

*Run!*

The word repeated inside Catherine Harper's head and she tried to get her feet to listen. They were moving, but not fast enough. She continued to make her way forward, doing her best to ignore the whipping winds of the upcoming storm. Not once did she take an extra second to glance behind her. If she was still being followed, looking to see would waste time and slow her down. If she wasn't, she'd find out soon enough.

The town's bell tower rang out once. One o'clock in the morning. Much later than she'd promised herself she'd leave. God, why had she stayed at the bar so long?

Because she hated being alone in the house she'd once shared with William. Her plan was to leave with her friend, Eva, around ten and drive down to Nana Ruth's place. William had been staying there for the last six months, and she wanted to surprise him. Maybe even attempt to reconcile with him.

But at nine-thirty, word spread that the mayor had called in all available law enforcement officers to prepare for the approaching storm. Catherine wasn't sure where William was, only that he wouldn't be at his Nana's, and because of that, when Eva left the bar, Catherine told her she was staying. Eva only had one drink two hours ago and was perfectly fine to drive, a fact she brought up while trying yet again to persuade Catherine to leave with her.

"I'm not ready to go yet," Catherine had finally told her. "There are a few guys I haven't flirted with yet."

"I don't like leaving you here by yourself. You're tipsy."

"I'm fine. Trust me," Catherine said. "I know how much is too much."

Finally, Eva looked disapprovingly at Catherine and told her to give her a call when she was ready, and she'd come pick her up.

But when Catherine left over three hours later, she didn't want to call Eva and wake her up. Especially remembering that disapproving look. The crowd at the bar had grown after Eva left, and Catherine couldn't remember the last time she'd danced so much. She decided instead to walk home, knowing it would be disastrous to drive. Little had she known walking could be just as dangerous.

When she finally stepped outside, the clouds of the upcoming storm covered the moon, making everything darker than normal. Thankfully, she could still make out the street and walked in the direction of her house. It was about five miles to the house she and William had built. A long walk, but it would help sober her up. One stretch of the walk would take her along the beach, and she'd always loved the sight of the moon over the ocean. She'd hoped that maybe once she got there, the sky would have cleared some.

She'd only made it a few feet when she heard footsteps behind her. She faltered for a second and thought about turning around and returning to the bar. But that would be crazy. They were in Eden, for crying out loud. She was perfectly safe. But as time went on, the footsteps continued

to follow, matching every turn she made. Whoever it was didn't call out, and she never looked over her shoulder. Yet, with each step, her heart beat faster.

And now she was running.

She came to the end of the street. Before her, the beach and Atlantic Ocean spread as wide and as far as she could see. To her left, the abandoned Beachcome Hotel loomed dark and eerie. No way she would go there with someone after her. Talk about a death trap.

To her right, the road home beckoned. She didn't hesitate. Even empty, it was still home. And home was safe. She'd never complain again about being alone if it meant she would make it home safely.

Safe.

She turned to the right and only took a few steps when a dark figure stepped out of the shadows in front of her. She froze.

With a scream, she just started running again and found herself on the beach. Her eyes searched frantically for a place to hide. The dunes! She'd played and hidden in them as a child. She'd make it to one, hide until whoever it was left, and then she'd call Eva. She reached for the assuring weight of her phone, but it wasn't there. With a curse, she remembered placing it on the bathroom sink at the bar while she washed her hands. She didn't remember picking it back up. How irresponsible of her to go out and get drunk. What was she, a college girl?

As she ran, the sand pulled at her feet, slowing her down while at the same time swirling around her and stinging her eyes thanks to the unrelenting winds. Panic threatened to overtake her. She forced herself to calm down and think clearly. If she took her shoes off, she'd move faster. On the other hand, if she stopped, even for a second, whoever was behind her would catch up.

So she kept moving forward. Shoes be damned.

If her feet hadn't responded before, they weren't doing any better in the sand. The ocean's edge rippled in the low light just ahead, warning her she had to turn one way or the other.

Right.

It was closer to home, and the path held a higher probability of running into someone. Not that she imagined anyone would be up in this sleepy town at one in the morning, other than the numerous officers planning for the coming storm. But they were miles away and of no help.

She only needed one person, and she searched the expanse of beach before her, looking for someone.

Anyone.

She dodged left and made a hard right, picking up speed unexpectedly. Her spirit soared as hope urged her onward.

Without thinking, she glanced over her shoulder. The person trailed behind, but not as close. She was going to make it home and relief filled her.

Her right foot came down, but instead of landing on sand, it met nothing. She whipped her head forward, only to tumble into a hole. Instinctively, her body flipped over and struggled to stand, but the top of the hole was over her head.

Panic no longer crept upon her, it attacked. She clawed the sand, desperate to climb out, but all her actions did was to bring more sand down on top of her.

She held still for a second, attempting to calm down and fill her body with air. She could do this. How hard was it to climb out of a hole?

A shadow fell over her and she looked up, heart pounding.

The dark figure stood at the rim of the hole.

The moon came out from behind a cloud, and the person bent down, even as moonlight illuminated their face.

She gasped in recognition and relief. "What's wrong with you scaring me like that? Help me out of here."

"The coins, Catherine. Where are they?"

She stared at the outstretched hand and the relief she'd felt seconds before, vanished. An icy feeling of dread swirled around her, leaving her with a cold sense of foreboding. Those damn coins. "Help me out first."

"No. The coins."

Every small move she made, even shifting to get closer, caused more sand to fall. Still, she lifted her head to look into the eyes above her, and found she no longer recognized the person behind them. At that moment, she saw the offer of help for the lie it was.

"You've made your choice then. Goodbye, Catherine."

In the second before the figure stood, Catherine grabbed the still outstretched hand, moving fast enough to get a grip on their arm. She clawed and scratched, desperate to climb out somehow.

Something slammed into the side of her face, causing her to let go and drop again into the hole.

"You drew blood!"

She'd lost precious ground she feared she couldn't get back. Mere inches of gain were lost, and it might as well have been feet due to the amount of sand her struggle caused to fall into the hole. As the sand climbed higher, every broken vow she'd made to William flashed before her. She had to make it right. She just needed more time. "Please. Get me out."

Sand raining down on her was the only reply. Every move, every breath brought more. Her lungs ached, and she took a deep breath, filling her mouth with a mixture of air and sand. Coughing made the ache worse.

"Please..."

It was too late.

The sand's weight pressed against her. She gasped as her arms slowly became pinned to her side. There was nothing to keep the sand from her face and she choked one last time as it slowly filled her mouth.

Her last thought was of William.