

## ***Chapter Five***

From that point, I began to understand there was more involved in sex than just having fun.

Before then, girls were little more to me than a means to an end, designed specifically for my pleasure. It never occurred to me that they were human beings, just like me. The consequences of sex might affect their lives and mine in ways I couldn't comprehend. My relationship with Sara had consequences, to be sure, but neither of us had suffered any permanent damage, so far as I knew.

After Bernice committed suicide, I made the connection: sex was connected with life and death. It staggered me to think about it, and at thirteen I really wasn't equipped to deal with the idea. I decided, after weeks of agonizing, that I would never really understand it, and I pushed the confusing thoughts from my mind, since as I had my earlier feelings of guilt. Dreams about dead babies and pregnant girls troubled me regularly, but I didn't allow myself to wrestle consciously anymore with issues of conscience.

I returned to the attitude toward sex I had before, only this time I deliberately decided not to care about anything beyond the pleasure of the moment. Girls became little more than collections of physical parts to me. I became almost fanatical, though, about keeping things safe. I looked for and found other devices and methods for assuring that pregnancy wasn't the unfortunate result of my fun.

Drugs were as commonplace as premarital sex at our school. For the Camps, though, they were never in the picture. The code of silence that covered sexual behavior didn't extend to drug use. The prohibition was so strong that breaking it could literally mean being disowned by the family. We all knew the stories of those who had committed that particular sin. Their names were never mentioned in polite conversation among the Camps, but the tales were still told.

The definition of the word "drug" was somewhat narrow, though. It didn't include alcohol. Drunkenness was certainly frowned on, but it wasn't considered grounds for being drummed out of the family unless it progressed to alcoholism. The religious faith of the Camps didn't view social drinking as

a sin. It wasn't at all uncommon for adults in the family to share a toast of good whiskey at New Years parties or some other celebration. Wine with dinner at a fine restaurant was perfectly acceptable.

Pop shared the majority view. He kept what he thought was a secret stash of booze, for medicinal purposes, mind you. He did mix up a hot toddy when he had a cough or a cold, but I saw him take a swig at other times as well. It didn't happen frequently, but later I told everyone he was a drunk. I finally started believing it myself, although I never saw him take more than a single mouthful at once. To my knowledge, he was never even close to being intoxicated.

I saw Pop got to his hiding place one day. Once I discovered where the whiskey was hidden, it was just a matter of time before I tried it myself. The first time I took a sip, looking all about with fear and trembling, I thought it was the most awful stuff ever invented. It literally burned like fire, and had no real taste at all that I could tell. I did like the warm glow it gave me, though, and I came back to it a few days later. I had enough sense to know that Pop would miss it if I drank any more, so I looked around for my own supply. It wasn't hard to find; you could buy just about anything illegal at our school if you had the money and knew who to ask. By skipping lunch for a few days I soon accumulated enough money to buy a small bottle of cheap wine.

I was almost fourteen when I had my first drink; for the next forty-five years, I was hooked. To begin with, it was just a matter of sneaking around and having an occasional swig. As was the case with sex, though, just a little soon became not nearly enough. Some of the girls I saw helped me increase my supply, and I resorted to stealing to come up with money to feed my habit. By the time I was fifteen, I was a full-fledged alcoholic.

Mama and Pop didn't suspect anything for a while. Lying was already second nature to me, and I never let myself get so drunk that I couldn't act more or less normally. I was stoned much of the time, both at home and at school, and most people around me never knew it. Anyway, that was the case until I finally messed up.

It was on my sixteenth birthday, on a Thursday. Some of my friends, including several girls, decided they wanted a special celebration for me. Two of the girls sought me out late in the day.

“Happy birthday, Henry, you sweet thing,” one of them cooed. “A bunch of us got together and decided to throw you a party this evening. We’ll have plenty of booze and pot, and lots of free sex, too. You *are* coming, aren’t you? After all, it *is* your party.”

I suspected the party would go on, with or without me. A small problem occurred to me.

“If I go home, LuAnn and Walter will have something planned for me. I’ll never get away.”

“Well, just don’t go home this evening, Sweetie,” the girl answered. “You can always make up a good story tomorrow.”

It didn’t take much to convince me. The deal was set.

