

A MAN WHO KNOWS WHAT HE WANTS, 313

A woman with long, wavy blonde hair is wearing a brown cowboy hat and a light-colored, long-sleeved shirt over a floral crop top. She is standing in front of a wooden structure, possibly a barn, with a horse visible in the background. The overall scene is set outdoors under a cloudy sky.

Becoming His
COWGIRL

FLORA FERRARI

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BECOMING HIS COWGIRL

AN OLDER MAN YOUNGER WOMAN ROMANCE

A MAN WHO KNOWS WHAT HE WANTS, 313

FLORA FERRARI

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The following story contains mature themes, strong language and sexual situations. It is intended for mature readers.

BECOMING HIS COWGIRL

Tina

Mom's one of those coupon and contest people.

Constantly entering this or collecting that to save a penny. The trouble is, apart from her having made a career out of it, her latest prize involves me.

A weekend retreat at a real-life ranch. Horses, cows, camping out in nature. The whole bit.

It's a trip for two, though, and most normal people would have a partner, which my mom doesn't.

So, guess who her *plus one* is for the weekend?

Yeah. Me.

I wonder what the first prize is...*two weeks* in the middle of freaking nowhere?

I'm just a city girl, I suppose. And the thought of the whole weekend with my mom, as well as having no creature comforts, doesn't sound like much of a prize.

But mom assures me we won't be the only ones there, and once I lock eyes with the ranch hand, Mack?

Well...I figure maybe this weekend isn't going to be so bad after all.

Not only is he ruggedly handsome and built like what every girl thinks a man ought to be.

He's the only one who can show us how to survive the next few days without the mod cons of the 21st century.

If I didn't know better, I'd say he's giving me more than just friendly smiles and welcoming looks.

But I do know better.

I already know a thick-set, chubby girl like me would never stand a chance with a hot, older guy.

Especially someone as amazing as Mack.

But he's just being friendly. He's not giving me the look.

It's his job to look after the guests and be nice.

So, I can't help thinking that as challenging as the weekend will be, at least I'll have a stunningly handsome older man to show me the ropes.

And maybe more...in my mind, at least.

A crush on an older guy for the weekend feels safe enough.

But once it's clear Mack has plans of his own where I'm concerned, this weekend crush looks like it might be a forever deal.

And once I learn the secrets of Silver Fox Ranch and a little more about Mack, I know that forever would never be long enough to be his.

An eternity of him all to myself could never be enough.

Mack

It's the off-season, but that doesn't mean I can slack off.

Silver Fox Ranch runs tours and romantic getaway weekends for couples.

About as close as I get to romance is passing the guests on the way to my next chore.

It's a big ranch, and there's always plenty of work.

But when I hear the prize winners for a weekend away at the ranch turn out to be a woman and her only daughter, I figure there'll be no romance this weekend. Just a mom and her daughter having a few days in the country.

It'll allow me to show them how much more a stay at the ranch has to offer.

But as soon as I set eyes on the daughter, Tina, I can already think of a million other things I can offer her.

One thing especially springs to my mind. And it will be a long weekend if I can't hide how I feel about her from showing through my jeans.

If she was interested in an older man, that is.

And if she wasn't a guest at the ranch.

See, getting friendly with the guests is one thing. But there's a kind of an unspoken rule against getting too friendly.

But the effect Tina has on me is instant, and once she sees for herself the impact she has on me, this weekend is never going to be enough.

Never long enough, and never over once I decide to stake my claim.

If only there were a way I could get her alone somehow, and for more than five minutes....

Someone like her only comes along once in this life. And I plan on being so close to her, skin on skin, hour after hour, that there'll be no room for anything but us in the forever weekend I have planned.

Because she's not going anywhere once this weekend's over.

Only straight back to bed, safe in my arms.

At home, where she belongs.

Home at Silver Fox Ranch.

** Becoming His Cowgirl is an insta-everything standalone romance with a Curvy FL, HEA, no cheating, and no cliffhanger.*

NEWSLETTER

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CHAPTER ONE

Tina

Playing *plus one* on what is supposed to be a romantic weekend for two, and with my mom, of all people, isn't my idea of luck.

But my mom's constantly entering free contests and hoards coupons like they're actual cash.

Going along with her latest big win is just to make life easier and say thanks to her in a way. I guess.

For all my teasing and eye-rolling, if it weren't for her crazy ways, we wouldn't have half the stuff we own. And we wouldn't be getting half the groceries we can afford every week without all those damned coupons. Pretty much everything from my bed to my earbuds. Some clothes, even my glasses.

Everything's from a contest or a coupon.

Mom enters every contest she can and drives a mean bargain whether she's got a coupon or not.

"I just wish you'd smile a little more, sweetie." She reminds me for the tenth time since we left home.

Our flight wasn't included in the weekend retreat at Silver Fox Ranch.

Neither was the electric car rental.

But mom being mom, she managed to get the flight with fly miles and the car rental as part of some deal.

I guess I do have plenty to smile about. Free holiday and all we can eat, apparently.

But I can't help getting nervous whenever I think about staying somewhere new. Even for just a few nights.

And out in the wilderness of all places?

"Is it still the horse-riding thing?" she asks me in a sing-song voice when I don't smile and stay quiet.

The flight was only a couple of hours, but this drive is twice that, and we still have a way to go.

As close as me and my mom are, being cooped up in small spaces for hours at a time isn't something either of us like much.

And when she starts talking to me like I'm five, I know to keep quiet.

I don't want to get this weekend off on the wrong foot by getting snappy.

I'm sure there'll be plenty of that later. Especially seeing as we're sharing a room on top of traveling together.

Reaching for the pamphlet from the Ranch, I unfold it, and, breaking my silence, I start to list my grievances.

"...*Guests are reminded that Silver Fox Ranch adjoins a National Park, and we have frequent four-legged visitors...*," I say aloud, reading from the pamphlet.

My mom already creasing her mouth and making that face she does when I get sassy.

But I read on, "...*Including bears, cougars, and coyotes!*" I exclaim.

I stare wide-eyed at my mom, who only cocks a brow. Smiling to herself a little.

"Cougars, eh?" she grins and flashes her teeth while she watches the road ahead.

“...Maybe there’s a younger man at this ranch who needs an older woman to show him the ropes...,” she purrs as I feel my face bunching up.

“Ewww, Mom! Gross!” I say, but wanting to keep the topic of danger open, I foolishly mention the horse-riding thing.

Again.

“Horses are dangerous too, remember?” I educate her in a lecturing tone, stabbing the glossy picture of one in the pages of the brochure I’m still clutching.

“See! Look at the size of that thing compared to that woman, it’s unsafe... *dangerous*.” I remind myself more than my mom. My voice cracking with emotion.

Her mood shifts instantly, and once it’s clear she remembers as much as I do, I feel her hand patting my knee.

“I’m sorry, honey,” she murmurs. “I did not mean...you don’t have to go horseback riding. I am sure there are a million other things to do at this Silver Fox Ranch,” she almost whispers before clearing her throat.

“Plus, that was a long time ago. And it wasn’t yours or *anybody else’s* fault,” she says in a firmer tone.

The memory of my pony riding accident when I was little always makes both of us a little edgy. Or sometimes, like today, it makes mom defensive and me emotional.

Afraid.

I wasn’t seriously hurt, not physically anyway. Besides, it was like a million years ago.

But the one pony riding lesson I had nearly ended in disaster when the stupid thing bolted out of the park into oncoming traffic with me still on it.

Dangling by my feet from the stirrups, my head missing the ground by inches.

That damned thing ran for what felt like a hundred miles, but it was only a couple hundred yards or so before somebody managed to stop it without me getting hurt.

But it was enough to spook me from horses, even animals, for life.

I've never wanted a pet and have no problems eating meat.

I'm a city girl who thinks nature should stay where it belongs. Outside.

Which is a place I only go when I really, really have to.

"I'd rather tackle a bear or some other wild beast, but I won't go anywhere near *anything* resembling a horse," I proclaim, almost sounding angry. "Plus, I don't think they'd have a horse big enough to carry my weight anyway," I murmur, trailing off and feeling instantly miserable.

Hating myself for even bringing any of this up.

It's supposed to be my mom's big weekend.

"We're almost there," my mom chirps, knowing there's no point in dwelling on the past or being miserable about the future.

Doing what she does best, she forces a better mood from herself as she glances at the space-age dashboard of the rental car.

"Is it doing that thing again?" I ask, glad to get off the topic of horses and the past.

"Mmm hmm," Mom chimes, crimping her lips before we both notice the car suddenly slowing down.

"Mom?" I croak, feeling like something's horribly wrong.

"It's alright, sweetie...it's just...."

She veers off to the soft shoulder of the broad, dusty road.

There's tree-lined wilderness on one side of us and a cornfield on the other.

But this car isn't going any further. That much is clear without us having to say it out loud.

Once mom parks, the door locks click open, and there's a sudden silence. As if...as if someone just pulled the plug out of it all.

“Shit,” Mom murmurs, her face falling and her shoulders sagging. “Electric car, my ass....”

Her hands are still ten and two on the wheel, and I lean over, peering into the dash, hoping it will tell me something. But I only see her ashen face staring back at me.

Both of us do not say a word.

The only sound inside the car is our breathing and my mom’s manicured nails tapping on the wheel as her mind turns over, trying to think what to do next.

All my other little worries seem to vanish as it quietly dawns on us.

We’re two females stuck on a lonely country road, a hundred miles from anywhere.

An electric car that will not go, and we both know already our cell coverage doesn’t work out here.

Plus, it’ll be dark out in a few hours.

I think that is the thing that makes me gulp when I realize it.

That and the howling from the woods that suddenly feels closer than ever.

“Well. It looks like we are stuck here for a bit,” Mom finally says, sounding way calmer than I feel. “It’s fine, honey,” she coos, patting my knee again. “Someone will come by, and we can get a lift or a tow...or something...,” she adds, shrugging a little and giving a small smile.

She never lets a bad situation get worse by getting upset.

That is my mom’s biggest gift. And right now, I need it and her more than ever.

“Oh, Mom!” I sniff, leaning over and hugging her. Apologizing for being such a brat so far. Telling her how scared I am right now, without even knowing why.

“Hey! What is all this?” she says soothingly, stroking my hair and hugging me tight.

Making me feel like I’m five again.

“It’ll be fine, Tina. We have to do like they say on the news, ‘*Stay with your car and wait for help,*’” she says in a deep voice and with such mock drama that I cannot help laughing, sniffing back my panic, and trusting that she’s right.

Mom’s always right. Right?

But after about an hour and not even one car passing by, not even a bird chirping, I get worried again.

The only recurring sound is that damned howling which feels like it is getting closer.

By the time the sky starts to glow orange, with inky black clouds looming over the already imposing mountains in the distance, mom and I feel like we’d rather be home right now.

Both of us need rescuing. Like right now, not in three days’ time or whenever they find our skeletons.

It’s only when my anxiety seems about to peak that I feel suddenly calm.

Not because my mom’s here, and not because I know we’re not in any real danger just yet.

The two beams of white light cut through the late afternoon mist.

Like fingers with eyes. Searching.

I gasp when I see them, craning my neck to make double sure I’m not imagining it.

“See,” Mom says. Opening her door and wasting no time waving her arms like a blow-up advertising thing that they have in used car lots.

Inflatable tube men with flailing hands and arms.

But my eyes are fixed on the lights, not even how crazy my mom’s acting.

Whoever it is, I feel like we’re more than rescued.

All my worry and fear have suddenly turned to excitement for some reason.

And once the heavy, modern pickup with dark windows gets closer, the feeling inside me turns to a shiver that runs from my tailbone to my brain.

I don't know who or what it is. But it feels like I have been hooked by something pulling me closer the nearer the truck gets. Tugging at my insides with a warm, electric pulse that sees me shiver more than just a breath.

The truck pulls up right next to our little car. Parking as if it is completely normal to stop in the middle of the road.

Like they own it or something.

And once I get my first glimpse of the man driving as he steps out and I notice the Silver Fox Ranch logo on the side of the truck as well as his shirt, I know that this weekend might not be so bad after all.

And I should have brought extra underwear if this feeling is the effect this man gives me is correct.

It's going to be a wet weekend, and if he keeps this up, I'm going to need a paddle.

CHAPTER TWO

Mack

It is nothing unusual to have guests lose their way out to the ranch.

It is kind of in the middle of nowhere, but that's how I like it.

Mountains as big as the sky on one side and the rolling plains and forests on the other.

But the weekend away contest winners are long overdue, and something in my gut tells me they might be lost, stuck, or worse.

I usually arrange to pick up VIP guests from the airport, but this time around, they insisted on driving themselves out and politely ignoring the email offer to pick them up.

So, with a shrug and a strange knot in my stomach, I set out to find them, which from past experience won't be hard.

Apart from nobody really driving around out here, there's only one major road.

If they haven't taken off into the woods or down a narrow trail, I should have them home in time for the complimentary *meet n' greet* dinner the ranch offers.

Groaning a little before I smile to myself, shaking my head as I study the sky under the visor of my truck, I notice it looks like some cold, wet weather is blowing in.

And it always does make me smile because I keep forgetting that not everyone, especially holiday makers, enjoys the cold and wet as much as I do.

It's off-season, and there are only a few bookings. The contest idea is just to fill some empty guest slots when it's quiet around the ranch.

But something else is gnawing at me as I cut through the National Park, making my way to the main road.

Something I haven't felt before.

It's not a bad feeling, but it's so weird that I can't help wondering if I should get my heart checked.

Thing's pounding like I've just climbed a hill on my hands.

Catching my reflection in the truck's windshield, I'm grinning like a maniac too.

Like something amazing or incredibly dangerous, or both is about to happen.

I've got a sense for these things.

Living on the land for so long and seeing trees and animals more than people has given me keen senses. Makes me more aware of certain things.

But it's a feeling I trust, and if it's a good thing, then...?

No wonder I feel my foot a little heavier on the gas.

And not only so I can find our wayward guests before dark, either.

Something feels like it's being drawn to me.

Like finding something I've lost...I don't know. But either way, it's a welcome sight when I spot the little blue bubble of a car parked at a strange lean on the shoulder of the road.

The mist is rolling in already, and if it's who I think it is with their car, there's no way they'd find the ranch after dark in the heavy fog once it sets in.

The woman getting out of the driver's side frantically waves me down, and at a glance, I can see the relief in her features

once I pull up.

Mack saves the day...Again.

It doesn't click with the woman that I'm from the ranch.

The fading light and the worry about being stuck out here having got the better of her, I guess.

She's talking a million miles a minute about electric cars, bears, and wolves.

I wonder for a second if she's got some other issue, but I can see they're stuck.

She doesn't introduce herself or even hints they're on their way to the ranch, so I wonder if this is who I'm looking for after all.

My gut says yes.

For this reason her passenger interests me more though, and for a more pressing reason.

The blond shape I'm trying to keep sight of as this woman keeps shifting herself and blocking my view.

That feeling I've been having?

I think I've just found the source of the signal.

Without meaning to be rude, I brush past the woman needing to see who's in the passenger seat now.

My curiosity takes a back seat to something else. This feeling that I've had for a while now.

But resting my hand on the roof of the car and leaning down to look inside, I suddenly have a million corny questions instead of a single useful answer.

The first thing that springs to mind is how can someone be so fucking beautiful?

The second is where has she been my whole life?

It clicks that she's the driver's daughter. And my next impulse is to groan aloud once I realize this is her daughter, and they are probably on their way to the ranch. She and her mom will be joined at the hip all weekend.

The thought should worry me, but it doesn't.

The idea of hitting on a guest, *any* guest is completely taboo. But it doesn't stop me from thinking about it for the first and only time.

Not just hitting on her. Actually filling her with my seed.

Making her mine. Nobody else's.

I've never felt such a powerful and instant attraction to anything or anyone.

I can tell she's been looking at me as hard as I've been trying to see her.

Her head jolts up when she makes a little sound of surprise, making her blond ponytail swish as her mouth opens, speechless.

Her crystal-clear blue eyes flashing wide behind her large oval framed glasses.

Her ample chest heaving as she pants for breath doesn't strike me as odd at all.

My heart is thrashing against my ribs and my quickening pulse is spreading to another part of me that suddenly likes what I'm seeing.

It's like seeing her has made everything light up brighter.

Feels like I'm seeing color and hearing sound for the first time.

So, before her eyes even finish locking onto mine, I know that she's mine.

She belongs to me now.

I don't know how.

But I do know why.

And I guess there are plenty of people who would want to hang me from the nearest tree for even *thinking* about a guest in that way...but I just *know*.

And this is different.

I know right now, this very second, I'd give up everything if it could mean just one night with her.

But I already know that one night could never be enough.

It has to be every night and forever. Just her and me.

It's *that* kind of feeling, and until today I would've laughed at anyone who said you could feel that way as soon as you meet *the one*.

But here she is, and if they're who I think they are, we've got at least one weekend to get to know each other a little better.

Even though my instinct is to simply put her over my shoulder and carry her off into the woods, I'm not *that* much of a caveman.

And if she's here for the weekend with her mom, I'd better go easy.

For now, at least.

"I'm Mack," I hear a deep, smoky voice saying. Glad when I realize it's me speaking.

Sounding like I have the situation in hand already.

"Tina," she practically wheezes, wincing and flushing a deep red.

Almost as if she regrets saying her own name.

But I've never heard a sweeter sound.

And at least now I have a name for this feeling.

Tina.

"Uhhh...excuse me?" her mom's voice says sharply from behind.

Feeling a lot like something trying to burst in on this flood of good feelings I'm having.

Instantly making me protective of what I know is mine now.

Better go easy. Remember? Pull your shit together, Mack, and for fuck's sake, cover your damned hard on....

I lift myself up from the little car, holding the door open to cover myself.

My own raging arousal is painfully obvious to me once I stand up straight.

Jesus, what this girl does to me...and I've only just met her.

"I'm Rose," she says in a softer tone, giving a little apologetic expression. "And this is my daughter, Tina. We're on our way to..." she says, but feeling my smile return, I finish for her.

"Silver Fox Ranch. You're Rose Tanner. Won the weekend retreat for two," I announce knowingly. Tina's mom finally joining the dots as she spots my shirt and the logo on my truck.

"Yes! Oh, my goodness, how stupid of me," Rose cries. "You work there?" she asks, shaking her head like someone who can't believe they've missed the obvious.

"I'm...uhhh..." I stammer. "Yeah. I work there."

Not being sure how to react to a question nobody's ever asked me before.

"So, you're a real-life cowboy?" Rose probes me further, her eyes widening as she shifts her gaze from me to Tina.

I wince internally at the word. But in my line of work, you'd think I would've gotten used to it by now.

"*Ranch hand* is usually what we call it these days," I grunt. Surprised by my sudden annoyance with the woman.

If Tina had broken down out here on her own, things might go a little smoother.

"I can give you both a ride. But this will have to wait until morning," I rasp, motioning to the tiny car that looks so small, so fragile that I could pick it up and toss it on the back of my own truck.

If it wasn't already so full of stock feed.

"I was out looking for you, Mrs. Tanner," I add in a kinder tone, remembering that as irritating as she might be, she's still a ranch guest.

And maybe even a future in-law...Don't want to get off on the wrong foot, Mack.

“It’s Ms. Tanner,” Rose snaps, almost spitting the words until she composes herself just as swiftly.

I feel my brows lift in surprise. Already wondering if her daughter’s as obviously single as her mom is.

“Sorry,” she murmurs. “It’s been a long day, and we’d just like to....”

“I understand,” I say to her, stopping her short. “I’ll get your luggage,” I offer, still mindful of my arousal.

Not even daring to shift my eyes to her daughter right now, let alone step out from behind the car door.

But Rose gives me plenty of cover once she orders Tina to help her with their things, and I have the perfect full view of her as she steps out of their car.

Her sweet, round face and hair. The way she pushes her glasses up her button nose with her finger. Still red with embarrassment when I feel her eyes almost meeting mine again.

But she looks like she’s in some kind of shock. The only thing giving away her true feelings is the coy little smile playing on her lips.

Maybe Tina likes the idea of a real-life cowboy?

I groan quietly to myself as I feel my hardness shift up a notch.

I watch as Tina’s ample chest strain against her shirt and her perfect, apple-shaped ass as she bends over to get her bags from the back seat.

The day’s travel seeing all her clothes clinging to her curves in a way I know my fingers could match.

A jeans and sweater girl too. And wearing decent hiking boots.

What’s *not* to like about her?

Uh...the fact she's probably half your age and her mother is within swinging distance.

That thought makes me grimace.

But the more I stare at Tina, the more I feel myself falling for her.

Every part of me, every fiber of my being wants to take her into my arms.

To hold her close. Tell her she's safe now.

Mack's here. And he's going to look after you from now on.

CHAPTER THREE

Tina

“I told you we’d be fine. Didn’t I?” Mom grins over at me as we heft our luggage from the back seat.

I haven’t packed too much, but the bags feel so heavy now.

The weakness in my knees spreads to my arms and makes me wonder if it’s from sitting so long and traveling all day.

Or is it a certain ranch hand? A certain, older, and handsome man who really has come to rescue me....

Mack seems happy enough to let my mom struggle to get her bags into his truck, but he’s quick to lift mine from my fingers once he sees me struggling. Moving over to me in two long strides, our fingers touching and making me gasp as he shifts the weight of them from me.

Making my bags look like they weigh nothing as he hovers one over his front, making out like he’s trying to find room for the other.

Almost as if he’s using the bag to cover himself or something.

I’m not imagining one thing, however.

A single little touch from his huge, thick fingers on mine has sent fresh shockwaves of that magic feeling I’ve felt building long before I even saw him.

Feeling him so close to me, even though it’s only for a moment, is enough to make me swoon.

My mom picks up on something that's not right, asking me if I'm okay for the tenth time since we spotted Mack's truck.

I shoot her a serious look. Already wishing maybe I was here for a weekend without her.

If I'd known we were going to have a real man like Mack for the weekend, I might've had time to make up a story.

You know, something like she's my older sister, not my mom.

Having her call me out or even ask if I'm okay in front of Mack is just embarrassing.

But mom's too busy huffing her own cases to the truck to really be worried about me.

She does return my icy look once it's clear Mack's not helping her with her cases though.

His hands are filled with mine, and he opens the passenger side up front for me, and I scoot in without hesitation.

Already feeling so familiar with Mack that it should be weird. But it feels like I've known him forever somehow, even though we've only just met.

"I'll sit in the back, shall I?" my mom chimes without trying to hide her sarcasm.

Mack chuckles as he settles himself in front after stowing my bags. "Sorry, Rose. I was going to get your bags, but you beat me to it," he says cheerfully. Giving a little shrug when she ignores him and pretends to look out the window.

"We really do need to get moving, though. It's almost dark, and with this fog..." he says, but mom's already sulking.

Both of us are feeling the strain of a long day, and her not being able to boss a guy like Mack around is probably annoying her more than anything.

"We'll take the short cut through the National Park," Mack informs us, sounding like a complete professional now. His mind suddenly focused on his job.

