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and

J. D. ROBB

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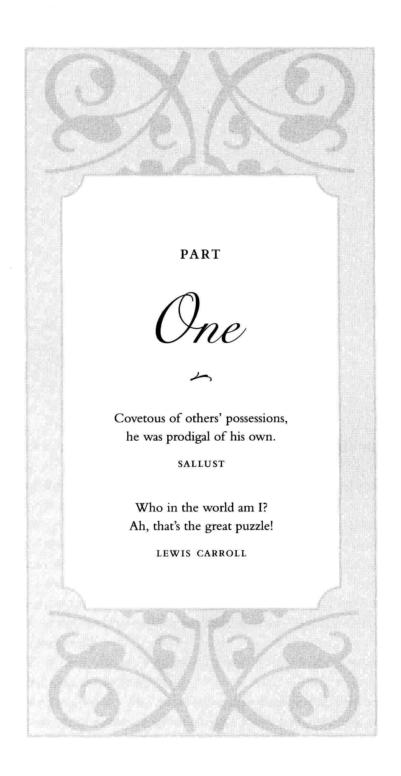
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TO MARY KAY McCOMAS,

who sort of plays a musical instrument, but who is the best of pals



1.

A HEROIC BELCH OF THUNDER followed the strange little man into the shop. He glanced around apologetically, as if the rude noise were his responsibility rather than nature's, and fumbled a package under his arm so he could close a black-and-white-striped umbrella.

Both umbrella and man dripped, somewhat mournfully, onto the neat square of mat just inside the door while the cold spring rain battered the streets and sidewalks on the other side. He stood where he was, as if not entirely sure of his welcome.

Laine turned her head and sent him a smile that held only warmth and easy invitation. It was a look her friends would have called her polite shopkeeper's smile.

Well, damnit, she *was* a polite shopkeeper—and at the moment that label was being sorely tested.

If she'd known the rain would bring customers into the store instead of keeping them away, she wouldn't have given Jenny the day off. Not that she minded business. A woman didn't open a store if she didn't want customers, whatever the weather. And a woman didn't open one in Small Town, U.S.A., unless she understood she'd spend as much time chatting, listening and refereeing debates as she would ringing up sales.

And that was fine, Laine thought, that was good. But if Jenny had been at work instead of spending the day painting her toenails and watching soaps, Jenny would've been the one stuck with the Twins.

Darla Price Davis and Carla Price Gohen had their hair tinted the same ashy shade of blond. They wore identical slick blue raincoats and carried matching hobo bags. They finished each other's sentences and communicated in a kind of code that included a lot of twitching eyebrows, pursed lips, lifted shoulders and head bobs.

What might've been cute in eight-year-olds was just plain weird in forty-eight-year-old women.

Still, Laine reminded herself, they never came into Remember When without dropping a bundle. It might take them hours to drop it, but eventually the sales would ring. There was little that lifted Laine's heart as high as the ring of the cash register.

Today they were on the hunt for an engagement present for their niece, and the driving rain and booming thunder hadn't stopped them. Nor had it deterred the drenched young couple who—they'd said—had detoured into Angel's Gap on a whim on their way to D.C.

Or the wet little man with the striped umbrella who looked, to Laine's eye, a bit frantic and lost.

So she added a little more warmth to her smile. "I'll be with you in just a few minutes," she called out, and turned her attention back to the Twins.

"Why don't you look around a little more," Laine suggested. "Think it over. As soon as I—"

Darla's hand clamped on her wrist, and Laine knew she wasn't going to escape.

"We need to decide. Carrie's just about your age, sweetie. What would *you* want for your engagement gift?"

Laine didn't need to transcribe the code to understand it was a not-so-subtle dig. She was, after all, twenty-eight, and not married. Not en-

gaged. Not, at the moment, even dating particularly. This, according to the Price twins, was a crime against nature.

"You know," Carla piped up, "Carrie met her Paul at Kawanian's spaghetti supper last fall. You really should socialize more, Laine."

