



Breach of Trust

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*“Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows.”
- Galatians 6:7*

CHAPTER 1

Librarian Paige Rogers had survived more exciting days dodging bullets to protect her country. Given a choice, she'd rather be battling assassins than collecting overdue fines. For that matter, running down terrorists had a lot more appeal than running down lost books. Oh, the regrets of life—woven with guilt, get-over-its, and move-ons. But do-overs were impossible, and the adventures of her life were now shelved alphabetically under fiction.

Time to reel in my pitiful attitude and get to work. Paige stepped onto her front porch with what she needed for a full workday at the library. Already, perspiration dotted her face, a reminder of the rising temperatures. Before locking the door behind her, she scanned the front yard and surveyed the opposite side of the dusty road, where chestnut-colored quarter horses grazed on sparse grass. Torrid heat and no rain, as though she stood on African soil. But here, nothing out of the ordinary drew her attention. Just the way she liked it. Needed it.

Sliding into her sporty yet fuel-efficient car, she felt for the Beretta Px4 under the seat. The past could rear its ugly head without warning. Boy Scouts might be prepared; Girl Scouts

were trained. The radio blared out the twang of a guitar and the misery of a man who'd lost his sweet heart to a rodeo star. Paige laughed at the irony of it all.

She zipped down the road, her tires crunching the grasshoppers that littered the way before her. In the rearview mirror, she saw birds perched on a barbed wire fence and a few defiant wildflowers. They held on to their roots in the sun-baked dirt the way she clutched hope. The radio continued to croon out one tune after another all the way into the small town of Split Creek, Oklahoma, ten clicks from nowhere.

After parking her car in the designated spot in front of the library, Paige hoisted her tote bag onto her shoulder and grabbed a book about Oklahoma history and another by C. S. Lewis.

The latter had kept her up all night, helping her make some sense out of the sordid events of her past. She scraped the grasshoppers from her shoes and onto the curb. The pests were everywhere this time of year. Reminded her of a few gadflies she'd been forced to trust overseas. She'd swept the crusty hoppers off her porch at home and the entrance to the library as she'd done with the shadow makers of the past. But nothing could wipe the nightmares from her internal hard drive.

Her gaze swept the quiet business district with an awareness of how life could change in the blink of an eye. A small land scaping of yellow marigolds and sapphire petunias stretched toward the sky in front of the newly renovated, one-hundred-year-old courthouse. Its high pillars supported a piece of local history . . . and the secrets of the best of families. Business owners unlocked their stores and exchanged morning greetings. Paige recognized most of the dated cars and dusty pickups, but a black Town Car with tinted glass and an Oklahoma license plate parked on the right side of the courthouse caught her attention.

Why would someone sporting a luxury car want to venture into Split Creek, population 1,500? The lazy little town didn't offer much more than a few antique stores, a small library, a beauty shop, Dixie's Donuts, a Piggly Wiggly, four churches— including one First Baptist and one South First Baptist, each at opposite ends of town, one First Methodist, and a holiness tabernacle right beside Denim's Restaurant. She wanted to believe it was an early visitor to the courthouse. Maybe someone lost. But those thoughts soon gave way to curiosity and a twist of suspicion.

With a smile intended to be more appealing than a Fourth of July storefront, she crossed the street to subtly investigate the out-of-place vehicle. Some habits never changed.

Junior Shafer, who owned and operated a nearby antique store, stooped to arrange his outside treasures. Actually, Paige rarely saw an antique on display, just junk and old Avon bottles.

"Mornin', Mr. Shafer. Looks like another scorcher."

“Mornin’. Yep, this heat keeps the customers away.” The balding man slowly stood and massaged his back. “Maybe I’ll advertise free air-conditioning and folks will stop in.”

“Whatever works.” She stole a quick glance at the Town Car and memorized the license plate number. No driver. “Looks like you have a visitor.” She pointed to the car.

Mr. Shafer narrowed his eyes and squinted. “Nah, that’s probably Eleanor’s son from Tulsa. He’s helping her paint the beauty shop. She said he had a new car. The boy must be doing fine in the insurance business.”

“Now that’s a good son.”

Mr. Shafer lifted his chin, then rubbed it. “Uh, you know, Paige . . . he ain’t married.”

“And I’m not looking.” She’d never be in the market for a husband. Life had grown too complicated to consider such an undertaking, even if it did sound enticing.

“A pretty little lady like you should be tending to babies, not books.”

“Ah, but books don’t grow up or talk back.”

He shook his head and unlocked his store.

“I have a slice of peach pie for you.” Paige reached inside her tote bag and carefully brought out a plastic container. “I baked it around six this morning. It’s fresh.”

He turned back around. A slow grin spread from one generous ear to the other. “You’re right. You don’t need to go off and get married. I might not get my pies.” He did his familiar shoulder jig. “Thank you, sweet girl.” He reached for the pie with both hands as though it were the most precious thing he’d ever been offered.

The door squeaked open at Shear Perfection.

