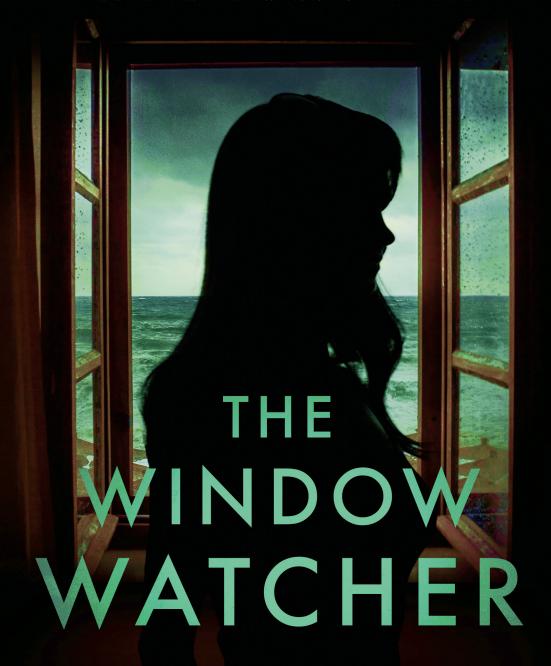
SELAH AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR



"Gripping from start to finish, brilliantly paced, and emotionally complex."

**—KYLE KEENAN, SUSPENSE AUTHOR** 

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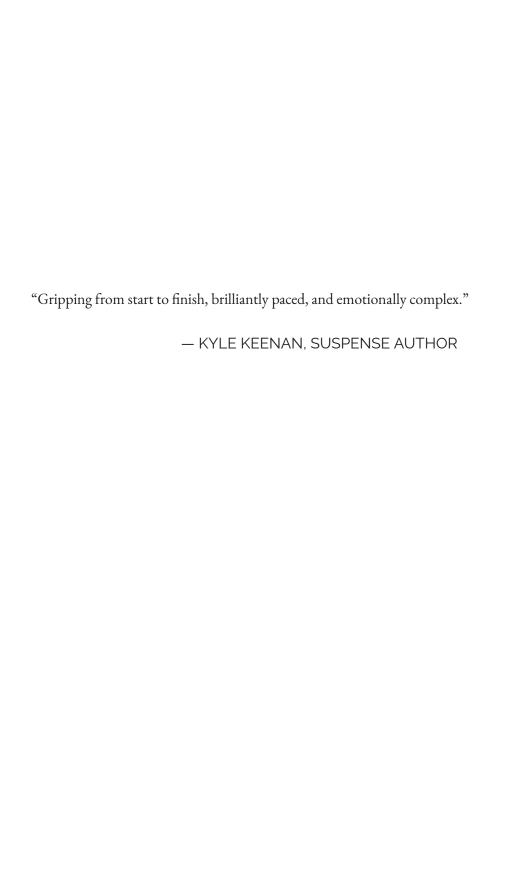
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Caspersen Beach Venice Island, Florida Present Day

I GUESS I shouldn't have noticed him. Not at this time of night. Just a bulky shadow, looming larger due to the trash bag he lugged across the sand. Probably, come daylight, he was the type who'd sprawl on the beach with a speaker box to his left and a cooler of beer to his right, trying to hide his potbelly with a hardback novel.

I knew the kind.

I knew all of them. After all, I'd watched them all enough, hadn't I?

Archie said it was stupid. He said wives should clean house, cook supper, rub their husband's feet all day and think of nothing else.

Not stare out beach cottage windows.

Not wish they could trade places with one of the strangers outside.

Pulling my pajama strap back on my shoulder, I lowered to the window seat and leaned my forehead against the cool glass.

Bulk Man stopped six or seven feet from the moonlit water and craggy rocks. He bent over, hands on his knees, as if the ordeal had exhausted him. Then, straightening again, he pulled something out of the bag.

Something long.

Like a shovel.

Unease spiked through me, as sharp as one of the new shark teeth Archie was always presenting to me with his ridiculous grins.

I squelched the tension, though. Nothing was wrong with bringing a shovel to the beach. Or digging, for that matter.

That's just what he was doing too. Digging. His movements were strong and fluid. Into the ground. Up. Over his shoulder. A spray of sand. Repeat and repeat again, until I had to force myself to uncurl the tight balls of my fists.

