seem to mind.

“Hello, my sister.” Miriam walked over the other woman, and gave her a hug, but I held back, still embarrassed. “We were just talking about you.”

“Something good, I hope.”

“Nothing but. We were talking about moving the family down here to the house, since the Lord has been watching over the place. Have you seen any really big men on guard around here and at the church?”

Betty smiled again, warming me down to my socks. “You must mean the angels. I’ve seen them a few times, yes. The outlaws and the Security Police won’t come near the house or the church. How did you learn about them?”

“Two of the outlaws were saved recently, and they told us what they’ve seen here.”

I saw my chance to even the score a bit with my sister. “That’s right, Sister Betty, and Miriam here is *really* sweet on one of those outlaws.”

It was my sister’s turn to blush. Betty was curious.

“Anyone I know?”

“You may remember him,” Miriam replied, not trying to deny what I had just said. “He hung around here a lot when we were teenagers. His name is Charlie Hanson.”

“Why, yes, I remember Charlie well. As a matter of fact, and I don’t know why I never told you, he’s related to me.”

Miriam was astonished. “Related? Really? How?”

“His mother was my first cousin. His father murdered her when Charlie was only twelve, but you probably know that story.”

Maybe Miriam knew, but I didn’t. “I wasn’t around then. Did the boy see it happen?”

“He not only saw it happen, but he found his father’s gun, and shot him in the head. The authorities ruled it was self-defense, since the man said he was going to kill them all. He beat my poor cousin Beatrice to death, and was starting on one of the girls when Charlie shot him. The kids got split up, and Charlie wound up in a foster home near the high school. He visited me a few times, but my first husband didn’t want him around. He said the boy was a no account, and he wasn’t surprised when Charlie dropped out of school and ran away.”

“You said ‘first husband,’” Miriam responded. “How many times have you been married, Sister Betty.”

She smiled again, and said, “Once.”

Miriam looked at me and grinned. I ignored her.

My sister told me a little more about her rediscovered love. He had saved her from a bully at school at a point when none of the other Camps was around to defend her. They had been sweethearts for two years before she broke off their relationship, though the only dates they had were carefully supervised. Mama and Papa were old-fashioned about dating just as they had been about everything else.

The morning was well spent when we left to return to the caves. Betty agreed that living with other people would be a pleasant change from living alone for so many months. She assured us she could

travel safely back to the church with Lady, who left Miriam reluctantly and a bit sullenly. Miriam had one last question for her as we parted ways at the top of the hill above the house.

“By the way, Sister Betty, can you cook?”

She laughed. “Such a question, Miriam Camp. You’ve eaten my food at church dinners for years. That’s one thing I haven’t forgotten how to do in my old age.”

I saw a chance to redeem myself. “Why, Sister Betty, I don’t think many people forget that much at yours and Miriam’s age. Just wait until you’re as old as I am.”

She turned toward Miriam instead of answering me directly. “I think I like him, Miriam.”

They both laughed, and Betty gave me a quick kiss on the cheek before turning to leave.

Miriam teased me relentlessly on the way back to the caves. I figured I had it coming, considering how I used to tease her, so I just grinned and bore it. Once we got back, Miriam called a family meeting almost at once.

“I just think that, if the Lord has kept the church and the home place safe, he means for them to be uses. I never did agree with the idea of hiding out like a bunch of rabbits, and I still don’t. We’ve had nothing but trouble since we’ve been here.”

Miriam’s voice was a bit louder than usual. It wasn’t so much that she was arguing; no one had really disagreed with what she was saying. She was anxious, though, to get her point across, because she thought she hadn’t done that well in the past. Her main opposition before had come from Homer, but since the incident with Hector all the fight had left him.

This time, no one offered any objection to her proposal. There were questions about how much room there would be for everyone, but not because they thought that was an obstacle. One question we hadn’t really considered was the logistical problem of getting our food supplies back down the hill. When the family first moved to the caves, those who were leaving helped with the moving. We had less to carry now, but there were still several hundred pounds of supplies.

“Miriam and I saw some empty burlap sacks in the barn,” I offered. “The only thing I would know to do would be to make several trips, and take what we can each time. We can leave two or three

on guard while the rest of us are gone. The roundtrip takes about two hours, but we'd wear ourselves out trying to make too many trips in the same day. If we move our personal belongings down first, we can take enough food for that day. If we have time, we can come back for another trip"

I wasn't used to taking charge, but it seemed like the right thing to do. Miriam looked at me with a question on her face, then smiled and nodded. "That sounds like a plan. Let's all get our things together. Maybe we can make our first trip down today."

Charlie and Robbie showed up a little later. They wanted to help with the move, but were concerned they would be missed if they were gone too long. There was barely time for Miriam to spend a few minutes alone with Charlie, because she was preoccupied with details of the move.

Just before they left, one of the scouts brought word that a Security Police patrol was once more in the area. Robbie assured us he would take care of it, and an hour later Charlie came back to give us the all clear. We set out for the home place late in the afternoon. There would be no time for a return trip until the next day.

It was a great feeling to sleep in actual bed that night, even if I did have to share it with Randy. I went to sleep almost immediately, waking up only once because of Randy's loud snoring. I thought it was a freight train at first. Ellen had snored, too, but I don't remember it's being so loud. Since I was passed most nights back then, I wouldn't have notice anyway.

Early the next morning, we headed back to the caves. We made repeated trips up and back for the next two days. The sacks we found made things easier to carry, but the loads were still heavy. All of us were glad to leave for the last time with the last load; the place was cursed, so far as I was concerned.

Our sleeping arrangements were a bit cramped, and we had to use the living room and dining room floor for some of our younger folk. No one minded, though; sleeping indoors was an unbelievable luxury after living in the damp, drafty caves for so many months.

The winter was almost past, but there was still a chill in the air. Our house had a big wood stove in the dining room, and once we cut some wood we kept a slow-burning fire in it. Gathering around the

stove on cold evenings became a favorite pastime for us, just as we often assembled on the front porch in the warmth of the day.

As promised, Betty joined us soon after we moved in. She was, in fact, a great cook, considering what she did with the very limited selection of food supplies we had. I was definitely in love.