



BRAIDED DESIRE

JC SZOT

Loose Id

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Chapter One

"I didn't know your father well. I wanted to, but he seemed okay with being alone most of the time." Cole Harrington handed Toni Jameson the keys to the weathered cottage. She opened the door, her nose filling with stale, pent-up air. During the last two years her father had lived here, she had never come to the farm to see him. He always insisted on meeting her, either in the city or somewhere in between. They had been regulars at several different diners.

"Don't take it personally. He no doubt considered your relationship to be normal." Toni took the keys, sneaking a quick glance at the farmer. Cole's tall, lanky frame filled a corner of the front porch, his eyes as dark as black coffee. He wiped the sweat from his forehead, shaved head shiny in the afternoon sun.

"Yeah, well"—Cole shrugged—"I thought he was a neat guy. We'll miss him around here. I'm sorry we couldn't make the service." He held the door for her as she lugged her bags inside.

"I appreciate that." Toni dropped her suitcase and tote bag in the cluttered dining room. She heard Cole's boots moving across the floor. He seemed hesitant to come into the house any farther.

"If you need anything, Antoinette, please let me know." Cole turned, resting his hand on the door frame.

"Call me Toni."

"Sure, and hey—" He raised a hand. He had a fresh cut on the bottom of his forearm, the blood drying, solidifying into a ruby red scab that Toni idly thought should be cleaned and bandaged. "Don't think you're under any kind of pressure. You can stay as long as you want."

"Thanks." Toni briefly met his gaze. Cole ran a palm over his head again, then let himself out.

Toni faced the ancient kitchen. A Formica counter with chrome edging that reminded her of an old diner from the fifties. Warm, musty air drifted into her nostrils—the smell of abandonment. The small, aqua-colored counter that lined the sidewall was littered with dishes. There was no way of telling whether they were clean or dirty.

Her father was no housekeeper.

It had been two weeks since the funeral. Since her father was not one to plan ahead, making all the last-minute arrangements put her under tremendous stress. As he had been a retired architect for the city of Newark, New Jersey, there had

been a huge crowd to contend with at both the wake and memorial service. His death was sudden, but since Toni's father never heeded the advice of physicians, impending death had loomed overhead for the last several years. A heavy drinker and a cigar smoker with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, he had to have known it was coming. Toni hadn't been surprised when Cole Harrington had called her, informing her that they had found Bruce slumped over in a chair, a book in his lap.

Toni walked through the house. It could take weeks to clean this place out. Cole had said there was no rush, but she didn't know how long she could stay without imposing. He might have plans to rent the house out to someone else—which made her responsible for getting it back into shape.

The once-white walls were bathed with a gummy, yellowish brown film. The tiny living room/den was stockpiled full of old magazines, newspapers, books, and old war videos. The only contemporary piece in the room was a large-screen TV. A dusty VCR sat nearby.

Toni passed the dining room with a sigh, seeing all the rolls of shelved drawings. As she lugged her suitcase up the stairs, the sound of her feet on the wooden stairs echoed the reality that now she was completely alone. It had only ever been her and Bruce. Their family had once been whole, until that cold, dark January night when her mother's life had been strangled out of her in a dark alley.

After Janet's murder, her father's life had stopped. Toni was only a year old. Her life hadn't existed long enough to stop, but there was no escaping the absence of her mother as she grew up. Her father tried his best, always seeking the guidance of his secretaries at the office. But, listening to her friends, Toni knew what she was missing. Her father tried to fill this void by introducing her to dancing and emphasizing the importance of her education. As an adult, she was successful on both fronts, her dancing and her career as an accountant. For that she would always be grateful to him.

Toni set her suitcase on top of a battered chest of drawers, the varnish peeling at the corners. She opened up the top drawer. All of Bruce's wool sweaters were neatly folded, a rancid odor rising to her nose. Tomorrow she would start cleaning.

* * *

"Bruce's daughter is here." Josh took a lengthy pull on his beer, sitting back on the porch swing, eyeing the gray SUV in the driveway.

"Yeah, Toni's here to sort through all of Bruce's rubble." Cole leaned against the railing, resting his beer on his thigh, the condensation seeping through his muddy jeans.

The slam of the screen door got their attention, their eyes aligning with the house. They watched Toni walk out to her SUV and unload the hatch.

"Should we offer to help her?" Josh whispered, giving Cole a sideward glance.

"Nah. I don't want to crowd her; she just lost her father. Maybe we should go in. I'll go check on her in the morning." Before turning his back, he took in her agile

figure lugging another suitcase and duffel bag up the stairs of the front porch. Her dark, curly hair was piled on top of her head, a few tendrils escaping the silver clips. The last hours of early darkness fell upon them, throwing the house into shadows from the large willow tree that sat in the middle of the yard. The clocks would spring ahead in two weeks. Cole went inside, Josh following close behind.

"Did you get a chance to talk to her yet?" Josh sat at the kitchen table.

"Yeah, I really didn't know what to say. I apologized that we couldn't make the service." Cole couldn't bring himself to go. He couldn't look at another body of someone he cared about lying in a coffin. He wanted to remember Bruce as he was. A cigar between his lips and drink in his hand, reviewing his theory on the fall of Napoleon.

"Think she'll be here long?" Josh leaned forward, digging his fingers into his scruffy cheek.

"Can't tell you. Being here will be a bit of an adjustment. She's a city girl."

"Oh yeah. Guess that's why we never saw her here, huh?"

"Bruce insisted she'd never like it here. He always went to visit her, something about her being busy with work. She's an accountant, works for some big-time firm in Montclair."

"Where the hell is that?" Josh frowned.

"It's up by the city, by Newark. You gotta get off this farm, man." Cole laughed, shaking his head.

"I think losing her dad is going to be the biggest adjustment," Cole said. "She's all alone now."

"Where's her mother?" Josh tipped his beer back, sucking the last of the frothy foam from the bottle.

"She's dead too."

"That sucks." Josh's lips flattened into a thin line.

"Yeah, her mother was murdered when she was a baby." A shiver crept up Cole's spine. He had lost his parents when he was twenty-two, and with that loss came the sudden acquisition of the farm. He couldn't imagine going through his adolescence without either of them. It was hard enough being without them as a grown man.

Having Josh's friendship and loyalty was what had saved him. They were best buddies all through school and had gone to vo-tech together to train in the plumbing and welding field. When Cole's parents were killed by a drunk driver, Cole impulsively planned to sell the farm, but only Josh could get through to him during his time of grief.

"Who killed her mother?" Josh's eyes widened.

"Bruce never said. He only told me she was murdered. I never had the balls to ask him any questions."

"Holy shit," Josh said.

Cole downed the last of his beer, the eeriness of their weighted conversation settling between them. Had Bruce lived out the rest of his life without a real answer? Cole's parents had been killed, but at least he knew who was to blame.

"So, you mentioned this girl's an accountant?"

"Yeah, so what if she is?" Cole eyed his friend, wondering what he was getting at.

"Well, don't you think that's convenient? You could use one of those." Josh chuckled. "A real one. Well, I'm going up to shower. What's the food situation like?"

"There's frozen pizza and minute steaks in the freezer."

Josh made a face. "Think we could go next door and get some real food from the city girl?"

"Get the hell out of here." Cole shoved him in the shoulder.

Cole knew his paperwork was a mess. The guy in town charged him a small fortune, probably because he didn't have many other clients. Cole always swore he would try to keep up with it, along with the barn chores, but somehow it always seemed to slip away from him. His finances were in complete disarray.

A knock sounded at the front door. When Cole opened it, Toni's figure was surrounded by a curtain of darkness. She had her purse under her arm, a denim jacket over her shoulders. Her eyes were glassy, reflecting the glow of the outside light on top of the barn.

"Hey, Toni. How's it going?" Cole let his gaze wander from hers, catching a patch of creamy skin peeking out of the flaps of her jacket.

"Okay." She shifted her weight. "You guys got a supermarket around here?"

"Sure. It only looks like the middle of nowhere."

Cole gave her directions, explaining where the store was in Asbury—the town closest to the farm.

"I guess New Jersey isn't all smokestacks and pharmaceutical companies." She laughed, tucking a wavy strand of hair behind her ear.

"Nah." Cole chuckled, noting her humor. He shoved his hands deep into his pockets. "You're just farther west, that's all. There's plenty of open space in Jersey."

"Thanks." A faint smile curved her lips.

"No problem." Cole narrowed his eyes, unable to resist a better look at her face up close. Thick lashes lowered in front of her dark eyes set above sculpted cheekbones.

"Well, good night, then." She grinned, her smile now brighter, a neat, white line.

"Hey, be careful. Not as many lights out here as in the big city."

"Thanks again, Cole."

It took a moment after she walked away for the thought to crystallize through his beer buzz—he liked the sound of his name on her lips.

Chapter Two

The next day was rainy and raw. A cold chill settled into Toni's bones. She peered out the window, wondering what farmers did when it rained. She got her answer within seconds when she saw another man walk across the yard into the barn, lugging a bale of hay on his shoulder.

She hadn't met anyone besides Cole but assumed he must have a few hired hands to help him on a farm this big. This one was only a few inches taller than she, sandy blond hair that was cut in short, shaggy layers with sideburns that were a bit longer than she was used to seeing. His muscles flexed under a wet, white T-shirt. When he bent over to release the lower latch of the barn door, she could see his blue and gold plaid boxers bunched up below the waistband of his jeans. She shivered, watching the cold rain fall onto his exposed skin.

There were no cleaning products in the house, only a jug of distilled white vinegar underneath the kitchen sink. Not bothering to get dressed, she went to work, scrubbing all the surfaces in the kitchen. By the time she was through, the house smelled like a delicatessen. There was a string mop in the hall closet that enabled her to attack the floor. While the floor dried, she sat in the den and began to riffle through a box of old papers. At the bottom of the box was a large manila envelope labeled "personal papers."

Toni reached inside. She pulled out a wad of credit card statements, cancelled checks, and a brittle newspaper. Her stomach twisted, her fingers shaking. She prepared herself, knowing the headline would scream at her once again, like it always did and would for the rest of her life. It had made the front page of the paper. It was January 17, 1979.

ESTEEMED CITY PLANNER'S WIFE FOUND STRANGLED

It took two weeks for them to find a suspect. Headlines continued to taunt her father for months, speculating her mother might have been having an affair. The police made an arrest but didn't have enough evidence to press charges. Her mother's killer was never brought to justice.

Bruce never talked about his theories. He always spoke of her mother with the highest regard. Toni had confronted him only once, when she was seventeen. She'd demanded to know why he never hired a private detective to try to find her mother's killer. Toni recalled accusing her father of not wanting to face the possibility that Janet might have been having an affair and that he was more concerned with his own embarrassment than the truth. This argument had only escalated the tension in their relationship, with Bruce unwilling to share anything about the case.

After that altercation, Bruce declared the subject closed. Toni was never sure if he had come to peace with things. Her mother's murder was a door he had kept closed.

The sound of footsteps on the front porch pulled Toni from her tormented time capsule. She hugged herself, feeling naked in her sleeveless white nightgown. She could see the back of Cole's head through the front window.

"Shit," she muttered. She turned the dead bolt, then opened the door. His face turned, meeting her gaze on the other side of the screen.

"Good morning."

Toni touched her hair. It was a wild, unruly mess. Wads of thick strands had escaped from the large barrette on top of her head during a restless sleep.

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize you weren't dressed." Cole's eyes darted away from hers, his line of vision diverted to the open field on the side of the cottage.

"No, I'm sorry." Toni lifted a hand, resting her palm on her chest. "I imagine farmers keep an earlier schedule than mine. I got so busy with the cleaning, I didn't bother to stop and get dressed." She laughed nervously.

"Yeah, I guess you have been busy." Cole wiggled his nose. "Smells like pickled beets in there." He grinned.

"I don't think my father's cleaned this place since he arrived. There's nothing here." Toni frowned.

Cole couldn't help noticing her lips. They were full, sensually pouty with a rosy hue to them. She hugged herself, trying to conceal her body in the thin, white gown. A delicate, embroidered trim disappeared down between her breasts. Her skin had more of a tawny color to it in the light of day.

"How 'bout I bring over something better? I have a ton of stuff in the barn."

"That would be great, if you don't need it." Toni stepped closer to the door.

"It's no problem. At least it won't smell like pickles in here. I'll leave it on the front porch for you."

Her eyes met his again, her lips bending into a shapely smile. "Thanks, Cole. I really appreciate it."

"Sure. Hey, come over to the house if you need anything else." He buried his hands in his pockets. "Don't keep running out to get stuff that I may have here."

Cole stepped off the porch. The door closed behind him. He walked across the driveway, his boots sinking into the mud. He needed to lay more stone before the persistent spring rains came.

Having Toni here could be a distraction. He really didn't bother with many women, let alone a steady relationship. Josh brought Chelsea to the farm one night after a few rounds at the bar, and she aggressively pursued both of them. For better or worse, neither of them said no.

With the farm to tend to, he was mostly overwhelmed and too tired to focus on much else. Another woman might think it was dysfunctional or wrong, but for Cole, it felt safe. Chelsea didn't need to hear certain words or be wined and dined. There was no need for flowers or commitments. All he had to share was his body. If she disappeared tomorrow, he'd still be intact. Chelsea was risk free.

With Toni staying at the farm indefinitely, Cole felt rattled. It was an uncomfortable feeling.

He left the cleaning agents for her on the porch. Cole pushed Toni from his thoughts, needing to get back to work.

* * *

Toni fixed a late lunch. Her limbs ached, hands wrinkled like prunes from wiping everything down. The house definitely smelled better; now a light, clean air settled in around her. While washing the dishes Toni heard a light knock on the front door. Wiping her hands on a frayed dish towel, she walked over to the door and was met with another visitor on the front porch, this time the man she had seen earlier carrying the hay into the barn. Toni opened the door.

"Hello, Ms. Jameson, I'm, uh, Josh Martin." He extended his hand. His skin was rough and calloused from outdoor labor. "Cole wanted me to bring this over, said you might need it."

Beside him was an upright sweeper, the cord wound around the handle.

"Nice to meet you." Toni reached for the vacuum, pulling it inside as Josh held the door. "This is great. Tell him thanks."

"Not a problem." He smiled, his lips closed. His one cheek bulged slightly, as if stuffed with tobacco. She watched the honey skin of his throat move as he swallowed. Her stomach felt queasy thinking of the brown, syrupy juice burning through his insides. "Let us know if you need any help with anything."

"I really don't want to be a bother. I pride myself on being low maintenance," she said lightly.

"We're here all the time. Not a bother at all."

He was shorter than Cole but thicker, his muscles pressing through the cotton of his shirt, his hair the color of graham crackers. Toni felt his eyes on hers. She met his gaze, his eyes a silvery grayish blue, like the frigid waters of winter.

"I really appreciate it. So what do you guys do around here when you're not working?" She laughed. "I took a ride around town, but I must've missed the hot spots."

"Well." Josh dug at the honey-colored hairs on his unshaven cheek. "We rent a lot of DVDs, drink beer, and play cards." He laughed, lifting his hands. "There's a pool hall across town. Guess that doesn't sound too exciting, does it?"

"I guess it's all what you're used to." Toni grinned, already enjoying his boyish smile and friendly manner.

"I suppose that sounds about right. If you really want some local fun, we're gonna have to get you on an ATV for some four-wheeling in the fields."

Toni ignored the invitation for the moment—fun was not the first thing that popped into her mind—and thanked him again. She watched Josh saunter back across the yard, his Levi's clinging to his hips. These guys were rugged, outdoorsy men. A far cry from the suit-and-tie guys she dealt with. If she was at Pal's Cabin down on Bloomfield Avenue and these two walked in to sit at the bar, everyone would call them rednecks. Toni wasn't sure if she'd agree with that. So far both of them had been very polite and accepting of her presence on the property.

* * *

"So what's your take on Toni?" Cole asked, sliding the platter of burgers across the whitewashed table. Josh sat adjacent to him in a pair of boxer shorts, his bare feet resting on a vacant chair.

"She seems really down-to-earth." He piled his plate with two burgers and a heap of fries. "I was thinking of taking her on a tour, show her around."

Josh sipped his beer, staring into Cole's eyes as he tried to read him. He was never sure what Cole was thinking. Josh learned over the years that the best way to decipher Cole was to catch him off guard with his questions, never allowing him too much time to contemplate his answer.

"What?" Cole wiped his mouth. "What's that look for?"

"What are your plans?" Josh stretched in his chair, lacing his fingers behind his neck.

"I'm hitting the sack early tonight. If it stops raining, we have to go check out the lower forty tomorrow and see if it's dry enough to start planting."

"No no." Josh shook his head. "Her, I meant. What are your plans regarding her?"

"None. You think I'm already planning on sacking her?" Cole's brows pulled together, his forehead pinched.

"Well, no. I wasn't going to put it quite like that." Josh bit into his burger.

"She's nice to look at, but I have no plans. Is Chelsea coming by anytime soon?" Cole sat back in his chair, holding his stomach.

"I'm not sure. Why?"

"Maybe it's just time to have her over again," Cole said, a knowing look in his eyes.

Chapter Three

After dinner Josh found Cole in the office. He stood at the threshold of the door, watching Cole riffle through a stack of receipts, his face set, his eyes narrowed.

"I think you should ask our new neighbor to give you a hand before everything we've worked for goes to hell."

Cole spun around, glaring at him over the high back of the leather chair.

"It's just a suggestion, man." Josh raised his hands, surrendering.

"Her father just died. What am I going to do? Go walking over there with my half-assed filing system, crying for help?" Cole shoved the pile of papers to the side. He faced Josh, then ran both palms over his freshly shaved head.

"Give her a few days to settle in, then go over there and ask her." Josh shrugged. "It's not like we won't pay her. I think she'd be better than that dumb-ass in town who calls himself an accountant."

"Yeah, he's screwing us over." Cole nodded, switching off the small desk lamp. He turned his back on the littered desk and empty ledger. He ushered Josh out of the office, then closed the door. He needed to remove himself from the papered chaos.

"We've got to do something. Your parents will start spinning in their graves."

"I'll give her a week, and then I'll go ask her," Cole told him, his tone admitting defeat.

Josh patted his shoulder. "Go to bed, man. We'll figure it out. We always do."

Josh followed Cole down the hall, the floorboards cool under his feet. Cole didn't meet his eyes before closing his bedroom door.

He knew he and Cole seemed an odd match for a friendship. Josh tried to be more open and willing to let others in. Cole's exterior was harder, a thickened shell that took time to get past.

Josh knew this was a defense mechanism—an icy layer that Cole assumed would keep people away, though there were a few who were patient enough to persevere and break through.

* * *

Cole sat on the edge of his bed. He pulled off his work boots and tossed them into the corner. He yanked the tattered red T-shirt over his head and threw it on

the floor. Once he was nude, he turned off the light. He reclined in bed, letting the cool night air brush over his skin. A faint yellow light spilled across the yard, filtering through the arthritic branches of the willow tree.

He rolled over to a chilled patch of mattress, squinting out the window. Toni had the place lit up, a far cry from the dismal, dark aura that used to surround Bruce on a daily basis. He sat up, suddenly curious, and saw Toni's figure through the open window. She was spinning, twirling, her legs lunging. He chuckled to himself, thinking she must have some kind of exercise video on.

Cole stood and shuffled across the room. He reached up to the top shelf of the bookcase. It housed all his mother's classics, books she had cherished. Cole would never think of throwing them away. Nestled between John Steinbeck's *The Winter of Our Discontent* and *Jane Eyre* was his hunting scope. He knelt by the window and brought Toni into focus. He saw her hair first, that wild hair that was beginning to make his toes curl. It was piled high on her head in a loose ponytail. A few strands stuck to her flushed cheeks.

Her eyes were closed; a maroon tank top stretched across her breasts—breasts that were small but nicely rounded, sitting high on her body, the nipples pushing through the thin fabric. Cole lowered the lens. A short, thin, black skirt fluttered around her toned thighs, her legs encased in black hosiery. He felt his lips part, sucking in a rush of air. When she hiked her leg up high over her head, her pink satin slipper filled the lens, the glossy ribbons wrapped around her ankle. She was a dancer. A ballerina.

He swallowed, his throat tightening. She had her leg raised high, resting against the wall, her body bent in half. The top of the square-toed slipper rested against her nose. Cole dropped the scope in his lap. He had never seen a real ballet dancer before.

His mother had gone to see the ballet several times, dragging his father to the city during the Christmas season. Cole recalled his mother saying she had always wanted to take dancing lessons, but her parents could never afford it.

He raised the lens again, fascinated by the movements of Toni's body, a fluency that must have taken years to master. Cole stared into her magnified eyes, watched the concentrated furl of her brow. He thought of going to tell Josh but quickly changed his mind, wanting to savor this discovery, hoarding it for himself, at least until the morning chores were done.

* * *

"I'm going to invite her over." Josh ripped the bale of hay apart. He tossed two chunks into Macy's stall. He nuzzled her smooth nose, laughing when her ears stood up straight, flickering. Josh patted the flank of the chestnut mare, then pulled out two browned wedges of apple. Her thick, pink tongue scooped them up, the juices dripping from her lips.

"You're what?" Cole asked as he mucked the corner of the stall.

"I'm going to ask Toni to come over for drinks and eats. It's only polite. Don't you think?"

Cole's eyes flickered, his brows lifting. "All right. When?"

"I'm going over there tonight. I'll ask her to come on Thursday. You don't have to ask her about the accounting. I just thought it would be nice to get to know her a little." Josh started brushing Macy's mane while she ate.

"You're right. We can't let her sit over there all by herself, night after night." Cole tossed fresh bedding onto the ground and winked at Josh before leaving the stall.

"Hey, what's up with you?" Josh followed him out of the stall. They needed to go down to the lower forty and map out their spring planting. "Your brain isn't anywhere near here today."

"I saw something last night."

"Such as?" Josh tailed him out of the barn and watched Cole's gaze go the small cottage before turning to face him.

"Let's get out of here. I'll tell you when we get down to the fields." Cole tossed him a set of keys to one of the ATVs.

* * *

"She's a dancer?"

"She's more than just a dancer." Cole squinted into the cool, early morning breeze. "We're not talking some nightclub go-go act. She's a ballerina."

"Seriously? Wow." Josh fussed with his gloves.

"Yeah, that's what I said." Cole sat on the ATV, trying to see the terrain. The image of Toni in her dancing outfit bled through his mind, distracting him. He could feel Josh's stare in his peripheral vision. Cole knew he wanted him to elaborate on his surveillance. Cole rubbed his eyes, trying to erase the image of her.

"And how did you learn this?" Josh turned the key in the ignition, revving the engine with a quick flick of his wrist.

Cole shrugged, trying to keep his expression neutral. "I saw her last night."

Josh's eyes sprang open. "You were spying on her."

"The whole house was lit up; I got curious," Cole defended himself. "All that paperwork had me depressed. I needed to do something." A long breath escaped from his mouth in a misty smoke. "Seeing her really lifted my spirits."

"That nice, huh?" Josh asked.

"It was..." he began but then was quiet again. The wooded area around the field rustled in the breeze. A soothing, early morning spring sun was warming the stiff soil, a light steam rising into the air. "I'm just not used to seeing anything like that, that's all." His words ran together in a rushed breath. He shook off the memory. "We have to decide what we're growing here." Cole rerouted the conversation back to safe ground: the crops. He needed to focus. "We'll rotate the

corn crop with the alfalfa. Let's go. We've got to change the oil in two tractors today."

Cole gunned the ATV, bolting across the field, the moistened dirt spewing out from underneath the tires.

* * *

"Do I at least get a few details?" Josh lifted the hood of the tractor, wrench and oil pan in hand. Cole knelt down on the dirt beside him. He screwed on a new air filter. Josh usually didn't press things with Cole, but down in the fields he had witnessed a different demeanor in him. Cole was at a loss for words, which was a rarity. Josh couldn't help but be curious.

"It's a change to have someone here, let alone a woman," Cole admitted. "I don't know... She just got here." His brows knitted.

"Yeah, so anything else?" Josh laughed, elbowing him. "That's all I'm gonna get?" Josh shifted his body, trying to see Cole's face through the wires of the engine. "Shit, your loss for words has me a bit spooked."

"She *is* beautiful, but I'm afraid she's too refined for me." Cole connected the new filter, checking all the sockets with an abrupt turn of the wrench.

"Oh, come on. You're just scared because she's different."

"You got that right. The dating game's all yours."

"Do you think Chelsea's the only woman who can handle you? I wouldn't underestimate that city girl if I were you." Josh laughed.

"Speaking of Chelsea, have you called her?"

"See, back to the same old, same old." Josh elbowed him again.

"I need the same old now. Dealing with the different takes more time, not to mention work."

"Acquiring what's different, and what may be good for you, does require work," Josh told him.

"Well, get busy, then. I like things just the way they are."

"We're already dealing with different. How many people, if they knew what was going on between you, me, and Chelsea, would think it was the same old, same old? It's all what you're used to."

"Hey, Ann Landers, just shut the fuck up and make the call." Cole's voice escalated, echoing off the rafters of the barn.

"You better put your balls on ice. I'm not calling her until after Toni comes over."

"You're doing that on purpose."

"Maybe, maybe not." Josh tossed him an oily rag and went to go feed the horse.

The three-way sexual circus they had been engaging in with Chelsea was becoming just that, a circus. The problem for Josh was it wasn't all he thought it would be. Something was missing.

Josh was interested in more—something he knew Cole didn't have a desire for. This could become the one line of division between them. They shared everything now, including Chelsea. Josh knew he was capable of loving a woman, and was ready to commit to the right one. But for Cole, this was dangerous territory.

* * *

The house was finally clean. Toni felt more comfortable breathing in the freshened air. She had seen the men this morning, riding on their ATVs, careening around the property before going into the barn.

After lunch, she decided to wash the car. She wasn't accustomed to dealing with all the mud—a reddish clay soil that seemed to seep into everything. Once she had the car soaped down, she circled the house, looking for an outdoor spigot. When she turned the corner, Josh was already hosing down the SUV. A frothy, white river of suds ran down the driveway. He angled the hose, rinsing off the roof. Her shadow moved into his. He turned to her, his smile wide and open.

"Hey, I thought you could use a rinse."

"Thanks. I can finish it up."

Josh handed her the hose, the frigid water misting her forearm.

"So, are you just about settled in?" He fussed with the bill of his Phillies cap, squinting at her in the late-day sun.

"You mean have I cleaned up my father's mess?" She sneaked a quick look at him. A light dusting of honey-colored chest hairs poked out of the neckline of his T-shirt. She directed the hose at the wheel wells.

"Well, yeah, okay. I wanted to be polite." His lips were full, cushiony-looking, his nose slightly hooked.

"No need." Toni laughed. "My father definitely lived to the beat of his own drum."

"Yeah, but what a great guy." Josh pulled a clean bandanna out of his back pocket. He wiped down the windows. "I liked his approach to things. He wasn't caught up in the all the bull—You know?"

"After what happened to my mother, everything else seemed so much smaller."

Josh nodded, clearly a bit uncomfortable with that line of conversation. "He loved to read. Smart guy, always had his nose in a book." He laughed. "He was definitely an abstract thinker."

She turned off the sprayer, then set the hose on the ground, feeling Bruce all around her, especially since she'd arrived at the farm, knowing what had drawn him here. She knew the peacefulness as well as the escape was what had held him here.

They worked in silence, drying off the car. Toni stole a few glances at Josh around the corner of the fender. There was gentleness in his demeanor, despite his roughened, soiled exterior. When they met at the grill, Josh took the dirty rag out of her hands.

"That's better. Thanks." Toni smiled.

"No problem. Do you have plans for Thursday night?" He fussed with the bill of his cap again, a nervous habit, maybe. Toni felt her stomach lurch, unsure of what this invitation entailed. Josh must have sensed her apprehension. His hasty words quickly filled the awkward silence. "I just thought maybe I could show you around the farm."

"Sure, I mean... I don't have any plans."

"Right, like who do you know up here?" He shook his head. "Hey, I'll take you for a ride on the ATV. Then we could hang at the house, have a few drinks."

"Okay, but during this ATV ride..."

"Don't worry." He chewed his lower lip. "I'll behave."

"I'll hold you to that." Toni cupped her eyes from a glaring descending sun. A darkened shadow moved across the fields, the air cooling.

"I promise. Come over around five, okay?" He tipped his hat.

Chapter Four

Toni sifted through her suitcase, kicking herself for not hanging up her clothes sooner. The chances of her father having an iron were slim. She decided on a pair of jeans and a light green T-shirt. She sank her feet into a pair of hiking boots, relieved she had packed them. They were practically brand-new. She bought them before a trip to Vermont she had taken three years ago and hadn't worn them since.

That was the last time she had seen Adam, an accountant from her firm's biggest competitor, Brackenridge & Reed. She had dated him for eight months. He seemed nice at first, but as time went on, Toni had discovered some sexual hang-ups she just didn't want to deal with. Adam had not been shy. He was a self-centered sexual partner. He never seemed to be interested in reciprocating, often leaving Toni wound up and fending for herself after they had parted for the evening.

Toni's sexual pleasure was never a concern for him. He had no desire to make love. He often needed to be prompted to pleasure her, which for Toni was uncomfortable. Adam had been a great kisser, but in the end, all he ever wanted was for Toni to suck his cock. He had a way of making her feel inept. After their breakup, there had been only a few isolated dinner dates and a one-night stand that only left her feeling dejected in regard to the male population.

It was five minutes to five. Her belly was fluttering, a nervous twinge braiding around her insides. She pinned her hair up, letting it balloon around her narrow face. It was so thick and heavy, it took two barrettes and four bobby pins to hold it in place. Toni checked herself one more time as she passed the small, round mirror in the hallway, unsure of why she was so set on making an impression. And on whom.

The days were getting longer, the sun still lingering in the sky. She guessed Josh would take her for their ride first before it got dark. Her boots stomped up the front porch. AC/DC's "Back in Black" was pounding through the dark, glossy door. A wreath of dried berries and pinecones hung on the front door, remnants of a forgotten Christmas decoration. She opened the screen door and tapped the brass knocker.

"Hey, Toni, come on in." She had expected to see Josh, but Cole held the door for her. She slipped through, feeling the heat of him drift over her. She felt her cheeks warm, avoiding his bare chest, but, sensing his eyes on her, tried to wipe the uncertainty off her face.

"How are you?" She had to tip her head to make eye contact, his frame a head taller than hers. He dragged his hand over his scruffy, shadowed jaw.

“Not too bad. Are you ready for your tour?” He chuckled, his tone hoarse. “Your guide is waiting for you.” Cole jutted his chin, motioning to Josh, who was walking across the open living room, pulling a sweatshirt over his head, his steps full of purpose.

Her eyes didn’t seem to want to rest on either man, so she took in their living space. The ceiling was high and vaulted. An immense fieldstone fireplace took up the entire back wall, the mantel a sturdy granite gray. On either side, high on the wall, were two eight-pointer deer mounts, their eyes large and glassy. Above the taxidermy was a railing. There was a small loft above. A large, rather contemporary sectional wrapped around the other half of the room. The floorboards were wheat-colored with a glaring sheen. Toni stood on the oval, blue braided rug, waiting.

“You better put this on, Toni.” Josh handed her a black sweatshirt. “It gets a little windy while you’re riding.” Josh gestured her toward the door she had just come through. “Make sure the food is heated by the time we get back,” Josh reminded Cole.

Toni glanced over her shoulder, Cole’s facial expression unreadable.

* * *

Toni felt hesitant to get on the ATV at first. Josh reassured her he wouldn’t go fast. They stood in the barn, Toni trying on the helmets for size. Josh buckled the strap below her chin. He mounted the four-wheeler. He gestured for her to sit behind him, patting the seat. Toni eased down onto the seat, unsure of where to put her hands. Josh reached behind and wrapped her arms around his middle, a friendly assertiveness.

“So...I guess Cole didn’t want to come with us?” She leaned into his helmet.

“He’s handling dinner,” he said loudly, competing with the idling motor. “Didn’t say he wanted to come, and I didn’t ask.” He turned, flashing her a full grin.

The ATV lurched forward, and Toni tightened her grip around Josh’s waist. Josh took off across the wide-open field, the earthy-scented wind blowing in her face. The ride was bumpy as Josh maneuvered the wheels over the deep, rutted soil. She wondered how many acres they had. The deadened look of winter still coated the landscape. A closer look at the trees they passed showed signs of budding new growth waiting to pop.

They drove around the top field first. He eased up on the gas, pointing to a horse grazing. “That’s Macy,” he yelled, looking over his shoulder.

“Do you ride her?” Her voice was muffled by the face shield of the helmet.

“When I have time. She belonged to Cole’s mom.” He paused for a moment. “You could probably ride her if you wanted.”

The ATV pulled forward, and they were off again. Toni soaked up the scenery, the fields a patchwork quilt of shaded greens and freshly tilled soil. Hedgerows of golden brush outlined the different areas of the property. Josh took her down to the lower fields, pointing to where the spring crops would be planted, his voice rising

through the air over the whine of the engine. Down at the very edge of the property was a small grove of fruit trees, outlined with a split rail fence. A wide stream curled down the side of the field, its water steel gray, the pebbled bottom like mosaic tiles.

On the way back, they stopped at the main barn that housed the steer. There looked to be a herd of thirty.

“Do some of them go to slaughter?” she asked, her stomach turning over.

“Yeah, eventually,” he said. “Hey, it’s the food chain. What can you do?” He shrugged, giving the throttle gas as they rode back to the house.

She had counted three barns in all. The one closest to the house held Macy’s stall, as well as being used as a makeshift garage. The sliding doors were open, enabling her to see a small black compact and a red pickup inside, along with the ATVs. Josh’s voice rose over the engine, informing her that the second barn housed two large John Deere tractors, a hay baler, and a threshing machine. The barn for the steer was the largest and looked like it had recently been painted a rich cardinal red. The others were a weathered whitewash, the trim black.

They returned to the barn. Josh parked the ATV and killed the engine.

“How many acres do you have?” Toni hung her helmet up on the nail.

“Six hundred.” Josh smoothed the short, wheat-colored strands of his hair, hanging his helmet next to hers.

“How do the two of you do it?”

“Damned if I know.” He laughed as they walked toward the house. “We hire a few hands to get us through the crunch times, when we’re cutting hay or corn, or getting the steer ready for auction or slaughter.”

Toni slowed her steps before they hit the front porch. He turned to her, his head tilted in question.

“I just want you to know that I won’t overstay my welcome. I hope me being here doesn’t disturb your routine.” Toni wrapped her arms across her chest, hugging herself. She didn’t want to be rude to Josh. He’d been so nice to take her out and show her around.

“It’s fine,” he began. He took her arm, and they started walking. They drifted into what used to be her father’s yard, the grass gold, dormant, and brittle. “I don’t know if you’re getting weird vibes from Cole, but let me give you a quick rundown, just in case. His parents were killed in a senseless accident—drunk driver.” He stared at her, his voice lowered. “Things haven’t been easy for him. He can be a little moody at times. Actually, he’s been pretty nice and social with you. Most of the time, he requires a *bit* of patience.” Josh’s lips tipped into a faint smile. Toni noted his struggle, wondering how many other times he had made excuses for his friend.

“God, I didn’t know.” Toni looked over his shoulder at the house. She watched Cole’s tall figure through the window move about the kitchen, catering to Josh’s request to do the food prep.

"Things have been hard for him, especially in town. It was the mayor's nephew who caused the accident."

"My God." Toni turned toward the house, watching Cole again through the window. He was stirring a pot on the stove.

"The worst part is how the locals have handled it."

"What did they do?" Toni sensed that Josh was hesitating, unsure if Cole would appreciate him telling her all about his past.

"Please"—she touched his shoulder—"don't break a confidence. I understand."

Relief crossed his face. Toni knew he didn't feel right about telling her, but at the same time, he wanted her to be comfortable.

"Really." She smiled. "Maybe someday he'll confide in me himself."

"Don't worry, Cole's a decent guy. He's just got a lot of layers you have to dig through. Don't take it personally; he's been making me tunnel through them for years." He laughed, patting her shoulder.

"I just don't want to be a bother, that's all."

"No." Josh shook his head, his voice sharpening. "We like the fact you're here. We don't often get the chance to have visitors. We're a bit isolated, but it's our choice. So please, don't feel that way." His voice quieted. He smiled, his full lips closed, bending in a sloping curve. "But if you've got to get back, then I understand."

"No. I took family leave and sublet my condo to a friend. She's taking courses at Montclair State and needed a place."

"Great." Josh reached out. He patted her arm. "Then we've got time. Now, let's go eat."

They retraced their steps and headed for the house. Toni figured if Cole was going to be a bit of an enigma, then at least she had an ally in Josh.

It appeared Josh was very loyal to Cole, ready and on the spot when it came to protecting or defending him. He seemed to be glad she was here, saying they were isolated. Even though he admitted it was their choice, Toni got the feeling he was somewhat starved for company. As for how hungry Cole was for camaraderie, she couldn't be sure. It appeared they were joined at the hip, but it was unclear how far their friendship extended the normal boundaries.

