

LITTLE GREEN DREAMS



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

DELILAH DEVLIN

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DEDICATION

This story has been simmering in my head for many, many years. I wrote the first chapters way back in 2002, and they placed in and won some contests. However, I pushed it to the back burner when other projects sold.

*Still, I never forgot about **Little Green Dreams**, likely because my father was from Gurdon, Arkansas, where the story is set. He took my daughter and me for a walk down the railroad tracks—his way of supporting my idea by making sure I got the details right.*

He's been gone several years now, but I thought it was time to resurrect the story about the little ghost light that could. Miss you, Dad. This one's for you.

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Also by Delilah Devlin

ABOUT THE BOOK

Sometimes, **Joe Franchetti** hates his job at the *National Informer*, especially when he's sent on assignment to cover a story involving aliens from another world. When he is sent to investigate the story of a woman in rural Arkansas who claims her husband was abducted by aliens, he vows to debunk her story, no matter how much the truth might hurt her attractive daughter.

Sandra Billingsley has a problem. Her stepfather is missing, and her mother is the prime suspect in his disappearance. In addition to protecting her eccentric mother from a possible murder investigation, now she must contend with a national tabloid reporter set on exposing her mother as a murderess or a madwoman.

While the investigation turns up more suspects and the local townspeople scheme to profit from the "alien invasion," Joe and Sandra work together to unravel the mystery, knowing their attraction is doomed to end in pain when the truth is revealed.

LITTLE GREEN DREAMS

New York Times and *USA Today* Bestselling Author

Delilah Devlin

CHAPTER 1



“PACK YOUR BAGS, Joe. I’ve got a story for you.”

Joseph Franchetti held his cell phone with one hand and rubbed the sleep from his eyes with the other. He turned the phone screen to check the time, squinting until the hour registered. “Boss, it’s not even five AM. Don’t you ever sleep?”

“Only when necessary. An intriguing message just hit my email inbox. I smell a story, and I want you to be the first national reporter to get the scoop.”

Joe groaned. Not again. He hated the excitement in his boss’s voice. Pat O’Byrne’s claims of an olfactory lead usually meant he had a stinker of a story—something revoltingly paranormal or science fiction. Not for the first time, he regretted the fact he’d chosen his current line of work over the life of a starving, future Pulitzer prize-winning author.

“Where are you, anyway?” Joe yawned and let the phone fall beside his head on the pillow. Maybe the call was just a bad dream. If he could just get back to sleep...

“Wake up, Joe!” Pat’s voice rasped from the instrument. “At home, of course. Someone sent a clip from a Little Rock magazine blog to my private email.”

“Huh,” Joe grunted sleepily and stretched. He needed to be alert,

conceding his pit bull of a boss would never let go of this bone. Sitting up, he swung his legs over the side of the bed. “You check your mail in the middle of the night?”

“Quit stalling. Get packed.”

“Wait.” One last time, Joe resisted the tug that would suck him into another of Pat’s whirlwinds. “I just got back into town, remember?” He cast a glance at his open suitcase on the floor, revealed in the light peeking from around the bathroom door. “I haven’t even had a chance to do laundry.”

“You’ve got a corporate card—buy new underwear on me.”

Fuck. If the boss was willing to spring for extras, he wasn’t getting out of this one. “So, where am I going?” he asked, finally resigned to his fate.

“Gurdon, Arkansas.”

“Arkansas? What am I investigating?” Joe asked grumpily, raking a hand through his hair. “Two-headed cows? A giant meth bust? A family feud?”

“A ghost light and an alien abduction.”

Joe swore under his breath. Sometimes, he really hated his job with the *National Informer*. He especially hated writing UFO stories—crop circles, flying saucers, little green men...and now, alien abductions.

“Boss—”

“Just listen for a minute, Joe. This one’s right up your alley. A real whodunit.”

Joe reached for the cigarettes on his nightstand and then remembered he’d just quit. Again, he sighed. “All right, I’ll bite. What’s the mystery?”

“Wait a second. I printed it out.” Paper rustled in the background. “Says here, ‘Woman questioned in the disappearance of her husband claims he was abducted by aliens while walking along railroad tracks near Gurdon, Arkansas, on June 21. When asked why she didn’t report his disappearance earlier, she said—’ Listen to this, Joe! ‘—she said she knew perfectly well where he was.’ Isn’t that great?”

Joe waited for the rest of the story, but the silence stretched.

“Well?” Pat’s impatience was clear in the single word.

“That’s it?” Joe asked, incredulous. “Has she been arrested? Are they digging up the rose bushes?”

“That’s all that was in the article. But I made a call to the editor of the paper.”

“It’s not a newspaper,” Joe grumbled. “It’s a fucking blog written by a guy in his mom’s basement who’s hoping his crap reporting will get him fifteen seconds of fame.” Joe wiped a hand down his face, his brain still muzzy from lack of sleep. Following Pat’s rapid-fire conversation left him feeling winded. “Wait, this blogger answered the phone in the middle of the night?”

“It’s the middle of the morning to a *real* newspaperman, Joe.”

Joe would never admit it, but his interest was piqued. *Reluctantly piqued*. He did like a mystery. “All right, so someone answered the phone. Where do the ghost lights come into the story?”

“This editor says the place where the man was walking is known for an unusual phenomenon called The Gurdon Light. He says the Light’s a fact. *Unsolved Mysteries* even did an episode on it twenty or so years back. Anyway, the lady in question says her husband walked into the light and disappeared.”

Joe flipped on the nightstand lamp and reached for the notepad and pen that were never out of reach. His mind was already racing through the probables. “The lady in question likely murdered him.”

“Yeah, thought you’d say that.” Pat chuckled. “You’re a cynic, Joe. I love that about you. It’s why I’m giving you the story.”

“Gee, thanks, boss,” Joe replied wryly. “So, do you have anything on this lady?”

“Yeah. Name’s Amelia Carruthers. Husband’s name was Bobby.”

Joe scribbled down the names. His reporter’s instincts kicked into high gear, and he began firing questions. “Did he have any life insurance?”

“Loads. She says she won’t claim a single penny. Told the cops she wouldn’t need money where she’s going.”

Joe snorted. “You got that right. Jail’s cheap. She sounds nuts.”

“Apparently, the woman has a reputation for eccentric behavior,” Pat conceded.

Another clue? Joe flipped over a fresh page. “What do you mean?”

“Don’t have any specifics.”

Joe was beginning to agree with his boss. There was something *more* to this tale. The hair standing up on the back of his neck told him so. But he couldn’t give in too easily. “You know, boss, the story sounds pretty open and shut to me.”

“You think?”

“Yeah. Amelia’s working on an insanity plea for when hubby’s body is found planted in the backyard.”

“I don’t know,” Pat said, his tone revealing an underlying excitement. “I gotta feeling about this one.”

Joe silently agreed but knew his boss wasn’t about to let go of the otherworldly twist without a fight. Pat lived hoping to find proof of an actual close encounter of the extra-terrestrial kind. “Any other leads?”

“No, and the daughter’s not talking.”

“Bobby and Amelia have a kid?”

“She’s Amelia’s from a previous marriage. And she’s no kid. She’s a waitress. You’ll find her at Dee’s Diner in Gurdon.”

“What about Amelia’s ex?”

“Dead.”

Joe felt the first ah-ha moment. “Twice now, huh?”

“Maybe. Amelia and her daughter live in a place called Dirty Corners.”

“Thought you said the town was called Gurdon.”

“Dirty Corners is near Gurdon, but you won’t find it on the map. You’ll have to ask for directions from a local. Where do you think you’ll start?”

Joe didn't hesitate. The first step was obvious. "With the daughter."

AS SOON AS he passed the city limit sign, which read *Gurdon, population: 1,845*, the writer in Joe collected impressions and began to sift through sentences for the opening paragraph of his exposé.

Gurdon sat amid a tall pinewood forest, still lush and green in sharp contrast to the sunburned, grassy landscape he'd flown over that morning as he'd departed Dallas. The town's buildings reflected a shabby Southern gentility, choked by vegetation. Old white clapboard houses sat atop pier foundations with mysterious, shadowy crawlspaces beneath them. Newer brick buildings, anchored on concrete, showed signs of the weathering of seasons in the cracked, peeling paint around the windows.

Turning onto Front Street, Joe slowed the rented sedan and looked for the restaurant that would be his first stop. Dee's Diner sat on the corner of Front and Joslyn. It wasn't much to look at, just a squat building with a slanted, shingled roof and large windows on three sides. A sign taped to the glass next to the door boasted home-style, country-fried steaks and catfish.

At three in the afternoon, the parking lot was nearly deserted. A glance through the restaurant's windows revealed only a handful of customers. That suited Joe just fine. He hoped to learn as much as he could about the daughter, Sandra Billingsley, before the town got wind that a reporter was asking questions about her stepdaddy's abduction.

Joe parked his car at the side of the building and grabbed his notepad. Flipping through the pages, he quickly reviewed what he'd learned about the disappearance and his preliminary theories about what had really happened that night in June.

So far, Joe had three likely explanations for Bobby Carruthers' disappearance. First, Amelia Carruthers had murdered her husband and invented her improbable story to cover up the crime. Second, Bobby staged

his own disappearance with the help of his wife and would reappear, then go on the talk show circuit to sell his tale of alien abduction to the world. Third, Bobby deserted his crazy wife.

Keeping in mind that Pat expected him to consider one more scenario, Joe jotted down a fourth—an actual alien abduction.

He opened his car door to a blast of humid heat that plastered his shirt to his chest in an instant. *Why couldn't aliens have visited Nome, Alaska, in the summertime?*

Cool air greeted him as he pulled open the restaurant's glass door. Two men dressed in mechanics' coveralls sat in one of the booths that lined the long window. Joe chose a bench seat behind them and slid gratefully across the cool, red-vinyl upholstery.

"You know, Coy, if we play this thing right, Gurdon could be the next Roswell," the younger of the two men said.

Joe's attention was snagged in an instant. He surmised the two men were related. Both shared the same tall, broad frame. The older man wore his light brown hair in a short, military-style haircut. The younger man's hair was the same shade but brushed the collar of his coverall.

"There's certainly money to be made in aliens," the one called Coy replied. "Could be a real boost for tourism."

"Why wait for 'em to come to us? We could set up one of them websites and sell pictures and T-shirts. We'd never have to leave the house to do it."

It was then Joe noticed a young waitress in a pink uniform slowly rubbing a countertop with a dishrag. She was staring at the two men, two spots of angry color on her cheeks.

Coy nodded his head. "Just have to get Amelia to go on *The View* and tell the world what she saw."

The waitress slapped the counter with the cloth. "Now, that's enough, you two. You know better than to involve my mother in any of your schemes."

"Ah, Sandy," the older of the two men said. "Loy here didn't mean

nothin' by it. You know the boy don't have much sense."

Joe felt a sucker punch to his gut. Sandra Billingsley didn't look like the daughter of a killer. But then, what did a murderer's daughter look like? Hell, she'd probably helped Mama bury the body.

"Mister, can I bring you coffee or tea?"

Joe started when he realized "Sandy" had addressed the question to him. As ferocious as her bite had been when directed at the two mechanics, her voice held nothing but Southern honey with a touch of tart for him. He felt its caress all the way to his toes and cleared his throat. "Iced tea, please. Lots of ice."

"Comin' right up." Sandy reached for a glass from a shelf on the wall behind the counter.

The older man, Coy, twisted in his seat to face Joe. "Don't look like you're from around here."

Joe smiled politely. "I'm not. I'm from Dallas."

"You lost?"

Joe cast a glance at the waitress. "No, I'm exactly where I want to be."

Coy chuckled and looked over at Sandy, who made her way around the counter, a glass of tea in one hand and a menu in the other. "The boy's lost, Sandy. No one comes to Gurdon on purpose 'less'n they have family here."

"Don't scare him off," Sandy said with a cute wrinkle of her nose. "We haven't had a new face around here in ages that wasn't attached to a salesman." Her eyes widened. "Mister, you sellin' anything?"

Joe couldn't resist teasing her a little. "And if I was?"

"I'd wish a big old hole would swallow me up so I could hide my embarrassment." A crooked smile played at the corners of her lips. "And we're not buyin' anything."

Joe realized with a start he was flirting with his subject. He wasn't sure what he'd expected, but it hadn't been this leggy, sun-kissed blonde with an enchanting sprinkle of freckles across the bridge of her nose and forehead.

Sandy set the glass on the table in front of him and handed him the menu. As he reached for it, he noticed more golden freckles and fine golden hairs on her arms.

“Well, are you?”

Joe jerked his gaze back to her face.

Sandy cocked her head to the side.

Coy’s sly chuckle sent a flush of heat across Joe’s cheeks.

“Am I what?” He’d lost the thread of the conversation.

Sandy’s blond hair glinted copper in the sunlight washing the cafe’s interior. His gaze dropped to her mouth. The bow of her upper lip wore a swipe of rose-colored lipstick. The bottom was its own natural pale pink—due no doubt to her habit of chewing it, as she was doing now.

“Are you a salesman?” she repeated, yet to let go of the other end of the menu.

Loy snorted. “You know, I almost feel sorry for him.”

Embarrassed that his attention had wandered again where it had no business going, Joe said gruffly, “No, I’m not a salesman.” He tugged the menu, but she didn’t let go. “I’m here to do some research.”

Sandy released the menu instantly, suspicion clouding her face.

“You here to find the aliens?” Loy asked, excitement in his voice.

Joe knew he had to lie or risk Sandy clamming up. “Actually, I’m here to investigate a phenomenon called The Gurdon Light. But what’s this about aliens?”

Before Loy could respond, Sandy interjected, her expression worried, “Never mind those two. Are you hungry?”

Relieved she’d changed the subject rather than halting the conversation altogether, he replied, “I wouldn’t mind a snack. What do you recommend?”

“Dee’s cookin’ a fresh batch of fried apple pies—”

“I’ll take one,” he said, not waiting for her to finish.

“Good. I’ll be right back.” She threw him a quick smile, scowled at the

mechanics, and left, the skirt of her pink uniform twitching enticingly.

Joe heaved a sigh of relief. He needed a little space to sort through his first impressions. His hands itched to reach for his notepad and pen.

“So, mister, are you some kinda scientist?” Loy asked, bringing Joe’s gaze around to the grinning pair.

“No, I’m a writer.” Joe preferred to stay as close to the truth as possible. He’d be here for a while and didn’t want to risk slipping up later. “For a scientific journal,” he added as an afterthought.

“You another one tryin’ to prove the Light ain’t real?” Coy asked. A frown creased his forehead.

“I don’t believe in ghosts if that’s what you mean. There’s usually a scientific explanation for this sort of phenomenon.”

“Good luck to you.” Coy snorted. “But if *Unsolved Mysteries* couldn’t figure it out, how do you expect to do it?”

“Well, their angle was entertainment.” Joe eyed the two guys and wondered how much information he could get from them. “I’m sure they didn’t look very hard for a natural explanation.”

“Now we’ve had our share of college boys out here, too,” the younger Loy scoffed. “Takin’ pictures. Usin’ devices to try to prove the Light ain’t real—that it’s just swamp gas—but they never could.”

“I didn’t bring any devices with me.” Joe cast out the bait and watched for a reaction. “But I’d be interested in hearing opinions from the locals about the source of the Light...as a starting point to my investigation.”

“Oh, people ’round here have plenty of opinions, stranger.” Coy’s wry smile grew wide. “How much time you got?”

Joe’s narrowed gaze looked toward the kitchen door through which Sandy had disappeared. “As long as it takes.”

CHAPTER 2



JOE HELD OUT HIS HAND. “Name’s Joe Franchetti.”

“Coy Nolan.” Coy offered his rough hand, clean except for grease-begrimed fingernails.

Joe schooled his face to hide a wince before answering with a knuckle-popping squeeze of his own.

Mercifully, Coy released his hand with a short bark of laughter and an assessing stare. “This here’s my nephew, Loy.” He jerked his head toward the younger man.

“Franchetti sounds like a racecar driver,” Loy said, his gaze searching the parking lot until it landed on the nondescript blue sedan Joe had driven.

“No relation,” Joe murmured.

Loy shrugged. “My grandma drives a car like that. Doesn’t have much go. Now that Dodge Charger out there—” he pointed to a bright purple car with shiny chrome bumpers and tailpipes, “has a breathed-on 440 with a six-pack making over 500 horsepower. Not a cop in the county could keep up with it if I had a mind to blow the carbon out.”

Coy glared at the younger man. “Now, nephew, you don’t go ’round insultin’ a man’s car.” He nodded to the blue Ford Fusion. “I’m sure she’s just the sort of ride a science writer needs—good on gas and all.”

“It’s a rental,” Joe stated flatly, feeling like his manhood had somehow

been put in question.

“Ahem!”

Joe glanced up.

Sandy stood before him with a plate and a napkin-wrapped roll of silverware. “Here’s your pie, sir.” Again, her voice oozed over him like maple syrup on pancakes.

Her features intrigued him even more. The slant of her green eyes and the tilt of her pert nose gave her an otherworldly appearance—almost faerie-like.

“There he goes again,” Loy drawled.

“Your pie, sir,” Sandy repeated.

“His name’s Joe Andretti,” Coy said.

Joe shook himself but was unable to tear his gaze away. She was a puzzle he needed to work out. The sooner he did, the sooner he’d dispel the attraction. “Franchetti.”

“Yeah, like the racecar driver, but he ain’t,” Loy offered.

“Well, hello, Joe,” Sandy said, her amazing green eyes dancing with amusement. She nodded toward the plate. “Better eat it quick, or you’ll have a puddle.”

Joe dragged his gaze to the plate. He had a part to play and a mystery to solve. However captivating the subject, he wouldn’t fail to find the truth.

The scent of baked apples and cinnamon rose from a large, piping-hot pastry in the center of the plate. Two dollops of vanilla ice cream melted beside it. “Smells good.”

She moved to place the plate on the table in front of him, and he reached to help her but missed. Instead, his hand slid along her arm. Her softly curved, lightly freckled, warm-skinned...

His face heating, Joe jerked away his hand.

Sandy set the plate on the table with a light thump.

As he unrolled the silverware, three sets of eyes followed his progress. He cut a piece of the pie with his fork, dipped it in melting ice cream, and

brought it to his mouth. He didn't have to pretend his appreciation when he bit into the treat. "Mm-mmm," he said, closing his eyes to savor the explosion of flavors.

Three pride-filled smiles greeted him when he opened his eyes.

"Dee's pies are famous," Sandy said.

"Yeah, someone from Sara Lee came down here tryin' to buy her recipe," Coy said.

"Dee turned them down flat. It's her mama's recipe." Sandy nodded as if that were explanation enough.

"Sandy, why don't you take a load off?" Coy said.

She glanced around the diner. "I've got a few minutes. Don't mind if I do. Do you?"

Joe realized she intended to take the seat opposite him. Feeling a little like the spider to her fly, he said, "Oh, not at all. Please sit down."

Sliding onto the red bench opposite Joe, she groaned. "Didn't realize my feet needed it. I'd take my shoes off, but I'm afraid I'd never get them back on." She waved a hand at his plate. "Don't mind me. Keep eatin'."

Joe picked up his fork again and took another bite, watching her from under his eyelashes.

"So, Joe, how long you gonna be in these parts?" Coy asked.

Joe glanced up from his now half-empty plate. "Two or three weeks," he managed to say around a mouthful of pie.

"Gotta place to stay?"

This time, Joe swallowed before answering. "I just arrived in town. This was my first stop. Perhaps you could point me to a hotel?"

"You might be more comfortable at Oralia's Bed and Breakfast," Sandy said, "if you're plannin' on bein' here for a while. She serves a hearty breakfast to her boarders." She sucked her lower lip between her teeth and blushed.

"She's right," Coy said. "The motels in town are all right for a night or

two, but Oralia would take good care of you.”

“Sounds good.” Joe gave Sandy a small smile, pleased she seemed eager to help. “Where do I find it?”

“It’s a little ways outside of town—in Dirty Corners.” Coy winked, and his grin stretched his mouth wide. “Sandy here can give you the directions. She lives right next door.”

Joe bit back a triumphant grin. He couldn’t believe his luck. Not twenty minutes inside the city limits, and he’d already met the daughter—and found the perfect way to get close to her and her mother.

JOE FRANCHETTI... With her back to the two Nolans, Sandy tried his name out on her lips while Joe’s attention returned to his pie. *Joe Franchetti...* The name sounded as dark and exotic as the man looked.

Her gaze flicked over his bent head with avid attraction. Perhaps it was pre-programmed in her DNA, but something about his darkness captivated her. Deep, olive complexion. Dreamy, brown eyes. Dark, wavy, close-cropped hair. Even the hairs on his broad, long-fingered hands and arms fascinated her.

