

MANICURES and MURDER

A TEXAS-SIZED MURDER MYSTERY BOOK 3

BY KERI LYNN



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For my Cowboy



“Sarah! Someone help us!” Voice shrill, I fell to my knees next to my friend and fellow cosmetologist, Sarah Greene. One hand went to her throat to feel for a pulse while the other shook her shoulder in the dim morning light. “Sarah, can you hear me? Please, God, don’t let this be happening.”

Unable to find a pulse, I pushed Sarah’s hair away from her face, revealing the gunshot wound in the middle of her forehead. The scream that left my lips echoed off the salon walls. Scrambling to my feet, I ran to the front door.

Shoving the door open, I stumbled across the wooden boardwalk and onto the street, still screaming. Across the road, business owners opened their doors and ran toward me, some pulling out their phones as they did so.

Tripping, I fell. Aubrey, owner of Flamingo Springs’ bakery and diner, caught me before I hit the dirt.

“Lacey, what’s wrong?” She pushed me upright, and I collapsed against her, trembling uncontrollably.

“Sarah’s dead,” I sobbed into her shoulder. “Oh, Aubrey, she’s been shot in the head!”

A gasp of shock went through the surrounding crowd, and

Aubrey wrapped her arms around me even as Jeni, owner of the local jewelry store, took off at a run for my salon.

“Someone get Jeff!” Aubrey yelled. Running past us, Blaze barked orders into his phone.

“God help us,” Marie, half owner of Esposito’s, murmured behind me. Her husband, Vincent, echoed her as he made the sign of the cross.

The following minutes were a blur as Aubrey sat me down on the wooden sidewalk in front of her diner and rested a cold water bottle on the back of my neck as I pressed my face into my knees. Sweat pooled at the waistband of my jeans even as condensation from the bottle dripped down my neck and dampened my shirt collar.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I forced myself to take deep breaths, following Aubrey’s instruction as she rubbed my back. I recalled how Sarah had looked, her brilliant blue eyes staring sightlessly at the salon ceiling. A bitter taste filled my mouth the same moment a wave of nausea slammed into me, and leaning forward, I threw up.

The crowd around me made sympathetic noises, their comforting words a dull roar in my ringing ears as I sobbed.

“Jeff’s here,” someone said.

I wiped my mouth as Flamingo Springs’ doctor ran into my salon, the Christmas wreath on the door tilting as it shut behind him.

“It’s no good,” I whispered. “She’s gone.”

Sitting down next to me, Aubrey wrapped an arm around my shoulder after kicking dirt over my vomit. “Do you want to talk about it? It’d help oil your gears since Blaze is going to need to talk to you as soon as he can.”

“She’s gone,” I repeated, the strong scent of cinnamon reaching my nose as Aubrey shifted positions. “I came into the salon at my usual time and found Sarah on the floor. I thought

she was still in bed—I didn't hear her get up this morning, and I certainly didn't hear a gunshot."

"I don't think anyone did. Or else they would have called Blaze."

My salon's front door opened, and Jeni stepped out. Pausing in the doorway, she said something over her shoulder before pulling the door shut and crossing the street. Standing in front of me, her eyes were sad, mouth drawn into a thin line. "I'm so sorry, Lacey."

Shakily getting to my feet, I hugged my friend. Her sequined blouse scratched against my cheek. Her strong arms held me tight for a long moment, letting me cry into her shoulder as the shock wore off.

"Let's get her inside until Blaze is ready to talk," Aubrey told Jeni. "And if someone can get Pastor Brent down here, his presence is needed right now."

Keeping one arm wrapped around my shoulder, Jeni guided me down the sidewalk and through the front door of Aubrey's bakery. The usually welcome smells of breakfast foods and bakery delicacies were sickly sweet to my nose, and my stomach cramped.

Jerking away from Jeni, I bolted past the few patrons who'd remained inside and watched me with pity-filled stares. Once I made my way into the snowman-decorated restroom, I collapsed, dry heaving into the toilet. Biting my tongue, the metallic taste of blood filled my mouth as my tears dripped to the floor. Jeni crouched next to me, one hand splayed across my back, the other holding tissues to my mouth to catch the blood I was too nauseated to swallow.

"God help her," she whispered. A male voice rang out in the dining area, interrupting the rest of her prayer. "We're in here," she called.

Pastor Brent entered the small restroom a moment later, his

wife, Suzanne, standing in the doorway, one hand covering her mouth.

