## --ONE—

**On the way home from the closing that morning at the title company, I sat in the back of my cousin Joan Flynn's convertible Saab and grinned at a term I'd learned in law school. "A frolic and detour," I announced as Joan turned up the quarter-mile lane leading to the Wisconsin farmette which she and I and a friend had just purchased. Astride a small hill, the two-story, hundred-year-old house sparkled in the April sun and presided regally over the surrounding property. With two barns, two cement silos, and a white-fenced paddock, these forty acres had been advertised as a "gentlemen's farm," but we--the City Girls, as our new neighbors would soon dub us--were decidedly not gentlemen.**

**The car's top was down, Joan's pedal was to the metal, and my curly hair was frazzled. I felt giddy, as free from responsibility as I'd ever been. I was definitely on a detour, straying from the straight and narrow for a year's sabbatical from my partnership at Austin, Winston & Platt, a large Chicago law firm.**

**"To retirement!" I shouted. In the front seat, our friend Michelle Strong tossed her salt-and-pepper ponytail. Like the artist she wanted to be, she was dressed in black jeans and a long-sleeved black jersey top, but she wore a silk lavender scarf that streamed dramatically in the wind, and her black sneakers were tied with lavender laces. At Joan's urging, Michelle had taken the early retirement package offered when her advertising agency serendipitously downsized. She was dressed for the frolic, but I knew that for Michelle, our hilltop farm was a destination.**

**“Free!” Joan yelled back at me, although technically she still had a city job.**

**"Free!" I echoed.**

**Turning fifty had not been easy for me. I'd given myself a large but lonely birthday dinner party at the University Club, full of celebration for all the things in my life for which I was supposed to be grateful, and when it was over, my next fifty years loomed empty. I knew my friends would retreat, with age, into the arms of spouses and sons and daughters. Single women like myself, never married, no children, without brothers and sisters, even--what happened to people like us?**

**Joan had called the day after my party to thank me, and, without prompting or warning, had sprung this idea on me. Just a few months ago, Joan said, she'd stumbled upon a fabulous farmette while driving home from a client’s. She'd been charmed by the possibilities, but was uncertain that she could afford it by herself. At my birthday bash, it had hit her: we could retire together!**

**I love my cousin. She has grand ideas and a make-it-happen way of standing up to the world. Childless, Joan has been divorced for some time. Like me, she was an only child. I could see that her idea could save me from myself; in fact, it could save us both. We would be like the reclusive spinster sisters who'd lived down the block from us when I was a kid. Then, I'd wanted a sister very badly, and had thought that if I got one, I'd never leave her. But as soon as I remembered those two dependent sisters, whom I'd never, ever, seen apart, I felt confined.**

**"What about Michelle?" I'd asked. Michelle, recently divorced, was also alone. The three of us had known each other our entire professional lives. Joan**

**readily expanded her concept. Cousins or not, we were all, Joan said, like family—probably better than family.**

**That week, Joan treated Michelle and me to tapas while we worked out the details of her plan. Joan predicted--crassly, but correctly, as it turned out--that in the next few months Michelle would be sent to pasture. Joan calculated that with her severance and whatever alimony she was getting, Michelle could easily swing retirement expenses, if they were shared. Of course, Joan had said, with just the slightest touch of financial envy and cousinly competition, "Lee is too old and too rich to be going to the office on Saturday mornings." I had to agree. I was tired of the frenzied pace of complex commercial litigation, and felt keenly that the opportunity to do something different was now-or-never. A devoted mystery fan, I longed to try writing one of my own. What was I waiting for? I'd saved more money than I ever expected to need—my condo was paid off, my pension fully vested, and my stocks in sync with the market. I didn't have a boyfriend. I was tired of being alone, fending for myself. If this worked out, I thought, I might not go back to the city or to the practice of law; I could retire right away, with my friends.**

