

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Laurie fell into a deep depression. So long as bad things happened to other people, she could explain them away. Matt's death, though, struck too close to the heart. She considered him her favorite grandson, the oldest son of her oldest son. As for Pack, he questioned everything his mother ever said about the Lord and the way He works. He spoke the unspeakable in open church; the congregation needed a new prophet, because his mother had lost sight of the Lord's will. In spite of my protests, the church chose me unanimously to fill the office of prophet (Laurie refused to vote). Matt's death ten days before had convinced everyone that evil times did, indeed, await them. A few people never came back; others would follow them out of the church in the months and years ahead.

The Lord gave me new eyes to see the world. I saw His hand even in the months of terror as a slave to drugs and Satanists. That experience gave me knowledge of the Enemy and his ways I never could have gained by listening to the testimony of others. Since I knew intimately the tactics the Satanists and their friends used to attack Christians and the church, I could help defend against them. Satan always attacks at the weakest point in our armor, whether through our families, or our jobs, or the material things we treasure. Even a church building can become an idol, assuming much more importance in the life of a congregation than it should. Because so many Christians had such an emotional investment in their church buildings, Satan attacked the buildings, and many of the congregations involved never recovered from the loss. Even at Shady Grove, we took too much pride in the building we built with our own hands.

With Misty Valley, we had more confidence in the place than in the God whose power kept it safe from evil. The Camp's trusted in their young men with their guns, more than in the Lord's watch care. I didn't suggest at all that they stop sending out patrols. I tried to get them to see, though, that they could never defeat Satan with his own weapons, but only by trusting in the Lord's power. The Camp's knew how to pray, but they didn't know much about spiritual warfare. They knew how to fight with their fists, and how to shoot a gun, but they didn't know about taking on the Enemy in the spiritual realm where he lived.

"Satan is a spirit, and the demons who serve him are spirits. If you fight the people the Devil controls, you aren't really fighting the Devil himself. He can always find more people to do his bidding if you defeat the ones he sends. Jesus gave us authority over Satan; if we use that authority, than we defeat the Devil himself, not just his tools. Learn to speak right to Satan when he's bothering you or your family. The Devil can't stand against the blood of Jesus, either, so use the Blood against him, and claim it over you and your home."

When they found they could, indeed, take authority over the Devil, and that he had no choice in the matter, their joy knew no bounds. They wanted to have special services for deliverance, and consecration services for every home and field in the little community. They even anointed the trails the patrols used, and I finally realized they had started trusting more in the ceremony than in the Lord who consecrated it. We had already traveled that road in Shady Grove, and I didn't want them to fall into the same trap. They insisted, in their enthusiasm, that they knew the Lord's power did the work, but I doubted they really understood.

The wolves came in winter. Two-legged wolves. Growing in numbers, and desperate for spoil, the bandits grew increasingly bold as the nights lengthened and the ice and snow drove people into their homes. Two of our young men suffered gunshot wounds, but both recovered. The patrols moved closer in to the homes, and moved in larger groups. Farthest away was the home of Vesta Camp, the old women who had first given us directions to Walter's house. The bandits attacked it one night, looted it, and burned it to the ground. Vesta escaped through a trap door, and crept away into the darkness. She walked over a mile in the darkness to the nearest house of her kin folk, arriving half dead with the cold. She survived to tell her story, but she no longer had a home.

Some of the men in the family wanted to mount a retaliatory strike against the bandit's camp, since they knew its general location. I argued, again, that we couldn't fight the Devil on his own terms, and that we should not repay evil for evil. After heated argument, and not a little shouting, cooler heads prevailed. The Camp's sent some of their sons off to lodge with the more isolated homes on the road they called home, and redoubled their prayer battle. The outlaws still took livestock and raided granaries, but they burned no more homes that winter. Two guards also stayed at the church at night, despite my arguments that the Lord needed no protection, and that any building was just a building. To the Camp's, the church stood at the center of their community and spiritual life.

