

**J.A.  
JANCE  
REMAINS OF  
INNOCENCE**

**A BRADY NOVEL OF SUSPENSE**

**HARPER**

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## **DEDICATION**

*In honor of the Hotshots, twenty good men and true,  
and to Marty Gossenauer, because I felt like it*

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## PROLOGUE

LIZA MACHETT'S heart was filled with equal parts dread and fury as she pulled her beater Nissan into the rutted driveway of her mother's place, stopped, and then stepped out to stare at the weedy wasteland surrounding the crumbling farmhouse. In the eleven years since Liza had left home, the place that had once been regarded as messy or junky had become a scene of utter desolation.

Spring had come early to western Massachusetts and to the small plot of land outside Great Barrington that had been in her father's family for generations. Liza had heard that in a much earlier time, while her great-grandparents had lived there, both the house and the yard had been immaculate. People said Great-Grandma Machett herself had tended the garden full of prize-winning roses that had surrounded the front porch. Shunning help from anyone, she had donned an old-fashioned homemade bonnet and spent hours toiling in the yard, mowing the grass with a push-powered mower.

Great-Grandma Machett had been gone for decades now, and so was all trace of her hard work and industry. Thickets of brambles and weeds had overrun the grass and choked out the roses. Long ago a swing had graced the front porch. Swinging on that with her much older brother, Guy, was one of Liza's few happy childhood memories. The swing was gone. All that remained of it were two rusty chains that dangled uselessly from eyebolts still screwed into the ceiling boards. As for the porch itself? It sagged in the middle, and the three wooden steps leading up to the front door were completely missing, making the door inaccessible.

As a consequence, Liza walked around the side of the house toward the back. On the way, she tried peering into the house through one of the grimy storm windows that had been left in place for years, but the interior view was obstructed by old-fashioned wooden window blinds that had been lowered to windowsill level and closed tight against the outside world. A shiver of understanding shot through Liza's body, even though the afternoon sun was warm on her skin. The blinds existed for two reasons: to keep prying eyes outside and to keep her mother's darkness inside. Liza was tempted to turn back, but she squared her shoulders and kept on walking.

In the backyard, the freestanding wood-framed one-car garage, set away from the house, had collapsed in on itself long ago, taking Selma's ancient Oldsmobile with it. That was the car Liza remembered riding in as a child—a late-1970s, two-toned cream-and-burgundy Cutlass that had once been her father's. Somewhere along the way, her mother had parked the Cutlass in the garage and told her children that the car quit working. Liza thought she had been in the third grade when her mother had announced that they no longer needed a car. From then on, Liza and Guy had been responsible for their own transportation needs—they could catch the bus, ride their bikes, or, worst case, walk. Now the vehicle was a rusted-out hulk with only a corner

of the back bumper still visible through pieces of the splintered garage door. Looking at the wreckage, Liza wondered if her life would have been different had the car kept running. After all, that was about the same time her mother had turned into a recluse and stopped leaving the house.

The only outbuilding that seemed to be in any kind of reasonable repair was the outhouse. The well-trod footpath to it led through an otherwise impenetrable jungle of weeds and brambles. Liza had hated the outhouse growing up. The smell had been vile; the spiders that lurked in the corners and would swing down on cobwebs in front of her eyes had terrified her. The presence of the path told her that the anachronistic outhouse, probably one of the last ones in the county, was still in daily use. That made sense. The social worker had told her that Selma's electricity had been turned off months ago due to lack of payment. Without electricity to run the pump at the well, the house would no longer have any indoor plumbing, either.

Liza's father had left when she was a baby. She didn't remember ever having met him, but she had heard stories about how, decades earlier, he and his father, working together, had remodeled the place for his widowed grandmother, bringing the miracle of running water and indoor toilets into the house. Legend had it Great-Grandma Machett had stubbornly insisted on using the outhouse and on keeping the hand pump at the kitchen sink that drew water from a cistern near the house. If that hand pump was, through some miracle, still in operation, it was probably the only running water Liza's mother had.

"Stubborn old bat," Liza muttered under her breath.

She had never admitted to the kids at school that they used an outhouse at home. Guy hadn't told anyone about that, either. Once Great-Grandma Machett passed on, they had moved into her place, and after Liza's father left, the only bathroom in the house had become Selma's private domain. No one else was allowed to use it because, she had insisted, running all that water through the faucets and down the toilet was a waste of electricity and a waste of money.

"We're too poor to send money down the drain like that," her mother had insisted. "I'm not going to waste the pittance your no-good father left me on that."

That meant that the whole time Liza and Guy were in grade school, they had been forced to do their sponge-bath bathing at the kitchen sink. That was where they had hand-washed their clothing as well. All that had been doable until the hot water heater had given out, sometime during Liza's last year of elementary school. After that it had been cold water only, because heating water on top of the stove for baths or for washing clothes had been deemed another extravagant waste of electricity and money.

Liza remembered all too well the jeering boys on the grade-school playground who had bullied her, calling her "stinky" and "dirty." The stigma stayed with her. It was why, even now, she showered twice a day every day—once in the morning when she first got up, and again in the evening after she got home from work.

