



SATURDAY MORNINGS were Stacy Broussard's escape, especially when life slapped her with stress. No better way to unwind from the week than to ride her quarter horse on Houston's airport trail and enjoy nature. This morning promised to be the perfect distraction from a truckload of problems, from the anniversary of the death of her sister to seeking custody of a twelve-year-old boy. She looked forward to a lift in her spirit.

She pulled her truck into the Aldine Westfield Stables. As usual she was the first one of the airport rangers to arrive. Chet's pickup wasn't parked beneath the moss-draped oak, and he normally arrived before dawn. Strange since he took his responsibilities as stable manager seriously.

Finishing her latte, she grabbed her wallet and keys and stepped outside her truck to admire an incredible purple-and-gold sunrise. Not even an early morning aircraft landing disturbed her. She walked slowly to the stables, taking in the singing robins and

the familiar humidity. The smell of horseflesh and straw tickled her nose.

“Good morning, boys and girls,” she said. “Your friendly veterinarian is on the scene.”

If anyone heard her, they’d declare her insane. Maybe so when she reflected on how much she preferred an animal’s company to a human’s. Except Whitt . . . the most fascinating twelve-year-old on the planet.

Stacy ambled past each stall until she reached Ginger’s, greeting the horses by name, touching velvety soft noses, and visibly checking to ensure they were okay. Her pets looked healthy. Spending a few extra moments with Ginger eased the knots in her shoulders that no massage could ever eliminate.

She led Ginger into the stable area and grabbed a pitchfork to tidy up her stall. A strong horse smell and a little manure on her boots never hurt anyone. Being prissy was not one of her traits. When finished, she retrieved her mare’s blanket and bridle from her tack box. Her cell phone alerted her to a text.

Sorry, Stacy. Got a sick baby. Won’t b there.

No problem. Take care of her and give a hug 4 me.

She’d miss her friend this morning. The idea of a sick child sent a pang of loss and melancholy through her—and not just for what she didn’t have. Who was she fooling? Reaching the age of thirty-five without a husband and children hadn’t been her idea of the future. A quote sailed into her mind: “*Want to make God laugh? Tell Him your plans.*” Not going there. Not today.

Checking her watch, she pondered the whereabouts of her other partner and Chet. She saddled Ginger, adjusting the cinch twice. Another text landed in her phone.

Stacy, my in-laws arrived late last night. 4got 2 call.

After a soft sigh, she typed, **Enjoy the visit.**

Airport ranger guidelines stated volunteers were to ride in pairs or threes. This kept the rider safe if a situation arose on the trail, like in the event a rider fell or encountered a difficult person.

But what choice did she have? Chet hadn't made an appearance either. Who would ever know she made a solo ride? She closed Ginger's stall door and hoisted herself into the saddle. No point in abandoning this beautiful morning because of a single guideline.

"Let's go, Miss Ginger. We'll see if we can shake up a few squirrels."

She crossed the road and made her way to the entrance of the wooded area where the north trail around IAH began. An aircraft broke the sound of chirping birds and the peacefulness that had settled upon her. Right on time. The moment she turned Ginger into the brush area, another aircraft announced its departure. So much for the quiet.

She rode the inside perimeter of the fenced area. Nothing eventful to report—not even a piece of trash. As she made her way into a clearing, a squirrel scampered across her path. A ray of morning light filtered through the trees.

Ginger reared, catching Stacy by surprise. She pulled fast on the reins. "Easy, Ginger."

Her mare crow-hopped and reared again.

What had startled her? A snake?

Then she saw it.

A pair of legs stuck out from a bush approximately fifteen feet to her right.

Her heart hammered, and Ginger had to feel it. She struggled to control her own fear and the horse beneath her while her sights were glued to the man's lower extremities.

"Hello, are you okay?" When only the quiet met her, she dismounted and moved closer to where the man lay. Eyes open and vacant. Stacy had seen scowls like this before, but not on a dead

man. He appeared to have defied his attacker in one last fit of anger before surrendering to death.

