



“**I**nhale,” Misty said in a whispery voice to her room full of yoga students, “and exhale. Now, let us repeat. Inhale, filling your lungs, your stomach, your heart, and your mind with clean air, focusing on the verse we read at the beginning of the session. ‘I can do all things through Christ ...’” the class repeated the verse with her, not an easy feat since they were inhaling.

“And exhale,” Misty instructed, “letting the toxins flow from your body, releasing all that tension we tend to keep stored up. All those negative feelings, those thoughts of being unable to accomplish the tasks before us—release them into the air.” She gave her class a gentle smile, a strand of vibrant hair falling over one eye.

The class members stood, palms pressed together in front of their chests, one foot up, flat against the inside of the opposite thigh. “That feels good, doesn’t it?” Misty asked. “Not only does yoga purify your body, Soul Yoga helps to purify and detoxify your mind as you do away with the lies of the world and focus on the truth of Christ.”

She led her class through a few more moves, then released

them with some instructions. I made my way over to her as she rolled up her gray mat. The only evidence that she'd just led twenty-five women in a rigorous forty-five-minute routine was a slight sheen of sweat on her upper lip. Not bad, since most of her clients had been dripping, even though she kept her studio cool. Misty gave me a nod as she took a swig of water, her long legs accentuated by the black yoga pants and the loose green shirt she wore. When she finally took a break from her drink, she turned to me.

"I suppose you're ready to get this show on the road?" At my nod, she locked the front door and switched the sign to Closed, then headed toward the back of her studio. "Let me take a shower first. There are some Cheetos in the kitchen, if you'd like some."

While Misty ran a tight fitness ship and had helped dozens, if not hundreds of people shed unwanted weight and develop healthy lifestyles, she also believed in moderation. She preached eating an eighty percent healthy diet and lived about eighty-five percent healthy. Though she worked out almost every day and ran a successful business teaching others to do the same, she wasn't afraid to eat a bowl of ice cream on the weekends and taught that everyone should allow themselves a treat.

She was the best kind of fitness instructor, and to her, the perfect body was a healthy body. Having a six pack and razor-sharp triceps didn't make you healthy, and positive body image was something she preached daily. She offered healthy cooking classes, and her large kitchen was always stocked with the best fruits, veggies, and meats. Misty proved you could get and maintain a rocking body without living on bean sprouts and lemon water—one of the reasons she was so popular in the fitness community, both online with her blog, and in the southern half of the States.

Helping myself to a banana and a jar of yogurt she'd made

the previous week, I took my first deep breath of the day. It wasn't until after I'd served Blaze and Stetson lunch that I'd realized how bad everything really was. When I'd closed the diner and started cleaning the kitchen, my hands were shaking. If I was arrested for Vicki's murder, I'd go to prison. I'd be punished for something I didn't do, while the real killer was still out there. What scared me even more was the thought that the killer could very well be someone I knew. After all, Vicki wasn't thought of fondly by most of the shop owners in town, having let them all feel the wrath of her razor-sharp tongue. Some weren't as forgiving as others, meaning I could have served them breakfast only hours after they had killed her.

"I'm thinking we should start with Lacey," Misty said as she came into the kitchen, now clad in jeans and a ripped tie-dyed shirt. Sneakers covered her feet, and she had her spike ring on. It was a fashion statement that also doubled as a weapon, and clearly we'd been thinking the same thing, because I was carrying pepper spray in my pocket. No one was safe, not with a killer running around, and I was glad to have her with me. On top of being armed, Misty was like a weapon herself. She'd been trained in several forms of karate, judo, and some sort of Brazilian self-defense, and I'd seen what happened when she practiced on a boxing bag.

"I think so, too," I said with a nod. "She's right next door, so maybe she saw something. Something she isn't willing to tell Blaze."

Misty gave me a look as we stepped out onto the street, which, for the sake of being a tourist town that didn't see much rain, had never been blacktopped. "You really don't like him, do you?" she said, dust puffing up on her bright purple sneakers.

