

## A Stranger on the Beach

By Michele Campbell

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There was a stranger on the beach. He was standing in front of my house, staring at it like he was casing it to rob.

Sometimes fate sneaks up on you. But Aidan Callahan didn't sneak up on me. He was brazen. He stood there in the middle of the sand, staring up at my brand-spanking-new beachfront house, looking like he was up to no good. I saw him clearly as I looked through the wall of windows, over the infinity-edge pool, to the ocean beyond. Yes, he was gorgeous. But I was a married woman of twenty years standing who loved her husband, and I barely noticed that. What I noticed was that this guy looked strong. Dangerously so. And he dressed like a townie. Baggy athletic shorts, tank top, the glint of a gold chain at his neck. People like him resented people like me, and sometimes, they robbed them. There had been a string of robberies recently, of some of the big houses. The summer people thought the local cops were dragging their feet about solving them, maybe because the culprits were local boys. When I saw Aidan standing there, those robberies were the first thing that leapt to mind, and a chill went down my spine.

I'll tell you everything that happened, starting from the beginning. My first impression of Aidan was that he was a potential thief. If only I'd listened to my instincts, I would've turned and run in the opposite direction. But that's not what I did. I walked toward him. And I will always blame myself for what came after.

It was a hot, sultry day, two weeks past Labor Day, and the bluff had cleared out. The summer people were all back in the city, leaving only me, and my next-door neighbor, old Mrs. Eberhardt. She lives in an old saltbox shack on a wide lot that's coveted by every real estate developer in the east end. I live in the type of place that people build after they tear down houses like hers. She has a yappy little dog that wakes me up at five-thirty every morning. As you can imagine, we didn't have much to say to one another, so basically, I was at the beach alone.

I'd been waiting around all day for the technician from the burglar alarm company to show up for the installation. The house had that fresh paint smell. Details were still being attended to, and the alarm was one of the last items on the punch list. The company gave me a window from ten to two for installation, which I said was fine, because I had work to do preparing for the huge housewarming party I would be throwing in a matter of days. Finalizing guest lists, working out catering menus, scheduling the delivery of the tent, negotiating with the valet parking company, angling to get a photographer from Avenue Magazine to show up and take pictures for the society column. On and on. Hours passed, and the alarm guy still hadn't showed. At four, I called to complain, and they told me the technician was overbooked, and they'd have to reschedule for next week. *Typical*. I thought about reaching for the bottle of gin in the cabinet and mixing myself a nice strong cocktail to ease my frustration. But it was hours till sunset, and I decided to be good. I'd go for a run on the beach instead.

As I laced up my sneakers, I got the urge to text my daughter. Hannah had just left for college, and I was having trouble letting go. I gave the hair elastic on my wrist a good snap to

feel the clarifying sting. My sister had taught me that trick. Aversion therapy. She'd used it to quit smoking, and now I was using it so I wouldn't be a helicopter mom. It worked. The urge passed. I walked through the French doors onto the terrace and took a deep breath of the salty air. The ocean was visible beyond the bluff, the crash of the waves audible from here. The surf was rough today, yet it never failed to calm me.

And I needed calming. Hannah's departure had set me adrift, leaving me all too conscious of how alone I felt in my life. My husband Jason traveled constantly for business. He'd never actually spent a single night at the beach house, despite the fact that we were pouring all our money into it. The house was a big source of stress between us. It was my dream, not his. We'd stretched to buy the land, which was postage-stamp-sized but in a primo location. We'd stretched even more to build the perfect house on it. Things weren't right between me and Jason, but in all honesty, I didn't fully know that yet. It was just a nagging feeling lurking in my heart, making me antsy and discontented. But I fought it. I told myself, he works a lot. He's a good provider. A good father. And hey, somebody's got to pay for the house, right? I shouldn't complain.

