

A M JENNER

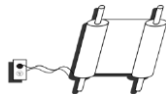


MANOR OF DEATH



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The characters in this book are fictitious. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental and entirely in the imagination of the reader.

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# BOOKS BY A M JENNER

Manor of Death  
Bolts From the Blue  
Web of Lies  
Deadly Gamble  
Inherit My Heart  
A Heart Full of Diamonds  
Clues to Food (a cook book)  
Bits and Bites (an anthology)

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## ONE

“But I’m his wife!” Sheila snarled. “*I’m* the one who should inherit! Me! Not you!” She jabbed an accusatory index finger at Crissy.

“Sorry,” Crissy said calmly, trying to ignore the bad headache she’d woken with a scant three hours earlier. “I didn’t expect to inherit so much as a paperclip, but I won’t hand it over. I’ve got to provide for Patti. In fact, as his only child, she should have gotten everything.” *He didn’t give her much while he breathed, so it’s only right;* the unspoken words skipped through her mind.

“But it’s *mine!* He *promised* I’d inherit it *all!* You *have* to honor his promises!” With a toss of her head she began an angry, almost stomping pacing. Her high heels echoed on the mobile home’s linoleum-covered office floor.

Crissy considered the younger woman: how would she feel if their positions were reversed? With the size of the bequest she’d received from her ex-husband, she could afford to be generous.

“I don’t have to honor Larry’s promises, but I’d be willing to give you something for the two months you were married. You’d have to sign a waiver stating you’d never take Patti or me to court for further money or anything else. Nor will you

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give Patti any trouble now or after she turns eighteen in a couple of months. I'll ask my attorney to draw it up.

“With her father’s death, the terms of our divorce are no longer valid. Her court-ordered visits stop now. I won’t tolerate any more of your hateful remarks to my daughter, or there’ll be no deal. Got it?”

Sheila stopped, facing Crissy, her mouth hanging open. Crissy didn’t know if it was from surprise or shock. The offer was more than Sheila was entitled to since the will hadn’t mentioned her at all.

Crissy felt Larry’s widow, only in her mid-twenties, would grab the money and happily give up parental responsibility for a step-daughter old enough to be her sibling.

Sheila shook her head, her voice becoming more strident with every word she hurled at Crissy. “You’re crazy! Raving mad, like Larry said. *I* wouldn’t give you a dime! Why would I agree to crumbs when I should have it *all*?”

She started to turn away, but stopped, still facing Crissy. “And don’t worry your fat head about Patti visiting me. I don’t want people knowing I’ve got a step-daughter at all. Just produce the will naming me the only beneficiary and I’ll get out of your life forever, you stupid, ugly bitch!”

Crissy was stunned at the venom spit at her by this rude girl. She’d tried to be kind. And now that kindness was being kicked in her face.

Thoughts ricocheted in her head. *She doesn’t want my help. I have no obligation to anyone but Patti. Larry’s estate belongs to us; not this bratty, selfish little wench!*

With increasing difficulty, Crissy kept her voice calm. “Your offensiveness was costly. Since you don’t want part of



my money, I won't consult my attorney. The will states I inherit everything. Period.

"I was Larry's wife for sixteen years. I deserve a huge reward for lasting that long. You married him after his parents were killed. You didn't live with their bullying. It's fitting I receive compensation for the hell they put me through.

"Patti was their only grandchild, yet they didn't put her in their wills. They left everything to their darling only child, Perfect Little Larry.

"As for producing a new will, I can't. I only know about the one."

Sheila tried to interrupt, but Crissy was on her high horse, having finally been pushed too far. She put her hand in front of Sheila's face. "Don't interrupt me because I'm only going to say this once.

"Larry's lawyer pulled a ton of strings to get Larry his parents' money and property so fast when they died last year. It was probably the only time in his life being a Mitchell was a good thing. The rest of the time, he detested it. Then, Mr. Goodson did the same thing to push Larry's will through so the estate could be accessed quickly, for which I'm profoundly grateful.

"I don't know anything about a new will; sorry. Mr. Goodson didn't mention any other will to me. Besides, it's only your word there *was* a new will." Crissy shrugged.

