

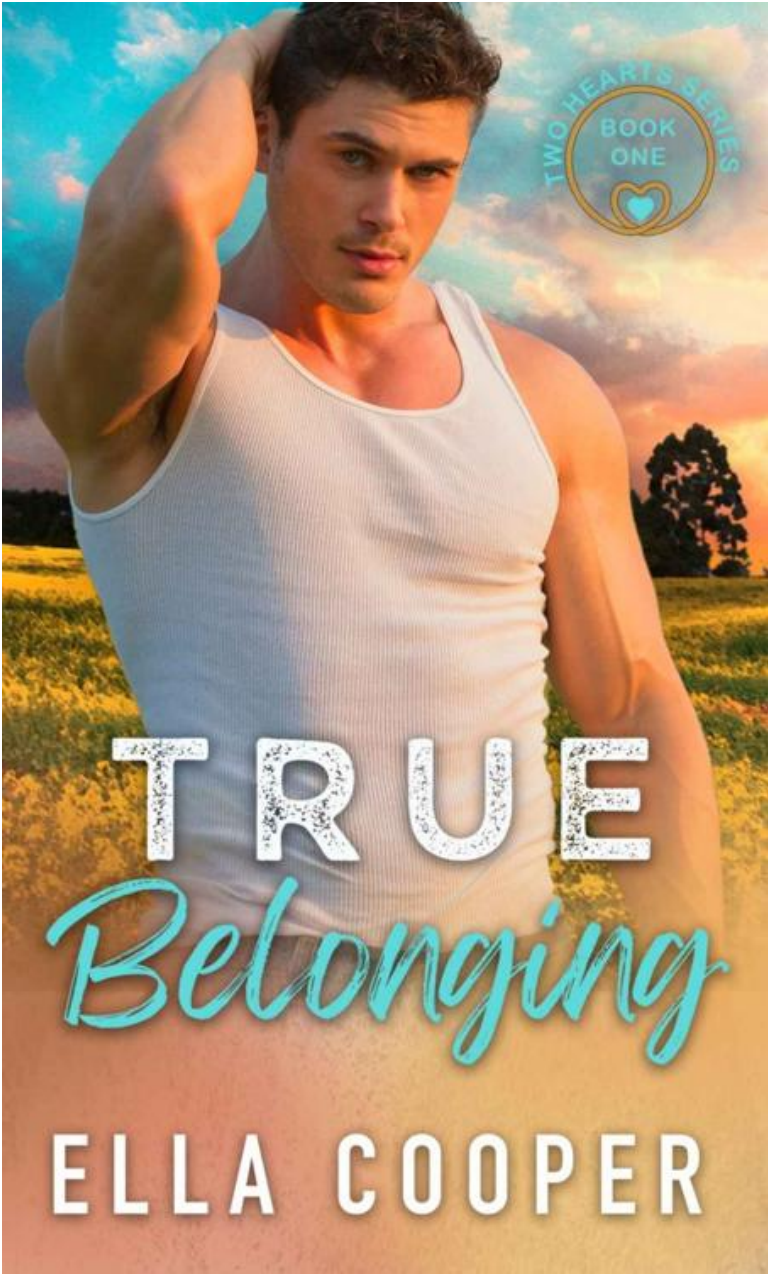
A muscular man with dark hair and a light beard is the central figure. He is wearing a white ribbed tank top and has his right arm raised, resting his hand on his head. He is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The background is a vast field of tall grass under a dramatic sunset sky with orange, yellow, and blue tones. A large tree is visible on the right side of the field.

TWO HEARTS SERIES
BOOK ONE

TRUE

Belonging

ELLA COOPER



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TRUE BELONGING

Book One

~ Two Hearts Series ~

by Ella Cooper

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Chapter One

Flint

“Well, here I am,” I said to myself as I drove the truck through the gate with *Heaven’s Peak Ranch* scrawled across it in letters made of rotting wood. That would be the first thing that I fixed. Ahead, the dusty road split into four. I took the turn-off to the left that led to the main farmhouse.

Trepidation traveled through my body as I saw the building creep upward in the distance. I could spot a group of people milling about near the entrance, obviously waiting for me. I had to wonder if they were there to help, or if they were going to lay into me the moment I got out of the truck.

Parking horizontally in front of the farmhouse, I took a deep breath and tried to convince myself that it was all going to be fine. None of them were going to try anything physical in front of the rest of the family.

“Don’t be stupid,” I chastised myself. Of course they weren’t going to try and murder me. Even cousin Lawrence wouldn’t go that far, despite the fact that he must have been absolutely furious at this turn of events.

“Hey, y’all,” I said as I got out and landed in the dust in front of the group. Lawrence was the first to step forward, holding his hand out to me for a good shake. There was something hidden behind his eyes, but it looked like he was going to keep the whole situation civil. Behind him, his wife,

Kate, stood together with Brett, Lawrence's sister. I wondered where the rest were, but I assumed that they were still too angry to come and look me in the face.

"Thought we could help you unpack." Lawrence shrugged when I let go of his hand and he stepped back. "Hope you didn't bring too many things."

"Honestly, Grandpa's barely in the ground, and you're already here to rule his land," Kate snapped, her face betraying how difficult it had been for her to keep that inside. I glanced at her with a sigh. Even if I had expected it, her words still stung. It was going to be difficult to get them all to accept that the ranch was mine now and not theirs.

"Kate, please." Lawrence looked over at her. "We've talked about this."

"More like you gave orders about it." Kate shrugged and crossed her arms over her chest in a huff. "Some of us still think he should do the right thing and give it all back to us."

"You disappear for years, go do your stupid college degree," Brett added snidely. "Pretend like your family never existed, and yet here you are, the moment you stand to gain something from us."

"I didn't make this choice," I answered, already making my way around the truck to start unloading boxes while keeping my eyes on them. "If you have a problem, then you should take it up with Grandpa. He's the one who gave me the ranch."

"We all know you did something to him for it," Kate sneered, but this time, Lawrence shot her a look that shut her up.

"If anyone wants to go home and leave the packing to us, then go," he said angrily. "I'm not going to repeat myself."

"Yeah, whatever." Brett was the first to come around and take a box from me. "But don't think we're just going to leave it there."

“I wouldn’t expect anything less,” I replied as I handed it over, and the rest of them started making their way over. I didn’t have a lot of belongings, so it would take less than half an hour if all of them stayed to help. Knowing that I would be expected to feed them all afterwards, though, already had my heart in a knot.

I wasn’t the best cook if I had the right ingredients in the first place, and I wasn’t sure if there was anything that I could use in the house. I’d brought groceries, of course, but they were supposed to last me several weeks.

Ahead of me, the family walked in a line toward the front door, which seemed to have been left unlocked. I wondered if they’d simply forgotten to do so, or if they’d hoped a coyote or something would break in and ruin my new house. Knowing how petty they could be, I wouldn’t have been entirely surprised.

“You can leave it all in the living room,” I called out as I followed them onto the porch in the tense silence that had been building up.

“Yes, boss.” The sarcasm that laced Kate’s voice had me rolling my eyes. Boxes were haphazardly dropped on the floor in the living room before everyone snaked back out to the truck. It took three more trips, but we finally had everything inside. It was going to take me some time to sort through the boxes, especially with the way they were simply thrown around.

Still, I couldn’t exactly complain. At least they had all helped me to carry things. I’d spent most of that time avoiding the pictures of my grandparents and the rest of the family on the wall. Only two of them contained me, from when I was still in grade school. Everyone else had adult versions of themselves captured forever in the frames.

When I placed the last box on the pile that sat atop the coffee table, I noticed that a circle of folded arms had formed around it. Eyes were filled with expectation, and I sighed.

“Make yourselves at home,” I said, stretching my arms above myself. “I’ll get started on dinner.”

“And poison us with your lack of talent?” Janice shook her head firmly. “Absolutely not. You get the ingredients. Kate and I will do the cooking.”

It seemed a good alternative to me. Brett and Lawrence shoved boxes out of the way to sit down on our grandfather’s old furniture. I twitched, hoping that they hadn’t scratched any of the wood. Belle followed her mother and aunt meekly to the kitchen.

“You should tell him about the barn.” I heard the sentence come from Brett as I was making my way to the kitchen, wondering what Janice was planning to make. The words made me pause, and I turned back to the living room.

“What about it?” I asked, arms crossed and eyebrow raised as I went to stand in front of the two men. Brett clearly didn’t think that I had been listening, but he now bumped an elbow into Lawrence’s ribs to encourage him to talk.

“I’ll sort it out myself,” Lawrence answered with a shrug, but I wasn’t going to be happy with just that.

“Sort what out?” I tapped my foot on the floor to illustrate my annoyance. “Is one of the animals sick? Why didn’t you tell me earlier?”

Lawrence sighed heavily, as if I was making a big deal out of something ridiculous. “No. At least, I don’t think so. Just some odd things going on.”

“I think it’s a wild animal. Cat, raccoon, coyote maybe.” Brett counted the fingers on his hand as he went down the list. “Some of the hens haven’t been laying eggs as well as usual. One of the cows isn’t giving the milk she should. I reckon we’ve got a sneaky thief on our hands.”

“Animals don’t steal milk,” Lawrence pointed out. “Would explain the eggs, though.”

“Cows give less when they’re stressed.” Brett shrugged lazily. “Sure a crazy raccoon could stress her out like that.”

“And you’re planning on doing what exactly?” I turned my attention back to Lawrence. I needed to take the reins right now so that they knew who the boss was on this ranch. As soon as the deed was in my name, it all became mine. Things were going to change around here, whether they liked it or not, and it was going to start with Lawrence no longer being in charge.

“I’m setting out traps.” Lawrence eyed me with sly annoyance. “See if I can’t catch it.”

“I’ll do it,” I insisted, continuing to stare him down. “Next time something strange is going on, I expect to be told. This is my ranch now.”

“Is that so?” Lawrence tensed, but he seemed to think twice about a fight. “Well, then, whatever you say, boss.”

“Are you bringing those groceries?” Kate called from the kitchen, and I could feel my cousins’ eyes burning into my back as I grabbed the bags and walked out of the room. I wasn’t the kind of person who really enjoyed confrontation, but I wouldn’t be a pushover, either.

I remembered Grandpa’s complaints about my cousins from before his mind left him. I remembered the rumors that my mother told me about, and how she’d confirmed them. All of them seemed to think that the ranch should have gone to Brett and Lawrence, and they’d never paused to question why Grandpa would choose to give it to me instead.

Maybe one day, I would bring it up over a casual dinner. I’d remind them of everything they’d done to him and insist that they were lucky I even let them stay. Right now, however, didn’t seem like the exact right time to do something like that. Maybe they’d stop their nonsense now that I was here.

