

"Bond just keeps getting better."
Susan Andersen

STEPHANIE BOND

Award-winning author of *Party Crashers*

Whole Lotta Trouble



***Whole Lotta
Trouble***

**STEPHANIE
BOND**



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Chapter 1

Dear Mr. Blankenship,

My name is Richard Wannamaker. After retiring from the IRS, I decided to write a story about my roller-coaster life as a cost accountant. Enclosed please find my 500-page autobiography, a volume I have fondly entitled Journal Entry—get it?

Tallie winced. She got it, and about twenty others like it on her desk every week. Reams of paper containing stories utterly inappropriate for the mystery and romance fiction lines for which she acquired. It wasn't that she didn't admire the man for creating the tome, but if he'd researched Parkbench Publishing at all, he would have known they weren't looking for autobiographies. And that she wasn't a Mr., but a Miss. *Miss*—as in unmarried and unlikely to be in the near future. If only Richard Wannamaker had been on her mother's Christmas card mailing list, he'd have been privy to that tidbit, courtesy of her mother's annual *Blankenship Bulletin*, complete with pictures, favorite family recipes, and news. This year's headline:

YES, OUR BEAUTIFUL, SUCCESSFUL DAUGHTER IS STILL SINGLE!

It was almost February and she was still recovering from that one.

Tallie sighed and forced her attention back to the cover letter in her hand.

My brother-in-law is a tax attorney and will be handling the contract negotiation—

A rap sounded at her office door and Tallie glanced up to see her assistant, Norah, stick her fair head inside. "Is this a bad time?"

"No—please save me."

Norah gestured to the mound of curled manuscripts on Tallie's desk. "Wading through the slush I flagged?"

Tallie nodded and rubbed her eyes. “And a few you didn’t. Ron tripped over one of my floor stacks the other day, so I thought I’d better do some housecleaning. What’s up?”

Norah looked apologetic. “Ron wants you in his office. He seems...agitated.”

Tallie’s stomach convulsed. Executive Editor Ron Springer was always a handful for the editorial staff to deal with, but lately he’d been wound as tightly as his name implied, snapping at the least provocation. Tallie had secretly wondered if the health of the company was in jeopardy, or if Ron himself was experiencing personal problems, but she wasn’t about to put her middle-of-the-road job on the line by asking. She had rent to pay, and a three-meals-a-day habit to support.

“Tell him I’ll be right there.”

Norah disappeared and Tallie pulled a mirror from her desk drawer, quickly checked her lipstick and her teeth, then smoothed a couple of dark strands back into her chin-length bob. Her hand stopped suddenly, and she yanked the mirror closer in disbelief.

Her first gray hair. She almost choked on the irony. While she was home during the holidays, her mother had accused her of letting her childbearing years slide by, and right on cue, here was an outward sign that her innards were aging. She knew that at thirty-four, she had no reason to complain, but it was still a blow...and it would remain her best-kept secret lest she give her mother another headline for the holiday newsletter.

OUR SPINSTER DAUGHTER IS GOING GRAY!

She replaced the mirror and slammed the desk drawer. Hoping that Ron wasn’t about to deliver news to add more silver to her head, Tallie grabbed a pad of paper and a pen, then walked in the direction of her boss’s office.

The bullpen was its usual beehive of activity, keyboards clicking and printers whirring, voices raised to be heard over cubicle walls. Although grateful for her ten-foot-by-ten-foot office with an actual door, she missed the camaraderie that she’d shared with her coworkers when they’d all been interns and assistants, still in awe of the publishing process and of the movers and shakers in the industry. All of the women she’d started with nine years ago had moved on to positions at other publishing houses or had left the industry altogether. She, on the other hand, had found a home at Parkbench and had managed to grow a stable of prolific and modestly successful writers. No *New York Times* best sellers yet, but she had high hopes for two books coming out in the spring.

The department walls were lined with framed covers of some of the company’s best-selling authors—Dewey Diamond, Grace Sharp, Linda Addison. It still gave

Tallie a thrill to see the faces and signatures of writers she'd grown up reading.

