

Chapter One

Sun. Dust. Sweat.

And of course, the tears.

Why do cars always break down in the middle of nowhere?

Case McCann stalked around the rented white Dodge Charger, kicking the front tire a few times in anger, and finally leaning over the opened hood again. And yes, the hood had a freaking racing stripe directly down the middle in midnight blue. That wasn't as bothersome as what was happening underneath that stripe, however. She could stare and ponder all she wanted, biting her bottom lip, deep in thought. The insides of a car remained totally mysterious to her. Botany? No problem. Perennials and annuals? Sure.

The black thingy spewing and smoking, connected to the other black tube stuff in the engine? Yeah right. Her hands were smudged with engine grease and God only knows what else, so she wiped her watery eyes with the back of her wrist.

Now what?

She sighed heavily and looked up the white clay road from where she'd come, a stark white ribbon in a sea of greens and yellows, then down to where she wanted to go. Live oaks sprouted with their crooked, thin trunks right up to the road's edge. A few weeds chased each other through white chunks of clay on the roadside, while a light, cool breeze swept down the corridor. Total isolation.

And if this road was anything like it was when she was younger, no one would just "happen" to drive by and lend assistance. Only six farms and ranches used FM-650, with metal gates directing people to more dirt roads winding through pastures and forests and dead-ending at a main house that was inevitably miles away.

Case knew everyone in the area. The Reiner Ranch was owned by the most elderly couple she'd ever met, and that was years ago. The probability that they could have died months ago and not been discovered yet was uncomfortably high. They never drove anymore, and they'd never had children. The Reiners wouldn't be any help.

The Smithy Turkey Farm had employees piled into truck beds at the start and finish of every day, headed to and from their homes in town, but it was well after five pm, and the daylight was dying. No help there, either.

The Colton's place and the Hanover Ranch were strictly vacation getaways these days, so she wouldn't run into any of them on a late spring Monday evening, either.

And the Blackhills? They owned over 35,000 acres—by far the most in the area. She and her three older brothers had only a handful of run-ins with Blackhill family members. Their ranches backed up to each other and had a common property line, so while they both tried to avoid one another, encounters were naturally unavoidable. Every single meeting ended up in a physical altercation.

Blood, profanity, for some reason the McCanns and the Blackhills hated one another. Damned if anyone remembered why.

So, if a Blackhill drove by she'd actually be better served if she hid in the trees or faked her own death.

Not that anyone would ever drive down the desolate unpaved road, though.

Closing her eyes as the sun beat down on her round cheeks, she peeled off her navy cardigan, tossed it in the driver's side window to the tan seat next to her black duffle bag, and started walking. Crickets chirped an invariable drone all around her. A buzzard circled far above her head. The loneliness was so tangible she began to feel sick to her stomach. This was not the life she liked.

The day really couldn't have gotten any worse. She'd flown in from her east coast school, a place that had made her so happy for the past seven years. No one was waiting to pick her up from the barn shaped terminal at the airport, and since cabs were non-compliant when it came to Farm-to-Market roads, had been forced to rent the ratty old Dodge Charger from the town's only car dealer. And he wasn't as honest as his sign had suggested.

An hour later, there she was, in her white long sleeved shirt, with blackened cuffs from the crap car's engine, her brother's hand-me-down boot cut Levis that were slightly faded to a medium blue instead of the currently popular acid wash of the 1980s, and the 5:30 Texas sun on her back. Her shoulder length light brown hair swung in an irritated sway as she stomped her dirty white Kaepa tennis shoes down the road, which would eventually dead end at her property.

The prospect of walking the squared off route around everyone's property just to reach the gate on the McCann ranch daunted her. Stupid county planners and their road grids.

Pausing, she glanced to her right and absent-mindedly pulled her hair back into a loose ponytail. The Blackhills owned the land on either side of FM-650, and technically, while she had to travel six miles down the road to reach her front gate, her actual property was only a few acres away on the other side of a thin strip of Blackhill land. She only knew this because her brothers had once suggested the Blackhills allow them an easement as a shortcut for the construction workers who were building the new barn. The Blackhills had laughed in their faces, and no such road was forged through the thick brush. They just weren't meant to be on each other's land.

For some reason, she remembered that day very well. Someone smashed the kitchen phone into the drywall and she learned a few new words to take back to the girls in the dorms at boarding school. She came to the realization for the first time that only two Blackhills were living on the estate, and only one was truly the heir, while the other just a distant cousin. Originally, she had imagined a whole compound of freaks, judging from what her brothers had said. Obtuse, unreasonable, violent freaks, if she recalled correctly.

But how obtuse, unreasonable, and violent? And how freaky?

Crunching through the yellow and green patched grass, she carefully placed her hands on the barbed wire fence on the side of the road. She pulled it apart, stuck her leg through, and then her body, only snagging a small piece of her shirt, and then continued through the dense oak, mesquite, and cedar trees. She was well hidden and there was no way anyone would ever figure out she was taking a shortcut through the Blackhill's place. And even if they did, she'd left her ID in the car so there was absolutely no way to prove she was a McCann... unless she ran into the one and only living Blackhill heir. She knew her way around, though, and had a great sense of direction. She'd be on her ranch in no time.

Ranching had been in her family's blood since before Texas had joined the Union. Her dad, his dad, his dad, his two uncles, their dad, on and on... there was a detailed family tree tracing her heritage in her father's study, and an exact replica in the Lyndon B Johnson Library in Austin. Family was everything to McCanns, and so was cattle ranching. All of her brothers had taken quickly to riding horses, herding cattle, watching fence lines, and irrigating pastures.

Her dad had done it, his dad had done it, and so on with every generation. No oil, it was all about cattle... and an exclusivity clause her great-great grandfather had forged in contracts with several stockyards across the state.

When her parents died in the plane collision that took the lives of many family members in their small town of Oakwood, her brothers jumped right in with both feet to run the family cattle business. Years of grooming had led up to that very moment.

Joel, the oldest, left his own ranch to come and make sure the books were clear. He ran his wife's family ranch in Kansas, but had bought in his own shares, so he had more experience than the other McCann children. He had to return home for most of the year, though, to be with his wife and children, so he left his two younger brothers in charge of the McCann place for the majority of the seasons.

