



“**T**oday’s Scripture focus is going to be Proverbs 15:1. ‘A soft answer turns away anger, but grieving words stir it up.’”

Walking through my nine o’clock class, I adjusted poses and corrected forms, softly whispering affirming words to my students, complimenting them on their improvement.

“How many times do we answer a question or statement with words that are less than Godly? Words that could be grieving to others? Oftentimes, the person who has spoken to us has done so with good intentions. But because we allow our present circumstances to define us, we reply quickly, without taking the time to check our words. And this often leads to an argument.”

Taking my place on the mat at the front of the room, I pressed my feet together in a butterfly pose. Smiling, I waited for Juniper, a seventy-year-old widow from two towns over, to stop giggling as she tried to mimic my moves. Apparently, my ‘grab a cheek to settle your balance,’ tip tickled her funny bone.

Clearing my throat, I called the class's attention back to myself.

"Or, someone speaks to us harshly and we respond in like, escalating the situation, I encourage you to remember that we don't know what others are going through, and grace is a gift we should extend to all, no matter the circumstances."

"Jaime, take a rest," I called, seeing the homeschooling mom struggling to hold her hip flexor stretch. Behind her, Janice Dowell toppled onto her back, the sixty-some-year-old having lost her balance.

"This verse is a good reflection of the Golden Rule. We should strive to always be careful of what we say, making sure we aren't being grievous, and in turn, when others speak hurtful things to us, we should use soft words in return. We don't do the whole, 'eye for an eye.' We do grace. Remember this in every setting of your life."

A loud huff filled the room as Presly, the new co-owner of Esposito's, struggled to raise her hand toward the ceiling, and the class broke into laughter.

Standing, I led my pupils in the final round of stretches.

"Being gentle with your words doesn't mean you are letting down the fences you've established in your life as boundaries, nor does it mean you're a pushover."

Slowly straightening, I released my hamstring stretch, and after a few more minutes of teaching, I dismissed my class, hands on my hips as I watched them exit. Yoga mats slung over their shoulders, their tank tops and oversized shirts stained with sweat, laughter followed them as they left.

Checking my schedule, I saw that my next class wasn't until two, giving me some time to dig into Ryan's past. Flipping the sign on the front door from Open to Closed, I headed into the studio's kitchen. Filling a bowl with homemade yogurt and topping it with berries and almonds, I carried it to the breakfast

counter and climbed up onto one of the tall stools, hooking my feet on the rungs as I opened my laptop.

I opened Facebook's homepage and entered Ryan's name into the search bar and clicked on his profile. Scrolling through it, I noted that he seemed to share everything publicly. I spooned yogurt into my mouth while I studied his pictures, wondering what had led to him being involved in a hit and run. After scrolling through two years of feed, I saw a picture that had me choking on the blueberry I'd just popped into my mouth.

Two loud coughs later, the blueberry sailed across the kitchen and landed in the farm-style sink. I wiped my eyes, tears streaming down my face as I cleared my burning throat. Tapping the keypad, I clicked on the picture—one that showed Ryan standing next to a blue car that looked exactly like the one that attempted to make him roadkill. His leg blocked the license plate, and at the bottom of the picture he'd tagged someone in the photo. Before I could click the link to see who it was, the page flickered then disappeared, and I was met with a white screen that showed a gray tower that displayed the message "Sorry, nothing matches your search."

Frowning, I refreshed the page but the same message appeared. When I went back to my home feed and entered Ryan's name into the search bar again, I was met with the same list of similar names that popped up the first time, minus Ryan's.

I pushed the empty bowl away from myself and reached for my cell phone, ready to call Stetson, but stopped short of tapping his name. He'd already warned me to stay out this. If I called to tell him what happened, there'd be a hefty price to pay. I set my phone on the granite countertop and ran my hands through my hair, watching as a couple of blue strands fell to the laptop's keyboard.

