

sweep up this mess.”

She returned with a broom and an old pair of house shoes that had been inside the door. “Put these on,” she shouted over the sirens. A truck turned into the driveway. From its dashboard, red and blue flashed like strobe lights in disco fashion across the white siding of the house. The sirens stopped and an officer exited the truck. He aimed a flashlight at the porch.

“Is everything OK, Miss Thompson?”

Jackson? Please, please don't let it be Jackson. “Fine. She’s fine,” Libby answered. If she’d known he was going to show up, she’d have taken time to dress. Or maybe stayed at home. What was the sheriff doing on duty at two a.m.?

There was a long pause. “Libby? Is that you?”

She took a deep breath. “Yes. I came up to check on Maddie. Are you just going to stand out there in the shadows?”

He took a few steps forward. The blinking Christmas lights decorating Maddie’s porch reflected off the handgun he carried. He holstered the pistol and stepped onto the porch.

In the faint glow he still looked much the same. His lanky frame had filled out by a few pounds, and his dark hair was just as wavy as ever, with a few strands standing up on top. He’d wasted enough money on hairspray when he was a teenager. Maybe he’d finally let his hair go its natural way.

“Did somebody try to break into your house, Miss Thompson?” His eyes were trained on the broken glass that Libby had begun to sweep into a pile.

“I shot at ‘em before they had a chance, Jack. It was looking in my window when I got up to get a

drink.”

“It? Did you see what he...or she looked like?”

“Sure did. You’d better get your police writing pad out and write this down. In fact, we might as well go in and sit down at the table.”

Libby followed Maddie as Jackson came close behind. She hastily ran her fingers through the back of her hair. No doubt it was smashed flat from her pillow. Suddenly, combing her hair seemed more important than it had fifteen minutes ago.

“He was big enough to see in my kitchen window. It couldn’t have been kids.”

Jackson smiled at the tiny eighty-nine-year-old woman. “Miss Thompson, a lot of people, even kids, could stand on your porch and see in your window.”

A deep crimson color crept into the elderly woman’s cheeks. “What kinda kids have huge eyes with glowing circles around them and two long green antennae that glow in the dark? You tell me that, Jackson Carter!”

He cleared his throat and shifted his weight in the chair. “Well...ma’am...”

Maddie narrowed her eyes. “You don’t believe me, do you? You don’t believe I really saw such a creature!” She turned to Libby. “You believe me, don’t you?”

Libby self-consciously pulled her coat closed over her flannel pajama top and turned her gaze to the broken pane of the kitchen window.

Tiny shards of sharp, shimmering splinters dusted the kitchen countertop and sparkled in the old cast iron

sink. A sprinkling glittered the floor as well. A couple of red Christmas balls from the little artificial tree on the counter had also been casualties. She'd have to make sure and clean all of that up before she went home.

Libby stole a quick glance at the sheriff, and then faced her neighbor. "I know you saw something...or someone...looking in your window. It's just that you'd been asleep and sometimes..."

"So you're taking his side, huh?" Maddie looked at Jackson and pointed a tiny, bony finger at him. "I believe it from you, all right. Ever since you painted all your Valentine hearts white when you were ten years old, I knew you didn't have a bone of imagination in your body."

"Now ma'am, I didn't say—"

"And you, Libby! I've known you since you were knee-high to my biggest settin' hen. I never thought you'd turn on me!"

Libby chewed the inside of her cheek. "I didn't say I thought you made it up. I just—"

"Well you might as well have."

The words stung Libby's heart. Maddie was a sweet neighbor and a good friend. The fact that she was eighty-nine and a little bit deaf and blind was factoring in to her assessment of the situation. No doubt it was influencing Jackson's, too.

"Well, you both might as well go on home. And don't bother with any report. I don't want everybody down at the Sheriff's office laughing at me. But if it shows up again, I'm gonna get him." She picked up the shotgun she'd leaned against the wall of the house.

"I'll have to make the report, ma'am. It's policy."

"Humph! Guess you'll do what you gotta do."

Jackson taped a piece of cardboard over the shattered pane, while Libby swept up the glass in the kitchen. Moments later Maddie locked the door behind them as they stepped on the porch. Libby winced when the door slammed extra hard.

