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# COLLEEN COBLE

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RICK ACKER

# WHAT WE HIDE

A TUPELO GROVE NOVEL

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RICK ACKER



THOMAS NELSON  
*Since 1798*

*What We Hide*

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## PROLOGUE

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### *DEATH IS A LONELY BUSINESS.*

The Ray Bradbury title pops into my head uninvited. I push it away and try to stay focused. Death is probably coming tonight, either for me or for Luis. Maybe for both of us.

I stare out into the waters off Fort Morgan, waiting for his boat. A waning moon hangs over the Gulf of Mexico, scattering shards of silver light on the uneasy water. Beneath it, a black wall of clouds rises. A storm is coming. It won't arrive for at least half an hour, but the air is already breathless and thick, even by southern Alabama standards. The weather is a complicating factor, but I've accounted for it.

I inhale deeply to calm my nerves, pulling in the mixed scents of sea and land—the wild salt odor of the ocean and the domestic smell of freshly mown grass from the fort's grounds. Perspiration prickles my forehead and I'm tempted to take off my light jacket—though I can't, of course. I shove my hands into my pockets.

I hear Luis's boat before I see it. The veteran smuggler is used to operating without lights. The low cough and chug of his motor comes across the water for several seconds, growing slowly louder before the low silhouette of the boat detaches itself from the shadows around the tip of the peninsula.

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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.

The little boat's bow slides softly onto the sand, and he jumps out. He pulls it up with a sharp tug and turns toward me. He's not a tall man, but he has thick shoulders and gorilla arms. A large pistol is holstered on his right hip.

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!"

"That would be stupid, Luis." I try to keep my voice calm and reasonable. "Think about it. You're making more money now than you ever could smuggling drugs or people. Why ruin it by being greedy?"

"You're greedy!" His hand twitches again, getting a little closer this time. "You give me ten thousand tonight or I tell all those nice rich ladies. I tell the museums. I tell everyone everything! I have the list!"

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."

He stares at me for several seconds. He seems uncertain, but it's hard to read his face in the dim gray light. Maybe he's actually considering what I've said.

"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."

His gaze flicks down for a split second. His eyes widen. There's a reason I wore a jacket on this sultry night—and a reason I've had my hands in my pockets during our whole conversation.

He pulls the gun out deliberately, finger off the trigger. But as soon as it's free of the holster, he dodges sideways and points it at me.

He's very fast, and my first shot hits his arm rather than center mass. The impact jerks him as he pulls the trigger, and he shoots into the air.

My second shot hits him in the stomach, and he doubles over. I pull the gun out of my tattered pocket and put a bullet into the top of his head. He collapses onto the beach and lies still.

My heart races and my breath heaves in deep gulps, like I just finished a marathon. I blink away the afterimage of the

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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 grab Luis by the ankles, drag him back to the boat, and shove him in. I pick up his gun and the bullet casings. The only evidence left on the beach is the dark stain where he had lain, but the coming rain will take care of that.

The storm clouds cover the moon as I push the boat into the water and climb in, and the darkness becomes almost complete. I fumble with the unfamiliar motor, and for a tense moment I'm afraid it won't start. But at last it coughs and comes to life.

The shoreline recedes and I begin to relax. Now I just need to dump the body where the sharks will find it fast. The guns and Luis's wallet will go in the water in separate locations where they're unlikely to be found by divers. Then I'll sink the boat in a different spot and swim back to shore. That's the riskiest part: open-ocean swimming is no joke, especially at night, but I've practiced the swim from the place I picked to scuttle the boat.

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

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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.



## CHAPTER 1

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**SAVANNAH WEBSTER SHOULD HAVE KNOWN THE BRIGHT** July day would be upsetting the minute she saw old Boo Radley blocking the brick walkway to her classroom. The bull gator roared at her before lumbering off toward the turgid banks of Tupelo Pond where he ruled. She'd forgotten the papers her students had turned in anyway, so while the alligator got out of her way, she retraced her steps to Connor Hall to retrieve her folders.