"Be about twenty minutes, and you can put your feet up."

But despite his almost business-like mode, I notice his eyes shifting over to mine plenty in the little while it takes me to get up the courage to actually speak.

Mom's busy on her phone, and it's clear she has no interest in Mack other than having him drive us to the ranch.

All the more for me.

"So...what's Mack short for?" I ask, trying to make conversation.

"Don't be rude, Tina," Mom drones from the back seat, not even looking up from her scrolling.

"I'm not being *rude*," I hear myself snap back at her, sounding a lot like the kid she's been treating me like all day.

"I was just asking if Mack was short for anything," I add, trying to smile it away when Mack's eyes lock onto mine. But now I just feel stupid.

Maybe this is just stupid, and all I need is something to eat and a hot bath.

Maybe I should just stop trying so hard. I mean, seriously?

The guy wouldn't be caught dead with me.

Maybe I could just sleep the whole weekend?

"It's just Mack," he finally says in his deep voice, ignoring my mom and instantly setting my mind at ease somehow.

It's as if nothing I could say or ask would be stupid.

But then again, we have only just arrived here. And I have a bad habit of saying the wrong things at the wrong time.

"Why don't you just let the man drive, Tina?" Mom clips.

But Mack doesn't seem to mind my question at all, and he gives me a knowing look before he rolls his eyes when my mom says her piece.

I cover my laughter with my hand over my mouth. Mack already making me feel like we have a lot in common. And as much as I love my mom, she does kind of drive me nuts after a full day together.

Realizing how much I have to crane my neck up to even look at him properly, it dawns on me just how big he really is.

He's an attractive man, sure. But sitting next to him, I feel so small. So...*plain*.

Petite almost, by comparison, though.

The thought makes me smile.

There are not many people I could sidle up to and feel tiny.

His truck's huge, but I'm feeling like a rag doll trying to stay in my seat as we move deeper into the woods by a dirt road.

All while his thick, silver-flecked hair is pushing against the roof.

His huge hands gripping the wheel and his massive forearms flexing as he steers us safely home.

His chiseled jaw is set in a way that matches the light in his eyes.

Did it just get like twenty degrees hotter in here?

Seeing a man like Mack up close, even brushing his hand is one thing.

But seeing him so casually dismissive of my mom has to be the biggest fucking turn on of all.

The silhouettes of the forest trees blur into darkness suddenly.

As if the black, inky sky has been suddenly tipped out over the landscape.

The thick, wide beams of Mack's lights cut a little way into the now heavy fog, and I can see what he means now about us never finding our way if we'd been stuck in this alone.

I can't help staring up at him again, feeling my heart swell by the second the longer I look at him.

Curling my fingers into my palm, still sure I can feel the electricity from his touch clinging to me like some dreamy static.

He mutters a curse to himself, and I watch his features pinch into a grimace as he plants his foot firmly on the brake.

His huge arm shooting out to cover me, holding me safely in my seat.

The truck lurches forward, and my head jerks and twists forward in time to see the wide eyes of a deer. Startled for a moment before it springs unhurt into the forest.

Mack's huge forearm is pressed hard against my chest from his quick-thinking instinct to hold me in my seat with his arm.

Saving a deer and saving me too.

"Sorry," he murmurs. "The deer don't see so well in the fog," he says, creasing the edge of his mouth once he realizes where his arm still is.

I feel him tense up to move his arm but feel my hands hugging it closer to me for just a second before my mom ruins another moment for us.

"Jesus Christ Bananas! Are you trying to kill us all?" she shrieks, re-emerging from the footwell of the back seat, her hair all over the place and her phone between my feet.

Mack swifts to bring his arm back over to his side, and I reach down for mom's phone, handing it back to her.

I feel her snatch it from my hand and know better than to make matters worse with a smart comment.

"I'll be having a word with the manager *if* and when we finally do get to this god damned ranch," Mom mutters, busying herself with the phone once we're moving again.

And I just know she's already trying to get a hold of the rental car company to complain as well.

Mom's great at driving a hard bargain and getting things for free, but she can take things a little too far when it comes to showing some gratitude.

I shoot Mack an apologetic look, but he seems to be trying hard not to smile or even laugh for some reason.

Not bothered in the slightest by my mom's over-tired and hungry traveler antics.

"Is it far?" I ask in a near whisper. And Mack shakes his head.

“Just over the next big rise, and we’re there,” he says confidently, driving a little slower now and making sure his eyes are front and center.

Even through the dense fog, which seems to lift a little once the ranch gates loom into view, I can see how much bigger and more impressive the ranch is in real life over the brochure photos.

The soft, uneven dirt road from the forest side meets smooth bitumen and then a circular white gravel driveway that arcs around the front of the main homestead.

It’s a massive stone building with a dark pitched roof. Arch-shaped windows light up the front, glowing yellow in the fog like sets of sleepy eyes suddenly jolted awake by our arrival.

I even hear mom gasp and hum to herself as the ranch pulls into view.

Hopefully easing her nerves as well as her attitude.

There’s just something about the place that tells me I’m going to love it here.

Suddenly it feels like anything to do with Mack or wherever he goes is the place to be, for me anyhow.

“I’ll have your bags sent up,” he assures mom, holding both doors open once he pulls up and gets out.

Mom shoots me a quizzing look like maybe we’ve missed something. But the huge double wooden doors open, and the warm light from inside spills out like a welcome carpet.

“The other guests are at the bar. Mrs. Corbett will show you around,” Mack says in a low tone, almost sounding annoyed until his eyes meet mine.

I can feel my mouth curving downward into a frown. Already hating it if Mack’s not going to be with us. With me.

I mean, he’s not even going to show us around?

But there’s no time to sulk, and even less time to try and find out when I’m going to see him again.

The heavy Irish accent of an older woman who appears in the doorway welcomes us both to Silver Fox Ranch.

Mrs. Corbett, I presume.

She's wiping her spotless hands on a spotless apron. Her withered features softening as soon as she spots us, and she calls out, waving us over to come on inside.

And turning from her to try and catch Mack again, he's already gone.

Like he might have never even been there.

A shower of heavy rain starts. It's warm, big drops getting bigger and faster the longer I stand there.

I stand stunned for a moment, but mom hooks her arm in mine and tugs me forward.

"C'mon sweetie. Let's go have a nice weekend, huh? And never mind that Mack ranch hand guy. I'm sure we won't have to see too much of him," she murmurs, leaning into me before hurrying me up some more.

"C'mon, honey. You'll get soaking wet."

Oops.

Too late for that.

Apart from the fresh memory, even the scent of the man is still in the air.

I don't think I'll ever be anything but wet whenever I think about Mack from now on.

CHAPTER FOUR

Mack

Pulling up out front, I feel like I've got this. I mean, I think I'll be able to pull it off.

Tina's mom even seems to have forgotten about the deer we almost hit, as well as the look she gave me when she saw how long I let my arm linger across her daughter's chest.

But when it comes time to actually head inside, I feel like the only thing I want to do is scoop Tina up into my arms, carry her across the threshold and take her to the nearest bedroom.

Not exactly normal behavior.

Plus, the effect Tina has on me is at a point where it's almost impossible to hide.

Outside in the dark, sure. I'm sure nobody's noticed so far.

But inside under all those lights?

Maybe this weekend isn't going to be a walk in the park after all.

Slow season be damned. If I'm going to be obsessed with Tina every minute of the day and night, I don't know how I'm going to function, let alone keep it less than obvious what she's doing to me.

I mean, it's a not so small a miracle that nobody's spotted my constant and now aching hard on that I have for her.

Not something I can exactly be roaming the halls welcoming guests with.

If it were just her and me, here it would be different. And I don't need to think too hard about it to know that her mom is going to be a serious kink in the works, even if I can convince myself that Tina would even go for an older guy like me.

But once Mrs. Corbett, the housekeeper, appears, I know I can escape.

For a little while at least.

Just to clear my head and try to begin to think straight again.

But damn. If leaving Tina on her own, even though she'll be surrounded by people I can trust, takes everything I've got to walk away.

The sudden rain showering my body, soaking me through in moments does nothing to dampen my mood or my arousal for her.

If anything, all I can think about is her walking in the rain with me.

Imagining her clothes sticking tighter to those curves of hers.

Knowing instantly that she'd look and feel way better with no clothes at all.

And just how is this 'dealing with it,' Mack?

Growling with the best kind of frustration there is, I almost slip when I kick at a wet stone, skidding on the spot and catching my balance just in time.

I close my eyes, taking in a deep breath of the pristine country air mixed with the rain.

The fog has a dankness of its own, too, reminding me of the forest.

The deer.

My arm across her chest....

I hear myself making a little sound at first. Almost like a wounded animal myself until it becomes a deep, almost

mournful growl.

Not really a *wounded* animal, though.

More like a beast who's spotted his mate, and the only thing between what I know is mine is not knowing if that's what she wants.

Oh, and then there's her mother.

That's like a living bear trap set to snap if I get too close too soon, I reckon.

Puffing out air until the plumes of my warm breath mix with the fog, I keep walking.

Away from the house and down the hidden path to my own cabin, which I stride past.

The large sign marked 'private' makes me smile a little to myself. My place is about the only thing off-limits to guests.

It's nowhere near as big as the main house but calling it a cabin doesn't do it justice.

There's plenty of room for me and my 'privacy,' which I usually crave when I'm not out working the ranch.

But the thought of going there right now, feeling nothing but emptiness when all I want is literally only feet away from me?

I figure staying outdoors and in the open might help break the spell I know I'm fast falling under.

Deciding a walk in the rain will do me some good, even if it's only to try and put out the fire I feel burning inside me.

Telling myself that Mrs. Corbett has everything in hand, and reminding myself that there are a ton of chores left to do as well as organize the gear for tomorrow's outdoor adventures.

Rain, hail, or shine, Silver Fox Ranch offers rough camping and trail riding as well as all the comforts of home.

Most guests come out here for the outdoors, but plenty are happy to just sit by the fire or fish in the lake, or just explore the old place by themselves.

And old Mrs. Corbett, bless her. She'd never have me in the house this dripping wet anyway.

I don't know how long I'm gone. Losing track of time is pretty normal for this part of the world, especially at night and in this kind of weather.

But there's something soothing about the ranch at night, and the rain only brings out the best of the place that I literally know stone by stone. Tree by tree.

Until today, I thought I *was* the ranch. I mean, it felt like that's what my whole existence was for.

But Tina....

She's just gone and turned everything on its head, and without even saying a word to prompt any of these feelings and thoughts I know are going to haunt me when I try to sleep later on.

The lifting fog and rain that disappears as quickly as it started seems to show me that at least one thing's clearer: the way back to the ranch.

But my little stroll's done nothing to change how I feel or give me any clearer insight into how to even begin to find out if Tina feels the same, let alone tell her how I feel about her.

It's later than I figured by the time I make my way inside, peeling off my wet clothes as I head for the shower.

Even setting the usually piping hot water to freezing cold does nothing to shrink what feels like a permanent erection courtesy of our latest guest.

But the thought of taking care of business myself, as tempting as it is, and as much as I know would give me some relief....

I also know it would be useless.

My own hands aren't what I need.

I need her hands on my swollen length.

Tina.

I want *her* hands and that hot little body of hers pressed up against me while I fill her balls deep with my seed.

Not wasting a drop anyplace else.

So, it's with the same hardness and another groan of frustration that I put on some fresh jeans and a shirt, setting about trying to distract myself with chores instead of what or *who* I know I'd rather be doing right now.

I set all the gear out, ready for tomorrow and once I do a final sweep of the stock yards closest to the house, I figure I'd better go get some food in my belly and call it a day.

Feeling the heat of exertion flushing my face once I step into the ancient kitchen at the rear of the homestead, Mrs. Corbett has a plate ready she's about to keep warm in the oven.

"I was just getting things set for tomorrow," I let her know, always feeling a stab of guilt when I don't show up when she has dinner ready.

"Well. You're not finished yet," she clips in her broadest accent.

The one she keeps for when she's pretending to be mad at me.

I raise my brows in a question. Feeling all my impulses finally simmering down and the gnawing hunger in my belly is the only thing aroused now once I smell the heady aromas of her usual perfect home-cooked meal. But I know it's going to have to wait.

"It's the contest couple," she sighs, wiping her hands down her apron again. Forever wiping away a stain that isn't there or a crease that's never existed.

I swallow. Hard.

So much for trying to forget about Tina.

"What's up?" I ask, meaning to sound casual or even disinterested. But my brain's snapped into action mode.

Already hoping that Tina's alright.

That she's safe.

“Oh! It’s that old window again! Jammed tight in this weather. Mrs. Tanner asked if someone could take a look,” she sighs, eyeing the clock and then my tin foil covered plate, which looks more like a tray in her hands.

“It’s Ms. Tanner,” I correct her sarcastically, smiling when she makes a face and pokes her tongue out at me.

“I see you’ve gotten to know her well enough,” she says, clicking her tongue. Not even needing to remind me not to take too long.

“I can’t keep it warm forever,” Mrs. Corbett cautions me, unhooking her apron as she silently signals to the whole world that she is definitely done for the day.

And at her age, I’m amazed she can do half of what she does around here.

But she nor I would have it any other way.

“I’ll go take a look,” I reply, failing at hiding the smile that creeps into my features. Just the thought of having a reason to go to Tina’s room is enough to reignite every feeling I’ve been kidding myself I was free of until just now.

Mrs. Corbett gives me a knowing look. But she’s never been one to really tell me what to do.

And something about that canny old woman tells me she can see things a lot clearer than even I can when it comes to our lucky contest winners.

CHAPTER FIVE

Tina

“Just leave it, Mom,” I say with irritation.

“No, I won’t just *leave it!*” she snaps back at me, straining her whole body as she tries to budge the biggest window in our room open.

“It’s like a god-damned oven in here...I need...some...fresh...air!” she gasps.

Her hands slipping again, this time the sickening sound of those claw-like acrylic nails scraping up the aging woodwork.

“*Great!* Now I’ve broken a nail,” she snarls. Heading for the room’s equally ancient telephone, which looks like something out of a museum.

“What are you doing now, Mom?” I groan, just wanting to have that bath I’ve been dreaming of and get to bed already.

Lucky for us the huge room has two double beds, so there’s some space between mom and me.

But if she keeps acting crazy like this, I don’t know how much more I can stand.

I couldn’t eat half of what was put in front of me for dinner, and not seeing Mack since we got here has left me wondering if I can actually spend two days and three nights with this lunatic who’s calling herself my mother.

I mean, I knew she was a bit annoying sometimes, but this weekend's showing me a different side of her so far.

"I'm calling that housekeeper who seems to run the place is what I'm doing," Mom grumbles, wincing when her finger tries to dial the old-style phone with her broken nail.

"I mean...it's like a fucking furnace in here. This whole house is way too warm!" she almost shrieks. "Look at your own face, Tina," she says forcefully, making me self-conscious of something I'm well aware of. "You've been red as a beet since we got dropped off by that...that *ranch hand* cowboy fella," she spits.

Letting me know loud and clear she's got no interest in him. But just mentioning Mack is enough to make me miss him a hundred times over again.

I can't help but get defensive. And even though Mack doesn't need me to stick up for him, I can't help but feel angry with mom for even talking about him like that.

She lets her words have their desired effect as she holds the receiver in a limp hand, and the other has her fingers curved into her palm as she studies her broken nail.

"Why don't you ask that guy you were making a fool of yourself with at dinner to come and fix it?" I reply hotly.

Hoping it hurts her to hear that as much as it hurts me to hear her saying anything negative about Mack.

But mom's too thick-skinned to get upset by my remark.

There are only three of us here for the weekend, with a guy around mom's age called Ben making up the numbers.

I thought mom was just chewing his ear off over dinner because there was no one else to talk to. But it was pretty clear that she might have more in mind than just Ben fixing her stuck window.

If anything, my snide remark has given her a better idea, but whomever she's trying to call on the phone picks up. And even I can hear the unmistakable, shrill voice of old Mrs. Corbett on the decayed line from across the room.

I notice mom's attitude shrinks whenever she's dealing with the aged housekeeper.

Mrs. Corbett must be pushing eighty or ninety, but there's no way she'd put up with any of my mom's nonsense. Ranch guest or not.

And I think they both quietly know it.

Mom hangs up the phone after explaining things in her own special way and seems a little happier, letting me know that it'll be fixed in a jiffy.

"See, Tina? Sometimes you've just got to tell people, not ask," she says boastfully.

But I'm sure it'll get done when someone feels like it, not because my mom's saying she wants it done.

I mutter something about her being impossible, and slotting my earbuds in, I let myself fall back onto my own bed.

Determined to ignore mom until she's got off the high horse she's been riding all day.

I got to say it again. As lucky as mom is with all her contests and coupons, she's lousy at being a satisfied customer.

She's always got to find something to bitch and nag about, which makes her a sore winner. And that's just weird.

I try to block her out as I listen to some music, but she's pacing and carrying on more than ever after twenty minutes pass before she stands over me.

Her mouth moving, but it doesn't match the song I'm playing, which almost makes me giggle because of how crazy she looks.

"...I said I'm going to go find Ben. *He'll* fix the window," Mom announces when I unplug one ear to hear her, but I only shrug after pressing it back in.

I'm glad when she does leave the room. And almost secretly hoping that this Ben guy doesn't mind being bothered by my mom.

Although, he didn't seem to mind talking to her at length over dinner. They both seemed pretty into what the other was saying, but I didn't pay that much attention.

Maybe there's romance in the cards this weekend, after all.

Pity it's not my turn, though, but I'm kind of used to that.

Even though I've never even known my mom to have coffee with a guy, let alone go on a proper date. It's the no-fly zone in our own relationship, I guess. Neither of us mentioning how sad and pathetically unattached each of us are.

I know my dad left mom when I was little. Went out for milk and never came back. That's her side of the story anyway.

But he did leave her the house and everything in it, so who knows what really went down.

But she's had ages to get over it and find someone else.

My excuse?

Well. Most people would only have to look at me to understand the answer to that.

And if mom has an interest this weekend that doesn't involve annoying me, I'm all for it.

Maybe I can get some proper sleep.

So, it's with a half-smile that I nearly doze off once mom goes hunting for Ben. Leaving me to myself until a rapping at the door makes me jump from my almost nap.

I don't think anything of sliding up off the bed and opening the door, expecting to see an elderly housekeeper.

But my heart is in my throat once my eyes settle on the muscular torso, and all my thoughts of being alone forever and forgetting about Mack evaporate when I realize it's him who's come to fix our window.

I feel my mouth hanging open, not even sure how to speak, let alone having anything to say.

Mack looks better than ever, if that's even possible. And he's changed and showered, too, by the looks.

The heady, woodsy scent of cologne is faint on him. But when I focus on it, it could actually just be how good the man smells all on his own.

Like a force of nature. Like the wind and the trees. Everything out here just feels and smells fresh.

But Mack is taking it to the next freaking level, standing out as the most amazing feature of our trip back to nature so far.

“Uhhh, you’ve got something that needs unsticking,” he says in his trademark deep tone, sending a shiver up my spine with his words.

The little smile that plays on his lips disappears as quickly as it comes, though, once he realizes what he’s just said.

Yeah, I’ve got something that needs unsticking. But it’s not the frickin’ window frame....

I stay mute but feel my open mouth moving as I try to find something to say, anything will do right now.

But I must look like a fish blowing bubbles.

“Can I come in and take a look?” Mack asks, looking behind me toward the window. But I can’t help feeling like he’s actually checking if we’re alone.

“Sure,” I squeak, feeling those bubbles I’ve been blowing finally burst. Getting replaced with that incredible feeling of excitement the man generates in me anytime I even think about him, let alone get within six feet of him.

I shift myself out of the way so he can come in but notice that his gaze has shifted from the window to my chest.

Anyone else staring at me like that would get a piece of my mind. But it’s the way he’s looking at me that makes me melt.

Looking at me like he not only likes what he sees, but that stupid grin he’s wearing gives me the impression of a man who not only knows what he wants but is only moments from actually getting it.

The shock of seeing him, or any man for that matter, actually looking at me like they’re interested is enough to make me feel

faint.

And taking a step back, I feel my heel catch on the big old carpet rug.

Mack's hand shoots out, gripping me by the waist and saving me for the second time today. He also hears just how strong the effect of his touch is on me.

I let out more of a moan than a gasp. And it's not the sound a girl makes when she's about to fall backward.

And once he pulls me closer to him, I can feel my already stiff nipples scratching against his rock-hard abs under his shirt.

"I've got you...", he croons, letting himself hold me long after it's clear I won't fall.

Both our eyes locked on each other again.

It's like being back in his truck all over again, only way better this time because my mom isn't around.

But I am still falling.

Falling harder and faster for him by the second. Only now I'm more confused than ever because I think Mack actually might be interested in me in that way.

God only knows why or even how. I mean, he could have any girl he wants just by smiling at them.

"Did you really call me up here to look at your stuck window?" he quizzes me, grinning again and cocking his brow. Pulling me just a little bit closer until I can feel the whole front of his body a half inch from mine.

"My mom," I stammer, and his expression shifts. "She's always complaining about something. But she's not here if you want to take a look," I manage to get out.

Feeling the torrent between my legs starting all over again.

Mack's huge frame moves further into the room while he keeps a grip on me.

"I'd love to," he rasps. Not letting go of me as he kicks the door closed gently with the heel of his boot.

Both my hands end up flat on his chest once it's clear this is the part where boy meets girl has nothing to do with stuck windows and everything to do with what comes naturally.

But I freeze up.

His hands over mine as he even starts to lean in a little closer.

Giving me all the time in the world to say yes or no. Giving me every chance to return the signal I know now he's been broadcasting since we met.

But dammit. If I don't just stand there like an idiot.

Mack's brow eventually creases.

"Uhhh. I hope I'm not reading the wrong message here," he murmurs, shifting his weight on his feet and moving his hands like he's about to let go.

"No! No, you're not. It's just..." I wheeze, feeling faint again.

Seeing spots dance before my eyes as I wonder just how much harder and faster my heart could actually beat before it explodes.

"Just what? Your mom?" Mack asks. His clear, dark eyes widening in a question. Talking so low I can't help but feel myself standing up on the balls of my feet.

Yearning for more than just his words.

Needing his mouth over mine so I can know for sure that all this isn't some incredible dream.

Neither of us hears the door swing open, and it takes a moment for it to register.

But it's as if saying the word mom seems to summon her every time.

"Well! About time," she exclaims as I feel myself pulled back from Mack.

His huge body blocking the view of him holding me long enough, so my mom doesn't catch what was actually about to happen.

But as shocked as I am by her suddenly appearing, I'm also mad as hell.

I mean, really mad.

She's interrupted the most magical moment of my life more than once today.

But Mack's almost pleading look, mixed with the same crazy grin he's been sporting tells me that there's more than just one chance for us both to get to know each other this weekend.

And in a split second, he's his usual, professional self.

Turning toward the door, it's only when he moves I can see that mom's not alone either.

"I ended up finding a real man to come help with the window," Mom drawls sarcastically.

