



“Stay in town, Ms. Turner. Don’t leave Ms. Turner. I’m the law, Ms. Turner,” I groused to myself as I flipped pancakes on the industrial-sized griddle in my kitchen. I avoided looking at the far wall, knowing the vault hidden behind a rack of spices was empty. My recipe book had been tagged and bagged as part of the crime scene. It’s not like I needed it, but still, I missed it. The vault itself and much of my store had been dusted for fingerprints, and several photos had been taken, all while Blaze breathed down my neck as he inhaled the Butter Ribbon biscuits I’d offered him, Stetson, and Jeff.

“Better not let Blaze hear you talking like that,” Terri said from behind me, and I turned, watching her as she bustled into the kitchen with a stack of dirty dishes. Since Vicki’s diner was, obviously, closed, I had almost double the number of customers I usually did. They were all hangry and demanding my famous buttermilk pancakes that, as boasted on the menu, were so fluffy the clouds were jealous.

“Let him,” I said boldly. “He decided from the minute I

puked on his stupid boots I must be the one who did it. You'd think they're alligator leather from the way he acted."

Terri snorted as she loaded the dishes into the steaming dishwasher. Despite the fact she worked as a dispatcher at the police station, she liked to help out at the bakery whenever she could. Though I'd offered her a full-time position, she always refused, saying she liked the fast-paced job of a 9-1-1 operator. I knew the real reason she loved it was because of all the gossip she heard, and it was probably just burning Blaze's buns for her to abandon her post on emergency leave and come help me. And I said as much.

"Blaze isn't that bad," she said. "I know he can seem a bit gruff, but once you get to know him ..."

Whirling back from stacking two plates with pancakes, apple wood smoked bacon, and fresh strawberries, I glared at her. "No. There will no 'get to know him.' At all. The guy's a jerk."

"You just haven't given him a chance, yet," she argued, coming over and squirting a generous dollop of homemade whipped cream on the strawberries. "The real reason you don't like him is because you miss how it used to be around here."

Our former sheriff, Mason Rogers, never pulled me over for speeding, while Blaze had already issued me three tickets in the matter of four months. It didn't matter to him that there'd been no one else on the road—going seventy-five in a fifty-five was a no-no.

"No," I ground out as I slung more pancake batter on the griddle, "the reason I don't like him is because he pretty much accused me of murder."

Terri grabbed the plates even as Brey called out a couple of orders through the service window. "He's just doing his job, hon'."

She left me fuming as I quickly stirred the ingredients of a batch of Call Me Caramel cupcakes. I'd met Terri when I'd

moved to Flamingo Springs a little over three years ago from New York, desperate for a new start, and had immediately liked the tough woman.

My fiancé had left me at the altar, handing the best man a note to give to me, which detailed a rather disgusting love affair with my maid of honor, who was also the best man's girlfriend. Not one to let a bunch of expensive food go to waste, I'd grabbed the unity candle we were supposed to light together and burned the letter, then my veil, and proceeded to have the best party of my life.

After that, I packed up and left. While I wasn't the laughing-stock of my friends and family, I was pitied, and I didn't like it. Knowing I was the woman everyone saw as the one who got jilted, left at the altar, was a terrible feeling that made me feel like I wasn't enough. As if there was something wrong with me.

So, I sold my engagement ring and bought a ticket with the money the pawn store gave me and found myself relocating to Flamingo Springs, Texas. The place had quickly grown on me, and, deciding to put my culinary school degrees to work, I bought a gutted restaurant and refurnished it with my last penny.

Life was going great, even if I did have to miss a few meals here and there to make it work out the first year before I was officially open. Although Vicki proved to be the biggest pain in the neck I'd ever had, I was still happy. Until now. False accusations of murder would kill my business (no pun intended). I could only hope it would clear up soon, and Vicki's murderer would be caught. Who knew if they would strike again? And if they did, who would be the target?

Pouring the golden batter into cupcake liners, I slid the pan into the oven, shaking my head. No. I wasn't going to let that happen. Blaze was so busy looking at me that I doubted he'd even interrogated anyone else. I wasn't going to sit around and make fondant flowers while some killer ran loose, knocking people

upside the head with rolling pins. If the new sheriff of Flamingo Springs couldn't piece two and two together, then I would. And I'd start right after I closed shop for the day, which, since today was Monday, would be 3:30 p.m., and not a minute after.

"Did they really take your fingerprints, Ms. Aubrey?" Jack Parker asked as I served him and his dad, Mike, their lunch of pancakes, sausage, and fluffy scrambled eggs colored with peppers and cheese. I gave Jack a smile even as Mike scolded him, though I saw the same curiosity mirrored in everyone else's eyes as they unashamedly leaned toward me. Lacey, owner of Lacey's Beauty is You Salon, almost fell off her stool at the old-fashioned bar where she sipped a smoothie.

"Yes," I said, wagging my fingers at the eight-year-old boy to show him the ink stains. "It was pretty cool. Kind of like being in a cop show or something." I smacked nonexistent gum, and everyone laughed. "Yes sir," I said, putting on the best drawl I could manage, for though I'd been living in the South for quite a while, I had yet to pick up the accent. "You should have seen it. There I was, handcuffed to a chair, a single light shining into my face as I was interrogated, facing up to the meanest sheriff I've ever met ..."

