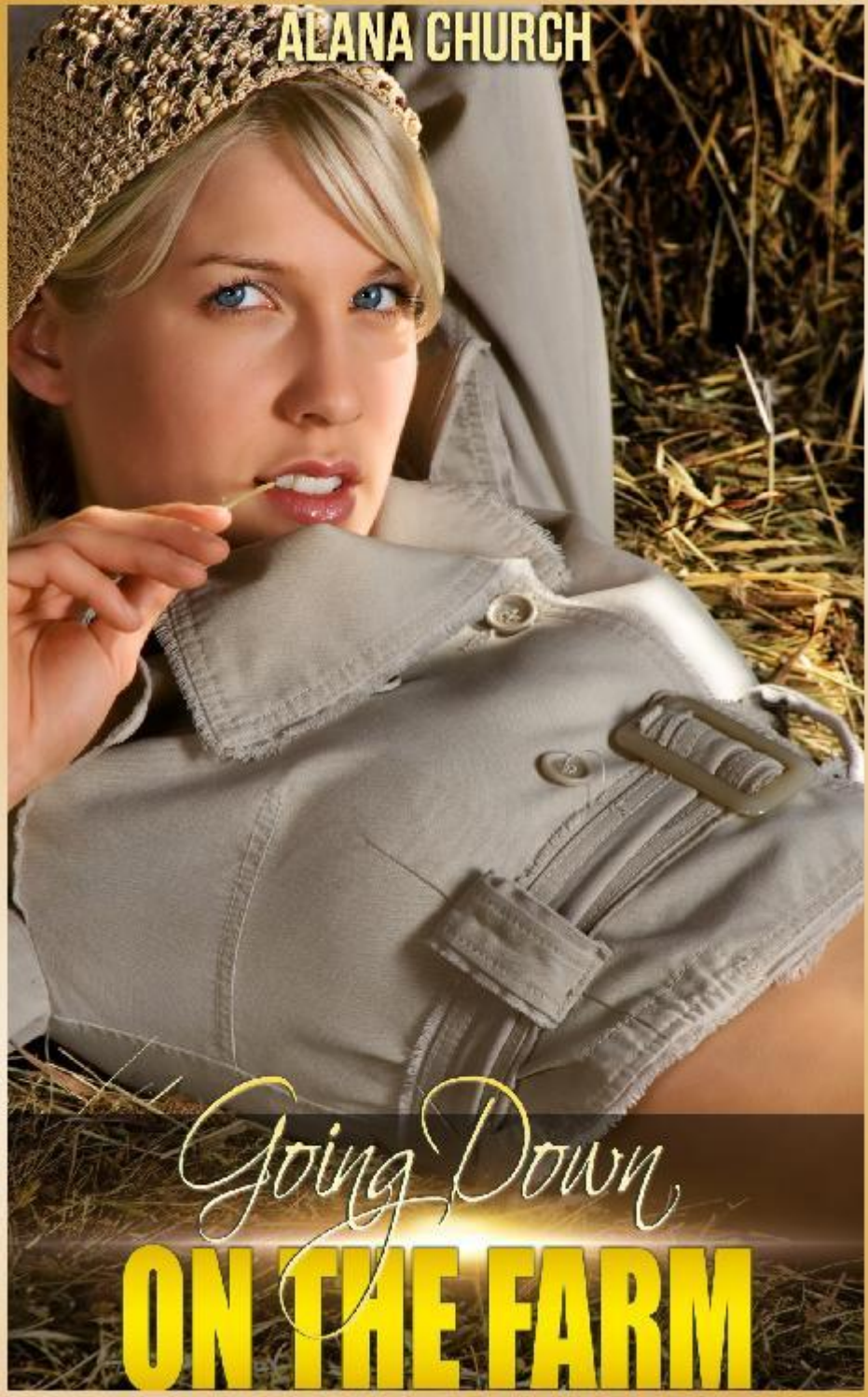




**ON THE FARM**

ALANA CHURCH



*Going Down*  
**ON THE FARM**

Going Down...On the Farm!

*Going Down*  
**ON THE FARM**

By Alana Church

Artwork by Moira Nelligar

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~~ All characters in this book are over 18. ~~

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## Chapter 1: Come Home to Roost

“I’ve always found it interesting,” his father observed, as Devin Harrow slouched at the kitchen table, “how with the right timing, almost anything is possible.”

Devin grunted. His head was pounding, and the aspirin he had swallowed before coming downstairs weren’t helping a damn bit.

“For instance,” his father went on in his slow, patient way, the way he did when he was well and truly angry. “A person could stay out late on Friday night, sleep until noon on Saturday, blow off a round of golf with his father and brother, miss breakfast, and still wake up in time for lunch, thereby taking care of two meals at once.” He saluted his son with a glass of iced tea. “I praise your economy, sir.” His words may have been jovial, but there was no humor at all in those cold brown eyes.

“Way to go, jackass,” his older brother growled at him, smacking him on the back of the head as he walked by. The motion made his stomach lurch, and he closed his eyes, fighting his queasy stomach until it settled down again.

“Bryan! Don’t wear your golf shoes inside!” his mother yelled from her spot at the kitchen counter. Tellingly, she ignored Devin entirely. “You know better! How old are you?”

“You tell me,” Bryan called back from the family room, dropping his clubs to the floor with a rattle. “You were there!”

“I thought we agreed how things were going to be this summer, Devin,” his father went on relentlessly. “In fact, I remember the conversation quite clearly, before you went back to school last August. You promised, Devin. You promised me and your mother.” He ticked off points on his fingers. “You were going to get a summer job this year. You were going to start

acting like an adult, rather than an overgrown juvenile delinquent. You weren't going to sit around on your ass for three months like you did when you were in high school. And after your freshman year of college.

"But here we are. You're halfway to getting your degree. Spring semester ended a week and a half ago. And the only time you've left the house is to go out with your high-school buddies, drink beer until you can barely walk, and then come home so wasted the entire house can hear you stumbling around and barfing into the downstairs toilet."

"Come on, Dad!" Foolishly, he decided to fight back. "It was one time! It's not like I'm going out every night!"

His father's eyes were hard. "Where's the car?"

"Over at Barry's place," he muttered. "I knew I shouldn't drive."

"Well. At least you're not a complete idiot." Though, judging from Jerry Harrow's expression, the jury was still out on that score.

His mother came over and thumped a plate and glass of milk in front of him. A sandwich, sliced fruit, and potato chips stared back at him. Slowly, feeling vaguely guilty, he picked up the sandwich and began to eat. It was oddly tasteless, good ham and cheese and mustard combining to taste like wood pulp in his mouth.

"And I suppose that you haven't bothered to fill out any job applications? Even though you said last week that you were working on it?"

"No," he mumbled.

"Ah." The tall, lean man, his dark hair cut close to his head, leaned back in his chair. "Which brings me to the conversation I had with Joy last night."

He frowned. What did his father's high-school sweetheart have to do with any of this?

"She's had a hard time, Joy has, since her husband ran off. Times are rough for farmers. Of course, times are never actually good for farmers," he said, with the bitter humor of a man who had been born and raised on a

South Dakota wheat farm. “Marnie is helping out all she can, now that she’s out of high school, but that’s a lot of work for just two people.”

“What about...that one guy? Coburn? He’s been helping out at their place for years.”

“He’s seventy-two, Devin. And he slipped on some ice back in February and broke his leg. He’s retiring, and good for him.”

“Maybe she should hire someone else,” he suggested.

His father took a long, slow sip of tea and looked at him. Just looked. A few feet away, Bryan snickered.

Eventually, the implication sank into his foggy, hungover brain and his mouth fell open. “Me? Be serious, Dad. I don’t know the first thing about farming. Hell, I’m a finance major!”

“Right now, you’re a young man who will have a hard time graduating if you don’t have the money for tuition,” his father snapped. “Which comes from me and your mother. I have *had* it, Devin. Every year since you were sixteen I’ve tried to get you to see what life will be like once you were out of school. And every year you blow it off. Do you think you can sit around for three months a year playing computer games and be ready for a nine-to-five job once you graduate? You don’t even know what work is.”

“So what are you going to do? Kick me out?”

“Shut *up*, Devin,” Bryan muttered from across the room. “Don’t give him any ideas.”

“No. I’m not kicking you out. I’m kicking you up. Here’s the deal. You work at the farm for Joy for the summer. That’s ten weeks between now and when school starts back up, give or take a few days. You’ll learn what hard work really is, and how lucky you have it here. If I get good reports about you from her, you can come back home a week or so before school starts and no harm done. If I get bad reports....” He trailed off and shook his head. “You know what? I’m not too worried about that. You’ll work for Joy. I guarantee that.”

“For free?” he demanded, his hangover forgotten.

“Of course not,” the older man snapped, his own temper rising. “You’ll get paid a decent wage, same as any other hired hand. Add in the cost of feeding you and putting you up at their house for a couple of months, and you’ll be doing a damn sight better than most of them. They don’t get bed and three meals a day for free like you will. And it’s more than you’d make at a fast food place or running a cash register somewhere. You’ll go back to school with money you’ve earned with your own two hands in your pocket, and you won’t have to be calling up your mother two or three times a month, asking for some money to tide you over.” He shook his head disgustedly. “I swear, Devin. For a finance major you have one hell of a hard time sticking to a budget. Is your allowance really that small, that you run out of cash halfway through every month?”

He stood up, signaling that the conversation was over. “It’s three hours from here to Mitchell. If you want to get there before dark, you better start packing.”

Thirty minutes later, his brother sauntered into his room.

“Mom and Dad send you up here to check up on me?” he sniped, shoving a drawer shut with a bang. Clothes lay in heaps on his bed. On the floor were a pair of suitcases, their open flaps gaping like hungry mouths. “Or did Mom get Dad to change his mind?”

“Change his mind?” Bryan leaned against the doorframe, his arms crossed over his chest. “This was Mom’s idea, mostly, from what I’ve heard. Dev, she is *pissed* at you. Big-time pissed. I can’t remember ever seeing her so mad. Not even that time when you set the rug on fire.”

“I was *seven*,” he snarled. He threw an armful of boxers into a suitcase. “And you were supposed to be watching me.”

“And you could have avoided all of this if you had acted like an adult anytime during the last three summers,” Bryan retorted. “Fuck, Dev! The

summer I graduated high school I was already working for Dad full-time! I'm not saying you should have blown off college and going to ISU. You were always the smart one. But every year between May and August it takes a crowbar to pry you off your dead ass. I've visited you in Ames. You can't tell me that college is so exhausting it takes you three months to recover.

"All you had to do was work thirty or thirty-five hours a week as a stockboy in the supermarket or flipping burgers or running a lawnmower for the public works department, and you would have been fine. But you decided you could get away with jerking them around again."

"So I get exiled to freaking Mitchell, South Dakota?"

Bryan stared at him steadily. "If what Dad told me on the golf course today was true, it was either that or finding yourself an apartment on about twenty-four hours' notice. Hearing you come home drunk last night was the last straw. That and lying about how this year you were totally going to get a job and then giving the entire idea the finger. Mom is *mad* at you, Devin. Really mad. You know how close she is to Joy. And how angry she was when Joe left her high and dry to take care of the farm by herself. She looks at you right now, and she sees the same thing. A smart, good-looking guy who thinks he can skate by on nothing but his charm his entire life."

Stung, he retorted hotly. "I'm nothing like him!"

"Yeah? Then prove it," Bryan shot back. "Once, just once, act like the entire world doesn't revolve around you. I hate to break it to you, bro, but you're kind of turning into an asshole."

"Fuck." Even to himself, his voice sounded unpleasantly whiny. "Joy's place doesn't even have DSL. Or a satellite dish."

Bryan turned and left, but his voice floated back mockingly. "Then I guess you better bring a lot of books."

"But don't worry. You'll be too tired to read anyway."

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Which was why he was driving down US 20 on a blistering late May day three hours later, the westering sun hammering into his still-aching head. The trunk of his old Buick held two suitcases full of clothes, a bag of toiletries, and his Kindle, onto which he had downloaded as many books as possible before he had been forced to leave the luxury of a reliable internet connection behind. He hoped to God he hadn't forgotten anything important, because he wasn't sure if he could count on his folks to send anything to Mitchell if he had. His family hadn't exactly seemed overcome by grief when he pulled out of the driveway and pointed the nose of the car west.

*I can't believe it.* He glanced in the rear-view mirror, as if his mother might show up behind him, chasing him down to explain how it had all been an elaborate practical joke. *I can't **fucking** believe it. They fucking kicked me out. They can call it what they want, but I've been exiled to fucking Mitchell until August. Abandoned. Marooned. Just because I have better things to do than get burned at a fry-vat at the Arby's or be Dad's gofer like Bryan is. Christ. What a fucking life. He's twenty-four and all he'll ever be is the 'son' in "Harrow and Son, Independent Electricians – A Fort Dodge Tradition since 1993."*

*Uh-huh.* An unpleasant, niggling thought formed at the back of his mind. *And what does it say about you, Devin, that Mom and Dad would send you an entire state away just to be rid of you? Doesn't say much for your social skills, does it? And did you see Bryan's face today? He looked at you the way you'd look at a dog-turd you had to scrape off the bottom of your shoe.*

*Shit.* He slouched in his seat, one elbow cocked out the window, and let the breeze wash over him, clearing his head. *This is one hell of a way to give me a wake-up call.*

He gassed up in Sioux City and grabbed a burrito at a Chipotle, which drained most of the remaining cash out of his wallet. As he swung the car

north onto Interstate 29, the reality of his situation began to sink in. If he managed to alienate Joy as thoroughly as he had his parents, he might not have enough cash to *get* home. For the last two years, he had rather embarrassingly depended on the monthly allowance his parents had set when he left for college. His checking account, he had discovered to his chagrin, contained a grand total of seventeen dollars and ninety-three cents. And what he had on him would barely cover the cost of a movie ticket, let alone fill up the gas-guzzling Regal.

North on twenty-nine for an hour, then he swung west again on Interstate 90, which crossed the United States from Boston to Seattle, including the entirety of South Dakota. He got off at Mitchell, curled his lip at the small town, and took a small two-lane highway south. One last jog to the west, and he hit the gravel road which led to the Harrow place. Grain stalks, not much more than knee-high this early in the year, waved in the constant breeze as he drove through the narrow valley between the fields.

After about a half-mile, the fields gave way to a large open dooryard, neatly covered in crushed white gravel. He pulled up to the fence, parked near Joy's old Ford farm truck and a Pontiac sedan of slightly newer vintage, and got out, stretching his back.

The farm was almost eerily quiet, the only sound the breeze whistling around the eaves of the farmhouse. It was brick, two stories high, solidly built and planted foursquare, as if prepared to take anything the Midwest could dish out with a sneer. Tornadoes, drought, grasshoppers, floods, blizzards, a world-wide depression – this structure had seen it all and outlasted it all, nurturing seven generations of Harrows within its walls.

*And Joy's the last one. If she gets remarried it won't be the Weatherford farm anymore. People will call it the Johnson farm, or whatever. Still can't believe Joy went to the time and trouble of changing her name from Lipzig back to Weatherford when she got divorced. He snickered. Or maybe I can. Who wants a last name that sounds like a sneeze, anyway?*

A sudden bellow caught his ear, and he spun, facing the red-painted barn, which stood about a hundred yards away. A voice, raised in irritated affection, answered it, and he relaxed. Just a cow, he guessed, anxious for the evening feed. The farm, as he understood from his father, had undergone many changes over the years. Back in the nineties there had been a small dairy operation. But now any cattle still on the property were raised for meat, not milk.

The door to the barn opened, and a tall, flaxen-haired figure emerged. Immediately, she raised her arm in greeting, and he returned it, leaning against the back bumper of the Regal as she approached.

“So, Devin,” Joy said, coming to a halt a few yards away. She snorted. “Seems like you managed to get your momma good and pissed at you.”

He rubbed the back of his neck, abashed. “Yeah. People have been kind of pointing that out to me. Repeatedly.”

“You know, if you had managed to drag your ass out of bed and go out and play cow-pasture pool with your dad and Bryan this morning, you might have managed to give her a chance to get over her mad. But you couldn’t even do that.” She put her hands on her hips, frowning. “Shit, Dev. Don’t you know how important family is to her? She never had any of her own that was worth a damn. A brother in prison for distributing meth, and her parents were both dead before she married your father. She doesn’t want to see you wasting your life.”

He raised his hands in surrender. “All right. I’m an idiot. Can we both agree on that?” He opened the trunk of the Buick and got out his suitcases. “Where’s Marnie?”

“Out taking a look at the alfalfa in the north fields,” Joy replied. “Seeing if it’s going to be any good when haying time comes around.” She made no move to help him with his things. “You can put those up in one of the spare bedrooms on the second floor. One of the things this place has is plenty of room.”

Determined to make a good first impression, he slung his backpack over one shoulder, closed the trunk, and picked up the suitcases. “Thanks.” He followed her as she led him up the cracked sidewalk to the back porch. The wood, he noticed, was beginning to weather in places, sagging in a disturbing fashion as he walked to the back door.

He was just about to go inside when an asthmatic rattle sounded from the lane. He turned, his eyes widening in surprise as a bottle-green tractor hove into view. A slim young woman, her sun-lightened hair tucked under a ballcap, sat in the high, narrow seat above the wheels.

“Holy crap,” he said, as she waved at them and turned towards the barn. “Is that the old Oliver?”

“Yep.” Joy’s voice was proud. “She got it running a couple months ago. Took her a year to restore it. Had to send away special for the paint, since no one makes that color anymore. She’s planning on showing it off in the Independence Day parade in town. A lot of the old farmers do that. Haul their antiques out of the barn and drive them down Main Street.”

He whistled. “How old is it?”

Joy leaned against a porch column, her eyes distant. “Let me think. My granddaddy bought it new back in nineteen fifty-four, if I remember right. He had to take out a mortgage to afford it, which ticked off his father something fierce. But since Grandpa Mark was running the place then, Great-Grandpa Clinton didn’t get a vote. He needed it to expand how much land we could put into production, once we bought that parcel down by the creek from the Gustaffsons.”

He smiled at the ‘we,’ as if Joy had been helping run the farm thirty years before she was born. “And Marnie did it all herself?”

“Mostly. I helped with some of the heavy stuff, like getting the new tires on it. Good God, you should have seen the old ones. That thing had been sitting in the back of the barn for so long they weren’t even rubber anymore.”

The young woman emerged from the barn, sliding the door closed with a bang. As she walked across the dooryard, eating up ground with her long, loose-limbed stride, Devin admired her athletic figure. “If she’s that good with machinery, I’m surprised she didn’t go to a vo-tech school. I bet there’s lots of places that would love to hire a woman with her kind of know-how.”

“She could. But she won’t. She wants to stay here and help run the farm.”

“Hi, Devin.” Marnie climbed the stairs and gave him a brief, unenthusiastic hug. “Bryan says you’ve been kind of acting like a shithead lately.”

“What?”

“He actually didn’t say that, Dev.” Joy’s eyes sparkled.

“Oh, right.” Marnie’s lip curled. “The word he actually used was ‘dipshit.’ Sorry.”

