

Sweet Jane

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CHAPTER ONE

The wind was blowing lightly as Jane pulled on her jacket and walked out of the house into the chill of the morning. She crossed the hardpacked ground to the thousand-gallon water tank bolted to the top of a twenty-foot tower of salvaged telephone poles sunk deep in the sand. She climbed the tank ladder carefully to avoid rubbing off what little paint remained on the galvanized metal.

The wind was blowing in her face. The wind stopped blowing out here about as often as it rained, maybe ten or twelve days a year. Sometimes it blew nasty, dry and gritty in your eyes, other times it shoved you along from behind, but most of the time it whistled softly past your ears, like an indistinct voice.

This was the Hi Desert, and even though it was only forty miles down Highway 62 to Palm Springs, it was separated by a crucial three-thousand-foot vertical drop that eradicated the lower desert's most precious natural resource—winter warmth. The Hi Desert was a world apart from the vast expanse of prime sea-level real estate stretching across Southern California and Arizona, sprawling with cities, retirement villas, resorts and golf courses. No one was lying around the pool at breakfast time in January up

here.

Jane shivered as she unscrewed the cap on top of the tank. She dropped in the measuring rod and pulled it out. The tank was nearly empty. Goddamn Guy, with his fifteen-minute showers. She'd even caught him taking baths. Now she'd have to order up a tanker of water two weeks ahead of schedule.

"Damn!" she shouted at the top of her lungs. Her cry didn't echo, just petered out in the vast empty expanse all around her. They were up on a mesa, a vast plateau that had once been a mountain, worn flat by who knows how many million years of this wind.

Sometimes on a morning of a full moon, Jane would come out and look down the road in one direction and see the sun rising straight ahead at the edge of the plain, and she'd turn around and there was the moon dropping down over the opposite edge, as if the two globes were on the ends of a balance beam. At that moment the earth seemed so perfectly flat that if you drove really fast in either direction chasing the rising sun or setting moon, you'd go shooting off the planet.

That's what she told Jimmy when he was four or five and she'd wake him up early to come outside to see it. Then he got older and came home from school to inform her that she was wrong, absolutely wrong, the world

was definitely round. She shrugged and told him not to believe everything they tell you in school.

Jane climbed down from the tank and walked back to the house. It wasn't much more than a glorified property marker. Back in the fifties this had all been an enormous tract of government land. Then, in some re-creation of a nineteenth-century land rush, they drew an arbitrary grid over the emptiness, creating three-acre homesteads available on a first-come, first-served basis, and if you put up a house within three years, you owned it. So the land was quickly dotted with twenty-by-forty-foot slabs of poured concrete, supporting shacks made of two-by-fours wrapped in wire mesh with stucco slapped on, topped with a corrugated metal roof—the minimal version of a house as defined by the regulations.

Now the landscape was pocked with rotted hulks that marked the sites of those desert dreams of personal freedom pushed to the limit, dreams of carefree retirement, and wilder dreams of fortunes made from the precious metals supposedly lying just beneath the surface, or greener dreams of harvesting exotic crops, and stranger dreams still of religious visions and landing sites for the space people. This chunk of the dream was called Joshua Tree, after the strange cactuslike trees that often grew as tall as thirty feet with their odd upturned supplicating arms.

Jane arrived when she was sixteen years old. She'd driven night and day from Wyoming with Jimmy's dad. They were only planning on spending the night with an old buddy of his to catch their breath before making a mad three-hour dash down the highway to LA. They'd be splashing around in the Pacific Ocean by noon.

But they never got back on the road, and she still hadn't gotten to LA, seventeen years later.

Jane walked back inside to the kitchen and poured her second cup of coffee and sat down at the little table and lit up a cigarette. When she ran through her list of positive attributes, being able to enjoy an occasional cigarette without ever sliding into the habit was definitely high on the list. When she really needed a cigarette the last thing she wanted to be thinking was that she was doing something bad to herself. This morning she absolutely needed the smooth, calm quickness that nicotine and caffeine concocts in your brain. The mix of aromas from the tobacco and the coffee infused Jane with a sense of encouragement she needed on the morning she was setting out to change her entire life.

She heard Jimmy's feet hit the floor as he got out of bed on the other side of the thin wall and listened to him clomp down the hallway into the

bathroom, smiling at his unmistakable exhalation of relief and the steady *shhhhhh* of water hitting water in the toilet bowl. Then there was an insistent rattling sound, and a moment later he appeared in the doorway of the kitchen.