I continued to spin my yarn, knowing that the worst thing we could do would be to dwell on the fact that a woman had been murdered right here in the midst of our small town. Even though the police had currently ruled it as an accident to keep it quiet, most everyone knew that wasn't the case since they were interrogating people.

"And I told the sheriff," I finished as I poured syrup on Jack's pancakes and gave Jeni, owner of the local jewelry store, a refill of coffee, "that he had better sit down or else I'd be seating him!"

The round of applause I'd expected to follow my exaggerated act never came, everyone seeming to have frozen in their

seats. Old Jepson Ray from a town over was holding a bite of cane-syrup-slathered biscuit halfway to his mustache, Terri's hand stopped mid-reach with a napkin to hand to Lacey. Looking around, I said, "What?" Taking on a gruff voice that was a poor imitation of Blaze's, I growled, "Confess, Turner! Or I'll run you outta Dodge!"

Still, no one moved, and finally, Mike caught my eye, before looking over my shoulder, where everyone else's attention seemed to be captured. Vaguely, I recalled hearing the tiny bell on the top of the glass door tinkle about halfway through my retelling of the interrogation. Swallowing hard, I said brightly, "Lunch is on the house, Sheriff!"

I slowly turned and stared at a pair of too familiar boots, scuffed and broken in from years of wear, looking shiny from their recent washing.

"Afternoon, Sheriff," Jepson Ray called around the bite of biscuits that had finally reached his mouth. "Cracked that case yet?"

"Not yet," Blaze replied in a conversational tone, and I let my gaze wander up his jean clad legs. "I'm actually here to ask Ms. Turner a few questions." My eyes jerked up to his, and he gave me a wolf-like grin, taking off his hat. "Is now a good time?"

Darting around the counter, Terri answered before I could tell him that it was most certainly not a good time.

"Yes. Yes, it is, Blaze. She has some things that need to get on the griddle in the back." I shot her a dirty look as I stomped toward the kitchen, holding an empty platter to my side, the white and pink frilly apron I wore suddenly looking silly over my jeans and plain shirt.

Once in the kitchen, I read the orders Brey had just pinned on the line above the order counter and slapped some bacon in a pan. "What questions did you have, Sheriff?" I asked tightly,

turning around to find him less than a foot away. I swallowed. “And what do you want for lunch?”

He eyed me for a long moment, then said, “Your double platter of bacon and egg biscuits with a side of hash browns, easy on the salt.” He stepped back, leaning a hip against the edge of the counter as I dug the ingredients out of the fridge. “The questions can wait, just wanted to see how you’re holding up, seeing as you were the one to find her and all.”

The sizzle of an egg landing on the griddle was loud as I prepared his meal. “I’m fine.” I reached for another egg. *Crack.* “Thank you for asking.”

I saw him frown, then run a hand through his wavy hair out of the corner of my eye, the other holding his hat next to his leg. “Yeah, well, you don’t seem to be.”

*Crack.* I slammed the egg so hard on the edge of the counter I almost ended up with it on the floor, and this time when I answered, it was through gritted teeth. “I assure you, I’m fine.”

He let out a sigh and came closer, resting a tanned hand on my shaking one. “Look, I get it. You gotta put on this tough act, pretend everything’s okay, like you didn’t find a dead body five hours ago, ‘cuz you have to run a diner and bakery, be a boss and a friend. But I also know what you’re feeling, and it’s okay if you need to talk, or even cry about it.”

Trying my best to ignore his concerned words, I grabbed my spatula and tested the sides of his eggs while I tugged my other hand away from him and used it to flip the bacon with a fork. “Thanks. How do you like your eggs?”

He eyed the griddle. “That’s not enough eggs.”

“Whaddya mean? You said the double. I ain’t cooking for the whole department.” I don’t know why I was fussing, since the whole department consisted of him and Stetson, but when it came to Blaze, I rarely saw straight.

Blaze leaned so close to my ear I could smell the mint on his breath mixed with a hint of coffee, and whispered, “You will

unless you want me to tell everyone what *really* happened during the ‘interview’.”

“Lunch for the department it is, on me. But no dessert,” I sighed before turning and batting my blue eyes at him. “And for the record, I think I did a spot-on imitation of you.”

He tilted back his head and laughed, the rich sound filling the kitchen, and I realized that perhaps I’d been a bit harsh on him earlier, though he probably deserved it. “You made me sound like I’m missing a front tooth, wear a straw hat, and play the banjo for barn dances on Friday nights!” The wink that followed his words had me fighting back a blush, and I hated how his flirting affected me.

Though I tried to level him with a steady look, he only chuckled before grabbing his finished plate and moving toward the dining area. I considered chucking a dishrag at his head but refrained. Blaze Martin might have thought he’d fooled me with his charm, but he couldn’t be further from the truth. I knew he would do whatever he had to in order to find Vicki’s killer, and since he seemed pretty stuck on the idea that the killer was me, I had to be careful. The man didn’t miss much, and I knew that every word I’d said had been carefully analyzed.

Tension settled into my shoulders, and I rolled them. Seemed to me like Blaze had already closed the case and was just waiting for the necessary paperwork to clear his desk before he arrested me with a murder charge. Since he clearly wasn’t going to do anything about the real killer, it was up to me, and then we’d see who had the last laugh.