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SHERRYL WOODS

Along Came Trouble

A TRINITY HARBOR NOVEL

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WAKING UP IN CHARLESTON
FLIRTING WITH DISASTER
THE BACKUP PLAN
DESTINY UNLEASHED
FLAMINGO DINER
ASK ANYONE
ABOUT THAT MAN
ANGEL MINE
AFTER TEX

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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Along Came Trouble



Dear Friend,

I'm so thrilled that you're getting a chance to know everyone in Trinity Harbor now that this series is back in print. To everyone's shock, murder and mayhem are currently the talk of the town. This time Tucker's the one stirring up trouble, which isn't exactly the smartest thing for a county sheriff to be doing. Naturally King Spencer, Tucker's father, is in an uproar, but thankfully King's own love life is in so much chaos, he can only do so much interfering in Tucker's.

I hope you'll enjoy this final installment in the saga of the Spencers. I have loved getting to know the residents of Trinity Harbor and sharing them with you, just as I have thoroughly enjoyed hearing from so many of you. That the books made you laugh and made you cry says that the Trinity Harbor folks came to mean as much to you as they did to me.

All best,

Sheryl Woods

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the real Westmoreland County Sheriff Buddy Jackson, who provided invaluable technical,
departmental and jurisdictional information. Sadly, in 2008 Westmoreland County lost this
outstanding law enforcement official to lung cancer. My thoughts and prayers are with his wife, artist
Diane Jackson, and all of his colleagues.

And, as always, my undying appreciation to editor Joan Marlow Golan, who not only stepped in to
guide the entire Trinity Harbor trilogy when it was first released, but who has taken me on once again.

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Robert “King” Spencer eyed the silent telephone beside his chair, willed it to ring, and muttered a curse when it didn’t. He’d never thought he would live to see the day when he actually wanted to fend off a dozen callers reporting trouble with one of his kids, but that day had come. With Daisy and Bobby settled down, it was past time for Tucker, his oldest, to start raising a ruckus around town.

Of course, as sheriff, Tucker was more prone to squelching trouble than stirring it up, but even a saint had an off-day every now and then. It was way past time for some woman to come along and lead Tucker astray, but as far as King knew, Tucker hadn’t even had a date in months now. Worse, King’s elder son didn’t seem to give two hoots that he had no social life to speak of.

As for trouble, there had never been so much as a whiff of scandal in that boy’s life with the possible exception of the time Mary Elizabeth Swan, his childhood sweetheart, had taken up with an outsider and left Tucker pining away for her. Folks in Trinity Harbor had had a field day with that one, but they’d been sympathetic to Tucker, and eventually the talk had died down out of respect for his feelings.

King should have been proud that his elder son was an honorable man who people looked to as an example, but the truth was, he found it frustrating. A man had to stir things up once in a while or life just passed him by. King considered starting a few rumors of his own, just to get the ball rolling. If nothing else, that would bring Tucker flying out to Cedar Hill to deny them...which would give King an opportunity to deliver a long-overdue lecture on marriage and family.

King was not a patient man. Okay, that was a massive understatement. He liked to be in control, liked to make things happen on his own timetable. He did not like having his plans foiled again and again by the streak of stubbornness that ran wide through his own children. Right now his plan included grandbabies, a whole dynasty of Spencers.

He had one flesh-and-blood grandson, for all the good it did him. J. C. Gates had been kept from Bobby and from King for years. Some of that had been King’s own doing, so he could hardly complain now that the boy still hadn’t warmed up to him. J.C. was as cautious and fractious as a spooked horse around his own daddy, never mind King. But Bobby was both patient and determined that the boy’s attitude would change with time. King was counting on it.

In addition to J.C., there were four more little hellions King could claim, even if they didn’t have Spencer blood running through their veins. Daisy’s adopted son, Tommy, was turning into a fine boy now that Daisy and Walker had taken a firm hand with him. And Bobby’s stepdaughter, Darcy, was a pistol. She looked real cute, too, now that her dyed-green hair had grown out. King was as proud of his two ready-made grandkids as if they were his own flesh and blood. He felt the same way about Walker’s two sons, even though they all saw precious little of them, since the boys lived down in North Carolina with their mama.

But even with all the commotion that brood had brought into his life, King wanted a new generation of full-fledged Spencers he could educate in tradition from the very beginning. He wanted a generation who’d grow up and see to things in Trinity Harbor, Virginia, the way King and his ancestors had from the beginning of time in this little town on the Potomac River. Spencers had a duty and an obligation to folks around here to keep things running smoothly.

