



## CHAPTER SIX

George takes no notice as we change directions. The demon has not sensed our presence, because the Lord shielded us. We come to the top of the ridge by a different route and head down the other side. We can no longer hear the sounds of death behind us. George plods on like a machine, methodically putting one foot in front of the other without any apparent notion of where he goes or why.

By daylight we are miles away from the massacre. I see a good spot for a day camp and manage to get George to stop. He looks around rather dully, not comprehending what he sees or what he should do. He lowers the wall around himself long enough for the Lord to touch his mind. Immediately, his eyes clear. He begins to talk, partly to himself, partly to the Lord.

“I wonder where I am, and how I got here. I don’t remember anything after the angel stopped me. Lord, you must have brought me here, because I sure didn’t do it on my own. I guess I’d feel better if I dropped this pack. – That’s better. I guess, Lord, I need to rest, and this is the place you’ve picked for me. It’s as good as any, I suppose.”

Ten minutes later, wrapped up in the blanket and using the coat as a pillow, he is fast asleep in the shelter of bushes. He sleeps through the day, because the Lord grants him rest. It is a healing sleep, to ease the pain and heal the hurt. When he awakens he eats the small packet of food Mary fixed for him, and manages to get through the simple meal without crying.

He prays then, talking long and earnestly with the Lord. When he rises from his knees he has a renewed sense of what the Lord wants to do with him and of where he should go. He starts out again, this time to the east.

In the days ahead, George comes upon many small towns. He always seeks out one family, as he did with the Bakers, and always the Lord directs him in his choice. They do not always respond as he had hoped, but no one ever betrays him. When a town accepts him, he has the new converts bring their relatives and friends to some field or other open area near the town. He stays away from church buildings, which the Lord’s people no longer use anyway. He remembers too well the first church building the people reclaimed.

Always he preaches the same message. Today he speaks to fifteen people in front of an old barn. The farm the building once served is deserted. Blowing brown dust covers the fields which once nourished green plants. No rain has fallen for weeks; many people here have left and some have died of hunger and thirst.

“These are desperate times. The world is dying, like these fields here. Why? Because God has cursed it! And you – you’re dead already. All of you are dead in your sins. God doesn’t know you. Do you know what Hell is? Hell is a place, a real place, a place of damnation, a place of fire, a place of torment. You know who God made it for? The Devil and his angels. You know who else is going there? *You are!*”

“You don’t believe me? The Bible says that whoever’s name is not found written in the Book of Life shall be cast into the lake of fire! It also says also that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

“You are without hope unless you accept Jesus as your Savior. The time is short. In not too many days the world will be destroyed, then it will be too late. Repent, while you still have time. Turn toward the Lord! Confess your sins! Jesus is knocking; don’t turn him away!”

A few scoff and turn away, but others join him when he asks them to kneel and pray the sinners' prayer. He stays with them for a few days to teach them to pray and feed on the Word. In some places he has to leave hurriedly to avoid arrest; he never sleeps in a house, because he doesn't want to endanger those inside. This night he will sleep in the barn behind him, but often he sleeps in the open. The nights are colder, but he always manages to find a small cave or a thicket of bushes that provides some shelter from the cold.

The times are desperate indeed. Many towns have no food in the stores at all, and people travel long distances in search of a supply source. More and more they congregate around the larger towns, leaving large areas all but deserted. This particular place is more fortunate than most; the local grocery store has an occasional food delivery, but the shipments are getting farther and farther apart. Those who haven't left are considering it.

George looks for his own food. He has long since ceased to be squeamish about eating whatever the Lord puts in his path, grubs included. He has gone an extra day without eating now and then, but has never faced real hunger. He looks tough and lean, with a long bushy beard that gives him the look of a prophet, which he is.

