

Chapter Six

I loved to tease my baby sister, once she got old enough to be annoyed by it. She first spent the night with her cousin Carol when she was five years old. I don't know if Mama and Pop approved of my visiting Clara to see their little darling, but Clara didn't seem to mind. I think she secretly enjoyed doing something my parents didn't want her to do. She never really felt accepted by the Camps.

Like me, Miriam went forward to be saved at an early age, when she was ten. Unlike me, she made a genuine profession of faith. When I saw her at Clara's after that, she had been a Christian for about six months. That was when my personal devil got hold of me.

I came by with Ellen. She had given up trying to find a job in Beckley, and never had bothered to find another place to live. We had moved out of town, near Shady Spring, since our country dump was cheaper than the rat holes we could afford in Beckley. I had a more or less steady job as a grounds keeper at a local golf course. It was winter, so my hours were sporadic at best.

Miriam was tall for her age, like Pop, and almost as quiet. She had a quick temper, which wasn't something she got from either Pop or Mama. Someone said Mama's father had been like that, but I had never known him.

We were sitting around Clara's living room, as we often did. Miriam and Carol were playing some nonsensical video game on the TV. I never could get into that stuff.

"Hey, Miriam, I hear you became a Christian a few months back."

She didn't even turn around, focused as she was on the TV screen. "Yes."

"Now, Sis, you really believe all of that junk, do you?"

"Yes, and it's not junk."

"Sounds like a fairy tale to me. Are you some kind of holy roller or something?"

I had her attention now. "That's mean, Henry. Why would you say stuff like that?"

"I just want to make sure you don't mess your life, like all of those other crazy Methodists."

That was the spark. She jumped to her feet, all but tripping over the game controller, and came to where I was sitting. She planted her feet as she stood in front of me, hands on hips. Her eyes blazing like Clara's fireplace, she said, "You're a devil, Henry Camp, and I *hate you!* Don't you ever even speak to me again!"

Ellen laughed her hoarse cigarette-smoke laugh. "I guess she told you, Henry dear."

Clara decided things had gone far enough. She got up and came over to Miriam, putting her arm around the girl, who was shaking with rage. "It's okay, Miriam, honey, Henry was just pulling your chain. He didn't mean it, did you, Henry?"

Her warning glance told me I'd better back off. I grinned and said, "Just chill, Sis. I was just teasing, like I always do."

She relaxed a bit, but she didn't smile. Turning on her heel, she rejoined Carol in front of the TV. She didn't speak to me or look at me for the rest of the day.

That was only the first round. From then on, I always made some comment or another about her beliefs and about Christians in general. For the first couple of years, she continued to rise to the bait. Finally, she realized that her reaction was what I was looking for, and was what motivated my teasing. Once she realized that, she either just ignored me, or called me names like "devil-worshipping, demon-loving back-slidden heathen." That tickled my fancy, and I began doing things like wearing "666" tattoos and pentagrams. I think she started believing I really was a Satan worshipper.

Clint and I had no such problems. He made the same kind of bogus confession of faith I had made, but it meant nothing to him. When I teased him, he just shrugged, and went back to what he was doing. I think he rather admired what I was, or what he thought I was. The image of a happy-go-lucky bum I presented was only half-right; I was a bum, but hardly happy or lucky.

Ellen and I had little more going for us than sex. Simply put, she was a shrew, and her life was one long litany of complaints. She complained about where we lived, the food we ate, the clothes she wore, and, especially, about me. Everything wrong that ever happened in her life was my fault. Never mind that she was already twenty-three years old when we met; I was responsible for all of it.

One incident, particularly, sticks out in my mind. We had been together about ten years at the time. I was sitting in the living room, nursing a bottle, as usual. Ellen was fixing what passed for dinner at our house, something out of a can or a box. Without warning, and for no apparent reason, she came into the living room and slapped me on the face, hard.

“What was that for?” I asked, rubbing my cheek.

“If it wasn’t for you, I could have made something of myself, you bag of vomit. I had real talent and brains; all of my teachers said so.”

“But, Sweet Thin, you were already out of school and past college age when we met.”