Her eyes crept to the collar of his shirt and the black hair that sprang from the open neck, then journeyed up the strong column of his throat to the wide, firm jaw speckled with the shadow of his afternoon beard.

Definitely not from around here. Too bad he was only passing through.

She wondered at her fascination. Perhaps it was the hint of mystery surrounding him, an air of something dangerous and starkly male. Or maybe she was just bored. But right now, looking at him was a joy. She shivered deliciously.

“You comin’ down with somethin’, Sandy?”

“I’m just fine, Coy, but thanks for askin’,” Sandy said, irritation making her voice a little sharp. That nosy man had probably counted the seconds

she'd stared shamelessly at Joe.

With a sigh, Joe pushed away his plate. He looked up and seemed surprised to find her staring, then his gaze shifted beyond her shoulder. The two Nolans must have been staring, too.

Sandy cringed. *He must think he's so far back in the sticks that we don't have a television to watch for entertainment.*

"Sandy, did you know Joe here's a writer?"

A writer? She stiffened, suspicion pushing away all the melty, mushy feelings she'd had. Sandy's glance whipped to Joe.

His eyes shuttered. "I'm a science writer," he said a little too quickly for her liking.

"Oh, yeah?" She folded her arms across her chest. "Which publication?"

"Scientific American," he countered, not missing a beat. He was a slick operator if she ever saw one.

"See there, Sandy? A patriotic boy," Coy said.

"He's here to write an article about the Light," Loy interjected cheerfully.

"And you just happened to stop at Dee's Diner as soon as you hit town?" Eyes narrowed, she waited to see whether he'd squirm.

"Dee's pies are famous," Coy reminded her.

Sandy's gaze didn't waver—she was as patient as a cat waiting for a mouse to show itself. Only Joe Franchetti was a larger, more dangerous sort of rodent. "He'd never even heard about them."

"Really," Joe said, raising one hand in the air. "The pie was great."

Sandy couldn't help thinking God would strike him dead if he went any further with this charade.

He shrugged and gave her a boyishly sheepish grin. "I've been assigned to look into the history and folklore surrounding The Gurdon Light."

She didn't believe him for a minute. His handsome face and flirty ways had been trained on her ever since he'd stepped into the diner. "And is there one particular theory that you're more interested in?" she asked, knowing her

tone was downright belligerent but not giving a damn.

“Ah, Sandy, give the man a break,” the younger Loy chided. “Aren’t you bein’ a little hyper-sensitive?”

She shot him a scowl. “Hyper-what? You shouldn’t use such big words, Loy. You’ll get a headache.”

Coy gave a suspicious cough. “Sandy, maybe it’s fate—kismet.”

She looked over her shoulder to glare at Coy. “Kismet, my a—”

“Now, now,” Coy said. “Don’t go losin’ that temper of yours.”

Joe removed a twenty from his wallet and laid it on the table. “Keep the change. Look, I can see you aren’t happy with my being here.” He scooted across the vinyl bench, preparing to leave. “If I could get those directions to the bed and breakfast, I’ll be out of your hair.”

“Find your own damn bed,” she said, glaring. Reporters didn’t deserve civility.

Joe raised an eyebrow, but the corners of his sexy mouth quirked. The man was amused by her rage. *Grrr*.

“Now, hush up, Sandy,” Coy said, his words clipped. “Or I’ll tell your mother how rude you’ve been to a stranger to our town.” He smiled at Joe. “I better draw you a map, Joe. I’ll walk out with you.”

Sandy kept her face averted as Coy slid from his seat. A knot of tension built in her belly. She hated acting like a bitch with anyone. That Coy had felt the need to dress her down made her ashamed.

“I appreciate it, Coy,” Joe said. “Well, it was nice meeting you folks.”

She snorted.

Then, the slithering snake had the gall to include her in the smile he flashed.

Sandy juttred her chin higher and bristled when he chuckled.

“Nice meetin’ you, Joe,” Loy chimed in. “I’ll be seein’ you around. I can point you to the folks you need to talk to about that Light.”

“That’s very kind of you, Loy. I’ll see you soon, Sandy,” Joe said the last

softly and then walked away.

Damn, if his voice saying her name didn't make her toes curl.

“Ooo-wee!” Loy howled once the two men exited the restaurant. “I can see the steam risin' from your ears. I'm thinkin' you have an admirer, Sandy-girl.”

Sandy swatted him on the shoulder. “Do us both a favor—don't think!”

Loy laughed. “I'm outta here. Say goodbye to Dee.”

Sandy stood, starch in her backbone, and began to clear the dishes from the two tables. She refused to give Joe Franchetti the benefit of a single glance as he left the parking lot. Strange, but she knew he was staring at her through the glass. Why else would her clothes suddenly feel tight and her skin flushed?

Of all the rotten luck. Sandy knew just about every man around Clark County, and not a single one had ever left her breathless with just a smile.

Sandy had been pleased when Joe's gaze had lingered as she'd waited on his table. Her gullibility angered her. At least now, she understood the danger in the air. She just wished she'd used a little more caution and paid attention to the niggling suspicion at the back of her mind.

She'd have to give Joe Franchetti a wide berth, however handsome and fascinating he was—and that was going to be nigh on impossible to do now.

She could just kick herself for suggesting Oralia's place. All he'd done was smile, and she'd looked into those doe-brown eyes and melted into a puddle of goo. When he'd mentioned needing a hotel, her first instinct had been to blurt out Oralia's Bed and Breakfast.

The thought raised her temper another notch as she stomped over to the sink with the dishes. That *reporter* had seduced her with his shiny hair and shiny teeth.

He'd even felt her up when she'd brought him Dee's special pie—gliding his big, hairy fingers along her arm, making her think how delicious it would feel for his hand to glide along her skin...well, elsewhere. And he'd done it

right there in front of God and the two Nolans!

In a heartbeat, Sandra's anger turned to panic. Sending Joe Franchetti to Oralia's was a big mistake because her mother was at home—right next door. She had to keep a distance between the two of them. There was no telling what her mother might say.

The last time she'd spoken to a reporter, he'd made her look like a nut. And worse, he'd cast suspicion on her over Bobby's disappearance.

Pushing through the kitchen door, she spied Dee glossing the tops of a batch of fried pies with a stick of butter.

"Dee, I have to leave early." Sandra reached for her purse hanging on a hook beside the bathroom. "Something's come up."

"It wouldn't have anything to do with that young man who was just here, would it?" Dee's eyes teased. "I saw him. Had to get myself a look at whatever had your cheeks glowin' like ripe peaches. Don't say as I blame you; he's a mighty handsome man."

"I didn't notice." Never good at lying, she felt her cheeks burn. "I need to check on Mama," Sandy said, pretending disinterest while searching her purse for her keys.

"Of course you do." Dee grinned. "Say hello to Amelia for me."

"I will. Thanks, Dee. I'll see you tomorrow."

Sandy hurried to her car, muttering to herself. "Great. Why couldn't I have a normal mother? Why couldn't she just be waiting for the Lord to call her home? No, not my mama. She's waitin' for a phone call from E.T."

CHAPTER 3



JOE WAS BEGINNING to think he was lost, although Coy's detailed yet unique directions had gotten him this far.

He'd found the Thompsons' white pump house with the green-shingled roof, the Andrews' tree with the tire around the base—painted white with pink and blue tulips, and he'd found the dead cat in the road just before the turn onto Big Shady Road. But he still hadn't seen the pretty little sign with the green ivy border next to the mailbox announcing Oralia's Bed and Breakfast. The directions said to drive "a piece." Well, he'd driven a good bit more. He had to be close. Finding a gravel-covered entrance to a pasture, he pulled the Ford off the narrow road to look at the map again.

Suddenly, a car blew past him. He looked up in time to see the rear of an older model white Honda Civic and a familiar glimpse of red-blond hair. Sandy Billingsley was going somewhere in a hurry.

Joe smiled with satisfaction. He had her spooked. He knew from experience that people who had something to hide got nervous when questions cut too close to the truth.

Pulling back onto the road, he gunned the engine. The Ford hiccupped. With the engine whining like a wind-up toy, Joe followed the trail of dust Sandy left in her wake.

Joe pursued at a lazy pace, letting Sandy's car disappear around bends,

catching up with her on the straightaways, only to lose her again when the road curved in the opposite direction. Her brake lights flirted, as sharp and sassy as the woman herself. A job that had started with a little arm-twisting was shaping up to be a whole lot more interesting than Joe had bargained for.

He had yet to determine how he'd conduct his investigation. Would he woo Sandy's secrets away, or would he be her shadow? Both offered distinctly different satisfactions.

One might prove difficult for him to maintain his objectivity as well as test his focus. The other would allow him a professional distance.

Joe decided now was too soon to decide. He was still feeling pleasantly bemused by his initial encounter with Sandra D. Billingsley.

The road narrowed, tunnel-like, shaded by a canopy of trees along the roadside. Up ahead, a clearing carved from the surrounding forest revealed a collection of clapboard buildings—small plantation-style houses with long, wrap-around porches. Dirty Corners.

Joe slowed his vehicle just as Sandy hit her brakes and turned sharply onto a gravel drive. Joe came to a halt to watch as she threw open her door and bounded from the car. She disappeared into a pale green, two-storied house that looked a little ramshackle, especially in contrast to the pristine, white house standing next to it. He didn't need to read the name on the ivy-painted mailbox or the tasteful sign next to it to know the second house was Miss Oralia's B&B.

Now, a cautious sort of man would have turned into Miss Oralia's drive, but Joe had the urge to tweak the tail of a certain little waitress. He wondered what she might say if he rattled her cage so soon after their confrontation in the diner—before she had a chance to gather her wits or practice her story.

He pulled into the drive and parked the Ford behind her car. Before he even opened the door, he saw a curtain twitch from a second-story window—too soon, he thought, to be Sandy. The mother was at home.

Even better.

He climbed the wooden steps, noting signs of neglect—a loose floorboard, paint peeling on the railing, flowerpots overrun with weeds.

He rang the doorbell.

Footsteps clicked on a wooden floor within the house and stopped on the opposite side of the door. A face peered through the lace curtain at the narrow window flanking the door, then jerked back.

Joe waited, guessing Sandy contemplated letting him cool his heels on the front porch for the next hundred years. But her mother was home. Would both of them hide behind the door?

He rang the doorbell again.

The door opened a narrow crack, just wide enough for Sandy's scowling face to peer out. "Oralia's place is next door, Mr. Andretti. And don't you even try to tell me you rang this doorbell by accident."

"It's Franchetti," he said, biting the inside of his mouth at her deliberate jibe. The lady had spunk. "The B&B is next door?" He pulled the scribbled instructions from his pocket and squinted at them, pretending to be confused.

Sandy rolled her eyes. "Now, how can you have missed Oralia's driveway? Not only is there a sign big enough to spot it from a mile in the air, but her name's also printed clear as day on her mailbox."

He gave up the thin pretense and went for charm. "I did see you blow by in your little Civic. When I pulled in, I realized you were home and decided to stop by to apologize."

Sandy snorted. "That'd take too damn long. You'd have to start with the day you were born and work all the way up to when you walked into the diner and flashed your alligator smile."

Joe tsked. "Sandy, why are you so dead-set against writers?"

The door slammed shut and then just as quickly opened as far as the slender chain lock would allow. "I did not give you permission to use my first name."

He leaned against the doorframe, his arms braced on both sides, looming

over her. “Why don’t you like writers? Or is it just me?”

Sandy’s brow furrowed in a fierce frown. “Sir, I’ll ask you once to remove yourself from my porch, or I’ll call the police.”

The door slammed again. This time, Joe decided to make a tactical retreat. He’d learned something very important—Sandy Billingsley was afraid.

As he walked back to his sensible little Ford, he began to whistle, ignoring the little twinge of concern he’d experienced when he’d looked into her haunted eyes.

SANDY WATCHED Joe as he returned to his car, her fingers closing around the lace curtain so tightly the curtain rod groaned.

How the hell was she supposed to go about her business when he’d be watching every move? And why the hell was she noticing how lovingly the seat of his blue jeans clung to the firm curve of his a—

“Sandra Deana Billingsley! Why didn’t you invite that handsome young man in for a glass of tea?”

Sandy closed her eyes for a moment, then turned to face her mother.

Dressed in her nightrobe, Amelia Carruthers peeked around the corner of the parlor, her eyes wide with reproach.

“He’s a reporter, Mama.”

“He has a steady job? Halleluiah!” her mother cried, raising her fist in the air. “How come you were so nasty to him at the door?”

“Mama, didn’t you hear me? He’s a reporter.” How many ways did she have to say it to get her to understand the danger he represented? “I mean, he might say he’s just a writer for a scientific journal, but I’m not buying it. He’s too handsome, too smooth, and wouldn’t know a Bunsen burner from a lighter.”

“It seems he’s caught your attention.” Her mother grinned. “Likes to live

dangerously, does he?"

Sandy rolled her eyes and swept past her. She headed for the kitchen, hoping her mother would take the hint and drop the subject.

Instead, Amelia shadowed her steps. "So, why should it concern me that he's a reporter? He's handsome, well-groomed, and by the look of his fanny, he takes good care of himself."

"Mama!" Sandy grabbed a dishtowel and plate from the dish rack beside the sink and rubbed.

"He's put more color in your cheeks than I've seen in a month of Sundays."

Sandy's cheeks grew hotter. "This is anger, *Mother*, not interest."

Her mother chuckled. "Sure, it is. So why were you checking out his backside?"

Sandy gasped and flipped the plate over. She wanted to deny that last bit but knew if she said anything at all, her mother would think she protested too much.

"You trying to rub the pattern off that plate?"

Rattled, Sandy set the plate on the counter and picked up the next one.

Amelia returned the shining plate to the cupboard. She sighed loudly. "Sure would've been nice to meet a fresh face."

"Well, he's gone now."

Her mother's face brightened, almost childlike in her delight. "Good news is, he's just across the hedge. I'll give Oralia a call later and see which bedroom she gave him."

Sandy's tummy knotted. Joe Franchetti in a bedroom was not a picture Sandy wanted in her head. "We've talked about this before. You shouldn't talk to strangers."

"So why don't you tell me all about him, and he won't be. What's his name? He's awfully cute."

"I never noticed."

“Don’t fib; you’re chewing your lip again. You did, too, notice.”

“If I noticed anything at all, it was how slick his lies are.” She’d never admit that her heart had stopped beating that first moment she’d seen him saunter into the diner.

“Seems a damn shame. You’ll never catch a man if you don’t stop findin’ fault with every last one you meet. I could go to Bobby with a free conscience if I knew you had someone takin’ care of you.”

Sandy closed her eyes. Bobby wasn’t a subject she cared to discuss. And she definitely wasn’t in the mood to hear her mother’s story concerning his disappearance one more time.

Bobby Carruthers was gone—and good riddance. She’d never liked him and couldn’t understand what her mama had seen in him in the first place. Bobby had epitomized the word slick. *That was*, until Joe Franchetti had tried to slide his way into her confidence.

“You’re not going anywhere, Mama,” she said, her tone brisk. “You know I’d be lost without you.”

“That’s certainly true. I told them I’d stay until you were settled. Just didn’t think it’d take so dang long.” Her mother took the last plate from Sandy’s hands and lifted a starchy eyebrow. “Think this one’s gettin’ hot from friction burn.”

Sandy tossed her cloth onto the counter. “I’m gonna go get a shower. I swear I smell like fried fish.”

“You do that—but take a bath and use some of those bath salts I gave you for Christmas. Maybe you won’t be as prickly as a porcupine after you relax a bit.”

Sandy nodded and headed toward the stairs. When her hand touched the newel post, she realized her mother seemed too eager to have her out of hair. “Mama?”

Amelia Carruthers’s glance was wide and suspiciously innocent. “Yes, darlin’?”

“Don’t you dare invite that man to dinner.”

“Wh—” Amelia clasped her hand to her chest. “What makes you think I’d do a thing like that?”

“Because you’ve tried to fix me up with every single man in a fifty-mile radius. No more matchmaking,” Sandy said, wagging her finger.

“Well, I’ll—” Amelia gave her an exasperated wave and dropped her innocent pose. “What harm can it do? I mean, how well do you really know that man? Perhaps you’re paintin’ his portrait blacker than it really is.”

Sandy hitched her fists on her hips. “Well, I’m not paintin’ lips on a pig!”

“What in heck’s that supposed to mean?”

“I won’t settle, Mama—not for a liar.”

“Like I did, you mean?” her mother asked softly.

Sandy drew a sharp breath that hissed through her teeth. “I didn’t mean it that way.”

“Sure, you did. You never liked Bobby.”

“He wasn’t good enough for you,” Sandy said fiercely.

“He was what I wanted. My choice. Not yours.”

Sandy glanced away, shamed by her mother’s soft rebuke. “Well, it’s all water under the bridge now.”

“No, it’s not.”

Sandy girded herself for another recitation of the abduction. “I’ve heard that fairytale before.”

Her mama’s face grew soft and wistful. “I hope someday something magical happens for you, baby. That Jacob Timmons wasn’t the man for you. Only good things he ever did was give you Cade, then skip out of town. But when it’s magic...” She smiled softly. “It’ll happen for you one day, I promise. Then maybe you’ll understand. Bobby isn’t your daddy, but I love him anyway. One day, I’ll join him.” She straightened her back. “In the meantime, you’re wastin’ a God-given opportunity.”

“Mama—” Sandy started to tell her to drop the subject of her single-hood

but realized the effort would be wasted. “All right. I’ll think about finding me a man—”

Amelia’s face broke into a triumphant smile.

“But—” Sandy gave her mother the meanest look she had in her limited arsenal so she’d know she was serious. “But he won’t be that reporter next door. So don’t you try settin’ me up with him—and don’t you go talkin’ to him, either.”

Her mother’s expression grew worried. “Well, what do I do if I’m in the garden, and he’s walkin’ to his car? I’d be rude not to say, ‘Hey y’all.’”

“You can tell him to go spit for all I care, but you shouldn’t be talkin’ to strangers anyway. You’ll just get yourself in trouble again. Now, where’s Cade? I need to make sure he stays out of Oralia’s yard, too.”

“He’s probably out in the woods. Said he’s makin’ a tree house out of Bobby’s deer stand.”

“Good Lord. He’s gonna break his neck.”

Her mother waved a hand. “He’s a boy. Boys climb.”

Why, oh why, didn’t I have a girl? Exasperated, Sandy returned to the original point of their conversation. “Mama, just listen to me, please. No more speaking to the press.”

Her mother wrinkled her nose but nodded. “By the way, Sheriff Wilson stopped by today. Funny thing—he said the same thing to me.”

Sandy’s heart stuttered. “Did the sheriff say whether they have any leads on Bobby’s whereabouts?”

“No, but he did mention a grand jury would be convened in a week or so.”

A shiver of dread raced down her spine. “Mama, you can’t pretend nothing out of the ordinary has happened and that you’re not in a mess of trouble.”

Her mother’s smile was as pure as an angel’s. “On the contrary, Sandy. Something extraordinary is about to happen. You needn’t worry about any ol’

trial. I'll be joining Bobby before all that.”

CHAPTER 4



JOE FOLLOWED Miss Oralia Shambarger into her sitting room. The room would've looked elegant in the 1940s but was charmingly dated now and clean, well-maintained, and very well-lit by the tall windows that looked out over her garden and yard. If he were to describe it, he'd say it had a quaint, out-of-time charm, much like the older woman whose home it was. Miss Oralia was tall and reed-thin with dark hair heavily threaded with silver that she wore short in tight curls close to her scalp. Her face was etched with fine lines, and her hands were dotted with liver spots.

"I don't get many guests way out this way," she said, her dark eyebrows rising. "You say you're here to write an article about the Light? No one's been interested in that ol' story in twenty years."

"It's a mystery that's never been solved, ma'am," Joe murmured, already tired of his cover story.

She waved a hand toward a delicate-looking sofa. "Have a seat on the settee," she said. "I'll be right back with some coffee. I'm assuming that's what you'd prefer to drink...?"

He nodded and gave her a smile before settling gingerly on the "settee." He was pretty sure he'd only heard that word in old black and white movies, but one couldn't call it something cozy-sounding like a sofa, with its spindly wooden legs and uncomfortably tufted back.

Joe glanced around the clean but dated room with its lace curtains and doilies on every flat surface.

Miss Oralia returned in a few minutes, carrying a silver tray with a carafe, two cups and saucers, a tiny pitcher with cream, and a bowl of sugar cubes. He wondered where in the world she'd found the sugar because he'd never seen "lumps" outside of the movies.

He waited patiently as she poured a cup. "Cream? Sugar?"

"One lump," he said, then crimped his lips to keep from grinning.

"You're sure you'll want to stay so long?" she asked as she added the sugar and stirred. "There are hotels that cost less in Arkadelphia, which is just down the road..."

Joe blinked. From the start, the woman had seemed concerned about how much he'd be spending on a room at her B&B.

