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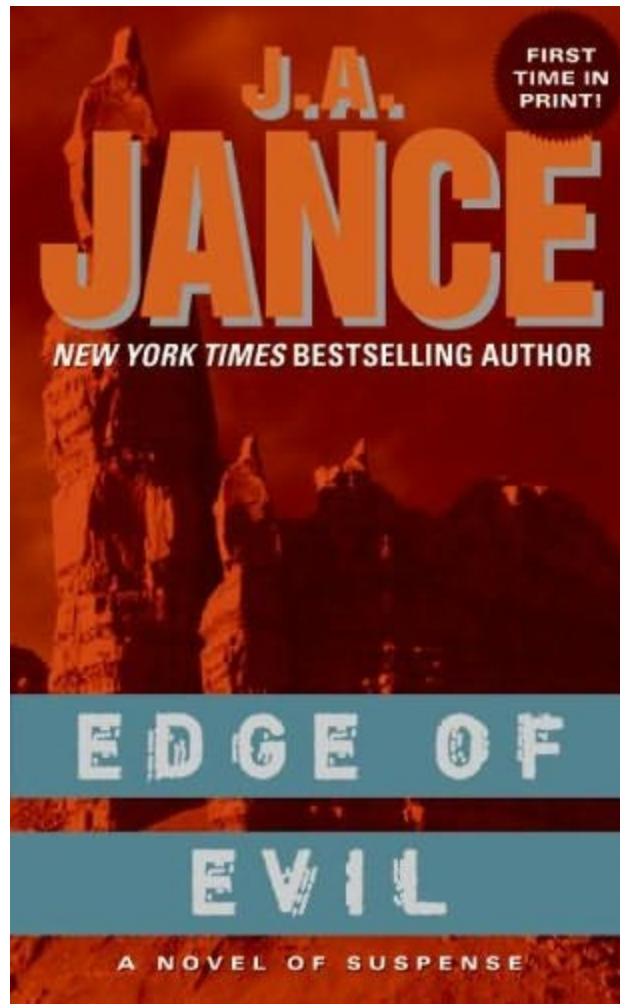
EDGE OF

EVIL

A NOVEL OF SUSPENSE

Edge of Evil

J. A. Jance



Prologue

A pair of headlights inched down Schnebly Hill Road, down from the Mogollon Rim toward red rock–rimmed Sedona, eleven treacherous miles below. Had anyone been able to see through the falling snow, they might have thought the vehicle was traversing the sheer cliff face itself. Less than half a mile from the top, at a spot where the road made a hairpin turn back into a canyon, an older model Chevy Yukon came to a stop. With the engine still running, a door opened. Someone stepped out into the falling snow. The door slammed shut quietly, very quietly, the sound muffled by the heavy, wet flakes.

For a few seconds nothing at all happened. And for a while after, it seemed as though nothing would. Then slowly, very slowly, the SUV inched forward. Rather than following the narrow roadway that wound back into the safety of the mountain, the Yukon instead moved forward, straight out and over the edge. The burning headlights cut through the darkness and the falling snow as the Yukon arched downward.

In clear weather the explosion of metal as the vehicle slammed into the first outcropping of rock would have echoed up and down the canyon walls, but on this snowy March night, it was muffled, too. As the Yukon continued its deadly end-over-end tumble, a body flew soundlessly out through one of the smashed windows and landed, limp and lifeless as a rag doll, its shattered arms flung around the base of a scrubby pine. Without its passenger, the Yukon continued on its destructive path, tumbling on and on, down and down. One by one, headlights and taillights were extinguished. When the vehicle finally came to rest, the interior dome light came on briefly. After a few minutes, that too went out. Then there was silence, utter silence.

On the snow-covered track far above, a single person stood and watched, peering through the snow searching for any sign of life coming from the scattered wreckage. Finally, after several long minutes, satisfied that no one could have survived that terrible downward plunge, the coat-shrouded figure turned and trudged back the way the Yukon had come.