Chapter Five

Toni stood at the doorway of the kitchen, watching Cole set the platter of sausage-and-pepper sandwiches on the table. Cole turned to her, offering her a drink.

"Water's fine." She shifted in her seat, looking around the simple kitchen. Blue floral curtains lined the windows; the cabinets and table were a basic, whitewashed pine. Stenciled grapevines decorated the walls. Cole rummaged through the only contemporary appliance in the kitchen—a large, stainless steel refrigerator. He set a glass pitcher of water on the table, then sat and pushed the platter of sausage toward her.

"So, how was your tour?" he asked. He chugged his beer.

"It was good. I have to thank Josh." Toni prepared her sandwich, the tangy, garlic-scented steam drifting between them. "This looks and smells outrageous."

"Yeah, we guys manage. Josh is really the better cook," he admitted.

Toni slid the platter across the table. Cole piled sausage onto two open rolls on his plate. Josh's footsteps echoed across the floor. He skirted around the table and claimed the chair on the other side of Toni. Toni noticed the glass of milk by Josh's place setting and smiled inwardly at the stereotypical farm-boy fare.

It was too quiet at the table. Toni felt her eyes gravitating over to Cole, his face expressionless, his thin lips set. He had put on a shirt. The uncomfortable silence loomed overhead, then descended, smothering her with its awkwardness.

To her surprise, his hardened tone was the first to slice through the thick air.

"How're things at the house?" He gave her a sideward glance. She met his intense stare. His face had almost more hair on it now than his head. The hollows of his cheeks were shadowed with a dark, wiry growth.

"I've got it cleaned up. If there's anything that my dad did that you think should be repaired, I'll pay for it," Toni told him.

A slight smile formed on Cole's lips.

"We wanted to paint, but your dad wouldn't let us near the place," Josh cut in. "The place really needs some work."

"Yeah, I figured it was something like that." She shook her head, smiling.

"No worries," Cole told her. "We're going to miss Bruce. Maybe we'll make it a sort of shrine. A place you can visit...you know, instead of a cemetery."

Toni was touched by this remark. Cole clearly wasn't going to stop surprising her anytime soon.

"So, Cole tells me that you're a dan—"—a thud resounded from underneath the table—"an accountant," Josh blurted out, wiping his mouth, his face breaking into a scowl.

"Yes, I am." She glanced at the two men. Cole's gaze bore into Josh, the heat of his stare rippling the air between them.

"That's great. You must be a smart girl. I sucked at math," Josh said. He took a swig of his milk.

"Some of us still do," Cole muttered.

"Excuse me?" Toni saw Cole lean his arm on the table and sink his head into his hand.

"How about some homemade ice cream, Toni?" Josh cleared the plates.

"Sure." She handed her plate to Josh, her eyes returning back to Cole. He kneaded his temple. He looked uptight. Dead silence filled the room again. Josh turned the water on at the sink. She offered to help him clean up, but he waved her off.

Toni wasn't sure if it was her curiosity or a form of determination, but she found herself preoccupied with Cole, wanting to know all that was hidden. A challenge she was ready to meet head-on.

He got up from the table and retrieved another beer out of the fridge, the glass bottles clanking on the swinging door. He stood at the counter, his long legs encased in faded, frayed denim. His jeans hung low on his hips, his bare feet crossed at the ankles. His inky eyes were locked with hers. She smiled weakly at him, trying to defrost his cool stare, wanting to show him she would not be deterred. He diverted his eyes first. A slight wave of triumph moved through her.

"Do you guys need help with something?" she asked.

Cole's head snapped up.

"Sit, Toni," Josh said over his shoulder, his voice competing with the running water.

"Well, no. I didn't mean with the dishes." She stifled her laughter. "What I'm trying to say is...do you two need help with something numerical? Do you need some accounting work done?" She raised her brows. "Some help?"

Josh tossed his head back, his laughter echoing through the quiet kitchen. "That's an understatement."

Toni watched the two men. Heated glances of frustration fired back and forth between them like bullets.

"I can help you. That is, if you want," Toni said softly. "I don't want to interfere, but I'm available if you need a hand."

Cole set his beer down on the counter. He rubbed his head with both palms as if to soothe an ache. Josh turned off the faucet and dried his hands. He neatly folded

the dish towel and looked at Cole pointedly. Cole tilted his face and stared at her, then rubbed his chin.

“Yeah, actually.” Cole chuckled sarcastically. “We do need some help.”

“Great.” Toni pushed away from the table, ready to get on with the business at hand. “You guys have an office anywhere on this farm?”

A bright smile moved across Josh’s face. He seemed relieved that Toni had won Cole over without him having to do any of the pressing.

* * *

The two men stood on either side of Toni, towering over her as she sat in front of the large oak desk. She had all the farm receipts piled into categories, the open ledger to the side. Toni tapped the top of the computer monitor. She swiveled around in the chair, looking to Cole first.

“Do you use the computer to manage your accounts?”

“I don’t know how to use the fucking thing.” He kept rubbing his scruffy cheek, his anxiety seeping out of him like sweat.

“That’s all right,” Toni reassured him. “You don’t have to use it, though I could teach you, but let’s get these accounts organized first. We can deal with that later, so when I leave, you guys can pick up where I left off and maintain things. Do both of you work on the books?”

“Cole has always been the one to handle it,” Josh said, shooting him a glance.

“That’s okay—”

“Not really, because I haven’t done jack shit in weeks.” Cole started pacing around the office.

“Why don’t you two sit down so we can go over a few things?”

“Actually, I’ll go make some coffee,” Josh said.

Josh left the room, his footsteps echoing down the planked hallway. Toni pointed to the small, tweed love seat that lined the wall. Cole sat and turned on the small Tiffany lamp. Vibrant stained-glass colors of blue, red, and green danced on the wall.

“I’m fucked, aren’t I?” His voice lowered, wrapping around her. Cole rested his elbows on his knees, leaning toward her, his intense, insightful eyes trying to read her. She felt his battle, questioning whether he should confide in her. They were still strangers, but he was asking for her help, and that couldn’t be easy.

The office was quiet for a long time, with only the sound of Josh making coffee in the kitchen down below breaking up the silence.

“No, Cole.” Toni shook her head. “You’re not fucked.” She smiled, feeling the need to encourage him.

“I can’t screw this up.” He looked away, his face creased in frustration. “If I screw things up, it’s not just me who’s gonna go down; it’s Josh too.” He shook his head. His lanky body suddenly looked weighted, folding in half on the love seat.

"I was never a paper-pushing, desk type of guy. My dad wasn't either. My mom did all the books," he confessed.

Toni reached over and patted his knee. He looked down at her hand. She pulled away, worried she overstepped boundaries. "We do have to get your records in order, but you're not fucked, and you won't screw things up. We just have to get a handle on it."

Toni tried to read Cole's expression as he stared at the desk piled with papers. She couldn't deny her curiosity about his and Josh's relationship; it seemed far beyond business and maybe even friendship.

"What would you charge?" He settled against the plump cushions, his tension easing slightly.

"I'm not concerned with that right now."

"I am." His tone tightened again.

"I'm not going to charge you what my firm would. You have to remember that a cut has to go to them."

"Toni." Cole's face hardened.

"Look." She met his eyes, not wavering. Toni felt safe standing up to him, becoming more comfortable with his shift in attitudes. "I'll get you guys organized for seventy an hour, okay?" She raised her hand, halting any further rebuttal. "That's my offer. I'm not going to compare this situation with any of the other stuff I do, because every client's needs are different, plus I work in a large city. The rates are always different. Not to mention this job cuts down on my commuting costs and wardrobe," she added drily.

"Well, I had some idiot in town doing it for me, but seemed like all he was doing was moving my papers around."

"I'll start tomorrow morning."

Josh came into the office with three steamy mugs of coffee. A tiny, airline-sized bottle of Irish Cream was in the center of the tray. He set it on the makeshift coffee table—an immense electrical spool.

"How we doing?" Josh's brows lifted. "I forgot to leave the chair and whip behind."

"Screw you." Cole shook his head. "He thinks he's some kind of comedian, and I'm an animal."

"You guys like to bust each other's balls, don't you?" Toni grinned, taking the mug from the tray.

Cole scowled at them both. Toni sipped her dark concoction.

"Have you been watching us?" Cole's lips curled.

"Ah, yeah... Maybe a little." She felt her face warm, thinking she was wandering into dangerous territory.

"Hey, that's a good thing." Josh jokingly patted her upper arm. "That means you want to get to know us."

Toni sipped her coffee, her eyes darting between them. Cole's eyes flickered at Josh. Toni was unsure of what was hidden behind that knowing glance, as they probably shared many.

"You can just call him Ann Landers." Cole jutted his chin. "He's got all the answers."

"Well, if we're talking about who has the better manners... Who took you on the tour of the farm?" Josh waved his hand through the air impatiently, gesturing for Toni's input. "It was me, thank you." He grinned sarcastically at Cole.

"All right, guys," Toni cut in. She felt like the mother of twin boys who were demanding her attention.

"Enough, Mr. Tour Guide. I think we better get back to the fucking accounting." Cole downed the rest of his beer, then reached underneath the sofa and pulled out a small bottle of Yukon Jack. Josh raised his brows, setting his coffee down. Toni redirected them back, thinking it was safer to stick to the business at hand before Cole hit the whisky.

The three of them sat in the dimly lit office discussing receipts, expenses, and incoming revenue. At midnight she went home, even though Josh wanted to put in a movie.

By the time Toni slipped between the cool sheets, she couldn't sleep. Cole clouded her mind. She found herself thinking about how he had coped with the death of his parents. She had never met anyone who had experienced a loss in the same destructive manner in which she and Cole had. She had gone through her entire life never being able to know her mother. That murderer, whoever he was, had taken that privilege away from her, squeezing all the life out of her mother. Toni had missed so much. Everything she knew about men and sex she had learned from friends and by reading novels and love stories. Those authors had become her mentors.

She and Cole Harrington had a lot in common. More than he thought. She lay in the dark, gazing out her window at the main house. She wondered what it would take to unearth the many layers she'd seen hints of, then blushed at her romantic notions. Being here was temporary; helping them with their accounting was a job. That was all.

* * *

Cole sat in the living room; Josh went upstairs to watch his movie alone. Cole could feel his body vibrating on the couch, a heat and hunger growing inside him. He couldn't be here in the morning when Toni came over. His head felt dizzy. He had to admit it wasn't from the liquor. It was from her.

He shivered at the thought of touching her tawny skin. Those earthy, brownish green eyes were dangerous. He stretched, unfolding his long body. Josh had to call Chelsea. His urges had to be dealt with if he planned to be near Toni again. Cole didn't trust himself. Toni made him nervous. Cole didn't want to care about her. As soon as he cared for something or someone, it was gone.

Watching her while sitting at the desk in the office was overwhelming. He felt like a nervous schoolboy. No woman made him tremble in his boots like that. His face warmed. Was it embarrassment? Was it her independence, her caliber? Or maybe it was her education that intimidated him? His fingers twitched. He recalled the wisps of dark hair that grazed the coppery skin of her neck. Just thinking of her had his cock rearing its ugly head. He abruptly shook off the memory. Guilt seared through him.

“Now I know why you never had your daughter come out to visit,” he muttered to himself.

He dragged his body up to bed, his legs weak and lazy.

Chapter Six

Toni was up early, struggling to shake off a restless sleep. She sat in the dining room, holding a heated mug. She wanted to wait until the men were out of the house before she went over and started restoring Cole's records.

She watched the front door, her line of vision clear through the sheer curtain. Josh came out first, barreling down the stairs. He walked toward the barn, disappearing inside. The rumbling of a diesel engine came to life. Where was Cole? She hoped he wasn't waiting for her. Which might be a lie, so she didn't examine the thought too much.

She pushed the ancient, caned chair away from the table, its legs scraping across the hardwood floor. The echo of her footsteps resounded through the room.

Her father must have not spent much time in the dining room. There were only a few pieces of furniture: a battered cherry table, four chairs, and a long buffet table that lined the back wall. Her father's drawings were piled high, the ends of the rolls torn and yellowed, the smoke-filmed walls bare.

A door slamming drew her attention back to the window. Cole sauntered down the steps. He squinted into the early morning sun. She took in his lean and lanky frame while he walked to the barn. She shivered as she took in the bare skin of his arms, thinking a sleeveless T-shirt would be too cool for this hour of the morning. The bottoms of his jeans were bunched around his ankles, tucked inside his work boots.

Warm breath curled from his mouth. A navy blue bandanna was wrapped around his head, the ends tied at his nape. A slow-moving river of heat traveled through her as she watched his long legs cover twice as much ground as hers would.

Josh emerged from the barn. Now she had both men, standing side by side. She soaked up the differences, grateful no one could read her scandalous thoughts. She found both of them equally appealing. Josh had already worked up a sweat and taken off his sweatshirt. His green shirt was torn on the bottom, the ripped edges grazing the wheat-colored skin of his navel. Josh was shorter than Cole, his body denser, his muscular physique sloped and curved.

The two of them talked for what seemed like a long time. Josh's hands moved through the air, gesturing to the wide-open field behind them. Cole nodded, dragging his fingers over his shadowed jaw. As soon as Toni saw Cole's head turn toward the house, she darted away from the window, her heart racing.

If her friend Dawn were here... Toni could practically hear her laughter over Toni's skittish behavior where the men were concerned.

She dashed upstairs to wash and then got dressed, pulling on a pair of jeans and a white pullover. She tugged on her boots and braided her hair into a loose french braid. She went downstairs and drank the rest of her coffee. Toni set the mug in the sink and left the house.

The grass was crunchy under her feet; the smell of damp soil filled her nose. By the time she rounded the corner of the house, Cole and Josh were gone. Relieved, she climbed the stairs of the front porch and let herself in. Josh had left her a note with a tiny smiley face on it, offering her coffee and a piece of apple crumb cake that sat on a plain white plate next to the coffeemaker. She felt a smile curl her lips, his friendly openness leaping off the paper, greeting her.

Toni poured herself another cup of coffee and ascended the stairs up to the office. The hallway was long and dark. She passed two doors, one open and one closed. She leaned against the door frame, peering into Josh's bedroom, the morning sun bathing the floorboards. His bed was made, decorated with a tan and red patchwork quilt. A tall dark mahogany dresser sat kitty-corner in the room. His nightstand held a clock and a small brass lamp. A rolled magazine lay between the two.

Toni speculated that behind the closed door was Cole's bedroom. It would be so easy to turn the knob and take a glance inside, perhaps a quick look to get some insight into the man, but she resisted the urge to break his trust.

Toni found herself thinking of the guys as a tipping scale. So far Josh had been fairly open and easy to talk to. Chatty and friendly from the very beginning. Cole, on the other hand—every conversation seemed a metaphorical roller coaster with that guy. Even when they were alone in the office, she felt like there was so much he wanted to say, but maybe the timing was off. She wasn't sure.

These men did strange things to her body and her mind. She shook her head, willing herself to focus on the matter at hand.

The office was dark. She opened the heavy draperies. The lemony heat of the sun spilled across the large desk. She set her coffee off to the side and got started.

* * *

She worked until after two. She had all their expenses logged in the ledger, as well as their deposits. They were barely breaking even, but she thought she could remedy that with a few suggestions and cost-effective ideas. They needed to increase their revenue; that was the bottom line.

She also thought of a possible tax break they could get if they made a few changes and modifications to the farm. She would have to sit down and discuss it with them. Toni didn't want them to feel as if she were trying to take over, but if they ever wanted to make any money, they would have to make some changes. They had been running the farm the same way for way too long now. It was time to see some increase in revenue.

By three o'clock, she figured out a way to soften them up before she laid out a possible new business plan for the farm. With a stocked freezer, she had all the ingredients to make spaghetti and meatballs—and really, what better way to get through to two bachelors on a farm? She would ask them over tonight for dinner.

She'd just finished clipping together all the logged-in receipts when she heard the creaking of a floorboard behind her. She swiveled around in the chair to find Cole leaning against the door frame, one hand buried deep in his pocket.

"How'd we do?" That dark look of his made her blush.

"It was a productive day." Toni stood and pushed the heavy leather chair under the desk. "I have a few suggestions I'd like to discuss, maybe over dinner, over at...your other house." She laughed nervously. She couldn't say it was her place.

"Oh yeah?" His brows rose.

"Yes. I'd like to make both of you dinner. You've been so helpful, and like I said, I have some ideas I think you and Josh should consider." She held her breath, waiting for her words to seep into him.

Cole stepped closer to her. Her mouth suddenly felt dry. Her nails curled into her damp palms. They stared at each other, his gaze lowered to her lips. Her breathing stopped, catching in her parched throat. Her body felt hot, a dewy perspiration collecting on her upper lip.

Toni could feel the heat of his body wrapping around her like a corset, cutting off her air. She could smell him—his dark, woodsy scent, a ruggedness that was alien to her but pleasing. Though Cole had widened their circle, the heat was still palpable. Their gazes held for what seemed like an eternity. Then the gears switched so quickly she could almost physically sense it. His coolly professional voice smothered the flame, bringing them back to business.

"So, what's on the menu?"

"How's spaghetti and meatballs?" Her voice hoarsened.

Cole casually shrugged a shoulder. "Sounds good to me."

"Great, come at six." She looked away, brushing past him. She bolted down the hallway, feeling her face flush with heat. She walked right into Josh.

"Whoa, sorry about that, Toni." He patted her shoulder. "You're acting as spooked as Macy does on a windy night."

"I'm sorry, wasn't watching where I was going." She brushed the loose hair away from her reddened face. "Um, Cole will fill you in on all the details. See you soon." She pushed past him, willing her feet to carry her the rest of the way out of the house.

Chapter Seven

"What do you think she'll tell us to do?" Josh asked.

"I have no idea," Cole said, scuffing his work boots across the slatted porch.

"Well, don't go in there and shoot her down."

"I won't." Cole hissed. The bottles of the six-pack he was carrying clinked together inside the cardboard carrier. He'd already guzzled three beers. He needed to ease up. He had clearly overstepped his bounds earlier. Seeing Toni rush out of the office told him he needed to keep himself in check.

"We did ask for her help," Josh politely reminded him.

"Yeah, I know." Cole peered in the small, rectangular window, cupping his hand around his eyes. The wrought-iron chandelier lit the surface of the table in a pale yellow light. He needed a minute to collect himself, but Josh hastily knocked on the door. Cole peered over Josh's shoulder, watching as Toni set a heaping bowl of steaming spaghetti on the table before walking toward the door to answer their knock.

She filled his line of vision. She had changed her shirt and now wore a maroon blouse, delicate wooden buttons lining the front. Her hair remained in the loose, thick braid. Cole tried not to stare, looking down at her bare feet, her coral-pink painted toes sticking out of the bottom of her jeans.

"Come on in, guys." She stepped away from the door, her gaze darting between the two of them. She waved them in, down the short hallway, and into the kitchen.

"Holy shit. You got this place gleaming like a TV commercial." Cole set the six-pack on the counter, inhaling the tangy scent of cooking tomatoes.

"It's nice, isn't it? You have a cute little place here." Toni leaned against the counter. Cole watched her chest rise and fall under the soft linen of her blouse.

"I hope you guys are hungry. Please sit. Cole, I see you have your beverage of choice." Her lips parted into a sloped grin. They shimmered, lightly coated with some kind of lipstick or a gloss. That was what it must've been. Lip gloss, a shiny, delicious mocha. "Josh, what can I get you to drink?"

"You got any milk?" He took a seat at the table. Toni laughed, pulling open the refrigerator. She filled a tall glass for Josh, then placed it in front of him.

"He's a real partyer." Cole rolled his eyes at the milk.

"I think it's cute." Toni turned and pulled a loaf of garlic bread out of the oven.

Cole sat next to Josh, watching him eat up Toni's compliment like a lost puppy dog. He felt his jaw tighten. This wasn't high school or a night at the bar, scoping for women. Jealousy never entered the picture with him and Josh, but being in Toni's presence was a whole different ball game. It made everything different in a way he couldn't entirely understand.

The dinner was top-of-the-line. Cole had two heaping plates, five meatballs, and two pieces of garlic bread. Toni and Josh chatted idly about the upcoming spring and summer, while Cole just watched her. It was Josh, of course, who brought up the farm, hungering for something else: Toni's advice.

"Well, I got all your transactions up-to-date." Her gaze moved between them.

"Give us the bad news first," Cole said.

"You guys are just about breaking even." She sat still, letting this sink in.

"That's no surprise," Cole mumbled.

Josh hushed him. "Hey, that was the bad news. Usually good news follows that."

"I do indeed have good news." She smiled, her perfectly arched brows raised.

God, she has a great smile.

"What might that be?" Cole asked, torn between the farm that was his life and Toni's animated face.

"You have a lot of equity. Your balance sheet reflects that you owe virtually no money, which is definitely a plus. Actually, it's unheard of in most of the businesses I've dealt with in the past."

"My parents had some money I inherited when they died," Cole explained.

"Well, you have a lot of assets." Toni tipped the serving bowl toward the men, offering them more spaghetti. They waved her off. She began clearing the table. "But"—she raised a finger—"we need to build up your cash flow statement."

"How can we do that?" Cole leaned against the table; her expertise was pulling him into less dangerous territory.

"You guys need more revenue," she said from across the kitchen, pouring grounds into the coffee-maker and turning it on.

Josh faced Cole, his eyes hopeful. Josh always saw things half full, while Cole saw them half empty. Josh was willing to do and try anything. He was always eager for a good solution. Cole needed to step out of the downer role and get in step with his friend. And Toni.

Toni brought a trio of mugs and a plate of sugar cookies to the table.

"First of all, stop growing your own hay. It's costing you a small fortune."

"Stop growing hay?" Cole wasn't thrilled right off the bat. "How the hell are we supposed to feed our livestock?"

"You should buy it from someone else."

Cole shook his head. Toni moved her chair closer to him. "I crunched the numbers after doing some research. When you look at how many bales you need and the cost to grow it, harvest it, and bale it, it's putting you near the red."

"It is expensive," Josh admitted. "Not to mention the fuel and maintenance to run the machine."

"See." Toni smiled at Josh. "He's on the right track."

"Mm, maybe you're right." It should annoy him that Josh and Toni were on the same side and tempting him over, but it didn't.

"You should sell that machine before it depreciates in value, and buy your hay."

Josh looked at Cole, nodding.

"Now let's talk tax breaks." Toni eyed both men over the rim of her mug. Cole tipped his beer back, downing the last of the warm, frothy foam.

"You know how we can get those?" Cole asked.

"You bet. And you should be expanding your production." Her tone rose, a hint of enthusiasm slicing through. "Consider a new crop."

"Okay." Cole suddenly laughed. He felt his aching muscles begin to unwind. She was adorable, her face animated, full of enthusiasm, her brown eyes rich with promise.

"I've suggested that," Josh said pointedly.

Toni slid her eyes over to Cole.

"He has." Cole raised his hands in defeat. He shoved a cookie into his mouth. The sweetness of the cookie and the bitterness of the beer collided on his tongue.

"I wanted to grow Christmas trees," Josh said over his shoulder as he headed over to the coffeemaker, making himself at home.

"Nice idea. Along that line—how about some pumpkins too?" Toni added.

Toni helped them plan their strategy. They wouldn't see any revenue from the trees for about five years, but the pumpkins and the berries, which Josh had already suggested and had gotten Cole to agree on, would be a start. He and Josh then debated on how much they could sell the hay baler for. Josh insisted they could get anywhere from forty-five to fifty thousand for it. Cole's father had purchased the machine just a few years before he was killed.

They discussed blue spruces, Douglas firs, and pines, which already dotted the property around the farm, down in the lower fields. Toni suggested cutting those down and planting new. After they finished discussing their plans for the farm, Cole was surprised that Toni asked about his mother's horse. Josh had left nothing out on his recent tour.

"Have you ever ridden before?" Cole asked.

"No. The idea of it scares me, but I want to try it, if that makes any sense."

“Actually, Macy’s perfect for the beginner. She’s got a good disposition. It helps to get to know an animal first, before expecting something of them. Spend some time with her; she’s harmless,” Josh said enthusiastically. “Feed her too. You can win over any animal just by feeding them. That goes for some humans too.”

Cole caught Josh’s wink. Toni agreed she’d start visiting the mare. Cole explained where everything was, including the hay that was up in the loft, above her stall. “Be careful when you’re up there, okay?” He tried to sound gruff, not overprotective.

“She loves apples and carrots,” Josh added. “After a few visits, you’ll have her eating out of the palm of your hand, literally.”

Toni might have said, “I’ll keep that in mind for everything around this place,” as she got up to refill her mug, but Cole couldn’t be sure.

* * *

They left around midnight. To Cole’s surprise, Josh kissed Toni on the cheek before leaving, thanking her for the wonderful meal. It was a polite, gentlemanly gesture Cole couldn’t partake in. At this point, any physical contact with Toni couldn’t be polite. It just wasn’t possible.

Chapter Eight

It was another night of fitful sleep, her mind overcrowded with thoughts of both Cole and Josh. What was wrong with her? Toni felt like a schoolgirl battling an adolescent crush. Or two. There was a dark, sexy mysteriousness to Cole that was evenly balanced out by Josh's schoolboy charm.

Dealing with Cole tonight was easier. She had handled him like a client, her consultation a helpful distraction. Using her professional skills, she felt like they'd created a trust, at least when it came to the farm. He was so protective of it, and she truly wanted to help him.

Josh had a down-to-earth sweetness she wasn't accustomed to, reflecting back on his polite kiss. Toni found him refreshing and cheerful, a natural-born optimist. She saw the balance of their relationship. In many ways, it made perfect sense—hell, she might even be jealous of their yin-and-yang balance. Still, she wondered if all her mooning was for naught. How close were they exactly?

If she was mistaking their actions for flirting and was wrong, then fleeing back to Montclair was going to be her only option.

* * *

The weeks passed quickly. The loud sounds and pungent smells of city life receded from her mind, replaced by peacefulness. It amazed Toni how tactile nature could be once the noise of a thriving population was removed. The musical chorus of crickets and a darkened dome glittering with stars had her in awe. The clocks sprang ahead. Darkness had turned to light, leaving the days longer and filled with an abundant, soothing sun.

Cole's records had been restored. Toni ordered him not to open any mail, that she would manage all of the incoming bills and receipts. The men never asked her how long she was going to stay, and she didn't feel like she had an answer. When she thought back to her overcrowded, noisy life, she realized how little like home it felt. She had fallen in love with the farm. The remoteness and its tranquility were better than any kind of antidepressant.

The hay baler was parked at the end of the graveled lane. Several men had come to look at it, but Cole and Josh still had no bites. Cole was getting impatient. Toni talked him into giving it more time. She and Josh had taken a ride into town, posting cards and giving all the merchants a personalized flyer that she had designed on the computer.

It was almost time for Toni to try to actually ride Macy. For the last few weeks, she'd visited the barn every day, feeding her apples and hay. On a muggy, overcast Thursday, Toni had set out after lunch to give Macy her daily apple. As she made her way across the yard, she spotted an old pickup parked near the silo. It was a turquoise blue. She hoped it was a buyer for the machine; the sooner it was gone, the sooner Cole's mood might improve.

She let herself into the stall, turning to secure the latch. The ripe smell of manure filled her nostrils. Macy's head bobbed as her hooves shuffled over to her, her glossy eyes on the apple.

"Hey, girl." Toni stroked her soft mane, letting the silky strands glide through her fingers. Macy's ears stood up straight, her hooves brushing over the straw. Macy nudged Toni's hand with her snout and scooped up the apple. Toni watched her yellowed teeth crush through the green skin. She stroked Macy's soft nose. It felt like suede under her fingers.

Toni always wondered what the mare was thinking. She stared into her hooded eyes, seeing her reflection. She wasn't sure if she saw pain or contentment. Josh had assured her Macy was thrilled to have her company as well as the edible benefits. Toni knew she was allowing herself to be manipulated when Macy kept nudging her with her nose, wanting more. Toni sighed, reluctantly climbing up into the loft to get her some hay. She would give her only half a wedge.

While pulling the hay apart, she heard the barn doors slide open. Voices drifted up, reaching the rafters. A woman's giggle pressed through the murmuring voices of Cole and Josh. Surprised—she hadn't seen another woman on the farm since she arrived—Toni walked out from behind the hay bales and looked down.

A girl sauntered around the barn as if she owned the place. She hiked up her short denim skirt and straddled Macy's saddle that rested on top of two sawhorses, legs swinging, her lips bending into a seductive grin.

Toni startled at her boldness. Who was she? She lowered onto the straw-covered floor, setting Macy's chunk of hay to the side. She made a snap decision to wait for more information before revealing herself. Maybe this was a friend or, more likely, this was a date for one of the guys. And surprising either one would be cringe-worthy, to say the least.

She could imagine Josh apologizing profusely, maybe being embarrassed that they had been caught. Cole, well, really, she didn't have any idea how he'd react.

"You guys never leave this place. You act like a couple of country wallflowers." Her wicked laughter exploded down below, ringing in Toni's ears.

"We like to be on our own turf." Cole's response was cold. Toni shivered. "What're you, tailing us now?" Cole's voice rose to the timbered beams.

"Well, you're here now," Josh chimed in. "Enough debating already. She just wants to make sure we still respect her, that's all." Josh slowly walked around her, circling her like a predator, his sudden, cocky behavior unknown to Toni.

Toni heard Cole's steely laugh, its coldness seeping into her bones. He moved closer to the woman, unbuckling his belt. The breath caught in Toni's throat.

What the hell was happening here? Was this consensual? Toni could feel her heart palpitating. Fear began to slice through her slowly; her assessment of the scenario was still cloudy.

"Thanks for answering our call, Chelsea." Josh spoke her name. His voice was altered, masked with something else. It was as if this was a charade, and he had his part to play.

"Well, it's about time my phone rang. If it wasn't for me, you guys would have blue balls. Your dicks would dry right up." Her laughter was rough and smoky.

"I guess she feels neglected." Cole's tone was gruff.

Toni stuck her finger in her mouth, chewing on her nail, an old habit resurrecting itself. This was consensual, all right. How she wished she wasn't here right now. This was something she wasn't sure she should see or know about.

This would only hang over her head every time she saw them, distracting her. She was going to have to wear a mask to hide the permanent blush on her face.

Chelsea smiled at the two of them, hopping off the saddle, not bothering to answer Cole's question. She began to finger the buttons on her shell-pink blouse. She eased the flaps open, her breasts now exposed.

Toni felt the sweat forming on her forehead. The heat in the loft suddenly felt like a sauna. Chelsea's shoulder-length blonde hair shielded her face. She was as tall as Cole. Her body was fleshy and voluptuous with pale, winter skin.

Toni couldn't reroute her stare when Josh began to undress. Cole's shirt was off, tossed to the ground behind him, along with his belt. He sat on the small garden tractor and yanked off his boots. The thought of their mouths and hands moving over Chelsea's body made Toni's skin burn. Her throat closed, pushing her unvoiced needs back down into the recesses of her neglected body. Toni silently scolded herself when she found herself stealing looks at Cole's lean physique.

Josh was beautiful too, the skin of his body glowing in the hazy afternoon light. Chelsea slipped out of her skirt. Josh walked behind her, rubbing his erection against the small of her back. Toni's feet began to fall asleep. She quietly repositioned herself. Temptation seduced her. She should just turn her back and wait for it to be over. When she tried to turn her body and direct her eyes to something else, she kept looking back, as if to confirm what she was really seeing was real. She gave in, annoyed with herself. She was preoccupied with Cole, feeling the pull of wanting to see him. It was either him or the shock of witnessing this type of encounter between them.

Josh nibbled at Chelsea's neck. He eased the thong down her legs, bending to lift each foot to free her. Josh knelt behind her. He rubbed his face against her bare ass. His fingers wandered over the front of her belly, then dipped between her legs.

Toni bit the skin of her palm when Cole's naked body entered her line of vision. His skin was smooth, pulling over the raised mounds of his biceps. His cock bounced

against his navel, springing forth from a thatch of dark curls. His chest was flatter than Josh's.

When Cole gripped Chelsea's shoulders, spinning her around so Josh's face was right in line with her pussy, Toni squeezed her eyes shut, turning away, waiting for the echoing moans and feminine wails to recede so she could figure out how the hell to get out of the barn without being seen.

Macy's snorting reverberated through the air. Toni stifled her nervous laughter. Macy was probably annoyed because she never came back with her treat—not to mention the peace and quiet of her home being disturbed by...that.

Toni slowly reclined, staring at the wooden beams. The sun had slipped down, the side windows of the barn now filled with a blinding orange light. The pressure in her was too much. A mild pounding started at her temple. She straightened out her legs; her limbs tingled from the lack of blood flow.

Well, there went her "gay" questions. She knew they were at the very least bisexual and apparently into three-ways. Her stomach tightened. It threw all their interactions into disarray.

Why would Cole be staring at her like that all the time? And why was Josh being so friendly, showing her around the farm and then asking her over for dinner? Were they setting her up for something—for that?

Toni's mind was flipping, trying to assess all the angles. Shock and alarm were now moving on to anger. Her jaw tightened. Trapped in the loft or not, watching them had been wrong, but now she knew more. No one was going to make a fool of her. Maybe it was time to clean out her father's stuff, teach Cole how to use a computer, and get the hell out of here.

Chapter Nine

Cole knelt by the window, the room doused in darkness.

“What’re you doing?”

Cole turned, seeing Josh’s silhouette in the doorway. Cole waved him over.

“Check this out.” Cole handed Josh the small hunting telescope, gesturing to the living room window that Toni had wide open, the curtain billowing in the cool evening breeze.

Again, she had the house lit up like a Christmas tree. Josh raised the scope to his eye, squinting into the lens. Cole sat near him, leaning into the screen.

Toni was skirting across the floor on her tiptoes, her arms above her head in an arc, her chin held high. Cole listened to the distant sound of classical music spilling out into the yard, a piano concerto. Josh handed the scope back to him, taking in a rush of air.

“I hope I can get to sleep,” Josh muttered as he rose to his feet and walked toward the door. “You shouldn’t spy on her anymore. It’s not right.”

“Don’t be so uptight. People do a lot of things that aren’t right.”

“Well, I’m not one of them.” Josh ran his fingers through his rumpled hair.

“Save it for tomorrow’s column, Ann. What we did in the barn probably isn’t right either.”

“Well, that’s the smartest thing you’ve said in weeks, because I’ve been thinking about that a lot.”

Josh’s sharp words sliced through him. Cole gripped the small hunting scope. Josh stepped back closer to the bed.

“It’s just sex, right? We don’t care about her—hell, I barely know her! I don’t like that. That’s not what I’m about, man.” Josh shuffled out of the room.

Cole continued to look through the lens, letting Josh’s comments roll off even as his jaw locked with tension.

She had on a short, mint green skirt this time. When her body spun, it lifted, fluttering around her waist. Cole swallowed, salivating at the narrow V between her thighs, her legs encased in white tights. He could tell when she rose up onto her toes, her height elevating with the tempo of the music. There was no denying it anymore. He ached for her. Fucking Chelsea had not cured his craving. Josh was right—the novelty of sex without strings or emotions had suddenly vanished.

He watched her until his knees became sore. Her arms waved through the air, her wrists bending with a gracefulness he had never seen.

* * *

Josh slid into bed, the sheets cooling his flaming skin. Seeing Toni perform her artful dance had his body in knots. His crazy, rampant thoughts had his cock sticking straight up like a flagpole. Every time he looked at Toni, he saw the missing piece to their puzzle, the one he'd been looking for. In the beginning, Josh hoped Chelsea would have been able to reach Cole, open him up, get him to release his pent-up emotions. He thought she might be a good candidate for a real relationship. One of love and loyalty. The problem was, Chelsea and Cole were too much alike. Josh needed someone to help him with Cole's emotional archeological dig, not work against it.

Toni had so much to offer. When he looked at her, he saw the potential for an equal partner, a woman who would be committed to them as well as the farm. She seemed devoted already. In a short time, she had organized their records and provided them with ideas of how to improve the farm. He was already nervous about her leaving. If Toni were to stay, then both of them could work on Cole and get him to really look at his life and where it was going—it seemed the answer to everything he'd been hoping for.

His head ached. It was so much to tackle, and there wasn't an abundance of time.

He was not going to grow old here watching Cole drink, never trying his hand at the real thing. It was a dead end, and he refused to believe that was all there was. Playing his part with Cole and Chelsea had lost its appeal. There came a time to get serious, and he was ready.

When he talked Cole out of selling the farm and moved in here to run it with him, he had made a commitment. He would not go back on his word, but he was entitled to a life too. He wanted more for them. Cole was just too corroded by the past to see things clearly. Whether he could bring Cole up to his level of thinking was a different story. He really needed to try. He wanted Cole with him. It just wasn't the farm and the friendship. Josh's need was deeper. He wanted them to work as a union, together during every aspect and experience in their lives. If Cole could just get a taste of something positive, that might alter his entire way of thinking. There was no one else to show him this. He wanted Cole involved in the event.

