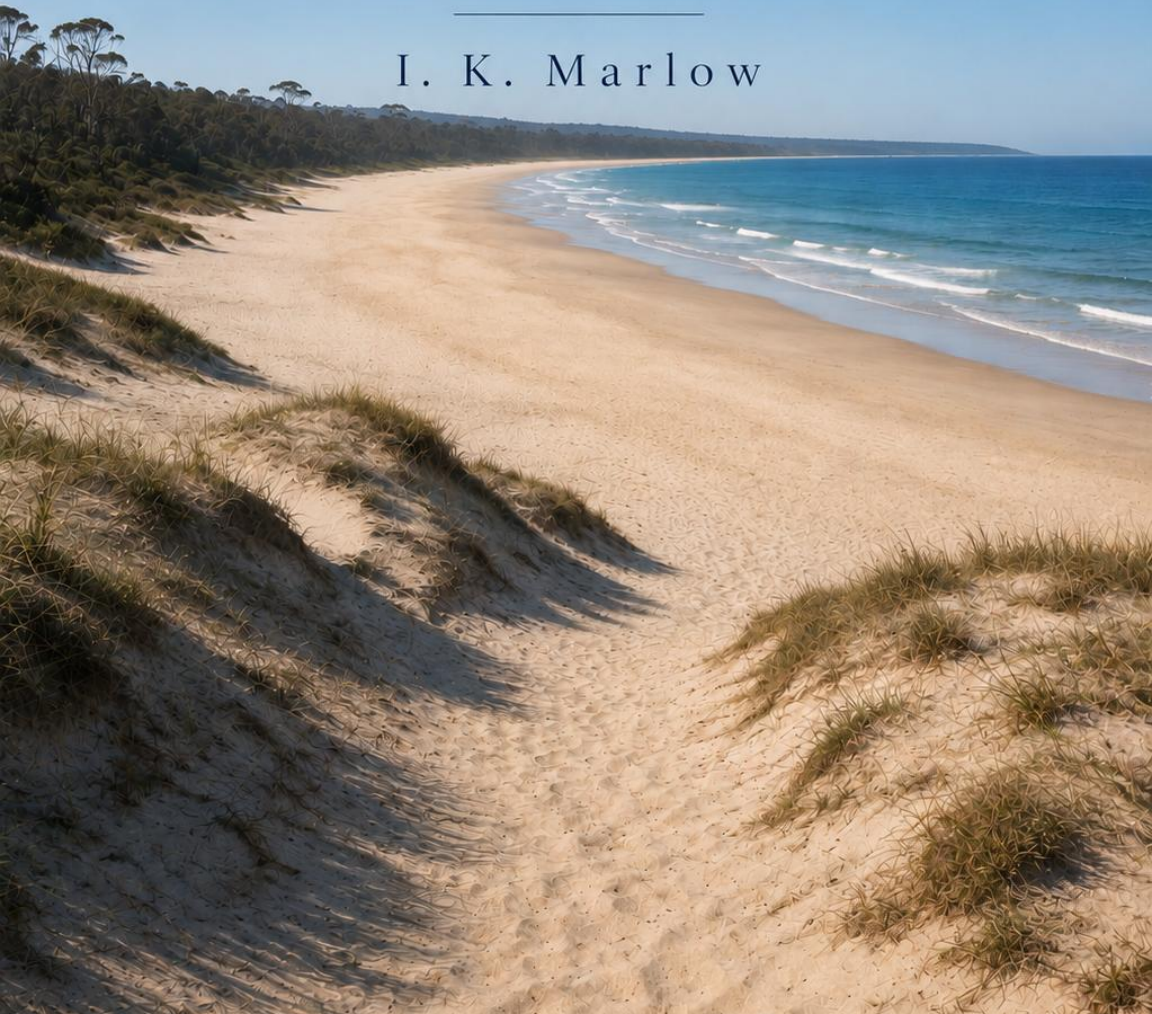


The Empty Beach

I. K. Marlow



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Chapter 1

Roger stepped into the only store in the small coastal village they were passing through. The place looked as though it had given up resisting time. The windows were clouded with salt, and the wooden door groaned when it opened. Inside, the shelves held only the barest necessities—cans, dusty jars, sun-bleached detergent boxes and some other old junk.

