

BODIE

CHAPTER ONE

Oklahoma City, Present Day

Monica Evans stood alone in her kitchen, bathed in the cold glow from the fluorescent lights. Beyond her windows, night had settled in around Oklahoma City. She had just wiped a sheen of water from a china plate when her arm went limp. The room spun. Her skin burned. Sparkles of light flashed on the periphery of her vision as her world retreated into an ever-narrowing tunnel.

She stumbled backward and hit the refrigerator. Time slowed. The plate slipped from her fingers, tumbled to the white tile floor. In slow motion, it shattered, sending bone-white shards of china flying silently across the floor.

She swayed, transfixed by the lone circle of light in front of her. A violent shudder sent her reeling. She grabbed for the stove, missed. A stabbing pain, like a carving knife to her chest, took her strength. Her legs buckled. She slid to the floor. A numbing cold swept through her body. A quivering mass on the floor, she grabbed her chest, cried out in pain, “Oh, God, what’s happening? Help! Someone help me!”

As she shivered on the hard floor, images flooded through her mind. Her kitchen vanished. In its place, surroundings she’d never seen – a beach, an ocean, a rolling surf.

Pain! Fear!

With dread, came recognition. “Sister. My sister.”

Monica curled into a tight ball. She whispered, “My sister. My sister. What’s happening to her?”

Monica’s mind spun as she felt her sister stagger along a cold beach.

Two thousand miles to the west, Monica’s sister, Janet Thomas, ran in cold terror along a deserted stretch of an Oregon beach. Wet sand pulled at her feet, as it fought to drag her down. Her heart pounded. With each throb, she feared her head would explode. Ahead lay the dark gray Pacific. The deafening roar of the incoming tide drowned out the rest of the world. Her mind raced. The beach, the water, the land – everything blurred. Scalding heat was spreading through her body, like burning gasoline flowing through her veins. Her eyes darted about the gray beach. She saw no one.

Her thoughts came to a sharp focus. Kirby! Where is Kirby? Should have seen him coming. My arm. Pain. A needle! Can’t fight him. Where is he? How did he find me?

Another burst of fire swept through her. She screamed and ran faster.

More dark thoughts invaded her mind. Like drops of water on a hot griddle, they skipped wildly, existed for a moment then, their energy spent, vanished. She wanted to speak, wanted to shout, wanted to cry out for help, but couldn’t.

The first tingle came in her fingertips like a swarm of insects crawling under her skin – hundreds, thousands of them. She felt them moving all over her arms, writhing, creeping upward. She stared, but didn't see them. Where were they?

Kirby. The needle you used. Things...bugs...under my skin. What did you do to me?

She cried out, scratched at her arms, dug at her skin. She had to get at them, had to stop their burrowing. She ground her fingernails deep into the flesh on her arms, ripped open long, jagged lacerations. The fire grew. The insects spread. Her shallow, rapid breathing gave her barely enough air to live. Her heart strained against the confines of her chest.

She ran.

As Monica lay on the tile floor, a faint voice cried out to her. Someone help me! Please, someone!

The images and fear surging through Monica's mind grew darker.

Kirby. Killing me. Run, can't save myself, can't...think. Help, Nick! Have to run.

Kirby? Nick? The names echoed through Monica's mind. She pressed her hands to her temples.

Who are they? What's happening?

As Janet Thomas ran through the cold, wet sand, the fire, the insects, the fear overtook her. She stopped, spun wildly, her arms wildly flailing at the bugs inside her flesh. She ran, left then right. The swarm of insects slithered through her arms, into her chest. Panicked, she ran into the cold Pacific.

The first wave broke in front of her hitting her at thigh level. The frigid water knocked her off her feet, stole her breath with a mighty gasp. She gathered herself and stood. Another wave sent a wall of icy white foam over her. She stumbled backward, regained her stability and moved outward. Her legs and chest were numb, still the insects dug. Another wave crested in front of her. She screamed and dove into it.

The cold, like a sponge, sucked the strength from her body, but gave a measure of relief from the fire within. She surfaced, fought to breathe, took a large gasp of air before the next wave passed over her. Her mind raced. She had to get away. Couldn't turn back. Kirby was there.

She choked on seawater. A new fear rushed over her - death. Gasping for breath, sensing she would die, she called upon her strong will power and her skills as a swimmer to save her.

Ahead, something in the water, gleaming black. Rocks! If she could reach them.

A wave washed over her. Another wave. She coughed, gagged on icy water but kept swimming. The numbing cold had slowed the crawling insects under her skin. Now, if only she had the strength to make it to the rocks. If only she could breath. If only...

