

WIDOW'S SECRETS

SHELLEY SHEPARD GRAY



LOVE INSPIRED
INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

Prologue



Seven months ago

The moment Liana saw the two police cruisers park in front of her house, she'd known whatever they intended to say was going to be bad. Glad that her hands and T-shirt were clean—she'd been painting in her studio all morning—she opened the door before any of the three officers could knock. She'd grown to hate the sound of fists pounding against wood.

“Yes?” she asked.

The officer who was in the front—a slim man in a blazer, slacks and polished black shoes—paused before regaining his composure. “Mrs. Mann, I don't know if you remember me. I'm Detective Doug Evans.” He held out a hand.

She didn't shake it, just gripped the door frame more tightly. “I remember you.”

He paused again. “This is Officer Silverstone. I believe you know Officer Grune, as well?”

“Yes.” Officer Libby Grune had interviewed her several times when Billy had first gone missing.

Officer Grune stepped forward, almost edging the detective off her small cement stoop. "We have some news to share with you, Liana. May we come in?"

Ten years ago she used to try to be polite. She would shake the police officers' hands and invite them in. One time she'd even served everyone coffee, like she was the type of woman who entertained guests all the time.

Now, because she knew that she never had a choice, Liana just stepped back so they could walk inside.

Detective Evans led the way into the living room but didn't sit down. Instead, he was looking around the dark room in a confused way.

Liana knew why. All the lights in the house were off. Though she hadn't intended to say a word about it, she apologized as she turned on one of the lights. "Sorry. I'm afraid my Amish neighbors have rubbed off on me." When the detective still looked confused, she explained, "They don't have electricity, you know."

"Oh. Yeah." He cleared his throat. "Can we sit down? This won't take long."

"Of course." She gestured to the lumpy couch. The three of them could squeeze next to each other there for all she cared. She took the wooden rocking chair in the corner.

To her amusement, only the detective and Libby sat down. Officer Silverstone, after looking at the small amount of available space, stood against the wall.

After another moment of uncomfortable silence, Detective Evans pulled out a notepad and scanned it. Then he gazed at her directly. "Mrs. Mann, the body of an adult man was found in a crevice about fifteen miles from here. After recovering the remains, our lab con-

ducted DNA tests. I regret to inform you that your husband was a match.”

“You found Billy.”

“Well, we found Billy’s remains,” Officer Silverstone blurted.

Liana lifted her gaze. The young officer’s cheeks were stained with embarrassment. After steadying herself, she asked, “How did my husband die? Do you know that?”

“We’re pretty certain he was murdered, ma’am,” Officer Silverstone murmured. “I’m very sorry.”

“I see.”

The silence continued.

Looking pained, Libby leaned forward. “I’m sorry for your loss, Liana. I know your husband has been gone for some time, but this still has to be difficult to hear.”

Liana wasn’t sure if this news was *difficult* or not. Living with Billy had been difficult. Having him go missing and then being subjected to weeks and weeks of questioning had been difficult. Spending ten years wondering if she was a widow or not had been really hard, too. Wondering whether Billy would one day show up out of the blue and expect her to take him right back had almost been her undoing.

But this? Well, she wasn’t sure what *this* was.

“What do you need me to do?” she asked.

Detective Evans blinked. “Do you have any questions, Mrs. Mann?”

Only one. “Do you know who murdered him?”

“Not yet.”

“We think Billy was likely killed ten years ago,

Liana,” Libby said, her voice quietly compassionate. “My guess is it happened soon after he went missing.”

They didn’t know who killed her husband. It was likely that they never would. Surely, there wasn’t anything more to say.

Ready to regain her privacy, she stood up. “Thank you all for coming to tell me the news.” She walked to the front door and opened it.

The brisk October breeze blew inside, chilling the temperature of the room. Detective Evans pulled out a card and handed it to her. “Here’s my contact information if you need it. In the meantime someone will be calling to discuss what you’d like to do next.”

With Billy’s body. That was what he was referring to. “All right.” She took the card and slid it into the back pocket of her jeans.

After Detective Evans walked out the door, followed by Officer Silverstone, Officer Grune paused in front of her. “Again, I’m sorry for your loss, Liana,” she said, handing Liana another card. “If you, ah, have any further questions or concerns, don’t hesitate to reach out.”

“Thank you,” she said as the woman followed the men down the narrow path to their cars.

The moment they opened their vehicles’ doors, Liana closed hers. Then she clicked the dead bolt.

And then she slid down on the floor and rested her head against the cold wood.

Billy was dead. He wasn’t going to come back. Not ever.

There would be no more panic attacks at two in the morning as she contemplated what would happen when he returned. No more living in limbo as both a wife and

a widow. No more bruises on her face or arms or side or thighs to either shake off or cover up.

That long, exhausting period of her life was all over. It was just too bad that it had taken ten years.

