

CHAPTER THREE

The walk there ended up being a lot more difficult than I thought. Because the lighthouse was situated on the top of a small cliff, it meant a near vertical climb on my hands and knees. I tried holding my iPhone in my mouth for a while until I decided I was better off letting my eyes adjust to the dark and have my night vision kick in.

With my hands soaking up the sea-sprayed grass and coarse dirt, I slowly found my way to the crest. On the other side, the cliff tapered off gently back into rolling dunes, and behind the lighthouse, weedy ground led into a dark forest. It was windier up here and noisier too, as the waves crashed against the large rocks and boulders. Every once in a while the wind would catch the spray and shower it in my face.

The dark outline of the lighthouse building loomed in front of me. It was enough to make me pause and think for a second.

I knew I could be very impulsive in certain situations, even to the point where I would find myself acting while my brain was screaming for me not to. This was one of those situations. I was cold, the weather was turning for the worse, I had a few glasses of wine in me, it was late, no one knew where I was, and yet my main concern was trying to get into a creepy old lighthouse. As much as the reckless side of me felt compelled to explore it, the rational side knew it was probably the stupidest idea imaginable, even more so because I had this overall feeling of dread about the place.

I know I said earlier that it felt like it was waiting for me and that still held true. Whether it was destiny disguised as dread, I didn't know but I truly wished that the small, responsible, (dare I say "adult"), part of my brain would overpower me and steer me back to Uncle Al's house.

But instead I decided to take out my camera. I put the strap around my neck and then switched on the video mode. A jarring, blue-white light lit up the ground in front of me. I took a deep breath and aimed the camera at the lighthouse. I flicked the recording switch on; might as well have something to show for my little exploration.

The lighthouse was only a few yards in front of me, bathed in the eerie electronic glow. The windows, for the most part, were all boarded up, though occasionally there was an unobstructed pane, broken or cracked from the corner. The building was impossibly immense up close, a feeling of density. The white paint was peeling, with black glistening patches plaguing its pebbly form. It was probably mildew; in the dark it reminded me of bloodstains. I shivered at that thought and steadied the camera.

I raised it to the second story and scanned alongside it to the tower. The tip was concealed as the camera light was now only catching the fat strands of thick, incoming fog.

I started towards the front of the lighthouse, where a few hardy windblown shrubs converged from the cliff's flanks. I inspected the building. I wanted to get inside but had no clue how. The rusty door was locked shut with a lock I surely couldn't pick.

"This is stupid," I said out loud to myself. The sound of my own voice was comforting. It *was* stupid. I should have turned back.

Instead, I kept walking around. I walked as close as possible to the building, not trusting the surrounding ground, and then came around front. It looked like the cliff's edge was a safe enough distance from the foundation, maybe fifteen feet. There were a few shrubs planted at the base of the tower and above them was a large round window. A single board had been placed across of it. Above the ground floor window was another

window, then another, and then another, until they reached the watchtower top.

I walked up to the window and saw that the board had been fastened from the inside. I knew what I had to do and was really excited I could do it.

I felt the board, testing its strength. It felt like it would fall off without much effort, which suited me perfectly.

“We have come to our first obstacle, a boarded window,” I said to the camera, turning it around so that it was filming my face, probably on extreme close-up. “However, this proves to be no challenge to Perry Palomino.”

I put the camera down on the ground, stacking it up against a rock so that it was filming me and stepped back. Feeling strength in my leg’s position and my body’s stance, I sprung forward, my body tilting at the exact angle, my arm extending until my palm met the board with precision. With a satisfying give, it flew off its anchors and into the back of the building, landing on the floor inside with an echoing clatter.

I turned and looked at the camera and mouthed my best out-of-synch Bruce Lee impression, “Movement number four: Dragon seeks path.”

Then, feeling like an idiot, I ran over to and scooped it up. I knew right then I would be showing this video to no one. Even though the objective was reached, my hand was stinging because I didn’t do everything correctly (it had been a year since my last lesson) and I was conscious of how big of a dork I was.

I put the camera back around my neck and poked my head inside. A wall of musty odor hit me, tickling my lungs into a coughing fit. I aimed the light into the darkness and saw the broken boards on the ground in an empty, circular room. A dripping noise came from the corner and there was an overall feeling of dampness. Near the back of the room there was a doorway but no door hung from its bare hinges. I could barely make out what

was beyond that; it looked like it was the staircase that would lead to the top of the tower.

