

PROLOGUE

Lying hot and sleepless in the narrow upper bunk, nine-year-old Ceci Grijalva knew her mother was leaving long before she left, long before the outside door opened and closed. When it did, Ceci pulled back a corner of the sheet that served as a curtain and peered out at the weed-infested yard that separated their dingy duplex from the one next door. Moments later, Serena Grijalva's pilfered grocery cart, stacked high with dirty laundry, rattled past the window toward the pot-holed gravel track that passed for a street inside the dreary complex known as Esperanza Village.

Hope Village. Even a little kid could tell that the name was a bad joke. Hopeless was more like it.

Ceci dropped back on her thin mattress and lay there hot and miserable. Back home in Bisbee where they used to live or down in Douglas with Grandma Grijalva, the weather would be cooler now. But not here in Phoenix. Peoria, really. The way her mother had talked about it, Phoenix was one huge, magical city—a wonderful place. Ceci had discovered that it was actually a bunch of places—Phoenix, Glendale, Peoria, Sun City. She could never tell where one stopped and another began, although the kids who had always lived there seemed to know—and they made fun of Ceci when she didn't.

Phoenix was hot. And the cooler didn't work. Even when it was running, it didn't do much good, and it smelled awful—like something green and moldy. Ceci hated that smell.

She lay on the bed, tossing restlessly. The knowledge that her mother was gone kept Ceci awake while her little brother, Pablo, snored peacefully in the bottom bunk. Out in the living room she heard the steady drone of the unwatched television set. Just before she left, Serena had turned on the TV.

She always did that. Ceci knew the blaring television set was a trick. Her mother thought if the kids woke up in the night and heard a mumble of voices from the other room, they'd think Serena was out there watching a program when in reality she'd probably been gone for hours, leaving the two children alone. Again.

Finally, careful not to disturb her brother, the sleepless child pulled her rosary beads out from under her pillow and climbed down from the top bunk. Clutching the beads close to her chest, she tiptoed out into the living room and turned off the TV.

There was no lamp in the sparsely furnished room, and Ceci didn't bother to switch on the overhead light. With the room illuminated by the street-light on the corner outside, she made her way to the sweat-stained armchair one of Serena's pickup-driving boyfriends had dragged home from a pile of unsold refuse after a Sun City estate sale. Moving the chair close enough to the window to see out, Cecilia curled up inside it. This was where she sat and waited when her mother went out late at night. This was where she sat and worried. And even though she tried to stay awake, she sometimes fell into a fitful sleep. Once Serena had come in and found her there, but usually Ceci managed to rouse herself. Serena's cart clattering back through the yard would give the child enough warning to turn the TV set back on and scurry into her bed.

Ceci sniffed the air. Serena had been gone for some time, but the heavy scent of her perfume and hair spray still lingered in the room. Ceci shook her head. Even though

the grocery cart had been full of dirty clothes when Serena left the house, Ceci wasn't fooled. The laundry was only an excuse—almost as much of a trick as the blaring television set. If washing clothes was all her mother had in mind, she could have used the laundry room right there in the complex. For that one—the one next to the manager's apartment—she wouldn't have needed hair spray or perfume.

Serena always said that the machines in the Esperanza Village laundry room weren't any good. She refused to use them, claiming that the clothes never came clean enough, and that the dryers were too slow. That's why she always took the laundry four blocks down the street to the WE-DO-YU-DO Washateria. Ceci may have been only nine, but she understood that that story wasn't the truth, either. Not the whole truth. The real answer lay in the business next door to the laundry—a place called the Roundhouse Bar and Grill.

Sometimes, on weekends, Ceci and Pablo would go along with Serena to do the wash. Usually the two children would be left on their own in the laundry while their mother went next door to get some change. That's what she always told them—that she was going for change—even though Pablo had pointed out the change machine right there beside the soap machine. Once Serena disappeared into the bar, she'd be gone for a long time—for hours. When she came back, her hair would smell of cigarette smoke, and her breath would smell like beer. By then Ceci and Pablo would already have removed the clothes from the dryers, folded them, and loaded them back into the waiting cart.

Often it would be late afternoon or even early evening by the time they started the four-block walk home. Ceci and Pablo would be hungry—grateful to munch on whatever treats Serena happened to bring out to them from the bar—potato chips or peanuts or even hunks of tough beef jerky. Sometimes a nice man from the bar would come find them and bring them hamburgers with real french fries.

Chances were, as Serena pushed the cart along, she would be singing or giggling or both. She never really walked straight after she'd been inside the Roundhouse for an hour or so. Ceci would spend the whole trip home praying to the Holy Mother that they wouldn't meet any of her friends from 'hoot along the way.

Sitting in the stifling living room, waiting for her other to return, Ceci Grijalva felt incredibly lonely. She missed her father. Even though her mother and father used to fight a lot, she still missed him. And she missed her grandmother, too. The happiest hours of Ceci's life had been spent at the rickety table in her Grandmother Grijalva's tiny house watching the old woman make tortillas. Grandma was blind, from something Ceci could never remember, something that started with a g. But even blind, the old woman's practiced hands still remembered how to make tortillas—how much flour and water to put into the bowl, how to pat the soft, white dough into perfect circles, how long to leave them on the hot griddle, and how to pluck them off with her thumb and finger without ever getting burned.

Waiting for her mother to return, Ceci ached for the comfort of her grandmother's ample breast and wondered if and when she and Pablo would ever see their father's mother again. Serena had said they might go down to Douglas at Christmastime, but Ceci didn't see how that was possible. Douglas was more than two hundred miles away. They didn't have a car. Two hundred miles was too far to push a grocery cart.

Blinking back tears of loneliness, Ceci fingered the beads that lay in her lap, the

ones she usually kept hidden under her pillow. Grandmother Grijalva had given her the string of black beads last year when she made her first communion. Nana had told Ceci that saying Hail Marys would help her feel better, no matter what was wrong. In the months since Ceci's mother had left her father and brought the children to Phoenix, Ceci had often used the hidden beads to put herself to sleep, slipping them out from under the pillow only after the lights were off and her mother had left the room.

Ceci didn't really need to hide them from her mother. Serena was sort of a Catholic, even though she hadn't been to mass since they moved. The real problem was Serena's mother, Ernestina Duffy. Nana Duffy, as she liked the children to call her. Nana Duffy was a Baptist, Ceci could never remember what kind, and she was always telling Ceci and Pablo that the pope was evil. Ceci didn't believe it.

"Holy Mary, mother of God . . ." she whispered. As the beads slipped through her fingers, Ceci's eyes grew heavy. Gradually she drifted off into a troubled sleep. Only this time the return of her mother's clattering grocery cart didn't wake her. Pablo did. He was standing in front of her in his underwear, frowning, both hands on his hips.

"How come you're sleeping there?" he demanded.

Ceci's eyes popped open. It was morning. Where the street light had glowed hours before, now bright late-summer sunshine filled the window. She shifted stiffly in the chair. The foot that had been curled under her was sound asleep. As soon as she moved it, needles and pins shot up her leg.

