

WHERE SECRETS LIE

A TUPELO GROVE NOVEL

COLLEEN COBLE
RICK ACKER



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

Where Secrets Lie

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*For our amazingly supportive spouses,
Anette Acker and Dave Coble.
This book wouldn't have made
it to print without you!*



CHAPTER 1

JESSICA LEGARE KEPT AN ESCAPE BAG IN THE LOWER-LEFT drawer of the desk in her home office. It held a burner phone, fake passports for herself and her son, two credit cards in the same name as her passport, hair dye, a loaded SIG P365, and a heart-shaped silver locket.

The bag was Dior, of course. Jess always carried a Dior purse, so to a careful observer, anything else might be a tip-off that she was up to something. If she ever had to run, she wanted to be halfway around the world before anyone noticed she was gone. She'd been caught flat-footed once—and she got arrested and very nearly spent the rest of her life in prison as a result.

She would not let that happen again.

The man who got Jess arrested, Beckett Harrison, was now in jail himself, facing a long list of felony charges, including murder. Still, Jess didn't assume she was safe. In fact, she knew she wasn't. Even if everything went completely according to plan, there was a good chance she'd need that escape bag.

Should she use it now? She opened the drawer and peered into the shadowy interior, lit only by the glow from the monitors on her desk. She could use one of the cards in the bag to buy tickets to Paris for her and her son, Simon. An Uber to the

COLLEEN COBLE AND RICK ACKER

airport could go on the other card. She could wake Simon and bundle him into the car when it arrived. Twenty-four hours from now they could be safely nestled into one of the little villages dotting the French Alps. They had distant relatives there. Maybe they could build new lives for themselves.

She sighed and shut the drawer. It was a nice fantasy, but nothing more. She and Simon wouldn't be safe in France. They'd just face different dangers. Her best bet was to stick to the plan. Besides, she needed to finish what she'd started. She owed it to her family and herself.

Her computer chimed, notifying her that it was 6:25 a.m. and her video call was scheduled to start in five minutes. She turned on her voice-altering program and opened the call. She kept her camera off. The calling program had end-to-end encryption, but she was taking no chances.

At six thirty sharp, two men joined the call. Both also had their cameras off and used voice-altering software. One had a picture of a gorgeous English cream golden retriever for an avatar, a subtle reference to the fact that his family raised championship dogs a century ago. The other man's avatar was the Punisher's death's-head logo, a not-at-all-subtle reference to how he viewed himself. Though she knew the real identities of both men, thinking of them as their avatars helped her distance herself and remember not to call them by name.

English Cream spoke first. "Greetings, all. Our buyers are getting impatient and starting to ask questions, especially with these new, very valuable pieces of art coming from the digs. We have to get them sold before anyone discovers the new areas being looted. How soon can deliveries resume?"

"Soon," Punisher replied. "Beach is crawling with Coasties

and cops all the way from Biloxi to Pensacola. We're working on an alternate route. Should be good to go in a week or so."

"And I can handle the paperwork, at least for now." Jess hadn't cared about the art they'd smuggled earlier—but this new vein of artifacts was culturally important, and she was eager to get them into the hands of collectors who could pay well. A brand-new Mayan ruin had been located in the jungle, and the treasures it offered were worth a fortune. They included a complete chocolate set and extremely rare codex pages found in a sealed jar. Her conscience twinged at the knowledge that the artifacts they'd found in Central and South America belonged in a museum, but her partners would insist that they be sold for full value.

She pushed away her qualms and focused on how these sales furthered her desire for revenge.

"Good, and what of the other initiatives?" English Cream asked. "Are those proceeding despite the, ah, excitement of the last month?"

Jess nodded, even though no one could see her. "We're very short-staffed, of course." Which was a major understatement—every member of the Tupelo Grove branch of the organization was now dead or behind bars, except Jess. "Nonetheless, everything is on schedule."

"Excellent!" The satisfaction in English Cream's voice came through despite the robotic distortion. "You've done fine work."

The job ahead of her would be hard, but it would be worth it. If only she didn't have to cause her sister so much pain in the process.

COLLEEN COBLE AND RICK ACKER

Whoever thought young love was the best hadn't walked through the fire to arrive at Savannah Webster's unexpected destination. She smiled at her ex-husband on the other side of the flickering candlelight. Even at thirty-seven Hez retained his lean, muscular build and strong jawline. He commanded a room when he entered, and he still had her heart.

She swept her hand at the familiar dining room. "It feels right to be back here."

Billy's Seafood Restaurant in Pelican Harbor had been the site of landmark moments in their past. He'd asked her to marry him the first time at this very table, and they'd celebrated all their anniversaries here. This spot held tender memories and others with a sharper edge to them. The food and ambience had been a constant throughout their marriage.

He reached across the table and laced his fingers with hers. "Our first real date in ages. This is where I wanted to bring you last summer when I showed up at your office."

If she hadn't been so hardheaded that day, she wouldn't be single right now. "Better late than never. I've been thinking about where and when to have our wedding. What do you think about the gorgeous old chapel on campus? Plans are under way to restore it, and it should be finished by June when the term ends."

"June? Why so long?" He flashed an amorous smile. "Run away with me. I'll pull some strings and we can get married after dessert."

It was a tempting offer, especially with the candlelight dancing in his blue eyes and gleaming off his dark hair. But she shook her head. "I want to do this right, Hez. A clean break and a fresh start. Just getting remarried right away in

front of a justice of the peace would feel . . . I don't know, like nothing has changed and we're going to slip back into the old habits that wrecked our marriage the first time."

His eyes grew tender. He gave her hand a gentle squeeze. "I understand. And I agree—as much as I'd love to have you back tonight."

Her heart stuttered and she squeezed his hand back. "Almost as much as I'd love to have you." She took a deep breath to steady herself. He hadn't formally asked her yet, but they both knew they belonged together. "There are practical things we need to think about too. We need to find a house to buy. With Jess's hours, I expect Simon will be with us a lot. My rental on campus isn't big enough for you to have a home office and Simon to have his own room. I'd like a place off campus where Simon can play ball with his friends."

"You're right, and I want to get the Justice Chamber planned too. There's a lot for both of us to do, but I'm ready to restart our life together. That old chapel is beautiful. Do you want to do the whole thing again—white dress and tux?"

"I don't need a big, fancy wedding. Just a sweet ceremony with close friends and family. I don't need a fancy dress with a sweeping train for you to stumble over."

His smile extended to his eyes. "I remember that. In my defense, it was dark outside and I was ducking the birdseed."

"You had a cut on your head where it hit the bench on your way down."

He rubbed his head. "I was afraid I was bleeding all over your dress. I'm glad we aren't replaying that fiasco."

She took a sip of her sweet tea and waited while the server delivered their oysters. "A simple sheath will suit me fine."

COLLEEN COBLE AND RICK ACKER

Maybe a pale blue one. You can wear a suit instead of a tux. Jess will be my maid of honor, of course. Who do you want for your best man? Maybe Blake?”

“I was thinking about asking Simon. He might actually say yes if he doesn’t have to wear a tux.”

“Oh, Hez, he would love that! I’d assumed you’d ask Blake or Jimmy. Jimmy’s done a lot for you.”

“It would be hard to choose between them, but they’d both understand if I ask Simon.” He took an oyster shell and slid the meat into his mouth. “Wow, these are good. Have one.”