There was something strange about this place, something vaguely familiar. I racked my brain for any concrete recognition but came up short.

There was a heavy stillness to the air inside despite the wind that was now freely entering from the coast. It was strangely compelling and very otherworldly.

I put my hands on the windowsill and pulled myself up, my under-used pecs aching from my own weight. I swung my legs around clumsily and hopped down. My feet landed in a small puddle, spraying cold water onto my leggings. I immediately regretted coming inside.

The air here was thick. My breaths were coming in slower and more sluggish, like fluid was entering my lungs. The pressure inside was different too, causing my ears to throb.

I shone the camera around me in a circle but the air swallowed up the light as if it was hungry. That analogy made me shiver. It was cold too, and I hated the way the blackness felt behind my back, like a net waiting to drop. At that thought I spun around. No one was there, of course.

My chest thumped wildly. I breathed out slowly, deeply, and tried to steady my heart. I felt like I just *had* to come to this place, and now that I was here, reality was sinking in. This really was not the best idea, was it?

I pointed the camera around the room one more time, trying to take in the morbid scenery. I was about to say something witty about my soon-to-be cowardly exit when I heard a THUMP from above me.

My heart literally froze. My breath stopped with it.

I listened hard, as if I strained enough I would sprout super ears.

Another THUMP from upstairs. It came from the room right above my head. The urge to vomit traveled up my body, from my toes to my lips. It increased as the *thumps*

followed a footstep pattern, as if someone was walking across the room and to the hallway.

My first thought wasn't that it was a ghost or anything creepy like that, but something worse, something that could actually hurt you like a meth-addicted hobo or a rapist that used this lighthouse as his hideout. Or his rape palace.

I looked behind me at the window I came in through. No doubt the person, or thing, must have heard me break in, must have heard my lame ramblings to the camera. They knew I was here. The only choice I had was to go. But could I get to the window before I was caught?

With the footsteps continuing quietly above me, as if they knew I was listening, I carefully slinked my way back to the window.

I reached for the edge of it with my hand when an ominous shadow passed outside. It happened so quickly that I didn't see what it was but it was human enough so that I ducked and flattened myself against the wall.

I was fucked, and I knew it. I had stupidly wandered into some epic rape palace run by meth-addicted hobos and bald men with beards who recently escaped nearby jails and had taken over this place for their torture sessions with hapless young women they found exploring the coast. Even worse, I was going to be the hapless woman who decided to infiltrate their headquarters.

In most movies, the heroine would poke her head over the windowsill to get a better glimpse of what was going on outside, but I knew if I did that, I'd be spotted right away.

So, despite the fact that the window represented freedom and a way out of this hell hole, I slowly moved away from it and scooted along the wall. The light from the camera danced around the room, and I immediately knew that I was begging to be found. I switched it off with a click and was quickly engulfed in total darkness.

I knew that by turning off the light I was still letting people know where I was, but at least in the dark I could

hide if I needed to. I started fishing around in my pockets to see if I had any weapons. I didn't. I didn't even have sharp nails. I hoped my karate "skills" worked well on adrenaline.

While trying to keep the urge to pass out at bay, I decided the best thing for me to do was to go out into the hallway. I was trapped in the dank room anyway, and I wasn't brave enough to go through the only exit. The footsteps from up above had stopped, although I wasn't sure when, and the hallway probably had another door or more windows to escape out of.

I inched as silently as possible to the doorframe and poked my head out into the hall. Naturally I couldn't see anything except murky blackness, but after a while my eyes adjusted.

The air in the hallway felt even heavier than it had in the room and smelled like rotten kelp. I squinted at the staircase at the end of the short hall. Lo and behold, there were inky trails of seaweed in the hallway, leading up the stairs. It was like some kelp monster had gone up there, leaving its entrails behind.

Stop it! I yelled inside my head. I was freaking myself out even more and it needed to cease before my brain spiraled out of control. Only bad things could come of that. My main objective had to be getting out of there swiftly and safely and without losing my mind.

