

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

From time to time we got news from home or from our friends in Bentown. Our young son, Patrick, grew up rapidly after we left. He relied heavily on the experience of the older adults at the school, but he had to make the difficult decisions himself. The Pike County Board and the Sheriff's office continued to harass the school with demands for ever more paper work and endless inspections. As happened in former years, though, with the single exception of Max Trundle when he arrested me, no one who entered the valley left with a bad report. This fact both mystified and enraged the county authorities.

The continuing harassment, difficult as it was, posed no real problems for the school. The decisions Patrick had to make dealt with everyday problems between parents, students, and teachers. Some of the arguments seemed silly, but the people involved considered them deadly serious. One mother objected because her child had to sit at the back of the room because her last name began with "Z." Another student complained because he couldn't be a cheerleader for the school's intramural athletic events. More serious problems included chronic shortages of supplies and difficulty finding qualified teachers who were also Christians.

In the case of the irate mother, Patrick worked out a trade of seats with a painfully shy child who was more than happy to move away from the center of attention. Our son told the would-be cheerleader he could compete on an equal basis for a position, but only if he brought his grades up first. Patrick started a recycling program for supplies, found ways to make some things in the valley, and found other things where no one thought to look. The county landfill held an assortment of useful junk. He tapped the school's alumni for teachers, and it pleased him when a couple of former graduates accepted the invitation to return home.

He also met his first love, a girl a few years younger than he. He had known her for several years but largely ignored her until she blossomed into a lovely young woman. He asked Clarice to marry him the spring following our move to West Virginia, and she accepted. They planned to get married in June.

Mail service grew more and more unreliable. Our friends in Misty Valley sent letters for us first to Liz Leighton, who then sent them to the Camp's. We heard stories of whole mail shipments disappearing, and about rampant corruption at the post offices. Some letters never reached us; others took three or four weeks to arrive. We dared not use the phones on any regular basis, because the police had begun monitoring public lines, and running logs of calls through computers for analysis. They specifically targeted Christians, and I knew they must have my name on their lists. We felt more and more isolated in our little community.

Our own school did well. Most of the students came from the Camp family and their relatives, but we did get a few from farther away. Other local churches contacted us about starting their own schools. Emily and I traveled up to fifty miles away to hold meetings and seminars with other church leaders. My old Cherokee finally died the death, so I often borrowed Walter's car. We never publicized the meetings, and they almost invariably took place at night. Usually we stayed with a host family, and drove back early the next morning. One evening, though, we decided to risk the one hour drive back to Camp Town, because we had an important meeting there the next morning. We never bothered to ask the Lord's advice, to our deep regret.

Between the towns of Ansted and Gauley Bridge lies a respectable hill called Gauley Mountain. We drove across it many times without incident, though we heard an outlaw band operated in the area. We passed Chimney Corner, where U.S. 60 meets Route 16, and continued on up the winding mountain toward Hawk's Nest. Coming around one dark curve, we saw light up ahead, and realized someone had lit a bonfire in the middle of the road. We also realized, too late, that we were the uninvited guests at a very dangerous party.

I brought the car to a stop, hoping to back away from the problem. When I looked in the rear view mirror, however, I saw several armed men walking our way, and they all had guns pointing directly at our car. One

of them motioned us to continue driving forward. I toyed with the idea of stomping on the gas in hopes of crashing through the barrier, but I knew other bandits would be waiting on the other side. Glancing at Emily, who smiled bravely but looked deathly afraid, I breathed a prayer for the Lord's protection, under the Blood, and drove slowly toward the bonfire.

Men and women, all heavily armed, materialized around the fire, and came toward us. The huge woman in front, her graying hair framing a hardened dark face, appeared to be the leader of the gang. The others deferred to her, and stayed respectfully behind as she walked toward us. I rolled down the window as she came up to my side of the car.

She shined a light directly into my eyes. "What are you doing out here, white boy?" This in spite of the fact that she was the only African American in the gang. "Don't you know the roads aren't safe at night?" Her followers guffawed at their boss's joke. "Shut up, fools!" she said, swinging around toward them. They immediately shut up.

"Now, I want you and the old biddy there to get out of the car, very slowly, and leave your hands where we can see them at all times. My boys get nervous when anybody makes a sudden move."

