

PANCAKES, BACON
& A SIDE OF
MURDER

A TEXAS-SIZED MURDER MYSTERY

BY KERI LYNN



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To all who dream.

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Finding the dead body of Victoria Phillips wasn't exactly how I had planned on starting my day. Especially only ten minutes after eating my second strawberry-mango donut.

Victoria—or Vicki—ran the diner across the street from mine. We'd been rivals from the day we'd opened our stores in Flamingo Springs, Texas, which, subsequently, happened to be on the same day. Both offering the deal of All You Can Eat Pancakes for \$3. In all fairness though, Vicki had copied my ideas, not the other way around. Originally, she was scheduled to open a week after me, but moved it up to the same day to try to outdo me, which was also why she'd put the same coupon in the paper.

Staring down at where she lay on her stomach on the sparkling blue floor of her kitchen, I swayed. Shaking, I dug my cell phone from my pocket and dialed 9-1-1, knowing from the grotesque way her neck was twisted there was nothing I could do for her. I congratulated myself on being calm, until I noticed the dark pool of blood slowly drying around her blond head.

“9-1-1, what’s your emergency?” Terri Townshend’s powerful voice filled my ear.

It took a few tries before I managed to squeak out, “Terri, it’s—it’s, Aubrey.”

“Aubrey?” Terri’s voice sharpened, and I could imagine her sitting straight up in her chair, one hand flying to her generous bosom. “Are you all right? Tell me what’s wrong.”

“I—I’m in Vicki’s kitchen, and—and,” my words broke off as I started to sob. “Oh, my word, Terri, she’s dead! Someone killed her.”

Terri said something, but I couldn’t understand what through the rushing noise that pounded in my ears. It wasn’t until she’d shouted my name repeatedly that I heard her.

“I’m sending the sheriff,” she said. “You sit tight, don’t touch anything, and stay on the line. If you feel at all unsafe, get out of there. Do you understand me?”

“Yes,” I whispered, still staring at the lifeless form of my archenemy. Blood pooled by her shoulder, staining her neatly coiffed hair. I could only imagine what she would say when she woke up, as Vicki really prided herself on her hair. I leaned against the wall, hearing Terri breathe into my ear as I realized I was going into shock. My stomach threatened to give me back my breakfast, and I swallowed hard, hoping I didn’t vomit.

Well, until I saw what was sticking out from under Vicki’s chest—something she’d obviously clutched against her when the killing blow had been delivered: my secret recipe book. In fact, it was the very one I kept locked in a vault in my own bakery, a book filled with recipes and measurements that took me years to collect and create. Vicki found out about the book only days after I opened, overhearing me talking about it to a friend when she dropped by to see what type of special I was serving, and she’d never stopped trying to get her hands on it. First, she tried to bribe me, then threaten me, and lastly, she tried to pay my waitress to steal it. For the briefest of moments,

I wished she were still alive for the simple reason that I could slug her right in her perfectly made-up face. I didn't think the police would find it acceptable for me to do it now, since she was dead.

Hearing a noise at the front of the pink and green dining area, I let out a squeak, Terri's warning suddenly sinking in that I could be in danger as well.

"That's just Blaze," she assured me. "Now honey, I'm getting off the line, but once this is over, I'll be waiting for you at your diner, okay?"

The room spun around me, and I dropped my phone to the floor where it landed with a clatter. When it settled into the pool of blood, my equilibrium decided it was a good time to take a vacation. I swayed forward as Blaze, the new sheriff of Flamingo Springs, came through the swinging door, one hand on his gun. Boot heels sounding loud in the somber silence, he strode forward, the scent of his cologne filling my nose.

He grabbed my arm and pulled me across the room. We were almost through the door before my stomach came up with the brilliant idea to reject my breakfast. Letting out a belch, I leaned forward and deposited the contents of my guts right on his boots. The last thing I saw was my own puke coming up to greet my face as I tipped forward.

And then, there was nothing.



"I'M GOING to need you to tell me again exactly what you saw and did when you came into Vicki's Creations, and why you were here."

Blaze pinned me with a hard stare, green eyes dark as they met my pale blue ones.

"And while you're at it, you can tell me why she has a recipe book with your name on it in her arms."

Biting back a groan, I pulled the blanket he'd given me closer around my shoulders, even though it had to be pushing ninety degrees outside. I was seated on a metal Victorian chair painted an obscene shade of bright pink. When I focused on the table in front of me, the surface cleared of its vase of fresh flowers and dainty menus for Blaze's hat and laptop, I found the lime green to be just as hard on my eyes.

"I already told you three times what happened," I snapped at Blaze, shifting in my chair, jean-clad legs rubbing together. It'd been less than an hour since I found Vicki, and already, I felt like the case was closed. Like it was only a matter of time before I was forced to take a mug shot, which was ridiculous. We might be enemies, but there was no way I would have ever killed Vicki, even though there were times I could have planted my boot in her rear.

Blaze stabbed at a key on his laptop and looked back up. "Humor me, and tell me one more time." His voice was gruff.

