
Chapter 1

I *t's one degree hotter than hell, and she decides to run.* Lucas wiped the sweat from his face as he watched the girl slip into the woods. *Damn it, you're gonna lose her.* Lucas sucked down a gulp of air and ran after her.

Sheriff Lucas Griffin's duties weighed heavily on his shoulders. His instinct, or what he referred to as the nagging voice in his head, decided to be silent today. Lucas didn't have the luxury of waiting for it to wake. He lost count of how many times he scoured the hills outside of Solley's Springs, searching for the Plunkett brothers and the Wild Girl. Lucas cursed himself for not learning the terrain of the hill country, but everyone knew the hill people solved their own problems. But this time, the brothers attacked one of *his* townspeople, a woman under *his* protection. Thank God, the Wild Girl rescued Stormy Anderson before she suffered any harm. The Wild Girl, he needed to find her too. She had witnessed the attack on Stormy. He didn't know how reliable a witness, heck, he didn't even know if she could speak. Nonetheless, helping Stormy placed the girl in danger. If the Plunketts could rub their brains together long enough to get a thought, they might realize the Wild Girl might put them in prison.

Lucas and the Wild Girl had crossed paths a few times, but as soon as she caught sight of him, she ran. At first, he suspected she ran out of fear. Now, he believed she enjoyed the chase, since she loved to run him into mud wallows and thorn bushes. Once, she almost ran him into a beehive. He wondered what mischief she planned for today as he plunged into the thicket.

The low branches slapped his face. Lucas pumped his arms as his boots crushed the underbrush, stirring the scent of fresh loam. Damn, she ran like a deer. Where was she? Lucas slowed. His eyes darted from tree to tree. A blur crisscrossed the trees in front of him. *There you are.* He picked up his pace, determined to catch her today. Lucas burst into a small clearing where the hillside sloped up to a rock face. He leaned over and braced his hands on his knees, his breath sawing in his chest. It was so damn hot, his shirt clung to his body. Lucas wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. One more drag of air and he straightened his stance.

"This ain't a good day for running. It's so humid, you could drink the air, and that's perfect weather for a storm."

Lucas searched the sky; gray clouds were gathering in the west. "I gotta find her before the rain comes and washes away any tracks."

What tracks? Where did she go? He huffed out a breath and scanned for his prey. Where the hell did she go? Lucas pivoted on the ball of his foot, searching for some sign of her.

Not a trace. He yanked off his hat and tunneled his fingers through his hair. No branches swayed, no broken limbs or trampled grass. The only other direction was straight up the rock face, but she wasn't half Billy-goat, was she? He lifted his eyes to see the Wild Girl, in all her glory, standing on a ledge just out of his reach.

This was the first time he got a good look at her. Small and filthy, Lucas didn't think there was an inch of her that wasn't covered with a layer of dirt. Her tattered sack of a dress skimmed

her knees. A rope cinched her waist and worn moccasins covered her feet. The Wild Girl's hair was a riot of curls and mats. The dust and dirt encrusting her hair made it difficult to tell the color. Her tanned, dirty face enhanced her turquoise eyes. Even from where he stood, he noted a mischievous spark in her piercing gaze. She crossed her thin arms and strutted back and forth with a look of superiority that almost made him chuckle. *Damn, she is part Billy-goat.*

Stay away from others, or they'll find you out. Granny Munch's words echoed in her mind. But the Wild Girl couldn't deny how much she enjoyed this small interaction with another person—with him. After all, she kept her distance, and she knew this play wouldn't last forever. He would tire of the chase, and she would return to her world of solitude.

Why did he chase her? She stole an apple, *just* an apple. Well, maybe not *just* an apple. She figured over time, she'd stolen a bit more, but what about this time set him in search of her? Was it her fault he caught her once and let her go?

Loneliness and boredom coaxed her to town that day. She recalled sitting on a small hill, content to watch the townspeople scurrying about their daily tasks. Her contentment fizzled the moment she spotted the storekeeper setting a bin of apples outside his store.

