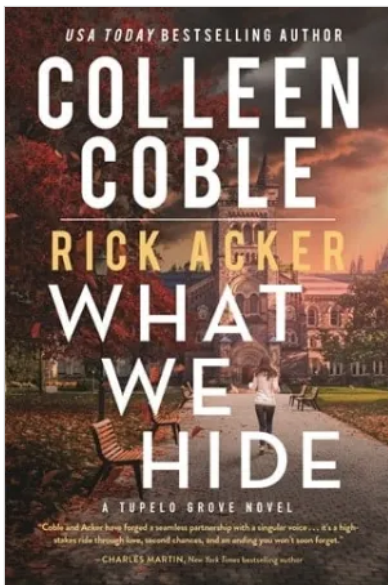




What We Hide (Tupelo Grove #1)

Author: Colleen Coble, Rick Acker

Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Family secrets. Historical wrongs. And the truths that refuse to stay buried.

Savannah Webster is trying to find her way forward. She and her husband, Hez, have been separated since tragedy tore them apart and he began numbing his grief and guilt with alcohol. She returned to Tupelo Grove University, which her family helped found over a century ago, to teach history.

When Hez turns up in her classroom asking for a second chance, she rejects the idea immediately. But twenty-four hours later she's under suspicion for murder, and since Hez is the best attorney she knows, she reluctantly asks him for help. They suspect the murder is tied to someone selling off the university's pre-Columbian artifacts, but the secrets go much deeper than they realize.

The only hope they've got is each other, and they're going to have to put their past behind them if they're going to stay alive long enough to uncover all that's hidden.

Total Pages (Source): 43

Page 1

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Death Is a Lonely Business.

I'd expected him to tie up at the little pier a few yards away, which would have put him fully in the moonlight while I stayed partially in the shadows. Instead, he tips his motor up and lets the skiff's momentum carry it up onto the beach. We'll both be fully in the light.

He starts walking toward me.

"That's close enough," I say when he's about ten feet away.

He frowns but stops. "Where's the money?"

"You've been fully paid. You won't get a bonus by blackmailing me."

He snarls and his hand twitches toward the gun. "I can destroy you!"

It's true, unfortunately. He somehow got a partial client list from a delivery driver. The driver has already been dealt with, but Luis is still very much a problem. My problem. "But it won't be just ten thousand tonight, will it? You'll want another ten thousand after you've spent the first one. And your friends will ask where all the money came from, and you'll brag about how you outsmarted the gringos. The other smugglers will hear about it, and they'll figure it's safe to blackmail us too. We can't start down that road. You must see that."

"Give me ten thousand," he says again, but with less conviction.

“No.”

His face hardens. “Give me ten thousand!”

“No.”

He puts his hand on the butt of his pistol. “Give me—”

“Take the gun out slowly and drop it. Keep your finger away from the trigger.”

My heart races and my breath heaves in deep gulps, like I just finished a marathon. I blink away the afterimage of the muzzle flashes and turn in a quick circle, scanning for lights or movement. Nothing. The only sounds I hear over my pounding pulse are the surf and a fitful sea breeze.

I reach an area popular with sharks and put the motor in neutral. I search the stiffening corpse for wallet, watch, phone, and anything else that might identify him and survive the scavengers. His phone lights up at my touch, displaying a snapshot of a young woman holding a little boy. She’s wearing a simple white dress that sets off her black hair and caramel skin. The boy has on a Pikachu T-shirt and is reaching toward the camera. They both have beautiful smiles. Their large brown eyes are just like the eyes that have haunted me ever since I saw them watching me from a medieval crucifix in an Italian church years ago.

I click off the phone and put it down, willing myself to forget the picture.

“A lonely business,” I say to the darkness.

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Her husband, Hezekiah Webster, looked out of place and uncomfortable standing in the garden by the marble angel fountain. He had to be hot in that black suit, and sure enough, he tugged at the buttoned-up collar and red tie at his neck. His dark hair had been freshly trimmed, and his expression seemed pinned in place. She'd always thought him the handsomest man in the room, and he still was with his lean build and strong jawline. His deep voice was as attractive as his striking face with its dark brows and ready smile.

"Hez," she said in an even tone. "I didn't expect to see you here."

"Thanks for seeing me, Savannah."

He didn't flinch, but then, an experienced DA like Hez never showed his emotions. "Would you have agreed to see me?"

"Probably not."

"I didn't think so, and this was too important." His gaze swept the room and swung to the window frames with the paint peeling. "Tupelo Grove looks a little worse for wear since the last time I was here. Is the university about to fold?"

She looked up at his coaxing voice. For years he'd had juries eating out of his hand, but she'd learned to steel herself against his persuasion. His clear gaze told her he was telling the truth, but that didn't change her gut reaction. Being around him would be too hard, especially since she'd finally made the decision to end this misery.

This time he flinched, and pain filled his eyes. "You blame me for everything, don't

you?”

He shoved his hands in the pockets of his jacket. “Aren’t you interested in how I can afford to do this?”

She brushed past him toward the cavernous hall. “I’ve got to go. Find another law school for your clinic.”

She’d thought she was healing until she saw Hez’s face again.

Abernathy’s blond hair was perfectly styled, and his trademark Armani suit was gray today. The white shirt and yellow tie finished the look. He believed clothes made the man, and she’d never seen so much as a piece of fuzz on his jacket.

He steepled his fingers. “You wanted to talk about tenure?”

She’d expected this, but it still hurt. The treasure had been part of her family for decades. Some of her earliest memories were of wandering the warehouse and poking through crates of terra-cotta masks and jade statues with her father. The artifacts of an entire city were in those crates, and she had dreams of seeing them set up in the museum. The problem was, much of the art wasn’t the shiny objects that drew in visitors, and the museum was still too small to display even a fraction of what the warehouse held. A new wing for the Willard Treasure would be wonderful, but that goal wasn’t high on the list for the trustees.

She moistened her lips. “You don’t make it sound hopeful. Who is on the tenure committee?”

That tenure position belonged to her. Ellison had practically promised it to her when

she accepted the professorship. She couldn't leave here. Too much of her past anchored her to this place, and she couldn't leave the little grave in the family cemetery. Not yet. Maybe not ever. And now Hez had shown up. Could the day get any worse?

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She noticed him walking up and turned, giving him a quick glimpse of her profile—still perfect at thirty-five. Then he was looking into those big green eyes again, so close he could see the tiny flecks of gold. He'd always liked that she was tall so he could study those amazing colors in her eyes. He had been about to launch into his big planned speech... and the moment was over before it began. She hadn't listened to a word he said. New Hez, old Hez—it was all the same to her.

It didn't matter if he had changed—the past hadn't. And Savannah still blamed him. Of course she did.

He took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. Maybe it was time for him to move on too.

“Can I help you?” a reedy voice said.

“I was just visiting someone, but I'm done now.” He walked out past the guard, who trailed him until he left the building.

He sat down and surveyed his surroundings. Despite Savannah's assurances, Tupelo Grove University looked more threadbare than he remembered. The dead limbs on the towering oaks in the quad needed trimming. Weeds and grass sprouted from the brick paths. Legare Hall, the grandiose marble administration building Savannah's father started twenty years ago when he was university president, still wasn't finished. Even from Hez's vantage point over a hundred yards away, it was clear that construction stopped a long time ago and the half-built hall was slowly decaying into the perfect setting for a Stephen King story. Tupelo Grove certainly wasn't “Harvard on the Bayou” anymore. Much of its five hundred acres was still swampland and

planted fields for the agricultural department.

“How’d the hearing go?”

Hez smiled at his boss’s impatience. “We won.”

“Yes!” Hez could almost see Jimmy punching the air. “Tell me all about it.”

Hez gave a blow-by-blow description, which took twice as long thanks to Jimmy’s frequent interjections and questions.

“Are you on the road back to Birmingham?” Jimmy asked when Hez finished his story. “I’ll buy you dinner at Highlands.”

“Oh.” Jimmy paused. “That’s pretty close to Tupelo Grove, right?”

“Yeah. I’m actually at TGU right now.”

“Are you there about the Justice Chamber?” Jimmy’s voice was wary now. He knew the Justice Chamber was Hez’s dream. After a couple of long conversations, Jimmy had reluctantly agreed that Hez could have six months of paid leave to start the clinic someday—but he also clearly hoped someday never came.

Hez sighed and ran his fingers through his hair. “Yeah, but it doesn’t look like it’ll work out.”

“I’m sorry, man.” Jimmy’s tone conveyed the exact opposite of his words.

“It’s fine. It was a mistake for me to come down here.”

A bead of sweat runs down my temple. I've been here too long already, but I can't leave until my search is done.

I take a deep breath and blow it out through my nose. Maybe I need to take the Hez situation into my own hands.

Time to go. I skim my gaze over the office one last time, skipping the wedding picture. Then I slip out, close the door behind me, and hurry down the back stairwell. A quick check of my phone shows Savannah walking around the pond. Good.

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She licked dry lips. “What is it, boy?” she whispered.

She flipped on the lights, and the glow pushed back the shadows. Her neat bedroom looked exactly the same. The small desk area where she worked was the only spot of disarray with its stacks of homework folders. Was the picture of her and Hez with Ella out of place?

“Come,” she told Marley. With the dog beside her, Savannah explored the house.

Working steadily, she was down to the final folder in an hour.

The substance of the letter caught her attention. It was a letter of provenance for some pre-Columbian artifacts. The letter didn’t interest Savannah until she realized the provenance was listed as proof of sale for the listed statues. As far as she knew, the university wasn’t planning to sell any of their pieces. The value of the artifacts was enormous in so many ways, and she almost felt they were part of her personal history.

Hez could help me.

“Beckett.” She answered her own question with a relieved sigh. As provost, Beckett Harrison was in charge of Tupelo Grove’s bureaucracy, so hopefully he would know if these were legitimate sales. And if they weren’t, he’d be able to put a stop to them.

She grabbed her phone from its charger and called Beckett.

He answered on the first ring. “Morning, Savannah. You’re up early. Something wrong?”

“I’m not really sure. I found some strange documents mixed in with a stack of essays.”

“What kind of documents?”

“Yes,” she said without hesitation. “The letters specifically talk about sales.”

“I see.” He paused. “How did they wind up mixed in with a stack of your essays?”

He was silent for a moment. “Do you have any idea who it might be?”

“I think I know who you have in mind.”

“Ellison.”

“I know.” She bit her lip. “I’ll need help from someone high up in the administration, someone who really knows the system.”

He lay awake until after two, then finally fell asleep.

He tried to call her name, but his vocal cords made no sound. The last door loomed before him, and he reached for it with trembling fingers. It didn’t budge when he yanked on it, but it released on the second try.

He stared into the abyss, then backed away. He needed to scream, but he couldn’t open his mouth.

“Hezekiah Webster?”

“Yes.”

The guy thrust the envelope into Hez’s hands, then stepped back and snapped a picture with his phone. “You’ve been served.”

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She stood and smoothed her navy skirt. “Thanks for coming so quickly.”

He took her hand and squeezed it. “Of course, Savannah. This is too important to put off.”

She handed him the folder. “This is what I found.”

He perused it silently, then handed it back. “He also ordered a ream of history department letterhead.”

“He’s a law guy. What reason did Ellison give for the order?”

Beckett shrugged. “I doubt anyone questioned him. Most people know better.”

She held up the folder. “Should we call the police?”

“I think we should confront him first. We’d look pretty stupid if he has a perfectly good explanation for all of it.”

“What explanation could there be?”

“I have no idea, but you know Ellison. He’s quick on his feet. I’m ready to go now if you are.”

Beckett swiped his pass at the door and opened it.

The door to the presidential office suite wasn’t quite shut. Beckett frowned. “It’s

usually closed until his secretary arrives.” He pushed it open and walked in. The small secretarial office in front of the president’s office was empty. Beyond it, the door to the president’s office stood ajar. “Ellison?”

Savannah grabbed Beckett’s arm. “Something’s wrong, Beckett. I can feel it. We should call campus security.”

She scrambled back on her haunches, not aware of the keening sound erupting from her throat until Beckett called her name.

Breathe. In and out.

Then her gaze fell on the note pinned to his lapel. She leaned down to take a better look.

Something Wicked This Way Comes.

Pelican Harbor provided police services to the university under a century-old agreement. Savannah wished she could call her best friend, Nora Craft, for moral support, but Nora was a forensics tech in the Pelican Harbor Police Department, and Savannah didn’t want to place her friend in the middle of this mess. Besides, Nora was out of town for the next couple of weeks.

“Did you call the police and report it? Or campus security?”

“No, the provost, Beckett Harrison, suggested we should confront Abernathy ourselves first and see if there was a good explanation.”

“It sounds like you don’t really like him.”

Richards wrote in her notebook. “Did he have any good friends among the professors?”

“Your family has deep ties to the university, is that correct? Did your family start it?”

“Well, not exactly. It was originally named Universitates Nova Cambridge Willardius when it was founded after the Civil War.”

“That’s a mouthful.”

“And this Joseph Willard is the one who amassed the pre-Columbian artifacts that seem to be disappearing?”

“Exactly.”

“I see. Thank you for that clarification. Would you mind coming to the station for a little longer chat?”

“I’d be happy to come down.” Though happy wasn’t really what she felt, she didn’t have any choice but to agree.

Richards left, and Savannah sank into her chair. Was it her imagination that the detective had looked at her with suspicion?

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After watching Cody bounce for half a minute, the aristocratic dog finally smiled, did an elegant little jump, and trotted toward Cody, who put his ears back and tore off like a furry missile with the other dog loping in pursuit.

“It looks like my dog made a new friend. Yours?”

“Saluki. And Cody is...?”

“Mostly dog, I think.”

She let out a sunny laugh. “He’s adorable. I’m Dani, by the way.”

“I-I’m sorry to bother you, Hez.” Her voice trembled. “I didn’t know who else to call.”

“There’s been a murder. I think the police suspect me.”

“What? Why? Who was killed?”

“There’s no doubt they’ll be looking hard at you, Savannah. The police play good cop for a reason—they can get a suspect to relax and share things they shouldn’t. You just told her you didn’t like Abernathy and that you might have a motive because of the missing artifacts. You have a vested interest in the school and the artifacts because of your family connection.” He paused as a new thought hit him. “Hold on, where are you now?”

“On my way to the police station.”

“Are you under arrest?”

“I—I don’t think so.”

“But won’t that make them think I’m guilty?”

“Tell them your lawyer told you to do it.”

“You’ll be my lawyer?” The hopeful note in her voice made him wince. He’d said that reflexively without thinking it through.

“Could we discuss it in person? I’m sorry, I know I’m asking a lot.”

“Actually, I can’t represent you. I have a conflict of interest because we’re, um, adverse parties in another matter.”

A burst of motion caught his eye. He turned in time to see one of Birmingham’s resident peregrine falcons catch an unsuspecting pigeon, killing it instantly in a burst of feathers. Would Savannah be like that pigeon, caught by brutal forces she didn’t really understand? He knew the world of criminal justice and deadly conspiracies, but she didn’t. She’d somehow wandered into that world, and she could easily wind up in prison or even dead. Could he let that happen to her?

“Hez, are you there?”

She settled in the chair. “I hope you weren’t waiting long.”

“I just got here.” He scooted in her chair before resuming his seat. “I hope you still drink peppermint mochas.”

“And you’ve got black coffee in your cup, right? No froufrou drinks for you.”

His wide grin emerged. “It’s really great coffee. How long has this place been here? It looks new.”

He arched an eyebrow. “You always make small talk when you’re nervous. Is it that bad?”

“It’s not good. I feel like the police are circling like sharks around a bleeding dolphin, and I don’t know what to do.”

Hez’s brow furrowed, and he took a sip of his coffee. She watched his mouth touch the edge of the cup and a sudden memory of the feel of his lips on hers hit her out of nowhere. How could she still feel such a draw to him after all that had happened? His sudden reappearance showed her how little progress she’d made to forge a life without him. Would she ever be free of him? Did she even want to be?

“Why would he need someone in the history department when he had access to history department letterhead on his own?”

He lifted a brow. “How do you know he had access to letterhead?”

“Beckett told me.”

“Beckett? Who’s Beckett?”

“He just blurted this out to you?”

“So he was with you when the body was discovered?”

She gave a quick bob of her head. “Yes.”

Her cheeks had to be bright red. Hez was the smartest man she'd ever known. He would see right through her "good friends" comment and realize at least a potential relationship might exist there.