“Christ! Does *everyone* in the family think I’m a complete asshole?”

“Oh, no,” Joy said. “Not at all. If I thought you were a complete asshole, Devin, I wouldn’t have let your dad talk me into letting you work here for the summer. I would have told him to jam it sideways.”

“Right,” Marnie added. “Uncle Jerry just thinks you’re a *partial* asshole. Though from what I hear, the asshole portion has been growing lately.” The look he got from her wasn’t in the least bit friendly. “Our job is to reverse that. Oh, look at his expression, Joy! Can you believe it? He’s actually surprised!”

He opened his mouth to snap off a sharp reply, then thought better of it. Marnie gave as good as she got, and fought dirty, besides. A runaway who Joy had taken in three years ago, when she found her sleeping in the hayloft, the young woman was all sharp edges and prickly corners. Rather than reporting her to the authorities, Joy had hired her on, and then convinced her into going to the high school in Mitchell to finish her

education, using her connections so that not too many uncomfortable questions were asked. When she was in a good mood, she treated Devin like a particularly dim-witted animal, rejecting his clumsy overtures with scarcely-hidden disdain. When she wasn't, she told him where to go and how to get there, using terms that would make a sailor blush.

She didn't look like she was in a good mood now.

Face burning, he turned and opened the screen door, hauling his luggage into the house. "I'm going to put away my things," he shot over his shoulder, trying to hold onto some shred of dignity. "I'll be down in a little while."

A mutter from behind. "I'll alert the media."

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As the door banged shut, the two women faced each other. "God, Joy. What are we going to do? What if he finds out...finds out about us?"

"Shhhh. Don't worry. I've seen a hundred boys like Devin. And so have you. It doesn't matter if they're in high school, college, or are grown-ass men." She snorted, thinking of her deadbeat husband, who had run off with a waitress from the diner three years ago. "He's a self-absorbed jerk right now. For years people have been telling him how smart he is, how special. First person in the family to go to college and all that." A hand traced the line of her back, making her shiver. "He won't notice a thing unless we make it obvious."

"Ten weeks," Marnie moaned, burying her face in her shoulder. "Ten weeks with that...that *dumbass* hanging around, ruining everything."

Her lover's lips curled in a fond smile. "Ten weeks? That's nothing. A blink. I put up with Joe for seventeen years, Marnie. I can handle a couple of months."

“And don’t take it out on Devin. He’s not hopeless. Jerry and Celeste are good people. No child of theirs could be a complete waste.

“We just have to...readjust his thinking.”

## Chapter 2: A Pig in a Poke

*“If I thought you were a complete asshole, Devin, I wouldn’t have allowed your dad to talk me into letting you work here for the summer.”*

The words echoed through Devin’s head as he put his clothes away in the bureau and hung them up in the closet. The jeans and the few dress shirts he had brought seemed very lonely, as if they knew as well as he did that he was not welcome here.

*Allowed? Let? Joy is acting like she’s doing me a favor.*

*Well, an unwelcome thought slithered into his mind, like a snake across a doorsill. Maybe she is. You know, Devin, right now the verdict seems to be pretty damn close to unanimous. Mom’s pissed. Dad is furious. Bryan is disgusted. And Joy and Marnie aren’t exactly meeting your appearance with paeans of rapture, either. So what is it? Are all five of them wrong? Or you?*

*Me, maybe.* He hauled up the drop-sash window, letting air flow through to drive the musty smell out of the room. He had stayed in it several times over the years, when he and his family would come to the farm for a long weekend or for Thanksgiving or Christmas. Joy and his father might have broken up more than twenty years ago, but they were still closer than any two people who weren’t married that he had ever seen, and his mother wasn’t jealous about the relationship in the least. He and Bryan had grown up thinking of the farm as a second home.

The room was simple but clean, the walls painted a soothing pale yellow, a couple of brightly-braided rugs on the gleaming hardwood floor, and a bed with a thick comforter to ward off the prairie chill at night. He took out his phone and plugged it in, grimacing as read the home screen. One bar, which was no worse than he had expected. Cell service was spotty at best

this far out into the country. Joy, he remembered vaguely, had a dial-up connection on her land-line, but he would need to beg the use of her computer to take advantage of it.

*And what are you going to use it for, anyway? Streaming a movie?* He snorted. *It would take a whole day to watch one.*

“Devin!” Marnie’s voice floated up from downstairs. “Dinner!”

“Coming!” he shouted back. Squaring his shoulders, a prisoner ready to meet his fate, he left the room.

Dinner was quiet, with conversation sparse and mostly contained to subjects that flew right over his head. The alfalfa, he managed to surmise, looked no worse than it should, the news of which Joy accepted with a satisfied nod and a comment about how they should think about harvesting it for hay in a few weeks. There was talk about the need for rain for the wheat, and how the barley and rye were coming along.

“I heard talk in town,” Marnie said, during a lull. “Bert Stickney is selling out. It was either that or declare bankruptcy. There’s going to be an auction of his equipment and machinery next month.”

Joy grimaced. “And another family farm goes down.”

He blinked. “Is it really that bad?”

Joy nodded grimly, her hair, done up in a neat braid down her back, bobbing in time. “The tariffs the government put on overseas imports hurt us bad. The other countries just did the same thing right back to us, only on agricultural products. One of our best markets went right into the shitter. Why should China buy American soybeans when they can get them cheaper from Brazil or Argentina? So then,” her voice dripped acid, “the feds started to give us these subsidies to make up the difference. Like we were on welfare or something. But amazingly enough, the biggest checks go to the big consolidated places, not the family farmers who actually need it.

“Bert bet that things would cool down before too long and the tariffs would go away. So he put a good chunk of his acreage into soybeans last year. Damn fool. It’s all sitting there at the grain elevator, looking for a buyer. And his land is going to go to another conglomeration, or anyone with the cash to buy it.”

“What did you guys do this year?” he asked quietly. “Not soybeans, I guess?”

Marnie shook her head. “Not one damn acre. It was all grains for us this planting season, outside of what we need for feed for the livestock. Wheat, barley, and rye. No tariffs on those yet, thank Christ. And people will always buy grain. Everyone needs flour. We’ve kept our head above water. Maybe even our shoulders. You know what the definition of a successful farmer is, don’t you, Dev?”

He had heard the old joke from his father a dozen times. “One who can look his banker in the eye.”

“Yeah. You’re a finance major, right? Imagine getting a couple big paychecks in September and October and having to make that last the entire year. That’s what we do. But we still have to pay for food and equipment and gas and feed and everything else.” She set her hands on the table and rubbed her eyes. “Did we hear anything from the wind people, Joy?”

The older woman shook her head. “Wind people?” Devin repeated, feeling like an idiot.

“Wind turbines. The way the wind blows in the part of the country, people are putting them in like crazy, selling the power to utility companies. We had a woman out here a few weeks ago, looking things over. I’m interested. We lease them the land, they pay us a fee. Win-win. The best part is that it doesn’t use up much of a footprint, so you don’t lose land you’d rather put under the plow. The alfalfa fields where we grow hay right now would be perfect.”

“Huh.” He finished his meal in silence. Outside, the sun had long since set. “So,” he said, broaching a subject he knew would be awkward. “How does this all...work? Me working for you, I mean.”

“You do what I tell you to do,” Joy said bluntly. She slanted a look at Marnie, who was watching the conversation with interest. “What we both tell you to do, actually.”

“No...I mean...what about hours? Pay? That sort of thing.”

“Town boy,” Marnie muttered into her plate. “Thinks a farm runs like a flipping feed store.”

“Be nice,” Joy murmured. To Devin, she said, “But she’s right. We can’t take a day off if we have a sick cow, Dev. Or if we need to put in a crop, or harvest one. And neither will you. Starting tomorrow morning, you’re going to be on the clock twenty-four by seven.

“Money?” She shrugged. “We don’t intend to make you a slave. You’ll start out tomorrow, at the same rate that Coburn got. For the last few days of May you’ll be prorated. June and July, you’ll get paid for the full month. August will be the same as May.”

“If you last that long,” Marnie added below her breath.

“And how much is the rate?” he asked doggedly.

Joy sighed. “Fifteen hundred a month. I wish we could afford more, but...”

“No, no,” he said hastily. “That’s fine!” The last thing he wanted was for Joy and Marnie to think he was dickering. “I wouldn’t be making that much with a part-time job over the summer.”

“Good. Because this isn’t part-time, Dev.

“It’s full-time.”

He helped with the dishes and then went upstairs to his room, finding a book on his kindle to read. His eyes were beginning to feel heavy when there was a tap at the door. “Come in.”

Joy slipped in. “All settled?” she asked, eyeing the tidy room with surprised approval.

He yawned. “Yeah.” He took a deep breath and dove in. “Is it just me, or is Marnie kind of...hostile...where I am concerned?”

“It’s not just you.”

He blinked. “Oh.”

“But I’m not going to get involved. If you want to know why, you should ask her yourself. I’m too old to get involved in these teenage dramas anymore.”

“I’m not a kid. And you’re not old.”

A brief smile. “Thanks. Though when your husband leaves you for a teenager, you start to wonder.”

He sat up straight, his back braced against the headboard of the bed. “Joe was an idiot. I think we’re all pretty much agreed on that. That’s not your fault.”

“It might not be my fault, but it still means my husband saw me getting old and decided to trade me in. Like a guy getting a better truck. Only one with bigger tits.”

“Dad says you were Homecoming Queen in high school. I can’t believe this girl, whoever she was, looks better than you do.”

“Your father,” she said, a blush darkening her tanned skin, “talks way too much. Remind me to tell you about the time he locked himself in an outhouse.”

“But the *real* reason I’m here is to remind you that you should hit the sack early. Morning comes early. Especially if you’re used to staying up late.”

“All right.” He turned off the reader and put it on the nightstand. “Good night, Joy.”

“Good night, Devin.”

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There was a voice calling his name and the room was freezing. “What?”

“I said, get *up*, Devin.”

“Go away. It’s still dark out.” He peeked over the edge of his comforter. “Come back later,” he added blearily.

“God damn it,” Marnie muttered. “I fucking *knew* this was going to happen.” He heard her draw a breath. “Joy says if you don’t work you don’t get breakfast.”

That seemed like a fair trade to him. “Fine.” He rolled over and pulled the blankets higher. He closed his eyes. Now, he thought, as Marnie’s angry footsteps faded down the hall, if he could just get someone to turn off the light, he could get some more sleep. Not much. Five or six more hours should do it...

Thirty seconds later the blankets were ripped off and he got a drizzle of freezing-cold water along his spine.

“Fuck!” Somehow he went from a prone position to standing in less than a second. His clammy t-shirt stuck to his skin, as did his boxers. Water dripped down his back and puddled around his feet. “What the hell, Marnie? I could have been naked!”

The look she returned him was completely unimpressed. “Doesn’t look like I’d be missing much if you were.” She shot a glance at his midsection. “Jesus. What are you living on, Dev? Pizza, dorm food, and cheap beer?”

She shook her head as he began to splutter a protest. “Never mind. If you want to pack on a gut, it’s your business, not mine. Get dressed.” She leaned against the doorframe, arms folded, seemingly willing to wait and watch.

He shot a disbelieving look out the window, where the sky was still dark. “Are you kidding?”

“We need to let the cows out. We need to feed the pigs. We need to muck out the cow barn.” Her voice grew steely. “*Now, Devin.*”

“All right, all right.” He turned his back and put on clean boxers, jeans, a t-shirt, socks, and shoes. The clothes did little to dampen the bite of the morning’s raw chill. “Don’t you have heat in this place?”

“Don’t you have the sense to not leave your window open all night?” she shot back as she led him down the stairs. “Gas for the furnace costs money. Here.” She tossed him a worn denim jacket from the coat-rack near the door. “Put that on.”

Her long stride ate up the ground, and Devin found himself half-running just to keep up with her as they crossed the dooryard. A fat moon hung overhead, but in the east, the sky was beginning to lighten from black to a deep, cobalt blue. A few pale stars lingered in the west, and he stared at the unfamiliar early-morning constellations.

*Christ. Imagine doing this in February, when it’s twenty below.* He shivered sympathetically. “Don’t I even get a cup of coffee?”

“You could have. But I let you sleep in. If you want one tomorrow, wake up earlier.”

As soon as Marnie slid the barn door open a series of bawling bellows sounded. “Oh, shut up!” Marnie shouted as she turned on the lights. “You’ll get out as soon as I can let you, you ignorant heifers! Here,” she added, tossing Devin a wooden staff, about five feet long and as big around as a broom handle. “Once their stalls are open, give them a poke in the ass and nudge them towards the door if they don’t move quick enough for you. Once they’re outside, they can find the pasture on their own. Even cows are smart enough to do that.”

She opened up the doors on the opposite side of the barn and trotted back to the stalls. She unhooked the latch at the end of the row and stepped aside. The cow, dull black with white legs, stepped out, then stopped.

Marnie stared at him. “Well? Are you going to do something? Or just look at it all day? It’s not going to turn into hamburger on its own, Dev.”

Hesitantly, he reached out with the staff and gave the cow a nudge on its side. It stared back at him, its eyes full of bovine indifference, and didn’t budge an inch.

“I said poke, not tickle.”

He tried again with the same result. Marnie blew out an impatient breath. “Damn it, Dev, I don’t have time for this. Show it who’s boss.”

“I don’t want to hurt it.”

“The cow weighs half a freaking ton. Make it move.” She stepped forward, swinging the end of her staff, and caught the cow a sharp smack across the flank. The sound echoed through the barn. Giving Marnie a reproachful look, the cow ambled towards the exit.

Marnie raised her brows at him. “Think you can handle it?”

His lips tightened. “Open the next stall.” When the metal door swung open, he waited, and when the cow didn’t seem to be in much of a hurry, prodded it sharply in the rear with the butt-end of the staff. It glanced at him, cocked its tail, deposited a greenish-brown pile of shit on the floor, spattering his shoes, and walked away.

“Gross! Shit!”

Marnie almost smiled. “Good call, Devin. Yeah, that’s shit.” Ignoring his disgusted look, she opened a third stall.

“Fucking cows,” he muttered, slapping it in the side. That had a much better result, and soon another cow was on its way out the door. He felt a faint surge of satisfaction, which almost cancelled out the fact that he would much rather still be in bed.

Eventually, the cow stalls were empty. “Good,” Marnie said. “That only took you twice as long as it should have. Tomorrow you can do it yourself. Now the pigs.”

“The what? We don’t let them out to graze, do we?”

“No, you doofus.” Marnie face was annoyed. But had she looked happy since he arrived? “They stay inside. So we feed them. Twice a day. Once now and then again in the afternoon.”

He followed her into another section of the stone-floored barn, his nose wrinkling at the pungent reek. While the cow barn had smelled bad, this took things into brand new territory. “Gah!”

“Yeah. They stink.”

He covered his nose with a flap of the jacket. “Why’s it so bad?”

“Because pigs stink. End of story.” She flipped on the lights and dozens of beady little eyes swiveled their way. “Here’s the feed.” She pointed at a pallet, loaded high with bags. “Twenty pigs. Five troughs. These are eight-week pigs, barely two months old. They need about a pound, pound and a half of feed per day. Though that’ll go up as they get bigger. In a month they’ll need two pounds each.” She leaned against the post. “Do the math, college boy. How much per trough with two feedings a day?”

“How much are in the bags?”

“Twenty-five pounds of feed each.” She stuck her hands in her pockets. “Not that it matters. The numbers work out the same.”

He blinked, trying to force his mind to concentrate. He had never been a morning person. If he’d just had a chance to wake up, maybe get some caffeine into his bloodstream...

*Twenty pigs at a pound and a half per day equals thirty pounds per day. Two feedings means fifteen pounds a feeding. Divided by five means-*

“Three pounds?”

Her eyebrows rose briefly. “Impressive. You can do math.” She waved a hand. “Go on, then.”

“How am I supposed to weigh it?”

She unhooked a plastic measuring cup from a nail on the wall and tossed it to him. “Fill it to the line. That’s a pound.”

He picked up a bag of feed. It was so heavy it staggered him when he put it on his shoulder, but with Marnie watching he didn't have the guts to complain. He sliced it open with a pocket knife she wordlessly handed him, and started measuring out the feed. The pellets rattled at the bottom of the galvanized metal trough, and at the sound, the pigs clustered around, heads dipping as they fed.

"When you're done there, come back over to the cow side," Marnie said. "You need to learn how to muck out a stall."

"Enjoy it while it lasts, boys," Devin said to the pigs, who watched him avidly as he dumped another container of feed into the trough.

"You're all going to wind up as bacon anyway."

"Here," Marnie said as he came back to the cow side of the barn. She tossed him a pitchfork, which he caught awkwardly in one hand. "Ever used one of these?"

"No."

"You'll learn." With a practiced motion, she slid the tines under the thin layer of straw that covered the floor of the stall, lifted it, and dumped it into a waiting wheelbarrow. "We do this every few days during the winter. The straw is to protect the cows' feet when they're standing, and their bodies when they're laying down. Better than a chilly stone floor.

"But they piss on it and they shit on it. So after a few days it's worse than nothing at all. It's a damn magnet for flies and vermin and it's awful for their hooves.

"So, college boy, we haul it out, we dump it on the manure pile out back, we hose down the stalls, and then we lay down new bedding." She forked up another batch. Devin tried to keep his eyes away from the sway of her hips and rear in her tight blue jeans. "Or, rather, you do," she added with an evil smile. "You try it."

The pitchfork felt clumsy in his hands, and his first effort got him a pitiful handful when compared to Marnie's large clump. He tipped it into the wheelbarrow. Barely half went in. The rest slid down the sides and back to the floor. He flushed, eying it with a malevolent glare, wondering if it would be easier to pick it all up by hand.

She shrugged. "You'll learn. You get to do all of this," she gestured at the stalls, "and then we'll find something else for you to do. Come on. I'll show you the manure pile and where we keep the straw, and then you can get back at it. Breakfast is at seven. Don't be late."

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Two hours later he kicked off his stinking shoes and walked into the farmhouse, greeted by the wonderful smell of cooking food and the sound of frying bacon.

"Ah. Dev." Joy was at the stove, apparently preparing breakfast for a small army. "Help Marnie set the table, would you?"

"Sure." His stomach was growling and the smell of the food was almost enough to make him drool. Marnie was already putting out plates, so he fished silverware out of a drawer and pulled milk and juice out of the refrigerator.

"Scrambled eggs okay with you?" Joy asked.

"Anything," he said, "as long as it's hot and it doesn't smell like pig crap."

Joy laughed. "They are fragrant, aren't they? If they weren't so darn tasty," she winked, "I'd stop raising them altogether."

His eyes met Marnie's. "I'd stop raising them," they intoned in unison, then broke into snorts of laughter. For just a second, they were friends again, watching silly movies together.

“Jerks.” Joy set a plate of sausage on the table, and another of bacon. Toast was already stacked on a saucer in an untidy heap, with butter and preserves close by. “Give me your plate, Marnie.” She forked eggs out, then repeated the process with Devin. “You two in the same house together. God knows why I agreed to that.”

“Because of my good looks and charm, and the labor of my strong young arms,” he replied, biting into a slice of bacon.

