

## ***The Buck Stops Here***

by

Mindy Starns Clark

### ONE

Someone was following me. Again.

I spotted the vehicle about three car lengths behind me, a familiar silver Buick that had appeared and disappeared in my rearview mirror a number of times in the last few days. The surveillance was being conducted by more than one person, and though they tried to hide the fact they were trailing me by alternating different vehicles from day to day, there was something uniform about the way they came and went, the way they hovered back in traffic, took the same turns, got off at the same exits. They were at it again. Whoever they were, I was growing tired of them.

They had latched on early today, less than three miles after I started out from my home on Maryland's Eastern Shore. By the time I reached the top of my rural peninsula and the town of Osprey Cove, I could see the car a few lengths behind. Despite its presence, I knew I had carried this burden by myself long enough. My nerves were shot. I was caught in an incredibly confusing and disturbing situation, and it was time to talk with someone about it.

I had been thinking for several days about what to do, about whom I could bring into my confidence and simply use as a sounding board. The one person who kept springing to mind was my pastor. This wasn't exactly a situation that I could discuss with just anyone, but because Pastor George was bound by confidentiality rules of the clergy-parishioner relationship, he would have to keep everything I told him to himself. He was also a wise and godly man.

Despite my near-constant tail, I decided to head there now. I didn't have an appointment with him, nor did I use my telephone to call ahead; for all I knew, my phones were tapped as well. Better to catch everyone off guard and go for what looked like a casual visit to my church.

On the way I stopped at the grocery store and bought some staples: salt, sugar, and sweetener. I hoped these would provide a visual explanation for why I was going into church at ten o'clock on a Monday

morning. Not that I cared for my own sake, but if I had misread the situation, I certainly didn't want to put my pastor in any danger. At the checkout I asked for a box instead of bags, and as I walked to my car, I made sure that the items I was carrying were sticking out of the shallow box and plainly visible.

Up the street, the church parking lot was nearly empty, but I pulled in beside the cars that were there and unloaded the box of staples. The front door was locked, so I made my way around the side of the building, casually glancing around as I did so. I didn't see my tail at the moment, but that didn't mean it wasn't there.

My church was a lovely old building at the end of a lane and looked like something out of a storybook with its tall, white steeple. The best thing about the facility, to me at least, was that it was located directly on a bluff overlooking the water. Last year we had put in a "prayer garden" on the most scenic spot, and I sometimes came and strolled there, reading the Bible verses that were inscribed in stone, taking in the view, and praying. On this beautiful May morning, the garden looked quiet and peaceful—despite the turmoil that reigned in my heart.

The side door was open, so I went inside and made my way to the office, showing the groceries to the secretary there.

"I noticed we were running low on sugar," I said. "I was just at the store, so I thought I might stock us up a little."

"Oh, how nice," she said, standing up and following me to the kitchen. "That's great, Callie." She was in my Ladies' Circle group, and I let her chatter on about an upcoming event as I walked to the kitchen and unloaded the supplies into industrial-sized cabinets.

"Is Pastor George in?" I asked when she paused for air.

"He's in his study," she replied. "Do you need to see him?"

I finished my task and tossed the box into the big trash bin. "

"If he's free," I replied, trying to sound nonchalant. Fortunately, the phone was ringing when she and I got back to the office, so while she answered it, I took the liberty of walking up the short hallway to the pastor's office myself. He was at his desk, deeply engrossed in the newspaper.

"Hi, George. How's it going?" I said, waving from the doorway.

"Callie Webber!" he said, glancing up at me. "What's a seven-letter word for 'vanquish'?"

"Um...conquer?"

He counted off the letters and smiled.

"That's it. Thanks. Can't start my week without the Monday morning crossword."

Without being asked, I stepped into his office and shut the door. And though I kept the same casual smile on my face, my words were quite serious.

"I need to talk to you, George," I said. "It's a matter of great urgency. Can you give me a few minutes?"

"I—of course," he said, standing. He was quite tall, with brown eyes behind old-fashioned, rectangular glasses. He gestured toward the chair opposite his desk. "You know you can come here anytime, Callie."

The blinds were open over a broad window next to his desk. Fortunately, the angle of the morning sun allowed us to see out but not those on the outside to see in. I sat, repositioning my chair slightly for the maximum-possible view of the road.

"I just need someone to talk to."

"Lots of folks come to me for a little counseling," he said as he sat back down and put away the crossword. "There's no need to be embarrassed."

I focused my gaze away from the window and onto his kind face. Though he and I had never spent much time one-on-one, I had seen his impressive background on his resumé when the church called him two years before, and I knew he was a devout man of God, both from his actions day to day and from the wise words he spoke from the pulpit every Sunday.

"I'm not embarrassed, George," I said. "I just have a complicated problem and need some advice. I also need this entire conversation to be totally confidential—without question, without compromise. No offense."

He did not seem offended.

"I never divulge a confidence," he told me earnestly, "though I assume you know that under certain situations I'm not only free but actually obligated—"

"I'm not planning on harming myself or anyone else, if that's what you mean."

"Very well, then. How can I help you today?"

I scooted back a bit farther in my chair. How could he help me? After all I had done to get here, I found myself faltering. Where should I even start?

"Maybe we should narrow things down a bit first," he said gently, sensing my hesitation. "Let's begin with a word of prayer." We bowed our heads and he said a brief prayer, asking for God's wisdom and peace in this moment. "Now," he said, leaning back slightly in his chair, "tell me what's on your mind."

I placed my hands on my knees and tried to gather my thoughts.

"It's a long story," I began finally, forcing myself to focus. "I'll try to make it quick. As you probably know, four years ago my husband, Bryan, was killed in a boating accident."

"Yes, I had heard that. I'm sorry."

