



## Never Trust a Cowboy (Harlequin Special Edition)

By Kathleen Eagle

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When a Cowboy Comes Calling...

The last thing harried Lila Flynn needed was another cowboy to deal with. But new hire Del Fox was different than most sweet-talking wranglers. The hard worker had a gentle touch and eyes that spoke of a past he didn't share. Lila soon found her hardened heart softening, frightening her more than any other hurdles she was facing.

Del's assignment in Short Straw, South Dakota, was meant to be fast and simple. Falling for Lila Flynn, however, had complicated everything. If he did his job right it would mean destroying everything Lila had worked for. He'd given her every reason never to trust him again. But when all was said and done, would she trust their love enough to give them a second chance?

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### Editorial Review

#### About the Author

*New York Time* and *USA Today* bestselling author Kathleen Eagle published her first Silhouette Special Edition, an RWA Golden Heart winner, in 1984. Since then she has published more than 40 books, including historical and contemporary, series and single title novels, earning her nearly every award in the industry including Romance Writers of America's RITA. Kathleen lives in Minnesota with her husband, who is Lakota Sioux and forever a cowboy.

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Delano Fox enjoyed watching a smooth heist in progress the way any skilled player might be entertained by another's performance. Sadly, under the starlit South Dakota sky on the flat plain below his vantage point the only real skill on display belonged to a blue heeler, and even he was a little slow. Del was going to have to forget everything he knew about rustling cattle if he was going to fit in with this bunch. Otherwise he'd find himself itching to take over, which wasn't the best way to get in thick with thieves. Even rank amateurs had their pride.

One by one, six head of black baldy steers stumbled into a stock trailer, each one springing away from the business end of a cattle prod or kicking out at the biting end of the dog. There was no ramp, but a jolt of fear helped the first two clear the trailer's threshold. When the third one tried to make a break for it, Ol' Shep lunged, crowding the animal against the trailer door. The guy manning the door cussed out both critters, while the one handling the prod added injury to insult by missing the steer and connecting with the dog. It would've been funny if he'd stung the other man with a volt or two, but Del instantly set his jaw at the sound of the yelping dog. Inexperience was curable, but carelessness could be a fatal flaw, and lack of consideration for man's best friend was just plain intolerable. The best cowhand of the lot—the one with paws—jumped into the bed of the jumbo pickup, where he shared space with the gooseneck hitch.

Two shadowy figures climbed into the growling workhorse of a pickup that was hitched to the stock trailer, while the third—the prod handler—hopped into a smaller vehicle—a showy short box with an emblem on the door—parked on the shoulder of the two-lane country road. He would be Del's mark. One of them anyway. He would be local, and he would be connected. Rustlers were high-tech these days, and they used every resource, did their research, found their inside man.

Del didn't go in much for high tech. He did his research on the down low, and he had already had a private, persuasive conversation with a man he knew to be one of the two hauling the stolen stock. The job he himself was looking for would soon be his.

He chuckled when he passed the sign welcoming him to the town of Short Straw, South Dakota, promising, You'll Be Glad You Drew It.

Maybe, but there was bound to be somebody in the area who wouldn't be. Del knew how to handle the short straw. He'd drawn it many times.

He followed the sawed-off pickup at a distance, which he kept as he watched the driver pull up in front of a windowless storefront emblazoned in green neon with what would have been Bucky's Place if the *P* were lit up. The *B* flickered, trying mightily to hang on to its dignity, but it was *ucky* that cast a steady glow above

the hat of Del's mark, the man who had just helped steal six head of cattle. Del could see enough of the guy's face now to add a few pieces to those he'd already collected. He could now read the Flynn Ranch emblem on the pickup door. So far, so good. The driver wasn't much more than a kid, early twenties, maybe. The steers might well belong to his father. Wouldn't be the first time the heir decided to help himself to his inheritance a little early. Del just hoped Junior had the power to hire and fire ranch hands.

It took Del all of thirty seconds to disable a tail-light on Junior's pickup.

A typical edge-of-town watering hole, Bucky's was shades of brown inside and out. Customers were lean and green or grizzled and gray, but they were all on the same page at Bucky's. They were winding down. Two guys sat side by side at one end of the bar, a third sat alone at the other, a man and a woman exchanged stares across the table in a booth and pool balls clicked against each other under the only bright light at the far end of the establishment.