“Mornin’, Eleanor,” Mr. Shafer said. “I see your son’s car. Glad he’s helping you with the paintin’.”

“That’s not my son’s.” Miss Eleanor crossed the street, shielding her eyes from the steadily rising sun. “He isn’t coming till the weekend.”

Paige’s nerve endings registered alert. “Won’t that be wonderful for you?” She took another passing glance at the vehicle. “I wonder who’s driving that fancy car? Too early for courthouse business.”

“Somebody with money.” Mr. Shafer lifted the plastic lid off the freshly baked pie and inhaled deeply. “Can’t wait till lunch.”

“Mercy, old man, you’re already rounder than my dear departed mama’s potbelly stove.” Eleanor’s blue hair sparkled in the sunlight as though she’d added glitter to her hairspray.

“You’re just jealous. If you weren’t a diabetic, you’d be stealing my pie. Paige here knows how to keep a man happy.”

One block down, a man carrying a camera emerged from between one of Mr. Shafer’s many antique competitors and the barbershop. He lifted it as if to snap a picture of the barbershop. Paige swung her attention back to her friends. He could be the real thing. She hoped so and forced down any precursors of fear.

“What’s he taking pictures of?” Eleanor paused. “I’m going to ask.” Determination etched her wrinkled face. She squared her shoulders and marched toward the stranger as though she represented the whole town.

Good, Eleanor. I’ll head back and let you do the recon work. Eleanor and the stranger stood too far away for Paige to read their lips, but at least while the two talked, the man couldn’t take pictures. A few moments later, the stranger laughed much too loud. Eleanor reached out and shook his hand, then walked back.

Paige focused on Mr. Shafer. She picked up a watering can leaning precariously against a rotted-bottom chair. “Is this a new addition?”

“Nah. It was inside. I just brought it out yesterday.” From the corner of her eye, she saw the stranger stare at them. Medium height. Narrow shoulders. Italian-cut clothes. Couldn’t see the type of camera. The stranger walked their way, shoulders arched and rigid. Unless he was a pro, she’d have him sized up in thirty seconds, and then she’d go about her day—relieved. Mr. Shafer lifted his gaze toward Eleanor. “Who’s your friend?”

“Jason Stevens, a photographer looking for some homespun pictures about small towns in Oklahoma.”

The way he’s dressed? Paige’s heart pounded. She replaced the watering can. “Did he say for what magazine?”

“Didn’t ask. Why don’t you? He wants to take a few shots of us standing in front of our businesses.” Eleanor beckoned to Stevens. “Come on over and meet my friends. Paige here wonders what magazine you work for.”

The man continued to smile—perfect teeth, perfect smile.

“It’s for a newspaper, the Oklahoman.” He stuck out his hand.

“Mornin’, folks. I bet you’d like your picture in the magazine insert.” His camera rested in the crook of his right hand, a new Nikon with fast lenses, perhaps a D90 or D200. No dents

or sign of use. Who was this guy? He wasn't any more a photographer than Eleanor or Mr. Shafer.

Have you used that piece of equipment before today?

"Welcome to Split Creek," Paige said. "I'll pass on the picture, though. I'm not photogenic, but you have a beautiful day to photograph our town." She turned and started across the street to the library.

"Of course you're photogenic," Eleanor called. "No one wants to see a couple of old fuddy-duddies like us, but you'd make front-page news."

"You two are the center of attention. I'm the dull librarian." Paige continued to move rapidly across the street.

"Wait a minute," Stevens said.

"Sorry. I need to open the library."

"Come on back, sweet girl. There's no one waiting to get in," Mr. Shafer said.

She lifted her hand and waved backward. Guilt nipped at her heels for leaving them with Stevens, but she had more at stake than they did. "See you two later. Nice meeting you, Mr. Stevens."

She unlocked the old building that had once been a bank but now served as the town library. It oozed with character—beige and black marble floors, rich oaken walls, tall ceilings with intricately carved stone, and a huge crystal chandelier the size of a wagon wheel. The areas where tellers once met with customers now served as cozy reading nooks, and a huge, round, brass-trimmed vault—minus the door—held children's books.

The windows still even had a few iron bars. If only the town had high-speed Internet access. They'd been promised that modernization for months.

For a precious moment, she relaxed and breathed in the sights and smells. Bless dear Andrew Carnegie for his vision to establish public libraries. Because of his philanthropy, Paige had a sanctuary. From the creaking sounds of antiquity to the timeworn smell of books and yellowed magazines, she had quiet companions that took her to the edge of experience but not the horror of reality.

In a small converted kitchen behind a vaulted door in the rear corner, Paige placed a peanut butter, bacon, and mayo sandwich in the fridge. Reaching down farther into her tote, she wrapped her fingers around a package of Reese's Pieces. Those she'd stash in her desk drawer. The rest of the peach pie sat on the backseat of her car. She'd retrieve it once Stevens moved down the street, preferably out of town.

