

“If I owned Texas and Hell, I would rent out Texas and live in Hell.”
—General Philip Sheridan

The universe had completely crapped on Kelsey Quinn’s life.

She dabbed at her eyes, blew her nose, and wadded up the tissue before dropping it to the pile on the seat next to her. Pressing her forehead against the car window, she watched the scenery fly by at seventy miles per hour. They passed *Bob’s Stay and Go* combination gas station—fast food restaurant—hotel, followed by some weird concrete starship-shaped pizza parlor. Next, three-foot fluorescent letters screamed about redemption across a junkyard fence surrounding rusted pieces of mangled metal. The few words of scripture painted there weren’t going change her fate. Her dad was in the driver’s seat and they were heading straight for the armpit of Texas.

With a sigh she slumped against the seat and tried not to think about the boyfriend who’d been ripped from her life, or the best friend she’d been forced to leave behind. But it wasn’t just her forced exile from Drew and Zoe. She’d lost her identity. At St. Monica’s, she knew who she was and where she fit in. It was her senior year, the year she’d looked forward to for as long as she was in school. They had taken it away with less thought than the car they’d sold one afternoon while she and Zoe were shopping. None of it was her fault. She was a victim of her dad’s incompetence on one hand and her sister’s immorality on the other.

Her dad exited onto a two-lane highway where they were greeted by a faded, *Welcome to Hillside Texas, Population 5000*, sign. They slowed to a crawl as they entered the town. At a four-way stop her mom screeched, “Oh my God Tom, look at the cute little diner. We’re all starving, let’s stop before we go to the house.”

“Sounds good to me. Jack’s not expecting us for another couple of hours anyway.” Dad angled the Infinity between two pickup trucks and turned off the engine.

The diner was nestled in the center of a row of dilapidated two story buildings. *Early Bird Café* was painted in bright blue letters across the glass. Kelsey pulled her compact mirror from her purse and studied her reflection. She’d been crying for two days, no amount of makeup magic would fix her swollen red eyes. It didn’t matter. She didn’t care about this place or these people. She sure as heck didn’t care what they thought about her. She shoved the mirror back into her purse.

Her younger sister, Ryan, looked all wide-eyed and curious. And worse, she actually looked excited to investigate this hick little town. Why not? It was her fault they were in this mess in the first place. Her parents would have been justified to ship Ryan off to some kind of school for troubled kids. But no—Quinns don’t give up on their own. Everybody had to suffer because Ryan couldn’t say no to drugs or boys.

Mackenzie, Kelsey’s youngest sister, flipped her compact gymnast’s body from the third seat to the back seat nailing Ryan in the shoulder with her foot.

“Watch it!” Ryan drew her fist back, but before she could get the hit off Mackenzie flashed a cherub smile and released a powder sugar apology. *Yeah. That wasn’t an accident.* Kelsey almost smiled when she saw foot impact with shoulder. Mackenzie had been fairly silent about the ruin Ryan’s exploits had done to her life. Apparently, she had her limits too.

Kelsey reached for the door handle that offered freedom from her sixteen-hour prison. Truthfully, they had only been on this leg of the trip for six hours but really, two days stuffed in an SUV with parents

who had lost their minds, one sister she hated, and another who hardly spoke was about all Kelsey could stomach.

Cracking the door was like opening a portal to hell. Heat blasted in and snatched her breath. “God, this place should be called hellside.”

Dad coughed and said, “Welcome to Texas in July.”

The Quinn family crawled from the confines of their cell-on-wheels, stretched their crunched bones and crinkled muscles, and tried not to pass out from heat stroke.

Kelsey’s dad worked his neck from side to side. His classic super stressed move. Despite the stories he’d told about growing up on the farm, he sure didn’t look excited about returning home after so many years away. But then again, Kelsey doubted his life plan included being fired from the investment firm he’d helped found.

