
PROLOGUE

The father sat on the boat's only seat, his broad shoulders bent to the task of rowing. The girl fixed her eyes on the back of his red plaid shirt as he reached and pulled, reached and pulled.

My daddy.

She wore his denim jacket beneath her plastic poncho and life jacket, and she wriggled so that she could feel the fabric of the sleeves, as if his arms were holding her, keeping her safe. So long as he was there, she was not alone. Not a drift child.

Whenever the zodiac rocked wildly in the trough of the giant grey waves, she gripped the ropes fastened to the starboard pontoon and braced the heels of her runners against a plastic floorboard. The bow leapt high in the air and smashed back into the trough, pitching the girl against her two siblings. She pulled herself free, leaving them clinging to each other and the blanket they shared.

"Those two have each other," her aunt had once told a neighbour, "but this one is alone. A *drift child*."

A gust of wind blew rain into the girl's face. *I can't see! I can't see!* She blinked and blinked, but every time she raised her head, her face was drowned anew. She couldn't breathe. *I can't see!* Bending forward, she swiped her face against the plastic covering her knee, then, looking up, squinted until she found the red plaid of his back again. Strong. Purposeful. Working the oars.

My daddy! The words screamed inside her head.



ONE

Sunshine streamed through the skylight and fell on the mushroom-shaped mound of spinning clay. Emma Phillips compressed the mound into a solid bell shape. On the floor beside the potting wheel a large calico cat rolled playfully onto its back, tummy exposed and paws clawing the air.

“Forget it, Purkins,” Emma said, pursing her lips in concentration. She was using more clay than she had ever worked with before and it was proving much harder to centre. Gently pressing downward, she formed a hollow in the top of the mound and began widening it into a bowl, oblivious to everything except the sound of the wheel and the rhythmic hum of the motor.

I’m getting it! Scarcely daring to breathe, she pulled up the sides, then took her hands away and studied the bowl. There was still a lot of clay at the bottom. *One more pull.* Smoothly applying pressure, she began working the clay upward.

Suddenly the telephone rang, and Emma’s hand jerked outward. Her right foot dropped to the flywheel, braking it slowly to a stop, but the damage was already done, and as she lifted her hands away from the clay, she stared in disgust at the misshapen bowl. She cursed herself for bringing the phone into the studio, then cursed the phone because it continued ringing. Finally, without bothering to wipe the clay from her hand, she answered the damned thing.



“What?”

Taking his cue from her greeting, Sam Gabriel said, “I’m sorry to trouble you on a Sunday, Emma...”

“Uh-huh...” Her lawyer-boss was famous for turning a simple acknowledgement into such an unequivocal yes that the Supreme Court of Canada would have a hard time dismissing it.

“Kazinski called me this morning,” he continued carefully. “He’s probating a will and one of the beneficiaries lives in Bear Creek Landing, near Rivers Inlet. Apparently his secretary mailed the cheque to the woman before arranging to get the release signed.”

Emma put the phone between her ear and shoulder and reached for her clean-up rag. John Kazinski had recently been made a partner in the Toronto law firm where Sam had worked before semi-retiring to British Columbia five years earlier. “Why doesn’t he fax it to her?” she asked, wiping clay from between her fingers. “They do have fax machines in Toronto, you know.”

“Well,” Sam said, “for one, this Mary Dahl — she’s the beneficiary — could flat-out refuse to sign it, since she’s already cashed the cheque. For another, it seems she lives out on a ranch in the middle of no place. She doesn’t have a phone or access to a fax machine. And for a third, the estate’s executor is complaining because it’s taking so long to probate the will.”

Emma tossed the rag aside and took the receiver in her hand once more. “Rivers Inlet is a long way from Shinglewood, Sam. How do you plan on getting there?”

“Kazinski will pay for a charter there and back. The thing is, I’m delivering the keynote address at that conference in Vancouver this week. So it has to be you.” Resorting to his usual authoritarian manner, he added, “He’s emailing me the release, and the plane will be at the dock at eleven. That will get you to Bear Creek Landing by noon, and you’re booked on the regular flight back tomorrow morning.”

Emma glanced at the clock. “Sam! It’s already ten now. You can’t expect me to pack, stop at the office for the release, and be down at the dock by eleven!”

“It’s the only time I could get,” he said. When she didn’t respond, he added, “This could mean that Kazinski will give us more work in the future.”

“Right,” Emma said. “Never mind that you’re sending me out into the middle of God-knows-where, just so long as we maybe get some more work out of these Toronto guys — which you don’t have time to do anyway!” She looked at her collapsed bowl and her voice hardened.

“I can’t do it, Sam.”

The line between them was silent.

“I’ll pay you extra.”

Emma pictured moths flying from Sam’s wallet. “Five hundred bucks,” she said finally. “Over and above my salary. You can add it to Kazinski’s bill.”

