

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Liz's letter spoke volumes in a very few words:

Dearest Hank & Emily,
Someone killed my Bandy. Please come.
Can't write now; no words.
Love in Christ,
Liz

I handed the letter wordlessly to my wife. Her look of expectancy changed instantly to concern. After reading those few words, she looked up at me, tears in her eyes.

"What has become of us, Hankie? What kind of curse has fallen on this world? Bandy was one of the kindest, gentlest young men I ever knew. How could someone do that to him?"

"In these times, dearest, the good die first. You know how many good people have died in the last 20 years, and it will only get worse as the Lord's coming gets closer. Liz needs us; let's go find us a car."

Milo had the only car close at hand that we dared ask to borrow. He agreed without hesitation; he had a great heart, though he seldom spoke. We took time to call Walter, who promised that the whole clan would pray constantly for us while we were gone. We also took time to consult the Lord, and felt the assurance of His blessing on this trip, unlike the last one. Two hours after receiving Liz's letter, we were on our way. Though we felt a sense of urgency we had not felt on our trip from her house the year before, we decided we should still stick to the back roads. What would have taken two or three hours on the four-lane system took us over four hours. The early summer sun had already sunk below the steep hills of Mingo County when we arrived at Bentown, though the light of the day would still continue a few hours more.

Liz came out from her house to greet us, with Mary, a child of ten or eleven, following along behind. With great dignity, she hugged us both and led us inside her house. Once the door closed behind us, however, she threw herself sobbing into my arms. For a long while, she could do nothing but weep in great wrenching sobs. I knew nothing to say to comfort her in her grief; I could only stroke her head and repeat over and over, as to a little child, "It's okay; get it all out; it's okay."

When she finally composed herself a bit, she drew away from me, and turned to greet Emily. My wife had waited patiently in the background, as she so often did, trying to comfort Mary. The child didn't understand everything, but she understood her mommy was crying, and that made her to cry, too.

The story of Bandy's death came out in painful bursts, interrupted by more episodes of grief. What I tell here in a brief time took Liz over an hour. "Neither of us had any idea someone hated us that much. Things have been getting worse, with Brett Halcomb stirring up the Satanists and cursing all of us who follow Christ. We got so many obscene and threatening phone calls we finally had the phone disconnected. We also had to put up with broken windows, spray painted threats, and threats and insults whenever we went out in public. Still, we never expected anything like this; none of that Satanists had stooped to open murder around here before, and we believed the Lord would keep us from that kind of harm.

"Friday evening before last – it feels like a lifetime ago – Bandy went up north of town to visit a church member who was going through some tough times with a teenage child. I expected him to be late, but when 11:00 o'clock came and he still hadn't arrived, I started to get concerned. Around midnight, I finally bundled Mary into my own car, and went looking for him. I found his car beside the road several miles out of town,

but he wasn't inside it or any where around. It was too dark to try to find him by myself, so I went back into town, and gathered some of the church members together. We went back to the place where his car sat, and went looking in the woods on either side of the road. Two of our men found him about an hour later, or found what someone had left of him."

At this point, she began weeping yet again, almost hysterically. She couldn't describe to us what they found; we heard later from one of the men who discovered the body. Bandy's face had been smashed in, and his arms and legs severed. Deep, gaping wounds covered his chest and back; someone, probably more than one, had smashed and hacked him to pieces. Liz had fainted at the sight; both of the men who made the discovery vomited at what they saw.

"We reported it to the police. They could hardly claim Bandy's death was accidental, the way they so often did with Christians killed in Kentucky. Instead, they've been dragging their feet, saying they have no clues and no suspects. I know for a fact that someone saw Brett Halcomb come back into town with blood on his clothes, but everyone's afraid to talk. Hankie, I *know* he killed my Bandy, but I can't prove it. I've tried so hard to forgive him, but I just can't let go of the hatred I have for him."

I knew all the usual things I should say: you can't hold to that unforgiveness or it will leave you bitter; the Lord expects us to forgive even the worst things others do, because He forgives us our worst. I knew all of these things, but I didn't say them. Now wasn't the time for preaching; all we needed to do right now was love our dear friend. The prophecy the Lord had given her as a young girl came back to my mind; she hadn't forgotten it either, I was sure.

We moved on to other things as we sat together in her living room. Jack Baker, my student of long years before, had joined the church, but his love of the Lord was lukewarm at best. I still believed the Lord would do great things through him one day, but he would have to go through some major changes first, and probably some great crisis or another. Meanwhile, Green Halcomb, Brett's big brute of a son, grew wilder each day. "If ever I saw a demon-possessed child, Hankie, he's the one. You can see it in his eyes; he frightens me, every time I look at him. He catches cats and dogs, and tortures them for sport. He beats up smaller children for no reason, and Brett won't do a thing to stop him."

We shared our own experiences of the past year, including the great bonfire and the encounter with the bandit gang. Liz showed no surprise about Miriam's gift of prophecy, saying she had seen it lying dormant in her for quite some time. When we mentioned bandits, she shuddered, saying that several groups of them operated in the nearby hills of West Virginia and Kentucky. Many of them now stopped cars on even the busiest highways, sometimes in broad daylight. Only by the Lord's blessing had we made it through without once being stopped.