**Joan, a management consultant who owned her own firm, couldn't quite afford to quit altogether, but she said she planned to raise her billing rates and cut back on her engagements. Eventually, she said, she wanted to maybe start a new business, like breeding horses.**

**Joan turned from the lane up the drive. "Oh, look at my silo!" I said. At the edge of the paddock, next to the stubby milk-house which was attached, in turn, to the long cattle barn, the weathered white silo towered about three stories and**

**sported a dark asphalt shingle cap. With the sun casting only the slightest shadow on the milk-house side, I thought it looked majestic, like a lighthouse from the coast of Maine. "Joan, this is the best consulting job you've ever done!"**

**"*Your* silo?" Joan stopped the car opposite the walk on the side of the house.**

**"It's going to be my writing studio, remember? My *raison d'être* for the sabbatical."**

**"Studio? I didn't think you were serious." Joan opened her door. She was about as tall as the car. "It's not a bad idea, but it would have to be heated, and plumbed, and God knows how much that would cost."**

**"But it was the only reason I wanted to do this," I said, an obvious exaggeration. "I'll pay for it myself."**

**With a wave of her perfectly manicured hand, Joan said, "We've already agreed that we all have to decide on expenditures for the house. It will be simpler should we ever have to split up."**

**Joan and Michelle got out of the car. I hesitated. Joan's summary dismissal of my studio alarmed me. She'd never said "no" to any of Michelle's or my fantasies during the many hours the three of us had spent talking through our plans for the farmette, but as soon as my cousin mentioned splitting up, the lawyer in me regretted that I'd not made us put our arrangements in writing. I'd convinced myself that our relationships were far better glue than any paper documents, and besides, I was trying to act like less of a lawyer in my personal life and to become more trusting, more go-with-the-flow, more like Michelle.**

**My first instinct had probably been right: After the honeymoon, three professional, opinionated women in their fifties probably were not going to see eye-to-eye on what a country estate should look like. Already, Joan, whom I so admired for her spunk, was being pig-headed. I had the slightly disappointed feeling I sometimes had with men, the morning after.**

**"Come on." Michelle flipped down the front seat. Michelle had been married more than twenty years. Five years before, when her only daughter went off to college, her ex-husband, a well-respected voice-over artist, regressed. He followed a new girlfriend to California and partied like a teenager. She'd let him go with more grace than I would have mustered under the circumstances.**

**With a mother's peace-making humor, Michelle said, "Come, Lee, I'll help you beat up on her later. Let me carry you over the threshold."**

**I smiled reluctantly and got out. Joan was nine months my senior and had beaten me to every punch all the time we were growing up. It probably wasn't true, but I'd always felt my own mother's excitement at my milestones was tempered by the fact that cousin Joan had "done that" first. Now, I was surprised by how much I still resented following in Joan's footsteps, even as I latched on to her inspiration about the farmette. I consoled myself that at a certain age, one should no longer want to be "first"—first to sag, limp, leak, forget. Eventually, we might have to read to each other, repeat the TV, button each other's buttons, zip each other's zippers. She was my cousin, and I did love her. We would be each other's family. We would grow old together, responsible for each other. I would not be alone. The three of us would work things out.**

**Joan turned the key in the door. Michelle and I waited behind her as she fiddled with the old lock. At the closing, the previous owner had handed Joan his one and only set of keys. Apparently, people in Wordsworth, on the south side of Batchelor Lake, the side without the mansions, didn't lock their neighbors out. Waiting to be let into my own house, I felt a little dispossessed, so much of my future in my cousin's hands. With a jerk, the side door--the only one anyone ever used—opened.**

**Stark naked, the empty house did not look to me like the house we'd bought. To the left of the side-door foyer, the living room was filled by an expansive Southern view from two big picture windows, one on either side of the unused, center door. Sunshine poured in, illuminating a slight haze, but pine paneling and worn mustard carpeting darkened the room. The real estate agent had said something about the pine being salvaged from an abandoned hunting lodge. Seeing it bare, without the camouflage of furniture and wall hangings, I thought it was too bad it hadn't been on a ship, where it could have—should have-- sunk.**