What was wrong with me?

I watched people every day from this window. Last week, I saw a two-year-old girl half drown because her mom was too busy flirting with a beach patrol officer. Days before that, a fifty-some-year-old woman had a seizure in her beach chair. Once I'd even witnessed a brawl between three college kids—and I'd sat here, safe and unaffected in my window seat, as the paramedics stormed the beach and carted two of them away on gurneys.

They hadn't interested me much. Their life didn't appeal to me any more than mine did.

But this.

I swallowed hard as Bulk Man pulled something unidentifiable out of the bag. *This* did interest me.

And terrified me.

One by one, he dropped the too-dark-to-see items into the hole he'd dug, crumpled the bag, tossed it into the hole, then made use of his shovel again. Within fifteen minutes, he was finished. He continued down the beach with powerful strides, then disappeared.

Too bad I couldn't walk away from things as easily.

I sighed and scooted from my window seat, rubbing my arms against the

chill bumps. From above the refrigerator, the atomic-age clock stirred a groan in my throat. Two o'clock already. How had it gone by so quickly?

In less than four hours, Archie would be back. Good ol' Archie—wearing his front desk polo shirt, with the *Salt & Swim Resort* badge pinned to his chest, his eyes circled and haggard from another night shift.

They would brighten as he walked through the door, though. They always did.

Not at me.

Heaven knew they skimmed past me every time and landed on something else. Something I hated. The wooden-framed displays, hundreds of them, with their black and white shark teeth all staring at me and gashing into my sanity and making me wish I could escape the pain of their bite.

I tried not to look at them as I made my way into the bedroom, shut the door, and climbed under our plush comforter. The warmth stifled me. From the pillowcase next to mine, his bergamot aftershave made my stomach roil.

I never dreamed it would be like this. I never dreamed that I'd go to bed by myself every night, or that I'd sit in a window seat all day because I had no one to talk to, or that I'd dread the sound of my husband's Impala pulling up to our cottage beach house at six every morning.

I sniffed and palmed the moisture away from my eyes. I yanked the comforter over my head. No more thoughts of Archie. Not tonight. He annoyed me enough without inviting him into my dreams too.

No, I'd dream about something else tonight. The Bulk Man outside maybe. Yes, that's what I'd dream about. Not just because he'd frightened me, but because he walked like a man who had purpose. Because he intrigued me. Because whatever he buried in that hole made me forget about shark teeth, if only for a moment.

Maybe tomorrow, I would go outside and see if I could spot him with his speaker box and beer cooler and hardback novel.

Maybe tomorrow I'd dig up whatever it was he buried.

### "MORNING." Dismal, as always.

I leaned in the doorway between the den and the kitchen, tightening the fleece strap of my robe. "I made coffee."

"Not hungry." Archie Duval set his lunch box on the counter with a *thud*. "Where's my new sifter?"

"Where'd you put it?"

"Come on, Lise. It came in the mail yesterday. You saw the package. Where is it?"

"Oh, that." I moved into the den, grabbed the UPS package from the sofa, and brought it back to him. "You have so many I didn't know which one you were looking for."

He caught my eyes for a second and shook his head, as if disgusted with me. "You never leave off, do you?"

"All I said was—"

"Yeah, yeah. I know what you said. Good thing I don't keep tabs on how many new shirts you buy in a month or how many shoes you bring home or—"

"Forget it, Arch. It's too early for this." I went to the white-painted cabinets, grabbed a mug, and poured myself a cup since he didn't want one. "How was work?"

He'd already moved into the den and didn't answer.

I followed him in, watched him lower to the couch and rip open the box. If only I could swallow down my ire as easily as I swallowed down the warm coffee. "Well?"

"Work was fine. Long night." His mustache twitched with excitement, as he pulled out the new sifter and ran his fingers over the metal edges. He looked different sitting there—with his polo shirt, his sandy-blond mustache, his short frame and combed hair.

Not at all like the pleasant, smiling Archie I'd met four years ago in California. He'd been stronger then. He'd walked with more surety in his steps. Like a man. Like a human. Like someone I could look up to and respect. When he'd looked at me, in those early days, he'd seen *me* and understood *me* and loved *me*.

Not this aimless obsession of his.

Not the teeth. In some ways, they'd torn him apart as much as they had me. He just couldn't see it.

