

Chapter Fifteen

“You know something, Betty,” I asked her as we walked up the hill to the church.

“What’s that, Henry?”

“I think you’re just the prettiest woman I’ve ever seen.”

She laughed in that rich way of hers. “I bet you say that to all the girls – but, thank you!”

She kissed me on the cheek, and reached to take my hand in hers. I had known her for exactly three weeks, but it seemed as if I had always known her. Just now, I felt like a schoolboy on his first date, suddenly shy and tongue-tied.

Lady ran up the hill in front of us, tail wagging as she sniffed the ground for nothing in particular. Every once in a while she stopped to see if we were still coming, then resumed her meandering. She had the same sweet spirit that Betty and Miriam shared, and she accepted my right to be around from the very first day.

The church didn’t look that special, as you would expect for some place receiving divine protection. It was a plain, white frame building, with an extension on the back. It didn’t have a steeple. As soon as you mounted the front steps, though, you could tell something was different. It was like walking under a sunlamp, or walking out into the sunlight from an air-conditioned room. There was that same feeling of being safe and secure that I felt in the home place.

We had decided to have our first worship service since the return the following Sunday. Betty and I were checking to make sure everything was clean in the old building, and ready for use. That part was easy; what really frightened me was that I was expected to lead the service. Miriam insisted it be done by a man, and I was the only candidate. She pointed out that I grew up in a Christian home, and the fact I had returned to the Lord only a month or so ago didn’t mean I was totally ignorant about the Word.

“You don’t have to preach a sermon. Nothing fancy like that. Just lead the service, and call on other people to pray or lead singing. Share a little of your testimony; not everyone has heard it yet. If you

want to read a few verses of Scripture, and tell us what they mean to you, that's fine. Remember, we're all family, and nobody's going to judge you or give you a grade."

Easy for her to say. I would rather have spoken to a bunch of heathen than to those who knew me well. Once we were in the church, I mentioned my concern to Betty.

"I'm not afraid of many things since the Lord came back into my life, Betty, but the thought of speaking in front of my family scares me to death."

She faced me, hands on hips, a look of mock disapproval on her face. "Henry Camp! You should be ashamed! Do you think God is so weak he can't help you with something like this, after all the things he's saved you from?"

I was more than a little embarrassed. "Well, it's just that all of these people matter so much to me, like you do, and I don't want to disappoint any of you."

"Ah, but Henry, that's what so great about it. You don't have to please any of us, not even me."

I was puzzled. "I know, but—"

"The only person you have to please is the Lord. You just trust him, and let him use you. If you please God, everything else will fall into place."

I felt tremendously relieved. "That makes me feel a *lot* better! I could just kiss you."

"Well, why don't you?"

That made me blush again. She saved me the effort by stepping up to me, and kissing me full on the lips. When I put my arms around her, she made no attempt to pull back. Minutes later, we came up for air, and she smiled in a way I hadn't seen before. She didn't try to remove my arms from around her waist.

"I knew from the first time I saw you that night," she said breathlessly. "Something stirred in my spirit, and I knew. All of those years alone, even when I was married."

"I'll have to say it was a little later for me, but I did think you were attractive the first time I saw you," I responded. "It wasn't till the second time that I knew something was happening. I'm the same

way; I lived with a woman for almost forty years whom I didn't love. It's sad it took so long for us to meet, but I'm just glad it finally happened."

It took us rather longer to clean the church than we expected. As soon as we got back, and saw Miriam, she looked at me, then at Betty, and back at me again. Her whole face smiled.

"The two of you are lit up like Christmas trees. It must be love. No – don't try to deny it. It's been coming since the two of you first met."

I just grinned, but Betty blushed. It was the first time I'd seen that reaction from her. I had been doing most of the blushing lately. There was a spring in my step the rest of that day, and I found myself humming a lot.

Miriam wasn't the only one who noticed something was different. That evening, Lisa took me by the arm, and told me to walk with her. That wasn't unusual, but the twinkle I saw in her eyes was.

As we reached the lower limits of the yard, she stopped, and looked up at me.

"Daddy dearest, are you in love?"

"Is it that obvious?" I saw no reason to deny it.