Behind the counter sat a bulky old man with a thick white moustache and skin the texture of leather. His eyes were pale and unfocused, as though always watching something that wasn't there.

"Any nice, quiet place around here where we could swim?" Roger asked, setting a bottle of orange juice on the counter.

Without speaking, the man reached below the register and pulled out a folded paper. It was yellowed and fragile at the edges, the ink faded into soft lines.

"Help yourself," he said, sliding it forward.

"You sure?"

"I know this place like the palm of my hand," the man said flatly.

"Haven't looked at that thing in years."

Roger nodded. "Thanks." He tucked the map under his arm, paid, and left.

Outside, the light was sharp. The breeze was soft and smelled faintly of salt and eucalyptus.

Roger stepped out into the sun, the bottle of juice in hand. The breeze picked up slightly, rustling the dry grass along the road.

The pickup truck waited a few meters ahead, engine off, windows rolled halfway down. Inside, Anna sat in the passenger seat, one leg folded up, her bare foot resting on the dashboard. Her light brown hair was tied

loosely, a few strands dancing around her face in the breeze. She wore a thin summer dress that clung lightly to her figure, the fabric almost translucent in the sunlight. Beneath it, the outline of her bikini was visible—bright blue straps tracing her collarbones and looping behind her neck.

She wasn't trying to pose, but there was something effortlessly sensual about the way she sat—comfortable, confident, unaware of how the sunlight wrapped around her like warm silk. Her sunglasses sat low on her nose as she flipped through the tourist map, squinting at the faded ink with mild frustration.

Roger slowed his pace slightly, taking in the sight for a moment before pulling open the driver's door and climbing in.

He handed her the juice and climbed into the driver's seat. He lit a cigarette, cupping his hands against the breeze. The flame flared, then settled into a red dot. He took a slow drag and stared out at the quiet street, then turned the key.

The Toyota diesel groaned to life with a rattling growl and puffed a small plume of black smoke. They rolled out of the village, tires crunching over the loose gravel. Within moments, the last building was behind them.

Ahead stretched a road that looked more forgotten than maintained—cracked asphalt, half-swallowed by dry grass at the edges. On either side, the land was wide open and strangely empty. No houses. No fences. Just low hills, some sunburnt shrubs, and clumps of tall grass moving lazily in the wind.

Anna studied the map. "It's hard to read. Some names are gone."

"Good," Roger said. "Means nobody goes there."

The sky above them was vast and unbroken—no planes, no birds. Just endless blue. They didn't pass a single car. No traffic signs. No parked vehicles. Just the low, steady hum of the diesel engine and the occasional crunch when a pothole caught a tire.

The trees began to change—first low acacias, then taller pines and thin eucalyptus with peeling grey bark. Their long limbs cast narrow shadows on the dirt, and the air started to smell green and resinous. The road thinned further until it was no more than a trail, dusty and pale, lined with tire-worn grooves.

Roger flicked the ash from his cigarette out the window and leaned forward. “This map better not be lying.”

“We’re not lost,” Anna said. But there was no confidence in her tone.

Soon the road turned to pure sand and dust. It kicked up behind them in a long plume, clouding the trees and sky in the rearview mirror. Roger slowed. With the windows down, the grit began to settle in their mouths and hair. They rolled them up and sat sweating in the rising heat.

They hadn’t seen a single person. Not even a bird or animal crossing the road. Just the rising hum of insects somewhere far off—and even that seemed to fade.

Finally, Roger pulled over beneath a group of eucalyptus trees that clustered near the base of a large sand dune. He killed the engine. The sudden silence felt heavy.

Anna got out, stretching and wiping her neck with a sleeve. She looked around and frowned.

“It’s weird,” she said. “There’s no trash. Not even a scrap.”