"I'm going to grab a quick nap, then head out to the beach." He stood and handed me the empty box. "Take this to the trash, will you?"

I tucked it under my arm. "Goodnight to you too—"

A scream.

I dropped the mug, the box, and yelped as the hot coffee soaked through my pajamas. "What was that?"

Archie crunched over the broken glass with his sneakers. "Burned?"

"No. Not really." I went on tip-toe. "I may need you to get my slippers. They're in my closet next to the—"

He swung me into his arms. Something came over his expression, a slight flush, as if the impulse of holding me made him uncomfortable.

Heat burned at my own cheeks. His skin was smooth against mine, scented with bergamot aftershave, and something about needing him and him obliging, if even for a moment, birthed a longing in me I'd thought was dead.

He cleared his throat. "I'd never find them with all your shoes." He swung me to the window seat, as if he'd known I'd want to be there, and practically dropped me to the tropical-patterned cushion. "I'll get a broom."

I turned to the window and pushed it open. Through the screen, a woman stood on the beach—near Bulk Man's hole—with her hands covering her mouth and someone else pulling her back.

Another woman, in shades and a bikini, seemed to be making a phone call. I couldn't make out the words over the roar of the ocean and the incessant *huoh-huoh* of the seagulls.

Last night's tension hit me in the stomach again.

Only worse.

I waited until Archie brushed the broken mug into a dustpan, then skirted around and darted to my bedroom. I threw on a green bandeau dress, whipped my hair into a ponytail, then hurried outside and followed the wooden walkway to the beach.

Three feet from the partially un-dug hole, the woman in the bikini raised a hand to stop me. "I wouldn't look if I were you, honey. Police are on their way. Best just stay back."

But I didn't listen. I couldn't. I slipped closer and glanced down, taking in a sharp breath.

A severed leg. A torso. A head, with blond hair, matted with blood, so much blood...

Nausea hit me and I had to step back to keep the black spots from overtaking my vision. I wrapped my arms around my stomach. Then sank to the sand. Then jumped when the bikini lady laid her hand on my shoulder.

"You better just sit there for a minute, honey. You're going white on us."

I took my gaze out to the horizon, the light pink-blue sky, the morning sunlight, the soothing sway of wave toppling on wave. A thousand thoughts pricked at my brain. None of them made sense.

Except one.

I had seen a murderer.

FOR TWO HOURS STRAIGHT, I sat in my window seat and watched the beach light up with red and blue lights. Policemen milled back and forth, one carrying a clipboard, another talking on his radio, another bagging and tagging evidence. Near the hole, a female forensic photographer snapped photos of the body parts.

The body parts. I forced down another wave of vomit and tried to think. The man last night. I must have seen something. I must have noticed more than what my memory was serving me, a clue that could unmask such a brutal butcherer. Why hadn't I realized? The bag, the shovel, the mysteriousness of it all. Shouldn't I have known?

"Someone's coming."

I nearly toppled from my seat at Archie's voice drifting in from the kitchen.

When I didn't answer, he poked his head in. "Hear me? Someone's coming. A cop. What's going on out there?"

"You mean you slept through all that?" Too emerged in his precious dream of finding a megalodon, no doubt.

He must have sensed my thoughts because he frowned. "You try staying up all night and see what you can sleep through. Answer the door, will you?"

I didn't feel like facing anyone, least of all a policeman. Besides, I had nothing to tell them. Nothing that would help, that is.

Pushing loose hair from my face and sucking in air, I walked to the kitchen, brushed past Archie, and swung open the door.

A forty-something cop stood before me, smeared eyeliner beneath both eyes and a weary pull to her lips. "Sorry to bother you, ma'am. I'm sure you're well aware of what's going on out there, so I'll get right to the point."

"Just what *is* going on out there?" Archie must have stepped behind me because his warm breath fell on my neck.

The woman pinched the bridge of her nose. "Last night, alleged murder. Today, chaos. I'm the preliminary investigating officer, so like I said, I'll get right to the point. Did either of you see anything last night or this morning? Anything at all?"

"I'm a front desk clerk at the *Salt & Swim Resort*. I work nights. Slept through the morning."

The officer nodded. Then turned to me.

A thousand words tried to spring through my throat, but the only one that made it out was a soft, "No."

"No what, ma'am?"

"No, I didn't see anything. I'm sorry."

