

Wickedly funny eco-thriller dramatizing  
the deadly seriousness of global  
warming.

## **Sally St. Johns**

by Denise Heinze

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# Sally St. Johns

Denise Heinze



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ISBN: 978-1-63492-102-2

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

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BookLocker.com, Inc.  
2017

First Edition

# 1

I was in trouble. BIG trouble. And what does one do when faced with gut-wrenching threats to one's life and liberty? Easy. Call your mother, of course. Something I haven't really needed to do since third grade—me, a forty-three-year-old CEO on the verge of a highly anticipated, revolutionary breakthrough in global warming.

"You're where?" she screeched, my mother. I could see her squinting in the phone, one of those plastic off-white relics with a snarled cord attached. "Doing *what*?"

"I'm in jail." I tried to keep it as simple as possible.

She cackled, then coughed hard.

"It's true," I said.

She'd stopped hacking and was lighting up. Her cure. The hair of the dog. The woman'd been smoking since she was thirteen. She was seventy now, looked ninety-(one foot in the grave)-nine. But she'd seemed old before her years even in her wedding picture. Thin and brittle as a soda cracker. To all appearances, a flickering flame of a life that should have been snuffed out early. But it was an illusion. She'd gone on to bear ten kids, outlive her beefy husband, and run the dairy farm. In spite of arthritis and angina, she could still milk a cow by hand and wring a chicken's neck.

"Ah, come on now, Sal. I ain't got time for this. My Michael Jackson movie is about to come on."

"You've seen that, what, fifty times?"

"Gonna see it fifty-one. Now, what the hell you calling me for?"

Why that Motown soap opera held such a fascination for her was beyond me.

"I said, I'm in jail." This time, there was silence, except for the TV in the background blasting Judge Judy's verdict. My mother and Judge Judy, now? Soul mates.

"Hang on." She put the receiver down. She must have tried to record Judy. I ordered DVR for her a year ago. It's one of

the few things she'd let me buy her. She loved it, when she could work it. She must have screwed up again because I heard her mutter "damn Sam" then, "the hell with it," then to me, "Now, what?"

"Did you take your heart medicine?"

"What? Yeah. Every morning right before *Price is Right*. Don't pussyfoot around Sal. Spit it out."

"I've been arrested on charges—"

"You? Miss Star of the World?"

"The CIA thinks—"

"I KNEW it. I knew it, I knew it, I knew it. How many times—"

"Let me finish!" I already regretted making this call. She and I had been off-kilter since college. Why did I keep forgetting that? And how stupid to throw in the CIA. My mother believed every conspiracy theory that was ever made into a miniseries.

The guard stood nearby. She was busting out of her uniform in three places. The ragtag end of her ponytail poked out from underneath her cap. She smiled faintly at me. She had a mother too.

"Calm down. It's mistaken identity or something. I just wanted you to—"

"Gallivanting all over the place. Gettin' into stuff ya shouldn't. Where they got ya? That A-bo Goby place?"

"No, for heaven's sake. They closed that down." I shook my head and rolled my eyes at the guard, whose smile stretched across her face. Right then, she wasn't the law and I wasn't an ISIS operative. We were two gals dealing with our own special brand of domestic terrorism.

"Then where?" This time I heard the fear, a slight tremble in her voice just underneath the craggy surface. I preferred her anger to this.

"I'm being held in Ames, Iowa. I'm hoping I'll be out of here and cleared before anybody from the media gets a whiff of it. I don't even want my lawyers in on this yet."

“What’d ya do?” She was whispering now. I thought I could hear her shutting windows.

“NOTHING! I told you.” I was about ready to disconnect. I took a deep breath instead.

“It’s those wind tur-bines. That’s it, ain’t it? They’re sending off secret signals or something. Am I right? Huh?”

I was counting to ten.

“Mother. I need you to be quiet now and listen.” I used my best measured voice, the one that my former hookers, teammates, and current employees—all fifty of them worldwide—cowered at.

The only sound now was the high-pitched whine of the phone line. Probably being tapped. But I don’t care. I’m innocent. The last time I broke the law I was receiving payments on behalf of my black-laced employees.

“I am suspected of conspiring with terrorists to search out and destroy every alternative source of energy in the world.”

“Why’d you want to do that??”

“I’m *not* doing that! For Chrissakes, Mother!”