"I'm sure, ma'am. Besides, I'm using the company's card to pay for it. Don't you worry about the expense."

She smiled. "I usually get couples staying the weekend, although not often, because we are off the beaten path. You bein' from Dallas, how on earth did you hear about my place? Did you see my ad in the *Gurdon Gazette*?"

"No, your place came highly recommended by a waitress at Dee's Diner," he murmured. "I believe her name was Sandra..."

"Ah, Sandra. Bless her." She shook her head. "Poor girl's had a time of it."

He raised his eyebrows, hoping she'd continue but not wanting to push and raise her suspicions about his interest.

Again, she sighed. "I'm not one to gossip..."

Joe felt a flicker of anticipation fill him. Anytime he heard that line, he knew he was about to get some dirt, but he kept his expression only mildly interested.

"She's a pleasant girl," Miss Oralia continued, "always quick to lend a

hand when I bring in groceries. I suppose she can't help falling in and out of trouble, what with that family she was born into."

"Oh? I hadn't heard," he lied. "But since I'll be about town for a while, it would be good for me to know a bit about the people I'll meet..."

"Well..." Miss Oralia pulled her lips in and pursed them, then sat forward in her seat. "I'm sure you'll hear all about her mother and poor Bobby." She blinked. "I hope you won't be put off staying here seein' as how half the town thinks Amelia did her husband in."

"Amelia?" he said, keeping his expression neutral.

"Sandra's mother. When Bobby went missing, no one had a clue for a few days. She didn't say a thing about his absence. When his work called around, and then sent the sheriff..." She drew a big breath and shook her head. "She told quite a tale. It's a shame, really. I've enjoyed Amelia's company over the years..."

"Was Bobby one to leave without letting anyone know?" he asked, not wanting her to pause too long and think better about confiding in a stranger.

"Well, Bobby had a certain reputation with the ladies, if you know what I mean," Miss Oralia said with a definitive nod.

"Ah, so Amelia said her husband was visiting...elsewhere?"

"Oh no." Her pale blue eyes widened. "Amelia's been telling stories about aliens visiting these parts for years. She told the sheriff aliens took her husband away."

"Aliens? You don't say," he said, raising his eyebrows high.

"Said she was going to be following him soon." She shook her head. "I think someone ought to consider having her committed. The poor woman's not right in the head." She tsked. "As if Sandra doesn't already have too many burdens to bear..."

"Is Sandra in some kind of trouble?"

"Well..." she looked around as though someone might overhear them. "Poor girl was all set to attend Henderson State, just down the road."

Scholarships already lined up to pay for her tuition, and then... Well, she and her high school beau... He headed off to college, and we all wondered why she didn't. Until she began to show... That Jacob Timmons was a scoundrel, leaving her in the family way. Abandoning her and her son. He's off in St. Louis, coaching some high school football team now, and she's raising her little boy all on her own. It's a damn shame. Then she has her mama to deal with, too. It's more than a woman ought to have to bear. Without Bobby around, Sandra has to provide for all three of them. I mean, who would hire her mama? Especially now."

Joe sat back and blew out a deep breath, thinking about everything the older woman had revealed and wondering how this affected his investigation. "You say Bobby was a bit of a womanizer. Did the cops ever check with the women to see if they knew anything about his whereabouts?"

"I'm not sure the sheriff knew who to ask. I did see Mina Parker parked on the road one day, all prettied up like she was waiting on Bobby to sneak out of the house."

"Did you see him get in the car with her?"

She gave him a prim look. "I'm not a gossip, Mr. Franchetti."

"Joe, please. I wasn't inferring you were, but a good neighbor would be concerned about some random car parked along the road."

She nodded. "Yes, I was concerned. I watched from my upstairs room as he snuck through the woods and got right into her car. He even kissed her through the window before he got inside."

Joe pressed his lips together to hide a smile. He had a lead, but now, he figured he'd better lay off the questions for now so as not to arouse her suspicions. He pointed their conversation toward his fictional purpose for being there.

"As I said before, I'm working on an article about The Gurdon Light. What can you tell me about it?"

"Well, they aren't alien communications, which is what Amelia believes

they are. How ridiculous is that? No, sir. They're the light of a lantern held by the ghost of a dead railroad man who's looking for his head. Anyone can tell that from lookin' at the Light, the way it bobs from side to side." She held up her hand and moved it, mimicking the motion. "But if you need more information, I can look in my rolodex for the number for the former librarian at OBU. She's our local expert."

"I'd appreciate that, Miss Oralia," he said, giving her a smile. "I guess I should get my things and unpack before I try to get in touch with her."

So, he excused himself to get his suitcase and computer bag from the car. When he returned, she led the way up the stairs to his room. "If you can't get hold of Janice," she said, handing him a small Post-It with Mrs. Janice Anderson's telephone number, "the diner really is the best place to find more folks who can tell you more about the Light. It's the place to go if you're lookin' for gossip."

When she left, he quietly closed the door and moved to the window. As luck would have it, his room faced Sandra's home. Through the large sycamore standing between the houses, he could still clearly see the front porch and a bedroom window facing his.

He began unpacking his clothes, stowing them away in an old-fashioned armoire.

A rattling sounded at his window. He turned from the armoire, curious about the noise.

What sounded like a shower of pebbles rattled against the glass again, so he moved closer and pushed up the window to lean out.

"Psst. Hey, mister, over here."

Just outside his window, he saw a boy, perhaps eight or nine years old, straddling the branch. A smear of dirt was on his cheek—his lightly freckled cheek.

Joe wondered if this was Sandy's kid. "Well, hello there." He glanced down. "You're kind of high up here. Will your mother be upset if she finds

out?”

The kid rolled his eyes. “She won’t know, ’less’n you tell her. I heard you’re some kind of reporter.”

“I’m a writer...for a science magazine.”

The boy shrugged. “Don’t reporters write?”

Joe wrinkled his nose. “They do, indeed. Can’t get one over on you, can I? My name’s Joe Franchetti,” he said, leaning closer and holding out his hand.

“Cade Billingsley,” the boy said, wiping his hand on his jeans leg *after* he let go of Joe’s hand.

Given the grime under the boy’s fingernails, Joe barely suppressed the urge to do the same. “Is your mom Sandra D. Billingsley by any chance?” At the boy’s nod, Joe sat on the windowsill and crossed his arms over his chest. “What can I do for you, Cade?”

The boy glanced back at his house and then leaned toward Joe. “Can I talk to you...*confiduciary*?”

“If you mean confidentially, sure.”

“My mom said not to talk to you on account of you bein’ a stranger *and* a reporter—which she said is even worse. But seein’ as I’m the man of the house now, I just wanted to tell you that my grandma isn’t crazy like everyone thinks.”

“I haven’t had the privilege of meeting her myself. I won’t make any prejudgments. Promise,” he said, tracing a cross over his chest, but wondering if kids still did that. “Is that all you wanted to say to me?”

The boy nodded. “And to tell you, I’ve seen the Light, too. It’s real.”

“Do you think it’s aliens or a ghost?” Joe asked.

Cade straightened his shoulders. “I haven’t made up my mind yet. Grandma says it’s aliens, and she’s never lied to me about anything, but my mom thinks she’s a bit...*confeuds*.”

“What do you think happened to your step-grandpa.”

Cade's face screwed up into a scowl. "He's not my grandpa, step or otherwise. My mama doesn't like him much, but she thinks he just got tired of livin' with us." His mouth twisted, and his expression fell. "I think he just got tired of me bein' around. I was always makin' a mess or too much noise."

"You think he just...went away?"

"That's what my daddy did." He shrugged. "When I grow up, I'm not gonna be like that. I won't make my womenfolk cry."

Joe felt something in his chest pinch. The kid was too wise for his years. He'd suffered from abandonment but was loyal and protective of his "womenfolk."

"You know, I think you're all right," Joe said. "Your mom and grandma are lucky to have you looking out for them. Well, it was really nice meeting you, but you're making me nervous being so high off the ground. Do you want me to pull you into my room?"

The boy's eyebrows rose. "Miss Oralia would have a fit if I walked through her house with dirty shoes. I'll just climb back down. This tree's the best for climbin'. Lots of good footholds." He began scooting back on the branch, then paused. "It was nice meeting you, too, Joe. See you around."

"See you around."

Bemused, Joe watched the boy nimbly climb down the tree, jumping the last five feet before turning and giving him a big smile and wave.

SANDRA WATCHED as her son jumped to the ground. She'd spied from her bedroom window across the way as her son had spoken with the reporter. When she'd realized what he was doing, she'd been tempted to stalk outside to the base of the tree to tell him to get down because she'd just warned him about staying away, but she'd waited, hiding behind the curtains with her window open to hear what they said.

She'd listened as Joe had deftly asked his questions and how her son had

given him honest answers. She was as “confeuds” as her son about where the hell Bobby Carruthers had gone. Not for a minute did she believe that Bobby had been beamed up to an alien spaceship, but she worried her mother might have seen something so awful that her mind had finally snapped.

When Joe disappeared from his window ledge, she eased away from her window and sat on the edge of her bed. He wasn’t going away anytime soon. The big problem was that he was smarter than the average local reporter, or perhaps he didn’t care as much about whether he ruffled feathers or left folks devastated by what he found because he didn’t know the people here.

Perhaps she was going about this all wrong. Rather than trying to thwart him at every turn, hoping he’d just get fed up and leave, maybe she should find a way to steer him away from her mother or give him a view into their lives so he’d understand the damage his story could do. It was already bad enough that the law was investigating her mother.

Now, how on earth could she influence his search for the truth?

Well, Joe Franchetti was a man like any other man. Weren’t most led around by their hormones? Her personal experience with her ex and observing her mother’s relationship with Bobby up close had given her plenty of insight into the male psyche.

What was it Miss Oralia always said? You can catch more flies with honey than vinegar. Could she be the honey?

The thought of getting closer to the newsman left her feeling a little unsettled in her belly. Like a stomachache or the beginnings of the flu, she told herself. Not at all like the beginnings of desire.

Nope. Not going there.

Although, if she played it right, she could give him a more favorable view of her little family. Maybe he wouldn’t be so quick to jump to all the conclusions the folks in her little town already were. It was worth giving it a shot.

She could sacrifice her pride to save them.

Sacrifice? She snorted. *You're just remembering how you felt when you first met him, nearly drooling over his handsome face and tall, nicely muscled body.* But she'd had handsome before, and what had it gotten her?

Her shoulders slumped. It had gotten her Cade, and she wouldn't trade him for the world. This time, she'd tread cautiously, aware this was a game she was playing that she intended, for once, to win.

CHAPTER 5



JOE STOPPED by the Gurdon Police Department, hoping to talk to whoever was investigating the missing person case, but the small station was empty except for the dispatcher, Crystal Hughes. Joe wasn't disappointed. Dispatchers were the center of the gossip hub in smaller departments.

"Ms. Hughes..." he said, leaning over the counter and smiling—not too broadly because he didn't want to come off as a leering wolf. "I came to town to do a piece on The Gurdon Light, but every time I start asking the locals questions, they always wind around to talk about Bobby Carruthers' disappearance. The only research I have regarding the Light has to do with the legend of a railroad man who lost his life. Now, I'm hearing the Light might be communications from aliens. Being such a central part of this department, can you tell me what's got everyone talking?"

Crystal batted her fake eyelashes and furtively glanced around the open area. Then she, too, leaned over the counter, her bountiful bosom resting on the surface. "Well, I hear things. You're right about that. Everyone talks around me or brings me their gossip." She rolled her eyes. "This story is just too big for this little town. We never get this kind of excitement."

Joe leaned an elbow on the counter and relaxed, knowing she was about to spill everything she knew, likely along with her own opinion.

"Bobby Carruthers has been missing for a month," Crystal said. "And do

you think his wife came in to report it?” She shook her head. “It wasn’t until his boss over at the car dealership in Arkadelphia got worried because he couldn’t contact him that he called Amelia, his wife. She told him he wouldn’t be coming back to work on account of him being off in space.” Her eyes widened. “Have you ever heard the like before?”

He had, but he shook his head, widening his own eyes.

“Anyway, Sheriff Wilson—he’s with the county, not the PD—he went out to Ms. Carruthers’ place to ask some questions, and Amelia told him the same thing. Said Bobby had walked along the railroad tracks with her when the aliens came to take him away. Said she told them she wasn’t ready yet, so that’s why she’s not gone, too.”

“That’s some story,” Joe murmured.

“You know,” Crystal said, lowering her voice. “Bobby was always a dreamer. Always looking for easy money, some get-rich-quick scheme, and pardon me...easy women, too. I figure he got itchy feet and up and left. Amelia is crazy as a bedbug, but she’s a sweet woman. I can’t see her going all psycho and chopping him up into bits.”

That last bit had Joe blinking.

“But ya know—it’s always the quiet ones,” Crystal said with a definitive nod.

After thanking Crystal for her time and “promising” to come back and let her know anything he found out, he headed to Dee’s Diner, figuring he’d catch a late lunch while figuring out where to go next.

He chose a seat at the counter, thinking he’d stand a better chance of talking to the random Gurdon resident. An older woman with her hair knotted at the top of her head took his order.

Behind him, the door opened, and he glanced over his shoulder to find a woman entering whose gaze was fixed on him. He straightened on his stool and waited as she made her way toward him. The closer she came, the more sure he was of her identity. Her hair was a couple of shades darker than

Sandra's, and the red-gold highlights were intermixed with silver. Her expression was neutral, but her gaze was warm, very like the one Sandra had aimed his way before she'd figured out he was a reporter.

"Ms. Carruthers?" he said as she came alongside him.

"I am. You're Joe, the reporter."

He nodded and waved a hand toward the empty stool beside him. "Would you like to sit, ma'am?"

"I heard you talkin' to my grandson today," she said as she settled on the seat.

"Cade is quite a character," Joe murmured. "He has nothing but love for you."

"He's a good boy, and he's a bit confused about what's been happening. I thought before you wasted too much more time, you ought to get your story straight from the horse's mouth."

He arched an eyebrow. "Are you offering to let me interview you?"

"Call it what you want, but I'll share the news with you."

"The news...?"

"Joe, we aren't alone," she said. Then she smiled the kind of smile he'd seen when he'd interviewed true believers who thought the world was soon going to end in some apocalypse that never happened. Serene. Beautiful. Her face breathtaking in its joy.

Joe felt conflicted. His cynicism was rising, ready to eviscerate her argument. He didn't believe in miracles or aliens. His natural cynicism said she was acting exactly according to his preconceptions. She was trying to hide her crime by acting quirky. That, or she was after publicity. A story that would get her on TV. But he kept quiet. Amelia Carruthers seemed like a really nice southern lady. As a journalist—even one who worked for a tabloid—he owed her the chance to speak her "truth."

"Do you mind if I take notes?" he asked.

"I don't mind at all. I want you to get it right."

“Would you like some coffee or sweet iced tea?” he asked as he pulled a small notebook and a pen from his shirt pocket, opened the notebook to a blank page, and turned back to her.

“Tea would be nice. It was a long walk from the grocery store.”

He signaled to the waitress and ordered two iced teas before looking again at the woman beside him. “Whenever you’re ready, ma’am.”

“Stop with the ma’am. I’m Amelia.”

“Amelia,” he said with a small smile. He wondered where her daughter was and what she’d think if she knew what her mother was doing, but Sandy wasn’t here, and he had a job to do. Amelia was an adult—perhaps a few fries short of a Happy Meal—but she was here of her own free will.

The waitress arrived and set down two iced teas. She appeared ready to linger, but Joe gave her a pointed stare, and she flounced away farther down the counter.

“Why don’t you tell me about Bobby,” he said, prompting Amelia to begin.

Her head tilted, and she smiled warmly. “I’m sure you’ve already heard some things. Bobby might not be the most loyal man, but he’s harmless, really. He has his head in the clouds most of the time, always thinking about the future. He likes fast cars, big houses...things that don’t really matter as far as I’m concerned. I told him from the start I wasn’t planning on being here forever.

“We met when Sandra and I needed a new vehicle. He helped us with the purchase of her little Honda. We struck up an acquaintance. Sandra was so busy working and tending to Cade that she kind of missed the fact I was falling in love. Bobby and I went to the courthouse to get married—we didn’t tell her because she didn’t like him very much. I thought once she got to know him better, after he moved in, that she’d soften, but she never did. She thought he was after the house.” She shook her head. “Silly girl. She never had to worry about that. I put it in her name years ago. I’ve been preparing

most my life to leave her.”

She drew a deep breath, and her gaze seemed to turn inward. “I was always deep in the woods when I was a kid. I loved the train tracks. No trains run on ’em—haven’t for years and years. It’s kind of lonely. I used to take my camera and try to catch the Light. Had to stay out after dark—some folks say they’ve seen ’em in daylight, but I never did. Only at night. The funny thing is, they never scared me. When I’d see them, I’d try to get closer. One night, I did. When it hovered over me, I felt...bathed in warmth. I think...I must’ve...slept. Because I woke up on the tracks, feeling a little disoriented. When I went home, I slept so deep and peaceful...” She hugged herself. “For the first time, I didn’t feel alone. Something was with me. Something they left inside me. I can’t explain it, but ever since then, I *feel* them. Sometimes, I even think I can hear them. That’s how I knew they’d be there when Bobby and I were out there.”

Joe tapped the paper. “Are you saying they left something inside you? Like a chip or something?”

She chuckled. “My doctor did X-rays just to prove to me that nothing had happened—that no chip or device had been implanted in me. That I’d just fallen and hit my head or something—and that was why I’d slept. But I don’t think they left something...mechanical inside me. They changed me. They made it so I was connected to them. It’s something organic, I think.”

“What happened with Bobby, Amelia?” Joe asked softly.

Her eyes grew glossy with tears. “I told him I was nearly ready to go. That if I knew Sandra was going to be okay, I’d leave right then. I asked if he would come with me. He got...angry. Said I was talking nonsense. I ran out to the car and got in. He got in beside me, still trying to talk to me. Said he had something he needed to tell me. That it wasn’t working out, that my... craziness was...ruining what we had.” She sniffed. “I drove to just before where the tracks cross State Road 53 and parked. Then I got out and began walking down the tracks. He followed, trying to pull me back toward the car,

but I shook him off and began running. Not fast because, well, I'm not in great shape, but he followed me still. I had my flashlight and was watching my steps between the rails when he said, 'Will you look at that?' When I looked up, I saw the Light. It was as bright as it was when I was a teenager. They were there. I'd hoped they would be, that the dreams I'd been having were telling me they were coming, and there they were."

When she paused, she breathed deeply, her tears drying as she smiled at him. He waited for her to continue.

"I didn't have to tell them a thing. They knew what I was thinking. *Take him. Let him see. I'll come later.* The Light grew, and when it dimmed and disappeared, he was gone."

She clasped her hands together on the counter. "And that's the story you should tell. That's what happened."

"You didn't tell anyone afterward?"

She rolled her eyes. "Tell them what? That Bobby was taken by the aliens? Who would believe me?"

"But now, you're under suspicion for having something to do with his disappearance."

"But that's true, isn't it? I wished he could see the truth, and they took him...because I asked."

The sound of a throat clearing nearby pulled their attention back to the waitress. "Do y'all wanna order some food while you talk?"

Joe turned to Amelia and arched a brow. "I'll treat."

She snorted. "Wish I could, but my daughter will be lookin' for me any minute now, and I don't think she'd be very pleased if she saw who I'm sittin' with."

Joe shrugged. "Truth. I'm not her favorite person."

She rose and patted his arm. "She's very protective of me. All this bother is makin' her a bit snappy. She's not always like this."

"I get it," he said. "You take care, Amelia."

“See you around,” she said, curling her fingers in a feminine wave before heading toward the exit.

The stool beside him squeaked, and he glanced sideways to find Coy settling next to him. A throat clearing on his other side announced the arrival of Loy.

“How’s the investigation goin’?” Coy asked.

“I’ve just started.”

“Amelia tell you her story?”

“She did,” Joe said, closing his notepad and sliding it back into his pocket. “What are you two up to today?”

“Same ol’ thing. Cars don’t fix themselves.”

Loy leaned close. “Our hands work on cars, but our *minds* are always workin’ overtime.”

Joe chuckled. “I bet they are.”

“Do you think you’ll be mentionin’ Amelia’s story in your article?” Coy asked. “Aliens sell better than ghosts.”

“They do,” he murmured, remembering how well a piece on crop circles in Kansas had done for him.

“Could you maybe mention us in your article?” Loy asked.

“If I can get a direct quote or an eye-witness account, I could.”

Loy’s brow wrinkled, then his eyebrows shot upward. “Maybe we could show you the tracks. See if we can’t find that light with you. Then you could mention us and our website.”

“You have a website?”

“Well, we bought a URL. Have to make the website now. Been watchin’ some YouTubes.”

