



CHAPTER EIGHT

“Howie, you idiot, stop it!”

The sheriff runs down the hallway toward the cell.

“Let him go, or so help me I’ll kill you where you stand. We want him alive, you idiot!”

Reluctantly, with a disappointed grunt, Howie drops George to the floor. He steps sullenly out of the cell and locks the door.

The sheriff holds his pistol, fully cocked, to Howie’s head. “I catch you any where near this cell without my say so and I’ll kill you on the spot. Understand?”

Carefully, the big man nods his head and grunts.

“Now I’ll have to get a doc in here to look at him before we start. The way he is now he’d go with the first jolt. Now get out!”

Without bothering to look back at George, the sheriff follows his unhappy deputy down the hall. Somewhere, someone is praying for George, because the Spirit begins to do a mending work in him. The healing is not complete, but it is enough. The Lord speaks to me and I obey.

I walk over to George, lean over, and touch his forehead. Once more I step into his knowing. He opens his eyes, still swollen; looks up at me; and smiles a painful smile.

“It’s about time you got here. I about gave up on you.”

“I’ve been here all the time, George. It’s time we left, though. Take my hand.”

He reaches to take my hand and I help him to his feet . . .

. . . and immediately the Spirit translates us to a campsite where Henry still kneels in prayer. Lisa sits close by, making no pretense of praying now. She cries out in fright when we appear. As Henry looks toward her she points at us. He turns around and when he sees George he literally dances for joy.

“George! I thought we’d lost you! You look like you’ve been through a meat grinder. Who’s your friend?”

My work done, I step back out of their sight. Lisa gives a yip of surprise and Henry says, “Wow! An angel! Never thought I’d see one of those. What happened, George, and how’d you find us so fast?”

George tells him all he can remember, filling in some of the gaps based on what he heard. Henry listens with open mouth. Lisa feigns interest, but her mind is elsewhere.

A small spring lies nearby. At Henry’s insistence Lisa cleans George’s wounds and binds his hurts with clean cloth. George’s blanket roll is gone, so Henry insists that he lie down on the sleeping bag. George protests only briefly, as a matter of form, and soon falls fast asleep. Henry stays awake and tends the fire, for it is now

dark. Lisa eventually curls up in her own blanket.

Next morning when George wakes up, Henry still sits by the fire, dozing. George stays quiet so as not to disturb his friend and Lisa sleeps on. After a while Henry wakes up, stretches, and looks around. He sees George looking back at him and grins.

“How are you feeling, Brother? Sleep good?”

“I slept like a log. I feel okay, but I’m as weak as a kitten. I don’t know if I’ll be fit to travel or not.”

“I thought about that last night. I think if I started out this morning and went to my family looking for help, I could be back here by this time tomorrow morning. You think you’d be all right if I left you here with Lisa? Looks like no one is following us. They’re probably tearing Beckley apart looking for you.”

“Sure, I’ll be fine, but can you make it by yourself?”

“I used to hunt in this country. Know it well. I can make it from here with my eyes closed.”

That is a small lie, but not entirely untrue. He means well by it.

“Well, if you’re sure. I’d be all right by myself, but I’ll be glad to have Lisa for company, if she doesn’t mind staying.”

The demon of lust that encircles her squirms in anticipation. She grins wolfishly and says, “I’ll take *real* good care of him, Daddy.”

Her tone and the message in her grin are lost on both men, who are preoccupied with other things. Henry gives them the last of the meager supply of food and leaves. Lisa is very solicitous of George’s needs, insisting on checking his wounds under the cloth bandages and making clean ones for him. She gives him the lion’s share of the food and hovers over him all day like a mother hen. Her attentions plainly flatter George, who gives no hint he suspects any but the purest of motives. When night at last comes she builds up the fire and carries wood to keep it going. George is still too weak to help.

The work done, Lisa comes and sits close beside George, who lies on top of the sleeping bag. She begins running her fingers through his hair, careful to avoid the cut places on his scalp. He permits the gesture without comment. She says in a low, soft voice, “How long has it been since a woman has done this for you, George?”

“Since before Betsey died. Many, many months.”

“That’s too long. A man needs a woman to do nice things for him.” Reaching down, she begins undoing the buttons on his shirt.

“Lisa, I don’t think –”

She puts her finger over his lips. “Hush, you don’t have to think now. Just enjoy. It’s free.”

I turn away as she begins caressing his chest and try to close my ears to the sounds of animal passion that come from them both. Mercifully, the Lord draws a veil over the scene and I neither see nor hear what follows until the sound of George’s voice breaks through.

“You lying demon of lust, I command you to come out of her in the name of Jesus!”

Both of them are nearly naked. The girl holds herself at arm's length above George. Such an ugly expression of lust fills her face that George must have realized what he was really dealing with.