"Yep. I'm thrilled for you, for both of you. Betty is very sweet, and she and I are already becoming great friends. Have you proposed yet?"

I laughed, in a giddy sort of way. "Slow down, little girl. We've hardly just met. Besides, there's not a preacher to be found any more."

She laughed, too, and bent forward to kiss me. "The Lord will provide. You deserve a good woman, after what you had to put up with for all of those years. I've forgiven Mommy, but she really did make our lives a living Hell for all of those years."

Thinking about Ellen was painful, and my smile vanished. Lisa quickly turned the conversation to Betty again, and we walked back to the house smiling and laughing again. I saw Betty on the porch, and she made room for me on the swing.

Sunday morning came more quickly than I liked or expected. It was a beautiful sunny day, in spite of the dimness of sunlight we had come to expect. As small as the church was, we barely filled up

the first couple of rows of pews. It made me realize how far the family fortunes had fallen over the past few years.

We decided to have Sunday school first, just like in the old days. Lisa was a marvel with the children, and she took them into their old classroom in the back of the church. The teenagers went downstairs with Betty, who had never taught before. She had protested when Miriam first asked her, but finally agreed that if I could deliver the message, she could certainly teach a class. The adults stayed in the sanctuary, like always, and Miriam taught our class. She had filled that role for years, and she was quite good.

Sunday school hardly started when it was over, it seemed to me. The children and teenagers all filed back in, and we had a closing prayer. When Miriam motioned me to the front, I was surprised to see Betty move to the old piano. No one else thought it was remarkable, so she must have done it before.

Reaching back in my mind all the way to my childhood, and I somehow knew what needed to be done, and in what order. I asked Lisa to do the opening prayer. She looked a bit surprised, but pleased, too. A sweet spirit settled over the service as she invited the Lord into our midst, and asked Him to direct us in our worship. She also asked him to give me the right words to say, and to strengthen me. The last shreds of apprehension left me.

After she finished, a hush settled on us for a few minutes, then I asked for a request for a hymn. Miriam asked us to sing the old Charles Wesley hymn, *Amazing Love*. It had been a favorite of Papa and Mama. When Betty played a few chords of song as an introduction, I was surprised again; she was a very accomplished pianist. I wasn't the world's greatest judge of musical talent, but I knew it when I heard it.

Miriam led the song, with her strong soprano voice. I just sang the words without giving them much thought until we got the last verse. What we were singing then touched me so deeply that my eyes brimmed with tears, and I could hardly see.

*Long my imprisoned spirit lay
Fast bound in chains of sin's dark night.
My eyes diffused a quickening ray.
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light.
My chains fell off and I was free.*

I rose, went forth, and followed thee.

Those words described me so perfectly, that I could hardly believe they had been penned hundreds of years before. When we finished the song, it took me several minutes to recover my composure. I wasn't the only one; most of the others were drying their own eyes.

I asked for testimonies then, because that's what we always used to do. One by one, all of the adults and teenagers, and even some of the children, stood up to speak. Most of them just wanted to thank God for watching over us during the past months of crisis, and for bringing us back together as the body of Christ. Miriam's testimony was a bit longer, but along the same lines. The main difference in her case was that she thanked the Lord for bringing Charlie, Lisa, and me back into their lives.

When my daughter got up, my heart skipped a beat. I realized for the first time how breathtakingly beautiful she was; I had always just taken her appearance for granted. She looked directly at me when she spoke.

"I'm thankful to my Lord Jesus Christ for delivering me out of terrible bondage, and for saving my soul. Most of all, I'm thankful he gave my daddy back to me. What we share together now is what I wanted us to share when I was young. I'm sorry for all of the years we missed, but that's all in the past. What matters is that we have each other now, and that we both know the Lord. I love you, Daddy, and I know the Lord still has great things in store for you. I am so thrilled and blessed that he has brought someone else into your life."

She blew a kiss at me, and sent me a dazzling smile as she sat down. I started crying again; I just couldn't help it. That started another round of weeping around the room. It was hard getting composed enough to sing another song. The logical one to sing was *Standing on the Promises*.

