



“Can you believe it?” Lacey asked me as she wiped down her salon’s counter with a sanitizing cloth. “A diamond the size of a blueberry!”

Taking a bite of chicken salad from the paper plate on the table in front of me, I met her gray eyes. I’d taken to eating dinner with Lacey most nights, and when Aubrey wasn’t with Blaze, she usually joined us. Going over the day’s events, we’d clean the salon, then share supper, and since it was my turn to bring the food, I made an easy favorite—chicken salad with grapes and peanuts spread on pita bread crackers.

Though it was almost the end of November, the weather in south Texas was still in the low eighties, so the cold salad was a refreshing treat after a hot day of yoga.

After swallowing, I wiped my lips with a napkin, noting the way Lacey was worrying her lower lip. “Are you going to accept it?”

Platinum blond curls brushed her tanned shoulders as she scrubbed at a sticky spot on the counter. “I want to, but I don’t know, Misty. I love him, I know that much. And he loves me,

but I feel like if I say yes, it'll be because I don't want to hurt him."

"Kinda the old 'I love him but I'm not in love with him?'" I crossed one leg over the other. She finished the counter and moved to wash the front door. My nose wrinkled as the smell of vinegar hit me.

"That," she agreed, "and the inner voice that tells me if I don't say yes, I'll be on my own for the rest of my life. Sounds a lot like my mama. Nothing breaks her heart more than knowing her daughter is twenty-seven, unmarried, and living in what she considers to be the most backwater town in all of Texas."

Moving behind the counter, she bent down and put her cleaning supplies back on their shelf. "It still kills her that I decided to stay here instead of moving with her to Virginia after Daddy died."

She sat across from me and spooned some salad onto a plate, piling pita crackers next to it. "I'm not asking you what I should do. I know you can't answer the question for me, but do you have any suggestions?"

Watching her feather and rhinestone earrings sway back and forth, I took a moment to think before answering. I nudged a bottle of water toward her, noting how tired her clear eyes were. Her normally big smile drooped at the corners.

"Lacey, if you can't see yourself being happy if you're married to this guy, don't do it. And don't worry about hurting him. You'd hurt him more if you said yes and then you didn't love him with everything you are." Popping a cracker in my mouth, I shivered as the AC blew cold air across my back. "I haven't said anything, but don't you think you went into this relationship a little fast?"

Lacey sighed, scooping salad onto a cracker. "I know I did. But I'm really trying to convince myself that I'm over Cody. I

thought that maybe if I started seeing Tom again the feelings would go away.”

“It takes time to get over someone you really cared about.” Tone matter of fact, I rubbed one hand down my thigh, the soft material of my maxi skirt catching on my callouses. “Jumping into another relationship right away only makes it worse.”

Lacey nodded and took a bite of her food. “I know you’re right. And I know I should be happy on my own for a while. I told Tom I needed some time.” Smiling, the soft light of the evening sun shining through the windows lent a glow to her tanned face.

“You should have been there when he proposed. He took me to a fancy rooftop restaurant and had the ring brought out on a saucer of chocolate dipped strawberries. It was everything I wanted in a proposal, but I couldn’t help but wonder if he was wishing I was Natalie.”

At my raised eyebrow, she continued, “Natalie is a former flame. They were engaged for a while before she broke it off. From what Tom told me, she was unhappy living in Houston and said she needed to find herself, discover her purpose in life, before she committed to a lifelong relationship.”

Lacey winced, as if traveling back to the night of the conversation. “That was four years ago. She never came back. She left her job, sold her condo, and joined a mission trip to Uganda. Last he heard, she was almost done with Bible school and was heading up a new mission’s team for Russia.”

I stared out the window, watching Jesse walk past, carrying a takeout box from Esposito’s. A few other residents meandered down the street, and when I finally turned back to Lacey, she’d finished her salad and was draining her water bottle.

“What aren’t you telling me?” I reached for her empty plate, stacking it on mine.

She blushed. “I reached out to Natalie today on Facebook. I

told her who I was and asked how she was doing. From there I told her that Tom proposed but that I felt like he was still in love with her.” Lacey let out a soft laugh. “That’s when I found out that she’s still in love with him too. But she swore she’ll never tell him and that I’m welcome to him.”

“So, back to square one,” I concluded. “You want to marry him even though he’s clearly not the love of your life and you aren’t his either, simply because you’re both tired of being alone.”

Glancing down at my hands, I studied my nails for a moment before continuing, noting I’d somehow torn a cuticle.

“Sounds to me like y’all have some things in your pasts you need to face and come to terms with. I hope I’m not overstepping the lines of friendship here, Lacey, but it seems like you’ve got some abandonment issues. From what I know, I’d guess they come from your dad’s passing. Cody leading you on probably didn’t help.”

Looking up from hands, I met Lacey’s gaze, my tone gentle. “The best thing you can do is confront your past and give it to God, who holds time itself in His hands.”

