



Forbidden Cowboy

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Category: Romance, Western, New Adult

Description: She's off limits and I've never been allowed to want her.

And I shouldn't be having these feelings.

But there's no way I can resist her.

Our families have been feuding long before we were born.

That didn't stop us from sneaking over the fence line growing up.

We were best friends.

Until one shared smooch at the fair kissing booth.

We haven't talked in twelve years.

Last year, a scorned lover burned down the kissing booth.

Now we're forced to work together to resurrect a new kissing booth.

Our families are furious.

The town is in chaos.

And I can't get those sultry lips out of my head.

And I don't want to. I won't stop until I've claimed her in every possible way.

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PROLOGUE

WILMA AND FAYE

(The Quilt Queens)

“I’VE ACQUIRED THE first two blocks of material for our next quilt.” Wilma Quylt drags two clear totes in front of her chair. Inside each tote are colorful piles of perfectly cut and folded ten-by-ten-inch squares. “These two bins of blocks tell a tale of a forbidden love.”

The Rocky Ridge Creek quilters hold their breath and wring their hands with anticipation. Sitting in the quilting circle with Wilma and Faye Quylt, also known as the Quilt Queens, is a privilege.

Wilma lowers herself to the chair. “Let’s take a second to remember and thank our ancestors whose foresight guided them to weave quilts for those destined to be together.”

“Here, here,” the circle of friends chants.

“And to be grateful, we can continue the journey.”

“To the Quilt Queens.” The group lifts their pointer fingers in the air to salute. Silver thimbles embossed with QQ rest on the tips of their fingers.

The town’s local folklore is known for miles around. It’s also as common as it was

hundreds of years ago for parents and family members to gather scraps of material from their children and hand them over to the current Quilt Queens. These sentimental scraps include detailed hand-written notes with meanings behind each scrap which assist with the matchmaking process.

Wilma lifts a block lying on top of the first tote. She's the serious one in charge, and you'll never find her wearing anything besides denim pants and an embroidered western shirt. On the other hand, Faye is never in a sour mood and wears tea dresses and extravagant hats suited for a queen to all the rodeos.

"This denim scrap belongs to Levi Wilde."

The admission garners a round of thrilled woo and woohoos. It's been decades since the Quilt Queens have chosen a Wilde.

Wilma holds up a lilac patch with a floral pattern. The room is buzzing with excitement. "This lilac patch belongs to Hope Fox."

The space falls quiet. Even the birds outside the open bay window have stopped chirping.

"A Wilde and a Fox?"

"It's never been attempted."

"It shouldn't even be allowed."

"Love doesn't pick a last name." Faye reaches for the lilac patch and runs the material over her fingers. "Tell us about these."

"These first patches were cut from Levi and Hope's outfits when they first met. When

their friendship bloomed.”

“Wildes and Foxes don’t have friendships.”

Wilma ignores the comment and continues her story. “Six years old. Both peeking over the fence line until Hope snuck under to introduce herself. It’s been over twenty years—” Her cowboy boot kicks a bin. “—each block tells a part of their story.”

“They shouldn’t have a story.”

“Unless it involves a cow and murder.”

Wilma digs out a green scrap from the first bin and reads the note attached. “This is from the blanket Levi would sneak to their meeting spot.”

Faye digs out a yellow scrap from Hope’s bin and unfolds the paper. “This belonged to the sundress she tore on one of their hikes.”

“How did you get these?”

Wilma slides her square-brimmed glasses down her nose and peers at everyone in the circle. “From their mamas, and they didn’t need as much convincing as this room.” She peers at each member individually. “Get ready, ladies and gents. We’re about to weave the biggest love story yet.”

Chapter One

HOPE

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“WHAT IS THAT hunky cowboy of a man, Levi Wilde, doing here? At a town meeting?” My youngest sister licks her rosy lips. She’s not shy to flaunt her apparent attraction for the entire fair committee to witness.

“Look at you, Josie Fox, all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed for a Wilde,” I say.

At the same time, I peer over the committee agenda, which widowed Wilma Quylt handed me on our way in. The older woman and her gossiping sidekick are still chattering my mama’s ear off at the main entrance.

Sisters Wilma and Faye Quylt are local busybodies and pride themselves on being experts on all things love-related in Rocky Ridge Creek.

Ironic since they’re the only ones who don’t notice Levi Wilde stride in all confident like he knows he’s hot shit. Or that every woman—single or not—is making a spectacle of themselves.

Batting eyelashes.

Teeth gnawing on lips.

Eyes filled with enough lust to set Rocky Ridge Creek’s town hall up in flames.

There are more than enough prospects the old croons could shoot their cupid’s arrow into—or, in their case, weave a love quilt for.

Levi's deep brown eyes skim the crowd and land on me.

Directly on me.

There's no mistaking it.

Our gazes lock.

My breath catches in my chest, and I'm lost in his mysterious gaze for what feels like a lifetime. Until the married town flirt, Peggy-Ann stands up and slams straight into Levi's chest. Her bright yellow halter top boosts her breasts against his solid wall of muscles. His thick callused hands grip her bare arms to put distance between them.

I'd remember those callused hands anywhere.

"I'm so clumsy." Peggy-Ann's fake giggle irks me to the core. Her hand lingers so long on his chest he's forced to remove it.

"Excuse me." His gruff voice curls my toes.

I'll admit, it's hard to miss him. Hard to miss any of the Wilde brothers. All hard-working ranchers laboring under the sun and tossing hay bales like they're weightless.

Tall.

Rigid.

Muscular.

Tattoos that dip down in all the right places.

Our properties touch, so I've seen a shirtless Wilde or two mending a broken fence.

Those men strut their tight asses like they own the town. I suppose that being one of the wealthiest ranching families in the state boosts that ego. And ego is precisely what all the Wilde brothers bestow.

Just like Levi, right now, strutting his tight ass in a good pair of denim. And did he purposely wear a white T-shirt slightly tighter than need be? His biceps are stretching the material to the max. And I'm sure all the Rocky Ridge Creek gals want to rip off that T-shirt and sink their nails into the flesh beneath.

Myself included.

I'm glad I wore a flowery summer dress to cool the growing warmth between my legs. I can enjoy as much Wilde eye candy as I please, but the Wilde boys are off-limits to the Fox family. Some big rivalry bullshit feud between our two families. A feud that is way past due to being resolved. Plus, Levi wants nothing to do with me. He's made that crystal clear.

My oldest sister, Jade, would disagree with resolving the ancient dispute. My stubborn sister would never be caught ogling a Wilde brother. "Excuse me. Good evening, Mrs. McCoy. How are you tonight?" Jade shakes hands as she makes her way down our row of folding chairs.

Glaring.

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Scoffing.

But never ogling.

She's loyal to our father and continues the centuries-long feud between the Wildes and Foxes.

I elbow my youngest sister. "Jade, three o'clock."

Both our gazes slide down to the committee agenda. My sister undoubtedly sees a whole lot of mumble-jumble. She attends meetings for the gossip. I'm here to volunteer to rebuild the kissing booth after a scorned lover burned it to the ground last year. The kissing booth raises barrels of money each year for the end of high school's grad trip.

"This might be a record." Jade plops down beside me. It's too humid for her flared denim and Aztec geometric coat. At least her standard ponytail will give her neck a cool breeze in the crowded town hall. "Spotting that Wilde off the family ranch." She nods in Levi's direction.

I steal a glance. I mean, if she's looking, I can look, too.

He removes his midnight-black Stetson. His thick waves of dark hair look like a mane I'd like to run my fingers through. He lowers his incredibly taut body onto one of the rickety folding chairs. Can it even hold the king of muscles?

"Must be something on the agenda he wants to bitch about." Jade's plain, short, and

chipped fingernail skims her agenda.

“He attends the rodeo every year.” I don’t know why I feel the need to defend him. Possibly to stop stirring the coals between our families.

I also might be staring, but so is everyone else. Who would even notice lil’ ol’ me?

Jade clicks her tongue. “He does minimum appearances and hides away with his cattle.”

“Coming from the one who never leaves the ranch.” Josie folds the edge of the agenda in an inch-wide crease before flipping over and repeating to create an accordion pattern.

“I leave the ranch.” Jade flips over her paper to continue her search.

“O-Kay.” Josie pinches one end of the agenda. She’s now transformed it into a fan and waves it back and forth by her face. “It’s hotter’n a blister bug in a pepper patch.”

“I’m not a stuck-up stubborn asshole who solely pops in when he wants something. Ah-ha!” Her finger practically jams through the page. “Now I got you, you oversized, egotistical dick.”

Josie chokes and quickly uses the fan to hide her coughing spell. “It’s already too hot in here to be talking about a Wildes di—”

Jade holds up a warning finger. “Don’t you even go there.”

Josie laughs. “Go there. Down there.” Her elbow digs into my side. “Get it.”

I catch a glimpse of the couple in front of us rustling at the implications.

I lower my tone. “Josie, watch your words. Jade, be nice. His wife skipped town, and he already endures enough gossip.”

Jade’s head snaps in my direction. “I’m talking about Hart Wilde.”

“Oh.” My mouth drops open as I scan the room for the eldest Wilde brother. My gaze jumps to a halt beside Levi. Was Hart there the entire time? Or had he walked in beside him? Sat beside him? The whole time and I missed it? No way. But Josie’s curiously arched eyebrow suggests it’s true.

What is the matter with me?

“I don’t care what Levi does,” Jade snaps.

“You shouldn’t care what Hart does either.” Josie likes to stir the pot. All pots. Any pot that gets a rise out of anyone.

“He’s been a thorn in my side since school.” Jade takes our sister’s bait—lock, stock, and barrel.

“Thorns blossom into roses.” I draw a heart around the kissing booth segment of the program. I spent the last few weeks designing a new and improved kissing booth to present to the committee. “We don’t know the Wildes.”

Jade talks over me. “Spreading a rumor, I slept with him. Yeah right. Like I’d sleep with a Wilde.”

“I’d fuck a Wilde.” The couple in front of us shuffles again at my sister’s crude words.

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I send her a glare. “Josie, seriously.”

“I am serious.” Josie leans forward to look around me at our sister. “And don’t think for a second we believe you made up the rumors about the kinky stuff Hart is into.”

“I did make that up.”

“Right. Yeah. Sure you did. And a lot of good yourrumordid.” Josie air quotes the single word. “Every woman in this room wants Hart to do kinky things to her.”

“Not back in the day—”

“Oh, don’t you fool yourself. They did.” Josie sucks air between her closed teeth. “I’m getting a retaliation vibe from you. Scorned lover after a secret affair gone wrong.”

Jade straightens to the point it appears uncomfortable. Maybe there’s more to the rumors than she lets on. “Watch it, Josie, you’re going to end up like the Quylt twins, thinking you have insight into everyone else’s love lives.”

The knock of the gavel on the front table demands attention. “Rocky Ridge Creek’s town meeting has come to order.”

“It’s time.” Josie pulls a bag of popcorn out of her leather knapsack. “Let the fun begin.” She wedges her insulated YETI bottle between her legs. I bet the juice is spiked.

Town mayor Thomas Banks clears his throat. “Tonight’s meeting is dedicated to the fair for the upcoming rodeo.”

His panel is accompanied by the deputy mayor, Rita, whose big red hair resembles an eighties Reba McEntire. She taps her long red fingernail on the microphone, and it squeaks at us. “Alright, y’all, let’s try to get through today in a timely manner.”

“Talk low, talk slow, and don’t say too much.” Grumpy Wayne quotes John Wayne, who he prides on being named after, even if he is always grumpy.

Then there’s councilors Wilma and Faye, who always have glints of troublemaking rebellion in their eyes.

“Knit Happens closed early again yesterday!” A vulture shouts from behind us. Or should I call her the cat lady? Miss Graves has a maze of wood-crafted outdoor two-story cat apartments in her backyard.

Thomas visibly breathes deeply through his nostrils.

Josie snickers.

I press my lips together to keep my snicker at bay.

If Thomas hasn’t learned by now that town meetings never go as he plans, he never will.

My head twists back and forth between Thomas and Mrs. Graves.

“Mrs. Graves, tonight we are discussing the fair.” Shades of red are already beginning to creep up Thomas’ face.

“They closed two hours early.” The older woman holds up two wrinkled fingers.

“Two,” Josie coughs.

I save my glares and scolding because she’s encouraged chaos at town meetings since she sported pigtails.

“Knit Happens closed two hours early,” cackles Mrs. Graves. “They can’t up and take the afternoon off on a Wednesday afternoon.”

“Absolutely not.” Josie slurps on the straw she stuck in the top of her YETI. Her wide grin can’t be broken. “It’s unacceptable.”

“I heard there was a death,” a loud whisper offers.

“Who?”

“Out of town for sure.”

“Or is there an afternoon lover?” Josie’s contribution enrages the fire of local gossip.

Thomas hits the gavel three times until the whispers simmer down. His face is hot red now. “The town has no control over business owners setting their hours.”

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“My knitting group scheduled a planned visit to their shop at two o’clock sharp, and they were closed.”

“Disgraceful.”

Thomas sends Josie a scowling warning before fixing his attention on Mrs. Graves. “Again, we have no control over business owners’ hours.”

Mrs. Graves balances on her cane as she unsteadily rises to her feet. “I say we take a vote.” She strikes her cane on the side of the chair.

“Take a vote. Take a vote.” Josie stomps her white suede booties on the wood plank floor.

Thomas raises his hands. “We are not voting. The first topic on the fair agenda is—” He slides his glasses down his nose to read the paper before him.

“The Knit Happens topic is just getting started,” Josie loudly whispers and pops a handful of popcorn in her mouth.

“Can you keep quiet for one meeting?” Jade reaches across me and tries to snatch the popcorn. Josie lifts the bag away and sticks out her tongue.

“Sign up for volunteer scheduling will be online this year.” A thunder of groans erupts. “I’ve been informed it’s fast and convenient,” Thomas rushes on.

“Hogwash.”

“What’s wrong with a signup sheet at the door?”

“Or sign-ups now. I’ll help with games.”

“I’ll sell tickets.”

“I’ll stand at the concession.”

“Sign-ups are online!” Thomas shouts.

“Then what are we all doing here? If we don’t know what we’re doing, why are we having a meeting?”

“To vote on Knit Happens hours.” Josie slinks in her chair, accompanied by her evil chuckle.

“I second the vote.” Mrs. Graves agrees.

“No voting. Onto the matter of the burned kissing booth.”

I straighten in my chair. The excitement is bubbling through my veins like hot water. You might wonder what’s up with this girl and the kissing booth—besides raising absurd amounts of money. I had my very first kiss in the fair kissing booth.

Sixteen.

Never been kissed.

I hadn’t intended to be a volunteer—I was underage. In a confusion of sorts, the director ushered me to the stand for a single kiss. With no other than—my gaze falls on the man I can’t seem to keep my eyes off—Levi Wilde.

That's right. My first kiss was with the forbidden boy next door. And not because I'm some girl in the back of the bleachers swooning over the popular guy. I'm a Fox. My family owns and operates Fox Lodge, the largest dude ranch for miles. I'm a catch. But the problem is, that's how guys see me. As the catch. But not Levi. He'd seen me as me—until he saw me as the enemy. The kissing booth is a reminder never to forget that. And this year, I will make the best damn kissing booth the town has ever seen.

“The kissing booth is canceled.”

My heart stops.

Canceled? What?!

“I second that vote!” Jade stands up. Her arm shoots into the air like we're back in high school.

“There's no voting.” Thomas clears his throat, but my sister speaks over him. She has a knack for talking over people.

“The Kissing booth is a degrading tradition towards women.” Jade clamps her hands on her hips.

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“This is not a debate, Miss. Fox. Moving on—”

I ignore Josie’s moan of enjoyment when my chair scrapes the floor. I rise on my beaded flip-flops. “This should be a debate. Kissing booths date back to the early 1900s. Rocky Ridge Creek’s kissing booth has paid for the grad’s end-of-year trip for as long as I can remember.”

Jade spins, and we meet face-to-face. “At the expense of flaunting women around like objects for men to do as they please.”

“It’s a mutual agreement. A harmless kiss.” I get the irony of my statement. “And sometimes it’s simply a hug. There’s absolutely no flaunting.”

“It’s all flaunting.”

“What’s wrong with some harmless flaunting?” Hart’s voice silences Jade—silences everyone. My sister’s popcorn crunching is the only sound in the town hall.

Jade’s knuckles turn white from squeezing her hips. “You would say that.”

Hart removes his Stetson as he rises to his feet. He barely glances at my sister as his gaze travels the room. Natural charmer. “My great-great-great grandfather met my great-great-great grandmother at the Rocky Ridge Creek kissing booth.”

My sister’s green eyes do not stray from Hart’s. “And what a floozy she would’ve been for her time, flaunting her lips to all the single men in Rocky Ridge Creek.”

The room coils, and I can see the town folks picking sides. Will they choose the Wildes or the Foxes? Both are highly respected names in the town. Both are notably known for donating money to the town for decades. Both are essential to make Rocky Ridge Creek the amazing small town it is.