She pulled the key from her jacket pocket, and Jackson followed her to the truck. "Do you think she's OK?" he asked.

She laughed. "If she's not, I dare you to do something about it. She's probably the most independent person in the county. I know I've only been back from Denver a few months now, but she's just like she always was. It's been twenty years since she was my fourth grade teacher, but she can still put fear in my heart when she clears her throat a certain way."

Jackson grinned, his perfect teeth flashing white in the dim light. "Yeah. And that little beady-eyed stare she has. I always wanted to crawl under my desk when she looked at me like that." His gaze went back to the front door of the house. "Still. I can't help but worry about her. She's always been pretty sensible."

Libby opened the door of the rusty Ford, feeling it was time to get out of the company of Jackson Carter. Her heart was starting to remember things she'd put behind her. Stirring up emotions she'd vowed to lock away for good after things fell apart. "I'll check on her the first thing in the morning." She glanced at her watch. "Which is about five hours away."

He cleared his throat and put his hand on the truck door. "Libby, I just want to say how sorry I was to hear about your husband. I've been meaning to stop by and see you. To tell you....but things just keep getting in the way. And well..."

She smiled tightly as she climbed in the truck. “I could say the same, Jackson. Your office is right there in town, and I haven’t stopped by to say hello.” She swung the door closed and rolled down the window. “I saw you in the back of the church Sunday night, and I was going to talk to you after service, but you were already gone.”

This conversation was lasting way too long, she decided. Pleasant chitchat wasn’t exactly comfortable after the past.

He reached into his shirt pocket. “Yeah. I rarely make it through a whole service without some emergency coming up. If you don’t mind, would you give me a call after you see Miss Thompson tomorrow? I’d appreciate it. I’ll be in the office by two.”

“Sure.” She took the card he held out to her. Their fingers brushed, and she felt that familiar ache she hadn’t encountered since high school. She bit down hard on her lip to squelch the response. The Libby and Jackson fairytale lived only in the past, like a story read one too many times.

Jackson had slammed the cover shut. Part of her had never forgiven him for breaking her heart.

She tucked the card into her jacket pocket. “I may stay with her for a while in the morning—if she’ll let me. I’ll give you a call when I get back home.”

He nodded and waved as she backed out of the driveway.

Libby turned the lights to bright and smacked the gear shift. Pain shot through her hand, and she winced. He was nothing but a friend from the past, a little heartache long over. Puppy love. That’s what grandma had called it. So what was wrong with her? Lack of sleep? A twinge in her heart whispered something else.

But she had no intention of listening.

His dark hair and smoky eyes flashed across her memory. For years, she tried to push him from her thoughts, not that it had worked until she met Ben. Turning into her driveway, she reminded herself of all the reasons to keep things the way they were now, without poking around in the past. She was finally getting back all she had lost. She was finally starting to feel like a living being again. Jackson Carter would do nothing but complicate her life, and she wasn't going to let that happen.

Libby unlocked the front door of the farmhouse and stepped inside. The Christmas tree lit at the flip of a switch, instantly transforming the room with its blinking lights in red, gold, and green and its old-fashioned ornaments. She touched a button and the peaceful notes of "Away in a Manger" filled the silence. Calm seeped through the tension that had lingered after Jackson's appearance. The scent of peppermint and pine wafted through the air and made her stomach rumble.

She sighed. Chasing after aliens and trying to forget old boyfriends seemed to be the perfect recipe for hunger. Nothing that a cup of tea and some cinnamon toast wouldn't cure, at least temporarily.

She put the kettle on the stove and a couple of slices of bread in the oven. A slight breeze from the ceiling fan blew softly across the lace curtains hanging on the window over the sink. She pulled the shade down behind them. No little green men with antennae were going to look in her kitchen.

She took a cup from the shelf and deposited a tea bag in it. Pouring the water into the cup, her mind wandered back to the last hour. What, exactly, had Maddie seen?

Despite the sunshine, the morning air was cold and brisk. Perfect for a walk. Libby hugged her jacket against the breeze and quickened her step. From a distance, she could see Paula Felton's car parked in the driveway. Paula came two days a week to help Maddie with the house and take her shopping.

