



Nanny

FOR
THE

GRUMP

KATE LOVELACE

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By Kate Lovelace

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Epilogue

Also by Kate Lovelace

Fireman's Secret Baby.

ANA

New Harmony, Indiana.

Even the name of the town sounds like a place I wouldn't fit in. It's too perfect, too idyllic—like something out of a feel-good television romance. And my life has been anything but. The last few years have been nothing short of a disaster.

But, even if I don't belong in a place that resembles the cover of an old-time Christmas card, here I am.

Drumming my fingers on the steering wheel, I glance up at the diner in front of me and bite down on my lower lip. The small establishment looks like a family-run place with a simple painted sign that reads "Millie's Café and Diner."

This town could be the perfect place to hide out for a while—to get my bearings while I escape my past. Maybe this is a place where I can finally feel safe and protected. It could be my refuge in a world that's far too cruel.

Stepping out of my car and into the warmth of the sun, I prepare to make my arrival in New Harmony known. A burst of chilly air hits my face as I swing open the door and enter the diner. Everyone in the tiny restaurant turns to gawk at me like I pulled a needle across a record.

I glance down at my clothes. I don't think I'm dressed so out of character. But, when I scan the room and realize most of the patrons are old men wearing bibbed overalls, it makes sense.

Walking up to the counter, I pull out one of the wooden stools and take a seat. The middle-aged waitress glances at me, and I see her weathered face crinkle into a sour expression. I can't tell if she's disgusted or confused.

She wipes her hands on her white apron and puts on a smile as she comes to the counter, pulling a pencil and a piece of paper out of her pocket.

“What can I get for you?” she asks, eyeing me.

I'm hungry—being on the road for hours will do that. But, knowing I only have a little change left in my purse, I remind myself I have to be frugal. I sit up straight on my stool.

“A cup of coffee, please,” I say, forcing a smile. At least the caffeine will help keep me awake.

Nodding, she tucks the small notepad back in her apron pocket and snaps her fingers. As I sit, waiting for her to get me my drink, I let my eyes wander around the small restaurant, taking in the scene. Old pictures cover several of the walls in what appears to be the opening of the diner back in nineteen fifty-four.

“Here you go,” the waitress announces, signaling her return.

She puts the hot cup of coffee down in front of me, along with a spoon.

“You're not from around here, are you?” she asks.

This time, her smile is a little more genuine, as if she sees I'm not a threat.

Trying not to laugh at her comment, I shake my head and reach for a packet of sugar. In spite of my cynicism, I've got a positive feeling about this place.

“No. I'm not,” I confess, looking up at her. “I've been traveling, but I'm hoping to find a place to put down some roots. Do you happen to know of anyone looking to hire? I could really use a job.”

The waitress's face lights up as she sees an opportunity to make a new friend. I wasn't trying to make small talk, and yet

it seems this is exactly the thing she was hoping to hear from me. She sticks out her hand and gives me a smile that stretches across her tanned features, her dirty-blonde and gray ponytail bouncing up and down as she nods.

“It’s my pleasure to welcome you to our community,” she declares, reaching for my hand, and giving it a firm shake. “I’m Jenny. Jenny Ockerman. And you are?”

I pull in a breath and tense my shoulders, shifting my weight on my seat. I know I can’t hide my identity forever, and yet the better part of me wants to play it safe. There’s something about keeping my real name private that makes me feel safe, like no one can find me if I keep that part of myself secret.

“I’m Ana... Ana Green,” I say with a tentative smile. My last name is not Green, but I need to remain as anonymous as possible. Plus, my full name, Anastasia Brzezinski, probably wouldn’t fit in with the locals.

“What kind of work are you looking for, Ana Green?” Jenny asks as she puts her hand on one hip.

I shrug my shoulders and throw up a hand as if I don’t care. I really don’t—as long as it’s a job that doesn’t require a photo ID. I’m going to hide behind the last name Green for as long as possible.

Leaning her weight on the counter and standing directly over my cup of coffee, Jenny studies me as if she’s trying to figure out a job that would be suitable for me. Then she straightens and reaches for a damp rag, her mouth scrunching to one side as she thinks. She wipes a dirty spot on the counter and peers back at me—weighing the options.

“How do you do with kids?” she finally asks, tossing the rag aside as if she’s satisfied with her cleaning job.

Kids? At twenty-three years old and growing up an only child, it’s been a long time since I was a kid, and I’ve had nothing to do with them since. I’ve lived my whole life with only myself to worry about, and that’s been quite enough.

“Kids,” I declare, trying to sound positive. I can’t afford to let any job option go. “I love kids.”

Jenny reaches up to brush a strand of loose hair out of her face.

“Well, we’ve got a local rancher, Silas Berne,” she explains. “Sad story... he moved away from town when he was younger, to get married. Then he came back years later with no wife and a kid. He’s not what you would consider a friendly sort of fellow, but he does have money. I think something terrible must have happened to him while he was gone. I mean, he wasn’t so weird when he was younger... now he’s more like an old hermit.”

Jenny drones on and on with her story, filling me in on details I don’t need to hear. At the moment, all I care about is coming up with enough money to buy some food. I don’t need to know the history of the entire town and its residents. But I don’t want to sound rude by interrupting. As soon as she takes a breath, I jump on the opportunity and speak up.

“And this Mr. Berne is looking for help?” I ask, trying to guide the conversation.

Getting to the point, Jenny says, “Yeah. Silas needs someone to help him on his property. He’s been advertising all over town how he wants someone to watch his son and do some work around the place.”

Jenny shrugs her shoulders.

“I guess he’s finally admitting that taking care of his big farm all by himself is too much of a job for one person,” she adds with a snort and then lowers her voice. “He says he needs someone to stay at his house around the clock. Like a live-in nanny, I guess. Or a wife with none of the benefits. Needless to say, it’s not a job very many people want. You know, most girls around here want to have a life outside their work.”

“Hey, Jenny!” one of the men in overalls calls from a booth behind me. “Am I ever going to get some service?”

“Just hold your horses for a minute, Alvin!” Jenny calls out in a stern voice as she throws up a hand. “I’m taking care

of a customer.”

Grabbing for the paper in her pocket, she pulls the notebook back out and tears off a sheet. Hurrying to scribble down some directions.

“Here’s his address, and a little map to get to his place,” she says. “You tell him Jenny from the diner sent you. Just be sure to tell him you’re capable around the house and you love kids.”

She smiles, handing me the paper and giving me a friendly wink.

“Good luck to you, dear,” she says. “I hope you get to make New Harmony your new home. And if Silas doesn’t give you the job right away, one of our waitresses is sick with the flu. You could always fill in here for a couple of days, now that I think of it.”

She starts around the counter to go check on the complaining patron.

As I take the paper and study it, I think about her words. I hope New Harmony can be my home too—at least for a little while.

I drink the last of my coffee in a hurry and pull myself to my feet, heading back out to my land yacht of a car. I slide into the old Chrysler, readjusting my butt against the coil springs of the leather bench seat, and take in a deep breath.

As I close the door, a puff of fresh air fills the cabin with the warm scent of freshly cut grass. I press my head back against the seat and close my eyes. I know everyone in the restaurant is looking out the windows, staring at me, but I don’t care. This is the most amount of interaction I’ve had with a person since I started running a week ago. Maybe Ana Green is exactly who this town needs.

All I know is, I have a chance to rebuild. In a place where no one knows me, I can be whatever and whoever I want.

Collecting myself, I put my keys in the ignition and fire up the rumbly eight-cylinder. I got a room at a clean but primitive-looking motel on the outskirts of town. But that will

be the last of my cash once it's paid for, so I've got to figure out a way to make some money after today.

"Babysitting a kid," I mutter to myself in the empty car. "And cleaning an old farmhouse."

The idea of taking on these jobs sounds ridiculous to me. My mind travels back to my college major in Art History, and I wonder how I ever managed to land here.

Of course, I can never forget how I ended up here. But I blame myself. I'm the one who let myself get sucked into a relationship with a dozen red flags. I'm the one who fell for someone who turned out to be an abusive, controlling egomaniac. It has been my bad choices that have put me where I am right now.

Guiding my car back toward the motel, I can only hope and pray there will be a way to change the trajectory of my life. Now that I've managed to escape my ex, perhaps I can find a way to get my life back.

Glancing from the road back toward the piece of notepaper on the seat next to me, I can't help but wonder if this job with Silas Berne might be the solution to all my problems. If I can manage to get the job he's offering, I will have a place to stay and food to eat. And, considering the few quarters I have left in my purse, that alone would be a welcome relief.

Digging through my glove box with my free hand, I fish out a package of peanuts. For today, these peanuts will have to suffice as my dinner. By tomorrow, maybe something else will turn up.

At this point, really, my luck has nowhere left to go but up.

ANA

The old sedan jitters and squeaks as I direct the wallowy automobile down the long, gravel driveway. I cringe as my beloved cruiser copes with an endless barrage of potholes and loose rocks, shaking loose the decades-old bolts holding her together.

“Why would anyone choose to live so far off the main road?” I shout.

I try to imagine what kind of person I’m going to meet at the end of this harrowing experience. For a minute, I wonder if I’m driving right into the hands of a psychopath. The idea of asking for a job from someone who is so intent on living out of the public eye is slightly unsettling.

And you’ll be living back here, too, I remind myself as I ease around another pothole. Part of me wants to turn my car around and head in the other direction. But the growl of my empty stomach keeps me moving forward.

Who knows, this might be the perfect job for me. Maybe I’ll be amazing at wrangling kids and cleaning things. Stranger things have happened.

After many tense minutes dodging tire-popping pebbles and potholes, a broad gray farmhouse rises in the distance. As it comes into view, I can see it looks well-maintained and yet, neglected. At first glance, it seems to be getting the basic attention, but the paint is faded and chipped, and the roofline is rough at the edges. It hasn’t received the care it once enjoyed.

As I pull into the round driveway, the spacious residence appears ghostly. The front of the building is stark. White-trimmed windows, dark on the inside, are squarely set against the flat, gray exterior. The front porch yawns like a humorless expression and the empty windows loom above like lifeless eyes.

I scrutinize the yellowed grass and random toys in the front yard as I shut off my engine. The air is silent. I notice a baseball tee, set to a low height, and a small red bike that still has its training wheels attached. An old birdbath sits empty, bordered by several half-dead plants, long deserted. At one time, someone tried to make this place look like it was a home.

A short distance from the house, I can see several outbuildings: among them, a small log cabin, a large shed, and, behind it, an enormous red barn. There's something idyllic about the setting and my fears that it might be the home to a psychopath start to dissipate.

Opening the door to the car, I step out onto the circular driveway and pull in a deep inhale of warm air. Pebbles crunch under my steps as I make my way to a flagstone path, leading me to the front steps of the stately farmhouse.

I direct my tennis shoes along the flat stones as if it were a children's game, trying to picture myself living in a place like this as I make my way closer to the front entrance. This place is worlds apart from the city where I've spent my whole life, and yet I think it might well be a soothing change of pace to be here.

One thing is sure—out here, there is no chance anyone from my past will find me. I can hide out and make this a haven for as long as I need to stay away from the rest of the world.

The more I think about it, the more inviting this job opportunity is.

I make my way onto the porch and take another deep breath, lifting my hand to knock against the hardwood door.

Rapping three times, I step back and let out the air I've been holding. My heart beats faster in my chest as someone starts to work with the latch on the door on the other side.

The doorknob turns and the door swings open, revealing a man I can only guess is the mythical Silas Berne.

It takes a couple of seconds for the swinging door to reveal the full breadth of his shoulders. He stands well over six feet and seems to grow even taller as he steps forward into the doorway, glowering down at me with an expressionless glare.

My heart pounds and my throat goes dry like the breath has been knocked out of me. I pictured someone hideous and weird—a frail, backwater man with thin lips and beady eyes.

Silas Berne is the opposite of that.

The man standing in front of me appears to be in his mid-to-late-thirties. He has dark brown hair with a sort of wave to it, and intense, blue eyes that pierce right through me. He's a huge man with a broad chest and powerful arms, wearing a tight-fitting, white T-shirt with dark smudges along his front. Even if his shirt were looser, his farmer's muscles would be impossible to hide.

I would normally find meeting a man like this intimidating, and yet, somehow, I am comforted by his presence, as if he could protect me.

I catch myself staring and I clear my throat. Then it hits me. I forgot to check my appearance before and I probably look like a total mess. I'm still dressed in the same jeans I wore yesterday and my shirt is covered in wrinkles. My hopes of making a good first impression are lost.

“Are you... Mr... I mean... Silas?” I stammer, not knowing how to begin. I'm sure I look like a homeless, crazy person, standing on this man's porch, trying to form a greeting like a blubbing idiot.

I close my eyes and work to get my nerves together before opening them and trying again.

“Hello. Are you Silas Berne?” I ask, like a door-to-door salesperson.

Leaning his broad shoulder against the door frame, Silas crosses his arms and inspects me from head to foot, his expression hard as steel.

“Who’s asking?” he breathes.

His deep, gravelly voice rumbles against my chest causing my heart to beat erratically as a shiver runs down my spine. He sounds like he belongs in an old Western film.

Throwing out a hand, as I would at a professional interview, I put on my award-winning smile.

“I’m Ana,” I declare. “Anasta... Green. Anasta Green. I just go by Ana.” I fumble as I catch myself.

Ignoring my extended hand, Silas stares at me, arms folded, unamused. Shaking his head, he grumbles, “I’m not sure what you’re trying to peddle, but I’m not interested.” He steps back and grabs the door as if he’s going to shut it.

I step forward, realizing my window of opportunity is quickly closing. I hurry to explain myself.

“I met Jenny Ockerman at the diner yesterday,” I state. “She told me you’re looking to hire someone. She said you needed someone to clean your house and babysit your son. Well, I love kids and I love cleaning... so, I think I’m your girl.”

I force a smile as I kick myself for showing my worst possible side when I’ve never needed a job more in my life. I have interviewed for, and gotten, jobs at major corporations before. What’s wrong with me? I can’t deny the fact that my poor apparel and his good looks have been an unusual distraction, but this is ridiculous.

Jesus, Ana, pull it together.

Shaking his head, Silas Berne shows nothing but quiet exasperation. He doesn’t even look at me as he chuckles sardonically—one of the worst signs when you’re interviewing for a job.

“Thanks for coming by,” he says and starts to shut the door on me for the second time.

Once again, I see my fleeting chance to redeem myself and take another step closer. The two of us are now only a couple of feet apart.

“Can’t you give me a chance?” I ask.

My heart thumps in my chest as he steps toward me, closing the distance so he is mere inches from my face. His massive size should be intimidating, but again, it has the opposite effect. There’s something soft about him that makes me feel safe. Maybe it’s the blue in his eyes which belies his hard exterior. I study his face for any sign of acquiescence. But instead of seeing his gaze soften, his eyes only turn colder as he states, “You’re too young, you’re too disheveled, you’re totally inexperienced, and you’re a stranger. No.”

With that, he takes a step back and, with one swift movement, slams the door in my face.

Standing on his weathered porch, staring at the brown hardwood of Silas’s front door, I can’t believe what happened. I blew it. My heart sinks as I recognize my one chance to make a life for myself in New Harmony just went right down the drain.

Disappointment weighs on my heart, along with a hefty dose of embarrassment. What a horrific way to present myself when there was so much riding on this. What the hell was I thinking?

I try to contain my emotions until I get back to the car, hurrying to get into the driver’s seat and start the trip back down the long, bumpy drive toward the main road. I have no clue what I’ll do now. I’m nearly starving to death, I’ve checked out of the motel, and I have no gasoline to get me anywhere else. It’s starting to look like my hopes of making it on my own are going down the drain faster than I can stop them.

In the back of my mind, I remember Jenny Ockerman’s offer to let me fill in at the diner for a few days while one of the other waitresses recovers from the flu. I’m not sure how well I’ll do at waiting tables, but at this point, I’m desperate. If it comes down to having to clean toilets with my own

toothbrush for a hot sandwich, I'll be first in line to take the job.



LUNCH HOUR IS over and the diner is empty when I step back through the front door of the diner. I'm greeted by the same, familiar whoosh of air-conditioned air as I enter. As I look around the small establishment, I begin to wonder if anyone is there at all. In the back, I hear pots and pans rattling.

"Jenny?" I call out the only other name I know in this town. The middle-aged woman I talked to for ten minutes yesterday has now become my only friend in the world.

"Over here," a voice calls out from across the dining room.

I turn my head to see Jenny seated in a booth at the far end of the room. Her gray-blond hair is not in its usual ponytail and she looks pensive as she puffs on a cigarette, staring out the window beside her.

Nearing her table, I feel my stomach growl when I see a piece of half-eaten pie and a glass of soda sitting in front of her.

"Good to see you back," she says, perking up a little as she motions toward the empty seat across from her. "Sit down and take a load off, darling."

She exhales a puff of smoke and looks at me with a weary gaze.

"We had another waitress call in sick this morning," she explains. "And I've been the only one on the clock since breakfast. That means I've been here since five o'clock this morning. I'm too old to be doing this crap."

Raising an eyebrow, she takes a sip of her soda.

"Did you manage to find a job?" Jenny asks.

My heart sinks as I let my mind travel back to my encounter with Silas Berne.

“Unfortunately not,” I admit, embarrassment clogging my throat. “Mr. Berne thought I was not a good fit for the position.”

A grin spreads across Jenny’s face, showing she doesn’t share my disappointment.

“That’s too bad,” she says, sitting up in her seat. “I don’t guess you’d be up for working here for a couple of days, would you? Just until Patty gets back. She told me she’s feeling better, so she should be at it soon. The pay isn’t much, but the tips are good.”

She doesn’t have to ask me twice.

“Yes!” I exclaim. “What do I have to do to start?”

Putting out her cigarette, Jenny smiles.

“Hot damn!” she exclaims, holding up her palm to me.

I’m not used to high-fiving, but I give her hand a half-hearted slap.

“I have a hot date tonight,” Jenny says. “And I was afraid I might have to miss it. We can start right now. Have you had anything to eat?”

Awkwardness washes over me as I wonder whether I should tell her the truth. How would she react if I admitted I have no money and haven’t eaten more than a bag of peanuts in the last two days?

“Food’s on the house for the workers,” Jenny says, as if she can see how hungry I am. Reaching for one of the paper menus, she slides it my way and hands me a pad of paper. “Write down what you want on this, and give your order to the cook in the back. This is your first lesson in how to be a waitress.”

The prospect of free food gives me the biggest smile I’ve had in days. Grabbing a menu, my mouth starts to water and I look over the options, picking out the one that sounds the most filling. Jenny peers over me, explaining the fastest way to write out the order on the paper.

Within fifteen minutes, I'm scarfing down a huge chicken club sandwich with a side of fries and a lemonade. Jenny explains all the ins and outs of the job, but I struggle to hear her through my constant chewing.

A temporary job as a waitress won't solve all my problems, but it will provide me with what I need to get through a few more days. I can at least save up some gas money to travel somewhere else.

Maybe I'll have more luck someplace else.

SILAS

“Jace! Get your butt out here right now.”

I glance at the time on my phone and then back toward the gray farmhouse I call home. No sign of my son yet. Gritting my teeth, I try to remember the conversation I had with my mother last week. ‘Jace is just a little boy. You’ve got to learn to be more patient with him.’

Her words echo in my mind, and guilt cinches my gut. But it’s so aggravating when he doesn’t listen and do what I ask.

I know my mom’s right, Jace is only eight years old. Perhaps I do expect too much from him at times. But it’s very difficult to run a household, operate a working farm, keep up my construction business, and organize all the paperwork, all while having the patience and gentle nature of a mother. It’s not possible.

My frustration is building, and I run a hand through my hair, shaking my head. Things were never supposed to be this way. I wasn’t supposed to be a single parent to my son. When Jace’s mom was pregnant with him, I had no clue about the turn life would take. None of it is Jace’s fault, and yet the exhaustion of daily living makes it hard to keep from taking it out on him.

I slam the car door closed, releasing a heavy sigh, and make my way back toward the farmhouse. With every step, I remind myself to be patient.

The front door swings open and I step into the house.

“What the hell!” I exclaim as I trip over a toy truck Jace left on the floor of the entranceway.

I manage to regain my balance and arrest my fall. “Jace, where in God’s name are you?” I shout.

“I’m coming!” A small voice calls out from the back of the house. “Be there in a minute.”

I know my son too well to trust that tone of voice. He sounds like he’s been into something. I huff out an exasperated breath as I venture inside to find out what he’s up to.

Pushing open the swinging kitchen door, I let out a groan. My eight-year-old is standing near the sink with the water running full-force against the dirty dishes that have accumulated over the last few days. The stream of water is making a tiny pond on the floor and Jace is standing right in the midst of it, a frown on his face, as he uses the dirty dishrag to scrub something on the front of his shirt.

Rushing over to the sink, I turn off the water and look down at my son in total confusion. Jace stands in a pool of water that is quickly turning to mud on his dirt-caked sneakers. His curly brown hair is in complete disarray, and his jam-stained shirt is soaking wet.

“What are you doing?” I ask, reaching for the dishrag in his hands and pulling it away. When the hand towel leaves Jace’s shirt, I see how huge the stain he had been trying to remove is.

“I was trying to make a jelly sandwich,” Jace explains. “And I got some of it on my shirt. I knew we were in a hurry, so I was trying to clean it off real quick.”

I roll my eyes and blow out a breath, bending over so I’m at eye level with my son.

“How about getting a clean shirt out of your drawer and changing?” I suggest, swiping in vain at the dark smudge.

Jace lets out a sigh and stares up at me.

“I don’t have any clean shirts left,” he shouts and throws up his little arms.

His declaration makes me realize I have not been an award-winning father. I groan with frustration and look at his shirt.

“Forget it,” I say. “Just wear this one. Now, get your butt in the car.”

With a playful swat of the dishrag, Jace laughs and dances around me as I reach into the sink to drain the water. I throw the cloth onto the pool of water which sits on the linoleum floor and move it around with my foot, running after Jace as he squeals and escapes through the front door.

“You’ll never get away from me,” I yell as he scurries down the front steps, and out to the car, laughing the entire way.

Now that Jace is out of the house, I look back at the mess inside. My cheerful disguise sinks with my expression as I take it all in. Another heavy sigh escapes me as I rub the bridge of my nose with my fingers. My house is turning into a disaster and, if I’m not careful, I’m going to have to beg my mother to come help me get it straightened up again.

I head back to the kitchen and lean my hands against the kitchen counter, looking over the pile of dishes that need to go in the dishwasher. When we get home, I’ll toss in a load of dishes and do some laundry.

I can’t ignore it any longer. I am in desperate need of help. But good help is hard to come by.

You should have hired that weird girl who came by this morning.

I kick myself.

It took me by surprise when I opened the door that morning and found someone who looked like she might belong to the Babysitter’s Club standing on my front porch. Anasta Green... what the hell kind of name is that?

But that was her name, so she said. She half looked like she belonged on the cover of a magazine and half like she crawled out from under a bridge.

I remember those jeans she was wearing, with obvious stains on them, a wrinkled T-shirt, and a rather sloppy makeup job. She had an innocence about her, with her sweet face and childlike demeanor—almost like she wasn't old enough to be part of the workforce. And yet, despite myself, there was something attractive about her—like I could see the woman she might be if she cleaned up and presented herself better.

But I have no time for women. With a business to run, a farm to manage, and a kid to keep corralled, I don't have time for any people. And I don't want to risk inviting some girl into my life who will undoubtedly add to the chaos. I've got to stay the course, and that means keeping Ana Green as far away as possible.

Besides, I'm almost positive my initial assessment of her was right—she is disheveled, inexperienced, and downright strange.

Shaking off my frustration, I realize I need to get out to the car where Jace has been waiting. It's time for my dreaded bi-monthly trip to town, and it's time to get it over and done with.



I'M one of the least social people in the entire town of New Harmony, but my son has not inherited my hermit ways. Jace spent the entire trip perusing through every store we passed, pointing things out, and conversing with the employees at each establishment.

As we load the heavy groceries into the car, I can't help but study my son in amazement. How did he turn out to be such an extrovert? He has none of the weight of the world on him, and I find it incredible.

But I shouldn't be amazed. I've had thirty more years on this earth than Jace. I've managed to see what people are capable of and I've learned their motives are typically bad. My ex-wife showed me that. And, in a way, I thank her for teaching me a valuable life lesson.

As we load up the last of the supplies, I reach out to tousle my son's hair. Envy pulls at my heart as I look at him, and I hope he never becomes like me—jaded and anti-social. I hope he sees the bright side of life forever with those wide, innocent eyes, and never gets hurt by the cold, hard reality of this world.

“Dad, can we go get some ice cream at the diner?” Jace asks, looking up at me with a twinkle in his green eyes. “Pleeease.”

As if his puppy dog eyes aren't enough, he gives me the biggest, dopiest grin, revealing his one missing tooth which just fell out. I guess the tooth fairy forgot he promised ice cream when that happened.

Another venture into a crowded store is too much for me. I open my mouth to inform my son that ice cream will have to wait, but then I stop myself. Glancing at Millie's Café and Diner, it appears to be empty; a minor, but significant, consolation. It's getting late in the afternoon but the dinner crowd hasn't started arriving.

“Sure,” I say, letting out a sigh of defeat.

Jace jumps into a little dance of joy and grabs me by the hand, dragging me across the street toward the small diner.

Stepping inside the air-conditioned establishment, I look for a table as far away from any prying eyes as possible. Spotting one in the far corner, I direct Jace toward it and wait for someone to arrive.

“I want a chocolate cone,” Jace whispers to me as he climbs into the booth. “Chocolate with whipped cream and sprinkles on top. What are you having, Daddy?”

Grabbing the menu, I glance over it and give a shrug.

“Welcome to Millie's Café and Diner. I'll be right with you,” a cheerful voice announces. I can't place it, but it sounds familiar, and I look up in surprise.

There, walking right toward us, staring at the notepad in her hand, is the weird girl who showed up on my doorstep yesterday morning.

As she looks up from her order book, her eyes meet mine. Her expression drops and she stares at me, silent for a solid six seconds. She gasps and her cheeks turn pink.

I stare back at her in equal shock, not sure if it's the same disheveled stranger who showed up at my door. She looks prettier than she did when she came to my house. She's wearing fresh clothes and her hair is pulled back into a loose bun, and her makeup reapplied. If she looked attractive then, she looks much more so now. The thought makes me kick myself and I turn my attention to the menu in my hand.

Jutting out my jaw, I motion to my son that he should go first.

Ana puts on a smile as she turns toward Jace.

“And what will you be having?” she asks, leaning down.

“I'd like a chocolate ice cream cone with whipped cream on it and sprinkles on top,” Jace replies with his signature toothy grin.

“You must be like me and like chocolate a lot,” Ana observes. Tapping her pencil against her notepad. “Would you like some chocolate chips on it, too?”

At the mention of more chocolate, Jace's expression lights up.

“Yes!” he exclaims. “As many as you have.”

With a kindhearted laugh, Ana turns back to me and her face grows more serious. There's a tension between us that makes me wish I hadn't come here.

“What can I get you?” she asks.

Tossing the menu aside, I regard her patient expression.

“Coffee,” I reply. “No whipped cream. No chocolate. Just coffee.”

Giving a quiet nod, she smiles back at Jace and says, “I'll be right back.” Then she hurries off to the kitchen.

Perhaps I judged her too harshly when I slammed the door in her face and turned her down. I snatch my napkin and begin

to work it in my hands like a stress ball. I am annoyed to encounter Ana Green again, and even more annoyed that she seems to be good with kids.

“I’ve never seen this new waitress before,” Jace declares, leaning forward in his seat. “But she sure is nice.”

His words only make me more frustrated—I like to think I’m good at reading people. And I hate being wrong.

In a matter of minutes, Ana returns with an ice cream cone in one hand and a coffee in the other. Handing them to us, I feel like making a comment about how she managed to find a job so quickly, but I bite my tongue. There’s no need to be more sociable than necessary.

Taking a lick of his ice cream, Jace smiles and says, “This is the best ice cream cone I’ve ever had here. You’re the best! I hope you’re here every time we come from now on.”

“Well, I’m glad you like it,” Ana says, smiling at his comment. “But you probably won’t see me much. I’m only filling in for someone while they have the flu.”

So she doesn’t have a full-time job? I’m tempted to ask if she’d still be interested in filling the position at my house. After my afternoon of struggling with dirty laundry, dirty dishes, and a dirty kid, I’m almost willing to lower my pride enough to ask. But before I can give it a second thought, she turns around and hurries to another table where some new patrons have arrived.

Staring at the smears of ice cream on my son’s face, I take a sip of my coffee.

“Let’s finish these on the way home,” I grumble.

God knows Jace will make a mess and put his sticky hands all over the car, but at the moment, I don’t care. This alluring stranger named Ana Green is starting to get to me, and I’m ready to get home as soon as possible before I do something stupid—like inviting her to come live at my house.

ANA

The good thing about the flu is, it doesn't last forever. But, in my case, that's also a bad thing. Three days after I got the temporary waitress job at the diner, Jenny had to break the news that I was no longer needed.

So, as I sit in my car, counting my money and preparing to say goodbye to New Harmony, an unsettling feeling churns in my gut. I can't ignore the tears threatening to overtake me as I contemplate filling my car up with gas before I get back on the road.

There was something about New Harmony that felt like home. This little town touched my soul in a way I didn't think possible in the brief time I've been here.

Glancing toward the motel where I've been staying the last few days, I let out a deep sigh and close my eyes.

"If there were any way to make things work..." I mutter to myself like a silent prayer in the stillness of my car. I've been checking the local newspaper for other jobs in town but all the positions are more official and would no doubt require an ID and tax information—none of which I can provide if I'm going to keep my true identity hidden. I can't risk being found.

An image of my ex crosses my mind and a shiver runs up my spine. I've been trying to get away from him. I'm not going to let him find me after everything I've been through to get away. If It means I have to run for the rest of my life, I'll do it.

The tension in my throat rises and I swallow hard against it, reaching for the keys. There is only one place in New Harmony where I could work under the radar and hide out, but that's the one place where I'm least welcome.

Shifting my thoughts, a vision of Silas Berne fills my mind. The memory of him slumped over the table—his large, muscular frame crammed into the booth and sitting with his son, sticks in my mind. I recall his powerful hands as he gripped the coffee mug—his rugged face, offset by that distant, shimmering stare, made me weak in the knees.

“God, I need that damn job!” I yell, slapping my hand against the steering wheel.

I can't believe I'm thinking of going back to his house to beg him for work. And yet, that's what's playing through my mind. A last-ditch effort. There's no other choice if I'm going to stick around this place, and I may never get another opportunity as good as this.

Silas is my only hope of staying in New Harmony and my one chance at a job where I can remain anonymous. That grumpy man holds the key to my entire future.

The sun beats through the windshield and heats up the inside of my car like a greenhouse, making me break out in a sweat. The smell of worn leather and cracked vinyl fills my nostrils as I suck in the stagnant, warm air.

I nod my head with resolve. I'm doing this. Crazy as it sounds, I'm going back there, and I'm going to make him hire me. I don't care if I get humiliated or yelled at or if he runs me off his property, I can't leave New Harmony without at least giving it one last shot.

Pulling out of the motel parking lot, I find the country road that takes me out toward the Berne farm. I'm going to throw myself at the mercy of this handsome loner and see if I can soften his heart.



BY THE TIME I park my car in front of Silas Berne's house, I'm so nervous I feel sick to my stomach. For a moment, a horrible image fills my mind and I imagine puking right at his feet when he opens the door.

Steeling my nerves, I walk toward the house, determination in my step. I make my way onto the wrap-around porch and knock on the door. I wait for him to answer.

I wait a lot longer than before. And with each passing second, I wonder if he may have looked out the window and spotted me coming. Maybe he's avoiding me, not willing to put up with me again.

Sucking in another breath, I knock again and hold my breath. Still nothing. I peer in through the narrow glass next to the door, trying to make out any signs of life. The interior of the home is full of clutter but absent of any people.

Maybe he's not home.

I'm deflated, like a balloon that met with the quick jab of a sharp knife.

There's no reason to stick around this man's house, waiting for him to show up when he could be gone for days or weeks, for all I know. Releasing my breath, I begin the slow descent back to my car.

Thwack!

A strange noise fills the air and I stop dead in my tracks.

Thwack!

It's coming from behind the house.

Pursing my lips together, I redirect my course and head around the side of the house. As I round the corner, I'm struck with the sight of Silas Berne, standing with his back to me—his upper half bare as he pulls a cord of wood from an enormous pile of logs at his side and places it in front of him.

His back and shoulders ripple as he sets up each piece, bringing his ax down against the helpless logs that splinter and fall at his feet. He looms over his work. His massive shoulders broaden as he breathes, ax in hand, revealing muscles his

clothing only hinted at when I saw him at the diner the other day.

His giant, muscular frame glistens with sweat in the midday sun and nerves flutter in my stomach like crickets as I stare for what feels like an eternity, half-hidden by the corner of the building. Staring in fascination, I am almost light-headed as I quiet my breathing and slink backward to avoid catching his notice.

Again, Silas raises his large wooden maul high above his head and brings it down with a resounding whack, shattering another log. As he bends over to pick up the pieces, I notice he has earbuds in.

No wonder he didn't hear me.

I can't keep staring at this man like a total degenerate, so I step forward, clearing my throat loudly enough to be heard. When he still doesn't hear me, I make my way around his side, next to the woodpile he's stacking.

He turns toward me and jumps in surprise, his blue eyes growing huge as he reaches up to pull the earbuds out of his ears.

"You again!" he exclaims, his voice no friendlier than it was on our first visit. "What are you doing, sneaking up on me like that?"

I see now, this wasn't the best way to reintroduce myself and plead for the job I'm so desperate to have. Startling him to death likely won't put him in a good mood, and I wonder if I'd be better off running back to my car and forgetting about the whole thing.

"I'm sorry," I say, my mind racing. "I didn't mean to scare you."

Silas gives me a scowl and I realize I've put my foot in my mouth again.

"I meant to say startle," I correct myself. "I didn't mean to startle you like that."

Grabbing for the T-shirt on the large woodpile, Silas quickly pokes his head and arms through it. As he pulls the shirt down, over his torso, he studies me with a grimace. However, I can't help but feel a little disappointed to see him get dressed, and I have to fight to keep my mind on the task at hand and not stare at his body.

"Listen," I say, raising my palms. "I know we didn't get off to the best start the other day. I did a pathetic job trying to convince you to hire me. But now I'm back and I'm ready to show you your first impression of me was wrong."

Silas raises an eyebrow and crosses his arms over his chest.

"Mhmm," he grunts.

"I do come across as inexperienced and young," I add, trying to remember the speech I practiced during the ride here. "And you might have been right about those things. But the truth is, I am also determined and driven. When I want something, I will do whatever it takes and I am willing to learn anything, no matter how challenging. I can't help it if I've never worked on a farm, but I'll work as hard as it takes to prove to you I can do whatever you need me to do."

Desperation is threatening to overtake me and, to my horror, tears are welling up in my eyes.

"Please," I say, holding my hands together in front of my chest. "I'm at the end of my rope. I have no money and nowhere to go. I need a chance. Please, give me a chance. I will do anything you want me to do. I'll... I'll... I'll wash your clothes by hand if I have to."

I'm trying to think of something I can say to get some sign of approval from him. But Silas Berne just stares at me with a blank expression. His gaze is unnerving.

"I'll do anything... just please give me this job," I beg, ready to fall on my knees as I give him the most imploring look I can muster.

Silas picks up his long, heavy ax and throws it against his shoulder.

“Sure,” he says.

Then he turns back to the pile of logs spread out on the ground, lifting one up and setting it on the chopping block.

Sure? My ears have to be deceiving me.

“What do you mean, sure?” I ask, afraid I’ve misunderstood him.

Turning back to me, Silas nods and says, “You can have the job.”