I wondered about the eggs and milk, though. It could be that it was the kids that stole the eggs and stressed out the

cows. Brett could also be right, since there were a good number of wild animals out here. Still, it seemed like something simply wasn't adding up. Were they just messing with me? I wouldn't be that surprised. Of course, the two of them would look for any way to prove I was too incompetent to run this ranch successfully.

“Just going to stand there?” Kate ripped one of the bags from my hands and went through its contents. “Ugh, you barely brought anything worth making.”

“I didn't think you'd all want to stay for dinner.” I shrugged, leaning against the counter once I'd put down the rest of the bags. “After all, I'm sure I'm not exactly your favorite person.”

Kate glanced over her shoulder at me. “Tradition is tradition, Flint. Maybe if you hadn't abandoned us, you'd know that.”

“I didn't...” I paused, deciding that I wasn't going to go down that road. “Look, there are enough steaks and potatoes for all of us. They were supposed to last me a few weeks, but I guess I can live on whatever else.”

“Typical man.” Janice shook her head as she started rummaging through the cupboards. “No vegetables at all.”

“Potatoes are a vegetable,” I pointed out, but they looked at me, irritated. “Anyway, I'll bring the fellas a beer, okay? Let's loosen up.”

I carried the beers back to the living room with me, hoping that this whole dinner would be over fairly quickly. Knowing Janice, she'd want to get to bed by seven-thirty. That was still a whole three hours away, but I could handle that.

“Bud Light?” Brett made a face as he took the beer from me and cracked it open. Drops of the liquid landed on the carpet, making my jaw tighten. He'd never really had respect for our grandfather's belongings, and it seemed like that wasn't going to change any time soon.

“Know anyone in town looking for work?” I pushed the subject of my choice of drink away. “Sign out front has seen better days. I figure there’s a lot more that needs to get done around here.”

“Of course.” Lawrence peered at me before he took a deep swig of his beer. “You barely get here, and you already want to change everything.”

“You can help me if you like.”

“Go ask in town,” Lawrence insisted. “Sure there’s a kid or two who will work for a couple of bucks.”

“Am I not still paying you a salary?” I sat down on an open arm chair, eyeing the both of them strictly. I wasn’t entirely sure how much they got from our grandfather every month, but I was almost certain it was more than they deserved. The time for those kinds of games, however, was over. If they wanted money from me, then they would have to earn it.

“Not for fixing shit,” Brett answered calmly, but I could see something in his eyes that told me he was getting uncomfortable. “We look after the animals. You want a handyman, hire one.”

I nodded, not wanting to push much further. At least if they were competent in what they had to do, it was one less thing for me to think about. I would still have to keep an eye on them, but I knew that they at least cared for their animals. It was the one thing none of the rumors said anything about.

“Fine, then.” I crossed my legs at the ankle and pretended I was deep in thought. “You keep up with the animals, and I’ll fix up the farm myself. Except for your houses. That’s all on you.”

The room remained quiet for a while as the three of us drank our beers in the stale, tense atmosphere. A few times, I checked my phone, wondering how long I’d still have to entertain my family.

I did want to at least remain civil. It was what I'd promised myself when I decided to move back to the ranch. Still, it didn't look like they were going to make it easy for me to do so. Hopefully, things would settle down as time went on, and they'd see that it wasn't so bad. Except, of course, that I wasn't going to allow them to steal from me like they did to our grandfather.

"Kate!" Brett shouted at one point, clearly starting to become impatient. "How's the food coming?"

I got up from my chair, my beer empty and my mind wandering. "I'll go and check on it."

The aroma coming from the kitchen had my stomach rumbling. You could say a lot about Kate and Janice, but they knew what they were doing when it came to cooking. I only now realized how hungry I actually was. I hadn't eaten anything all day.

"Smells fantastic." I mentioned when I entered the kitchen and dumped my empty can in the trash nearby. "Thanks."

"Didn't say you could come in here." Kate snapped over her shoulder as she started gathering plates and cutlery.

I didn't point out that this was my house, but I didn't leave, either. I simply watched them work, thinking that I would offer to do the dishes myself afterwards. I was already tired of having so many people around, and I had a lot of unpacking to do. On top of all of that, I wanted to get up early to check out the situation in the barn.

"Right, it's ready. Get the boys, Belle." Janice finally said, carrying plates past me to the dining room. From what I could see, they'd worked magic with the few groceries that I'd had, creatively weaving together a meal fit for kings. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad to have my family around if I could get that kind of food more regularly.

We gathered around the dining table, and luckily, Lawrence and Brett didn't try to take a seat at the head of it.

That was one sign that they were, though reluctantly, allowing me to take the reins. I sat down, waiting for them to start the prayer that I knew they'd want to give before we started eating.

Something caught my eye outside, flashing far down in the field. It happened so quickly that I almost thought that I'd imagined it, but I was sure I'd seen something. Was that the wild animal that they'd been talking about? I wanted to jump up and run out to see if I could catch another glimpse of it. On the other hand, if it really was an animal, it was already gone. There was no way I'd be able to catch up.

Brett cleared his throat. "What are you looking at?"

Lawrence had taken over the prayer, and when they'd said amen, they must have noticed that my eyes were still open. I sighed, knowing that they were all silently judging me for that.

"Thought I saw something out there," I answered simply. "Wondered if it was that animal you've been talking about."

"You want to go check it out after dinner?" Lawrence perked up, slicing into his steak violently. "If it's still there, we can catch it red-handed."

"No, I don't think we'll be fast enough." I began eating with the rest of them, savoring the taste of the meat with the first bite before I continued. "I've got a lot to do here tonight. We'll get it in the morning, see how much it's taken."

Dinner went on, mostly silent, with only the sound of clinking cutlery breaking up the monotony. At my suggestion, they left the dishes to me and finally disappeared down the dusty road back to their side of the ranch. I was alone with my boxes and my thoughts, and I suddenly realized just how tired I really was.

Everything could wait until morning, even cleaning up. I'd get a good night's sleep and monitor the state of the farm when I woke up. After all, everything didn't have to happen

immediately. It wasn't like there was anything chasing me anymore.

I went upstairs and wondered for a moment if I'd sleep in my grandfather's room, but I decided against it. Instead, I turned to one of the guest rooms, which hadn't been used in years, and got under the dusty covers. It wasn't going to be the best sleep I'd ever had, but it would be good enough.

Chapter Two

Eliza

One week earlier

“It’s for your own good.”

“Just do what we tell you, and it will all be fine.”

“Don’t be stubborn, Eliza!”

The words continued to echo in my head as I stuffed my backpack full of supplies. I needed to be able to move quickly, so I couldn’t exactly pack for a three-week holiday in the Bahamas. They’d probably be back in a few hours, so I didn’t have a lot of time either.

The backpack was getting heavy and full, and I squeezed in a last set of underwear before I zipped it up. I couldn’t believe that this was what it was coming to, but it didn’t feel like I had any choice in the matter. If I stayed here, then there would be trouble.

With one last glance across my cramped apartment, worried slightly about everything I was leaving behind, I made my decision to get going. I’d left my credit cards and my cell phone in a box in the back of my closet, hoping my family wouldn’t find them. I didn’t really think they were capable of

tracking me with those things anyway, but I wouldn't have put it past them to involve the police. So I'd emptied my accounts and shoved the cash into the very bottom of my bag.

After all, they'd be able to convince them fairly easily that I was mentally unwell and missing, putting on crocodile tears and sad faces until they got what they wanted.

I needed time to figure out my next move, somewhere neither they nor that psychiatrist could find me. That meant that I needed to get out of Tucson. Even if I could gain a few weeks, it would be more than I had now.

I locked the apartment behind me with a worried sigh and rushed downstairs, hoping fervently that I wouldn't run into them on their way to come and get me. The nearest bus station was a good two-mile walk from here, but I could weave my way through buildings and stay unseen.

"Why don't you come with us, and we'll show you. It will all be better soon." My mother's voice replayed itself in my head over and over again. A sweet tone laced with poison and selfish intent. It hadn't ever been something I considered until recently. I honestly had never known my family would throw me under the bus like that.

Down the street and around the corner, I could finally take a breath without complete panic. Now I would be able to disappear more easily.

It took a while, but I finally reached the bus station, and I walked straight to the counter. Luckily, the whole place seemed to be all but abandoned, with only an old lady coughing on a broken chair in the corner. It made sense for this place to be empty in the middle of the day. Most people would get their tickets early in the morning and late afternoon, or online if they wanted to.

"Where do you want to go?" The lady behind the counter peered at me as if I had been interrupting something important.

I hesitated, glancing up at the names of places on the board above her head. “I don’t know, wherever the cheapest tickets are, and the soonest. I need to get out of here.”

That earned a slight eyebrow raise from her, but she didn’t say anything about it. Instead, she started typing on the computer in front of her.

“There’s a bus going north to Flagstaff in twenty minutes,” she finally pointed out.

“Yes, great, that one, please.” I pulled as much change out of my pocket as I had kept there for this purpose and dumped it on the counter. “You can keep whatever’s left. Just give me the ticket, quickly, please.”

On one hand, I appreciated that she didn’t ask any questions as she printed out the ticket and handed it over. On the other, I kind of wished that she would show at least the slightest interest in who I was and where I was going.

For now, this would be far enough. I’d find somewhere to sleep and plan the rest from there.

“Thanks,” I said as I took the ticket, but her attention was already elsewhere. I assumed that I’d have to wait outside for the bus, so I left without greeting her. Behind me, all I could hear were the ragged coughs of the old woman in the corner.

Standing in the parking lot, I took a moment to think about what I was doing. It seemed insane, a ridiculous idea that was bound to backfire on me. After all, I couldn’t run away forever. I needed a job somewhere, a place to live, especially when my money ran out.

And if my family did report me missing, what would happen when they found me? Would the police listen to their stories and believe their psychiatrist witness? It could be that they would hand me over without question, and I’d have no options left.

Maybe I would have to change my name, wherever it was that I ended up. I wished for a second that I was a smoker,

so that I could light one up and do something about the stress itching across my body.

By the time the bus pulled into the lot, I almost ran at it in my haste, shaking and peering around to see if anyone had managed to follow me this far. The schedule said it would leave in ten minutes, but I wanted to get on as quickly as I could.

“Here.” Once the door opened, I shoved my printed ticket at the driver before anyone could even get off of the bus. He didn’t say much, but the people who were trying to pass me as I pushed my way to the back had grimaces of serious annoyance painted on their faces.

I found a seat in the far back corner and pulled the tiny curtain closed so that I could no longer see the outside world. It felt like I was finally hidden away and gone. A huge sigh of relief passed through me, and I settled down into the hard seat as if it was the most comfortable thing in the world.

When the bus eventually trundled away from the parking lot in a cloud of dust and carbon monoxide, I was giddy with nervous excitement. This was the first time that I’d ever done something this crazy in my twenty-four years of life. I only wished that there was someone next to me that I could share it with.