She picked up one and ate it. The salty taste tantalized her taste buds, and she swallowed it down with a cracker. “So good.” She gave him a mischievous smile. “We could ask Jimmy to be the ring bearer.”

Hez chuckled. “That’s quite a mental picture. He’d make four of Simon.”

“We could tell the guests he’s your bouncer and is there to keep you from backing out.”

“Or maybe to keep you from running away.”

She shook her head. “I’m not going anywhere. I have a chain in the car ready to use on you, though.”

His smile vanished. “I will never leave, Savannah. I learned from my mistakes.”

“We both did.” She withdrew her hand to take a look at the menu. “The specials sound great, but I must have my favorite shrimp étouffée.”

A server carried a bottle of wine and two stemmed glasses past their table. Hez’s gaze followed the trajectory as the man delivered the wine with a flourish to the couple next to them. The familiar bottle with its black-and-copper label reminded

WHERE SECRETS LIE

her of the last time Hez had ordered his favorite Nth Degree chardonnay. After too many refills, she'd had to steady him for the walk back to the Bayfront Inn.

Hez cleared his throat. "I love it too, but I'm not sure it will taste the same with water instead of a good chardonnay." He inclined his head toward the other table. "Looks like a few more people have discovered our favorite label."

His favorite label. She struggled to keep her smile in place. She'd be happy if she never saw another bottle of wine in her life. She'd read that 85 percent of alcoholics relapsed in the first year and 90 percent in the first four years. Knowing Hez, she was sure he was aware of those statistics and was determined to be in the small percentage of people who stayed the course. She didn't understand the struggle he faced, but she wanted to. And she wanted to help in any way she could.

She studied his wistful expression. Was he missing the taste of the wine, or was he thinking of happier times and the things they'd celebrated? Or were good wine and good times inextricably intertwined in his memories? It began to dawn on her that this might be a lifelong battle for him.

CHAPTER 2

HEZ SAT IN THE FRONT ROW OF THE OLD COURTROOM GALLERY, stomach full of razor-winged butterflies. He was a veteran of dozens of felony trials—many in this very courtroom—but he'd always been one of the attorneys dueling in the front or a spectator watching from the gallery. This would be the first time he experienced one as a crime victim—and a witness.

Hez's old friend Hope Norcross stood from the prosecution table at the front of the courtroom. "The People call Hezekiah Webster."

Hez walked down the aisle and across the open space known as the "well of the court" to the witness stand. He could feel every eye on him, and for once he didn't like the sensation.

The bored-looking bailiff pushed himself to his feet as Hez approached. "Raise your right hand. Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?"

"I do." Hez took his seat on the witness stand. The courtroom seemed bigger and more intimidating from this perspective. Rows of reporters filled the gallery benches, watching expectantly. A man and a woman in expensive suits sat at the defense table. The defendant was Beckett Harrison,

the slimy former provost of Tupelo Grove University who had first tried to steal Savannah's heart and then attempted to murder them both, along with their nephew, Simon. Beckett's dark hair was perfectly coiffed, and he looked relaxed and comfortable, like he was waiting for a board meeting to start. But his brown eyes followed Hez with cold hatred.

The woman beside Beckett watched Hez with an unsettling smile tugging at the corners of her perfect lips. Beckett's attorney, Martine Dubois, wore a charcoal-gray suit and a white blouse that set off her tan. A silver clip gathered her blonde hair at the nape of her neck, accentuating her strong cheekbones and almond-shaped brown eyes, the only features hinting that her mother was half Vietnamese. Hez had known her since law school, and he did not look forward to being cross-examined by her.

Hope arranged her notes on the lectern. She was five years younger than Hez and barely reached five and a half feet, even with the three-inch heels she wore to court. Still, she managed to project strength and confidence—a confidence Hez knew she didn't feel today.

Hope couldn't tell Hez what she thought about the Beckett Harrison case, but she didn't have to. She and Hez had been friends since she first walked into the DA's office as an intern a decade ago and he became her mentor. Ordinarily, she'd be bubbling with excitement over a high-profile trial like this. She couldn't say anything specific because Hez was a witness and not her co-counsel, but her enthusiasm and energy should have been palpable over the past few weeks. They weren't. In fact, she had been tense and unhappy whenever they got together for coffee or a run.

COLLEEN COBLE AND RICK ACKER

It wasn't hard to guess Hope's problem. There was a right way and a wrong way to try the Harrison case—and she was doing it the wrong way.

The right way to prosecute Beckett Harrison would have been to do it in at least two trials, maybe more. Beckett had committed a series of crimes, including two murders. The case against him for some of the crimes was a slam dunk. But the evidence for others—including both murders—was much thinner, at least for now. Hope could have tried Beckett on the slam-dunk charges now to put him in prison for a few years. Then she could have built her case on the murders and other crimes while he was safely behind bars and charged him whenever she was ready. Instead, she had charged everything at once. That decision would have come from the DA himself: Elliot Drake.

Drake was up for reelection, and he considered himself an excellent candidate for governor someday. Future governors didn't bring piecemeal cases that would barely merit a mention in the local newspaper—they brought big, splashy cases that would capture the media's attention statewide. So Hope was stuck trying a big, splashy case that she could well lose.

Compounding Hope's problem, Beckett had hired a smart lawyer. Defense attorneys usually wanted months or even years to prepare for trial because the prosecution had a huge head start since they'd finished investigating the case before bringing charges. But Martine correctly read the situation and pressed for the earliest trial date she could get, gambling that her odds of an acquittal would only go down if both sides had time to do a full investigation.

Hope cleared her throat. "Please state your name for the record."

Hez turned to the jury box and spoke directly to the jurors, just like he'd always coached witnesses to do. "Hezekiah Webster."

"When did you first meet the defendant?"

"The day I started investigating the murder of Ellison Abernathy."

"Why were you investigating that?"

"My wife, Savannah—or, well, she was my wife at the time—she found the body and the police initially showed interest in her. I'm a former prosecutor, so I was representing her."

"Did you suspect that Mr. Harrison might be the killer?"

"Not at first, but I should have."

"Why?"

"Because he immediately insinuated himself into the investigation for no obvious reason. He had no law enforcement background or investigative expertise. Also, he had a very busy job and he wasn't particularly close to Abernathy, and yet he somehow always had time to work on this case." Hez shook his head, annoyed at the memory of his stupidity—which had nearly gotten Savannah, Simon, and him killed. "I should have suspected that he was trying to figure out whether he was a suspect and divert suspicion away from himself."

"When did you first begin to think that he might be the killer?"

"It wasn't until I saw his number on the phone of his co-conspirator, Erik Andersen, that I—"

COLLEEN COBLE AND RICK ACKER

Martine rose in a fluid motion. “Objection. Assumes facts not in evidence. Specifically, assumes that the defendant and Mr. Andersen conspired together.”

“Sustained.” Judge Achilles Hopkins leaned over the bench and arched a bushy eyebrow at Hez. “You know the rules of evidence as well as I do, Mr. Webster.”

Hope smiled. “Let’s take it step-by-step, Mr. Webster.”

Hez’s face grew hot. It had been a stupid mistake brought on by nerves. He started over, with Hope helping him to “lay a foundation,” as all rookie litigators were taught to do, before launching into the story of how he and Savannah caught Beckett’s crony, former TGU European history professor Erik Andersen, red-handed with a smuggled artifact. Andersen tried to call Beckett, but Hez had grabbed the phone before Andersen could press Call.