Thomas's gavel slices through the room like a knife. "I was wrong." Wilma and Faye are on either side of the man, tapping his clipboard. "The kissing booth reconstruction is being completed by Hope Fox and Levi Wilde."

Chapter Two

LEVI

"WILDES DON'T WORK with Foxes." My brother's growly statement rings in my ears, barking like our father's stern voice my entire life.

Never let your guard down.

Watch out for those Fox dames and their lust games. That's how they hook you, and then they destroy you.

I got the memo.

Loud and clear.

So why the hell is my brother glaring at me like I offered to work with a Fox? I didn't even want to come tonight. And I sure as hell didn't bring up some sappy love story about our great-great-great grandparents.

Look at the reflection in the mirror, brother.

And then Thomas goes and throws me to the wolves. Or, in this case, the Foxes. I'd rather wrangle a dozen territorial bulls at once.

"Foxes don't work with Wildes," Jade retaliates, mirroring my brother.

"Something we agree on." The way my brother eye fucks her, there's no mistaking they've hooked up.

The room explodes into huge arguments. Everything from their sordid history of murder and hog theft to slapping Knit Happens with a hefty fine for breaking their hours.

I slump back in my chair and rub my temples where the twangs of a headache are starting to develop.

Glancing at the stage, I notice sly smirks pasted on the pesky duo. And pesky those two old birds are. They habitually stick their noses into everyone's business.

Why do I get the feeling they had something to do with pairing up Hope and me on this pointless project? Honestly, I side with Jade on the topic. Fox or not, I vote to leave the kissing booth in a bed of coals.

If that's the case, then why is there a fucking ripple of something I don't want to name coursing through my gut at the idea of working with Hope Fox—the girl next door. My brown-haired, hazel-eyed, tree-climbing best friend. At least she had been free of responsibility and expectations when we were wild kids.

I remember the first time I saw her. She'd given me the same peculiar, curious look she'd given me not ten minutes ago.

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I'd been hooked.

Instantly.

While my father prodded me and my brothers against befriending a Fox, I'd been sneaking away from the ranch every afternoon, sun or rain, to secretly climb trees and hike the ridge with the forbidden girl next door.

Until that day, the day everything changed between us. And it all started with the damn kissing booth.

"I propose a vote," Josie mutters as if trying to disguise her voice. She's another troublemaker that sly Fox is.

"There's no vote." Thomas wipes the beads of sweat from his forehead with a plaid handkerchief.

Jade lifts her hand. "All in favor of eliminating the kissing booth, a show of hands."

My hand shoots up.

Hart slaps it down. "Hell no." He points his Stetson at Jade. "The kissing booth stays."

Hope raises her hand. "I second that vote."

"There's no voting." Thomas's voice hikes an octave, and he flips over his

handkerchief to wipe behind his neck.

“Why don’t we vote and move on?” Rita suggests.

“All battles are fought by scared men who’d rather be someplace else,” Grumpy Wayne says.

“No voting!” Thomas repeats louder.

“We’re voting whether the Wildes or the Foxes reconstruct it.” My brother’s booming voice ricochets off the walls. “All in favor of the Wildes, show of hands.”

My throbbing head feels like it’s going to explode. No wonder I don’t leave the ranch.

My eyes trail to the one person in this room they shouldn’t: Hope.

Fuck, she’s gorgeous. Long wavy hair as rich brown as the earth. Her tomboy figure has transformed into a helluva curvy woman. My fingers itch to slide under the thin material of her dress. But it’s her smile that gets me. She radiates sunshine, just like I remember. And those luscious lips. I hadn’t known how much I wanted to kiss Hope Fox until we stood across from each other at the fair kissing booth. It didn’t matter that there had been lineups shouting behind me. Or that all eyes had been on us. I’d only seen her, felt her, wanted her.

But Wildes and Foxes are all but outlawed in Rocky Ridge Creek. And it took one kiss with Hope to realize I couldn’t pretend with her anymore. I couldn’t hide our friendship or whatever the hell would transform after that kiss. And I sure as hell couldn’t be the man she deserved.

Those lips have taunted me for years, and now Thomas and the old birds think they’re

pairing us up?

Hell no.

“Next topic is the sponsorship packages. We have Fox Lodge and the Wilde Ranch competing for the top package.

This is the reason my brother’s here.

Hart blabs his rehearsed speech, and Jade counters him. Their competition overtakes any possibility of getting in another word on the kissing booth topic.

I’m done.

Even Peggy-Ann is too distracted to notice when I pass. Thank the heavens. The last thing I need is for her husband having a beef with me.

The humid summer night hits me. Fresh-cut grass and the woody scent of cedar fill my nostrils. The town where I was born and raised, married my high school sweetheart, planned to raise my family, and never leave. Too bad my ex-wife had different plans—home sweet home.

I head to Bucky’s Bar for a nightcap. It’ll be empty with practically the whole town at the fair meeting.

The Buckley Brewing Company has been brewing craft beer for generations. Meanwhile, the bar next door belongs to the Wards, who have been distilling whiskey just as long. We have some of the best booze around and another family feud.

I skip over the cobblestone sidewalk and cross the road to Bucky’s Bar. The neon whiskey and beer sign is smack dab in the middle of a row of businesses. Two-story

buildings run both sides of the street with arched, ornate windows and decorative brick. Rocky Ridge Creek's historic district is Downtown, surrounded by endless rows of craftsman houses.

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The long, drawn-out howl of Gus, our local stray basset hound, pierces the quiet Main Street. He's nowhere to be seen but has a local route for scraps and attention.

A bell hanging above the bar's door jangles my arrival.

"Evening, Bucky." I nod at old man Bucky.

The lines on his face are as weathered as the long maple counter he's wiping down. Hundreds of bottles reflect off the mirror covering the wall.

He glances over the rims of his round glasses. His suede vest, long greying ponytail, and facial hair give him a free spirit vibe. "Lo and behold, if my eyes don't deceive me, it's Levi Wilde in my bar."

"Better your bar than mine." I recognize Kiwi Ward's voice before I glance to my right.

"That's new." I admire the ten-foot-wide unfinished hole dividing the rivalry bars.

The two widowed fools were known for banging on the connecting wall during minor disputes. Clearly, their dust-up had erupted.

I nod my hat at the older lady. "Evening Mrs. Ward."

Besides a few laugh lines—or growl lines if you're her enemy—she hasn't changed much—same cherry red hair tied back with a bandana. Short, stick thin, and all bones. Even in her eighties, she still dresses like a biker babe in leather, studs, and

cowboy boots and makes sure the heart tattooed to her arm is on display.

“Don’t you evening, Mrs. Wardme.” The Wards favor the Fox family, while the Buckleys favor the Wilde family.

“Why the hell not?” Bucky slams a closed fist on the counter. “It’s a helluva gorgeous evening out there.”

Kiwi waves her hands at both of us before spinning on her heel and stomping away. “Worthless as gum on a boot heel.”

“Levi!” The sloppy slur comes from the town drunk, Earl. He’s partially slumped over the end of the counter. He raises his empty glass a couple of inches off the wood before it clunks back down. His head lands in the crook of the arm resting on the countertop. Sleep steals him.

Some things never change.

“Old fool.” Bucky pries the empty beer mug out of his fingers. “Comes in skunk-drunk and thinks I’m going to serve him more. Help me move him to a booth, will ya?” He slaps the terry cloth over one shoulder before making his way from behind the bar.

“I got it.”

But the old man clambers around, pushing his bad leg to grab one of Earl’s arms. We drop him in the closest booth with a torn leather seat. He mumbles incoherently before curling over.

Bucky ambles back to the bar, now coddling his limp. “What can I get you?”

“Whatever’s on tap.” I find an empty booth in the corner—the furthest corner in the joint.

It’s only drunken Earl and me, but I’d prefer inconspicuous if anyone else pops in. I hang my hat on the coat hook nailed to the side of the booth before I slide in.

I run my fingers through my hair and rake my hands over my face. A frustrated groan rumbles in my chest.

Hope Fox.

Kissing booth.

Working side-by-side.

Hell no. There’s no debate. It ain’t happening.

The door jangles. I feel irritation lace my insides. I don’t want to talk, chat, gossip, or anything. I expect the place to fill up once the meeting adjourns, but I thought maybe I’d get a minute to drink my beer alone.

I steal a hooded glance. And instantly regret it.

A white lace wrap drapes down Hope’s bare shoulders. I imagine my lips trailing a path over her soft skin.

I should look away.

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I don't.

Her floral dress sways from her curvy hips to precisely above her knees. My fingers itch to climb those legs. I fist my hands together on top of the table and fight the desire to want to yank that dress over her head and kiss her wherever the fuck I want. Hell, I'd like to do a whole lot more than kissing. But kissing is what put us in this damn predicament. If we hadn't smooched at the kissing booth, I might have never discovered my feelings for a Fox. Especially not my best friend.

My gaze locks with hers. I hate how damn natural it feels. How I never felt anything close to these feelings with my ex-wife. Like how Hope's eyes seem to soothe my soul.

"Bucky, I'll have what he's having." She doesn't take her eyes off me. Doesn't ask to sit with me before sliding into the seat across from me. She doesn't jump when our knees touch beneath the table. She doesn't seem unnerved by my presence, the way she's rattled the fuck out of me.

Bucky arrives with our brimming liquid gold. His eyes dart from mine to Hope. If I didn't know him better, I'd think he was preparing to spread some gossip.

"Anything else? I got some wings ready to go hot and fresh for after tonight's meeting."

"We're good—"

"I would love some wings." Hope smiles sweetly at him. Her real smile. The one I've

longed to see again.

“Coming right up.” Bucky squeezes Hope’s shoulder and winces. “My knee tells me there’s a storm coming.”

When we’re alone, I sip my beer. “What will people say, you sitting with a Wilde?”

“What will people say, you drinking alone?”

“I like to drink alone.”

“No one likes to drink alone.” She raises her mug in a salute before pressing the glass against her lips. She slugs back a hefty mouthful.

Her shoulders appear stiff, her eyes shifty. Maybe she’s not as unfazed as I originally thought.

“When did you and Bucky get so friendly?”

“I don’t play the feud hand, and Bucky is one of the few who also doesn’t.” Her wide smile is back, and damned if it doesn’t melt every wall I’ve built.

“I’m here to discuss the kissing booth.” She licks away the foam from her upper lip. I’m so goddam jealous of that foam.

“Since you made yourself crystal clear, you’re against resurrecting the booth; I’m here to let you off the hook.”

Her words shock me. But not nearly as much as my reaction, which should be, damn straight, you’re letting me off the hook.

It's not.

Disappointment.

Anger.

Regret.

I say nothing and sip my beer.

"I've already been discussing the project with Wyatt Ashwood. You know Wyatt, his family owns the lumber yard."

I know I want to give Wyatt a shiner. Or a broken arm. Or both.

"The Ashwoods agreed to donate the wood for the kissing booth. I had an entire proposal prepared to present to the committee." She sighs, a sweet melody to my ears.

No sweet melody. Dammit!

"But I guess they didn't need to see my proposal to give the go-ahead, and Wyatt already offered to help, so that lets you off the hook."

"Who said I wanted to be let off the hook?" My big mouth is speaking without permission.

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Hope's chin dips down. Her teeth clamp her lower lip for a quick second before she regains herself—enough of a second to drive me wild inside.

“You did. Obviously, the kissing booth holds bad memories for you.”

My gaze slides to her lips. She has no clue about the good memories the kissing booth holds for me.

When I meet her gaze, I notice a hue of pink staining her cheeks. “What kind of memories does the kissing booth hold for you?” I ask.

I don't need her to say the kiss changed the way she looks at me. I saw the desire reflecting in her eyes that day. I saw our friendship shift to something different. I want her to say it. And from heaven to hell, I don't know why.

Something changes in the way she's looking at me now. From the friendly, sweet Hope I remember to something I'm not entirely familiar with. Pain, regret—anger. And I'm not so sure I like it.

“The kissing booth reminds me never to trust a man.”

Chapter Three

HOPE

I'VE FANTASIZED ABOUT the moment I would belittle Levi for the way he left things between us.

What kind of asshole spends the day swimming in the creek with a girl and the evening kissing her under the moonlight to altogether avoiding and ignoring her indefinitely?

The Wilde kind, that's who.

I yearned for the satisfaction of finally saying my peace and the closure to follow. I feel neither satisfied nor the latter.

Instead, I'm thirsty for the second half of my fantasy, where we finish what we started with that kiss all those years ago.

Drunken Earl's snore evolves into a hacking cough.

Yeah, that's why they're called fantasies because they're not realistic.

Levi's eyes soften, and I don't like it. "It wasn't my intention to hurt you."

"Shame on me for not listening to my father. They'll use you and take what they want. They'll break your heart. They'll leave you out in the sun to die."

His dark eyebrows draw together in a look of pain. "I broke your heart?"

Fiddlesticks! Did I say that out loud?

"No. You used me, Wilde."

"I never used you. Not once."

I spin my glass, staring at the condensation ring on the table. “You and I have very different definitions of what friendship is. And mine does not include turning your back on someone without an explanation.”

“I broke your heart.”

“You didn’t break my damn heart!” This conversation is going sideways fast.

Earl mutters something about going home. It’s as good an excuse as any to leave.

“I’m glad you won’t be helping with the kissing booth.” I stand. “I’ll leave you to your drinking alone.”

I can smell the alcohol stench penetrating from the booth Earl’s using for a bed. “I’ll take him home before the meeting crowd arrives,” I call to Bucky.

“I’ll pack your wings to go.”

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“Thank you.” My knees dig into the ripped leather seat. I grasp handfuls of Earl’s faded plaid shirt and yank him into a sitting position. He slumps against the back of the seat like deadweight. A groan rumbles up his chest, followed by an incoherent mumble-jumble. But he’s still passed out.

“Come on, Earl, help a gal out.”

“You can’t be serious.” Levi is over my shoulder. “There’s no way in hell you’re getting him home by yourself.”

“You got a better idea?” I lightly slap Earl’s cheeks. “Come on. Wakey-wakey.”

“I’ll do it.”

I glare over my shoulder. “Do you even know where he lives? You come to town as often as the plague.”

“I was born and raised here just like you. I ain’t forgotten where the town drunk lives.”

“Y’all take my pickup.” A set of keys rattle on the table beside my takeout bag of wings. “Out the back door.” Bucky points down a dark hallway where the bathrooms are located.

“Alright, you drunken fool.” Levi lifts me out of the way in a swift motion and hauls Earl out of the booth like the beer belly of a man is weightless.

I meet his gaze with a glare.

“Are you going to grab his other arm?”

I cross my arms over my front. “Are you sure you want my help?”

“I’m helping you, darlin’. Lead the way.”

With a half-irritated and half-appreciative sigh, I hook Earl’s other arm over my shoulder while muttering, “Don’t you dare feel sorry for me. I would never fall in love with a Wilde. Especially not an asshole like you.” I snatch the bag of wings with my free hand.

Levi’s arm reaches across the front of Earl, and his gentle finger lifts my chin. The tiny gesture sends heat flaming through my body like wildfire.

I’m a liar. I didn’t only fall in love with a Wilde. I’m still in love with him.

“I wasn’t always an asshole.”

I know that. Deep down, I do. But the last thing I wanted tonight was his pity. “Are you sure?”

His jaw tightens. For a second, I think he’ll retract his offer to help me. Maybe it’s for the best. But without another word, we drag Earl out the back door. Bucky’s old rusted jalopy awaits us.

“I don’t know why the old man doesn’t buy a new truck.” The passenger door creaks and groans when Levi heaves it open. “Lord knows he has the money.”

“Maybe not everyone’s looking around the corner for the next best thing to abandon

for the good thing they have now.”

“This rust bucket is not a good thing.” Levi hoists Earl into the front seat and shoves him into the middle.

I swat Levi out of the way and climb in beside Earl. “I was talking about you.” I slam the truck door in his face.

It’s a five-minute drive to Earl’s pale yellow-sided house. Besides the scrap piles overgrown with weeds and broken shutters, the place isn’t bad. It isn’t great. But the issues appear to be mainly cosmetic.

We dump the drunken fool on the couch. The springs must be busted because his deadweight body sinks into the cushions. I leave the bag of wings on the cluttered kitchen table.

Silently, Levi and I mosey back inside the truck.

Levi turns over the keys, and the hunk of junk sputters. “Come on.” He twists the keys again.

A sputter and chatter.

“I’ll check the battery.” Levi clambers out of the truck and pops the hood. He rattles and clangs under the hood for five minutes before he opens my door.

“The battery’s dead. We’re walking. Unless, of course, you’d like to call one of your sisters for a ride.”

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I send him a dumbfounded look. “Do you want to call one of your brothers?”

We share a knowing look as we begin our trek together. We don’t call a single soul for fear of sparking rumors.

A block down the road, and the humidity is sinking into my skin. A roll of thunder threatens. The black clouds are rapidly sweeping above us.

“Looks like Bucky’s prediction is spot on.” I pull my wrap tighter around my arms.

“Indeed.” I catch Levi lifting his head to the darkened sky from the corner of my eyes. Age and worry have etched lines on his once-baby face. Don’t get me wrong; they’re sexy as hell. He’s sexy as hell. But I wonder if he smiles less now and worries more.