#

The bus continued on for around two hours before I got off in a small town called New River near a gas station. Apparently, this was as far as my ticket could send me. I stood in front of the convenience store attached to the station, staring out into the quiet roads. This place was so small that I was almost sure there would be no motels good enough to stay at.

I sighed to myself and walked into the convenience store, thinking that I’d grab something to eat before I kept

going. Maybe they sold tickets for another bus, and I could get somewhere with a bit more life.

Inside, there were two burly men with thick beards reaching for their chests browsing the snack aisle.

“Mm, it’s a shame about old Mayfield, huh?” My ear caught their conversation, and for some reason, I kept listening as I stood staring at the energy drinks in the fridge.

“I mean, he’s been wrong in the head for a while now,” the other man answered gruffly. “Probably a good thing that he’s passed.”

“Yeah, but he’s got a real nice house on that ranch. I hear the family’s been fighting over who gets it in the will.”

An idea was forming in my mind. It seemed completely insane, but the more I was thinking about it, the more I liked it.

“I expect that Lawrence boy will get it.” The one with the lower voice sounded as if that was something this Lawrence would not deserve. “Any case, it’ll be empty for months, I bet. Law stuff takes forever.”

An empty house on a ranch sounded like a dream. Out in the middle of nowhere, with no one and nothing to bother me. Just me and my thoughts, figuring all of this out. If I had a few months, I was certain that I’d be able to make a plan to escape for good. Maybe even get what I deserved all along. Even a few weeks would be enough.

Still, how would I get out there? I had no idea where this place was, or even what it was called. This was a really long shot, and I was probably being really stupid.

I grabbed an energy drink from the fridge and stomped to the cashier to pay for it after rummaging in my backpack for a bit of cash. When I left, I noticed a truck parked close to one of the pumps and figured it probably belonged to one of the burly guys inside.

Another ridiculous idea started forming itself in my mind. I didn't think that they had paid attention to me when I was in there, and I'm sure they wouldn't have thought that I was listening to their conversation. If I could act convincing enough, then maybe I could get them to take me out there.

"Hey, uh, sorry!" I called out to them when I saw them walking back outside to their truck. This could be dangerous, but I was taking the shot anyway. The money I'd save on a place to stay would be worth it. At least, that was what I was telling myself.

"You talking to me, miss?" The gruffer man with the red beard and arms like tree trunks asked, looking surprised that I even existed.

"Yeah..." I scratched at my head, hoping that I looked at least a little innocent. "I need a ride."

"To where?" Red Beard blinked at me. He must have been wondering what the hell I'd be doing in the middle of nowhere, or where I could possibly want to go from here.

"Uhm, my grandfather, he, uh..." I searched for the words, making my face as sad as I possibly could. "He passed away recently, and, uh... I wanted to see my family. They live on a ranch out here, and they were supposed to get me at this station, but they haven't come, and my phone is dead and stuff."

Red Beard and his friend both seemed suspicious at my hurried explanation, but there was compassion in their eyes. I could pull this off, I was sure of it.

"Yeah, so, my cousin, Lawrence Mayfield, it's his ranch, I think..." I continued, watching as recognition flickered in their eyes. "I'm not sure what it's called, I mean, I haven't been back here in years."

"Ah, Heaven's Peak." Red Beard nodded slowly. "I know the place. You say you need a ride?"

I smiled as sweetly as I could. "Please."

They made space for me in the truck, which smelled a bit of compost and cow dung. We drove out in relative silence, with the only sound tinny country music blaring on the radio. Soon, we'd left the town behind, and quickly the roads gained holes, the tar eventually giving way to gravel and then just sandy earth.

It was about forty minutes or so of rough driving before I spotted the old, banged-up sign hanging over a ranch gate. This was the place. Red Beard, who I'd learned was called Allan, drove through comfortably.

"You can drop me at the fork." I pointed ahead of us, not wanting them to actually drop me at someone's house. It would be difficult to explain why Lawrence or any of the other people had no idea who I actually was.

"You sure?" Allan peered at me and pointed up ahead to the left. "I can take you right up to old Mayfield's house."

"No, it's fine, really," I insisted, lifting my hands to emphasize further. "I need the fresh air for a minute."

"If you say so." Allan stopped his truck, and I popped open the door. "Give the family my condolences, will you?"

"Yeah, thanks." I waved at him, pretending like I knew exactly where I was going. Thanks to Allan's unwitting directions, I was at least aware of which way the empty house should be. It would be embarrassing to run into any of the Mayfield family members, but I would take the chance for now.

Hopefully they'd left their grandfather's home as it was, and I could get at least a few weeks' worth of time here.

I watched Allan drive away in a cloud of dust, and I was alone again. Following the road to the left, I started to realize just how lonely this was going to be. There were no people in sight, just a barn down the hill somewhat. That made me wonder if there were animals on this ranch.

If they were, then surely someone was looking after them. I would have to be careful, study their movements, and

run if anyone came too close.

First, however, my plan was to take a long shower. Or a bath, depending on what I found in the house.

I made it up there without any trouble. The front door wasn't even locked, so I simply let myself in. Beneath my feet, the old wooden floors creaked, and the wind leaked through cracks in the windows. It was certainly a creepy old place, but it kept most of the weather out. Plus, it was really out in the middle of nowhere. My family wasn't going to find me here.

Unfortunately, the fridge was empty. I should have expected that. Nobody is going to stock a dead man's pantry. Even the cupboards had been cleared out, as if the moment he had died, his family had ransacked the place.

I'd brought a couple of cereal bars and things with me to eat, but they weren't going to sustain me for long. That made me think of the barn. If I went down there, maybe got a bit of milk from a cow or a goat, maybe an egg or two... Then I could last here a lot longer without needing to go into town for supplies.

"I'll do that in the morning," I said to myself. My voice echoed through the empty house, making me shiver. For now, I simply wanted to wash all of the dust off of myself and look through the place.

Upstairs, there were two bathrooms and three bedrooms. I wondered what an elderly man would do with this much space. I chose one of the guest bedrooms rather than the main bedroom, thinking that I didn't want to sleep there if someone had died in the bed. It was possible that it happened somewhere else, but I wasn't going to take that chance.

I didn't switch on the light in the bathroom. It wasn't dark just yet, and I didn't want anyone who might be out on the ranch to see anything suspicious through the windows. Luckily, this room only had a small window, so people wouldn't spot me moving around inside.

The water started running and turned brown. It didn't smell terrible, and its color went back to normal fairly quickly. Still, it made me cringe slightly. I made a mental note not to drink any of the water that I got from the taps.

I undressed and dipped myself in, sighing at the soothing heat that flowed across my body. I was finally really relaxing, laying my head back over the rim and breathing deeply. This was definitely the nicest part of my whole day.

The rest of the night, I spent my time eating cereal bars, going through some of the books in the house, and going to bed rather early. I would have to be up before four in the morning to beat the farm workers to the barn.

When I did wake up and went down the hill, it was pitch-black still outside, and I was convinced I was early enough. I hurried to the barn, where I found several cows, goats, pigs, and a chicken coop.

“Jackpot!” I whispered to myself as I lifted a hen and found her on an egg. I took two more before I decided it was enough. From there, I moved on to one of the cows. I'd brought a bottle from the house, and some knowledge from visiting farms when I was younger. It wasn't easy to get milk, but I managed it eventually.

“Stupid bloody Flint, can you believe it?”

Someone was coming, and my heart skipped a beat. They couldn't catch me here! I looked upward. The barn had a loft, filled with hay. To one side stood a ladder. I made my way up to the top and tumbled behind a bale, hoping my breathing wouldn't be loud enough to hear.

Below me, the conversation continued between the men who had just arrived.

“You don't think he'll actually take the ranch, do you?”

“He told Lawrence he'd be here next week, apparently. Moving into the house and everything.”

I swore under my breath. That was going to ruin my plans of staying there. I would have to think of something quickly.

“What’s the matter, Debbie? Look like you’ve seen a ghost.” It seemed like they were talking to the cow I had so haphazardly milked. I wished I could have apologized to her, but I would simply have to do a better job the next day.

I had a week to stay in the house. Maybe I could move out here to the barn by then. I’d have to gather some supplies, but I could stay hidden in the loft. It was noisy enough out here that people wouldn’t hear me moving around. It was worth a shot.

Chapter Three

Flint

The sun had barely touched the sky when I woke up the next morning. Outside, a rooster was losing its mind, and the sounds of a waking ranch sung their way into the sky. It was refreshing, until I remembered that I still had to clean up after the dinner from the previous night.

“Of course, always leaving your problems for the future,” I mumbled to myself. “Good job, Flint.”

On top of that, I would have to go out to the barn to investigate the animal that everyone had been complaining about.

First, though, I was going to grab a cup of coffee, maybe have some eggs. I had all day to be productive, and I would enjoy my first morning as the owner of a ranch before I did anything else.

Whistling, I descended the stairs toward the kitchen. Everything seemed to be covered in a thin film of dust, collected in the time that Granddad could no longer look after the house for himself. Halfway down, I spotted something that gave me pause.

“What’s this?” I said aloud as I leaned down over the railing to give it a closer look. The entire staircase’s railing had that same film of dust, but in this one spot, there was the shape of a hand printed into it. As if someone had caught themselves falling before continuing upward.

I thought back to the night before, but I didn’t remember that I’d touched the railing or that anyone else had gone upstairs. Still, I convinced myself that I must have done it accidentally at some point, even though the shape of the hand print didn’t look very much like my own.

Deciding to ignore it, I continued on my way down to the kitchen. I wasn’t going to let something small like that bother me today. I needed to dust everything down, anyway.

A few minutes later, I was headed out to the porch with my cup of coffee and a piece of buttered toast. Outside, the air was fresh, and a breeze teased my hair, all around a fairly pleasant day. I stared down in the direction of the barn, trying to calculate my approach to the investigation.

If it was a coyote, then I’d have to build a fairly big trap to catch it. If it was something smaller, then it would be more difficult.

“Maybe,” I said to myself, mouth full of crumbs, “I should just get animal control on it.”

That idea was quickly shoved to the side, though. I couldn’t be the owner of a ranch and want to call animal control. That was pathetic and would probably make my family think they were right to be angry about the inheritance.

No, I would have to deal with this nuisance myself, and quickly. When I finished my coffee and carried the mug back to the kitchen, however, I had to sigh. I couldn’t leave all of this dirty stuff out. Insects would carry me away within a few hours, and I didn’t want that problem to deal with, too.

Grumbling to myself about my family’s unwillingness to be helpful, I started on the dishes. Something seemed off here, too. There seemed to be a bit of leftover egg dropped

right beside the stove on the counter. I hadn't had any eggs, nor had anyone in the family.