"Nothing to apologize for. We just have to check our grounds." The woman tipped the end of her black ballcap, murmured thanks, then left.

When I finally glanced up at Archie, he was watching me.

Strangely.

Irritation flamed in me. "What?"

He leaned his hip into the counter. "Weren't watching the window last

night?"

"No."

"You're lying."

"No, I'm not. I read a book and went to bed early. Isn't that what you always want me to do?" I started past him, but he grabbed my arm. His eyes stayed with me a long time, saying something, though I didn't know what.

Then, shaking his head, he released me and left out the sliding doors to the beach, taking his new sifter with him.

My mind reeled as I moved back to the window seat. A fissure of panic opened inside of me, as I tried to process what in the world was wrong with me. Why had I lied just now? What had made me do such a thing?

I didn't know.

But something had.

And that was what alarmed me.

AS SOON AS Archie left for work, I stayed glued to the window. For hours I sat there, leaning against the cool glass, hearing the roar of the ocean faintly over the hum of the air conditioner.

He wouldn't come back.

Of course I knew that.

Bulk Man, whoever he was, was probably long gone by now and would cover his tracks so well he'd never be seen again. He was the sort of man who could do that. He had power about him, a sense of strength and intelligence. I'd known that from the beginning, hadn't I?

After several hours, I began to doze off. I shook myself awake several times, then finally grabbed some yogurt and granola for a snack. Just as I spooned the last bite of cool vanilla into my mouth, movement caught my eye in the distant moonlight.

My stomach dropped as I jerked my gaze to where he'd been before.

He was there now. Standing just the same, another bag, digging a second

time with all the nonchalance as if he were taking out the trash or hoeing the garden.

I dropped the yogurt and raced for my cell. I dialed 9, then 1, but I couldn't press the button again. Why? Why couldn't I call?

Tears pushed to my eyes and I scrambled back to the window and brought up my camera instead. I snapped photos. Then took a short video. Then just sat there, weight pressing the air from my lungs, shaking with a fearful cold.

As soon as he'd finished digging, he stuffed the shovel back into his bag. He started away, just as he'd done before—but this time he stopped. In the silvery light, he turned to face me. Almost as if he'd known. As if he'd expected I would be watching.

He waited for so long the weight in my chest turned into an ache. I couldn't see his eyes, his face, not anything but his bulky and rigid stance against the dim and blueish ocean.

Then he started walking again.

Within seconds, he was gone.

THE NEXT DAY, it happened all over again. Sirens blared, voices drifted from the beach, but I didn't go to my window seat or wander out to watch.

I stayed locked in the bedroom with Archie. I never slept with him anymore, not with the schedule of his latest job, so when he'd first come home to find me curled up in pajamas and still in bed, he'd raised a brow. "Sick?" he'd asked.

I'd grunted a yes and pulled the covers tighter over my shoulders.

Then he'd climbed in with me. For the longest time, I felt little more than his weight creaking the mattress springs, or his warmth spreading through the sheets.

But as he drifted into slumber, his limbs spread out. Once or twice, his leg brushed mine. Or an arm slipped over and nearly landed on me. Or his face turned my way and the even, deep, soft breaths tickled my face.

Across the cottage, someone rapped at the front door.

In the dim room, I glanced at Archie's face to see if it would wake him, but his lashes didn't even flutter. I snuggled closer to him until the knocking passed —then, like some sort of frightened fool, I pressed my head against his bare chest.

His solid heartbeat drummed away some of my anxiety. What was wrong with me? What was this about? Why did I feel this way...as if something were wrong, something more than two strangers being mutilated and buried outside?

I must have slept more fitfully last night than I thought, because next thing I knew, I was batting open my eyes and Archie was nudging me awake.

"Hey." Groggy and smooth. His hand wiped over my face and smoothed back my hair, a caress that would have been familiar two years ago in California. "You must be sick."

I yawned, but instead of pulling away as I meant to, I pressed closer to him. "Just tired, that's all."

"How long were you up at the window last night?"

I jerked. "How did you know?"

"Come on, Lise. It doesn't take rocket science to figure that one out."

"Oh." I hesitated. "Yeah."

"See anything?"

"No."

"Even if there were someone out there, it'd be too dark to see much, wouldn't it?"

"I guess."

"Maybe you should stay away from the window for a while."

"Why? Worried for me?"

