

ONE

Running

“There never is a bad time for a margarita, is there?” Pam Walker asked Brooke as she mindlessly swirled her glass. They were watching the comings and goings along Main Street from their sidewalk table in front of The Green Chile.

Brooke Turner adjusted the dazzling yellow and green umbrella that billowed overhead. “If the margaritas are so good, why haven’t you even taken a sip?”

Pam grinned. “Because I’m one drink away from becoming a blabbering idiot on the podium. I don’t think anyone wants to see that.”

“So you’re worried that Biscuit is going to win the debate?” Brooke teased.

“Oh, he’s such a good dog, isn’t he? I’d even vote for him. But seriously, some name was added to the ballot yesterday, and I don’t think it’s another golden retriever.”

Pam leaned back in her chair, closed her eyes and tilted her face to the sun. “Do you ever have those dreams where you’re naked standing in front of your locker in high school?”

“Yeah, I love those,” Brooke said.

Pam rolled her eyes. “Of course you would. And if I didn’t know you so well, I’d be very worried about that comment,” Pam said. “But I had one last night.”

“You’re just nervous about speaking in front of a crowd.”

“Yeah, and look at them all!” Pam said, pointing toward the park. The crowd that had gathered for Lumby’s first mayoral debate had grown larger than the park could contain, and had flowed out into the street, all but stopping traffic in both directions.

“Hovering like vultures.”

“Pam! They’re all your friends. You and Mark are the two most popular people in town.”

She ran her hand through her hair. “I just don’t think this is a good idea.”

“There’s no one who would be a better mayor for our town than you,” Brooke said.

“Gabrielle?”

“Great chef, but no,” Brooke quickly replied.

Pam took a small swig of her drink. “Well, if nothing else, the amount of tequila in this margarita proves how much she loves us and wants us all to be happy.”

Brooke was intently staring at something across the street. “Well, she certainly looks like she is.”

Pam looked over at Brooke. “What do you mean?”

Brooke discreetly pointed toward the library, where Gabrielle Beezer was walking with an incredibly handsome man who definitely was not her husband. She was waving one arm about as she laughed. Her other hand rested comfortably on his arm.

“Stunning,” Pam said.

“Shocking,” Brooke added.

Brooke tilted the umbrella back to improve their line of sight. It was a rare occasion when such an eye-catching stranger walked down Main Street, they didn’t want to miss any details. The man was at least six feet four, and had a long, loose stride that Gabrielle struggled to keep up with. His starch-pressed, black T-shirt was tight enough to show washboard abs and sculpted shoulders and biceps, but not so tight to be offensive or appear narcissistic. His jacket hung loosely over his shoulder, hooked on one finger.

Mark stepped out of the restaurant. “Okay, the flyers are up. What’s next, honey?”

Pam didn’t hear him.

“What are you guys looking at?” Mark focused on where both women were looking.

“Why does he look so familiar?” Pam asked.

“Because he’s gorgeous and you’re just wishing he was one of your college dates,” Brooke teased.

“Wow,” Mark said. “That’s the last person I would expect to see in Lumby.”

Pam finally realized Mark was standing behind her. “Who is he?”

Mark scratched his head. “I can’t remember his name, but I think he won the decathlon gold medal in the late nineties...maybe at the Atlanta Olympics. He was on the Wheaties box forever.”

Pam slapped Brooke’s arm with the back of her hand. “That’s where we’ve seen him! In bed on Sunday mornings.”

“Don’t you wish,” Brooke chided.

Pam immediately blushed. “No, you know what I mean—when Mark brings me breakfast.”

Joshua called out from the bookstore next door. “Mark! I could use your help over here.”

Mark waved back to Joshua before leaning over and kissing his wife. “I’ll see you in the park in twenty minutes,” he whispered. “Don’t be nervous, and don’t get plastered beforehand. This may be a shoo-in, but lots of folks are counting on you.”

Pam took another sip of her margarita. “Please don’t remind me.”

Just then a commotion from down the street caught everyone's attention. Loud voices could be heard coming from the crowd in front of the park. Suddenly, the mass of people began to divide, scrambling in two opposite directions.

Pam gawked at the sight. "It's like the parting of the Red Sea."

A Clydesdale the size of a small school bus trotted into the clearing, heading straight down Main Street. Stranger still was what was riding the mare: a true knight in shining armor. Fully geared in medieval regalia, the only things it was missing were a lance and a fair maiden.

But the armor wasn't holding together particularly well. The horse was of such enormous proportions that with each thunderous step it took, a piece of armor fell off and immediately became sixteenth-century street litter. First the knee coverings and elbow joints broke off, and then metal arms and headgear went flying everywhere. When a piece of armor would hit the mare's flanks, she shied left or right, losing the gear all the more.

The crowd collectively gasped in preparation for the unsightly accident that would surely follow.

But the Clydesdale did what the breed was known for: she put her head down and shouldered forward. Likewise, the brave knight continued in the face of adversity.

When the Clydesdale cleared the crowd, its pace quickened, and that's when odd turned to bizarre, even for Lumby. At a small canter, the vibration shook off both the helmet and the chest guard. Underneath was not some poor lad looking for attention, but instead, a full-sized human skeleton.