Then he raises a hand as if to stop my excitement before it can hit me.

“Temporarily,” he adds, looking deadly serious. “I’ll pay you in cash each week, and you can have free room and board. Just make sure you don’t do anything to hurt my son, or I’ll kill you.”

I nod my head. That’s reasonable enough. Of course, I would never do anything to hurt a kid—what kind of weirdo does he take me for? Certainly not the sort who would ogle him in secret as he works, half-naked, on his property. But, insulting or not, I don’t care. I can barely contain myself and all I want is to jump up and down.

“Thank you, Mr. Berne!” I exclaim, rushing forward and grabbing his hand before I can think better of it. “Thank you so much. You will not regret it.”

His hand is rough and calloused, and he jerks it away before I can think. I should be embarrassed, but I’m so excited that the moment passes without a second thought.

“Be here tomorrow morning. Early,” he says, over his shoulder as he lifts the long, wooden handle and brings the head of the ax down with another loud thwack.

“We can get started then,” he grunts.

Nodding my head, I hurry back to my car. I don’t know where I’m going to spend the night or what I’m going to do until tomorrow, but at least I have hope.

New Harmony isn't a place from my past and no one knows me here. If I can keep this job and prove to Silas he made the right choice, I can hide out as long as I need.

SILAS

I can't believe I said yes.

As I stand at the kitchen sink, wiping down the countertop, I shake my head and think over the decision I made to hire Ana Green. For Chrissake, what the hell was I thinking?

But I know the answer to that question—my mother.

She is the one who came to my house yesterday to help me get things back in order. I can still recall the long speech she gave me about needing help around the house.

“Why can't you get someone to help you?” Her voice still rings in my mind. “It's not like you can't afford it. Get a housekeeper who can come in here and at least do the laundry and the dishes.”

I felt like a negligent teenager as I watched her work like a woman on a mission to put away clean dishes and fold clothes as they came out of the dryer. She worked herself ragged, and then took Jace home with her for a few days so I could catch up on some of my own work around the house. It felt good to have the help, but it sure didn't make me look like a responsible adult.

She left right before Ana arrived. Ana, who came marching back and hunted me down while I was chopping wood, pleading with me to think again about hiring her. It seemed like fate and, in a moment of weakness, I said yes.

Now, as I wait for her to arrive for her first day of work, I'm reconsidering my decision. I wonder if it's too late to change my mind. Maybe I could tell her I've thought better of it and I'm going to have to let her go. If I give her a hundred dollars and tell her to be on her way, maybe it would be enough to satisfy her.

I hear a knock at the front door. Letting out a deep sigh, I prepare myself for whatever new problems this new employee of mine might bring into my life. She has the look of someone who likes adventure and excitement—and I don't want either of those things.

Making my way to the front door, I swing it open to find Ana standing on the doorstep, a smile on her face and a small duffle bag tossed over her shoulder. Her clothes are, once again, a little wrinkled.

“Good morning!” she greets me with her bright green eyes.

I think about mentioning it's almost noon but I bite my tongue. I keep reminding myself, if she doesn't work out, I can always fire her. This is temporary at best. And, if she turns out to be better at her job than I fear, then, at least, she can provide some much-needed help around the place.

“Let me show you where you'll be staying,” I say, looking toward the car. “I can get your bags.”

She shrugs and gives a nervous smile. “It's no problem,” she explains. “I'm a light packer. Everything I own is pretty much right here with me.” She lifts her duffle bag and then lets it back down on her shoulder.

Her answer troubles me. A lot. It's strange for a young woman her age not to have a wardrobe of clothes and a table full of makeup.

My eyebrows knit together in confusion as I ask, “That's all you own in the world?”

Ana laughs and shrugs once again. “I used to have more, but I've been traveling a lot lately. There's no good reason to own a bunch of junk when you're trying to squeeze it all into

your car. It's unnecessary, you know? I'm a minimalist. All that stuff is just... stuff."

I try to believe her excuse, but it sounds pretty phony. Deciding to go with it for now, I point her around the back of the house. "I'll show you the guest room."

Leading her around to the backyard, I direct her toward the small log cabin I built near the main house. "This is where you'll be staying," I explain as I open the front door and usher her inside. "It's not much, but it should have everything you need."

I don't tell Ana but this used to be my old workshop when I first started making greenhouses. I put electricity and plumbing in it, along with a swing to hold baby Jace while I worked. Once my business expanded and I needed something bigger to work out of, I turned the cabin into a place for guests to stay. I thought it would be a nice place for family members who might want to stop by. Thanks to the shed, they can have their privacy, and I can have mine.

The building is only sixteen by twenty feet, but it has a small bathroom with a standup shower, a couch, a kitchen nook, and a queen-sized bed with a matching dresser. Ana investigates it all, taking it in. She looks as if she might cry as she looks at everything and turns to me with a smile. "It's perfect," she beams.

Walking over to the bed, she tosses her bag on it and then turns back around. "So, what do I do now?"

She unnerves me. I'm not a fan of social interaction and I dislike being around new people in general, but this is different. There's something distractingly cute about Ana Green that gets under my skin, and it's messing with my mind.

Standing in the doorway, studying her, I feel the same irksome attraction I've felt every time I have seen her. When I was younger, this was the type of feeling that would have led me to ask for a date. But, after everything I've been through in my life, it's now the type of feeling I try to avoid. So, rather than being charming and trying to come off as appealing as

possible, I choose to remain cold and distant and keep our relationship strictly professional.

“Well,” I say. “You arrived late today, and I have to meet with someone in about ten minutes. So, you can get settled in. Just be ready to work tomorrow. At six o’clock I want you at the house, ready to start.”

“Six?” I see Ana’s eyes widen as she asks, “You mean like six in the morning?”

It’s easy to tell by the expression on her face Ana isn’t used to early mornings. My old defenses start to rise. As I expected, she is way too immature for this job.

Glaring at her, I repeat, “Six AM. Don’t be late.” My tone sounds harsh, but I’m not at all sorry. Ana Green begged me for this job – she needs to be prepared to do what I ask.

With that, I step out of the cabin and close the door behind me. I shake my head as I walk back toward the house. Once again, I’m doubting my decision to let her work for me. This girl is almost as lost and confused as my eight-year-old son, Jace, was when I tried to explain how zebras are white with black stripes and not the other way around.

“This will never last,” I mutter under my breath as I walk toward the house to prepare for my meeting.



HAVING kids has always been weird for me. Whenever they’re around, you’re wishing for a break. But, as soon as they’re gone, all you can do is wish they were back. Tonight, I miss Jace.

Reaching for my phone, I consider calling my mom to ask her to bring him home now, but I shove it back into my pocket. I’ve got a lot of work to do and I’m running behind on my orders. I need the time without a kid underfoot, and I know Jace is enjoying the time with his grandparents.

In the large workshop behind my house, I pick up a piece of paper and look over all the new orders for greenhouses.

Construction and carpentry work has always been my mainstay in life, and I've managed to make a name for myself building small greenhouses that can then be transported in sections to the customers' homes once they're finished.

Looking up at the window that overlooks my backyard, I see a light on in the guest cabin. For a second, it takes me by surprise.

It's Ana Green, I remind myself before I look back at the order form in my hand. Images of her fill my mind as I struggle with a torrent of emotions roiling inside me. Glancing up again, I peer out the window, hoping to catch sight of her.

Across the short distance between the cabin and my bedroom window, light pours unobstructed across the dark expanse between us. My heart jumps as I see her pass in front of her window. Even from a distance, I can see that she's dressed in skimpy pink pajamas, exposing her bare, taut stomach as she holds an open book in her hand, oblivious to my prying eyes. Her hair is down, loose on her shoulders, visibly wet, probably freshly washed.

Why hasn't she drawn her curtains? Does she want me to see her? My face is warm and I look down at the paper in my grasp. Only this time, I can't read any of the words on the paper. All I see is Ana's partially nude form—the sight of her exposed midriff and the curve of her breasts, playing with my imagination, begging to be touched.

My blood runs hot in my veins as arousal begins to throb in my pants. I can't remember the last time I had a woman spend the night on my property. In fact, come to think of it, I've never had any woman at my house for more than a few hours—and it's always been for something work-related.

I squeeze my cock through my jeans and bit my lip in frustration.

You have done it this time, Silas. You have really done it.

I shake off the rather appealing image of Ana in the guest window, forcing my mind to travel to some of my more pressing questions about her. I move away from the window

and head out to my work shed where a half-finished eight-by-ten greenhouse is underway.

Pulling a tape measure out of my pocket, I hold it up against one of the wooden beams and measure. My father always taught me to measure twice, cut once. It was a piece of advice that made you think twice before you made a mistake that could cost you a lot.

Sometimes, I wish I paid attention to his advice in more areas than just my carpentry work. It would have been nice if I'd been cautious where women were concerned, too.

An image of Jace's mother fills my mind and my face pulls back into a frown. Marrying her was one of the absolute worst decisions of my life. There had been a dozen red flags where Kelly was concerned, and yet I overlooked them all. In that situation, I didn't even measure once before I cut.

But that's one mistake I will never make again. No one else will ever have the chance to touch the place she managed to crush. After six years, my heart is only now starting to feel normal again, and I won't ever risk putting it on the line again.

Then I think of Ana Green, and I want to punch something. I've been an idiot to allow her into my life. She's too young, too attractive, and too suspicious. I can't put my finger on it yet, but there's something about that girl that doesn't add up. Beneath her cute exterior, she's hiding something.

Ana may not realize it yet, but I'm not someone who takes kindly to being lied to. I will discover whatever secrets she's hiding, no matter how long it takes or what the cost may be. I'm not going to risk having someone on my property who could be a threat to me or my son.

I've put my family through enough. From now on, I'm working to protect the two of us, my son and me, from anything and everyone.

ANA

The shrill sound of the alarm clock wakes me from the best night of rest I've had in months. Squinting my eyes, I reach for the off-switch and glance at the time.

Five-thirty.

Who gets up at five-thirty in the morning?

Letting out a deep groan, I bury my face in my pillow and close my eyes. I huff and force myself to sit up, taking in a deep breath and glancing out the window. The sun is still nowhere in sight. Despite getting a good night's rest, my body could still use a few more hours of sleep. My bones are tired, and everything about getting up when it's dark outside feels wrong.

Pulling myself to my feet, I stretch and release a heavy exhale. I've worked for multiple companies, but the workday started at eight or nine. This is downright uncivilized.

For a moment, I have a terrible urge to crawl back into bed and throw the covers over my head. What's the worst that could happen?

You'd be fired, that's what, I remind myself.

Silas Berne may have given me the job, but I could tell yesterday he's still not thrilled with the prospect of my working for him. He has a rough way about him. Maybe that's his default, but I think he doesn't like me. Maybe he doesn't like anyone. He's not the most charming person to have as one's employer, but I can't let that defeat me.

Walking over to the dresser where I placed my clothes the night before, I open one of the drawers and pull out a plain pink T-shirt along with a pair of jeans. Hurrying to change into my clothes, I remind myself how much I need this job. After all, this is the position I begged for. It's the position that's going to make it possible for me to stay in New Harmony – and away from my ex, Brett.

Glancing at the small mirror on the wall, I work to apply some quick mascara and lipstick.

“If I have to work for Ebenezer Scrooge, then so be it,” I mutter. Anyone would be a welcome escape from a future with Brett.

I rearrange my hair and look at the finished product. For the first time in days, I am somewhat presentable. With a smile, I take a few deep breaths to prepare myself for whatever the day has in store.

Stepping out of the guest cabin and into the morning air, I can't believe how chilly it feels. The late summer sun hasn't had a chance to heat the air, and I clutch my arms tightly against my body.

Guided by the beam of the security light over the back entrance of the main house, I make my way to the backdoor. I'm not sure whether to knock or barge into the house. Turning the handle, I discover the door is unlocked. So I push it open and step inside, listening for signs of life.

I've entered the laundry room and I try not to trip as I weave my way through piles of clothes littering the floor. There's a dim light spilling into the room from down the hall, so I follow it. The inside of the house is warm and I start to relax as I head toward the light.

The blessed smell of coffee fills the air as I emerge from the long hallway, and I find myself in the kitchen which is lit only by a small light over the stove.

Silas is sitting at the table with a newspaper laid out in front of him and a cup of coffee next to it. He looks well-rested and ready to start the day – not at all like I'm feeling.

“Good morning,” I say, trying to sound cheerful in spite of my lingering sleepiness. I hope he can’t tell how tired I am.

Without looking up from what he’s reading, Silas points toward the counter where the coffee pot is sitting in its place.

This kitchen is a foreign place to me, and I fumble through several cabinets before I find the mugs. Silas never says a word to try to help me, leaving me to grope for what I need on my own. Choosing the first mug I find, I lower it to the oak countertop and pour myself a cup.

Silas’s kitchen is strange. It has all the newest and fanciest appliances, and yet it’s very simple and rugged in another way. The house is like a reflection of its owner—a nice exterior but lacking heart.

Glancing toward Silas, I clear my throat and ask, “Do you have any creamer?”

That gets my new boss’s attention. His brow furrows in confusion as he pulls his eyes up from his newspaper, looking at me like I’ve lost my mind.

“No. No, we don’t have anything like that around here,” he says, shaking his head.

Looking down at the coffee, I wonder if I will be able to stomach it black. I tend to be more of a latte kind of gal.

I pour myself a mug and make my way over to the table, pulling out a chair across from Silas and sliding down into it. As soon as I start to lower myself into my seat, I wonder if I’m making a big mistake. Perhaps sitting on the job isn’t allowed? I stand back up, almost pouring my drink over the edge of my cup.

Silas glares up at me again. This time, he looks more annoyed than I’ve seen him yet. He rolls his eyes and motions back to the chair. “Sit down for a minute,” he says. “Drink your coffee.”

Thankful for a moment’s kindness from him, I lower myself back into the wooden chair and take a cautious sip of the dark liquid. It’s strong. Very strong. And very bitter. I try

to spit it back into the mug without his noticing, but I think better of it.

Turning my attention toward Silas, I watch as he takes a sip of his coffee and swallows it without any problem. I can only hope he didn't see my humiliating display.

He turns the last page of the paper and folds it up, setting it aside. He turns toward me and regards me with his signature blue-eyed stare that always has a touch of suspicion in it. I fight the urge to squirm in my seat. There's something unnerving about the deadpan look in his steely gaze, as if he can see right through me.

"Well, Ana Green," he breathes. "This is a working farm, but it's also my home. I'm going to need your help maintaining the house, taking care of Jace once he returns from his grandmother's, and doing some of the daily chores around the property."

I have no clue what he's talking about. I had an image in my head of being like Alice from the old TV show, "The Brady Bunch." And now he's making it sound like I'm expected to be like some home-stading pioneer. Images of Annie Oakley play in my mind and I half expect him to hand me a rifle.

"I figure you'll get into the swing of things soon enough," he says and takes another swig of his dark coffee. "But until you do, I'll help you out. The first thing I want you to do is to go out and gather eggs. The chicken coop is also looking a little rough, so you'll need to put out some fresh bedding for the hens. You'll find the egg bucket hanging on a peg by the front door of the coop. We generally get around twenty to twenty-five eggs a day. There's a pitchfork next to the door, and you can find the bag of cedar chips in the loft area."

I feel like I've just been dropped on a different planet. Swallowing hard, I try to keep my horror in check. For a moment, I wonder if Silas could be kidding me. But, as I look at him, he shows no sign of levity. I bet he's never told a joke in his life.

Silas rises to his feet and opens the dishwasher, setting his mug inside.

“Before you go out to the chickens, straighten up these dishes and start the dishwasher, too,” he instructs me. Narrowing his eyes as he peers back at me, examining me again as he asks, “Did you understand all that?”

Oh sure. As well as if you had said it in Greek. Part of me wants to break out in tears and admit the only thing I understood was the command to start the dishwasher. But I suck it up and put on a brave front.

“Sure thing,” I tell him with a nod and a confident smile as fake as a three-dollar bill. “Dishes, eggs, and cleaning up the coop. Got it.” I give him a cheesy thumbs-up to seal the deal.

Rather than finding any of my actions at all amusing or reassuring, Silas only looks more disgusted. Starting toward the laundry area, he announces, “Once you’re done, come out to the workshop. That’s where I’ll be and I can tell you what to do next.” Then he heads out the backdoor.

Pulling myself to my feet, I watch him through the back window to make sure he’s not going to turn back. I grab my coffee mug and pour the disgusting liquid down the drain, hoping there is some other form of caffeine in the house.

I can tell this is going to be a long, hard day and it’s only going to be worse if I end up falling asleep on my feet.



FINDING the chicken coop was easy. All I had to do was listen for the sound of clucking and a rooster crowing. The sun is coming up now, cresting over the tree-lined hillside, illuminating the early morning sky all pink and orange. Not that I’ve seen very many sunrises in my life, but it looks much prettier here in the country than it ever did when I lived in the city.

I stand outside the chicken coop, bracing myself for the challenge at hand. Closing my eyes and making fists at my

sides, I try to cheer myself on.

“Come on, Ana,” I whisper as the rooster makes another deafening cry. “You’ve dealt with animals before. These are chickens... not lions. They’re just oversized songbirds. Come on, this is no big deal.”

If gathering eggs were such a big job, I’m sure Silas wouldn’t have given it to me.

But almost as soon as the idea crosses my mind, I laugh. The more I get to know Silas, I’m convinced he would give me the job of clearing an entire forest and still think it was no big deal.

Taking one last breath, I swing the door to the chicken coop open and step inside. As soon as I enter the small building, I’m hit by the horrible stench of manure. It’s like nothing my nose has ever experienced before and it stings my nostrils, making my eyes water.

Several large, oversized birds crowd around my feet, making me jump back in surprise. For some reason, I expected they would be scared of me. Instead, they have no fear at all and they peck at my tennis shoes with their dirty beaks.

Reaching for the wicker basket hanging on a nail, right where Silas told me it would be, I swing the basket toward them. “Back! Back!” I exclaim.

I wonder how I can be expected to fill the basket with delicate eggs when I also have to use it as a weapon for my protection.

When an excited hen runs at me and tries to snip at the basket, I almost lose it. This may be one job beyond my abilities, but I have to prove to myself, and Silas, that I can do this.

Gritting my teeth, I shake my head with determination. I have done everything in my power to get this job. These chickens will not get the better of me, goddamnit.

Pressing my back against the wooden door of the chicken coop, I consider my options and formulate a plan.

SILAS

“**T**hat’s right. I have you down for that weekend,” I say into my phone as I use my free hand to write a couple more notes on a piece of paper. “I’m happy you chose my farm for your upcoming venue. Thanks for letting Berne Farms serve you. Feel free to call back if you have any more questions.”

Waiting for the person on the other side to end the call, I let out a sigh and put my phone back into the pocket of my jeans. I can put on a schmoozing front when necessary. I may not get along with most people, but at least I can tolerate them long enough to do business with them.

Once I’m back in my work shed, I look over the finished greenhouse and put some final touches on it.

When I first purchased the one-hundred acres that became Berne Farms, I envisioned cultivating a large ranch with hundreds of cattle and herds of sheep. What I didn’t realize was, taking care of a child by myself was hard enough, let alone trying to run a large-scale operation like that at the same time.

As time passed, I discovered building greenhouses and keeping more of a hobby-style farm was more in line with the life of a stay-at-home dad. Rather than sell the farmland or let it go to waste, I started renting it out for events. Weddings, birthday parties, graduations; even tent revivals would sometimes take place on my property. With so much unused

acreage, I am still able to maintain my privacy while providing others with the space they need to have their fun.

But this is something new. I chew my bottom lip as I consider the next event to take place on my property.

The city council of New Harmony asked to rent my land for an upcoming weekend festival. Carnival rides, live music, and contests are all set to be a part of the proceedings. Shaking my head, I can't help but think how much Jace would enjoy something like that. If only there were some way for him to attend while I stay at home.

Perhaps assisting me with that whole headache would be a good job for Ana. After all, she's going to be a part-time babysitter. Managing my son when there's a circus in our backyard would fall under her job description. But considering how she looked this morning, it remains to be seen what her abilities and qualifications actually are.

My mind travels back to the image of her sitting down at the table, still half asleep and unable to drink coffee without creamer. I hope she was just tired and not stoned.

How on earth did a girl like that ever end up here?

It's a question I'm almost afraid to ask as I wonder if I even want to know the answer. Pulling my phone out of my back pocket, I look at the time. It's almost ten and I still haven't seen Ana return from the chicken coop.

Where could she have gone? By now, she should have picked up all the eggs and cleaned the coop. Scrunching my face, I wonder if she gave up and left. That wouldn't be too surprising. A lot of pretty women like her give up when things get challenging. God knows my ex-wife was one of them.

Setting my work to the side, I go out to get some answers. So far, Ana Green is turning out to be more trouble than she's worth. As I make my way out of the workshop and across the yard toward the chicken coop, I question whether I've hired her as a babysitter or a charity case.

My footsteps crunch against the dry grass as I near the red chicken coop. I can hear the sound of clucking hens and the

soft voice of a woman from inside. It sounds like Ana is talking to someone, but I can't imagine to whom. She is a strange girl, to be sure, so I wonder if, maybe, she met someone out in the coop or if she is on a private phone call.

Swinging open the door to the coop with care, I peer in to see what's going on. To my total shock, Ana is seated, cross-legged on the floor, looking at my prize-winning Buff Orpington like she's addressing an audience of schoolchildren at story time.

She croons, "I think you're a sweetheart, aren't you? Yes, I can see you're a little stiff and hard to get to know, but underneath the rough exterior, you have a gentle heart." Nodding her head and smiling, she says, "You remind me of my Aunt Susan. I think I'm going to name you Susie."

So, my employee is out in the chicken coop talking to the chickens? Maybe that's what she's hiding... that she's an escapee from some sort of institution.

Clearing my throat, I inquire with perfect calm, "What are you doing?"

My voice startles Ana and she stands up with a gasp. Her sudden movement sends the chickens flying in all different directions. She turns to look at me, her eyes wide and her face red with embarrassment.

As I step toward her, I flick some of the chickens out of the way with my feet. "You've been out here for almost three hours," I inform her, trying to keep steady as I point toward the floor. "You haven't cleaned out the coop yet. And the eggs..." I reach out and take her basket, my voice growing harsher as I exclaim, "You've only got two eggs? Ana, I could send my eight-year-old son out here to do this job and he would have had it done by now."

Ana's face turns bright red and she looks down at the floor in shame. It appears she might cry, which only makes me more irritated. But I regain my calm just as quickly.

"What have you been doing out here?" I ask, "Why haven't you done what I told you to do?"

Giving a slight shrug, Ana meets my gaze with wide, glassy eyes. Looking from me to the chickens and back to me.

“I felt like I needed to make friends with the chickens before I tried to approach them,” she hurries to explain. “They don’t know me at all, and they were acting a little... well, defensive. When I tried to get an egg, Celia over there...” She points toward one of the large yellow hens. “She tried to bite me. I was afraid I should probably make friends and bond with them a little bit so they wouldn’t attack me.”

There is something about the way she talks that is almost hilarious, yet I’m in no mood for jokes this morning. Crossing my arms against my chest, I ask, “Afraid the chickens might bite you?”

Chickens don’t bite, they peck.

Ana nods her head and reaches out to pet one of them as she explains, “See, after we spent a little time together, they started to get friendly with me.”

In all my years of raising chickens, I’ve never treated them like pets. My practice is to throw some food at them and shove them out of the way with my foot when they get in my path. Looking at Ana, I don’t know what to make of her. She doesn’t belong in the same universe as I do.

“Here,” I say, pressing my way through the chickens and shoving my hands into one of the wooden laying boxes. “You don’t have to worry about making friends or bonding with them or counseling them. You just have to shove them out of the way and get what you want. Show them who’s boss.” Looking up at her confused expression, I try to make it clear. “We give them food, they have to give us eggs. Simple.”

“What if they bite?” Ana presses, leaning in closer to watch what I’m doing.

“If they *peck*,” I correct. “We take them out to the chopping block and I cut their heads off. Plain and simple.”

Ana yelps in horror and throws a hand over her mouth.

I can tell she is horrified by my straightforward way of putting things. But I don’t care. If she doesn’t like it, she

doesn't have to stay. It's becoming more and more clear to me she's going to be more trouble than help around the farm.

"Here." I point toward one of the nesting boxes where a chicken is still sitting on her egg. "You reach in, and take the egg. This is a job kids do. Surely, you can too." I know my words are harsh, but they're well-deserved. Anyone who is so incompetent in basic life skills doesn't deserve common respect.

Ana takes a step toward the box and reaches out slowly. She's scared, like I asked her to reach her hand into a box full of rattlesnakes. I watch her face contort as she closes her eyes and dives her hand in before jerking it out, no egg in sight.

Seeing her falter at such a minimal task is almost more than I can handle. Shaking my head, I reach out to take the egg basket from her and say, "Go back to the house. Wash up and fix us something to eat. I'll take care of this."

Looking at Ana's face, I see a half-pout as she asks, "Are you sure? I haven't gotten all the eggs yet."

"You haven't gotten *any* eggs yet," I return. "Go back to the house and fix something for lunch." I want to say, if we had to wait for her to gather all the eggs, we'd all starve, but I bite my tongue.

Ana doesn't seem too disappointed to leave the chicken coop. She gives a solemn nod and heads for the door. Stepping out into the sunshine, she closes the door behind her and leaves me with the task of gathering the eggs.

Letting out a sigh, I reach into each of the wooden laying boxes and pull out the eggs that have been deposited by the chickens. It takes me a whopping five minutes to finish it all.

Grabbing the pitchfork, I start the job of cleaning up the soiled wood chips so I can replace them with fresh ones. I wonder what could go wrong with Ana Green next. I am dreading the prospect of lunch. God knows the poor girl probably doesn't know how to use a microwave, let alone a stove. I roll my eyes as I picture her standing in front of the

gas cooktop, trying to make friends with the knobs before she uses it.

“What the hell were you thinking, Silas?” I mutter as I reach for the bag of cedar chips and start to spread them across the floor, filling the coop with a pleasant scent. This deal with Ana is not going to work.

I should have listened to my better judgment in the first place. I should never have let her come to work for me, and I wonder how long I should let her stay before I send her packing. After all, it might be nicer to end things now, before she has time to settle down here at Berne Farms.

ANA

Standing in front of the refrigerator, I look at the selection of lunch meats. I've never done a lot of cooking, and it doesn't appear Silas Berne has a whole lot of options. His refrigerator and freezer are mostly stocked with easy-to-cook options like hot dogs, sandwich supplies, and frozen pizzas. Not the healthiest meals, but at least I do have hope that I can fix them without too much trouble.

Being a chef has never been my strong point. College kids don't spend a lot of time practicing their culinary skills, and after graduation, I got involved with Brett, so I became accustomed to dining at nice restaurants or getting take-out.

Letting my mind travel back to the times with my ex-boyfriend, I have to admit he and I had some pleasant experiences. I would never forget eating Chinese with him for the first time and the way he pushed me to try new things.

But the good times were short-lived. The sweet façade Brett exhibited when we first started dating faded in an instant, revealing the truth about him too late.

I can't think about Brett now. Thoughts of him only make me nervous and scared, leaving me feeling like I need to look behind my back and see if he's somehow watching me. The fact that I got away from him at all is almost too good to be true.

Turning my mind back to the task at hand, I pull out the sandwich meats and put them on the counter. Sorting through a few cabinets, I find some bread without much trouble.

I look at the sandwich meats, considering my selection. Turkey. Ham. Bologna. Roast beef. Which type of meat would Silas like? Cocking my head to one side, I contemplate asking him, but I stop myself. I've already caused enough trouble for one day. I don't need to point out more of my inadequacies.

Opening each of the sandwich meats, I decide to make one of each. I reach for a loaf of bread and lay the pieces out on the counter and start loading them down with meat. Searching through the refrigerator, I find some mayo, lettuce, and tomato and put a few of each topping onto each piece of bread. I wonder if Silas is the type of person who likes mayo and tomato on his sandwich. I'm going with, yes.

As I finish making the sandwiches and set them out on a plate, the backdoor opens, alerting me Silas is home. I step back and look over my work, praying it will be something he finds appropriate. God knows I've had enough failure for one day with the chickens.

Making his way into the kitchen, Silas doesn't do more than glance at my lunch offering. Instead, he lowers his bulky body onto a chair and grabs for the first sandwich on the plate. Obviously, he isn't too picky about his sandwiches – at least that's one good thing. Pulling his phone out of his pocket, he stares at the screen as he eats.

I sit down across from him, studying him for the slightest reaction as I watch him chew his sandwich. He hasn't made any odd faces, so I'm somewhat relieved. As if he can sense my relief, he looks up at me with a flat expression. A shock of embarrassment makes me look away as he catches me staring at him, and I try to seem less obvious about it by looking at something next to him.

“What's wrong?” Silas breathes.

Shrugging my shoulders, I reply, “Nothing.”

“Eat,” he commands, nodding his head toward the pile of sandwiches on the plate.

Grabbing one of them, I bite into it.

Silence is reigning supreme in the kitchen as he turns his attention back to his cell phone. I've never been the greatest with silence. I know I should appreciate that he doesn't want to ask a lot of questions about my life, but there's something deeply uncomfortable about sitting in a room with someone who ignores your existence. I can remember Brett doing the same thing—only, he always did it when he was trying to warn me he was mad.

Shifting in my seat, I put on a happy smile and say, "I think my work with the chickens this morning went a long way. I would almost bet tomorrow they'll be much more comfortable around me."

Silas doesn't look up from his phone. He doesn't even nod his head or acknowledge I'm talking.

Taking another bite of my sandwich, I find it hard to swallow. My nerves are in a blender as I wonder if I've made myself such a nuisance this morning that he's considering firing me.

"Of course, I'm sure I'll be more confident with them, too," I prattle on. "I really did bond with some of them. There were a couple of them that acted like they wanted to be friends. I'd say they'll be eating out of my hand soon – both figuratively and literally."

Silas looks up from his phone and stares at me in confusion. Furrowing his brow, he asks, "Do what?"

Sitting back in my seat, I shrink as he examines me. He looks at me like I should be locked away in an old-fashioned insane asylum. Scooting back in my chair to increase the distance between us, I decide to change the direction of the conversation. "I hope you like the sandwiches. I wasn't sure what kind of meat you would like, but since there were a bunch in the refrigerator, I decided you must like them all... or else you wouldn't have them in there."

Silas' attention is back on his phone and he shrugs as he says, "They're fine."

Every word out of his mouth only makes me more nervous. I wish he could be like other, more normal people who can carry on conversations and like to chat. I try to remember Jenny's warning – that Silas Berne was strange, but it doesn't help a whole lot. As far as I can tell, he thoroughly dislikes me and I'm not sure why.

“Making sandwiches is harder than it looks,” I continue, although I realize the words coming out of my mouth don't sound very intelligent. “There are so many options for dressings and everyone wants things a little different. For instance, when I was in college, my roommate loved her cheeseburger with only mustard and lettuce, while I only liked mine with ketchup and tomato.”

I'm right in the middle of a story when Silas stands up from his chair and yawns. Reaching for another sandwich off the plate, he announces, “I'm heading out to the shop.” He glances around the kitchen and announces, “Why don't you clean the kitchen and see about straightening up the house? Can you do that?”

Not waiting for a response, he turns and makes his way out of the house. Peering out the back window, I watch him as he walks out to the shop.

My heart sits heavy in my chest. I don't have to be loved by everyone, but I truly dislike wondering if someone hates me. If Silas Berne showed me some semblance of friendship or any sign he doesn't flat-out loathe me, it would take a tremendous load off my nerves.

A heavy sigh cuts the silence in the room. Where are the cleaning supplies?

Squatting down, I look under the sink to discover a pile of rags, some all-purpose spray, and a small bottle of dishwashing liquid.

While I may not be a professional with chickens, I do have some experience with cleaning. I hope this will be one task where I don't have to worry about messing anything up or doing something wrong.

Starting at the far end of the kitchen, I begin to wipe down all the appliances and countertops. As I work, I find my mind wandering to places I don't want it to go. The brooding silence of Silas is almost too much for me and I am consumed by thoughts.

An image of Brett fills my mind and I find myself replaying our last big fight. As I wipe grime and crumbs out of the crevices of the stovetop, I can still see him, up in my face, waving his arms like a madman and making me scared for my life. Brett isn't a particularly big guy, but he can be intimidating.

I caught him cheating on me with another woman, and yet, somehow, I was the one to blame when I confronted him about it. It was somehow my fault that he went after someone else in the first place – my fault he felt it necessary to stray. If I was more devoted to him, more focused on our relationship, and more giving, none of it would have happened.

While his lies paralyzed me in the past, I finally determined not to fall for any of his, or my, excuses. I saw the text messages between him and the new girl, and I heard from a coworker that they were going out in public together.

When I told Brett I was going to leave him, his demeanor became worse. He acted pathetic and cried, but, when it became obvious I wasn't falling for it, he became threatening.

Reaching up a hand as if he might hit me, I can still see his eyes burning with rage as he backed me into the wall.

“You will never get away from me,” he hissed, spit flying as he spoke with such hostility. “If you leave me, I will hunt you down,” he warned.

Even now, months after I escaped him, my body shivers at the memory of that incident. I didn't want to believe Brett was capable of anything horrific, yet it was hard to put it past him. He wasn't a man used to losing. He was privileged and used to getting his way in all things.

Brett might not love me anymore, but he's not one to give up. As long as he's alive, I'll have to constantly look behind

my back, wondering if he's going to find me.

“But here in New Harmony, you're safe,” I think to myself. Miles away from Brett and the home I used to know. My ex won't be able to find me here. Even if he were able to locate the town where I'd escaped, it would be impossible for him to find me at Berne Farms. As far as I can tell, I am completely safe, hiding away in my little cabin in the middle of nowhere.

If I can just keep Silas satisfied with my work and keep myself from getting fired, I've got the best place to stay right here.

SILAS

It's been a long day working on my projects in the workshop. I have two greenhouses completed and ready to ship and I'm trying to start the third when I hear a knock on the door.

I'm not used to company and I'm not used to anyone knocking. Standing up in surprise, I make my way to the door and open it. There, on the slab of concrete at the workshop entrance, is Ana Green. She looks messy with her hair frizzing out from her ponytail and grease on her cheek.

I was so busy with work that I forgot she was still here. Masking my irritation, I ask, "Done with the cleaning already?"

Ana nods her head, a look of pride on her face. "I think my cleaning skills might beat my chicken-taming work," she says with a grin.

I raise my eyebrows but keep my comments to myself. It's hard to imagine anything could be worse than her attempts with the chickens. Looking at her expectantly, I wonder why she's come out here to bother me, but then I realize she must be looking for her next job.

I had never pictured having to guide my household help step-by-step. I thought I'd be able to unleash them on the place, like a worker bee, and they would figure out what to do. Keeping Ana busy is like having another chore around the house.

Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I glance at the time and groan. “Goddamn it, I’m late!” I exclaim as I turn around and reach for my jacket which is lying over my office chair.

“Late?” Ana asks, stepping into the workshop and shadowing me. “Late for what?”

“Don’t worry about it,” I reply as I motion her toward the door.

Hurrying out of my way, Ana makes her way over the threshold and back into the yard, watching me as I lock up the shop.

“Do you want something else to eat?” Ana asks. “I don’t have anything made yet, but I could throw something in the oven.”

I barely look in her direction. “No. You’re done for the day. Go and do whatever you want to for the rest of the evening.” Realizing she might be hungry, I add, “Fix yourself some food if you want. I’ll get more supplies on my way home. I have to pick up my son.”

Rushing around the side of the yard to my car, I jump into the driver’s seat without stopping in the house. I’m late to pick Jace up from my mom’s house. My boy is extremely resourceful and doesn’t let much get him down, but the fear of being abandoned is ingrained into his being.

Of course, it makes sense things would be that way. At an early age, one of the most important people in his life walked out on him, his mother.