Parkbench had made its mark in the 1950s with film noir spin-offs, then they'd developed successful mystery series in the 1960s and '70s. In the '80s, the company had cashed in on the romance genre boom and continued to grow their line of thrillers. In the last twenty-plus years, Parkbench had become known as a boutique publisher, one of the few privately owned houses left after the merging madness of the '90s. They were small, but mighty, with a reputation for being author-friendly. Some of their writers had been around for longer than Tallie had been alive.

Kara Hatteras, aka Scary Kara—editor in the health and nutrition books section and Tallie's nemesis—came out of her office and arranged her Botox-puffy face into a smug expression. "Hello, Tallie."

Tallie was forced to stop, since the Nordic giant towered over her and was standing with her legs wide enough for a child to walk through. "Hi, Kara."

"Have you heard that my book *The Soup to Nuts Diet* is going to be featured on CNN?"

Tallie bit the inside of her cheek; Kara never gave credit to her authors and bragged endlessly about "her" accomplishments. "Um, no, I hadn't heard. That will be great coverage for the company."

Kara lifted her finger and wagged it precisely. "No. That will be great coverage for *me*." She dipped her chin. "I heard through the grapevine that our department is going to be reorganized. This little media coup might be just the thing for Ron to finally make me an associate senior editor."

Ahead of Tallie, she might as well have said. Tallie managed a tight smile at the woman whose surgically enhanced lifestyle was the antithesis of the books she edited. "Good for you, Kara."

Kara made a rueful noise. "Don't worry, Tallie—even though you haven't hit any home runs, I'm sure Ron appreciates the little things you do around here."

Tallie gritted her teeth. But Kara's condescension aside, Tallie hadn't heard any rumors about a reorganization—because she was going to be reorganized out onto the street? Was that why Ron had been acting so edgy lately, because he was going to have to fire someone?

Her?

"Oh, Tallie," Kara said, leaning down. "Is that a gray hair?"

Tallie froze. "No."

"I think it is."

“No, it isn’t. I have to be going. Ron wants to see me.” She hadn’t meant to say that.

Kara looked sympathetic. “Good luck.”

Tallie pushed past her and, with heart tripping overtime, headed toward the hallway where Ron’s corner office was located. His assistant Lil was coming out of his door, and she gave Tallie a warning look when they passed.

Tallie’s stomach churned as she walked into his office.

Ron glanced up from his desk, where he was frantically scribbling in the margins of a memo, and frowned. “Close the door, Tallie.”

She did, truly worried now. Ron’s handsome face was flushed, and his normally perfectly knotted tie was pulled to one side.

“Sit,” he ordered.

She sat in one of two sleek Eames chairs that faced his desk. Ron collected chairs—he claimed they would be worth more than his stock portfolio when he retired. She herself would be sitting pretty if “some assembly required” furniture became collectible.

While Ron finished his note-making, she glanced around his office, never failing to be impressed by his accumulation of industry awards and the achievement of his stable of world-class authors—Britt Manning, Gaylord Cooper, Stella Roundtree. According to her sources, Ron could have left Parkbench and taken a more prestigious position at least a half dozen times, but his dedication to his authors was legendary.

Tallie adored him, and she’d wasted her first two years at Parkbench lusting after him from afar until one of her bullpen buddies, Felicia Redmon, had informed her that Ron Springer was gay.

“He is not,” Tallie had said, devastated. “He’s in the Army Reserves, for heaven’s sake.”

Felicia had scoffed. “Haven’t you heard of ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’? Oh, let me guess—there are no gay men in Circleville, Ohio?”

Tallie, sensitive about her rural upbringing, had lifted her chin. “The man who owned the two car washes in town was gay...allegedly.”

“Well,” Felicia had said gently, “let’s just say that if Ron ever visited Circleville, he’d get his car washed.”

“But Ron doesn’t have a car,” Tallie had said.

She cringed now when she remembered the conversation—her naiveté had been the butt of more than one joke among her friends.

But that was years ago—before the accent reduction class and before getting mugged—twice. Now she spoke with shortened *i* s and carried a personal alarm that sounded at twenty decibels above the threshold of pain. And she could generally tell if a man was gay.