Most days she loved living in this place of uncommon beauty with its grand old buildings, flowering plants nurtured by the botany majors, and hot, humid days tempered with sweet tea. The gators she could do without.

She reached for the outer door's ornate brass knob, then flinched when a shadow moved to her left near the banks of azaleas and rhododendron into the late-afternoon Alabama sunshine. Boo Radley was far less disconcerting than the man who stood regarding her with a half smile.

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.

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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."

She twisted the doorknob and practically fell into the cool recesses of the building. Locking the door against him would do nothing to avoid the coming discussion. Hez was used to taking command of any situation and would smooth-talk his way past her defenses. In this case, capitulation would be the better part of valor. Get him out of here before she fell into his arms again and she'd claim the meeting a victory.

He didn't answer as she hurried to the sanctuary of her classroom, and even if he had spoken, she probably wouldn't have heard him past the clatter of her heels on the marble floor. She set her briefcase on her desk and turned to face Hez with her arms crossed over her chest, waiting for him to speak.

"Thanks for seeing me, Savannah."

His sudden reappearance reached inside and touched something she thought had died when she walked out. She steeled herself. "I don't think I had a choice, Hez. It would have been thoughtful for you to have called first."

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?”

Did he sound worried, and if so, why would he care? His opinion didn’t matter. “Jess has been working hard to revive things here. We’ve got more students this year than we’ve seen in ten years. Even the summer class I’m finishing is up in attendance by 20 percent over last year. We’ll have nearly four thousand here this year.”

“That’s great!” His blue eyes lit with what appeared to be relief. “I’m clean now, Savannah. I haven’t had a drink or any Vicodin in almost a year.” He held out his hand. “Look, no shaking. I want to start a clinic at the law school here. I’ll hand-pick the best students, and we’ll examine old cases that have merit. I’d like to give innocent prisoners a chance at a new life. The Justice Chamber. Has a nice ring, don’t you think?”

“Sounds like a good idea.” His DA-turned-defender-of-the-innocent persona was too little too late to impress her. She turned her back on him and threw folders into her briefcase. “I need to go. Good luck, Hez.”

He took a step closer. “I won’t let you down again. I can do this. I can make a difference in the lives of people unjustly incarcerated and maybe make amends in some small way. There were times when I was a DA, I knew corners had been cut and evidence was presented that shouldn’t have been allowed. They weren’t my cases, but they happened. I should have confronted it back then, but I was too focused on my career. I was wrong, and I want to make things right.”

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

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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.

"I filed for divorce, Hez." She closed her eyes briefly as pain ripped through her chest at the words. How did they even get here? She zipped her briefcase closed, then turned and locked gazes with him. "I struggled with it because of my faith, but I couldn't live in limbo forever. I haven't heard from you in two years. Two years, Hez!"

Didn't she deserve to find another relationship someday and learn to be happy with the remnants of her life? Their tenth wedding anniversary had been two months ago, and she'd slowly realized since then that her life wouldn't change unless she made a conscious effort to repair it.

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

Did she? His career had always been uppermost in his mind. She'd always taken second place. At least it felt that way. She shook her head. "It was your affair with the bottle I couldn't handle."

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

They both knew the DA's office had forced him out when he'd gotten a DUI. They didn't want the scandal. But what did it matter how he'd done it? Their marriage was dead, and she'd signed the death certificate in her attorney's office last week.

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

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By the time she hit the front door, she was practically running. The shade from the oak trees festooned with moss cooled her hot face and calmed her agitation. Tupelo trees marched in rows along the brick paths, and the scent of camellias followed her to the small brick cottage on Pelican Boulevard. Its steep roof and arching windows had been her sanctuary ever since she arrived at Tupelo Grove University after her world imploded. Her roots went deep into the weedy lawns and old buildings, and the university's fading grandeur welcomed her grief and soothed it with the bright faces of her students and their shared love of history. It had been the perfect haven. Until now.