"Where's Mom?" she asked.

Pablo turned on the TV set and squatted in front of it. "I dunno," he said. "Maybe she already went to work. I'm hungry."

"She isn't here?" Ceci asked.

Pablo didn't answer. When the needles and pins went away enough so Ceci could walk, she limped into Serena's bedroom. There was no sign of the laundry basket. Hurrying to the back door, she looked outside. The grocery cart wasn't where it belonged, either. Dismayed, Ceci realized her mother had never come home from the WE-DO-YU-DO Washateria.

Ceci felt sick, but there was no phone in the ' house; no way for her to call someone and ask for help. She did the only thing that seemed reasonable tit the time.

"Turn off the cartoons, Pepe," she said. "Get dressed. We've got to get ready for school."

CHAPTER ONE

"You never should have gone out with him in the first place," Lael Weaver Gastone told her thirty-year-old daughter, Rhonda. "You should have figured out from the very beginning that a guy like that would be trouble, and you certainly shouldn't have married him."

Holding her hands in her lap, Rhonda Norton examined her tender fingertips. She was so on edge that she had chewed the nails off all the way down to the quick. "How was I supposed to know that?" she asked, trying her best not to cry.

Lael looked up from the thumbnail sketch she was working on. The bar of pastel stopped scratching on the rough surface of the Sabertooth paper.

"Oh, for God's sake, Rhonda. How dumb can you be?" Lad demanded. "If a

married professor starts dating an unmarried undergraduate, you can pretty well figure the man's a jackass. And so's the girl for that matter."

Rhonda Weaver Norton's cheeks reddened with anger. The tears retreated. "Thanks, Mom," she plaid. "I always know I can count on you for sympathy."

"You can always count on me for a straight answer," Lael corrected. "Now tell me, why exactly are you here?"

Rhonda looked around the spacious, well-lit studio her stepfather, Jean Paul Gastone, had built as a place for his lovely new wife to pursue her artistic endeavors. Rhonda interpreted that cluttered but isolated work space as an act of self-serving generosity on Jean Paul's part. Lael had always been messy. If nothing else, the physical separation of the studio from the main house would help keep most of that mess localized. That way the main house—a breathtakingly cantilevered mountaintop mansion—could continue to look picture-perfect, as it the photographers from *House Beautiful* or *Architectural Digest* were due at any moment.

The place where Lael and Jean Paul lived now was a far cry from the way Rhonda and her mother had lived when Rhonda was a child. She and the free-spirited, starving artist Lael Weaver had lived a nomadic existence that took them from place to place, from drafty furnished rooms to countless roach-infested apartments. This million-dollar-plus architectural wonder was perched on a steep hill-side overlooking one of Sedona, Arizona's, most photographed red-rocked cliffs. The fourteen-foot floor-to-ceiling windows offered a clear and unobstructed view.

All the furnishings in both the house and studio had been tastefully chosen by someone with an eye for beauty. Rhonda didn't have to look at any of the labels to know that all the assembled pieces were name brand, as were the clothes on her mother's back. That was far different from the past as well. Rhonda had spent her school years living with the daily humiliation of wearing the second-hand clothing her mother had bought at thrift stores and rummage sales. She had endured the steady taunts from other children who somehow knew she ate the free lunches offered at school. And she recalled all too well how embarrassed she had been every time her mother sent her to the grocery store with a fistful of food stamps instead of money.

Lael's life had taken a definite turn for the better. In the last few years, her oddball pastels had finally started to sell. She had met Jean Paul Gastone at a gallery opening when he had stopped by to say how much he admired her work. Now they were married—seemingly happily—and living a gracious and beautiful life together. Rhonda couldn't help envying the idea of her mother living happily ever after. Too bad things hadn't worked out nearly that well for Lael's daughter.

In the course of a long, lingering silence, Lael returned to her sketch. With nothing more to say, Rhonda once more examined the room. She realized with a start that her mother's studio—that one room, not counting either the private bath or the convenient kitchenette that had been built off to one side—was larger than her entire studio apartment.

She had moved into that god-awful, low-life complex only two days earlier. Already she hated it. But she had come face-to-face with stark economic reality. Rhonda Norton was a newly separated, unemployed woman, with no recent work history and only marginally salable skills. Her university work was sixteen credits shy of a bachelor's

degree with a major in American history, a curriculum that didn't have much going for it in the world of business. As a consequence, that tiny upstairs apartment facing directly into the afternoon sun was all she could afford. In fact, it was more than she could afford.

Confronted with the obvious dichotomy between her mother's newfound wealth and her own new-found poverty, Rhonda Norton felt doubly impoverished. And defeated. It would have been easy to give up, to make like Chief Joseph, leader of the Nez Perce, and say to all the world, "I will fight no more forever."

"Well?" Lael prompted impatiently, dragging Rhonda back to the present and to the real issue at hand.

She dropped her eyes once more. "I'm afraid," she said softly.

"Afraid of what?"

Rhonda dreaded saying the words aloud, especially since she didn't think her mother had ever been afraid of anything in her whole life. As far as Rhonda was concerned, Lael had always seemed as brave and daring as the brilliant greens, blues, and reds she was swiftly daubing onto the paper.

"Afraid of what?" Lael asked again.

"Of him," Rhonda answered. "Of Dean. He threatened me. He told me that if I went through' with the divorce, he'd see me in hell before he'd pay me a single dime of alimony or give me a property settlement."

"Oh, hell," Lael said. "The man's just pissed because he got passed over for department head and then they shipped him off to that other campus, wherever that is."

"The ASU West campus is on Thunderbird, Mom," Rhonda returned quietly. "But he's not bluffing. He means it. He won't give me a dime."

Lael Weaver Gastone was incensed. "If it's the money, don't worry about it. He's bluffing. Jean Paul and I could always help out if it came to that, but it won't. You'll see. The courts will make him pay."

But Rhonda was no longer looking at her mother. She had dropped her gaze once more. "It's not just the money, Mom. I don't care about that." She took a deep breath. "I'm afraid he'll kill me, Mom." She paused and bit her lip. "He hits me sometimes," she added almost in a whisper.

"He what?" Lael asked. "I can't hear you if you don't speak up."

"He hits me," Rhonda repeated raggedly. "Hard." A single tear leaked from her eye and slipped down her cheek. "And he told me the other day when I was packing that he'd kill me if I go through with it—with getting a divorce."

Slowly, without looking directly at her mother's ace, Rhonda Weaver Norton unbuttoned the top three buttons of her cardigan sweater; then she slipped the soft knit material down over her shoulder. Under the sweater her bare shoulder and back were discolored by a mass of green-and-purple bruises. Lael gasped when she saw them.

"You let him do this to you?" she demanded. "Why didn't you say so in the first place?"

Blushing furiously, Rhonda pulled her sweater back up. "The first two times he promised he'd never do it again, so I dropped the charges. This time I haven't... not yet."

Lael tossed the piece of blue pastel in the general direction of her box, then slammed the lid shut. "And you're not going to, either. Come on. We'll talk to Jean

Paul. He'll know what to do.”

