

OLIVIA HARDY RAY



**FOX
HOLLOW**

**BOOK ONE OF THE FOX HOLLOW
ROAD ABDUCTION SERIES**

FOX HOLLOW

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Olivia Hardy Ray

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God not only plays dice, he also sometimes throws the dice where they cannot be seen.

Steven Hawkin

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FOX HOLLOW

Fox Hollow Road Abduction Series

BOOK ONE

Olivia Hardy Ray



Chapter One

It was a beautiful night in early August. The moon was so full it appeared fat — as if it had swallowed every star in heaven and glowed purely from the pleasure of consumption. Nick Dowling gazed up at the sky through the windshield of his new Jeep Cherokee. His wife, Jenna, had just sent him out for a quart of milk and he was pleased to go, happy to be driving out under the stars on the back roads of New Kingston. Except on this particular night, there were no stars — just the moon, contently serene as it trailed his car like a wayward balloon.

Nick tapped his hands on the steering wheel and started singing along with the radio. It was an old song that came through, something about leaving a Chevy at the levy. The music filled the evening stillness and mingled with the cricket's song, and the hooting of the owls.

Nick was pleased, the lack of static was not expected. Clear reception was not always a reliable luxury in the Catskill Mountains of Upstate New York.

The road ahead was empty. His beams were high and his speed, slow. The last thing he needed was a startled deer to show up in his headlights. He was lost in his thoughts, thinking about the time off he'd finally been able to take. This was the first of several long weekends that he and Jenna had been able to steal since they'd bought their second home in the mountains. Finally, his saved vacation days provided a perfect opportunity to hit the highway and leave Manhattan's sweltering concrete behind.

The music changed abruptly and the scratchy sound it made reminded him of an old phonograph needle that had skipped over a record. A song from the early eighties came through the speakers, with only a slight static sound, like cackle. It was Billy Joel's *She's Got a Way About Her*, the first song Nick

had heard after finding himself waking up in a nasty looking hotel room so many years ago, dead broke. All he realized he owned back then was a pair of jeans and a rusty Gillette.

I don't know what it is, he sang out, just as his headlights illuminated a road on his left, a barely visible road — almost entirely hidden by trees.

“Looks familiar,” he said aloud, smiling, as if someone sat beside him that might have agreed.

“I know that road,” he whispered aloud. He hunched over the steering wheel. He slowed down for a better look. Something about the road was mysteriously beautiful, framed as it was by Pine trees that swayed ever so gently in the summer evening air. The impulse hit him like a spray of cold water, and he braked.

“Oh, what the hell,” he said as he backed the jeep up. This impulsive action was not a predictable character trait of Nick Dowling’s. But on this particular evening, before he could even think about having a second thought, he took a sharp left onto the road. Perhaps there was something about the moon that night, close enough to touch, a flirtation he could not refuse.

“Have I lost my mind?” He laughed, looking around, seeing nothing much of anything that warranted the fascination.

The road was narrow and dark, but he had just enough light from the moonlit sky to read the barely visible road sign: *Fox Hollow*.

Nick switched off the radio; he’d lost the clear station right after he’d made the turn, and the static was irritating. Slowly, he drove up the bumpy road. The night seemed wrapped in mesh, opaque and colorless. He accelerated his speed just a bit, attempting to see beyond his headlights, but there was nothing before him but the adumbration of trees; it seemed like hundreds of them standing tall against the sky, bending, and tipping their branches into the quiet swirl of the evening wind like visions between this world and the next.

The moon hovered at the end of his sightline like a big mysterious white ball, descending into the earth, as if being swallowed. But the edges of night were dull. Everything around him looked like a poorly developed print. Nick rubbed his eyes and watched as night’s illusionary mist played havoc with his imagination and shadow monsters came out of the darkness, as tall as giants.

Something flashed through Nick’s mind with voracious intensity. Was there magic on this road? All of a sudden, he had a memory, a childhood memory. It came out of nowhere: A boy fearing dragons in the night and dreaming of mythical sword fights in mystic forests with a moon as elusive as this one. Was he that boy? His memories of childhood didn’t exist; his early life was a void. Yet there it was: a vision of sword fighting with a friend so small and light— Sir Lancelot in dungarees with his mother’s pot for a shield.

Nick felt a sudden chill. Leaning in to switch off the air conditioning, a flash of light appeared on his hand, swiftly expanding, trapping his body in its

glow, a blaze of cold and paralyzing illumination. His body froze and he held his breath. In moments, the light was everywhere, consuming the darkness as if from a hundred headlights.

"What the hell is going on?" Nick came out of his stupor and looked around frantically. It was getting increasingly colder, as cold as the dead of winter in Upstate New York can get. He started to shiver. But this was August and the night air had been warm. What the hell was happening? He could feel his heart pounding; it felt as if he were sitting inside a freezer.

Apprehensively, Nick looked through one eye. The light was still there, ubiquitous, the brightness; blinding.

Fear settled on his chest as if he were in the line of unexpected gunfire. He closed his eyes again.

