

Jodie's Choice

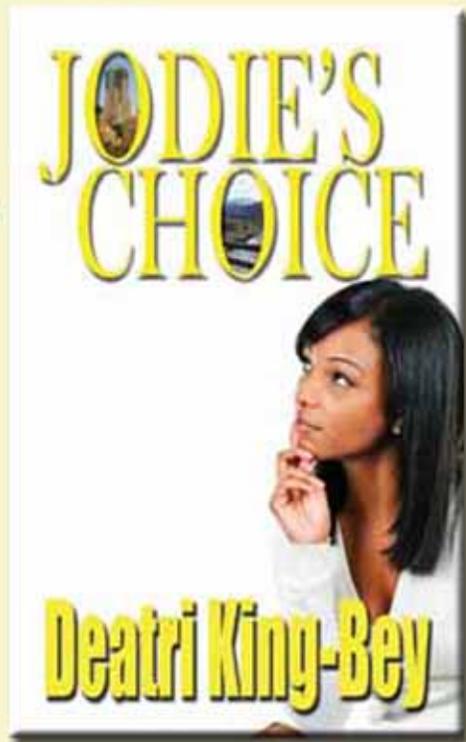
Dr. Ashton Tolliver has known Linda Shell his entire life, so knows she doesn't have children. When Linda is in a car accident and pleads with Ashton to go to her farm and watch after her daughter, he is sure he is about to make the trip to see a beloved pet. The beautiful, vivacious woman who answers the door is definitely not a pet. Ashton sets out to save Jodie, but soon finds he is fighting against love.

Jodie has never left her family farm, never heard of print media or many of the technologies of the modern society, and never knew love until Ashton Tolliver came her way.

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Chapter One

Linda reached up from the hospital bed and grasped Ashton's hand. "You have to believe me," she said weakly.

"I want to, but..." What she'd just told him was impossible.

He'd known Linda since he could remember, been her gynecologist for five years and knew there was no way she could have children, yet here she lay telling him she had a daughter, and that was only the beginning of the impossibility. This daughter knew little of the "outside" world. Born and raised on a farm, she had little contact with outsiders, their technology or "evil ways" as Linda had put it.

“This is all too crazy.”

“She’s expecting me home tonight. If she doesn’t hear from me, she may try to find me. You must go to her. Please, just indulge this crazy woman.”

Even if this daughter turned out to be the beloved cat of a lonely woman, he had promised his mother to keep an eye on her reclusive friend. “I’ll go.”

Tears fell from Linda’s eyes. “Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

Jealous of a horse. Jodie watched her chocolate with white speckles Appaloosa, Bonnie, lazily exit the barn, walk toward the pasture, then begin to graze. Clyde, her cream Appaloosa with jet black spots, followed a few moments later. Once close to Bonnie, he nuzzled her neck with his nose.

Jealous of a horse.

She pushed thoughts of having someone who loved her as a man loved a woman out of her mind. Love was not an option for her. Her only option was caring for her mother. She went into the house to prepare supper. A few hours later dinner was almost done, but her mother hadn’t arrived. She stepped onto the porch and looked into the nothingness of the dark night.

Pacing from one end of the porch to the other, she mumbled, “Where is she?”

Relief washed over Jodie when she saw headlights peek through the trees. She rushed into the house and headed straight for the kitchen to plate their dinner. After being stuck in the city for a week, she knew her mother was more than ready for a good meal and relaxation.

A short while later, knocking at the front screen door caught her attention. “Here I come.” Every time Linda returned from a trip into the city, she had more bags than she could possibly carry.

She swung the door open, but froze at the sight of an incredibly tall, handsome man. Not that she hadn’t seen a man before. She’d seen Dr. Elders and his son, Lionel. Pete, the mail carrier. Then there were the delivery and repairmen who came by every so often and Mr. Hawkins who repaired the farm equipment. But none of them could hold a candle to this man.

At a total loss for words, the best she could muster was a hesitant, “You’re not my mom.”

Seemingly just as surprised as Jodie, the handsome stranger took a step back and held his large hands up slightly. “I’m Linda’s friend, Ashton Tolliver. Are you her daughter?”