"I'm looking for the owner of the Chevy short box parked outside." Del was looking at the bartender, but he was talking to anyone who'd noticed his entrance. Which would be everyone.

"That'd be me." The kid who'd wielded the cattle prod waved a finger in the air and then turned, beer bottle in hand. He wore a new straw cowboy hat and sported a pale, skimpy mustache. "What's up?"

"The name's Delano Fox." Del offered a handshake. "If you're with the Flynn ranch, I was told you might be hiring."

Junior admitted nothing, but he accepted the handshake. "Who told you that?"

"Ran into a guy who said he'd just quit. Told me to look for a red short box with a taillight out. Your taillight's out."

Junior frowned. "You been following me?"

"More like following up on a tip. Not too much traffic around here. Hard to miss a single taillight."

"When did he say he'd quit?"

"Maybe he said he was *about to* quit. I don't remember exactly how he put it, but if you're not short one hand, you soon will be. You hire me, you won't need anybody else. I'd get rid of the other guys."

The bartender chuckled.

"Only got one hand. *Had*, sounds like. Where did you run into him?"

"Couldn't say. Somewhere along the road." Del tucked his thumbs into the front pockets of his jeans and gave an easy smile. The way to play the game was to keep the questions coming and the answers on the spare side. "After a while they all look alike. Faces and places and roads in between."

Junior nodded toward the empty stool beside him.

"Did he mention his name?" Junior asked as Del swung his leg over the stool. "Or mine?"

"Flynn was all he gave me. Said he was helping move a few steers and that the guy driving the red pickup might be hiring. That last part was all that interested me."

"Brad Benson. Tell me why I should hire you."

So this wasn't Junior. One missed guess, but it was a small one. As long as the kid could hire a new hand, he would be hiring Del.

"I'll put in a full day every day." Del sealed the deal with a sly smile. "Or a full night. Whatever you need."

Benson took a pull on his beer, took his time setting it down and finally glanced sideways at Del.

"How about both?"

"A guy's gotta sleep sometime. But yeah, calving time, I'm there. Workin' on a night move once in a while? I can do that, too."

Benson didn't bite. "Where have you worked before?"

"Just finished a four-month job on a place west of Denver. The Ten High. Foreman's name is Harlan Walsh." Walsh was his standard reference. Harlan knew the drill. Del had actually worked at the Ten High, just not recently.

"If Thompson don't show up tomorrow—"

"Pretty sure he won't." *Damn sure he won't.* Thompson had been most cooperative once Del had ruled out all other options.

"If he don't, then we'll try you out. The Flynn place is sixteen miles outside of town on County... Well, I guess you already know the road. We pay thirty a day to start, six days a week. You'll have the bunkhouse to yourself, and you'll get board with the family." The grin was boyish. "Bored, too. Get it?"

"Either way, as long you've got a good cook in the family."

"You can always get yourself a microwave," Benson said, tipping the beer bottle in Del's direction. "Oh, yeah, and you answer to me. It's my stepdad's operation, but he's getting on, and we're trying to get him to take it easy."

"Understood."

"And if it turns out you're more skilled than most, more...specialized..." Benson's lips drew down in the shape of his mustache. "You could bump up your income, put it that way."

"Like all good cowboys, I'm a jack-of-all-trades." Del tapped his knuckles on the bar as he dismounted from the stool. "With resourcefulness to spare."

"Just to show your appreciation, spare some on buying the second round."

Del chuckled. There hadn't been a first round. "My employer always gets the better end of the deal. I'd

suggest the other way around if I wasn't dog tired. I've been on the road awhile."

"And I'd show you to your room, but I ain't ready to hit the road."

"I'll be there by eight."

"Breakfast's at six."

Del glanced at the shot the bartender set down next to Benson's beer, and then gave his new boss a slight smile. "I'll be there by eight."