"We were water-skiing on the Appomattox River in Virginia, and Bryan was hit by a drunken speedboat driver named James Sparks. Sparks was caught and charged with manslaughter. He pled guilty and was sentenced to sixteen years in prison—a stiff sentence, but apparently the man had a prior history of driving under the influence."

George nodded thoughtfully.

"Bryan and I were..." I faltered, wondering how to make my point. "We had a solid marriage, George. A great marriage. When he died, I very

nearly thought I would die too." I didn't add that in the early days, I really didn't want to survive without him. But I did, of course. I had no choice but to go on with my life. "About a year after Bryan died," I continued, "I was offered an unusual job with a company I had never heard of—a nonprofit organization, actually, called the J.O.S.H.U.A. Foundation. I wasn't really looking for work—and I wouldn't even have entertained the offer except that it came to me through one of my dearest friends, a man I consider my mentor, a private investigator named Eli Gold."

"I'm familiar with your work, Callie. I've always been very impressed with you and the foundation."

"Thank you, George. Anyway, I have known Eli all of my life and I trust him implicitly. When he told me about this job offer, I let him persuade me to take it, even though I had never heard of the foundation, I couldn't find any information about it, and the man who was at the helm was a complete mystery to me."

"You accepted a position acting on the advice of a wise and trusted friend," he said. "Nothing wrong with that."

"Yes," I replied. "Exactly. Except now I'm starting to wonder if Eli really is a trusted friend. I'm starting to question everything I know about him and myself—and about the man who founded the J.O.S.H.U.A. Foundation. Right now, it seems as though I can't trust anyone."

The room was so silent I could hear the second hand on his watch.

"That's a scary feeling," he said finally, "to think that you can't trust."

A sound escaped my lips that started as a laugh but came out sounding more like a bark.

"I'm not paranoid, if that's what you're implying. Things have happened, George. Concrete, tangible things."

"I'm listening."

In my agitation, I wanted to stand and pace, but I didn't. Instead, I focused my attention on a soothing sculpture on the corner of his desk. It was an abstract piece, a deeply sanded and polished hunk of

wood in a free-form shape. I reached out to touch it, running my fingers along its smooth edge.

"As you probably know, I'm a very curious person by nature. And the longer I worked for the foundation, the more intrigued I became about its founder. We never met in person, at least not at first. In the beginning, I didn't even know his full name—he just told me to call him 'Tom.' He explained he was a very private person, and if I wanted to work for him, I would have to respect that privacy. Which I did."

"Did you have much contact?"

"Well, we spoke on the phone and e-mailed one another frequently, but otherwise he was very hands off. He has a primary business out in California, where he lives. The foundation in D.C. is a side thing for him."

"Tell me again your official title at the foundation?"

"I'm the director of research," I said, "and my job has been the perfect mix of my two professions. Basically, I investigate nonprofit organizations that have applied to our foundation for grants. Using my investigative skills and my legal background, I verify their integrity and suitability for grants."

"Must be fascinating and rewarding work."

"It is," I said, looking out at the sunny May morning. "It's everything I ever wanted in a career. Especially when a case is closed satisfactorily and I get to present the recipients with a big grant. That's the best part."

I closed my eyes, wishing this were easier. The closer I came to spelling out what had happened, the more real it all felt.

"Last fall," I continued finally, "I realized to my great astonishment that I was starting to have some feelings for Tom. We still hadn't met in person, but our phone relationship had become very important to me. From the things he said over the phone, the interest seemed mutual." I swallowed hard. "When we finally met and then spent a bit of time together, I knew without a doubt that I was falling in love with him. The same thing was happening for him as well. With Tom, I really thought I could begin a new chapter in my life. I thought we had a future together."

"Why do you sense a fly in the ointment?"

"Bigger than a fly," I replied. "More like a Cessna. A jet plane. The Concorde, even."

Outside, I noticed the silver Buick moving slowly down the street.

"The thing is," I said, feeling a sudden sense of urgency, "even though we had acknowledged our feelings and our relationship, Tom still wanted a lot of things about his life to remain private. It was as though he had secrets from me. He also alluded frequently to feelings of regret and the need for forgiveness, but I never understood what he was talking about. A few weeks ago, I decided I had had enough of all his secrecy. I did a little investigating, and I learned, much to my surprise, that Tom is a code breaker for the National Security Agency. To complicate matters, I also learned that my mentor, Eli, had been an NSA agent as well, years ago when he was younger."

"Wow."

"Then ten days ago, I overheard a conversation between Tom and Eli at the hospital. My world fell apart at that moment."

"The hospital?"

"Eli was...having some medical problems." I didn't elaborate, thinking there was no need to cloud the issue with the fact that Eli had landed in the hospital after having been shot by a sniper. Tom and I had investigated Eli's shooting and solved that mystery. "Tom and Eli were talking in Eli's hospital room. I came in and overheard them, but they didn't realize I was there because of a privacy curtain in the way."

"And what did you overhear?" George asked, leaning forward.

I closed my eyes, remembering the conversation as if it had happened ten minutes ago, not ten days.

"I want to marry her, Eli!" Tom exclaimed.

"So ask her and be done with it," Eli replied. "It's that simple."

"It's not that simple. She has to know. I have to tell her."

"You said it yourself, you can't. The NSA has tied your hands."

"But if I don't tell her, Eli, the secret will always be there between us. Even now, every time she looks at me with those trusting eyes, it just tears me apart. James may be the one behind bars, but all of our lives irrevocably were changed that day. Callie has the right to know the truth."

Piece by piece, I tried to relay that overheard conversation to my pastor. When I was finished, George squinted his eyes.

"What did Tom want to tell you?"

"I don't know. There's some secret, a big secret, that stands between us. Something that has to do with the NSA and—I'm very afraid—with my late husband."

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