



CHAPTER NINE

The days following are difficult ones. Much healing needs to be done. The two who did the actual killing, Missy and the man, Homer, need the most attention and prayer, but there are other needs as well. The children, especially, have been traumatized. They often awake screaming in the night and have to be comforted. Some healing takes place, but still there are many open wounds.

Miriam shares the story of the coming of Hector one evening with George and Henry. She is the strongest of the group, and the one on whom the others depend. Her usually placid face often chokes with emotion, however, as she tells her story.

“We’ve lived in this area, the Camp family has, for several generations. Several of us built our homes close together along a country road that never has been paved, at least not on our part. We attended a little Methodist church across the hollow on another hill for as long as any of us can remember. It was just a one-room church for almost a hundred years, but they finally added a basement and some Sunday school rooms.

“Anyway, that was our church, although other people in the community attended there. Everyone knew we were Christians and we never thought that would be a problem. In the last few years, though, we heard stories of Christians being persecuted, even killed, right here in the United States. Finally, we heard that the local police and the sheriff’s people were calling themselves ‘World Security Police,’ and that they were arresting Christians at every opportunity. We had a family council and decided to move up into the hills. About half decided that kind of life wasn’t for them and they left the area. They promised not to tell where we were.

“We stored a large amount of corn in a cave we knew of up in the hills. It had a fresh water spring inside that never went dry. There was another cave next door, this one, which we planned to use for living quarters. Everything went fine for several months. Then, one day, Hector showed up with his two buddies. He pretended to be a Christian and said he and the others were looking for a place to hide, like us. When he found out we didn’t have guns, he took off the mask. He and his two bullies moved in and took over. He had the food supply and the water and he had the weapons. All we could do was pray.

“He made us work and fed us just enough to keep us going. We built the two barricades and collected rocks. Some work he made us do over and over, just to keep us busy. Three of us died under the rope, and several of us, including me, were beaten with the twenty lashes. Finally, we decided we couldn’t take any more. We would either get rid of them or die trying. When the three of you showed up, we were sure the time had come. We really hadn’t planned to kill anyone, but that’s the way it worked out.”

For Miriam, the speech is a long one, because by nature she is a quiet woman. Once the story finishes, she lapses into silence and stares into the fire. Henry puts his arm around her. “You know, I left home when I was a teenager. I wanted nothing to do with the church or Jesus or anything. I used to make fun of the others, and got my share of spankings for it. I used to tease Miriam unmercifully, but during all the years I was away I thought of my family often and wished I could have what they did. I could just never quite bring myself to believe in the Lord until you came upon me there in Beckley, George. I had gotten to the point that I thought I’d just drink myself to death. Now, I’m finally home, and my sister is *really* my sister!”

He pulls her closer, and she turns to him and smiles. The family resemblance is very strong at that moment; it was hard to see before.

The day comes when Missy can talk as well. She relates how both Hector and his two bullies, who shared the cave, raped her repeatedly. The only thing that kept her going was the conviction that she would take revenge on them one day. She can remember nothing about the day of the killings after she picked up Mac's gun. Miriam helps her work through some of the feelings of hurt, guilt and shame, but the process of inner healing will take a long while for the young girl. She is only sixteen.

At George's urging they send scouts out around the camp so they won't be surprised again. For a while, they find nothing, but report seeing a strange set of tracks not far from the caves. They think they might be bear tracks, and there have been stories of bear sightings in the area.

One day, about noon, the scouts come in with news of a different kind. Lunch has just finished and the some of the women are cleaning and putting away the eating utensils. The two young boys who have scout duty come bounding into camp together, all out of breath. Immediately they seek out George and Henry.

"We were two ridges over, near the old logging road. That's about as far as we ever go. We saw two security police and they had a dog with them. They didn't see us, but they broke off the road and started coming up the ridge. If the dogs pick up our tracks they'll lead 'em right here!"