"I am victim to my own vivid imagination," he said, staring once again into the opaque night.

The lights suddenly disappeared, as if they'd been chewed and discarded by the darkness.

"Kids with flashlights, must be ... what else?" *But the cold? Strange weather condition? Well, maybe...in the mountains.*

Nick sat quietly, even patiently, until his fear passed, until it flowed out of his body, until his heart beat normally once again. When he felt calm enough, he stared back into the shadows and nervously surveyed the space around him.

He lowered his window halfway and made sure the lights were really gone. He was relieved to see that everything appeared normal in the evening's shadow and the air was warm on his skin. Once again, the moon bounced naturally in the sky, throwing a path of light before him, like a megalithic corridor inviting entry.

He accelerated slowly and drove forward. The moonlight faded back behind the trees, and the night became as dark as black ink. He nervously listened to the rocks and branches crunching beneath the wheels of his jeep and wondered if he'd lost the road and was driving further into the woods.

Nick couldn't see anything but his headlights, not even the trees. But then, sudden as lightning's flash, as if he'd willed it, the night was lit by a welcomed and sudden reappearance of moonlight.

"Where you been hiding?" he whispered.

He stopped the jeep. He needed a sense of direction. The moon was fuller than he had ever seen it, but there were no stars out to guide him, just some shadowy image in the sky that he couldn't quite make out.

What the hell am I doing in the middle of nowhere, playing tag with the goddamn moon? There was a threatening hush, a silence too barren to trust. The owls had ceased to hoot, and the crickets were far too silent.

Without warning, the stillness shattered into a million pieces by a sound that shook his body from inside out.

“Shit!” Nick cried, nearly leaping out of his skin. “What the hell was that?”

Like a drill in concrete, the sound was deafening. The darkness had been jarred by it, so intensely shrill it might have torn the sky in two, a sound so abruptly acuminous that it might have caused the moon to crack.

The intense lights vanished, disappeared as contiguously as a passing thought, back into the night. *Had he imagined all of it?* Nick brought his hands up to his face. They were shaking badly. *No, this was not imagination.* The suddenness of that awful sound had jostled him so badly that his heart beats were on overtime, and his favorite t-shirt was soaked in sweat.

He'd been on this road before. Of course he had; he'd seen the road in his nightmares. He dreamed he was here. And his dream had been a nightmare.

Right after Nick and his wife, Jenna, closed on their weekend getaway in New Kingston, their retreat from Manhattan's urgent and colossal perplexities, Nick's nightmares had accelerated. It was absurd to have them — monster nightmares belonged to children, not to men in their late forties. “I feel foolish to have so many of my dreams invaded by macabre caricatures,” he told Jenna.

But he'd always had disturbing dreams, dreams he'd kept to himself until he had no choice but to explain them to his wife. He did so, after a careful edit.

“An odd thing for a grown man to have — nightmares,” he'd said reluctantly.

“Not altogether unusual,” Jenna had responded as she listened to his tentative explanations. “Maybe something is triggering some old and unresolved issues you have with your mother ... or father.”

Nick scowled at that, wondering how he'd ever get out of seeing a shrink. It was absurd to think he needed one. Jenna insisted on blaming everything on his parents. But how could he blame anyone he didn't remember?

He accelerated over the stones and the broken branches of trees, hoping all the crap on the road wasn't scratching the paint off the jeep's body, or putting any frigging dents on his car. But he felt too uneasy to slow down and check out the damage. He just wanted to feel sane once more. This introduction to Fox Hollow had antagonized his sense of reality and had left him surprisingly disentangled from his perspective on who the hell he was or believed himself to be.

He looked up toward the sky. He felt as if he'd just driven in a circle, the shadowy cloud was still above him and it appeared to cover the entire sky.

He drove forward, afraid that if he didn't he'd wind up in a ditch — lost forever in the goddamn woods. His heart was getting a workout and his mouth felt like an old hot towel. He wanted nothing more at that moment than to reach civilization and grab a shot of whiskey.

“I've had enough of this amusing adventure,” he said, his eyes riveted ahead.

Suddenly he noticed lights, as if coming from a house. Thinking he might finally be off Fox Hollow and onto a road that would take him into town, he breathed a sigh of relief.

“Shit,” he said, as he got closer to the house. “Looks like a frigging dead-end.”

He slapped his hand on the steering wheel. He was frustrated and anxious. He decided to knock on the door and ask for directions. He stopped the jeep near the driveway. It was quiet, desolate. He took a deep breath and confronted his fear. “Get hold of yourself, man,” he said.

Nick stared back at the farmhouse. *It was familiar, which was not unusual, at every turn in upstate New York, there was a farmhouse.*

“A compelling sight,” he said.

The house was stately and white. Lace curtains moved with the wind, like the porch swing. He could hear the creak. The house stood against the night in shades of grey, like an old postcard photograph picked up at a flea market. Nick could see bicycles lying on the grass. A dog lifted his head from the porch and stared at him. Nick felt strangely nostalgic.