After three days he leaves this town, just ahead of a car load of deputies. He enters a desolate, deserted area. The dark windows of the houses stare back at us, threatening dire and dangerous things to anyone who dares enter. George walks into one of the dead towns and finds a house with its door swinging open on its hinges. He will not enter one with the door still closed, out of respect for the owners, living or dead. The skeleton of some dead animal lies in the dusty yard. The place has the smell of death, and he starts to turn away.

From inside comes a weak moan. He turns back and walks cautiously into the house. The sound comes from a room near the back. There is just enough outside light left to allow him to pick his way among piles of garbage to a bedroom. There on a filthy bed, covered in excrement and stinking of urine, lies an old woman. She seems unaware of our presence, for she continues to moan weakly.

George speaks softly to the Lord. "I'm used to the filth, Lord, but she is very near death. What should I do?"

*There is a well in the yard. It was dry, but I have filled it. Go, draw out some water, and wash her. She was mine once, but strayed away. She has prayed for someone to come and save her. You are the answer to her prayers; I will save her through you.*

George goes obediently outside and finds the well, which is nothing but a length of pipe with a stopper at the top and a rusty bucket attached to a pulley above. He removes the stopper and lowers the bucket down the narrow pipe. Eventually he hears a gurgle indicating the bucket is full; he cranks the pulley to bring the bucket back to the top. When he lifts it out, he realizes he has nothing to empty the water in. He has to leave the bucket, go back inside the house, and search until he finds a container large enough to suit his purposes. As it is, the large plastic bowl will hold only a small part of the water in the long, narrow well bucket.

Taking the water back inside, he looks until he finds a more or less clean cloth and goes back to where the old woman still lies groaning. Tenderly, without a trace of revulsion at the filth, he washes her clean. He has to make several trips back to the well, emptying the bowl on the ground and filling it again. He replaces the woman's filthy rags with an old but clean robe he finds hanging in a closet.

Through this whole process, which takes over an hour, the woman does not regain consciousness, but continues to groan in the same way as when we first entered. George has to light a lamp to have enough light. When he finally finishes, satisfied with his work, he speaks to the Lord.

"Lord, I have done as you asked. What would you have me to do now?"

*Find a cup, a clean one, and pour a little bit of water down her throat. She is almost dead of thirst. She will*

*awaken then. Lay your hands on her and pray, and I will restore her strength for a while. Minister to her need.*

Doing as the Lord tells him, George rummages in the kitchen until he finds a cup. He takes it outside, rinses it, and fills it with water. Going back to the bedroom, he lifts the old woman's head and carefully pours a small amount of water into her open mouth. She sputters, opens her eyes, and draws her tongue over her lips. Her eyes are glazed and she remains somewhere beyond the realm of understanding.

George lays his hands on her and prays for her in an angelic language, a beautiful anthem of praise for the Lord's intervention and saving power. I see the Lord's hands work through his. As so often happens, the Spirit's hands reach inside the woman's mind and body to do a work of healing and restoration. When the work is done, He releases George from the prayer and the old woman's eyes clear. She smiles up at George as he slowly removes his hands.

"I knew you would come. I kept praying the Lord would send someone. What's your name?"

"George Alfred. You're right; the Lord did send me here, but I'm not the one who saved you; He did. He told me that you knew Him once, but turned away. He wants you to come back to Him."

Her eyes brim with tears. "With all my heart. What do I have to do?"

"Just tell the Lord you confess your sins, ask Him to forgive you and ask Jesus back into your heart. Almost like the first time you came to know Him."

She does as he says, her eyes closed as she repeats the words, and when she finishes she smiles up at him again. "I felt Him come in. It's been so very long since I felt His presence with me. Can I tell you how I came to be here?"

"Of course. That's one reason the Lord has sent me here, so that I may hear your witness."

"Well – I'm not from here. I come from a town down near the Kentucky border. It used to be a coal mining and sawmill town, but everything closed down. I grew up in the church, but as I got older I sort of fell away; I just stopped going. One of the women in the church, Mrs. Leighton her name was, kept telling me she was praying for me, but I just made fun of her. I hope I have a chance to tell her one day how sorry I am.