He waited until midnight. Not that midnight had any special significance, other than the fact that it was the time of day he liked best—the time when he felt most at home.

He thought about what he was doing as a bridge—a ritual bridge—between the past and the future, between the women who had already died and the ones who soon would. Although he didn't think of himself as particularly superstitious, he always performed the midnight ceremony in exactly the same way, starting with closing all the blinds. Only when they were all safely closed did he light the candle.

Once upon a time, he had used incense, but his damn fool of a landlady in Sacramento had reported him to the cops. She had turned him in because she thought he was smoking dope in her precious downstairs apartment. That was right after Lois Hart, and he was nervous as hell. When the young cop showed up on the doorstep and knocked on his door, he'd been so scared that he almost peed his pants. He'd managed to talk his way out of that one—barely—but he'd also learned his lesson. No more incense. From that day on, he' used only candles.

As the wick of the scented candle caught fire, he breathed in the sweet, cinnamon scent. He preferred cinnamon over all the others because they always reminded him of his grandmother's freshly baked pumpkin pies. Cinnamon candles were easy to come by during the holidays, and he usually stocked up so he wouldn't run out during the rest of the year.

After setting the burning candle in the center of his kitchen table, he went around the whole house and switched off all the other lights. Turning off the lights slowly, one by one, always added to his sense of anticipation. He liked finishing his preparations in darkened rooms with the only light coming from the flickering glow of a single candle. Everybody always said candlelight made things more romantic. No argument there.

Next came the music. That was always the same, too—Mantovani. In her later years, his mother had kept only one Mantovani album, and she had played it over and over until he thought he would lose his mind. The record had worn out eventually, thank God. So had the record player, for that matter, but when he had wanted to play the familiar music once again, he'd had no trouble finding it.

Now he used a cassette player and cheap cassettes that he picked up for a buck or two apiece at used-record stores. He himself didn't care all that much for Mantovani, certainly not enough to pay full retail.

By the time he turned on the music, his eyes had adjusted to the dim light. With the soft strains of violins playing soothingly in the background, and with his whole body burning with anticipation, he would finally allow himself to go to the bottom right-hand corner of his closet to retrieve his precious faux alabaster jewelry box.

The box wasn't inherently valuable. What gave it worth was where it came from, what it meant. Like that single scratched Mantovani album, the jewelry box had been one of his mother's prized possessions. When he was twelve, he had bought it for her as a Mother's Day present. He had paid for it with money he earned delivering newspapers.

His mother had loved the box, treasured it. When she died, though, the gift had reverted to the giver. He remembered how, on the day she unwrapped t, his mother had

run her finger over the smooth, cool stonelike stuff, how she had admired the figure of the young Grecian woman whose delicate image had been carved in translucent relief on the hinged top.

He looked down now at the graceful young woman in the revealing, loosely flowing gown. His mother had thought her very beautiful. As a matter of fact, so did he. In a lifetime of quarreling with his mother, the Greek maiden's virginal beauty was one of the few things the two of them had ever agreed upon. The girl's obvious innocence was one of the reasons he used the box as an integral part of his midnight ritual. He liked the symbolism. The other reason for using it was equally satisfying in the same way Mantovani was—the box had belonged to his mother. Had she known the use he made of it, the knowledge would have made her crazy, if she hadn't been already. That aspect of the ceremony always added a whole other dimension to his amusement. He had never loved his mother, never even liked her.

As he carried the box to the kitchen table, his hands shook with anticipation. His whole body quivered. But he held back. Instead of giving in to his growing physical need, he forced himself to sit down and wait. He calmed himself by staring into the flickering glow of the lighted candle, by watching its muted, soothing light reflected in the satiny finish of the jewelry box.

He liked knowing that he could control the urge, that he could turn it off and on at will. He prided himself on being able to go all the way to the edge and then pull himself back if he had to, although sometimes, like tonight, waiting was almost more than he could bear. It reminded him of the game he used to play with his mother's old dog, Prudence. He'd dish up the food and put it on the floor, but instead of letting the dog eat it, he'd put her on a down stay and make her wait for it, sometimes for hours. And if she tried to sneak over to it without permission, he'd beat the crap out of her. It had been great training for Prudence. It had taught her the meaning of self-control. It had taught him the same valuable lesson.

So he sat at the table, in front of the flickering candle, and waited for however long it took for his breathing to slow, for his heart to stop pounding, and for the painful bulge in his pants to disappear. Only after he was totally under control did he allow himself to lift the hinged lid and look inside at the folded treasures waiting there—six pairs of panties.

Each pair had its own size, shape, and color. He could have sorted through the box blindfolded and still known which was which because he knew them intimately, more by feel than looks.

Except for the beige ones, which he quickly laid aside, he always stored the underwear according to a LIFO (last in/first out) style of inventory—a system he had learned about way back in college. That when he was so naive that he had wanted to be accountant just like his daddy, when he was still growing up and all gung ho on following in his father's footsteps. Screw that!

Even though the box was open, still he delayed, postponing for a few minutes longer the moment of gratification. It struck him as interesting that each pair was so different from all the others. But then, since the women were so different, that was only to be expected. Every time he sorted through collection, he felt like a decorated veteran examining his medals. Each trophy brought to mind name, a place, and a time. The sounds, the feelings, replayed themselves as vividly as if it were happening all

over again. He was sure his memory did a better job at replaying the details than any of that virtual reality stuff he kept reading about in the newspaper.

Finally, satisfied that he had waited long enough, he picked up the first pair—white cotton briefs so worn that the material was see-through thin. Holding it to his face, he closed his eyes and breathed in and out through the soft folds of material. With each breath he remembered everything about that Mexican girl with long, dark hair and big tits. Serena was her name. She had been anything but serene out there on the mountain. He smiled again remembering her good looks and those soft, voluptuous breasts.

He didn't usually target women he knew. He often had no idea what any of the women looked like when he first chose them. At the time he selected them, they were only names on paper. Due to the luck of the draw, some of them turned out to be whole lot better looking than others. In fact, one had been a real dog. In Serena's case he had created the opportunity rather than waiting for it to pres itself. It had worked like a charm. Not only that, other than Rochelle, Serena Grijalva had been best looking of the bunch.

Laying Serena's underwear aside, he picked u the next pair. Jockey, the label said. Whoever heard of Jockey for women? What a queer idea! And then he giggled because the thought itself was so funny. It figured. These had belonged to Constance Fredericks, and she was queer all right—as a three-doll bill. He had suspected her of being a lesbian just from the paperwork, and of course she was. When he followed her to ground down in Miami, Florid she and her partying friends had verified all worst suspicions. It didn't bother him that Constance liked women. What she liked or didn't like had no bearing on him. As a matter of fact, he ha enjoyed watching the way Constance and the others carried on. They did things to one another that, up to that time, he'd only read about in books, things that his uptight mother never would have believed possible.

He put down the jockeys and picked up the next pair. Black lace. Control top. These had belonged Maddy Piper, an aging showgirl-turned-stripper from Las Vegas whose figure was starting to go to seed. She would have been far better off if she hadn't ended up getting into a big fight with her agent, an ex-middleweight boxer.