When she had heard Ron declare that *Beaches* was the best movie ever made, she had conceded that he was, indeed, gay. The problem was, before Felicia had informed her of his sexual orientation, Tallie had confided her crush on Ron to, of all people, her mother, who had gotten it into her head that Tallie and her “handsome boss” would someday wind up together. Tallie had elected not to divulge to her mother the extent of the impossibility of her and Ron’s “winding up together,” because it would have simply generated more drama. Besides, what was the harm in giving her mother a little hope that she would someday find a nice guy, fall in love, get married, have twins, quit her job, and move back to Circleville to live in a house on the same street as her parents.

But if Ron canned her, she’d have to come clean with her mother, which might prompt a special mid-year edition of the *Blankenship Bulletin*.

Ron sighed noisily, then looked up and seemed startled to see her sitting there. His gaze was unfocused, his expression slack. Panic blipped momentarily in Tallie’s chest.

“You wanted to see me, Ron?” she prompted.

“Oh...right.” He ran his hand through his immaculate blond hair, leaving it standing at all angles. He tossed down his pen. “Um...Tallie, how long have you been working here?”

Oh, God, here it comes. “Nine years.”

“Nine years,” he repeated, looking thoughtful. “In that time, I think we’ve become friends, haven’t we?”

She knew next to nothing about his personal life, but she nodded congenially.

“Good, because I have a favor to ask.”

Her chin bobbed nervously. “Anything.”

He sighed, then leaned back in his chair. “Gaylord Cooper will be here Thursday to deliver his last book on his current contract.”

Tallie nodded. Gaylord was the darling of their publishing house—two hardcovers on the NYT best-seller list last year, both at number one. Ron had found the man’s work in the slush pile fifteen years ago, and the rest was publishing history. The one

drawback of working with Gaylord, though, was his...idiosyncrasies. The man mistrusted everyone, especially the government, and refused to use computers or telephones. He typed his intricate thrillers on an ancient Underwood typewriter and conducted all business face-to-face, including hand-delivering his finished manuscripts.

Ron shifted in his chair. "I'm going to be away from the office for a few weeks, beginning tomorrow. Since I won't be here, I was thinking I'd have you take over the editing of this manuscript."

Tallie felt her eyes go wide, but she schooled her face into a composed expression. "I-I'd be happy to, Ron, but—"

"But?"

"But how will Mr. Cooper feel about working with me?"

"I'll give his agent a call and let him smooth the way. Do you know Jerry Key?"

Her stomach crimped. "I know of him." And what she knew wasn't favorable.

Ron sighed. "Yeah, Jerry has a reputation, but you can handle him."

She tried to smile. "If you say so."

"And I won't lie to you—Gaylord himself is one crusty customer. But once he realizes how much you respect his work, he'll come around. Just don't change a word of his manuscript, and he'll be fine."

She started to laugh, but Ron's expression grew grave.

"Seriously, Tallie, I can't stress enough how important it is that Gaylord remain pacified. He'll be negotiating a new contract after this book, and I know those bastards over at Bloodworth will be trying to lure him away. I've assured Sandra that you'll be able to pull this off."

Sandra Pellum, publisher of Parkbench, emerged from her corner office on the floor above them only to reprimand, chew out, and fire. No pressure. Tallie wet her lips. "I understand, Ron. Do you have something going on with the Reserves?" Ron put in his time one weekend a month, but considering the state of the world, it was entirely possible that he was being called up.

"Um...not this time," he said shortly.

"Oh. When do you expect to return?"

A pinched look came over his face, and he cleared his throat. "I don't know, but I'll be checking in periodically to answer any questions you might have." He stood

abruptly, signaling the end to their conversation.

Tallie pushed to her feet, her head swirling with questions about Ron's sudden leave, but so honored by his trust in her that she wasn't going to pry.

"I'll make sure that Lil notifies you when Gaylord arrives," Ron said. "Depending on his frame of mind, he might want to have lunch. If so, take him to Spegalli's, because they receive consistent good marks on their health department inspections."

"Right. Anything else?"

He lifted his gaze, and something flashed through his dark eyes—alarm? "Watch your back, Tallie."

