



Flipping the sun visor down, Aubrey carefully steered her jeep onto the dirt road to Cody's ranch house. Heat set on low, the almost thirty-minute drive had been quiet, both of us lost in thought.

Dalton's bullet-riddled truck was still parked on the side of the road, the yellow caution tape surrounding it fluttering in the slight breeze. Staring down at my hands, I refused to look up until it was well behind us. A sad silence filled the vehicle.

"This isn't exactly the easiest decision to make," I finally said. "But I know it's the right one. Even though I'm more scared than I've ever been in my life, I'm gonna see this through."

"That's how I felt after Vicki was murdered," Aubrey said softly. "Knowing the right thing to do but being terrified to do it."

Braking, Aubrey brought the jeep to a halt in front of Cody's massive ranch home, dust swirling around the two Australian Shepherds that ran up to our doors barking. Luna and Henry were both three years old, and I'd missed them when Cody and I had parted ways.

Putting the vehicle in park, Aubrey glanced over at me as Cody appeared in the doorway of the barn that loomed to our left. His foreman, Greg, stood next to him.

“Sure you want to let him back in your life?” Aubrey asked.

“No.” I took off my seatbelt off and eased my door open, careful not to hit the dogs, which were still barking at us. “And I never will be.”

Sliding out of my seat, I slipped my phone into my back pocket before bending and petting Luna as she sat at my feet, her barks turning into pants. Tongue warm, she licked my hand, and I took a moment to crouch down and rub her ears, breathing in the heavy smells of dust and animals.

The sound of boots crunching on gravel alerted me to Cody’s presence right before he rounded the front of the vehicle. White hat tilted back, he came to a stop a few feet away from me and hooked his thumbs in his belt loops.

Looking up at him, my stomach tightened as I remembered all the plans we’d once had to get married and have a few kids when he’d retired from the rodeo. All that had changed in the matter of a few minutes when he’d decided it was easier to walk away from me than face his commitment issues.

Glancing back at the dog, I rubbed her ears a moment longer before standing, the thin hoodie I wore feeling too tight around my neck.

“Cody.”

I stared into his familiar blueberry-colored eyes. The sound of Aubrey slamming the car door shut was faint as Cody met my gaze.

“Lacey.”

After a moment’s hesitation, he stepped around Luna as she rolled over and gathered me into his arms. It was in me to push him away, but when his chest heaved against mine, I shoved the memories of our relationship aside. Looping my arms around

his waist, I held him close as he buried his face in my neck, his tears hot against my skin.

Cody and Dalton had been childhood friends, and, like Sarah and me, had lost contact over the years. When Dalton had moved back to Texas to pursue Sarah, Cody had been overjoyed to have his friend around. Losing him only a few weeks later was clearly affecting him, and I found myself yet again praying to a God I still wasn't sure I believed in.

After a moment, Cody pulled away, keeping his arms around my waist.

"I'd say I'm glad to see you, but I know why you're here." Voice raspy, his look was stern.

"And why am I here?" Quirking an eyebrow, I took a step back, putting space between us, and he let his arms drop to his sides.

Glancing over his shoulder at Aubrey as she rounded the front of her vehicle, ending her phone call as she did so, he let out a short laugh.

"Lacey, if there's one thing I've learned, if Aubrey's around, you know trouble's brewing. Ain't no secret she solved the case with Mabel and that you and Misty figured out what was goin' on with Seth and Royce. You're here to see if Blaze missed anything."

Aubrey propped a hand on her hip and looked up at the tall rancher, squinting in the bright morning sun. The sound of cows lowing in the pasture behind the house was a pleasant backdrop to the chickens that clucked around our feet. "Got a problem with that?"

Tilting his hat down, Cody gave us a long look, chewing the inside of his lip, a habit he'd picked up after quitting chewing tobacco.

"No," he drawled. "I reckon I don't. Two people have been murdered in less than a week. The more people snooping

around the better, I say, long as those who aren't trained to do so watch their steps and don't get themselves hurt."

"That's fair," Aubrey agreed, absentmindedly scratching the cattle dog that now sat on her feet and looked up at her.