“Yes.” Joy’s voice was bone-dry. “I’m sure that was it.”

Devin ignored her. Normally for breakfast he had a coffee from the campus Starbucks and a muffin. But the taste of the bacon and eggs exploded in his mouth and he found himself eating hungrily, not stopping until he was mopping the last traces of sausage grease off his plate with a crust of toast.

“Are you done with the stalls, Dev?” Marnie put her chin in her palm and looked at him inquiringly.

He shook his head. “Not even close.” He frowned. “Why are the cows indoors, anyway? It’s May. Shouldn’t they be out to pasture doing cow things, like eating and crapping?”

Marnie drew in a sharp breath, but Joy held up a hand. “It’s a good question. And yes.” She addressed him. “We send the cows out. Once we’re sure we’re not going to have a late snowstorm. It’s only May. Five years ago we got six inches of snow right before Memorial Day and lost two cows to pneumonia because my lazy jackass of a husband got tired of mucking out the stalls and sent them out to pasture early. We wait until June, now.”

“That makes sense, I guess. What about the pigs?”

“What about them?” Marnie’s forehead creased in puzzlement.

“Well, don’t we need to do the same thing? Mucking out?”

“Oh, no.” She shook her head. “Cows and pigs are different. They don’t need bedding. If you take a look, you can see that the barn floor there isn’t

stone. It's a heavy wood laminate with spaces between the slats. Most of the pig shit runs into a catchment under the floor and drains away. It's nice and liquidy," she went on, ignoring his queasy look. "Though we do hose the floor down a couple times a week in the summer. The pigs love that. They think they're getting a nice cool shower.

"Oh. All right." He got up. "Well," he said reluctantly. "I guess I better get back to work."

"I guess you better." Joy's eyes held an amused gleam, as if she guessed he would rather be doing almost anything else. "When you're done with that, come back here. I have to go check the fields, but I'll leave you a list of chores you can do."

Marnie snickered evilly. "And what are you going to be doing?" he challenged.

"I have to make a supply run into town," she answered complacently. "Be good, and I might take you along the next time I go."

"Don't worry about it. I've already seen the Corn Palace. What else is there?"

He turned for the door. "Devin, wait." Joy slid a pair of boots across the floor. "Put those on instead of those shoes of yours. They belonged to Joe.

"I hope you can fill them better than he did."

## Chapter 3: Fox in the Henhouse

Two weeks later, Devin suspected that working on the farm was a torment made up by Satan to punish those who deserved eternal damnation.

Two weeks after *that*, he was sure of it.

The work never fucking stopped! There was *always* something that needed doing. And that ‘something’ almost always involved dirt, crap, large smelly animals, heavy manual labor, or some unholy combination of all of them. If he wasn’t feeding the pigs or shoveling manure, he was weeding the large garden behind the house, where Joy and Marnie grew food for themselves. Or scraping peeling paint off the railing of the porch, and then sanding it down and repainting it until it was a blinding white. Or shifting the mountain of straw and hay in the upper level of the barn so it was ready for the winter to come, heaving the clumsy, bulky bales until his shoulders were screaming with strain and his arms red with rash. Or doing housework – washing clothes or dishes or beating the dust out of rugs or sweeping or mopping or vacuuming. Joy had apparently heard the term “division of labor” and had decided the idea was for chumps. She didn’t give a damn that he was a man. Housework was for both men and women. The only thing she hadn’t let him do around the farmhouse was cook, for which he couldn’t blame her a bit.

And they were always watching him. Joy with her cool, assessing gaze, Marnie with a suspicious expression, as if she might accuse him any second of some bizarre perversion, like molesting the cattle or slacking off on his chores. Small chance of that. The one time he had done a shoddy job of mucking out, she had called him into the barn, wordlessly pointed at the stalls, and told him to do it all over again. When he protested, she fixed him with a cold glare.

*“You had time to do it wrong. Now you’ll make time to do it right.”*

If he hadn’t been so exhausted, he would have been amazed that two women, one of them still in high school until a few weeks ago, had been able to keep the farm going, aided by just one old man whose best days were long past. Because Joy and Marnie didn’t ask him to do anything they couldn’t do themselves, and a lot more besides. Joy was on the move between sun-up and sundown, constantly riding out in the truck to check on the fields and make sure that the crops were coming along. This was, she had told him to his flat disbelief, one of the *easy* periods of the year, when the planting and treatments had been done, but well before the time had come to bring in the crops. Right now there was only the constant, low-grade worry about what would happen if there was a drought or a sudden flood. She checked the weather forecast two or three times a day, each day without a disaster getting her one day closer to the payoff of the harvest.

“This didn’t seem so hard when we visited,” he mumbled into his plate one night. His back was killing him and his arms felt like limp noodles. He barely had the strength to lift his fork to his mouth and take another bite of the fragrant beef stew Joy had made for supper.

“What?”

He opened an eye. The other stayed resolutely closed. “When we visited. For Christmas or Thanksgiving. I never saw you guys working like this then.”

“Those were *holidays*, Devin. We did all of our work before you guys got here. And even then, we usually had to go out and feed the pigs and make sure the cows had enough hay. Or weren’t you paying attention?”

“I guess I wasn’t.”

Still, it would take a moron to not notice the changes in his body. Despite the fact that he was eating ravenously at every meal (when he could stay awake, that is) his jeans were looser than they had been in months, maybe longer. He took in his belt a notch. Then, a couple of weeks later, another.

As fat sloughed away, muscle emerged to take its place. One night after a shower, he passed his reflection in the bathroom mirror, then backed up to take a closer look. His cheekbones were much more prominent in his face, his shoulders somehow broader, and his stomach... “Watch out, ladies,” he said, slapping his belly. “Jesus Tapdancing Christ. When this summer is over I am going to be *cut!* Who wants to take a ride on the D-Train?”

“No one, unless they have a taste for arrogant, vain frat-boys with more ego than sense,” Marnie said, wandering into the bathroom. She smacked his rear with her palm. “Get out of the way. I have to brush my teeth.”

“Amazing that you don’t have a boyfriend,” he gibed. “I can’t imagine why the guys aren’t breaking down the door to get at you.”

She rolled her eyes in the mirror at him as she brushed her teeth. Under the long, thigh-length t-shirt she typically wore before bed, the motions of her arms made her breasts bounce and jiggle in the most pleasantly distracting way. And when she leaned over the sink to spit, the hem rode up, exposing the bottom of her butt cheeks and her white cotton panties.

He flushed and looked away. He hadn’t been laid since he had come home from college, and here, ten miles away from the closest thing that passed for civilization, he had resorted to reading dirty stories on his kindle for jerk-off material, despite how long they took to download. But he was damned if he was going to stare at Marnie’s tits and ass like he was some gross pervert.

*But Jesus, those legs.* Marnie was tall for a girl, only four or five inches shorter than his own six-one. His eyes fell to Marnie’s long, toned legs, firmly muscled and tanned an even brown all over from the sun. His cock twitched. Once, then again a second time, more strongly.

“What?” He tore his eyes away to find her staring at him in the mirror.

“I asked if you wanted to go into town with me tomorrow,” Marnie repeated.

“Town?” he repeated stupidly. *God, Marnie. Either put on a bra or take off the shirt. You’re driving me crazy. The only tits I see these days are on the cows. And I try to stick to primates.*

“Yes, Devin. Town. You know, where all the people live?”

“Yeah. Sure. Town. That sounds great.” He swallowed. “Why?”

“I have errands to run and I need you to carry stuff for me.” Her lips quirked in one of the few smiles he’d seen out of her since he’d arrived. As sweet as it was unexpected, it transformed her face. “That’s why you’re here, right? A strong back and a weak mind?”

“I suppose,” he said sourly. “When do we leave?”

“Right after breakfast. And if you’re nice, I’ll even stop by the bank. Joy tells me she deposited your first check the other day. You might want to buy a couple of things for yourself.” She glanced pointedly at the towel. “Better manners, for instance.”

A flush crawled up his neck. He thought his partial erection had been hidden from view. “Listen, I…”

She cut him off before he could embarrass himself any further. “Forget it. You’re a man. I should know better than to expect any different.” She turned her back on him and stalked out.

“Besides,” her voice floated back to him. “It wasn’t that impressive anyway.”

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After three of Marnie’s ice-water wake-up calls, the last of which had been full in the face and had left his pillow soaking, Devin had started setting the alarm on his phone for five AM. He still hated getting up, but it had been worth it that first morning to watch Marnie open the door, a tumbler of water in her hand, and see the disappointment flood her face when she saw him sitting on the bed, pulling on Joe’s borrowed boots.

It was now the middle of June, and when he came downstairs, trying to muffle the thump of his footfalls in the stairwell, the sun was already peeking over the horizon, though it was barely five-thirty. As usual, Marnie was downstairs before him, as was Joy. The older woman was at the kitchen table, writing notes on a pad of paper, her sort-of-adopted daughter leaning close and making suggestions.

Joy glanced up. “Just putting together a list for your visit into town, Dev. Marnie tells me she invited you along this time.”

He nodded, pulling a moronic face. “Yep. Is it true that they have buildings there that are actually *three* stories tall?”

Joy nodded solemnly. “Yes. And places where if you go there and give them money, they will actually make your food *for you*, so you don’t have to cook.”

He rocked back, blinking stupidly. “Really? And roads paved with the finest shimmering blacktop? And the little blinky lights that tell you when it’s safe to cross the street?”

“All of it. I know it’s going to be a strange experience for you, Devin. But don’t be scared.” She glanced at Marnie, who was studying the paper with every evidence of deep concentration, though her shoulders were shaking. “Marnie is going to be there the whole time. So if you start to feel frightened, just hold her hand. She’ll take care of you.”

He blinked. “But she’s a girl!”

“Girls can be brave, too, Devin,” Marnie said in a strangled croak, then broke down into giggles.

He finished his coffee, washing out the mug and returning it to the drainboard. “Anything that needs doing before breakfast?”

“Muck out the stalls after you feed the pigs,” Marnie said, glancing up. “But don’t lay down any more bedding. The weather forecast says we’re in for a warm-up, so we’re going to let them stay out to pasture.”

“Really?” He sighed in relief, the prospect of a few free hours every week dancing like a vision in his head. “That’ll be nice.”

Joy smirked. “Yeah. Until you have to do the daily round to make sure they’re all still out there, and find some brainless animal has managed to tangle itself in a fence or got lost down in a creekbed or something and you have to spend an hour figuring a way to lure the damn thing out. Oh,” she went on as his face fell, “there’s also making sure there’s enough water for them, too, since they won’t be getting any in the barn. Pleasant dreams.”

“I hate you all,” he said, and walked out the door. But the wave of warm laughter that followed him out almost made up for it.

“Get nice and fat, girls,” he said to the heifers as they wandered out the barn door. The morning air was balmy, the grass a brilliant green, the sky clear, though with a haze that promised the possibility of rain later. “You all know how much I love hamburger. Yum. Or maybe a really nice roast.” He poked one in the rump to move it along. “Yeah. I bet you’ll be nice and tender. Nothing like some grass-fed South Dakota beef on my dinner plate.”

He fed the pigs, who were losing their adolescent cuteness and getting bigger by the day, drained the water from the previous night from the water-trough, and filled it back up with the hose, taking some time to wash some of the bigger chunks of pig-shit down between the gaps in the floor. Their half of the barn wasn’t ever going to be anything but rank, but he if could keep it from smelling like the inside of a pig’s asshole, he was going to give it a shot.

*Last time, last time*, he sang in his head as he cleaned out the cow-stalls, dumping loads of fouled straw and manure into the waiting wheelbarrow. Unlike his jerky, hesitant motions of a month ago, his movements were quick and sure, the pitchfork a trusted tool, not a despised enemy.

*And oh my God am I actually enjoying this?*

He blinked, resting the butt of the pitchfork on the floor as he considered the question.

*You know, maybe I am.* He hadn't fit in at home. He knew that. So did his parents. He had only gone to college because that had seemed to be what everyone expected. And it beat the hell out of whatever was waiting for him in Fort Dodge. The rules had been drilled into his head by the time he was eleven. Smart kids went to college and got good jobs, the kind that didn't involve manure or grease or dirt. The kind where you sat in an indoor office rather than unplugging a clogged sewer main. He was a finance major because he was good with numbers, not because he actually had any deep love for the subject.

He had been drifting, he thought as he moved to the next stall. Drifting towards a future that was not desired, merely accepted. And his sullen refusal to get a job during the summer had simply been a reflection of that.

But here...

“Shit!” He stared at his left arm. The sleeve of his shirt hung in a flap, and a nasty gouge ran down his tricep, courtesy of a nail protruding from a post. When he tried to get back to work, the hanging sleeve and the trickle of blood running down his arm to his wrist made concentrating almost impossible, and he gave up. *Screw it. I'm going to change my shirt and wash this off. God knows what kind of germs were on the fucking thing. The least I can do is put a bandage on it.*

He walked up the steps, noting with a frown how the porch seemed to creak a little more loudly, the sagging boards giving a little more each time he crossed it. Inside, the dishwasher was chugging merrily along, almost covering the creak and bang of the screen door as it shut behind him. He stopped just inside the door, sitting in one of the kitchen chairs to take off his boots. It was a pain in the ass, but Joy raised holy hell if he tracked dirt and cow crap across her hardwood floors.

“Please, baby. I need it.”

His head jerked up. It was Marnie's voice, coming from deeper in the house, but unlike any tone he had ever heard from the tall, self-assured

teenager. There was something in it, something deep and desperate.

“Devin could be back in here any second.”

“No he won’t.” Her voice caught, hitching, then continued. “You know how long it takes to muck out the stalls. You’ve done it often enough. Please, Joy. I’m so fucking horny. Just eat me real quick. I need someone to touch me.”

“I really shouldn’t.” But even Devin, slack-jawed with shock, could make out the way her voice lingered over the words, the reluctance.

“Please.” He stood up, then whispered across the room on his stocking feet, peeking into the living room. Marnie sat on the easy chair, her body in profile. Her long legs were drawn up, the balls of her feet on the arm-rests. Her jeans and panties were discarded on the floor. “It’s been nearly a month. Just me and my fingers, late at night, when Devin’s asleep and can’t hear me.

“I’ve been good. Every night, I want to sneak into your room, so we can sleep together like we used to. And every night, I stay in my cold, lonely bed.” Her hands went down between her legs. Touching herself? Or displaying her womanhood even more lewdly for the older woman? “Just once, please. I need to take the edge off. Devin and I were in the bathroom last night, after his shower.” Her eyes closed and one hand left her groin to stray under the hem of her sweatshirt. “Damn, he’s getting sexy. The flab’s melting away. The muscles are coming out. And underneath that college-boy shell there’s a pretty decent man.

“He was getting hard for me. I could tell. A nice little tent making the towel bulge. So if you don’t do anything for me, I might see if Dev will.”

“Blackmail, huh?” But Joy sank to her knees, sweeping her hair off her shoulders with a graceful motion. Before he could do more than blink, her face was between her thighs. Muffled licking sounds rose up into the morning air, almost drowned out by Marnie’s keening cry of victory.

He leaned against the door-post in shock, though he couldn't have walked away from the scene for fifty bucks and a slab of ribs. *Joy and Marnie are lesbians? Lovers? How long has this been going on?*

Did his father know? His mother? Immediately, he shook his head. There was no way on God's green earth they would have sent him out here if they thought anything strange was going on between Joy and Marnie. Not that there was anything wrong with being gay in the abstract. But he had a pretty good idea what his parents would have to say if they could see the scene in front of him. "Thermonuclear" didn't even *begin* to describe it.

"Oh, God, Joy, you lick me so good." His attention was jerked back to the two women. Marnie's shirt was pushed up over her breasts. Disappointingly, her hands covered her mounds, kneading slowly, softly. But he caught enough glimpses between her fingers to see that Marnie's tits were fantastic. "Oh, Jesus, you've got my clit. Oh, *yeah...*" Her voice spiraled off into a low guttural groan, punctuated by muffled slurps from below. Her hips rocked, pushing herself up into her lover's face.

*Leave. Leave now.* An insistent voice, a thread of sanity in a world gone mad, drilled into his mind. *Would you watch Mom and Dad screwing? Bryan and Carla? No. You wouldn't. So why are you perving on these two?* As Marnie's high-pitched squeaks of pleasure grew in volume and intensity, he slowly backed away, as carefully as if the living room was inhabited by a light-sleeping and ill-tempered grizzly. *You know what's going to happen when they're done? They're going to look around and notice things. Like you, if you are anywhere near them. So you better be out of sight.*

His groping hand found the door-handle, and he let himself outside. To hell with the gouge on his arm. He could take care of that later.

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"You're quiet, Dev," Marnie said.

Sitting beside her in the farm truck, he shrugged.

Her lips quirked up in a smile. “Not used to going so fast?” In defiance of her words, the ripening grain was crawling by, not much faster than he could run. “Don’t worry. We’ll be in town soon and you can get out of the big, scary truck.”

He tried to smile back, but the expression felt false on his face. Half a dozen times, through breakfast and now with Marnie, he had opened his mouth to admit that he had seen Joy and Marnie having sex. Each time his throat had closed, unable to force the words out.

“At last.” They had come to the end of the farm lane, and Marnie hit her blinker, swinging left to catch the paved road which would eventually lead them into Mitchell. She slanted a look at him as they picked up speed. “You know, Joy hasn’t exactly been very fair to you, Dev.” A considering pause. “Neither have I.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. We needed your help. No two ways about it. When your dad called. offering you up like a sacrificial lamb, it was an answer to our prayers. We needed another pair of hands. Too many men have gone off to work in the fields.”

“The what?”

“The gas and oil fields. This fracking bullshit is killing people like Joy. The farm’s too big for two people to work. We need more hands. But why would someone work for us when they can get twice as much money driving a truck or laying pipe in a gas field?” She sighed gustily. “We looked around this spring. Even put up some ads on the internet message boards. And not a damn nibble. No one wants to bust their ass on a farm that’s barely solvent.”

Alarmed, he asked, “It’s not that bad, is it?”

She waved a hand, skillfully passing a lumbering horse-trailer. “It’s not that bad. With luck and a couple good harvests in a row, maybe it won’t

ever get that bad. But the big folks see a couple of women like us, and they think they have our balls in a vice. And so they try to squeeze.” She held up a hand, fingers gripping for emphasis.

“Unless joy is a lot different than I think, she doesn’t have balls,” he observed. “I’m not so sure about you, though.”

“Jerk. You know what I mean.” She put a hand on his arm. “What I’m trying to say, Devin, is thanks. We owe you. You’ve saved us a lot of time. Instead of fucking around with the pigs and cows and trying to keep the house from falling to pieces I’ve been able to make sure the crops are coming along and the stock is healthy. And Joy has been able to have a couple of hours to herself each day, rather than running herself ragged with worry. We’ve been able to plan, rather than reacting.”

He shrugged, embarrassed. The sudden praise was almost too much, and a flush crept up the back of his neck. Would Marnie be quite so effusive if she had known he had watched Joy eat her out less than an hour ago? “You didn’t seem so happy to see me when I got here,” he noted.