Townes, only a year younger than Joel, and his wife tried to care for the 10,000 square foot plantation style home, 8000 head of cattle, 50 quarter horses, and drought problems, but they were already pregnant, and both had jobs in Amarillo. Like Joel, they could only come and help out a few times a year.

Jackson, God bless him, was left to make sure everything ran smoothly, the employees were happy, and the ranch stayed in the black. He wasn't the smartest or most ambitious McCann, but he figured things out eventually and was able to keep the place afloat. After his seventh year of college at UT, he welcomed the opportunity to go back home and run his own ranch. He and Case were the closest.

Case, for whatever reason, lacked any and all ranch style coordination and zeal. She'd been thrown from three different horses, had broken her arm twice, and had her shoulder dislocated after being smashed between a cow and a fence post. She'd never taken any interest in the cattle business, and didn't care an ounce about the hunting that people would pay thousands of dollars for on the McCann property.

She liked plants, flowers, and any Jane Austen book. She preferred her bike over a horse, and had raised feral cats secretly in one of their hay barns after her dad had told her and her brothers to shoot them. She adored all animals and human contact, so when she turned eleven, she told her parents that she was going to a boarding school in Virginia that she'd applied for and had already been accepted into. Since her grades and achievements had led the local teaching

staff to make similar suggestions to her parents, they obliged. She only had to return home on holidays and summers.

This was a big summer. She'd graduated, had an internship lined up at a national laboratory, and was heading to an advanced science program at SMU, where she'd get her BA and MA in Botany in only three years. It was an honor to have the staff even consider your application, let alone accept you into the school, she'd been told. She didn't care. She was so ready to move on with her life and so ready to forget her old life out in the sticks of south central Texas, where the plains met the hill country.

Her bags were packed, she'd been given the old blue Chevy pick-up truck that all of her brothers had driven before her, her apartment was leased and furnished in University Park, in Dallas, just waiting for its modern, chic tenant, and her internship would start in mid-June, setting her up with contacts at the Center for Disease Control. She'd always wanted to research there, discovering cures and remedies through horticulture. Her new life was ready and waiting.

Then she'd gotten a call from Tizzy Smithy, her old friend from her public school days in Oakwood. Now an administrative assistant at Commerce Bank, Tizzy had noticed that the McCann bills were not only being returned, but were all past due by two months. She told her that the bank was going to have to send someone out to her ranch and take drastic actions if the bills weren't settled. Case quickly paid everything, which added up to over \$15,000, through a wire transfer from the bank account her father and brothers had set up for her, but didn't really start to worry until after her third day of calling her ranch house and hearing nothing from Jackson.

Jackson always answered, always half drunk at the end of the day, making her laugh as she leaned against the musty smelling wood paneled walls of her hallway with the one phone in her dormitory. He'd tell her about something dumb that one of the employees had done, the usual suspects being Zeke and Paco, and then tell her who he'd had over to the house for a "sleepover," the usual suspects being one of the sorority girls visiting the Colton or Hanover ranches. She'd tell him about her greenhouse she'd built by the back wall of the campus and everything she'd planted until he yawned excessively. Then they'd hang up.

And now, when she needed him to give her an explanation about the bills, and to pick her up from the airport, he was nowhere to be found.

“He’s in Mexico on another drinking binge. Give him a week and he’ll be back, taking care of everything,” Joel had said after she’d called him in Kansas, worried. Joel had three kids screaming in the background so she decided not to bother him any further. She went out with her friends that night and tried to forget about it, but had to call Townes the next day to see what he thought.

“Don’t worry about that ass wagon. You go to Dallas and study hard. You’ve earned it, Casey, you hear me?” Townes had said, sounding so serious as usual. She didn’t want him to know how worried she was about her favorite brother, so she just agreed and hung up. For the first time in her life, she didn’t like being so far from her family.

She didn’t listen to them, anyway. They’d been twelve and eleven years older than her, respectively, and may as well have been total strangers. Jackson was only seven years older and they’d been buddies growing up, playing the role of the immature children while Joel and Townes took all of the responsibility. When their parents died on the chartered plane to the UT game, they started singing a different tune, though. The whole town of Oakwood had taken a major hit. The 30-passenger plane had collided with the private jet of Mr. and Mrs. Blackhill on the runway. It was the biggest tragedy in the history of the county. All of their friends at school had to either leave to go live with relatives in distant cities or states, and the rest had to deal with aunts, uncles, and annoying cousins coming to live with them.

Fifteen couples died when the planes had crashed, and Jackson and Case were the only minors with brothers old enough to care for them. Jackson graduated from high school and went on to his seven-year stint at UT, while Case returned to her coveted boarding school and tried to be normal. She gladly returned home during holidays but secretly wished that she could be as old as her brothers, and just get on with her life. They were getting married and having kids and not living on the ranch. She hadn’t even hit puberty yet.

Her brothers had always teased her and called her The Great Mistake. Her parents told her she was their favorite Christmas surprise. They’d found out they were pregnant over the holiday. Mistake or not, she’d loved her parents. She missed them whenever she was back in Oakwood.

Now, in a strange twist of fate, she was the one being counted on, while her brothers’ lives had stagnated and hers was moving on. Just one quick stop in Oakwood, yell at Jackson to get his act together so they wouldn’t lose their ranch, then back to getting settled before her

internship began in Dallas. With Joel and Townes so far away, and her with a summer break, she really was the only one *able* to check on things. And Jackson had pretty much made a name for himself as the picture of irresponsibility.

She'd called for the thousandth time and had left a message on one of those new answering machines with a recordable cassette tape, telling him to sober up and grab her from the airport on Monday at noon in the nearby town of Gomez. The airport in Oakwood had shut down after the accident, so visitors either flew into Dallas and took a prop plane to Gomez, or flew into Austin and drove.

Jackson, of course, hadn't been there and she'd been forced to deal with Honest Bill Gomez himself, the great-grandson of the town's founder, who owned the car dealership. He gave her a terrible deal on a Dodge Charger that had to be more than ten years old.