Only then did Pam notice that the legs were duct-taped to the cinch of the saddle that wrapped under the horse's underbelly, and its hands taped to the reins. To her surprise, the mannequin knight actually had very good riding posture.

A teenage boy was running behind the horse as fast as he could, but was clearly losing ground.

Within seconds the horse was almost to the bookstore, where Mark and Joshua were taping up posters.

"Mark! Stop the horse!" Pam yelled.

Mark spun around, his foot catching the leg of the ladder Joshua was on, forcing Joshua to grab hold of the awning and hang on for dear life. Mark bolted toward the horse and heroically dove into the air, grabbing the dummy around the waist as if he was making a football tackle. Both Mark and the dummy slid partway down the mare's side, so the dummy was perpendicular to the ground. Mark lost his grip, and in a last-ditch effort to hold on, grabbed the dummy's head, which separated from the body.

"Ew," Pam exhaled.

Now used to the commotion on its back, the Clydesdale paid little attention and never missed a beat, continuing to canter down Main Street, leaving Mark in the dust waving the skull in the air.

"He looks a little like Hamlet," Brooke commented.

Suddenly, the stranger who had been with Gabrielle ran out into the street and waved his jacket in front of the horse. "Whoa!" he said in a deep, commanding voice.

The horse came to an abrupt stop.

A few seconds later, the boy caught up and grabbed the reins.

“Thanks, mister,” the kid said. “She would have run all the way to Franklin.”

“She looks like a good horse,” the man said, slapping the thick neck of the mare.

“Perhaps she shouldn’t be the butt of your pranks next time.”

“Yeah, but I won the bet,” the boy said, turning around to see if his cohorts were nearby.

Mark walked up to them and handed the youngster the skull. “I’m assuming this yours as well?”

“Nice tackle, Mr. Walker,” the boy said before leading the horse away.

Mark shook the stranger’s hand and they spoke briefly before Gabrielle led them over to The Green Chile.

Mark was more excited than usual. “Pam, you’ll never believe who this is!”

Joshua called out, waving from on top of the awning. “Mark! The ladder!”

“Oh, got to go,” Mark said, dashing to Joshua’s rescue.

Pam stood. “Hi, I’m Pam Walker.”

“An honor to finally meet you,” the man said.

His voice was so smooth and deep one could get lost in it forever, Pam thought.

“I understand the privilege is mine,” Pam said. “And thanks for taking care of the horse.”

“It was nothing at all,” the man said, shaking out his jacket.

“You underrate yourself, Duke,” Gabrielle said.

Pam wrinkled her brow, confused. “Duke?”

“Yes, Pam. This is Duke Blackstone,” Gabrielle chirped in an unnaturally high voice.

Pam narrowed her eyes, taking a better look at the stranger. “So you’re the one who’s added his name to the ballot?” she said, forcing a smile. “I didn’t know you were a resident of Lumby.”

“I own a small place west of town on Cherry Creek.”

Pam thought for a minute. “*You* bought the old Kremmer place last month?”

The man smiled and nodded.

Brooke sensed that Pam had been caught off guard, and immediately introduced herself. “I’m sure you’ll bring a lot to the debate. The other two candidates have pretty weak platforms.”

Duke laughed. “I can understand why—a dog and the deceased incumbent.” His smile was utterly engaging. “Well, I’d love to talk with all of you some more, but let me go and offer Mark some help.” Before leaving, he turned to Gabrielle. “I just wanted to thank you for last night,” he said graciously, kissing her on the cheek. “I could not have asked for a better hostess.”

“It was my pleasure,” Gabrielle gushed. “We’ll see you again tomorrow night.”

Pam’s jaw dropped even farther.

Gabrielle grabbed a chair as the women watched Duke saunter away.

“How can any man be that good-looking?” Brooke asked before taking another gulp of her margarita.

“He’s actually nicer than he is good-looking,” Gabrielle said.

Pam sat down slowly without taking her eyes off Duke Blackstone. “But...don’t you think it’s odd that Mr. Blackstone shows up out of nowhere, quietly buys a

dilapidated, uninhabitable shack, becomes a Lumby resident overnight, and then throws his hat into the ring for town mayor?”

“He said he’s renting a home in Rocky Mount,” Gabrielle said.

Pam glanced over at Gabrielle. “How do you know him?”

“I don’t really,” she replied. “He brought his campaign staff to my restaurant for dinner last night.”

“He has a *staff*?”

“Only four or five men,” Gabrielle said.

“To run for town mayor?” Pam asked in disbelief. Either she had radically underestimated the responsibilities of the position or she’d drastically misjudged the likelihood of her winning the position. Or both.

Mark called over to Pam. “Honey, you’re up.”

Gabrielle grabbed Pam’s arm. “Be gentle with Duke,” she asked.

Pam shuffled back a step. “*Gentle*?”

“He said he’s new to small-town politics,” Gabrielle explained. “And he really doesn’t know anything about Lumby.”

Pam laughed. “Don’t worry. He’s so charming, I’m sure he’ll be just fine.”