"I see."

"Why would you do that, Savannah? Just so I'll represent you, or because you're willing to give us a second chance?"

"Savannah?"

She lifted her gaze to meet his again. "I don't know, Hez. Reconciliation is a long, painful process. I'm under so much stress right now, I can't think." She swiped her palm across her forehead. "Can we postpone talking about starting over until I'm not under suspicion for murder? You'll represent me if I pull back the divorce, won't you?"

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Savannah pinned a neutral expression in place and held up an iced caramel latte from University Grounds. “Good morning.”

Her sister looked up from behind her big desk. “What are you doing here so early? I suppose it’s about Abernathy’s death? I should have called when I heard you’d found the body, but I was out of town until last night.” She ran her hand through her hair. “And I’m nowhere near ready for the fall semester to start, so I have a ton of work to wrap up.”

“I’m sorry to bother you, but I have something important to discuss with you.”

Jess set the coffee on the desk with a careful motion. “Out of the question.”

Jess’s hazel eyes went wide, and she leaned back in her chair. “Start at the beginning.”

Though she hadn’t wanted to tell Jess about the provenance letters, the police knew, so it was time to tell her sister. She spilled out the events of the last few days. The color slipped from her sister’s cheeks when Savannah got to the part about the Ray Bradbury book the police saw on her bookcase.

Jess sighed and rubbed her forehead. “You know I don’t.”

She leaned forward with the paper still clutched in her hand. “Then you’ll arrange it?”

“I don’t have a choice. I hope you know what you’re doing.”

More for her own sake than for her sister's, Savannah gave a vigorous nod. "I'm sure it's the right thing. I have to go in to the police station for an interview, and it will help so much to have Hez there. I already said more than I should have. That whole good cop / bad cop thing."

Guilt, a familiar companion, compressed Savannah's heart. She handed Jess the paper and stood. "I'm sorry."

Her sister pointed at the door. "We can talk more when this meeting is over. I need to get back to work."

"Of course. Thanks so much. I'll let Hez know he can start on Monday."

Hez's entrance into their lives had changed everything. It was no longer just her and Jess, and Savannah had been unable to prevent Jess's resentment of Hez's intrusion. Her recovery might be jeopardized by dealing with Hez in her life again, but there was no choice.

Bertha watched the retreating boat for a few seconds, then settled back down into the muck. Hez relaxed and retrieved his line. His fly hung over the warm green water, a brilliant gem of wet red and yellow feather, almost completely hiding the sharp steel hook. "I should've seen her. I was distracted. I've got a lot on my mind."

A sympathetic grimace creased Blake's tan face. "I'm sorry, man. Did she change her mind about withdrawing the divorce case?"

"No, but she's only doing it so I'll represent her."

"Did she say that?"

“Do you blame her?”

Hez frowned at his cousin. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Blake shrugged his broad shoulders. “Do you blame her for divorcing the guy you were two years ago?”

“But I’m not that guy anymore.”

“Does she know that?”

“Did she say that?”

“I could tell.”

Blake looked him in the eyes. “Have you forgiven yourself?”

“God can forgive you.”

Hez could feel Blake watching him, but his cousin accepted his silence. Hez appreciated that. Blake knew him well enough to realize that pressing the subject would only result in an argument.

“Fine. But you’d better be ready to bail me out of jail.”

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She didn't remember Savannah. That was a big relief. Their paths hadn't crossed since she'd left for college, but she still vividly recalled "Miz Willard's" dislike of all things Legare. The miniature woman in front of her was a sharp contrast to the female powerhouse she'd feared all her life.

Savannah had always thought Joseph Willard was a lot like her dad—bigger than life and a hero to those who didn't know him well. Scratch beneath those likable surfaces and the rot underneath became all too clear.

She nodded. "I'd love to hear the story of how and why he founded TGU. He was quite wealthy?"

Savannah turned a warm, encouraging smile on Helen. "And we still have Nova Cambridge as part of the area's heritage."

Savannah could hardly wait to read them. She opened the letters and snapped pictures of them with her phone. "These are wonderful, Miz Willard."

Helen gasped and put her hand to her neck. "B-but her name is Webster. Are you sure, Deke?"

"She was evicted from her house?"

He sneered. "Your innocent act doesn't fool me, Savannah Legare. You knew exactly what you were doing. The Legares have taken advantage of our family for years. You won't get away with it forever, you know. Your sins will find you out eventually. All of you, especially your father."

The dash lights glowed when she switched on the engine. It was only nine, and a plan sprang to life. She could search the warehouse. Maybe she could examine the Willard Treasure room and find a clue as to who had done this. Abernathy's murder had to be tied to the sale of artifacts.

She studied the enormous stone carvings and frescoes torn from the walls of Aztec tombs. Where was that huge one that had been her favorite for so long? He was so ugly she'd felt sympathy and a real connection to him. Oh, there he was, hidden behind boxes. Had someone moved him? She snapped pictures as she walked along the rows past boxes labeled "Assorted Pottery from Building 3" and another row of boxes with the itemized contents labeled.

Maybe it had been her imagination. Or a raccoon. The thought of an animal being in here with her wasn't much of a comfort, and she retraced her steps to the back of the building. Her breath came fast as she strained to hear any movement behind her. Maybe coming here alone hadn't been a good idea.

Something rustled to her right, and somebody struck her on the head. Darkness rushed down to claim her in its folds.

The answer popped into his sleep-fogged mind: Savannah.

He grabbed the phone from its charger and took the call. "Hello?"

"Savannah is in the hospital," Jess said without preamble. "She asked me to call you while they take her in for an MRI."

He bolted upright. “What? What happened?”

“Oh. I—I...” His voice trailed off as he fumbled for words. “Is she okay?”

“I hope so. The doctor just walked in. Get down here.” She ended the call.

Savannah had to be all right.

Ten minutes later, he was headed south on I-65 with Cody in the back seat. He collected his scattered thoughts as he drove. Savannah’s email had offered him a teaching job and a home for the Justice Chamber if he’d represent her. He hadn’t responded because he didn’t know what to say. He could easily represent her from Birmingham—Little & Associates had clients all over Alabama. A local PI could do the legwork, and Hez could drive down for court hearings and key witness interviews, and he could invite Savannah out for dinner whenever he was in town. Simple—and very different from what Savannah had in mind.

A cold wave of guilt washed over him, settling in an icy lump in his stomach.

Hez pulled into Pelican Harbor just after dawn. He’d called ahead and found a pet boarding place that agreed to take his dog for a few hours, and it only took moments to drop Cody off. Hez turned into the hospital parking lot. Long shadows stretched across the mostly empty asphalt. He parked as close to the entrance as possible and hurried in. Once the front desk verified he was Savannah’s husband, a nurse guided him to her room. Fluorescent lights buzzed overhead, and the scent of disinfectant lingered in the tiled hallways.

He smiled. “I was just thinking how good you look. You’ve got first-thing-in-the-morning beauty. How are you doing?”

“That’s great! Have you talked to the police?”

“Yes.” A shadow crossed her face. “I should have waited for you, shouldn’t I? I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it. You’re a crime victim this time, not a potential suspect. I’m sure it was fine. What did they say?”

“There weren’t any witnesses, and whoever attacked me seemed to know the locations of all the cameras. All the police have is a partial image of the back of someone wearing a gray hoodie. The crime techs are out checking for fingerprints, but they didn’t seem optimistic.” She hesitated. “Do you think you can help?”

He had, which was a big factor behind his 98percent conviction rate in murder cases. “Yes.”

“Did—did you get my email?”

“Oh, good! You’ll love Tupelo Grove. It’s the perfect place for your clinic.”

Her lips flattened. “Oh.”

She smiled, but it seemed forced. “You’re right. It’s for the best this way.”

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Hez's blue eyes looked shadowed, and she suspected he wasn't sleeping any better than she was. In the old days she would have caught his hand and dragged him off for a nap that turned into much more. Her cheeks flared with heat.

"I was lucky to get it."

"So you're telling me to keep my new Jimmy Choo pumps in the closet?"

"And your jogging shoes and your sandals. I appreciate you keeping him until I find a place. The hotel manager hates dogs."

Savannah eyed Cody again. "Maybe it's just your dog."

He grinned at her comment. "Hey, I've got a lead on a rental. It's a condo in downtown Pelican Harbor. Jane Dixon owns it."

"I know Jane," Savannah said. "I could talk to her, put in a good word for you."

"I'm meeting her at the condo at three on Saturday. You could meet us there."

Beckett frowned and shifted in his chair. "You're moving here?"

"I need to be near enough to help find who's behind this."

"I'm perfectly capable of helping."

"I wish I could say that, but no. I'm sure you're their top suspect. It's my job to point

their attention in a different direction.”

Beckett straightened in the brown armchair. “The guy hit you with a crowbar?”

Beckett’s brow smoothed. “It’s always smart to follow the money. As provost I have access to TGU’s financial data. If Abernathy and his coconspirators were selling artifacts from the university’s collection, some traces should exist in the financial records. They would have wanted to run the funds through the school’s bank.”

She rubbed the lump on the back of her head. “Whoever it was, he was serious about making sure I didn’t find anything of value.”

She walked across the wood floors into the living room, beautifully furnished in gray and white. Through the big window overlooking the street, she spotted an iron balcony with two chairs and a table. No sign of Hez or Jane. “Hello?” she called.

“We’re in the bedroom,” Hez called.

Jane inclined her head toward Hez. “Hello, Savannah. I understand you’re his local reference.”

“I usually like a year’s lease, but he says he’ll only be here through December.”

Though being in this coastal town where they’d spent so many romantic weekends had her emotions in a jumble.

“I’d appreciate it if you could make an exception for me,” Hez said. “If circumstances change and I’m able to stay longer, I’ll sign an extension immediately. And I’ll take good care of your beautiful place.”

“Mama!”

Jane bounced the little girl in her arms. “This is Dolly. She’s two. Say hello, sweetheart.”

“Hello.” The word was muffled as Dolly buried her face in Jane’s neck.

Savannah couldn’t help staring. “She’s beautiful, Jane. And her name is perfect.”

Jane smiled and set her daughter down. “It’s a done deal. I have the lease agreement with me if you’re ready to sign, Hez.” Her smile faltered when she looked at Savannah.

“Thank you so much.” Savannah swallowed past the constriction in her throat. “I—I need to go now.”

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He reached Savannah's office, took a deep breath, and knocked on the door.

"Come in," she called.

"Did you see Beckett's email to the history faculty?" she asked. "That should make these interviews easier."

"Great," he said without enthusiasm. "Who do you want to talk to first?"

"Let's start with old Charlie Hinkle. His office is just down the hall."

"Good morning, Charlie!" Savannah said, brightening the dusty room with her smile. "Do you have a few minutes?"

"Yes, yes, yes." Hinkle shifted in his seat. "I, um, I'm sorry about that."

Hez's ears perked up. "Sorry about what exactly?"

"Which pieces?" Savannah asked.

They picked their way around the desk, with Savannah in the lead. Half a dozen pots, dishes, and other items lay haphazardly on piles of paper. She snapped pictures of the items with her phone.

A stone sculpture of a flat-nosed man's head wearing a helmet sat on a small table. Hez pointed to it. "Can I see that?"

Hez nodded. "I'd still like to see it. Could you hand it to me?"

Hez stopped too. "What is it?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. There's something off about these pictures of the warehouse. I feel like I'm missing something, but I don't know what. This stupid postconcussion brain fog makes it hard to focus."

She sighed and pocketed her phone. "Maybe it's nothing. Okay, let's talk to Tony Guzman next."

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As soon as they finished introductions, Guzman said, “I’m glad you stopped by.”

Savannah arched an eyebrow. “Why is that, Tony?”

“Because the so-called Willard Treasure has bothered me for years. It contains thousands of priceless artifacts—the looted heritage of an entire city of my ancestors—and no one has ever even done a proper catalog of them. You could steal half of what’s there and no one would ever notice. So I’m glad someone is at least investigating missing items.”

“I think I’ve heard you mention him,” Savannah said.

Guzman shook his head. “The place looked like a war zone when they left. They shipped back a literal boatload of artifacts—intricate gold work, enormous stone carvings, and frescoes torn from the walls of tombs. The flashier items went into the museum, but a lot of the ‘boring’ artifacts went into boxes labeled ‘Assorted pottery from northeast building’ and stuff like that. They went straight into storage, where they’ve stayed ever since.”

“I see,” Hez said. “So in your view, it all really belongs to the people of Veracruz, especially the descendants of the Aztecs.”

Guzman nodded. “Exactly.”

“Like you.”

Guzman gave Hez a pointed stare. “What do you mean?”

Hez shrugged. “Well, if it belongs to you, then you’d be entirely within your rights to take a few pieces, wouldn’t you?”

Savannah smiled. “Thanks, Tony. That would be great.”

“Yes, thanks.” Hez thought for a moment. “I don’t have any further questions, at least for now.”

Once they were back in the hall, Hez turned to Savannah. “I’m less positive about him, but my gut says no.”

“Or a murderer.”

“It doesn’t sound like he’s a favorite of yours.” He frowned. “Wait, is this the guy Jess dated?”

“Yes. I was surprised to find him still working here. He’s the department chair and is pretty full of himself.”

“Come in,” a deep male voice called.

They walked into an office that seemed more suited to a politician than a professor. The polished walnut bookcases and matching table were mostly decorated with awards and honorary degrees Andersen had received and pictures of him with famous people. The man himself sat behind an ornate walnut desk, smiling at them with too-perfect teeth. He was a big man, and Hez guessed that he’d probably been handsome in a rugged-Viking way about ten years ago. He still had the thick blond hair, broad shoulders, and square jaw, but he’d gotten squishy in the middle and florid in the face.

Andersen steepled his fingers. “What can I do for you?”

Hez cleared his throat. “We’re investigating the removal of artifacts from the Willard Treasure warehouse.”

“Just one thing: Why were you in the warehouse?”

Another hint of terror flashed across his face as Andersen stared at her phone, followed by another fast recovery. “Oh... oh yes. Thanks for reminding me. I was just looking around. As head of the department it behooves me to look in on our collections from time to time, of course. Now, I’m sorry, but you really must excuse me. If you have more questions, please contact my secretary to schedule an appointment.”

“I think we have all we need,” Hez said. “For now.”

Back outside, Hez stared up the hill toward the cemetery. Savannah turned to stare that way too. “It’s the day after tomorrow.”

Three years.

Jess struggled to keep up in her heels. “I should have changed to my running shoes,” she muttered. “Wait up, Savannah.”

Jess reached her, and her expression softened. “You doing okay, Savannah? I don’t know that it’s healthy to come here every year. Being confronted with it first thing in the morning sets you up for a terrible day. I worry about you.”

“I’d probably be in jail if he hadn’t.”

Her friend Nora always reminded her to remember the good times, and Savannah

would try to focus on those today.

Marley woofed at the sound of his name.

Jess stirred and settled on the bench. “It’s such a peaceful place up here. Do you come up often?”

“When Ella first died, I came every day, sometimes more than once. Now I come often, but it’s not a compulsion.” She glanced at her sister’s somber face. “Remember how Ella would squeal when you came to see us? She’d run with her arms outstretched the minute she spotted your car.”

Savannah sighed. “You need to forgive him, Jess. Your hatred only hurts you.”

Jess didn’t often talk about this, but Savannah wasn’t ready to delve into that pain on an already agonizing day.

“You’re defending him like Mom defended your dad.”

She rocked back and forth, and her cries echoed back at her from the canopy of trees overhead. “Ella, my Ella,” she sobbed.

How was Hez handling the anniversary? She prayed he wasn’t falling apart like her.

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“I’m fine.” Hez took a sip of the rich black brew. “As fine as I can be, anyway.”

“Yep.” Hez drew in a deep breath, and the scent of fresh beignets from the restaurant below reminded him that he hadn’t eaten. “I’m going to grab a little breakfast and then go for a long run, with a stop at Ella’s grave. Then errands and paperwork for the rest of the day. I’ve got a to-do list a foot long.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Jimmy paused. “Are you going to be on your own?”

“Yeah. Blake is tied up today.”

Jimmy was silent for a moment. “Wish I could be there. I’ll give you a call later. And I’ll be praying for you.”