Spring came early to the mountains. The return of bright sunshine, warm days, bright flowers, and singing birds made us all feel that the world held hope for a better day after all. One of the young women in the family gave birth on a bright March morning, and that somehow lessened the pain of the death that chilled the winter months. Carmen, the mother, named her baby girl Missy, after her grandmother. Her first days in this brand new world rang with laughter and joy, as the whole family celebrated.

Winter, though, refused to die. Late one afternoon, before March ended, clouds gathered over the far hills, and a cold wind blew down from the northwest. The old timers muttered about a false spring, remembering other times when Nature promised something only to jerk it back again. Born in the mountains myself, I knew too well what they talked about. That night, the moaning winds increased to a howl, and a cold rain started. Before midnight, the rain changed to snow. By morning, a foot of the white, heavy stuff covered the ground. Leaf-laden branches bowed low under the weight, and some cracked under the strain. The pretty flowers lay buried under the icy blanket, and birds huddled forlorn among the trees, looking vainly for warmth and food.

The turn of events caused an even more dramatic effect on the mood of the Camp family. Breakfast around Walter's table started as a somber affair, with no smiles and little conversation. I did my best to cheer them up.

"You know, Walter, this would be a good time for a bonfire. This will probably be our last chance to enjoy making snow men, throwing snow balls, and drinking hot chocolate. We have a lot of wood and brush piled up below Milo's house. I know this snow hit us all pretty hard, after we thought spring had come, but we have to trust that the Lord's hand is in this as well. He created the cycle of the weather and the seasons, and we shouldn't get depressed over things we can't control. Let's just enjoy and make the best of whatever He sends our way."

Emily took up the thread. "Some of our young people, like Clint over there, have sweethearts they don't see nearly enough. Your niece, Carol, just came over from Beckley, and she'd probably like to meet some eligible young men. While don't we call around, and invite some people from outside the family as well. We could have a sweetheart party, even if our sweetheart happens to be an old fogey like mine. Miriam? Clint? We could use some support here."

Miriam's thin face, always carrying an air of sadness, brightened. "Why, that's a *great* idea, Emily – you, too, Hank. We can have games, and elect a Sweetheart Couple of the Year. Maybe we can do this every year, don't you think? Please, Papa, can we?"

Walter and LuAnn exchanged glances, and LuAnn smiled and nodded. She replied for them both. "All right, child, but you put it together. Get Emily and Hank to help, since they brought it up. Better call Milo first, and make sure he has no use for that pile of brush."

Milo didn't. Within two hours, thanks to the network of communication the family had set up, the entire community, for miles around, knew about the big party. Several of the boys went out to prepare the site for the bonfire and clear paths to the site. Miriam and her young friends began planning and plotting the games and dances for the festivities, and rounded up several musicians. Convinced that more hung on this than a

simple party, I withdrew for a while for prayer. I felt no sense of impending gloom or disaster, but something important surrounded this seemingly impromptu gathering.

By the evening, the snow had already begun to melt, as the temperature climbed into the forty's, but plenty of snow remained around the bonfire site on the shady side of the hill, where no afternoon sun fell. Before the last rays fell below the western hills, the young men had already started the fire. Children from all over had come to watch, and they yelped with delight as the flames leaped high into the air. Someone brought in a load of straw, and eager hands helped spread it around the dance area. Nearby, at a separate fire, a pig turned slowly on a spit, an extra treat for the evening's fun. Around dark, couples, young and old, gathered in around the circle of light surrounding the bonfire. The musicians arrived about 7:00 o'clock with their guitars, banjos, and fiddles; the party had officially begun.

In Pike County, you could hardly find people who still played traditional instruments. Here, the Camp family had passed on for generations the art of playing instruments that used no electricity. I had heard a few of the family play before, but not as a group. I found a new slice of heaven, and learned dance steps that I didn't even know existed. Uncoordinated as I was, I still managed to stumble through the intricate twists and turns of the various square dances and reels, persevered from the dim past. In between, we relaxed to the Blue Grass ballads named after the state of my birth. Miriam was shocked that neither Emily nor I, with all our wealth of knowledge, had ever heard of Bill Monroe, who started the whole thing so many forgotten years before.

