



*Catherine's Cross*

*Millie West*

## CHAPTER 1

# *The Dark Hours*

Just before one in the afternoon, while Jenks was watering her ferns, she felt a strange sensation run through her body, like a chill that went to her bones. She'd had these feelings before. Both Jenks and her identical twin, Gigi, experienced them when they sensed the other was in trouble. Their mother called these instincts a gift. "God has given you two the ability to look out for one another," she would say.

This time the chill gripped her more intensely than ever before. She reached for the telephone, and dialed Gigi's phone. The answering machine picked up. Gigi's cheerful voice said, "Leave a message, and I'll call you back . . ." When she dialed her sister's cell phone, she was forwarded to voice mail. "The owner of this cell phone is unavailable."

Jenks left a short message. "Gigi, please call me as soon as you get this." For the rest of the afternoon, Jenks could not stop thinking of her sister, and her continued attempts to reach her by phone were met with failure.

Just before midnight, the doorbell rang at her home. She cautiously walked to the threshold and asked, "Who is it?"

"Jenks, it's Mom and Gregg. Please open the door."

When she opened the door, fear rushed through her limbs as she looked into her mother's eyes. She knew immediately what was wrong.

"What's happened to Gigi?" Jenks choked as she spoke.

"Baby, can we come inside?" her mother, Linda, asked.

Behind her mother and her mother's neighbor, Gregg Mikell, were two men. They were dressed in suits and both had police identification badges on lanyards around their necks.

Her mother moved quickly to Jenks and took her in her arms. Jenks could

feel her mother tremble as she pulled her close. "Baby, I have terrible news," her mother said with a shaky voice.

"Oh, Mama—no."

Her mother stroked her hair back and looked into Jenks's eyes. "Gigi drowned this afternoon in the Beaufort River."

Jenks felt as if the wind had been knocked from her lungs. Her knees buckled, and she collapsed to the floor.

One of the men who had accompanied her mother and Gregg to the house rushed forward and helped her into an armchair.

"Jenks, these are detectives with the Raleigh Police Department," Gregg said, nodding toward the two men. "They were kind enough to come see your mother and me. A Detective Seth Mason with the Beaufort County, South Carolina Police Department contacted them this evening, and asked them for help. Gigi was diving for artifacts with Frank Hiller."

Jenks felt numb to her very core. She had known all afternoon that something was wrong, but not this. She tried taking deep breaths, but her strength failed her. Tears began to well in her eyes, and she nearly choked while speaking. "What happened to her?"

"Miss Ellington, I'm Detective Taylor and this is Detective Turner." Both men looked sad and worried. Detective Taylor continued, "I'm very sorry about your sister. When the lead detective, Seth Mason, called us from Beaufort, he was very concerned about this news coming to you on the telephone. He asked for our assistance. Apparently, Gigi was with her diving partner, Mr. Hiller, when something happened. She became overdue on the dive, and he began to search for her. He called the police when he realized she had to be in trouble." He paused for a moment. "Divers with the Beaufort Sheriff's Department found her this evening. I have Detective Mason's phone number. He said he would like to assist you and your mother, and for you to please phone him."

"Thank you," she said as she choked back tears.

Detective Taylor nodded his head to acknowledge her statement. Jenks looked at her mother, who was sitting in an armchair, staring into space. Tears were rolling down her cheeks and she sat motionless, her face lacking expression. Detective Turner went into Jenks's kitchen and returned with two glasses of water, giving one to Jenks and the other to her mother.

Linda took one sip of the water and then set the glass down on a table. Her

neighbor, Gregg, went to her side and softly said, “Linda—the detectives may have some other work they need to do. They can give us a ride back home.”

She nodded her head, and then softly said to Jenks, “Would you please call the investigator in Beaufort. I don’t think I can.”

“Yes, Mama.”

Gregg helped Linda from her chair, and the police officer assisted her toward the front door. Detective Taylor turned back and put a couple of business cards in Jenks’s hand. “This is Detective Mason’s phone number and my business card. We’ll help you in any way we can. Don’t hesitate to call us.”

“Thank you.”

Gregg left Linda standing beside Detective Turner, and he returned to speak with Jenks. “Are you going to be all right here?”

“Yes, Gregg, thank you.”

“I’ll look after your mother tonight, so don’t you worry. I’ll call you in the morning to let you know what time we’ll be picking you up to go to Beaufort. I’ll drive.”

She nodded as she wiped tears from her cheeks with the back of her hand.

