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# *Rosie's* PROMISE

*Selena Kitt*

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# Rosie's Promise

*Selena Kitt*

## Dedication

For the man I promised everything to—I would have waited forever.

## Chapter One

"Rosie! That damned cow isn't going to milk itself."

*I wish it would.* I sat at the top of the stairs and braided my long brown hair into two, even plaits. The sun hadn't even come up yet, and the rooster had been crowing for near half an hour.

"Comin', Daddy." I made my voice as light and easy as I could. *Tread lightly, Rosie-girl.* That's what Billy Ray had told me, and that's what I intended to do. There was no sense starting a row on today of all days, considering what I wanted to tell them.

"I invited that nice preacher, Preacher Harris, to supper on Sunday after church." Mama's voice carried up the stairs and I stopped, mid-braid, my belly tightening. "His wife's visiting relatives up north, and I know that poor man and his boy couldn't cook their way out of a paper bag."

"Now, May..." Daddy snorted. "I reckon they'd do all right by themselves."

"Ha!" Mama laughed. "You wouldn't last two days without my cooking."

I knew my daddy replied, but I didn't listen to the rest. Mama's words meant one thing to me. *Billy Ray's comin' on Sunday.* The thought sent a hot jolt down my spine and into my pelvis, straightening me bolt upright on the stairs. I grabbed my book—*To Kill a Mockingbird*—and tucked it deep into the back pocket of my overalls.

"Mornin', Mama." I gave her a kiss on the cheek, swinging into my chair at the table next to my father. "Sorry I'm late, Daddy."

"I been out and in already." He raised an eyebrow and looked over the rim of his coffee cup at me. "Up readin' 'til all hours of the night again, weren't ya, missy?"

I flushed, flipping a braid over my shoulder and reaching for a blueberry muffin. "Not so late."

"I noticed the light on at midnight up there when I passed by to the bathroom." Mama put a plate of eggs and sausage in front of me.

I bit my lip. Which was worse, reading until midnight, or falling asleep with the light on? With a wince, I opted for the latter. “I’m sorry, I forgot to turn the light off.”

“Gonna ruin your eyes, girl.” Mama shook her head, pouring juice.

“Cows and chickens.” Daddy downed the rest of his coffee and stood. “Them stalls need mucking, and then come out and help me on the back forty. I got a fence to repair you can help with.”

“Canning this afternoon, John,” Mama reminded him, pointing to the rows of mason jars on the counter. “I’ll need her help.”

“Fine.” He shrugged.

I glanced at my mother, but her back was to me now, running water over the pans. “I wanted to ask you both something...” Daddy didn’t stop shoving his feet into his boots, and I knew I was going to have to talk fast. “I applied to the University of South Carolina, and they offered me a scholarship.”

Daddy’s hat stopped midway to his head, and Mama dropped her dish towel on the floor. I swallowed hard and went on, all in a rush. “It won’t cost us nothin’, and since they opened one up in Lancaster, I can take the bus from town. It will only be a few hours a day, Daddy. I can get up early to milk the cows and do the chickens.” I ignored the doubtful look on his face. “I’ll be studying to be a teacher, like I always wanted.” Breathless, I stopped, my eyes skipping between them. Never mind telling them about having to transfer to USC proper after two years. We’d cross that bridge when we came to it.

*So much for treading lightly, Rosie-girl.* Billy Ray’s voice in my head made me wince. No one said anything. Daddy just looked at Mama, and Mama just looked at Daddy and I traced the violets on the tablecloth.

“We’ll talk about it—your mama and I.” Daddy’s hat found its way to his head and he gave me a curt nod before disappearing out the door.

“He’s mad.” I sighed, reaching for my own boots. “I knew he was gonna be mad.”

Mama picked up her dish towel, wringing it in her hands. “Not mad. Surprised, I’d say.”

"Mad." I said it again, yanking my boots on. I turned my eyes up to Mama's face and saw the worry there. "Are you mad, Mama?"

"Not mad." Mama's mouth crinkled at the corners when she frowned, her blue eyes, very like my own, blinking rapidly. "Just...surprised. We didn't even know you applied."

"I was afraid to tell you," I admitted, saying the words to the door as I pulled it open.

"Your breakfast," Mama called as I leapt down the front porch steps.

"I'm not hungry."

I was really running late. The sun was going to be coming up over the fields soon and Elsie and Clara, our two Holsteins, would be bursting at the seams. I would have to milk first and collect eggs from the henhouse after.

Both cows lowed in protest when I opened the barn door and hurried toward their stalls. "I wish Daddy would buy an automatic milking machine." I peeked over to see Clara rolling her eyes.

"Don't need one, when I've got you, eh, Rosie?"

I whirled to see my father standing silhouetted at the barn doors. "Daddy! You scared me."

"Sorry 'bout that." He sucked on a bit of sweet grass, shoving his hands into his overall pockets. "Didn't mean to."

I faced him as he came into the barn, kind of edging toward the stall where Elsie still protested to be milked. "*She's* mad at me too."

Daddy tipped his hat back and frowned at me. "I ain't mad, girl."

I shrugged, turning toward the cows. "Gotta get my chores done."

He didn't say anything else as I slipped into the stall, putting down the milking stool and situating myself. Elsie was one unhappy cow, rocking back and forth, clearly uncomfortably full.

"Sorry, girl." I put my hands high on her soft teats and pulled downward.

"I never wished you was a boy." Daddy's voice stopped me mid-squeeze and I looked up to see him peering over the stall at me. "I know I've asked a lot of you, Rose." *He called me Rose.* "And you've always been so willing to help out..."

“I don’t mind it.” I continued milking when Elsie lowed again and shifted her weight. “I’ve never minded, Daddy.”

“I know you ain’t no boy.” He cleared his throat. “And I know you don’t want the same things boys want. I don’t quite understand girls, but I know they’re different.” I hid my smile and turned back to milking as he went on. “I guess what I’m sayin’ is...if you want to do this whole college thing...” I lifted my head, eyes wide, breath caught. “Well, I guess I’m sayin’ yes.”

“Daddy!” Poor Elsie. I squeezed her so hard she kicked the back of the stall. Upturning the stool as I stood, I didn’t even open the stall door. I just jumped up and threw my arms around his neck. “Thank you. You’ll be so proud of me, I promise...”

He gave me a little squeeze before pulling my arms from around his neck. “Get back to that cow before she explodes, would you?”

“Yes, Daddy.” I could barely sit back on the stool, I was trembling so hard. After all his talk about putting on airs and “book-learnin’”, I hadn’t expected him to come to such a fast decision. I’d been out of high school two years and the thought of spending the rest of my life doing nothing but farm work made me crazy. I just had to do something else. Daddy and Mama held a lot of our little church’s old-fashioned beliefs about women and farm life, although they weren’t quite as bad as the preacher. I thought there might be a chance for them to approve of me doing something different, but still, even when I was filling out the applications and sending them in, I never really believed... *I’m going to college.*

“And, Rosie?” Daddy tipped his hat back on. “I always was proud of ya.”

With that, he was gone, out of the barn and back to the fields. My eyes filled with tears that were determined to spill down my cheeks, and I wiped at them with milky hands.



## Chapter Two

I didn't have to try to explain why I got all dressed up, because we were already going to church. I think Mama noticed the extra special attention I started giving to the mirror on Sundays when the new preacher came to town in March, but Daddy was clueless. The preacher's family always sat in the front row, so most of the service I stared dreamily at the back of Billy Ray's dark head. Sometimes, during the hymns, he would kind of turn to peek at me—our family always sat in the same pew—and if he thought no one was looking, he'd give me a wink.

Today it was just Billy Ray and his little sister, Lottie, since his mama was out of town. He kept smiling at me during the hymn. I knew I should have been thinking about God, but every time we sang "How great thou art, then sings my soul", my soul wanted to sing for Billy Ray. Somehow I just didn't think God would mind.

When the service was over, I followed Mama and heard Preacher Harris say, "We're looking forward to supper, May." I smiled at him as we passed and managed to steal a glance at Billy Ray. He was holding his little sister's hand and looking at me for all the world like he wanted to eat me up. I smoothed my yellow sundress with sweaty palms and tried not to look like I wanted him to.

Daddy sang Johnny Cash tunes all the way home, with the radio in the truck turned up so loud no one could scarce think, let alone talk, but that was all right—I didn't want to think or talk. I just wanted to feel that humming ball of excitement in my belly when I thought about Billy Ray coming to visit in a few hours. I didn't know how I was gonna make it through the waiting, but Mama helped me out with that. Between peeling potatoes and setting the table and all the rest of the things she had me doing, I was busier than a pond full of frogs in May. I couldn't believe it when I heard Lottie squealing on the porch as Harley jumped up, with true canine Southern hospitality, and licked her face until she fell over laughing.

Daddy, coming in from the barn, was shaking Preacher Harris's hand on the lawn. Everybody had changed out of their Sunday clothes but me and Mama—she had an apron on over her navy dress with the white polka dots. I peeked out onto the porch to see little Lottie sitting on the steps with her arms around Harley's shaggy red neck. His tongue was lolling out and he looked happier than a hog in slop.