“Doesn’t matter. If you were half a man, you would have helped me go back to school after I came here. Instead of helping me, you’ve taken me from one rat hole to another these past ten years.”

There was no use arguing with her; we had been through all of this many times before.

“Whatever you say, Snookums. It’s all my fault. When do we eat?”

She turned on her heel, and walked out of the room. Minutes later she came back and slammed down a dish of the night’s special on the coffee table. This scene played out day after day, year after year.

I didn’t have Miriam’s temper, which was probably a good thing. One of the few traits I inherited from Pop was his patience. It took a while for my fuse to burn down. When I did lose it, my usual reaction was to storm out of the house and look for the nearest bar. Getting drunk didn’t make me violent, but weepy. I was a crying drunk, and when I staggered back home I usually was blubbing, apologizing for everything I had and hadn’t done.

Curiously, this didn’t make Ellen mad. Instead, she would tenderly cuddle me like a baby, and tell me everything was okay. If I didn’t pass out first, we would often have sex then. She had a very strong maternal instinct; when I appeared helpless, she became more of a mother than a wife.

Ellen’s childhood hadn’t been an easy one, especially compared to mine. Her father beat both his wife, Nora, and his children, regularly. He finally drove her mother over the brink when he raped Ellen one warm summer evening. Nora shot her husband dead as he lay atop a screaming Ellen. Very calmly,

she then turned the gun to her own head, and pulled the trigger. There were no more bullets; she pulled the trigger repeatedly until Ellen's brother, Kevin, managed to wrench the gun from her hand.

Ellen was seventeen. Nora was sent to a mental institution, and released a year later. She never really recovered, and finally succeeded in killing herself a few months after she returned home.

Kevin, three years older than Ellen, was the breadwinner for them now. He drove a school bus for the local Head Start program, and continued doing that for several years. Sara was a frequent visitor to their house, first because of Ellen, then because she and Kevin were sweethearts. They dated until Sara was eighteen, because Alphonse wouldn't give his consent for her to get married. When she tried to move in with Kevin before she reached eighteen, he sent the police to bring her back. She never forgave him for that.

On her eighteenth birthday, she went with Kevin to get a marriage license. He didn't see any need for the formality of marriage, but she insisted on it. They were married by a justice of the peace, and she moved in with him the same day. The marriage lasted for two years, until Kevin's eyes fell on a sixteen-year old girl who worked as a part-time volunteer at Head Start.

Ellen and Sara never discovered where they went, so there was a rumor he had taken his new love to Columbus, where she had relatives. Sara got a divorce not long after, and used her family connections to get a job as a legal secretary in Oak Hill. Ellen had no luck in getting a job, despite two years of trying. She finally decided to move to Beckley, which was when Sara hatched a plot to get her hooked up with me.

All of this came out over a period of years, on those few occasions when Ellen was inclined to talk honestly about her past. Sara made no effort to visit her old friend; she married her boss, a prominent local attorney, after he divorced his first wife. They moved to New York, and I lost track of my kissing cousin after that.

For a while, Ellen and I took precautions to avoid making babies. About five years into our relationship, she decided she wanted to be a mother. We tried for years to produce offspring, with no

luck. With each passing year of failure, Ellen became more bitter, and my home life was more of a living hell than ever.

I didn't think it was my fault at first, because of the incident with Bernice when I was young. As Ellen's harping continued, though, I began to wonder if I were the father of Bernice's child at all. Maybe I was sterile, after all.

By the time she was forty-two, nineteen years into our relationship, I thought Ellen was ready to give up. We continued to have sex, if less frequently than in earlier years, but she stopped railing about my impotence. She had a relaxed air about her for a few months, and I began wondering if she was seeing another man. I had no real proof of it, but her change of attitude was definitely cause for suspicion.

When I came home that evening from work, hot and tired, she greeted me at the door. She *never* greeted me at the door. She was smiling; she *never* smiled when I came home. Most suspicious of all, she gave me a hug and kissed me, a demonstration of affection I hadn't seen in years unless we were in bed.

"What's going on?" I said, as she drew back.