* * *

Toni danced until she was soaked in sweat, attempting to release her restless sexual energy. After a cool shower, she lay in her father's bed, sifting through his selection of nighttime reading that was still piled on the nightstand: *Powerful World Leaders*, *The Art of Subliminal Seduction*, and *The Walk of Wall Street*. From world leaders to the shrewd world of business, she found nothing worth reading before sleep.

The images of this afternoon kept rewinding and playing back again, over and over, the sight of their naked bodies embedded in her mind. Only one other time had she witnessed other people having sex. While in college at a frat party, she had briefly witnessed group sex. She had been asked to join in, but was too drunk and confused to respond.

After she broke up with Adam, burying her needs became relatively easy. Following those few botched dates, she wasn't sure what men wanted. She had only learned things secondhand, from books and friends. Growing up without a mother had certainly put a damper on her life later on, concerning men and dating. Did they all want what she had seen today? Her discovery confused her, sexually, emotionally, and physically. How could she contain her thoughts the next time she saw both men?

They were all sequestered together. The farm was only so big.

* * *

Early the next morning, before he began doing his chores, Josh spotted Toni going into the barn. He waited until she slid the door closed, then followed her.

He wasn't usually the one to initiate a pursuit, but he was eager to know Toni. Spying on her was rude, not to mention cowardly and immature. He would do this right and get to know her first. It would take too long for Cole to initiate anything. He was already too intimidated by Toni. He was too scared of everything Josh wanted for them.

In his eyes, his parents had a great marriage. They were best friends as well as lovers. They worked as a team. As a child, whenever he had a problem, they would counsel him together. There was never division between them. If they didn't agree, they would come up with another solution. If he searched his memories, there were no huge arguments to mar their happy home. Their bond had withstood the test of time.

Josh hoped to someday have what they still had now and had had for twenty-eight years.

His hand shook as he lifted the latch of the barn door. A wide arc of sunlight spread across Toni's back. An array of curls sat on top of her head, her hand stroking Macy's mane. She turned, meeting the bright glare of the sun, shielding her eyes.

"Hi, Josh." She squinted slightly when she smiled.

"Good morning. How's our girl doing?" Josh leaned on the edge of the stall and reached in to stroke Macy's ear.

"She's great." Toni patted her neck. "I'm getting attached to her," she admitted, glancing over her shoulder at Josh, chewing her lower lip.

"Are you ready for a ride?"

"You think I'm ready?" She faced him, holding on to Macy's halter. Her perfectly shaped brows rose, framing her beautiful face.

Josh wiped off his damp forehead.

"Sure you are. Macy's crazy about you. I say we saddle her up."

"Do you have time to put me on the lead today? I don't want to interfere with your chores." Cole had suggested to Toni that she be taken out on a lead line first. A horse could always sense an inexperienced rider, often running off and taking the rider by surprise.

"No worries." Josh waved her off. "I'll go get the saddle, and we'll take her for a spin." While carrying the saddle over to Macy's stall, Josh saw Toni nuzzling the lovable mare, her lips pressed against the horse's shiny brown coat. Josh was determined to give her a pleasant afternoon.

As Josh carried the saddle toward the stall, Toni felt a ripple of awareness expand through her, visions of his naked body swimming in her head. She returned her focus back to how he'd been so helpful and welcoming since she'd arrived. She chuckled inside, unable to ignore the temptation. If she blurted out what she'd seen from the loft, what would he say?

Part of her still worried all she had learned about Josh might be inaccurate. Which guy was with her now—the polite, friendly farmhand or Mr. Kinky Threesome? Her questions echoed in her head, sounding almost audible. She felt her face warm, scared she may have spoken aloud.

The crunching of Macy's hooves brought her back. Josh led Macy out of the stall. He tied the line around a side rail. With a quick heave, the saddle was on. He raised his knee, pressing on her belly to ensure the girth was snugly buckled. Toni watched as Josh slipped the bridle into Macy's mouth, the metal clanking between her teeth.

Josh gave Toni a leg up, instructing her how to situate herself in the saddle. His hand brushed against her leg as he adjusted the straps of the stirrups. Toni looked down at Josh, the sun glinting off the strands of his hair. His fingers wrapped around her ankle. Josh placed her boot into the stirrup. A twinge spread through her when his fingers grazed over the exposed skin above her sock.

"All set?" He gazed up at her, smiling.

"I think so. Now you're going to hold the line, right?" A wave of apprehension moved through her as reality weighed in. She had never actually ridden a horse.

"Sure." Josh patted Macy's neck. "I'll be right here. Don't tense up. We don't want Macy getting any ideas." Josh fed the reins over Macy's head and handed them to Toni. He walked to the side of the horse and took Toni's hand, his palm warm.

"Here, you have to hold the reins like this, for Western riding, anyway. Folks around here don't ride English."

"What's the difference?"

“Western riders have to work a little harder. There’s no posting involved when you trot. You have to squeeze those thighs tight and hold yourself in the saddle. You’re in good shape; you’ll do fine.”

Toni gripped her hand around the horn of the saddle as Josh slowly led them out of the barn into the fenced-in field. Josh let the lead out, giving Toni and Macy some room. When Toni glanced to the side to check her stirrup, she saw Cole standing outside the fence, leaning on the post. He smiled at her, wearing a wide grin she wasn’t accustomed to seeing.

She glanced back at Josh, but he was preoccupied trying to untie a knot in the lead line. Images flashed in her mind again—Cole’s dark conduct in the barn and Josh’s bold conceit.

She didn’t know which of the many faces they’d presented to trust.

Chapter Ten

“So you think I did well for my first ride?” Toni stood off to the side, brushing down Macy’s smooth, shiny coat, seeking Josh’s approval.

“You were fantastic.” Josh slung the saddle back onto the sawhorses, then walked back into the stall. He rubbed Macy’s nose. He watched her as she worked around the mare. “I didn’t think you’d let me disconnect the lead, but I’m glad you did.” He smiled.

Toni returned to the head of the horse and began brushing Macy’s mane with the currycomb. Josh had been an excellent coach with uncommon patience, his voice calm and soft while instructing her. When he released the lead line, Toni had total control of Macy and the reins. They even trotted around the field for several minutes while Josh gave her directions on how to maintain her seat in the saddle. His voice pulled her back out of her thoughts.

“The important thing to remember is, you’ve got to get out there again, and soon. Don’t wait too long.”

“Well, I don’t want to be a nuisance,” Toni told him.

Josh shook his head. “Please don’t say that.” He stepped closer to her, their shoulders touching. His warm breath drifted against her cheek. Toni’s hand shook slightly, the comb slipping between her fingers. She tried to focus on the task at hand, but her surroundings became blurry with a heated haze. “You’re not a nuisance.” His hand covered hers over the currycomb. His warm fingers brushed over hers as they worked the comb through Macy’s mane.

Visions of him kneeling in front of Chelsea burned in her mind. She was afraid to look at him, afraid of exactly which of his faces would be looking back at her. Usually Toni liked to have all the answers before making a choice. Somehow she knew that wasn’t going to happen this time.

He made the decision for both of them, removing the comb from her gripping fingers and setting it up on the shelf. Josh placed his finger on the side of her chin, steering her face to his.

“I want to kiss you. Maybe not my best idea ever, but I’m going to do it anyway.” He let out a sigh, as if releasing the weight of his confessed intentions. “Because I’ve run out of reasons to stop myself.”

She looked into his eyes; their color seemed to change like a mood ring. His fingers inched behind her neck, pulling her to him. He smelled woodsy with a scent

of sweetness from Macy's grain lingering on the skin of his palm. When he angled his head, she shut her eyes.

His lips rested against hers, polite and unobtrusive. He didn't push, didn't force his way in, easing her into the kiss. Toni lifted her hand. She felt the mild abrasion of his whiskers on her palm.

His body pressed up against hers, guiding her backward until her back was pressed against the slatted walls of the stall. She could feel his cock throbbing through his jeans and pushing against her leg. Josh deepened the kiss, his tongue lightly coating hers with his moisture.

She didn't know what to do with her other hand. It twitched at her side. The urge to touch more of him raced through her body. She curbed the urge, curling her fingers into a damp fist. She reciprocated, tasting the edge of his lips.

He pulled away first, his forehead resting against hers, their lips touching. His quiet words bathed her heated face.

"I'm sorry." He laughed softly. "I just couldn't help myself." With that, he was gone, brushing past her, leaving her alone in the stall.

* * *

"You're awful quiet." Cole tipped back his beer.

Josh couldn't eat. He moved the chicken around his plate, his lack of appetite mocking him after a full day's work.

"Ah, just beat, I guess." Josh chewed his food, pushing it down his parched throat.

"How'd Toni do on Macy?" Cole buttered his bread.

"She did well. I think if she eases into it, which she is, she'll do fine."

Josh tried to remain casual, but the truth was, he was having trouble facing Cole after he had kissed Toni in the barn. Cole might not want to say the words, but Josh knew he was interested in Toni too.

The fact that he had acted first could be a problem.

They'd never been in competition for a woman before. In high school, Cole couldn't be bothered with any serious entanglements. Whereas Josh had a semiserious girlfriend, only to see her slip away right after graduation, eager to expand her horizons. Cole was more aggressive than Josh with most things. The fact that he was hanging back, resorting to only spying on Toni, was unusual.

"So I guess you're planning on taking her out again?" Cole leaned back in his chair, braiding his fingers behind his neck.

"I'll do it until she feels comfortable. It won't interfere with my duties, don't worry." Josh realized his tone sounded a bit clipped.

"Hey, man"—Cole raised his hands—"I wasn't thinking anything like that." Cole frowned, his face creasing. He rested his elbow on the table, his cheek in his palm. "You all right?"

“Yeah, I’m fine.” Josh got up and took his plate to the sink. He stared out the window, his mind now flooded with her. What was she doing? Would she dance tonight? What had she thought about the kiss? Was she thinking about him, or was she turned off? She had reciprocated, though.

He felt Cole’s hard stare. It was burning into him. He had to tell him. If Cole decided to make a pass at her, she might tell him what happened between them today. He shook his head, running his hand through his hair, yanking the short strands, wanting to feel pain, punishing himself for his lack of control. He wouldn’t let a woman get between them. After he realized Chelsea had no future with them, she became more of a convenience. One that wouldn’t cause any emotional issues that affected their friendship. As he turned and walked out of the kitchen, his decision was already made. If Cole wanted Toni, he’d step back, relinquishing his claim on her and the attraction he felt. He wouldn’t sacrifice the friendship; though it was tempting, he could never do it. He and Cole were bound by the past, a past that had been a lot of work. It had taken Josh so long to get through to him and earn his trust. He would put his respect for their friendship first, even if it killed him.

The fact was that now, almost ten years later, their connection had grown, deepening their relationship. It was a rare camaraderie between men, but for them it worked. Their friendship flourished. Josh wasn’t only connected to Cole, but now he was connected to Cole’s parents and the legacy of the land.

Josh shared his vision. A vision Cole was unable to see while crippled with grief. After much digging, Cole understood, admitting he felt linked to the land, and wanted to stay close to his late parents. Josh wanted to prove to Cole they were capable of carrying on with things after his parents were gone, enforcing the fact that his parents would be proud and that the land gave them both a sense of purpose. Josh made himself part of that pitch, selling himself along with his sweat and hard work.

Cole needed him. Whether Josh’s dependence on Cole was on the same level, he couldn’t be sure, but if Josh ever left, he knew it would destroy Cole. He was all Cole had left. And Josh had too much of a conscience. He could never hurt Cole. If he were to ever leave, Cole’s life would self-destruct. He would probably drown himself in liquor and forget to feed the animals.

* * *

Cole reclined in his underwear on his bed, his hands laced behind his neck. The cool night air blew over his body. When he saw Josh in his blue boxers through the crack of the door, he pulled off the headphones. Cole silenced the blare of heavy metal music, then waved him in.

Josh walked over to the bed and sat down. He was staring out the window, his face a mask of confusion.

“What’s going on with you, man?” Cole sat up, playfully punching him in the bare shoulder.

"I think I screwed up, brother."

If one of them was in a mood, they usually just let it go, letting it run its course, but Josh was obviously troubled about something. They didn't usually visit one another after they went to their rooms for the night.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Cole squinted at him.

"I couldn't help it, man." Josh shook his head. "I just lost it."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Cole had never seen him this way.

"I kissed Toni today," he confessed.

"You did?" Cole felt his mouth drop, his eyes widen.

"I'm sorry, man. I just lost it."

"Holy shit." Cole laughed, his mouth drying at the thought. A tingle spread through him. What he had only been able to imagine, Josh had experienced in reality.

"I really am sorry."

"Shit, man." Cole shoved him again. "You don't owe me any apology." Cole's pulse raced. He was shocked Josh had acted on his attraction. Why couldn't he have?

"It bothered me. I know you're, well, attracted to her too." Josh sighed, flopping down on the bed next to him, staring into empty air.

Cole tossed his head back, chuckling, trying to ease the anxious tension that was building, and wanting to be tactful.

"Why do you find this funny?" Josh shifted his body, glaring at him.

"Well, for starters, I thought you were going to tell me one of the tractors blew an engine or something."

"No. It's not that dramatic, but I just thought I should tell you."

"How was it?" Cole rolled into him, nudging him, his curiosity eating him from within.

"It was fucking incredible."

"So she didn't freak out on you?" Cole prodded him, eager to know Toni's reaction to his buddy's overture.

"No. She let me do it. She kissed me back too. Have you..." Josh waved his hand, his face tense.

"No, man." When Cole thought of making a pass at Toni, his body clammed up. Never before had his attraction toward a woman made him feel like he was thirteen again.

The evening silence filled the room, the two of them gazing into space, their mutual desire anesthetizing them.

"What are you going to do?" Cole asked, giving Josh a sideward glance.

Josh sat up, facing the doorway.

Cole stood and circled around the bed. Josh leaned his elbows on his knees, his head buried in his hands. He looked up at Cole through vented fingers.

"I know you want her too."

"Wanting her and going for it are two different things. Don't concern yourself with me; we've already covered that. Toni doesn't go for guys like me."

Cole stared down at him. Josh's blue eyes were heavy-lidded, filled with longing. He shrugged as if attempting to plead ignorance. Cole didn't know how to react, not wanting their new tenant to cause any friction between them.

Cole didn't want to try to read him either, afraid of what Josh's thoughts were. He also didn't want to ask questions. The less he knew, the better; ignorance was bliss.

Josh shook his head, turning away from him as if too exhausted to debate. He got up and left the room. The door closed behind him, sealing them in their own spaces. Cole listened to his footsteps as they moved down the hall. He sank down onto his bed, his hands gripping the sheet, twisting it into a creased ball. His head began to pound. Haunting images flashed behind his eyes, the colors bright and too painful for him to look at.

What did this mean? Was Josh falling hard for Toni? Was she "it" for him? Josh falling for Toni equaled a slew of problems for Cole—rings, marriage, children. His stomach twisted; every muscle had gone taut. Would Josh leave? Would he move to the city? Toni sure as hell wouldn't give up her top-notch job and salary, and for what? To live here, surrounded by a bunch of livestock, inhaling the stench of manure? He licked his lips, his mouth dry. His body screamed for a drink, needing to numb it all away.

Chapter Eleven

Toni sat at the kitchen table, fixated on her father's den. She drank her coffee, staring into the room, knowing it was time to start gutting it. She needed something to do today to distract her. She couldn't get Josh out of her mind. Him and his sweet, tender kiss.

The kiss had felt good. Who was she kidding? It had felt amazing. Josh's touch was soft and light. His approach couldn't be refused. But damn, Cole hovered over her, a mystery that intrigued her.

He provoked something inside her. Something deep and dark, something forbidden. These were the thoughts that came to her mind every time she saw him. A temptation lingered inside of her. The fact that he was more closed off than Josh just made her curiosity all the stronger.

Then she was right back to Josh. And that woman in the barn—she desperately needed to know who she was and what she meant to the guys before she could even begin to sort through her feelings for “them.”

Her head ached, shifting through the possibilities. She took a deep breath, forcing out all the butterflies that fluttered in her stomach. She would take one day at a time. She would try to act as casually as possible while with them, which would require great effort. She didn't know what their patterns were or about their history with women. One sighting in the loft couldn't confirm anything.

Toni was sure of one thing. Josh and Cole had a unique relationship, one that was bound by deep ties. She in no way wanted to be the cause of any conflict while she was here. The fact that Josh has kissed her had the power to change things.

After she got dressed, she ransacked her father's den. She was torn whether to just start packing and hightail it back home or stick it out. It was part of the agreement, that she could return, but her tenant would, of course, stay and finish out her term at school. That meant her first roommate since dorm life. Maybe she should stay on at the farm and try to dodge the bullets.

Toni kicked one of Bruce's boxes that was filled with old *Life* magazines from the forties and fifties. She slid down the wall, dropping her head into her hands. How had things gotten so complicated? Guilt wormed through her. She'd never imagined in all her life she'd have these problems with men. She'd gone from famine to a possible feast. Another woman might thrive on all this attention. For Toni, it had her life off-kilter.

If she was going to stay through the summer, she needed a studio. She didn't want to drop her dancing because she didn't have the space. She'd managed to get a few sessions in during the last several weeks, but she needed more room. She needed to do something with the floor and hang up a few mirrors. Installing a barre wouldn't be a bad idea either.

She spent the entire day packing up her father's periodicals and some of his books. Toni left some of them on the shelf, including her favorites: *The Great Gatsby*, *The Art of Architectural Drawing*. These books reminded her of him. She felt that if she could see them, hold them, and smell them, she'd be able to keep him close to her.

Her eyes burned, her throat dry and tight. She hadn't cried since the service. She knew he wasn't happy living in the city. She hoped he had been happy here. He seemed to thrive off his reclusiveness. He had come to Montclair to see her frequently, insisting she wouldn't like it here. He told her it was muddy, and the air reeked of manure. She'd never had the pleasure of sharing the beauty of the farm with him. She regretted that. In a way, he hadn't allowed it, just as Cole had said to her.

By dinnertime, she moved all the boxes into the closet upstairs. Toni then moved the TV and VCR into the dining room along with the small blue-and-gold-striped couch and matching chair, turning that room into a living room. The dining room table and chairs were moved into the kitchen. She left the other table and folding chairs propped up near the front door. She would ask Cole and Josh to haul them away.

She stood in the middle of the empty room, hearing her breaths echo off the ceiling. This room would be perfect. A few mirrors, a barre, and about four or five coats of wax, and she'd be all set up to dance. She left the mini compact stereo system up on the shelf, her opera and classical disks stacked neatly on the side. She could paint the walls herself; the other tasks she would need help with.

But should she stay? That was the ten-million-dollar question, and still no concrete answer in sight. She turned her back on the room and went searching for her purse. She suddenly needed to get out. A nice, quiet ride would hopefully help her to sort things out. While digging for her car keys, she found her phone. Something she couldn't get through one day without seemed to have been forgotten and so quickly. She used it only once since she'd arrived, to research the trees for the farm.

She turned it on, noticing four text messages in her in-box from Dawn Shaffer, her coworker and only confidant at the firm. Dawn had been trying to get in touch with her. Her messages became more frantic as Toni scrolled down the screen. She punched in the number for the firm, then Dawn's extension at the automated request. Dawn picked up before the phone could ring a second time.

"For fuck's sake! Where the hell have you been?"

Toni apologized profusely. "I'm sorry; I sort of forgot about the phone, and..."

"I was worried about you! What the hell is going on there?"

"You'd never believe it. Listen"—Toni started pacing around the house—"I really need to talk."

"Well, we're not doing it over the phone and with me in eavesdrop central. Meet me. Let's have dinner. Harry was supposed to have a meeting, but he cancelled it, something about his grandkids, so I'm blowing out of here early."

"Perfect. You have no idea how much I need this." Toni darted upstairs as she clutched the phone to her ear. She sifted through a pile of clothes she had stuffed into her father's chest of drawers. "Where, when, what time?"

Of all the people she knew, Toni could tell Dawn anything. It was hard to shock Dawn. Toni found herself chuckling, her anxiety easing because today just might be the day Toni managed to do it.

"I have to stop in Parsippany and drop something off for a client of Harry's. There's a diner around there."

"I know the one. It's off Landix, right? I'll be there."

"See you in about two hours."

Toni disconnected the call. She pulled her hair into a tight ponytail before resuming her hunt for a decent shirt.

* * *

Dawn was out in the parking lot, leaning against the fender of her black sedan when Toni pulled in. She had made good time, the traffic still moderate. Dawn waved, a bright smile spreading across her face. By the time Toni was unbuckled and out of the car, Dawn was at her door.

"God"—Dawn pulled her into a tight embrace—"I am so glad you finally called. I was starting to get a bit panicky. Mostly at the thought of driving to the sticks to find you."

The fine hairs of Dawn's blonde hair grazed Toni's cheek. Toni stepped back and hooked her arm into Dawn's. "I'm sorry. I've been preoccupied."

"Sounds like it, girl; let's get us a table. I'm famished."

They walked up the ramp and through the front door. Dawn's heels clicked across the floor. The dinner rush hadn't started, but the counter was lined with customers. The hostess took them to a booth and handed them their menus.

"I'm going for the artery clogger. What about you?" Dawn slid her menu to the edge of the table, her ivy green eyes meeting Toni's

Toni gestured toward the side of the menu with all the salads. Dawn wiggled her nose.

"Come on." Dawn sipped her water. "What...are you afraid your tutu isn't going to fit?"

"You are a bad influence." Toni laughed. "All right, hotshot"—Toni set the menu down—"I can be hard-core. I'm going for the bacon cheeseburger, fries, and onion rings."

"Nice." Dawn grinned. She tucked her chin-length hair behind her ear. "You look great, so rested. Maybe I should stay with you for a while, take a sabbatical."

"Yeah, well... It's sure different out there." Toni shifted in her seat. It was great to see Dawn, all dressed up in her smart, light gray pantsuit.

The idea that she hadn't had to dress for work had her suddenly feeling somewhat removed from her previous life.

* * *

The waitress took their order. While they waited, Toni asked Dawn how things were going at the firm.

"Nothing's changed. Crunch season is starting, but you're not getting off that easy." She wagged her finger. "Tell me what's happening."

Toni told Dawn about the farm and how her father had accumulated too much stuff.

"It's amazing he fit that much shit in such a small house."

Dawn kindly asked her how she was coping with Bruce's death. Toni admitted there had been times, especially since she'd arrived at the farm, that the loss of her father had a way of rebounding, the sting still quite fresh.

"I just wish I could've shared the farm with him. It's so beautiful there. We never left the city when I was growing up." She lifted a shoulder. "It would've been something different for both of us, you know?"

"So you met the guys who run the place?"

"Yes, Cole Harrington"—Toni fussed with her straw—"owns the farm, and Josh Martin, his friend, helps him. He lives there too."

"Hanging with farmers? How weird is that?"

The waitress arrived, setting their steaming plates on the table. Dawn dived into her fries while simultaneously picking up the ketchup and dousing them.

"Josh has been very friendly, showing me around, teaching me to ride. Cole's a little more, uh...serious."

"So the way you say their names, I'm guessing they're not old guys with overalls?" Dawn's eyes flickered.

"They're both good-looking," Toni offered, putting way too much ketchup on her plate to avoid Dawn's face. "Not old at all. Like, thirties, maybe?"

"Oh reeeeeeally?" she asked, biting into her burger.

"Yes, really. Two good-looking, thirtysomething farmers who are my landlords and neighbors." Toni felt the heat bathe her face. Other women should have her problems.

"I sense a story. Or possibly a porn flick plot. Wait—are they straight?" Dawn smacked the table. "I'm already envious."

She couldn't hold back. The entire situation bubbled up as a mildly hysterical laugh. "I caught them," Toni whispered, scanning the surrounding tables.

Dawn's mouth opened, her food cooling on her plate.

"Together? They're gay? That's a shame...though potentially still hot."

"No—I mean, maybe they're bi or something, but...I saw them together with a girl. You know. Together."

"And you saw it? Seriously?" Dawn sat motionless in the booth.

"I certainly did." Toni explained how she had gotten stuck up in the loft.

"Good God."

"Wait, it gets better. Or something. So, like, two days after that, Josh, he kissed me."

"Holy shit." Dawn gasped, her brows raised.

"And the other one goes from, like, lukewarm to sort of hot, then to nothing. Which of course means I can't stop thinking about him."

"What the hell are you going to do?"

"I don't know. I was thinking I should leave, but...I'm doing work for the farm now, accounting stuff. And my dad's house isn't even halfway ready for someone else to live there."

"Wow, that's a lot, Toni. How do you feel about this guy, the one who kissed you?"

Toni's stomach tipped, her appetite suddenly fleeing.

"I'm attracted to him, but..." She took a breath. Dawn nodded.

"You're thinking about the other one as well."

"I'm all fucked-up." Toni leaned on the table, glancing at Dawn through spread fingers.

"You need to ask yourself a few questions. One, what are their plans for the woman you saw in the barn? Two, what are Josh's plans for you? And what do you want? It's not like you had high traffic coming through your place down here, and I don't mean that in a bad way."

The waitress cleared their plates. Dawn asked for two coffees and waited until the waitress scurried away.

"Do you think these guys are looking for something more? Maybe this other girl's just a casual thing? Some women do casual."

"Jesus, I don't know."

"Have you even considered that?"

"That's something I don't know if I can look at."

"You may have to." Dawn patted her hand.

"I should just come back home."

"That's not an answer. I'd call that an escape."

"Things have just been really screwed up." Toni laughed, trying to downplay it all.

Their coffees arrived. The conversation seemed to be losing steam. Dawn's soft voice washed over her.

"You're going to have to talk to them, or at least the one that made the pass."

"I was afraid you'd say that."

* * *

Toni drove slowly down the rutted lane. She was tired, her mind exhausted. The farm was coated in darkness like dripping black paint. She pulled her SUV up alongside the porch and killed the lights. She and Dawn had spent hours at the diner, even giving in to the siren call of Black Forest cake. She sat back in her seat, gazing into the twinkling night sky. She would stay, for a while, at least. But if things between Josh and Cole became strained, she would have to leave.

As she let herself into the house, she recalled her thoughts on building a makeshift studio.

* * *

The next day, she resolved to go over and visit the men. Toni felt the bashful warmth seeping out of her skin before she even attempted walking across the yard. Seeing Josh again would only revive the feelings he had stirred up inside her with his kiss. Looking at Cole would be like facing a billboard of uncertainty. Cole had already paid her for her initial services, but she would make the offer of bartering with them. She would suggest they not pay her for the maintenance of their records and ask them if they would help her install the studio. It would mean making changes to the house, but for some reason, she was confident they would allow her to do it. Having them in the house could backfire, but as Dawn said, she shouldn't run. She should carry on with her life and attempt to hold on to something that was hers. Something that provided her with solid ground, and that was her dancing.

Toni saw the light on in the kitchen, the two of them sitting at the table. The TV blared the evening news broadcast through the door. She tapped the brass knocker. Toni wiped her damp palms down the front of her jeans. The door opened, a wide arc of light falling across her face.

"Well, good evening. Look who it is, Josh." Cole opened the door, glancing back at Josh. Toni saw Josh sitting at the table. "It's Ms. Jameson." Cole's lips twisted into a sly smirk, his tone dripping with sarcasm.

Toni swallowed, her mind trying to decipher Cole's conduct. She looked at Josh's face. His eyes were bright and welcoming. His lips eased into a subtle smile. She let the air slip from her lungs, her insides loosening.

"I'm not interrupting your dinner, am I?" Toni cleared her throat. She thrust her hands into the front pockets of her jeans.

"Not at all. Come on in," Josh called from the table, waving her over.

"Yes, please join us." Cole's tone was hard and icy.

She stepped through the door. His sleek, angular body stepped in right behind hers after he closed the door. She would persevere. Not dealing with him head-on was a form of avoidance.

"Can we get you anything? Coffee?" Josh was up, setting a few mugs on the counter.

"Sure." Toni edged into the kitchen. Cole walked into the living room and turned off the TV. He tossed the remote on the sofa and returned to the kitchen. Toni watched Josh bustle around the rustic farm kitchen.

"We don't bite." Cole grinned, his brows lifting. "Are you going to sit down?" He gestured to the pine bench that butted up against the wall behind the table.

Josh was busy clearing their dinner plates. He then set a steamy mug in front of her, their eyes catching for a brief moment. He smiled at her. A dimple she hadn't yet seen recessed on his cheek.

It was too late to be shy, but she was guarded, not knowing what the men had discussed or how much they told each other. Toni figured that if they shared a sex partner, then they probably communicated pretty damn well. She wasn't sure if she found that offensive, nerve-racking, or exciting.

Josh handed Cole a mug of coffee and then took his place at the table. Toni felt Cole's weight on the bench as he sat next to her. He slid over closer to her. He was taunting her. He knew about the kiss. His behavior was premeditated, almost wanting to provoke her. She turned, bravely facing him. He held up a bottle of whisky, his eyes glimmering.

"Need a little extra something to warm you up?" He held the end of the brown bottle over her mug.

"Sure." She canted her head at him, then glanced at Josh. Again she was met with the bright clarity of his eyes. Toni let Cole's innuendo run off her.

"So what brings you by, Toni?" Cole's voice pulled her away from Josh's open, welcoming eyes, sucking her back into the depths of his. He lifted his mug.

"I had a question, a barter of sorts," Toni began.

"Oh yeah?" Cole's eyes sprang open. "A barter, huh? I like those."

"Don't let him distract you. If there's something you need, we'll be happy to give you a hand." She looked at Josh, his face contorted in a disapproving frown. "What can we do for you?"

Toni shoved her hands under her thighs, concealed by the table. She felt Cole shift his weight next to her, his thigh touching hers. "Could we go over to the house? I want to show you something." She rushed her words in an attempt to break the spell.

* * *

"Are you going to perform for us?" Cole turned Toni's ballet slipper in his hand, analyzing it as if it were a foreign object.

Toni shrugged. He was fishing again, as he'd been doing all night. She noted a subtle shrewdness in his behavior tonight.

"What's in it for me?" She walked over to him and yanked the slipper out of his hand.

"The studio," he said, his tone husky.

"Well, since I'll be staying through the summer, I'll consider it, but if you're going to be difficult, I have a home I can return to."

Cole stepped back.

Josh walked around the room with a tape measure, taking all of the measurements for the premade floors. Both of them insisted on putting in a new floor. They thought it was pointless to wax and varnish a floor that old. "You can't shine shit," as Cole had put it to her frankly.

"How high would you like the mirrors? And don't you need some sort of barre?" Josh clicked the button on the tape measure and the tape sprang back, retracting into its casing.

"Ah, we need to secure our performance first." Cole cleared his throat, moving in for a second round at the debate.

Toni tucked a few strands of escaped hair behind her ear, glancing over at Josh. He made an aggravated motion with his hand and began eyeing the wall, more interested in planning the project.

"When it's done, and I'm ready," Toni answered firmly.

Josh laughed. "Good for you."

"I'm going to hold you to that." Cole walked toward her, his boots scuffing across the floor, echoing in the empty room. He took the slipper back, out of Toni's hand. He ran his fingers over the glossy pink ribbons, but he only had eyes for her.

Chapter Twelve

The spring rains came.

Frustration seemed the primary emotion of everyone on the farm. They needed to get the planting done. Erosion was becoming a concern. Toni didn't talk to them for three days. She only saw them getting on and off the equipment and going in and out of the house. Josh had sent her into town to purchase everything they needed to start the construction on her studio. She had been in to visit Macy but didn't feel comfortable riding her alone yet.

At the end of the third day of planting, the turquoise truck returned. Toni bolted to the window, paint roller in hand. Chelsea stepped down from the truck. She glanced over at Toni's car, squinting. The warm breeze blew the strands of her blonde hair around her heart-shaped face. A white button-down blouse pulled across her full breasts. She hooked her thumbs into her belt loops and sauntered toward the barn.

Cole rounded the corner of the barn just in time to receive her. Toni saw him glance over at the cottage. He fussed with his cap, appearing to be anxious over her presence. He would die if he knew she'd seen them. That was definitely a trump card she could use on him later.

Chelsea placed her hands on Cole's shoulders, leaning into him, kissing his cheek. He wrapped his arm around her waist loosely. Chelsea then grabbed Cole, pulling him into her. Cole shook his head, pulling back, his hand rotating through the air. Chelsea stepped back, her posture tense.

This was the first Toni had seen of her since her sighting in the loft. So why was he turning her down?

Cole shrugged, pleading his excuse. Chelsea turned around on her heel and stomped back to her truck. When she turned toward the window again, Toni stepped back.

Toni finished painting the studio a pale pink. She tried not to read too much into what she'd seen. Or be too pleased by it.

* * *

Four days later, the hay baler sold. Cole came bursting through Toni's front door, check in hand, his eyes on fire.

"Okay, Ms. Accountant. What do you recommend I do with this?" He waved the check under her nose.

“That’s fantastic.” She raised her hands in triumph. “It goes into the bank. We’ll use it to start the trees.”

“I knew you’d have a plan.” Cole walked into the empty studio, evaluating her paint job. “Nicely done.” He faced her.

He looked less threatening today. His face softened, his cap backward on his head, a smudge of dirt on his cheek.

“Thanks.” Toni looked up at him, his body towering over hers. “Bet you didn’t know I could paint, did you?”

“I bet there’s a lot of things you can do that I don’t know about,” he whispered, his voice hoarsened, his gaze reaching down inside her.

Her mind scrambled for a good comeback, but she found none.

“Actually, you don’t have to answer that.” He stared down at her from under his long, dark lashes. “I like it when things are doled out a little bit at a time. It makes things more exciting.” He lifted his hand, twirling a curly strand of her hair around his finger, then tucked it behind her ear. He then did something that was totally out of character for him. He blew her a kiss and walked out of the house

Chapter Thirteen

"These slats of flooring can be nailed or glued. Which would you prefer?" Josh stood in the center of the empty room, his arms crossed in front of his chest. Josh had graced her doorstep after dinner, determined to get the studio floor done tonight.

"I want the floor to be sturdy. What do you think?" Toni checked his expression. He held his chin in his hands, surveying the floor, glancing back at the pile of hardwood flooring.

"I think we better nail it. It will be stronger, and it won't stink. The fumes from the glue will have you stoned for three days, unless you want to bunk over at our place." He grinned at her, turning up his palm. "I'm just giving you all the angles, that's all."

"We'll go with the nails." Toni nodded, brushing over the note of humor in his tone. The thought of staying at their house for even one night petrified her.

Josh and Toni worked for three hours, taking a break to eat the subs she made. Toni watched him work, assisting him when she could. She appreciated his attention to detail. Josh wanted to make sure that he'd set everything up exactly the way she wanted.

He glanced over his shoulder, aligning the last floorboard. "Your dancing. Is it like running or lifting weights? Like—does it get hard when you stay away for a while?" he asked, standing. He drained the last of his root beer. He set the can up on the shelf, near the stereo speaker.

"It is. Dancing requires a type of endurance that has to be maintained, just like anything else. It's like exercising or playing an instrument. You should do it every day."

"Maybe you could show me how it's done sometime," he whispered, returning his attention back to the mess on the floor, the scattered nails and dirty rags. "I won't bug you about a performance, though." Josh patted her shoulder, his fingers lingering on the skin of her arm. "Now as for Cole"—his lips twisted—"I can't be sure, but I'll try to behave in the meantime."

Josh dropped his hammer back into his tool belt and began cleaning up. He slid the extra nails into his pocket and then crawled around on the floor with a damp rag, wiping down the shiny, smooth boards.

"You're both very different." Toni's voice reverberated through the empty room. She felt her face warm. She wanted to fish, get some of her questions answered. She

figured Josh was easier. But she certainly didn't want to put the guys at odds. She wished she knew just how much they did share. It was on the tip of her tongue, the thought of asking.

"That we are," Josh agreed. He wiped his hands on the front of his pants. "That's what keeps it from getting dull after all these years, I suppose." He laughed.

"I guess so," Toni murmured. The urge to confess her sighting while up in the hayloft also nagged at her. She refrained. If she told them, they might clam up on her. She wanted to get to know them better. Making them uncomfortable with her comments or questions would only delay her progress. Finding out exactly what Chelsea meant to them would certainly put her on more stable ground.

Josh walked into the kitchen, taking off his tool belt. He set it down on the counter. Toni didn't know what to do. She'd offered him coffee, but he had politely declined. At the sink, he filled a glass from the drain board with water; then his head tilted back, the smooth skin of his throat working. She shoved her hands in her pockets, her heart pushing through her chest.

He set the glass in the sink and walked toward her, his face still as stone.

"Thank you so much." She smiled weakly at him, feeling she needed to fill the silence that lingered between them.

"I'll do anything you want or need me to do." He stepped closer, reaching out to glide his fingers over her jaw.

When Josh was near her, all the air went out of her lungs.

She didn't think he was talking about home improvements right now. His finger trailed back up the side of her face, brushing over her lower lip. He rested his finger there, his face moving closer. Toni's eyes clamped shut again. His hushed voiced spilled from his mouth.

