

# *Roses in the Desert*

*Stories of Gay Romance*

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Lulu Press  
Morrisville, NC

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# *On My Own*

An awful lot happened to me when I finished school. I thought I'd write it all down, since I got all that fancy schooling behind me. I guess the best place to start is where everything began to change.

It was the end of May 1938 in Texas, and I guess it was the same about everywhere else, too. Pa was real happy I was graduating from high school. He had to quit school in the third grade, and he said if I graduated, I'd have a chance to make something more of myself than he did. Since he was sacrificing so much for me to go to school, I figured I'd better make the best of it, so I did the best I could and even made pretty good grades. But now that I was graduating, and had all the book learning I could stand, I could help out on the farm all day, every day, even after school started up again at the end of summer.

We couldn't afford to hire extra hands, except for the big harvest in October when I'd take a week or two off school so I could help, too. That was when we'd hire a team of hands until we were done. But the rest of the time I'd help out as much as I could every day after school, on weekends, and of course, summers.

The last few years sometimes my buddy, Charlie, would ride the fifteen miles home with me on my horse, Lucy, and stay for a weekend. We had met when we started our first year at the high school in Howardville. I had a few friends from the school I had been going to, but I knew the first time I saw Charlie there was something about him that was different. I didn't know what it was, exactly, but he had this way of looking at me that made me feel good inside. All I knew at the time was that I liked him and we always seemed to know what the other was thinking. Even though I got better grades, I always thought he was smarter than me.

Charlie lived in town and wasn't used to the hard work on the farm, but he'd do what he could even though he couldn't quite keep up with Pa and me. I know Pa probably thought Charlie slowed us down some, but it wasn't often

he was there, and I really liked it when Charlie would come and visit, so I guess that's why Pa never said anything about it.

I kind of wondered sometimes why Charlie came out to the farm to work so hard, because it seemed like his legs and arms would always get real sore. I helped him as much as I could, rubbing him down at night, especially the night before we rode back to Howardville for school on Monday morning.

We had to share my bed when he stayed, so he'd lie on his stomach and I'd sit on him and rub the stiffness out of his back and arms and legs. Naturally, he'd have to take off his drawers for me to rub him, so he was naked. I'd keep mine on, because I didn't think it'd be right for both of us to be naked.

He said he really liked it when I worked on his muscles, but he always said he was still a little sore when I finished. I rubbed him as hard as I could without hurting him more, and I liked the feel of him, but I'd get a woody every time I did it, so I was awfully glad he was on his stomach so he couldn't see me.

Charlie was real skinny when I met him, but it didn't take long for him to get some real good muscles and lose all his baby fat. I guess you could say he was a real looker, what with his brown hair, green eyes and smile dimples, but I always wondered why he never said anything about dating one of the girls that were always wanting to talk to us at school. I know why I didn't. I was always busy helping Pa with the farm, but the girls would always want to talk to both of us, anyway. Personally, I always thought they were a bother, buzzing around us like flies, but I put up with them for Charlie's sake, even though he didn't seem any more interested than I was.

I had my eighteenth birthday on Friday just one week before we graduated. Pa got us some big juicy steaks from a neighbor that had just slaughtered a steer and picked up Lucy and me from school with the truck and trailer, saving us the fifteen mile ride home. We had us a real fine meal, Pa and me.

It was just the two of us because Ma had died when I was born, and I guess Pa never had time to find another wife. I got to thinking that he must have still hurt inside from Ma's passing, because whenever I asked him about her, he just got real quiet and cleared his throat a lot. It didn't take long before I knew better than to ask about her.

Anyway, my birthday supper was the best meal we'd had since Christmas. I was real grateful to Pa for remembering my birthday like that, because he had said when I was eleven that birthdays were, as he put it, "for kids and old folks. In between, it's jes' another year gone by, so it's nothin' special. Y'shouldn't be sad if we don't do nothin' special for yer birthday no more." I guessed the real reason was that we didn't have much extra folding money and couldn't afford things we didn't need real bad. I should have told him it didn't matter to me much, because he gave me so much love all year long that I didn't need a birthday remembrance to make me feel good.

Thinking on that made me real curious, so after we finished our meat, potatoes and snap beans, I patted my full stomach and said, "Pa, I need to ask you something. I really appreciate the great birthday meal and all, but I gotta know why you did it. You told me when I was little that I shouldn't worry about remembering my birthday any more. So, why is it you're doing this for me, now?"

He got real quiet and looked out the window. He waited for such a long time, I figured either I'd really stepped in it, or he was trying to think of something to say. Finally, he cleared his throat. "Son," he started and cleared his throat again. Whenever he started by calling me "son" I knew I'd stepped in it for sure, but at least I wasn't in too much trouble. But when he cleared his throat the second time, I knew he was choked up about something.