And there she was, broken down on the side of the road, miles from her family's beautiful home that had probably gone to crap in the past year, shuffling through leaves and yellow dirt in the late afternoon. She knew the land very well, having been caught a few times playing with her brothers and the other kids on the right and wrong side of the fence line. It was mostly a terrifying experience, usually resulting in a Blackhill shooting a shotgun straight up into the air to get everyone back over the fence, but Henry Hanover swore one time that Mr. Blackhill grabbed him by the hair and shoved his head into a full water tank a few times, nearly drowning him.

Sure, it was a little ridiculous, but enough to make Case tread very carefully through the trees, checking over her shoulder every now and then. She'd been smart enough to rarely get caught if any mischief was afoot, and even when she and the other children were caught, she'd been spry enough to make a clean getaway. Sure, she felt bad for the other kids, but they also didn't live as far out of town as she did. It was a good ten-mile jaunt to get from the city limits to her front gate, so that had turned out to be punishment enough.

She shoved a leafy branch out of her way as she wondered what had become of all of those kids after the accident. She'd already started at her new boarding school when it happened. They'd been shipped to grandparents in New York, cousins in Seattle, a creepy uncle in Utah, a slightly famous member of a rock band in Chicago. Case could hardly imagine what they lived like. Tizzy was the only friend her age that remained in Oakwood, her turkey farm having been taken over by her Aunt Evelyn. The bank must have been great for Tizzy, even though she was a

secretary, because Evelyn made her hose out the turkey hatches every day. It was the single most disgusting thing Case had ever seen or smelled.

Case's black digital watch beeped. She looked down and noticed that it was already six. By eight it would be dark, and she wasn't sure she'd be back home by then. Luckily, again, she could make her way blindfolded, but she still worried about things like snakes and stray bullets from an angry Blackhill. She finally hit a familiar fence and turned north in an opening, feeling a cool evening breeze swoosh through the lane as she walked on the light colored dirt and grass.

A twig snapped.

She paused and lifted her head, frowning as she stood very still. Her property couldn't have been more than a hundred yards ahead. Wait... was that right? She couldn't be entirely certain of her location. Another twig snapped. She was in a clearing in the lane between the trees and the fence. No twigs.

Leaves rustled.

She frantically looked right and left. Oh no. If a Blackhill spotted her on his land, he'd shoot her for sure. She wasn't ready to die. She had important things to do in her life! Fight or flight... or hide? Hand to hand combat seemed futile since Blackhills were notoriously tall and she was as vertically challenged as they come. Flight was out because, although she was fast, she could not outrun a speeding bullet. The live oak trees around her had trunks like the legs of a giraffe. No low brush. There was absolutely no possible way she could effectively hide.

Why didn't she just stick to the public county road?

After more sounds came from the distance she decided to just give it a whirl and dove behind the straightest tree trunk she could find, slapping her hands at her sides, and sucking in as she stood sideways. Be the tree. You are the tree.

"Who's there?" a deep voice demanded to know in a loud, annoyed tone.

She held her breath. I'm just a tree.

"I can see your pony tail and white tennis shoes," the voice announced, leaning more towards annoyed and less towards anger. She'd take irritated over fury any day... especially with her historically adversarial neighbors.

"I don't like waiting."

Damn it. There was no avoiding it any longer. She took the tree trunk in her hands and slowly poked her head around, her lungs deflating and threatening to never refill again. She

forced a short breath and slowly took in the person who'd caught her. A large, shiny black horse stood in the lane, stomping its front hoof every now and then, and causing the packed yellow dirt to fly up in little dust clouds.

Its rider sat perfectly still with perfect posture. His well-worn brown boots, crisp dark Levis patched with dust, starched tan shirt, and a matching tan straw hat, curled at the edges from years of wear and tear, made him an impressive vision. Pulled low over his eyes, the shadow from the Stetson only allowed her to see the faint hint of whiskers and a strong jaw line. In his left hand, he held the reins very firmly. In his right hand, he held a long rifle quite ominously.

“Get out here,” he commanded harshly.

Maybe if she stood still he would go away. She could pretend that English was her second language... or that she was deaf. She couldn't just give herself up and walk out into the open on Blackhill property. She'd heard they killed trespassers all the time and buried them under the barn. Adam Thorne had said so and he'd been on the property before on his paper route.

“Come on out, you're caught.” She heard him sigh heavily and load a round into the rifle's chamber. The metal click churned her insides.

Swallowing so hard she was certain she'd bruised her esophagus, she stepped around the tree and paused next to it, head down. She slowly eyed three possible escape routes through the woods if he decided to actually aim his weapon in her general direction.

“Look at me. What's your name?”

She scratched her head where loose wisps fluttered around her face. Oh God. If she looked at him, he'd know exactly who she was. McCanns had light brown hair and bright green eyes lined with long, dark lashes, a widely known family trait. It actually looked fairly average on her, but had given her brothers quite an advantage in the dating department. They'd made a name for themselves with the unique look, but that unique look would unfortunately totally give her away to a Blackhill.

“I told you to look at me and tell me your name. This is private property. You have five seconds to comply.”

Good God, would he really shoot her? There was no one around to witness... anything. She was at his mercy and she hated feeling that way. The clicking of his rifle echoed in her head. Digging her hands into the worn pockets of her brother's old jeans, she kicked around at

the dead leaves and finally turned her eyes up to meet his. They both furrowed their brows at the instant recognition of one another.

“You’re the McCann girl,” he loudly stated, sounding surprised and tipping his hat up to get a better look.

“You’re Halston Blackhill,” she choked, saying something for the first time and wishing that her voice hadn’t cracked. She’d been certain it was just a chance run-in with one of the distant Blackhill cousins who worked the land.

But it was Halston Blackhill. He’d been somewhere between Jackson’s grade and Townes’ grade, and his story had been quite opposite. As an only child, when his parents had died in the plane crash, he had to return home right at the beginning of his junior year at Harvard. He never got to graduate, had to leave behind his dreams of becoming a doctor, and was forced to care for all 35,000 acres of Blackhill land, as well as his ailing grandparents in a nursing home.

And he was bitter. No one in town liked Halston Blackhill. They cowered in fear if he ever ran into the grocery store or barbershop. Tizzy hid and cried in the vault every time he made a transaction at the bank. No one knew exactly how many people he’d killed on his land, but the rumor was that it was in the double digits.