Next came the pink satin bikini briefs with the Frederick's of Hollywood label. They had belonged to Lois Hart, a barmaid at the Lucky Strike bowling alley in Stockton, California. Lois had sold drinks during the day and dealt in other kinds of chemical mood enhancers by night. When she was found bludgeoned to death and tied to a snag on the banks of the Sacramento River, nobody had gone out their way looking for her killer. The cops had written Lois off as a drug deal gone bad and let it go that.

That brought him to the bright red pair at the very bottom of the box, the ones that had once belonged to Rochelle Newton. Lovely, tall, and slender Rochelle from Tacoma, Washington. Years earlier, when he was up in Seattle, training to be an eager-beaver CPA, Rochelle had been the not-too-savvy hooker who had laughed at him when couldn't perform. She had been his very first victim —an accident almost. He hadn't really intended to kill her. It had just happened. But once he started hitting her, he had found he couldn't stop himself. Afterward, when he knew she was dead and after he had carefully disposed of her body, he took the key to her apartment on Pacific

Highway South, let himself in, and helped himself to a single pair of panties from her dresser drawer.

At that point, all he had wanted was a token—something that belonged to her, something to remember her by. The moment he had found the red panties in a drawer, a tradition was born.

Over the years, he had figured out how stupid he had been. It was a miracle nobody had seen him going to or coming from Rochelle's apartment. Now he either took the panties at the time of killing—if he thought he could take them without investigators seeing it as a signature M.O.—or did without.

For years after killing Rochelle, he had lived terror—waiting for the knock on the door that would mean the cops had finally caught up with him. The knock never came. And then one day Rochelle's name had turned up on the list of missing persons who were thought to be the possible victims of one of the Northwest's most notorious serial killers. The very night Rochelle's killer read her name in the paper, he went to bed safe in the knowledge that he and slept like a baby, safe in the knowledge that the cops were no longer looking for him. They were looking for someone else, someone they called a serial killer.

He had quit his father's firm the next day and gone off on his own, working at two-bit jobs, but savoring the freedom. And knowing that his mother would always slip him a little something he got caught short.

Once on the road, he realized there was a world of difference between serial killers and recreational ones. The first kind kill because some evil compulsion forces them to. The second ones do it for the fun of it—because they want to.

Breathing deeply, he fondled the swatch of bright red silk. Rochelle. She was the one who had shown him the rules and taught him how to play the game. Once he knew how simple it was to fake the cops out and trick them into looking the other way, everything else was easy.

All six pairs of panties were out on the table now, laying there in full view. Allowing himself to become excited again, he studied them under the glow of the candle's flickering light, stroking each one in turn. One at a time, he held five of the six up to his face once more, trying to make up his mind.

As he did so, his heartbeat quickened. Which would it be tonight? Which one should he choose? Other than Rochelle, he had never raped his victims, not at the time. He knew better than that. DNA tests were far too reliable these days, and some cops were a whole lot smarter than they looked. Besides, he didn't want to pick up some kind of sexually transmitted disease. One way or another, all women were whores. When it came to that, he believed in the old adage, Better safe than sorry.

At the time he was doing it, he enjoyed killing them. That was satisfying in a way, but he took his real pleasure from them later on, over and over, in the privacy of his own home. There—with the doors carefully closed and locked, with the blinds pulled, and with a scented candle burning on the table—they offered him the relief he craved. No questions asked.

By then his breath was coming in short, sharp gasps. His pants were bulging so badly that it hurt. He breathed a sigh of relief when he finally opened the zipper and allowed the caged prisoner to roam free. A moment later his other hand settled on newest prize in his collection—Serena Grijalva's thin white cotton briefs.

It didn't take long. He grasped himself and masturbated into the soft material, groaning with pleasure when he came. Afterward, he hurried to bathroom and washed out the panties with soap and water before hanging them on the towel bar to dry. Then he went back to the kitchen table, turned on the overhead light, and blew out the candle.

Sitting down once more, he picked up a single piece of paper that had slipped out of sight temporarily under Maddy Piper's black lace panties. The paper was a fragment hastily torn from the corner of a yellow legal pad. A few words had been noted on it in painstakingly careful printing. "Rhonda Weaver Norton," it said. "Fourteen twenty-five Apache Boulevard, number six, Tempe, Arizona."

Using a strip of tape, he fastened the piece of paper to the bottom of the box and then sat there for a moment, admiring his handiwork.

"Rhonda," the man whispered aloud. "Rhonda, Rhonda, Rhonda. You'd better watch out, little girl. The big bad wolf is coming to get you."

CHAPTER TWO

Joanna Brady zipped the last suitcase shut and then sat down on the edge of the bed. "Off you go," she said to her daughter, who was sprawled crosswise on the bed, thumbing through a stack of family photos.

"I like this one best," Jenny said, plucking one out of the stack and handing it to her mother. The picture had been taken by Joanna's father, Big Hank Lathrop, with his Brownie Hawkeye camera. The irregularly sized, old-fashioned, black-and-white snapshot showed an eight-year-old Joanna Lathrop, dressed in her Brownie uniform. She stood at attention in front of her mother's old Maverick. In the foreground cartons of Girl Scout cookies were stacked into a Radio Flyer wagon.

Joanna was almost thirty years old now. Big Hank Lathrop had been dead for fifteen years, but as Joanna held the photo in her hand she missed her father more than she could have thought possible. She missed him almost as much as she missed her deputy sheriff husband, Andy, who had died a victim of the country's continuing war on drugs only two months earlier.

It took real effort for her to speak around the word-trapping lump that mysteriously filled throat. "I always liked that one, too," she managed.

Joanna usually thought of Jenny as resembling Andy far more than she did her mother's side of the family, but studying the photo closely, she could see that Jenny and the little girl in the twenty-two-year-old picture might have been sisters.

"How come none of these are in color?" Jenny asked. "They look funny. Like pictures in a museum."

"Because Grandpa Lathrop developed them himself," Joanna answered. "In that room below the stairs in Grandma Lathrop's basement. That was his darkroom. He always said he liked working in black and white better than he did in color."

Carefully, Joanna began gathering the scattered photos, returning them to the familiar shoe box that had been their storage place for as many years she could remember. "Come on now," she urged. "It's time to go to bed in your own room."

Jenny pouted. "Oh, Mom, do I have to? Can't I stay up just a little longer?"

Joanna shook her head. "No way. I don't know about you, but I have a big day

ahead of me tomorrow. After church and as soon as dinner is over, I have to drive all the way to Phoenix—that’s a good four-hour trip. I’d better get some sleep tonight, or I’ll doze off at the wheel.”

Folding down the covers on what she still considered to be her side of the bed, Joanna crawled in and pulled the comforter up around her chin. Climbing into the double bed was when the now familiar ache of Andy’s absence hit her anew with soul-wrenching reality.

Instead of taking the hint and heading for her own bed, Jenny simply snuggled closer. “Do you have to go to Phoenix?” she asked.

