

CHAPTER SIX

Lamar hit the ground running, almost before the car stopped. He crossed the yard to where we stood in almost a single bound. He swept a startled Pam up in his arms, and whirled her around in his exuberance. When he finally settled down, still holding tightly to Pam, he said between gasps for air, "I finally did it! After all these years, I found my way back to the Lord. I haven't felt this great since – I've *never* felt this good! It happened this afternoon, Pam. I felt like I really needed to pray, so I took the car out away from everything and everyone, and just started walking.

"Somehow, I ended up on the far side of that hill, near the valley. I could hear voices in the distance, but I couldn't tell what they said. All of a sudden, the power of God fell all over me, and I went down to my knees right where I stood. I confessed every sin I could think of, and asked God to forgive them all. Then I told Him I wanted to serve Him however and wherever He wanted me to. Then, as clearly as you hear me now, He *spoke* to me, and told me I would serve as His minister, and – this is the part you may not believe – He told me *you* would be my help mate. I told Him you probably wouldn't believe that, but He assured me you would. You do, don't you?"

Tongue-tied, she nodded vigorously, and started to cry again. We felt a little embarrassed to watch them, so we went inside the house. Half an hour later, they came to get us. Pam had recovered her voice by then. "We've decided we want to get married, but we're going to wait a while. We want to get joined together in December, near Christmas. Emily, would you be my maid of honor?"

Things moved much too fast for me that day, as they had for the whole week end. I discovered later that Pam had prayed for Lamar on the opposite side of the hill, at almost the exact time God's power overcame him. He didn't realize at the time he had stopped so close to us. Right then, I didn't think about any of that. I just wanted to sit down somewhere and let my head stop spinning. I felt relieved when Pam and Lamar left, and immediately felt guilty. Emily's presence helped calm me, as it always has. After she, too, had left, Mae Mae and I talked it all over, and agreed that God's ways are marvelous and mysterious indeed.

Come Monday, the world returned to a measure of normality and routine. A new student came to join us, Lamar's fifteen year-old brother, Bandy. His parents died several years before, so Lamar served as both father and mother to him. He was a brand-new Christian, having accepted Christ only the night before. I noticed with some pleasure that Liz Majors couldn't take her eyes off of him. They would be a good match. Meanwhile, Kay pursued Nate relentlessly. I had to scold her for passing notes and whispering in class, but at the time I didn't see much wrong with the flirtation.

About 11:00 o'clock, Lane Darker put in his appearance, a week earlier than announced. I expected the worst, but for some reason he stayed quiet and meek all during his visit. He was obviously ill at ease, constantly wiping his face with his big bandanna, even though the day was comfortably cool. He hurriedly went through the motions of examining our curriculum and facilities, nodding his head at our explanations and asking no questions at all.

We insisted he tell us how we did before he left, and he mumbled something like, "No problems. No, no problems. Everything in order." He marked the check boxes on a carbonized form, signed it, gave us a copy, and left. He raced out of the valley at breakneck speed. We couldn't figure out what had happened until Auntie Mae reminded us. "Don't you remember what we did yesterday? Lane serves his master, Satan. He couldn't stand it here, because we consecrated the whole valley to God. All he could only think about getting away. Mantro will go apoplectic, but there's nothing he can do when his own hand-picked man gives us a clean bill of health."

Classes flew by the rest of that day. We agreed we had a great group of students, well advanced by public school standards. Not all of them were Christians, but so far as we knew, none of them used drugs, a remarkable fact for any group of young people of that size in our day and age. A few of the older ones smoked, but we made clear they couldn't light up in or around the school. I smoked myself through my college years, but stopped cold turkey on returning home.

That September I still remember as one of the most eventful months of my life, and it had still not half finished before something else happened which thrilled and excited us all. It concerned my secret favorite in that first group of students, Liz Majors, now thirteen. Wednesday morning she came prancing into the classroom after chapel, obviously in a very excited and agitated state. At first I thought it had something to do with Bandy Leighton, but when he came in, she didn't seem to notice. She came over to my table, which served as my desk, and leaned over conspiratorially to whisper, "Mr. Crandall, I just *have* to see you! Something great happened to me last night, and I've *got* to tell someone before I bust!"

Her eyes held such intensity and urgency I couldn't refuse. I asked Bonnie to cover for me for a while, explaining only that one of my students urgently needed to talk to me. I took Liz outside, and we sat down together under the old maple.

"Okay, honey, what did you want to tell me?"

Her words came in a rush. "Last night I sat in my room, and thinking about things, and I decided I wanted to be a Christian. So, I got down on my knees beside my bed, and asked God to forgive my sins, just like you taught us. I asked Jesus into my heart, and I could tell right away He came. I felt real warm inside, you know, like I was at peace. Then, I went to sleep."