Patting my shoulder after handing me the blood-soaked tissue, Jeni went to join her, letting Brent kneel next to me on the cold tiles. The scent of lemons and bleach surrounded us.

Resting a warm hand on my head, he began to pray, his voice strong, and the nausea left me not long after.

“Lacey! Where is she?” The familiar voice of my ex-boyfriend, Cody Jackson, cut Brent off. The sweet scent of hay, leather, and musky aftershave reached my nose just as Cody shoved past Jeni and into the crowded restroom.

“Cody, I told you to wait,” Aubrey snapped at him from the hallway, but he ignored her, pushing Brent out of the way to take me into his arms.

“Blaze called me,” he said, holding me tight against his chest, and I buried my face in his shoulder. Though we’d broken things off for good the previous month, I needed him, and he knew it.

“I’m glad you came,” I whispered, my tears soaking his plaid shirt. “Cody, I don’t know what to do.”

“You don’t have to.” He cupped the back of my head. “I’m here, and I’ll take care of you.”

“She needs to get upstairs.” Aubrey’s voice was firm as she still stood in the hallway behind Suzanne and Jeni.

“I don’t want to be alone.” I pulled away from Cody, looking at my friends over his shoulder. Quick to speak, Suzanne leaned around Brent to do so as her husband went to stand in the doorway. “Oh, honey, we won’t leave you alone, I promise. Cody, can you help her upstairs?”

The professional bull rider and ranch owner looked down at me, blue eyes narrowed. “Can you stand?”

When I shook my head, the room spun, he let me go and stood. Crouching a bit, he slid an arm under my knees, the other wrapping around my back, picking me up as he stood.

Boots loud on the white floor, he turned, careful not to hit the counter with my feet, everyone moving out of the way and letting us enter the hallway.

“Aubrey,” Brey called from the kitchen. “I hate to interrupt, but I’m getting overwhelmed in here.”

“Be right there,” Aubrey yelled back. Digging in her pocket, she pulled out a set of keys and handed them to Brent. “Go ahead and unlock my apartment. Feel free to use anything she might need.”

“Will do.” Brent took the keys and headed into the kitchen toward the back door. “Kinda wish Misty was here, if I’m being honest.”

“You and me both,” Aubrey sighed, going to stand in front of the industrial-sized griddle in the kitchen. Brey handed her a stack of orders before scurrying past us and back into the dining room with a coffee carafe.

The sudden change in scenery as Cody carried me through the kitchen and out the back door had my head spinning again, and I rested it against his chest. Shivers shook my body despite the warm air that surrounded us as he stepped out onto the back porch. The sky above seemed painfully bright, and the sudden tightening in my lungs had me twisting away from him and almost falling to the ground.

“Lacey,” he grunted, struggling to hold on to me as my quick movements caused him to drop to one knee.

“I can’t breathe,” I gasped, jerking away from him and falling on the wooden planks. Splinters stabbed my hands as I opened my mouth, trying to gulp in air, and black pinpricks began to swim across my vision. “Cody, I can’t breathe!”

Legs tangled together, Cody rested one hand on my back, the other going to my chest, just under my collarbone, his touch warm against my cold skin. “Through the nose, out through the mouth.”

Brent, Suzanne, and Jeni stood a few feet away, giving me space. Jeni wiped her eyes, lips moving as she quietly prayed.

“Come on, Lacey girl,” Cody urged me. “Breathe through your nose. Yeah, like that. Hold it for a second, if you can. Atta girl.” Rubbing my back, he shifted until he could wrap his arm around me, his lips almost touching my ear as he spoke.

The sharp jabs of pain that filled my lungs subsided as I focused on breathing. Shoving my hair behind my ears, I scrubbed my hands down my thighs, the feeling of denim rough against my palms.

“That’s it.” Cody squeezed me against him, the scruff on his chin rough against my ear. “Just keep doing exactly that.” Pausing, he smoothed a hand down my hair. “Do you want me to carry you, or do you want to try to walk?”

Pulling away, I stared into his worried eyes before shaking my head as my pulse began to slow. Hands braced on the wooden porch, I pushed myself to my feet, Cody keeping a hand on my arm as he stood with me.

“I think I can walk,” I said. My first step was wobbly, and I grimaced, Cody’s arm looped around my waist as my stomach clenched. “At least, I’m going to try to.”

“Take your time, Lacey girl,” Cody said softly, guiding me toward the stairs. Brent stood at the top, working to unlock the door, muttering something about Aubrey needing to oil the mechanisms.