"What's fair?" Greg appeared behind the ranch owner, holding his hat by his side. Straw-colored hair tousled, his green T-shirt sported a tear on the left arm and was speckled with mud and loose bits of hay.

Not giving anyone time to answer, he went on, "Ahh. Letting them think they'll find something so they feel better?"

"Cool it, Cowboy," Aubrey told him. "We're not here to start a fight. If there's anything we can do to help, we want to make sure we're doing it."

Brown eyes squinting, Greg made a show of leaning over and spitting out a mouthful of dip. "Just one more thing to have to worry about," he muttered. "And we've already got more than enough to take care of."

"Greg." Cody turned to his foreman. "I've given them the all clear. Pretty doubtful they'll find anything, but it can't hurt."

Greg's brow lowered as he stared at his boss of several years. When it became evident Cody wasn't budging in his decision, he looked away, slapping his hat against his thigh before plopping it back on his head.

"It's your call, boss." Digging his can of dip from his back pocket, Greg made a show of packing his lip before walking away. Mason said something to him when he reached the barn, making the foreman laugh as they disappeared inside.

"Don't mind Greg." Cody turned back to face us. "He'll come around. It's just a lot to take in right now, and everyone's already on edge with Blaze snooping around."

Looking over at me, he lifted an eyebrow. "I was gettin' ready to ride out to my south pasture and check something, if you'd like to ride along."

"Don't worry about me," Aubrey said cheerfully, still petting

Henry. "I'll find my own way around." The sarcasm in her voice wasn't lost on me but obviously was on Cody because his lips parted in a grin.

"Good!" Holding out his hand, Cody waited for me to take it before heading toward the barn, leaving Aubrey to roll her eyes at me.

"What is it you're checking out?" Hurrying to keep up with the tall bull rider, I almost tripped, and he shortened his stride.

"She speaks!" Cody teased, squeezing my hand like he'd done a million times before.

Shrugging, I kicked at a piece of gravel as we crossed the driveway, the sun warm on the back of my neck. I glanced over my shoulder, watching Aubrey head in the opposite direction toward the back of the house.

I shifted my gaze back to Cody. "Guess I just don't have a lot to say right now."

"That's not the Lacey Baker I know." Cody's leg brushed mine as we entered the barn. "You always have something to say." At the other end, Greg and Mason worked on a tractor, both laughing as music played.

"You don't know me anymore," I said softly, and Cody stopped, turning to face me, dropping my hand.

"Don't you think there's a better time to address that?" The muscles in his forearms tensed.

"I do. And I wasn't addressing it, but since you brought it up, we need to agree I'm not here for anything related to us. I'm here to find out who murdered my friend and your ranch hand. Deal?"

"Deal." Turning away, Cody headed to the stall where his horse, Garth, was saddled and patiently waiting for his rider. "Take your pick and saddle up."

"Now that we got that out of the way, what is it you want to look at?" I went to the opposite wall and picked up a saddle. The weight was both strange and familiar to me, as it'd been a

long time since I'd done anything ranch or horse related, and the stretch across my back felt good.

"Might be nothing, and it probably is." Cody fiddled with Garth's reins, the yellow overhead lights casting his face in shadows beneath his hat. "So I haven't said anything to Blaze. Honeysuckle was on the floorboard in Dalton's truck, and it only grows in the south pasture by that shallow ravine where we lost that calf last year. We haven't used that pasture in two months and won't be doing so for another three. Doesn't make sense for him to have been out there."

"So you'd like to see if there's anything else there." Walking a few stalls down from him, I set the saddle down before opening the wooden gate. Brooks, the mare behind it, nickered when she recognized me.

"It's probably nothing." Despite his efforts, Cody sounded unsure.

"How was Dalton when he first got here?" Throwing a blanket over Brooks' back, I gave her ears a rub before adding the saddle and leaning down to cinch it.

"Distant. Wouldn't really talk about anything from the last few years and made a lot of trips out of town setting up new accounts."

Leading Brooks out of her stall, I looked toward my ex. "Sarah did the same. A completely clean slate, she called it. Deleted all her social media and changed all her accounts as soon as possible."

"One could say they were just starting over," Cody argued, saddle creaking as he swung up on Garth.

