

**CANCELLATION
NOTICE**



J. W. BECTON

Cancellation Notice
A Southern Fraud Short Story

J. W. Becton



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*The Personages of *Pride & Prejudice* Collection*

Seven Years Ago

The sun struggled toward the horizon, sending its first warming rays to tickle the dew that clung to the grass. The haze of night was lifting to reveal a brand new day.

It was a beautiful morning to commit a third-degree felony.

I just got off third shift—the 9 pm to 7 am stint that every cop in the Mercer Police Department dreads—when my cell phone chirped. I yanked the thing off my overloaded belt and checked the ID: Tripp Carver.

A detective in the Violent Crimes Unit of the MPD, Tripp was my first love. We'd dated throughout my high school years, and he'd helped me through some tough times. We grew apart when he went away to college, but I think we both secretly wondered if we would get back together one day.

It hadn't happened yet. I liked to believe it was because we were both busy with our careers and not because we just weren't meant to be.

Tripp started on the force two years before me and had already moved up the ranks to plainclothes detective, while I was still donning the blue polyester every day. But he always had my back no matter what kind of material it was clad in.

Tripp was good like that.

I put him on speaker and set the phone in my lap so no one would see a uniformed cop chatting away on a cell phone while driving a cruiser.

It didn't present a good image.

"Jules, you got a minute?" Tripp's voice sounded edgy, which was so unusual that I figured it must be the product of the tinny speaker on my phone or my sleep-deprived brain playing tricks on me, but I pulled into the nearest parking lot just in case something was wrong.

What did a few more minutes without sleep mean in the grand scheme of things?

I put the cruiser in park, but left the engine and the air conditioner running. "What's up?"

"You know the promotion list is due out any day now."

"Yeah," I said, feeling hope rise in my chest. I'd passed the detective's exam the previous month, so in theory, I was a lock to be promoted. But in reality, one never knew.

Tripp made some hesitation noises, and my hope began to fade away.

"Whatever it is, just say it."

"Okay, okay." He sucked in a deep breath. "You're not on that list."

Disappointment settled like a leaden weight in my gut. I leaned my head back on the rest and closed my eyes.

I'd been counting on that promotion. I couldn't keep up this crazy shift work, and I wanted to wear something other than an itchy uniform.

"Well, there's always next year." I said with a sigh.

"That's not all, Jules."

My eyes flew open.

"What else could there be?" I squeaked.

Tripp hesitated some more and finally said, "You've heard the rumor about the city-wide budget cuts, right?"

Every cop had heard the rumor that the MPD's budget was on the verge of being slashed, resulting in all sorts of trouble for the department. In fact, it was the longest running bit of gossip

in the MPD, and it was discussed with almost as much frequency as the story about Officer Jones and Tammy the receptionist getting it on in the supply closet one night.

“Yeah,” I said, drawing out the word.

“The cuts happened.”

“You’re kidding. The city council actually cut our budget? The captain will crap Frisbees.”

“He’s done more than that.”

“What? Cut overtime?”

“Jules...” His voice had gone very serious. “There’s another list.”

“Another list?” Sleep deprivation was clearly catching up with me because I couldn’t fathom what kind of list Tripp might be referring to. Hit list? Grocery list? Suspect list? Shit list?

“Lay-off list.”

So, yeah, a shit list.

Realization struck me. “A lay-off list... I’m on it.”

I pressed my fingertips to my forehead in order to prevent the headache I felt coming on.

“Yeah, you are. Sorry.” Tripp paused for a moment before rushing on. “But they’re not making anything official until Monday morning. I found out early. Don’t ask how.”

Great, so I was employed for exactly three more days. Just dandy.

“I just wanted to give you a heads-up.” Here, Tripp’s voice became quieter still, and I could imagine him turning his back to the rest of the police station so he could speak as privately as possible. “I know how hard this is going to be for you.”

It’s not as if I’m some kind of law enforcement prodigy who was destined to become a super cop from the cradle.