Placing my foot on the first step, I took a deep breath, then another, before grabbing the guardrail and easing onto the second step. Falling in behind me, Cody kept one hand on my back, Jeni behind him while Suzanne stayed on the porch and talked quietly into her phone.

Once I reached the landing, legs shaking, Brent held the door open, one hand extended to me. Grasping it, I let him lead me into Aubrey’s small living room.

“Sit here,” he said, nudging me toward the couch. Once I’d

settled onto the worn cushions, he crossed over into Aubrey's pristine kitchen and ran a glass of water and pressed it into my clammy hands.

Cody's phone rang as he sat next to me, Brent taking the rocking chair across the room. Jeni busied herself in the kitchen, filling the coffee pot and digging out the can of grounds from the cabinet.

"This is Cody," my ex-boyfriend said, voice rough. Glancing at me, he nodded, eyes narrowing as he ran a hand through his hair. "Yeah, Pastor Brent is here. So is Jeni. No, she's lucid. All right. We'll be waiting." Hitting a button on his phone, he slipped it into his pocket. "That was Blaze. He'll be up in a few minutes. They've about got the scene secured, and he wants to interview you right away."

Pulling my legs up so my heels rested on the cushion's edge, I wrapped my arms around my knees. "I'll do my best, but there's not much to tell him." Staring at the small, brightly lit pine tree in the corner, my eyes burned as I focused on the multi-colored lights.

"That's okay," Brent assured me. "Just answer his questions the best you can." Shifting in the rocker, he crossed one leg over the other before continuing. "I know this seems like we're rushing you, but is there anyone we should call for you? We can't call anyone on Sarah's behalf until Blaze gives the all clear, but perhaps your mother? For support?"

"Oh, my!" Straightening, I turned to Cody, grabbing his arm. "Dalton. Cody, you have to tell Dalton."

Muscles tensing beneath my hands, Cody met my gaze as the smell of percolating coffee filled the air. "He's going to be devastated. I don't even know how to tell him."

"Dalton?" Brent asked, accepting the slice of banana bread Jeni handed him on a saucer. Green eyes bright, I knew she was making notes of everything being said as she set a glass of

water on the coffee table next to me. “Is he that new ranch hand you just hired?”

Cody nodded. “Yes. He moved here to try to patch things up with Sarah.”

“They were on the right track too.” I closed my eyes for a moment. “She told me only a few days ago they were thinking about getting married.”

Cody stood. “I’ll be out on the landing. It’ll be best to call my foreman first so he can be with Dalton when I break the news.”

Closing the door behind him, Cody’s voice faded out, and letting out a sigh, Jeni sat next to me, wiping her hands on her legs as she shook her head. “Lord have mercy on us,” she said. Brent echoed her as he drummed his fingers on the armrest of his chair. “This world has lost its mind, and it’s the innocent who suffer the most.”

Pulling one leg up beneath herself, Jeni took a sip of water from the glass she’d filled in the kitchen, forehead wrinkled as she frowned. Settling back onto the couch, I glanced around us as Cody’s voice rumbled outside the door.

Aubrey’s apartment was nothing special, but I always felt at home when I visited her. Staring at the various pictures she’d staggered across the walls—garland strung between them—the tension in my shoulders slowly drained away.

“We had such big plans, you know.” I rested the glass on my knee. Jeni and Brent looked at me, both quiet, waiting for me to go on, and after a moment, I did. “With two of us running the salon, we could offer twice the service, and we were planning a girls’ trip to the Bahamas for Valentine’s Day.”

Looking down, I cleared my throat, eyes stinging as tears began to fill them again. “She was one of my best friends in beauty school, and it was so incredible to get back in touch after drifting apart over the years. Having a business partner

who was also a friend ..." Trailing off, I stared blankly at the wall above the door. "And now she's gone."

"Oh, Lacey." Setting her plate down, Jeni wrapped an arm around my shoulder as tears slipped down my cheeks, my swollen eyes stinging as my throat tightened.

"God, we need you," Brent whispered from his chair.

The sound of Cody reopening the door interrupted the soft prayer, and looking over my shoulder, I watched as Blaze followed him in. Green eyes crinkled at the corners, his mouth was a thin line, and the sigh he let out was heavy.

"Let's sit at the table." Blaze gestured toward the small dinette in the middle of Aubrey's kitchen. Glancing around the full apartment, he frowned. "Only one of you gets to stay, so decide who that should be."