"Look at me."

She opened her eyes; he was close. Too close.

His fingers kept moving, gliding down the skin of her arm, rising up again, over her shoulder, behind her neck.

"If you want me to stop, you need to say so right now." His lips covered hers briefly. He pulled back, watching her face intently.

Toni felt the dam straining, the force of her desire rushing over. She didn't say anything, but she also didn't move away from his embrace.

He pulled her closer. Their pelvises pressed together, their heat meshing. "You're very beautiful." He caressed her face, his other hand wandering down her back, resting on the slope of her ass.

Josh leaned into her, brushing his mouth across hers, slowly licking her lower lip.

His touch moved over her body, palm now massaging her, her skin smoking under his touch. She shook, even as her mind raced with unanswered questions and explanations.

"Is this okay?" he whispered, his smooth cheek sliding against hers. His warm tongue glided around the outer edge of her ear. She gasped.

"Yes." She rested her hands on his chest, his heart pulsating into her palm.

He held the back of her neck, his fingers entangling in the mass of hair that hung in a loose ponytail. He gently tilted her head, her eyes locking with his again.

Toni felt his body move. He left their circle of heat briefly to flip the light switch on the wall. Blackness coated the air between them. He pressed the small square package into her palm. Her insides shivered with excitement.

He steered her backward until she hit the edge of the table. His fingers slowly worked the buttons of her blouse. His mouth nuzzled her neck. His teeth grazed the sensitive skin there. Toni breathed him in.

Her blouse was open, hanging off her shoulders. Shards of white moonlight seeped through the sheer curtain, illuminating Josh's face. He unfastened the front clasp of her bra, revealing her breasts to his gaze. When his warm hands cupped them, a moan escaped from her lips. She listened to her own sounds permeating the dark kitchen.

"You like that?" His hands worked her flesh, kneading her, his touch like velvet on her skin. Toni moaned again. She reached for him, pushing his shirt up to reveal the tight definition of his chest, his skin warm under her palms. He pressed his body against hers. She felt his cock, swollen and ready.

"Shut up," she whispered fiercely.

He yanked his shirt over his head and tossed it on the floor. He faced her, his eyes round and hungry. His head dropped, his mouth covering her nipple. Toni clutched his head in her hands, his mouth feeding on her.

She arched into him, urging him to take all of her. Electrical pulses moved through her as he nibbled, providing sensations for her to savor. Cool air rushed at her skin when he released her. He knelt on the floor. Her hands threaded through his hair nervously.

Josh unbuttoned her jeans. Her thighs twitched with anticipation. He gently tugged at her jeans, pushing them down. His fingers danced over the silky material of her panties. Her breath caught again. She touched his face.

Josh fingered along the edge of her panties, sliding them down her legs. He untied her sneakers, freeing her from the clothing piled at her feet. Her belly swelled with heat. His warm breath blew into her heated folds, wetness pouring out of her.

He spread her open, his thumb gliding over her clit. Her hips bucked at his touch.

"Oh no." She exhaled, embarrassed by her sensitivity.

White dots of light flashed across the insides of her lids as his tongue slithered through her. He slowly lapped at her, his groans of affirmation vibrating against her flesh. His mouth eloquently worked on her. He moved slowly, lazily, like thick syrup.

Toni leaned against the edge of the table, arching for him, her body riddled with arousal.

“Oh God.” She grabbed his head. “Please.”

Josh stood up and removed his boots. He quickly unbuttoned his pants, his eyes never leaving her face. Toni drank in his body, his tight flesh wrapping around his toned limbs. She reached out, wanting to feel him. His cock was smooth and hot. He tipped his head back, his mouth falling open, savoring her touch. Toni stroked him, his skin silk on her fingers. He met her eyes.

“Slow up a bit.” His voice was tight but gentle. “You’re just so incredible. I don’t want to lose it right now.” He licked his lips, his breath a delicate hiss. The muscles in his arms moved as he lifted her, anchoring his hands on her hips. Her ass was now on the edge of the table, the wood cool under her flaming skin.

Josh ran his finger up the inside of her thigh, slowly gliding over her pussy. Josh was adhered to her, their heated flesh fusing together. Josh was holding himself, running the tip of his penis over her blooming folds. Toni’s fingers shook as she tore open the wrapper.

“God, please,” she whined. She couldn’t stand it. It was like a need she never knew existed or had trained herself to ignore.

Josh cupped her ass, scooting her closer to the edge of the table, his eyes wide as he slowly slid into her, as if savoring the moment. His cock burrowed into her, splitting her wide open, filling her.

“Oh.” Toni reached behind him, pressing him into her, deeper and deeper.

“You like that?”

She canted her head, searching the darkness.

“Oh no you don’t.” Josh took her head into his hands. “Look at me.”

Toni nodded, her ability to speak smothered by the way his hips slowly gyrated against hers. Caged tension and friction burned, skating along a narrow path of pleasure and pain.

“Come for me, Toni.” He huffed, his chest heaving against hers.

Her orgasm snowballed, the rush careening through her body. Her hips bucked against his. She wrapped her legs around him, her skin sliding against the heated moisture of his.

He grabbed a fistful of her hair, burying his face in it. His other hand gripped her ass cheek. He sighed, his chest collapsing against hers.

She convulsed against him. As Toni’s orgasm descended, her limbs going limp, a deep, groaning drawl slipped from Josh’s mouth. His cock burrowed deeper, his pleasure audible, purring into her ear.

Chapter Fourteen

Cole stumbled across the front yard. Too much liquor, too many thoughts in his head. If he'd driven himself to the bar, he would've never let himself get to this point. But Chelsea had come to pick him up, clearly wounded over his rebuff the other day. Her ego wouldn't let him get off that easily.

They spent the evening fucking in the bed of her truck, parked behind the Dumpster. As hard as Cole tried, Toni still pressed through his alcohol-induced haze. He'd kept his eyes closed most of the time. If he looked at Chelsea too long, his dick went limp in confusion.

The kitchen light was on. Josh was still up. He hiked up the porch stairs, fumbling with the latch of the screen door. He kicked the door closed, seeing Josh sitting at the table. To his surprise, Josh was sipping bourbon out of a shot glass, his eyes glazed over. It was unusual for him to be drinking and up this late.

"Hey, man, didn't think I'd catch you up." Cole's feet dragged across the floor as if dipped in cement. He fell into a chair, resting his pounding head in his hands. He glanced over at Josh. "How'd it go with the floor?" he asked.

"Good, good." Josh cleared his throat and took another sip of the dark amber liquid.

Cole felt tension breaking through the alcoholic haze. Josh looked strange, almost sedated.

"What's with you?" He almost reached across the table for the bottle, but then thought better of it. He glanced at the analog clock on the wall, the face decorated with various species of wild game. They had to be up in less than six hours.

"Just clearing my head," Josh said softly, pushing the shot glass away.

Cole searched his face. His mouth was slack, his eyes red and sleepy with fatigue. Then he knew. Josh had slept with her. Josh began to fidget in the chair. His heavy-lidded eyes roamed around the kitchen. Cole captured his gaze, holding Josh with his stare.

"You fucked her, didn't you?"

"Watch your mouth." Josh's voice rose. He pushed away from the table, taking the shot glass up to the sink. "And Toni is way above just a fuck." He glared at Cole, his eyes squinting in anger. "What the hell are we doing here?"

"We're running a fucking farm, the one you told me not to sell, remember?"

"That's not what I mean."

“What the hell do you want from me!” Cole gulped the whisky, inviting its burn, wanting it to make everything disappear.

“Stop pickling yourself and think for a minute, if you’ve got a brain cell left. Are we gonna be two old men jerking off together, with regrets, thinking about what might have been? Thinking what we might have been able to have with...someone else. Like—being in love with someone.” Josh’s head fell back, his fingers digging at his eyes.

“Whoa.” Cole panicked. “What, you love her now?”

Josh turned away from him, leaning over the counter, kneading his temples.

“Not yet,” he whispered, “but I think I could.”

“Well, you go on then and get yourself sucked in. Live in your fantasy world. If you think she’s going to stay here and give up her snakeskin shoes and let her heels sink in manure, then you need a fucking reality check.”

Silence swelled between them. Cole had never seen Josh this way. Maybe he should’ve made things clear to Josh after he confessed about the kiss he and Toni shared.

“You said you wouldn’t be jealous.” Josh’s head snapped up. His hands gripped the counter, his controlled temper now flaring.

“I’m not, man,” Cole lied. “I’m not fucking jealous.” *Not jealous of Josh. Or Toni.*

Josh turned his back to him to get a glass of water from the tap. Cole pushed his chair against the wall, leaning his back against the cool, hard plaster, his head spinning. His drunken words were pulling him deeper and deeper into a hole. A hole he would be left alone in.

“How was it?” He treaded cautiously, his tone gruff.

Josh slowly rotated to face him. He thrust his hands into his pockets. “We need to grow up, both of us. Hopefully you’ll be able to see that. Your future may depend on it.”

Cole sat back, widening his eyes, his body numb from Josh’s jarring statement.

Josh walked out of the kitchen, leaving Cole speechless. He listened to Josh’s feet ambling up the stairs. He reached across the table and grabbed the bottle. He tipped it back, gulping down the liquid fire. He said Toni would leave, and that would hurt. But Josh leaving?

The possibility of it paralyzed him.

* * *

Toni paced around the house, her body still quaking, unable to comprehend what she’d felt tonight. She didn’t even know how to begin to describe it. Josh was a magnificent lover.

She reclined on her bed, running her hands over her naked body, almost contemplating performing her own self-induced pleasure. She let her hand fall away to rest on the cool sheets. She would wait hopefully for his touch again.

Darkness fell over her. Cole seeped into her thoughts, chilling her skin like ice. She alternated between wanting to keep him from hurt and the secret thrill of what his jealousy might mean.

Her imagination began to run wild, conjuring thoughts of Cole and his naked, sleek body. It was virtually impossible to think of Josh without having Cole push his way through her thoughts.

Everything in society labeled what she was feeling as wrong. No matter how she tried to reconcile it, there was a sense of sexual freedom in wanting two different men. It was painful when she thought of having to choose.

* * *

The next morning, Josh found Cole feeding Macy in the barn. Josh leaned into the stall, rubbing her nose. The heat of the spring sun streamed through the window, throwing a path of light across the back of Cole's blue T-shirt.

When he turned around, Josh caught his eyes. They were coated with a glassy redness. His body moved slowly, battling the liquor-induced fatigue. No matter how angry he was, it pained Josh to see Cole this way.

Josh hadn't slept well. Their heated debate over the future had created a wedge between them, something Josh wasn't used to.

"Hey...listen."

"No need, man." Cole shook his head, tossing Macy's straw on the floor. "If you want something, then go after it. Don't let me stop you."

"What do you want? I'd really like to know. Is this it for you? Don't you want to care about anyone?"

"Like I said"—his eyes narrowed—"if you want her, if you think you can love her, then great. I don't do love; even if I did, what makes you think she'd want to be with us both?" Cole pushed past him, tossing the grain bucket into the corner. He stood in the threshold of the barn, the doors open.

"Time and a little cooperation from you might answer that question." Josh felt his temper boiling up again.

"What's the sense of liking someone or something if you don't know how long it's gonna stick around?" The death of his parents had caused him to regress behind a wall of anger, unwilling to take any chances. He had learned the hard way that anything could change in the blink of an eye.

Josh grabbed Cole's shoulder, spinning him around. "So what now? You gonna live like he did?" Josh pointed to Bruce's cottage. "Because let me tell you something, that was a sad state of affairs, man. I will not be like him. Did you ever watch him? Didn't you see what kind of life he had? We can have more."

Cole's eyes searched his face; Cole then stepped back. "Well, then, you go and get what you want." Cole turned, leaving Josh in the driveway, his fists clenched.

* * *

The weather began to warm. The sun positioned itself, beating down with a penetrating heat. The men were busy, planting the corn and cultivating the field for the tree seedlings. They rented a planting machine from a farmer in Hampton. They filled two acres with over two thousand seedlings. Cole wanted to start small, leery of suffering a loss.

Toni's studio was finished. Josh did most of the work. One night, when he had come over to hang the mirrors and mount the barre, he apologized they hadn't been able to spend that much time together alone. In the morning, Josh would stop over, asking her to meet him at the house for lunch, but Toni was growing restless with the unresolved state of affairs.

Sometimes Cole would eat with them. He seemed removed, wolfing down his meal and leaving them alone in the kitchen as quickly as he could. Some days Josh would hold her in his arms, explaining how busy they were. They had shared a kiss, one Toni felt more frustrated by than relieved. Pointing that out to Josh wasn't easy.

Josh explained that once the planting was done, they would have a reprieve. She ran her hands over him, reciprocating with her touch. Words sometimes complicated things. Afraid her words would be wrong, she used her hands, running them down his toned body. When he said, "Soon, promise," she nodded along with him.

After saying good night, she had watched him walk across the yard, his shirt draped over his shoulder, the muscles of his back dotted with sweat. She thought about the things she wanted to do to him, places she wanted to touch and taste. She couldn't wait until he came back for more than a brief visit, a teasing kiss.

But even as she mapped out everything she wanted to do with Josh, to him, she couldn't resist a glance at the upstairs window she knew belonged to Cole.

* * *

Two weeks later, Toni knew the planting was done. The men had returned to their normal routine that morning. And unfortunately, Chelsea also returned to the farm. Toni stood at her kitchen window, sickness swirling in her stomach.

Chelsea hopped out of her truck, the hem of her black miniskirt riding up her thighs. She walked toward the barn, her cowboy boots sinking in the mud. Toni had seen Cole go into the barn a few minutes earlier, but not Josh.

It was time to discover if there was a level of trust. She felt as if there was, but today would seal the deal. Chelsea turned to slide the barn door closed, looking around the farmyard.

As soon as the door closed, Toni slipped out and walked across the yard. She actually felt ready to meet Chelsea today, wanting to face her opposition head-on. If

Chelsea happened to step out of the barn, Toni would have no trouble extending her hand and introducing herself. She just needed to see if both vehicles were there.

Her throat closed. She hoped that Josh wasn't in the barn and that Cole sent her away again. A loud clanking echoed across the field. She turned, shielding her eyes. Josh was down below near the larger barn. He was repairing a fence post. She waved to him. He mopped his forehead with the hem of his shirt and waved back. A rush of pent-up air left Toni's lungs. She wanted to believe he saw Chelsea's truck and hadn't been interested in even coming up to engage her.

She turned on her heel, returning to the house, feeling a little lighter. Every second Chelsea spent in the barn with Cole was painful, though. Then the winding out of an engine had her facing the barn again, her feet rooted on the porch. Tires spun in the driveway, stones kicking up from the rear of the truck, dinging the undercarriage. Chelsea's truck fishtailed down the lane in a reckless rage, leaving a cloud of dust drifting through the air.

She might be absolutely wrong or really crazy—but the sight of Chelsea's taillights was the prettiest thing she'd seen in an awfully long time.

When Cole knocked on her door the following night to ask her to sign a few accounting statements, Toni couldn't hide the wide smile she greeted him with.

"Well, look at this." His brows rose. His lips curled into a seductive smile. Toni's heart fluttered as she watched his wandering eyes lower over her body. "Maybe I'll get a private performance."

Chapter Fifteen

Cole couldn't believe his good fortune. He had come while Toni was dancing. He drank her in as she stood there in her formfitting outfit. Tonight her figure was sheathed in dark shades of red and black, the bright, glossy ribbons of her toe shoes shimmering around her ankles.

"I don't know if I'm up for a performance tonight." She wiggled her nose. "What do you have there?" She squinted at the triplicate carbon Cole held in his hand.

"I just need you to sign these for the tax assessor's office." Cole handed her the paper. "It's the details on the plots for the trees."

"That's no problem." Toni walked into the kitchen, the hard tips of her toe shoes thumping on the floor. She reached across the counter for a pen and scribbled her signature then handed it back to him. Cole pulled out a chair, turning it to face the doorway of her new studio. The antique caned chair creaked under his weight.

"Could I just watch you for a minute?" He tipped his head, gazing up at her. "It's something I've never seen before." His tone was low, almost pleading. He had already spied on her. He really didn't feel right doing that anymore.

"Okay. No harm done, I suppose." She wiped off her forehead with the back of her hand.

She walked back into what used to be Bruce's den, which had always been piled with papers and smelling like cigars. Toni had the curtains drawn, the window open. A balmy breeze blew through the room. Cole felt light-headed as she raised her leg. She rested it on the barre.

Her body flowed to the soft music, the chirping of a flute and the smooth baritone of a clarinet. Her body continued to sway, her arms floating through the air, her fingers splayed.

The tempo of the music changed, gaining momentum. She rose onto her toes. The toned muscles of her thighs flexed with definition, pushing through the black tights. She fluttered across the floor, her tiny skirt lifting as she extended one leg, twirling, her body spiraling.

Cole's body ignited. She was the most amazing thing he'd ever seen. She lifted her chin, kicking her leg back, the toe of her slipper grazing the small of her back. Her body was bending like soft licorice. He shifted in his seat, an awareness swelling inside his jeans.

Toni dropped down to the flats of her feet, her toes pointed outward. She bent her knees, her arms gracefully drifting through the air.

“Hey,” he called, clearing his throat. “That’s a plié, right?” He had to get out of there. Her pebbled nipples pushed through her crimson leotard, distracting his attempt to distance himself from her.

Toni laughed, her mouth spreading into a wide grin, weakening him in the knees.

“That’s right. Very good,” she praised him. “Where’d you learn that?”

“Ah”—Cole wiped his dampened forehead—“my mom mentioned it, I think. She liked ballet.” He fought with his words.

She walked across the room to sit in the chair next to him and untied the ribbons of her slippers. He clenched the paper in his damp hands. His eyes skimmed over the bronze-colored skin of her back when she bent over. Her thick dark hair was piled on top of her head. His fingers twitched. He wanted to reach over and slip the pins out, see the weight of all that hair tumble down her shoulders. The sound of the nylon brushing together as she crossed and uncrossed her legs made his mouth water. He really ought to get going, before his reckless stupidity took over.

“I should go.” He stood up. He had to turn away from her, petrified that his erection could be seen through his jeans. “Thank you.” With a quick glimpse down, he spun around for one last look.

“You’re welcome.” Her cheeks were a reddish pink, and her eyes darted everywhere but his face. Cole wondered if she felt uneasy around him now, since she and Josh had been together. He thanked her again, his eyes fixated on the door. She silently followed him in her stocking feet. He faced her again in on the threshold. She blinked, her lashes casting shadows on her cheeks.

His hands shook. He lifted one, the temptation to touch her making him crazy. Her gaze followed his hand as it caught in midair. He smiled, stepping back, impressed by his own self-control.

“See you, Toni.” He barreled down the porch steps, gulping the cool evening air.

Cole quickened his pace, bolting across the yard. The last thing he wanted to do was cause her to run like he was. He was having a hard time as it was. He was constantly at odds with himself. His body ached. He was tormented over what it would feel like to have her. She evoked feelings in him he didn’t know how to deal with. It was a deep yearning that bordered on sickness. He felt driven to protect her and take care of her. He was afraid to put a name to what he was feeling.

After the death of his parents, his heart had been blown apart. His mother had been the only woman in his life for whom he would have died. He had wished it was him in the car that dark and snowy night instead of her. From that night on, Cole had pushed love out of his life, unwilling to take any risks with his heart for anyone. Everyone around town pretended to feel sorry for him. Poor Cole Harrington trying to hang on to his parents’ legacy. It was all phony. They could never understand his pain, because they didn’t own it or respect it.

The proof of that came the following year at election time. It didn't matter that the mayor's nephew had committed a crime and killed two people. He didn't even get sent to the state prison. He got to hang out in the county jail for eighteen months and enjoy the newly renovated rec yard and new exercise equipment.

Then Chelsea came. They had the same thirst for instant gratification, a shared appetite. An indulgence that always left him empty afterward, only ever feeding his anger. He lived in a vicious cycle of urgency, uncontrollable rage, and an emptiness that always lingered.

He didn't know how to handle a woman like Toni, nor did he know how to deal with his feelings, feelings that were digging at him, creating a deep void that couldn't be filled with a fling anymore. Josh seemed to be a natural with taking the reins and getting to know Toni. Her presence had Josh looking at new things, options they were never confronted with before.

* * *

Toni stood under the cold water, letting it pelt her skin. She lowered herself to the floor, her back sliding down the chilled tiles. It was time to be honest. As much as she wanted Josh, she wanted Cole too. She tried to ignore it. But it had grown to be more than just an elephant in the room. It was threatening to suffocate her.

As soon as she admitted it, the guilt and repulsiveness left, immediately replaced by a rushing thrill. Toni only ever wanted the affections of one man, but now there were two. Both of them wanting her was empowering. What looked to be one thing was weaving itself into something else. Something that might involve all three of them—a braided desire.

Toni was shocked how quickly the picture came together in her head. She between the both of them, one body warm and firm, the other lean and taut. How she wanted to feel their mouths on her skin, exploring, wanting to know her inside and out. There would be four hands gliding over her body. She saw herself giving them everything they wanted, listening to their groans, their moans of affirmation, wanting to please them.

A boldness that had felt odd in the beginning was now taking root inside her. She knew Josh would be there, but what about Cole? He seemed to always keep himself at a safe distance. This just made her urge grow even more. She wanted to push through his wall and watch him open up to her. Could she do that? Would Cole ever react to her that way? She felt the rush through her body, a need to plow her way in. A cold shiver followed. If things went badly, then she needed to be able to face what was on the other side. Would she be one of many people who had already tried to get through to him? Maybe it was crazy, but she felt deep down that she had a good chance with Cole Harrington.

Chapter Sixteen

The next night Josh came over to check the studio floor.

"I think we need to put another coat of varnish on this floor." Josh was crawling around on his hands and knees, rubbing his palm over the wooden slats. "It just feels grainy to me." He glanced up at her standing over him. "How do your slippers feel on it?"

"It's okay, but..." Toni hesitated, not wanting to ask Josh to do anything else.

"It needs more." He stood up and took her hand. "Why didn't you just tell me?"

Toni shrugged. "I don't want to be a pain in the ass." Toni took in the creases around his mouth.

"Please don't say that." He pulled her into him, her body tight against his. He stroked her face, running his fingertip over her brow. Josh leaned into her cheek, his lips puckering over her skin. Toni's chest rose, every fiber in her body awakening.

Toni turned her lips into his cheek, boldly kissing him. His hands slid down her back, cupping her ass, pressing her into him. She felt him beneath his jeans, his cock now hard, pushing against his zipper.

He steered her face to his. Her lips opened, letting him spread his warmth into her.

He nibbled on her neck, his palm sliding over her breast, his touch spreading over her, absorbing into her bones. He had plugged her in, all her responsive parts now flooding with power. All the things she had thought of doing to him, she could do now. It could be tonight.

"I say we give this thing another coat and you bunk with me tonight." His hand dipped between her legs, teasing.

"I don't know." She pulled away from him. Cole's presence in the house hovered over her, stalking her conscience.

"Why not? You shouldn't stay here. The varnish will make you sick if you inhale the fumes all night."

"What about Cole?" She stared at him, wanting to know how Josh was going to deal with him. How she was going to deal with him was another matter entirely.

"What about him?" Josh tilted his head at her.

"He'll be in the house."

"He's out. He'll probably come home smashed and pass out, unless I get a phone call that he's gotten himself into trouble," he said darkly.

"Does that happen a lot?"

Josh shrugged, his only answer. "He'll never know you're in my room." Josh ran his hand down the side of her body, her skin prickling under the light and calming touch of his fingers.

"He drinks a lot, doesn't he?" Josh avoided her gaze. She had put him on the spot. His silence spoke volumes, his loyalty to Cole deep. "What's he running from?"

"Too many things," Josh answered quietly. "Please stay with me tonight, please."

Her body was at war with her logical mind; she wanted Josh, and she let that urge overcome the worry about Cole being there. Cole's reaction.

"All right, but I'm staying in hiding until you guys leave to do the barn chores."

Josh worked quickly, slapping on another coat of varnish while Toni washed a sink full of dishes, needing to keep busy.

* * *

"Can I get you anything?" Josh locked the door and faced her, the house dark, their faces shadowed.

"No, thank you." Toni wrung her hands.

"You feel uncomfortable here, don't you?" He took her hand, his palm warm.

"A bit, yes." Toni laughed, her throat suddenly dry and burning.

As if Josh read her mind, he walked into the kitchen, pulling her behind him. He opened the refrigerator. The small appliance light illuminated their faces for a brief moment. He yanked two bottles of water off the shelf and closed the door, the room smothered in darkness again.

He gripped her hand, his thumb stroking over her fingers as he led her through the living room. They ascended the stairs to his room. Josh flipped a switch, a small wall sconce lighting their way. Cole's door was slightly ajar. Josh's room was at the end of the hall, the bathroom in between.

His room was neat, the bed made, the floor free of clothing and shoes. He set the two bottles on the nightstand, then bent to turn on a tiny night-light in the corner. A faint, buttery light fell over them. Josh stood, his back to her. He lifted his shirt up and over his head, his beautiful, bare back exposed.

Her stomach flipped when he turned around, his eyes blazing. He unlaced his boots, then shoved them under the bed. It was if she weren't in the room; his eyes focused on disrobing. The clicking of the zipper on his jeans made her shudder.

Toni's limbs were stuck. She watched and waited, her anticipation building. A warm thrill enveloped her as she watched Josh stand and move across the floor.

His jeans were unzipped, hanging on his hips, his bare chest glowing in the low light. Josh reached up and began to pull the clips out of her hair. Thick tendrils

fell, draping over her shoulders. He held them in his hands, burying his nose in them, breathing her in.

"It's beautiful. You're beautiful. All of you," he whispered. Her body felt watered down, running recklessly. His lips found hers, kissing her gently, tongue dipping into her mouth to sample her. Her insides expanded as her hands wandered over his warm chest, her fingers brushing over the fine hairs that lightly covered his skin.

He lifted her shirt, easing the fabric away from her skin; the cool air chilled her, fine-tuning her senses. She couldn't wait but didn't want to break his rhythm. He undressed her, his actions slow and meticulous.

Toni reached for the waistband of his jeans and his boxers, easing them both down the slopes of his thighs. She lowered her eyes, her fingers gliding up the sleek heat of his cock. She felt his body shudder, his head tipping back. He leveled his eyes with hers, his pupils wide with arousal.

"God, I want you." He slowly shook his head.

"You'll have me," she whispered, "but...let me..." His eyes grew wide with her words. She knelt before him. This wasn't like her. Nothing was like it was before. All the awkwardness was gone, and it felt good to be this free.

"Jesus, Toni." Josh grabbed her hair, entangling his hands in it, holding her head.

He smelled warm, musky. His cock grazed her mouth. She held it in her hand, guiding it to her lips. She took him in her mouth, his skin a smooth stretch of flesh. His hips moved against her, just as hers had that first night. Toni ran her tongue up and down his penis, his breaths laboring over her.

His hips swayed against her face. He reached down, cupping her breasts, pinching her nipples. A river of saliva flooded her mouth. Her body quickly grew accustomed to him, wanting to accommodate him, taking him deeper. His muscled frame began to twitch. She wanted to learn the feel, shape, and taste of him.

"Easy does it." He stepped back. "We"—his breath hitched—"we have all night. He assisted her to her feet, rubbing her nakedness against him. He lowered his mouth, taking her breast into the heated depths of his mouth.

Toni moaned. His tongue swirled around her nipple.

Her nails dug into his back. His jaw clamped down on her shoulder, taking her skin between his teeth. Toni gasped, her body molding into his. He steered her backward toward the edge of the mattress. She gripped his torso, pulling him on top of her.

"No, not yet. You're not ready for me." His voice was raspy.

He began to slide down her body, his wet, warm mouth gliding over her skin, hot and eager. He showered her with kisses, pressing his face into her belly, moving lower.

Toni's eyes popped open. Josh gently lifted her legs, bending her knees. He eased her open, spreading her. His heated breaths blew into her pussy. His tongue

trailed along her inner thigh, making her whimper, then slithered through her wet creases.

“Oh...oh God,” she panted, the sensation almost too much. His tongue was like wet silk, caressing her most delicate places, kissing and sucking her clit. He lifted his head, his hands running up her body. Then his hands deserted her, and he reached for the handle on the nightstand to open the drawer. He rummaged around for a second until he returned his attention to her with the condom in his hand. He leaned back on his heels, sheathing his cock.

“I couldn’t wait for this again.” His body rose over hers, their pelvises meeting, joining together. She reached between their bodies, wanting to touch him. He was holding his dick, the tip grazing over her slick opening, as if to taunt her. He gently spread her, the broad head of his penis stretching her sensitive tissues.

“Can’t seem to get my fill.” His breaths puffed down onto her skin. The golden bar of the night-light lit his face. His eyes held hers as he slid into her.

“I’ve thought about you too,” she said, feeling him fill her.

His body rocked against hers, rolling over her like waves. He lifted her leg, wrapping it around him, sealing them together, his cock tunneling deeper, igniting her from within.

His mouth lowered to hers, his lips pressing into hers. The feel of his body shuddering over hers had her senses reeling. The idea that she had sent him over the edge had her falling right behind him, a feeling that they created and was all their own.

Chapter Seventeen

Josh spooned against Toni's warm body, his hand lying on the silky skin of her hip. He listened to the light cycles of breath going in and out of her body. Being with her again had been a magnificent ride. He glided his cheek against her hair, the thick, wavy strands fanned across the pillow.

Her body stirred when a door downstairs opened and closed. Cole was home, his feet stumbling up the stairs. The water was running; then the toilet flushed. Toni rolled over, the sheet slipping down her copper skin, her breast exposed. Josh caressed it lightly, the cocoa brown nipple teasing him. He couldn't seem to get enough of her.

Footsteps resounded down the hall. Cole wouldn't come into Josh's room, not this late. Though he wasn't sure what Cole would say if he knew Toni was right here in the house, in his bed. He felt his body tense, fearing another argument, this one in front of Toni.

This would be easier if he could just claim Toni—date her, declare his feelings. Push Cole out of his heart to a certain extent and just focus on *her*.

The uncertainty was tearing him apart. Josh wanted to savor Toni for now, enjoy her alone, but he felt Cole's absence. He was such a strong element when he and Josh were together. Maybe he just got used to the idea because they had played around with Chelsea together. He found himself tortured by the scenario. If Cole were to walk in right now, what would he bring to their bed? Josh wrestled with the void. It was a gaping hole he wasn't sure he could brush aside and ignore. Maybe he needed more time to get used to flying solo. Josh was aware of Toni's preoccupation with Cole, and Cole's with her. Would the three of them work? Together, could they reach Cole?

* * *

Toni woke up to the soothing heat of the sun. Bars of yellow sunlight streaked across the quilt of Josh's bed. She had felt him nuzzle her, kissing her lips before he left. Her body felt hung over from a ravenous night of wild, uninhibited sex.

She rolled onto her back, taking in his quarters in the light of day. His desk was neat, the leather blotter holding a calendar. A small pencil jar sat in the corner near a thick novel, the tasseled bookmark shoved between the pages. She slid across the chilled side of the mattress and lowered her feet to the floor. She yanked her T-shirt over her head, leaving behind the rest of her clothes until after a much-needed visit to the bathroom.

She walked over to the door and opened it slowly. It was after nine, the men long gone. Her eyes leered down the desolate hallway, the house quiet. She darted to the bathroom and closed the door.

After relieving herself, she stood in front of the mirror, her hair an unruly mess. She ran her fingers through it, pulling the strands straight, only to have them spring back up, billowing over her shoulders and down her back. When she was younger, she used to wet it constantly, smoothing it down in attempts to straighten it. After her father showed her a photo of her mother, her hair a rich brunette, thick and curly, she abandoned the idea. She decided it was a trait worthy of cherishing.

She became lost in her thoughts, visions of her night with Josh distracting her. The scuffling footsteps in the hallway yanked her out of her euphoric fog. She turned and placed her ear to the door.

Someone was rummaging in the office, the drawers to the desk opening and closing. Her heart hammered. She cursed herself, standing there in her T-shirt and nothing else. She flipped the switch on the wall, hiding her presence from anyone walking down the hall.

She knew it was Cole in the office. She held her ear to the door again, his work boots making their way down the hallway. Her breathing sounded loud, echoing off the tiled walls, as his steps drew near. They passed the bathroom door, pausing at Josh's room.

She ran her fingers through her hair, holding her breath, thinking of her clothing draped over the chair. This would only complicate things, as if they weren't already.

The shuffling of his feet grew closer, his steps amplified. He passed the closed door. His steps descended down the stairs. Toni sat on the lid of the toilet seat, her insides sinking. He knew she was here. She didn't know what was worse: prolonged unspoken attraction or getting caught and dealing with it head-on.

* * *

Cole hung up the pitchfork, having just finished with Macy's stall. Josh was down in the lower fields checking on the seedlings.

Toni had spent the night with Josh. The hallway reeked of her, her fragrance mixed with the muskiness of sex. Cole grabbed a shovel and began walking toward the barn that housed the steer. He heard the front door open, the brass knocker clanking. Toni poked her head out, glancing both ways. He snickered to himself, watching her act like a teenager sneaking in from a late-night date. When she spotted him, everything went still. Cole watched her mouth as it opened slightly. She brushed her loose hair away from her face. Cole felt his lips curl. A snide comment formed on his tongue. Toni sauntered down the steps, seeing that her exit hadn't gone unnoticed.

He swallowed hard. It would have been easier if she kept running, sneaking across the space to her front door. Her confidence, her lack of fear and shame, undid him. The warm breeze lifted her hair up and off her shoulders, the wavy strands

flouncing behind her like a black cape. He walked toward her, meeting her in the driveway.

“You’re not running away, are you?” He poked at the gravel with the shovel, leaning into her. She avoided his stare, her self-assuredness masking nerves. He knew the feeling well.

“Ah, no... I wasn’t planning on it.”

“That’s a relief. I don’t think our boy Josh would like that too much.”

“I try not to hide from my problems,” she said pointedly.

Cole felt the return of his sarcastic dig. It was as if she had tossed the knife right back and twisted it in his gut. She caught him off guard with her challenge. He was still hung over, his response time impaired. She took over finishing the thought for him.

“But that’s me. Anyway, I wanted to make sure you’d be here later. Have a good day.” She waved, grinning, strolling across the driveway.

Chapter Eighteen

During the course of the next week, Toni began to ride Macy by herself. Josh encouraged her to ride down in the lower fields by the creek, but Toni wanted to stay close to the house. She rode several times in the top field. She felt fairly comfortable. She and Macy had developed a good rapport.

The crops took root. The men seemed to be pleased with their endeavors. There was more time now to take care of some maintenance-related tasks around the farm. Toni helped them paint the smaller barn and repair some fencing down in the lower fields that housed the new seedlings.

She and Josh hadn't had the opportunity to be alone together intimately since she had stayed at the house, which actually turned out to be fine with Toni. She didn't feel comfortable flaunting their entanglement in front of Cole. Josh was also playing it cool. In the evenings, Josh and Toni would take walks around the farm, checking on the trees.

She tried to reinforce that she didn't want to cause trouble between them. Josh told her not to worry, and that he would handle Cole. It seemed he tried to shield her from any type of conflict, but for Toni, that didn't seem productive. In a way, some type of confrontation could work to her advantage, pushing things out into the open so they could be dealt with.

The first wave of humidity arrived in May. The sun's heat was oppressive, the air thick and stagnant. Toni had just gotten back from riding Macy. She wiped down her dark coat with a cool, wet rag, Macy nudging her shoulder in appreciation. Toni had just dumped the bucket of water when the barn door slid open, the wheels squeaking on the metal runners. After hanging the bucket on the hook, she turned, Cole's quiet footsteps catching her off guard.

"Hey there." He took off his blue cap and set it up on the shelf with Macy's grooming equipment. He ran his palm over his head. She knew that meant he was nervous, and somehow, it lessened her nerves.

"Hi." Toni stepped back, trying to widen the area between them. Cole continued to close in on her. She dug at her hair, her eyes shifting over to the barn door. She didn't know where Josh was. Maybe that was why Cole was here, seeking her out alone.

"So, how's the riding going?" He reached up, patting Macy's neck, his fingers combing through her mane.

"It's going well. Thanks for letting me ride her."

"I only let special people ride her." His tone was rich and deep. He glanced back at her; she felt the pull of his stare. "In fact"—he faced her—"you're the only one who's ridden her since my mom died, with the exception of Josh and I."

"Like I said... I appreciate you letting me ride her. The fact that you'd share something of your mom's with me means a lot." She felt the heat moving up her neck, spreading to her face. "She's a great horse." Toni turned her back to him, fussing with the tack she had forgotten to put away. She felt suffocated by him. An aura of awareness was always around them. It always arrived with his physical presence, roping her in. It was as if neither of them knew what to do about it.