Hope walked Hez through the rest of his investigation of the murder and smuggling case that dominated his life during the past few months. The jurors listened raptly, and one elderly woman was literally on the edge of her seat. But Hez couldn’t help seeing the holes in the case Hope was building. Someone knocked out Hez while he was outside Beckett’s home, but it probably wasn’t Beckett. He had been inside talking with Savannah—and denying that he had anything to do with the artifact smuggling or anything else. Hez found a bug in his office light fixture, but there was no proof that Beckett planted it. Only the evidence from Erik Andersen’s phone and home—all of which later vanished—connected Beckett to the artifact smuggling. And nothing at all tied him to the scenes of the two murders or the knife used in both.

The only direct evidence tying Beckett to either murder was

a security-camera video that appeared to show him stealing a fleece from Hez's former client Jessica Legare. That fleece was later found soaked with Abernathy's blood, wrapped around the murder weapon, and buried on Jess's property. But the video only caught the thief's leg, which had a scar that resembled one on Beckett's left leg.

The best evidence in Hope's entire case was what Beckett did after Hez and Savannah found the video. Beckett kidnapped them and Simon, knocked them unconscious, and took them out on Bon Secour Bay, where he planned to kill them all. Fortunately, Hez had been wearing a wire, so the police had heard everything Beckett said. Even so, law enforcement barely arrived in time.

Hope milked this part of Hez's testimony, drawing out every detail. He understood why she was doing it, but reliving that day was brutal.

"What did you see when you woke up on the boat?"

"The first thing I saw was Savannah's face, right over mine. She looked terrified."

"Then what happened?"

"She kissed me and told me she loved me." Hez took a deep breath and fought to keep his voice steady. "I think she wanted me to know before we both died."

"Did you think you were going to die?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"We were lying in the bottom of a boat with our hands and feet bound. Beckett had already threatened us, and that was before we had hard evidence that he was a murderer. His intentions were clear, and he removed all doubt a few seconds later."

COLLEEN COBLE AND RICK ACKER

“What did he do?”

Hez forced himself to look at Beckett, who returned his gaze with a stony stare. “He came over holding a pistol and said he really enjoyed seeing us helpless. Then he kicked me in the stomach.”

“Then what happened?”

“I thought he might start shooting any second, so I tried to get him talking. If I was going to die, I wanted you to have as much evidence as possible to prosecute him for murdering us.” He pushed his mouth into a half smile. “Fortunately, he’s more of a talker than a thinker. You know the old law enforcement saying: ‘We never catch the smart ones.’” Hez savored the spasm of impotent rage that flashed across Beckett’s face. He hoped the jury saw it too.

“What exactly did he say?”

The jury would doubtless hear the tape several times over the course of the trial, but Hez knew the impact live testimony could have, and he was sure Hope did too. He turned to the jurors, making eye contact with each one as he spoke. “He said he’d rented the boat and bought the gun using my credit card. He told me that he planned to make it look like a murder-suicide—that I was unstable and killed my wife and nephew before turning the gun on myself. He said it would be how the world remembered me, my epitaph.”

He paused as the memory rushed back over him. “I’ll never forget the look on his face. He was smug, proud of himself. He was about to kill three people, including a child, and he was patting himself on the back.”

“What happened next?”

WHERE SECRETS LIE

“I heard another boat approaching and then a Coast Guard air horn.” He smiled and shook his head. “I’ll never again complain about how loud those things are.” Several jurors smiled and one suppressed a chuckle.

Hope turned to the judge. “No further questions at this time. Pass the witness.”

CHAPTER 3

EVEN THE OLD GATOR BOO RADLEY WASN'T AS TERRIFYING as what waited on the other side of the door. Savannah smoothed her damp palms on her navy skirt and took a deep breath before trying on a smile. It felt more like a grimace to her. The undercurrents of uncertainty had been hard to miss in these final days of tenure approval. She should have been a shoo-in, but Tony Guzman's résumé was formidable. While her PhD came from the University of Alabama with honors, Tony's had come from Yale. Alabama was a good school, but it couldn't compete with an Ivy League one.

With her smile in place, she twisted the doorknob and stepped into the conference room in the administration building with her head high and confident. "Good morning."

Professor Charlie Hinkle's warm brown eyes smiled back at her from under his white brows. He was serving as acting head of the history department, and his white hair stood on end, as if he'd run a distracted hand through it. She didn't know the acting provost, Gerald Saunders, well, and she almost wished Ellison Abernathy back from the grave. At least he was a known personality, even if they'd often clashed.

Gerald, with his thick black hair, put her in mind of an aging

Elvis, and she resisted the urge to break into a rendition of “Don’t Be Cruel.” She bit the inside of her lip to choke back the nervous laughter struggling to erupt.

“Have a seat.” Gerald steepled his hands in front of him on the table. He waited until she slid into a chair at the other end of the conference table. “You have an impressive résumé, Savannah. Your family’s long history with TGU is much appreciated too.”

She absently fondled her bracelet before forcing herself to stop. They’d given her five years’ experience full credit when she was hired two and a half years ago, and she’d come with full expectations of being granted tenure. She was a Legare and that meant something here. “Thank you. I love TGU and my students. I have many fond memories of running through the swamps and open fields in my youth. It’s wonderful to be back.” She wanted to add “permanently,” but it felt presumptuous. She had to be granted tenure. The future she planned with Hez centered around TGU and the surrounding community.

“We have two very talented individuals competing for the same position. I wish we could offer tenure to both you and Professor Guzman.”

The *but* hovered in the room like an early morning fog off the swamp. Her stomach tightened at the sympathy on Professor Hinkle’s gnomelike face. “I wish that were possible too. Tony is an excellent professor.”

She’d sat in on Tony’s lecture on the Neo-Babylonian Empire and had noticed how enthralled the committee had been when he’d mentioned protecting ancient sites in Iraq. He’d worked to recover priceless artifacts looted from Iraqi

COLLEEN COBLE AND RICK ACKER

museums as well. It wasn't even his specialty, but he'd been passionate and knowledgeable about all of it. But her expertise in pre-Columbian artifacts had made a huge contribution to the university already. No one else had her wide breadth of experience and knowledge about the Willard Treasure—not only the artifacts themselves but the history behind them as well. That had to count for something. The university press was going to publish her book on the Willard Treasure too. That was big news.

Gerald exhaled. "I'm sorry to tell you we have decided to offer Professor Guzman the tenure position. We'll have to eliminate a professorial position and switch the course load to adjuncts, so there's just not room in the budget for both of you. I know you were hoping for a different outcome."

The news stole her breath, and nausea roiled in her stomach. "I—I understand. Tony is an excellent choice, and I wish him well."

"I've already written you a glowing letter of recommendation," Hinkle put in. "Several other members of the committee are doing the same. I hate to see you go, Savannah. I'm sure you'll land a wonderful position soon. I hate losing you."

She couldn't wrap her head around the realization she had to leave this haven she'd found. Her legs wobbled when she stood. "Thank you for the recommendations. I appreciate them so much."

She fled the room before she disgraced herself by crying or throwing up. Finding another job wasn't as much of a problem as having their lives upended when they'd already been through so much. Jess had guaranteed Hez his legal clinic here. How could she tell him he had to relocate now? He needed

the stability of his beloved law while he continued the road to recovery. They both did.