“You’re Mama’s doctor!” So this was the Dr. Ashton her mother couldn’t say enough about. According to Linda, Ashton was one of the few good people left in the city. He’d grown up on a farm, but didn’t return after he finished college. She looked around him toward his SUV. “Where is she?”

“I’m sorry, but she’s been in a car accident.” He reached for the cell phone on his belt clip.

“Oh my goodness. I knew something was wrong.”

“Try to remain calm. She’ll be all right. She knew you’d be expecting her home tonight so sent me to let you know what happened.” He placed the phone to his ear. “Hello, Miss Linda. I made it.”

A car accident. How many times had Linda told her cars were too dangerous? More times than Jodie cared to count. Yet she still wanted to learn how to drive.

“She wants to speak with you.”

“Thank you.” Anxious to hear her mother’s voice, she took the phone. “Hello, Mama. Are you okay?”

“Did you offer Ashton something to drink?”

She stared at the man before her. Here her mother had been in an accident and injured. Injured so bad that she’d done the unimaginable—invited someone from the outside world into their sanctuary, yet not injured bad enough to give up the slightest bit of control. Knowing Linda, she had sent Ashton to maintain control while she was incapacitated. She stepped to the side and allowed him into the house. “Could we at least start with the subject of your car accident *before* you change the subject? What happened?”

She walked toward the kitchen to burn off some of her frustration. From the few words exchanged, Linda sounded weary. Jodie knew her mother needed her, but the woman was too stubborn to see issues from anyone’s point of view but her own and too afraid of the outside world to see Jodie had grown into a strong woman who could help her battle whatever may come. Past tired of being overprotected and controlled, Jodie didn’t know what to do, but something had to change and change soon.

Ashton followed her into the kitchen and stood to the side with an odd look on his face, like he was studying her. He had to have the deepest, darkest eyes ever. She could easily find herself lost in them. Trapped in his gaze and enjoying being there, she snapped herself out of it.

“Mama, I asked what happened.”

“It’s nothing major. Someone ran a red light and broadsided me. I have to stay here for a few weeks.”

“Weeks!” A few days before Linda had to go into the city, she would always become irritable. Whenever she returned, she complained and fussed about how horrible the outside world was. Jodie just couldn’t imagine her mother staying there for weeks. “Where are you? What are your injuries, and why do you sound so weak?”

“I’m in a place called a hospital.”

“A hos-pi-tal?” Jodie hated that she knew little of the outside world. She and her mother butted heads constantly about expanding Jodie’s horizons, but in the end, Jodie remained trapped by her mother’s fears.

“Yes, injured people stay here until they are well enough to go home.”

“But weeks? This must be serious. What’s wrong?”

“I don’t want to say because it will sound worse than it is.”

“Don’t do this. You’ll have me sick with worry. What’s wrong?”

“It’s not as serious as it will sound.” She drew in and released a long breath. “My hip... it’s broken.”

“Oh no...” Jodie drew her free hand to her face. “I’m so sorry. I’ll call Dr. Elders and arrange for him to—”

“No, you aren’t to come here. Stay there.”

“But, Mama.” She turned away from Ashton so he wouldn’t see the irritation, worry, and pain that must have been on her face. All she had was Dr. Elders and Linda. Now that they were entering their elder years, Jodie worried constantly for them. “You need me,” she said softly.

“No. Have Ashton program this number into your cell phone.”

This was it. Linda had gone too far this time. Jodie had no intentions of following her mother’s wishes. Her mother’s fears of the city were just that—her mother’s fears—and Jodie wouldn’t give in to them. Not this time. Linda would need her. Phone propped between her ear and shoulder, she grabbed the potholders, took the roast and vegetables out of the warmer and set them on the trivets on the center of the table.

“Did you hear me, Jodie?”

“Yes.” She pulled the biscuit tray out of the oven and placed it on the table. She’d already set the plates and glasses of sparkling red grape juice out before her guest had arrived.

“I love you, baby, and miss you, but I don’t want you here. I’m fine. Really. Stay there. I love you.”

“I love you, too.” Love of her mother had kept her trapped. Now love of her mother would free her.