He breaks the silence this time. “My pa used to say the same thing to me.”

“That you’re an asshole?”

His low rumble chuckle stirs a flutter in my stomach. “I’d be a liar if I said no.”

A smile steals my lips. So natural. So right with him.

“My old man warned us about the Fox dames and their lust games.”

I laugh now. “Our lust games.” I snap my fingers. “Yes, those are my favorite. I intentionally initiated this drunken Earl and broken truck escapade to lure you in with

my lust games.”

“You’re doing a shoddy job.”

Another laugh peals up my chest. I smack his arm at his teasing, enjoying how easy it is to fall back into our old ways. But the touch lights my skin on fire. And the way his head whips to look at the contact before his heated gaze lands on mine conveys mutual desire. There will never be going back with us. We could never be just friends.

The silence stretches between us once again.

We automatically cut through the old Underwood property. It’s a shortcut most locals dare to venture into. In the 20th century, the town's schoolhouse was run by Isabel Underwood. The Victorian house sits abandoned and is said to be haunted.

We trudge along the path of flattened grass. “Our folks aren’t right, you know.” I feel a drop of rain on my shoulder.

Levi doesn’t skip a step in front of me. Nor does he comment.

“Pitting us against each other from young,” I continue. “We shouldn’t hate each other because your great-great-great grandfather stole our cow.”

“He didn’t steal it. The cow rightfully belonged to the Wildes.”

“It had the Fox stamp.”

“Sold to my family by a Fox.”

“A Fox who just happened to be murdered before he could testify.”

“It’s quite suspicious, isn’t it?”

I scoff. “Are you seriously defending the pathetic excuse for a feud between our families?”

He glances over his shoulder, wearing a huge shit-faced smirk. “Darlin’, never. But you getting so worked up about it —” Levi licks his lips.

I don’t know why, but something about the way he’s looking at me makes me mad as a bull. “Now, who’s playing the lust games?” I storm past him, and he catches my arm. The pearls of rain are increasing.

“Hey, what’d I say?”

“It’s what you didn’t say. Twelve years ago, when you walked away from me without a word. You let the rumors of an innocent kiss destroy everything we’d built. And instead of defending us, standing up for us, speaking up, you sat back and didn’t say a damn word.”

His fingers tighten around my arm. His jaw clenches. “It’s not that simple.” He storms past me.

A clap of thunder cracks like a bullwhip.

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“What’s not that simple?”

His boots stomp off the path into the high weeds as he takes a shortcut by the old metal swing set.

I have to run to catch up. “What’s not that simple, Levi? Our friendship? Or was that a sham too? You were my best friend. But maybe the feeling wasn’t mutual. Or were you using me the way you claim you didn’t?” When he doesn’t reply, I grab his muscled arm. “I’m talking to you, dammit. What’s not that simple?!”

He spins to face me. “Everything. Every goddam thing about us isn’t simple. Our last names. Our friendship. That goddam kiss!”

The sky dumps on us. Within seconds, sheets of rain soak me to the core—lightning cracks in the distance. Almost immediately, thunder rolls from the sky. The storm is creeping closer.

My hand disappears in Levi’s large hand. “We gotta take shelter!” His shout howls through the loud wind. “We can sneak into the back door of the Underwood house.”

I yank my hand away, surprised when his tight grip lets me go. “Answer the question!”

He points to the sky. “You see those clouds? Those are lightning clouds. We need to get inside.” He reaches for my hand again.

“What about that kiss? Didn’t you like it? Did it embarrass you? Embarrassed your

family? That's a pretty darn simple answer."

Levi throws his arms in the air. "For fucks sake, now is not the time."

"It's never the time for you!" I fold my arms over my front. The rain blurs my vision. The wind wrestles with my wrap. "I spent a year trying to find time in your busy schedule, and I'm not moving until you tell me why."

A roar, sounding as painful as a fox's cry, rumbles up his chest. He's in front of me now. So close I can feel the heat penetrating off him. His chest huffs up and down. Water runs down his twisted and strained facial features.

"I fucking loved that kiss. Nothing in my life has ever felt as right as that kiss. But I was sixteen, and a Wilde isn't supposed to fall in love with a Fox. I refused to let our family quarrel hurt you. I refused to hurt you. I let you go so you could find a man without my baggage. A man who could make you happy."

The words buzz in my ears. I'm trying to figure out what they could possibly mean. I keep coming back to the same conclusion.

"You fell in love with me?"

His hand cups my face. The pad of his thumb runs over my lower lip. "Why else would I ever walk away from you? You were my best friend."

The second half of my fantasy pops into my mind, but it's quickly extinguished.

"Levi, the hair on my arm is standing up." It's a well-known indication lightning is close.

"Run. Run!"

I let him pull me toward the house. A sizzle pierces the air, followed by an intense crack and what sounds like many sticks of dynamite being detonated. A lightning bolt hits the swing set. I scream and squint against the flash of white light. The loud and powerful boom vibrates the ground. My ears ring, and I crouch to the ground.

Levi pulls me on. “Come on.” He guides me to the house and kicks in the back door. “Inside.” He pushes me in first, then follows.

I can’t see a thing, but it’s not my first time here. It’s pitch black inside. The wood planks nailed to the windows leave only enough room for small streams of light between the cracks. All the kids sneak into the Underwood haunted house at some point to catch a glimpse of the little girl’s spirit who roams the halls.

“You alright?” Levi spins me, and his hands touch my face, shoulders, and arms. His strong hands clutch my hips. “Hope, are you hurt anywhere?” The tone of his voice reminds me of the time I fell during one of the many hikes we took together. He was right there. Quick. Caring. Loving.

I miss him.

I want him.

This might be the last time I’m alone with Levi. He’s made it clear we’re complicated. Not simple. But he’s also made it clear he wants me. I’ve already spent too long of my life wondering what it would feel like to touch him. To have him touch me. To kiss him and feel his kisses. I need him now more than I ever have in my entire life.

Maybe my head’s still spinning from the lightning. Or perhaps the lightning cleared away the fog of everyone else, always warning me to stay away from a Wilde.

I slide my fingers under the hem of his shirt. I feel him still as my fingertips graze the waistline of his skin.

“I’m okay.” My voice is a cracked whisper.

The rain, thunder, and lightning sing a melody in the distance.

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My hands trail a path up his bare chest. His woodsy ranch smell is a familiar scent I will never get enough of. It will always leave me wanting more.

“Hope —” His voice battles objection and want. The fear, desire, and lust mirror my own emotions.

“Levi.” I rise to the tips of my toes, pressing our bodies closer together. “No one’s here to tell us what we should and shouldn’t be feeling. To remind us you’re a Wilde and I’m a Fox.” I nibble on his scruffy chin. “It’s just you and me.”

The tips of his fingers dig through the material of my dress. “We can’t—”

“We can.” I lightly graze my lips across his. Tender. Barely a touch.

“We shouldn’t—”

I guide one of his hands to my breast. “Then walk away.”

It’s what he’s best at.

His groan turns into a moan as his mouth claims mine in a strong and forceful kiss.

Chapter Four

LEVI

FUCKING DELICIOUS.

I press my tongue between her lips to dance with her tongue. It's an easy dance to do. Perfectly in sync and yet a decision I'm sure to regret come morning.

I don't have to ignore everything inside me screaming no because the second her lips touched mine, Hope Fox is the only thing invading my thoughts.

I wrap my arm under her derrière and pick her up. Her legs naturally coil my middle like they've always belonged there. Her arms snake around my neck, knocking my Stetson off. Her fingertips dig through my hair and into my scalp. Our teeth click between scorching hot, wet kisses. Her warm scent of vanilla and fresh-squeezed oranges fills my nostrils. I've been avoiding oranges for years to forget how goddam good she smelled. Now, I nuzzle her neck and never want to forget.

My back bumps into a coat rack. I think. The object falls over with a loud crash.

"Shit," I curse.

She giggles against my mouth. "Where are you taking me?"

"Right fucking here."

I squeeze her butt cheeks before I pin her against a wall. My hands rake her dress up to slide under her bra. I gently rub her stiff nipples and swallow her pleasurable moan. I've fantasized about this moment more nights than not. And nothing could prepare me for this woman's sweet and luscious taste. The softness of her supple skin. How much I fucking want her.

I trail kisses over her jawline, throat, and to the top of her breasts.

“Too many clothes.” Her arms raise, waiting for me to lift the dress over her head. I release her, and she slowly slides to her feet. I strip off the dress. I unclip her bra and cup both breasts in my hand. I suck her nipples and tease them, gently biting.

“Your turn.” She yanks on the edge of my T-shirt.

In a swift motion, I rip the shirt over my head. I don’t give a shit where it lands or if I ever see it again.

While my hands work at unbuckling my belt, her hot lips brand her mark against my chest. Her tongue flicks and tastes my nipple. A hissing noise escapes my gritted teeth. She’s driving my body fucking insane.

I release my pants and push them down with haste. My briefs follow.

I want to be inside her, but there’s one tiny piece of clothing still between us.

I glide Hope’s panties down her legs, kissing every part of her I can on the way down. I stop at her sensitive middle. She moans, arching against the wall and gripping the sides of my head, pulling me closer to her.

She steps out of her panties. They land where they land.

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My hands trace back up her outer legs while my lips plant wet kisses along the naked grooves and dips I missed. Her hot lips are waiting for mine. I dive deep into the warmth of her mouth, stroking her tongue faster and harder.

I find her triangle of curls and her soaking-wet sex. Her fingertips dig into my shoulders as my finger penetrates her. My thumb rubs circles over her nub, stimulating her soft whimper in my ear. I slide my finger in and out, ensuring she's slick with need. I feel the heat of desire bursting from her. I pull my fingers out from inside her. She whimpers at the sudden loss.

“Levi.” Even my name is perfect from her lips.

“Come here, beautiful.” I kiss her and place my hands under her bottom. I pin her against the wall again and lower her slowly onto my shaft.

My body clenches as I fill her. I hear her muted gasp of pleasure. My mouth moves over her neck as waves of pleasure crash through me. I can feel her nails digging into my shoulder as I slide in and out of her. The soft growl forming in her chest becomes a soft purr as my tempo increases. My hands are firm on her bottom. I take her breast into my mouth, suckling in rhythm to my pace until I slam her in a wild frenzy of passion. Her body trembles as the power of her orgasm rocks her. She cries out in pleasure, sending my pulsating heat into overdrive. She tightens and spasms around me as my orgasm reaches for release. I ride us to the crest, our lips and tongues muffling our sexy noises.

Hope's body collapses against mine. So perfect. So amazing. In this instant, I realize what I've been missing all these years. And there's no way in hell I'm running away

from Hope Fox again.

I kiss the ticklish spot behind her ear. “Your fucking lust games sunk me.”

Chapter Five

LEVI

“HEARD THE TOWN meeting yesterday was a shit show.” My brother Wheeler slams shut the driver’s door of the pickup. He circles to meet me at the back.

I tear off the red flag stapled to the end of a load of wood I ordered from the mill. He offered to pick it up since he’d been heading into town this morning, and the extra time allowed me to remove a few sections of the rotting wood along the west fence line—the fence line that touches the Fox property.

Was I hoping to catch a glimpse of Hope lounging at her favorite spot?

Maybe. Yeah. Definitely.

“Every town meeting is a shit show.” I don’t dare admit it’s the best damn meeting I’ve ever attended. I’m riding on sunshine today. But I need a hot second to figure out how I’m going to break it to my family that I’m going to marry a Fox with or without their support.

“Especially when a Wilde and a Fox are patched together.” He slaps my bare shoulder with a chuckle. I shed my shirt hours ago. The heat would loosen the bristles on a wild hog, even in the early morning.

It burns my insides at the thought of my family, the people who have supported me my whole life and who I have supported, disapproving of my decision to marry Hope. But the feud has never been taken lightly. Wildes and Foxes aren't the only enemies. It runs deep through the town like poison creeping through veins. Kids are raised to pick a specific side. No one questions. No one fights. Friendships and marriages are based on the old feud.

"I heard you ducked out early." My brother slides a natural cedar log from the truck bed. "And Hope Fox practically chased after you."

I grunt. "Back fence talk never fails."

"Yes, the gossip mill is wild this morning." He nudges my side with a chuckle at what he thinks is clever. "I stopped at Cowboy Cafe, and it was kissing booth this and kissing booth that. Levi this and Hope that."

I thought about messaging Hope before the sun rose and after the sun rose—and every second between. I didn't get a wink of sleep after I walked her back to her truck and kissed her goodnight.

The kissing booth is an excellent project to hide behind until we devise a mutual plan to tell our folks. I have to think about her too. Her family could disown her. Hell, so could mine. But I'm not spending the rest of my life without the woman I've always loved by my side. I'm ready for a big, hoedown wedding with many babies to follow. Fighting, laughing, making love, and almost being struck by lightning opened my eyes.

"But I guess you two must've hashed out a new plan because I saw her and Wyatt looking pretty chummy at the lumberyard talking specs for the new booth."

"What?" The log slips off my shoulder and slams onto the ground.

Wheeler doesn't notice. He's tugging the next log out of the bed of the truck. "At least Hart can stop growling around about a Wilde and a Fox working together." When he approaches, he gives a sideways glance at the log at my feet. "What's up with you?"

"You're missing half my damn order is what's up with me."

He drops the log in the pile and slaps his hands together. "There's not a sliver missing out of this order. I personally double-checked it."

"This is what I get for not doing it myself."

Wheeler folds his arms over his chest. "There's grumpy Levi. I wondered where he was hiding this morning. You've been all sunshine and rainbows. Figured you got laid last night."

I pick up my pace unloading the rest of the truck.

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What the hell is Hope doing with Wyatt?

After last night I thought I'd made myself damn clear we'd be building the kissing booth together.

"I was going to ask who the lucky lady was, but I have a feeling I know exactly who she was." He grabs the next log in his leisurely chilled speed.

"You don't know a damn thing," I growl.

"Funny story."

"I'm not in the mood." I toss the next log.

"When we were young, Ma would tell us to stick close to home. Never head west. Never cross the west fence line." He leans on the area of the fence I haven't ripped down yet, crosses his ankles, and lowers his hat to shade the sun. "But we'd sneak away anyway."

"Should I start a campfire and get some marshmallows to roast for your tale?" I mutter.

The wood pile is decreasing without my brother's help.

"See that brush right over there." My dumbass, nosey brother points at a patch of trees that begin on the Wilde side and end a few miles up the Fox side. "One day, we chased our big brother into that brush."

I know where he's headed with his story. The brush was the secret entrance Hope and I shared.

"Into the brush and over the fence. I mean, it was a rush to break the rules." Wheeler tells stories like he lives in an irritating cool, calm, and collected manner that stretches out for what feels like days. "And to see our big brother break the rules." He whistles. "What a rush. But then we saw why, and she was pretty as a spotted horse in a daisy pasture."

My hands pause around the last log. The wood bites my flesh. "Wheeler—"

"I'm on your side."

I tilt my head to send him a forewarning glare. He meets me with a sincere smile.

"The feud is stupid. Overkill. I don't care if Pa and Mr. Fox beef it out at every town rodeo. I'm on your side. Beck's on your side."

I can't control the dumbfounded look I know is plastered over my face. I never expected any of my brothers to jump on board.

"In all honesty, the way you hurt Hope, if I'd been older and bigger, I would've kicked your ass."

"I stayed away to protect her."

"Look how that turned out. You went and married the first girl to bat her lashes at you. And we all knew she was in it for the money."

I'd been too blinded, trying to run away from my feelings for Hope to notice.

“A little powder, a little paint, makes a girl look what she ain’t.” My brother’s full of useless quotes today. He sounds like grumpy Wayne.

“I’m not making that mistake twice.”

Wheeler pushes off the fence and struts over to hit my shoulder. “Attaboy! Just tell me what you need from us.”

“Right now. Silence. We do this on Hope’s terms.”

“I totally understand.” He makes a zipping motion over his closed mouth. “My lips are sealed.”

“I’m going to the lumberyard.”

“Go get your girl.”

I toss the last cedar log in the pile and swap transportation modes with my brother. He climbs on my horse's back, and Coral and I get behind the truck's wheel.

I throw the truck into gear when I see movement by the brush. My heart sparks, expecting to see Hope.

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My granddad strolls out. I swear he's wearing yesterday's overalls and a blue button-front shirt.

I drive alongside him, one hand on the wheel, the other leaning out the rolled-down window. I tap my hand on the side of the truck. "Granddad, what are you doing out here?"

He runs a hand through his unkempt, partly slicked up, and brushed back thick grey waves of hair. "Getting my morning exercise."

"You're awfully far away from the house."

"So are you."

"I'm fixing the fence." I hitch a thumb to the mess behind me.

"Once I find Betty, I'm heading to the main house for your mother's blueberry flapjacks." Betty is the all-terrain vehicle he named after my grandmother when she passed. He rides Betty all over the property but doesn't generally misplace her.

"You lost Betty?"

"I just can't seem to remember where I parked her."

The old man isn't forgetful. He's quick as a whip. He can be a growly son of a bitch like my pa and a softie like my ma.