The filmy wisp of the demon tears itself off the girl and leaves. Her face transforms itself first to confusion then to shame. She shakes her head back and forth and cries like a small child. Her tears fall on George's bare chest. He sits up and helps her get off him. Wordlessly he puts on his clothes and makes a silent prayer asking forgiveness of the Lord. My memory contains a gap of what has happened, but I do not wonder at it.

Lisa also replaces her clothes, still crying. After she dresses, George speaks very gently to her. "Lisa, that wasn't you. The thing that controlled you has left. I was wrong, too, not just you. The Lord has already forgiven me and I certainly have forgiven you. Are you ready now to ask Jesus into your life?"

She nods, but continues crying. He goes through the plan of salvation with her again, and again she repeats the sinner's prayer. This time, though, she is sincere, and the Lord answers. The miracle of new life has come to Lisa Camp.

After that, they talk for a long while. He shares some of his own testimony with her and she opens up enough to tell her own story.

"Mom and Daddy were never actually mean to me. They gave me what they could in terms of material things, but the one thing they never gave me was love. I grew up thinking I must be the worst sort of trash because my daddy didn't love me, no matter what I did or how hard I tried.

"When I got to high school I looked for love in all the wrong places. I gave my body to anyone who wanted it, male or female, and offered it to some who didn't want it. I tried booze and every kind of drug imaginable, but nothing seemed to make me happy. It's really a miracle I didn't become some sort of dope head, but I didn't. Then, one day, I met Keith.

"Keith was a new boy in town, Mr. Cool. He seemed to have his head on straight and his act together. He liked me and invited me to his house. His parents were into spirit guides and out-of-body experiences. Along with Keith, they introduced me to my 'spirit guide,' who showed himself to me as a very handsome man. I know now it was a demon, but at the time it was the greatest thing that ever happened to me.

"Keith and I made very passionate love together and I was careless with my pills. Before I knew it, I was pregnant. Keith dumped me when he found out. I went to a family planning clinic and got an abortion with no problem. I can see now it was murder, but back then it was just an obvious solution to a problem.

"Things got very bad out in the country where we lived. We had to leave everything because Daddy had no work and there was no food. Mommy died right before we left, so we were in pretty sad shape when we reached the hell hole you found us in. My spirit guide told me I could make money telling fortunes. Sure enough, I started bringing in some big change as a fortune teller and palm reader. I made enough money to set myself up in the tent. When Rafferty's bully boys found out, they muscled in and forced me to raise my prices and give most of the money to them. That went on for over a year. Daddy kept trying to talk me out of it, but I got tired of hearing him. I told the guards to keep him away. The rest you know.

"George, I'm so very sorry for the way I've been acting. Will you please forgive me?"

He smiles. "I already have. You need to forgive yourself. I won't tell Henry. If you want him to know, I'll let you do it."

"Thanks. Anyway, I don't know if I can face him now or not, after the way I've treated him."

“I don’t think you’ll have to worry about Henry. He’s changed a lot from the man you knew as your daddy.”

They finally go to sleep late in the night. Henry awakens them when he arrives in the middle of the next morning. The man with him has a beard even heavier than George’s, but of an iron gray color. Henry has a worried look on his face, and not because of George or Lisa.

“Good morning!” he says, with forced cheerfulness. “Looks like you two had a good rest. This is Brother Leon. He’s staying with my family right now.”

Leon, who is no brother in Christ, looks Lisa up and down appreciatively as she rolls out of her blanket. He whistles and says, “Brother Hector sure will be happy to see you. *Real* happy.”

“Uh, Brother Leon here has come to help you get to my family’s camp.”

George slides out of the sleeping bag and stands up, a bit shakily. “I think I can make it by myself, Brother, if we take our time. Leon looks like a strong man, but hopefully I won’t need his help.”

Leon shrugs and says, “Suit yourself.” He doesn’t notice the omission of “Brother,” but the other two do. They exchange quick glances and Henry shakes his head slightly at George.

In a matter of minutes they break camp. They set out at a deliberate pace toward the north. Though Leon tries to hurry them along, Henry reminds him that George is still weak and can’t keep up if they go faster. George has to stop and rest frequently, but he is recovering his strength gradually. They walk through the day and into the early hours of the evening. Leon has a lantern that he lights, but he stays too far ahead to do the others much good. The three of them stumble along as best they can.

Finally someone calls from up ahead. “Stay where you are! Is that you, Leon?”

“Brother Leon, stupid. Of course it is. Who else would be walking into this god-forsaken place at a time like this?”

“Well, we have to be sure. You know Brother Hector’s rules. He’s been waiting for you. You’re late.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve been nurse-maiding that sick nigger. He may not be of much use to us, but wait ’til you see the woman.”

“Bring ‘em up to the light and let’s take a look.”