Following suit, I mounted Brooks, leaning to the side to adjust the stirrups. Because I was wearing sneakers and not boots, I needed them to be a bit higher than normal.

"One could say that," I agreed, echoing Cody's words. "But it seems to me like they were making sure no one could find them."

Riding out into the sunshine, Cody glanced over as I brought Brooks up next to Garth. Tilting his hat down, he waited a moment before answering. "Guess we're gonna find out."

Falling silent, we headed out, and if I closed my eyes, it felt like old times, when we'd been madly in love and would spend hours riding the range together. The time we'd spent together had seemed like minutes, and though much of our drama was public knowledge, few knew just how long the rancher and I had known each other.

Cody and I had first met at a rodeo. While he brought home bull riding trophies, I received my own prizes as both a barrel racer and a steer wrestler. Bull riding came soon after, and I won more than a few championships in a male-dominated sport. Our names became synonymous, and we became the rodeo world's favorite couple. Everything had seemed perfect, and when I'd decided to retire and use my cosmetology degree and open my own salon in Flamingo Springs, I'd thought life was mapped out. That is, until two months into our engagement when Cody broke things off, citing he didn't love me like he'd thought he did. It was a pattern that would repeat two more times, finally ending this past year once and for all.

Sighing, I brought myself back to the present and glanced at the man who rode in silence next to me. Breaking things off for good had been the best thing I could have done, but last month, Cody had asked me to take him back. Though he promised he'd changed, I couldn't help but feel bitter over the last several years of hurt he'd put me through.

Sensing my eyes on him, Cody looked at me.

"What?" His mouth turning up in a slight smile. "Got somethin' on my face?"

Shaking my head, I focused my gaze between the smooth spot between Brooks' ears. "No. Just thinking."

"About?" Cody pressed me, tugging on Garth's reins until

our horses were side by side and the toe of his boot brushed my calf. It was how we'd used to ride, holding hands and talking about raising kids and cattle.

My cheeks flamed. "Um, Dalton. Sarah. Everything that's going on. There have been four murders in a year. Flamingo Springs has been around for over forty years and never had a murder, and now here we are. One right after the other."

Scratching Garth's neck, Cody nodded in agreement. "Blaze said he ain't found anything yet on any of his leads. That's why I'm going out to the pasture. I can't just sit around and do nothing."

Falling silent again, we continued, and thirty minutes later, crested the hill that signified the beginning of the south pasture.

Bringing Garth to a halt, Cody stood in his stirrups, looking around, eyes crinkled at the corners as he searched for the plant he'd found in Dalton's truck. After a moment, he sat back down and clucked to his mount, and I followed him down the hill into the shallow ravine, Brooks bobbing her head when I gave her a soft whistle.

A few minutes later, Cody brought Garth to a halt again and swung down, letting the reins dangle loose. Dismounting, I patted Brooks' neck before joining Cody as he walked toward a patch of shrubbery that had partially climbed the young tree next to it.

Pointing, he said, "Winter honeysuckle. Highly invasive down here and a pest to trees and anything else it can climb. The previous owner of the ranch told me his great-grandmother brought the plant in. It's on my list to get rid of before it spreads too far."

"That's a shame." I studied the large bushes. "They must be beautiful when they bloom."

White buds dotted the thin limbs, and though they were



still hard fists not yet ready to unfurl, I could smell the sweetness of the blossoms.

“They usually don’t bloom till late January,” Cody said as he looked around the ravine. Twisting, he scanned the ground, forehead crinkling as he faced the sun.

Stepping away from him, I looked around, taking in the rolling green and brown hills that blurred into flat lands as I turned west. Clouds crowded the horizon, and after a moment of admiring them, I dropped my gaze to the ground.

Squinting, I saw a patch of dirt about twenty feet away slightly darker than the rest, and nudging Cody’s shoulder, I pointed to it. “Think that might be what we’re looking for?”

Elbow brushing my side as he turned, Cody looked to where I pointed. After a moment, he nodded. “Looks like it.”

Grabbing my hand, he pulled me forward. After a moment of resistance, I followed him. The calloused hand that grasped mine felt both strange and familiar. I debated pulling away but knew he’d only done it from habit and meant nothing by it.