“Jump in, and I’ll drop you off at the house.”

He climbs in the passenger seat, a wrinkled mess like he’s been out all day. “You’re not staying for breakfast?”

Not when my girl is out with another man. “Granddad, it’s lunchtime.”

Chapter Six

HOPE

“I CAN HAVE the wood delivered to the ranch Friday.” Wyatt leans his hip on the side of a wood pile.

His family has been dropping off firewood at Fox Lodge for as long as I can remember. He’s handsome enough—built like a logger, thick and all muscles. Blonde hair. Blue eyes.

But he isn’t Levi.

My womanly parts warm at the thought of Levi. Is this how it’s going to be now? Heating up like a fool for a man who chose a family feud over me?

“Thanks for all your help, Wyatt. I’m sure between me and my sisters; we’ll be able to build this bad boy.”

“My offer stands. I’m a call away if you need help or find yourself in a jam.” Wyatt would use any reason to pop by the ranch. He fancies my middle sister Hannah, but she’s too busy chasing her twin five-year-olds to notice.

“What the hell’s going on here?” Levi’s voice sends my heart racing.

I turn to face him, my insides giddy like Christmas morning.

The sight of the man’s dirt-stained T-shirt and the torn knee in his dark denim pants floods my body with warmth and all kinds of pulsating reminders of last night.

“Levi.” Wyatt straightens. “Did you have an issue with your order?”

Levi doesn’t even give Wyatt a glance. He stops in my personal space, which I enjoy more than I’d like to admit. Soap and the woodsy outdoors mix with his distinct primal smell.

“I told you we were working on the kissing booth together.” Is the jealous lion coming out to play? I’d never pegged Levi as the jealous type.

“There were some mixed signals yesterday.”

“Mixed signals? Care to elaborate?” I want to kiss his pinched lips until they relax.

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“It’s not that simple.” I throw his words back at him. Nothing has changed between us just because we had sex. Our families still loathe one another. This public interlude is the most a Wilde and Fox have ever been seen together. Besides, I doubt he’s ready to stand up to his family. No matter what happened between us yesterday, he’s a family guy through and through. It’s one of the things I’ve always loved about him. Even if I hadn’t known it was love back in the day.

“You’re funny.” His sarcastic stoic tone plunks a grin on my lips.

“I get it from my mama, who your family still has it in for. Something about a cow.”

I catch Wyatt’s wary expression as he circles us, eyeing the situation.

“Wyatt, when can you drop off the wood at the rear of the town hall?” Levi still doesn’t look at him.

“Friday.”

“Perfect. It’s a mutual place where Foxes and Wildes are both welcome. We’ll build the booth in the back shop where no one will see us.”

There it is. Hide me away from the town. And then what does he think is going to happen? Another play date on the worktable? I don’t think so. I’m so angry I can’t put out a word.

“See you Friday, Miss. Fox. Sharp after lunch.” Levi nods his Stetson before walking away and leaving me more confused than I was this morning. And how on this grassy

earth am I supposed to work with Levi now?

“Are you okay with the change of location, Hope?” Wyatt steps into my sight.

“Yes, it’s fine.”

“You alright?”

I force a smile. “Of course. The kissing booth has a sentiment toward the Wilde family. Something about their great—”

“Great-great grandparents sharing a kiss before tying the knot.”

My smile is genuine. “I guess everyone in town knows the story.”

“The Wilde and Fox history is common knowledge.”

“Right. Thanks again, Wyatt. And pop into the ranch on Friday night. Hannah’s planned a campfire scavenger hunt.”

“Sounds like a good time.”

“Always a good time at the Fox Lodge.”

“That’s what the tourists tell me.” Our all-inclusive ranch resort brings bounds of tourists to town.

Wyatt waves me goodbye.

My jeep is parked in the shade under a row of oak trees. It’s lunch hour, but it’s already booming busy, and my vehicle is wedged between two pickups.

When I reach the side of my truck, someone spins me around and pins my back against the metal frame.

Familiar moves.

Familiar hands.

Familiar scent.

Levi's eyes bore me with a storm of emotions. Our mouths collide like lightning and thunder. He threads his fingers through my hair. His arms circle my waist, pulling me flush against him. The kiss is hard, hot, and heavy, just like our rocky relationship. When we part, we're panting and breathless.

I press my hand against his chest to put distance between us. He lifts my hand and kisses my knuckles.

"Are you trying to get caught kissing a Fox?" I try to wiggle out of my trapped position between Levi and the truck. Levi doesn't budge. The truck isn't forgiving, either.

"Levi?"

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He slides a piece of my hair behind my ear. “Yes, darlin’.”

“Last night was a one-time thing. Nothing’s changed between us. You’re hiding us inside the town hall to work on the kissing booth so no one sees us working together.”

“Only until we talk.”

“Talk about what? How it’s not that simple?”

“How to make it simple.”

I shove him with both hands. He takes a step back. His eyebrows etch together.

“You’re too late. You’re twelve years too late. We can’t just pick up where we left off. You have a life. I have a life. It’s more complicated now than the day we kissed in the kissing booth.”

“I’m seeing clearer now than in my entire life. I’ve missed you. I’ve missed us. I didn’t realize how much until—”

“Until you got into my pants.” I smooth my hands over my grey eyelet top and distressed boyfriend jeans.

His lips form a thin line, and he takes another step back. “You know that’s not true.”

I do.

“I don’t know you at all. The guy I once knew has grown into a man I don’t recognize.”

He takes a single step forward, and my body presses flush against his. “Hope, Fox, I am going to marry you.”

My mouth gapes open. “What are you talking about?”

“You’re the only woman I’ve ever loved. The only real friend I’ve ever had. One night with you and I wake up feeling like the weight of the world has lifted from my shoulders. You bring out the best in me. You always have. Come hell or high water, I’m going to make you my wife.”

“You sound like you’ve fallen off your rocker.” I scan our surrounding for bystanders.

“And if you think I’m scared to be seen with you, you have another thing coming. I made arrangements to work with you behind closed doors out of respect for your feelings on the situation.”

“I was done hiding twelve years ago, but you didn’t give me a second to tell you.” I yank open my Jeep door and haul myself into the seat. “I’ll see you Friday behind town hall promptly after lunch to hide from the town.”

Chapter Seven

HOPE

“GOOD MORNING, FOX Lodge staff.” Jade taps the stylus on the side of her iPad.

It's a nervous gesture only family would recognize.

"Is she trying to smile?" Josie passes me a mug of steaming black coffee, just the way I like it. I cradle my morning pick-me-up with a satisfied sigh before I bring the hot liquid to my lips for a taste. I need it after my restless sleep. Thanks to a red hot sexy cowboy whose kisses send a gal into a night of lustful dreams she never wants to wake from.

"She thinks her smile softens the harsh tone of her voice," my sister Natalie says. She and Josie share a wicked sense of humor. Closer in age, the two had been inseparable growing up and were magnets for trouble.

"Be nice." I tsk my sister.

The floor-to-ceiling stone fireplace crackles behind us while it burns faux fire. Few guests are awake at the early to stroll into the large lobby where our meetings are held. And those who do can sit in the twig chairs scattered around the lobby.

"I love morning meetings when Hannah's busy and Jade steps in to oversee the session." Josie juggles her coffee and phone to zoom her camera on Jade's crooked smile. She snaps a picture with a devious chuckle.

"How are ya'll doing?" Jade lifts her arms in the air. Her smile strains as her gaze roams the employees. "Are we ready to have a fabulous Fox Friday!"

"Yes!" I shout alongside the staff. They shower my sister with positive vibes, regardless of how uncomfortable she appears.

Josie stifles a laugh that stretches out into an injured animal sound. "Why does she make this look so painful? She's a natural fighter."

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“She lacks fun,” Natalie whispers as the voices settle.

“As summer kicks off, new members have joined our team.” Jade welcomes the new members by name. They’re mostly high school students taking on part-time summer positions.

“Do you think she’s going to try the handclap?” Josie digs out a handful of mini marshmallows from the fake tree stump on the fireplace. She has mini marshmallows stashed in secret hiding places throughout the lodge.

“She’s going to try the handclap.” Natalie wrinkles her nose at the mountain of marshmallows in our sister’s mug as if this isn’t an ordinary morning Josie routine. “That’s disgusting.”

“You’re disgusting.” She tosses a coffee-drenched marshmallow at Natalie. “And she sucks at the hand clap.”

My mama strums her acoustic guitar a minute later, and Jade leads us in the Fox Lodge handclap and song. It’s a bouncy tune I will never tire of and an effective custom to energize the staff on a positive note before the meeting gets down to business. Jade lists off the day’s special events, including the outdoor scavenger hunt my niece and nephew have been boasting about for days.

“This weekend Hope Fox has booked off to work on the fair kissing booth—” Jade glares at me over the rim of her glasses. I’m thankful I’m not within talking range after the barrage of lectures all week. “—and Mrs. Fox will be filling in for her.”

“Come and find me anytime for anything.” My mom tilts her favorite red Stetson in a friendly nod. She’s never seen without it.

She’s a cowgirl in all the senses—layered blonde hair with curtain bangs, a plaid shirt knotted above her waist showing off the silver fox head belt buckle.

“What’s the deets on the kissing booth?” Natalie blows the steam on her mug before taking a sip.

“I have great plans.” I slide my cell phone from my pocket and swipe it open. “I want to do this sort of double booth. One side for kissing and the other for hugs.”

“I’m not interested in the kissing booth construction. I’m referring to the man assisting with the construction.”

My insides turn to goop. I try to maintain posture as I casually ask, “What about him?”

“Your shoulders stiffened at the mention of him.” Natalie digs her fingertips into my shoulder.

“You should’ve seen her after the town meeting,” Josie slurps another marshmallow. “She had this look on her like she’d been laid—” Josie gasps. “Did you get laid? Who was it? It was Levi, wasn’t it? Oh my gosh, tell us!”

Jade’s stare snaps in our direction. “Something you’d like to share, Josie?”

I’m thankful when Josie shakes her head. “No, ma’am. Just excited for the day. Go Foxes. Go.” When Jade moves on, Josie nudges me. “I want all the details.”

“I see Natalie Fox is absent tomorrow, and Mrs. Fox will take over her hikes.” Jade’s

questioning eyes dart from my sister to my mom. “How are you doing horseback tours and hikes?”

“Sweetheart.” My mama’s southern drawl is thick. “I’ve run this ranch much longer than you.”

“And Josie Fox is taking another weekend off.” Jade swings her iPad, and it hits the side of her leg. “Is Hannah going to be around for tonight’s scavenger hunt?”

“She’s losing it,” Josie whispers without moving her mouth.

“Yes,” I chirp up. “The scavenger hunt has already been set up, and the setup for the campfire to follow will begin during supper.”

The meeting doesn’t last longer than fifteen minutes.

“Another successful meeting.” Josie pushes off the wall. “I’m off. Can’t wait until we meet again.” She walks backward, blowing kisses at me.

“Why is she acting weird?”

Natalie shrugs. “I have no idea.” Her smirk suggests otherwise.

“Why are you acting weird?”

“Not acting weird.”

After a hardy breakfast of pancakes and bacon, I saddle up my morning horseback tour and guide them along the dusty paths and picturesque rocky backdrop.

I’ve been tempted to ride to the Fox/Wilde fence line for days. Instead, I took days to

mull over Levi's confession. And maybe he needed time to rethink it, too. Either way, my body is a bag of nerves today because I find myself on board with Levi. I'm all in—if he hasn't changed his mind.

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I skip lunch at the lodge and head into town for a quick eat at Cowboy Cafe.

Matching pair of red Adirondack chairs sit on either side of the main door painted the same jam red. Inside hasn't been updated in years. The waitresses take orders in denim skirts and plaid shirts, bustling about curved wooden chairs and placing steaming lunch plates on pedestal tables. Framed rodeo photos clutter the panel and brick walls.

Sheriff Nash sits on one of the red vinyl stools along the counter.

"Sheriff." I slip onto a stool two down and eye the pecan pie in the countertop pie display.

"Afternoon, Hope." Sheriff Nash is a couple of years older than Jade. But his long hair and scruffy beard drastically age him. "Am I going to be called to the town hall for a Fox and Wilde altercation?" His growly straightforward tone makes most folks nervous. Not the locals. We all know something in him changed after his daughter died and wife left him. Grumpy. Irritated. Short-tempered. He reminds me of Levi these days.

"Absolutely not." I wave at Alma. She pulls a pen out of the white bun fastened at the nape of her neck. "Can I get a couple of slices of pecan pie and a turkey sandwich to go?"

She cups her ear. "What's that deary?" She's hard of hearing and refuses to wear hearing aids.

I repeat my order.

“Two slices of pumpkin pies —” She jots down the order on the small pad.

“No, pecan pie. Two slices of pecan pie.”

She pushes her thin-rimmed glasses up her nose. She plays Mrs. Claus every Christmas Holiday because the resemblance is uncanny.

“That’s what I said. Two slices of pumpkin pie.”

“Pecan.”

She ignores me. “And a turkey sandwich.” Half an order correct is better than none.

After a promise not to stir up trouble and a surprise bag of food, I drive to the town hall.

I’d planned to drive back like a good little Fox girl and sneak in under the radar. My plans are foiled when I see the scene in front of the town hall unfold.

I slide my sunglasses into my hair to ensure I see correctly. The town hall’s front lawn is cluttered with wood supplies, a work table, a table saw, rolling tool boxes, and large duffel bags.

Shirtless and with the sun pelting off his glistening body, Levi hooks the tang on the measuring tape over a two-by-four edge. He stretches the blade across the wood and locks it. His free hand slides a pencil wedged over his ear. He marks the wood before running a hand through his shaggy hair.

The entire ordeal makes me hot all over.

The statement he's making working with a Fox, out in the open, well, that opens a whole new set of feelings—feelings I've never dared to allow.

I collect the food and drinks and climb out of the jeep. The sweltering heat makes me appreciate I chose my denim cut-offs and midriff T-shirt with the Fox Lodge logo on it.

Levi spots me and abandons the wood he's carrying. "Good afternoon, darlin'." He strolls to me, all muscle and sweat and hotness. His cocky grin dares me to kiss it away.

I hold the bag between us like a shield. "I brought pie."

"I like pie."

I'd like to lick pie off the V muscle disappearing down the front of his pants.

"It's surprise pie."

He chuckles. "Alma was taking orders."

I nod, clutching the bag against my chest. "What is this?"

"This—" He waves an arm at the chaos. "—this is you and I proclaiming our friendship."

"Friendship? Yesterday you said you were going to marry me."

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“I am going to marry you, Miss Fox. But I also know there are many things we have to discuss. There’s a lot of ground to cover, and I don’t want to wait another twelve years. Today, we show the town a Fox and a Wilde can work together.”

This is a huge step. Most people take going out for dinner and a movie for granted, but it’s never been that simple for us. It’s not a pleasure we’ve been able to enjoy.

I want to jump up and down and scream for the world to see. I want to wrap my arms around Levi’s neck and kiss him silly. But I understand his method—one step at a time.

“If you’re not afraid to work out here with me, then I’m not afraid.”

I smirk. “You’re a little afraid.”

“I’m fucking terrified.”

I laugh, loving his blunt honesty. “I’m terrified, too.”

“But I’m more terrified of being without you. I’ve hidden behind my work long enough and am ready to stop hiding. For you. For us.”

“Fine.” I sigh dramatically, and all the while, I feel the biggest, goofiest grin on my face. “You’ve twisted my arm. I’ll do it. What’s the worst that can happen?”

“You mean besides our families killing each other.”

“Yes, besides that. And the sheriff says he’s not to be called here, or we’ll end up in a cell for the night.”

“Jail together for the night doesn’t seem like a bad idea.” He steps close. “I want to kiss you.”

“I want you to kiss me.”

“Then we’re on the same page?”

I nod, knowing he won’t do it, and at the same time, wanting it so badly my body aches.

“What in tarnation is going on here?” Mayor Thomas barks. “What is this mess?”

“The reconstruction of a local fair attraction.”

Thomas yanks off his sunglasses and pushes up the front of his straw hat. His beady round eyes give us a death stare. “Tourists don’t want to see this mess.”

“Who cares what the hell tourists want—”

I cut Levi off. “Thomas, this is an opportunity to advertise. Consider erecting the famous kissing booth for the end-of-the-month fair. Go get some of your fancy banners and signs and hang them around to advertise the upcoming fair and give people insight into the work the town puts into it.”

His snarl turns upside down. “Oh, that’s a good idea.”

“It’s a great idea.” I exchange a look with Levi.

“I’ll go get some. But no more things on the property. You’re wrecking the grass.”

You-hoo!” Wilma and Faye’s all-terrain club car tires barrel over the sidewalk. It’s unlike any club car I’ve ever seen. Painted brown like a bull, it’s complete with a mouth on the hood, eyes on the side, and a pair of bull balls hanging off the back.

Wilma yanks the wheel to steer away from a pile of wood. Tire marks dig ruts into the ground. The tires skid to a stop in front of us.

“Ladies!” Thomas sounds like he’s going to have a heart attack right here on the spot. “No club cars on the grass! It is bad enough Rita hosted the yard sale here last month.”