"I really should," she agreed with a winning smile. If I want to hook up with a balding, divorced CPA with a sinus condition. "I know Carrie's going to love whatever you choose. But maybe an engagement gift from her aunts should be something more personal than the candlesticks. They're lovely, but the dresser set's so feminine." She picked up the silver-backed brush from the set they were considering. "I imagine another bride used this on her wedding night."

"More personal," Darla began. "More—"

"Girlie. Yes! We could get the candlesticks for—"

"A wedding gift. But maybe we should look at the jewelry before we buy the dresser set. Something with pearls? Something—"

"Old she could wear on her wedding day. Put the candlesticks *and* the dresser set aside, honey. We'll take a look at the jewelry before we decide anything."

The conversation bounced like a tennis ball served and volleyed out of two identical coral-slicked mouths. Laine congratulated herself on her skill and focus as she was able to keep up with who said what.

"Good idea." Laine lifted the gorgeous old Dresden candlesticks. No one could say the Twins didn't have taste, or were shy of heating up their plastic.

She started to carry them to the counter when the little man crossed her path.

She was eye to eye with him, and his were a pale, washed-out blue reddened by lack of sleep or alcohol or allergies. Laine decided on lost sleep as they were also dogged by heavy bags of fatigue. His hair was a grizzled mop gone mad with the rain. He wore a pricey Burberry topcoat and carried a three-dollar umbrella. She assumed he'd shaved hurriedly that morning as he'd missed a patch of stubbly gray along his jaw.

"Laine."

He said her name with a kind of urgency and intimacy that had her smile turning to polite confusion. "Yes? I'm sorry, do I know you?"

"You don't remember me." His body seemed to droop. "It's been a long time, but I thought . . ."

"Miss!" the woman on her way to D.C. called out. "Do you ship?"

"Yes, we do." She could hear the Twins going through one of their shorthand debates over earrings and brooches, and sensed an impulse buy from the D.C. couple. And the little man stared at her with a hopeful intimacy that had her skin chilling.

"I'm sorry, I'm a little swamped this morning." She sidestepped to the counter to set down the candlesticks. Intimacy, she reminded herself, was part of the rhythm of small towns. The man had probably been in before, and she just couldn't place him. "Is there something specific I can help you with, or would you like to browse awhile?"

"I need your help. There isn't much time." He drew out a card, pressed it into her hand. "Call me at that number, as soon as you can."

"Mr. . . ." She glanced down at the card, read his name. "Peterson, I don't understand. Are you looking to sell something?"

"No. No." His laugh bounced toward hysterical and had Laine grateful for the customers crowded into the store. "Not anymore. I'll explain everything, but not now." He looked around the shop. "Not here. I shouldn't have come here. Call the number."

He clamped a hand over hers in a way that had Laine fighting an instinct to jerk free. "Promise."

He smelled of rain and soap and . . . Brut, she realized. And the aftershave had some flicker of memory trying to light in her brain. Then his fingers tightened on hers. "Promise," he repeated in a harsh whisper, and she saw only an odd man in a wet coat.

"Of course."

She watched him go to the door, open the cheap umbrella. And let out a sigh of relief when he scurried out into the rain. *Weird* was her only thought, but she studied the card for a moment.

His name was printed, Jasper R. Peterson, but the phone number was handwritten beneath and underscored twice, she noted.

Pushing the card into her pocket, she started over to give the traveling couple a friendly nudge, when the sound of screeching brakes on wet

pavement and shocked screams had her spinning around. There was a hideous noise, a hollow thud she'd never forget. Just as she'd never forget the sight of the strange little man in his fashionable coat slamming against her display window.

She bolted out the door, into the streaming rain. Footsteps pounded on the pavement, and somewhere close was the crunching sound of metal striking metal, glass shattering.

"Mr. Peterson." Laine gripped his hand, bowed her body over his in a pathetic attempt to shield his bloodied face from the rain. "Don't move. Call an ambulance!" she shouted and yanked off her jacket to cover him as best she could.

"Saw him. Saw him. Shouldn't have come. Laine."

"Help's coming."

"Left it for you. He wanted me to get it to you."

