



“Sarah would’ve hated this.” Dalton Hennings’ shoulder brushed mine as he gestured around the room, his voice grew raspy from unshed tears.

Nodding, I clenched my hands in my lap as we sat in the corner of Aubrey’s diner. It’d been two days since Sarah’s murder, and Brent had asked to have a small memorial service for the cosmetologist after learning she had no contact with her family.

“Tell me about it.” I shifted in my chair.

Aubrey moved around the cheerfully decorated dining room she’d rearranged so everyone could mingle. The silver tinsel she’d hung from the ceiling moved as the vent on the wall blew out warm air, and Christmas carols drifted from the radio on the counter. One hand holding a pitcher of lemonade, she offered napkins to those eating the free cupcakes displayed on the counter, her smile wide as she gave someone a hug.

“Sarah hated any form of attention, and this would have driven her crazy,” Dalton said.

Sipping my glass of water, I glanced at the cowboy next to me before setting it back on the table.

His curly black hair needed a trim, and stubble covered his normally smooth jaw. Green eyes bloodshot, the thirty-something year old cowhand's shoulders slumped forward, and his jeans sported a tear at the knee.

"I know it's such a useless thing to say, but if you need anything ..." Voice trailing off, I waited until Sarah's fiancé looked at me before finishing my thought. "I didn't know her like you did, but she was a good friend, and I was glad to have her in my life."

Eyes meeting mine, Dalton cleared his throat. "I won't need anything, but thank you for the offer. That means a lot." Hands clasped between his knees, he let out a deep sigh. "We were planning on having kids, you know. Maybe buying some land from Cody and having a small spot to call ours while I worked my way up at his ranch. Mason was gonna help me crunch all the numbers to see how soon we could manage it."

"She mentioned that." Taking another sip of my water, I blinked back tears as I gave Mason, Dalton's friend and Cody's third in command, a weak smile as he took a seat across the room. "It's not fair."

Dalton snorted. "Life never is. And when I track down who did it, they'll find out real fast how unfair life can really be."

Glancing at him, I licked my lips. "I know Blaze already interviewed you, but any idea who might be behind it? With no trail, he said it's starting to look like a senseless murder, but nothing premeditated."

"Oh, it was planned out. Have no doubt about that." Voice low, Dalton clenched his jaw. "She left that salon in Florida on bad terms, Lacey. Someone there had something to do with it, mark my words."

"But why?" I pressed, leaning closer to him, our voices low, not willing to catch anyone's attention. I had no need to worry though, as no one seemed to pay us any mind.

"Miami is many things. Absolutely bogged down with drugs

is one of them. One of Sarah's coworkers was messed up on drugs, and I think that's why she was murdered. She knew too much."

"Did you tell Blaze all this?" My eyes followed the sheriff in question as he checked his phone.

"Yes." Dalton sat back in his chair. "And he said he was looking into it, but so far, there's no proof anyone in the salon was involved with drugs."

Getting to his feet, Dalton looked down at me. "If something happens to me, promise me you'll keep searching until you find Sarah's killer."

Standing, I stared up at the tall cowboy. "You're scaring me. Nothing is going to happen to you."

Dalton leaned so close I could smell the coffee on his breath, his voice serious. "It wasn't a random murder, and you know it. If they went after her, they'll come after me, and then they'll come after you until everyone she knew is dead."

Stepping back, he lifted his chin. "Stay close to Cody. He'll keep you safe. But promise me. Promise me you won't let it go."

"I promise," I whispered, and after a moment of fierce eye contact, Dalton nodded before moving past me toward the door.

Chills ran down my spine as he disappeared into the night, and the fear I'd never see him again settled into my stomach.

Dalton wasn't wrong when he'd said Sarah had been murdered for knowing something. From the first day of moving in with me, she was hesitant to talk about her past job and refused to discuss anything but the future. Having deleted all her social media accounts and switched bank accounts immediately upon moving to Flamingo Springs, it had seemed like she was starting over, but now I wondered if my beauty school friend had been trying to disappear.