“Mom, the toilet’s broken again.”

Jimmy stood there unself-consciously in his jockey shorts and worn-pocket T-shirt. It seemed that lately, every time she looked, his appearance changed entirely. At seventeen he had no baby fat left on him. His thighs, calf muscles, shoulders and arms had a new, heavily muscled quality, as if they’d been pneumatically inflated overnight. Only his eyes remained utterly familiar. Whenever she looked at his eyes, time dissolved and he was just a newborn in her arms, and Jane herself was only sixteen years old.

He sniffed the air for coffee like a bear emerging from hibernation, nose alive, other senses not yet kicked in. Jane got up and poured him a cup as he collapsed at the kitchen table. He hated mornings as much as she did. She stirred in a lot of sugar and slipped it in front of him and watched with pleasure as he sighed and lifted it to his lips with a smile that assured her that taking care of him was not a thankless task.

Fortified by caffeine, they went into the bathroom and peered into the murky depths of the broken toilet. Of all the rooms in the house, the

bathroom irritated Jane the most. There wasn't enough space in this tiny cubicle to perform any function without contortions. Jane always tried to avoid looking at the cheap paneling that covered the walls, nailheads erupting from the surface like acne. She long ago gave up her plan to sheetrock the walls and tile them over, but on this morning she could stare at the walls and entertain once more her notion of the way things ought to be.

“We need the pipe wrench,” Jimmy decided.

“I lent it to Guy.”

Jimmy hesitated, “So is it gone?”

“I'll get it back. Sometime.” Jimmy's lips twisted disapprovingly.

“What?” Jane challenged him.

“Nothing.” He shook his head. “I just thought he was okay, that's all.”

“So did I, once, obviously.”

He shrugged as if: *Yeah, sure, if you say so.* Jane grabbed him by the shoulder. “For God's sake, Jimmy, what if Katy, you know, the girl you call three times a day, the one you spend half your life mooning over—”

“*Mooning over?*” Jimmy rolled his eyes.

Jane tried not to laugh as she rushed on with her tirade. “Yeah, her. What if you found out your little darling was screwing an old buddy of yours?”

“What?”

“Yeah. And she lied her ass off and swore it never happened, 'cause she wasn't gonna give it up. What would you do?”

Jimmy's eyes bugged. His throat constricted, and his bowels went watery. “I'd kill her,” he exhaled in a hoarse whisper.

Jane shook her head. Somehow her attempt to explain herself to her old son had taken a strange left turn. “That's terrific, Jimmy. I'm really proud of you. Well, I just kicked the bastard out.” Jimmy breathed an intense sigh of relief. It was all okay. Katy was still faithful to him. Jane pushed him out of the bathroom. “Come on, we're gonna be late.”

Jane went out to the car to warm it up. She was wearing jeans, as she did almost all the time, reasonable ones, not the spray-painted, pinched-at-the-hip, grabbing-the-ankles, how-in-the-world-did-she-ever-get-them-on kind. Jane hated looking cheap, and she knew cheap inside and out. Cheap was different than low-down and dirty. It was a fundamental lack of pride, a posture you didn't even necessarily believe in, but were just adopting as bait. Cheap girls always had that loose-lipped pout. That's why Jane always wore her jeans like she had something to do in them besides just showing off her ass, and cowboy boots so well broken-in, she could walk without looking

like she was clenching a twig between her thighs. But she wasn't intending to go unnoticed in this world, and she always added an unusual scarf or belt or bracelet you hadn't seen everywhere else from her private stash of accents and punctuation marks that completed the little statement she made each morning when she got dressed.

This morning, however, she was attempting to make an entirely different statement than she'd ever made in her life. She got up half an hour early to try on the brand-new dark blue wool suit she'd ordered by mail, black panty hose she hardly ever wore except for an occasional wedding or funeral, and the brand-new pumps she'd bought down in Palm Springs. The whole outfit was inspired by a spread she'd found in *Cosmo*: "What Today's Entrepreneurs Are Wearing on the Job."

