

Chapter One

Sunday, January 13, 2013

3:33 p.m.

“YOU WANT ME to steal a Bible?”

Jackson Douglas studied his potential client from across the table as she slowly nodded.

“Yes.”

He sat back and took a deep breath.

Her name was Abigail Vanderbilt, but she had told him to call her Abby. The nickname fit her better. She was in her early thirties, he guessed, average height and weight, not a knockout but not unattractive either. Blond-brown hair in a shoulder-length bob, small mouth, wide brown eyes that studied him over a cup of tea. She wore jeans and a mauve Henley top, faint makeup, no jewelry, and only a dash of perfume. Missing were the air of superiority and the tall, rigid posture that should go with a regal name such as Abigail Vanderbilt.

Then again, she didn’t have the angry scowl and dark gaze, the abundant leather, and the chopped, belligerent speech of a Bible-stealer either. So maybe Jackson didn’t have Abby pegged quite as well as he thought.

He reached for his coffee, warranted on a gray, drizzly day, and took a slow drink, allowing him time to formulate his line of questioning. If he was going to consider making Abby’s case his first of the new year, he had to know what he was getting into.

“Whose Bible is it?” he finally settled on, feeling as if it was the question Jesus might ask. Not why she wanted to steal the Bible, but who the rightful owner was. That would determine a lot—about her and about whether Jackson was soon to be employed.

“It was my stepfather Alec’s,” she said, lowering her cup and dabbing the corner of her mouth with her thumb.

“Alec Vanderbilt?”

“You know him?”

Jackson shook his head. “Should I?”

“Only if you’re familiar with the art world. Or the CIA.”

Jackson frowned. His intrigue meter rose at the same time his internal alarm bells sounded their first warning.

“Was,” he said, again honing in on what he deemed the salient point. “Whose is it now?”

“That’s the thing,” Abby said. “I think it should be mine.”

“Obviously, or you wouldn’t have asked me to steal it. But whose is it?”

She locked eyes with him. He waited for a Clintonesque debate over the meaning of the word “is.” Instead, Abby sighed. “Technically, my stepbrother Desmond has possession of it. You see, when Alec passed away, his inheritance was supposed to be equally divided between me, Desmond, and Noah.”

“Who is . . . ?”

“Our half-brother. Desmond was Alec’s son from his first marriage. Noah was his son from his second marriage, to my mom, who had me before meeting Alec. When they got married, Alec adopted me, and we were one family . . . no step-this or half-that.”

“So what happened?”

Abby looked down at the teabag she was bobbing in her cup. “Mom died a month before my sixteenth birthday.”

Jackson swallowed. He could empathize. His parents and brother had died in a restaurant explosion twenty months ago tomorrow.

“Desmond is eleven years older than me and was out of the house by then. Plus he was never all that close to Mom, so it didn’t affect him as much as the rest of us. Noah was only ten and was crushed. He went into a shell for the rest of his childhood. And I,” she said, looking up, “relied on the one person I had left.”

“Alec.”

She nodded. “From the moment he married Mom, he became my dad. I never knew my biological father—he died when I was two. So Alec filled the void. After Mom’s death, we both filled the void for each other, and our bond was . . . It was special.”

Jackson looked up as a waitress with a pot of coffee stopped by. He let her top off his cup, trying to place the face. His friend Reggie owned the restaurant, and, as a result, Jackson spent a lot of time there. But Cameron’s had experienced a lot of staff turnover lately, and he couldn’t place her.

“So how does all this genealogy link back to a Bible, right?” Abby asked.

Jackson nodded.

“Like I said, Alec’s inheritance was supposed to be divided three ways. But Desmond’s lawyers strung the whole thing out in probate. I don’t know how they did it, but they got him almost everything—the house, most of the artwork, and two-thirds of the money. I tried to fight them, but . . . my lawyers weren’t in the same league.”

“What about Noah?”

“Indifferent. He moved to Europe a few months later.”

“How long ago was this?”

“Ten years this December,” she said, nodding over her shoulder as if December was in the booth behind them. The movement caused Jackson’s eyes to flicker to a TV screen over the bar, a TV screen showing an AFC Divisional playoff game. It reminded him that he had things to do unless Abby could provide a compelling reason why he should risk his recently reacquired private investigator’s license to steal a Bible.

