

BREAKFAST
AT THE
HONEY CREEK
CAFÉ

JODI THOMAS



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For Tom
I'll meet you at the Gate

Prologue

Wednesday, May 23

Mayor Piper Jane Mackenzie

The mayor of Honey Creek, Texas, walked slowly down the long hallway to her office on the fourth floor of city hall. It wasn't dawn yet and she already felt a heavy weight bearing down on her slender shoulders.

This may be her last day in public office. It may be the end of the Mackenzies occupying the mayor's seat since the building had been built over fifty years ago.

And she'd be the one at fault.

As she turned the key to the private entrance to her office, she glanced at her grandfather's picture. "Morning, Granddad." No one would hear her this early, she may as well talk to him. "I screwed up bad this time. You know how you always told me that sometimes doing nothing, saying nothing, can get you in more trouble than doing or saying the wrong thing?" Piper

patted her chest. “Well, that’s me. I didn’t lie, but I wasn’t honest either.”

Her granddad seemed to be smiling back just at her.

Piper touched the glass as if brushing his beard. “I wouldn’t mind if you sent in the cavalry about now.”

She heard the elevator door opening and rushed into her office. The last thing she wanted to do was talk to the press.

As she closed the door, she noticed a square white envelope on the floor. Someone must have shoved it under the door—the private door that few people ever noticed tucked away in the corner.

Before she could turn on the light, the phone rang. Piper dropped the envelope and moved to the window. The first hint of dawn bloomed to the east, but the town was still only shadows.

The phone rang again.

Piper didn’t move. She needed time to think. Fear crawled up her spine.

Her pretend boyfriend’s body was probably floating down the Brazos River by now, and somehow everyone thought she had all the answers.

Kicking off her four-inch heels, Piper seriously thought of hiding under the desk, but she was a Mackenzie and Mackenzies stand their ground.

As light moved through the windows, she picked up the mail and slit it open.

One note folded once. Two words written inside.

SAY NOTHING.

Chapter 1

Friday, May 25

Dawn

Sam

Samuel Randall Cassidy pulled his dusty blue Audi into the rest stop parking lot forty miles from Honey Creek, Texas. It was time to clean up and step into the parallel life he might have lived if he'd turned down another road after college.

He laughed softly to himself and wondered if the Devil was joining him in the joke of thinking Sam had finally gone mad. Five years of seminary school, then ten years in the army flying, and another five as a firefighter in the Rocky Mountains. He'd been called a student, a captain, and a smoke jumper, but now he was stepping into a new identity . . . a preacher.

He'd spent almost half his life shifting, just being one of many. Moving among the crowds, never standing out, and now he was headed toward a little town where everyone would be inspecting his every word and action.

At thirty-eight, he knew it was impossible to rewind his life and go back to a simpler time. If he could truly look into his childhood, he might discover that it wasn't as peaceful as he remembered. But he had to try. His life, his sanity depended on it. He'd been invisible so long he'd lost himself. It was time to go back to his roots and see what might have been.

He'd passed through this part of Texas several times as a kid. His father had even preached a revival a few times in the small town he was headed for.

As he walked across the deserted parking lot, a gray cloud floated over the pale sunrise. Humidity peppered with dust, he thought. The kind of dawn no one would want as the backdrop for a selfie. Not that he had anyone to send a picture to. He used his phone mostly for directions and weather reports.

Today, though, there were no directions helping him travel down the path he hadn't taken that fall after school.

Sam had been born in Texas, spent most of his youth here moving from school to school, following his dad's work. But Texas wasn't home.

Nowhere had ever been. Even the small farm his parents went to between jobs wasn't home. It was just a little house his mother had inherited because no other relative wanted it. When Sam inherited the place, he'd sold it to fund his last year of school and a trip to Europe after graduation.

Sam lifted his old suitcase shoulder high to stretch his muscles, then walked into the public restroom designed to look like one in a turn-of-the-century train station—lean, steel and porcelain, empty. The place was about as welcoming as disinfectant. A line of stalls. A line of sinks. A line of tall windows.

He pulled off his T-shirt and hung it on a stall door, then opened his shaving kit and began removing his short beard.

After that, he changed into a funeral black suit that matched his hair, pulling the price tags off as he went.

He felt as if he were traveling backward through the layers of his life. He couldn't tell whether he was running toward or away from his destiny.

Fate had chosen his path, and he'd been fool enough to follow. A letter from a small church in a place called Honey Creek traveled though half a dozen former addresses to reach him. Sam knew before he opened the tattered letter that the mail was meant for his father. Samuel Cassidy, Sr., had been dead more than a dozen years, but the churches he'd preached in still wrote asking him to return to fill in for a sick pastor or stay long enough for them to find another shepherd.