Libby tapped on the door frame and waited. A moment later, a tall, middle-aged woman with graying hair opened the door. The red cotton apron she wore over her yellow shirt and blue jeans was marked with water. A smile lit her face. "Libby Johnson! Maddie told me you were back and living down at your grandparents' place. Come in and have some coffee."

Libby stepped inside and pulled the screen door shut behind her. "Hi Mrs. Felton. How's Maddie this morning?"

The woman turned and motioned for her to follow. "I sent her back to bed. She's tired after all the excitement last night. You were here after it happened, weren't you?"

In the kitchen, Libby took a seat at the green Formica-topped table. "Yes. I heard the shots and came up to check on her." Her eyes drifted to the window. The cardboard Jackson had taped over the top half of the window was now reinforced from the inside by a layer of duct tape.

Mrs. Felton handed a mug of dark liquid to Libby

and sat across the table. "I suppose she's no worse for the wear, poor old dear. I called her niece earlier, and I've already unloaded that shotgun and put it in the car where she can't get to it anymore. We can't take a chance of her hurting someone just because she's starting to get a little senile. I think this incident has finally sealed the decision her niece has been struggling with. She really needs to be moved to a care facility."

Libby scorched her throat as she swallowed the hot coffee and coughed, wiping her mouth with a napkin before she spoke. "Mrs. Felton, Maddie may be a lot of things, but she's not senile. You spend enough time with her to know that. And excuse me for being rude, but the last place that she belongs is a nursing home."

Mrs. Felton's eyebrows arched. "Her niece believes she's showing signs of Alzheimer's, and I'm sure any doctor or judge who reads the police report will agree. You have to admit seeing little green men isn't exactly the norm."

Libby curved her lips into a smile and unclenched her jaw. It was hard to force muscles against their will, but Grandma always said you could get more butterflies with sugar water than with buttermilk. "I don't know what happened here last night, but I know Maddie saw something. You believe that, don't you?"

The woman shrugged. "Maybe. Or else she was dreaming. She could have killed someone shooting out the window like that."

Libby sighed. "Mrs. Felton, Maddie's loved by a lot of people around here. Having to leave her home will break her heart."

"I'm sorry, but that decision is for her niece to

make." She cleared her throat. "I heard about your husband's plane crash. I'm sorry. I was glad that it was ruled an accident."

Libby widened her eyes in surprise. "It was never considered anything else."

Mrs. Felton's face flushed. "Well...of course not. But you know how people talk."

Libby's jaw set. "Yes. Unfortunately, I do."

"Anyway, I'm glad you were able to come back here. And don't pay any mind to those nasty rumors."

Mrs. Felton went to the coffeemaker and brought the pot to the table. "More?"

Libby shook her head and stood. "I'd better be getting home. Please tell Maddie I came by."

"Of course. And I guess that you should know Maddie's niece has an appointment with the nursing home director this Friday."

Libby blanched. "But that's the day before Christmas Eve. How can she do this to her?"

"She's just doing what's best."

At home, Libby stomped in the door and threw her jacket on the sofa. Zoe, her orange striped cat pounced on the wooly lining and began kneading a cozy nest for herself.

Libby sighed and sat down, coaxing the feline from the fabric folds and into her lap, where the cat snuggled and began to purr. Libby hugged the cat tighter and let go of the tears that burned her eyelids. "I'm telling you, Zoe, that niece of Maddie's is making a terrible mistake. Poor Maddie. This will break her heart." The ball of fur purred in agreement.

Wiping away her tears, she sat up straight and stroked the ears of the upturned orange head, smiling into its trusting golden eyes. "I'm not going to let her

do it, Zoe." Libby breathed. "I don't know how I'm going to stop her, but I will. And I've got until Christmas Eve."

Jackson's modest office was lit by a bare bulb that cast shadows across the room.

The dingy gold and green wallpaper was water stained and hung in several curled strands.

Libby's fingers itched to rip the ragged coils from the wall. But what if someone came in and caught her at it?

The only window was located behind an old desk stacked with papers, a laptop computer, several jars of pencils, and a small lighted Christmas tree. The glass panes were heavy with condensation and appeared to have last been washed before March of 1995, if one were to treat the calendar hanging over the bottom section as proof.

"Libby?"

She turned. A tall blonde woman in a county deputy uniform was standing in the doorway with two Styrofoam cups of steaming coffee.