Ella was buried in the family cemetery, and Savannah wanted to be able to visit with her baby girl at any time. She couldn't move clear across the country where it would require a flight to sit by her daughter's grave and watch the mourning doves pecking seeds in the grass.

Savannah shut the door behind her and, breathing heavily, leaned her back against it. Hez was testifying right now, and she couldn't talk to him. Did Jess already know? Savannah escaped the building and rushed to her sister's office across the green space. Tears burned in her eyes, and she wished she could blame it on the stiff January wind that made the fifty-five-degree weather feel like the forties. She entered Jess's building and spotted her open door.

The clatter of Savannah's heels on the marble tile alerted Jess as Savannah rushed toward the room. Eyes wide, Jess stood and came around the side of her desk. "Savannah, what's wrong?" She tucked a strand of chin-length blonde hair behind her left ear.

Savannah stopped and pressed a hand to her midsection. "I didn't get tenure, Jess. They offered it to Tony. I have to find another job."

Jess's mouth opened and closed before she clenched her jaw. "The rats. I'm sorry, Savannah."

"I shouldn't be surprised. Tony is a terrific professor. If I were on the committee, I would have picked him too." She stepped past her sister and yanked a tissue from the box on Jess's desk. "I don't want to leave here. I want to be with you and Simon." She blew her nose. "Where is he anyway?"

COLLEEN COBLE AND RICK ACKER

“He’s at the gym playing basketball with some of the guys. I told him to be back here in an hour.” Jess gripped Savannah’s upper arm. “There’s just enough time for some coffee and a cinnamon roll at University Grounds. Some carbs will settle your nerves. Try not to worry. I’ll help you find something.”

Savannah let her sister tug her toward the door. By the time Jess had to be back for Simon, Hez would be out of court, and they’d have to decide together what came next.

Martine took Hope’s place at the lectern. “Good morning, Mr. Webster.” Her voice held a hint of a French accent from her Paris childhood. “Let’s start with a standard preliminary question that Ms. Norcross forgot to ask. Are you under the influence of alcohol or any other substance that might impair your ability to testify accurately and completely?” The gleam in her dark eyes said that she knew all about Hez’s past.

Hez smiled. He’d expected her to try to rattle him. “Nothing except caffeine.”

“I’m glad to hear it. Mr. Harrison was friends with Savannah, wasn’t he?”

“Yes, though that was before he tried to kill her.”

Martine’s full lips twitched. “We’ll get to that. As her friend, it would make sense for him to be concerned for her welfare, correct?”

“I suppose.”

“And that would explain why he was so interested in seeing her cleared of an unjust murder charge, right?”

“I don’t know. You’d have to ask him that.” Which almost certainly wouldn’t happen. No competent defense lawyer would put the defendant on the stand in a case like this. A prosecutor like Hope couldn’t comment on Beckett’s decision to take the Fifth, but Hez was a mere witness today, so the same rules didn’t apply to him.

Martine’s eyes narrowed. She adjusted her notes on the lectern, knocking a pen off in the process. She bent over to pick it up, flashing her ample cleavage at Hez. He suppressed a chuckle and kept his gaze fixed on the back of the courtroom. She had told him about this trick over drinks when they dated briefly before he met Savannah. She called the tactic “blinding ’em with boobs” and used it to knock difficult male witnesses off-balance.

Martine straightened. “The video allegedly showing Mr. Harrison with Ms. Legare’s fleece does not show his face, correct?”

“Yes.”

“In fact, the only reason you think it shows Mr. Harrison is the scar on his leg, correct?”

“That, plus the fact that his build and gait are the same as the man in the video. Plus, he had been in Ms. Legare’s office on multiple occasions and likely knew she kept a fleece there.”

“Are you aware that Mr. Harrison is an avid cyclist?”

“I’ve seen him dressed in bike shorts on occasion.”

“Are you aware that many cyclists have scars on their legs?”

Hez shrugged. “I know a lot of bikers, and I’ve never seen a scar exactly like that.”

“But some of them do have scars?”

COLLEEN COBLE AND RICK ACKER

“Yes.”

“Did you ever see the murder weapon in Mr. Harrison’s possession?”

“No.”

“Did you ever hear him threaten to kill either Ellison Abernathy or Peter Cardin?”

“No.”

“Did you ever see him act aggressively or violently toward either of them?”

“No.”

“Did you ever see a trafficked artifact in Mr. Harrison’s possession?”

“No.”

“How about fraudulent documents designed to allow the sale of such artifacts? Did you ever see him with any of those?”

“No.”

“Would it be fair to say that you never liked Mr. Harrison?”

“We weren’t friends, if that’s what you mean—but I didn’t really have anything against him until I realized he was a murderer and was trying to pin his crimes on my client, Ms. Legare.”

“But he was friends with your ex-wife, correct?”

Hez felt his blood pressure rising at the memory of seeing Savannah and Beckett together. “Yes.”

“Close friends?”

Close enough that Hez once walked in on Beckett giving her a shoulder massage. Hez did his best to purge the image from his mind. How had Savannah let such a sociopath into her life? “You’d have to ask them,” he forced out.

“Did their friendship bother you?”

Hope stood. "We're getting pretty far afield. Counsel is simply harassing the witness now."

Martine wrinkled her forehead. "Harassing? No, Your Honor. I'm merely demonstrating that the witness is biased against Mr. Harrison."

Hope leaned forward. "The defendant kidnapped and tried to kill the witness, his wife, and his nephew. I think we can stipulate that the witness probably doesn't have warm feelings for the defendant."

The judge nodded. "You've made your point, Ms. Dubois. Move on."

"Thank you, Your Honor." Martine turned back to Hez. "In each of the attacks you claim occurred, you admit that Mr. Harrison did not act alone, correct?"

"Yes."

"In fact, aside from him allegedly striking you on the boat, he never touched you in anger, correct?"

"Yes."

"In every other case, someone else struck you, clamped a drugged cloth over your mouth, and so on, right?"

"Yes."

"And one of these violent individuals was on the boat with Mr. Harrison at the time of the alleged attempted murder, correct?"

"There was another man on the boat, but I don't know whether he was the same one who had attacked me before. I never saw their faces."

"Are you aware that the other man on the boat with you, Deke Willard, has a long criminal history, including convictions for assault with a deadly weapon and attempted murder?"

COLLEEN COBLE AND RICK ACKER

“I didn’t know anything about Mr. Willard at the time, but I subsequently learned about his past.”

“Mr. Harrison had previously stated that he was attempting to protect you, Savannah, and Simon from dangerous individuals, correct?”

Hez blinked. Was Martine really trying to portray Beckett Harrison as a frightened pawn trying to protect them from Deke Willard? “Yes—but it’s pretty clear from the surrounding circumstances that he was lying.”

“Is it possible that your bias against Mr. Harrison has colored your memory?”

“No.”

Martine picked up her notes. “Pass the witness.”

The judge looked at Hope. “Any redirect?”

She stood. “No, Your Honor.”

The judge leaned over the bench and peered down at Hez. “Thank you, Mr. Webster. You’re excused.”

Hez got up and walked out of the courtroom on stiff legs. The adrenaline crash hit as he stepped out into the cold January sunshine. All he wanted to do was get to the old couch in his condo and take a nap. He’d never realized just how exhausting it was to testify.