"Hey, Rosie." My heart skipped at the sound of Billy Ray's voice as he came up the porch steps, tipping his hat back on his head. "You look pretty."

"Thanks." I glanced back to see if Mama had heard, but she was stirring lemonade in a big glass pitcher. "Harley's sure happy to see Lottie."

He chuckled, glancing back at them. "I think it's mutual."

"Howdy, Rosie." Preacher Harris reached around his son and pulled open the screen door we were talking through. "Isn't it a fine Sunday?"

"Yes, indeed." I couldn't have agreed more as Billy Ray met my eyes around his father's back. "Mama's making lemonade, and we've got a ham. I baked a strawberry pie. They're real fat and ripe this year—you should take some home to the missus."

"That'd be fine." Preacher Harris smiled as he took a seat at our kitchen table. "Maybe you and Lottie and Billy Ray can go pick some after dinner, then?"

Was it horrible of me to be thinking, *That's just what I hoped you'd say?*

"Oh, speaking of picking..." Mama poured lemonade over a glass of ice she set in front of the preacher. "Rosie, will you run out back and pick me... Let me think..." She frowned, looking up at the ceiling as if the answer were written above her head. "I'd say...fifteen...fifteen ears of corn should do it."

I couldn't believe my luck. We were gonna have the opportunity to be alone twice in one Sunday?

"Sure, Mama." I didn't bother with my shoes and I tried to make it sound real casual when I stopped with my hand on the screen door, looked back and asked, "You wanna help me, Billy Ray?"

He slipped behind me, pushing the door open as an answer.

"Your daddy don't care, does he?" I glanced back at the preacher man on the front stoop drinking Mama's lemonade and talking with my daddy as Billy Ray and I made our way through the field.

"Oh, he cares." Billy Ray picked a piece of long sweet grass and stuck it between his teeth to suck on. "He just trusts me, is all."

I lifted my blue eyes to his dark ones and we both smiled. "We got a new lamb. Wanna see him?"

"Sure." He followed my change in trajectory as we cut toward the barn.

It smelled like hay and manure inside and the earthy odor of animals. I stopped to give my horse a nuzzle, rubbing my cheek against his silky black nose. Jupiter nibbled at my long, brown hair looking for goodies, and I giggled, pushing him away.

"Not today, Jupiter." I noticed Billy's eyes on me as he leaned back against one of the stalls, his arms crossed, just watching.

"He just wants a little sugar," Billy Ray noted with a slow smile. "Don't see as I blame him."

My cheeks blushed even pinker as I moved past him, hearing his boots fall on the concrete behind me as I made my way to the sheep pen. The new lamb was sleeping curled by his mother's side but he looked up and bleated as we approached. His mother nuzzled him and bleated back as if to say, "All's well" and the lamb closed his eyes again.

"Ain't he sweet?" I squatted down to peer through the wooden slats.

"Yep." Billy Ray leaned over the rail, chewing on his blade of grass. "Not as sweet as you, a'course."

I snorted, putting my hands on my knees and rocking back, rolling my eyes. "You think I'm stupid, Billy Ray Harris?"

He smiled down at me. "Why would I think that?"

"I know what you're doin'." I stood, brushing my hands over my dress as if squatting next to the pen had made it dirty, and put my feet up on the first rail to peer over at the lamb, making me just as tall as the preacher's son.

“Yeah?” Billy Ray did the same, bringing his height to a full head taller again. His shoulder brushed mine as he reached up to tip his hat back. “What am I doin’?”

“You’re no better than Jupiter.” I nudged him with my knee. The lamb was blinking, swinging its head back and forth between us. “You’re just looking for some sugar.”

“Aw, come on, Rosie.” He tilted his head when he smiled at me. “Can you blame me? Pretty girl like you...you’d just melt in my mouth like sugar...”

“Billy Ray!” I pushed him with my shoulder, meeting solid resistance. He didn’t budge an inch. “What you’re talkin’ ’bout is a sin. What would your daddy say?”

He snorted. “What Daddy don’t know, don’t hurt him. Besides, I told you, he trusts me.”

I hopped off the rail, brushing my hands together. “Well, now, that was his mistake, wasn’t it?”

Billy Ray stepped off the wooden slat and stood in front of me. “Don’t you trust me, girl?”

I met his eyes, trying to decide if the question was genuine. “Should I?”

“Wouldn’t hurt ya.” He brushed a stray hair off my cheek. It tickled. His fingers lingered over my jaw, his thumb rubbing there.

I glanced nervously past him, clearing my throat. “I don’t know ’bout that.”

Billy Ray frowned, stepping back. “You act like I’m Lucifer come to tempt you with a nice shiny apple.”

“I didn’t mean—” I stopped as he turned and started toward the barn doors. “Hey, Billy Ray, wait up...”

I caught his hand as we neared the doors and went out into the sunshine. We didn’t talk, but our hands stayed locked together as we walked. He squeezed my fingers once, pointing up to show me a hawk riding the updrafts and we both stood, shading our eyes with our other hand, to watch. And still we didn’t let go.

“Your mama’s sister still feelin’ poorly?” I asked, more a bid for connection than anything else.

Billy Ray didn't answer for a long while and I thought for sure I'd hurt his feelings again, but then he said, "She's a mite better, I s'pose. Most of it's in her head. She's just still grievin' my cousin Brian getting killed in 'Nam last year."

"Was he drafted?" I squinted up at him in the sun, and I knew the smattering of freckles there wrinkled with my nose.

"Yep." He said the word flatly, but it could have been a scream to my ears. Too many of my former high school classmates had gone off halfway across the world to fight some war that my daddy watched every night on the TV and Preacher Harris vehemently opposed from his pulpit every week. It scared me to think of Billy Ray being drafted, but it was a real possibility. He was twenty come September, and he had no deferment—he was a young, single man, not pursuing a college education. All he had was a job at the feed store in town.

"I got something to tell you." I swung his hand as we walked around to the high rows of corn. We were away from the sight of the house now, and I could barely contain my excitement. I'd been waiting to tell him for near a week.

"Lemme guess..." Billy Ray started feeling corn in its husks with his big, knowledgeable hands. "You're running away and joining the circus?"

I laughed, nudging him with my hip. "Very funny."

"You could be their living bookworm." He grinned as he broke off a fat ear of corn, still in its husk. "Blind as a mole from sitting under the covers reading until the wee hours of the morning."

"I got a full scholarship to USC." The words hung there for a moment before he swept me into his arms, swinging me around and whooping.

I laughed. "Put me down, Billy Ray."

But he wouldn't. He turned until we both got dizzy and collapsed, breathless, next to the cornfields. Here the grass was low and soft as velvet and we rested as we always did, side by side on our backs, watching summer clouds drift lazily by.

"So, what did *they* say?" He rolled and leaned up on his elbow to look at me. I knew my sundress was getting dirty and Mama would say something, but I didn't care. The

way his gaze moved over me, as I stretched out next to him on the grass, made me feel like I had an itch I was desperate to scratch.

I grinned. "They said I could go."

"Hallelujah!" Billy Ray leaned over and kissed me lightly on the cheek, and I turned my face up to his in expectation. His eyes had turned dark and serious though.

"I'm real glad, Rosie." He played idly with the top button on my dress. "Not just 'cuz I know you'll be an amazing teacher...but it'll give you something to keep your mind busy while I'm gone."

"Gone?" I frowned. "Gone where, Billy Ray?"

He looked off into the distance. "I'm enlisting."

My heart stopped. I watched the wind nod the wild goldenrod. Finally, I asked, "When?" following his gaze, as if I could see what he was seeing.

"End of the summer." He pulled the piece of grass out of his mouth and tossed it aside. He didn't look at me, and I could feel him doing it on purpose, not meeting my eyes. I reached for his hand, then, finding and squeezing it. I couldn't talk around the lump in my throat. I wanted to ask "why" but I already knew. And there was no talking Billy Ray out of a thing once he set his mind to it.

"Don't know what's gonna happen, Rosie." He lifted my hand, still not looking at me, and turned it palm up in his. He kissed it, his lips soft, and then closed my fingers tight as if to save it there.

"You'll come home," I whispered back, holding his kiss in my hand and leaning my head against his shoulder.

He sighed. "I can't know that, and you can't know it either. All I know is that I want you, girl, and now all we got is this summer."

He kissed me—not for the first time, but it was like the last. It went on and on, our mouths raw and aching, our bodies strung like taut wire as we lay together on the ground.

There was no stopping what we wanted and we rolled together, pressing hard and rocking. He pushed up my dress, feeling past my panties, and led my hand to his zipper

so I could feel him, too, all hard and wanting me. His mouth was like moist heat, trailing down my throat as his big fingers slid into my wetness.