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

Savannah's heart still throbbed against her chest wall when she entered the president's office, and she tried to slow her breathing. Ellison Abernathy wasn't her favorite person, and to have to face him after seeing Hez again was more distressing than usual. "Sorry I'm a little late, Ellison."

He raised a brow and pointed his pen at the chair on the other side of his massive desk. Bookcases ran the length of the south wall all the way to the ten-foot ceiling, displaying pictures of Abernathy with politicians and carefully curated mementos of his career. The sun streaming through the mulioned windows would illuminate her distressed face, but she had no choice so she sank into the leather chair.

Abernathy's blond hair was perfectly styled, and his

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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 nodded. "I have seven years of strong experience already, and I'm working on a book about the Willard Treasure. It's basically finished, but I have to verify a few details." The boast about it going well was a stretch. While the subject was wildly exciting to her, she wasn't certain her passion for the project came across in the manuscript.

"I hope it's accepted before the committee meets. I know when you were hired two years ago, you'd already published a few articles about the Willard Treasure, and with your family connections, you clearly know a lot about the subject. However, Professor Guzman is here now as well. His credentials are stellar with his PhD from Yale and his strong history with pre-Columbian artifacts in general. He's been working on cataloging the Willard Treasure, and once it's done, it will be even more of a draw to pull in archaeology and art students. It will also increase TGU's reputation. So it's a toss-up between which of you would be our best expert on the treasure."

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?"

"I'm not quite certain just yet. Any tenure committee for a history professor will, of course, include the provost and the history chair." His left brow rose. "I've heard you're friends with Beckett Harrison. You might make sure to cultivate that, um, *friendship*. And it wouldn't hurt to be extra *friendly* to Erik Andersen."

Abernathy's practiced smile made her skin crawl. If he meant what she thought he did, it was a disgusting suggestion. "Beckett and I are merely friends. Not *friendly* in any kind of questionable way. I'm not sure what you mean, Ellison." She kept her voice even, but she clenched her fists in the folds of her skirt.

"I didn't mean anything by that, of course. It never hurts to help the process along by being agreeable and on good terms with anyone who holds the reins to your future. Surely you can understand that." His gaze flicked over her legs before rising to linger on her chest. His leering smile left no doubt as to his meaning.

"Thank you, Ellison. This has been very illuminating." Determined not to let him see the tears of rage gathering in her eyes, Savannah rose on wobbly legs. She swung on her heels and stalked out the door. It shut behind her, and she caught a glimpse of his secretary's surprised face as Savannah stormed past. She shoved open the exterior door and stepped outside to draw in air untainted by the odious president's presence.

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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?

## CHAPTER 2

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***DIVORCE. THE UGLY WORD HUNG IN THE CLASSROOM'S*** stale air after the sound of Savannah's steps faded into silence.

Hez wanted to go after her, but it would be futile. No one ran away from problems as fast as Savannah Webster. He'd just hoped she might not think of him as a problem anymore.

He had spent the last two years getting clean, rebuilding his life, and laying the plans for the Justice Chamber. It had been grindingly hard work, but he hadn't given up. Always in the back of his mind, he imagined how Savannah would react when she saw the finished product, how thrilled she would be by the new Hez. She would immediately see that he was a much better man than he had ever been during their marriage. Then, after a few suitably gushing words, she would melt into his arms.

He'd played that stupid scene in his head a hundred times, most recently on the drive down from his court hearing in Mobile today. Reality had actually matched his fantasy, at least for a few seconds. He spotted her a moment before she saw him, and she'd been just as breathtaking as the first time he'd seen her. The late-afternoon sun caught the red-gold highlights in her shoulder-length auburn hair, and her sleeveless top showed

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off her toned arms.

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.

His vision blurred and he wanted a drink. Just one to take the edge off the pain. He took a deep breath and shook his head. No. He knew where that path led.