Toni hung up the bridle, hearing his boots crunching over the straw bedding of the stall. She froze, knowing if she turned around he'd be right there, his face, his eyes, his lips inches away from hers. She could feel his heat moving from his body into hers. Warmth slowly spread through her. Her breath caught when she felt his pelvis lean into her from behind, pressing her against the slatted walls of the barn, the scent of aged wood filling her nose.

He lowered his face into her hair, inhaling, breathing her in. "You were at the house. In Josh's bed."

Toni lifted a shoulder casually, not sure how to respond. And just like that she was tired of feeling like a game. Toni pulled out her trump card. Enough was enough. She could be shrewd.

"I saw you too." Her throat singed with her words. There was no taking them back now. They were drifting in the open air. Her admission would change everything.

"Oh yeah? When?" He gripped her shoulder, spinning her around.

Uneasiness began to worm under her skin. Toni was unsure of what she was starting.

"In here. Right up there." Toni pointed up to the loft. Cole's pupils dilated, a wicked grin tugging at his lips.

"Spying on us, were you?" He raised his arm, leaning against the wall. The skin of his forearm grazed her cheek. "And what did you see?"

Toni shook her head. "I was getting hay for Macy. You and Josh were with that girl, the one with the blue pickup."

"And what were we doing?"

"You were fucking her on Macy's saddle." She struggled to keep her voice even and neutral.

Cole laughed in her ear, his breaths hotter and faster, as if excited by her observation.

"What about our boy Josh? What was he doing?"

"You were there. I'm pretty sure you remember what happened." He was pulling her in, seducing her into exposing her feelings regarding Josh's participation. This only spelled trouble.

“Did you like what you saw?” His brows lifted. His other hand rose to her face, the tip of his calloused finger running across her lower lip, pulling it away from her teeth.

Her face warmed.

“You did, didn’t you?” He tossed his head back, his laughter echoing through the quiet.

“Do you love her?” Toni blurted, locking her eyes with his, tired of feeling intimidated.

Cole clicked his tongue, running his hand across his chin. He looked away for a moment, contemplating his words.

“That wasn’t about love, Toni.” He stroked the side of her face, dipping his lips to hers. Her lungs tightened. She was now questioning everything that had transpired between her and Josh. His lips were an eighth of an inch away from hers, his sultry breath coating her face.

Toni was torn, her mind a split personality of thoughts. She did want him. Her urge and curiosity had been building for weeks, but she really cared for Josh. Toni felt her body shiver, her limbs wilting. She stared into his inky eyes, falling into a deep, dark place.

“I know what you’re thinking.” He lowered his lips to her cheek, running them over her skin, down her neck, blazing a trail of fire. “You’re worried about Josh.” He petted her hair, shaking his head. Cole’s body pressed into hers, pushing her into the wall of the stall.

She forced down the lump that had sprouted in her throat, gasping to fill her lungs with air before everything went black.

“That studio’s looking good; how long you planning on hanging around?”

His words scraped over her. What was he getting at? It sounded as if he thought she was going to hurt Josh.

“I’ll be here for the summer; other than that...” She listened to herself stammer. “We haven’t talked about it.” Toni looked away from his dark eyes, faltering.

“Mm, maybe you should add that to the agenda.”

He stepped back from her. A rush of air moved between their bodies. He held her face in his hands, his fingers slightly digging into her cheeks, moving down her neck, skirting along her collarbone. One hand grazed over her breast, the other sliding down her hip and resting there. Intrigued alarm vibrated throughout her body. A body that wasn’t quite ready for Cole Harrington.

His eyes pinned hers, his lanky body compressing hers again. “You don’t even understand how much you’ve been taunting me since you got here.” His voice trailed off. His hand slid between her legs, cupping her mound, lightly stroking the V between her thighs. He fingered the seam of her shorts from the front to the back, gripping her ass cheek.

“Well, if there’s something you want, maybe you should just ask? You dance around things,” Toni said boldly, her face tipping to meet his fiery gaze.

“Talking’s no fun; dancing can be, though.”

Cole’s body pushed against hers again, a tight fit. He buried his hand into the hair piled on her head, winding his fingers around the strands, pulling. He yanked her head back. His face dipped to hers, his fingers clenching her jaw. A fiery desire moved over her flesh. He tugged at her hair again. A tingle spread across her scalp, her senses wanting to experience more of him.

His lips were cool, thinner than Josh’s, but his tongue was hot, saturating her mouth with unleashed fire, searing her insides. Her hands hung at her sides, paralyzed by his force. He mashed his mouth into hers, bruising her lips. His fingers gripped her neck before pulling away, holding her face, aligning it with his. His face was set, his brows knitted.

Cole released her and stepped back. Toni fought for the right words, her mind running recklessly, wondering now where all this was leading.

Chapter Nineteen

“For fuck’s sake.” Josh grabbed the remote and turned off the TV. He threw the remote onto the coffee table. The room was sinking, drowning in silence. Cole reclined on the couch, one leg draped over the back, his hard demeanor programmed not to flinch. The ground could open up, swallowing the farm, and he would still remain unfazed by the drama of it all.

“I only kissed her.” He huffed, sitting up. “Just a little kiss before she takes off.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Josh’s body froze. Did Toni insinuate she was leaving?

“Don’t get too stuck on her, I’m telling you.”

“Jesus Christ, Cole, I know you’re good at throwing the daggers, but I didn’t think it would ever be at me.”

“I’m just telling you like it is. You have no clue what she’s going to do. It doesn’t matter that you built her that studio. She could just cut you a check and split.”

Josh was floored. Cole had already tried planting the seeds of doubt. Now he was trying to give him an instant panic attack. Cole tipped back the bottle of beer, condensation dripping onto his thigh. He leaned into the cushions, his eyes hardening.

“I suppose you blame me for the three of us getting sighted?” Cole’s tone was icy. “You’re the one who suggested she spend time with the goddamned horse.” He set the beer bottle down. “If it wasn’t for that, she wouldn’t have been in there in the first place.”

“Hey!” Josh rushed to his feet, thrusting his finger in Cole’s face. “Fuck you.” He stormed out of the room, going into the kitchen. He started making coffee, filling half of the mug with brandy. He usually didn’t numb himself like this, but this was a problem he wasn’t sure he could smooth out, and he had a lot to lose.

Josh’s feelings for Toni were consuming him. Every thought had her in it. Would Toni leave? He thought the studio would hold her here for awhile while things progressed. He felt sick, his vision clouded over. His insides cried in desperation.

He rubbed his eyes. He couldn’t fall into this trap; he wouldn’t. Cole was just jealous. Until he figured out why Cole had resorted to these tactics, he had to play it cool. Josh could connect with Toni. An exchange of real affections. A sense of

openness, love, and honesty. To him, that was real freedom. And if he had to fight for it, then so be it, but the fight could go only so far. Underneath it all, Josh knew he could never leave Cole. He would not win this war by leaving.

He set the mug on the counter, the coffeemaker gurgling. When he turned to sit at the table and sulk, Cole was leaning against the door frame, his shoulders rounded. Josh sat at the table, every muscle tense.

"I'm sorry, man." Cole's lips were flat, his face smoothed. "I'm a fuckup."

Josh had heard those words slip from Cole's mouth only a few times over the years. He knew he had hit a nerve. "I'll go talk to her, that's all." He tried to stay calm, ignoring the floor that felt like it was about to drop.

"I saw her in the barn." Cole's voice trailed off.

Josh watched Cole shake his head, as if waking back up to the conversation.

"I just lost it, man." He sat across from him.

Josh looked up at him.

Cole shrugged. "Like I said, I fucked up."

"What did she say about the three of us in the barn?" Josh's stomach twisted at the thought. She was probably repulsed. He held his aching gut until Cole spoke.

"She asked me if I loved her—Chelsea."

Josh felt his face fall. "What did you say?"

"I told her Chelsea wasn't about love." The lines around his face deepened, something Josh knew was shame playing over his features. It was the only positive thing that resulted out of this mess.

Josh sipped his coffee. The heated brew mixed with the liquor lit a path of heat down his throat, into the pit of his hollow stomach. Josh pinned him with his stare.

"I'm warning you, Cole"—Josh's voice rose for the second time that evening—"just let me handle it."

"Okay, okay, man." Cole's hands rose "Now who's jealous?"

"I'm not jealous, but Toni isn't some sort of game." His teeth clenched.

* * *

The air the next morning was fresh and new, the humid haze now lifted. Josh told Cole he was going to see Toni. He needed her to tell him how she felt about Cole's advances. Whatever chores needed to be done, Cole would have to take care of them. When Josh stepped out onto the front porch, he saw Toni standing on hers, a steaming mug cradled in her hands. Her rich, brunette hair was loose, falling around her face, streaming down her back like a river of ink. She turned, hearing his boots on the gravel, squinting at him, her face empty. His insides knitted together. He was afraid what would happen next. He shoved his hands into the pockets of his work pants and slowly climbed the stairs.

A thin, white nightgown blew around her body in the temperate breeze. He could see the delicate curves of her body underneath. She turned away from him,

staring out into the back field. Green, lush foliage now covered the landscape, rich with new growth, the scent of honeysuckle hanging on the breeze that blew lightly from the hills. Josh stood adjacent to her. She set her mug on the railing. He pulled his hand out of the safe confines of his pocket, almost touching her, then thinking better of it.

"I'm sorry." He sighed. Her hair blew off her neck. He ached with the need to comfort her, pleasure her. He wanted nothing more than to bring her peace, joy, and everything in between. "Once we got involved... Once we made love, I should have told you. I was just so scared."

Toni faced him. "You're scared?"

"Yeah, I am." Josh shifted his weight, still unable to touch her, not wanting her to flee. "I feel this connection with you...that I've never felt with anyone else. I mean... I have it with Cole, but what I'm trying to say is, I've never had this with any other woman." He stammered, his throat burning. "I think about you all the time—when I'm with you, when I'm not, in bed, while I work." He rubbed his eyes. "I'm messed up."

Toni was soaking up his animated confession.

"You're serious, aren't you?" Her eyes lit up.

"I can't help it." He moved closer to her. He took her hand in his. Her skin was warm, still holding the warmth of her bed.

"And that girl?"

"You mean Chelsea." He exhaled. Toni nodded, her face still.

"That was just a game. A game I haven't played since we were together, here." He pointed. "In your kitchen."

"What about Cole?"

"I can't answer that." Josh treaded lightly, trying to conceal how happy he was this was going so well. He thought she would have thrown him off the porch by now.

"I'm confused." Her eyes were heavy, watery with uncertainty.

Josh touched her shoulder, the cotton of her nightgown warm and soft. She stepped closer to him.

"I think I feel something for him, in here." She touched her heart, her eyes filling. "But I still want you," she whispered, her voice scratchy. "God, you probably wish I never set foot on this damn farm. Just tell me to pack my shit and go the hell home."

"I can't do that." He shook his head. "I won't."

Josh wrapped his arms around her, pulling her slender body into his. He could feel the heat of her body. It seeped through his clothes, melting him. The confession overwhelmed him for a moment, a mix of joy and jealousy warring in his heart.

"You leaving is the last thing I want."

"It isn't fair to either of you. I can't come between you, Josh, I can't. You're all Cole has." Her voice was tremulous. "And I don't think I can be like that girl."

"It wouldn't be like that. It could never..." Josh fumbled with his words.

"How do you know?" She swallowed hard.

Josh felt his eyes burn. She was thinking about them both. She wrestled with the world's opinion of right and wrong, something he was well acquainted with.

"Because I know we can have more," Josh whispered. "You make it way different, and in so many ways. Just the person you are, it's just not the same. It won't be the same."

"Did you want us to be with Cole from the beginning?" Toni asked.

"I thought about it. If I told you I didn't, I'd be a liar. This is hard for me too. You need to do what's right for you. I want you to feel comfortable about it." He buried his hands in her hair, his lips covering hers.

She opened for him right away. He let her kiss him. Her tongue glided over his, spreading her unique, sweet taste throughout his mouth. When she retreated, he poured his affections into her, wanting her to feel his sincerity deep in her bones. Their lips parted, their noses touching.

"Part of me wanted you for myself, but letting go of Cole is almost like losing..." He couldn't even put the feeling into words. "I can't explain it."

Toni touched his face. "You'd feel like you were missing a limb?"

"Sort of." He laughed. "I want to be with you, but I don't think I could leave here." He ran the strands of her hair through his fingers. "It's a lot, and I know we haven't really talked about any kind of future."

"Not many people reach Cole, do they?"

Josh took a breath, her question confirming what she had thought about. "No, but you might be one of the few. You're someone who might be able to change that."

"How?"

"You're forcing him to deal with his junk, to face things he's turned away from for years."

Her face changed, like a storm cloud rushing in. "Am I going to be one of many shared women?"

"No." His tone cut her off. He regrouped, not wanting to lose the ground he had gained. "Chelsea was the only woman Cole and I ever shared. And she turned out to be just a game. A game that is over for me. With you, it won't be a game. It will be the real thing, and it will mean everything, for all of us."

"I need to think." Her brows pulled together.

"I know this is a lot. And I'll accept any decision you make."

"I need to learn how to speak to Cole, you know, like have a real conversation." Her laughter was sarcastic.

"Ah, yeah, that's a skill you'll have to work on. I already went through that phase of the boot camp, not that I can't help you."

* * *

She steered Josh toward the front door, pushing him inside, suddenly wanting to bury herself in his body. She nuzzled her face into the planes of his chest.

What had she become? A person could lose her sense of self in a big city, the noise, the chaos. Her once organized and routine life had become more free-flowing. Toni felt liberated. She was aggressively guiding her lover to her bed as his friend pushed into her thoughts. What might be available to her, others could only fantasize about.

Chapter Twenty

"I could lie here all day with you." Josh exhaled. Toni listened to the inner workings of his body, his cozy voice echoing in her ear. She lifted her head, gazing into his hooded eyes.

"Is that your polite way of telling me you have to go?" She rolled on top of his sturdy body and played with the light hairs that dotted his chest, the springs of her father's old bed protesting. She straddled him, her body absorbing the refreshing breeze that blew through the window over the bed. Toni gazed out into the field, the steer grazing, their tails swishing through the air.

"Yeah, I gotta get out of here." He stretched lazily. "We have work to do, as always."

He pulled her lips down to his for one last taste. A regretful groan slipped from his mouth. She pressed her breasts into his chest, thriving on the feel of his nakedness below her.

"Come over tonight." He sighed, his balmy breath drifting over her face. Toni tensed. He seemed to read her thoughts, gently rolling her onto her side. He slung his leg over her hip and held her against him. His cock was still hard, resurrecting itself for another round of play.

"You don't have to come to the house." His brows lifted. "I'll meet you in the barn."

Toni frowned, images of Chelsea rudely intruding on the moment.

He crawled inside her head again. "Not the barn near the house. The one in the lower field, and if the weather's nice, we can stay outside, under the stars. I'll provide all the comforts of home, I promise."

"What time?" She reached for him, taking him in her hand. Her fingers glided over the stretched skin of his length, his eyes fluttering at her touch.

"Jesus, Toni." His body arched into her touch, his eyes rolling beneath their lids. "Come as soon as it gets dark."

* * *

"Hey, it's about time." Cole hopped off the tractor.

"Yeah well, I had to take my time talking to her. I don't want her to think it was no big deal, and I don't give a shit." Josh could still taste Toni's sweetness on his tongue.

"Ah yeah, all right." Cole's face creased. "So, how did it go? Does she think I'm an asshole?"

"No."

"Did I ruin things for you?"

"No, you didn't," Josh bit back. "Is that what you're trying to do?"

Cole's eyes flashed.

"If you want to know her, then why don't you just try talking to her like a human being?"

"I am not you." Cole slapped him on the back, then walked toward the house. "You've got it bad; better be careful, man."

Josh couldn't believe the skepticism Cole was tossing at him. Josh would not break. There was motive behind it, because with Cole, there was always a motive. Josh was pretty sure that under all of his resentment was a thick layer of fear.

They spent the rest of the day irrigating the seedlings, using the water from the creek. They worked in silence, which was unnerving. Most of the crop was doing well. There were only a few seedlings that were becoming yellowed and brittle, not adjusting to their new environment. The berry crop would be the least of their concerns, the leaves a lush green. The strawberry plants were already flowering, all the leaves decorated with tiny, white blooms.

By four p.m. the day's work was done. Both men hiked back up to the house. Cole announced after his shower that he was heading into town. This was always a concern. Josh wanted to be alone with Toni, but Cole going to the bar to pickle his thoughts, trying to figure out this so-called new approach where Toni was concerned, could be risky.

Josh waited for Cole to leave before beginning to pack the things needed for his nighttime respite. He filled a thermos with hot, spiked coffee and rolled up a blanket, securing it with a bungee cord. Toni knew where the barn was, but he would wait for her near the orchard because he was unsure if she had a flashlight.

* * *

Cole was soused, his body saturated with liquor and regret. He had spent the evening at the bar, sitting in a dark corner, struggling to sort out his feelings before walking home. Remorse was eating at his gut. Josh didn't deserve the things he'd said, his recent behavior. Without Josh, he'd have nothing. Josh's assessment of Bruce had him petrified. It was brutally accurate.

He needed to make a choice. His feelings were like a foreign language he couldn't read. He had to grasp them and work through them instead of pushing them down and burying them with something else. His anger and jealousy were becoming a mask that was too heavy to wear. He felt his body shudder, the fear wrapping around him, cutting off his air.

If it didn't work and Toni wound up going home, Cole could fall back on the thought of Josh staying with him and both of them suffering through it together.

That didn't seem so bad, but Cole was unsure if they were still safe together on the farm. Things had been said, wounds opened that might never be closed again. If Toni left alone, Josh might be so angry...

Would Josh leave too?

The main house was lit; Toni's was dark. He looked at the darkened windows, wondering if Josh and Toni were in her bed, Bruce's old bed. A flickering of yellow light caught his eyes, filtering through the trees down near the barn that housed the livestock. Cole began walking, following the light.

He strained his eyes, the liquor hindering his night vision. He heard Toni's light laughter drifting through the night air. Josh's low mumbles trickled through her sweet giggles. His entire body awakened at the idea of seeing her, seeing them.

Cole rounded the corner of the barn, seeing their shadows, then slowly stepped back to establish his post. He looked up at the glittering sky, contemplating going into the barn, hiking up to the loft so he could gaze down at them, just as Toni had. Afraid he would rustle the steer into a frenzy, he changed his mind and crept back around the side of the barn.

They were naked, sprawled across a blanket. A small flashlight was lit, lying alongside them. He had to look away, his eyes now discovering the parts of her that were unknown. His pulse quickened, pounding in his ears. He was blindsided, not fully aware there was this much desire pent up inside of him. His hunger had grown, sending him into a state of desperation. His appetite scared him, testing his self-control, fueling his temptation. Something he wasn't sure if he should ever act on. His lack of restraint had the power to destroy everything between him and Josh if it wasn't channeled appropriately. He had already seen the strain the night Josh had come home and confessed to having had Toni and after Cole had kissed her. There'd never been any real tension between them until Toni. And here he stood, watching every heated second, their bodies joined, his eyes taking it all in. Toni or no Toni, he would never allow her to tear them apart. He couldn't, because if she did, his life with Josh as he knew it would be forever changed.

They kissed, long and deep, Josh's body knitting to hers. His palms glided smoothly down her body, his actions mimicking Cole's thoughts, tasting her and suckling her.

Josh was a skillful lover. Cole had always credited him for that, but Chelsea wasn't into the artfully soft. She liked it hard, rough, and fast.

He watched Josh bend Toni's knees, spreading her. His eyes burned, unwilling to blink, not wanting to miss a second. Toni's fingers wove through his hair. Her hips arched into him, Josh cupping her ass as he pushed his mouth against her.

Her moans rose into the night air as Josh savored her. His cock was pushing against his zipper. He felt like a caged animal. Cole tried to imagine the flavor of her on his tongue.

Toni scooted back on the blanket, gripping Josh's toned shoulders, gesturing that he stand. She got on her hands and knees, her tiny ass raised. Cole reached

into his pocket, stuffing his cheek with a wad of tobacco, needing to fill himself with something. The nicotine and the sight of their nude bodies made his head spin. A violent rush coursed through his veins feeling like his own injected speedball.

Josh's cock sprang toward her full, rosy lips. She held it in her hands, her tongue swirling around the tip. Cole felt his envy flaring. God, how he wanted to be a part of what Josh and Toni were building and feeling.

Toni took Josh into her mouth, running her lips up and down his cock. Cole watched her tongue work, spreading her wetness all over him. Josh held her head, tenderly stroking the side of her face. He murmured something; Toni leaned back on her heels. Her sensual body glowed, her nipples peaked, her face slack with longing.

Their bodies rotated again, Josh kneeling down behind her. He slowly lowered her, his palm resting on the arch of her back. Josh's fingers worked slowly, as if giving her time to determine what was going to come next. He spread her, holding his cock, shiny with the moisture of her mouth. Toni's head tipped, gazing over her shoulder to look at Josh. Cole watched his friend sheathe himself before easing into her. Josh grabbed a mass of her hair, burying his hands in it. Her ass lifted, elongating his path.

Cole had traveled down the road with them. There was no turning back. His jaw was tight. He yanked open the button of his jeans and pulled the zipper down. The fresh night air blew over his boiling body. He slowly fondled himself, then gripped his cock. He watched their bodies undulate, gasps and moans spilling from their parted lips. He rubbed himself, unable to continue being an observer. His orgasm racked through his body.

Cole's heated juices coated his palm. His body trembled when Toni panted Josh's name. A fantasy that Cole wanted desperately to have fulfilled would be to hear Toni say his name. Hearing her breathy voice calling out to him, pretending it was he who was pleasuring her.

Chapter Twenty-one

The crunching of gravel had them both turning. A shadow was lingering near the barn.

"Is that Cole?" Toni whispered.

"Yeah." Josh stepped back.

They watched him saunter across the grass, losing his footing on the uneven ground.

"Is he drunk?" Toni asked, trying to read Cole's body language.

"Yeah, probably." Josh's face looked exhausted over the fact that he'd have to deal with Cole's intoxication yet again. "I better get over there."

"Do you think he saw us?" Toni's body vibrated at the thought.

"He may have." Josh faced her. "I'm sorry. I thought he was out."

"I'm not going to worry about it." She kissed his cheek. "I know you'll help me with Cole."

"Sometimes *I* need help with Cole." He chuckled.

* * *

Toni felt like a made-over woman. So many things had happened since she had come here. Her life in the city seemed like some kind of a farce, no longer real. A sexual self-confidence had emerged. She had been awakened. Josh had torn her guard down, enabling her to express herself and be open to receive as well as give.

Her fear of Cole had boiled down into empathy. It seemed his drinking had increased. He was running from something, keeping himself numb. She knew his behavior was really a cry for help. But the question was—would he ever reach out to her? Josh had gotten through to her, showing her what she had been missing. Maybe it was Toni's turn to reach out to Cole.

* * *

Several days later, while she was up in his office doing their monthly expenses, Cole poked his head in the door. His eyes drooped, fatigue creasing his face. Josh was in town, doing the banking.

They were alone.

Calmly, she closed the ledger and tidied up the desk. When she got up to leave, he stood in the center of the office, hands at his sides, body immobile. She felt a deep twinge of sympathy, his obvious torment seeping into her blood.

"Hey." She kept her tone light.

"How's it going?"

"Good. How are you?" She watched his eyes.

"The same." He shrugged. "Josh should be back soon."

Her heart broke a little as she realized he assumed she didn't want anything more to do with him.

"Okay." She smiled, feeling her brows pull together. "Just because Josh and I spend time together, doesn't mean *we* can't."

Cole's eyes lifted. He was processing what she had said.

"Well, I, uh, wanted to ask you if you'd like to come over for dinner. I was thinking of getting us some steaks." He buried his hands in his pockets, looking down at his boots, the toes dotted with grass clippings. "I was going to wait until Josh came back to ask, but..."

"I'd love to. I don't need Josh's permission. What's the occasion?"

"I just wanted to thank you for all you've done, you know, for us." His words trailed off. "The farm and everything. I just want you to know how much I appreciate it."

He seemed nervous, glancing over her shoulder.

"How about tomorrow night?"

He rocked back on his heels, his gaze returning to hers. He held her with his stare. Something was different. His previous looks of suspicion or scrutiny now looked like an exploration. Toni let him look. His dark eyes mirrored her, her grinning face reflecting back.

"It's a date." She leaned into him, kissing him on the cheek before she left him alone in the office.

* * *

"These steaks are great." Josh grinned, patting Cole on the back. Cole noted the excitement in Josh. He had commended Cole on his idea of having Toni over for dinner. He seemed to be excited the three of them were going to spend the evening together. Cole plated the New York strips, surrounding them with the baked potatoes he had prepared. He'd been in the house since three, making sure he had it all right. He made a fresh salad and ran out to the store for wine and beer, having just enough time to get showered before Toni came over. It had been a long time since he'd worked this hard in the kitchen.

When he was a boy, he used to help his mother with the canning. It was his job to check and make sure all the jars were turned upside down, and sealed. His

insides softened at the recollection, his mother at the stove in her apron, her face flushed with the heat from the steaming pots.

"Not bad huh?" Cole gathered up the plastic cups and plates. Josh asked if they could eat outside, saying they were going to have a clear night with a full moon. He wanted to look through the telescope later. It was already set up on the porch. Cole started transporting the food outdoors.

As he was setting up the picnic table in the side yard, Toni strolled across the grass carrying a pie.

"You didn't have to bring anything." Cole drank her in, her shapely, browned legs, her feet covered with braided leather sandals. The green tank top she wore made her features radiate. She set the pie down and buried her hand into the pocket of her beige shorts.

"I wanted to. Don't worry, I won't steal your thunder, Master Chef. This looks delicious."

"Yeah, I'm sort of proud of myself. Amazing what a little incentive can do."

Josh's voice called from the porch. "Are we ready for drinks? Hey, Toni, want some wine?"

"Sure. You need some help?"

"Nah, stay put, I'll be right out."

Cole watched the cool evening breeze lift the ends of her hair. He needed a beer bad but needed to watch his drinking. This was his chance. He couldn't blow it. He had to behave and be a gentleman. He'd noticed Josh's quick glances throughout the day. He wasn't sure what was going through his head. He didn't ask, and Josh hadn't said. The fewer words, the better, for now. Too much conversation would only make him more nervous.

His motive was pure in planning tonight's dinner. He wanted only to reciprocate and thank Toni for all she'd done and spend a nice summer night together. Since she'd taken over the accounts, he didn't worry about the paperwork as much. A tremendous weight had been lifted. She deserved a little catering to. And if Josh was going to be with her... Well, he needed to make sure she didn't hate his guts and pull Josh away from the farm forever.

The sun descended; the sky was streaked in grays and purples. A blazing finger of heat lay on the horizon. Cole lit a citronella candle in the center of the table. They talked about the trees and the upcoming berry crop. Cole complimented Toni on advancing her riding skills. He watched her inhale everything on her plate. She then began fingering the box of blueberry pie.

"I take it everything was good?" Cole fell into her eyes. She lifted her brows at him.

"This girl isn't afraid of eating."

"That's good." He nursed his beer, tipping the bottle, sucking down the last of the warm foam.

"My compliments to the chef. Well done." Josh patted his belly. "Check out the moon. In about another hour we should have a decent view. Should I fix coffee?"

"Yeah, bring out the Irish Cream too." Cole would have just one shot. One beer, one shot. For him, that was a light evening. Josh went into the house.

"I'll clear." Toni jumped up.

"No, you're a guest tonight, sit." Cole covered her hand, her fingers long and soft.

"I'm tired of being a guest." Her eyes rolled.

"Too bad," he ordered. Cole picked up the plates, balancing them on his arm, and grabbed the salad bowl.

Stars glittered like scattered pieces of quartz in the nighttime sky. Blinking dots of light hung in the cool evening air. The moon rose, glowing like a large pearl. Josh moved the telescope out onto the grass, leveling the tripod and adjusting the lens. Cole and Toni were sitting on the blanket he had spread on the grass.

"Come check this out." Josh waved them over.

Cole took a look through the lens. It was a perfect moon. Raised craters outlined the edge. The moon was surrounded by a chalky ring. Its brilliance hurt his eye. He stepped away from the telescope and let Toni take a look.

He sat back down on the blanket, suddenly feeling exhausted. He wasn't sure if it was due to the lack of liquor or just the fact that the meal was now over and Josh and Toni seemed to be enjoying themselves. Cole had been tense most of the day. He reclined on the blanket, feeling the bones of his spine easing, actually cracking in relaxation. He braided his fingers behind his neck and gazed into the sky.

He was nudged awake. Toni's warm body was being rolled into his. Cole shook himself out of his sleepy haze, uneasy that he had dozed off. He shifted his body on the blanket, turning, looking for Josh, thinking they wanted more room. He was on the other side of her, his body tight against hers. Cole met his eyes. Despite the darkness, they were glowing, his lips bending into an easy smile. Josh licked his lips. Cole's body woke up with sudden intensity. His skin tingled, his cock slowly swelling inside his jeans.

Toni nestled into his chest. His heart rate soared, trying to accommodate the need for the extra blood flow that his body was now demanding. His hands froze at his sides. His mind began careening at high speed, wondering what was happening and what he should do. Her hair was tickling his lips. He breathed her in. Her hair smelled like vanilla. He stroked the strands, his hand shaking. Her body was nudged again. Toni slung her leg over his, her palm wandering down his stomach.

Should he kiss her? He looked to his friend again, needing confirmation. Cole felt his eyes widen when he saw the strip of condoms sticking out from under the corner of the blanket. Josh raised a brow. Toni's hand was moving into dangerous territory. When her palm slipped down his thigh and back up his body, gliding over his housed cock, he heard himself groan out loud. He tensed, not wanting to do

anything wrong. He bit his lip, his body screaming for more of her touch, his mouth wanting her lips. He gently held her head, guiding her back up his body. She moved over him, her hair hanging around his face, her eyes wide.

“Kiss me, for Christ’s sakes.” Her words were a heated whisper.

Cole pulled her lips to his. She nipped at him, her tongue gliding around the edges of his mouth. She tasted sweet, the wine still lingering. Cole’s palms itched. He wanted to grab her, toss her on her back, and sink his cock deep inside her, but he had to keep it reeled in. They were welcoming him into their circle. Maybe it was for a night, maybe more. He would do it their way, feeling them out. He’d already watched, but now he was a participant.

His fingers slipped underneath her tank top, her skin smooth, gliding under his hand. Her shirt was being lifted. Cole didn’t know if it was her or Josh. He kept his eyes closed, her kiss pulling him in deeper and deeper. It was safer for them to take the reins. He was drowning in her, a seductive quicksand. He felt suffocated. He pulled away, breathless. He couldn’t speak, his mouth dry. She had sucked all the life out of him, and with just one kiss. She stroked his face, her eyes heavy-lidded.

“I like your mouth.” She smiled lazily, stroking his cheek. He regretted he hadn’t shaved.

“I...”

She covered his mouth. “Shh, let’s just enjoy the night and be together.”

Her lips grazed over his again. She slipped her arms out of the tank top, Josh helping her. She tugged at Cole’s T-shirt. Cole let her dictate to him. He clawed his way out of his shirt and tossed it behind him. Her hands ran over his chest, pinching his nipples, making his skin pimple. He let out a breath, stretching his body out, trying to keep his muscles loose. His eyes lowered just enough to see Josh over Toni’s back, his mouth moving over her skin. His clothes were already off. Cole’s balls hiked up into his body. He tried to calculate where all this was going. How Josh had undressed so quietly and skillfully, he had no idea. Cole felt like he was in a dream, trying to move through a slow, rolling fog, unsure of his destination.

Toni’s warm mouth bathed his chest. She playfully nibbled on his nipple. His skin shivered, the nighttime chill colliding with her heat. He felt her soft breasts against his chest. He reached for her, cupping the soft mound, his mouth wanting to taste and suckle. Her touch was soft. It was arousing and soothing all at the same time. He pinched his eyes shut.

Her touch was melting him, turning him into a boneless sprawl. He was hypnotized, a feeling he’d never felt or known. Her hands were fumbling with the fly on his pants. His eyes flew open. He was on the edge, the hole deep and dark, luring him in. He fought with his restraint, calling out.

“Oh fuck,” he groaned, his chest aching. Cool air settled over his flaming skin.

“Shh.” Her warm breaths blew against his navel. Josh’s hands moved between their bodies, his palms caressing her breasts. Josh straddled Cole’s legs, nestling in behind Toni. Their legs moved down his body. She had Cole’s cock in her hot palm. Cole felt the weight of their bodies over his. Cole could touch both of them. He could feel the light brush of hair on Josh’s legs against his. He reached for him, never having touched Josh’s bare flesh before. When Toni’s warm mouth took him in, that thought vanished. The night sky exploded into colors. His own fireworks trailed across the sky, the shades vibrant.

His head was buzzing. Her tongue glided up and down his cock. She rolled his balls in her palm. He felt his hips lift, wanting more of her. He was deep inside her mouth, her heat engulfing him. Her hair slithered over his skin like satin ribbons. Cole touched her, her shoulders smooth and curved.

“Oh Christ,” he moaned, unable to remain silent. His eyes met Josh’s over the stretch of Toni’s back, her skin glistening in the moonlight. Josh’s eyes glowed like embers. He moved Toni’s body back as her mouth worked Cole’s cock. His insides were smoldering, the flame about to ignite and burn him from within. Toni’s hands gripped his thighs, air slicing between them as Josh moved her again. Cole could feel Josh’s cock slide into her from behind, her body tensing, then welcoming him. Toni took him deeper into her mouth, her lips hotter and moving faster.

“Oh.” Her mouth left his for a moment. Everything went still around them. Their breaths roared in his ears. Cole watched their bodies moving in unison.

“Jesus, Toni!” Josh’s voice was raspy with need. “God, so good.”

Cole’s cock was about to detonate. Toni lowered over him again, her ass rising to meet Josh’s cock. Her body trembled over his, her soft lips pulling, her hot tongue lapping at his stretched skin. Cole grabbed onto her hair. He arched into her, relishing the feeling, soaring to new heights. His spine twitched, his cock pulsating, no longer able to hang on. He moved his hands, wanting to feel her delicate skin one more time before it was over.

“Oh no,” he moaned. His cock throbbed, blasting with release. Cole brushed her face away, unsure if she wanted to taste him. White ropes of heat coated his fingers. Her eyes lifted to his, her lips swollen. She leaned up, onto him more fully, finishing him with a kiss. Her mouth formed over his, as if molded to fit him.

Josh pushed into her from behind, his pleasure audible.

“Holy shit,” Josh gasped. Toni moaned. Cole reached for her, his fingers gliding down her inner thigh.

Their bodies moved into his reach. His fingers found her. Her pussy was warm and wet. Josh’s cock was deep inside her when his thumb accidentally touched the base. His face burned, his hand fumbling as he realized what he’d done. Josh eased in and out of her. He didn’t seem to notice the contact. Their hips washed over him. Cole slid his finger over her clit. Toni’s body jolted, her head falling back.

“Right there, yes.” Her chest rose. Her breasts were within reach. Cole felt his cock resurrecting itself. He suddenly wanted to touch and taste all of her. Her

nipples were pebbled, her skin dark and rich. He stroked her clit. Her cries of pleasure rocked him.

“Oh God.” Her thighs tightened, her muscles corded. Cole lightened his touch, watching her face as she came. Her mouth fell open, her breaths rushing. Josh grunted, biting down on her shoulder.

Toni collapsed on him. Cole could feel her body molding over his. Josh moved into the light of the moon, casting a shadow over them. He kissed her, sliding down onto the blanket. It was quiet except for their breathing. Cole stroked Toni’s cheek, her forehead damp. The silence fell around them. He turned his face, kissing her temple, gesturing that she turn over.

“Let me hold you.”

Toni faced Josh. Cole held her, feeling her heart, its rhythm radiating from her back into his chest. Now that the heated haze had left, he felt the pain slowly seeping into him, trying to take root. Feeling Toni in his arms and how well her body had fit with them had him spooked. Had he just given in to a temptation he wasn’t capable of holding on to? Was this the beginning of something? Or the beginning of the end?

Chapter Twenty-two

The next morning when Josh came down for coffee, Cole was already in the kitchen. He leaned against the counter.

"You beat me this morning." Josh grabbed a mug, filling it with the strong brew. Cole shrugged. The aloofness was rippling off Cole, his hard words filling the kitchen.

"What're you trying to do to me?"

Josh had gone over this in his mind for the last hour as he lay in bed watching the sunrise, trying to assess what Cole's reaction would be. "She wanted to be with you, with us." His breath caught.

Cole turned away, staring out the window.

"Where the hell is all this going?"

"I can't answer that." Josh sipped his coffee, its appeal suddenly lost. "Some things in life are a risk."

"Wow, that's an intelligent statement." Cole set his mug on the counter, moving around him toward the door.

"You think I knew how all this was going to work, me here, with you farming." He laughed, trying to lighten what had become very dark. "Christ, I thought you would've been happy." He heard Cole expel a breath.

