

## PROLOGUE



They had such big plans. If it weren't for the headlights of her car, she would have been in total darkness, the steady rain pounding on the windshield only contributing to her bleak view. Momentarily the wiper blades cleared a path, allowing her eyes to follow the steps up to the gloomy front door and dark windows. The view made her feel alone and unwelcome, as if she didn't belong.

*Why didn't I leave a light on somewhere inside the house,* she wondered, but when she'd rushed out earlier, flipping one on had been the last thing on her mind. Then the thought of sleeping here by herself came, with an anxious feeling she didn't want to face.

She turned the car off and sat for a good ten minutes, struggling to put what happened in perspective as the rain continued to pelt the metal roof above her head. Her vision trailed down to her hands. They were clenched into fists. She relaxed her grasp and extended her fingers on her left hand, slowly moving it into the light so she could see her wedding ring. She let out a long sigh and laid her head back, her eyes closed briefly in silence. *Might as well go in and get it over with,* she thought.

As she began to move, her body felt unfamiliar, not her own. She mechanically rose out of the car, into the rain, and put one heavy foot in front of the other, reluctantly making her way up the stairs to the door.

Her hands shook as she fumbled with the key. To her dismay, it wouldn't turn. A simple task causing her difficulty. Then she remembered earlier, he had jiggled the key slightly, coaxing it to budge, so she tried this with the same success.

The heavy door opened, and she walked into what was *their* house, but not yet *their* home. A home is where you know the creak of every stair and floor board, how to open every door that might stick a bit. A home is where you can get up in the middle of the night and walk to the kitchen for a glass of water without ever turning on a light to find your way. Memories of Christmases past, birthdays celebrated, summer picnics, friends for dinner, time with the kids, and sometimes companionable silence between the two of you.

There was a row of light switches to her left. She flipped on and off three of them before she found the right one.

The living area was full of boxes stacked and arranged around the room. To say she felt overwhelmed was an understatement. What was she going to do with them? He was supposed to help her unpack and start this new chapter of their life *together*. The one where the kids were grown and starting their own lives, getting married and having grandchildren for them. At least that's what he'd told her.

Maybe she should open a box and start the never ending process of putting things away. Would she really stay and live here? She wanted to turn and run back to their old house, but they'd sold it to a family she was sure already started making it theirs. She had to stay here, at least for now.

How could he have done this to her? How could he! She trusted and believed him when he told her they were going to build a life together here.

The anger came from deep down, like nothing she ever

felt before. She wanted to turn back the hands of time so she could ask him.

Maybe this was one of the dreams she'd periodically have. Soon she would wake up and her life would be back as it had been, and they'd both laugh at how silly she was to have dreamed something so impossible.

But her dreams were never like this. They were never this clear. They always took place in a blur, and most of the events were odd and unnatural, short and all in one place.

Then, with a shiver, she remembered how cold and unfeeling he'd looked only an hour ago, not the warm engaging man she slept with every night and cared for every day.

God, how can a woman prepare for something like this? Nobody believes it will happen, but yet it can, and it does.

There was a family picture on top of one of the open boxes, taken a year ago. Everyone with big smiles and no idea what was to come. She thought about how it was supposed to be and shook her head in disbelief.

They'd been fortunate to save enough money to put the kids through college and buy this beach house on St. Simons Island in southern Georgia. She was going to get a job as a nurse at the local hospital, and he would transfer his position with the bank where he'd been working for the past fifteen years. They had thought the beach house would be a great place for the kids to come visit and for them to use as home base when they traveled after they retired. That was the plan.

He told her he made good investments for them so it could be a reality. Then they found this beautiful house, everything falling into place, allowing them to make the big change and move to the island. She assumed they would live here, together, a long time. What a mistake she made believing this.

The kids. What should she do about them? She needed to call them but what would she say? How could she help them understand something she didn't understand herself? They'd be devastated. She couldn't deal with telling them

right now though. She needed some time to regroup and be strong like they expected her to be.

A slow panic started in the pit of her stomach as it occurred to her she was all alone now. She hadn't been all alone since... well, ever. Again she shivered, chilled to the bone from the rain.

She needed something dry to change into, so she went upstairs to find the boxes of clothes. After opening two of them, she found a hooded sweatshirt and a pair of long pants. She felt slightly better after she changed into them.

She didn't know what to do next. After slowly descending the stairs, she stood at the bottom for several seconds, trying to hang on to the tiny amount of control she still possessed, eventually losing it and sliding to a sitting position on the last step, collapsing into sobs.