She stopped, but I could tell she hadn't finished. I tried to encourage her.

"That's *wonderful*, Liz. We've all prayed this would happen. Go on."

She still hesitated. "You may not believe this part, Mr. Crandall," she said, slowly.

"I know the Lord was in it, whatever happened. Don't be afraid."

"Well – like I said, I went back to sleep, but after a while, I woke up, and saw someone standing by my bed! He was real tall, dressed all in white, and there was this light around him. I got scared, and started to scream, but he put his finger on my mouth, and I knew I didn't need to be afraid.

"He started talking to me, and I remember everything he said." Her shoulders straightened, her head lifted, and her face shone with a light of its own. "God has chosen you for a special work. You will marry and move to a town you do not know. There, you will be my messenger and my light in the midst of great darkness. The school where you learn will serve as a refuge for many, but not for you. The Lord will always be with you, even in the most evil times. Never be discouraged, for in your greatest need I will visit you again."

She stopped and looked at me, her face still glowing. Words failed me, but the Spirit within me testified she had spoken the truth. I opened my mouth and shut it again. I could do nothing but give her a hug. Finally, I said, "That message came from the throne, Liz. God truly does have His hand on you, and He has touched you in a most sovereign way. Never let anyone tell you it wasn't real; you can live your whole life in the light God gave you last night."

We didn't share what she told me with everyone, because I didn't want to open her to ridicule or teasing from the other children. I did tell the other parents, though; she hadn't even told Fred and Pat yet. the schedule

didn't include Pat that day, but I called her after we went back inside. She arrived half an hour later, her hair in curlers and looking anything but her best. After a quick conference with Bonnie, we told the children she had to leave, and that Pat would fill in for her. Pat gave her oldest daughter a big hug, but didn't say anything to her until lunch time. Then, she took her out for a walk, so she could hear for herself what had happened.

A different Liz attended our school from then on. Although still basically shy, she exhibited surprising boldness when it came to talking about her faith and her relationship with Christ. She personally led three of the other students to Christ. With the agreement of her parents, she started to recruit students for a Bible study after school. At her urging, our church agreed to start a special class for new Christians for all ages. Everybody loved and respected Liz, with at least one notable exception.

Kay Rathwell didn't just expect attention, she demanded it. Wherever she went, she expected to be at the center of anything that happened. Liz's new-found popularity irritated her, and she began plotting ways she could regain the limelight and disgrace her rival at the same time. That, however, still lay in the future. My attention that week quickly shifted away from Liz to the last minute preparations for my wedding.

Tuesday, September 19, was an unofficial holiday, being both our wedding day and Mae Mae's birthday. The night before the wedding, we had our one and only rehearsal with the preacher. Moab Bloomington appeared, if anything, more nervous than I was, but proud to finally be giving his little girl away. Auntie Mae had already done her magic in decorating the house for the occasion, though we planned on having the actual ceremony in the yard under our favorite tree.

I had always heard that grooms, not to mention brides, experienced last minute doubts and second thoughts. I had none, but I did stay awake much of the night in a high pitch of excitement and anticipation. After Auntie Mae left for her quiet time, I lay in my bed, unable to sleep. I got up and went downstairs for a glass of milk, hoping that would somehow help me sleep. It didn't; I'm not sure when I finally dozed off, but it must have been around 3:00 in the morning. At 7:00 I was up, and ready to face all the day had in store.

Several of the women came by the house around 9:00 to help with the myriad last minute tasks that remained. They carried out tables and chairs, made sandwiches, and put the finishing touches on the wedding cake, which they didn't allow me to see. Though there was no threat of rain according to the radio, Mae Mae prepared the inside of the house just in case. We would pass our first night as a married couple in that very house, so she put fresh, frilly sheets in our bedroom, and pretty towels in the bathroom.

Other than putting my suit on, I finished my own preparations by 11:00, with four hours ahead of me before the wedding. I tried to concentrate on Bible study and prayer, as Auntie Mae suggested, but I couldn't concentrate at all. Finally, I just set out walking, knowing I would have to take another shower when I returned. I made it back by 12:00, but the women forcibly restrained me from going inside for a few minutes until Emily could be ushered to her dressing room. After a quick shower, I got dressed, and spent the following two hours sitting in my room and staring out the window, while the women folk bustled around Emily.

Finally, the time came when Fred Majors, my best man, knocked on my door. "They want us to go on down, I guess, Hank. Time for the lynch party." I almost beat him down the stairs. The groom's party, all four of us, congregated in the main school room. We could hear the giggling and chatter of the women on the other side of the house, but we men were a subdued lot.