Lacey eyed me, tapping her bright green nails on the desktop. The rhinestones embedded at the base of each nail caught the light.

“I forgot you’ve got a counseling degree,” she mused. Standing, she picked up our trash and carried it to the waste bin behind the counter.

“You’ve given me a lot to think about.” Her sandals slapped the floor as she came back over. “And if you don’t mind, I don’t want to talk about this anymore. Why don’t you tell me what happened this morning with Ryan?” Shuddering, she leaned back in her chair. “That must have been awful.”

Drumming my fingers on the table, I recounted the crime I’d witnessed before sharing my suspicions with her. My

stomach twisted as I remembered the scent of blood that had filled the air.

“I really don’t think it was an accident, and neither does Stetson, though that’s what he’s telling the public. We think it was deliberate and that someone tried to murder Ryan.”

“But why?” Lacey cried, hand pressing her chest in a melodramatic manner that was only hers. “He’s such a nice guy!”

“Not that we know him that well,” I pointed out. “He’s been in Flamingo Springs for barely a year. How do we know he wasn’t involved in something before he moved here? Maybe that’s why he moved here. He might be running from something.”

“Something tells me you’re not going to let this go,” Lacey chuckled.

“Well, why should I?” I argued. “A man is nearly killed less than five feet from my back door.” After a pause I added, “When I called Jeff this afternoon, he told me that Ryan was still in ICU, and the doctors aren’t sure he’s going to make it.”

“Does Stetson know you’re helping out?” The direct question brought me up short, a blush creeping its tingly way up my neck.

“Not if I can help it,” I muttered. “If there’s one thing I know about Stetson, it’s that he’s just like Blaze when it comes to this stuff.”

“Yeah, well, look at how that turned out for Aubrey,” my friend teased.

Throwing a pita cracker at her, I shook my head before checking the time on my phone.

“Almost eight,” I said. “I better get going. I’ve got a private session with a pop star tomorrow, and the lesson I’ve got planned is a big one.”

Lacey walked me to the door and gave me a hug. “Thank

you,” she whispered. “You have no idea how much these nights mean to me.” As I stepped out onto the wooden boardwalk she added, “And whenever you’re ready to track down who tried to kill Ryan, let me know. I missed out on all the action with Mabel.”

Snickering, I turned Lacey’s offer over in my mind as I headed down the sidewalk toward my studio, the back-half of which was my apartment. Aubrey was gone, so I was going to need help, and since the first place I wanted to search was Ryan’s shop, I’d need a lookout.

Busy compiling a mental list of all the things to research about Ryan, I failed to notice a man waiting for me, and almost walked past Stetson as he leaned against the front of my building. Startling at his voice, I jumped, one hand going to my throat.

“I’ve been thinking,” he said, dark eyes searching mine from beneath the brim of his cowboy hat, “that since Aubrey’s out of town, I wouldn’t have to worry about her sticking her nose into police business. Then I remembered that you two are thicker than the flies on a cow’s hindquarters.”

Moving past him, my keys jingled as I pulled them from my purse, unlocking the door to my studio.

“If you were hoping to make an impression, you missed the mark by a mile when you referred to me as a fly.”

I tugged the handle of the glass door, and my skin prickled as a cool breeze blew over my arms. The sun a faint memory in the orange sky that was quickly changing to dark blue. The door didn’t budge, and I glared at the strong hand pressed against the metal bar that went across the middle of it.

“Misty,” Stetson growled, the scent of his tobacco aftershave drifting past my nose as my skirt swirled around my ankles, “unlike Blaze, I have no problem in telling you to mind your business. A man was almost killed today. That’s nothing

for you to be mixed up in. We're short a man at the station, and I don't have time to babysit you while you run around trying to solve something that's to be left to the law."

I faced him, tilting my head back ever so slightly. The end of my flipflop touched the toe of his scuffed boot.

"Stetson," I replied, dropping my keys back into my purse, "it's a free country. I've done nothing that merits being harassed, and I have no intention of doing anything that would require your reprimand. If I choose to start my own case, I am completely within my own right to do so."

Tugging on the door again, I was painfully aware of how close we stood. Memories of what his arms felt like around me flashed through my mind as I recalled the dance that we'd shared almost a year ago at a barn bash.

"Just stay out of trouble," Stetson finally said, dropping his hand from the door and resting it on his hip.

Staring at me for a moment longer, his hazel eyes traced my face, pausing on the stubborn strand of blue hair that insisted on laying across my nose.

He cleared his throat and lifted his chin. "And see that Lacey gets the message."

Turning, he walked away, boots loud on the plank sidewalk. And for briefest of seconds while I watched him go, a smile teased my lips.

Pulling the door open, I entered my studio and headed to my personal quarters. No matter what anyone said, I had no intention of stopping.

One way or another, I was going to find out who had tried to kill Ryan.