He'd assumed years ago that he'd been raised in Phoenicia, New York, because that's what it said on the hotel register when he checked out of the room he'd awoken in, with no memory at all of how he had gotten there. Phoenicia, New York, another small town not far from New Kingston, certainly in biking distance. Well, then, he must have been on a lot of country roads in his childhood, staring at houses just like this one. He never went to Phoenicia, though, it was too frightening to confront a past he couldn't recall, but he'd insisted on buying a second house in New Kingston after finding the town on a Google search for vacation homes. Had he subliminally chosen to be near Phoenicia?

He didn't have any answers, perhaps he never would. Perhaps he didn't want them. As he stared at the house, it drew him in, it engulfed him in some kind of black and white fantasy, like an old film he'd seen once, but there couldn't be a connection to this farmhouse, it hadn't been the town of New Kingston that was written on the hotel register, it had been the town of Phoenicia.

He stared at the house for several more minutes before the image faded, simply drifted off into the night, leaving behind a phantasmal mist. Nick drifted into the ebbing image, falling into a mindless stupor, as if inebriated, as if he'd just finished off a fifth of scotch.

“God,” he cried out. “What the hell is happening to me?”

He struggled to escape the blank plateau into which he had fallen, but he couldn't. It was as if his thoughts were being gripped by a distant hand. He suddenly had an image of the shadowy shape in the sky and felt as if he'd floated right up to it.

“Leave me alone!” he shouted.

His head fell sharply to his shoulder, an action that seemed to come from somewhere else, another person – another body.

“Stress can cause people to blank out,” Jena once told him.

“Yes, of course, that’s it – stress,” Nick whispered. He looked back at the house again. The noise returned, overbearingly loud – the drill into concrete ... deafening.

Quickly switching the radio back on to fight the noise, he thought about screaming out for help. The sound hovered above him, precariously close.

He turned the radio up louder. *Nothing but static – Damn.*

The noise continued ... threatening to use its power ... devour him. It was directly over his head, so very close. He was almost lifted by it, lifted up to someplace far, as far as space.

“This is madness,” he whispered. “This is impossible.”

He had spent his entire adulthood distracted by the ordinary pressures of survival. He had never considered himself particularly introspective, not much caring to delve into the remnants of feelings hidden beneath the debris of inconsequential information – feelings his wife insisted were vital links to his mental well-being. Nick never questioned his life after waking up in a Chelsea hotel with no past. He walked out into the city and survived. Surviving took up all his time, owned his thoughts. He didn’t need to know the rest, the forgotten past. The only choices he needed to make were the ones that he faced in his profession as a circulation vice president for a major New York newspaper. It took twenty years, but he finally had an executive’s salary. Clearly, he was a survivor.

He didn’t want to know his inner life at all. The dreams he’d had over the years had been too disturbing to probe – images of violent anger, blood everywhere he looked, murders he could not explain.

“My inner life is uneventful and average,” he’d told Jenna when they first met. “I can’t devote much time thinking about it.”

And then, years later, new torment, new dreams ... monsters haunted his sleep, metaphors for himself, he surmised.

No, Nick did not want to find his past or obsess on any uncomfortable emotions, especially not with his dreams, blood on his hands, a dead child at his feet ... a battered woman.

“Am I insane?” He looked out into the night and shook his head. “Am I?”

He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. He switched the radio back off and listened for the quiet stillness of night to return, soft and melodic. He listened until all he heard was the wind.

He stared back at the old Farmhouse and tears came to his eyes. He suddenly wanted to leap from the car and run to the front door, as if he belonged there, behind the majesty of its silent repose.

I’m home. Mom! I’m home, he wanted to shout.

His eyes blinked as the lights in the farmhouse flickered. He switched the

radio back on. He needed the music to ground him, but the static had returned with an irritating repetition. He tried to find a clear station. He was agitated. He wanted to get the hell out of there. He knew that by now the only general store in town would be closed and he'd have to deal with the supermarket for a lousy quart of milk. He hated the supermarket, big, cold place ... *so why then can't I get the hell off this damn road and make it to the God damn general store?*

"Shit," he said, switching off the radio altogether.

The lights from the house flickered again, as if an electrical storm was passing over, but the night was clear. Nick backed the jeep up, deciding he would leave the way he had come in ... no need to ask for directions. As his breathing returned to normal, he was grateful for its steady rhythm. He was thinking like his old self, making rational decisions. It had all been imagination, just imagination.

As Nick backed up the jeep, he noticed a man at the window of the old house peering through a torn shade.

"What the hell happened to the lace?" he whispered as he stared in awe at the tattered blind. He quickly thought of his wife, how the hell he'd ever explain any of this to her, the look in her large dark eyes as she gave him that half parted smile and suggested therapy.

He sat quietly. His eyes drifted back to the house. He looked quickly for the dog. All he saw was a tired old porch — empty.....no porch swing and no dog.

"Shadows playing tricks," he said.

The oblique shape in the sky expanded and lowered itself closer to the earth.

Books by Olivia Hardy Ray

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Annabel Horton, Lost Witch of Salem
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