He led the family up the steps to the sidewalk raised about two feet above the street and held the screen door open as they filed into the Early Bird Café. A waitress wearing blue jeans and a black “Cowgirl Up” T-shirt zipped across the wood floors carrying a couple of plastic pitchers. “Howdy folks. Sit wherever ya want.”

Kelsey followed her mom to a large table in the corner situated between two roaring floor fans. Mom looked around the dinner. “Isn’t this cute?”

Kelsey took in the aluminum tables and chairs and the various occupants of those chairs and muttered, “I’m thinking, no.”

Ryan grinned as she gawked at the framed football jerseys, photographs, and yellowed newspaper articles lining the gray chipped paint walls. “Look at this stuff. This is awesome!”

Trashy was the word Kelsey would have used but she kept it to herself. *How dare Ryan be so happy?* Did she not have a freakn’ clue that they’d given up everything because of her? They’d had it all in Chicago.

The cowgirl-up waitress scooted to their table and passed out plastic menus. “What would you folks like to drink? We have coke, water, and tea.”

With the word *coke* Kelsey throat went into a kind of get-me-wet-now spasm. “I’ll have Coke.”

The waitress pulled a pad from her apron pocket and smiled. “Okay, darlin’, we have Seven-up, Dr. Pepper and Pepsi.”

“Oh, I thought you had Coke?”

The waitress’s brain must have not cowgirl-ed up yet because she looked at Kelsey like she was speaking gibberish and repeated. “We have Seven-up, Dr. Pepper and Pepsi. Now which coke would you like?”

Kelsey sighed and looked at Dad.

A grin tugged at the corner of his mouth. “Coke and soda are the same here, Kel.”

About the time Dad spoke, a grey-haired man sitting at the table stood and faced the family. “Well, who let the damn Yankees in Hillside?”

Kelsey held her breath. She’d heard about these rednecks. They hate all things not Texan. From the toothpick stuck between his teeth and the gut hanging over what Kelsey presumed was a western belt buckle, this guy could be the poster boy—until his weathered face cracked into a grin.

“Tom Quinn, welcome back to paradise.”

Dad stood and reached for the man’s hand. “Mr. Barksdale? It’s been years. This is my wife Maggie and my daughters Kelsey, Ryan, and Mackenzie. Guys, this is Joe Barksdale. He was the Agg teacher when I was in school. Are you still teaching?”

“I got one year left.” The man rocked back on his heels. “I understand you’re taking over the feed store from your brother.”

“Yes, Jack and Susan are ready to take it easy for awhile.”

“Well, I’ll be...” Joe craned his neck toward his table and yelled. “Austin, git over here.”

Austin unfolded from his chair and shuffled to stand next to their table. No wonder Texas was hot, with guys like Austin taking up space. He was taller than her six-foot dad. His hair was super short, almost buzzed, but it looked good, kind of natural. Like the navy blue T-shirt that matched his eyes and the jeans that stretched down to his worn brown boots. All outdoorsy and cowboy. Total opposite of always-wears-khakis, five-foot-six boyfriend, Drew Montgomery.

Joe placed a hand on Austin’s shoulder. “This here is my nephew. He’s worked for your brother at the feed store since he was twelve.” Turning to the boy he continued, “Austin, this is Tom Quinn.”

Austin stuck his hand out. “Pleased to meet you, Mr. Quinn. Jack’s talks about you a lot.”

Dad shook his hand and added, “Well, I hope you only believe the good stuff.”

“Yes, sir.” Something about the way he nodded when he spoke—or maybe it was the twang in his drawl—kept Kelsey focused on the conversation.

Dad crossed his arms. “Are you planning to stay on at the store?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good, I sure will need the help.”

Cowgirl-up elbowed Joe in the ribs. “Are you gonna stay here yammering with my customers or are you gonna finish yer chicken fry so these nice people can eat?”

Joe grinned. “You got any good pie today?”

“I got lemon meringue and coconut.”

“Coconut.” He turned to the Quinn family, “I’ll let y’all eat. Are y’all staying at Jack’s new place in town?”

