

DESERT GUARDIAN

By Karen Duvall

Chapter One

What a perfect night for a kidnapping.

The dry desert air felt warmer than usual for early spring, even for California, and a moonless sky offered Sam Reed the ideal cover of darkness. He peered through his binoculars at the row of trailers rimming the camp of the Star Mother cult. The camper in the middle, a dim yellow light glowing from a tiny window, held his soon-to-be kidnapes. He recognized the camper even in the dark. It was the same one he had stayed in with his mother twenty years ago.

“Well, Cody old boy,” he whispered to the scruffy coyote that stood at his side. “You ready to play?”

The lanky canine, no longer the starving pup Sam had rescued from the side of the road two years ago, appeared to grin, his wide pink tongue lolling from a panting mouth.

Sam nodded. “Me, too. It’s showtime.”

He stepped out from behind a mesquite tree and reached inside the black Jeep Wrangler for his flashlight. He gestured toward the uniformed dummy sitting in the front seat. “Stay here and guard our phony sheriff,” he told Cody before setting off.

Crouching low, Sam stealthily made his way toward the line of camper trailers, his suede hiking boots kicking up plumes of sand, his black jeans and leather jacket blending with the night.

He peered into the darkness at a ragged array of army surplus tents and weather-beaten shelters from the cult’s carnival days. Utility trailers made of splintered wood and peeling paint dotted the campsite.

When he spotted the tall black tent that stood majestically at the center of camp, dread gathered like carnivorous locusts to chew through the pit of his stomach. The dark side of his soul longed to grab what was inside and make her pay for all the suffering she’d caused him and countless others. The woman who lived there had tried years ago to mold him into something like herself. It hadn’t worked. And in the process, she had taken from him the only family he had.

But payback would have to wait. He’d never have come here at all if he hadn’t been hired to take Kelly Bancroft and her brother away from this circus of sadists.

Sam stopped in back of the wide metal box with bald wheels, its ancient aluminum sides scarred from years of use. He took a quick look around to make sure none of the cult’s sentries had snuck out of their holes to ambush him. But all was quiet in the ramshackle camp, the hive of cult devotees bedded down for the night. He just hoped the two people he’d come to rescue would be as eager to leave as he was to get the hell out of there.

Resting his ear against the camper’s side, Sam listened for movement. Nothing. They must be asleep. He crawled beneath the trailer, his small flashlight clamped between his teeth as he searched for the trapdoor that would get him inside through the floor. Once he found it, he hesitated with his hand on the lever. He was assaulted by sudden memories of how this portal had been used in years past.

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Star Mother's sentries would sneak up on unsuspecting guests who were promised sanctuary in a peaceful community that guaranteed eternal life beyond the stars. The cult was similar to Heaven's Gate in principal, but not in practice. After a few days of artificial kindness and false compassion, the women were raped, the children were separated from their parents, and the men were beaten...all in the name of Star Mother. The bitch. Heaven's Gate was a nursery rhyme compared to the horror novel epitomized by Star Mother.

He gritted his teeth against an onslaught of emotion, biting down so hard he heard the crunch of enamel on enamel. Must remain focused. The people inside needed his help, not his rage.

With a careful twist of the lever, he pushed up on the trapdoor and climbed into the darkness within. According to the man who had hired him for this covert intervention, his daughter Kelly was only visiting the cult for a couple of days. His son Jake had been a full-fledged member for well over a year. Kelly's plan was to cajole her brother into leaving the cult, but her father feared she was in over her head. He was right. Sam hoped he'd arrived in time to prevent any physical or psychological damage to either of them.

He knew the trailer's layout like the back of his hand and automatically veered toward the two bunks in back. One was empty. The other held the form of a woman who turned in her sleep as if reacting to his presence, though he knew he'd been silent as a cat.

The woman's eyes were closed, but her eyelids fluttered as if she were dreaming. The room was dimly lit by a nightlight, enabling Sam to see the sensuous curves of her body beneath the blanket. He couldn't help wondering what she wore under the sheets. Maybe a skimpy nightgown. Or perhaps she slept in the buff.

She jerked and her eyes flew open. He swiftly knelt beside her to place one hand over her mouth before she could scream.

"Be still, Miss Bancroft," Sam said, glancing behind him to make sure no sentries had come up through the floor. "Your father sent me. I'm to bring you and your brother home."

Her startled blue eyes widened, unconvinced.

"Don't believe me?" he said, and leaned in closer, his voice low. "Your father's name is Frank Bancroft and he owns a small tourist gift shop in Phoenix, Arizona. You're Kelly Bancroft, twenty-five years old, a physical education teacher at Piedmont High in Phoenix, and you coach girls' track and field for the local community center on the weekends. How am I doing so far?"

She scowled, but nodded. He didn't dare risk taking his hand away. If she screamed, every sentry in camp would come running and then they'd be totally screwed.

"Your eighteen-year-old brother dropped out of high school a year ago to join Star Mother. You're here now because you want to talk him into leaving the cult, is that right?"

Still scowling, she nodded again, but her eyes were more intent. She might believe him now.

