

## HIDDEN CURRENTS excerpt

### CHAPTER ONE

The lake was calm and glassy, reflecting the bluffs on the other side. The giant bur oak rustled above them, its foliage almost fully returned after its winter shedding. The tree had stood near the White River for more than two hundred years, adding rings as settlers built Branson around it and dammed its river to create the lake. On this side, the shoreline was flat, dotted with homes, a cabin resort, the edge of downtown where Main Street met the water, and the park where Sam Karnes and Brenna Cassidy now stood.

It would make a beautiful background, Brenna said. There was no guarantee the weather would be good, Sam thought. But he looked at his fiancée's face and kept his mouth shut. They had decided on a May wedding, before everything got too hot and sticky with summer humidity. That didn't mean they'd be safe from the rain, though. That could come any time. He thought maybe he should suggest a contingency plan, then remembered his boss's advice. "You can have an opinion on the food and the music. Everything else—tread carefully."

So he stood quietly as Brenna framed potential photos with her hands. Where to take the wedding party pictures was one of the last decisions they needed to make. He hoped.

"This area looks good," he said. "Doesn't it? It's not too far from the church."

She half-nodded and moved to eye things from a different angle. "I don't know how to avoid that darn plaque. It ruins every shot."

He walked over to it. It was such a part of the scenery, he'd almost forgotten it was there. When some enterprising 1970s tree aficionado figured out the oak was older than the country, it became the Liberty Tree and the plaque went up in time for the bicentennial. Now the thing needed a good cleaning and, if Brenna had anything to do with it, a relocation.

"If we shoot this way, you don't see the lake. And if you do it that direction . . ." She sighed. "Big old ugly plaque."

It stood on a waist-high column. Sam leaned against it and watched Brenna wander around this end of the park. The darn thing was wider than he was. He thought about that and stepped away. Then did some hand measurements.

"What if we covered it up?"

Brenna walked back to him. "What do you mean?"

He moved so he stood directly in front of it. It was clearly visible behind his thin frame. "We put Roddy in front of it." He spread his hands out a foot on either side, which was about how wide his groomsman Roddy Hale was. "He'd block the whole thing. We just have to arrange the order of everybody so he's right here."

Brenna considered that. "I think that could work. Don't move. Stay right there."

She walked fairly far away while Sam stood with his hands out as if he was illustrating the size of a particularly large trout. A mom with two young children walked by and gave him a look. He wished he had his sheriff's deputy uniform on. Then he'd look like he was doing something important instead of just standing around like a sketchy weirdo in the park. The lady hustled her kids past and headed to the picnic area. Sam watched her go as another group came by on their way to the shoreline. By the time they noticed him, Brenna had gestured that he could put his hands down.

"Yes, that's going to work. Good thinking, babe." She stood on tiptoe and kissed him. "And good thing you have a football linebacker as a friend."

Sam laughed at that. Roddy's size had come in handy many times growing up. He told her a few stories as they walked back to his car. By the time they got there, the group near the picnic area had equipment out, and a lady in slacks and a silk blouse was pointing them in multiple directions.

"Looks like someone else is planning an event, too," he said, opening the passenger door of his Subaru for Brenna. "The way they're measuring things, maybe it's a whole wedding ceremony."

She scoffed. "That would be way too risky. What if it rained?"

## CHAPTER TWO

Sheila Turley had left him a note. And a file. It never boded well when she did this. Hank Worth sat down at his desk and cautiously slid the paperwork closer.

*Gursey's at it again. He's all yours this time.*

The Branson County sheriff opened the file and pulled out the arrest report. Sheila, his second-in-command, only printed things out when she wanted to make a point. Or wanted quick action. Because Hank wasn't known for staying on top of his email. And she knew this particular suspect was a pet project of his. Gursey Rugg.

The young man had shoplifted again. The twenty-three-year-old was always plucking cheap items off the shelves of local retailers. If it was food, he'd eat it. If it wasn't, he'd sell it on cheaply to friends and use the money for drugs. If the shopkeepers caught him, they'd call Hank's deputies and Gursey would spend a while behind bars. But only rarely did people press misdemeanor charges. It wasn't worth anybody's time and, even if it had been, the sticky-fingered addict would still be back out on the street soon enough. So instead, he sobered up in Hank's jail, swore he'd stay off the meth, and slouched back off into an existence where everyone involved deserved better and no one knew how to accomplish it.

But this time, Gursey overstepped. A magpie entranced by bright and shiny, he'd scooped up a handful of the wrong thing in the wrong store. Fourteen hand-tied, rare-feathered flies from Reel Life Outfitters. The owner was a newcomer. Purchased the two venerable fish and tackle stores on opposite ends of Lake Taneycomo when Lyle Boskins retired and seemed to be doing well. But it turned out he wasn't willing to do nice. He wanted to press charges. And that meant a felony, because of the misdemeanor convictions Gursey had already accumulated. And a felony meant a stint in state prison, which wouldn't be good for the fragile kid.

Hank re-read the narrative included in the arrest report. Then he got up and walked over from his office in the sheriff's department Forsyth headquarters to hear from the man himself.

"Hi, Gursey. How you doing?"

"Hey, Sherf." A disheveled scarecrow the color of a ghost rose to a seated position on the cell bunk. The jail scrubs hung off him in folds, and his dull brown hair stuck out in a dozen directions. At least it was clean. The young man blinked blearily and steadied himself on the mattress.

"What happened?" Hank leaned against the bars. "Last I heard, you were doing pretty well."

Gursey shrugged, clavicles jutting like wings. "I was. Ask my addiction counselor. I got one of those, did you know? Nice lady. Always worried all the time, though."

"It sounds like she was helping. When was the last time you saw her? Because right now you don't look so hot."

Gursey rubbed his wrists together. "Don't feel so hot, neither."

"You coming down off something?"

“Not really. Not like last year. At all, man, I swear. Just a little bit when Morty come to town.”

Hank had no idea who that was. He sighed and ran his hand through his dark hair in frustration. “And when did Morty come?”

“’Bout two weeks ago. He brought some homemade stuff, fresh cooked. I don’t remember much after that, ’til last night—I think. There weren’t no Morty anymore and I was at some trailer someplace.” He shifted suddenly from staring at the ground to looking Hank straight in the eye. “And that sucked, man. It was gross, and I was gross, and I don’t like that anymore.”

Hank blinked in surprise. After every previous arrest, Gursey had promised to stop the drugs. But until right then, he’d never come close to saying he *wanted* to stop. He kept Hank’s gaze as he continued to talk. “I walked ’til I got past Honey Lane and then saw that fishing place. Figured it would have a bathroom. I went in, and bro, I just wanted money for food. Thought I could turn some stuff over for a few bucks. I—”

“Stop talking,” Hank said. “Just take a deep breath and stop talking.” The goal of keeping Gursey out of state prison would not be helped by a confession to the county sheriff. He considered the inmate. In their numerous interactions in the four years since Hank became sheriff, Gursey had never made this much eye contact. It gave Hank hope. And made him a lot more willing to do what he was going to do once he left the cell block.