**To the right of the side entrance was my favorite part of the house, a more recent addition, a sprawling combination family and dining room, floored with a modern, easy-to-care-for imitation oak that could almost pass for the real thing. Off this great room, the kitchen was big and airy, and from it, sliding doors opened to a redwood patio on the west side of the house. Between the family room and the kitchen, rear stairs led to two small bedrooms, adequate for guests.**

**I stood for a while, staring out the window over the stainless double kitchen sink. I couldn't remember where the north lot line was. Stretching her arm out,**

**Joan pointed to a thick woods several football fields away. Behind the house, a couple of stately oaks not yet awake graced a gently sloping lawn. At the bottom of the slope, separated by a vine-encrusted wire fence, twenty acres of rough dirt were pockmarked with gray-brown spots.**

**I'd remembered the view differently. I'd pictured black, neatly-tilled fields and endless rows of short blades of spring corn, not the moraine rocks and dried remnants of last year's crop which now littered my--our--back field. I took a deep breath, the kind I sometimes used to control runaway panic. I forced myself to sound casual.**

**"I can't believe we're doing this." I said to Joan. "What are we doing?"**

**"Moving in," she said. "It's pretty cool."**

**Moving in? I didn't even have keys to my new house! Move in, and then what? Could anything ahead make up for the loss of what I'd left behind? Whose idea was this? Life had been pretty simple at home: I had a decent reputation as a tough litigator, intellectual challenge, financial security, good friends, respect. Every day when I woke up, I knew what to do, what I was expected to do. What was I going to do in Wordsworth?**

**"I guess I could take my suitcase to my room," Michelle said. Her voice was pitched just a little higher than usual. She left the kitchen and went up the front stairs, Joan following her with her own duffel and sleeping bag. I took a second long look at the backfield moon-scape and joined them.**

**We'd purchased some furniture together—it had been relatively easy to agree even on our biggest purchase, a nubby, semicircular family room couch--but it**

**wouldn't be delivered until Monday. Michelle was having her bedroom set delivered from the city as soon as she closed on the sale of her condo. I'd arranged to rent my place to a visiting professor and Joan was keeping her apartment in the city for a while. Later in the week, each of us was supposed to bring up some pots and pans and dishes and other household items according to a detailed plan Joan had carefully worked out.**

**Upstairs, in the front of the house, there were three good-sized bedrooms, two with the same wide-open Southern vista as the living room. Before the closing, Joan had proposed a system for divvying up the rooms. As it turned out, we didn't need her system, each of us had a different first choice. Joan and I took the front rooms, and Michelle the third, looking east to the barns. She said she liked the play of the morning light on the peeling paint on the silos and the corrugated tin of the barn roofs.**

**That night we celebrated at a local fish fry, stuffing ourselves with both potato pancakes and French fries, coleslaw, applesauce and all the fried perch we could eat, certainly more than we should have. Drinks were less than two dollars, and a bottle of wine cost half its price in the city.**

**"I feel like we're in a whole different country," Michelle said.**

**"They think *we* are from a different country," I said. "People are staring at your shoes!" Michelle waved her hand like a starlet to her adoring public. I love Michelle's quirkiness. The idea of changing the color of my shoelaces would never occur to me, and if it did, I would never have the patience to actually do it.**

**“Here’s to us,” Joan said, and raised her glass in toast. I lifted my glass but bit my lip, still a little disappointed about my silo. I wondered if this was how new couples felt on the first day of “happily ever after.” How long would that be? What if we changed? We clinked our glasses and my worries temporarily faded.**

**Full of perch and wine, we went straight home. At night, without furniture or table lamps or drapes on the windows, the house felt too hollow, a little spooky. I suggested a slumber party, and Michelle and Joan readily agreed. The previous owners had left logs in the fireplace in the living room, and I lit them. The fire popped and crackled and cast orange shadows about the room. We stretched our musty sleeping bags in front of it.**