For once Sam didn't toss out the letter meant for his father. Instead, he decided to take the two-week calling. He might not have been in a church since his folks died, but he grew up on Sunday school crackers and funeral food leftovers.

One thing was certain. This assignment would pull him back to the past and maybe help him remember a period when the world was calm. This time he wouldn't be flying for the army or fighting forest fires. This time, he'd be reliving the life of a man he'd never understood.

Just out of high school, he'd boarded a plane to head for seminary with his parents waving proudly. He'd felt the whisper of a calling to preach, to be a man of the cloth like his father and grandfather, or maybe become a missionary in a land he'd never heard about. Sam longed to see the world and this might be his ticket.

Five years later, three months after he graduated, he'd stepped on another plane after swearing in at the army recruiting office in Dallas. No one stood waving or wishing him well that time. But the calling to serve his country had been loud after the bombing of the London Tube he'd witnessed that summer.

After a few tours in the army, he left his uniform behind and drifted. No callings spoke to him. He'd crossed the country,

stopping now and then to rest. By the time he'd finally stopped wandering, his hair was over his collar and his clothes rags. Sam decided to be a chameleon moving with the seasons. With no family, no roots, he just blew with the wind.

Until he met April Raine in San Diego. Sunshine wearing a ponytail and honey brown eyes that saw him completely, she became his home, his heart. He told everyone that he loved her from the moment they met.

He took a job as a firefighter their first summer when wild fires seemed rampant in California. Before long he was boarding planes to fly everywhere he was needed. He loved the rush of excitement when he parachuted behind the fire line.

Sam was a born leader, and his skills as a pilot made him even more valuable to the team.

April had said what he did was a gift. The world needed men like him.

He flew on a moment's notice fighting wherever he was needed, but it seemed every time Sam left, he missed her more. When the mission was over, he'd go wherever she was. April had been a travel writer whose home was on wheels. When he wasn't working, he was seeing the world through her eyes.

Buttoning his clerical collar, Sam gazed into the tin mirror wondering what had happened to the man who used to laugh. The man who took gulps of life. The Sam who camped out with April beneath the stars. The wild man who'd fallen in love with a free spirit and howled at the moon just to make her laugh.

In his reflection now, he saw his father, a traveling preacher who never had his own church. But Sam saw no peace in his own dark eyes.

"Hi, Pop." Sam raised one side of his smile like his dad always did. "I'm finally going to use that divinity degree you wanted me to have."

Silence. The hint of a smile vanished.

Sam swore under his breath and continued his transforma-

tion. He combed his black hair back, letting the widow's peak show. April would have hated it this way. His California girl would tell him he looked "New York slick." Then she'd tease him and say preachers' sons never learn to look sexy.

He stood perfectly still for a moment as if waiting for her to dig her fingers into his hair and mess it up. "Let it curl," she'd say, laughing.

April had loved him and she never seemed to need more than what he gave. When they were together, the world was theirs. Tomorrow didn't matter as long as they had today.

But she hadn't been waiting for him the last time he'd come home from an assignment. When he finally found her RV parked at a police lot, she'd been dead two weeks and no one had told him.

"She wasn't your wife," one clerk of the station said. "You'd listed no living relatives, Cassidy. I heard you say your folks died when you were in college, so we had no one to notify."

April had died without anyone knowing she was his world, his anchor. The doctor who checked her said her heart just stopped beating. Sam had taken the words calmly, but he felt his heart had stopped beating too.

He'd said he would survive, he'd heal, he'd march on, but in truth, a big piece of him died that day—the most important part. He didn't know how to be anything without her. He couldn't be a fighter in a world he didn't care to live in. He'd lost his mate and had no plans of ever allowing anyone close again.

Samuel Cassidy continued to work, but mentally he was drifting. Never staying one place long enough to get to know anyone. His only goal was to survive until the next fire came in. He was no longer on a mission to see new things, no longer counting days before he'd be home with April. All the fight, all the passion, all the peace he'd known was gone.

Then the letter came. A chance to go back in time for a while.

The offer for Samuel Cassidy to fill in at a church in Honey Creek might be just what he needed. A change. A place where he could hide out from his life.

He stared at his reflection in the tin mirror. He could play the part of a preacher.

The metal door on the public restroom rattled as if a strong wind blew past.

A man in scrubs and a lab coat stormed in carrying two plastic bags. He glanced at Sam, then disappeared into the last stall.

Sam watched as the lab jacket was tossed over the door. The guy was cussing as he bumped against the walls of the stall. Scrubs, bloody in places, were thrown over the door next. Then plastic shoes slid out from under the door as if trying to escape.

More banging against the walls.

Just as Sam was shoving his old clothes into the suitcase, the man burst out of the stall. The stranger now wore jeans and a western shirt. Worn boots had replaced the hospital shoes. He turned and collected the clothes and shoes he'd discarded, dropping them into the trash bin. Then he pulled a Stetson from a bag, crammed it down over his ginger-colored curly hair, and turned toward Sam.