As he ran, Ella filled his thoughts. He shied away from memories of her death, making himself focus on her all-too-short life. She’d been a carbon copy of Savannah, except that she had his blue eyes—which had been gorgeous on her. They sparkled when she laughed, which she did often, especially after they brought home Marley as a puppy. The two of them had been best friends. If only Hez had paid attention when Marley started barking that day, maybe...

He ran to the hilltop and the scene came into view. Savannah and Jess, standing in bright sunlight at Ella’s grave. Savannah’s back was to him, her shoulders heaving with grief. Jess had her arm around her sister, comforting her. He took a step forward into the light, instinctively wanting to comfort his wife.

Ella’s eyes had the exact same empty stare when he pulled her body from that pool.

He needed cayenne pepper and a few other items for the bisque. His wallet was back in the condo, but Publix had Apple Pay, so he could just use his watch. He spotted a store off the path and headed for it. Hopefully, he wouldn't see anyone he knew.

He hesitated. "I have work to do, babe. This brief is due on Monday."

She pressed her lips together. "You always have work to do. It's the weekend, and she needs some time with her daddy."

"I was going to take her to the park when this is done."

"Take her now. I won't be gone long."

Hez went back to his home office and left the door ajar—enough so he'd hear what was going on, but the movie wouldn't distract him. He soon lost himself in the brief, honing his argument that the other side had misinterpreted a key statute. If he could just convince the judge on this point, everything else would fall into place. It was a nuanced issue, so he needed to word this section exactly right.

"Ella?"

No answer.

"Ella?" he called in a louder voice as he walked down the hall.

Still no answer.

The first little wave of fear rippled through him. "Ella!"

And in the pool itself, Ella floated face down. Her golden hair spread out around her little head like a halo.

The rest of the day had been a blur. Scattered memories cut through him like glass shards—the sirens, the EMTs, Savannah’s screams when she came home, the grocery bags she dropped on the kitchen floor. The only thing he clearly remembered was fighting over the candy. He yelled at Savannah for leaving it where Ella could see it from inside, and she yelled back that he must have done it. It was the first skirmish in his losing war against guilt.

“Mr. Webster,” a vaguely familiar voice said, breaking him out of his thoughts.

“I just wanted to let you know I checked them out.”

Hez blinked. “Checked out... what?”

“The pieces for my book. The ones you and Savannah came to see me about.”

“Oh, uh, yes. Thank you.”

He went straight to his condo, where he grabbed his phone from its charger and called Jimmy.

Jimmy picked up on the first ring. “Hi, Hez. You okay?”

“No. No, I’m not.” Hez recounted everything that had happened since he walked into the cemetery.

Jimmy whistled. “Man, that’s rough. Wow. When was the last time you prayed the Serenity Prayer?”

“The last time we were at a meeting together.”

“It’s a long drive.”

“Yeah, perfect for listening to a book I just downloaded.”

“I don’t know, Jimmy. I—”

Hez managed a chuckle. “Thanks, Jimmy. I really appreciate it.”

He ended the call and went out on the balcony. Pelican Harbor’s bustling little French Quarter spread out below him. His shaky breathing became even, and a light breeze cooled his face, bringing the scent of beignets and the faint strains of jazz.

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Luis's right foot washed ashore last week. The police think it belonged to a drowned fisherman or migrant, but they found it near where I dumped the body. Also, the foot was in a black cowboy boot, and I can still feel the leather of his boots as I dragged the body across the beach to his boat.

I shiver, but not from the cold.

A male silhouette appears in the light, hand on his gun. "Let me see your license." I can't see his face, but the voice sounds young.

"What are you doing out here?"

"Walking on the beach."

"At one in the morning?"

"I couldn't sleep. My job can be pretty stressful."

"Did you see anyone on the beach?"

"No, but I noticed a pickup parked on the side of the road about a half mile back."

He nodded. "We saw it. Mind if I search your car?"

My pulse starts to race again. I need to find out where the leak is and plug it fast. If I don't—

A tap at my window makes me jump. The young officer is smiling. “Sorry to startle you,” he says as I roll down the window. He hands me my license. “You can go now. You shouldn’t come down here during the night. It’s not safe.”

I nod. “Yes. Yes, I realize that now.”

“You can look away when we eat them then. I’ll be glad to have yours.”

A corner of Beckett’s lips lifted. “You with powdered sugar on your face would be way more tempting than the beignet.”

Hez’s posture went rigid at their friendly exchange, and her gaze swung back to him. Except for the tired lines around his eyes, she never would have guessed yesterday had been as tough for him as it had been for her. And maybe it hadn’t. He’d always been a master at compartmentalizing his life. Once he got over the shock of Ella’s death, the stacks of folders and his distraction with work had only grown.

And so had the mound of empty liquor bottles.

She blinked and refocused her attention on the problem facing them. “Sorry, what did you say?”

Hez pulled out his phone and glanced at it. “Andersen is a definite possibility. His reason for being there is flimsy. In my view a lie immediately takes a suspect to the top of the list.”

“Well done,” Savannah said. “Any hint of where the money is coming from?”

“Shouldn’t the report show where the money came from and where it went?” Hez

said.

“The reports I can access are general without the detail we need. We need more information.”

Hez glanced at Savannah. “Who would have complete access? Jess?”

She saw where this was heading and nodded. “Jess is the CFO and can see everything.”

Beckett chuckled, but Hez’s eyes narrowed. He’d likely charge to her defense if he deemed it necessary. The thought of having him as a protector brought more comfort than it should.

And an hour later she was even less sure. There was no sign he’d been to Ella’s grave at all.

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Hez settled into the chair in front of her desk. “Thanks for meeting with me. Yes, the university is investigating the theft of artifacts. We think there might be a connection to the Abernathy murder, particularly in light of the attack at the warehouse.”

Richards nodded. “That occurred to me too. Do you have any hard evidence?”

“Have you pulled surveillance videos from the professors’ visits to the warehouse?”

“Good thinking. Can you send me a copy of anything you find?”

She looked up from her notes, a hint of concern in her brown eyes. “Are you preserving the metadata?”

“We are—I thought of that too. We want to make sure any evidence we find is admissible.”

Another encouraging sign. He decided to push his luck a little and see if she’d tell him anything about her investigation. “Of course. We’re happy to help. Is there anything you can share that might make our investigation more efficient? For example, are there any indications that this might have been a burglary that went wrong?”

“Time of death?”

“Unless the murderer killed him somewhere else and used his card to get in and dump the body.”

She glanced at her watch. “That’s pretty unlikely given the amount of blood around the body.”

“Good point. Did anyone else card in after him?”

“Got it. Well, I won’t take up any more of your time. I’ll let you know what we find.”

He did his best to keep from grinning like an idiot until he left the station. The meeting could not have gone any better. Richards had given him more information about the case than she really had to, though he would have been entitled to it eventually if Savannah were charged. But more importantly—much more importantly—Richards didn’t act like Savannah was likely to ever be charged. This had been a collaborative meeting between two investigators, not a cop meeting with a suspect’s attorney. Hez had been in both types of meetings, and he knew the difference.

Jess’s mansion on the outskirts of Pelican Harbor oozed privilege and power. The sunset painted the Greek Revival house in oranges and gold, giving it a warm and inviting look that Savannah knew was entirely external. Jess lived alone and only used the larger rooms when she was throwing upscale parties for donors or financiers. The only parts of the house that got regular use were the home office and pool, where Jess put in miles each day. The rest of it felt lifeless and dusty, even though Jess’s maid service kept it spotless.

Jess eyed her warily. “What?”

Jess pulled the box of shepherd’s pie toward her and lifted the lid. She inhaled and smiled. “No one makes shepherd’s pie like Mac’s.”

Savannah crossed her arms over her chest. “Did you hear me?”

“I see more than you know.” Savannah wet her lips. “You’ve always been there for me, and I need your help. I don’t know where to search next if you say no. I might as well turn myself in and let them put me in jail.”

Jess put a hand on Savannah’s arm. “I’m sorry. Fortunately, he’s only here for a few months. Once Christmas comes, he’ll be out of your hair.”

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Besides, he had something else he'd been meaning to do. He picked up his desk phone and dialed.

A familiar female voice answered. "Paige Alexander, Federal Public Defender's Office."

"Hey, Paige. It's Hez Webster."

"Hez? I haven't heard from you in years! Are you still with the DA's office? Or did you finally decide to join the Light Side?"

He laughed again. "That's actually what I'm calling about—everyone deserving a defense, that is. Not you committing malpractice to get me behind bars. I'm taking a leave of absence from my firm and teaching at Tupelo Grove. I'd like to do some pro bono work while I'm here and maybe involve a couple of my students. Does the PD ever refer out cases?"

He was used to—and usually appreciated—Paige's bluntness. "Yep. I haven't had a drink for almost two years and I'm in AA."

"They couldn't find anything?" Hez echoed. "No drugs?"

"None. They even brought out a dog after they towed his boat to shore. Nada. The only thing in the boat was a fishing pole."

That didn't add up. "So why is this a drug case, let alone a felony case?"

“Seems thin.”

Hez didn't hesitate. “Yes.”

A message from Nora pinged back almost immediately. Got you covered, girlfriend. Already at a back table with their first batch of spiced cider in hand.

Savannah collapsed onto the chair and reached for the comfort of the hot drink. “My life is a mess.”

“Is it about Abernathy's murder? Augusta is a good and fair detective, so try not to worry.”

Savannah relaxed a little. “That's part of it, but not all. Hez showed up out of the blue and asked for another chance.”

Nora's brown eyes went wide behind her glasses. “I—I don't know what to say. How do you feel about it?”

“There are other attorneys.”

Savannah appreciated her friend's cautious tone. “I know, but Hez is the best.”

“Oh please, this is me you're talking to. You've heard me blather on about Nathan's death ad nauseam over the past three years. I talk about how much I loved him and how much I miss him. I've told you about the affair he had when he was deployed to Japan and how God reminded me of my own sin when he came crawling back. We've discussed how hard it was to rebuild our marriage and how excited he was when Preston was born. But you're as silent as a fence post about your relationship with

Hez. You've kept back every detail except that he drank too much and took Vicodin after Ella's death."

"It's hard to talk about it."

"Do you still blame him for Ella's death?"

"But you found her. You paid attention. Wasn't he supposed to be watching her?"

"Isn't that kind of normal for an attorney?"

"Did you talk to him about Ella? It might have been helpful to go to the cemetery together."

"Did you call him? Text him?"

"Well, no."

"Maybe he was hurt he didn't hear from you."

"I never thought about calling him."

"Do you want to try again with Hez?"

"The heart wants what the heart wants. Has Hez changed?"

"So talk. You are so good at your job and can take charge of any situation except this one."

"I get it, but you can't heal yourself without talking to him. It's time, Savannah. Past time."

Savannah bit her lip and held Nora's gaze. "I realized the other day that I blame God more than Hez. He could have prevented Ella's death, but he didn't. I don't know how to get past that."

"I've had to deal with that, too, Savannah. I think every parent who has lost a child feels that."

"How did you get past it?"

Nora got a text and read it. "I have to go in to work. I'm sorry. Will you be okay?"

Nora slung her bag over her shoulder. "I'll call you later."

Savannah's phone rang, and she glanced at the screen. Maybe he had new information. "Hey, Beckett."

"You doing okay, Savannah? I wanted to see how your visit to Ella's grave went. I hope you weren't alone."

How sweet that he'd remembered it was the anniversary of Ella's death. "I survived."

"I can be there in thirty minutes."

The lilt to his voice touched her, and she smiled. "I'll meet you on the porch."

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He pictured her sitting across a little table from him now, her beautiful face lit by candlelight as she listened appreciatively to his description of his meeting with Augusta. His pulse quickened at the thought, and he smiled.

He decided to text her. Hi! I've got some news about your case. When would be a good time to talk? Happy to buy you dinner if you haven't eaten.

A few seconds later, the pulsing ellipsis appeared. Then, Now is fine. I'm at University Grounds. The ellipsis appeared again before he could respond. With Beckett.

Hez reached University Grounds after a five-minute walk. Strings of patio lights cast a warm yellow glow on the wrought-iron tables and chairs on the broad porch of the old hotel that housed the coffee shop. The tables were mostly full of students and faculty, and it took Hez a few seconds to spot Beckett and Savannah. They sat close together in a dimly lit corner along the porch rail, chatting and laughing. Beckett had his arm on the rail behind her—not touching her but familiar and possessive. Savannah noticed Hez and waved him over.

“They really do.” Savannah took a long sip as if to illustrate the point. “You said you had news. What’s up?”

So she wasn’t going to invite him to join them. Maybe that was because the porch was crowded. Maybe.

She gave a relieved smile. “Excellent—for both of us. You must be looking forward to getting back to Birmingham.”

“I, uh, haven’t made a decision about that.” Hez cleared his throat. “You know, Tupelo Grove has been growing on me.”

“Thanks for stopping by,” Beckett said, his frown now transformed into a smug grin.

A hint of concern showed in Savannah’s eyes. “You just finished work?”

Savannah stared down into her cup again and said nothing.

Hez decided to leave before things got even more awkward. “Have a good evening.” He turned and walked away.

Before he’d gone a hundred yards, Hez realized he was heading in the wrong direction. He was walking toward downtown Nova Cambridge, which had a collection of restaurants catering to faculty and students. But that was the last place he wanted to go now. His gut felt like it was full of cold gravel, and he couldn’t think of anything more depressing than sitting alone in a restaurant while Savannah was out with Beckett. Besides, he needed to get back home to Cody, who hadn’t been out since noon.

The guy ran his fingers through shaggy hair—and Hez knew why he looked familiar. His hand shook and his movements were jerky and fidgety. Hez had seen it at least a hundred times in the past two years: The guy was an addict going through the first symptoms of withdrawal. He was hours past due for his next fix or drink, and it was starting to affect him. So why was he out here rather than feeding his craving?

Part of the reason he could picture the man’s face so clearly was that he’d seen it before in better light. But where?

Beckett's arm dropped from the back of her chair enough for his hand to settle on her shoulder. "You okay?"

Maybe he'd gotten the wrong idea from her invitation. "I'm fine. It's getting chilly."

His arm didn't return to its former position. "Supposed to go down to forty-eight or so tonight."

The warmth radiated off his skin, and she leaned forward to curl her cold fingers around her mug of hot cider. When she leaned back, he'd pulled his arm to his side. She breathed a sigh of relief.

Her phone dinged with a message. She snatched it out of her purse with relief she struggled to hide. It was from Hez.

You okay? I spotted an addict watching you. I've seen him before, but I can't think where. Wavy brown hair, glasses, dark brown eyes, thin nose and lips, early thirties, about 5'2". Want me to check out your house?

No thanks, I'm still with Beckett, and he will make sure I'm safe.

The way her pulse blipped when she hit Send told her she wanted to upset him. Sometimes she didn't understand her own behavior.

She exhaled and told Beckett about the man Hez had spotted. "It's probably nothing."

"I'll walk you home," he said. "Let's get out of here before he comes back."

Marley sneered in the way only a dog can, and she sighed. "Yeah, I know that's a crazy thing to say. You adore Hez and always have. I'm sure he loves you more than Cody. A guy never forgets his first dog."

“Stay,” she said.

The door opened, and Beckett gestured for her to join him. She loosened fists she hadn’t realized she’d clenched. “All clear?”

“Anytime.”

His strained smile didn’t reach his eyes. “I sure wish you were single, Savannah,” he said in a husky voice. He went down the two steps on the porch and walked away without looking back.

She rubbed her forehead and went inside. The investigation had enough drama on its own without adding more.

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Hez's students seemed to be learning—and one in particular caught Hez's attention: Eduardo Hernandez. Ed was a varsity swimmer who was only in law school because he had an extra year of athletic eligibility. Hez originally wrote him off as a jock just using up his scholarship, but Ed had turned out to be a surprisingly good student with a strong interest in criminal law. He was smart, paid attention, turned assignments in on time, and was never late to class. He also spoke Spanish fluently, which made him perfect for what Hez had in mind. And when Hez had asked for volunteers to help with the Morales case, Ed had been the first to sign up.

Hez pulled up Ed's number on his class chart and sent a short text, asking him to call.

“That would be awesome! Swimming season is in full swing, but I'll make the time. What's the case about? And when can I start?”

The video clips from the warehouse security camera had finally arrived—over two weeks after he'd requested them—while he was in class yesterday, but he hadn't opened them until he was sure he had the building to himself. The last thing he wanted was for a colleague or a student to pop in for a chat and see someone they knew on his monitor. He went to the door and took a quick peek down the hall—no one in sight and all the other offices were dark.