Gathering herself, Liza turned to face the back door of the house she hadn't stepped inside for more than a decade, even though the place where she lived now was, as the crow flies, less than five miles away. Looking up, she noticed that, in places, the moss-covered roof was completely devoid of shingles. Just last year, Olivia

Dexter, her landlady in town, had replaced the roof over Liza's upstairs apartment in Great Barrington. That roof hadn't been nearly as bad as this one was, but Liza had seen firsthand the damage a leaky roof could do to ceilings and walls and insulation. How, she wondered, had her mother made it through the harsh New England winter weather with no electricity and barely any roof ?

Liza's mission today was in her mother's kitchen, and that was where she would go. The disaster that inevitably awaited her in the rest of the house would have to be dealt with at a later time. She remembered all too well the narrow paths between towering stacks of newspapers and magazines that had filled the living room back when she was a girl. Maybe all those layers of paper had provided a modicum of insulation during the winters. Even so, Liza wasn't ready to deal with any of that now, not yet.

Liza made her way up the stairs and then stood for a moment with her hand on the doorknob, willing herself to find the courage to open it. She knew how bad the place had been eleven years earlier, on that distant morning when she had finally had enough and fled the house. Rather than facing it, she paused, unable to imagine how much worse it would be now and allowing a kaleidoscope of unwelcome recollections to flash in and out of focus.

The memory of leaving home that day was still vivid in her mind and heart, even all these years later. Her mother had stood on the front porch screaming taunts and insults at Liza as she had walked away, carrying all her worldly possessions in a single paper grocery bag. She had walked down the half-mile-long driveway with her eyes straight ahead and her back ramrod straight. There were still times, when she awakened in the middle of the night, that she could hear echoes of her mother's venomous shouts—*worthless slut, no-good liar, thief*. The ugly words had rained down steadily as she walked away until finally fading out of earshot.

Liza Machett had heard the old childhood rhyme often enough:

*Sticks and stones may break my bones  
But names will never hurt me.*

That was a lie. Being called names did hurt, and the wounds left behind never really healed over. Liza's heart still bore the scars to prove it. She had learned through bitter experience that silence was the best way to deal with her mother's periodic outbursts. The problem was, silence went only so far in guaranteeing her safety. There were times when even maintaining a discreet silence hadn't been enough to protect Liza from her mother's seething anger.

Liza understood that, on that fateful day, a pummeling from her mother's fists would have come next had she not simply taken herself out of the equation. Their final confrontation had occurred just after sunrise on a warm day in May. It was the morning after Liza's high school graduation, an event that had gone totally unacknowledged as far as Selma Machett was concerned. Liza's mother, trapped in a debilitating web of ailments both real and imagined, hadn't bestirred herself to attend. When Liza had returned home late that night, dropped off by one of her classmates

after attending a graduation party, Selma had been waiting up and had been beyond enraged when Liza came in a little after three. Selma had claimed that Liza had never told her about the party and that she'd been up all night frantic with worry and convinced that Liza had really been out "sleeping around."

For Liza, a girl who had never been out on a single date all through high school, that last insult had been the final straw. A few hours later, shortly after sunrise, Liza had quietly packed her bag to leave and had tiptoed to the door, hoping that her mother was still asleep. Unfortunately, Selma had been wide awake and still furious. She had hurled invectives after her departing daughter as Liza walked across the front porch and down the steps. The porch had still had steps back then.

Liza walked briskly away with her head unbowed beneath Selma's barrage of insults. At the time, Liza's only consolation was that there were no neighbors nearby to witness her mother's final tirade. Walking away from the house, Liza had realized that she was literally following in her older brother's footsteps and doing the same thing Guy had done five years earlier. He had walked away, taking only what he could carry, and he hadn't looked back.

Liza had been thirteen years old and in eighth grade on the day Guy left home for college. A friend had stopped by shortly after he graduated and given him a lift and a life. During the summer he had waited tables in the Poconos. Then, armed with a full-ride scholarship, he had enrolled at Harvard, which was only a little over a hundred miles away. As far as Liza was concerned, however, Harvard could just as well have been on another planet. Guy had never come back—not over Christmas that first year nor for any of the Christmases that followed, and not for summer vacations, either. From Harvard he had gone on to Maryland for medical school at Johns Hopkins. Unlike Guy, all Liza had to show for enduring years of her mother's torment was a high school diploma and a severe case of low self-esteem.

Did Liza resent her brother's seemingly charmed existence? You bet! It was perfectly understandable that he had turned his back on their mother. Who wouldn't? Liza remembered all too well the blazing battles between the two of them in the months and weeks before Guy left home. She also recalled her brother's departing words, flung over his shoulder as he walked out the door. "You're not my real mother."

Those words had been true for him, and that was his out—Selma was Guy's stepmother. Unfortunately, she was Liza's "real" mother. Half brother or not, however, Guy had always been Liza's big brother. In walking away from Selma, he had also walked away from Liza. He had left her alone to cope with a mentally damaged, self-centered woman who was incapable of loving or caring for anyone, including herself.