Since Daisy and Bobby didn’t seem to be in the slightest hurry to give him grandbabies, that left Tucker. Unfortunately, his son seemed to be aware of King’s intentions. Tucker had been giving his

father a wide berth for weeks now, making up excuses to avoid Sunday dinner at the farm and the pointed questions that King tended to serve along with the fried chicken and mashed potatoes.—

Worse, King hadn't been able to corner him in town or at the sheriff's office over in Montross. Tucker was getting to be as slippery as some of those criminals he was always going on and on about.

Now, it was *possible* that Tucker was trying to crack a big case, but King doubted it. The kind of "big" cases that turned up around here tended to begin and end with a drunk-and-disorderly charge or a traffic citation. Oh, there had been that drug business a couple of years back, and an occasional shoplifting incident or shooting, but all in all, the county was fairly quiet and serene. Which should have left plenty of time for Tucker to pursue a woman, in King's opinion.

"I guess that means it's up to me," King said aloud. "Again."

He managed to pull off a resigned tone, but anyone looking would no doubt have seen the glint of anticipation in his eyes. There was nothing on earth that King liked better than a little well-intentioned meddling, especially when it came to romance. He glanced across the room at the silver-framed photos Daisy and Bobby had given him last Christmas. They both had fine-looking families, thanks to him.

Yes, indeed, a little lively romance was exactly what Tucker needed. And King was getting darn good at providing it, if he did say so himself. He'd get on it first thing in the morning.

Tucker stood in the doorway of his bedroom and wondered why in hell there was a woman in his bed.

Unless, of course, he was hallucinating. After the kind of day he'd had, that wasn't out of the question. He blinked hard and looked again. Nope, she was still there. Practically buck naked and gorgeous.

Okay, then, he thought, deeply regretting that he hadn't had one last cup of coffee. He rubbed a hand over his face and tried to get his brain to kick in with the kind of quick thinking for which he was known in law enforcement circles. The woman was a reality. That still didn't give him the first clue about what she was doing in his house and, more specifically, in his bed.

He certainly hadn't invited her to share that king-size space, not in years, anyway. He hadn't even known she was there until he'd walked in the house, dead tired from working a double shift and ready for bed himself. If he hadn't flipped on the bedroom lights, he might have crawled in beside her, which wouldn't have been altogether a bad thing under other circumstances.

As it was, he was simply standing here, mouth gaping as if he'd never seen a half-naked woman before...especially this particular woman.

Last he'd heard, Mary Elizabeth Swan had wanted nothing further to do with him. In fact, the last he'd read on the front page of the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, she was marrying the local delegate to the Virginia house of delegates. Though that was far from the last occasion on which her name had appeared in print, it was the last time Tucker had permitted himself to read any article that mentioned her. He had to skip quite a bit in the local weekly—to say nothing of entire pages in the feature section of the Richmond paper when the house of delegates was in session.

It sometimes seemed to him as if Liz, as she preferred to be called these days, was on the board of every cultural institution in the entire state. Her picture—always taken at some fancy shindig requiring designer clothes—leapt out at him at least once a week, reminding him with heart-stopping clarity of just how susceptible he was to any glimpse of that flawless face and tawny mane of hair.

Of course, he sometimes had a hard time reconciling those sophisticated images with the girl he'd fallen for on a schoolyard playground the day she'd pummeled a nine-year-old boy for trying to sneak a peek at her panties while she'd been scrambling up a tree. Mary Elizabeth had been a tomboy back then, and while she'd eventually outgrown tree climbing, she'd never outgrown her go-for-broke enthusiasm for life. Not while she'd been with him, at any rate. She'd looked depressingly sedate in those newspaper pictures, however, so maybe she'd changed now that she was going on thirty and a force to be reckoned with in Richmond society.

Tucker had finally taken to tossing the feature section aside just to avoid the temptation to sit and stare and brood about what might have been...what *should* have been. What kind of pitiful excuse for a man couldn't get a woman out of his system after six years and a steady diet of gushing reports about the wildly successful man she'd chosen over him?

Lawrence Chandler had high-tech millions and political ambitions. Mary Elizabeth, who'd been born right here in Westmoreland County, came from generations of Virginia blue blood. She'd inherited Swan Ridge, her grandfather's estate overlooking the Potomac. A cynic might have wondered if that stately old house with its manicured lawn and sweeping views hadn't been as much a lure for Chandler as Mary Elizabeth herself. New money seeking old respectability, as it were.

Be that as it may, it was a marriage made in political heaven. If Tucker had heard that once, he'd

heard it a hundred times, usually right before people realized they were saying it to the prior man in Mary Elizabeth's life, the one who'd loved her since childhood, the one who'd expected to marry her. Then they'd slink away, looking embarrassed or—even worse—pitying.