Chapter One



Monday, May 4

“You want to take that one or should I?” Angel asked as Chris Pine’s look-alike walked through the diner’s front door. “He’s a regular snack.” She grinned. “Right?”

“I will,” Liana said, barely refraining from rolling her eyes. From the day Angel had started at Dig In Diner, the girl had been a stereotype old-school waitress come to life.

She wore it well, too. Angel had bleached-blond hair and an enviable figure encased in a uniform that was one size too small, cracked a constant wad of gum and treated everyone to big, bright smiles. Everybody loved the girl, Liana included. She only wished that Angel would stop referring to half-decent-looking men like tasty treats.

“I don’t blame you for wanting that one. Well, go get ’em, Tiger.” Angel laughed before walking in the opposite direction.

The man, all blue eyes and perfect physique encased in faded denim and a gray T-shirt, looked a little wary

when she approached. No doubt he'd heard Angel's not-so-quiet quip.

"One," he said.

She picked up a menu. "Do you want to sit at the counter or a booth?"

"Booth."

Leading him to the booth in the back, she smiled at him politely. "The special today is roast chicken and stuffing. Take a minute and I'll be right back."

"Hold on." When she turned back to him, pencil in her hand, he glanced at her name tag. "Any chance you're Liana Mann?"

It took almost everything she had not to flinch. "Who wants to know?"

Shifting, he pulled out a worn leather wallet. "I guess I do," he said as he flicked it open and showed a badge. "So are you?"

She nodded. When he gazed at her for a moment longer, obviously waiting for her to say more, she remained silent. She knew this game and wasn't playing.

He swallowed. "I was hoping we could talk."

Aware of the door opening again, of Angel cracking jokes, of Gabe shouting out orders to Cane, their newest dishwasher, Liana slipped her pad and pencil back in her pocket. "I'm sorry, but I'm working. If you're not intending to eat—"

"I'm going to eat. I was just hoping you could give me a couple of moments of your time." He smiled. "I promise you're not in trouble."

He might have been making a joke but it didn't sit well with her. The thing was, Liana knew she hadn't done anything wrong, just as she knew she hadn't done anything that would cause suspicion. She wasn't near

perfect but she did learn from past mistakes. "Do you want some coffee? A Coke?"

"Coffee's good. Thanks."

She scurried back to the counter before the guy could say anything else, though as far as she was concerned, he'd already said too much.

Angel immediately sidled next to her. "Li, you two were sure talking. Do you know him?"

"No." She debated not saying anything more, but figured there were some things that just couldn't be pushed aside. "The man is a cop. He came in here to talk to me."

Angel's eyes widened. "What did you do?"

"Nothing," she said. "I don't know what he wants."

Viv, Gabe's wife, walked over. "Did I hear that right, Li? That cop is here to talk to you?"

Feeling like every person in the restaurant was staring at her, she nodded as she poured the cop's coffee. "Don't worry. I'll take care of it."

"We're not busy right now," Viv said in her motherly way. "Go see what he wants, Li."

There was no reason to say anything more—Liana knew an order when she heard one. Hating that her pretty decent day had turned so sideways, she picked up the man's coffee and walked back over to him. "Here you go. Do you want to order something or talk first?"

He tapped the all-day breakfast special. "I'll have that. Fried eggs, bacon, wheat toast. How about we talk while it's cooking? It won't take long."

Liana went back to Gabe and put in his order, then told Viv that she was going to sit down and get that talk over with. By the time she approached his table again, two more tables were full and half of the cop's coffee was gone.

He also had a pad of paper and a pencil in front of him.

She sat down on the red vinyl bench across from him. "I only have a few minutes."

His expression warmed, as though her crankiness amused him. "All right, then. My name is Kent Olson. I was recently assigned to investigate some cold cases in the region. I decided to focus on your husband."

Billy. Her mouth went dry. "Billy died ten years ago, Officer."

"And his body was discovered about seven months ago." He picked up his pencil, seeming certain Liana had a lot to say.

She did not. Now that she finally had closure, she had done everything she possibly could to remove him from her life. There was nothing about Billy Mann that she wanted to revisit.

"I cooperated with everyone both times. I told the officers everything I knew," she said quietly. Well, what she'd ever intended to share. What she didn't mention was that she hadn't known much about her husband's private life at all. Billy had enjoyed keeping secrets and she'd gotten really good at pretending they didn't exist.

Officer Olson fussed with the pencil, tapping the eraser end against the table. "We did an autopsy. His neck was broken and the medical examiner found traces of ligature marks on his throat."

"Ligature marks?"

"As if he'd been strangled." He paused. "Although we didn't find a bullet, the medical examiner also believes he was shot. Did you know that?"

"Yes." Even to her ears, her voice sounded rough. When his eyebrows rose, she tried to explain her reaction. "When Detective Evans and Officer Grune came

to see me, I... I'm afraid everything was a blur. I don't remember many of the details."