“Peoria,” Joanna corrected, fighting her way through her pain and back into the conversation. “It’s north of Phoenix, remember?” Jenny said nothing and Joanna shook her head in exasperation, “Jennifer Ann Brady, you know I have to go. We’ve been over this a million times.”

“But since you’re already elected sheriff, how come you have to take classes? If you didn’t go to the academy, they wouldn’t diselect you, would they?”

“Diselect isn’t a word,” Joanna pointed out. “But you’re right. Even if I flunked this course—which I won’t—no one is going to take my badge away.”

“Then why go? Why couldn’t you just stay home instead of going all the way up there? I want you here.”

Joanna tried to be patient. “I may have been elected sheriff,” she explained, “but I’ve never been a real police officer—a trained police officer—before. I know something about it because of Grandpa Lathrop and Daddy, but the bottom line is I know a whole lot more about selling insurance than I do about being a cop. The most important job the sheriff does is to be the department’s leader. You know what a leader is, don’t you?”

Jenny considered for a moment before she nodded. “Mrs. Mosley’s my Brownie leader.”

“Right. And what does she do?”

“She takes us on camp-outs. She shows us how to make things, like sit-upons and buddy-burners and stuff. Last week she started teaching us how to tie knots.”

“But she couldn’t teach you how to do any of those things if she didn’t already know them herself, could she?”

Jennifer shrugged. “I guess not,” she said.

“Being sheriff is just like being a troop leader,” Joanna explained. “In order to lead the department, I have to be able to show the people who work under me that I know what’s going on—that I know what I’m doing. I have to know what to do and how to do it before I can tell my officers what I expect of them. And the only way to learn all those things in a hurry is to take a crash course like the one they offer at the Arizona Police Officers Academy.”

“But why does it have to start the week before Thanksgiving?” Jenny objected. “Couldn’t it start afterward? You won’t even be back home until two days before Christmas. When will we go Christmas shopping?”

Andrew Roy Brady, Joanna’s husband and Jenny’s father, had been gunned down in mid-September and had died a day later. After ten years of marriage, this was the first holiday season Joanna would spend without him. She couldn’t very well tell Jenny how much she dreaded what was coming, starting with Thanksgiving later that week.

After all, with Andy dead, what did Joanna have to be thankful for? How could she explain to her daughter that the little house the family had lived in on Lonesome Ranch—the only home Jenny had ever known—was the very last place Joanna Brady wanted to be when it came time for Thanksgiving or Christmas dinner? How would she be able to eat a celebratory dinner with an empty place in Andy’s spot at the head of the table? How could she make Jenny understand how much Joanna dreaded the prospect of hauling the holiday decorations down from the tiny attic or of putting up a tree? Some words simply couldn’t be spoken.

“Thanksgiving is already under control,” Joanna said firmly. “Grandma and Grandpa Brady will bring you up to see me right after school on Wednesday afternoon. We’ll have a nice Thanksgiving dinner in the restaurant at the hotel. I won’t have to be in class again until Monday. We’ll have the whole weekend together up until Sunday afternoon. Maybe we can do some of our Christmas shopping then. We might even try visiting the Phoenix Zoo. Would you like that?”

“I guess,” Jenny answered without enthusiasm. “Why isn’t Grandma Lathrop coming along? Didn’t you ask her?”

Good question, Joanna thought. Why isn’t my mother coming along? Eleanor Lathrop had been invited to join the Thanksgiving expedition not just once, but three separate times—by Joanna and by both Jim Bob and Eva Lou Brady. Eleanor had turned down each separate invitation. She claimed she had some pressing social engagement that would keep her from spending even one night away from home, to say nothing of three. Joanna had no doubt that Eleanor would have been more enthusiastic about the trip had the idea been hers originally rather than Jim Bob and Eva Lou’s. That was something else Joanna couldn’t explain to Jenny.

“I asked her, but I guess she’s just too busy,” Joanna answered lamely. With a firm but loving shove, Joanna finally booted her daughter out of bed. “Go on, now. It’s time to get in your own bed.”

Reluctantly, Jenny made her way across the room. She stopped beside the three packed and zippered suitcases. She glowered at them as if they were cause rather than result. “I liked it better when Daddy was here,” she said.

Joanna knew part of the reason Jenny didn’t want to go to her own room—part of the reason she didn’t want her mother to be away from home—stemmed from a totally understandable sense of loss. The child was still grieving, and rightfully so. And although Jenny’s blurted words weren’t meant to be hurtful to her mother, they hurt nonetheless.

Joanna winced. “So did I,” she answered.

Jenny made it as far as the bedroom door before she paused again. “Come on, you dogs,” she ordered. “Time for bed.”

Slowly Sadie and Tigger, Jenny’s two dogs, rose from their sprawled sleeping positions on the bedside rug. They both stretched languorously, then followed Jenny out of the room. When the door closed, Joanna switched off her light and then lay there in the dark, wrestling with her own feelings of loneliness and grief.

She had been agonizingly honest when she told Jenny that she too had liked things better the way they were before Andy’s death. It was two months now since Joanna had found Andy lying wounded and bleeding in the sand beside his pickup. There were still times when she couldn’t believe he was gone, when she wanted to call him

up at work to tell him about something Jenny had said or done. Times Joanna longed to have him sitting across from her in the breakfast nook, drinking coffee and talking over the day's scheduling logistics. Times she wanted desperately to have him back beside her in the bed so she could cuddle up next to his back and draw Andy's radiating warmth into her own body. Even now her feet were so distressingly cold that she wondered if she'd ever be able to get to sleep.

Minutes later, despite her cold feet, Joanna was starting to drift off when the telephone rang. She snapped on the light before picking up the receiver. It was almost eleven. "Hello?"

"Damn," Chief Deputy for Administration Frank Montoya said, hearing her sleep-fogged voice. "It's late, isn't it? I just got home a few minutes ago, but I should have checked the time before I called. I woke you up, didn't I?" _

"It's okay, Frank," Joanna mumbled as graciously as she could manage. "I wasn't really asleep. What's up?"

Frank Montoya, the former Willcox city marshal, had been one of Joanna's two opponents in her race for the office of sheriff. In joint appearances on the campaign trail, they had each confronted the loud-mouthed third candidate, Al Freeman. Those appearances had resulted in the formation of an unlikely friendship. Once elected and trying to handle the department's entrenched and none-too-subtle opposition to her new administration, Joanna had drafted fellow outsider Frank Montoya to serve as her chief deputy for administration.

"I had dinner with my folks tonight," Frank said. "My cousin's getting married two weeks from now, so my mother had one of her command performance dinners in honor of the soon-to-be newlyweds. I was on my way out the door when she pulled me aside and asked me what are we going to do about Jorge Grijalva. 'Who the hell is Jorge Grijalva?' I asked." Frank paused for a moment. "Ever heard of him?"

"Who, me?" Joanna returned.

"Yes, you."

Joanna closed her eyes in concentration. She had been so caught up in her own troubles that it was hard to remember someone else's, but it came to her a moment later. "Ceci's father," she breathed.