All the while Liza had been growing up, there had been no accounting for Selma's many difficulties, both mental and physical, real and imagined. There had been wild mood swings that most likely indicated Selma was bipolar—not that she'd ever gone to a doctor or a counselor to be given an official diagnosis. There had been episodes of paranoia in which Selma had spent days convinced that people from the government were spying on her. There was the time she had taken a pair of pliers to her own mouth and removed all the filled teeth because she was convinced the fillings were poisoning her. It wasn't until long after Liza left home that there was a name for the most visible

of Selma's mental difficulties. She was a hoarder. Liza found it disquieting that hoarding was now something that could be spoken of aloud in polite company and that, in fact, there was even a reality television show devoted to the problem.

Liza had watched the show occasionally, with a weird combination of horror and relief, but she had never found a way to say to any of the people who knew her now, "That was my life when I was growing up." Instead, like a voyeur driving past a terrible car wreck, she watched the various dysfunctional families on the small screen struggling with issues she knew intimately, from the inside out. In the well-ordered neatness of her own living room, she could compare what she remembered of her mother's house with the messes and horrors in other people's lives, all the while imagining what Selma's place must be like now after another decade of unchecked decline.

Sometimes what she saw on one of the shows moved her to tears. Occasionally the televised efforts of loved ones and therapists seemed to pay off and damaged people seemed to find ways to begin confronting what was wrong with their lives and perhaps make some necessary changes. With others, however, it was hopeless, and all the painful efforts came to naught. The people trying to help would throw things in the trash—broken toys, wrecked furniture, nonworking appliances—only to have the hoarder drag the garbage back into the house because it was too precious to be tossed out.

For her part, Liza suspected that Selma was one of the ones who wouldn't be helped or fixed. She doubted her mother would ever change, and Liza knew for a fact that she had neither the strength nor the will to force the issue. If Guy had offered to come home and help her? Maybe. But all on her own? No way.

As a teenager, Liza had dealt with the shame of how they lived—the grinding poverty and the utter filth of their existence—as best she could. She had put up with her mother's ever-declining health and occasional screaming rages. Liza's smallest efforts to clean anything up or throw away one of her mother's broken treasures had been met with increasingly violent outbursts on her mother's part. Liza understood now that she most likely wouldn't have survived high school had it not been for the timely intervention of first one and subsequently several of her teachers.

It had been at the end of phys ed during the first week of her freshman year. After class, some of the girls had been taunting Liza about being dirty when Miss Rose had come into the locker room unannounced and heard what they were saying. She had told Liza's tormentors to knock it off and had sent them packing. Ashamed to show her face, Liza had lingered behind, but when she came out of the locker room, Miss Rose had been waiting for her in the gym.

"How would you like a job?" she had asked.

"What do you mean, a job?" Liza had stammered.

"I need someone to come in after school each afternoon to wash and fold the towels," Miss Rose said. "I couldn't pay you much, say ten bucks a week or so, but you'd be able to shower by yourself and wash your own clothes along with the towels."

That was all Miss Rose ever said about it. Liza didn't know how Miss Rose had

known so much about her situation. Maybe she had grown up in the same kind of squalor or with the same kind of mother. Not long after that, some of the coaches of the boys' sports teams had asked Liza to handle their team laundry needs as well. Eventually she had been given her own key to both the gym and the laundry. She spent cold winter afternoons and hot spring days in the comforting damp warmth of the gym's laundry room, doing her homework, turning jumbles of dirty towels and uniforms into neat stacks and washing her own clothing at the same time. As for the money she earned? The collective fifty dollars a week she got for her efforts from various teachers and coaches, all of it paid in cash, was money that Liza's mother never knew about, and it made all the difference. It meant that Liza was able to eat breakfast and lunch in the school cafeteria rather than having to go hungry.

In the end, Liza had done the same thing her brother did—she left. But she didn't go nearly as far as her brother's hundred miles. Guy had been brilliant. Liza was not. Her mediocre grades weren't good enough for the kind of scholarship help that would have made college possible, but her work record with the coaches and teachers had counted as enough of a reference that she'd been able to land a job in Candy's, a local diner, the first week she was on her own. She had started out washing dishes and had worked her way up to waitress, hostess, and finally—for the last year—assistant manager. Candy had taught her enough about food handling that, in a pinch, she could serve as a passable short-order cook. She didn't earn a lot of money, but it was enough to make her self-supporting.

Liza's car was a ten-year-old rusted-out wreck of a Nissan, but it was paid for and it still ran. That was all she needed. Her home was a tiny upstairs apartment in an old house off Main Street in Great Barrington. It could be freezing cold in the winter and unbearably hot in the summer, as it was right now in this unseasonably late April heat wave, but the apartment was Liza's and Liza's alone, and she kept it immaculately clean.

She never left home in the morning without first washing and drying the dishes. Her bed was made as soon as she climbed out of it. Her dirty clothes went in a hamper, and when she came back from the Laundromat, her clean clothes went in dresser drawers or on hangers. Her floors were clean. Her trash always went out on time. There was never even so much as a hint of mouse droppings in the freshly laundered towels she took out of her tiny linen closet and held up to her face.

Driving out to her mother's place from the hospital that morning, Liza had measured the distance on the odometer. She had been surprised to realize that the hospital was a mere four miles and her apartment only another mile beyond that from her mother's squalid farmhouse. Somehow, in all the intervening years, she had imagined the distance to be much greater. She had always told herself that she would never go back, no matter what, and she hadn't—not until today. Not until a social worker had tracked her down at work and given her the bad news.