“I’m exhausted, but I couldn’t go to sleep thinking you’d be there worrying about me. I wish you could see I’m well with your own eyes. I just can’t drive. Not in this condition.”

“When you return home, you’re teaching me how to drive. No more excuses.”

“That’s not happening.”

“We’ll see.”

“Promise you won’t come.”

“I promise,” she said with her fingers crossed.

“This time promise without crossing your fingers.”

Jodie couldn’t help but smile. “Who says my fingers were crossed?”

“Umm hmmm. Stay there. What do you think about Ashton?”

“I don’t understand the question.” She loved the way he watched her every move, but she knew her mother couldn’t be asking that. Then there was his voice. The few words he’d spoken sent her pulse racing as it never had before. Between this news of her mother and his presence, it took everything she had to appear calm.

“Don’t mind me. It’s the drugs talking. I’ll see you in a few weeks. Talk to you tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow it is.” She disconnected and handed Ashton the phone. “Thank you very much for everything.” She took her cell phone out of her back pocket and handed it to him. “Please program Mama’s *hopsticle* number in.”

He gazed into her eyes, and she didn’t know what to do. A strange force drew her to him, but she resisted. No wonder her mother had sent him. This strange pull would keep Linda’s daughter under control. She smiled internally—not if Jodie had anything to do with it.

“Hospital,” he slowly corrected.

“Hah-spi-tal,” she repeated and handed over the phone. “Tell me the truth. Will she really be all right? A broken hip sounds serious to me.”

“I know it’s hard, but try not to worry. She’s in pain, but that’s being managed with medications. I don’t see any reason she wouldn’t recover fully. Have you ever been off this farm?”

That voice again, so reassuring, so warming, she believed him. “Dr. Elders lives on the next estate. Sometimes I’ll ride or walk over to visit him.”

He’d changed the subject a little too quickly for her liking. She moved away from him, away from that voice. Knowing Linda, she’d told him not to take her into the city and to distract her if the subject came up. She’d let it go for now, but when he returned to the city, she would return with him.

“Mama says you grew up on a farm.”

“Until I went away to college. My sister lives on a ranch not too far from here.” He went over to the sink and washed his hands. “This smells delicious. I hope the second plate is for me.”

“It most certainly is.” His closeness heated her in ways that boggled her mind. She took her seat at the table to give herself enough distance from him to clear her mind.

“Thank you very much. Don’t worry, after I finish dinner, I’ll be on my way back to the city.” He sat across from her.

“You’re not leaving tonight. It’s too dark. Mama was already in a car accident. I don’t want you getting into one also. You’ll stay here.”

“I don’t think that’s such a good idea.”

“But driving in the dark on unfamiliar ground is a good idea?” She flashed a quick smile.

“Touché.”

“Touché?”

He took the knife from her and began cutting the roast. “That means you got the best of me that time.”

“Oh, I like that.”

Dinner tasted like dinner to her, but watching him enjoy the meal brought a completely new appreciation for roast, potatoes, green beans and carrots. He seemed to experience the meal, savoring every bite. A long conversation, three helpings and four biscuits later, he leaned back in his chair with a satisfied grin on his face.

“That was the best meal I’ve ever had.”

Why it pleased her so well he enjoyed the meal was beyond her and scary. There was just something about him. Something she didn’t want to feel, not for this man her mother sent to control her. But their conversation had flowed so easily. As if they’d known each other for an eternity. “Would you like some peach cobbler?” To distance herself from his pull, she picked up their plates and carried them across the room to the sink.

“I’m stuffed. Maybe later.” He pushed away from the table and joined her at the sink.

This was not working. Every time she tried to move away from him, he was right by her side again. He hadn’t done anything wrong, but having him so close felt too right.

“Let me wash the dishes. It’s the least I can do after that fine meal. You can really cook your tail off.”

She laughed. “My tail off. I like the way you say things.” She dried and put away the dishes as he washed them. “Horace, one of my pigs, hasn’t eaten all day.”

I've put him off to himself just in case he has something. Can you examine him in the morning for me?"

"I'm a gynecologist, not a veterinarian." He handed her a few utensils.

"I thought you were a doctor." She opened the silverware drawer.

"A gynecologist is a doctor who specializes in females."