For a moment they looked at each other. Sam could see now that he was a few years younger than he was, a few inches shorter, but still over six feet.

Just as the man seemed about to speak, a dozen Boy Scouts suddenly invaded the restroom. Talking, laughing, pushing one another, they formed a line in front of the five stalls.

The cowboy nodded his head once at Sam. "Guess we'd better head 'em up. . . ."

Sam grinned, realizing he'd just met a chameleon like himself. "And move 'em out."

The man headed out the door and Sam turned back to the mirror and his own journey. The mirror reflected a stranger's face now. No longer his father's and not quite his. He'd been

trying to save the world in one way or the other for half his life, but no more. He'd take this trip back in time; then he'd bury all the past. His childhood, his parents' deaths, memories of April.

He was mad at God.

Not because He took April, but because God had left him behind.

Chapter 2

Friday morning

Colby

Colby McBride watched the man he'd seen in the restroom walking toward an Audi. He had the stride of a man who'd once marched, Colby thought. Now, the guy looked like a preacher going to a funeral, not the type who'd give a hitchhiker a ride.

There was something about him Colby couldn't peg. A priest maybe who didn't seem to fit into his clothes. Or maybe it was his skin that he didn't fit into. He was a tall man, 6'4", maybe 6'5", with black hair slicked back and eyes that missed little. The man of the cloth was drinking in every detail of his surroundings.

Colby sensed there was more to this preacher than met the eye. Colby could usually spot the ones who weren't what they seemed—a drug pusher or someone who drove stolen cars out

of state. Private investigator or undercover feds tracking movements on the interstate. They moved easy, almost invisible, and they watched their surroundings as if their life depended on it.

As a state trooper, Colby McBride had seen all types in the ten years he'd worked the Texas highways. If he'd been in uniform he might have pulled this guy over or maybe followed him a few miles down the road.

But then, Colby was always skeptical of strangers, and even sometimes friends. He caught himself looking for the criminal in everyone he passed. Maybe he was wrong this time, but he would swear this easygoing man in black was hiding something.

Colby laughed to himself. Get in line, he almost said aloud. Who isn't hiding something these days? People were rarely what they seemed, and today that included him.

He hadn't felt properly dressed in a decade if he wasn't wearing a badge and his service weapon. But today—no badge, no patrol car, no backup. Now was Colby's turn to pretend to be someone else. For the first time in his career he'd be investigating *off* the record.

Texas Ranger Max Mackenzie had asked Colby to go into Honey Creek without calling too much attention to himself. Check the place out. Find out what was going on. Keep any scandal away from the Mackenzie family and especially his sister, who just happened to be the town's mayor.

And damn if the assignment wasn't so intriguing Colby had to break out of the hospital to make it to Honey Creek as fast as possible. Doing this favor for the Mackenzie family would be great for his career. He borrowed scrubs and a coat, had a friend pick him up at the back door of the hospital, and headed straight to his unofficial assignment.

The friend dropped him off at the nearest rest stop to Honey Creek, and Colby planned to hitchhike into town before noon. He'd cowboied enough in his college days to drift into town

and fit in. The friend had provided clothes, and Colby had made up a great cover story.

Max had told him over the phone to spend the day mingling with the locals. Mingle? Colby had no idea how to mingle. It wasn't in his skill set. But he'd come up with something.

Now, with no sleep and little money, Colby walked toward a line of trucks on the back lot of the rest stop. They'd probably stopped to rest until full light. Places like this were quieter and sometimes safer than the big truck stops near towns.

The driver of the third rig was walking around his cattle truck. He wasn't tall, but he was wide, with a beard like a scruffy Santa Claus.

Colby kept his hat low. "Mornin'," he said. "Any chance a cowhand could catch a ride. I got a girl waiting for me in Honey Creek. My pickup broke down a few miles back and I'm not sure how long my girl will wait."

The truck driver looked him up and down.

"I got kin in Honey Creek who'll help me tow the truck in later." Colby shrugged. "It's only forty miles."

"I'm not supposed to take on passengers, but if you're stranded, I could take you a few miles. I'd enjoy the company."

Colby nodded his thanks. If he ever stopped this truck on the highway for a driving violation, he'd return the favor.

Colby had made two phone calls, in order to disappear from his real life. One to ask for a few vacation days and another to his neighbor asking him to pick up the mail.

Max had made it clear that no one was to know what Colby would be doing in Honey Creek. He even hinted that he'd owe Colby a big favor for doing this. Most of the Mackenzie family were in politics. They couldn't afford any rumors.

Apparently, the mayor and little sister of Max, Piper Jane Mackenzie, had a fiancé who had disappeared. The town sheriff of Honey Creek suggested to the nearest news station that this could be foul play. It had been a back-page news note until the

fiancé's car was found floating in the Brazos River just outside of town. No fiancé. No body.