I became a police officer for only one reason: to bring my sister Tricia’s rapist to justice.

Her case was fourteen years old, and I was familiar enough with the justice system to know that if I didn’t keep an eye on things within the Mercer PD, then her file would just sit there collecting dust. Or worse, disappear.

If I allowed that to happen, Tricia’s rapist would never be caught, and he would effectively keep our family on the path of destruction he’d cast us upon.

Since I had joined the MPD, I’d been running the unknown subject’s fingerprints every few months, hoping the bastard had committed a crime that would put him in the system. Over the years, I’d come upon several possible matches, spent hours of my personal time comparing prints by hand, and concluded each time that there was no match.

So either the rapist had been clean since he assaulted my sister, or he was really good at avoiding arrest. Or he could be dead, the worst option of all. I couldn’t find him if he were dead, and the crime would remain unsolved forever.

One day, though, one day, her attacker would screw up. He would commit a crime, leave behind a fingerprint, get a speeding ticket, something. And then, I would catch him. I would catch him if I had to work constantly to do it.

I would never quit.

But I hadn’t planned on being fired.

“You okay?”

Tripp’s voice jarred me. I opened my eyes and looked around.

I shook my head even though I knew he couldn’t see me. “Not really,” I managed to whisper.

“I understand.” Tripp’s voice remained quiet. “I know exactly what you’ve given up for this.”

It was funny that he should say that because I didn't even know what I'd given up, what I might have been if it hadn't been for Tricia. What our family might have been. What Tripp and I might have been.

But what might have been did not matter to me now, only what was.

My fatigue fell away, and the energizing power of adrenaline zinged through me.

I might be out of the MPD, but that didn't mean I couldn't keep investigating on my own.

I would do whatever it took to bring Tricia's attacker to justice.

Whatever it took.

"Trust me," Tripp said. "I will not let your sister's case fall through the cracks. I promise you."

"I believe you," I said, and truly, I wanted to believe him. I wanted to trust him and put my confidence in the notion that justice would be done simply because right always prevails. But I knew from experience that wasn't true.

Sometimes, the guilty go free.

And I could not let that happen.

"Listen, I've got to go. Don't say anything to anybody, okay?" Tripp paused. "And don't worry. You'll find another job, maybe on another force. It'll all work out."

"Yeah, it'll all work out. I know."

In fact, I had already made a few decisions about my immediate future. I may not know where I would work next week, but I knew exactly what I would do in the next few hours.

We hung up, and I peeled out of the parking lot and back into town. There were a few matters I needed to attend to while I was still official.



After a quick stop for supplies, I parked the cruiser outside the MPD evidence storage facility. When most normal people were just starting their busy workdays, here I was sleep-deprived, soon-to-be unemployed, and plotting to steal evidence.

Security at the lock-up had been tightened after the evidence inventory had come up short a few thousand dollars' worth of marijuana. What used to be a large room full of disorganized metal shelves had become an entire building unto itself, complete with a locked vault for drug evidence and cash. Plus, the department implemented a new organizational system for general evidence in a climate-controlled room with no direct sunlight. There were new procedures for viewing evidence, and the process for checking out boxes required paperwork that would intimidate even the most staid actuary. The whole facility was overseen by one of the most power-mad officers in the MPD: George Gutfeld.

Gutfeld and I were not on good terms. Before the change in evidence storage procedures, I could come to view my sister's case file and evidence as often as I wished.

Not that I really needed to see it; I practically had it memorized. But I'd always believed that one day something new would jump out at me and break the case. That day had not yet come.

Now that Gutfeld controlled the evidence storage facility, he was suspicious of my every visit. I was almost certain that he had me pegged as one of the marijuana thieves.

But I'd never taken anything from lock-up. Not yet anyway.

Sure, I had copied my sister's case file and the fingerprints that had been found at the crime scene. But those were only copies.

Today, I needed something original.

I needed a little sliver of the fabric that contained fluids from my sister's assailant. I couldn't leave behind that piece of evidence, which could establish someone's guilt or innocence. I had to have a sample of it, and today might be my last opportunity to obtain it.