According to all those same reports, Chandler intended to be governor by forty, bypass Congress and head straight for the White House by fifty. Not one single political pundit seemed to doubt him.

But he wasn't likely to pull that off, Tucker concluded, if people discovered that his wife was sleeping just about bare-assed in the bed of a small-town sheriff who had once been her lover.

Tucker might have gloated over this turn of events, but he'd been a sheriff a long time now. Things were seldom what they seemed. He doubted Mary Elizabeth had come crawling back because she realized she'd made a terrible mistake six years ago and wanted to rectify it tonight.

Nope, one glimpse at her pale complexion, at what looked like dried tears on her cheeks and the dark smudges under her eyes, and he concluded that she was here because there was some kind of trouble and for some reason she was desperate enough to turn to him. The thought of the strong woman he'd once known being vulnerable and needy shook him as much as her unexpected presence.

He needed to think about this, and he couldn't do it in the same room with a woman who'd once made his blood roar just by glancing at him with her stunning violet eyes. Mary Elizabeth in a tangle of sheets with only one of his T-shirts barely covering her pretty much rendered him incoherent. She always had, and judging from the way his body was reacting right now that hadn't changed.

Tucker retreated to the kitchen and poured himself a stiff drink, thought about it and made it a double. He had a feeling he was going to need it before the night was over.

Liz stretched, then froze as a barrage of ugly memories crashed over her. For one instant, for one brief moment, she'd forgotten everything that had happened the night before. She'd forgotten the discovery that had brought her running to a man she'd abandoned years ago, the only person on earth she could trust to help her.

If he would.

He had to, she told herself staunchly. Tucker was not the kind of man to turn his back on someone in trouble, even someone he hadn't spoken to in years, someone who'd hurt him. Tucker was the most honorable man she'd ever known. She was counting on that mile-wide streak of Spencer integrity to come through for her, even if she didn't deserve it.

She hadn't expected to sleep at all when she'd gotten here. In fact, she'd expected to spend endless hours answering questions, but with no sign of Tucker on the premises, she'd been left all alone in the dark with her nerves rattled and her thoughts scrambling. She'd waited for a while on the porch, but eventually exhaustion and fear had taken their toll. She had gone inside the unlocked house—a testament to Tucker's faith in his own law-enforcement skills—in search of a much-needed shower to cleanse away all signs of the night's events.

Then she'd found one of his T-shirts tossed over the back of a chair, slipped it on and, like a child seeking the safety of a familiar place, had crawled into Tucker's bed to wait for him, uncertain what shift he was working or even whether he would be home at all. For all she knew, he could be spending his nights in another woman's arms.

Now, judging from the soft gray light spilling in the windows, she'd slept through the night. Alone, which was as it should be.

Some sixth sense told her that she might be alone in Tucker's bed, but she was not by herself. She rolled over and looked straight into eyes that were as familiar to her as her husband's. More familiar, in some ways.

Tucker regarded her with a cool, penetrating gaze that seemed to see straight into her soul. She

wondered if he could see the turmoil, if he could read just how terrified she was...how relieved that he was finally there, even if his expression was far from friendly.

“Welcome back seems a little inappropriate,” Tucker said with the wry humor that Liz had once decried because it kept her at a distance.

She studied his face, noted the new lines fanning away from the corners of his crystal-blue eyes, the furrow in his forehead that meant he’d spent most of the night thinking hard about how to cope with her unexpected presence. She wanted to touch him, wanted to smooth away that furrow and tell him not to worry, but that was out of the question. He had every reason to worry. She was about to draw him into a quagmire.

Not only was she—the woman who had once dumped him—suddenly back in his bed, but she was in more trouble than even Tucker Spencer with his keen intelligence, sterling moral streak and investigative skills was likely to be able to fix. But, God help her, she needed him to try...for both their sakes.

“Why are you here?” he asked, when she said nothing.

Liz wished she had the kind of simple answer he seemed to expect. “It’s complicated,” she began finally.

“Not good enough,” Tucker said flatly.

His inscrutable gaze never once left her face, not even to stray to the ample amount of bare skin revealed by his twisted, hiked-up T-shirt. She shivered at the sudden chill in the air and drew the sheet tightly around her, embarrassed by her indecent exposure. Once it wouldn’t have mattered, but now it did. Things between them had changed. Much as she might hate it, it was an undeniable fact.

