



# Sally Smiles

## James Chambers

**H**E IGNORED THE SUN SINKING INTO DUSK AND followed the amber lights deeper into the woods. Darkness crept through the trees as he pushed on further and further from the bright, warm house he had left behind. For miles he had chased the glowing specks that floated always the same distance ahead of him. He had come so far now he had no choice but to pass the night in the unfamiliar wilderness and wait for morning to find his way back.

No matter.

A destination—though one he didn't know—awaited him. He wouldn't leave until he found Bonnie Bloch. He hoped the lights would lead him to her.

Despite the frigid air, beads of exertion-born sweat trickled from his bald head. He opened his coat and let in a touch of the chill. A feeble breeze wandered by, laden with hints of sound.

*Laughter? Music?* he thought. *Too faint to tell.*

The dancing lights beckoned him forward. Dry leaves and twigs crunched underfoot. Low branches scratched at his face and neck, his hands. The treacherous ground rose in sudden mounds and fell in shallow valleys, and his legs ached from traversing them. Still, he continued on with determination, certain that the worst this night held was yet to come, but not caring as long as he brought Bonnie home.

It tore him up not knowing where she was, whether or not she was hurt.

Reggie Dan Clay and Bonnie worked together at WHPL radio—Bonnie as receptionist and general assistant, Reggie as on-air engineer

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and partner to Madeline Night, host of *The Midnight Hour*. The show debunked occult frauds and documented true—often bizarre and dangerous—cases of the paranormal. Bonnie was an unofficial member of *The Midnight Hour* team, and it had always impressed Reggie how much in stride she took the frightening occurrences they investigated. She seemed to possess an innate understanding of the supernatural. It was part of what had caused Reggie's feelings for her to grow until they had recently emerged full-blown when he saw Bonnie injured—nearly fatally—by a demon. Reggie had stayed by her side then and done all he could for her. When Bonnie recovered, he told her how he felt, and she welcomed his affection.

Now, in the early, nervous stages of finding their way together, all Reggie wanted was Bonnie safe again, back from the cruel, spiteful things that had taken her. Bonnie's father lay at home, scarred by the evidence of their savagery: deep cuts gouged into his torso, his face pocked by bruises and punctures, his right leg broken from a fall off a high granite boulder.

*What might they do to Bonnie?* Reggie wondered.



The drive across the Blackburn Mountains from Hamilton to Gullyskill had taken a hair over four hours with good weather and light Saturday morning traffic. Reggie and Bonnie had started early after Bonnie's mother called and woke them in the middle of the night. Bonnie's father had been badly hurt, and though Bonnie tried to dissuade him, Reggie insisted on driving her home. Two hours later with a cup of roadside coffee churning in his belly it dawned on him that he was going to meet Bonnie's parents for the first time—under less than ideal circumstances. Almost ten years Bonnie's senior, he wondered what her folks would make of him.

"You know, Reg, my family's farm isn't exactly your typical country home," Bonnie told him as they rolled through the most desolate stretch of the mountain pass. "I took the job at WHPL because I've always been interested in the supernatural, right? Well, I got that from where I was raised."

"I always wondered why you seemed so comfortable around our investigations," said Reggie.

"The weird stuff isn't so bad when you grow up with it, but even for someone like you, who knows the supernatural better than most, there can still be surprises," Bonnie said. "The things you've seen and done working with Maddie—that's work. Right? I mean, it's different when it's part of your life, part of *us*."

"It's okay, Bonnie," said Reggie. "I can't imagine any skeletons in your closet worse than what we've already been through together."

"Maybe. But do you want that as a permanent part of your life? The skeletons have been in my closet since I was five, and believe me they've mucked things up