His perpetual bad mood seemed to hover around him like a black aura. Case swallowed again.

“What are you, spying on us?” he suddenly asked, swinging his leg over the horse and jumping to the ground, marching forward and reaching her in five steps.

She stood frozen with fear. He was at least two heads taller than her, looked more than angry, and he had a gun. Oh God, she wanted to be buried in 60 years in her family’s plot, not that night under his tractor in the barn.

“Say something, damn it!” he ordered, taking another step. The anger had reached his eyes. Steam might have been shooting out of his ears. It was hard to be certain since every organ in her body numbed with trepidation at his overpowering presence.

“W-what?” she choked, flinching and closing her eyes for a second, trying to regain her senses.

“You’re suddenly interested in our Wagyu beef now, is that it?” he asked, shoving his rifle stock against her and pushing her back into a tree, pinning her as he held both ends of the

gun. His shirt was tight around his broad shoulders. If she remembered correctly, he was kind of a soft kid who didn't play any sports. When did the muscles come into play?

She grunted as she grabbed the rifle and fruitlessly pushed back as the long barrel pinned her against the rough bark of the tree. After assessing his physique, his strength did not surprise her. At least the dangerous end of the gun wasn't pressing against her.

Time to answer him. "No, I just..."

"Restaurants will pay double for this beef at the stockyards and we're the first to breed them in Texas. So, what, you think the McCanns can get in on the action? You think you have the know-how and the resources to not only find this particular breed of cow in Japan, but ship them over and keep them healthy, too? Huh? Is a McCann suddenly speechless? Forgive my astonishment but listen to this. You're living in a fantasy, Kiddo."

Of all the arrogant...

"Okay!" she rumbled through clenched teeth, ducking down and letting the rifle push against the tree trunk as she shuffled aside and glared up at him. She rubbed her hand across her collar. "First of all, Halston, my name is Case, and I am not a kid."

At first, he gave a surprised look at her agility, and then leaned back as she suddenly got an attitude. He towered over her as he threw the rifle over his shoulder and let it rest there as he waited for the rest, intrigued. People rarely spoke to him, let alone argued with him.

"Second, you are so arrogant to think that I want or need to spy on you! I don't give a crap about your Japanese beef or whatever! And if you knew me at all, you'd know that I don't give a crap about anything down here! I'm here to check on my brother, and then I'm back to my science internship, okay?"

He squinted in the sinking sun and considered what she'd just said. All he'd ever done was fight McCanns about property lines and right of ways and easements. He was prepared to go all the way to fight them on his new venture. It was costing him too much to not fight. He knew the McCanns, though. They were likable and used to getting their way. Was she lying? How could she not care about any of it with a family like that?

He cleared his throat as she stared up at him with outraged fists on her hips.

"So then what the hell are you doing in the middle of my property?" he asked, turning and shoving the gun back into his saddle straps. He glanced at her over his shoulder as he waited

for an answer. She visibly shrank inside herself as she rubbed her hands and looked at the ground.

“My car broke down so I thought I’d... take a shortcut.” It sounded bad as she heard it come out of her mouth.

“Through Blackhill land?” he smirked, an incredulous look on his face.

Yes, it was dumb, but he didn’t have to ridicule her. Not him. She defensively pulled her shoulders back and chin up.

“It’s over six miles to the gate from back there!” she protested, pointing her thumb over her shoulder.

Now the arrogant shoe was on the other foot. It didn’t matter if she was just a kid, she needed to hear what he had to say.

“Do you have any idea what your family has done to mine? Do you even know why we hate each other? Are you aware of why I am seething with anger just looking at you standing on my property right now?”

Case licked her lips as she looked up at his dark gray eyes, glaring down at her. The Blackhills hated everyone but they especially had a deep-rooted rivalry that was extremely unfriendly with the McCanns. She had no clue as to why. The only thing she’d ever heard during her childhood included phrases like, “We don’t talk to Blackhills,” or “That Blackhill boy will be there,” or a variation of a scathing remark towards their neighbor.

Furious couldn’t even begin to describe the look on his face. And so, cue the sarcasm, a mechanism she’d successfully used to defuse situations at school. “Did my dad try and steal your foreign cow idea?” she asked, a subtle hint of mockery in her voice as she kept the look on her face very even. She raised a defiant eyebrow at him as she put her hands on her hips.

“It goes back a little further than that,” he murmured, shaking his head. Why was she trying to be cute? If she’d been anything other than a little girl, he’d have shot the ground at her feet and chased her screaming off the property. If she’d been one of her brothers, he’d have pistol-whipped her by now. Neither were viable options, of course, judging from her innocence. He’d have to find another way to edify this audacious little girl.

Good God, she just wanted to get out of there without any buckshot in her and get home so that she could yell at Jackson. She’d had three days and a long plane ride to make up scenarios in her head about what he was doing, where he was doing it, and what she was going to

say to him. This Blackhill situation was all so... distracting. He was intimidating, sure, but there was something else about him.

Finally, sighing heavily, she held her arms out and slapped her hands at her sides.

“Fine, then. It goes back further than I can understand. Now, if you’ll excuse me I’ll get going,” she sneered, gesturing around his horse.

“You think I’m just gonna let you walk away?” he asked, holding up his hands. Not with their past. He may have had encounters with her brothers in town over the years but he’d never interfaced with her. She was tremendously overconfident to actually believe that he’d just let her walk away. He knew she had to be up to something no good. Her last name was McCann.

“So, okay, my family did something to yours a million years ago. So, what do you want, reparations?” she asked, this time hurling all of the sarcasm her 5’2” frame could send in a single sentence. If he was going to bring up the past, then she’d certainly fight back.

He stared down at her for a second, then finally widened his eyes and nodded.

“Actually, yeah,” he agreed, reaching out for her. He consented to her own suggestion with something in mind that would really scare her. He’d been in plenty of violent fights with her brothers resulting in busted lips and black eyes, but he couldn’t very well hit a girl. Could he?

She backed away very quickly, tripping over her feet and suddenly finding herself pushing off the dried, yellow patches of grass, ready to run down the road. Why was he suddenly grabbing for her? Was he going to make her eat the barrel of his rifle? Then she saw it. The water tank, sitting there at the fence, glistening in the sunset. Uh-oh.

