

## Chapter Four

Things were better both at home and at church after that – for a while anyway. I even put out a little more effort at school, and my grades showed it – for a while anyway. I still helped Alphonse at the church, just because I wanted to, and that improved my stock both at home and at church. The other Camp Town gents, as we called ourselves, treated me with more respect now than when I was their star villain.

I spent a lot of time at Cousin Alphonse's house, even more than before. My parents thought he was a good influence on me, and didn't object as long as I did my homework and my chores. I was still puzzled by Sara's new attitude toward me. I caught her staring at me more than once, and whenever I caught her she just winked. Alphonse and Arnetta evidently noticed nothing out of the ordinary, so I figured everything must be okay.

One rainy Saturday afternoon I showed up at the church at the usual time. When I went inside, the only one I saw waiting for me was Sara.

"Hi, Sara. Where's your Dad?"

"I asked him to let me start doing it, since he didn't have to watch you anymore. Besides, I've been wanting a chance to be alone with you."

That threw me for a small loop. "Why? Was there something you wanted to talk to me about?"

She smiled, and stepped close to me. "You're old enough to learn about girls now. I've always thought you were just the cutest thing. Have you ever been kissed by a girl, on the lips I mean?"

I started to tell an indignant lie, but realized she probably knew the answer already. I had never even *wanted* to kiss a girl before. Just now, though, the idea didn't seem so ridiculous.

"Well, no – you know me, Sara. You've always known me."

Without answering, she grabbed me and pulled me close to her, planting her lips firmly against mine. It wasn't unpleasant, but I didn't especially enjoy it either. I pulled away from her.

"But, Sara, we're cousins! You're *family*! We shouldn't be doing something like this."

“We’re just third cousins, silly. Besides, I was adopted. We’re not really related at all.”

I found out later that the part about being adopted was a bald-faced lie, but I was too young to think she would be so devious. At the time, it seemed to make it okay; after all, I was starting to have an interest in girls. The preacher thought I had reached the age of responsibility; that must mean something.

I just said, “Oh – well, I guess it’s alright then.”

With that, she grabbed me again. It was a while before we got around to cleaning the church. Over the months to come, we continued our Saturday evening romance. Sara grew bolder as the months went on, and we did things that the boys in school were just talking about doing. I still felt guilty about it, not because of what we were doing but because she still seemed like family.

I discovered quickly that she was the one who had turned me in, after seeing me leave the church that Friday evening. It wasn’t hard to forgive her, because she was helping me experience things I had never dreamed were possible. What was hard was to keep up appearances when we were together in public, or in Alphonse’s home. She was a good actress, and her calm indifference (more indifference than before, in fact) helped me act more or less normally, too.

Alphonse treated me like a younger brother. He trusted me implicitly now, fully believing I was reformed. No one among my friends thought there was anything unusual or out of the ordinary about my spending my Saturday afternoons alone with a female cousin. Not everyone was fooled, though.

Mama came to my room one early January evening, something she rarely did after we ate supper. She knocked politely first; I thought it was Pop, who sometimes dropped by for a few minutes before retiring for the night. She smiled when I opened the door, and as I stepped back in mild surprise. Her eyes weren’t smiling; they looked worried as she sat down on my chair.

“Sit down, Honey. I want to talk with you a few minutes.”

“Sure, Mama,” I said cheerfully. I plopped down on the bed, and looked expectantly at her.

“What’s going on?”

“That’s what I want to know, dear. You’ve changed these last few weeks. You come home every Saturday with the look of a grown man who has been with a woman. I’ve been around for a while; I

recognize that look. Alphonse tells me that you and Sara have been cleaning the church alone, and that you take longer than usual. So, I'll ask you the same question, young man – what's going on?"

It was surprisingly easy to lie, even to her. "Mama! I can't believe you said that! How could you even *think* something like that! Sara's family, and I would *never* do anything like that with her! I don't know what you think you're seeing, Mama, but it's not that."

She smiled, and got up from the chair. "Okay, Baby, I'll take your word for it. I have to believe you. Still, though, I think it would be better if you and Sara didn't clean the church together anymore."

I could tell she wasn't really convinced as she walked out of the room, but she didn't bring it up again. The next time I went to the church to clean, Alphonse was there. He was still friendly, but a little distant at the same time. He didn't invite me in afterward, which was unheard of until then. When Sara came at all, it was always with her father.

I didn't see her much after that, for several months. When springtime came, she managed to get me alone for a few minutes, and we arranged to meet up in the hills above my house. It wasn't unusual for me to go off walking in the woods alone, so my parents weren't too concerned. As was the case earlier at the church, they had no reason to expect anything was going on. Sara had a friend, Ellen, not related to the Camps, who agreed to cover for her. She would make a pretext of visiting the other girl, who would then drop her off, out of sight near the church.

The place we chose was a double cave among some rock cliffs, about an hour's walk for both of us. The caves were sometimes used by hunters, but few people bothered to come there otherwise. The countryside there was a bit rough. For us, it was perfect.

We kept our arrangement secret and intact for several more months. We met at odd times, so as not to arouse suspicion again. No one thought to try to connect Sarah's visits to her friends with my long walks in the hills. One hot August afternoon, I had my first experience with "knowing" a woman, as the Bible describes it. I was not yet thirteen. Sara insisted we both use protection, even though she was taking birth control pills she had obtained through her friend.