“What’s the name of your website?”

Coy’s expression brightened. “We chose AlienInvasionGurdon.com—no spaces. We’re already workin’ on the logo.”

“Well, you’ll want to get it up and running before I write my article.”

“We’ll get right on that,” Loy said, stabbing the counter with his forefinger. “Yeah, we’ll start with T-shirts, then maps to the Light. Got a cousin who’s an artist. He said he’d do us up some illustrations to put on a shirt and coffee cups.”

“Sounds like you have big plans. I hope you see that spaceship and get a picture. Now, that’d be big,” Joe said, stifling a laugh. “Well, let me know when you decide to head out to the tracks. I’d like to tag along, just to get the lay of the land—you know, fill in a bit of description so I get it right.”

“You got a camera?” Coy asked. “You could take pictures of us leading you down the track.”

“Yeah,” Loy said. “Maybe we can offer personal tours to folks who wanna try to see the Light.”

“Does it appear that often?”

Coy shrugged. “When I was younger, about the time Amelia first came in contact with the Light, you could see it all the time. Now, it’s hit or miss, but the tracks are still real spooky.”

“Now, I heard there’s a ghost story attached to the Light, too. Anyone I can talk to about that?”

“Well, the person who knows that history is the old librarian from OBU,” Coy said. “Forget her name.”

Joe pulled out his notebook and flipped through the pages. “Miss Oralia mentioned a woman by the name of Janice Anderson.”

“That’s her,” Coy said. “She’ll tell you all about that foreman who was murdered out there on the tracks when they were constructing the line. Sad story. Boy caved his head in with a shovel, then beat him the rest of the way to death with a spike hammer. Happened way back in the 30s, I think.”

“I’ll give her a call. I have to cover all the angles.”

“I understand that.” Coy’s eyes narrowed a little. “Guess if you saw something up close and personal, you’d lean toward one side more than the other, wouldn’t you?”

Joe could almost see the wheels turning in Coy's head. It might be fun to see what Coy came up with to try to get him to swing toward Team Alien. He pushed up from his seat. "I have to get back to work, and you two need to eat your lunch before you head back to the shop." He pulled a business card from his pocket and handed it to Coy. "You call me when you're ready to make that trip out to the tracks."

"Will do," Coy said, giving him a casual, two-fingered salute.

When he turned toward the door, he halted in place because Sandy Billingsley was headed his way, and the red in her cheeks and the glint in her eye said she had a bone to chew.

CHAPTER 6



IT TOOK a second for Sandy to pull her gaze from Joe to scan the restaurant. There was no sign of her mother, but that didn't mean she hadn't already been there.

If she had, Sandy wondered if Joe had figured out who she was and squeezed her for information. Sandy had only turned her back for a minute in the grocery store, and her mother had escaped. Every business she'd passed between here and the grocery store had said they'd seen her walking this way. She'd moved "with purpose," Maggie Haygood had said when she'd stopped at the pharmacy to see if she was there.

With purpose? Sandy had a sinking feeling in her stomach she was already too late. Joe looked entirely too smug, watching her approach him.

Oh! The nerve of him! Her ire was rising, but so was her awareness. How could both go hand in hand? She wanted to yell at him and kiss him, and she wasn't sure which she wanted to do first.

Hell, if she were honest with herself, she'd go for the kiss, then slap his smug smile off his face. That scenario filled her with a righteous indignation she held onto as she stopped in front of him.

She tilted her chin upward. "Have you seen my mother?" she asked, her words clipped.

One side of his lovely mouth quirked upward. "She left just a few

minutes ago. Charming woman. I can tell where you got your good looks.”

She felt a tic begin to twitch at the side of one eye. “And what did you two discuss?”

His eyebrows shot upward. “Oh, that’s confidential, Sandy, between me and your mom.”

Sandy rolled her eyes. “That’s horseshit. If I tell you she’s not responsible for what she says—”

“Are you saying your mom isn’t in her right mind?”

She almost blurted yes, but was she really? Still, if she had to face a grand jury, she might need to insist on her mom being examined to help her with the charges. However, she wasn’t ready to do that just yet.

She balled her fists in frustration. “No, I’m not saying she’s not in her right mind...” she said, lowering her voice.

“Then you’ll have to forgive me, but I can’t talk to you about what she said.”

“Your mom spilled the entire story, sweetie...about her gettin’ chipped by aliens and Bobby gettin’ beamed up to a spaceship.”

Sandy blinked and leaned to the side to look behind Joe. Roxy, the waitress who’d been with Dee for as long as the restaurant had been open, gave her a nod.

“Yup. Heard it all,” she said. “I don’t have to worry about confidentiality when they forget I’m even there.”

Sandy closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose. Well, hell. When she opened her eyes, she leaned to look past Joe again. “Did Mom say where she was headed?”

“Said she had to beat feet before you caught her talkin’ to the reporter.”

“So, she’s probably back in the grocery store,” she muttered. Damn, she’d walked in the heat for nothing.

Joe glanced over his shoulder at Roxy and then looked back at Sandy. “Is everyone constantly in your business?”

There was laughter in his eyes. Not on his mouth. His mouth was a thin, pressed line. Likely, the man was trying hard not to bust a gut laughing at her. “Pretty much,” she said, glumly. “Small town. Everyone’s a gossip.”

“Well, see if I help you out again,” Roxy grumbled.

“I wasn’t talking about you,” Sandy said.

“You kind of were,” Joe said dryly.

“I thought so, too,” Roxy said with an arch of a heavily penciled brow.

“Want me to help you look for your mother?” Joe asked.

She studied his expression, her eyes narrowing. Then she forced herself to remove the belligerence she knew was exposed in her expression and gave a deep, heartfelt sigh. After all, hadn’t she just been talking herself into cozying up to this lizard-brained reporter?

“I’d hate to take you away from whatever it was you were doin’,” she said, deliberately oozing a little more southern into her voice.

Roxy snorted behind him.

Joe’s eyes blinked, and then his gaze went straight to her mouth.

She wondered if she still had any lipstick on her bottom lip, but the way he checked her mouth out, he didn’t much care. She forced a small smile.

He turned toward Roxy, who was chuckling softly behind the counter, then pulled out his wallet and left her a twenty.

“Tea don’t cost that much in this little town.”

“You were very helpful,” he said. When he turned back to Sandy, he tilted his head at the glass door. “After you.”

Sandy quickly determined that she did not like walking in front of him. For one thing, she seemed to forget how to walk. Her hips felt twitchy, and her feet turned a little pigeon-toed. Plus, she couldn’t gauge his expression, which left her feeling vulnerable.

Unable to stop herself, she glanced back to find him staring at her, his dark gaze focused on her. Her toe caught on something, and she felt herself begin to fall, but he quickly shot out an arm and caught her around the waist,

pulling her against him.

When she caught her breath, she realized her head was tilted back, and their faces were only a couple of inches apart. Then she felt the firm band around her, just beneath her boobs. Was his thumb stroking the side of...

“Sorry,” he said and moved his arm downward, his hands settling on either side of her hips, which kept her bottom pressed against him.

Did he know he was feeling her up? Did he notice that she gave him a little bump because, hell, she was curious?

“Um, I think you can let me go,” she said breathlessly.

“Yes, of course,” he said quickly, and his hands fell away.

The heat against her back also withdrew, and she felt an odd twinge of disappointment.

She brushed back her hair and pointed to the sidewalk beside her. “There’s room for both of us. If I’m not lookin’ back to see where you are, I won’t try to face-plant again.” She knew her tone was a little acidic, but the way his mouth twitched at the corners said he was amused rather than insulted.

“Maybe I should hold onto you as we walk,” he said, then grabbed her hand and stepped out, forcing her to come along with him.

He was holding her damn hand like they were goin’ steady or something. How ridiculous they must look. But she did like his firm grip and the way his large hand swallowed up hers.

Big hands...

She nearly tripped over her own two feet when she finished that phrase in her head. Her aim was to get close to him, try to divert his attention or gain some measure of kindness for her family, not to sleep with the man. However, that thought was hard to let go of.

The grocery store was just ahead. Her mother was standing on the curb, her head turned their way. Her gaze, of course, snagged on their hands, and her mouth stretched into a wide grin.

Sandy groaned, knowing Joe Franchetti would be seated across the table from her at dinner time.

AT 6:30 PM, Joe circled the hedgerow dividing the two yards and made his way to the front door. He quickly pressed the bell and raised the bouquet of flowers he'd purchased earlier. Miss Oralia had received a bouquet of her own, and he was glad he'd thought to bring her the flowers because her delight had been evident in her smile and misty eyes.

"It's been forever since a young man brought me flowers," she'd said.

The tapping of heeled shoes sounded from inside. When the door opened, Sandy failed to hide her own delighted smile, but he wrinkled his nose. "These are for your mom. She's the one who invited me."

"You should give them to Sandra; she's the one you need to butter up," Amelia's voice called out from the kitchen doorway.

Joe grinned. "I bought you and Miss Oralia matching bouquets."

"You gave Oralia flowers?" Amelia pressed a hand to her chest over her heart. "She hasn't had flowers from a gentleman since George went off to war."

Joe held still. "Who's George, Ms. Carruthers?"

"George Theriot. Her beau. He was killed in Vietnam. She never so much as glanced at another man after he was laid to rest. She visits him at the cemetery every Sunday. I go with her sometimes. We chatter away, tellin' George everything that's happened."

"That's so sad," Joe said.

"It's not. Not really. Oralia would've liked to spend her earthly time with George, but she knows he's waiting for her. Every now and then, he tells her so."

Sandy stepped beside him and leaned closer. "She holds seances *every now and then*. She and my mom, and another friend, Gladys. They open the

windows, turn off all the lights, then set a single candle in the middle of the little table Oralia has on the closed-in porch.”

“Oralia hears him loud and clear. Sometimes, I hear his voice in the wind,” Amelia said. “It’s enough for now. She’s just happy he’s still hangin’ around.”

Joe didn’t know what to do with all that. He felt bad for Miss Oralia but thought maybe her best friends were going along with the seances to give the old woman hope. Although perhaps Amelia believed. After all, she thought aliens abducted her husband.

He didn’t believe in an afterlife. He didn’t believe in ghosts, and he wouldn’t change his mind until he met one.

“Come on into the kitchen. We’re going to eat there tonight. It’s cozier than the dining room, and I don’t like carrying the dishes so far.” She waved a hand toward the kitchen but walked to the end of the stairs and cupped a hand next to her mouth. “Cade! Dinner time!”

He stepped into the kitchen and glanced around. The room was very yellow. Eye-damaging yellow. Perhaps it was just the fact he hated the color. The tiled counter, the curtains, the shiny vinyl on the seats surrounding the vintage metal and Formica table, and the yellow watercolor flowers in frames against the dated paneled walls—were too much.

Sandy pressed her mouth into a straight line and headed toward her mother, who was making her way to the kitchen counter where large dishes were sitting on trivets. Even she knew it was too yellow.

“Your kitchen is...very cheerful,” he said, then winced when he realized the plates were white with yellow flowers and neon green leaves on them that looked like a psychedelic dream from the sixties.

“It is, isn’t it?” Amelia said, smiling. She carried a large flat dish with yellow and green potholders, the kind he’d made as a kid with his grandmother.

“I made a casserole. I hope you like it. It’s a chicken spaghetti casserole.

Easy as pie to make. I'm not the cook Oralia is, but I haven't killed anyone with my cooking yet."

"Chicken spaghetti?" Cade said, running into the kitchen. "Again?"

Joe grinned. "I'm not a picky eater. I'm sure the casserole will be great."

Sandy set a tall glass of iced tea on the table in front of him, garnished with lemon. "More yellow," she whispered.

"Go ahead and sit," Amelia said, waving downward.

"I'll wait until you're ready to join me," he said.

Amelia's smile was wide as she raised her eyebrows and shot her daughter a glance. "He's a gentleman, Sandy."

Sandy rolled her eyes. "Mama..."

Cade stared at Joe, then stood behind the chair next to his grandmother.

Besides the casserole, there was a dish of green beans with bacon bits spread liberally over the top and what looked like squares of focaccia bread.

"There are tomatoes, onions, and green and red peppers in the casserole, but I added the green beans because the table would've looked a little bare."

"I hate green beans. You can't dress 'em up with bacon and make 'em taste good," Cade mumbled.

"This looks wonderful, ma'am," Joe said, aiming a look at Cade, whose cheeks turned pink. And the dinner actually did. He hadn't had a homecooked meal in forever.

Miss Oralia had looked a little disappointed when he'd said he was eating dinner next door, but she'd told him she'd have leftovers in the fridge, including an apple pie, if he were hungry later.

"I know you writers keep the strangest hours," she'd said. "Don't worry about waking me up if you need something from the kitchen. I'm not a light sleeper."

At last, Amelia sat. She gave her daughter a pointed glare and then looked at the seat beside the one he stood behind. Sandy gave a grimace-like smile and sat beside him before he took his seat.

Cade took his seat then shot out a hand for the bread, but then glanced at Joe and pulled it back.

They passed around dishes, filling their plates.

“Don’t be shy. Fill your plate with as much as you want,” Amelia said. “Doesn’t look like you have to count calories. How do you do that? Writing is a sedentary profession.”

Joe smiled. “I run every other day and do some calisthenics every morning before I shower.”

“A disciplined man. Hear that, Sandra?”

Sandy choked on a bite of chicken and coughed. When she had control of herself, she turned to him. “My mother has a terrible habit of throwing men at me. Be warned. She’s not the least bit subtle.”

“Throwing men at you?”

“Only eligible, upstanding men,” Amelia said. “She keeps so busy she forgets she’s in the prime of her life.”

Sandy groaned.

Joe couldn’t help it, he chuckled. “Well, Amelia, I am eligible, but I’m not sure your daughter would consider me upstanding. She has something against my profession.”

“That’s on account of the reporter who kept showin’ up at all times of the day and night, tryin’ to get an interview with me.”

“What paper was he with?”

“It’s not a paper. It’s a gossip rag—on the Internet. The *Gurdon Gazette*. So, not respectable at all. But he wore me down, and I told him all about Bobby and the Light, and when he wrote his little story, I thought for sure no one would read it. I mean, who even knows it exists?”

“He has nearly a hundred thousand followers, Mama. You could’ve asked me.” She turned to Joe. “Is that how you heard about my mama?”

Joe kept his face set. “I heard about the Light when my editor assigned me the story.”

Sandy tilted her head. “You’re quick on your feet. Did you rehearse that so you could pull it out of your a—”

“Sandra D!”

“Sorry, Mama.” She turned to Joe, her eyebrows lowered, and said, “Sorry.”

Her tone was beyond begrudging. Joe smiled. “You know, you’re pretty when you scowl.”

CHAPTER 7



SANDY'S SCOWL DEEPENED. How dare he...*compliment her*. Okay, so maybe sitting next to him was stretching her nerves. Seated this close, she felt the hairs on the arm closest to him lift, like a charge of static electricity was buzzing between them.

"Maybe we should've started our meal with a blessing," Amelia murmured.

Feeling ashamed because her mother was ashamed of her behavior, Sandy sighed. "Cade, you have school tomorrow. Hurry up and finish your meal. You need to take a bath—a long soak—and make sure to clean under your nails."

Cade held up his nails and looked at them. "What difference does it make? They're just gonna get dirty again."

"Cade..." Amelia said, her tone soft.

Cade grimaced but lowered his hands. "Yes, ma'am. I'll take a long bath."

"Did you finish making that fort in the deer stand?" Amelia asked, clearly changing the subject.

Cade's expression brightened. "I don't hafta do too much. The floor's solid. The top keeps out the rain. I just need to make some shutters so I can close the windows when I'm not there. Oh, and there's a dirt dauber nest in

the corner. I'm afraid to scrape it out in case they sting me."

"I have some spray under the kitchen sink. Use some of that, but be quick with it and leave it a day or so. They'll abandon it."

Cade nodded.

"What are you going to do with the fort?" Joe asked. He'd made forts in the fields behind his own home as a child.

"I might invite some friends or just go there for the quiet."

"He wants to go there to escape his chores," Sandy said, shaking her head.

Cade shook his head, his eyes wide and innocent. "I'll do those first. Swear."

"Hmm..."

Sandy didn't sound convinced.

They ate. The conversation was peppered with questions about where he was from. "I live in Wolf Creek on the south side of Dallas." How did you become a reporter? "I studied journalism at UT." Do you have family there? "My mom and stepfather live north of Dallas."

And brothers and sisters? "Two half-brothers. One's a captain in the Army. The other is an engineer working on an oil rig in the Gulf."

"Ever been married?"

Joe blanched. "Nope. I've never found the right partner." He couldn't help that his gaze strayed to his right, where Sandy paused, twirling her fork around the noodles. "No fiancée ever, either."

"Did you always want to be a reporter?"

"No, reporting pays the bill, but I want to write books. Novels and True Crime."

"Why haven't you?"

Joe drew a deep breath. "I guess I just got too busy."

"Sounds like you need to make some changes. Find a place with a slower pace," Amelia said. "Gurdon's pretty slow."

Sandy snorted softly beside him. “Slow or moving backward?”

“There’s value in holding onto traditions and being part of a community.” She moved her gaze from Sandy back to Joe. “You should think about finding yourself a small town. Some place where everyone knows everyone. You could find a job that’s a little more laid back that will give you the time you need to write.”

He’d thought about that often, usually when sitting on a plane going somewhere obscure to do some ridiculous piece he dreaded writing.

“Cost of living can’t be beat,” Amelia continued. “You wouldn’t need much.”

“Be warned,” Sandy said beside him. “Next, she’ll say the room in the attic would be the perfect place for a writer.”

“Always thought that,” Amelia said, chuckling softly to herself. “You about finished with your meal?” she said, turning to Cade.

“Don’t we have dessert?” His gaze shot to Joe. “Seein’ as how we have a guest...?”

“Help yourself to a piece of pecan pie. Just a skinny slice, now. You don’t need all that sugar right before bed.”

Sandy pushed back her chair, and Joe started to rise, but she pressed a hand on his shoulder. “I’ll get everyone a slice,” she said. “You just sit.” Then, she began gathering the dinner plates and took them to the sink.

“She’s a little bossy,” Amelia whispered.

“Heard that,” Sandy said.

Joe chuckled and finished his last bite of spaghetti. “That was tasty.”

“You were surprised, weren’t you?”

“When you said casserole, the first thing I thought of was my grandma’s tuna casserole.” He gave a mock shudder.

Amelia laughed. “I have a recipe for that, too. If you’re feelin’ nostalgic, I’ll make it sometime.”

“Oh, no. Don’t put yourself out,” he said, shaking his head in mock

horror.

Sandy returned with three plates balanced on one arm and hand. “Waitressing skills come in handy,” she said as she placed a plate in front of him.

Joe didn’t have to pretend his appreciation for the generous slice of pie. He picked up his fork, cut a piece, and slipped it into his mouth, groaning as he chewed. “This is the best pecan pie I’ve ever tasted.

Amelia laughed again. “I’ll tell Oralia that. She snuck it over while I was cooking. Said she’d made it special for you and knew I’d have my hands full with dinner. What she meant was I’m not half the cook she is, so she wanted to make sure you ate something worthy.”

Joe chuckled around his full mouth, chewed, then swallowed, and said, “I’ll be sure to tell her how wonderful it is.”

They ate in silence, each enjoying their slice of heaven. When they finished, Cade waved goodbye to Joe and trudged up the stairs. Amelia shooed Sandy away from the dishes. “Go sit on the porch with our guest.”

Sandy shared a glance with him and shrugged. “Guess we’ve been told.”

Joe followed her to the door. She paused to flip on the porch light, then stepped out, heading toward the swing at the end of the porch. “There’s room for both of us. I promise not to bite.”

When they sat, Joe set the swing in motion and crossed his arms over his chest. His belly was full. The evening had been...pleasant. More than pleasant, actually. He’d been unable to keep his entire attention on the food or the others sitting at the table. His focus had been on the woman sitting beside him and his reactions to her.

For one thing, the hairs on his right arm had lifted, signaling their attraction for her body. Completely understandable. He’d felt drawn to her from the start. Had it only been that morning that he’d watched her cleaning tables with agitated motions as she’d skewered Coy and Loy with glares?

A lot had happened since then. He’d gathered leads. Met some of the

town's interesting folk. Everyone and everything kept leading him back to Sandy and her mother. Both were fascinating. He felt a little unsettled by how drawn to them he felt.

Amelia might be exactly as she appeared. A woman with an open, childlike heart. Maybe a little nutty, but charmingly so. But a murderer? He couldn't see it. There had to be another explanation.

The daughter? Sandy was unfailingly loyal to her mother, and he couldn't blame her. Amelia needed someone to watch out for her. She was lucky to have a pit bull of a daughter doing just that.

