



## Deeper

By Megan Hart

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Twenty years ago she had her whole life spread out before her. She was Bess Walsh, a freshly scrubbed middle-class student ready to conquer the design world. And she was taken. Absolutely and completely.

But not by Andy, her well-groomed, intellectual boyfriend who hinted more than once about a ring. No—during that hot summer as a waitress and living on the beach, she met Nick, the local bad boy. He was, to put it mildly, not someone she could take home to Daddy.

Instead, Nick became her dirty little secret—a fervent sexual accomplice who knew how to ignite an all-consuming obsession she'd had no idea she carried deep within her.

Bess had always wondered what happened to Nick after that summer, after their promise to meet again. And now, back at the beach house and taking a break from responsibility, from marriage, from life, she discovers his heartbreaking fate—and why he never came back for her. Suddenly Nick's name is on her lips...his hands on her thighs...dark hair and eyes called back from the swirling gray of purgatory's depths.

Dead, alive, or something in between, they can't stop their hunger.

She wouldn't dare.

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### Editorial Review

#### About the Author

Megan Hart is the award-winning and multi-published author of more than thirty novels, novellas and short stories. Her work has been published in almost every genre, including contemporary women's fiction, historical romance, romantic suspense and erotica. Megan lives in the deep, dark woods of Pennsylvania with her husband and children, and is currently working on her next novel for MIRA Books. You can contact Megan through her website at [www.MeganHart.com](http://www.MeganHart.com).

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#### *Now*

The sea remained the same. The sound and smell of it wasn't different, nor the push and pull of its waves. Twenty years ago, Bess Walsh had stood on this beach and looked forward to the rest of her life, and now...

Now she wasn't sure she was ready for what lay ahead.

Now she stood with cold sand scraping her toes and the salt-scented air tangling her hair. She breathed deep. She shut out the night with the darkness behind her eyelids and lost herself in the past so she didn't have to think about the future.

The night air in late May still held a chill, especially this close to the water, and her thin T-shirt and denim skirt didn't provide much warmth. Her nipples peaked, and she crossed her arms to hug some heat into herself. It seemed appropriate to shiver, remembering that long-ago summer. Remembering him. For twenty years she'd tried to forget, yet here she was, back again, and unable to forget any more than she ever had.

Bess tipped her face to the breeze that pushed her hair from her face. She opened her mouth to drink it in, to eat it like some sweet candy. The smell filled her nose and coated her tongue. It took her back more effectively than mere memory could. Transported her.

Silly. She was too old to entertain fairy tales. Time travel didn't exist. There was no way to go back. No way, even, to stay where she was. Her only option, anybody's only option, was to move forward.

Thinking this, she did move forward. One step, then another. Her feet sank into the sand and she cast a glance over her shoulder to the safety of her deck and the single candle burning there. The wind pushed the flame into flickers and she waited for it to go out, but it stayed lit within the protection of its glass container.

Back then, that house had stood apart. Now neighbors flanked it, close enough to hit if you spat in the right direction, as her grandma would have said. The house behind, four stories of million-dollar architecture, loomed over hers. Now seagrass-dotted dunes that hadn't been there twenty years ago swelled between the houses and the beach, and though a few lights shone in windows farther down the sand, closer to the main square of Bethany Beach, this early in the season most of the houses near hers were dark.

The water would be too cold for swimming. Great whites could be lurking. The undertow would be strong. Bess went to the water anyway, drawn by memory and desire.

The ocean had always made her more aware of her body and its cycles. The push and pull of the tide had seemed such a feminine thing, tied as it was to the moon. She never swam in it, but being around the sea always made Bess feel more sensual and alive, like a cat wanting to rub up against a friendly hand. The warm waters of the Bahamas, the cold Atlantic waves of Maine, the smooth, rippling Gulf of Mexico, the gorgeous blue waters of the Pacific, had all called to her, but none of them so strongly as this patch of water and sand. This place.

Twenty years later, it was stronger than ever.

Her feet found the hard-packed sand the last wave had left behind. She curled her toes into the chill. Now and then a glimmer of white foam appeared, but nothing touched her yet. She took a dragging step, letting her feet guide her so she didn't come down unexpectedly on a sharp stone or shell. Another step forward led her to even wetter sand. Squishy again. The rush and roar of the water threw up spray into the breeze, and she opened her mouth for it the way she had the scent.