Apples. Sweet, juicy apples. The favorite treat of her childhood and her weakness. How could she resist the forbidden fruit?

She made her way to the store unnoticed. Her treasure lay in front of her. Their sweet aroma intoxicated her, making her oblivious to any danger. She picked over the apples until she discovered the perfect fruit. The Wild Girl held the apple under her nose. Her nostrils filled with its delicious, fresh scent; her fingertips slid over the flawless ruby-red skin. Her mouth

watered, desperate to take a bite. She wrapped her hand around her prize, ready to return to the hilltop and devour her award.

The steel grip of a hand latched around her wrist. She whipped her head around, locking her eyes on the scowling face of the storekeeper.

"I gotcha. You ain't stealing from me anymore."

The rage reflected in his eyes frightened her. She struggled to free herself from his grasp.

"Stop wiggling around, girl. Be still." The storekeeper held up his hand to strike her.

A small, redheaded woman intervened. She slapped down the storekeeper's hand. "Don't you dare strike her, Mr. Sommers!"

Amid the squabble, a pair of hands grabbed her elbows. A deep voice weighted with authority spoke. "Let her go, Aaron, the girl's in my custody."

"He was going to hit her," the redhead interjected.

"Stormy, go home and let me handle this."

The Wild Girl recalled glancing over her shoulder at the sheriff's handsome face. He cut her with his stern, hazel eyes. They favored the brownish shade of hazel but faded into a softer greenish hue when their eyes locked.

The Wild Girl turned back to the ranting, red-faced man.

"Sorry, Mrs. Anderson," the storekeeper said, "but this ain't the first time she's stolen from me."

The Wild Girl winced as the storekeeper tightened his grip around her thin wrist. His screeching voice grated on her nerves. She was in the sheriff's custody. Why wouldn't he let her go? Her fear morphed into anger.

"Well, Mr. Sommers, and you, too, Sheriff, have you considered she might be hungry?" the woman called Stormy asked.

The men were silent.

The Wild Girl remembered she'd seized the opportunity to spit in the storekeeper's face. The man raised his hand once more

to strike her, but the redheaded woman stepped between them and received the blow. The sheriff released his grip. He dashed to catch the woman before she hit the ground. The Wild Girl recalled bolting, but the memory of those hazel eyes reached something deep within her she did not understand. She felt drawn to him.

Did he feel the same? Is that why he chased her? No. Couldn't be. He's the sheriff, doing his job, trying to catch a thief.

He must be angrier than I thought. Why else would he chase me?

"You'd best get down, girl, before you fall and break your neck." Lucas used his thumb to push his hat back.

She grinned and pushed an imaginary hat back with her thumb. Nailing her hands to her hips, she started a silent parroting of his words.

"Very funny." The mountain of a man folded his arms across his chest.

She did the same.

"Listen here." The sheriff jabbed a finger at her. "You get down from there. Don't you know how dangerous that is? You could fall."

She copied him once more, jabbing her finger and pantomiming his words.

"Don't you think I won't come up there and get you, because I will."

The Wild Girl clapped as he approached the rocky slope.

Try it, big guy. I know the easy way up and you don't.

It was funny until he lost his footing and slid down the sloping rock face, landing on his back. A flutter of concern stirred in her stomach.

She heard a low groan as he got to his feet.

Good, he's all right. Hey, why is that vein pulsing in his neck?

"Just you wait 'til I get my hands on you, little girl."

She held up her palms, signaling him to stop.

"No way. I've had enough of your antics. Today's the day I get you, and I can guarantee you won't like it."

Why did her insides tingle at his threat? Her thoughts dissolved when a breeze blew across her face. She looked west. The storm clouds darkened the sky. Storms here could turn violent without warning.

"What are you looking at?" Lucas followed her stare. "Well, little miss," he placed his hands on his hips, "a storm's a coming, you know you'd best get down from there. Come on, I'll catch you. I ain't gonna let you fall."

The girl shifted her weight. The wind was bringing more than a storm. Survival honed her senses; they were far more sensitive than most people's. The wind brought a scent to her, and she knew they were not alone.