"Okay, boys," George says, standing to his feet. "One of you come with me and show me where you saw them. Henry, get everybody ready to run if something happens. You know the plan."

Henry nods, a look of mild panic on his face, and George heads out with one of the boys. As they leave the area of the caves they hear the distant baying of a hound, drawing steadily nearer. George breaks into a run as he orders the boy back to camp. The youngster, plainly scared, doesn't argue.

Topping the ridge opposite the cave, George can now tell that the hound is coming directly toward him. Obviously hoping to draw the dog off, he heads swiftly down the hill. In a few minutes, he catches sight of the dog and the two men with it. The men also see him.

"Hey, you up there! Stop where you are! Security police!"

He slips behind a tree out of their sight, and they immediately head for the spot where they saw him, dragging the dog with them. The hound vainly tries to make its way back to the trail it was following, but they ignore it. George has learned a few things about hiding in the woods over the last months and the officers soon lose sight of him. They stop to put the dog on his trail. Satisfied that they are following him, he leads them in a direction opposite the caves, crossing the old logging road and heading up the hill on the other side.

The game goes on for hours. George finally manages to throw the hound off his scent in a rocky area. He watches from close by as the dog vainly circles around and around trying to regain the trail. With a stream of curses, the two security police finally give up the chase as night falls.

After they leave, George talks with the Lord. "Lord, I sure wish you'd let me know where I am and how to get back to the caves. I'm so mixed up and turned around now I don't know where I am."

Your work there is finished. You are about to face the enemy in another place. Whatever happens in the next few days, know that I am still with you. Your situation will seem hopeless, but I have provided a way of escape. Nearby you will find a man beside a fire. He will feed you and see you safely through the night. Go now.

The Lord tells me of the place He has prepared and of my part in what will take place. George comes out of his hiding place and I direct his steps until he sees the light of the fire. I then walk ahead of him, leaving him

in the Lord's care for a few minutes. At the fire I take on the guise of a grizzled mountain man and step into the world of human understanding. The food is already there.

George soon walks into the circle of firelight. "Hello, there, young man. Won't you come and join me? I have meat and bread and some hot coffee to warm you on this cold night."

He smiles and says, "The Lord has sent me here."

I smile back and say, "I know. Come and sit with me by the fire and tell me about yourself."

He accepts the invitation. I give him a cup of hot coffee, freshly made, as he sits opposite me. He relates his testimony, in abbreviated form, and I ask questions from time to time to encourage him. When he pauses, I offer him food and he accepts. He remarks on how good everything tastes. "I haven't had food like this since I left Marve and Martha's house, all of those months ago."

I assure him he can eat all he wants. When his stomach is full and his tongue is stilled, I point to a fur sleeping rug near the fire. "This is for you. It's a cold night, so wrap up well. Sleep, because tonight nothing will bother you."

"But what about you?"

"I'm going to sit here by the fire. If I get sleepy later, I'll just doze right here."

He accepts my explanation and nods. He wraps the fur around him and is soon asleep. I am always amazed at how easily he can do this, no matter how difficult the circumstances. The Lord explains that this, too, is a gift.

The Lord places a hedge of protection around us. Some beast, whether bear or whatever, comes near during the night but does not dare come any closer. There are demons whispering in the wild places, but they, too, keep their distance.

When morning comes, I let George sleep as long as he will. I give him breakfast when he rises, as the Lord provides. When time comes for him to leave, I insist he take the fur with him. "You will find other cold nights. This will replace the blanket roll you lost."

Offering his thanks, he gives me a hug of gratitude. I continue to sit by the fire as he leaves, but step back into my guardian role as soon as he walks out of sight. He hasn't gone far before he remembers he didn't tell me about losing his blanket roll in Beckley. He runs back toward the fire, but isn't too surprised to find neither fire nor mountain man. He thanks God for the time of refreshing. It is the last he will know for many days.