Which made him wonder why she was sitting here with him in the shadows of the porch. She'd agreed without an argument, a heavy sigh, or a roll of her eyes. Was he starting to win her over?

"You're thinking too hard," she murmured beside him.

"I was just going over my day, starting with meeting you at the diner."

"You stalked me to the diner."

He figured his cover story was shredded at this point; she'd seen right through it from the start. Plus, he was tired of the subterfuge. "I was hoping someone there would help me find you."

Her head jerked toward him. "So, you're through lyin'?"

He decided to lay it all out and hope she wouldn't blow up. "I got a call from my editor in the middle of the night, telling me to get my ass to Gurdon, Arkansas. He read the article in the *Gurdon Gazette* and wanted me to track your mother down for a story."

"You don't write for the *Scientific American*, do you?"

"No." He was glad the shadows hid the heat in his cheeks. "I write for the *National Informer*."

He waited for an explosion. For her to start yelling at him. Instead, she snorted and then bent at the waist as her shoulders shook—with laughter. "The In-Informer?" she sputtered. "The one on the racks by the cashier at the checkout stand in the grocery store?"

“Yup,” he said, popping the P at the end.

Her laughter rang out, a lovely, unreserved sound that soon had his own lips twitching at the corners.

“Oh my God, and here I thought you were from an actual newspaper!” She chortled some more, seeming to lose control over her body as she leaned hard against his side.

When she quieted, he turned his head toward her. “You finished?”

She snorted again and then wiped tears from her eyes. “So, it was the alien connection, right?”

He grimaced and nodded his head.

“You should’ve told me sooner. I was really worried my mama was going to end up on Dateline.”

“You mean being investigated by a *real* reporter?”

“Oh, I didn’t mean to make fun of you...”

He tilted his head.

“Okay, so maybe I think it’s funny. They do some really out-there stuff.” She tilted her head away and stared at him. “Do you write that out-there stuff?”

Joe cleared his throat. “If you’re talking about crop circles and Area 51 conspiracy theories, Marfa Lights, and stories about alien abductions...then, yeah, that was me.”

“Wow. For someone who wants to be a real writer, it must be hard on the old ego.”

“You’re getting way too much enjoyment out of this.”

“I am. I’ve been worried sick since this morning.”

“And now, you’re not? Do you not think I can get to the bottom of this mystery?”

She pursed her lips. “Is that what you want to do? Wouldn’t it bein’ an actual abduction story make a better headline?”

“My boss may print absurd stories, but he’s a dreamer at heart. He wants

that real story. He likes that I look for the facts because he knows that if I ever did find evidence, he could believe it.”

“Ah, so you’re the one who paints those lovely stories about abductions, that if you read down to the end, you completely debunk what you’ve just described. Don’t you worry that readers might feel a little robbed?”

“It doesn’t work like that. They read the opening, take it to heart, and then if they make it to the end, they still come away with that feeling of possibility. It’s a strange dynamic, but so far, the paper hasn’t fired me. Pat, my boss, always sends me to ferret out the truth behind the most intriguing claims.”

“Crop circles are the most intriguing?”

“When they happen miles apart at the same time, it’s hard to think some prankster can be that fast...”

She wagged a finger. “You were hoping it was real.”

He frowned. “I’m a cynic. I did not.”

“Yes, you did. You might think you’re going in to debunk a story, but in the back of your mind, or in your heart, you wish it was true.”

He wrinkled his nose and looked forward.

“Don’t be insulted. We all try to hold onto that bit of child-like wonder.”

His gaze shot her way. “Do you?”

Her shoulders fell. “I stopped believing in what might be. I have to live in the now. I have a kid to support.”

“And a mother to protect,” he said softly.

“Yeah...”

They sat silently, side by side. The pause wasn’t an uncomfortable one. Perhaps there was a bit of sadness, an underlying feeling of dread, but maybe that was his creative mind trying to paint something into the void.

“I know you have a job to do...” she said.

“I’m not looking at doing a hit piece, Sandy.”

“I know, but I was thinkin’ maybe...you could widen your focus. Maybe

talk about all the possibilities, the mundane as well as the weird, when you write your article.”

“I plan to do just that. I have it on my to-do list to contact Janice Anderson tomorrow.”

“About the Light?”

“Yes.”

“Well, if you got lost finding Oralia’s place,” she said, with wry humor in her voice, “you might need someone to help you find Janice’s house.”

“Are you offering to come along with me...so I won’t get lost?”

She shrugged. “It’s my day off.”

Joe knew she was likely still wary of his intent and wanted to shadow him to figure out whether what he’d said was on the up and up. So long as she didn’t interfere with his investigation, he was okay with having her tag along.

Huh. That didn’t ring quite true in his own head. He liked Sandy—a lot. Any excuse to spend more time in her company, though inadvisable because he was no doubt going to cause her hurt, was still time he was greedy to share.

Joe studied her expression for a moment but detected no mischief there, then held out his hand. “Deal,” he said and shook.

CHAPTER 8



“A MOTEL 6 would’ve been cheaper,” Pat O’Byrne growled in Joe’s ear the next morning.

“They only have one motel, and it only gets three stars.” Joe wasn’t sure about that, but he knew Pat wasn’t really griping about the fact he’d chosen a B&B over a crappy motel. He wasn’t worried about Pat getting irritated about his expenses. Pat had to growl. He didn’t know the real reason Joe had chosen Miss Oralia’s B&B, but Joe would let him grouse some more because it was part of their dynamic—what proved their mutual respect.

“What? They don’t leave mints on their pillows?”

Joe chuckled. “Now, do you really think I can’t rough it when I follow a story?”

“What makes Oralia’s so damn special?”

“It’s right next door to Amelia Carruthers’ place.”

Pat was silent for a second, then began to chuckle. “So, have you looked over the fence for depressions in the backyard to figure out where she buried the body?”

“No depressions,” he said.

“This Miss Oralia tell you any of the gossip goin’ around about your target?”

“Now, do I tell you how to do your job?”

“Anyone else think it was aliens?”

Joe didn't miss the hopeful note in his boss's voice. “I've talked to a couple who do,” he said, thinking about Coy and Loy.

“What are your plans?”

“Well, today, I'm meeting with a woman who's a local expert on The Gurdon Light—the ghost story. She's a former librarian at Ouachita Baptist University.”

“Covering all your bases, as usual. When are you going to try to go see the Light for yourself?”

“I'm waiting to hear from my two local guides, who've offered to take me down to the train tracks.”

“Good, good.” He sighed. “Well, I won't gripe anymore about your expenses. Sounds like you're doing your usual thorough job.”

“Thanks, boss. I'll let you know if I uncover anything substantive.”

“You do that. Out here.”

The call ended abruptly, not that Pat was being rude. That was just how he was. He had the information he needed to feel like he was a part of this “investigation.”

Joe glanced at his watch. He'd called Ms. Anderson after Miss Oralia's glorious breakfast and arranged for him and Sandy to drop by at eleven. It was 10:30 now.

He slipped his phone and keys into his pocket and headed down the stairs.

“Say hello to Janice from me,” Miss Oralia called out from her chair in the sitting room.

“I'll do that, ma'am. See you later,” he said, waving goodbye.

Outside, he rounded the hedge just as Sandy was descending her porch.

His footsteps slowed as he took in the sight of her.

Today, she wore a pair of jean shorts that showed quite a bit of her lightly tanned legs. Her shell-pink tee had a scoop neck that exposed the beginning of her cleavage. On her feet, she wore a strappy, nude-toned pair of sandals.

Her toenails were the same shell-pink as her shirt. Her hair was down and curling around her shoulders, and she wore the bare minimum of makeup—a slash of pale pink lipstick and mascara—as far as he could tell anyway. He wasn't an expert on women's "natural" looks, but Sandy seemed to be a *naturally* stunning woman.

His heart sure appreciated the sight of her. It thumped hard inside his chest. "Good morning," he said, smiling.

"Good morning." Her own gaze slid up and down his body, and he hoped he didn't disappoint. Jeans and tennis shoes. A button-down blue shirt with the sleeves rolled up. And his camera slung over his shoulder. He wanted to look professional but not pretentious to Ms. Janice Anderson.

"You look nice," he said when she stopped in front of him.

"So do you." Then she chuckled. "Look at us, both smiling like fools."

Joe laughed. "Do you ever stop to think about the things you say?"

"Nope."

"Good. Don't change."

She drew a deep breath. "My car or yours?"

"Since my boss is buying the gas—mine." He crooked his elbow and waited for her hand to slide into the corner. Now, he wished he'd donned a T-shirt of his own because he'd love to feel her hand caress his bare skin. *Stop. Just stop. This isn't a date, dumbass.*

They got into the car, and he backed out of Oralia's drive, pointing the car toward town. "You just tell me when I need to turn. You're in charge."

They didn't talk much as he drove; it was just her giving him directions. He watched her from the corner of his eye while he traveled. She was seated, turned halfway toward him, her gaze on him more than the road. He wondered what she saw as she studied him. He'd neglected his run that morning but wouldn't the next day. The meals he'd been consuming were guaranteed to make the waist of jeans tighten, and he suddenly wanted to make sure Sandy stayed as rapt as she seemed today.

Which had him wondering why he cared. He didn't usually. Women found him attractive. They told him so. He wasn't vain, just self-aware. As much as he studied other people, he was always considering what they saw when he approached them. Keeping himself in shape, and dressing in clothing that didn't stand out but that did convey his seriousness was part of the job.

"That's her place," she said, facing forward in her seat. "The red brick house with the yellow shutters," she said.

He pulled into the driveway in front of the closed garage door and turned off the engine.

"Got your notebook ready?" she asked, a hint of teasing in her voice.

He patted his pocket. "Always."

"Well, I just saw the curtain move. She knows we're here."

"Let's not keep her waiting."

They exited his sedan and followed the flagstone path to the front door.

The door opened, and a woman with bright white hair and thick black-framed glasses opened the door. She looked exactly like the stereotypical retired librarian, down to the elastic-waisted slacks and blue and red-checked blouse. From the meowing in the distance, she had a ton of cats as well.

"Come in, come in," she said, waving them inside. "Don't want Tabitha and Tess to slip outside." She waited until they passed before shutting the door. "Those two are escape artists. Any time the door opens, they're ready to run. Come on into the parlor."

The parlor was like his parents' living room. Two recliners facing a TV on a stand. A sofa and two armchairs behind it, which was where she was leading them now. She gestured toward the sofa. "I can offer coffee or tea. The coffee's already made, but tea won't take a minute."

"I'd love a coffee," Joe said, knowing he couldn't refuse. The homemade cookies sitting on the platter in the middle of the coffee table said she'd prepared and would be disappointed if he didn't accept her hospitality.

“Coffee for me, too, Ms. Anderson,” Sandy said.

“How’s your mama doing?” the older woman said as she walked toward the kitchen, which was separated only by a long wooden counter.

“She’s well.”

“All this fuss,” the older woman said. “There’s no one nicer than your mom. Shame on the sheriff for adding to her stress.”

“He has to investigate. We understand that,” Sandy said, her mouth tightening a bit.

Joe hated that the stress was resting heavily on her shoulders. So far as he’d determined, Amelia wasn’t stressed one bit.

“Well, you be sure to tell her I’m praying for her,” Ms. Anderson said, carrying another tray with cups of steaming coffee, a sugar bowl, and creamer.

“Miss Oralia told me to tell you hello,” Joe said.

“That’s sweet. You tell her I’ll see her at our book club meeting on Thursday.”

After they all took their cups, Joe eyed a stack of papers sitting on the other end of the coffee table.

“That’s everything I have in my files about the murder, the first sightings of the Light, and the investigations into the source of the Light. There’s a lot to get through, so I thought you might like copies.”

“That’s very kind of you.”

“The Gurdon Light is our town’s one claim to fame—other than being the birthplace of the International Concatenated Order of Hoo-Hoo.”

Joe raised his eyebrows. “The what?”

The woman grinned from across the coffee table. “It’s an outlandish name, isn’t it? It’s one of the world’s oldest service organizations. It was organized in 1892 to further the welfare and promotion of the forest products industry. You have to have seen the black cats painted on buildings and the statue in front of the Hoo-Hoo headquarters.”

“I wondered about that. The Hoo-Hoos, huh?”

“My father was a member. They’re still going, although their meetings happen mostly all over the world. Not so much in little Gurdon, Arkansas, anymore. Such a pity. But we have our claim to fame.”

“Along with a pretty famous ghost story. That’s more than most small towns have.”

“You have that right. But you’re here to learn about the Light.” She tilted her head. “Do you believe in ghosts, Mr. Franchetti?”

He drew a breath before answering. “I believe what I experience for myself. So far, I’ve never actually witnessed a ghost.”

“Well, our Mr. McClain might be just the spirit to make you a believer.”

“Have you seen the Light?”

“A long time ago. All the school kids here like to walk the tracks around Halloween. It’s almost a rite of passage. I saw it as plain as day.” Her glance moved over his shoulder as though she was looking at it in her memories. “My brother and two others from our high school were with me. We all saw it swinging like a pendulum over the track, a hazy blue-white light. It made quite the impression. It’s not a short hike, but we made it back to our vehicle in record time.” She chuckled softly to herself.

“Mr. McClain?” Joe said, deciding not to pull out his notebook just yet because he was pretty sure everything he needed to know was in the stack.

“William McClain was a foreman working for the Missouri-Pacific railroad. Late one evening, he was finishing up when he was approached by one of his workers, Louis McBride. It was during the Depression...1931, as I recall. Times were hard, and Mr. McBride, although he had a job, wanted more hours because he needed money. The railroad had strict rules about how many hours a man could work, so Mr. McClain said he couldn’t give him any more. They got into an argument, and McBride raised his shovel and struck McClain in the head. Then he beat him to death with a spike maul—it’s a tool a railroad man uses, like a sledgehammer. It was an awful thing.”

“I can imagine,” Joe murmured.

“The Light began to appear shortly after the murder. Many people have seen it over the decades since. There are folks who’ve seen it dozens of times. If you look for it, you’ll find it. The Light’s not shy. Some folks think it’s the headlights of cars driving along Highway 30, but the highway is a good two miles from the tracks, and more importantly, the Light began to appear before the highway was even built in the 1970s. Most say it hovers three or four feet off the ground. It changes color—sometimes blue-white and sometimes an eerie red glow—and it bobs, side to side. Some folks have said they’ve seen it appear in front of them and then blink out. They turn to go back to their car, and it’s in their path.” She pointed to the stack. “It’s all in there. Eyewitness accounts, the court transcript for McBride’s trial. I wrote up my observations as well.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“Try the cookies,” she said. “Don’t be shy. The oatmeal and raisin are a specialty of mine.”

They spent an hour together, Ms. Anderson reminiscing about the Light and the TV crew from *Unsolved Mysteries* that investigated in the 90s. Joe promised to look up the episode on YouTube. He asked whether anyone other than Amelia had ever said they thought the Light was some form of alien communication rather than a ghost’s lantern, but she said she’d never heard such a thing before.

When she appeared to tire, Sandy, who had remained mostly silent, touched his knee.

He gave her a nod and pushed up from the sofa. “Ms. Anderson, thank you so much for your time. I’ll be sure to mention our meeting and how helpful you’ve been in my article.”

“I’ll add it to my Gurdon Light files,” she said, waggling her eyebrows.

When she began to stand, Joe waved her back into her seat. “We’ll let ourselves out. Thank you again.”

Back in the car, with the stack of documents safely put away in the trunk, Joe and Sandy shared a look. “That was kind of fun,” he said. “You have some characters in this town.”

“Oh, I’m sure you’ve only scratched the surface.”

“I bet.” He glanced at his watch. “I know we just ate a bunch of cookies, but can I get you some lunch?”

“You want to hit the diner again?” she said, arching an eyebrow.

He grinned. “It does seem to be the community hub.” He started the engine and backed into the street before turning toward the town’s center.

“Don’t be surprised if you get a bunch of stares,” Sandy said. “It’s only been a day, but I’m sure everyone in town knows you’re here now.”

“Sure you don’t mind going there?”

“Not at all. Just keep an open mind. Everyone has their own opinion about the Light and what happened to Bobby. You might have to tell that boss of yours you’re staying awhile to run down all the stories.”

“Will it be all right with you if I do...stay a while?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” she said airily. “I’m kind of getting used to you.”

Joe was sure she wasn’t as comfortable with the thought of Joe, the reporter, as she was pretending to be. However, he hoped she was beginning to trust Joe, the man.

Her cell phone rang, and she angled her body to slide her phone from the back pocket of her shorts. When she read the text, her face went pale.

“Something wrong?”

“I need to go to the PD. You should drop me at home. I’ll drive from there.”

“I can take you there.”

She frowned but then nodded. “All right, but you don’t have to come in with me.” Then she shook her head. “Right, like that’s gonna happen. Just get me there.”

A few minutes later, they parked in front of the police station. Sandy was

out of the door before he turned off the engine.

He followed her inside to the counter. Crystal Hughes, the dispatcher, gave him a small smile before turning to Sandy. “I already told you everything I know on the phone, sweetie. The prosecuting attorney, Dan Metcalf, has the case now.”

“So, they’re moving forward with charges?”

“I don’t know how this works other than to say it’s serious when it leaves the local PD’s jurisdiction. They have their own investigators.”

“This isn’t good,” Sandy said softly. “Not good at all.”

“If I were you, I’d get your mama a good attorney.”

“We can’t afford a lawyer,” she said, tears gleaming in her eyes. “It’s hard enough keeping up the place and putting food on the table.” She closed her eyes and then blew out a breath that billowed her cheeks. “Can you give me the number to Dan Metcalf’s office?”

“Sure you want to talk to him?”

“I don’t know what I want to do, but I want it, just in case.”

Crystal pulled a page off her notepad, tapped the computer keyboard, and then scribbled down a phone number. “Here you go. Good luck to you and your sweet mama.”

“Thank you for the heads-up.”

When she turned toward the door, she blinked, almost like she’d forgotten that he was there. Joe held her elbow and walked her out of the PD to his car.

CHAPTER 9



SANDY SAT QUIETLY in the front seat of Joe's sedan. "It's really happening. They're really going to press charges."

"Don't jump too far ahead of yourself," Joe said, starting his car again. He hated seeing her look so lost.

"Mama won't do well in prison. She might spend the rest of her days in there."

"Before they can try her, they have to prove a crime was committed. Right now, they don't have a body. They can't know whether Bobby simply walked away or met with foul play."

"Then why would they move forward? What do they know that we don't?"

Joe frowned as he drove toward the diner. "I know you're probably not very hungry, but how about we get a table and try to figure out what we've missed."

"It's not aliens, and it's not some ghost," she whispered harshly.

"If something has happened to Bobby, we need to list the possibles and then track down any leads."

"That's what they're doing."

"Yeah, but what might they miss? They don't know your mom. They might look for reasons to charge her rather than be open to other explanations

because she's the easiest, most statistically logical suspect."

She nodded absently. "I guess you're right. That's what you came to do, anyway, wasn't it? Find the truth?"

"Exactly. You might want to consider getting some soup or a sandwich, something to help your belly settle and keep up your energy."

"I hope you have some ideas of where to start looking because I'm fresh out."

"I do, but as we talk through it, we might come up with other leads."

"Do you really have time to do all this? Doesn't your boss just want you to say it's aliens and be done with it? He can blame a small-minded, backward little town for their lack of imagination," she said, a touch of bitterness in her tone there at the end.

"Sandy, my boss wants the truth. Between you and me, I think he's hoping I'll find indisputable proof one of these days, and he trusts me to always give it to him straight." He reached over and grasped her hand, then held it the rest of the way to the restaurant.

SANDY DIDN'T KNOW how much she needed to be touched until he held her hand. She'd prefer to lean into his body and get a great big hug, but she reminded herself he wasn't her boyfriend or really any kind of friend at all. At best, they were like co-workers working toward the same end, or at least she hoped they were. If he had another agenda and wanted to smear her mother somehow, he hadn't shown any signs of it.

Sure, he was a reporter—and she didn't trust any of them—but he seemed so sincere. He'd been kind to her mother, Miss Oralia, and Ms. Anderson. Keeping up a façade of kindness would eventually crack, right?

Unless he was a complete sociopath. But no. No way would she be attracted to someone like that. She'd been burned by a narcissist and was aware there were bad guys out there, which was why she was picky about

who she dated—to the point she hadn't had a *date-date* in a couple of years. Her priorities were taking care of her mother and Cade. Period.

And while she'd been thinking about things other than the coming legal disaster, they'd arrived at the Dee's Diner.

As soon as she stepped inside, a voice called out. "Girl, don't you get enough of this place when you're workin'?"

It was Roxy, and her too-dark eyebrows were high on her forehead as she noted who she'd arrived with.

"Here," Joe said, touching her elbow and guiding her toward the last booth at the end of the row.

Sandy gave Roxy a quick wave and let Joe lead her to the booth.