"So if Horace were a female, you'd care for him?" She began placing the forks and knives into the proper slots.

"Sorry, no animals."

This couldn't be correct. He must have misunderstood. What kind of doctor didn't take care of animals? Especially a doctor who grew up on a farm. "What about female horses?"

"No, horses."

"Dogs, goats, cows, chickens?"

"No, no, no and no," he said with a nervous chuckle in his voice.

"Men, children?"

"No, no."

"Female children?"

"No."

"So you're only a women's doctor?"

"I'm afraid so."

She couldn't imagine city doctors needing to know less than the country doctors. Her mother had said how selfish people were in the city. Maybe no one would teach Ashton what he needed to know to be a real doctor. "Dr. Elders is really nice. If you'd like, I can ask him to give you more training."

A deep rumble laugh escaped him. "Thank you, but that won't be necessary. My practice is doing very well."

So that was it. He was practicing being a doctor. He hadn't finished learning yet.

"Do you ever have visitors? Maybe your neighbors?"

She noted the change of subject. To keep from embarrassing him, she played along. "Dr. Elders comes by to see Mama a few times a week. I used to see his son all the time before he went off to college. Otherwise, no. Not really."

"This is none of my business, and you can feel free to tell me to take a hike, but don't you get lonely?"

"No," she lied, but didn't know why. For some reason she didn't want to admit just how lonely she was. Lonely for companionship. Lonely for someone to love and be loved by. "Mama says people in the city live on top of each other and still don't know each other. It's like they always want someone around, yet don't want to be bothered with anyone. Do you know your neighbors?"

"I guess I don't actually know them. I mean I recognize them, but haven't taken the time to get to know them." He handed her the last plate.

"Everything is fast in the city, isn't it? There's no time for anything." After drying the plate, she set the drying towel and the napkins in the linen basket under the sink.

"I think it's more of a 'we don't take the time.' It all depends on what your priorities are. Besides Dr. Elders, you don't know your neighbors either."

"Touché"

“Very good. You learn quickly.”
“I have a fantastic teacher.”

Ashton watched the seductive sway of Jodie’s hips as he followed her up the stairs, thinking this was a mistake, a huge mistake, yet unable to stop himself. On the ride to the farm, he’d gone through different scenarios in his mind. What if the crazy story Linda had told him were true? He only saw her once a year since he’d graduated. Maybe she’d adopted a child. He had come up with a strategy to woo the timid child out of the house. Convince her he wasn’t there to harm her. Then Jodie swung the door open, and he’d just about been knocked over by her beauty. But there was more than physical attraction at play.

The strong, vibrant woman before him was nowhere near timid, and she was smart as a tack. For a few moments he’d felt incompetent and offended when she had explained he was “only a women’s doctor,” but her genuine concern and offering to ask her country doctor to teach him a thing or two showed him her heart came from the right place.

He entered a bedroom behind her. “This isn’t your room, is it?”

“Yes.” She went into the closet.

He hadn’t seen a television, radio, magazines or newspapers as he’d walked through the house. She literally had little knowledge of the outside world and obviously didn’t understand the danger of having a man in your home. What if this Dr. Elders fellow found out she was home alone? Yes she was grown, but naïve. In a way, Linda had entrusted Jodie in his care. Seeing how they lived, he was honored Linda trusted him enough to confide in him, but he was having trouble trusting himself. Jodie had so many questions, and he wanted to answer them all, including the ones burning in her golden-brown eyes.

“I found it.” Pair of pajama bottoms in hand, she eased out of the closet.

“Why do you have men’s pajamas?”

“I was sent the wrong order. Mama said to just throw it out and reorder, but I couldn’t see throwing the items away, and they are too big for Dr. Elders or Mr. Pete.”

“Mr. Pete?”

“The mailman. He brings the mail in from the P.O. Box about once a month.” She handed him the bottoms. “I actually wear the top.” She returned to the closet.

The attraction he had for Jodie was dangerous. He watched her dig through boxes in the closet, her tail end teased and taunted him. There was nothing sexier than a sexy woman who didn’t know she was sexy. And Jodie was the sexiest he’d ever seen. She was the entire package, brains, beauty and a sense of humor. Dangerous.