Colby thought about turning off his personal phone. The only one who ever called him was his ex-girlfriend, and she just dialed now and then to remind him that she never wanted to hear from him again.

But then Max might call. He was collecting info from official sources and promised to send along anything significant

This would be Colby's first private job. An "off the books" case. A missing person's case if he was lucky, a murder maybe, who knows. Colby hadn't fully believed it was real until Mayor Piper Mackenzie called an hour ago and said he needed to start digging fast and report in to her at dusk. She sounded as bossy as her brother.

She'd had an *all business* kind of voice, like her idea of a fun time would be guessing how many paper clips are in the jar on her desk. Maybe the fiancé just got bored and left, and she was up before dawn trying to find him.

Colby could picture her just from her voice. Flat shoes, shapeless suit with padded shoulders to make her look like a general, hair short or tied back so tight her eyes bugged out. Glasses, definitely glasses. She'd expect his work to be the best, and he planned to do just that. An assignment like this could move him up the ranks faster and a connection with a mayor, rumored to be on her way up in politics, couldn't hurt. Who knows, she might be governor in ten years and he'd be guarding her as the Texas Ranger he'd always planned to be from the day he signed on with the Texas Highway Patrol.

Problem was, her call came in before dawn while he was getting stitched up from a really bad evening at work.

Don't bleed on the mayor, Colby reminded himself as the truck driver pulled into the postcard-cute town of Honey Creek.

Chapter 3

Friday late afternoon

Piper

Mayor Piper Jane Mackenzie sat in her cramped office on the fourth floor of city hall, looking out over the town square. She'd barely slept in three days, but by dusk she'd meet the man who would help her get to the truth.

Her nitwit *almost* fiancé was still missing. Which wasn't a crime but could mean trouble for both their families. She'd known Boone Buchanan all her life. His grandfather and her grandfather had been friends and political allies. People had teased her since she was a kid that she'd grow up and marry him. She'd be the governor's wife and he'd be the governor. Only Piper wanted to be the governor.

Boone was handsome, impulsive, fun, and popular all the way through law school, while she was plain, shy, and bookish.

But Boone also had a wild streak. Life was a game to him

and he had to win. Their engagement was just a card up his sleeve that he'd played for fun or to get something he wanted. She wouldn't be surprised if he walked into town with some tall tale.

The truth and Boone had never been more than passing strangers. She'd let him win at games when they were kids, she'd listened to his rants when they were teenagers, and she'd gone with him to a few political rallies where he rarely talked to her.

Six months ago, at a big fund-raiser for her father, Boone had seemed the perfect date. He lived in Austin. He was rich and handsome. His family was powerful. He was a young partner in his uncle's law firm. Surely he'd outgrown his pranks and temper tantrums.

She talked about her work and he acted like he cared. He talked about himself and she made an effort to act like she was listening. Best of all, there were no sparks between them. She didn't have time for romance in her life and she wasn't his type.

Boone liked the press he got with a mayor on his arm. After their first fund-raiser, he offered to accompany her again, getting friendly when there was a camera around.

Last month someone, probably Boone, leaked a rumor that he and Piper were engaged. Maybe he wanted a little more attention.

She should have shot the rumor down, but Piper didn't see any harm in it. It was just a rumor. It'd die on its own and Boone would get the notice he craved. Just what the youngest in the firm thought he needed to build his base in the law office.

He never visited her in Honey Creek, but when Piper was in Austin, Boone was always showing up, hanging around, even saying things like "we think" as if she and Boone had somehow locked brains.

It embarrassed her, but Piper was just shy enough not to want to cause a scene.

But then he vanished after visiting half the bars in the county

Tuesday night, and the rumor of their engagement seemed to become a fact. His red limited edition BMW was found floating in the Brazos River, and no one had seen Boone since. She'd heard that he used the valley around Honey Creek to let loose, though he'd never mentioned it to her. He might not be able to get drunk in Austin without some reporter snapping a shot, but here no one noticed, or cared.

To make matters worse, the county sheriff, LeRoy Hayes, had also disappeared. Then the deputies seemed to have gone deaf, mute, and blind, and the dispatcher declared she'd only answered the 911 calls. Everyone in town believed the deputies and the dispatcher knew something, but they were loyal to the boss.

As stories flew as fast as the north wind, Piper could almost see her career crumbling around her. Part of her felt like she was standing with the men at the Alamo. She might not win, but she wouldn't go down without a fight.

In whispers people began to talk. Some said she killed Boone because he cheated on her. Some said her father had him kidnapped just at the thought of Boone becoming his son-in-law. Autumn, her secretary, suggested that he killed himself. Piper had even heard that the beauty shop talk thought Boone hadn't been near town. His car could have been stolen and taken for a joy ride by someone who fit his description.