I think he was still a bit peeved over me upchucking on his boots, even though he managed to keep me from faceplanting on them. I don't know why that would upset him, though, since they washed off quite nicely outside with a water hose.

I took a deep breath, pinching the bridge of my nose between my fingers. "I told you, she always opens exactly thirteen minutes before me every day, like she has been for the last two years, because that makes perfect sense in her world. She says the breakfast crowd will come to her and not me that way, but I've never noticed that to be true." I paused to collect my thoughts. "When I went to turn on the open sign this morning, I looked across the street and saw she was still closed. That's totally not like—" I swallowed hard, doing my best to not look over Blaze's shoulder toward the kitchen, where I knew Vicki was still laying as Jeff, Flamingo Springs' doctor, made his examination, occasionally muttering under his breath. "That

wasn't like her," I went on, finally shifting my gaze to the glossy black floor.

"And then what did you do?" Blaze asked, pecking at his keyboard, the scent of his limey cologne wafting across the table at me as the AC kicked on.

Staring at the table, I replied, "I thought something might be wrong, like maybe she'd fallen or something. Just last week, I slipped on some spilled butter and almost cracked my head op—" I felt the blood leave my face, and for the first time, Blaze showed a hint of compassion.

"And you thought the same thing might have happened to her, since she never hired anyone to help out, so there would be no one to check on her," he finished for me, typing out a few more words.

Nodding, I looked up. "Yeah. I mean, even though we didn't like each other, we still looked out for one another. The one day I opened late last year, she came over and pounded on the door to make sure I wasn't sick. She told me no one was trustworthy enough to work for her, and that's why she never hired anyone, so I tried to keep an eye out for her."

"And when you went into the kitchen, you found her on the floor, with your recipe book clutched in her arms." Blaze leaned back in his chair, focusing on me, and I found myself unable to meet his harsh stare. I settled for staring at his throat, made visible because he'd left the top two buttons of his tan shirt undone. The patch with the police emblem was fixed right above his heart, a pen stuck in the pocket just below it.

"Yeah," I said. "That's my secret recipe compilation." I shuddered as I remembered the blood splattered across the spine of my treasured book and wondered if it would come out of paper.

"Which you've said on multiple occasions that you keep hidden, locked up, because it holds the recipes of your famous pancakes and those weird jalapeño chocolate things."

"Dragon's Breath cupcakes," I corrected him, and his brow

lowered. “But I have no idea why Vicki had it, or how she even got it. I keep it in a vault in the bakery kitchen!”

Blaze stared at me for a long moment, and I resisted the urge to wipe my sweaty palms on my blue T-shirt, knowing that would make me look guilty, though of what, I didn’t know. He couldn’t possibly be thinking *I’d* murdered Vicki. Could he?

“So, to reiterate, you found Vicki dead in her own kitchen with your secret recipe book still in her arms, something you two have fought over since you both opened two years ago, killed by a single blow to the head, the weapon most likely a rolling pin—something you look like you’re strong enough to do—and you’re telling me you have no idea how the victim got like this?”

Flabbergasted at what he was suggesting, it took a moment for it to sink in, but when it did, I stood. Dropping the blanket from my shoulders, I ignored Stetson, the town’s only deputy, as he moved past us with a camera, having finally taken enough crime scene shots. Glaring down at the sheriff with all the fire and vinegar I possessed, which, after being accused of murder, wasn’t much, I took a breath.

“How dare you even suggest that I would do such a horrible thing—”

“Sit down, Ms. Turner.” Blaze never even batted an eye at my display, only stared at me with cool eyes. It was as if he’d already condemned me of the crime and locked me in prison, throwing the key in the garbage on his way out.

Though I swayed a bit, I stood my ground. My mouth filled with the bitter taste that comes from having regurgitated coffee. “I will not! Now, you—”

“You either sit, or I will seat you.” Blaze never moved, but one look at the shoulders wide as a barn and the fact he outweighed me by a good fifty pounds had me quietly retaking my seat. He leaned forward. “Now, Ms. Turner,”

“Aubrey,” I interrupted him snappishly. “Ms. Turner is reserved for those who treat me with respect!”

“Aubrey,” he ground out, “I never accused you of anything, I simply stated the obvious, which, if you forget, is my job. Now, I’m going to ask you some more questions, and you will answer them without moving from your chair. Are we clear?”

Pulling the blanket back around me, I gave him a small nod. He shut the laptop and pushed it to the side of the table, arms folded in front of him, biceps straining at his long sleeves. Unlike Flamingo Springs’ last sheriff, Mason Rogers, who liked his beer and loved his cupcakes, Blaze Martin kept himself in good shape. Not that I was noticing or anything. I totally wasn’t.

“Where were you between the time of 12:30 a.m. and 1:45 a.m. this morning?”

“At home, of course. Why?”

Blaze drummed the fingers of his right hand on his left forearm. “Just answer the question. I’m interviewing you, not the other way around.”

“I did,” I snapped. “Or are you that hard of hearing?”

To his credit, Blaze ignored my question and went on. “And what were you doing at that time?”