The Flynn Ranch sign hung high above the graveled approach five miles south of the scene of the previous night's crime. Del's first thought was how easy it would be to alter the Double F brand that adorned the intersection of the gateposts and the crossbar on both sides of the entrance. A seasoned rustler would have it done by now even if he was hungover. Del was betting Benson was fairly new to the game and that last night's haul still carried the Double F. He doubted Benson had any authority to recruit new thieves. A man new to the game only stole his own cattle for show, to convince family, friends and FBI that he was among the victims. And by peeling off some skin and dropping it into the game, he bought himself some street cred. But he'd have to keep up appearances on both sides. Del looked forward to seeing whether Benson was any more serious about his acting than his rustling.

The red Chevy pickup was parked kitty-whompus beside an old two-story farmhouse that probably had been a local showplace in its day. The right front tire had crushed a bed of pretty blue-and-white flowers. Some of the once-white paint on the house was peeling, and some had been scraped. The covered porch looked as though it had recently been painted.

Del mounted the steps to the sprawling porch and rapped on the screen door. He heard movement, peered through the screen and saw a pair of chunky rubber flip-flops—neon green, if he wasn't mistaken—sitting on a rag rug in the dim alcove.

The bare feet that belonged to the shoes appeared at the top of the stairs beyond the alcove, paused and then ran down like water bouncing over rocks. Del was fascinated by the quickness of the flow and the lightness of the feet. He'd never seen prettier. He watched them slip into the rubber thongs, pink toenails vying for his attention with bright green straps. The colors spoke volumes about the woman who came to the door.

He wasn't sure why he wanted to hold off on looking up. The colors were cheerful, the feet were pretty and their owner probably belonged to his new boss. But for some reason he wanted to take her in bit by stirring bit.

She wore jeans that ended partway between her knees and her curvaceous ankles—Del admired a well-turned ankle—with a sleeveless white top over a willowy body. Her neck was pale and slender, chin held high, lips lush and moist, dark hair pulled back, and her big blue eyes stared at him as if he were some kind of a rare bird. Maybe he was looking at her the same way. He couldn't tell.

"Mornin'." Del recovered his game face and touched the front edge of his hat brim. "I'm looking for Brad Benson."

He watched her shut down any interest he'd sparked. "You came to the wrong door."

"If you wouldn't mind pointing me to the right one..." He smiled. "Sorry. Del Fox. I'm your new hired man."

"I don't have an *old* hired man. Or a man of any kind behind any of my doors. And if I did, it wouldn't be Brad Benson."

"My mistake. I saw his pickup out here." He was pretty sure she hadn't meant to be funny, but he had to work at keeping a straight face. His new boss was clearly in trouble. He stepped back and nodded toward the side of the house. "Looks like his pickup anyway."

She pushed the screen door open and ventured across the threshold, took a look and planted her hands on her hips. "It does, doesn't it?"

"Same plates and everything. Must be around somewhere. You wanna tell him I'm here?"

"I want to tell him to get his pickup out of my flower bed. Or maybe you'd tell him for me when you find him."

"Should I try the doghouse?"

"I don't have one. My dog..." She stepped past him and surveyed the yard. Her tone shifted, the wind dropping from its sails. "Should be chewing on the seat of your jeans right about now."

"Guess he ain't hungry. Maybe he got a piece of Benson."

She gave her head a quick shake, banishing some momentary doubt that had nothing to do with him or with Benson. "Maybe you should check the pickup." She nodded toward the dirt road. "It's another mile and a half to the new house, and you can be sure Brad didn't walk. How drunk was he when he hired you?"

"Couldn't say."

"And you wouldn't if you could." She lifted a lightly tanned shoulder. "It really means nothing to me, but it might make a difference to you."

"I'll check the pickup." He touched two fingers to his hat brim and stepped back. "Sorry to bother you. Sign says Flynn Ranch, and Benson wasn't clear on where the house would be."

"I'm Lila Flynn," she said quickly. "Brad is my stepbrother. He lives down the road with his mother and my father."

"In the *new* house." He smiled, grabbing the chance to start over. "You get the home place."

"And you'll get the bunkhouse out back if Brad remembers hiring you." Suddenly retreating, she cast a backward glance. "Like I said, check the pickup."

Before the screen door slapped shut, Del caught the edge of a smile, the flash of blue eyes. Slim chance, he thought, but the door to making a second first impression had been left ajar.

Driveway gravel rattled under Del's boot heels as he approached the red short box pickup. Benson's chin rode his collarbone as his head lolled from one side to the other.

## **Users Review**

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