"Listen...she's..." He looked at the floor. "It was good, last night...being with...both of you."

"Then what's your problem? Can't you just chill and see what happens?" Josh asked.

Cole turned, his eyes narrowed.

"I can't pressure her into anything about staying. Don't you get that? There are no guarantees." Cole's doubt had ruined the euphoria.

"I don't know." Cole's face creased. "It felt great last night, but now it just feels weird."

"It feels weird because you have feelings for her, that's what it is. You're used to sex, not...something more."

Cole's mouth dropped open. Josh waited for his comeback, but he had none.

"The feelings have to be dealt with, brother."

* * *

"I like it here," she told him. They walked single file alongside the fence. Toni had asked Cole if he had any fertilizer and topsoil she could put down in the beds around the cottage. It was a good excuse to talk to him, get a feel on where he was after last night. He seemed surprised she wanted to be involved with sprucing up the yard. She was determined not to let any awkwardness come between them.

She suggested they take a walk first before going into the barn to get the bags. She wanted to talk to him alone. He smiled faintly, receptive to the idea. They walked in silence. She sifted through her mind for the right words, needing to start up some kind of conversation but not wanting it to sound rehearsed. When he spoke, her body lifted in relief.

"You can stay. As long as you want." He faced her. He reached for her hand, his actions hesitant. Toni braided her fingers around his, the skin of his palm rough against hers. He seemed a little cautious after their entanglement the night before. She wanted to reinforce that it wasn't a mistake. It hadn't really been planned. She and Josh had just given them all a bit of a shove. She had no regrets. She escaped his gaze for a moment. The previous evening flashed through her mind. Cole's body in the glittering shadows of the moon, the way he smelled and tasted. The feel of him in her mouth. She was closer to him now, on her way to knowing him.

"Don't tempt me." She laughed, feeling light on her feet in his presence.

"No one's throwing you out of here. You have to decide what's best for you." His face went serious on her. He was fishing. Maybe he wanted her to come right out and say she was staying on? Especially after what they had shared. She redirected him. She couldn't make that decision yet.

"I know that. Now, don't frown. Your smile's beautiful."

He chuckled, shaking his head. They walked down to the orchard, the trees thriving with growth. Cole sat on a large boulder, patting the hard surface next to him. Toni sat beside him, her eyes drinking in the open countryside. The sun's heat burned through her shorts, warming her skin.

Rolling hills of green and gold decorated the horizon. She really didn't want to go home. When she thought about her condo, her job at the firm, she became overwhelmed. Shaking off the thought, she shifted on the rock, facing him.

"I know what it's like to be alone." She examined his face. She didn't want to push him, but she was determined to learn more today. "My parents are dead too. I don't know how much my father told you, but..."

"I know your mother was murdered."

"Bruce, he never told me anything else, and I never asked. Josh told me about your parents." She sighed, using her words carefully. "They were murdered too."

"They were." His voice was stiff. "The bastard got off too. He killed my mom and dad, took their lives, and destroyed mine."

"What do you mean he got off?" Toni touched his arm, his skin spewing heat like a raging furnace.

"Pleaded out. Knew the right people, had an expensive lawyer." His voice cracked.

"I hate when people say this to me, but I am sorry."

Cole turned his face, spitting his tobacco into the weeds. He looked at Toni. He squinted into her eyes as if asking for more of her, more of her past, a life he knew little about.

"My mother was strangled to death in a dark alley." Toni's voice was quiet in her shared pain.

Cole squeezed her hand. His calloused thumb stroked over her fingers. She listened to his breathing, unsure of what to say next. They were making progress, their pasts and their words pulling them together. They had been together physically, but they needed to be able to communicate. His hoarsened voice edged through.

"It still makes me so angry." He glanced at her, his eyes watering with pain. He maneuvered his body on the rock, grabbing her other hand. He looked into her, his stare intense, his burden about to be released.

"Everything...everything makes me so angry. Then I run, you know? I run away because I can't handle it."

Toni cut him off. "Like running away from people. Relationships."

His gaze lowered. He released one of her hands. He massaged a knot behind his neck.

"Yeah." He nodded. "Something like that. I feel like if I can't control things, that everything will be yanked out from under me."

"You couldn't have prevented the death of your parents. My father couldn't have prevented my mother's murder."

"Yeah, yeah, I've heard all that." He shook his head. "When I feel like I have no control, that just frustrates me even more. That's why I hide out here." He waved his hand, gesturing to the vast property that surrounded them. "This is my control. It's all mine. No one can tell me what to do."

"Steers and trees are easier than people." Toni smiled.

"Yes, absolutely. But they're nowhere near as pretty as you," Cole said, playfully nudging her shoulder.

"You know it's unrealistic to have control over everything. Unrealistic and impossible and a little ridiculous..."

"I'm learning that." He chuckled, his laughter soothing her. A laid-back smile moved across his lips. Cole appeared more relaxed, his body loose, his expression softened.

Toni took him in, the two of them having their first real conversation, a pleasant exchange, the tensions of the past eroding. "In the beginning, I felt a little unnerved by your, uh...intensity."

Strands of hair blew across her face. Cole reached for them, sliding them through his fingers. He took the ends of her hair, lifting them to his lips, nibbling on them.

"Speaking of, uh... So last night was...pretty intense." His voice was hushed. His face was still, his body motionless. Toni felt his hesitation, his admission breathing more life into their experience.

"Did you feel it?" Toni touched his thigh.

"I felt it." He swallowed. "I just don't know what it is yet."

"It's all right." She leaned over, kissed his cheek. "Sometimes it takes time to find the answers." He nodded, standing. She felt him pulling back, sensing they had said enough for now.

They walked back to the barn. Toni watched Cole load the fertilizer and a few bags of topsoil into the wagon. The browned flesh of his arms worked, his shirt damp with sweat. Before they left the barn, Cole gave her an old horseshoe of Macy's. He explained to Toni that it was good luck to hang them in your home, but to make sure the rounded part was on the bottom; that way, all the good luck stayed inside. He started the tractor, gesturing for her to hop on. They rode across the rutted fields toward the cottage, the sun shining on their faces. After unloading the topsoil, he turned to her, his head tilted in question.

"Do you feel safe here.? With us? Me and Josh?"

"I do." Her eyes left the burn of his gaze. She stared across the sloping fields, the corn rustling in the breeze. "There's a sense of community here, you know, like a family. I never had that." She felt her chest tighten, her father all around them. She finally understood his need for this place and its sanctuary.

* * *

They sat at the table, the kitchen surrounded with an undisturbed peace. The refrigerator clicked on, filling the silence.

Dinner had been quiet. Cole found himself studying Josh while he wasn't looking. Something felt different in him now. Josh was acting so casual, their routine carrying on like any other night, but for Cole, the last twenty-four hours had been anything but the norm. Cole was sure Josh was in love with Toni. Had he voiced his feelings to her?

After washing the dishes, Josh said he was going over to Toni's.

"Come on. Let's go. Come with me."

Cole was glued to his seat. Everything around him felt like it was unrestrained, bursting with change. The wheels were already in motion. It was like a wild amusement park ride he wasn't sure if he should jump off of.

"What could possibly be wrong?" Josh's lips curved into a grin.

"If we get roped into this thing...whatever you wanna call it, how are we going to get her to stay?" Cole looked up at Josh. His body tensed at the thought of what taking this risk might mean, though Josh seemed unfazed by it.

“We do our best to make her so happy, she won’t want to leave.” Josh took his mug to the sink. He turned around, facing him. “And I can’t do it alone. Didn’t we sort of cover this earlier this morning?”

The ways of love and wooing a woman were far from any of Cole’s mastered goals. Josh seemed to have a lot of faith in him. Could he deliver?

“You’re awfully sure of yourself, of us.”

“Listen... I took a chance on you, and yeah, it was my idea, but now I need you to take a chance for me.” Josh’s forehead creased, his lips now a thin line. “I know what you’re trying to do, and it won’t work. This is a chance I won’t pass up. I won’t let you do it either. You can plant all the seeds you want of why it won’t work. That might work out in your fields, but it won’t work with me.” The need for this thing between them all to work was gushing out of him. He looked parched, thirsting for its success. “I’ve hardly asked you for a thing.”

Josh had him. In all the years they’d been on the farm, Josh asked for virtually nothing. Toni had opened up something inside Josh, and now she was trying to do the same with him. She was moving in, taking ownership. Cole felt the need that was slowly building back up inside of him. He didn’t think he and Josh were competing for Toni anymore. It seemed all could be shared, but why did he still feel so unsettled?

“I’m going. It would be nice if you’d join us.” Josh grabbed a paper bag out of the freezer, leaving him with his thoughts, which was always dangerous.

Cole got up, riffling through the cabinets looking for the whiskey. He leaned over the counter, tipping the bottle back. His body greeted the warmth. He would go over. Toni took the first step today, seeking him out to talk. She sifted through him, trying in her own way to get him to acknowledge what he was feeling.

By the third shot, his insides were hot and numb. He rinsed out his mouth, replaced the cap on the bottle, and headed across the yard.

Chapter Twenty-three

The light classical music drifted through the evening air as Cole climbed the porch. He pushed the thoughts of their unknown future from his mind. He would try to just roll with it. He had pulled it off the night before. Josh saw him through the screen door and waved him in.

When Cole got into the kitchen, the music seemed to rush through his ears. Josh was sitting at the table, his boots in the corner, watching Toni dance. Cole's body stilled, the torture raised to a new level. What he'd seen only through the small lens of his hunting scope had rebirthed itself into a live, sensual performance, the stage all hers. Josh was eating ice cream out of a carton. His brows lifted as he pulled up a chair. Cole quietly sat down.

The floorboards gleamed, shining like ice. Toni stood at the barre, turning out her legs and feet, her palm resting on the dowel, beginning with a series of pliés. She then raised her leg, stretching it out, resting it on the barre, her heel hooked over it.

Classical music drifted through the air as her body flowed to the music. Her body twirled, moving the air around them. Toni glided on her toes across the sleek floor. The music wrapped around her, lifting her up and off the floor. The chirping of a flute provided a serenity that Cole felt himself latching on to. His nerves began to battle, the same war he had fought the night before. The way she moved through the air had his groin swelling into an uncontrollable state.

For a self-conscious person unsure of all those images reflecting back, the mirrored walls might be intimidating, a sort of fun house. Her body spun in an erotic revolution. When she stopped, grabbing the barre, their gazes met. She rested her hand on her chest.

"I'm sorry." His voice was low, a gruff whisper. "I didn't mean to break your rhythm." His stomach rose. The excitement was building, his head swimming from the sight of her. Maybe if he had any balls like Josh did, he could admit to himself how bad he had it for her. Then maybe things could just evolve, but Toni was already like an addiction, something neither of them seemed capable of turning away from.

"It's all right," she said breathlessly. "You can come in, but the boots gotta go."

Cole removed his boots, his fingers shaking and fumbling with the laces. He shoved them against the wall next to Josh's.

They watched her dance, the music saturating the air between them, keeping them in a stunned state of silence. Josh handed Cole the quart of ice cream then walked toward the refrigerator. He stuffed his mouth full of cherry-flavored ice cream. His liquored palate froze over. Josh was setting other containers of ice cream out, along with whipped cream and cherries. A container of hot fudge was the last item to reach the table.

"Want a sundae?" Josh asked.

"You're not eating without me." Toni's voiced echoed off the walls. Her toe shoes thumped across the glossy floorboards.

"I'm glad you came." She grinned. Her face flushed.

"Are you kidding?" Cole laughed, his throat tight. "We've waited a long time for this." His eyes swept over her tiny pink skirt, her legs encased in white hosiery.

Toni grabbed another quart of ice cream and a spoon off the table. She dived in, lifting the spoon to her lips. She closed her eyes, a soft moan slipping from her mouth.

"This is my favorite. Chocolate with peanut butter." Her light giggle tickled his insides. He watched her savor the spoon in her mouth. "Here, try it." She had a spoonful aimed at Cole's lips. She fed him. The sweetness of the peanut butter-flavored ice cream collided with the tartness of the cherry. Josh moved around them, the container of hot fudge in his hand.

"This is better." He dipped his finger into the container. The melted chocolate stretched around his finger. Toni's mouth opened. She sucked on his finger. Her eyes dimmed. Cole swallowed hard, his lungs stuck. It was a sweet act of seduction, staring him right in the face, again.

"Can I taste it?" Cole rose from his chair, taking the bait. Toni was walking toward the mirrors, chewing at her lower lip.

"You'll have to come and get it."

His pulse drummed in his ears as his socks slid across the new varnish. Cole's eyes held hers, seeing every angle of Toni that the mirrors provided. He couldn't recall leaving the chair. A haze coated his vision, everything around him muted except her. Josh's reflection pulled him back. The three of them stood in the barren room, their quickened breaths taking the place of their words.

Cole took her hand, gently pulling her to him.

"I guess I'm supposed to taste you, then." He tipped her chin, his lips touching hers. He edged his way inside, her mouth wet and sweet. Her tongue met his, gently sliding, coaxing. Their breathing grew loud, an invitation, a welcoming of continuance. Josh's light groan of approval rose into the air.

Fabric whispered over their bodies. Cole pulled back, his mouth nuzzling her neck. He tried to assess Josh through his lowered lids. Josh's shirt was tossed on the floor, his jeans open. He held his cock in his hand, lightly stroking himself.

Toni's touch spread over Cole's body, his skin waking up. Toni wiggled in his arms. Was she waiting for him this time, wanting him to take the reins? Her fingers

worked down the zipper of his jeans. She tipped her mouth to his ear, her words a thermal wind.

“I want to really feel you tonight.”

Cole’s body quaked. He did want her. He had conjured the scenario so many times. His stomach knotted. Sweat began to bead across his forehead. He spun her around, unable to face the fire in her eyes just then. He lifted the tank top over her head, immersing his face into the pile of hair at her nape. Cole eased the pins out, the strands falling down her back. The remnants of the day’s light had slipped past the window. Her bronzed skin glittered like the facets of a diamond. He slid his hands around her breasts, feeling her breath catch. He felt the ground beneath him fall, in awe of her. Her nipples peaked under his fingers, her response to his touch instantaneous.

Toni had turned Josh around, his back to her chest, their bodies aligned. She moved them, stationing them in front of the mirror. The multiple images of their bodies had him soaring, a kind of high that didn’t come in a bottle. Josh’s cock bobbed against the wheat-colored skin of his navel. Toni reached in front of him. Her fingers glided over his flexed skin. The fingers of her other hand reached back for Cole, tugging at the waistband of his jeans, letting him know she hadn’t forgotten him.

Cole bent over, his hands fighting, freeing himself from his clothes. He moved closer, his pelvis meeting the arch of her lower back. He felt her lungs pulling for air. Her eyes were following his reflection, surveying his every move.

Cole’s heart hammered. Josh’s eyes rolled, slowly closing. Watching Josh riding the wave of his feelings had Cole spellbound. Their steely, dominant approach during their encounters in the past seemed almost like a charade. Cole shook off the memories, trying to focus on the here and now. The reality of it all exploded in his head.

His hands passed over Toni’s body from behind. His fingers slid down into her pussy. He stroked her lightly, her thighs trembling. Her head fell back, resting against his shoulder. Cole ran his lips down the side of her jaw. He glided his fingers through her moistened folds, his body trembling at her arousal.

Her hands made light passes over Josh’s back. The toned skin of Josh’s flesh twitched under her hands. Josh moaned softly, his hand working his cock faster. Cole’s hand found Toni’s, his fingers entwining with hers as they moved over the knotty bones of Josh’s spine.

Josh’s skin singed his fingers, his palm damp. Cole’s hand mimicked Toni’s, the firm flesh of Josh’s body weaving them all together. Toni whimpered softly. Cole’s cock was throbbing. His body ached for her. Josh’s eyes flew open. Cole looked away, afraid of what he’d see. Had he felt his touch? The ache had spread, dominating his actions, his restraint slipping. He felt Josh’s hand press into his.

Something deep within him was emerging, something foreign that he couldn’t grasp but had acted on. He tried to force it back, afraid of any pending foolishness.

Toni cupped his face, her mouth taking his again. Her hips pushed against him. Her breasts brushed against his chest. Everything gave way. She pressed into him, her wants sounding bells of alarm. He wanted to be inside her but didn't want to tarnish her, knowing where his body had been. Cole watched her swallow, the tawny skin of her throat working, then smoothing. He lowered his head, his mouth taking the pliable flesh of her breast into his mouth. She hummed in his ear, his body riddled with a desire he'd never felt. Her skin glided under his lips. Her fresh, citrusy scent raced through his blood.

Josh was pressing into them from behind, his hands steering Toni's hips, his fingers dancing over her skin. The three of them stretched things to the limit. Cole tore open the condom, his hands shaking. He lifted Toni. Her legs wrapped around him. Cole steered them toward the wall, Toni's breath bathing his chest. Their eyes locked, her lids heavy. His cock grazed her opening. He fought for strength. Every joint dissolved as he eased into her. She welcomed him. Their bodies fit, a perfection that would haunt him.

His head fell back. One minute melted into the next. Her hips arched into him. Cole felt her request, her body wanting more of his. He thrust into her, his pleasure now audible. His cock was about to blow. She was full of him, and he with her. She seeped into every pore, filling every crevice, flushing out the old, making him new. Josh's mumbled words floated over them.

"Christ, I can't take it." Josh moved around them, his feet brushing over the glossy floorboards. Through his heavy-lidded eyes, Cole watched Josh's face contort in pleasure. His eyes fixated on them, his cock spewing with white heat, coating his fingers. Toni's fingers dug at his shoulders, her body sagging in his arms. Every nerve was on alert. Her pussy clenched around his cock, his balls tingling. The friction was so good, too good. He burrowed in deeper, wanting to consume her. Her body responding to the pleasure that his had to give made him crazy, a type of frenzy that knew no reasoning. She shuddered against him. His orgasm built, the tension grew, blossoming outward. He had waited, filling her, giving to her.

Tension eroded from his body. His limbs felt weak but light. He lowered her feet to the ground, his breathing labored. Josh nuzzled into her neck. Cole leaned into her. Toni kissed him, her soft tongue grazing his. He parted his lips. A ragged groan slipped from his mouth, swallowed up by her rush for air. Josh's hair brushed against his chin. They were so close, their mouths, their bodies. Their heat surrounded him, their personal scents sedating him, and there was no way out now.

* * *

Josh fell into his bed, his body sedated. Tonight had been amazing, all he'd hoped for in uniting the three of them. There was still some indecision on Cole's part that they needed to work through, but he was definitely reaching out. Cole was also reaching out to him, in a way he couldn't define. This was gnawing at him. He recalled feeling Cole's hand moving with Toni's over his skin, knowing the roughened calluses didn't belong to her.

If he called him on it, all progress would be lost. Cole would pull back. Josh needed Cole to trust them. They both needed to move forward. Josh wanted their feelings to come together and stay together, wanting them all to love with confidence and stability. He craved it, like Cole craved his drink.

Josh rolled over, letting sleep take him away, needing to escape this latest problem. Cole's expressions of affection toward him was confusing because it had stemmed from what he thought was the beginning of a solution, the three of them braided together.

* * *

Over the next several days, Josh tried to determine exactly where Cole was emotionally. He'd been quiet, keeping to himself and his chores. They had barely spoken to one another while irrigating the seedlings. Josh saw some mild irritation emerge when he had asked him one too many times if he was okay.

Before lunch, he went over to the cottage to talk to Toni. She was sitting on the floor sorting through her father's papers, making piles of what to keep and what was garbage. He collapsed into a chair. He took an apple out of the fruit bowl. He bit into it, feeling his frustration mount. She set a pile of old *Reader's Digests* to the side and sat next to him.

"What's up?" Her eyes narrowed.

"Is he talking to you at all?"

"Uh...there hasn't been any deep revelations about the other night, but yeah, he's talking. He helped me spread the topsoil and plant some begonias." She covered his hand with hers. "Why? What's going on?"

"I don't know." Josh kneaded his temple. "He's off."

"We need to give him space. He needs to process. You should know this better than anyone." She laughed. She was trying to lighten his mood. "There is something, though." Her brow arched.

"Yeah, I know. He was touching me." Josh looked away, feeling the heat soak into his face. He gazed out the window; Cole was down in the lower field, leaning against the fence. Anger rose in him. He wanted to claw his way into Cole's head and dissect every thought he was having.

"I was sort of wondering about that." Her tone was guarded. Toni's fingers ran through his hair. "I guess this blood-brother thing is a bit more multifaceted, huh?"

"I don't know what's going on. It's never happened bef—" Josh buried his head in his hands, kicking himself for almost bringing their past with Chelsea into this. This was way above that. There was no comparison.

"Look"—Toni shook him—"this is way different. You know it, and God knows I do." She chuckled, her cheeks flushing. "He's learning that now too. You gotta let him work at his own pace. Let Cole be Cole. He's emerging. You need to embrace him. That's why we want to be with him, right? Actually"—her eyes lit up—"I kinda think it's a turn-on."

“Great.” Josh felt his face pinch. Emerging as what? That was what scared him. Was there something below that had been lurking all these years? A hidden bisexuality? He shook off the notion, panicked at the thought of examining the possibility.

“These feelings are new for him, for all of us,” Toni stressed. “Don’t think for a minute I wasn’t frazzled. I was freaking out those first few weeks I was here.” She tucked her hair behind her ears. “Just take it easy.”

“Are you happy?” Josh stared at her. He was so tense, his body rigid, his mind swarming with a confusion that didn’t reflect his heart. “This isn’t fucking you up, is it?”

“I’m fine. It’s an adjustment for all of us.” She got up and then sat in his lap. She guided his chin to her lips. Her kiss restored him. It was soothing with a slight edge of need that had his body squirming. He wanted to tell her he loved her. He wanted her to stay. It was on the tip of his tongue, ready to spill out in a jumbled mess. He let her kiss smother the idea. She needed time too, just as she knew Cole did. He was so ready. Ready to tell her how he wanted to wake up to her between them every morning and build their lives around her. His head spun. His spirits sank, the same questions stalking him.

Chapter Twenty-four

Toni offered to help with the berry crop. Early Saturday morning, she hiked down to the garden to do some weeding. She even beat the men out of the house. The summer sun warmed her skin, its rays soaking into her shoulders. After weeding around the strawberry plants, she sat in the field, tilting her face, meeting the heated June sun. She extended her legs, letting her feet dip into the frigid creek water.

A rustling across the creek had her sitting up and staring through the tall brush. A twig snapped. Golden grass swayed on the opposite bank. Toni got up and edged her way into the water. She watched the pristine water run over her ankles, her bones numbing. She carefully navigated her way through the water trying to avoid the sharp edges of various-sized stones.

“Hey there.” A velvety-soft voice lapped over her, just like the water below, but it was warmer, almost soothing. Her head snapped up. Cole was standing in the center of the creek, the water frothing between his boots. He smiled, his grin lazy. He wasn’t wearing his hat. His eyes were hidden by a pair of dark sunglasses.

Toni’s head spun, the look of him resurrecting all the sensual benefits his body was able to provide. His long legs were anchored in the water. His corded muscles pressed through the ribbed cotton of a white T-shirt, a few dark hairs poking out of the neckline. He removed his sunglasses and slid them into his pocket of his jeans.

“Enjoying the water?” His head tilted to the side, his eyes moving over her.

“I just got done weeding the garden.”

“Well, we certainly appreciate your help. You’ve turned into quite the farmer.” He moved closer to her, the water now seeping into the hem of his jeans. Her feet were stuck, sinking into the murky mud of the creek floor. Her foot slipped on a rock sided with moss. Cole grabbed her upper arm, steadying her, her cheeks flushing with heat. “Careful now,” he said playfully. Toni had never seen him so content, his lips bending into a wide grin.

“So”—he released her, his palm sliding over her skin—“I hear you’re coming over tonight, am I right?”

“Yeah.” She grinned. “It’s movie night, so I hear.” She shrugged. She swore she could smell him, her lungs pulling in the moist, woodsy scent of him.

“Then I guess we’ll see you later?” He took two more steps, his boots splashing through the water, showering her legs with a chilled mist. “Are you going to bring your toothbrush?” His brows rose.

Toni felt her nails digging into her palms, her body twitching with awareness.

His smile deflated when she didn't answer right away, his lips a thin line, his brows pulling together.

"Does me coming over tonight require me bringing my toothbrush?"

"I guess only you can answer that. I'm off to shovel some shit." He laughed. "I'll see you later."

Toni let it all roll off her. She felt his struggle, had recently owned it. It was as if she'd passed it on to him, unintentionally. She knew what she wanted. She had had a taste and was now eager to have more.

Chapter Twenty-five

"I can't believe he's sleeping," Toni whispered, eyeing Cole, his long frame stretched out on the other end of the sectional.

"Yeah, me too. He must be beat." Josh's hand wandered up the back of her shirt, his palm cool on her skin.

They ate their sandwiches and watched the movie, the credits now rolling over the large screen.

"So what do we do about that?" Toni rolled over, facing Josh, her head on his lap.

"Nothing." He shrugged.

Josh reached for the remote, silencing the TV, the room bathed in black. He shifted his weight beneath her.

Josh lowered his lips, meeting hers. Toni felt her body awaken to his touch. His hand caressed the skin of her back, unfastening her bra as if he had been the one to invent the hook-and-eye. His other hand cupped her cheek, his tongue gliding against the insides of her mouth.

His kiss flooded her with heat. She welcomed the feel of his bare chest, pinching his pebbled nipples. A light moan sounded in his throat.

"I have to get you upstairs." He groaned. Toni opened her eyes. A faint glare swam in the blue depths of Josh's. "Come on." He gently nudged her.

Toni got up and walked over to the stairs. Josh turned off the outside light and locked the front door. Toni watched his shadow float across the floor, passing the couch, leaving Cole in his slumber.

Josh took her hand and steered her up the darkened stairwell, down the hall, and into his room. Toni noticed he left the door open for Cole if he happened to wake up. The glow of a full moon spilled through the window of Josh's room, coating his room with a pearly sheen. Toni gazed out the window. Charcoal clouds passed over the vibrant sphere, pushing eerie shadows across the yard below.

Josh came up behind her, his hands anchored on her hips, his pelvis pressing into her. His cock was ready, its hard length sliding up and down the seam of her ass as he rubbed up against her.

His teeth clamped down on her shoulder. Toni gasped, reaching behind her, gripping his thigh. She turned around. The moon's glow settled in the strands of his hair like glitter.

“You know what I’m going to do to you tonight?” He lifted the hem of her shirt, easing it over her head. Her bra hung on her arms, having been tampered with earlier.

“I can probably make a few guesses.” Toni rubbed his erection that was still housed inside his jeans, watching his eyes roll as they closed. “But I like to be surprised.” She heaved a sigh, the clicking of his zipper reverberating through the room.

Josh dipped his head. His warm mouth covered her breast, sucking on her flesh, his tongue lashing at her nipple. He lowered to his knees, removing her shorts and panties, showering her with light kisses, the strands of his hair tickling her belly. He buried his face between her legs, his soft moans drifting through the quiet night air.

He glanced up at her, his expression filled with a longing that made her crumble under his hands. “I want all of you tonight, every inch.”

His finger played with her folds, spreading her wetness through her, then slipped inside her, gently rubbing, rotating, lighting the fire within her, preparing her to receive him, her body engulfed with flames of need and want.

He gently opened her, exposing her pink pearl of pleasure. Josh blew lightly on her clit, his padded lips nibbling. When the warmth of his tongue slowly glided over her pussy, Toni called out, her voice hoarsened.

“Oh God.” She sighed. “That’s so nice. I love how you do that.”

Toni looked down at him, the brilliance of the moon white bars on his face. His eyes met hers, his tongue slithering through her swollen vagina, her wetness glistening on his lips.

“God, yes. I love how your mouth feels on me,” Toni whispered. Josh widened her stance, politely requesting better access. His hands slid over her thighs, cupping her rear.

He guided her to the bed. The mattress hit her thighs as Josh reclined her back. His pants were unzipped, his cock fighting to get out of his boxer-briefs.

She arched her hips, grinding against him, gripping his shoulders. Josh leaned back on his heels, yanking his pants down, over his thighs. He turned, shucking them from his legs. He tossed them to the floor.

Toni stared at his nude body as he walked toward the desk. He opened the drawer. He returned to the bed with a strip of condoms and a small bottle. Her insides trembled, her limbs shaking as Josh squeezed the lubricant into the palm of his hand. He left the cap open, setting the bottle on the nightstand. With one hand on her body, he graciously gestured to her how he wanted to position her on the bed.

Josh had her on her knees, leaning forward against the headboard, her legs spread. He reclined behind her on his back, sliding his head between her knees. He grabbed her hips, lowering her onto his mouth.

His tongue washed over her pussy again, his teeth nibbling at her clit, making her shudder. His fingers moved through her sensitive tissues, up the crack of her

ass, his finger slowly pushing at her opening, easing into her ass. His tongue flicked over her clit as his finger slowly slid in and out of her ass.

Toni's belly filled with a heated pressure, her orgasm about to detonate. When Josh slipped a second finger into her ass, she hissed, sucking in a rush of air. Her ass quivered, unaccustomed to the foreign intrusion. Every bone in her body melted at the unconditional pleasure that Josh had to give.

Her hands gripped the headboard, her hips convulsing over his face. Her head fell back. She loved the soaring sensation, her body weightless. A floorboard creaked. Toni glanced over her shoulder. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught the outline of a shadow in the doorway, illuminated by the moonlight.

Toni scooted back, sliding down Josh's corded body. The muscles of his thighs tightened under her. She took his cock in her hand, running her thumb over the engorged head, sheathing him. She knew Cole was there, watching them.

Chapter Twenty-six

Cole moved toward the bed. The skin of their bodies were wrapped in a milky light. Toni was on top of Josh, his cock sliding in and out of her. Her hair hung around his face like a silk curtain.

“Ah God, Toni,” Josh panted. His hips rose off the bed, meeting hers. Toni leaned into Josh, kissing him, her tongue outlining the edges of his mouth, her delicate moans moving through the darkness. Cole’s body began to buzz. He unbuttoned his jeans, quickly peeling them from his legs. It was a sweet torture, watching them fuck. A raw ache spread through him like a disease.

His throat throbbed, his heart tearing. The bittersweetness of love tangled his emotions.

Toni sat up, her head tossed back. Black ribbons of hair grazed over the satiny skin of her back. Cole stepped closer to the bed, stroking himself, his balls about to explode. She glanced back, seeking him in her peripheral vision.

Toni welcomed him. She lifted herself off Josh, gesturing that he move up on the bed. Josh rested his back against the headboard, his erection still very much alive. Toni crawled backward. With her body no longer shielding Josh’s, Cole connected with his heated gaze. A knowing stare they’d shared before burned between them. But this was different. The sight of Toni’s naked body between them again had Cole’s head in an uproar, the voices continuing to torment him, egging him on. What was she to them? What were they to her?

Cole felt his eyes widen, taking in the crack of her ass spreading open. He stood near the bed, watching her take Josh deep into her mouth, her ass high in the air. Her pink tongue slathered Josh’s cock. His feet slid across the smooth floorboards, moving to the head of the bed. He tugged on his dick until it burned. Watching Toni sucking Josh’s cock had his insides rumbling. Toni faced him, her weight shifting on the bed, her expression shadowed, her lips glossy with wetness.

“I want your mouth on me.” Cole’s flat tone cut through the shaded darkness. He met Josh’s eyes. His pupils were rolling. He looked drugged. Toni craned her neck toward him, her lips parting to take him in. He moved closer, meeting the stretch of her luminous body.

When her mouth took him, he was catapulted into another sphere. Her full, soft lips gripped him, pulling and licking, his cock blasting as if stuffed with explosives. His balls pulled up into his body, their sac tingling with a prickling heat. Cole became engulfed, sucked into a vacuum, the tunnel deep and bottomless, with

no end in sight. The sensation was too much, something he couldn't yet comprehend. He held his cock, pulling away from Toni's mouth, her lips swollen. He returned to the foot of the bed, his body screaming, awaiting more torture.

Cole placed his hand on Toni's back, sliding his fingers down the knitted bones of her spine. His palm glided up and down the arch, slipping down the curvature of her ass. His hand rested there, his fingers inching between her ass cheeks.

His mouth salivated as his finger became drenched with her wetness. He removed his finger, bringing it up to his mouth. He tasted her cream. A salty sweetness exploded on his tongue, his appetite ravenous.

He crawled onto the bed, and seeing the lubricant on the nightstand, he coated all his fingers. He snapped the cap closed and left it on the bed behind him. He leaned over her, cupping her breasts, pumping them in his hands, spreading the lubricant on them. Cole reached for her hair, weaving the strands around his fingers, gently pulling her head back. A high-pitched whine fell from her mouth as her body rose, adhering to his. Josh's hands moved over her, his fingers now slick with lubricant. He sat up, his mouth latching on to her breast, his tongue teasing and tasting.

Toni leaned back, meeting his chest. Cole pressed his cock against her. He was gutsy tonight. He turned her head by her hair, murmuring in her ear. "I want you." He took the lobe of her ear between his teeth, biting it. Her shoulder quivered. "Do you trust me?" He cupped her ass cheek, squeezing her flesh. He pressed his body into hers, their flesh sliding together.

"Yes," she breathed.

"I want to be inside you, with Josh, all of us together. Do you know what that means?" He reached for the condom. He rolled it down his cock.

"I do." Her body trembled against his.

"We only want what you do, Toni." Josh's voice was thick. "You with us—it means everything."

A rumble of thunder sounded outside. Bolts of white light flickered across the sky. The curtain shot out into the room, riding on the gust of a balmy breeze.

Toni reached behind her, answering Cole with her touch. She cupped his balls, rolling them in her palm. He felt her fingernails lightly stroking him, his cock tingling. The mattress shifted, his reservations deflating as the repressed emotions fought to push through. He clenched the skin of her buttocks in his hands, shaking his head, unsure of letting the feelings escape. Once completely freed, they had the power to dictate his life and control everything.

Toni's voice pulled him back.

"Just let go." She gasped.

Toni smoothed Josh's hair back away from his face. She took Josh's cock deep into her pussy. Josh's head arched back, his body taut.

Cole watched his friend's eyes dim with desire, then close, delighting in Toni's sweetness. Cole had to remoisten his fingers, spreading more of the lubricant on his cock. Her ass pressed into him, her soft flesh teasing him.

Cole inserted a finger, feeling her back jerk under the palm of his other hand, thinking he'd scare her like a frightened bunny. He smoothed his hand over her back and felt her spine ease. He leaned into her ear.

"Are you sure?"

"You talk too much." Her back arched. He held his cock right at her opening. As he slid his finger out, he pressed his cock into her in its place, giving her only an inch at a time. He pushed deeper, feeling her open for him.

"Ah, fuck yeah," he growled, feeling her warmth seeping into his cock. He eased into her, feeling her ass right up against him, a tight fit. He buried himself inside her. She was now full of both of them—a branding that couldn't be removed. Toni leaned back onto his cock, urging him on. Cole felt her body relax even more, opening just for him.

His groin tickled with pleasure. The warm depth of her body that she had just given him wiped his mind clear, all thoughts stunted. He gripped her hips, pushing, then retreating, pumping into her as his hips rocked against her.

Josh's moans filled the room. Cole strained to see through his euphoric haze, needing to confirm it was all real. Josh's mouth fell open, his chest fighting for air. Cole leaned over Toni, their bodies united, sliding together in a thin sheen of sweat. He kissed her cheek, her hair sticking to his lips. Josh's breath hit his face, his musky scent luring him into something he couldn't yet identify. Josh's hips ground into Toni's. Cole's mouth brushed over Josh's; Josh's lips were full and wet. Cole felt the rush barrel through him. He retreated, feeling Josh's body shudder. He shifted back, squeezing his eyes shut, the heated pool pulling him under, the water still unclear. He gripped Toni, his cock tight in her ass. He fucked her in slow, sweet strokes.

Their bodies flinched. Thunder rolled across the fields, the sky opening. The rain pelted on the roof, sounding like hurled stones, smothering their choral cries of pleasure.

Cole began to shake, his body pulling apart like a fault line. Toni's breasts shimmered in the darkness. Josh's mouth suckled her, his tongue lapping and tasting. Toni's lips parted, her head thrashing from side to side. Josh took her hands.

"Oh God," she cried. "Help me." Her body squirmed with pleasure between them.

"I'm right here, baby," Josh whispered. "God, I love you."

Cole groaned, his cock short-circuiting inside her. Cole's hands dug into her hips, his heart racing with the thrill, absorbing Toni's screaming cries, trying to ignore the words he thought he had heard.

Chapter Twenty-seven

Cole slipped out of Josh's bed, turning to gaze back at their sleeping forms. Toni had been nestled up against Cole, her arms wrapped snugly around him.

He watched Toni turn over, her hair slithering over her skin. In her sleepy state, she grabbed onto Josh, nuzzling her head against his chest, rolling away from the empty space he had left behind.

He walked down to his room and climbed into his bed, the sheets cold and stiff. His head pounded, his mind a chaotic mess.