One old vet at the coffee shop said Boone wanted to step away from the world. Boone had served three years in the army. That'll mess with your mind. Piper didn't bother to point out that Boone was messed up long before he went in the army.

Piper couldn't deny the engagement now. She'd look like a fool. All she could do was wait until he showed up. She'd act relieved to see him, then vanish from the press. A few months later, she'd quietly break up on the first busy news day.

Piper decided not to dwell on the stories. Boone wouldn't have killed himself. He loved himself too much. Her father

would never kill a future son-in-law. If he'd been turned that way, he would have murdered the guy she had married in law school and divorced less than a year later.

Dating Boone had ended some talk about her being the only mayor with a stone-cold heart. All she wanted to do was serve the people and keep her private life private. Which shouldn't be too hard since she had no private life.

Looking out on the town she loved, Piper tried to think of a way out of this mess. Of course, she could call a press conference, but that might just draw more attention. More questions.

Yesterday she'd finally called Max, not because he was a Texas Ranger, but because he was her big brother. He'd always thought his job was to tell her what to do and he didn't hesitate. He'd said simply that first they had to get the facts, and he'd send someone down to do just that. Then he'd hire a researcher in Austin to dig through every detail of Boone's life. Boone wasn't the squeaky-clean guy his family would like everyone to believe. There were whispers of money trouble in Boone's past. Gambling debts.

Max's suggestions seemed like a plan. Not much of a plan, but at least she'd be doing something besides pacing.

A hundred-year-old clock on the wall behind her chimed five times. Over the three years she'd been mayor, she'd grown so used to the sound she rarely noticed it. But now it reminded her that another day had gone by. Her career, her life seemed to be ticking away.

"You need anything else before I go?" Autumn yelled from her desk in the next room. It never occurred to the secretary to use the phone or step into the doorway to ask her question.

"No, thanks," Piper answered, feeling as always like she had no control over her one real employee. There were six more people working at city hall and several departments who reported to the mayor's office, but they all seemed to answer to Autumn.

And Autumn was loving all this drama. Piper overheard her tell someone that she felt like she was living in a soap opera.

Piper and Autumn O'Toole had graduated from high school together fifteen years ago. While Piper went away to college and then law school, Autumn married right out of high school and hired on as a secretary at the courthouse. She'd worked for the county courts and most of the city offices that filled the top two floors. By the time Piper was elected mayor, her former friend thought she ran the town. As far as the secretary was concerned, Piper was just passing through, while Autumn planned to stay embedded at her government job until retirement.

Piper waited for her once best friend to leave. She hadn't told Autumn about the man who had an appointment after dark. If she'd done that, half the town would know by dawn tomorrow. The city secretary's Rolodex mind for gossip was both a blessing and a curse.

Piper heard the click of the file cabinet. The rattle of blinds dropping. The bottom *purse* drawer opening, then slamming shut. All sounded like the last few ticks of a workday clock. At exactly five p.m. Autumn would open the door leading to the hallway and say a good night to her office.

Piper used to think the farewell was directed at her, but the secretary never waited for a reply. Work was over. Time to get home to her husband and kids, where she'd spend all evening talking about what happened in the courtrooms downstairs and the city offices upstairs. Then she'd return to the office at exactly eight o'clock the next morning, and begin to fill every empty moment talking about how great her children were or complaining about her husband, who apparently hadn't done anything right since the day after they married. His only saving grace was that he wasn't as bad as her sister's husband. Autumn reported on him regularly.

Kicking off her heels, Piper leaned back in her worn leather

chair that still smelled a bit like her granddad's pipe, and enjoyed the now-silent office. Public service was in her blood. Her grandfather had been mayor for thirty-seven years. Her dad was a state senator. Both her brothers were Texas Rangers.

She had a proud heritage, but she knew she didn't belong in this chair. She agreed with Autumn. She was just passing through. Four or five years from now she planned to move to Dallas or Houston and let someone else take over the worries of Honey Creek. She wasn't made for a small town, not in her dreams anyway. But this place flowed through her veins, slow and steady as the Brazos River wound around the city limits. Low as the wind blowing down the valley whispering of legends of outlaws and ghosts.

Her heart was here in Honey Creek even if her dreams were in the big city.

Old-timers claimed the town was a hideout back when Texas was its own nation. Over the years misfits seemed to gravitate to the place. A small band of bigamists in the 1800s. Hippies in the 1960s. Survivalists settled on farms to the north of town ten years ago. They stayed just long enough to realize that there was no Starbucks within fifty miles. A coven of witches reportedly ran the local bakery. No one knew for sure, but they made great scones.

Bonnie and Clyde were even said to have stopped for gas. But few believed it. The people of Honey Creek had one talent in spades . . . imagination. They treasured it.