Then he looked me straight in the eye and said in a real low voice, "Son, turnin' eighteen is a special time in yer life. And with y'graduatin' high school an' all, well, y'know I never got past grade three. I had to quit and he'p my pa with this place. I just want ya t' know your pa is real proud a' ya. I'm so proud I could jes' . . . bust right open!" He wiped his nose on his sleeve then said, "Now, I ain't got nothin' t' give fer a present . . . 'cept this place."

I'm sure my jaw was hanging open as he got out of his chair, walked to the side board and opened a drawer. He glanced at me before he reached in and pulled out a thick envelope. He carried it back to the table and sat before he handed it to me.

"This here paper makes it 'fficial."

You could have knocked me over with a feather! As it was, I almost fell out of my chair. I looked up at my pa and opened my mouth, but nothing came out. I shook my head as I pulled out the wad of papers and tried to focus on the words. All I could make out was something about "Deed" and my name. The rest was either a bunch of stuff I couldn't understand, or a blur.

I wiped my face with my hands, cleared my throat and managed to say, "Pa, don't do this."

He smiled at me, but he seemed sad. Still in his low voice, he said, "Don'choo tell yer pa what t' do. It's done and that's that. You own this place now. But if y'think yer runnin' me off, y'better think ag'in! I jes' wanted t' see to it y'got what's comin' to ya. No sense in waitin' 'til I couldn' enjoy th' surprise! But, I gotta tell ya I got a selfish strain. I always been 'fraid y'd run off, first chance y'got. Now, since th' place is yers, y'gotta stay."

Pa never did talk a lot, but when he did, he always said something I wanted to hear. This time I had to listen, because I couldn't talk. I was more choked up than I'd been since the time I found out my favorite rooster was supper!

When I finally found my voice I fell to my knees next to my pa and hugged his neck. I whispered in his ear, "Pa, you never had to worry about that. I never would'a left you."

Well, that did it. We held each other tight for the better part of a half hour bawling into each other's neck. Pa always loved me and I knew it, but I guess he never knew how much I loved him. I knew he had been running an unusual number of errands in town, because when he did he'd always carry Lucy and me home from school in the truck and trailer.

I remember thinking he must have worked extra hard those mornings before he went to town, because sometimes he seemed real tired, even after he rode in the truck to town and finished his errands. It was no wonder he'd been smiling at me a lot more, but seeming sadder. He had to have been planning to give me the place for some time, and he must have been thinking I'd run off and leave him. At least he could rest easier knowing I'd never leave, anyway. Those were my thoughts that night. It wasn't until the next weekend that I'd learn different.

The following week went by slow at first, with the last of my end-of-term classes and tests, and then there were some parties during school hours for the seniors the last two days. What with all the goings-on, I had forgotten completely about Pa putting the place in my name.

When Saturday morning finally came, Pa took it easy while I fed and watered the stock. There wasn't much to do, so I was done fast. The rest of the morning we just sat around and rested. After we ate our noonday meal early, we got cleaned up and went to town for the graduation ceremony. Pa was already busting his buttons, and I was proud that I was the cause of it.

I found Charlie and his family by the flagpole like we agreed, and I made Pa sit with Charlie's folks, his older brother and two younger sisters. Naturally, Charlie and I sat together during the ceremony. I was smiling so hard my face hurt, and every time I looked at Charlie he had "that look" in his eyes that made me feel so good. It suddenly occurred to me that since we were graduating, I might not see Charlie again. Just as suddenly, my guts felt like I'd just swallowed dirt. I finally asked Charlie, "What're you gonna do after this?"

"After this? You mean now we're graduating?"

"Yeah. You haven't said. You keep saying you don't know. I already told you I'm gonna stay on the farm with Pa. So what're you gonna do?"

"Jase (He always called me 'Jase.'), I still don't know. My pop said I should work with him and my brother down at our grocery store, but I don't know. You still haven't changed your mind about working with your Pa, huh?"

"No, I'm not going anywhere. Oh! I forgot to tell you, what with all the excitement and all! Pa deeded the place to me! It's mine, now!"

His eyes got wide and black, but he slowly smiled. I swear I thought he was gonna kiss me!

“Charlie? You all right?”

He shook his head a little, like he was coming out of a fog. “Uh, yeah. Yeah! I’m fine!” That was when he blushed. But he said, quick, “Hey, do you need some help with the place? Could you hire me on?”