He ripped back the covers and slid out of bed. "You do what you want to do. That's what you always do anyway."

I flinched a little at the tone. Had I expected one tender moment to change anything?

When he dressed, gathered his shark tooth hunting paraphernalia, and left

the bedroom, I went to the adjoining bathroom and hopped into the shower. As the warm water sprayed over me and the steam filled my lungs, I tried to fight back whatever it was Archie had just said that bothered me.

Or maybe it wasn't anything he'd said.

Maybe it was the way he looked at me, right before he left the room.

Lise, stop it. I was driving myself crazy, Bulk Man was getting under my skin, and the tension of two murders out my beach cottage window was starting to undo me.

Maybe Archie was right.

Maybe I shouldn't go to the window tonight at all.

# AFTER A SHOWER AND A MID-AFTERNOON MEAL, I was refreshed and ready to do something more than wring my hands inside. I gathered a beach towel, a book, a thermal of lemonade, and a bottle of tanning lotion, then headed out the sliding doors toward the beach.

I walked a mile or so past the crime scene, though the police and ambulances had mostly dispersed, and found a quiet spot beside a cluster of rocks. The salty breeze whipped at my damp hair, as I spread out my beach towel, rubbed on the lotion, and settled down to read. I was six pages into the new book when a gust of sand flew my way.

"Jett, please. Don't shake your towel at that poor lady." A woman with a toddler on one hip and a beach bag on the other glanced from her six-or-seven-year-old son to me. Her grin was apologetic. "I'm so sorry, miss. It won't happen again."

I nodded. "You're fine."

For several minutes, the woman fumbled with her blankets and towels and umbrella, applied sunscreen to an antsy little boy, then began changing her toddler's pink dress for a mermaid swimsuit.

I couldn't read through all the commotion, so when she asked me how often sharks attacked swimmers in the area, I didn't mind answering. We

engaged in a simple and pleasant conversation, despite the fussing toddler, and we covered everything from the weather to the predators of the sea to the price of vacations these days.

Then, as she plopped her toddler into the sand with a bucket and shovel, the woman sighed. "I still can't believe about that girl. It makes me a little nervous to even come here again, after two bodies being found so close."

"Yeah." Imagine living here, lady.

"I heard about the woman first, but we were at the Inglewood beach the day before that. But yesterday..." The mother's voice caught. "You know, I don't like to talk about this in front of the kids. They're confused enough with all the police I've had to talk to this morning. I wish I would've been somewhere else yesterday, because now I've got her face in my mind and it keeps flashing in my brain like a bad nightmare."

"The girl who was killed? You knew her?"

"Not really. I met her yesterday at the beach. Just a lanky little thing, long braids, a pretty smile. Probably not more than sixteen, I'd guess. She helped Jett there build a sand castle. Wasn't that nice?"

"Yeah. Sad too." I folded the edge of my page and closed the book. "What else do you know about her?"

"Nothing really."

"Who was she here with?"

"I don't know. From what I could tell, she was walking down the beach alone, stopping for a while here or there to find—"

"Mommy! Look at this. I found it." The little boy sprinted to his mother, tracking wet sand onto the towel, and grinning as he presented a large, broken seashell.

"That's nice, Jett. Go back and play." She dropped the seashell into her beach bag, shook her head with a grin. "The energy kids have—"

"The girl, though." I didn't realize I was gripping my book so hard until my fingers started to cramp. "What did you say she was looking for?"

"Oh, that's right. She carried around one of those round things." The woman sighed. "She said something about looking for shark teeth."

ARCHIE WASN'T INSIDE when I hurried back into the beach cottage and threw my things to the floor. He never bothered to worry about tracking in, or leaving a sandy pile of mess wherever he wanted, so why should I?

This wasn't the time to fuss about his untidiness, though.

Grabbing the car keys from the hook and slipping on my flip-flops, I left the cottage and hurried into our blue-velvet Impala. His bergamot aftershave hit me again. My hands turned clammy as they tightened around the steering wheel. What is happening?

I drove down streets, stopped at lights, hit the gas and break in turn—all in a daze. This was insanity. The fact that I was actually doing this, that I gave enough validation to my own stupid suspicions, made me sick.

Archie wasn't Bulk Man.

He couldn't be.

I knew that.

In less than five minutes, I'd prove it and settle my mind. Next time it happened, I would have no reserves in calling the police. Or sharing the photos and videos on my phone. Or answering questions asked by the preliminary investigating officer.