I grit my teeth and clench my hands on the steering wheel as I direct my truck down the driveway. An image of my ex, Kelly, fills my mind and I am so irritated that I wish she were here so I could give her a piece of my mind. What kind of woman runs off and leaves her infant child? I’m still angry at her but, even more so, I’m angry at myself. What type of man chooses a woman like that for a wife and then has a child with her? Had I been so blinded by her beauty I couldn’t see reality? I let out a rough sigh as I try to wrap my mind around it for the thousandth time.

One thing is sure, I will not let that happen again. No other woman is going to turn my head and jeopardize my family like that. From here on, it's just me and Jace. And that's the way I like it.



BY THE TIME I reach my mom's house, Jace is sitting on the front porch swing. He watches me pulling up, with his backpack sitting by his side. Putting the truck in park, I roll down the window and yell, "Are you ready to go?"

Standing up and grabbing for his backpack, annoyance is clear in my son's body language. "I've been ready for over an hour!" he exclaims.

My mom steps out onto the porch and hugs Jace, waving at me and inviting me in to visit. Shaking my head, I lean my head out. "Sorry. I need to hurry back home," I call out. "I've got a lot of work."

When Jace climbs into the front seat of the car, it's obvious his mood isn't about to improve. I wait for him to fasten his seatbelt before I wave goodbye to my mother. The manual window of my old pickup rolls up stubbornly as I direct it back to the road.

"Hey buddy, I'm sorry I'm late," I say. "It's been a crazy day."

"You were supposed to be here at five o'clock," Jace returns with a shake of his head. He has a wide frown that occupies most of his tiny face. "It's after six now." He points to the clock on my dash as if he's presenting evidence. "I wanted to call, but Granny told me to be patient. How could you forget me?"

I could kick myself for not setting an alarm on my phone.

"Jace." I let my breath out slowly and weigh my words carefully. "I didn't forget you. I was working and I got caught up with things. It got late before I realized it. I'm sorry." Reaching over to tousle his hair, I try to reassure him. "I would

never forget you. You're my whole world. Don't you know that?" Changing the subject, I ask, "So, what did you and Grandma do?"

The question brings Jace out of his mood. Sitting up straighter in his seat, he happily recounts stories about everything they did together, from riding bikes to making cookies.

As I listen to him, I think about how good it is for him to have someone else who can spend time with him. I hope hiring Ana Green will provide him with someone to keep him company when I'm busy. Unfortunately, I can't see Ana being much help where Jace is concerned. As far as I can tell, she's not much help where anything is concerned—except making sandwiches.

I decide to pick up some pizza for Jace and me, and by the time we arrive back home, it's late. The house is unlocked and we step inside. As I turn on the lights, it feels like I'm stepping into a different world. The house smells fresh, the hardwood floors have been mopped, and the dank smell of dust that had been coating the furniture has been lifted.

Jace follows me in and lets out a whistle. "Wow!" he exclaims as he looks around to take it all in. "What happened? Have you been cleaning?"

Shrugging my shoulders, I try to wrap my mind around what could have happened.

It has to be Ana, incredible as it seems. She might be a liability on the farm, but I have to admit, she has some cleaning skills.

As I lead Jace into the kitchen so we can share the pizza I picked up in town, I find the sparkling clean doesn't end in the living room. To my sheer amazement, the entire house is spotless. I am not easily impressed, but right now... I'm impressed.

As I glance out the back window of the house, I see a light on in the cabin. For a minute, I wonder if I should go over and

invite her to come join us. After all, it would be a good time for her to meet Jace.

But, as soon as the thought crosses my mind, I think better of it. Part of me still senses Ana Green isn't completely trustworthy. She has a cute way about her, and that keeps me on this tightrope between annoyed and attracted. I don't want to risk letting my toe slip too far to either side.

Sitting down across from Jace, we share our pizza, and I listen as he tells me more about his fun adventure away from home. There will be time for him and Ana to get acquainted in the morning. I can only hope she is as good a babysitter as she is a housekeeper.



SOMETHING ABOUT ANA'S ability to clean gave me a newfound respect for her. I felt a bit more confident about her as I went to bed that night. But now it's morning, and reality is setting in.

It's ten minutes to six. Looking up from my paper, I watch Ana stagger into the kitchen, stumbling like she's got a hangover from a three-day drinking binge. Part of me wants to roll my eyes, but I divert my gaze back to the paper in front of me.

"Good morning," she mumbles as she slumps her way over to the counter. She pours herself a cup of coffee. Although, I'm not sure why. I saw her dump hers out yesterday without taking a sip.

Walking over to the table, she lowers her weight onto a chair and lets out a yawn. I take a sip of my coffee and look up from my newspaper to watch her eyeballing her mug as if she's trying to summon the courage to drink it. There's something about her aversion to black coffee that irritates me, as if it makes her weak.

"Am I gathering eggs today?" Ana asks as she looks up from her coffee cup. She's trying to muster enthusiasm but isn't quite pulling it off.

Let her gather eggs again? What a disaster. Shaking my head, I say, “No. Nothing like that. Today I’m going to let you help my son milk the cow.”

Ana’s eyebrows go up and she lets out a faint yelp. With a nervous laugh, she confesses, “I think cows might be a little more intimidating than chickens.” Gripping her coffee cup tightly, she looks scared.

I don’t understand this strange fear of animals that plagues her. Animals have been a part of my life since I was a kid. Milking cows and picking up eggs are child’s play. Why does she act like I’m asking her to climb Mount Everest when I make these simple suggestions?

“Don’t worry,” I offer. “You’ll have help. My son, Jace, is here. He’ll be up soon.”

I can’t tell if my comment makes her feel better or worse. Now she looks nervous in a new kind of way.

Folding up the newspaper, I stand up and toss it in the garbage can under the sink. Setting my empty coffee cup in the dishwasher, I start toward the backdoor. As I walk past her place at the table, I see her own cup of coffee is still mostly untouched.

Oh well. If she’s going to stay employed at my farm, she’s going to have to get used to strong coffee and my way of life.

ANA

I wonder if Silas Berne simply hates me. He throws the most impossible tasks at me and then leaves me to flounder all alone. Pulling myself to my feet, I rub my eyes and take a sip of the coffee. The taste is so bitter I nearly gag as I choke it down.

Pouring the rest of the black brew down the sink, I put my mug in the dishwasher and turn the appliance on. Leaning my weight against the countertop, a frown creeps across my face. I was disappointed Silas didn't say anything complimentary about my cleaning job from the previous day. Is there any way to impress this man?

Shaking my head, I mumble, "Hard to impress someone who doesn't want to be impressed."

"What does that mean?" A childish voice makes me turn around in surprise. There, standing in the doorway, is a little boy with tousled, light brown hair. Dressed in a pair of overalls and a striped T-shirt, he rubs his eyes and yawns as he looks at me.

"You're the woman from the diner," he says as recognition fills his sleepy eyes. I remember him too. How could I forget my chocolate-loving friend with the hankering for ice cream? Making his way to my side, he looks torn about how he should greet me. "Dad told me he got someone to help around the house, but he didn't tell me who." Before I can comment, he adds, "We were both pretty surprised when we came home last

night and the house was so clean. Dad's jaw about dropped open. It hasn't been that clean in forever." He lets out a laugh.

His words warm my heart. It would have been nice to hear the compliment from my stiff employer, but it does me good to know that he noticed the house looked better.

Watching the boy as he makes his way across the room, I wonder what exactly I'm going to do with him all day. What do good babysitters do anyway? Crossing my arms over my chest, I try to think, finally asking, "Would you like some coffee?"

Jace looks at me like I've lost my mind and shakes his head. "No way," he declares, pointing toward the top shelf of the nearby cabinet. "Chocolate puff cereal in my blue bowl... with chocolate milk mixed in with it."

I laugh and ask, "No chocolate sprinkles on top?"

Straightening with sudden expectation, Jace replies, "Do you have any?"

I'm smart enough to realize that added sugar isn't the best idea for breakfast, but I prepare his cereal in the blue bowl just as he directed. When I set it down on the table, he hurries to eat it, wiping some milk off his chin. "Dad said I'm supposed to show you how to milk the cow today," he says.

Oh great. More comments about those blasted cows and the task that awaits me. I take a tentative breath. "Yeah. That's what I understand," I reply.

"Have you ever milked a cow before?"

I feel like I can be honest with this kid. "I've never even touched a cow before," I admit.

Shaking his head, Jace speaks. "Don't worry. It's an easy job once you get the hang of it," he says. "I'll show you how to do it. I'll show you how to do a lot of stuff around here." He sets aside his empty bowl, sporting a toothy grin that reveals the gaps in his smile as he boasts, "Once you've been around me for a little while, you'll be a farmer."

The notion is a little far-fetched, yet I can't help but smile back at him. If Jace is this easy to deal with all the time, babysitting is going to be a breeze.



“HERE.” Jace pulls a stool up next to the cow and points toward it, motioning me to sit down.

The chickens were intimidating, but the cow in front of me is much worse. One swift kick to the head and I'll be dead for sure. And if she bites me... well, I don't want to think what a mouth that big could do to my body.

But I'm trusting this child to lead me in the ways of the farm, so I sit down on the filthy-looking stool. Jace steps up to arrange the metal bucket under what looks like the biggest set of boobs I've ever seen in my life. This cow puts all the negligee models I've seen to shame.

“You just grab on there and squeeze,” Jace says.

When he notices my pained expression, he assures me, “Don't worry about it. The cow doesn't mind.”

I try not to say anything about it to the kid, but I feel awkward grabbing and squeezing the cow's nipples. How do poor cows have such a sad life that they get groped daily without any say-so on their part?

“Hang on,” Jace says as he kneels beside me and helps me to rearrange my hands. “You have to squeeze and pull, up and down.”

When a stream of milk squirts out into the bucket, I let out a little squeal. Suddenly, all my worries about offending the cow are gone. I can't believe I've managed to do something right.

“You just keep doing that,” Jace says as he pulls up an overturned bucket and sits down beside me. Watching me, he gives me some pointers as the tiny stream starts to accumulate at the bottom of the bucket.

“You must not be from around here,” Jace says with a laugh as I show more excitement about the milk. “Where do you come from?”

The question makes me nervous. He may be just a kid, yet letting him know too much could be dangerous. Shrugging it off, I say, “Here and there, mostly in big cities. I’ve never been out in the country before, and I’ve never had any dealings with farm animals.”

“I lived in town when I was a baby,” Jace returns as he reaches out to help me. “But I was so little, I don’t remember it. That was before my mom left.” Squinting at me as if to gauge my reaction. “My mom left when I was a baby,” he adds. “Dad doesn’t tell me why, but it’s weird, don’t you think? Moms don’t usually leave their babies. I don’t know why a mom would do that. What do you suppose I did that made her want to leave?”

The question breaks my heart and I lose my rhythm with the milking process. So Jace’s mom left him? He had a good question – how could any woman leave a kid so sweet and cute? I don’t understand it, but I’ve never been a mother. Turning my gaze to him, I want to take him in my arms and hug him. Letting out a deep breath, I reply, “I don’t know why your mom would leave... but I know it wasn’t anything you did.”

Shrugging, Jace changes the subject. “Where are your parents?” he asks. “Do you have any brothers or sisters?”

I understand kids are nosy, but this little boy is starting to make me uncomfortable. Shifting my weight, I only partially answer his question. “Nope, no brothers or sisters.”

“But where are your parents?” He pushes for more details than I want to give.

“Back in the city,” I tell him with a sigh. “Hey, once we get done with the milking, do you think you could show me how to gather the eggs? I tried yesterday but the chickens almost bit me.”

Jace throws back his head and laughs. “Chickens don’t bite, silly! They peck.” Once he stops giggling, he adds, “As soon as we get done with the milking, we will go get the eggs.”

I smile as he goes on to tell me about how much he wishes they had horses like his friend, Stephen, has at his house. Listening to him talk about them, I am doubly glad I got the job here at the Berne Farms instead of some other farm.

I have not had a lot of experience around kids, but I was worried Jace might take after his father. The idea of putting up with a child who was so broody and critical was a difficult thing to fathom. Thankfully, he’s nothing like I pictured. The cheerful kid I met at the diner is the same kid Jace is all the time. How a man like Silas created such a sweet and charming kid is beyond me.

“Do you have any kids?” Jace throws another personal question in my direction. He’s a pro at distracting me with small talk and then pouncing with something deep.

Shaking my head, I reply, “No. No kids.”

“What about a husband?”

“No husband.”

Almost a husband, I think to myself, but thankfully things didn’t progress that far.

“What did you do before you came here? Have you always taken care of kids? I can tell you’ve never been on a farm before.” He looks at me as if he’s studying me, trying to determine exactly what my secrets are.

Laughing awkwardly, I think about how to answer his questions. I don’t want to throw out any answers that might eventually get me in trouble. I don’t want anyone to know anything about me. It’s dangerous to give out too much information.

“I went to school, and college,” I tell him, trying to come up with a long answer that will satisfy him but won’t provide any information. “After that, I worked for a few companies... then I decided to travel. I wanted to see the world.”

Squinting one eye, Jace asks, “What about now? Are you here forever, or will you choose to leave here eventually, too?”

I can tell the question is bothering him. It’s like he’s trying to determine whether he can get used to me or not. I wish I had an answer for him, but I don’t. “Look at how much milk we have!” I exclaim, pointing toward the bucket filled with the creamy, white liquid. “How much more do we need?”

My question makes Jace laugh. “Oh, we’re done now,” he says. “All we have to do is get it in the refrigerator over there and then we can see about the eggs.”

Pulling myself to my feet, I’m glad that job is over. Not so much because it was a terrible task, but because it gave Jace too much time to talk.

I dust off the seat of my pants and watch as Jace picks up the bucket of milk like it weighs nothing. He sets it aside and releases the cow, leading her through a gate that sends her back into the grassy pasture.

Turning around, I jump as I find myself staring right into the face of Silas Berne. He’s here to check up on us, quietly observing us as he leans against one of the wooden support beams. The way he stares at me makes me instantly nervous. His eyes bore a hole into me as if he’s measuring me for everything I’m worth.

“Dad!” Jace calls out as he runs up to his father and throws his small body into the tall man’s leg, wrapping his arms around his waist. “I taught Ana how to milk the cow and she did great. We’re going to hang out with the chickens next.”

Reaching out to rub the top of his son’s head, Silas mutters, “That’s great, Jace.” And his eyes never leave me. It’s like he’s judging me, taking stock of me in his silent, brooding way.

“We better get going,” Jace announces, and I’m more than glad to follow him. Anything to escape Silas Berne’s x-ray stare. I don’t know what that look is about, and I’m not sure I want to find out.

SILAS

There's something nice about being at home and away from everyone. You don't have to worry about dealing with the crap that comes with the outside world. You don't have to worry about someone doing something to hurt you or your family. You're in your own little fortress of solitude.

After Kelly left, I made it my mission to stay on the farm and devote myself to my job and my son. It was the only way to keep us safe from the chaos of the outside world.

But now I've let an intruder in and I find myself questioning everything. There is something off about Ana Green and I can't put my finger on it.

Standing inside my workshop, I place a call and hold my cell phone to my ear. As it rings, I peer out the window into the backyard where Ana and Jace are now playing with the remote control race car I gave him for his birthday. They seem to be having fun together.

"Hello?" The voice of my brother, Sean, answers tentatively. He's not used to my calling in the middle of a workday.

"Hey, Sean," I reply. "I hope I'm not interrupting, but I needed to talk for a sec."

"No problem," he assures me. "What's up?"

I'm still watching Ana and my son, almost like I can't let them out of my sight.

“Well,” I start. “I hired a girl to come here and help out around the place. You know, like Mom has been telling me to do for years. This girl appeared out of nowhere looking for a job, and she was so annoying about it, I hired her.”

Sean laughs on the other end and asks, “So, good choice or not? What does Jace think of her?”

Seeing them play together, it’s pretty easy to answer that one. “Oh, well, he just met her today but they’ve taken to each other like best friends. He’s got her out playing in the backyard right now. She’s pretty young, so I guess she doesn’t mind acting like a kid. And she’s great as far as the housework. Her cooking isn’t too bad and she knows how to keep things clean.”

“Sounds great,” Sean says, obviously not catching the hint of uncertainty coating my voice.

“Yeah,” I mutter. “But I’m worried.” Letting my mind wander back to the conversation I overheard Ana having with Jace. “She’s... guarded and closed off. Like she’s hiding something.”

“Like what?”

“Who knows?” I reply, trying to think of anything she has been overtly secretive about.

Chuckling, Sean retorts, “Well then, maybe she’s the perfect match for you. Why don’t you just ask her about herself? Is she pretty cute or something?”

My brother’s teasing makes the heat instantly rise to my face. “I shouldn’t have to ask if she’s telling the truth about herself,” I retort. “And... yes, she’s cute. But like I already said, she’s young. She’s probably not even twenty-five.”

“As long as she’s over eighteen, you’re good,” Sean teases with another laugh.

His words are starting to irritate me. Not only are his insinuations infuriating but, given the attraction I feel toward Ana, they’re also embarrassing. I don’t want to start any kind of family rumor that I’m dating the help.

“Shut up, Sean,” I reply. “This is serious. I think there’s something off about this girl. She is way too sneaky and secretive. Jace was asking the most basic questions earlier today about her family and where she’s from. She just sidestepped them all.” Letting out a sigh, I admit my deepest concern. “I don’t want to put my son in danger,” I confess.

Sean is silent for a moment.

“Silas,” he starts in a serious tone. “You have kept yourself and Jace locked up on that farm ever since Kelly left. It’s not right to live like that. You don’t trust anybody and, frankly, I think you’re paranoid about this girl. As long as she’s doing her job and gets along well with Jace, then it sounds like you’ve found a winner. Give her a chance, why don’t you? Sure, if you see her hiding knives or something, that might be concerning. But her not wanting to be quizzed about her past isn’t a big deal.”

As I listen to my brother, I feel somewhat ridiculous. I wonder if he’s right and I’m making a mountain out of a molehill. Yet, deep in my gut, something still doesn’t sit right. I can’t get over the feeling she’s got something weird going on with her. But I don’t want to stay on the phone and indulge my paranoia with my brother any longer.

“Okay,” I say. “Thanks for listening.”

“Don’t ask her things that make her uncomfortable,” Sean insists. “Unless you want to start dating her.” Of course, my brother would finish his speech with one more jab.

I laugh and say, “Yeah, yeah. Funny. Thanks, Sean. I’m going back to work now.”

Hanging up the phone, I stuff it in my back pocket and look out the window. Jace has taken Ana over to one of the trees in the backyard and is pointing up at the top branches.

As I watch her standing with him, I can’t help that the sight of her with him warms my heart. The way she plays with him, talks to him, how they both laugh together - that’s exactly the kind of female figure Jace needs in his life. And it doesn’t

look like she's putting on an act – she truly appreciates my son.

I cock my head to one side as I consider what Sean said. He told me to give her a chance. Maybe that's the best idea. I don't know. She is pretty good with Jace and it would be hard to find anybody who would clean the house as well as she did.

I don't know. Maybe I'm crazy to keep her around. I let out a sigh and turn back to the building schematic spread out on my desk. There's work to be done. Right now, I don't have time to focus on what Ana might be hiding. I'll take Sean's advice, for a change, and give her a chance. But, at the first sign of trouble, I'm kicking her out of my house immediately.



A KNOCK on the workshop door pulls me away from the almost-completed frame I've constructed for my newest greenhouse. Making my way to the door, I swing it open to find Jace standing outside, smiling.

"I'm supposed to tell you to come in for supper," Jace announces, his smile growing wider. "Ana made an actual meal for us. She's been digging around in the cabinets and has come up with some stuff to cook."

I'm glad to see my son so anxious to eat dinner, and I follow behind him as I pull the shop door shut behind me. Walking alongside him to the house, he explains, "And that's not the best part... we've got brownies too! It's been forever since we've had brownies."

Now I know why he's so excited.

An array of smells fills my senses as I swing open the back door of the house. Making my way into the kitchen, I find Ana standing over the stove. Her hair is pulled back into a loose bun at the back of her neck, and she's stirring something on the stovetop.

It's been a long time since I've had a woman in my house. Actually, other than my mom, there has never been a woman

in this house. Ana looks so at home and so sweet that, for a moment, I am overcome by a deep longing in my heart.

This is what I hoped for with Kelly. Someone who would be able to come along and make a family with me.

As soon as the thought enters my mind, I brush it aside. Right, that's what I wanted with Kelly – and she's a prime example that wishes don't always come true. Ana Green is sneaky as well, and she's just as likely to leave as not. I'd better not get used to her, either.

Turning around, she gives a smile and points toward two chairs at the table. "You all go and sit down. Dinner is almost ready."

Taking a seat, I study her carefully. In the background, Jace is telling me about their experiences with the chickens, but I'm only half listening to him. I am almost annoyed with Ana for being so adorable and competent all of a sudden. She's making me feel things I haven't felt in a very long time, and I'm not sure what to do about it.

When she comes to the table, she presents steaming plates full of spaghetti and meat sauce and sets them out in front of each of us.

"I hope you don't mind, but I went through the cabinets when I was cleaning yesterday," she says as she sits down.

"I told her we love spaghetti," Jace explains as he takes a big bite of the pasta and dribbles some sauce down his chin. "I'm sick of eating sandwiches and stuff from a can."

The food is delicious and the sauce tastes homemade. The smell of brownies lingers in the air, making me anxious to be done with the spaghetti.

Before I have time to reach for my napkin, Ana grabs hers and leans across the table to wipe Jace's chin.

"I could make more intricate meals if I had more ingredients," she declares, her voice tentative. "I mean, if I had a chance to go to the grocery store, I could pick some stuff up. I'm pretty good with recipe books."

I can tell her suggestion is more like a question. Looking up at her, I reply, “We’ve got enough food here. There’s no need to act like we’re at a restaurant every night. Jace and I have been eating frozen pizza and lunch meat for years. We’ve both lived through it so far.”

My comments make Ana go silent. Jace lets out a half pout but he quickly sucks it up and starts to tell me more about playing outside.

Ana’s food is good. She somehow managed to take the few items in my pantry and make an Italian restaurant-style meal. I am impressed, yet I don’t want to let on. She doesn’t need to know how much she impressed me over the last few days. If I start giving her compliments now, that could be a slippery slope. Then, I might start telling her how good she looks, and then what?

She gets a gold star for housekeeping, cooking, and taking care of Jace. As I eat my meal in silence, the two of them jabbering about their day, I can’t help but admit Sean might be right. Perhaps giving her a chance is my best option. After all, she’s not as useless as she seemed at first.

For now, I’m just going to enjoy having her around. But this is still a probationary period as far as I’m concerned.

ANA

I t's half past six in the morning and I'm alone with the chickens again. I grab the bag of wood chips and begin to toss them around on the floor. One of the chickens, Aunt Pearl, comes toward me and I reach down to pet her before she jumps away with a cluck.

I've now been at the Berne Farms for almost a week. I've grown accustomed to the chores and have even made a routine for myself. Waking up before six o'clock is still a challenge, but I'm beginning to feel less like a zombie when I pull myself out of bed.

This morning, Jace is out in the workshop with his dad. It gives me some free time to complete tasks around the farm without a little boy begging me to hurry so we can play.

I never expected I'd like kids as much as I like Jace, but he's making it easy. He's very agreeable and fun to spend time with. Even Silas is becoming a bit more bearable as the days pass. Sure, he might be surly and gruff, but I'm starting to think it's just his way. I take his actions less personally now, which makes everything easier. Now that I've learned he just isn't a talker, I'm less desperate to keep a conversation going. I am more at ease, and hope he appreciates my place in his home.

Of course, he might still surprise me and fire me tomorrow. I never know what to expect from the quiet, broody man.

Taking a break from spreading wood chips, I wipe beads of sweat off my forehead with the back of my hand. I was right when I thought New Harmony seemed like the perfect place to build a new life. I lean my weight against the handle of the pitchfork and squint my eyes as I envision a future where I stay here at Berne Farms and work until Jace is an adult. By then, all worries about Brett should be gone. My ex should have moved on and found someone else to torture and obsess over.

A shudder travels down my spine, like it does every time I think about Brett. I know him well enough to know he doesn't give up easily. I've seen him settle scores with old friends, leading them to believe their offenses were long-forgiven, only to stab them in the back when they least expected it.

My stomach tightens as I think back to his threat to hunt me down if I ever left him. He was probably telling the truth. Brett was the type of person who was certain to get revenge, no matter what the cost. If he managed to find me, he would do something to ruin me – I'm sure of that.

The sound of the chicken coop door opening makes me jump and I turn sharply. Caught up in my fears about Brett, I instinctively raise the pitchfork to defend myself.

“Sorry, didn't mean to scare you.” It's Silas. His deep voice soothes my soul like a warm bubble bath and my fears vanish.

Lowering the pitchfork to the floor, I let out a breath and laugh it off. “Wow, I guess I was in another world.”

Silas isn't amused, however. His eyes narrow as if he can see right through me and read my secrets. “What are you so scared of?” he asks.

Part of me wishes I could be honest, but I know that's not an option. Shrugging my shoulders, I put on my best poker face. “I was up late last night reading a scary book,” I declare. “I guess that wasn't the best idea.”

Silas doesn't relax his stare. He studies me with his blazing blue eyes and I feel his gaze inspect every part of me. “Go get

in my truck,” he commands.

A shiver runs down my spine. What does this mean? I’ve never been anywhere with Silas before. The idea of being alone with him makes me uneasy. Not because he scares me, but because I struggle to keep myself a secret from him. “Where are we going?” I ask.

“You’ll see,” he says and walks out of the chicken pen. Following behind him, I struggle to keep up with his long strides. “Where is Jace?” I ask.

“Already in the truck.”

That’s a relief. With Jace around, that will take a lot of pressure off. The idea of taking a drive with Silas alone is slightly petrifying. He has a way of looking at me that makes me feel like I can’t hide anything from him. I’m sure he would fire me in a heartbeat if he knew I was not who I said I was.

Getting in the front seat of the car, I buckle my seat belt as he starts the engine and takes off down the driveway. Looking in the back, I see Jace is already in place with a grin on his face. If something bad is about to happen, he doesn’t realize it.

“I hope you’re not taking me off in the middle of nowhere to leave me,” I comment as we reach the main road. I’m half-joking, half-serious. “At least let me drive myself away so I’ll have my car.”

Silas looks at me out of the corner of his eye. Snorting, he says, “I’m not dropping you in the middle of nowhere.”

So, it’s a mystery what we’re doing here. But I choose not to ask and keep my mouth shut as we ride in silence.

When we reach the town of New Harmony, Silas pulls his car up to the grocery store and parks.

“What are we doing here?” I ask, finally letting a question slip off my lips.

Silas reaches over to me and takes my hand, placing a plastic credit card in my palm. “We’re here to shop,” he replies. “You mentioned last week we needed some more food so you could cook something. So, here we are.”

Taking the card, I stare at it, amazed that he was listening to anything I said. I don't know if I should be flattered or suspicious of this out-of-character behavior, but I feel like crying. "How much do you want me to spend?" I ask.

Silas shrugs. "Whatever you think we need," he says.

I can't believe my ears. Silas was so confident we would be fine living off canned foods and microwavable junk. I never expected he would give in to my suggestions – and I never expected he'd trust me enough to just hand over his card.

"You two go on," Silas says, leaning back in his seat. "I'll wait for you out here."



BY THE TIME we check out, we have a full cart to push out to the waiting car. As we approach the vehicle, Silas looks up to see us coming. Getting out of the car, he walks around to the back of the truck and helps to transfer the heavy bags of groceries.

"Do you intend to cook all of this?" he asks as he takes the bags out of the cart.

Nodding my head, I smile and say, "Yes. I may stun you with my cooking abilities now that I have something to work with."

Silas raises an eyebrow as if he's not sure whether he believes me but it's a challenge I happily accept.

"Hey, Dad." Jace tugs on the edge of Silas's shirt. "Can we go to the diner? It's getting late and I'm starving. I'd love some ice cream and a burger."

"What do you think this is?" Silas asks, motioning to all the food he just loaded up. "It's food, just waiting to be fixed. We don't need to waste more time and money eating somewhere else."

Clasping his hands together, Jace gets a pathetic pout on his lips as he begs, "Please!"

Silas rolls his eyes and turns to me. "Do you mind getting dinner over there tonight?" he asks. "You can impress me with your cooking another time."

I shrug my shoulders. Although I had been looking forward to cooking up a masterpiece, I'm happy with the idea of a break from more housework. Never in my life have I cooked so many meals or washed so many dishes.

In a few minutes, we're walking into Millie's Café and Diner. As the bell over the door jingles upon our arrival, I look around the small establishment and notice the evening crowd hasn't arrived yet. A few customers are in their seats enjoying their meals, but it ought to be fairly easy to get food quickly.

"I'll be right there! Find yourself a seat!" I hear Jenny's voice call out from the back of the diner.

Silas leads us to the booth furthest from anyone who might show up. Stuck in a back corner, it would be hard for anyone to see us, including the waitress. Scooting into my spot across from him, I can tell he's uncomfortable. Silas isn't a fan of crowds or public outings.

"Well, hello, hello." The familiar voice of our waitress rings out as she comes to our table. Jenny has a bright smile on her face and her long, wavy hair is pulled back in its usual ponytail. "What can I get for you all tonight?"

Grabbing the menu, Silas looks over it with a discerning eye. He tosses it aside and says, "Cheeseburger. Fries and a coke." He turns his eyes toward Jenny, adding, "Please."

"Same," Jace says with a grin. "But for a drink, I want a chocolate shake with all the toppings you have."

Turning her eyes on me, Jenny winks and takes my order. I choose a fish sandwich, thinking I should try to eat healthier. She puts the paper in her pocket and says, "I'll be right back." Then she looks at Silas and back at me. "Nice to see you're still around," she adds before heading back to the kitchen to place our order.

Something about the way she said that makes me nervous. I think about how it looks for my employer, a handsome, older man, to take me out to eat with him and his little boy. Jenny loves to gossip. She would grasp at any chance for a story about some local intrigue. God knows she's inventing something in her imagination right now about what's going on with me and Silas behind the scenes.

The thought makes me blush.

As we wait for our food, Silas and Jace whisper and play with each other. Jace tries to poke at Silas who catches his hand every time. All I can think is how much we look like a family—or at least a couple of some kind.

It's not far from the truth.

Silas is one of the most difficult men I've ever known. Other than his stunning good looks and muscular body, he's not the type I'd consider a potential boyfriend. And yet, when I glance up and see him playing with his son, in a good mood for once, I realize there's something about him that's starting to get to me. In some strange way, this ornery, standoffish hermit has become part of my heart. And, for a few seconds, I almost wish this were a date.

But almost as soon as the thought flits through my mind, I push it aside. How crazy am I? I'm a woman on the run, hiding out from an over-possessive and abusive ex, lying to my boss. Not the best starting point for a relationship.

Shaking my head, I try to get the thoughts out of my mind. I have to live in the present and appreciate what I've got for today—which is a place to hide, where Brett can't find me. I should never hope for more than that.

SILAS

Life has a weird way of changing things. When Ana Green showed up on my porch and asked for a job, I thought it was the most ridiculous thing I'd ever considered. But now, after a week and a half of having her at my house, I feel like I made a good choice in hiring her.

At least a good choice in some ways. In other ways, it's frightening how much I depend on her. While she may not have come knowing anything about life on the farm, she has made a tremendous impact on the house. The clothes are all clean and we have an empty dishwasher every evening.

Most of all, I appreciate what she's done for Jace. As I think about how their relationship has grown, my eyes wander toward the back of the yard where the two of them are feeding the cows.

Working my tongue in my cheek, I consider how much she has done for my little boy in such a short amount of time. While I worried she would be too immature to care for him, she has proven herself to be trustworthy and dependable, going above and beyond to make sure he's happy. But, at the same time, she's also got enough energy to connect with him in a way I never have.

What if she decides to leave one day?

The question floats through my mind like a nightmare. I hate wondering such things. And, more than that, I hate admitting how much she matters to me. Depending on people is not my strong suit. Ever since Kelly left, I've been happy to

fend for myself and take care of my own show. I'm the only one I can trust to make decisions for me and for the good of my son.

The fact that I'm starting to appreciate and depend on Ana makes me vulnerable. And vulnerability makes me deeply uncomfortable.

It won't matter if she leaves, I tell myself. I'll just find someone else to take care of things.

"Dad, Dad! Come quick!" The sound of Jace screaming makes me jump. Throwing down the hammer I was about to use, I rush toward the backfield. It rained last night, so the grass is wet and slippery under my boots and I have to be careful as we rush toward the barn.

When I round the back of the barn, I see Ana, down on both knees in the mud, one of her shoes completely sunk into a cow print. Jace is holding onto her right hand, trying to help her up.

"What happened?" I ask, climbing over the plank fence to get to her faster, "Are you hurt?"

To my surprise, Ana isn't crying from pain. She has a few tears running down her cheeks, but, to my relief, they appear to be from laughter more than anything else.

"I am so clumsy," she declares with a shake of her pretty head. Reaching up to push some hair out of her eyes, she wipes mud against her forehead. "I wasn't watching where I was going, and I was trying to beat Jace back to the house when I fell right in this muddy hole."

"I bet I would have won the race," Jace teases with a twinkle in his eye.

Walking closer to her, I can't help but laugh. Ana is a mess and yet, she looks cuter than ever. Trapped in the mud, she is almost helpless, and the dirt smeared on her face is about the most adorable thing I've ever seen.

As I lean over to take her arm, I have the sudden urge to pull her into me and wipe the dirt off her. Before I can think better of it, I'm holding her adorable, mud-smeared face, just

inches from my own, with both hands. Her pale green eyes stare at me with blank innocence as I gently push away the muck sullyng her porcelain cheeks.

I catch myself and stand up straight. “Here, hold onto me,” I tell her. Ana takes hold of my arm with both hands and clings to it. She’s such a little thing that her weight hardly affects me as I yank her free, pulling her directly into my arms. I hold her for a moment before I slowly lower her to the ground, still gripping her hand. She may be small in stature, but her presence does something powerful to my senses.

“There we go,” she says with a laugh as she holds onto me and kicks the mud off her foot, her shoe still miraculously attached. “I was afraid I was going to lose my shoe.” As I lead her away from the muddy pit that almost swallowed her, she looks down at her body and moans.

“Oh my God, I am such a mess!” she cries. “I’m sorry, dinner is going to be a little late tonight. I have to change my clothes.”

She lets go of me to walk by herself, and I fight the urge to walk with her. I hate the feeling of her hand leaving mine.

“Don’t worry about dinner,” I assure her as I take a step back. Looking at her mud-soaked clothes and face, I suggest, “How about you just take a nice shower, and once you get in the house, we can have something quick like sandwiches.”

Nodding her head, Ana says, “Well, I hate to neglect my work, but I guess it might be a good idea.”

“Especially since you may have cow poop on your face!” Jace teases.

The expression of horror on Ana’s face makes me laugh out loud despite myself.

Nodding again, she says, “Yeah, a shower is a good idea.”

She hurries to her cabin and my eyes travel after her. By the time I snap out of it, I feel my face growing warm from embarrassment. Glancing down at Jace, I’m happy to see he’s busy looking at a worm on the ground and hadn’t noticed my staring at Ana.

“Hey,” I suggest as I bend over to give him a nudge on the shoulder. “Let’s go inside. I’ll fix supper tonight.”

Ana’s been working hard. It only makes sense that she should have a chance to take a break for one evening.



BY THE TIME I have a pan full of hamburger cooked and have added some sloppy joe mix, I hear the backdoor of the house creak open. For some reason, my heart beats a little faster now when I know Ana’s about to step inside.

I wouldn’t admit it to anyone, but while I was cooking, images of her were running through my mind non-stop. I kept envisioning her covered in mud, laughing like a kid as I helped her.