He never had to battle these types of feelings. Her uniqueness and beauty held an astronomical amount of fear for him. Could he feel safe loving her? And would she stay, able to endure the long haul? He knew that was what Josh wanted. The picture became clear, the colors brightening, the shapes on the canvas now taking form.

Loving someone meant exposing everything. If it didn't last, he saw it as a form of robbery, a crime that went unpunished. The thought of a woman knowing things, then disappearing, running around loose in the world with your innermost secrets, terrified him. With Chelsea, he didn't have to confide in her. All he had to do was fuck her, and she would go away until the next time.

He had the urge to take care of Toni and protect her. Was that love? Was he even capable of that? He glanced at the glowing digital numbers—3:30 a.m. He rolled over. His body was vibrating, the aftershocks still shooting through him.

* * *

Josh could hear Cole in his room, his bedsprings creaking every time he moved. His gut wrenched, recalling his kiss. How he had knelt over them, Cole's mouth on his, the scrape of his nighttime growth on Josh's lips. He tried to deny the stir he had felt inside. He kept telling himself it was just the heat of the moment, but this was something he couldn't look away from. He curled up in a ball, shivering, unable to dissect what had happened. He wanted to talk to Cole but was petrified of the results. He knew with a painful certainty it would backfire in his face. Toni hadn't reacted. She had responded to both of them, her body open as well as her mind. He couldn't blame his panic on wondering what she would think—it was all on him. What did he think?

He touched his lips, the thought of Cole's mouth anywhere else on his body sending him into a state of panic, like an adolescent shyness coming back to life.

* * *

Cole and Josh gave Toni the job of getting the produce stand set up for the season. The strawberries were ready for picking; the other summer fruits and vegetables were soon to follow. While Toni worked the stand one afternoon, the slaughter truck had come, hauling two steer away. Toni turned away from the truck, unable to watch the two sets of gleaming eyes that peered out from between the gray steel slats.

The men had taken her into town for the annual Fourth of July 4-H celebration. It was the first time she had really been off the farm attending a social function with them.

Once again this rural lifestyle intrigued her. The various competitions of livestock and homemade foodstuffs had her sampling her way around the fairgrounds. There was a certain pride in showing off your baked and canned goods, as well as gloating over your cows and horses.

The three of them seemed to get a lot of attention from the locals, which unnerved Toni. After receiving a few suspicious glares from the beer tent, Toni asked Cole if they could go home.

"They don't even know me," Toni said, nestled between Cole and Josh in the cab of the truck.

Cole stared straight ahead, his expression hard.

"Small-town gossip. What can you do?" Josh shrugged. "Some small towns are filled with small minds."

Cole steered the truck down the darkened lane. A muggy breeze blew through the cab.

"What we do on our property is none of anyone's fucking business." He rammed the truck into gear and killed the engine. He got out of the truck.

"Well put, by the man himself." Josh held out his hand, helping her down.

Cole lingered around the truck. He reached for her, touching her hair. Josh grabbed Toni's waist, turning her to face him, pressing her against the truck. He stroked her face, letting his finger glide down her neck and over her breast, his thumb circling around her clothed nipple.

"Everyone tonight was staring at you because you're the most beautiful thing they've ever seen. You know that, don't you?"

Toni shrugged, feeling uncomfortable with the attention.

Cole was staring at her, his gaze scorching over her body. Awareness pooled inside her.

"Are we staying out here?" he asked them, his body closing in around them.

"Why not? It's a nice night."

"I don't mess around in the back of trucks anymore." His tone was flat.

"I guess the man wants to go inside."

Josh's mouth moved over the skin of her neck. Toni looked into Cole's eyes. His lids lowered; his shoulders rounded. He shoved his hands in his pockets, his demeanor weighted, his words assertive.

"Let's go to my bed."

Josh shrugged a shoulder, his eyes questioning. He took her hand and pulled her toward the door.

They followed Cole inside, walking through the living room and up the dark stairwell.

It was quiet as they undressed. Toni slipped into Cole's bed, his room once closed to entry. She nestled between them, unable to see much through the darkness around them. Their cocks gently poked against her flesh. Josh was aggressive tonight, Cole a bit standoffish. When Josh made love to her, she caught herself stealing glances at Cole. His body was next to them, his hand working his cock as he watched them, his eyes gleaming.

He reached for her, his abrasive palm gliding over her body, but she felt him a million miles away. Toni tried not to be distracted, not wanting to ignore Josh.

Cole had propped himself up on one elbow, pulling at his cock until his head fell back, his hand coated with a milky sheen.

Cole couldn't help himself. He had to watch them tonight, especially Josh. He envied his friend. How he could let himself go, losing himself in his emotions. He made it look so easy. Cole was trying; he really was. This learning to express his emotions had unearthed an entirely different problem. When he found himself being swept away, he felt the emotions branching off. These urges to touch and kiss Josh had him berating himself. He was surprised Josh hasn't hauled off and punched him.

Watching Josh had helped him. He hadn't failed as a student, but Josh had an absolute trust Cole couldn't get hold of. No matter how wonderful Toni was, how beautiful and caring, he needed her confirmation.

Much of his life since his parents' death had not been solid. If he was going to give himself over, he needed a promise, their promise, together as one.

He watched them sleep, their bodies wound around one another. Their breaths rose and fell to their own individual rhythms. He eased out of bed and quietly pulled on his jeans.

Cole walked down the driveway, the fields awash with the silvery light of the moon. He sat near the creek where he and Toni had talked before all these feelings exploded. The water rushed over its bed, looking like black ink.

He knew Josh was way ahead of him. If Toni left, Josh would be devastated; the hard realization hit him deep in the gut. If she left, he might be crushed as well. There would be much suffering for Josh. A sort of self-protection moved in, pulling all those feelings down. The thought of abandonment made his body wither. That

type of heartbreak would tear his world apart again, just as the death of his parents had.

He would let Josh take his chance. He was an adult. But Toni was a risk Cole just wasn't sure he could take. As he rationalized this to himself, his insides twisted in sickness. He had had his taste of her, but now he needed to purge himself of her.

Chapter Twenty-eight

Toni wiped off her face and arms with a cool rag. She turned to drape the rag over the cooler when she saw Josh walking toward the stand, his boots kicking up the dry dust behind him.

Business was slow today. The August sun was relentless, pounding down on the tarp roof, creating a sauna of heat, her every pore open and weeping with sweat. She lifted the lid of the cooler and popped a chilled strawberry in her mouth.

“Hey, gorgeous.” Josh walked behind the stand and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. He leaned into her, giving her upper arm a squeeze. “How’s it going?”

She fell into his eyes, the blue light and airy, matching the scorching summer sky.

“It’s slow and freaking hot as hell.”

“Close up, then. Call it a day. Don’t stay out here and get a heatstroke.”

“You don’t have to say that twice.” She laughed. She reached for him. Josh’s skin was damp underneath his shirt. He smelled of straw mixed with the sugary molasses of grain.

“You coming by tonight? I’m making tacos.”

Toni closed the money box and shoved it underneath the counter. She wasn’t sure she was up for another tense evening with Cole. He’d been acting strange since their night together in his room. He’d spent time with them but never said much, often just staring, his eyes holding all his secrets. Every encounter with her seemed to traumatize him.

“I don’t know.” She paused, not liking to see the look in his eyes change. “Cole’s been so damn tense lately. He comes down here to visit, eats a piece of fruit, stares at me, and walks back up to the barn. He...he doesn’t touch me, and I’m honestly afraid to touch him.”

Josh grabbed her arm. He pulled her into him. His fingers threaded through her hair, cupping the back of her head. His soft, wet mouth began working on the skin of her neck, his hand inching up the back of her shirt. His touch made her sweltering, sticky skin shiver.

“Let it go, Toni,” he whispered. He took the lobe of her ear between his teeth. “If he wants to be with us, then he will. We can’t cure him of all his hang-ups. God”—his hot breath tunneled into her ear—“I want you. I want to have you right here. Please come tonight.” He pulled away from her, holding her at arm’s length.

He gazed into her eyes, his forehead creased. "He hasn't changed anything between us. Please tell me he hasn't." His tone rose, cracking with desperation.

"And what is between us?"

He pulled her close. "I love you. I said it the other night in the heat of the moment, but I have no trouble saying it again." His chest rose against hers. "I sort of wanted to be a bit more romantic about it." His laughter was laced with reserve.

"You mean not pour your heart out while we're at the fruit stand." She kissed him playfully.

"Yeah, something like that."

"I love you too. I really do; it's just..."

His face drained, making her insides ache. She did love him, but she loved Cole too. As hard as she tried, it was becoming a problem. She found herself overly preoccupied with why he couldn't just let go and let things be. She had done it. If she could, anyone could.

"I don't have much experience with these types of arrangements."

"We've done all we can. It's up to him. It's okay for you to love him. It's not you. You have to know that." His grip tightened. "You're beautiful, loving, and accepting of us, the way we are," he stammered. "You've helped us so much." He steered her face to meet his, his lips finding hers. His moist heat saturated her mouth, her body molding into his. He grew against her, his cock swelling with need. He held her face, ending the kiss, his head resting against hers. "Whether he's in...or out, you and me are. You got that?"

She nodded, their heated bodies fusing together under the hot sun.

"Now"—he tipped her chin—"when can I expect you tonight?"

Toni assured Josh she'd come for dinner. She shut down the produce stand and covered all of the fruit. Later on in the afternoon, she went to go visit Macy. She had the urge to ride, but it was so hot, she thought it would be cruel to take the animal out today.

She stepped into the barn, the shaded air cooling her skin. She opened the stall, greeted with her glassy, oval eyes, Macy's nostrils flaring at her presence.

"Hi, girl." Toni stroked her smooth, glossy coat. Macy's soft, thick lips nibbled at her hand, smelling the treat that lay in her palm. Macy scooped up the carrot, her teeth crunching through the crisp, orange spear. While Macy ate, Toni brushed her down, feeling her skin twitch beneath her hand. She spent the afternoon in the barn cleaning her grooming utensils and mink oiling her saddle, planning to ride once the heat broke.

She and Josh had said the words, their love voiced for the other to hear. Things had moved to another level for them. She did love Josh. He was everything she could ask for in a man, but where did this leave Cole? What did that mean for her affections toward him? Josh had said he could never leave the farm. Could she and Josh carry on with their relationship here if she were to stay? Would Cole

always linger on the periphery? Now that she had been with Cole, it would be hard to give him up.

Chapter Twenty-nine

A few days later, Josh went to Lancaster on farm business. He wanted to see an irrigation system he thought might be cost-efficient for the crops, which were thriving. They had only had to pull twelve trees that just didn't take out of the ground. He had asked Toni to come with him, wanting to share the sights of Amish country with her. She'd politely declined, not feeling she could give him all her attention.

She felt rejected by Cole, and it hurt. The last time they were together, he hadn't even touched her. He watched her and Josh, his own hand working over his body. She found herself feeling foolish and embarrassed. If she let those feelings own her, then he was winning. She had done nothing wrong. She had given Cole everything and so had Josh. They had willingly shared their bodies and hearts with him. Josh was right. There was nothing else left to give.

Before Josh left, he asked Toni about the use of windmills on the farm, inquiring if they would provide them with an additional tax break. Toni had praised him for his research, encouraging him to make the trip out and tour other farms that were using similar types of equipment. His enthusiasm made her heart stutter; she wished it was possible to just focus on Josh entirely, forget Cole. Move on.

The next morning, a cold front moved in, filtering out the muggy, humid air, replacing it with a fresh breeze and a cloudless, powder blue sky. Toni walked over to the barn, deciding to take Macy out for a ride. Cole was gone. He was either in town or somewhere on the property, actively avoiding her.

Once Macy was saddled up, Toni settled in to enjoy a long, peaceful ride. Macy trotted across the driveway, her hooves crunching over the gravel. They circled around the apple orchard and headed down toward the steer pasture. Toni took a deep breath, letting the clean breeze blow through her hair, licking her heated shoulders. The steer turned, their large eyes following them as they rode by.

Toni gently tugged on Macy's reins, steering her toward the strawberry patch, wanting to check and see whether she needed to do some weeding and picking. She had been procrastinating with her field chores due to the oppressive heat. Her eyes scanned the neatly tilled rows, seeing an abundance of large, ruby berries that were ready. With a light nudge of Toni's heel, Macy headed up the crest of the hill that sat behind the berry patch.

The coppery soil of the lower field turned into tall stalks of thick, lush grass that sprouted on the hilltop. Large oaks framed the acreage; behind them was another rock wall. Toni had asked Cole about the rock walls that were sporadically

built around the farm. He had told her that he and his father had started the project but never finished. The project had died along with Cole's father.

Macy abruptly stopped in her tracks, making Toni tighten her seat in the saddle. Toni turned to see what had spooked her. Chelsea's aqua-colored pickup sat parked under the trees. Toni's fingers gripped the reins. She heard muted voices coming from behind the rock wall, riding the coattails of the gentle summer breeze.

Toni dismounted and tied the reins around a tree trunk. Toni watched Macy dip her head, plowing her way through the grassy meadow. Seeing that Macy would be well occupied with plenty to eat, she started moving toward the truck.

She stood next to the open driver's side window, seeing Chelsea's red leather purse on the floor, the keys still hanging in the ignition. She walked in front of the bumper and squatted down near the wall. She moved through the grass on all fours. Rods of golden sunlight streamed through the branches. Her eyes scanned through the shaded foliage, looking deeper into the woods.

She found them in her marginal vision, their creamy flesh radiating like a bright light amongst the dark, woodsy greenery. Her stomach tipped, spilling. A deep pain stabbed at her insides, penetrating her gut. She crouched, leaning against the wall, her fingers digging into the hard, cold granite.

Cole was naked, his elongated body glowing, holding an aura of power. He was leaning against the tree, his jeans in a puddle around his work boots. His head was tilted back, his eyes pinched shut, his face set. He looked as if he was in pain. Chelsea was on her knees. Her mouth was on Cole.

Toni's hands began to shake. Her heavy breaths battled with her silence, a silence she was desperately trying to maintain.

Toni lowered her head into her hands, her chest heaving with an impending illness. She slowly turned around and crawled back, her eyes locked on the nutty color of Macy's gleaming coat, the muffled moans of Chelsea and Cole swarming above her head like locusts.

Chapter Thirty

The sky began to darken. Cole watched the tailgate of Chelsea's truck disappear down the desolate lane that exited the farm from the back of the property. He tipped his head, eyeing the sky, befuddled over the drastic change in weather, the pure blue sky now filled with bulging, angry, gray clouds.

He pulled his shirt over his head, feeling the first drops hit. He walked along the stone wall, his body weighed down, his actions sickening him. As he crested the top of the hill, he saw the matted-down grass, the fresh imprints of Macy's hooves. He lowered to his knees. He touched the indentation in the dirt near the bottom of the tree trunk. He stood, squinting toward the barn, his forehead now coated in a cold sweat.

Cole broke into a run, his legs slicing through the tall grass. His limbs throbbed, mimicking his pulse as his blood ran furiously through his veins. He stopped near the fence, gripping the post, feeling his insides contort.

He spat in the bushes, the brown liquid from a previous tobacco chew regurgitating up from his stomach. He wiped his mouth, watching the barn. He had to right this, if she had seen his wrong. He opened the corral, knowing the steer would enter into the barn of their own accord once the heavy rain came.

His legs became stiff, as if the mud was pulling him under. He ran toward the house, his breathing strenuous.

A balmy wind gusted across the yard. He watched the sky open, the cool rain falling sideways, pelting his face.

The barn door slid open with force. Toni emerged and slammed it shut behind her. She felt him there, turning to face him, the expression on her face haunting, her eyes liquefied with pain.

"Stay away." She seethed, her cheeks reddened. "You don't even have the privilege of looking my way, Cole Harrington." Her hair blew wildly around her, the strands whipping around her neck, sticking to her dampened skin.

"Toni...listen." Cole choked on his words, scrambling. He shook his head, feeling attacked by all the emotional demons that suffocated him, the demons he had tried to bury. Regret, frustration, and self-hatred had him bound, the ropes tightening. Josh flashed in his mind. Panic careened through him, his gut a wrenching mess. Cole could feel the poison of his actions slowly sucking the life out of him.

His stupidity would destroy everything.

Toni stomped across the driveway, her hair billowing out behind her. Cole ran after her, grabbing the wet skin of her shoulder. She whirled around, shaking her finger at him.

"Don't you touch me!" Her eyes filled with fire, her once full and sensual lips pressed into a thin line. "You know what you are? Huh? Do you?" Her breathing heaved.

"Toni...please. Let me explain. Let me just talk to you."

"There's no more room for that," she spat. "Let me tell you what you are, since you haven't figured it out yet."

"Toni, I'm begging, please." Cole ran his palms over his head, his nails digging. The rain continued to assault them. Water ran in paths down her face.

"You're nothing but a fucking coward. You know that?" She shoved his chest.

"Toni... No." Her words sliced into him. "That's not true."

"Sure it is," she said cruelly. "We gave you everything. All you do is take. You won't risk shit for anybody, not even Josh," she screamed. "That poor guy's done nothing but build his life around yours, and what do you give him in return? Nothing! You won't give an inch of yourself. What do you think I am? A fucking idiot? You think I'm going to stay here and let you do this to me?" She turned on her heel. She broke into a run toward her front porch.

"No, Toni. It's not like that." Cole ran after her. She spun around.

"Then why?" She yanked the hair out of her eyes. "Why her? After everything—why her?"

Her face crumbled, her eyes filling, her rage transitioning into despair. The salt of her tears spilled over, mixing with the rain. Cole stepped back, traumatized by her hysteria. He had broken her. He moved backward. His heart deflated, sinking to his feet. Weariness sank into his bones like a virus. He had crushed her and Josh. Damage he could never repair.

* * *

Toni slammed the door, turning the dead bolt. She staggered down the hall into the kitchen. Her body dropped into the nearest chair, her world tipping off its axis.

She had to leave. There was no way she could stay here now. Maintaining a relationship with Josh was a question she couldn't answer, now that she loved both of them. How could she work in reverse, only having feelings for one while the other would always be in the background? Sure, she could tell Josh, but that would only complicate things further. Josh's anger toward Cole could result in something destructively permanent between them. She would not be the cause of that. Her time spent diagnosing Cole Harrington had come to an end. Toni glanced at the clock. It was almost five. She would be out of here by eight. Josh was due home tomorrow. She couldn't see him again. It would just make everything harder.

The daylight slipped down the western side of the sky. A misty rain fell while the fog rolled in, coating the fields with a murky haze. Toni retaped a box she had stored in the closet. She packed all her father's drawings and precious books. She folded Bruce's favorite brown sweater and placed it on top. She scribbled a note instructing the men to throw out the rest of his belongings and furniture.

She emptied the chest of drawers then tossed her clothes into the suitcase and duffel bag. She wondered if she should call Dawn and tell her she was coming, seeing as how she couldn't just blow back into her apartment while it was occupied. She hauled her bags down the stairs and set them near the door.

She walked through the small house, turning off all the lights. She saw the old horseshoe of Macy's that Cole had given her the day he helped her with the fertilizer. She picked it up off the counter, the iron heavy in her hand. She walked toward the studio, her darkened shadow reflecting back at her. She angled her arm to the side and hurled the horseshoe into the mirror. The popping of glass exploded in her ears.

Toni stared at herself, her body split into broken shards, an apt metaphor at the moment. She took a breath, shaking off her tears, turning away from the reflection that held her hard reality, her footsteps resonating behind her as she walked out of the house.

Chapter Thirty-one

Josh pulled into the farm, driving a bit too fast down the lane, dodging the potholes that had sprouted up while he was gone. He couldn't wait to see Toni. He glanced down at all the brochures he had on irrigation equipment and windmills. She would be impressed with his research and thoroughness.

He didn't notice that her SUV was gone until he parked the truck in the barn. He thought maybe she and Cole had gone out for breakfast. He folded the brochures in half and stuffed them into his pocket. He got out of the truck and walked into the barn. Things were quiet. His eyes scanned the yard looking for Cole. Why didn't they answer the phone? He jogged across the driveway toward the cottage.

He climbed the stairs of the porch. He gripped the doorknob, flicking his wrist, unnerved that the house was locked. He cupped his hands, peering inside. The kitchen was dark, the other rooms cast in an eerie shadow. Josh saw the pile of rubble at the foot of the stairs. His mouth ran dry, his stomach twisting. He raised his fist and punched through the small, rectangular window. Glass splintered below as he reached inside to disengage the lock, his actions desperate.

Josh pushed his way through the door. The house was quiet. The kitchen looked as it always did, Toni's coffee mug in the drainboard, the dish towel neatly folded on the counter. When he turned to glance into the studio, his eeriness faced him, debilitating him with uncertainty, his thoughts of a future with promise evaporating.

He stood in front of the mirror, his image sliced in pieces. His boots moved across the glossy floor. He bent down and picked up a piece of glass. His eyes clamped shut, his palm curling into a fist. The shard of mirrored glass pierced his skin, slicing through him. He relished the stinging of his raw flesh, not wanting to feel the other pain he knew would move in, taking root deep inside him. Warm blood ran down his forearm. He stood, his head pounding with a sickened dizziness. He tossed the glass onto the floor and stormed out of the house.

He could see Cole now. He was down below, tossing fresh hay into the barn. Josh broke into a run, his legs wired. An unknown rage surged through his body. Cole shut the tailgate of the wagon, turning to grab the pitchfork. Their eyes met across the field. Cole took two steps back, tossing the pitchfork into the wagon.

He knew Cole, his face a stage of many expressions. Misfortune was written all over him. What had he done? Josh's eyes burned as his body cut through the air, his vision of Cole distorted. Josh came up on him and grabbed his shoulders. His blood was smeared on the front of Cole's gray T-shirt.

"Where the fuck is she?" he yelled, shaking him.

Cole stared at him, his face sagging.

"Answer me! You fucking asshole!" Josh shook him with every syllable of his speech. Cole's body went limp in his hands, his neck flopping like a rag doll.

"She just left," he mumbled.

"Bullshit!" Josh rammed Cole's body into the fence. "You did something. I know you did. Why don't you be a man and just admit it?" His grip tightened. He pulled Cole's body by way of his shirt.

Josh watched Cole's eyes. They darted around him, avoiding his stare. They lowered, fixating on the blood that was dripping down Josh's arm.

"I went back, thinking the other way was safer—because new and different has me scared shitless," Cole whispered.

Josh was confused for a minute, rattled over Cole's choice of words, then realized he couldn't be man enough to use his usually frank terminology.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

Cole rubbed his temple, his eyes on the ground.

"She caught me." His words were hoarse.

Josh's eyes burned, the pieces clicking. He didn't need to hear her name or imagine what happened. He just knew.

It felt like Cole's admission drained all the blood from his body. "You're a goddamn fool," he screamed, his body torqued with rage. Josh flung him into the fence again. Cole's body tensed, the bones of his spine cracking into the fence post. "We trusted you. How could you do this to me?" Josh's eyes filled. He wiped his face, spreading his own blood across his cheek. "She was everything to me, man. Everything!"

Josh stepped away from Cole and lost his footing on the uneven ground. He grabbed the edge of the wagon to stabilize himself, then walked away from Cole.

* * *

Darkness fell over the farm, the landscape browned and brittle with drought. The August sun was relentless, its heat a wicked evil. The once lush and green tilled fields withered in a wave of heat that wouldn't leave. Despite all the irrigation efforts, the trees were beginning to fade, their branches yellowed and frail.

The barn chores got done with little or no communication. Josh spent all of his time in his room, the dirty dishes piling up on the floor near his door. Cole avoided him. He couldn't look at him, his pain a constant reminder of his selfishness.

Josh had done so much for him and the farm. In return, he had taken away the one thing that ever mattered to him. He was surprised Josh hadn't left. He wouldn't blame him if he did. If he did leave, then Cole would have to sell. He would never be able to do this alone. He could never hire others to help him, because he didn't trust

anyone else the way he trusted Josh. He had destroyed Josh's trust in him, and for what?

Cole thought Josh might take a trip down to Montclair and try to talk to Toni, and it shamed him that Josh didn't, that he stayed with Cole to fulfill his obligations to the farm instead of pursuing his heart's desire.

So it was Cole's turn to make the repair. He owed him that. But for all the resolve of "fixing," Cole didn't have a clue of what to say or do. The more he tried to come up with a plan, the more hopeless he felt, until "planning" became drinking, drowning himself to escape the pain.

* * *

It was the third night of listening to Cole stumble up the stairs and into his room. Josh's mind was in a constant state of battle. He wanted to go to Montclair and hunt Toni down, but he had made such a mess of things, not to mention her emotional upheaval. She didn't deserve this. He wanted to bring her joy, not pain. His mission had failed. Seeing him would just be a reminder of all that had happened. His emotions were at war. The fury inside him simmered for days, on the verge of boiling over. His thoughts fired like an assault weapon. *Go—leave the selfish bastard here by himself. You tried. Cole has obviously chosen the type of life he wants.* Once his anger receded, his empathy for Cole would have his insides crumbling, knowing his departure would be the antecedent to Cole's demise. His loyalty to Cole and the farm went beyond friendship; now it was a responsibility.

The loud popping of glass had him sitting up on his bed. He stood, placing his ear on the wall. It vibrated beneath his cheek. The floor shook as the sound of splintering wood permeated the wall. He bolted to the door and ran to Cole's room. He plowed through the door just in time to see Cole's fists crashing through the window. Shards of glass flew into the air.

Josh leaped across the bed. He grabbed Cole and pulled him into a bear hug. Cole thrashed against him, grunting. Josh strained to hold him. He was no weakling, but Cole had a slight height advantage. Cole's head butted back, hitting Josh square in the nose. Pain seared through his face, his eyes tearing.

He tried to turn their bodies away from the window. Blood dripped down Cole's arms, the window shattered. Josh reached back, taking the sensitive skin behind Cole's biceps and pinching it between his fingers, attempting to yank him out of his rage.

"Knock it off! What the fuck are you doing?" Josh shook him.

Cole spun around, his eyes filled with fury.

"Why don't you leave?" he spat. "Why are you still here?"

"Is that what you want?" Josh felt the rage bleeding from Cole into him. Cole's liquor-laced breaths blew into his face. Josh grabbed Cole's shirt. He pushed him up against the wall. Cole's eyes swam in a sea of red. "You...you want me to go too?"

“Fuck you!” Cole shoved him. Josh struggled with his footing, plowing all of his weight back into Cole, body-slamming him. Cole’s body seemed to be losing steam.

“You fucking kissed me!” The accusation flew out of Josh’s mouth before he could stop it. He grabbed Cole, his fingers digging.

Cole growled in response; his eyes sparked. He yanked Josh by his shirt, pushing him back into the edge of the dresser. Josh’s back tensed, the pain shooting up his spine.

“Fuck you.” Cole’s voice was raspy. He stepped back, releasing him. “Just fuck it all.” He leaned against the wall and slid to the floor. Their heaving breaths filled the quiet air. Cole’s shoulders slumped; a deep whimpering spilled out of him, his knees bending under his chin.

Josh leaned against the dresser, taken aback, unsure of what the hell he wanted Cole to say right now. There were too many unanswered questions: Cole’s advances toward him, their relationship, and what it meant. And then there was Toni. Where the hell was their future headed?

His head throbbed.

The blood solidified on Cole’s skin, his long body curled into a fetal position. The whimpering came louder and harder. Josh’s heart sank. How had it come to this?

He sat behind him. Cole moved his back into his chest, nestling, calling out to him for comfort. Josh bit his lip, his best friend crumbled and defeated at his feet.

“I’m here, man.” He wrapped his arms around him. Cole’s skin was spewing heat, trembling against him. Josh rubbed his back, his head leaning against the wall. He really was out of answers. Tears heated his eyes. He was just so tired. It was all just too much. Maybe this was his fault for wanting everything.

Toni or no Toni, he had love. It was right here with him. He felt Cole’s back tense.

“I’m sorry. I just got caught up in something.” Cole shuddered, his head hanging. He coughed, clearing his throat. “I just needed her to say she was staying. I let myself love her, and now she’s gone. And then I hurt you, and I didn’t want to, and...it’s the story of my life.” His words were strained.

Josh looked around the room, their surroundings destroyed. A bottle of Southern Comfort lay on its side on the dresser, half of its contents consumed. Cole had ripped the closet door off the hinges, broken his window, and overturned his nightstand.

“I know.” He sighed. “I wanted that too... Believe me.”

It was quiet for a few minutes.

“I shouldn’t have done that to you,” Cole said finally, and Josh thought he was talking about the kiss, maybe because he needed him to talk about it.

“Eh, it was just a kiss. It did sort of fuck me up, though.” Josh laughed, needing to lighten the dramatic air. It was quiet again.

"I repulse you, don't I?" Cole's words were rough. His body began to curl, retreating back into hiding.

"No, man," Josh whispered. "It's not like that. Like I said... It messed me up because...I feel something." His tone was low. "I'm just not sure what. Christ, we're taught to think so many things are wrong, I just can't explain what it is right now. I do know one thing. You'll never repulse me." Cole's body eased back into his. "You've got this wall; it's made of fucking granite. Sometimes I wish I had it, but boy, can it piss me off sometimes." He took a breath. He sat there, his hand on Cole's shoulder.

"Just promise me one thing. Just don't try to suck my cock, okay? That...I might have a problem with."

Cole slowly shifted around to face him, his cheeks damp, his lips curved into that teasing grin Josh knew all too well.

"Fuck you." He laughed, wiping his face, the blood dotting his cheek.

"You really know how to remodel." Josh smiled, the skin of his cheeks tight from his tears. "Man, I think you broke my nose. You're one strong fucker."

"Yeah, a strong but drunk fucker."

Josh put Cole in the shower. They cleaned the room, and he patched the window. Josh brought a pot of coffee up to Cole's room. Cole reclined against the headboard, Josh sitting on the edge of the bed. Cole's raspy words caught him off guard.

"I'm going to get her."

"You're what?"

"I'm going to Montclair tomorrow. I made this mess, and for once I'm going to be the one to clean it up."

* * *

Josh wanted to say something, but Cole could see he couldn't find the words. "Just take care of things here. All right?"

"I will, but do you think it will work, you tracking her down?"

"That's my problem, but I've got to try. I took you for granted, only ever thinking of myself. I'm going to right this thing. I don't care what it takes. You will have her. I know where to look. Once I find her, I'll take it from there."

"How do you know where she'll be?"

"I found her business card in the house." Cole pointed to the dresser.

Josh got up. He picked up the business card that had sat on his dresser for days. Josh sat on the bed, turning it in his hands.

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* * *

He made a promise to himself; he would do whatever it took, and would pray it worked. Josh's life depended on it. The hard reality that Cole had to face was that his life depended on Toni's return as well. There was no life here without her for either of them.

If Toni didn't return with him, Cole knew a piece of their relationship would be lost forever, a rare piece he had just found and wanted to hold on to. Toni's presence between them had forced Cole to look at his feelings, for both her and Josh.

His feelings for Josh were much deeper than he'd ever thought. Now that he was in touch with those feelings, he could comprehend that. Toni had gotten him to see that. He had acted on them. He had taken a risk. It was time he expanded that risk, and take it with Toni as well. If he didn't, his life would be full of unanswered questions that would only torment him for the rest of his life.

Chapter Thirty-two

After three days of crying in a hotel room, living on room service, and watching mindless cable TV, Toni called Dawn.

"You're where?" Her voice carried through the line.

"I'm here, at the Hampton Inn in Cedar Grove."

"What?"

"I'm..."

"Yeah yeah, I heard you. What the hell is going on?"

"Oh God."

"Okay, never mind, save it. I'm on my way over. What room are you in?"

"Two-eighteen."

"Should I bring sweet or salty?"

Toni cracked a smile. Dawn was exactly what she needed now. "I could really go for some White Castle."

"Done. See you in twenty."

Toni showered and tried to pull herself out of her slump. Why was it when women were traumatized, they didn't shower or dress? It was almost as if they wanted to look as unattractive as their situation. She had just slipped on a yellow T-shirt over her jeans when Dawn's fist pounded on the door. Toni opened the door. She stepped back, ready for her whirlwind.

"Easy does it." She tossed her wet hair over her shoulder. Dawn pushed past her, her fingers clenched around the white bags.

"What's going on, Toni? Out with it now. Boy, you look like shit. When was the last time you ate?" Dawn spread their miniburgers out on the table. The large cups of soda were nestled in the crook of her elbow.

"Actually...I've been pigging out." Toni sat at the small circular table, unwrapping a small cheeseburger. She inhaled it in two bites. Dawn sat across from her, sucking her cola through a straw, her green eyes glaring with suspicion.

"Out with it. I'll sit here all night if I have to."

Toni didn't pull any punches. She couldn't with Dawn, anyway.

"I had an affair with...*both of them*." Her mouth dried. She reached for her soda.

"At the same time?"

“Yes.”

“Okay.” Dawn took a breath. “Uh, I don’t know what to say.” She laughed, her face reddening. “What—Well—I guess you should just tell me what happened.”

“I think Cole...”

“Was that the one who was sort of, like, cool and removed at first?”

“Yeah, but he had trouble dealing with his feelings. There’s some past baggage.”

“His feelings for you? Or was he jealous of his buddy?”

“I know he feels something for me, but see, him and Josh...”

“Whoa.” Dawn raised a hand. “You’ve lost me already. Back up.”

Toni went through it all, a dissection of Josh and Cole’s relationship along with her involvement with them and the farm. She explained how once Cole had been with them, he seemed to be receptive and open to things in the beginning but then had pulled back, she and Josh not really knowing why. When Toni told Dawn about Cole having made a few advances toward Josh while they were together, her eyes went wide.

“You don’t think he’s bi, do you? Shit, Toni, he may have been hiding it all this time. Is that why you left? You think they’re just...you know, the two of them together?”

Toni shook her head. “No. I understand...them. That wasn’t the reason.” She pushed the food away, her stomach suddenly tipping.

“Then what’s the real issue?”

“Cole... He went back to that girl. The girl in the barn.”

Dawn’s face fell.

“What about Josh?”

“It was just Cole.” Toni choked, her eyes spilling over.

“Oh girl, look at you.” She reached for her hand across the table, her fingers warm, her grasp full of strength. “I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have encouraged you.”

“Hey”—she grabbed a napkin—“I’m a big girl. When you do adult things, you need to accept the consequences.”

“What now?”

Toni shrugged.

“I don’t know. I miss Josh.” She dabbed her eyes.

“Well, call him...”

“He’d never leave Cole.”

“Now you’re deciding for him?”

“Yes. Because I know him.”

"That's a crock." Dawn frowned. "But I'm going to stop pushing you. For now." She got up and cleaned off the table. Toni blew her nose, her throat sore and dry. Dawn moved her chair closer, taking her hand again.

"Have you called Harry?"

"No. Don't tell him I'm back. I need some more time. In fact, I've thought of quitting."

Dawn's face went blank, her expression unreadable. "Well, okay... If you do, then what are your plans?"

Toni looked at her, raising her hands in defeat.

"I have no clue. But after being away from here, I just don't know if this is where I belong anymore."

* * *

The next day, Toni got dressed and drove to the firm. Why wait? She couldn't stay locked up in a hotel room forever. She needed to make a move.

When the elevator glided open, Toni was relieved most of the cubicles were empty. All her coworkers were downstairs in the cafeteria having their coffee break, probably complaining about some new tax law. She just wanted to slip out unnoticed, not wanting to have to recite her reasons for leaving a hundred times. Toni tapped on the door of Harry's office. When she poked her head inside a warm smile graced his face.

"I'm sorry you're leaving." Harry Reed fussed with his tie as he sat behind his desk, the large, glossy surface littered with papers. It had been a long time since she and Harry had sat in his office. His brows pulled together; his forehead creased. Toni needed a fresh start. Where that would be, she had no idea. Her father had left her some money, and there was the monthly rent coming from Allison that would help with her expenses until she decided what to do.

"Me too." Toni squirmed in her chair. "I just feel it's time." Toni felt bad, knowing she caught Harry off guard. He had always been good to her.

A relentless, hot sun pounded through the window, warming her legs. Harry cleared his throat, pulling Toni from her thoughts. She lifted her eyes to meet his, and met the photos of his grandchildren's smiling faces.

"I'll contact payroll and have them cut you a check for all your accumulated time."

"Thanks, Harry." Toni watched him move out from behind his desk. Hearing the door close behind her, Toni stood and walked toward the window. She stared down into the parking lot, feeling stifled by the return to city life. She'd been back for only a few days. She turned away from the window, feeling numbed by the sight of the plain beige walls. Toni just wanted to collect her money and get out of here.

Toni paced around Harry's office. She ran her fingers over the thick leaves of a potted rubber tree plant. The door opened behind her. She faced Harry, his pale blue eyes looking into hers over his bifocals. He pushed the lenses up on the bridge

of his nose and handed her the check. She didn't glance down at it, knowing he would be more than fair.

"Please come back and see us sometime." He extended his hand. "You'll be missed."