Roger stood beside her, cigarette hanging between his lips. He scanned the ground, as if to confirm. Nothing. Not a can, not a bottle cap. Even the ground looked untouched—just dry grass, pale earth, and patches of sand where the wind had swept clean.

He moved to the back of the truck, pulled out a pair of towels, their canvas bag, and his Canon camera. He slung it over his shoulder.

Anna shaded her eyes with her hand and pointed toward the dune. “Let’s hope it’s over that rise. I’m not hiking another mile.”

The sand dune was tall, but gradual. Eucalyptus and pine trees dotted the slope, standing far apart, their shadows stretched thin on the ground. The eucalyptus trunks were white and flaking, their sickle-shaped leaves

trembling lightly even without wind. The pines, darker and stiffer, stood silent and still, like watchers.

There were no birds in the branches. No chirps. No calls. Just an occasional leaf rustling.

Roger lit another cigarette as they climbed. The smoke curled up lazily in the dead air.

At the top, they paused.

Before them stretched a semicircular beach, hidden like a secret at the edge of the world. White sand sloped gently into the water. The bay was cradled by two cliffs, arms of land reaching out to hold the sea at peace. The ocean itself was flat and endless, a blue pane of glass beneath the sun.

“Rog, this is beautiful,” Anna breathed.

Roger didn’t answer. He stared silently. He hadn’t expected this. There was something unsettling about it—too perfect, too still. He took a slow drag from his cigarette and exhaled.

No boats. No swimmers. No footprints. No gulls in the sky. No sound.

Even the waves moved strangely—long, even swells that glided in and broke with almost no foam, then rolled back as if reluctant to leave.

“I don’t hear anything,” he murmured.

Anna stood beside him, still staring. “No... it’s completely quiet.”

“No trash either,” Roger added. “Not even seaweed. Nothing’s washed up.”

They began walking down toward the water which was the beginning of the pacific ocean, their feet sinking slightly into the soft, sun-warmed sand. Behind them, their footprints trailed like marks on untouched snow. Roger looked over his shoulder, back toward the trees, then forward again. The cigarette was burning close to the filter.

Still, no sound.

The ocean ahead glinted in the light like it had always been there—and no one had ever come to see it.

They walked farther than they realized—half a mile, maybe more—down the dune and across the sand. The slope had been gentle, and they

were too busy admiring the ocean, the way the cliffs cupped the bay like stone arms, to notice the distance. No landmarks. No frames of reference. Just white sand and blue water in every direction. Only the tops of the big trees were visible behind the dune.

Behind them, their footprints trailed like marks on untouched snow.

Then Roger froze.

Roger looked back toward the trees once more. Still, nothing. No sound. No movement.

He took a final drag from his cigarette and flicked it into the sand.

Then he froze.

The feeling hit him without warning. A sudden jolt—like a drop of cold water on the back of his neck.

He went completely still.

His body knew before his mind did.

Something wasn't right.

Not noise. Not sight. Just presence.

The silence grew sharper, heavier. His skin prickled.

Anna kept walking, unaware. The distance between them increased.

Roger didn't move. He didn't speak.

He just stood there, head slightly turned, eyes scanning the trees behind the dune.

There was nothing there.

But he was certain.

They were not alone.

Chapter 2

After walking more than half a mile, their feet were hot and stinging from the sand constantly slipping into their flip-flops. It stuck between their toes and clung to their damp skin. The sun was high now, sharp and indifferent, and the slope behind them had long vanished from view.

The incident—Roger's sudden, frozen stillness—had passed unspoken. He never mentioned it. But his eyes scanned the edges of the trees more often now.

"Let's settle here," he said at last, slowing to a stop. "Not too close to the water. I don't want our stuff to get wet if a wave creeps in."

He dropped the canvas bag and towels onto the sand. The ground was warm and dry. Roger tugged off his shirt and shook out the sand from his flip-flops. Anna stood beside him, glancing left, then right—just a quick, unconscious scan. The kind women make when undressing outdoors. It wasn't theatrical. Just caution.