Selma had evidently fallen. Unable to get up, she hadn't been found for a number of days. A postman had finally notified someone that her mail was piling up in the mailbox at the end of the driveway, and a uniformed deputy had been dispatched to do a welfare check. Selma had been found unconscious on the floor of a room that bore

no resemblance to a living room. Revived at the scene, she had been forcibly removed from her house and taken by ambulance to the hospital. Selma was currently in the ICU where doctors were doing their best to rehydrate her with IV fluids and nourishment. Liza had been told that Selma was in stable condition, but the social worker had made it plain that the outlook wasn't good. Despite her relatively young age—Selma was only fifty-seven—her emphysema was much worse, and her next stop would most likely be a bed in the hospice care unit of the Sunset Nursing Home. The end might come in as little as a few days or a few weeks at the most.

Hearing the news, Liza tried to feel sorry for her mother, but she could not. The woman had brought it on through years of chain-smoking and neglecting her health. Liza had always told herself that as far as her mother was concerned, she was done; that if Selma ever needed help, Liza wouldn't go—wouldn't cross the street or lift a finger to help her mother, but when push came to shove, Liza had caved.

The social worker had come by the diner to let Liza know. Before the social worker had finished telling her what had happened, Liza had her phone in hand and was dialing her boss's home number to let Candy know that she was going to need someone else to cover her shifts for the next few days. Within forty-five minutes, she had turned up at the ICU, as dutiful as any loving daughter. She rushed down the polished corridor to Selma's room as though there hadn't been a lifetime's worth of bad history and eleven years of total estrangement between them.

And what had Liza expected for her trouble? Maybe she hoped the long-delayed reunion with her mother would turn into one of those schmaltzy Hallmark moments, with Selma reaching out to embrace her daughter and saying how precious Liza was; how much she had missed her; how glad she was to see her; how sorry she was for all the awful things she had said those many years ago. Of course, that wasn't what happened—not at all.

Selma Machett's eyes had popped open when Liza warily approached her mother's bedside.

"Where've you been?" Selma demanded. "What took you so long? I told them not to do it, but those stupid jerks in the ambulance brought me here anyway. And when I told them I needed my cookbook, they couldn't be bothered. You know the one I mean—my old *Joy of Cooking*. I need it right now. I want you to go to the house and get it—you and nobody else."

No, not a Hallmark moment by any means. Liza understood full well that her mother simply issued orders rather than making requests. *Please* and *Thank you* weren't part of Selma's vocabulary. Liza also knew that her mother had a vast collection of cookbooks, moldering in her filthy kitchen. Not that she'd ever used any of them. In fact, Liza couldn't remember her mother ever cooking a single meal. All the while Liza was growing up, they'd survived on take-out food, burgers and pizza that her mother had somehow managed to pay for. Afterward, the wrappers and boxes, sometimes with stray pieces of pizza still inside, were left to rot where they fell.

Even though Liza knew it to be a futile exercise, she attempted to reason with her mother. "Look, Mom," she said placatingly. "They have a very good kitchen here at the hospital. You don't need a cookbook. When it's time for you to eat, they'll bring

your food on a tray.”

“I don’t care about that,” Selma snapped. “I want my cookbook, and I want it now. The key’s still where it’s always been, under the mat on the back porch. Go now. Be quick about it.”

Which is exactly how Liza came to be here. When she lifted the mat, it disintegrated in her hands, falling in a brittle heap of disconnected rubbery links on the top step. After inserting the key and turning it in the lock, Liza stood on the far side of the door for the better part of five minutes, trying to summon the courage to venture inside.

Knowing that the power was off and that the inside of the house would be beyond filthy, Liza had done what she could to come prepared. She had stowed a small jar of Vicks in her purse. She had stopped at the drugstore and bought a package of face masks and a box of surgical gloves. Finally, after dabbing the eye-watering salve under her nostrils and donning both a mask and a pair of gloves, she opened the door.

No amount of advance warning could have prepared her. The stench was unimaginable. Covering her face with her hand, Liza fell backward and fought, unsuccessfully, to push down the bile that rose in her throat. Giving up, she clung to the crooked porch rail and heaved the hamburger she had eaten for lunch into a waist-high mound of moldering trash that had accumulated next to the steps.

At last, wiping her mouth on the tail of her blouse and steeling herself for another assault on her senses, Liza edged the door open again. To begin with, that was all she could do—crack it open. A heaping wall of rotting garbage, this one stacked almost ceiling high, kept the door from swinging open completely. As Liza sidled into the room, finger-sized roaches and fist-sized spiders scurried for cover.

Selma had always been a chain-smoker. Underlying everything else was the stench of decades’ worth of unfiltered Camels, but that was only in the background. In the foreground were the unmistakable odors of rotting garbage and of death. Liza chalked up the latter to some dead varmint—a rat or mouse perhaps—or maybe a whole crew of them whose decaying corpses were buried somewhere under the mounds of trash.