Once we’d reached the darker area of ground, we knelt together and studied it. With the sharp wind blowing every night, it couldn’t have been too long since someone had overturned the dirt. After a moment, Cody released my hand, reaching around to grab his gloves from where he’d tucked them into the back of his pants. Slipping them on, he began digging at the mound of fresh dirt.

Just as I was about to stand, the cold from the ground seeping into my knees, Cody let out a triumphant mutter. The hole he’d dug was almost a foot deep, and the top of a plastic bag could be seen among the clods. Tugging on it, he lifted it out of the hole, almost dropping it when he saw what was in it.

“You don’t think ...” My voice trailed off as we stared at the handgun in the see-through bag. Its dull grey finish gleamed in the white sunlight as Cody brushed dust away from the outside of the bag.

“Yeah,” he responded grimly. “I’d say this is the gun used to kill Sarah, and Dalton was out here trying to find it.”

Sitting back on my heels, I stared at the sober-faced cowboy next to me.

“Trying to find it? Or trying to hide it?”

The look Cody gave me was serious as he contemplated my words. Opening his mouth, he hadn’t even gotten the first word out when the ground began to rumble, the sound of lowing and bellows reaching our ears.

Grabbing my arm, Cody jerked me to my feet as he shot to his, still holding the bag.

“Stampede!” he yelled as he ran toward our horses, dragging me along after him.

Reaching Garth, Brooks too far away for me to reach in time, Cody pushed me up into the saddle. He swung up behind me just as the first few cattle reached us, Garth stepping to the side as he did so, and Cody lost his grip on the bag.

Arms circling me as he grabbed the reins, Cody let out a piercing whistle, trying to herd the dozens of cows stampeding down the hill. Brooks was a faint shadow in the distance, having bolted moments before, and tugging on Garth’s reins, Cody attempted to head in her direction as cattle ran over the bag.

“Grab onto my belt!” Cody yelled into my ear, fighting to keep Garth steady as cattle brushed against his sides, knocking my legs into Cody’s.

Garth was an excellent herding steed, but we were caught in the middle of a stampede, and the usually steady horse lost his calm, pulling hard at the reins.

Reaching back, I hooked my fingers under Cody’s belt and held on as he tightened his arms around me, Garth rearing up. Thighs burning as I squeezed them as hard as I could, I struggled to keep my weight toward the front of the saddle

instead of completely on Cody's chest as he wrapped the reins around his fist, fighting to keep control of Garth.

Dust filled the air, sticking to Garth's sweating sides and coating the inside of my nostrils. A sudden sharp pain in my calf had me crying out as the horn of one of the cattle cut my leg.

"Cody!" Voice shrill, I tightened my hold on his belt until my hands cramped, blood filling my sneaker.

"Hold on!" Whistling again, Cody pulled hard on the reins, and I could feel him nudging Garth with his heels, trying to get the horse to move forward.

"Our best bet is to move with them until I can see a way out," Cody shouted. "They're startled, and I can't herd this many on my own."

Going with the flow, it was almost ten minutes before Cody was able to steer Garth through the herd and up a hill. After a moment, he leaned forward and pressed his hand against my calf, his other resting on my opposite hip. Garth's sides were flecked with white spots of sweat, and he stomped his hooves, still pulling on the reins.

"It don't feel deep enough to worry about bandaging it before we get back to the ranch." Pulling his hand away, Cody wiped my blood on my thigh. "And we'll need to disinfect it really good and have Jeff give you a shot to keep out infection."

"What about Brooks?" Twisting, I scanned the horizon, searching for my mount, shirt sticking to my back, my arms coated in fine dust.

"She'll head back to the barn." Several cattle still passed by, and Cody's chest heaved with a sigh. "I don't know how in the world that happened, but you can bet your last dollar it had something to do with us looking into why Dalton was out here. This pasture is fenced off for the winter. Only way those cows got out here is if they were herded and then spooked."

“Attempted murder?” I asked as Cody clucked his tongue and steered Garth in the direction of the house.