Within minutes, the telltale impressions of hiking boots had been totally obliterated. Before long, the tire tracks leaving the roadway had disappeared as well. All that was left was silence and the falling snow.

Chapter 1

When Alison Reynolds left the studio after the eleven o'clock news, she was amazed to find Cliff Baker, the news director, waiting out in the hall. He was usually gone for the day by then, or else he was out in the parking lot toking up.

“Talk to you a minute, Ali?” he said in that clipped almost rude tone of his, one that made his smallest requests come across as issued orders.

Ali was whipped. She had started that morning as the featured speaker for a YWCA fund-raising breakfast. At noon she had MC-ed an American Cancer Society–sponsored charity event. In the process she had driven from one end of LA to the other. She had also co-anchored two evening live news broadcasts—one at six and the other at eleven. She was ready to go home, kick off her high heels, and put her feet up. Looking at Cliff’s uncompromising face, she knew he wouldn’t take no for an answer.

She summoned a tired but necessary smile. “Sure, Cliff. What’s up?”

That’s when she noticed Eduardo Duarte, a uniformed security guard, standing off to one side and hovering awkwardly in the background. Ali knew Eddie and his wife Rosa. They had met in a hospital room on a juvenile cancer ward where she had gone to cheer them up while the Duarte’s three-year-old son, Alonso, had been undergoing treatment—successful treatment it turned out—for leukemia. Ali Reynolds was, after all, the station’s unofficial but very committed one-woman cancer research and treatment spokesperson.

This status had been a natural aftermath of her first husband’s death from an inoperable brain tumor at age twenty-four, twenty-two years earlier. His death had left Ali a widow at age twenty-three—widowed and seven months pregnant. Christopher had been born two full months after his father’s death. Since then, Ali had been a tireless crusader for cancer research. She walked in Relays for Life, participated in Races for the Cure,

and did countless cancer-related public appearances whenever possible. And private appearances as well.

For most of the on-air folks at the station, Eduardo Duarte was just another nameless, faceless security guard who checked IDs as employees came and went through the front lobby. For Ali, Eddie was far more than that. She had been with the Duartes in the hospital waiting room and had held their hands during the dark time when no one had known for sure whether or not their child would survive.

“Hey, Eddie,” she said. “How’s my man, ”Lonso?”“

“He’s okay, I guess, Ms. Reynolds,” Eddie answered, but he kept his eyes averted. That’s when Ali tumbled to the fact that Cliff Baker’s hallway ambush meant trouble.

“What’s going on, Cliff?” she asked.

Six months earlier Clifford Baker had been brought on board to “fix” things. At least that was the way the story was told to the news team at the staff meeting when Cliff was introduced. But what had been bad then was still bad now. It was hard to win the ratings game when there were too many people out in the parking lot smoking joints before and after their shifts; when there were too many people hiding out in their offices with too many lines of coke going up their noses. And Ali Reynolds long suspected that one of those problem noses belonged to Cliff Baker.

“The ratings still suck,” he said.

Ali didn’t say anything. She was over forty in a world in which thirty-five meant on-air womenfolk were nearing the end of their sell-by date. Standing there in the hallway, breathing the sweet perfume of marijuana smoke wafting off Cliff’s rumpled sports jacket, Ali knew exactly what was coming. There was a certain inevitability to the whole process, and Ali wasn’t about to say something that would make Cliff’s job any easier. If he was there to fire her, he would have to come right out and say so.

“We’ve decided to take the news team in a different direction,” he said at last.

Presumably without me, Ali thought, but she kept her mouth shut.

“I know this is going to be difficult for you,” Cliff continued.

Ali had known from the moment she met the man that he was a cold-blooded bastard. The supposed reluctance he was exhibiting now was all an act—a classic study in self-serving, cover-your-ass camouflage.

“And I’m sure this is going to seem hardhearted,” he went on, shaking his head reluctantly, “but we have to let you go. We’ll pay you until the end of your contract, of course, and then I’m sure there’ll be some severance pay, but after that...” He shrugged.