"You okay?" Sitting down next to me, Aubrey offered me a

small smile along with a pat on the knee, the diamond on her ring finger catching in the light.

Sighing, I met my friend's blue eyes. "I don't think this is as simple as it looks, Aubrey."

Frowning, the bakery owner leaned back in her chair, its metal hinges squeaking as she did so, the low murmur of those around us covering up our conversation. "What do you mean?"

"Dalton just told me he thinks he's next." Voice low, I bit my lip. "I'm really glad I'm staying with you right now and neither one of us is alone."

Glancing across the room to where her fiancé showed Jesse something on his phone, Aubrey's mouth thinned. "Did Dalton speak to Blaze about it?"

"He did. And Blaze is doing everything he can, but Dalton was pretty sure he's next."

"Hopefully, he doesn't try to borrow trouble." Getting to her feet, Aubrey gave me a concerned look. "But I'll mention it to Blaze, just in case he's right."

Thanking her, I slouched in my chair, staring at the floor in front of me. Dalton's words rang in my ears, and I couldn't forget the sincerity with which he'd spoken them.

Not much of a religious woman, my thoughts turned to God, and I sent up a small prayer, the very act feeling foreign. I hoped I wasn't the only one praying, because it seemed like things were about to get much worse.

"Lacey?"

Aubrey's whisper interrupted my restless sleep, which was full of flashbacks from the last few days. Sitting up on the couch in her living room, I blinked at her in the dim light of the Christmas tree as she crouched over me. One hand holding her phone to her chest, she pressed the other against the front of her thigh.

"Is everything okay?" Words slightly slurred, I struggled to

blink, trying to bring her into focus as I pulled my legs to my chest, the blanket scrunched up around me.

Sitting down next to me, Aubrey rubbed the back of her neck. The pink satin pajama set she wore shimmered in the colored light, and after a moment, she looked at me.

“Dalton’s dead, Lacey. They found his body about forty minutes ago just outside Cody’s ranch.”

All feelings of grogginess left, and I was suddenly cold. Hands covering my mouth, I stared at my friend. “Aubrey. No.”

She nodded. “Cody and Mason found Dalton after he sent them a blank text. He was in his truck, two tires blown out. Whoever it was killed him with a single shot to the head, just like with Sarah. Blaze isn’t sure yet, but it’s probably the same gun used to kill Sarah.”

Placing my feet on the floor, I resisted the urge to vomit. “He was right. And he told me I’d be next.” Looking at Aubrey, I could hear the panic in my voice. “Aubrey, we’re not safe.”

“We’re as safe as we can be right now,” she told me, shifting positions, a lemon scent teasing my nose as she did so. “Blaze already figured you might be a target, and this is the safest place until he gets back.” Pausing, she checked her phone, reading something before continuing. “That’s the problem with a small town—the police department is also small.”

“Two lives gone, just like that,” I said, pressing my hands to my face, eyes burning with tears as I remembered the pain in Dalton’s eyes. “Two people with dreams and hopes just gone.”

“My question is, why was Dalton outside Cody’s ranch at three in the morning?” Wrapping an arm around my shoulder, Aubrey’s voice was strained. “That means he left once everyone had gone to bed and was on his way back. What did he find between when the ranch hands went to bed and 3:00 a.m.?”

Hands shaking, I placed them in my lap, leaning against Aubrey. “More than that, who found him?”

Stifling a yawn, Aubrey leaned back against the cushions,

pulling her arm away as I curled up against the side of the couch. “You’re sure Sarah never said anything that might point Blaze in the right direction?”

Shaking my head, I wiped my hand over my eyes. “No. All she told me was things ended badly at her old salon and she needed to start over. Dalton followed her here to fix their relationship.”

“Dalton told Blaze he suspected drugs are involved,” Aubrey said, tapping her phone against her leg. “But this seems extreme.”

“Ryan was killed by his own brother all because of drugs,” I reminded her, and we fell silent as I thought about the young store owner’s death and the arrest of the mastermind behind it, local favorite, Seth. Though in the end, Seth admitted his crimes and surrendered his life to God, Ryan was still gone, and a gunshot wound had left Deputy Stetson partially paralyzed.

