



*Mark MacDowell is investigating the most challenging case of his FBI career when he runs into the love of his life. He hasn't seen Zuzu Westbrook in years....*

# **MOONBOW**

by Arlene Holland

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# Moonbow



Arlene Holland

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## CHAPTER 19

Early Monday morning Mark sat in his newly furnished apartment and wondered if there would be any other new employees at the Sandstone County Sheriff's Office. He grabbed his cell phone.

"Rick, my man, I was wondering if I could have an updated employee list before my first day on the job. Sandstone County had several openings when I was interviewed, and I'm curious if those positions have been filled; you know, I don't like surprises."

"I doubt they've had time to hire anyone. These small county offices are slow on paperwork, but I'll check and get back with you," Rick said. He scratched his cheek as he sat at his desk at the Dallas FBI Headquarters. "I hate not being in the field with you. This promotion is nice, and I like being at home every night with my family, but it sucks, you know."

Mark laughed. "Yeah, I miss working with you, too. But, we've been undercover agents for too long. It was time for a career move."

Rick joined Mark in the laugh. "Yeah, so when are *you* going to put in for a change?"

Mark sighed. "I've tried, remember?" He shook his head. "I don't know what I want to do with my life. I don't think I'm cut out for anything except undercover."

Rick nodded. "Yeah, yeah, I remember," he replied. "Well, I'll do my best on that list. I'll be in touch with you soon."

Mark hit the end button on his phone and left for his first day as a deputy for the Sandstone County Sheriff's Office.

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Zuzu sat at her desk and ran her fingers through her hair. She looked down at her blue flowery dress and smoothed the wrinkles. She was exhausted from lack of sleep and wished for a nice, long nap.

At eight-fifteen a.m. the telephone sounded, and Zuzu picked it up on the second ring.

"Good morning. This is the Sandstone County Sheriff's Office. Zuzu speaking," she said into the receiver.

"Hi, Zuzu. This is Carroll from the district attorney's office. I need the paperwork that inmate Wilson signed. He's due to appear in court this morning at nine o'clock. I need it before he gets here."

Zuzu fished through the basket scheduled to be taken on the courthouse run and found the paper. "I have it in my hand right now," she said. "I'm on my way."

She hung up the phone and turned to Darcy. "Guess I'm doing the courthouse run early today. You'll get to greet the new deputy," she said as she stood and grabbed the basket. "Don't forget to roll out the red carpet for him."

"Okay," Darcy said. She smiled. "I'm going to let him sweep me off my feet and take me away with him. If I'm not here when you get back, you'll know what happened."

Zuzu laughed. "If he's working here, he doesn't have the money to take you far," she shouted over her shoulder as she left.

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At precisely eight-thirty a.m., Mark MacDowell walked up to the counter of the Sandstone County Sheriff's Office. He wore black slacks with a white shirt and a black tie. He tapped on the Plexiglas window; the woman at the second desk turned around and smiled at him.

Darcy strolled to Zuzu's desk and pressed the button allowing him to enter. "Well good morning, Deputy MacDowell," she said.

"Good morning, ma'am," he replied, flashing an easy smile. "You're Darcy Lawrence, right?" he asked.

Darcy nodded. "That's me." She gestured with her hand. "Come with me," she said. "Sheriff Montgomery and Chief Levin are waiting for you."

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Zuzu returned to the sheriff's office and met Darcy at the door.

"Has the new deputy made it in yet?" Zuzu asked. She sat down at her desk and turned to face Darcy.

"Oh yes," Darcy answered. "He's so polite. Everything is 'yes ma'am, no ma'am.'" She sat down and rolled her chair to Zuzu's desk. "He's a real southern gentleman that man is."

Zuzu smiled. "I'm anxious to meet him. So, you think he's good looking?" She wished she had taken more time with her appearance.

Darcy gave a sly smile. "I wouldn't kick him out for eating crackers in my bed, even though he's bald. He's got nice, hazel eyes." She shrugged. "Good teeth. Sharp dresser."