Someone had just deleted Ryan's Facebook account. Going back to the search bar on Google, I typed in Ryan's name and place of residence, adding Instagram behind it. The first result that came up was the link to his page. Reading the bio that Google previewed, I confirmed that it was indeed Ryan's page, because how many other Ryan Matthison's were writing a book on quantum physics?

"I bet I know what's going to happen," I murmured to myself, readjusting my feet on the stool rungs, my left foot having developed a cramp. The annoyed grunt that left my lips was loud as I was brought to yet another gray page that said there was no account by that name, and I should check my spelling.

The same thing happened when I went to Twitter, and again and again across every social media platform I could think of. It was as if Ryan had never existed, because his profiles weren't just being privatized, they were being deleted. I was certain they were being deleted by the same person who tried to kill him.

Rolling my shoulders, I looked out the kitchen window. The sun was bright and cheery as it shone on the wall of the building next to mine, but I couldn't shake the dark thought that whoever was doing this was doing it right now. Maybe Ryan knew them and had given them all his passwords should he die, something most social media sites encouraged. But I couldn't see him giving all of his passwords to someone. Unlike Facebook, Twitter and Instagram didn't need an explanation as to why you'd stopped posting.

I clicked on the red X at the corner of the browser. No, something told me that Ryan's accounts were being hacked and deleted to erase every bit of evidence. Letting out a frustrated sigh, I closed my laptop. If only I'd been faster, I could have seen who he'd tagged in that photo!

For a moment I debated contacting Facebook but immediately shook the thought away like a pesky fly. Like they would or even could do anything.

Tapping my fingers on my thigh, I wondered why someone would want to kill Ryan in the first place. I knew him enough to know he barely scraped by on his earnings from his store. Most of what he made went toward student loans, so he wouldn't exactly leave a lot behind. Possibly, it was a jealous colleague who carried out the horrific act, wanting to claim his discoveries as their own. It was something worth looking into, but I couldn't help thinking it was something much simpler than that.

Most crimes come down to money, and glancing at the clock, I knew my best plan of action would be to head to Ryan's store. I doubted it would be unlocked, but there was the off chance it was, so I pulled on a pair of green running shoes and made my way outside,

Less than three minutes later, I stared the front of Ryan's store, surprised to see the open sign on and movement inside. Pushing the heavy door open, I was greeted with a blast of cold air that carried the slight scent of paint with it. Squinting in the dimness of the small shop, I saw a thirty-something-year-old man sitting in Ryan's chair behind the faded Formica counter.

Brows drawn together in a scowl, he painted a small flamingo figurine a brilliant shade of blue. Several more just like it spread out in front of him, and I wondered when Ryan started selling more than just the usual pink souvenirs. A small bag of chips sat on the manual register, and dust particles danced in the air, pushed around by the AC.

The man added one more stroke to the bird before looking up at me. He set the tiny paintbrush down on a paper towel. Green eyes met mine over the tops of his wire-rimmed glasses,

and a warm smile stretched across his face as he stood, still holding the figurine.

“You must be Misty,” he said, extending his free hand.

Still standing by the door, I stared at him. He laughed. “Ryan told me all about his fellow townspeople, and since you’re the only one he ever talked about having blue hair, that’s gotta be who you are, right?”

Centering myself, I strode forward between the several wooden and glass shelves that housed a multitude of souvenirs, took the hand he offered, and gave it a firm shake. Small flecks of paint dotted it, his fingernails short and stained various colors.

“Yep, that’s me.”

I gave him a curious look, taking in his messy hair and trim frame, My sneakers scuffed on the old wooden flooring as I shifted my weight. His oversized tie-dye shirt said Hawaii on it, and his black jean shorts were frayed at the cuffs.

Realizing we were just staring at each other, I opened my mouth but was cut off by the stranger who bore a slight resemblance to Ryan.

“I’m Royce, his older brother. From over by Galveston.” Royce paused, then added, “His only brother, actually.”

I offered him a tentative smile, doing my best to look around the store without being obvious and asked, “Do you know how he’s doing?”

Looking back at Royce, I saw the smile drop from his face and he sighed, glancing down at the flamingo he still clutched.