Hez poured himself a fresh—or new anyway—cup of coffee and started the Andersen clips. In the first one Andersen walked in carrying a duffel bag. Hez expected him to start shoving artifacts into it. But instead he took out a wine bottle, corkscrew, glasses, and candles. He arranged these on a little table in the corner next to a couch Hez hadn't noticed before. He returned a few minutes later with a young woman wearing a sorority sweatshirt.

Hez was left with the same questions he had started with. Who was stealing artifacts? And who had attacked Savannah?

She repeated the process down the long line of crates and, hours later, found nothing missing now that Professor Hinkle had checked out the items he'd taken. Even the gold pieces were still present. There were still crates to go through, but Savannah had the sinking feeling she would find no information for the long hours she'd spent. Maybe she should take a break and run out for coffee.

He glanced around the huge room. "Find anything?"

"Nothing. It's so frustrating. I wouldn't have been attacked unless someone wanted to keep me from discovering something criminal."

"You look stressed. A workout would fix that. I've got an extra bike, and we could pedal down to the beach."

A mere nine miles for him, but a hard trek for her when she hadn't been on a bike in years. She and Hez used to have bikes they'd take out for leisurely rides with Ella in her little helmet perched in a seat behind one of them. The sudden memory pushed out the frustration of her lack of progress on the case.

"You okay?"

She nodded and rubbed the back of her neck. "Fine."

"Better?" he asked.

"So much better."

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He hurried to the warehouse, dodging students on the way. He passed the guard—sure enough, the man was staring at his phone and tapping on the screen. He didn't even glance up as Hez half jogged by him. The warehouse door was open, and the inner door leading to the climate-controlled room holding the Willard Treasure was also ajar. Concern tightened his chest.

Her eyes opened wide. "Hez! What are you doing here?"

His concern congealed into a lump of ice that sank into his gut. "You weren't responding to texts, and I was worried."

Beckett smiled broadly but said nothing.

Hez kept his eyes on Savannah. "I see."

She stared down at her phone. "Your messages still haven't shown up. Did you have news?"

Savannah bit her lip and seemed lost in thought. Was she wondering how to break the news to her sister?

Hez wasn't surprised. "Someone is smurfing."

Beckett nodded. "I thought the same thing, Hez."

"Smurfing?" Savannah frowned. "Sorry, you lost me."

Savannah got to her feet and walked over to a crate that had papers spread across the top. “How many inbound transactions?”

Beckett cocked his head. “Inbound transactions?”

Beckett stared into the middle distance for a few seconds. “About thirty inbound transactions, I believe.”

“And how much money are we talking about in total?” she asked.

“About twelve million.”

She moved around to the back of the headstone and stopped at the sight of a waterlogged stuffed puppy lying upside down as if it had fallen off. She picked it up and saw a tag that read “Daddy loves you.” Her throat tightened at the realization Hez had to have placed it on the headstone. She battled the sting in her eyes at the thought of him coming here alone like she did. If only they could have faced this battle together these past years.

“I’m fine. I wanted to decorate Ella’s grave for fall.”

Jess’s brows winged up. “What’s happened?”

“He carried out artifacts?”

Savannah shook her head. “He took things out—a wine bottle, corkscrew, glasses, and candles.”

Jess stilled. “That sounds like he was expecting a—a woman.”

“Exactly. A young woman showed up for a romantic tryst. He appears to be using the warehouse to hide an affair with a student.”

“That’s strictly against university policy.”

Jess stood and paced in front of the park bench. “I’ll need to do something about this. It can’t continue.” She stopped and thrust her hands in the pockets of her cotton sweater. “What about Beckett’s investigation into the financials? I want him to quit poking around as soon as possible, and he’s had ample time to evaluate them.”

Jess followed her. “What’s going on, Savannah? You’re hiding something.”

Her eyes widened. “Did he actually believe I’d do something like that?”

“He said he checked with the bank, and the person had presented documents claiming to be you.”

“I’ll get to the bottom of this! They surely have a copy of the ID and any other proof the thief used in my name. I guess I should be grateful Beckett saw something so I can put an end to it and figure out what’s going on here.” Jess’s expression turned thoughtful. “Could Abernathy have been involved? Maybe there’s a connection with his murder. Will Hez tell the police what your little investigative group has uncovered?”

“I—I assume so, but we haven’t talked about it.”

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The phone rang again. Same number. Hez plopped into his office chair and picked up the receiver. “Hi, Don. What can I do for you?”

“We’re working on it.”

“Great, but when will I see the indictment?”

“I know what a prelim does,” Hale snapped. “You’ve got the complaint. That tells you all you need to know.”

“Look, Hez, read the complaint again. I’ve got confidential witnesses saying there’s a smuggling operation and that there was supposed to be a delivery coming in by boat at 1:00 a.m. on the night of September third. Your guy showed up at 1:00 a.m. on the night of September third in a boat, and he was acting exactly like a cartel smuggler—no lights, he ran when the Coast Guard showed up, and he threw something overboard. Sounds like Sinaloa, don’t you think? That’s enough to show probable cause. Forcing us all to go through a prelim will just tick off me and the judge.”

“You’re gonna regret this,” Hale growled. He hung up without waiting for Hez’s response.

Hez stared at the phone, wondering if Hale was right.

She rubbed her aching neck and stared out the window toward the lights of the

football field. Her first date with Hez had been to a football game, and he'd kissed her that night with the taste of butter and popcorn still on his lips. She touched her lips and smiled. For the first time a seed of hope unfurled and pushed its way to the surface. Was there any chance of a reconciliation?

"Knock knock," a male voice announced.

She turned and saw Erik Andersen standing in the doorway. "Professor Andersen, what can I do for you?"

"That's good. I mean, whatever Abernathy was involved with, it was clearly dangerous. I wouldn't want you getting in the way of danger too. Jess would never survive something happening to you."

Savannah tensed. Was he warning her off? "Luckily, she'll never have to face that."

She rose and began stuffing papers into her briefcase. "Well, I don't know anything about the videos. You could ask Hez directly."

Another veiled threat? She shuddered and locked the door once his footsteps faded down the hall.

Ed gave him a blank stare. "Excuse me?"

"Hernando. Who do you think he's working for? He was pretty tight-lipped about that when we interviewed him at the jail."

Ed shrugged muscular shoulders. "He was pretty tight-lipped about everything." He paused for a moment. "Maybe one of the big drug cartels?"

Ed stared at him in confusion.

Ed nodded. “I’ll make five copies and pre-mark them with exhibit stickers.”

“Yes, Dad.” Ed grinned. “I’ll make the copies and then head over to the library.”

Two minutes later, Hez walked out the law school door and into the gathering night. The air wasn’t quite cool, but it no longer held the day’s heat as tightly as summer evenings did. The leaves hadn’t started to change colors yet, but that would come soon. He smelled woodsmoke—probably from one of the firepits so popular at the fraternity and sorority houses. A few students strolled in the twilight. A faint babble of conversation and laughter came from a party somewhere. A few early stars twinkled in the deep blue sky overhead.

Maybe it was time to move on—and to let Savannah move on. She’d made it very clear that’s what she wanted. She had shown no interest in getting back together despite seeing the “new Hez” at close range for over a month. And he vividly remembered the contented smile on her face when Beckett was massaging her. How many moments like that had the two of them shared when he wasn’t around to interrupt?

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“Just a few minutes.” Jess inhaled a breath and blew it out. “I love the smell of the sea. It beats the stale air of my office any day. It’s been ages since we came out here. I was glad you suggested it. I was just watching a pod of dolphins.”

“You said you needed to talk. What’s up?”

“Hez says he’s an addict. He spotted some telltale signs.”

Jess stared out over the water before she shrugged. “I find that hard to believe.”

Why was she acting so defensive about this? Was it because she felt responsible for hiring Peter? “If Hez finds out who is behind all this, it will be over. The more help you can give him, the faster that will happen.”

Did she even want to wriggle out? Whenever she was around Hez, she felt the same old pull, even though she fought against it. The inexorable tide dragging her into the old patterns was nearly impossible to resist. When she’d married Hez, neither of them had any idea of the challenges and heartache they would face, but wasn’t that the way it was with any marriage? Even losing Ella hadn’t killed her love for Hez. It was only when he chose booze over her that Savannah had begun to consider what life without him would look like.

Lost in thought, she missed her sister’s comment when she stopped at her car. “I’m sorry?”

“Not really. Can’t you swing by the office and email it to Hez before you leave? And why such a last-minute trip?”

“Out of Pensacola or Mobile?”

“Either will work.”

“I’ll be glad to do it.”

As her sister drove off, Savannah’s phone dinged with a message with the code. She got in her car and ran the window down to enjoy the breeze while she pulled up the airline website. The existing flight was out of Mobile into London for next Thursday, so it was off by a week. It wasn’t like Jess to make a mistake. Savannah was able to reschedule it for six tomorrow morning.

“All rise,” the bailiff intoned. “The United States District Court for the Southern District of Alabama is now in session, the Honorable Daphne Montpelier presiding.”

Metal clinked as Hernando and his guard rose from the bench behind Hez. A creak came from the prosecution table as Hale stood.

Hale pushed himself to his feet again. “Donald Hale for the United States.”

Hez stood. “Hezekiah Webster for Mr.Morales.”

Hale looked back into the gallery. “The government calls Special Agent Harold Jenkins.”

Hale picked up a manila folder and notepad, then strode to the lectern. “Agent Jenkins, how long have you been with the FBI?”

“Ten years, the last eight in the Mobile office.”

“Please tell the court how you came to be involved in the investigation that led to the arrest of Mr.Morales.”

Hale pulled a document out of the folder. “May I approach the witness?”

The judge nodded. “You may.”

Hale handed the document to Agent Jenkins, then returned to the lectern. “Is this the tip you mentioned?”

“Did the task force in fact intercept a boat headed for that location at approximately 1:00 a.m. on September third?”

Jenkins nodded. “Yes. We intercepted Mr.Morales’s boat.”

“He was operating his boat without lights, which is illegal at night. He also tried to evade the Coast Guard vessel that performed the intercept. Finally, he resides in Biloxi, which is over forty miles away by water and longer if you’re driving.”

“Were drugs found in his boat when he was apprehended?”

“No, but personnel on the Coast Guard vessel saw him throw something overboard while they were pursuing him.”

Hez rose. “Objection, lack of foundation.”

“Yes, I think there’s a fair probability that he committed the charged crimes.”

Hale shot an annoyed look at Hez. “I won’t waste the court’s time by cataloging every drug case Agent Jenkins has handled. Pass the witness.” He picked up his papers and returned to his seat.

Jenkins shrugged. “Probably somewhere on the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico.”

“You’ve had divers looking for them, correct?”

“Yes.”

“And in two weeks of looking, you haven’t found the drugs Mr.Morales allegedly threw overboard, correct?”

“Well, yes—but we’re still looking.”

“That’s a shallow area with good visibility and well-known currents, correct?”

“I don’t know. I’m not a diver.”

Hez decided to take a gamble and ask a question he didn’t know the answer to. “And what did you find in your search?”

“No drugs?”

“No.”

“Why hasn’t the task force been able to find the drugs in two weeks of searching?”

Jenkins opened and closed his mouth twice before answering. “I don’t know.”

“I’d like you to look at exhibit one, the tip received by the task force. It simply refers to a ‘delivery’—or entrega in Spanish. It doesn’t contain any actual reference to drugs, correct?”

“Not an explicit reference, no.”

“And no drugs were found when Mr. Morales and his boat were searched—not even trace amounts, correct?”

“Correct.”

“The only thing in his boat was fishing gear, correct?”

“Yes, but there were no fish and he didn’t have a license.”

Jenkins’s eyes widened. “I... I can’t speculate on that. He would’ve come a long way just to fish.”

“Is illegal night fishing unusual in that area?”

“I have no idea.”

“Switching gears, drug smuggling in the Gulf of Mexico is controlled by the Mexican cartels, correct?”

“In general, yes.”

“And when individuals associated with different cartels are incarcerated, they’re separated to prevent violence, correct?”

Jenkins eyed Hez warily. “I can’t comment on Bureau of Prisons policies.”

Hez turned to the judge. “Your Honor, I have a witness who can testify to this policy, but I believe it is well known to both the court and the prosecution, so hopefully a stipulation will be possible.”

Judge Montpelier nodded. “Hopefully. And if not, I’ve handled enough of these cases

that I can take judicial notice of it.”

Hale stood. “The government so stipulates.”

“Thank you.” Hez turned back to the judge. “Pass the witness.”

Judge Montpelier looked at Hale. “Any redirect?”

“Yes.”

“No further questions. The government rests.”

“You may step down, Agent Jenkins,” the judge said. “Mr. Webster, please call your first witness.”

Hez reached back to the table to get his binder of witness notes. “Thank you, Your Honor. The defense calls Alfred Smith.”

“Mr. Smith, what is your occupation?”

“I’m a shrimper.”

“Do you know the waters off Pelican State Park?”

The old man bobbed his head. “Know ’em better than my own bathtub.”

“Is the fishing good?”

“Some of the best fishing in the South,” the old man said with a touch of pride.

“Good enough to make someone drive from Biloxi?”

Smith nodded. "Absolutely. Fact is, I've seen boats all the way from Miami."

"Do they always have licenses?"

"Is it fair to say that unlicensed night fishing is a problem?"

"Yep. Parasites. Worse than ticks on a hound dog."

"How deep is the water there?"

Smith shrugged one shoulder. "Varies depending on the tides and where you are, but not more than thirty feet."

"Are the currents strong or unpredictable?"

"Not particularly."

"Have you ever gone diving there?"

"How's the visibility?"

"Good enough for spearfishing. Lot better than Mobile Bay."

"Is it easy to see objects on the bottom?"

Smith nodded. "Sandy bottom, not a lot of weeds."

"Would it be hard to find an object dropped from a boat in that area?"

"Did it take you two weeks?"

“More like twenty minutes. It was easy money.”

“Impressive. Would you consider working for the U.S. government?”

Smith laughed and the judge smiled. Hale sat stone-faced.

“Pass the witness.”

Hale replaced Hez at the lectern. “Mr. Smith, do you have any experience with drug smuggling?”

“No, sir.”

“Pass the witness.”

Hez stood. “No redirect, Your Honor. The defense rests.”

“All right,” the judge said. “I’ll hear closing arguments now. Mr. Hale?”

Hale drew himself up to his full height, looming over the courtroom. “Thank you, Your Honor. As the court is well aware, the government need only show that there is a substantial chance that Mr. Morales committed criminal acts. That is enough to establish probable cause for his arrest and detention. The evidence presented today clearly meets that standard.” He held up a thick forefinger. “First, the drug interdiction task force got a tip indicating that a smuggler would make a delivery at a particular time and place.” Another finger. “Second, Mr. Morales’s appearance at the time and place from the tip.” And another finger. “Third, Mr. Morales’s behavior was entirely consistent with smuggling. He had no lights on his boat, he fled when he saw the Coast Guard, and he threw something overboard. That is more than enough. Further, we don’t need to rule out other possibilities. The defense’s evidence establishes, at most, that it’s also possible that the defendant might have been fishing.

But that's irrelevant. The question before the court is whether there's a substantial chance that the defendant was smuggling drugs. It does not matter that there may also be a substantial chance he was doing something else."

Judge Montpelier nodded. "Thank you, Mr.Hale. Mr.Webster?"

"Thank you." The judge turned to Hale. "Any rebuttal?"

He shook his head. "No, Your Honor. The evidence speaks for itself."

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A text pops up on the burner phone I use to communicate with him: Hearing over. Opening Zoom.

“What?” I can hardly believe my ears. Dawkins had told me this should be an easy win for the prosecution. The most we could hope for was a preview of their evidence against Morales. Actual victory wasn’t a real possibility. “I thought all they had to do was show there was a substantial chance Morales committed a crime. How did they lose?”

“So what happens now? Is the case over?”

So that was the fly in the ointment. I knew there must be one. “I see. Let me know if there are any further developments.”

Ten minutes later, a driver picks up Morales and whisks him to a waiting private plane. The knots in my stomach loosen and I take a sip of my tea, which is now lukewarm but still good. I lean back in my chair, stare out at the rain-shrouded landscape, and smile. This day has turned out much better than I expected, and I have Hez Webster to thank.