Zuzu laughed and wrinkled her nose. “Well, I’d say you checked him out pretty closely,” she teased.

“All I’m saying is that he’s easy on the eyes.” Darcy giggled. “Honey, I’m too old for him, but he’s just right for you.”

Zuzu’s gaze drifted to the name on the front of the file. She picked it up and opened it. The new deputy’s physical description was too close to Mark’s for her to even think about dating him. She shook her head. “He’s not for me,” replied Zuzu. “I’m not into bald guys.” She closed the file and met Darcy’s gaze. “Where is he?” She nodded her head toward the offices. “Is he with the sheriff?”

“Yes, he is. You’ll need to give him his uniforms and gear when they are done today. After all the time you spent organizing and cleaning that damn uniform room, you deserve a chance to show it off.”

Zuzu huffed. “Awesome,” she said. She rolled her eyes. “I can’t wait.” She looked at Darcy. “Actually, I’m tired and wish I didn’t look so drab. Maybe he won’t need his stuff until tomorrow.”

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Mark twisted in the chair and rubbed the back of his neck. He felt his phone vibrating in his pocket. Something was wrong—other than the two people in this room, Rick was the only person who had his new number, and Rick knew he was with the sheriff at the moment.

He half listened as Sheriff Montgomery and Chief Levin went over his job description. Mark attempted to smile, but an uneasy feeling churned in the pit of his stomach even though everything appeared to be going well.

“...and that’s about it. You’ll learn as you go. We are pretty easy going around here. Is there anything you’d like to ask us?” Chief Levin questioned.

“No. Nothing I can think of,” Mark said as he shook his head. “Oh wait, there is one thing. Are uniforms issued, or are they taken out of our salary?”

“They’re issued. Our secretary at the front office will issue you three shirts, three pairs of pants, and everything you’ll need except for boots. If you want more than three, you’ll have to purchase them yourself,” Chief Levin explained.

“Fair enough,” Mark said. “I can’t think of anything else. I’m sure I’ll have plenty of questions as situations arise,” Mark said with a grin.

Sheriff Montgomery stood up and reached out to shake hands.

“We are very impressed with you, Mark,” Sheriff Montgomery said. “Follow me to the front office. Our secretary, Zuzu, will help get your uniforms and gear.”

Mark’s smile faded as he stood and shook Sheriff Montgomery’s hand.

Chief Levin scooted his chair back, stood, and extended his hand. “I’ll meet you out front after you’ve met with Zuzu,” he said.

*Zuzu!* For a split second, he wanted to bolt. He didn’t think it was possible to meet two Zuzu’s in one lifetime...both in Texas. He legs felt weak as he shook Chief Levin’s hand. Suddenly his eyes were dry in his new contacts, and the fluorescent lights were too bright. He blinked rapidly, but his eyes refused to moisten. With blurry vision, he followed Sheriff Montgomery to the front office.



Mark took three deep breaths before the door to the front office opened...he recognized the back of her head immediately, even through his distorted vision.

Everything seemed to happen in slow motion. He remembered the same golden highlights in the soft blond hair that now moved across Zuzu's shoulders as she turned her head to look in their direction.

Mark blinked hard again, and his vision cleared. It was too late to run and too soon to speak. He was forced to let the scene play out unrehearsed.

As the color drained from her face, Zuzu sat there, frozen in place. Her mouth opened to speak, yet nothing came out. She stared, unblinking; her heart beating wildly.

Sheriff Montgomery looked from Zuzu to Mark and back to Zuzu. "Do you two know each other?" he asked.

"NO!" both spoke in unison with a bit more force than necessary. Sheriff Montgomery raised his eyebrows and looked at them questioningly.

Zuzu gave a nervous laugh and touched her forehead. "No, Dan. I'm sorry." She forced a smile. "I'm being rude," she said as she stood. "Is this your new deputy?" she asked, trying to recover.

