
Chapter 1

Kelly Taylor leaned back as the force of the plane's takeoff pushed her against the seat. She breathed a huge sigh of relief. She was so glad to be away... finally. Away from Georgia, away from Eric, away from life. Kelly pulled out her night mask and earphones. Taking the in-flight blanket, she snuggled deeply into her seat. She wanted to block out the world. Normally, Kelly dreaded long flights but tonight she welcomed the seven-plus hour journey from Atlanta to Bozeman, Montana.

Kelly's mind drifted to the last few months. Her job in computer systems technology was a good one, but the pressure was killing her. As if that wasn't enough, her ex-boyfriend, Eric Hinton, had shown up again. How many times was she going to have to break up with him? She had started seeing Eric about a year ago, after meeting him in a computer class. Things had started out well enough, but it didn't take long for Kelly to see that there wasn't a future for her with Eric. Eric didn't seem to agree. Every time she broke up with him, he would somehow manipulate her into taking him back. The last time she told him it was over, he had actually threatened to kill her. She didn't think

Eric was serious, but he had really scared her. Kelly was embarrassed she had let herself get involved with someone like Eric. She never told anyone in her family.

Instead of blaming Eric, Kelly blamed herself. She should have told Eric sooner, or more clearly. Eric always made things seem like they were all her fault. She wished with all her heart she had never met him. Getting her confidence back was proving to be difficult. The last time Eric showed up at her work, she was so upset, she packed up her desk and quit. The restraining order against him didn't seem to make any difference. She was flying to Montana, back to Canyon Gulch Ranch, back to the place where her heart belonged. Hopefully, her time at the ranch would help heal the part of her soul that Eric had taken away. Leaving her parents and her past in Atlanta, Kelly was headed for what she hoped would be a bright, new future.

The big jet plane lowered its landing gear and touched down on the runway. After a short taxi, it was time to disembark. Kelly felt like skipping down the walkway toward the terminal. Memories of the weeks she spent every summer at Canyon Gulch floated through her mind. She could hardly wait to be back. Aunt Emma and Uncle Bob were waiting for her arrival. She had not seen them in almost two years. They had agreed to let her come stay while she got settled and looked for a job. Both had missed seeing her and Kelly felt likewise. She was so thankful that she had a place to go. Far, far, away from Eric Hinton. She just hoped it was far enough.

Aunt Emma and Uncle Bob stood at the terminal gate. They looked like the quintessential westerners, both in cowboy hats, jeans and boots. Aunt Emma looked a bit older. Her hair was gray and curly and she wore it short. She still cut a fine figure for a woman of sixty. Uncle Bob had not changed much. His wiry frame was just as skinny as it had always been. Kelly could never figure out how someone so skinny could eat as much as Uncle Bob did. Must be all the hard ranch work. Kelly dropped her

carry-on luggage and ran to greet them as they surrounded her in a tight hug.

“Hey, sugar,” Uncle Bob said. “You’re a sight for sore eyes, isn’t she, Emma?” Aunt Emma pushed Bob out of the way and gave Kelly a big squeeze.

Stepping back, she looked Kelly up and down. “Let me get a good look at you, little one. Why, you get prettier and prettier. My goodness, Bob, can this possibly be our little Kelly?” Kelly was twenty-five years old, but she never got too old to be petted and made over. Emma and Bob stood gazing at her.

“It’s me all right! What’s left of me.” Kelly gave a nervous laugh and reached out her arms for another squeeze. What a relief to be in Montana.

Uncle Bob walked over and picked up the luggage. “Baggage claim is over here. Ladies, follow me.” Uncle Bob led the way, as arm in arm, Emma and Kelly chatted excitedly.

“Oh, Kelly!” Emma exclaimed. “We should have done this a long time ago. Just think, we’ll have time to talk, and shop and talk and then shop some more!”

Kelly gave a happy laugh. “Auntie, you have no idea how much I have been looking forward to this. Canyon Gulch is like home to me, and I’m so glad to be here, finally.” The old familiar anxiety gripped Kelly’s stomach, but she pushed it away. She was here, Eric was there, and she didn’t need to think of it again.

Kelly helped Uncle Bob with the luggage, and Aunt Emma found a luggage cart. There were a lot of bags. Kelly was planning on staying a long time. On the drive home, Kelly filled her aunt and uncle in on all the latest happenings, careful to leave out anything having to do with Eric Hinton. She was too embarrassed for anyone to know about that relationship, and how much it had destroyed the last year of her life. Kelly told Bob and Emma she wanted to stay in Montana permanently, but she needed to find a job.

Uncle Bob was so kind. “Honey, you plan on staying at

Canyon Gulch just as long as you want. There's no need to get in any rush."

Extremely grateful for their hospitality, Kelly listened with interest as Bob and Emma told her how well the ranch was doing. "The business just keeps growing," Emma said.

Bob shared that they had just purchased some new yearlings for the trail ride. "You make sure you stay off those new mounts, Kelly girl. I know you ride, but it's been a while and those horses are way too headstrong." Kelly gave her solemn promise that she would leave the new horses alone. She didn't want to worry Uncle Bob.