A realization hit her. She wouldn't make it. She was too weak. It was too far. Another wave swept over her.

Monica shuddered at a new feeling. Her sister was changing. She was accepting death, was at peace. The fear had vanished, replaced by a warm serenity.

Her sister reached out, reached beyond the ocean, reached beyond the cold and her fear. She reached out in prayer.

With each word her sister prayed, Monica felt more peace. God, I have lived a life of sin. I have tried to take you into my life, to let your love into my heart, but I failed. I am tired and very sorry. If you will have me and forgive me...take me. Take my sins, take my past, my regrets. I give my life to you.

As death took her sister, as the final wave dragged her under the frigid surface, a feeling of peace rushed through Monica. Not a peace that came from within her, this was her sister's peace. She had never experienced anything so strong, so totally overwhelming. Sheer, absolute peace and love.

As an enveloping darkness folded in around Monica and she was passing out, she began sobbing. Tears of pure joy ran down her cheeks. For that brief moment that exists between consciousness and unconsciousness, and as her sister's life was ending, Monica Evans smiled. She wasn't sure why, but she was happy. Then she passed out.

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Above the gray-black Pacific, beyond the rock-strewn beach that defined the Oregon coast, a blood-red smear of low hanging clouds dominated the sky. To the east, evening had cloaked the Coastal Range Mountains in overlapping layers of purple shadows. A biting chill, pushed on shore by strong westerly winds, settled in over the beach.

With every stride Nick Thomas took, a growing angst, worries as dark as the surging ocean, filled his mind. On his nightly five-mile run, his thoughts were far from the ocean and the wet sand that clung to his shoes. As he broke through stray clumps of mist that blew in from the ocean, his mind swirled with images of Janet, his wife of two years.

Swinson's Peak, a 150-foot high large, pyramid shaped, granite sea-stack, marked the halfway point. He made a sweeping arc out of the wet sand and into the dry, loose sand, then began the return. He picked up his pace.

As he ran, Janet filled his mind. He knew he should have stayed with her, should have comforted her, should have helped her.

Should! Should! Should! Jesus Christ, he couldn't get the word out of his mind. Should! He should have done all of those things – but he didn't. Now, he was sorry, sorry he wasn't there in what was surely a moment of need.

When he first saw her concern he should have turned around and gone back home.

He had pulled out of their driveway, on the way to the beach, when he saw the corner of a red cardboard box under the windbreaker in her lap. He lifted the jacket. Beneath it was an unfamiliar dark blue, leather-bound book with a strange symbol on the front.

"No!" Her eyes narrowed, pushed the jacket back over the book and box. She frowned then smiled and spoke in a low, mellow voice. "I don't want you to see that, not yet."

"Honey, what's going on?" he said as he jerked his hand back. "Are you Ok?"

She widened her smile and a softness entered her brown eyes. Her words slowed. "I'll be fine."

"Then tell me what you've got there."

"Not now. When you finish your run, I'll be waiting for you. Then I'll tell you," she said brushing a lock of hair from her forehead and staring deeply into his eyes. "I'll tell you everything."

"No! Tell me now."

"Honey," she said, "I'll tell you when you get back. There's a lot I have to tell you, but not now." She smiled then winked. "Afterward."

"Damn it!" He pulled off the road, onto a wide turnout. Gravel crunched under his tires as he slid to a stop near a winding path to the beach, down a small, vine-covered hill. "I can't talk you into it?" he whispered as he leaned over and kissed her lips. He ran his hand along her back, feeling the softness of her sweater. He massaged her shoulder, cupped her breast.

"No, Honey!" She pushed his hand away. "Don't! I'll tell you...but in my own way. That's all there is to it."

"God, I hate it when you're so damn stubborn!"

"Nick! I'll tell you everything, but in my way. Give me that much?"

They exchanged a long glance, then he grudgingly gave in. "I love you," he whispered.

"I love you too, Sweetie." She grabbed his hand and pressed his palm to her cheek. She ran her fingers through his thick brown hair. With a fingernail, she outlined the contours of his cheekbone. "I love you so very much, Nick. I hate to think of my life before...before I met you. I was so lost, so empty, empty of all happiness and meaning."

"Now, you're really scaring me. Goddamn, Janet, tell me what's wrong!"

"No!" she said with a newfound resolve in her voice, then gently pushed him toward the car door. "Now hurry! I'll tell you everything when you get back."

As Nick ran, her words haunted him. I'll tell you everything when you get back. I'll tell you everything. Everything. "Son-of-a-bitch," he muttered. What was she hiding?