“I’m sorry,” I hurried to say. “That was probably inappropriate for me to ask, but ...”

“No. No, it’s totally okay to ask,” he replied. “It’s just ... man, I can almost convince myself that he’s okay and nothing happened, and then when someone asks about him, or I see

something that really reminds me of him, it hits me all over again.”

Royce sank back into the creaky lawn chair that Ryan liked to call his throne. Setting the flamingo down on the counter, he sniffled. “The doctors are doubtful he’ll make it. Even if he does, he’ll be in a vegetative state for the rest of his life. But they told us not to lose hope, things may still turn around.”

“I’m so sorry,” I whispered. Gaze roaming the room, I searched for anything that might be out of place. My stomach twisted at the sad news. A stack of T-shirts yielded about as much information as the display of keychains, and the rack of flamingo ornaments next to the coffee cup stand wasn’t any better.

“His right leg is broken,” Royce continued, cleaning his paint brush, “and his right wrist was shattered. He also has four broken ribs, two cracked ribs, obviously some head trauma, three busted fingers, and a lot of internal bruising.”

Wincing, I absentmindedly flexed my own fingers.

“Thank God Jeff was here,” I murmured. “He saved Ryan’s life.”

Royce looked up at me, lips twisted in a sad smile. “From what I hear, it’s actually you who saved his life. If you hadn’t been where you were, it could have been hours before anyone found him.”

“It was a crazy scene to run out to.” I picked up a figurine that looked just like the one he’d been painting. “I knew these were hand painted, but Ryan never said anything about it being his brother who was behind it. Matter of fact, he never mentioned he had a sibling.”

Royce laughed. “He’s offered plenty of times to feature my work here, but I’m content to just send him the flamingos. I don’t have a lot of time to paint much, so when I do, it’s just these little guys.”

Still chuckling, he looked down at the figurine in front of him, obviously proud. "I think to date, I've painted around eight or nine hundred of these things. They sell fast, and I use the cut Ryan gives me to save up for a house."

"That's a lot of talent in one family." Hesitating, I wondered how much more I could dig without being nosy.

Royce must have guessed what I was thinking. He took a sip from his coffee mug. "Yeah," he murmured. "It's just me and Ryan, so our parents really spoiled us when we were growing up." His green eyes darkened, and he shook his head, letting another sigh.

"How are they handling this? How are *you* handling it?" I asked quietly.

"Not well," he answered. "But who does? I mean, you get a call that your kid brother is lying in a hospital bed because he got hit by a car, and the doctors don't know if he'll ever wake up."

The laugh he let out was short. "Me? I'm just doing the best I can to hold it together. I know how much this store means to him, so that's why I'm here. To keep it running." He eyed the bag of chips next to him before taking another sip from his mug. "Thank God for Cynthia."

I moved forward, fingering one of the keychains. "Cynthia? Your wife?"

Royce snorted. "As if! No, she's Ryan's girlfriend. I think they've been together for at least six years. She's been by his side since this happened. Hasn't left for more than a few hours at a time—just to get fresh clothes or food."

I pulled the keychain off the hook and stared at it as if I was double-checking the spelling. "No kidding? He never once said anything about being taken." I chuckled. "Guess it's a good thing I didn't flirt with him, right?"

Royce didn't answer, and when I looked over at him, he was

staring at me with a puzzled, almost angry expression on his face. “You know, Misty, if I didn’t know better, I’d say you work with the cops, because you’re asking an awful lot of questions.” His tone was laidback, but the look in his eyes was anything but, and I walked toward the counter, digging in my pocket for money as I placed the keychain on the counter.

While I boast certifications in both theology and nutrition, I hold a master’s degree in counseling, and one of the leading signs I was taught to study in clients was body language. Royce’s arms were crossed over his chest, a defensive gesture, and his torso pushed forward a bit, which, in this situation, was an act of intimidation.