Leaving the back door open, Liza stepped gingerly into the room, sticking to a narrow path that meandered through the almost unrecognizable kitchen between unstable cliffs of what looked to her like nothing but refuse. The mountains of garbage were tall enough that they obscured the windows, leaving the room in a hazy gloom. Although Liza knew this to be the kitchen, there was no longer any sign of either a stove or a sink. If her great-grandmother’s hand pump still existed, it was invisible, completely buried under masses of debris. The refrigerator was hidden behind another evil-smelling mound. Standing on tiptoe, Liza saw that the door to the freezer compartment was propped open, revealing a collection of long-abandoned contents, their labels indecipherable behind a thick layer of mold. Next to the fridge was the tall stand-alone bookcase that held her mother’s cookbooks. She could see the books, their titles completely obscured behind a thick curtain of undisturbed spiderwebs.

There were few things in life that Liza hated more than spiders and their sticky webs. These were clotted with the desiccated corpses of countless insects who had mistakenly ventured into the forest of silky threads and died for their trouble. Liza

knew that hidden behind the layer of webs was the book she was charged with retrieving. If she squinted, she could almost make out the bright red letters of the title through the scrim of fibers.

Gritting her teeth, Liza pushed the webs aside far enough to reach the book. She had the cover in her hand when a spider glided down a web and landed on her arm. Screaming and leaping backward, Liza dropped the book and, with a desperate whack from the back of her hand, sent the startled spider sailing across the room. When Liza looked down, she saw that the book had landed spine up on the floor, sitting like a little tent pitched on the dirty floor among an accumulation of mouse turds. And scattered across the filthy floor around the half-opened book were what appeared to be five one-hundred-dollar bills.

For a moment, Liza could barely believe what she was seeing. Squatting down, she picked them up one at a time. The unaccustomed gloves on her hands made for clumsy fingers, and it didn't help that her hands were shaking. She examined the bills. They looked real enough, but where had they come from, and what were they doing in Selma's copy of *Joy of Cooking*?

Stuffing the bills in the pocket of her jeans, Liza picked up the book itself. Holding it by the spine, she flapped the pages in the air. As she did so, two more bills fluttered out from between the pages and drifted to the floor.

Liza was amazed. Seven hundred dollars had been hidden in one of her mother's cookbooks! Where had the money come from? How long had it been there? Had her mother kept the bills squirreled away the whole time Liza had been growing up—the whole time she was struggling to fit in at school while wearing thrift shop clothing and buying her school lunches with money she had earned by doing sports teams' laundry? Had there been money hiding in her mother's cookbook even then? And if there were seven hundred dollars in this one book, what about the others? Was money concealed in those as well?

Using the book in her hand, Liza swept away the remaining spiderwebs and reached for another book. The two mammoth volumes next to the empty spot left behind by the absent *Joy* turned out to be Julia Child's *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, Volumes 1 and 2. A quick shuffle through the 652 pages of Volume 1 was good for five hundred bucks. Ditto for Volume 2. With close to two thousand dollars now crammed in her pocket, Liza reached for the next book on the shelf: *Betty Crocker's Quick and Easy*. A thorough examination of that one surfaced only three hundred dollars, but by the time Liza had worked her way through the entire collection, she had amassed close to thirty thousand dollars. It was more money in one place than Liza had ever seen in her life, more money than she had ever thought her mother had to her name.

At last the bookshelf was cleared. The cookbooks, plucked clean of their hidden treasure, lay in a careless heap on the floor. During the search, Liza had gone from first being surprised and amazed to being beyond furious. The more money she found, the more she wondered if the small fortune in hidden bills had been in Selma's possession the whole time. If so, why had Selma always pretended to be poor? Why had she denied her children and herself simple creature comforts like running water and hot

baths that some of that money might have afforded all of them?

As a teenager, Liza had never thought to question the fact that they were poor. Their poverty was an all too demonstrable reality. She had listened in silence while her mother bewailed their fate, complaining about their lot and blaming the fact that Liza's father had run off—presumably with another woman—leaving them with barely a roof over their heads and not much else. Liza knew from something her brother had said that before Anson Machett bailed, he'd at least had the decency to quitclaim the family home—the farm and the run-down house that had belonged to his great-grandparents—to his soon-to-be-abandoned wife. Before Guy left home, Selma had told the kids that their father was dead, having died in a car wreck somewhere in California. Selma had offered no details about a memorial service or a funeral. First their father was gone and then he was dead.

Now, at age twenty-nine and standing in the desolation of Selma's filthy kitchen, Liza Machett found herself asking for the very first time if anything her mother had told them was true. If Selma had lied to them about being poor, maybe she had lied about everything else, too.

After gathering the last of the money from the books, Liza stayed in the kitchen for a long time, too stunned to know what to do next. Should she go to the hospital and confront her mother about all this? Should she demand to be told the truth, once and for all?

Ultimately Liza realized that a direct confrontation would never work. Instead, she reached down, pawed through the pile of books, and retrieved the one at the bottom of the heap—the *Joy of Cooking*. Pulling the thick wad of bills from her pocket, she extracted seven of them and placed them in various spots throughout the book. If Selma remembered the exact pages where she had stuck the money, then Liza was screwed. Otherwise, Liza could hand the book over to Selma and act as though she hadn't a clue that there was money hidden inside.