He forced the memory from his mind and ran harder. His legs ached, lungs burned. Flocks of gray sea gulls soared above him, dove past his head. Chunks of wet sand flew up behind his feet as he forced himself on, faster.

He wiped a flood of stinging sweat out of his eyes. The scent of pine and the ocean's strong salt smell evoked warm memories. Three years ago, they brought a picnic basket to the beach. She had never seen the ocean, never realized the power of the Pacific Ocean at high tide. The sights and sounds of the ocean excited her. She could barely contain herself.

She walked out into the ocean, shivering from the cold and excitement. She faced him. As she laughed and waved, a massive wave rose up behind her.

"Janet," he shouted. "Look out!"

She turned in time to see a five-foot-high wall of churning, gray-white foam and water about to swallow her.

"Oh no!" she screamed and ran shoreward, just inches in front of the breaking wave.

“Never turn your back on the high tide,” he laughed as he wrapped his arms around her. “It’ll get you every time.”

Farther along the beach, they found an isolated cove. They stopped to gaze at the ocean. Nick grabbed Janet’s shoulders, pulled her to him. “I don’t want you getting hurt,” he said as he ran his fingers gently over her cheeks and lips.

“I feel safe,” she answered, “as long as I’m with you.”

Nick pulled her tightly against his body. They kissed. He guided her to a grassy section of the beach and spread out the blanket. As the sun turned the western sky a bright red-gold, they made love.

Now, running back to her, he needed her, wanted to make love to her again.

Was she happy? He knew he had been spending too much time at work. He knew, at times, he had let his construction business interfere with his home life. Was that what was bothering her? Was she feeling abandoned and lonely? Was she thinking of leaving him? No, not that! He shuddered. Anything but that!

Whatever she was going to tell him, whatever her news, he told himself that he was going to give her more time, maybe even a surprise vacation to Hawaii. He loved her too much to see her unhappy.

At the end of the run, he scanned the beach and nearby road. Deserted. The car was off to the right, near the main highway...but not her.

He ran to the car.

“Janet!”

No answer.

He looked up and down the beach but saw no one.

He stood with his hands on the door. Her cotton windbreaker lay in the front seat. He grabbed it and breathed in her perfume that clung to the fabric. The book and the cardboard box were gone. The keys were dangling in the ignition. Coarse grains of sand covered the soft leather seats. Deep scratches ran the length of the driver’s side door.

“Janet!” he shouted again.

He barely heard his own voice above the constant roar of the surf.

From behind, he heard heavy breathing and rapid footsteps on the loose gravel. He turned to see a large man, wearing dirty jeans and a faded red and gold San Francisco 49er’s sweatshirt. He ran toward Nick, his arms pumping, the look of wide-eyed fear etched into his face. He stopped just inches from Nick.

“Is there a police station nearby?” the large man cried out, anxiously fidgeting with his hands, his eyes shifting from left to right. “Well Goddamn it, is there?”

“Yes, yes!” Nick shouted. An augural chill swept over him as he felt himself drawn into the other man’s anxiety. “It’s not far from here, over there in Rock Bay.” Nick pointed to the soft yellow glow of lights that had begun to show above the hills to the south. “Why? What’s happened?”

“Out there!” he pointed. “God, it’s awful. A body! Out there on the rocks!”

“A body? Where?”

A cold wind swirled in off the ocean. Nick's heart quickened its beat. He scanned the beach and the highway with a series of nervous flinches.

"Right out there!" the man screamed and pointed seaward. "Against the rocks." He gasped for air. "I was up in the mountains." He pointed toward the coastal mountains beyond the highway. "I saw something. Something happened. I...I don't know...A man, a big man, choking a woman, or something...I tried, but I couldn't get here in time to help."

Nick twisted toward the ocean. The waves breaking across the jagged granite boulders sent sprays of white-foamed water high in the air. Through the exploding mist, he saw the body, partly exposed above the churning surf, a loose arm rhythmically marking the ebb and flow of each new wave.

Nick choked on the sight. An acid taste filled his mouth.

Auburn hair.

Red sweater.

"Oh, my God, no!"

He ran into the ocean. Splashes of salt-water on his lips mixed with the remnants of her lipstick, to form a bittersweet taste in his mouth. He had to reach the body.

It can't be her. God, no. Please don't let it be her!

"Janet!" he cried out as an enormous wave slammed into his chest, sent him tumbling backward, like a strand of seaweed caught in the surging tide. He rolled over twice, scraping his back and chest, then righted himself and ran back into the sea. Another wave stopped him, pushed him shoreward.

He sobbed, "No, Janet," as his soul withered and died.