Piper looked over the rolling land just beyond the town's business lights. Small farms were nestled between clusters of cottages separated by roads as rambling as streams feeding into the highway. Fishing shacks were scattered along the river's banks with dock lights already blinking. Now and then a trailer park caught the last light of day and reflected it back to her. She smiled at her view from her office window. The beauty of her town might haunt dreams with legends and stories that floated

on the evening breeze, but it was also a place where ideas thrived.

Without much thought she tiptoed to the hallway and bought her fourth canned Coke of the day from a machine so old it shivered loud enough to wake the janitor. When Piper went back to her office, she didn't bother to lock the door. She read the incoming mail stacked almost a foot high as she waited.

As time passed she moved to her computer and pulled up every newsfeed she could find about what was happening in her hometown. Boone's disappearance had made a dozen papers today. She might be sitting on ground zero, but the press seemed to have all the facts. Some true. Some not.

The good news was that the number of articles was down from yesterday. The bad news, she had a feeling everyone in the state was laying odds on what really happened to Boone Buchanan. Some said he was afraid to break up with the mayor, so he killed himself. Or was so drunk he thought the river was a winding road. Or, the rich lawyer wanted better than a mousy small-town mayor, so he faked his death. Maybe her family had had him killed because he knew one too many secrets about the Mackenzies. One neighbor of Boone's in Austin even suggested his own family sent him somewhere because he had embarrassed them one too many times.

One reporter hinted that dumb lawyers, even good-looking ones, just don't make it in the capital city.

Her granddad was probably cussing in his casket. He'd left her to take care of the town, not to become a storyline for one of the TV crime shows.

Piper stood and began to pace. She needed to have her strategy ready when the specialist her brother had hired showed up. No one, including Autumn, was to know who he really was. He reported directly to her brother, and her, of course.

The man had been hired last night and was probably in town all day. He might already know more than she did.

Her office, with boxes stacked to serve as a coffee table and books lining her windowsill, was suddenly way too small for Piper to breathe.

She ran past Autumn's desk and out into the hallway. After hours, the building was silent as a tomb. She took the stairs up to the widow's walk that topped the building, making city hall look like a square wedding cake with each floor smaller than the one below.

As she stepped out on the walk, Piper felt her heart slow. She could always breathe here. Top of the world, her granddad used to say. The highest building in town. She could see almost all of Honey Creek and the river to the west. The water sparkled in the dying light, like it was winking at her, and the old cottonwood trees seemed to wave at her as they squatted on the river's edge, their bony roots looking like knees bent toward the sky.

Piper leaned on the railing, listening to the evening noises as if they were the only beat that matched her heart. Closing her eyes, she almost believed she could hear the river drifting by as the low echo of a train's whistle whispered on the breeze.

How could anything be wrong in this world? The people were hardworking and good to the bone. They cared for one another. The whole valley was known for being friendly, and Honey Creek seemed its center. The town was an eccentric day trip from Austin or Dallas with its legends and stories. Small towns like Honey Creek were where farmers' markets thrived, and barn dances made the whole valley echo with pure country swing.

Half the folks in town maintained they were either related to someone crazy or had an ancestor who was an outlaw or gunfighter. The town even had a bed and breakfast that claimed to have a ghost who hiccupped. Fishermen near the river swore there was a catfish as long as a man that lived in the muddy water downstream.

And now, she reasoned, Honey Creek had a mystery. One handsome, almost boyfriend was missing.

As the sun lowered and evening lights made the town shine like a jewel nestled in the green rolling hills, all Piper saw was trouble.

She lowered her head almost to the railing. Somehow, this was her problem. She was the mayor. The whole town would look to her to do something.

The creak of a board alerted her a moment before a low voice whispered, "You all right, lady?"

Piper battled panic. She didn't move.

Chaos whirled all around her. It might as well have a voice. She fought down a scream, but a tiny sound slipped through. Just nerves. Stand tall. Don't let anyone know you're afraid, she reminded herself.

"I'm fine," she answered as if chaos would care. After three days of having reporters and townspeople screaming in her face, she was finally cracking up. With her luck she'd go down as the first mayor to be found mad while in office.

"You are the mayor, right?" The low voice came again.

Piper turned her head slightly as she pondered the idea of lying. The shadow of a man wearing a Stetson stood between her and the landing's exit.

The stranger slowly removed his hat, and curly hair with a touch of crimson amid dark blond appeared. "I know you said we'd meet after dark, but I saw you up here from the bench across the street and thought we might as well talk here and now."

"And you are?"

"I'm Trooper Colby McBride. The Rangers sent me. When we talked briefly before dawn, you said I was to check in with you at dusk."

Piper let out a breath she felt like she'd been holding for days. "You've come to help, Officer."