If one isn’t careful, their feelings will display themselves in body language, and I knew that if I wanted to get anywhere with Royce, I’d need to keep an eye on his, for he had trouble controlling it. Studying how he positioned himself could tell me a good deal about him, including if he mimicked me. It’s another unconscious action, but when nervous, people will often mimic the pose of the person talking to them, usually someone who has authority over them or who has the stronger alpha bearing.

Even as the thought crossed through my mind, Royce dropped his hands to his sides, one pressing firmly against his thigh, just like mine.

“Ryan is my friend.” Voice quiet, I stared into his eyes, and my pulse threatened to beat its way right out of my neck. “I want to know what happened to him. I’m sorry if I’ve offended you.”

Stomach clenched with nerves, I finally found the right amount of change in my pocket and pushed it across the counter, waiting for Royce to ring the purchase up.

Royce stared at me for a long moment before punching various buttons on the register and picking up the money.

“No offense taken,” he finally said. “I’m a little edgy right now, and I’ve already been questioned a few times by that deputy who shares his name with a hat.”

Making a sympathetic noise, I reached forward and scooped up the keychain but accidentally knocked one of the freshly painted blue flamingos onto the floor. Shattering, white powder coated the wood planks around it, but before I could even open my mouth to apologize, Royce stood in front of me, sneaker clad feet covering the mess, shards of porcelain crunching beneath him.

“I am so sorry,” I gasped, reaching back into my pocket. “Please, tell me what I owe you, and I’ll help clean it up.”

“Oh, no need,” Royce told me, and though his lips were stretched into a polite smile, his eyes were hard. “Accidents happen.”

Pausing, the back of my neck tingled.

“If you’re sure ...”

Royce nodded. “These blue flamingos aren’t for regular sale anyways. Ryan has a buyer who put in a custom order, so it’s not a big deal.”

“Well,” I hesitated.

“Seriously, it’s fine.” Royce’s smile tightened. “You probably should be going. I’m sure you’re a busy woman.”

“Oh, you know it.” Voice holding a forced cheerfulness, I backed toward the entrance. “Again, I’m so sorry, and I hope you have a good day.”

I reached behind me and pushed the door open, turned, and darted out to the sidewalk. As the door closed behind me with a heavy thud, I looked at the keychain in my hand. Lily, it read. I didn’t even know anyone by that name.

Tucking it into my pocket, I turned toward my business and almost ran over Seth Carline, an elderly man who moved to Flamingo Springs not long after Ryan. He’d taken up residence

in the empty apartment above the local attorney's office and spent his days sunning on the flat roof, learning French, and managing his investments.

Voice apologetic, I steadied him. "I wasn't looking where I was going. Are you okay?"

"It's no problem, Misty," he chuckled. The light wind moved through his short, curly white hair.

"In fact, if I were a decade younger, I'd have used this to ask you out!" Throwing his head back, he laughed. The sun caught in his neatly trimmed white beard.

I giggled. "Something tells me you were quite the lady's man in your younger days," I told him, smoothing my hair away from my face.

Seth stared at me, white teeth glinting, the small gold hoop in his left ear quivering. "Were? My dear, I assure you that I still am."

Both of us laughed. We visited for a bit longer before I bid him good day, needing to prepare for my next class.

"He in there?" Seth asked, and I stared at him, confused.

Seth nodded at Ryan's store.

"Royce. He in?"

"Ryan's brother? Yes, but how do you know him?" I followed my question with a sweet smile, hoping to find something out about Ryan's mysterious sibling.

Seth scrubbed a hand down his denim shirt, patting the breast pocket before remembering he no longer smoked, something he'd told me he'd given up shortly before he moved to Flamingo Springs.

"Royce? I've known him and Ryan since they were in preschool. I used to eat dinner with their parents all the time. When I spend time in the city, I usually fill the car up with those little figurines Royce paints and bring 'em back to Ryan."

Letting out a sigh, he rubbed the back of his neck. "It's a

shame, ain't it, what happened to Ryan? This world is so dangerous anymore."

I bit my lip and nodded. "I'm keeping him in my prayers, Seth. His name is on my prayer board, right next to yours."