It was painful to stand in her slightly rounded, nearly forty-year-old body and know this striking girl in her twenties was her ex-husband's widow. It was the awful reality of the joke of what the husband did for his wife's fortieth birthday; trade her in for two twenty-year-olds. But it was Crissy's

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truth, which apparently matched his opinion of her worthlessness.

“But there *is* a new will,” Sheila spat. “I saw it before we were married. It named me as his sole inheritor. Now what have you done with it?” She faced Crissy, an ugly look on her face. The beauty of a moment ago was gone as if it had never existed.

Crissy sighed. “You’re not listening, Sheila. I. Don’t. Know. Of. Any. Other. Will. I can’t say it more clearly. When we were first married, he talked about making a will. I never knew he’d done it. If there *is* another will, his lawyer would have a copy, the court would have a record, and it would’ve been the one they read.”

“But I *saw* it! He showed it to me or I’d ne...” Sheila stopped and a pink flush shone through her perfectly applied makeup. She bit her lip and turned away, hugging her slender torso.

“Or you’d never have married him?”

“I didn’t say that,” Sheila snapped. Her voice didn’t seem as confident as it had been moments ago.

“You didn’t have to. Not for me, anyway. I no longer have illusions. I know what he was like.” Crissy could hear the sadness in her own voice.

“But that wasn’t how it was when we first met,” Sheila said, a wistful note in her tone. “He was fun! He’d take me to fun places. We’d go dancing. He’d buy me things; expensive, pretty things! He made that Albuquerque trip fun even though he had to go to those stupid meetings!”

She sighed, her body beginning to sway, dancing to an orchestra only she could hear. Her motions brought her partially around to face Crissy. Sheila’s eyes were closed and a

dreamy look had settled upon her face.

Crissy watched the wistful dance steps. Her chest constricted. It was she who broke the stillness once she could breathe again. Surprisingly, she managed to speak in a calm voice.

“The business trip to Albuquerque? We were still married then. I didn’t know he’d met you yet.”

Sheila’s eyes flew open; her motions stilled. She hugged herself tighter as though to ward off physical blows.

“How long before our divorce did your affair begin?” Crissy felt like a barrel of icy water had been thrown in her face.

Sheila didn’t answer.

“How long?” Crissy prodded the silent widow.

“What makes you think we had an affair?” Sheila’s tone was unsure; defensive. She didn’t look directly at Crissy.

“Look; Larry’s dead and Patti’s not here right now. Don’t fence with me. How long did the affair last before the divorce?”

“I didn’t say we had an affair,” Sheila hedged, whiny fear creeping into her voice.

“Your denial doesn’t matter, but a bunch of things make sense now. Hmm; it’s true the wife’s the last to know. You’re disgusting.”

Crissy rubbed her upper arms, as if to give herself warmth. She looked at the younger woman with a new understanding.

“Well, my finding out about your affair *now* should make one thing very clear to you.”

“What?”

“You can be sure that keeping my inheritance isn’t about

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getting even for stealing my husband.”

“But...” began Sheila, turning to face her rival fully. She put her fists on her slender hips.

Crissy again held up her hand, wordlessly demanding silence. “But nothing. Produce another will and prove it’s legal – which means it was signed by Larry and his attorney and legally recorded into public records – or we have nothing further to discuss. Stop harassing me with visits or phone calls. If it continues, you’ll hear from my attorney. Understand?”

“I’m not harassing you, Bitch! I just want what’s mine.” Sheila’s voice regained its strength and discordance.

“You *have* been harassing me. Constantly calling and hanging up when I answer is harassment. Constantly calling and visiting me whining for the money I’ve inherited is harassment. That stops now. Have you got that straight?”

The younger woman opened her mouth, but Crissy forestalled her. “I have Caller ID on my phone. I can prove how many times you’ve called. I’m tired of your childish games.”

*I’m tired of seeing your young, stylish, skinny little body parade around making me feel fat and ugly and extremely old, too.*

She bit her lip to keep those words from escaping. She wouldn’t be petty and spiteful. A deep breath calmed her. “Find the new will or leave me alone.”

“I can’t and you know it! You hid it to keep me from getting everything!”

“So you’ve said and I heard you; but you aren’t listening. Larry’s lawyer didn’t have a new will. I’ve got plans for this money. Stay away or I’ll get a restraining order against you.