I picked up the pace, fighting the pull of the sugary sand against the bottom of my sneakers, legs working, oxygen pumping through my veins. A shaft of light broke through the clouds, illuminating the water to a sparkling green. I lived on the part of the bluff closer in to the main road, where land was "affordable" at a million-plus an acre. (I won't say how much beyond a million.) The route I liked to run took me down the beach away from the road, toward the point, where the true mansions were. There was a house out there that last traded at forty million. You couldn't see it though, because of the tall, perfectly groomed hedge that its famous

owners installed for privacy. I'd never met those people, and I guessed I never would. Jason and I didn't rate. He was an investment banker, but not one of the famous ones who hung out with celebrities and owned a fleet of jets. I was an interior designer, but not the type with a million Instagram followers and houses featured in Architectural Digest. I'd stopped working when Hannah was born and had only recently gone back, trying to get my business off the ground, but facing headwinds. Jason and I moved in well-to-do circles, but we weren't at the top of the heap. The thing about being rich is, there's always someone richer.

I ran a mile-plus down the beach, not letting myself stop till I was out at the point. Then I doubled over, panting and holding my sides, till I caught my breath. I'd be forty-three in November, and I liked to think I still looked good. But lately there were hints of middle age coming on. Fine lines in the mirror that I covered with make-up, gray hairs peeking through that I masked with highlights. But you can't fake exercise. I needed to get back to Pilates class, or hire a trainer. Getting the house finished had taken too much time and energy. With Hannah gone, I should focus on *myself*.

The clouds were rolling in over the water, turning the sky black. I could smell the rain coming. I hadn't checked the forecast before I left, but generally they were saying to expect a stormy fall and a bad hurricane season. My superstitious mother had left me with a fear of electrical storms, to the point that I wouldn't turn on a faucet if it was lightning out. So, when the first peal of thunder sounded, I turned around and headed back.

Ten minutes later, I was back on my stretch of the bluff, with a clear line of sight to my house. A huge thunderclap sounded, and a vivid bolt of lightning split the sky. And there he was again, like some demon who'd materialized from thin air. The stranger I'd seen an hour earlier

from my kitchen window. Staring again. The sight of him stopped me short. I could tell he was a townie, that he didn't belong in my neighborhood. Maybe that sounds snobbish. But I don't come from money, and I didn't mean it that way. As a matter of fact, Aidan that day reminded me of my own people. My brothers and their friends, playing street hockey back in the day on hot afternoons in front of our house. I loved those guys, but they were no angels. I know what I'm talking about. I know casing when I see it, and when I saw Aidan, I knew exactly what he was doing.

I'm not a shrinking violet, and I can take care of myself. I walked toward him, determined to say something.

*"Hey! Hey, can I help you?"* I yelled.

The wind took my words away. But somehow, he heard and turned and smiled at me. The smile, I definitely noticed. It was like the sun breaking through the clouds, and all my suspicions melted away. He fooled me. Anybody can get fooled.

*"That's your house?"*

He spoke as if he already knew the answer. I should have noticed that, and realized it was odd. But I didn't see it. I only saw him.

*"Yes,"* I said.

*"She's a beauty."*

*"Thank you."*

*"I'm Aidan,"* he said, and held out his hand. I took it.

*"Caroline."*

*"Caroline. Pretty name."*

“Thank you.”

His hand was warm. His eyes were very blue. He looked at me searchingly. I felt tongue-tied. He had to be ten or fifteen years younger than me. He seemed like he was about to say something more. But then, the skies opened, and it started pouring.

“You should get inside before you get soaked,” he said.

“Yes.”

That was it, our whole conversation. He gave me a little wave and turned and hurried off. He was so casual about it, so nonchalant, that I forgot all about the idea that he might be a burglar. The beach where he'd been standing was public. He had a right to be there, and I figured he was just a guy who stopped to look at a beautiful house. Twice. Okay. But that's not a crime. I went inside and tried to put him out of my mind, but I didn't entirely succeed. My interest had been piqued. My guard had been lowered. My life was not in order. The combination of those things would prove to be my downfall.