She had to fight to blink back the tears that threatened. She wouldn’t—she couldn’t—cry. If she started, she might never stop. She had made such a mess of things—of her relationship with Tucker, her marriage, of her life. Right now, though, she had to concentrate on one thing...finding out what had happened last night and who was responsible.

“Still have that rigid self-control, I see,” she said, covering her nerves with sarcasm, even at the risk of alienating the only friend she was likely to have in Trinity Harbor, where people might have voted for her husband but had been slow to forgive her for the choice she’d made between Tucker and an outsider.

“It’s gotten me through the rough spots,” he replied evenly.

“Meaning what I did to you,” she said, regretting that they hadn’t had this particular conversation years ago and gotten it out of the way. But Tucker, stoic and disdainful, had refused to let her explain anything back then. He’d said it was enough that she was turning her back on everything they’d shared. He hadn’t wanted to know the details, hadn’t wanted to understand her reasons for choosing Larry over him. Maybe he’d been right. Maybe none of them were good enough to make what she’d done forgivable. Maybe he hadn’t needed to know how deeply she regretted having hurt him.

In the years since, even though they lived within miles of each other for part of the year, she’d done her best to stay out of his path. She’d figured she owed him that much. And if she hadn’t come to that conclusion on her own, King Spencer had made it a point to remind her every time they’d crossed paths. She’d made a powerful enemy there, no doubt about it.

“Is our breakup the rough spot you’re talking about?” she asked.

“That was one thing,” he agreed.

It saddened her that there might have been more, that he’d suffered losses, endured crises, she’d known nothing about. “And the others?”

“Liz, you’re not here to catch up on old times,” Tucker said with a hint of impatience. “Why are you here, instead of over at Swan Ridge? Where the hell are your clothes? What kind of trouble have you gotten yourself into, and last—but hardly least—why aren’t you turning to your husband for

help?”

~~She shivered again at the cold glint in his eyes and wondered if she'd made a dreadful mistake in coming here. Tucker was, after all, the sheriff. His first obligation would be to the law, not to her. But instinct had brought her to Tucker, and desperation would keep her from leaving. She needed help that he could provide...if he would. It all came down to that.~~

“I'm afraid Larry can't help me with this one,” she told him.

“Why not?”

She risked a look into those hard, unyielding eyes, praying that Tucker would forgive her for the past, praying even harder that he would help her despite it.

“Because he's dead,” she said, then added before she could lose her nerve, “and everyone's going to think I killed him.”

Well, hell, Tucker thought, as Mary Elizabeth's explanation hit him in the gut. He should have known she wasn't here to rekindle an old flame. He *had* known it. A part of him just hadn't wanted to believe it. A part of him, overcome with that same old uncontrollable lust, hadn't given two figs why she was back. He was going to have to try really, really hard to ignore that part of him, at least until he knew what the devil was going on.

If Chandler was dead, why hadn't he heard about it? Surely it would have been big news. She couldn't possibly be telling him it had just happened, could she?

"When did he die?" he asked, trying to ignore the fact that tears were welling up in her eyes and that she was doing her best to keep them from spilling down her cheeks. Mary Elizabeth had always hated to let anyone see her cry, especially him.

"Sometime yesterday, I think. I'm not sure."

He stared at her incredulously. "You don't know?"

"I went to Swan Ridge last night about eleven," she began.

The news just got worse and worse, Tucker concluded. "Am I hearing you right? It happened here, in Trinity Harbor?" he demanded as the ramifications of that slammed into him. He had a dead politician in his jurisdiction and no one knew about it. Dear God, what *had* Mary Elizabeth been thinking?

She nodded at his harsh question. "Yes. I..." She swallowed hard. "I found him. And then I came here."

"Damn it, Mary Elizabeth, have you lost your mind?" Tucker exploded before he could stop himself.

Now the tears were more than she could fight. A steady torrent of them streamed down her cheeks, and Tucker's heart flipped over. He fought the reaction and stayed right where he was.

"I didn't know where else to go, what else to do," she whispered.

She sounded more frightened and helpless than she'd ever sounded in her life, at least around him. Bravado had been ingrained in her from the day she'd arrived to live with her grandfather, a little girl who'd just lost her parents and been left with a man who was a virtual stranger.

"Did you think for one single second about calling the police?" he asked, trying to keep the impatience out of his voice, but not really succeeding.

She stared at him with those huge, watery eyes. "You *are* the police."

Tucker raked a hand through his hair and muttered a curse. Okay, first things first. "You're sure he's dead?"

She nodded, her expression bleak.