He had kidded himself that the door back into Savannah's heart was still open a crack because she hadn't filed for divorce. But she probably just hadn't gotten around to it because thinking about their marriage—about him—had been too painful. She had stuffed their failed marriage into that enormous mental closet full of things she didn't want to deal with. Until now.

A new idea hit him like a kidney punch: Did she have a boyfriend? Was that why she'd finally filed for divorce? That would also explain why she pushed him away so hard just now.

If she was seeing someone, he couldn't blame her. The last time she had set eyes on him, he was "all messed up with no place to go," as he admitted at the time. He was a workaholic alcoholic who had destroyed his family and his future. Why would someone like her wait around for two years on the slim chance that he might turn himself around? It would make perfect sense for her to move on.

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.

Hez turned and saw an ancient security guard standing in the door. The guy’s uniform was probably as old as he was. His name tag read Oscar Pickwick.

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

It was after five o’clock, but the sun still turned his jacket into a personal sauna the minute he stepped outside. He took it off, then pulled off his tie and unbuttoned his collar for good measure.

He looked for a shaded spot away from students where he could sit for a few minutes. A rickety bronze bench, green with age, stood under a nearby tupelo tree. He tested it and it wobbled, but it seemed sturdy enough to hold him. A plaque announced that it was the *Gift of the Class of 1956*. Cheap class.

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.

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If anyone could turn this place around, it was Savannah's sister, Jessica Legare. Jess was a financial wizard who had spent eight years at a cutthroat Wall Street investment bank before taking the CFO job at Tupelo Grove three years ago. She had the brains and intestinal fortitude to fix the university—if it was fixable. He hoped it was, for Savannah's sake if not his own.

Hez's phone buzzed in his pants pocket, and he pulled it out. It was Jimmy Little, Hez's friend and head of his current law firm. He took the call, happy to think about work for a few minutes. "Hey, Jimmy."

"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."

"Thanks, but I figured I'd spend the night down in Pelican Harbor. I'm having dinner at Billy's and staying at a little B and B on the water."

"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.”

I wait until Savannah goes home, which seems to take forever. At least I have a tracker on her phone, so I don’t need to spend hours watching for her to leave.

Finally, the blue dot labeled *S* begins to move on my screen. I move too. Ten minutes after she walks out of the building, I walk in.

This old pile of ivy-covered brick and stone has a unique stink to it, like all of TGU. It’s more of a feeling than an actual smell: the stench of generations of dirty laundry that has never been washed or aired. The pile just grows higher as the years roll by.

My first stop is the classroom where that idiot left the provenance letters he was supposed to pick up. Those letters were basically certificates of authenticity for every artifact in the last shipment. Without them, we wouldn’t be able to sell a single one. Where were they? Did Savannah grab all of them? Peter thought he saw her take the whole stack as he was going back to get them, but he’s not a particularly reliable source, especially when he’s agitated. Maybe she left some of the letters behind.

I do a quick search of the desk and trash. Nothing. I walk up

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and down the rows of student seats, glancing down each. I see only dust and the occasional snack wrapper or soda can.

Next I go to her office. A little ripple of adrenaline runs through me as I open the door. I have a cover story for being in the building, but not here.

I close the door and look around. The early evening sunlight slants through her windows, making the room warm and stuffy. I step behind her well-organized desk and flip through the papers on it. Student essays to be graded, university paperwork, scholarly magazines and newsletters. No provenance letters. I check the desk drawers and credenza. Nothing there either.

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 scan the room, looking for any other place she might have left the letters. The bookshelves hold only books. The top of the credenza has the standard TGU computer and some family pictures.

One of the pictures catches my eye. A wedding photo showing a radiant Savannah and a self-satisfied Hez wearing a smirking smile. My fists clench and I resist the urge to tear the picture from the frame and rip it to shreds. Why is that still here? He's supposed to be out of her life!