He paused to admire the view, which he did even when he wasn’t searching for an excuse to stop running. He could see most of the animal refuge, and it was remarkable. Covered, open-air safari trucks lumbered along the roads on the African bush excursion. A lion sunbathed on a rock outcropping half a mile away. Birdlike hoots from a forest grove in the other direction told him that the sanctuary’s family of

bonobos was nearby, probably laughing at the silly humans running for no reason. A giraffe's head appeared from behind an acacia tree beside the road. Its long-lashed brown eyes watched him for a moment as it chewed lazily. Apparently satisfied that he was harmless, it turned back to its meal.

"Sightseeing or just out of shape?" Blake called from fifty yards ahead.

"A little of both." Hez started running again and caught up with his cousin by the time they reached the sanctuary's office.

Blake chuckled. "No, you couldn't. You'd be bored in less than a week."

Hez looked at his glass, watching the tendrils of cream and coffee slowly mix. "Yeah, I guess I do like to keep busy."

"Think he's okay?"

"I hope so. He mentioned that he had family back in Mexico. Maybe he's headed back to them." That was all part of a defense attorney's job—he couldn't judge a defendant's guilt or innocence. All he could do was put the government to its proof and ensure his client's rights were respected.

"Which one?"

Blake arched an eyebrow. "What about Savannah?"

Hez swallowed the rest of his coffee. "Things don't seem to be working out."

Blake grimaced in sympathy. "Sorry to hear it."

Blake shook his head. "A mistake to show your wife who you are now and let her

know how you feel? No. You did the right thing. But you can't force her to love you back."

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This is it.

She was a crazy person.

Marley, tail wagging, went to push his head against Hez's hand. As his long fingers ruffed up the dog's ears, she had a stab of longing that he would cup her face in those hands.

He held up a white box. "I brought a peace offering of beignets." A manila envelope was tucked under his arm.

"And I made coffee." Savannah clamped her lips against the nervous words that wanted to spill out. "Come on in."

"Thanks." He inhaled the coffee's aroma and took a sip. "You've always made the best coffee."

She settled on the sofa beside him with one leg tucked under her. The scent of his spicy cologne made her want to move closer. She opened the Petit Charms box and took a beignet. It was a perfect snack to celebrate what was about to happen. Her defensive walls had tumbled the minute she opened the door.

Hez set down his mug beside the envelope he'd brought. "I have so much to apologize for."

Her smile faltered. "You've apologized, Hez. It's not necessary."

“I—I didn’t think it was presumptuous. I’m glad you’re clean, Hez. Really.”

“I have the power to give you what you want. So I’m going to do just that, Savannah.” He picked up the envelope he’d placed on the table and handed it to her. “I’m giving you your freedom with these divorce papers. You can move on with Beckett, and I’ll stay out of the way. I’ll work on the investigation and keep it strictly business. All I want is for you to be happy, and I’ve realized that’s out of my power now. I blew my chance. Once the semester ends, I’ll be out of your hair. The pro bono case has been wrapped up, and there won’t be a reason for me to stay. In the meantime I’ll try my best not to run into you.”

“B-but...” She barely got the word out before he stood and strode to the door.

Savannah practically fell into her friend’s arms, where she sobbed while Nora made soothing noises and patted her back. “He’s divorcing me,” she managed to choke out before she got her tears in check.

“Come inside.” Nora led her into the living room where a diffuser wafted lavender oil into the room.

“Here.” Nora thrust a mug of tea into her hand. “It’s passionflower. It will calm you down.”

Nora sat beside her on the sofa. “Tell me.”

“What did you say?”

“Nothing. I was too shocked to say anything, and he was out the door before I could stop him.”

Nora took a sip of her tea. “Hmm,” was all she said.

“What’s that mean?”

“Just that your attitude took a major shift. Last time we talked you didn’t want to still love him.”

“I know, right?” Tea sloshed in the mug when Savannah set it down on the table. “I’m such an idiot. Everything I thought I wanted was a smoke screen to cover my feelings. I should have paid attention when he showed up that first day. I’ve always had such a visceral reaction to him. Even the day we met, I just knew. It’s probably why it took me so long to file for divorce. I thought it was what I should do, but I didn’t really want to.”

“So what comes next?”

She was already second-guessing her reaction to seeing him standing in the door to her house. The attraction between them had always been so powerful, and that much hadn’t changed. But was it enough to overcome Ella’s death? Him blindsiding her like this left the bad taste of distrust. He’d said she should have talked to him before she filed, so shouldn’t he have done the same thing? She’d had no idea he was thinking about this. Every time they’d been together, hope shone through his eyes.

Nora eyed her. “I think I’d better fix coffee while you figure out what you want before it’s too late.”

Too late.

Savannah nodded and hurried toward her car. She couldn’t think about it tonight. Hez had been so final. And maybe he was right.

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Who was Peter Cardin, and what was he up to?

He shook his head and muttered, “Focus!”

Cardin was the key. Hez was sure of it, and his certainty grew as he worked. The personnel file Jess sent over contained a very interesting résumé. Cardin had an accounting degree from Northwestern and three years’ experience in PwC’s education group—one of the best accounting practices focused on colleges and universities—but his employment there ended two years before he started at TGU. Where had he spent that time? Prison, as Hez soon discovered. Searches of a couple of legal databases revealed that Cardin pled guilty to embezzling from clients and spent a year and a half behind bars.

Bruno was a semiretired San Francisco software genius who had founded and sold two companies before he was thirty. He spent most of his time skateboarding now, but he sometimes took on criminal cases that interested him. Hez managed to hook Bruno with the words “Willard Treasure” and reel him in with tales of Willard’s exploits and Abernathy’s murder. By the end of a thirty-minute call, Bruno had agreed to run his custom facial-recognition software on the TGU security camera video, culling it down to only clips that showed Cardin.

Another rumble. “Okay, okay,” he told his abdomen.

He froze with his hand on the mouse. The video showed Cardin arguing with a man in the parking lot behind the history building. The time stamp was July 27, 7:34 p.m. The same day Hez arrived on campus—and the day Savannah unwittingly picked up the forged provenance documents. He didn’t recall the exact time, but he remembered

the hot late afternoon sun on his back as he walked out of the building alone, and he'd had dinner reservations at Billy's at 7:00. Had Cardin accidentally left the documents, realized his mistake a few hours later, and come back looking for them? The biggest piece of info in Hez's view was that Cardin was wearing a gray hoodie. A strange thing to wear on a humid summer evening. Was he the man who'd attacked Savannah in the warehouse?

Hez was sure he'd recognize the man if he could only get a glimpse of his face. "Turn around. Come on, turn around."

She should have been glad he'd taken the decision out of her hands, but she wished she'd been able to tell him how she felt.

He turned from the display case and spotted her. The skin around his blue eyes crinkled in a warm smile that curled her toes. "Good morning." Heat flooded her cheeks, and she checked the impulse to press the iced caramel latte to her face.

He took a step toward her. "Do you have some papers for me?"

"Want me to take the lead, or do you want to do that?"

"She's always prickly with you, but you're the one who knows more about Cardin. I'll jump in if she pushes back."

Savannah crossed the office to hand her sister the iced latte. "Early morning?"

"I was here at five." Her gaze went past Savannah to Hez. "I don't have much time."

"I understand," Hez said in a calm voice. "One more thing and we'll let you get on

with your day. Can you think of any reason why Cardin and Andersen might get into an argument?”

“Any ideas?” Hez asked again.

Jess took a sip of her latte, then set it on her desk. “No idea. Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to get back to work.”

“Fair warning—Augusta will need to hear what I’ve discovered,” Hez said.

“Augusta might agree with you, but we’ll let her decide.”

“I’ll soon find out. I’ll go see her right away and turn over the video. Something’s there, Savannah. I’m sure of it.” He held her gaze for a long moment. “Be careful. Things may heat up if Augusta pokes in deeper.”

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He reached the side path leading to the cemetery where Ella was buried. He hesitated for a moment. Might he run into Savannah at the grave? No, she had class now. He turned off the main trail, and the crushed oyster shells crunched under his feet as he jogged up the gentle slope to the graveyard. The rusty gate still stood open. He slowed to a walk and went in. His panting dog followed him, tongue lolling out of the side of his mouth.

He had been gripping the past like shards of a broken crystal sculpture, trying to force the shattered pieces back together with bloody fingers. He needed to let go and accept what had happened. The sculpture could never be made whole again, but the pieces held a broken beauty of their own, especially when touched with healing light. Like this place. There was wisdom here.

And he needed to visit Ella's grave more often. A lesson for him resided here.

Savannah couldn't seem to shake the dark cloud riding on her shoulder ever since Hez served the divorce papers, and it was already October sixth. Her class this morning didn't start until eight, and she'd hoped an early walk around the pond with Marley would clear her head and help her focus on a different future than she'd envisioned. After notating an even split of their assets, she'd finally signed the papers, made a copy, and brought everything back to Hez yesterday evening. She had also included her engagement ring and wedding band, with a note asking him to sell them and donate the proceeds to the Justice Chamber. She'd had to pray for the strength to do it, and she finally managed to pull the trigger. To her relief, he'd been out, so she had shoved everything through the old-fashioned mail slot in the front

door of his condo.

Savannah squinted through the darkness toward the gothic-style building. Was that a light? She shook her head. She'd never seen anyone poking around the old building. Numerous signs warned students to stay out. The place wasn't safe and had been roped off for the past two years after a student crashed through a floor and broke a leg. She'd had to resist the urge to explore herself more than once.

She started up the slope toward the building. "Marley, come!"

"There you are, boy." She squatted beside him and ran her hands over his coat. No blood. "You okay?"

He whined before launching into a full-throated howl again. "What's wrong, boy?" She rose and shone the light around the area.

Marley barked and jerked away again. Even though she'd been prepared for a lunge, he managed to escape again, and he darted through the entry door into the old building. Why was it even open? Probably students again.

The dog whined, and she went toward him. She stumbled over something on the floor and dropped her phone. With the light snuffed out, the room plunged into suffocating darkness. Her phone must have fallen upside down. She knelt and touched the wooden floor, then ran her fingers through the debris. Where was her phone? Her fingers touched something warm and pliable, and she instinctively shuddered and jerked her hand back.

Peter Cardin. His eyes stared up toward the ceiling, but she didn't think he was conscious.

Someone had murdered Peter Cardin.

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That didn't mean she was the killer, of course, but it did make her a natural suspect—especially since, by her own admission, Cardin's body was still warm when she'd found him. It would be reasonable for the police to think Savannah might have spotted him stalking her and decided to take matters into her own hands. Was that what Detective Richards was thinking?

He caught himself wishing he could stay. There were good memories here, and he'd settled into the rhythms of university and small-town life faster than he'd expected. It would be hard to go back to Birmingham. Hard, but necessary. She'd returned the signed divorce papers, eliminating any doubt about her intentions. Her insistence on an even split of the assets had been touching, unnecessary, and very Savannah. And then there were the rings, of course. Even at the end, she had insisted on being more generous than he deserved.

His phone buzzed and he pulled it out of his pocket. Savannah. His pulse quickened as he accepted the call. "Hey, what's up?"

"The police just showed up with a search warrant!" Her voice shook. "Can you come over here? Please?"

So the other shoe had finally dropped. "Where are you?"

"Jess's house."

He blinked. "Jess's house?"

"Yeah, of course. On my way."

Hez ended the call and headed for his car. The legal wheels whirled in his head during the ten-minute drive as he tried to figure out what the police were up to. Jess didn't have any apparent motive to kill Cardin—or Abernathy, for that matter—but it would be natural for her to help Savannah. Jess was highly competent, fiercely protective of her sister, and cold and hard as Arctic ice. If Savannah killed someone, Jess wouldn't hesitate to get rid of the body and destroy evidence. Was that why the police were searching her home?

“Thank you!” Savannah put her hand on his arm as he walked up. Her touch sent a thrill through him, despite the circumstances.

He patted her hand. “Of course. Happy to help.” He turned to Detective Richards. “Can I see the search warrant?”

The detective glanced over her shoulder. “You'll have to ask her.”

Hez's gaze traveled past the detective to a severe-looking young woman in a suit standing behind the vans. She caught his eye and walked over. “Deputy District Attorney Virginia Samson. Can I help you?”

“That won't be possible at this time.”

Samson frowned, accentuating the sharp planes of her face. “Do you represent the property owner too?”

Jess turned to Samson. “Yes, he represents me.”

Before Samson could respond, an officer and a tech approached and motioned for her and Detective Richards. They walked a little distance away and talked in tense, low tones for a few minutes. Then they came back, and Detective Richards appeared as grim as Samson. She walked up to Jess. “Jessica Legare, you are under arrest for the

murders of Ellison Abernathy and Peter Cardin.”

His expression went somber. “I remember.”

She took a step back. “Why did they arrest her, Hez? She couldn’t have anything to do with this. It’s insane. They didn’t even tell her why so she could explain.”

“Didn’t they need a warrant to search her house?”

“Can we get her out today?”

She felt a surge of hope. “So maybe I can get her home tomorrow?”

“Why did you say ‘her lawyer’ like that? You’re her lawyer.”

The distance in his gaze and manner alarmed her. She took hold of his forearm. “But you will represent her, won’t you, Hez? Please, you have to. There’s no one I trust more than you.”

“They aren’t done yet. Once they release the house, you can go in and set it to rights. I’ll help you.”

She reached out without thinking before pulling back her hand. He might not welcome her need to touch him for reassurance, and she didn’t want to give him false hope when she didn’t know herself how to start over. “I can do it. You’ve already done so much. Is there any way you can find out what evidence they have before the preliminary hearing?”

He shook his head. “Sorry, our hands are tied for now.”

“Can we see her before she’s arraigned?”

“I can. I’ll go see her right away.”

“What about me?”

He squeezed her fingers. “All I can do is promise my best. She’s your sister, and I’ll do everything I can.”

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The jail loomed into view. It was an enormous redbrick cube with a low, flat-roofed building in front. Well-trimmed bushes and palm trees lined the parking lot and gave the compound the appearance of a government office building, at least until a visitor spotted the razor wire–topped fences.

“I thought you were only representing me regarding that search warrant,” Jess said as soon as the guard closed the door.

Her eyes narrowed slightly. “I didn’t ask you to.”

“No, but Savannah did.”

“Did she ask—or did you suggest it?”

He arched an eyebrow. “Why would I do that?”

“Because you’re still trying to win her back.”

“You may not have heard, but I filed for divorce.”

“But the papers aren’t final yet, are they? And I see how you look at her.”

The mention of the divorce brought a sharp stab of pain. “We’re here to discuss your criminal case, not my marriage.” He tried to keep the anger out of his voice, but he wasn’t entirely successful. “Do you want me to represent you or not? And it’s totally fine if the answer is not. I’d actually prefer it. I want to be back in Birmingham permanently by Christmas.”

She folded her arms across her chest. “Promise me you won’t use this to try to worm your way back into her heart.”

“Wait.”

He sighed and turned back. “What?”

A calculating expression creased her face. Had she been testing him? “I want you to represent me.”

“Are you sure? I know some very good local defense attorneys, and I’d be happy to—”

“I’ll pay you the same rate as my New York lawyers—fifteen hundred dollars an hour. Will that be satisfactory?”

He blinked. That kind of money would be a big help when he was finally able to start the Justice Chamber. “Sure.”

“Good. How soon can you get me out on bail?”

She leaned forward, and there was new urgency in her voice. “I need you to get me out in the next week. What will that take?”

She hesitated. “I have a very important meeting. It’s confidential school business.”

“Okay, well, I’ll see what I can do.”

She laid a hand on his arm. Her fine-boned fingers were surprisingly strong. “Hez, you have to win this.”

The door opened, and Nora stepped into the room with a University Grounds coffee in her hand. “I came as soon as I heard.”

Nora handed her the coffee cup. “You know I can’t talk about the case, but let me just say they do have some evidence.”

Nora sat on the chair beside her. “I know you’re hurting, Savannah, but you have to let this play out. Who’s her attorney?”

“Hez. He might be in there right now. They haven’t let me back yet.”

“He’s a great attorney.”

“I see the wheels turning,” Nora said.

“He filed to make you happy.”

Nora lifted a brow. “Oh? And how did he react?”

“Maybe Beckett would help. He might have the power to get into files and places you can’t.”

“I can understand that, and I think that’s wise. What about your dad? He’s got the money to hire a private investigator.”

“We’ve got to get you out of here. You saw Hez?”