“Yep. And once we get your leg taken care of, I’m coming back out here to find that gun.”

“If there’s anything left of it,” I mused, shifting, the saddle horn digging into my inner thigh. Looking around us, I scowled at the sight of the freshly trampled dirt. “How will you find the place where you dropped the gun? The ground is completely turned over from the cattle.”

“I know,” Cody replied, hand still resting on my leg. “But we were about thirty feet from the honeysuckle when I dropped it, so it shouldn’t be too hard.”

Removing his hand, he pulled his phone from his belt clip. “I’m gonna see if I got enough reception to call Greg and see if he knows what in the world is going on and have him get Jeff out here.”

“I really don’t think a shot is necessary,” I protested, patting Garth’s neck. His ears twitched back at the sudden pitch change in my voice. “It ain’t hardly hurting anymore.”

“Lacey,” Cody chided me, chest warm against my back. “You’ve broken your arm twice and your collarbone, but you’re afraid to get a shot?”

Shushing me before I could argue with him, he spoke into his phone.

“Greg? Get Jeff out to the ranch. We were stampeded, and Lacey’s got a nasty cut on her leg. And find out who was assigned to the east pasture.”

Hanging up, he clipped his phone back onto his belt and nudged me. “You all right?”

Nodding, I focused on Garth’s mane. “Little shaken up, but I’m fine.”

“Think you better back out of this and let me and Blaze handle it?”

The squeak my teeth gave as I gritted them was loud, and I

leaned forward so I no longer pressed against Cody. “Sarah was my friend and deserves justice, and I’m going to do whatever I have to in order to find out who’s behind this. You got a problem with that?”

Chuckling, Cody wrapped his arm around my waist and pulled me back against him, our bodies swaying with Garth’s easy canter.

“Nope. Can’t say I do. But I want you to stick with me until we get it figured out. I want you safe.”

I struggled to find a rebuttal to his order, but after a moment, gave up, staying silent. Glancing at our surroundings, I remembered the several rides Cody and I had taken through this pasture when we’d still been in love.

I gave myself a mental scolding. The past held nothing for me, and it was time to stop dwelling on it. Cody and I were done, and nothing was going to change that.

Shifting, I fixed my eyes on his house as it appeared on the horizon several minutes later. Jeff’s truck was already parked in the wide gravel drive, his hound, Betsy, running circles around it with Luna and Henry, all three yapping loudly.

“Was it really necessary to call him out here?” I demanded, all eyes on me as we entered the yard.

Mason was leading Brooks into the barn as we crossed the drive, her sides glistening with sweat. Greg stood next to Jeff at the front of the doctor’s truck, hands tucked into his pockets as he spit onto the ground.

“Lacey, you know as well as I do the bacteria that are on those horns. Yes, it was necessary.” Cody’s voice was dry.

“Whatever,” I grumbled, sliding off Garth instead of letting Cody dismount first.

Doing my best not to limp, I made my way toward Jeff, ignoring the slight sneer that crossed Greg’s face. We’d never gotten along since the first day we’d met, and the contempt

between us had worsened when Cody and I had broken up for good.

“Lacey, I hear you got a nasty scratch from a horn. Care to take a seat in my office?” Giving me a crooked grin, Jeff lowered the tailgate on his truck and helped me up on it.

Behind me, Cody dismounted Garth, talking heatedly to Greg. “I want whoever was in charge of that herd up here now! They almost killed us, and it’s gonna take hours to get that herd back in their pasture.”

“I got Jake out looking for Tyler,” Greg replied.

“Tyler?” Cody’s voice rose. “That was his assigned pasture? He’s second foreman, Greg. He better have a good explanation as to why he almost killed us.”

“Pain level?” Jeff rolled my pant leg up as Aubrey rounded the corner of his truck, cradling two barn cats in her arms.

“About a four.” I hissed through my teeth when he sprayed antiseptic on the gash.

“Lacey, what happened?” Aubrey’s black hair was tousled from curious paws as a cat clambered up her shoulder. “I overheard Greg’s phone call to Jeff.”

“Never mind all that.” My fingers wrapped around the cold metal of the edge of the tailgate. “Did you find anything out? We definitely found something suspicious before we were stampeded by a loose herd.”