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

I check the tracker on my phone. Savannah has left her house and is walking back toward campus. She's probably walking her dog, but she might stop by her office. She's brought him here before.

Time to go. I skim my gaze over the office one last time,

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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.

I exit the building and head for my car, keeping to the lengthening shadows. She might have taken the provenance letters home. Maybe I can get in and search before she returns.

I make the short drive to her neighborhood and park a block from her cottage. But the blue dot is heading back now. She'll be home in just a few minutes. I'll need to wait until she's asleep.

Another jolt of adrenaline hits my bloodstream, and it's much stronger this time. What exactly will I do if she wakes while I'm in her home?

## CHAPTER 3

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**SAVANNAH'S EYES POPPED OPEN IN HER BEDROOM. THE** room was quiet except for Marley's low growl, and the only light was from her bedside clock shining out the time of almost three in the morning. Her Aussie always let her know if anyone stepped foot in the yard. Her frozen muscles finally released, and she sat up to reach for Marley's soft fur. He stood on the floor beside the bed, his attention focused on the window.

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

He uttered another growl. Her room was at the back of the small shotgun-style home and looked out on a small pond. Marley and Boo Radley had a mutual hatred for one another, and she stepped to the window to see if the gator had wandered into the yard. She peeked through the blinds and saw nothing but the moonlight glimmering on the koi pond and nearby bench. Nothing moved.

The floor creaked down the hall toward the kitchen, and her pulse rocketed again. Marley's attention never wavered from the window, so she tried to tell herself she was alone in the house, but that didn't comfort her.

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.

The kitchen still carried the faint aroma of the roast chicken she’d had for dinner. The living room and bathroom were clean and empty. In spite of the noise she’d heard, she found nothing out of place. Marley might have caught a whiff of Boo Radley’s scent outside.

When she returned to the bedroom, she knew she’d never be able to sleep. She might as well grade papers for an hour or so. Seeing Hez again had so discombobulated her that she hadn’t graded a single essay. She picked up the first folder and began to read through the paper. The shock and pain in his face when he’d heard she’d filed for divorce kept intruding on the job in front of her.

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

She took the last folder and frowned. It was much heavier than the rest. And the feel of the folder was different too—it wasn’t the standard school-grade folder but a heavier stock. She flipped it open and scanned the top page. It appeared to be some kind of document on school letterhead.

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

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almost felt they were part of her personal history.

She flipped through the rest of the folder and found multiple letters like the top one. Was someone selling off museum assets without permission? Savannah had suspected something was amiss at the museum when she tried to find a box of historical documents to show her students last year and found them missing. Selling items with fake documentation would increase their value substantially.

Was the university in more trouble than she knew? If this was as bad as it looked, it could be the end of the school her family had dedicated their lives to for over a century. She owed it to the school and to her family to ferret out the truth. But she was a lowly history professor, not an investigator.

She could go to Ellison Abernathy, but everything in her rebelled at the idea. He was the slimy sort, just like her father. Ellison reminded her of an old-time snake-oil salesman with his too-perfect hair and toothy grin. All flash and no substance.

Savannah couldn't tell Jess yet either. Her sister had her hands full trying to keep the university in the black, and this kind of news would be too distracting. Better to wait until Savannah got to the bottom of it.

*Hez could help me.*

It was the worst possible idea. But no one was better at figuring out cases than Hez. The thought of working with him made acid churn in her stomach—and how could she ask him for help just hours after dropping the divorce bomb? No, there had to be a better option. But who?

“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 glanced at the clock. It wasn't quite four o'clock, but she could kill time for two hours by working on lesson plans. She picked up her laptop and got to work. She worked steadily until light crept into the room. Just after six so she could call now.

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?"

"Provenance letters. Whenever an ancient artifact is sold, there should be some sort of proof that it's not fake and wasn't looted. These are letters attesting to the provenance of Aztec artifacts from the university's collection." She took a deep breath. "Beckett, are we selling the Willard Treasure? Are we in that much financial trouble?"