“By the way, here’s more advice, Sheila. I gave you six months to be out of the house you shared with Larry. You

have sixty days left of that Order to Vacate and remove you and your stuff from it.

“When that sixty-first day arrives, a crew will come clear it out and get it ready to sell. If your things are still there, they’ll be hauled to the nearest dump. You won’t get even one extra day.”

“I need more time! I’ve got a lot of stuff!” Sheila was so angry Crissy could see her shaking. The skin around her mouth was without color.

Crissy had a moment of fear. What would Sheila do to her if she didn’t get her own way? Crissy’s resolve stiffened; this was for Patti.

No longer Larry’s doormat, Crissy wouldn’t give in or be bullied. Patti’s heritage was at stake. She stood her ground.

“So? Legally I only had to give you 30 days; I gave you 6 months – 180 days. Neighbors tell me you haven’t removed so much as a dust bunny. Hire a company to pack and move you. Or save a bundle and pack everything yourself. I don’t care which. Just be gone by the deadline.”

Sheila was becoming angrier. Crissy wondered if she’d be attacked or would the girl grab a handful of Crissy’s hair and yank her around?

Crissy plastered a smile on her face, trying to hide the sudden fear swamping her. The song from *The King and I* whizzed into her head, about how pretending you were brave fooled not only your opponents, but yourself. As it passed through her mind, it gave her courage.

“Who knows?” she said, looking the younger woman steadily in the face. “While you’re packing, you may find the missing will. Now, you’ve taken up enough of my time today. Go. Be out of that house in sixty days. Goodbye.”

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For one long terror-filled moment, Crissy thought she'd get punched squarely in the face.

Finally, Sheila said, "You will *so* pay for getting in my way! You'll be sorry you were ever born!"

She whirled and stomped out, screaming that when her attorney finished, Crissy wouldn't be able to afford a postage stamp and neither would that smart aleck, bratty daughter of hers. She slammed the door with great vigor.

The room resounded with a sudden, deep silence.

Crissy took in a much-needed breath of air. Sheila was now a malicious enemy, and from what she'd said, Crissy didn't know how lethal she would become. One thing she did know, however; she wouldn't share the money with the hateful widow. She'd earned it by living with Larry's crass behavior; deserved it for enduring the abusive treatment from his parents. With this windfall, Crissy could build her resort and provide for Patti.

She walked around the desk and slumped into the chair. The strength she'd faced her enemy with drained away, leaving her limp and hollow. As the new information sank in, she felt older than her thirty-eight years. The scoundrel had been cheating for at least three years before he filed for divorce.

Larry's parents probably knew about the affair. Well, she didn't have to worry now. They were as dead as her cheating husband. If she thought about them at all since their fatal car crash, it was to enjoy the end of their cruelty, which had started the year after she'd married Larry.

In the solitude surrounding her, she wondered how they'd feel if they could know about her current situation. The daughter-in-law they hated now owned the whole kit and caboodle from both estates. The irony of it struck her funny.

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Crissy smiled, then giggled, and then laughed out loud. They'd be grinding their teeth and rolling over in the confines of their elaborate coffins. It was such a funny mental image, she nearly fell out of her chair with the hilarious, paradoxical beauty of the moment.

## TWO

“Of course I want you to win, Jacob; that’s why you need to lay low.” Detective Bryce Wheeler’s voice on the telephone was serious.

“You’ve been worried since I entered the Senate race, Bryce. I’ve been nothing *but* careful. The primary is eight days away; I’m well in the lead. Janning’s going to start shooting off his mouth like he did on Sunday and he’ll blow it. Relax; we’ll finish with a 45% lead! You’ll love it!”

“Only if you’re still alive; he’s lethal.”

“Relax; we’re coming down the home stretch. I need to write my speech for tomorrow’s rally, which is why I’m home early. So, breathe, man!”

“Janning’s rivals are only safe when he’s more than 55% ahead in the polls.”

“Well, I’m home and don’t even have to go out for milk.”

“Doors locked?”

“Yes; and the alarms are set. I’ll know if he tries to break in.”

“Jacob, just humor me, okay?”

“What’s given you the heebie jeebies? You were okay last night.”