“Oh, Rosie,” he groaned when I unzipped him, digging inside his jeans, seeking to free him. He reached down to help me, guiding my hand to the stiff length poking out above his zipper. His breath came faster in my ear as I tugged, his fingers probing up inside me. I squirmed against his hand, wanting more. He seemed to know it, his thumb finding that sweet spot at the top of my cleft and beginning to strum.

For a moment I forgot all about the hard length of him in my hand, and I moaned softly and rolled my hips in little circles. It felt too good for me to concentrate on anything else. Billy Ray's hips moved, too, reminding me, and I pulled him, up and down, making him groan with pleasure.

“Rosie, please,” he begged, meeting my eyes. “Your mouth...”

I bit my lip but turned around, situating myself on my hands and knees so he could still touch me. I pushed his jeans down further, stroking him before sliding my tongue around the head. He gasped, yanking my panties down to my knees and shoving my dress up over my behind, exposing me. His fingers slid in easily—I was so wet—his thumb working that little bud of flesh back and forth.

He thrust up into my throat, one hand in my hair, his breath coming faster and faster. I could barely contain my own excitement, moaning around his shaft as he fingered me from behind. My climax was coming, and there was nothing I could do to stop it. Billy Ray thumbed my little button, his fingers moving in and out. I didn't take him out of my mouth to tell him, but I knew he could feel it, the delicious spasms squeezing his fingers again and again.

My mouth tightened around him, too, and he groaned. The head of his cock seemed to swell against my tongue as I shuddered with my own orgasm, and then he exploded, filling my mouth with waves of white hot fluid. I swallowed the first wave quickly, waiting for more, and it came with a loud moan from Billy Ray, his hips bucking up as he shoved himself deep into my throat.

“Rosie...” He reached for me, tugging me up and cradling me against him. We kissed, lying half-naked on the grass. The ache between my legs was nowhere near satisfied, and I rolled on top, slipping my panties off and straddling him, my tongue searching for his. His hands moved over my body, pulling my dress up, seeking the heat of my flesh. It was as if we couldn’t stop. We were too desperate to have each other.

His fingers moved between my legs again, parting my lips, rolling that little nub between his thumb and forefinger. I sat up on him, lifting my dress so he could see. His eyes lingered between my thighs and he used his other hand to slide his fingers up into me. I sighed, my head going back as I rocked.

“You’re so beautiful.” His words made me flush and I could feel his cock growing hard, pressing up against my behind. He was still wet from my mouth and I reached back to grasp him, making him groan out loud as I slid him through my fist. “God, Rosie, I want you so much.”

“I want you too.” I leaned in to kiss him, situating the length of his cock between my swollen lips so I could rub my slit there, up and down. He grabbed my hips, biting his lip and looking at me through half-closed eyes as we rocked. We had kissed and touched and petted, but never had these two core parts of us been so achingly close.

“Oh God, I want to be inside you.” He thrust his hips up, grinding me down onto his cock. I knew, if I just shifted a little, he would be inside of me. I wanted it, too, now more than ever before, knowing he was leaving, maybe forever. I rocked back and forth, and Billy Ray guided my hips, sliding through my wetness. The head of him rubbed that sweet spot, making me moan and pinch my own nipples through my dress.

“That’s it,” he murmured, pulling me against the saddle of his hips. “God, you feel so good.”

“Oh, Billy Ray!” I collapsed onto him as I came, my whole body shuddering with it, still rocking the length of him up against my sex. He was like an iron bar between my thighs, seeking entrance to my heat.

“Please, Rosie.” His hand was there, looking for the place he wanted to go. “I need—”



“Yes.” I nodded, spreading wider, aiming him.

We would have, too—we would have found each other there next to the cornfield, if the preacher man hadn’t started calling for his son. Eyes wide, we scrambled up, straightening and tugging clothes back on. Our breathing was fast and our faces flushed. Two people had never picked fifteen ears of corn faster in their lives.

“Hey, son.” Preacher Harris clapped Billy Ray on the back as we walked up to the house. “John is thinking about selling his truck—are you interested?”

I saw Billy Ray trying to come up with an excuse in his head why he wasn’t—clearly his daddy didn’t know about his plans to enlist. I knew Billy Ray wouldn’t have told him, what with Preacher Harris’ fairly public views on the war.

“I don’t know if I’ve got enough saved from the feed store.” Billy Ray shrugged, his arms just as full of corn as mine were. “Let me take these in.”

“No need for that.” Mama came out onto the porch with paper bags folded over at the edges to make them stable. “Less mess to shuck it outside.”

The subject seemed dropped as Preacher Harris started throwing a stick for Harley. It was a race to see who would catch it first, Lottie or the Irish Setter, as they ran back and forth, laughing and tumbling. Billy Ray and I sat on the steps with a bag each between our knees, pulling thick, green strips of husk off fat ears of corn.

“Get all that damned silk off,” my daddy called from the porch swing, giving me a wink before he took a drink of lemonade. “That stuff sticks like grim death in my teeth.”

I glanced over at Billy Ray and he smiled at me, but I was all of a sudden thinking about “grim death”. I didn’t like to watch the news, but you had to be in a coma nowadays not to have seen the bodies of soldiers at some point on the TV. There were protests going on all the time, and Preacher Harris was organizing a busload to head up to Washington in August.

“Oh, don’t throw those away,” Mama said to Billy Ray when he started balling up the bag full of cornhusks. “I save them.”

He gave her a puzzled look. “What for?”

“Cornhusk dolls.” I took his bag full of husks and dumped it into mine.

“Can you show me how to make one?” Lottie poked her head through the railing.

“Sure, sweetheart.” Mama picked up the big pot we’d filled with golden ears of husked corn. “I’ve got some dried in the house. Just let me bring it out.”

We sat on the big wraparound porch, Daddy and the preacher drinking lemonade on the swing, talking about baseball while Harley panted under their feet. Mama and Lottie sat cross-legged, making cornhusks into slowly recognizable shapes. Billy Ray had one of the dried husks that he twisted in his fingers as we sat on the steps, waiting for a cool breeze to lift our spirits and listening to the warblers and the meadowlarks calling in the trees.

I wanted to talk to Billy Ray, ask him about his decision, but it was too close to supper to go wandering off again without any excuse. Instead I just hugged my knees and watched the leaves on the trees move in the wind like schools of silver fish, back and forth, swimming with the currents. I wasn’t paying any attention to the conversation at all—just listening to my own heartbeat and imagining I could hear Billy Ray’s—when Mama mentioned my going to college.

“What for?” Preacher Harris frowned from the porch swing. “Pretty girl like Rosie should already be settled down with a baby on her hip.”

I flushed at the thought, blinking fast. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to, someday, be a wife and mother. I just couldn’t imagine that’s *all* I wanted to be.

“The world’s changing,” Mama piped up, fluffing out the skirt on Lottie’s cornhusk doll. “Girls can go to college and be all sorts of things nowadays besides wives and mothers.”

Preacher Harris tipped his wide-brimmed black hat back and cocked his head in my direction. “So what are you fixing to be, Rosie?”

“A teacher.” My voice didn’t sound as clear and solid as I wanted it to.

“Oh, well that’s all right then.” He seemed satisfied with my response as he sat back, picking up his glass of lemonade again. Then he frowned and leaned forward, wagging a finger at me. “But you best be careful—don’t forget about what happened to those kids at Kent State.”

I saw Billy Ray roll his eyes, his fingers still working the corn husk in his hands. He had it all separated into thin rows and was twisting it into something. “I don’t think Rosie will be participating in many war protests.”

The preacher raised an eyebrow at his son. “And why not?”

Mama stood, brushing the back of her dress off, and held her hand out to Lottie. “Let’s go in and sit down. I’ll get supper on the table.”

“Good idea.” Daddy stood and stretched. “I’m as hungry as a devil.”

“John!” Mama’s eyes got wide and she snapped the dishtowel tucked into her apron at him.

“What?” He gave her a sheepish grin. “Preacher here can perform an exorcism if we need one.”

Preacher Harris chuckled. “Luckily the remedy for your ailment is just some fine home cookin’.”

When we got inside, I managed to finagle my way next to Billy Ray on one side of the table across from the preacher and Lottie, who kicked incessantly. Daddy sat at the head, as usual, and Mama barely sat at the other end at all after Preacher said Grace, getting up a hundred times during the meal to get all the things she forgot to put out. By the time the meal was over, it looked like we hadn’t eaten a thing off the table, it was still so filled with food.

“Strawberry pie?” I offered as I helped Mama clear and put away.

“I wouldn’t say no to that.” Preacher winked, looking down at his daughter. “How about you, punkin?”

“Is there whipped cream?” Lottie perked up.

I smiled, pulling a big bowl of fluffy white stuff from the fridge. “Whipped it myself.”

No one had said much during the meal—we were all too busy eating. But dessert was a slower process, now that our bellies were full, and our mouths had less to do, so the talk started flowing. I still wasn’t paying much attention. Billy Ray’s hand was inching

my skirt up my knee while he speared a fat, juicy strawberry on his fork. He had a spot of red juice on the corner of his mouth that I was just aching to kiss right off.

