

Chapter 5

Rendezvous

An hour later, Sarey heard two sets of footsteps ascending the stairs. She listened for her parents' bedroom door to close. It seemed like she waited forever just to be certain they were asleep. She knew she had to be careful.

Lord knows what they'll do if'n they ketch me.

Sarey crept out of bed, put her flannel shirt on over her nightgown, threw on her overcoat, then put on her woolen socks and boots. She arranged some clothes in a pile under the covers, just in case her mother came in to check on her. After opening up the window, Sarey climbed through, dropped to the ground and headed toward the back pasture. She held her nightgown over her knees to make sure it wouldn't get muddy and walked as fast as she could on the soggy ground, knowing that any misstep would cause her to come tumbling down into the mire. As she approached the back pasture, Sarey saw a dim light.

That's gotta be Billy. I'm sure glad he waited for me.

Sarey ran the rest of the way, almost out of breath when she reached the boy.

"I thought you said you wasn't comin'," Billy remarked.

"I changed my mind. I'm late 'cause I had to wait 'til Mama and Papa was asleep."

"I figgered you might change your mind."

"Ya did, didya? Well, ain't you the smart one," she teased.

"Too smart, sometimes. I reckon. Leastwise that's what my Pa tells me."

Eying the object in Billy's hand, Sarey exclaimed, "You got a flashlight!" Can I hold it?"

"Sure."

"My daddy bought one at Mr. Taylor's store a coupla weeks back, but he won't even let me touch it. Says I'll break it."

The girl picked up the flashlight and started turning it on and off.

“Hey! That ain’t no toy. I see why your pa won’t let you touch his,” Billy quipped.

“You’re so mean, Billy Puckett!” Sarey teased back, lightly slapping his arm.

Billy pulled her gently toward himself, but Sarey resisted his move.

“Look, I don’t have much time, so are you gonna show me them books with the pictures in ’em, or not?”

“Of course, Sarey. Come sit down,” he said pointing to the canvas cloth spread on the ground. “I brought this so’s you wouldn’t get your clothes wet.”

“Well, ain’t you clever, Billy Puckett,” Sarey said, laughing.

“Ma used to say I’m too smart for my own good and one day it’ll get me into trouble.”

“My mama calls it bein’ uppity.”

They sat next to each other on the canvas and Billy opened up the encyclopedia.

“Now, here’s a picture of New York City with the skyscrapers. Look at all them automobiles on the street.”

“Ain’t that somethin’? New York City must be way bigger than Mary’s Cove.”

“Heck, New York City is lots bigger than Knoxville and I reckon Knoxville’s bigger than ten Mary’s Coves put together.

They continued to thumb through the encyclopedia looking at pictures. Sometimes Billy would stop and read a description underneath one of the images.

“You sure can read good, Billy.”

“I went all the way through seventh grade, so I learned a heapa things. What about you Sarey?”

“I don’t read so good. I only went to fourth grade and I was pretty slow.

“I remember!” Billy exclaimed. “You got kicked outta school ’cause you tried to beat me up. I was kinda sad when you left.”

“Tried to? I had you pinned to the ground.”

“Well, Miz Mable stopped the fight before I could get a hit in.”

“Was you really sad when I left?”

“Yep. None of them other girls had pigtailed long as yours.”

Sarey slapped his arm playfully.

“Ouch. That hurt.”

“You big baby,” Sarey teased.

“You’re right feisty.

“I could beat you up right now, for real,” Sarey said as she playfully pushed him down.

The two wrestled a bit and then, out of breath, they lay still. Sarey’s and Billy’s eyes met.

She quickly sat up. Billy touched her hair and smoothed it down where it had gotten mussed up.

“Show me more of them pictures ’fore I have to leave. Can you read me more of them words, too? Mama used to read to me out the Bible and them fairy tale books. Sometimes Daddy reads somethin’ out loud from the newspaper. Mama and Papa said I don’t need to learn to read.”

“I could teach you some, Sarey.”

“I don’t think so. Comin’ here tonight was takin’ a chance. Mama says we shouldn’t tempt the Devil.”

“How’s seein’ me temptin’ the Devil?”

“You know how it is twixt our kin. And sneakin’ around behind mama and daddy’s back is goin’ ’gainst the Ten Commandments.”

“I know, but I sure would like to see you again.”

“Likewise.”

“Do you always say ‘Likewise?’” he teased.

“No. And what if I do?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean nothin’ by it. Leastwise, I’ll get to see you for a bit on Saturdays.”

“You sure are lucky, Billy. Readin’ and all. And gettin’ to do excitin’ stuff.”

“Ain’t no luck to it. You gotta want somethin’ real bad and you gotta work hard to get it, too.”

“I reckon you’re right. I sure wish I could go somewheres different and see all them things you talk about. Heck, the furthest I been is to my granny’s house in Morriston.”

“Wishin’ is the first step to doin’, Sarey.”

“You reckon?”

“I don’t jest reckon. I know.”

“Then I ’spect I got a lot of doin’ ahead of me. I’m always wishin’ for somethin’.”

“You’d best be gettin’ on home. I don’t want you in no trouble ’cause of me.”

“Don’t wanna tempt the Devil,” they said in unison, laughing.

“You think maybe we can meet out here again, Billy. Maybe you can help me learn to read.”

“Sure can. How about next week?”

“Okay, but let’s make it a little later so’s I can be sure Mama and Papa are asleep ‘fore I sneak out?”

The idea of deceiving her parents was something new to Sarey and she had a sense of foreboding. She could hear her mother’s voice—*Don’t tempt the Devil. He’s just a-waitin’ for us to do somethin’ wrong. Little slips leads to big sins and big oaks from little acorns grow.*

“We best be goin’. I’m gonna walk part of the way back with you, so’s you don’t trip over somethin’ in the dark.”

The two proceeded across the field, the moon lighting their way, while Billy pointed the flashlight toward the ground so the light wouldn’t show in the distance.

“I reckon that flashlight’s mighty handy and it don’t stink like them kerosene lanterns do,” Sarey remarked.

Billy laughed. She loved the sound of his laughter.

As they got close to the house, Sarey said, “I ’spect we better part ways here. Rover might bark if he heard a stranger outside.”

“You named your dog, Rover?” Billy asked, laughing.

“Not me. My daddy did. He don’t have much, what do you call it?”

“Imagination?”

“Yeah. ’magination.”

“You sure say some funny things, Sarey.”

“What do you mean—funny?”

“I didn’t mean it in no bad way. It’s jest that you make me laugh and that’s good. Ever since my ma died, there ain’t been much laughin’ ’round our place.”

“Okay, long as you don’t mean it in no bad way. If you did I’d have to whoop you.”

They both giggled.

“I’d like to see you try.”

“My daddy taught me how to fight, ’case anyone bothered me.”

“See you next Saturday at Mr. Taylor’s, Sarey?”

“Lord willin’ and the creek don’t rise.”

Sarey grabbed hold of the window ledge, wriggled a few times, swung one leg over the sill, then the other and crawled through the window. Then she hurriedly wiped off her muddy boots with a dust rag as she watched Billy walk off into the night.