We did as she ordered, taking care to open the doors slowly and lift our hands up where they could be seen. The bandit chief stepped back, and motioned her men to grab us as we got out. Two of them got in the car and drove away, on beyond the bonfire. We never saw the car again; I wondered how I could tell Walter the bad news. Maybe we'd never get the chance anyway.

The outlaws called their leader Boss Richards. She told us to go warm ourselves at the fire, though the temperature was about 75. Perhaps they intended some kind of torture. When I started to make some comment in an effort to break the tension, one of my guards, a surly sort they called Hicks, hit me in the mouth, hard. I felt blood oozing from my lips, and heard Emily sob. Richards cuffed Hicks in return. "You hit when I say, idiot. Try that again, and I'll shoot off your knee caps."

"Now, you two, talk fast. Who are you, where are you from, and where are you going?"

"My name is Hank Crandall, and this is my wife, Emily – "

"You let her speak for herself."

"Okay – we live in Camp Town. We're on our way back there after visiting friends in Montgomery –"

"Camp Town? I've heard about that bunch. They shot up some of the boys in the Leander gang last winter. How you related to them?"

"Just a brother in Christ. They took us in when we needed a friend –"

"Christ? You a Christian? Hey, boys, we done caught ourselves a couple of true believers. Maybe we can sell them to the Devil Doers down in the Gorge. Now, old woman, it's your turn."

It angered me to hear her refer to Emily as old. My wife looked far younger than her 55 years, a few gray hairs notwithstanding. I knew it was calculated to bring just that response, but it made me mad, anyway. Emily spoke in a firm voice that belied the turmoil I knew she felt inside.

"My husband has told you all you need to know. We trust in the Lord, no matter where we go."

Richards didn't like that response. She slapped Emily hard on the face, leaving her fingerprints there. The two

men on either side of me held on tightly as I tried to lunge to my wife's defense.

"Don't get smart with me, you white witch! I'll burn you right here and now. Tie them up boys, and teach them both some manners. Don't damage them too much, or we won't get a good price for them."

For the next several minutes, after we were securely bound, the outlaws proceeded to pommel and kick us both until we all but lost consciousness. I felt something break inside, and wondered if they had broken the same rib the prison guards broke before. After a few minutes, I could no longer bear the pain, and began letting any sounds out that wanted out, not caring anymore if I screamed like a woman or wept like a baby. My own sounds didn't bother me; the screams and pleas for mercy I heard coming from Emily hurt far more.

When Richards figured we had our lesson in humility, she ordered her men to stop. Neither of us could walk; they half carried, half dragged us off the road and down a steep path toward the New River, several hundred feet below. As we made our painful way into the woods, I heard one of the outlaws call out that another car was coming. Richards would have another victim for her collection.

Since they had us securely bound, we couldn't hold on to anything on our way down the steep sides of the gorge. Spectacular when seen from the road above, it meant nothing to us now but hours more of torture. We both fell repeatedly, sometimes rolling down the mountain for some distance before something stopped our fall. Only by the Lord's grace did we survive with no more than assorted cuts and bruises. Emily moaned or screamed with every new jolt, and my greatest pain came in her suffering, not my own.

When we finally reached the narrow bank of the river, my joy knew no bounds. Regardless of what lay ahead of us, at least that particular nightmare had ended. Our guards stopped for while at the bottom to smoke and eat, but they offered us nothing. I remembered that I still belonged to the Lord, and started praying again. I prayed first of all that the Lord would grant strength and comfort to my wife, then I prayed for our captors, and their leader. Last of all, I prayed that I might be a more faithful witness for the Lord than I had so far.

After our break, the outlaws ordered us to our feet, and we walked ahead of them, mostly in the strength that the Lord gave us. Just ahead of us, an old railroad crossed the river to our side, and continued along the bank. We began following the road bed; someone had long since removed the rails and many of the tracks, but at least we had a clear path to walk. We walked for what seemed hours, barely able to see ahead of us even in our captors' flash lights. Very little of the moonlight from the sky above filtered down into this hole.