Her face grew pink. “Well, look at the situation,” she protested. Outlying houses were beginning to flit by. “The way your dad talked, we weren’t sure what the hell was going on. All we knew was that everyone was pissed as hell at you.”

“Well, they had good reason,” he admitted, as Marnie swung the truck into the parking lot at the grocery store. He got out, groaning. His arm ached, though he had changed his shirt before breakfast. “So where’s the hitchin’ post? And the general store? And the whorehouse? I’ve been out on the trail so long, I’m just itchin’ for a bath and a shave and a roll in the hay with a dollar hooker.” He paused, scratching his chin. “Maybe *two* dollars, iff’n the trail boss pays my wages and I don’t blow it all on cheap whiskey and a fancy new stripey shirt.”

“You’re an idiot,” she said, but her tone was mild, without its previous rancor.

*Getting laid must do wonders for her personality.*

They hit the grocery store, the library, where Marnie returned some books, and where he was able to wheedle her into checking a couple out on her card for himself, and the feed store, where he was dragooned into carrying all sorts of supplies, the purpose of some a complete mystery to him, out to the truck. When Marnie finally slammed the tailgate shut and went inside to settle up the bill, his back was aching and his shirt was plastered to his chest.

“One last stop,” Marnie said, maneuvering the truck into a parking spot by the bank. “I need to get some cash. And I’m sure you’d like some walking-around money.” Then her expression darkened. “Oh, great. That asshole’s here.”

“Who?”

She nodded at an expensive luxury car, brazenly taking up two parking spots. “Denton Fitzpatrick. A rep for one of the big consolidated agribusiness outfits. The fucker likes to hang around the bank and see who’s having financial trouble. Thinks if he can catch someone in a weak moment, he might be able to swoop in and get an easy sale.”

As if on cue, the door to the bank shot open and a stout, gray-haired man scurried out, looking over his shoulder with a harried air. A shorter man followed unhurriedly, dressed in charcoal trousers and a black shirt, open at the neck.

“Stay away from me, you damned vulture,” the first man snarled, his hand on the door handle of a farm truck, almost a mirror of their own. “No, I’m not interested in selling to you and your pack of hyenas. No, I don’t want you to make an offer. No, I don’t want to talk it over. No, I’m not looking to retire to Florida or Arizona or some other damned place. No, no, no. For the hundredth time, no! And if I see you out around my property

again, hassling my help,” he continued, his voice rising, “I swear to God I’ll have you shot for trespassing.”

“Vernon,” the second man spread his hands, a smarmy smile on his face. “All I’m trying to do is help you out. If you’re not wanting to sell the entire spread, maybe a hundred acres or so? I bet some cash money in your pocket would come in awful handy right now. How’s the wife? Still sick?” He shook his head sorrowfully. “Cancer is tough. I lost my own grandmother to it, back when I was a tyke. And the bills sure do pile up, don’t they? And the hospital and the insurance companies never understand.”

“You disgusting bastard,” Marnie breathed under her breath, as Vern’s face went white with rage.

“You leave me alone,” he grated between his teeth. “Me and my wife.”

“Vern-” the man took another step forward, his face full of condescending sympathy. “I’m your friend. Let me buy you a cup of coffee.”

As Devin watched, disbelieving, Vern reached into the cab of his truck and grabbed a shotgun from a rack behind the bench seat.

“You’re no friend of mine,” he said, pulling the hammers back.

*Good God. He’s actually going to shoot him!*

Thinking quickly, he pulled his phone out of his back pocket and dialed 911. “Yes, ma’am!” he said loudly, as soon as a voice answered. “I want to report a crime! There’s a car taking up two parking spots in front of the First Farmer’s Bank here at Main and Washington. And one of them’s a handicapped spot. That ain’t right,” he continued, his voice broad and dull, as three sets of eyes stared at him. “That’s *illegal*. I want you to get someone down here to take it away! The license plate number? Hold on.” He bent down, squinting as if reading was an unusual and difficult chore. “Here it is. Gee Arr Emm space Arr Pee Arr. Hey! It spells out somethin’. What you suppose a garm raper is?”

“Hey!” Denton pulled at his arm. “What the hell are you doing! That’s my car!”

“Your car?” He goggled at the older man, trying to keep an expression of vacuous stupidity on his face. “Well, you’re going to jail! How do you like that! That’s what happens to criminals who don’t follow the rules.” He poked him in the chest. “Why don’t you take your big fancy car back to... to...to *Chicago*, you big jerkhead!”

“Jesus Christ.” The smaller man swore. “Tobin, is this idiot with you?”

“Yeah, I suppose,” Marnie said. Her voice was resigned, though Dev thought he could see a tide of mad hilarity rising in her eyes. “Joy hired him on through August, since old Coburn broke his leg.” She sighed dramatically. “Don’t pay him no mind, Denton. He’s just a little soft in the head. It’s not his fault. We’re all as the good lord made us. Even you.” She slanted a look at Vern, whose gun had dropped into the crook of his elbow as he watched the show. “But maybe you should leave before J.R. shows up. You know how the Ewing boys have had it in for you, ever since there was that misunderstanding about that little bartender at the Double Dutch last month.”

“Fine.” Shooting Dev a venomous look, Denton got into his car. Vern walked up, not quite missing the front bumper as he spit out a stream of tobacco-juice. Even through the windshield, Dev could see the way Denton’s face colored at the casual mistreatment of his expensive care. But apparently fear of a parking ticket outweighed his anger, because he backed out and tore off, narrowly avoiding a panel truck that was trundling across the street.

“Too bad he didn’t hit him,” Marnie said dispassionately. “Though Dolf would have been upset about getting his new paint job scratched up.” She glanced at the shotgun, still cradled in Vernon’s elbow. “Why don’t you put that thing away before the cops really do show up? They might ask some awkward questions, Mr. Flannery.”

“Yeah, I suppose,” the gray-haired man said regretfully. “Though ventilating the sonuvabitch would have been almost worth it.” He cracked the gun, ejected the shells, and put it back in the truck. “How’s things out at your place? Are we going to see you at church anytime soon?”

“We’re fine. How’s Mrs. Flannery?”

He sighed. His face was old and weathered, deep lines carved into his sun-browned skin. “She has her good days and her bad days. But don’t we all?”

“We do.” She put her hand on his shoulder in a bracing manner. “You tell her that me and Joy send her our best, you hear?”

“Will do, Marnie. And you. Boy.” Devon jerked to attention. “Thanks. I won’t say I was about to shoot that greasy little snot. But I won’t say I wasn’t, neither. So thanks. Rebecca would raise *such* a fuss if I murdered someone. You know how women are.” One eyelid dropped in a wink as he climbed into his truck. “So emotional.”

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“And then,” Marnie said, her voice filling the kitchen, “he poked Denton in the chest and called him a...a ker-min-al. Like he dropped out of school in fourth grade or something!”

“He didn’t!”

“My right hand to God,” Marnie said solemnly, as Joy clutched her stomach and hooted with laughter. Beside her, Dev grinned and took a bite of his sandwich. “If I hadn’t been scared to death that I was going to be a witness at a murder trial, I would have cracked up right there.”

Joy slowly regained control of herself and wiped her eyes. “You have unexpected talents, Dev.”

“I’m not sure that pretending to be a moron is actually a talent,” he said, wiping his mouth.

“Well, you might have prevented a homicide. Not that anyone would shed a tear if Denton Fitzpatrick met with an accident one dark night. He’s been sniffing around here, too. He sees good farmland and two women running things with nary a man in sight, and he thinks he can swoop in and pick it up on the cheap.” She made a spitting sound. “I’ll see him in hell first.”

He shook his head. “Dad always said that sometimes it seemed you loved this farm more than your own family. I don’t get it. I mean,” he said, as Marnie’s eyes narrowed in renewed suspicion, “I know it’s been in your family for over a century. And that you depend on it for a living. But...but couldn’t you guys do something else? Marnie could have gone to college if she wanted. Hell, Joy, Dad says that between the two of you, you’re the one with the brains, not him. So why are you breaking your backs on this place?”

“That doesn’t matter.”

“What does, then?”

“Love.”

“What?”

“It’s love, Dev. I love this farm, this house, this land, as much as I do my own flesh and blood. It’s part of me, like my bones and my soul. I can’t imagine living anywhere else but this house, can’t imagine doing anything else for a living. Your father...” she sighed. “He had a bit of a restless streak. He didn’t want to end up like so many others, holding onto the land until he died of stress or overwork, like your grandfather did. And when Joe and I divorced, he said I was crazy not to sell out and make a new start somewhere else.

“Which is fine,” she sighed. “I’m sure it made sense to him. But not to me. I am going to make this farm pay. Just like it did for my father before he and Mom died. And his father. And his, all the way back. And no one –

not my horn-dog husband, not Denton Fitzpatrick, no one – is going to get me out of here.”

“Or me,” Marnie said. Her voice was soft, but her blue eyes were stormy as thunderclouds at dusk. “When Joe left, your father practically begged Joy to sell out, Dev. As if she hadn’t been practically running the place on her own since her father died and didn’t know how to plant a crop or run a combine. She took me in, even though I could have been a thief or a crazy person or worse. She gave me a place to stay, a life that had some meaning, which I had just about given up on at the time. I owe her so much.”

It would have taken a duller person than Devin to not see the love shining in her eyes as she looked at Joy. “I won’t leave here. Ever. I can’t. Too much of my heart lives here, in this house.”

She tossed down her napkin. “All right. Enough talking. Time for me to go check on the barley. Dev, can you bring the stuff we bought inside? Joy can tell you where to put it. If you can’t figure it out on your own.”

He nodded. “Sure.”

“Good.” She walked out, long legs and slim hips taking her out the door. The room fell silent.

*You should tell her you know. Get it out in the open.*

*Yeah. Like a fart in church.* He shook his head and stood up, taking the plates over to the sink for washing-up later.

A few minutes later, bring in the supplies and trying to make up his mind about how he could tell Joy that he knew that she and Marnie were lovers, it finally happened. He had a bag of groceries in each hand and was reaching for the handle of the screen door when the porch gave way, sending his left leg through the spongy, rotting boards almost all the way to his hip.

“Shit!” he yelled in surprise, as cans of beans and tuna bounced across the porch. “Joy?” he called, bracing his hands and trying to lever himself out of the splintered hole. “I need some help out here.”

The door swung open. “Good grief. I guess you do.” She gripped him by the wrist, and with her help he was able to pull himself out. “Thanks, Joe, you lazy, misbegotten slob,” she muttered, staring at the roof overhead. For the first time, Devin noticed the speckles of light which showed where tiny holes had allowed water to seep in and destroy the integrity of the porch flooring. “I guess we’ve found your next project, Devin. I should have taken care of that last spring.”

“Why didn’t you?” he hazarded.

She held up her hands. “Only three pairs of these to go around. And Marnie was still in school.” She cocked her eyebrows at him. “Ever done any roofing, Dev?”

He shrugged uncomfortably. “I’m not an expert. But I helped my dad and Bryan a few years ago when we re-shingled our place.” He scuffed his boot-heel on the peeling wood. “What if I screw it up?”

“It’s just the porch, Dev. Not the roof of the house.” She skipped down the steps. “Let’s get some plywood to cover up that hole, and a ladder to get up top and take a look. Then we can decide what to do.”

“Joy?”

The older woman folded her arms under her breasts, leaning against the wall of the house as he crawled around on the porch, taking measurements and counting boards. “Yes, Dev?”

The words threatened to choke him, but somehow he forced them out through his tightening throat. “I know,” he said, the tips of his ears flaming red. “I know about you and Marnie.”

“I know.”

“What?”

“I know that you know.” She smiled wryly. “But Marnie doesn’t know you know. Or that I know you know. Does that make sense?”

“How...how do you know?”

She snorted under her breath. “You’re not near as sneaky as you think, Devin. If I didn’t hear the door open this morning while Marnie and I were...entertaining ourselves, I sure as hell noticed your shadow in the doorway. Even if I couldn’t see you.”

He groaned. Yes, the window in the kitchen was at just the right spot for the sun to shine through and reveal his presence. And he had thought he’d been so careful.

“So,” Joy went on, “what are you going to do about it?”

He looked up at her. “Do?”

She shrugged elaborately, though he could see her tension in the set of her mouth, in the way her eyes narrowed. A lot, he was reminded suddenly, like Marnie, when she was in a foul mood. “Yes, Devin. Do. Are you going to hold it over my head like a club? I’m sure you’ve thought about it. Either I let you go back home to Fort Dodge or you tell your father. That sort of thing.” She shook her head. “Blackmail is ugly, Devin. And have you thought about what the effect will be?”

He sat back on his heels, the pad of paper and pencil forgotten. “You think I’d do that?”

“You’re not?”

He glared at her, suddenly angry. “Of course not!”

“Oh.” Her voice was small. “Why not?”

“I’m not a complete shit, you know. I mean, I was surprised. Big-time. I didn’t think...” he trailed off. “Are you lesbians? Both of you?”

Joy chewed her lip. “You know, I think this is a conversation which would be better if we were both sitting down. Give me that.”

She took the pad of paper and scribbled a note, sticking it through the door handle. “We’re going to need stuff to fix this anyway. Do you have the measurements?”

“Um. Yeah?”

“Then we might as well get all the crap before the store closes.” She tossed him a set of keys. “You drive.”

## Chapter 4: Hanging for a Sheep

*At least the boy had sense enough to confess, Joy thought, rolling up the window of the truck against the heat. I figured he'd take the chance to run back home with his tail between his legs.*

Which was, she admitted to herself guiltily, both unfair and untrue. The boy, son of her best friend, had tackled every job she and Marnie had set to him, if not eagerly, then at least without audible complaint. And the work of his hands had been invaluable, even if it meant that the nighttime activities she and Joy had used to indulge in had been severely curtailed by his presence. Even now, her pussy was still damp with arousal from her tryst with Marnie earlier in the morning, throbbing with unsatisfied need. She had gotten her off, her tongue and fingers plunging deep inside her. But there hadn't been time for Marnie to return the favor. She drummed her fingers on the seat in irritation. Over the past few months, she had grown used to a steady diet of sex. And now she was forced into unwilling abstinence.

“What?” She realized she had been staring off into space.

“I asked,” Devin said, his fingers tight on the steering wheel, “how this all started. If you don't mind telling me. It's a hell of a shock, Joy.”

“Turn on the air, first,” she replied, stalling for time. God, she had never imagined explaining this. Not to anyone. Especially not to her childhood sweetheart's youngest son. “I'm not going to roast in here while I explain. Typical South Dakota. You go from chilly to Death Valley in about three days.

“How did it start?” She cast her memory back to the past winter as Devin fiddled with the controls. Soon a cool stream of air was blowing from the vents. “Well, here's the thing, Dev. Joe was a jackass in more ways than I

can count. He was lazy, bad with money, in love with the way he looked, and he would screw anything that would hold still for five minutes.

“But what he *wasn't* was a bad lover. Probably why I put up with him as long as I did.” She heaved a gusty sigh. “So after a couple of years of being single, I really got to missing having a man in my bed at night. And I was too busy trying to keep our place afloat to try to find a new boyfriend.”

Dev glanced at her, lips twitching. “Not a dating website? We see the ads for farmers-only all the time back home. Mom thinks they’re hilarious.”

She snickered. “Yeah. All those wholesome, black-haired girls riding horses, or the buff young studs with their shirts off. It’s almost like Amish porn. No. Not a dating profile. Not for me.

“So anyway, it was a night last winter. About four months ago. February. It was one of those nights that makes you wonder why you’re a farmer, and didn’t take up an easier, less-stressful line of work, like bomb disposal or handling poisonous snakes or something. Tom had just broke his leg and Marnie was still in school, so it was just me most of the time.” She shook her head. “Fool girl actually suggested that she drop out to help. I put an end to that nonsense real quick. After all the trouble I went to to get the school district let her in, when I wasn’t even her legal guardian, I wasn’t going to let her throw that away.

“Well, it was time to send the pigs in for processing.”

“Processing?”

“Yeah. You know, Dev. Or should. When they aren’t cute little piggies anymore, but get turned into bacon and sausage and ham?”

“Oh.” Devin looked vaguely ill. “I never really thought much about that.”

She nodded, once. “It’s all part of life on the farm. But you try getting thirty head of fat, scared hogs up onto a flatbed in the mud and wind with rain pouring down the back of your neck. It seemed to take hours, and by the time the truck drove off all I wanted to do was lie down and cry. If that

asshole Denton had shown up and waved a contract in my face, I'm not sure I would have told him no.

“Well, Marnie came home a little while later. I was soaked to the skin and sitting in the kitchen, trying to warm up with some coffee. Might have put a little nip of whiskey in the coffee, too,” she smiled. “Just for medicinal purposes, of course.”

“Of course.”

“Well, that girl pitched a fit about me sitting around in my wet clothes, and bullied me into taking a shower. I was tired and depressed and didn't feel like taking orders from my hired help, even if she had just turned eighteen, and I said so.

“And that girl practically dragged me upstairs with her own two hands, going on about how...” she carefully edited some things which were not hers to tell, “...about how her family was gone. and how Tom was hurt, and how she would be damned to hell if she was going to lose me to pneumonia or the black lung or something.”

Devin blinked. “Black lung? Isn't that, like, a coal-miner thing?”

“When that girl gets going, you don't get in her way. So she pushed me into the big upstairs shower with all my clothes on, turned on the hot water, and every time I tried to get out, she pushed me right back in. And eventually I realized I was being an idiot and started taking my clothes off. And Marnie said that since she was half-soaked anyway, because I was being such a brat, she might as well get in with me.

“And then it happened.”

She watched as Devin's throat bobbed. “What happened?”

“Do you expect me to give you a full play-by-play?” Dev looked back to the road and the fields spooling by, a flush mounting his neck. She shrugged. “It just happened. The way two people can lock eyes across a crowded room and know, just *know*, they are right for each other. I saw Marnie there, her hair plastered to her back and her eyes damn near glowing

because she was mad and scared for me, and saw her as a young, attractive, *sexy* woman. And she looked at me and saw something like the same thing. Before we knew it, we were all over each other. Jesus, it's a damn miracle we didn't fall down and break our necks. As it was, we barely made it to the bed, we were so horny. I had almost forgotten how good sex could be. But when Marnie spread my legs and started licking me, I came almost right away."

"I'm sorry. But I still don't get it, I guess. Are you lesbians? I thought Marnie had a boyfriend, before. And you were married. Or are you both bisexuals? Or is this something that's just between you?"

She put a hand on his thigh, noting with amusement the way he jumped under her touch, like a skittish horse. She stroked him through his jeans, trying to calm him, happily surprised by the hard muscle she found.

*I bet he's got more than one muscle that's hard, too, she thought wickedly. Most guys his age can't help but fantasize about women. Marnie's great, and I love her, but she'll never have a cock. And that strap-on she ordered on-line doesn't do the job for me. I need flesh and blood.*

"Why do you need to put labels on things, Dev?" she asked reasonably, trying to hide the surge of arousal. Oh, Marnie had been right. Devin was a fine-looking man. A strong young body was emerging day by day, struggling out of lazy habits and a layer of fat like a butterfly from its cocoon. "I love Marnie. She loves me. Sometimes – well, actually, a *lot* of the time, to be honest – we express our love for each other physically. Would it really matter if I said I was a lesbian, or bi? Or if Marnie did?"