I laughed at him, but then I got to thinking that he wasn’t nearly as slow as he used to be. The last time he’d come to work on the farm we were even racing down rows of corn, side by side, weeding with hoes as fast as we could, and he didn’t even cut any stalks. He even came close to beating me, and when I checked, he hadn’t missed any weeds. But the best part of hiring him was that I’d get to have him around all the time, and see him every day. I also got to thinking about him being in my bed every night and my Johnson started to swell. I guess you could say I was warming up to the idea.

I looked at him and smiled. There was that good feeling again, deep down inside. “I’ll ask Pa.”

He showed me his dimples again. “Call me tomorrow and let me know.”

“You got it.”

After all the boring awards and music were finally over and all the fancy speeches said, we all went to supper at the café. Charlie’s dad wouldn’t let Pa pay anything, so Pa argued with him. He tried to be quiet, but I heard Pa say softly, “Don’t think I cain’t pay my way!”

Charlie’s pop argued softly, too, but not softly enough. I could still hear him. He said, “No, William, it’s not like that! Kathleen and I are just grateful to you for making a man out of our Charlie. Working on your place has made him strong and confident. Besides, we think your Jason has been a good influence on him. Charlie’s grades even improved after they became friends.”

“Well, with his workin’ on the farm, I shoulda’ been payin’ him, but didn’t. I oughta at least pay for this.”

Charlie’s pop smiled and said, “I’ll tell you what. I’ll arm wrestle you for it!”

That got my pa to chuckling and then he laughed. I knew it was over, then, so I breathed a sigh of relief. I hated it when Pa argued with anyone. It just wasn’t like him.

Pa threw up his hands and said, “A’right! You win! You pay the consarned bill!”

I was proud of Pa for giving in, because I knew no one could beat him at arm wrestling. They both laughed and slapped each other on the back. I liked it when they were friendly like that.

When we were leaving, I went to shake Charlie’s hand, but he grabbed me and hugged me. I was so surprised, I hugged him back, pressing the side of my face against his. While I was hugging him, he pressed against me so hard, I felt him on my groin. It was like he was hugging me with his whole body!

That good feeling came rushing back, and I wasn't even looking at him. He felt even better than he looked!

Then Charlie whispered in my ear, "Don't forget to ask your Pa."

"Hmm?" I said. When he whispered in my ear it felt a bolt of lightning struck me, right there in the café, but it seemed to stop in my privates. It was like I lost all control. Mr. Johnson was definitely boning up, and it embarrassed me to blazes! It happened before when I was around Charlie, like it did during the ceremony, but that time it was harder to hide. "Uh, yeah," I whispered. "I won't forget."

I was still a little dizzy, my ears were ringing and I was having a tough time catching my breath when he let me go. I was at least twice as strong as Charlie, but I felt like a limp dish rag, weak at the knees, and my heart was pounding like I just ran to the far side of the farm. I thought to myself, "What's happening to me? Maybe I ate too much."

Fortunately, it was only a few steps to the door and it was dark outside, so we finished saying our goodbyes on the way to our cars. I should say they went to their car, and Pa and I went to our truck.

I flopped into the seat, wondering why I felt so weak and trying to hide my woody, but Pa leaned in and said, "Why don't you drive us home? Your Pa's tired."

"Sure!" I said without thinking, and I slipped over behind the wheel.

While I drove home, I was trying to figure out why I got such a strange feeling when I was around Charlie, when Pa asked, "Watcha thinkin' so hard about?"

I'm sure I blushed, but at least Pa couldn't see me for the dark. "Nothin' much," I said.

In spite of getting all embarrassed around Charlie, I still liked being around him, but I couldn't figure that out either. For some reason I didn't want to tell Pa that I'd been thinking about Charlie and why he made me feel so strange, so I decided to tell a little fib.

"Charlie asked if he could come work with us. I was thinking it would sure be nice to have him help out around the place."

I glanced over at Pa. I couldn't see his face very well in the light of a car coming the other way, but I thought sure I could see him smiling. He spoke just loud enough so I could hear him over the howl of the truck and the wind in the windows. "I think that'd be fine. Charlie's a good boy, and he's always been a good friend to ya. Keep 'im close, son. Friends like that don't come 'long ever' day. I got me a feelin' he'll be real special to ya some day. But for now, tell him we cain't afford to pay 'im much, but we'll give 'im room 'n board an' some spendin' money."

I wasn't completely sure what he was saying about Charlie, but thought I'd figure it out later. "How much can we pay him?"

“Well, yer gonna need t’ know how t’ work the money end a’ things, anyhow. I’ll show ya the books when we git home. We’ll figger it out, t’gether.”

I looked at my watch. “It’ll be late when we get home, Pa. Why don’t we do that tomorrow?”

“No. Let’s do it t’night and git it over with. It ain’t gonna take long.”