Leon ushers them forward. The other man responds the same way as Leon when he sees Lisa. “Now that’s the best thing I’ve set eyes on in *years*. Don’t see many city girls up here.”

“Well, I’m bringing them on into camp. You stay on guard.”

In a few minutes we pass through two log barricades. Finally we walk into an open area in front of two caves. A short stout man dressed in a striped shirt and jeans steps out to meet us.

“Brother Leon, I see you made it back. A bit late, I’m afraid. These must be our guests. Now from what Brother Henry told me, our nig – uh, black friend must be Brother George and this *lovely* young woman just has to be Lisa. Welcome to our little group. I know you must be tired, so get some rest and we’ll talk in the morning. You’ll be staying in the cave on the right. The good people in there will show you where you can sleep. Brother Leon will be around to see you’re not disturbed.”

His greetings accomplished, Hector turns on his heel and walks into the cave on the left. We can hear him say to someone inside, “You’ll be moving out tomorrow. I’ve found someone else to minister to my needs.”

Inside the cave, lit by a single candle stuck into a crevice, they find fifteen people of all ages. One of them, a woman, rises from where she rests and comes to them. She takes Henry’s arm and whispers, “Come to the back of the cave, where they can’t hear us.”

The three of them follow her. She turns with her back to the wall and speaks to Henry. Darkness shadows her face. “Henry, I’m glad to see you again, but I wish you hadn’t come. I didn’t have a chance to warn you yesterday. Those three men are nothing but hoodlums. They moved in here six months ago and took over, when they found we didn’t have any guns. We moved up here to hide from the security police, but we’re worse off than we were at home.

“Hector thinks he’s a preacher of some kind, and he forces us to listen to what he calls ‘sermons’ every evening. He took one of our girls to be his private whore, but I’m afraid he’s going to take this new girl to replace her. Honey, you’re far too pretty for your own good in this place. He meant for you to hear what he said to Missy before. The poor thing is probably looking forward to getting out of there.”

“This is my sister, Miriam,” Henry says when she’s finished. “She’s been a Christian for most of her life. The others here are all family, and I think all of them are Christians.”

George and Lisa each take Miriam’s hand in turn, but there is no joy in the greeting. She tells them to try to get some rest, as Hector expects them to begin work early. No one asks just what kind of work it might be.

Sure enough, when the first light breaks the entrance of the cave Hector stands outside calling them. “Time for another day’s work, children. Idle hands are the devil’s workshop.” He has his saying wrong, but the message is clear enough. The people in the cave troop out like so many robots, except the three newcomers. They remain full of vigor.

“You new people, listen up. Here are the rules. You work hard all day, you eat in the evening. If you don’t work, you don’t eat. If you don’t follow orders, you will be punished. We believe that godly discipline makes for a happy community. Brother Leon here will assign you your tasks. I need Lisa, though, inside my cave to clean it out. She’ll be ministering to my needs from this day on. Missy will join the rest of you. Lisa, come with me.”

Lisa follows him reluctantly into his cave. Henry starts to protest, but Miriam grabs his arm and he closes his mouth. They wait for orders from Leon, who begins strutting about like a rooster.

“All right, you lazy bums! Here’s where you earn your keep! See that big pile of rocks over there? I want you to carry them down to the south wall, the inside one, and pile them up against the logs. We’re going to turn this place into a fortress. Now, get to work!”

As they carry the stones, George learns that they have just spent several days gathering them together. Hector’s men ordered them to pile the rocks near the caves although they had to walk outside the wall to get there. That is part of Hector’s strategy of control; he keeps them all too tired to start any trouble. He feeds them just enough to keep them going. He doesn’t realize that the work has toughened to the point that they are much stronger than when they started. I can see that clearly, but none of them seem to realize it.

George talks to Henry about how stupid it is carrying rocks about from place to place and Leon overhears them. His lips curl back into a snarl, but he says nothing at the time. There will be trouble later.

The rock pile grows steadily smaller as the day progresses. Most of the people walk back and forth like

robots between the rock pile and the wall. George is still weak and must rest from time to time. Leon notices this as well, but still says nothing. At midday the guards give them a small cup of water each, but no food.

When Hector calls them all to eat, George almost collapses with relief. He can hardly put one foot in front of another. He soon discovers the worst part of his day is still to come.

“All of you form a line to eat, except the nigger. Brother George has shirked in his responsibility today and will not eat. He has also criticized our way of life, which is ordained by God. Later, he will be punished at a public meeting. The rest of you enjoy your meal. Oh, I almost forgot. Lord, bless this food. Amen.”

Leon leads George to a tree and forces him to put his hands around the trunk. The guard ties his prisoner's hands together and leaves him standing there. The others file through the line to get their bowls of cornmeal mush and a cup of water. This is their meal for the day. They are allowed to refill their bowls once.

