

CHAPTER TWELVE

Like the Bloomington's, the Camp family counted a lot of heads. With in-laws, cousins, sons, daughters, aunts, uncles, and grand kids, they numbered over 200 strong. Most of them lived within five miles of each other. Traditionally, several of them from the same patriarchs and matriarchs clustered together on the old home stead. Originally farmers, the Camps had branched out into retail trade, teaching, the medical profession, construction work, and about every other area of the local economy. Other than a few branches in other counties of southern West Virginia, their family line didn't extend far beyond their home area in Fayette County.

We stopped at an old two-story white frame house, about a mile in from the turn off. The day had hardly begun, but an old woman sat rocking serenely of the front porch.

"Pardon me, Ma'am."

"Heh? Speak up. I can't hear ya."

I shouted out my question. "Do you know where Miriam Camp lives?"

"You don't have to shout. Ain't deaf, you know."

Silence. I tried again. "Where do the Camps live?"

"No, I don't know where you can camp. Now, get out of here, before I call out the dogs."

Giving up on that particular wealth of information, I drove on. We could hear her yell, "Stupid tourists" after us as we left. We had more luck at the next house, about a quarter of a mile away.

"Miriam? Sure, they live two miles on out the road, off on a little side road. I'm Harriet Camp; Miriam is my great niece, by marriage. My late husband, rest his soul, was her grandfather's brother. Whar do you want with Miriam? You friends of hers?"

"We know her relatives over in Mingo County, and since we were in the area, we decided to pay her a visit."

Her face clouded over with suspicion. "You aren't friends of that no account Bessie, are you?"

"No, no. We knew her parents, Alice and Jim."

I couldn't believe the number of lies coming out of my mouth. The Spirit brought me under heavy conviction. I decided to start over.

"Look, let me tell you the real truth; I can't lie to you. We're from Kentucky, from a group of Christians over in Pike County. The authorities there are after us, just because we're Christians. A friend of ours in Bentown suggested we come here for a while until the trouble blows over."

Her face relaxed. "Mercy sakes, Child, why didn't you say so right off, instead of spinning some yarn. Miriam called me this morning, told me to keep an eye out for you. Seems your friend called her long distance, and explained what was going on. Mama LuAnn and Walter are expecting you. When you come to the top of a long hill, about two miles from here, you'll see houses and trailers on both sides of the road; it's

the biggest community of Camps in these parts. About half way down the hill, on the left, you'll see a little lane. With a sign that says, "Jesus is Lord." Turn there, and the house is about a thousand feet off the road. Just bear to the right at the forks. It's a rough road, but your vehicle can handle it."

We thanked her, and moved on. With Harriet's instructions, we had no trouble finding the house. It sat tucked away in a clearing, with trees all around the large yard. An assortment of dogs came out to greet us as we parked the car. A young woman as tall and slender as my Emily came out of the house toward us, followed by a short, plump woman I judged to be her mother. They reached the car as we got out. The younger woman held out her hand.

"I'm Miriam, and this is my mom, LuAnn. You must be Hank, and you're – Emily. You're welcome in our home, as long as you want to stay. Come on in and have some breakfast. We'll get your luggage later. Miser, Tramp – go lay down! Quit jumping all over everybody." The barking, excited dogs trotted away, looking back resentfully as they retreated.

Walter Camp's home had grown over the years. The original structure of the house, which I could make out easily, had been expanded on the down hill side by another thirty feet, so that the whole structure was over seventy feet long. A big porch extended half the length of the house. By contrast, the building was only about thirty feet wide; the total effect made it look a little like a warehouse.

Walter himself met us at the kitchen door; the Camps usually entered the house from the back, in a custom going back several generations. Several other members of the family sat around the table: baby Missy, cousin Homer, and older brother Clint. The big wooden table carried a heavy load of plates of scrambled eggs, sausage, bacon, fried potatoes and biscuits. After greeting us and shaking our hands, Walter motioned us to two empty seats, and all of us except LuAnn sat down. She brought us fresh coffee, made sure the food plates got to us, and took her own seat.