**I stared at the shadows on the white stucco ceiling. I turned on one side and then the other. I could hear Michelle sigh. I couldn’t tell if Joan was awake or not. Finally, I sat up. “Okay, guys. I can’t get to sleep. I feel like it’s Christmas Eve and I’m just too excited.”**

**“Anxious to see what you’re getting?” Michelle said.**

**“Worried as hell that Santa won’t deliver the goods.” Joan said.**

**“He always did. Always. He never let me down.” I was surprised both by my own insistence and by the harshness of Joan’s cynicism. I'd loved Christmas, my mother’s decorated cookies, my father’s outdoor lights.**

**“Not easily pleased?” Michelle asked Joan. “Setting your sights too high?”**

**“Well, let’s just say I wouldn’t rely on Santa in a pinch,” Joan said with a sarcastic upswing to her laugh. “As far as I’m concerned, if you want something done right, you do it yourself.”**

**“Jeez. All I said was I couldn’t sleep,” I said. “I didn’t mean to get into 'true confessions.'”**

**“Plenty of time for that,” Michelle said. “I dare say none of us will have any secrets left by June." She burrowed down in her sleeping bag. "It’s going to be a wonderful adventure, you wait and see. Flexibility, girls, is the key.”**

**“Sleep is the key,” Joan countered. “Good night, all.”**

**As the fire died back, I dozed off, but slept uneasily. The house, originally built in the eighteen nineties, rattled. I wasn’t used to house noises. I also wasn’t used to having other people around. I thought I heard bats in the attic, but was oddly comforted when I realized I didn’t know what bats in the attic would sound like. All three of us woke up early and cranky.**

**I sat up, gathering my sleeping bag around me. I stared down at Joan, who, without her business make-up, looked puffy, ashen and all of her fifty-plus years. I imagined that my curly hair made me look younger than Joan, whose short straight brown hair was lighter--grayer--at the roots. I touched my face, certain that I had not yet developed such deep bags under my eyes.**

**Joan opened a hazel eye. “You look terrible,” were her first words to me.**

**“Thanks,” I said, in mild shock that she had read my thoughts and turned them against me so quickly.**

**“Forgive her Lord, she’s a consultant,” Michelle groaned. “If it’s any consolation, Lee, you don’t look nearly as bad as Joan.”**

**That was some relief, anyway, if not a compliment. My knees cracked as I got up from the floor, and I headed towards the kitchen. “It’s too bad neither of you**

**wants any of my coffee," I said. I was feeling quite proud of myself for remembering to bring instant and a pack of Styrofoam cups. Joan rolled over, but Michelle bounded after me, begging with mock humility for my forgiveness.**

**I boiled water in the microwave, and Joan straggled in and mixed herself a cup. We stood around the built-in breakfast table.**

**"We need chairs," Michelle observed.**

**"Food," I said. "Card table chairs are still in the trunk."**

**"And cream. This stuff is terrible." Joan said.**

**"Ingrate," I said, even though she was right.**

**"Sorry." Joan said. "More importantly, I need to do something about the paddock." She'd bought two horses a couple of weeks earlier, before the closing, and they were being boarded at a local stable. "They're going to bring the horses on Monday."**

**"I didn't know you were going to keep them here," I said, testing her.**

**"Of course you did," Joan said. "I've said all along that's why I wanted this place. The cattle barn's in good shape and has a few adequate stalls. Eventually, I'm going to become a breeder." She looked directly at me, and I could think of no response. Did she really not see the irony in our conversation?**

**With flip, false innocence, I said, "I didn't know you were serious."**

**Joan ignored me and turned to Michelle. "I'm going to the hardware store to buy a scythe and some garden tools. Then you guys can use the car to go grocery shopping if you want." My Accord was still in the city. I'd planned to take the train down to pick it up later in the week. Michelle didn't own one yet.**