Roger noticed.

"It's alright. There's nobody but us out here."

He meant it to sound reassuring, but the words came out thinner than he liked. Even to himself, there was a hint of doubt.

Anna hesitated another second, then peeled off her dress, folding it neatly and placing it on her towel. Her black bikini caught the sunlight. She sat down, brushing sand from her thighs.

Roger popped the cap off a beer and took a long pull. The glass bottle was still cold from the cooler, and he let it rest against his neck for a second before setting it onto the sand. He lit a cigarette. The smoke drifted slowly upward, barely disturbed by the ocean breeze.

They lay back, side by side on their towels, staring up at the sky. Not a cloud in sight.

Anna rubbed sunscreen on her arms and legs, then handed the bottle to Roger. He applied it half-heartedly, distracted. His gaze kept drifting to the far line of trees behind them, then the distant water.

He turned onto his side, trying to get comfortable. The sand was too soft in some places, too firm in others. He shifted, adjusted the towel, but it didn't help. Something felt... wrong. Not physically. Just—off.

Anna tilted her head toward him. "What do you want to do after this? We should stop for more juice on the way back. You only got one."

Roger nodded vaguely. "Yeah... maybe."

"You alright?"

"Yeah, I'm good."

He said it automatically. Didn't even look at her.

She watched him a moment longer, then lay back again, one hand resting on her stomach. She didn't push the conversation.

After a while, they both sat up. The silence stretched long between them—not awkward, just heavy. Still no birds. No distant motorboats. Not even a gust of wind. The only sound was the slow breath of the ocean—the long, quiet waves pushing in and pulling back like a calm machine.

"Let's walk," Anna said suddenly, brushing off her legs.

Roger grabbed his beer and took one last sip before setting the bottle in the sand.

They strolled along the shoreline, leaving fresh footprints in the wet sand. The waves rolled in quietly, licking at their feet. As they walked, Roger glanced back at their trail. No others. No signs of life. Not even shell fragments or driftwood.

"It's like we're the first people to ever be here," Anna said.

Roger didn't reply. His eyes were narrowed, scanning the far curve of the beach. He kept feeling like something was just out of sight.

After ten minutes or so, they turned around. The sun was hotter now, the sand reflecting the heat like a mirror.

Back at their spot, Roger knelt to put down his watch. The sand shifted beneath him, warm and dry. As he leaned forward, he felt it again.

That feeling.

Like someone was standing behind him.

His body reacted before he had time to think. He turned sharply—fast, defensive.

“Jesus, Anna—!” he snapped.

She froze mid-step, startled. She’d only come up behind him to hand him her sunglasses.

Roger stared at her for a second. His heart was beating faster than it should have.

“I... sorry,” he muttered. “You startled me.”

Anna raised an eyebrow but said nothing, handing him her sunglasses. She backed away slowly, then sat down on her towel, turning her face toward the sea.

Roger stared out at the horizon, trying to shake the feeling crawling up his spine.

Something was wrong here.

He just didn’t know what.

Chapter 3

They returned to their towels. The sand was now too hot to stand on without flip-flops. Roger glanced at the sky—no clouds, no seagulls in sight. Just the sun, climbing steadily. Time felt uncertain out here.

They both lay down again. For a while, neither of them spoke.

Anna had gone quiet. Not distant—just quieter. She rolled onto her side, closer to Roger than before. Her arm lightly brushed his. He noticed it. The way she lingered in contact a bit more than usual. As if she were unconsciously seeking closeness.

He didn't say anything. But he felt it too.

She glanced back toward the dunes once. Then again. Her brow barely furrowed, but Roger caught it.

Something in her had shifted.

Roger found himself looking over his shoulder more often now. Not deliberately. Not like he was searching—more like a reflex. Like his eyes kept trying to confirm nothing had moved.

But something had.

Or maybe not.

He thought he saw a shape shift behind one of the pines. A dark flicker against the pale trunks. It was quick—too quick. By the time he focused, it was gone. Could've been the wind. Could've been nothing.