"I express my love for my mother physically, too." Devin said. His jaw was set. "I sure as hell don't do it in bed, though. I stick to hugs."

"Oh?" she purred. She leaned close, well aware of how the seatbelt running between her breasts made them look more noticeable. Devin glanced at her once, then away. "And what are you going to do about it?"

“Nothing. But you know it’s all going to go to hell when someone finds out, don’t you?”

“You sound just like I did, that first night. Scared to death that I would open my eyes and find out we’d had an audience the whole time. Who’s going to find out, Devin? We live on a farm. A *farm*. Our nearest neighbor is half a mile away. Unless Marnie and I start making out in the middle of Main Street, no one’s going to suspect a thing. It’s just the two of us out here.” She slanted a look at him. “Well, just the three of us, now.”

She let that statement hang in the air, wondering if he would catch the hint. Probably not. Well, give it time. Marnie hadn’t said she wanted to bring Devin into their relationship, but she didn’t need to. When she started out her morning seduction by telling her how seeing Devin in a towel had made her horny, she might as well have written her desire in great big green letters in the sky. She might not admit it to Joy, not even to herself, and *certainly* not to Devin, with whom she shared a somewhat prickly relationship, but she wanted a man.

Which was perfectly natural, Joy thought. She wasn’t certain how far towards the lesbian side her hired hand swung. Certainly Marnie hadn’t shown any interest in other girls closer to her own age. Her bisexual passion seemed solely reserved for her. But she had dated boys in high school, and Joy was willing to bet that she had the same itch she did. The itch for a nice hard cock between her legs. And if that cock belonged to Devin, the son of Joy’s high-school sweetheart? Well, in the eyes of their more conservative neighbors, they had committed so many sins already one more wouldn’t make much of a difference.

Lost in her thoughts, she barely noticed when Devin pulled into the home-supply store. “You’ve got the list, right?” she asked as they got out into the afternoon sun. Heat seemed to steam off the blacktop in wave, and sweat broke out on the back of her neck.

He waved a sheet of paper at her. “Right here.”

“Good.” She slung her purse over her shoulder and sighed. “Well, let’s spend money we don’t have.”

They bought plywood, tarpaper, shingles that almost matched the ones on the house, roofing nails and a new nail-gun, since Joy had no idea if they had one, or if they did, if it worked, and a truly massive quantity of one-by-six deck boards. Joy turned up her nose at the treated wood, choosing to get several containers of water-proofing instead.

Luckily, the pilings that held the porch up were still in good shape, and a couple of hours later, she and Devin were on top of the porch roof, stripping off shingles, tarpaper and rotted plywood and throwing it down into a huge corrugated bin which they had dragged out from behind the barn. The nails made a happy little tinkling sound as they hit the metal, and she smiled as she levered up another layer of shingles.

“God, what a mess,” Dev said, as his roofing shovel bit right through a section of rotten plywood. A chunk as big as his head fell down to land on the porch, where it bounced crazily before coming to rest. “We’re lucky none of us got brained by the whole damn thing falling in on us. How are we going to fix this?”

She straightened, admiring his broad back and tight ass. Yeah, the boy had gone through some changes in the last month. He wasn’t the snotty college kid with twenty extra pounds of flab packed around his belly and his butt anymore. Under their guidance, he had begun to despise shoddy work almost as much as she or Marnie did.

“Strip it down to the plywood,” she answered. “If the plywood is good, we can lay tarpaper over it and reshingle. The sections where the plywood is bad, we pull it out, strip the whole damn mess down to the studs, put on new plywood, and do the same thing.” She heaved another jumbled mass of shingles and tarpaper over the edge. It hit the bin with a satisfying thump. Eventually, she and Devin fell into an easy rhythm, the young man prying

shingles out and shoveling them over for her to pitch over the side. In a surprisingly short amount of time, only the plywood remained.

“Could be worse,” Devin said, kneeling down carefully. He tapped a section with the head of his hammer, testing it for soundness, nodded, then moved over to the next, which was obviously falling to pieces. “Looks like the shingles buckled about halfway down the slope. Maybe some ice got in there and pried the layers apart. So every time it rained more seeped into this lower layer.” He sank the claw of the hammer into the wood, demonstrating. It gave like wet cardboard and he ripped up a chunk disdainfully, tossing it over his shoulder. “But the joists are still sound.”

“Good.” She got up out of her crouch, stretching, and looked at the sun. “Come on. We’ve done enough up here for today. We’ll unload the truck now and start the re-roofing early tomorrow morning.”

“All right,” Devin said. As he turned for the ladder, picking his way across what remained of the porch roof, he was visibly limping. “Ow,” he said as he stepped back onto the ground. “This place has done a number on me today.”

She looked at his leg. “Good lord.” The inside of Dev’s right thigh was mass of half-scabbed scrapes. “Why didn’t you do anything about that?”

“That’s not the half of it.” He displayed his left arm. A bloody gouge ran from just below his shoulder to nearly the elbow. “Got this little souvenir from a nail in the barn,” he said proudly. “Good thing girls dig scars.”

“Oh?” She hooked her thumbs in the belt-loops of her jeans. “Do they dig tetanus, too?”

“What?”

“Lockjaw.”

“What?” He looked at his arm in sudden concern. “From this?”

“Yeah. From that.” She took his uninjured arm. “Come on, you idiot. We’ll get some peroxide on that cut and put a bandage on it, and then take a look at the leg. God knows how many splinters you’ve got in there. If you

don't do anything, they'll just sit in there and fester. I'm sure you'd like to have a bunch of nice oozing sores on your leg for the big Independence Day picnic in town."

"Ew. No."

"So come on."

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Joy sat him down in a chair in the kitchen, a wet washcloth in one hand, a brown glass bottle of peroxide and a white roll of bandage on the table. "Push up the sleeve for me."

He complied, noticing the way her pink lips pinched down as she examined the injury. "Don't screw around with stuff like this, Dev. Especially in the barn. Those rusty old nails have had years to get all sorts of nasty crap on them. Like crap, for instance. Lord knows what sort of bacteria you could have swimming around in your bloodstream right now. First thing tomorrow we'll take you into town to get a tetanus booster." She dabbed away the blood, then wet the washcloth with peroxide, ignoring his yelp at the sting. "Baby. Not too deep, thank goodness. Probably won't even scar. You should have seen my grandfather with his shirt off. He looked like he'd been through a war, and I'm not sure if he ever left the Midwest in his life."

She wrapped the wound in a bandage, tied it off, and looked at his leg. "All right. Take those shorts off."

"What?"

She sighed dramatically. "I'm sure you heard me. Some of those scrapes go pretty high, Devin. And I need to see the splinters if I'm going to pick them out of your skin. Or do you want me to just start randomly stabbing you in the leg, hoping I get lucky?"

“All right,” he said, unsnapping the button and letting the shorts fall to the floor. He winced as Joy ran a hand up his leg. None of the scrapes were deep, but the skin was raw, and some of them were still oozing blood.

“Lucky you aren’t hairy,” Joy commented, briskly wiping his leg clean. “That would make it even harder to see. I’d have to ask Marnie if we could borrow her razor. The one she uses to shave her legs and her...other things.

“And relax.” She squeezed his knee and knelt on the floor. “I’m not going to amputate.” She pushed his thigh wide. “Look. There’s one already. Big little bastard,” she muttered, digging it out of a gouge on his upper thigh and dropping it onto the table with a tiny *click*. The bit of bloody wood was half the size of a matchstick, and he winced.

As Joy went on, now jabbing him with the tweezers in an effort to make sure he didn’t drop dead of blood poisoning, now dabbing droplets of blood away with the washcloth, Devin began to feel more than a little... uncomfortable. Joy had changed when they came back from the store, switching into a button-up shirt which she had knotted above her stomach. The first few buttons were undone as well, which allowed his eyes an unfettered view to the large tan swells of her breasts. And as she bent close, gentle hands belying the irritated tone of her voice, her warm breath made goosebumps rise on his arms and legs.

Inside his boxers, his cock stirred. *Oh, Jesus Christ*, he thought at it desperately. *Don’t you know this is **not** the right time? Go down!*

He bit his lips, closing his eyes and turning away, trying to distract himself with boring, unsexy thoughts. Soccer. English period dramas on television. Sumo wrestling. Economics class. His mother nattering on about what was going on at church.

Nothing helped. Slowly, with a sense of impending doom, he felt his shaft stiffen. He knew if he looked down, he would see it, tenting his shorts obscenely.

“Devin.”

He sighed. “You know I can’t help it, right?”

Joy’s voice was grimly amused. “And what do you do when you go to the doctor for a physical? Pop a boner every time the nice nurse tells you to turn your head and cough?”

He colored. “The last time I had a physical, the nurse was sixty years old. And a guy.” He looked down. “Done with the splinters?”

“Yeah.” He choked as her hand circled his shaft. “But I think I found some wood.” She stroked him through the boxers, then undid the button, reaching in to caress his rod. “God, it’s been years since I’ve had my fingers around a nice stiff prick. Of course,” she grinned, “that prick belonged to a prick.”

He opened his mouth. “I’m not perfect,” he heard himself say, then flushed, looking down at his her. Her hand was hot where she touched him, her thumb sliding along the head of his glans. Already, he could see the navy-blue cloth of his boxers darkening to black where his slit was leaking pre-cum.

“Neither am I,” she said bluntly. Somehow, her shirt had come undone, the sides hanging free. He could see almost all of her breasts, warm and golden-brown, capped by perky dark nipples. She caught the direction of his gaze, and smiled. “I like to sit out naked, when I get the time and the weather’s nice. Gives me a nice even tan.”

“Not since I’ve been here,” he stuttered.

“Of course not.” She licked her lips, staring at his groin. “But maybe now I will. Would you like that, Dev? To come around the side of the house and see me all hot and naked and sweaty? Suntan oil on my skin? And you could shove this nice hard boner deep inside my hungry wet pussy and fuck me til I cum all over it.”

“Christ!” He knew his eyes were bugging out of his skull. How many people actually knew what other people were like? Apparently he didn’t.

“But we’ll have to wait for that. Marnie could get home any minute. And then we’d have to do a lot of explaining about why we were fucking, which would *totally* ruin the mood.

“So I’ll just suck you off and we can do the fucking part later, okay?”

“Okay,” he stammered.

“Good!” Joy smiled up at him perkily, as if she were selling cookies at a church bake sale. “Now we’ll just take off these boxers,” she said, lowering them to the floor, “and-”

*Holy shit.*

Devin had received blow jobs before. Hell, some girls at school preferred it to sex, since then they could at least pretend they weren’t cheating on their boyfriends or sleeping around. One of his exes had even been pretty good at it.

But one of those compared to a blow-job from Joy was like the difference between a plain hamburger from a drive-through and a great big quarter-pounder fresh off the grill with cheese and pickles and grilled onions and bacon. She didn’t just bob on his dick, eager for him to shoot his wad and go away. She made sweet love to it. Now licking his shaft, her tongue teasing his hardness with slow, inquisitive curiosity; and now lifting, her lips forming a seal around the very tip of his cock as she pleased his sensitive organ. Her fingers joined her mouth on his manhood, testing him, exploring his length and girth as if he was a new piece of farm equipment she might want to buy. Before he knew it, he was leaning against the back of the chair, his eyes closed, insensible to everything but the hot wet heat of her mouth, her tongue, her hands as she lovingly jacked him, his shaft slick with her saliva.

And then it was gone. He blinked his eyes open, trying to keep the breath that escaped his lungs from becoming a whine of disappointment, to see Joy looking at him, a curiously intent expression on her face.

“Do you have a girlfriend?” she asked.

“What?”

One hand still gripped the base of his penis. At his question, the fingers tightened, almost imperceptibly. A warning. “Do. You. Have. A. Girlfriend?” she repeated, each word clear and distinct.

He swallowed, recognizing the silent warning. “No.” He returned her gaze calmly, his chin rising just the slightest in challenge as she searched his face, looking for the signs of a lie. And how weird was it, he thought, that someone would think he was lying about *not* having a girlfriend, rather than it being the other way around?

Joy’s face softened. “You really don’t, do you?”

“No.” And, he thought morosely, that was just one more link in the chain of his failures. Sure, he was good-looking enough. And quick with his tongue, able to make girls laugh at a bar or a party. But wasn’t it strange, that once he got a woman into bed, very rarely did she want to stay there? Was he that much of a failure as a lover? Or was it his own personality that drove them away?

“Good.” Joy’s voice drew him back to the present. “You’ve got a very nice dick, Devin. And I’d hate for you to have to break up with some poor girl because I’m so much better at sucking it than she is.”

Despite the situation, he couldn’t help but snort a laugh. “You’re that good?”

Her eyes twinkled. “I haven’t heard you complaining so far, have I?”

“No.”

“And you won’t.” Slowly, her hand ran up his erect phallus. Her lips curled in a dark, knowing smile as his shaft jerked. “God,” she breathed. “I wish we had more time. What I wouldn’t give to have a nice thick cock like this one buried deep in my cunt. I bet I’d cum as soon as I got you inside me.”

“Jesus, Joy!” He stared at her, stunned by her crude language.

“But we’re getting close to dinner time,” she continued regretfully, seemingly oblivious to his shocked face. “Marnie’s going to be back any minute.”

And with those final words, she opened her mouth and inhaled him again, not stopping until he was completely inside her, from crown to root. Her hands stroked him, seemingly trying to learn his entire body by feel. Up his thighs, across his newly-flat belly, up his chest, tweaking his nipples, exploring his arms and shoulders. She hummed around his rod in approval as she took in the layers of muscle built up over the past month.

*God, what can I do? She was right. This is the best fucking blow-job ever! She’s making me feel incredible and I’m not doing a damn thing!*

He reached down, hoping to at least touch her breasts, but she pushed his hands away gently. Her eyes rose to meet his, and she gave the tiniest twitch of her head. Was this a test? Or did she simply want to concentrate on him? Regardless, he managed to keep control of his raging need to explore her body, and instead reached for her face, brushing her cheek with the tips of his fingers, trying to impart with the gentlest of touches his desire for her. There was a pause, a timeless moment, when he thought he had erred again, but then she closed her eyes and redoubled her gentle assault on his cock.

*Joe didn’t appreciate her.* The thought blazed through his mind, the insight as undeniable as it was sudden. *He left her for another woman.*

He took a deep breath. “I love you, Joy,” he whispered.

Her eyes popped open, bright blue focusing on him like a laser beam. He could read the suspicion in them, so like Marnie when she was in one of her fouler moods he almost laughed.

“I love how you touch me,” he continued. “How you treat me like I’m a real person. An adult. I love how you’re always patient, even when I don’t understand something or screw it up. I love how you took me in when you

didn't have to, how you gave me a place to stay when I had pissed off everyone in my family by acting like a selfish dickhead.

"I love how you gave me work that...that has value, instead of pushing numbers around on a spreadsheet.

"And I love how you make me feel. Like a man." Carefully, so very carefully, he put his hands on her head, sifting his fingers through the corn-silk softness of her hair. Not overbearing her. Just...guiding her to a rhythm which was somehow even more pleasurable than before. Unconsciously, his ass-cheeks began to flex on the chair, pushing his groin upwards to meet her descending mouth on every stroke. "God, I want to be a man for you. Be your man and make you cum."

"Mmmmm!!" It was a moan of desperate agreement, and the sound, vibrating through his steel-hard shaft, made his balls boil with need. Devin could feel it starting, the pulse of his muscles as the hot seed of his loins crept up his cock. Joy wrapped a hand around him, pulling at his manhood, urging him on. The other cupped his balls, her fingers stroking the skin of his scrotum lovingly. Her cheeks hollowed as she sucked at him, and her tongue laved his throbbing flesh.

"Joy." He could barely form words, she was making him feel so good. But somehow he forced them out from between his numb lips. "I'm getting close. I'm going to cum."

"Yes." His cock was freed from her mouth. Joy knelt on the floor in front of him, her hand flying up and down his shaft. It was slick with her spit and shining in the afternoon sunlight. "I want to feel it. I want to feel your jizz all over me, baby. Come on! Cum for me!"

His only response was a groan. It was too much. He couldn't hold back any longer. And there wasn't a need to. With a relief that was almost comical, he let himself go, thick, ropy bursts of cum shooting from the head of his prick to land on Joy's face and chest. Dollops formed on her cheek,

her lips, her chin, her cleavage, slowly trickling down her skin to gather in white, milky pools.

“Oh, yeah,” Joy sighed, as his orgasmic shudders slowly ceased. She bent down, letting him see her tongue as she licked him clean in long, lingering strokes. He shivered, his skin almost painfully sensitive in the aftermath of his climax. “That’s what I needed. Hot cum all over my body. Almost as good as being *inside* my body.” She ran a finger up her chest, coming away with a glistening blob, and sucked her fingers clean with a moan. “Marnie’s a wonderful lover, if I can say so. But I’ve always liked to see proof.”

“I’ll be happy to provide all the proof you need. Whenever you want it.”

She smiled at him and got up. “You’re sweet.” A warm hand touched his cheek. “I’m going to go clean up. And you should probably get your clothes back on. Unless you want her to find you half-naked in the kitchen.

At the thought of Marnie, his cock gave a twitch. Joy must have seen it, because she raised a sardonic eyebrow. “What? I’m not good enough for you?”

He stood up, heedless of the shorts around his ankles, and kissed her on the mouth. Her lips parted, and she gave a breathy little moan in response.

“You know you are,” he said. He was barely able to keep himself from crushing her to him in an embrace. “But you can’t blame me if I think that she is almost as gorgeous as you are.”

“Smooth talker.” But her voice was fond. “Just be careful with Marnie. She’s been hurt. And men are not her favorite people. If you decide to go after her, Dev, you better be damn sure you know what you’re doing.”

## Chapter 5: Leading a Horse to Water

Marnie pulled into the dooryard, feeling grumpy.

*God. When am I going to get laid again? For-real laid, and not just a quick tonguing, me and Joy trying to make it quick because we're scared to death Devin might catch us?*

*And I could use some cock, too. If my pussy was my tummy, I'd be starving to death. The only thing that's been in there lately are my fingers and my dildo. And neither of those are what I want.*

She got off of the tractor, hopping to the ground with a quick flex of her knees. *What the hell?* She stared at the house. A huge metal storage crate, which she vaguely recalled seeing behind the barn the last time she had noticed it at all, was to one side of the porch. It was surrounded by lumps of debris which she recognized, after a dumbstruck moment, as being shingles and plywood from the porch roof. More bits and pieces of the roof were also laying on the porch, and a large section of plywood was right in front of the door.

She charged up the steps, a scowl on her face. *What was that idiot doing now?* “Devin? Where are you?”

“In here.” Her cousin emerged from the downstairs bathroom, wiping his hands clean on a towel.

“What the hell have you been up to?”

“What?” A panicked look crossed his face. “What are you talking about?”

She pointed out the door. “Did you do that? Or,” she added with heavy-handed sarcasm, “did a very small tornado hit the front of the house?”