I rolled my eyes as we approached Lacey's, the bright sun beating down on my shoulders as the town began to quiet down a bit. Even in the peak of tourist season, Mondays were usually slow, and today was no exception. "Whatever," I

grouched as we stepped up onto the wooden sidewalk. I paused, staring at Vicki's shop, cordoned off by yellow tape. Even though it'd been several hours since she'd been found, Stetson's police car was still in the side alley, its tail end sticking out from between the buildings. I'd been there when they'd carried Vicki out on a stretcher, covered with a pale blue blanket. A shiver ran down my spine, freezing an errant bead of sweat in its place.

Misty opened the clear glass door and motioned for me to go first. Stepping over the thresh hold into Lacey's Beauty is You Salon, I was transported into another universe.

Texas is a beautiful state—mile after mile of rolling plains covered in wiry green grass, and if you steer clear of the big cities, there are a lot of ranches. Flamingo Springs is located in a small patch of desert surrounded by green plains, and no matter where you go in the state, there's always the same theme: cowboy hats, horseshoes, and lassoes—usually tacked to the walls in either a rustic fashion or a chic, stylish way. Even Vicki, with all her posh-posh decorations—the bright pink and green Victorian theme, and dainty lace tablecloths—had kept true to the Texan feel. The teacups had little cows and horseshoes painted on them, and there was leather mixed in with the lace.

Cowboy boots and a bandana around my throat were usually part of my attire when I waited on tables, and Misty, in all her calm and serene yoganess, had a few ranch-like knick-knacks in her studio. Everybody in Flamingo Springs, and everyone in Texas, for that matter, decorated their business with some form of cowboy attire.

Except for Lacey.

Maybe it was because she'd been born and raised in Houston and just wanted to have something different from the rest of the state. Maybe it was because she wanted to escape it.

Either way, stepping into Lacey's salon made you feel like you'd been transported into France.

Tiled with cream-colored stones and filled with Paris-themed décor and dark leather chairs, the salon was both charming and relaxing. Large pots housing luscious ferns filled the corners, and a line of old keys was strung across one pale gray wall. Little replicas of the Eiffel Tower were scattered throughout the room, their dark colorings complimenting the watercolor artwork staggered across the walls.

At the moment, Lacey sat at a small wooden table, imported from France, I'm told, painting a woman's nails. I studied her as Misty moved away, exclaiming over the new selection of organic hair dye on display by the back of the store. Lacey didn't look like a killer, but then again, did a killer ever look like their profession? She was of medium stature, with platinum blond hair (her natural color, she always said) that she wore long, almost to her waist. Being a hair and nail stylist, she always had it styled in some elegant fashion, and today, she had little braids going down her head on each side that looped up in the back in a bun. Loose curls dangled around her face as she concentrated on her client's nails, laughing as she said something.

Soft jazz music played in the background, and after a few more moments of watching my suspect, I moved over by Misty. Picking up a box of hair dye, I turned it over, pretending to read the back, though I couldn't give two hoots about it. The lengths I'd have to go to in order dye my jet-black hair were a bit too much for me. Running my finger over the ingredient list, I craned my ears toward what Lacey was saying, turning my body slightly, as if I needed more light to read the box.

"Bit of a shock, you know, hearing about it," she said as she applied a top-coat to the bright orange lacquer she'd covered the woman's nails with. "Not what you were wanting for your vacation, I'm sure."

“Well,” the woman said, her poorly dyed hair wobbling on the top of her head as she nodded, threatening to spill out of its tangled knot, “I just hope everything is figured out. I can’t imagine how her family and friends are doing.”

“What friends?” I muttered, and Misty elbowed me.

Lacey only shook her head. “We’ll let your nails cure for a second, then I’ll finish them up.” She eyed the woman’s frizzy ponytail. “If you’re in town for a while, I could dye your hair if you want, or give it a new cut.” She continued yakking away about the benefits of using organic hair dye, and I turned back, putting the box on the shelf, almost upending a three-foot Eiffel Tower that stood next to it.

Steadying it, I moved away, almost ready to give up on talking to Lacey, but then I turned back, running my finger over the feet of the metal sculpture. The thing had to weigh a good five pounds, and if it fell on someone, it could really hurt. I frowned. Blaze had hinted that Vicki had been killed with a rolling pin, but what if it hadn’t been a rolling pin at all? What if it had been an Eiffel Tower?