The lawyer part of his brain refused to shut down, though. His testimony had gone about as well as it could, and Hope had made the right decision in forgoing redirect. She’d gotten everything she could on direct, and Martine hadn’t done any damage that could be fixed on redirect. Still, she had done damage.

Was it enough to establish reasonable doubt in the minds of the jurors?

CHAPTER 4

THE BLACK IRON STAIRS TO HEZ'S CONDO CLANGED UNDER Savannah's feet as she climbed to the second floor. A fishing boat motored toward the Pelican Harbor dock, and another boat blasted its horn out on Bon Secour Bay. The scent of crab cakes should have made her hungry since she hadn't eaten since last night. She hadn't touched the cinnamon roll Jess had insisted on buying her. Her stomach was still in knots from the news.

The door was locked, and she pressed the doorbell. It seemed forever until Hez opened it. His hair askew and sans tie and suit jacket, he blinked blearily down at her. The welcoming smile that appeared fell away when he finally focused on her face.

She threw herself into his arms, and the familiar scent of his cologne soothed her agitation. "Were you sleeping? Just hold me a minute."

His arms came around her. "I didn't get much sleep last night, so I took a nap on the sofa after I got back." He hugged her tightly to his chest, and his heartbeat sped up under her ear. "What happened?"

She lifted her head to stare up at him through her tears. He

COLLEEN COBLE AND RICK ACKER

wouldn't expect her to be strong the way Jess had. Hez always understood. "They gave tenure to Tony. I'm out." Her voice wobbled at the end, and fresh tears blurred her vision. "I—I can't stay here, Hez. I have to find a new job somewhere else."

"Oh, babe." He folded her close again and rested his chin on her head for a moment before he stepped back and guided her into the living room. He dropped into the armchair and pulled her onto his lap. "Cry it out, and we'll talk."

The sound of his deep, confident voice coupled with the security of his arms was enough to stop her tears. She gulped and wiped her face with her palms. "I'm okay. I should have expected it. I mean, Tony Guzman is a first-class professor. It was wrong of me to expect my family connections to sway anything. It should be based on merit alone—and it was."

His fingers rippled through her hair in a soothing gesture. "He's good, but he's not better than you. Your book about the history of the university should have been something the committee took into account too. They've lost a star."

His voice still sounded groggy, but she'd never known him to nap in the middle of the afternoon. He really must have been tired. "Your new clinic is here, Hez. I'll try to find something close enough for us to at least see each other on the weekends."

His fingers in her hair stilled. "Not going to happen, Savannah. Now that we've found our way back to each other, I won't let anything come between us. We can check out Birmingham universities. There are several, and I could go back to work for Jimmy or set up shop just about anywhere."

"But what about your clinic?"

His palms cupped her face, and he stared into her eyes.

“You’re more important to me than anything else. A clinic like mine is a draw to law students. Someone will want it eventually. Maybe the timing isn’t right yet.”

She slid her arms around his neck and pulled his face down for a kiss. His arms tightened around her, and his kiss drove out the pain and humiliation of the morning. Her smile and optimism returned when he lifted his head. “I don’t know how you do it, but I knew you’d make everything right again. We’ve weathered far worse than this setback.”

Her pulse resumed its normal rhythm, and she laid her head back on his chest. “It’s only about four hours to Birmingham. We could visit Ella’s grave any weekend we wanted.”

His fingers resumed their path through her hair. “I could check out Mobile for a job too. It wouldn’t have to be Birmingham. Being close to Ella’s grave is important to both of us. We have options, babe. The only thing that isn’t an option is splitting up.” His final words ended in a yawn. “I should make coffee and try to wake up. I’ve never been on the witness stand, and I didn’t realize how grueling it was.”

She patted his arm. “Did Beckett’s lawyer give you a hard time?”

He nodded. “It was Martine Dubois. Do you remember her?”

Savannah remembered her very well. She first met Martine on one of her and Hez’s early dates. Martine spotted them at an outdoor table at Maria’s and walked up. She commented that Hez had been working out and squeezed his upper arm. She then left her hand on his shoulder as Hez introduced Savannah, and they chatted for a couple of minutes. Then Martine trailed her hand across the back of Hez’s neck as she walked away. Savannah was sure Martine was making a power move,

COLLEEN COBLE AND RICK ACKER

but Hez insisted she was just a friend and touched people a lot. “She didn’t go easy on you even though you’re friends?”

He chuckled. “That’s not her style. She wouldn’t go easy on her own grandma if she thought it might hurt her chances of winning.”

“How did it go?”

“I think my testimony helped the case, but Hope has an uphill battle for conviction on the two murders. Beckett will probably get convicted on the kidnapping and attempted murder charges but acquitted on everything else.”

She winced before kissing him again and sliding off his lap. “I’ll make coffee. You need it good and strong. You have anything to eat in the fridge? I’m starving.”

“Leftover shrimp bisque. There’s enough for both of us. I’ll go get a breath of fresh air. That should wake me up. We can take a walk along the water and make plans.”


She kicked off her pumps and padded on bare feet to the kitchen. She dumped an extra scoop of coffee in the grinder and washed out the carafe, then grabbed the old filter and grounds. When she opened the trash, she froze.

An empty bottle of Mondavi cabernet sauvignon lay atop the rest of the garbage.

Her lungs squeezed, and she couldn’t draw in a breath. Hez had been so groggy when she arrived. Was this the reason? The fingers of her right hand crept to the comfort of fondling the bracelet on her left.

Maybe someone had given it to him and he’d dumped it down the sink. She hadn’t smelled alcohol on his breath, but she’d been so upset, she might not have noticed. Tears burned

her eyes again, and she swallowed hard. Was their newfound happiness a sham?



Hez pushed himself out of the armchair as Savannah went into the kitchen to make coffee. He opened the door leading to the condo's little balcony and walked out, letting the chilly breeze blow the last wisps of grogginess out of his head. He surveyed Pelican Harbor's quaint little French Quarter. The cries of seagulls mingled with the pleasant hum of voices on the street below and jazz from a couple of better-than-average street musicians. A pair of mourning doves cooed from the power lines across the street. The familiar smells of fresh coffee and hot beignets drifted up from Petit Charms. Most days, he would have been tempted to go down for a sweet snack and jolt of caffeine, but he had no appetite after Savannah's tenure news.

This place had just started to feel like home, but it wasn't. They would have to pick up and start over somewhere else. He could set up shop basically anyplace that had a courthouse and affordable office space, but what about Savannah? What if another school denied her tenure in a couple of years? How many chances would she get? Had TGU been her best shot?

She seemed to be holding up well, but this must have been a real gut punch—and one that she wouldn't recover from quickly. She'd feel it every time she set foot on her beloved TGU campus.

He shook his head. She said he'd made everything right

COLLEEN COBLE AND RICK ACKER

again, and he wished that were true. She deserved to be happy. He shoved his hands in his pockets and fidgeted with the contents. The longing to be husband and wife again only intensified with each day. One day soon she'd be his again. He'd be able to roll over in the morning and find her warm and still groggy in the same bed. That time couldn't come soon enough for him.

"Hez?" The brittleness in Savannah's voice told him something was wrong even before he turned around.

Her auburn hair stood out from her head as if she'd raked her hands through it. Her green eyes were wide and disbelieving in her white face. She held out a bottle like an accusation. A wine bottle.

