

Chapter Twenty

“I died that night.” Mary Jane’s voice had the same ring of certainty as Jenny’s. “I actually went to Paradise, into the Lord’s very presence. It’s beautiful beyond description. You can smell sights and see sounds. The colors are incredibly vivid, and just touching a flower causes a wondrous surge of joy. Most of all, the Lord’s presence is everywhere, all outside and all inside. Wherever I turned, I saw Jesus, and his whole attention was always on me, and on everyone there. At first, I saw no one but the Lord, then I realized there were people all around, all praising God.

“Masses of angels singing, and above it all I saw God on his throne. I didn’t want to come back at all, but the Lord told me he had a little more work for me to do. I let myself be captured so I would be in the jail when you all got there.

“The Lord wants me to tell you this right now: He hasn’t removed the hedge to punish us. He hasn’t deserted us. The reasons he wants us to leave now, to be with him, we won’t understand until we see him. Our physical deaths will be quick, without pain. There is no terror in what we face. We will die as we have lived, together, united as the body of Christ.”

We had joined together to pray and worship. The sense of sadness and despair that had settled over us was almost palpable. When Mary Jane finished speaking, though, the mood changed completely. Miriam began singing a praise chorus, and we joined her for what must have been hours of song and testimony. My brother Clint, whom I barely knew, shared his own experience of deliverance.

“My life was a lot like Henry’s. I grew up here as a rebel. Hank and Emily came when I was still a teenager. I really liked them, but not enough to change the way I acted or felt. In school, I did as little as I had to do to keep Mama and Papa happy. By the time I was thirteen, I had my first experience with sex and alcohol, and both of them got a real hold on me. Mama and Papa didn’t know, or at least I don’t think they did, until after I left home.

“I got along well enough with Miriam, but I thought she was a spoiled brat.” He stopped here to smile at our sister. “She was everything I didn’t want to be, including a sincere Christian. You were

model, Henry, and I decided long before I left home that I wanted to be just like you. That's not your fault; it was my decision. As soon as I finished school, I went to Beckley and looked you up. I really didn't want to stay around you and Ellen; I thought she was certifiable. You were like a springboard.

"Work was hard to come by, but I got a job in construction with Uncle Brindle's help. When I wasn't working, I was in the bars. That's where I found my wife. I married a woman whom I didn't really love, and I'm certain she never loved me. All we shared together was lust, and once that was gone we had nothing. I know that sounds like your life with Ellen, Henry, and in a lot of ways it was. The only difference was that we never had a child.

"Sharman left me earlier this year. I was desperate for some sense of meaning in my life, so I started looking around for a church. I knew Carol was a Christian, so I asked her where to find one. She took me to hers, of course, and Mary Jane led me back to Jesus. I really think I was saved when I was young, but I never submitted to the lordship of Christ. I was with Stan and Mary Jane when the Security Police found us. Even when they beat me senseless, I wasn't afraid. My main concern was for Mary Jane, but I figured she was already with the Lord. I saw one of the cops shoot her in the head at close range. I wasn't even aware she came to the jail.

"I am so blessed that the Lord has allowed to spend these few weeks with my older brother and my sister. Like Henry, I wish Mama and Papa were here, so they could see it all. I know we'll see them soon, and they probably know all about us already. My one real sorrow is that sister Missy chose the world over Christ, but I believe she is saved, and we'll see her again some day."

That was a long speech for Clint, who usually didn't say much. He was a lot like Papa. We sang another song after he finished, then Stan shared. The sense of joy that settled over us when he finished was so powerful that we could only express it by laughing. It was like a deep well bursting out to the surface, and nothing we could do nothing to hold it back. We didn't want to. It was the most worshipful, cleansing experience I had ever had. I'm not sure how long it lasted, but it left us all helpless on the floor.

While we were lying there, eyes closed, I heard soft footsteps in our midst. Wondering who had gotten up, I opened my eyes. I saw a man I had never seen before, but I knew immediately who he was.

He walked from person to person, touching each in turn. When he came to me, he looked into my eyes and smiled as he stooped to touch me.

“I’ll see you again soon, Henry. You are a faithful servant.”

He moved on. When he finished with the last person, Mary Jane, he vanished. We were all still lying on the floor, looking around at each other in awe.

We spent another hour or more in praise, not talking. After we were finally finished, we shared a meal together. There was food for about four days left, now that the supply was shrinking. That gave us a clear idea of how much longer we had to wait. It seemed far too long now; earlier in the day, we would have begrudged every second.

The night passed quickly, and we all got up early to share another day in the joy of the Lord’s presence. About mid morning, Lady began barking furiously, up the hill from the house. We thought the Security Police may have come already, earlier than we expected, but there as no sense of anger in her bark.

A lone figure came down the hill, a woman. Lady was running and jumping around her, her tail wagging in celebration. I had never seen her, but the family resemblance was unmistakable. Sister Missy had come home after all.

Miriam jumped the rail of the porch, and hit the ground running. Clint and I were right behind her. Missy ran toward us as soon as she saw Miriam coming. We all came together at once, in the grass at the top of the yard. We fell to the ground, laughing and crying at once. When we finally got untangled, we surrounded our sister and took her to see the rest of our brethren, who were waiting patiently on and around the front porch.