The water, when at last it touched her feet, wasn't cold. The warmth was more shocking than a chill would've been, and Bess gasped. Before she took another step, another wave came. Warmth swirled around her ankles and splashed up her bare legs. It pulled away, leaving her feet buried. She went deeper without thinking. Step by step, until the water, as warm as a bath, as warm as a kiss, bathed her thighs. It soaked the hem of her skirt and splashed onto her shirt.

Laughing, Bess bent to let the water flow over her hands, her wrists. Elbows. It rolled under her touch, evading her grasp. She knelt, soaking herself in the waves.

They touched her like a thousand kisses all over her at once. Like tongues licking. Splashing higher, wetting her panties. Water covered her to the waist when she sat. Moved up over her throat when she lay back. It covered her face and she held her breath, waiting for it to retreat.

Her hair came loose, but Bess thought nothing of losing the clip that had bound it. Like seaweed, her hair swirled, tickling her bare arms and covering her face, only to be washed away by the next wave. Salt and the grit of sand painted her lips when she licked them, opened them as if for a lover's kiss. She spread out her arms, but the water wouldn't be held. Salt stung her eyes, but not from the sea. From her tears, sliding unbidden across her cheeks. They tasted bitter, not like the fish-sand-salt sweetness of the ocean.

Bess opened herself up to the water and the waves. To the past. Every time the surge came she held her breath, wondering if this next time would be the one to take her by surprise and fill her lungs with water. Or to pull her deeper, under. And she wondered what she would do if that happened. If she would care. If she would fight or let the sea take her away, if she would give up and be lost in it the way she had once been lost in him.

They'd made love on this beach with the sound of the ocean masking their cries. He'd used his mouth and hands to make her writhe. She'd slid his cock inside her to anchor their bodies, but no matter how many times they'd fucked, it hadn't worked. Pleasure didn't last. Everything ended.

Her own hands were a poor substitute, but Bess used them anyway. Sand rasped her fingertips as she slid them beneath her shirt to cup her breasts, remembering how his mouth had felt. Lower, how his hands had

moved between her thighs. She parted her legs, letting the sea stroke her the way he once had. Her hips lifted, pushing against something that didn't push back. The water retreated, swirling, exposing her to the night-chilled air.

More waves came to embrace her as she caressed herself. It had been a long time since she'd taken this pleasure, done this alone. She hadn't made love to herself in so long her hands felt like someone else's.

He hadn't been her first lover or the first boy to give her an orgasm. He hadn't even been the first she'd loved. He'd been the first to turn her inside out with something as simple as a smile. The first to make her doubt herself. He'd taken her deeper than anyone ever had, and yet she hadn't drowned.

The affair had been short. A page in the book of her life, barely a chapter. Only one verse of the song. She'd spent more years without him than she had with him. None of that mattered, either.

When Bess touched herself, it was his smile she imagined. His voice, murmuring her name. His fingers linked with hers. His body. His touch. His name.

"Nick." The single word slipped off her tongue for the first time in twenty years, unlocked by the sea. This sea. This sand. This beach. This place.

*Nick.*

The hand that closed over her ankle was as warm as the water, and for a moment Bess thought a hank of seaweed had wrapped itself around her. A moment later another hand touched her other foot. Both slid up her legs, to her thighs. The weight and heat of a body, solid and not like the water, covered her. She'd opened her mouth to the sea as if accepting a lover, but now a real kiss claimed her. Real lips, real hands, a real tongue plunged into her mouth and stroked hers.

She should have screamed at this invasion. At this dark stranger's sudden violation. Yet this was no stranger's touch. She knew it better than she knew her own. The weight of his hands. The shape of his cock. The taste of him.

It was fantasy, memory. It was wishful thinking. Bess didn't care. She opened herself to him the way she had to the water. Tomorrow when the sun rose and her skin chafed from the sand's abuse she would call herself a fool, but here and now her desire was too strong to deny. She didn't want to deny it. She'd tossed caution aside then, and she did so now.

His hand went beneath her head to cradle it. His mouth covered hers, nibbling, before his tongue plunged again into her mouth. His moan vibrated her lips. His fingers threaded through her hair.

"Bess," he said, and then more. The sorts of things lovers said in the heat of their passion, words that didn't hold up under scrutiny.

She didn't care. Bess slid her hands down Nick's back to the familiar rounded curves of his ass. He wore denim and she pushed it down until he was naked, his skin hot. She traced the ditch of his spine with her fingers as his kiss claimed her. Water splashed and retreated, no longer rising high enough to cover them.