Taking a fabric sample was much trickier than making a few photocopies. I would have to defeat the tamper-proofing and then physically alter a piece of evidence in such a way that it could endure scrutiny. Doing this was a huge risk, both to me and to my sister's case should it ever go to trial.

Of course, for the case to go to trial, the guy had to be identified and arrested first, and for that to happen, I had to have that evidence.

I had to do this.

Parked outside the lock-up, I quickly inventoried my supplies. I stashed a small bottle of acetone nail polish remover and an eye dropper in my shirt pocket, and my multi-tool hung in its proper place on my belt. I pulled two blue nitrile gloves and an evidence bag from their storage places in the cruiser.

Once I was sure I had the proper gear, I had to develop a plan. So many criminals get caught because they do things on a spur of the moment and give no thought to how they are going to commit their crime and get away.

The escape was the critical part. What use was there in stealing something if you got caught?

Mentally, I walked through my crime. I imagined myself getting out of the vehicle and walking casually to the large glass doors of the evidence lockup. I would be on video from this time until I entered the evidence viewing area, so appearing relaxed and natural was essential. The first hurdle was the check-in desk. That's where I'd encounter Gutfeld, whom I'd have to charm as usual.

I laughed at the thought. Gutfeld seemed immune to charm. He always suspected that I was up to no good, and today, he'd be right. Worse, with all the new security measures, there would be a clear trail from the evidence to me.

But I couldn't worry about that now.

Once I had the evidence box in hand, I'd be allowed to view its contents in the large common room where there were no cameras. I hoped to be alone there so I could work my magic on the tamper-resistant tape and then cut a little piece from an unobtrusive section of the fabric. After that, it was just a matter of returning the evidence box to Gutfeld and leaving the building in a calm manner for the cameras.

The plan sounded simple and logical. All I had to do was request the evidence, as I'd done a hundred times in the past, but this time I'd just leave with a bit of it.

Nothing could be simpler.

So why was my stomach tying itself into knots?

I checked my watch. It was quarter after eight, which meant enough time had passed for Gutfeld to have had his first cup of coffee. Perhaps he would be feeling more cooperative.

It was now or never.

Taking a deep breath, I checked my appearance in the rearview mirror, wondering how I'd gone from Julia Jackson, up-and-coming detective at the MPD, to Julia Jackson, felon, in just a few short minutes.

It felt completely surreal.

Finding that I looked no more like a criminal than I ever had, I stepped from the cruiser. As I approached the large glass doors, I reminded myself to be nonchalant. I was on camera.

Suddenly, I felt as uncoordinated as a newborn giraffe.

My legs wobbled, and I kept touching my hair. It was amazingly difficult to do something as simple as acting calm when you know you're being observed doing something illegal.

No wonder criminals were so easy to spot.

Still, I managed to make it to the door. I did not pause even to take a deep, bracing breath before entering the building and encountering Gutfeld. No, instead, I gripped the door handle and gave it a shove.

Unfortunately, the door was designed to be pulled, and I ended up with my face mashed against the glass.

What the hell was wrong with me? How many times had I gone through that door?

Yeah, nonchalant. That's me.

I looked around. No one but the camera had seen me, so I supposed that was okay. I pulled the door open and walked to the front desk.

Gutfeld was nowhere to be seen, but I could smell coffee brewing. Maybe he had gone to the back room to get a refill. I took the opportunity to fill out the evidence request forms that I'd completed a hundred times. I was quick about it, and when Gutfeld emerged from the back room, I was done and waiting for him.

He limped into the room carrying an oversized coffee mug, and when he saw me, his iron grey eyebrows lowered. "You here for your sister again?"

"Yes, sir," I said, trying to sound innocent.

He narrowed his eyes at me. "Haven't you seen that file enough by now?"

I smiled at him to cover the fact that I really wanted to grit my teeth. "Obviously not."