"Dana Martin? I had no idea that you were still living here, much less working as a deputy."

"Well, it's Dana Lewis, now." She laughed. "I married Doug Lewis."

Libby wrapped her arms around Dana in a close hug, despite the cups of coffee she held. "You almost caught me committing a crime," she admitted, taking one of the coffees and testing its contents with a sip.

Dana laughed and leaned against the desk. "What are you talking about?"

Libby nodded towards the wall. "I've been resisting pulling off those strands."

Dana rolled her eyes. "That would hardly be a crime. More an act of mercy. I'm not sure how Jack stands it. Besides, aren't you some sort of interior decorator?"

Libby nodded and took another sip. "I was a consultant for an interior design company in Denver for three years. Now, I have a website and do the same job online. It works pretty well and leaves me a lot of free time to pursue other things. Like the chance to be on the Christmas parade committee this year. Three more days before we see how well the planning went. You're coming, aren't you?"

"Are you kidding? Everyone is. And to the party afterwards, of course." Dana's smile faded. "Hey, I'm sorry about your husband. I didn't know about it when it happened or I would have sent you a note. Are you doing OK?"

Libby shrugged and nodded. "Thank you. It took a while, but I've adjusted." Her life with Ben wasn't a subject she wanted to discuss. "So, do you have children?" Another painful subject. Ben hadn't objected to children until after they were married.

Dana's eyes lit up. "Two boys. They're four and six. I have pictures on my desk. Stop by when you leave."

Libby looked at her watch. "That meeting with the mayor must be going overtime. I guess I could just leave a message for him. Nothing too important." It would make a perfect excuse to escape before she encountered Jackson face to face again.

Dana put her coffee on the desk. "I heard about the excitement last night."

Libby took a blank piece of paper and a pen from the desk. "That's really what I'm here about. I went to see Maddie this morning, but she was napping. Mrs. Felton was there and said she was OK. Jackson just wanted me to let him know how she was doing."

A smile tugged at Dana's face. "He does have a phone, you know. He could have called her."

Libby's eyes narrowed as she looked up. "Don't start any rumors, or I'll remember where they came from," she warned, half-teasing, half-serious.

Dana shrugged and laughed. "My lips are sealed. But you gotta know that people are already talking, now you're both back in town."

Libby swallowed hard and folded the note. Was that the real reason he hadn't been out to see her?

"I hear they've already been talking. And not about me and Jackson," she said. The bitterness in her tone hinted at the pain in a way words couldn't express.

Her friend's smile vanished. "Nobody that knows you puts much stock in those kind of lies, Libby. It's just an easy way for them to have someone to talk about. I've heard Jack cut off a conversation about that very subject."

Libby stood straighter and put the note on a stack of folders. "Really?"

Dana nodded. "I'm sure it brings back some old feelings for him. I mean, after his dad was the main suspect in that bank robbery years ago, he knows what it's like to live with nasty gossip."

Libby took a last sip from her cup. "It's such a shame that his father died with suspicion still hanging over him. I can't believe there hasn't been any progress in the case. Somebody has been sitting on that money

for a long time.”

Dana stacked the cups and tossed them in the trash can. “Some cases never get solved. But it would be nice for Jack if this one did. He’s a good sheriff. And folks were sure glad to see him come back after all these years. You know how much everyone here thinks of him. That touchdown in the Coyote-Burrville game is still legend around here. Probably comes up at least once a week down at the Coyote Café.”

Libby smiled. “Everyone at that game will always remember that play. He really put us on the map that night.”

Dana sighed. “He and his mom left town so quickly after his dad died. Not that anyone blames them. I wouldn’t have stayed, either. Who could live with all those guarded looks from people?”

Libby took her purse from the chair and shoved back the memories. Jackson had broken her heart when he’d moved with barely a word. A couple of phone calls and three letters later, everything was over between them.

“Tell him I dropped by, and that I left Maddie’s number on the note.” Jackson was the sheriff—he could find out about Maddie easily without her.

As she moved to the doorway, she squeezed Dana’s arm affectionately. “Thank you,” Libby said. “For not listening to rumors.” She forced a pleasant smile to her face. “Now, let’s go look at those pictures before I leave.”

Jed’s Grocery appeared to be the last stop of the day for working moms. Libby grabbed a basket and