“Here it is.” She tapped the box. “Hold the top boxes steady.”

He could do her one better. He stood over her, wrapped his powerful arms around the upper boxes and lifted, allowing her to remove the bottom box.

She pulled the box she wanted out of the closet and moved out of the way. He set the others down.

“I may have to keep you around. Thanks.”

Unsure if she were joking or serious, he didn’t comment. Having her around had possibilities he’d love to explore, but wouldn’t.

“This is the rest of the order. A few jeans, shirts. No underclothes. You can go without tonight, wash yours by hand and throw them in the dryer.”

She talked about his briefs as if she were saying the time of day. Didn't she have any shame? He definitely had to keep her from the city, but he couldn't stay more than a few days.

“Where will I sleep?”

“There are three extra bedrooms on the other end of the hall. I change the linens, dust and vacuum in them every week to keep them fresh. The one on the right is the largest and has a private bathroom.” She handed him the box, then grabbed a pair of sweat clothes out of the closet. “I need to shower. Feel free to roam around. After I'm done, I'll warm up the cobbler.”

She walked into her bathroom and left him standing there. A few seconds later, she began singing, and he heard the shower running. The thought of her undressing had him hard as hell. Linda was right. There were too many dangers in the city Jodie wouldn't be able to imagine. The hardness in his pants called his attention. There were dangers right here she couldn't imagine. How he'd stay away from her until... until when? He couldn't leave her alone and he couldn't take her into the city continued to rumble through his mind.

The bathroom door opened. The yellow of her satin bra and panties played all too well against her sun-kissed skin and wreaked havoc on his already amorous libido.

“You're still here,” she said with a tad bit of shock but without the least hint of embarrassment or fear. “I thought for sure you'd be selecting a room by now.”

His gaze traveled from her mesmerizing eyes, over her sensuous lips along her luscious body and back to her lovely face. “I'm... I mean.”

“Mama thinks city folks are afraid to be by themselves. That's why they live on top of each other and always need noise around them.”

“I'm not afraid to be alone.”

“Then why are you still standing there?” she asked as she approached.

Well, maybe he was afraid to be alone—alone with her. He weaved his fingers through her thick mane of hair and massaged her scalp. Instead of making his life easier and moving away from his touch, she sunk into it. He cupped her face between his hands. “I need you to go back into the bathroom.”

Concern overtook her face. “Are you okay?” She gently laid her hand on his forehead. “You don't have a fever.”

The softness of her touch finished him off. “Please,” he said quietly, “I'm fine.”

Disbelief reflected in her captivating eyes, but she backed away. “I won't be long. I'll come to your room as soon as I'm finished.”

He forced himself to leave her bedroom and the image of removing the remainder of her clothing.

After a freezing shower, he still wanted Jodie in the worst way. On one hand, she was grown, intelligent and available. On the other hand, she was naïve to the ways of the world, and he didn't want to take advantage of her.

“I can't leave her alone and I can't stay,” he repeated. He closed his eyes to clear his mind, but only saw Jodie. In the few hours they had known each other, she'd already commandeered his thoughts. This was crazy.

The ringing of his cell phone startled him. He checked the caller ID. "Thomas, I could use a distraction."

"So how's the cat?"

"Jodie isn't a cat but a grown woman in her lower thirties."

"No way. We've known Linda our whole lives. She doesn't have any children. You're not serious, are you?"

"Dead." He lay on the bed and stared at the ceiling. Jodie would be by soon to continue torturing him. He was only human. How much more was he expected to take? "Everything Linda said is true. Jodie has never left this farm except to venture to the neighboring property, and she's only seen a handful of different people in her life. They don't have a television or any other form of media."

Thomas laughed. "Oh, I know you're ready to kill yourself. No ESPN, MSNBC, CNN... how will you survive? Damn, you can't even turn on a radio."

"Believe me, it's hell in more ways than one. You couldn't pay me to live like this."

"I'll bet. If I came out, do you think she'd speak with me?"

"Stay your butt in Denver," he said to his psychologist cousin. "Next thing you know, you'll want to conduct one of your studies on her."

"I'm wounded. How do you communicate with her?"