Gregg closed the front door behind him and the room became intensely quiet. Drawing a deep breath, she picked up the telephone beside the couch and dialed Detective Mason’s phone number.

It rang a couple of times before a firm voice answered, “Detective Mason.”

Jenks had a difficult time beginning the conversation and she choked on her words.

The detective responded after a few moments. “Miss Ellington?”

“Yes, Detective.”

“The Raleigh Police Department informed me that they went to see your mother and you. I’m very sorry about your sister, Gigi.”

“I just don’t understand how this could have happened,” Jenks said in a high-pitched voice.

“She was with her diving partner, Frank Hiller. According to Mr. Hiller, they were diving in an area where they had recovered numerous artifacts. An old wharf used to be there. Mr. Hiller lost contact with her, and when she didn’t surface, he said he began to look for her . . . when it became clear she was in trouble, he called the police. We searched the river for her . . . I’m sorry, but we recovered her body this evening.”

Jenks drew in a deep breath. "Where is she now?"

"She's been taken to the Medical University of South Carolina—for an autopsy."

Jenks could barely get her words out, but she told him, "I'll be riding to Beaufort in the morning with my mother and her friend."

"I'll be available to assist you—the sheriff's department is at 2001 Ribaut Street. Just ask for Detective Seth Mason." The last thing he said was, "I'm sorry. I know how you feel."

As she hung up the receiver, Jenks felt like she was in a daze. Could this really be happening?

She dropped to the floor and slammed her fists onto the hardwood floor. Wails of grief came from deep within her. She sobbed until her body shook. "God no, don't let this be true!"

This was surreal. The shock was debilitating, and she lay on the floor for a long time, unable to move, weeping tears of inconsolable anguish. Her only thoughts—of Gigi and the fear she must have felt as she drowned.



The next morning, Gregg drove the two women to Beaufort. They were too stunned to speak as they made the journey from Raleigh.

Jenks breathed deeply, attempting to calm herself. Ordinarily, the beauty of the South Carolina Low Country would have been exhilarating to her, but feelings of sorrow left her depressed and weak.

Both she and her sister were teaching the third grade; Jenks in Cary, North Carolina, and Gigi in Beaufort, South Carolina. The twins had discovered the beauty of the Low Country when their family began to take vacations to Fripp Island when they were children. Their father was still alive, and they spent countless summers enjoying the beaches, the fresh seafood, and especially the peace and quiet of the barrier islands. When the sisters graduated from the University of North Carolina, Gigi announced that she would be relocating to Beaufort, having developed a deep admiration for the area. She believed she had acquired a strong sense of place for the Low Country and had told Jenks that she couldn't imagine living anywhere else.

Jenks had remained in Raleigh to be near their mother, Linda. After their father's death in a construction accident, her mother had been extremely lonely,

but a widower, Gregg Mikell, bought the house next door, and they had both found companionship, if not love. He was there now to take care of her mother when she needed his help the most.

When they arrived at the Beaufort County Sheriff's Department, a young policewoman with dark hair and a thin face was behind the front counter. She slid a glass window open and with a soft voice asked, "Are you the Ellingtons?"

"Yes, ma'am," Jenks responded.

"Please have a seat, and I'll go get Detective Mason. He's been expecting you."

When the door into the offices opened, a tall, dark-haired man came into the waiting room. Jenks thought he looked to be in his early thirties. He was wearing a suit and tie, and an identification badge hung around his neck. She thought him ruggedly handsome. His hair was cut extremely short in a military style.

As he came forward to greet them, his face looked tense, and fine lines of worry formed on his forehead. He first took Linda's hand and told her how sorry he was for her loss. Turning to Jenks, he looked down into her hazel-colored eyes. "Miss Ellington, I am indeed sorry for the loss of your twin sister. Please accept my condolences."

"Thank you, Detective Mason."

After he introduced himself to Gregg, the detective asked them to join him in his office. He explained that they were investigating Gigi's death. There were no signs of a struggle at the landing where her car was parked.

Linda entered his office and placed her arms on the back of a chair to steady herself. The detective noticed her failing strength and helped her sit down. She looked up into Jenks's eyes and said, "You'll have to do this alone, Jenks. I don't think I can talk about this right now." She continued weakly, "Gregg is going to drive me to Gigi's home. Just call us when you're ready to leave."

"I'll be glad to give you a ride, Miss Ellington."

Jenks nodded. "Yes, thank you. That's very kind."

"We'll see you there, honey. Thank you, Detective Mason."