"I'll stay," Cody said, cutting off Jeni, who pulled out a chair for me, but I shook my head.

"I want Pastor Brent to stay." Sitting on the wooden chair that had seen better days, I propped my elbows on the table, crossing my ankles.

Brent took the spot next to me as Blaze sat across from us, opening his laptop after looking at his phone. Cody and Jeni quietly let themselves out.

"There was no sign of forced entry, so Sarah must have known who killed her." Blaze's voice grew quiet as he stared at his computer screen. "With no security cameras outside, there's not much for me to go on, but at least I know this wasn't a random murder."

"So what now?" Brent asked quietly.

"Now," Blaze answered, "we start here. Get all the info possible and chase leads." Glancing at me, he cleared his throat. "Ready?" he asked, the tan of his shirt bringing out the brown flecks in his eyes.

"No. But I don't have a choice."

"Yeah," Blaze murmured. "And I'm sorry." Looking down at

his computer, he tapped a few keys. “Let’s start with how you knew the victim.”

A sad smile twisted my lips, and Brent reached out, patting my arm as another tear fell to the table.

“Sarah and I met in beauty school and became roommates. We lost touch over the years, and after I moved here, I never heard from her again. Life was so busy for both of us, so I was surprised when she reached out a few weeks ago and asked to visit me.”

“Any reason for that visit beyond just wanting to catch up?” Blaze typed away, ignoring the phone buzzing on his belt.

“Healing from a broken relationship. But other than that, nothing I’m aware of. It was so good to see her again, and we hit it off so well I asked her to join my business here, as she’d left her position in Miami.”

“Any mention of an abusive ex, or any hint she was in danger, or was ever involved in something that could bring her harm?”

Blaze looked at me as he asked, sucking on his teeth while he waited for my answer. The faint line of a mustache darkened the skin above his mouth, making him look older than he was.

Shaking my head, I clasped my hands in front of me, licking suddenly dry lips. “No. She never mentioned anything like that. Dalton was her ex, and he came here. They repaired their relationship and were talking about marriage.”

“What about her former job? Anything there? Did she leave for a reason?”

Frowning, I met Blaze’s gaze. “Actually, that’s the one thing she wouldn’t talk about. Sarah is—*was*, such an open person about everything, but she wouldn’t talk about it beyond saying she and the salon owner didn’t see eye to eye on a lot of things and she left on very bad terms and almost lost her license.”

“I see.” Scratching the side of his nose, Blaze typed

something out before clicking the keypad mouse. "I'll see if I can find out which salon and try to talk to the owner."

Shifting, he took a sip of water from a cup Jeni had placed in front of him before leaving. "Let's talk about last night and this morning. Did she act unusual the last time you saw her?"

"Honestly," I sighed, burying my face in my hands, "I don't know. It was like getting to know her all over again, so I wasn't too familiar with all her moods and quirks yet." Looking back up, I frowned. "I'm sorry."

Blaze nodded. "And what about early this morning? Jeff estimated her time of death to be about 3:00 a.m. Were you up at all during that time?"

"No. I went to bed at 11:00 p.m. and didn't wake up until my alarm went off at 6:30 a.m. I thought she was still asleep in her room and didn't know anything was wrong until ..." Voice trailing off, I looked toward Brent, who gave me an encouraging nod. "Until I walked into my salon and saw her on the floor. From there on, it's a little blurry. I just remember running outside."

"Well," Blaze said, closing his laptop, "it's not much to go on, but the part about her leaving her job on bad terms interests me." Standing, he slid the computer into a leather bag before draining his glass of water. "Lacey, at this point, you're not a suspect, but you are a person of interest, which is standard. I'd ask you not to leave town, and if you think of anything that might be helpful, you have my number."

Walking past me, he paused, dropping his hand to my shoulder. Giving it a gentle squeeze, he waited until I looked at him to speak. "Might be best if you stay somewhere else for a while. Aubrey would love to have you stay with her, and so would Jeni. When you're ready to go pack a bag, just let me or Terri know, and we'll meet you there."

Letting his hand drop away, he strode toward the door,

boots loud on the wood floor, and twisting in my chair, I called after him. "Promise me you'll find who did this, Blaze."

Turning, he gave me a long look. "No promises on that, but I do promise to do everything I possibly can. Deal?"

Biting my lip, I nodded, and once he'd left, I turned to Brent.

"Whoever did this can't get away," I whispered. "I won't let that happen. I don't care what I have to do, or where I have to go. I'm going to find them."