

Chapter Three

There was nothing unusual about that Sunday morning, so far as I could tell anyway. We always went to the 8:30 service, and we got there fifteen minutes early, like always. The usual crowd was milling around in the church yard, and there were smiles and handshakes all around. Reverend Woods was there to meet us at the front door, just as he always did. I thought he stared a little hard at me, but figured it was just my imagination.

We got through the preliminaries (three songs and a prayer, plus the offering), and the preacher came to the pulpit. That's when I knew something was wrong. The first thing he did was pick up the pulpit Bible, open it up, then turn it around and hold it for everyone to see. There was a gasp of horror, almost in unison, at the sight of the not-so-neatly cut page. I told myself to just relax; nobody knew who had done it. It was hard advice to take; my stomach just about dropped through the floor.

“For the last six months, someone has been committing acts of vandalism here at the church. We've had pages cut out of hymnals and pew Bibles, chewing gum stuck to the seats of chairs and pews, and crayon drawings on the walls in the bathrooms and classrooms. Beside costing the church money, these actions show a total contempt and lack of respect for the Lord's house and for his people. I'm sad to say that one of our own children has been caught doing these things. Henry Camp, come up here, young man.”

My stomach didn't stop at the floor this time; it kept going. I could feel all of the blood leaving my face. I managed to stand up, my legs shaking, realizing for the first time I was sitting on the outside of the pew. I *never* sat on the outside of the pew; that meant Mama and Pop already knew.

I held onto the edges of the pews as I slowly made my way to the front. There were scattered snickers from some of the kids in the congregation, immediately stifled. I finally made it to the altar area, and stopped hesitantly before going up on the stage.

“Cone on, boy, up here with me.”

Somehow I climbed up to the stage; my whole body was shaking now, not just my legs. I walked around the pulpit and stopped beside the preacher. He ignored me, directing his attention once more to the congregation.

“Brethren, if this were an adult, past the age of responsibility, I would recommend expulsion from the body. As it is, Henry is only a preparatory member. He won’t be eligible for full membership until he attains age twelve later in the year. We cannot, however, let his actions pass unpunished.

“I have discussed this matter with Brother Walter and Sister LuAnn, and with the Board. Here’s what we propose: Henry will be charged with cleaning the church every Saturday, under adult supervision, from now until he attains age twelve in October. He will also be required to assist in cleaning the church grounds, including the cemetery, during that same time. Finally, he will be given a written Bible study assignment every week, to be turned in to Brother Alphonse every Sunday morning. When he reaches age twelve, we will review his progress and decide if he should be accepted to full membership. Are there any comments from the congregation?”

I was looking at the floor during the awkward silence that followed. I heard a quiet sob, and figured it must be Mama.

“Fine. Consider it done. Henry, take your seat. We’ll talk to you later. Turn in your Bibles to the third chapter of Genesis. I’ll be reading from one of my own copies of God’s holy Word.”

I didn’t hear much of the rest of the service. I was so caught up in my misery that the last thing I wanted to hear was another sermon. The preacher had just sentenced me to Hell, for the next six months anyway.

Sunday school was sheer torture. The other boys, even Kermit and Mikey, were whispering and giggling before class, pointing at me and giving the choke sign. Alphonse handed me my first Bible study assignment, which was on the passage in Genesis I had torn from the pulpit Bible. There was no sympathy in his face.

The walk home after Sunday school was not pleasant. No one said a word, not even my mother. It was unheard of for Mama LuAnn to go for such an extended period without talking. I expected another

thrashing when we got home, and I was right. What I didn't expect was that Mama came to the woodshed along with Pop. This was a very rare expression of united disapproval. The physical pain of the whipping didn't hurt nearly as much as my mother's look of hurt, disappointment, and determination.

I wasn't wrong about the next six months being a brief glimpse of Hell, or what my idea of Hell was anyway. Every evening, after finishing my schoolwork, I had to do my Bible assignment, while Pop looked on to make sure I wasn't goofing off. After school let out for the summer, I still had Book work every evening. Every Saturday afternoon at 5:00 sharp, I had to report to Cousin Alphonse, and clean every nook and cranny of church while he looked on. Cleaning the bathrooms was the most humiliating part.

