

**June, 1958**



A time of innocense.





The air was as still as it was hot—only the whir of a grasshopper’s flight troubled the quiet. Jesse felt like an overcooked chicken, his meat darn near ready to fall off his bones. Mouth so dry he didn’t have enough spit left to swallow, Jesse croaked, “That guy tryin’ to kill us?”

Dudley’s answer took a while coming. From where he slumped against the other side of the tree trunk, he said, “I’m beginning to wonder.”

The live oak’s skimpy shade was as good as it got there in the south yearling pasture—wherever the hell that was on the Box 8’s ten thousand acres of ranchland. A half-dozen red-brown Hereford yearlings, broad white blazes down the centers of their empty faces, grazed on parched yellow grass. Jesse had tried a friendly moo, but they paid him no mind.

Jesse said, “Doesn’t seem like a foreman should be leavin’ people stuck out here with no water.”

“Maybe Buddy ol’ buddy doesn’t know what he’s doing. He’s not much older than us.”

“Oh, he knows. You hear him laugh when he drove away?”

Dudley chuckled. “You mean right after he said, ‘You ain’t bothered by snakes, are you?’”

“Yep.” Jesse tossed a stone at a prickly pear cactus the size of a laundry basket. A dry rustle started up, whispered

through the air, and then faded away. Jesse said, “You hear that?”

“Yeah.”

“Rattler?”

“Sure sounds like it.”

Jesse thought about taking a look, but his legs were like empty sacks. It had been a good three hours since Buddy dropped them off to dig a hole for a watering trough, and it had taken two of those hours to hack one into the rocky ground with shovels, leaving their hands blistered and their arms and faces cooked medium-rare by the sun.

They’d sung “summertime summertime sum sum summertime” along with the Jamies on the car radio all the way from Dallas, but now he was thinking they had a little more summer than they’d expected.

After they had dragged the galvanized steel watering trough—four feet tall, three wide and five long—into the hole, they had stomped around under the live oak to scare away snakes and then collapsed against the trunk.

What if they really were dumped out here? It was at least a mile to the ranch house down dirt roads with no signs and Jesse didn’t know if he could find his way back. His imagination fired up thoughts of rattlesnakes seeking the warmth of his body when night came.

He scanned the landscape in hopes of a dust plume signaling Buddy’s return in the Jeep. He saw no sign of rescue, but did find reason to smile—the hill country west of Kerrville was so blessedly different from home in flat, suburban Dallas. Under a white-hot afternoon sun in a never-ending blue sky, the green of live oak and cedar trees bordered yellow-gold meadows. Sprawling patches of bluebonnets prettied up hill-sides here and there.

Jesse inspected his hands; his blisters were definitely prize winners. Digging holes was not his idea of cowboy work,

and it sure wasn't what he'd imagined when Dudley's mother found them a summer job on the Box 8 Ranch. With their dream of becoming ranchers one day, they'd thought an invite to work on a real ranch as junior ranch hands was like a pass through the Pearly Gates. It hadn't mattered that they only got paid room and board.

That was then. He said, "Some fun so far."

Dudley stayed quiet for a spell. Then he said, "That Lola's something."

So Dudley had been thinking about Lola Braun, too. Jesse had figured the rancher's daughter for sixteen when they met at the ranch house that morning, so he had a year on her. But she was already the kind of girl a boy undressed with his eyes.

It wasn't her body that had started his mental peep show, although she was fun to look at. Lola was little, five feet tip to toe, if that. His gaze had roamed happily down and back up slender, tanned legs exposed by short shorts, but on top she was no Playmate of the Month.

It was a boldness in her green eyes that promised the stuff of daydreams. And then her handshake had lingered, her fingertips trailing across his palm.

Who was he kidding? Dudley would be the one she'd go for—he'd been on lots of dates and had a Cadillac. Jesse had never been on a date and had no car. He glanced at Dudley. "You think you'll ask her out?"

The corner of his eye caught a shrug. Dudley said, "She was looking at you."

Jesse could think of only one word for what she had seen—medium. Medium tall, medium brown hair, medium brown eyes, medium looks, medium build (if he could shed a couple pounds). Medium nobody. He said, "Probably wondering how anybody could possibly be that dull."

Dudley laughed. "Yeah, that would explain her giving you the twice-over with those big ol' eyes."

“The what?”

Dudley hitched around and gave Jesse a look. “You don’t know, do you?”

“Don’t know what?”

“What girls say about you.”

Jesse couldn’t imagine any girl saying anything about him. Why would they? And say what?

The whine of the Jeep’s engine butted in before Jesse could ask. That dust plume he’d hoped for was here. Axel Braun, the owner, rounded the hill and pulled up beside the trough. Dust drifted over them. Jesse had to steady himself with a hand on the tree trunk when he struggled to his feet.

Dudley moved in even slower motion. Big and powerful at six feet and on the fat side, every year the Wildcat football coach came after Dudley for the offensive line, and every year Dudley was too lazy for all that exercise. But his strength hadn’t seemed to help today.