When at last she raised her head to look around the electricity went out, startling her and leaving her in the dark. What did it matter? The darkness allowed her to not look at the inside of this house, filled with what was to be their new life and dreams. The lack of light mimicked the ache in her heart, growing hopeless, empty, and dim as time moved on.

Her tears stopped, and as her eyes adjusted to the darkness, they were drawn to the panel of tall windows framing the view of the water where she noticed that the rain had finally stopped and the clouds were starting to clear in spots. She could see a silhouette of the winged-back chair and ottoman he placed in front of the huge glass windows earlier when he needed to rest. The sight of the chair and ottoman released a short sob from her chest as she pictured the last time she saw him sitting there. She pushed herself up from the bottom step, drawn to the windows by an increasing brightness.

The full moon was peeking out of the break in the clouds, producing an eerie grayish glow reflecting off the water.

The moonbeams accentuated the white line of foam along the incoming tide and seascape.

She dropped down into the chair and put her feet on the ottoman, thinking about how he'd sat there only hours ago. Was it strange that she felt comfort in sitting there?

She sat silently for over an hour, though it felt like only minutes. Outside the waves came in and out, in and out, over and over. She found them calming and hypnotic, as if she had discovered a tiny bit of control as her world unraveled. How could life change so quickly between morning and evening? She knew deep inside that she couldn't stop what had been put into motion, only deal with what happened the best she could.

Thank God there were no memories attached to this house — she could never live here if there were. It was still a blank canvas waiting to be painted. The only problem was she thought the painting was going to be of the two of them.

Her eyes and thoughts were back at the window when her stomach growled. She realized she hadn't eaten since this morning, and there was nothing in the house to fix. She started to cry uncontrollably again.

It occurred to her that if she put some distance between herself and this house, she might be able to start sorting through what happened.

She decided to get into her car and drive until she found a restaurant, order something to eat, and think about what she should do. She grabbed her purse and keys and headed for the car, having the same trouble locking the door as she had earlier when she tried to open it.

She sat in the car a few minutes before backing out of the driveway, in an attempt to build up the courage to strike out on her own. Finally, she started the car and began to back out when a deluge of rain started coming down. She cried again, but didn't allow it to stop her. She was determined.

After driving ten minutes in the torrential rain, a flashing

neon OPEN sign caught her eye outside a barbeque restaurant. She parked her car in the gravel lot and forced herself outside, thankful for the steady raindrops on her face — they masked her tears.

The restaurant was not very busy. A middle-aged man in blue jeans and a red and blue plaid shirt stood behind a counter. He gave her a quizzical look but smiled. “Can I take your order, ma’am?”

“You’re not getting ready to close are you?” she asked.

“No, ma’am. Just not a busy night,” he said. “Probably ‘cause it’s rainin’.”

She ordered a barbeque sandwich plate and a glass of sweet tea.

“Go ahead and sit at any table,” he said, as he handed her the tea. “I’ll bring you the sandwich when it’s ready.”

The dining room was nearly empty. She picked a table as far back as possible. She felt the need to be alone.

As she sipped her tea, she went over what had happened. In twenty-four hours her life had changed drastically for the worst. What should she do first? The kids. When she was back at the beach house, she’d call them and explain what had happened. The thought had her crying again.

She looked up to see the man behind the counter studying her, before taking his leave through a swinging door.

She pulled a pack of tissues out of her purse and wiped her eyes and nose, telling herself to stop crying and get in control. What would she do after she called the kids? She had no friends here so, whatever it was, she would have to do it alone.

She wasn’t sure how much time had passed when she saw a figure dressed in white coming toward her. Through her tears, the figure looked like an angel slowly gliding closer.

It was a woman. She sat down opposite from her, silent for a few minutes, then said something she didn’t hear. After that the woman rose from her chair and leaned over to wrap a shawl around her shoulders. The gesture not only made

her feel warm but also loved, exactly what she needed at the moment.

She started crying again, and looked down. The woman took her hand, causing her to look up at her.

The man who had taken her order came over and set her sandwich down along with two steaming mugs.

“My name is Betty, and this here’s my husband Jack,” the woman said. “We own this restaurant. Honey, what’s wrong?”

She looked up at the woman. She knew nothing about her, although she felt she could trust her. A calm peace came over as the tears dried up, and she finally found her voice.

“My name is Cynthia, and I’ve had a terrible thing happen to me.”

“Well, why don’t you start at the beginning and tell me everything?” Betty said.

So Cynthia did.