“Ana!” Jace calls out from the dining room where I’ve directed him to set the table. “Dad and I decided to give you a break tonight. We cooked for you.”

“Oh wow,” Ana exclaims, her voice showing true appreciation. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“Sit down,” Jace tells her as I pull out a pack of hamburger buns and start dishing the meat sauce onto them.

When I turn around to place the loaded plates on the table, my heart jumps into my throat. Fresh out of the shower, Ana looks like a changed person. The mud is, of course, washed away and she’s wearing a loose pair of pink striped sweatpants with an oversized white T-shirt. Her wet hair is combed and hanging neatly at her shoulders. Her cheeks are still flushed from her hot shower and she radiates a soft, feminine warmth as she steps into the room.

I deposit her plate in front of her and am hit with the scent of something like rosewater lingering in the air around her.

Handing Jace his plate, I sit down across the table and stare at my food, trying not to allow my eyes to travel back to Ana.

“So, I guess I won the race tonight,” Jace asserts as he munches down on his sandwich.

“I don’t think so,” Ana returns. “As I recall, I was the one in the lead until my foot got stuck in the mud. Just because there was an obstacle in my path doesn’t mean I wasn’t the fastest.”

Jace snorts so hard he has to put his hand over his mouth to keep the food from flying out his mouth.

“It doesn’t work like that, Ana!” he exclaims, shaking his head. “People fall in races all the time... and they still lose, even if they were ahead. It’s about who gets to the finish line first.”

Holding up a finger, Ana has a serious look on her face as she says, “But, the question is... who got to the finish line first? If I remember correctly, I went on to the cabin while you lingered behind with your dad.”

Jace swallows hard, putting his sandwich down on his plate. “The house was the finish line,” he protests. “You went to take a shower, so Dad and I got here first. Isn’t that right, Dad?”

I haven’t been paying attention to what they’ve been saying. Looking up, I raise my eyebrows and try to gather what they’ve been babbling about.

“Who won the race?” Jace presses, glaring at me. “Me or Ana?”

Taking a bite of my sandwich, I chew for a minute before I announce, “I think the race was called. Neither one of you was running when I came out there. It’s been rescheduled on account of poor conditions.”

Ana and Jace both laugh, and he reaches out to give her a high-five. Grinning at her, he says, “We’ll have a rematch tomorrow.”

“But not through the mud,” Ana warns. My gaze wanders in her direction, and I stare longer than I should. Her smile reveals her teeth, which are perfectly aligned, and I study with

fascination, the delicate curve of her lips, and the playful glint in her eyes as she laughs.

Good God, she is a vision. How had I not seen her like this before?

I catch myself and pry my eyes away. I sigh inwardly and focus on the food on my plate. If anyone could hear my thoughts at the moment, I would die of embarrassment. As much as I've tried to keep my distance from Ana Green, something is different now. I am constantly fighting the urge to take her in my arms.

Jesus, Silas, have you lost your mind?

As I chew my food, I kick myself, trying to talk sense to the half of my brain that isn't listening to reason.

"I left something out in the workshop," I abruptly announce, pushing back from my plate. "You all go on and don't wait for me. I may be a while."

I don't explain anything and I don't wait for a reply. Instead, I march out of the house. The evening air is cool and a welcome relief for my blood, running hot in my veins. Images of Ana's lips and teeth bombard my thoughts. The memory of her sweet smell and the subtle press of her breasts against her oversized T-shirt is more than my male brain can handle. She has infected me with need and its creeping fingers clutch at my most sensitive parts.

I need the solace of my workshop and the distraction of my work to get my mind back in order.

Peering back through the kitchen window, I watch Jace at the table with Ana. The two of them are still talking together and laughing. I narrow my eyes. I knew from the start Ana Green was going to be trouble, and this is proof.

From now on, I'm going to have to work harder to keep my guard up. It's the only way I can protect myself from the threat to my sanity that she represents.

ANA

I have no clue what got into Silas last night. He surprised me by being so charming and making food for us, only to turn around and hurry out of the house immediately after. Jace was already in bed, asleep, and I'd gone to my cabin for the night before he went back into the house.

I can't figure Silas out. While I'd like for the two of us to be friendly with one another, it's starting to seem like he wants to keep me forever at a distance. Sometimes I feel his eyes lingering on me and I can't help but wonder what he could be thinking.

"Have you seen my tablet?" Jace asks, interrupting my thoughts.

Cutting some strips of meat off the turkey I cooked that morning, I shake my head and squint. I try to imagine where it could be. "No, I don't think I have."

Jace sits down at the table with a huff and mumbles, "Of course, it would have to disappear right now. My friend Stephen said this new game is coming out today and I can play it on my tablet or a phone."

"I'm sorry," I reply as I plate the turkey. "I haven't seen it."

The familiar whine of the backdoor opening tells us Silas is home. As he steps into the kitchen, Jace hurries to his father's side and calls out, "Dad! Hey, have you seen my tablet? I've been looking everywhere for it."

I put some dressing and mashed potatoes on the plate along with a serving of peas. I don't even look at Silas. I haven't seen him since his sudden departure from the dinner table last night and I am uncomfortable looking at him now. I'm worried I upset him somehow, but I don't understand how, or why. So I do what he does, just push it to the side and get on with things.

"No, I have not seen your tablet," Silas says as he takes a seat at the table. "But knowing you, I seriously doubt you've looked hard enough."

As I put Silas's plate down in front of him, he moves his chair back from me, as if he's trying to put more space between us.

"Could I use your phone, Dad?" Jace begs while I set down his plate.

Shaking his head, Silas picks up his fork. "No. I need my phone for work," he replies. "You know that. It would be bad if someone tried to get in touch with me and couldn't."

As I sit down, I feel Jace's eyes travel toward me. Putting his hands together in a pleading manner, he asks, "Ana, can I please use your phone? You can watch me while I'm using it. I promise I'll be so good."

I glance at Jace, then over to Silas who doesn't seem at all interested in this discussion.

Use my phone? The question is almost laughable. A phone was the one thing I was positive Brett would use to track me, so I dumped it a long time ago. If Jace wants to use my phone, he'd have to travel back to Chicago and dig it out of Lake Michigan.

Shaking my head, I take a bite of turkey. "I don't have a phone," I say.

Silas looks up from his plate, his gaze landing on me. He has a quizzical expression when I look over to meet his eyes but he breaks it off in an instant.

"How about you quit trying to borrow someone's phone and really look for your tablet?" Silas suggests, turning his

attention back to Jace. “I bet if you got under that bed of yours and dug through some of the junk, you’d find it.”

Jace lets out a groan. “Okay. I guess, but can Ana help me?”

“No,” Silas replies firmly. “You lose something like that, you need to be the one to look for it. It’s called being responsible.”

Jutting out his jaw, Jace mutters, “I hate responsibility.”

I want to laugh but it gets caught in my throat. There’s something about the way Silas keeps looking at me that stifles all my cheer. I’m not sure what he’s thinking and I’m always too afraid to ask.

As soon as Jace has scarfed down the last of his food, he asks to be excused and hurries off to his room to hunt for the missing electronics.

Pulling myself to my feet, I look at Silas and ask, “Are you done? I’m going to put the dishes in the washer and then clean the bathrooms.”

Silas hands over his plate as he continues to stare at me. His eyes follow me as I load the dishwasher and then start it.

“So,” he says, leaning back in his seat. “You don’t have a cell phone? A young woman like you without a cell phone. That’s almost impossible to believe in this day and age.”

Goosebumps form on my skin. It’s almost like I’m being questioned about a crime and he’s the detective. I swallow hard. “Oh, I used to have one. I just got rid of it. I found it tied me down too much to places and people I was through with.”

The words are true and I hope they sound believable enough without giving anything away.

Silas shrugs and says, “Fair enough.”

Taking a sip of water, he pushes back his chair and heads outside. I have never been happier to see him leave the house. My heart is pounding and I can only hope he doesn’t suspect my answer. I have to be cautious around Silas Berne – everything I say is like a potential weapon he could use against

me. I know he's concerned for the safety of his household and his son, but this job is too important for me to let my secrets see the light of day.



A COUPLE OF HOURS LATER, Jace has found his beloved tablet and is on the couch, playing a game over the internet with one of his friends from school. I'm glad to have the chance to give the house a quick once over.

I grab some cleaning products and throw them into a bucket. Since I cleaned the bathroom yesterday, I decide to head down the hall to the master bedroom - Silas's room.

There's something strange about being in a grown man's room, especially when the room smells like aftershave and deodorant. My thoughts flash back to my high school years, as a memory of sneaking into the boys' locker room with my best friend, Becky Stevens, enters my imagination. It's almost like I'm treading on sacred ground and I'm somewhere I'm not supposed to be.

As I peer around the room, I notice he has no pictures on his walls, not even on his dresser. I stroll over to his wardrobe to inspect what sentimental items he may have, which isn't much, but then I turn, and my heart nearly jumps out of my chest. The bucket I was holding hits the floor with a sharp crack.

There, in the doorway, stands Silas, watching me with his arms crossed over his chest.

"Wow, I am so sorry!" I hurry to apologize, feeling even more awkward than before. "I didn't mean to be intrusive. I just thought I'd clean up real quick while you were outside working."

My apology doesn't seem to phase Silas. Instead, he continues to stare at me. My heart pounds as he silently makes his way across the hardwood floor toward me. He stops a foot from me and asks, "What are you doing in New Harmony?"

I raise my eyebrows. How can I begin to answer that?

Not giving me a chance, Silas continues, “You say you’re from the city. So why did you come here? What made you stop in New Harmony?”

Shrugging away the nerves in my stomach, I try to look unconcerned as I explain, “I thought I told you all that. I had been traveling around for a while. And when I came across this town, I just fell in love with the place.”

Silas narrows his gaze. “You love this place so much you’re willing to give up everything to move here?” he asks. “You cut all contact with the outside world and your old life... so you could come beg me for a job?”

I grab the duster off the floor and begin to run it back and forth across the top of the furniture. Maybe if I keep my hands busy, it won’t show how nervous I am.

“I hated the city,” I insist. “There was nothing there for me. Sure, I had friends, but I needed a fresh start. There will always be time to reconnect with people like my parents once I get my footing.”

In a swift motion, Silas reaches out and grabs the duster, jerking it out of my hands. Taking a step closer so he has me boxed in between his large body and the dresser behind me, he stares me dead in the eyes. “I don’t know what it is about you, Ana Green, but something doesn’t sit right with me. Something doesn’t add up. You’re hiding something. You’re welcome to keep your personal life to yourself, but only as long as it doesn’t impact me or my son.”

I try to look down at the floor, but my eyes drift back toward Silas. It’s as if I’m magnetized by his gaze. Brett pinned me in a corner like this before, but that was different. With Brett, I was always afraid he’d hurt me. With Silas, I feel exposed, but somehow, I know he would never hurt me. There’s something soft about him, something that tells me I can trust him. He’s powerful, yet I know he would only use his body to protect and not harm.

Part of me wishes I could spill my guts and tell him the truth about everything, but that's out of the question. If I were to tell Silas everything, he would fire me, I'm sure.

"Just don't do anything to hurt Jace," Silas warns. "You and I get along well enough, but I promise you, if you ever do anything to harm my son, that will not be a happy day for you."

His warning is fair enough and I nod my head in agreement. "I will never hurt Jace," I say. "I promise you. You and I both have secrets, but I left mine far from here."

Silas's gaze softens and he hands me back the duster.

"Fair enough," he says.

He turns and leaves the room and I stand stock-still, listening to his footsteps as they grow more and more distant through the house. Once he's gone, I let out a breath and close my eyes. Goddamnit, that was awkward. How am I turned on right now? I should be in shock, shaken by the imposing presence of that huge man cornering me and demanding answers. Instead, I just want him to rip my clothes off. What the hell is wrong with me?

I suck in a fresh inhale and Silas's scent overwhelms me. I don't know if it was his body, so close to mine, the lingering odor in the room, or my imagination. All I know is, I have to be careful. Silas Berne is still my only real tie to New Harmony. He's the only one providing me with the ability to stay here, but he's also the one most likely to run me off.

I can only hope my answers appeased him. Maybe now he'll let my secret past stay a secret.

Awareness floods my senses as I become aware of my surroundings again. I am overwhelmed with conflicting emotions. On one hand, I am terrified to tell Silas the truth, especially since I've been lying to him the entire time I've been here. But on the other, he has done something to me. Silas has put a longing in my soul that I've never felt before. He has shown me how a man can be; powerful yet controlled, firm but gentle.

I wish there were some way I could be honest with him. I wish I could lay all my secrets bare before him so he could see me as I am. And yet, even as I wish it were so, I know it can never be.

Silas and I will always have to keep each other at arm's length.

SILAS

My eyelids part and I roll over on my back, staring at the ceiling. To my surprise, flecks of sunshine are already dotting the white-painted walls of my bedroom. Sitting up, I reach for my alarm clock and stare at it in disbelief.

Six o'clock. How could I have let myself oversleep like this? I never sleep so late.

Of course, when I think back to last night, I realize falling asleep after three o'clock might have had something to do with it. I tried to doze off earlier, but sleep was impossible.

Images of Ana Green filled my mind. Images and thoughts that were outside the realm of good sense.

As I lay alone, sleepless, I imagined what she must be doing out in the guest cabin. At the time, she was probably asleep, but my mind wouldn't let go of her image. I was in a helpless state, vulnerable, as memories of her face, her innocent, pouting lips, and the outfit she wore at dinner, all danced in my mind. I yearned for her. I imagined holding her close, protecting her from whatever demons might be haunting her.

When I confronted her about her secrets last night, I expected her to either come out with a lengthy confession or try to lie even more. She had done neither. Instead, she told the truth – she does have secrets, but they're only affecting her and not my son. She was also right to point out another truth that I had long ignored: we both have secrets.

Shaking off my thoughts and lack of sleep, I roll out of bed and grab a pair of blue jeans off the floor. I slip them on over my boxers and wonder what my new nanny's secrets could be. What is she running from? Why did she feel the need to start a new life here, on my farm?

Lots of people need a fresh start, I reason to myself. And yet, few people are so devoted to starting over that they cut all ties to the past. Ana is not an idiot – it's easy for me to see she's well-schooled and, from things she's said, I can guess she's even held some decent jobs in her time. Why would she give all that up so she could be a maid to an old grump like me? I know that I'm no bouquet of daisies to deal with, and she'd probably make more money as an executive assistant, given what I'm paying her.

Biting my lip, I let my mind wander back to some of the thoughts I had last night. This intense longing to have Ana there with me was overwhelming. It would almost be enough, just to have someone there to wrap my arms around, to feel the comfort and warmth of a female. But with Ana, it's much deeper than I care to admit.

In the light of day, my corny wishes make me want to slap myself in the face. How could I threaten her one moment, then wish I could hold her the next? That's insane.

Maybe I'm losing my mind. It's been a long time since I've felt anything for a woman, and I can't remember ever feeling like this, giddy and horny like a schoolboy all at once.

When I was younger and I found a girl attractive, I pursued her full force. But after my ex left, I've avoided people so much that I've managed to stay clear of women altogether. I would never have dreamed of this predicament – a woman whom I find unnervingly attractive, and yet having the unstoppable urge to push her away.

Pulling on my T-shirt, I make my way out of my bedroom and toward the kitchen. I wonder if Ana has already been in the house. Knowing her and how sleepy she is in the mornings, she probably saw I was still asleep and went back to the cabin to catch a little more shut-eye herself.

To my surprise, when I swing the door open to the kitchen, I find Ana standing over the sink. The coffee pot is already steaming with the hot, black liquid, and my newspaper is sitting at my place at the table.

“Good morning,” Ana says as she turns around and offers a smile in my direction. She has a crockpot out on the counter and is arranging a large beef roast in it.

“Morning,” I reply as I pour myself a cup of coffee and take a seat.

I’ve noticed Ana doesn’t seem to prattle on as she used to. Sure, she might say something occasionally, but she’s grown more comfortable the longer she’s been at my house. Now, she no longer feels the need to fill every waking moment with some sort of endless talk. There’s something nice about that. She’s grown more at ease with being here.

The sound of rain pattering on the roof makes me groan.

“Sounds like it’s going to be a miserable day,” Ana says with a shake of her head.

The sound of tiny feet on the hardwood floor makes us both turn around to find Jace walking into the room. He’s still wearing his pajamas and his hair is a mess. Walking over to the table, he moans, “I don’t feel good at all.”

It’s been a long time since he’s been sick, so I should have known this was coming. Putting my hand on his forehead, I announce, “You don’t feel hot. What’s wrong?”

“My ear is hurting,” he whines.

Glancing at Ana, I see she’s concerned. She washes her hands in the sink and makes her way to his side. Looking up at me, she asks, “Do you think he should go to the doctor?”

Letting out a deep sigh, I nod. “That would be a good idea. He’s had some pretty nasty earaches in the past.” Scooting my chair back, I dig through my wallet to find the doctor’s phone number. Looks like I won’t be starting work as early as usual today.



I WASN'T surprised Jace didn't want to go to the doctor without Ana, and yet, as I sit in the waiting room with him squished between the two of us, I feel horribly out of place. Jace is leaning his head against Ana's shoulder as she gently strokes his hair and, for the first time, I feel like I'm playing second fiddle to someone else. I'm more like an accessory while she's taking over the role of the parent.

"Jace Berne?" The voice of the nurse practitioner makes us both sit up straight. Standing up, I reach out for Jace's hand but he shakes his head.

"I want Ana to go with me," he informs me.

Smiling sweetly at us, the nurse informs us that only one person can go in with the child.

"I still want Ana," Jace insists.

Stepping back, I let Ana lead Jace toward the doctor. As they walk away together, a mix of emotions swirls in my chest. I'm glad Jace has a mother figure now, but I'm disturbed he's become so attached to Ana. We know little about her and, even though she promises her secrets will never hurt Jace, I still don't think she is completely trustworthy.

I have a sneaking sense that things might work out, but my mind goes to different places and I imagine how it would be if Ana were Jace's mother. Picking up one of the magazines in the waiting area, I lead through it absentmindedly, trying to distract myself from such ludicrous thoughts.

"He's so sweet." I hear the receptionist say from her desk. Looking up to meet her gaze, I don't recognize her. It's surprising because this is a small town. She must have moved to New Harmony recently. Nodding her head toward the door where Jace and Ana just disappeared, she asks, "Is she his big sister?"

I snort out a sarcastic laugh. "Not exactly," I reply.

I turn back to my magazine, hoping she won't ask me anything else. What seemed like a touching moment, the three of us going to the doctor together, has quickly gone sour. Out of place and unwanted, I can only imagine how things look. I feel like some sort of old pervert, preying on a helpless younger woman.

Running the uncomfortable thoughts through my mind, I'm surprised I have no idea how old Ana is. She could be in her mid-twenties, but it would be just my luck if it turns out she's some high school runaway.

My face grows warm with embarrassment as I wonder if I've been making eyes at an underage girl.

Trying to turn my attention back toward the magazine, I force myself to read articles about how to bake the perfect sourdough. I would look around for a more interesting magazine, but I don't want to create another opportunity for the receptionist to grill me about who the young girl with my son is.

When I hear the office door open again, I sit up and toss the magazine aside with relief. Ana and Jace are walking toward me hand-in-hand with the doctor following behind them. The doctor approaches me and hands me a piece of paper. "It's just a simple ear infection," she explains. "I ordered him some antibiotics at the drugstore along with some children's ibuprofen. He should feel better in a day or so. I told Ana to have him rest and drink plenty of fluids. He should stay inside and try to just relax for the rest of the day." Reaching out to pat me on the arm, the doctor adds, "By the way, congratulations. I had no idea you were engaged."

Before I can open my mouth to comment, she is already back in her office. Raising my eyebrows, I stare at Jace who peers up at me innocently. I have no clue what the doctor was talking about and I'm not sure I want to know.

"Just wait until we get to the car," I command.

As we make our way out to my truck, I am overcome with dread about what Jace could have said to provoke such a comment.

Once we're all seated in the vehicle, I turn over my shoulder to face my son. "What was that all about?" I ask. "What the doctor said... where did that come from?"

Shrugging his thin shoulders, Jace explains, "I just told her Ana was my adopted mom."

Holding up a finger as if to defend herself, Ana adds, "My exact words were 'stand-in mom.'" She stares at my face, trying to read my expression as she adds, "Nothing was ever suggested about our getting married. I promise. Nothing at all."

Backing my truck out of the parking lot, I can't wait to put some distance between myself and the doctor's office. That place was a minefield of conflicting emotions and humiliation. Perhaps I should go back and set the record straight with Jace's doctor, or maybe put the receptionist in her place.

Ana as my fiancée, or Ana as my daughter... I don't know which one is worse.

"I never thought of you getting married again, Dad," Jace says from the back seat. "That was a funny idea. But why don't you get married? If you and Ana were married, she could do all the same things, but you wouldn't have to pay her."

Good God, I'm glad we got out of the doctor's office before my son made that observation.

I haven't blushed so much in my entire life. I'm sure my face is as red as a beet. I can't even glance over at Ana to see what her expression might be. Slapping my hand against the steering wheel, I decide it's time to put an end to all this talk.

"Enough," I declare. "No more talk of marriage or stand-in mothers or sisters. That's enough."

The inside of the cab is silent as I pull into the parking lot of the drugstore down the street. "I'm running in to get the prescription while you two stay in the car," I say.

After today, I never want to go back to town. This may be the last time I leave the house, and it's the last time Jace, Ana and I ever go anywhere together.

ANA

The rain is still beating down outside and I'm glad Jace's sickness is keeping us in the house. The idea of trying to handle cows and chickens isn't my favorite thought in any condition, but especially not in this weather.

Sitting on the carpeted family room floor with my legs crossed, I pull another card from the pile and turn toward Jace. "Do you have any sevens?" I ask.

On the other hand, I feel sorry for Silas. He's had to do his usual work in the shop on top of the other house chores while I take care of Jace.

"Go fish," Jace says.

My mind wanders back to the events at the doctor's office. I figure Silas is more than glad to hide out in his shop for as long as possible given the way he reacted. A smile creeps over my expression as I remember the comments Jace and his Doctor made.

"Have you any... queens?" asks Jace.

I am partially to blame for the way everything turned out. Going into a doctor's office as the guardian of a young child was a new experience for me. But strangely, I enjoyed feeling like a mother. When Jace introduced me as his adopted mother, it took willpower on my part to set things halfway straight.

"Go fish," I reply.

Looking back, I realize how ridiculous that was. I should have immediately told the doctor I was just his nanny instead of my stupid “stand-in mom” suggestion. Maybe I didn’t want to embarrass Jace by calling him out. My cheeks flush from embarrassment as I think about it.

Even worse is the memory of Jace telling Silas we should get married so he wouldn’t have to pay me. I’ve never been more embarrassed in my life, but Silas was pissed. Was he angrier at the idea of marriage in general, or the idea of marrying me?

“Ana!” Jace urges as he grabs my arm. I glance down at him and he points toward my remaining card. “You forgot to ask what I have.”

I can’t keep my mind on this damn card game when I’ve just caused Silas the humiliation of a lifetime.

“Do you have any threes?” I ask.

Aromas waft in from the kitchen and I smell the roast cooking. I glance at the clock on the wall. As soon as the potatoes and carrots have softened, it will be time to eat. I wonder if Silas will come in to eat with us. After Jace’s doctor’s appointment, he’s been keeping his distance. The entire ride back to the farm was silent and he went outside to work in the shop as soon as we parked in front of the house.

“How long until we eat?”

The deep voice makes me turn my head in surprise, and I watch Silas appear outside the family room. He stands under the arched entryway, leaning to one side with a notebook and his cell phone in his hand.

It appears he’s planning to join us for dinner.

“About twenty minutes,” I reply.

“How about you play with us, Dad?” Jace suggests, “This is Ana’s first time playing, so I’m letting her win.”

Shaking his head, Silas says, “No. I’ve got some papers to go over.”

To my surprise, he doesn't leave the room. Instead, he walks around us toward the leather reclining chair where he sits down and spreads the notebook open on his lap. There's something strange about having him in the house, hanging out with us like he's one of the commoners.

In all the time I've been with the Berne family, I've never known Silas to just sit down and hang out. He's always too busy, always doing something constructive, using every spare minute to work on the house or out in his shop.

"Look, Ana," Jace says as he points at the cards I'm holding in my hand. "If you'd been paying attention, you could have used those cards and won the game!"

I can tell Jace is disappointed in my playing abilities, but I can't help myself. At first, I was distracted thinking about Silas, and everything that unfolded at the doctor's office and now I'm distracted with having him so near.

"How old are you anyway, Ana?" It sounds like a question Jace would ask but it's Silas's voice that rings out to break the silence. "And I want the truth, not some fib. You're not a teenager, are you?"

Raising an eyebrow, I try to understand where this question is coming from.

"I'm twenty-three," I answer honestly.

Jace lets out a whistle and announces, "You're a lot younger than my dad. He's forty-six."

"Thirty-six." Silas corrects.

A thirteen-year age difference. At one time, I would have thought that was a lot, but, at the moment, it doesn't seem so bad. As the thought crosses my mind, I kick myself. What am I thinking? Not so bad? What does that even mean? Silas Berne is my boss—and not just any boss. He's a mean and stubborn, closed-off, difficult man. It's not like he's in the market to date me.

As I steal a peek in his direction, I find him staring back at me, and my heart pounds in my chest. I'm falling for this man and I don't know what to do about it.

The sound of the timer going off in the other room helps to distract me from my crazy thoughts. Pulling myself to my feet, I announce, “I better go get the food on the plates.” Maybe once everyone is sitting around the table, things will go back to normal and my brain will relocate itself inside my head.



THE MEAL IS like every other meal I’ve had at the Berne house. Silas eats in silence, paying little attention to anyone else, while Jace and I talk to one another. For a kid who was suffering from such terrible ear pain earlier that day, he seems to have made a miraculous recovery.

As soon as Jace finishes his last bite, he says, “Ana, come play with me. I want to play another game of cards.”

I open my mouth to answer, but Silas answers for me.

“Ana has had a hard day already,” he declares. “We all have. You’re sick and you need to get ready for bed. Go lay down and watch a little TV. I’ll come to say goodnight in a little bit.”

Letting out a groan, Jace pulls himself to his feet. With a cute smile, he says, “Thanks for dinner, Ana. You are a great cook. And thanks for going in with me to the doctor. You were a good stand-in mom too.”

Of course, he would have to bring that up again. I hoped we brushed that fiasco under the rug once and for all. I only hope my cheeks don’t turn red again in front of Silas.

Jace hugs his father and takes off toward his bedroom. I pull myself up from the table and gather the dishes.

Silas studies me from his seat as he watches me work. His stare makes me nervous, but I hope he can’t tell how his gaze causes flip-flops in my stomach.

“You’ve had a long day,” he says finally. “Why don’t you let me clean up the kitchen for a change? You don’t have to do all the cooking and cleaning.”

“That’s what I’m paid to do,” I inform him, feeling awkward right after I say it. After what Jace said earlier, any mention of my getting paid to be here makes me uncomfortable. “You’re the one that’s been out working all afternoon. I’ve just been playing cards. You sit back and relax.”

I quietly hope Silas takes that as an invitation to go out to the workshop, but that doesn’t happen. Instead, he stands up and makes his way to the refrigerator. Pulling out a drink, he leans his weight against the appliance and continues to watch me clean up.

“You know,” Silas says as I rinse off dishes and place them in the dishwasher. “Jace was right. I mean, he was right about one thing. You’re a good cook.” Holding the bottle by his side, he takes a step toward me. “You have talent in the kitchen, Ana, and you’ve done well with your job here. I haven’t told you that before, but I should have.”

His tone is deep and serious. I can’t meet his gaze but my face breaks into a smile as I say, “Well, thank you. I’m glad you’re happy with my work.” These are the kindest words he’s ever spoken to me, but not knowing how to process them makes me slightly uneasy. I am so used to getting criticism from Silas that I don’t know how to handle a compliment from him.

I pull a large piece of Tupperware out of the cabinet and put away the leftovers for tomorrow. Before I know what he’s doing, Silas is by my side, placing his hand over mine. I pull in a breath as a wave of excitement lifts my pulse.

“How about I take care of that for you?” he says.

His body is so close to mine, I can feel his heat. A silent whimper escapes on my exhale as the rumble of his voice enters me like a bad idea.

The way he’s acting is so unlike his usual brooding way. I wish I could look over at him to make sure it’s the same person. But I can’t. I’m frozen—overcome by the light press of his chest against my shoulder.

He takes the Tupperware away from me and I watch as he puts the leftovers in the refrigerator. The sleeves of his flannel are rolled up above his forearms and I can't help but notice the way his muscles tighten, even as he carries a dish to put it away. The sight of his enormous body in action takes my breath away.

Turning back around, Silas asks, "Anything else I can do to help?"

At the moment, I'd ask him to carry the table and chairs to the other room, just so I could watch him work. But I bite my tongue. Shaking my head, I answer, "I don't think so. I've got a couple of things to put in the dishwasher and I'm done."

Silas exhales and steps toward me, peering over me as he examines the contents of the sink and begins to load the dishwasher. Without saying a word, he carefully places the dishes in their spot. I watch in silent fascination as he moves slowly and deliberately around me.

"Jace wants to go to his friend's house this weekend to ride horses," he finally says. "What do you think?"

What do I think?

Is Silas seriously asking my opinion about what he should do with his own child? My heart is pounding in my chest from all this new attention, and compliments I never thought I'd hear from his mouth. Standing there, frozen in place, I feel like I've entered an alternate reality.

His words eventually make their way to my brain and I shake my head as I decide how to answer. It's almost like he's been affected by the doctor's confusion that I am Jace's stepmother. The thought is not as weird as it should be.

I shrug my shoulders and say, "I don't know. I mean, he's your son, so it's your choice."

Silas straightens and looks me in the face. He takes a breath.

"What happened at the doctor's office today..." he begins. "Well, I was embarrassed to death at first. Between the doctor claiming you were my... and that nosy receptionist. I was

upset, but once I started thinking about it, I realized you do play an important role in my son's life. While I was working, I started thinking you're the closest thing he's ever had to a mom."

His words melt my heart and fill me with such warmth. Biting down on my lip, I finally ask what I've been wondering since Jace told me about his mother.

"Did she just abandon him?" I ask.

Silas nods his head. Reaching across me for another dish, he looks down as he admits, "Yeah. She wanted a baby more than anything but, as soon as she got pregnant, she acted like it was the worst thing in the world. She resented me. And after Jace was born, she resented him. I kept hoping she'd come around but..." he pauses and shakes his head as his face draws up with emotion. "Then one day I woke up and she was gone. She left me a note saying she'd found someone else and was moving on. At the divorce proceedings, she said she didn't want to see him again - just wanted it to all be over."

The story breaks my heart. Not just for Jace but for Silas as well. I can't imagine the pain of having a wife who would do such a thing.

"Wow," I say, "That... sucks." My answer sounds so pathetic to my ears, but Silas doesn't seem to mind. He just nods in agreement.

His deep blue eyes drift back up and I see the sadness in them for the first time.

"I've been protective of Jace over the years," he says. "But I haven't been able to be much like a mother to him. So I'm asking for your opinion, as the only motherly figure in his life, about letting him spend the night with a friend."

I have no clue what to say. I have no insight. I know nothing about raising children. But the next moment, I hear myself offering suggestions that might have come out of a woman's magazine. I ask Silas if he knows Stephen's parents and thinks they will be safe riding horses on his farm. As Silas

goes over the details about who they are and how they watch the kids like a hawk, he slowly answers his own question.

By the time the dishwasher is loaded, he's ready to tell Jace yes.

"Well," I say as I wipe my hands on my jeans. "Looks like we've got the kitchen cleaned up. Thanks for your help."

It feels wrong to leave Silas standing in the kitchen alone. After he's done so much to help me, I feel like I need to do something in return. But I have no clue what. Part of me wants to throw myself into his arms and hold him, but I pull back.

"Hey, would you want to... ?" Silas's voice trails off, leaving me to wonder what he could have possibly been thinking. Shaking his head, he laughs and says, "Never mind. I need to go tuck Jace in. Goodnight, Ana."

I smile back at him.

"Goodnight, Silas."

The short walk back to the guest cabin is lonely. I wish I were still back in the kitchen, washing dishes alongside Silas and discussing how I'm the closest thing to a mother figure in his son's life.

Silas lights me up in a way I've never known. His deep voice and his powerful presence are like a drug and I can only crave more.

As I slide into bed, I close my eyes, dreaming of wrapping myself in his scent and feeling his strong hands all over me.

I bite my lower lip as the thought of him manhandling me sends a thrill of arousal throughout my body. My nipples are hard as I lie on my back, cupping my breast and sliding a hand under the thin fabric of my panties. The image of Silas's wide shoulders and rough hands plays in my mind as I imagine him propping me up on the kitchen counter.

I slide a finger inside me and let out an agonizing moan. I imagine his powerful grip propping me up on the kitchen counter and sliding my underwear down my legs, entering me, grabbing my ass with those huge hands as he has way with me.

God, what are you doing to me, Silas?

Arching my back, I'm careful not to make any sound as my climax surges through me. My body aches for his touch and my pleasure is almost bitter-sweet as the spasms gradually subside in waves.

I don't know what to make of this new side of Silas, or this intoxicating effect he has on me. But, as I reach out to touch the empty side of my bed, I realize how terribly empty it is.

SILAS

Something changed after we got back from the doctor's office. I can't put my finger on it, but it was like a lightbulb went off in my head. Ever since I first met Ana, I felt like I was walking a tightrope with my emotions. I knew I was attracted to her and I did everything in my power to battle that attraction.

But yesterday, the unthinkable happened, and I let my toe slip off the tightrope. When we got home from the doctor's office, I went out to my workshop, but instead of working, I let myself think.

Bad idea.

Standing out there, I thought about Jace and the way he has taken to Ana. I thought about the positive impact she's had on our lives since her arrival. I took Sean's advice to "give her a chance" but I let it go beyond a normal working relationship.

As soon as I let myself think about her, I nosedived off the tightrope entirely.

There is something unique about Ana. She isn't like other women I've known. I remember the way she marched up to my house and demanded a job not once but twice. Never has she let my horrific attitude destroy her positive spirit. She's determined and bold in a way I never imagined possible. She might be young, but she has the courage of a woman twice her age.

When I first met her, I was attracted to her cute face and her slim figure. I am a man after all, and she makes my blood

reach temperatures it hasn't known in years. But now I realize she's so much more than a cute face.

I like her, and I think I might be falling in love with her.

Sensations are rising in me that I thought were long gone. I feel like I'm in middle school all over again. I have no clue how to act around her or how to deal with my emotions.

Glancing out the window of my workshop, I watch as Ana marches out the backdoor of the house and grabs a shovel leaning against the wall next to it. I can't tell what she's doing and I observe her candidly, so curious I can hardly stand it.

Finally, I decide to head out and see what she's up to. Making my way to the edge of the backyard, I find her driving the shovel repeatedly into the ground. She doesn't see me as I approach and I watch as she tosses aside the mounds of dirt. She's not wearing gloves and I notice how she grips the wooden handle like it's a familiar tool for her now.

"What are you doing?" I ask, clearing my throat. "I hope you're not burying a body on my property." The words are cringy, even to my ears.

Yep, just like when I was in middle school.

Ana turns to look at me, her eyes twinkling. "No, no bodies yet... although, with these digging skills you better watch out."

She holds the shovel up victoriously and drives the metal head back into the soft earth.

"I told Jace we would build a flower bed out here," she explains. "I thought I could pick up a few flowers the next time I'm in town, if it's okay with you. I can use my own money."

Her suggestion makes my heart soften. She wants to make my place feel more like home. This is not just a job for her anymore – she cares about Berne Farms like it's her own.

"Where is Jace?" I ask, hoping my face doesn't show how much I adore her at the moment. "Is he sick again?"