If he worked for Daniel Keary, her life was about to change— and not for the better. She shook off the chills racing up her arms. I can handle whatever it is. Snatching up her tote bag, she closed the kitchen door behind her. With the election nearly three months away, Stevens could be one of Keary's men sent to make sure she still understood her boundaries. Regret took a stab at her heart, but there was nothing she could do about Keary's popularity. She'd tried and failed against a force too powerful for her at the time. But her prayers for truth continued.

Her sensible shoes clicked against the floor en route to the front window. Standing to the side, she peered out through the blinds to the sun-laden street for a glimpse of Stevens. He continued to take pictures. Mr. Shafer would most likely give him a tour of the town, beginning with his store and the history of every item strewn across it. The so-called photographer from the Oklahoman entered the antique shop.

That'll bore him to tears and chase him out of town. Paige went through the morning ritual of checking the drop box for returned books, of which there were six. She changed the dates on the date-due stamps and stacked the books to be shelved in her arms. The seasoned citizens of Split Creek representing the local book club would arrive any minute, as regular as their morning's constitutional. For an hour and a half they'd discuss the merits of their current novel, everything from the characters to the plot. Today they couldn't storm the shores of the library too soon for Paige.

As if on cue, Miss Alma bustled through the door—her purse slung loosely from her shoulder, her foil-wrapped banana nut bread in one hand and two books in the other.

"Good morning, Miss Alma," Paige said. "Do you need some help?"

"No thanks. If I loosen my hold on one thing, everything else will fall."

A picture of PoliGrip hit Paige's mind. "Well, you're the first today."

Miss Betty sashayed in, a true Southern belle dressed in her Sunday best, complete with a pillbox hat. "Miss Paige, may I brew a pot of decaf coffee?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am. It's waiting for you." Oh, how she loved these precious people.

Within moments the rest of Split Creek's Senior Book Club arrived. Paige waved at Reverend Bateson, and as usual, Miss Eleanor and Mr. Shafer were bickering about something.

"At least we agree that Daniel Keary should be our next governor," Miss Eleanor said.

At the mention of that name, Paige thought she'd be physically ill. Keary was running on an Independent ticket, and she didn't care if a Democrat or a Republican pulled in the votes. Anyone but Keary.

"I have banana bread," Miss Alma said. "But don't be picking up a book with crumbs on your fingers."

"We know," several echoed.

Paige appreciated the comic relief. The rest of the members placed chairs in a circle beneath the massive chandelier while Paige checked in their books.

The library door opened again, and Jason Stevens walked in with his camera. The sight of him erased the pleasantries she'd been enjoying with the book club members. He made his way to the circulation desk and stood at the swinging door, trapping her inside.

Hadn't she just swept the bugs off the steps of the library?

"Since you won't let me take your picture outside, I thought I'd snap a few in here. Wow—" his gaze took in the expanse of the building—"this was a bank." His brilliant whites would have melted most women's resolve.

Paige approached the swinging door. "No pictures, please. They always turn out looking really bad."

"How about lunch?"

"Are you coming on to me?" Disgust curdled her insides.

He waved his free hand in front of his face. The man knew just when to utilize a dimple on his left cheek. "I'm simply looking for a story to go along with my photos. This library is charming, fascinating, and so are you."

Revulsion for the dimple-faced city boy had now moved into the fast lane. "Miss Alma, I'll help you arrange the chairs."

"Nonsense." Miss Alma shook her blue-gray head. "You help this young man. Those old people can do something besides stand around and complain about their gout and bursitis." Any other time, Paige would have laughed at the remark. But not today.

"Looks like they have everything under control." The low, seductive tone of Stevens's voice invited a slap in the face.

"I suggest you visit with a few other business owners for your newspaper's needs," she said.

"I'm very disappointed."

"You'll get over it."

“Can’t we talk?” He leaned over the swinging door.

“You can leave, or I can call the sheriff. Your choice.” She picked up the phone on her desk and met his gaze with a stare down.

“So much for sweet, small-town girls.” He tossed her his best dejected look. Obviously he wasn’t accustomed to the word no. Her reflexes remained catlike thanks to tai chi workouts still done at home behind drawn curtains. With minimal effort, she could dislocate a shoulder or crash the kneecap of an opponent twice her weight. Such skills were not a part of the job description for most small-town USA librarians, but then again most of them didn’t have a working knowledge of Korean, Angolan Portuguese, Swahili, and Russian. The ability to decipher codes, a mastery of disguise, and a knack for using a paper clip to open locks . . . not to mention a past that needed to stay buried. She had to resist the urge to toss Stevens out on his ear. Calm down.

“I’m sorry we don’t have the book you wanted. I’m sure one of the branches in Oklahoma City can help you.”

A silent challenge crested in his gray eyes, and she met it with her own defiance.

Stevens walked to the door and turned, carrying his camera the way patrons carried books. “Know what? This town would be a great place to hide out a CIA operative.”

For more information about *Breach of Trust* and other books by DiAnn, visit www.DiAnnMills.com.