"Wow . . . I—I . . ." Shock rattled his usually smooth and confident baritone. He cleared his throat and started again. "This is stunning. No, we're not selling anything from our collection, especially the Willard Treasure. That's the history department's pride and joy. Are you sure these letters mean someone is selling our artifacts?"

"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?"

The memory of her surprise meeting with Hez popped into her head, flustering her more than it should have. "I . . . was a

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little distracted when I left yesterday, and I must have accidentally grabbed them with my students' papers." She hurried on before he could ask what had distracted her. "Someone must've left them there by mistake, but who? We can't let someone pilfer those artifacts—they're worth so much, in both monetary and cultural value."

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

As soon as he asked the question, she knew the answer. "Someone who has access to the Willard Treasure, the university seal, and our letterhead. And who likes to live larger than his university salary allows."

"I think I know who you have in mind."

"Ellison."

He sighed. "It's possible you're right, Savannah—but you'll need more evidence. A lot more. Bringing down a university president isn't easy, and trying is dangerous."

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

"Someone like the provost." He took her unsubtle hint, a note of resignation in his voice. "Okay. I'll need to see those provenance documents. Give me the weekend to see what I can find out."

Hez had planned to take a mini vacation on the Gulf shore. He'd have dinner at Billy's—hopefully with Savannah—and spend the night at the Bayfront Inn, a cozy little B and B he

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and Savannah had stayed at a few times. The morning would be devoted to old Pelican Harbor favorites: a run in the park before it got too hot, takeout beignets from Petit Charms, a walk along the beach (hopefully also with Savannah), and coffee at one of the little shops that dotted downtown.

It was, of course, a terrible plan from beginning to end. He knew it the moment he walked into Billy's. The smell of grilling oysters should have made his mouth water, but instead it made his stomach churn. Savannah loved them almost as much as he did, and they'd often shared an order when they came here for dinner. He left after barely being able to choke down a cup of crab-and-corn chowder.

The Bayfront Inn was even worse. It had been a rambling old mansion before being converted to a bed-and-breakfast twenty years ago, and rumors abounded that it was haunted. And for Hez, at least, it was: The ghost of his dead marriage followed his every step. There was their favorite nook in the dining area. And the stairs leading up to the suite on the top floor where they'd stayed on their anniversary, the one with the skylights and the panoramic view of the bay.

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

*Hez moved through the house, but his legs dragged like lumps of concrete. Where was Ella? He wanted his little girl's arms around his neck. Door after door opened in his hand, but each space stood empty. He had to find her.*

*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*

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*scream, but he couldn't open his mouth.*

Hez bolted upright in bed, shaking and covered in sweat, iron bands of grief and guilt still coiled tight around his heart. He'd never get back to sleep, so he went for a run at four. He was back by five o'clock and on the road back to Birmingham by six.

It was a relief to see Pelican Harbor in the rearview mirror. The first rays of dawn gilded the tops of the highest buildings as he pulled out of the inn's parking lot, and he could hear the gulls crying as they flapped out to follow the shrimpers. He loved the little town, but it was crowded with memories and had no room for him anymore.

He spent the four-hour trip listening to continuing-education podcasts, pausing occasionally to dictate notes when he came across something useful for one of his cases. It was mostly dull stuff, but it forced him to get his mind out of the past. It worked—by the time he reached the parking lot for his apartment building in Birmingham, he had new ideas for a couple of cases and a tentative list of schools to call about the Justice Chamber.

As he walked to the building, a man got out of a car and intercepted him. The guy was a twentysomething in khakis with a neat beard and shoulder-length black hair. He was carrying a thick envelope and looked vaguely like an upscale messenger.

"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."

The guy got back into his car and drove off as Hez opened

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the envelope. It contained a stack of legal documents. The top one was titled “Divorce Complaint” and was captioned “Savannah Webster v. Hezekiah Webster.”



## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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