A chill went through him. "Where did you get that?"

Her voice was barely above a whisper. "Your trash."

His heart stopped. "I—I have no idea how it got there."

"Hez, this is Mondavi cab. You always used to have a couple of bottles in the kitchen before—" She stared down and blinked.

"Before Ella died and I became an alcoholic." He rubbed his forehead. "I know. Look, Savannah, I never saw that bottle before. Someone must have planted it in my trash." He winced inwardly as soon as the words were out of his mouth. He sounded so desperate and paranoid.

"Why . . . why would someone do that, Hez? And who would know about your go-to wine from three years ago?"

He shook his head as the implications of the bottle in her hand sank in. Someone had broken into his apartment. Someone who knew a lot about his personal history. "I don't know, but I'll figure it out."

She drew a shaky breath. “I know recovering from alcoholism is really hard. I’ll be there for you, no matter how long it takes.”

Her words cut through him like a cold knife. “I haven’t had a drink in over a year. I swear it. I swear it before God. Someone is trying to frame me.” His brain whirred, spitting out half-formed theories. “Augusta hasn’t caught the smugglers yet—maybe it’s one of them. But how would they know I drank Mondavi cab? The mole in the police department! That’s it! There must be something in the file on Ella’s death that—”

Her shoulders started to shake and a ragged sob broke from her throat. “I—I can’t do this. Not now.”

“Savannah, you have to believe me. I—” He reached out to touch her arm, but she flinched away.

“I’m sorry, Hez. I have to go.” She turned and fled.

“Savannah, wait!” He started to follow her, but she was gone. He heard the front door open, followed a moment later by the clatter of steps on the outside stairs.

He stood alone in the middle of the empty apartment and sighed. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small box. He opened it. A diamond sparkled in the rays of late-afternoon sun slanting in through the living room window. It was the same diamond he gave her the first time but reset in a new band with five small rubies, one for each year of their first marriage. He’d been waiting for the right moment to give it to her.

Would that moment ever come?

CHAPTER 5

SAVANNAH PARKED IN THE LOT ACROSS FROM UNIVERSITY

Grounds and dodged a rusty blue pickup on her way across the street. After she'd shot a panicked text to her best friend, Nora Craft had promised to meet her here. Once upon a time the building that housed the coffee shop had been Hotel Tupelo. An investor had bought the grand old place with its high ceilings and had turned it into retail and office space, but it maintained its stately exterior.

She slowed to calm her racing heart and glanced around the quaint town of Nova Cambridge. It had always reminded her of a smaller, shabbier version of Oxford, Mississippi. The weedy cobbled streets held cozy 1920s bungalows interspersed with grander, newer homes. The little university town was strategically located near all the things she loved while maintaining its individuality. Just offshore, Mobile Bay and Bon Secour Bay kissed and merged, and close by was the road leading to the Sanctuary Animal Refuge over a little bridge with Mobile Bay on one side and Weeks Bay on the other. It was fifteen minutes from Pelican Harbor and about the same to Foley if she wanted bigger stores and more people.

A familiar voice called out her name, and Savannah turned

to see her sister hurrying toward her on the sidewalk. The Dior bag on her arm was a pop of bright green against her tan slacks and sweater. Savannah tried to force a smile, but her eyes filled with tears.

Jess touched her forearm. “Savannah, I’m so sorry I didn’t have more time to talk when the tenure news came down. You want to discuss your options a little more? I’ll help you find another job. Simon is at a tutoring session with Will Dixon, and I’m free for however long you need me.”

Savannah knew Jess valued her time above all else, and her willingness to offer comfort spoke volumes. “I think Nora is already inside, and I’d love to have you join us.”

They went up the steps to the wraparound porch. The outdoor tables and chairs were taken by college students in TGU sweatshirts. She opened the door for her sister, and they stepped into the warm space scented with espresso, cinnamon, and cider. Nora waved to them from a table by the window. She was a forensic tech with the Pelican Harbor PD, and the two of them had bonded in a grief group. Nora was in her thirties with thick brown hair cut in a bob. She had been Savannah’s spiritual mentor as well as a sounding board for the trials of the past two years.

Savannah managed to hold her composure on the way to join her. She spotted several other professors inside who avoided eye contact. News like hers traveled at warp speed through a university, and no one ever knew what to say when someone was on their way out. She’d been in their shoes before, but she’d never expected to face this fate.

She settled next to Nora and slipped out of her jacket. They ordered coffee and sandwiches before Nora poked her glasses

COLLEEN COBLE AND RICK ACKER

back into place over her brown eyes and leaned over to squeeze her hand. “What’s the SOS about?”

“I didn’t get tenure. They gave the job to Tony Guzman.” When her friend’s eyes widened, Savannah tried to smile and failed. “I would have given it to him too. He’s a terrific teacher and scholar.”

Jess tapped her red nails against the tabletop. “He’s not even in your league. You’ve always told me God doesn’t make mistakes, but I think he blew it on this one. TGU doesn’t deserve you.”

“When do you need to leave?” Nora’s voice shook. “What about applying at one of the other nearby universities? That way you could still stay in the area.”

“I’ll need to be out in the summer so they can move in someone else.” The thought of her sweet cottage belonging to another professor tightened Savannah’s throat. “I need to consider what’s best for Hez too.”

“I assume you told him?” Nora asked. “You guys will get through this. Maybe a fresh start will be good for both of you.”

Savannah tore her napkin into strips as she nodded. “He’s willing to start over wherever I can find work.”

“I agree with Nora,” Jess said. “Get out of here and make a fresh start. Hez has contacts in Birmingham. Or maybe you want to start over in Florida or somewhere else near the water.”

Savannah pushed the paper strips aside. If Jess wasn’t here, she would have already told Nora about the bottle she found in Hez’s trash. It was something she needed to air, but her sister was bound to jump to the wrong conclusion. Even Hez’s help through the jail ordeal hadn’t endeared him to Jess. But Savannah couldn’t hold it back any longer.

Her fingers stilled, and she stared at Jess. “That’s what he said too. Right before I found an empty bottle of Mondavi cabernet sauvignon in his trash.”

Shock settled over their faces before they looked away. It was one thing to be upset with Hez herself and another thing to hear anyone else condemn him.

The server brought their coffees and sandwiches. When he left, Nora eyed Savannah over the top of her coffee mug. “I’m sure you didn’t let that slide. What did he say when you confronted him?”

“He denied it was his and said someone must have planted it there.”

Jess put her hand to her mouth. “You can’t go back into a toxic relationship like that, Savannah. How can you even work through things if he denies the truth? I know how you value honesty.”

“He’s never lied to me before.”

“You sound like you believe him,” Jess said.

“Maybe I do.”

Jess hesitated for a heartbeat. “Is it possible he’s deluding himself? Or could he have forgotten it? He took a hard hit to the head a few months ago. Did he complain of a headache or anything like that?”

Savannah took a sip of her coffee. “He seemed fine. When his drinking was at its worst, he had some memory issues. It’s possible that’s what happened. I could have him ask the doctor about the effects of the concussion.”

Nora took a toothpick out of her BLT club. “Memory loss from one bottle of wine? That seems doubtful to me considering his history.”