"It's all right." She scooped her dripping hair out of her eyes and took the umbrella someone offered. She angled it over him, leaned down closer as he tugged weakly on her hand.

"Be careful. I'm sorry. Be careful."

"I will. Of course I will. Just try to be quiet now, try to hold on, Mr. Peterson. Help's coming."

"You don't remember." Blood trickled out of his mouth as he smiled. "Little Lainie." He took a shuddering breath, coughed up blood. She heard the sirens as he began to sing in a thin, gasping voice.

"Pack up all my care and woe," he crooned, then wheezed. "Bye, bye, blackbird."

She stared at his battered face as her already chilled skin began to prickle. Memories, so long locked away, opened. "Uncle Willy? Oh my God."

"Used to like that one. Screwed up," he said breathlessly. "Sorry. Thought it'd be safe. Shouldn't've come."

"I don't understand." Tears burned her throat, streamed down her cheeks. He was dying. He was dying because she hadn't known him, and she'd sent him out into the rain. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"He knows where you are now." His eyes rolled back. "Hide the pooch."

"What?" She leaned closer yet until her lips almost brushed his. "What?" But the hand she had clutched in hers went limp.

Paramedics brushed her aside. She heard their short, pithy dialogue—medical codes she'd grown accustomed to hearing on television, could almost recite herself. But this was real. The blood washing away in the rain was real.

She heard a woman sobbing and saying over and over in a strident voice, "He ran right in front of me. I couldn't stop in time. He just ran in front of the car. Is he all right? Is he all right? Is he all right?"

No, Laine wanted to say. He's not.

"Come inside, honey." Darla put an arm around Laine's shoulders, drew her back. "You're soaked. You can't do anything more out here."

"I should do something." She stared down at the broken umbrella, its cheerful stripes marked with grime now, and drops of blood.

She should have settled him down in front of the fire. Given him a hot drink and let him warm and dry himself in front of the little hearth. Then he'd be alive. Telling her stories and silly jokes.

But she hadn't recognized him, and so he was dying.

She couldn't go in, out of the rain, and leave him alone with strangers. But there was nothing to be done but watch, helplessly, while the paramedics fought and failed to save the man who'd once laughed at her knock-knock jokes and sung silly songs. He died in front of the shop she'd worked so hard to build, and laid at her door all the memories she thought she'd escaped.

SHE WAS A BUSINESSWOMAN, a solid member of the community, and a fraud. In the back room of her store, she poured two cups of coffee and knew she was about to lie to a man she considered a friend. And deny all knowledge of one she'd loved.

She did her best to steady herself, ran her hands through the damp mass of bright red hair normally worn in a shoulder-sweeping bob. She was pale, and the rain had washed away the makeup, always carefully applied, so freckles stood out on her narrow nose and across her cheekbones. Her eyes, a bright Viking blue, were glassy with shock and grief. Her mouth, just a hair too wide for her angular face, wanted to tremble.

In the little giltwood mirror on the wall of her office, she studied her reflection. And saw herself for what she was. Well, she would do what she needed to do to survive. Willy would certainly understand that. Do what came first, she told herself, then think about the rest.

She sucked in a breath, let out a shudder, then lifted the coffee. Her hands were nearly steady as she went into the main shop and prepared to give false testimony to Angel's Gap's chief of police.

"Sorry it took so long," she apologized as she carried the mugs to where Vince Burger stood by the little clinker fireplace.

He was built like a bear with a great shock of white-blond hair that stood nearly straight up, as if surprised to find itself on top of the wide, comfortable face. His eyes, a faded blue and fanned with squint lines, were full of compassion.

He was Jenny's husband, and had become a kind of brother to Laine. But for now she reminded herself he was a cop, and everything she'd worked for was on the line.

"Why don't you sit down, Laine? You've had a bad shock."

"I feel sort of numb." That was true enough, she didn't have to lie about everything. But she walked over to sip her coffee and stare out at the rain so she wouldn't have to meet those sympathetic eyes. "I appreciate your coming in to take my statement yourself, Vince. I know you're busy."