Canyon Gulch Ranch was a dude ranch. In Montana, that meant it was a vacation destination for people that wanted to experience the great outdoors, western style. It had all the trappings of a real working ranch without all the hassle. Canyon Gulch hosted guests from all over the world. Visitors could come and experience western ranch life in luxury. Emma was in charge of the work inside the house, and Bob headed up the horses and other outdoor activities.

It was a good hour's drive from the airport, and Kelly was busy the whole way, soaking in the scenery. The sky stretched out on both sides as far as she could see, blue and broad. Montana was known as "big sky country," and nowhere was it more true than here. Beyond the highway, the fields and pastures were dotted with horses and cattle. As they neared the ranch, they passed a field congregated with more cattle than Kelly had ever seen before.

"That's a big herd, Uncle Bob. I don't remember that many cattle around here before."

"That's because there weren't that many. Those cattle belong to Branson Bennett over at the Triple H. He's been there for a few years and has managed to grow that place into a real success story. He's raising beef cattle, Kelly. Been good for the economy round here, lots of jobs you know."

The road passed close by the herd and Kelly commented as the car drove by. “My goodness, look at that big old bull out there. That thing is huge. I’ve never really seen one so close up before.” Kelly turned in her seat to look out the back window. “Good grief, that thing is terrifying.”

Bob nodded his head. “That’s over a thousand pounds of pure muscle. A bull can be a very dangerous animal. Don’t ever get near one, Kelly.”

“Don’t worry, Uncle Bob, I won’t.”

Kelly thought about old friends she was looking forward to seeing again. She inquired about several neighbors and remarked that she was surprised Branson Bennett had done well enough to own a big spread like the Triple H so quickly. She thought he was a relative newcomer. She could just barely remember seeing him at a distance one time in town a couple of years ago.

“He’s a good man and a good neighbor,” Bob commented, “but he’s a quiet sort of fella. He doesn’t bother nobody, and he don’t want nobody to bother him. He’s a loner, that one.”

Uncle Bob’s comments made Kelly even more curious. “Doesn’t he have a family, Uncle? The Triple H is a mighty big place to live all by yourself.”

“No, honey,” Uncle Bob answered. “He’s been too busy building that herd up to fool with a family. Not that every filly in town hasn’t tried.”

“Huh,” Kelly responded, but then dismissed Branson Bennett from her mind as they drove through the Canyon Gulch archway and pulled up at the house. She jumped out and raced toward the yard. Bugle, the Border collie, ran to greet her. He jumped into her arms and Kelly fell down laughing as Bugle licked her face. “Good boy, good boy,” Kelly squealed. Bugle barked as he ran frantically back and forth between licks. Kelly breathlessly sat up and took in the scene. The beautiful ranch house stood in front of her. It felt like it had been another lifetime ago since she had been here. Made completely of stone and wood, it had a

nice modern cabin feel to it. There were wrap-around porches on every side and a lovely porch swing on the front. It was landscaped with native plants. Summer flowers bloomed in the flowerbeds and borders.

The air was clear and fresh, and Kelly breathed deeply as she crossed back to the car to help unload her things. Uncle Bob already had an armful and was headed to the house. He hollered over his shoulder, "You'll be in your old room, Kelly girl."

It took two trips, but Kelly managed to get the rest of her things inside and up the stairs. Her room overlooked the front of the house, and from the window, she could look across the field and out onto the road that led to the small town of Beaver Creek, ten miles away. Curling up on the window seat, Kelly felt the warm summer breeze stir her hair. The lace curtains fluttered around her, and she leaned back against the wall to relax. She was so glad to be away from Georgia. She'd miss her parents, but she had been desperate to leave.

The familiar ring of the old dinner bell interrupted her thoughts. She could already smell dinner and it made her mouth water as she got up to go to the dining room. Susie, the ranch cook, was waiting downstairs. She gave Kelly a big, sweet, hug. "We're mighty glad you finally came home, Kelly. This time, we're going to keep you." Kelly smiled at the welcome and hugged Susie back.

"Oh, Susie, it's so great to be here. I can't wait to get back into the swing of things. I'm going to be helping around here until I get a permanent job. They may even have me helping you."

Susie tousled Kelly's long auburn hair. "Girl, there is so much work around this place you won't have a shortage of things to do. I'd love to have you in the kitchen."

Kelly kissed Susie's soft cheek. "Thanks, Susie."

All the guests, along with the house staff, gathered around the long dining table for dinner. There was a delicious ranch hand

beef stew simmering in a big black cast iron pot at the end of the table. Uncle Bob and Aunt Emma took their place at either end. Everyone stood and joined hands as Uncle Bob said the blessing. After the Amen, Aunt Emma began dipping up stew as the bowls were passed. Susie brought fresh baked rolls with homemade butter to the table. Kelly knew from the wonderful scents that there would be a homemade blueberry cobbler for dessert. Her mouth watered as bowl after bowl passed under her nose until finally, one came to rest at her place.

