COLLEEN COLLEEN COBLE

A TUPELO GROVE NOVEL

PRAISE FOR COLLEEN COBLE

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AND RICK ACKER

I THINK I WAS MURDERED

"This is a book that grabs you straight out of the gate. Centered around a bang-up concept with a great techno twist, a rich cast of characters drives you through a twisty plot that is a white-knuckled ride straight to the end. The suspense was killing me as I read! Make sure you're well-rested before you start *I Think I Was Murdered* because it will keep you up at night."

-P. J. TRACY, New York Times bestselling author

"A timely and intriguing premise played out in a way that keeps readers guessing."

-Steven James, national bestselling author of Synapse

"What a roller-coaster ride! *I Think I Was Murdered* gripped me on page one and didn't let go until the epilogue—after a twist that caught this seasoned reader by complete surprise. If you like thrilling suspense, you won't want to miss this novel by Colleen Coble and Rick Acker."

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"Colleen Coble fans will devour her latest offering, which—with the help of thriller writer Rick Acker—cleverly uses AI, family secrets, and a lost treasure to keep readers guessing until the final satisfying page."

-Creston Mapes, bestselling author

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WHAT WE HIDE

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"Coble and Ackerman have forged a seamless partnership with a singular voice. I honestly can't tell where one writer starts and the other ends. *What We Hide* is a crisp and hard-charging start to a legal suspense series that tests the boundaries of yesterday's secrets against today's lies, all while trying to escape tomorrow's verdict. From the courtroom to the shadow of a decaying Gothic university, it's a high-stakes ride through love, second chances, and an ending you won't soon forget."

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"Get ready to be hooked! Brace yourself for a thrill ride as Coble and Acker masterfully weave a web of suspense in *What We Hide*, where secrets simmer and unexpected twists leave you guessing until the shocking finale."

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"This book has it all. Intrigue, suspense, and the mysteries of the heart, woven together masterfully by the great new pairing of Coble and Acker. Fans of their individual books will not be disappointed. New readers will be delighted."

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"Much is hidden in Tupelo Grove and Pelican Harbor. In *What We Hide*, expert storytellers Colleen Coble and Rick Acker will take you on a riveting ride through a picturesque Southern town inhabited by characters who will pull you in and make you care. Hidden truths find their way into the light—sometimes quickly, often slowly in the face of great obstacles and danger. Once you start reading, you won't put this book down."

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-ROBERT WHITLOW, BESTSELLING AUTHOR

"When you combine two brilliant storytellers such as Coble and Acker, the result is a beautiful, well-crafted legal thriller that keeps the reader utterly riveted. If you're looking for a novel that's edge-ofthe-seat compelling, emotionally engaging, and nail-bitingly (I know that's not a word, but it fits) suspenseful, look no further than *What We Hide*. With its compelling narrative, well-rounded characters, and intricate plot, this is a must-read, goes-on-the-keeper-shelf, that will stay with you long after the final page is turned."

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"What We Hide grabbed me with the first chapter and had me reading until two in the morning with its twisty plot and engaging characters."

-PATRICIA BRADLEY, AUTHOR OF THE PEARL RIVER SERIES

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ALSO BY COLLEEN COBLE AND RICK ACKER

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THE TUPELO GROVE NOVELS

What We Hide Where Secrets Lie When Justice Comes (available March 2026)

STAND-ALONE

I Think I Was Murdered

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A TUPELO GROVE NOVEL

COLLEEN COBLE AND RICK ACKER



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Where Secrets Lie

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CHAPTER 1

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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

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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.

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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 6:30 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

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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."

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"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.

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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.

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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 iconic memories 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 early May when the term ends."

"May? 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

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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."

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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.

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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?"

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"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

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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.

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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.

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CHAPTER 2

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HEZ SAT IN THE FRONT ROW OF THE OLD COURTROOM GAL-

lery, 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 woman in expensive suits sat at the defense table. The defendant was Beckett Harrison, the slimy

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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.

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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 crossexamined 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.

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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.

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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

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record."

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

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"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?"

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"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 coconspirator, Erik Andersen, that I—"

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."

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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.

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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."

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"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."

"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."

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"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 murdersuicide—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?"

"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.

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

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CHAPTER 3

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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

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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.

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"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 gnome-like 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 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.

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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. "I hate to see you go, Savannah. Several other members of the committee are doing the same. 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

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recovery. They both did.

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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.

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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 fiftyfive-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?"

"He's at the gym playing basketball with some of the guys. I

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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."

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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

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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.

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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."

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"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?"

"Yes."

"Did you ever see the murder weapon in Mr. Harrison's possession?"

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"No."

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

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"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."

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"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

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Honor. I'm merely demonstrating that the witness is biased against Mr. Harrison."

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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."

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"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?"

"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

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to protect you, Savannah, and Simon from dangerous individuals, correct?"

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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."

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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?

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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