She hit the off button, ending Sam’s sputtered protest, and turned back to her table as the outside door opened and a scruffy, wheat-coloured Norfolk Terrier bounded across the room. Purkins sprang onto Emma’s shoulder, knocking her off balance as he leaped for the safety of a nearby shelf. Emma grabbed the potting wheel to save herself and plowed her right hand through the bowl.

“Damn it, Twill Lafferty!” she yelled, shaking a clay-covered fist at the tall, bearded man who had followed the dog into the studio. “I told you to keep Rugrat out of here!”

“And how the bejaizus am I supposed to be doin’ that when he’s slippin’ through my legs faster than a cadfish with a seal bitin’ his arse?” her friend and neighbour said as he made a grab for the dog, who sensibly abandoned the cat and skittered back outside. “I’ll be bound now if you think you’re ridin’ back with me!” Twill shouted after the dog.

Emma waved at her ruined creation. “Like that’s going to help,” she scoffed, unimpressed by the Newfoundland dialect that Twill slipped into when his emotions ran high.

Skeptically eyeing the mess, he ran calloused fingers through his grey-streaked hair, taking care not to dislodge the transmitter coil of his speech processor. “Didn’t seem like you was havin’ much luck with that jar anyways,” he said. Noting Emma’s glare as she scraped what was left of the bowl into a slippery ball, he added, “Though it was clear as day you was workin’ hard to fix it.”

“Your damned dog ruined my bowl!” Emma got up from the wheel. “What are you doing here, anyway? I thought you were going to Campbell River.”

“Just getting’ back,” he said, visibly relieved by the change of topic. “I picked up an Oscar Peterson LP.” Twill was the only person Emma knew who still bought vinyl records. He played them on an old-fashioned cabinet-style stereo that he and his wife had received as a wedding gift. Listening to the music they had shared was the only thing that sustained him after her death.

“Which one?” she asked, certain that he already had every recording the pianist had ever made. She threw the ball of clay into a plastic bag and began cleaning up the tray attached to her potting wheel.

“*Tracks*, recorded in 1974. I thought maybe you’d like to have a listen tonight over dinner. Fresh hatchery trout and some of Leonard’s huckleberry hooch.” He ogled her. “No tellin’ where *that* might take us.”

Emma grimaced. Leonard Smythe was the assistant manager at the fish hatchery Twill managed. The last time she’d tried his homemade wine, she was ill for a week. “I’ll bring the wine, and we’ll see about the rest,” she said. “But it’ll have to wait a few days. I’ve got to fly up to some place called Bear Creek Landing in about forty minutes.”

Twill's right brow rose.

As she sponged out the splash pan, Emma explained what Sam wanted her to do. "He figures I'll be back tomorrow afternoon, but this woman lives out in the middle of nowhere, so it could take me an extra day or two. I'll leave food out for Purkins, but if I'm not back tomorrow, I'd be grateful if you'd drop by and give him some more."

Twill leaned against the door and watched as she carried her tools to the sink, washing them at the same time as her hands. "I'd a lot rather be fetchin' that signature for you," he said. "I could use a few days away from the hatchery."

"And I'd be happy to let you," Emma responded, as she whipped a worn towel from its hook on the wall and dried her hands, "but the bonus Sam's going to pay me will help buy my new roof."

"So you're finally taking my advice about that..." Twill began, then wisely muttered something about finding his dog and made a hasty exit from the studio.

Emma had no patience with men, not even with Twill, whom she had known since she was fourteen and came to live with her grandparents in Windrush. He had been a big brother to her then, and it wasn't until many years later, after his wife had died and Emma's marriage to Tommy had ended, that they had drifted into a closer relationship: friends with benefits.



It took only a few minutes for her to change and throw an extra pair of slacks and a sweater into a wheeled suitcase, and less than that again to set out food and water for Purkins. He had disappeared through the cat flap in the boot room and didn't return even when Emma went outside to call him. She looked anxiously over the tangled garden that skirted the rear of the two-storey grey clapboard house. Two robins were fighting noisily over a piece of string while a Stellar's Jay screamed at them

from the lowest branch of a nearby cedar. Far below them, the Stuart River ambled eastward through marshy second-growth forest. But there was no sign of her cat and finally, with a last regretful look at the river, she turned away.

“He’ll be fine,” she told herself. Gathering her gear, she headed for the truck.



On the way to the Shinglewood harbour, where she was to catch her flight, Emma stopped at the Rusty Anchor Coffee and Gift Shop to deliver a box of bowls to Sam’s wife Kate.

“I brought you all that’s left from my last firing,” Emma said, setting the box on the counter.

The redheaded proprietor opened the cover. “Same old, same old,” Kate said with disappointment. “I was hoping you might branch out into something more... creative. Like those pieces in your basement.”

