



## Chapter 2

Monday, April 12<sup>th</sup>, the witching hour

I sat up in bed, checked the bedside clock, yanked the down comforter up to my neck and took a deep breath to calm my pounding heart. What is there about sudden sounds in the night? *There it was again. The sound of an engine.*

In a time-honored ritual of wives everywhere, I shook my husband. “What’s that noise?” He groaned and turned over. *Hopeless.* Stopping only to throw on the complimentary bathrobe, I stumbled to the door and cracked it open, chilled by a sharp wind. Nevertheless, curiosity drove me outside onto the small portico. I peered around the corner and back to the left.

*It couldn’t be.* A black Escalade sat with its door open in front of the reception building. A tall dark figure darted from the Wandering Nun grove, slid into the car and slammed the door. The SUV shot from the parking lot and melted into the darkness. As it passed beneath me, I recognized a California license plate; without specs, I couldn’t read the number. An icy band tightened around my chest.

I hurried inside and bolted the door.

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Sometime later, Mike slipped into my side of bed and spooned himself behind me. “You awake?”

I'd half-heard him fumbling around the room for the last few minutes. "I am now," I said, snuggling myself into him, hoping to warm him back to sleep. "Did you hear that car earlier?"

"What car?" he asked, but I felt his body tense. He'd heard it all right.

"The one that roared out of the parking lot. You sat up in bed."

"That doesn't mean I was awake." I heard him smother a yawn.

"Your eyes were open."

"Sure you weren't dreaming?" he asked.

Was I? Too much thinking for so early. I settled into Mike and the covers. "Maybe I *was* dreaming. Let's sleep some more, enjoy this room as long as possible. I'm so glad the management is taking care of the rooms and the amenities, even if they've let the outside go to hell."

"Except they no longer provide in-room coffee." Mike uttered the sigh of a man who is not himself without his first cup. "Let's walk down to the lobby and see if they finally got around to plugging in the pot."

"No qualms about facing the desk clerk?" I asked half in jest.

"Probably crawled back to his cave," Mike muttered, but his body tensed once again.

Last evening, we'd walked in our dress clothes, with me in high heels and cursing every step, back on the park road to the nearby Bayside Café. Here we'd dined lavishly (for us) on bay scallops in béchamel sauce and a liter of house Chablis. Afterwards the earlier encounter with the clerk hadn't tamped down Mike's Wandering Nun fantasies and I'd happily complied.

"I can make you a cup of instant with hot tap water."

"I'd rather drink boiled oil," he grouched.

Finally I had to address the elephant in our bed. "What's with you and that desk clerk? You started to call him something that sounded like 'Steve.'"

"Did I?" He shifted his weight. "He looks like someone I once arrested. No big deal. It was years ago and if it is the same guy, he didn't recognize me."

"Mike, he did. You know he did."

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In a skinning wind that ripped through the trees, we fought our way down the steps to the parking lot and hurried to the reception building. Across the road the sun was just peeking over the hills beyond the golf course. We stepped inside the dimly lit foyer. Mike sniffed and grabbed my arm. "Bella, stop. Right now."

"Why?" I asked and then it hit me; an odor, metallic but sweet.

Blood.

"Let's get out of here!" he said. "Could be a robbery in progress."

Too late. I'd already shaken off his arm, crossed the room and peered over the reception counter. Blood slickened the floor behind the counter. It splattered the wall. Left tracks to the entrance. I dashed to the door.

"Stay inside!" he warned, contradicting himself.

"No way. There's someone hurt out there."

"Or a bad guy," he said. Again, too late. I'd already pushed the glass door open. Bloody footprints led to the footpath through the eucalyptus groove. I stepped toward it; Mike blocked my way. "Stay back."

“No way.”

I followed the blood spots several hundred yards through the grove to a small beach below the Natural History Museum. Then I saw him. The clerk lay on his back, sightless eyes staring at the rising sun, his shirt a bloody swamp.

“Jesus H. Christ!” Mike, his face milky gray, stared at the body. Without warning, he grabbed my arm and pulled me toward the parking lot.

“Stop that. You’re hurting me.”

His eyes were a fury. “Listen to me. Walk back to the campsite, take down the tent. Go home.”

“But—”

“Will you *listen*? Leave a bike by the bathroom. I’ll ride home later.”

“That’s crazy talk. We need to call 911.”

“I’ll do it later. Trust me.”

I took two steps and stopped dead. I wasn’t going anywhere. I pulled my cell phone from my pocket and thrust it at him. “Trust has nothing to do with it, Mike. Now do you want to call, or should I?”

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*The Wandering Nun braced herself with one hand against the tree, gaping at the drops of blood on the beach. She knew there was a body beyond, just out of sight. She’d seen and heard the couple arguing over it, their shrill voices disturbing the morning stillness. They were gone now and the quiet had returned, but it wouldn’t last.*

*Her birds were in mortal danger. The couple would bring people with vehicles and equipment and lights to violate the sanctity of their grove—and frighten her charges.*

*Her eye fell on a wicked looking knife half-buried in the dirt. She picked up the bloody thing with two fingers and studied it briefly. Maybe the strangers would leave her and the birds alone if the murder weapon was never found. She could make that happen. She grabbed it by the blade, drew her arm back and hurled the loathsome thing into the bay, drawing strength from desperation.*