Nodding her head toward the house, Ana says, “Oh, he’s fine. He just wanted to watch some TV and I thought it might be best since he’s still a little puny.” Giving a smirky grin, she lowers her voice. “He’s so anxious to go stay at Stephen’s this weekend. He’s doing everything he can to rest up and get well.”

Looking down, I kick at a clump of dirt lying next to Ana’s new flower bed.

“Probably a good idea,” I say

I want to stay and watch her work, but I realize how creepy that would be. “Do you need help?” I ask.

Ana lowers the shovel to the ground and looks over at me. She lets out a chuckle and goes back to digging in the damp soil.

“No. It’s fine,” she says. “The rain yesterday made it pretty easy to work with.”

Motioning toward the workshop, she adds, “You can go back to your projects. Please don’t let me distract you.”

I walk back to the shop, but as I begin to work, my eyes are magnetized to the window. Every rivet and screw I drive into the new greenhouse frame leaves me dying to peer out and see how Ana is doing.

An hour later, I’m still poking around doing nothing while Ana has an entire flower bed dug from the back porch around to the side of the house. I stare out the window as she stops for a moment. Leaning her weight against the shovel, she uses her free hand to rub the back of her neck and then raises her face toward the sunshine. Wiping her forehead against her sleeve, she starts back to work.

She must be thirsty.

As soon as the thought enters my mind, I snap my fingers together. Hurrying to the mini fridge that sits in the corner of my office, I pull out a bottle of cold water. I step out into the sunshine and start making my way back toward the house.

It's a little goofy to bring her something to drink. After all, she is only a few yards away from the door that leads to the kitchen. And yet, I can't give up the desire to do something for her, to find ways of interacting with her.

Stepping up in front of her, I hold out the water bottle and say, "You look like you might be getting thirsty."

Ana raises her eyebrows in surprise. She looks confused but pleased. She opens the bottle and takes a big sip. As she swallows it down, I catch myself staring at her. I can only hope she doesn't have some secret feminine power of being able to read my mind. Just the thought of it makes my face start to grow warm.

I redirect my gaze toward the flower bed and say the first stupid thing that comes to mind.

"You're going slow."

There is no end to my idiocy. It's been almost ten years since I flirted with a girl, but I would have hoped my skills weren't this rusty. It's obvious at the moment they're on par with the boys in Jace's age group.

Ana's lips part as she considers her response and I close my eyes in shame, trying to think of something to say to repair the damage I just did.

"Slow?" Ana repeats, but her tone doesn't sound defensive. "I'd like to see you do better."

I open my eyes in time to receive a splash of cold water right in my face. Ana is holding out her water bottle and has just sent a stream of it at me. She giggles at my shock as I try to wipe it out of my eyes. I start laughing along with her. It's been a long time since I've laughed like this, and it's been even longer since I've been so carefree with anyone.

"I hope you're fast," I warn, "Because you've got some running to do!"

Ana lets out a squeal and drops the water bottle to the ground next to her shovel. Taking off across the yard, she's running with the excitement of a little girl. In a moment of total irrationality, I take off after her. She's fast, but her slender

legs are no match for mine. In an instant, I've overtaken her, grabbing her from behind and putting my arm around her waist to stop her.

By now, we're both laughing so hard we can't catch our breaths. Ana's body buzzes against mine and I let my arm drop away from her waist but I keep a light grip on her wrist. She doubles over, struggling to catch her breath between fits of giggles.

"So, you like playing with water?" I ask as I pull her up to me. "We have a water hose right over there, next to the barn. How about I hose you down and find out how much you like it?" I glance toward the barn and am even more tickled when I envision how easy it would be. I would love nothing more than to grab the hose and give her a good dousing.

"I give, I give!" she cries out between gasps and rounds of laughter. I accept her pleas for mercy and release my grip.

Standing up straighter, I hold her arm to help steady her. She's still laughing so hard that she looks like she might fall over.

"Are you okay?" I ask. I wonder if it was pure water I gave her, or if it got mixed with something else.

Every comment out of my mouth makes her giggle more. She takes in one breath after another, trying to calm herself. Turning to look up at me, there are tears in her eyes. But when our eyes meet, all the humor falls away. The laughter is gone and has been replaced by something else: need.

All I can think is how much I need her. In every way.

My expression relaxes as calm washes over me. I take her hand and pull her closer to me. She obeys my every movement like she's a rag doll in my hands.

I cup her face, marveling at her soft skin. I've looked at her so many times but I've only dreamed of letting my rough, carpenter's hands touch her until now. Running my fingers along the edge of her jaw, they land on her lips and I outline the curves of pink skin with my touch. I'm overwhelmed by a surge of something so rare I don't have words for it.

Instead of pulling away, she shakes her head slowly from side to side, brushing her lips against my tough hands. Her eyes are lit with excitement as she raises her face toward mine.

Has she seen me watching her this whole time? Does she know the hours and days I've spent dreaming about her, of having her near me, aching to feel her warmth?

Before I have time to think about what I'm doing, I lean over and press my lips to hers, drawing her into me. She lets out a faint whimper as I explore her mouth with my own. Our tongues meet, intensifying the lust swirling inside me as my blood rushes with desire.

Feeling the increasing tightness in my jeans, I pull myself out of my lust-filled haze but keep my face close to hers. Her warm breath fills the space between us as she pants. I move my lips to the corner of her mouth and to her cheek, savoring her impossibly soft skin before I press my forehead to hers. We breathe into each other, and, as our air comeslingles, I try to make sense of what just happened.

It's been a long time since I've kissed a woman and I fear I might have lost my talent. My thoughts are jumbled in a sea of uncertainty, my own emotions clouding my senses as we hold our faces near one another, our lips brushing lightly together. It happened so quickly.

But then I pull back.

It's like a gun went off, and we stare at each other as if we've never met before. My mind grasps at facts and I feel like I've just experienced some kind of out-of-body experience as I come back to reality.

My cheeks grow hot and I stare at Ana for an unnaturally long time with no words. Part of me wants to go back for more, but another part wants to run for cover. It's all her choice what happens next.

Ana is still breathless and her cheeks are flushed with what I hope isn't embarrassment. I swallow, against the rising tension in my throat and am about to say something when she breaks away from my gaze, her demure expression

accentuated by those long dark lashes. She looks sexier now than ever.

She speaks first, her gaze cast downward.

“Where did that come from?” she asks.

I don’t know what to say. Where did it come from? How can I possibly tell her about all the times I’ve noticed her and dreamed about her? She would think I’m a total creep, and she’d be right.

I step back and stare at her. Following her gaze downward, I notice her cheeks are still flushed and her chest is heaving erratically. I wish she’d say something else to let me know how she’s feeling. Did she like it or did I just cross a line?

Again, I try to speak when a voice cuts through the air, but it’s not Ana’s voice and it’s not mine.

“Ana! Dad!” Jace calls out. “What are you all doing?”

Turning around, my son is standing on the back porch holding the television remote in the air like a flag.

“Dad, come here!” he screams at the top of his lungs. “Something’s wrong with the internet. The TV won’t work.”

At the moment, I can’t decide whether to curse technology or give thanks to a higher power for providing a way of extricating myself from this situation. I don’t know whether to be thankful to escape her presence or to be disappointed that I may not get to kiss her again.

Letting out a deep breath, I call back, “I’m coming, Jace.”

And, with that, I turn and leave Ana standing alone in the backyard. I don’t look back to see what she does or where she goes after that. I set my eyes straight ahead of me and make a break for the house like a fugitive on the run.

I’m so overcome by nerves and convinced I’ve made a tremendous mistake that it makes me sick. How could I have lost myself and sprung a kiss on Ana like that? What if she goes to the cops or claims sexual harassment in the workplace or something like that?

A few minutes ago I felt so young and alive, like a teenager. Now, I'm sickened and overwhelmed with the notion that I'm just some seedy old sex predator, preying on my pretty young nanny. Hopefully, a lawsuit isn't in my future but, at this point, I still don't know how she feels about things.

I have been an idiot today, and it's not possible to undo that. At this point, my only option is to proceed as normal and hope Ana can put this insane moment behind her. Maybe if I go back to acting like I always have, she'll think I was just drunk or possessed by aliens.

I may have to give her a raise in order to get her to stay on after this.

Yeah, bribing her. That sounds worse.

As I rush into the house to assist Jace with the TV, I pray this day can somehow be stricken from the record.

ANA

Standing alone in the kitchen, I open the refrigerator door and stare at its contents. At least, I pretend to stare at it.

Before I realize what I'm doing, my fingers trail up to my face, lingering on my lips. Closing my eyes, I let my mind take me back to the moment Silas leaned over and kissed me.

Silas Berne, my extremely hot and buff employer. Mr. Grumpy himself, who was so standoffish and impossible, just planted one on me.

It's been three days since it happened, but it has happened over and over again in my mind during that time.

"Wow," I mutter under my breath as I picture Silas leaning close to me. The scent of his aftershave was intoxicating as it mingled with the sweet smell of sweat and earth from the flowers I'd been planting in the noonday heat. I would give anything to go back to that moment and live it over again. If I knew what was coming, I would have been able to enjoy it more.

But, considering how Silas has been acting since it happened, it's not likely to happen again. It looks like our romantic moment was a one-and-done.

I don't know what happened, but Silas has been more standoffish than ever since our lips met. He's hardly been inside the house at all and, when he is, he is only focused on eating so he can get back out. I can't decide if that means he liked it and is just agitated, or if he thought I was the world's worst kisser and is hoping he can forget it ever happened.

It's hard to imagine he thought the kiss itself was that bad. I mean, it was over in a second. It wasn't like we were making out for an hour. He's not going to judge me for a kiss that he sprang on me without warning.

Jace is gone for the night to his friend Stephen's house and I have yet to see Silas since Jace left. Considering how things are going, he might choose to camp out in the workshop until his son comes back home.

Licking my lips, I notice they feel a little dry. I wonder if they were dry when Silas kissed me. My stomach sinks at the thought. That could be the reason right there. Maybe that's why the kiss was over so quickly—my lips were rubbing on his like sandpaper.

I straighten up and let out a deep sigh, remembering why I came to the fridge in the first place.

"Mayo, mayo, mayo. Where are you, mayo?" I utter into the empty kitchen as I search for the missing condiment.

The sound of the back door swinging open makes my heart beat skip erratically in my chest. Turning around, I watch Silas come into the kitchen from the laundry room.

Ignoring my nerves, I ask, "Have you seen the mayo?"

"Yeah. I threw it away last night," Silas replies. I think it's the first thing he's said to me since our fateful kiss. "The bottle was empty."

I can't help but let out a groan of frustration. There goes my dinner plan of making potato salad.

"I'm getting ready to go into town to pick up some nails at the hardware store," Silas says, looking me over. "I could pick up some mayo while I'm there."

Seeing this as an opportunity to break the tension between us, I suggest, "How about I go with you? I'd like to buy some flowers while I'm out."

I don't know if the reference to the flower bed makes Silas blush or if I'm imagining it, but he must not be too upset

because he gives a shrug of his shoulders and says, “Sure. That would be fine.”

Closing the refrigerator door, I wash my hands and slick my hair back into a ponytail. As Silas leaves the room, I can’t help but smile. The opportunity to spend some time with him is a miracle. Maybe I can recover the ground we’ve lost since our romantic disaster and get some answers.



DRIVING to town with Silas is the best choice I could have made.

The trip began a bit awkwardly. However, as we start talking about Jace and some of the things he has been doing, I feel the ice start to break.

“He told me he’s going to be riding in a rodeo this time next year,” I announce as Silas maneuvers his truck down the country highway toward town.

Letting out a snort, Silas returns, “Pretty big and mighty talk for a kid that’s never been on a horse before. He’s been trying to get me to buy a horse ever since he saw a picture of his friend Stephen’s.” Pausing for a moment, he admits, “I’ve been considering it. What do you think?”

Again, he’s asking for my advice on how to raise his son. I can’t help but smile. I relish the opportunity to have another bit of say-so in the lives of Silas and his son. Biting down on my lower lip, I contemplate the best decision. “Well, it would be good in some ways. If we could keep him from trying to ride it when neither of us is with him... that would be a challenge.”

“Oh, no,” Silas says. “That won’t happen, or else the horse will go right back where I got it.”

Turning a glance toward my handsome employer, I notice the way his blue eyes light up as we talk about his son. I study his face as if my life depended on it, getting lost in every line and curve of his square, rugged face. I think back to the kiss

we shared and a tingle runs down my spine. Something aches deep in my soul and I wish he would pull the car over, alongside the road, and make out with me. If I had a little more time, a little more warning, I could enjoy it so much more.

“Ana?” Silas says my name and I realize he’s been talking to me. He glances away from the road and snickers before asking, “Are you awake?”

Nodding my head, I snap out of my daydream.

“I was asking if you ever rode horses,” he explains as he turns onto a different road.

“Oh,” I laugh and begin to fiddle with my seat belt, my mind still on the image of him taking me here in his truck. “No, nothing like that. We lived in the city and my parents were strict about things that might be dangerous. I guess that’s why I ended up with such a scumbag for a boyfriend... I was anxious to get out and try anything after I got out from under their protective thumb.”

As soon as the words slip off my lips, I know I’ve said too much.

I look over at Silas and hurry to change the subject. “What about you? Any horse riding?”

Silas shakes his head and doesn’t respond to what just slipped out of my mouth. “No. None for me, either. When I was a kid, having a working farm was my dream. I have always loved the country. I was going to have a beautiful farmhouse and raise a family to enjoy it. Once I got older, I dreamed of a workshop where I handmade custom furniture. And look at me now.” His voice trails off as if he believes he’s fallen short of his goals.

“I don’t see that things are so bad for you,” I say, trying to encourage him. “I mean, you do have a nice farm and a workshop.”

“Yeah,” Silas huffs. “A workshop where I make cookie-cutter greenhouses day in and day out. Not much of an art. Any loser could do it if they had a template and a bit of practice. As far as the rest goes, my family life has turned out

to be a disaster. No offense, but I never thought I'd have to hire someone to take care of my house and my son."

There is so much disappointment in his voice. I can sense the pain of so many years of heartache coursing through him. I have the urge to comfort him. Rather than wanting to kiss him again for the fun of it, I wish I could take him in my arms and repair the years of damage he's had to endure.

That's impossible, though. So, I reach out and put a hand on his arm which is rugged and sturdy under my touch.

"You're doing great, Silas," I whisper the words I think he needs to hear. "You've accomplished a lot in your life, and you may still see your dreams come true. Just because the path is different than you expected, doesn't mean you won't reach your destination eventually."

Silas doesn't say anything. He's quiet for so long that I wonder if he might not have heard me at all. I pull my hand away and put it awkwardly on the console between us. Silence fills the air like I've frozen him over by saying too much.

Then, before I know what's happening, Silas reaches out and takes my hand in his own, squeezing it as he says, "Thank you. I hope you're right."

When he lets go of my hand to grasp the steering wheel again, an emptiness consumes me. It's like the more I get of Silas, the more desperate I become for his touch.

As we arrive downtown, I hope I'm right about Silas eventually getting to his destination in life. And I hope, no matter what, I get to be part of the future he's building.



MY TRIP to the grocery store is a quick one. To my shock, Silas offers to go in with me. As long as I've been working for him, he has never been interested in shopping with me. The entire process is not unpleasant, and yet, I found myself second-guessing every item I picked up. Silas's way of

hovering over me makes me feel both intrigued and scrutinized by his attention.

He trails along behind me, more like a disgruntled librarian than a shopping companion.

As we work to unload the groceries into the back of his truck, he takes me by surprise once again as he suggests another unexpected idea.

“Why don’t we run over to the diner and grab a bite to eat?” Silas shoves a bag full of sandwich supplies into the back of the car. “It’s getting late and I’m sure you don’t feel like cooking after all the shopping we’ve done today.”

Silas and I are going out to eat... together? And alone? My heart catches in my throat as I wonder what this question is supposed to imply. Shrugging my shoulders, I try to act nonchalant.

“Sure, that would be nice,” I reply. “I could use a little break.”

Silas smiles back at me and I feel butterflies start to dance in my stomach.

A few minutes later, I’m walking into Millie’s Café and Diner ahead of Silas. The entire experience is more awkward than any of the other times I’ve been inside the familiar establishment. I’m relieved when I see Jenny is nowhere in sight. I don’t think I can deal with her knowing glances that say she’s reading more into my relationship with Silas than there is.

As I sit down across from Silas, my face grows warm with the realization that I’m eating dinner with my boss. The same man who chased me through the backyard and kissed me like I was his. A jitter of excitement fills my chest as I imagine what it would be like to be on a proper date with Silas; the huge, brooding figure who could barely say two sentences at a time to me when we first met.

We order our food and wait in silence as the waitress hurries back to put our order in.

“I’m glad we’re doing this,” says Silas, leaning forward across the table. “Getting out of the house without Jace is not something I’ve done in a long time. It’s nice to have a break.”

Nodding my head in agreement, I say, “Yeah, you’ve been working especially hard. Do you always stay this busy?”

Silas reaches out to grab a straw, unwrapping it with his thick fingers. He slips it down into his soda. “Yes and no,” he explains. “This is a busy time for greenhouses and it’s also a time when the farm is in high demand. Lots of people want to use Berne Farms in the summer months for their events. Next weekend there’s supposed to be a large festival and it’s got me a little nervous.”

Stirring his straw around in his drink, he admits, “I’m not used to having to oversee any of the activities, but I will need to be around for at least part of this one. In the past, we’ve had things like weddings and parties at the farm – more like small family events or maybe a church cookout. This will be a festival with thousands of people passing through. I’m a little out of my element, I guess.”

This kind of chit-chat is so unlike Silas, but I’m relishing it. The entire time I’ve worked for him, he has been so closed off, always maintaining a protective wall around himself. He’s never been one to give anything away. Now, it’s like he’s letting me peer through the cracks of those walls at the person hiding behind it.

The diner door swings open and I turn my head. My heart stops in my chest immediately and my mouth goes dry.

It’s a tall, boyish figure with thin, broad shoulders. The dirty blonde hair is slicked to the side with perfection. The sunglasses shade his eyes.

Brett.

It has to be Brett.

My heart is beating so fast it feels like it might pop. I can’t even hear what Silas is saying to me. My hands are trembling so hard I have to hold them together to keep from making a scene.

“Hey, Steve. Over here!” A voice calls out from a nearby booth.

In an instant, the man I recognized as Brett turns and waves toward a group of high schoolers. Pushing his sunglasses up on his forehead, his eyes are full of joy and youthful vigor. His face is far too young to belong to Brett, far too innocent, and his chin much less pronounced.

Relief washes over me as I recognize my mistake. I feel like crumpling forward in my seat and crying tears of joy.

“Ana,” Silas says my name as I turn my gaze toward him. The concern in his eyes is apparent. Letting out a chuckle, he nods his head toward the plates our waitress is setting in front of us. “Are you going to be able to eat?”

Smiling, I nod and reach for my hamburger. “Sorry about that,” I manage to say as I force a laugh. “I guess I got lost in a daydream.” Using every bit of strength, I turn the conversation back to what Silas was saying about the upcoming festival.

I try to push Brett out of my mind, but it’s almost impossible. He’s still lurking at the back of my thoughts, taunting me and reminding me I will never escape his grasp. Even hidden away in a place like New Harmony, I will always have to watch my back.

And Brett will make it impossible for me to move on. As much as I’m enjoying my time with Silas, I realize that I should try to keep our relationship a bit more professional. In the end, I can never be honest about who I am or what I’m hiding from.

SILAS

Festivals have never been my thing. At least, not since I graduated from high school. Fairs and bazaars have created more frustration for me than anything else. The throngs of people traveling around, shoving and pushing each other, the loud noises, the commotion... it's all too much to handle.

Other than a couple of times when Jace begged me to take him to the fair, I've always done my best to avoid them.

But, here I am, having one of New Harmony's biggest festivals of the summer hosted on my property. And I'm right in the midst of all the excitement, trying to oversee how things are going.

Of course, Jace was more than thrilled to find out I was going to go check it out. He has been talking of nothing but the festival ever since he realized it was this week. And, no surprise, Ana has been just as anxious as he has to come along and see what the festivities have to offer.

Walking by my side, Jace points from one thing to another. "Wow, Dad!" he exclaims as he points toward a merry-go-round that has been set up right amid the field, "Look at that!"

Before I can say anything in return, he's pointing in the other direction. "Look, there's a Ferris wheel too! And a roller coaster!"

The carnival that has taken over my property is fairly small, with only enough rides to provide a little entertainment,

and yet it looks like a Disneyland theme park to my eight-year-old son.

“Dad, this might be the most exciting thing that has ever happened in my life,” Jace declares.

As I laugh at his statement, I let my eyes travel toward Ana. She’s walking along with us, and yet her mind is everywhere but on the event. She looks pensive and sad.

I have no clue what happened. We were eating at the diner last weekend and she was having a good time – when, all of a sudden, she got quiet and had a complete change in attitude. I have no idea what happened to change her or what I did wrong. God knows I’ve wracked my mind enough trying to figure it out.

She’s been avoiding me ever since. I’ve come so close to asking her what’s going on, but I’ve kept my questions to myself. It’s almost too scary to think of what her answer might be. I am afraid she’s disturbed by her much-older employer making moves on her. Once again, the thought makes me brace myself for the inevitable sexual harassment case and I wonder how I will state my case.

“Stephen’s supposed to be here, Dad,” Jace informs me as we walk along. “If he’s here, do you mind if I go with him on some rides?”

Shrugging my shoulders, I reply, “It doesn’t bother me, kiddo.” I look toward Ana again, seeking her approval. To my disappointment, she appears unwilling to offer any comment.

“You all go on and look around,” I suggest to Jace and Ana. “I have to go do something quick.”

The force of obligation pulls me away from my concerns when I spot someone in the crowd.

Relief escapes me in the form of a deep exhale as I step away from the constant chatter in my mind. I head toward a large stand that was brought onto the field on an old flatbed wagon. Henry Benson is working to set everything up, throwing his arms around as he directs people where to put various pieces of sound equipment.

Walking up behind him, I clear my throat to get his attention. Henry's wrinkled face breaks out into a smile as he turns to look at me. The man is nearing seventy years old, and yet he has more energy than most teenagers. He slaps me on the back and pulls a cigarette from behind his ear, sticking it between his lips.

"Silas Berne!" he exclaims, reaching out and shaking my hand in excitement. "The man to whom we owe it all." Motioning around my field that he has transformed into a different world, he declares, "New Harmony has never had anything like this before. We've still got an hour until the festival is supposed to start and people are already pouring in." Letting out an exasperated breath as he digs for his lighter. "Everything is working out just as I planned," he adds. "We've got live music about to start here on the stage, contests throughout the day, and carnival rides. It's going to be just like an old-fashioned fair is supposed to be."

"It's turning out great," I say.

Lowering his voice, Henry adds, "I know we've already got a set price for the rental of the farm, but if this place draws in as many people as I expect, we might be looking at a nice little bonus for you."

The idea of a bonus is always a plus, but not necessary. I'm happy to help out the community in my own small way. God knows I've got more land than I know what to do with.

"Well, that would be great," I say. "Although I think it's already rewarding enough to see the excitement my little boy has about all this. Jace has never been more thrilled."

Someone on the stage says something and Henry turns his attention back toward them. I reach out to give him a friendly slap on the arm. "Hey, I'm going to look around and make sure everything looks okay on my end. I'll see you in a while."

Henry walks away and I manage to press through the throngs of people that are starting to gather around the center of the excitement. I make my way toward the small shelter that has been set up on the back half of the farm. The make-shift building was built as a place to provide restrooms, electricity,

and vending machines for visitors, but there's only one other person using it when I arrive. I turn on the water in the men's bathroom to double-check that it's working.

In an effort to feel like I have a reason to be out here, I walk around, testing door hinges and pretending to do things to make sure everything is running smoothly, but in fact, I'm hiding out. The growing crowd of people is more than I care to deal with, and a chance to inspect plumbing and mechanical functions fits my comfort level much better.

By the time I calm myself down and head back toward the festival, the crowd has only grown. The carnival rides are now in full swing, country music playing with full abandon in the background. People are laughing and joking loudly, obviously having the best time of their lives. It makes me happy to see the farm providing a place for so many people to enjoy themselves, but in a way, I am jealous. I wish I could have fun like they do. I wish I wasn't so damaged by the past and so desperate to hide away in the safety of my own home.

Walking past the Ferris wheel, I see a line forming. A young couple stands at the end of the line, hand-in-hand and gazing at each other. They're so enamored with one another, I wonder if they'll have the presence of mind to get on the ride when it's their turn.

A sudden desire to see Ana overwhelms me and fills me with a longing, deep inside my heart. I try to push it away, but it's difficult not to wish for something that was so beautiful and yet so brief.

Following along with the crowd, I circle around the activity and find a group of people lined up, throwing horseshoes at stakes that have been set up on the ground. A man with a loudspeaker is overseeing the event, chuckling as he calls out, "Looks like the little lady may beat you all!"

As I step closer to the crowd of onlookers, I see the ten contestants are all men, minus one young woman in the midst of them. Ana. I feel my breath catch in my throat as I watch her send a horseshoe flying through the air, only to have it

land right on the stake. Next to her, a teenage boy tosses one that hits the mark as well.

“It’s a tie so far, folks!” The announcer calls out as some of the other contestants groan and move away, not needing to stay in place since they lost their mark.

Ana sticks out her tongue in firm concentration as she grabs a second horseshoe, narrowing her eyes as she bends slightly forward. I find myself rooting for her, hoping she will be able to make the mark, and marveling at how damn cute she looks.

Letting the horseshoe go in unison with her competition, Ana steps back and closes her eyes. Her horseshoe sails through the air, only to miss the mark by a mere centimeter. The teenager next to her lets out a shout of triumph as his horseshoe hits the target.

“Sorry, young lady!” The announcer says as he steps forward to grab the winner’s hand, “Looks like bandana boy here is our winner!”

Ana’s shoulders sag in disappointment, yet she still smiles good-naturedly. Making her way out of the crowd, she heads into the crowd, back toward the festivities, and I hurry to catch up with her.

“I didn’t know my son’s nanny had such a good aim,” I comment as I fall in step beside her.

Turning to look at me, Ana’s smile turns into a grin. She’s glad to see me – and I’m thrilled to see she is genuinely happy at the sight of me.

“Oh, I could have done better,” she declares. “If I hadn’t made myself so nervous, I would have won. I came so close.”

It surprises me how impressed I am by her, and even a little proud. Nodding my head toward a carnival game alongside the walkway, I force her to turn her attention toward it. Stuffed animals adorn the front of the stand, while balloons are hanging on the back wall. “Try your luck there, then,” I suggest. “I’ll pay.”

Digging into my pocket, I pull out a five-dollar bill and hand it to the man working behind the stand. Ana giggles as she steps forward and takes the darts he lays out on the counter. Glancing over at me, she weighs my expression before turning her attention back to the task at hand. Lifting the first dart, she tosses it at a balloon and hits the target with a resounding pop. Grabbing the next one, she hits the target with it too, and tosses the third one to hit yet another balloon.

She turns to me with a cocky smile. “I told you I had good aim,” she says with a grin. The sparkle in her eyes melts away my concerns about harassment and all that crap, and I smile in genuine admiration.

The carnie operating the game lets out a whistle and exclaims, “We have a winner!” Pointing toward the stuffed animals hanging along the top of his stand. “Choose whichever one you want, little lady,” he says.

Pointing toward an oversized, blue stuffed bear, she’s paying more attention to me than to the prize she’s just won. Once she has the bear in her arms, she and I continue to walk side-by-side. I stifle the urge to grab her hand as we walk, which feels so natural at the moment.

“What did you think of those moves?” she asks with a smirk. I can see a new sort of swagger in her walk.

I look down at the stuffed bear before meeting her eyes and admit, “I have to say... I was pretty impressed.”

“You can keep the bear then,” she announces as she presents me with her prize.

I’m not the type of person to collect stuffed animals. I’ve not had any interest in teddy bears since I was a toddler. But there’s something about Ana’s bear that makes me want to keep it. Taking it in my hands, I put it under my arm for safekeeping. I don’t know what will happen between me and her, but I do know I want some way to remember her – even if it is a stupid stuffed bear she won at a carnival game.

ANA

Carnivals have always had a way of making me feel like a kid, and today proves that things haven't changed. As I wander through the festival with Silas at my side, I feel like I'm twelve years old again. I'm giggling and goofy, acting foolishly like I don't have a care in the world. All of my concerns about my past are washed away and Brett is the last person on my mind – the present is all I'm living for right now.

As the early evening turns dark, I find my eyes drifting toward Silas more and more, watching him in the strings of party lights dotting the field. There's something about him that is almost magical tonight. This is not a context I've ever dreamed of seeing him in, and there's something about a man as powerful and self-assured as him looking so out of his element and yet so in awe.

We find Jace and Stephen and trail along behind them, watching as they ride the carnival rides over and over again. How such a slim array of rides is giving them such joy is amazing to me. I am convinced they would spend the next six months riding the same four rides non-stop.

"I want to go for the Ferris wheel again!" Jace declares as he and Stephen hurry to get in line before anyone can stop them.

Silas chuckles under his breath and leans his elbows against the metal safety gate surrounding the attraction. Then, he leans down, pauses for a moment, and stands up straight.

Cocking his head as he turns to look at me, he has a strange expression on his face. I'm not sure what to make of him or what to expect.

“Ride with me?” he asks.

I feel my heart beating faster in my chest. It's a simple request, and yet it means everything to me. Giving a nod, I smile softly and agree. “Sure,” I say, my heart picking up its pace.

As we make our way to the back of the line to wait our turn, I feel an overwhelming desire to reach out and take Silas's hand in mine. It takes all of my willpower not to reach for him. I do this by keeping some space between us, but the fact that we're both in line makes it difficult to create any distance.

We watch Jace and Stephen each climb into one of the seats, and then the ride takes them so high in the air. Even though a few couples in front of us have moved on, my focus has not left Jace. As the ride takes him and his friend higher and higher, his infectious smile grows with every vertical inch.

“Riding as a couple?” The carnival worker's voice interrupts my thoughts and I look up to see Silas and I are next in line. Nodding my head, I force an awkward smile as he leads us to one of the swinging seats.

Silas scoots into the seat across from me and I let out a slight yelp as the ride lurches to a start.

“What? Are you scared?” Silas asks, shooting me a playful smile.

“Never!” I return with a laugh.

The ride picks up pace, taking us high above the action below. Silas points out the scenery as we ascend, showing me different areas of his farm that can be seen from the high point. “And back there's downtown,” he explains as he directs my gaze in a different direction.

I want to pay attention to what he's showing me, but it's difficult. All I can think is how handsome he looks in the soft orange and blue lights, and the fact that it's just him and me,

alone in our little compartment, far away from anyone. He looks stunning tonight, and being in this kind of proximity makes me wish for things I know I can't have. Everyone knows you're supposed to make out when you're a couple on a ride like this. I wonder if that fact is lost on Silas, who seems more fascinated by the view of his farm from up here.

I've tried to be stand-offish the last few days, knowing it's unfair to revisit our all-too-brief connection when I still have so much trauma from my last relationship lingering in the back of my mind. But tonight, it's impossible. The fair has washed all my worries aside and all I can see is what's right in front of me: the hunkiest single dad I've ever known.

"Are you okay?" Silas asks, shaking me out of my thoughts.

My cheeks warm and I open my mouth to speak, only to find my words too jumbled to come out. Silas scoots across the car, onto my seat, so we're sitting side by side, and his knee brushes my thigh as he sits. I wish he would kiss me again. I can still remember the taste of his lips on mine and I bite my lip when I think of how his tongue felt. My breath quickens as he leans closer, staring at me as if he's thinking the same thing.

Then, as soon as I hope he's going to make a move, the ride comes to a screeching halt. Leaning over, I look down and see Jace getting out of his seat with his friend trailing behind. The ride starts up again, but only long enough for the seat in front of us to stop and unload. The moment has passed.

In mere seconds, Silas and I climb out of our seat and walk away from the ride. I trail behind to take a couple of calming breaths.

"Jace!" Silas calls out in a tone that tells me my hopes for the evening are dead. "It's time to go home."

Jace stops mid-step and frowns, "Do we have to go already?"

A young couple whom I recognize as Stephen's parents step forward from the crowd. The woman is holding a bag of

pink cotton candy and the man calls out, “We’ll be here another hour. How about we keep Jace with us and bring him home on our way to leave?”

Silas nods. “Sure, that’ll be fine. Thanks.” Turning toward me, Silas asks, “Are you ready to leave?”

His tone doesn’t give away a thing, but my breath catches in my throat and I smile as I realize we’ll have more time together. I try not to show my enthusiasm for this fact. Maybe there’s still hope of getting that second kiss I’ve been dying for.



COMING out of the house with two cups balanced in my hands, I make my way toward the porch steps where Silas is sitting. From where he’s positioned, we can see the festivities perfectly, still unfolding across the field. We’ve only been home a few minutes, but I suggested he wait outside as I ran inside to get a couple of lemonades, hoping we could soak up the warm glow of the evening a little more.

“What do you see?” I ask and hand Silas his drink.

Silas chuckles. “This is the perfect distance,” he says. “It’s close enough to enjoy, yet far enough to feel comfortable.” His eyebrows knit together as I offer him a cup. “What are you so revved up about? I figured you’d want to head back to your cabin by now.”

How can I explain how much I want to be with him? How can I tell him how lonely it sounds to think of going back to my empty bed and trying to sleep?

“I thought I’d fix us something to drink,” I say. He looks down at his cup suspiciously. “It’s lemonade,” I explain. Silas lets out a snort. ” I know you have to get up early in the morning,” I add. “So, I thought I’d fix you something light.”

In a bold move, I take a seat close to him, relieved when he doesn’t try to stop me as I lower my weight onto the step next to him.

Taking a sip of his lemonade, Silas looks at his cup, impressed. “That’s pretty good,” he says. We’re both quiet for a minute, listening to the sounds of people cheering and carnival music making its way across the field. He breaks the silence and says, “You know, I don’t have to be up early tomorrow morning. It’s not something I like to do if I don’t have to. I...” His voice gets low as he admits, “I have never slept well alone.”

The words crackle in my ears like a kindling fire. The mere thought of sharing a bed with him melts my insides into a puddle of scarcely-controlled, panting lust. A tingle of anticipation trickles down my spine and I wish so many things could be different than they are right now.

Turning to look at me in the glow of the porch light, Silas stares at me with a gaze I don’t recognize. There’s a hollowness in his eyes, like fear, that shows his neediness—neediness which I know all too well.

He tips toward me and I lift my face to meet his. In an instant, he captures my lips in a tender kiss, but this time it’s different than before. This time, his kiss is unbridled. There’s an urgency to it. He wraps a hand behind my neck and pulls my mouth into his. Our tongues intertwine and he finds his way to my breast, evoking a breathy moan from my lips. He pulls away suddenly, and I find myself gasping for air.

“Silas,” I whisper. My voice feels thick. “What are we doing?”

Giving a shake of his head, Silas swallows hard, his voice is hoarse as he admits, “I don’t know, and I don’t care.” Before I can say anything else, he leans in and kisses me again. I’m dizzy and my body melts into him as I wrap my arms around his neck for support as much as desire. His calloused hands catch on my blouse as they drift to my waist. His firm grasp on my midsection turns me into a rag doll, and I long for him to take me.

Silas pulls back, rising to his feet as he reaches down to offer me a hand. “These steps are killing my back,” he says.

I'm so afraid the moment might be over, killed by back pain and a hard wooden step. Unsure of what to say, I follow his lead and stand up next to him. I reach out a hand and run it through his thick, wavy hair, enjoying his soft locks as I take a fistful of it in my hand.