Seth gave me a grin. "This old rascal can use all the prayer he can get." Looking over my shoulder at the building behind me, he scuffed the toe of his squared toed boot against the boardwalk. "I hate to cut this short, but I've got an investment firm calling soon ..."

Moving back, I made room for him to step up to the door to Ryan's store. "Oh, no, not at all." I gave him a smile. "You take care, okay? And let me know when you want that pie from Aubrey's."

We exchanged a few more words, and then I hurried down the street to my business, nodding at fellow townspeople as I passed them on the way.

Once I was back in my kitchen, I opened my laptop again and went back to Facebook and searched Royce's name. When I went to his profile, I was met with a newsfeed full of new updates. Both his profile picture and cover photo had been changed less than a day ago, and as I scrolled through his albums, I saw inconsistencies that made me wonder what he was hiding.

"Ryan and me trying to impress the ladies," one caption read. "The fourteenth picture is my favorite. He's always twisting the belt as soon as he gets in."

Frowning, I scrolled through the album. There were only thirteen photos, and none of them matched the description he'd written. Album after album was like this, as if Royce had gone through every photo he'd ever uploaded and deleted the ones that alluded to the same subject, though what that subject was, I didn't know.

When I'd reached 2012, I went back to his home page and

clicked on his friends' tab, wondering if I could find out who Cynthia was.

Checking the clock on the stove, I saw there was less than an hour until class. My phone vibrated, and I picked it up. It was a text from Lacey asking if I'd found anything out. I typed a response.

Meet at six?

Aubrey's?

Okay.

Going back to my laptop, I entered in the name Cynthia. Four results appeared on my screen, and I clicked on the first one, but her page was a dead end. Upon closer inspection I saw that this Cynthia was at least seventy years old and had an impressive number of grandchildren. The second one was married and lived in the Philippines where, her about section read, she and her husband worked at a clinic for the destitute.

The third profile I clicked on led me to a page where a gorgeous young woman smiled at me from the profile picture. Curly black hair pulled away from her face, her green eyes sparkled as she grinned at the camera. White teeth slightly crooked, she was biting her bottom lip as if she'd been trying not to laugh when the picture was taken.

Her status read that she worked at a zoo as a gatekeeper. Her check-in memory was Paris, and her relationship status was single, but that didn't mean anything. Few people updated their relationship status. But as I went through her feed, I found there wasn't a single mention nor photo of Ryan anywhere. And for that matter, there was no hint of Royce either, or his parents.

If she and Ryan had been together for six years then there would at least be some reference of him or his family, but there was nothing. While it was possible that she mentioned him, and it was shared only with her friends, it didn't seem likely. From the looks of it, she never shared anything privately. If her boyfriend was lying in a hospital, wouldn't she have at least posted something about that since his profile was gone? If they were an item, they would have a lot of the same friends, and it was easier to post an update on Facebook than to text everyone.

"I just feel like he was lying to me," I muttered, reaching for a small banana from the fruit bowl. "But why? What's there to hide?"

A sharp rap on my back door prevented me from trying to find an answer to my question. Sliding off the stool, I padded my way across the kitchen, peeling my banana on the way. Unlocking the door, I found myself face to face with a glowering deputy who shouldered his way past me before I could even get out a greeting.

"I thought I told you to stay out of this." Stetson's voice was low.

Closing the door, I slowly turned to face him, taking a bite of banana.

"Stetson," I said around the chunk of fruit, "before you pop a blood vessel, would you like a glass of water?" I walked past him and tossed the banana peel into the bin underneath the sink as I shoved the last bite into my mouth.

"What?" Stetson sounded thrown off by my sweet tone. Following me, his boots scraped on my floor. "No, I don't want any—wait, I guess I'll take a glass of water if you have it."

I handed him the cup I'd started filling while he'd spluttered. Hip against the counter, I studied him as he took a sip. His hazel eyes watched me over the rim of the glass. The scar on the back of his hand rippled as he lowered it. My

sudden burst of confidence faded as he continued staring at me, holding the glass next to his waist. He'd forgone his hat this visit, and his black hair, mussed and bearing a hat band indent on the sides, hung over his forehead, bringing out the bronze tan of his skin.