But his back tingled. That kind of subtle electric tickle that made the skin crawl. A warning from the animal part of the brain.

Anna sat up. "Let's go swim," she said, almost abruptly.

Roger stood, brushing the sand off his chest. "Yeah. Good idea." He didn't like to sit longer with these thoughts constantly running in his head.

The water was stunning—clear, light blue, cool without being cold. They waded in slowly, adjusting to the change in temperature. Waves brushed their thighs, then their stomachs. The bottom was smooth, no sudden dips, no rocks.

Anna dove first, disappearing with barely a splash. Roger followed.

Underwater, the world went silent and slow. He opened his eyes. The salt stung slightly, but he could see—his own limbs, the light dancing through the surface above.

He had a thought.

If something was watching... what if I confused it?

He kicked, gliding deeper. Instead of surfacing, he turned and swam sideways beneath the water. Moved gently, silently, shifting positions.

He waited.

Waited longer.

His lungs began to tighten. His chest ached. Just a few seconds more.

Still under.

The surface shimmered above him like glass.

Then he burst upward.

He gasped for air, coughing water from his throat. For a moment his vision was doubled, rimmed with black. The pressure of breathlessness echoing in his ears.

And then—

Just at the edge of his sight—

Something moved. A shadow. A flick.

Gone.

He blinked, hard. Tried to focus.

Nothing. No sound, no shape. Just Anna swimming toward him.

She said something. He didn't catch it.

He was still breathing heavily, forcing air into his lungs like a man pulled from drowning. His heartbeat thundered in his chest.

Anna floated close, face relaxed, but her eyes searching his.

"You okay?"

He nodded. "Yeah. Just... held my breath too long."

They treaded water side by side for a while, floating with the slow swell of the sea. The silence here was different. Denser. As if the water absorbed not just sound—but thought.

Roger felt the goosebumps before he felt the breeze. The kind that crawled from your spine outward, making the arms tighten and skin prickle.

“I’m done with swimming,” he said quietly.

Anna nodded without question.

They walked back out together, the water sheeting down their bodies. It steamed off them quickly under the hot sun, but the chill stayed beneath the skin.

Neither of them spoke.

The only sound was from their feet trodding the water.

Chapter 4

As they stepped out of the water onto the wet sand, droplets rolling off their skin, the wind touched them cool for the first time that day. Roger ran his hand through his wet dark hair, eyes adjusting to the glare of the sand.

Anna slowed her pace. She was looking down.

“Roger,” she said quietly, pointing.

There was an imprint in the sand. Faint, partial, and shaped like a footprint—but strange. Too soft at the edges. Just one. Nothing leading to or from it.

Roger glanced at it, then at Anna. He didn’t say anything. Just stared.

Anna crouched beside it. “We didn’t pass here when we walked, right?”

Roger shook his head, but it wasn’t clear if he meant no or maybe. He forced a half-smile, but it didn’t reach his eyes. Inside, his tension doubled. He felt it coil somewhere in his ribs.

“Could be just... a depression in the sand,” he said flatly. “Wind, maybe.”

Anna didn’t argue. She stood and brushed off her hands.

They returned to their towels. The sand was hot again, but the breeze felt different now—drier, sharper. Roger lay down, arms behind his head, eyes closed. He began to take deep breaths and tried to bring himself back to normal.

It’s just a nice, lonely beach. Just like I wanted.
No noise. No tourists. No cheap music. No kids shouting.

His pulse was still elevated. Probably the heat. Haven’t worn a hat.
Maybe I’m dehydrated.

But then something shifted. Not outside—inside.

A chill crawled across his back.

Goosebumps.

He opened his eyes. The sun was still burning. The sand nearly scalding. And yet his skin felt cold.

His mind drifted back to the footprint. Just one. Where were the others? Why only that one?

He sat up slowly and looked around.

Anna sat down on her towel, pulling her knees up and wrapping her arms around them. She rested her chin lightly against her knees, eyes focused straight ahead on the ocean.