"My husband was a mean man. He beat me and our boy for no reason at all, just because he enjoyed it. He didn't drink alcohol; he always knew exactly what he was doing. He had no sense at all of right and wrong. Eventually, I started noticing a change in him, for the worst if you can believe it. He had never had anything to do with religion; he always made fun of it. But, all of a sudden, he started talking about how Satan was the only true god, and how much he hated Jesus. It frightened me.

"He started bringing home books on occult practices and black magic. He would stay gone for hours at night and return with blood on his hands. People started reporting their pets were missing. Some local boys found a stone altar with animal corpses around and reported it to the sheriff. A deputy came by and looked, but he just laughed about it and left.

"My boy started acting strange, too. He had always been such a happy, friendly child. Now he was angry, hostile, and spiteful. He was big, *real* big, and I became afraid of him, too. Other people in the town began talking about worshipping Satan, and before long it was out in the open. The Satan worshippers killed several of the local church leaders and others ran away. One night my husband came home and beat me so bad I almost died. When I recovered, I decided I'd had enough. I ran away. That's been over ten years ago. I finally ended up here. I got real sick and no one would help me. They all left the place when there was no

more food, but I was too weak to move. Finally I couldn't even move from the bed. I just kept praying the Lord would send someone to save me until I blacked out. And He did send someone, praise His name! I thank God for you, George Alfred."

George's face registers a multitude of emotions as the woman tells her story and he realizes who she is. Now he smiles down at her and asks, "Is your last name Halcomb?"

"Why, yes, I'm Bessie Halcomb. How did you know?"

He tells her the story of his encounter with Green, Liz Leighton, and Julie Baker.

Her face darkens. "I knew that boy was no good. The Devil really got hold of him. But he wasn't always like that, really. It's his father's fault. What happened then?"

He relates the rest of the story, up through the night of his flight and the massacre. She starts crying again before he finishes and so does he.

"I knew them. I knew them all. I'm so glad that the Lord set them free, but I can't understand why they had to die like that. They loved you very much, I know. I can see why they would have been willing to lay down their lives after what the Lord did for them through you. I would have done the same thing, still would. The Lord's finished with me, George Alfred, but He still has a lot of work for you."

"Finished with you? Maybe not; He's healed you already. You may have a lot of years left."

She smiles with a touch of tenderness and reaches for his hand. She shakes her head. "I'm dying, George. The Lord is already calling me home. He allowed me to live long enough to repent and to share these precious moments with you." She looks up and raises her free hand toward Heaven. "Can't you see, George? He's sending His angel for me, so I won't lose my way."

There is indeed an angel coming down the eternal path toward her. The Lord opens George's eyes so that he may see as well. Bessie's hands go limp as she leaves the shell of her body and rises to take the hand of her guide and guardian. She turns to look at George one last time and smiles as she waves good-bye. She turns and enters the light-drenched path to eternity.

The Lord removes the scene from George's sight. He releases the hand of the shell Bessie left behind. For a moment he is silent in the wonder of what he has just seen, but then he speaks. "Lord, why do I always seem to be coming upon people at the moment of their death? Why does everyone else get to go with you, while I have to stay behind? It doesn't seem fair."

*Each has an appointed time, my son. Your time has not yet come. You are not alone; I will not forsake you. You'll be with me soon enough, in my time. You'll understand then.*

George doesn't look as if he really understands, but he says nothing further. He takes the lamp and searches around until he finds a shovel. He digs a grave in the front yard and goes back inside to retrieve Bessie's body. After covering the body, he says a brief prayer. He makes a simple marker, places it atop the mound of earth, and leaves the grave, still carrying the kerosene lamp.

He has not traveled at night since he left the last town early one morning. Now, though, instead of looking for a place to rest, he retrieves his blanket roll from the house and walks away from the forlorn collection of empty buildings. Soon he climbs yet another hill. He seems angry and preoccupied for some reason; the Lord understands and that's enough.