"That's really weird," I pondered aloud. "Where could that have come from?"

I was becoming more and more suspicious, but of what, I wasn't entirely sure. My first thought was a ghost, but I've never believed in that kind of thing. On top of that, I didn't think that ghosts would make themselves scrambled eggs for breakfast.

It did make me wonder if anything else in the house was a bit off. There was the possibility that they were messing with me, too. Still, Lawrence and Brett weren't the pranking type, and I was certain the women thought themselves above that kind of thing.

Pausing my dish washing, I walked off to investigate the rest of the house. There was something else amiss in the kitchen. One of the milk bottles that Granddad kept under the sink wasn't there. Maybe it had broken, but that seemed unlikely with how the others were packed together.

"Hmm," I mumbled, continuing to scan through the rest of the counters. Nothing else was out of place, though, apart from the groceries that I had brought in myself. The rest of the downstairs rooms also seemed completely normal. That was except, of course, for the bundles of boxes that stood around taking up space.

The only strange thing on the stairs was that handprint that I'd found. At this point, I was thinking that I was just crazy. That my imagination might simply be running away with me.

When I reached the guest room that I hadn't been sleeping in, I realized instantly that that wasn't true. I opened the door, and immediately noticed a serious lack of the dust that covered nearly everything else in the house.

"What the..."

The bed had been freshly made, with crisp, clean sheets. The curtains were drawn, unlike any of the others in the house. One cupboard even stood slightly open, as if its door had been hastily closed and wouldn't stay shut.

"Someone was in here." I gritted my teeth. Someone had been in the house before I arrived. It was possible that one of my cousins had made themselves at home there for a while, which didn't sit right with me.

At least they hadn't slept in Granddad's room, but it still made me angry. I marched back to the room I had been using and grabbed my phone, dialing Lawrence's number.

"Flint? What is it now?" he answered in a grumpy and sleepy tone. "The sun's barely up."

"You should be awake far earlier," I pointed out. "You have a lot of duties."

"Mm, yeah, sure," Lawrence yawned before he continued. "Still, why are you looking for me?"

"Who stayed in the house before I got here?" I demanded, tapping my foot impatiently even though he couldn't see me.

"Granddad did." Lawrence sounded incredibly confused, as if he was wondering if I lost my mind. "What are you on? Seriously, bothering me this early for something so stupid."

"No, after Granddad," I said without hiding my frustration. "Don't lie to me, I can see someone's been here!"

"You're imagining things" came the answer from the other end, angrier by the second. "It's bad enough you got our inheritance, but now you want to make dumb accusations? Get real. I'm going to end this call. If you know what's good for you, you'll apologize when you see me."

The phone clicked, and I sighed as I put it back in my pocket. I wasn't sure, but it really didn't seem like Lawrence

was lying. But if it wasn't one of my family members, then who had been in the house?

It did look like they'd tried to hide that they were there haphazardly, but it wasn't incredibly successful. I hadn't found any personal items that didn't belong to my grandfather, and nothing suggested that they'd taken anything.

Then, pretty suddenly, the whole thing clicked in my head. The milk and eggs that had gone missing. It wasn't an animal that was raiding the barn at all. Whoever had been in the house must have been the one taking all of it.

My anger flared up at my very core. This squatter had disrespected my grandfather and stolen from my family. The wise decision was probably going to the police, but I didn't want to do that. This was my ranch now, and I was going to sort out its problems myself.

First, I would have to determine if they were still here. Obviously not in the house, but it was possible that they were out in the barn. I decided to ask Brett when the last time was that something had gone missing, since Lawrence was furious at me.

I shot him a message and received an answer fairly quickly.

"Yesterday" was all it said. That told me all I needed to know, however. If they were still there the day before, it was likely that they were still there that morning. I decided that I'd go down to the barn myself and count the eggs and check the cows. I'd start unpacking the boxes after that, while I made a plan to catch whoever it was.

I went upstairs to get dressed in jeans, a button-up shirt, and boots. If I caught them in the act, I was at least going to be comfortable. With the sun lazily climbing upward in the sky by now, I stomped out of the house and down to the barn.

At first, I did consider calling someone to help me. However, I really didn't want to deal with them. Lawrence would point out whatever I wasn't doing perfectly in his

opinion, and Brett would complain that I shouldn't have gotten the ranch. The women would tell me that they weren't my slaves, and the rest of the family wasn't even talking to me.

Essentially, it would be a lot less trouble if I just did this myself.

Down at the barn, I sighed when I spotted Lawrence walking through. He was yawning but clearly on his way to get started with the day.

"Oh, you're here." He saw me and headed right over, clearly ready for a fight. "You gonna accuse me of something again, huh?"

"No," I shook my head, but I wasn't about to apologize either. "Listen, was that animal here again today?"

"Huh?" Lawrence blinked a few times. "Seriously, you say sorry, then you can come make your demands again."

"Fine, I'm sorry." Rolling my eyes, I pointed down to the barn. "Now answer my question. Was it here?"

"Yeah," Lawrence said with a frustrated nod. "We put out traps, but they caught nothing. It must be real smart and whatnot to miss all of that. Two hens that look like they haven't laid anything in days, cow's freaked out."

"Okay, you know what," I sighed. I was too late for today. "I'll deal with that. You keep your focus on the animals."

"All right, I ain't gonna complain about having less work." Lawrence nodded, wiping his hand across his forehead for extra impact. Instead of removing the sweat, though, he only managed to sweep the dirt around. His normally blond hair, peeking out from under the hat, was now a muddy brown.

"Well, I'll get out of your way." I turned around. "That animal will be gone by tomorrow, don't you worry."

"Better be, we're losin' money," Lawrence grumbled, making his way to the chicken coop. "Not a lot, but still. Why

would it be the same two hens that have no eggs each time? They're young, have had no troubles.”

While I unpacked most of the boxes for the rest of the day, I formulated my plan. It would require cat-like reflexes and absolute stealth, but I was sure I would pull it off. I was going to implement it far before anyone else on the ranch was awake, including, hopefully, the squatter.

At midnight, I lay in bed, trying to sleep for a few hours but finding that I was unable. I twiddled my thumbs and stared at the ceiling, going over the plan again in my head. Did I need a weapon? Was this person dangerous? I didn't really know the answers to those questions, but I would take the bat in one of my boxes just in case.

Minutes passed like hours. When I checked my phone again, it was half past one. Another hour and a half before I made my move. I couldn't switch on any of the lights in the house, because it could be seen from the barn. I didn't want them to become suspicious.

Still, there was no way I was going to fall asleep. I got out of bed and made my way downstairs for coffee. That would help me pass the time somewhat.

I paced around in the dark with the mug steaming in my hands. With every step, I was more impatient and angry. Who did this person think they were, stealing our produce like that? It was likely that they were living in the barn, too.

Finally, the clock struck three, and I snuck out through the back door. Hiding behind trees and equipment, I approached the barn.

It was dark enough that it was unlikely anyone would see me coming, but I still had to be careful. I needed the element of surprise. There was no way that I could predict what the squatter was going to do if they actually knew I was coming.

Darting farther down, I eventually made it all the way to the wide side of the barn door. It wasn't locked, but it

definitely was going to creak when I opened it. On top of that, it was likely that the animals would kick up a fuss when I entered.

“Not here, then,” I said to myself as I started walking around the barn. There was a ladder leaning against one wall, which I could use to get into the upper window. That way, I could avoid most of the commotion.

I moved it into position and started climbing. Every now and then, something would shift or creak, and I would freeze. When I heard nothing from above me, I’d keep climbing. It felt like forever before I reached the top.

With heavy breaths and nerves crawling all over my body, I heaved myself over the edge of the window and tumbled awkwardly into the barn. The crash was loud enough to wake up every animal below me. Amid that noise, I clearly heard the sounds of a person jumping up from where they were sleeping onto the wood of the barn’s attic.

“Hey!” I shouted instinctively, hoping that I could catch them in the chaos.

A figure ran toward me in the dark. Thinking they might have a knife, I lunged out of the way and watched them rush for the window.

“Stop!” I ran after them, even as they fell out.

Within seconds, my hand was through the window, and I grabbed hold of an arm. The ladder moved and fell, crashing to the ground far below.

This wasn’t a man’s arm; I was sure of that.

I pulled the person back into the barn without letting my grip slip.

“Let go of me!” Her voice was desperate and full of panic. Even so, it instantly stirred something inside of me, something that wanted to protect her.

For a moment, I wanted to comply—until I remembered why I had grabbed her.

“Excuse me,” I said, dragging her past me and making her sit on a nearby hay bale with sheer strength. “What are you doing in my barn?”

“None of your business,” she hissed up at me. My eyes were slowly adjusting to the light. She had her hair tied up in a bun. Her frame was much smaller than mine, and I felt guilty for overwhelming her.

I switched on the flashlight on my cell phone to see her better. She was staring at me defiantly with chocolate eyes, loose strands of dark hair curling down past her ears. Her features, even in the shadows cast by the light, were sharp yet delicate. Her body, shaped like that of a Brazilian dancer, stood unnaturally still now. In combination, it was all enough to take any man’s breath away.

Still, she’d broken in and stolen from me. I couldn’t simply forgive it because she was beautiful. All I would do was give her a chance to talk, unless she insisted on this ridiculously defensive attitude.

“Uh, I disagree,” I said, deciding that I would release her arm. “This is my ranch, and you’ve been stealing from me.”

“I thought the owner was dead,” she answered, leaning back from me. “It’s just a couple of eggs and some milk anyway. It’s not going to financially ruin you.”

“Maybe not, but that doesn’t make you any less of a criminal.” I inserted my anger into my tone, making sure she understood how serious this was. “You owe me quite a bit of money for all of this. Rent, food costs, what do you think it’d run up to?”

“Look,” she sighed, her eyes full of fear. “I really am sorry that I didn’t tell you I was here and that I freaked you out, if I did. But I’m not sorry that I’ve done what I had to do to survive.”

“Survive?” I had gotten so obsessed with catching the squatter through the night that I hadn’t thought about the

reasons she might have had to be here. “What do you mean? Who are you?”

“My name is Eliza Stone,” she answered, refusing to look at me. “I’ve been running from my family, because they... Well, it’s a long story.”

I had a million questions, but I knew she wasn’t really going to answer any of them. I stayed quiet instead.

“I needed a place to hide,” Eliza continued. “Where they wouldn’t find me. I found this ranch. I was in the house for a while, but someone’s moved in there. So I came out to the barn. That’s it, okay?”

“Do you have any reason why I shouldn’t kick you out?” I wanted to be sympathetic, but she wasn’t as innocent as she was trying to make herself out to be. “I’m Flint Mayfield. This is my ranch, and I’m the one who moved into that house.”

“I don’t want to be on the streets,” Eliza answered, ignoring my introduction. “Please, I really wouldn’t have done this if I had another choice.”

