



## The Marfa Lights

I saw the Marfa Lights for the first time in the summer of 2002. I had traveled from my home in California to be with my sisters-in-law and mother-in-law for a weekend "girls only" retreat in Marfa, a small dusty town on the high plains of West Texas. One night we went to nearby Alpine ("Whiskey" in the book) for a fancy dinner. Remnants from a hot-air balloon festival that day dotted the skyline like colorful floating gum balls. Sometime after 10 P.M., on the way home, we decided to stop off at the Marfa Lights viewing point off Highway 90. There were several dozen cars already parked on the side of the road. In the semidarkness—starlight accompanied by the occasional headlights of someone leaving or coming—we could see people sitting on broad, rugged boulders, looking off toward the horizon. There were a lot of cowboy hats, authentic cowboys from a nearby rodeo mingling with local families and out-of-town gawkers. Right away, I felt a buzz and the hair on my arms rose. The lights were there that night.

They hovered just above the horizon, at quite a distance, much farther away than I'd imagined, looking the size of twinkling stars. There were three in the beginning, lined up horizontally in a row. They flickered, turning different colors, from white to pink and yellow. Then they seemed to crash together and multiply. Now there were five, twirling in the darkness. Every now and then, one would rise up straight in the sky like an ascending shooting star. They disappeared and reappeared as people oohed and ahed. It was magical, unlike anything I'd ever seen in my life. We watched for about twenty minutes, then got back in our cars, and rode home in the darkness, babbling about what we'd seen.

Legend has it that in the 1800s the lights were seen by pioneers on wagon trains and by a cattle rancher, who all thought they were Native American campfires. Some tales of the lights included mention of the ghost of Alsate, an Apache war chief, seen walking up the slope of a nearby mountain. The story of his ghost was linked with tales of the lights. Other legends told of an Apache warrior left in a cave to guard a gold treasure, and Indian princesses mourning the loss of their husbands. Even later, locals believed the lights were that of Pancho Villa and his men traveling across the mountains by torchlight.

Many explanations, scientific and unscientific, of the Marfa Lights have been offered. One theory says they are a mirage caused by the sharp temperature changes of warm and cold air of the high desert plateau. A similar theory contends that the quartz in the nearby mountains expands during the day and contracts at night, causing a voltage that eventually discharges in the air like ball lightning. Other ideas include phosphorescence, mica, uranium, swamp gas, static electricity, bat guano, and even UFOs. The most far-fetched theory contends that the lights are darting jack rabbits covered in phosphorescent dust. Naysayers have made a strong argument that the lights are merely a light show of car headlights reflected in the atmosphere.

When I came back from my trip to Marfa, my experience stayed with me. The lights haunted me. Not long after, when the idea for the story of Merilee Marvelous began to form, the beautiful and mysterious landscape of West Texas was an easy choice for the setting. I did more research on the history of the lights and came across an intriguing story. In the 1940s a rancher looking for stray cattle got caught in a sudden blizzard in the mountains. According to his daughter, he said that the Marfa Lights appeared to him and him to a cave. One of the lights stayed nearby all night, giving him warmth and saving his life. Years later, when the daughter asked her father what he thought the lights were, he said he thought they were merely "curious observers." I knew then that Merilee would encounter the lights just as the cattle rancher had. What a perfect way to end my story: Merilee, a curious observer of the world, saved by something she no longer thinks exists. Do the lights really exist? Did they save Merilee and Biswick? It all depends on whether you believe in magic. I do.