"Yes, Zuzu, this is Mark MacDowell. Mark, meet Zuzu Westbrook," Dan said as he waved a hand from Zuzu to Mark. His eyes narrowed. "Zuzu, you look as if you've seen a ghost. Are you okay?"

Zuzu tried to swallow the golf ball in her throat. "Yes. I'm okay." She knew she wasn't very good at hiding the truth. "I'm so sorry," she apologized again. "I didn't get much sleep last

night, and I guess it's catching up to me. I'm, I'm fine...really I am."

The sheriff studied Zuzu's face for a moment before adding, "Well, okay then," he said before turning toward Mark. "Mark, I'll leave you with Zuzu. She'll get you situated with uniforms."

"Thank you for this opportunity," Mark said as he extended his right hand.

Dan shook Mark's hand. "You're very welcome. I think Sandstone County is lucky to have you. Please, call me Dan." He smiled as he pressed the buzzer on Zuzu's desk to open the door and strolled back to his office.

Once the door had closed behind Dan, Mark turned his gaze to Zuzu. "It's very nice to meet you, Zuzu," he said. His smile was easy but uncertain. He was happy to see her. Under ordinary circumstances, he would have grabbed her for a hug, but the circumstances were anything but ordinary. He extended his hand across the counter.

Zuzu wasn't as happy. Her posture was stiff, and her hand flew to her chest before she spoke. "I've been looking over your application," she said as she lowered her gaze to the file in front of her. "Is this your *correct* phone number?"

She eased back into her chair without shaking his hand. Zuzu couldn't think, and her whole body trembled. She continued to stare at his file on her desk.

Mark laughed nervously and pulled his hand back. His throat was dry. "Yes, I wouldn't give you a fake number," he said as he glanced around for security cameras. Only one covered the front door.

Zuzu's head shot up and met his gaze. Her eyes were glassy. They stared at each other as the fragile, thin silence lingered.

Zuzu was the first to break eye contact. She pretended to study Mark's application. Then she looked behind her, knowing Darcy was outside smoking and had missed the encounter. With shaking hands, she grabbed the key to the uniform closet and stood. She placed both palms on her desk to steady herself for a moment.

Darcy walked in rubbing her hands together. "I hate smoking this time of year," she said. "It's stupid to stand outside in the cold just to smoke."

Zuzu nodded as a heat wave flushed through her body. "People quit every day. You could quit if you wanted, and you wouldn't be taking so many breaks," she snapped. Her tone sliced the air like a razor. She squeezed the key tightly in her hand.

Darcy's posture stiffened.

Zuzu licked her lips and bit her bottom lip. She looked from Darcy to Mark and then back to Darcy. "Deputy MacDowell and I will be in the uniform closet. Do you mind catching the phone?"

"No, not at all," Darcy said. "I won't need *another* break for a while. Take your time." She sat at her desk and turned toward her computer.

Zuzu took a deep breath. "It shouldn't take very long." She forced herself to move forward.

When Darcy didn't respond, Zuzu walked stiff-legged toward the uniform closet with Mark on her heels. She plunged the key toward the keyhole and dropped it.

They both bent down for the key; he was close enough for her to smell his familiar musky lavender scent. She felt light-headed.

“I’ve got it,” Zuzu snapped. She snatched up the key and opened the door.

As she stepped past him into the room, Mark caught a whiff of her hair. He smelled apricot shampoo. His chest tightened.

“All the men’s uniforms are on your left,” she gestured with her hand.

Mark nodded. “Gotcha.” He rubbed his nose and strolled toward the shirts.

The silence was deafening, and the air was thick with tension. Neither one dared to speak or make eye contact.

Zuzu stared at Mark’s back.

Mark shuffled through the shirts until he found his size. He yanked his tie away from his neck, unbuttoned a couple of buttons, and pulled the white button-down shirt over his head. The white T-shirt underneath pulled away from his beltline, exposing smooth, bare skin and tight abs.