I took my eyes off of the kelp and looked around the hallway. Dots of green and black danced before my eyes, making it hard for me to focus, but I eventually spotted what seemed to be a door into another part of the lighthouse.

I crept across the hallway, which was thankfully only a meter or two, and reached the door. My hands fumbled and hit the handle loudly. I winced and froze, keeping my breath quiet. When I didn't hear anything after a few terrifying seconds, I carefully turned it and pulled. It barely moved.

I brought my hands up along the frame and came across a lock. I jiggled it silently but to no avail. Unless I magically had a lockcutter in my leggings, this door was not the way out tonight.

I felt tears of frustration rushing to my eyes and blinked quickly to keep them contained. I took my hand off the lock and took in a very deep breath, the type I was taught to use to ward off my panic attacks. All my previous panic attacks seemed pretty frivolous compared to this. Impending death (or worse) was an honest-to-God real reason to panic.

I had only one option left: Go back into the room and climb out of the window as quickly as possible. Maybe if I did it fast enough, I could leap out into the night without being noticed, and even if I was noticed maybe my stubby little legs and screaming skills would be enough to keep any potential murderers at bay.

I steadied myself and closed my eyes. Pins and needles were literally flowing along my veins, revving my engines.

I turned on a dime and sprinted towards the room across from me.

BAM!

I ran right into someone.

Or something.

“Auuuggh!” I screamed.

I had hit them hard, my jaw clattering against my teeth as I flew backwards. There was a rattle, a metallic smashing sound. My head rocked against the cold ground. I didn't even give myself time to register the pain.

I leaped to my feet and tried to run again, only to have my foot slip on a slimy patch and send my leg flying forward so that I was airborne once more.

This time I hit the ground even harder and immediately felt my body go limp. The blackness behind my eyes started spinning and my lids closed briefly. Thoughts of danger and harm seemed very far away and

the room started to vibrate and hum, almost lulling me to sleep. Sleep seemed like a nice idea.

But sleep was not to be had. A bright light flashed in my face, interrupting the comforting haze behind my eyelids. I squinted uncomfortably and felt a pair of hands on my head. One felt gingerly along my neck, another brushed against my forehead.

Rapists are gentle these days, I thought absently, and raised my arm up against the light that bore down on me so relentlessly.

“Don’t move,” a gruff voice said from out of the darkness. It sounded vaguely panicked and a million miles away.

I obeyed and dropped my hand. Thankfully, the light moved off of my face and I was aware of something being placed on the ground beside me.

I felt hands on my face again. They were shaking slightly. I tried to open my eyes wider as more coherent thoughts entered my flustered head. The panic began to rise instinctively throughout my body. It intensified when I saw the outline of a man’s face above me. I tried to jerk away, but the man had one hand down on my shoulder pressing me down.

“Seriously, you might be really hurt. Please don’t move.”

I couldn’t see the guy’s face save for the outline, so I leaned back and closed my eyes and did an internal once over of my body. The back of my head throbbed with a dull ache, but other than that, the rest of me felt OK. From my fingers to my toes, my muscles were awake and primed and ready to be used.

“I’m OK,” I managed to say. I opened my eyes and tried to make eye contact with the faceless figure, aiming to where his eyes ought to be.

He took his hands off of me and backed off slightly. I slowly eased myself up and leaned forward. My head was definitely aching and the room was still spinning in the

murky dark, but I didn't feel like I had done any major damage.

Of course that meant I didn't have to worry about *that* and could instead focus on this potential rapist in the lighthouse.

I could see a lot better once my night vision kicked in. The man was crouched a foot or two away from me. I could only make out his outline, which was backlit by the moon coming through the window and from a light source on the floor. Upon further inspection it seemed to be coming from a video camera. Not like mine but like the ones filmmakers use. That tiny bit of information calmed my heart down by a few beats. Most lustful meth addicts didn't have high quality digital cameras.

"I'm so sorry," the man said. I tried to read his voice but other than its deep, rough quality like his throat was lined with gravel, I had nothing. It was strangely comforting, though.

"I was upstairs," he continued, "and I heard this crazy clatter from down here, and I thought maybe it was the cops or something. I didn't know what the fuck to do. I thought I could get out the way I came in, but I saw you there, and then I saw the window probably at the same time you saw the window, and I'm...I'm so sorry if...well, you're obviously OK."