Nudging Misty, I nodded at it, but she didn’t seem to catch my drift. “What if she used this?” I whispered out of the side of my mouth.

Misty frowned. “What?”

“The tower, what if she used it to kill Vicki?” I hissed.

Misty rolled her eyes. “Oh, please, Aubrey. Really?”

“Ladies,” Lacey called as she ran her client’s credit card, “I’ll be right with you.” She gave us a warning look, I guess because our whispering was ruining her jazzy atmosphere. She bid the woman farewell after handing her an appointment card, having talked her into a hair session, then came toward us.

I wondered if Lacey had the strength to heft one of the towers and hit someone in the head. But, then again, she used to be a rodeo star, so maybe she was stronger than she looked.

“Looking for something particular or just browsing?” she

asked. When we replied with the standard, “Just looking to look,” answer, she stood for a moment, staring at us, tapping her lower lip with a black nail that had a rhinestone moon in the middle of it.

The thing about Lacey is that even though she does her very best to pretend she’s from some hotshot city like L.A. or New York, it’s not hard to guess she’s originally from Texas. Even though she’d lived in both of those cities for a few years, no amount of Santa Monica or Brooklyn could erase her drawl. That’s the thing about accents. You can run from the place you learned it, but it’s hard to hide. I still carry my New York accent, and I’m proud of it.

Still staring at us, a frown marred Lacey’s face, bronze from the hours she spent lying in the sun during her weekend escapes to the city. She’d framed her gray eyes with smoky eyeliner, and they squinted a bit as she tapped a sandaled foot on the floor, her pink shirt and black jeans smelling like chemicals.

“Blaze was in here,” she finally said, turning away and sitting in one of the massager chairs. “Had the nerve to ask if I dye my hair.” She sniffed. “Don’t know why it’s so hard for y’all to understand I came out of the womb with this hair color.”

Dragging the chair her client had recently occupied over in front of her, I sat on it, while Misty struck an uncomfortable-looking yoga pose on the floor, though she’d assured me many times it was good for the spine. “At least he didn’t accuse you of murdering her,” I grouched.

“He hardly accused you,” Misty cut in from her spot by my knee, pink hair brushing her cheeks. “He just asked you stay in town because you’re on the suspect list.” She gave me a smile. “I’m sure he said that to everyone.”

“Not me,” Lacey boasted, twirling a finger through a strand of what I still secretly thought to be bleached hair. “I even asked, and he told me I wasn’t a suspect, so I was free to travel.”

She shook her head. "I mean, look at me. Do I look like the type of person to bash someone's head in?"

To me, that phrase sounded like something a murderer would say, but I held my tongue. "Besides," she sighed, "I had a date last night. I didn't get home until well after three."

She glanced at us, making sure she had our full attention, but before she could bore us with the details about her date with some hot shot lawyer from Houston, the door crashed opened. We all turned at the commotion to see Mabel Rose, full-time Flamingo Springs resident, my occasional kitchen help when tourist season was at its busiest, and the fastest talker this side of the Rio Grande, standing in the doorway. She worked from her home as an insurance agent, a job that paid far above minimum wage, and she scheduled her own hours.

Mabel was born with a thyroid issue that left her growth severely stunted, and it wasn't until she was in her twenties that a doctor diagnosed her. From behind, she was often mistaken for a child, but what she lacked in size, she made up for in heartiness and love. Her small stature never seemed to bother her, and I considered her to be one of my dearest friends, though she had about fifteen years on me.

"Good night!" She ran toward us, hot pink toddler sneakers flashing as the glitter on them caught the sun shining through the windows. "Y'all, one of you have to tell me it isn't true! Tell me that what I heard when I bought a loaf of bread at Jesse's isn't true!"

Grief-stricken eyes searched mine, then Misty's, before moving on to Lacey, and when we all looked at our feet, unable to tell her, she let out a whimper. Mabel is probably the sweetest resident of Flamingo Springs, and even though Vicki had a distaste for her, Mabel still loved the now-deceased drama queen.