“I kinda got a little distracted.” Aubrey worked a claw free from her shirt as the cat on her shoulder nuzzled into her hair. “Greg showed me the new kittens, and that’s all it took for me to get off track.”

“Not to interrupt,” Jeff said, smearing ointment on my leg, “but Lacey, it’s not quite deep enough to require stitches so I’m going to wrap it up and put you on an antibiotic. I do need to give you a shot, however.”

“Do you though?” I scooped away from him. “My immune system is pretty tough.”

Jeff pinned me with a look before digging through his bag. “Now, Lacey, don’t make me stand here and tell you why you need it after all the time you spent in the rodeo. Don’t tell me you’re afraid of needles when you’ve been on the back of a 1,500-pound bull.”

My retort was cut off by raised voices as Tyler entered the yard, Greg yelling as he followed him even as Mason tried to calm him down.

“Now wait just a minute.” Tyler threw his hands in the air as he shook his blond head. “Didn’t none of y’all get my messages? Someone cut the wires on the backside of my pasture, and I lost the whole herd. I’ve been asking for help for two hours while I rounded up what head I could find, but no one would answer.”

“So why didn’t you ride back here and get help?” Greg demanded, and Tyler rounded on him.

“Oh, I’m sorry, in-between repairing the fence to keep what cattle I could in and rounding up the nearby ones, it completely slipped my mind to waste time to ride back. Especially when no one would answer their phones.”

“Everyone, calm down,” Cody interrupted. “No one was killed or seriously hurt, so let’s focus on rounding the cattle up and getting that fence fully mended. We’ll find out who’s behind this later. Might have some rustlers trying to move in. I’ll contact Blaze and give him a heads up.”

Greg’s reply was cut off by my sudden yelp of pain as Jeff jabbed me with a needle full of antibiotics. Coming over by the truck, Mason gave me a concerned look, and I waved him away.

“The point is,” Cody said, his voice much quieter now, several of his ranch hands gathering around him in a circle, “we all need to watch our backs. Rustlers are not something we take lightly, as everyone knows, and they have no limits as to what they’ll do.”

Faces grim, his employees nodded in agreement before

dispersing into groups, one led by Greg, the other by Tyler and Mason. It'd take several hours to round up the scattered cattle, and while Greg was busy doing that, Tyler and his team would be repairing the fence and looking for any traces of rustlers.

I glared at Jeff as he zipped his bag shut. "I didn't agree to a shot."

"I didn't ask." The doctor helped me to the ground.

"You two done?" Aubrey interrupted, the kittens playing at her feet. "We've got a case to solve, and standing around arguing over Lacey's fear of needles isn't helping."

"And playing with kittens is?" I lifted an eyebrow.

"It's good for my stress level." She smiled. "And I was thinking. There's no way one person was able to herd that many cattle. I know Cody is leaning toward it being rustlers, but I think it's whoever is behind the murders, and now we know there's more than one person behind them."

"Following that train of thought," Jeff slammed his truck door shut after putting his bag inside the cab, "that means no one should go anywhere alone."

"I agree." Cody rounded the front of the truck, Betsy on his heels.

I tugged on Aubrey's arm, jerking my chin toward her jeep. Henry was sprawled out next to the passenger door, Luna sniffing around his stretched-out legs.

"There's not much else we can do here," I said.

"Wait." She looked at Cody. "You told your ranch hands you think it's rustlers, yet you just agreed to my opinion it's the murderers. Which one is it?"

Crossing his arms over his chest, Cody pinned Aubrey with a hard look, sucking on his teeth. Blond hair tousled, jeans streaked with dust and some of my blood, he looked every bit the hardened cowboy he was.

"If there's anything I've learned in life, it's that you can't trust everyone. You should know that, Aubrey."



Aubrey's face darkened for a moment, and I knew her thoughts had turned to Mabel, someone she'd thought was a good friend who had turned out to be a murderer and had made several attempts to take Aubrey's life.

"One of your employees, then?" Jeff broke the silence, a kitten slowly climbing up his denim-clad leg.