His hand slid between her legs and pulled at her panties. The thin material gave way at once. He pushed her skirt up to her hips. Her shirt was so thin and so wet it was as though she wore nothing. When his mouth

clamped over one turgid nipple, Bess cried out and arched. His fingers found the heat between her legs. He rubbed, and her body jerked. She was ready.

"Bess," Nick said into her ear. "What is this?"

"Don't ask," she told him. She pulled his mouth back to hers. Beneath her, wet sand cradled them. She dug her heels into it and opened her thighs. She reached between them to grab his cock, the thick heat of it as familiar as everything else. "Don't ask, Nick, or it might all go away."

She stroked him gently, too mindful of the salt and sand to urge him to enter her. Not even in fantasy could she forget the agony of sand in places it didn't belong. The memory of it, of how they'd both walked bowlegged from it, made her laugh aloud.

Bess laughed again as Nick's mouth fastened on her throat. His hands roamed. The two of them writhed together, rolling in the wet sand. He laughed in turn, tipping back his head. In the faint starlight he looked no different than he ever had.

His hand moved slowly between her legs, but it was enough. Bess tensed, her fingers digging into the smooth muscles of his back. She bit back her cry as a climax filled her. Nick grunted, hips thrusting forward against her. Heat spurted against her belly, bared by his touch, and the sea smell grew briefly stronger.

Nick bent his face to her shoulder, holding her tight. The water tickled her feet but came no higher. His body, naked and smooth, covered her.

The sea had brought him to her, a fact Bess accepted without question. Without hesitation. None of this would be real in the daylight. It wouldn't be real even the moment she left the water and stumbled, soaking, to her bed. None of this was real, but all of it was, and she didn't question it for fear it would all go away.

*Then*

"You sure you don't want a hit?" Missy waved the joint in Bess's direction, sending a cloud of fragrant smoke to tickle her nostrils. "C'mon, Bessie. It's a party."

"Bessie is a cow's name." Bess flipped the other girl the finger and cracked the top on a can of soda. "And, no, I don't need your weed, thanks."

"Suit yourself." She drew deep and coughed, destroying her carefully wrought illusion that she was some sort of druggie queen. "That's some good shit!"

Bess rolled her eyes and eyed the bowl of potato chips on Missy's coffee table. "How long have those been there?"

She coughed again. "I just put them out, bitch. Right before you got here."

Bess pulled the bowl closer and checked them carefully. Missy's trailer was consistently filthy. Seeing no bugs or garbage even when she tipped the bowl from side to side, Bess took a chance. She was starving.

"Christ, I could go for a pizza." Missy flopped onto the battered armchair and hung her legs over the side. The bottoms of her feet were dark with dirt. Her skirt rode up, flashing a hint of hot-pink lace. "Let's get a pizza"

"I have exactly two dollars to last me until payday." Bess crunched chips and swallowed them down with store-brand cola that had already lost its fizz.

Missy waved a languorous hand. "So I'll call some guys. Make them bring the pizza."

Before Bess had time to protest, Missy sat up with a grin and tossed her bleached-blond hair over her shoulder. The motion caused one unfettered breast to surge out of her tank top. Missy was built like a brick shit house, as she was fond of saying, and didn't mind showing it off.

"C'mon," she said, as if Bess *was* protesting, though she hadn't even opened her mouth. "It'll be a party. Who doesn't like a party? Well, besides you."

"I like parties." Bess leaned back against the couch Missy had stolen from outside the Salvation Army. "But I have to work tomorrow."

"Shit. So do I. So what? Let's have a fucking party, okay?" Missy jumped off the chair and settled her joint in the overflowing ashtray. "It'll be fun. You need some fun in you, Bess."

"I have fun!"

Missy rolled her eyes. "I know what kind of fun you have. I'm talking about some real fun. Get some color in those cheeks. And I don't mean the ones on your face."

"Nice." Bess laughed, even though Missy's assessment of her wasn't entirely flattering. How could she not? Missy had a way about her that didn't allow Bess to take her too seriously. "So you're going to call some boys and tell them to bring pizza. And they'll just do it."

Missy lifted the hem of her teensy-weensy skirt and flashed her tiny pink panties. "Of course they will"

"I'm not screwing some guy for pizza, no matter how hungry I am." Bess put her feet up on the coffee table without taking off her flip-flops. She would never have done that at home, God no, even in bare feet. Missy didn't seem to care. Or notice.

"What do I care who you screw?" She was already dialing the phone as she rummaged in the fridge for a beer. "I mean, do you even— Baby, hi!"

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