Once a month, always on the first Saturday unless it rained, I had to help cut grass and weeds around the church yard and cemetery. I didn't mind that part so much, especially as I had a chance to study the tombstones. I found tombstones for people who died over 100 years before. Sometimes I would find whole families buried together, with the same date of death. I wondered what long-forgotten tragedy had befallen them, whether some disease or an accident or even a murder. It made me shiver to consider the possibilities.

Grandpa Camp had died just a few years before, and Grandma a couple of years before that. They were buried with my Uncle Jimmy, who died as a child long before I was born. Great Grandpa, whom Pop remembered from his own childhood, was buried nearby. The graves nearest the church were the oldest; some of them had simple stone markers with no names, and I knew there must be some that were unmarked. Sometimes my stomach would flip at the thought of all of the thousands of bones I was walking over.

After the first few weeks, Alphonse broke down and started talking to me. Although not the nonstop variety of talker like Mama, he still enjoyed conversation. He had served in the Marines in his earlier years, and had seen action in the Middle East. When I felt confident enough, I showered him with questions about life there and in other places he had visited.

“Muslims hate us, Henry, you know that? They think they’ll get into Paradise if they die killing us, or killing Jews. When I was over there in the Gulf, in the last war, we had kids your age coming up to us like they were asking for candy, then blowing themselves up. I lost my best pal that way. In one battle around Baghdad, hundreds of men came charging at us, armed at nothing but rocks and knives. We shot every one of them. It was sickening. Even worse, when we went out to check to see if there were survivors, a lot of them had smiles on their faces. A few were still alive, and had grenades with them. They blew themselves up along with three of our men before we figured out what was going on. After that, we just shot ‘em from a distance, to make sure.”

His matter of fact attitude telling the story made me shiver. “Well, Cousin Alphonse, but – aren’t we at peace with those people over there now? I mean, there hasn’t been a war for a long time, and in school they say we’re on good terms with the Arabs now.”

He smiled a grim smile. “That will change one day, Henry, mark my words. The last great battle of all time will happen over there, and you can guess whose side the Muslims will be on. This country is full of them, and they hate all of us Christians. Why, there’s a mosque down in Charleston, and I hear it’s packed every time they have a service.”

I didn’t say anything else; he was obviously too prejudiced to listen to reason. I changed the subject to food and dress, and he was more than ready to give details of what he saw, and definitely didn’t like.

“The women there cover themselves from top to bottom when they’re in public. You can get in trouble just for looking at one of them. The food turns my stomach; it’s swimming in grease and spices. I think they use meat that’s half-rotten, and use the spices to cover up the taste. I actually enjoyed getting back to mess rations, and they were bad enough.”

Like most of the Camps, Alphonse had several children. Once he got to know me better, he started inviting me to his house for refreshments after we finished at the church. I knew all of the family members, of course. His wife was Arnetta, a tall woman who reminded me of Pop in her quiet strength and self-confidence. The five children ranged in age from three to thirteen. The oldest, Sara, was two

years ahead of me in school, and I didn't know her very well. Mostly, among the Camps anyway, boys hung out with boys, and girls with girls.

Sara was a carbon copy of her mother, except that she still had some growing to do, up and out. She was just beginning to take on the appearance of a young woman, and was obviously quite proud of the fact. I was surprised her parents let her wear such tight jeans and shirts, even if it was just around the house. At the time, her wiles meant absolutely nothing to me. She was friendly enough, though, and I liked the attention. She was usually the one who brought me some cookies or ice cream, and a cold drink.

It took a while for me to recover my position with the other boys. I was angry with Mikey and Kermit for weeks before I finally let them make up with me. I was the leader and chief instigator of our little group, and they knew that. Then, too, some of the boys rather admired me in my wickedness and boldness. More than once, they made me a team captain in some of the games involving the larger group.