Her jaw loosened in confusion. She was on the verge of asking for specifics when his phone rang. He snatched up the receiver. "Ron Springer." She turned to vamoose, and as she was closing the door, Ron said in a lowered voice, "I told you to never call me here—don't you think I'm in enough trouble?"

Tallie bit her lip as she silently closed the door. It seemed reasonable to assume that the "trouble" her boss alluded to was the basis for his abrupt holiday. And for Ron to leave his responsibilities at Parkbench, even temporarily, the trouble had to be dire.

On the walk back to her office, she nursed mixed emotions—concern for her boss, elation over her high-profile assignment, and fear that she would do something to alienate the company's biggest cash cow, Gaylord Cooper. She tingled with anticipation, thinking this could be a turning point in her career.

Watch your back, Tallie.

She worked her mouth from side to side, chalking up Ron's odd comment to his uncharacteristic state of mind. Then she released a dry laugh. Or perhaps he was talking about what Scary Kara might do when she discovered Tallie had been singled out to work with Gaylord Cooper. A gloating smile curled on Tallie's mouth, and she made a mental note to call her best friend Felicia to tell her the good news.

But meanwhile...back to the slush pile reading. Her phone rang and she smiled—a reprieve. "Tallie Blankenship."

"Hello, Tallie," said a deep, male voice—a hesitant deep, male voice. "My name is Keith Wages. We've never met, but our mothers are acquainted."

Tallie squinted—*Wages*. "Sheila Wages in Ann Arbor?" She had met her mother's childhood friend once, years ago. She vaguely remembered a son in the pictures the woman sent at Christmastime, but she couldn't place his face.

"Right." He gave a little laugh. "This is awkward, but I live in the city and when my mother found out that you live here, too, she suggested that I give you a call. You

know...have lunch or something.”

Red flags went up in her mind. WARNING: GEEKY SON OF MOTHER’S FRIEND DETECTED. PROCEED AT YOUR OWN RISK.

“That sounds nice,” she said carefully. “But I’m really swamped for the next couple of weeks.”

“Maybe we could grab a cup of coffee?” he suggested. “Something quick?”

Her mind raced, but she couldn’t think of a polite put-off. And if she didn’t meet the guy, her mother would eventually hear about it and pester her to death. “Okay,” she said, checking her calendar. “How about Wednesday at twelve-thirty?” She’d learned a long time ago that having to get back to work was the best way to escape an encounter-gone-wrong.

“Sounds good—where?”

Someplace not too close to her office and not a regular hangout, in case he turned out to be a psycho. “Are you familiar with Suspicious Grounds coffeehouse on Lexington Avenue?”

“Yeah, sure. I’ll see you there.”

“Um, wait a minute,” she said, her pulse suddenly picking up for no good reason other than the fact that he had a nice voice. “How will I know you?”

“I’ll be wearing a Michigan State ball cap.”

Oh, great—a sports nut, and obviously badly employed if he could wear a ball cap in the middle of the day. “Okay. See you then...Keith.”

He hung up and she replaced the receiver, already dreading the meeting. The weirdo quota in her circle of acquaintances was full. With a sigh she picked up Mr. Wannamaker’s cover letter for a quick skim to the end.

Many people don’t realize how interesting the life of an IRS accountant can be. There was the time I had a hit put on me for nailing a congressman for tax evasion. And the time I killed a man, and got away with it.

Tallie’s eyebrows shot up. She was accustomed to receiving outlandish letters from inmates trying to sell their life story, but this was a new one.

Suddenly, Mr. Richard Wannamaker’s submission was a lot more interesting.

Chapter 2

Felicia Redmon dropped into her desk chair and sorted through her phone messages. Suze Dannon. Phil Dannon. Suze again, then Phil again. She sighed—the Dannons were determined to drive her and each other completely mad. Her best-selling husband and wife writing team had separated under nasty circumstances but had agreed to finish one last book together. Unfortunately, Felicia had soon found herself in the middle of not only their editorial squabbles but also their personal disagreements. Playing referee was wearing her nerves thin, but sometimes an editor had to go beyond the call of duty to make sure the book got in on time. Still, she was afraid that if the Dannons didn't find a way soon to put aside their differences, the hostile couple, known for their sensual murder mysteries, was going to wind up killing each other.