Something is following us. I smell the demon scent, and this time the creature knows where we are. The Lord tries to warn George, but at first he will not listen. The monster creeps so close to us that George must surely know he is there, yet he gives no sign of it. Finally the Spirit all but shouts at him.

*RUN!*

George immediately runs forward, dropping the lamp as he does. The monster lets out an angry growl of disappointment and rage. He had been just ready to spring. We can hear his footsteps hard behind us as he starts in pursuit. Although I guide George as he runs, so he misses all obstacles in the way, the demon-driven man still gains ground. He has come within a few steps of us now and prepares to make one great leap onto George's back.

*TURN LEFT!*

George obeys instantly this time; the beast cannot stop himself as he leaps forward. He lets out a great scream of fear and terror as he plunges off a high cliff. We can hear him crashing through branches on the way down as his scream fades into the distance. Finally there is a sickening thud, then silence.

George stops and stands still, chest heaving. He is afraid to move in any direction.

*Continue in the same direction you're going. You're safe now. You can't help the man.. Leave this place.*

George walks away on shaky legs and I lead him to a path down the cliff. He plods on until morning, when he finds a place to rest and falls into a deep dreamless sleep. He doesn't wake up until late evening. By the time he finds something darkness has fallen again. A winter chill creeps into the dry air as he sets out.

Late that night we come suddenly to the top of a canyon wall that drops away several hundred feet. A ribbon of water, all but invisible to George's eyes, winds its way snakelike along the canyon floor, far below. Rather than attempt to find a way down in the darkness George sets up camp near the canyon rim. He awakens in the late morning and, after finding food, sets off to find a way down.

The path is a steep one, but no steeper than many of the mountains we have crossed. I guide George down; in some places the path ends at a cliff face, but there are footholds. George goes very slowly in these sections and I climb down below him in case he should fall. He makes it safely to the bottom, crosses the shallow river easily on dry rocks, and heads up the other wall of the canyon. The upward climb takes a while longer, but he makes it to the top without difficulty.

Once safely away from the canyon rim, he stops to rest. The trip from the opposite wall has taken the entire day. He considers and decides to spend another night here. He makes no effort to find food but does spend his usual time in scripture reading and prayer before he sleeps. The night air is brisk and he wraps the blanket closely about him.

The next day, as we head away from the river, we see signs of other human life. A four-lane highway runs from north to south, with small towns scattered over its length. We can see road signs that mark the distance periodically to the town of Beckley. George follows the road from atop a ridge; when one hill gives out, he climbs another one. The road must have been heavily traveled once, but few vehicles use it now.

A large sign above the right hand lanes, three of them now, announce the exit for Beckley. There are other exits farther north. George stops to consider and the Lord confirms what he is thinking.

*Yes, you must go there, too. There is danger for you in this place, but I have a work for you to do here. Don't be afraid, but be bold in me.*

George waits for nightfall to make his way down to the road. Looking carefully to be sure no traffic comes, he dashes across and finds a place he can climb up on the other side of the highway.

He makes his way carefully and cautiously toward the town. We soon see a collection of tents and shanties on every scrap of open ground on the outskirts. The night is alive with raucous laughter, screams of pain and anger and the assorted sounds of a large group of people living too close together. The Lord selects a tent in the middle of one of the encampments and tells George, *Go to that one.*

“But Lord, there’s a whole line of people there. That must be a prostitute or something.”

*Let me be concerned with that. That is where I want you to go. Stand in the line and wait.*

After a moment’s hesitation, George makes his way off the hill that has provided his cover and walks into the confusion of tents, lean-tos and cardboard mansions. He walks toward the tent where the line is, stepping over drunks and a couple of dead bodies on the way.

He reaches the line of people and can see the hand-scrawled sign over the tent flap. He stops, uncertain about whether he should go on, but someone pushes him roughly from behind.

The sign reads: “Madame Sophie knows all, sees all. Palms read, Fortunes told. \$10.00.”