“Oh.” His shoulders seemed to droop with relief. “That.”

“Yes,” she snapped. “That. What the hell are you doing to my home?”

“Exactly what my employer told me to do,” he replied hotly. “If you got a problem with it, take it up with her. It’s not my fault her husband let the porch roof go to hell. And it’s not my fault the floor rotted out and I fell right the hell through it this afternoon when I was bringing in the supplies from town. Joy decided we should tear off the roof, re-shingle, and redo the flooring as well.” He glared at her. “So get off my back, huh?”

“Oh.” With the ground cut out from under her, she tried to rally. “Well, you might have said so.”

“I would have, if you hadn’t jumped down my throat as soon as you walked in the door.”

“Where’s Joy?”

“Upstairs, taking a shower, I think. We got pretty sweaty up on the roof.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Yeah. You might want to do the same thing, Dev.” She sniffed pointedly. “You’re getting pretty fragrant.”

He shrugged. “I can wait. Unless you think I should climb into the shower with her.”

*In the shower with Joy.* She tried to stifle a sigh of fond memory. “Well, while you wait, let’s clean up that mess outside. We don’t need old nails and crap lying around out there. That’s a good way to catch a nice little case of lockjaw.”

“Yeah, she read me the riot act about that earlier,” Devin said, as he followed her outside. He picked up a clump of mingled shingles and tarpaper and lofted it into the bin. “Right after she found out I picked up a souvenir in the barn this morning.” He rolled up his sleeve, displaying a neat white bandage around his bicep. “Lord, you guys can get yourselves into some mischief, can’t you?”

“You should see it in the winter,” she said. “When it’s about fifteen below and the wind coming in from Canada. You’d think the North Pole was about five miles away and moving south. Or that we were ready to start another ice age.”

Devin grunted. "I'll pass," he said, bending down to pick up more detritus. The motion brought his firm, muscular thighs and tight ass into disturbing prominence, and Marnie looked away, swallowing.

*I shouldn't even be thinking about him. I've got Joy, and she's got me. We're all we need. In a couple of months, Dev is going to drive away and never come back. Just like Dad did when I was just a kid. You can't trust men. They'll always let you down. Always.*

"Marnie? Hey, Marnie!"

She blinked, realizing she was standing rigid, staring off into space. Her fist was holding a crumpled bit of tarpaper so hard her knuckles ached.

Devin peered at her. "Are you all right? You looked so angry just then..."

She shook her head, then picked up a piece of plywood, throwing it into the bin viciously. The clang as it hit the metal wall made her feel the tiniest bit better. "I'm fine, Dev. Just fine. I can look after myself. You're not my father."

"No," he said quietly, giving her a deep look. "I'm not."

Supper was a louder affair than usual. Joy had declared that it was too hot to make anything fancy, and had popped a couple of frozen pizzas into the oven instead. While those were cooking, she had sent Marnie and Devin out to the garden to gather the fixings for a salad. As they ate, Devin opened up more than he had before, apparently not completely exhausted from the day's work, as he had been during the first few weeks of his involuntary visit. Joy also was more talkative than usual, answering Devin's questions about the farm and its history while he nodded in apparent interest.

It left Marnie feeling a little left out, watching the way the other two were getting along so well. "You never seemed that interested in the farm, Dev," she remarked during a lull in the conversation.

He shrugged. “It’s part of me, too. My dad grew up around here, after all, even though he left for the bright lights and the big city.” Across the table, Joy snickered at the thought of Fort Dodge being a metropolis. “I’d like to get to know more about it, while I have the chance. You know Dad. You practically have to drag things out of him.”

Joy laughed. “That’s the truth. He was always a close-mouthed little grump. Especially when he was a kid. I think that’s why we got to be close. It took so much effort to get him to say anything that by the time you did, you knew him better than he knew himself.”

As they talked, Marnie’s eyes narrowed in suspicion. There was something odd about the way Devin and Joy were acting. Devin seemed... more confident, more sure of himself, as if he had passed some test while she was out checking on the fields. And the older woman looked almost... smug, laughing along with Devin’s jokes, and ruffling his hair fondly when she refilled his glass of ice tea.

She blinked, pieces falling into place in her mind. *No. No way. She wouldn’t. Not with Devin! Not with that fat, conceited jerk!*

*But he’s not fat. Not anymore.* Weeks of hard work had sloughed the excess poundage away from his body. Rather than the pale, doughy, whiny asshole who had balked at the merest hint of physical labor when he arrived at the farm, in his place sat a man. A man with tanned skin, clear, bright eyes, and a solid, lean body that, she was forced to admit, was the match for anyone in Mitchell or the farms around.

The pizza was abruptly tasteless in her mouth. She looked from Devin to Joy and back again, then stood up.

“It’s too hot,” she said, trying to hide the quaver in her voice. “I’m to go and take a shower. A nice cold one.”

The older woman frowned. “Are you sure, Marnie? You didn’t even finish your meal.”

“I’m just not that hungry, I guess.” *Please, don’t make this worse.*  
“Maybe I’ll finish when I come downstairs.”

But she didn’t come downstairs after her shower, instead staying upstairs in her room. When her lover came tapping at her door, asking if she maybe wanted to come downstairs for some apple pie and ice cream, she said she wasn’t feeling well, and wanted to go to bed early. But rather than the rest she sought, she ended up tossing and turning all night, tortured by dark fantasies in which Joy chose Devin as a lover and she was left alone while they laughed at her. Even when she fell asleep, it was troubled, and when she woke up, she felt as if someone had been pounding on her tense limbs all night with a baseball bat.

At breakfast, Joy declared that after she took Devin into town to get a tetanus booster, they were all going to work on the porch, denying her the opportunity to escape to the fields. While they were in town, she took care of the pigs, then the rest of Devin’s chores. When they returned, she was forced to witness their easy banter all day, and found herself growing more and more furious, taking her anger out on the porch, ripping each of the old boards out with far more force than necessary. And the air rang to the tune of her hammer as she pummeled innocent cedar planks into place.

“Marnie?”

“What?” she snarled.

“Here.” He handed her a cordless drill and a bag of wood screws. “If you keep up like this, you’ll hurt yourself. Besides,” he said with a charming, lopsided grin. “Screws are easier than nails to get out. All you got to do is reverse the direction on the drill.”

“I knew that before you were in kindergarten.”

“Yeah. Well, some people need a head start.”

She took a grip on her fraying temper, telling herself *again* that it wasn’t Devin’s fault that Joy found him attractive. “Why don’t you get up on the roof and help out,” she said quietly. “I can handle this.”

“We’re done,” he said simply. “I was going to ask if you wanted to come up and take a look, but you were too busy beating the crap out of a one-by-six to notice. Here.” He knelt down at the other end of the board, slotting it into place, its butt-end flush with the brick of the house. “Let me help.”

“I don’t need your help,” she snapped.

“I know.” He looked over his shoulder at her as he screwed the board into place, the drill a low whine in the summer air. “But you’re going to get it anyway. I don’t know why you’re so pissed off at me, but I didn’t come here to sit on my ass and watch you do all the work.”

The sentiment was so unlike the lazy, self-absorbed twerp who had shown up at their house a month before that she could do little more than sit and stare. But when Dev went to pick out another board from the shrinking pile, she bent and started working with her own drill.

*Either I’m going to kill him, or I’m starting to like him.* She couldn’t tell which thought was more disturbing, and tried to shove it away.

After supper she escaped back up to her room, but came down after dark with a blanket and a pillow in her hands.

“I’m going out to the back pasture,” she announced. “I want to look at the stars.”

“That’s nice, honey,” Joy said. She had her glasses on, a look that Marnie always found unbearably sexy, and was tapping away at the computer. “You kids have fun, but don’t stay out too late. I want to take all that crap from the roof to the dump tomorrow.”

“I didn’t...” she looked at Devin helplessly. “Do you want to do some stargazing?” she asked, her voice sounding sulky in her own ears, as if she was being forced to ask someone she didn’t like to her birthday party.

He looked at Joy, who ignored him, and shrugged. “Sure.”

“Then get your own pillow. I’m not sharing. And I’m not waiting for you.”

They both missed Joy’s smile as the door closed behind them.

*Two horny kids, a blanket, and the night sky. Couldn't be easier.*

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“I know what you two did,” Marnie said, as they tramped through the long grass. The smell of crushed alfalfa rose up around them, and moths fluttered ahead of their passage.

“Oh.” Suddenly Marnie’s antagonism made sense. He let a moment pass as he followed her. “Well, I guess that’s fair. I know what you and Joy have been doing, too.”

She turned, facing him, and he could sense the tension in Marnie’s stance. “Is that how you managed to get her to have sex with you? Blackmail?”

“First of all,” he snapped, tired of her constant sniping, “we haven’t had sex. She just gave me a blow job. Second, she’s the one who came on to me. And third, I know you don’t think much of me, Marnie. But do you really think I’m *that* big of a douche?”

“I don’t know.” Unwilling to face him, she turned away, spreading the blanket over the grass with a snap, then kicked the pillow on top of it. “Most men are.”

“I’m not most men. I’m me. I’m not perfect. Fuck, I’ve had my nose rubbed in that fact pretty thoroughly the last month or so. But even I have standards.”

“Which include screwing your employer?”

A smile, his teeth gleaming in the night. “Well, I would have felt kind of awkward being the only person in the house who *wasn't* humping each other, once I found out about it.”

Despite herself, she snickered. “Yeah, you’re a real hero.”

“I make the sacrifices I must,” he replied piously, and tossed his pillow down beside hers. “You really stargaze out here?”

“Yeah.” She lay down, the alfalfa grass providing a cushion almost as good as a mattress. “It’s nice and peaceful. You can think. Too bad you’ll probably be back in Iowa by the time the Perseids roll around.”

“The what?” Devin lay down beside her, his hands behind his head.

“The Perseids. It’s a meteor shower you get every August. Around Joy’s birthday. Sometimes you can see one every few seconds. Look.” She pointed to the west. “There’s Venus.” Her hand swung upwards. “And Saturn. The Big Dipper. Andromeda. Look there.” She pointed straight overhead. A tiny light made its slow way across the pinprick-fine motes of the cosmos. “Do you see it?”

He squinted. “Yeah. What is it?”

“A satellite. Maybe the ISS.”

“The what?”

“The International Space Station, you dope.” For once, her voice seemed more fond than angry.

“Oh.” For a while they lay in companionable silence. Slowly, Marnie felt the knot of tension in her stomach unwind, eased as always by the night sky.

“So,” Devin said. She could sense him picking his words carefully. “Is it all men that you hate? Or just me?”

“I don’t hate you! Or men!”

“Really.” His skepticism was obvious. “You’ve looked at me like a walking, talking pile of pig crap since the minute I showed up. And you can’t talk about your dad or the rest of your family, wherever they are, without looking like you want to spit. Hell, even when we go into town you’re way nicer to the women than to the men. Don’t think that people don’t notice, either. I heard one guy call you a stuck-up, frozen-ass, dime-store bitch in the grocery the other day. You might think that out here, people aren’t going to notice what you and Joy are doing. You’re probably right. But they will notice the way you treat them.”

The words hurt. The honesty behind them hurt even more. She felt hollowed out, numb. Could Devin understand?

She swallowed, then spoke. “Every man I ever trusted has failed me, Dev. I’ve learned that I can’t count on them. That the only people who I can rely on are the two of us.

“Dad left my mom, ran off with a brain-dead bimbo with a huge rack when I was in grade school. And then my mom,” she made a spitting noise, “started bringing home these men. Every six months or so there would be a new guy and I would be told he would be my ‘new dad.’ But the new dads weren’t any damn better than the old ones. And once I started getting these,” her shaking hands indicated her chest, “they started getting more interested in me than my mother. And she didn’t do a damn thing to stop them. So I ran away. And it wasn’t men who helped me when I was freezing and starving and sleeping in a barn. It was Joy.

“Joy hasn’t seen an alimony check in two years. Hell, I don’t think she even knows where the asshole lives, so good luck trying to collect what he owes her. My boyfriends at school were more than happy to get into my pants, but when I had work to do and couldn’t go to the stupid dances and basketball games and all that other high-school bullshit, they dumped me rather than try to make my life any easier.”

Somehow, her hand had found his, as she gave vent to all the frustrated fury that had built up over the past three years. “Even you. You’ve busted your ass the last few weeks. I can’t deny it. But you’re temp work, Dev. In a month, month and a half, you’ll be back at college, sitting in a classroom, and we’ll be back where we were.

“Alone.”

Devin rolled over, propped on one elbow as he looked down at her. His eyes were shadowed in the night. “What if you weren’t?”

“What?”

“What if I stayed?” One hand still held hers. The other lifted to rest on her belly. Through the cloth of her blouse, she could feel its heat, seeping downwards toward her core. “What if I wasn’t just temp help? Would you trust me then?”

“Don’t be silly.” She swallowed, firming her voice. “You know your dad wouldn’t let that happen. I don’t know him as well as Joy does, but I know him well enough to know that. And your mom would pitch a fit if you dropped out.”

“But what if I could?” He bent low, his breath warm on her neck. “I think you’re just as sexy as fuck, Marnie. And I don’t blame Joy a bit for falling for you. Or you for her. She’s gorgeous.” His fingers strayed lower, creeping under the loose waistband of her shorts. Unconsciously, she spread her legs, needing his touch. “She told me, you know,” he whispered. “How you liked men and women. I’m not saying I’m the best lover ever. But I’m here if you need me.”

And she did need him, she realized. Needed a man with a sudden, visceral urgency she could hardly credit. Under her shorts, under her panties, heat began to build.

“Dream on, college boy.” She managed to keep her voice steady, but made no move to push his fingers away. “You’re not nearly as good as you think you are.”

“Oh?” Suddenly, his hand was cupping her mound, one finger teasing her lips through her panties with the tiniest little strokes, lighter than butterfly wings. “And how would you know? I didn’t do anything for Joy. We didn’t have time and were scared of you catching us.” She could barely make out the curve of his lips as he smiled. “Wouldn’t you like to be the first to get a taste of what I can do?”

*Smug, self-centered jackass.* “I think Joy already got a taste. Didn’t she?”

“I blew all over her face and chest,” Devin responded calmly. “Just what she wanted. But I want more. And so do you, don’t you?” He bent and

whispered in her ear. "I can feel you. Getting wet. Don't deny it."

She couldn't. But she also wasn't about to roll over for him so easy. She was still the boss. "All right," she said. "On one condition."

"What?"

"You make me cum first. And," she added, "you get to use one hand. That's it. No mouth, no kissing, no oral. No dick. One hand."

Devin raised his eyebrows, but he didn't take his hand away from her pantie-clad pussy. "Do I at least get to choose which hand? Or are you going to make me do this lefty? And is there a time limit?"

"Use whatever hand you want. And you can take as long as you need. Unless I start to get bored."

"Oh, I don't think you're going to get bored." Removing his hand from her crotch, he unsnapped her shorts and pulled them down with his right hand, doing it, she was frustrated to note, not at all clumsily. She sighed, expecting the panties to immediately follow, but instead he tugged on the hem of her blouse. Tempting though it was to simply remain sprawled on the ground and frustrate him with her lack of cooperation, she sat up and let him pull it off.

Even in the dimness, she could see his frustration. "A bra, Marnie?"

She arched her brows. "And am I supposed to go around all day with my tits bouncing around? That's a good way to get all saggy and floppy when I'm still in my twenties."

"Yeah," Devin said, coming around behind her. "I can see how you'd be worried about that. It's obvious you need a bra just to keep them from dropping into your plate at lunch."

"You wish."

"Actually, I don't." He traced the line of a strap with one finger, making her shiver. "You've got gorgeous breasts, Marnie. I've wanted to get a better look at them for weeks."

“Well, here’s your chance. Can you get the bra off one-handed? Cause if you can’t, I’m not helping.”

“You’re all heart.” She could feel his frown, though his fingers were gentle. She bit her lip, not wanting to show how much his touch was affecting her. Soft, cautious, with fingers which were growing calloused by hard work. They made her breath come short and quick, her belly ache with frustrated arousal. “I used to know how to do this,” he mused, and it was all she could do to not reach behind her and pop the hooks herself.

“Voila!” A strap fell free, and she could feel the cups of her bra drop away from her chest. The balmy night air caressed her overheated skin as she slid it down her arms and put it to one side.

“Well?” She knew her breasts weren’t very big, though Joy had assured her she still had some maturing to do. Nevertheless, it was only with an effort that she kept herself from arching her back to emphasize her bust. *Stop being silly. You know he wants to screw you.*

“You are incredible.” A finger traced the line of her collarbone, then dropped between her breasts, circling one in ever-tightening spirals. Her breath quickened as the fingertip approached her nipple, then just as slowly backed away. “Lay down,” Devin suggested. “I want to touch you all over. And I can’t do that if you’re sitting.”

“Remember,” she said, laying back. “No kissing. No cock. One hand only.”

“I want to renegotiate,” he said, but she could hear the smile in his voice.

“No deal. You want more, you have to earn it.”

“Story of my life,” he sighed. He lay down beside her, his hand flat on her belly, fingers spread. “What do you like?” he asked.

“A lot more than you can do with that.”

“Obviously. But what *can* I do that you like? Do you want me to play with your breasts?” His words were followed by a hand-stroke that ended with her left breast cupped in his palm. “Your nipples?” A teasing tickle.

“Your legs?” He shifted, his fingers sliding down the inside of her thigh. “Or someplace,” his voice deepened, “a little more...intimate?”

“My pussy,” she gasped. She couldn’t help it. She wanted a man’s fingers on her, in that most wonderful of places. Yes, she liked having her tits played with. Yes, she liked to be held and cuddled and kissed. But she wanted to come, wanted Devin to touch her. Her legs were spreading on their own. “Play with my pussy.”

“Well, since you insist,” he smiled. He lay down again, his hand covering her through a damp layer of cotton. It was very strange how he could make her feel different things with the tiniest of movements. His palm pushed against her mons, sending delightful sparkles of energy through her body. And his fingers brushed against her nether-lips with the lightest of touches, paradoxically making her want more, and she humped her groin up against his hand, telling him without words what she needed. Slowly, with long, lingering strokes, his fingers moved up and down her slit. Each stroke made her hotter, wetter, hornier, and Marnie bent her head back, her hands finding her breasts, fondling them, making her nipples stand straight up from the tips of her tits.

But then, in an act so cruel she could do little more than keen in loss, his hand left her, instead playing with the edges of her panties where they framed her moist, hungry pussy. “What should we do with these?” he asked, lifting the fabric away from her leg. Cool air flowed in to do battle with her body’s humid heat. “Take them off or leave them on?”

“Whatever,” she snapped. “It doesn’t matter.”

“What does?”

“That you don’t fucking stop.” She seized his wrist and guided him back down to her cleft, then thought better of it and lifted up her hips, pushing her panties down to her feet, where she could kick them off with a dainty flick of her toes. She sighed in relief as Dev’s hand covered her again, and spread her thighs wide. Her mother was an incredible lover; generous,

skilled, and inventive. But right now she wanted a man's touch, even if her self-imposed rules meant that touching was all she was going to get. "There, yeah," she sighed, as his fingers explored her wetness before leaving again.