This was for my own peace of mind more than anything.

I pulled in front of the five-story *Salt & Swim*, with its neon sign blinking from above the door and a cluster of palm trees swaying to the breeze. Ignoring the churning of my stomach, I fast-walked to the entrance, pushed inside, and approached the front desk.

A young man greeted me, looking to be college-aged, with a name tag that read *Derek*. He spread a Colgate smile. "Afternoon, ma'am. You have a reservation?"

"I actually came to speak with the manager."

"She stepped out for a few minutes."

"When will she be back?"

He shrugged, but his smile stayed in place. "Anything I can help you with?"

I placed my hands on the counter, swallowed. "I, uh, was wondering about my husband's schedule." A pause. "He works here."

"Name?"

"Duval. Archie Duval."

The desk clerk tapped a pen to his cheek. "Hmmm. I haven't run into him, but I only work here part-time. Let me check with someone real fast." He disappeared for several minutes. Several hours, it seemed.

When he came back to the desk, he looked pleased with himself, as if he were glad he had been able to find the answers I needed. "Five days ago."

I blinked. "Pardon?"

"Five days ago. That's how long he's been off payroll." His smile faltered. "That is what you said you wanted to know, right?"

"You mean he..." A burning sensation ascended my chest. "You mean, he doesn't work here at all?"

"As of five days ago, no." I could tell what the guy was thinking. That if I was really Archie's wife, I should know this already.

There were a lot of things I should know.

"If you want to find out anything more, you'll need to talk with the manager."

"No." I backed away from the counter and rubbed my own arms, a chilling pain spiking through me. "No. That's all I needed to know."

FOR TWO HOURS, I drove around in an aimless attempt to shake the terror out of my head. Instead, it grew. The road blurred with tears and my last string of composure snapped. I doubled over the wheel with sobs.

This couldn't happen.

Not to Archie.

Not to me.

I swerved around a curve too fast and pulled into an outlet mall parking lot, lest I wreck. Get a grip. I covered my mouth, squeezed my eyes shut, but

I couldn't stop the hysteria from unfurling. Why did he always have to fail me?

Ever since our vows, he'd done everything wrong. He'd taken me to an amusement park for our honeymoon, even though I told him roller coasters made me sick. Through the following weeks, he'd been gone too often or smothered me too much. He'd worn clothes I didn't like, or hung out with friends I didn't enjoy, or listened to music that got on my nerves. He even insisted one summer on adopting a stray cat, even though I argued that I didn't want pets.

Then he whisked me from California. The one place where things had been good for us, in those pre-marriage days—and he wanted to leave.

Then the obsession.

The shark teeth. Those stupid, ugly, wretched shark teeth. I hate them. I hate them.

Sucking in air, I abated the sobs and wiped my eyes dry with my T-shirt. I pulled out my phone. The pictures stared back at me, blurry and grainy—and I watched as Bulk Man came alive in the video.

Yes, it was Archie. He must have been wearing some kind of coat, maybe a toboggan too, but it had to be him. I guess I'd known that all along. How many times had we been through the conversation?

"Look at them out there," he'd say, as he'd glance out the sliding glass doors to the beach.

"Who?"

"The people. How stupid it would be if someone like them just glanced down and found a megalodon. They wouldn't even understand the magnitude of it."

"And you do, I suppose?"

"Yeah. I do."

The words replayed in my mind, taunting me, as I turned the car back on and pulled out of the parking lot. My knees bounced with nervous energy as I sped back toward home.

His game was over.

This was one wrong Archie wasn't going to get away with.

THE HOUSE WAS DIFFERENT TODAY. The air was quiet and cold, the walls somber-looking, the shark teeth menacing in their glass display frames.

I shivered and tried not to look at them as I waited for Archie to come home. Curled up at my window seat, I watched the people outside like a stranger looking through glass at a world they could see but never be a part of.

Under a blue-striped cabana, a young couple snuggled close to each other on one beach towel. The man dipped his head to her ear and must have whispered something funny, because she threw back her head with a laugh.

Closer to the water, another couple took the hand of a little girl and swung her above a frothy wave. They shared a look with one another. A tender look. Even from here, I could see that.