**“Let’s shop together,” Michelle said, giving me a hopeful glance. “We’ll all help clear the paddock when we get back.”**

**“Speak for yourself,” I said. I was seething, particularly since I knew I would end up helping. Something had to be done. The paddock was at the end of the lane, the grand entrance to the place, and it was overgrown with seven-foot tall reeds the width of a child’s fat pencil.**

**It was noon by the time we started in. With her new garden scythe, Joan took a whack at a stand of bamboo-like weeds. The blade stuck in the stalks as if they were clay, and she had to bend down to free it. She tried again and the blade stuck again.**

**"You have to swing through it, as in golf," I said.**

**Joan silently handed me the scythe.**

**I've been told I have near-perfect form, so I bent my knees, tucked my chin, and took a little back swing from my left shoulder. “And through the ball,” I said, in the sing-song of a pro. The blade clunked to a dead stop at the base of the stalks.**

**“I can see I’ve been Tom Sawyered,” Michelle said. She grabbed the scythe from me and made three jerky swipes at the weeds, rested, and tried again. “Maybe it’s not sharp,” she said, and took a swing on the grass outside the paddock, slicing it in half with frightening efficiency. She shrugged. “Oh.”**

**Joan had purchased a handsaw, the kind used on small branches. She knelt down and started sawing. Michelle and I watched as she slowly made progress. Three tall weeds fell, and Joan got up, grinning and sweating.**

**I surveyed the paddock. It was at least a hundred and fifty feet long, fifty or sixty wide. "We can't do it that way."**

**"How about we pull them up and then burn them?" Michelle said.**

**Michelle was always one to think outside the box. I put my new garden gloves around four or five of the giant weeds. I yanked but nothing happened. I let go of all but one, and gave it a solid pull. With steady effort, it popped out of the ground. It would be slow work, but I set to pulling them up, one by one. After about ten minutes, I was soaked, and the three of us had cleared a space about ten by ten. Joan went in the house and brought back three beers.**

**We guzzled the beers like fraternity boys and returned to work. In half an hour, we had weeded not even five per cent of the area. We took another beer break. In the next hour, my shoulders began to throb, and Joan stopped three times for cigarettes. Michelle and I only smoked on rare occasions, but today, it looked and smelled good. We sat on the paddock fence, smoking Joan's cigarettes and trying not to inhale too much.**

**I arched my back in a cat stretch. "I don't think we can finish this in one weekend," I said as gently as I could. "Maybe the fire department would come burn it or something."**

**"They don't have a real fire department here," Michelle said. "It's volunteer."**

**"How do you know that?" Joan demanded.**

**"I saw a sign for a pancake breakfast," Michelle said.**

**"We don't have a choice," Joan said and jumped off the fence.**

**Michelle and I looked at each other. It was a pleasant, seventy-degree spring day. In jeans and tee-shirts, I was sweating as if it were August. "Retirement sucks," I said to Michelle.**

**"She did all the legwork on this place. We owe her this one favor," Michelle said. She hopped down.**

**"Are you always so good-natured?" I asked her with some disbelief. "I mean, this is really stupid. We're killing ourselves over horses that I, for one, can't stand."**

**Michelle smiled at me and attacked another weed. We worked in relative silence for another hour. I could feel myself getting redder in the face both with the effort and with a growing resentment over the damn horses, the damn weeds, and Joan's assumption of authority. I looked up at the silo and tried to decide where to put the window in my writing studio.**

**About four in the afternoon, with not more than a sixth of the paddock done, an old blue pick-up roared up the drive. A huge man, perhaps in his late forties, heaved himself out. He wore a dark green tee shirt and blue jeans, and brown leather work boots, covered with dirt. His navy baseball cap said "Brewers." He walked slowly, as if each movement of his giant self required deliberate effort. When he reached the fence, I walked over to him. I was the logical one to do this-- I'd sometimes been appointed to represent an inmate, and I'd been to the Cook County jail a few times. He watched me closely, and I held his gaze and tried to smile politely.**