He wanted to relent, to reach for her and hold her until those uncharacteristic tears dried up, but he steeled himself against that reaction. He needed to be a cop first, a friend second, at least until he knew more. It might seem cold and unfeeling, but it was the best way to help her.

And to protect himself, he thought bitterly. He couldn't let himself forget for one single second that he'd been burned once by this very same woman. Lust aside, he couldn't let himself trust her, not for a minute. She could have come here just to muddy the hell out of any investigation by the local authorities. Maybe she wanted the state police on the case, for some reason—they would take over if there was any question about whether the sheriff's department had a conflict.

“Did you do it?” he asked, leveling a look straight into her eyes. He would know if she was lying, had always been able to tell, not because she was lousy at it, but because he could see into her soul. He knew her inside out, knew what she was capable of. Or at least he’d once thought he did, and she’d let him believe it, right up until the day she’d announced her engagement to Chandler. He’d missed that one coming.

Now there was a flicker of hurt in her eyes at the question, but then she responded, her tone as cool and impersonal as his. “No.”

Tucker held her gaze, but she never once wavered, never even blinked. Something that felt a lot like relief—or maybe more like cautious optimism—rushed through him. “Okay, then, why don’t I make some coffee and you can tell me what’s going on.”

At least that would get her into some clothes and out of this bedroom. Maybe then he’d be able to concentrate, act like a policeman instead of a frustrated ex-lover who wanted to jump the bones of a potential murder suspect.

She seemed surprised. “Just like that?”

He shot her a rueful look. “You knew how I’d react. That’s why you’re here and not at the station over in Montross.”

“That’s one of the reasons,” she conceded.

“And the others?”

She sighed. “Maybe we’d better save that discussion for another time.”

Since Tucker’s supposedly rigid self-control had been weakening for the last ten minutes, he knew better than to press her on that. One tiny hint that she was back here because of him, because of something personal, and he’d be in that bed and all over her. It seemed like a really bad idea to go that route, especially if someone had very recently killed her husband.

Which, he noted as he headed for the kitchen to make the coffee, she didn’t seem to be all that broken up about. She was scared and shaken, not grief-stricken. He was going to have to ask her about that. Hell, he had so many questions, they might not get out of the house for days.

While the coffee brewed and he waited for Mary Elizabeth to join him, he called the station and told the dispatcher that he wouldn’t be in.

“Until later?” she asked, sounding stunned.

“No, I won’t be in at all,” he told her, understanding her shock. He hadn’t taken a day off in weeks, if not longer. Work had been his refuge, especially since Bobby’s wedding. He knew that he was on his father’s shortlist of projects. Staying out of King’s path had seemed like a good idea. “Until further notice, I am officially on leave.”

“Well, good,” Michele said, rallying. “It’s about time. I hope she’s gorgeous.”

“This is not about a woman,” Tucker said very firmly.

“Yeah, right. It’s *always* about a woman when a workaholic male finally takes time off out of the blue and in the middle of the week.”

“Well, this time it’s not,” he said, lying through his teeth. The last thing he needed was word getting around that he was holed up at home with a woman. Until he knew what was going on with Mary Elizabeth, he had a hunch no one should know she was even in town, much less hiding out at his place. He told himself he was gathering evidence, not hindering an investigation in which he already knew he would have no formal role. He needed an hour, two at most, to get a firm grip on what the hell was going on. After that, he’d go the official, by-the-book route.

“Have fun,” Michele said cheerily, clearly not believing him.

Tucker hung up on her. He looked up to find Mary Elizabeth regarding him with amusement.

“Haven’t taken much time off lately?”

“No.” He poured two mugs of coffee and handed one to her. He surveyed her from her tousled,

subtly frosted brown hair to the pink tips of her perfect toes, noting the shadows in her eyes and the fact that she was wearing another one of his shirts and not much else. “I asked this before, but I think maybe I ought to ask it again— Where are your clothes?”

“In the trash,” she said with a shudder.

He stared. “Why? Please don’t tell me there’s blood all over them.”

“Okay, I won’t tell you that,” she said.

Tucker was forced to admire the stubborn, defiant jut of her chin. He’d leave the issue of the bloody clothes for later. As long as they were in *his* trash, whatever evidence they might provide was safe enough.

“Are you hungry? The cupboard’s pretty bare, but I can manage eggs or cereal.”

“Nothing for me. You go ahead.”

“I had breakfast earlier, while I was waiting for you to wake up.” He handed her the coffee, noticed that her hand shook as she accepted it. She was not nearly as composed as she wanted him to believe.

She met his gaze. “Then I guess there’s nothing left but to deal with all those questions racing around in your head.”

“Just one question for starters,” he corrected. “What happened?”