Zuzu gasped; she looked at the floor and cleared her throat. “There’s a changing room over there.” She pointed with a trembling finger and met his gaze with a cold stare.

Mark held a pinched expression. He pulled the T-shirt down to his waist and grabbed a shirt off the hanger. “You’ve seen me in a T-shirt before, Zuzu. Don’t freak. I’m not stripping down.” He pushed his arms through the sleeves and buttoned a few buttons. “What do you think?” he asked as he splayed his arms. “Does it fit?” He looked at her and gave a wavering smile.

Zuzu couldn’t bear to look at him for very long without tearing up. She nodded and returned her gaze to the floor. “Yes,” her voice almost a whisper. “It fits fine.”

“Good. I need two more of these the same size,” he said as he returned to the shirts. He fished out two more and dropped them on the floor beside him. Then he turned to the pants. He began to look through them as a pair of pants fell off the hanger and onto the floor.

Zuzu bent over and picked up the pants. “If I knew your size, I could help you,” she said as she replaced them on the hanger.

“I always have a hard time finding the right length,” Mark said. He closed his eyes and tried to think. He couldn’t think of shirts or pants. What he wanted was to grab Zuzu and hold her close to his chest. He looked around and strolled to a stack of folded pants on a shelf. As he looked through the stack, he didn’t notice as two pairs of pants fell to the floor.

“You’re making a mess,” Zuzu said as she picked them up. She caught a whiff of his musky lavender scent once more, and she felt the tears began to sting behind her eyes.

“Well, if they were in order, I might be able to find my size,” Mark snapped. He threw up his hands. “They’re jumbled up in here.” He mumbled as he pushed a stack aside and began to shuffle through the bottom. A neat, folded stack crumbled to the floor.

“No, they're not jumbled,” Zuzu snapped back. “What's your size? Stop digging through them,” she bent over and placed the stack back on the shelf.

“Thirty-eight, thirty-four,” he said as he placed his hands on his hips. He looked around and swiped beads of sweat off his forehead. “Damn it’s hot in here. It’s like there’s no ventilation at all.” He looked up at the ceiling and didn’t see any air vents. “A person could suffocate in here.” He wrinkled his nose. “Smells like mildew in here...or...sweaty socks. It stinks.”

Zuzu turned and glanced through the shelves. Her face burned. The tiny room *was* hot and did still have an awful smell. She pulled two pairs of pants out of a folded stack. “Here are two in your size. I’m sorry I don’t have another pair of pants for you. I’ll order a pair today.”

“Thanks,” he said as he took them from her. Their fingers touched, their eyes met, and it was as if the world had stopped spinning. Neither one breathed for a moment.

He managed a smile as he held up the pants. “These two will be plenty. No rush.”

Zuzu walked to the back of the room and picked up a small paper sack. She retraced her steps and met his gaze. “Epaulets and pens for the shirts are in here,” she said as she dropped the sack into his outstretched hand. She motioned behind her. “Duty belts are hanging on the back wall.”

Zuzu turned away from him, walked to the door, and placed her hand on the doorknob. “Sheriff Montgomery will give you a badge when he swears you in.”

Mark stared at her back. “Thanks, Zuzu.” He bent over and picked up his shirts.

Hearing his voice say her name made her tremble. She wheeled around. “What’s happening here—*who are you?*” she asked urgently? Every muscle in her body shook.

“Mark MacDowell is my real name.” He sighed and looked down. “Zuzu, we need to talk.” As happy as he was to see her, he knew she didn’t feel the same. She felt betrayed and lied to...again. “I thought you were in Houston. What happened? Why are you working *here* of all places? Are you living with your parents or with Lara?” He took a deep breath knowing she didn’t owe him an explanation.

“Ha!” She laughed bitterly. “Now you think we need to talk? Now, after all this time, you want to talk?” She looked away. Warm, red color came to her cheeks. She didn’t have any answers for him—nothing she wanted him to know.