"Yes, ma'am." After her mother departed, Detective Mason offered Jenks a chair in his office. "Can I get you anything from the vending machine? A Coke?"

“Thank you . . . no . . . I’m okay.”

The officer cleared his throat, and Jenks noticed that he was staring at her. “Miss Ellington, how close was your sister to Frank Hiller?”

Jenks wiped a tear from her face and the detective handed her a handkerchief from his pocket. “Thank you. Gigi . . . my sister was in love with him.”

“Do you know if they were having any problems?”

“No . . . why do you ask?”

“I’m just gathering information. When the autopsy and toxicology reports come back, we’ll know more.”

“What about her diving equipment?”

“A police diver checked out her gear and said that everything was working fine. She had plenty of oxygen.”

“I just don’t understand.”

“Frank Hiller told me that he and your sister had recovered numerous artifacts from the waterways around Beaufort. He said they had sold many items to collectors. How did they work the division of the assets?”

“Gigi told me once that they split everything fifty-fifty.”

“Was your sister a good swimmer?”

“Yes, she was very capable. Frank helped her get open-water certified, and he looked out for her on the dives. She told me so.”

“I know he has many years of experience as a US Navy diver.”

Jenks wiped more tears away that trickled down her cheeks.

“I’ve spoken with several divers that knew your sister and Frank Hiller. They all told me they were very close.” He paused as he looked at her. “I was told by a couple of people that your sister also dove by herself for artifacts.”

“What? I wasn’t aware of that. She never told me.” Cold chills ran up her spine. “I can’t believe she would take such a risk.”

“I’m sorry to ask you this, but diving is an expensive hobby. How did your sister afford it on a teacher’s salary?”

Jenks looked up into his chestnut-colored eyes. “Our father died in a construction accident when we were teenagers. There was an insurance policy. We both receive \$25,000 a year from a trust our mother set up after his death.”

He nodded. “I’m sorry. Miss Ellington—did your sister own a boat?”

“Not that I know of.”

“How did she get to the diving sites?”

“Some of the locations were accessible from landings. She drove her car to them. I think she told me she went to some sites with Frank in his boat. Why do you ask?”

“She was diving alone at times. Frank told me that he was aware she didn’t exclusively dive with him. He said that she was very independent and occasionally leased a boat for diving from one of the local marinas. I checked the records with the South Carolina Boater Registration and she was not a boat owner of record. Do you know anything about her access to boats?”

“No, I don’t.”

“I spoke with Dave Patterson, who owns a local dive shop, and he told me he did business with your sister and had advised her against diving alone.”

“Why are you asking me about her diving alone? She was with Frank when she died.”

“I’m just gathering information.” He looked at her for a moment and then said, “I’d like to take you to your sister’s now.”

“Thank you . . . I’d appreciate it.”

Detective Mason led Jenks out of the sheriff’s department building to a silver-colored police car that was parked at the rear of the building. He opened the car door for her, and she sat down in the front seat of the vehicle. When he started the engine, Willie Nelson’s voice crooned on the stereo, “You are always on my mind . . .” He quickly turned the sound system off.

Jenks didn’t want to hear music and was thankful that he stopped it. She thought how terribly unfair this was. Gigi had her whole life ahead of her. She thought of all the wonderful times they had shared growing up. Gigi was not only her sister, she was her best friend. Her mind raced to thoughts of their last skiing trip to the mountains of North Carolina and how much fun they had had together. This was just three months ago.

A feeling of numbness descended upon her. They had just spoken a few days before. The conversation had been about a trip Jenks would take to Beaufort during the summer to visit Gigi. As she rode in the detective’s car, Jenks could still hear Gigi’s voice in her mind. The last words she had said before the conversation ended: “I love you, Jenks.”

The policeman drove Jenks to her sister’s Port Royal home. Cars filled



every parking spot in front of Gigi's house. Many of her friends and neighbors had assembled at her cottage. Gigi's next-door neighbors, the Bernsteins and the Forrests, were on the front porch, and they offered their condolences.

As Jenks and Detective Mason entered Gigi's home, a young woman came forward and took Jenks by the hands. Tears were on her cheeks and she said hesitatingly, "I taught school with Gigi. When I saw you enter the room, I thought you were her."

After Jenks thanked Gigi's friend for coming, she glanced into the corner of the living room. Standing in a darkened corner was Gigi's diving partner, Frank Hiller. Blond-headed and handsome, his towering, six-foot, three-inch frame rippled with muscles. The former Navy diver stood with his arms crossed in front of his powerful chest, and he looked at Jenks as she walked in his direction.