"Food's already been blessed, so dig in. We always talk while we eat, but if you'd rather not, we'll understand." We could hardly refuse conversation, after being treated so royally. I gave them an overview of our story, concentrating on the past years. They listened with rapt attention until I paused for breath, several of them wiping tears from their eyes. The inevitable questions came then, and continued well after we finished eating. Finally, LuAnn firmly put a stop to it.

"These folks have been up all night. Let 'em rest for a while. They may be staying with us for a long while, so there's plane of time for more talk later."

We hadn't asked about staying yet. The Camps had already decided. All we had left to do was thank them. Lu-Ann just waved us off. "Don't you worry your head about it. If we can't help our brothers and sisters in need, we have no right to call ourselves Christians."

Homer brought our luggage in, such as it was. We explained we hadn't had much time to pack, but, again, the explanations proved unnecessary. LuAnn had already cleaned out a room and made up a bed for us. We found out soon that some of the family members had to double up because of us, but the arrangement didn't offend anyone, so far as we could tell.

We slept soundly for four or five hours, awaking refreshed. Before going back out to rejoin our hosts, we had our morning devotionals, which we had missed earlier. We prayed especially for our son Patrick and the school, but we didn't forget our brethren in the church, or the family that had invited us into their home.

I grew up in the country, but this place had a different feel about it. The Crandalls had once farmed Misty Valley, but we never raised anything more there than a small garden, during the years I lived with Auntie Mae. The Camps not only raised a large garden, but cows, chickens, pigs, and horses. Though hills still surrounded this area, they were more open and gentle than those in eastern Kentucky. Pike County boasted

some spectacular scenery, but not much flat land. Misty Valley contained more of it than most areas of the county, with the exception of the John's Creek valley. By contrast, generations of Camps had cleared several of the hills surrounding the Camp homes, and planted them in grass, corn, or garden crops. Most of the food they ate came from their own land.

The troubles that fell on us in Pike County had not yet reached the Camps, at least not to the same degree. Christians still held important posts in the county, and in the nearby towns. Persecution had started, yes, especially in the schools, but up until then no one had started burning churches or causing Christians to have "accidents." The local people knew they weren't immune to the things they saw happening around them, but that made them more thankful for the measure of peace they still had.

Farther north, out in the really wild country, outlaw bands roamed, but the local police still had enough authority to hold them at bay. The bandits raided isolated farms on occasion, but stayed away from well-armed communities like that of the Camp family. Even so, the young men of the family regularly patrolled the near-by hills with dogs and guns.

I felt frustrated at first because there seemed to be little I could do to help out. Everyone else had tasks to do, but, as guests, the Camps didn't permit us to do anything for a while. I finally made Walter and Lu-Ann understand that we really did want to do something, so they set us to teaching the children. Like the Christians in Shady Grove, the Camps did not like the local schools, or the type of things they saw happening there. Across the "hollow," as they called it, or on the opposite hill, sat the church which the family had attended for generations. Originally only a one-room building, it had grown to a collection of three buildings, one of which they called "The Education Building," because they held Sunday classes there.

There, Emily and I, with help from Miriam and some others of the Camp women, began teaching all comers. Lacking our sense of concern over the legalities and formalities, the Camps simply informed the local schools they intended to teach their children on their own, and pulled all thirty-odd of them out. No one bothered to challenge them; the local officials had tried that before, without success. Within three weeks of the time we arrived, we had a thriving Christian school.

The Methodist church which the Camp family attended, Mt. Pleasant, had no pastor; the old one had died, and the Conference sent no replacement. The adult members of the church, male and female, selected three of their own to the offices of prophet, preacher, and pastor. A prophet, in their view, should be able to interpret the Lord's will to the flock, and should have a special ministry in prayer. Mounting the pulpit to deliver sermons, explaining the Word as it applied to every day life, was the office of the preacher. The pastor, finally, ministered to the daily needs of the flock, mental, physical, and spiritual. Walter served as preacher, and, from the evidence I saw in Sunday services, did his job well. Every Saturday afternoon, he withdrew by himself with his Bible, concordance, and notebook, to prepare the sermon for the next day.