When the pig finally roasted enough to suit the cooks, we shared a feast of a more familiar sort. Joined with the fresh, hot bread and potatoes baked in the coals, the tasty meat gave us all the feeling of enjoying the wealth of kings. To wash it all down, we drank great, steaming mugs of hot apple cider; I never dreamed it could taste so good.

As much as I enjoyed the affair, something still sat in the back of my mind. The Lord wanted me to do something, but He still hadn't shown me what it was. After a round of games, most involving snow and several requiring couples to compete as teams, we had our contest for Sweetheart Couple of the Year. Several people called out names at once, so we had Miriam step forward to take charge of the whole thing. Milo nominated Walter and LuAnn, a nomination heartily seconded by several others. Other names came up, including Emily and I, but no one had any real doubt about the winners. By voice vote, Walter and LuAnn carried away the prize, and they got the honor of beginning the next dance alone. By then, I knew what the Lord had in mind.

At the end of the dance, I took the spot before the bonfire that had become the unofficial center stage for the evening. It took a few minutes to get everyone's attention, but finally a respectful silence fell on the crowd, broken only by the shrill laughter of children playing out in the snow.

"Not all of you belong to our church, but you do belong to this community. We gathered here tonight, not just to have fun, but to celebrate the Lord's blessings on us. God has seen fit to give me the office of prophet in the Mt. Pleasant Church, and because of this I feel a deep sense of responsibility to you all, not just to our congregation. I trust and pray that the Lord will use me here for many years, but the day will come when the office must pass to someone else. In the past, when we had a pastor, we had no such office as prophet, so no traditions formed around it.

"The Lord has impressed on me, though, to name someone as my successor, if the body will agree. Why He has chosen to do that here, tonight, and not at a church meeting, I do not know. I questioned my leading when it first came, but the Spirit persisted. My dear sister, Miriam, will you please come here."

The gasp of astonishment we heard came from Miriam herself. She stood close by, and I could clearly see the shock and disbelief that washed over her wan features. She hesitated for the briefest moment, then walked very slowly over to me. When she stood still, tremors shook her body from top to bottom. I took her hand,

and drew her closer to me. At my touch, she quieted.

"Brethren of the faith, I present to you this night, in the sight of the Lord and these witnesses, my sister in Christ, Miriam Camp. The Lord has seen fit to settle a special measure of His Spirit on her, and He desires to prepare her for a great work among His people. When the Lord's time comes fully, He will use her to fill the office of prophet in my stead. If you will agree to affirm this calling, please say, 'Amen.'"

The chorus of agreement came instantly, as a resounding "Amen!" rang out in the night, echoing among the hills. I asked Miriam to kneel, and, placing both hands on her head, lifted my eyes to Lord as I prayed. "Father, I commend to your care this, my sister, Miriam. You have called her into your service, and I pray a double measure of your Spirit and blessing would rest upon her. May she always be faithful to the charge you give her, and may I be faithful as her teacher and friend for the years to come. In Jesus' name, Amen."

"Amen!" This time a crowd rushed around her as I helped her to her feet, eager to touch her and tell her how much they rejoiced for her. Those who did not belong to the church or the family held back, but most of them also sought her out when the press cleared. The night felt complete to me now, even though the party lasted until after midnight.

Miriam took me aside as the bonfire started to die down, and people drifted away to their homes. "I don't know quite what to feel, Hankie. I'm thrilled and excited the Lord has chosen me for something so important, but I'm a little frightened, too. I don't know what to expect, or if I can live up to what everyone else expects of me. What do I do? What happens now?"