“Yoga,” I responded, my mind momentarily wondering if Brey, my more than part-time but not quite full-time help had opened my shop yet. The brunch crowd would be moving through soon, if they hadn’t already.

“Yoga,” Blaze repeated, leaning back in his chair, arms over his chest. I fought to not stare as his shoulders flexed. “At one in the morning?”

I could hear the disbelief in his voice, and though I really wanted to climb on top of the table and give him a piece of my mind for looking at me like I was crazy, I remembered his warning and answered. “Yes, yoga. I work out when I have the time, and that was when I had time yesterday.” I frowned. “Or today. Whichever.”

He stretched his legs out under the table, boots nudging my sneakers. “You were doing yoga, at one in the morning, which is around the time Jeff says Vicki was killed. Was anyone with you?”

Blowing out a breath, I ran a hand through my hair. I’d started my day with it in a neat French twist, and already, it had managed to mostly come free, probably from when I’d passed out in the arms of the rather grumpy sheriff.

“Aubrey, if someone was with you, I need to know. Nothing you tell me will leave this interview.”

Letting out a heavy sigh, I contemplated not admitting someone was with me that night. Not because, like Blaze was probably assuming, I had a secret lover, which, I mean, I wouldn’t argue if I did. I don’t know the last time I had a date. But it wasn’t that. It was something far more embarrassing.

Pulling my feet under my chair so that they no longer touched Blaze’s boots, I leaned forward. Boots, I might add, that were attached to mile long legs I’d admired from afar more than once. But that’s beside the point. “There was someone with me,” I admitted.

Before Blaze could open his mouth a voice said, “And that someone was me.”

I didn’t even have to turn to know that Misty Von Oepen, my best friend and owner of Soul Yoga, had entered the building. She sat next to me in a vacant chair that was just as pink as the rest of the dining area, a cloud of lavender rising from her as she did so. “I was with her, Blaze, helping her with a pose.”

Blaze’s eyes darted between us, taking in Misty’s broomstick skirt, pink hair, and feather earrings. After a pause, he said, “Okay, so, you were with Aubrey this morning, helping her with a ... yoga pose, from midnight to almost two?” Disbelief was evident in his voice, clearly thinking we were lying.

But with a gentle smile, Misty replied, “Yes. Aubrey recently started following a rather strenuous exercise program, and

when she complained about being stiff, I suggested she take up practicing yoga at night to relieve the tension. She called me after she got turned around doing a pose.”

At Blaze’s blank look, I hurried to add, “I was doing Eka Pada Sirsasana.” I paused, pretty sure I’d just murdered the proper way of saying it, then went on, “It’s the pose where you put your feet behind your head.”

Blaze turned back from signing some paperwork Jeff handed him. “I’ve seen it, but I just call it the ‘tryin’ to lick your rear like a dog’ pose,” he drawled.

Misty laughed, her cotton-candy pink hair bright in the hot sun that poured through the frosted windows. Her pale green eyes danced. “It’s good that you see things in poses,” she told Blaze. “It suggests an open mind and gentle spirit.”

Staring at her, I tried to figure out why she was complimenting him, but gave up a moment later. I was just glad she was by my side.

“You were doing, this ... this pose.” Blaze’s lips twitched. “And you got turned around. What does that mean?”

“I got stuck,” I told him, flushing. “My hip locked up, and I couldn’t move, so I had my talking home assistant thingy call Misty to come help. You can check it if you want.”

“I’ll be doing that. So, she came over and helped you out of your pose. How long did that take?”

“Almost an hour,” Misty replied. “It took quite a while to loosen her muscles up, and since the problem was most likely caused by dehydration, I made her drink a smoothie. We talked for a good hour before I went home. I think it was around two when I left.”

Blaze nodded, seeming to accept her explanation. He was even starting to look halfway nice before Jeff, who was also the town’s vet, since we didn’t get too many murders in the bustling county of less than 800, came back into the dining area and whispered something in his ear. Nodding, Blaze stood. Misty

followed suit, her pink hair swept up in an elegant messy bun that would have made me look like a homeless rat if I'd attempted it. I was hesitant to rise, remembering Blaze's cold threat to seat me, but when Misty reached down and gave my arm a firm tug, I stood.

"Thank you for your time, ladies," Blaze said, clamping his hat down over his shiny brown hair. "Misty, if I think of anything, I'll be in touch." He sent my yoga friend a winsome smile, then turned to me, his eyes cold. "As for you—don't leave town."

Stiffening, I darted around the table as he moved past us toward the door. "And why not?" I demanded, wondering why he was all smiles and charm for Misty but crabbier than, well, a crab, to me.

He glared down at the hand I'd grabbed his arm with as if I'd personally offended him, and said, after I pulled it back, "Because, Ms. Turner, I have a murder on my hands, and a lot of evidence that's pointing me in only one direction. Stay in town. I won't repeat it again. You may have an alibi, but she's also your best friend."

He strode out the door and I was left with a sick stomach, knowing my life had just been thrown into a mixing bowl with the beater set on high.