"Ana..." Silas says, letting out a groan. "What are you doing to me?" I worry he's about to run away, but instead he wraps his arms around my waist and pulls me off my feet into him with unexpected force. I squeal and wrap my legs around his waist as he cups my ass and continues to explore my mouth with his tongue.

Silas Berne, Mr. Big-and-strong-show-no-emotion, is moaning sensually against my eager mouth, overcome with emotion that he doesn't have the tools to process. There's a vulnerability about him but it's clear he's as drunk with desire as I am. We lose our breath and he lowers me onto the wooden porch. I lean back, bumping against the front door with a thud. Trapped between the structure of the house and Silas's massive frame, I am cornered, but in the most delightful way.

Silas stares into my eyes with his piercing baby blues, as if he can see into my soul. He presses a hand against the door next to my head and leans into me with a gravelly exhale.

Tilting his face back down to mine, he begins to kiss me again; lightly this time savoring the sensation of our lips grazing each other. I tilt my head as he cups my cheek and brushes a thumb over my lips. His mouth travels down the side of my neck. My knees go weak and my head is light as he lands on the sensitive part between my neck and shoulder, his other hand finding my breast. I bite and suck his thumb as he gently twerks my sensitive, erect nipple. The pleasure he causes is absolutely sinful, but we're too far gone to hold back now.

I close my eyes and my entire body relaxes as I allow myself to give in to my carnal urges. This is a dream come true, the kind of dream I would never tell Silas, or anyone, about. As he guides his lips back toward mine I feel his hand drift lower. He kisses me with renewed intensity as his hand slips into the front of my pants, into my panties. His fingers

find their way along my wetness, teasing me, coaxing me. I gasp as his finger enters me. I am so pent-up that I may explode.

“Ana,” Silas breathes between kisses. I cover his hand buried in my pants with my own, aching to feel him all the way inside me.

I want to hear the words he’s saying, but my brain is overpowered by my body. Pulling him closer, I continue to press his hand into me, encouraging him.

I break away from his mouth as his fingers pleasure me and a moan escapes my lungs. His body is so close to mine, I am drunk on his scent. All I can think is how badly I want to merge with this man. I want to be one with Silas more than I’ve ever wanted anything else in my life.

The sound of an approaching vehicle knocks me out of the moment with a jolt. I try to ignore it, but Silas is unable to do so. The crunch of gravel and the flash of headlights makes him turn his head, and he groans irritably as he pulls away from me.

Straightening up and pushing back my hair, I follow him to the edge of the wrap-around porch. A car is pulling around the circular drive a few yards away as the passenger window opens. The familiar face of Stephen’s mom peers out at us as she announces, “Stephen got sick on one of the rides, so we’re going home early. Sorry about that.”

Thank God it’s dark, I’m completely flushed. Hopefully, she didn’t notice the scene on the porch before they pulled up.

“It’s no problem,” Silas assures her as the back door of the car opens and Jace comes hurrying out, a broad grin stretched across his face. Although Silas’s words sound confident, it’s easy for me to tell from his tone of voice he’s as disappointed as I am.

The car pulls away as Silas steps down to direct Jace inside. “Did you have fun?” he asks his son, trying his best to sound normal.

“Yes!” Jace declares as he waves goodbye to the car as it departs. “Tonight was one of the most fun nights of my life!” Walking past me and into the house, he declares, “I could have stayed for hours.”

Yeah, I understand. It was one of the most fun nights of my life, too. I wish it hadn’t ended so soon. Reaching out, I tousle Jace’s hair as he makes his way into the house with Silas traveling behind.

I’m heartbroken that the moment had to end so abruptly. I can only imagine Silas and I will, once again, close our hearts, and our bodies, to each other. But as he walks past me, following Jace into the house, he reaches out with one giant hand and gives me a squeeze of the arm. His reassuring touch makes a tingle run through my entire body. Now it’s obvious we both want this. It’s no use hiding it anymore.

SILAS

It's amazing how a little kid as young as Jace can wield such power. A few minutes ago, I was at my breaking point, ready to give in to things I hadn't experienced in years. In an instant, it was all torn away from me by a little human, a fraction my size, who controls one hundred percent of my life.

I follow Jace through the house, still reeling from the experience. The memory of Ana is still fresh on my senses. I can taste her. Her scent still fills my nostrils and I have to fight the memory of her soft body against mine as it fills my thoughts.

"Can I stay up later?" Jace asks, holding his hands together with a pleading look in his puppy-dog eyes. "We can watch a movie together or something." Glancing toward Ana, he adds, "All of us."

I'm never one to let my son stay up late, but the chance of spending more time with Ana is almost too much to pass up. Even if we are separated by several feet and the interruptions of an eight-year-old, at least we won't be in separate houses. Turning to glance at her as she steps into the house behind us, she shrugs and declares, "I could be into that. I'm not sleepy yet."

I understand the feeling. At the moment, sleep is the last thing on my mind. "Sure," I concede. "Let's all watch a movie together."

A few minutes later, I'm kicked back in my recliner while Jace and Ana are on the couch with a blanket spread out over them. Holding a bag of popcorn between them.

Jace's eyes are fixated on the television screen on the wall, and my eyes are fixated on Ana. I can't get past what happened earlier. I was so unhinged, so ready to take her in every way imaginable. Yet, it was also intimate. I was vulnerable in a way I didn't think possible. In the light of the television screen, my eyes travel over her face, taking in every detail.

I want her in my life from now on. I know that now. She has become so much more than a nanny or a maid or just a pretty thing I stare at in secret. She's taken hold of my heart in a way I never expected. I find myself mystified by her; by her ability to awaken part of me that has been dead for years. I had meticulously constructed what I thought were impenetrable walls of ice around my heart. And, almost without trying, she has melted them and brought me back to life.

Jace is snuggling down next to Ana, putting his head on her shoulder. Lucky kid. I wish I could be close to her, too – even if it's nothing more than putting my head on her shoulder.

Ana feels like home to me now. It's been a long time since I've had anyone feel like home to me.

From the blue glow of the TV, she glances toward me and gives a soft, almost sad, smile. I wonder if she's also imagining everything that happened between us less than an hour ago.

Leaning back in my recliner, I close my eyes and suck in a breath. I don't care about the movie – all I care about is trying to reclaim the moment that was torn away from us far too soon.

My concerns about our employee-employer relationship are gone. The age difference between us doesn't matter. The only thing that matters is what we share in common: a mutual and powerful attraction. The desire to rip each other's clothes off and merge with each other.

My mind travels back to the tender touch of her lips, the sexy sounds she made as I explored her body. I drift off into something like a mingle of a dream and reality as I close my eyes and lean my head back in my lounge chair.



I OPEN MY EYES. The movie is over and an infomercial is playing on the TV screen. I let out a groan as I sit up straighter in my chair and struggle to pull my cell phone out of my back pocket.

Six o'clock in the morning.

I'm normally up long before this time.

Glancing across from me, I see Ana and Jace still on the couch. She's got her shoes kicked off and her feet propped up on the ottoman, her head leaning against the back of the furniture. Jace is laid out lengthwise with his head resting in her lap. The blanket they had been sharing is a tangled mess, and popcorn is tossed across the floor.

I sit and stare at them in disbelief. Last night was a lot of excitement for all of us. We must have been so overtired.

A grumble in my stomach stirs at my insides and I pull myself to my feet, making my way to the kitchen. I'm not one for breakfast, but this morning I'm starving. Swinging the door of the fridge open, I peer in at the scarce supplies that are available. Ana is a good shopper, but I don't see frying up a steak for breakfast.

An idea hits and I snap my fingers and hurry out to my truck. On my way out the door, I take one last look at Ana and Jace, their sleeping forms making my heart melt a little more.



MY TRUCK COMES to a stop and I put it in park in front of our little town grocery store. All along the drive over here I've been wracking my brain for any recipes I can remember.

I've never been skilled at shopping or cooking. Aside from fruit, anything pre-made has been my answer to all my grocery needs, but today I'm getting outside my norm. Standing in line at the grocery store, I unload my items in front of the cashier.

The customer in front of me is digging around in his pocket, searching for the right amount of change. As he waits for the cashier to provide him with a receipt, he turns to look at me. "Well, hello there, Silas. You're out bright and early."

Looking up, I smile when I see it's none other than the carnival event manager, Henry Benson, buying a package of donuts.

"Hey, Henry," I return. "Looks like you didn't let any dust settle on you either. Did you get any sleep at all last night?"

Chuckling, the older man shrugs his shoulders and admits, "I guess maybe a couple of hours. I was so worked up after the success of the festival last night, it was hard to think of going to sleep. Once again, thanks so much for letting us use your farm. It has been perfect so far."

Nodding my head, I let my thoughts travel back to last night. From the bear Ana won for me, to our special ride on the Ferris wheel, to passionately making out with her on my front porch. It had been a perfect night.

"It looks like you have a little someone special in your life now," Henry says, cocking his head to one side. Before I can comment, he adds, "I saw you walking around with her."

A warmth creeps up my neck and I wonder what I should say to hide my embarrassment. Should I try to explain that she works for me and that our relationship is purely platonic? But as I consider saying such a thing, I realize what a lie it would be. After our makeout session, even a blind man could see that it's not platonic.

Smiling, I decide to go along with it as I watch the cashier reach for my package of bacon. "Thanks. It's nothing official or anything... but she is something else, that's for sure. It would be hard to find another one like her."

Henry reaches out to pat me on the arm and declares, “I can see a change in you now. You seem happier.” Giving me a wink, he adds, “That’s the type you don’t let get away from you, Silas. Make sure you hang onto that girl as long as you can. She looks like a keeper.”

As I watch Henry walk away, I nod and call out something in reply. I don’t know what I’m saying. Instead, I’m listening to his words roll around in my mind. I know what he’s saying is true. Ana is a keeper and I have no intention of ever letting her get away from me if I can help it. I’m ready to throw myself into whatever this is. I know Ana has a past and a history she’s trying to escape, but I don’t care – I want to make sure she has a future with me. We can work through anything else together.

The cashier grabs my box of pancake mix and hits the total button on the register. Spouting off the amount, she stares at me with a blank expression that tells me she’s not living her best life.

I think of something else. Raising a finger, I announce, “I forgot something. Give me a second.”

I hear the young woman huff out a snort of annoyance as she leans her weight against the counter and grabs for her cell phone. Meanwhile, I rush toward the back of the store. There’s one more thing I have to grab before I leave.

ANA

My eyes open and I let out a groan before I close them and open them again. Glancing down at my lap, I see Jace, spread out across it, a sluggish smile on his face and a trail of dried drool on the corner of his mouth. Despite looking a little gross, he looks so sweet and I want to bend down and kiss him on the cheek.

Instead, I struggle to rearrange my weight under him without waking him up. Glancing toward the window in the living room, I see sunlight streaming into the house.

“Ugh,” I mutter. “What time is it anyway?”

“Eight-thirty,” Silas’s deep voice answers in reply to my question. He entered the family room without my realizing it. He walks toward me, holding a cup of coffee in his hands.

“Wow, I overslept,” I say as I reach up to rub my eyes. “I’m sorry about that.” I can’t decide how to read Silas this morning. Everything that happened last night feels like a dream and I have to pinch myself. It was not a dream.

“Did I spend the night here?” I ask.

Chuckling, Silas nods and says, “I guess we all fell asleep before we knew what we were doing.” He extends the cup of steaming liquid in my direction. I feel my stomach churn. It’s hard enough trying to pretend to drink the nasty stuff at the table – I don’t know how I’ll handle it with him standing over me, gawking.

Perhaps it's time to admit defeat and let him know I can't stand black coffee. After all, he and I were swapping saliva mere hours ago – we're close enough that I can let him in on my coffee weakness.

“Silas...” I take the cup in my hands and peer down into it. To my shock, it's not the usual normal black-as-tar color. Instead, it has a light brown hue. Raising my eyebrows in surprise, I look up at him. “The coffee is different,” I say. “What happened?”

“Creamer,” Silas says with a wink.

I can't believe my ears. After such a long time of Silas forcing straight black coffee on me, he noticed my displeasure enough to get me some creamer. The simple act makes my heart throb within my chest and I feel myself blushing.

Nodding his head toward the kitchen, he says, “I've got to go check on breakfast. You get Jace up and come on in here.”

A delicious smell floats in the air, making my mouth water. Leaning over, I give Jace a gentle shove on the arm. “Jace, wake up,” I say. “Come on, time to get up.”

Sitting up, Jace stretches his arms above his head and lets out a yawn. “Did we spend all night here?” he asks.

I take a sip of my coffee and give him a silent nod. The coffee tastes heavenly and I feel like I might cry that Silas made it for me. It's been forever since I've had a good cup of coffee, and it's incredible how such a simple gesture can mean so much.

“Come on and get up,” I say, yawning. “Your dad wants us in the kitchen. He says he cooked breakfast.”

Jace raises his eyebrows, a grin playing on the corner of his lips. “He usually just makes cereal...” he says. “But it sure smells better than that.”

It does. As I follow Jace into the kitchen, I wonder what could be waiting for us. Silas is standing in front of the stove, flipping pancakes with a plastic spatula, while the table is already loaded down with food. Each of our plates has a helping of scrambled eggs and bacon.

“What got into you today, Dad?” Jace whistles as he takes his seat at the table and stares at the bounty spread out in front of him.

With the frying pan in one hand, Silas leans over to deposit two pancakes on the empty spot on his son’s plate. Making his way toward me, Silas scoops out two more pancakes and gives me a coy wink, his blue eyes flashing slyly.

A knock on the front door disrupts my thoughts from going any further and I straighten up and look over. Hurrying out of his seat, Jace announces, “I’ll get it!”

Silas is completely unconcerned as his son goes running to open the door, and yet a sense of unease makes my blood run cold. There have been few visitors to the Berne household since I’ve been there – and none of them has been unexpected. Who would be showing up unannounced?

An image of Brett crosses my mind and I feel my pulse quickening. I’m safe here, aren’t I? There’s no way he could track me down and locate me so far from civilization. Silas’s house and the property have been like a sanctuary. It’s hard to imagine that anyone can do me harm while I’m in its safekeeping.

“It’s Granny!” I hear Jace’s voice squeal with excitement.

A wave of relief spreads through me. But even though I’m relieved to know Brett hasn’t found me, the idea of meeting Silas’s mother sounds almost as bad. Before I know what is happening, a gaunt woman in her sixties is making her way into the kitchen, following right behind Jace. Her gray hair is short with a slight curl which bobs as she turns her head to scrutinize the state of Silas’s home. She looks like someone who would always keep her house in good order.

I watch her furtively over the rim of my coffee as her eyes travel around the kitchen. I’m unsure if I should get up and greet her, or if I should let her come to me. Silas is still standing over the stove, paying no mind at all, trying to flip the last pancakes while I’m sitting at the table like I’m part of the family. What is she going to think of me? I had never

envisioned actually meeting Silas's mom and now I am as unkempt and unprepared as I could be.

"Hello mother," Silas calls out as he steps away from the stove, reaching out an arm and giving her a side hug. "What are you doing here?"

She takes a breath and puts her hands on her hips.

"Well," she says. "I thought I'd drop by to see if you survived the festival last night. I know you were worried about it."

Silas transfers the pancakes to his plate. "Yes, things went well," he says. "I don't think I had any reason to be worried. Henry Benson had it all under control."

"Of course," Silas's mother says with a roll of her eyes and a high-pitched chuckle. "That man has been on top of things as long as I can remember." Directing her gaze toward me, she tries to figure me out as she holds onto the back of one of the kitchen table chairs.

I am painfully aware of my uncombed hair, sure that I look like a total mess after my night spent on the couch. Feeling her gaze on me, I know I look more like a vagabond than a person who someone would want raising their grandchild... or falling in love with their son.

"Oh, Mom, this is Ana Green," Silas hurries to explain as he notices her stare. "She's the one who's been helping out around here."

Mrs. Berne throws out a hand and I stand up to shake it. I can only hope I don't act as awkwardly as I feel but that's wishful thinking. "Sorry for such a bad first impression," I say as I take her hand. "We stayed up later than usual."

"We all went to the fair!" Jace butts in to announce. "Ana won Dad a huge teddy bear in a game and we all rode the Ferris wheel. Then, when we got home, we all watched a movie together." With a laugh, he adds, "Ana and I fell asleep on the couch and woke up there this morning."

My face grows red as I sense the weight of her judgment of me as her grandchild's caregiver. Jace has told her far too

much for my comfort. Then, to make things even worse, he points a little finger in my direction and declares, “You have a bad bruise on your neck, Ana. Did you hurt it at the fair?”

Now I’m beet red and I can’t keep eye contact with anyone. This is just the finishing touch on a disastrous first introduction—me, sporting a huge hickey on my neck. Silas’s mother is going to crucify me, I’m sure. I look down at my plate and pray he will make up a believable excuse for me.

“Oh, who knows with all the excitement last night,” Silas says. “How about you leave Ana alone, Jace?” Silas directs his son back toward his chair. “Mom, would you sit down and have something to eat? We have plenty.”

Letting out a laugh, Mrs. Berne pulls out a chair and sits down in it, lowering her weight carefully as she eyes me. “This is quite a change,” she says. “I’m used to being the one coming here to feed you. I can’t remember the last time I saw you in front of the stove doing more than boiling a kettle of water.”

Putting a plate of pancakes down in front of her, Silas takes a seat next to me. He makes small talk about the festival and how things have gone so far. As he talks, his hand reaches out to find mine in my lap, under the table. He gives my hand a simple squeeze as if to assure me everything is alright.

I appreciate the gesture. I can tell he’s uncertain about his mother as well. His squeeze tells me we’re still on the same side. If it’s going to be his mother against me, then it’s going to be his mother against both of us.

“So, are there any dishes for me to do?” Mrs. Berne asks as she takes a sip of her coffee. “Or laundry? Surely my son still needs my help.” His mother peers over me, eyeing my ‘bruise.’

Silas laughs and shakes his head as he reaches for his cup. “I’m afraid not, Mom. This is a different house now. Ever since Ana arrived, my workload has been reduced. At least, the inside work has... I can’t say much for her skills on the farm.”

“Hey,” I say, asserting myself and giving him a playful slap on the arm. “That’s not fair. The chickens and I are on great terms, and I’m pretty good at milking cows. Thank you very much.”

Swallowing a bite of his pancake, Jace turns to his grandmother and whispers, “She thought chickens could bite.”

To my relief, Mrs. Berne laughs. She looks toward Silas and declares, “Silas, that’s cruel of you to give her these jobs. Milking cows? Who on earth gets hired as a nanny and has to milk a cow?” Leaning forward so she’s looking directly at me, Silas’s mother says, “Don’t you let my son bully you. He may be good-hearted, but he has no clue how to treat a woman. He thinks that he has to run his life like he’s an army sergeant or something.”

The longer we talk, the more at ease I feel around Silas’s mother. She might be a little on the snobbish side with her appearance, but she is kind and sweet. She may hate me, but at least she’s putting on a good front.

Once breakfast is over, I stand up to start clearing away the dishes, glad to have a task to show that I do work around the place.

“Hey,” Silas says, hurrying to his feet and edging in next to me. “What do you think you’re doing? I fixed breakfast, I can clean up the mess. You relax for a little while.”

“Yeah,” Jace squeals, hurrying up from his seat and clapping his hands together. “You can show me what you got in that package the other day.”

The package is a surprise I ordered online so Jace would have something fun to do in the hot sunshine. Seeing his enthusiasm and realizing that arguing would only make me look worse, I say, “Okay. But that’s something we’re going to have to open outside.”

“That’s the best kind,” Jace says, pumping a fist in the air.

I nod to Mrs. Berne as Jace leads me out of the kitchen and through the back door toward the guest cabin. I want so badly

to be enthusiastic about giving him the gift I ordered, but it's difficult to do when my mind is churning with uncertainties.

I feel like I need to stay in the kitchen until Mrs. Berne leaves, so I can shield Silas from her comments as much as anything else. I have no idea what she thinks of me and I'm afraid to guess what she might say to him. If I could at least hear her comments, I might be able to defend myself later.

But that is far from sensible. I'm just going to have to plow ahead and face whatever may come from Silas's visit with his mother. If our budding relationship is so shaky that she can destroy it, then it was hopeless from the start. I'm just going to have to be patient and see what happens.

In the meantime, I need to cover up the deep purple hickey on my neck.

SILAS

As I scrape some leftover pieces of bacon into a bowl, I try to focus on my work, but my eyes are drawn toward the back window where I watch Ana leading Jace toward the guest cabin.

“Silas Berne, you have changed.” My mother’s voice interrupts my thoughts. Her words are more statement than question.

I turn my head to look at my mother. She is standing next to me with a plate in her hand. I can’t quite read the expression on her face and I am prepared to be on the defense. My eyebrows crinkle together as I take her dish and turn on the water in the sink.

“What are you talking about?” I ask with a laugh as I wash the plate, trying to sound nonchalant about the entire matter, “Nothing has changed about me. I’m still the same dear son you’ve always loved the most.” I hope my joking around will help to lighten the mood.

Leaning a hand against the edge of the countertop, my mom is staring a hole in me, yet she has a slight smile on her lips. “Yes,” she agrees, “The same son I’ve always loved. Not that I have favorites, of course. But this son is lighthearted and jovial and not a hermit. That’s what has changed. This is a son I haven’t seen in years.”

The warmth rises in my face as I recognize the meaning behind her words. Turning to open the dishwasher, I hope I can buy myself some time to ponder what she said. I don’t

know what to say, because I realize she is right. There is nothing I can say to refute her claims.

Now that Ana is in my life, I am more like the person I used to be before Kelly came along.

My mother takes a step toward me and puts her hand on my arm. “I don’t know anything about this girl, Silas,” she says. “But I want you to understand, I am not going to stand in your way. She’s done a lot of good here. I would urge you to be cautious and consider Jace in everything. But don’t worry about us. Your dad and I are going to support you, whatever you decide.”

Relief washes over me and I’m overwhelmed with gratitude. As we were eating breakfast, I couldn’t help but notice my mother staring at Ana, studying her. At the time, I feared that was a sign she was going to cause some sort of trouble or have an opinion about my relationship with someone who is merely hired help – and so much younger. Rather than being scornful, my mom is ready to embrace the situation with open arms and a warm heart.

Letting out a laugh, I admit, “Thanks, Mom. I don’t know what I’m doing anymore. I’ve gotten so used to being a loner, it’s going to be hard to be open with someone again.”

She chuckles and stands up on her toes, surprising me with a kiss on the cheek. “Trust your gut and let it come,” she says. “But watch it with those hickies, young man. There’s plenty of time for that once you get to know the girl.”

My face turns beet red and we both laugh as my mom offers to help me finish up the dishes before she heads back home.

Working side-by-side, I feel like my relationship with my mother has been restored to what it used to be before my heartbreak caused me to shield myself from my closest family members.



“JACE!” I call out for my son as I walk my mom to her car, “Jace! Come on and tell Granny goodbye, she’s about to go back home.”

The late morning sun is exceptionally bright, making the car door hot to my touch when I grab it. Swinging it open for my mom, I wait for Jace to arrive so he can say his goodbyes.

My son rounds the house like someone’s chasing him. He skips with glee as he throws himself into my mom’s arms and hugs her. “Bye Granny. Thanks for coming to visit,” he says, and before she can answer, he turns to me and declares, “Dad, you’ve got to come around back and check out what Ana got me. She’s the best.”

“Jace,” I say. “How about you give Granny a proper goodbye with a hug and a kiss?”

He steps forward to hug his grandmother, but it’s done with such speed I can tell he’s all wound up about whatever Ana got him. My mom leans over and whispers, “What did she get you?”

Lifting a hand to her ear, Jace whispers something that makes her smile even more. She looks toward me and points a finger as she declares, “Remember what I told you.”

Her car pulls away down the long drive toward the highway and I watch her. That was the most positive interaction I’ve had with my mother in years. I can’t remember the last time she was here and not criticizing me for what a mess my life is.

I put my hands in my pockets and let out a breath. Knowing I have my mother’s blessing where Ana is concerned is a load off my shoulders – one I didn’t realize I was carrying until now.

“Come and see,” Jace says, pulling at my arm.

Following my little boy around the back of the house, I discover his short but fast legs are hard to keep up with. I find myself looking forward to seeing what delightful thing Ana has brought into our lives now.

“Look, Dad!” Jace exclaims as he points toward something spread out across the grass in the backyard. It’s a small-sized inflatable pool slowly filling up with water. Ana is standing nearby, holding the water hose to make sure it doesn’t slide off the edge.

“It’s not deep, but I figured it would be enough for us to cool off,” Ana explains as she reaches out and runs her free hand through the water. I wonder if she has a swimsuit. The thought makes my pulse quicken, but I hurry to push the image out of my mind while my son is around.

Stepping forward, I help Ana lean the hose against the pool and secure it so it won’t move. Reaching for the cardboard box lying on the grass, tossed to the side, I read aloud, “Four feet deep by eight feet.” I glance up to meet Ana’s gaze, she appears to be waiting on my approval. “Where did you buy this? I didn’t think you came here with a pool hidden away in your belongings.”

Ana blushes as she admits, “I ordered it online. It got here yesterday and I’ve been so anxious to set it up.” She looks precious as she waits for the rising water to fill the inflatable pool. I know Ana isn’t this thrilled about the prospect of swimming in a kiddie pool – she’s excited about doing something fun for Jace. Knowing how hard she tries to make him happy makes my heart swell.

Standing together, I watch, alongside Ana and Jace, as the water rises higher and higher. The sun beats against the surface and sparkles, refracting the light so it looks like the pool is full of tiny glass diamonds.

“Do you think it’s full enough?” Jace exclaims once the water is up to the fill line.

Ana nods her head and he lets out a squeal as he rushes inside to find his swim trunks. With Jace gone to find his swimming attire, Ana and I are alone for the first time since last night. In the silence between us, I can see in her face that everything is different now. Glancing back toward the house to make sure we’re still alone, I extend an arm and grasp Ana’s hand, giving her a smile and a gentle squeeze.

I need to go out to the workshop and try to salvage part of the workday, but it's almost impossible to make myself do so. I am overwhelmed by an urge to stay and watch Jace enjoy the new pool and spend more time with Ana.

There is little space between us as I gaze at her gentle face. "Thank you, Ana," I whisper, trying to put into words what's in my heart. "Thank you for all you do for Jace... and for me."

I take a step closer. Ana's chest rises and falls heavily as I lift a hand to cup her cheek in my palm. She cocks her head to one side, leaning into my hand, and closes her eyes. No longer is there any doubt or uncertainty – we both know what we want.

Putting my other arm around her waist, I pull her against me and let my lips brush against hers. It's not a long or passionate kiss, but I hope it's enough to show her what last night meant to me.

Glancing again toward the house where Jace is still inside, I turn back to Ana and say, "I'm going to the workshop for a couple of hours. Tell Jace I'm not going to work too late." An idea enters my mind, teasing my good sense as I add, "Tell him we're going to do something fun tonight. Don't fix anything for dinner."

"You'd better watch it with all this cooking. I'm starting to get spoiled," Ana says, with a playful smirk.

I huff out a laugh and make my way to the workshop. It's good to laugh again, I can't believe I remember how. It's been a long time since I've felt free enough to laugh at anything. My mother is right – Ana has brought a part of me back to life I thought was long gone. I only hope it can last. In the back of my mind, I'm always preparing myself for things to fall apart.

But maybe they won't this time.

As soon as I reassure myself that things are going to keep going in a good direction, an image of Kelly flashes through my mind. Hadn't I thought the same thing about her? Hadn't I had blind faith and certainty our relationship was going to last? There were red flags, and yet I ignored them.

Just like there are some red flags with Ana.

As much as I hate to admit it, there are things about her that still don't make sense to me. So many unanswered questions I wish I had answers for. Why is she in New Harmony? Why did she show up on my doorstep, desperate for a job, when she could get a job anywhere? Why does she have no cell phone and why have I never seen any forms of ID?

The unknowns taunt me and rub my head, hating my brain for bringing them to the surface.

Stepping into the shop, I make my way toward my workshop and pull out the plans for the upcoming project. I need to focus on my work now. There's no reason to worry about Ana's past. There will be time for that to unfold later. My mother is right about another thing: for now, I need to follow my heart and let things happen.

ANA

The world is a fresh and exciting place after what happened between me and Silas last night. To say I've been excited all day is an understatement. My fears have all but vanished and the only thing I can focus on is the possibility of a positive future. Somehow, having Silas in my life has erased my entire painful past and given me a fresh start.

On a blanket next to the swimming pool, I watch as Jace kicks around in the water, making splashes in all directions. I've worn a pair of jean shorts and a T-shirt all day and haven't been in the water. Yet, Jace has gotten me almost as wet as if I'd been dunked right in the pool itself.

"So, when's Dad going to bring this surprise?" Jace asks as he swims up next to the edge of the pool. Looking down at his fingers, he giggles before turning his hands so I can see how pruned his fingers are.

Giving a shrug, I glance toward the shop. "I'm not sure," I say. "He said he wasn't going to be working too late and has something fun planned."

A grin breaks out across Jace's face and he declares, "I can hardly wait. If he doesn't show up soon, I may just go down there and see what's taking him so long."

I understand his anxiousness completely. I, too, am bursting at the thought of what Silas has planned for us.

As if he can hear us talking from a distance, Silas opens the door to his shop and steps into the sunshine. Gazing

toward the pool, he raises a hand to wave. My heart trips at the memory of how those hands were running all over my body just the other night. The memories make my head swim and I wonder if it shows outwardly. I wipe my mouth to make sure I'm not drooling, just to be sure. A large part of me wants to run to him and throw myself into his strong arms, to feel him close to me again. I am dying for a repeat of yesterday evening.

“Looks like he’s out of the shop.” Jace’s voice interrupts my thoughts, making my face turn red as if the kid could hear the thoughts floating through my mind. I clear my throat and regain my composure, turning my head to shoot him a smile.

“Looks like it,” I return.

Silas makes his way around the back of the building, causing Jace to groan. Determined to take both our minds off the unbearable anticipation, I start playing in the water with him, making large waves with my hands as we take turns trying to capsize one of his toy boats in the wake.

The sound of something dropping to the ground makes us both jump, and I turn in surprise to find Silas standing behind me, a proud smile on his face. At his feet, he dropped a giant pile of split wood, and is holding something over his left shoulder.

“What is that for?” Jace calls out, hurrying over to the side of the pool so that he can climb out for closer examination.

Setting a large canvas sack on the ground, Silas explains, “It’s such a nice day and you’re having so much fun outside that I thought it would be a shame to end it when it gets dark. So, I found an old tent and thought we could have a cookout.”

Jace’s eyes grow huge and his face lights up. “A campout?” he repeats. “You mean we’re going to have a campout?” Rushing to my side, he grabs my hand in his cold, wrinkled one and looks up at me for a reaction. I wouldn’t mind having a campout with just Silas and me, but something about all of us together, like a family, feels so natural.

I peer up at Silas and find that he's staring at me. His gaze has a softness about it that he hasn't had in the past. As much as he lights up my body, I feel like I'm falling more in love with him as I bask in the warm glow of his tender expression.

"Thanks, Dad!" Jace hurries to his father, soaking his clothes with his wet body.

Silas laughs and puts a hand on Jace's back as he says, "Well, we're going to have to run to town to pick up some hot dogs and stuff for s'mores, but as soon as we get back, it'll be time to start the fire. So, go get dressed."

Jace nods obediently and hurries into the house, yelling something about a perfect day as he slides across the porch.

"Don't slip on the floor," I call out after him. "Your feet are still wet!"

"Kids," Silas says with a chuckle.

He reaches out and takes my hand, pulling me into him like we're about to do the Tango. I practically gasp as he draws me against his chest, placing a hand on his wide pectoral muscle. My heart flutters at the sudden closeness, and it fills my soul that he has been wanting me just as much as I want him.

Silas's body is so warm and I feel right where I belong as he tips up my chin and kisses me tenderly, neither of us the least concerned about Jace seeing us. I throw my arms around his neck and pull myself up to him, deepening our kiss. Silas wraps his arms around me and pulls me to my toes, teasing me with his tongue as our lips lock onto each other's. I never want to let him go and I can't get enough of him.

As Silas releases me and I slide back down his tall, bulky figure, I hug his body and press my cheek against his chest. I can't help but compare this moment to those that I've experienced in the past. With Brett, there was some initial excitement, but Silas feels like home. I would die happy if I could just live in this moment for the rest of my life.



SITTING CROSS-LEGGED ON THE GROUND, I watch as Silas carefully pulls a hot marshmallow off the end of a metal stake and arranges it on a graham cracker. We've been home for an hour and our cookout has turned into a serious event. We bought hot dogs, burger meat, and vegetables to grill. And while a kid Jace's size can barely eat more than one hotdog, he is determined to savor each bite of the s'more to make it last as long as possible. I can understand why, as Silas and I exchange glances in the warm glow of the fire – we've been having so much fun that I think we're all trying to make the night last.

Behind us, between the campfire and the house, Silas has set up an old canvas tent; an army-issued piece of equipment he inherited from his father. It's big enough to house ten people, but it's more the type of thing that you would see in the showroom of an Army surplus store than in the great outdoors.

I can't help but wonder exactly what the sleeping arrangements are for the night. I am not totally comfortable with the idea of spending the night with Jace and Silas by my side, yet, at the same time, trying to excuse myself to my little cabin would be heartbreaking for Jace.

I do want to soak up these moments, though, taking in every minute with both Silas and Jace.

"Here, just take it easy," Silas instructs Jace as he helps the little boy put a slab of chocolate on top of his newly roasted marshmallow. "Just pull it off and then cover it up with the other piece."

Watching them together, my heart swells. How does it work that two people who were strangers only a few weeks ago are now the center of my world?

Sitting back on the ground, Jace starts to munch down on his graham cracker treat as he points up at the stars.

"Look," he says as his chocolate-covered finger directs our eyes toward one of the constellations, "That's the Little

Dipper, isn't it?"

Silas nods his head with pride as he says, "Good job. You know more about the stars than I expected."

"You should expect it," Jace says, raising an eyebrow. "I learned everything I know from you."

Scooting forward on the ground, I reach for a metal stick and a marshmallow of my own. "Are you a professional astronomer or something?" I ask, peering over the fire at Silas.

My question makes Silas laugh as he rearranges some logs on the fire.

"Not quite," he says with a smirk. "I used to be in the Boy Scouts and we learned a lot about the stars."

I study his broad shoulders and his monstrous frame. Even hunched forward, completely unassuming, he's still enormous and exudes manliness. I huff out a quiet laugh as I try to picture him as a little kid. It's nearly impossible to imagine he was ever as small and helpless as Jace. Yet, when I remember the sounds he made as our bodies and our mouths were entangled the other night, I realize there are still things about him that are vulnerable, almost helpless.

My gaze travels over the line of his jaw and lands on his lips. I wonder if he's thinking at all about what happened between us yesterday. Suddenly, my face grows warm and I glance behind me to find Jace walking away from the fire. He has managed to find his way into the tent. It appears exhaustion has finally overtaken him.

Smirking at the sight of him, I catch Silas's attention and nod my head toward his son getting ready for bed. "Looks like somebody had enough."

Silas grins as he watches Jace collapse onto his sleeping bag before his eyes drift back toward me. He reaches out a hand and pats the blanket-covered ground next to him. "Come over here," he says. "You've got to get your marshmallow closer to the fire if you want it hot." The fire is mostly coals at this point and the light it casts is dim, but his sly, blue eyes

still twinkle as he adds, “You ought to know by now I don’t bite.”

My face grows warm and I follow his lead, scooting right next to him. My movements are almost too fast but I want so desperately to be close to him that, when I’m given the opportunity, I am unable to contain myself. I’m like someone dying of thirst—and Silas Berne is a glass of water that I simply can’t resist.

Putting an arm around me, Silas pulls me close against his side. His soft gaze studies my face. “You’re not cold, are you?” he asks.