Finally looking at her, I felt something other than shock and anger go through me. I felt ... sad. Maybe I didn't like Vicki,

but others did, and now she was gone, stolen away before her time. Tears dripped down Mabel's pudgy chin, her brown eyes turning red as she cried. Stomping her foot, she wiped her face with the back of her arm.

"Tell me Blaze caught whoever did it," she said.

I shook my head as Lacey moved away to answer the jingling phone.

Mabel bit her fist, blond hair curled around her shoulders. "I don't want to know," she said around it, "but I need to know. Was it painful?"

Misty took over, saying, "No. The last thing Vicki would have known was happiness as she prepared her diner for today. She was hit in the head, so from what Blaze told me, it was as quick as someone turning a light off."

At this, Mabel began sobbing, loudly, and the couple who'd just entered the salon gave her worried looks while Lacey gave her a vicious one, obviously concerned about losing business.

"Come on, Mabel." Misty pressed a hand to her shoulder, nudging her toward the door. "Let's get out of here." Leading her out onto the sidewalk, Misty and I shared a glance over her head as Mabel did her best to corral her tears. But every time she looked at the yellow caution tape surrounding Vicki's shop, flapping in the hot breeze, she'd start bawling all over again until I finally squatted down, grabbed her shoulders, and gave her a quick shake.

"Get ahold of yourself!" I quietly shouted into her face. "Coming apart on the sidewalk isn't doing anyone any favors."

Calm and unfazed, Misty gazed off into the distance, as if she were transporting herself into her studio. While she smoothed her pink hair away from her face, Mabel gave a great hiccup before standing straight, pushing my hands away. "I'm fine now," she said. "I just—I think I'm in shock."

"Understandable." I straightened, looking both ways before

crossing the street. “Let’s go to my place and get a snack. Misty and I have a lot to tell you.”

Mabel was, besides Misty, my favorite person, and for good reason. She’d supported me opening a diner when others told me there was no point, since Vicki was opening one. When my first day had been a flop, everyone stuffing themselves on what Vicki had baked, Mabel sat herself down and proceeded to eat three of my donuts. She’d told everyone about my creations, and to this day, I truly believe it’s because of her praise (and the good Lord’s provident hand) that my shop was able to take off. Seeing her so distressed made my heart ache, and as soon as I got the door to my apartment unlocked, I ushered in my two friends who were standing on the step below.

Since I live above my bakery, I always have a fresh supply of goodies, and since Mabel was a frequent visitor, I always had her favorite—chocolate chip banana bread. Like Mabel, the treat was nothing fancy, nothing special to look at it, but it had a special taste that took customers back to a happy childhood memory, making them feel all warm and comforted inside.

“Why would Blaze have you as a suspect?” Mabel asked after washing a bite of bread down with some milk. “Out of everyone in town, you should be the last one he suspects.” She glanced at Misty. “No offense, of course.”

“None taken,” came the easy reply as Misty looked around my small apartment, seeming pleased at the few changes I’d made, adding a diffuser in one corner and changing my kitchen curtain. We usually met at my place since hers was incredibly small, and she often joked about being able to stretch her legs out and not worry about hitting a wall.

“Aubrey and Vicki weren’t friends,” Misty said, “but the only thing between them was competition. Vicki had far bigger arguments with almost everyone else, including me.”

We all sighed at that one, and I stared at a yellow kitchen wall, remembering that night. It’d been right after I’d opened

my shop, when Misty was still a bit of a mystery around town, her studio having opened only a few months earlier. Vicki had done everything she could to prevent Misty from opening, insisting that if a health freak took over, no one would want to eat sweets. When no one listened to her rants, she planted raw milk in Misty's kitchen the day before Misty taught a class, and turned her in, since selling or distributing raw milk is illegal in Flamingo Springs.

Misty almost had to close her studio due to the bad reputation the situation gave her and the fines she was forced to pay. But after managing to find out who had planted the milk, she'd went to the police and turned Vicki in. Sheriff Rogers, being drunk and lazy, turned a blind eye to Vicki's wrongdoings, but the town took notice, and Misty's studio was soon overwhelmed with customers.