“And they raised good money for the youth center,” I remind him.

Thomas points to the parking lot. “Off the grass!”

“We won’t be but a second.” Faye grips the frame of the cart as she scoots out.

Wilma meets her sister at the back of the club car. They open the plastic storage bin. “We need something from the lovely couple.”

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Levi and I exchange smirks. What's the point of arguing? Once they fix on a couple, there's no talking them out of their decision.

"I'm going to get my signs," Thomas grumbles away.

"Over here." Faye loops her arm around mine and one around Levi's. "Oh, very nice. It seems like you've been working out, Mr. Wilde."

I chuckle, but Levi looks less than impressed about being doted over.

"Right here." Before I can object, my flat hand is dipped in white paint.

"Hey, now." Levi pulls away, red paint dripping from his fingertips.

Wilma catches his arm. "Just place your hand right here."

Our hands are directed to individually framed squares of material. My hand is placed on a red square, while his hand is placed on a white square.

"What ya'll doing with our handprints?" Levi asks, but I know he's aware these squares are for the blanket. They're clearly quilting for us.

"Future quilting."

"Future or now?"

"That's not for you to know."

The duo's love quilts are all the rage by those who believe. I've never been one to believe or not believe. However, I suspect the twins are responsible for throwing Levi and me together, and it makes me wonder just what kind of power they have.

"Perfect." Wilma carefully stores the prints away. Faye hands us water bottles and paper towels to wash our hands.

The familiar sound of my sisters' voices draws my attention to the parking lot beside the town hall. Natalie, Josie, Hannah, and the twins, Lex and Rex, tromp around the flower beds spilling with ground foliage and ornamental grass. Their arms are loaded with picnic baskets and coolers, restraining them from waving. Their excited vocal greetings make up for it.

I wave back. "I don't know what they're doing here."

"Tramping on Thomas' green grass." Wilma locks the bin like someone will break in for our precious handprints.

Levi touches the small of my back ever so lightly. "I invited them."

My heart swells. "You did?"

"And they're not the only ones."

From the opposite parking lot, a herd of Wilde brothers stop at the edge of the grass. Folding lawn chairs and tents are packed under their arms or over their shoulders.

I see my sisters halt. Tension and hesitation vibrate the distance between them.

I'm getting an old-school Western showdown vibe.

“This might not go the way you planned,” I whisper.

“It has to.”

Chapter Eight

LEVI

MY BROTHERS PROMISED to be on their best behavior. Not that I’ve ever known them even to have a best behavior.

I wave them over. “We’re going to set up the tents here.” I point to the area away from the trees.

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Reluctance dances across their faces.

“Pick up your pace,” Wheeler bumps into Dean’s shoulder as he bounds past. He’s my wingman today. He will ensure every last Wilde is pro-Fox by the time night falls.

“Yeah, Dean.” Beck, my youngest brother, slams Dean’s other side with a chuckle. They are always the playful and rowdy bunch.

“Where’s Hart?” Hope whispers to me.

“I didn’t invite Hart, and I noticed your sisters didn’t invite Jade.”

“Jade won’t be easy to convince.”

“Neither will Hart.”

“The kids didn’t take long.” Hope points to Wheeler’s daughter and her niece and nephew chasing each other around the town statue.

“That’s got to be a good sign, right?” I lace my fingers in hers, feeling her immediate hesitation. I nudge her to face me. “First, we distract them all. Keep them busy setting up tents and food. We’ll assign each of them tasks. One Fox and one Wilde per task. Once they’re relaxed, we’ll break for food and beer and pray we’ve begun to chip away the walls between us.”

Hope’s nodding, her smile lifting. “Okay, I like this idea. This can work.”

I want to kiss her. If today goes right, there will be a day when kissing the woman I love, wherever the hell I want, won't be a second thought.

"I want to kiss you, too," she says as if she can read my mind. Her teasing smile is a mixture of sweetness and allure.

My manhood tightens against my denim. Damn, no woman has ever had this effect on me.

She squeezes my hand before turning to her sisters. "We'll set up the food under one tent and dine under the other."

After the tents are pitched, and the coolers of cold drinks and trays of food are set up on the tables, the crew gathers around me and Hope.

Doubt and mistrust penetrate the space between us. Wildes won't stand beside Foxes. Foxes won't make eye contact with Wildes.

Hope addresses our siblings. There's a spark in her eyes I haven't seen before. "We're so thankful for y'all coming out and helping us with this."

No cheer.

No applause.

No words whatsoever.

"We will separate everyone into groups to work on specific stations. There's measuring and cutting the lumber, kissing booth assembly, staining, and painting. Who wants what?"

Hands are reluctant to rise, so I bark orders, including assigning Beck and Josie to set up ring toss and lawn darts for the kids.

The bright sun's cool breeze and close working quarters force conversation and interaction. I'd go even as far as to say friendly conversation.

A couple of hours pass, and it's no longer only the Foxes and the Wildes building the kissing booth. Passing townspeople, whether on foot or driving by, stop to see all the commotion in front of the town hall. Wary at first, realizing the feuding families are working together, some stay and lend a helping hand while others bring back the booze, food, and chairs to watch. The kids' games turn into full-blown adult games filled with laughter you can hear for miles down the road.

Thomas is fuming by the time he gets back with the signs. "What is this? Put those tents down. Move those lawn chairs." He runs about, trying to rid the crowd, but everyone is having such a blast they brush him off, as usual.

"Thomas, relax. Have a beer." Deputy Mayor Rita offers him a cold one.

"You can't drink on town hall property!" He tosses the entire bottle in the garbage as he berates the townspeople.

"Here ya go, boss." Wheeler drops another load of lumber beside the saw. "All measured and ready for you."

"Thanks." I slide the safety glasses over my eyes.

My team includes Wheeler, Hannah, and Wyatt, who popped back around twenty minutes after unloading. I'm sure to check on Hope. But finding the Wilde and Foxes together—which undoubtedly appeared to be a disaster in the making—he decided to stick around.

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We finish cutting the structural wood and tackle the redwood. I'll give Wyatt credit for choosing redwood for its resistance to moisture purposes. I'll also give him credit for not trying to steal my girl. He has a thing for Hannah. Unfortunately for him, she's too distracted checking on her rug rats tonotice.

The rumbling buzz of the saw blade touching the wood screeches in my ear. The fresh-cut wood's fragrant and earthy aroma brings me to my roots.

I love working with my hands. Always have. I remember being a young lad, chasing my granddad with my small toolbox and mini tool belt to fix the barn or a fence. While Wheeler's love for tractors earned him a spot cultivating the crops, and Beck's love for animals secured his position as head of cattle, I wanted nothing more than to work with my hands. Hart has always been the bossy numbers guy and enjoys hiding in the office.

I slice the last of the wood and scope out Hope. I've been tracing her tracks like a lost puppy all afternoon. My lip lifts in a half smile when I see her sauntering my way carrying an ice-cold beer. Her loosely braided pigtails flow from under her brown Stetson.

I toss my safety glasses on the saw table. "That for me?"

"I just got you back in my life, and I'm not letting you cut off a finger drunk sawing."

"Drunk sawing? That's not a thing."

"It's not today." Her natural pink lips swathe the top of the beer bottle. She tilts her

head backward to slurp the liquid gold. I'm jealous as hell of that bottle.

"Screw it. I'm done on machinery." I take the bottle from her and swig what's left. It's as close to her lips as I've been all day.

She laughs.

I laugh.

And when we've settled down, she beams at me. "This is going to work."

At the six-hour mark, the kissing booth's construction is finished. A handful gathers around the bright red booth for the final paint stroke of the night. Hope has some extra touches she plans to add once the paint dries, but the main construction is officially finished.

I step nice and close to Hope, brushing against her backside. My hand covers her hand, which grips the paintbrush. I hear her slight intake of breath, even surrounded by half the town. I smell her orange womanly sweetness. Half the town is drunk, so I doubt they're paying attention to the heat between us.

"Three, two, one!" The crowd counts down.

We stroke the last spot, and the crowd goes wild. Flashes from phones snap. Beer bottles clang together. But the most crucial part of the night is seeing my brothers and Hope's sisters congratulate one another.

With work finished, barbecues are grilling steak, burgers, and hotdogs. I swear half the town is here. The crowds have spilled into both parking lots. Everyone's getting along, laughing and joking. Wilma, Faye, and their quilting club claimed a tent, and they're busy quilting away. Thomas has given up trying to shoo everyone and is

passing out the rodeo and fair flyers while attempting to rope in more volunteers.

“Hey, come here.” I slip my hand in Hope’s, and we duck out of sight. We skip to the side door of the town hall. Inside, I pull her down the short hallway into the events storage room.

I lock the door behind us and gather her in my arms. “Hi.”

She wraps her arms around my neck. “Hi.”

“I missed you.”

She laughs, and the sweet, soft sound is music to my ears. “We’ve been together all day.”

“It’s not close enough.” I cover her mouth with mine and slowly lap my tongue with hers. The rush and fear of never kissing her again diminish, leaving time to truly enjoy every part of her.

“You taste like beer and sour cream chips.” She sucks her lower lip between her teeth.

I groan. “I want to take you here.”

A devilish glimmer lights her eyes. “I’m not objecting.”

I groan again, this time capturing her mouth in another kiss. Harder. Longer.

When her fingers tickle the skin above my belt buckle, I grasp her hand. “Not here.”

“Why not?” She puckers out her lower lip in a sexy pout. Her gorgeous green eyes

are a pool of desire. I'm so fucking hard that I'm on the verge of exploding.

"I want to do it right next time. No hiding. I want to strip you naked, lay you down on a bed, and ravish every part of you like you deserve."

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Her fingers curl around the waistband of my pants. “Aren’t we the romantic?”

“I was thinking we’d have a date first.”

“A date.” She rolls the words on her tongue. “How very formal of you.”

“I wanna do right by you, Miss. Fox. Make up for lost time. Make up for my asshole adolescence.”

“You were such an asshole.” Humor smears her stern look.

“So I’m told. Even Wheeler said if I don’t do right by you, he will kick my ass.”

“Wheeler?” Surprise laces her voice.

“Yeah, he has a soft spot for you. I think Beck does too.”

“I hate to say it, but none of my sisters have a soft spot for a Wilde.”

“Not even Josie?”

She laughs. “If it comes up to defending you or getting a rise out of a crowd, she’ll toss you in the mud every time.”

“Tough crowd.”

Her fingers curl around my hair, pulling my ear to her mouth. “Listen, cowboy.” Her

tongue wets my earlobe. “We have a lot of lost time to make up for. Twelve years. So many lost opportunities.”

“So many lost opportunities.” My voice is a hoarse whisper.

“That I say we take advantage of every single moment we have alone.” Her teeth tug my ear. “And that means banging me in the storage closet.”

“I have a better idea.” I unbutton her shorts and shove them down her legs. I lower myself and kiss her middle while slowly sliding her panties to her ankles. I lift her easily, and she wraps her legs over my shoulder. I press my lips against her womanhood. She’s wet and waiting. I lick her in long, slow strokes before my tongue spreads her apart.

Hope’s nails dig into my scalp, pulling me deeper. She moans my name, and it’s the best fucking sound in the world.

Chapter Nine

HOPE

PURE ECSTASY.

Flames of passion rise through my entire body.

My head leans back against the wall. My eyes fall closed. His mouth is on me, making love to me with his tongue. My body is numb as his mouth makes me tingly inside. I clench fistfuls of the material of his T-shirt. His tongue laps me. I’m drowning in the most intense sensation. I never want it to end, but I’m close. My

orgasm teases, just out of reach. He slides two fingers inside and pushes me over the edge.

“Oh yes, yes!” I clench my teeth tighter as fireworks explode inside me. I shudder and gasp, riding the wave of my climax. I’ve never been so in sync with a man before. I’ve never let a man take me in public, even if the door is locked. I’ve never wanted a man as much as I want Levi.

When I finally come down from the clouds, he’s standing with me, supporting, holding, and loving me.

“Hi.” His sultry voice ignites me again.

“Hi.” I tease him with a small kiss. I stroke his hardness. “There’s no way you can go back out there like this.”

He groans and leans his forehead against my breast. “You go out first. Give me a few minutes. I’m right behind you.”

“If you insist.” I slip away from him and collect my shorts and panties off the ground. With every movement I make, I can feel his eyes boring in my back.

I glance at him over my shoulder. His back is against the wall. His chest rises and falls in deep breaths. His hooded gaze never leaves me.

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I climb onto the horse-drawn sleigh. It's stored here until winter when local sleigh rides are an evening event.

I face him and drop my shorts and panties on the ground. I can't believe how brave I feel, standing here with only my midriff T-shirt, exposed and vulnerable.

I grasp each side of the sleigh frame opening. "Or, I could take you for the ride of your life."

"There's the outgoing gal I remember." He's across the space in seconds, gathering me in his arms. "Tomorrow we go on a date. A proper date." He says between kisses.

"Cross my heart." The words barely make it out of the mass of kisses.

His jeans are off, and he sits on the sleigh. He pulls me onto his lap to straddle him. I sink onto him. His erection swells inside of me. He cups my ass. His thick fingers dig into my flesh. We rock back and forth, slowly at first. We're still kissing and groping. I gasp when he squeezes my nipples between his index fingers and thumbs.

"Yes, baby, moan for me." He caresses one breast and lowers his mouth to the other.

Then we're rocking faster until he surges into me one last time. I cry out his name again, and he follows me over the edge this time.

We stay wrapped in each other's arms longer than we should.

I draw designs on his shirt, wishing we'd shed it with his pants. "I wish we didn't

have to leave.”

He strokes my hair. “Soon enough. Today we convinced the town and our siblings. Tomorrow our parents.”

“And Jade and Hart,” I remind him.

“What will they say if we have our parents on board?”

I shrug. “Time will tell.”

He nudges me. “Let’s go finish what we started.”

After we’re dressed, we walk hand-in-hand through the town hall. I inwardly sulk when he releases my hand to open the door. But like he said, all in good time.

Outside, the laughter and calmness we’ve left have exploded into an argument. And at the head of the fight is Hart and Jade.

“Shit.” Levi breaks into a run.

“Jade!” I race behind him. Our backs bounce against each other as we step between my sister and his brother.

“Jade, please, stop.” I hold up my hands in her direction.

“Don’t, Jade, please stop me.” The nervous woman standing in front of the Fox staff is replaced by whatever fuels my sister when it comes to these Wildes. “This is why everyone took the day off? To slum with some Wildes?”

“Don’t get your pretty little skirt in a twist.” Hart’s calmly relayed insult turns Jade’s

cheeks fire red.

“Egotistical asshole!”

“Jade!” I shout.

“Hey! Hey!” Levi’s stern shout lands on either side of us.

I can see the crowd taking sides, slowly shuffling behind his brothers or my sisters. We’re going backward, and my heart is sinking with every ticking second.

“You going to let your boyfriend talk to us like that?” Jade’s words hush the crowd. If it’s one thing Whisky Ridge Creek enjoys, it is gossip.

“Boyfriend?” Hart grits out. “What the hell is she talking about?”

Levi takes a step toward his brother. “Listen, Hart—”

Jade cuts in. “I guess Hart doesn’t know about all the sneaking around you two did growing up.”

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The crowd gasps at the secret she divulges. A secret that doesn't belong to her. My heart breaks at my sister's betrayal in front of the entire town.

"A Wilde can't date a Fox." The shout comes from the Wildes crowd.

"Foxes don't want to date Wildes!" Chants from both sides increase.

"Everyone, stop!" I shout. "We've spent the day having fun. It didn't matter whose side you were on." My pleas are ignored.

An open can of red paint soars from the Fox side and splats over the Wilde crowd. The strike ensues a full-on western brawl.

"You steal blueberries from our patch to make the pies you sell for a profit!"

"Your eggs aren't grass-fed!"

"If you don't cut down the tree on our fence line, I will!"

Some fight with words. Others run forward, fists swinging. Within minutes, the entire area is ransacked. Tent poles are kicked in half and ripped down. Chairs are tossed, and tables of food are overthrown.

Levi runs in the middle of throwing punches to separate people.

"Mrs. Miller, you liked the flowers, remember?" I try to break up the shouting matches, but there are too many, and I'm pulled in all different directions. We're

losing. It's two of us against an entire town. I'm desperate to change a single person's mind, but no one is open to anything other than fighting and arguing.

I smell the burning wood before I see the smoke billowing.

"No, no, no!" I shove my way through the crowds. I'm too late. Flaming fire licks the kissing booth from base to top. "We need water! The hose! Where's the hose?"

Levi catches my arm. "It's too late."

"This can't be how today ends." I glance around the dust-up of conflict. The fire stops no one. "This can't be how it ends." The sentence repeats in my head like a broken tune.

Cold metal snaps against my wrist. My gaze flickers down to find handcuffs on my wrist.

"I warned you, Hope." There's no mistaking the irritation laced in the sheriff's tone. "Hope Fox and Levi Wilde, you are both under arrest."