"I will. Thanks for everything. I really appreciate your understanding." Her throat tightened with a wave of emotion she didn't expect. She lowered her gaze to the floor, heading toward the door.

"Boy, that fellow must be lost." Harry chuckled behind her. Toni turned, confused by his comment. He was standing near the window, staring down into the parking lot. Being four floors up gave them an ample view of the parking lot and the busy intersection of Bloomfield and Pompton Avenues. Toni walked toward the window and glanced down where the last thing she expected to see was parked in the middle of the BMWs and Audis.

Cole was outside, down in the parking lot, sitting on the tailgate of his truck. He did stick out like a sore thumb in his jeans and work boots. Toni made a soft sound of surprise.

"Toni? Do you know who that is?" Harry faced her, his brows lifting in question. Toni couldn't speak. Her chest felt stepped on. She couldn't believe he was here.

"I do," she murmured. She realized she was staring, and Harry must be contemplating her mental state at the moment.

Harry rubbed his chin, looking troubled. "Do you need me to call security? I can do that." His voice was deep and comforting.

Toni shook her head. "No no." She sighed. "I can handle it." At least she hoped so.

"Thanks again, Harry."

"Good luck, Toni."

She knew he was talking business, but she needed that luck to deal with Cole.

* * *

Cole dug through the White Castle bag. He knew he had one more hamburger. He held the small square in his hand, feeling addicted already. He bit into the burger, never realizing that ground beef and cheddar cheese could taste this good at this hour of the morning.

He had spent a few nights in his truck, refusing to pay a hundred and thirty dollars for a hotel room. The local gas stations provided bathrooms and sinks so he could at least perform some basic hygiene. So far, he hadn't seen Toni. She had to turn up here eventually. She did work here. He stuffed the rest of the burger into his mouth and went in search of a trash can.

He walked around the building and found one in the corner of the parking lot. He tossed the bag in and turned, heading back to the truck. That's when he saw her

SUV parked between a green luxury sedan and a black sports coupe. She was here, inside. His heart began to race. It was only a matter of time.

He walked back to the truck and leaned against the tailgate. He stared out into the busy street. People were bustling along with their noses to the ground like a pack of bloodhounds. He tilted his head back, gazing up at the tall, mirrored building. A train whistle blew in the distance as it clattered down the tracks.

Cole sat back down on the tailgate, unsure if he should leave his post again. Maybe she would come out at lunchtime. He crawled into the bed and crossed his long legs. He should have worn shorts, feeling the scorching heat push through his jeans. He closed his eyes, trying to shut out the rumblings of the city.

His lids darkened, the sun's heat cooled by a cloud. He opened one eye. Toni's somber face filled his vision, jarring him awake. Cole rubbed his eyes, her beautiful image coming into focus. A wave of current shot through him, his body suddenly alive and charged. The sight of her had his hands twitching. A black miniskirt grazed against her brown thighs; a cream-colored, sleeveless silk blouse glowed against her skin. He quickly sat up, her eyes raking over him.

After all his mental rehearsing, his mind went blank. His words were stuck in his mouth. He felt like an ass. It was time to humble himself. Their future depended on it.

Toni stared at him, his lanky body sprawled out in the back of the truck. As his eyes opened, bringing her into focus, her mind raced, trying to find the right words. Anger still lingered, mixing with the shock of his presence here in the city, alone.

"Toni." Cole struggled to sit up, righting himself.

"What the hell are you doing here?" She leaned on the truck, the residual odor of hay and manure drifting into her nose, returning her senses back to the farm.

"I had to see you." Cole scooted to the tailgate and hopped out of the truck. "I have to talk to you."

"I believe we've said and done all there is," Toni said mockingly. She turned on her heel and retraced her steps back to her car.

"Toni, wait!" She listened to his boots as they pounded on the pavement, following her, his shadow moving into hers. His hand grazed her shoulder. She spun around, facing him. His eyes were open as if soaking her up, his lips parted, struggling for words that he wasn't accustomed to saying. He was out of place. Seeing the skyscrapers looming behind him almost made her laugh. She tried to harden the grin that was slowly creeping across her lips.

"Josh loves you, Toni. You're everything to him. This isn't his fault. This is about me and my fuck-ups."

Toni thought of Josh. Her resolve wavered. She looked away for a moment, wondering how he might have reacted when he got home from Lancaster and discovered she was gone.

"I know you love him," he said softly, staring at her hard, squinting into the sun. "Don't do this to him. It's killing him. You know he doesn't deserve it."

"I didn't do *this*." Her words were biting.

"I know that." His tone was desperate. "Please. Just talk to me. Just give this egotistical asshole some of your time." He flung his hands into the air, pleading, using Josh's words, hoping they were effective.

He'd come all this way, loitering around the city like a vagrant. The more she looked at him, the more she felt sorry for him, but her anger hardened, pushing through. He would not make a fool of her again.

Deep down, Cole wasn't a malicious person. He was involved in a struggle. She knew that intimately. But for all her compassion, she was afraid to let down her guard for even a second.

His cautious voice reached for her. "Can we talk? Your terms, your way."

She tipped her face to his. Her hand itched; part of her wanted to haul off and slap him. Dark stubble coated his face, the bill of his John Deere hat facing backward. She thought it odd he was wearing a long-sleeved T-shirt on a summer day.

"I'm staying at the Hampton Inn. You could use a shower." She twitched her nose at him.

He stepped back, rubbing his face. "I know. I'm sorry."

"Where are you staying?" Toni asked, waving him toward her SUV.

"The Ford Motor Inn." He pointed back to the truck, a sheepish laugh escaping.

His light laughter worked on her, worming its way through her defenses. She looked up at him, shaking her head. She dropped her gaze down to his boots, smelling the lingering scent of sour manure as it rose, the heat of the asphalt ripening him. His words finally registered.

"You stayed in the truck?" Her mouth gaped.

"The prices here are absurd." He scowled, shaking his head.

"That's city life for you, but if you want to talk to me, then you'll have to pay and get a room. You better scrape your boots off before we go into the lobby. You're going to have people running for an oxygen mask." She shook her head. "Wait for me at the entrance. You can follow me. I wouldn't want you to get lost."

Toni left him, walking to her SUV. She started the engine, turning the air on full blast while waiting for Cole to fill her rearview mirror.

Chapter Thirty-three

Toni slid the card key into the slot and opened the door. She had left Cole on the elevator. His room was on the fourth floor. The maid service had come, leaving fresh towels. Toni set her purse on top of the desk and called Dawn, telling her Cole was in Montclair.

"He's here?"

"He was loitering around Brackenridge and Reed. I'm surprised you missed him." She chuckled.

"I've been in meetings all morning. Now what?" Her words tumbled anxiously over the line.

"I don't know." Toni dropped down on the bed.

"You gotta talk to him. Just don't break in front of him; then he'll know he's got the upper hand. Guys know when they can use our emotions to get what they want."

"I know, I know, I just..."

"Hey... See what he has to say. You'll never know if you don't. It doesn't mean you have to go back. You've got the upper hand, girl. Feel the power. Use it!"

Toni stifled her tears, her fingers clenching the bedspread. The line went quiet.

"Harry's bummed you resigned."

"Yeah, I feel guilty about it. He did a lot for my career. I just don't want to be here anymore."

"Just call me, okay?"

"I will."

Toni had told Cole she would ring his room when she was ready, and he could meet her downstairs in the pub. While soaking in a hot tub, she recalled Dawn's words. She couldn't allow herself to be swept away by her feelings for him. Thank God Josh wasn't here. Seeing him would've made that all the harder, double trouble, impossible to resist.

She kept her attire basic, not wanting to draw any of his attention. She put on a clean pair of jeans and a pink shirt. When she got downstairs, Cole was already at a table. He had cleaned up well, his face smooth from a recent shave. She fought her eyes as they lowered over him from a distance. The jeans he had on were dark, not the usually faded and frayed kind he wore around the farm. She was surprised to

see him in sneakers and a beige, button-down shirt, the sleeves cuffed above his wrists.

Cole rose from his chair as she walked to the table. He waited for her to sit, assisting her with her chair. A waitress came over asking for their drink order. Toni asked for a rum and Coke. Cole's order had her baffled—a coffee, black.

"No beer? Or whisky?" She leaned on the table, trying to keep it together. Dawn's words echoed in her head. "*Feel the power. Use it!*"

"Nah, not tonight." He smiled faintly. He shifted in his chair. When he leaned on the table, she saw the cuts. No wonder he had on a long-sleeved shirt earlier, and now a button-down. The cuts were thin, like the scratches of a cat. They had scabbed over, trailing up under the cuff of his sleeves.

She raised her eyes. Cole stared at her. She felt herself building the wall between them, but that would solve nothing. That wasn't why she was here. They sat there, the dinner rush happening all around them. There was a hushed silence. Cole fidgeted in his chair again, tugging on the sleeve of his shirt, sensing her stare.

"What happened?" Toni watched his face, the lines around his mouth deepening with annoyance.

The waitress delivered their drinks, then lit the small votive candle in the center of the table. A soft light flickered over his face.

"I think the technical term is temper tantrum." He reached for his coffee, his eyes lowered.

"Is Josh all right?" She rubbed her palms down her thighs, thinking there had been some sort of accident. He wouldn't look at her.

"Yeah, he's okay. As always, it was my fault."

Toni didn't know what to say. She knew his game. Wanting her to insist that it wasn't and that it was okay, when she knew it wasn't.

"I don't know what happened after I left, but what happened before I did was your fault." Her words were clipped.

"You're right. It was my fault. Everything was and has been. I'm an asshole. I'm a coward, as you said." His eyes narrowed. "I've had this problem for years. I think the world owes me because of what I've been through. But that doesn't give me the right to disregard other people's feelings."

"Like Josh's?"

"Like Josh's and yours, for that matter." Cole sat back in his chair. He rubbed his face, shifted his gaze. His eyes weren't as dark. It was as if more light had moved inside him.

"Josh." He chewed his lip. "That guy has done more for me than humanly possible, I think. He has an uncommon patience. I really don't deserve him. If it weren't for him, I would've been either dead or in jail a long time ago."

"Did he leave?" Toni held her breath.

"No." Cole sipped his coffee then set the mug down. "I told him to, but he won't."

Toni fussed with her napkin. Her throat was beginning to burn. She was afraid to ask the question, afraid of the emotional heartstrings it would pull. She would not cry in front of him.

"Why did you do it?" she whispered. She gulped her drink, the carbonation prickling down her throat.

"I need to start at the beginning. I've fucked up everything else. If this is the last time I see you...I need to get this right. I haven't been the same since the day you came to the farm."

Toni felt her face contort.

"Listen Toni... This is not a pickup line. This is not a guilt trip. I just need to tell you all the things I was feeling and right from the start. You can still call me an asshole. It's okay. I know I deserve whatever it is that I have coming. The ride I was on, it was almost manic."

Cole told her how she had affected him after arriving at the farm. How he had wrestled with his lust and with Josh's growing feelings toward her.

"Were you jealous?"

"Sure I was. I was scared shitless, thinking you were going to take him away, move him down here, and leave me up there all alone. A drunk, angry, old farmer." His face creased. "That's what was going through my head. Then I began to torment him. The only friend I have, my best friend."

"What do you mean?" Toni thought back, trying to see all of what Cole was saying. She was so immersed in her own stuff, she didn't realize things had gotten that strained between them.

Cole's tone sharpened. "I laid it on thick, telling him you'd do nothing but hurt him. You'd lure him in. He'd fall in love with you, and then you'd be gone, leaving him to suffer, all so it wouldn't be me who would suffer."

"But..." Toni's jaw tightened. "I would..."

"I didn't know anything. Don't you see? I didn't want him to get sucked in, because I was the one who was really afraid. I took my fears and fed them to him."

"Did he believe it?"

"No. The guy's stable as a rock. He wouldn't let me steal his joy. You made him so happy. He was always positive, saying it would all work out."

Toni sat back, feeling exhausted. She thought of Josh at home, alone, wondering where they were and what was going on. He was an innocent party in so much of this.

"He knows you're here, right?"

"Yeah, he knows."

She needed to know where she stood. He still hadn't told her why he had gone back to Chelsea. "Why?" She didn't elaborate.

His eyes flashed for a minute, then softened. He took a breath.

"As time went on, and you two...you know, the three of us got involved, I fell in love with you." His words were an anguished groan. "All the while I was falling hard for you, so was Josh. I waited for you to say you were gonna stay." He leaned on the table, his head in his hands. "God, I waited and waited. Every time we were all together, it became harder for me not to panic and listen to the voices in my head." He stopped and breathed like he'd run a race. "Josh is miserable. And this is the first night I haven't been drunk."

"Were you drunk when you had the meltdown?"

"Yeah, Josh and I fought, but he got me to talk." Cole laughed bitterly. "That was the one good thing about it. Being with you unearthed a lot of junk inside of me I just didn't want to deal with. I went back because with her I didn't have to feel; only that last time was different."

Toni shivered, not wanting to hear anymore.

"The last time... I did feel... What I felt was a deep, sickening pain. I tried to outrun my feelings for you, but I couldn't. It's still no excuse. I know that." He raised his hand. "It didn't run its course, if that makes you feel any better."

Toni felt her brows lift.

"I didn't have sex with her that day," he mumbled. "I almost did, but I didn't. There's this space you've filled inside. Josh too. You own it. It's not ever going to belong to anyone else, whether you come back or not. It'll always belong to you."

Indecision filled her, leaving a bitter taste on her tongue. She did love them. Talking about the future never seemed to come up, and now it seemed that apprehensive silence had loaded the dice against them.

"I didn't talk about any future plans because...this thing between the three of us—it was all a little new for me. I didn't want to assume..."

"I know." Cole reached for her hand. His fingers held hers cautiously.

Maybe enough was enough for tonight. She pulled away and stood, her body suddenly folding and wanting her bed. Cole rose from the table and pushed his chair in. He dug through his wallet and threw a few bills on the table.

"If you love Josh and want to be with him, then that's where you belong."

Toni looked up at him; his eyes were filled with a sensitivity that was alien to her. "What about you?"

"What about me?" He shrugged. "I sell my land and move on."

"You make it sound so easy," Toni whispered.

"Oh no." He smiled sadly. "It'll be anything but easy. Josh has put my happiness before his for a long time. It's time for me to step up. Thanks for seeing me. You look beat."

"Yeah, I am." She shifted her weight, torn, still not sure. He pretty much put his heart on the table, but her anger still lingered. Lashing out at him seemed pointless. The guy had some issues. Issues that had been brewing for years.

"Are you leaving tomorrow?"

"If you think I should, then I will. If I need to stay on a bit longer, then I can do that."

"I don't know. I think I should just say good night for now."

"Good night, Toni."

She was glad he didn't say good-bye.

* * *

Cole stretched out on the bed. He couldn't sleep. He'd taken a walk around the parking lot of the hotel, taking in the nighttime sounds and lights of the city. Now back up in his room, he fought his urge for a drink. He would be happy and safe with a beer or two. Before he left, he told Josh to ransack the house and get rid of all the whisky. That stuff was turning him into a menace. At ten thirty, he called Josh. He answered on the first ring.

"What's happening?" His tone was anxious.

"We met for a drink. I told her everything; I swear I did."

"I believe you, man, but how'd it go?"

"I'm really not sure. I told her if she wanted to be with you, then I'd cut you loose." Cole's chest hurt. He'd known Josh for so long. He could match the tone of his voice with any expression, almost seeing his sober face in his mind.

"Will you see her tomorrow?"

"She didn't tell me to go home. I told her if this was it, then I'd leave."

"Fuck." Josh groaned. Cole heard the water running, the clinking of dishes. Cole could feel his agony. It was embedding itself inside him. He wanted to yank it out like a rotten root.

"Listen, I'll call tomorrow."

"Come home." Josh's tone was weary. "It's over."

"Don't give up."

"Maybe it's your turn to be optimistic."

"I'm going to do this. I'll get it right," Cole vowed.

"Christ, I hope so."

* * *

The next day Cole was up early, restless. He walked downstairs and got a coffee and a corn muffin. The mornings back home were his busiest time. He'd never battled boredom before. He knew Josh was running his ass off right now, getting all the livestock fed.

After he ate, he went exploring. He bought a tin of tobacco, and discovered a park a few blocks away from the hotel.

He walked around the pond, watching the ducks skate along the water. Morning joggers and walkers passed by him. Cole sat on a bench, sticking a pinch inside his gum. He didn't want to pressure Toni, but he couldn't linger around here too much longer. If she wouldn't return to the farm, then he needed to get his ass back there and start making plans.

When he got back, she was in the lobby.

"I just had them ring your room."

"Well, you know I'm usually up early." He laughed. He wanted the air to be lighter today. He was sure there were more questions, but he hoped the bulk of it was over with. Even though he'd eaten, his gut was cramped. The uncertainty was excruciating.

He wished he was crazy enough to throw her in the truck and take her home, drive fast, and get away from this chaos.

"Where were you?" Her head tilted.

"I found a park a few blocks from here, just went for walk."

"Um, can we go back?"

"Sure."

They walked down to the park, Cole guiding her to the same bench. They sat down. A light breeze drifted across the water, casting a rippling glare on the surface. Cole leaned into the bench, crossing his legs. This was it. Life or death for him and Josh. He looked into her eyes, their earthy color deep and rich. Her hair gleamed in the sun. Her brows pulled together. He prompted her.

"What is it? Let's get it all out."

She laughed, looking away.

"I know, that's funny coming from me, but you know, I feel better. Like I've been purged." Cole soaked her up. She was gorgeous, the morning radiating all around her.

"A lot cheaper than therapy, huh?"

"Damn right. I have a beautiful shrink too." He ate up her smile, unsure if it was the last time he'd see it.

"You kissing Josh... Can we talk about that?"

"You even talk like a shrink." He laughed. His head swam for a minute. Was this going to make or break her decision? Cole wasn't used to all this pressure. He supposed it was warranted. He wanted to give her the right answer, one she wanted to hear, one that would bring Josh all that Cole wanted him to have. He'd go with the truth.

"Being with the two of you..." He paused, needing to phrase this right. "It unearthed a lot of things. I can't even explain them all yet. Watching you both was such a turn-on. I've never felt that way."

"Honestly?"

"Look." He felt that same desperation clawing its way back in. "I've always had strong feelings for Josh; now they're stronger than I ever thought."

"Yeah, I know about all this blood brother crap, but—"

"I love him." The words flew out without any contemplation.

Toni sat up. He watched her stiffen in her seat, her eyes wide.

"Not like that. It's not what you're thinking. Josh is the only family I have. He's my brother, my partner in business. I love him. The three of us together... I don't plan on making love to him, if that's what you're asking. I'd like to save that for you," he whispered. "Please tell me you get what it is I'm trying to say?" He leaned on his hands. For the first time since his arrival, he felt the frustration mounting. "This isn't your typical situation." He sighed.

"No it isn't, but I knew that going in."

Her hand was on his back. Her touch was resurrecting something inside of him. Everything that had been dormant since she left was coming back to life. He couldn't take it. He'd said it all. There was nothing else left. He faced her, taking her hands in his.

"You need to do what's best for you. I love you, Toni. God knows Josh does too. That guy is up there, probably shoveling shit as we speak, not knowing what's going on. I've done all I can do. I would love to have you pack your bags and come back with me. I would love to be the one to bring you back for Josh. I want to do that for him. But you have to decide. We can sit here and tear it apart for days. The bottom line is, you have to decide." Cole swallowed, his heart on the table again.

"Can you get past my mistake? That's the question you have to answer. I can't make you do anything. If the answer's yes, then we're yours forever. If it's just Josh you want, then go get that man, put him out of his misery. I'll sell my land, and you'll never see me again."

Her eyes glistened. He didn't want to hurt her, but there was no more terrain to go over. He leaned over, taking her face in his hands. Cole rested his lips on her, feeling her softness and tasting her one more time. He felt the electricity, the sparks igniting. He pulled away. A warm breeze moved between them, the sun streaking across her face. "I want to thank you."

"Why? For what?" Her lips twisted.

"For letting me say my piece and not kicking my ass."

"I already did that." Her tone was flat.

"Yes, you did, and I deserved it, but what I meant was that being here with you hasn't been all bad. But there really isn't much else for us to say." He stood. He ran his fingers through her hair. "Just do me a favor, if you can stomach it."

She lifted her eyes to his, the tears lining her lower lids.

"Call Josh. Don't keep punishing him for my mistake."

She nodded. "I will."

"Good-bye, Toni. I do love you."

It was the hardest thing he had ever done, with the exception of walking away from his parents' caskets as they were being lowered into the ground. It was another death, he thought.

* * *

"I think you already have your answer." Dawn paced around the room. "I mean...look at you!"

Toni wiped her tear-streaked face. She felt sick. She fell back on the bed, staring up at the ceiling.

"I can't make Josh choose." She held her stomach, pain gnawing through.

"Then it's up to you."

Chapter Thirty-four

The sound of a diesel engine pulled Josh to the window. He threw the dish towel on the counter and bolted out on the porch. He waited for Cole to park the truck in the barn. Cole walked across the yard, his duffel bag slung over his shoulder. Josh tried to read his face. He had been living with a terminal wound, feeling the pain every day. It was an absolute anguish that never faded.

"What's the word?" Josh's body was wired. He hadn't eaten or slept since Cole left.

Cole climbed the porch, his tone one of defeat. "Let's go inside."

Josh followed him in, almost looking down the driveway, thinking Toni's SUV would magically appear. Cole dropped his duffel near the door. Josh watched him rummage through the cabinets.

"You told me to get rid of the whisky, remember?"

"Fuck." He leaned over the sink, his head lowered.

If Cole was looking for a drink, then things hadn't gone well with Toni.

"There's beer, though." He moved past Cole and pulled the six-pack out of the fridge. Cole dropped in his seat. Josh handed him a beer, popping the cap of another for himself. He waited, not wanting to bombard him. Cole looked tapped out. Cole drank from the bottle, his throat working quickly. He set the bottle down, wiping his mouth.

"I did everything I could. It's up to her now. And if you want to leave, I told her I'd let you go for her."

Josh couldn't speak for a moment. "What did she say?"

"The first night, I told her everything. I spilled my guts, but I know she's worth it. This morning we went to the park." He took another gulp of beer, his eyes watery. "She asked about...the time I kissed you while we were together. Did she ever ask you about it?"

"I talked to her about it, right after it happened." Josh turned his attention to the kitchen table. "She said it sort of turned her on."

"We talked about that too. I tried, I really did."

"I know you did. And just for the record, I'm not fucking leaving."

"I told her to come and get you."

"I'm not fucking leaving." His heart was breaking. Cole had done what he said he was going to do. He had gone after her. He didn't think there was anything more

they could do, aside from him leaving, and that wasn't an option. He had worked way too hard to build a life here. He loved Toni. He wanted to be with her, but life in the city away from Cole wouldn't work either. He leaned on the table, his head pounding.

"Well, it has ended the way it began." Josh chugged his beer, the bitter ale burning his throat.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Cole's face hung with exhaustion.

"Remember the night Toni arrived? We were sitting right here, in this very same spot, talking about her."

"Why aren't you, like, beating the shit out of me?"

"Won't solve anything. We gotta just try to get past it."

Cole made an incredulous sound.

"We're not sinking into some dark hole." Josh felt his body tense. "It's not happening." He set his beer bottle in the sink and left the kitchen. He was angry but not at any one person. He was angered by the lack of resolve over things. He believed Cole did his best. If Josh was going to stay, then he had to believe that. It was done now.

Tomorrow was a new day.

Chapter Thirty-five

Toni turned off the ignition. The SUV slowly rolled to a stop on the front lawn of the cottage. The main house was dark. She stepped out of the car and closed the door quietly. The key she left under the mat on the porch was gone. The chilled night air washed over her as she made her way over to the barn.

She slid the door open, quietly talking to Macy, not wanting to spook her into a frenzy. Her wide, glossy eyes followed her. Toni pulled several bales of hay over next to the stall and reached up to the shelf to get Macy's saddle blanket.

"Hi, girl." Toni reached over the latched door, stroking her warm, smooth nose. She felt Macy's nostrils flaring, pulling in her scent. She leaned into her, kissing her neck. It was two a.m. Toni was going to stay in Montclair another day, but while she was lying in bed at the hotel, something had shifted. Everything seemed to click. Her feelings and her forgiveness for Cole had meshed, giving her an answer with a sense of permanence.

As she drove up the interstate watching the city lights recede behind her, she felt light inside, excited to start her new life. Her father had used the farm as a way to hide and disappear. Though it had met his needs, her return held an entirely different meaning. What had been the end for her father would be a new beginning for her.

She reclined her tired body across the bales, covering herself up, the wool scratchy under her chin. Toni breathed in the scent of hay and grain, smiling as she drifted off to sleep.

* * *

Josh couldn't sleep. It had been that way since Toni had left. His energy was beginning to wane. Day after day, more life drained out of him, his body left to struggle through an emotional muck he didn't think would be leaving anytime soon. He had to snap out of it. He didn't want Cole to succumb to it, knowing the power it would have over him. He'd come so far. He wanted Cole to hang on to the gains he had made, though Toni had not been one of them.

He stood over the kitchen sink, reaching for a glass. He leaned into the window, seeing a shadow on the front yard of the cottage. His eyes sprang open. He dropped the glass into the sink and darted to the front door.

Toni's SUV was parked carelessly on the grass. His stomach dipped, a fine line between excitement and sickness. He crept upstairs and pulled on his jeans and a T-shirt. Carrying his boots, he tiptoed down to Cole's room. He could hear his light

breathing, his back to the door. The moonlight fought to push through the patched window.

In the kitchen, he pulled on his boots. The clock over the sink read almost three o'clock. When had she gotten here? It was the middle of the night.

* * *

She awoke to the barn doors sliding on their runners. A stream of cool air blew into her face. She shifted her legs, her back stiff. When she opened her eyes, Josh's shadowed body was kneeling next to her. His eyes glowed through the darkness, drinking her in.

"This better not be a dream." He combed her hair with his fingers, his words a raspy whisper. He plucked bits of hay out of the strands. "I'm so sorry. Nothing went the way I wanted it to."

"There's nothing for you to be sorry about." She pulled him onto her, his warm, sturdy body climbing on hers. She held his face in her hands, wanting to fall into his deep blue eyes, a place she never wanted to leave. His mouth met hers. Their bodies sealed together, a familiar, welcoming fit. His lips pressed lightly at first. The heat began to mount. Her tongue reached for his, her palate craving his taste. He groaned against her, his arms tightening. Toni moved her hands over him, his body golden and sleek with muscle. Her mouth dried, despite the refreshment of his kiss. Josh pulled away, his breathing jagged.

"Please tell me you're staying." His voice hoarsened.

"I know you both love me." She kissed the tip of his nose. "I know now I belong here." She smiled, her eyes tearing. He buried his face into her neck. She could feel the inner workings of his heart thumping rapidly against her chest. His muffled words settled on her skin. She pulled away, meeting his eyes.

"What?"

"Wait till Cole sees you. It's good I know CPR."

"How is he?" she asked hesitantly as Josh slid off her and helped her to sit up. Toni dusted off her jeans.

"Drained. I think he was hoping to bring you home himself, but hey—it's all over." He shook his head. "You're here now. That's all that matters." He lifted her hand to his lips, kissing the tops of her fingers. "When did you get here?"

"It was late."

"You shouldn't be driving those highways this time of night."

"Well...it was the last time." She smiled brightly.

Josh led her out of the barn and closed things up quietly. He took her hand. They walked across the yard and climbed the front porch. The house draped in darkness took her back to her first night here. Her life had been so small. She possessed only a few things. A decent career and an enjoyable hobby couldn't take one through one's entire life. Love certainly did reign over all.

“Should we go get our other guy? I bet his bed’s nice and toasty warm.” Josh faced her, stroking her cheek.

“Damn right.” Toni tugged his hand toward the stairwell. “I’ll lead the way.”

Cole’s door was ajar. Josh pushed it open, waving Toni in first. Toni toed off her shoes, leaving them near the nightstand. She sat on the bed, seeing the evidence of Cole’s meltdown. Cole’s back was to her, the sheet twisted around his waist. She touched his back. The warmth of his skin seeped into her, her blood rushing with new life, flowing to all her responsive parts. Her fingers gently glided down the skin of his back. She could feel his strength, his firm flesh smooth and tight. Josh knelt on the floor, his brows raised. Toni caressed Cole, her body waking up, battling a need to feel their bodies against hers. She wanted their touch, their taste.

She felt Cole’s breath catch, his ribs still under her palm. He spun around in his bed, his face creased. His eyes narrowed. His fingers dug at his eyes, as if to erase an image he might have thought was a dream. Toni touched his mouth with her finger.

“Have I ever told you that I love your mouth?” she whispered, soaking up the expressions as they moved across his face. Cole took her hand, his face slack.

“Toni, my God.” He pulled back, shaking himself from sleep. She felt him assessing her, trying to answer all the questions that were probably barreling through his head. Josh’s hand was on his leg, the thin sheet between them.

“You brought her back, man.”

Cole sat up, leaning against the headboard. He took her hands, gently pulling her into him. Her head rested on his chest, his skin holding the warmth of his bed.

“Thank fucking God.” He lowered his face into her hair. His long arms wrapped around her.

Cole gently pulled her up onto the bed. His hands gripped her head. She felt the urgency surge through him. His lips took hers. His mouth was hot and hard. The feel of his tongue sliding across her lower lip made her body melt into a reckless pool, flooding the bed. His hands knotted in her hair, gently tugging. He pulled back, his breathing rough.

“You realize now that you’re here, you’re staying.”

“Oh yes. This is it.”

“Fucking right, it is. You’re not allowed to leave a second time.” Cole’s fingers held her chin.

“That’s the furthest thing from my mind. And uh—not how I envisioned this reunion. Are we done talking for now?” Her chest tightened as her voice dropped to a husky purr. Two sets of wide eyes gleamed, their hands already roaming.

Cole’s face nuzzled into her breasts. Toni felt Josh’s weight mount the bed. His hands slipped underneath the hem of her shirt, his touch slow and methodical. Josh gently assisted her with her clothes, then quickly peeled off his own. He slipped between the sheets, leaning against the headboard, beckoning her. Her belly filled,

the heat shooting through her limbs. She climbed on top of Josh, his cock smooth, resting against his navel. He handed her the condom, giving her the honors. She stroked his sleek skin, his eyes never leaving hers. Cole knelt near her, freeing his legs from his boxers. His hands smoothed over her body, his mouth sucking and nibbling the tender skin of her neck. His mouth found her ear, the scent of him calming her.

“Tell me what you want.”

“I love everything that comes from you.” She gasped. Cole’s head lowered. His tongue laved her nipple before he took her into his mouth. Josh’s fingers slid into her moistened folds, stroking her clit lightly. Toni couldn’t stand the anticipation, needing to feel Josh inside her, her body aching with withdrawal. She moved over his body, her hand taking his cock. She lowered her hips, his rising to meet hers, thrusting. Cole moved on the bed, reaching into the drawer of the nightstand. Seeing the small bottle of lube and condoms in his hand made her twitch with anticipation.

“Oh God.” Josh’s neck arched back. His hands gripped her hips, their bodies grinding. Cole’s mouth moved over her skin, his kisses like warm, spring rain. His calloused palm glided up and down her back, his teeth nipping at her flesh, sending a searing tingle to her toes. His finger slipped into the seam of her ass. Her body levitated off the bed; the realization of it all had her soaring to new heights. Josh’s cock eased in and out of her, a delicate ebb and flow. Toni leaned over him, taking his gaping mouth with hers, their tongues mingling and tasting.

The warmth of Cole’s body covered hers from behind, his cock grazing her ass. He teased her lightly, his fingers cool and slick, prodding and wanting. Her body rested on Josh’s, his chest firm. Toni arched, meeting Cole from behind, the pieces all fitting. His hands slid around her waist, his cock slowly sliding inside her with exquisite ease. She was ripping apart at the seams. She was full of them, her body adapting for both. Their bodies all moved, their rhythm having already been mastered. Josh’s thick cock filled her pussy, equally balanced by the thin sleekness of Cole’s buried inside her from behind.

Their personal musk enveloped her as their hands made light passes over her body. Josh and Cole’s hands touched, their fingers braiding together around her. Toni felt the swell of pleasure building, then crashing over her. Josh’s body contorted below hers, his eyes rolling closed. His cock pulsated inside her, his internal heat now becoming hers. Cole’s fingers dug into her, his groin pressing up as if to seal them all together. His corded thighs tensed behind her. His breath blew into her back. A deep groan filled the quiet air, his jumbled words informing them he was going to come.

She felt Cole leave her body, not welcoming the empty space. He crawled to her, kissing her temple, his words a musical chorus she thought she’d never hear.

“I love you, Toni Jameson, like no one or nothing else.”

"I love you, both of you." Her eyes stung. Josh pulled her to his lips, his mouth swollen. Cole's cheek scraped against hers. The smooth face of one, balanced by the rough abrasiveness of the other.

"I love you too, brother." Josh stretched, reaching with his body. Cole's lean body moved across the bed. Toni watched their mouths touch; a quick swipe of Josh's tongue grazed Cole's lower lip.

"Oh yeah," Toni moaned. "I like that," she whispered. "Do that again."

Cole stared at her, his eyes filled with a lust that had boiled over. She laughed, seeing his brow arch in warning, telling her in his unique way he would only take the change in his repertoire so far. Ever the one trying to please her, Josh reached around Cole's neck, pulling him close, their lips joining again. Cole's teeth nipped at Josh's lower lip, making Toni's body scream for them all over again.

They were so different, but she loved them both. A positive and negative had met in the middle, the scale now even, with her balancing out the middle.

* * *

The sun moved up the horizon, painting the upper panes of the window with a dusty purple.

"Someone's gonna have to go do the morning feeding." Josh moaned, stretching.

"I'll go," Toni offered.

"That'd be funny." Cole smiled, his hands and mouth traveling down her body. She rested her head on Josh's chest. Cole was sprawled across the bottom of the bed, his hand and mouth worshipping her during the afterglow. He lifted her leg, his tongue flicking over the skin of her inner thigh. His fingers found her pussy, her breathing quickening.

"Well hey, if I'm staying, I should be helping. I have to figure out what I'm gonna do." Her words were lost to Cole's talented hands and mouth.

"Such as?" Cole's breath tickled her inner thigh, his fingers teasing, making any kind of conversation incoherent.

"I need to get a job." She squirmed.

"You have one already."

His tongue slithered through her pussy, his lips pulling lightly on her clit.

"Oh yeah, love that brilliant mouth." Cole's hands slid down her thighs, spreading her. Josh leaned up on an elbow, watching her relish the pleasure that his friend was providing. Her body was raised again, her orgasm slow and sweet, stretched to the limit.

Cole's hand soothed her, stroking over her belly until the aftershocks subsided, then he nestled in on the other side of her, picking up where they left off.

"You don't need to go get a job."

"She can—if you want to, babe." Josh smiled lazily, brushing the loose hairs away from her face. "There are other farmers that may need some work done. There aren't a lot of accountants in the area. You have a good shot of developing a strong clientele."

"Well, she's got plenty of time to work it all out; there's no rush," Cole told them.

"She is still in the room and will make up her own mind." Toni shook her head. Josh laughed.

Cole responded with an eye roll. "I should get out there, before we suffer a stampede."

"I'll go with you." Toni sat up, her body languid.

"We'll all go." Josh leaned in for a quick kiss. "Then I say we come back to bed and make out." He grinned. Cole wagged his brows. Toni laughed as the three of them hunted for their clothes.

"Hey, can I ask you guys something?" Toni watched them dress, mourning the loss of bare flesh as it left her eyes. "Why don't you have any chickens?"

Josh laughed, jutting his chin, looking to Cole for an answer.

"You ever try cleaning chicken shit out of the soles of your work boots?"

Josh nodded. "Ah, yeah—chickens produce the worst of all animal waste."

"Okay." Toni laughed. "I had a feeling there'd be a good reason."

They finished dressing, a new day brightening before them. Cole took Toni's hand, steering her body to face him.

"If you want chickens, we'll get them." His lips curved. "Anything you want, everything." His eyes were sleepy, but there was contentment in them. The tense lines that once traced his face were gone. He possessed a sense of peace she could see and feel. It was radiating all around him.

"I got everything I want right here," she whispered.

Cole took her into his arms, his newfound strength solid. Josh held her from behind, his embrace just as strong, just as safe. Their love had sewn them together, the seams now strong.

The softness of Josh's cheek glided against hers from behind, his lips capturing the corner of her mouth. Cole's mouth met theirs. She closed her eyes, feeling the smooth strokes of their tongues, drinking in their individual tastes as they blended in her mouth, knowing they both belonged to her from this moment on.

THE END

Loose Id Titles by JC Szot

Braided Desire

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JC Szot was born in Morristown, NJ. She grew up in the quiet town of Long Valley, NJ. She now lives in Upper Mount Bethel, PA with her husband Mike. JC has tried to escape her imagination for years. Giving in was the best move she ever made.

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