It wasn't a casual pose.

It was tight, closed, like she was shrinking inward—folding herself into a smaller shape. She didn't glance to either side, not even once. Her head stayed still, as if she feared what she might see if she turned it.

Roger noticed the way her shoulders were slightly tense, how she kept one hand gripping the opposite arm just a little too firmly.

She wasn't saying anything.

But something in her posture whispered what her mouth refused to admit: she felt fear.

Then she turned, almost too casually. "Rog... would you take some photos of me? For memory's sake."

Roger hesitated, then nodded. She stood and brushed herself off.

He grabbed the camera and stood, stepping back to frame her in the lens.

Anna moved toward the center of the beach, where the curve of the bay met the open sand. She turned her back to the ocean, posing lightly, hands in her hair. She smiled. Her skin was tanned evenly, glowing against the white sand. Her legs long and smooth, her posture confident but casual. Her bikini clung to her just enough to hint at what was beneath—elegant, natural, unforced.

Roger clicked a few shots. Focused. Adjusted exposure.

But he didn't feel present. Not really.

He should have felt the desire. She was beautiful. The kind of beauty that normally turned his mind to distraction.

But it didn't.

His eyes kept drifting over her shoulder—past her—to the tree line in the distance.

It was blurry in the camera's depth of field. Still. Silent.

He had a fleeting thought: go to her and kiss her. But before he could move, he heard something.

A soft rustle.

Far away. Like a tree shifting. Or something stepping.

He lowered the camera. Looked around.

Nothing.

The breeze carried nothing but silence.

"Did you get them?" Anna asked, walking back to him.

He nodded. "Let's check."

They sat on the towels and began scrolling through the old Canon. He navigated through the photos using stiff plastic buttons, the camera clicking softly with each press.

Anna leaned in. "Let's see."

One by one, the images flicked past. Anna in the center of the frame—smiling, turning, playing with her hair. The curve of the bay behind her, the tree line in the distance. Each shot sunlit and still.

Then she touched his arm. "Wait. Go back."

Roger tapped the button. The image returned.

"Wait. Go back."

Roger returned to the previous photo.

"There," she pointed to the edge of the display.

He squinted. Near the edge of the frame, behind one of the pine trees, there was something. Blurred. Obscured by bark and shadow. He fumbled with the zoom, but the digital magnification only pixelated the image. The shape didn't resolve—it just pulsed in and out of recognition.

A bush, maybe. A shadow. Or— could've been something else.

Neither of them moved.

Both were holding their breath.

Anna whispered something, too soft to hear.

Roger remained speechless. He kept on staring into the display.

The shape in the picture wasn't clear. But the feeling was. It wasn't about what they saw.

It was the presence behind it.

Watching.

Waiting.

Roger lowered the camera slowly.

The air felt heavier than before. And wrong.

Chapter 5

Both of them had lost track of how long they'd been sitting there, staring at nothing, saying even less.

Roger was smoking again. The cigarette trembled faintly between his fingers as he exhaled through his nose. A small cluster of butts lay in the sand beside him—three, maybe four. He hadn't noticed how many he'd gone through. Neither had Anna.

He stared at the horizon. Whispered something under his breath.

"Probably overthinking. Too hot today."

But then—

Anna saw it too.

That wasn't nothing. That wasn't just his nerves. That wasn't just the sun.

It wasn't a coincidence.

Still, he tried to talk himself down, like untying a knot in his chest.

Just enjoy it. It's a beach. Quiet. Perfect. This is what I wanted. No noise. No idiots. Just silence.

But that silence had grown sharp. Thin, like ice ready to crack.

Roger took another drag, squinting at the line where sky met water. His gut twisted again.

Something was wrong here.

The sky above was clear, relentless. The kind of blue that made the edges of your eyes ache if you stared too long. The sun was high, but they couldn't say whether it moved, or moved too fast. Roger wasn't sure anymore.

There was a sense that something had slipped.