"I'd hate to say it, but I wouldn't rule it out." Cody shrugged. "Sometimes people get tangled up in things they shouldn't."

The sudden chirp of his phone cut off the rest of his words, and he quickly answered it. "I'll let Blaze know," he said after a moment, eyes darting to mine. Lips twitching in what I knew was a sign of nerves, he ended the call and dialed Blaze's number while we watched.

The sudden wind that had come up blew sand into my face, and I licked my lips, grit scraping across my teeth. Aubrey shifted, her arm brushing mine, and we shared a glance.

"Blaze? It's Cody again." Cody dropped his hand to his hip, shoulders drawing inward. "The boys just found agun I dropped when Lacey and I were stampeded. The bag it was in is completely shredded, but the gun is still in good shape, and they're heading back now with it."

"God help us," Aubrey said, one hand going to her throat.

"Indeed," Jeff agreed.

"Is that the suspicious thing you were talking about?" Aubrey asked me, and when I nodded, she closed her eyes for a moment and whispered a prayer.

Finishing the call, Cody turned toward us, his lips set in a grim line.

"No one leaves until Blaze says so. He's heading out here now with Chase. I'm gonna designate the front dining room as his interview room, so why don't y'all get situated in there while I call in the boys?"

Without waiting for us to reply, Cody turned away, thumb swiping across his phone screen, and I looked at Jeff.

“I am so tired of being interviewed.” I sighed. “This is the fourth time this year.”

Aubrey gave me a sympathetic look while Jeff pursed his lips.

“Gotta wonder when it’s gonna stop,” he said. “Seems like the last six months have been nothing but death and chaos. Not exactly what I’d wanted to tend to when I moved here.”

“But there’s been beauty too,” Aubrey interjected as we walked toward the house, the dogs staying behind to tussle in the dirt, playfully yipping at each other.

Jeff looked at her curiously. “How so?”

Tripping slightly on a loose piece of gravel, Aubrey took a moment to answer, squinting up at the sky. “Blaze and I fell in love, for starters. And Brey met Kasey, and we gained him and Mitch as friends. Then Misty and Stetson finally got together, and Abby opened her toy store. And now with Cynthia getting clean and hoping to settle here in the spring and learn jewelry making with Jeni, it’s clear there’s beauty at the end of every difficult story.”

“My mom always told me if things are bad, the story isn’t over,” I said quietly, walking between the dark-haired bakery owner and the tall doctor.

“I think your mom might be right,” Jeff said after a pause, gesturing for Aubrey and me to step up onto the wraparound porch. Large green and red ornaments hung from the eaves, and I glanced at our reflections in them before reaching for the screen door handle.

Entering Cody’s large home, I was enveloped with memories of us kicking off boots covered in dust from long days in the saddle. Walking down the hall and past the kitchen, I remembered all the times Cody and I had danced in it while old country played. That was where he’d proposed the third and final time, and my heart skipped a beat as I recalled how hopeful I’d been everything was going to work out.

Everywhere I looked reminded me of the plans we'd had. From the kitchen table where we'd spent hours dreaming of kids and cattle to the Bible on the bookcase filled with both our handwriting, there were memories of what had once been. "I wonder if the gun they found is the same one that was used to kill Sarah and Dalton." Aubrey sat at the dining room table, hands clasped in front of her.

Jeff waited for me to sit next to her before taking a seat across from us, stretching his legs out beneath the table. "I wouldn't doubt it."

"I don't know." I glanced around us at the cheery yellow walls and pine flooring. "Seems too easy to me if it is." Reaching forward, I fiddled with the drooping poinsettia. Cody had a habit of overwatering his plants, and this one was clearly no different.

"It does, doesn't it?" Jeff agreed while Aubrey nodded. Her lemon perfume scent drifted past my nose and mingled with the scents of Cody's aftershave, coffee, and whatever he'd cooked for breakfast.

"Thinkin' it was planted?" Aubrey scratched the side of her nose, dark eyebrows drawn together as she thought.

"Honestly?" I scowled at my friends. "That doesn't sound right either."

"Well it's one or the other," Jeff said. "Maybe whoever did it was panicked and thought it was a good place to hide it."