Now all of it was neatly folded in her traveling suitcase that she carried out to the car, along with a little briefcase-kind-of-thing she'd picked up at K-Mart, filled with the important papers. As she stashed them in the trunk she couldn't help opening the briefcase one last time to check her own handwritten note with the date and time of her appointment. *Mr. Dennis Tompkins, Vice President of the Wells Fargo Bank in Yucca Valley for today, Wednesday, November 12, 1991 at 1 pm.* Yup, today was Wednesday, November 12. Not like she hadn't counted down to this day every morning

for the past three weeks.

She honked the horn, and Jimmy came stumbling out pulling on his coat, and they drove off. There were seven miles of hardpacked dirt road, deeply eroded with washboard grooves, crossing the mesa from the house all the way out to the state highway. After years of experimenting Jane determined that a constant speed of thirty-two miles an hour caused the least bone-rattling vibration, which was important when you were driving a '71 Dodge Dart on its third rebuilt engine, and every jolt brought it a heartbeat closer to the junkyard.

“Terry thinks he could get me some hours at Burger King.”

“What for?”

“For money.” Jimmy looked at his mother oddly, like, *for what else?*

“Didn’t we have a long talk about the kind of grades you need for a real college and not some dinky community college where no one even knows how to read? So I don’t see where extra money comes in high on the list.”

Jimmy’s frown was huge. “We could use a little more money, Mom.”

“Everyone could use a little more money.”

“Yeah, but we, in particular, could use a little more since you quit waitressing.”

“I told you, I didn’t quit. I have a long-term plan.”

“Right. But in the meanwhile we could use some money.”

Jane felt accused, as if somehow her ambitions were only in her best interests and not in his. “Jimmy, there was no future in waitressing. When you’re in your twenties, it’s still kind of cute dancing around, putting on a performance, bouncing from one table with two bored salesmen on the road dying for a little female juice, to the next table with an old married couple ready to tear each other’s throats out and needing their ruffled feathers smoothed. And let me tell you, I was good at all of it.” Jimmy had to smile. His mother told good stories.

“Well, maybe you shouldn’a given it up so fast.”

“You call fourteen years fast? You think maybe I should’ve waited till I was an old waitress, lugging trays around with broken-down veins? No one tips old women worth a shit.”

Jimmy gave up arguing. He loved his mother without qualification. It wasn’t something that could be talked about, a feeling that he could describe, it was just a given, like gravity. Even when she pissed him off mightily, his affections could not be alienated.

When they reached the state road, Jane pulled over for Jimmy to get out at the school bus stop. “Wait a sec.” She reached for her purse and dug

out her wallet. A sure indicator of the economic state of someone's life is the denomination of currency they consider significant, the size of the bill they are reluctant to break into smaller units. For a brief period of time, the first time in her life actually, when she still had her last waitressing job at the fancy place down in Palm Springs and had paid off a lot of debts, Jane was able to pull out a twenty and not feel it heavy and reluctant in her hand, but now she was back to feeling that way about a ten.

Once she came up with her plan two years ago, she had to cut back on her working hours to take night classes at the Beauty Institute down in San Bernardino and pay for tuition. Even when she graduated and gave up waitressing entirely to work at Serio's Beauty Salon in Yucca Valley, she started out working mostly for tips and had to build up her own clientele. She wasn't doing too badly now, but they were deep in debt like they hadn't been for a long time, so at the end of each month she had to carefully choose which bills to pay and which she could safely let slide.

This morning, though, it felt absolutely critical that she make a loud statement to the money gods that always sat above her shoulder, so she pulled out a twenty and handed it to Jimmy.

He understood the enormity of the gesture and accepted it somberly. He leaned over and gave her a kiss on the cheek, then he got out and walked

across the road, waving to his friends at the bus stop.

She knew how shamelessly she pampered him. But it felt too good to restrain herself. Of all the permutations of the male-female relationship, none is more filled with unqualified mutual admiration than between a single mother and her son. It is entirely different than a mother's relationship to her son when she is just one leg of a triangle that includes the presence of his father, where Dad acts as a natural restraint on the conspiratorial affection between mother and son.

The essential ingredient of a father's relation to his son is judgment. A son is continually trying to measure up and failing, then trying harder, chafing against authority, building up an internal reservoir of pride, anger, ambition, an appetite for competition and a tolerance for discomfort. A father makes his son uncomfortable—not a bad preparation for life—but mothers make it all right, all right, all right, with a soothing hand she'll never apply to any other male in her life. But if there's no Dad in the house to inhibit her ministrations, they only grow lusher over the years.