"Trooper," he corrected. "And as of right now I'm working

off the record. What I find will be reported straight to you with the understanding that any felony uncovered will bring in the Texas Rangers.”

She could barely see his eyes, yet she saw nothing but honesty in them. Of course, she'd been fooled before. If he'd waited a few more minutes in shadows, she wouldn't have been able to make out his eye color or the sharp line of his jaw.

He seemed the kind of man she'd need on her side. Strong, straightforward, protective.

“I'm just a ghost here, Miss Mackenzie.” He smiled, suddenly looking younger. “I'm an observer hired to get to the bottom of this mess. The Rangers have already examined the car that was pulled from the river. They are sending me the full report along with a list of every person who was known to have seen Mr. Buchanan three nights ago. My job is simply to put the pieces together.”

Piper doubted this man would ever be *just* anything. He seemed self-assured, maybe a bit dangerous. The kind of man she wouldn't feel comfortable dating. The kind who'd run straight toward trouble, instead of away.

He wore his western shirt and blue jeans casually. He'd fit in perfectly with the locals. If he'd worked the oil fields or rodeoed, he could probably walk into any bar and learn more in an hour than she'd ever known about the people in town. No one gossiped about crimes to a mayor who had two brothers who were Rangers.

From his stance to his slight twang, the man before her seemed pure Texan. He might be the type who said “yes, ma'am” to the ladies and fought his way out of a bar at midnight. But she had to trust him if she hoped to clean up this mess.

“I'm Piper Jane Mackenzie, the mayor.” She realized he already knew who she was, but she needed a bit of formality in their meeting.

He smiled. “I figured that out. You look just like your pic-

ture in the press. Former mayor's granddaughter, state senator's daughter, a rising star in politics. You had plenty of press before this happened, lady. Runner-up for the cobbler cook-off when you were sixteen, youngest one in your graduating class from law school, with high honors."

He lowered his chin a bit and grinned. "Eleven months older than me, which makes us both thirty-three for one more month. You made a habit of collecting speeding tickets until you ran for mayor. Since then, not even a parking ticket. Lots of photos out there of you, none that would be embarrassing. Seems you're perfect, Miss Mackenzie. Or at least you were until you started dating Boone Buchanan."

"I wasn't dating him, really. We were not engaged. Our families knew each other. I just asked him to go with me to a few functions in Austin and then he started showing up when I was in the capital. To be honest, I don't even think I'd call us friends." She thought of saying that Colby was more her type than Boone, but she had to keep this professional. "I don't date, Trooper McBride."

Colby shrugged. "I saw the pictures. You two looked pretty friendly to me. Also, you looked taller in the photo. Of course, you were wearing high heels then." He leaned down closer, so he could look straight at her. "That threw me for a minute. I pictured you taller." His gaze moved from her face all the way down to her feet. "Cute toes, by the way, Miss Mackenzie."

"You don't need to notice my toes, Mr. McBride."

"I thought I was hired to notice everything, Mayor. Right now, as far as I'm concerned, you, like everyone in this town, are a suspect."

She nodded once. "Fair enough. What do I call you?"

"Colby. It'll be easier when folks see us talking if they think you already knew me from somewhere. In fact, that's part of the cover story we'll use. I based it on what I know of you. Don't alter the back story of us in any way, or people will start asking questions of both of us."

“All right.”

Colby’s amber eyes, reminding her of a wolf’s stare, flashed in the low light as he moved closer. He studied her. “Thanks to the Internet I know enough to put together reasons why I’m in town and why people might see us talking. If any part of my cover doesn’t fit with your approval, let me know and we can change it now.”

“Should we go to my office to talk?”

He shook his head. “It’s safer here. I wouldn’t be surprised if your office is bugged. With the sheriff missing a day after your boyfriend vanished, leaving his car parked in a river, who knows what else is going on.”

His fingertips lightly brushed her back as he guided her deep into the shadows. “The cover story is, I’m an old friend of your ex-husband. We were college buddies before I flunked out and you came into his life. At your engagement party, nice pictures by the way, I got drunk and made a pass at you. I wasn’t invited to the wedding.”

“Okay, so that could have happened, but why are you here now?”

“I decided you’ve been divorced ten years and might be desperate enough to give me a second chance. I’ve inherited a little money, so I got time to follow my dreams, so to speak. One is to hook up with you, and another is to buy land around here if things go good between us.”

“Your dream is to charm me after I crossed you off the list of guests at my wedding?”

His voice lowered a bit. “How am I doing so far?”

Piper grinned as she fought the urge to kick him. “You’re not my type, Colby McBride.”

Colby shrugged. “As near as I can tell, Mayor, you don’t have a type. Not one picture of you out on the town since you divorced. Unless you count the ones of you dancing with Boone at a fund-raiser in which you looked bored. Or a dozen shots

of him hugging on you and you not even looking his direction. If you've got some secret lover out there, you might want to let me know. Otherwise as far as the town is concerned, I've come a-courting. I'm downright crazy about you."