Milo Camp, the pastor, also did his job well. He had a kind heart, and a deep sense of concern for his people. Sometimes he appeared bumbling in his eagerness to do the right thing, but no one questioned either his commitment or the depth of his love. The one office which generated controversy and disagreement was that of prophet.

I liked Laurie Candiff, the red-headed aunt whose husband had died years before. She possessed an irrepressible good humor, and a stubborn insistence on seeing the best in everyone. Her great strength, though, also proved to be her greatest weakness; she could not see evil at work in the life of anyone she knew, and insisted on the basic decency of all people. Because she had such a determined air of optimism, she never saw disaster coming. She refused to believe the Lord would allow anything bad happen to good people, the story of Job notwithstanding.

One Sunday Walter preached a powerful sermon on the Second Coming, and the period of the Great Tribulation. Many in the congregation wept at the events he described, but Laurie sat stony faced throughout

the message. She sat across the aisle from Emily and I, and I could see the stern disapproval on her face. At the end of the service, she stood up to be recognized.

"Now, Brother Walter, you shouldn't scare people like that. Why, everyone knows the Lord won't let anything like that happen to His people. He won't do anything until the Church has been removed, and that won't happen for hundreds or thousands of years. Things will improve, just like they did after the Dark Ages. Sure, we're going through some bad times, but they won't last. Why, I heard just the other day that a great revival is already breaking out in a lot of places. Most people are good, and that'll come out over the next few years. You'll see."

Everybody started to talk at once, most eager to tell Laurie just how wrong she was. I did not intend to say anything, but I felt a familiar feeling come over me. The Lord had something to say, whether I did or not. I stepped out into the aisle, walked to the front of the church, and held up my hand for silence. Immediately, the babble of voices of voices stopped. I opened my mouth to speak, having no idea what word would come out.

"Hear what the Lord says to His people: 'I have judged the world and found it wanting. The cup of my wrath is full to overflowing. The hour will come when the Enemy, in his rage, knowing his time is short, will scatter my sheep. Some of you will flee to the hills, but they offer no hiding place. Others will desert me, seeking security in the powers of this world. Those who remain faithful, though they will die the death of martyrs, will reap an everlasting reward. Those who refuse to obey me will die an eternal death, and they will not escape the sword. Beware of false prophets who promise peace and prosperity; the words they speak do not come from my mouth.'"

Dead silence greeted the end of the message. Some of the faces before me flushed red with anger; others blanched white with fear and dread. Laurie clearly thought I had made a personal attack on her, and her supporters mirrored her expression. Here and there, though, some nodded in agreement, even those who first responded with fear. Miriam, Walter, LuAnn, Milo, and others obviously approved, and some of them said so. Walter, for one, proclaimed that the Lord had, indeed, spoken to us, because the Spirit ministered to his spirit that it was so. Pack Candiff, Laurie's son, spoke for the scoffers.

"What do we know about this guy, anyway? He comes here out of nowhere, and Walter's clan accepts him on the word of a perfect stranger. Why? Just because Miriam said so. He's been here less than two months, and already he's trying to take over. Well, I, for one, believe my mother is the *real* prophet. That man standing up there is the false one!"

Laurie and her supporters voiced their agreement, but they stopped when Walter once more called the service to order. "Brethren, a house divided against itself can not stand, like the Word says. If we Christians start fighting each other, the Devil's already won. He doesn't have to attack us with the world's weapons, because we'll destroy ourselves. I believe that Brother Hank had a word from the Lord – Wait, hear me out – and he never once mentioned Laurie. All the Lord said through my brother was what I already said in my sermon. The Word tells how we know if He really sent a word of prophecy. If it comes to pass, it was of the Lord; if not, it came from another spirit. Sister Laurie still occupies the office of prophet in this church, and that won't change unless we as the body decide to change it."

