



Chapter One

I approached the oven with a mixture of hope and trepidation. Could it be that I'd *finally* done it? I reached for the handle, then hesitated, breathing deep. The pie definitely smelled right. The kitchen of Pies N' Prattle was steeped in the scents of caramelized butter, cinnamon, and apples. A promising sign.

I opened the oven a crack and peeked in. *No!* The caramel apple pie I'd spent my entire afternoon making looked like a natural disaster. The crust was a sinkhole, cratering into the caramel apple filling; only its sad, crinkled edges remained.

I ripped off my oven mitts and launched them across the room, letting out a cry of frustration. I'd always had a temper

worse than a grease fire—flaring in an instant and tough to douse. My parents often laughed about the fervor with which I'd thrown myself on the floor as a toddler whenever I was told I had to eat my peas or go to bed. It wasn't a trait I was proud of, but I never could seem to get a handle on it, either. In fact, I might've hollered again over my pie fiasco if the muffled voices of our customers in the main room hadn't stopped me.

“¿*Qué pasó?*” I heard Mrs. Gonzalez say. “Is that Dacey? Is she all right?”

Mom's bell-like laughter sounded from the other side of the kitchen door. “She's fine. Just doing some baking is all. She's so much like her great-grandma Hazel . . . a bundle of pint-sized passion, especially when it comes to pies.”

Like GG Hazel? I scoffed, staring at my sunken pie. I'd never known GG Hazel in person. She'd died long before I was born. I knew about her, though. Every person in Bonnet, Texas, did. There was one, universally acknowledged truth about Hazel Culpepper: That woman could bake pies.

And I couldn't. But Mom kept insisting on this resemblance I supposedly had to GG Hazel. As if Mom's saying it might give me the pie gene that seemed to have skipped my DNA.

"Dacey?" Mom stuck her head around the door. A quick scan of the kitchen told her I was alive and well, but she still said, "Scale of one to ten, hangnail to Armageddon. Go."

Mom had played this game with me for as long as I could remember, asking me to pick a number on a scale of one to ten as a way of gauging the severity of any problem. It was her not-so-subtle way of reminding me to control my temper.

"Two," I mumbled grudgingly. "Not Armageddon, but my pie *does* look like it's been hit by a meteor."

"Caramel apple *crumble* it is, then." Mom smiled. "You come from a long line of great pie bakers, Dace. Don't worry so much. You'll grow into your talent." She took my apple "crumble" out of the oven and slid it into a pastry box. I had no idea what poor victim Mom might give it to, but I hoped I'd never set eyes on the disaster again. "Now come on out and say hi to everybody. They've been asking after you."

I followed Mom through the swinging doors. The snug main room—painted a cheery daffodil yellow and crowded with armchairs, settees, and coffee tables—instantly brightened my mood. More than that, though, were the waves, smiles, and “hello”s I got from the dozen or so folks in the shop.

There was Mrs. Gonzalez with her fussy baby Marco and little daughter Alma. There was Mrs. Beaumont and her Friday afternoon knitting group. Mr. Jenkins and Mr. Walker were arguing over their game of Scrabble, and Ms. Jackson was working on the romance novel she’d been swearing she’d have finished by the summer solstice. They weren’t customers so much as permanent fixtures in Pies N’ Prattle. They’d been coming to our shop since before I was born, and knew almost as much about my life as Mom and Dad did.

It was like having a bunch of aunts, uncles, and grandparents watching over me 24/7—and not just in our shop, either. Our small, homespun town of Bonnet was bordered by the Brazos River on one side and the Jenkins cattle ranch on the other. A hiccup took longer than a drive down our main street. Bonnet’s

single traffic light had made the front page of the *Bonnet Times* when it had finally been installed two years ago, and Bonneters loved to boast about the bona fide hitching post that still stood, as it had for over a century, outside The Chicken Shack. But people looked after each other in Bonnet, and it gave the town a coziness and familiarity that I loved.

“Don’t forget, Selena,” Mom said to Mrs. Gonzalez, who was leaving with Alma and the squalling Marco in her arms. “Two slices of the lavender honey pie an hour before you nurse Marco and you’ll both sleep through the night. You’ll see.”

Mrs. Gonzalez hugged her, gushing her thanks, then waved to me and headed out.

“Poor Selena,” Mom murmured. “A colicky newborn and now her restaurant closing its doors next month.”

Together, we stared out the window at The Whole Enchilada—the tiny but delicious Tex-Mex restaurant the Gonzalez family owned on Main Street. It sat between two vacant stores; those had once been the Bonnet Soda Shop and Shoe-La-La Consignment.

“That’s the fifth business to close in the last six months,” I said. “And we’re not even counting the Longhorn Loop.”

Just saying the name of Texas’s oldest wooden roller coaster made my throat hitch. It wasn’t that I was particularly attached to the ride. But when the coaster closed six months ago, the loss of the tourist attraction had been a virtual death knell for Bonnet’s businesses. Visits from out-of-towners had always been few and far between. Still, for over a century, Bonnet had boasted two claims to fame: Hazel Culpepper’s pie shop and the Longhorn Loop. Now we had only the pie shop left, and the tourists were dwindling.

“It’s not good,” Mom said. A second later, she straightened her shoulders, adding, “*But* it’s no use drowning in a river of worry, either.”