"Dressed like that?"

"So, I'm the underdog type. People will want to help me out."

"That's the worst cover story I've ever heard."

"You got a better one? Everyone will either try to run me out of town or take my side. Heartsick lovers always get pulled under someone's wing. With luck I'll be able to play the fool and seem harmless. No one will notice I'm listening for clues. People tend to let the truth slip. I'll hang out at the breakfast café in the morning, bars at night, and maybe even land in church on Sunday. I'll blend in."

She reached in her pocket and pulled out a key she'd been holding all day. "Check in at Fisherman's Lodge. Show the owner, Digger, this key. Pay in cash."

"Is Digger working as my partner?"

"No, he's just helping out, but you can trust him. This key will unlock a storage room in the cabin he rents you. You'll be working alone. Let me know anything, no matter how small, that you find out." She met his gaze deciding she had to trust him. "Do you need to change your name?"

Colby shook his head. "Colby is a nickname. No one will find a Colby McBride on the Web. If I find something, I'll try talking to you in public. Of course, you'll be polite, but distant. Then we meet somewhere in private and talk."

"Where?"

"You tell me, PJ?"

"Don't call me by my initials. I hate that."

The trooper just waited like she was a toddler throwing an unnecessary fit.

She continued. "I'll set a book with a red cover on my far windowsill, if I need to talk to you. We can meet here."

“Fair enough. I won’t be hard to find,” he said as he backed into the shadows. She couldn’t see his face when he added, “I’ll find you.”

The floor near the door creaked again and he was gone.

Piper turned back to the view of her town and watched for a few minutes before she saw Colby walking away from city hall. His hands were in his pockets, his hat low. He headed straight across the street to a little diner. The *T* on the neon sign had burned out years ago, but the exas Best Coffee sign burned bright. The place served only breakfast from six to midnight, but it had a direct line of vision to city hall.

If Colby sat in the front window table, he’d be able to see the square and she’d be able to see him from her office window.

Slipping down the stairs, she tiptoed to her office trying to decide what she thought of the undercover visitor her brother had sent. She knew he must be the best at his job or Max wouldn’t have picked him, but the idea of spying on her own population bothered her. Plus, this Colby guy was too young. He was her age. Shouldn’t he be older, wiser? Shouldn’t she?

Piper closed her eyes. Maybe she was too young to be mayor of even a small town. The fact she’d run unopposed was probably the only reason she’d won. That and her grandfather stood just behind her at every public event.

This was her town, her people. How could a stranger uncover anything that she didn’t already know? Hiring a man to dig up the truth about the sheriff’s secrets as well as Boone’s disappearance would probably be a waste of time. Either no one would talk about it, or more likely everyone would make up their own facts to prove their theories.

After all, what could a spy find that her secretary, Autumn, didn’t already know?

When a cool breeze chilled her, Piper ran down the hallways that always seemed haunted after five. As always, she waved at Granddad when she passed.

A moment later she slipped past Autumn's desk and was at the threshold of her office when she looked up and saw a man in a black suit and clerical collar around his tanned throat sitting at her desk. He was staring out the window, obviously lost in his own thoughts.

Piper froze, trying to decide to run or scream. One strange guest after dark was enough for tonight. "May I help you," she whispered as she backed toward the door.

Then, the stranger turned toward her and smiled. "Howdy," he said. "I'm Sam Cassidy. I noticed your light on and I hoped you might still be here. When I got upstairs the door was open, so I made myself at home."

Before she could answer or run, the man stood and offered his hand. "I'm the fill-in preacher at the First Saints Independent Church. Sounds to me like you people had a bit of a problem naming the place."

She should have been mad at him dropping in, but the preacher was a charmer. There was a bit of mischief in his smile and pure Southern charm in his low voice. She'd thought Colby was tall, but the preacher was another three or four inches taller, making her feel tiny standing beside him.

"We weren't expecting you so early." In truth she'd forgotten he was coming. "And locals just call it Saints Church."

As she reached across the desk and shook his hand, she noticed the note stuck to her desk lamp. It said simply, *Don't forget to welcome new preacher. Take him to dinner. Autumn.*

"I'm Mayor Mackenzie."

His big hand circled around hers. "I figured you'd be back. Cold Coke can on your desk, shoes in the middle of the floor."

She pulled her hand back, moved over a few feet, and stepped into her heels.

Piper didn't miss his widening smile as she grew four inches closer to his height. "If you're up to it I'd like to show you

around my town. We'll stop by the church first; then if you're feeling brave, I'll take you to dinner."

"Brave?"

She shrugged. "My last date went missing three days ago."

"Sounds like an interesting topic for dinner. Lead the way, Miss Mackenzie."