There was a message from her doctor's office—an appointment reminder, no doubt—and one from Tallie, who probably wanted to firm plans for getting together at their regular hangout. And Jerry Key had called. Her heart jerked a little, just like every time she heard the bastard's name.

She should have known better than to have gotten involved with a man with whom she would also have to do business, but literary agent Jerry Key had a way of making a woman forget little things...like consequences. He was probably calling on behalf of the Dannons, who were his clients. And whatever was wrong would definitely be her fault.

Might as well get it over with, she decided, and dialed Jerry's number—by memory, how pathetic.

“Jerry Key's office, this is Lori.”

Felicia cringed at Lori's nasally tone. “Hi, Lori. This is Felicia Redmon at Omega Publishing, returning Jerry's call.”

“Hold, please.”

Felicia cursed herself for her accelerated pulse. A year was long enough to get over someone, especially someone as smarmy as Jerry had turned out to be.

The phone clicked. “Felicia,” he said, his tongue rolling the last two vowels.

“How are you?”

She pursed her mouth. “What’s up, Jerry?”

“What, you don’t have time for small talk anymore?”

Remembering the impending auction of one of his clients’ books, which she’d be participating in, Felicia bit her tongue. “Sorry, it’s been a long day. How’ve you been?”

“Never better,” he said smoothly. “Except when we were together.”

She closed her eyes. “Jerry, don’t.”

“Funny, I believe that’s the first time you’ve ever said ‘don’t.’ ”

Her tongue tingled with raw words, but she reminded herself that she was to blame for the predicament she’d gotten herself into. The bottom line was that Jerry Key represented enough big-name authors—some of them tied to Omega Publishing—that she had to play nice, no matter how much it killed her.

“Jerry, I’m late for a meeting, so I really can’t chat. What did you need?”

He sighed dramatically. “Sweetheart, we have a problem. The Dannons are upset.”

“Both of them?”

“Suze in particular. She said that you’re siding with Phil on all the manuscript changes.”

“Phil is the plotter, Suze is the writer, it’s always been that way. Suze never had a problem with Phil’s changes before.”

“Suze said he’s changing things just for the sake of changing them, to make more work for her.”

“Have you spoken with Phil?” Felicia asked.

“Yes, and I believe his exact words were ‘You bet your ass I am.’ ”

She rolled her eyes. “Jerry, the last time I checked, you represented both Suze *and* Phil.”

“Yes, but editorial disputes are your responsibility, Felicia, and I rely on you to be fair.”

She frowned. “I *am* fair.”

“Then you need to be firm. Being assertive isn’t your strong suit.”

Anger bolted through her. “That’s not true.” She only had a problem being assertive with Jerry; he had a way of making her feel defensive and defenseless at the same time. “Don’t turn this around, Jerry—you know that the Dannons are both hypersensitive right now.”

“Which is why, Felicia, it would behoove both of us if the Dannons find a way to patch things up and forget about this divorce nonsense.”

“And you’re telling me this because?”

“Because I think you should find a way to make this project more enjoyable, to make them realize how good they are together.”

She summoned strength. “Jerry, I’m not a marriage counselor.”

“But you’re a woman.”

A small part of her was flattered he remembered, but she managed to inject a bite into her tone. “What does that mean?”

“It means that...you know, you’re all wrapped up in the fantasy of marital bliss. If I tried to talk to the Dannons about staying together, they’d know I was bullshitting them for the sake of money.”

“Isn’t that what I’d be doing?” she asked.

“No, you actually believe in all that happily-ever-after crap.”

Felicia set her jaw. It wasn’t enough that the man had broken her heart; he had to reduce her hopes for the future to the lyrics of a bad love song.

“What do you say, Felicia? Why don’t you try to get the Dannons face-to-face and make them see that they’re better together than apart? If anyone can convince them to work together, you can. After all, you almost convinced me to give up my freedom.”

It was Jerry’s idea of a compliment, and she conceded a shameful little thrill at his admission.

“I’ll see what I can do,” she said. “Oh, and Jerry—have you set a date for the Merriwether auction?”