"We probably shouldn't hang around too long," Sandy said. "I'll need to check in with Mom, and Cade will be home from school in a couple of hours."

"No worries. Lunch, a review of what we need to dive deeper into, then we'll go."

"Sounds like a plan." She watched as he pulled his notebook from his pocket and fanned the pages to find something.

"Possibles," he said under his breath.

She leaned forward and tried to make out the list, reading it upside down. Sure enough, the top of the page said, "Possibles." She stabbed the paper. "Does number one say my mother murdered Bobby and invented her story to cover up the crime?" She glanced around to see if anyone had heard because she hadn't meant to raise her voice.

"Sandy, I wrote that before I met you or your mother. It was the most logical explanation."

"Well, Mr. Spock, screw you and your logic."

He gave her a steady stare that had her cheeks heating. Yeah, maybe she'd reacted a little over the top.

He leaned over the table toward her. "You know it's the first thing the

cops thought.”

“Still do,” she whispered. “What’s ‘possible’ number two? It’s hard to read your chicken scratch upside down.”

“That Bobby staged his own disappearance with the help of his wife and will miraculously reappear and hit the talk-show circuit, maybe write a book, get rich...”

She sat back in her seat. “I can see that one. Him doing that, not my mama. The man’s always trying to figure out an easy way to make money.”

“Well, staging an alien abduction isn’t *easy*.”

“True. What’s three?”

“Bobby deserted his wife.”

She glared back at him. “There are more words there than that.”

Joe grimaced. “Sorry, again, I didn’t know you two. It says, ‘Bobby deserted his crazy wife.’”

Sandy felt heat boil her brain, but she held onto her temper. He’d just apologized. He hadn’t met her mother, but truthfully, she wouldn’t blame him one bit if he still thought that. Not after the story her mother had told him.

“What’s that last thing?” she asked, squinting at his page.

“Um, an actual alien abduction.”

She gave a single bark of laughter. “Your boss make you add that one?”

“Nope. I was just looking at all the possibilities, however insane.”

She sat back. Where on earth could they begin to look? She was fresh out of ideas.

“I have a couple of things to add,” he said, flipping the page over to add items five and six.

“Tell me.”

“Your mom is adamant that this all happened when Bobby followed her down the tracks. I think I should take a trip down there to see if there was anything the sheriff’s office or the PD overlooked.”

“Because it’s not like they would’ve looked too hard, seein’ as how they think my mama murdered him and buried him in the rose bushes.”

He arched an eyebrow. “Have they dug up the rose bushes?”

“No.”

“Well, they might enlist a cadaver dog to sniff around the outside first. Then they’ll move indoors to smell the floorboards...”

Sandy felt her eyes widen.

Joe reached out and cupped her hand. “I’ll take a look in the woods around the tracks—”

“It’s mostly swampy, mushy ground on either side.”

“It won’t hurt looking.”

She nodded. “Number six?”

“I need to talk to someone. Someone the cops might not be aware of.” His gaze fell away like he didn’t want to say anymore.

“Out with it,” she whispered, leaning closer again. “What’s number six?”

His gaze met hers, and she saw regret there. “Mina Parker.”

She blinked. “What does Mina—” Her hand slipped from under his and covered her mouth. “How do you...?”

“Miss Oralia saw him sneak through the woods to the road and get into her car.”

“That two-timing bastard.”

“Did I hear Mina’s name?” Roxy said as she placed two iced teas in front of them.

Sandy’s gaze went to Joe.

Joe gave Roxy a small smile. “Have you seen her around lately?”

“Mina Parker? Can’t say I have, but then, it’s not like there’s anything good enough to interest her here. She does all her shopping and all her appointments in Little Rock. Whose man is she tryin’ to steal now?” Her gaze moved between Joe and Sandy. Then, seeing Sandy blanch, she said, “Oh no, honey. Poor Amelia.”

“We’re not saying—” Sandy began.

“Amelia doesn’t know,” Joe said, giving the waitress a meaningful stare.

Roxy mimed zipping her lips. “I didn’t hear a thing. Now, what can I get you two to eat? The meatloaf is particularly good today.”

They both ordered the meatloaf, which arrived at their table just minutes later.

“So, there could be another suspect for the police to consider,” Sandy said between bites.

He shrugged. “If she hasn’t taken off with him, maybe they had a lover’s quarrel. Could be.”

Her shoulders fell. “Or they’ll decide my mother found out he was cheating on her and killed him in a fit of rage.”

Joe closed his notebook. “The point is, we have a couple more possibilities. And the deeper we go, more might be revealed. That’s the nature of investigation.”

“All I can think is that my mama’s getting deeper and deeper into trouble. Every one of your *possible* possibilities centers around her.”

“There’s still alien abduction,” he said, lifting his brows.

“Don’t joke about this.”

“Okay,” he said.

“There he is!” came a loud voice.

Sandy glanced over her shoulder and groaned. “It’s the Nolan boys,” she said, and they were heading right their way.

Loy settled onto the edge of Joe’s seat while Coy snagged an empty chair from a nearby table and pulled it up to their booth.

“We’re ready for you,” Loy said.

Coy backhanded Loy on the shoulder before clearing his throat and turning back to Joe. “We have time to take you out into the woods.”

“Our trip down the railroad tracks?” Joe asked.

“Yup. You got time tonight?”

Joe glanced at Sandy before turning back to the boys. “What time do you suggest?”

Coy glanced at his watch. “Sunset’s around 8:20 PM. It’s a hike to get there, so it’d be nice to start no later than eight, so we got some daylight. There’s swamp on either side of the tracks in places. Don’t wanna fall and hit the marsh, what with all the snakes in there and all.”

“What do I need to bring?”

“A camera would be good.” He glanced under the table. “Some muck boots, too.” He glanced up at Joe.

“I’ll have to find a store.”

“Might have ’em at Plyler’s...” Loy said, looking doubtful.

Coy looked under the table again. “You wear what? A ten?”

“Mighty tiny feet,” Loy said. “Maybe my nephew can loan you—”

Joe’s eyes narrowed. “Twelve-and-a-half.”

“Huh,” Coy said. “I have a pair I can loan you.”

“I’d be much obliged,” Joe said. His words were polite, but it looked like he was gritting his teeth.

“So, we’ll pick you up at eight in front of Miss Oralia’s,” Coy said. At Joe’s nod, he stood and rapped the table. “See ya.”

The two Nolans ambled back outside to Loy’s purple Charger. Sandy watched them. They seemed almost giddy.

“They’re up to something,” she said.

“Doesn’t mean it’s not a good idea to let them show me what they want me to see.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “You’re a sneaky man.”

“Now, why would you say that? They’re the ones who might be trying to pull one over on me.”

“But you’re letting them do it. It’s almost...” She couldn’t think of the word.

“Entrapment?” he said, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes,” she said, wagging her finger. “It’s entrapment.”

“Or...they could just want me to experience Arkansas’s spookiest mystery.”

“Well, what are you going to do for the rest of the day?” she asked, glancing down at her plate and realizing with a start that she’d finished her meatloaf, potatoes, and green beans.

“I’m not sure. Any suggestions?”

She laughed. “If you Googled ‘things to do in Gurdon,’ all you’d see is the Hoo-Hoo Museum and The Gurdon Light.”

“I guess I should just head back to Miss Oralia’s. She said something about dinner at 5:30. I could read through the materials Ms. Anderson gave me and then get ready for my trip to the tracks.”

“Be sure to put on some extra-strength bug repellent.”

He nodded. “I have some.”

“When you tell Miss Oralia where you’re heading, she’ll probably pull out an ancient bottle of Avon’s Skin So Soft bath oil.”

“For what?”

“Some folks swear it keeps the bugs away.”

“Does it work?”

She shrugged. “Everyone’s grandma swears by it.”

“How can one argue with ancient wisdom?”

She chuckled, shaking her head. Joe Franchetti was too much—too much man, too smart, too nosy, too damn sexy. Lord have mercy, she was in trouble for sure.

CHAPTER 10



WALKING AHEAD OF HIM, Coy kept turning his head and sniffing the air.

Yeah, Joe had gotten the hint the first time Coy had sniffed loudly that Miss Oralia might have overdone the Skin So Soft. He smelled like he'd doused his entire body in the feminine-smelling oil.

Coy really shouldn't have made fun of him. He seemed suspiciously well-acquainted with the scent. Joe really didn't care all that much that he smelled extra aromatic. The mosquitoes were buzzing all around them, but very few had ventured close enough to him to bite.

"We almost there?" Joe asked for the tenth time, grinning in the gloom. They'd trudged forever down the deserted track. When they'd still had twilight, they'd passed a poorly kept graveyard that appeared only accessible by a footpath through the woods. Loy had picked up a couple of railway spikes along the way that had worked their way free of the track and gave them to Joe as souvenirs.

The iron spikes were heavy, standing in his back pockets, but he wanted his hands free. He'd left his camera case behind at the B&B and held his camera in one hand as he followed his guide.

He heard a sound like a twig snapping and glanced behind him. "Think we ought to slow down until Loy catches up?" he asked as he looked back but saw nothing.

“Nah. He had mother nature’s business to take care of,” Coy said. “He’ll catch up when he’s done. He knows his way.”

Joe noted the depth of the shadows in the dense forest that framed the tracks on either side. The scent of the marshy ground—brackish water and rotting vegetation—surrounded them. Every now and then, bright gold eyes blinked at them out of the darkness—some high in the trees, some closer to the ground. Likely, they were the gazes of owls and coyotes, wondering what these foolish humans were doing at this time of night. He stood still and snapped some shots without a flash, hoping some of them caught the eerie sets of eyes.

The tracks themselves rode a long hillock of dirt, mounded up to support the twin rails, keeping them above the marsh. The wood slats between the rails were often broken or soft from rot. They’d already passed several small bridges over trickling creeks. The scant moonlight and stars in the sky provided just enough light to cause a dull gleam on the rails.

Again, a shuffling sounded behind them, and Joe turned to look back.

“Joe, will ya look there?” Coy called out.

He turned back, and his eyes widened. Further down in the center of the tracks was a bright beam of light. It didn’t much match the orb-like descriptions and pictures he’d seen in Ms. Anderson’s research, but it was there and bright, seeming to pulse and then moving side to side in slow arcs. He quickly raised his camera again and began filming, this time using the video setting. When the light was maybe forty feet in front of them, it suddenly shot straight upward, going higher and higher before the glow dimmed and disappeared.

“Did you see that?”

Joe kept silent. He’d seen something. He just wasn’t sure what.

More sounds, recognizable as crunching footsteps, sounded, this time from the left of the tracks. Then, a loud cry erupted.

“Ow, ow!” came the cry of a male voice.

“You keep movin’! Shame on you! What were you thinkin’?” This voice was female, and Joe had no doubts about whose voice it was.

He unclipped his flashlight from his belt and shone it into the dark forest.

“Keep movin’!” Sandy said.

“You’re gonna tear my ear off! Let go!”

Definitely Loy’s voice. What the hell was happening?

“Ah, for fuck’s sake,” Coy muttered under his breath, then stepped sideways down the berm to the forest floor.

Joe stayed where he was, peering into the dark until his light caught movement. Sandy and Loy broke into the clearing. With one hand, she was holding onto his earlobe, keeping him bent low as she dragged him toward the tracks. The other hand held a small dark box.

“Sandy? What the hell are you doing?” Joe called out.

“I knew these two were up to something,” she called out. She held up the black box. “They were flying a drone!”

“Are you serious?” His gaze shot sideways to his companion.

Coy stood with his lips pursed, not saying a word.

Sandy let go of Loy’s ear and stood with her hands fisted on her hips. “What do you have to say for yourself, Loy Nolan?”

Loy rubbed his ear. “We just wanted to make sure Joe here got a good show.”

“Why would you need to fly a drone?” she asked, exasperation in her voice. “If you wait long enough or come out often enough, you’re gonna see the light.”

“Well, a little orb dancing over the tracks isn’t as impressive as a big spotlight, now is it?” Loy said, with just a touch of whine.

Joe felt his mouth twitch. Then a grin stretched wide, and he found himself bending in the middle while laughter shook his body.

When he finally quieted, all three of his companions were staring at him like he’d lost his mind, which sent him into another gale of laughter. When

he finally got control of himself, his gaze caught the hint of something further down the track. An orb-like light, bright white with a tinge of blue, hovered over the rails, a bit of illuminated mist surrounding it.

He lifted his camera one more time and filmed the Light as it moved toward them, then skipped to one side and then the other. For about five seconds longer, it continued toward them, then slowly faded away.

When he lowered his camera, goosebumps dimpled his forearms.

“You thought that wasn’t impressive?” Joe asked, feeling a little awestruck. Although he was sure there was an explanation, one that didn’t involve ghosts or aliens, he discovered he wanted to hold onto the magical moment for a little bit longer. And yes, he knew it was a strange reaction for him to have.

“We better head back,” Sandy said. “I’m gettin’ eaten alive.”

“Should’ve used Miss Oralia’s magic cure,” he teased.

“Lord, I can smell you from here. Did she pour the whole bottle over your head?”

Sandy began to climb the berm, and Joe reached out his hand to grab hers to help her up the last few feet. Not that she wouldn’t have very capably climbed it herself. She wasn’t wearing muck boots but had on a pair of very mud-encrusted cowboy boots.

“You two coming?” Joe asked, looking back at Coy, who was staring at Loy and shaking his head.

“Have to find that drone first. It wasn’t cheap,” Coy said, his voice filled with disgust. “Sandy, can you give Joe a ride back? We’re gonna be a while.”

“No problem. Good luck finding that thing,” she said, her voice too cheerful.

They both waved and turned to head back toward Gurdon. When they were out of earshot, Sandy asked, “Well, did you have fun?”

Joe chuckled. “I did. Not sure how much I can use in my article, but I’ll write it all up anyway.”

“Maybe you can save it for that book you’re gonna write.”

“Who knows?”

They bumped together, their arms sliding together and apart.

“Wow, she really slicked you up,” Sandy said.

“Want some?”

“Hell, yeah.”

They paused and faced each other. Joe rubbed his arms and gathered some of the fragrant oil on his palms, then began to rub it on Sandy’s arms and then her face and neck.

“Well, that’s an improvement,” she said breathily.

He slipped his fingers under her hair at the back of her neck and rubbed the soft skin there. “All done.”

Her breaths shortened when she placed her hands on his arms and moved them upward, over his shoulders and around his neck. Then she slowly rose on her toes, leaning toward him.

Joe dropped a hand to her hip and brought her body to rest against his. Even through her T-shirt and bra, he felt the tips of her nipples harden against his chest. He bent his head, and their mouths met in a slow glide of lips with very little pressure.

It wasn’t enough, but he raised his head to make sure she felt the same way.

Sandy dropped one of her hands from his neck to slide it around his waist, then...lower. Her hand clutched his buttock at the same time she leaned closer. When she began to lift one thigh, he slid his hand under it and lifted it to ride his hip. With a little jump, both of her legs encircled him.

Their mouths explored, rubbing fiercely together, lips parting and tongues exploring. Joe couldn’t get close enough, deep enough. His hand clutched her hips and held her while he ground between her legs.

Her arms encircled his neck, and she mashed her chest against his, rubbing her breasts on him, her panting breaths becoming whimpers.

Joe swayed, then widened his stance to make sure he stayed upright. He lifted his head and stared down at her face, illuminated only by the stars above. “I wasn’t expecting that.”

“I wasn’t either,” she whispered. “I mean, you’re attractive and all—I noticed that from the start, but—”

“I thought you were the most naturally stunning woman I’ve ever seen,” he whispered back. “Back when you were glaring at Coy and Loy in the restaurant on that first day.”

“Yesterday,” she said. “That happened yesterday.”

He rested his forehead against hers, knowing they were about to face reality but wanting to savor a few last moments of connection. “You’re right. This is too fast.”

“Never heard a man complain about that before,” she mumbled.

“I don’t want to take advantage. I still need your help.”

“With the investigation.”

“Yeah.”

“You think you can’t keep your impartiality if we have sex?”

He jerked against her, surprised by her bold words. “I can remain logical, but I don’t want—”

“For me to think I can pull sway over you because I have some kind of magical hoohaw?”

Joe laughed. “Hoohaw?”

“I’m a southern girl and not that crass.”

“So, are you telling me you want to have sex?”

“I haven’t had any in a very long time—and I could use the stress relief.”

“You need stress relief?”

“I need something.”

Now, he caught an edge of impatience. “Well, we have a logistical issue. I can’t take you back to Miss Oralia’s, and you can’t take me home to your place. What would your mama or Cade say if they caught us?”

“My car has a backseat—that’s good enough for me.”

“It’s a ways from here. You might change your mind before we get there.”

“Now you want to do it out here in the woods with the snakes?”

“No.”

“Ah, you’re afraid I’ll change my mind before we get to my car,” she said, her mouth stretching.

“I’m not afraid—and you can change your mind.”

She wiggled, dropping her legs down. He let her slide down his body. Then she tugged her T-shirt from the waistband of her jeans, ripped it over her head, then balled it up and tossed it away.

“What are you doing?”

“Think I’m going to be anything but horny when we get to my car?” she said, challenge clear in her tone.

“Wait.” He raked a hand through his hair, then glanced back down the track to ensure Coy and Loy weren’t heading their way.

Laughter sounded in front of him, and he turned back to find her already jogging down the tracks.

CHAPTER 11



SANDY COULDN'T BELIEVE she'd stripped off her shirt and tossed it away—or that Joe was running after her.

She'd never done anything this reckless before. Lord, if some high schoolers were heading down the tracks to see the Light right now, they'd get an eyeful of twin gleaming orbs.

Not that she cared. She was feeling too high, too wild. The thuds of his footfalls behind were thrilling.

A hand reached out and caught her shoulder. "Slow down, there," he said.

"Having trouble keeping up?" she said, not looking back—or slowing.

His hand trailed down her upper arm. "It's dark. You could trip over something you can't see."

"Then I'll fly," she said, laughing.

His hand snagged her hand and tugged, forcing her to slow to a stop. "Now, watch your footing. Remember you have to balance on the rails when you get to some of the bridges, or your feet can fall through the slats."

"Where's your sense of adventure?" she asked, arching her neck. When his gaze fell to the tops of her breasts, she felt a surge of something... feminine power, perhaps? Whatever it was goaded her to lose whatever remained of her modesty.

His eyebrows drew together. "My sense of adventure seems to have

deserted me. You should take my T-shirt and cover up. There's no telling who else might be out here tonight."

"You'd have to let go of my hand to take your shirt off," she said, angling her chest toward him and drawing his gaze downward again.

He squeezed her hand. "Dammit, Sandy..."

"Just keep moving," she said, tugging on his hand this time, forcing him to move then quicken his steps. "The sooner we get there, the sooner we can find your missing sense of adventure."

"Is that what you'll be looking for?" he muttered.

"That and the zipper to your jeans."

A sound gusted from him, but she couldn't tell if it was a gasp or a bark of laughter. "I'll be hunting for the clasp on that bra," he rasped.

"Don't have to hunt; it's right here in front," she said and reached between her breasts with her free hand, but he turned her suddenly and placed his hand over hers, stopping her from unsnapping it.

"Not yet," he said. "Not until we have a little privacy."

"Again, you're wasting time," she said, sliding his hand over her breast. "We could be twenty-five steps closer to that back seat."

"Yeah, we could." Only he didn't turn to resume walking. Instead, he tucked his fingers beneath the cup of her bra and smoothed them over her nipple. "Dammit," he muttered and withdrew them. Then he gripped her shoulders and turned her to face the direction of town again. "Forget what I said about watching your steps. Fly!"

They raced down the tracks, at last arriving at the place where the tracks crossed the road. She veered to the right and slipped into the trees, running toward her car that she'd parked just off the road.

She reached into her pocket for the fob and pressed to unlock the doors. The lights blinked, showing her and Joe exactly where her car was.

They both ran for the doors, opened them, and then slipped into the seats. When she started the engine, he angled his body toward her. "You can still

change your mind.”

“It’s so funny that you’re the one stomping on the brakes.”

“Baby, I don’t want to stop, but I don’t want any regrets, either.”

She put the car into reverse and backed out onto the road. “I know a place.”

It wasn’t far—and it wasn’t much. Just a dirt and gravel entry to a farmer’s field, but far enough off the road that a passing car wouldn’t easily see them. She parked, opened her car door, and stood beside her vehicle while she methodically stripped, piling her clothing on the driver’s seat before opening the back door and sliding naked across the microfiber upholstery. The door beside her opened. Joe ducked inside, and suddenly, they were together, breathing hard, the shadows obscuring too much of their bodies.

She reached up and hit the overhead lamp. “Just a few seconds, and I’ll turn it off.”

Joe’s hungry gaze locked on her breasts then moved lower. And he must have liked what he saw because his dick jerked closer to his belly.