Mister Braun got out and inspected their work. He fit Jesse’s idea of a Texas rancher. Stranding about eye to eye with Jesse, he was lean, his tan skin like a tight leather glove. The gray that peppered his black sideburns made him look old to Jesse, maybe as old as forty.

The dust whitening his jeans looked like it belonged there, and the sweat darkening his shirt and straw cowboy hat looked like hard work. Instead of the boots Jesse had expected on a rancher, he wore heavy-duty high-top work shoes.

Mister Braun turned to them. “How come you didn’t put the trough in the shade?”

Dudley said, “Buddy said to put it right there.”

Jesse wondered why he hadn’t picked the shady spot. It would have been better than digging in the full sun. Water would stay cooler, too.

Mister Braun studied them and then scanned the area. “Where’s your water?”

Jesse said, "Don't have any."

"Damn. Buddy should never've left you out here without water." Mister Braun opened a cooler in the Jeep's truck-like rear end. Ice rustled when he pulled out two bottles of Coke, popped the tops off with an opener welded to the side of the Jeep, and passed them out. "I brought these as a treat, but you need 'em for more than just fun."

Jesse's Coke was ice-cold heaven. He chugged most of it, some dribbling down his chin, the rest causing a cold ache in his chest, but it felt so good going down in a rush. He said, "Thank you, sir."

Dudley burped. Jesse laughed. Mister Braun smiled with the first warmth Jesse had seen from him.

Mister Braun handed Jesse a thermos. "Wash it down with this."

A long swallow of ice water completed Jesse's resurrection. He handed the thermos to Dudley and wondered if he was as sad a sight as his friend—clothes dirty and rumpled, shirttail half in, half out, sweaty, dirt on his face. They hadn't expected to work right away, so they'd arrived at the ranch in nice clothes to make a good impression. Jesse's sport shirt, khakis, and new penny loafers were now a mess.

Mister Braun said, "You boys ready for some supper?"

Dudley said, "I would kill for something to eat."

Jesse said, "Me, too."

Mister Braun grinned and hopped into the Jeep, and they scrambled to join him. Dudley took the shotgun seat, and Jesse climbed into the back, which was sorta like a miniature pick-up truck. Mister Braun roared off, and Jesse thought maybe there were some things to like about the boss.

There were a ton of things to like about Lola, too . . . not that Jesse would ever dare to do anything about it.

Then there was Buddy . . . and rattlesnakes buzzing in cactus.



Lola smoothed her new Coral Pink lipstick onto her lips, pressed them together, and then blotted with a tissue. She studied the look in her dresser mirror and liked it. Now if only her mother wouldn't get so weird about her wearing makeup. She rubbed a bunch off so it wouldn't be noticeable.

She grinned at how the shy summer boy, Jesse, couldn't keep his eyes off her after she gave him her "secret sexy thoughts" smile. His big friend was nice, but Jesse had what her friend Cindy called bedroom eyes. She checked her nightstand clock—it would be a while before they got back to the house.

Sweat made a run down her spine—she stood and paced, and then paged through the new *Western Horseman* magazine, but the ads just made her want stuff her parents would never buy, especially the fringed leather jacket.

She fanned her face with the magazine. Maybe a ride down to the river—it was always cooler under the cypress trees. She changed from her shorts into jeans and pulled on her boots. A little bit hungry, she headed for the kitchen.

Connie shucked corn at the kitchen sink, her gray maid uniform relieved by an apron ablaze with bright yellow daisies. She'd pulled her long black hair, threads of gray running through it, into a ponytail that swayed while she worked.

Seemed like every other week Connie said that Lola put the gray there and that she oughta go back to Mexico. And then she would smile and sometimes throw in a hug for good measure.

As Lola examined the oatmeal cookies Connie had baked for the new hands, searching for the perfect balance of raisins and cookie, Connie said, “*Señor* Braun I think is too hard on the *niños*, makin’ them work the minute they get here.”

“You always say that. You’re such a softie.”

Connie aimed a glare at Lola—and then added a grin that turned it fun. “So I should be tougher? On you too, maybe?”

Lola laughed. “I’m shakin’ in my boots.”

Connie grinned. “He could have start them tomorrow.”

“Daddy has to know if they can cut it. Remember last year we had to send that crybaby home and work short-handed?”

“I don’ think it was the working, I think it was Buddy.”

She had a point. “Yeah. The way he’s mean to the boys is dumb. They go home, and there’s still just as much work.”

“Buddy don’ do no more.”

Lola nodded. “That’s for sure.” Buddy put the extra load off on the wetbacks, who never complained because they’d lose their jobs.

Connie rinsed the corn. “Are the *niños* nice?”

“One is kinda cute.”

Connie looked around, and so did Lola. It was best to make sure they were alone when the talk concerned boys. Connie said, “Don’t let the *Señora* hear you say that. You know what she tell you about the boys.”

“I’ll be careful.”