“No. We’re moving straight into the old farmhouse.” Dad answered with a smile that Kelsey recognized as the one he’d used

over the past six months to avoid having to answer embarrassing questions about their finances.

“Well, welcome home.”

Joe and Austin returned to their table and the Quinns ordered lunch. After the waitress walked off with their orders, Mom leaned across the table like she was about to spill a juicy secret. “See girls, it’s going to all work out.” Patting Ryan’s hand she continued, “This is exactly where we need to be.”

“Seriously, Mom? A gross dinner in the middle of nowhere is where we need to be?” Kelsey couldn’t hide the sarcasm in her voice if she’d wanted to. “Maybe this is good for Ryan—the rest of us are totally screwed.”

Mom pressed her lips flat and swallowed before speaking. “We’re family, we support each other—even if it means making a few sacrifices.”

Mackenzie shoved her chair back. “Keep telling yourself that, Mom.” She stood and stormed toward the poster board *Restrooms* sign.

Stunned silence filled the table. Kelsey couldn’t remember a single time she’d seen her youngest sister lose her temper, much less talk back to her parents.

Mom stood to go after her, but Dad placed a hand on her arm. “Let her go, Maggie.”

Mom eased back into her seat. Ryan’s eyes filled with tears and Dad rubbed his manicured hands across his face like he wondered what in the hell he was thinking by moving the family to Texas.

Cowgirl-up plunked a tray full of drinks on the end of the table and began passing them around. “Tom Quinn. I thought you looked familiar. Where’ve you been all these years?”

“Chicago,” Dad answered.

“Chicago! No wonder you look like something the cat drug in. And you’re taking over Jack’s place.” She looked at Kelsey and Ryan. “So you girls will be starting school here. What grade are y’all in?”

Dad answered for them. “Kelsey will be a senior, Ryan will be a junior, and Mackenzie—the one in the restroom—will be a freshman.”

“Well I swanny, pretty little things like you girls are gonna set Hillside High on its ear. “I’ll be right back with your lunch.” The waitress sashayed off toward the kitchen.

As soon as Cowgirl-up was out of earshot, Kelsey looked at her mom. “I swanny? Is she for real?”

“Isn’t it cute, honey? This is a good change for the family.”

This is a good change for the family. Giving up friends, their house, and their lives? “The family doesn’t need to change, Mom. Ryan is the one who’s screwed up.” Kelsey rose from the table before Mom could answer and headed to the restroom to find her sister.

Kelsey knocked on the door. “Mackenzie? You okay?”

She heard a lock click before the door cracked to reveal Mackenzie leaning against a rust stained sink, blowing her nose. “I hate this place.”

Kelsey entered the tiny room and closed the door behind her. She wrapped an arm around her sister. “I know. I kept thinking they’d back out, that they wouldn’t go through with the move...”

“My gymnastics life is over.” Tears streamed down her face.

Kelsey tore some tissue from the roll and handed it to her. “I know. While you and I were following all the rules, Ryan was out there breaking them. We’re the ones suffering for it.”

Mackenzie dabbed at her eyes. “Every time I hear mom say ‘isn’t this cute’ I want to scream.”

“Yeah, there’s nothing cute about this place. But, we have to eat. Come on, let’s get some lunch.”

One thing for sure, Kelsey had never seen anything like the enormous chicken fried steak the Early Bird Café served. She stared at the plate of golden brown crust covered meat soaked in cream gravy, and the mashed potatoes mounded next to it, and sighed. It was probably about a million calories. Just looking at it made her feel fat. “How am I going eat this?”

She looked up and caught Austin staring at her from the other table. He smiled and mouthed “like this.” He exaggerated stabbing the meat with his fork and shoving a piece in his mouth. Her ears burned and she wanted to be mad but a smile formed on her lips anyway. She ducked her head and dug into her meal. She had to admit it was delicious. So this was the first good thing she discovered about Hillside, Texas. The second, she figured, would be the town shrinking in her rear view mirror.