"And they weren't wrong. That was an excellent place to hide something," I said. "But they weren't careful enough when they did it, because Dalton was in that pasture looking around before he was killed, and I think he put the honeysuckle in his truck on purpose, so if something happened, Cody would know to check the south pasture."

"And you two were almost killed in doing so," Aubrey murmured.

The rest of her words were cut off by the rumble of Blaze's

truck as he rolled to a stop in front of the barn. The dogs' excited yipping filled the sudden silence when he cut the engine, and shoving my chair back, I went to the door, Aubrey right behind me.

Blaze stepped up onto the porch, his tall frame casting a shadow across the screen door. Cowboy hat tilted back, his green eyes were serious, but a smile played at the corners of his mouth when he spotted Aubrey.

"I sure am gettin' tired of interviewing y'all," Blaze said, opening the door as Chase tore himself away from petting the dogs and followed him. "Chase, go ahead and start the report. They should be back anytime with that gun."

Stepping back to let him enter the foyer, I chuckled. "And we're getting tired of being interviewed."

"Agreed," Aubrey sighed, face lighting up when the sheriff brushed a kiss against her cheek before gesturing for us to go back to the dining room.

The creaking of the floor in the hallway alerted us to Cody's presence. The ranch owner's hair was still mussed from our stampede adventure, and his lips were thin. Jeans and boots covered in dust, the muscles in his arm flexed as he shook Blaze's hand before sitting down next to me.

Taking the spot at the end of the table, Blaze took his hat off and set it on the table, the brim facing up. Dark hair pressed against his head, he looked younger than his thirty-some years, but one look in his eyes let me know the former Houston detective had seen more than his share of life.

"The boys will be back any minute." Cody clasped his hands on the table in front of him, thigh brushing against mine as he twisted to look at Blaze.

"Can I ask how well you know your ranch hands?" Aubrey leaned around me to look at Cody. Quirking a dark eyebrow, the baker's blue eyes were narrowed.

"I'm sorry." Blaze interrupted Cody's answer. "I must be

confused. Thought I was the one doing the questioning here.” The look he gave Aubrey was stern, but she only rolled her eyes.

“It’s all right.” Cody cleared his throat, trying to distract the brewing argument between Blaze and Aubrey. “I know my employees quite well, and I trust every single one.”

“With your life?” Aubrey pressed. “Or just in general?”

“Aubrey,” Blaze warned, but she put her back to him, turning in her chair. Tired of having her and Cody lean around me, I scooped my chair back, Jeff giving me a sympathetic smile from across the table.

“I’d have to say in general,” Cody answered. “I trust very few people with my life.”

“So, it could have been one of your ranch hands who stampeded those cattle.” A hard gleam came to Aubrey’s eyes, and I wondered what my friend had figured out that I hadn’t.

“Um, it’s unlikely.” Cody slouched in his chair while Blaze scrubbed a hand down his face.

“Interesting.” Aubrey sat back. “Okay, Blaze, I’m done. Ask away.”

“Thanks for your permission. I’ll be sure to add you to the payroll.”

His next words were cut off by the low chirp of Cody’s phone, and he raised an eyebrow at the rancher.

“They’re back.” Cody shoved his chair away from the table.

Blaze stood. “While Chase is processing that gun, I’m gonna get a feel for who I want to interview first.” Squinting down at us, he picked his hat up and placed it on his head, giving the brim a slight tug. “Think you two can stay out of trouble while I do that?”

Once Aubrey and I promised we would, Blaze left, Cody leading the way, and Aubrey gave Jeff a grin.

“What?” The doctor quirked an eyebrow, knowing full well

Aubrey's penchant for involving herself in police business.  
"What's that look for?"

"He only mentioned Lacey and me staying out of trouble. He didn't say anything about you."

"Now, Aubrey." Jeff raised his hands in the air. "I don't think I wanna get caught up in this."

"So don't think," I told him. "We'll take the heat."

Jeff paused and averted his gaze. He appeared to struggle with wanting to stay neutral but also wanting to join us. After a moment, a small grin came to his face. "Why not?" A gleam came to his eyes.

"Oh, good." Aubrey leaned forward. "Here's what I need you to do."