“Well, yeah, I know. What I mean is why would YOU, ya know, someone LIKE you, want to do that? You wouldn’t blow up a balloon.” She laughed a little, nervously, coughed once. “I’ll tell those bastards, too. Bust their chops. Where the hell is Ames, Iowa? I’ll be there.”

My mother, Wonder Woman. She meant it. Once, to defend my honor, she’d stormed off to the neighbor’s house two fields away with a pitchfork in one hand and me in the other. I was maybe five at the time and all arms and legs, a full half a body taller than my playmates, even the boys.

“It’s me. Marti. I need to talk,” she’d shouted, pounding on the Morgan’s front door with the pole end of the pitchfork. “Ya in there?”

Betsy Morgan, my only friend in three miles, peeped out from behind the curtains. Her eyes were as big as doughnuts. Which she loved to eat every chance she got.

“Mama?” I’d asked, wide-eyed myself. “She didn’t mean it.” I was so little at the time, but right then and there I wished I had never asked Mother what “freak of nature” meant. Betsy didn’t know either. She’d just repeated what her mother had said.

“Shush. Ain’t nobody going to talk like that about my girl. Sharon?” She shouted for Betsy’s mother. They’d gone to high school together, but no love was lost between them ever since Sharon had called mother a scag back in ninth grade. My mother could hold a grudge, now.

The door flew open.

“Mart? What in the world?” Sharon backed up, bumped into Betsy who was reaching for her pant leg. By the looks of it, Sharon and her daughter bonded over various pastries. Her thirty-year-old hair was dyed to match up loosely with Betsy’s yellow Buster Brown mop. I envied her a little for that. Betsy and her mother were always well-coiffed while Mother and I looked like a comb had not yet been invented. Our hair—hers black and mine a golden color—hung to our shoulders like gnarled tassels of corn. Mother cut all our hair, including my bangs, which always ended up on a steep slant.

I’d never seen my mother so mad before or since. She seemed to get madder the longer she stood there. Maybe because she also noticed the crisp lines of their haircuts and the sharp plaid blouses and blue jeans they wore so casually, clothes she could not afford to buy, unless she scored at the secondhand store.

“Your kid’s got a mouth on her.” She pointed the head of the pitchfork at Betsy. “I was raised you don’t say mean things to each other.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Sharon lied. There’s that moment of awareness that clicks in people’s eyes when they *do* suddenly realize what you’re talking about. That look says “Oh, shit.”

“Called my girl a ‘freak of nature.’”

“Did not!” Betsy whimpered. Actually, she was telling the truth. She’d said “reek of nature.” Sharon drew her in close.

“Now,” Marti turned the pitchfork towards Sharon. “I know that’s something a five year old wouldn’t come up with all on her own. Am I right?”

Sharon didn’t say a word. I watched a good sized blue-black beetle crawl across the porch. I hoped by focusing on it, all of this would just—poof!—go away.

“So, here’s the deal. You teach your daughter some damn manners and I won’t feel a need to take this here pitchfork to your heiny. Which, if I was as mean as a snake like you are and always have been, Sharon Morgan, I’d compare to something really ugly.”

I tore my eyes away from the beetle to mother, to see if she was going to do it, call Sharon what I had called Betsy after she called me a “reek of nature.” I thought, “Go on, Mom. Give it to her.”

Sharon crossed her arms, expecting it. There was a dead pause, the four of us like wooden figures in a dollhouse. Right then, Sharon seemed more afraid of the red meat insult than the pitchfork. Mom must have sensed it.

“Hmmph.” She drew the pitchfork back. “Whatcha got to say for yourself?”

“Betsy, apologize.” She yanked her front and center. Sharon was throwing little Betsy under the bus. The kid was shaking.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean nothin’. It’s just, she’s so—”

“Quit while you’re ahead, sister,” Mother said. “Now you.” She turned to me.

“Huh?”

“I said you.”

“But I—”

“But you nothin’. I know you ain’t no suffering saint in all a this. No way you walked away with your tail between your legs.” She bore down on me, her eyes like black buttons.

Well, sometimes I'd let the jabs and insults go. And that was getting to be less often, the older and taller and odder looking I got, and the more kids I was around, which made kindergarten a living hell. I learned to be cruel, just to chase it away.