She knew about Lanesa, including some details Patrick hadn't shared with us. "She's been on our prayer list since she came back with you from Ohio. When Bandy told me Lamar was preaching a revival, I called Pam and suggested she invite Lanesa. She had already thought about that, but hesitated before I called her. She didn't think Lanesa would come, but we agreed she should try. When I found out about her conversion I laughed and danced and cried for an hour. I went to visit her before Patrick talked to her, and told her I believed the Lord had a ministry for her there at the school. That little girl, Hank, is the most precious little thing I've seen besides my own Mary."

Mary sat there beside her mother through all of our conversation, clutching Liz's hand tightly. She knew her Daddy had died, but didn't really understand how or why, or just what the significance of it all was. A quiet child, she had sad eyes, and rarely smiled during the time we spent with Liz. I wondered how all of this would affect her as she grew older.

That night we went to a church service. Several of the members stayed away out o fear; only fifteen showed up, out of a congregation of forty. No one stepped up to the pulpit to fill Bandy's place; everyone just sat

around with bowed heads, some weeping, others doing nothing at all. I felt someone needed to get things started, so I got up, and walked to the front of the building.

"Brethren, most of you don't know me. My name is Hank Crandall, and I'm from Pike County, over across the river. I taught Liz and Bandy in school, and both of them have been dear friends and brethren for Emily and me for many years. Except for Liz and Mary, no one feels the pain of Bandy's death any more than I do. The Lord has allowed a lot of pain to come my way these past few years, and I couldn't begin to explain why. I was arrested on a trumped-up charge and thrown into a jail cell with three other men, a cell not big enough to stand up in, or even stretch out straight. The guards in that place were demon-directed monsters; they tortured and starved me for what seemed like years, though it lasted only a few weeks. The other men in my cell died.

"When I came close to death myself, they took me out, fed and clothed me, and sent me to an awful place in Cleveland, Ohio. They pumped drugs into me, hypno-drugs, and convinced me I was a Satanist priest. I lived that life long enough to be involved in terrible sacrifices, persecute Christians to the point of death, and father a child by a strange woman I thought was my wife. Through it all, though, my wife and my brethren in our church refused to believe the story the authorities told about my death. They prayed for me constantly, and when my brother-in-law Drew saw me one day on the street, they sent a rescue party after me. The sight of my dear Emily brought me back to reality and sanity

"We had to run away, for fear that my presence in Misty Valley would cause trouble for the church and school. A fine family of Christians up in Fayette County took us in, and we even have a home there. We have continued to serve the Lord, in spite of constant attacks from the enemy. Only the intervention of angels saved us from slavery and death at the hands of a band of outlaws.

"I told you all of that to say this: No matter how black things seem, the Lord will not desert his people. These dark times we live in now will lead to the Last Days, and the Lord's return. I'm certain of that. All the signs point that way. No matter how bad things get, though, we must continue to trust in the Lord. He's the only one who can see us through all of this. And, believe me, Brethren, things will get worse in the years ahead, not better. We must support each other in prayer and consolation, or the Enemy will destroy us one by one. Even now, you see how few of you came here tonight; many will desert the church in the dark times of persecution, including even some of you who sit here tonight, but the Lord will never desert His people.

"All of us should gather around the altar and pray for this church and this community. Emily and I will pray with you."

They all listened during my little speech, some of them still dabbing away at their tears. Some nodded at the things I said; a few showed no sign of hearing or understanding. When I gave the invitation for prayer, all but two or three came forward; those who did not come left before we arose. Liz and Mary came to kneel beside Emily and I, and we joined hands as we prayed. The Lord sent me a terrible vision of fire and death, but of victory and salvation as well. I saw a man coming in the power of the Spirit to restore what the Enemy destroyed. Mary had a part in the restoration; Liz did not. I told Liz a part of what I saw after the meeting, but not the part about her. She would have pain enough without knowing everything that would happen in the years ahead.

The next day, the Spirit compelled me to walk alone up one of the hills that surround the town. Liz and Emily tied to talk me out of going, but I assure them I would be fine. As I walked through the part of town where Brett lived, people spat at me, and cursed me, but no one tried to attack me. The day was hot and humid, and sweat drenched my clothes as I walked toward the hill. The shade of the trees, when I reached them, offered a blessed relief, but the heavy sense of oppression I felt did not leave me. I toiled on up the hill until I finally reached the top, at a spot where I could look down on the town.

Evil pervaded the place. It seeped into the very pores of my skin, and the stench of it filled my nostrils. The

gorge of vomit rose up in my stomach, and I fought to keep it down. When my mind began functioning, I understood; someone would be murdered here; an innocent life would be snatched away suddenly and brutally. This, too had some connection with Liz, but the Lord did not show me every detail. I wondered why He even showed me at all; I couldn't warn someone I didn't know about something that might not happen for many years.