“Stop by my desk and sign for your uniforms. I have to keep an inventory of everything.” She waved a hand in the air. “I did *try* to get the smell out of here.” She put a hand to her forehead. “As petty as all this may seem to you, it *is* my job,” Zuzu hissed and lowered her voice. “I don’t know what’s going on, but I’m not stupid. You don’t have to worry about me blabbing.” She took a step back. “I won’t ask you anything about your personal life, so don’t concern yourself with mine.” She turned her back on him once more and opened the door.

Mark quickly reached around her and pushed the door shut. “Zuzu, I’m sorry. In no way did I mean to imply that your job is petty. Tell me where you live. I want to talk and tell you everything...*please*.” He whispered in her ear. “What time do you get off work?”

Zuzu stared at the door and kept her back to him. His breath swept across her shoulder. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “I get off at five. I’ll meet you at The Point. Give me about forty-five minutes.”

There was a brief moment of silence. Mark looked down and frowned—she didn’t trust him to be alone at her place with him. “Okay,” he said. He nodded, both relieved and surprised she had agreed to meet him. “Okay, I’ll be waiting at The Point.” He watched her walk out of the room before he changed back into his clothes.

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Having Zuzu back in his life complicated his assignment in ways she couldn't possibly understand. She had matured into an even more sophisticated and desirable woman than before, and he was still in love with her. But trust was a very fragile thing, and he had violated and shattered her trust in him. This investigation wasn't going to improve their situation. If the assignment ended as Mark suspected it would—if Sandstone County was turned inside out—if the leaders of the community were exposed and brought to justice, Zuzu and the rest of the citizens would be shaken to their core.

He needed to meet with Chief Levin and get started.

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After another strained, overly professional encounter with Zuzu while Mark signed for the uniforms, he strolled out the front door and into the bright sunlight. It was the first sunny day in weeks, but he felt drained. Seeing Zuzu again had been a much unexpected and emotionally exhausting surprise.

Chief Levin was waiting for him in the squad car, but Mark didn't plan on spending much more time with him today. He needed to talk to Rick, and he wanted to be on time to meet Zuzu.

Zuzu watched Mark as he walked out the door to meet Chief Levin. She looked down at his signature and tried to calm herself.

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"Your call was about seven minutes too late," Mark said into his phone as he slammed his car door shut. He was parked behind the sheriff's office in the employee parking lot. He had finished his meeting with Chief Levin. He looked around, hoping to see a classic yellow Firebird, but didn't see one. He frowned and hoped Zuzu hadn't sold her Firebird.



“I was in Dan’s office when I received your call.” Mark bit his bottom lip and smiled. “I’m pretty certain I know what you wanted to talk to me about...Zuzu.”

“Yes. I’m sorry I didn’t reach you in time,” Rick said. “How did it go? I take it you two saw each other?”

“Oh yeah, we saw each other,” Mark answered. He shrugged. “It went okay. Sheriff Montgomery suspected something, but I think we both covered it well enough.”

“Listen, it’s not good you’ve been burned; complications are bound to come up. Let me pull you off this case. There will be other job openings, and we can get someone else inside. I’ll make a few phone calls. You can quit today. You can just say you’ve changed your mind. Again, I’m so sorry I didn’t get to you first.”

Mark chuckled. He was so happy, he was almost giddy. He shook his head. “No way am I leaving this assignment. I’m in, and I want to finish it. But I think this is a sure sign that Texas is becoming too small for me.” He laughed. “What are the odds of this happening?” He didn’t wait for an answer before adding, “I trust Zuzu; she’s not going to burn me.”

He rubbed his bald head. “I’m meeting Zuzu later on today, and I’ll let you know if I foresee any problems with her compromising the assignment.” He frowned. “I’m not sure where her head is right now; I think she’s in shock. I know she’s hurt and confused, but I don’t blame her.... I’ll call you tonight after I talk to her, and then we’ll discuss the situation.”