“Janning held an airport press conference an hour ago and



left for Washington. He just alibied himself for the week. He'll do public things to get his face on the nightly news. Meanwhile, you're a sitting duck. It's his M.O. His sweaty white hands are clean while his opponents are compromised or go missing. I don't trust the bum."

"Laura and I are having dinner alone and we'll go nowhere." He rubbed his hand across the desk phone's front edge, vaguely feeling the smooth plastic there.

"Is Laura already there?" Bryce neatly changed tactics.

"Not yet. She had training after work. She'll be heading home in about..." Jacob looked at his watch, "ten minutes. Monty's with her, so she's protected until she drives into our garage. We'll eat, coordinate tomorrow's clothing with her impeccable fashion sense, and make it an early night."

"You're not being serious, Jake. I'd bet my pension half our cold cases are Janning's doing; I just can't prove it. He's got to have help; but until we find the dude, we can't nail Janning. His guy's as substantial as smoke on a windy day!"

"Look; I know you don't jump at shadows, Bry, so I'll be careful until the election's over. Will I be safe then?"

"Don't know. None of his opponents ever won so there's no history. He's slippery; like trying to hold light in your fingers. Watch your back, and Laura's back."

Jacob laughed. "We'll be fine. Laura hates Monty breathing down her neck; I've got Unger leading me by the nose. He even waits until the garage door shuts behind me before he drives away."

"Did he do that tonight?"

"Yes. I listened. He stayed there for two minutes after the door was totally closed before he drove off. Satisfied?"

"Not really, but I don't have much choice."

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Jacob heard Bryce sigh. “Geez, Bry, you need to get a life. You’ve been entirely too serious since your divorce. Lighten up or you’ll have a coronary on top of your ulcers.”

“My annual physical was last week and showed no ulcers. Even my cholesterol levels are good. I won’t breathe easy until Janning gets back and holds his ‘I’m back home, Kiddies’ press conference. Until then, don’t take chances, okay?”

“Okay, okay! I’ll be good; I’ll stay inside and lock the doors and windows until Mommy gets home!” Tension from these last hectic weeks caused a sarcastic bite to his words.

There was a long pause before Bryce quietly said, “In view of my caseload, Jacob, that isn’t funny.”

Jacob took a breath. “I know; I’m sorry. I guess I’m feeling the strain to the point I can’t breathe. I’m alert for myself and my family. Even at college, the kids both have body guards watching them. They’re too precious for even one moment of negligence. And Bryce, thanks for caring. I appreciate all you do. Laura’s with me there. You know that.”

“Yeah, I guess so. Just...okay; see you tomorrow.”

Jacob laughed. “Right-oh, Mother Hen!” The words being said with a laugh, they lacked the sting of the earlier remark.

Bryce’s laugh crackled through the phone’s receiver; he’d taken it as it was meant.

Jacob relaxed; his friend’s feelings were no longer hurt.

“That’s better. If you’re laughing, you’re not mad at me. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Deal!” Bryce said, and they severed the connection.

Jacob replaced the earpiece on its cradle. He stood still a moment with his hand on the receiver. His thumb rubbed the earpiece briefly as he softly said, “Don’t worry, I won’t take

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chances.” He tapped the phone and froze as he heard a noise behind him. It could’ve been a slight cough or a stifled chuckle.

Jacob turned to face a man standing in the doorway pointing a gun squarely at his chest. With the silencer on the barrel, it looked huge and deadly. His eyes flicked to the man’s face; a large smile blossomed there.

“Hi, Jacob Garner, Senate Hopeful. I’m your new best friend. Don’t move a muscle or this will be the shortest friendship on record.”

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A M Jenner is a mother and grandmother who lives in Gilbert, Arizona with her family, cars named "Creature" and "The Tardis", and around 5,000 books. A self-professed hermit, she loves interacting with her fans online, and was last seen entering the library.

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Crissy Mitchell got lucky...her ex hadn't changed his will, and she inherited everything. His widow Shelia threatens mayhem and more if his fortune isn't handed over immediately.

Meanwhile, the construction of Crissy's medieval castle resort is suddenly plagued with delays and problems, including finding her contractor's body with a cracked skull, and recent human bones in his pocket. Then other, less recent bodies are discovered.

Can Crissy find out who's been using her property for a graveyard before she becomes the next occupant?



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