She reaches beside herself and hooks her arm into Ben's. Making him gulp and then blush as he scans Mack's huge frame from toe to tip.

"It's an old house, and sometimes the windows get stuck when it's wet out," Mack says. He cheerfully ignores her comment and moves past me just long enough to lift the stuck window in one movement using only two of his fingers.

A splinter of wood and some old paint flutter in the gust of cold air that rushes into the room.

But we all shiver for very different reasons.

Me most of all.

Now I know.

Mack's not just looking. He's staking his claim.

And even though it should make me happier than I've ever felt, I can't help being terrified at the same time.

Terrified because this stuff just never happens to me.

Men like Mack just don't want to kiss me.

"I'll see you bright and early," he remarks to us all, leaving the room with the air of a boss that's just showed people how shit really gets done.

And leaving me with more questions than answers.

Even though I don't think he could've been clearer on what he actually wants. Not even if he tried.

CHAPTER SIX

Mack

I don't expect to find Tina on her own in their room. And it wasn't exactly my plan to try and fucking kiss her either.

Not *exactly*.

But something just seems to happen when the two of us get close.

Something I know now that neither of us could stop even if we both wanted to.

She didn't scream or call for help.

She didn't try to get out of my firm grip on her.

She didn't call me old or ugly or any of the hundred other things I'd die from if they came out of her sweet mouth.

No.

She was going to kiss me back, and probably a whole lot more.

I know now more than ever that she's going to be mine.

Whether her mom is here or not.

Plus, Rose looks like she's found someone to occupy her time with pretty quickly too.

Ben's the only other guest, and if it weren't for almost getting my own way just now, I'd probably stay a while and introduce

myself.

But once Rose slaughters the almost kiss moment, I know better than to try and force things.

Tomorrow's another day, and if I've got the whole weekend to stake my claim on Tina, I'm going to have to pick and choose my moments a little better.

Lifting a stuck window is no big deal. But it seems to be the only thing to shut Rose up before I make my exit.

I head back down to the kitchen and remember hearing Rose refer to me as 'that ranch hand' again.

Feeling it sting this time because I hope like hell that's not all Tina really thinks I am.

Hope it's not all she thinks I can offer her.

I find my piping hot meal waiting for me on the kitchen table.

Mrs. Corbett lingering in the doorway between the kitchen and her own rooms she keeps.

Already in her nightgown and with curlers in her hair, she stifles a yawn and bids me goodnight. Hanging back only long enough to make sure I'm actually eating. Which I never have a problem with whenever she's made something special like she has tonight.

I thank her for dinner, and after promising not to leave a trace once I'm done, she retires for the night.

Alone again, I fork what should be delicious food into my mouth.

Only able to think of just how close I got to actually kissing Tina just now.

Trying to chew what I can't even taste anymore. Because there's only one thing I'm hungry for now.

Only one place I want my mouth.

And I know it's going to be a long night ahead, because try as I might, I just can't get the image of Tina's sweet face moving closer to mine out of my head.

Can still feel the firmness of her hands as she pressed them against me.

Still smell the scent of her hair when I finally do go through the motions of cleaning up and then heading to my own bed, knowing I've got an earlier than usual start.

But sleep doesn't come for me.

Not tonight or any other night I can't be with her.

Having her so close, knowing that she feels the same way even though she hasn't exactly said the words yet.

I can't help but lay on my back in my huge bed. My sheets like a tent pitched in the dark.

My harder-than-ever cock making my bed look like a big top at the damned circus.

My mind swimming with images of her face, her body.

Those child-bearing hips I almost got to hold with both hands.

Already imagining just how hard but tenderly I'd fill her with my seed.

Fill her with our baby.

How long I'd kiss that mouth of hers and easily spend the rest of my days only making sure she has everything she could ever need or want.

This goes on and on, around and around in my brain, until it's pretty clear I'm not going to get any sleep. And I can only wonder if Tina feels the same.

Smiling to myself as I feel my cock twitching under the covers.

Thinking about her thinking about me.

It's an oddly satisfying but kind of tortured feeling. But something in me just knows.

Something in the way she parted her lips, and she stared up at me when I leaned in.

I know she doesn't just want it.

She fucking needs it as badly as I do.

It's only when I finally feel the heaviness of sleep coming that I know it's also time to get up.

I lift my watch from the nightstand, same as I always do, and flick off the alarm before it even sounds.

Early to bed and early to rise is no joke out here. If you want to get shit done, you got to get up early, and by the time I'm usually through, my bed is a welcome sight.

But tonight's been different.

An otherwise empty bed with just me in it isn't something I look forward to. And if I'm going to stake not only my claim on Tina but also claim her proper, then I've got a lot of work ahead of me.

Everything's laid out so I only have to pack it into my truck before taking it out to the campsite so we don't have to lug a ton of gear.

The regular plan is a hike and horseback ride out into the woods by the pristine stream that feeds into the lake.

I keep a trail bike by the cabin out in the woods, so making my way back in time for breakfast isn't an issue.

Rough Camping on the ranch isn't as harsh as it all sounds in the brochure either.

That old cabin has more mod cons than even my own place. But everyone has the option of sleeping out under the stars around an open fire, or in a bed like regular folk if they prefer.

Once I'm back at the homestead, I make my way in through the back again. Not surprised to see Mrs. Corbett already having prepared not just breakfast but packed hampers of prepared food most hikers and trail goers would only dream about.

She studies me for a moment in silence as I give her a good morning grunt. Already feeling my eyes hanging out of my head.

Making a beeline for the pots of fresh coffee she's already brewed too.

"You didn't get any sleep, Mack. Something on your mind?" she asks wistfully.

Not even trying to hide the rare but warm smile she flashes me. Making my cheeks redden.

"There's no fooling you, is there?" I quip. Pouring a mug of coffee into my favorite tin cup.

Not even minding when it nearly scalds my mouth because if Mrs. Corbett's in a good mood, then it's always a good omen.

"Thinking about something or *someone* keep you up?" she asks boldly. But I can't say I'm surprised.

She knows me well enough, and I give a sheepish look in reply. Telling her at least a part of what I thought was my only secret.

"Well, you've got competition if that's what you're thinking about," she says in a sterner tone, crimping her mouth and shaking her head.

"What do you mean?" I snap. Not fooling anymore. Feeling a jolt of panic at the thought of Tina with anyone else.

Feeling more than just a little overprotective at the idea that anyone else would even dare think about what I've already decided is mine.

"Aw, C'mon, Mack," she exclaims, putting her hands on her hips.

"You think I'm some stupid old woman, do ye? I saw the way you were looking at her. Then all that guff about her room's window being stuck," she adds before holding up a finger of caution.

"Just you mind how ye go, Mack. She's here with her only daughter. Not here for any *funny business*," she says in her thickest accent for emphasis.

But my mind's already struggling to keep up with what she's talking about. With no sleep and no more than a sip of coffee, I

tell myself I must've misheard what she just said.

"Plus, I think your ship's sailed," she continues. Not even noticing my puzzled expression.

"Rose *and* Ben have gone out for a walk this morning...*Alone*. I'm surprised ye didn't see them on your way back," she chimes.

Suddenly cheerful again. Almost content that Rose has an interest in someone other than....

Than me?

What the actual fuck?

"Mrs. Corbett. What the hell are you talking about?" I ask her firmly, needing her to repeat what she's just said.

She thinks I'm hot for Rose. But it looks like Rose is hot for Ben.

"I know ye get lonely out here, Mack. But I only thought it fair to warn ye," Mrs. Corbett says in a hushed tone, even glancing over her shoulder for effect.

"I think once this weekend's over and you get a proper sleep, you'll forget all about her," she adds in a sympathetic tone.

"But I mean..." I stammer.

Torn between telling her the truth and just letting her believe what she likes.

But I know the old woman as well as she knows me, and as much as I trust her with the running of the house, I also know she loves to gossip.

I can't have Rose thinking I'm remotely interested in her.

And worse than that, I can't have Tina hearing the old woman talking nonsense like this.

"Uhhh, Mrs. Corbett?" I remind her tactfully, "I have *no idea* what you're talking about, and it's probably best if you keep things like that to yourself," I tell her, crimping a smile.

Making a joke after the long silence that follows. "Maybe you've been reading too many of those romance novels, eh?" I

quip.

But she only shakes her head like someone who knows everything.

I mean, she's half right.

She just thinks I'm crazy about Tina's mom when that's got to be the furthest thing from my mind.

If anything, I feel like sending Ben a 'with my deepest sympathy' card.

My fatigue vanishes, and I'm part way through repeating myself to Mrs. Corbett, spelling it out to her loud and clear that I have no romantic interest in Rose Tanner, "or any other guests for that matter," I add, raising my voice even more.

But it's too late.

We both turn to see Tina standing in the doorway of the kitchen.

She's heard everything I said just now.

Her eyes glisten with tears and before I can say or do anything, she's gone again.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Tina

I don't think I slept. And if I did it was only for a few minutes before I heard mom up and about when it was still dark out.

Checking my phone and noticing the time, I guess I must've dozed until the smell of fresh coffee and sizzling bacon rouses me.

Plus, the familiar, deep voice of a certain man I was up all night thinking about filling my ears.

I'm like iron filings on a magnet. Dressed and wide-eyed, practically skipping downstairs.

Forgetting all about mom and only reliving last night over and over again in my mind.

An almost kiss with Mack.

I'm walking on a cloud by the time I'm sure it's his voice I can hear, and maybe being a little too familiar, I let myself through to the doorway of the kitchen downstairs.

Ready to wish my man a *very* good morning.

Instead, I feel like someone's put a knife through my heart.

I'm not imagining it when I hear Mack say, practically shout, that he's not interested in *any* ranch guests.

Not in the way I can assume he must've been talking about with old Mrs. Corbett just now.

‘Not interested in *any* ranch guests....’

Don't get much clearer than that, Tina.

Mack and Mrs. Corbett notice me coming in right when he says it. And feeling as if my eyes are sink plugs that have just been yanked out, the tears start welling up in them before I can even try to stop myself.

That dream I thought I was having?

The one where the handsome, older ranch hand almost kissed me, and we still have the whole weekend to find out just how far it can go?

Well. it's just turned into a nightmare.

I feel like I need to get out of here.

Like, right now.

But knowing I'm dependent on my mom to get home, I feel a different kind of anger and upset about to spill over inside me.

How could Mack even say that...? Let alone after what we almost did last night?

It's too much to process, and my instinct to run is only matched by never wanting to talk to or see Mack ever again.

But that would only mean I'll never really know what just happened.

I'll just have this horrible aching hole where my heart used to be for the rest of my life.

Oh god...I'll probably turn into my mother.

Plus, I don't hate Mack. I love him.

I love him with all my heart, but hearing what he's just said makes it feel broken.

I'm so confused, so frightened even.

The only place I really have to run to right now is back to our room.

And stumbling up the heavy wooden staircase, I heave the door closed behind me. Hurling myself back onto the double

bed I tried so hard to sleep in last night.

It's the only place that feels anywhere near safe right now.

I try to cry with my face buried in the soft pillows, but only a dry croak comes out. My body shivering and convulsing like I'm throwing up, but it's just this horrible feeling that's taken over.

Wanting the ground under this whole place to just open up and swallow me whole, bed and all. The last thing I want to do is talk to or see anyone.

So, when I hear heavy footsteps on the stairs, and then the door handle rattling before someone knocks, I try to tell him to go away while also trying to bawl my eyes out.

I guess there's a big part of me that's secretly hoping Mack followed me up here.

Maybe I did hear it wrong...and now he's come to see if I'm alright.

But it's not Mack.

My mom's shrill voice from the other side of the door demanding I open it makes me groan.

Sniffing back my tears and wiping my eyes, I peel myself off the bed and unlatch the door before heading straight back for the bed.

"Why are you locked in here?" mom gasps, making a sweeping entrance and surveying the room.

"I'm sick, mom...", I murmur. Laying on my side and turning my back to her so she can't see me crying.

"Sick? What are you talking about?" she clips dismissively.

I can hear her swishing about the room as if she's looking for something or gathering things up.

Totally ignoring me.

The pain in my stomach only getting worse and joining the ache in my heart takes a lot for me not to sob out loud.

“Ben and I are going on a picnic by the lake,” she chirps. Actually, humming a tune to herself as I hear her unzipping herself and changing into something else.

Stifling another groan but wondering if she even heard me, I roll over to face her.

“I don’t want to stay here, Mom...I just...I just want to go home,” I finally sob.

All the emotions I’ve been trying to hold in flooding out of me.

But nothing’s going to break my mom’s good mood. And, after giving me a frown, studying my outburst, she lets me know it.

“We just got here, Tina,” she says coldly but forces her mouth back into a smile before she goes on.

“I’m going to enjoy myself this weekend, so if you just want to lay in bed and mope that’s your business,” she says, waving the idea away with her hand before pressing her finger to her lips in thought.

“Ah! I can wear the red ones,” she thinks out loud and gets back to making herself look way overdressed for anything, let alone a picnic on a ranch.

At eight o’clock in the morning.

I turn over again so I don’t have to look at her, but mom finally finds enough time once she’s done to explain everything to me.

Like I’m five.

“There’s the trail hike to the cabin, fishing by the lake...,” she muses aloud, listing off all the things I could be doing today. “...They have horseback riding, but I know you wouldn’t want to do that. But would it kill you to get off your ass and actually try and enjoy yourself for once, Tina?” she practically whines.

Tempted to pull the pillow over my ears, I settle for hugging it instead.

Wishing she'd just hurry and leave so I can die from misery in peace.

But the sound of a man clearing his throat makes my entire body freeze up. My broken heart is suddenly in my throat.

Without even having to look, I know it's Mack.

"Oh. *You* again..." my mom groans. Making me cringe inside hearing her be so rude.

"I... I just came to check on the window," he says, trying to sound offhand about it but I can feel as well as hear the edge to his voice.

"Well. It's still there," Mom chimes with an extra helping of sarcasm. "And remember, the flaking paint and splintered wood was your doing. Not ours," she clips. "Don't let me see a bill for damages or anything sneaky like that," she cautions him.

And that's when I have to say something.

"Mom. Can you just stop acting like such an asshole?" I growl at her, feeling at least some of my hurt and anger channeled in a better direction.

She goes silent and I can feel her eyes on my back.

I know I'm going to have to pay for that one later, but right now, I just wish she'd disappear.

"I just came to see if it was still working," Mack says in a calmer tone.

Professional.

"And to let you know there's a hike to the cabin for tonight's program. We leave in an hour, so..." he adds, trailing off.

But Mom's not interested.

"I'm doing some hiking of my own today," she sighs. "Ben and I are going to the lake for a picnic. I already had this conversation with Mrs. Corbett earlier," she adds with annoyance.

“Now. If I can get through.... *Thank you!*” she exclaims, making me realize just where I get all my own brattiness from.

But she goes, and then it’s just Mack and me.

Alone in this room again.

My hurt and embarrassment slowly give way to those butterflies in my belly I get when I think about him, or whenever he’s close by.

He waits long enough to hear mom’s steps disappear, the strong scent of her perfume lingering long after her. And I swallow hard once I hear him close the door gently.

I give a tiny gasp, and dammit. If I don’t feel anything but sorry for acting the way I did earlier.

Already feeling the warm rush of heat to my groin before he even says a word.

“Old Mrs. Corbett thinks I have a thing for your mom,” he rumbles with irritation.

I feel my eyes tense and my nose bunch up. Forgetting all about how horrible I must look, I roll over and prop myself up on my elbow.

My whole face a puzzle.

Mack’s own features soften once our eyes meet.

And I can see that although his voice is as deep and strong as ever, something’s bugging him.

“I only said what I said before....,” he starts. “I mean, last night....”

He makes a sudden pained expression and looks away, then down at his feet.

“Sounds like my mom is more interested in Ben,” I sniff. Feeling like I might get out of this yet.

Sure, hearing what Mack said hurt me, but only because I don’t know the full story yet.

Mack goes quiet.

“You’re not actually interested in her, are you?” I ask, hearing my voice crack.

Relieved more than I thought possible when he makes such a strange, twisted face that I can’t help but laugh out loud.

“No. No, I’m not interested in your mom,” he assures me, but his eyes look like they’re filled with a million other things he’s trying to say.

I wait for him to make the next move. Not daring to even hint about how he might feel about me.

And I definitely don’t want to jinx it by bringing up last night.

After some thought, Mack finally finds the words.

“It would be just you and me if we went hiking to the cabin,” he finally says in a husky tone.

His lip curling into a knowing grin.

His eyes burning with the same intensity they did right before we almost kissed last night.

“Just...just us?” I stammer. Wondering if mom would even notice I went, let alone care.

I’ve never seen her so interested in anything since she laid eyes on Ben.

“Just us,” Mack echoes, letting his eyes run over me as he takes a slow breath in.

I feel myself redden, but not from embarrassment or hurt anymore.

“I’d love that,” I hear myself murmur. Almost purring the words as I feel a fresh wave of damp warmth flood my pussy as I let my own eyes move over his body.

Taking my time to pause at his ample pant bulge. Still in shock a man like him would even take the time to see if I was okay, let alone explain himself.

“Perfect,” he rasps. His lip quivering into another satisfied smile.

“Better get some breakfast into yourself. I’ll let Mrs. Corbett know it’s two not four for the trail ride,” he says, sounding all professional again.

Wait, what?

“A trail ride?” I ask, gulping. Not wanting to ruin a second chance with Mack. But already freaking out if he means what I think he does.

“Sure. We usually hike the long way to the stables, then ride the rest of the way,” he says, giving a little nod of enthusiasm.

“You ever been horseback riding?” he asks.

I feel my head turning slowly one way and then the other.

My body’s telling him no I haven’t, but my mind’s already racing with the old memory of my accident.

“It’s easy,” he assures me. “I can show you how, but only if you want me to?” he says, lifting his brow and his eyes widen with the question.

Instantly making me forget the past, letting me see a light in his eyes that suggests maybe riding more than just horses.

But if anyone can get me back on a horse, it’s Mack.

In fact. If it means we can start over, I’d walk on hot lava if he wanted me to.

And if he’s talking about learning something else along the way, then I think he’s the only man I’d want to take lessons in *that* from too.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Mack

“Well, what was all *that* about?” Mrs. Corbett quizzes me as I brush past her.

She’s been hovering by the stairs ever since Tina overheard us and ran off.

I wait as long as I can before going after Tina, not wanting to let old Mrs. Corbett see just how much it cuts me up inside to see Tina upset.

Especially over something so stupid out of my mouth.

My instinct telling me I need to get Tina and me alone again. Away from her mom, away from this house even.

Just for a few hours...give me a chance to get to know her in the way I know she needs...

Seeing her so upset, and all over something so stupid makes me more determined than ever to claim her properly.

“I didn’t know Ms. Tanner and Ben were skipping the trail ride and camp out,” I hear myself reply.

Shifting the focus of the conversation away from what just happened.

Sounding all business compared to what we were talking about earlier before all this nonsense started.

“I *told* you,” Mrs. Corbett says, gripping my forearm, stopping me from going. “She and Ben went off for a walk this morning. They did mention the picnic instead of the trail ride, but then I must’ve...forgot...,” she breaks off.

Both of us grow silent a moment before I shrug it off and turn to go, I let her know I’ll be prepping the gear.

“So...it’ll just be you and the young lass going?” Mrs. Corbett asks.

The tone of caution, concern, and curiosity were all ringing in her voice.

“Ah...yeah, I guess so,” I remark. Trying to sound like it’s the most natural thing in the world.

Tina is an adult, after all, and I’ve done hundreds, maybe even thousands of tours and trail camps with all types of people.

But the way the old woman stares at me gives me a chill.

Her mouth curving into a warm smile and that knowing glint in her eye tells me she might have just figured out who this lowly ranch hand really *is* interested in after all.

But I don’t want to waste time giving her more fuel for her already overactive imagination.

“So, it’ll be two for dinner back here, not three,” I remind her. Keeping it sounding like it’s just another day at the office.

When really, my insides are in a knot. My need to be alone with Tina is overpowering.

My need to be inside her stronger than ever after seeing her laid out on the bed like that just now.

And knowing she totally misunderstood what she heard. Seeing how upset it made her.

It means I need to make it up to her as soon as I can, and in private.

“Okay then,” Mrs. Corbett sighs, but she’s holding me with her gaze before she wags a finger at me, smiling.

“I’ve known you since ye were a lad old enough to put over my knee...,” she reminds me. “...And I’ve never seen you so wound up since those two contest people came.”

She doesn’t say anymore because she doesn’t have to.

“Thanks for taking care of their luggage, by the way,” is my only reply, changing the subject as quickly as I can. “...And for parking the truck round back last night. I don’t know what I’d do without you, Mrs. Corbett,” I tell her truthfully.

Always knowing that flattery is the only way to distract her whenever she starts getting ideas in her head about *me* finally settling down.

Even though, when it comes to Tina, I think I’m already one step ahead of her on that one.

“Just mind how ye go. And make sure you take your radio with ye!” she calls after me once I make an exit.

“I will,” I call back. “Nice and easy.”

Already feeling like some of the weight in my mind’s been lifted. And already feeling the weight at the front of my jeans as I think of *her*.

Knowing I actually have Tina to myself not just for the day, but all night tonight as well.

It doesn’t surprise me to hear myself whistling a happy tune as I stow enough gear and supplies for two instead of four in the hiking packs.

Making sure Tina’s is lightest of all.

Already picturing the thousand different places I want to show her.

Having her alone is one thing, but I really want to show her how beautiful this place is. And the change in weather overnight gives us an unusually perfect day ahead for this time of year.

Or is it just how thinking about her makes the sun seem brighter, and the clouds less gloomy?

Either way, I've never been more eager to go on a trail hike. But the sooner we get to the cabin, the sooner I know we can have total privacy.

Unless she really does just want to see the sights and look at the view.

The thought makes me shake my head to myself.

No. She's up for it, I know she is. Why else would she get so upset if she wasn't interested in me in *that* way?

Ready to go whenever Tina is, I head back to the house, and entering through the kitchen, I can see my faithful housekeeper piling a fresh plate high with food.

"And no," she says in a stern tone. "I might forget a lot of things, but I wasn't going to see ye go hiking on an empty stomach!" she declares, putting her hands on her hips until I take a seat at the ancient wooden table.

Letting me know I'm not going anywhere until I've cleaned my plate.

"What about...?" I start to ask. Stopping myself before I make it obvious all I'm interested in is Tina, but Mrs. Corbett's features soften as she sighs knowingly to herself.

"She's in the dining room having her breakfast." She smiles. And after a pause she rests her hand on my shoulder. "Go to her, Mack. Her mother and that Ben fellow will be ages yet," she says in a hushed tone.

My eyes meet hers, and patting her hand, I'm reminded that she's the closest thing I have left to family.

"I don't know what I'd do without you, Mrs. Corbett."

Lifting my plate and myself from the table and pretending not to notice when Mrs. Corbett has to dab her eyes with her handkerchief, I make my way through to the dining room.

Tina's empty plate is the first thing I spot, followed by her perfect behind as she stands on tippy-toes looking intently at one of the dozens of old photographs that line the walls.