COLLEEN COBLE AND RICK ACKER

Jess shook her head. “Not from one bottle of wine—from a serious blow to the head. I’ve heard of people having memory problems and even personality changes years after a head injury. What if he has memory issues and maybe other problems, which alcohol makes worse? He might not even realize it.”

Had Hez seemed off recently? Savannah searched her memory. Nothing came to mind, but they’d both been so busy she couldn’t be sure. “I suppose it wouldn’t hurt for him to check with his neurologist.”

“Have you considered premarital counseling?” Nora asked. “It would be a way to get into the deeper issues. You have a lot to work out—both of you. The kind of trauma you’ve been through isn’t something you ever get over, but you can learn to handle it better.”

“I haven’t said anything to him about it, but I will.” It had been the right decision to tell them what had happened. She felt stronger and more ready to deal with it than an hour ago. In the past, she’d run away from their problems, but she couldn’t make that mistake again. Hez was in a better place too, and she had to believe they could make their way through this new challenge.

“So who do you think put the bottle in your trash?” Hez’s cousin, Blake Lawson, asked Hez as the two of them jogged along the asphalt trail bordering Bon Secour Bay.

“Good question.” Light rain dampened the shoulders of Hez’s red-and-white TGU sweatshirt. The rain was the tail end of a blustery overnight storm that had scattered driftwood,

seaweed, and dead fish over the beach. The rank stench was nauseating. Hez's snaggletoothed rescue mutt, Cody, loped along beside him, occasionally pulling at his leash to get closer to a particularly smelly piece of debris left behind by the waves. "My best guess is someone from the Pelican Harbor Police Department. My landlord is the police chief, and she's the only other one with a key to the condo."

Blake turned his head, surprise in his blue eyes. "You think Jane Dixon planted the bottle?"

"Not Jane . . . but someone in her department." Hez had trouble talking while keeping up the eight-minute-mile pace set by his cousin, but he wasn't going to ask to slow down. "Someone who could walk into her office when she's out and no one would get suspicious. We already know there's a mole in the department."

"Have you told anyone around here that you used to drink?"

Hez shrugged. "It's not exactly a secret. And I've started going to an AA group, so anyone who shows up there would know. But I don't think I've ever mentioned that the Mondavi cab used to be my favorite wine."

"So how did someone discover that? Or was it a coincidence?"

"Probably not a coincidence. I'm guessing there's a mention of Mondavi cab somewhere in the police file on Ella's death. We always used to have a bottle or two in the kitchen." A new connection clicked in Hez's head. "That also explains the candy. We found Justin's peanut butter cups with Simon after he was kidnapped last year. That was the candy Ella was trying to get to when she drowned. That would have been in the police file too."

"Have you talked to Jane?"

COLLEEN COBLE AND RICK ACKER

“I called her yesterday, but I’ll stop by today to mention the candy connection.”

Wispy cowlicks waving in the breeze, Cody lunged toward a group of seagulls gathered around a trash can blown over by the storm. The birds squawked and flapped away—and Cody instantly grabbed whatever they’d been eating.

“Leave it!” Hez yanked at the leash as Cody frantically gobbled garbage. “Leaveitleaveitleaveitleaveit!”

Cody ate even faster, deftly managing to avoid dropping any morsels as Hez dragged him away from his feast. Cody managed to swallow past the constriction of his collar, then looked up at Hez with a triumphant grin.

Hez sighed. “Know a good vet?”

Blake chuckled. “You know I do.” He and his mother ran an animal sanctuary near Gulf Shores, and they had one of the best veterinarians living at the park. She also happened to be the love of Blake’s life who’d recently returned to town.

Hez shook his head. “You’d better not throw up on the police chief’s handmade rugs.” Cody gave him another grin and went back to scanning the beach for targets of opportunity.

They ran in silence for a few minutes. Gray waves crashed on the shore, and gulls cried overhead as they rode the gusty sea breeze. Hez kept Cody on a very short leash. Hez felt bad for dumping his worries on his cousin when Blake was dealing with his own problems at the animal park.

“I’m not sure I get it,” Blake said. “Why would someone do this? I mean, if Beckett’s cronies are still after you and they got into your kitchen, wouldn’t they poison your food or something? Or at least leave a threatening note? What’s the point

WHERE SECRETS LIE

of breaking into your apartment just to leave an empty wine bottle in your trash?”

Those same questions had nagged at Hez ever since Savannah walked out with the bottle. “I don’t know—but I’m going to find out.”

CHAPTER 6

HEZ APPEARED CLEAR-EYED AND SOBER, AND HE PATTED the bench beside him overlooking the sparkling Bon Secour Bay. Maybe his drinking had been a fluke. Savannah sat beside him, feeling the warmth of his body on the chill winter day. She threw the last crumbs of her beignet to the gulls and ordered Marley, her black Aussie, and Cody to leave them be.

The two dogs were becoming best friends, and they made a strange sight together. Marley with his trim athletic build that was all Australian shepherd and Cody, who looked like no other dog she'd ever seen. He seemed to be made out of leftover parts from random breeds: Chihuahua legs, Great Dane ears, greyhound body, and an elegant—but crooked—Chesapeake Bay tail.

The gulls stopped their squawking long enough to gobble up her offering before demanding more. She opened her hands to show them. “All gone. You’ll have to find someone else.” The nearest gull pinned her with a black-eyed stare before fluttering off to a group of teenagers fishing out on the pier. “There’s Jane.”

“I asked her to meet us here. I want to talk to her about the mole in her office. Someone planted that bottle in my trash.”

That unbelievable story again. Savannah's mood deflated, and she laced her fingers together. She couldn't help him if he wouldn't admit to the truth. She pinned a smile back in place as the police chief, Jane Dixon, reached them. Even when she was in uniform, it was hard to miss her resemblance to a younger version of Reese Witherspoon but with chin-length light brown hair. Even at barely five-two, Jane was a force to be reckoned with.

Jane carried a cooler and set it on the grass beside the bench. The dogs sniffed the container before dashing off after a butterfly. "I brought fish to feed Pete."

As if he'd heard his name, a brown pelican flew down to join her. She crooned to him as she tossed him fish. "People are used to me doing this every day and won't think anything about it. You want to talk about a mole in my office?"

Hez leaned back and extended his arm across the park bench behind Savannah. "The file on Ella's death probably mentions her love of Justin's peanut butter cups. It's not something Savannah and I talk about. That detail had to come from the file. And someone put an empty Mondavi cab bottle in my trash. I think there has to be a mention of that in the file too."

With the last of the fish gone, Jane shut the cooler lid and wiped her hands on the grass. "I reviewed the file after your text. I found a mention of the peanut butter cups, but there was nothing about that brand of wine."

"You're certain? I don't know how else anyone would know I used to drink that brand. I haven't had any type of alcohol in over a year. I want to find out who planted it. And why."

Jane's hazel eyes were blank and professional. "I'm taking the idea of a mole very seriously, and I'll continue to dig to find

COLLEEN COBLE AND RICK ACKER

him or her.” She gave a polite nod. “I’d better get back to work. Thanks for the information.”

Savannah tried to analyze Jane’s just-the-facts demeanor. She hadn’t dismissed Hez’s assertion that a mole had planted the bottle, but she hadn’t tried to encourage it either. Maybe she thought it was as crazy as Savannah did. Her breaths grew shallow and her palms were slick at the thought of pushing him about this, but she had to. She couldn’t tuck her head under her wing like the gull at her feet. She loved Hez too much to ignore the danger.

