

# PROLOGUE

June 22, 2007

Leaving Whisper Island, Washington

Emma asks me how I'm doing.

I shrug. Gaze into the distance with weary eyes. Give her the lie that slips off my tongue like ice cream on a hot day.

"Good. I got a new job. Big money."

"Congratulations!"

Emma blinks one-two-three, more like a flutter, her freckled face creased, squinting into the sunshine. She's waited until this moment to ask, three weeks after her wedding, as we stand on the ferry's upper deck, watching Seattle lurch closer. The wind slaps her wavy hair across one eye and she claws at the billowing strands, then tugs them behind a perfect ear.

I hang my head, feel my shirt collar vibrate against my cheek. Mouth droops. My hurt look, one from my repertoire of imitations. "You should have waited."

Beneath our viewing platform, parked vehicles squat, penned-in like cattle corralled for slaughter. Beyond the bottle-green bow, white water churns, angry and loud, like the voice in my head. I'm not getting what I want. Both Emma's hands grip the railing. They don't grip me.

“Why do you do this?” A note of sharpness in her voice. “There never was anyone but Dustin.” She squeezes her lips together, stopping anything else she might have said. “We’re still friends. Just because I’m married, doesn’t mean—”

“It doesn’t matter. I don’t care anymore.”

Emma turns, so her back rests against the rail. Hair crowds her face. All I see is the tip of her nose.

“Don’t spoil a great morning,” she says. “You haven’t seen our new condo. Come take a look. We’ll drink coffee and talk. It’ll be like old times.”

It’s as if her voice comes from the bottom of the sea. I don’t see her. I don’t see anything. Blindly, I raise a balled fist and slam it down. It hits the rail. She flinches.

“No, it won’t!” I yell. “It will never be the same.”

Until then, I’d been in control.

Heads turn. People stare.

“What are you looking at?” I sneer at a middle-aged woman in Jesus sandals, a metal water bottle dangling from her daypack. She looks away, then heads inside, creating what she must view as a safe distance between us.

There is no safe distance.

Emma’s lips are parted, her pale brows raised. She takes a subtle step away from me. Gone is the camaraderie. Instead, there’s fear in the black holes of her eyes.

“Em, I’m sorry. It sounds like a great idea.” But she’s raised a wall between us. *Oh no you don’t.* I create puppy-dog eyes. “Please?”

Emma relents. She always relents. Except over Dustin.

“I need the bathroom,” I say. “Won’t be long.”

I duck inside so she can’t see my unguarded euphoria, like I’ve smoked strong weed and my cheek muscles ache to laugh. Past the cafeteria and down internal stairs to the near-deserted car deck where I won’t be seen. Behind an empty bus, I stop, lean

my elbows on the ferry's rail, allow the sea spray to cool my skin. Only now do I acknowledge the pain in my hand.

For a while, when we were teenagers, Emma was the closest I had to a friend. Then one day she stepped out of our relationship, as if fleeing my leaky inflatable boat and jumping onto a sleek yacht, and set sail for calmer waters. That sleek yacht is Dustin. He isn't a freak. He remembers to gel his hair and brush his teeth and to ask her how she feels.

From my pocket I pull out my scuffed leather wallet with an unsightly bulge like a giant wart. I check that nobody can see, then slide my finger inside, remove the bulge. In my palm is a yellowed tooth. A premolar to be exact. Root and all. Straggly threads of dried gum, like prosciutto that's way past its expiry date.

It had been an afterthought. A memento. I'm glad I kept it. I run the tip of my tongue over its ridges and dents, then trace the V-shaped root. Licking the taste of her.

She's mine now. And so will Emma be.

# CHAPTER ONE

Monday, July 31, 2017

Spring Lake, North Carolina

The ground around the memorial stone for Sergeant Major Patrick Miller was parched and cracked. Tufts of grass, so lush and green in the spring, had become patchy in the hot and unusually dry summer. Thirty-nine-year-old Stephanie Miller had come to say goodbye. She knelt before her husband's memorial and tried to focus on the arrangement of blue hydrangeas and sea lavender, white roses, and lilies in the cobalt-blue vase. Perhaps then she could hold back her tears. She pulled out a lily stalk for no reason other than it gave her something to do. She put it back in the vase in a different position.