For her part, her gaze was glued on his thickening...uh, member. “Oh, my.”

He flicked off the light.

“Did someone remember condoms?” he said.

“I’m guessing not you,” she quipped. “It’s a good thing I thought to get some today. They’re in the glove box.”

“You thought about this...?”

“I hoped we might...at some point...”

He pushed up, leaned between the seats, and stretched to reach the glove box, stabbing the button and then grabbing the box before sitting back down. “I’ll just put them here,” he said.

The box scuffed the rubber mat on the floor. She made a mental note of its position but quickly forgot about the rubbers because they were here...

naked...*in the back of her car.*

Should she make the first move? Hell, come to think of it, she'd made all the first moves.

“Do your legs have enough room?” she asked.

“Depends on what you want them to do. I'm sitting now, and they meet the back of the front seat, but that might actually work.”

“Ah,” she said, then came up on her knees and felt for his shoulder. Then she slowly lifted her knee, careful not to knock into something vital, as she climbed onto his lap, facing him. “So, we're here...” she whispered. “What now?”

He chuckled, and she felt her mouth stretch into a goofy grin that she was glad he couldn't see.

“Maybe you should direct me,” he said.

“You want me to tell you what to do?”

“If you have me touch you the way you want, I won't miss anything important.”

He sounded so reasonable. So cool. But she felt how *uncool* he really was at the moment because the part of him he only had partial control over was jerking against her center. “I've been dying for you to rub my tit again,” she said.

Instantly, his hand was on her left breast, his fingers stroking over her nipple.

“You have two hands,” she grumbled.

“*Riiight.*”

Had she heard a note of sarcasm in his voice? When he held both breasts, she leaned into his palms, inviting him to squeeze. Which he did. His chest rose, filling with air, and his hands squeezed tighter, plumping them, then lifting them, possibly measuring their weight.

When his thumbs scraped her hard tips, she shivered. “I like that.”

When he captured the tips and gave them a little twist, she whimpered.

“Too much?”

“More,” she whispered. And she garnished her approval by grinding downward on his cock, rolling her hips to glide along his length.

He leaned his head forward and captured her lips. That’s all it took for her to forget the awkwardness and *what next?* questions. She pressed her palms against both sides of his face and poured all her loneliness and desire into that kiss.

When he pulled back his head to sever the kiss, she followed his lips, but he gripped the sides of her body, just below her breasts, and lifted her so that he could latch his mouth around one straining tip.

The deep suctioning motion of his mouth pulled her into full arousal. Moisture dampened her sex, tension wound inside her belly, making it quiver. When he moved to the other breast, she held his head to keep him right there. “Bite it,” she whispered.

Teeth clamped, then tugged—just the right amount of pain to get her hissing between her teeth.

When he pulled back again and lowered her, he bent sideways and stretched his arm, captured the box of condoms, then brandished them. The flash of his white teeth in the gloom had her smiling, too.

“Need help?” she asked.

“Just lift up,” he said, then tore the plastic wrapper with his teeth. His hands fumbled between their legs.

At last, he gripped her waist and raised her again. This time, he kissed her neck and glided his mouth along her jaw while his fingers found her folds, tracing their length, spreading her moisture. When he parted her and placed his cock at her entrance, she tossed back her hair and gripped his shoulders, her fingernails digging into his skin as he lowered her slowly onto him.

She aided his entry with tiny swirls of her hips until, at last, her sex met his groin. They rocked together, both groaning with their powerful swelling desire.

His hand smoothed over her buttocks and molded each side, moving her forward and back and then upward and down. More moisture built, and the slick, slippery sounds joined their panting breaths and groans.

Sandy had never, ever felt this way—outside herself and yet connected. Primal and on the edge of discovery. “Joe, Joe...” she chanted.

The door beside her opened, and she turned her head, thinking someone must be outside, but not really caring. Then she realized Joe had opened the door. He cradled her body against his and put his feet on the ground, then turned and came over her, laying her on the edge of the seat while he encouraged her to raise her legs and encircle him. Then he stood between her legs and pounded into her, each thrust rubbing her back against the smooth fibers beneath her, heating her back and bottom while he built friction inside her with his quickening thrusts.

He pushed her higher and higher toward the peak. Her head turned on the seat, thrashing side to side. Her hands cupped her own breasts and held them, flicking the engorged tips while his thrusts sharpened, slapping skin against skin in a steady thrum.

At last, she felt the explosion radiating outward from her core, and she arched her back and cried out. A muffled shout quickly followed, and Joe continued to thrust, only with less rhythm, slowing gradually, until his glides were more for comfort than prolonging the pleasure.

He pushed her deeper into the car and came over her, tucking his face into the corner of her shoulder while he dragged in deep breaths.

Sandy smoothed her hand over his slick back, then cradled his head, turning hers to kiss his hair. In the distance, the whine of an engine sounded, and Joe jerked his head up. He pulled out, and they both scrambled to sit on the seat while he closed the door and they both huddled down to make sure a silhouette wasn't visible, should the driver happen to look right and see the car.

The car moved past, not slowing, and they both drew deep, relieved

breaths, but then Joe snorted and began to laugh.

She joined him, clinging to him as they fell against each other. When they quieted, they kissed again. Sandy didn't want this to end. Didn't want to draw away from him and dress. She definitely didn't want to head home to her solitary bed, knowing he was just across the hedgerow from her.

Joe kissed her temple. "We should get dressed."

"Yeah, I suppose."

He chuckled. "You having as much trouble as I am working up any enthusiasm over the thought of letting you go?"

"Something like that. I kind of like feeling your skin against me." She rubbed her chest against his arm, producing new prickles of arousal in her nipples.

"I'll get my shirt for you to use to clean up," he said.

"I have Sonic napkins in my glovebox."

"Great."

"Yeah, I'm going to need that shirt for when I sneak back into the house."

"Of course."

He backed out of the car and stood.

She couldn't help giving him one last look, top to bottom. Lord, he was a gorgeous man. But then he was moving away. The glovebox opened, and he held a crushed bunch of napkins over the seat for her to take.

She scooted out of the car, walked around to the opposite side, cleaned up, then opened her door, and began dressing. He tossed his shirt across the top of the vehicle, and she caught it, quickly drawing it over her sweaty skin. "I wonder how many mosquito bites I got," she mused, scratching her shoulder through Joe's shirt.

"Probably as many as I have on my ass," he muttered.

She giggled. "I'm sure Miss Oralia would've loved anointing your ass with Skin So Soft."

"Stop. Way to kill the mood."

They both chuckled and then climbed into the car. She reached for the ignition button, but Joe caught her hand and kissed it. “I’d like to keep seeing you, Sandy. Not just to do this,” he said.

She arched an eyebrow. “We’re going to see a lot of each other since we’ve still got an investigation to continue.”

“That’s not what I mean,” he said softly, pulling her palm to his mouth. “I want to take you to dinner, buy you flowers—”

“You want to date me?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I would hope so, seeing as how you’ve already drank the milk.”

“What?”

“A saying my grandma always used to say to warn me off having sex out of wedlock...you know... *Why would a man buy a cow if he’s already drinking the milk?*”

“That’s a terrible saying.”

She grinned. “But now you’re thinking about my tits again, aren’t you?”

“And if I say yes?”

She laughed. “Well, I can’t hold it against you because I’m thinking about how good it felt to have your mouth—”

“Stop.” He rubbed his cock, adjusting it in his jeans, then reached for the seatbelt. “The next time we do this will be when we have time and a bed...”

“The Rodeway Inn is pretty much all we’ve got...”

“I’m not shacking up with you in a cheap motel.”

“Cade has that tree house...” She started the car, and the dashboard lights lit his face, revealing his wrinkled nose. “Well, we could always find a downed tree in the woods. We’ll just need to bring a stick to chase away any snakes.”

He shook his head, but his lips were stretched into a wide grin. “We’ll figure this out.”

Sandy grinned, too. He’d had her and still wanted more. And he didn’t

seem to mind her sassy mouth. *Hear that, Grandma?* So much for attracting more bees with sugar than vinegar.

CHAPTER 12



“THAT’S HER HOUSE,” Sandy said, pointing at the small, white clapboard home with its somewhat neglected garden.

On this third day of his investigation, he’d decided to interview Mina Parker, the girlfriend.

He’d tried to dissuade Sandy from accompanying him. In fact, he thought his arguments had been pretty good and that she’d believed him when he’d said that Mina would be unlikely to be forthcoming with the daughter of “the wife” sitting across from her, glaring daggers.

Sandy had lifted her chin and given him a flinty glare. “I don’t care that she was sneaking around with Bobby. If he’d run off with her, I’d have thrown a damn party. She’s welcome to him. I just want to know if she’s heard from him so we can clue the cops into the fact he skipped town.”

They’d both been disappointed when they’d placed the call to Mina’s house that morning while they’d had their coffee at the diner. They’d hoped she wouldn’t pick up. That she, too, was missing, but she’d answered the phone, and after a little honeyed persuasion from Joe, she’d agreed to an interview.

They exited his rental car and followed the pathway to her front door.

The door opened before he had a chance to reach for the doorbell button.

In the opening, Joe noted that Mina was an attractive woman in her early

forties, with brassy blond hair and perfectly applied makeup. She wore a button-down blouse with a straight, curve-hugging skirt.

Mina's gaze shot to Sandy. "What's she doin' here?"

"She's been assisting my investigation," Joe said with a polite smile.

"I don't think this is a good id—"

She started to close the door, but Joe pressed on it to prevent it from closing. "I'll only ask a few questions, then we'll be on our way. Like I said on the phone, the cops will find out about your association soon enough. I'll be gentler, promise."

Her gaze went to Sandy, and a frown dented the space between her brows, but she opened the door wider and invited them in with a wave of her hand.

Inside, the house was a little shabby, like the yard, but the sofa she pointed to was comfortable.

"So, ask your questions. I have to get to work soon."

Joe pulled out his notepad and pen and opened to a blank page. "Is it true you were having an affair with Bobby Carruthers?"

Sandy elbowed him. "That's where you start?" she muttered.

Mina rolled her eyes. "Yes, I was sleepin' with Bobby. But I wasn't the only one he cheated with—just the latest."

"How did you meet?" Joe continued, ignoring the tension Sandy radiated beside him.

"I've known Bobby since we both started workin' at the car dealership in Arkadelphia," Mina said. "I'm the receptionist. Sometimes, I catch...or, um...*caught* a ride with him to work—or I'd pick him up."

"Did he ever mention wanting to leave Gurdon?"

"And his wife? Yeah. Bobby had big dreams, and he was offered some opportunities in Dallas and Houston that he had to pass on because Amelia wouldn't leave. He was frustrated."

"Did the two of you ever make plans to leave?"

Mina's gaze went to Sandy before locking again with his. "Yes. We planned to leave at the end of summer. He just needed to stash away some money, and I had to get my house ready for sale."

Joe tilted his head. "When were you planning to begin working on improving the curb appeal of your house?"

Mina's mouth turned down at the corners. "We made those plans before he up and disappeared, but I was draggin' my feet because, after talking to the realtor, I wasn't so sure I wanted to sell. Not now, anyway. I would've let Bobby go first..."

Joe narrowed his gaze as he studied her expression. Her gaze fell away. "Did you change your mind about going, Mina?"

She sighed. "Yeah. He had dreams. I have reality. It was fun...for a while."

Joe glanced sideways at Sandy, giving her a warning glance, then turned back to Mina. "Did Bobby ever say whether he'd talked to Amelia about leaving her?"

Mina nodded slowly. "She said he wasn't goin' to Texas. That he'd be goin' somewhere better."

"What did Bobby think she meant by that?"

"He said it kind of creeped him out. I mean, he knew she believed she talked to aliens, but he wasn't so sure she was all there. He said that pushin' her to accept he was leavin' might not work out so good for him."

SANDY AND JOE were quiet as they drove back to Dirty Corners. She felt uneasy after hearing Mina talk about how Bobby had been "creeped out" by her mother. Now that she looked back, she remembered how he'd frown and go still whenever her mother talked about the Light and the aliens. He'd cut her off and change the subject while her mother would smile, her expression a mixture of sadness and faith that all would work out the way it should.

Had she taken Bobby's talk about leaving to heart? Had she tried to dissuade him? Was it possible they'd argued, and something had happened—some horrible unintended consequence that her mother wasn't willing to face?

Sandy thought maybe it was time to face the possibility her mother might go to jail.

"I need to talk to your mother," Joe said.

"I know." Yes, her stomach tightened in rejection, but she knew he'd only ask questions the prosecutor would ask. "We should probably do it soon."

He nodded and kept his gaze on the road ahead. "I'm sorry I'm only adding to your anxiety," he said.

She shook her head. "I've been fighting this ever since Mama told me Bobby was gone. I didn't want to consider any other possibility but that Bobby had run off."

"If he didn't, he might have met with an accident."

"Which means my mother knows something about it. Otherwise, why would she insist she was there when he disappeared?"

"She might not be able to face whatever happened. That's why she's clinging to the alien abduction story."

"They're going to try my mama, aren't they?"

Joe shook his head. "They still have to determine that he's dead. There's no body. No evidence of violence..." Joe shot her a glance. "One thing we've never talked about... Your father... How did he die?"

Sandy's eyes stung with sudden tears. "He became sickly, but he hated going to the doctors. He waited too long."

"Did they do an autopsy?"

"Do you mean, did they check to see if Mama poisoned him?"

When he met her gaze squarely, she knew he was only asking questions the authorities would. "He had cancer. He passed two months after he was diagnosed."

As they rounded the curve, Joe's foot hit the brake pedal, and Sandy bounced forward, her hand going out to the dashboard while her gaze stared straight ahead.

There were four vehicles parked in her driveway. The sheriff's SUV, a local PD sedan, a white van with a state police decal on the side, and a dark sedan with darkly tinted windows and an extra antenna on the back.

Joe drove slowly forward, passed Sandy's driveway, and pulled into Miss Oralia's.

The second he placed the car in park, she unclipped her belt buckle and launched herself out of the door.

When she came around the car, Joe caught her arm. "I'll go with you."

When he slid his hand downward to hold her hand, she didn't shake it free; she clenched her fingers tightly around his.

"It's happening," she said, her breaths coming in short, ragged gasps.

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves, Sandy. Your mom is in there. She needs you to be strong. It's time to lift that chin and be her champion."

With his hand wrapped around hers, she felt the frantic terror inside her subside somewhat. They rounded the hedgerow dividing the two properties, and Sandy took a look around. Someone dressed in a dark coverall was leading a dog around the yard, directing it to sniff around the bushes next to the house. Was it a cadaver dog? She almost rolled her eyes. Her mom wasn't strong enough to dig a grave, so she knew they'd find nothing.

They climbed the steps but were stopped at the door by a local deputy. "You'll need to go back next door," the deputy said.

Sandy leaned forward. "Seth Turner, you know damn well I live here. I'm going to see my mama."

"He don't live here, Sandy," Seth whispered back while scowling at Joe.

"He's my attorney," Sandy said, jutting her chin higher and daring Seth to call her a liar.

Seth blew out a breath that rounded his already chubby cheeks. "Dammit,

don't interfere. They have questions that have to be answered."

Sandy gave a jerky nod and swept inside, still holding Joe's hand. They entered the foyer and turned toward the kitchen, where the voices were coming from.

Inside the kitchen, her mother was busy putting together a tray with a carafe of coffee, sugar bowl, creamer, and a row of store-bought cookies on a pretty dish. When she looked up at Sandy, she smiled broadly. "I'll add two more cups! We got hungry after talking so long."

The sheriff had the good grace to blush when Sandy gave him a searing glance. The other man she'd never seen before, and he looked so serious and stern, she knew he was from the prosecutor's office.

Sandy moved to her mother's side. "You go sit. I'll bring the tray."

"Well, thank you, Sandra. I can't imagine they have too many questions left to ask. They've been here a while already."

Sandy's stomach dove toward her toes, but she picked up the tray and pasted a neutral expression on her face as she strode toward the table.

Her mother was seated, and Sandy nodded toward the empty chair at the end for Joe to take. She set the tray down and lifted the carafe, reaching around to pour cups of coffee before sitting herself next to her mother and beginning to pass the sugar and cream.

The men stayed quiet until her mother raised her coffee cup.

The stern-looking man turned to Joe. "You here in some official capacity?"

"I'm here for Sandra. Have you read Ms. Carruthers her rights?"

"She waived them."

Sandy shot her mother a pointed look.

Her mother lifted her shoulders. "I have nothin' to hide."

"Innocent people can be made to look guilty, Mama. Don't be naïve."

"Everything's gonna be okay, baby girl. We're almost done here."

Sandy heard the sound of footsteps upstairs and looked up at the ceiling

and then at the sheriff. “What’s happening?”

“We’re performing a search.”

“Do you have a warrant?” Joe asked.

“Didn’t need one. Miz Carruthers gave us permission to proceed.”

“So long as they didn’t make too much of a mess,” her mother added.

Sandy felt as though her head would explode. “Why on earth would you agree to that?”

“Because, dearest,” her mother said gently, “I have nothin’ to hide.”

Sandy was so angry she felt ready to shout or cry, and she was afraid she’d cry, and that would be so much worse than cursing a blue streak in front of strangers, but then she felt a hand on her thigh and glanced sideways at Joe whose calm expression felt like a comforting blanket.

She drew a deep breath and let her shoulders fall.

“I was hoping to get a few minutes of your time, too, Miz Billingsley.”

Sandy looked at the stern man. “Are you going to read me my rights, too?”

He arched an eyebrow. “We can do this here or in my office in Arkadelphia.”

That was when she noted the small tape recorder next to his coffee cup. A red recording light shone. “What do you need to know?”

“I understand you weren’t a fan of Mr. Carruthers.”

“Now, Mr. Metcalf,” her mother said, “you will not cast aspersions at my daughter. She was no fan of Bobby’s—she didn’t think he was good enough for me—but she tolerated him for my sake. She had nothing to do with any of this. She wasn’t the one who took Bobby to the tracks.”

Mr. Metcalf’s gaze hardened on her mother as he stared at her.

Was he hoping his mean look would make her mother crack and spill her secrets?

“Are you done?” Joe asked.

Mr. Metcalf’s jaw tightened, but then he nodded. “For now. I will likely

have more questions later. I'll check with the officers and see how much longer they'll be."

"Good, good," her mother said. "Cade will be home from school before too long. I'd like a chance to straighten up so he's not upset."

The sheriff and Mr. Metcalf shared looks. The sheriff's wasn't hard to read. He thought her mother was a fruit loop and that they'd been wasting their time talking to her.

Sandy would've risen to follow the men out of the room to make sure they found the front door, but Joe flattened his palm on her thigh to keep her seated.

At last, the officer moving around upstairs clomped downward, pulling off blue gloves. He had a clear baggy filled with papers, which he took outside. "We should know what he just took," Sandy said, pointing at the man's disappearing back.

"It's just paper," Mama said. "Looked like some of the business receipts Bobby keeps in a folder when he empties his pockets. Nothin' to worry about."

Joe leaned toward Sandy. "I should tell them to have a talk with someone else," he said.

She knew from his frown that he was talking about Mina Parker. She nodded. "I'll stay here, I guess."

"It's for the best, dear," her mother said. "When I disappear, you don't want them thinkin' you've got a screw loose, too."

Sandy blinked back at her as Joe's hand left her thigh, and he stood and walked away.

"I know what people think," her mom said. "I'm okay with it because I have the truth, and it's a beautiful truth."

Sandy swallowed the lump in her throat. She was going to lose her mother, one way or the other. Everything she'd said had been her attempt to prepare her daughter for that inevitability.

CHAPTER 13



MISS ORALIA INVITED Sandy's family to dinner at her house. Cade had groaned because it meant he had to wear his "Sunday Best" clothes—and he had to clean under his fingernails. Her mother had perked up because it had been a while since she'd spent time with her dear old friend. Plus, she said she hadn't the energy to cook a meal after all the "brouhaha" caused by the law descending on their home.

Joe was simply happy to spend time with Sandy sitting across the table from him. He made it his mission to distract her from her troubles, telling the women stories about some of the investigations he'd conducted in the past for the *National Informer*.

"That was your story?" Sandy said, her eyes wide and her mouth curving into a grin. "How did you know he'd built that alien body out of road kill?"

"Well, I didn't know he'd used road kill per se, but I'd seen his workshop and the many model planes and ships he'd constructed. He had the skill to put something together and make it look authentic."

"I remember reading it and going down that rabbit hole you described where you followed that man's tale about how he'd figured out where the alien's star system was by the diagram the alien had supposedly traced in the dirt. You even went so far as to see whether any actual scientists had said there were planets that could sustain life in that part of space."

Joe smiled. “That’s what I do. I follow all the possibles. I don’t shortchange those scenarios.” He shrugged. “And it makes for a better story.”