During the summer that year, I still had to work in the cornfield, along with my Saturday work at the church. Although I didn't have homework from school, I still had to do my Bible study every night, after the chickens went to bed. We had family devotionals every night, too, right after my Bible study was finished. Pop knew the Bible well, from long years of familiarity, and his lessons that year had to do a lot with personal holiness and spiritual discipline. He often asked me pointed questions, to make sure I was getting the intended point. Mama, meanwhile, was eager to take me back into the fold. She wasn't the sort to hold a grudge for long, and she was as affectionate as ever.

Summer finally passed, with my routine well set, and we went back to school. I was going into sixth grade, which meant top of the heap in our school. I knew better than to try lording it over my cousins, but the other kids were another story. I persuaded third and fourth graders to run errands for me, their only reward being my approval as an exalted sixth grader. My overall attitude could be charitably described as obnoxious; without resorting to active bullying, I made life miserable for several of the younger and smaller kids. That made me quite unpopular, in turn, with the teachers. They used any excuse they could devise to send me to the principal's office. My grades, meanwhile, settled back into the same pattern they followed the year before.

October 6 finally came around, and so did the end of my sentence to Purgatory. I was actually sorry about it, in some ways. As much as I hated the discipline of cleaning and Bible study, I kind of enjoyed being around Cousin Alphonse and his family. Still, the thought of having evenings and Saturdays free outweighed any twinges of regret.

My birthday fell on a Saturday that year, which made it even better. Mama was all smiles, and she made me a big chocolate birthday cake. Several cousins came by, and we had an impromptu party. It didn't take much encouragement for a crowd to gather when Mama LuAnn baked a cake! Some of those who dropped by were well out of my age group, including several adults. When it came to food, though, Mama was never caught short-handed; when my original birthday disappeared, she just brought another one,

The next day was my big judgment day. I was a little nervous about it, but I knew I had redeemed myself over the last six months. The morning started much like the disastrous one in April. We arrived at the church exactly fifteen minutes before the service, and saw the usual faces in the usual places. Once inside, I again found myself on the aisle side of the pew, but it was no surprise this time. There the resemblance ended.

The preacher didn't stop before his sermon to ask me to come to the front. Instead, he waited until the very end of the service; I squirmed in my seat all the while. Like before, I had no clue what the sermon was about.

Just before the closing prayer, Brother Woods paused, and looked straight at me, smiling this time. "Brother Henry, come up here, please."

I didn't shake this time. I immediately rose from my seat, and walked quickly and confidently to stand beside the pastor. He brought me to his side, and put his arm around me.

"It's always a joy when a lost sheep returns to the fold, when the prodigal comes back home. Six months ago, we had a very bad moment with young Henry here. This one is as joyous as the other was sad. Brother Alphonse and Brother Walter tell me that Henry has performed every task we assigned him back in April. Not only that, they tell me his attitude and behavior have been exceptional.

“The Board has recommended to me, and I agree, that we accept Brother Henry as a full member of this congregation effective with the date of his twelfth birthday, which was yesterday.”

He took his arm from around me, stepped away, and turned to offer me his hand.

“Congratulations, my young brother, and happy birthday! You stick at the front here after the service, and let everyone come by and offer you the right hand of fellowship. Brother Milo, you close the service in prayer for us, won’t you?”

I thought I would bust with pride as I took my place in front of the stage. It was a place of honor for our church. I could hardly wait for Uncle Milo’s prayer to end, but it finally did. There was a rush of people to the front before a line formed. Mama and Pop were first in line, of course, and Mama gave me one of her patented crying / smiling / laughing hugs that about busted my ribs. Pop just gave me an iron grip, and a rare smile. I thought I saw a tear in the corner of his eye as he walked on, but I couldn’t be sure.

Alphonse and his clan came later, and I had to endure another bone-crushing handshake. He beamed with pride as he took my hand, since he figured he was the main agent of my redemption. His wife and all of his children were with him, except for Sara. That surprised me a little, because Camp family tradition said you stayed with your parents and siblings when you were in church. I spotted her at the end of the line, talking with some of her girl cousins. When she finally reached me, she hugged a lot closer than necessary. When she kissed me on the cheek, I was almost sure I felt a wet tongue. She gave me a smile and a wink before she walked away.

Mama was standing off to the side waiting for me, and I noticed she gave Sara a hard look as the girl walked out of the back of the church. What was all of that about?