Two men came walking toward us. We didn't see them coming, which wasn't surprising, but they suddenly appeared about a hundred feet in front of us. The light shone a little more from above us now, and I could make out their faces as they approached. Both of them stood at least six feet six inches tall, maybe more. For a brief instant I thought they had come to buy us from the outlaws, like Richards had said, but I knew immediately they posed no threat to us. These men served the same Lord I did.

"Hey," one of the outlaws called, "you all with the Devil Church? We got a couple of Christians for you here. Make good sacrifices, if the price is right."

The voice of the man who answered rang out like a bell in a tower. "We have no need of sacrifices, but we will take them with us."

"Oh, yeah?" answered the outlaw, suspicion in his voice. "How much you give for them? We don't take no credit, just cash money."

"You will receive your just reward for what you have done. Release them to us now, and go your way. The Lord has spoken it."

Without another word, the men with us loosened our bonds, and all three of them turned and left, going back the way they had come. After they passed out of sight, the man who had won our freedom turned to us.

"The Lord heard your prayers, and sent us to bring you out of captivity. Remember, my children, you must seek Him in *all* the decisions you make, great and small. If you had but asked me, I would have spared you the suffering of this night. Now, sit, rest, and eat, for the road ahead is a long one."

He reached out and touched me, and liquid fire flowed through my arm through the rest of my body. The hurts disappeared, and my broken bone mended. I never felt such a surge of warmth and healing power. Emily received a touch as well, from the other stranger, and it had the same effect on her. Once I had recovered, I followed the angel's gaze – I knew what he was – and saw a blazing fire to the side of the tracks. Taking Emily's warm hand, I walked with her to the fire. A large piece of meat roasted on a spit, and on a blanket, spread out by the fire, lay a large loaf of bread and a container of water. No king could have asked for a grander feast.

The two angels came and sat with us by the fire, but they did not share in our meal. They talked kindly to us, but afterward we could remember nothing that they said, except that one of them told us his name. "I am Mitrael." Years later, I would hear those words again.

We ate. We slept. We awoke alone, in the brightness of the day. Somehow rays of sunshine made their way into the canyon, and shone on our faces as we awoke. More food awaited us, and the fire still burned. Neither of us felt any trace of the pain that had so tortured our steps the night before, and we could find neither cut nor bruise as evidence of what we had gone through. We discussed the possibility that it had all been a dream, or a nightmare, but the fact that we both shared it made that seem unlikely. After all, we had ended up in the bottom of the New River gorge somehow, and someone *had* left the fire and the food and water there for us. With a joyful step and a song to the Lord, we set out on the return trip back to the top of the canyon.

The trip home took two days. We considered trying to find a place to call, or stopping at a church to seek help, but we felt we should just keep walking, staying away from the main road as much as possible. We did pray about it, and our decision stayed the same. The extended period alone gave us an opportunity to talk with each other at greater length than we had in years. Emily described to me her fears and tears during the time of my captivity. She remained convinced that I was still alive, and when her brother Drew called to say he'd seen me, she ran around the whole valley screaming in sheer relief and delight. For a while, the others thought she had gone stark raving mad, but Patrick told them to leave her alone. She finally calmed down enough to let everyone know what had happened; they had a prayer meeting to seek the Lord's guidance as to what they should do next.

They finally decided to send Rick to join Drew, and bring me home, forcibly if necessary. The rest I knew about. The day I arrived, Emily told me, felt like a rebirth to her, though she was terrified for an instant that I wouldn't remember her at all.

"How could I *ever* forget my best gal," I said, pulling her close against me as we walked. "Seeing you brought me back to life again, after that monster had lived in my brain for all of those months. I'm still amazed at the way you forgave me for all those things I did, especially fathering a child with another woman."

"That wasn't you who did all of those things. I knew that. I hope that poor girl finds the Lord, and a good man to be the father of her child."

"I'll have to ask Patrick how Lanesa's doing. So far as I know, she's still living over at Belfry, working in that mall. I wish she would have stayed in the valley, but I guess I can understand how hard that would be for her."

Emily stopped walking, and gave me a little kiss. "I pray for her and that precious little girl every day. I'd love to see her; Felicia is such a pretty name."