It wasn't the first time Vicki had pulled a stunt along those lines, nor was it the last. Then again, there was a reason most of her clientele was either non-store-owning residents or tourists—the other store owners couldn't stand her. While I couldn't prove it, I was certain she was the one who had almost outbid me on my building, as it was something she'd do.

Mabel set her cup down, jolting me back to the present. Her pudgy hands twisted my tablecloth until I wanted to smack them, but I refrained. "If Blaze won't do his job," she declared, "I say we find out who did it."

Sharing a look with Misty I said, "That's what we were doing in Lacey's shop, Mabel. We think it might have been her."

"*You* think," Misty cut in, popping a slice of carrot into her mouth. "I said no such thing."

"Whatever," I replied, rolling my eyes. "Anyway, that's why we were there. We were looking around. I think she might have used one of the Eiffel Tower things she has."

Mabel gave a thoughtful nod. "That would do the trick, wouldn't it?" she murmured.

“Guilty before tried?” Misty raised an eyebrow. “I think you two need to cool it before Blaze catches on. And didn’t Lacey say she had an alibi? I’m pretty sure that’s something Blaze would have looked into.”

“Her alibi could have lied,” I snapped, shoving some bread into my mouth. I spoke around it, angrily brushing some hair away from my face. “Lacey might be all sweet and charming, but don’t think she’s forgot about the time Vicki called her a blond bimbo.”

“Being insulted is hardly a reason for murder,” Misty reasoned, as Mabel jumped up and rummaged in my junk drawer.

“We should make a list,” she said, climbing back into her chair, feet swinging beneath the table.

“What kind of list?” I asked curiously, thinking along the lines of a grocery list, which wasn’t a bad idea. Last time I’d looked in the fridge, I was out of pretty much everything, including cheese, which, in my home, is a sin. I took a deep breath, enjoying the smell of lemongrass from my new diffuser.

“A suspect list,” Mabel finally replied, having pried the cap off an old ink pen. “We need to write down the names of everyone Vicki had a beef with and investigate them.”

“Be a couple hundred names,” I said drily, and when Misty gave me a disapproving look, I added defensively, “Well, it’s true, isn’t it?”

She looked away, but not before muttering, “Reading Ephesians 4:29 would do you a world of good.”

Her gentle rebuttal brought me up short. I knew the verse she referenced well—in fact, I had a poster of it in my bathroom next to the mirror. “*Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers.*” I also had a poster of it in the bakery by the old-style wall phone, though in a newer translation, one that caught even Terri’s attention when she

made phone calls to her friends while waiting for a loaf of bread to bake. “*Stop all your dirty talk. Say the right thing at the right time and help others by what you say.*”

“You’re right,” I said. “I need to cool it.” Just because Vicki and I didn’t get along didn’t mean I had to be quite so cruel. I don’t profess to be a perfect Christian, but even I knew I was out of line.

“Don’t give her any ammo,” Misty mouthed as she nodded at Mabel, who was furiously scribbling away on my notepad, her hand already smudged with ink, tongue between her teeth as she squinted in thought. She seemed oblivious to our silent conversation, pausing to stare off into space before quickly scrawling another name down and sliding the paper over to me.

“I think this might be a good start,” she said, laying the pen on the table before resting her chin on the edge. I’d offered to keep a booster seat on it for her, but she’d declined, and not wanting to offend her, I’d dropped it.

She caught my stare and said, “Look, Aubrey, I can’t say that I had the greatest feelings of affection for Vicki, but she was somebody’s daughter. Somebody’s friend. We have to find who did this, because if they did it once, who’s to say they won’t do it again?”

“And besides that,” Misty added, reaching for another stalk of celery from her saucer, “we need to figure out how she got her hands on your recipe book. No one knows the code to the vault except you, and the only fingerprints found on it were yours.”

“Tell me about it,” I groaned, burying my face in my hands. “If I didn’t have you as an alibi, Blaze would have locked me up then and there.”

Mabel slid off her chair. “That settles it then. No one kills one of our fellow residents, then frames my friend. If Blaze won’t take care of it, we will.”

