

Margaret's Conference

Margaret summoned a Steinman family conference for after church that same Sunday morning, but she hadn't invited Damien and Annie. She told everyone else it was of utmost importance. For Sunday dinner she roasted three chickens and added boiled red potatoes, pinto beans left over from Saturday's supper, and candied carrots. She put the carrots in the oven after covering them with brown sugar to make a glaze. Three cherry pies cooled on the counter and slices of fresh bread were lying on a green platter next to a narrow blue dish of yellow butter.

They ate in silence; only Paul knew the reason for the conference and he spent most of the time staring at the kitchen window. Paul, Royal, Jack, Jenny, Alice and Lizzy remained at the table with Margaret after dinner. The other men and all of the children went outside.

Margaret put both hands on the table and said, "I received a phone call from Damien's neighbor, David Hansen, who said that Damien is having sex with David's little sister Angela. She's sixteen years old. David said he couldn't stop them, but hoped that we could. And if we didn't he threatened to tell his father, Annie and the sheriff."

Royal, as if hard of hearing, asked, "He's doing what? Fiddlesticks. I don't believe this Hansen fellow."

Lizzy said, "I was certain that Damien wouldn't be able to keep his fly closed when I heard they hired Angela and saw her beauty. She's a woman and *not* a girl."

Jack asked, "Do you think Annie knows?" Jack was the youngest son in the family though older than both Lizzy and Jenny. He was a quiet young man who had always looked up to Damien. He added, "If she doesn't know, maybe we should tell her first and then confront Damien."

Royal clenched a fist. "Ma, I can beat up Damien if it'll help."

"Don't judge your brother. We know about your shenanigans and a pot shouldn't call the kettle black. Anyway, I won't tolerate my sons fighting."

Paul tapped his pipe on the palm of his hand to get everyone's attention. "Well, we'd better do something soon or Damien will be in jail. He was this way even as a teenager. He never listened to us while growing up. Margaret, can you say something to him at the picnic on the fourth? The rest of us will be standing by if we're needed, but no one else should know about this and we certainly don't want Annie to know. At least not yet."

Jack raised his hand as if he were in school. "Pa, let me talk to Damien."

Margaret shook her head. "No, it won't be effective coming from you. Damien will get angry and knock you to the ground. I'll talk to him. He might listen to me."

"Don't worry about me ma, I can handle Damien."

"No Jack, stay out of it. And I mean just that. Stay out of it."

Lizzy finished drinking a glass of water and said, "Damien's been a time bomb since he was a boy. I've never seen anyone more wrapped up in women and sex. It's all he thinks about, even now. Charles hates being around him because that's all he talks about. He tells the same smutty stories and jokes over and over again."

Alice dabbed at her eyes. She put her hand on Margaret's arm and glanced at Paul. "Damien raped me when he was sixteen and I was thirteen. I know you didn't realize what he was doing. The first time was when you all were in town one Saturday. He wrestled me to the floor, pulled off my pants and raped me." A flood of tears exploded from her eyes as she went on, "He raped me several

times afterward, mostly in the barn, but also in the henhouse and in the cellar. One time I grabbed a butcher knife when he tried to throw me to the floor and I chased him from the house. If he'd stopped running, I would've killed him. He tried to rape me the night before my wedding, but he stopped when I threatened to tell William."

Margaret rose to her full diminutive height and demanded, "Why didn't you tell us? Oh Alice, dear daughter Alice, we should have known."

"I was afraid that you'd blame me for tempting him. You would have said I was at fault because of the short skirts I wore. Anyway, I knew pa would kill him."

Paul had been looking at the floor during the conversation between Alice and Margaret. He raised his head and said, "Yes, I would've killed him."

Lizzy put an arm around her older sister's shoulder. "Does William know about the rapes?"

Alice shook her head. "No, but I'll tell him tonight. I also know that Damien tried to have sex with Dorothy, but she must have said or done something because he was quiet for days. We should have told you, pa." She sniffed and then added, "I was so afraid I'd get pregnant."

Lizzy stood up from the table and carried dirty dishes to the sink. She turned toward the table and said, "Damien nearly killed me when I was four or five. It must have been about the same time he raped Alice the first time. Pa, ma, Alice, Jack, Royal and Jenny had gone to town. Ma told Damien to take care of me while everyone was gone. He began teasing me about something not long after you all left. I think he took my doll and punched it several times. You know how he liked to tease. I began to cry and he slapped me—hard. I cried louder and he picked me up and carried me to the bridge. He grabbed my ankles and lifted me over the rail. I screamed. There I was, hanging upside down thirty feet above the creek. After several minutes I stopped screaming and he brought

me back to stand on the bridge. I ran home and crawled under my bed.”

Lizzy paused and the rest of the family looked at her with wide eyes. She continued, “Damien said that if I told anyone he’d kill me and I think he meant it.” Lizzy wiped away a few tears and her lips trembled. “I’ve never told anyone else, but I haven’t trusted him since then.

“The dirty bastard,” Alice growled as she walked to the sink. She took the dipper off its nail, filled it from the pail of water and drank. She put the dipper back on the nail and turned to face Lizzy. “The dirty bastard.”

“That’s enough girls,” Margaret said. “I know what has to be done and I’ll talk to him at the picnic. Let’s hope it helps.” She forked a cold piece of chicken breast into her mouth.

Paul stared at the tablecloth. “I should have killed him when he was a lad. I should have shot him dead. I’m so sorry now that I didn’t.”

Margaret walked around the table and grabbed him by the shoulder. She looked him in the eyes and said, “You wouldn’t break that commandment and we all know it. Anyway, you’d have to kill me before you could kill one of our children.”

Paul left the table and stood in front of the kitchen window watching a woodpecker attack a branch of the old cottonwood tree. For a few seconds the steady staccato of the bird’s quest for insects was the only sound heard in the house. Margaret sat back down at the table; tears rolled from her eyes as if they were artesian springs. Jack handed his mother a handkerchief and she wiped off the tears and blew her nose.

Paul pounded on the window sill with a fist and repeated, “I should have killed him.”