Would he try to drown her, like his grandfather had done to Henry Hanover so many years before? She turned and gave him a panicked look. It was a ridiculous thing to assume... wasn’t it?

“Consider this your upper school lesson in property lines and management,” he grunted, grabbing a handful of her shirt and pulling her the twenty or so feet to the tank. She’d been gaping up at him with scared green eyes. Certainly, this would teach her.

“Wait, wait, wait!” she hollered, pulling back with everything she had. She couldn’t believe this was about to happen to her.

A week ago, she’d been sitting very undemonstratively in her upper school assembly hall, ready to present her senior paper about the benefits of federal funding for cross-pollenating

common crops. The next day she'd walked across the traditional Franklin Gardens in her cap and gown to receive her diploma.

Now she was going to be drowned by the psycho, next door neighbor in the middle of nowhere.

She didn't care about his ranch, or his Japanese cows, or even her own ranch and cattle. She twisted around and wrapped her hands around the arm that was holding the back of her shirt, looking desperately up at him. "Please..."

"Like I said," he replied, reaching the circular water tank and sitting on the fat concrete ledge that stood up a couple of feet. He grabbed a handful of the front of her shirt and pulled down so that her face was inches from the algae topped water. "This is a lesson in Blackhill-McCann property supervision."

The breath left her lungs as her body slammed into his legs. She was about to start pleading for her life when she realized he wasn't pushing down on her head. Her face remained dry, inches above the dark water and green algae. His hand was pushing down in the middle of her back. He wasn't trying to drown her.

So was what he really doing? Trying to scare her into compliance? He was so strong and obviously unbalanced so she really couldn't figure out what he hoped to accomplish by forcing her face to hover above an old tank for watering cattle. Was this the lesson?

The reality turned out to be much worse than her imagination.

She turned her head over her shoulder to inform him that he'd thoroughly scared her and the lesson had been learned when she saw his hand raised above his head.

"Oh shit! No, wait, I can explain!" she quickly yelled, far more apt to defend herself than she'd been only minutes before. She pushed her hands awkwardly against his strong leg but he held her down almost effortlessly with one imposing hand. Okay, no escape. She didn't want to beg really, so a good explanation was in order. The next few words she spat out very quickly. "I can't reach Jackson, and my car broke down, and my other brothers have lives of their own, so the responsibility kind of falls on me..."

She'd found herself in a situation like this only once before in her lifetime. Joel and Townes had caught her chasing a lame fawn onto the Blackhill property when she was about 14 and had physically expressed how scared they'd been that a Blackhill might have shot her by dragging her back to the house and paddling her with an old ping-pong paddle. She'd never

forgotten how scared they'd looked, or how scared she'd been of the both of them at that moment. She'd also steered clear of Blackhill land until that very day. Actually, she'd forgotten all about that until the sudden influx of memories came to the forefront of her mind as she kicked her feet and tried to find something to push off of.

Now, in this moment, Halston Blackhill had her terrified. Was he kidding? He wouldn't dare. She knew all about him though they'd never even really met. She'd seen him once at the post office and a couple of times driving through town, people leaning in and whispering as he passed. Everyone around those parts knew her brothers and loved them, though no one really knew her that well. She'd been gone at school for years, and preferred the anonymity. No, she was a total stranger to him and he'd never go through with it. He was just trying to scare her.

He smacked his hand against the back of her jeans. Hard. She winced, closed her eyes, and kicked her legs, but she really had nowhere to go under his firm grip. She grabbed handfuls of his jeans and tried not to give away how much it hurt as he kept going. She finally had nothing left to do but open her mouth and vocalize a defeated whimper.

“P-please.”

Surprisingly, he stopped.

“Okay,” he groaned, standing up as he held the back of her shirt. She wobbled around a little as she brushed her hair out of her face, ponytail askew, totally shocked.

“Time to take you home. I'm sure your big brothers will be happy to hear that I found you stalking around my property. Won't they?”

Her mouth dropped open as she stared up at him, still holding the back of her shirt and pulling her along as he walked. How could he have possibly have known about the fawn or what her brothers had done? And, more importantly, had this really just happened to her? Her white shirt bunched up under her arms as he pulled her along to his horse. Her body moved because he forced her to walk, but she couldn't say a thing. She was just... stunned.

“Up you go, Kiddo,” he said, tossing her onto his saddle and straddling it behind her. She ground her teeth and closed her eyes as he kicked the horse and they moved on down the hard packed yellow dirt of the road, green grass growing in the middle of the tire tracks.

The pain was intense at first. White hot pain sitting there on a worn saddle with her back against him, then as it numbed she got a little braver. She glared down at his hands holding the cracked leather reins as his arms enveloped her.

“You know, I told you, I’m not a kid.” Really? That was the best she could muster? He’d just assaulted her. She should swing kick him across the face! Just as soon as she got the feeling back in the lower half of her body.

“You’re off at your east coast school, you’re a big girl, I know,” he mocked, turning the horse and heading through a couple of large metal gates, jumping down and leading her and the horse through. The gates hadn’t been locked. It didn’t matter why, though. Now it was McCann property.

“How old do you think I am?” she asked, frowning as he climbed up behind her and shoved her forward as he reached around for the reins again. Why was he teasing her? Hadn’t he done enough already? Okay, maybe she should just turn and punch him in the face.

“Old enough for me to tell everyone in town that I bent you over my knee, and gave you a spanking so hard that you started begging and pleading with a Blackhill.”

Her mouth dropped open as she looked ahead. God, it sounded so terrible when she heard it out loud. She squirmed around and tried to get comfortable, then she composed herself, and looked over her shoulder with squinted eyes. She wanted to just leap down and make a run for it. She was fast and his horse couldn’t maneuver through the trees any quicker than a trot, but she was afraid of that slim chance of getting caught... and what he’d do to her then.

Swallowing, she knew she had to be brave. From the time she’d gotten the call at her new boarding school after only being there a couple of months, she had to tell herself to be brave.

Your parents are dead. You can’t be scared.

You have to get on an airplane, you can’t be afraid to do it alone.