"Figured you'd be more comfortable."

Better to lie to a friend than a stranger, she thought bitterly. "I don't know what I can tell you. I didn't see the actual accident. I heard . . . I heard brakes, screams, an awful thud, then I saw . . ." She didn't shut her eyes. If she shut them, she'd see it again. "I saw him hit the window, like he'd been thrown against it. I ran out, stayed with him until the paramedics came. They were quick. It seemed like hours, but it was only minutes."

"He was in here before the accident."

Now she did close her eyes, and prepared to do what she had to do to protect herself. "Yes. I had several customers this morning, which proves I should never give Jenny a day off. The Twins were in, and a couple driving through on their way to D.C. I was busy when he came in. He browsed around for a while."

"The woman from out of town said she thought you knew each other."

"Really?" Turning now, Laine painted a puzzled expression on her face, as a clever artist might on a portrait. She crossed back, sat on one of the two elbow chairs she'd arranged in front of the fire. "I don't know why."

"An impression," Vince said with a shrug. Always mindful of his size, he sat, slow and careful, in the matching chair. "Said he took your hand."

"Well, we *shook* hands, and he gave me his card." Laine pulled it out of her pocket, forced herself to keep her attention on Vince's face. The fire was crackling with warmth, and though she felt its heat on her skin, she was cold. Very cold. "He said he'd like to speak with me when I wasn't so busy. That he might have something to sell. People often do," she added, offering Vince the card. "Which is how I stay in business."

"Right." He tucked the card into his breast pocket. "Anything strike you about him?"

"Just that he had a beautiful topcoat, and a silly umbrella—and that he didn't seem like the sort to wander around small towns. Had city on him."

"So did you a few years ago. In fact . . ." He narrowed his gaze, reached out and rubbed a thumb over her cheek. "Still got some stuck to you."

She laughed, because it's what he wanted. "I wish I could be more help, Vince. It's such an awful thing to happen."

"I can tell you, we got four different witness statements. All of them have the guy running straight out into the street, dead in front of that car. Like he was spooked or something. He seem spooked to you, Laine?"

"I wasn't paying enough attention. The fact is, Vince, I basically brushed him off when I realized he wasn't here to shop. I had customers." She shook her head when her voice broke. "It seems so callous now."

The hand Vince laid over hers in comfort made her feel foul. "You didn't know what was coming. You were the first to get to him."

"He was right outside." She had to take a deep gulp of coffee to wash the grief out of her throat. "Almost on the doorstep."

"He spoke to you."

"Yes." She reached for her coffee again. "Nothing that made much sense. He said he was sorry, a couple of times. I don't think he knew

who I was or what happened. I think he was delirious. The paramedics came and . . . and he died. What will you do now? I mean, he's not from around here. The phone number's New York. I wonder, I guess I wonder if he was just driving through, where he was going, where he was from."

"We'll be looking into all that so we can notify his next of kin." Rising, Vince laid a hand on her shoulder. "I'm not going to tell you to put it out of your mind, Laine. You won't be able to, not for a while. I'm going to tell you that you did all you could. Can't do more than all you could."

"Thanks. I'm going to close up for the day. I want to go home."

"Good idea. Want a ride?"

"No. Thanks." It was guilt as much as affection that had her rising on her toes to press a kiss to his cheek. "Tell Jenny I'll see her tomorrow."

HIS NAME, at least the name she'd known, was Willy Young. Probably William, Laine thought as she drove up the pitted gravel lane. He hadn't been her real uncle—as far as she knew—but an honorary one. One who'd always had red licorice in his pocket for a little girl.

She hadn't seen him in nearly twenty years, and his hair had been brown then, his face a bit rounder. There'd always been a spring in his step.

Small wonder she hadn't recognized him in the bowed and nervy little man who'd come into her shop.

How had he found her? Why had he?

Since he'd been, to her knowledge, her father's closest friend, she assumed he was—as was her father—a thief, a scam artist, a small-time grifter. Not the sort of connections a respectable businesswoman wanted to acknowledge.