With the news broadcast ended, there were other people coming and going in the hallway. Ali noticed that they all gave the three people standing outside the newsroom door a wide berth. Ali wondered, *How many of you knew this was coming?*

She had noticed a few sidelong glances of late— quiet conversations that would die away as soon as she came into the room and resume once she left — but in the cutthroat world of television, she hadn’t thought them anything out of the ordinary. Now she knew better, but she couldn’t afford to think about her spineless co-workers just then. Instead, she remained focused on Cliff.

“Why?” Ali asked. “Why do you have to let me go?”

This was a good journalistic gambit. Go for the *Ws*—who, what, why, where, when, and sometimes how. She was never quite sure how the word *how* had been added to the mix of *Ws*, or why it was considered to be one, but when taking journalism classes from stodgy professors whose grading meant everything, it’s a good idea to avoid questioning the conventional wisdom.

“For the good of the team,” Cliff answered at once.

Ali Reynolds came from good Scandinavian stock. She was a natural blonde who could, on occasion, summon a suitably dumb-blonde persona. It was a gambit that had suckered more than one unsuspecting male interviewee into saying more than he intended. Cliff, dyed-in-the-wool male chauvinist that he was, took the bait.

“You know the demographics,” he added. “We need to appeal to a younger audience, a more hip audience.”

“You’re saying I’m too old?” Ali asked.

“Well, not in so many words,” Cliff answered quickly.

But, of course, he had said so in so many words. Not only had he said the revealing “hip audience” words to Ali, he had made the astonishing blunder of doing so in front of a witness, Eddie Duarte. Ali suspected that the grass Cliff had smoked while waiting for the end of the broadcast had impaired his judgment. Ali glanced toward Eddie, who seemed to be fixated on examining the shine on his highly polished shoes.

“When’s my last broadcast?” she asked.

“You just did it,” Cliff said.

Ali willed herself to exhibit no emotion whatsoever. She summoned the same strength she had used to get through the noon newscast the day of the Oklahoma City bombing. Her performance that day had been done with enough professional aplomb that it had been instrumental in getting her a job as a “pre”-Laurie Dhue Fox News Channel babe a year later. (Of course, her natural-blond good looks and flawless complexion hadn’t hurt, either.) Years later, after Ali had come to LA to assume co-anchor duties there, she had managed to remain dry-eyed and professional during the unrelenting hours of live on-air coverage in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. She was dry-eyed now, too.

“You’re not going to give me a chance to tell my viewers good-bye?” she asked.

“There’s no point, really,” Cliff said with a shrug. “Come on, Ali. When it’s over, it’s over. Schmaltzy good-byes don’t do a thing for ratings. But that’s why Eddie’s here. He’ll go with you while you clean out your locker and your desk. You’re not to touch your computer. Whatever’s on your office computer belongs to the station. And be sure to give him your ID card, your elevator pass, and your keys on the way out. Good luck.” With that, Cliff Baker turned away and sauntered, down the hall.“

“Sorry, Ms. Reynolds,” Eddie murmured.

“Thank you,” she said.

“Will you be all right?”

“I’ll be fine. Come on. Let’s get this over with.”

She went into the newsroom, where she saw that someone had taken the liberty of placing an empty banker’s box on the chair in front of her desk. As she approached it, she noticed that the other people in the room seemed totally involved in other things—studying their computers, talking on the phone. Only one of them, Kimberly Weston—the up-and-coming “weather girl”—came over to chat.

“I’m so sorry to hear about all this,” she said.

So the word had been out, Ali realized. And this little twit—the arrogant tiny-waisted twenty-something with her enhanced boobs, the bitch who had masterminded giving Ali a gift-wrapped gag package of Grecian Formula 44 on the occasion of her most recent birthday—had known all about it for God knows how long. Since long before Ali did.

With a swipe of her fist, Ali cleared her son’s high school graduation portrait off her desk and slammed it into the box with enough force that only a miracle kept the glass from shattering.

“That’s funny,” she said, “I only just found out.”