Their bodies are going into the ground, you can’t cry for them now.

You’re graduating. You need the courage to try new things.

Your brother isn’t answering your calls... be brave enough to believe that he’s just being irresponsible.

She cleared her throat and tried to twist around to look him in the eye.

“Watch yourself, Blackhill. Anything that happens to you on McCann land is legit.”

“I’ve seen your brother’s aim. I’m not in any danger,” he scoffed, looking at the back of her disheveled ponytail, kind of flopping to one side. She certainly wasn’t the typical polished east coast snob he’d come to know when he had attended boarding school. And she certainly

was brave. She hadn't shed a tear or tried to run away. She just sat there, flush against him, accepting his bidding.

"What about me?" she offered, hoping he didn't know that the last time she'd shot a gun it had been her Daisy pump action BB gun, and she was still wearing smocked dresses her mother had dressed her in.

"The only heat you're packing is the flush of your cheeks."

She frowned at him over her shoulder. "You know, you make me really angry."

The horse suddenly jerked to a stop and they stood very still in an opening in the trees, the sun completely gone, and darkness settling over them. The crickets and birds were quiet and the cool night air breezed through. Case rolled her eyes and turned her upper body around to look at him.

"What?" she grumbled.

"You really make me angry? That's... that's the best you have?"

"What the hell do you want me to say, Blackhill? It's the truth!"

He actually stared at her with a confused look for a second. He'd just spanked her. He was forcing her to ride on his horse with him. He wasn't being nice at all. Why wasn't she trying to castigate him with that smart McCann mouth? He shook his head and gently kicked his horse. They started moving through the crooked trunks of the live oak trees again.

"I can't believe your brothers never told you how much you hate us," he began, curious as to why they would shield her from the truth about their pasts. His parents and grandparents had never been shy about expressing their hatred towards any and all things McCann.

"I don't hate you," she snapped, sighing and brushing a wisp of hair behind her ear. "I mean, do all that again, I dare you, and not only will I hate you, but you'll eternally regret it, but... if I'm honest with myself, I don't hate you." She paused and continued quietly. "I've never understood why I had to."

And she really didn't. Being fourth after three brothers and losing her parents at such a young age, she'd always been good at sharing, forgiving, and empathizing. She'd secretly held just a little sadness for Halston Blackhill, somewhere deep down. Though not. Any. More.

Frowning at the back of her head, Halston didn't even know where to begin when describing his immense hatred of her family. Was she naïve? Stupid? He couldn't figure out what kind of game she was playing but he realized that he was out of time. The trees opened up

and a wide, green pasture boasted the McCann home, a place he'd never seen. He wasn't eager to be familiarized with it, and he definitely was growing weary of this little girl. He couldn't trust her.

"We're here," he quickly said, jumping down to the ground and reaching up for her, grabbing her under her arms and pulling her down, like her brothers used to. It was such a strange feeling because she had nothing but pure adoration for her big brothers. This guy infuriated her. She jerked her arms away from him and straightened her shirt out.

He continued to let her little speech about not hating his family marinate. Was she just trying to say what she thought he wanted to hear? Was she just trying to be polite? He absolutely couldn't get a read on her and was just ready to throw in the towel and go home.

There weren't any lights on at her house, though, and she was all alone without a car.

They walked slowly down the oak lined lane that led to the white plantation style home, wrap-around porches on the ground and second floor, with black shutters and shingles. Motion floodlights flashed on in the empty circular driveway, but the house lights remained off. Case turned and looked up when they reached the steps.

"Why is the front door open?" she asked him honestly, green eyes wide.

He glanced down at her confused face, and placed a hand on her shoulder. The large black door hung open, causing the hair to stand on the back of his neck. Something had happened.

"Stay here."

"Jackson!" she immediately squealed, running up the steps and through the large doorway.

"Wait!" Halston yelled, running after her and catching up inside. He quickly breathed in as she stood by the light switch, perfectly still.

Everything was tossed. Drawers were turned out, doors opened, clothes and papers lay sprayed everywhere, like a bomb had exploded. She caught her breath in her throat as she looked around the open foyer in disbelief. There was no sign of Jackson. His wallet and keys weren't on the little wagon wheel rack by the front door. She ran upstairs and called out his name.

Her shoes rumbled up and down the hardwood floor of the long hallway, flipping on lights and calling out for him. His room was empty. Every room was empty. All of the beds were made.

“Where... where is he?” she choked, tripping down one side of the split staircase of the gorgeous foyer and looking up at Halston Blackhill with tears in her eyes. No one could have ever predicted this situation in a million years.

Case McCann was asking him for help.

“Just... let’s not jump to any conclusions,” he began, realizing that she was frightened and truly wishing that he could give her answers as something strangely resembling guilt began to rise inside of him. Her sad little face could make an iceberg melt. He paced around for a minute and rubbed his neck. “Is he with a girl in town? Did he take a trip? Is this just a random robbery? It could really be any number of harmless—”

“He told me he was involved with a Mexican drug cartel out of Nuevo Laredo,” she quickly admitted, surprised at herself since she’d kept that information from her older brothers. She gave Halston a guilty look, feeling terrible that she’d kept it from everyone. “Just some deals so his friends could get some weed to their graduate school. Should, Jesus... should I have told someone?”

Again, how could a McCann look so cute and innocent? And heartbroken? He leaned over and held her shoulders, knowing exactly what had happened, and looked her directly in the eyes. Her worthless brother didn’t need to make her feel like she was responsible for whatever he’d gotten himself involved with. She didn’t need this kind of guilt at such a young age.

“This was not your fault. It had nothing to do with you.”

Nodding, she covered her eyes with a hand as she tried not to cry. Taking a couple of breaths, she wiped the back of her dirty hand over her face and shook her head. It was just such a shock to see her house destroyed like that... and Jackson gone. Turning for the light yellow kitchen, she decided it was time to tell Joel and Townes. They always knew what to do.

“The phone... I can’t get a dial tone,” she said in a frustrated tone, pressing the yellow receiver up and down on the rotary phone hanging on the wall. She unwound herself from the long cord as Halston entered the kitchen.

“Here’s why,” he stated, tossing a stack of envelopes on the long wooden table on the opposite end of the room. The envelopes sprayed across the dark, shiny, finished tabletop. “Phone, electric, gas, water....”