Silver Fox Ranch has a long but silent history, meaning it used to be a retreat for a lot of important people who nobody would remember these days.

She turns to notice me, flushing with embarrassment once she notices I've been admiring a very different kind of scenery.

The image of every part of her is something already etched in my mind, and I'm only hungry for more the longer I look.

"Mind if I join you before we head off?" I rasp, motioning toward my stacked plate with my eyes.

Feeling my lip curl with satisfaction when I notice Tina's eyes move from mine to my plate and further down.

My groin swelling by the second once it's clear she doesn't mind taking a look as much as I enjoy looking at her.

"You expecting a breakfast rush?" she asks, snorting nervously at her own joke.

"The food, I mean," she flushes, looking down.

"Oh!" I exclaim, forcing a chuckle and taking a seat before I reach full hardness.

My dick seeming to have a mind of its own whenever Tina's nearby.

If she ever does wander too far, it wouldn't be too hard to find her.

"It's the most important meal of the day," I tell her, adding that the ranch only started taking guests as a way to get rid of all the leftovers from Mrs. Corbett's constant cooking.

But my own little attempt at humor falls flat.

Tina looks unsure of herself, staring at me blankly before she blinks.

"I'd better get my glasses," she says suddenly. As if she's either just remembered or is looking for a way out of sitting through watching me eat a mountain of food.

"I can't see anything without them," she adds quickly.

And when she moves toward the door to go, I do the right thing and stand up whenever a lady leaves the table or room.

Looming up suddenly in front of her, Tina catches her toes on the carpet rug and falls forward.

Right into my arms for the second time in twenty-four hours.

She makes a little squeaking gasp, but I've got her.

Both of us are instantly aware of the effect she has on me when I feel my stiff front pressing into the softness of hers.

With no one to interrupt us now, I feel her relax into me for a moment and I make a low sound, stifling the groan welling up inside me.

She feels so fucking good.

"See?" she murmurs, looking up at me with wide eyes. "I can't see three feet in front of me without my glasses."

"Then I'll make sure I stay closer than that anytime you haven't got 'em," I assure her.

Relaxing what registers as a firm grip on both her arms before it is clear we either peel ourselves off each other or pick up right where we left off last night.

But if I kiss her now, or even if I kissed her then. I know once I start, I'll never be able to stop.

And I've got so much more for Tina than just kisses.

"I'll be right back," she assures me, not making much of an attempt to move off me.

But I could hold her like this all day and only feel the same way I do right now.

She pretends not to notice my aching front but watching her bite her lower lip before she hurries off back up to her room lets me know she's not completely innocent.

She's had a look and now she's felt it pressing right into her.

I smile to myself as I watch her go, chiming as she goes that she'll be right back for the second time.

Settling down and eating like a man starved until my plate's empty.

Not minding if she's gone long enough to get herself ready, but kind of missing her already too.

Both of us have a big day ahead of us.

I can just tell.

CHAPTER NINE

Tina

Mom's usually the one to remind me to wear my glasses, but whenever she doesn't, I usually forget. And once I trip on yet another carpet, falling into Mack's strong arms, I figure it's safer if I wear them.

Hiking in the wilderness without them would be stupid. Even though it is kind of nice having Mack catch me every time I nearly trip myself up.

He's finished eating already by the time I freshen up and come back down, hoping he doesn't think I look too goofy with my glasses on.

But seeing him clearer, how warm and instant his smile is when I reappear. I forget all about my own hang-ups.

Already tingling with excitement about the whole day alone with Mack.

Even forgetting all about horses, wild beasts, and everything else about nature I usually seize up from whenever I think about it.

"There's a lot of ground to cover, so we should probably get going," he suggests.

Reminding me that being inside with chairs and tables, food and warm beds is one thing. But roughing it in the woods means hiking, and lots of it by the looks.

Making me wonder if I just asked if we could drive to wherever we're going, would he agree?

I'm not exactly built for long hikes, and reading my thoughts, Mack assures me it'll be worth it.

"There's just so many things and little places we can see if we're on foot," he explains.

"Or horseback," I add, trying to sound enthusiastic but feeling my own features fall, hearing myself say it out loud.

Mack agrees with a friendly grunt, and missing my reaction, he starts to move like a man with purpose.

His rugged good looks match his natural swagger. The very picture of a born ranch hand, a man of the land.

Quickly lagging behind his huge steps when I follow him outside, I'm struck by how fit as well as how strong and handsome Mack is.

The bright morning sun on his silver-flecked hair and tanned features make him look even better.

I cringe at the thought of how I must look in the full sun, being a very indoorsy type compared to someone like Mack.

And without wanting to let Mack know, I have to admit to myself that my feet hurt already.

These new hiking boots I've never worn are pinching me in all the wrong places, and I already wish I'd worn thicker socks.

Mack moves swiftly and surely to a stone barn where all the gear's kept.

Each step he takes only makes him look more energized and powerful.

The barn's perched on a small rise overlooking a stream that joins a huge lake I can see in the distance.

Hustling to catch up, I'm already wheezing by the time I reach him.

His eyes scan the scenery for more than the view, which is breathtaking.

Literally.

“You okay?” he asks, keeping his eyes on something in the distance with his body turned away from me to one side.

“Just...yeah, I’m fine,” I puff, holding my breath, so I don’t pant so loud.

“I think I can see your mom,” Mack remarks, reaching down beside the packs he’s laid out and producing some binoculars.

“See?” he asks, handing them to me and holding them to my eyes, and turns me gently by the shoulders until I can see her and Ben.

“Okay. I can see my mom from here,” I murmur. Not meaning to sound bratty, but seriously?

“You came up here to see if you could spot my mom?” I ask him sarcastically.

Knowing she’s not at all his favorite person this weekend.

Mack chuckles, and putting me out of my misery, he explains.

“There are two trails we can take,” he says, giving me, the only hiker with the group for the day, the option of choice.

“The woods trail,” he remarks, thumbing to his right, “Or the lake trail,” he adds, jutting his chin toward the area he just had me spot my mother in.

“Uhhh. I think we’re taking the woods trail, don’t you?” I ask hopefully.

It only makes him smile wider to himself as he takes the binoculars back and lifts a pack for me to carry.

“I was hoping you’d say that,” he smiles, cocking a brow and then moving behind me as I slip my arms through the heavy canvas straps of the pack, which feels kind of empty.

Mack repeats the same for himself, turning away from me again as he hooks his pack over his massive shoulders that flex under his shirt.

I can tell at a glance that he’s carrying everything we need and already feel further behind him. My pack’s just for show, I

guess. Or maybe just to carry my water bottle.

He's got his back to me pretty much the whole time as we get started. Making me half wonder if this is going to be all business and no pleasure after all.

Without any more discussion, he makes for the opposite direction my mom's in, and only turning his head to make sure I'm right behind him, we set off.

It feels weird because a part of me feels like making the choice to go with Mack, away from my mom, is kind of what has to happen eventually.

I can't always depend on her, and the crossroads moment I'm having only makes the choice so much easier knowing I choose Mack.

I don't know how or why. But despite Mack keeping his distance as we set out hiking, this weekend's starting to feel like it's about to get serious in a good way.

But I can't help but already start thinking about what happens when it's time to go home.

I already told mom this morning I don't want to stay here, so if I suddenly like it so much, she's going to know why.

It wouldn't take a genius to figure out how badly I'm falling for him.

Five minutes alone with Mack and I don't ever want to be anywhere else. Not ever again.

"Stables are only five miles, this is the longer way, but it's all on horseback from there," he reminds me over his shoulder.

Five miles?

Oh, dear lord!

I do my best to keep up with him, and by the time we're at the crest of a wooded hill with the homestead out of sight, I feel my legs about to give way already.

"Mack," I wheeze, feeling a stitch in my side to match the pain in my out-of-shape body and feet.

“*Mack!*” I finally gasp, getting his attention, and he stops, keeping his body facing forward.

“I need to...I just...,” I stammer.

Feeling all of my pain and worries vanish when he does turn to face me.

The intense look in his eyes is unmistakable.

And the thick line of his arousal at the front of his jeans explains why he’s kept his back to me until now.

I feel my mouth hanging open, and my stitch transforms into a nest of butterflies in my belly.

Letting out a low growl of satisfaction as he takes slow steps toward me, he tells me in a low, deep tone exactly what I need.

“I think you and I both know this isn’t about hiking, Tina.”

I feel myself redden and try to look down at my feet.

Try to act shy and even look surprised. But he’s right. There’s no point in either of us denying this feeling a second longer.

And apart from being able to see for myself what he means, I can’t help but feel the thrill of hearing him saying it. Because I feel exactly the same way.

“So...what are we going to do if we’re not hiking?” I hear myself ask him, making him grin widely as he cocks a brow.

Moving so close to me that I have to crane my neck to look up at him.

He looks unsure if I’m genuinely so innocent for just a second, or maybe like myself, just wanting him to tell me exactly what he wants to do to me.

“I think we can start by picking up where we left off last night,” he rasps firmly.

My breath shivers as I watch his huge hands twitch forward. Wanting to reach for me, but I get the feeling Mack has something else to say before we go any further.

“See what you do to me?” he asks, glancing down at his front before showing me his hands, which I notice have the same

tremble running through my entire body.

I can only nod in reply. Feeling more drawn to him by the second.

Needing him to kiss me now, not just wanting it.

But also loving the suspense of the moment. Knowing that this is actually real.

It's happening.

An actual real-life man wants to do more than just have me follow him into the woods.

"I just need you to know that I've only ever felt this way about you, Tina," he adds.

My hand reaches for his and grips his huge fingers. They curl around mine as he makes my heart swell with his sweet words.

"Once I kiss you, I won't stop," he says with true grit in his voice. "But I don't just want to kiss you, Tina. I want all of you...and forever. Starting right now."

He gives me time to tell him otherwise, but I don't need to even think about it.

I know there'll be hell to pay, and most likely for both of us if I do give myself to Mack.

But something about this whole place, not just him, makes me feel like I really could stay here forever.

Without another word between us, Mack leans down and cups my face with his hand.

His mouth is gentle over mine at first, but as soon as we both feel and taste the power that's drawing us closer yet, we both abandon ourselves.

His mouth is hard over mine and our tongues swirling like the way I know our bodies could too.

My hands claw at his rock-hard chest and abs.

The pulsing line of his arousal stiff against my soft belly.

And his huge arms envelop me before he scoops me up. Literally picking me up as if I weigh nothing while we kiss.

Holding me so strong but tender, I can't help feeling I've finally been rescued.

I feel like I'm in the safest place in the world in his arms.

I know I'm home now.

CHAPTER TEN

Mack

I thought I could wait.

Maybe even just talk as we hike, then spend today getting to know Tina better.

But dammit if she doesn't make me harder than stone, and every step I take feels like one more away from her. Every second I waste in not telling her how I feel about her is too long.

I've never been much of a talker.

More of a *doer* kind of guy. So, once I know we're clear of the curious eyes of my aging housekeeper, I can't bear the strain in my jeans another second. I tell her.

I tell her what I'm sure we both already know, and from the look in her eyes, she doesn't have to say another word.

She does feel the same, but being a little shy and maybe even intimidated by my size or years, she isn't as bold as I am in letting her know how I feel.

How much I fucking *need* her over just wanting her now.

Kissing her for the first time, and more important, feeling her kiss me back with the same intensity.

It answers all the questions we have for each other without any words.

We just know.

And whatever happens from now on is nothing compared to this feeling, and knowing we have all day and tonight together only makes the rest of the world, let alone the ranch household, seem like it's so far away it might not even be real.

Scooping her up and carrying her with me, it's as civilized a caveman as I can be right now.

And even after just a few steps, and another long kiss, Tina lets me know in a casual tone I don't have to carry her all the way.

Squeezing her close, I chuckle softly.

"I'd carry you five hundred miles if it meant you'd be mine," I tell her candidly.

Knowing I could hold her forever like this, and not only because I have a strong arm.

"Plus, I'll set you down when I'm good and ready," I croon, nuzzling her neck and making her giggle.

Both of us instantly feel like we've known each other forever, and being close is the most natural thing in the world. Like it should be between us.

"You *can't* carry me five miles," she protests, gasping when my hand shifts, touching her ample chest on one side as I secure my grip on her.

More determined now not to set her down until we reach the stables.

"You bet I can't, or you really don't want me to?" I ask her, raising my brows.

She opens her mouth but closes it as she thinks to herself.

I let my hand move from her fine ass to the space between her legs, pressing three thick fingers against the line of her sex under her jeans.

She purrs and then moans, her whole body melting into mine.

“And if you can’t...carry...me?” she gasps, fighting to keep her eyes from rolling back into her head.

And I fight the urge to just carry her off into the nearby bushes.

Take care of what needs doing right here.

But I’m stubborn, I guess. And if she really thinks I can’t or won’t carry her that far, I’ll gladly prove her wrong.

“And what if I can?” I retort. “You want to put a wager on that challenge?” I ask confidently. “Or is it more of a dare type deal?”

Tina makes a little whimpering sound, fighting her own urges as she tries to focus on something as silly as a bet that I can’t carry her five miles.

“If you carry me that far...will you...would you keep going...keep holding me, I mean...?” she asks, looking up at me and curling her fingers into the collar of my shirt.

My hot mouth is over hers again before she can say anything.

Her whimpering moans making my balls rise up as I feel ready for her right fucking now.

Her own sounds are drowned out by my deepest, lowest growl yet.

It makes her jump with a start, her eyes wide as they flash toward the woods.

“It’s only me,” I soothe her. “This is what you do to me...and *this* is what I’m going to give you,” I remind her.

Letting her soft rear bob against my hardness as I take long steps, making her give little gasps and mews as she grips me tighter around my neck.

I’m more than eager to make it to the stables in record time now. And not just to prove a point.

Because carrying her like this, feeling her so close against me is the biggest turn on. If she’s anywhere near as horny as it’s making me, it’s the main reason I want to get her someplace comfortable. And fast.

It's what we both want, and I can't think of a better way to get to know her. Already feeling like I'm bringing home the greatest gift of all, and I can't fucking wait to unwrap her.

We go on like this for a time. Her hugging into me and me taking long, sure steps as I carry her.

Only pausing to lean in and kiss her again, or just to stop a moment to show her something along the way, like the incredible views at every turn.

Tina lets me know I can set her down anytime. That she doesn't care about a stupid bet or a dare.

But I know we're not far from the stables, feeling her tense up when I mention the word.

"What's wrong?" I ask her. Not sure if I should be lighthearted or more serious from the look on her face.

She recovers quickly, brushing the comment aside. "Nothing's wrong," she assures me. But I've seen that look before.

People that are shy of animals, especially livestock and horses.

It's not that unusual for people who don't deal with big animals to have a built-in fear of them.

Long as she's not having second thoughts about me, about this big animal.

But even when I ask her a second time if she's alright, Tina's happiest snuggling back into me for the last half mile or so.

Giving me a taste of my own when she asks about me instead about the name of the place, and how long I've worked here.

I catch the other meaning in her question. Like, aren't you scared you'll lose your job if we get caught like this?

And the answer to that is a big no. I'm not.

But I don't tell her everything straight away. We've got all day and night to talk about my boring life.

"For now, let's just say that whatever happens between us is our business. Nobody else's. How about that?" I ask her.

Glad when she nods quickly, but she wants to know again. “Why’s it called Silver Fox Ranch, though?” she quizzes me a second time, making me smile.

“I haven’t seen a single fox yet,” she observes, almost sounding disappointed. But I put on a mock look of being wounded by her comment.

“Except you, of course,” she whispers, blushing and making me chuckle softly.

“It’s a good question,” I let her know. “And it shows you have a keen eye too. There are quite a few foxes in these parts. But like most of the wild animals, they’re long gone by the time human feet get anywhere near them,” I explain.

We’ve gone up higher into the hills through the woodlands, and the breeze shifts suddenly. The chill in the air ripples through us both, making Tina snuggle into my chest deeper.

I ask her if she still wants to walk the rest of the way, chuckling again when she shakes her head, playfully batting at my chest instead.

“I want to hear all about Silver Fox Ranch,” she reminds me.

“Plus, is it normal for Silver Fox Ranch hands to carry young women off into the woods?” she asks with a giggle, but her question has the smile wiped from my face.

But only for a moment.

“No, it isn’t,” I tell her firmly. “It’s like I said, Tina. I’ve never done anything like this, not with anyone because I’ve never felt....”

She’s looking up at me, hanging on my every word. Eager to hear it from my own lips that what we’re doing is the only thing to do.

But the sound of voices from further up ahead makes me stop.

I hear them long before Tina does, so she stares up at me blankly until I feel her sweet little body tense up when she hears them too.

“Expecting company?” she rasps. An edge of irritation as well as hesitation in her voice.

But I’m not putting her down, not for anything or anyone.

“Probably some hikers from the National Park, we do get ‘em coming through once in a while. Can’t read the signs, I guess,” I tell her, feeling my jaw flex with annoyance.

Not surprised at all when a group of three round the turn in the nearly invisible track we’re following.

But it’s not the first time a group of strangers has roamed onto the ranch from the National Park, and it won’t be the last.

Still. Their timing couldn’t be lousier.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Tina

Hearing strange voices and then seeing people, even though it's been less than an hour since we left the homestead, I can't help but feel like I'm actually seeing people for the very first time.

Having Mack kiss me back the way I know we both feel it, and then having him carry me all this way sure has given my whole world a different glow.

Until now.

It really has felt like we're the only two people on the planet, let alone the whole forest.

So, I'm not surprised at all when Mack's mood shifts to irritation at us being interrupted yet again.

The three hikers look like they're glad to see us, though, and don't even seem to think a man of Mack's size carrying me is anything out of the ordinary.

The look in their eyes telling a story of its own, about a long, cold, and scary night spent out in the woods. Lost.

Alone.

There's a guy and two girls, probably around my age and definitely not from around these parts.

In broken English, they exclaim relief and let Mack know they got lost wandering in the National Park. Straying from their

camp and having spent the night in the woods, they look like they need some help.

Without loosening his grip on me, he lets me slide down just enough to cover his arousal using my big butt, which makes me shiver.

“You’re a fair way from the National Park, and on private property,” Mack observes gruffly before softening his tone when they look down at their feet.

“If you follow this path,” he tells them, drawing his huge foot on the ground beneath us and jerking his head back the way we came, “You’ll be at Silver Fox Ranch homestead in about an hour,” he tells them.

One of the girls’ eyes lifts to meet his, and I can’t help but feel a stab of insecurity when she smiles at him, asking if he could maybe carry her back to civilization.

She’s blond and tall.

Beautiful.

Everything I thought a guy like Mack would fall for, but his eyes moving to meet mine reassure me that I don’t have any competition.

Mack ignores the request, taking a long breath in as he works on keeping his mood friendly.

Professional.

“Mrs. Corbett will help you once you get there. Tell her Mack sent you and ask if she can call the ranger to come collect you. I’m kind of *busy* right now,” he says with strained patience.

His huge hands squeezing me gently. Silently telling me he isn’t going to let a few lost hikers interfere with his plans.

Our plans.

“Are you a...a *real-life* cowboy?” The guy asks, instantly impressed by Mack’s imposing figure and his total command of the situation.

“*Ranch hand*,” Mack rasps dryly in reply. Making me stifle a giggle as he moves past the trio.

“So, you aren’t even going to walk back with us?” Calls the blond again, but Mack doesn’t bother to answer.

Only moving forward with renewed energy as he works on getting us both closer to where we both really need to be right now.

Alone, and with no more interruptions.

Even as the thought forms in my mind, as I wonder if they’ll really be okay, Mack smiles. Reading my mind as if it’s his own.

“They’ll be alright.,” he drawls. “Once Mrs. Corbett sets eyes on them, they’ll wish they’d stayed lost,” he remarks with a chuckle.

“She’ll feed and fuss over them so much they’ll have trouble standing let alone walking that far ever again,” he adds.

“She’s really something, isn’t she? Mrs. Corbett, I mean,” Is all I can think to say.

Mack pauses mid-step to remind me the same about myself.

“I think *you’re* really something,” he whispers hoarsely, making me flush again as I gnaw at my lip.

Feeling like maybe nature isn’t so bad after all if there’s someone like Mack to help guide me through it.

Gasping some more once we reach the top of the huge, wooded hillside. The scenery even more breathtaking from his arms.

The ancient looking stone and wooden stables, overgrown with ivy and moss look more inviting than I could have imagined.

With sounds of heavier steps than Mack’s moving with snorts and puffs of welcome as the horses move from the corral to the modern timber fence line.

Tossing their heads and whinnying once they see Mack.

Shifting on the spot the way horses do when they meet someone new too.

Sensing my rising anxiety, which Mack is quick to put at ease.

“I think you’ve ridden before,” he murmurs, gently easing me down from his grip and taking my hand in his as he moves closer to the massive beasts that look suddenly small next to him.

“I-I had an accident,” I stammer. Figuring he may as well know now before I freak out when he tries to get me on one of those things again.

He gives me a pained look, flattening his mouth. “What happened?” he asks. Keeping one hand in mine while letting one of the chestnuts nuzzle his.

I find myself relating the whole story to him, to the horses as well, who all seem to want to move in closer.

Making me feel like they all understand how I feel somehow, but Mack most of all when he makes a low sound as he listens.

“It was so long ago,” I recall. “But...I dunno. I’ve just been scared stiff of animals, even going outside ever since,” I tell him honestly, hearing the emotion in my own voice.

Hearing my mom in my mind, and all the other people who try to understand but just don’t get it.

But Mack gets it. And so do his horses. That’s how telling them all makes me feel.

He’s quiet for a long time and with nothing but the breathing of the horses, and the buzz of insects in the undergrowth by the stables, I feel my whole past, not just the accident, fading into the shadows.

The weight of it all feeling like it’s finally been lifted somehow. Just by standing here with Mack and his horses.

Instantly knowing that they’re more than just work for him. They’re his friends.

And at the same moment it hits me.

“You’re not just a ranch hand here, are you, Mack?” I ask him, breaking the long silence.

And for the first time, I see the closest thing to shyness in his features.

He looks down at his feet bashfully before regaining his usual, stoic look.

“You can ride with me if you’d prefer,” he says in a deep voice, eyeing one of the mares.

“But I think Lucy here kind of likes you...she’d take it to heart if you didn’t at least pet her some,” he informs me.

The smallest of the horses whinnies in reply, tossing her mane as she lifts her head, stamping her hooves on the spot and making us both laugh softly.

“And what about our little bet?” I ask, surprised by my own newfound courage.

“You carried me this far, so now you just want me to pat a horse?”

Mack shoots me a quizzing look, but smiles broadly, showing his perfect white teeth as I feel him pulling me closer to him.

His low growl as he scoops me up off my feet yet again mixes with my shriek of surprise before he nibbles at my neck.

Moving surely toward the open stable doors. The smell of sunshine, pine needles, and hay all mixed with his own woody, manly scent.

Soon to be mixed with my own essence that I feel pouring out of me once it’s clear he has plenty of other things he wants to show me before we even think about going anywhere else.

