

## ***Chapter Eighteen***

We had a double wedding. As the only virgin of the four of us, Miriam was dressed in a white dress. She was gorgeous, but no more so than my own bride in her navy blue outfit. We gave Stan a whole week to recover before we had him perform the ceremony. That gave us enough time to prepare for the simple ceremony.

Kissing Betty when the deed was done was like bathing in honey. We took so long that the others began teasing us about coming up for air. Someone still had a Polaroid camera from somewhere, and took pictures of all of us. Robbie doubled as best man for both Charlie and I, while Carol was the matron of honor. Both of the brides had bouquets, made from our own flowers; Lisa caught Miriam's, and Mary Kay snagged Betty's. It broke my heart to think that neither would ever have much of a chance to get married.

I never quite figured out where Carol found the ingredients for the wedding cake, though I suspect Robbie and Libby had something to do with it. Regardless of where it came from, it was lovely. None of us had eaten cake for many, many months, and it tasted like manna from heaven.

We had prepared sleeping areas for our married couples in the barn. Using lumber from some of the other outbuildings, we constructed four bedrooms, two in the loft and two on the main floor. They were separated from each other by a discrete distance. We didn't have beds to spare, but the women made mattresses from sheets, and stuffed them with straw and old clothes. Compared to the floor of the caves, it was the ultimate luxury.

Betty and I didn't sleep much that first night as man and wife, and I'm sure Charlie and Miriam didn't either. I had never made love with a woman before that I actually loved; it made all the difference. All of the nights of passion I shared with Ellen seemed like no more than empty lust, which is what they really were.

We slept until noon; no one bothered us. When we finally roused ourselves, got dressed, and went to the house, there was the expected round of teasing. Miriam and Charlie didn't come out until an

hour later, and we joined in a bit of the banter. Next to my wedding day, this was the single sweetest day of my life. We did very little but sit around talking and laughing with those we loved the most. The pain and trouble of the outside world seemed very far away.

Reality came back that night with a vengeance. Some time in the middle of the night, there was a knock on our door. I woke up immediately, and hurriedly got up and dressed. Robbie was at the door, flashlight in hand.

“What is it, Robbie, what’s wrong?”

“I’m not sure, Brother. The Lord woke me up, and I have the strongest feeling that something terrible has happened. It involves my mother. We need to pray.”

I stepped into the hall, closing the door behind me. I heard Betty stirring inside, and knew she must be awake too. Another figure came toward us, and Charlie appeared in the dim beam Robbie sent his way.

“Something’s wrong,” he echoed. “The Lord jolted me awake.”

The door opened behind me, and Betty stepped out. Miriam and Libbie joined us in a few minutes, then Carol and Stan made an appearance. At Stan’s suggestion, we knelt together right there on the floor, and asked for the Lord’s guidance. By the time we finished, we knew what we needed to do.

The first thing we decided was to wait for daybreak; the danger at that point in the night was too great for us to venture out. We all tried to go back to sleep, but I don’t think anyone did. At the first hint of daylight, we were up and about. We didn’t need a large party; it was too late for that. The four of us who had gone to Beckley, along with Libby, set out in the direction of the outlaw hideout.

No lookouts called out to us as we approached. Miriam and I had never been there, but the others knew exactly where they were going. Before we even saw anything, we smelled smoke. We hoped it was just normal cook fire and chimney smoke, but we soon confirmed our worst fears. The collection of buildings that had made up the outlaw town was now a collection of smoldering ruins.

There were bodies everywhere, mostly outlaws but also some clad in Security Police uniforms. Some of the people were still alive, but too far-gone for us to help. Their wounds were hideous, and pools of dried and drying blood all but covered the ground.

Robbie ran about from body to body, trying to find his mother. The rest of us just stood there in the midst of the carnage, too shocked to move. We could hear him calling “Mom, where are you?” as he ran around, slipping on the blood and falling more than once. Finally, he stopped, and stooped down, on the opposite side of the camp from where we stood.

“Over here! I’ve found her!” His voice had a desperate ring to it, and something about it stirred us all to action. We made our way carefully over and around bodies to where he stood.