**"Whatcha doing ladies?" the man bellowed.**

**“Who’s asking?” I said in a friendly enough tone. Even leaning against the fence, the man was a foot taller than I, and seemingly three times as wide. He looked to weigh well over three hundred pounds.**

**“Your neighbor’s asking, that’s who,” he said, and touched his hand to his cap in a gesture that might have been a courtesy or maybe a swipe at an itch. “Pete Ericson,” he said and pointed his chin and his right index finger east, across the fields to a distant red barn.**

**I held out my hand, hoping he wouldn't feel the need for a macho handshake. “Hi, I’m Lee Hilliard. This is Michelle Strong. And that’s Joan Flynn.” He pressed my fingers gently, a man aware of his strength. Joan pulled one more weed and strode towards us. “She’s getting horses on Monday.”**

**“It’s her place, then?”**

**“It’s all of ours,” I said.**

**Pete looked from one to the next. “Some kind of hippie commune? Where are the men?”**

**“No men,” Joan said.**

**Pete raised an eyebrow and the corner of his mouth curled in a wry smile.**

**“Don’t want ’em or did ya lose ’em?” Pete said.**

**“Both,” Joan said, her eyes digging into his. She was even shorter than I, and when Joan drew herself up to go toe to toe with Pete, he dwarfed her and made her swaggering look ridiculous.**

**“She’s a feisty one,” he said to me, the corner of his mouth rising in amusement. Then, bending down to look Joan straight in the eye, he said, “Too bad. Looks like you could have used some help.”**

**Joan scowled and I feared for a moment that she was going to tell Pete to get lost.**

**Michelle stepped forward, loosening her ponytail and combing her fingers through her shoulder-length hair. “We could use a suggestion,” she said, her voice matter-of-fact but soft. “About getting rid of these weeds. We’ve tried….”**

**A big grin crossed Pete’s face. “City Girls." He shook his head. “Take a break, ladies. Wait here.” He lumbered back to his truck, and left. I was too exhausted to react to being called a girl.**

**“We can do this,” Joan said to no one in particular. “We can do this.” She returned to pulling weeds.**

**Michelle and I hopped up on the fence, and shared another of Joan’s cigarettes.**

**It occurred to me we were in trouble. "We don’t know what the heck we’re doing, Michelle. Just yesterday, people paid me because they thought I was an expert. Now look at me.”**

**Before she could respond, a friendly horn beep-beeped behind us. Pete was barreling down the driveway on his John Deere. He stopped it, swung open the paddock gate and lowered the blades on either side of the tractor. He made four passes, two up, two back, and was done. He waved as he retreated back down the**

**driveway. All the weeds were chopped into foot-long lengths, mulched like cornstalks in the fall.**

**I laughed out loud. "Like I said, it's all in the wrist."**

**"Damn." Joan lit a cigarette. "It's going to be a lot harder now to rake them up. He cut them too small."**

**I looked at her in disbelief. Her hands were filthy, and her usually perfect nail polish was badly chipped. Sweat had soaked her thin hair into flat strings. "You're kidding, aren't you? Pete just saved us about a week of work."**

**"I can't leave it like this. It looks terrible. The horses could trip."**

**"Jeez, Joan. It's a field. Horses are out in the fields all day. They're not going to trip."**

**"You don't know a damn thing about horses." She jumped off the fence. She shouldn't have, because that meant I was then talking down to her.**

**"Well, I know idiocy when I see it, and this, my friend, is it. I'm done. I'm not breaking my back so that your stupid horses can pretend they are in frigging Kentucky. I think Pete knows what he's doing." Michelle bit her lip, recoiling against my tirade, but I felt I could talk to Joan that way. After all, she's my cousin. In this case, my idiot cousin.**

**"Do you have to bring the horses home Monday? Could you board them a week or two longer?" Michelle tried again to make the peace.**