“No, but you’ll be the first to know.”

“Good, because I finished reading the proposal and I believe that Omega is the best publisher to take the book to market.”

“We’ll see,” he said, his tone noncommittal.

Unease tickled the back of her neck, but she figured it was just another Jerry Key power play.

“Sweetheart, I got another call coming in,” Jerry said. “Let me know after you’ve set up a meeting with the Dannons and I’ll be there.”

She started to say she couldn’t promise miracles, but he had disconnected the call. Listening to the dial tone conjured up memories of when Jerry had phoned her to abruptly “cool things off.” She had been in bed, still warm from their morning tussle, and had been caught completely off guard. Her cheeks still burned with mortification when she thought of it.

She called Phil Dannon first. “Phil, this is Felicia. How’s it going?”

“If you mean the book, not so well, but that’s Suze’s fault.”

Determined to keep her tone calm, she asked, “How so?”

“She refuses to make the changes that I want—you know that’s the way we’ve always worked.”

“Have you talked to Suze about it?”

“Talked, shouted, and screamed, in that order. She’s impossible. She has a lot of nerve, giving me a hard time when she’s the one—”

“Phil,” Felicia cut in, not wanting to hear details about the breakup, “I know this is a tough time for you and Suze to think about work, but everyone has a lot riding on this book. I was thinking that you both should come in to the city, then we’ll all sit down and work through these issues. How does that sound?”

“Fine with me,” he said. “Of course, I’m not the one being unreasonable.”

She decided not to bring up Jerry’s comment about the ass-betting. “If I can get Suze to agree, would the day after tomorrow be okay with you?”

“Wednesday? Sure, just let me know.”

“Meanwhile, could you fax me a list of the changes you asked Suze to make?”

“Will do. I’m sorry about all this, Felicia. I know this makes your job harder.”

“It’s okay,” she said, experiencing a surge of affection for the man. Suze was the creative one, and Phil had always been the voice of reason. She suspected that Suze had initiated the breakup, although she couldn’t be sure. And even though infidelity hadn’t come up in the conversation when Phil had broken the news they were going to

divorce, she had speculated that Suze, a flamboyant and attractive forty-something, had had an affair. But she could be wrong. People had fooled her before.

“We’ll work through this,” she promised. “I’ll let you know about meeting on Wednesday.”

She hung up, feeling another headache coming on. They had escalated in frequency and duration over the past few months, all stress-related, she knew. Which was only more frustrating because she hated the idea that, to all the emotional pain that Jerry Key had caused her, she could add a psychosomatic condition as well. She opened her desk drawer and removed a bottle of Imitrex, popped one, and washed it down with Water Joe, hoping the caffeinated bottled water would speed the drug to the site of her pain. She couldn’t afford to go home with a migraine, not with all the work that had to be done this week.

She picked up the phone and dialed Suze Dannon’s cell phone number. Suze answered on the first ring.

“Hel-LO.”

Felicia blinked at the rather seductive tone of Suze’s voice, then recovered. “Hi, Suze, this is Felicia. Did I catch you at a bad time?”

“Oh. Hi, Felicia. No, I can talk. I assume you’re calling to plead Phil’s case.”

At the woman’s brittle tone, Felicia touched her temple. “No, Suze. I understand that you two are having some editorial differences, and I was hoping we could all sit down Wednesday and work through some things.”

“There’s nothing to work through,” Suze said. “Phil is being ridiculous. I’m not making the changes he wants.”

“Why don’t you let me see if I can come up with a compromise, Suze? The book is due in production soon and I need to know that both of you are happy with it.”

“I don’t know,” Suze said, her tone suspicious. “No offense, Felicia, but you always side with Phil.”

Felicia exhaled for patience. “I’m sorry if I’ve given you that impression, Suze, but believe me, I have only the best interests of this book in mind.” Appealing to Suze’s Achilles’ heel—pride in her work—Felicia said, “Since this might be your last collaboration, don’t you want it to be the best it can be?”

Suze sighed, and Felicia could feel the woman’s resolve crumbling.

“Besides, Jerry will be there to make sure everything is decided fairly.”

“Well...okay,” Suze relented. “When and what time?”