"Ceci?" Frank asked.

"Ceci Grijalva. She was in school and Brownies with Jenny last year. I believe her parents must have gotten a divorce. The mother and the two kids moved to Phoenix right after school got out. The father worked at the lime plant down by Paul Spur until the mother turned up dead somewhere outside Phoenix. It happened about the same time Andy was killed, so I didn't pay that much attention. As I understand it, Jorge is the prime suspect."

"Only suspect," Frank Montoya corrected.

Joanna sat up in bed so she could think better. "Didn't the detectives on the case pick him up at work down in Paul Spur? A day or so after I was sworn in, I remember seeing a letter from the chief of police up in Peoria. He sent a note to the department, thanking us for our cooperation. Since it happened on Dick Volland's watch, I passed the letter along to him. That's all I know about it."

"You know a lot more than I did, then," Frank Montoya returned. "You're right. The family had been living in Bisbee for a while, but Jorge is originally from Douglas."

Pirtleville, actually. And it turns out that Jorge's mother, Juanita, is an old friend of my mother's. They used to work together years ago, picking peaches at the orchards out in Elfrida. According to Mom, Juanita thinks Jorge is being sold down the river on account of something he didn't do. She asked me if I...I mean, if we... could do anything to help."

"Like what?" Joanna asked.

"I don't know. All I can tell you is his mother swears he didn't do it."

"Mothers always swear their darlings didn't do it." Joanna countered. "Didn't you know that?" "I suppose I did," Frank agreed, "but if we could just..."

"Just what?"

"Listen to her," Frank said. "That's all Mom wanted us to do—listen."

Joanna shook her head. "Look, Frank," she said. "Be reasonable. What good will listening do? This case doesn't have anything at all to do with Cochise County. In case you haven't noticed, Peoria, Arizona, happens to be in Maricopa County, a good hundred and forty miles outside our jurisdiction."

"But you're going up there tomorrow," Frank argued. "Couldn't you talk to her for a few minutes before you go?"

"It was a domestic, Frank," Joanna said. "You know the statistics as well as I do. What could I say to Juanita Grijalva other than to tell her that the cops who arrested her precious Jorge are most likely on the right track?"

"Probably nothing," Frank Montoya agreed somberly. "But if you talk to her, it might help. If nothing else, maybe she'll feel better. Jorge is her only son. No matter what happens afterward, if she's actually spoken to someone in authority, she'll at least have the comfort of knowing she did everything in her power to help."

Frank Montoya's arguments were tough to turn aside. Knowing she was losing, Joanna shook her head. "You should have been in sales, Frank," she said with a short laugh. "You sure as hell know how to close a deal. But here's the next problem—scheduling. I go to church in the morning. We finish up with that around eleven-thirty or so, then we come rushing home because my mother-in-law is cooking up a big Sunday dinner. We'll probably eat around two, and I'll need to light out of here for Phoenix no later than three. When in all that do you think I'll be able to squeeze in an appointment with Juanita Grijalva?"

"How about if I bring her by the High Lonesome right around one?" Frank asked. "Would that be all right?"

"All right, all right," Joanna agreed at last. "But why do you have to bring her? Tell her how to find the place, and she can come by herself."

"No, she can't," Frank said. "Not very well. For thing, Juanita Grijalva doesn't have a car. For another, she can't drive. She's legally blind."

Joanna assimilated what he had said. "There's nothing like playing on a person's sympathy, is there?"

Now it was Frank Montoya's turn to laugh. "I had to," he said sheepishly. "I'm sorry, Joanna, but if you hadn't agreed to talk to Juanita, I never would have heard the end of it. Once my mother gets going on something like this, she can be hell on wheels."

Joanna stopped him in mid-apology. "Don't worry about it, Frank. It'll be fine. I've never met your mother, but I have one just like her."

“So you know how it is?”

“In spades,” Joanna answered. “So get off the phone and let me get some sleep. I’ll see you tomorrow. Around one.”

Joanna put down the phone. Once again she switched off the lamp on her bedside table. In the long weeks following Andy’s murder, sleeping properly was one of the most difficult things Joanna Brady had to do. Loneliness usually descended like a smothering cloud every time she crawled into the bed she and Andy had shared for so many years. Usually she tossed and turned through the endless nighttime hours, rather than falling asleep.

This time, Joanna surprised herself by falling asleep almost instantly—as soon as she put her head back down on the pillow. It was a much-needed and welcome change.

“Last call,” the bartender said. “Motel time.”

At ten to one on a Sunday morning, only the last few Saturday night regulars were still hanging out in Peoria’s Roundhouse Bar and Grill.

“Hit me again, Butch,” Dave Thompson said sagging over the bar, resting his beefy arms along the rounded edge. “The last crop of students for this year shows up this afternoon. Classes this session don’t end until a couple of days before Christmas. With the holidays messing things up, this one is always a bitch. You can’t get ‘em to concentrate on what they’re supposed to be doing. Can’t keep ‘im focused. Naturally, the women are worse than the men.”

“Naturally,” Butch Dixon agreed mildly, putting a draft Coors on the bar in front of Dave Thompson, the superintendent of the Arizona Police Officers Academy three quarters of a mile away. “By the way, you’ve had several, Dave,” Butch oh served. “Want me to call you a cab?”

“Naw,” Thompson replied. “Thanks but thanks. Before I decided to get snookered on my last night out, I asked Larry here if he’d mind giving me a ride home. Shit. Last thing I need is a damned DWI. Right, Larry?”

Larry Dysart was also a Roundhouse regular. These days his drink of choice was limited to coffee or tonic with lime. He came to the bar almost every night and spent long congenial evenings discussing literature with the bartender, arguing politics with everybody else, and scribbling in a series of battered spiral notebooks.

He looked up now from pen and paper. “Right, Dave,” Larry said. “No problem. I’ll be glad to give you a lift home.”

CHAPTER THREE

Even though Joanna was only going through the motions, she went to church the next morning. She sat there in the pew, seemingly attentive, while her best friend and pastor, the Reverend Marianne Maculyea, gave a stirring pre-Thanksgiving sermon. Instead of listening, though, Joanna’s mind was focused on the fact that she would be gone—completely out of town—for more than a month. She was scheduled to spend five and a half weeks taking a basic training class at the Arizona Police Officers Academy in Peoria.

There was plenty to worry about. For instance, what about clothes? Yes, her suitcases were all zipped shut, but had she packed enough of the right things? This

would be the longest time she had ever been away from home. She wasn't terrifically happy about the idea of staying in a dorm. As much trouble as she'd had lately sleeping in her own bed, how well would she fare in a strange one?

But the bottom line—the real focus of her worry—was always Jenny. How would a protracted absence from her mother affect this child whose sense of well-being had already been shattered by her father's murder? Had it not been for the generosity of her in-laws, Joanna might well have had to bag the whole idea and stay home. Putting their own lives on hold, Jim Bob and Eva Lou Brady had agreed to come out and stay at High Lonesome Ranch for the duration of Joanna's absence. Not only would they care for Jenny, getting her to and from school each day, they would also look after the livestock and do any other chores that needed doing.