Dropping his heavy pack from his shoulder, and easing me onto a solid wooden bench, my legs move wider apart as he faces me.

Taking a moment to stroke back my hair as he stands in front of me, resting his hand on my burning hot cheek before he leans in to kiss me again.

Each time his mouth meets mine, it’s better than the last, and now we’re truly alone. It’s crystal clear to me that we both need more than just kisses.

Feeling his big warm hands sliding up my sweater, I hear myself moan from his touch.

Still unsure what a man like this could ever see in me, but his sure movements and low groan of satisfaction is music to this shy, chubby girl's ears.

"I want you so bad, Tina," he groans. "Wanted you like this the second I laid eyes on you."

My own hands are moving across his firm chest, his chiseled, muscular frame under the thick cotton of his shirt making me realize how fit and strong he really is.

Making me remember my other little secret now it's clear that he's a man who knows what he wants, and he's come to collect.

"Mack, I...", I try to tell him, but his mouth over mine again, his bulging jeans pressing into my mound cancels out my efforts at conversation.

I feel my eyes close and my entire body shivers as he unhooks my bra. Sliding it out from under my sweater as he takes my breasts in both his hands, I feel like something deep inside me is about to come loose.

And Mack's the only man I want to help me with that, even though I've....

Well. I guess it wouldn't take a genius to figure it out, but I'm not exactly experienced at this sort of thing.

But like everything else Mack sets his hand to, I can't help but feel he's got more than just my chest at his command.

Forcing my eyes open, I hear my shivered breath trying to tell him, one last time before I can't say anything.

But his head's already shaking and pressing one of his thick fingers over my lips, he starts to unbutton my jeans.

Promising me that we can talk later.

"Right now," he says in a firm tone, yanking at my jeans while I grunt with growing need for his mouth over something else. "I need your sweet little pussy, and the only words out of your

mouth I want to hear are you begging for my cock while you come for me....” he growls.

Making me groan louder, hearing him say that is more of a turn on than I could have imagined. I forget all about my own little problem for a minute, I figure I may as well just let the man keep doing what he’s doing.

Every word to me in his deep, powerful voice, each promise he makes to have me come for him as well as claim me for his own sends fresh shockwaves of arousal right through me.

“You’re mine now, Tina. *Mine!*” he gasps, lifting me off my rump long enough to slip my jeans off, taking my hiking boots with them in one swift movement.

Making me gasp long and loud when I feel my naked thighs wrapping around him.

His low growls echo in my ears as he slips off my sweater too, freeing my aching breasts, which he pauses to admire.

“*Mine,*” he grunts again, burying his face between my breasts as I grip his thick hair with both hands.

Knowing I’m in for more than just a horseback ride this weekend.

Knowing I’m about to be given a series of lessons I’ll never forget.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Mack

I thought I'd seen everything this country has.

Thought I'd seen nature in all its wonder and glory.

But seeing Tina's curvy little body. Smooth and soft. Milky white against the dark roughness of my own hands.

Seeing that ample chest of hers heaving with anticipation. Catching the glimpse of her wet mound through her white panties.

Knowing that she'll be mine. I feel like I'm seeing nature, as well as Tina at her finest for the first time.

Feeling her hands on me too, her fingers tight in my hair. Her mouth hot on mine again before both of us are in a frenzy to kiss, touch and feel as much of each other as we can.

I lift her from the bench, moving over to the stack of fresh bales of hay, feeling her entire body shivering against mine as I set a nearby blanket down with one hand.

She's not shivering with cold either, and I can feel my own body, taunt and tense as it is, shuddering too as I waste no time laying her down.

Running my hands up the inside of her creamy, thick thighs. Humming with disbelief that anything could be so fucking perfect.

On my knees in front of her, her calves hooking over my shoulders. I ease the thin fabric from her dripping pussy.

My thick fingers shine instantly with her arousal and send mine through the roof when I hear just how much she needs me touching her.

“*Mack!*” she gasps, making a tiny whimpering sound that turns to a low moan once my fingers gently stroke her perfectly pink pussy lips.

Edging them open in time with her own mouth, round but silent before she lets out a growl when I start to probe her quivering sex.

It’s slick and tight around my fingertip, and her hands grip me harder as she sucks air in through her teeth, swearing loudly and letting me know just how bad she wants it.

“Eat me, Mack,” she pleads, tossing her head from side to side. Her hair flowing out from her like a wild mane. Matching the color of the hay that catches in it.

“Suck my clit until I...,” she grunts, suddenly stiff as her body jerks and she moans again.

“Come,” I groan, finishing her sentence. Pleased to hear she doesn’t mind saying exactly what’s on her mind either.

Feeling my mouth wanting to keep grinning like a maniac but needing to have it cover her sweet sex.

Needing to taste her as well as feel her all over. Every inch of me needing to cover her and feel her body against mine.

I take all of her easily in my mouth. The soft curls of her blond mound teasing my nose. The depth of her moans as my tongue joins her swollen clit, making us both grip the other tighter.

My rising urge to be inside her is overwhelming, but she’s so tight, so small.

Shame it’s going to take so long to have her all to myself while I loosen her up.

Let her know just how hard she can come in my mouth, so she gets plenty of practice before I teach her how to ride the

aching, stiff cock I have for her.

Making her cream all over my fat dick before I fill her with my seed.

Giving her a very different kind of saddle sore, I know she'll never shy away from again.

Her stiff nub is drenched in her sweet arousal, and I savor every precious drop of it.

Feasting on her greedily, and with a hunger I know can only be satisfied once she is and my seed is deep inside her, I feel her climax close already.

But we've got time.

And there was never any mention of her only having the one climax, was there?

She gasps with wheezing breaths, making me grin as I lap at her perfect little fuck pot. Panting out the words as if I can't see and feel how close she is for myself.

"Mack... I'm going to...I. Oh...*Fuuuuck!*" she growls, bucking her hips in time with each pass of my tongue on her rock-hard little bud.

I hum in agreement, letting her know that I know just how close she is, and this isn't going to be short but it is going to be a very sweet adventure together.

All day today, and all night tonight.

And every night after tonight if I have my way.

Shifting my hands from either side of her quivering pussy, I grip her perfect ass and groan myself.

Feeling handfuls of her under me. The softness of her skin against my cheeks as I squeeze hers.

Letting my tongue find more than one pleasure center, and sending her over the edge, it's clear now there's no going back.

This is where she belongs from now on. With no other hands but mine on her. And no other eyes but mine seeing her. Worshiping her.

Both of us sound like a pair of wild animals driven out of their minds with more than just primal lust as Tina's body stiffens again.

This time with her back arching as she squeaks a dry croak before I feel her sex tremble against my mouth.

Her clit pulsing like white heat, sending wave after wave of her powerful orgasm through every cell in her body.

Filling my own senses as well as my mouth with her climax. Making my cock twitch as I struggle not to come myself.

The warm silk of my precome making my swollen helm slide in my jeans, feeling like a third arm trying to free itself.

Yearning to be inside her. But a part of me feeling like I'm in heaven already.

It feels like forever since I first saw her only last night, but every second spent waiting is worth it now.

Feeling her whole sex shudder against my mouth. Her ass quivering as I grip her harder. Her strained sounds of total pleasure finally giving way to little jerking gasps and moans.

The grip on my hair she's almost pulled out by the roots relaxing until I nuzzle her perfect pussy with my mouth.

Eventually, she strokes my hair instead of yanking it. Purring loudly as I make it clear we're nowhere near done here.

I slide up her body, running my stubbled chin thick with her juices all the way up her belly. Past her breasts to her lips.

Kissing her deep and hard.

Letting her taste herself like I can. Growling with renewed intensity when I feel her hands tugging at my zipper.

Feeling her trembling fingers running over the thick outline of my cock. Her eyes growing wide, as if she's suddenly remembered something, or only just come to her senses.

"What is it?" I ask, cracking a smile. Noting her flushed look and the beads of sweat on her brow.

Registering that although it's only felt like moments, I think I've been feasting on my girl for quite some time already.

Tina's round cheeks glow with a deeper shade, and she looks torn between embarrassment and looking like a girl who's just found her new favorite pastime.

"Did I just...?" she gasps. "I mean, did I really?" she asks aloud, almost as though it's a question to herself.

She lets herself fall back, but keeping her hands gripping my forearms, I feel her shiver with another set of little aftershocks before she exclaims, "Holy Moley. That was incredible!"

I make a humble face, but inside I'm swelling with as much pride as I have hardness for her still.

Anyone would think that she's never even...

Oh.

Her eyes lock onto mine, and even though she's smiling, her eyes turn silver with tears that tell me what she's thinking long before I hear it from her own lips.

"You mean you've never even...?" I ask her gently, feeling like the luckiest man alive when she jerks her head from side to side in the negative.

"Not even by myself," she confesses. Shivering the words as though it's as much a shock to her as it is to me.

But I don't think it's a bad thing, and I'm quick to tell her so.

I just can't believe someone as stunning as Tina hasn't had the world falling at her feet.

And with a body like hers, I'm almost concerned she hasn't been enjoying it herself, to be honest.

I mean, she's fucking perfect.

Going quiet, she moves to hold me closer, and I cover her with all my warmth. Smothering her like a living blanket.

Feeling her body relax in a way only getting something off her chest as well as out of her system can do.

Totally spent, but already I can feel her curiosity as well as my own need for her hanging heavy in the air around us.

“You don’t mind if I’m...you know...a virgin?” she whispers. My head automatically shaking before I kiss her in reply.

My mind already snapping to more pressing issues.

Like, is claiming my queen on a bale of hay the way I really want to make her mine?

I was picturing a little more luxury for my girl, even though we’re out in the woods acting like animals, it doesn’t mean we can’t be comfortable.

And even though I’m sure I can hold out until we reach the cabin so I can really spoil her and then claim her properly.

The real question is, can she?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Tina

Okay, so losing my virginity at twenty probably isn't going to be as big a deal as I thought it would be.

Actually, come to think of it. I never thought I ever could or even would be anything but a virgin my whole life.

But knowing it'll be with Mack, and knowing just how fucking amazing he makes me feel?

I'm actually glad I've never been with anyone else. Gladder still that only his hands and mouth could give me my first orgasm ever.

Because quite frankly, I don't think anything else would even come close to the real thing.

Every tiny touch and firm grip from his huge body only makes me want more. And when he scratches one itch, even once, he soothes the biggest one of all.

It only leaves me wanting more of him.

Needing all of him as much as I want to give all of myself to him.

Knowing there could never be anyone else.

But Mack surprises me a little when I finally hear myself tell him the truth.

He doesn't look annoyed or disappointed by my inexperience.

He doesn't seem to mind at all.

If anything, he looks like a guy who's just won the lottery.

And mom's booby prize weekend away? Well. I feel like *I'm* the one who hit the jackpot.

I just never would've guessed a man like Mack could be so into someone as plain and yeah, even as *boring* as I am.

But as I look up at him when he lifts his head to study me, I don't see a man who's having second thoughts.

And his deep voice reminds me without a shred of doubt that he's a one-woman man.

He doesn't do things by half, and this is a forever thing. Not just some roll in the hay.

"I meant what I said, Tina. I want all of you, and forever...I want to..." he says with renewed intensity, but he stops himself short.

I feel my nails pressing into his arms, my eyes pleading with his to tell me what he *really* wants.

"You want to what?" I ask, hearing my voice tremble. Feeling a fresh line of warmth rush over my sex as his hard body presses down on it.

He looks like he's trying to find the right words, wanting to make all this perfect. But he doesn't have to try so hard.

Everything with Mack has been perfect so far, but I got to say, when he spells it out, I'm kind of shocked, thrilled, and maybe even a little scared by just how serious he really is.

"I want to put a baby in you, Tina. I thought I'd give up all this if it meant I could have you for a single day, but I want to share all of it with you...forever," he finally says.

His voice thick with determination, and I hear myself swallowing hard as my hands instinctively start to move over his body again.

Hearing him say it in no uncertain terms feels like a fuse that he's lit so deep inside me. The only way I know it can be put out is with the nuclear blast that'll have to follow.

I might be a virgin, but I'm no dummy. And I'd never just give my heart away.

But Mack's talking about a bigger picture. A forever picture.

And as much as my heart's screaming yes, my mind, or should I say, the voice of my mom in my mind is shouting something else.

You've known the man for less than twenty-four hours. What could possibly make you think this could last more than five minutes?

I don't have to dwell on that question too long.

Once my hands find his stiff cock again, stroking him through his jeans, I feel the growing pulse of electric current flowing from him like lava.

Knowing full well I'm already hooked. And that a lifetime of nothing but pleasure from him would be heaven on earth.

I'd be crazy to say yes, to agree with anything.

But it's Mack himself who cautions me.

"I mean it, Tina," he says again in a softer tone. "I'm all yours, but the only thing I ask in return is that you're mine. *All* mine, and *always* mine."

He lets his words sink in, and far from feeling like I'm still falling.

Far from feeling like I'm in the grip of some weekend crush on an older guy. I know I've hit the bottom.

Feeling my ears pop. Knowing I never have to come up for air ever again.

Feeling the space inside me where my heart will implode.

I know in a single second that I love Mack, and yes. I want to give myself to him.

All of me in return for all of him. What's not to love about that?

It sounds like the fairest deal I've ever had, and even though I haven't even seen all of it in action yet, I can already feel

Mack drives a hard bargain.

And he won't quit until he gets what he wants most of all, which somehow, I just know is me being the happiest girl alive.

Content with the man of her dreams in real life.

"I'm yours, if you really want me," I hear myself reply, making him look relieved but frustrated at the same time.

"I don't know how to tell you any other way, Tina," Mack murmurs. "So I guess I'll have to show you."

My mind already racing to the thought of how good he will feel inside me.

If he can do that with his mouth, imagine what he can do with that delicious fat dick of his?

But a baby!

I haven't even had him inside me yet and he's already talking about a baby.

The tingles that thought gives me inside are just as intense as everything else so far this weekend, and only because I know he's right.

Because I know deep down that all I'll ever need is Mack, and a baby of our own would mean we'd always be together.

"You're the most amazing, beautiful girl I've ever seen. And soon, real soon. I hope you'll see just how much you mean to me," he whispers, holding me close to him again.

And I hold on for dear life this time.

Harder and longer than ever before. Hoping I can show Mack just how much he means to me already.

And already knowing I couldn't live without him. I know it's just as well.

Because once my mom gets wind of all this, my life probably isn't going to be worth living.

Not the way it was just a few hours ago anyhow.

“We don’t have to..., I mean...not here,” Mack finally says, the wheels of his mind turning as I catch the intense look in his eyes.

His features focused on everything I haven’t seen yet. The cabin. The rest of today.

Tonight.

The ripples of my afterglow re-emerge, and I suddenly couldn’t care less if he took me to the moon or just flipped me over this hay bale and filled me with that dick of his.

But maybe. Just maybe, Mack’s a little bit of a romantic at heart under that tough guy exterior that suits him so well.

And seeing as it is my first time, I’m guessing he wants to make it special.

Even though just being with him is special enough.

“We can go as slow or as fast as you want,” he tells me.

Making me wonder if *I* can wait until we get to his cabin in the woods, not to mention riding there on horseback.

Already wondering how I made it through twenty years of my life without a climax *a la Mack*, let alone how I’ll get through the next twenty minutes without more of the same.

But like every other racing thought I have, Mack seems to read me easily. And after assuring me we’ll be more comfortable at the cabin, as well as amazing me with his self-control, he suggests we keep moving.

“Unless you want to stay here?” he asks, cocking a brow, eyeing the stirrups, reins, and riding gear that’s all neatly laid out.

The rich scent of heavy leather, sawdust, and straw all mixed with the natural woodland smells.

Stirring something primitive and something I’m almost afraid to own inside of me.

“Maybe we should go to the cabin,” I blush, biting my lower lip. Feeling so horny at the thought of Mack riding me like one

of those thick, glossy saddles that I feel my whole body shudder again before he helps me up.

He manages to find my jeans and sweater, but in a half-joking, half-serious tone he lets me know that the little horse called Lucy has a habit of sneaking around, eating whatever isn't tied down.

"I don't think you'll be needing a bra and panties anyway," he adds with a grin. Running his hands up and down my shoulders before stroking my hair back again.

Leaning in to kiss me, and between the two of us, we almost end up right where we started before we can pull ourselves off each other long enough to get ready to go again.

"Did you mean it?" I ask him suddenly. "About me riding with you, I mean."

The mention of horses quickly reminds me that although I've come a long way today, I'm not exactly a hundred percent confident that I can ride again.

"Of course," Mack reassures me.

"We don't even have to ride if you don't want to," he adds. A strange gleam in his eyes as he grins to himself.

"Why I could...carry you there myself!" he exclaims, and laughs at his own joke out loud, but he's swift to reign it in once he sees I'm not sharing his mood.

"I mean it, Mack," I murmur, hugging my elbows. "And I don't want to put a downer on things. I'd just feel safer with you is all," I tell him honestly.

"I'd like that," he replies without hesitation, his lips pulling into a smile and letting me know we'll have to take Lucy along with us anyway.

"She gets antsy if she doesn't get to ride along, and like I already told you, she likes you," he adds, shrugging to himself.

"I think she's beautiful," I reply. "I'm just not ready...." I trail off, but Mack isn't one to dwell on stuff like that.

And once it's decided he'll saddle up the biggest mare to carry both of us, with Lucy in tow, I set to work trying to dress myself.

Still feeling naked once I'm fully clothed again but without my underwear.

Wondering how the hell my clothes could get so tangled, making me think that maybe Mack wasn't kidding about Lucy and her own secret appetites after all.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Mack

She's not only into me. Vowing to be mine and promising herself to me. She's a virgin to boot.

And she doesn't shriek or run a mile when I mention needing to put a baby in her either.

I mean, if she isn't the most incredible girl already, Tina impresses me more than anything when she wants to help saddle up the horses once she gets dressed.

Even though I know it's a big deal for her to be around them again after what I know must've been one of the biggest traumas of her life.

I still can't help thinking what a natural she is around the mares. Even though she's wary of them, I can just tell they love her being around them.

And I'd trust their judgment over any person's any day. A good animal knows everything there is to know about you in a second.

And just like me, those horses fell for Tina the second they sensed her, even if she is a little shy of them for now.

Lifting the saddles on, I stand between the horses and Tina at first, and once she's feeling more confident, I move to the side a little. Giving her room to help adjust the tack.

Gently, I let her know it's a little too tight. Tina murmurs a nervous apology to me first, then to my mare, Ruby, who's quick to turn and toss her head.

Letting Tina know it's no big deal.

"She puts up with a lot," I murmur. "But she's pretty strict about how tight she'll have things if she's carrying me," I explain.

"And what about me up there as well?" Tina gasps, looking fretful again.

But Ruby senses way more than even I do. Making everything easier when she shifts herself around, pushing her nose into the crease of Tina's neck, making her giggle.

"I think she means you're the least of her worries," I chuckle. Patting Ruby and scratching at her neck.

Reminding Tina that she's doing great and everything's going to be fine.

"We can go whenever you're ready," I remark. Turning to check the packs of gear one more time before stowing them on Lucy's saddle, I ignore her snooty look once she figures out that Tina's riding with me and not on her.

"She'll come around," I whisper into Lucy's ear. "Just give her some time."

Lucy snorts and nods her head up and down. I press my forehead against hers, silently thanking her for being so patient.

With me, though, not with Tina. I can already tell the two of them are going to be fast friends.

I've been so tied up with other work on the ranch lately, it feels like too long since we all just went out on the trail together.

The three mares all looking at me like female relatives. Finally, looking satisfied I've found some human company for a change.

The mares have their own run of a whole valley, but they love people too. And they get as much out of a good, long ride as I do.

And seeing how they are with Tina, I know she gets their seal of approval, which means the world to me.

I wonder if Tina's mom is going to feel just as happy for us.

And Mrs. Corbett?

Hmmm. Best think about that when the time comes. We've got the rest of today and tonight to ourselves. No point spoiling it by thinking about *that*.

"Uh, Mack...? *Mack!*" I hear Tina call out suddenly.

Spinning on my heel, I don't know whether to smile or worry when I see her already up on Ruby.

The reins in her hands, and a look of shock mixed with excitement on her face as Ruby starts to walk slowly around the yard.

"Well, look at you!" I exclaim. "You got up there all by yourself," I encourage her.

Ruby is taking sure but slow steps as Tina feels what it's like to be back in the saddle for the first time in so many years.

"You're fine," I call over to them both, sensing Ruby making sure she's not in any trouble for stealing Tina away from me.

But she won't go far.

At eighteen hands, she's a big mare, and Tina looks small perched awkwardly in my huge saddle.

But she knows enough to keep herself upright, and Ruby's so gentle it makes my heart swell to see Tina taking the initiative and doing the only thing that's best for her.

Getting back on a horse.

"You want to walk her around for a bit?" I ask Tina, who's shaking with nerves but looking determined to conquer her biggest fear.

"I'm right here," I remind her. "And Ruby won't go far."

Tina gives a nod, crimping her mouth and gripping Ruby's reins tighter, she gives her a nudge with the stirrup, setting them both off in a trot.

"Easy on the reins," I call over to her, noticing Ruby tense up as she glances over to me for approval.

"Alright," I say. "It's *alright*." Noting Ruby's not the only one who's tense.

An older part of me wants to let Tina work things out for herself, but the new me wants to protect her from everything and anything that could take the smile from her face.

Keeping my distance, I let them both go for a while but am primed to step in if Tina has any trouble.

After a good while, and only once Tina's looking more relaxed, Ruby marches right over to me. Bringing Tina back safely with a snort of approval as I lift Tina back down.

Feeling her still trembling, I hold her close.

Not surprised when she cries a little.

"Thank you, Mack," she sniffs. Her eyes shining with happy tears.

"You did just fine," I tell her, rubbing her back and kissing the top of her head.

"You're still riding with me, though," I'm quick to add, and feeling her nod I hum low to myself.

Satisfied.

"Why are they all the way up here anyway?" Tina asks me, recovering quickly from her emotions.

"The mares? We keep 'em up here for the trail ride groups. But they have the run of the valley once they're older or aren't cut out for mustering," I explain.

"Like Ruby?" Tina asks, reaching up and stroking the mare's shoulder, making me chuckle as my hand joins hers.

"Ruby? She's always done whatever she wants, and yeah. She's too big for mustering cattle."

“And where are all the cattle?” Tina asks me next, sounding more interested about ranch life now she’s had a feel for it.

Even though she only just rode Ruby for a few minutes, I can see the light in her eyes, the thrill she got out of it.

“Mostly sold for the year,” I tell her. “But like the horses, the cattle have their own area. Over in the next valley,” I explain, pointing toward the opposite hills.

“How big is this place?” Tina muses aloud, shaking her head.

“Big enough to need a ride to get around,” I remind her, asking if she feels up to making for the cabin.

She readily agrees, and I can see her glancing over at Lucy, thinking how she could maybe ride her after all.

“The trail’s pretty steep in parts,” I let her know, not wanting to talk her out of riding Lucy if she really wants to.