Case pressed her hands on the table as she leaned over and looked at the pile of bills. They were post marked in March, April, May, had no one noticed that Jackson had been missing *that long*? Had she not noticed? She had been a little preoccupied with her senior paper, exams, and graduating.

“He must have run out of money or something,” Case nodded, looking around and brushing loose wisps of hair behind her ears. “See? He had to have paid some bills. The lights are on.”

“You probably have a backup generator,” Halston nodded, turning the squeaky knobs in the sink. Nothing came out. Jackson must have been in some serious trouble. “We have one, too.”

Case frowned and walked out of the back screen door, letting it slam as she stood on the top step and stared out into the dark pasture behind the house. What had happened? Jackson could be anywhere. He could be dead. Was he lost or hurt somewhere? She tried to ignore the fact that maybe she’d been so caught up in her senior year that she hadn’t talked to Jackson in a long time.

The screen door softly closed and she smoothed her un-tucked shirt, turning and looking up at Halston as the kitchen light cast shadows through the tall windows facing the porch.

“Um... thanks for... bringing me home, I guess, and for... hanging around,” she mumbled, not sure why she was thanking someone who’d just disciplined her like she was a Kindergartener, still in smocked dresses with a BB gun.

“You don’t have to thank me,” he replied, wondering the same thing. He also wondered why she appeared to be so sweet. Every other McCann he’d ever encountered had been a supercilious asshole. His shocked expression eased into a suspicious one.

She stood silently in front of him for a moment, then held her hand out to the side of the porch.

“So, bye,” she said with a little more force, hoping he’d take the hint.

He huffed a laugh and raised his brow in an authoritative way as he looked down at her. “I’m not leaving you here alone.”

“Uh, well, you’re not sleeping over, girlfriend,” she smirked, annoyed that he wasn’t budging.

He laughed again and shook his head, pressing his hat a little more firmly onto his head like he was getting ready to get into a tussle. If she wanted a fight, he could certainly give her one.

“Listen to me. Your house is trashed. Your brother is missing. You have no utilities. You have no clue who did any of this, or when they might return to collect. You have no clue where your brother is, or what he’s done, and to whom he’s done it. None of this can be resolved at nine pm on a Monday. Tomorrow we’ll call Bob Nixon to tow your car and we’ll get your water and everything else back on.”

“We aren’t going to do a damn thing,” she scornfully said, taking a brave step towards him and placing her hands on her hips. “I’m home. I said thanks. I will take care of all of this tomorrow. Bye!”

She held both arms out and waited for him to get moving. There was no way she was going to spend another second with him. He’d terrorized her for no reason but the fact that someone’s great-great-granddad offended the other’s great-great-granddad and to her it was all some great, great mystery.

“Well, I’ve got some news for you, Kiddo. Good and bad,” he began, folding his arms over his chest and squaring up to her in front of the door. Now she seemed like a McCann. A small feeling of joy swept over him as he half-hoped she’d want to fight.

“I am not a kid,” she quickly replied through clenched teeth.

“Bad news is... one way or another you’re going to have to come back to my house for the night,” he grinned, watching as her face turned from angry to stunned.

Her voice caught in her throat and she hated that she had to physically jolt her body to start breathing again. She glared up at him. “Oh really? And what’s the good news? The cleaning lady just came and tidied up your torture chamber?”

The laugh came from deep down but he quickly stifled it and continued. “I don’t need a torture chamber to keep you in line... but there really is good news. Fortunately, it’s Monday. Helena has made green chili chicken enchiladas for dinner.”

Her stomach deflected and rumbled, giving away the fact that she was starving, but she continued glaring up at him. What, was he trying to be funny now? He wasn't funny at all. And he wasn't going to scare her, either. "Look, Halston—"

"Please call me Hall," he interrupted, peering down at her and not moving an inch. He noticed her cheeks flushed pink again. The anger had returned.

"Whatever," she continued, shaking her head and rolling her eyes. "While I do appreciate the fact that at this particular moment you actually do seem to care about what happens to me, I really, really don't think there has ever been a time in Flag County when a McCann and a Blackhill have slept under the same roof. On top of which, I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself."

"Is this speech going to be over soon? The enchiladas will get cold," he grinned, looking at his silver wristwatch. For some reason it was actually kind of fun watching her give him attitude. She obviously had no idea how to argue or insult people, a trait he'd been certain up until that day that all McCann's possessed. He liked that she was changing his opinions. Not many people could.

And she made him laugh.

"Are you paying attention?" she snapped, clenching her fists at her sides.

"Sorry," he calmly said, holding up his hands in surrender. "Please, continue."

"Thank you," she huffed, not knowing why she was thanking him again. She opened her mouth, but had forgotten where she was. "I...you don't..."

"You are perfectly capable of taking care of yourself," he mumbled in a leading way, trying his hardest not to laugh.

"Yes, thank you," she nodded, closing her eyes and clearing her throat. She glared back up at him. "I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself. This is my home, it's my responsibility, and I can defend myself."

"You can defend yourself?" he interrupted with a half laugh. She'd been frozen with fear and couldn't even talk when he'd first found her that afternoon.

"I'm so glad that you find this so amusing!" she yelled, frowning as he suddenly turned and pulled open the screen door.

"Fine. Show me where y'all keep the guns, show that you know how to load them, and I'll leave right now," he offered, watching her face fall. If she was anything like him, and he was

discovering that she was, there was no way she could return from boarding school with any knowledge of where expensive things like guns were kept in the house. It had taken him a couple of weeks to locate everything after the accident and his parents' death, learn how to load and clean the guns, and how to effectively discharge them. Like her, he hadn't really been interested in "ranch" things. He'd wanted to get out and get on with his life elsewhere.

"You're a Blackhill, I'm not leading you to our gun closet," she quickly recovered, shaking her head at him and folding her arms defiantly. Weren't the guns just in... some closet, somewhere? She couldn't be certain, and she hated that Halston Blackhill knew that.

"Great, then let's go eat enchiladas," he said, standing aside so that she could walk through the screen door.