Jane swung her car south toward Yucca Valley and slipped a cassette into the bashed-up player on the seat beside her. A smooth, compassionate, baritone voice instructed her how to develop “A Mind-set for Prosperity.” She'd acquired the cassette series and accompanying workbook from an

eight-hundred number on late-night TV, after much hesitation, deciding it was as much as she was willing to invest—this time. Four years ago, she'd forked over a shitload of money for a correspondence course to obtain a real estate broker's license, but by the time she was ready to take her certification exams, the market collapsed, and everyone and their uncle in town was already a broker with nothing to sell.

Jane listened intently to the tape, and, following its instructions, she tried to determine whether Guy's departure was *an economic event of primarily negative or positive impact*. Well, he'd kicked in some money, occasionally, and usually showed up with groceries. But he drank a phenomenal amount of beer, ate like a horse, and used up half the month's water in a week. As she was trying to give each factor a precise dollar value, she was startled by the *whoop-whoop-whoop* of a police siren. The flashing lights were right behind her. She pulled over to the side of the road. She couldn't believe it. Not this morning. But underneath the sudden surge of adrenaline she was calm, confident that she could talk her way out of whatever this was about.

The cop walked up so close to the car that all she could see was his chest and arms right in front of her nose. "Can I please see your license and registration, ma'am."

Without hesitation she pulled an arrow from her quiver, notched it and let it fly, a shaft of pure innocence. “Officer, there must be some kind of mistake. This car won’t go fast enough to break your speed limit.” She liked the tinkle of good-naturedness in her voice.

The cop took a step back and stared down at her. “You weren’t speeding. Your taillights don’t work.”

She had to scrunch down and twist her neck to see him. He was a good-looking guy, and he wasn’t even wearing sunglasses like every cop in California does even at midnight in a rainstorm. He was older than her, in his forties, with dark bushy eyebrows and an intense, tightly wound jaw, but his eyes were very relaxed, almost dreamy.

Now she smiled at him. Nothing suggestive. Friendly. “Awww, come on, officer, with all the cars out here doing eighty at least, you stopped me for my taillights?”

“You were in front of me for five miles. I watched you hit the brakes a couple of times. I couldn’t just ignore you.”

She nodded and sighed as if: *Yes, I understand your problem*, and then she perked up as if the perfect solution had just occurred to her. “Well, now that you’ve brought it to my attention, I’ll get them fixed right away.”

The cop sighed, “The infraction already occurred.”

Penitence was required. Jane lowered her eyes, like a thoroughly chastened, naughty little girl. “I’ll take care of it today. I promise,” she murmured.

“Could I please see your license and registration?”

Jane knew he was demanding obedience, but that did not automatically imply punishment. She took her wallet out of her purse and removed her license, then silently opened the glove box and dug out the coffee-stained registration. But before she handed them to him, she made her plea.

“Officer, my taillights are broken because this is a shitty old car, which means the person driving it cannot afford to pay the ticket you are about to give her. What I don’t understand...,” and her voice rose into a register where she couldn’t be absolutely sure it wouldn’t crack, “...is why—since you’ve got to write a certain number of tickets per day, and you could just as easily collect that money from tourists up from Palm Springs roaring to the Park who can afford it—why you would stop me?” She sighed, amazed by how genuine it felt. “Because, officer, this is really going to hurt.”

He didn’t respond. He couldn’t. He was staring into her eyes. Just the way guys had stared into Jane’s eyes for as long as she could remember. She

knew she might not be the greatest beauty in the world, but men fell for her. Not all men, and not always the ones she wanted, but a very significant portion of the male population comprehended what she was about very quickly when they looked into her eyes. It wasn't flirtation, not a vain siren call for admiration. What they saw was some serious shit, and they wanted some of it.

But right now it pissed her off that this cop was staring into her eyes that way. She'd had no intention of getting into that with him, and she had a pretty clear idea after all these years when and how to turn it on and when to leave it idling in neutral. She'd been trying hard to slip out of this jam on superficial charm alone—a little smile, a *thanks a lot* and *have a nice day*—but she had no idea whether he'd even heard a word of her plea because he was devouring her with his eyes. Jane couldn't quite activate her neck muscles to turn her head away. His eyes, she noticed, were big black floating things that crowded out the whites.