Abby took a drink before continuing. “At the time, Desmond claimed the Bible had disappeared, that it wasn’t part of the inheritance. He insisted he didn’t have it, and Noah and I didn’t. That happens, I suppose, stuff gets lost in the mess, but I always knew he was lying.”

“Why would he lie about it?” Jackson asked. “What’s so special about this Bible?”

“For one thing, it’s over three hundred fifty years old.”

Jackson whistled.

“According to family lore, the Bible originally belonged to Jan Aertson when he immigrated to New Netherland as an indentured servant in 1650.”

“Who is Jan Aertson?”

“The great-great-great grandfather of Cornelius Vanderbilt.”

“You’re . . . Wait, you’re related to those Vanderbilts?”

“Technically,” Abby said with a sigh. “But the family tree would have to be a forest to trace it. You pretty much have to go back to Jan. Anyhow, I don’t know if the legend is true or not, but I do know this Bible has been in the family for generations, and it’s old enough to have come with Jan from the Netherlands. I’ve done the research and, in good condition, it would be worth up to a quarter of a million dollars.”

Jackson whistled again.

“But it’s not in good condition. This was Alec’s Bible all his life, after having been passed down for centuries. It’s also full of his markings and notations. But considering his prestige in the art world, it would probably still fetch up to a hundred thousand dollars.”

“Still a good reason to hide it from the inheritance if you’re Desmond,” Jackson said.

“And that’s only half of it. In addition to being a collector of fine art, Alec also worked for the CIA. He started out of college and retired . . . well, nobody really knows when. Some claimed he worked there until the day he died. And legend has it that some of the notations in his Bible are actually CIA code.”

“Hold it,” Jackson said. “When you say legend, you mean like the legend of Paul Revere or *The Legend of the Seeker*?”

“I don’t know. But Alec’s life was full of secrets. He was always meeting people late at night or in clandestine places, disappearing unexpectedly, having strange guests show up. Art people are a little eccentric, which I’m sure explains some of it. But I always wondered if the rumors were true, that he was—at least partially in some capacity—still working for the CIA.”

Jackson raised his eyebrows.

“After he died, I believed it even more. There were two guys in suits and shades—straight out of *Men in Black*—at his funeral. They even bugged me after the reading of the will, snooping around. I think they were CIA spooks after the Bible.”

Jackson wasn’t convinced. But he wasn’t ready to discount the theory either.

“So which are you,” he asked, “a treasure hunter or a codebreaker?”

“Neither,” Abby replied. “I want the Bible because it’s a link to my father, to the person I cared about more than anyone and was closer to than anyone after my mother died. I don’t care if what he wrote was CIA secrets or his reflections on the 23rd Psalm. I just want this Bible because it was his.”

“Why would Desmond want it?”

“Money. Doesn’t matter who’s paying.”

“He’s not a collector.”

She huffed, almost a snort. “No. He already sold half of Alec’s art collection, and the rest he keeps for image and prestige.”

“What does he do for a living?”

“Makes more money off what Alec left him, hobnobs in the art world as if he actually belongs.” She huffed again. “Probably involved in a number of criminal enterprises, although that’s just speculation. Technically he’s a talent assessor, but I think that’s more of a hobby than anything. A way to meet women.”

“So what makes you think he still has the Bible? If he’s in it just for the money, how do you know he didn’t sell it years ago?”

“I talked to him at Christmas. I made the gesture to go see him since we are still related. I was hoping to bury the hatchet, lay the groundwork for a peaceful inquiry about the Bible. Instead, he told me he’d just found it and was going to sell it to the highest bidder. I think he had it all along, keeping it just to spite me, not having a clue how much it was really worth. Now that he’s somehow found out, he’s going to sell.”

“Why would he tell you about his plans?”

“Because he knew it would get under my skin. Even when we were younger, Desmond always lived to make me miserable, and he always had the power to do so. Alec was many things, but not a great disciplinarian. And as much as he loved me, he would never believe me over Desmond if it came down to it.”