When the meal is over, Hector makes them sit in two rows in front of the caves. He proceeds to deliver his “sermon,” which consists of a droning monologue about the virtues of hard work and discipline. From time to time he throws in some misquoted scripture, none of which relates to what he says. He ends with a sanctimonious prayer thanking God for his little children and for his own wisdom and strength. The Lord hears none of it. Hector's demons, which control him, mimic his words and dance around in glee. They are ugly creatures, but not remarkable as demons go.

His pastoral duties complete, Hector turns his attention to George. “We can't have a happy community unless everyone does his duty. Brother George has not done his duty today. Worse than that, he has seen fit to criticize our way of doing things, which God Himself has ordained. To restore our dear brother to the right path we must administer discipline. Since this is his first offense, we will only sentence him to bear twenty lashes. The next offense will bring forty lashes.

“I have asked Brother Mac to join us from his guard duties so that we may all witness and learn. Brother Leon, remove Brother George's shirt and bring me the rope.”

Leon carefully reaches around George and unbuttons his shirt. Discovering that the shirt cannot be removed because of the tied hands, he patiently undoes the knot, throws the shirt to the ground and redoes the knot. The effect is almost comical. He then walks to the edge of Hector's cave and extracts a knotted rope, with wicked-looking barbs embedded along its length. The thing is intended to do great damage and inflict great pain. Leon grins as he brings the instrument to Hector, and so does the other man, Mac. A stern glance from Hector wipes off the grins; he takes this task very seriously.

The scars of his recent ordeal already cover George's back. Hector delivers his first blow with all the force he can muster. The whip draws blood in several places and rips skin off when the briars are buried in the flesh and torn back out again. Hector draws back for a second blow, but it never comes.

Things begin happening fast. Hector falls backward, the back of his head crushed with a heavy rock. The members of his “church” struggle with the two guards. Mac tries to retrieve his gun but it goes off at the wrong time, killing him. One woman who scuffled with him picks up the gun and walks calmly over to Leon, the remaining guard. She empties the gun into his skull. She pulls the trigger like a robot long after it is empty. One of the others tries to take the gun from her, but she will not let go of it. It has to be forcibly taken from her, and her clinched fist still convulses in the motion of pulling the trigger that is no longer there. I recognize her as Missy, the girl Hector kept in his cave.

The scene comes out of some nightmare. Pools of blood spread around each of the three dead men. Leon's head is almost completely shot away; the gray stuff of his brains oozes out onto the ground. Several people are retching, and when nothing remains to vomit they still retch. Others, especially three young children, scream hysterically. George calls for someone to cut him loose, and Henry finally finds a knife and cuts his

bonds.

Besides George and Henry, the only person who still has her wits is Miriam. Lisa stands near Hector's cave, an expression of blank horror on her face. George and Henry walk over to Miriam, who tries to comfort a child.

"Leave her alone for a minute and go to Lisa. If you can snap her out of it she can help you with the others. Work with the adults first, so they can help with the children. Henry and I will get rid of the bodies and try to clear up some of this mess. The Lord is here; be brave."

She nods and goes to Lisa. George and Henry drag the bodies out of the camp and place them together some distance away. When they have carried all three corpses away, they cover them with rocks and go back to the caves. By the time they begin sweeping away the blood and gore, Lisa has returned to her senses and helps Miriam with the others. They are able to calm all but Missy and the man who hefted the stone that killed Hector. George helps in the prayer for those two, and they recover enough to be led inside the cave. Lisa stays with them there, holding a hand of each and talking softly to them.

It is now completely dark. Only the light of the cook fire illuminates the scene of the carnage, and it slowly dies. Gradually the survivors filter back inside the cave to join their two brethren. Miriam cleans and bandages George's back and he replaces his shirt. The night turns steadily colder and they, too, seek the cave's shelter. Henry goes to sit by his daughter, who still holds the hands of her two charges.

"Did he do anything to you?"

"No. He tried, but I've had a lot of experience handling men. I'm not proud of it, but it's knowledge I can use. I put him off with promises of something better in the night. If he had tried to make love to me, I don't know what I would have done. I think I would have killed either him or myself."

"You've changed, Lisa. I noticed that yesterday morning, when we came to bring you back."

She smiles at him in the dim glow of the candle. "I was pretending before. I didn't really come to know the Lord in Beckley. That happened while you were gone, when I was alone with George."

He gives her a hug. "I'm glad, baby, for both of us. Now, you let me watch these two for a while and you get some rest."

She shakes her head. "I'll be fine. This is something I want to do. Besides, you've been working hard all day. When they both go to sleep, so will I. Go on and rest."

He pats her hand, kisses her on the cheek, and goes to find Miriam. The two of them sit together and talk in low tones for much of the night. George is already asleep.

Off in the distance I hear some animal growl in rage. The sound is familiar.