“Well, I don’t disagree with you about the war,” Daddy said, leaning back in his chair. “But I think if a man gets drafted, he should do his duty and serve his country.”

Preacher Harris put down his fork. “My wife is consoling her poor sister as we speak, who is so prostrate with grief she can barely get out of bed most days.” He paused, looking around the table at each of us in turn. “All because her son ‘did his duty’ and ‘served his country’.” He let the silence stretch longer this time, and I felt, suddenly, like I was listening to a sermon. “He was just nineteen years old, John. How can anyone justify that in the eyes of the Lord?”

My father held up his hand in protest. “I’m no warmonger, Preacher, but I’m not a pacifist either. Sometimes you gotta do what you gotta do. That’s part of being a man.”

“I just don’t agree.” Preacher Harris’ voice rose, his face reddening in anger. “Violence is *never* the answer.”

“I don’t know.” My father shrugged. “Even the Bible says there’s a time for war and a time for peace.”

I stared at him in disbelief. He was just as against the war as preacher was, and we all knew it. Why was he arguing? Billy Ray’s hand tightened on my knee and I glanced at him. His ears were red and his jaw was working hard.

“If you had a boy, you’d understand.” Preacher Harris sighed. “Rosie can’t get drafted.”

“No.” My daddy frowned, rubbing his chin. “But she could get hit by a bus, or get struck with some awful disease—”

“John, bite your tongue.” Mama made the sign of the cross—her mother had been Catholic.

Daddy held up both hands this time. “I’m just sayin’. We all care for our children, but we can’t protect them from life.” He glanced at me and winked. “Things happen that you don’t expect—including good things, like college applications, or not-so-good things like war and the draft. At some point, we have to let them go and live their own lives.”

Preacher Harris pushed away his half-eaten strawberry pie, his brow creased in a deep frown. "Well, if they ever drafted Billy Ray, there would be no way I'd let him go."

The pressure on my knee increased and I gasped, looking over at Billy Ray. His face was set, his eyes dark. "You can't make my decisions for me."

This time it was preacher who held up his hands in protest. "Now, son—"

"No." Billy Ray's voice grew loud. "Don't 'now son' me. I may not agree with the war and all the reasons we're fighting over there—but *I'm no coward*."

"No one said you were," my father interjected, trying to make peace at the dinner table now that he saw my mama's wide eyes and Lottie covering her ears against her brother's tirade.

"Do you know what he did?" Billy Ray turned his eyes to my father, but he was pointing at his own. "Does the Classification II-D sound familiar to you?"

Daddy frowned. "I'm not familiar with that one..."

Preacher Harris was white as a sheet, his voice low and shaky when he said, "Two-Dee...registrant deferred because of study preparing for the ministry..."

"My cousin died in Vietnam after being drafted." Billy Ray's voice shook too—in anger. "Half my classmates are over there right now, and I don't know how many of them are going to die."

Preacher Harris' eyes pleaded with his son. "Then you must understand why I did what I did."

"I am not nor have I ever been preparing to enter your ministry...isn't that right, Dad?" Billy Ray looked across the table at his father, crossing his arms over his chest. I could almost feel the thundercloud hanging over the middle of the table.

Preacher Harris swallowed hard. "It was just a little white lie..."

"It was wrong." Billy Ray slammed his fist down so hard on the table that the silverware clattered. "You lied to them and you lied to me. And you, of all people, should have known better."

"I did what I had to do." Preacher crossed his arms, too, his chin jutting forward.

Billy Ray nodded, pursing his lips. "And I'm going to do what I have to do."

“What does that mean?”

“I’m enlisting.” Billy Ray stood, glancing down at me. His eyes were full of sadness. “Tomorrow.” With that, he slammed the screen door and pounded down the porch steps, leaving all of us in stunned silence. I could see Mama wanted to say something to make it all okay again, but there just wasn’t anything to say.

“I’m sorry.” Daddy said the words to preacher, but he was looking over at Lottie, who had tears leaking out of the corners of her eyes. I knew just how she felt.

“Excuse me.” I put down my napkin and ran toward the door, going after Billy Ray. He was squatting down next to the barn, petting Harley. I touched his shoulder and he looked up at me and took my hand. As if by some unspoken understanding, we walked away from the house instead of towards it. We didn’t talk again for a while, walking until we neared a clearing at the other end of the field.

“Now you know why.” He tilted my chin up, searching my eyes. “Do you understand?”

I nodded. “Yes.” I didn’t like it, and I didn’t want him to go, but I did understand. In fact, I’d never been more proud of anyone—proud and scared all at once. “But I wish there was no war.”

“So do I.” He put his arms around me and we stood like that for a long time. I listened to the sound of his heart beating like a promise. “Your daddy was right, Rosie. Sometimes you gotta do what you gotta do. It’s part of being a man.”

“And what do we women get to do?” I swallowed past the lump in my throat.

“Wait.” He sighed and I felt his lips brush my hair. “And hope. And pray.”

I looked up at him, seeing everything I had ever wanted shining in his eyes. “Then I will.”

He smiled. “I know you will.” Reaching into his pocket, he said, “I made something for you.” It was the cornhusks, the ones he had been twisting on the porch. He had made them up into a ring. “It fits my pinky, so maybe...” He slid it onto my ring finger. It fit perfectly. There was no time for anything else. The preacher was calling for his son, and I held him as long as I could.

“Meet me in the barn tonight,” he whispered into my ear and I nodded my assent as we started our walk back to the house.

## Chapter Three

He never said what time, but it was past midnight before I was sure Daddy was sleeping. I knew Mama wouldn't wake up. I avoided that creaky third step and was careful not to let the screen door slam back. The night was cool, the moon full overhead lighting the path to the barn like a black ribbon as I followed it along, wondering if he would be there, hoping he would be, afraid he might be.

I didn't dare turn on a light, but the moon was bright enough for me to see a little ways in when I opened the door. The animals stirred—Jupiter nickered, sounding as confused as a horse could sound. I crept into the barn in bare feet, hugging myself, a ghostly figure in my white nightgown.

“Billy Ray?”

The lamb bleated at my intrusion.

“Up here, girl.” He poked his head out from above me, up in the loft.

My heart in my throat, I went to the ladder and started to climb. It had never felt like such a long way up before, and when I got to the top, Billy Ray was there, holding out his hand to help me.

“You're a vision.” He held both my hands in his and out to the sides as he looked at me.

I laughed, sounding nervous, glancing up at him in the dimness. “What can you see in the dark?”

“Enough.” He slipped his arm behind my back and pulled me in tight to his body.

Of course I knew what we were here to do, what we were here to finish, but my head panicked anyway. I was like some little rabbit cornered and searching for a way out, even as he kissed me and my body responded like a wildfire spreading in a dry summer heat.

“Billy Ray...” I pushed against his chest, breaking our kiss. “Maybe...”



"It's all right, come here." He led me along and I followed him over the rough boards until I felt the soft cushion of hay underfoot. "I made us a little bed."

There was a fleece blanket spread out over a thick nest of hay, and he led me down onto it. We lay there belly to belly in the moonlight coming in from the loft door—he'd opened it wide, and the breeze was cool and delicious against my bare legs.

"I was afraid you weren't comin'." His breath blew warm over my cheek.

I let my feet tangle with his, realizing he'd taken his boots off. "Had to make sure everyone was asleep."

"I think the whole world's asleep." He leaned his forehead in to touch mine. "Except you and me..."

"And the lamb." I giggled as a soft bleating came from down in the barn.

"Are you afraid?" He kissed my cheek, his lips grazing my skin.

I nodded. "Are you?"

"Of this?" He shook his head as he slid a hand behind me again, pressing my belly to his.

My arms went around his neck, my nightgown shifting up as I twisted the dark, curly hairs at the nape of his neck in my fingers.

"Not this." I nuzzled his neck, kissing him there. He made a low noise when I did that. "What about the war? Are you afraid of that?"

"I'm not afraid of going..." His hands, moving down my body over my nightgown, paused at my hips. "I am afraid of never coming back."

"What did your daddy say?" I asked, wincing when his fingers dug deep into my flesh at the words.

"I don't want to talk about it," he growled.

I stayed still, listening to his breathing, my heart beating against his chest. "I'll miss you, Billy Ray."

"I'm not gone yet."

His mouth found mine in the dark and we rolled together over the blanket, back and forth so many times I was breathless and dizzy on top of him when I finally broke our

kiss. He wouldn't let me go, though, as he pulled my nightgown high up over my thighs, his hands cupping my behind as I straddled him.

"Sit up," he told me, and I did, using my hands against his chest for balance. I could see the flash of his eyes in the moonlight, half of his face in light, the other half in shadow.

His palms moved up my legs, my hips, over my ribs, taking my nightgown with them. I reached around and unbuttoned it at the back of my neck so he could slip it off over my head, and then shivered as the air touched my bare skin. I was sitting on him now just wearing a pair of white cotton panties, and his eyes swept over me from top to bottom.