Then, abruptly, just before school started again, it all came to an end. Sara informed me that afternoon that she was feeling really guilty about it all. She also told me that she had lied to me from the beginning; she was not adopted.

“You really are just a kid, you know, and it was really wrong for me to do all of these things with you.”

I was crushed. My trysts with Sara were the high points of my young life, and gave me something to look forward to from day to day.

“Why? Why now? Did I do something wrong?”

“No, of course not. You’ve been great. But – I’ve met someone else. It’s my friend Ellen’s brother. He’s eighteen, and he likes me. We’ve been – doing it for several weeks now.”

“Several weeks? You mean you were already having sex with him when you did me a couple of weeks ago?”

She had the decency, if you can call it that, to blush. “That’s why I knew how to do that; he taught me. I’m sorry, Henry. I feel just awful about lying to you.”

I doubted she felt the least bit sorry. I turned and ran out of the cave, and all of the way home. I stumbled and fell repeatedly, but I just got up and kept going. She called after me, but I ignored her. When Mama asked what had happened to me, I just said I had fallen down around a cliff. She really didn’t believe me, but didn’t press the point. She just cleaned me up and bandaged some of the cuts.

I never visited Alphonse’s house again, and never again volunteered to clean the church. I went when I asked, but I always politely refused Cousin Alphonse’s invitation to come by the house. He stopped asking after a while; I could tell he was puzzled and hurt. Mama, on the other hand, seemed relieved.

I spoke to Sara only when I had to, and rebuffed any attempts she made at small talk. My coolness didn’t seem to bother her as much as it did Alphonse. One time, when I was up in the hills around the caves, I heard sounds of moaning and groaning coming from one of them. I left immediately, and didn’t step foot in that area for many years.

The genie had been let out of the bottle. Since Sara was no longer available, I started looking around at school for some other girl who was. My only requirement was the she couldn't be remotely related to the Camps, which was a hard one to meet. Before long, though, I found several who were more than willing to meet me in the bushes near the school. All of them were older than me, but that didn't seem to bother them. I wondered how many of them already knew about Sara and me.

It soon became common knowledge on campus that Henry Camp was wise far beyond his years. He was a veritable Don Juan. Some of my cousins strongly disapproved of my reputation, and let me know they did. Most were involved in premarital sex themselves, and were in no position to criticize. Whatever their opinions, though, none of them chose to spread the word to the adults of our family. It was part of the unwritten code we followed that had nothing to do with family tradition.

As usual, Mama knew something was going on, but she knew it didn't involve Sara. She gave me some long lectures about keeping myself pure until I got married, but her heart wasn't in it. She realized it was far too late for that. Pop gave me an awkward rendition of the birds and bees speech, but he, too, knew it was an empty gesture.

Even though I tried to be careful, one or the other of the school officials almost caught me, and more than once. It finally occurred to me that I needed better cover, in more ways than one. I joined the school band, though I never considered myself as talented in playing anything other than a radio. Pounding on the drums was easy enough, and I did have a natural sense of rhythm. It was also easier to find out-of-the way places on band trips to continue my chosen recreation.

Life at home went on in the usual routine, despite all of the lies and deception. I did my chores, went to church on Sunday, and kept myself out of trouble. I did start to pull apart somewhat from my cousins, especially Kermit and Mikey. Childish games no longer appealed to me. I thought they were talking about me behind my back anyway, like everybody else. Family no longer had the same meaning for me as it once had, thanks to Sara.

I was never sure just when and how it happened, and I'm still not sure I was the guilty party. In April of the following year, almost exactly two years after the episode at the church, one of my

girlfriends drew me aside on a band trip. I thought she just wanted to arrange to meet later, as we had done a number of times before.

Bernice was a cute little blonde, even shorter than me. She was a sophomore in high school, the same age as Sara. We had had an off-and-on relationship for the last few months. Right that minute, though, she didn't like she was interested in sex. She looked worried; I didn't like worried, because that usually meant I was in trouble.

"I'm pregnant, Henry."

I swallowed, hard. "Pregnant? How? Are you sure?"

"I think we both know how, little man. I found out for sure this morning. I'm pretty sure you're the one."

"But – we were always so careful I thought you were on the pill."

"I missed one, and your protection must not have worked."

"Well– I--what do you want to do?"

"You're a little young for marriage. Don't worry about it; I can get some abortion pills with no problem. It's still early."

I was speechless. The idea that I had fathered a child at age thirteen was heavy enough, but to speak so casually about killing it...

"Isn't that wrong? I mean, won't you be killing another human being?"

"Nah, it's just a blob of tissue right now. People do it all the time."

She left then, still looking worried. It must have bothered her more than she was admitting.

I didn't know what to say, so I said nothing, and left. She didn't come near me after that, and I didn't blame her at all. Other girls who were still willing to provide free sex, whether they knew about Bernice or not. Some of them probably did. I had a twinge of conscience from time to time, but just pushed it away. Life went on.

A few weeks later, I heard, but not from Bernice, that she had successfully aborted the pregnancy. After school was out, in June, I heard some more news.

Bernice Lindell, daughter of a prominent local minister, had been discovered dead in her bedroom early that morning. She died of an overdose of sleeping pills.