“Well, I hope your boss, that Pat O’Byrne, knows he has the real deal in you,” Amelia said. “I heard tell what happened in the woods with those Nolan boys last night.” She shook her head. “Those boys are a nickel shy of a dollar.”

Miss Oralia chuckled. “I heard Coy’s wife made him strip in the yard, and then she hosed him off with the garden hose because he came home covered in mud.”

“Did Esme Todd tell you that?” Amelia said. “Bet she was watching the whole thing from her front window. She’s probably got the pictures, too.”

The two women shared chuckles.

Cade tugged on Joe’s arm. “You see the Light? The real one?”

“I did. Plain as day. I even got a couple of pictures of it.”

“I’ve seen it lots,” Cade said, puffing out his chest. “Sometimes, Grandma takes me out there to see it.”

Sandy arched an eyebrow. “I hope you know not to go out there on your own, Cade.”

“It’s pretty far,” Cade said. “I’d have to ride my bike a good piece to get to the tracks.”

“I’ll probably go out one more time before I leave,” Joe said. “Maybe your mama might let you come.”

Cade swung his glance to his mother, who narrowed her eyes at Joe but nodded. “We’ll see. Maybe I’ll come along, too.”

Joe’s gaze met hers, and they shared a little secret smile, remembering what had happened after their adventure on the tracks. Hell, he’d gotten little sleep after he’d left her because every time he’d closed his eyes, he’d been right back there in the backseat of her car, having the best sex of his life with a woman he didn’t want to say goodbye to.

It was a helluva time to fall in love.

Amelia cleared her throat. “Oralia, how about you and I have a glass of that special *juice* you have while the younger folks clear the tables and do the dishes.”

“Amelia, I invited them over to treat them to a meal. They are not going to do my dishes.”

Sandy pushed up from the table. “Mama’s right. You two should head to the sitting room and enjoy your...*juice*. We’ll take care of cleaning up.”

Oralia shook her head but followed Amelia out of the dining room.

Cade began carrying dishes into the kitchen. “Wish I could have some juice,” he muttered.

Sandy and Joe stacked the rest and headed to the sink.

“I’ll wash while you dry,” Joe said. “You know where things go, I assume...?”

“I do.” She bent and retrieved washing detergent from under the sink, then turned on the hot water and ran her hand under the spigot while she waited for it to heat.

“I wonder why she hasn’t had a dishwasher installed,” Joe said.

Sandy’s mouth twitched. “Took me forever to convince my mother to get one. Why would she need one when she has two perfectly good hands to wash with?” She stoppered the sink, squeezed soap into the water, and then waved her hand to build some suds.

“What was that about juice?” he asked.

Sandy laughed. “Miss Oralia has a bottle of cordial she hides in the bottom of her curio cabinet. She only partakes on special occasions.” She pointed to the dirty dishes. “Let’s start with plates. You scrape them off and hand them to me. I’ll wash and put them into the drainer.”

Joe began scraping plates of leftover bits of food into the trash. “You notice anything odd about your mom tonight?” he asked when Cade went back into the dining room to retrieve the rest of the dishes. He handed her a plate.

“Odder than usual, you mean?” she asked as she began washing.

“Yeah. She seemed quiet, but she was watching everything like she was...”

“Storing up memories?” She nodded, and her eyes began to fill. She drew a deep breath and quickly blinked away the extra moisture. Then she leaned closer to whisper, “Dee at the diner said Mama came in and sat at the counter drinking coffee. She told her how much her friendship meant to her and how she hoped Dee would look out for me and Cade if anything happened to her. And this afternoon, Cade said he saw her packing a suitcase.”

“Do you think she’s going to try to skip town?” He couldn’t imagine the woman doing that. However, a move like that would point to her guilt.

“She’s planning something,” Sandy said. “I’m going to keep an ear out in case she decides to try to leave.”

“I’m just across the way,” he said. “I’ll keep my window open. If I hear the car start, I’ll alert you.”

“Maybe we should follow her if she leaves...”

He nodded. “She might lead us to Bobby. Have you ever thought that maybe she’s keeping him somewhere?”

“Like tied up?”

He shrugged and handed her another dish. “I don’t know. But if she makes a move, I say we let her go and follow her.”

Sandy removed a hand from the soapy water and dried it on a towel. Then she cupped the side of his face and rose on her toes. “I’m glad you’re here,” she said, then kissed him.

Joe placed his hands on her hips and leaned into the kiss, getting lost in the moment.

“Ew!”

The pair jerked apart and looked toward the doorway. Cade stood there, his nose wrinkled in disgust.

SANDY HEARD a creak on the floorboards in the hallway and sat up in bed, awake in an instant. She crept to her door and eased it open an inch to see her mother sneaking toward the stairs, carrying a small suitcase at her side.

Sandy went to her phone on the nightstand and quickly dialed Joe. “She’s on the move,” she whispered.

“I’m heading to my car. Meet you there.”

Since she’d gone to bed wearing shorts and a T-shirt, all she had to do was slip her feet into her shoes and creep down the stairs, careful not to wake Cade. The boy slept like the dead anyway. She hoped he wouldn’t get up when she left and wonder where she’d gone, but he’d spent time on his own in the house before, and Miss Oralia was right next door. Just another worry to add to her list.

She heard the sound of the car starting and peeked out the window beside the door to see her mother backing out of the driveway without turning on the headlights.

As soon as her mother pulled away, Sandy darted out the door and ran around the hedgerow. Joe had his car started, the headlights off as well, and as soon as she jumped into the passenger seat and slammed the door, he began backing out.

Once he was on the road, she could see her mama’s lights were on. She was entering the first curve.

“The moon’s bright enough, I’m not going to turn on the headlights,” he said.

“Not until we get closer to town,” she said. “Let’s just hope a deer doesn’t jump into the road.”

They followed at a distance. When her mother turned onto State Road 53, Sandy knew where she was headed. “Good Lord, she’s going to the train tracks.”

Joe was silent but reached across the console for her hand. “Have I told you how much you’ve come to mean to me?”

“Nope,” she said, popping the P. “And why you’re tellin’ me now isn’t makin’ me any less nervous.”

“Just wanted you to know. I’m here for you, Sandy.”

She drew a shaky breath. “You think she’s going to lead us to his body, don’t you?”

“It does seem like a possibility.”

“Possible number one, as I recall.”

He squeezed her hand. “I don’t want to be right. We’ll just have to wait and see. Your mom’s a good person. Keep that in mind, no matter what.”

“She’s just crazy as a bed bug. I hate this for Cade.” She watched as her mother parked in plain view just before the road crossed the train tracks. “Turn left. We’ll go down the road a bit and park. I don’t want her to see your car.”

He turned left, then slowed near where she’d been parked the previous night.

“Yeah, this is good,” she said as he parked among the trees.

“We should give her a few minutes to get ahead of us, or she’ll hear us behind her.”

“Right, but I can’t sit here.” She opened her door and headed toward the crossing.

Joe came up beside her and reached for her hand.

“I’m getting used to this,” she whispered, raising their hands. “Does that make you nervous?”

“Why should it? I like holding your hand. I want to do it more often.”

She stopped at the crossing and stared down the tracks. She didn’t see her mother. She must be moving fast. “When we find his body, you’ll have your story.”

“I still have to write it. I can do it here as well as I can in Dallas.”

“And then you’ll be gone.”

“Maybe...”

She gave him a quick sideways glance.

He swallowed, then locked his gaze with hers. “I was thinking...maybe I could work from here. I’m always traveling anyway. I’m sure Pat would let me work remotely.”

She tugged his hand and moved forward, her mind racing. “You mean, you want to live here? In Gurdon? No one moves to Gurdon on purpose unless they have family here.”

“I have friends here. And I’d like to spend more time with you. See where this goes.”

Warmth spread through her chest, and her heart thudded so loud she could hear it in her ears. “We could be your family. Hell, Mama’s already staked out the attic room as your study.”

Joy filled her heart even as dread dragged at her feet. They continued walking, letting the moonlight gleaming on the rails show them the way. They slowed their pace only when they reached the small bridges. Deeper and deeper into the woods, they went.

Then she heard a whirling, pulsating sound in the distance and voices just ahead of them...her mother’s and...*Cade*’s. “What the hell?”

Joe dropped her hand, and they both broke into a run.

A light hovered just about waist-high beyond Cade and her mother. The pulsing sound became a loud throb. As Sandy ran, the Light approached, growing bigger and bigger as it neared, the colors changing from a blue-rimmed white to a pale pulsating green.

Her mother bent toward Cade and gave him a hug, rocking side to side as the boy clung to her. Then her mother held Cade away and pointed toward Sandy and Joe, who were drawing closer. When Cade turned toward them, Amelia opened her arms wide. She smiled at Sandy, her expression radiant. Then she closed her arms in a hug, bent to the side to pick up her case, and stepped backward.

The light flared all around her so brightly that Sandy had to hold up her

hand before her eyes to shield them from the glare. A moment later, it winked out.

Sandy blinked, trying to peer into the darkness.

“Mom! Mom!” Cade called and ran toward her.

She swept him off his feet and held him against her chest, all the while staring at the spot where her mother had been...but was no more.

Crashing sounded in the woods beside them.

Joe pushed Sandy and Cade behind him as two figures staggered out of the woods.

“Did you see that?” Coy Nolan shouted. “Did you see?” He held up a camera. “I got it all!”

Loy wrapped his arms around Coy and began jumping up and down. “We’re gonna be rich!”

Sandy stood, her mind reeling. She couldn’t process what had just happened, but she knew her mother was gone—to the same place Bobby had disappeared.

Joe put his arms around Sandy and Cade and hugged them. “You’re going to be okay,” he said, his voice husky. Then he dropped his arms and turned to Coy and Loy, still slapping each other’s backs.

“What the hell are you doing out here?” Joe shouted, no doubt to be heard over the men’s celebration.

Coy and Loy let go of each other. Coy tucked his camera under his shirt, then climbed the berm to stand next to them, Loy on his heels.

“We been stakin’ out the tracks. We even built a camp in the woods so we’d know when someone came out here. We heard Cade there and Ms. Amelia talking, got our gear, and followed ’em. Thought for sure she was gonna take the boy with her.” His gaze went to Sandy. “We’d have stopped her if she hadn’t pushed him back, Sandy. Swear.”

Sandy gave a crisp nod.

“But we saw the Light coming, swingin’ like always, then moving faster

—I think it recognized your mama. Then it went big, like a beam of light from heaven. Look, I'll show you."

He pulled his camera from under his shirt, and they all huddled in a circle around him as he replayed the moment Sandy's mother had disappeared in a big, blinding light; only the camera moderated the flare so they could see her body slowly disappear in sparkling lights.

Coy glanced up. "Oh, man! That's the money shot."

"I'm sure my paper will pay you for the use of stills," Joe said.

Sandy punched his arm. "How can you be thinkin' about your story now?" Her heart was breaking, and he was already thinking about work.

Joe frowned at her. "You do know that the police are going to want answers. Not only is Bobby missing, but now your mother is, too. And I doubt they're going to buy a story about her leaving with aliens—unless the story's so big it drowns out any other logical explanation."

"They don't have bodies."

"That's right. And we have five people who saw her disappear right in front of us."

Sandy felt her face crumple. "My mama's gone."

Cade pulled on her shirt. "She's comin' back. Said even though she won't be much older than she is now, I'll be older, so I better do good at school and study so I can become an astronaut. She said you and Joe should keep the house for her."

Sandy's gaze went to Joe, whose mouth was stretching into a wide smile.

"Wait a second," Coy said as he held up his camera with the flash on. He started to laugh, then turned the light to his face so everyone could see. His face was sunburned red, with the outline of a camera covering his eyes, nose, and part of his cheeks. He turned the light to Loy. Half of Loy's face was sunburned.

Coy began clicking pictures of each of their faces. Both Sandy and Joe's lower faces were burned where their hands hadn't shielded their skin.

“It’s just like those sightings I read about in your paper,” Coy said.

“Wait, my paper?” Joe said.

“Yeah, the *National Informer*.”

“I didn’t tell you I wrote—”

“You didn’t think we really believed that the *Scientific American* wanted to do a story about The Gurdon Light, did you? We may be rednecks, but we’re not stupid.”

Joe chuckled. “No, you’re not stupid at all. Want to hand me that camera? I’ll need shots of the men who captured the moment for posterity.”

Cade wiggled in her arms, and she bent down to put him back on his feet. “Now, how is it that you came out here with your grandma? I saw her leave. I thought you were sleepin’ in your bed.”

Cade’s eyes looked a little sad as he gazed up at her. “I knew she was goin’ when she packed that suitcase. I was afraid I’d miss her leavin’ ’cause you know I sleep pretty hard. So, I took my sleeping bag out to the car and laid it on the backseat. She was already by the tracks before I popped up and asked where she was goin’. Gave her quite a shock. She screamed.”

“Why on earth would she let you go with her down the tracks in the dark?”

“Because she knew you were following her. She said I’d be safe. That I should just wait for you two to come get me.” His mouth trembled. “I’m gonna miss her.”

She pulled him against her chest and ruffled his hair. “I will, too. But it’s not forever,” she said, praying her mother was right.

She glanced across at Joe, who was staring back at her, a small smile lifting the corners of his mouth. Maybe it was too soon. Hell, she knew it was, but would there ever be a moment like this again? A perfect, once-in-a-lifetime moment to take a chance nearly as momentous as her mother’s brave bid for freedom?

She drew a deep breath, then mouthed, *I love you*.

EPILOGUE



“HEY, Joe. Have you had any more alien sightings over there in Gurdon?”

“No, Pat. And we didn’t *see* any aliens the last time. Just a big green light. Plus, I told you it could be years before they’re back.”

“You ever figure out how to get yourself chipped so they’ll talk to you like they talked to Amelia?”

Joe snorted. “No, I haven’t,” he lied. Soon after that night, Cade had started dreaming about the aliens and swore he could sometimes hear his grandma talking to him. Joe wouldn’t be surprised if the boy shared the same connection, but he wasn’t going to mention it to Sandy because she was only now getting past the sadness from her mother’s disappearance.

It had taken months for the police and the prosecutor to leave them alone. They’d dug up the backyard, dug holes up and down the sides of the tracks, looking for bones, but came up with nothing.

All the while, the five of them repeated their unchanging stories. Sandy had even been compelled to take a lie detector test, but the technician had said the polygraph results were “inconclusive.” Sandy had told them they should keep the case open because sometime in the future, her mother would be back.

“Well, you know, if you ever get tired of writing bestselling books,” Pat said, “I have stories I need someone like you to follow. We might get lucky

again and find proof we aren't alone."

The door to his attic office creaked open, and Sandy tiptoed inside, carrying a steaming cup of coffee. She put it on the desk and slid onto Joe's lap. Then she took the phone from Joe. "Pat, how are you?"

"You know you're too pretty for that husband of yours."

"You're such a sweet talker. Have you managed to convince him to write for you again?"

"Nope. Said he's getting ready to start on a new book. His publisher doesn't care if it's fiction or real. Seein' as how *Little Green Dreams* is still on the bestsellers' list, I think he should go for it. He's got a knack for it." Pat sighed. "But if he ever gets bored..."

Sandy laughed. "I'll put a bug in his ear."

"Bye now."

Joe grimaced at the way Pat sang those last words to his wife. He was putty in her hands. So was he, come to think of it. Sandy placed his phone on the desk and glanced at his laptop screen. "You're still on page one."

"I'm waiting for inspiration."

She leaned back to glance at the hands of the analog clock on the wall. "We've got an hour before Cade's bus gets here..."

Joe grinned. "I like the way you think."

"Well, you might not find that perfect opening scene, but you won't mind so much, will you?"

They leaned together and shared a kiss.

Then Sandy locked her gaze with his. "Maybe you could begin the chapter talkin' about the fact your stepson went and got himself chipped."

Joe blinked. "You know it's not an actual chip, right?"

"And you're not denying that you know," she said, her eyes narrowing.

He shrugged. "I didn't want you worried."

"Worried about what? That he's gonna up and step into a light someday and disappear forever?"

“He said it will be years. He seems content to wait.”

“Makes me feel like I’m missing out on something. I’ve seen him standin’ in the yard, starin’ up at the sky—talkin’ to Mama.”

“Do you wish you shared that connection?”

She was still for a moment and then nodded.

“Me, too,” he admitted.

“What are we gonna do about it?”

“Want to take a walk along the tracks?”

She wrinkled her nose. “I’ve done it a dozen times in my life and never felt it.”

“You’ve never believed before.”

Her gaze moved to the view of the yard and the woods beyond. “I’ve never been this happy in my life. My mama’s gone, but I don’t feel as though I have to let go. She’s still out there. Somewhere. And I have this new life with you.”

“It’s not so new. You still have Cade to take care of, and you haven’t given up your job at the diner.”

“The diner’s been a lot of fun. Lots of tourists. All of them want pictures with me—the daughter of the woman the aliens took. And it really gets nuts when Coy and Loy come in.”

“They still hold storytelling hours there where they brag about their exploits?”

“It sells their T-shirts. Alien Invasion, Gurdon, is booming since they opened the store last fall.”

Joe chuckled. “Coy said they swing both ways now. They sell the alien T-shirts alongside their EVP ghost detectors.”

“And their train track tours are booked through Halloween.” She waggled her eyebrows. “Your book’s still in their front window.”

“They get a royalty for every book sold, seeing as how their photos are featured inside.” He kissed the tip of her nose. “Life’s good, isn’t it?”

“And about to get better,” she whispered.

“Oh?”

“I’m hoping it’s a girl. I’ll call her Amelia, after Mama.”

Joe’s heart thudded, and he felt the backs of his eyes begin to burn. He cleared his throat. “Amelia sounds perfect, but what if we have a boy?”

“Let’s wait and see.” She pushed off his lap and then held out her hand. “Fifty minutes to go…”

Joe let her lead him down the attic stairs to the landing outside their bedroom. That feeling of expectation and hope that he’d had ever since that night still lingered. Something was going to happen. Maybe soon, maybe in years to come. But he’d be here, waiting.

ON SUNDAY, Joe and Sandy drove Miss Oralia to the cemetery. She’d mentioned how she missed having company on her visits with George. Amelia’s absence made her feel lonelier.

“I don’t expect you to talk to him like Amelia did. I packed some hot chocolate in a thermos,” she said, patting the basket she’d packed. “There’s a bench nearby, so you can drink your cocoa while I change out his flowers.”

“You take your time, Miss Oralia,” Joe said. “It’s a nice day. We’re happy to accompany you any time you want.”

“You’ve both been such good neighbors,” she said.

Joe had taken over the chore of cutting her lawn, and he was teaching Cade how to operate the mower so he could take over at some point. They shared a meal at either Miss Oralia’s or their house at least once a week. It was part of the rhythm of their lives now.

He parked outside the small cemetery and then carried Miss Oralia’s basket for her, setting it beside the grave of Georgie Theriot. Miss Oralia removed the fresh flowers she’d brought, then pulled out the thermos and two paper cups to hand to him and Sandy.

Sandy sighed beside him when they were seated a dozen or so feet away. “It’s lovely, isn’t it?”

“What?” he said, putting his arm around her shoulders and rubbing her upper arm.

“Having a love like that.”

“We have a love like that, Sandy,” he said.

She turned toward him and smiled. “I’d wait for you.”

“You’d bring me flowers?”

“And I’d bring a copy of the *National Informer* to read the entertaining stories.”

“I like the thought of that.”

She squeezed his knee. “Won’t ever happen, though. I’m not letting you leave before me.”

He chuckled and looked over at Miss Oralia, kneeling on her blanket. Only now, there was a young man dressed in jeans, the sleeves of his white T-shirt rolled up on his biceps, kneeling beside her. Joe’s breath caught, and the hairs on his arms lifted.

“Do you see him?” he whispered to Sandy. From the corner of his eye, he watched her head turn toward Miss Oralia.

“Who?”

“Was George ginger-haired?”

“I do believe so.”

The young man looked over his shoulder at Joe and smiled.

Joe kept his gaze on George and slowly stood. “I’ll be right back, sweetheart.”

“You go say hi,” she said softly.

As he approached, Miss Oralia glanced back. Tears gleamed in her pale blue eyes.

“Miss Oralia,” Joe said, “will you introduce me?”

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Hot SEAL, Decoy Bride

Begging For It

Hot Blooded

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ABOUT DELILAH DEVLIN

Delilah Devlin is a *New York Times* and *USA TODAY* bestselling author with a reputation for writing deliciously edgy stories with complex characters. She has published over two hundred stories in multiple genres and lengths, and she has been published by Atria/Strebor, Avon, Berkley, Black Lace, Cleis Press, Ellora's Cave, Entangled, Grand Central, Harlequin Spice, HarperCollins: Mischief, Kensington, Mountlake Romance, Running Press, and Samhain Publishing.

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