"Sorry Betsy. I didn't mean to call you a Tub-a-l—"

"Hey, hey!" Mother pointed a bony finger at me.

"Or you and your mother the Blobbsey Twins—"

"Sally Joan St. Johns!" Mother glared at me like I was a five-legged frog. I shrugged my shoulders.

"That's ok." Betsy was ready to prostrate herself to make this crazy woman and her too-tall daughter go away.

Mother faced Sharon, who was pushing a thumb against her cheek, biting the inside of her mouth.

"If your kid ever again says anything that hateful to my daughter, I'll make sure sitting on your ass will hurt you the rest of your life." She stood eyeing Sharon for a full second. "Got it?"

"Yeah? What about her?" Sharon aimed her elbow at me.

"Don't have to worry about my kid. I'm the one dragged her over here in the first place, remember?" Mother and I marched off the porch. When we made it to the road, Sharon shouted at us.

"Can't protect her for the rest of her life, Marti. Can't go around threatenin' everybody who says an unkind thing about her."

Mother's shoulders clenched, but we kept walking.

"Why didn't you give it to her?" I asked, as we trooped home.

"It'd make me feel dirty. The kinda dirt you can't wash off."

I tried to imagine it in my five-year-old mind.

"Pigsty dirt?"

"Worse."

"Yeah," I'd said, ashamed.

"But ya know what?" She asked.

I looked up at her, waiting. She was using the pitchfork as a cane. She walked as if hunched against a non-existent gale wind.

“The Blobbsey Twins? That ain’t dirt.”

“It’s not?”

“Nope. That’s what the eggheads would call poetry.” She hee-heed. I didn’t know what she meant in words, but the laugh said it all.

“Eggs don’t have heads,” I said, giggling back.

She laughed a little harder and so did I. Then, like a trickle from a leak in a sodden ceiling, we burst open. Mother doubled over, wracked by noiseless spasms. She had tears in her eyes as if the hilarity ached. She’d gone far beyond my own sheer childish joy at belly-deep laughter. Hers was transcendent, and I could only watch and wonder.

I still have a mouth and I use it, but name-calling is chicken shit compared to my mother’s in-your-face approach to conflict resolution. I wish she were here now, weapon of rash destruction in hand, threatening to stick it to the Feds. But the years and the hard work and all the kids had worn her smooth. There were too many Sharons in the world for her to bitch slap and no more little ones to fight for.

“I said I’ll come. Just give me the word.”

I smiled to myself. I could hear her wheezing.

“Sally?” Her voice was weak, a little shaky.

“You stay put, Mother. I’ll be outta here in no time.”

“I’ll call my congressman!”

“It’s a congresswoman.” Had been for six years. “No. Don’t do that. Give me some time to straighten it out. Just sit tight—”

“It’s because of that Marzipan thing, ain’t it? Are you growin’ again? You’re so tall you stand out in a crowd, ya—”

“Marfan, Mother. Mar-fan Syndrome. How many times have I told you that?” Her memory was slipping. Probably why she kept watching that Jackson movie. She forgot whole parts

of it, which meant each and every viewing was almost like the first.

“Well, I know, but I’m gettin’ old.” She sniffed. “Sure wish I could do something. Did ya call your brothers and sisters?”

“That’s what you can do for me. Use that prepaid I gave you. Don’t do it on the land line.”

“In case the Feds are listening?”

“Let’s just be cautious.”

“I’ll call ‘em between commercials.”

“Great, mother. That would be a big help.” Save me nine phone calls and nine different reactions ranging from the histrionic to the catatonic. I didn’t need that right now. I didn’t know what I needed. I’d been in a hell of a lot of trouble in the past, but this? Maybe that’s why I called her. Maybe why we all call our mothers when life threatens to plow us under. Talking to her, I could be five-year-old Sal again with my little ol’ slip of a mother out front slaying the dragons for me.

## 2

“Your old lady, eh?” My jailer asked, after I hung up, surrendered my cell. She gave me that “I know what that’s like” look and shook her head.

“Oh, yeah,” I said. “Man. That was harder than telling her about the first time I had sex.”

“Huh. I can one-up that. How about her finding out ya don’t like boys?” Ms. Jailer sat on the edge of the table. She was ready to throw down some serious mother baggage.

“You got me there.” I hate to say, my mother’d take a terrorist daughter over a lesbian any day.