I was furious enough to drag her out to the road and leave her there. At the same time, I couldn’t in good conscience kick her out on the street to let her fend for herself. Still, I wasn’t just going to let her stay in the barn.

An idea came to me and tumbled from my lips before I could stop it. “Then come and stay in the main house and work for me.”

Eliza tensed, immediately suspicious, and I felt that I had to clarify.

“I need someone to help me fix the ranch back up,” I said with a shrug. “Might as well be you. You can still lay low and make up for stealing from me, and save up a bit of money for your next move.”

She paused for a moment as if she was thinking before she answered. “And I’ll get my own room in the main house?”

“You can take the one that you stayed in before.”

“All right, then, I’ll accept your offer.” After this sentence was the first time that I saw the semblance of a small smile cross her face.

Chapter Four

Eliza

The morning after I settled into the bedroom, I felt more refreshed than I had the whole week. After all, cotton sheets and a mattress were far superior to scratchy hay bales and a makeshift blanket. I shuffled downstairs, watching the sun rise through the windows of the house. It made me wonder whether Flint would be up this early, as well.

I was actually very grateful that he hadn't simply kicked me off the ranch. If I was working, I could save up a few hundred dollars to keep myself on the move. Plus, I wouldn't have to survive on eggs and too-fresh milk every single day.

"Morning, thief," Flint called from the kitchen when the stairs creaked under my feet. Of course, he was probably the kind of guy that grew up on a farm. A morning person that couldn't imagine sleeping in past seven in the morning.

I entered the kitchen, and he immediately caught my attention. His dark hair was unkempt, his stubble calling for a shave, and yet both of these factors only served to make him more attractive. It seemed as if he'd styled himself this way on purpose.

What made it more intense was that he was only wearing a pair of boxers, showing off the tight, slick muscles

of his abdomen. I found myself wishing that he wasn't staring at me with a deep suspicion that made me nervous.

It forced me to swallow and look away. "Mm, think I can have something other than eggs this morning?"

"I've already started coffee," Flint grumbled. "Guess you can have some if you want. There's toast and bacon, and I'm starving. You can make that, too."

"Oh, yes, please," I said, almost groaning with relief. I gathered the ingredients and turned the stove on. Pretty soon, the air filled with the thick smell of frying bacon, and my stomach grumbled happily.

"So I thought of working on the sign out front today," Flint explained frankly, his tone strict and commanding. He was standing pretty close to me, and I caught a whiff of Old Spice and earth. "I think it needs to be replaced entirely."

I was trying not to stare at his body, but it was difficult. When I glanced, I caught him looking, too. He cleared his throat immediately and looked away.

"Sounds good to me," I answered, despite not really ever having participated in manual labor like that. "You know what you're doing, right? I'm not exactly an expert on sign replacement."

"Mostly," Flint admitted, leaning on the small breakfast nook table in the corner. "We're probably going to have to break the whole thing down. That's going to take a while, but between the two of us, it's possible."

I put toast in the toaster, enough for both of us. "All right, so, we'll need shovels and axes, right? What else?"

"Strength," Flint said as if it was entirely obvious. "Everything else is in the truck. Now tell me. Why are you really on this ranch?"

The question made me pause. I didn't want to tell him. I didn't know whether he'd simply call my family right away

and get them to come get me. Maybe I could lie, but his face told me he'd realize immediately if I tried.

"I don't want to talk about it," I finally answered. "All you need to know about me is that I'm willing to work hard."

He studied me with eyes the color of the night, a look that forced me to turn my head away.

"If I don't know anything about you, why would I let you stay, or trust you at all?" he asked with a growl. "Seems like I'm getting the bad end of this bargain."

"You're not telling me anything about yourself, either," I pointed out. "Maybe you're some crazy serial killer living out here in the boonies, and I'm your next victim."

"I own this ranch, I'm not a serial killer, horses are my favorite animal, and I like strawberry jelly," Flint said. "Your turn."

"Uh, all right." I almost laughed at his list but kept it down. "I'm not a crazy person hiding randomly on ranches, I'm afraid people will find me because they want something from me, my favorite animal is a horse, too, and I hate strawberry jelly. I really love bacon, though."

When the bacon and toast was done, I piled it all onto two plates and handed one to Flint. After over a week of just eggs, it was absolutely heavenly. I noticed that Flint was watching me more than eating himself, but I didn't point it out. I probably did look a bit ridiculous, eating with my hands and getting bacon grease all over my face.

"We could go into town as well, get you some things," Flint continued, getting himself a fork and a knife. "Just so you don't break yourself working in city clothes."

"Maybe." I hesitated. It was more likely that someone would recognize me in town. Flint's eyes held mine with a strength that was difficult to deny. I couldn't stop staring at his body, wishing that I could be wrapped up in him.

I shook my head at myself. I wasn't supposed to be getting romantically involved with a rancher. Pretty soon, I'd have to leave, to keep moving. If I just stayed here, it was only a matter of time before my family ruined it all.

Instead of continuing the conversation or even excusing myself, I simply left the kitchen and headed upstairs to take a shower. I'd already jumped in a bath the previous night, but I had a newfound appreciation for how refreshing it was to get clean. Staying in the barn, I'd gotten so dusty and gross. My sweat had turned some of the dirt on my skin into mud, and everything had been itchy.

My clothes were still in a state of disarray, however, so it made sense that Flint suggested replacing them. I didn't really want to head into town. There could be someone looking for me there, or missing person's posters. It seemed a bit unreasonable, but I didn't put it past my family. They would go to crazy lengths to get me back.

After my shower, I found Flint waiting for me on the front porch, gazing out on his ranch. "Oh, good, you're done. Bit of a shame that we're just going to get dirty again, huh?"

"I'm fairly decent at getting dirty," I joked, my cheeks immediately going hot and forcing me to look away from him. Flint chuckled anyway and started walking down to the barn.

"Come on, Little Miss Comedian," he called back to me with a clear note of annoyance. "We've got a long day ahead of us."

"Sir, yes, sir!" I saluted him, even though he couldn't see me.

Flint shook his head as he led me forward, clearly irritated. Even his annoyance made something flutter in my soul, but I shoved that away. I had to be more careful. Falling in love with this man was something I simply couldn't afford right now. Besides, I didn't want to drag him into all of my problems.

We gathered up the equipment that we needed before we got into Flint's truck and drove down to where the sign stood. I could understand why he wanted to replace it. The letters themselves had become rusty, and the wood seemed like it was starting to rot.

"Okay, I'm going to take the pick and start breaking up these stones," Flint explained, pointing to the stone pillars that held the sign's wooden poles. I frowned, glancing up at the sign above us.

"You think that's the best idea?" I asked sincerely. "Don't you think the whole thing will crash down on us if you do that?"

"Nah." Flint shrugged as he walked around the truck to get the pick. "It still has the wooden poles to keep it up."

"Yeah, but breaking up the pillars first could throw it off balance," I insisted, following him. "I really think we should take the top part of the sign down first."

"I thought you said you didn't know much about all of this," Flint sighed with an exasperated tone in his voice. "Why don't you leave the decisions about the process to me?"

He pulled the pick out of the bed of the truck and stood there, his legs spaced shoulder-width apart. For some reason, I couldn't help but think about how attractive he looked in that pose, almost like the main character on the cover of a novel.

"Because it's a stupid decision." I replaced my attraction with irritation and crossed my arms over my chest. "I don't want to be injured just because you're stubborn."

"All right, fine, we'll do it your way." Flint dropped the pick near the back wheel of the truck. "Help me get the ladder out."

I was satisfied that he gave in, but I didn't let it show on my face. I wasn't the kind of person who would rub it in like that. We got the ladder and a hammer. From here, the situation was going to get more complicated. There was only

one ladder, so one of us would have to go up and pry off the letters and hand them to the person below.

“Can you hold it stable?” Flint asked, his gaze focused on the sign above him as he started climbing the ladder. From this angle, the sun cast a glow over his face that lit him up like he was on stage. His movements as he climbed were strong, deliberate, and powerful.

I almost forgot what he’d asked me to do, but I shook my head and grabbed on to the ladder’s legs.

“Wait, this might be a bit easier,” Flint mumbled above me. “Can you move it to the left a bit?”

“Uh, you want me to pick this up, with you on it, and move it without throwing you off?” I blinked in surprise at the request. “You realize how nuts that sounds, right?”

“Okay, fair enough. I’ll come down first.”

He came back down the ladder so fast that I was still holding on to it by the time his hips were level with my eyes. His body bumped against my shoulder, the rough sensation of his jeans making me jump back.

“Hey, be careful,” I said, completely flustered at the momentary interaction. “You really should look where you’re climbing.”

“Sorry.” Flint wasn’t looking at me, but I could almost hear him raising an eyebrow before he cleared his throat. “Um, anyway, let’s move the ladder to that side.”

A few minutes later, he was up on the ladder again, working on the screws that held the curved wooden board of the sign in place. Several times, I found myself glancing upward to appreciate the view of his body from where I stood.

Every time I did, I would drag my eyes away from him again and shake my head at myself. I really wasn’t trying hard enough not to fall for this man. My heart was already beating fast at the thought of being with him, and my hands felt

sweaty. I constantly had to wipe them on my shirt to keep my grip on the ladder.

“Okay, I think I got it,” Flint eventually said, sounding as if he was fairly deep in thought. “Now we just need to get the other side.”

I realized it was going to be hard to hold the one side up while Flint worked on the other side. The only choice was for him to hand it down to me so that I could gently let it hang from the side that was still being held up.

“Give it here!” I yelled up at him, climbing up to the third step on the ladder so I could reach it more easily. This had me far too close to Flint’s behind, and I could feel my ears burning.

“You sure?” Flint asked uncertainly, although he was already lowering it carefully. “It’s really heavy.”

“I’ll drop it if I can’t take it,” I teased, knowing that I was most definitely not going to do anything of the sort. “Come on, it’s fine, I’ve got this.”

“All right.” Flint didn’t sound convinced, but he lowered the board until I could reach it. Even with him still bearing most of its weight, I could tell that this was going to be difficult. The wood was thick, solid, and incredibly heavy.

“Easy, now, easy,” I said as I took hold of it, grunting once Flint released it. With a lot of focus, I managed not to drop it as I started to reverse down the ladder.

For the first few steps, it went well. On the last one, I managed to snag my shoe, and I tumbled backward. Immediately, I let go of the sign, which swung dangerously on its remaining hinge. It was too heavy to hold, and the rotten wood broke off, crashing down.

I rolled out of the way, already wincing and knowing that I was definitely injured. Luckily, the sign landed next to me in a plume of dust, and the chaos finally settled.

Flint leapt from five steps up on the ladder to land next to me, almost angry that I'd gotten injured. "Hey, are you okay?"