And why the hell should that make her feel small and guilty?

She slapped on the brakes and sat, brooding through the steady whoosh of her wipers at the pretty house on the pretty rise.

She loved this place. Hers. Home. The two-story frame house was, strictly speaking, too large for a woman on her own. But she loved being able to ramble around in it. She'd loved every minute she'd spent meticulously decorating each room to suit herself. And only herself.

Knowing, as she did, she'd never, ever have to pack up all her belongings at a moment's notice to the tune of "Bye Bye Blackbird" and run.

She loved being able to putter around the yard, planting gardens, pruning bushes, mowing the grass, yanking the weeds. Ordinary things. Simple, *normal* things for a woman who'd spent the first half of her life doing little that was normal.

She was entitled to this, wasn't she? To being Laine Tavish and all that meant? The business, the town, the house, the friends, the *life*. She was entitled to the woman she'd made herself into.

It wouldn't have helped Willy for her to have told Vince the truth. Nothing would have changed for him, and everything might have changed for her. Vince would find out, soon enough, that the man in the county morgue wasn't Jasper R. Peterson but William Young, and however many aka's that went with it.

There'd be a criminal record. She knew Willy had done at least one stint alongside her father. "Brothers in arms," her father had called them, and she could still hear his big, booming laugh.

Because it infuriated her, she slammed out of the car. She made the house in a dash, fumbled out her keys.

She calmed, almost immediately, when the door was closed at her back and the house surrounded her. Just the quiet of it, the scents of lemon oil rubbed into wood by her own hand, the subtle sweetness of spring flowers brought in from her own yard stroked her frayed nerves.

She set her keys in the raku dish on the entry table, pulled her cell phone out of her purse and plugged it into the recharger. Slipped out of her shoes, out of her jacket, which she draped over the newel post, and set her purse on the bottom step.

Following routine, she walked back to the kitchen. Normally, she'd have put on the kettle for tea and looked through the mail she'd picked up from the box at the foot of the lane while the water heated.

But today, she poured a big glass of wine.

And drank it standing at the sink, looking through the window at her backyard.

She'd had a yard—a couple of times—as a kid. She remembered one in . . . Nebraska? Iowa? What did it matter, she thought and took a

healthy gulp of wine. She'd liked the yard because it had a big old tree right in the middle, and he'd hung an old tire from it on a big thick rope.

He'd pushed her so high she'd thought she was flying.

She wasn't sure how long they'd stayed and didn't remember the house at all. Most of her childhood was a blur of places and faces, of car rides, a flurry of packing up. And him, her father, with his big laugh and wide hands, with his irresistible grin and careless promises.

She'd spent the first decade of her life desperately in love with the man, and the rest of it doing everything she could to forget he existed.

If he was in trouble, again, it was none of her concern.

She wasn't Jack O'Hara's little Lainie anymore. She was Laine Tavish, solid citizen.

She eyed the bottle of wine and with a shrug poured a second glass. A grown woman could get toasted in her own kitchen, by God, especially when she'd watched a ghost from the past die at her feet.

Carrying the glass, she walked to the mudroom door, to answer the hopeful whimpering on the other side.

He came in like a cannon shot—a hairy, floppy-eared cannon shot. His paws planted themselves at her belly, and the long snout bumped her face before the tongue slurped out to cover her cheeks with wet and desperate affection.

"Okay, okay! Happy to see you, too." No matter how low her mood, a welcome home by Henry, the amazing hound, never failed to lift it.

She'd sprung him from the joint, or so she liked to think. When she'd gone to the pound two years before, it had been with a puppy in mind. She'd always wanted a cute, gamboling little bundle she'd train from the ground up.

But then she'd seen him—big, ungainly, stunningly homely with his mud-colored fur. A cross, she'd thought, between a bear and an anteater. And she'd been lost the minute he'd looked through the cage doors and into her eyes.

Everybody deserves a chance, she'd thought, and so she sprung Henry from the joint. He'd never given her a reason to regret it. His love was absolute, so much so that he continued to look adoringly at her even when she filled his bowl with kibble.