One of the girls, Annie, lived in a large house, with parents who were so caught up in addiction themselves they didn’t care what went on. I had been there before, so I knew what to expect.

I didn’t make it home that night. My so-called birthday party ended up in a drunken orgy, and I literally passed out on the floor, next to a girl I had had sex with. I didn’t make it to school the next day, either. Around noon, there was a pounding on the front door of the house. It was a state police officer, and he was looking specifically for me. My parents had launched a panicked search for me, and someone at school reported overhearing our party plans.

I rode home in the back of the police cruiser, with a raging headache and a stomach that turned flip-flops at every bump in the road. My parents were not happy to see me when I got home.

Pop was waiting on the front porch, slowly rocking back and forth in his new chair. He thanked the officer without getting up, and motioned for me to sit another chair when I walked up on the porch. For a long while, he said nothing, just staring off into space as he rocked. When he spoke, his voice was a lot quieter than I thought it would be.

“How long has it been going on, Henry?”

“Oh, about two years, Pop.”

That was the first time I had ever called him anything but “Papa,” and he flinched a bit. “And the sex?”

I saw no need to lie anymore. “Since I was twelve, thanks to Sara.”

“I’m sure Sara didn’t force you to do anything you didn’t want to do.”

“I guess not.”

He was quiet for a while longer, and sighed deeply before he started speaking again. “Your mom and I have talked it over. We’ve decided that the best thing might be to get you away from the crowd you’re running with. It’s all arranged. Brindle’s coming to pick you up this evening. You’ll stay in Beckley with him until you turn eighteen. After that, it’s up to you. We’ve tried our best with you, but that wasn’t nearly good enough.”

He got up and walked into the house, without speaking another word. Brindle was Pop’s older brother, who had moved to Beckley in search of a better life years before. He had a one-year-old baby girl, born when he was already sixty years old, but the rest of his family was grown and gone. I had visited his house a few times, but didn’t really know him or his second wife, Clara, very well. Like Pop and Milo, Brindle was quiet and reserved.

Mama didn’t speak to me at all that day until I left. She served me lunch in silence, her eyes red from what probably had been a night of weeping and worry. She packed my clothes that afternoon, again in silence. Brindle and Clara showed up before the other kids even got back from school. Mama hugged me good-bye, but Pop just nodded his head. We passed the school bus on the way out our road. I didn’t realize it at the time, but I would not see my home again for many years.

Brindle lived in the Maxwell Hill area of Beckley, still a nice residential area but in decline. A lot of the upper middle class families who lived there were selling their homes, and moving farther away from the downtown area. Like so many small cities, Beckley was rotting from the inside. The major shopping areas were on bypass roads outside of town, and downtown was more and more deserted. The local economy, based on coal mining, had all but collapsed. A once thriving middle class was either collapsing into poverty or leaving.

For me, the new surroundings were perfect. Both sex and booze were easy to come by, and I experimented with other drugs, too. Brindle tried to exercise some control over me for a while, but finally all but gave up. I spent a lot of time around the Mountain State University campus, which had a

plentiful supply of everything I wanted. When I wasn't there, I usually hung around the bars in east Beckley. The fact that most of the patrons there were Black didn't bother me much, and the barkeepers didn't bother to ask if I was underage.

The police picked me up a few times, and I spent more than one night in the Raleigh County jail, but that didn't motivate me to change my ways. The only laws I broke, at the time, were those relating to public intoxication and underage drinking. The magistrates I saw routinely let me off with nothing more than probation and a warning. Brindle bailed me out a few times, but gave up on doing even that after a while.

Mama was pregnant when I left. I discovered that a few months after I moved to Beckley. My younger brother, Clint, was born in March of the following year. After that, Mama and Pop had two more children. Miriam came along two years after Clint, but it was another ten years until Missy was born. Mama was forty-seven when she stopped bearing children. I assumed at the time that I had been a hindrance to her getting pregnant again. Once I left, the floodgates opened.

School in Beckley was lot like school at Midland Trail, but a lot bigger. Woodrow Wilson was one of the largest high schools in the state. Back home, I knew everyone in the school to some degree or another, but in Beckley I knew next to no one. I did get familiar with the kindred spirits there, who attracted me like a magnet, but most of the kids remained strangers to me. I didn't know the teachers much better; they knew me, as a troublemaker, but not personally.