"You're beautiful..." His hands were trying to span my waist. I felt beautiful, like some virgin sacrifice, a bleating lamb, pale and vulnerable and trembling. He gathered me to him, kissing me breathless again, pressing my naked body against his clothed one, and I squealed when his belt bit the tender skin of my belly.

"This is hardly fair," I whispered, unbuckling him.

He leaned back as I unzipped his jeans and struggled to pull them down, not helping except to lift his hips, watching me work them off. I ignored the bulge in his underwear and started at the top button of his shirt, working my way down and spreading it wide when I was through, exposing his chest and belly to my hands.

I had a sudden flash of fear, remembering some of the images of the war on TV—soldiers' wounded—and the thought froze in my mind of Billy Ray being among them. My fingers moved over his ribs, his chest, feeling the strong beat of his heart and knowing that just one bullet could stop it forever made me crazy with something—fear and longing and some sort of desperation. I wanted to keep him.

I had to fight not to cry, then, but I couldn't stop. I slid fast down between his legs to keep it from him, so he would think that the wetness on my cheeks was just saliva and not my tears as I freed his cock and began to lick the length of his shaft. He jumped in surprise, gasping and groaning out loud as I took him into my mouth, wanting to swallow him whole if I could.

“Oh yes, Rosie,” he murmured, his fingers in my hair. My tongue ran over the soft head, that little ridge around it that came to a point at the back like an arrow shooting straight into my mouth. I worked my way up and down the shaft, kneeling between his legs and gripping his thighs with my hands. I sucked and licked and gulped the length of him until he was panting and holding my hair in both hands, making a low, growling noise in his throat.

“Easy,” he moaned, pulling me off, and I let his shaft throb there against my wet cheek, panting with my effort. “Damn, girl.”

He was reaching for me, guiding me up toward him. I wiped my cheeks with my hands, settling beside him and letting him kiss me again, nothing between us now but my panties, and he was working on those. His fingers found the elastic band, edging them first down one side, then the other, but they caught in the sticky wetness between my legs and he abandoned them for the moment, rolling me to my back and feathering kisses over my neck.

I gasped when his mouth covered my nipple, sucking gently while he sought its twin, finding and tweaking it between his thumb and forefinger. The sensation was sweet and bright and it made my body come alive like heat lightning on a hazy summer night. I couldn't help the noises I started to make, mews and cries. Downstairs the lamb began bleating with me, too.

“Billy Ray!” I cried when his mouth left my breast, leaving a wet trail down my belly as he settled himself between my legs. “What—? Oh God...”

He had my panties down to my knees and his head under them, his tongue parting my lips with a gentle back and forth motion, pushing past the soft, curly brown hair toward my center. When he found that secret place, the tender bud of flesh I thought only I knew about late at night with the sheets pulled up tight between my legs, I nearly screamed, grabbing his curls in my fists.

“Oh God, oh God, oh God,” I whispered over and over, aware of the irony of what Billy Ray and I were up to and my taking the Lord's name in vain, but I just couldn't help

it. His tongue between my legs was the most glorious, exquisite thing I had ever felt, and I never wanted it to end.

He didn't seem to be in a hurry to go anywhere, and I slipped my panties off, putting my feet up on his shoulders, opening myself up to him, grateful for the semi-darkness to hide the shamelessness of my lust. He explored through the soft folds of flesh, his tongue never leaving that sweetly sensitive spot as he eased two fingers into me, making me squirm and gasp.

My belly was pulled taut, something curled there, waiting for release as he licked my flesh toward some slippery edge. His fingers worked in and out, twisting and plunging into me, the sound of it, the rhythmic wet squelch, making me flush with pleasure and embarrassment. I felt as if he had exposed an appetite in me for something wild and urgent, a hunger I couldn't control.

"Oh no, oh my God," I moaned, and that just made him lick me faster, his tongue flashing over my clit so rapidly I thought I would die or explode, and that's just what I finally did. It was every Fourth of July picnic finale all rolled into one, and I shuddered all over like I couldn't stop it, my body rippling with waves of pleasure, sparks of sensation raining down like fire and spreading through my limbs.

I didn't make a sound, biting my lip so long I thought I tasted blood, and realizing too late that I was pulling Billy Ray's hair hard in my fists. He didn't seem to mind, moving on top of my still quivering body and nuzzling his wet face against my neck. I could feel his hardness against my thigh and knew what he wanted, and I couldn't possibly say no, not after that.

Wrapping my legs around his waist, I kissed his shoulder, grabbing his arms as he held himself above me. There was a delicious rub and slippery exploration as he slid the head of his cock up and down, seeking the pink cleft where my flesh gave and angling his hips slightly when he found it, poised above me and waiting. I tried to show him with my body, wiggling, lifting my pelvis, wanting the weight of him, but he held himself aloft, his eyes searching my face in the moonlight.

"I love you, Rosie," he whispered, leaning in to kiss me as he pressed slowly forward with his hips, and I didn't know what took my breath more, his words or the feel of his hard, insistent flesh parting mine, easing me open with a stretch and burn that made me gasp and dig my nails into his arms.

"Billy Ray," I panted, shaking my head, gripping his hips with my thighs so tight they were trembling the both of us. He kissed me, tender, easy kisses feathered over my lips that he punctuated with soft whispers that I couldn't quite understand, but my body recognized them and slowly relaxed.

When he started to pull out, I grabbed at him, panicked, not wanting him to leave me, and his slow press forward again was a relief. I squeezed myself around him, everything about me taut and quivering beneath him. He was gentle, rocking me on a soft cloud in the silver light of the moon, whispering my name and filling me with more than his flesh—he told me how much he wanted me, how beautiful I was, how good I felt, and I lost myself in his words and the aching sensation between my legs.

"Touch yourself," he whispered, taking my hand and guiding it down between us.

The supple wetness where we met was a fleshy pulse that seemed to deepen and expand with every movement we made together. My fingers found that little swollen bud, rubbing it as he moved on me, in me, still careful not to put his full weight onto me. The sensation in my belly grew, stretching even tighter and I moaned, squirming under him.

"Does it feel good?" he asked, his breath hot against my ear, closer now, his hips making hard circles into me.

"Oh, yes," I gasped, my hand working fast between my legs. "You feel so good..."

He made a small sound in his throat, slowing, pressing deep and staying there for a moment. I could feel the thick pulse of him in me, stretched wider than I imagined I could possibly stand. Wanting him, I clamped myself around him and he groaned, shaking his head.

"Ahhhh God," he cried, his fingers digging into my shoulders. "I can't do this much longer..."

I misunderstood him, saying, “I can,” and nudging him over with my hip, so I was sitting up on him. He gasped when I started rocking, making those same circles with my hips, with my fingers against my clit, lost in the rising sensation.

“Oh hell,” he whispered, his hands cupping my breasts, squeezing my nipples and sending waves of pleasure through my body. “Rosie, stop... Oh God...”

“I can’t stop.” I felt that tension in my belly reaching some sort of impossible height, a shocking summit, and I wanted to see what was on the other side. My fingers worked hard as I panted on him, against him, leaning forward as I crested that peak and pushed myself over, my whole body shuddering with the effort.

He grabbed my hips and shoved into me hard, growling and gasping, and I knew he had reached that point, too, his body taut and arching as he thrust it against mine. He was swelling inside of me, surging with the hot fluid erupting deep into my flesh as I collapsed onto him, kissing his cheek, his neck, holding him tight. I didn’t ever want to let go.

I whimpered when I felt him softening, slipping out of me, but he tucked me next to him, resting his chin on the top of my head as he pulled me close. The breeze felt cool against our damp skin, and although I could see his belly and chest, the rise and fall of his breath, his face was in shadow. His breathing was slowing, becoming deeper and more even.

“Billy Ray?” My fingers played in the dark curls over his ear.

“Hmm?” He sounded tired, or far away, and it made me sad, like he was already gone.

“I love you too.” I wanted to pull him back. My words did, for a moment, his arm squeezing tight around my shoulders, his lips brushing my hair.

Downstairs, I heard the lamb bleating again, softly looking for comfort and finding it against a warm body in the ensuing silence. I found it, too, in Billy Ray’s arms, our silence stretching long. There weren’t words for what we were feeling, or for what we wanted and couldn’t have. It was a long time before either of us spoke.

“Will you really wait for me, girl?” he whispered into my hair.

I nodded, not trusting my voice at first, swallowing around something caught in my throat. “Yes. I promise.”

We found heaven that night in each other's arms, and neither of us wanted to let it go. He stayed almost until dawn before slipping down the ladder. I knew he wasn't just heading home—he was off to fight in a war halfway around the world. I promised him once again as I let him kiss me for the last time, and then I shivered barefoot in grass full of morning dew.