But I have to admit, there’s a big part of me that wants Tina riding up with me.

Seeing her curves bounce and shift when she rode Ruby, and watching her hair toss around....

I want that all to myself, I guess.

“Maybe on the way back,” Tina says, shifting her eyes back to mine and smiling the biggest smile I think I’ve seen from her yet.

The sunshine on her face and the fresh mountain air in her lungs, and maybe a little help from my tongue lashing in the barn...Tina’s already looking like a girl who’s found the country life.

And I hope that’s the life she’ll choose, because I have a strong feeling in my gut that this whole weekend’s going to mean one of us has to make a choice.

“How far to the cabin?” Tina asks, breaking my reverie.

“Too far to carry you,” I quip, and noting her instant pout, I add, “Ten miles the long way or two if we take the shortcut.”

“And we’re taking the shortcut?” she replies, making a face.

“If you want,” I tease her, trying my best to look casual about it, but already wanting to take her right here and now if that’s what she really wanted.

“I think the short way sounds nicer,” she agrees, and we both share a look of yearning for each other that sees her standing on tippy toes as I lean down to kiss her again before lifting her back up onto the saddle.

Climbing up onto the saddle myself, I sit behind Tina. Her body firmly against mine and already making me hard before we’ve even taken a step forward.

I hear her mew softly then shiver a breath as my arms move over hers. Both our hands touching as we hold the reins together.

“What about Lucy?” Tina suddenly asks, sounding concerned.

“Oh, she’ll tag along,” I remark casually. Knowing that wherever Ruby goes, Lucy is sure to follow.

And both mares know the way to the cabin by heart, so it’s no real effort to set off. Giving Tina and me plenty of time to feel so good bunched up as we share a saddle.

With me fielding one question after another from her about the ranch, the horses, trees, and rocks that we pass. Until finally, the conversation turns to me.

Something I’ve never been real good at talking about.

“You never finished your story about why it’s called Silver Fox Ranch,” she says with a probing air.

“The cabin’s just up on that ridge,” I say, trying to shift the subject, but she cranes her neck and frowns at me.

“Alright, alright,” I chuckle, knowing she’s going to find out everything sooner or later.

“It’s probably just easier to show you, though, once we get to the cabin.”

That seems to satisfy her curiosity for now. But I was going to tell her everything once we got there anyway.

The mares have picked up speed, hungry for the sweet grass they know is waiting for them. And passing through an ancient wooden arch, the words ‘Silver Fox Ranch’ burnt into the timber so old it looks like iron, has Tina turn her head to me again in a question.

“I thought you said it was a cabin?” she asks, making me smile. The scene of the original ranch homestead unfolds before our eyes as we round the bend.

“It is. I mean, it was. C’mon. I’ll show you,” I tell her.

Both of us feel more of our own animal attraction building as I help her down and let the mares wander.

And keeping her hand in mine, I lead her up the gravel path to the porch that runs all the way around the old place.

Wishing already that we had more than just tonight together.

Having to push the thought aside because the thought of her not being within arm’s reach for a moment is hard enough.

The idea that she could ever leave is too hard even to contemplate.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Tina

“Umm. This is a house, Mack. Not a cabin,” I inform him once we climb the wide stone steps to the porch.

He beams a smile and shakes his head in resignation before he shrugs.

“What can I say? Everything’s bigger in the country,” he laughs, opening the huge wooden door with a big old key.

But I’m not exaggerating.

I thought ‘cabin’ meant a pokey one or maybe two-roomed hut.

Like our apartment in the city. If that were plucked from the building and stuck in the wilderness, that would pass as a cabin.

So, before I even learn that this was the original homestead, I can see it’s not only going to be comfortable, it’s going to have its own story to tell, and Mack doesn’t waste a moment before he starts to show me around.

I half thought, or maybe was half hoping, that as soon as we got here, he’d throw me down on the nearest bale of hay or piece of furniture. Picking right up from where we left off at the stables.

But it’s clear Mack wants to tell me more about himself. And maybe just clear up the myth that he’s just some lowly ranch

hand around these parts before we get down to what I know we'd both rather be doing right now.

The house itself is solid stone with huge wooden beams holding up the more modern-looking pitched roof.

The floors are polished boards, wider than any modern house would have. And the flat, dull heads of blackened antiquated nails used the day they were laid still show through the thick gloss of modern varnish.

Much like the homestead we just came from, the cabin has walls lined with old photos, some so faded it's hard to make them out in the dappled sunlight streaming in through the large rectangular windows that make up the entire front of the place.

Mack's huge hand over mine, he leads me to the giant stone fireplace in the main living area, neatly furnished with heavy leather chairs and thick, woven rugs.

Modern fittings blend in with the old, and if I didn't know any better, it feels as though we might really just have stepped back in time.

"*This* is Foxx Macintyre," Mack announces, and I strain my eyes to make out the rugged features of a well-built man dressed in a style that matches the age of the house we're in.

He pauses for effect but is quick to explain the origins of the ranch, and how it got its name.

"Old Foxx was a rancher, buying the original plot and building this homestead," Mack begins.

"But Foxx was also a prospector, only being able to buy the ranch with the money he'd made in the California gold fields," he says, pausing again, lifting his brows as he studies my reaction.

Which I hate to say, is a look of me kind of losing interest.

I'd rather Mack showed me the bedroom, to be honest. This feeling in me he's unleashed. The country air, whatever it is.

I need Mack *now*, not some ancient history lesson.

But I can see how much it means to Mack, so I smile and nod with slightly feigned interest.

Mack hums knowingly before continuing.

“So, when Foxx was looking for property, he was looking for a place with running water as well as all the tell-tale signs that there might be gold about.

Okay, gold. Now that’s a little more interesting.

“Did he find gold?” I ask, suddenly curious.

Feeling the full effect of Mack’s dramatic pauses in the story, I sense he hasn’t told anyone.

Not the whole story anyhow.

“Silver,” Mack says abruptly, sounding disappointed, but he curls his lip into a sly grin, telling me that old Foxx Macintyre found more than just a nickel’s worth of the stuff.

“So, he found a silver *mine*?” I squeak, hoping that’s true. And it is.

“Oh yeah, he did. But the problem was, half of the claim he’d have to make was on land he didn’t own...yet. So old Foxx kept his discovery to himself. Biding his time until he could buy up the neighboring land without drawing too much attention to himself,” Mack reasons. “Only naming the place once he’d staked his claim and knew exactly what he was going to get out of it,” he adds, stopping to give me another intense look.

The shiver that runs up my spine when he emphasizes the words ‘staked his claim’ sends my mind and body straight back to the stables.

The fresh memory of Mack’s face between my thighs making my heart race and my head spin.

“And even though he was an old man by the time he made it happen, he mined more silver from the place in a day than he ever got in total from the gold fields,” Mack exclaims triumphantly. “Meaning, he became a very wealthy man,” he adds for my benefit.

I guess I'm like most people, and figured silver was never really worth much. Especially in olden times.

"So, what happened to him?" I hear myself asking. "Is there still a silver mine here?"

Mack looks around and lowers his voice as if he's about to reveal his biggest secret.

"Some say that old Foxx was wily enough never to let anyone know what *else* he found in those hills, but the official story is the seam ran dry not long before he passed. The fortune he'd made was passed on to his only daughter," Mack shrugs, making me think that's the end of the story.

But the glint in his eye tells me it's really just the start of it.

He shifts us both over to another withered photograph, a sour-faced woman in pants and boots manning a sluice, ankles deep on a muddy hillside.

"Millie Macintyre," he says, as if he's really introducing her in person. And I feel my mouth drift open as I look up at him.

Wondering if maybe Mack's been stuck out in the woods for too long. Or maybe he just *really* likes the history of the ranch.

Reaching for a more modern-looking photo from the mantelpiece, he thumbs a line of dust off the top edge as he admires it with affection.

"And this is Millie's great-grandson, Bo, and *his* wife, Emily."

I don't know why, but there's just something in the way he says it that makes me realize these aren't just strangers to him somehow.

"Bo and Emily ran the ranch, building the main homestead you were in last night," Mack explains.

And placing their portrait back with some reverence, he shocks me with how he fits in with all this.

"They used to take in wayward kids, fostering them sometimes, but mostly just having them out here for a few weeks to work the ranch and get some discipline as well as fresh air."

He suddenly goes quiet. Instantly lost in his own history. In his own past.

“Were you one of those *wayward* teens?” I ask softly, a smile blooming on my face that makes me feel nostalgic for some reason when he nods.

“I was. And when Bo and Emily adopted me as their own, well...I didn't just find a family I'd never had. I found a forever home too. Silver Fox Ranch.”

My throat itches, and I can feel a lump in it. Like I want to cry but in a good way.

“What happened?” I ask after a while, hoping it's not the one question I should never ask.

But Mack's quick to answer, proudly too.

“Oh, they passed a long time ago. Both of them well over a hundred,” he remarks casually, making me cringe internally.

“I'm sorry,” I murmur. “I didn't mean to....”

“It's alright,” Mack assures me. “They had more life than there are years allowed, and they sure made the most of every minute of every day.”

We both fall silent again, even the chirping birds and swaying treetops outside seem to stop long enough to be noticeable.

The only sound is an antique clock ticking on the other side of the room.

“Sooo?” I finally ask. “You're not really just the ranch hand at all, are you, Mack?”

My question breaks into his thoughts, and he gives a little smiling grunt with just a hint of irony in it.

“No. I own Silver Fox now,” he sighs. “Left to me by the only family I ever had.”

On one hand, it's a shock, Mack acting so humble about everything. Only ever coming across as some random guy who just happens to work at the place.

But when I really think about it, he'd be the same. Whether he owned it, ran it all, or was just passing through.

He's just that kind of a man.

Never one to big note himself, and I can see now that family means the world to him over things like property or money.

And by the looks, he has plenty of one and none of the other right now.

Loads of money and property, but no real family to share it with.

The idea makes me sad for some reason. But it still hasn't clicked that Mack's not just telling me this for fun.

"Old Mrs. Corbett is Emily's cousin, but she has no real interest in running a ranch," he adds with a fresh smile.

"She's more interested in keeping everyone fed and the doorknobs shiny. She made a deal with her cousin that she could live out her days at Silver Fox, giving up any claim to the title as long as..." he starts but breaks off.

Suddenly ending the story I was just getting interested in. And bringing himself back into the present, he suggests he shows me where everything is.

But I can't leave it there. I need to know what he was about to say.

"Mack? What were you going to say?" I ask, pressing my hand against his arm.

He turns to face me, taking my face in his huge hand as he looks down at me.

"It was left to me, but only if I promised to keep it as it was, like it always will be. And also, that I marry and raise a family here. Just like all these folks before us," he says.

I hear myself swallow hard at the word *us*. Feeling myself suddenly zapped into the faded sepia-toned pictures of Silver Fox Ranch.

Realizing just how serious Mack is about me.

About a future together.

Putting a baby in your belly....

His words ring in my mind again, making perfect sense.

Making me feel a little dizzy too, and I lean against him for support before he helps me to a chair.

Making me know for sure what I guess I really knew all along.

That Mack, just like his great, great relatives, has staked his claim, and the only 'mine' on *his* mind is me belonging to him, forever.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Mack

“You did want to know the *whole* story,” I remind Tina, kneeling next to her and stroking her hair. Kind of kicking myself for telling her so soon about the promise I made to old Ma and Pa Macintyre.

About keeping the homestead in the family, as well as raising my own herd.

I thought any chance I had at that really happening had long passed.

But seeing Tina for the first time. I just knew she was the one. I knew it in my gut, and I still know it now.

The effects of what I’ve just told her are registering on her features once she catches on to just how serious I am about her.

About *us* and a future here, together. A family of our own.

It’s a lot to take in, and I don’t want to rush things or ruin our time together by getting down on one knee just yet.

Although, it is only lunchtime, and we’ve got all day to go yet....

But she needs to know how I feel, and long before it’s supposed to be time for her to go back to the city with her mom.

And yeah. Even before I do claim her properly. I need her to understand I'm not just talking my way into her pants.

I want all of her. And not just for the weekend.

"I'll go get the gear and tether those mares before they eat our lunch," I tell her.

Not expecting her to follow me, but glad when she moves to do just that.

"Thanks for sharing your story," she says, sounding a bit formal and making me chuckle to myself.

A part of me almost expected the gentle let down as she explains she's really just a girl looking for a good time, not a ball and chain act for the rest of her days.

But when she notices the question in my eyes, she shifts nervously. Moving closer and letting her fingers curl around the edges of my shirt buttons, she looks up at me.

"Will you show me the bedroom?" she purrs, showing her forward, daring side.

A part of her I'm liking more and more by the second.

"I mean...you did say we were going to... you know...," she says, losing some of her bravado and trailing off, flushing with shyness mixed with her fresh interest in what we both know we came here for.

And it wasn't just to have a lesson in my family history.

"I'll do more than show you the bedroom," I caution her with a grin, pulling her close. "But I do need to bring our gear in. Because once you're on your back, we won't be going anyplace for a long while," I assure her.

She shivers with excitement, and her eyes flash wide, darkening with her own instant arousal, which is like a laser beam activating my own in a split second.

My need to be inside her rising up as quickly as the tent pole in my jeans, but I meant what I just said.

Those damn horses can't be trusted on their own for this long. Especially if they find out there's food they're not allowed in

amongst those packs Lucy's carrying.

Both of us head back outside, and before I even whistle for the horses, I can see them skulking off hoping I haven't spotted them.

They love a bit of mischief, and I guess why should us humans have all the fun today?

Ruby's so big it's hard to miss her. And I catch her eye just once before she breaks off into a quick canter, an instant accomplice in Lucy's game.

Both of them heading for the meadow that leads down to the stream opposite the cabin, and with more than just a head start on me, I've got no choice but to take off after them.

"Mack, wait!" Tina cries, giggling once she pegs what the horses are up to. And without another word she's trying her best to keep up with me as I jog forward.

Hoping to spot them again before they get too far.

Once I get to the ridge where the meadow drops off, I crouch low as I scan the tree line.

Knowing that at least one of them is as lousy at hiding as I am.

Tina huffs a wheezing breath and tries to stay low and quiet when she sidles up next to me.

Pushing her glasses that have fogged up further back on her face.

"What...is...so important...in those packs?" she asks, trying to look casual, but looking like she's just run a marathon.

Making me stifle a laugh but also making me realize just how fucking adorable she is, no matter what's happening.

"Just our lunch...*and* dinner, for one thing," I murmur. "Plus the radio..." I add, groaning to myself once I realize.

Tina shoots me a quick look of concern.

"If I don't radio in soon, Mrs. Corbett will have the whole forest department out looking for us," I mutter.

"Don't think she wouldn't either," I'm quick to tell Tina.

“It was my birthday one year and I was a couple hours late back. It took a lot of free steaks and favors to make them forget about the bill for those search and rescue helicopters.”

Tina makes a comical grimace.

“Yikes!” she mutters to herself. “So, what do we do? I mean, how do we get them to come back?” she asks, her brow creased as she thinks hard herself.

But I know those horses, and it would be a fool’s errand to chase after them.

Plus, that’s exactly what they expect me to do.

“I guess we’ll just have to wait for them to come back,” I shrug. “There is the old radio in the basement, but I don’t know if Mrs. C would have hers tuned to it. Haven’t used it for years,” I think aloud.

“And no lunch,” Tina pouts, making me smile once I see she’s getting quite the appetite being a country girl.

Despite what she’s said, I’d like to see Tina eating more, and gaining a few pounds.

She’s tiny, really.

“I think we can find something to eat in the cabin,” I let her know, but her eyes still have that look from before.

Showing a different kind of hunger.

And as much as I’d love to take her as she is, right here out in the open field, I really do need to radio in, otherwise we won’t be having any fun later on.

“How about we check the radio, and you can find us something to eat?” she suggests, and I have to agree, it’s the only thing to do if we want to avoid any more trouble.

Returning to the cabin, which is what it’s always been to me, Tina sticks by me as I point out the various rooms on the way to the basement.

The dusty old radio crackling to life, and just as I thought, Mrs. C is all ears.

Waiting with both the walkie-talkie and the old ham set up. Eager to hear that we made it safe and sound.

We've only been gone a few hours, but at her age it's important to touch base. Both for her sake and for the tour groups we have up here.

Tina looks around as I let Mrs. C know how it went getting here. Looking like she's trying not to eavesdrop, but it's hard when you miss every word over the aging radio set up.

"Okay Mack, thanks for checking in," Mrs. Corbett shouts, making me smile as I picture her in her kitchen.

But she doesn't sign off and takes the time to fill me in on the goings on at the ranch so far since I left.

All of three hours ago.

"I'll tell ye," she says suddenly in a hushed tone. "That Tanner woman and Ben. They've really hit it off," she confides to me and I shoot Tina a pained look of apology.

But Tina's already got her face buried in her hands, laughing to herself and pretending to scream *No!*

I guess it's no surprise to anyone that her mom and that Ben fella were going to be friendly.

I can't help wondering if it's so obvious between Tina and me.

But there was Mrs. C thinking I was interested in Rose.

I wish Ben and her every happiness.

"Oh! And I rang the mechanic. He can pick up their rental car and get it charged up, he'll drop it back in time for when they leave tomorrow," she adds.

A minor detail that in any other situation would be good to know.

Helping a guest get their car ready for when it's time to leave.

But Tina's not leaving.

At least, that's not what *I* want. And I'm pretty sure she can't really want that either.

The shift in her expression when she hears it is instant, and both of us feel the sudden, heavy weight of life before we even knew the other existed pressing in on us.

The past few hours have felt like a dream, and both of us just want that to go on forever.

Don't we?

Tina's shoulders sag, and once Mrs. Corbett starts telling me about a neighbor's mare who should be in foal any minute, she makes a silent exit from the basement.

My instinct is to go to her. To tell her she can't leave. Not tomorrow, not fucking ever.

But I also know I can't keep Tina anywhere she doesn't want to be.

And if she needs a minute to herself, then that's one long minute for me. But it looks like she has some thinking of her own to do.

Her pacing steps on the boards above me let me know she hasn't gone far, and after asking if I'm still there, I resume my radio call with Mrs. C.

Letting her know to radio me if there's anything urgent, otherwise we'll see her in the morning.

Signing off, I sit staring at the dying red light of the radio. My ears following each of Tina's steps above me until I hear her voice moving out the front door.

My heart freezes for a second, and I lurch to go after her.

Determined not to let her run away from me upset ever again.

But the tell-tale snorts and loud whinnies from a certain pair of mischievous mares set my mind at ease instantly.

By the time I get upstairs and out the door, Tina's holding both horses by their bit.

Looking every bit like a rancher and sniffing back some emotions, she smiles over at me.

“It’s not so hard when you know how,” she brags, taking all the credit for bringing the horses home.

I guess we both know we don’t want to spoil things by talking about her leaving.

Hell. We haven’t even done anything yet, and there’s still so much I want to show Tina.

Let alone the things I want to do to her.

“I’ll get those packs off and then you can help me with the saddles,” I suggest.

Shifting the focus to happier things, even if it’s as mundane as settling the mares into their corral.

Tina’s no slouch when it comes to minding horses, and has no trouble helping me with their gear as well as our own.

She offers to brush them down and I suggest I fix us some food.

And moving back inside, I watch her from the kitchen window as she totally wins the horses over by spoiling them the way they like best.

Both of us feeling the giant wedge already being driven between us, but I make good on my promise not to pressure her or try to force Tina into staying if she really doesn’t want to.

Trouble is, I can’t picture it any other way.

I can’t see my life going back to how it was yesterday before I met her.

And I know, I just fucking know that she feels the same way.

Mrs. C’s packed enough food for four, so there’s plenty to eat and dinner will only need reheating.

So, serving up some lunch takes no time, and as I move to take our plates outside, I pass the bathroom. Wait, I have a better idea.

Who says we have to eat outside, or even at the table.

My girl's going to be all dusty after her ride as well as brushing those mares.

I set the plates down on the vanity, and twisting the old brass levers I start to fill the tub.

Whatever decision Tina makes, I'm going to make sure that today, tonight is the most special day of her life.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Tina

Mack's helped me get over my fear of riding again, but it's the horses themselves that make me remember just how much I love them.

How much I do love the outdoors.

I offer to brush them down so I can reconnect with all that, but I also need some time to think.

Think about how I'm going to explain all this to my mom, I mean. Her getting with Ben is no real surprise. And if anything, I'm happy for them both. But it won't be enough for mom to see how happy Mack makes me.

And she'd throw a fit if I told her I wanted to stay since I have only known the man since yesterday.

Although her own reasoning for the same with Ben would be different.

I know her well enough to not even kid myself that she'd actually be happy for me for a change.

Taking turns between Ruby and Lucy, so the other doesn't get upset, I brush them both until I hear the sounds of running water.

Then noticing the steam pouring from an open window, I wonder if everything's alright in there.

As if I'd be much use.

But I miss Mack already, and the idea of him doing whatever he's doing, stewing on the same problem I have is enough to see me heading back inside.

Following the steam, and then my nose once the sweet, earthy smell of bath salts and something else fills my senses.

If he's running me a bath, I'm staying. No matter what.

Any man that runs me a bath in the middle of the day is a keeper.

Not to mention the images that flash through my mind when I think of Mack actually joining me in the tub.

But I don't have to wait long to find out.

His head cranes around the bathroom door, his eyes ablaze with the same unmistakable intensity they transmit whenever he's got one thing on his mind, which lucky for me *is* me.

"I figured you'd be all dirty after brushing the girls down," he offers, moving his eyes over me in a way that makes my knees feel like they're about to give out from under me.

I try to act natural, blowing the stray hair out of my eyes.

Trying to look perfectly calm as I feel my insides and pussy swell up with more wet heat than that huge four-legged tub could ever hold.

My glasses are misting up and making me go cross-eyed when I try to hold Mack's gaze.

Making both of us end up laughing and he opens his arms wide as he emerges from the bathroom.

Not a stitch of clothing on him.

My eyes zoom in on his massive erection, and I hear myself gasp before I moan quietly to myself.

Needing *that* more than I need a bath, but if he's offering both, what's a girl to do?

"Everything really is bigger in the country, isn't it?" I tremble nervously, but inside I'm aching to feel every smooth line of

his manhood fill me from my tight little pussy all the way up to my core.

He growls low in agreement, and I can see his arms are out not just to welcome me, but to get me out of my clothes so he can have his prize.

I can't bring myself to think about leaving him. Not tomorrow, not ever.

But there's no way I can let it spoil the most amazing moments of my life so far, either.

And once he starts to lift my sweater off and unbutton my jeans, the sure movements of his strong hands running over my body, which he always makes look so small, make me forget about everything else.

Forget that anything except Mack even exists as his mouth joins mine, and I finally feel all of his nakedness pressing rock hard into all of my softness.

Total opposites that fit together like day and night.

And neither one of us able to exist without the other, that much is obvious the more I feel his hands on me.

The longer I stay in his tender embrace.

Not even feeling it when my feet leave the ground, and he carries me over to the massive tub.