“You’re crazy, Brother,” Rick said with a laugh. “I just hope she’s as happy to see you as you are her. Let me know how it washes out. I’ll be waiting for your call.”

Mark laughed out loud. "I have to admit, I wasn't expecting Zuzu to be sitting at the front desk. This is the only surprise that's ever made me happy."

Rick pulled the telephone away from his ear and looked at it. He hadn't heard Mark's genuine laugh in months.

"She's beautiful, Rick," Mark said in a low voice. "I had forgotten how extraordinarily beautiful she is."

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Zuzu sat in the break room and stared at the blank wall in front of her. Darcy had suddenly remembered she had plans for lunch. She had been very short with Zuzu ever since Zuzu's remark about taking smoke breaks. Darcy had told her that she didn't appreciate being embarrassed in front of the new deputy.

Zuzu knew she was wrong and had apologized to Darcy, but the hurt feelings lingered. She needed to think of something to make it up to Darcy and smooth things over between them.

Zuzu spent her lunch break alone and sick to her stomach. Her palms were sweaty. She couldn't stop thinking about seeing Mark after work. She was happy to see him and happy to know he wasn't in prison, but she was angry and confused, too. Obviously, he was a cop, probably undercover.

She over-analyzed every word Mark and she had exchanged in the uniform closet. Another rejection from him might be more than she could take. Zuzu felt sure Mark was going to tell her that he hadn't ever intended to see her again and didn't feel anything for her other than friendship. He could have contacted her long before now, but he had chosen not to. He wasn't in love with her and never had been. She had to prepare herself for more disappointment.

Zuzu made up her mind she wasn't going to cry or put up a fight. Hell, he probably knew by the way she looked at him that she still loved him. It wasn't hard to figure out.

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At four-forty-five p.m., Dan called Zuzu to his office. She turned and looked at Darcy. "I wonder what he wants," Zuzu said as she pressed her brows together. After seeing Mark, she had spent the rest of the day in a fog. She quickly went through the day in her head, wondering if she could have done something wrong.

"Don't worry so much," Darcy replied. Her body remained ridged as she shrugged. "He probably wants to ask how things are going."

Zuzu stood and smoothed down her dress. "Yeah, I hope you're right." She replayed her words to Darcy and wished she could take them back. "Darcy, I am so sorry. I don't have an excuse. I was just stressed out over giving Deputy MacDowell his uniforms. I took it out on you." She bit her bottom lip. "I'm truly sorry."

"I'll get over it. I'm a big girl," Darcy replied as she turned her back to Zuzu.

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Zuzu popped her head in Dan's doorway. "You wanted to speak to me?"

"Yes, Zuzu, come in," Dan replied as he gestured to the chair in front of him. He pulled off his readers and laid them on the desk.

Zuzu sat down and met his gaze.

“I’m going to get right to the point. Are you sure you don’t know Mark MacDowell?” he asked with narrowed eyes.

Zuzu shook her head. “No, sir. He looks like someone I used to know, but I’ve never met him until today.”

Dan waved both of his hands in front of him. “It’s no big deal if you have; I’m just curious,” he said with a sly smile. “I thought maybe he was an old flame or something.”

She returned his smile. “All my old flames have burned out; not even a spark left on the back burner.” Her mouth was pasty dry as she licked her lips.

His gaze bore into her. “Well, I guess there’s nothing left to talk about, Zuzu. I just didn’t want anyone to get off on the wrong foot. I like to think of us as a family around here.”

“Sure Dan,” Zuzu said as she stood. “I understand.” She turned and walked back to her desk.

Sheriff Montgomery stared down at Zuzu and Mark’s applications and wondered if he’d missed something. He couldn’t ignore the silent exchange he’d seen pass between his two newest employees. What did it matter if they’d met previously? And why were they keeping it a secret?

Zuzu was lying; he was sure of it.



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