Hez shifted on the bench and withdrew his arm. “Well, that was disappointing.”

Savannah curled her fingers into her palm. “She’ll keep digging.” She put her hand on his knee. “I love you, Hez, and I’m committed to you. You know that, right?”

His gaze searched hers. “I love you too. I never stopped. It feels like there’s a ‘but’ in there somewhere.”

She shook her head. “No ‘but.’ I want us to be as solid as possible for our new beginning. What would you think about getting premarital counseling? I made plenty of mistakes the first time, and I don’t want to fail you again.”

“Babe, I failed you. We both know it was my fault.”

“The fault of a marriage’s failure is always on both sides. I want us to start again the right way with our marriage centering on the right things—love and faith. I never doubted you loved me and Ella, but life took us into uncharted waters. I should have told you the minute I saw you drifting deeper into your work and away from me and Ella. And after she died, I should have intervened when I saw the wine bottles piling up. And you should have talked to me about how you were feeling. If we make

sure we know what to do next time, our marriage will start out stronger.”

He slipped his arm around her and leaned in close enough for her to catch the tantalizing scent of his skin mixed with soap. His lips brushed her ear. “Have I told you how beautiful you look this morning? I’d do anything for you. You know that.”

His reply bolstered her courage for the next step, and she leaned into his embrace. “How have you been feeling?”

He nuzzled her neck. “Fine.”

“I think you should have a checkup, just to make sure. Maybe a CT scan to make sure everything is okay.” He pulled away, and she felt him stiffen. “A concussion can cause memory issues.”

“This is about the wine bottle, isn’t it? You don’t think I picked up a stray empty bottle along the road and plunked it in my trash, then forgot. You think I bought it and drank until I passed out. I wouldn’t forget something like that, Savannah. I’d have a hangover, and I’d know.” His voice was tight, and he didn’t look at her.

She touched his arm and felt the tense muscles under his shirt. “I just want us to be honest and open with each other. I’m not going anywhere, Hez.”

He finally turned a furious gaze on her. “Do you think I’m drinking again, Savannah? Do you not believe me when I tell you someone put the bottle in my trash?”

She tried to cup his face with her hands, but he shook off her touch. “I don’t want to fight.”

“Neither do I, so I’d better leave.” He called a reluctant Cody to him and clipped on his leash.

She rose and took a step toward him. “Hez, don’t be mad.”

COLLEEN COBLE AND RICK ACKER

He didn't answer, and she sensed his despair and hurt from the stiff way he walked toward his car. She'd handled this all wrong.

"Bye, Mom!" Simon called as he climbed into the cab of Will Dixon's spotless silver pickup, decorated with TGU Gators stickers.

"Bye, Simon!" Jess called back. She watched from the pillared entrance of her house as they drove down the long curve of her driveway and disappeared around the corner. That was the first time he had called her "Mom" instead of "Mum." His English accent was melting away faster than ice cream on the Fourth of July. Six months from now, he'd probably have an impeccable southern drawl. She chuckled at the thought.

Simon had made the change from an upper-crust Essex boarding school to an Alabama public school with surprising ease. Of course she'd planned on putting him in an Ivy League prep school, but he had been adamant about attending public school. She couldn't argue with that really—the local schools had fine faculties thanks to TGU's influence on the area.

Having Will as a tutor certainly helped. Simon's only academic deficit was American history, a subject he easily could have learned on his own. Will was a good teacher, but he was an even better surrogate big brother. Simon idolized him, and the fact that Will was the starting quarterback for the Gators had given Simon instant social standing at school. It was a pity they'd be separated soon, when TGU imploded and Will was forced to transfer to another school.

Her watch buzzed against her wrist. Almost time for her call with Punisher and English Cream. She sighed and went back inside.

She did a quick sweep of her home office for bugs. She had no reason to suspect anyone was spying on her, but if she waited until she suspected something, it would probably be too late. Satisfied that the room was clean, she flicked on her computer. The gorgeous dog and grim death's head appeared on her monitor.

English Cream started the conversation. "Greetings, all. I see deliveries have resumed and we're even making a dent in our backlog. Nicely done."

"Thanks." Jess had put in a lot of late nights to make that happen. It was nice to have her work noticed. "I'm still short-staffed, but I can hold up my end."

"And I'm holding up mine," Punisher added. "The new over-land route adds a day and some costs, but it works. What about the money angle?"

"The vehicle is almost finished," English Cream said. "The funds are available for transfer. When will the debt consolidation be complete?"

Jess tapped her newly manicured nails on the desktop. She hadn't expected English Cream to be ready this quickly. She had been so busy getting the deliveries back on schedule that she hadn't made much progress on the university's finances. "Not yet. I'm working on it."

"Better work fast. Someone will be watching soon. You need to do better." Punisher seized on her shortcomings, as always. Their relationship in real life at least was better, but it was his way of making sure she performed to his expectations.

COLLEEN COBLE AND RICK ACKER

He was right. Jess needed to get as much done as possible while TGU had no president or permanent provost. Once those positions were filled, her actions might be scrutinized. “Well, at least we don’t need to worry about the lawyer watching.”

Punisher gave a harsh laugh. “Heard about that. Guy can’t think about anything except that bottle.”

The bottle plot had worked even better than Jess had hoped. She had surreptitiously copied Hez’s key while she and Simon were at his condo for a dinner with him and Savannah. Then it had been a simple matter to slip in while he was testifying in Beckett’s trial and drop the bottle in his trash. She’d expected him to find it that evening. That would have rattled him plenty and kept his focus off TGU’s finances—but having Savannah find it must have been devastating. No wonder he was obsessed with that bottle.

She tried not to think about the pain in her sister’s face when they met at University Grounds. The double whammy of the tenure committee’s decision and the wine bottle must have hit her like a sledgehammer. But Jess didn’t have a choice, did she?

“What about our police source?” English Cream asked. “Has the lawyer tied the bottle to them?”

Jess’s ergonomic chair squeaked as she leaned back. “Yes, but the lawyer is wrong, of course, so that’s just taking him down a dead end. If anything, it’s leading him away from the source.”

“I see.” English Cream paused for a moment. “What about you? What will you do if he accuses you?”

Jess had thought of that too. “I’ll deny it, of course. It doesn’t matter whether he believes me. Even if he blames me, he’ll chalk it up to our, ah, personal history.” This wasn’t the first time she’d done something that undermined Hez’s relationship

WHERE SECRETS LIE

with Savannah. He'd never connect the university's finances to Jess putting a wine bottle in his trash.

"Good. Very good." Jess could almost see English Cream's little nod of approval. "Perhaps we should accelerate our plans—strike while the lawyer is distracted and key supervisory positions are vacant."

"Right," Punisher said. "Best time to rob a store is when no one's watching the register."

Jess's fingers dug into the armrests of her chair. She couldn't let TGU implode while Savannah was still there. Jess had a golden parachute carefully packed for herself, but her sister didn't. Savannah would be in free fall—jobless and with a black mark on her résumé. And she might try to interfere with the university's collapse. She could get hurt. "We should stick to the original timetable. Acting sooner creates too many risks."

"I think not," English Cream replied. "We move when the money is ready to be transferred."

"Right," Punisher put in. "No time like the present."

Jess's gut clenched. She had to save her oblivious sister from the Mack truck barreling toward her, but how?