“Wait a minute!” I reached out and dragged her back before she could march herself over to the door and down the stairs. “We haven’t even looked at your list yet!” She stopped, and, after making sure Mable wasn’t going to run off and perform citizen arrests on people, I turned to the list. Not too terribly long. Most of the names didn’t surprise me, but a few did.

“Cody Jackson? Really? I mean, Lacey I can see, and she *was* acting odd when Misty and I tried to pump her.” I gave Mabel a long stare. “But Cody? Why would you think he’d want to kill Vicki?”

Mabel crossed her arms over her chest, the dramatic sigh she gave drowned out by the loud crunch to my left as Misty finished her rabbit snack before grabbing a piece of banana bread.

“*Because*,” Mable said, stressing the word, “don’t you remember that they used to be an item?”

“Well,” Misty interjected around her food, wiping a smear of chocolate off the small flower tattoo on the underside of her wrist, “as much of an item that you can be in Flamingo Springs.”

“Even so,” I said, attempting to scratch a bug bite on my thigh through my jeans, “*he* dumped her! It’s not like she left him. He wanted out of the relationship.”

Mabel squinted at me even as she climbed back into her chair and reached for another slice of banana bread. Taking the hint, I got up and poured her another glass of milk. “He said the only reason he dumped her is because he overheard her telling her sister on the phone that she was going to leave him. He decided it would be better to act first and save face than to deal with being rejected. That’s exactly something he would do, and you know it.”

Holding up a hand, I was ready to refute her point, but the thing is, I couldn’t. I mean, this was Cody Jackson we were talking about. He runs a dude ranch and has posters of himself

riding bulls plastered on the walls in his house for crying out loud. He's cowboy tough, but he's also a snot. Not exactly someone who murders people. Then again, most murderers don't seem capable of the crime.

"Good point." I ran my finger down the list as Misty read over my shoulder, leaning over in her chair.

"I see you've placed Lacey on your list," she said. "Why?"

"Cody chose Vicki over Lacey," Mabel said, but my shriek of surprise cut off the rest of her words.

"You've got to be kidding me!" My voice rose a bit. "Lacey Baker has the hots for ... for Cody?"

Misty held up her slender hand. Wait a minute. "Mabel, how do you know all this stuff? You're not hearing it on the grapevine, that's for sure, otherwise we'd know it too."

"Yeah," I teased. "Do you tap phones?" I got up and switched on a few lamps and the dining room light, since it was getting dusky outside.

Mabel gave me an indignant look. "In case you've forgotten, I get my hair and nails done at Lacey's. Last time I was there, which," she gave me a pointed look, "was only three days ago, she seemed upset. I asked her why, and she broke down and told me that even though Vicki and Cody weren't seeing each other anymore, he won't consider going out with her, saying he needed time. She told me he's still pining over Vicki, and if Vicki would just leave, she'd have a chance. Sounds like a motive to me."

"As for Cody, I was out at his ranch probably three weeks ago helping Jeff give the kittens their shots. I noticed Cody seemed a lot crabbiier than usual, so I confronted him. He said he's angry at Vicki. Thing is, I don't think he was just angry. I think he was livid."

"Probably never been dumped before," I said thoughtfully. I tapped my chin, then leveled her with a look. "Why aren't you at the station telling all this to Blaze or Stetson?"

At the mention of Flamingo Springs one and only deputy, Misty flushed a delicate pink, and I don't think it was from the heat, since my place was quite cool. Stetson was a lifelong resident of the town, and, like Blaze, owned a ranch outside of city limits. I rather liked the tall deputy, and I could see why Misty was attracted to him. Not my type, but definitely worth a second look.

"Really?" Mabel said. "You really think that either one of them would care about some gossip?"

"They might if it involves the case," Misty told her, but I shook my head.

"No, she might be right. They'd probably laugh at us. And besides that, Mabel is one of my best friends. Blaze would just think she's saying all this to make me look innocent. Which I am," I hurried to add, "but he wouldn't see it that way. I think, for now, this should stay between us."