“If only the answer were as simple as the question,” she said. She took a sip of coffee, then another, clearly not anxious to get into it. She set the mug on the table; then, as if desperate for something to do with her hands, she picked it up again.

“There are lots of starting places,” he told her. “The beginning. The end. Anyplace in between.”

Still she hesitated. The color in her cheeks faded and her eyes took on a faraway look, as if she’d retreated to a place where her world had come crashing down.

“I found him in my grandfather’s library, in a chair in front of the TV. The news was on. The anchor was talking about some fireman who’d rescued a cat from a roof.” She met Tucker’s gaze, looking lost. “Funny how I can remember something like that, but I can’t remember what it felt like to love my husband.”

She sounded so pitiful, looked so fragile, that once again Tucker fought the temptation to reach for her, to offer any sort of comfort. Years of training as a cop told him to sit perfectly still, to wait her out until the whole story had come spilling out. Years of loving her made that almost impossible. His fingers tightened around his own mug of coffee and he waited.

“I thought he was asleep at first, but he was a light sleeper. Usually the slightest sound brought him wide awake. When I spoke to him and he didn’t answer, I knew something was wrong. I knew... Her voice shook, then steadied. “Somehow I just knew that he was dead.”

“Did you call for a doctor? An ambulance?”

She shook her head. “I started to. I really did. I walked closer to get the portable phone beside him. That’s when I saw it.”

“Saw what?”

“The bullet hole.” She shuddered. “In his chest. And the blood. There was so much of it. The bullet must have hit an artery or something. I touched him. His eyes were wide open and he was cold. Her gaze sought Tucker’s. “That means he’d been dead a long time, right?”

“Probably,” Tucker agreed. “Was it a suicide?”

She shook her head. “Definitely not his style.”

“That’s not an explanation that’s going to wash with the police. Any man’s style can change if he’s feeling desperate enough.”

“Okay, then, there was no gun.” She regarded Tucker with a helpless look. “That means he had to have been murdered, right? There’s no other explanation.”

“You’re sure about the gun? Think, Mary Elizabeth. Could it have fallen on the floor, slid under the chair?”

Fresh tears welled up in her eyes at his harsh tone. “I looked,” she whispered. “I looked everywhere, and then I realized that someone had shot him and that I was going to be the first person everyone thought of. I panicked. All I could think about was coming here and telling you, letting you figure out what happened.”

“Why would anyone think you’d done it?” he asked, even though he knew that the spouse was the most likely suspect in a case like this, at least until things had sorted themselves out and more clues had been uncovered.

“Because I was leaving him for good.”

Tucker was as shocked by that as he had been by her announcement that Chandler was dead. “You were?”

She nodded. “It was a well-kept secret that we were having problems. I’d moved out of the Richmond house months ago.”

“You didn’t come back here,” he said. He would have known, would have heard if she’d been back at Swan Ridge alone. If nothing else, King would have warned him away from her.

“No, I traveled with a friend. Larry told everyone I was taking an extended vacation, that he’d planned to go along but that pressing matters in Richmond had kept him here.”

“Any of that reported in the media, any speculation that you two were splitting?”

“No. His press secretary was very careful. He knew Larry would fire him if so much as a hint leaked out.”

“Okay, then, if everything was so hushed up, what makes you think people would suspect you of killing him?”

“I got back to town two days ago. I’d made up my mind to end things. We went to dinner in Richmond, and I told him it was over. We had a really nasty, very public brawl. I had thought it would be better if I told him in public, that he wouldn’t risk a scene because of the political ramifications, but I was wrong. He went crazy. He started accusing me of cheating on him.”

“Were you?”

“Of course not,” she retorted. “I couldn’t believe the lies that came pouring out of his mouth. He didn’t believe a word he was saying. He was just trying to give me a taste of what it would be like if I went through with a divorce. He wanted me to see that my name would end up being dragged through the mud.” She shuddered. “People were staring, starting to whisper. It was obvious that he was already off to a good start at ruining me to save his own political career.”

“So there were a lot of witnesses to this scene?” Tucker said. “Anyone you knew?”

“I don’t know. I was too humiliated to look around. It was a restaurant that’s popular with the movers and shakers in Richmond, so I imagine it’s a safe bet that there were people there we knew. Why?”

His mind was already whirling in a dozen different directions. That scene couldn’t have done a better job of setting Mary Elizabeth up to take a fall. “Because if one of them had a grudge against your husband and wanted him out of the picture, you had just handed him the perfect opportunity to arrange it and throw greater-than-usual suspicion on you.”