"Frank, thank you for coming," Jenks told him.

As soon as she spoke, his arms relaxed and he hugged her. "I'm sorry about Gigi," he said. "I wish I had known she was in trouble."

"Frank . . . How could this have happened? She told me once that she wore a safety line to you."

"We used the line at first because she was uncomfortable diving in the dark waters of the rivers. On one occasion our safety line became ensnarled in underwater tree branches, and we had difficulty clearing ourselves of it. We discontinued using the line after that."

As the mourners departed, Frank Hiller was one of the last to leave. Jenks knew that Gigi was crazy about him. They had met two years before at the Beaufort Water Festival. He had helped her gain her open-water certification so that she could dive with him in the rivers. A number of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century taverns had been located along the waterways of Beaufort County, and they had had success recovering artifacts and ancient spirit bottles from the sites. They sold their discoveries to antique dealers as far away as Boston, and Gigi had assembled her own collection of antique bottles that she proudly displayed on the shelves beside her fireplace.

As he made his departure, Frank hugged Jenks and her mother and asked if he could do anything to help them. "I'm very sorry about what happened," he said as he went out the door.

Jenks looked in Detective Mason's direction. Earlier that evening, she had

noticed the two men talking together. Standing side by side, Frank was slightly taller than the detective, but it was obvious that both men took great care of their physiques. After he had spoken with Frank, Detective Mason had taken a position in one corner and quietly observed the people in the room.

Jenks now noticed the detective give Frank a hard look as he left the home. His light chestnut brown eyes seemed to darken as the former Navy diver passed by.



The next afternoon, Detective Mason came to see Jenks and her mother at Gigi's home.

"I checked with the local marina operators to see about Gigi's leasing of a boat for diving. The owner of the Morgan River Marina, Joe Mitchell, said that he had leased a motorboat to her for several months. He's been out of town for two weeks and was not aware of Gigi's death. He offered his condolences."

"Thank you, Detective," Linda said.

"Joe said that she had used the boat frequently during the spring. The watercraft was set up for operating a GPS, but he said Gigi had her own equipment. It has been removed." The detective gazed inquisitively at Jenks and her mother when he said this.

"I know so little of technology. What is a GPS?" Linda inquired.

"It's a device to measure your position on the earth's surface. It uses satellite signals to triangulate latitude and longitude locations."

Jenks was quiet for a moment before saying, "It would be a method of recording her diving sites."

"Yes, ma'am, she could have done that."

Before the detective departed, he told them that he'd be in touch when the Medical University of South Carolina issued the autopsy report on Gigi's death.



Two days later, Detective Mason came to see Jenks and her mother with the preliminary results from the autopsy. "The cause of death was drowning due to asphyxiation. X-rays proved there were no broken bones and no evidence of barotrauma."

“Barotrauma?”

“Yes, your sister was diving with scuba equipment. A breath of compressed air taken at depth can over expand in the lungs if a diver does not breathe out while ascending. The diver’s lungs do not sense pain when the air over expands, but an injury can result. In the depth of water that they were diving, that should not have been a factor. Also, she was wearing gloves, and the check for material under her fingernails did not reveal anything.”

Jenks remembered that Gigi had cut her hand on a broken bottle during one of the dives and had started wearing gloves to prevent injury.

“It could take up to two weeks to get the toxicology results, but I have asked the lab to expedite the process.”

“I don’t understand how this could have occurred.”

“Perhaps the toxicology report will reveal new information,” Detective Mason said.



Gigi had adored the Port Royal community. She told Jenks once that she had heard that the Port Royal of the past was known for three things: bars, fighting, and shrimping. But with the prospect of the port terminal being developed, new businesses had been established. Unfortunately, the port project had failed and during the economic downturn, shops had closed, and some homes were in foreclosure.

Jenks knew that Gigi was proud of her cottage. She had renovated it doing much of the work herself. Gigi had landscaped and decorated her home to be one of the loveliest in the neighborhood.

There were a number of military personnel living in Port Royal since the Marine training base at Parris Island was a short distance away. On the street where she lived, Marine flags flew from the front of a few homes.

Neighbors continued to come by for brief visits to Jenks and her mother. The Bernsteins, who lived next door, brought over casseroles, and they promised to keep a close eye on Gigi’s house. The neighbor to the other side of her home, Crawford Forrest, came by twice. Gigi had told Jenks that she had become friends with the Bernsteins, but while the Forrests were cordial, they usually stayed to themselves.