Cold? What’s cold? At this moment, things like temperature are lost on me. All I care about is being close to Silas. It could be ten degrees with a foot of snow on the ground and I would hardly notice as long as his body is pressed against me.

“Here,” Silas whispers as he snuggles his head down close to mine, his rough cheeks brushing against my face as he points up to the sky, “Do you see those stars? That’s Cassiopeia, the vain queen who boasted too much about her own beauty.”

All I see are twinkling lights in the sky and all I feel is the rhythm of my heart beating wildly in my chest. “I’ve never been able to identify constellations,” I tell him honestly. “Stars all look the same to me. And living in the city most of my life, I never really had much of a chance to see the stars until now.”

Silas’s eyes go wide as he glares at me in surprise.

“Then you’ve been missing out your entire life,” he says.

He’s right. I have been missing out my entire life. And not just because I haven’t watched the stars. I’ve been missing out on everything. I’ve lived my entire life on the outskirts of reality, and only now that I’ve come to New Harmony am I experiencing the world as it was meant to be.

“Now, just follow my finger with your eyes,” Silas whispers as he leans closer to my ear. His breath ignites goosebumps on my neck and all I want is to melt into him like

a marshmallow over a flame. But I obey and follow his gesture upward. Leaning into him, I let my vision travel along his finger, trying to see everything through his eyes.

I want to see the world as Silas sees it. I want to be entrenched in every aspect of his existence.

SILAS

Ana's weight shifts as she scoots over closer to me. I hate to be so full of myself, but it seems she can't get close enough to me. It's a feeling I share. I want to be so close to her that it's impossible to tell which of us is which.

Turning my gaze back to the tent, I make sure my son is still sound asleep. I'm still trying to figure out exactly how our sleeping arrangements are going to work for the night. I'm picturing the intense passion we shared last night, and wishing that we could somehow make that happen again.

"I see it," Ana gasps, her voice enthusiastic as she points at the sky. "I think I can finally make it out." She begins to trace the outline of Cassiopeia, and my heart swells as I observe her excitement.

"Well, you've made a Boy Scout out of me after all," she declares. In the glow of the fleeting embers, she looks so young and alive, and the sight of her rejuvenates my soul.

"Let me show you some more," I whisper, pressing my cheek against her hair. My voice sounds thick as I rasp the words. Right now, finding constellations with this sexy angel at my side is not foremost on my mind.

Ana turns her head to look up at me with eyes wide and full. I can't help myself anymore. I lean in and let my lips find Ana's. They're so soft and small, tender and sweet against mine. I swear she tastes like honeysuckle, but I feel like any kiss is going to end in frustration for both of us, given that Jace is only ten yards away, asleep though he may be.

As I pull away from her, I let my fingers run down the side of her cheek. “Ana,” I say her name so softly that I hope that she can hear my voice. Her eyes lock on mine and I see something in her I’ve never seen in any other woman before - an honest longing that assures me she feels the same way about me that I do about her.

Gathering all my courage, I place a hand on the back of her neck and guide her down along the blanket. Turning my entire body so that I am above her, staring right into her face. I marvel at her smooth, porcelain skin in the soft glow of our dying fire. The evening is cool but the embers put out just enough warmth to be comfortable.

“You have turned my life upside down,” I whisper, brushing the back of my hand along her cheek. The thoughts that have been trapped in my mind all these weeks finally have permission to come out in words.

“When you came here, I had no idea how I would feel about you. I’m sorry to say, when I first met you, all I cared about was how well you could work. I had the lowest hopes of your being a good employee.”

Ana interrupts my comment with a laugh. I snicker along with her, glad that I didn’t offend her.

Her laugh subsides and I lean in, kissing her again. I can’t get enough of her. My heart beats erratically every time I feel her lips on mine, as if something inside me shifts. Even if we had no fire at all, the sheer excitement of being so close to Ana raises my temperature so much it wouldn’t matter.

She weaves her fingers into the hair at the back of my head and pulls my face to hers, deepening our kiss. I have to resist the urge to sigh with delight at her invitation. I want nothing more than to rip her clothes off and have my way with her, but I can’t, with my eight-year-old son close by. Such is the struggle of every parent.

But that doesn’t stop Ana as she finds my belt and glares up at me with a devilish grin.

“Hmmm, my turn,” she muses, and she dives a hand into the front of my pants.

She quickly finds my erection and I grunt as she grips me, a wave of carnal euphoria washing through me. I drive my tongue into her waiting mouth to stifle the sounds of my ecstasy. I can't remember the last time a woman touched me anywhere, let alone down there. Her small hand strokes me slowly as I guide my free hand up and under her shirt, only to find she isn't wearing a bra.

My sexual excitement ratchets up a notch as I feel her naked breast for the first time - her perfectly soft handful, with the slightest nub at its tip. I tease her nipple between my thumb and forefinger, eliciting a desperate mewl from her lips before I catch myself and pull back.

“Woah,” I whisper. “Hold on. I'm going to pass out if we don't slow down.”

There is only one direction this is headed and there's no way I'm going to let our first time be within earshot of Jace. I am way too worked up to let things go any further.

“I don't know where all this is going,” I say. “But I think... I love you.”

I've said too much, I'm sure, and I study Ana's face in terror as she looks up at me with bright, lucid eyes. Tears blur my vision and I sit up sharply, kicking myself for admitting what's been on my mind for days but I never thought I'd hear myself say. The emotions that I have bottled up for years are surfacing and pouring out. I didn't realize how much I had given up or how much I had been missing since Kelly left.

Ana sits up and puts her arms around me, pulling me close to her as I stare at the smoldering embers in the fire pit. Her touch is reassuring, but I don't want to think about what I just said. I don't want any words of reciprocation from her and I'm annoyed at myself for creating any expectation at all.

Damn it, Silas.

I'm like a drowning man who has finally found his lifeline, and I'm holding onto her for dear life.

I let out a breath of surrender as my deepest fears come to light. “I don’t just want this to be some sort of short-lived fling,” I confess. “Does that make sense? I want more than that. You know?”

But I know the answer to my question almost before I’ve asked it. Ana nods eagerly and snuggles her head against my shoulder. “Of course,” she murmurs, holding me. “I want that too.”

I pull away slightly as I turn to face her, studying her expression as I ask, “What do you want, Ana?”

“I want...” Ana lets her eyes trail off for a second, almost enough to make me doubt her. Then, she looks back at me with a gaze so full of love that it’s impossible to deny. She clears her throat and whispers, “I want to be a part of your life too. I want to make Berne Farms my home and I want to build a life together.”

I don’t think it would have been possible for her to say the words that matched my own thoughts more perfectly. Sinking into her, I kiss her again, running my hands through her hair.

“Hey!” a familiar, little voice calls out, breaking the stillness of the night. “What are you all doing out there? Isn’t anybody going to come sleep with me?”

Kids have an innate talent for ruining a perfect moment.

Ana jerks away from me as if she’s been caught doing something illegal. “What is it, Jace?” she asks, jumping to her feet, her voice comically loud as she tries to regain her composure.

I stand up next to her, somewhat more slowly, as I turn my gaze toward the tent. In the light of the fire’s glow, I can make out my son peeking out of the tent’s opening with a sleepy expression and tousled hair.

“It’s scary in here alone.” Jace explains as he stares out at us, “I saw a huge spider. I’m not sure I want to stay out here anymore. My back hurts and it smells weird.”

I try not to roll my eyes. I figured camping out probably wouldn’t last all night, but did it have to be interrupted at that

exact moment? I fight the urge to suggest he just go back to sleep. Another magical moment with Ana has come and gone and I sigh as I accept that fact. “Okay. Go on inside and brush your teeth,” I say. “I’ll be in shortly.”

“Awww... do I have to?” Jace whines as he pulls himself, pillow in hand, out of the tent.

“Yes, if you’re sleeping inside, then you have to brush your teeth,” I announce. “Now, go on and I’ll be in there in a minute.”

Jace makes his way into the house, marching in annoyance and mumbling something about how unfair I’m being. I’m just glad to have a couple more minutes of adult time.

Turning around to look at Ana, she has a smirk on her face, her arms crossed her chest. “Punishment by toothbrushing,” she says.

I can’t help but grin back at her. “Well, I couldn’t think of anything else, but I had to do something to get back at him for interrupting us.” Taking a step closer to her, I run my finger down the side of her cheek and then lean forward to give her one last kiss.

“Tomorrow let’s tell Jace,” I suggest as I make myself move back from her, wishing that our night together didn’t have to end.

Nodding her head in agreement, Ana takes a deep breath. “Okay. Let’s do it,” she says. There’s something about her answer that makes me think this is all going too far too fast, as if she’s still tentative about the entire relationship. Her attitude makes me kick myself again and I have to work to keep my guard from going back up.

“Goodnight, Ana,” I whisper as I lean down and give her a kiss on the cheek.

“Goodnight, Silas,” she coos in return.

She walks away to her cabin and I find myself staring after her, my gaze lingering in her direction even after she closes the door. I can’t wait for the time when we no longer say goodnight to each other before settling down into our separate

beds for the night. But I have got to cool it and stop getting ahead of myself.



“SO, WHAT’S THE BIG ANNOUNCEMENT?” Jace asks as he tips his bowl to his mouth and drinks the milk that’s leftover from his cereal. His eyes travel from me to Ana as if he’s trying to hazard a guess before we can tell him.

Ana and I got up that morning before Jace came out of his bedroom and decided that we were going to tell him about our decision to date each other first thing. It seemed like the best idea to just get it out in the open. Jace was already telling people she was his stand-in mother – so I don’t know why I’m nervous. This should be exciting news for him.

“Are we going somewhere today?” Jace asks, trying to glean more information.

Shaking my head, I tell him, “No. I have to go into town to talk to Henry Benson so that I can get paid for the farm rental, but you all are staying here.”

Rolling his eyes, Jace starts to whine about wanting to go, but I put up a hand to stop him. I’m so nervous about this announcement that I don’t have patience for any type of childish antics.

I reach a hand out to bridge the space between myself and Ana, taking a deep breath. All the well-devised words that I spent last night planning are suddenly gone from my mind.

“Jace...” I glare from him to Ana and find that she is just as speechless as I am. “Jace, Ana and I have decided that we want to be more than what we used to be. We want to be more than just friends.”

“You’re getting married?” Jace asks, jumping up from his seat, almost knocking his cereal bowl off the table. He has such a hopeful gleam in his eye that I’m almost disappointed to tell him the truth.

“No, no,” I explain, holding up both my hands. “At least, not at the moment.” Glancing back at Ana I see that her face is bright red.

“It’s too soon to start thinking about getting married,” Ana interjects. “We need time to get to know each other and to really make sure that we’re.... right for one another.”

Jace lowers himself back into his seat. His eyebrows are scrunched together as he asks, “So, you’ll just be like a couple now?” He looks down at his bowl as if he’s deep in contemplation before looking back up and announcing, “Alright. That’s okay, I guess. But I don’t really know why you need more time. You’re perfect together.”

I glance over at Ana who is bright red but beaming at the same time. I chuckle as I pull myself to my feet. How the hell does my eight-year-old son have any idea about how we are as a couple?

“By the way,” Jace adds. “I saw you two kissing last night after you sent me in to brush my teeth. Not too sneaky.”

I run a hand through my hair and take a sharp inhale. Thank God that’s all he saw. I give Jace a sideways glance. “How about you don’t be such a peeping Tom?” I say. Before he can answer, I offer my hand to Ana, helping her to her feet. I lean forward to give her a quick kiss on the lips. “I’ve got to run to town but I won’t be long. I’ll see you both soon.”

It feels weird to kiss Ana openly in front of Jace. I’ve never even had a date since his mother left me. But it also feels right, as if I’m providing him with the family I was never able to give him in the past.

Giving my son a quick hug, I rush out the door. I need to hurry to meet Henry Benson. I have to pick up a check for the festival he hosted at my farm, and possibly talk to him about another upcoming event he wants to host.

The sun outside is shining and the day is overall spectacular. I can only hope that things keep going in this direction. I have no reason to fear that they will go otherwise.

ANA

Jace and I stand at the front door, waving as Silas pulls away down the long driveway. I put my hand on Jace's shoulder and feel more protective and motherly than ever. I don't know what it is about this little boy that makes me feel like he's my own. I've never known this feeling before and I'm shocked by the fact that I've embraced the role of mother figure so much.

Glancing down at Jace by my side, I ask, "Are you happy? I mean about the two of us dating."

"Yeah," Jace returns. "I'm happy. But I think it's silly you two don't just go and get married."

Laughing, I bend down and give him a hug. "How about you go play with your toys while I clean up the kitchen and do some laundry?"

"Awww..." Jace moans with a frown, "I had hoped that you would play with me." He takes my hand in his and starts to pull on it, "Can't we play with my toy trucks for just a little while?"

Part of me wants to give in, but I have responsibilities. Plus, I could use a few minutes by myself. After everything that has happened in the last few days, I feel like I've been through a tornado – I need time to collect my thoughts and process things.

Kissing him on the top of the head, I say, "Why don't you go and play by yourself for now? If I get some stuff done here

in the house this morning, we can play in the pool this afternoon.”

“Will you get in with me this time?”

The idea of getting into the kiddie pool doesn't sound too appealing, but I'm so anxious to get some time to myself that I nod my head and agree, “Sure.”

Jace gives a smile and hurries to go play with his toys, leaving me alone. With a deep sigh, I turn and head back toward the kitchen where I start to load dishes in the dishwasher.

My mind reels like it's in a whirlwind as I carefully stack the plates in their proper places. I am so alive and so on fire, and yet so nervous and uncomfortable at the same time. But why? I know that I want to be with Silas – I meant it when I said I want to be a part of his life and live with him forever. But the mention of marriage makes me uncomfortable.

In all of the excitement of the past few days, I forgot that I still haven't told Silas anything about my past. He doesn't even know my real name. I've gotten so used to hiding my true identity that playing the part of Ana Green has become second nature. How can someone hiding under an alias ever hope to get married? There's no way I can move forward with this relationship unless I come clean with Silas – and that's still not something I'm comfortable doing.

Hopelessness weighs on my heart as I head to the laundry room and begin to unload clothes, carrying back a basket of clean laundry to the kitchen table. Folding the laundry might as well be my only accomplishment for the day. There's something about the mindlessness of sorting socks that gives me time to think than any other type of household project. Although, given the heaviness of the thoughts swirling around my mind right now, I don't know if I want to be thinking at all.

“It's going to be okay,” I mutter to myself, in the silence of the room. “You just need to focus on right now. When the time is right, you'll come clean.”

Besides, most people date for years before they start talking about marriage or anything serious like that. Maybe I can drag the dating experience on long enough that, with time, Silas will be more accepting of my secrets and the reasons behind them. If we can get through a year as a couple, he'll see that my having an evil ex and an alias isn't such a bad deal.

But as the thought flitters through my mind, it almost makes me sick. How can anyone be in a relationship when they can't even be honest about something as basic as their own last name?

The sound of floorboards squeaking alerts me that I'm not alone. Putting two gray-tipped socks together, I don't even look up from my work. "Jace, I told you to play with your toys for a little while. We'll have time to get in the pool later. I'm not going to play trucks with you right now."

"Don't worry, I don't want you to play trucks with me."

A shot of adrenaline hits me like a punch in the gut. That voice doesn't belong to Jace. It's the deep voice of a man. My skin curls as recognition fills my senses and I start to tremble so hard I can barely stand my ground. A pair of boy's trousers slips out of my hands and falls to the floor.

"It's been a long time since I've seen you, Anastasia."

There's only one person on this earth that calls me Anastasia and it's the one person I least want to see.

Brett.

I raise my eyes slowly as if taking my time might make the reality of this moment disappear. Unfortunately, it isn't so.

Standing in front of me, on the other side of the kitchen table, is none other than Brett Wilson himself.

His tall, lanky figure is imposing, even from a distance. He takes a step forward and puts his hands on the edge of the table. Reaching up to push back his dirty blonde hair with one hand, he eyeballs me with a stare of mixed suspicion and disappointment.

“Anastasia, Anastasia.” He whistles my name and clucks his tongue as if he’s scolding a little child.

I had forgotten how horrible it feels to be examined by my crazy ex’s hollow stare. I had put out of my mind just how insignificant he could make me feel. I stand before him, stunned. I’m completely exposed and vulnerable, like a little turtle stripped of its protective shell and left to wither in the hot sun.

“Brett,” I rasp his name around the lump in my throat. “How did you find me here?” My mind travels in a million different directions and I scan my surroundings for a way to defend myself if he tries to grab me. I’ve been so careful, talking to no one from my past and going out of my way not to do anything that could be used to trace my location. What breadcrumb trail could I have possibly left behind?

“Anastasia Brzezinski,” he oozes, my own name sounding foreign on his lips. “Haven’t you learned by now it’s impossible for you to get away from me? When you tied your life to me, you did it forever. Like it or not. There is no escaping me.”

His voice has an eerie calm, like he’s stating the most mundane fact. I swallow hard and try to think of something to say. I want to counter but I can’t find the words. There’s also a hint of truth to his words. Haven’t I been selfish in trying to get away from him? This charade of hide and seek was nothing more than a game to him. I tried to make a life without Brett but it seems like that’s impossible.

“Come on, Anastasia,” he demands, his voice growing firmer. “It’s time for you to come back home where you belong.”

I won’t take this anymore. I won’t take Brett bossing me around like this. He’s bullied me as long as he’s been a part of my life, but I won’t stand for it. I’ve got a new place to live now and a new path I’m on. Brett doesn’t belong in my life anymore and I don’t belong to him.

Slamming his fist against the table, Brett’s voice gets louder as he curses and declares, “For fucksake, Anastasia,

have you forgotten what I told you I'd do if you ever left me? I'm being kind enough to give you a second chance." His eyes narrow as he points toward the front of the house. "You better get out that door before I lose my patience."

Brett's threat from the past reverberates in my mind. He told me that if I ever left him, he would hunt me down. There was only a hint of what he might do if he found me. And now that he's found me, I don't want to imagine what lies in store for me.

My blood runs cold at the thought of what he might do. I never imagined that he meant it, that he was actually capable of something truly awful, but it was something I could never put outside the realm of possibility. He's a crazy sonofabitch and I have no idea what goes on in that head of his.

This far away from civilization, it wouldn't surprise me if he took me away from Silas's house into some wooded area and left me, tied to a tree, or worse. I suddenly feel like Silas is my only hope in the world.

I pull in a sharp breath, preparing myself for any outcome as I stare daggers into his deep-set eyes. "No," I say, standing my ground. "I'm not coming with you. I'm staying here."

With each word, Brett appears even more furious. Without warning he swipes a long, powerful arm across the table, sending all the laundry flying across the room and knocking over a chair in the process.

The sound of little feet pattering on the hardwood cuts through the tension in the room. Jace appears in the doorway, his eyes huge as he asks, "Ana, what's wrong? Who's this?" He looks at Brett as if he's the devil himself, and I can't help but think his assessment is dead on.

"Jace, go back to your room," I say with deadly seriousness, my voice harsher than I intend. "Go back to your room and shut the door."

Brett's gaze travels toward Jace and I watch his dark eyes narrow. I don't even want to imagine what might be floating

through his psychotic mind as he stares at the little boy who is as much like my own child as anyone in this world.

Taking a step forward, I try to distract him. “Brett, I think it’s time for you to go. If you want to talk things over, then we need to meet in a public place where we can work out our differences. Not that we have anything to work out. I told you a long time ago things were over between us, and I meant every word that I said.”

I had hoped that being strong was going to intimidate my ex, but I was wrong. Instead, his anger burns like a fire in his eyes, making my stomach tighten with fear as he glares back at me. Making his way around the table, he’s in my face before I know what’s happening.

“Hey, leave her alone!” Jace yells from the doorway, unsure of what to do.

Brett shoots a chilling glare in Jace’s direction and then back at me. “Talk things over?” he snarls, spit flying in my face as he speaks. “What do you mean? There is no talking things over. I have told you how things are going to be. You’re coming with me, like it or not.”

I want to punch him straight in his bony face, but I know my strength is no match for his. Brett may be skinny, but he’s much stronger than I can ever dream of being.

“Leave her alone!” Jace screams out, making his way around the table.

He throws his tiny body into Brett, slapping at him with everything he can muster. Turning his attention away from me, Brett gives Jace a shove that sends him sprawling backward on the kitchen floor.

I can’t stand to see him hurt Jace. I turn on him and begin to tear into Brett in retaliation, slapping and hitting him, grabbing hands full of his hair and pulling so hard that I can only hope that it will rip out.

While I do provide a distraction from Jace, my actions infuriate Brett more than ever. Swinging his body around, he

grabs both my hands and holds them in front of my face. I struggle against him, but it's useless.

Brett's eyes flash with hatred and I have a feeling I'm going to find out just how far he'll go to punish me for leaving.

SILAS

My trip to town was a huge success. I didn't even have to go all the way to town because I passed Henry Beson as he was driving out my farm to meet me. The elderly man flagged me over alongside the road to present me with the check for the property rental – along with a generous bonus he wouldn't let me turn down.

After a few minutes of talking about his upcoming plans for a music festival, we parted ways. I considered running into town to get some ice cream, but stopped myself. It was a beautiful day and I felt like I had a family for the first time in years, so it made sense to wait and take them into town with me. Ana has been working hard and deserves a break – maybe a trip to the diner as a family would be fun for us all.

But as I pull into the driveway at my home, my pleasant mood is suddenly replaced by a chilling uncertainty. Right in front of my house is an unfamiliar black SUV with darkened windows.

“Who in the world drives a vehicle like that?” I ask myself as I pull up beside it. I can't help but notice that they've pulled in directly behind Ana's car, as if they were trying to block her from leaving.

“Well, now that we're officially dating, maybe it's time for her creepy relatives to show up,” I comment under my breath. I say it to myself as a sort of joke, and yet my words do little to ease my growing discomfort.

It's strange that Ana would have someone over without telling me.

Stepping out of my truck, I hear loud voices emanating from inside the house. I hear Ana let out what sounds like a scream, and a man shouting.

My fear turns to outright panic as I run toward the front entrance of the house. My heart pounds in my chest and a surge of adrenaline sharpens my actions into pure instinct to protect my loved ones. Who or what is in my home?

I fly up the porch steps, skipping two at a time as I charge toward the front door. I charge full speed toward the commotion at the back of the house, my blood pressure skyrocketing as I step through the kitchen doorway. The first thing I see is Jace, curled up on the floor with tears streaming down his face. And above him, behind the table is Ana, struggling against a strange man holding her tightly by the wrists.

Taking one bound across the room, I grab the stranger's shirt at the collar and yank him violently away from Ana. He doesn't know what hit him before he's flying backward. His body slams into the refrigerator with a crash before he falls onto the laundry spread out on the floor.

I don't even say a word as I stand over his crumpled body, hovering above him with my nostrils flaring, resisting the urge to tear him limb from limb. I wish someone would give me some answers. I don't think I could speak if I wanted to.

What the hell is going on here? I look over at Jace who looks up at me with terror in his eyes. He's crying, but he appears to be okay.

"What are you doing in my house?" I shout so loud that the stranger winces.

He tries to regain his footing and I grab a handful of his button-down shirt at his throat, pinning him against the fridge with one arm. Glancing toward Ana and Jace, I ask, "Are you both okay?"

Ana nods and rubs her wrists. Jace is by her side in an instant, hiding his face in her shirt.

I'm not interested in excuses, so I drag this lunatic by the collar, through the laundry room, and out the back door. Glancing toward the pool, I consider drowning him, but then I think better of it.

I tighten my grip and stare into his dark eyes, as tempted as I've ever been to end someone's life before I release him. I let him stand up in front of me. "I'll ask you again," I say, with menacing calm. "What the fuck do you think you're doing in my house?"

The man who was so tough terrorizing a woman and kid only a few seconds ago is now cowering before me. Running his hand through his hair, he says, "I'm sorry, sir. I didn't mean for this to happen. I was just here trying to get my fiancée back. I just wanted to tell Anastasia that it's time to come home."

"Your fiancée?" I snarl. I'm so mad at this little punk that it takes every ounce of control not to pound the life out of him, but his words surprise me more than I want to admit. Does this man have a history with Ana? My Ana? And that name—who the hell is that? The woman I know and love is Ana Green.

"Is that how you treat a woman you think is your fiancée?" I ask. Regardless of what Ana may be hiding, this man is nothing but the lowest scum.

I'm so inflamed by his words that, before I can stop myself, I take a step forward and punch him square across his cheek, wishing I could force those words right back into his stupid mouth. The force of my blow sends him flying back and he staggers to hold himself upright before he falls back onto one of the stepping stones.

I have unleashed all my pent-up emotions at once, and the blood that starts trickling out of the young man's nose is proof that my rage has found its mark.

Stepping toward him, I loom over the intruder, my chest heaving as I stare at him. Part of me wants to spit on him but I

don't want to waste any more of myself on this worm of a man.

“Get off my property,” I seethe, tightening my fists at my sides as I tower over him. “If I see you here again, I swear to you, I will hit you so hard you’ll be lucky to walk out of here.”

I take a step back, but the man remains dazed on the ground, examining his bloody nose, so I yell, “I said get out!”

The boy hurries to his feet, wiping his nose on his sleeve as he makes his way around the house to his vehicle. I rub my knuckles as his vehicle starts up, his tires spinning and kicking up gravel as he drives off.

“Dad!”

From the front of the house, I hear Jace’s voice and realize Ana has brought him to the porch. I can tell from their voices that they’re okay.

I can’t even bring myself to look at her as I come around to the front of the house. I am so angry and so hurt that it feels like I’m going to explode. I close my eyes and try to imagine how things have fallen apart so quickly.

Gathering all my strength and patience, I lift my eyes and look at the pair of them, standing on the porch together. Jace is next to Ana with his arm around her waist as if the excitement of the day has made him love her more than ever. It hasn’t done the same to me.

I can’t look at Ana right now.

Stepping closer to them, I ask, “Are you both okay?”

They both say yes.

“Jace,” I say. “I want you to go out to the truck and wait for me. I’ll be there in a minute.”

“Where are we going?” Jace asks, his voice showing a familiar whine.

I’m in no mood for his questions or whining. “Just go get in the car and wait,” I reply, gritting my teeth. “And lock the doors until I get there.”

Jace sighs but hurries to do what I ask. I guess seeing your dad knock the sand out of some stranger can keep a kid from sassing off for a few minutes. I force my eyes toward Ana, but she averts her gaze, trying to avoid contact. The way she's acting only confirms my suspicion.

Ana heads back into the house. I wait until Jace is in my truck before I try to get some answers about what just happened from Ana. When I enter the kitchen, Ana is leaning over, picking laundry off the floor, and putting it back in the basket.

“Are you all right?” I ask. My question is kind but my tone is as hostile as I feel.

Nodding her head, Ana starts to tear up as she puts the basket full of laundry back on the table. Her voice thick with emotion, she rasps, “I never thought he'd actually come here.”

Her comment only serves to infuriate me more. How am I supposed to accept what just happened? What has she been hiding that just endangered my son?

“So, you know that man?” I demand, half-questioning, half-accusing.

Ana nods and picks up one of Jace's socks. Turning it over in her hand, she admits, “He and I dated for a while. We were supposed to get married. I left him after he cheated on me. I never thought that he'd be able to find me here.”

I can hardly believe what I'm hearing. I want to scream at her to get out but instead, I ask, “You're not Ana Green, are you?”

Clenching her jaw, she closes her eyes before opening them slowly and admitting, “Everyone calls me Ana... but I made up the Green part. I had to come up with some sort of alias if I wanted him not to find me.”

So, she knew he might find her? She knew he was going to be searching for her.

“Ana, I trusted you... not just as my employee but as...” the words get caught in my throat. “I trusted you with

everything,” I stress. “The idea that you could lead someone like that guy to my house... I just can’t believe it.”

The more I say, the more frustrated I become. Ana has broken every level of trust between us.

“Why would you take a job here?” I press, looking into her eyes for answers. “Why would you take a job caring for a young child, knowing that you were putting him in danger?”

Ana’s face looks white as a ghost as she softly admits, “I thought I was safe here. And it was the only job I could get without any sort of ID.”

No one has ever said anything so outrageous to me. I feel completely violated. Suddenly, I don’t recognize the Ana I thought I knew. All the uncertainty I ever had about her in the past is coming back to haunt me, and I realize that I should have listened to my gut. Ana is nothing but trouble, and I should have kept her far away from me and my family.

“I don’t mean that the way it sounds,” Ana explains as if she sees the carelessness of her words. “I did take this job out of desperation, but, as time passed, I truly have come to love you and Jace... more than I ever dreamed possible. If I had thought that Brett was actually a danger, I wouldn’t have stayed.”

Her words mean nothing now. I don’t know who she is anymore and all my old alarm bells are going off. My mind is spinning and all I can do is doubt her, allowing dark thoughts to overwhelm me. Shaking my head, I look away from her as I mutter, “I’m going on a drive with Jace. Don’t worry about your friend, he’s not coming back after our little interaction.”

And, with that, I turn toward the door. I leave Ana standing in the kitchen alone. I don’t care. My heart has iced over once again, and this time, the walls will be impenetrable.

ANA

As the front door slams shut behind Silas, the emptiness in the house is cavernous. My heart and mind throb, deafening my thoughts in the surrounding silence. A sudden panic rises in my chest, but I push the fear aside. Brett wouldn't come back here after Silas's treatment of him. I'm confident he doesn't have the nerve to set foot back on the Berne property again. But he has left his mark. He might not have taken my life, but he has destroyed everything else.

I almost wish he had killed me.

I rub my wrists, wincing in pain. They're sore but the shock coursing through my veins is worse. I walk to the bathroom to splash some water on my face and cool off.

Staring at my reflection, I have nothing but disgust with myself for bringing that crazy asshole into this household. How did I ever get involved with such a psycho? What is wrong with me?

How could you have done this, Ana? I think as I regard my sad reflection, letting the reality of what happened wash over me. My irresponsibility, past mistakes, self-esteem issues, whatever-you-want-to-call-it, almost got Jace hurt. And they have destroyed my hopes of being with the only man I've ever loved.

I can still see his face, the way he stared at me, standing in the kitchen after Brett left. Silas looked at me like I was his enemy. I've seen him look at me with scorn, then with desire

and love. This time, his face showed an expression I've never seen on him: hatred.

Tears start to flow down my cheeks as the emotional pain of what I've lost sinks into my bones. Silas was so much more than my gorgeous boss who made my heart flutter. I felt safe with him, in every way. I trusted him. I had forgotten how to be vulnerable with a man, and he awakened part of my spirit that had closed itself off.

Leaning my forehead against the bathroom mirror, I scarcely have the strength to hold my head up.

What do I do now?

Silas didn't tell me I had to leave, but he certainly suggested that I'm not welcome here. Knowing him, I am sure the disdain he has for me now is going to be impossible to change.

"Maybe it's time to move on," I mutter.

Maybe that's all I can do. Yes, Brett may be gone for the time being, and he may never come back to Berne Farms, but I know my bringing him here has destroyed any chance of a future with Silas.

Pulling myself back from the mirror, I grab a washcloth and run it under the cold water. I wring it out and cover my face with it, providing some momentary relief.

After cleaning myself up, I make my way back through the house. Looking around the kitchen, I decide to straighten up the mess that surrounds me. I can't leave Silas's house in such a disastrous state. At least this is a mess I can clean up. I owe him that much—I've already wreaked enough havoc on his life.

As I make my way around the kitchen, I throw the now-dirty clothes back into the washing machine and put away the dishes that have been sitting in the dishwasher.

I ignore the feeling like my heart may break into a thousand different pieces, but it's nearly impossible. Every hope I had about my future has become so entwined with Silas

Berne and my future with him that I can't even imagine what life looks like without him.

Maybe I'll head off to the coast now - go back to running. I wipe a fresh tear from my eye. Maybe that's exactly what I need - some sunshine and sand.

But my heart doesn't want those things at all. Deep in my soul, what I need is the clean, country air, chickens with fresh eggs in a red coop behind the house, cows to milk in the barn, and my handsome-as-hell rancher by my side. Those are the things I want more than anything, but now I have to leave it all behind. I clutch my stomach like the air has just been kicked out of me.

A crazy idea fills my mind. After being thrown aside by Silas, it feels like Brett is all I have left, and what I most likely deserve. But I push aside the thought in an instant. I'll never do that. I'll never allow myself to be a punching bag to a man who treats me like I'm his property. I may have endangered a child and lost the man I adore, but I know I deserve better than that.

With a heavy sigh, I turn to the kitchen counter and start wiping it down while the clothes finish in the washing machine. I don't know where Silas and Jace have gone but, considering Silas's attitude, I don't think he's in any rush to get back home. Before I leave, I'm going to make it my mission to get this house in tip-top shape. At least I can leave some sort of a good memory behind me. Hopefully, Silas and Jace will have something to think about other than the horror that I brought to their otherwise peaceful home.

SILAS

Seated at my parents' kitchen table, I take measured breaths as I trace a finger along the grain of the finished white oak, lost in thought. I made this table as a Christmas present for my mom and dad years ago. Looking up, I watch as my mother pulls a tray of cookies out of the oven and sets them aside to cool.

“Jace!” she calls out. “The cookies are ready!”

My little boy appears from the other room where he's watching cartoons with my father. To look at him, I would never imagine what he's been through in the past couple of hours. He's grinning from ear to ear as he makes his way into the kitchen.

My mind wanders back to the vision of him curled up on the floor, tears streaming down his eyes as a predator terrorized him and Ana. I was so overwhelmed with adrenaline when I arrived on the scene and it scares me to think what I could have done in that state. It's the worst thing to happen to my home since Jace's mother ran off and left us.

“Grandpa says I'm supposed to bring ten cookies to him,” Jace informs my mom with a laugh as he steps up to the oven and holds out a hand.

My mom smirks and playfully slaps him on the shoulder as she says. “Well, you just tell your grandpa that he's full of beans. There's no way he's having that many cookies. I'll give you two and you tell him he's lucky just to get one.”

Taking the cookies with an outstretched hand, Jace giggles as he turns and starts back toward the living room, obviously anxious to repeat her message.

My mom's expression changes as soon as Jace leaves the room. Her cheerful smile has faded and I see the worry in her eyes. "Would you like a cookie?" she asks, looking directly at me.

I shake my head in tacit response and swirl the ice in my glass of water. I don't feel like drinking anything, let alone stomaching any kind of food. In the mood I'm now, I feel like I'll never eat anything again.

"So, where is Ana now?" Mom asks as she lowers herself onto the chair across from me, a cookie in her own hand.

Shrugging my shoulders, I swallow the lump in my throat. "As far as I know, she's still back at my house. But who knows? At this point I don't feel like I know anything about her. For all I know, she's rifled through my valuables, stolen my guns, and is on her way to Mexico." The words hurt as they come off my lips, but I can't stop them. My trust has been so shaken that I have nothing good to say about her anymore.

Mom just stares at me as she considers her response. "This has been a rough day," she says. "You've been through a lot."

A rough day? What a mild way to put it. I can't even describe to her what it was like to have a violent stranger in my house—not just wreaking havoc on my son, but on my woman. And now, Ana is the stranger, the worst kind, the kind that not only endangers your home with her carelessness but breaks your heart as well.

Gritting my teeth, I explain, "After what happened with Kelly, I told myself I wouldn't let anything else bad happen to Jace. I vowed to protect him with everything I had in me. Then I let this little snake slip in." My mind travels back to those first days when I was still trying to make up my mind about Ana. "Actually, I could blame Sean for a lot of it. He was the one who suggested I give her a chance when I had reservations about her."

Mom raises her eyebrows and doesn't say a word. She doesn't have to. I know how much she hates it when Sean and I blame each other for things.

"Was giving her a chance actually such a bad thing?" she finally asks. "After all, if you hadn't opened your life up to her, you never would have experienced the happiness you did, even if it was short-lived. The change I saw in you was remarkable. She did something to you that I worried was beyond anyone's capability—she opened your heart back up."