I gave her a reassuring hug. "You don't have to do anything just now. The Lord will let you know what has to be done when the time comes. Don't look to your own strength; He'll provide you with all you need. I'll be coming to you as the Lord directs, to study His word, to pray, or just to talk. You just enjoy being who you are. The Lord has blessed you with a loving family and a lovely home. Enjoy His blessings, and let the future take care of itself."

That satisfied her, and she went off to find the boys who had the responsibility of putting out the fires and cleaning up the mess left by over a hundred party guests. I went back to my Emily, and the two of us walked back down to Walter's house. For not the first time, we talked about finding a house of our own. Neither of us knew how long we might be here, but we agreed it would be for a period of years, not weeks or months.

Spring returned for good a few days later, and the last of the snow melted away in the hollows and under the rock cliffs. Despite protests from the Camp's, I accompanied some of the boys into the hills north of the farm land. A couple of ridges away, Harley Cundiff showed me a place I didn't know about. Behind a tangle of brush and tangles lay two dark openings, each leading into caves large enough to stand up in, with enough room to hide a fairly large group of people or a food supply. I wondered why the outlaws hadn't found the place; Harley said he thought it was because the Camp men often patrolled there.

"I figure, maybe the time will come when this may make a good hiding place. We could defend it easy. It wouldn't hold us all, but a good-sized group could hole up here."

The words of the Lord's prophecy came back to me. Harley hadn't been in church that day, but I doubted it would make much difference. One day, despite all of the warnings, the Camp family would indeed flee to the caves, and disaster waited for them here. If only I could convey that to Miriam, maybe some of them could be saved.

Farther down the road from Walter's house lay a flat bench of land, not very large but suitable for a small house. I spotted it soon after coming to Camp Town, as they called their collection of houses and farms. Emily and I talked about approaching Walter to buy the land, but we had no visible income. The money we brought from Kentucky had disappeared long ago, and we depended entirely on the charity of our hosts for

our existence. Walter himself found the solution for our problem.

He looked directly at me one morning at the breakfast table, after we finished eating, and said, in his abrupt way, "Let's go for a walk."

Once we got away from the house, well out of earshot, he stopped and turned toward me. I could tell he felt uncomfortable, and thought for a moment he had bad news to tell. I needn't have worried.

Clearing his throat, and looking down at his feet, he said, "Some of us have been talking, and, well, we think you should be paid for the work you do at the school. It won't be much, but we'll provide your food, too. And – you know that piece of land you've had your eye on – " Waving his hand, he silenced my protest. "Forget it, son, there's nothing wrong with looking. Anyway, we're going to build you a house there. The lot will be the property of the church, but you'll live there as long as you want. We'll have a crew out there tomorrow for a house raising, and it'll go up in no time. Now, don't go blubbering on me, boy, just give the Lord praise for it. It all belongs to Him, anyway."

Three weeks later, Emily and I moved into our first new house. The day before, the Camp's threw a house warming, as only they could. Not only did they provide the sheets, towels, dishes, pots, and other myriad things needed to set up house, but they provided all of the appliances and furniture. Emily just sat and cried, as her way was. I hugged a lot of people, and my own eyes had moisture in them from time to time.

We moved our meager personal possessions to the house the next day, and Walter and LuAnn came by to fill our cupboards, refrigerator, and pantry full of food of every variety and description. Walter also promised, over our continuing protests that he had already done too much, to bring us a milk cow and chickens after they had built the necessary pens and sheds. A large garden area flourished near the house, and he said we should get whatever we needed.

That night Emily and I shared the first private moments together we had enjoyed for many months. I found her every bit as lovely as that day I first saw her years before at Auntie Mae's. Some of her brown hair had turned to gray now, but I cherished every hair on that lovely head. For a long while, we just sat close to each other on the old couch, drinking in love with our eyes. The same memory struck us both at the same time, and we collapsed in helpless laughter into each other's arms. I led my bride out the front door, and for the second time I carried her across the threshold. Time fled away, and we shared our bed as on our wedding night...