Blood pooled on his chest and trickled over his abdomen and left side. One—no, two horrible holes. The wounds looked fresh, perhaps within the last hour or so.

Terror rose, and she thought she'd be physically sick. She swung her attention in every direction, expecting someone to emerge from the tangled green terrain along the north section of Houston's Intercontinental Airport. She yanked her only permissible weapon from her jeans—a pocketknife—and opened it as if it would ward off a killer.

Why had she chosen to ride alone?

A yellow Lab snuggled near the body, her head resting on the dead man's chest. A leather leash from the dog was wrapped around the man's fingers. Five feet to the right, a blood-spattered motorcycle stood at attention. Securing the pocketknife in her palm, she lifted her phone from inside her jeans pocket and pressed in 911 while she continued to look over her shoulder.

"What is your emergency?" the operator said.

Stacy swallowed the acid rising in her stomach. The morning's heat didn't help. "I've found a dead body on the north trail that runs along the FM 1960 side of IAH. The nearest entrance is on Farrell where a sign designates the Houston Airport System equestrian security trail. My name is Stacy Broussard, and I'm an airport ranger volunteer."

"You're sure he's not alive?"

She bent beside the body and felt the side of his neck for a pulse. Nothing. "Very much so. He's lost a tremendous amount of blood from his chest and abdomen. I'm assuming gunshots."

"Do you know the man?"

"No, ma'am."

“Are you all right?”

“Shaken. I’m alone except for a dog lying next to the body. The animal’s right front paw is bleeding, and I’m a veterinarian. She’s not protective or aggressive.” Stacy drew in a ragged breath. The dog rose from the body and limped to her side, while the leash stayed fixed in the man’s hand. She rested her head on Stacy’s knee.

“You’re doing fine,” the operator said. “I’ll keep talking until the police arrive and I’m assured you’re safe. How did you happen upon the body?”

Keep your head. You can get through this. “I’m a volunteer for the airport rangers. We ride horseback to patrol the outer perimeter of IAH and report any problems to the Houston Police Department. The man is in a clearing. I checked for a pulse, and I’m sure of his condition.” She removed the leash from his hand and examined the dog’s bleeding paw, a wound that would require a few stitches. The man wasn’t as fortunate. “How long until officers arrive?”

“Only a few more minutes. You’re a brave woman.”

“I don’t feel brave. How awful for this poor man.” The victim’s eyes would haunt her for a long time, maybe forever.

“Tell me more about the airport rangers,” the operator said. “I wasn’t aware Houston had such a service.”

She’s trying to calm me, divert my attention from the blood-coated body. “We’re not highly publicized. Normally we find evidence of drugs or kids’ inappropriate behavior. Never anything like this. And we aren’t supposed to ride alone, but the other two volunteers canceled at the last minute. Our stables are close by.” Stacy avoided staring at the body and instead concentrated on the injured dog. Her collar didn’t have an ID. Had the animal been hurt while protecting her master?

“Are there any signs of a struggle?”

She peered around for what seemed like the hundredth time.

“There’s a motorcycle, a Kawasaki. I suppose the plates won’t be hard to trace.” A strange object captured her attention in the shadow of the bushes. Boots? Shoes? “I see something unusual, but I can’t make out what it is.”

“Be careful. The police can investigate it.”

No need to caution her. She was already frightened out of her wits. Sirens grew closer. “I hear them.”

“Stay where you are until the officers arrive. They’ll take over the situation.”

“I’m sorry, but it might be another body or someone hurt. I have to see if someone needs help.” She bolstered her courage and moved toward the questionable object. The dog followed her to the edge of the clearing, where a type of drone with four propellers was lodged in a fallen tree branch and bushes. A churning panic swirled through her. Had the dead man stopped a potential crime of blinding a pilot? “What happened here?” she whispered, more to herself than the 911 operator.

“Talk to me, Stacy.”

“I’ve found a drone. A clear dome is attached underneath, and it’s pointed toward the northwest end of the runway.”