The sheriff continued to scold her, but her attention focused on the woods below.

There.

The limbs swayed but not in the direction of the wind. Someone was coming toward them.

The Wild Girl looked down at the sheriff.

"Finally got your attention?"

She jumped and pointed, desperate to get him to look at the approaching danger.

"Oh no, you don't, you ain't gonna fool old Lucas again. If I turn, you are likely to lob me with rocks."

Thunder cracked the air. "You look scared to death, honey." His voice softened. "You scared of thunder? Come on down. I'll take care of you."

Splats of rain dropped from the sky as she frantically tried to get his attention, but he didn't understand. She gathered her voice, something she often forgot she possessed.

"Run!"

The storm obscured the sound of her voice. A shotgun edged its way out of the woods. Without thinking, she skidded down the

slope, ramming into the sheriff. He fell to the ground and rolled to the edge of the woods.

A crackle cut through the air and the Wild Girl crumpled to the ground.

What the hell? Lucas scrambled to his feet.

"Damn girl. What was she thinking?" His eyes fell on the girl lying in a heap a few feet in front of him.

"Damn it, she fell off the ledge."

A bullet ricocheted off a rock, inches from where the girl lay. Lucas ducked behind a tree.

"Hell, that wasn't thunder I heard. Someone shot her."

He heard voices muffled by the pounding rain.

"Sheriff, ain't ya gonna come out and help that poor gal?"

"The Plunketts." What the hell?

He knew he messed up, he could hear his Pa's words, *'always be aware of your surroundings, boy.'* "She tried to warn me." Blood and water pooled where she lay.

"Ima thinking, she's dying, Sheriff, ya best hurry up."

Lucas sucked down a swig of air and dove from the trees. He hit the ground, shooting as he rolled toward the girl. His arm cinched around her waist, and he rolled them behind a boulder. The tips of his finger checked her pulse. Weak but there. Lucas kneeled behind the rock; his gun propped, waiting for another round. Were they getting closer? He waited, trying to listen while the rain bucketed down.

The rumble of thunder filled the air as lightning arced and zig-zagged across the sky. A blaze of light blinded Lucas, followed by a vibrating boom, rattling him to his bones. A tree sizzled, collapsing a few yards from where he crouched. The smell of burning wood dissolved into the pouring rain. Minutes ticked by without gunfire. Did they leave, or did the tree land on

them? If he waited any longer, the girl could die, but he was no fool. Once more, he wrapped his arm around her tiny waist and rolled them into the woods. Silence. No shots, no murmuring voices, just the pounding of the rain.

The heavy rain blinded him to any movement around him. The girl moaned. Lucas bent down next to her. Blood stained the front of her dress. He untied his bandana and shoved it under the top of her dress.

"Damn it, I gotta get her to Doc." He slipped one arm under her legs and the other supported her back.

"Don't worry, Moppet, Lucas will get you help. You're gonna be all right." Her eyes opened to narrow slits. "Close your eyes, honey, and trust Lucas. I'll get you out of here." He damn well would.

Lucas raced through the woods toward the meadow where he left Buck, his horse, grazing.

"Buck, please be here."

Buck didn't spook easily, but the fierce thunder and lightning might send him running to town. He broke out of the woods to the meadow. No Buck. Lucas whistled for the horse and waited. No Buck. Once more, he sent out a sharp whistle. A faint whinny reached his ears. Lucas whistled again; he spotted the outline of the horse running toward him.

The animal stopped short. The horse's eyes bulged, his dark irises framed by the white of his eyes. Buck snorted air through flared nostrils. "It's all right, boy," Lucas cooed to the horse. "I'm here now. Everything will be fine, Buck." He continued to calm the animal. "We gotta get the girl to Doc. I'm gonna sit her on you, then I'll get on." The horse shifted. "Steady, Buck." Lucas carefully set the Wild Girl on his saddle. He steadied her with one hand as he mounted the horse. "Come on; let's go." A tap of his boots sent Buck galloping.