I knew there were many things wrong with that incredibly long sentence but I didn't have the brains to dissect it. The best I could do was:

"Who are you?"

The man didn't say anything. His silhouette started to rock back and forth slightly.

"That depends on who you are," he said simply.

Hell, even I didn't know who I was right now. I shook my head.

"I asked you first."

He sighed and reached back into his pocket. He fished out a business card and handed it to me. He picked up his camera and shone it on the black paper.

“Dex Foray,” I read the shiny white print aloud. “Producer, cameraman, cinematographer. Shownet.”

I flicked the card over. There was nothing but a Seattle address. I looked up at him, at his face that I couldn’t see.

“Are you from *West Coast Living* or something?”

He laughed. “Fuck no.”

I stuck the card in my pocket and felt strength returning into my bones and into my tongue. I was glad all my courage hadn’t deserted me.

“Well, Dex Foray, I have a feeling that whatever you guys are doing here tonight, you’re doing so without the permission of my uncle who owns the lighthouse.”

“There’s no one else here. It’s just me.”

Now it was my turn to laugh. “Look, I don’t care. I’m not going to report you. I shouldn’t even be here myself. Just get your crew together or whatever and get out of here before you do get in trouble.”

The man, Dex, stopped rocking.

“It’s just me,” he repeated. “Did you see someone else here?”

His voice became pitchy. Something about his change of tone alarmed me.

“Yes,” I said slowly. “I heard you upstairs, and I was going to go out the window, but I saw the shadow of someone pass by. Outside.”

There was silence. He shuffled in the dark and moved closer to me. I wished I could see his face properly.

“Are you sure you saw something?” he asked.

I was starting to doubt myself a bit with the questions but I stuck to my guns. “Yes, I saw someone. Someone walked past the window, swear to God.”

“Where did you come from? Did anyone come with you?”

I shook my head. He raised the light so it was on my face. I winced.

“Sorry,” he said, not sounding very sorry at all. “I...well, nevermind.”

“Nevermind?” I couldn’t help but sneer. “You just broke into my uncle’s lighthouse. Don’t you tell me to nevermind.”

I realized it wasn’t probably the best idea to start provoking a complete stranger, especially when you actually hadn’t seen his face yet and you were in a dark, possibly abandoned lighthouse together, but...

He straightened up, his figure blocking the moonlight and reached down with his hand to help me up. He wasn’t very tall at all, maybe 5’9”.

I took it hesitantly and he brought me up to my feet. I wavered a bit at the change in height and gravity and within seconds he had his arms around both sides of me. He smelled like Old Spice aftershave. I felt like I was in some bad drama on the Lifetime network.

“You OK?” he asked. His face wasn’t too far away from mine. I turned around on the spot so that my back was to the window and the moonlight was coming in on his face, illuminating it.

He was a surprisingly handsome guy. Maybe I *was* expecting a bald man with a beard, but he wasn’t like that at all.

His jaw was wide and round, totally acceptable. A dusting of an Errol Flynn moustache traced his upper lip and his chin was shaded by scruffy beard. He had fathomless, dark eyes framed by brows that were devilishly arched and set low on his forehead. A simple eyebrow ring graced his right eyebrow. It was a very '90’s look. A man after my own heart, apparently. He reminded me of Robert Downey Jr. in his strung-out drug days.

He watched me, his eyes glittering darkly in the moonlight, full of intensity. I felt relieved that he looked

like a normal person and almost tickled that he was quite a looker as well.

“Just a bit dizzy,” I managed to say. He kept his gaze with mine. It was a bit unnerving after awhile. It must have shown on my face because he smiled very slowly, showing perfect white teeth.

“Good,” he said. “Promise not to sue?”

I eyed him warily. “I won’t. Can’t speak for my uncle, though.”

He pursed his lips and seemed to think about it, though his eyes remained motionless.

“Why are you here?” he finally asked.

“We’re having a bonfire on the beach. I got sick of hanging around teenagers and wanted to come here. My uncle never let me come here when I was younger. I didn’t tell anyone, I just left. I was hoping to film some stuff.”

At my own mention of filming I panicked. My camera! I reached down and pulled it up in front of my face. I turned it on and the lights flared and then steadied. I couldn’t see the lens but Dex grabbed it and held it in front of the light. He peered at it, brows furrowing, and gently put it back around my neck.