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered here in the sight of God and these witnesses to join this man, Hank Crandall, and this woman, Emily Bloomington, in the bonds of holy matrimony." She took my breath away when I saw her come out to the strains of the wedding march, and I have yet to get it back. Even partially concealed by the bridal veil, her face looked lovelier than I had ever imagined. My heart skipped a beat, and started racing like a thoroughbred on Derby Day. When I took her hand, it felt hot and sweaty like mine, and I knew she felt just the same as I did.

"By the power vested in me, and in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, I now pronounce you man and wife. What God has joined together, let not man put asunder. You many kiss the bride."

My love life began from that moment. Our first kiss as man and wife washed away all memories of the ones which came before; it was, at that moment, our very first kiss and our first embrace.

The rest of the afternoon passed in a daze of eating, dancing, tears and laughter. We celebrated not only our union as husband and wife, but my dear Auntie Mae's birthday. Some seventy-five people, mostly from the Bloomington clan, crowded into our yard, and filtered into and out of the house. Pam and Lamar glowed as they flitted from place to place, like two roman candles, happily answering questions about their own wedding plans. Emily and I barely saw each other for the rest of the day, as this or that friend or relative took us aside to give us advice or wish us well.

Kay Rathwell and Nate Bloomington disappeared for a while, but nobody took much notice at the time. About 7:00 that evening, Mae Mae began shooing the guests away. Except for a few of the women who stayed behind to help, the crowd cleared out by 8:00. Kay and Nate had not reappeared. I talked with Emily, and we decided to get out of our wedding clothes and go looking for them. Bonnie, who had stayed to help, insisted nothing at all had happened, but I wasn't so sure. By 8:30, we came back downstairs to start our search, but the two missing persons appeared just as we started to leave. Kay quickly assured her mother they had just gone for a long walk, and Bonnie accepted her explanation without question. I exchanged looks with my bride, but we said nothing.

At long last, around 10:00, we found ourselves alone. Auntie Mae insisted on spending a night with one of her dear friends. I closed the door behind her as she went to a waiting car, and came back to sit on the sofa with my wife. We just sat there for a while holding hands, looking at each other but saying nothing. After a while, I don't know how long, we finally burst out laughing, and collapsed helplessly into each other's arms. We couldn't stop; when we thought we had it all under control, we would pull apart, look at each other, and start over again. We literally fell off the couch and rolled on the floor together. It was one of the most exhilarating moments of my entire life, and hers. It wasn't that we found anything funny; the Lord just gave us such an overwhelming sense of joy, we couldn't contain it.

When we regained a measure of control and composure, we went upstairs together. We dressed separately, she in the bathroom and I in the bedroom. As always, I finished first, and waited anxiously for the second eternity of that long day. When she opened the door, ending my wait, I forgot about the delay. No woman on the face of the earth is as beautiful as my Emily in a night gown, especially one as revealing as the one she wore our first night together.

We saw the new day dawn together, having dozed only intermittently through the night. We didn't spend all of that time making love, as some accused us of doing, but just enjoying each other's presence. We talked about a myriad of things, prayed about many of them, and even sang songs of praise together. All the years of loneliness and shattered hopes drained away, and we got up from our beds cleansed and refreshed.

Auntie Mae arrived about 7:00, and insisted on fixing breakfast for us. Classes didn't start until 9:00 that morning, so we had time for a leisurely first meal together. When the children did arrive, they giggled and whispered a lot, but behaved remarkably well throughout the day. Even Kay put a bridle on her sharp tongue, and managed to keep her hands to herself. My protégée, Liz, continually came to Emily and I during the day to let us know how much our marriage thrilled her.

Pam came by around lunch time, both to bring a belated wedding present and to ask a question. She pulled me aside from the lunch table. "Do you need some help here? I've got plenty of time, and I want to do something to serve the Lord after so many years of doing nothing."

"My dear sister, there is nothing right now that would complete my joy any more than having you join us

here. We don't get much in the way of tuition, so"

"Oh, no!" she interrupted quickly, "I couldn't take money. The money I got from Benny's insurance will take care of me for a long while. I wouldn't dream of taking anything. Just think of me as a full time volunteer."

"Praise the Lord! When can you start?"

"Is tomorrow too soon?"

The children loved her, and why wouldn't they? She was both sweet and tough, gentle and strict. She taught the lower grades all day long, so I could concentrate on the older children. Though we needed the parents less, they still came faithfully, and helped with both assignments and discipline. Bonnie knew a little about everything, and in some areas she rated as an expert. The students never tired of hearing her spin yarns about all the things she had done, and all the places she had seen. She even began teaching Spanish, and conducted our music classes. All the while, Kay did her secretive things; Bonnie steadfastly refused to believe her extended absences during and after school represented anything more than boredom. As she pointed out, Kay finished her assignments quickly, and often sat around staring out the window. The fact that Nate invariably disappeared with her just meant she needed a friend, She did help him with his own work, after all.