George heads deeper into the hills, farther and farther away from the caves. Occasionally he sees a deserted farm with its empty house and barns, but no people. The day passes uneventfully and he stops near dark in the lee of a rock cliff. It offers enough room under the overhang to sit or lie down comfortably and there he fixes his fire. He has eaten nothing all day, and I know he feels no need to. The food he ate the night before and in the morning will sustain him for several days if necessary.

He no longer has a Testament or Bible, so he quotes passages of scripture from memory and spends some time in prayer. He concentrates on interceding for the Camps and the people in his home church, but he doesn't forget to thank the Lord again for the season of refreshing he has enjoyed.

He doesn't know that two sets of eyes watch him from the darkness, and that neither set looks on with

kindness. One set leaves after a while, but the other stays close during the night. The Lord still has not removed the hedge.

Next morning George rises as usual, performs his morning tasks, and sets off again. This day proves to be much more eventful than the one before. It starts out quietly enough; George continues his walk, still not knowing where he is going. About halfway through the day, though, things change.

Walking up a hill just like a hundred others, he finds himself looking down on a small valley. It contains a collection of buildings of varying sizes, including several that could be houses. They are so rough and nondescript they could be anything. Unlike the other places he has seen recently, though, people occupy this one. Smoke rises from the chimneys in several buildings and men walk about in the clearing. George concludes this is where he is supposed to go and heads down the hill. He hasn't gone very far before rough hands seize him from behind, forcing him to the ground on his face. Two men, both of them unshaven and bearing the marks of hard living, stand over him.

"This the one, Charlie?"

"Yeah. He was camping under a cliff last night, couple of ridges over."

"Let's take him to the boss, see what she wants to do with him. Looks like a big, strong buck."

They tie George's hands behind him, then force him to his feet and down the hill to the encampment. The other men in the settlement crowd around him, asking questions of the two who brought him in. They take him to a large house in the middle of the camp and one of the men knocks respectfully at the door. A couple of minutes later a large woman, with a hard-bitten face and snow white hair, comes to the door,

"What have you got for me, boys?"

"We found him snooping 'round the camp, Boss. Charlie, here, spotted his fire last night, so we were expecting him."

"Why, it's a brother. Don't see many 'round these parts. How you doing, brother?"

The words are friendly, but their tone is not. The "boss" has black skin, like George, but the resemblance ends there. A powerful demon controls her, and he is not happy that I am here.

"You know, boys, something tells me we have more than just a brother here. I think he's a Christian, too."

The one called Charlie agrees. "I saw him praying last night. I was going to mention that."

"Good boy, Charlie. Maybe he can show us a miracle or two while he's here, however long that is. For right now, put him to work cutting firewood. We'll figure out what to do with him later. Raiding party come in yet?"

"No, ma'am, but they should be back soon. These days they have to go a long way to find anything."

"Ain't that the truth! Well, get back to work. I'm about to eat breakfast."

The one called Charlie takes George out to a large stack of wood and unties his hands. He points out the ax to George and tells him to start cutting. Charlie stands a safe distance away, gun drawn, and watches as his prisoner splits wood. George does not seem to mind the work, especially as his hands are now free. The wood pile sits near the edge of the camp, close to the woods, and he glances casually in that direction.

Charlie notices the look.

“Don’t get any ideas, black boy. The color of your skin won’t save you. You make a move toward the woods and I’ll kill you before you take two steps. Keep working.”

George stacks the split pieces of wood into another pile, near the larger one, and the new pile grows steadily. When Charlie decides to take a break, he has George drop the ax and step away from it. He then makes George put his hands around a nearby post and ties them securely. The method of securing a prisoner is familiar to me, and I can tell George remembers as well. Charlie goes off for about half an hour then comes back. He allows George to relieve himself before he resumes chopping.

The day is gloomy, the sun obscured by clouds and a thin shroud of fog. It is the first day in many months that there have been any clouds at all, but no moisture comes from them. The parched land gets no relief. A cold wind whips down the valley, and Charlie stomps his feet from time to time and hunches up against the cold. George sweats freely and shows no effects from the cold at all. He swings rhythmically away at the blocks of wood, apparently no more tired now than when he started.