“People will do anything,” I whispered. “No matter the price, no matter who it hurts.” Picking up my phone and unplugging it from its charging cord, I tapped Cody’s name in my contact list. Listening to it ring, I looked over at Aubrey. “Maybe Cody can give us a few more details.”

The rest of my words were cut off when my ex-boyfriend answered his phone.

“Lacey?” His voice sounded strained.

“Are you okay?” Hands shaking, I pressed my phone against my ear, wishing I could be with Cody. Even though we’d parted ways on bad terms, I still cared for the rodeo star and hated the thought of him facing this alone.

“About as okay as you are. Lacey, whatever is going on is bad, really bad. Blaze and a few boys from a county over have been tracing Dalton’s tracks, and they can see where someone chased him for about five miles. His truck is full of bullet holes, and he was so close to the ranch before they got him. So close.”

Choking up, Cody fell silent, and for the second time that

night, I sent up a feeble prayer as Mason said something, his words muffled.

“I wish I was there.” As soon as the words left my mouth, I regretted them. Though Aubrey remained silent, the look she gave me was more than a little surprised. The bakery owner had been witness to the disaster of a relationship I’d had with Cody for the last three years and had consoled me more than once as I’d cried over the rodeo star.

“That means a lot,” Cody told me, and in the background, I could hear the low murmur of male voices and the distinct sound of a dispatch radio. “But I’m okay.”

The rest of his words were cut off when Blaze said something, and after a moment, Cody ended the call.

Looking at Aubrey, I set my phone down. “What now?”

Staring back at me, my friend’s blue eyes were narrowed. “What do you mean?”

“What do we do now?”

Leaning forward, Aubrey picked up a piece of lint from the floor, turning it over between her fingers for a moment before answering. She finally spoke, a measure of anger in her voice. “Looks to me like we’ve got two options. Either we can sit back and pray and hope for the best while Blaze does what he can, or ...” Looking back at me, she clenched her jaw. “We can still pray and also do everything we can to find out who’s behind this and ensure they pay for what they’ve done.”

Holding up a hand, she cut me off before I could even get one word out. “When Mabel attacked others after she murdered Vicki, I had a moment where I had to decide between letting fear control me and hiding, or getting involved and doing what I could to stop her before she hurt someone else.”

Unable to meet Aubrey’s harsh stare any longer, I glanced down at my hands, which were clenched together so tightly my knuckles were white.

“I didn’t use to be so timid,” I whispered. “As a teen, I was a barrel racer and the only girl in my county to join steer wrestling. Then, in my early twenties, I was a bull rider, and I almost always won. I wasn’t afraid of anything, or anyone, for that matter. Sometimes, when I see you, Aubrey, I see who I used to be. Strong, confident, and able to push forward even when afraid.”

“What changed?” Aubrey’s voice grew soft as she drew her legs up on the couch, all traces of sleepiness gone from her tone.

“Daddy died.” Sniffing, I scrubbed a hand across my eyes. “The one person who always had my back, who always cheered me on and told me I could do anything with God by my side, was gone, and I didn’t even get to say goodbye.”

“You’re afraid to get attached to anything because there’s a chance you could lose it.”

The compassion that filled my friend’s voice surprised me, and when I looked at her, she shrugged.

“I’ve been there. Coming here, opening the diner, that was easy compared to choosing to let Blaze into my heart.” Pausing, she reached out and rested a warm hand on my knee as it bounced up and down. “And letting God into my heart? Easily the scariest thing I’ve ever done.”

“So what got you to that point where you decided to just do it afraid?”

Sighing, Aubrey patted my knee before pulling her hand away. “Misty, actually. One night when she helped me repaint the kitchen, she asked me two hard questions. Had I decided I was incapable of doing something because of fear? And had I created an idea of God based on the bias of others instead of seeking Him myself?”