My whole day with him so far has been like walking on a cloud.

Feeling him lift my glasses off before he steps into the water, still holding me, we both groan and even wince a little as he lowers us both down.

"It's hot!" he exclaims, but I don't mind. The steaming heat from the water's nothing compared to the heat I have for him.

And it's clear Mack wants this to be a day to remember, so if we have a soak, and even lunch too by the looks of it, *in* the tub?

This cowgirl ain't complaining, because I know if this is his idea of foreplay mixed with lunch, then him claiming me and

making me his. Even if it is only for one day, is going to be unforgettable.

And if there ever was the perfect man, it's one who brings you a meal to the bathtub.

But long before I even think about food, I remember everything Mack's said about me being his, but right now, I'm more interested in his share of what he's promised is mine.

Both of us slowly explore each other as we sit chest deep in steaming, fragrant water.

His massive hands know just where I need them, while mine trace each outline of his muscular chest and abs. Twirling the soft patch of silver hairs that get darker the further my hands shift down.

His constant hardness is smooth and warm, at full attention up out of the water, making it impossible to keep my eyes or hands anywhere else.

His low groans and my little whimpers of feeling like I could come a river if he even thought about brushing my aching pussy with those hands of his, fill the air with the scents of the bath as well as our own desire.

Without even trying, we're keeping each other at the edge. And I'm a fast learner when it comes to feeling when Mack's about to lose himself.

Long before I feel more than one little climax of my own, all from him just stroking me and holding me.

His deep voice echoes gentle words that rumble through the water, right up inside me.

Working its way past my boiling clit, all the way to my heart where I know Mack's going to be forever. No matter what happens after today.

Mack and I soak like this for what feels like hours, even longer. But it could never be long enough.

He leans out of the tub only long enough to reach some food. Feeding me and watching me eat with the same satisfaction and arousal as when he sees me come for him.

I feed him too, and we devour both plates easily between us. Taking turns to share our meal this way until it really feels like we're one and the same person somehow, even though we're so different.

But once the plates are cleared and the water he's topped up a half dozen times starts to go lukewarm again. We both know, without a single word between us, that it's time.

I want my man to claim me properly. And I need him like air right now.

Like I'll somehow suffocate if he doesn't lift me in those huge arms, lay me down someplace, and give it to me like I know he wants to.

Like I *need* it after spending this long balancing on the delicious edge of arousal and what feels like a never-ending climax.

Not a bad day's effort so far, for a virgin girl. Even if I do say so myself.

It's as if wanting it so bad makes it happen, and Mack slowly shifts forward, sending waves of still warm water splashing over the edge of the tub onto the floor.

But his eyes are fixed on mine, even when he kisses me hard. My hands gripping his thick cock firmer as I pump him until he groans.

My own sounds of need echoing like a cry for help off the black and white tiles.

His tongue swirling around mine as I feel him lift me up for the last time as a virgin.

Carrying me from the bathroom to the bedroom, neither of us caring about the water we're trailing everywhere.

Not even minding when he lays me flat on the bed in the main bedroom, still soaking wet. The heavy drips from his body feel like they're sizzling and evaporating as he moves his huge, naked body over me.

His arms holding up his weight like two huge tree trunks that my fingers could never get around.

So, I run my hands over his chest instead, sliding them down before gripping his swollen helm and squeezing it gently, making him groan.

Whispering to him how much I want him and feeling his smooth hardness pressing against my already slick valley, I tell him what I knew the second I saw him.

“I- I love you, Mack,” I rasp.

He moans tenderly, looking into my eyes as his knees push my thighs further apart.

The words from my mouth are like the key that unlocks me for him. His thick, smooth hardness finding my quivering sex instantly.

Both of us gasping and then moaning louder as he slowly enters me.

His eyes blazing into mine and his thick fingers bunching up the sodden sheets underneath us both.

“Mine!” he growls low, making my head fall back, and my legs grip him like a vice, pulling him deeper inside me until I feel everything I thought I knew about the world so far fall away.

Not a chubby little virgin anymore. Not a horse-shy city girl who’s afraid to go outside.

Mack starts to slowly move his engorged length slowly in and out of me, his low growls of satisfaction filling my ears. His perfect cock filling me like I was made just for him.

I know I’m his woman now, a real-life woman.

Not a girl anymore.

And the furthest thing from my mind once Mack sets to work pleasing me in ways I never dreamed of, is what *might* happen tomorrow.

Today, right now, is all that counts. And once I feel my first climax with his thick cock balls deep inside me pulsing to the surface.

He groans the words I've secretly longed to hear him tell me, right at this moment.

The second I'm about to come for him.

"I'm going to put a baby in you, Tina... And I'm going to fuck your little pussy until you cream all over my fucking cock."

*And if I have a baby by Mack, then we have to be together.
Right, Mom?*

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Mack

It's not her sweet little pussy yielding to my swollen cock.

It's not the little pleading sounds she makes, eager for every fucking inch as I fill her balls deep until she's begging to come for me.

It's when she tells me she fucking loves me that undoes me.

Makes me hear the three words I've never heard meant in the special way I know she really means it.

And knowing just how much she means it makes me harder than ever.

Swelling to an enormous size inside her as I start slow but find out just how hard and fast my little cowgirl really likes to ride cock.

It's her cock now. All for her.

And her tight little pussy belongs to me.

I tell her again that I'm going to fill her with my seed.

Put a baby in that sweet belly of hers, and those words from me send her body into shuddering spasms.

I can already feel her about to come, and I know I'm not too far behind her if she keeps pumping me like this.

Easily keeping my girth inside her, and in a single movement, I flip her over, growling for her to fuck me while she watches

my cock come inside her.

The huge antique mirror opposite the creaking bed gives her all the prompting she needs to shift herself into her soon-to-be new favorite position.

Reverse cowgirl.

My cowgirl.

Easing her rump that I squeeze tight until she gasps me with both my hands, I feel her smooth thighs straddle mine.

Her hands run down over my knees. Her eyes locked on mine as we watch each other in the mirror.

Her back arches and I let out a long groan as I feel her in a way I never thought possible.

Her twitching pussy filled from behind, my swollen helm probing her newest pleasure center. So deep inside her, the moans from her mouth are like a postcard.

An echo of just how good it feels.

“Oh...fuck...,” she groans, gritting her teeth before sucking in a huge lungful of air. Clawing at my calves as she swivels her hips and bucks them forward and back.

Riding like I knew she could, and always would again.

Her legs wide and trembling. Her smooth skin rippling with each thrust back onto me.

Her eyes struggling to hold their focus on mine, reeling back into her skull as I feel her final attempts to stop it coming.

Her last whimper before her eyes grow wide and both my hands grip those child-bearing hips. My own body tense as steel as I feel my balls rise up, the boiling heat of my seed about to fill her with more than just a promise.

“Watch me fuck you, Tina,” I gasp. “Watch me...Put a baby...in...you!”

Gripping her so hard, I know I’ll leave more than just a mark. I have to make sure she sees the exact moment.

The very second that I put our child into her belly.

But her eyes are fixed on the mirror, and she's bucking against me like a wild bronco. Her swollen clit dragging the sheen of my precome mixed with her own essence up and down my rigid staff.

Spraying my glistening rod with her own cream as I feel my pent-up desire, my complete obsession with her, pulsing into her.

Our shared orgasm makes both of us practically howl like lunatics as wave after wave of the most intense climax grips us both.

Almost making us feel like it won't stop.

A climax so strong. She shakes so hard I realize it's my own shuddering release that's making us both tremble uncontrollably.

"Oh Jesus! Oh fuck, Tina...Tina!" I groan, staying inside her as she quivers and grips my still throbbing cock inside her.

Turning to face me again so I can have my mouth over hers.

Sealing the most intense moment of our lives with a kiss that matches it.

Her soft little body suddenly goes limp in my grip, and I can't pull her close enough quickly enough.

I can't tell her quickly enough.

"I love you, Tina," I rumble. "I love you and I've just put our baby in you..." Sounding like my voice is coming from far away, but it's only because it's the first time I've said those words to anyone other than my adoptive parents.

And from today, from this moment.

It's those three words, 'I love you' as well as my body, heart, and soul that belong to her, and her alone now.

And whether she's right here in my arms, or on the other side of the world. That feeling's never going to change.

Because it doesn't know distance, it only knows intensity.

The love we have for each other, this *thing* between us?

It's not between us anymore. It is us.

And it's way bigger than any lines on a map and it's definitely way bigger than anyone else's opinion about whether an older guy like me should even be with a younger girl like Tina.

Not a girl anymore. A younger *woman* now.

And she's my woman. All mine.

She grips me inside and out. Our tangled bodies fused into one as I feel myself still rock hard inside her.

My claim well and truly staked, and my arms holding the greatest riches I've ever known so tight, no one and nothing could ever get between us.

Her shivering moans and my own deep grunts and groans eventually subside.

Both of us totally spent but determined to spend the rest of today exactly as we are.

Naked as blue jays, soaking wet and more in love with each other with each second that passes.

The fading light outside matches our afterglow having the sky lit with an almost eerie glow of purple and orange.

The night already making its own claim on the daylight.

And after I yank the damp sheets out from under us, covering us both with a heavy quilted blanket.

Tina's eyes flutter closed as she smiles to herself in my arms.

The only words on her lips and in her mind saying the same thing I'm thinking as I watch her slowly drift into a deep, dreamless sleep.

I love you...

Neither of us has slept a wink since we first met yesterday, that much is clear to me when she's out like a light.

My own eyes are burning from lack of sleep too, but I watch over her. Stroking her hair and unable to help myself, I nuzzle her neck and kiss her more than just a few times before there's

only enough light left to make out the shape of her features in the darkness.

It's a pleasing darkness that I feel myself falling into in no time.

Feeling like I couldn't fall any further than I have in one day.

Falling for my cowgirl. My virgin and my woman, all in the same day.

It's the sleep of a weary man that grips me, but it's the best fatigue I've ever known.

And knowing she'll still be in my arms when I wake up is all I need.

She's all I'll ever need from now on.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Mack

Before I open my eyes again, my arm asleep with Tina hugging it. Both of us in the same position we fell asleep in.

I smile to myself.

Knowing that she's mine. And knowing that I'd make old Foxx Macintyre look poor with the riches I've found with Tina.

I let my lids creep open, moving my gaze over her curves under the blanket as she shifts and mews in her sleep.

The same smile still glued to her lips, set exactly the same all night.

And to her, it probably is still night.

For me, four thirty a.m. starts are a part of life.

Us country folk don't just go to bed early for the hell of it. We go to bed early because we have to get up while it's still dark.

Old habits will die hard, but with Tina under the covers with me, it only makes it all the harder to get moving.

To get up and check the horses. To do everything a day on the ranch needs doing, whether I want to stay bunched up with Tina or not.

Sliding my arm out from under her, and kissing her still flushed cheek, I tiptoe out of the bedroom, already missing her

warmth as I pull my clothes on.

Already to set to work to make sure she has a proper breakfast waiting when she does wake up.

Skipping dinner last night wasn't my plan for her, but everything else has kind of made up for that.

I'd starve myself for a month if I knew it was her waiting for me at the end of it.

But before any of that, I hear the familiar sounds of the ranch.

The first songbirds, bold enough to sing in the faint pre-dawn light.

And the muffled sounds of hooves on soft dirt. The snorting neighs of the mares outside in the corral.

Reminding me too that I didn't give them any extra attention last night.

Something I'm sure they'll forgive me for, given all that's happened in one day.

Trying to creep outside without waking Tina, the old place sounds like a symphony of nothing but noise as I make my way out.

The creaking boards and groans of the heavy iron hinges on the front door, to the squeal of the rusty latch as I let myself through to say good morning to the mares.

But Tina doesn't stir, and after the horses give me a good going over, sniffing and head-butting their way through my silent story as they read it in their own special way, I feel the heaviness coming back.

Knowing that I'm supposed to pack all the gear up and load it back onto the saddles.

To hitch them to the horses, ride back down the hillside, and then what?

Just watch her drive away?

No.

I can't see that happening.

So why the sudden doom and gloom? Why does it feel like our first day together could well be our last?

Ruby picks up on my mood and nuzzles my neck with her nose.

It's cold, and wet. And as much as I could try and tell myself she's consoling me somehow, I know she's just waiting for her oats, same as Lucy.

Almost mechanically, I watch myself feeding them and checking them over.

Heading back to the cabin once I feel my own belly groaning with hunger. And almost jumping out of my skin when I creep back inside as quietly as I can.

Tina is suddenly in front of me, wearing nothing but one of my shirts. Her mouth wide as she yawns silently. Her hair all bunched up, and her eyes still dreamy with sleep.

"I woke up, and you weren't there," she murmurs.

And I've never been so glad to hold her close, instantly feeling whole again once she's in my arms.

But it only intensifies my dread at the idea she could still be leaving today.

She becomes more alert when she picks up on my mood.

Suddenly wide awake herself once she reads the look in my eyes.

That conversation we never wanted to have is already hanging thick in the air between us without us saying a single word.

Both of us knowing that we each have something that wants to take the other away from us.

For me, it's the ranch. The endless work, and the simple fact I'm not supposed to get friendly with the guests.

For Tina, it's her mom.

The one person she's relied on her whole life to provide for her.

The one who's expecting to take her home in just a few hours' time.

I want to tell her she's not going anywhere. That everything I said was and is still true. She's mine now, and she's going to have our baby.

And feeling my mouth open to say it, I watch her eyes widen as she leans forward. As if she's waiting for me to say the only thing either of us wants to hear right now.

But I can't.

I can't force her to stay, and she hasn't actually said anything about leaving.

Not yet, anyway.

"You hungry?" I ask instead, feeling the pressure in my brain vent someplace else when she nods eagerly.

Asking me with bright, alert features what I had in mind.

So that's how we play it, for the next few hours at least.

I cook us up a storm with the provisions we have left plus more than just a few fresh eggs from the henhouse.

And long after the sun's come up, and everything's been washed, cleaned up, or stowed away, it's time to head back.

If we don't go soon, things will only get more complicated than they already have to be once we get back to the homestead.

I know Mrs. Corbett's going to read me like a neon sign once she sees me with Tina.

And despite her mom being a royal pain in the ass to begin with, she's no dummy either. Even if she has found her own romantic interest for the weekend.

So, I guess it surprises me when neither Tina nor I can even say what I know we're both thinking about.

Each of us just wanting to enjoy every second we have left together.

Wondering how one night that felt like it could last forever suddenly feels like it may be slipping away from us for good.

Especially if she leaves.

“I’m going to talk to my mom as soon as we get back, okay?” she says eventually.

Giving words to the feelings I can’t voice, which is weird.

I’m not a wordsmith, but I’ve never hesitated to say my piece before.

But this is different.

Tina means so much to me. I can’t even bring myself to say the words let alone think about her going anywhere but back to bed with me.

She’s not telling me she’s going to stay, but not exactly saying she’s planning on leaving either. Just a matter of fact comment that she’s ‘going to talk to her mom.’

Hopefully, telling her she’s not going home, and we can bear the brunt of her mom’s wrath together.

But before I can quiz her on it, Tina lets me know she thinks she’ll try riding Lucy back down to the homestead.

“If you think I’ll be okay,” she’s quick to add, making a strange grimace with her features that I can’t help but smile at.

Glad she’s feeling more confident around horses, but gladder still that she’s changed the subject somehow.

“I think you know how to ride, *cowgirl*,” I tease her, smiling before I pull her close and kiss her.

Savoring her taste and etching every tiny feature of her in my mind.

“I had the best teacher,” she quips back, poking her tongue out before heading outside over to Lucy to have a pre-ride pep talk.

But Lucy knows, and she whinnies with excitement once she sees Tina reaching for her reigns.

Making me wonder just one last time if I might've tried to hold on too tight myself.

Falling so hard for Tina, it never occurred to me to factor in the life she had before she met me.

The life we both feel calling her back with each step of the mares once we're making our way back down the hillside.

I let Tina go on ahead of me, helping get her confidence up, but also so I can watch her fine ass and hips while she rides.

I'm not going to lie. There's not a lot she does that doesn't make her look fantastic, but seeing her riding again is a double-win.

She gets the joy back, and I'm getting a view that makes me wish we had further to go because I could watch her riding all day and never grow tired of it.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Tina

Funny how the trip back is always so quick, whereas yesterday it felt like a year to get to the cabin, as Mack calls it.

It's hard to leave it behind, but something tells me I'll be back.

Coming back down to the homestead and riding a very well behaved and supportive Lucy. I can't help but wish we'd taken the long way after all.

I've vowed to myself that I'll tell mom everything too. Lay it out bare.

I'm a grown up now, not five. And I want to stay here as Mack's personal guest, I don't think he's going to mind one bit, especially if my still tingling saddle soreness from last night is anything to go by.

I just can't see myself anywhere but with Mack from now on, and I know he'll support me in staying. But I can't tell him anything definite until I've told mom.

And once the homestead comes into view, I feel the pit of my stomach lurch.

A stab of anxiety gripping me when I see mom and her new friend, Ben, waiting on the huge porch.

With all our luggage.

Mom has her hands over her brow, as if it makes her eyes binoculars or something.

But I hear her long before Mack spots her.

“Oh my god! Oh my goodness!” she shrieks, nagging Ben already to get his phone out and take a picture.

Mack groans from behind me once he reads the situation.

Even Lucy chimes in with her own disappointment this ride’s coming to an end.

She breaks wind so loud and long that Mack trots up next to us to get out of its range. Both of us laughing despite everything and Lucy whinnying now she’s said what *she* thinks about it all.

“Looks like she’s all packed,” Mack observes, giving me a worried look.

It’s the first and only time I’ve seen him look like he isn’t in command of something.

“I’ll go talk to her, see what’s going on,” I tell him.

But mom and Ben are trotting up to greet us faster than we’re taking our time to get there.

“What did you do?” she shrieks louder, aiming her big mouth at Mack. “What did you do to my baby girl!?”

My neck swivels to see his expression shift. His mouth half open, as if he’s about to say something.

“What did you do to get her back on a horse of all things? Oh my god, thank you! Tina, look at you!” she gushes.

Looking proud of me for once, but she also seems... different.

Like, not so *uptight*.

Noticing the way her new man Ben looks at her, it doesn’t take much to realize that obviously mom got what she needed so badly from Ben last night.

It might work in my favor if she’s so relaxed. She’ll take the news better....

I’m proud of myself, and of Lucy for putting up with me. Getting back riding makes me feel like I wasted a lot of years telling myself I couldn’t do it ever again.

When all I really needed was a little nudge from the right friends.

Mom's attitude towards Mack seems to have softened too, and she thanks him again for helping me ride again.

"You've no idea how much I've wanted to see her riding again," she says a few times, but giving me a strained look.

The *'this is nice, but we have to go'* look.

"Oh, Tina's quite the rider," Mack drawls. Shooting me a micro smile and winking, making me flush.

"Why are the bags packed, Mom? You don't have to go until..." I start to ask her.

Looking for my opening to tell her I need to talk to her. *Alone*. And like right now.

But as I let myself off Lucy, expecting Mack to do the same, the shrill but firm tone of old Mrs. Corbett seems to fill the whole valley as she comes rushing out from inside.

Holding her apron and long skirt up with balled fists, showing the old style lace up boots she has on as she marches over to us.

Mom stands with her mouth hanging open.

Ben looks at his feet.

My eyes shift to Mack, and his eyes are narrowed with a stern brow. His whole body tense and ready, as if he somehow knows what she's about to say.

"It's the Wilson's Mare!" she cries out with emotion.

"She's in breech and the vet's two hours away. If ye had yer bloody radio on, I'd have told ye sooner!" she scolds Mack.

But he doesn't pay any mind to being told off by her.

With a growl of annoyance, his steely gaze has my full attention.

"I have to go...but I'll be back. Don't go until I get back," he commands me.

Instantly whipping Ruby into action with a single nudge of his heel, the huge mare keen to obey and sensing the urgency, she bolts off at speed.

“C’mon, girl, fast as you can!”

It all happens so fast, almost as if the world’s running at too many frames a second.

And as heroic as it all looks and sounds, I can’t help feeling like I might never see Mack again.

He’s promised himself to me, but it’s clear a man so great and so large, he has more than just me wanting him. And for a dozen different reasons.

Mrs. Corbett sighs bitterly, but her mood shifts to relief as she watches Mack ride like the wind up a narrow track.

“He’ll know what to do,” the old woman murmurs knowingly. “And he’ll get there a lot sooner than that vet!”

Lucy snorts and stamps, calmer by degrees when Mrs. C takes her reins from me.

“I’ll get Lucy seen to,” she says crisply. “You’ll miss your flight,” she adds, crimping her mouth.

Studying me intently once I feel the tears welling up.

“But Mack said,” I croak.

“Honey, she’s right,” my mom clips, eyeing her watch and rolling her eyes.

“There was no way of letting you know, but the airline bumped our flight forward a few hours. We got to go,” she says with rising urgency, sounding more like the old mom now.

Making me think Ben might have his work cut out for himself after all.

Trying to keep my mom satisfied? Good luck with *that*, buddy.

“Mom?” I tell her rather than ask. “I need to talk to you... *Alone*.” Making her click her tongue and roll her eyes, but then she suddenly grins to herself.

As if she has something of her own she wants to share.

Mrs. C walks on with Lucy to the corral, and Ben goes back to the porch, loading up the rental car we came in with our luggage.

Mom grabs my arm and pulls me over to some nearby bushes, speaking over me as I open my mouth.

Hoping the right words will come out.

But it's clear she's going to speak first. As usual.

"Honey... Now don't get upset or weird. But... Well. Ben and I..." she starts, stopping herself mid-sentence and blushing when she hears herself say his name.

"Ben and I... Oh! There's no other way to say it. Ben's asked me to go to Baltimore with him. I think he might *propose!*" she says between her teeth, stifling a squeal as she grips my arm so tight I can feel her nails about to break my skin.

It's not quite what I expected to hear, but surely that means I can just stay here, right?

Wait for Mack so we can just pick up where we left off.

Right?

"So, I rang the airline and swapped my ticket so I can go with Ben. You're getting an earlier flight, so we have to leave... *right now otherwise I'll miss Ben's plane!*" She orders me with a smile.

Leaving me totally speechless, and without Mack nearby, I don't know what to think, let alone what to do or even say.

All my courage. All the strength I felt inside whenever Mack was around seems to have vanished. As if he's some natural force like the wind or rain.

Something that comes and goes, but maybe you never really can keep it forever.

Either way, I feel like a five-year-old kid again.

Being ordered about and bundled into the car by my mom, with her obviously new boyfriend following behind in his

rental car.

Mrs. Corbett only waves us off as we leave.

A woman of her years, living on the land? It's just another day at the office for her, and I can't help but think she might even be glad to see the back of another carload of city folk.

But Mack....

I'm numb by the time we're on the open road, only murmuring an occasional grunt as my mom talks at a million miles a minute.

Planning her own future with Ben, while I'm still trying to figure out how the heck I let any of this happen.

By the time I'm angry enough instead of stunned like a fish, it's too late.