“So Desmond is going to sell the Bible, and before he gets the chance, you want me to steal it?”

Abby nodded. “I know that possession is nine-tenths of the law, and in fact, I talked to my lawyer just this week. I thought maybe that since Desmond admitted he had it, I’d have a chance of getting it back legally. Well, to make a long story short, the answer is no. Especially since if I started any legal action, Desmond could just make the Bible ‘disappear’ again. If he hasn’t already sold it by then.”

“But since he can’t legally own something that doesn’t legally exist, our stealing it wouldn’t be illegal, is that how you figure it?”

She nodded again. “And I can prove Alec wanted me to have it, if I can just see it.”

“How?”

“He wrote me a message in the front, in the dedication area, shortly before he died, bequeathing it to me. Unfortunately, he didn’t specify it in his will.”

Jackson sat back, furrowed his brow for a moment. “I’m not real familiar with the workings of estate law, but whenever Desmond makes the announcement that he has the Bible and is willing to sell it, won’t potential buyers get to look through it?”

“Yeah, so?”

“So, wouldn’t you be able to find that dedication page then?”

“Maybe, assuming he doesn’t rip it out first. But my lawyer said that still wouldn’t be enough legally to get it from him. Plus, you’re assuming this is going to be an out-in-the-open Christie’s auction.”

“It’s not?”

“I doubt it. Too many hoops and regulations that way.”

“Does anybody else know what he’s planning?”

“I don’t think he’s announced yet. But I’ll bet dollars to donuts it’s Friday.”

“This Friday?”

Abby nodded. “Every year, Desmond throws a masquerade ball, always for some art-related charity. Usually, something trumped up for the snooty Hollywood types, not a legitimate charity like the Red Cross or Doctors Without Borders or something. And he controls the invites, so he can use it as his personal auction service.”

He leaned forward. “Any idea where he’s keeping the Bible?”

Abby bit her lip and shook her head. “I would guess at the house.”

“Security?”

She shook her head again.

“And we only have four days until he auctions it off?”

“Yes, but I have an ace up my sleeve.”

“Do tell.”

“The ball Friday night. Mostly so he can rub it in my face how much money he has, Desmond always invites me. And a guest.”

Jackson turned and tipped his head. “It does get us in the door.” He tipped it back. “What about bringing a lawyer? Once Desmond admits to owning the Bible, they could file an injunction and settle this in court.”

“Maybe,” she said. “But my lawyer said my chances in court after all this time were between slim and none, and that’s if the dedication page is still there. And, my gosh, talk about expensive. Do you know what a lawyer charges these days?”

“I don’t.”

“More than I can pay. I’m an artist, Jackson, making a little here, a little there, living off the interest from the small percentage of Alec’s inheritance Desmond didn’t get.”

He nodded.

“Trust me, I wouldn’t resort to this if I thought there was any other way.”

By “this,” Jackson assumed she meant stealing, not hiring a private investigator.

She continued. “The ball gets us in the door, like you said. And in costume.”

“Access to the entire house?”

She nodded.

“Won’t he suspect you’re planning something?”

“No. He’d never give me enough credit to pull it off . . . or to even attempt to pull it off.”

Jackson ran it through his head. If Desmond was the rightful owner—whoever determined rightful—there was no way he would consider taking the case. But if Abby was right and Alec had intended for her to get the Bible . . .

“Don’t take this the wrong way,” Jackson said, “but I have to be careful. How do I know you’re not just trying to avoid Desmond’s little auction and get this on the cheap?”

“Because I’ve seen your rates. They aren’t cheap.”

“Try the P.I. firms. They bill by the hour.”

“I didn’t say I wouldn’t pay. And you’re right, I could be conning you.” She leaned forward. “So try this. Take the next four days and research me. I’ll give you my Facebook page, names of friends, contacts in the art world. Then research Desmond. Judge for yourself who to believe. And if you think my motives are anything other than what I’ve told you, you can stand me up Friday night.”

“Sounds reasonable.”

“That a yes? You’ll take the case?”

“Under one condition.”

“Which is?”

“I’m not going as Harry Potter or anything from *Twilight*.”