Sitting up, I checked all of my limbs. Nothing was broken, but I had several scratches that would need to be cleaned.

"I think so," I said, turning red with embarrassment. "I'm sorry."

"Well." Flint lifted his hat to wipe his forehead. "That's one way to get the job done fast. Come on, let's get you cleaned up."

He reached a hand down to help me to my feet. I limped after him to the truck, annoyed at my clumsiness.

"I'll be more careful next time," I said, trying to wipe the embarrassed look off my face. "Or just watch where my shoes are going."

"I think it'd be better if we get you proper work clothes," Flint answered. It didn't look like he was trying to laugh at me, or even noticed that I'd done something ridiculously stupid. "This is an accident waiting to happen."

"We can go tomorrow, but you have to promise you'll deduct the cost from my pay."

"Mm, we'll see." Flint almost seemed insulted at that suggestion, but he didn't voice that. "Sit down."

Awkwardly, I did so on the back flap of the truck. Flint started rummaging on the inside before he found an antique-looking first aid box. I felt hesitant about him treating my wounds with that, but when he opened it, the contents seemed new enough.

I wanted to apologize again. This was going to waste a lot of time, and we probably wouldn't be able to get the sign done that day. However, with Flint so delicately beginning to clean up the blood and dust, I was unable to do anything except watch him.

There was an intense focus in his eyes, as if nothing mattered except what he was busy with in that moment. I almost expected him to stick his tongue out like in a cartoon. Despite how rough his hands were from spending his life in rural Arizona, I barely felt him working. It made me wonder how it would feel to be wrapped up in his arms, to have his hands on my face as he kissed me.

I shook my head at myself. It was dangerous to think this way. Before long, I'd convince myself to stay on the ranch, and my family would find me. I couldn't allow myself to fall for him.

"Am I hurting you?" Flint had glanced up at me and must've seen the frown present on my face. "I'm trying not to."

"Uh, no," I answered, so flustered that I couldn't think of a reason for my expression. Flint's face was so close to mine that I could count the individual bits of stubble on his cheeks. I imagined that he tasted like coffee and the earth, something that I could simply fall into every day.

"I think I'll need a couple of Band-Aids." Flint suddenly looked away, ripping his gaze from mine as his hands shook slightly. I wondered if he had felt that same electric sensation that I did, and why he would deny it as strongly as I was trying to.

The way that he applied the Band-Aids was a bit strange. He opened them all up and placed them on his fingers, almost like they were tape. Then he took them off one by one to put them on the worst of my injuries. The whole thing made me chuckle with my hand over my mouth.

"What?" Flint raised an eyebrow at me, as if he had no idea why I was laughing.

"Nothing, really," I answered with a mischievous smile. The feeling that was welling up in my chest was familiar, but I hadn't felt it in several years. It was warm and pleasant, and I knew that I would have to suppress it.

“You’re weird, you know that?” Flint said, the irony of that statement flying right over his head. “Anyway, I think you’re fine now. Let’s get back to work.”

“Sure, just don’t make me get on any more ladders.” I hopped down from the flap I was sitting on. The ointment that Flint had applied had gotten rid of the burning sensation that I felt in the shallow scrapes, and I did feel ready to conquer the world.

Flint stood over the sign that had crashed to the ground, whistling as if surprised. “Pretty sure that was bound to happen some time or another. This wood is so rotten, I’m shocked that it didn’t fall off years ago.”

He kicked at the sign before he moved back to the pillars. “Think we’re going to have to start breaking away these stones. Are you comfortable with using a pick?”

“Mornin’, Flint!” A man was walking toward us from the path that led deeper into the ranch. “Heard there was some kind of commotion down here. Dang, what happened?”

The man had some features resembling Flint’s, but he was shorter and rounder, with a bald patch creeping onto the top of his head.

“Taking the sign down, Lawrence,” Flint answered in a tone that told me this guy wasn’t his favorite person in the world. “Nothing out of the ordinary.”

“Can you do it without all the noise? You’re freaking out the chickens.” After he said this, Lawrence’s eyes landed on me, and he paused. “Who’s this lovely young lady? Sure I haven’t met you before.”

Chapter Five

Flint

I immediately decided that I wasn't going to tell Lawrence the truth. The whole family would insist that I call the police and have Eliza arrested. After spending even just this morning with her, I didn't want to let that happen. Desperate situations could make normal people do crazy things, after all.

Besides, if I did tell him, that would only convince them more that I didn't deserve to own the ranch.

"Uh—" I searched for an answer in my head. "I hired her to help me around here. Remember? You told me to go into town and get someone."

Lawrence studied Eliza up and down, and I was sure that he was making her uncomfortable.

"So you got this little slip of a girl?" He tutted his tongue and laughed dryly. "You know, I never saw you driving. Where'd you get the time to find her?"

"I was referred," Eliza answered with her chin up in the air. I was relieved that she went along with my lie so easily. "By Allan."

"Allan, huh?" Lawrence nodded slowly, but it didn't really look as if he believed either of us. "Well, none of my business edgeways."

“That’s right,” I said, hopeful that he was going to drop the subject right there. “Now can I help you?”

“Really just came down for the commotion.” Lawrence shrugged, his eyes still tied to Eliza’s body. “But since you’ve brought someone new ‘round, why don’t you join us all for dinner?”

I was about to shoot that idea right down, but then I thought about it. Lawrence was clearly already suspicious, and I didn’t want to give him any more reasons to be. Maybe Eliza could help me salvage some kind of relationship with my family, too, although I doubted she’d want to.

“Yeah, all right,” I eventually agreed, even though I did it reluctantly. “We’ll see you tonight, then. You can get back to whatever it is you’ve been doing around here.”

Lawrence walked away, but he paused for a moment to leave one last comment. “Ah, I remember now. Nothing’s been taken from the barn or the coop this morning. Looks like you’ve gotten rid of that animal.”

The way that he said the word ‘animal’ convinced me that he probably already knew what had truly happened. I wouldn’t acknowledge that, however. Brett and the others weren’t really as bright as Lawrence was, though Lawrence didn’t have the power of the mind, either.

As long as he kept his mouth shut about his suspicions, everything would be fine. Perhaps he would blackmail me or threaten me, but I would deal with that when it happened.

“What a lovely guy,” Eliza said, her voice dripping with sarcasm. “Sorry, I guess he’s family, right?”

“No, I agree entirely with you,” I answered as I got a pick from the bed of the truck. “None of the rest of them are any better, though. Just a fair warning.”

“Ah, I’ll be fine as long as you’re there.” She picked up one end of the fallen sign and dragged it out of my way with a few grunts. “I mean, unless you turn into a monster at dinner parties.”

I had to laugh at that as I began to swing the pick to loosen the rocks. “Trust me, I couldn’t hold a candle to my family in that department. But if you want to leave at any point, we can do that. I don’t think we owe them pleasantries.”

“We’re only going so they don’t figure out the whole barn situation, right?” Eliza asked curiously, rummaging in the bed of the truck for the other pick. “Because I guess that’s fair enough. I only want to make sure.”

“You’re clever.” I smiled, even knowing that my statement might have sounded sarcastic. “I don’t want them to be too deep into your business. The less people know, the better for you, isn’t it?”

Eliza paused mid-swing before she nodded and continued. I was slightly worried that she’d injure herself again, especially since this was a much more dangerous activity. Luckily, it seemed like it was going to go well.

She stood with her legs shoulder-width apart to balance herself, lifting the pick over her head and bringing it down accurately onto the seams between stones. For several moments, I found that I was staring at her, the way that her body moved each time, and I had to drag my eyes away.

“Anyway,” I finally mumbled, clearing my throat, “let’s get this done, then go and get some lunch, huh?”

“Yes, please. I’m starving!” Eliza answered enthusiastically. “I think I deserve it.”

#

At the end of the day, Eliza and I returned to the main house, both pretty exhausted. Still, she seemed to be in slightly worse shape than I was.

“Ugh, I’m so tired!” she announced as we entered, heading right for the couch to sink into it. “My hands feel like they’re made of splinters!”

“You’ll get used to it pretty soon,” I called after her from the hallway. “Day’s not done yet, though. Time to get ready for dinner.”

“Ah, darn, I forgot about that.” I heard a massive sigh and creaking in the sofa when Eliza got back up. “I’ll take a bath.”

That left the bathroom that only had a shower for me. I didn’t mind, since I far preferred that option. As I stood under the water, I couldn’t help but daydream about Eliza. I imagined her hair dancing in curls down to her shoulders when she released it from that ponytail. Her deep, dark brown eyes staring into mine if I held her close to me. Her body, so much smaller and yet expertly woven into curves, draped in one of my shirts. All of it made me grit my teeth at myself. I knew next to nothing about this woman, and I wasn’t about to develop feelings for her.

When I came out, she was already standing on the porch waiting for me. The clothes she was wearing were different from the ones she’d had on that morning, but I knew that my family wouldn’t accept them.

For me, however, she looked absolutely gorgeous in those jeans. With them, she wore a red checkered shirt that flowed loosely over her upper body, and red sneakers completed the image.

“You look real nice,” I said, immediately feeling flustered as I did so. It was strange, this sensation of warmth in my chest and fluttering butterflies in my stomach. I’d been in love before, sure, but it had never happened this quickly.

Of course, I wasn’t going to share that with Eliza just yet. I was afraid that she’d run away from me or tell me I was a creep.

“Thanks.” Eliza’s cheeks turned the same color as her shirt, and she looked away from me. “Are we taking the truck or walking?”

“A good brisk walk will do us good.” In reality, my statement was only half true. Walking would mean that I could spend more time with her and less with my family. That would always be a better deal.

“Sure.” Eliza rubbed at her arms as if she was cold. I hurried back inside to get a jacket for her without an explanation. When I returned, she was surprised, but she smiled at me nonetheless.

“Thank you,” she said, pulling it on. Wearing my clothes, she seemed even more beautiful than before.

We walked with the sun setting in the sky, joking and teasing one another as we went. The whole time, I was certain that I could sense feelings from her toward me as well. I was in such a good mood that I couldn’t imagine it being ruined.

Of course, my family was always going to try their best.

“You know, I understand what it’s like to want to run away,” I said, glancing down at her.

“How?” She paused, almost frowning. “You have everything here. A grandfather who loved you enough to leave you this whole ranch and enough money to be comfortable. What else could you want?”

“I didn’t expect the ranch, I’ll tell you that,” I sighed. “I left this place because I wanted to escape my family. They hated me because my grandfather doted on me so much. I lost my parents, and he essentially raised me. Everyone else looked down on me, told me I should never have been born, that I was a disappointment, that they hated me for being the favorite. A lot of other stuff in that direction. But he still gave me the whole thing, even if I left him behind. I’m not really sure why.”