Jess nodded. “He agreed to represent me.”

“Not yet. Hez says that will come at a hearing.”

“I know you didn’t hurt anyone. I’m going to find out who’s behind this.”

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Jess leaned over and whispered, "Give me an update. I hate that I can't have a phone."

"What about bail?"

Hez stood. "Yes, Your Honor. We received a copy this morning. No need for a formal reading."

"Good. And how does your client plead?"

"Not guilty, Your Honor."

Hope pulled out her phone and scrolled for a moment. "Could we make it the twenty-fifth at nine, Your Honor?"

The judge nodded. "That works for me. Mr. Webster?"

Hez sat down and turned to watch Hope. Bail was a long shot in any capital murder case because of the aggravating factors that separated that crime from regular murder. Still, if any capital murder defendant deserved bail, it was Jess. And if any prosecutor would agree to bail, it was Hope.

The judge turned to Hope. "Ms. Norcross?"

"Mr. Webster, is this true?" the judge demanded.

Hez stood, his mind reeling. "I... Could we have a five-minute recess, Your Honor?"

The judge glowered at him. “Two minutes.” He turned to the court reporter. “Off the record.”

Hez sat and swiveled to Jess. “What’s going on?” he hissed in her ear.

She gave him an icy look. “I said I had an important meeting. You didn’t ask where.”

“What?!” Several heads turned toward him. He took a deep breath and lowered his voice. “Why do you have to go to London?”

“I can’t tell you that.”

She folded her arms and pressed her lips into a thin line.

“Okay, recess is over,” Judge Hopkins announced. “Back on the record. Mr. Webster, is the defense still requesting bail?”

Hez didn’t bother consulting Jess before he rose. “No, Your Honor. Ms. Norcross is correct. There has been a mistake.”

“I thought so.” The judge jotted another note on his pad. “That’s the last item on my list. Are we done here?”

Hope half rose. “Yes, Your Honor.”

“Yes, Your Honor,” Hez said as he shoved his notepad into his briefcase. “We’re done.”

She spotted Hez before he saw her. His tight jaw and flushed cheeks didn’t bode well,

and she rose with her hand to her neck. He spotted her, and the glacial expression on his face eased into a tight smile that didn't reach his blue eyes.

She bit her lip when he stopped in front of her. "Bail is high?"

Her phone rang, and she glanced at the screen. "It's Jess." She swiped it on. "I'm here with Hez, Jess. I'm so sorry."

"I need to talk to you right away. I got permission for an emergency meeting. Can you come right now?"

"I'll be there in a couple of minutes." She ended the call. "Jess needs to talk to me."

"Try to convince her to be honest about what's going on."

"I'll try." She paused a moment. "Thank you, Hez. For everything."

"Of course. You know I'd do about anything for you."

"Thanks for coming," Jess said. "I need you to do something for me. You have to fly to London since I can't go."

"London? What's so important in London that you'd wreck your chances of getting out of jail until the trial?"

The blood drained from Savannah's head, and she felt faint. "S-son?"

"He's ten, and his name is Simon. He's at boarding school in London, and he has a break right now. I promised to pick him up on Friday, so you'll need to fly there on Thursday. You'll have to explain who you are. Tell him I'm sorry I couldn't come." Her words flew faster and faster. "You can fly over and spend a few days with him,

then take him back to school. Don't tell him I'm in jail."

Jess folded her arms. "We can talk about that later. I need your help now."

Her sister's strange behavior with her son emphasized to Savannah the trauma of her upbringing. Jess had wrapped her cold strength around her as a shield against their father's snide comments. Savannah had tried to help as much as possible, but she was a child herself and could do little to buffer either Dad's narcissism or Mom's passionate recklessness. And Jess letting anyone know about her pregnancy would have felt like she was no better than their ruined mother. It would have confirmed Dad's opinion of her. No wonder she'd hidden it all.

Jess covered her eyes with her free palm. "You have to help me."

Jess dropped her hand and sighed. "I know. Please don't let him drop me. I need him."

But from Jess's expression, Savannah wasn't sure she'd tell Hez the truth. And without the truth, Hez was flying blind.

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She didn't take the paper. "I understand why you're upset, but I need you to stay on."

"Just until the real killer is caught. As my lawyer you'll have access to all the evidence, right?"

"Yes, and so will your new lawyer."

"Savannah will try to catch the murderer on her own, Hez. I tried to talk her out of it, but she wouldn't listen. She could be putting herself in a lot of danger. I need a lawyer I can trust to help her." She grimaced. "I need you."

He leaned forward. "Why didn't you tell me about that London trip? You humiliated me in court."

Her face hardened, but she nodded. "I'm sorry that happened."

"It can't happen again."

"It won't. I was caught by surprise, and I couldn't make alternate arrangements at the last minute."

He sat back. "Alternate arrangements for what? You still haven't told me."

She stared at him in silence. "I had a good reason for what I did. You'll have to trust me."

He arched his eyebrows and said nothing.

She rolled her eyes. “Trust Savannah then. Ask her if I had a good reason.”

He hated to admit it, but she had a point. “Well, your chances of winning are much higher if you don’t keep important information on a need-to-know basis. You’re not a lawyer, so you have no idea what an attorney needs to know. As you saw at the bail hearing.”

In any event, he had no choice. Not really. He couldn’t withdraw if that meant Savannah going after a murderer on her own.

And there it was, right where Jess told Savannah to look on the shelf in the walk-in closet. The Chanel leather vanity case was vaguely familiar. Maybe it had been their mother’s, but Savannah couldn’t be sure. She carried it to the bed and unzipped the top. A picture lay on top. Afternoon sunlight streamed through the windows on each side of the king-size poster bed and illuminated the contented grin on the boy’s face.

Simon. His name was Simon. And he wasn’t just any ten-year-old boy—he was Savannah’s flesh and blood. Her own nephew.

Why, Jess? How could you?

Did he even know he had an aunt? How would he feel when she showed up to get him when he was expecting his mother?

She would soon find out.

She stuffed the items in her oversize bag and headed for the front door. Through the window she spotted Hez getting out of his vehicle. Had Jess told him the truth? Savannah hated the thought of keeping such a huge secret from him, and he wouldn’t

say anything to anyone about this.

She wasn't sure she could hide her agitation from him, but she opened the door. "Did Jess need something?"

He shook his head. "I went by your place, and when I didn't see your car, I came by here on a hunch."

She searched his face for clues as to how things had gone. "Did you find her another attorney?"

This time he fell silent for several long beats. "She persuaded me to stay on to represent her."

"I'm shocked."

"As her attorney, I'll have access to everything the prosecution knows. There's no need for you to investigate on your own."

"But I'm going to, so you might as well clue me in on everything."

He heaved a sigh. "You can be the worst bulldog in the world. Does Jess's London trip affect the case?"

This time Hez's silence stretched out so long Savannah thought he wouldn't answer at all. He pressed his lips together and speared her with a hard stare. "Be careful, babe. While you're sure it's not related, the killer could follow you since you'll be alone. I could go with you."

The concern in his eyes only deepened. "I wish you'd tell me what this is all about."

If only she could. This was a heavy secret to bear on her own, but Jess was depending on her.

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The woman hesitated. “You’re not Ms. Legare.”

“I’m her sister, Savannah Webster.”

“Mr.Lloyd needs to speak with you in his office. This way.”

A man in a gray suit opened the far door and approached her with an extended hand.

“Ms.Webster, please step into my office.”

She perched on the wooden seat of the closest chair and fumbled in her bag. “I have a letter from my sister. She also should have contacted you personally to explain the change in plans.” Her fingers closed around the envelope, and she yanked out Jess’s letter authorizing her to take Simon. “Here you go. If you fetch my nephew, we’ll get out of your way.”

What was she going to do? Before Savannah could gather her thoughts, the door opened behind them, and she twisted in the chair to see a boy standing in the doorway. She drank in the first sight of her nephew. He could have been Ella’s older brother. He wore a Pikachu backpack, and his blond hair fell across his forehead just like Ella’s used to.

Mr.Lloyd brushed past them. “I’ll leave you to explain everything to Simon.” He shut the door behind him.

“Is Mum in London? Why didn’t she come?”

“There’s a lot going on back home, and your mom sent me in her place.” Lame. How

would she explain all this to a ten-year-old?

The even bigger question was what was she going to do with Simon?

“You’ll never find what you’re not looking for,” one of Hez’s early mentors liked to say. The forensic techs who processed Jess’s house hadn’t found any evidence that she had been framed, but they hadn’t been looking for it. Hez wasn’t a tech himself, of course, but he had seen enough of their work that he’d know what to look for. Or at least he hoped he would.

Ten feet in, a little patch of white caught his eye. A twig had been snapped off at shoulder height. The break was recent, though he couldn’t tell how recent. A deer or wind gust might have done it, but it was a hint that he was on the right track. He snapped a picture of it and moved on.

He snapped a few more pictures, but he didn’t bother with a more thorough investigation. This little piece of the crime scene had already been thoroughly documented by the police department’s techs and investigators, and he had their reports.

Someone was in Jess’s house. He caught a glimpse of movement. A figure in black appeared for an instant in one of the windows.

The burglar stopped. He pulled a phone from his pocket and held it to his ear for a moment. Then he jammed the phone back into his pocket and ran out of the room.

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She clutched the phone as if it were his arm she had in her grip. “Hez.” Her voice wobbled.

“Savannah, what’s wrong?”

“Everything.” She squared her shoulders. “The reason for my trip took a very unexpected turn.”

“Can you tell me about it?”

“She’s used up her call privileges for the rest of the week. You can’t speak to her until Monday.”

“I can ask for an emergency call, but I’d have to explain what’s going on.”

“I—I can’t tell you. Not yet.” The news would be all over town if Hez had to explain.

“Everything seems safe, but I’ll keep my eyes open.”

Savannah ended the connection and stared at her phone. Without her sister’s input, Savannah was on her own, and she’d never missed Hez’s strong, thoughtful presence in her life as much as she did right now. Talking to him had helped, but this was still her problem to sort out. She called up her flight back to Alabama and changed it to Monday, then purchased another seat for Simon.

He came out of the bathroom in jeans and a tee. “I’m hungry.”

She dropped an arm around his shoulder. “So am I. Do you want to eat here at the inn or at a nearby pub?”

He leaned into her embrace. “Our favorite chippy place. It’s just down the way, and they have wicked fish and chips.”

“Lead the way, kiddo.”

Simon leaned forward with an intent expression. “Mum has to take me home now, doesn’t she? I don’t have anywhere else to go.”

“Is that why you ran away?”

His plea touched her, and she reached across the table to take his hand. “Simon, your mum is a private person. You probably already know that about her, don’t you?” When he gave a jerky nod, she squeezed his fingers. “She’s always been that way. Until two days ago, I didn’t know about you. I think she loved you so much she wanted to hold you close to her heart without outside interference.”

“I know she loves you. She’s been trying to protect you.”

“That’s mental. I’m ten now and big enough to take care of myself.” He puffed out his chest. “I’m learning jujitsu.”

His chin jutted. “I’m never going back there. I want to be with my mum.” His grip on her fingers tightened. “And with you.”

“You will be. We’re flying to the U.S. on Monday.”

Her phone vibrated, and Beckett’s face popped onto the screen.

You flew to England without telling me??!

“Have you heard from Savannah?”

Her evasion irritated him. If they’d had more time and hadn’t been in the middle of a courtroom, he would have pressed her to answer his question. “Nothing since we last spoke. She’s coming back tomorrow morning, so I—”

Hope stepped up to the lectern and put a neat stack of notes on it. “Yes, Your Honor. The state calls Detective Augusta Richards.”

“Detective Richards, how long have you been a police officer?”

“Fourteen years.”

“How many murder cases have you investigated?”

“About two dozen.”

“Were you the lead investigator each time?”

Richards shook her head. “No, but I was the lead most of the time. Maybe twenty of those cases.”

“How did you become involved in investigating the murders of Ellison Abernathy and Peter Cardin?”

“And when she also found Peter Cardin’s body?”

A cold tendril of unease crept into Hez's heart at the mention of Savannah's discovery of both bodies. He'd thought she was in the clear. Had he been wrong?

Hope turned to the next page of her notes. "Please elaborate on those similarities."

"Thank you." Hope glanced at her notes. "Was there anything else that caused you to suspect Ms. Legare?"

"What did you do next?"

"When you say the payments were 'unexplained,' what do you mean?"

"They didn't correspond to salary payments, investment income, gifts, or any other known source. And when we asked the victims' families about the money, they had no idea where it came from."

"Did you also obtain financial records from Ms. Legare and the university?"

"What happened next?"

"What did you find behind the house?"

"We located an area of disturbed earth among the trees at the back of her yard. We excavated and found a women's fleece jacket confirmed to have belonged to Ms. Legare. It had a large bloodstain. A double-edged knife with a six-inch blade was buried with the fleece."

"Did you send those items out for forensic testing?"

"Did you also find relevant financial records?"

“What were those titles?”

“Yes.”

“Pass the witness.”

“We searched until we located the buried items. I believe the search ended at that point.”

Detective Richards leaned forward a few inches. “I believe that’s correct.”

“And no one from your team would know whether any footprints were there at the time of your search?”

“Also correct.”

“No, we had no reason to.”

“Ms.Legare’s home was burglarized after her arrest, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Did you consider the possibility that the burglary was related to the crimes Ms.Legare is accused of?”

“Yes, though it’s not uncommon for burglars to target empty homes.”

“Is it possible that the tipster and the burglar are the same person?”

“Possible? Certainly, but I’m not aware of any evidence indicating that.”

“Well, the tipster had pretty specific knowledge of what you would find in Ms.Legare’s home and financial records, right?”

“Yes.”

“The type of knowledge that could only come from having access to her home and records?”

The detective thought for a few seconds. “I’m not sure that’s the only possibility.”

“But it’s the most natural one, correct?”

She shrugged one shoulder. “I suppose so.”

“And someone with that kind of access could plant evidence, right?”

“Possibly.”

“I knew she had been on Wall Street. I wasn’t aware of the specifics.”

“Were you aware that her salary at TGU is less than one-tenth of what she made on Wall Street?”

“No, I wasn’t aware of her current salary either.”

“I can’t testify about her motives, just what the evidence shows she did. Criminals often do things that aren’t very rational.”

“I don’t know her personally.”

Hez took a quick look at his notes. He’d gotten everything he could reasonably

expect. Hope would have a hard time later arguing that investigators made the footprints in the woods or that the prints weren't there when they executed the warrant. And Hez was pretty sure he had raised a few questions in her mind without antagonizing Detective Richards in the process. "Pass the witness."

Hope half rose. "No further questions, Your Honor."

Judge Hopkins cleared his throat. "All right. Any additional witnesses, Ms.Norcross?"

"No, Your Honor."

The judge looked at Hez. "Do you have any witnesses, Mr.Webster?"

The judge turned back to Hope. "Does the state rest its case?"

"Yes, Your Honor."

"The defense also rests," Hez added.

Judge Hopkins swiveled back to Hope. "Any argument, Ms.Norcross?"

"Yes, Your Honor." She rose and stepped up to the lectern. "May it please the court. The evidence establishing probable cause is overwhelming and uncontested. The defense does not dispute that the murder weapon was found on the defendant's property, that a spreadsheet detailing payments to the victims was found on her computer, or any of the other evidence put on by the prosecution. Rather, the defense apparently thinks there may be another explanation for this evidence, that the defendant was framed by some unknown person or persons. But that is irrelevant. The only question before the court is whether there is a substantial chance that Ms. Legare committed the crimes charged in the complaint. The answer is yes. Thank

you.”

The judge looked at Hez as Hope returned to her seat. “Argument from the defense?”

“I’ll give you the last word if you want it,” the judge said to Hope as Hez sat.

“No, Your Honor,” Hez and Hope said in unison.

“All right, this hearing is adjourned.”

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“I’ve never been in a house before—only apartments and the dorm at school.”

“I’ll try. I’m knackered.” He dutifully got out his iPad, but his drowsy eyes told her it was unlikely he’d manage to keep away the sandman. Especially with the dog curled beside him. When she returned to the living room, she spotted Beckett getting out of his car.

“Too personal to tell me?”

“I can rectify that.” He grabbed her by the shoulders and yanked her toward him.

The pain from his grip made her gasp. “Let go of me!” Savannah’s pulse raced, and she shoved against his chest.