Professionally, Joanna's attendance at the academy was a thorny issue. Of course she needed to go. That was self-evident, even to Joanna. Her close call during an armed showdown on a copper-mine tailings dump a few days earlier had shown her in life-and-death, up-close-and-personal terms exactly how much she didn't know about the world of law enforcement.

Joanna's connections to law enforcement were peripheral rather than professional. Years earlier her father, D. H. "Big Hank" Lathrop, had served as sheriff of Cochise County. And Andy, her husband, had been a deputy sheriff as well as a candidate for the office of sheriff when he was gunned down by a drug lord's hired hit man. Joanna's work resume as office manager of an insurance agency contained no items of legal background or law enforcement training. Some of those educational gaps could be made up by reading and studying on her own, but an organized course of study taught by professional instructors would provide a more thorough and efficient way of getting the job done.

As the word *job* surfaced in Joanna's head, so did a whole other line of concern—work. If a five-and-a-half-week absence could wreak havoc in her personal life, what would it do to her two-week-old administration at the Cochise County Sheriff's Department? While she was gone, her two chief deputies Frank Montoya for administration and Dick Volland for operations—would be running the show. That arrangement—the possibly volatile combination of two former antagonists—would either function as a form of checks and balances or else it would blow up in Joanna's face. Sitting there in church, not listening to the sermon, Joanna could worry about what might happen, but she couldn't predict which way things would go.

Almost without warning, the people in surrounding pews rose to their feet and opened their hymnals as the organist pounded through the first few bars of "Faith of Our Fathers." As Joanna fumbled hurriedly to find the proper page of the final hymn, she realized Reverend Maculyea's sermon was over. Joanna hadn't listened to a word of it. No doubt Marianne had figured that out as well. When she and her husband, Jeff Daniels, followed the choir down the center aisle to the door of the church, the pastor caught Joanna's eye as they passed by. Marianne smiled and winked. Weakly, Joanna smiled back.

She had planned to skip coffee hour after church, but Jenny headed her off at the front door. "Can't we stay for just a few minutes?" she begged.

Joanna shook her head. "I have so much to do..."

"But, Mom," Jenny countered. "It's Birthday Sunday. When I was coming upstairs

from Sunday school, I saw Mrs. Sawyer carrying two cakes into the kitchen. Both of 'em are pecan praline—my favorite. Please? Just for a little while?”

“Well, I suppose,” Joanna relented. “But remember, only one piece. Grandma Brady’s cooking dinner at home. It’s supposed to be ready to eat by two o’clock. If you spoil your appetite, it’ll hurt her feelings.”

Waiting barely long enough for her mother to finish speaking, Jenny slipped her hand out of Joanna’s grasp and skipped off happily toward the social hall. As Jenny thundered down the stairway, Joanna bit back the urge to call after her, “Don’t run.” The first caution, the one about Jenny not spoiling her appetite, sounded as though it had come directly from the lips of Joanna’s own mother, Eleanor Lathrop. And as Joanna stood in line, awaiting her turn to greet and be greeted by Jeff and Marianne, she told herself to cut it out.

As the line moved forward, Joanna found herself standing directly behind Marliss Shackelford. “I was surprised to find someone had chosen of ‘Faith Our Fathers’ as the recessionary,” Marliss announced when she reached Marianne’s husband. “Isn’t that a little, you know, passe?” she asked with a slight shudder. “It’s sexist to say the least.”

Jeff Daniels cocked his head to one side, regarding the woman with a puzzled frown. “Really,” he said, pumping Marliss Shackelford’s outstretched hand. “But it doesn’t seem to me that ‘Faith of Our Parents’ has quite the same ring to it.”

Jeff’s comment was made with such disarming ingenuousness that Marliss was left with no possible comeback. Behind her in line, Joanna choked back a potentially noisy chuckle as Marliss moved on to tackle Marianne. When Joanna stepped forward to greet Jeff, they were both grinning.

“How’s it going, Joanna?” he asked, diplomatically removing the grin from his face. “Are you all packed for your six-week excursion?”

As is Bisbee “clergy couples” went, Jeff Daniels and Marianne Maculyea weren’t at all typical. For one thing, although they were officially, and legally, “man and wife,” they didn’t share the same last name. Marianne was the minister while Jeff served in the capacity of minister’s spouse. She was the one with the full-time career, while he was a stay-at-home husband with no paid employment “outside the home.”

In southeastern Arizona, this newfangled and seemingly odd arrangement had raised more than a few eyebrows when the young couple had first come to town to assume Marianne’s clerical duties at Canyon Methodist Church. Now, though, several years later, they had worked their way so far into the fabric of the community that no one was surprised to learn that the newly elected treasurer of the local Kiwanis Club listed his job on his membership application as “househusband.”

“Almost,” Joanna answered. “And not a moment too soon. I’m supposed to leave the house at three. You and Marianne are still coming out to the ranch for Grandma Brady’s farewell dinner, aren’t you? She’s acting as though I’m off on a worldwide tour.”

Jeff shook his head. “Wouldn’t miss one of Eva Lou’s dinners for the world. What time are we due?”

“Between one-thirty and two.”

Finished with Marliss, Marianne stepped back to greet Joanna with a heartfelt hug. “We’re all going to miss you,” she said. “But everything’s going to be fine here at home. Don’t worry.”

Not surprisingly, Marianne's intuitive comment went straight to the heart of Joanna's problem. "Thank you," she gulped, blinking back tears.

Marianne smiled. "See you downstairs," she said.

Joanna glanced at her watch as she headed for the stairway. There wasn't much time. She hurried into the social hall, scanning the tables for a glimpse of Jennifer. Initially seeing no sign of her daughter, Joanna made a single swift pass through the refreshment line and picked up a cup of coffee. With cup in hand, she finally spotted Jenny and one of her friends. The two girls were already seated at a table and scarfing down cake.

Not wanting to crab at her daughter in public, Joanna deliberately moved in the opposite direction. Too late she realized she was walking directly into the arms of Marliss Shackelford.

Joanna Brady had never liked Marliss Shackelford and for more than one reason. The woman had a real propensity for minding other people's business. She thrived on gossip, and she had managed to find a way to turn that hobby into a job. Once a week Marliss held forth in a written gossip column called "Bisbee Buzzings" that appeared in the local paper, *The Bisbee Bee*.

To a private citizen, columnist Marliss Shackelford could be a bothersome annoyance. Now that Joanna was in the public eye, however, annoyance had escalated into something else. From the moment Joanna Brady began making her bid for the office of sheriff, Marliss had chosen to regard everything related to Joanna and Jennifer Brady as possibly newsworthy material for her weekly column.

At first, Joanna hadn't tumbled to her changed circumstances. Then one day, she was shocked to see her own words quoted verbatim in Marliss Shackelford's column—words taken from a conversation with a third party in what Joanna had mistakenly assumed to be the relative privacy of an after-church coffee hour. Only in retrospect did she recall the reporter hovering in the background in the social hall during the conversation. Since then, Joanna had gone out of her way to avoid Marliss Shackelford.