"Damn it, Dev..." she started, but was shocked to muteness when he traced her mouth with his fingers. Her nose caught the scent of her own musk. But understanding what he was suggesting, she opened her mouth, sucking on his fingertips, moaning as she tasted her feminine juices. And when he put them at her gates once again, his fingers slid into her with only the most token resistance, filling her up, making her arch her back in ecstasy.

"Oh, Jesus," she whimpered, wishing she hadn't been so pissy earlier, wishing she hadn't set a bunch of stupid, arbitrary rules. She'd gotten just a hint of what his cock was like, how big it was in the bathroom the night before. And Joy certainly hadn't acted like a woman who was disappointed in what she'd experienced. So why hadn't she pulled down Dev's pants and seen for herself? It was right there, only a foot or two away. She closed her eyes, imagining him above her, filling her up with his thick, hot rod. His mouth on her tits, his thumb...

Her eyes popped open as fantasy gave way to reality. That *was* Devin's thumb, circling her swollen clit. She raised up on her elbows, looking down in the starlight, as he worked on her, falling into a steady, sensual rhythm. A push of his fingers inside her, a circling of her bud. A withdrawal from her quaking pussy, drawing steadily nearer to climax, another circle. Every so often the pad of his thumb would brush across her button and her hips would jerk in startled pleasure.

"Devin." For once she didn't snap his name, but instead lingered on it lovingly, her voice little more than a breath. She rolled over on her side, careful not to displace his hand. Her fingers slid under the hem of his shirt, exploring his hard, flat, belly, his abs. "You feel so good."

“What about the rules?”

“The rules were that you could only touch me with one hand. I didn’t say anything about me being able to touch you.” She found his pecs, lightly dusted with hair. She tugged on a strand, smiling as Devin growled under his breath, though his invading fingers never missed a beat. God, how long had it been since she had been able to touch a man’s body? Four months? Five? Her legs were shaking, her belly a red-hot pool of lava that sent its reaching tentacles through her entire body. Every so often, she squeezed his fingers with her inner sheath, loving the way he felt inside her. The only thing better would be a real cock. Longer, thicker, and ready to pulse inside her when she made him cum.

*Oh, God.* She groaned at the thought. She could take him now, she thought, putting her free hand on his groin. As she suspected, he was hard underneath the sensible work jeans. Her fingers traced his length, her lips curving in a possessive smile. It would only take a second. Pop the button, pull down his jeans and boxers, push him back, and hop on top. As wet as she was, he would slide right in. And Christ, wouldn’t *that* feel good! She whimpered, her loins pushing up into the nighttime air, clenching around his strong fingers. A virile man, a man who would stay with them, would take care of her and Joy and work by their side. God, yes, that’s what they needed. Someone who plant the fields in the morning and plant his seed in them in the evening.

*A baby. My baby. His baby.* The thought sent her arousal skyrocketing and she knew she only had seconds. “Devin,” she panted. She was pulling at her nipples now, totally lost in a haze of desire. “Get down here.”

“What?” He leaned close.

“Long and fast. But not hard. Can you do that?”

He nodded, eyes wide.

“And keep working on my clit. You got me ready to explode. Don’t blow it.”

“Good thing I kept my pants on then,” he grinned. But as she drew breath to say who knew what, his rhythm changed, his fingers driving fast and deep inside her, as deep as he could reach, but somehow gentle and firm, not bruising her tender flesh. His thumb settled on her throbbing pearl, rubbing her, and her back arched up, her mouth opening in a soundless scream as her breath caught in her throat. She couldn’t speak, couldn’t even *breathe* as her orgasm erupted, her pussy burning as pleasure burst through every part of her body, making her nipples blast white-hot fire into the blameless night sky. She writhed, caught on Dev’s fingers like a fish on a hook, only he was giving her ecstasy rather than pain, and his whispering voice, telling her how beautiful she was, how much he loved her, made her pleasure redouble, until she thought she might pass out from pure joy.

When she came back to herself, she was limp, lying flat on the blanket, sweat slowly cooling on her fevered skin. Aftershocks from her climax were slowly chasing themselves through her body, but she could think, at least.

“Bored yet?” Devin’s voice asked, filled with false concern.

“Asshole,” she whispered fondly. She clenched her muscles one last time on his fingers, then levered herself away, rolling over to lay on her stomach, her head resting on her arms and the clean pillow, still smelling fragrantly of fabric softener. She inhaled, wanting to simply drift off into sleep, regardless of small things like mosquitoes or coyotes. “And yes.” She answered the question men always had. “I came. And it was good.”

“Oh.” He looked down, and she realized that Devin - Devin, who could take ego and self-absorption to heights rarely seen - that Devin was actually embarrassed by her replete languor. “Good, then. That’s good.” He glanced up, and her breath caught at the hunger in his eyes. “So. Can we...?”

*Typical man. Always thinking with his dick.* “No.”

“But...you promised.”

“I said we’d fuck. I didn’t say when.”

“Oh.” Even in the starlight, she could see him chewing his lip. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

“I said okay, didn’t I?” His voice was irritated, but not angry. He stretched, his hands lifting over his head. “Now that you’ve seen how awesome I am in bed...or in an alfalfa field, I know it’s only a matter of time.”

“You have to be,” she said, “the most conceited man I have ever talked to in my entire life. The next time I see your mom, the two of us are going to have a talk.”

“Really?” He grinned in the night. “You’re going to ask her why I have an overinflated sense of my own sexual prowess? That would be an interesting conversation to listen to.” He sat up, posing like a body-builder. “I am Devin. And I am here,” he clapped his hands, “to sex you up!”

“Right.” She stood, casting about for her panties and the rest of her clothes. “You can sleep here tonight if you want. But I want a mattress. Trust me on this one. No matter how soft the grass feels, in the morning you’ll wake up with big nasty bruises because you slept on a rock.”

Devin shrugged and got up as she put on her shoes and socks, shaking out the blanket and folding it neatly over one arm, and tucking the pillows under the other. “We didn’t stay out here very long. What are we going to tell Joy?”

“Well.” She smiled at him, feeling fully relaxed for the first time in weeks. “I don’t know about you. But I definitely saw some stars.”

“Oh. Well.” He looked down, scuffing at the ground with one foot. “That’s good then. Right?”

He was actually unsure of himself. Part of her was tempted to press her momentary advantage. But she sat on that idea. Nothing good could come of making Devin feel bad. “Yeah,” she said softly, reaching up to kiss his cheek. That’s good.”

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“Joy,” she said, as soon as they entered the house. “We have to talk.”

Her employer (and lover) raised her eyebrows from her seat on the sofa, and clicked off the television. “Yes, it appears that we do,” she commented. “Since all you’re wearing are your tennis shoes and your socks. Did you have a good time stargazing with my farm-hand, Dev?” She cocked an eye at him. “No, I guess not. It looks like Marnie had all the fun.” She shook her head dolefully. “Kids. What are you going to do with them? You try to raise them up right, try to teach them right from wrong, and they go and make their co-workers eat them out and don’t even give them a hand-job as a reward.”

“He didn’t eat me out! He fingered me!”

“And how can she tell all that just from looking at us?” Devin added in a stage whisper.

Joy flipped a hand. “Anyone can see it. Or smell it.” She pointed a finger at Marnie. “You had sex. You,” the finger swung to Devin. “Obviously didn’t. Your posture is all wrong. If you had gotten laid, you’d look a lot more relaxed. And you wouldn’t be hovering over Marnie like someone might swoop down and take her away.

“So.” She leaned back, folding her arms across her chest. “What do you want to talk about?”

For the first time, Marnie felt nervous. Would her crazy idea work? “So. Um.” She flushed. “Dev told me about what you guys did yesterday. And he told me that he knows about us. Did you like it?” she finished in a rush. “Blowing him?”

Joy drummed her fingers on the arm of the sofa. Beside her, Dev shifted nervously, and she put an arm around his waist to calm him.

“Yes, as far as it went,” she answered at last. “Of course, I would have liked for there to be a little more time, so we could go a lot farther.” She

winked lewdly at Devin.

“Well, I liked having him finger me,” she replied. “And you know how much I like it when the two of us are in bed. So,” she went on, feeling as if she were negotiating a set of rapids in a leaky canoe. “Is there any reason the three of us all can’t go to bed? Together?”

Devin jumped in surprise, but didn’t say anything. “A threesome,” Joy mused. “Are you intending this to be permanent?”

“I...I don’t know. Probably not. I mean, there’s going to be times when I just want to be in bed with you. And you might to fuck just Dev, and not me, once in a while.”

“Sure,” Dev put in, speaking to the air. “Don’t ask my opinion. I’m just along for the ride.”

“Oh?” She swung on him. “Do you have a problem with it, smart-ass? Then say so.”

“No.” He looked down at his shoes, a flush mounting his cheeks. “No problem. Sorry.”

“Your mouth is going to get you in trouble someday, Dev.” Joy looked at them both. “Have either of you ever been in a threesome?”

“No, Joy.”

“No. Have you?”

“Once.” She snorted. “Joe talked me into it. It was a few months before he split on me. He got really pissy when the other woman and I found out we were more into each other than we were into him. Might be why he started screwing that red-headed bimbo at Sully’s Diner.

“So if you want this, we have to be careful. We have to share. And if, after tonight, we find out it isn’t working, we have to be damn mindful of everyone’s feelings. Dev, if Marnie and I decide it isn’t working out with you and go back to things the way they were, are you going to pitch a fit like a kid having a tantrum?”

He shrugged. “I hope not. I mean, I wasn’t expecting to get laid by you guys when I came here, so it’s not like I’m losing much.”

Marnie looked at Joy proudly. “See? I told you he wasn’t completely hopeless!”

“You told me?” she asked incredulously as Devin sputtered. “The first morning, after you showed him his chores, you begged me to put him on the first bus back to Fort Dodge.”

“There *aren’t* any buses to Fort Dodge,” Devin said.

“Yeah.” Marnie sighed regretfully. “That did kind of put a kink in my plans.”

“Right.” He put his hands on his hips. “So is someone going to fuck someone tonight? Or should I go back upstairs and spank it again?”

“I don’t know.” Joy got up, as graceful as a willow in the wind, and walked over to them. Tipping her head just a little, she kissed Marnie. A long, deep, lover’s kiss that left her body hot and flushed. Well before Marnie had had her fill, she stepped away, repeating the process with casual thoroughness with Devin. Devin’s eyes were slightly glazed when she finally pulled back. “Do you think the bed upstairs is big enough for all three of us? It’s only a queen-size, after all.” She pulled a sad face. “I knew we should have gotten a bigger one when Plackett’s had their sale this spring.”

“We’ll make room,” she said, and Dev nodded mute agreement. Of course, she thought, a man would agree to most anything if it meant he was going to get laid. And she bet that tendency only increased if faced with the prospect of a three-way. Entire porn films had been based on plots less threadbare.

“Well, then.” She smiled brightly. “Let’s go upstairs.”

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Dev tried to stay cool as he followed Joy up the stairs. Only a few steps behind him, Marnie followed.

Could this really be happening? Had Joy really just invited him up to her bedroom for a three-way? Or had he gotten a really bad case of sunstroke that afternoon, and was hallucinating the entire thing? It didn't seem to be completely out of the question. Marnie's prickly personality seemed to have undergone some sort of orgasm-induced transformation, as if his fingers had a benign magic he had never suspected before. Or had her constant ill-temper been frustrated horniness in search of an outlet?

And Joy...he had to restrain himself from reaching up and giving Joy's buns a nice firm squeeze. Joy was a classic MILF – sexy but wholesome, but with a certain look in her eye that told him that with the lights off there was no telling what might happen.

But the lights weren't off. He stood in the middle of the bedroom, hands at his sides, while Joy and Marnie examined him the way a pair of lionesses might check out a particularly fat, dumb wildebeest. He glanced at them, then the bed. It was neatly made, with a light quilt with an embroidered border in yellow and green laid on top of the cool sheets.

“Umm...”

Marnie giggled at his stammer. “Look at him! He's so worried. He doesn't know what to do with two women!”

“Take it easy on him,” Joy advised. “Most men don't know what to do with one woman. Let alone two.”

“Well, that's true.”

“Excuse me. Can you stop talking about me as if I'm not even here?”

“Sure.” Joy cocked her head at him. “Take your clothes off and get on the bed.”

“Huh?”

Joy sighed. “As much fun as it would be to unclothe you, sweet prince, in an act of love so gentle and tender that it would make the very stars weep

with envy, I'm not interested in that right now." Her voice grew blunt. "I want you to get naked. Now."

Marnie snickered, and he lifted his eyebrows at her. "Was she like this with you?"

"Oh, hell no," Marnie drawled. "I told her what I wanted and then I took it. It made things way easier." She grinned. "Move it, Dev. Or you might find yourself watching while we entertain ourselves."

"Oh. And that's supposed to be some sort of threat? That I get to watch two of the sexiest women in South Dakota make out?" Despite his words, he started to take his clothes off. When he was naked, he climbed onto the bed, kneeling in place. His hands clenched as Marnie and Joy eyed him with a sort of possessive hunger. "Well?"

Joy glanced at Marnie. "What do you think?"

"I think we should be in bed. With him."

"I agree." Her fingers were already busy at her buttons. Marnie, luckily, only had to take off her socks and shoes, her lissome young body glowing in the lamplight. She was naked first, and crawled into bed with him. Her hand caught his as he reached for her. "No, Dev. Wait." She put a finger over his lips as he tried to speak. "And shut up." Her eyes flicked to where Joy was shimmying out of her jeans. "I know you're a man, and therefore amazingly stupid. But for once, try to think with something besides your dick, okay? This is important. For me. But especially for her." Her voice lowered. "You're the first man to be in this room in three years. So let her call the shots, okay?"

He nodded, just as Joy turned back around. "Oh, damn." Her eyes softened. "What did I do to deserve so much beauty?"

"I don't know, Joy," he said as she joined them in the bed, which was beginning to seem quite pleasantly crowded. "Maybe Joe was God's way of putting you in purgatory before you died, rather than after?"

Joy snickered, followed by Marnie. Joy trailed a hand up his spine, making his skin prickle. “Damn, boy. A month on the farm, and look at you. What would happen if we gave you a year?”

“I don’t know.” Her touch was incredible. “Look even better, maybe?”

“Mmmm. I’d like that.” She bent low, her breath teasing the skin of his side. “Marnie is gorgeous. You know that. But sometimes,” a lick, “a woman,” another lick, “needs a little bit...more.” She kissed his stomach, her breath hot on his skin, sharp little teeth nibbling as his flesh as he jerked in surprise. Marnie, somehow knowing what her lover was doing, mimicked her from the other side, her tongue moving over the skin of his side in long, slow, hot wet sweeps.

And he was responding. Couldn’t stop, didn’t *want* to stop. Between his legs, his cock lengthened, thickened, grew, rising up heartbeat by heartbeat as blood rushed down to his groin, making him hard and ready.

“Nice.” Marnie lay her hand on him, rubbing the underside of his shaft in slow circles. “I knew you were big. But this is *very* nice.”

“I didn’t think you were a size queen,” he gasped.

“I’m not.” She looked up at him. “Boys who are average can be better than average in bed. I admit it. But you, Devin. Having a pecker like this means you were born on second base, sexually speaking. You didn’t hit a double. But you’re already in scoring position.

“A woman looks at this,” her hand curled around him, slowly pumping. “And we wonder what it would feel like. That wonderful sensation as you push inside, sliding past our lips and into our pussies. And how good you would fill us up. Will it hurt? And will it be a *good* hurt, a nice little ache to let us know that we’re with a real man? And how hard can you make us cum?”

He blinked. Obviously, being a woman was a lot more complicated than he thought. Joy seemed to be ignoring the conversation, but he caught the blush of pink as she flushed, slowly flowing upwards from the cleft of her

buttocks, across the smooth, satiny skin of her back. Her hair was down, falling across one shoulder, and he stroked wherever he could reach as she worked on him with mouth and tongue. Her hands tickled the line of his backbone, and he closed his eyes against a jolt of lust as she teased him, her fingers brushing against the downy hairs at the nape of his neck.

He opened his eyes to find Marnie glaring at him. “What?” he whispered.

She nuzzled his neck, and under the guise of kissing his ear, took the opportunity to speak. “Do something for her, you big dope,” she hissed under her breath.

“Like what?”

“Like, I don’t know. *Kissing her*, maybe?”

“She’s down there.”

“Then *go* down there. Christ, Dev! Isn’t it about time you did something for her?”

Fuming at her words, fair though they were, he reached down. “Joy?”

“Hmmm?” Her blue eyes blinked up at him.

“Come on up here.” Marveling at her lightness, he lifted her into his lap. One hand in the small of her back, the other at her shoulders. “Let me and Marnie make you feel good.”

“You and Marnie?” Her brow wrinkled. “But we were taking *you* to bed.”

“And I’m here. But you’ve been fighting your fight for so long, Joy.” Dimly, he could sense Marnie’s startled agreement. “Just for once, let us help you.” He held her close, easing the tight muscles, fingers working at knots that were so tense they almost hurt to feel. Marnie worked in behind her, strong hands kneading her shoulders, her back. Slowly, the two of them working in tandem, he lay Joy down on the bed, her back against Marnie’s front, Marnie propped up on the headboard. Marnie kissed her mother’s neck while he stroked her thighs.

*God.* His eyes feasted on the two women, so alike as to be almost twins, despite the difference in age. Marnie caressed her, while the older woman's eyes were closed, her chest rising and falling in sharp little pants. "You are so beautiful," he said lowly. "Both of you."

He wanted to bury himself inside them, inside both of them. To drill one and then the other with his rampaging cock and fill them with his seed. But instead he leaned down, his lips just catching Joy's cheek. One side, then the other. Her temple, her ear, her neck, the hollow of her throat as she tilted her head back, the gentle curve of her shoulder. And then, best of all, the honey-sweet bow of her lips, her mouth opening eagerly under his, her arms twining around his neck, pulling him close as they kissed for the first time as lovers. Her tongue was sweet, reaching into his mouth shyly, touching his and then darting away to the insides of his lips, stroking his mouth with velvety softness. Their lips rubbed against each other sensuously, and Joy moaned into his mouth as the kiss went on and on, neither of them wanting to let go.

"Devin! For pity's sake! Let her breathe!"

"I have a nose," Joy said as they parted, panting slightly. "It still works. Damn, boy." Her eyes sparkled. "Who taught you to kiss like that?"

"You," he smiled.

"Me?"

"Because I love you," he replied.

"Oh." Startlingly, her eyes pooled with tears. "I love you too, Devin."

"And I love you, you big conceited jackass."

"Thanks, Marnie." He cocked a sardonic eye at her, even as he slid down the bed and kissed Joy's gorgeous breasts. Large without being too big, he lavished them with attention with his lips and tongue. "You always know the exact wrong thing to say."

"Shut up and kiss those tits."