**"For god sakes, Michelle," I said, letting my disgust fly in her direction, too. I saw no point in humoring Joan's impatience.**

**"Maybe Pete's got another idea," Michelle said.**

**“He thinks we’re lesbians just because we don't have men with us,” Joan said. She bent down and sifted through the stalks. “A lot of help he’s going to be.”**

**“And because you acted like he was an axe-murderer," I said. I thought we could have explained ourselves a little better. It wouldn't have been so hard for Joan to say that two of us were divorced and one of us never married and that we wanted to escape the city for a while. Surely any person in a town of five thousand would understand the attraction of the space and quiet which Wordsworth offered. “But even so, he’s already been a ton of help!”**

**Despite myself, all day I'd been locking horns with Joan. There was no particular need for me to get into it with her, except that we were supposed to be equal partners. At my law firm, all partners had not been equal, but ranked in discreet increments according to the size of their clients’ bills. I’d had to be constantly on alert to make sure my clients or their billings weren’t being siphoned off in some power play by one or more of my less scrupulous partners. I’d be damned if in my hard-earned sabbatical I was going to cede an inch of my autonomy to my cousin, even for the sake of not being alone in some distant future.**

**Gravel crackled on the driveway. Pete was back, again with a John Deere, but this time with a tiller attached. He made several passes back and forth in the paddock, turning most of the weeds under and preparing the ground the way he would for planting. As if to turn being wrong and bull-headed into being right, Joan gave me a sisterly look that said, “I told you so.” I ignored her and looked up at my silo.**

**Pete turned off the tractor and wiped his brow. Not waiting for an invitation, he said, "I'll take a brandy and Seven-Up now," and started idly towards the house. We followed him.**

**"So you're City Girls, are ya?" Pete sipped his brandy with soda. We had stocked our bar that morning, but we didn't have Seven-Up—too many extra calories. Joan and I drank scotch straight and Michelle preferred white wine.**

**"I grew up in the country," Joan said. "Small town—two hundred people—in southern Indiana. Near horse country."**

**Pete made a face.**

**"You're not a horse person, Pete?" I asked.**

**"No matter," he said. "What are you going to do with them?" he asked, and I understood that he might have more interest if they could be converted to cash, like feeder cattle or hogs.**

**"Show them. Breed them." Joan's eyes sparkled as they did when she was at her most charming.**

**Pete looked out the sliding glass doors off the kitchen and a huge grin crossed his face. It wasn't exactly lewd, but it wasn't innocent either. Whatever he was going to say he must have thought better of.**

**I thought I knew what Pete was thinking, and I laughed. Joan's hobby could mean horses copulating in the fields day and night! All I wanted was a writing studio!**

**Michelle told Pete how I wanted to fix up the silo. He looked at her, took off his hat and scratched his head.**

**“City Girls!” he said to himself. “Want me to shoot the pigeons outta there?”**

**Joan jumped up. “No guns! No guns around the horses.”**

**"What pigeons?" I asked, probably a little late.**

**“Smoke. We could try smoking them out.” Pete said.**

**“Oh, Lord,” Michelle said.**

**“No fires,” Joan said, and sunk back down in her chair.**

**“Unless we need a fire to clear a paddock for the frigging horses!” I couldn't believe how everything was beginning to revolve around her stupid animals. I slammed back the rest of my drink and got up to get another. Joan had the nerve to pass me her empty glass. I grabbed it, refilled it and, remembering my manners, offered Pete another one.**

**“It’s a big place you got here,” Pete said, apparently oblivious to the tension between Joan and me. He pointed to Michelle. “I know it like I know my own farm. So, if you girls need something, you call me first, okay?” He declined the drink and got up. “This is the country, girls, and that's how we do things. You call if you need help or advice. You could hurt yourselves trying to do everything alone."**

**The three of us walked with him to the driveway. "One more thing," he said. "You're going to need some sturdier chairs."**