“I’m sure he knew that you deserved it.” Eliza shrugged sympathetically. “But yeah, I know how that feels. My family aren’t really big fans of me, either. Unfortunately,

my parents are still here, but they want more from me than I can give to them, and they hate me for it, too.”

It was quiet between us for a moment. Perhaps she was more like me than I’d thought. It was possible that she’d tell me eventually why she was running like I had been years earlier. At least she would understand why my family and I didn’t often agree once she met them.

“Don’t you think the sunset is incredible here?” I asked at one point, getting Eliza to pause and watch it with me by taking her hand. The motion was almost automatic, but I was still surprised that she didn’t pull away.

Instead, she turned toward me, her eyes glowing in the early evening light. “It’s beautiful.”

There was no way that I could resist her now. She stood so close to me that her hair brushed over my arm in the breeze. Her face was barely a few inches away.

I gave in to desire and leaned down to kiss her. This was the perfect moment, in the perfect place. The chemistry between us was electric, as if we were in a movie. She wasn’t going to deny it, either. I could see that she would lean into it as much as I was going to.

“Why didn’t you take the truck?” Brett’s voice came from behind me, making Eliza and me jump apart and let go of each other’s hands. “You’re late, you know.”

“Brett,” I sighed, pinching the bridge of my nose. “This is Eliza. She’s working with me on fixing up the farm.”

“So I’ve been told,” Brett said, reaching out a hand for her to shake. “Nice to meet you. Don’t seem the physical labor type.”

This was the second family member to make that kind of comment. Eliza only smiled and shrugged in response. Still, I could tell by the tension in her limbs that she was already annoyed. It was not going to be a fantastic evening if they couldn’t filter their words.

“You’ll be surprised what she can do,” I interrupted before things got ugly. “I’m sure they’re waiting for us inside, right?”

“Mm, yeah,” Brett answered and led us up to the house. It was about half of the size of our grandfather’s, a bit cramped for Lawrence’s family. Even so, it would have been cozy enough, if it wasn’t for the inhabitants.

Most of the family who lived and worked around the ranch were crammed into the dining room, food already stacked high on the groaning table. I fought the urge to heave a giant sigh. They never had anything interesting to do, and so the chance to gossip was one they would take each time.

Eliza and I were squeezed in together between Brett and Lawrence near the head of the table. Kate and Janice sat opposite us. An assortment of other cousins and second cousins lined the rest, with the kids being shoved into the living room.

“Aren’t you going to introduce us to your girlfriend?” Kate asked of me, without ever looking at Eliza or even bothering to greet her.

“Not his girlfriend,” Eliza answered without hesitation. “I am helping him fix up the farm. He hired me.”

“Never saw him go into town,” Brett said, adding on to what Lawrence had said earlier that day. “You must have arrived here all sneakily.”

“Are you accusing her of something?” I stared him down. “Because I’d be careful if I were you.”

“A bit touchy, especially since you insist you aren’t dating,” Janice noted with a shrug.

One of the other cousins, Lily, a rather more pleasant person, cleared her throat farther down the table.

“We can chat when we’ve dished up,” she insisted, peering at Brett and Lawrence with a warning in her eyes.

“And maybe we’ll be a little less hostile when we’re not as hungry.”

Lawrence immediately reached for the roasted potatoes, but he wasn’t quite done yet. “Hostile? I don’t think we’re hostile at all.”

I gritted my teeth and said nothing. Instead, I simply dished up for myself, and Eliza followed. When everyone had their food, Brett offered to say grace, and the table remained quiet. Unfortunately, that peace didn’t last particularly long.

“Why would a pretty young thing like you want to do such hard work, anyway?” Lawrence asked, pointing at Eliza with his knife. “Are you uneducated? Couldn’t find work as a cashier in town?”

Eliza stared at him, and I was already furious. I glanced at her, wondering if I should step in, or if she was going to answer that on her own. One look told me that it would be better if I simply kept my mouth shut.

“I think she’s just after Flint’s money,” Kate said before Eliza could speak, cutting into her potatoes. “Probably heard in town that he inherited the ranch and lied about her experience to get him to hire her. Pretty soon she’ll have her claws in him.”

“Excuse me.” Eliza cleared her throat, placing her cutlery beside her plate. “I’m right here, and you know nothing about me. These assumptions are not only inaccurate, they’re unbelievably rude.”

“Darn, calm down, little lady,” Lawrence laughed from his gut. “Reel in your mare, Flint, before she bites someone’s head off.”

Eliza immediately got up from the table. “Listen, I don’t care who you are. I’ve had enough of this nonsense. I will not stand here and be insulted by a bunch of common rural hicks!”

She shoved her chair back into place and stormed out of the room, making sure to slam the front door behind her

once she left the house. I sighed and put my head in my palm, knowing that this drama was going to last for weeks.

“Well, isn’t she a hot-headed one?” Another cousin, Henry, chuckled and shook his head. “Better be careful she doesn’t aim that at you, Flint.”

“Would you shut up?” I said as I lifted my head and pushed my chair back. “I hope you all know that you absolutely deserved to be called out for everything you’ve just said to her. I only regret that I didn’t do it myself.”

“So you’re saying you’re just as sensitive as a woman, then?” Brett seemed intent on provoking me even further. If I stayed there, the whole thing would have devolved into a fist fight.

“You’re all unbelievable.” I breathed to try and keep myself calm. “I hope you don’t expect either of us to spend any time with you again. That is, unless you figure out why you’re awful people, and you apologize to Eliza.”

“I don’t see anything to apologize for,” Lawrence snapped back. “If you two can’t take a joke, then it’s better if you stay on your side of the ranch.”

“I’d be happy to,” I growled, already heading for the door. “Goodbye.”

Behind me, I could already hear the whispers as the gossip started. It was only going to get worse from here, but I didn’t care. If they wanted a fight, then I would give them one. This whole night was only an excuse for them to humiliate Eliza.

In all honesty, it felt to me as if Eliza had held herself in quite a bit. At the same time, I was glad that she had told them off when she’d had enough. Even though this was going to make things even more strained, I couldn’t stand that they’d treated her that way.

As I stomped toward my own house in the chilly evening, I spotted Eliza ahead of me, mumbling angrily under

her breath. I caught a few curses, but most of it flitted past me on the wind inaudibly.

“Hey, wait up!” I shouted at her, but I was ignored. She didn’t turn around until we stood on my porch, at which point her eyes were burning with furious fire and her cheeks had turned red from anger.

“Look, Eliza, I’m sorry about all of that.” With an awkward smile, I walked past her to open the door. “I should’ve warned you how bad they could get. I mean, still, I shouldn’t have taken you over there. I knew they were going to be like that.”

“It’s not just them,” Eliza growled as she followed me into the foyer. “I’m angry at you, too.”

That answer surprised me, and I paused on my way to the kitchen. When I turned, I was frowning at her. Her expression seemed to be directed at me now, and I didn’t know why.

“What possible reason could you have for being angry at me?” I asked, trying to sound sincere. “I didn’t do anything.”

“That’s the point!” She threw her hands in the air as if exasperated. “Sure, you interrupted them once, but you didn’t even try to support me after that.”

“Did you want me to talk over you and make everything worse?”

“No, but it would have been nice if you’d agreed with me, or even said anything at all!” Eliza stormed down the hallway as if she was headed up to her room.

I grabbed her arm to stop her but released it immediately when she swung around. “Okay, fine, I’m sorry that I didn’t do more to shut it down. I grew up with these people, I know they’re not going to listen to reason or just going to end the conversation.”

“So what you wanted was for me to shut up and take it?” Eliza’s face told me that I was simply making this whole argument even worse. “Be a good little country girl and know my place in the household? Are you insane?”

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it.” I stepped back, unsure of where to go with this. In the end, I thought that the best move would be to apologize. In the morning, I would make the rest of them do the same, even if it was fake.

“Then what did you mean?” Eliza tapped her foot impatiently on the floor.

“I don’t know,” I admitted with a heavy sigh. “Look, I’m sorry. You’re right. I should have stood up for you, I should have shut them down. I should not have thought that you’d let them get away with it. I’m trying to be on your side, but I’ll show it more from now on.”

“That’s not necessary.” Eliza turned away decisively this time. “I’ll be leaving in the morning.”

THE END OF BOOK ONE

The series continues with TRUE BELONGING BOOK TWO.

Turn the page for a preview.

True Belonging Book Two Preview

Chapter One

Flint

I wasn't sleeping terribly well. A few times, I'd gotten up to go to the bathroom, mostly just because I needed something to do. Somewhere after midnight, I went down to the kitchen to get a glass of water. Out of the corner of my eye, I could have sworn that I'd seen something dash into the shadows as I walked through the hallway. I shook my head at myself. It was probably nothing, just my imagination trying to mess with me. After all, I was exhausted.

I wondered if Eliza was sleeping better than I was. It was going to be tough in the morning if neither of us were awake enough to do any work. If that was the case, I would have to give us both the day off. Maybe I could take her into town for a drink or a coffee. I wasn't sure she'd agree to that, but I could make it clear that we were doing it as friends. Not that I knew whether I wanted her to remain a friend or not.

The glass of water was refreshing, but I had to drink a bit of warm milk, too. After I drank that, I went back to my room, thinking that I might actually manage to fall asleep this

time. I rolled around in the bed a few times, frustrated that I couldn't seem to be comfortable.

Finally, however, my eyelids were starting to get heavy. My body was headed toward the bliss of dreamless sleep. I allowed it to do so with some excitement.

Suddenly, there was a crash somewhere downstairs, which made me jump up from my bed immediately. The slight hope of sleep was completely dashed. I was more awake than I had been before that glass of warm milk.

My first thought was that someone was breaking in. They must have been desperate to hit a place this far out of town. Still, it was possible that they thought the police wouldn't come quickly enough if the inhabitants called them. I couldn't rely on Brett or Lawrence, either. They would shout that there was a gun somewhere in Granddad's house, and that I'd regret waking them up for something this stupid.

I needed to take care of this myself. I scanned the room for a weapon, but the closest thing I could find was a belt. Nonetheless, I wrapped it around my hand and tip-toed out of the room. There was a voice coming from the hallway, but I couldn't hear what they were saying. Were there two of them? That was going to make this slightly more difficult.

Either way, I was powerful enough to overwhelm two people if I had the element of surprise. Besides, I knew this house like the back of my hand. I had the home field advantage. All I needed to do was to stay calm and not make stupid mistakes.

Reaching the stairs in the dark without creaking the floors was a challenge in itself. Now I had to go down noiselessly. From sneaking out of the house when I was a teenager, I knew exactly where each stair would creak and groan beneath my weight. Measuring each step made the process take longer, but that didn't matter. I couldn't afford to make any noise.

“Stupid boxes,” I heard a quick whisper come up at me. The sound of boxes being moved filtered through, and I used it to rush down the stairs and burst into the hallway, brandishing my belt.