“Well.” Joy’s voice hitched slightly as he swept his tongue up the inner curve of one breast. “Not always the wrong thing.” Her breath caught as Marnie’s hands came around, cupping the mounds from the bottom, lifting them slightly for him to worship. Her fingers stroked her mother’s nipples, and suddenly they were standing high and taut, jutting out from the areolae like a bulls-eye. He couldn’t resist, and he took one in his mouth, suckling on it lightly, while his tongue circled it over and over. It was large and firm, matching her breast perfectly, and he lashed the tip with his tongue as Joy slowly began to writhe under him, her knees lifting so she could caress his flanks with the silky flesh of her inner thighs, her groin humping up to grind her pussy against the underside of his cock.

“You’re wet.” Marnie’s voice was husky. Dimly, Dev sensed her hands exploring, working their way downward on her body. Joy jerked, then relaxed as she toyed with her. “Have you cum yet?” A faint negative. “Do you want to?” A louder positive. She kissed her neck, her hands moving over her body in long, loving caresses. “And you’ll be the first to get that big hard dick in you.

“You’ve done so much for us, Joy. For Devin. For me. You held me together when everything else was falling apart. You took Dev in when his family wanted to stuff him in a barrel and nail the lid down tight-”

“Hey!”

She ignored him cheerfully. “And the last few days, you’re the only one who hasn’t had some kind of sex. You ate me out, you gave Devin a blowie, you sat in the house while he gave me some awesome fingering...

“Tonight is for you. We’re going to fuck you so much you won’t be able to walk.” She lifted her breasts again, drawing Dev’s eye helplessly, and he bent to kiss them, pulling first one nipple, then the other into his mouth. “So how do you want to cum? My hands? You know what those are like. Dev’s hands? He’s pretty good. Or maybe one of us can eat you. She tastes

wonderful, by the way,” she said in a whispered aside. “Like sexy, horny honey.

“Or you can hop on that dick and take a ride on the D-train.”

Joy giggled, her laughter low and throaty as her body rippled in response to Marnie’s list of the erotic menu. “The D-Train? Seriously?”

“That’s what he calls it.”

A flush mounted his neck. “I thought I was alone.”

Joy reached up to cup his cheek. Her eyes burned with intensity. “I don’t think any of us will be alone again, if we don’t want to be.

“I was alone,” she continued. “So was Marnie. The same way you are now. Two are stronger than one. Three are stronger than two.” She kissed him again, deeply, her hand reaching down to circle his cock, her hot, strong fingers flowing over his skin until he had to close his eyes and bite his lip to keep from exploding all over her belly.

“Become one with us, Devin.” Her legs spread, her ankles locking behind his thighs. Slowly, she rocked up, grinding the sweet valley of her sex against his raging erection. The dense, close-clipped fur on her pubis teased his cock-head, almost painful in its nerve-heightened intensity. “I want you. We want you. Do you want us?”

“God yes,” he groaned.

“Then do it.” Suddenly, the tip of his cock was surrounded by hot, wet flesh. “Fuck me, honey. Fuck me now!”

Resistance would have been futile, even if he hadn’t wanted her with an intensity that made his balls roil and his shaft ache with unfilled lust. Slowly, he sank down, savoring the sensation as his cock plunged into her waiting pussy, inch by hot, delicious inch.

He paused, his eyes closed as he bottomed out, her pubic hair tickling his root, trying to stay under control as his body adjusted to the feel of sex for the first time in seven lonely weeks. Part of him wanted to ask her if he was big enough, if he met whatever standards she might have, but the words

caught in his throat. But then Joy looked up, as if she had read his mind, her lips curling in a large, lecherous grin, and he tucked the question back into his mind. He knew the answer would be the only one that mattered.

*Big enough.*

“Oh, yeaahhh.” Joy sighed, her lovely chest rising as she breathed in deep. A wiggle of her hips sheathed him even more comfortably inside her. “That’s what I’m talking about.”

“How does he feel?” Marnie asked curiously. Her eyes were avid as she looked over her shoulder. “God! He’s thicker now than before!”

“Not helping,” he gritted out from between clenched teeth. God, he was seconds away from shooting his load like a virgin. His cock twitched, and it was only with a monumental effort that he managed to control his rebellious body.

“How does he feel?” Joy repeated. A slight tightening of her sheath, and he gasped, nearly losing control *again*. “Like rain after a drought. Like a warm breeze in April. Like....” She trailed off as he began to move inside her, withdrawing, then entering her again, his cock stroking her inner walls, slickened with desire.

“Like a really big fat cock in your pussy after three years without one?” Marnie suggested.

Joy pulled him down for another kiss, her loins lifting to meet him on every stroke. “My sweetheart,” she chuckled. “The soul of a poet.”

“A horny one,” Marnie added, irrepressible as always.

“I love you,” he said. He glanced over Joy’s shoulder. “I love you both.” Stretching, he was able to reach Marnie’s mouth, taking her lips, nibbling just a little. Then Marnie reached around, taking her mother’s chin in her hands, pulling her around so the two women could make out passionately as his cock sawed in and out of Joy.

“Oh!” Joy’s eyes went wide and hazy. “So quick. Keep going, Dev! Just. Like. That!” The last word keyed upward, ending in a squeal, and he found

his cock clenched in a velvet vise as Joy bucked up against him, her pussy lips mashed against his groin as she humped him harder and harder and harder, her climax almost feral in its intensity.

“Keep fucking her, Dev.” Marnie’s hot whisper drew him back. “That’s what she loves. Don’t you?” Her hands played with her tits, fingers pinching her tight nipples lovingly.

“Oh, Jesus.” Her eyes opened as Dev plowed back into her. “That’s it, baby. You fuck me. And then you can fuck Marnie. I think she deserves it.” Her hands splayed across his chest, playing with his nipples. “I love your body. So young and strong. Like hers.” A twitch of her shoulder indicated Marnie. “We’ll all be so happy together.

“Are you going to cum for me soon? I love it.” She tensed her channel around him again, milking his shaft. “Love feeling a man shoot his wad into me. Even better than watching him shoot on my face or feeling him cumming down my throat when I blow him.”

“Yeah, Dev. Cum for her.”

He was past the point of no return. He leaned forward, kissing Marnie, then down, kissing Joy, her mouth opening to him like a flower, and surged forward, cum erupting from his cock as he came and came and *came*, came in the most intense orgasm of his life, sowing his hot, milky seed in Joy’s waiting womb. He caught her hips in his hands and plunged into her over and over and over again, mindless in his passion, until he was completely spent, his head drooping low with the force of his climax.

“Wow.” Marnie slipped out from behind her mother. “You are so damn cute when you cum, Dev.” She pushed at his shoulder. “Roll over.”

Bonelessly, he did so, flopping onto his back, his chest heaving, his eyes staring at the ceiling. Faintly, he could hear Joy sliding down to lay beside him, her head pillowed on his shoulder. A hot, wet sensation enveloped his sensitive cock, and he blinked aware to see Marnie cleaning him with her

mouth. Her tongue moved up and down his wilting shaft in slow, languorous strokes.

“The two best tastes in the world,” she grinned up at him. “Her cum. And yours. And now I get two for the price of one.

“So,” she added, when he was shining clean. “How long until you can get it up again?”

“Huh?”

“Well, you fucked Joy. And I hate to be left out. Especially when you made her cum so good.” On his shoulder, Joy gave a contented murmur of agreement. Marnie rolled on top of him, her shaved pussy resting on top of his withered staff. She rocked suggestively. “How long until your little soldier is saluting again?”

“I don’t know,” he groaned. “I’ve never tried.”

“Never? Poor baby.” She kissed his cheek. “No girl ever wanted to bone you twice in a night?” She grinned down at him, grinding slowly. “You better start working out, or taking supplements or something. Cause the two of us are horny, sexy bitches, and the lid’s off now.”

“Good God.” He closed his eyes. “Be careful what you wish for, Devin,” he muttered. “You might get it.”

“What?” Joy levered himself up on one elbow. “You wished to have sex with both of us? Pervert.” She kissed his cheek.

“Well, no. Not until a couple of days ago. But how am I supposed to deal with this? With her?” He gestured to Marnie, who had closed her eyes, rocking on top of him.

“Slowly,” Joy replied. “Really.” She nodded at the younger woman. “Marnie likes it slow and soft. She’s a romantic, really. You should see her at Christmas, watching all those sappy specials and using up all the tissue.

“So don’t worry about being Superman for her. She’s not looking for some sexual super-stud. Just...just love her, all right?”

“Sure.” He swallowed, and reached for Marnie’s breasts. Luckily, his cock was already beginning to show signs of life as Marnie’s hot wet lips slid across it. His balls still felt drained dry, but at least his body was doing something.

*Besides, his brain put in. You don’t need to cum for her to get off. She can just use your cock like a dildo. What’s more important right now? You or her? Just stay hard and let her do the rest.*

Sometimes, he admitted, his brain wasn’t completely stupid. He managed to pull Marnie’s body down close to his, so he could lavish her chest with kisses. Her breasts were just the tiniest bit smaller than her Joy’s, but not any less attractive. And she responded to his pulls at her nipples in the most gratifying way, cooing and holding his head close to her tits as she ground down on his phallus.

“Oh, damn,” she sighed into his ear. “Two hands are definitely better than one.” Her hand snuck down between them, finding her clit. Somehow, Devin didn’t even think about being offended by her pleasuring herself. It wasn’t a sign of inadequacy on his part, he knew. It was a signal of how much he was arousing her.

“God.” Her voice was hot in his ear, her breath coming in sharp little pants. “I love your dick on my lips. So hot. So hard. I want you inside me, Dev. You make me so fucking horny. And having her watching us...fuck, that’s hot.”

“Go ahead,” he whispered.

“Oh, fuck.” She raised up, sitting in his lap, and then sank down, taking him in in one slow sinking movement, closing her eyes as he bottomed out inside her. “God. I’ve been wanting this for days. Weeks.”

“Really?”

“Oh, yeah.” She kissed him, soft and sweet and gentle. The sound of her voice, his name a caress on her lips, was so unlike her normal prickly personality that all he could do was sit and stare. “You’re so damn hot, Dev.

Now that you lost all that weight.” Her hand explored his body, by way of explanation, roaming from his shoulders to his belly and stopping at his nipples, where she gave each one a playful tweak. “And the attitude,” she grinned.

“Attitude?” He sputtered in mock outrage. “You’re the one who acted like you wanted to make me sleep in the barn with the pigs!”

She put a finger to her mouth, as if considering. “No. I couldn’t do that. It would be inhumane. I mean,” she giggled, lifting up and sliding her feet beneath her. “Think of the poor pigs.”

Joy snickered. “Laugh it up,” he growled playfully, then gave Marnie a warning swat on the rear.

“I plan on it.” She closed her eyes, starting to bounce on his shaft. “Oh, God! His cock is awesome, isn’t it? Kiss my nips, Dev! Lick them. Oh, damn, I’m close already!”

He bent to her left breast, and then flinched violently, surprised as Joy knelt up beside him. She put a finger to her lips, warning him to silence, then kissed her daughter’s right breast, her mouth opening wide to take in the whole of the large, puffy nipple. Her cheeks hollowed, and Dev could just make out a slight slurping noise as she sucked and licked on her daughter’s breast.

“Oh, fuck! Oh, Joy. Oh, Dev! Keep doing that!” Marnie’s hand blurred as she strummed her clit, her hips jerking wildly as she bounced on top of him. To his amazement, Devin felt his shaft thickening, ready to erupt again. Joy was stroking his back with her hand, and across her lover’s chest, their eyes met. Hers were calm and happy, more serene than he had seen them in ages.

“Here we go!” Marnie leaned back, her breasts pointed at the ceiling, drawing them along with her. Her heels drummed on his back, and her groin pushed down into him, as if she wanted not only his cock inside her, but his balls as well. “Fuck!” she screamed, and Dev felt a hot wet surge around his

shaft, the skin of his dick drenched in fluid as Marnie shook in pleasure. “Coming!” she screamed. “Commmminnggg!”

He fell back onto the bed, Marnie slumped across his chest, his rod still buried in her, feebly twitching as his own orgasm completed. Beside him, Joy curled up, her head on his shoulder, their legs entwining, slowly stroking as he came down from the high of sex.

A click, and the light vanished. “What?” he muttered sleepily.

“We’ll talk about it,” Joy said quietly, her own voice muzzy. “In the morning.”

## Chapter 6: A Bird in the Hand

### *Two Weeks Later...*

“So.” His father leaned back, the remains of the Fourth of July potluck scattered on the picnic table. “That was a great meal, Joy. Thanks for inviting us over.”

“No problem, Jerry. It was Devin’s idea, actually. His and Marnie’s.”

“Hmmm.” The older man gave him a nod of grudging approval. “So has he held up his end of the deal? We haven’t heard much from him the last few weeks. But at least he hasn’t called up begging to come home.”

His lips tightened, but he kept his mouth shut. So much depended on this conversation. He couldn’t blow it. Wouldn’t blow it.

Though it had been torture, having to put on a show for his parents and Bryan. For the last fortnight, he and Joy and Marnie had made love in every place the farm allowed, in almost every position, limited only by their own imagination and the work, which never stopped, no matter how badly they might wish it.

Which made keeping his hands to himself through the Independence Day parade in Mitchell, Marnie sitting tall and straight and proud on the seat of the old Oliver as it chugged down Main Street to appreciative cheers (and not a few wolf-whistles), and the following picnic at the farm sheer agony. He had grown used to being able to kiss Joy and Marnie whenever he felt like it. Or catch them in an impromptu make-out session, and either watch or join in, whichever the two sexy women preferred. Pretending that he didn’t care for them felt like wearing a false face, all plastic and wrong.

“He’s got the makings of a pretty good man,” Joy observed mildly. “I don’t know how we’d get along without him, and that’s a fact. He and

Marnie were able to get the haying done in two days last month. It usually took me and Dad four, back in the day, if I remember right.”

Devin chewed the inside of his cheek, while Marnie choked back a giggle. Unspoken was the fact that Joy had encouraged them to work far into the evening with lewd promises of what she had in store for them when the haying was done.

“So I want to talk to you, Jerry. About the farm. And the future.”

“Sure.” The older man shrugged. “Kids, you can run off now.”

Bryan stood. But Devin and Marnie, warned by Joy, didn’t budge. “What I have to say concerns all of us, Jerry. Devin deserves to hear it. Marnie, too.

“Devin has made,” Joy said seriously, her hands folded in front of her on the table. “A very interesting offer.” A tilt of her head invited him to continue.

He swallowed. Could he do this?

“Well?” His father’s voice was impatient. “Out with it, boy. Do you want to come back home? No dice. You’re here for another four weeks, at least, no matter how good a job Joy says you’re doing.”

“No.” Something in the older man’s tone gave him the courage to square his shoulders and look him in the eye. “I want to stay here. I don’t want to go back to college in the fall.”

“No, Devin!” His mother shot up. “You can’t throw away two years of schooling!”

“What the hell is this, Devin? Some sort of trick?” His father’s face was flushed brick-red.

“It’s not a trick. It’s the truth. I was drifting at college, taking the easy way out to avoid the real world. But here…” He gestured at the farmhouse, the outbuildings, the ripening wheat and barley. “My work has value. It’s not just moving numbers around. I come back here at night and I see something real. Something honest. I want to stay.

“How much are you paying for my college tuition, Dad? Is two years of that worth the price of me getting a degree I don’t really want? Let me drop out of Iowa State and work here. You and Mom will save thousands of dollars. Maybe enough for you to take an early retirement in a few years. Don’t you think that Bryan deserves to be his own boss rather than working for you until he’s in his thirties? Or even longer? Let Harrow and Son be Bryan and his son, when he gets married to Carla and has a family. You and Mom can get the hell out of Iowa, like you’ve always talked about, and Bryan can run the business.”

“But Dev,” his mother protested. “What about college? What about a degree?”

“A lot of my credits are transferable,” he shrugged. “The first two years are all prerequisites anyway, classes that make sure I can read and write and do math and tie my shoelaces. I wasn’t set to really dive into the finance stuff until this coming year. I could take classes online and get a degree in Agricultural Science instead of finance, if Joy will agree to spring for some broadband out here. And it’d be a lot cheaper doing it that way, rather than paying for my room and board and tuition in Ames.”

“So you expect me to pay for that, too?”

“No, Dad. I’ll take care of that myself out what Joy pays me as a hired hand.” He ran a hand over his face, trying to disguise his frustration. “Let’s cut the crap, all right? I don’t want to be a finance major at ISU. I want to stay here and be a farmer. Joy and Marnie have taught me a lot in the last six weeks, but I want to learn more. They need help? I’m another set of hands.

“Everyone wins here. You save money by not having to fork out another two years of tuition. Maybe three.” He hid a smile as his father’s lips thinned. “Joy and Marnie get me to help with the farm.”

His father shook his head, but resignedly. His eyes, when they met Devin’s, were confused. “I don’t understand this. I wanted better for you

than this life. I left here and went to vo-tech school so I could make sure my sons' lives were easier than mine, not just as hard. Or even harder, with the way the government's fucking the little man over these days."

He shrugged. "What can I say, Dad? Some of us get what we deserve." He traded a secret smile with Joy. "And some of us are luckier."

"Huh. You going to feed the pigs when it's ten below? Going to bring in the wheat and barley when it's a hundred and ten and you've worked twenty days straight? You going to do it when you're so tired you can't see straight, and so sick you want to curl up and die? You going to put a boot in the ass of every shitheel who's got his eyes on this land?"

He nodded slowly. "Yeah. I will."

"All right." The older man stood up. "I'll think about it. I'm not going to make a decision like this off the cuff. I need to talk it over with your mom and your brother, run some numbers. This affects all of us. Not just you."

He stood up, meeting his father's eyes squarely. "I understand. And thanks."

"What for?"

He lifted a shoulder. "For sending me here. This place," he waved an arm. "It's made a man out of me."

The older man chuckled, shaking his head. "Well, it's what I hoped for. Didn't think I'd succeed so well that I turned you into a farmer, though.

"Well, what are we waiting for? Let's pick up this mess and head into town to watch the fireworks!"

"Do you think he'll go for it?" Marnie asked as they followed Devin's parents into Mitchell. The three of them were squeezed into the front seat of the truck. Dev thought he had the best seat in Hennepin County. *The meat in the sexy-lady sandwich*, he grinned.

"Maybe," he said cautiously. "But he's been making noise about wanting to retire since I was a kid. Or at least cut back on his hours and let Bryan

take over a bit. He's been busting his ass since he was younger than you and me, Marnie. It wouldn't kill him to slow down a bit. I think Mom's going to be the hard one to convince. She always wanted me to get a college degree."

"So what will you do if they say no?"

He gave her a lopsided smile. "They can't force me to go back to Ames. I'm ready to play hardball on this. Cooperate and do it my way, or I do it my way anyway." He put his arm around her shoulders, his fingers reaching down to cup a firm, swelling breast. "I'm not leaving you two behind."

Joy shook her head as they neared the city park. "I've created a monster. Two of them, actually. Dev, get your hands off my farm-hand's tits. And Marnie, stay away from his crotch."

"But Joy..."

"But Joy..."

She smiled at them. "Enjoy the show, kids.

"Because the real fireworks are going to happen when we get home tonight."

*The End*