She hoped the trick would work. If Selma didn't realize Liza had discovered her secret, it would buy Liza time—time to look for answers on her own and to sift through the rest of the debris in the house. Liza knew that once she reached the living room, she would find stacks of back issues of *National Geographic*, *Life*, and *Reader's Digest* as well. What if those had all been seeded with money in the same way the cookbooks had? There was only one way to find out for sure, and Liza was determined to do so—she intended to search through every single one.

Back outside with the cookbook in hand, Liza stripped off her mask and gloves and drew in a deep breath of clean fresh air. Her Nissan, parked at the end of the driveway, sat unlocked and with the windows wide open. Leaving the windows open kept the interior from getting too hot. That was important especially during hot weather since the Nissan's AC had stopped working long ago.

Liza dropped the book on the passenger seat before going around to the other side to climb in. When she turned to fasten her seat belt, the tail end of her ponytail swished in front of her face. That's when she smelled it—the same pungent combination of foul odors that had plagued her as a girl and that had been the cause of so much painful bullying from the other kids. The odor of decay in her mother's home

had somehow permeated Liza's hair and clothing. She could barely tolerate sitting in the car knowing that she was probably leaving the same stinky residue on the car seats and carpeting.

Hating the very idea, Liza headed for her apartment rather than for the hospital. She would go see her mother and deliver the book, but only after she had showered and washed her hair. Looking at the book, she realized it probably smelled the same way. Once she hit Great Barrington, she pulled in to the drive-in window of the local Dunkin' Donuts and ordered a bag of their Breakfast Blend coffee beans. She had heard that coffee beans helped get rid of bad smells. It seemed worth a try.

At home, Liza located a gallon-sized Ziploc bag. She placed the book inside that along with all the bills she had stuffed in her pockets. Then, having added the whole beans, she zipped the bag shut before going into the bathroom to shower.

She stood under the stream of hot water for the next fifteen minutes, trying to wash away the dirt and grit from her mother's house. With her eyes closed, she hoped she was washing off something else as well—the soul-destroying contamination of her mother's many betrayals.

She needed to send Selma Machett's perfidy circling down the drain every bit as much as she needed to rid herself of the odor of mouse droppings and rotting food that, despite all her scrubbing, still seemed to cling to her skin.

## ONE

**THE SUN** was just coming up over the distant Chiricahua Mountains to the east of High Lonesome Ranch when a rooster crowed at ten past five in the morning. At that hour of the day, it might have been one of the ranch's live resident roosters announcing the arrival of a new day, but it wasn't. This was the obnoxiously distinctive crowing of Sheriff Joanna Brady's cell phone.

Groping for the device in its charging stand on the bedside table, Joanna silenced the racket and glanced across the bed. Her husband, Butch, slept undisturbed with a pillow pulled over his head. Taking the phone in hand, Joanna scrambled out of bed. Now that Lady, her rescued Australian shepherd, had decamped to a spot next to Joanna's son's bed, she no longer had to deal with tripping over a dead-to-the-world dog when it came to late-night callouts, which usually meant there was serious trouble somewhere in Cochise County.

Hurrying into the bathroom and closing the door behind her, Joanna answered, "Sheriff Brady."

"Chief Bernard here," a male voice rumbled in her ear. "Sorry to wake you at this ungodly hour, but I could sure use your K-9 unit if you can spare them."

Alvin Bernard was the police chief in Bisbee, Arizona. Once known as a major copper-producing town, Bisbee's current claim to fame was its reputation as an arts colony. It was also the county seat. Alvin Bernard's departmental jurisdiction ended at Bisbee's city limits, the line where Joanna's countywide jurisdiction began.

Years earlier, Joanna had been elected to the office of sheriff in the aftermath of her first husband's death. Andy Brady had been running for the office when he died in a hail of bullets from a drug cartel's hit man. When Joanna was elected sheriff in her late husband's stead, members of the local law enforcement old boys' network had sneered at the outcome, regarding her election as a straight-up sympathy vote, and had expected Joanna to be sheriff in name only. She had surprised the naysayers by transforming herself into a professional police officer. As she developed a reputation for being a good cop, that initial distrust had melted away. She now had a cordial working relationship with most of her fellow police administrators, including Bisbee's Chief Bernard.

"What's up?"

"Junior Dowdle's gone missing from his folks' house up the canyon. He left his room sometime overnight by climbing out through a bedroom window. His bed hasn't been slept in. Daisy's frantic. She and Moe have been up and down the canyon several times looking for him. So far there's no trace."

Junior, Moe and Daisy Maxwell's developmentally disabled foster son, had been found abandoned by his paid caregiver at a local arts fair several years earlier. Once his blood relatives were located, they had declined to take him back. That was when

the Maxwells had stepped in. They had gone to court and been appointed his legal guardians. Since then they had cared for Junior as their own, giving him purpose in life by teaching him to work as a combination busboy and greeter in the local diner that bore Daisy's name.

In recent months, though, Junior's behavior had become increasingly erratic, both at home and in the restaurant. Only a few weeks earlier the family had been given the dreaded but not-so-surprising diagnosis—not so surprising because the doctor had warned the Maxwells a year earlier about the possibility. Now in his early sixties, Junior was suffering from a form of dementia, most likely Alzheimer's, an affliction that often preyed on the developmentally disabled. Under most circumstances, a missing person report of an adult wouldn't have merited an immediate all-out response. Because Junior was considered to be at risk, however, all bets were off.