Tilting her head, Aubrey gave me a small smile. “Maybe, she said, I should try letting someone into my heart and see if they’re supposed to be there or not instead of never unlocking



the door and never letting them in. So, we can sit and feel helpless and afraid, or, we can get busy, still feel afraid, but actually be doing something.”

I stared at my friend for a long moment, her wise words taking me by surprise. Biting my lip, I stood, the blanket falling to the floor.

“Let’s make some coffee. We have a suspect list to start.”

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TWO HOURS LATER, I drained the last of my fourth cup of coffee. Setting the empty mug down, I stared at the list Aubrey and I had compiled on the back of her electric bill. The straight, clean lines of her handwriting stood out next to the loopy letters I’d written. The top half of the paper was filled with names, while the bottom was crammed with notes and partial thoughts, as well as a few doodles here and there.

Tapping her pen against her teeth, Aubrey squinted in the pale glow of the overhead kitchen light before picking up a slice of toast.

“Obviously, Sarah’s former boss and coworkers are the main suspects, but since Blaze is already pursuing that lead, I think we should focus on who is after that.”

“It’s terrible to even think of Dalton being the one who murdered Sarah, but I agree.”

Running my tongue over my teeth, I took a deep breath, the smell of coffee and cranberry bagels filling my nose. Looking at the list, I studied the star Aubrey had drawn next to Dalton’s name before looking back up at my friend.

“Where do we start?” Aubrey glanced at me, eyes slightly bloodshot, as she bit into a piece of toast.

“We could start with her belongings.” I slouched in my chair, toying with my pen. “But I bet Blaze took everything.”

“And he probably seized all of Dalton’s stuff too,” Aubrey mused, speaking around the toast.

“So Cody’s ranch is our best bet. Obviously, I’m new at this, but maybe we’ll find something he didn’t.”

“Not necessarily. But rather, Cody’s ranch hands will be more likely to talk to us than Blaze. Some have things they’d prefer to keep hidden, and if they get involved with Blaze, he’ll find out. They don’t have to worry about that with two meddling women.”

“Will Blaze be mad we’re doing this?” Leaning forward, I poured myself another cup of coffee from the carafe Aubrey had left on the table, steam rising into the air.

Aubrey scratched her neck. Her black hair shone in the early morning sun that peeked around the kitchen curtain.

“Honestly? Yes. But he already knows we’re gonna get involved, so as long as we don’t get in his way or do anything dangerous, he’ll let us be.”

“And if we find something?” Setting the carafe down, I picked up a bagel.

“Depends on what it is,” Aubrey replied. “But let’s worry about getting to Cody’s ranch first.” Pointing at me with the piece of toast she still held, her brow lowered. “And more than that, how you’re gonna feel being around Cody so much. The man obviously still loves you, so you need to be prepared for that.”

Shrugging, I fiddled with my bagel. “Well, I don’t feel the same, so it won’t be a problem.”

Aubrey pinned me with a stern yet compassionate look. “I’ll leave that one alone,” she said after a moment.

My stomach fluttered. Maybe I could change the subject. “Will you be able to take time away from the bakery?”

“Terri’s off the next four days from the force, and I’m certain she’d love to pick up the hours. So it won’t be a problem.”

“If only Misty was here,” I sighed, setting my bagel back down, losing my appetite. “She’s good at this stuff. I’m not.”

“You did great when we were trying to catch Royce,” Aubrey said, and we were silent for a moment, remembering the events following the murder of his brother Ryan.

Slapping the table, Aubrey stood. “Well, we’re not gonna get anything done by sitting around drinking coffee and pining over the fact Misty’s on her honeymoon and not here helping us. I’m assuming Cody’s ranch is wide awake, so let’s get dressed and head there before Blaze thinks to stop us.”

Sensing my hesitation, she leaned down and wrapped her arms around me. “We’re gonna find who did this, Lacey. I promise.”

“That’s what scares me,” I whispered, a single tear falling onto the list in front of me, the ink slowly blurring beneath it, melting the letters together. “Because when we find them, I’m going to do everything I can to make them pay.”