He was cradling a white-haired head in his arms, kissing the woman’s face repeatedly and weeping like a baby. At first I thought she was already dead, but I saw her eyes flicker open. She smiled weakly.

“Hi, Baby. I was afraid I would never see you again. They double-crossed us. Hit us last night with helicopter gun-ships. Never had a chance.”

“You’ll be okay, Mama. I’ll take care of you.”

She gave him that weak smile again. “Not this time, Baby. I was just trying to hang on until you got here. I saw Jesus last night.”

“What do you mean, Mama?”

“I prayed, as I was lying here, and asked God to forgive me. I invited Christ to be my savior, just like you said I should before you left. Jesus was standing right there, where that man is standing now.” She pointed toward me.

“You can’t die, Mama, not now.”

“Don’t worry about me, Baby. I’ll see you again before long. The Lord is calling me; I have to go now.”

She reached her hands up toward Heaven, and slowly let them fall, a smile lighting up the hard features of her face. When her hands reached the ground once more, she was gone.

Robbie was inconsolable; he threw himself down by her side, still stroking her head. We had to drag him away from her finally. Among the ruins, Charlie found a shovel, and we buried her near the camp. I conducted a simple service for her, while the others stood, head bowed, by the grave.

There was no possibility of burying all of the other bodies. Forty or fifty corpses lay strewn about; the few who had been alive when we got there had all died. The best we could think of to do was to gather the bodies into piles, and cover them with rocks and dirt. It was grisly work, and took us all morning. By the time we left in the early afternoon, all of us were covered with blood and dirt.

Randy's younger brother Frank was on guard duty. The poor boy almost went into hysterics when he first saw us, until we assured him we were all okay. We sent him to warn the others, so they wouldn't react the same way.

Betty wouldn't let us into the house, with good reason. She brought a washtub out to us, and we filled it with water from the well. It had to be filled again for each of us; Robbie had his turn first. Several of the girls spent the afternoon cleaning our bloody clothes by hand, we long ceased having electricity for washing machines.

When we finally finished bathing and changing into clean clothes, we got together with Robbie and Libby. We didn't say much; we just wanted to be with Robbie, and let him know we loved him. It was a sad day, but the knowledge that Boss Richards was now in the arms of Jesus made it a lot easier to bear.

Life settled into a new routine after that, for a while anyway. I had never known that being a married man could feel so great. My only concern for our married couples is that one or more of the women might get pregnant; I couldn't conceive of bringing a baby into the kind of world we lived in. I knew there was no possibility with Betty; she was well beyond that age. Miriam was in her mid forties, but becoming pregnant wasn't out of the question for her. Carol had had her tubes tied years before. That left Libby; she and Robbie had been married for five years, and she had never been pregnant. That gave me hope that she never would be. It was a forlorn hope.

The news came about a month after Robbie's mother died. My first clue was seeing the women huddled together, whispering excitedly and giggling. When I saw Betty reach out and touch Libby's belly, I knew beyond any doubt what the secret was. Robbie came up beside me just then.

"What do you suppose all that's about?" he asked.

"Judging by all of the giggling, and seeing my wife touch Libby's belly, I'd say you're going to be a father."

It was as if I'd hit him with a sledgehammer. All of the blood drained from his face, and he stammered, "No, she can't be! Not now, please not now!"

He all but ran across the yard to where the women were huddled, and extracted Libby from them. He dragged her behind him to the barn. She looked back at the others, and shrugged, concern tingeing her joy. Moments louder, we heard the sound of raised voices, first Robbie's then Libby's. The shouting didn't last long. There was a long period of quiet, during which those of us outside stood transfixed, staring at the barn door.

When the two of them finally emerged, they were holding hands, and smiling. Robbie spoke first.

"I'm sorry, Brethren. I have been so afraid of bringing a baby into the world, knowing what he or she would face. Libby pointed out, though, that the life inside her is a gift from God. We have no right to question his providence, or his will. We've committed the baby to him."

Now we could all join in the celebration the women had started earlier. Charlie, Stan, and I took Robbie off to share with him our accumulated wisdom about being a good father. Charlie had never had children either, but that didn't keep him from offering advice. The women, meanwhile, had gone off to talk about--whatever it is they talk about when one of them is pregnant.