## Chapter Four

It was little William who saw him first, pointing at the truck coming up the driveway. That boy loved anything that moved—birds, tractors, trucks—they all fascinated him. I was shucking peas on the porch next to Mama, and Daddy was working under the hood of the old Scout while William drew with a screwdriver in the dirt. Then he started calling, “Peecher! Peecher!”

Mama shaded her eyes to look, but I didn’t stop. “Preacher’s here—gonna have to shuck s’more.”

I looked up when the truck’s door opened, and that’s when I saw the tall young man with dark eyes swing out of the cab. I knew, even as much as he’d changed, I just knew. I stood, then, my hand at my throat, the shucked peas I had pooled in the well of my skirt spilling onto the wooden slats of the porch.

“Good Lord, child,” Mama cried. “What a mess. You—”

She must’ve seen him, too, standing there next to the truck, just standing and looking at the house, at us, because she stopped talking and I heard her gasp. I couldn’t say anything—I didn’t have any breath—but I was moving anyway, squashing peas under my bare feet as I ran across the porch and down the steps. He was like hitting a brick wall, solid and steady, and he pulled me into his arms like a bit of fluff and kissed me so hard I knew he was bruising my mouth but I didn’t care.

“Billy Ray,” I whispered into his chest, willing my tears not to fall, but they came anyway, little rivers down my cheeks. “*Five years* since you disappeared. Where...? How...? The letters stopped after only a few months... We thought—”

I could see Preacher Harris and Lottie, who was in my seventh grade English class and practically a grown-up girl of twelve now, getting out of the truck too.

“You could have called me,” I said to preacher as I wiped my eyes.



"He just showed up on my doorstep today." Preacher Harris held his hat in his hands. He was older and grayer, his eyes a lot more sad. "He wanted to come over here first thing."

"Don't talk about me like I'm not here." Billy Ray frowned, glancing over his shoulder at his father.

"I'm sorry." Preacher Harris squeezed his son's shoulder briefly, giving him a nod. "We're glad you're here, son."

"Hey, you leave my mama alone." William's little fists were raised, and he was glaring up at this stranger with fierce, dark eyes.

Billy Ray's eyes met mine, then he glanced down at the boy. He squatted next to the truck with a smile, his gaze moving over William's dark, curly hair, just like his before they shaved it all off, like the one picture I had of him in uniform stuck in the mirror of my dresser upstairs.

"Hey there, fella." Billy Ray looked at the screwdriver William was still holding in his hand. "That's quite a weapon there. You're a good boy to protect your mama."

William's jaw relaxed a little. "I'm helping Grandpa fix our truck."

"I bet you're good at fixin' things." Billy Ray reached out to touch the boy's curls.

"I'm good at everything." William glanced up at me and decided I wasn't in danger. "I'm William. What's your name?"

"Billy Ray."

"That's my daddy's name." William cocked his head with a frown. "But he's dead. Mama said he was killed in the bad war."

And then he was running off to tell his grandpa about the new stranger come to visit, and Billy Ray stood and studied me, his eyes questioning.

"He's your—" I started.

"So I hear," Billy Ray interrupted, peering over at William, a mixture of shock and I hoped a little joy on his face.

"You disappeared..." I shook my head in disbelief. "I never got a chance to tell you. They said...missing in action..."

He gazed out across the field and I wondered if he was remembering back to that day, too, years ago, when we walked together across the grass the last time. He appeared older now, harder somehow, and his jaw tightened as I watched him trying to tell me, searching for the words. They didn't come.

"I'm here now, girl." He pulled me close and squeezed, hard.

"I waited." My heart soared as I held myself against him, listening to the steady beat of his heart in his warm, broad chest.

"I didn't know if you would." He kissed the top of my head. "I hoped...maybe too much. You were all I thought about..."

"I promised." I blinked up at him. His eyes were questioning, but I smiled. "Besides, there's no other man like you, Billy Ray. Not for me."

"Well..." He breathed a sigh, putting his arm around me as we started toward the house, where Daddy had joined Mama on the porch and they had William between them, all of them watching us. "Maybe some day I'll tell you...what happened...over there..." His jaw tightened again as he spoke, his eyes growing dark and distant. "But I came back. And you just made it all worth it."

Billy Ray shook Daddy's hand and Mama hugged him tight, and William decided he was all right and jumped into his lap the minute he sat on the porch swing. Preacher stepped up onto the porch but Lottie stayed down on the steps to pet old Harley. "I wish your mama could be here to see you." Billy Ray's mama had died two years ago, but there'd been no way to tell him.

Billy Ray nodded. "Me too."

"She would have been proud." Preacher's words surprised me. Her views on her son enlisting had been very clear, even extending to her grandson, whom she had refused ever to see or acknowledge. It was Preacher who had come to the hospital to hold the newborn, who had baptized him and taken him fishing.

"Do you think so?" Billy Ray shook his head slightly, staring off into the distance.

"I know I'm proud of you." Preacher blinked back tears, clearing his throat. I looked at Billy Ray, but couldn't gauge his reaction.

"We all are, son," my daddy said, squeezing Billy Ray's shoulder.

"Well, I guess I'd better fry some more chicken." Mama was wiping her eyes with the corner of her apron. "You're staying for supper, of course?"

Preacher nodded. "Of course."

I think we were all remembering back to the day before Billy Ray went to enlist. I know I was. I stared at him like he was a ghost come back to life.

"I think the peas are done for." Mama sighed, surveying the mess I had made in my hurry to get to Billy Ray. "Rosie, will you go out and pick some corn?"

I smiled over at Billy Ray. "Sure, Mama." I held my hand out to him. "Want to come help?" William protested, but Mama and Lottie distracted him as Billy Ray took my hand and we walked out toward the cornfield.

"This doesn't feel real." Billy Ray squeezed my hand and we stopped in almost the same spot that we had years ago. "I thought the hell I was in must be a dream...that you were all that was real. Now I'm wondering if maybe I'm still there and just dreaming all this."

"You're here, Billy Ray." I blinked back tears as I met his eyes. He was the same and different all at once. I was too. So much had changed since he'd gone and that realization ached between us. I wanted to bridge that gap somehow, and I put my arms around him, lifting my face up to be kissed.

"I don't know if I can come back." He brushed his fingers over my mouth instead of his lips, rubbing his thumb against my jaw.

"You *are* back." I pressed my lips to his, slipping my hand behind his head and slanting my mouth across his. For a moment, there was nothing. He let me kiss him, but his hands stayed chastely at my waist, his tongue politely admitting the intrusion of mine. I took his hand and pulled it up under my skirt, shoving my panties aside so he could feel me. His mouth trembled under mine, then, and his fingers moved, parting my flesh, probing inside.

"Feel," I whispered, spreading for him. "I promise you, I'm real..."

“Oh, Rosie...” He moaned when my hand found him through his jeans, rubbing there. “Oh God... I can’t...”

“Yes, you can.” I kissed him deeply, rocking against his hand. It had been so long...*so long*. With a deep growl, he snatched me down onto the grass and we rolled back and forth, unable to get enough of each other all of a sudden. It was like a dam breaking, a hot flood, as we fumbled with each other’s clothing and our own. The hesitation of our youth was gone, and the years between us melted as our bodies rocked together, knowing already what our minds were trying to catch up to.

This was no slow, easy coupling. We were desperate to find each other again, our hunger far surpassing our inhibitions. Billy Ray rolled me onto my back, pushing my dress up to my waist and yanking my panties down. I worked his jeans down his hips far enough so I could grasp him in my hand, to guide and aim him. He let me stroke it there against my wetness for a moment as he kissed me until his need grew too great.

The moment that his hips pressed forward, his thick length parting my flesh and sinking slowly into me, I knew that he was home—really home. And I sobbed with the realization. But he didn’t stop, thrusting deeper into me as he kissed my tears. Wrapping myself around him, arms and legs both, I held on as he slipped in and out of my swollen slit. My nails dug into his back as I arched, squirming beneath him, wanting more.

“Billy Ray,” I whispered, meeting his hips with mine. “Harder... God, please.”

He groaned, kneeling up between my thighs and grasping my knees, pressing them far back as he slammed into me. I moaned, reaching down and rubbing myself, my fingers making fast circles as the delicious friction built up between us. My gaze met his and I saw the feeling he had held for me, tucked away in some small part of him, waiting there until he could let it go. It had broken through, too, flooding his face, shining in his eyes.

“I can’t stop it—” He groaned, breathless, grabbing my hips and driving in deep. “Oh, Rosie, God, I love you...” I pulled him to me, letting him take us both over that shuddering peak as we rocked together on the grass. He flooded me again, spilling waves

of heat between my thighs as I quivered beneath him. My mind still hadn't caught up, but my body knew. It beat like a pulse between my legs, *he's home, he's home, he's home!*

I sobbed, kissing his ear, his cheek, never wanting to let him go again. "I love you too, Billy Ray..."

"I'm really home," he breathed, searching my eyes. "And you're really real." I nodded, unable to speak past the lump in my throat. He brushed the hair out of my face, surprising me when he said, "I hope we made another baby."

I smiled through my tears, and then laughed. "A little girl this time?"