"Why does something have to be going on?"

"Because you're never this nice to me, unless you want something."

I expected her to slap my face after that comment, but she just smiled again.

"I have some *great news*, Henry! You're going to be a daddy!"

The first thought that popped into my head was that she really had been seeing another man. I pushed it away.

"When did that happen?"

"About two months ago. I knew it when it happened; haven't you noticed I stopped talking about have a baby?"

I finally relented, and decided to be happy about it. We had a sweet time that evening, better than we had had since the early days. That nagging suspicion stayed in the back of my mind, but I refused to

give voice to it. We never talked about it, and when Ellen died I still wasn't sure if I was the father of our child.

Lisa Louise Camp was born on December 18, almost exactly seven months later. Although Ellen and I weren't married, we agreed to give the child my name. She was a beautiful baby; everyone said so. Even if they hadn't said it, though, I would have.

I got a better job, working year round at a ski resort at Ghent, and for a while I even stopped drinking. The first few years of Lisa's life were the happiest Ellen and I ever shared. Her attention was focused entirely on her child, and she forgot to blame all of life's problems on me for a while. I did notice, though, that her love for Lisa was very possessive; she would never let the child out of her sight. Lisa had no friends, because Ellen wouldn't permit it. Nobody was good enough, and who knew what kind of germs those other kids were carrying around?

When Lisa was old enough to begin Head Start, Ellen insisted on going with her as a parent volunteer. She made life miserable for the Head Start staff until they finally told her not to come back. She took Lisa with her, in spite of my protests.

For the next two years, she kept the child at home. Instead of giving her the love and affection she had showered on her at first, she was constantly berating the child for making messes or for being too stupid to learn.

Ellen had never care much about how her house looked, but it suddenly became important to keep it clean. She became obsessed with keeping germs away from Lisa. She tolerated messy diapers only because she had no choice. Lisa was potty-trained by the time she was two. Almost a year later, our poor little girl had a case of diarrhea. She tried to make it to the bathroom, but messed in her clothes before she got there. It could have happened to anyone.

No in Ellen's house. She was enraged, especially Lisa accidentally made a mess on the toilet seat, too. She made the child get into the bathtub, clothes and all. When she finished her bath, crying all the while, Ellen took the dried feces from the toilet seat, and rubbed it on the child's face.

"That'll teach you to make a mess in my house, you little monster."

By then, Lisa was screaming hysterically. I was home at the time, but had done nothing to interfere to that point. The screaming finally drew my attention away from the bottle. I got in the bathroom just as Ellen was beating the child again. I forcibly pulled her away, and had to fight her to bring everything under control. That kind of thing happened more than once, and I wasn't always home to stop the abuse.

I never spanked or otherwise corrected Lisa myself; her mother wouldn't hear of it. Lisa tried to get me to play her little games with her, but I couldn't quite bring myself to do that. Ellen wouldn't even let me hold the child on my lap. She called me a dirty old man even to think of such a thing.

The time came for Lisa to start kindergarten. Ellen tried to prevent it, but I went over her head and pre-registered my daughter. Once the authorities knew of her existence, keeping her out of school was out of the question. Kindergarten was mandatory in Raleigh County by that time. Curse and rail as she might, Ellen had no choice but to take Lisa to school that fall. Once more, she tried to stick around as a volunteer, and once more she was kicked out. This time, Lisa stayed behind; no amount of hysterics from her mother changed that.

Our little girl blossomed after that. She was bright, her mother's opinion notwithstanding, and she quickly made up lost ground. In a few weeks, she learned to read, something neither of us bothered to teach her at home. She proudly brought home her papers, including drawings she did especially for me or for her mother. Ellen said they were ugly, and threw them in the trash. Lisa soon stopped showing them to us.

In the first grade, she made A's on her assignments, and thought that surely would impress her parents. I did tell her once or twice I was proud of her, but Ellen refused. She told Lisa she had probably copied from someone else, because she was too stupid to learn anything herself. For neither the first nor the last time, our precious little girl ran to her room and cried her heart out. I was afraid to make any move to comfort her.