She looked shaken by his assessment. “Greater than usual?” she repeated in a whisper.

“You knew you’d be under suspicion,” he said. “You said that was why you’d come to me.”

“I know. Hearing you say it, though...” Her voice trailed off. “I’m scared, Tucker.”

Again, he fought the temptation to offer comfort. She needed real help more than she needed empty reassurances. “Let’s get all the facts on the table, okay? How did Chandler end up at Swan Ridge? Did he come back here with you after dinner that night?”

“No. I told him I was coming here and that he should stay in Richmond, that I didn’t want him anywhere near me.”

“He agreed?”

“He said he’d stay in Richmond and come down here later to pick up a few things. I made it a point to be out of the house all day yesterday to avoid another confrontation.”

“Where? Were you with anyone?”

She shook her head. “I took the boat out.”

“And stayed on the water till eleven?” he asked skeptically.

“No, till dusk.”

“Where do you keep the boat?”

“At the marina at Colonial Beach. I didn’t think we should keep it here because of...well, you know.”

“Because my brother owns the marina,” Tucker said, realizing anew in just how many small ways they had managed to keep their lives from intersecting. “What did you do next?”

“I stopped over there and had dinner.”

“Did you see anyone you knew?”

“No. The restaurant was almost empty.”

“Would the waitress remember you?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. We talked about her daughter and the trouble she’s having in school and about standardized testing. I know a lot about it, because it’s one of Larry’s campaign issues.”

“Did you mention Larry? Did she realize he was your husband?”

“No. At least, I don’t think so. His name never came up.”

“What time did you leave there?”

“Around ten-thirty, maybe a little later.”

“Then what?”

“I drove home. When I got to Swan Ridge, his car was in the driveway, so I knew he was inside. I almost turned around and left, but I didn’t want to act like a coward, not in my own home.”

“So you went in, and that’s when you found him?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have help working at the house?”

“Just Mrs. Gilman, but she only works when I call her. I hadn’t let her know that I was back in town.”

“Is that unusual? Wouldn’t you normally call her to get the place ready for your return? Maybe go in and dust, stock the refrigerator, whatever?”

Her face paled. “Yes, but I...I didn’t this time.”

Tucker could see exactly how suspicious that would look to a jury. “Why?”

“I was too upset after I saw Larry that night. I came straight down here without calling. I just wanted to get away from him, to be alone.” Her gaze clashed with his. “It looks bad, doesn’t it? Like I didn’t want anyone around so I could kill him?”

“That’s one interpretation,” he agreed. “But your explanation is just as logical. The man had just given you a taste of how vengeful he could be. It’s little wonder you wanted to get away from him as fast as possible.”

“Will people believe that?”

He met her gaze. “I do.”

“Thank you. It’s more than I deserve.”

“Look, let’s get one thing straight,” he said bluntly. “I might hate what you did to me, but I don’t think you’re capable of murder.”

Relief spread across her face, only to fade in an instant. “Tucker, what should I do?”

~~Because he knew exactly how fast things would spin out of control once word of Chandler’s death started to spread, he said, “You need to hire a criminal attorney, someone from Richmond, I think. Do you know any good lawyers down there?”~~

“The city is crawling with them, though most of the ones I know don’t like to get their hands dirty with anything as messy as murder.”

Tucker nodded. “Then we should call Powell Knight. If he won’t take the case, he’ll recommend someone who will.”

“Powell Knight who bloodied your nose over me in the fifth grade?” she asked incredulously. “He’s a lawyer?”

Tucker chuckled. “He stopped the assaults before law school. He’s been walking the straight and narrow for years now. And he owes me. My nose is still crooked.”

Liz smiled for the first time since she’d begun talking. “It is not. It just has a little character.” She lifted her hand as if to touch it, then drew back with a sigh.

“Why does life have to be so damn complicated?” she asked wistfully.

“Keeps it interesting,” Tucker said. He might have said more, but common sense and practicalities kicked in. “Do you have a cell phone with you? Why don’t you make that call to Powell. I’ll see if I can’t rustle up some clothes for you to wear, then I’ll call the station and have a deputy meet us at Swan Ridge.”

“Do you have a stash of women’s clothes around here?” she asked, regarding him with curiosity.

“No. I’ll call my sister.”

“No,” Liz said at once, looking panic-stricken. “Tucker, you can’t call Daisy. She already hates my guts for what I did to you. She’ll be furious that I dragged you into the middle of this mess.”

“I would have been dragged into it one way or another,” he said, shrugging off her fears. “It happened in my jurisdiction. If you don’t want me to call Daisy, do you have any better ideas?”