A face peered in the small meshed window of the door to the interrogation room. The guard shape-shifted from my new best friend back to Officer Mason. She pulled on the heavy metal door to let in the detective, who thought he’d won the lottery when he arrested me at the Dollar Exchange. I was there picking up some white shoelaces and a can of diet Mr. Pibb when Withers rushed in with a uniformed officer. I was sure he was gonna nab the two or three customers who, minutes before, were contemptuously shoplifting around me.

“Like, no way!” One reedy-thin teenager with a red goatee had spoken loud enough to startle me in the next isle. “Eight bucks? For a jar of fucking nuts? Shit. What kinda dollar store is this?” He stomped away, grabbed a pack of toothbrushes and jammed them in his back pocket. Good choice, I said to myself, after getting a peek at his chops.

An old lady, built like a Buddha with a smile just as serene, fitted her three grans with 99 cent flip-flops from a bin at the front of the store, then waddled the kids right past Withers and straight out the door.

“Amazing,” I’d said when Withers stopped inches from me, on Aisle 4. I thought he was going to ask me to be a witness. “Why steal from a dollar store to begin with? At least pick a ten-spot joint.” I laughed, he didn’t. I clutched my Mr. Pibb. “Then,” I stuttered a bit, not sure why this old guy wasn’t

chasing after the crooks, “they waltz out like they did the store a public service.”

“Are you Sally St. Johns?” He asked, but he knew.

“Yeah.”

And that was it. I was under arrest.

Withers hiked one leg up on the chair directly in front of me, crossed his arms over it, then leaned toward me and grimaced. Thought he was on *CSI* or something. He looked five years past retirement but tried to hide it with some off-brand Grecian Formula. Or maybe it was varnish, as stiff as his hair was. I wanted to laugh at his Kingston Trio-do but he looked as grim as a gulag. I wished my mother could suddenly appear at my side, in one of those quantum leaps.

Not that she was the only Johnny-on-the-spot for me growing up. Pops, a man of choice words, glowed like embers when I got ogled. His face, neck, arms—I couldn’t see the rest—would burn red. “Whatcha lookin’ at” is all he’d say and people’d slide their eyes away. My brothers and sisters, too, learned early on to master the clenched fist and steely gaze. I became the family’s cause célèbre. Our tribal totem. Must have been exhausting to have my back like that. It was for me, fending off the insults, which grew as I did, longer and longer with each year. By the time I was thirteen, I was the tallest girl in junior high, by a couple of inches. That helped because nobody—not a boy or a girl—dared to crap on me to my face. And the volleyball and basketball coaches corralled me like a prize stallion. As for getting boys? Huh. I was told I was pretty, but what pubescent male is eager to parade around the halls holding hands with the six-foot-two She-la Monster, which is what they called me behind my back. There was only one other kid as tall as I was and he was black. My father and mother would chop me up and donate the meat to a soup kitchen if I brought Chester Rhimes home.

But size wasn't my only albatross. There was additional carrion that cruelty could feast on. The St. Johns were land rich but cash broke, twenty acres away from white trashiness. The farm gave us all we needed to eat, but we basically lived off of Pop's pay from GM where he worked the graveyard shift. Our little house was stuffed to the gills with bodies, we shared one constantly clogged toilet in a broken-down bathroom, we bought clothes from a thrift shop then wore them as hand-me-downs, we drank right from the cow's teat, or rode them for cheap entertainment, we ate the hogs we raised and smelled so heavily of breakfast sausage on the morning bus kids pinched their noses and prayed we wouldn't sit next to them.

The nobility of farming saved us, I guess, from out and out ostracism. But the shunning was obvious in other ways. We ignored it as best we could and made poverty our own special joke. Nobody but nobody could outdo us in making fun of ourselves.

"Hey, Cal. You got enough dirt in your ears to grow carrots!"

"Actually, asshole," Al, my oldest brother, said to Soffit Smith, "I'm holding out for pearls."

"Where'd ya get them glasses, Martha? The Salvation Army?" This to my younger sister—named after my mother—from Angela Green, an only child. Like Angela ever had to fight for bathroom time or worry about the well running dry or wearing a moth-eaten wool sweater that smelled like it had been donated by an English sheepherder.