He immediately released her and held up his hands as he took a step back. “Sorry, but you made me so mad.” His hand shook as he swiped it through his hair.

“What’s going on here?” Hez’s deep voice came from her left side, and he bounded up the porch steps to reach them.

She lifted her head. “I’m glad you came when you did.”

His eyes narrowed and his jaw flexed. “It looked like he was manhandling you. Are you all right?”

Hez frowned when he saw her arms. “Beckett did that?”

“Yes.” Beckett’s strength had surprised her. “He got so angry so fast. It was a little scary.”

He looked over her right shoulder, and his mouth dropped open as he stared through the window into the living room. “Who’s the kid?”

“You’re scaring me, Savannah. What’s this all about?”

“I can stay with him, but I’m confused. Why would she hide him?”

“She doesn’t want his father to know of his existence.”

“Erik?”

“Yes. He’s ten and a great kid.” She tugged at Hez’s hand. “Come meet him.”

Hez didn’t give her the opportunity to decide. He smiled down at the boy. “I’m your uncle Hez. It’s good to meet you. I guess you and I are going to hang out tomorrow.” He settled on the sofa beside Simon. “You a gamer? I can bring over my Sony PlayStation.”

Simon sat up and didn’t look sleepy any longer. “Brilliant!”

Jess gasped. “What? Is he all right? Where did he go? Someone could have snatched him.”

“He’s fine. They found him right away, but the headmaster didn’t mention how far he’d gotten. He’s very unhappy at the school and wants to be with you.”

“That’s not possible.” Jess swept her hand around the tiny cubicle. “Obviously.”

“Thank goodness you agreed to go. Did it take much convincing for him to let Simon stay on?”

Jess half stood. “You told Hez?”

“No. I took Simon to the hotel for the weekend like you’d arranged, but I had no choice but to bring him home with me.”

“Other kids grow up in boarding schools. It’s a common enough thing. You have to get him out of town before anyone sees him.” Realization dawned on her face. “Who has him now?”

“Hez is with him at my cottage. He seemed the safest person to tell since he’s your attorney.”

Jess was shaking her head before Savannah finished talking. “That’s not possible. I have to save Tupelo Grove.”

Jess pressed her lips together. “Just do what I say. We can talk about what happens next when I’m out of jail.”

“That’s going to be months away—if Hez can get you acquitted. Simon doesn’t want his nanny. He wants his family, his mother. Let me keep him, Jess.” Her voice trembled, and she cleared her throat. “He reminds me of Ella in so many ways. He’s got her coloring and eyes. Until I saw him, I hadn’t realized how much she resembled you. He’s a wonderful boy and deserves to be with people who love him. We could say I’m his foster mother.”

“Sarita loves him. He’ll be fine with her.”

A guard opened the door. “Time’s up.”

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“So now you know,” Jess said as Hez settled into his chair.

She glared at him and folded her arms. “We already talked about that.”

“This will take some explaining.” Little stress lines appeared around her eyes and mouth. “The basic problem is that TGU’s books are a mess. I knew there were problems when I took the CFO job, but the accounting system was much worse than I expected.” She sighed and rubbed her eyes. “Actually, there was no system. The CFO’s office had one software program and the student aid office had another, and of course they weren’t compatible. The president’s office kept its own records. So did the law school and the business school. The history department actually kept its records in old-fashioned ledger books—when they kept records at all. I’m not even going to tell you what the English department did.”

“That was the second surprise. I found a lot of stuff that wasn’t on the books. For example, Ellison Abernathy’s official salary was supplemented by money coming in from a private foundation in Birmingham. Funds would appear in an obscure account controlled by the CFO’s office, then be withdrawn in cash and handed to Abernathy.”

“That sounds fishy, to use a technical legal term.”

Now Hez got it. “And that could appear to be embezzlement and blackmail payments if taken out of context.”

“That’s fake. Maybe the burglar planted it on an earlier visit.”

“Maybe. He forced a side door last time. Did you notice any damage to your doors or

windows?”

“No,” she admitted. “Maybe it was planted remotely.”

He jotted down a note to check with his computer expert, Bruno. “And why would the burglar have come back?”

“Probably because there’s a lot of cash in the house, thanks to TGU’s irregular finances.”

“It sounds like whoever framed you knows a lot about this stuff.”

“Well, they know about the payments to Abernathy and Cardin. Most of the department heads and administration veterans know at least something about the off-the-book payment streams—but I’m not sure who knows what.”

“Nothing I can think of.” She held her hands palms up. “You know all my secrets now.”

He doubted that was true, but maybe he knew enough to get her acquitted.

She didn’t want to do this. Savannah gritted her teeth and punched in the old nanny’s number Jess had given her. The call to Sarita Barnes began to ring through, and Savannah settled on the swing on her front porch. Marley lay beside her, and he growled when Boo Radley roared over at the pond. A breeze touched her face with the scents of moss and pine.

Her phone sounded, and she answered it. “Good morning, Sarita. Thanks for returning my call so quickly.”

“Good morning, Ms. Webster. Simon is back in the States?”

“He is. Jess would love you to take charge of him again.”

“Ms. Webster, are you there?”

“Sorry, yes, I’m here. I was trying to decide what to do.”

“Okay, see what you can find, and I’ll tell my sister. I appreciate your help.” After a few more pleasantries, she ended the call. Marley rose and stretched before nosing her. She wrapped her arms around his neck and buried her face in his soft fur. Even the best dog in the world wasn’t going to make her feel better about this.

“I’ve missed you. Hey, Dad, you still have your condo, don’t you?”

“Of course. It’s my sanctuary.”

“I have an emergency and really need your help. Could I borrow it for a few weeks?”

His brown eyes narrowed, and he frowned. “Aren’t you up for tenure here? You’re not quitting, are you?”

“No, no, nothing like that. It’s not something I can talk about. It would only be for a couple of weeks.”

He studied her face. “What’s going on?”

The door stood ajar when she went to the front door, and she frowned. Had Simon been listening at some point? She hoped he hadn’t caught the gist of the conversation with Sarita. She called for her nephew and he didn’t answer. His room was empty, and she picked up the iPad on his bed. The screen lit, and she saw a newspaper article

about Jess's arrest. "Oh no," she said under her breath. She'd put off his questions, so he'd gone looking for answers.

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“Savannah?”

No response.

He set the box of games on a chair and pushed the door open. “Savannah?” he called more loudly. “Simon?”

Silence.

The cottage’s back door stood ajar. The familiar horror threatened to strangle him as he pushed it open. She’d been attacked once. He should have made sure she was using her security. Horrific images of finding her and Simon lying in a pool of blood ran through his head.

“Over here!” she called from a brushy area at the back of her property.

“Where would he go?”

“I’m not sure. He doesn’t know anyone here except Jess.”

“Have you told him where she is?”

Her shoulders sagged with relief. “That would be great. I’m so glad you came.”

Her gratitude stirred a warm glow in his heart, despite the stress of the situation. He made the call. No blond ten-year-olds had shown up and asked to see Jess, but they promised to let him know if one appeared.

Savannah's brows drew together in a quizzical frown. "Hmm. How would he get there? He'd have to take a bus, wouldn't he?"

"About now is when you need an old-time southern tracker," Hez said.

She slipped her hand into the crook of his arm. "There's no one I'd rather have with me right now. He's only ten and he doesn't know his way around. Poisonous snakes and gators are everywhere. And mosquitoes and ticks." Her voice wobbled at all the things that could have happened to him. Wildlife might be the least of the danger. "We have no idea what tree he's even in."

"Try calling him again."

"I've tried three times. I don't have a good signal."

He laid his other hand on top of hers. "He's a smart kid, Savannah. Maybe he's heading for the jail to see his mom."

"Not right through the swamp. It would make more sense to catch a bus." She took a few steps and studied the trees.

"Seems a dangerous place for kids."

Her phone sounded, and Simon's picture showed on the screen. "It's him!" She swiped it on. "Simon, where are you?"

"Aunt Savannah, you have to come! I'm afraid I'm going to fall, and the gator will eat me."

“Are you on a platform?”

“I couldn’t make it to that one you and Mum built, but I can see it from here. I’m on a tree limb.”

She heard a gator roar as he spoke. “We’ll be there as fast as we can. Stay on the phone and tell me when you see us.”

“You there, Aunt Savannah?”

“I’m near the platform, but I don’t see you.”

Hez slogged out of the water to join her. “Any sign of him?”

“I see you.” She ended the call and started that way.

Hez picked up some sticks and threw them at the gator. He then found a heavier branch and wielded it like a baseball bat, whacking the undergrowth and water as he approached the gator, shouting at it the whole time. It hissed and lumbered away. While he had the gator distracted, Savannah ran to the tree and reached up toward the boy. “Lower yourself down, and I’ll help you.”

Once he was on the ground, Savannah palmed the boy’s face. “What were you thinking to come out here alone?”

His gaze dropped away from hers. “I—I wanted to explore.”

He was lying. She took a step back and held out her hand. “Give me your phone.”

She turned the phone around to face him. “What’s this about?”

Hez moved closer. “I’m defending your mom, and we’ll get to the truth. I know this is all confusing, but you have to trust us. No more running off, okay?”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Hez said.

When will the bomb go off? That’s out of my control—but it will happen soon. Savannah and Hez now have all the pieces to the puzzle. Once they manage to put them together, it will all be over.

All I can do now is wait for the right moment. And try to get some sleep.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 7:03 am

Savannah nodded. "Time period?"

"Between 300 and 100 BC." Dominga's voice gained confidence. "Its provenance locates it in Mexico."

The students chattered excitedly on the way out, and Savannah grabbed her purse and hurried to her car in the falling dusk. She paused to check Simon's whereabouts. The app she'd put on his phone showed him still in the building where Hez worked. Was this a day he met with Will, Jane's son, for tutoring? If so, she had a little time. She could zip to the library, then gather Simon. Maybe Hez would agree to join them for dinner. She had chicken out for alfredo, and it was one of Hez's favorite recipes she made. She told herself she only wanted him to join them so they could discuss what to do about Simon, but she wasn't so delusional that she didn't recognize the rationalization for what it was.

The librarian, a woman in her thirties, greeted her when she reached the desk. "Can I help you find something?"

Savannah extended her phone. "I know this will seem like a strange request, but have you seen this boy?"

Savannah tensed. "Was there a particular time period he asked about?"

The woman's brown eyes held curiosity. "He was particularly interested in 2012 to 2014. He printed off a page of engagement announcements."

Savannah shot a text to Hez. On Simon's tail. Stand by. I might need help.

He stood at a partially open window, and when she called his name, he glanced her way before he shoved the pane up the rest of the way. He threw himself inside before she reached him, and she grabbed at his ankle but missed. She dove inside the house after him, and the fall to the hardwood floor knocked the breath out of her for a minute.

“Simon Legare, what do you think you’re doing? We are leaving now.” She grabbed his arm, and he jerked it away.

Savannah had no idea how she’d get Jess to open up to her son, but her heart broke at the torment in Simon’s blue eyes. He let her embrace him, and as she held him, she spotted a jade statue on top of Erik’s desk. Her mind cataloged it as an Olmec figure. When Simon stepped back, she moved past him to pick up the piece. Jade was always a pleasure to hold, but even as her fingers registered the patina on the surface, she spotted a provenance letter on TGU letterhead. It identified the piece as part of the TGU collection and was signed by Professor Wilson Fremont on behalf of the Tupelo Grove University History Department. There was no Professor Wilson Fremont.

“Aunt Savannah?”

Hez’s phone buzzed with a text from Savannah—something about being on Simon’s tail. What was she on his tail about this time? Simon had been behaving himself all day, as far as Hez could tell. The kid had been sitting in Hez’s office, quietly playing on his phone for the past few hours, and he didn’t complain when Hez parked him in a dingy empty room so they could meet with Bruno. Hez made a mental note to check with her later, but he had more important things to think about right now. If Bruno was right, this could give him the evidence he needed to exonerate Jess. “Great news! Tell me about it.”

“Keystroke logger—that would have recorded her passwords, right?”

Hez’s phone buzzed again, but he ignored it. “Are you absolutely positive it happened after that?”

“Yup. She backed up her laptop to the cloud every night. The last backup happened at 2:00 a.m. on October 16. That backup had the logger but no spreadsheet. The copy of her hard drive you gave me had the spreadsheet but no logger. Ergo, someone removed the logger and added the spreadsheet after the backup. QED,” Bruno added with a flourish of his Red Bull can.

He needed to warn her when she came to get Simon.

Her tongue didn’t want to unravel the circumstances of how she came to be standing in his home office, and she had to get out of here and call the police. Erik was the person behind everything that had happened, and she struggled to tamp down the fear souring her tongue. “I—I can explain.”

Simon, blue eyes alert and eager, took a step toward him. “You have to be Erik Andersen, right? You were engaged to my mum.”

Savannah winced at the pathos vibrating in Simon’s voice, and she wanted to scream at her sister for what she’d done to this little boy. All of Jess’s secrets had knotted into a tangled mess that just might destroy all of them. This man had orchestrated everything and had framed Jess for murders she didn’t commit. He wouldn’t allow his hard work to unravel now.

“I only found out about Simon myself last week.”

His shoulders tensed, and his lips flattened. He reached out and closed the door before she could reach it. “I think there are some things we need to discuss.”

Savannah’s gut clenched, and she pulled Simon against her. Please come, Hez.

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Where was Simon?

Hez walked down the hall to the men's room. No one there. His stomach muscles tightened.

He dialed her number. "Please pick up, please pick up, please pick up!"

The call went to voice mail.

He jerked open the bathroom door and raced for the staircase leading to the exit nearest the parking lot. He took the stairs two at a time, almost falling on the narrow, worn steps. Then he was out in the pale November sun, sprinting for his car.

He prayed he wouldn't be too late this time.

"Nothing. Like I said, I just came to retrieve Simon and prevent him from confronting you."

"Nothing, Erik. I don't have any real idea of what's going on at TGU."

Her phone sounded with an incoming call, and she started to answer it, but Erik stepped forward and snatched it out of her hand. He held it aloft, and she caught a glimpse of Hez's face on the screen before he clicked the side button and sent the call to voice mail. When the screen went black, he tried to turn it on again, but it was set for face recognition. Erik gritted his teeth and swore.

Andersen reacted first. He held up his hands, each of which gripped a cell phone. “Whoa, whoa. No need for violence.”

Hez stepped into the room, keeping the tire iron cocked and ready to swing. “What’s going on here?”

“He’s not calling the cops,” Savannah said, her voice tight with fear. “He’s calling his boss!”

Hez tensed to bring the tire iron smashing down on Andersen’s phone, but a better idea hit him. He nodded and pulled out his own phone. “Good, the state police can arrest both of you when they get here.”

Andersen looked up from his phone. His finger hovered over the surface. “The state police?”

Hez nodded. “I have friends there. Former prosecutor, you know.”

“I...” Andersen breathed a shaky sigh. “Look, we all need to talk.”

Simon gasped. “My dad framed my mum?”

So Simon and Erik both knew the truth. That was unfortunate. “I’m afraid so, Simon.”

Hez flicked a glance toward the statuette on Andersen’s desk. “Then where did that come from?”

“It... was brought to me. I don’t know where it came from. I just get the artifact and

write the letter—that's it."

"And you get paid, right?"

"Where I'll join you, I guess." Hez smiled and held up his phone. "You just confessed to aiding the trafficking of stolen goods, and I recorded the whole thing."

Andersen's face went gray under his tan. "Turn that off!"

"What... what do you want?" Andersen's voice was barely more than a whisper.

"Answers. Let's start with who you were about to call when I came in. Who's this boss of yours?"

"I—I can't say."

"Sure you can."

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Wait a minute. Olmec. Willard looted an Aztec city that had been abandoned soon after the Spanish conquest of Mexico. The Olmecs were the first known Mesoamerican civilization. They occupied the Veracruz area starting in 1600 BC until about 400 BC. And though the university had acquired a few Olmec pieces through the decades, there had been none in the Willard Treasure since it was a completely different time period. The Aztec civilization hadn't arrived in central Mexico until AD 1300, well over a millennium and a half later.

She stepped to Erik and held out her hand. "My phone."

Hez's blue eyes narrowed as he assessed her sudden insight. "An ongoing laundering operation, not just theft and embezzlement."

"I don't know anything. I just provide the letters—I don't know what he does with things after that. My role is too small for you to bother with."

Hez advanced toward Erik with the tire iron. "Tell us what you know."