He tries to strike up a conversation. “Been here long, Charlie?”

“That’s no business of yours. Shut up and keep working.” George shrugs and keeps chopping.

A cry rises from the other side of the camp. “Raiding party’s coming in! They’ve got wounded!”

Charlie turns his head to look in the direction of the shout. In that instant George throws a block of wood and hits the man in the head. Charlie drops like a shot and George is already on his way into the woods. His captors spot him before he can make the trees.

“Hey, that one’s getting away! He just hit Charlie! Let’s get him!”

George hasn’t bothered asking the Lord if he should try to escape. When he sees the opportunity he just seizes it. He doesn’t reckon with another set of guards on this side of the camp. He runs practically into their arms. One hits him squarely on the head with a rifle butt and he sprawls forward, unconscious again. The men carry him back into the camp.

The guards dump him unceremoniously into a shed and lock the door from the outside. The men resume talking about the failed raid, momentarily forgetting George.

“I’ve never seen security police in that area before. There were only two of them, but they had a dog and automatic weapons. They knew we were coming, so somebody must have squealed. They killed Bart and shot Richards, too. He’s pretty bad off”

“The boss's boy? Somebody better tell her right away.”

“Tell me what? What’s all the noise about? Where’s Robbie?”

An awkward silence greets her questions, then one of the men says, “He’s been shot, Boss. He’s hurt bad.”

“Where is he?”

“We took him over to his house, Boss; Libbie’s looking over him.”

“You should have brought him to me. That girl doesn’t have a brain in her body. What happened?”

“We were ambushed by security police?”

“Security police? I thought we had them paid off. We’ll just see about that. Anybody else hurt?”

“They killed Bart. There was no time to get his body.”

She spouts a string of obscenities. The men around her look down at their feet and fidget uncomfortably.

“Cox, get on the two-way with the sheriff’s office and find out what’s going on. Also, find out where the nearest doctor is. I’m going to go check on my boy.”

She disappears inside a house and the man she calls Cox hurries into another building to carry out his orders. All this I can see through a small window on one side of the shed.

George recovers from the blow enough to open his eyes and look around. He holds his head as he starts to sit up and decides against it, but a few minutes later he gets to his feet and looks out the window. The window is on a different side than the door, so he can’t see if a guard is posted, but he tries the door anyway. It is locked.

Some time later the door opens and a man with a gun steps inside, first checking to be sure he can see George. He motions with his gun and says, “Come on. Boss wants to see you. No more tricks or I’ll shoot you where it hurts.”

He ushers George into the house where the woman went to find her son. She sits in a straight-backed chair in a sparsely furnished living room. Signs of worry cloud her face for the first time. Her demon has temporarily lost his hold. She wastes no time getting to the point.

“My boy is lying in there shot. If he keeps going down hill he’ll be dead by morning. We called the sheriff’s office and they say all the helicopters are grounded due to poor visibility. The first day in a year we’ve had clouds and fog and it had to be now. Anyway, there’s no way they can get a doctor here before tomorrow. We don’t have roads out here and Robbie can’t be moved.

“I know you’re a Christian. I don’t believe in that stuff but right now I’ll try anything. I want you, I’m *asking* you, to pray for my boy to live. Will you do it?”

George doesn’t have to think about it. “Of course. Where is he?”

“Not so fast. There’s just one thing. If Robbie recovers, or if he’s still alive when the doctors get here, I’ll see that you go free with anything you want. If he dies, though, you’ll be dead within five minutes after that. Got that?”

Not even a flicker of doubt comes to George’s eyes. “The Lord has never let me down yet. If He’s ready for me to go, though, then I’m ready.”

“Pretty brave, aren’t you? Just remember what I said. Now Hicks will go back to the bedroom with you, so no funny stuff.”