Liz continued to blossom. The Bible study group she wanted, started two weeks after our wedding, and the special class for new Christians began in October, with the new quarter. Eight of the children, over half of our group, joined the study group, and most stayed with it throughout the fall. I sat in from time to answer, or try to answer, questions about some of the tougher passages they studied. Rev. Parkman also came by, and so did Bonnie, without Kay.

The persecution began shortly after the Sunday school class began. Liz's assignments mysteriously disappeared, even though I knew she had done them. Someone called her house repeatedly at night, at all hours, until finally Fred and Pat disconnected the phones when they went to bed. Kay took every opportunity to criticize the girl she clearly saw as her rival, and I had no doubt she caused all the nasty things that happened. Bonnie, of course, hotly denied any such suggestion. She said I was just being paranoid, because Liz was my pet and I had never liked Kay.

As the fall progressed, so did the problems between Kay and Liz. Each had her supporters among the other students, and the split began to affect our ability to teach, and the relationship among the parents. I began to doubt whether our prayers of anointing had done much good, but I never expected the Devil's attacks to come through other Christians.

The climax came one bright November day, at the height of Indian summer, near Thanksgiving. Emily and I took a break at lunch, soaking up the sunshine in two lawn chairs out under the autumn sun. That morning had passed quietly, and we dared to hope that the worst had passed. We couldn't have been more wrong.

The screams and yells came from the far side of the house, and the sounds didn't resemble those of play. We both bounded out of our seats, and ran full tilt toward the source of the noise. We almost ran into Carmen, who wept hysterically. "She's hurting her! She's hurting her! Hurry! Please, help her!"

By the time we got there, Pam had already arrived. She pulled Kay off of Liz, who lay unmoving on the ground, bleeding from several places. Kay had been kicking her brutally, when Pam pulled her forcibly away. She continued trying to kick the fallen girl, even as Pam held onto her with both arms.

"You help Pam," I told Emily, as I ran over to Liz. I could see she had blood on her face in several places, and her nose bled profusely. Blood oozed from her scalp, and soaked through the side of her blouse. I was concerned she had broken a rib, which proved to be the case. I sent Bandy inside to get some wet cloths so I could make a compress for her nose. Fearful of moving her, I had a student bring me a nearby blanket used as

a meeting place for lunch, and rolled it up to make a pillow.

Randi Albertson arrived a moment after we did, and I sent her inside to call Pat and Bonnie. Auntie Mae came to help me, and with long years of practice in healing hurts, began probing with skillful hands even as her lips moved in silent prayer. We managed to staunch the nose bleed, and wash and bandage the visible hurts. Randi and Emily took the other children inside, and Pam continued to talk urgently with Kay, who had calmed down somewhat.

Pat and Bonnie arrived at about the same time, breaking all speed limits. Liz had roused by then, in considerable pain but able to talk. From the other students we found out that the attack on Liz had come suddenly and with no apparent provocation, except that Liz had had the unmitigated gall to talk to Nate about Jesus. Kay flew into an uncontrolled rage, certain that Liz meant to steal away her boyfriend. Liz refused to fight back when Kay attacked her, and the older girl knocked her rival to the ground and began kicking her brutally, even as the other children pleaded with her to stop. Bandy had tried to interfere, but Nate told him to stay out of it. A few minutes more and Liz may well have been killed.

Pat reacted in concern and anguish for her little girl. She wept and trembled uncontrollably as she stroked Liz's head, saying over and over, "It's all right, Baby. Oh, my poor baby!" Bonnie, by contrast, arrived in a towering rage, certain Liz had provoked her daughter beyond all reason. The fact that no one agreed with her mattered not at all. Kacee wasn't around when the fight started, but he defended his big sister as fiercely as Bonnie did.

I accompanied Pat to the emergency room at the nearest hospital, forty-five minutes away; we made it in thirty. Bonnie took her two children and left, still fuming. The other children also left as soon as their parents could gather them up. Liz recovered from her injuries, though she had to wear a girdle around her ribs for several weeks. She came back to class the following Monday; the Rathwell children didn't return.

We heard in December that Kay had gotten pregnant, and that she accused young Nate of raping her. Bonnie didn't want a public scandal, so she brought no charges. The succession of traumas shattered young Nate; one cold December night he walked out of his house for the last time. Hours later, his father found him lying in the snow in the midst of a pool of blood; his hand held a gun, and his head a gaping hole.