Veering to one side, Joanna dodged the Marliss pitfall only to stumble into another one that proved almost equally troubling.

"Why, Joanna Brady!" Esther Brockner exclaimed, clasping the younger woman by the hand. "How are you and that poor little girl of yours doing these days?"

Two weeks after Andy's death, Esther Brockner had been the first elderly widow who had felt free to advise Joanna that since she was so young and attractive, she wouldn't have any trouble at all marrying again. That well-intentioned but tactless comment had left Joanna fuming. She had forced herself to bite back the angry retort that she didn't *want* any other husband. Now, after being told much the same thing by several other thoughtless acquaintances, Joanna's hide had toughened considerably.

Facing Esther now over a cup of coffee, Joanna had little difficulty maintaining her composure. "We're doing fine, Esther," she returned civilly. "How about you?"

"Every day gets a little better, doesn't it?" Esther continued.

Not exactly, Joanna thought. It was more like one step forward and two back, but she nodded in reply. Nodding a lie didn't seem quite as bad as telling one outright.

"Why, Sheriff Brady," Marliss said, using her cup and saucer to wedge her way into the two-way conversation. "I guess you're off to school in Phoenix this week."

“Peoria,” Joanna corrected. “The Arizona Poll Officers Academy is based in Peoria, outside Phoenix.”

Marliss waved her hand in disgust. “What’s the difference? Peoria. Glendale. Tempe. Mesa. If you ask me, those places are all alike. From the outlet stores in Casa Grande on, there’s way too much traffic. I hear it’s almost as bad as L.A. All those people!” She clicked her tongue in disapproval. “It’s not like a small town. In a place like that, nobody cares if you live or die. In fact, I’ve heard it isn’t safe for a woman alone to drive around Phoenix. I wouldn’t go there if you paid me.”

Joanna felt a sudden urge to smile because she was, in fact, being paid to go to the Phoenix area. Not only that, some of Marliss Shackelford’s hard-earned tax dollars were partially footing the bill.

“I’m sure most people in metropolitan Phoenix are just fine,” Joanna said.

Marliss drew herself up to her full five foot three. “I understand the course work at that school is pretty tough,” she said. “Aren’t you worried about that?”

“Why should I be?”

Marliss shrugged, in a vain attempt to look innocent. “If you didn’t pass for some reason, it might be a bad reflection on your ability to do the job, wouldn’t it?”

“I expect to pass all right,” Joanna replied.

“Speaking of doing the job, I need a picture of you.”

“What for,” Joanna asked, “the paper?”

“No. For the display in the Sheriff’s Department lobby. I’m on the Women’s Club facilities committee, and I’m supposed to get a glossy eleven-by-fourteen of you to put up along with those of all the previous sheriffs. I don’t need it this minute, but I will need it soon. I’ll have to have it framed lime for an official presentation at our annual luncheon in January.”

Looking around the room for Jenny, Joanna nodded. “I’ll take care of it as soon as I can.”

From across the room she succeeded in catching Jenny’s eye. Joanna motioned toward the door. In response, Jenny pointed toward her empty plate, then folded her hands prayerfully under her chin.

The gestured message came through loud and clear. Jenny wanted a second piece of Mrs. Sawyer’s cake.

Shaking her head, Joanna walked up to her daughter. “No,” she said firmly. “Come on. We’ve got to go.”

Scowling, Jenny got up to follow, but as they started toward the stairway, Cynthia Sawyer abandoned her spot behind the refreshment table and came hurrying after them. She was carrying a paper plate laden with several pieces of her rich, dark-brown pecan praline cake.

“I know this is Jenny’s favorite,” Cynthia said, smiling and carefully placing the loaded plate Jenny’s outstretched hand. “She mentioned that you folks were having a little going-away party this afternoon. We have more than enough for the people who are here. I thought you might want a piece or two for dessert.”

Joanna knew she’d been suckered. There was no way to turn down Mrs. Sawyer’s generous offer without making a public fool of herself.

“Why, thank you, Cynthia,” Joanna said. “That’s very thoughtful.”

Clutching the plate, Jenny scampered triumphantly up the stairway to safety while

her moth stalked after her.

“Jennifer Ann Brady, you’re a brat,” Joanna muttered when she knew they were both safely out of Cynthia’s hearing.

“But, Mom,” Jenny protested. “I didn’t *ask* for it. Mrs. Sawyer *offered*. And not just because it’s my favorite. She asked me if you liked it, too. I said you did. You do, don’t you?”

Joanna laughed in spite of herself. “Oh, all right,” she said. “I suppose I do like it. Praline cake is one of those things that grows on you . . . in more ways than one.”

Juanita Grijalva sat at her wobbly Formica-topped kitchen table wearing only a bra and slip, waiting Lucy, her brother’s wife, to finish ironing her best dress. The starched cotton was so well worn it had taken on a satiny sheen. Juanita knew the dress was getting old. She could tell that from the gradually changing texture of the aging material, but glaucoma kept her from being able to see it.

Thee navy-blue dress—brand-new then and with all the stickers still pinned to the sleeve—had been a final, extravagant gift from the lady whose house Juanita had cleaned and whose washing and ironing she had done for twenty years before failing vision had forced her to stop working altogether. If Juanita had worked as a maid in the hotel or as a cook in the county hospital, she might have had a pension and some retirement income instead of just a blue dress. But it was too late to worry about that now.

Juanita had lain awake in her bed all night long, worrying about the coming interview. She had finally fallen asleep just before dawn when her brother’s rooster next door started his early-morning serenade. Now, as noon approached and with it time for Frank Montoya to come pick her up, Juanita found herself so weary that she could barely stay awake. Her sightless eyes burned. Her shoulders ached from the heavy weight of her sagging breasts. To relieve the burden, she heaved them up and rested them on the edge of the table,

“Who’s coming for you?” Lucy asked.

“Maria Montoya’s son. Frank. He used to be city marshal over in Willcox, but he works for the Sheriff’s Department now. He told me last night that he’d drive me up to Bisbee to see that new woman sheriff.”

Lucy plucked the dress off the ironing board then held it up, examining the garment critic under the light of the room’s single ceiling fix. Finding a crease over one pocket, she put the dress back on the board.

Lucy was quiet for some time, seemingly concentrating on eradicating the stubborn crease in Juanita’s dress. She and her husband, Reuben, had long since decided that their no-good nephew, Jorge, was a lost cause. He drank too much—at least he always used to. For years he had bounced from job to job, frittering away whatever money he made. Not only that; anyone his age who would mess around with a girl as young as Serena Duffy had been wasn’t worth the trouble.

Finally, Lucy set the steaming iron back down on the cloth-covered board. “I don’t know why you bother about him,” she said. “It’s not going to do any good.”

“I bother because I have to,” Juanita replied reproachfully, staring with unblinking and unseeing eyes in the direction of her sister-in-law’s voice. “Because Jorge’s my son. If I don’t stick up for him, who will?”