"You know," he said, pausing to take a sip of coffee, "you really need to learn to let this go, Jackson. It ain't healthy."

"Thanks for the advice and for your concern over my health, but I doubt looking at the file is going to make me ill."

Gutfeld frowned at my response. The gesture caused even more wrinkles to accumulate in his saggy skin, giving him the appearance of a grey Shar-Pei. "Now, you know that ain't what I meant. I was referring to your mental health."

The expression on his face issued a challenge, one that I usually ignored or glossed over with a bit of innocent flirtation, but today, I just didn't have it in me. I was tired, cranky, and almost unemployed.

"Look," I said, leaning forward across the counter and into his space just a bit. "I'm here to look at a case file for Tricia Jackson. I've filled out the paperwork. I've signed the registry. I don't need any commentary on my health—mental or otherwise. Just get me the box."

Gutfeld's lip curled up in a snarl, but his eyes lit with amusement. Then, he turned and disappeared into the lockup.

I watched him go with a bemused smile. Apparently, I'd been handling him wrong all these years. I'd been sweet and Southern, but he seemed to appreciate direct and bitchy.

I could do direct and bitchy.

He returned and handed me the box. "The room is empty. Take all the time you need."

Squelching a sigh of relief, I gave him a stiff nod of thanks, took the box, and went into the common room. It held several beat-up old tables, which were equipped with old desk lamps. It wasn't luxury, but it would do.

I selected a table in the far corner, pulled out a chair, and sat down with the box directly in front of me.

I flipped on the desk lamp, and the glow of the bulb brightened the dark corner of the room.

This was it.

I was really going to steal evidence.

With one last glance over my shoulder at the door, I opened the lid.

I pulled out each item slowly. I'd seen and touched every piece of paper hundreds of times over the years. I practically memorized each swirl and crest of the fingerprints and each bump and divot in the tire tread impression.

I pulled out the large file folder but didn't open it. Instead, I went straight for the sealed plastic bag that contained the fabric: white cotton underwear with blue flowers that my sister had been wearing the day she'd been raped.

Though I knew the rest of the evidence by heart, I rarely looked at this piece. The terror of the attack seemed encapsulated in that one damaged article of clothing, and if I allowed myself to think about it, I wouldn't be able to function correctly for a week.

Before that day, Tricia had been an innocent girl, and one brutal moment had ruined her entire life and changed three others.

I shook my head. I couldn't think about that now. I had to think about how to get into the bag without leaving behind any trace that I'd done it.

I studied the tape that had been used to seal the bag.

I could do this.

I snapped on my gloves and set my empty evidence bag in my lap. Carefully, I began to unseal the evidence bag. A drop of acetone, a little wiggle of my knife.... Lather, rinse, repeat.

Soon, the bag was open just enough for me to use two fingers to manipulate the piece of cloth.

The lab had determined and marked the locations of the semen, and all I had to do was cut off a small sliver in an unobtrusive spot. I decided to take off a small section along the rip. A missing bit of cloth would be hard to detect there.

I pulled that section of fabric out of the bag's opening. I switched my multi-tool from knife to scissors and, again, checked over my shoulder. The door was still shut, and I could hear no activity in the hallway.

My hands began to shake, and I reminded myself that I had to do this.

I didn't let myself think of the consequences. I started to cut, taking small snips to make the edges appear as jagged as possible.

When I was finished, I set the multi-tool back in my lap and quickly stowed my sample—a small strip about one inch long and a quarter inch wide—into my waiting evidence bag.

One day, this little strip of cloth would save my sister.

How strange a thing to say about a piece of cotton.

I was just resealing the evidence bag when I heard a door slam in the hallway.

Guttfield was coming.

Dammit. I knew he wouldn't leave me alone. My snappy reply must have tipped him off that something was wrong. Or maybe he'd heard about the layoffs and knew I was on the list.

With shaking fingers and unsteady mind, I sealed my new evidence bag and slid it into my pants pocket.