Chapter Ten

LEVI

"THIS ISN'T WHAT I meant by spending the night in a cell with you." I lean against the bars connecting the two cells in Rocky Ridge Creek's small jail. All my brothers join me in one cell, while Hope occupies the second alongside her sisters.

Sheriff Nash stretches out on his chair with his ankles crossed on the corner of the

single desk.

Hope chews on the inside of her mouth. “None of the day went the way we’d hoped.”

“We will figure something out.”

“You know we can all hear you.” The consistent tap of Jade’s boot on the cement floor sounds like a clock’s ticking second hand.

Hope spins around and points at her sister. “Hear this. I won’t forgive you for your part in causing today’s riot.”

Jade pushes off the wall and folds her arms over her chest. “I don’t forgive you for sneaking around behind my back.”

“Can you blame me? Look at what happened when you showed up.”

“If you hadn’t been all, look at me and a Wilde—” Jade flails her hands in the air. “—all over social media, I wouldn’t have even known.”

“You shouldn’t have come! You weren’t invited!” Hope’s scream silences the few scuffles in the cells. The shout doesn’t stop old man Earl’s crackling snores. The drunken fool is passed out and curled in a ball in the corner of the Wilde cell.

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“Papa wasn’t invited either. How do you think he’s going to take it?”

Hart snickers behind me, and the anger I’ve been holding surfaces.

I spin around. A couple of giant steps, and I slam my brother against the wall.

I press my arm against his throat, stopping his cocky chuckle. “I’ve always had your back.”

“Was that while you were sneaking around with a Fox?”

I lean close to his ear. “You’re one to fucking talk. Don’t pretend you haven’t screwed the enemy. And I didn’t say a damn word. Ever.”

His jaw tightens. Anger pools in his glare. “I didn’t prance my easy fuck around for the town to see.”

My arm is in the air and swinging before my judgment catches up—his jaw cracks. My knuckles throb. The punch motivates my brothers to jump in and separate us.

“Is this how I raised my boys? To fight over a Fox?” My pa’s low and deep rumble sounds like thunder. “Guess I failed in raising men.”

“How can a boy raise men?” Mr. Fox maintains a similar stern tone. The space shrinks around the two overbearing men.

Sheriff Nash slams his boots on the floor. “How the hell y’all get in here?” The man

lacks common courtesy, manners, and all things kind.

The cold metal kisses my palms as I wrap my fingers around the bars. I catch sight of the Foxes, and Wildes join me at the front of the cells. All appear equally unsettled with the confrontation of our fathers. The last time our dads were together was a town meeting five years ago. Thomas's brokengavel and a row of smashed chairs later, they'd both been banned from attending town meetings.

The sheriff plows between the two burley men. He's equally muscular and not afraid to get physical.

"Molly!" He shouts down the thin hallway leading to the front receptionist's desk and exit.

"Yes, sweetie." Molly Nash happens to be the sheriff's mother—a sweet little old lady who knits baby hats between phone calls and visitors.

The sheriff growls. "It's Sheriff Nash in the workplace. What did I tell you about letting visitors back here?"

"No visitors, but their kids are in jail. I would've liked to have visited you in jail when you were young."

Nash holds his hands up, halting her from further speaking. He steps back. "You two, out."

"I'll be taking my girls with me."

The sheriff presses a flat palm against Mr. Fox's chest, halting his stride. "Not yet."

"What the hell do you mean not yet?"

“The law punishes criminals,” my pa snickers. I see Hart replicated a hundred times in this man. Everything from his anger to the way he presents himself. Boss of the family. Boss of the room.

“Your boys aren’t free to go either. A meeting at town hall is being organized as we speak.”

“What the hell do my boys in jail have to do with a town meeting?” My pa’s question is reasonable—my curiosity spikes.

“The damage to the town hall is severe. I can charge every Fox and Wilde with mischief concerning property, and mischief causing danger to life, which is an indictable offense and liable to imprisonment. Or they can listen to what Thomas and the town council say.”

My pa shoves a finger in the sheriff’s chest. “Council can kiss my ass.”

“Pa,” I growl.

Calvin Wilde stares me down with his deadly glare. The one he enforced growing up. That single look sure had me obeying the rules without question. “I’d want to stay behind bars if I were you, too.”

“Is that how you raised your boys? On threats and violence?”

“Better than raising them to manipulate men to get what they want.”

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The Fox women ruffle in the cell beside me. I don't blame them.

"You two are the root of our problem." Hope's bravery stirs a feeling inside me. "You've been fighting for so long, you don't even know why anymore. Ask yourselves whether a fight between our ancestors is worth tearing families and a town apart. Over a disagreement that never belonged to either of you."

She's standing up for me.

For us.

"Hope's right." I push off the bars. "This feud has gone on long enough, and I will no longer be a part of it. I refuse to drag my children into this fight. They won't be raised to hate a Fox."

"Get my boys the hell out of their cell. These tarts are brainwashing them. And we all know what happens once a Wilde falls for a Fox."

Mr. Fox takes the first swing. His fist connects with my pa's chin. He deserves it. Had I been on the other side of the bars, I would've swung too.

Sheriff Nash steps between them. My pa's swing knocks the sheriff in the eye.

"Council is ready to see them." Molly maneuvers around the brawl in a carefree way, as if outbreaks of violence at the station are a daily occurrence. I know for a fact they aren't. The biggest crime in town is wherever drunken Earl lands.

A ring of keys jangles in Molly's hand. She singles out one key and opens each cell.

"I smell alcohol on your breath." The sheriff has my pa pinned against the wall.

"Of course you do. I get a call when I've sat down to enjoy a beer with my supper. I suggest you take these off."

Outside the cell, I want to pull Hope in my arms. Her reluctance and fear keep me at my brother's side.

Mr. Fox marches to meet his daughters.

Nash releases my father. "All of you, get the hell out of my building before you end up back in cells. Now!" The sheriff points out the door.

I grab Hope's hand to hold her back. "You okay?"

"I don't know."

Mr. Fox storms back in and shoves my chest. I stumble a couple of steps back. The man has strength. "You stay the hell away from my daughter, or so help me, Lord you will regret it. You hear me?"

Chapter Eleven

HOPE

TWO WEEKS LATER, nothing has changed—at least nothing between our families.

I look at Levi from across the front lawn of the town hall. He's kneeling in the flowerbed, digging out soil to plant ornamental grass. He's always got his eyes on me, like now. Those brown eyes melt my heart through and through.

Jade drops a bag of mulch in front of me. "Your eye fucking is what got us into trouble in the first place."

I raise my hand to block the sun as I peer up at my sister. "Oh, Jade, we've been knocking boots every single night. And there's not a darn tootin' thing you can do about it. So I suggest you get on board."

"No one's on board. That's why you're sneaking out at night and sneaking in early morning. Walk of shame has never looked more pathetic."

She purposely stomps over the new sod we laid down this week, ignoring the multiple signs Thomas installed that readstay off.

Thomas has a new list every evening, including building another kissing booth. I wondered if the lists would ever end.

Tonight it ends.

And we're no closer to bringing our families together. On the turn side, I've also appreciated the space it granted Levi and me time to get to know each other again. There's no denying things are different between us. We've each grown up and changed. Levi now wears briefs instead of boxers—a couple of prior skinny-dipping adventures in the creek exposed his underwear choices. But a lot hasn't changed. He would rather spend time outside than inside. And the ranch and his family are his heart and soul. The latter scares me. But truthfully, my family is my heart and soul, too. It's not looking like either is coming together anytime soon—or at all.

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“Hey.” Natalie hunches down and slices the top of the mulch bag. “Listen, I don’t have anything against the Wildes. Josie and Hannah are on your side too.”

My gloved hands shovel out a handful of red mulch. “You’re the only ones.”

“It’s a start.”

“It’s exhausting. The sneaking around. The lies. The glares.”

“What are you saying?”

What am I saying?

“I want Papa to walk me down the aisle, and I want the grandparents of my kids to get along.” I dump out the rest of the mulch. “Deep down, I know I can’t have that with Levi.”

“Hope —”

I shake my head. “Forget it. I’m going home.”

Natalie picks up the mulch bag I toss on the ground. “We’re not finished for another hour.”

“Thomas knows where to find me.” I rip off my gloves and throw them on the ground as I storm to my jeep.

“Hope! Hey! Wait up!” Levi presses his hand on the jeep door to keep it closed.
“What’s going on?”

“This isn’t going to work.” I wave my hands in the space between us.

Levi catches them with his dirt-stained gloves and kisses my knuckles. I feel my restraint drop a hundred levels. He has this effect on me. With him, everything feels right. It always has. The only difference was he knew to walk away back then. We’re both fooling ourselves now.

I retract my hands from him. “A handful of people are on our side. The entire town is against us.”

“Wilma and Faye are not against us.”

“A handful plus two.” I roll my eyes. “I’m tired. My papa won’t even look at me. And yours isn’t talking to you. How can we get married and have children when our parents hate each other?”

“Is that a proposal?”

“No.”

“Are you trying to tell me something else?”

He touches my middle, and I slap his hand away. “Gahhh! I’m serious.”

He cups the side of my face. All his joking vanishes. “Come away with me.”

“What?”

“For the weekend. We’ll drive for a couple of hours and rent a room. We can dine out, tour the town, do a little shopping, and do some dancing. Without the feud on our shoulders. Without people watching our every move.”

“And then what? Come back here and hide in the night?”

“We knew this would be hard.” His voice holds a stern tone.

“I didn’t know they’d start the Cowboy Wayne’s statue on fire.”

“He was a bit of a douche. It was well deserved.”

“Is that what they’ll say when they start our house on fire? While we’re sleeping? While our children are sleeping? It was a Fox and a Wilde. It was well deserved.”

“Hope —”

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I shake my head. I know I'll listen to anything he says. "I need a minute to get my head on straight."

Levi holds open the door. His thick arms lean above the door frame. "Will I see you tonight?"

"In our secret rendezvous spot?" Sarcasm drips off my words.

"I'll wait all night." He shuts the door. His fingers wrap over the metal of the open window. "Come away with me."

"What does it accomplish? We'll only come back to what we've left behind."

I take the fast way home, and my mama waves when I pull in. "You're home early. Where are your sisters?"

All my pent-up anger rages out. "You know what, Mama? This feud is stupid. I'm done with it. It will destroy whatever chance I have with Levi, or it will put a wedge between me and my family. I don't win. I won't win!"

"I agree."

"With which part? The part where you tell me to obey Papa? That Levi and I won't ever be together. That I'm risking losing my family for some guy?"

"The feud is stupid."

I think I've heard her wrong. "That's the part you agree with?"

"Yes." She takes my hand and guides me to a couple of unoccupied chairs under a moss-ridden oak tree. "Did you know Mrs. Wilde and I were friends before I started dating your father?"

I stare at her, stunned. "I had no idea."

"It's true. And we shared a mutual friend, Naomi."

"Aunt Naomi?"

My mama nods, and I see sadness wash over her face. I never met my papa's sister. She died long before I was born. There'd been an accident during a hike on the ridge. No one talks about it, and the details have always been minimal.

"After her death, your father and I grew close. Inseparable. We missed her so much. We'd spend hours sharing stories about her. She was a free spirit, much like you. She didn't listen to the rules, just like Josie, and she loved the great outdoors like Natalie. I see so much of her in all my girls" She tucks a piece of hair behind my ear. "While I was seeing your father, Lillian started dating Mr. Wilde. Our new found loves left no room for our friendship."

"Mama, I'm sorry."

"We all have decisions to make. I chose your father over my best friend, and she chose her husband over me. And at the time, we were both fine with our decisions."

I wring my hands together. "Do you regret your decision to marry papa?"

"Never. I love your stubborn ass of a father. But I do regret not fighting harder. Not

setting down rules or boundaries before I said yes to his hand in marriage. Lillian was my friend, and I'd already lost Naomi."

"Levi has been my best friend for as long as I can remember."

"I know, and you should fight to keep him like I should've fought for Lillian. I should've made sure there was room for her. Then maybe you and Levi wouldn't have been forced to sneak around."

"He invited me out for the weekend. Just me and him."

"I hope you said yes."

"Jade hates him. Papa hates him."

"Papa doesn't know Levi. His own issues blind him."

"He loathes Mr. Wilde. He punched him in the face at the station. Punched him. Papa. I was shocked. I've never seen him hurt a soul."

"Sweetheart." My mama grasps my hands and pulls me so close our faces almost touch. "Stop worrying about everyone else. First, go figure out if Levi is your man. Go away with him for the weekend. And the next weekend. And the next if you have too. Discover who you both are now. And if he's the one, you fight for him. You don't give up because Papa isn't talking to you. That's not how we raised you."

She's right. I'm not a quitter. And neither is Levi.

Chapter Twelve

LEVI

NIGHT AFTER NIGHT I've met Hope at our spot and not once was I as nervous as I am right now.

I stretch out my clammy hands before I spread out blankets on each side of the fence. I carry over the picnic basket my ma prepared for us. She's on our side. Ever since the kissing booth fiasco, she's silently been giving me hints of approval. It's my pa and Hart who are sitting on the edge. If I can wrangle my pa on board, Hart will have no choice but to jump on too.

I lift out the bottle of wine and two long stem glasses.

Will Hope show up? Or has our sneaking around been too much for her? I wish to the stars it wasn't so complicated between us.

"How'd you know I'd come?"

The sound of her voice calms my jittery nerves.

I face her. She's gorgeous, fresh out of a shower with damp hair darkening the shoulders of her long dress.

“Come, sit with me.”

She lowers herself cross-legged on the opposite side of the log fence. Her makeup-free face glows with sun as it begins to set.

“Hi,” I say.

Her lips curve upward. “Hi.”

“You look beautiful.”

Her nose turns up and she takes a quick glance down at her outfit “I just got out of the shower.”

I growl. “You’re making me jealous.”

Her smile is reserved, her tone low, and her bubbly self appears knocked down. “You look nice, too. New shirt?”

I pinch the middle of the plaid shirt I picked up in town before heading home. “This old thing?”

She laughs. “Yeah, that old thing.”

I uncork the wine bottle and slip a glass between two logs for her. Our hands brush. I don’t pull away. Instead, I loop my finger around hers. “I didn’t know if you would come.”

Her tongue darts across her lips moistening them. “You can’t get rid of me that easy.”

“I don’t want to get rid of you.”

“You put a blanket on each side of the fence.”

“Because I know, if we’re sitting on the same blanket, I’d be kissing you by now.”

She nibbles on her lower lip in a way that drives me wild. “It’s true, you can’t keep your hands off all this.”

I laugh. Deep and throaty, all at the same time. “I love you, woman.”

“I love you, my forbidden cowboy.” Her words are music to my ears. “But the last couple weeks we’ve been distant in public and hiding at night. I can’t do it. I want to walk down the street and hold your hand. I want to sit in a restaurant and eat food off your plate. And I want to kiss you all the times you make me giggle inside.”

I wish I was on the other side of this damn fence.

“And don’t get me wrong, I love hiking the trails hand-in-hand and eating the veggies you pack on our picnics. And I especially love making love to you under the stars, but I want everyone to know that you’re my cowboy.”

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I can't stay here for another second. I hop over the fence and gather her in my arms.
"I love all those things and I want all the rest."

"That means we're standing up against our families and the town."

"I know what it means."

She cups my face in her hands. "But before we do this, let's get away. Let's pack a bag and spend the weekend where no one knows us. Where they won't whisper behind our backs or shout in our faces. Where we won't feel judged every second, or end up in jail."

"Hope, I would take you anywhere in this world."

Chapter Thirteen

LEVI

"THERE'S TALK GOING around town." My pa sits on the tailgate of my pickup.

I nod at two ranch hands who pass by. After my divorce, I sold the house I bought my ex-wife and moved into one of the ranch hand houses on my folk's property. It's worked just fine, until now. Now I want a big house with lots of bedrooms to share with Hope. The man glaring me down now is the one holding back my dream.

I toss my overnight bag into the back of my pickup. “There’s always talk.”

“Son, Henry will never let you date his daughter, let alone marry her. You’re fighting a battle you know nothing about.”

“I know what everyone else knows.”

“Who says they know everything?”

I hop on the tailgate beside my pa. “No one can keep secrets in this town. Unless of course, you have something you want to share.”

My pa’s gaze glides over the land stretching out miles. Land we’ve worked on together my whole life. Worked, laughed, and screamed our frustration out. I feel like he’s keeping something from me. Something he wants to tell me, but won’t. Or can’t.

“You’re going to get hurt, son.” His voice is rough with pain.

“The only thing hurting me is your disapproval.” I hop off the truck. “I’m spending the weekend with Hope. I plan on marrying Hope and I’d really appreciate it if you’d stop the rivalry and stand by my side.” I don’t wait for his reply, knowing damn well he won’t budge. This weekend isn’t about him. So as I drive away from the ranch, I focus all my attention on the love of my life.

She’s waiting for me at the end of Fox Lodge driveway and wearing one of those knee-length floral dresses I can’t get enough of. They hug her body in all the right places and give easy access to romps in abandoned houses.

Josie gives a double thumbs up before the tires of the all-terrain vehicle peel back up the long driveway.

I hop out and take Hope's bags from her. "Morning, sunshine." I kiss her.