Archie and I never looked at each other that way. I wish we did. I wish we laughed together. I wish we were happy, like the carefree girl and boy who fell in love at a surfing shop in California.

But this wasn't California, I wasn't the same giggling girl, and he wasn't that same flirting boy.

With a knot pushing up my throat, I left the window and forced myself through the motions of fixing dinner. Sardines filled with kale, raisins, and pine nuts, with a side of sweet potatoes—Archie's favorite. Ironic that I should fix his favorite now.

He wouldn't show up to eat it anyway.

I had nibbled at the meal, put it all in the refrigerator, and washed all the dishes before the sliding doors whined open. A couple of thuds, another whine of the doors, then his footsteps echoed throughout the house until he went to the bedroom.

I almost followed him. Instead, I went to the drawer underneath the utensil drawer and checked the Glock. It was loaded. Was this what he used to kill that blonde-headed woman? And the girl with braids? What had he used to disfigure them?

Disbelief clawed through my questions. I was wrong. I *wanted* to be wrong. Heaven help me to be wrong.

I eased the drawer back shut and went for the bedroom, my heart rate thundering.

He was inside the adjoining bathroom, door open, with sand on his tan legs and his swim trunks dripping onto the rug. He leaned close to the mirror and lathered his face. "Smells good."

It took several seconds before I comprehended what he meant. "You didn't show for supper."

"That beach stand was set up again. I grabbed a gyro."

"Good for you."

He guided the electric razor down his cheeks and didn't respond to my sarcasm.

My hands shook as I edged closer. And closer. I leaned against the doorjamb and stared at his reflection in the mirror.

The smooth, tanned skin. The gray-green eyes. The full lips and damp sandy-blond hair, tousled across his forehead, as soft to look at as it was to touch.

I hadn't run my fingers through that hair in years. Too many, maybe, because now I'd never get to do it again.

He splashed water on his face and toweled it dry. "My work shirt clean?" "Drop the act, Archie."

He paused and stared at me, surprise arching his brows. "How long you known?"

"Since today."

"It's just as well." He pushed past me into the bedroom. "Whatever you're going to say, say it now and get it over with."

"You think it's that easy?"

"What do you want me to do?" He turned on me, mouth flattening in disgust. "I was fired, okay? Slept on the job. Pretty bad guy, aren't I?"

"That depends."

"On?"

"Where you've been the last five nights."

With a humorless laugh, he jerked open his dresser drawer. "You really kill me, you know that?" He rummaged through his folded shirts with vengeance. "I almost wish there was another woman."

"How dare you—"

"How dare I?" He whirled back to me. "Don't talk to me about jealousy. I know what you do all day at that dang window. So let's not whine about respecting each other's wishes now, okay?" He yanked a sleeveless white shirt over his head and started for the door—

"I saw you."

Partway across the threshold, he paused. "Saw me what?"

"From the window. I saw you bury them."

Now he turned fully, a bulge in his forehead, eyes wider than I'd ever seen them before. "What?"

I nearly wilted under the intensity of his stare. "The woman." Nausea resurfaced. My mind summonsed the imagery. "The one with blond hair that you cut in pieces."

He stepped toward me. "What're you saying?"

"And the girl. The young one. She had braids, but you killed her—"

"Lise." My name. Different sounding. Another step. "What in the name of—"

"I don't want to hear your lies. You don't even have to explain. I know why you killed them. I should have known all along." Stinging tears blurred him. "It was for the shark teeth. That's what everything's all about, all the time. Those dumb shark teeth. That one megalodon. Finding something you can put in your displays and obsess over and—"

"You're crazy." He shook his head, breathing hard, then darted from the bedroom.

I chased after him, but shrank back before I followed him into the kitchen. I needed to think. Needed to act. With hands damp and shaking, I pulled my phone from my pocket and dialed 9-1-1, pressed it to my ear...

"Lise, no!" He lunged for me and slung the device across the room.

I scampered after it, but he caught my elbow. Then I was against him, back to his chest, with his muscled arm around my neck. My own frantic heartbeat drummed against his skin.

"Listen to me." His voice in my ear. Slow. Thick. Each syllable measured. "We're gonna talk this out."

"There's nothing you can say."

"I didn't kill them. I didn't kill anyone."

"I don't believe you."

"You can't call the police. I won't let you tell those lies about me—"

"You can't stop me." I wrenched free and stumbled away from him, but he followed me into the kitchen. I backed into the cabinets. In one nanosecond, I rolled out the drawer and pulled out the Glock.