There it was. Mom’s glass-half-full MO. She smiled at our shop full of regulars. “We have our tried-and-true Bonneters.” Then she turned to the picture of GG Hazel that hung on the wall, alongside Hazel’s favorite apron. The photo was part of a framed article from the *Bonnet Times*, May of 1945. Mom

reached out and pressed her fingertips to Hazel's cheek. "And we have GG Hazel to inspire us. I just wish we still had her Heartstring Pie, too. Now *that* would be something folks would talk about all over Texas."

A reverent hush fell over the shop at Mom's mention of Heartstring Pie. There wasn't a soul in Bonnet who hadn't heard the stories about my great-grandmother's most famous pie and the supposed "curse" surrounding it. Nor was there a soul who hadn't, at one time or another, hoped to be the one to find the missing recipe for it.

"I had a piece of Heartstring Pie," a gravelly voice said behind us. It was Mr. Jenkins. With his six-foot-four-inch frame, thick silver mustache, and broad build, he might've seemed imposing, except that I'd known him my entire life. "Just once when I was eight." His expression softened into nostalgia. "Hazel brought me a slice after my mama's passing. I didn't want to touch a bite of it at first. Couldn't eat a thing, let alone talk or even cry. But Hazel, she leaned over me and said, 'Now, Jeb, just the tiniest nibble will ease you. It won't stop the hurting,

but it'll make it tolerable.' She spoon-fed me a bite and, next thing I knew, I was in her lap, the floodgates open." He shook his head. "Strangest thing, too, but it *did* help. I don't know how, but it did."

I'd heard Mr. Jenkins's story many times before, and it always gave me a little tingle of warmth, like there was a part of me that believed there *was* some magic in that pie. But then I brushed the thought away. I knew it was a silly idea.

"That sounds like Hazel's Heartstring Pie, for sure," Mom said reverently. GG Hazel had passed away when Mom was only five. Even though Mom didn't remember her, she'd grown up steeped in Hazel's larger-than-life legend, fostering a loyalty so deep that she felt "called," as she put it, to do right by Hazel and the pie shop. "That pie was a treasure."

"Miss Edie?" Mr. Jenkins said to Mom. "Speaking of pie, could I get a slice of your pecan pie for my Mazie? Her rheumatism's acting up again and we've got company coming—"

"Of course." Mom flew behind the sales counter to box up the

pie. “And I’m sending you home with a slice of pineapple pie, too. Just the trick for aching bones.” Mr. Jenkins reached for his wallet, but Mom waved it away. “On the house.”

Mr. Jenkins clucked his tongue. “Edie, how many times have I told you to quit giving your pies away for free?”

Mom put her hands on her hips, feigning indignation. “Jeb, you run your ranch the way you see fit, and I’ll do the same for my shop.”

He gave a deep chuckle, tipped his Stetson cattleman hat to her, then smiled at me as he headed for the door. “Dacey, I’ll see you at the stables in the morning?”

I felt a swell of excitement. I boarded my horse, Ginger, at the Jenkins ranch and I never missed a day of riding if I could help it. “Count on it!” I told him.

I’d been riding Ginger in Western horse shows since I’d gotten her in the third grade, and I’d taken riding lessons at the ranch long before that. Dad teased that if he hadn’t witnessed the event himself, he would’ve sworn I was born in a saddle. My temper

never got the better of me when I was around horses. I itched to be riding Ginger now—instead of stuck here at the pie shop.

I could feel GG Hazel's gaze on me, as if she'd heard my thoughts. I studied the black-and-white photograph, taking in Hazel's fair skin, wavy black bob, small mouth, slightly crooked nose, wide-set eyes, and dark arched brows.

Mom didn't much resemble Hazel, but everyone was always commenting that I did. I couldn't see it. Yes, I had Hazel's dark hair, though mine was longer, curlier, and more unruly, usually tied back in a mussed knot. But her eyes were nothing like mine. Hers had a confident clarity and an almost clairvoyant quality that made people believe she could help them with whatever troubles they brought before her. Of course, that glimmer in her expression might also have been pride in the flawless Heartstring Pie she offered up to the camera.

What I apparently *had* inherited from her was her temper. The story went that Hazel had once pitched an entire banana cream pie at Bonnet's mayor, simply because he'd suggested

removing Main Street's old hitching post. How bad did my luck have to be that I'd gotten GG Hazel's only flaw and none of her charms?

I sighed and scanned the newspaper article for the hundredth time.

HAZEL CULPEPPER BAKES UP HEALING AND HOPE

Just days after D-Day, our own Hazel Culpepper, alongside other Red Cross volunteers, was saving the lives and lifting the spirits of dozens of American soldiers at Normandy Beach, France. Only it isn't her nursing skill that's earned her the nickname "Healing Hazel"; it's her pie. Since returning to Bonnet, Hazel's been busy baking up pies for our returning veterans.

"I saw our boys suffering," she says. "Many were weary and shell-shocked. Some were plain brokenhearted from what they'd seen and done. The best comfort I could offer was a lending ear to hear their sorrows, and a pie to please their bellies."

Hazel and her Heartstring Pie, in particular, are earning the admiration and devotion of every veteran for miles around.