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“I know from experience how dangerous these people are, Miss Bancroft, and I’m afraid you won’t be talking anyone into anything here. The Star Mother cult plays for keeps, and the only way out is my way.” He nodded toward the open trap door. “Quietly, in the dark, and without anyone the wiser.” He narrowed his eyes. “If I take my hand away, can I trust you not to scream?”

Her eyes softened, no longer frightened, and she slowly closed her lids to show him she’d calmed down. He braced himself and lifted his hand from her mouth.

Kelly pushed herself up to a sitting position, tugging the thin blanket up to her chin. The short sleeves of a faded blue t-shirt covered her shoulders. So much for being naked.

Fear had melted from her expression like ice in an oven, her eyes squinting in defiance. Sam hadn’t expected Frank’s daughter to be beautiful, especially since her buck-toothed, gray-haired old man was no prize. Her chestnut hair cascaded in thick waves to her shoulders, her tanned face emphasizing the whites of her eyes. The irises were vibrant blue and seemed to glow with annoyance as she continued to stare without blinking.

She licked her full lips with the tip of her tongue, and in a voice still froggy from sleep, she said, “Thanks for going to all this trouble, mister…”

“Reed. Sam Reed. But I’m better known as The Arrow around here.”

She snorted, unimpressed. “Thanks anyway, Mr. Arrow, or whatever your name is, but I don’t need your help. I know what I’m doing.”

Sure she did. “Mind if I ask what that is?”

“Yeah, I mind. It’s none of your business.” She peered at the empty bunk and sighed. “Besides, Jake’s not here. He’s away on some kind of recruiting mission, but he’ll be back tomorrow. And I’m not going anywhere without my brother.”

Ah. He was on a recruiting mission. How convenient. “Are you sure he’s where they say he is?”

She looked puzzled. “Why would they lie?”

“To keep you here. They’ve probably already started your conditioning.” Though she seemed fine, not frightened at all, and not nervous or edgy as he’d expect from someone the cult had gotten their hooks into. And physically, she appeared unmarked. She looked fit and healthy, and not too hard on the eyes, either. “How long have you been waiting for him?”

“I arrived day before yesterday. And by the way, no one’s conditioned me for anything.” She rolled her eyes, then cocked her head to one side. “What’s up with the arrow bit?”

Sam gave her only half a smile. “I’m known for arrowing in on my target and getting a bull’s eye every time.” *Almost* every time, he chided himself. He’d failed one time too many. And that one time would haunt him till the day he died.

“What kind of target do you arrow in on?” she asked, her words coated with sarcasm.

“I’m a cult intervention specialist. I rescue victims of mind control, people who can no longer think for themselves. After they’re rescued, I counsel them back to health.”

“Give me an example.”

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“You want my resume?”

She shrugged. “The Reader’s Digest condensed version will do.”

Though pressed for time, he could afford a few minutes to enhance his credibility. She wouldn’t cooperate if she didn’t trust him. He scratched his jaw, trying to recall an example that might come close to the Star Mother cult’s profile. “Okay. One example. Have you ever heard of the Children of God?”

She shook her head.

“River Phoenix was a member before he died. It’s a cult that’s now referred to as The Family of Love, or just The Family. They preach on the dangers of a de-Christianized society. Like Star Mother, their members are required to cut all family ties.”

Kelly tilted her head down and peered up at him through thick, dark lashes. “But Star Mother is happy to have me here.”

“I’m not finished,” he said. “The Family’s leader encourages female members to practice what he calls ‘flirty fishing,’ which means attracting men to conversion with the promise of sex. The media call these women ‘Hookers for Jesus.’”

“That’s sick.”

“I agree.” He crossed his arms and pinned her with a serious stare. “I helped one of their members escape a life of prostitution last year. As for Star Mother being happy you’re here, it’s because they want something from you.”

“They want me to be a hooker?”

“Maybe.” He remembered back to the time when a pretty teenage girl he knew had been used by Star Mother to help convince a new convert to give a charitable donation. Tax deductible, of course.

Kelly laughed, revealing deep dimples in both cheeks.

He failed to see the humor. “There’s nothing funny about innocent people getting robbed and lied to.”

She shook her head. “I meant no disrespect. What’s funny is that you’re here to save me when I don’t need saving. I have everything under control so go back and tell my father...”

The humor disappeared from her face and she stared solemnly at the floor.

“Tell your father what?”

She looked up, stabbing him with a glare of pure malice, though he doubted it was meant for him. She hadn’t known him long enough. “Tell him he’s too late.”

“Too late?”

“He had his chance to fix things with Jake, but he chose not to. He kicked his son out, disowned him. Disowned me, too, whether he meant to or not. I’ll never forgive him for giving Jake no choice but to find himself a new family, and because of me...” She broke off and swallowed, her eyes shining in the dim light of the tiny trailer room. “It’s my fault he’s here. I have to get him out.”

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“How is it your fault?” Sam recognized the anguish pulling at the corners of her mouth, the shadows beneath her eyes and worry lines etching her forehead. He knew guilt when he saw it. He stared it in the face every time he looked in a mirror.

She shrugged. “I don’t want to talk about it. Just go away.”