"Yeah," I snort. "That's the bad thing." Grabbing my glass, I take a sip of water, just to fill my mouth with something other than the bitter taste of my words. As I mull her comment over, I have to push away any happy memories I shared with Ana. "You know what," I admit. "She did manage to open my heart back up, and I hate that I let her. She betrayed me. Just like Kelly."

Raising a hand, my mom silences me. The expression on her face says she's heard enough.

"Stop right there, young man," she says. "It's not fair that you take everyone that ever disappoints you and put them in the same category as Kelly. Your ex-wife was a selfish person who deserted her own baby when things got rough. From what I can tell, Ana is nothing like that. She had no clue this was going to happen. I'm sure if she did, then she would have been taking more precautions to keep this ex of hers away. She deserves the benefit of the doubt, Silas. She deserves your forgiveness."

I give a helpless shrug. Mom might have a point, but I'm not going to let Ana off the hook entirely. She still bears plenty of blame.

"She made bad choices, and her dishonesty did hurt you all in the process," Mom agrees. "But what happened today is only the fault of this man, Brett... not her. Thank the Lord, no one was seriously hurt by him and you were able to drive him away." My mother leans in, taking my hand. "You protected your family. But now, are you going to be selfish and turn your back on this woman you thought you loved and throw her to

the wolves? Or, are you going to forgive her? And protect her?” Leaning back in her chair, she studies my expression. “If anyone sounds like your ex-wife, it’s not Ana. I think you need to take a look in the mirror.”

Wow, is my mom comparing me to my ex-wife? That seems entirely unfair. I open my mouth to speak, but Mom isn’t about to let up on me.

“Silas,” she speaks. “You have always been so devoted to the ones you love. You have been so focused on caring for your family and protecting them. What has this changed? This time yesterday, you were so infatuated with Ana that I thought you would do anything for her.”

I hate to admit my mother is getting to me, but her comments make me think. What am I doing? Am I so upset with Ana that I would send her packing, without consideration for what that means for her future?

“What’s going to happen to her if you’re not there for her?” Mom asks softly, putting my own thoughts into words. “And what’s going to happen to *you*, if you don’t let her be there for you?”

My heart tightens and I clear my throat against the emotion rising in my throat. I can’t remember a time in my life when I was more torn. The memory of Ana, struggling against that awful man, chills my blood—it’s almost more than I can stand. And yet, the pain I feel from her betrayal and lies overwhelms me. The idea of forgiving her plucks at every sense of right and wrong in me. How can I just move on and be with her after she lied to me about so much? I would be putting my heart on the chopping block, opening myself up to who-knows-what.

“I don’t know what to do,” I admit, shaking my head. “I don’t know what to do at all.”

My mother’s eyes are filled with sympathy. She takes my hand and whispers, “It’s okay, Silas. Just listen to your intuition and do what you know is right.”

If only things were that simple.

Glancing through the open doorway, toward the living room where Jace and my dad are sitting together on the couch, my mind wanders. I have spent Jace's entire life trying to protect him from the world. Protecting what was mine has always been the most important thing. How can I just give that up? Wouldn't that cheapen who I am to toss aside my beliefs for some girl that caught my eye? Surely, that would make me less of a man.

I take another sip of water and shake off the conflicting emotions. I came to my parents' house to get some insight and a fresh perspective. Instead, my thoughts are even more scattered than they were before.

Yet, the idea of throwing Ana out of my house, leaving her to the mercy of her cruel past, stabs at my heart. Like it or not, Ana has become part of my family. So, maybe it's time I treat her that way.

ANA

Goodbye has never been one of my favorite words. Thankfully, there have been few people and places that I've felt bad about leaving in the past. Leaving home was hard, but when my parents pushed me to go to college, I became excited for a fresh start. When I left Brett, I was so scared and anxious to be out in the world, alone. But freeing myself of him was liberating in a way I couldn't even imagine.

But now, I'm realizing how painful goodbye can be.

Standing in the guest cabin at Berne Farms, I look at the small number of things spread out on my bed. I didn't have much when I arrived in New Harmony, and I don't have much to take with me as I leave.

I suck in a breath as I reach for my small bag and start to put my clothes in it.

I have grown more accustomed to this place than I ever thought I would. The preparation to leave has almost killed me.

I've cleaned the entire house from top to bottom, scrubbing it in as little time as possible. Then I went out to the barn to pet the cow before peering into the chicken coop to say farewell to Celia and my other feathered friends. It's amazing how attached you can get to animals that tried to bite you only weeks earlier.

As I stand over the bed, trying to organize my clothes, I wipe the tears from my eyes. I never imagined things would end like this.

I pick up an old, worn-out T-shirt and examine it before stuffing it in my bag. I think about the day my best friend, Katie, gave it to me. She and I always enjoyed chatting for hours and going out for a girl's night every once in a while. I do miss some of the people from my past; my friends, some of my co-workers, my parents. My grandpa was sick when I ran away from Brett, I wonder if he's doing okay.

Maybe this is a sign that I need to stop running and go back home.

Yet, while I do miss some of the people in my life, returning to the city where I was raised doesn't sound like going home. I don't belong there anymore. In my bones, I know where I belong: the country, New Harmony, Berne Farms, in the arms of my handsome carpenter.

The sound of the door opening behind me makes me jump. Spinning around, my heart is in my throat until I recognize Silas entering the cabin. He has a puzzled look on his face that I've never seen before. He looks wounded as he glares at my packing, then back at me.

It's hard to believe this is the same man I was passionately making out with by the fireside only last night. It's hard to believe this is the same man who told me he wanted to share his life with me.

In just a few short, horrible minutes, the bridge that connected us was destroyed and now there is no way of getting back to each other.

Silas glares at me, his piercing blue eyes tearing through my soul. Tears start to form in my eyes. I can't look at him anymore. I don't think I can stand to look at him ever again—not the way I'm feeling right now. As I was cleaning the house, I hoped he and Jace wouldn't return before I had a chance to pack my things and leave. Now that I'm faced with him again, I wish I had just left. Nothing hurts worse than realizing all that we shared is gone.

“What are you doing?” Silas asks.

“I’m packing,” I reply, tossing my last item into my bag. “You’re right, it wasn’t fair what I did to you and Jace. Coming here and putting you in such danger was careless and horrible of me. I had no clue Brett would find me and I had no idea he would go so far as to barge into your house unannounced, but it doesn’t matter. I was wrong and I can’t risk letting it happen again. I’m sorry.”

Not that Silas is going to give me a chance to let it happen again. I’m sure he’s ready to kick my ass to the curb as quickly as possible.

“Where will you go?” Silas asks, his voice deep and breathy.

“Back to the city,” I reply. “Back to my family.”

“Isn’t that where your scumball ex is waiting? Are you just going to get back together with him?”

I glance over my shoulder at Silas who has his arms crossed, standing like a brick wall as he examines me sternly. Just the idea of going back to that asshole makes me sick, and Silas suggesting it stings, as I’m sure he intended.

I sigh like I deserve his sarcasm and shake my head. “No, I’m not doing anything like that,” I say, feeling his gaze upon me. “But I can’t just spend the rest of my life running, either. I’ll find some way to deal with Brett. You don’t have to worry about me bringing my problems to your front door anymore.”

“You’re not leaving,” Silas says.

That’s not what I expected to hear. I’ve been waiting for Silas to get red-in-the-face angry and scream at me to stay the hell away from him and his family forever.

“Please,” he says, before I can ask what he means. “I don’t want you to leave.”

Silas steps close to me, placing his hand on my arm and turning me to face him. “Look at me, Ana,” he breathes. “It’s not your fault. Please don’t go.”

I stare up at Silas’s gruff, handsome face, trembling inside.

“But... I... “

“Shh,” he cuts me off.

Even angry, he’s still gorgeous. He stares at me with that gaze like two perfect sapphires and fills me with a sense of calm. I might be imagining it, but his lips tilt with the slightest smirk.

“But I lied to you,” I say, tears choking my words. “I put Jace in danger, and...”

I break down in sobs. I can’t help myself. I’m a horrible person.

“Ana,” Silas breathes my name, lifting me up. “It’s not your fault. I understand why you did it. You didn’t know what would happen. But he’s gone now and you’re safe here, with me. That’s all I care about.”

He reaches up to stroke my cheek. Letting his finger travel down my chin. He raises it so I can’t escape his gaze. Staring at me for what feels like an eternity before he closes the distance between us and kisses me with such tenderness.

“I love you, Ana,” he whispers. “Don’t leave. Don’t ever leave.”

He pulls me into him and I melt into his kiss. I ache for him—to feel his touch again, his mouth, everywhere on me. I had written off ever knowing this feeling, or the thrill of his mouth on mine.

“I’m the one who’s sorry,” he continues between kisses. “Yes, it was wrong of you to lie to me...” Silas pauses, brushing a thumb across my cheek, his eyes darting across my face. “But I’ve seen who you truly are. I should never have doubted that.”

I can hardly believe my ears and I fall into his arms, embracing him tightly. Tears overwhelm me as I sob into his strong chest. He holds me and nestles me close against his heart, beating its steady, calming rhythm in my ears.

“I’m going to take care of you, Ana,” he whispers as he gently pulls my head against his chest. “I’m so sorry you ever had to deal with a guy like that, but you don’t have to worry about him again. I’m going to make sure of that. I always said

that taking care of my family was my number one priority—well, you're a member of our family now. I'm here for you, no matter what."

I peer up at him in shock. I feel like I'm dreaming as he abruptly picks me up in his arms and carries me the few feet to my bed. Swiping my open suitcase off the mattress, he gently lowers me and comes to lie next to me before resuming his kiss. I pull him into me, raising my hands to his face to make sure I'm not dreaming, feeling his scruff under my touch as I kiss him urgently.

"God, Silas," I rasp. "I love you so much."

Silas consumes my mouth with renewed vigor, his soft tongue seeking entrance at my lips which I happily grant. His weight comes onto me as our kiss intensifies and I run a hand under his shirt, feeling his skin and the ripples of his abs and his chest. I snake my hand around his back and a shudder of delight fills my chest as I pull him into me, reveling in the feel of his bare skin.

He pulls up my shirt, pressing our naked fronts together, our lips and tongues intertwine in a passionate dance while I work to undo his belt.

"Take me," I say breathlessly. "Please, Silas."

Silas guides his attention lower, to my bare midriff, placing soft kisses along my belly button which ignite tiny eruptions of pleasure in their wake. He unfastens my jeans and I arch upward to assist him as he slides them down my thighs. I've never been so naked with Silas before and I blush with excitement.

He kisses me over my panties, unleashing a burst of pleasure in my core and evoking a quiet whimper from my lips before he skims them slowly down my legs. Silas takes a moment to stand up, off the bed, as he pulls the cotton undergarment past my ankles with a dramatic gesture. He gazes at me with a devilish smirk as he drops his jeans to the floor and removes his shirt in one quick motion.

I pull in a breath as my eyes roam over his naked form. Standing before me, like a Greek God, is the most beautiful man I've ever seen. His tan shoulders are broad, framing his wide, powerful chest. He is impossibly toned and has the slightest amount of chest hair which trails downward in a subtle line to his equally impressive manhood.

I gasp, speechless, as he slips onto the bed alongside me. He pulls my shirt over my head, tousling my hair which I brush out of my face. I stare at him like a deer at its hunter as he lightly grazes my naked side with his finger. He's so powerful and yet so gentle and it shows in the way he touches me. The smell of him, the taste of him, he intoxicates my senses and I can barely stand how turned on he makes me.

"God, Ana," he whispers, his forehead pressed to mine, breathing in the space between us and brushing his lips across mine.

Our legs intertwine and I wrap an arm over him, pulling him onto me.

Silas strokes my hair, gazing into my eyes as he slides between my legs, teasing my entrance with his cock. My body writhes with anticipation as he deepens his kiss. His hand finds my breast and lightly pinches my nipple, electrifying me as he thrusts himself inside me in one, long motion.

"Uunnhh," I moan.

Silas is inside me and I want him so badly it burns. His thrusts are slow and intense as he cups my ass with one hand, pulling me deeper onto him. My whole body itches with desire. I want to merge with him, to feel him in every part of me. I have never known such closeness with a man and the feeling of love emanating from my heart mingles seamlessly with the sheet-shredding desire between my legs.

As he picks up his pace, our bodies mesh, sliding against one another like silk on silk. He grows inside me as our pleasure begins to escalate.

I wrap my legs around him, matching his stroke, feeling him growing even harder as my own arousal begins to crest.

Finally, he thrusts deep inside me and my world goes white. Stars dot my vision as my eyes squeeze shut. All of my pent-up sexual fantasies about this perfect statue of a man—all of my sadness, anger, regret, frustration—all of it explodes in an instant as Silas buries himself inside me. Our voices mingle wordlessly as we pant with delight, riding the wave of our simultaneous climax.

Silas groans with release as I pull him into me with every ounce of desire I have in me, tears streaming from my eyes as spasms of carnal pleasure pervade my helpless body.

He collapses on top of me and settles to my side. I catch my breath. The room comes slowly back into focus and I exhale.

He turns to me and lowers his mouth to mine with a tender, warm kiss. Even in my naughtiest, most intimate dreams, I never imagined how exquisite making love to Silas would be. How a man, so powerful and commanding, could be so gentle and sensitive at the same time, defies logic.

For the first time in my life, I have someone who will protect me and care for me—who sees me for who I am, even when I forget. And it makes me love him more than I dreamed possible.

Closing my eyes, I lean my head on Silas's shoulder and breathe deeply. The weight of the day has melted away, but, more than that, the weight of all that I've endured since I started running from my past.

I am finally free.

SILAS

Standing inside the sheriff's office, I sense Ana's uncertainty as she shifts her weight in front of Sheriff Bart Miller. He studies her with concern as she recounts the events of yesterday.

"We would call that a home invasion," the Sheriff explains as he motions for his secretary to come over. "Lucille, come write this down."

His middle-aged secretary comes running to our side with a notepad in hand. Her pale green eyes grow wide as she sees Ana's distress.

"What happened, dear?" Lucille asks.

"She says it was her ex-boyfriend." The sheriff recounts the story, raising an eyebrow and jutting out his bottom jaw.

"He entered my house while I was gone," I say, "I came home to find him yelling at her. On top of that, he also shoved my eight-year-old son who tried to break them apart."

"I bet this isn't the first time he's been like that, is it?" Lucille gives Ana a sympathetic look and reaches out to pat her on the arm. I can see that Ana isn't quite sure what to do with all the attention, but she nods her head and whispers, "No, it isn't. He's threatened me before. I don't know if he meant it, but he's been scary like that in the past."

The sheriff turns to me and says, "I'm going to assume you want to file a restraining order against this guy."

I nod and put my hands in my pockets. Actually, I want more than that—I want his ass behind bars, but I’ll take what I can get. “I already busted his nose,” I declare, a surge of pride filling me. “I think he’s smart enough to stay away from my property. But I want better than that. I don’t want to see him near Ana or my son again. And, if he ever comes back to this town, I want him to be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.”

Ana looks at me and shakes her head. “I don’t think Brett will ever get in any kind of trouble. He can just buy his way out.”

Her comment lights a fire under the sheriff. Letting out a snort, he informs her, “No offense, ma’am, but that’s not how things work around here. We have one of the best county attorneys around, and she prides herself on getting men like him behind bars.” Before we can say anything else, he goes over to the phone that sits on his desk. “In fact, I’m going to give her a call right now.”

Lucille snaps her fingers with a sudden realization. “Jenny down at the diner told me that there was a strange, city-looking guy there today,” she says. “He was driving a black SUV with tinted windows. She said he gave her the creeps. He was parked at the motel at the edge of town. I wonder if he’s still there.”

The sheriff looks up sharply and hands the phone to Lucille. He picks up his coat as he moves to the door. “Well, let’s hope so,” he declares. “If we can get this underway, we can put that jerk behind bars before the night is over.”

I’m proud to see the community coming together to protect the girl I love. When I look at Ana, I see the fear in her expression. She’s never had anyone like me on her side before. Just from what little she’s told me about her past, ever since she was involved with this guy, he made her feel like it was her against the world if she ever tried to go up against him.

I shudder to think what might have happened to her if I kicked her out. If I hadn’t decided to accept her. I imagine how

she might just have ended up back with Brett and who knows how badly that would have gone for her?

Putting my arm around her, I pull her close to my side and give her a hug. Kissing the top of her head. “It’s going to be okay, Ana,” I whisper. “You’re not alone anymore.”

Some day, Ana will relax and realize she’s safe here. Until then, I’ll spend every day of my life proving it to her.



FROM MY WORKSHOP WINDOW, I peer outside. In the distance, Ana is standing by the pool, watching Jace as he swims.

It has been a week since her psycho ex broke into my house and wreaked havoc on our lives. And, while I will forever loathe that man for the fear he instilled in Ana, I appreciate the change that has happened since he made his torrential appearance. I appreciate having the chance to choose Ana and love her as a member of my own family. She is no longer just like a girlfriend—she is part of my soul.

Brett was arrested at the motel just an hour after our statement, and, while he’s out on bail, the attorney assures us that he faces some very stiff charges for what he did. That sleaze-ball may never get what he deserves in my eyes, but knowing he faces some serious consequences makes me happy. He will learn enough to never mess with my family, or my community, again.

A smile tugs at the sides of my mouth as I watch Ana help Jace wrap himself in a towel. She’s always so attentive, looking to meet his every need. She is the perfect stand-in mother. When fate brought her to my house, I was blind not to see that she was a perfect fit for our family.

Taking a deep breath, I open the shop door and step out into the sunshine.

As I make my way over to them, I reach into my pocket, feeling for the small box I’ve been carrying for days. Now seems as good a time as any. I guide my steps purposefully

along the path to where Ana is bending over, pulling a weed out of her new flower bed. I clear my throat, alerting her of my presence as I stop behind her.

“Hey, Dad,” Jace calls out from his place in the pool. “Watch this trick!”

But I’m not paying any attention to Jace. My eyes are locked on Ana as she stands and turns, smiling at me with her whole face.

“Taking a break from work?” she asks as she leans forward on her toes to give me a peck on the lips.

With a smirk, I reply, “Something like that.” Before she can stoop back down to pick another piece of overgrown grass from between her flowers, I grab her hand and pull her toward me. Her hands are covered in dirt, and the knees of her jeans are muddy from the pool water mingling with fresh earth. “Wait,” I say, hoping my words will come.

Ana raises her eyebrows in confusion and glances toward the pool to check on Jace.

When I can’t think of what to say, I reach into my pocket and pull out a small box. Ever since I picked it up in town, I have been trying to figure out the right words to say and the right time to say them. And yet the words didn’t come and the perfect time never presented itself. My mouth is dry and my heart is racing as I gaze into her emerald green eyes and lower myself to one knee.

“What?” Ana gasps, putting a dirt-smudged hand over her mouth.

“Anastasia Brzezinski,” I say, opening the small box. “Will you marry me?”

In the light of the day, rays of sunshine bounce off the diamond edges, making it sparkle colorfully. Tears form in her eyes and she can only nod her exuberant acceptance. Her face is as red as mine and I take my cue to slide the ring on her finger.

Ana doesn’t say anything. Instead, tears start pouring from her eyes. At first, she tries to control them, but then she lets

them erupt in full force as she slings herself into my arms. Pulling her damp body close to mine, I realize I'm crying as well.

"Yes," Ana sobs, her cheek pressed against my shirt as we hold each other. "A thousand times, yes."

"Is this real?" Jace screams as he hurries from the pool, nearly sliding on the grass as he makes his way to us. "Are we really going to be a family?"

Pulling her head from my chest, Ana looks down at my son—our son—as she announces, "Yes, Jace. We're really going to be a family." Jace wraps his arms around us, soaking us both in pool water, and all I can do is laugh. Ana looks into my eyes with a gaze full of so much love that I feel like the luckiest man on earth. She stands on her tiptoes and I lean down and kiss her softly.

For the first time since I became a father, my heart is whole.

EPILOGUE

The melody of the birds chirping outside my window wakes me. Their morning songs have become the soundtrack of my mornings this time of year. Blinking my eyes open and closed, I smile as I glance at the alarm clock on the dresser. Nine-thirty. Not bad for a Saturday morning.

Rolling over on my side, I stare at the sleeping form of Silas next to me. Dressed in nothing but a pair of pajama pants, he has the blankets halfway tossed off his body, revealing his muscular torso. Muscles that, even after all this time, still send a shiver down my spine.

Reaching out, I tenderly run a finger down his arm, soaking in the ripples of his soft flesh against my fingertips. I brush my lips along the back of his shoulder and close my eyes as I breathe in his scent.

Silas cracks open one eyelid and groans as he rolls over and reaches his arm around me, pulling me close to him. Smiling softly, he peers at me. “Did I oversleep again?”

Giggling, I nod. It’s hard to believe that this is the same man who used to demand that we get up at the crack of dawn every morning.

“Good,” he exhales. “It’s nice to be able to sleep in.”

I know what he means. The sleepless nights, tossing and turning alone in bed, are gone. Snuggling down into his arms, I smile and wonder how much longer it will be until my belly gets so big that I’m unable to cuddle this close to my husband. We’ve only been married a few months, but it was meant to be

when I found out I was pregnant, almost immediately after the wedding.

Jace is thrilled at the prospect of being a big brother to a baby sister.

“We have to get up,” I remind Silas as I lean over to give him a peck on the lips. “Remember, you have someone coming to look at the bedroom suite you made.”

Silas’s eyes flip open as he remembers his first commission to build furniture. A smile spreads across his face. It’s the kind of smile that I love and have gotten used to from him. It’s certainly a change from when we first met, which is nothing more than a distant memory now.

Nodding his head, he scoots up and says, “Yes. I definitely can’t miss that.”

Not long after we got married, I convinced Silas to try his hand at chasing one of his dreams – which was to start making his own custom furniture. While he still rents out the farm and sells some greenhouses, he’s branching out into an area that he actually loves, and, so far, everyone that buys one of his pieces can’t stop raving about him.

Throwing his feet over the side of the bed, Silas makes his way toward the bathroom. I love seeing him so excited, but I hate losing the warmth of his body in bed with me. I sit up and use a pillow to prop up my back, looking down at my growing belly. I let my hands travel over it, marveling at the subtle movements of my unborn child.

Silas stops in the doorway to the bathroom and turns around like he forgot something. He stares back at me, an animated look on his face. He’s so cute and I feel myself blushing as I smile at him in anticipation.

He makes his way back toward me, tiptoeing to the edge of the bed by my side, and dropping down so his face is level with me. He leans in and kisses me repeatedly on my baby bump. “I forgot to tell the baby good morning,” he whispers, looking at my growing abdomen. “Good morning, baby girl,” he softly says.

Silas drifts up to my face, his lips brushing teasing kisses against my eager lips. He pulls back enough to catch my gaze and whispers, "Good morning, my Ana." Then, he kisses me with a passion that is deeper than ever before.

I throw my arms around his neck and soak up all the love he offers. Allowing my lips to conform to his. I kiss Silas and am so grateful that he's mine to keep.

When I first came to New Harmony, it seemed like a place I didn't belong. My life was anything but peaceful and harmonious.

This quiet, country town has changed me. I belong to it like I belong to the earth. But, most of all, I belong to Silas Berne. And that is something for which I will be forever grateful.

THE END

ALSO BY KATE LOVELACE



Thank you for reading *Nanny for the Grump*.

If you loved this book then you will love the first book in this series, *Fireman's Secret Baby*.

It's a story of a young girl who returns home to a rocky relationship with her mother and a childhood crush she can't escape.

Click here to get your copy of [Fireman's Secret Baby](#).



Here's a sneak peek:

The smoking hot fireman next door stole my heart and knocked me up.

It all started with a lie. I got booted from art school and I'm too embarrassed to come clean about why.

So it's a godsend when my friend has an extra room for me.

But my bestie lives with his older brother - Michael - who is pure temptation.

Seeing that firefighter God casually strolling out of the bathroom every morning, in whatever hand towel he uses to dry himself would be the highlight of my day. *If we weren't practically family.*

I push the images of his magnificent midriff out of my head until I can find my own place. But then I make a crucial error... I ask him to pose for me.

Alone in my studio, his clothes come off, and I know I'm a goner. Tensions ignite as he devours me with a fiery fervor that leaves my v-card thoroughly punched.

But when he pulls away for no reason, I just know this was a huge mistake. My instinct says, run, never to speak to him again.

There's one small problem... now I'm late.

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FIREMAN'S SECRET BABY

Chapter One

Bree

Usually closing my bedroom door would be an easy thing to do. But I have my arms full clutching tubes of paint like newly collected chicken eggs, some of which barely have their lids screwed on. Not unlike myself right now, it feels like my whole world is a messy art studio and I can't even think. That's why the dining room table is, or was, the perfect place for me to work. The room is spare and the surface of our eight seater dining room table is ample for me to create.

But no.

The powers that be determined that my painting there, when it isn't mealtime and no one needs the space otherwise, just isn't allowed. And in letting me know this, she—my mother—brought up every other unsettled topic in my dumpster fire of a life. So, I swept up the paints in a huff to *show her* and also to get her off my back.

My nose is running. My eyes are blind with tears, and if I drop a single tube of paint, my luck, it'll go everywhere. Not that tubes splatter, unless you, say, step on them. But these would. Because that's how life goes for me these days. these months, maybe these years.

I balance as I kick the door shut, harnessing my mental powers to will my precious cargo steady. I teeter and am about to not only fall over but drop everything. I quickly scan my options. It's either the floor or the bed. Because in order to keep from tumbling over with zero control, I have to dump the paints. And I am not going to spring for having the oak floor refinished.

The bedspread must be sacrificed. My fluffy, pristinely white bedspread that survived dorm life without a single stain. I love this bedspread. But I drop my load of Blick Studio primary colors, wet brushes, and a well-used artist's palette in the middle of the mattress before I regain my balance.

"Damn it!" I holler.

"Watch your damn language!" my mother returns like a heckler from the peanut gallery.

"I'm not damning you," I call back in consummate frustration. "Oh, never the fuck mind." I fume inwardly.

I gingerly lift each tube like they're hair-trigger explosives and set them on my art table where I am supposed to be painting (the only place I'm apparently allowed to work). It's not the worst thing in the world that there are one or two intense drops on the duvet. I can get that out with rubbing alcohol, but I feel like the bedspread, like the day, like my life, is ruined. It will never be the same.

This is all it takes for me to reflect on a backpack's worth of recent events. I just got home from college, and at first, it was a major relief. But almost immediately Mom makes it clear I am in her way. I can't paint on the table because it's where we eat. Only, we don't. We order take out and go to our separate corners.

And it's just the two of us. Always.

It was just the two of us before Oona came home. And now that my big sister is gone, it's just us once again, only this time, it's different.

Mom gets this major smile on her face whenever Oona is mentioned. She's away for three years, and somehow, manages

to slip back into the perfect life. Her perfect man and a perfect baby. Me on the other hand, I just feel like I am some kind of hanger-on.

Of course, it doesn't help that my mother tells me to move all the time. Not out of the house, but out of her way. No matter what I'm doing, invariably she needs to be where I am. I am the usurper of space.

I tried once to have the perfect life, like Oona has now. Different, but still perfect. I had a scholarship at a top art school, working towards a career doing something I love. At a good school, in Chicago no less, a city I absolutely adore. I had Tyler, my smoking hot boyfriend. But I was an idiot and fate conspired to teach me a lesson.

So now I'm back home; a college dropout, and love, which I so desperately desire, further away than ever. I left school with my tail tucked between my legs and lied through my teeth to my mother about why. So, not only am I relegated to my bedroom like a tenth grader, I am delaying the inevitable with my mom. And I'm going to double-disappoint her when I tell her that not only did I not graduate art school, but I lied to her about why.

I take a sharp inhale and look at the pile of oil paints, one of which has lost its cap and is leaking onto my wooden desk. A desk which we inherited from my grandfather, who constructed it by hand when he was young.

"Goddamn it," I mutter.

I bound over and lift the tube off the unfinished wood surface as though I might actually catch the spill before it's too late. But of course, the damage is done. I stare down at the dark blue smudge, helpless, paralyzed with indecision about how to clean up yet another mess I've created. I grab an old T-shirt from my laundry bin and carefully pick off the glob, trying to keep the least amount of it from infecting any more of the precious surface. If my mother saw this, I'm sure it would launch her into another dimension of hatred.

Maybe alcohol would work, or some kind of denatured spirit. But would that damage the wood? Frustration wells up

in my chest and erupts in a stifled whimper. This might just be the last straw.

It dawns on me that being an artist is a messy and dangerous profession. And I am not one who likes mess. In fact there was a time when my mother thought I might have a serious OCD condition. I always arranged the labels in the pantry to face in the same direction, I was unnaturally excited by having several different kinds of dental floss, and most ironically, I was obsessed with cleanliness – my hands, the kitchen sink, the bathtub. The irony is not lost on me as I take in the mess around me.

I guess making art was a way for me to find balance. Sinking into the creative process gave me permission to express the other aspects of my personality. The world saw me as stiff and unfeeling, rigid perhaps. But inside, I was a seething mess, and that demanded to come out in some fashion or another.

A laugh escapes my lips as I try to grasp the string of disasters which have marked my life for the past six months. It's almost too much to process. And in the middle of it all is this sinking loneliness. This hopeless feeling that I'm just some garbage person who has no direction and no prospects in life.

Yes, I have friends here in my hometown. But there is something about the intimate touch from a boyfriend, a man, that fills me in ways other relationships can't.

I try to picture Tyler's face; to remember him in any kind of sentimental light, but I can't. His image is permanently destroyed. So now I just have this vacant feeling living in the pit of my stomach, with no identity, no recognizable source. I built an emotional structure for Tyler, and now that he's no longer a guest there, it just takes up space and draws attention to the fact that there's a void living inside me. A much-larger-than-I'd-like kind of void.

After all this, I am firm on the fact that sex ruins everything. That is, until I get a text from Lauren, my best friend ever. It's a picture.

“Living the dream!” she writes.

Dream is the operative word. She sent me a snapshot of herself at firefighter training, which is all I ever heard her talk about growing up. I was going to be an artist and she was going to rescue kittens from trees and give them to me.

She looks amazing. Not just because she is incredibly beautiful – Firefighter Barbie, I call her – but because there is a light in her eye that tells me she is doing what she is meant to be doing – against all better judgment and speculation.

But the *dream* part is standing behind her in the picture. Since the drama began with Tyler, a hell of my own making that I just couldn’t stop from participating in, I have not felt anything hopeful.

Until I behold this gorgeous specimen standing behind my best friend. I have seen plenty of beautiful men, some of them as naked live models just a few feet away from me in my figure painting classes. But this man does something to me. And if the feeling is this powerful just seeing him candidly in the background of a picture, I can only imagine how it would be standing next to him.

Or lying beneath him.

I look around my room. My bedspread, no longer laid with tubes of my craft, is now folded strategically so that the stain won’t re-stain something else. I lock the door and plop onto my bed as I daydream-stare at the picture on my cell phone. I feel like I know this firefighter god from somewhere, and then it hits me. This guy is practically my brother-in-law. He’s Liam and Ethan’s older brother, Michael. Ethan and Oona are engaged, and Liam and I are practically best friends.

Suddenly, I’m rushed with something – naughtiness – that I find someone so hot that I’m not even sure I should. But it’s not just that he’s hot, he’s actually, maybe accessible. Accessible in the sense that he lives nearby. And we basically grew up together.

The Brothers Parker (Oona and I liked to call them) were always around when we were young. But Michael probably

wouldn't even give me a second look. It's not like we ever hung out, given our age difference. Also, he's a grown man and probably has his shit together. And honestly, I don't.

He's ten years older AND a complete hottie. Totally out of my league. But the more I try to stop thinking about him, the more I do. And here I am, in bed, wishing he were with me right now. Of all the random times to be slammed with a need for sex, like I even knew what that was about, having never actually experienced it. But when I am seized with these sweet, agonizing urges, it's like eternity tells me exactly what I need. The information is embedded in my cells, instinctively putting pictures in my mind of those perfect moments.

I can almost feel him, the hunky fireman who inadvertently photobombed Lauren's selfie. His huge muscular arms on either side of me, positioning himself perfectly as his warmth enters me right here in my bed. I don't know him, but I *know* him. I can practically see him, his rugged handsome face shining an adoring smile as he studies me. He strokes my hair, and grazes my lips as we breathe in unison. I am literally envisioning my first time and it's with Michael Parker.

In all the times I've been horny out of my mind, I could never get this far picturing Tyler and me. Physically, Tyler and Michael are both tens. But I couldn't bring myself to go as far with Tyler as I am craving to go with Michael right now.

My body is lit, my nipples hard and my panties wet, I'm giddy with sexual excitement. I find myself smiling at my cell phone like a fool, and all Lauren has texted is basically hello.

Suddenly, my daydream is lanced with an insistent knock on my door.

"Bree," my mother snaps at me.

"Just a sec," I bark, rolling off the bed.

I take a deep breath, but my anxiety is back on the rise. I take a breath, remembering I love my mother.

"Yes," I say, greeting her at the door like she's a salesperson at my apartment.

Her eyebrows flare.

“Can we, at least, talk like civilized adults?”

“What about my saying yes is uncivilized?” I say. “I can’t seem to do anything right. Everything is a trigger with you.”

“So, I’m the problem?” she responds defensively.

I take another deep breath.

“Is there something you came to my room for?” I ask with re-committed calm.

“I want to know what you’re going to do with your life,” she demands indignantly.

Her arms are folded, and her chin is high. Somewhere along the line, I must have insulted her and now she feels like she has to go on the attack. I just can’t do it anymore.

“Mother,” I say. “I don’t want to fight with you. You’ve had your hands and your heart full with Oona and her problems for so long. And now that she’s settled, you’re happy for her. And so am I. But my life is still a work in progress, and if my being under the same roof causes you grief—”

I think that I am doing a great job at diffusing the situation, but my mother wants to keep it going. She doesn’t want peace or resolution between us.

“You can’t answer a simple question?” she reiterates, her voice wobbly with tears. “What are you going to do with your life, Brenna Anne?” Her using my full name tells me she’s serious.

“Mom, I’m an artist,” I say without trying to sound like I’m being smart, but I begin to crumble the more I talk. “I paint. That’s what I want to do with my life. I was trying to do just that on the dining room table, which no one ever uses. And now I’m trying to do that in my room.”

She cranes her head around the door into my bedroom and snoops judgmentally at the folded bedspread.

“Doesn’t look like you’re doing such a hot job,” she snips.

And then it hits me. I do the mom math. My painting at the empty, never-used dining room table somehow signals to her

that we were never the kind of family that would sit at a big gathering-type table. She probably acquired that bulky old thing with dreams of family dinners and entertaining neighbors. But it just ended up being a symbol of our broken family, my drunk father, years of pain and bitter disappointment. My wanting to make use of it has somehow been an affront to her. That's why she's attacking me now, and why she can't let me work down there.

It becomes abundantly clear in that moment that I have to move on. I have to find a place of my own. I try to be mindful of my mother's tender feelings because that's what a grown-up would do. And it was probably high time I started acting like one. For starters, I'd like not to have to hide things about my life – like getting kicked out of school – from her anymore.

“You're absolutely right, Mom,” I say in a non-combative tone. “I'll give my life plans more serious thought.”

She doesn't know what to do with me now that I'm not fighting with her.

“Okay?” I ask quietly as I slowly close the door.

“Okay,” she says meekly.

I lay back on the bed, this time with no thoughts of sex with the daunting Mr. Michael Parker. I do, though, pull up Lauren's text and take another hit off that wonderful picture. I place the phone against my chest and the thought hits me like a slap in the face.

I have got to get the hell out of here.

A text notification makes my phone buzz. It's Lauren.

“Let's go out. Michael's working the bar at Mickey's tonight!”

I respond immediately, “God he is such a hottie. Yes, please.”



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