"He's on foot then?" Joanna asked.

"Unless some Good Samaritan picked him up and gave him a ride," Alvin answered.

"Okay," Joanna said. "I'll give Terry a call and see what, if anything, he and Spike can do about this."

Terry Gregovich was the human half of Joanna's departmental K-9 unit. Spike, a seven-year-old German shepherd, was Terry's aging canine partner.

"You're sure Junior left through a window?"

"Daisy told me they've been concerned about Junior maybe wandering off, so they've gotten into the habit of keeping both the front and back doors to the house dead-bolted. It was warm overnight, so Daisy left the window cracked open when Junior went to bed. Had Daisy Maxwell ever raised a teenage son, she would have known she needed to lock the window as well."

"That's how he got out?"

"Yup, it looks like Junior raised the window the rest of the way, pushed open the screen, and climbed out."

"Do you want me to see if I have any additional patrol officers in the neighborhood who could assist with the search?"

"That would be a huge favor," Alvin said. "We'll be using the parking lot of St. Dominick's as a center of operations. Once the neighbors hear about this, there will be plenty of folks willing to help out. From my point of view, the more boots we have on the ground, the better. It'll make our lives easier if Terry and Spike can point the search crews in the right direction."

"I'll have Dispatch get back to you and let you know if anyone else is available."

She called Terry first, dragging him out of bed, then she called Dispatch to let Tica Romero, her overnight dispatcher, know what was going on. The City of Bisbee and Cochise County had a standing mutual aid agreement in place, but it was better to have everything officially documented in case something went haywire. Mutual aid in the course of a hot pursuit was one matter. For anything else, Joanna had to be sure all the necessary chain-of-command *t*'s were crossed and *i*'s were dotted.

Butch came and went through the bathroom while Joanna was in the shower. Once

dried off, she got dressed, donning a neatly pressed everyday khaki uniform and a lightweight pair of lace-up hiking boots. Early on in her career as sheriff, she had worn business-style clothing, most of which couldn't accommodate the Kevlar vest she wore each day right along with her other officers. Then there was the matter of footwear. After going through countless pairs of pantyhose and wrecked pairs of high heels, she had finally conceded defeat, putting practicality ahead of fashion.

Minutes later, with her bright red hair blown dry and her minimally applied makeup in place, she hurried out to the kitchen, where she found Butch brewing coffee and unloading the dishwasher.

"What's up?" he asked.

"I'm on my way to St. Dominick's," she explained. "Junior Dowdle took off sometime overnight. Alvin Bernard is using the parking lot at St. Dom's as a center of operations, and he's asked for help from my K-9 unit."

Joanna knew that her husband maintained a personal interest in Junior's life and welfare. She and Butch hadn't been married when Junior first came to Bisbee after being abandoned at the Arts and Crafts Fair in Saint David. Bringing him to Bisbee in her patrol car, Joanna had been stumped about where to take him. Her own home was out. The poor man wasn't a criminal and he wasn't ill. That meant that neither the jail nor the hospital were possibilities, either. In the end, she had taken him to Butch's house in Bisbee's Saginaw neighborhood, where Junior had stayed for several weeks. A restaurant Butch had owned previously, the Roundhouse in Peoria, Arizona, had once fielded a Special Olympics team, and Butch had been one of the team coaches. He had taken charge of Junior with practiced grace and had kept him until more suitable permanent arrangements could be made with the Maxwells.

"You're going to join the search?" Butch asked, handing Joanna a cup of coffee.

She nodded.

"All right," he said. "If they haven't found Junior by the time I drop the kids off at school, I'll stop by and help, too. Do you want breakfast before you head out? It won't take more than a couple of minutes to fry eggs and make toast."

That was one of the advantages of marrying a man who had started out in life as a short-order cook. Joanna didn't have to think long before making up her mind. Depending on how her day went, the next opportunity to eat might be hours away. Besides, this was Alvin's case. She and her people were there as backup only. In addition, Butch's over-easy eggs were always perfection itself.

"Sounds good," she said. "Do you want any help?"

"I'm a man on a mission," Butch told her with a grin. "Sit down, drink your coffee, and stay out of the way."

Doing as she'd been told, Joanna slipped into the breakfast nook. She'd taken only a single sip of coffee when Dennis, their early-bird three-year-old, wandered into the kitchen dragging along both his favorite blankie and his favorite book—*The Cat in the Hat*. There wasn't a person in the household who didn't know the story by heart, but Joanna pulled him into a cuddle and started reading aloud, letting him turn the pages.

They were halfway through the story when two dogs scrambled into the kitchen—

Jenny's stone-deaf black lab, Lucky, and a relatively new addition to their family, a fourteen-week-old golden retriever puppy named Desi. The puppy carried the tattered remains of one of Jenny's tennis shoes in his mouth. Both dogs dove for cover under the table of the breakfast nook as an exasperated Jenny, wearing a bathrobe and with her wet hair wrapped in a towel, appeared in the doorway.

"I was only in the shower for five minutes," she fumed. "That's all it took for Desi to wreck my shoe."