I looked out over the town, and saw a dark cloud spread over it. At first I thought a thunder storm was brewing, but I soon realized this was a storm of a different sort. Satan's forces gathered over the place, marshaling their strength to battle the Lord's people. The cloud descended down into the town and disappeared, but the darkness stayed. As I stood there, still wondering what it all meant, the Lord spoke to me, in almost audible voice.

"I have shown you shadow of things to come. Go, now, strengthen my people. Tell them that darkness and evil must come, but I will deliver them in my time. Some of them will indeed face death and torture, but those who remain faithful will receive a reward far beyond their suffering. Tell my servant Liz that she will serve as my sure anchor here, and that she will hold fast during the storm. When she finishes her work, I will give her up for a sacrifice, but then she will forever be with me. She will raise up a child, not her own, who will lead my instrument of delivery here."

The voice spoke no more. I hurried back down the hill, walking much faster than when I came. No one seemed to notice me this time, and I arrived back at Liz's house without incident. She and Emily sat on the front porch talking as I approached, but they both came to meet me. A look of relief filled their faces, but not before I saw the anxiety it replaced. Each of them in turn gave me a hug, and each took one of my hands as we walked back into the house. The ceiling fan in the living room did little to cool the place; it just circulated the hot air. We needed the privacy to talk, though, and the heat did not bother us much at that moment.

I told them what had happened, in every detail, and included what I had not told Liz the night before. Her face darkened when I gave her the Lord's message, but the darkness did not stay. When she realized the trust the Lord had placed on her, and the role He had called her to play, joy took the place of despair.

"I never thought of myself as being anything special. The Lord gave me that vision as a child, but I just figured it was to help out the school, and you. The idea that He would call me to be His anchor in any place, much less one like this, is just too great for me to understand. I don't look forward to all the pain and suffering He promised me, but I know now He'll be with me through it all. I wonder who that little child will be, and what that means for my sweet little Mary. Life without Bandy – I never thought I could face it. I know I'll miss him every day for the rest of my life. Nothing can change that, but at least now I can live again."

We spent several more days with Liz, and went to Sunday services with her. A few more people showed up, but unlike before, a sense of new hope and expectancy filled the service. Liz took charge of the meeting, and gave what I thought must be her first sermon. She started in a halting and hesitant way, but her voice strengthened until, by the end of the message, it rang out strong and clear. She spoke of the Lord's provision in times of need, and of His promise to be with them no matter what happened. The service ended in a joyous time of singing and celebration, and the people left to go their homes with smiles instead of tears.

That night, some of Brett's cohorts broke into the church, smashed the windows and pews, and spread animal blood and human feces all over the sanctuary. We helped clean up the awful mess, one of the last things we did before we left, but the Satanists had damaged the building beyond the means of the little congregation to repair it. They decided to board it up; from then on, they would meet in each other's homes. Within days, we found out later, Halcomb had taken over the place, and begin conducting his own worship services, in honor of his lord, Satan.

Several years after our visit, Liz's daughter, Mary, fell in love with a much older man, Jack Baker. The news

of their marriage came as a shock to me, but I knew it had to come as a crushing disappointment to Liz. Mary gave birth to a daughter of her own, Julie Ann, six months after her marriage.

We traveled back to Camp Town without the same sense of security we enjoyed before, constantly on the watch for road bandits. Again, though, the Lord watched over us. We saw nothing but a few abandoned cars along the way to remind us that the roads were no longer safe. Before night fall, we turned onto the now familiar one-lane road that led to Camp Town. We returned Milo's car to him intact. Walter and his crew greeted us with the same warmth, but we could tell something had happened. Something of their joy had left them, and a mood of sadness hung over the big house. When we had finished exchanging greetings, I turned back to Miriam, a question on my face.

"Clint left home yesterday. He said he felt smothered in this place, and wanted to go somewhere that still had some life in it. Uncle Harold called us this morning and said Clint showed up in Beckley. He refused to stay with them, and we don't know where he is right now. He may be with Henry."

They didn't talk much about Henry. He had left home years before, and I had never met him. Back then, Walter drank liquor from time to time. Henry picked up the habit on the sly, stilling whiskey from Walter's stash. He told everyone that his father was a drunk, and he was carrying on the family tradition. After he left home, vowing never to return, Walter threw away his liquor, and never touched another drop. His fear now was that Clint would follow in his brother's footsteps. Henry was living somewhere in a ghetto in east Beckley, with a woman he never married and their young daughter.

"We'll keep praying for them both. I believe they'll both return to the fold some day. We have to trust what the Bible says: 'Train a child up in the way he should go, and when he's grown, he will not depart from it.'"

Miriam just smiled a sad smile and gave me a hug. We should have prayed for both of her brothers then and there, but we could think of nothing but getting home to rest.

Our own little house awaited us, and it seemed to be the most beautiful place on earth at that moment. Someone, probably Miriam, had cleaned and dusted it for us, and stocked our refrigerator. Emily fixed us a light meal, and we went to bed early. We had one more person and yet another need to add to our prayer list. Outside our window, a screech owl sang its eerie song. I shivered in the heat of the night.