I had this uncanny feeling that all of these fears of mine being confirmed was no accident. Maybe God was trying to speak to me, and I was just writing off the feelings as a natural tendency to worry. Something told me that Libby wouldn't be the last of our women to get pregnant; two weeks later Miriam announced she was certain that she was also with child.

Both women had morning sickness in the early weeks of pregnancy, and both made the lives of their spouses miserable in the process. I thought it was all hilarious, and charming, but Robbie and Charlie failed to see the humor in it all. Betty didn't say much, but I could tell she didn't appreciate my attitude.

Stan assumed the role of our pastor. I continued to assist in leading the service, but Stan removed from me the burden of preaching sermons. He was an even newer Christian than I was, but he had the gift of preaching. With no formal religious education, and with only limited knowledge of the Scriptures, he shared truths with us that utterly amazed and thrilled me.

Jenny was another wonder in the Lee family. She had a quick, sharp mind, and a grasp of the truths of Word that exceeded even her father's. She was in perpetual motion; I never saw the child sit still for more than a few minutes at a time, except to listen to her father's sermons. She knew the object of the sermons; Jesus wasn't someone sitting up in Heaven; he was her best friend.

One day, after church, we were sitting on the front porch of the home place, as we always did on Sunday afternoon. Most of the children were playing in the front yard as usual, but Jenny wasn't with them. That wasn't unusual, and her parents expressed no concern beyond asking if anyone had seen her lately. She came out the front door to the porch some time later, and announced she had a message from Jesus; that also wasn't unusual. What she had to say this time, though, was anything but usual.

"He told me that before the end of the year he would bring most of us home to be with him. Those who are left here will have to leave for another place. The babies will return to him first."

Her strong young voice held utter conviction. She didn't seem to realize the significance of what she was saying, but the adults did. We all looked at each other; we had learned not to doubt Jenny's messages from Jesus. What she had just predicted was our deaths, and the timetable. I couldn't imagine what "the other place" might be, or which ones of us would be going there. What puzzled me most was the cryptic reference to the babies; that sounded ominous. Both Miriam and Libby turned pale, and their husbands tried to comfort them. The concern was all too real.

Miriam's miscarriage came first, and Libby lost her baby in the following week. It was almost more than they could bear. Robbie was beside himself with grief. He was angry with God for giving him something, and jerking it back again. Libby sat for hours rocking back and forth, nursing the baby she would never see.

Charlie and Miriam grieved, too, but my sister's faith was unshaken. She stayed with Libby during the worst of her withdrawal into madness. Just as Jenny was the one who brought the first word of the double tragedy, she was the one who brought the word of encouragement. Libby had been in her near catatonic state for several days when Jenny walked up to her and took her hand. She was crying, but her voice was as strong as ever.

"Libby, Jesus says to tell you that your daughter is with him now. Don't cry anymore; you'll see her soon. And, Miriam, your son is there, too. Jesus loves them both, and he took them so they wouldn't have to suffer here. He's holding them both of them in his arms right now."

The effect on both women, was powerful and immediate. Libby stopped rocking, looked down at the little hand holding hers, and smiled for the first time since the miscarriage. She got from her chair, and knelt to hug Jenny. Both of them cried and laughed at the same time. Miriam joined them, her own face glowing as it did when she first announced she was pregnant.

Their husbands rushed to see what had happened, and we had a real shouting time. The dark cloud over us had lifted.

That evening, another part of Jenny's prophecy began to take shape. About eight o'clock, Randy came in from his rounds. With him was the largest human being I had ever seen. He was easily seven feet tall, and was built like a grizzly bear. Something about him looked distinctly familiar.

I went out into the yard to meet him, confident that the Lord would not allow anyone to come near to us who wasn't one of his own. Robbie and Stan followed behind me, though I doubted all of us together could do much with this one, if the need arose.

He stopped and held out his hand as I approached, a smile splitting his big face. My own hand got lost when his closed around it.

“Hello, Brother”, came the big booming voice, as big as the man himself. “I’m Green Halcomb.”