She finally managed to hand him the license and registration, hoping he'd just run a check on her and let her go with only a warning. Exactly. A warning. He took the documents without a word and walked slowly back to his cruiser.

The cop sat down on the seat of his car waiting for the dizziness to pass. His vital energy had plunged precipitously from his brain, stopping his heart along the way down and landing with a thud in the depths of his intestines. But the cop didn't fight the sensation. His name was Davey Stone and he was a man who believed that the universe sends you messages in strange ways and that he had just received a critical transmission.

Jane drummed her fingers on the wheel, nervously watching him in her rearview mirror. Finally he got back out of his cruiser, and she looked down quickly as he approached. She intended to keep her eyes down, nod as he lectured her, thank him very much for letting her off this time, and get the hell out of there as quickly as she could.

He was squatting beside the car so his face was level with hers through the window. The sun, hanging low in the sky behind his head, highlighted the brushstrokes of gray in his thick black hair.

“Miss Vaughn—”

“It's Mrs. Vaughn.” His face seemed to harden like plaster. It kind of frightened her. “Actually, I'm divorced. For twelve years.” She couldn't help it. It was like he was wringing the confession out of her. “I guess I should have changed my name back to Ramsey, but my son's name is Vaughn.” She was totally discombobulated now.

“I don’t want you to take this the wrong way. I’ve never done this before.”

She laughed. Damn, it sounded nervous. She cleared her throat, “Oh, come on.” There, that was lighter. “I’m sure you let people off with just a warning all the time.”

He didn’t seem to hear her. “I want to see you again, Miss Vaughn.” He held up a ticket all written out. “That’s why I wrote this citation first. Because if I didn’t, and I asked to see you, that would be coercion, wouldn’t it?”

She nodded somberly and was reaching for the ticket he was holding out to her when she suddenly snapped out of her trance and pulled her hand back in the nick of time, as if she’d been about to pet an alligator. “But now I have a damn ticket to pay!”

“I’ll be glad to pay it for you.” The intensity in his voice was like a big wave swelling off the shore, rolling toward her.

“But it’s a moving violation, right? It goes on my insurance. I’m gonna be paying for it for the next three years. What are you gonna do, show up every six months with a check for my insurance company?” Jane shook her head wearily. “How about just throwing it away, huh?”

“Sorry. There’s a copy in my book that goes straight into the

computer.”

“Let me get this straight. You would have let me off with just a warning, but since you want to go out with me, I get a ticket?” She looked him straight in the eye, to make him back off, but it didn’t work. The minute their eyes met they were back into whatever they’d been into.

“I want to see you,” he repeated.

“You do?” He nodded. “Then toss your whole damn book of tickets over in the cactus and tell them you lost it.” It was a dare she knew he wouldn’t take. That was how she dealt with guys when she wanted to put a stop to things. Men don’t expect a dare from a woman. They think daring is only their thing. She waited for him to pull himself uncertainly to his feet and say: *Ma’am, what you’re asking me to do is against the law and we’ll drop this right here and now.*

But he got that it was a dare and he just kept staring into her eyes, betraying no perceptible slackening of will. He seemed to be studying her as if she were some strange, new, wild creature he’d encountered for the first time, and he was calmly considering what it would take to subdue her with a minimum of bloodshed.

Which was way too much for Jane on this particular morning. She shook her head, grabbed the ticket out of his hand, dropped it into her lap,

and rolled up the window of the car without another word. But she couldn't help it. As she started the engine, she watched him out of the corner of her eye, slowly rising up and stepping back. She pulled away, glancing in the rearview mirror at him standing stock-still, staring at her.

He watched her car driving off until it disappeared down the road and then he walked back to his car. The call radio was squawking loudly, "Davey? Davey, where the hell are you?"

"Right here," he answered.

The voice over the radio chortled. "Daveeee. I just checked this morning's winning numbers in the paper. You know the dozen Big Draw tickets we went halves on? Well, we hit the sonuvabitch! It's winning time! A thousand bucks, man!"

Davey Stone just stared out his windshield in the direction of Jane's departed car.

"Davey? You there? You hear what I said? You got a winning ticket."

"I already knew that."

"How? Why didn't you call me? You saw the numbers on TV already?"

Davey shook his head, still staring down the road. "No. I just knew it."