Forcing himself to ignore the sadness in her eyes, he stood and snatched an apple from a bowl of fruit on the counter. “Did you eat any of this?”

“Not yet.”

“Don’t. It’s probably laced with acid. Hallucinogens help them turn you to their way of thinking.”

“Boy, are you paranoid.” She crossed her arms but didn’t move from the narrow bunk, the blanket still covering her from the waist down. “I’m not brainwashed, and I have no intention of joining Star Mother, ever. I’m only here to talk my brother out of killing himself.”

This brought Sam up short. “He wants to kill himself?”

She nodded. “I’m not surprised my father left out that little detail. Jake sent me a goodbye note that to anyone else would sound like an innocent farewell letter, as if he’s going away on a trip. But I know better. All that nonsense about a spaceship was a sure giveaway.”

Sam’s blood rushed to his toes. Damn Star Mother, they’re really going to do it. His mother used to talk about it all the time, praising the day that Star Mother’s followers had waited for all their lives. Anston’s comet was closing in on Earth and the cluster of asteroids would soon become visible as it skimmed the edge of Earth’s atmosphere. The cult expected to catch a lift on the starship that rode the comet’s tail. Destination: Atria, Star Mother’s supposed home planet.

Sam knew it was crazy, a total fabrication born of a madwoman’s hysteria, but his mother had believed it with all her heart. What had always disturbed him was the method the cult would use to hitch their ride. They claimed the human body was too heavy for the ship to carry, meaning they’d have to kill themselves to free their Essence and travel as weightless passengers.

A familiar rage laced with grief lifted the hairs at the nape of his neck. Thanks to Star Mother’s onerous leader, and his own error in judgment, his mother hadn’t lived long enough to make the trip.

Kelly squinted at him. “What’s wrong with you? You’re white as a sheet.”

The explanation was too complicated to go into now. Rather than get bombarded with her questions, he took a second to erase all expression from his face. “Let’s get you out of here before they turn you into one of their mindless drones.”

“Excuse me?” She pushed her back stiffly against the camper wall. “I already told you I’m not going anywhere without my brother.”

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She and this brother of hers must be pretty tight, a foreign concept to Sam. He had no brothers, no cousins, no aunts or uncles, no family at all. And he didn't need any. "I'll come back for Jake later." As much as he'd like to free every follower in this demented cult, he wasn't Superman. A fresh wave of guilt flooded his chest, making it hard for him to breathe. He couldn't save everyone. He couldn't even save his own mother. "Get your things and let's go."

They glared at each other. Kelly's eyes widened, a brief look of fear swimming in their blue depths before her gaze turned steely again. The abrupt shift was like having a door shut in his face.

He didn't have time for this. Holding back a sigh of exasperation, he reached out to touch her arm. "Come on."

"Like hell," she said, and bolted down the narrow hallway toward the bathroom.

Sam lunged after her.

By the time she reached the doorway, he was on top of her. He grabbed her arms and clasped her hands behind her back. She heaved in a breath as if preparing to scream so he covered her mouth with his hand.

"Damn it!" he said through clenched teeth. "Don't scream. I'm here to help you, for Pete's sake." He shouldn't have grabbed her this way, but what other choice did he have? Now that he knew the cult planned to make good on its death wish, there wasn't time to wait for Kelly's cooperation. She would leave here now whether she liked it or not. Besides, if the entire squadron of sentries came after them, they wouldn't stand a chance of getting away. And Sam was painfully aware of the persuasive tactics the cult used to make people behave. Kelly might not survive with her sanity intact.

He dragged her down the short hallway, her powerful legs kicking as she squirmed in his arms, her feminine scent making his head swim. Damn, she was strong. Lucky for him he out-weighted her by a good hundred pounds. He was a foot taller as well, though she wasn't petite by any means.

He tugged her with him to the trap door and prayed he could count on his decoy, Sheriff Longbottoms, to help him pull this off.

"Listen to me," he said, one hand firmly clamped over her mouth as his other held both her wrists. This won him a hard kick to the shins and he almost lost his grip. "Damn it, you've gotta trust me! I know what these people are capable of and it's not something you want to find out for yourself."

She struggled and forced out a muffled scream.

"I'll make a deal with you," he said, desperate to get out of the trailer and on the road as far away from there as possible. "I'll let you help me get your brother out."

Kelly grew calm.

"So you'll cooperate?"

She nodded, then kicked his shin again, and he let her go.

Her face red with exertion, she glared up into his eyes. Her lovely chest that stretched the too-small T-shirt rose and fell with a couple of deep breaths before she opened her mouth to let out an ear-popping scream.

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“That’s it!” Sam grabbed her around the waist and hoisted her over his shoulder. He spotted her backpack on the floor and seized it as well.

“Bastard!” she yelled, pounding her fists against his back. “You’ve seen way too many old pirate movies. I’m a grown woman! Put me down. I’ll sue you for sexual harassment. My uncle is an attorney and he’ll have you thrown in jail! You’re going to regret ever coming here to get me--”

“I already do!” So much for a calm and quiet exit. He’d have to settle for fast.