"Enough already," said Amy, her fourteen-year-old daughter, who sat cross-legged, clutching a water bottle.

"Maybe a touch more," Stephanie said.

Amy sighed loudly. Her nostrils flared. She topped up the vase until it overflowed, the water pooling on the baked ground.

"Who's going to do this when we're gone?" Amy asked, screwing the cap on the near-empty bottle, then giving her mother a hard stare.

It had been nine months and eleven days since Stephanie had returned home from dropping Amy at a friend's house to find the men waiting for her on the porch. The low sun was in her eyes. When they stepped out of the shadows, she saw the formal uniforms, and recognized Patrick's commanding officer and the chaplain.

"Professor Miller," the colonel had said, "may we come in?"

Stephanie groaned at the memory as if she were in physical pain. She bent forward, clutching her stomach. Her grief hadn't diminished with time passing, as people said it would. It was a wound that never healed. It bled day and night, draining Stephanie of her strength, until she was a shadow of her former self. Beneath her wide-brimmed hat, a warm tear followed the bridge of her nose and dangled at its tip. She wiped the tear away with the back of her hand and sat up. She had to try to be strong for Amy's sake.

"Nancy," Stephanie said, finally answering her daughter's question. "I've asked her to come by with fresh flowers each week."

Perhaps Stephanie was biased. She guessed every mom was. Or maybe it was because Amy was so like her father. Beneath the purple hair dye and the harsh black eyeliner, Amy was beautiful. She had her father's cornflower-blue eyes, his thick dark hair, and his height, all five feet, eleven inches of it. Stephanie, on the other hand, was a nudge over five-feet tall and the epitome of pale, with blond hair that in direct sunlight could be mistaken for white. Patrick used to describe Stephanie as "ethereal," but these days, given how often Amy ignored her, there were times when she wondered if she might be transparent.

"I'm not leaving," Amy said, her eyes narrowed.

Could Stephanie do it? Could she actually board that flight and leave the house, the town, the life she'd shared with Patrick for sixteen years? Just the thought of walking away from the cemetery caused bile to rise up her throat. But she had to do it. Amy was

on self-destruct. Before Patrick's passing, she had been a popular, straight-A student. Since his passing, Amy had played truant from school, picked fights, broken a teenage boy's jaw, verbally abused a teacher, graffitied the school walls with obscenities, and been expelled. Seeing a shrink hadn't helped either of them. Stephanie was at her wit's end.

"We can come back and visit. It's for the best." Stephanie tried to sound positive.

Amy stood suddenly. Dirt clung to her distressed black jeans. "No, it's not," she said, her voice raised. "We'll be thousands of miles away on some stupid island. I don't want to go."

Her words carried across the quiet of Sandhills State Veterans Cemetery and the neat rows of memorial stones lying flat on the earth. Not far away, an elderly couple stared at Amy with disapproving frowns.

Stephanie swayed, doubt swirling around her, sucking the oxygen from her lungs. She put a palm on the ground to steady herself. What if she was making a terrible mistake, uprooting their lives like this?

"I can't keep doing this. This arguing. Please, Amy. Please understand. I love your father with every ounce of my being. But—"

"But what?" Amy spat out.

"We need a new start. Somewhere we can heal."

Amy's lip curled into a sneer. "You're pathetic! Dad would be ashamed of you."

She turned her back on her mother, then stomped across the patchy grass, heading for the parking lot. Stephanie watched her go. She'd grown used to such outbursts, but this one really stung. She took a few slow breaths in and out, trying to clear her head, then ran a finger across the warm stone and the words *loving husband and father*.

“I love you, Patrick. You are always in our thoughts. Always. I know you’ll be with us wherever we go.” Stephanie pulled out a tissue and blew her nose, then glanced in the direction Amy had taken. She should go check on her. She tried moving her stiff legs. Pins and needles caused her to wince. She stood unsteadily, like a woman twice her age. Then she paused. “I’m so sorry.”