It struck me that we must have made quite the odd-looking pair, him dressed in his uniform and looking like the poster boy for the Texas Rangers and me standing barefoot, my sneakers under the stool by the counter. Clad in loose yoga pants and a tank top that sported a cartoon cow twisted into camel pose, my blue hair had come loose of its bun and hung around my face like an alien-possessed ball of cotton candy.

"Misty," Stetson sighed, "it wouldn't matter if I cuffed you and threw you in jail, you'd still find a way to interfere."

Swirling the water in his glass, silence once again fell in the kitchen. The soft hum of the refrigerator almost drowned out by the dull roar of Jeff's truck as he drove past on the street.

Stetson favored his Native American mother, who passed away when he was five, boasting high cheekbones and naturally bronze skin. The hazel of his eyes and the straightness of his nose and jaw came from his father, Frank, who currently resided in Louisiana, where he ran a charting boat for tourists.

Taller than me by about five and a half inches, Stetson had spent a few years in the rodeo before settling on being a police officer. Like Blaze, he'd transferred from a bigger city, though he came from Galveston and not Houston, and had bought a ranch on the outskirts of the county. His property line ran alongside Blaze's. While I'd known the handsome deputy for almost four years, there was still a lot about him I had yet to learn.

"Look." I shifted so that my forearm rested on the edge of the sink and squinted a bit in the sunlight that shone through the window. "I've done nothing wrong. And considering all the

things Aubrey did when Mabel was running around whacking people upside the head with rolling pins, you should take it easy on me. I haven't done anything illegal."

"Yet," Stetson countered. "Yet. That's the thing, Misty." He set his now empty glass in the sink. "You'll keep saying that, pretending that you'll stop before you cross that line, but you won't. I know you want to find out what happened to Ryan, and trust me, I'm working as hard and as fast as I can to figure it out, but stalking his cousin isn't the way to do it."

I lifted my chin. "I wasn't stalking, I was shopping."

Stetson all but rolled his eyes. "Oh really? Shopping? I didn't see you come out with anything."

Digging in my pocket, I pulled out the keychain, dangling it in his face. "I'm not lying."

"So, you're saying it took you almost twenty minutes to pick out a generic keychain?" Stetson laughed. "I saw what was on your laptop just now. Don't you think I've already gone over all this?"

Shoving the keychain back into my pocket, I resisted the urge to stamp my foot. "I don't you see getting bent out of shape over Seth going into the store. Blaze sure didn't act like this."

Stetson let out another laugh, throat working in the open collar of his tan shirt. The badge on his chest glinted in the beam of light that shone on it. Leaning so close I could smell his minty breath and spicy cologne, he lowered his voice.

"Darlin', maybe you haven't noticed, but I ain't Blaze. We're doing things my way, so keep your nose out of my business and go back to standing on your head. And as for Seth, I know he isn't sticking his nose where it doesn't belong. Unlike you, he's a law-abiding citizen."

"Oh, I've noticed you aren't Blaze," I assured him, but the words that were meant to be a retort came out with a bit of a different tone, and I realized I sounded a bit breathy. From the

grin on his face, so did Stetson. The sight of it infuriated me, and this time I was the one to invade his personal space, closing the distance between us until we were almost nose to nose.

“I will do everything I can to find out who did that to Ryan,” I hissed, “whether you like it or not. Do what you will. Throw me in jail. Write me a fine. I don’t care.” Though it’d only been hours since I’d taunted on the importance of applying Proverbs 15:1 to life, I was already throwing its teachings out the door. The only soft answer I had for Stetson was going to be a slap upside the head.

“You should care,” Stetson growled, breath fanning my face, eyes darkening. “Because I *will* throw you in jail. Toe the line with me, and I’ll have you in cuffs.”