"No," Martha would reply in her most affected voice. "I did not get them from the Salvation Army." She was the brain in the family. We're talking genius-level. Her glasses were as thick as the bottom of shot glasses, missing one stem so that they sat at an angle on her nose. She'd straighten her glasses, peer down at the cow pie who deigned speak to her, and come up with the weirdest repartee: "I took the glasses from an unidentified corpse at the morgue." Angela, who didn't have the smarts to know Martha was pulling her leg, fled aghast.

Soon enough, though, even the meanest kids respond to pluckiness. Our clever way of dissing ourselves won us friends. We were still poor, still odd, and still ethnically indeterminate (yet another drawback I promise to get to later), but, we were damned good sports.

Withers stared at me as long and hard as his obviously challenged attention span would allow. I guess he was trying to intimidate me. But I had some history with cops so this particular gumshoe with his red-rimmed eyes and coffee breath only made me want to laugh. If I weren't so freakin' scared to death.

"So," he finally said, lifting his foot gingerly from the chair and planting it on the ground.

"So?"

I think he'd forgotten what he wanted to say. Had been forgetting for years, my guess. It wasn't his age, I'm guessing again. The way he favored that one foot could mean gout and gout, unless he ate lots of livers and kidneys, meant he was a booze hound.

The lady guard shifted her ample hips. I KNEW she wanted to give me the eye that said, "For real?" but couldn't.

"When did you do it?" He found the loose thread.

"Do what?"

"Turn against your country?"

I did laugh then.

"Somethin' funny, girlie?"

The lady guard winced.

"My name is Sally St. Johns. As in CEO of St. Johns Enterprises."

"Yeah. And whoda thunk it would be a cover for a worldwide terrorist operation?"

I laughed again.

"Do you have any idea what my company does?"

I knew better than to talk to this Boris Karloff knockoff but I couldn't help myself. I'd just devoted the last ten years of

my checkered life to an innovation that could save his tail and everyone else's.

"Sure I know. I got a lot more going for me than a pretty face."

The lady guard snorted.

"You wanna say somethin', Mason?" He glared at her, but there wasn't any heat in it.

"No, sir. I like your face just fine."

Especially at Halloween, I thought.

"You're the big energy guru." Withers turned back to me. "The one that's gonna put the chill on global warming."

That surprised me. He knew it.

"Oh, sure. I did my homework. You have what they call a colorful past. Real colorful." He scratched his chin, then stared off, like he couldn't find his car in the parking lot.

"Sir?" Mason took a step towards him. He snapped to.

"Yeah, yeah. Now here's the deal, girlie. The big guns are coming in. FBI. CIA. I suggest you give it up to me right here and now."

"I don't have anything to 'give up.' I'll take my chances with the Feds. Not some two-bit over-the-hill senile Andy of Mayberry."

The old guy actually laughed, hard. Mason didn't. She took a step towards *me*. What the hell was up with this?

"Back off, Mason. Miss CEO hotshot doesn't know a good thing when she sees it. But she will."

Mason retreated, eyeing me like I might pop out of a toaster.

"You don't have a clue what you're in for, sister. This looks bad for you. REAL bad. But, for me, the pieces don't fit." He cleared his throat. "See, I played basketball in high school. Pretty damn good guard. Made All-State honorable mention Division III." He paused to see my reaction. I closed my mouth. I was about to lose my freedom over a trumped up charge and Withers here had his head up his reminiscing ass.

“But I was only so good. Enough for a small college and that would be the end of it. So.” He stopped again. His eyes teared up. “Met my Bethy senior year,” he went on. “Made up for the disappointment.” He paused.

Would somebody spare me this? I tried to catch Mason’s eye but she was looking down at the floor, her hands behind her back. We waited.

“Sir?” she finally asked, gently.

“Anyways. You played the game. How you played it says a lot. That and driving a car will give someone away every time. You played clean. And hard. You had a temper, but no whining and complaining when you lost. Humble when you won. Classy enough to bow out when it was time.”

My mouth cracked open again. Damn if he hadn’t followed my career.

“Out of the blue, you quit that cushy gig to start a company from nothing, I mean scratch, and less than five years later, you’re getting interviewed on MSNBC. Hell, you aren’t just living the American Dream, you’re it. No way in God’s green earth you plotted against your own government.”

He waited for me to say something, but I didn’t know what.