He stared at the name, and his eyes turned steely as he seemed to make the same connections she did. And they both knew they had no proof of anything. She hoped Hez had some kind of legal wrangling up his sleeve, because it would be hard to sleep tonight knowing Beckett was out there plotting his next move. And she believed Erik—Beckett might target Simon.

Simon started to run after Andersen, but Hez caught his arm. "Let him go. You'll just

get hurt if you try to stop him.”

Simon tried to jerk free. “But he’s my dad! He’ll listen to me.”

A chilly breeze blew in through the open door and Savannah rubbed her arms. “Should we stay here until the police arrive?”

A little furrow appeared between her brows. “What about the local police?”

“They’ve been compromised.” He told her about Bruno’s findings. “I’m reluctant to involve them until I know who we can trust.”

Savannah shivered. “Let’s get out of here.”

Hez nodded. “I’ll walk you to your car.”

She blinked in the autumn sun as they stepped outside. “Do you think they’ll have enough to arrest Beckett?”

Simon snorted. “I can’t believe my dad is such a git.”

Savannah patted him on the back. “At least you’ve got a great mom.”

Simon frowned. “I can help too!”

Simon jerked free of her arm as they reached her car. “She’s my mum!” He opened the passenger door without another word, got in, and slammed it.

You awake?

Instead of an answering text, the phone sounded. She swiped it on. “That was fast.”

“You okay? You’re up late.”

His deep voice soothed her agitation, and she sat on the edge of the bed. “I keep thinking about what might have happened if you hadn’t shown up. I don’t know where Simon and I would be right now if you hadn’t busted in. You brandished that tire iron like a sword.” Her chuckle ended in a hiccup she barely managed to keep from morphing to a sob. “I didn’t know you had it in you.”

“Does that mean we might get Jess out of jail?”

“Maybe. With the right breaks, we might have the real culprits in jail and Jess home by Christmas.”

“Oh, Hez, that would be wonderful!”

Her tongue dried, and she clamped her lips shut. All she wanted to do was tell him she wanted to put the divorce papers in the shredder and have him move back in with her. She was beginning to think maybe he really wanted a divorce, and the thought made her heart shrivel.

“Savannah, you there?”

“I-I’m here. Listen, I’d better go.” She ended the call and held her head in her hands. She wasn’t ready for things to end.

Simon had escaped again. No wonder the school expelled him.

She shot him a text. Simon, get out of there now!

“Beckett?”

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 7:03 am

“Hi, Savannah. What’s up?”

“They kidnapped Simon!”

He bolted upright in his bed. “What? Who kidnapped him?”

She described her conversation with Beckett. “Should we call the police?”

He tried to force his brain to function. His mind went back to the time he called 911 to report a burglar in Jess’s house—and the man got a warning call a few seconds later. “The last time I called them, someone tipped off Beckett immediately. If that happens now, he might kill Simon.”

“Wh-what should we do? He’s expecting me any minute.”

“You can’t go over there alone.”

“I don’t have any choice! If I don’t go, he’ll kill Simon.”

“Thank you! Are you ready to go?”

Though it was nearly one, lights blazed from the windows of Beckett’s house. Savannah parked in his driveway and glanced into the shadows before she slid out and shut her car door. Her heart thudded against her ribs. She switched her call with Hez to FaceTime and kept the phone in her hand. The hooting of an owl drowned out

the faint sound of her sneakers on the walk to the porch, but Beckett must have seen her headlights because he opened the door and stood waiting for her.

That sounded like Simon. She gave a slight nod for him to continue.

She went past him into the entry and spotted the disarray in the living room. Someone had pulled everything out of the storage spaces under the end tables and left it on the floor.

“That’s not true!” She breathed in and out to calm herself. “Jess is no murderer.”

“These guys mean business. Let’s start by taking your phone to them.” He reached toward the hand clutching her iPhone.

“I told you—they wore ski masks.”

“I might recognize their clothing or their builds. Something might be familiar.”

“You’re wasting time, Savannah. The clock is ticking on Simon’s life.”

She backed away and glanced around for a weapon. Nothing was handy in the living room.

Her mouth went dry. Did they see Hez parked nearby? “What do you mean? I’m here alone.”

“You are now. They grabbed Hez too. And you’re next.”

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Hez got to his feet and tested his limbs. He was stiff and chilled to the bone from the rain, but he found no injuries other than an enormous lump on the left side of his head. He wasn't bound and no one else was in sight. His captors had apparently just dumped him on Andre Legare's grave. Again, why?

"I don't see him, but when you can stand, we'll search for him." He hugged her tight. "Thank God you're okay!"

"I thought they were going to kill both of us," she whispered. She lifted her head. "Why did they leave us here?"

"I think they got me right after you." She started to shiver. "D-did you get the evidence you need?"

She took out her phone—and it also had been wiped. Her hands shook, so he took off his jacket and wrapped it around her shoulders. The smile she gave him warmed him to the tips of his toes, despite the wet November chill. "Thank you."

He'd tried not to think about the boy's fate. If Beckett had harmed him...

Savannah gasped and grabbed his arm. "Simon!"

Hez followed her gaze. Simon lay on Ella's grave. There was a package of candy on his chest.

Hez stepped closer and put his hand on the boy's shoulder. "What do you remember, Simon? Did he answer any of your questions?"

Simon crossed his arms over his chest. "I pounded on his door. When he opened it, I asked why he had framed my mum. He just stared at me and had this creepy grin. He said, 'You don't know anything, do you?' Then he waved at someone behind me. A guy in a ski mask picked me up and carried me to a van. He poked a needle in my arm, and I woke up here."

Simon stared at the bag in her hands. "It's not mine. I'm allergic to peanuts."

"It was on your chest when we found you," Hez said.

"They never really said anything about it when they followed up with questions. So who else knew?"

Hez took a step back. "You're saying someone left the candy here as a warning?"

A glance at Simon's curious face made Savannah check her initial response. "I don't know what it means."

But she knew. They both did. Beckett was warning them that if they poked around, Simon might die. But how did Beckett know Ella had likely gone after the bag of candy? It wasn't something she'd talked about with anyone other than Hez. Not ever—even to Nora. Even she and Hez hadn't discussed it much after a couple of early fights about who left the bag where it would tempt Ella. Neither of them remembered leaving the bag out there by the pool.

So how had Beckett found out?

Hez exhaled. "Maybe a snitch in the police force gave him the file."

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Hez groaned and leaned back in his chair.

Simon looked up from his phone. “Is something wrong, Uncle Hez?”

Hez gestured at the monitor on his desk. “They somehow got into my computer and deleted everything I had on your mom’s case, plus a bunch of other stuff.”

“Does your phone unlock with facial recognition?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have remote access for your computer?”

“Yes.”

“And you let your phone remember your passwords?”

“Yes.”

“Yep.” Hez nodded slowly as he thought it through. “You’re a smart kid, Simon.”

Hez chuckled. “She must’ve been furious.”

Simon looked at his shoes. “I just... I want to help.”

“Which is the exact opposite of what you did yesterday. Aunt Savannah said you’d be the death of her, and that was almost literally true last night. I’m surprised any of us

woke up this morning.”

Simon’s reply was barely audible. “I know.”

The pieces finally fell into place. He sighed and turned to Simon. “I know why we’re alive, kid.”

Simon frowned up at him. “What do you mean?”

“Beckett and his friends didn’t have to kill us to keep us quiet. All they needed to do was get rid of the evidence we’d discovered. Once they did that, killing us would have been counterproductive because it would have gotten the police involved, and honest officers might have been assigned to the case. As things stand now, all we have is a wild and completely unprovable story. After last night, we don’t have a single shred of evidence that Beckett, your dad, or any of their friends broke a single law. It was the perfect crime.”

What would Hez say if she told him she’d changed her mind? And how did she even bring it up?

“How did you know where I was?” When his lips tilted in a smirk, she fisted her hands. “What? You were watching me?”

“The campus has cameras all over, Savannah. It wasn’t hard to figure out your location. It never is.”

“You don’t need to threaten me.”

Cold fear shuddered down her back. “Simon has nothing to do with what is going on

at the university.”

On that, at least, she could wholeheartedly agree. “Absolutely not!”

“Good. And you and Hez will leave things to me.”

“I understand.” But she refused to say they would stop. She couldn’t—not while Jess was in jail.

“Does Hez?”

“I’ll make sure he knows your demands.”

Beckett’s smarmy fake concern made her skin crawl. “I’m leaving shortly too.”

When he disappeared down the steeper slope, she exhaled and started that direction too. There had to be some way to find the truth without putting her nephew in danger. Jess was facing a conviction for two charges of capital murder, and Savannah’s greatest fear was that her sister would be sentenced to death. Maybe Hez would have an idea how to get Jess released. Once that happened, Savannah could whisk her and Simon out of Beckett’s reach and get to the bottom of what was going on here.

He lifted his foot to crush the little spy, then stopped. Even if he was able to find and destroy every single bug, Beckett and his minions would just install new ones and hide them better. Or they might conclude that Hez and Savannah were continuing to investigate despite Beckett’s warning and simply kill them.

The phone was probably bugged, so Hez chose his words carefully. “Is the blood his?”

“I’m waiting on DNA results. I’ll send you a copy as soon as I have them.”

Hez winced at the mention of the package. That was the last thing he wanted Beckett to hear. He had to do some fast damage control and get her off the phone. “There won’t be a package. Sorry. I, uh, misplaced the materials I was going to send you.”

Surprise and disappointment mixed in her voice. “You did?”

“Yeah, I did. Hey, I’d love to chat, but it’s been a rough couple of days and I was just about to head out for a run.”

She’d picked up on his hint. “That would be great. I’ll meet you in half an hour outside your office.”

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Savannah stuffed the stack of papers into her briefcase and motioned for Simon to follow her from the classroom.

“Are you chuffed? You’re smiling.”

She nodded. “I texted Hez to meet us at the beach.”

“Headache?” she asked.

He nodded. “Comes and goes in intensity.”

Simon was listening with rapt attention, but she didn’t dare let him out of their sight. He was as vested in getting his mother out of jail as they were. “Jess’s fleece is the key.”

His frown was an obvious attempt to follow her through the pain of his headache. “The one with blood on it?”

“And the security footage might show it.”

“Exactly.” She gestured to a nearby bench on an empty beachside bike path. “Let’s take a look.”

Hez paused the video and zoomed in to get a better view. “I can’t make out his face with that hood over it.”

“He’s got something in his hand!” Hez froze the screen again and enlarged the

picture. “Do you recognize it?”

Hez exhaled. “We’ve got him.”

Hez needed to buy time. If he didn’t, they were all dead. And he needed to get that gun pointed away from Simon. “Hey, Beckett!”

The man froze, every muscle tensed.

Savannah examined her limbs and took a tentative step. “I—I think so.”

“Me too,” Simon added.

Savannah pulled out her phone. “I always have terrible reception here. I’ll be right back. Come on, Simon.”

Hez trained the gun on Beckett’s midsection. “Stay where you are.”

Beckett looked past Hez, and his swollen mouth stretched into a lopsided sneer. “Oh, I’m lucky all right. And you’re not.”

Savannah’s head pounded, and she licked dry lips as she blinked and tried to clear her vision. Why couldn’t she move? The drone of an engine penetrated her fuzzy brain, and she smelled seawater as she rolled over. The vibration of an inboard motor alarmed her, and she struggled up with her hands bound behind her.

A crooked smile chased away the pain in his face. “You can’t get rid of me that

easy.”

“I don’t want to get rid of you. I love you. I tried to tell myself I didn’t, but it was a lie.”

His gaze widened, and he struggled to sit up. “I wish you’d told me that when I could move my hands.”

“You could kiss me again.”

She started to lean down again, but a noise behind her brought panic surging in her chest, and she turned to see Beckett coming toward them with a pistol in his hand.

Simon stirred and woke crying. Savannah scooted toward him. “I’m here, honey.”

“No!” Savannah struggled against the ties on her wrists. “No one who knows Hez would believe he’d hurt anyone.”

Why wasn’t Hez objecting or struggling? A smile pushed its way past the pain on his face. “You forgot one thing, Beckett.”

Beckett barked out a derisive laugh. “And what’s that?”

Beckett took a step back as the Coast Guard swarmed up the side of the boat.

Hez nodded. “Yes, Your Honor.”

The judge flipped through an accordion folder of papers. “I don’t see an opposition on file from the DA. Was one filed?”

Hez resisted the urge to let out a victory whoop. Hope had hinted that there was an internal debate at the DA's office over whether to dismiss all of the charges against Jess or just the charges related to Abernathy's murder. Hez had filed a motion to dismiss to force a decision out of them. It had been a gamble, but it just paid off.

Hez turned to Jess. Tears pooled in her eyes and her voice was rough. "Thank you!" To his utter amazement, she hugged him.

Five minutes later, he was in the corridor outside the courtroom, phone in hand. He couldn't wait to tell Savannah the good news. But before he could dial, someone called his name. He looked up and the clerk from the domestic relations courtroom hurried toward him, carrying a sheaf of papers.

Savannah was no longer his wife.

Simon punched the air. "Yes! That's ace!"

She took the paper and read it. The color drained from her face.

He motioned to Simon. "Let's go get your mom."

Divorced.

Wasn't it?

When Nora hurried up the steps toward her, Savannah's control crumpled. She sank into her friend's embrace, and the comforting press of Nora's arms around her released the floodgate holding back her tears. Savannah sobbed against her shoulder until she managed to get a grip on her emotions. The familiar scent of peppermints and Nora's vanilla shampoo strengthened her as much as Nora's patting her on the back.

Nora glanced at the decree. "Let's get inside out of the wind. We can talk while we decorate for the celebration."

Nora sat beside her. "You can always get remarried. What's driving this fear you have?"

"What did he say when you told him you loved him?"

"He said I could kiss him again, but he didn't say he loved me too."

She shook her head. "I have to know what he's thinking. He said to let him know when I was ready to talk. I'm going to tell him to meet me at Ella's grave tomorrow morning."

The inscription on Ella's headstone caught his gaze: "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." After his last visit to the cemetery, he had read the passage in Luke that it came from, so he now understood that Jesus had been talking about storing up treasure in heaven. Blake had told him it had nothing to do with his money but his actions. And Hez had no idea how that worked. Not yet. Blake had promised to help explain it, and Hez realized he was finally ready to listen, to maybe accept that God might forgive him. It seemed impossible, but what if it was true?

There was that crossroad. Or there might be a crossroad anyway. He needed to find out.

She took his hand in hers. "You don't need to keep apologizing. It could have happened to anyone."

"You've changed. I see it every day."

She squeezed his hand. "It's enough for me."

"But look at us now! You're not hiding and I'm not leaving. I've forgiven you, Hez. God has forgiven you. You don't have to keep carrying around the guilt of the past. Just let it go. You can have a fresh start."

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“I thought she wouldn’t mind.” Savannah leaned her head against his chest as his hand settled around her waist. “Where’s that little cutie pie of yours, Jane?”

“It’s a miracle.” Savannah’s attention was caught by genuine laughter ringing out from her sister.

Jess clapped her hands together and gestured for everyone’s attention. “I’d like to thank all of you for standing with me. It was a hard few months, but this will be the best Christmas I’ve ever had.” She nodded toward her son, whose joyous grin was brighter than the Christmas tree.

“Who could not love you?” He reached out and pulled her close enough she could feel his heart beating against her ear. “This is a new beginning for all of us, babe. I intend to grasp my second chance with both hands and never let go,” he whispered against her hair.

He smiled down at her. “Let’s take a walk on the beach when this is over. I want to kiss you without an audience.”

And there was nothing she’d like better. She tucked her hand into his arm. “I think we can duck out in about an hour.”

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I open the door slowly, taking care that the hinges don't squeak. Simon lies on his side, facing me. He's fast asleep, exhausted by the excitement of the party. Shafts of moonlight from his windows bathe his face in silver-white light. He looks like an alabaster angel.

I'm grateful to Hez, but I'm not thrilled that he'll be staying. My former and future brother-in-law is too clever for his own good or anyone else's. With Beckett and his puppet, Deke Willard, behind bars, everyone will assume our little operation has been wrapped up with a Christmas bow—and Beckett and Deke are smart enough not to say otherwise. But Hez is sharp enough to see the loose ends on that bow and start pulling on them. Hez needs to leave as soon as possible, and he needs to take Savannah with him.

No, I won't worry about that. Not tonight.