"I don't know why you think I'm going to stay at your house tonight," she stated, walking in and standing by the kitchen table. "It's not like I'm going to sleep tonight anyway. It'll take me hours to get through all of these bills."

Hall looked down as she gestured at the table. True, it would take a while, and it certainly wasn't fair that she was the one who had to deal with it, but he absolutely couldn't leave her alone in that house. He couldn't bear to have anyone's blood on his hands, and the thought of anyone hurting her made him particularly uncomfortable.

"Those will hold until tomorrow."

"I'm not going with you."

"You already know how unpleasant this can get, Kiddo," he indirectly said, crossing his arms, almost hoping she would challenge him so that he could toss her over his shoulder and carry her back to the horse.

Her mouth dropped open and she took a timid step backwards, holding the door frame to the kitchen. "Wha..." That was the only thing she could squeak out of her mouth. He was awfully ostentatious and terribly mistaken if he thought she'd be caught off guard again. If he ever tried to take her across his knee again, he'd get an elbow flying back into his mouth. That was certain. And maybe a foot... or a shoe. Perhaps she should change into her boots just in case.

The threat was still very valid, though, as he towered over her.

"Shall we?" he asked, gesturing for the front door and knowing that she knew she was really no match for his strength.

Pressing her lips together, she held in countless profanities and other things she'd wanted to say that could get her into even more trouble. He stepped past her, flipping off the kitchen light, then grabbed hold of her upper arm, and pulled her towards the chandelier lit foyer. She wasn't really resisting.

"I see your boarding school at least taught you to act politely and not argue with your elders," he said, turning off the last light and shoving her out onto the porch. The circle drive lights beamed and the crickets chirped again, making things feel very lonely.

"You're an asshole," she grumbled, standing and looking out at the empty flood light dotted driveway and un-manicured bushes and trees lining it. Jackson. He was the only reason she was in this mess. Where could he have been for the last couple of months? It just didn't make sense that he'd pick up and leave. The only real explanation was that he'd been kidnapped by the cartel, or he was... she turned and looked up at her beautiful old house, not even able to think about Jackson being murdered.

Joel and Townes were going to have kittens whenever she told them about this.

"You see, how it works is, you get on the horse and it gallops towards your destination," Hall calmly but sarcastically stated, standing behind Case in the shadows of the tall, full oak trees. They'd obviously been planted over half a century before along the sides of the main road, giving the house a traditional and even regal feel. They'd been neglected though, with shrubbery and moss taking over the trunks and limbs, unchecked. No one had been taking care of the McCann place for a while. With no one to pay the employees, they'd probably stopped showing up to work.

She stood before the large, black horse and didn't move, her back to him. He wished he could know what she was thinking. He'd always thought he could tell what a McCann was thinking: I'm rich, I get what I want, when I want, and everyone loves me.

Case was proving to be nothing like that, though.

"I'm thinking," she muttered needlessly, turning her head slightly and speaking to him over her shoulder.

"Apparently."

Her body turned and she glared up at him with those green eyes. They'd been so scared and sad before, but now there was a little fire burning behind them.

“I’m sorry,” he huffed, holding up his hands and shaking his head. “But what is there to think about? It’s a horse. We ride it.”

“I’m thinking about what’s going to happen after I get on that horse,” she sighed, looking down at her dirty white shoes and brushing her loose hair behind her ears. She’d sounded almost defeated, very uncharacteristic for a McCann.

He peered down at her for a moment, arms crossed over his chest, then felt like she wasn’t going to defect and make a run for it. He relaxed his stance and ran his hand over his whiskers. She was making it nearly impossible to be mean to her.

“Case... you can’t stay in that house.” He really didn’t want to be mean to her. He just wanted to be firm.

“What are Joel and Townes going to say when I tell them Jackson is missing?” she asked, looking up at him desperately. She didn’t think they’d be very understanding.

He stepped back and shook his head. Their families had always gone to great lengths to avoid each other. The few times he had encountered Joel and Townes they’d been children and had fought until an adult had broken them up. Since then, he’d imagined run-ins with McCann’s for many years, but this was not unfolding in any kind of proverbial fashion. Why was she looking at him like that? He could hardly stand it. She was like a lost puppy.

“I, I don’t really....”

“What are they going to say when they ask where I am and I say your house?” she groaned, rubbing her forehead and looking around in the darkness as the motion lights from her house flickered off. She’d almost rather risk it and stay in the abandoned, totally trashed house with no utilities.

“The risk is too high,” he said, his silhouette barely visible as her eyes adjusted. “And while your family has made mine miserable for years... I just can’t let you get hurt.”

“I think we’re way beyond that, schoolmaster,” she huffed, shaking her head and glancing back at the house. She wished she could insult a little better but sarcasm would have to do.

“You’re right,” he sighed, holding up his hands in surrender. And she was. He’d just been so incensed when he first laid eyes on her that all of his memories blew to the front of his mind and everything he’d ever been taught about hating her family just screamed at him. He hadn’t wanted to hurt her, truthfully. He’d just decided on the least awful thing he could do to

teach her a lesson. “But like you said, reparations. Now it’s a clean slate and I don’t hate you, either.”

The dark outline of her body stiffened, as if in surprise, then he saw her relax after a minute or two. She took an unsure step backwards, then towards him, then finally ended up back in the same place.

“I’m sorry... I can’t. I just can’t. This is the first time a Blackhill has ever set foot on McCann property since before the Civil War and you want me to go with you and stay at your house? It’s insanity.”

“It’s survival,” he stated, growing tired of her internal struggle. He didn’t want her there any more than she wanted to be there, but it was the right thing to do. His mom had at least left that imprint on him. Selflessness was what she’d taught him. He wasn’t certain where rescuing your helpless little rich neighbor came into play. Still, he was able, so he knew he had to help.

“It just doesn’t make sense that the people who did this would come back,” she shrugged, shaking her head. They’d looked for something pretty thoroughly and instead had left with Jackson. They wouldn’t return.

Hall was about to pull his rifle out and force her into the saddle when headlights suddenly appeared around the bend at the far end of the pasture. He heard Case suck in her breath.

“That’s the road to the front gate,” she whispered, barely able to choke out the words. It was too late for visitors.

Good God, the people who’d trashed the house were coming back.