The dinner conversation was interesting. There were guests from Delaware and New York, families mostly, and one sweet honeymooning couple from Tennessee. Kelly thought that meeting people from different places was one of the best things about living on a dude ranch. After dinner was finished, it was time to clear the dishes. Kelly helped wash and dry. When everything was put away, the ranch staff and guests gathered together on the front porch to watch the sun set. The crickets began their nightly serenade and Uncle Bob got out his guitar to play cowboy songs. Even though Kelly knew how cheesy it was, it was still one of her favorite things about the ranch. She gave the old porch swing a push and listened to the familiar creak of rusty chain grinding together. Uncle Bob's rich baritone sang deep and low. Kelly gave a contented sigh. There was no other place on earth she would rather be.

The next morning the sun rose bright and fair. Kelly was awakened by all the activity downstairs. The day was full of promise as Kelly made her way to the breakfast table. Most everyone else was already gone.

She whined a little to Aunt Emma. "Good grief. I don't know if I can get used to these early morning ranch hours."

Emma smiled. "No rest for the weary, sweetheart, so you might as well start on schedule today."

Kelly poured herself a cup of coffee. "Is there anything interesting going on today?"

“Well,” Emma replied, “Jeb is pretty eager for you to come down to the paddock and see the new colts. He’s excited about showing them off to you. I was going up to Meadow Farms this morning to pick strawberries. Would you like to go with me?”

“Oh, Auntie, that would be so great. Will we be back by lunch?”

“Yes, dear, if you and I go together, we can pick enough strawberries to make a batch of preserves in a couple of hours. You can go down and see the horses this afternoon.” Emma and Kelly finished with breakfast and got ready to go to Meadow Farms. Kelly knew exactly where the strawberry baskets were kept and ran to get them. What a wonderful way to start her time at Canyon Gulch. Kelly and Emma loaded up the rusty old pickup truck and started down the road. Meadow Farms was only about twenty minutes away.

Emma chatted with Kelly on the drive. “I feel bad about not raising my own strawberries, Kelly, but they’re so much work. By the time I do all that, I could just go up to Meadow Farms for heaven’s sake.” Kelly listened to Emma’s conversation as she thought about long ago summers. Time seemed to disappear as Kelly reminisced about picking strawberries with Aunt Emma as a little girl. She leaned her head against the truck and closed her eyes. The sun warmed her face and the wind tangled her hair. She could almost believe she was ten again. Aunt Emma’s voice startled her out of her daydream. “Here we are, Kelly.” Emma parked the truck. The doors protested with a loud squeak as they got out.

Kelly and Emma divided the baskets between them. Meadow Farms charged by the quart. Together they went out to the strawberry field. The rows ran straight and long. Each row was mulched with straw to keep the weeds down, and the vines were loaded. It was so tempting to eat as you picked. Kelly decided to just pay for the extra quart that would be inside her stomach rather than try to resist snacking and working at the same time.

She thought that would be only fair. The day grew warm and a fat honeybee flew by. Kelly continued to fill up her baskets. Aunt Emma picked like a machine. Kelly couldn't figure out how she could go so fast. Maybe it was because she didn't stop to eat along the way.

As Kelly went down the rows, her back began to ache. She stood to stretch her legs and admired the baskets of fat, ripe berries she and Emma had filled sitting at the end of the row. Kelly looked back at Aunt Emma, who continued to pick, far away in the distance. Instead of squatting, Kelly decided to sit on the ground. Her legs were killing her too. Kelly rested on her elbow to search for a berry. Moving the leaves aside, she saw a nasty black bug sitting on top of the finest berry of the bunch. She leaned close and tried to blow him away. Oddly, he didn't move and continued to rule upon his strawberry throne. You can have it, Kelly thought. There are so many strawberries out here, I don't mind sharing one with you. Kelly leaned over to watch the bug as she laid her head on her arm. She gave a huge yawn.

Kelly thought she heard a small voice. She looked closer at the bug. He had grown a mouth and tiny beady eyes stared warily back at her. The bug waved its little arms in warning. Unexpectedly, the sky grew dark overhead and the clouds blocked out the sun. Kelly looked up and to her surprise a full moon appeared. The moon glowed a faint pink as dashes of black and gray clouds swirled around it. Kelly had the sensation of falling, falling from a million miles away. Her body gave a jerk and she awakened suddenly to find herself lying on the ground in a strawberry field in Montana. Sitting up quickly, she glanced around. What a weird dream! She couldn't have been asleep for long, because there was Aunt Emma, continuing her trek down the endless strawberry row. Kelly quickly got back to work, hoping no one had seen her.

Emma and Kelly had hit the strawberry mother lode. Their baskets were full, and it was time to go home. As the truck

bumped and rattled, Kelly gave a groan. “I can’t eat a thing for lunch, Aunt Emma. My stomach’s so full of strawberries I think I’m going to pop.”

Shifting gears, Emma laughed. “Maybe you should have paid for two extra quarts.” When they arrived at Canyon Gulch, Kelly rolled out of the truck like the fat strawberries she was full of. “You go on down and see the colts, Kelly, I’ll take the strawberries in.” Kelly was thankful for that. She didn’t think she could make it to the house. Holding her stomach, she walked down to the paddock. She felt like she was going to turn into a strawberry.