"I thought maybe you'd changed your mind." She runs her hand down the front of my shirt.

"A wild bull couldn't have kept me away."

We load into the truck. I feel the tension as we drive through town. It's not until Whisky Ridge Creeks sign is a dot in the reflection of the rear view mirror that my shoulders ease.

"I have a game to pass the time." Hope shifts to face me.

"Do you?"

"It's sixty-nine questions to test our compatibility." Her thumb slides to open her homescreen on her phone.

I reach for her free hand. "That's a lot of questions and I don't think we need a compatibility test. I can tell you without a doubt, we're one-hundred-and-ten percent compatible."

"It's very accurate." A small smirk on her pink painted lips. "I found it on the internet."

"Of course then, by all means, this will determine our compatibility." I chuckle. "On a side note, did you notice the number? Sixty-nine."

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“Are you sixteen?”

“My guess is a sixteen-year-old wrote this.”

She ignores my accurate side note. “First question. Are you a spender or a saver?”

I squeeze her hand. “I’m a saver. But this weekend I’ve rented us a cottage nested in a southern belle pecan orchard.”

“So you’re a romantic.” She scrolls down the list.

“I’ve never been a romantic. Never had the desire.”

Hope leans back in the seat and rearranges the visor to block the early morning sun. “I recall many times you surprised me on one of our adventures. You snuck pie from your grandma’s baking. Or the time you set up a campsite on the fence line. Sleeping bags, a campfire and marshmallows were all present.”

The night is fresh in my mind too. We’d lied to our parents and spent the night under the stars. “That wasn’t supposed to be romantic.”

“Maybe not, but it revealed who you were, deep down. This sweet, caring guy who went out of his way for those he cared about.”

“Don’t go telling everyone. You’ll tarnish my grumpy name.”

“Next question, what is the most annoying thing couples do on social media?”

“I don’t have no goddam social media.” I tilt my head to her. “See, written by a sixteen –year-old millennial.”

The four hour drive to Louisiana is long, but I don’t mind. I don’t mind tracking across the state if I get to do it with Hope by my side. We stop in Alexandria for lunch. We find a patio outside and enjoy the buzz of the city over classic Louisiana red beans and rice with grilled sausage and cornbread. Halfway through our meal, Hope takes a bite of my cornbread with a little giggle. No one around us noticed. No one cares.

We tour an upscale flea market. Each time she slips her hand out of mine to look at a unique find, I want to grab it back. We don’t make it out without a few buys. Supper is creeping up, so we stop by a grocery store and pick up enough supplies to last us the weekend.

We check into our private log cabin with a terracotta roof. I know the specs: kitchenette, dining area, jacuzzi bathtub, and plush king size bed.

“It’s so cute.” Hope carries in her bags while I juggle the groceries and my own bag. “It reminds me of the lodge with its walls and earthy colors.”

I leave the bags on the kitchen table and follow Hope into the bedroom.

She runs her fingers through the rose petals sprinkled over the white coverlet on the maple bed. “Not the romantic type, huh?”

I lean against the doorframe. “Maybe a little.”

“Definitely a little.” She turns to me. “Are we eating out for supper?”

“We can.”

She loosens the top button in her dress. “I think I’ll take a shower before we go.” The second button opens. “I mean you were very jealous of my shower the other day—ahhh!” I’m across the room and tossing her over my shoulder in seconds. I slap her derrière. “I’ve been waiting all week for this.”

Chapter Fourteen

HOPE

“THERE’S ANOTHER ONE!”

Levi runs and sweeps the net over a lightning bug. He walks back to me in the slow sexy way the man walks without even knowing how darn hot he is. We carefully shake it to the mason jar of lightning bugs we’ve already caught.

“There are definitely not as many lightning bugs as when we were youngins.”

After we spent both evenings lying by the campfire, entwined in each other’s arms, and watching the light-show of blue-white lights under the oak trees, we decided to catch some like the good ol’ days.

Today was perfect.

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The entire weekend has been perfect.

We've had no worries of family members stumbling upon us. No sneaking back to our side of the fence afterward. No stopping on opposite sides of the road and knowing meeting in the center would cause uproar.

Levi wraps his arms around me. "It's our last night."

"I wish it wasn't."

"Then let's make the most of it." He nuzzles my neck with a barrage of soft kisses. He draws me close. Our thighs brush. My breasts press against his torso. "Move in with me."

"In your ranch hand cabin?"

"I don't care where. The cabin. Your lodge. The Quilt House B&B until we buy our own place."

"You would stay at the Quilt House? With the twins? Stealing patches off our outfits and dipping our hands in paint to finish quilting our love blanket the entire time?"

"For you, I'd live there a lifetime."

I shake my head with a laugh. "I wouldn't survive a lifetime."

He captures my mouth with a kiss, bringing a rush of emotions. "Should we call it a

night?”

I nod, knowing our evening is only beginning.

Rivers of desire flood me as he leads me to our cabin. He guides me to the bedroom. The room is lit with mason jars filled with lightning bugs.

“This is beautiful. When did you sneak these in?”

“I have my ways.” His warm palms take my face in a way that makes my knees weak and my heart sing a country tune.

“I could get used to these sweet surprises.”

“In case you didn’t hear, I am quite the romantic.” His lips are soft and firm on mine. Sweet and hot. “Wait here.”

He leaves me, legs trembling, in the middle of the bedroom. Music floats from the old-school radio on the dresser. Levi sweeps me into his arms and begins slow dancing.

“I had other thoughts in mind.” I rest my head against his chest. I can feel his arousal pressed against me as we sway.

“Darlin’, we’re getting there. Don’t you worry.”

“I’m not worried.” I love being in his strong protective arms, swaying to the music in perfect sync. “I’m worried about going home.” I tried to leave the issues back home from spoiling our weekend. I hadn’t planned on brining them up now, but they’re lingering in the back of my head. Always there. Always threatening to destroy me and Levi.

His finger hooks my chin and lifts my gaze to meet his. “We’ll talk, I promise. We will devise one helluva plan that our families won’t be able to resist.”

My lips curve upward. “Will we now?”

“It’s going to blow them away.”

“If it’s anything like this romantic side of you, I’m sure it will.”

“Then we can get married.” He kisses the tip of my nose. “Build our dream home.” A kiss lands on my cheek. “Start a family. I envision six youngins running about.”

“Six?” I lean back. “Whoa cowboy, hold up.”

He’s wearing that adorable cocky smirk. “I’m not fussy. Five’s fine.”

“Three. Tops.”

“As many as you want.” His mouth covers mine in a ravenous kiss that has me clinging to the front of his shirt.

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The shag carpet tickles my feet. The back of my legs bump the edge of the bed. In a single swoop, he pulls my dress over my head. I sink into the quilted comforter.

He stops above me, openly drinking me in. “You’re so damn beautiful, Hope.” He positions himself above me and leans down, forcing me to lie on my back. His warm lips kiss the edge of my jaw. He dips to my neck leaving a sensual path over my skin.

I reach for his pants and he stops me. “Not yet darlin’. Let me cherish you first.” He lifts his head to face to me. His eyes are glossy and sultry. “You’re exquisite.” He runs his tongue across my bottom lip.

“You’re exquisite,” my breathless words put that half-smile on his face. I suck in my lower lip to taste him.

He growls deep in his chest. “And you’re sexy as hell.” His head lowers to the tender skin behind my ears. “I’ve dreamt of being this close to you every damn night.” His hand caresses my thigh. He rains kisses down my neck until he finds the lace netting on the swell of my breasts.

My fingers dig into the quilt at my side to keep from reaching for his pants again. His hands slide up my back and he unclips my bra. I gasp when he flicks my nipples with his hot wet tongue.

“That’s my girl. Tell me what you like.” His large hands cup my breasts.

“I like it all.” My breath staggers.

His low chuckle drives my body wild with desire.

He suckles my breasts and swirls the nubs with his tongue. I can't suppress my needy moan. I arch my body and lift my hips against him. He continues sucking, licking, and biting. Moving lower, he kisses and nips the skin across my belly. All the while, his hands run up and down my quivering legs.

He brushes his hand between my legs over my panties. "You're so wet." He hooks his fingers over my panties and slowly slides them off. My body is shaking with need. I'm grateful when his lips meet mine. At the same moment, his fingers dip inside of me finding the spot that drives another long moan out of me.

"That's it, darlin'." He moves his fingers in and out, teasing and probing.

I need more than this. "I need you inside me."

He doesn't argue this time. He yanks his shirt off and I fumble undoing his pants. He sheds his clothes, pins me to the bed and buries himself deep inside me. My hips rock back and forth in a rhythm of love. Our bodies join and the rest of the world fades away.

LEVI

LATER THAT EVENING, peace claims me. Hope lies on my chest with her head in the crook of my shoulder. I feel the rise and fall of her breathing. Her heart beating with mine.

I don't want to ruin the moment. I don't want to discuss a plan, or talk about our folks or the town. But I've seen the weight Hope carries with our unresolved issues. Plus, the conversation with my father has been nagging me.

I run my fingers along her silky bare shoulder. "I think there's something deeper going on between our folks."

I feel her still beneath me. "What do you mean? Deeper than the feud?"

"My pa came to see me off and he didn't seem angry that we were going away together. He seemed almost sad."

She tilts her head to face me. "Sad? Why would he be sad?"

"I don't know." I slip a piece of her strewn hair behind her ear. "It's been playing in my head all weekend and the only conclusion is they're not telling us something."

Hope shakes her head. "We would know. The town would know."

"Would they?"

"The town knows everything."

"I have a gut feeling they don't."

She sits up and rests her elbow on my chest. "We should get them together and flat out ask."

"That seems like a disaster in the making."

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“We can enlist the help of the twins.”

A laugh bursts out of me. “No. Involving them is asking for trouble.”

She taps her fingers on my skin. “The quilt queens can arrange for our parents to meet at Bucky and Kiwi’s bar for supper. If they set up a table in the hole, your parents can eat on one side and mine on the other side.”

“Bucky and Kiwi will never go for that.”

“If Wilma and Faye are calling the shots, what choice do they have? Those women don’t take no for an answer.” She pokes my chest. “You said we were devising one helluva a plan and I’ll tell you now, any plan with Wilma and Faye is a helluva plan.”

He doesn’t look as convinced.

“This is all we have left.”

“Then I guess we better make it one helluva meal.”

Chapter Fifteen

HOPE

“I’M MORE NERVOUS than a cat in a room full of rocking chairs.” I fix the flower

arrangement on the table between Bucky and Kiwi's bar — again.

Levi lifts my hands away from the white hydrangeas. He smooths his rough palms down my bare arms. "You're shivering."

It has nothing to do with the air conditioning and my spaghetti strap white lace dress. "When they discover we've tricked them —" I take a deep breath.

"From what you've told me, your mom is already on our side and your father would do anything for you."

"It's his opinion of you that scares the death out of me."

Levi chuckles. "Imagine standing on my side. I wouldn't put it past your father to punch me."

"My papa wouldn't hurt a fly. He's actually the biggest teddy bear ever."

"You do remember he punched my pa square in the jaw, right?"

"He's really protective of his girls."

"I rest my case." He hooks a finger under his chin and turns his head sideways. "Take a good look darlin' cause it might be the last time I look this pretty."

I sink my face into my hands and groan through my fingers. "Maybe this is a bad idea."

"This is the best idea you two have come up with." Faye positions a wine and water glass at the six place settings.

“Buckle down. Stick to your decision. At your age, it’s about damn time you made the right one.” Wilma fusses over the linen wrapped cutlery.

The twins have gone all out to make tonight perfectly special. In the short time since our phone call, they’d managed to rope Bucky and Kiwi into pushing together a couple tables in their feuding hole. Three settings on Bucky’s for the Wildes and three settings on Kiwi’s for the Foxes. The table is decked with a burlap runner stretched over an ivory tablecloth. Fancy plates sit on floral placemats. I’m sure the entire getup is from the sisters’ bed and breakfast, Quilt House B&B.

“There’s no way in hell we’re backing out.” Levi cups my face and plants a long kiss on my forehead before pressing his forehead on the exact spot. “Right?” His whisper is only for me, but I’m sure the sisters are hanging onto every word.

“Right.” I run my hands along the stubble of his jaw.

“You ready?”

I nod against his head. “Yes.”

He softly brushed his lips over mine.

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“It’s time.” Faye scoots away from the window. Wilma follows her to a booth tucked away but within hearing distance.

I slip over to Kiwi’s side of the bar. While Bucky has a rustic country vibe to his bar, Kiwi’s bottle-green walls, bronze pipes and bamboo to create privacy booths has a more earthy tone.

“This is a bad idea.” Kiwi chops a tomato. The halves roll on either side of the knife. “We’re about to have a come-to-Jesus meetin’.”

“Hush now.” I take a deep breath as the door opens. I rush straight into my mama’s open arms.

“I see your weekend went good,” she whispers in my ear.

“It did.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” She kisses the side of my head and steps back in-line with my papa. “Henry, hug your daughter.”

My papa eyes me under his grey bushy eyebrows. “You come to your senses?” He’s referring to his hope that I ditched Levi in Louisiana.

“My senses have never been clearer.”

His eyes soften and light up for the first time in weeks. I only wish it was for my happiness and not his own selfishness. He wraps his massive arms around me and I

pray this isn't the last time. I pray we all walk out of here on good terms.

"What the hell is he doing here?" My papa growls over my shoulder.

"Henry, behave. I told you—"

He wrenches out of my grasp and storms around me. "You never told me nothing about no Wilde." He points at Levi. "You think you can kidnap my daughter and do whatever the hell you want with her!"

"Papa!" I have to run to get in front of his long strides. "Stop!" I shove his chest and he nearly slams into me Levi.

"I dare you to put a hand on my son, Fox." I'm thankful a table separates my papa from Mr. and Mrs. Wilde.

"Mr. Fox, I would never disrespect your daughter."

"Horseshit. The rumours going around are plenty dis-fucking-respectful."

"Papa, he didn't start those rumours. Your feud with his family did."

"Henry, you agreed to sit down and eat with Hope, so let's take a seat."

"I ain't eating with no Wilde."

"I ain't eating with no Fox."

"Sit down, Calvin." Levi's mother points to a chair and Mr. Wilde grumbles into the seat.

“You too.” My mama takes the upper hand and I’m grateful when my papa sits down.

Levi pulls out a chair for me before he takes his. We sit on each end of the table, smack dab in the middle of both bars. In the middle of our family’s feud.

The table is dead silent. Our fathers rage a scowling war. Our mothers share half smiles.

“On the menu tonight is barbecue pulled pork accompanied by my famous hush puppies,” Wilma interrupts the sparring match, joined by Faye carrying plates of steaming meals.

“These yummy golden fritters are made from a thick cornmeal-based batter.” Wilma serves the Wilde side.

“Thank you,” I say when Faye sets a plate in front of me.

“The batter is fried until crisp outsides and chewy tender insides—”

“We all know what hush puppies are.” Mr. Wilde pops a whole one in his mouth.

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“They look delicious,” Levi tells Wilma.

She plants her hand on her hips. “They sure are. They win first place at the fair every year.”

The main course is eaten in silence. Our fathers ignore each other or cut off any conversation our mothers try to start up.

I regret sitting so far away from Levi. The space between us feels stretched out by every minute that ticks by and we’re no closer to our fathers even pretending to smile at one another.

When the ladies take away our plates with promise of pecan pie, my papa tosses his napkin on the table. “Let’s cut to the chase and y’all can tell us what we’re doing here.”

“We all know what we’re doing here.” Levi’s father sticks a toothpick in his mouth. “These two are shacking up.”

Levi’s elbows dig into the table. “Pa—”

“Am I wrong?”

Levi laces his fingers together.

“No.” I stand up. “But it’s more than shacking up and I think you already know that.”

Levi comes to my side and slips his hand in mine. “We gathered you here to—”

“Nope.” My papa’s chair legs scrape over the floor.

My mama clamps a hand on his shoulder to keep him from standing. “You’re not leaving until you’ve heard our daughter out.”

“I don’t need to hear her out. The answer is no.”

“You would argue with a fencepost,” my mama snarls.

“At the least the fencepost isn’t disrespectful.” His gaze lands on mine and my heart sinks.

“With all due respect sir, I love your daughter. I’ve loved her from the first time I saw her pigtails bouncing on the other side of the fence.”

“I told you we should’ve built a solid fence along the Wilde line,” my papa grunts at my mama.

“Hush now, and let the boy speak.”

“She’s sunlight on a cloudy day. I don’t believe in a Fox luring a Wilde, but I was captivated by Hope. Even at the young age of six. Through her eyes, the world was her adventurous land to explore. Her wholehearted laughter sounded for miles.” Levi faces me with glossy eyes. “I admire your strength, the kindness of your words, your patience and understanding.” He kneels to the ground.

My heart swells. My breathing hitches. My legs buckle and I sit down in the chair. I knew he’d planned on marrying me, I just had no idea he’d be proposing today. Here. Now.

“Hope Fox, you complete me. I didn’t understand just how much until you weren’t catching lightning bugs with me, or hiking up the ridge or swimming in the creek.”