*Standing on the promises, I cannot fail
When the howling storms of doubt and fear assail
By the living Word of God I shall prevail
Standing on the promise of God.*

I had doubts about taking an offering, but Miriam pointed out that whatever we had was God's anyway. I was surprised that everyone put at least something in the collection plate, even the children. Homer took up the offering, and said a prayer of blessing over it.

There was always a special song before the sermon, so I asked if anyone wanted to sing a solo. Betty immediately began playing, and sang a song I had never heard before, *When He Was on the Cross, I Was on His Mind*. Her voice wasn't as strong as Miriam's, but it was clear and sweet.

When she finished, she said, "I'd like to say a few words before Henry comes to speak. This has been my church for over thirty years, and you all are the only real family have. The Lord saw fit to leave me here as a caretaker while you were away. He was faithful not only in keeping me safe, along with this building, but in providing for my needs. To keep from being lonely, he sent me Lady to keep me company. She sometimes would go off for a day or two, but she always came back.

"I was married for many years to a man I didn't love, and one who never came to know the Lord. He wasn't mean to me, and by the world's standards he was good man. In the Lord's eyes, he died a sinner, and he refused every effort I made to bring him to Christ. We had two children; both of them left home at an early age. I haven't heard from either of them in years.

"Henry is God's special gift to me in my old age. All of you know by now how we feel about each other; there are no secrets in this crowd. Miriam wouldn't hear of it." She smiled here. "I know the Lord is using Henry, and that he has some special things to say through him. Henry, my love, may God bless the fruit of your mouth."

I couldn't speak for a few minutes; for the third time that morning I was all choked up again. When I finally could get a few words out, I croaked, "Let us pray."

After a very brief prayer, basically just asking for the Lord to use me, I read the Bible verses I had selected. The choice was an easy one: I read the parable of the prodigal son. That fit me perfectly, except that I hadn't been given a monetary inheritance to squander. Instead, I had squandered about forty-five years of my life.

“I don’t think any of you were here the last time I spoke here,” I started. “Homer was, but he would have been very young. Back then, I gave a phony little speech about having learned my lesson. I was punished for defiling the Lord’s house, and for desecrating his Word. My repentance was phony, but the church accepted me back into fellowship. This time, I come to you as a new man, a new creation according to Second Corinthians 5:17. The Lord truly has restored me, and you welcomed me with open arms.

“I could spend the next hour and more telling you about all of the years of depravity I lived through, but there’s no need to glorify the past. My wife, too, was lost, just as I was, and my memories of her are not pleasant. The two of us made Lisa’s life a living Hell, and I almost lost her as a result.

“When George Alfred found me, I was at the bottom of the pit. All of my energy was directed to getting more booze, so I could pass out and forget all of the pain for a while. I did still care about Lisa, but more out of guilt than anything else. I was trying to see her when somebody conked me on the head for breaking line. When I woke up, George was bending over me. The Lord used him to save my soul, and my daughter as well. When I think of all the wasted years, I weep, but the Lord is gracious. He promises he will restore all of the years the locust has eaten. All of the moments I have with you, however long they last, are precious to me.

“We live in a world gone insane. I truly believe we’re in the Great Tribulation; all of the signs point to it. Whatever the Lord has in store for us, he will never leave us. No matter how long or short the time remaining for us is, I know this: We’ll have eternity together.

“All of you are precious to me, but I give thanks to God especially for the three women who love me best. My sister Miriam is a rock, and her prayers for me over the years brought me through the fires of Hell. Lisa is my light and joy, and I praise God every day for her sweet spirit and lovely face. And, late in life, the Lord has seen fit to give me a soul mate; as soon as we can find a preacher, I’ll ask her to be my wife.”

The handkerchiefs and shirtsleeves were busy, and my own eyes filled yet again. The rest of what I said is a blur; I talked for a while about the prodigal son, and about how his story applied to me.

The words weren't important; I had already said what I wanted to say, from the heart. We had a final hymn and prayer, then we all rushed together to hug and laugh and cry. At one point, Lisa, Miriam, Betty and I were all in a big huddle. At the last, Betty pulled me aside, and kissed me all over my face.

I had no idea what time it was when we left, and didn't really care. When we finally made our way outside, though, we had concerns other than the time of day. Three people were waiting for us there.