The guard directs George down a short hallway to a bedroom where the young man lies. His breathing is shallow and his eyes are closed. Someone has wrapped a large cloth bandage, already soaked with blood, around his chest. A young white woman sits in a chair at the head of the bed. She must be the woman named Libbie whom the boss referred to earlier. She stares helplessly at Robbie, wringing her hands. Her eyes are red with crying.

“Get out,” Hicks says flatly.

“But he’s my husband! I have a right to be here! What are you going to do to him?”

“It’s okay,” George says gently. “Let her stay.”

Hicks grunts, but makes no further effort to send the woman away.

George continues, “His mother has asked me to pray for him. I’ll be laying my hand on his head while I pray. The rest is in God’s hands.”

Hicks snorts, but George ignores him. He places his right hand on top of Robbie’s head and prays. “Father, in the name of Jesus I pray that you would touch this young man’s body and heal his wounds. I pray that the power of your Holy Spirit would work in him from the top of his head to the bottom of his feet. I pray also that when he recovers he would know that you have healed him. I thank you, Father, for hearing my prayer and I thank you already for Robbie’s healing. In Jesus’ name I give you praise. Amen.”

He keeps his hand there for a few minutes more and prays silently in an angelic tongue. The Lord has answered his prayer, but the answer is not yet manifested. The young man’s condition does not change. George removes his hand and opens his eyes.

“That’s it?” says Hicks contemptuously. “That’s the big fancy prayer? I could make up a better one than that myself. Looks like you’re going to have a short life span, buddy.”

George says nothing, but turns and leaves the room. Libbie resumes crying behind him. The two men go back into the living room.

“Is that it?” the black woman asks George, echoing Hicks. “I figured you’d be in there for at least an hour.”

“The Lord heard me,” answers George simply. “It’s not always necessary to make long prayers. He’ll heal your son.”

“You better hope he does. Take him back to the shed, Hicks, but bring him a blanket. I don’t want him to freeze to death before I have a chance to kill him.”

“Sure, Boss. Anything you say.”

He follows George back to the shed and brings him a blanket a few minutes later. George sits in the lone chair and wraps the blanket around him. He spends the rest of the evening there praying. The Lord ministers to his spirit.

Night comes early in the winter mountains. Most of the men are inside their houses or barracks, except for a couple who seem to be a security patrol. Shortly after dark Hicks brings George some water and a piece of bread. George eats the bread but does not seem especially hungry.

The hours of darkness pass slowly. The lights we can see in the other buildings go out one by one. As the shed gets colder, George draws the blanket more closely about him. His head drops to his chest and he dozes fitfully, in and out between sleeping and waking.

A noise from outside disturbs the night. A man grunts and I hear the sound of a body hitting the ground. The smell of blood reaches inside the shed and George snaps fully awake. He stares intently toward the door. No other sound comes.

Out the side window we can see one of the two sentries walking toward the corner of the building. He calls softly, "Hicks, are you there? Is everything all right in there?"

No one responds, so he walks cautiously toward the front of the shed. We lose sight of him as he passes the window. An instant later there is a strangled cry followed by the sound of bones cracking, then nothing.

George calls, "Who's out there? What's going on?"

No one answers.

Something shakes the door, tentatively, then someone, or something, tests the lock. We can hear harsh, guttural breathing. Demon spoor drifts on the cold night air. George shows the first traces of fear.

The minutes drag on. Nothing else happens. We wait. The sound of running feet comes to our ears; whatever it is must be moving away. George breathes a sigh of relief and tries again to sleep.

He dreams a troubled dream, mumbling in his sleep. He shivers from the cold as he sleeps. I keep my post and worship the Lord. No more sounds come.

George upsets his chair in sudden terror. He looks around, embarrassed, realizing the fear was bred in his dream world. He starts to get back to his feet.

With one mighty blow, the thing outside shatters the door and bursts into the shed. For the second time in his life, George screams.