We're at the airport, and mom's literally pushing me forward with my bags once we drop off the rental car.

"We've really got to go, Tina," Mom says for the hundredth time. Only seeming to relax once she reaches her gate.

Ben in tow carrying all their luggage.

My mom looking like she's having the thrill of her life.

The kind I'm supposed to be having right now, with Mack.

My Mack.

"I've put some money in your account," she murmurs in my ear confidentially once their flight starts to board.

"Get a cab straight home and I'll call you later," she says, widening her eyes to emphasize her words.

I should be happy for her. I mean. I am. And it's just as well Mom and Ben are leaving first because another minute of their song and dance, and I'd scream.

Ben mumbles a polite goodbye, and mom waves at me, flapping her hand as if the whole world's there to see her off.

But I only feel my own emotions welling up once the gate closes. And I even wait until I watch their plane take off before I rush to the nearest restroom.

Sitting in an empty stall and crying my guts out.

I get a few knocks on the door, girls asking if I'm okay. But I don't know how long I sit there. Feeling like I need Mack now more than ever but thinking maybe I really am just too innocent and unknowing.

I mean, a man like him with a girl like me?

It's like something you'd read in a dollar novel. That stuff just never happens in real life.

So maybe I just need to be grateful for my first time being with someone as amazing as Mack?

But I can tell already, this isn't something I can just get over.

So, when I hear my flight boarding call, it's with a heavy heart and even heavier, dragging step that I clean my face up and defog my glasses.

Sighing to myself like every single, lonely girl the world over does once she realizes that she just has to keep going.

I'm last in line to board, trying not to think about anything anymore because it hurts too much.

When it hits me.

Mack's instructions before he rode off.

'Don't go until I get back....'

It's as if he's growling the words in my ear as I let out a gasp of realization.

How dumb am I? He told me not to leave...so what the hell am I doing? Getting on a plane just because someone rushed me to it?

The relief washes over me, and I politely smile at the guy holding the boarding gate ribbon open, so I can get through before turning on my heel.

If Mack wants me to wait. Then I'll wait.

I can't leave him, and I won't. No matter what happens. He said I'm his and he's mine. How could I forget it?

So, I wait.

And I wait some more.

A million things swimming through my mind once I miss my flight, knowing I really am stuck here now.

And how does Mack know I haven't left for good?

How will he even know where and when to find me?

It all swims around in my mind until I feel sick.

Doubting myself all over again as I slump down into a plastic chair, wincing and then smiling when I feel every bit of my insides reminding me who was there last night.

The airport seems empty now. All the flights for the day are gone, and once the sun dips low in the sky, I can't help wondering if I'm just making a bigger fool of myself.

Heading for the exit, almost shaking my head for even listening to my mom, I wonder again how Mack would find me.

If he's even looking.

But something in me makes me stop. And right as I'm about to leave through the huge glass sliding doors, I feel a familiar tingle in my belly.

That magic feeling I had before I even saw the man.

I turn slowly, feeling the thick thread of something tugging at me playfully. Like an invisible line joined to something pulling me back in. Rescuing me from water that's too deep.

Mack's frame casts a long shadow that reaches mine. And feeling my eyes mist up for the right reasons this time, I let out a cry of relief.

Running into his arms as he takes sure and strong steps. Scooping me up again and holding me so tight I can only rasp his name.

"Oh, Mack!" I sniff. "I thought...I wasn't..." I babble, not sure what to think or say anymore.

But Mack doesn't say a word.

He only presses his mouth over mine. Long and hard. His hands gripping me like a man who knows what he wants and he's not going to let it go.

Not for anything.

Picking my bags up with one hand and carrying me all the way out with the other.

I know I should've just listened to him the first time.

But I'll never leave him again. Not ever. Not even for a minute.

"C'mon, *cowgirl*," he drawls, finally saying something once he's helped me into his truck. "Let's get you home where you belong," he rasps, smiling.

Looking as relieved as I know I feel now.

"Oh, mare and foal are going to be fine," he adds, already answering my question before I even ask it.

"That's great news," I smile, feeling the tears of relief still warm on my cheeks.

"Let's go home," I echo back to him. "Where we *both* belong."

EPILOGUE

THREE WEEKS LATER

Mack

“I know it’s your kitchen, Mrs. Corbett. But I’d just like to prepare something special of my own. For Tina,” I smile down at her.

Thumbing the little box she gave me earlier, making sure it’s still snug in my pocket.

“And what’s wrong with *my* cooking?” she retorts with feigned offense as I pretend to shoo her away, but really, it’s the closest thing to a hug she’d allow.

She pauses in the door long enough to squeeze my arm, winking at me.

“I’m just sorry Bo and Emily aren’t around. Seeing you two so happy would make them pleased as punch!” she exclaims, a streak of silver at the corner of one eye.

“I’ll scoot, don’t worry. But just mind how ye go with me pans!” she warns me before disappearing into the dim light of the old homestead.

It’s two weeks tonight since Tina and I... Since we....

It’s an *anniversary* of sorts, and I’m making the effort to do what I probably should’ve done on our first date, if that’s what you’d call it.

I’ve laid out the family silver in the dining room, and Mrs. C’s been good enough to help unpack some of the old lace

tablecloths and napkins.

As well as helping me unearth something extra special I never knew about.

The candles are lit and there's a crackling fire. Nobody else for miles around, so tonight's all about Tina.

I've made our meal, Tina's favorite.

Spaghetti. And it's almost ready to serve. But somehow, even the sight of food isn't doing much for me.

My guts filled with nerves.

The good kind.

Stirring the pot of meat sauce, I don't hear her come into the kitchen. But feeling Tina's arms wrap around my waist makes me jump, which is not something I'm in the habit of doing.

"I didn't see you there," I grunt, trying to hide my agitation as I press a hand over hers, which I feel sliding down my jeans.

"Is that something in your pocket, or are you just glad to see me?" she asks in a comical voice. And I'm quick to bring her hand back into mine.

"You'll spoil your appetite," I caution her, trying to sound like my usual self, but Tina knows when something's up.

"Don't be mad, Mack. But I'm actually not that hungry right now. Can it wait a bit?" she asks, and I turn to face her.

Kissing her hands, agreeing with her instantly.

"My cooking's not that bad," I tease her. "But you know what? I'm not that hungry, either. It'll keep. Shall we go for a walk?" I ask her.

Sounding like I may as well have just asked her if she wants to paint the roof.

"A walk?" she asks, giving me a sidelong glance, grinning with excitement as she wonders just what I might mean by taking a 'walk' at this time of night.

"Sure," I coax her, recovering my determination to do this right.

“It’s a nice night,” I volunteer, glancing up at the ceiling.

Both of us fully aware of the rain pattering noisily against the roof.

“What are you up to, Mackenzie Macintyre?” she asks in a friendly accusing tone, tickling my ribs and giggling like a schoolgirl.

I’m not the ticklish kind, but seeing her so happy, I can’t help but relax.

A little, anyhow.

“I’m not up to anything,” I reply innocently. “I just... Can we just sit down and talk a minute?” I ask her, noticing her smile fade with concern before I lead her through to the living room.

Setting her down on the sofa and standing in front of her, looking like I have something important to say because I kind of do.

“It’s been a little over two weeks now,” I remind her, glad when that makes her smile.

Her eyes bright in the firelight, looking up at me as they turn into a question.

“Mack, what is it?” she asks.

Here goes nothing....

In a single, slow movement, I stab three fingers into my pocket, fidgeting for the box.

My hands slipping with sweat from nerves and the heat of the kitchen. I feel it pop out of my jeans like an egg from a hen.

My eyes follow it as Tina’s mouth gapes open.

Both of us watch the worn velvet box shoot right into her lap.

Sitting right way up, as if an unseen hand just put it there.

I hear her swallow hard, and as much as I try to, I feel like my mouth’s suddenly full of cotton wool.

But my lower half seems to know what to do next.

And getting down on one knee in front of my woman, I lift the box slowly and open it in front of her eyes.

“It’s the same ring old Foxx Macintyre gave his wife on their first anniversary here. The silver’s from the first pieces he found. And the diamond...,” I say, breaking off.

Not wanting to sound pretentious. But it’s true.

“...The diamond came from his other little secret. The diamond mine he found while digging for all that silver,” I add.

Watching Tina’s eyes dance with the sparkling rays from the stone like rainbows against the sky of her blue eyes.

Her mouth hanging open in a way I hope she understands what I’m really trying to say here.

“Tina. I...”

“It’s beautiful, Mack,” she finally gasps, getting up the courage to inspect the box a little closer.

I feel my brow knot with confusion.

“I’m not just *showing* it to you, Tina,” I explain. Slowing my words to make sure I don’t mess this up more than it already has been by throwing it at her.

“It’s only been two weeks, but I knew in the first two seconds who I wanted to spend the rest of my life with,” I tell her.

Taking her hand in mine and lifting the ring from the box, poised to slide it on her finger.

Taking in a sharp breath, it clicks with her what I’m getting at.

“I love you, Tina. And I want you to have this ring as well as all the history that goes with it. I want you as my wife, and I want our children to pass this ring along when the time comes. But until then, I want you all to myself, and as long as I live.”

My heart pounds in my ears, and watching her hand tremble as she slides her finger into the ring.

She says yes.

A near whisper at first, but then she says it again.

Clearer and much louder before I kiss her.

A dull thud interrupts us from out in the hall.

“It’s alright, Mrs. C. She said yes, you can come in now,” I call out, making Tina and I both chuckle when Mrs. Corbett opens the door sheepishly.

Her eyes shining with tears as she comes over and gives Tina a big hug.

Welcoming her into the family, and making an old lady’s wish, as well as my own, come true.

That Silver Fox Ranch would live on, with a herd of my own and a woman at my side I’d also be glad to call my wife as well as my best friend.

EPILOGUE

THREE MONTHS LATER

Tina

Mom was so wrapped up with Ben, still is. So, it was no real news when I called her and told her I was moving in with Mack.

Not in the end anyway. At first, she was a little shocked, but not totally surprised.

She could see for herself the change in me that day we came back from the cabin.

And once she found out Mack actually *owns* Silver Fox Ranch and isn't just some ranch hand drifter type, mom changed her tune pretty damned quick about Mack.

Especially when she saw my ring for the first time, and I let it slip that the diamond was from the family mine.

A secret I made her swear to keep to herself.

Since then, it's been the bum's rush from mom for Mack to put a *gold* band on my finger.

Make it official.

And as much as I hate to have her boss me around, today hasn't come quick enough.

I don't think I could've sat through another wedding dress alteration without losing my mind.

Mack's a big guy. Huge.

And from the size of me so far, I'm wondering if it's just one giant baby he's put in my belly or a 'whole herd' as he likes to call it.

But Doc Wilson, whose mare Mack helped to foal, assures me that there's only one heartbeat, and without us wanting to know if it's a boy or a girl just yet, he assured me there's just the one.

"A big 'un alright," he agreed. "But just one healthy little baby growing in there," the doc assured me.

And once Mack proved to me I wasn't imagining it, that he really did put a baby in me our first time, he wasted no more time in joining forces with my mom to make our wedding day happen sooner rather than later.

And here I am, only three months to the day since our first night together. About to marry the man I love after everything worked out perfectly in the end.

Ben did propose to mom. But they've decided to hold off on their wedding until next year.

Mom's idea, not Ben's.

I think she likes the idea of the romance of an engagement, but they sure do make each other happy as a couple.

A not-so-gentle rap on the door tells me it's time.

Looking at myself in the full-length mirror, I notice my smile.

Something I never knew could be almost permanent until I moved out here.

Until I met Mack.

His face appears around the doorframe. His eyes moving over me as he smiles wide.

Neither of us believes in it being 'bad luck' to see your bride before the wedding.

Kind of hard not to as we spend practically every second of the day and night together.

Plus, Mack and me make our own luck. We're the luckiest people I know now that we've found each other.

"You look beautiful," he croons. Moving closer to me and hugging me from behind. Admiring me in the mirror as I fold my hands over his arms across my not-so-little baby bump.

"You're not so shabby yourself," I say. Feeling a shiver when I see him in his perfectly tailored suit he's had made just for today.

Knowing it'll probably be the only time I see him in one too. Same for my dress.

Ranch life is just way easier in jeans and a shirt. Boots and not heels.

"Are we ready?" he asks us both, and I nod without hesitation.

"I know it's soon, but I want to make sure they have a proper mom and dad before they even come into this world," Mack reminds me.

Always apologizing in his own way if he thinks he's rushing me or pressuring me. But the truth is I would've run away with him and married him our first night if he'd wanted.

He knows what's best for me, and for his family....

"Wait. *They?*" I ask him. Rethinking what he's just said.

"Sure. You do want lots a kids, right?" he asks, cocking a brow and shifting his head back. Making me giggle.

"You sure like trying to have me put 'em in yer belly," he challenges me, putting on a ridiculous country accent. Making himself sound like a toothless hick.

I tell him not to make me laugh or my makeup with smudge. But I also let him know I want as many kids as he wants.

"Then let's go make it official, Mrs. Macintyre," he says, a little emotion in his voice as he takes my hand, leading me downstairs where our rides are parked.

Ruby and Lucy have never looked prettier, or more behaved.

It was Mack's idea to have Ruby as 'best mare' instead of a best man, and I couldn't have Lucy missing out.

So, she's my 'mare of honor.' Both of them bonding with me so much over these past few months that it's like Mack said, "They're part of our family, so why shouldn't they be in the wedding party?"

And he couldn't have made a better decision.

With a little help from Mack as he lifts me up so I can sit side saddle, just for today, he eases himself up onto Ruby, and with a nod to each other, we make a wedding procession that would make city folk cringe.

But the swarms of neighbors and people from all the nearby towns who've come to share our special day think it's perfectly normal and natural to ride your horse to the altar.

Once word got out that we were getting hitched, we had to build bleachers around the corral to make sure there'd be enough room for everybody.

And it feels like half the state turned out, all dressed in their best country clothes. Even the organ from the church has been carted out, filling the whole valley with our wedding march.

The gentle, sun-soaked breeze is heavy with the scent of white roses and cut hay.

Paddocks filled with our guest's trucks, and plenty of horses still saddled up are making the most of the fresh green grass.

Doing us a favor by making it shorter as they have their fill.

Passing by my mom and Ben, who are sitting right up front by the altar, I feel a lump in my throat when my eyes catch hers.

She mouths the words, 'I'm so proud of you, honey,' before dabbing a tear from her eye. And it feels like this is the start of a new life for all of us.

Starting for Mack and me on our first night. But starting new for me and my mom, who's soon to be a grandma as well as a bride herself.

We'll have a little life of our own come into the world, and Silver Fox Ranch will have its lineage continued.

Just the way Old Foxx Macintyre always wanted it, even though it's a few hundred years too late for him to see it for himself.

The local preacher conducts the ceremony from a raised platform.

Mack and me, side by side on our mares. Their manes and tails beautifully brushed and plaited by Mrs. C., who's also dabbing at her eyes when I smile over at her.

Our vows are simple, and traditional. But with every word of them so true, there's hardly a dry eye by the time I finally get to say, "I do," making me all Mack's.

Officially Mrs. Tina Mackenzie Macintyre.

We exchange gold bands, leaning out of our saddles so we can kiss to seal our bonds of wedlock. It's clearer to my mom and the other city folk who've joined us today why we're on horseback.

Mack's planned honeymoon is for us to ride straight to the old cabin at the top of the hills.

With strict instructions that we're not to be disturbed by anyone.

We take a few slow laps of the corral. Making sure to thank everyone we need to before leaving them all to celebrate with a giant wedding feast and dance.

Mack and me preferring to do our own celebrating someplace else.

And in private.

He helps me off Lucy once we reach the old cabin. The one I knew I'd see again, but never in my wildest dreams did I imagine it would be as Mack's bride.

And as we cross over the threshold, his huge arms hugging me close to him, we both smile knowingly into each other's eyes.

Finally, together.

Forever.

His cowgirl.

And more than ready for him to show me over and over again
just how a man like him puts a baby inside this cowgirl's belly.

EPILOGUE

FIVE YEARS LATER

Mack

The storm overhead soothes me into a restful half-sleep and I smile as I listen to Tina humming a lullaby to our baby daughter, Stacy now that she's had her midnight feed.

Like me, baby Stacy doesn't mind a good storm. But her mom as well as her two older brothers don't seem to feel the same way.

"You awake?" Tina asks me, and I grunt in a low tone. Competing with a rolling boom of thunder to let her hear me.

"Mack?" she asks, a shiver in her voice. I peel my eyes open as I prop myself up on my elbow.

Knowing well enough to make some more room in the bed for the two more little bodies I know will be here any second.

"Can you go check on the girls?" she asks me, making me have to do some quick math.

Last time I looked, we only had one daughter.

"Oh. *The girls*," I groan, not even trying to stop myself from yawning before I lean over and peck her lips.

"They were doing fine out in the valley, before you came along," I tease her.

Glad when she pokes out her tongue to let me know she's not taking me seriously.

“I’ll go see how they’re doing and pick up those other two monsters on the way back,” I add, drawing a murmur of thanks from Tina.

Meaning I’ll bring our two sons back to our bed if they’re too spooked by the storm to make it all the way across the hall by themselves.

Jake, the eldest, even though he’s five now is more like the size of a ten-year-old. And he has no trouble helping out his younger brother, Max who’s only nine months younger but catching up to Jake in size already.

“You think I’m being stupid, don’t you?” Tina asks. Her mouth creased with the kind of worry it took me two babies to figure out is only natural for moms to have.

It’s real worry, but it’s only because they love their kids so much.

And in our case, I guess we do have two extra daughters, if we include the four-legged variety.

Lucy and Ruby would live in the house if Tina had her own way all the time.

So having their stables moved closer to the house was as good a compromise as we could reach.

But the tradeoff is it’s my job to go check on them whenever Tina worries about them. And on a night like this, it’s not a bad idea to go make sure that they’re warm and dry and that the roof’s still on while I’m at it.

“I’ll go see,” I assure my wife, kissing her cheek and then pressing my lips to the sleeping head of little Stacy.

Promising them both I’ll be right back.

The old place creaks and groans on a regular night. But in the middle of a storm, it sounds and even looks like something out of a B-grade horror movie in the darkness.

I know my way around with my eyes shut. And checking the boy’s room with a glance around the door, seeing the muted beam of a flashlight under Jake’s quilt as I hear his brother hissing for him to be quiet.

The huddled figures of their bodies making a tent out of Jake's bed.

Max whispering that he was sure he heard something...or someone.

I know they've been up for a while, being the best kind of brothers and helping each other out when they get a little scared.

And scaring each other more by the looks. Telling ghost stories or whatever it is they talk about.

There's a break in the howling wind and it dies down long enough for me to ask if the boys want to come help their old man.

The sudden sound of my deep voice in the dark making them both shriek with fear that's so over the top I can't tell if they're actually scared or just making out like they are for the sheer suspense of it all.

Who needs scary movies when you live in an ancient house in the middle of a storm?

I smile proudly to myself, shaking my head. Remembering a snapshot of my own life when I was their age.

The dormitory life of the boy's home that was all I knew before I came here.

The place that's my home and will be all theirs one day.

"I'm going to check on the mares," I tell them both. "You guys want to come help out?" I ask.

The pair of them gasping with excitement, racing out from under the covers and sliding into their slippers.

Always ready, day or night to join me in doing 'ranch stuff' as they call it.

A phrase I'm sure they learned from their mom.

We make our way downstairs, and I cut through the kitchen, tossing them an apple each from the wooden bowl on the counter.

The sudden flapping crash of an iron sheet come loose somewhere outside making them both jump.

The whole kitchen lit up for a second as fingers of forked lightning flash outside.

My sons' eyes wide and alert. Both of them putting on such a brave face for their dad.

"C'mon," I drawl, making this more of an adventure than a chore. "Sounds like we've got work to do out there...are you boys up for it?"

They both nod eagerly, and I watch them both gulp down any apprehension. I jerk my chin toward the door, picking up a tool bag once I slip into a waterproof slicker.

Not even opening the back door until each of them has his own on too.

The mares are shifting uneasily, Ruby rearing up and lifting her front legs when she sees us.

That sheet of iron that's come loose is right over their stable.

"I need you boys to calm those horses while I go fix the roof," I tell them, keeping my voice low and firm for effect.

Both of them stand taller and nod at once. And both the mares are happily distracted by the apples the boys have brought them to munch on.

Both Jake and Max calm the mares quickly. Showing me just how much of their mom's gift for animals they've inherited before I climb up onto the roof.

Easily securing the iron and double checking the roof, knowing I can trust my sons to stay put and do what's asked of them while I do it.

I take my time and get mostly soaked in the process.

But it's little things like this. These little adventures that we share that I know will make these boys fine young men someday.

Max and Jake would stay out here all night if I let 'em. But their mom might have something to say about that, so once the

roof's repaired, we all file back inside.

Trying to keep quiet as we hang up our dripping jackets, but managing to wake Mrs. Corbett, who looks like she can't sleep.

Moving into the kitchen and flicking the lights on out of habit, she doesn't need to ask what we've been doing.

And we don't even try to stop her when she tells us she's making us all hot cocoa with marshmallows.

Listening to the boys while she gets to work, as they tell her all about the extreme danger we all just faced in going outside to save the stables from certain destruction.

Max embellishes the facts, just a little. And by the time he gets to the made-up part where it was he who climbed onto the roof to replace the whole sheet of iron himself, his mom appears in the doorway.

The side of her mouth creased, and little Stacey fast asleep against her chest.

"Coming straight back to me, huh?" she quizzes me.

Smiling over at Mrs. Corbett and asking if there's any leftovers from dinner.

"Och! You know there's always plenty to eat," Mrs. C. smiles back. Already clanging some pots and pans.

Announcing she'll reheat some soup and toast some bread if anyone's interested.

Which we all are.

Tina sets Stacey down in her crib by the table, tucking her in, and we both marvel for a second at how this little girl could sleep through anything.

The boys are already arguing over who's having the red bowl, and Mrs. Corbett's kind gray eyes seem to mist up with more than just tiredness as she sighs with contentment.

Knowing she's as much a part of our life, part of our family as she was to all those who aren't with us anymore.

I curl my arm around Tina's waist, and like seeing my sons helping with the stable roof, I feel nothing but pride and love for each of them.

For baby Stacey, Mrs. C., but most of all, for the love of my life.

Tina.

"How are the girls?" she asks, squeezing me tight as she stretches herself on the balls of her feet.

Sighing the words without worry now, because of her man. Her *men* of the house have already taken care of it.

"They're fine," I assure her, kissing her neck. Making Max groan and mumble something about us being 'gross' again.

But I don't hide my affection for any of them. Least of all, the love I have for my wife.

"We're fine," Tina echoes back to me.

"And we always will be," I remind her, kissing her forehead and whispering just how much I love her.

All of us dragging out the heavy wooden chairs to sit elbow to elbow around the thick wooden table.

The storm still raging above us, but with more than just hot soup and bread for our bellies. We've got everything we need right here to weather any storm that life throws our way.

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