Missy and I had never met, but we didn’t need any introduction. There were several of us she didn’t know, though, and she had no idea Miriam and I were married. Later, after she had a chance to rest and eat, she shared her story with us.

“It’s odd how three of us in this family have a similar testimony, of leaving home and returning again. I didn’t run off when I was a teenager, but I ran anyway. I was always Mama’s favorite, just as

Miriam was Papa's. Mama may have seemed weak, and easily swayed, but she was really a rock.

Nothing shook her faith. As long as she was alive, I was content. Earl and I moved into that little cottage Hank and Emily had used, and there was a lovely spirit there.

“After Mama died, things got steadily worse for us. People started moving away, and getting killed. The leaders of our clan, like Papa and Milo, died of old age, and other than Miriam there was no one to take their places. The earthquake, and the fire and hail, destroyed most of what the outlaws had left. Our home was spared, but both of us decided we had had enough. When we had that last family council, Ear and I voted with those who wanted to leave it all.

“I followed my husband, and we left here. I didn't want him to leave without me, but I really wanted to leave as much as he did. I convinced myself everyone here would be all right, since the Lord had always watched over us. Earl and I moved in with one of his cousins, on the east side of Charleston. Things were really bad when we got there, and they kept getting worse.

“All of the churches were closed, and I wasn't even sure for a while that there were any other Christians in the city. Earl wasn't concerned, and I realized he had never really given his life to Christ. He couldn't find work, and we finally had to move into one of the public shelters.

“The food stores were empty; if you wanted food, you had to register with the Security Police. They had food depots set up around the city. You could see long lines of people there at any time of any day. You had to get an identification mark in your forehead or on the back of your hand before they would let you have anything. I knew very well that this was the mark of the beast, and I refused to have anything to do with it. Earl came home one evening with food, and with the mark on his hand. I was horrified.

“I left that night. There was a group of believers in Belle, so I managed to get there. They were in bad shape themselves, and had little to spare, but they helped me as much as they could. For the next several months, I worked my way back in this direction, going from one body of Christians to another. Three days ago, one of the believers had a word of prophecy for me. She told me that my family was about to be martyred, and that if I wanted to see all of you again in this world I needed to go on home. I

was in Gauley Bridge at the time. It took so long because I had to work my way around several Security Police patrols and checkpoints. They're gathering in Ansted even now, and that bunch is probably coming our way."

There was a lot of sharing to do. We spent hours bringing her up to date on everything that had happened since she left. She laughed and cried with us, and rejoiced at what we had experienced the day before. The knowledge that we would be sharing physical death together didn't upset her now.

The circle was complete. All doubt and regret was gone. We celebrated all of that day, and well into the night. The following days passed like a blur. One of the sweet things that happened was the bond that formed between our two Missy's. They were almost always together, and when someone called "Missy," both would answer. We finally decided to use their first and middle names together, Missy Marie and Missy Renee.

We didn't think we would have any more visitors before the end, but the Lord had one more surprise for me. It wasn't as positive as the others, but it still tied up a loose end for me. That evening, when we brought food in for dinner, it was apparent we had food for just one more meal. We were literally at the bottom of the barrel.

The guards we had posted for so long stayed with us. There was no longer any need for them. When he came, only Lady's barking let us know someone was approaching. I could see enough to recognize a Security Police uniform. I went to meet the man walking down the hill, and was surprised when he greeted me by name.

"Hello, Henry. It's been a while."

"Kermit? Is that really you?"

"None other. We heard a group of Christians had taken shelter here. Nobody wanted to get anywhere near this place; said it was haunted. The last time they checked, though, whatever had been here was gone. I figured some of my family might be here, so I came to warn you.

"What happened, Kermit? Why did you join the Security Police?"

“A man has to eat, Henry. I joined in Columbus; I never dreamed they would transfer me here. Anyway, if you want to live another day, you all better head out of here tonight. Go up into the hills or something.”

“The Lord has us where he wants us, Kermit. You bear the mark of the beast on your forehead, so I don’t expect you to understand.”

He looked down at the ground, obviously ashamed, but unrepentant. When he looked up again, he was dry-eyed. “Well, you’re family, and I did warn you.”

That seemed to satisfy whatever sense of guilt he had. He reached out his hand, but I turned my back on him, and walked back down the hill. I heard his booted steps going back up the hill behind me.

On that last morning, we got up early and shared the remnants of the food. When the time was right, we went together to the front yard, formed a circle, and went to our knees together in prayer.

We heard the approaching vehicles, and the slamming doors, but no one moved. We heard the footsteps approaching, and someone proclaiming loudly that we were all enemies of the State, and of the Pontifus Maximus, the very living image of God. No one answered, and no one moved. When the order came to fire, and the bullets slammed into my body I wondered if Kermit was one of those pulling a trigger.

I got up, and looked curiously down at my body, which was lying in a pool of blood. My attention was directed away from the scene by a Voice coming from above.

“Come up, Henry. It’s time to go home.”

My guardian angel was standing there beside me, and I took his hand. Together, we rose to meet the Lord, and all of the hosts of Heaven. Hello, Mama. Hello, Papa....