Pa sounded determined, and I knew better than to argue with him when he got like that. I could almost hear the set in his jaw, so I didn’t say anything more. A while later, I pulled the truck up to the house and we got out. Pa seemed even more tired, so I tried to reason with him again.

“Pa, you’re tired. Let’s look at the books tomorrow.”

I watched as he stumbled on a rock and leaned on the truck. He caught himself, clumsily, and looked at me. He was more tired than I’d ever seen him.

“No,” he said weakly, but with that determination of his. “I’ll show ya the books as soon as y’change outta them duds.”

I couldn’t understand his stubbornness. I had never seen him like that. This man, my pa, the strongest man I ever knew, was growing weaker and weaker, even while I watched. I put his arm over my shoulders and helped him into the house to the dining room.

A few minutes later, I’d changed, Pa had loosened his collar, and he had papers spread all over the dinner table. As he explained each piece of paper, I nodded or grunted to make him think I was listening and understanding, but I wasn’t doing any such thing. My full attention was on my pa. When he finished, he slumped onto the table. After a few minutes, sitting in silence, and me worried about his state, he said, “Son, I need help gittin’ to bed.”

I stood at his side and reached for him to help him up and he grabbed my upper arm.

“Damn!” he said.

“What’s wrong, Pa?”

He lifted up the sleeve of my shirt and looked at my arm. “I ain’t seen ya shirtless in years! When didja git like this?”

I looked down at my arm and said, “Whatta y’mean?”

“These big muscles! Lookit this!”

He grabbed my bicep and couldn’t get his hand half around it. He squeezed it hard, and it hurt, so I flexed it to push his fingers out of my flesh. I guess I had gotten pretty strong.

He pulled my sleeve all the way up and looked at my arm then said, “Take your shirt off. Let’s git a good look atcha.”

Hesitantly, I unbuttoned and pulled my shirt off. It felt strange taking my shirt off in front of my pa while he watched, but I’d do anything for him. I stood and let him look at me. After a short minute, he reached out and ran his hand down my stomach muscles. His touch was gentle, and it gave me an odd

feeling. I watched while his fingers bounced over my stomach like a stick on a picket fence. Then he said, "Turn 'round. Let me see your back."

When I'd had my back turned on him for a while, I looked over my shoulder at him and turned at the same time.

"Damn, Son," he whispered. "Yer built like that brick shithouse ever'one always talks about. And yer the handsomest young buck I ever laid eyes on." He sighed and swallowed hard, looking directly into my eyes. "Yer the best son a man could hope for," he whispered.

My eyes started to leak. "I love you, Pa," I strained to say.

He swallowed hard and said, "I love you, too, son. Now, he'p me t' bed."

I didn't know what was wrong with my pa, but I was really scared. I helped him stand, putting one of my arms around his back then scooped up his legs. I guess I surprised him, because he looked into my eyes and smiled. "Yer one strong cowboy," he whispered as I carried him to his room.

When I got him to his bed, I laid him on it, carefully. It wasn't easy, but I helped him out of his clothes, turned down the bed and got him under the sheet. When he was comfortable, I sat on the side of the bed next to him and said, "Pa? Tell me what's wrong."

With his eyes closed, he said, "What makes you think somethin's wrong?"

"Pa, something's wrong! You've never been this sick!" I put my hand to his head, feeling for a fever. He felt cool and a little clammy.

He opened his eyes to me and said, weakly, "I thought I'd last longer'n this. Doc said this'd happen, but I didn't wanna believe 'im. . . . I'm dyin', Son."

"What? How? WHY?" A lump came to my throat and tears to my eyes.

Slowly, he said, "I been gittin' weaker ever' day fer the last coupla' months. I went to see Doc, an' he said I got some disease I cain't pernounce. He said you won't catch it, but it's gonna take me."

"But, there's gotta be something Doc can do!"

"No, Son, there ain't. Doc said I'd get weaker 'n weaker, an' then it'd be like a candle goin' out. I'm sorry, Son, but my time's up. I'm real sorry. You'll be fine. Yer strong an' yer smart. The place is in yer name now, and I set up the accounts at the bank so all y'have to do is go an' sign a paper when y'get there. Y'know where I hide the money in the bookcase, so that's it. Just call th' Oaks Mortuary and they'll take care a' ever'thin'. I already paid 'em, so don't let 'em tell y'diff'rent. Oh, an' call Charlie in the mornin' Tell him to come out here right away. You two'll be good t'gether." He reached up and ran his hand through my hair. "Y'need a haircut. Yer gittin' shaggy."

Tears were streaming down my cheeks, and I still didn't understand what he was saying about Charlie. I assumed he just meant I'd need Charlie to help me take care of the farm. I screamed at him, "No, Pa! You can't die! I need you!"