“It’s fine. I thought you wrecked the shit out of mine when you ran into me.”

He lifted his camera up and patted it. I immediately felt guilty, even though it was his own damn fault for trespassing.

“You’re right,” he continued, reading my face. “Who cares? I probably deserve to have this camera smashed.”

I was about to say something else, what exactly, I don’t know, but I have a feeling I would have tried to make him feel better, when there was another loud *thump* from up above.

I froze. I could feel him freeze too. I slowly looked over at him. He was watching me intently.

“You sure you came alone?” he whispered. The fact that he had to ask again chilled me.

“Are you?” I answered. He nodded gravely.

I swallowed hard. We both listened hard, still as death.

Another thump followed. My mind started to reel wildly. Was this Dex guy really alone? Maybe this was still the rape palace and he was trapping me down here while the bigger guys did all the work. There was an air of uncertain danger about him, though that could have just been the situation or his floppy, messy dark hair and Byronic mannerisms.

I eyed the window. Dex caught my stare and shook his head as if to warn me. I gave him an incredulous look.

He leaned into my ear, his lips brushing my lobe. At contact it felt like mini lightning bolts were traveling along my skin in a heated fury and burrowing into my head. That feeling alone was distracting. I closed my eyes and enjoyed it.

“Are you one hundred per cent sure that no one else came with you here?” he whispered, his low voice joining the static and traveling in waves down my spine.

I shook my head and tried to focus. Even if someone did follow me, there was no way they could get inside the lighthouse before me. Hell, I didn’t even know how Dex got in the place if he didn’t come through the window. I put that question aside for now. The thumps continued.

I eyed the window again and started to automatically move towards it. With him right beside me, he didn’t yield.

“We have to go upstairs,” he whispered.

I almost laughed loudly but caught myself. Was he fucking crazy? I wasn’t going upstairs, I was going out the window and back to Uncle Al’s where I could call the cops. If that got Dex in trouble, so be it.

He put his hand under my chin and tilted it up so that I was looking at him. It was OK. I liked looking at him.

“You’d be best to stay with me,” he said.

I couldn't believe it. Part of me wanted to stay with him for some reason but the rational part knew that "some reason" wasn't good enough. I shook my head violently.

"You? I don't even know who the fuck you are. You give me a business card? I'm not going to be part of your rapist tower," I said that last part a little too loudly.

He raised his eyebrows and pursed his lips. I guess he was a bit taken aback.

"Go then," he said slowly. "But once you are out that window, run all the way back to your uncle's place. Don't stop to look at anything. Even if you run into something, just keep running. It would be better if you just kept your eyes closed the whole way."

My body was covered in chills as he said that. I was suddenly afraid to leave his side. He seemed to know a lot of things that I didn't.

"What's upstairs?" I asked. "Do you know?"

He shrugged, rather nonchalantly considering the circumstances.

"I have an idea. That's why I'm here."

"Why *are* you here?"

"I'll show you," he said. He reached down and grabbed my hand. With his other he hoisted his camera on his shoulder. He eyed my own camera around my neck.

"You may want to turn that on. It's better if we get as many ways of recording this as possible."

Shit, son. If there was a moment that determined the course of my future, I'm pretty sure this was it. I had two somewhat simple choices. I could make a run for it and go back to Uncle Al's. Back to the bonfire where my cousins and dear sister would still be drinking and revel in the normalcy of a Saturday night and forget I ever went to this horrid place and ran into this weirdo. Or I could go with said weirdo up the stairs in this decrepit old lighthouse, that was most likely condemned and unsafe, towards some unknown person (or *thing*) that was walking around, potentially waiting to murder us in horrible ways.

It didn't seem like a very hard decision to make. In fact, I think 99.7% of people in the right frame of mind would have picked from column A and gone on with their merry lives as is. But for some freaking crazy reason, I thought that maybe, just maybe I should go with this stranger up those kelp-ridden stairs and towards the lair of unimaginable horror. You know, because it was the more interesting alternative.

I turned on my camera with my other hand and let Dex lead me away from the fresh air and freedom, towards the monstrous uncertainty that was waiting for us further inside.