After everyone nodded, Misty stood. "And on that, I think I'm going home. I've a few lessons to prepare, and I need to start some more kombucha." At Mabel's protest, she said, "Mabel, it's almost nine. We've been sitting here for hours trying to come up with something. It's a little too late to be heading out to solve a murder. Let's pick this back up tomorrow, okay?"

"Fine," Mabel grumbled, snatching the list from me before I could finish reading it, "but this is staying with me."

After sending her on her way with a wrapped loaf of bread and seeing Misty down the stairs, I locked the door and went around pulling the curtains shut. Then I went through the motions of tidying everything up and checked the door three more times. The thought of a murderer being on the loose made me a bit on edge, and it was quite a while before I could talk myself into going to bed. Even then, I stared at my ceiling, listening to my fan whir in the corner as it rotated.

Had Vicki left a will behind? If she hadn't, it was going to be

one big mess for her family to sort out. I myself had never seen the importance of having a will, always figuring that was something you had made up when you were a grandparent, or, at the very least, a parent. That mindset changed when my accountant in Houston corrected me during our first meeting when she helped me set up my LLC. She'd stated that having a will isn't just for the elderly, it's for the young as well, and she herself had written hers out when she was only nineteen.

"If you die and don't leave a will behind," she'd told me, "how can your family access your bank account? How will they know if you intended a certain possession to be given to a specific person?"

Though I was glad she'd talked me into it, I still shuddered to think about dying. But should I die, my assets were in complete order. I'd updated it about a year ago, with Mabel inheriting the bakery, while Misty inherited whatever was in my personal bank account, along with my car. Misty also was in charge of my health should I become unable to make my own decisions. Originally, my parents had been set to inherit everything, but they were getting on in years, and I didn't want the responsibility to fall to them. It made more sense for those who lived close to me to take control, and it gave me peace of mind knowing my business would fall into good hands.

I just hoped that wouldn't have to happen for a long, long time.



IT WASN'T until I was almost asleep, and my phone read 3:45 a.m., that I realized I'd forgotten to mix up dough for tomorrow's bread. I always did it the night before, and it was a customer favorite, so I couldn't *not* have it on the menu. It's not that it had to rise much—it was letting the spices I kneaded into it infiltrate it, giving it a fragrant smell and a heavenly taste.

Rolling onto my side, I let out a deep sigh. Maybe no one would notice if I didn't make it. I closed my eyes, hands under my pillow in a prayer position. Unless the Kevly brothers came into town. They always bought almost every loaf I had, and there'd be a high price to pay if they showed up and I didn't have any. If I didn't like them so much, it wouldn't be a problem, but I did. Especially Darren.

Groaning, I sat up, swinging my feet over the edge of my bed. After finding my slippers, I padded into the bathroom and tied my hair back in a tight French braid. I was dressed in cotton pajama pants and a tank top with a sports bra underneath it, so I didn't paint the prettiest picture, but who cared? It was the middle of the night. No one was going to see me anyway.

Sleepily, I made my way down the outside stairs and unlocked the backdoor to my bakery. I was calculating how much I needed of everything and already planning the day's special as I flipped on the kitchen lights. I opened at eight o'clock on the dot, and this bread wouldn't make itself. Washing my hands, I set to work, and even though I was exhausted, I moved quickly, enjoying myself, as I always did when I was alone in the kitchen. Unlike most of the other stores in town, I don't have music playing in the background, preferring silence or the happy hum of satisfied customers as a soundtrack, and I let out a contented sigh in the soothing quiet.

Except for its base, the bread doesn't have an exact recipe, and I'd started calling it Gold Mine Loaves because of all the goodies in it. Besides bacon, jalapenos, and cheddar cheese, I was known to add a few other surprises, such as dark chocolate chunks, pepperoni, and the occasional piece of sweet pineapple. Hot or cold, it was delicious, and I always served it with a side dish of homemade strawberry jam.

Soon, the delicious smells of spices, herbs, and pickled jalapenos filled the air, and I gave my full focus to the task of

buttering several metal bread pans. Hearing a soft scraping noise above the whir of the stand mixer, I turned. A tall person in a trench coat stood behind me. I reached toward the counter for my phone as they brought their arm up. Something hard connected with the side of my head, and I dropped to the floor like a sack of flour.