She hesitated, her shoulders slumping. It was tantamount to an admission that she’d maintained few real friendships in Trinity Harbor. He almost felt sorry for her, but he steeled himself against the reaction. She’d made her choices. Her grandfather had been an important man in Trinity Harbor. She would have basked in the same respect shown him if she hadn’t hurt a Spencer.

“I’ll call Daisy, then. You don’t even have to see her. And she doesn’t need to know what’s going on, or even who the clothes are for.”

“You shouldn’t have to lie to your own sister on my account.”

“It’s an omission, not a lie.”

“I doubt she’ll see the distinction once she hears the whole story.”

“Let me worry about Daisy. You call Powell.”

As soon as she’d gone looking for her cell phone, he called the station and asked for Walker. His brother-in-law had been a homicide detective in Washington before he’d hooked up with Daisy and moved to Trinity Harbor. He was the best deputy Tucker had, and the only one he wanted on the scene this morning.

“I need you to get over to Swan Ridge,” he told Walker. “We’ve got a problem.”

“What kind of problem? That’s Larry Chandler’s place, isn’t it?”

“There’s a report that he’s dead. I’ve got his wife here with me. Keep this under your hat until you see what’s going on over there. I’ll be there right behind you.”

“Didn’t I hear that you once had a relationship with Liz Chandler?” Walker asked. “Are you sure you ought to be anywhere near the scene?”

“Dammit, Walker, I know better than to take on the case myself. That’s why I called you, but I’m not keeping my nose out of it. I want to know everything you find the minute you come up with it.”

And I want you to do it all by the book, no matter how bad it looks for Mary Elizabeth.”

“Do you think she did it?”

“What I think doesn’t matter. The only thing that matters is the truth.”

“Noble words,” Walker said. “But what’s your gut telling you?”

“It’s your gut that matters. Do your job.”

“I’m on my way.”

“And try to keep the media from finding out anything, at least until we have a fix on what went on over there.”

“Done,” Walker promised.

Tucker placed his next call to his sister. “I need some clothes over here—a pair of your jeans, a T-shirt, some underwear, some shoes. And I need it without a lot of questions.”

“But—”

“No questions, Daisy. Please, just this once, help me out without giving me the third degree.”

“Third degrees are your business,” she said with an indignant huff. “Okay, I’ll bring everything over there. Want me to leave it in a plain brown bag on the front porch and slink away?”

“Actually that’s not a bad idea.”

“Fat chance.”

“Daisy,” he warned.

“Okay, okay, I’ve got it. Bring the clothes, leave the questions back home.”

“Thank you.”

“But you’ll owe me,” she told him.

“I usually do.”

As soon as he got off the phone, he retrieved a clean garbage bag and went looking in his trash for Mary Elizabeth’s bloodied clothes. She hadn’t exactly tried to conceal them. They were right on top, in plain view. He took that as a good sign. Less positive was the fact that there was a lot of blood more than a person would get checking a man’s pulse. Was there as much as if she’d shot her husband at close range, maybe even struggled with him as he bled? Tucker didn’t even want to speculate on that. He’d leave it to the experts.

He turned and saw Mary Elizabeth regarding him uneasily. Her gaze shifted to the trash bag, then back to his face.

“Tucker?”

He met her gaze. “What?”

“Are you going to arrest me?”

“I won’t even be involved in the decision,” he told her.

Something that looked like panic flickered in her eyes. “Why not?”

“Because by coming here, and because we have a past history, you’ve made sure I have to take myself off the case.”

“But—”

He cut her off. “That’s the way it has to be, Mary Elizabeth. You know that. I’ve got my best deputy heading over to Swan Ridge right now.”

“Oh, God,” she whispered. “What have I done?”

Tucker’s blood ran cold. “Why do you say that?”

“I wanted you to handle this.”

The icy fist kept a firm grip on his insides. “Because you thought I’d protect you?”

“No. Because I trust you.”

Tucker wanted desperately to believe that’s all it was, that she hadn’t come here hoping to use their past to keep him from delving too deeply into the circumstances surrounding Chandler’s death.

“I hope you’re telling me the truth.”

~~There was genuine hurt in her eyes when she met his gaze. “I’ve never lied to you. *Never.*”~~

“I think maybe that’s open to interpretation,” he said quietly. “But what’s done is done. All I care about is whether you’re being honest now.”

“I am. I swear it.”

He nodded. “Then we’ll deal with the rest as it comes.”

“Together?”

He thought of the sensible reply and the one that came from his heart. “Together,” he agreed.

All he could do was pray that he wouldn’t live to regret it.

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