

Chapter One

Dawn broke in heavy fog. A solitary runner moved along the beach, guided by the slope of the shore and the faint glow of the Atlantic horizon. Up ahead a lifeguard stand formed in the mist, her quarter mile marker. It gained substance as she drew near, a tall weathered bench facing the sea with a sign at the base that said DANGER—NO SWIMMING. She passed to the right with a backward glance, as stand and sign disappeared in the fog.

Moments later she sensed them behind her, two runners, maybe more, approaching at a steady pace. She felt their footfall beneath her own feet, strong and rhythmic on the hard-packed beach. To avoid a collision she veered to the right, and her sneakers slapped through warm, foamy surf. But they stayed on her tail, closing the gap, and a flush of panic rose in her face. They had found her, somehow, on this empty beach. No one would save her, and no one would witness her murder.

She cut left toward the dunes and the oceanfront homes, clutching her head protectively against the blast to come. But he pounced from behind, knocking her down and pinned her to the sand. She felt a knee in the small of her back and his hot, ragged breath in her ear. She would die, but not like this, and with her one free arm she flailed at the air.

“Don’t fight him, lady! That makes it worse.” A male voice, young and concerned, from somewhere close by.

The weight shifted suddenly and she rolled onto her back, finally locking eyes with her killer. “JEsus—”

“Sorry about that,” said the young male voice. “Dogs are allowed on the beach before nine.” His dog was a pony-sized Newfoundland. He twitched in manic delight and repositioned himself across her chest. A slimy string of saliva hung from his jowls.

“Sorry - ”

“Just get him *off* me!”

“I’m trying, but he thinks you’re playing with him.”

She blinked the sand from her eyes and a kid, about sixteen years old, came into focus.

He yanked the dog’s collar and pulled him to his feet. “He doesn’t bite, you know.”

“Why should he? He can just scare people to death!” She stood up slowly, both eyes on the dog, and scraped a layer of wet sand from her nylon running suit.

“I’m really sorry,” the boy repeated lamely. He was slightly built, no heavier than his monster pet.

“Okay. Just forget it.”

“Did he hurt you?”

“No. But he knocked the wind out of me. You really should keep him on a leash.”

The boy nodded contritely, then squinted into the fog. “What happened to your friend?”

“Friend? What friend?”

“The guy running right behind you. I thought you were together.”