"Not even about his murder?"

Looking at him in the eye, she shrugged. "I thought it was over." It was a poor answer but it was actually the truth. All she'd ever cared about was that Billy wasn't coming back into her life.

Instead of questioning her some more, he looked satisfied by that, like she'd passed a test Liana hadn't even known about. After scribbling something on that pad of paper, Officer Olson leaned back against the bench. "I think we have a lot to talk about, Ms. Mann. I want to know more about your husband. Look around your property."

"He's been gone ten years."

"Yes, but since you still live in the same house, it's important to me." His expression hardened along with his voice. "Discovering what happened to Billy Mann is important to me, ma'am."

"Here's your order," Viv announced, her voice hard. "You might want to eat before it gets cold, sir."

That was all the incentive Liana needed to get to her feet. "I'll go fetch you some more coffee."

Turning away, she kept her head down, avoiding eye contact with Viv as she grabbed a carafe. Her insides felt like black tar had coated them, making every bit of her feel uncomfortable and poisoned.

She was going to need to start praying again—and start trying to figure out how she was going to survive this next round of questions.

One step at a time, she reminded herself. That was all she had to do—stop thinking about the future and

the past and only concentrate on each minute, then hour, of the day. That was the way to survive.

Billy had taught her that.

Officer Olson was writing notes with one hand and holding a piece of bacon with the other when she approached again. “More coffee?”

“Yeah. Thanks.” While she poured, he slid a white business card toward her. “Ms. Mann, here’s my contact information. You need to call and set up our next meeting. Soon. Otherwise, I’ll be forced to stop by here again.”

That sounded like a threat. Years ago she might have called him on that. Might have even told him that she had rights. That she didn’t have to put up with him badgering her. But she was a different person than she’d been all those years ago. Therefore, all she did was pick up his card, turn around and hope that he’d leave really soon.

As Kent Olson watched Liana Mann slip his card into the side pocket of her polyester dress, he wondered when she would give in and call. And she would call; he was sure of that. She didn’t like him being at her place of work; she’d made no secret about that.

He wondered why his presence here had bothered her so much. Was it because she had secrets she didn’t want anyone here finding out about? Or had it been his bringing up Billy? She’d visibly tensed every time he’d said her husband’s name. Or did her discomfort have more to do with his occupation? A lot of folks simply didn’t like cops.

When he got back to the station, he was going to have to look again at the officers’ reports from their

visits with Liana. Not everyone was as kind to widows as they should be, and it seemed as if Grune and Evans had been especially callous.

Taking another sip of the surprisingly decent coffee, Kent reminded himself that there was another possibility—and that was that Liana didn't like him. Thinking back to how he'd acted, appearing out of nowhere, demanding that she talk even though she was in the middle of her workday, Kent realized Liana probably had a lot of reasons to want to avoid him. He'd been heavy-handed, cool and unsympathetic.

Again.

Those traits hadn't been the main reason for his being taken out of the detective pool and put into cold cases, but like his lieutenant had said, it hadn't helped.

After pulling out his wallet, he left enough money to pay for his breakfast and give Liana a decent tip. It wasn't a bribe, but maybe she wouldn't add *cheap* to his list of faults.

Back in his car he turned left, then carefully passed a horse and buggy. After pausing to admire a line of clothes fluttering in the spring breeze, he eased out on Highway 32 and headed west toward Anderson. Within twenty minutes the fields surrounding him gave way to retail stores and fast-food joints. Ten minutes after that he was back in the heart of the affluent suburb of Cincinnati. Pulling into a parking space at the station, he noticed that his dad's black Lincoln SUV was in its parking place near the entrance.

His father, Lieutenant Detective Richard Olson, was one of the most celebrated members of the police force. He was just one year from retirement, and now carried around cruise and resort brochures on Sunday after-

noons. He and Kent's mom—who had just quit her own career in law—now spent hours dreaming about trips they were finally going to take and all the sleep they were finally going to get.

Kent was happy for them. He really was. Both of his parents had worked long hours and built successful, respected careers. They deserved to take as many vacations as they could—especially if it would give them some distance from him and the disappointment he'd just brought to the family name.

Striding toward the building, Kent focused once again on Liana Mann. She was brown-haired, blue-eyed, and had really pretty creamy skin. She looked as wholesome as the Amish women he'd spied walking with their children on the side of the road.

But unlike those Amish women, he was sure that Liana wasn't as innocent as she looked. He was sure that she knew more about her husband's death than she'd let on. He had to find a way to get her to talk to him. He knew there was more to Liana Mann than met the eye, and he intended to learn what she was hiding.

And he'd also recoup a little bit of the respect he'd lost...and hopefully get back into the detective pool and out of the basement's cold-case room.

As far as he was concerned, that couldn't happen fast enough.