“The Feds pretty much told me to back off now that they’re here, but I’m gonna get to the bottom of this.”

“You arrested me!”

“Yeah. Had to. Doing my job. But I didn’t believe it then, don’t believe it now. And I’m gonna prove it, if it’s the last case this sad sack wanna-be TV cop cracks.” He turned and reached for the door. Mason got to it first, then stepped out in the hall with him. I heard her ask how he was doing. Then she said something about how sorry she was. When she came back in the room, I let loose.

“What the hell was that? Someone needs to take that old dude to the vet for one last shot.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Mason said.

“All I know is I’m in serious, serious trouble and I got this bozo—”

“That man,” Mason’s voice went into a deep growl, “is one of the finest detectives in the state of Iowa, maybe the country, for all I know.”

“Come on. He looks like he’s been on a bender and either the booze or old age has turned his brain into tapioca.”

“Smart as you are, that’s what you think?” Mason shook her head. She planted her palms on the table and looked me dead in the eye. “He just lost his wife of fifty years.”

“Betty?” I swallowed.

“You know how?”

Nope, and I didn’t want to know. I was sure it was going to make me feel like reconstituted shit.

“It was late spring. Withers and Bethy were out walking near the woods behind their house. Bright, sunny afternoon, the kind that makes you glad to be alive.” She stopped, took a breath. “They heard thunder in the distance, but didn’t believe it because it was so pretty out. Withers said later they shoulda paid attention. Said it was a warning. Well, anyways, Bethy loved wild flowers, which was why they were out there. She spotted some phlox. You know, that bluish purpley flower that grows in clumps?”

I shook my head no.

Well, Withers didn’t either. Said he couldn’t tell phlox from the pox.” Mason giggled softly, shaking her head. “Anyways, he bent down to gather up the flowers for her. Bethy stopped him. ‘Leave ‘em be,’ she said. ‘Don’t kill ‘em.’ That’s when it happened. Right then.”

“She got struck by lightning?”

“No.”

I waited. Mason struggled to get a grip.

“Damn nest of bees in the tall grass. Withers had stepped on ‘em and stirred ‘em up. Funny thing was, a few got him on the ankle, but the rest just swarmed her.”

“Was she allergic?”

“Not that they knew. She’d been stung a few times before and had a little pain and some swelling, you know. Nothin’ that a couple of antihistamines didn’t fix. But doctors told Withers later that each time you’re stung you get closer to a fatal reaction. I guess her ship had come in. Withers had to watch her puff up and blacken like a roasted marshmallow. Nothing he could do ‘til the EMTs got there and by then it was too late.”

“Good God.”

“The man hasn’t been the same since. Used to laugh and joke all the time. Sing, too. Church choir quality.”

“His limp. Caused by the bee stings?”

“No, no. That’s Withers’ story, but scuttlebutt has it that his bites went away in a couple of days, didn’t do any lasting damage. We—me and the other cops—think the pain’s all in his head. A way to punish himself for stepping on the nest of bees that killed his wife.”

“That’s twisted.”

“Try telling him that.”

It got quiet between us. My mind was racing.

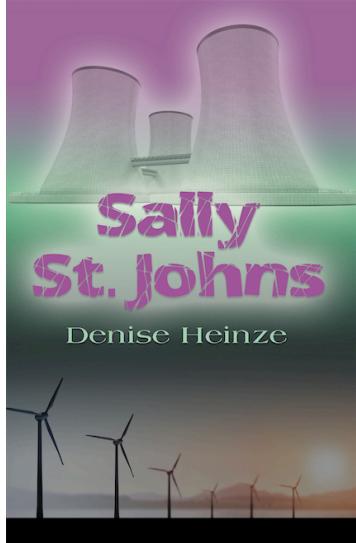
“Why in hell does he care what happens to me?”

“Not you, personally, he doesn’t. To him, you’re one of those liberal commies who’s going to ruin America. The guy still has a Reagan bumper sticker on his 1978 Chevy Impala. But he’s smart and fair and he believes in justice. Truth be told, that’s about all he has left right now.”

“You sure he’s good?” I felt dizzy.

“The best. You can take that to the bank.”

If only I could. Get up and head to the bank like it was any other day. But it wasn’t. Withers’ sad story evaporated like smoke when the door opened to the men in suits.



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