“The ridge?” My papa interrupts. “You took my daughter hiking up the ridge?”

Mr. Wilde curses under his breath.

My mama’s hand slides over my papa’s arm. “Henry, calm down.”

“Did you take my daughter hiking on the ridge?” He breaks down every syllable.

“Yes, sir.”

I don’t even know who moved first, but in seconds my dad has Levi backed up against the unfinished wall. His arm is across his throat. “You son of a bitch.”

“Papa!” I grab his arm.

“Get your hands off my son!” Mr. Wilde grabs my father’s shoulders and pulls him off Levi. They both stagger backward into the table. Glasses fall over and plates smash on the ground.

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“I see where he gets his disrespect from.” My father narrows a hostile glare. “Always pushing boundaries, never following rules, putting other people’s lives in risk for his own selfishness.”

“I never put her life at risk,” growls Mr. Wilde.

My head snaps to meet Levi. He’d been right about more history than we knew.

“Don’t you fucking dare talk about her.” My papa’s aggressiveness is rare.

“Who is her?” I ask.

“No one,” both men grumble. They look away with guilt ridden faces.

“Wait a minute, so you two aren’t fighting because of the feud between the Foxes and the Wildes?” My finger waggles between them.

“We absolutely are.”

“Of course we are.”

I shake my head. “No, no, no. Who is she? Who are you talking about? Mama?” I look at my mother. She shakes her head and then it hits me.

“Naomi?”

Every face turns pale as a ghost, including my mama’s.

All except Levi. “Who’s Naomi?” he asks.

“My aunt. She died when she was fifteen or sixteen—”

“We’re not here to talk about your aunt.” My papa fists his hands at his side.

“It seems like we should talk about her. Or at the very least, you two should talk about her. It’s obvious something happened and you two are still pretty angry about it.”

“Something didn’t just happen, Hope.” My father’s hands land on the table and the dinnerware rattles. “She died. She died because of this son of a bitch you’re making me share a table with.”

“Naomi didn’t die because of me.”

“Don’t you fucking say her name!” My father’s fist slams down and shatters a plate.

“You can’t blame me for her death.” Mr. Wilde sounds broken and I realize they really deceived the town.

“Mr. Wilde, were you secretly dating my Aunt Naomi?”

Chapter Sixteen

LEVI

MY PA DATED a Fox?

I can't even wrap the idea around my head. It's a foreign thought I'd never considered in my entire life.

“Pa? Were you dating Hope's aunt?”

The strained features on his face answer my question, but it's not enough for Hope's father.

“Of course, he was.” Mr. Fox looks ready to smash my father into the wall. “His lack of respect landed them on the ridge and my sister death.”

“It was an accident.”

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“It wouldn’t have happened if she hadn’t been there with you. And now your son is taking my daughter to the ridge? I won’t have it! We’re leaving and if your son comes within a hundred feet of the fence line, I will shoot him.” When Mr. Fox reaches for Hope’s arm, she pulls away. “Hope, we’re leaving.”

She laces her fingers in my hand. “I’m not leaving, papa. There is going to be a Wilde and Fox wedding.”

“Over my dead body!”

“I’m about to have a come-apart,” mutters my pa.

“We didn’t bring you here to ask your permission.” Hope takes a deep breath. “I’m so sorry Naomi died. I can’t even imagine the pain that must’ve caused, but I can see the pain in Mr. Wilde’s eyes. He’s hurting too. After all these years, he’s still hurting. That’s how much he loved her.”

“Horseshit.”

“Papa, we invited you here to ask you both to put your rivalry aside to be a part of our lives. Together. We’re getting married. We’re having your grandchildren. And if you can’t set aside your differences—” She glances up at me for confirmation. I nod. “—you won’t be a part of our lives. You won’t be a part of your grandchildren’s lives.”

The room falls silent. The rattle of Bucky cleaning the same glasses stop. Kiwi chopping tomatoes for her famous salsa pauses. The hums and haws of the twins is

nipped in the bud.

Mr. Fox points at Hope. “You want to marry into this family, it’s your funeral and I will have no part of it.” He storms out the front door of Kiwi’s bar.

Mrs. Fox takes our hands. “He just needs to clear his head.” She rushes out after him.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you, son.” My pa strides out the front door of Bucky’s side.

My ma tightly wraps her arms around us both. “This will not be how this ends,” she promises before storming out behind my pa like an aggressive bull.

Hope’s tear-filled eyes meet mine. Her head drops into sobs.

“We tried, darlin’.” I press my lips against the top of her hand.

I’m angry.

I’m disappointed.

I’m sadder than all the dead Christmas trees of the world.

“They’re so damn stubborn,” she sobs.

We stand in the bar for too long. Until her tears have subdued. Until my chest is breathable again.

Faye and Wilma are waiting beside us when we part. I don’t let Hope get far. I keep my arm tight around. It’s the only support I can give her.

“Stay at the Quilt House B&B.” Wilma holds up a key to the quaint bed and breakfast

the sisters own and operate. “Get a good night’s sleep. Let them get a good night’s sleep.”

I shake my head. “We’re leaving town, ladies. It’s what we agreed on, right?”

Hope nods. “We can’t stay in a town that hates us.”

“Don’t leave,” Faye’s pleading is desperate. But we’ve come to the end.

Shouts outside intensify and lights flash through the weaved bamboo window coverings.

“Ahh, hell!” Bucky limps around the counter in his bar. “Drunken Earl’s likely passed out again. I ain’t cleaning up no puke.”

Kiwi rushes past us. “You ain’t pressure washing the vomit onto my side again either!” She hauls the big old wooden door open. On the other side I see my pa pinned against the hood of the cruiser.

“Shit,” I mutter.

Outside, two cruisers are accompanied by the local towing service.

“Why is papa in the cruiser?” Hope rushes to her mother.

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“Nash arrested him for causing a disturbance in a public place.” Mrs. Fox hugs her daughter.

The sheriff reads my pa his rights. It’s hardly comprehensible over my father’s shouting.

I’m preoccupied with the tow truck securing the yolk to my truck. “Hey! What are you doing?”

The bald guy in the towing uniform presses a button and lifts my truck’s front end.

“Hey!”

He doesn’t look at me. “It’s parked illegally.”

“It’s not parked illegally.”

“It is technically parked illegally.” Wilma comes up beside me. “It’s a no-parking zone.”

“Everyone parks here,” I growl.

The tow truck slaps a paper against my chest. “Take it up with Nash.”

Wilma jangles the keys in front of me. “I guess your father is spending the night cooped up with Mr. Fox in a cell and you have no way out of town.”

Why do I get the feeling she likes it this way?

Chapter Seventeen

HOPE

“THE KISSING BOOTH is on fire!” The bedroom door swings and rattles the hanging collector plates on the wall. “Wake up!”

I jump from my deep sleep and out of the arms of the man I love. “What? What’s going on?” I clutch the quilt over my bare breasts.

“The kissing booth is on fire!” Wilma’s shoes scuttle across the wood floor as she rushes to the large bay window. She whips open the curtains.

The bright morning sun blinds me. I turn away and blink until the room focuses. Levi is snuggled into the blanket still fast asleep. I feel his arm draped over my lap. My eyes trail down the sun glistening over his rock hard body to see his trim ass is out for the world to see. Or in our case, Wilma and Faye. Unaware, or unfazed by Levi’s naked body, Faye slaps his leg. I toss the blanket to cover his naked cheeks.

“Nothing I haven’t seen.” Faye smooths the front of her pink and white floral tea dress in front of the mirror. She repositions the wide-brimmed organza hat. “I wiped both your barebaby bottoms.”

“Too much.” I yawn, rubbing my eyes. “Too early. Too much.”

“Get dressed.” My dress smacks my face. “You too.” The old wood floor creaks as Wilma stomps around the bed and yanks the pillow out from under Levi’s head.

“What? Hope?” His grumble is so damn sexy. His strong arms wrap around my middle and he drags me back beside him. “Good morning, beautiful.”

“We’re not alone.” I kiss his forehead.

His eyelids pop open, hooded and sleepy. I want to stay snuggled beside him for the rest of the day.

His gaze darts to the end of the bed where Wilma and Faye stand. They stare at us with no shame.

“What the hell is going on?”

“The kissing booth is on fire.” Levi’s denim pants hit us both. Wilma has a great right pitch. “Get dressed. I’ll drive.”

Five minutes later, we’re rumbling down the road in the back seat of the twin’s club car. I’m tucked in the groove of Levi’s side and his arm rests over my shoulder.

“Why do we care about the kissing booth?” Levi is still half asleep.

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I don't make eye contact. "We don't care." It's not true. I care. The kissing booth is where we began and now someone has gone and lit it on fire for the third time. I'd bet my life it was a Fox or a Wilde. And I'm leaning toward my father and Jade being responsible.

Rocky Ridge Creek is an up before dawn kind of town. I'm not surprised when the parking lot of town hall has a crowd around the kissing booth.

Wilma jams down the horn. "Get out of the way! Coming through!"

The crowd parts.

"It's not on fire," Levi grumbles. He's a morning person and this grumpy side of him has nothing to do with being woken up early.

"Hey." I catch his face in my hands and draw his forehead to mine. I feel his pain penetrate with mine. "I don't want to leave my family either. I know, babe. I know."

His hand cups the back of my neck. "I love you."

"I love you."

He gently brushes his lips across mine.

"Save it for the honeymoon." Wilma's foot is heavy and we jerk forward when she slams down on the brakes.

I'm more than happy to climb out of her beast of a club car. She's a wild driver who ignores stop signs and rides on front lawns. I'm going to walk back to the bed and breakfast.

I'm surprised to find my papa and Mr. Wilde standing on either side of the kissing booth. Beside them is a veiled structure similar in size to the kissing booth.

"What's going on?"

Levi envelopes my hand.

The two men exchange what appears to be a difficult look. My father's face is strained and his body is more rigid than usual.

"Pa?" Levi's hand tightens around mine.

Mr. Wilde makes direct eye contact with Levi. "We're here to fix things, son."

The men each strike a match and toss it at the base of the kissing booth. Fire dances up the wood.

"No!" The scream tears out of my chest.

"What the hell?" Levi catches my waist to stop me from running to put out the flames. "This doesn't fix anything!"

My papa crosses the space and stops in front of me. His hands crush my arms the way he did when I was young and he wanted to thoroughly explain something. Not painful, just a firm grip eye-to-eye.

"Hope, you built the kissing booth from anger and sadness." His calloused thumb

gently wipes away a tear from my cheek. “Because of me. It’s a reminder of how I’ve hurt you. I was so blinded by my own sadness that I never realized I was hurting you. That’s my mistake and you paid for it.” His chest rises with his deep breath. “What I’m trying to say is, I’m sorry.” His big, strong arms bear hugged me. My papa’s always been a hugger, but not with the emotion this one carries today. It makes up for the last couple weeks of ignoring me.

“Fox, you got sidetracked,” grumbles Mr. Wilde.

“Right.” He squeezes me one last time before joining Levi’s father at the veiled structure.

My mama’s guitar strumming draws my attention to her and Levi’s mother. They sing the Fox Lodge theme song. My sisters wave from the sidelines. Jade is there, but she doesn’t wave. Her arms are crossed over her chest and a scowl stretches her face.

“What’s happening?” Levi whispers.

“It’s the Fox Lodge theme song.”

“You mean you sing this every day?”

I grin at him. “Don’t judge us.”

“Drum roll my darlin’,” my papa shouts.

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My mom strums a quick drum roll. Our fathers tear off the cover. The red material floats to the ground. Behind it is another booth. Only the big sign painted at the top doesn't read Kissing Booth. Instead, it reads Whisky Ridge Creek's Friendship Booth.

Claps of applause and whistles pelt out through the crowd.

Our fathers step in front of the booth and clasp hands in a firm handshake.

"Over here!" They turn and the local journalist snaps their picture.

"All the Fox and Wildes together now!" Mr. Wilde waves everyone over.

"This doesn't feel real." I watch my sisters skip over. I see his brothers strut to meet our parents.

Levi spins me to face him. "We did it, Hope."

I smile. "We did it."

He picks me up and twirls me in the air. His lips cover mine as he sets me to my feet.

"Save it for the honeymoon!"

We run to the friendship booth for a picture.

Wheeler shakes my hand before pulling me into a hug. Josie hugs Levi. And before I know it, I'm shaking hands with Mr. Wilde, while Mrs. Wilde pulls me in her

embrace.

“Welcome to the family, Hope.”

“Something’s missing.” Levi kisses my cheek before running off.

LEVI

THE FLAMES HAVEN’T touched the painted sign screwed to the top of the kissing booth. While it might not have meaning to our fathers, it holds a helluva lot of meaning to me and Hope.

I try to yank it off, but fire jumps at my feet. I’ve screwed it in pretty good, if I do say so myself.

“Let me help you, son.” My pa reaches for the far side of the sign. My heart is beating so hard I hope he can’t hear it. I’ve never spent so many days without talking to my pa. He’s the guy who takes the time to explain every single tiny detail to every single situation, big or small. And I’ve missed him.

“Thanks, Pa.”

He nods, understanding the meaning behind my thanks. “On three.”

“I’ll help.” Hart grabs the center of the sign. He doesn’t look at me. He doesn’t have too. His action says a thousand words.

Together, we yank off the sign.

“Just for the record, I think you’re bat shit crazy for marrying a Fox.” Hart claps my shoulder. “But you’ve always been a few peas short of a casserole.”

“Thanks man.”

Hope watches me from the friendship booth. I’m impressed as hell our folks erected an entire booth in less than twelve hours. I’m further impressed they didn’t kill each other doing it.

I stroll in her direction, holding the sign facing her. She meets me halfway.

“Nice sign.”

“I thought it would look nice hanging above our mantle.”

“Our mantle?”

“Hope Fox, if you haven’t figured it out yet, I’m never letting you go again.” I hook my finger under her chin. “I want to marry you.”

“Marry me, cowboy.”

“I want to kiss you.”

Her lips curl in a wide smile. “Kiss me, cowboy.”

I lean down and take her mouth in mine, right here, at town hall, in front of the entire town and our family. And it feels fucking amazing.

“Save it for the honeymoon!”

Her laughter bubbles in my mouth.

“I have many other things I plan to do on our honeymoon.”

“The sooner, the better.”

“I’ll put the duo on it.” I kiss her again.

“What’s going on here?” Thomas runs across the pavement in brown and white cow print slippers. “Put that fire out! Call the fire department! Call the sheriff! This town is out of control! You’re all banned from town hall!”

Epilogue

WILMA AND FAYE

“THERE’S NOTHING LIKE a good ol’ shotgun wedding.” Faye fans her face with the rustic-inspired hand fan.

The wedding of Hope and Leviis printed on one side of the fan and the wedding party is listed on the opposite. As if the town didn’t know exactly which bridesmaid was walking down the aisle with which groomsman before they arrived.

“Right here will be perfect.” Wilma chooses a hay bale nice and close to the front of the outdoor ceremony.

Mismatched quilts cover hay bales that are being used as rows of chairs. Wild flowers inside cowboy boots are placed at the end of each aisle. Two old wooden doors joined together with logs create an archway where the groom awaits his bride.

“A Wilde and a Fox, who would’ve imagined?” Faye plops down beside her sister, fixing her hat to block the hot afternoon sun. “It’s beginning.”

Wedding music from the local folk band commences. The Wilde and Fox siblings are paired together as groomsmen and bridesmaids. They walk down the aisle, arms looped, smiles not as convincing as they should. Hesitance remains and will take time to overcome. The ring bearer, Rex, chases behind the two flower girls, Lex and Lily. Soon Henry Fox escorts his lovely daughter, Hope down the aisle. The aisle which only days ago had been a fence dividing the Wilde and Fox property.

The vows are exchanged and the celebration continues under a large tent. Before

dinner is served, Wilma and Faye carry their large box to the main table and set it down in front of the newlyweds.

The groom sips a beer and eyes the package. “Whatever could this be?” He might not be as grumpy as he was, but he still carries his teasing sarcasm.

Hope unties the red bow. “I, for one, am very excited to see how the quilt turned out.”

Together, they lift off the lid and tear away the tissue paper.

Hope runs her fingers over the material. “It’s beautiful.”

“Do you recognize this?” Levi touches the lilac floral pattern.”

“No.”

“It’s from the dress you were wearing the first time you climbed over the fence. Remember, you ripped it?”

Hope’s eyes light up recalling the memory. “You’re right.”

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“Of course I’m right. I remember it like it was yesterday.” Levi kisses his bride before looking back to the sisters. “The real question is, how did you get her dress?”

Wilma straightens. “We do not give away our sources.” She lowers her voice. “But when you have your first child, we will set up a meeting and explain how the quilting begins.”

“Do we know how soon that might be?” Faye inquires.

Levi smiles wide. “Sooner than you might think.”

Walking back to their seats, Wilma zeroes in on a lonely cowboy dancing his night away with his beloved daughter. She nudges her sister and points at the strapping lad. “Wheeler Wilde will be the inspiration for our next quilt.”

Faye’s eyes light up like a bright sunny day.

“And I know exactly who to call.”

THE END