The motion caused my multi-tool to fall to the floor with a loud clunk. Cursing, I reached for it just as the door behind me opened.

I sat bolt upright, unable to grasp the tool in time.

Best just to pretend everything was fine and hope Gutfeld didn't notice the multi-tool on the floor beneath my chair. I began to place the rest of the evidence back into the box with slow deliberation.

I felt his approach, but I didn't say a word or even look at him. I just kept working as if he weren't there.

"Jules, tell me you're not doing what I think you're doing."

I spun around and faced the worst possible person who could have caught me in the act: Tripp Carver.

Tripp looked much as he had in high school, only now he was dressed in a wrinkled sport coat and slacks. His dark brown hair gleamed in the lamplight as he looked at me with those dark, hooded eyes. I loved those eyes, and now, they held disappointment.

"What are you talking about?" I asked even though I knew he saw right through me. He leaned down and picked up the multi-tool, and as he returned to his full height, he swung the scissors attachment back into its place. He handed it to me with a look full of meaning.

He knew exactly why I was here, what I'd done.

"What?" I asked. My voice was high, nervous.

"I told you I'd take care of things," he whispered. "You don't have to do this."

Tripp was wrong.

I did have to do this.

I had no other choice.

The serious expression on his face told me that my next words would be crucial.

Our entire relationship would hinge on them.

I could either tell him the truth and hope one day to rekindle our romance, or I could lie, and lose the possibility forever.

His eyebrows were raised almost in curiosity, but his mouth was drawn down in a tight frown as if he were expecting the worst and still hoping for the best.

I was at yet another decision point in my life. I could do what my heart wanted and confess everything to Tripp. If I did that, Tripp and I would still have a chance, but my sister's rapist would likely never be arrested and incarcerated.

Or I could walk out with the evidence tucked in my pocket and the hope hidden in my heart that one day, the rapist would pay for what he'd done to my sister and my family.

All I wanted to do was stand up and throw myself into Tripp's arms. I wanted to be done with the search for justice; I wanted to lead my life for myself and not for Tricia.

But something within me would not allow that to happen.

Not yet.

Until Tricia's rapist was caught, I would never be truly free.

I looked at Tripp and watched sadness steal over his features.

He knew too.

My next words were soft, and my heart tore in two as I spoke them: "I don't know what you're talking about."

Tripp's face did not change, but when he spoke, his voice sounded overburdened. "Okay, Jules."

We stared at each other for long moments, and then, he offered me a sad smile that seemed to reflect all that we had in the past and all that we might have had in the future.

All that was gone now.

Soon, he was gone too.

Alone again, I faced the box and replaced its lid before hurrying out of the common room and back to Guttfeld at the counter. I slid the box in his direction with mumbled thanks and signed the registry with my departure time.

I was halfway to the glass doors when I heard him bark, "Jackson!"

I stopped, terrified that I'd been caught somehow or that Tripp had squealed on me.

Slowly, I turned to face the steely-eyed old man.

He bared his teeth in a smile. "Don't let me see you back here for a while," he said. "Mental health reasons."

I tried to smile back. "You definitely don't have to worry about that."

And that was the truth.

Then, I turned, pushed open the door, and stepped into the bright morning sunlight.

I was a different person from the one who had run into this glass door less than an hour ago. I was now fully dedicated to my quest.

There was no turning back.

I had committed a felony.

I had obliterated any chance that Tripp and I might one day become a couple again.

But I had the evidence that would one day liberate my sister and family.

Yes, I was stepping into a new day.

About the Author

J. W. Becton (a pseudo-pseudonym for historical fiction author Jennifer Becton) worked for more than twelve years in the traditional publishing industry as a freelance writer, editor, and proofreader. Upon discovering the possibilities of the expanding ebook market, she created Whiteley Press, LLC, an independent publishing house. *Absolute Liability*, the first in the six-book Southern Fraud Thriller series, became an Amazon Kindle Best Seller and made the Indie Reader Best Seller list for three nonconsecutive weeks.



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