Somehow, I made it through my last two years of high school with grades good enough to graduate. As with Bobby Matlock way back when, maybe the teachers just promoted me to get rid of me. I didn't start fights, and I was never actively in trouble at school, but my reputation was well known. I was a drunkard, a womanizer, and a frequent occupant of a local jail cell. My friends were the worst kind of trash, and they did often make trouble.

Brindle died the summer after I left high school. I saw Pop and Mama at the funeral, but barely spoke to them. I saw my younger brother briefly, but Mama didn't let me hold him. She may have been afraid some of me would rub off on him, which turned out to be truer than I imagined years later.

I didn't stick around Brindle's house after he died, which suited Clara just fine. She had her hands full raising little Carol, and didn't need yet another headache. In spite of everything, though, I remained on relatively good terms with her. I continued to drop by her house, and grew quite fond of Carol. From time to time as the years passed, Clint and Miriam visited there, too, and those were the only chances I had to get to know them.

I had a series of jobs after I left school, mainly because I got fired often for missing work and drinking on the job. I worked in fast food joints, supermarkets, and shopping malls. Other times, I drove taxis and delivered pizzas. Every corner of Raleigh County became familiar to me, not to mention the entire southern part of West Virginia. I even went around the Ansted and Hico area more than once, and saw many of my old running mates. On the few occasions when I saw any of the Camps from the home area, they ignored me. That included my childhood buddies, Kermit and Mikey.

Like my jobs, I didn't stay in my dwelling places long. Even in the worst part of town, the landlords didn't want you around if you wouldn't pay your rent. Wild parties were okay, but not being broke. Sometimes I moved in with some girlfriend or another, but that lasted only until one or both of us tired of the relationship.

My life changed yet again when I was twenty, but not for the better. One evening I was drinking with some of my buddies in one of the more upscale bars I frequented, north of town. It was Tuesday, and things were slow. The only women I had seen so far were ones I had already slept with. None of them appealed to me much until I was roaring drunk. Around eight o'clock, though, things improved considerably.

Two women came into the bar. I knew right away they were new. I whispered, "Fresh meat," to my buddies, and went over to the bar to check them out. When I got close enough to recognize them, I could hardly believe what my eyes were telling me.

"Sara? Ellen? Is that really you? What are you all doing here, in a place like this?"

Sara hadn't changed much, except she had definitely matured. I hadn't seen her since I left home. Ellen wasn't really pretty, but she did have a nice body, I thought. Both of them seemed glad to see me. Sara gave me big hug and a kiss on the mouth.

"We usually do our social drinking over around Oak Hill, but we had business over here today.

"I'm doing great. I was married for about six months to Ellen's brother, but it didn't work out. He ran off with a young girl. I guess it serves me right, considering what I did to you when we were kids."

I waved her off. "I forgot about that years ago. You turned me into a man, and I always appreciated that."

She smiled, a bit wistfully I thought. "Anyway, I'm working as a legal secretary over in Oak Hill. I make pretty good money for just a little old Midland Trail grad. Ellen, though, is out of work. She wants to look for work over here, as soon as she finds a place to stay."

Without bothering to think about what I was saying, I blurted out, "Well, hey, she can stay at my place until she finds something."

"Really? Are you sure? That would be great, if she could. I never even thought about that."

She had just told another lie, but that came easily for her. I turned toward Ellen, who was looking expectantly toward me.

"What about it, Ellen? It's a dump, but you're welcome to stay if you want to. I'll even promise to be a good boy, if you want me to."

She laughed, without real humor. I could tell from the sound of her voice she was a heavy smoker. "I think I can take care of myself. If you'll take me in for a while, that would be great. If there are some side benefits, they won't cost you anything."

When I left that evening, she went with me, her suitcase stuffed in the trunk of the heap I drove. We got drunk together back at the dump, then had sex as a matter of course. I thought she was good in bed. Forever however long it lasted, having her around promised to be fun.

I thought that might be for a few weeks, or a couple of months at most. After she found work and another place to stay, she would probably want to move on.

I was little off in my calculations. She stayed with me for thirty-eight years.