“Is that a threat?” I asked, my voice almost a whisper, realizing that somewhere along the line the atmosphere of the room changed. When Stetson’s eyes dropped from mine, tracing my lips, I found myself struggling to decide if I should stay put or step back.

Thankfully, I didn’t have to choose, because a clearing of a throat from the other end of the kitchen halted our argument.

Both of us turned toward the noise to see Jeni, owner of the local jewelry store, standing in the doorway, holding a water bottle and gym bag. She often came early to read her Bible and meditate before class started, and glancing at the clock above her head, I realized there was less than twenty minutes before class began. I glared up at Stetson.

“If you don’t mind, Officer, I do have a job, and you are preventing me from doing it.”

“Head on in,” I called to Jeni, waving at her. “I’ll join you in a few minutes.” Nodding, she disappeared, and it was just Stetson and me again.

“I’m warning you, Misty,” he snapped. “Stay out of this. If this was truly an attempted murder, the only thing you’re doing

is painting a big fat target on your back.” Turning, he stalked toward the back door. “You saw what Ryan looked like after someone tried to make roadkill out of him. Don’t think you’d look any better.”

Slamming the door harder than necessary, he left, and once I’d splashed cold water on my face to cool down my burning cheeks, I joined Jeni in the large room that would soon be filled with almost two dozen people.

She looked up from her Bible as I stomped through the door, and a smile pulled at the corners of her mouth. Sitting mermaid style, she ran a hand through her pixie-cut red hair.

“I didn’t mean to interrupt anything,” she apologized.

I shook my head as I checked the diffuser behind her, making sure it held enough water for the entirety of the class. “You didn’t,” I told her. “Stetson was just leaving.”

“He likes you.” Jeni’s voice was soft. She closed the Bible and stretched her arms above her head. “I think that’s why you two argue so much.”

Snorting, I moved to sit across from her on my mat, studying the silver and gold necklace looped around her throat before dropping my gaze to the small tattoo on my wrist.

“Someone tried to kill Ryan, Jeni,” I told her, rubbing the purple flower that covered the veins of my wrist. “I can’t just sit around and do nothing about it. We’re practically family in this town, and we’ve got to look out for each other.”

Brown eyes met mine.

I frowned. “Am I crazy for feeling that way?”

Jeni stared past me for a moment before answering. The smell of essential oils permeated the room, and I rolled my shoulders, relaxing.

“I think that Stetson understands where you’re coming from,” she said slowly. “But look at it this way. He’s from a big city. He’s seen a lot of things that most of us can’t even

comprehend—and we wouldn't want to. When he took that oath to serve and protect, he meant it. And that's what he's trying to do, Misty. He's trying to protect you."

Nodding, I drew my knees up to my chest. The soft material of my pants rubbed my forearms as I wrapped them around my calves.

"I get what you're saying, but do you think I should stop trying to figure out who did this?"

"No." Jeni's replied quickly. "I think you could do it a bit more quietly, though. The entire town knows you didn't go over to Ryan's store to buy something." She gave me a sudden grin. "You need another partner. I think that's the real issue here. You're trying to stretch yourself too far."

"What are you suggesting?" I asked. "Lacey is helping me as much as she can, but when you work all day ..."

"When Mabel was running around trying to kill everyone," Jeni mused, eyes bright as she leaned toward me, "before you knew it was her, you worked with her and Aubrey as a team. Three women. I think that's what we need here. A team of three. And unlike you, I don't have to be in my store the entire day now that I've hired Sandra. Ever since my uncle passed away and left me with that inheritance, I don't have to worry like I used to, so I can spend a lot of my time doing what I want. I was able to pay my way out of bankruptcy and buy my building. Now I have free time to help."

"So you could do a lot of the research, and Lacey and I could chip in whenever we can. We could compare notes every day." I ran my tongue over my teeth. The sweetness of the banana I'd consumed only minutes before lingered. "I like the idea, but if there's ever any breaking or entering, anything that could be considered even remotely dangerous, I think I should be the one to do it."

Jeni quirked an eyebrow. "Got a reason for that?"