I tried to describe for her what I had experienced as Mark Mantill, but the emotions connected with those memories always overpowered me when I tried to talk about them. Emily let me know, for the hundredth time, that I didn't have to talk about it, but I believed I should. Some day, when the memories weren't so raw, I might be able to tell her more.

When we reached the first Camp homestead, we went in and called Walter. Miriam answered the phone.

"Hank? Praise the Lord! We got pretty worried about you all the morning after you were supposed to be back, and didn't show up. Daddy was all for putting together a posse and going to look for you, but I told him we should pray about it first. The Lord told me you both were fine, that He had taken care of you. He also told me that the two of you would be back by the following day. Here it is the following day, and well, you're here, or there, or whatever. You know what I mean. You want us to come and pick you up? Milo's got a car."

"No, Babe, we're fine." I started calling Miriam "Babe" as a joke, and it stuck. "Luke here has already offered to bring us on in. We'll stop by your house on the way, and let you know what happened. Tell Walter I'll replace his car as soon as I can get the money."

"Don't be silly, Hanky. Daddy already told me that you shouldn't worry about that old car. Just come on home; you and Emily are safe, and that's all that matters."

Over the next few days, we told our story over and over, as each household of the Camp clan wanted to drop by to give their regards. The part about the angels always thrilled them most. Some of them shared experiences that they thought also involved angels, particularly from their childhood.

We received two letters in the mail a week after our return. One of them came from Patrick, and contained good news. Lanesa, it seems, had found the Lord a few days before he wrote; the Lord saved her in a revival meeting that Lamar Leighton held in Belfry. Pam had gone personally to see Lanesa to invite her to the meeting.

"I think she was a little surprised when Lanesa accepted right away. I took Clarice to the meeting, so I was there when it happened. Lamar preached a great sermon about forgiveness. He told how the Lord would forgive us no matter what kind of horrible things we had done. He specifically mentioned Satan worship, and everything connected with it. Lanesa sat across the aisle from me; she looked like someone had hit her over the head with a sledge hammer. I don't know if I've ever seen someone under such deep conviction. She started wailing like a banshee, right there in the middle of Lamar's sermon. Pam put her arm around her, and she quieted down, but she kept on crying like a baby.

"At the end of the message, she ran up to the front of the church before Rev. Leighton even finished the invitation, and threw herself down at the altar, flat on her face. The folks in the church didn't know what to make of her, but Lamar did. He told the piano player to just start playing, and he got down on his knees right there beside her. The whole front of the church filled up, and people started shouting and crying all over the place. Half an hour later, Lanesa got up.

"Dad, you just wouldn't believe it – or, *you* probably would. If ever I've seen a new creature in Christ, it's Lanesa. She lit up like a Christmas tree, and ran around hugging everybody she saw. She shared some of her testimony the next night. You may not know it, but your witness to her in Cleveland, before Mark Mantill, affected her more than any other event in her life until the revival. You got her to thinking about God in a whole new way; Satan worshippers raised her, and they never spoke about God except with contempt. No one had ever shown her real Christian love until she met you. The only thing that kept her going during the time you were Mark Mantill was the knowledge of who you really were. She didn't know how to pray, but

she did ask God to deliver you.

"And, Dad, you should see little Felicia. She is absolutely the most adorable, sweet little baby girl I've ever seen. The only problem is, she looks exactly like you (Just kidding!). You may not know one other thing about Lanesa; she graduated from college with a degree in electronics. Malovich planned to use her to spy on Christians electronically. So, to make a long story short, I've asked her to move to the Valley and teach at the school. She starts in two weeks.

"Clarice sends all her love. Hope we can see you and Mom before too long. I wrote Mom a separate letter, like always."

I looked over at Emily, who had not quite finished her own letter. She smiled and cried at the same time, dabbing at her eyes with her sleeve. She realized I was looking at her.

"Oh, Hankie, isn't it *grand!* The Lord is *so* gracious and merciful and kind! Just think, when we talked about her that day, she had already accepted Christ. Looks like we would have known that in our spirits, but maybe the Lord just wanted to share this nice surprise with us through our son."

After rejoicing with each other, and reading each other's letter, we opened Liz's letter. I knew something wasn't right even as I opened the envelope. Liz wasted no time in sharing her news.

Bandy was dead. Someone murdered him.