Ashton chuckled. "And you say I watch too much television. She wasn't raised by wolves; she was raised by an English speaking woman. Granted, Linda's always been a little paranoid, but she's intelligent, and so is Jodie. Linda's the one you should be talking to."

"I did."

Now that shocked him. Linda could be quite... ornery, and never took to Thomas. "She actually spoke to you?"

"No, but the whole hospital is buzzing with the wild story she told you. I had to try to speak with her. Get into her mind. See what makes her tick."

"Even though you thought I was coming to see a cat?"

"Yep. Linda's intelligent, yet insane. Her mind is simply amazing. But now that she was telling the truth!"

"This is such a mess."

"You got that right. The word spreading around the hospital is Linda's uterus was removed when she was twenty. So who are Jodie's parents? Where did Jodie come from? Linda never brought her by when she'd visit Aunt Lisa's," he said of Ashton's mother, Linda's best friend.

The exact questions he'd been asking himself all evening would be on everyone's tongue shortly. He would venture to guess more gossips roamed the halls of the hospital than the *Enquirer* had readers. Being Linda's doctor, he knew the "word" of her inability to have children was true.

"You listen to too much gossip. Stop before you make matters worse. Haven't you ever heard of HIPAA. You can't go around talking about patients' medical conditions." This time he prayed Linda had adopted Jodie and her paranoia made her hide her away, but every fiber of his being said this prayer wouldn't be answered.

"What are you going to do?"

“Like I said, this is a mess. I can’t take her into the city. I can’t leave her alone. Don’t get me started on who her parents are.”

“Why can’t you leave her alone?”

“She’s too vulnerable. If anyone found out she’s here alone...” He could feel her gentle touch on his forehead, and his manhood jumped to life again. She had no idea what she was doing to him. What if a repairman dropped by or Dr. Elders’ son? “She can’t be left alone.”

“Do you need my help? I can clear my schedule. It may take a day or two.”

“Yeah, right. You’re just trying to figure out a way to interview her. I have a bad feeling about this. The truth about her...” He wasn’t ready to deal with Jodie’s paternity. “I think I’ll ask Cassidy to stay with her. She doesn’t live that far away.” Now that he thought about it, his sister’s ranch would be the perfect place for Jodie to stay for a few weeks. Born and raised on a farm, he’d always hated the great outdoors and couldn’t wait to grow up and move away. His sister was the complete opposite and eventually started a horse ranch. “Or better yet, I’ll send her to Cassidy’s.”

“No. Don’t let her be tainted by the outside world. Have Cassidy go to her.”

“There you go snapping into scientific study mode on me. I have to return to civilization Monday. Whatever works best for Cassidy is the way I’ll go.”

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“Jodie, it’s well past bedtime, what’s wrong?” Dr. Elders answered his phone, voice filled with worry.

“I’m sorry to call so late, it’s just...” Jodie trailed off and leaned back on the porch swing. The air of the crisp spring night stung her nose, but she still loved it. “Mama’s been in a car accident.”

“Oh my God. Where is she?”

The concern in his voice touched Jodie. He was a good man and never hid his feelings for Linda. Often times she wondered who had hurt her mother so greatly that she wouldn’t love anyone fully or allow herself to be fully loved. “She’s at the hospital in the city.”

“Which hospital?”

Brows furrowed, she asked, “There’s more than one? I... I didn’t know to ask.”

“It’s all right, baby. Who contacted you? Did they give you a number?”

She glanced at the front door. “Ashton, I mean Dr. Ashton told me and gave me the number to reach her. I briefly spoke with her, but she was exhausted.” A little voice told her she should have told Dr. Elders that Ashton had delivered the message personally and was still there, but another voice—a louder one—said to keep that tidbit of information to herself for a while.

She gave him the phone number and explained about her mother’s broken hip.

He cursed under his breath and mumbled about putting a stop to this nonsense.

“Try not to worry,” she continued. “She’s healthier than you and I put together. She’ll be fine.” Ashton had said there was no need to worry, so worry was not what she’d do. Yet she still planned on paying her mother a visit. It was

time Linda saw nothing horrible would happen if Jodie ventured into the outside world.