He stared at it with a new expression. Less shock, more hurt—and instead of edging toward me with his arms spread, he stopped and dropped his arms to his sides. Was it my imagination, or was there moisture in his dazed expression?

"Back into the den." My voice was not my own. I was detached from the words as much as I was detached from every movement I made.

He moved into the den without response and stiffened when I bent down to retrieve the cell.

"I can't let you call, Lise." I should have known that. Just like the amusement park. Or his wardrobe. Or the stray kitten. He never bent to anything I said.

"Don't try to stop me." With one hand steadying the gun at his chest, I unlocked my phone and dialed—

Like a flash, he dove for me.

The gun went off. The sound ricocheted and jarred the framed displays, followed by the alarming thud of his body hitting the carpet.

No, no. I sucked air into my lungs, but couldn't release it. I dropped the gun. I scurried to the opposite side of the room, fingers splayed over my chest, and made the call.

"911. What's your emergency?"

"I, uh, I..." Licking my lips, I tried to keep my gaze away from the red

seeping into the carpet beneath my husband's body. "I'm c-calling to tell you that I, uh...that I know who killed those two women buried on the beach."

"Thank you for coming forth with this information, ma'am, but he's already in custody and taken care of." The words pierced me to the core and I dropped the phone.

But not before I heard her say, "He signed a confession this morning."

I WANTED to tell him the ambulance was on its way. I wanted to tell him about the mistake, about the man who signed the confession and committed the murders and caused all the madness we were suffering.

But I didn't tell him anything.

I sat beside him with my knees soaking up his metallic-scented blood, and eased him over.

His nostrils flared, the vein bulged again, and his skin drained colorless as he groped for the hole under his collar bone.

"I didn't know." How stupid to say that. How stupid to sit here and thread my fingers through his soft hair, when ten minutes ago I had tried to end his life.

He was dying.

The reality of it seared through me, white-hot and painful, like shark teeth ripping through my organs. I touched his cold cheeks, then his brow, then his lips. "Archie?"

His eyes stayed on me, stricken and rounded.

"I thought you were the man. I thought you were the man in the window."

"I hated...that window."

What? The tone was familiar. The same one I'd used endless times about his friends, his hobbies, his cat, his shark teeth.

I never knew he hated something of mine.

"You sat there and...and..." Blood leaked from his lips. "Wished you were someone else." A cough. "Or that I was."

"Archie, don't talk."

"Nothing I ever did was good enough."

"That's not true."

"Back in California...you loved me for what you...imagined me." Deeper, quieter. "Couldn't live up to it. Just a man, Lise. I'm just a man..."

"Don't say that. It isn't true." I drew in a breath of gun smoke and bergamot aftershave. I almost puked. "Things would have been good for us. If it weren't for the shark teeth, we could have been happy."

He shook his head, but his eyes drifted shut. As if to say the shark teeth were irrelevant. As if to say he'd run to an obsession to cope with mine. To fill his needs. To escape.

"I didn't know." Crushing agony enveloped me. I bent over him. I kissed his lips, still and soft and tasting like that old passion I once knew in California.

A passion I could have had here in the beach cottage. Or anywhere else, the rest of my life, if I'd only loved him. Just as he was, without expectation, without wishing him or myself into something else.

His lips no longer responded. They went slack beneath me, and my breath ceased to mingle with his.

Loss hollowed through me and shot numbness through my veins. What had I done? In the name of sanity, how could I have been so wrong?

I moved away from him, the sticky blood dripping down my fingers, and staggered to the window seat. In a daze, I took my usual position and stared out the glass at the people outside.

For the rest of my life I would watch them.

Not wishing I could live their life. Not like before. Not wishing Archie could be like a stranger I spotted on the beach.

But wishing I could have back all those things I used to sit here and wish away.

God forgive me.

## **ABOUT THE** AUTHOR



HANNAH LINDER, represented by Books & Such Literary Management, is a Christian fiction author residing in the mountains of central West Virginia. Her upcoming Regency romantic suspense novel, Beneath His Silence, will be releasing with Barbour Publishing in November of 2022. She is a double 2021 Selah Award winner, a 2022 Selah Award winner, and an ACFW member. Follow her journey at www.hannahlinderbooks.com.