Connie whispered, “Which is the cute one? I could only see one was big and one not-so-big.”

“Not-so-big. Jesse. He’s real shy.” Lola selected a plump, perfect cookie. “I’m going for a ride.” She left with an exaggerated swing of her hips. Looking back, she giggled when

Connie shook her head and rolled her eyes.

When Lola reached the big red barn a couple-hundred yards downhill from the house, she stopped at the open doorway to say hello to Spot, the barn cat, and scratched the orange patch in his otherwise white fur. The barn was always a comfort to her—she probably spent as much time there as she did in her room at the house. The upper level hayloft had been her playhouse as a kid, and it was still a good place to get away for a little privacy. But it would be an oven today.

Inside, Fibber, her little brown-and-white paint, stuck his head out of his stall and nickered. Even though he wasn't much over thirteen hands tall, he was a good size for her and fast as the dickens, which was why they made such a good barrel-racing team. The other two horses peeked out of their stalls and then went back to munching hay. She went to Fibber and rubbed the sensitive bump between his ears, a spot that would set a horse to purring if it could.

“How about a ride down to the river?”

Fibber pawed the earth, which she took for a yes and went to the tack room in the corner of the barn to fetch her saddle and bridle. As she reached to lift the saddle from its rack, the ranch's flatbed truck arrived.

Loaded with hay bales, it backed up to the barn doors and shut down. Romero, one of their two Mexican hands, got out of the driver's side. Heavysset and as old as her father, he frowned at her, his black mustache emphasizing his sour look.

He grabbed a bale and carried it toward the stack at the end of the barn. Romero had been friendly the summer before, but not now. She stuck her tongue out at the back of his sweat-stained blue denim shirt.

She smiled when Alejandro, not all that much older than her, rounded the other side of the truck, his lean body bare from the waist up, his coppery skin glistening with sweat. She

loved his beautiful eyes, a brown that was as dark as night, and the musical sound of his name, Ah-lay-HAN-dro.

He returned her smile with one of his big, bright-white ones and came to her, his gaze roaming over her like a little kid eyeing a Popsicle on a July day. Excitement fluttered in her. She glanced at Romero; he was still headed toward the back.

She expected Alejandro to just sneak a quick peck on her Coral Pink lips, but he slipped his hands under her arms, lifted her off her feet, and carried her into the tack room, where he pulled her to him for a real kiss.

She liked it at first, but then he put his hand to her breast and squeezed. She pushed away. “No!”

“Ah, *mi corazón* . . .” He slipped his arm around her waist and forced her toward him.

She pushed against his chest, and then brown hands clamped onto his shoulders and jerked him back.

Romero bared his teeth and shoved Alejandro against a wall. “*Estúpido!*”

Alejandro launched himself at Romero, swinging a punch that caught Romero on the shoulder and staggered him back to slam against a saddle rack. Alejandro crouched, arms wide, eyes hot.

Romero pulled a straight razor from a pocket, flicked it open and dropped into a fighting stance.

Lola yelled, “Stop it!”

Neither man glanced her way. They circled.

“Stop or I’ll tell my father!”

Long seconds passed, and then Romero straightened and glared at her. He jammed the razor into his pocket.

Alejandro came out of his crouch and took a step back.

Romero brushed past Alejandro. “You gon’ git us kicked out.” He strode to the truck, grabbed a hay bale, and carried it into the barn.

Alejandro smiled at her as though there’d been no trouble.

He said “Tonight” and returned to his work.

She ran from the barn. Heart slamming, she forced herself to walk, and then stopped and looked back. They were unloading the truck in silence, but she could see the anger on Romero’s face. She headed for home, thinking on what to do.

When Alejandro had come to the ranch, she’d thought she could have some fun with him. And she had, getting him all lathered up with sexy glances, lowering her gaze and then looking up through her lashes, and sneaking kisses. But the way he had grabbed her today hadn’t been fun. She would tell him when they met later that if he didn’t behave himself it was “*no mas*,” no more.

She trudged up the driveway and had reached Buddy’s trailer, a hundred yards to go to the house, when the Jeep’s horn honked behind her. She stopped and her father pulled up beside her. Dudley was in the passenger seat and Jesse sat in the rear.

Her father said, “Want a lift?”

“Sure.” Dudley swung a leg out to give up his seat, but she hopped into the back with Jesse. “Let’s go.” Her father took off in his usual hell-bent-for-leather fashion.

Jesse’s face was sunburned as red as an apple. Buddy, the turd, had made ’em work in the sun without hats. She smiled at Jesse. “How’re you doing?”

His answering grin was shy but warm. “Great.” His gaze darted away and then came back. He grinned again. A cute grin.

“Get along okay with Buddy?”

His eyes tightened, but he said, “Great.” This time his gaze flicked away and stayed there, looking back at the barn

Her father sent a glance at Jesse, his eyebrows raised.

She couldn’t blame Jesse for not answering truthfully with the boss right there and it being his first day.

Lola found herself hoping it wouldn’t be his last.