

ON THE SLY by Wendy Koeing

EXCERPT

I moved to the front again, checking shadows before dodging into them. Reaching the door, I leaned into it, listening. Silent as a ball of cotton. The key slid smoothly into the lock and turned. I eased open the door. Watched and listened for any movement or noise. Nothing. I slipped my arm in and turned on my lights. The alarm was already off.

Mayhem erupted from my backyard as my dogs snarled and threw themselves at the sliding glass door with angsted fervor. I hadn't let them out there. Maybe Aaron had stopped by. But the dogs were clearly upset, and they wouldn't be if it had been my brother who'd visited.

Even if there was a noise, I wouldn't hear it over the violent ruckus. I sidled into the room. Nothing but my blue furniture and beige carpet. Through the glass door, I saw Ruffles was foaming and standing stock still. When he moved, it was with the stiff-legged, high-toed, movements of a mechanical being. His upper lip was curled completely over his nose and the resulting sound came through the glass like an outboard motor. I'd never seen him so livid, and I honestly wondered how he could breathe like that.

Satan was throwing herself at the door again and again, as if she were a small missile that would weaken and eventually punch through the glass. I could picture the trauma her body experienced every time she made contact. If I didn't do something fast, she would be covered in bruises, maybe even broken bones.

Something had upset them so much that even my presence didn't calm them. Moving quickly through my home, I cleared all the rooms; no one was hidden anywhere. Then, I put the safety back on the gun, set it down, and went to focus on my poor dogs. I pulled out the rod I kept in the track. That's when I noticed the dark brown handprint on the sliding door.

Unless I missed my guess, that was dried blood.

I pulled my cellphone and dialed Eccheli. It took him a long time to answer, and he didn't sound too happy, but his sleep-cracked voice got animated the moment I explained what had happened.

He said, "Don't touch anything. We'll be right there."

"My dogs might be injured. I need to go out there and check them." Satan had calmed a little, but she still paced the window in agitation. Ruffles was standing stock still, growling.

He hesitated. "Do you have kitchen gloves?"

"I have painter's gloves." Actually, I didn't. But I did have some of the gloves the police left behind at the bar. Close enough.

"Perfect. Go out to them, don't let them in. We'll get there right away." He disconnected.

I probably was working my way back up Johnson's 'person of interest' list with this middle of the night phone call. Nothing to be done about it.

When he'd said they'd get there right away, he wasn't kidding. I'd managed to find my gloves, put them on, and had only been outside a few minutes. I was sitting in the soaked grass, trying to calm a frantic Satan so I could inspect her for injuries when my cellphone vibrated against my thigh.

Eccheli asked, "We good to come in?"

"Yeah, we're out back."

The minute the front door opened, Satan became all claws and teeth and twisted out of my arms. She threw herself at the glass door, ballistic missile at work again. As for Ruffles, I was used to his snarls, but the intensity of the one he gave at that moment scared me.

I watched Eccheli and Johnson as they entered my house. Saw how he noticed my Colt Python on the counter, pointed it out to Johnson, and how she nodded and pocketed it. I certainly hoped she was going to give that back; it had cost me a pretty penny.

As the two detectives cleared the house, again, flashing lights of an arriving squad car ricocheted off the back fence of the yard. I would probably be as popular in my neighborhood as a scorpion. At least there was no siren.

Mr. and Mrs. Detective returned to the front room. Eccheli leaned close to the glass, studying the handprint. Johnson stared out the glass at me and pointed at the door handle. When I shook my head, she pulled out her phone and called me. "How are the dogs?"

I shouted over the violence of growls and barks. "Ruffles has no injuries, but I can't get Satan to hold still to check her!"

"Want me to call animal control to tranq her?"

I hesitated. I didn't want to do that to my dogs, but I didn't foresee Satan letting me check her any time soon and that bloody handprint scared me. I nodded to the woman staring out at me, feeling somehow like a traitor.