That's when the preacher called for his son and we both jumped like kids caught doing something they shouldn't be in the cornfield. Laughing, we pulled on our clothes and gathered the corn, heading back toward the house. I left them all downstairs talking in the kitchen and went upstairs to my room. I just needed a moment alone, to breathe, to think. It was the same room I'd had for years, but it had changed over time. It wasn't the room of a little girl anymore. William's was right across the hall—Daddy's old office converted into a little boy's room.

But there were still things here from the past. I lifted my bedspread and reached past the dust bunnies for the wooden box I kept there. This is where I'd put the few months of letters that Billy Ray and I had exchanged before preacher got the telegram announcing him missing in action. At the bottom was the cornhusk ring he had made me that day. I looked at it through prisms. How long it had been since that day when we had both surrendered our innocence. Today was somehow a bookend to that one, like a mirror reflecting back the lives we had left behind while showing us the way to the future. I slipped the dried, old ring on my finger with a sad smile before I went back downstairs.

William and Billy Ray were swinging on the porch. I sat on the other side of my son, who was talking a mile a minute, smiling into the summer afternoon. Billy Ray's hand fell over mine and I glanced up at him. He held my hand up, fingering the ring there.

"You saved it?" His voice cracked and I smiled, nodding. Clearing his throat, he said, "I'll get you a real one. Soon."

William hadn't stopped talking, completely ignoring the exchange between us. I wondered if he knew, or suspected, who this new stranger might be. We would have to tell him...soon. Mama came out onto the porch with paper bags, glancing over at the three of us sitting there.

"Aren't you all just one big happy family?" She shook the bags open. "Who wants to help me shuck corn?"

William jumped up. "Me! Can we make a cornhusk soldier, Nan?"

"Cornhusk soldier?" Billy Ray smiled.

"I have a whole collection in the barn," William said. "My daddy was a soldier."

Billy Ray nodded. "I know."

"I can take you out to the barn and show you!" William exclaimed as I helped Mama fold over the paper bags. "We have a new lamb, too."

"Oh, I don't know..." Billy Ray shrugged. "I think your mama might like to take me out to the barn to show me the new lamb, for old time's sake—what do you think, Rosie?"

"I think you boys better wash up for supper." I nudged his shoulder with my hip as I passed him to go get the big corn pot, and his hand brushed my thigh under my skirt. I leaned over to whisper into his ear, "Meet me in the barn tonight."

And later, under a full moon, he did, and we found heaven again in each other's arms.

## About the Author

Like any feline, Selena Kitt loves the things that make her purr—and wants nothing more than to make others purr right along with her! Pleasure is her middle name, whether it's a short cat nap stretched out in the sun or a long kitty bath. She makes it a priority to explore all the delightful distractions she can find, and follow her vivid and often racy imagination wherever it wants to lead her.

This sassy, outrageous author lives with her family in the Midwest, including two dogs and two fellow felines, all of whom she thinks are the cat's meow. Her writing embodies everything from the spicy to the scandalous, but watch out—this kitty also has sharp claws and her stories often include intriguing edges and twists that take readers to new, thought-provoking depths.

When she isn't pawing away at her keyboard, she loves spending her time belly dancing, attending drum circles, gathering in women's groups, and taking beautiful pictures of everything in her world.

To learn more about Selena Kitt, please visit [www.selenakitt.com](http://www.selenakitt.com). Send an email to Selena at [selena@selenakitt.com](mailto:selena@selenakitt.com) or join her Yahoo! group to join in the fun with other readers as well as Selena! <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/selenakitt>.

Look for these titles by Selena Kitt

*Now Available:*

Rosie's Promise



*Kenneth Hailey believes he can deal with everything logically—even love. Until he meets Rose Red, a free-spirit flower child who believes in loving the one you're with. And, while love plays its part, for Kenneth, 1967 is the year he wakes up.*

## Long Strange Trip

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Kenneth Hailey, an uptight, conservative mathematician, believes he's in control. After all, every problem can be solved in a deliberate, logical manner—even love. When his fiancée drops him for his best friend, he leaves Manhattan for the West Coast to start afresh. What better place to step out of his shell. After all, it's 1967, and San Francisco is the place to turn on, tune in, and drop out.

But is he ready for Rose Red?

Rose Red, a free-spirited flower-child, challenges Kenneth's very essence. She itches to strip him of his button-down shirts, crew cut and thick rimmed glasses by introducing him to her world of love-ins, protest rallies, and rock concerts. Their worlds collide, and Kenneth finds himself falling down the rabbit hole, hanging on for dear life! Not willing to give up his old habits, he tries to retire into his shell, a place of security and comfort, but Rose has other plans for him.

Set in San Francisco during the turbulent sixties, it's a story about love, acceptance and the willingness to see the world in a new light.

Warning, this title contains the following: explicit sex, graphic language.

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Long Strange Trip:*

Kenneth sat with his legs cramped under the table. Every so often, he'd glance at the bay window hoping to catch a glimpse of red hair. He pushed his plate aside and opened his book. A mental war raged in his head. He was stupid to eat here in hopes of running into Rose. And worse, she was a student, which meant hands off. He stroked his lower lip and thought of their kiss. The thrill had stayed with him days later, and as much as he tried, he couldn't get Rose out of his mind. He knew he was being unreasonable and

illogical. He stood up to leave, when Rose walked in. At once, his stomach flip-flopped, and his logic flipped right out of his head.

Rose walked up to his table and sat down. “Hi. Surprised to see you here.”

“You smell good. It’s unique, like you.” An idiotic utterance, he looked down at his book, fumbling with the pages.

Rose slid the book away from Kenneth’s hand. “So you like my fragrance. I mix my own oils.”

Kenneth took off his glasses and gazed at her face. “It suits you.”

Rose dragged her chair around the table, and stuck her wrist under his nose. “Guess what’s in it.”

Kenneth rested his hand under her elbow and sniffed her wrist. “There’s some type of citrus, lemon?”

“Red grapefruit, go on.”

“And a spicy scent.”

“That’s the musk, and a hint of mint.” She pulled back her wrist. “Why didn’t you stop by Far Fetched to see me? Or come to the house?”

He felt a rush of heat rise in his face. “What makes you think I’m here to see you?”

“You hate this place.”

“I...I do not. I’m growing rather fond of sprouts.”

“That’s why you have them rolled up in your napkin?” She raised her brows. “Come on, you can do better than that. If I told you there’s a diner down the street that has the best hash browns, fried eggs, and bacon, would you be interested? Or would you rather stay here and eat sprouts and drink fresh carrot juice for breakfast?”

Okay, Rose wasn’t playing fair, and his mouth watered at the thought of a rasher of bacon. “You win—this time.”

Her mouth split wide. An unexpected gift, wrapped up and tied with a bright colorful bow, and he wondered why her smile made him happy.

Kenneth stood up and placed money on the table. “How about showing me that diner?”

They waited in line for twenty minutes before being seated. The diner had remained untouched since the forties. Fattie, a Vietnam vet, had bought the diner in '66 and kept the original decor and the staff. The diner was packed every day since it opened, and Fattie made sure his customers always got fresh food and large portions.

"This is my treat," Rose insisted.

Kenneth nodded, too busy perusing the menu to argue. Besides, girls liked to pay once in awhile. It was their way of stating their independence.

A waitress with stiff bubble hair placed a brown plastic thermos on the table. "What'll you have, dearies?"

"Two eggs scrambled with ham, toast with butter, and hash browns. And a side of fruit," Rose added.

The waitress turned to Kenneth and brushed his crew cut with her pencil. "How 'bout you? Haven't seen someone with hair this short in a long time. Free coffee."

Kenneth sat back, his tone dry. "Ah, thanks. I'll have two eggs over easy with wheat toast, no butter, and a side of bacon, and hold off on the potatoes."

The waitress swished her way back to the counter. Rose let out a laugh and poured the coffee into the heavy white cups. "She likes you. Wow, free coffee. It pays to keep your hair short."

"You eat a lot for being so skinny. And ham and eggs? I thought you were a health nut?"

"You might think I'm too skinny, but I'm fine with my body. You didn't seem to mind it the other day when you kissed me." Rose leaned her elbows on the table and glared at him. "Is that why you're not attracted to me?"

Certainly, she was irritating, but the effect of her clear eyes focused on his face unnerved him to the point where he had to look away. "I didn't mean it in a bad way," he said, struggling for the right words. He did like her body. Although slight, it held infinite possibilities. "I never said I wasn't attracted to you. You're, ah, well, nice."

"Nice? That's all you have to say?"

“No, I mean, you’re more than nice. We shouldn’t be talking about this. I’m a professor, and you’re a student at the same university.” But even to him, his excuse sounded lame. He couldn’t care less at this moment.

“So you teach at Cal? I’ve never seen you around campus.”

“It’ll be my first year, and my first job. I certainly don’t want to do anything to jeopardize my position.”

Rose picked up her coffee cup and swirled the coffee around. “You must be in the math department.”