“Hey!” I yelled, making the dark figure in front of me swing around. A wave of relief washed over me when I realized that it was Eliza. She’d knocked over a box filled with fragile glassware and was trying to clean up after herself.

Something didn’t make sense about the picture, though. Eliza was carrying her backpack slung over her shoulder, and she was completely dressed. In my head, I already clicked what was going on.

“Uh, hi,” she said as she got up from where she’d bent to sweep up the glass. “Can you, maybe, help me out with this?”

I decided that I’d ask what she was up to after we cleaned everything up. I got the box and checked its contents, but it was all completely destroyed. Luckily, there was glassware in the house already, and I didn’t have any sentimental value attached to these.

“I’m really sorry,” Eliza continued, picking up some of the larger pieces to dump with the rest of them. “I didn’t see it on the dresser there. There’s a lot of stuff in this house.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I insisted, especially since I wasn’t even thinking about what she’d broken. My mind was still locked on to why Eliza was leaving. “None of this is important to me.”

I offered her a smile as I glanced up and took the broom that she’d brought along to sweep up the smaller shards back into the box.

“Ouch!” Eliza dropped one of the bits of glass she’d picked up, staring at her palm. “I managed to cut myself, I think.”

“Okay, well, I’ll get this done,” I answered, still continuing to sweep. “Go clean your hand in the kitchen, and

I'll be right there to help you out."

I hoped that she wasn't going to disappear out the back door while I was busy. There was this tension in the air, almost like she was a rabbit cornered by a predator. As if she was looking for any opportunity to get out of there.

"Sure," she said calmly and left the hallway. Within a minute, I heard the backdoor's knob turning, ever so slowly. She really was going to leave right there and then, while I was still distracted.

Without thinking, I dropped the broom and rushed through the hallway to the kitchen. Within seconds, I burst out of the door after her.

"Eliza!" I yelled, making her stop running immediately. "Where are you going?"

She turned, her eyes filled with tears. "I have to go."

"Why?" I stepped forward, completely prepared to grab her arm if she ran again. I didn't want to hurt her, but this didn't make sense. It was almost as if she was scared of something. Whatever it was, I wanted to protect her from it with everything in my being.

"Eliza, please, can we talk about this?" I continued, lifting my hands. "You don't need to run away in the middle of the night. If you really have to go, you can wait until morning, can't you? Your hand is injured, too. At least let me take a look at it."

"Okay," Eliza breathed nervously, following me back into the house. I switched on the kitchen light and waited for her to take a seat, but she remained in the doorway. It was as if she wanted to make sure that I wouldn't block her path if she ran again. I stayed quiet about that, rummaging instead in the cupboards to find the first aid kit.

"You need to give me your hand," I instructed when I did, setting it down on the counter. Hesitantly, Eliza held out her palm, which was covered in blood. "Wow, this is a really bad cut. You were just going to run out there with this?"

“I was planning on getting a Band-Aid in town,” she whispered, but I could tell from her tone that she knew how ridiculous that sounded. “I’m not going to die from it, anyway.”

“Infections are no joke,” I grumbled in return as I prepared saltwater to clean the wound. “Are you going to tell me why you’re trying to leave in such a hurry?”

Eliza refused to look me in the face. It didn’t seem like she was going to answer my question, at least not directly. She cleared her throat.

“I just have to, okay?” she finally said. “I can’t stay here.”

“Why not?” I started feeling angry. If she hadn’t broken all of that glass, she’d have been gone by morning, and I’d never have had the chance to get an answer. I used a sponge to clear most of the blood from her hand, and she twitched a few times when the salt began to burn her wound.

“There are people who want to find me, and I don’t want them to,” Eliza said. “I told you that, didn’t I? I haven’t committed a crime or anything, but I definitely don’t want to be found.”

“Whoever it is,” I insisted, lifting my eyes to stare into hers seriously, “I won’t let them take you, all right? That is, if you promise to be more honest with me.”

She looked at me with distrust evident in her expression. “I don’t know.”

I sighed, getting Band-Aids and a bandage to cover her injury. It didn’t look like it was going to be easy to convince her. To be fair, I had no idea why I wanted her to stay. Eliza was essentially a stranger to me, a woman who had stolen from me and kept injuring herself. There was no real reason to protect her so fiercely.

At the same time, I didn’t want her to leave.

“Listen, how about some coffee?” I suggested, seeing the exhaustion in her face. “We can talk about this, I’m sure of it.”

Eliza paused while I wrapped up her wound, then hopped down from the table and nodded at me. Her uncertainty made me even more concerned. She’d told me before that she wasn’t a criminal, but the way she was acting now made me wonder. What was it that she was running from if it wasn’t the law? Why would she want to run so badly?

I switched on the kettle, turning away from her to grab mugs from the cupboard. I did it that way on purpose, wanting to see if she’d try to run again. She didn’t. Instead, she took a seat at the kitchen table. That was a good sign, at least to me.

The silence grew between us into a tension that permeated the whole kitchen. I didn’t know how I was going to get her to tell me the truth, and I wasn’t sure that I should try in the first place. This was her privacy, after all, and I didn’t have the right to invade it. At the same time, if I really was going to do my best to protect her, I at least had to know what I was protecting her from.

“Don’t know how you take it,” I eventually said, my voice slicing through the thick atmosphere with a lot of effort. “But here.”

I placed the mug in front of her and sat down on the other end of the table. The way to the back door was still open, and I wasn’t going to stop her if she tried to leave now. Even so, it didn’t look like she would.

“Thanks,” she mumbled, cradling the steaming mug. “I really am sorry about the glass stuff.”

“It’s fine,” I replied insistently. “Seriously, don’t keep apologizing for it. I don’t even remember what was in that box.”

The second half of my statement wasn’t entirely true, but I sensed that she was trying to steer the conversation in a different direction. I didn’t really want to pressure her, but I

hated that I could see the hurt lying just behind her eyes, and I couldn't do anything about it.

"I don't really want to leave," Eliza mumbled suddenly, catching my stare in hers and trapping me in those dark, mysterious pools.

"Then why are you trying to?" I asked, instinctively reaching for her hand. "It's not necessary, you know."

Eliza didn't pull away from me. Instead, she allowed my rough, callused palm to envelop her smaller, smooth hand.

"I don't want you to be a part of this," she continued in a near-whisper. "You don't deserve the trouble that is going to come for me. You deserve a quiet life on your ranch, happy and free, without the baggage that I carry."

"A quiet life?" I let out a dry, cynical laugh. "Have you met my family?"

"I'm serious," Eliza replied with a frown. "I don't know what's going to happen, and I don't know why you'd want to be involved in it. It'd be a lot easier to let me leave."

I got up from the table to stand in front of her. There was something in my very soul pulling me toward her, something that I couldn't quite explain, no matter how hard I tried. Her beauty washed over me like waves of electric energy, but that wasn't the only reason. There was something else, something just out of my reach that told me whatever it was, it would be worth it.

"I think I'm the only one who could decide what would be easier for me," I said, pulling her to her feet so that she stood almost against my chest. "And even if you're right, I still get to choose if I want to be involved or not."

"Flint..." she muttered, her free hand on my chest. "This isn't a good idea."

"What are you talking about?" I had an eyebrow raised as soon as I finished the question. I did know what she meant,

however. My heart was beating more quickly than usual, my breath shallower.

It seemed like I wasn't alone in that. Eliza glanced up at me, biting at her lower lip. She made a decision and lifted her free hand to place it behind my head.

I let her pull my face down until our lips met in the space between us. It was tentative at first, almost hesitant. But the contact sent unexplainable, urgent sensations through my limbs, and I pressed my mouth against hers more firmly. This was perfection in its purest form, fate come to life in our presence.

Instantly, I wanted more. I wanted to pull her against me and feel her heart beating against my skin. Simultaneously, I knew that I couldn't push too hard or move too fast. We pulled apart breathlessly, staring at one another for several moments.

"Will you stay a while longer?" I finally asked, hoping that she'd give me the answer that I wanted.

"Okay," Eliza said in reply with a short, curt nod. She let go of me and sat down at the table again, clutching her coffee. "I will."

"Good." I wasn't really sure what else to say. My head was spinning with the sensations that came with that kiss. I was trying not to give in to the urge to grab her and kiss her again. Grabbing my own mug, I stood against the wall on the opposite end of the kitchen.

"We should probably get to bed after this," Eliza pointed out. "We have a lot to do in the morning."

"Yeah, of course, sure," I answered as I ran a hand through my hair. The atmosphere was quiet again, and we sipped at our coffee without looking at each other. I was relieved that Eliza wasn't going to leave yet, but I was still worried. She could change her mind at any point.

Her insistence on running reminded me of memories that I had of years ago, when I felt much the same way. I could

remember Brett and Lawrence standing over me after they'd shoved me to the ground. Shouting that I was a loser who wasn't ever going to amount to anything. That they couldn't believe Granddad was always standing up for me.

Once I was able to fight back, they backed off somewhat. By the time I was eighteen, I was bigger than them. One fight ended in a broken nose for Brett and a bloody face for Lawrence. After that, I struggled to face my grandfather, who'd always taught me that violence wouldn't solve anything.

I went to college then. Most people wouldn't call that running away, but for me, that's exactly what it was. I could have stayed on the ranch and learned everything I needed to know from Granddad about how to run it. But I wanted to get away so badly that I left him behind. He quickly started getting ill after that, and I never came to see him. I still felt guilty about that, that he was stuck with my greedy cousins while I went off on my grand adventures to the city.

"I promise I won't try to disappear in the middle of the night again," Eliza said eventually, slicing through the silence. "If I change my mind and decide to leave, I'll tell you."

That was at least better than her earlier uncertainty. She got up from the table and placed her mug with the rest of the dishes before she turned around. Her eyes caught mine with an incredible sadness, something that I definitely did not expect to see.

"Thank you," I answered with a frown. "Are you all right? Did I upset you?"

She shook her head firmly. "No, absolutely not. I just have a lot I need to think about."

"Sure." I put my mug down too, still halfway full of lukewarm liquid. "Maybe we should get you some work clothes in the morning. What do you think?"

I thought that changing the subject would at least help a bit. From the slip of a smile that Eliza gave me, it seemed

like it was working.

“Sounds good,” she said before she left the kitchen. I listened to her footsteps ascending the stairs, and then the door closing behind her.

I knew that I wasn't going to be able to sleep just yet. My mind was spinning, my lips still tingling from her touch. Who was this woman that she could have such an effect on me?

“Get it together, Flint,” I mumbled at myself before I moved to do the dishes.

End of preview.

Thank you for buying and reading this book, it means the world to me.

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Ella Cooper's romances are short, steamy, suspenseful, filled with mystery and lots of turns and twists. She likes her readers to feel satisfied with a happily ever after, always and forever!



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