"Wait until you have kids of your own," Butch warned her. "Desi will be over it a lot faster than a baby will. Besides, it could have been worse. It's only a tennis shoe. When Lucky was a pup, he always grabbed one of your boots."

Leveling a sour look in Butch's direction, Jenny knelt down by the table. Rather than verbally scolding the miscreant puppy, she glowered at him and gave him two thumbs-down—her improvised sign language equivalent of "bad dog." Next she motioned toward her body with one hand, which meant "come." Finally she held out one cupped hand and patted the cupped one with her other hand, the hand signal for "give it to me."

There was a momentary pause under the table before Desi squirmed out from under his temporary shelter and handed over the mangled shoe. In response, Jenny gave him a single thumb-up for "good dog." Two thumbs would have meant "very good dog," and currently, no matter what he did right, Desi didn't qualify. Once the puppy had been somewhat forgiven, Lucky dared venture out, too. He was rewarded with the two-thumb treatment before Jenny took her damaged shoe in hand and left the room with both dogs on her heels.

Joanna couldn't help but marvel at how the hand signals Jenny had devised to communicate with Lucky were now making it possible for her to train a service dog as part of a 4-H project. There was the expectation that, at some time in the future, Desi would make a difference in some person's life by serving as a hearing assistance dog.

"Your breakfast is on the table in five," Butch called after Jenny as she left the room. "Two eggs scrambled, whole wheat toast. Don't be late."

"I'm afraid training that dog is more work than Jenny anticipated," Joanna commented. "After losing Tigger the way we did, I'm worried about her ability to let Desi go when it's time for him to move on." Tigger, their previous dog, a half golden retriever, half pit bull mix, had succumbed within weeks of being diagnosed with Valley Fever, a fungal disorder commonly found in the desert Southwest that often proved fatal to dogs.

"Jenny and I have already discussed that," Butch said, "but you're right. Talking about letting go of a dog is one thing. Handing the leash over to someone else is another."

Joanna nodded in agreement. "We all know that when it comes to horses and dogs, Jennifer Ann Brady has a very soft heart."

"Better horses and dogs than boys," Butch observed with a grin. "Way better."

That was a point on which Joanna and Butch were in complete agreement.

"Speaking of horses, did she already feed them?"

For years the horse population on High Lonesome Ranch had been limited to one

—Kiddo, Jenny’s sorrel gelding, who was also her barrel-racing partner. Recently they had added a second horse to the mix, an aging, blind Appaloosa mare that had been found, starving and dehydrated, in the corral of a recently foreclosed ranchette near Arizona Sunsites. The previous owners had simply packed up and left town, abandoning the horse to fend for herself. When a neighbor reported the situation, Joanna had dispatched one of her Animal Control officers to retrieve the animal.

After a round of veterinary treatment at county expense, Butch and Jenny had trailered the mare home to High Lonesome, where she seemed to have settled into what were supposedly temporary digs in the barn and corral, taking cues on her new surroundings from Kiddo while she gained weight and recovered. Dennis, after taking one look at the horse, had promptly dubbed her Spot.

In Joanna’s opinion, Spot was a far better name for a dog than it was for a horse, but Spot she was, and Spot she remained. Currently inquiries were being made to find Spot a permanent home, but Joanna suspected that she had already found one. When Butch teased Joanna by saying she had turned High Lonesome Ranch into an unofficial extension of Cochise County Animal Control, it was more true than not. Most of the dogs that had come through their lives had been rescues, along with any number of cast-off Easter bunnies and Easter chicks. Now, having taken in a hearing impaired dog and a visually impaired horse, they were evidently a haven for stray animals with disabilities as well.

“The horses are fed,” Butch answered. “Jenny and the dogs went out to do that while I was starting the coffee and you were in the shower.”

By the time Jenny and the now more subdued dogs returned to the kitchen, Joanna was ready to head out. After delivering quick good-bye kisses all around, she went to the laundry room to retrieve and don her weapons. For Mother’s Day a few weeks earlier, Butch had installed a thumb recognition gun safe just inside the door. Located below a light switch, it was within easy reach for Joanna’s vertically challenged five-foot-four frame. With her two Glocks safely stowed—one in a holster on her belt and the other, her backup weapon, in a bra-style holster—Sheriff Joanna Brady was ready to face her day.

It generally took the better part of ten minutes for Joanna to drive her county-owned Yukon the three miles of combination dirt and paved roads between High Lonesome Ranch at the base of the Mule Mountains and her office at the Cochise County Justice Center. In this instance she drove straight past her office on Highway 80 and headed into Bisbee proper. St. Dominick’s Church, up the canyon in Old Bisbee, was another four miles beyond that.

The time Joanna spent in her car each day gave her a buffer between her job and her busy home life. On this late-spring day, she spent some of the trip gazing off across the wide expanse of the Sulphur Springs Valley, taking in the scenery—the alternating squares of cultivated fields and tracts of wild desert terrain punctuated with mesquite trees—that stretched from the nearby Mule Mountains to the Chiricahua Mountains in the distance, some thirty miles away. She loved the varying shades of green that springtime brought to the desert, and she loved the very real purple majesty of the mountains rising up in the distance to meet an azure sky. As much as she