“I’ll tell you what, baby girl. As soon as I get off this phone with you, I’ll phone Lionel and tell him to make his way over here to keep you company while I’m with your mother.”

“Thanks but...” Quite truthfully, she wasn’t in a hurry to end her time with Ashton, and though she had barely heard from Lionel since he’d gone away to college, she wasn’t looking forward to seeing him. He had promised to come back and take her away from the farm, but... She sighed. It hadn’t taken long for his letters to become spaced further and further apart until they just stopped.

“I know you’re upset with the way Lionel acted after he left. Trust me when I say I wasn’t happy with it either and let him know, but he’s changed since he graduated from college. He’s matured and regrets his actions, but he’s also proud and letting his pride get in the way of doing the right thing.”

Maybe Dr. Elders was correct and she was being too hard on Lionel, but she still hurt. No, they weren’t in love, but she did love him. “He used to be a bossy know-it-all, can college teach that out of you? Thank you, but I don’t need anyone else around to tell me what to do. I can take care of myself. Will you talk to Mama again, see if she’ll let me come to the city to be with her?”

“I’ll try, baby, but you know how she is. You know, Lionel has really grown into a fine young man. This time you two have had apart gave you both time to grow up. I’ll have him call and check in on you. This will give you a chance to get to know him again.”

She knew what Dr. Elders was up to. He saw Lionel as her way off the farm. If she married him, she could leave her mother’s. But he had misunderstood the problem. It wasn’t that she wanted to leave the farm. She loved her life except for the fact that she was lonely and wanted to share it. Somehow having Linda and Dr. Elders was just not enough anymore. And it wasn’t that she just wanted a mate. This was deeper. She wanted family and friends. She wanted to visit people and people to visit her.

Never one to hold back her feelings, she’d expressed this sentiments to Linda a countless number of times, but Linda always told her she didn’t know what she was asking and would go into one of her tirades about the outside world.

“He’s really settled down a lot as he’s grown older. All I’m asking is that you speak with him.”

To make Dr. Elders happy, she agreed to speak with Lionel.

“That’s my girl. It’s late and I’m heading out first thing in the morning. I’ll call you from the hospital.”

Ashton stepped onto the porch, and an automatic smile came to her heart, thus face.

“How many days will it take for you to get there?”

“I should be there well before lunchtime.”

“What! But I thought it takes days. I mean... never mind.” She turned her back toward Ashton. With the way he always watched her, he would be sure to see the frustration and pain on her face. Linda had deliberately mislead her to believe the city was days away by car and virtually impossible by horse. “Thank you.” This went beyond a little over exaggeration about how bad it was in the

outside world. If she was flat out lying about this, what else was she lying about, and why the lies?

“Hell, I’ll tell you what. I’ll swing by there in the morning and pick you up. Linda is being completely unreasonable.”

“She’d never forgive you.”

“I love your mother, but this is wrong. I’ve stood by too long...”

She felt Ashton sitting on the swing behind her. She was sure she could convince him to take her into the city. If not, she’d have to find another way that didn’t include Dr. Elders. “I’d never come between you two. She loves you. You go ahead and see her. Drive safely.”

“I’ll talk to her.”

“Goodnight.” Dismayed, she disconnected.

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Jodie continued to sit with her shoulders slouched and her back to Ashton. He had heard enough of the conversation to know he had to do something to help her.

“Did you enjoy your cobbler?” She tried to cover her sadness with cheer, but it didn’t work. He could hear the tears in her voice.

“Immensely.” He wrapped his arms around her and rested his head atop hers. He wanted to protect her, but protection wasn’t what she needed. She needed true freedom. He didn’t know how he’d do it, but he swore Jodie’s life would be what she wanted.

She turned, leaned her head on his chest and cried. He had never felt so powerful yet inept at the same time. He just wanted to keep her in the safety of his arms and never let her go, but that was her problem. Linda had taken over-protectiveness to an insane level, and the few people who knew of Jodie’s situation did nothing to help her. He had to be willing to let her go.

“It’s all right,” he said softly as he rocked her. “It’s all right,” he repeated, never wanting to let her go.

END SAMPLE

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Jodie’s Choice made it into [USA Today!!!](#)