Despite some mutterings from the Cundiff's, these words brought calm to the meeting. After our closing prayer, I made a point of going to Laurie to apologize if anything I said had offended her. She accepted my hand stiffly, but her smile carried no warmth, and her expressions of denial rang hollow. The Lord's message had made enemies both for me and for His cause, though I felt certain the seeds of rebellion took root before we ever came there.

Later, at Walter's house, he and the others in his family made clear what they believed. "You have the gift of prophecy," Miriam stated firmly. "You've been avoiding it all of these years, except when the Lord took hold

of you. He sent you to us, and the sooner the rest of them recognize that, the better off we'll all be."

I protested that prophecy came to me only as a some-time gift, not as a ministry, but Walter and LuAnn both backed up their daughter. When Emily, too, joined in, I wondered if they could possibly be right. They still didn't quite convince me, but I promised to pray about it.

That night, I woke up in a cold sweat, weighed down with a heavy sense of evil and foreboding. Someone would die that night; I saw the pool of blood in my dream, and the young body that lay in the midst. Fighting off the heaviness, I jumped out of bed.

"Hankie? What's wrong?"

"Someone died tonight, one of the young men out on patrol. I just saw his body."

"But, Baby, it was just a horrible nightmare; you know you have those all the time."

"No, no, it was nothing like that. This is real. I'm going to wake Walter."

Minutes later, a groggy Walter joined me on the front porch, still rubbing the sleep from his eyes. "You're sure? This is from the Lord?"

"Just as sure as I was when He gave me that message in church. I don't know what we can do but wait. The other two boys, I believe, are fine. I don't know which one got killed, because I couldn't see his face."

"Well, they'll be coming in up at Milo's house, because two of those boys are his. The other one is a Cundiff, Pack's oldest."

As soon as he said it, I knew. Matt Cundiff wouldn't be coming home tonight. "It's Matt," I said, quietly. I went in to let Emily know where we were going, and we walked up the lane to Milo's house, which sat on the hill above Walter's place. As we walked in the yard, we saw the two boys walk in from the other side, carrying someone between them. Both of them sobbed as they came toward us.

"Bandits, Cousin Walter. They ambushed us up on Mullen Ridge. Matt never had a chance. We got one of them, and winged another one. The rest of them ran off; they could have killed us all, if they weren't such thieving cowards. How are we going to tell Pack? He adored Matt, and so did Miss Laurie."

"Don't you worry about that," Walter said kindly. "You boys go tell Milo, and get a blanket. Wrap the body in the blanket, and we'll go see Pack."

I felt sick inside, the more so because that dead young form I had seen in my dream now had a real face and a real body. No longer did I believe that this gift the Lord had given me was a blessing. The Spirit pointed out to me, in that soft inner voice, that if I hadn't known, we wouldn't be here to greet the young survivors, or to minister to Pack. Those thoughts gave me little comfort.

In silence, we walked up the hill together, up the rough dirt and gravel road that had gone unpaved for so many years. Half way to the top, we turned to the left, on to Pack's driveway. The dogs came running out to meet us, snarling and growling, but they quieted at a word from Walter. The front porch light came on; someone stayed awake waiting for the return of a son. Pack's wife, Andrea, a stolid, quiet woman, came out on the porch.

"Thought you was Matt. What's wrong, Walter? Has something happened to my boy?"

"Go wake up Pack, Andy. Both of you need to hear this."

"Hear what?" came Pack's gruff voice, as he stepped outside. "You've got your nerve coming here Walter, after the things you said today."

"Shut up, Pack, and listen, for once," Andrea said, her voice breaking. "Can't you tell something's wrong. What happened? Did he fall and get hurt? How bad is it?"

Walter walked up on the porch, and put a hand on each of her shoulders. "Sit down, Andy, right here. This ain't easy to say, so I'll just go ahead and say it – Matt's dead."

Her scream split the night.