Roger checked his watch. Frowned. Looked again. It was working—ticking—but it didn't help. It didn't feel like early afternoon, or late. It just felt like they'd been here too long without knowing what time meant anymore.

Anna lay back again, arm across her forehead.

The breeze had picked up. Not a gust, just a steady wind now. Dry and constant, curling over the dunes and pushing faint ripples into the sand. The eucalyptus branches finally moved, creaking softly, like something stirring from sleep.

Roger sat up. He ran a hand down his face, then looked out at the water.

"It's just the heat," he muttered. "I'm cooking my brains."

He stood. Anna looked at him.

"I'm gonna dip in again," he said. "Just to cool down."

She nodded, eyes half-closed.

He walked briskly toward the water. The sand burned underfoot. The sea, once inviting, now looked pale and still.

Roger stepped in, waist-deep, then dove under. The shock was refreshing. Clean. His skin responded immediately. For a moment, it felt like clarity.

But when he surfaced and turned back, something twisted in his chest.

Anna sat where he left her. Unmoving.

Too unmoving.

The distance between them suddenly felt enormous.

Roger's heart kicked once, hard. A thought appeared—irrational and absolute:

Something is going to happen to her.

He didn't think. He moved.

Not calmly. Not reasonably.

He lunged forward, wading through the water, legs dragging, arms breaking the surface. By the time he reached the shore, the fear had already begun to recede, embarrassed by its own urgency. But it hadn't been imagined.

It had been felt.

Anna looked up, surprised. "What's wrong?"

Roger didn't answer right away. He caught his breath, hands on his knees, water dripping from his arms.

“We’re leaving!” he said, his voice low and tight.

His chest was still heaving, the saltwater dripping from his arms and hair. His voice was tight, breath catching between the words. The adrenaline hadn’t faded—it surged quietly through his veins, sharp and urgent.

Anna stared for a moment. Then she nodded. She was happy to leave.

Roger moved fast—too fast. His hands trembled slightly as he stuffed towels into the bag. The Canon. The empty bottle of beer. The sunscreen. Anna packed in silence beside him, watching the way he kept glancing toward the trees as if expecting something to step out from behind them.

In his rush, Roger didn’t notice that his Omega had slipped off the edge of his towel and half-buried itself in the sand. It lay there, barely visible, face down—cold metal vanishing slowly into the white sand.

They didn’t look back as they started walking.

Climbing the sand dune felt harder this time. The incline seemed steeper, the sand looser. Wind whispered across the crest in a low hiss.

When they reached the top, both of them turned to scan the beach one last time.

Nothing.

Just a perfect, untouched stretch of sand and ocean.

But it was too quiet.

No birds. No rustling in the branches below. Only the high eucalyptus tops swayed gently in the wind, like the rest of the forest had gone still.

Roger stood there a moment longer, breathing hard.

Then they turned and left the beach behind.

Chapter 6

It's been thirty odd years since that day.

I can still feel the heat on my skin, and the silence. It's loud, even though it sounds absurd. That kind doesn't leave your memory.

And still, when I think about it—really think about it—I get chills.

Some moments fade with time. Others don't. That beach... it never did.

We never went back.

Not once.

I lost my watch that day. I didn't realize until we were halfway back to the highway. It must've slipped off into the sand while we were packing. I thought about turning around—but I didn't.

Just the thought of walking back down that dune, stepping back onto that sand... it made something twist in my gut. You don't ignore that kind of feeling.

And you know what? I've worn other watches since. Expensive ones. Plastic ones. I don't remember any of them. But I still think about the one I lost.

Because it wasn't just a watch.

It was something left behind.

Even now, decades later, when I think about that beach—the stillness, the way the breeze moved only the treetops, the way the sand swallowed sound—I get goosebumps. My skin tightens like it remembers something my mind can't explain.

Anna and I never talked about it after. We just... let it drift away. I think she felt it too. But some things are easier to leave behind if you don't give them shape in words.

I've wondered if anyone else found that place. Or if it closed itself again, folded back into the land like nothing ever happened there.

But the more I think about it, the more off I feel.