“Yeah, so I guess our paths will never cross.” Kenneth pushed his mug back and forth.

“Not many girls in your line of work?”

“It takes a certain discipline.” Kenneth pressed his lips tight realizing his mistake, for Rose’s eyes became rounder than a full moon. “I mean, well, what I mean is…”

Rose patted his hand. “Forget it. You already said too much. You think girls don’t have the brains for math. We’re too emotional for such discipline. So, do you want to sleep with me?”

Kenneth choked, and a spray of coffee spurted across the table, barely missing Rose. He wiped up the mess with his napkin, while muttering an apology. “I might be behind the times, but I like to be the one to invite the girl to bed.”

“Okay, so you don’t want to. That’s cool.”

“I didn’t say that, but there’s the unwritten teacher-student rule.”

“You said our paths will never cross, so why worry about it? Do you always follow the rules?” Rose asked, ignoring his awkwardness. “We can bend them a little. I’m not talking about a relationship here.”

“You’re talking about loving the one you’re with.” He smiled at himself using her phrase. The sunlight broke through the window and Rose’s hair shone a burnished copper. Luscious, silky hair he’d like to touch. He thought about what she’d said. “What do you mean by *bend*?”

“We can sleep together, and since we’re not looking for love, and we’re not each other types, and don’t want to…”

“...form any attachments.”

“Are you going to let me finish my sentence?” Rose sat back and crossed her arms.

Kenneth sank in his chair, uncomfortable with the conversation, but fascinated.

“Yes, since we don’t want any attachments,” she continued. “It would be ideal. So, what do you think?”

He scratched his chin. “So, I’m going to love the one I’m with after all? I don’t know.”

Rose waved off Kenneth’s worried expression. “Sex can be fantastic, and I’m horny, been without it...”

“...for a day?”

“There you go again finishing my sentence.”

Kenneth longed to take a risk, trip the light fantastic with Rose, but an affair with a student? Certainly, this was risky. Yet, she did mention their paths would never cross once the school term began.

“It’s summer, and fall semester is three months away,” she reasoned. “We’ll go our separate ways after classes begin.”

“Maybe you have a point.” Wanting to be clear, Kenneth stated the obvious. “You know I’m not interested in a relationship. I might not be here after next year.”

“You’re not going for tenure?”

“It’s too soon to tell. I don’t know if I fit in with the West Coast scene. I may do better in New York, among the sane.”

“Do you have another teaching job set up in New York?”

“I’ve had offers from NYU and MIT. New York may be better for me. It’s familiar. But I’m not going to decide until I’ve been here long enough to try it.” He shrugged. “But I wouldn’t be able to teach anywhere if it was known that I’d slept with a student. It wouldn’t look good. You know how word gets around.”

Rose gave him an alarming smile, and Kenneth tried to calm down his erratic heart. Relationships were distracting, and Priscilla had snuffed out any desire for wanting to start a new one. Anyway, there was Mark. Clearly, Rose wasn’t over him. Yet a friendly

arrangement between friends may fit both their lifestyles. If they were cautious, and ended it at fall semester, it could work.

Why not bend the rules, live a little?

*A young minister's celibacy is challenged by an earthy Appalachian woman.*

## Blackberry Pie

© 2007 Bonnie Dee

On a blistering summer afternoon, Reverend Nathan Andrews climbs a mountain to meet backwoods members of his congregation. Fresh from seminary, the young man isn't prepared for the onslaught of lust that hits him when he encounters a sensuous girl picking blackberries.

Determined to implement his outreach plan, he helps her harvest the fruit. But their potent sexual chemistry is too intense to deny and they engage in passionate sex surrounded by the beauty of nature.

Grace is earthy and primal, the opposite of the proper young lady he expects to take as a wife some day. Can there possibly be a future for a college-educated minister and a primitive mountain girl?

Warning, this title contains the following: explicit sex, graphic language.

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Blackberry Pie:*

"Blackberry?" She held up her bucket. The sweet aroma that had teased his senses since he entered the glade rose strong and potent from the mass of fruit.

"Thank you." He reached into the bucket and picked a berry. It was pulpy and moist from the heat. He nodded at the girl and popped the fruit into his mouth where it burst, syrupy and rich. Hard seeds crunched in contrast to the mushy flesh of the fruit.

She watched him chew. Her gleaming eyes made the act seem too intimate, as if he was doing something other than eating in front of her. Although the bite of berry was small, Nathan swallowed hard. "Very sweet. Thank you," he said again.

"This 'ere's the best patch around." The girl lifted a berry to her own mouth. Her indigo-stained tongue slipped out between rosy lips. She placed the berry on her tongue and drew it slowly back inside.

Nathan watched, mesmerized, searching for something to say, but his mind was completely blank. Pleasantries like asking about her family, where she lived, whether she

ever attended the Grace Baptist Church—which ironically shared her name—all that was beyond him. He could only stare at her moving mouth and the subtle fluctuation in her throat as she swallowed. His erection swelled harder and he backed away a step, looking past Grace at the blackberry patch. “What will you make with the berries?”

“Preserves and pie.” She reached into her bucket and selected another berry. Her eyes sparkled like the sun on a dark pool as she extended her hand toward his mouth. If chewing in front of her had felt intimate, the offering from her fingers directly to his lips was downright erotic. Her eyes challenged him to open his mouth and accept the fruit, and he couldn’t refuse it without looking like a flustered fool.

He opened his mouth, throat dry as sandpaper, and felt the feather-light touch of her fingers brushing his lips and the berry settling on his tongue.

She smiled as she withdrew her hand and let it drop back to her side.

Nathan’s heart pounded like a blacksmith’s hammer. His cheeks blazed with heat and blood rushed in his ears. His cock throbbed in time to his rapid heartbeats. The glade’s heat seemed intensified, smothering. Nathan’s head swam and he wondered if he was about to pass out—all because a country girl hand-fed him a blackberry.

A charge like ionized air before a thunderstorm smoldered between them for several seconds before the girl broke it by speaking. “Must be thirsty from all the walkin’. There’s a stream over yonder.” She pointed toward the woods on the far side of the glade.

“Yes, water would be good,” he agreed weakly.

“Best come ’round the patch lessen you want to get your nice clothes all ruined.” She turned and walked in front of him, hips swaying slightly from side to side.

It took every ounce of Nathan’s willpower to drag his gaze away from the undulations of her hips and buttocks and the long, lean legs stretching down below the short hem of her shift.

“You been to Cadey’s Pass, seen the family up there yet?” she asked as she led him up a slope and through a stand of pine trees. He heard the trickling of water and his mouth salivated in response.

“Um, no. I had directions, but got lost on the way.”



“Easy to get twisted ’round on the mountain.” Her light voice drifted back over her shoulder, rising up and down with a musical lilt.

“Where do you live?” he finally remembered to ask. “What’s your last name?”

“Owl Ridge over yonder. Last name’s Parkins.” She stopped walking suddenly and Nathan ran into her. He stepped back so quickly he tripped on a branch half-buried in the leaf mold. It took him a few stumbling steps to regain his balance.

“Here.” She crouched and pushed back a tall clump of ferns to reveal water bubbling right up out of the ground and meandering away in a thin stream. “It’s plenty cold.” She lay down on her belly and bent her face to the surface of the water.

Nathan could hardly breath, watching her natural ease as she sprawled on the ground and scooped water to her mouth. Her dress rode even higher, revealing a lightly haired expanse of leg all the way up to the rounded shadow where her thighs met her bottom. He swallowed the hard lump in his throat and raised his eyes to the canopy of green leaves above them. This was a test—surely a test from God of Nathan’s dedication to the ideal of chastity.

Back in the seminary it had been easy to talk analytically with his peers about moral and spiritual matters. The seminarians all expected to work in the mission field for a year or two, return home to meet and marry a suitable young woman and begin life as a family man. Full of religious fervor and the desire to grow new spiritual communities, none of them considered delaying sexual gratification a problem. The young men had been celibate so long, what was another year or two? But out in the world, Nathan had discovered working with real people was considerably more complicated than he’d anticipated, and today’s sudden, unexpected and powerful surge of physical desire for a strange young woman took him completely by surprise.

“Ain’t you thirsty?”

He looked down at Grace. She had pushed up off the ground and squatted by the water, looking up at him, her lips glistening wet. Her hair was darker here in the shadows with no sun highlighting it. Her eyes looked darker too. She gazed at him over one bare shoulder, the sleeve of her shift having slipped down her arm. The vulnerability of the

soft curve of flesh made his heart twist. She looked like a young girl wearing her older sister's too-large dress.

“Yes,” he finally answered her question. He dropped to his knees on the leafy forest floor, setting his jacket aside. With one hand pressed flat to the ground, he lowered his face close to the bubbling stream and scooped icy cold handfuls of water to his mouth. The sharp mineral tang soothed his throat and cooled his raging libido a little—until he turned his head and faced Grace's eyes, only a couple of feet away, looking back into his.

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