A few years earlier, while searching for items to include in a rummage sale for the hatchery, Kate pulled out a box of hand-built stuff: horses with goddess heads and serpent manes flowing behind them, bearded muscle-men rising from grotesque tree stumps — the kind of fancy Emma had indulged in before her marriage. At the time she’d refused to include them in the sale, and now she deliberately misunderstood her friend’s request.

“I *was* trying to build a bigger bowl, but between your husband and Twill, I smashed the damned thing,” she said. “And now Sam’s sending me halfway up the coast on my day off.” She watched Kate set the box aside. “Anyway, the tourists buy them, and that’s what counts.”

“Tourists. What do they know about art?” Kate leaned her elbows on the counter. “I bet Sam that you wouldn’t go.”

“He didn’t give me a chance to refuse,” Emma said, “but he’s going to pay dearly for it.”

“Well, as far as I’m concerned, you could do with a little

adventure. Anything to get you away from that mausoleum of yours.”

“I had my fill of adventures crewing on fish boats for nine years,” Emma said stiffly. “And Windrush may be old, but I’d hardly call it a mausoleum.”

Kate sniffed. “It looks like one. All those trees, and more moss on the roof than shingles.” She jabbed the air with her index finger. “You think it’s a safe place, Emma, but one day you’re gonna wake up dead and realize you’ve never lived.”

“Yeah, well, if I miss that plane, I won’t have to worry about living because Sam will kill me.” She headed for the door. “And who knows? Maybe I’ll see something on the trip that will inspire me beyond bowls.”



TWO

The aroma of drying mussels permeated the air as the morning sun warmed the pilings of the government wharf at Port Hardy. Overhead, seagulls flashed white wings and screamed for attention as they circled the fishing boats moored to the dock. From the water came the ragged *putt-putta-putt-putt* of an engine badly in need of service, and a moment later a large yellow zodiac rounded the end float. The lone occupant of the boat cut the motor as the boat glided alongside the only open berth. After securing the stern line to a metal cleat, he climbed onto the wharf and tied the bowline to a second cleat. Buttoning his denim jacket halfway to cover the oil stains on his plaid logger's shirt, he rubbed a hand over his unshaven face, then got to his feet and stomped toward the ramp. He had just reached the top when a car turned onto the pier, its tires *thump-thumping* softly on the uneven surface. As it came to a stop in front of him, the doors opened and three young children bounded out. "Daddy!" They screamed in unison as they ran towards the man.

The eldest, a ten-year-old brunette whose limbs were much longer than the clothes covering them, reached him first and wrapped her arms around his waist. "I knew you'd come, Daddy!"

"Hey, Julie-girl!" he said, hugging her with one arm. With his free hand he grabbed the youngest child, a towheaded



six-year-old boy who had the same wiry build as his father, and swung him up under his arm.

“Caden, come on up here!”

“Let me go!” The boy shrieked, kicking until the man let him down.

The third child, an eight-year-old girl with honey-blond hair and fierce blue eyes, hung back. Still, there was an eagerness in her expression that she couldn’t completely hide. The man reached for her.

“Come on, Skylar,” he said. “You know you want a hug.” His grin was infectious and reluctantly the girl allowed him to hug her, then quickly pulled away and pointed to a woman emerging from the driver’s seat.

“Aunty Glenda says you gotta take us!”

The wraith-like woman wore a long batik dress in various shades of purple. Her hair was as blonde as Skylar’s and there was an aura of peacefulness about her as she walked languidly toward the group — a serenity not shared by the children’s father.

“What’s this all about, Glenda? I thought we had an arrangement.”

Glenda smiled. “I’m sorry, Dennis. This isn’t working. You’re going to have to take them.”

He glared at her. “And how the hell am I supposed to do that? The camp’s fifty clicks up the strait, remember?”

Her laugh tinkled, but it held no humour. “How could I forget, Dennis? It’s where you’ve been hiding ever since my sister died. Six months without a card or a phone call. Not even on Caden’s birthday.” The rebuke startled the children, who clustered closer to their father as if to protect him.

Dennis’ reaction was angry. “I’m a logger, for Christ’s sake! What do you expect?”

She waved her hand. “You have to take them,” she repeated.

“They’re disturbing my energy field.”

“Yeah, right,” he said. “And how the hell are they doing that?”

Caden piped up, “Skylar scared the dead guy away!”

“I did not!” the blonde girl said, punching her brother’s arm. “And anyway, he wasn’t even real!”

Dennis grabbed Skylar’s hand, preventing a second punch. “Knock it off, you two.” He looked at Glenda. “A dead guy?”

“I was conducting a seance for a woman who recently lost her husband,” she said, “and I had barely contacted his spirit when this one began howling like a banshee!”

Stepping closer to her father, Skylar scowled at her aunt. “I was just makin’ it more spooky.”

“You frightened his spirit,” Glenda snapped. “Now it will take me weeks to coax him back!”

Dennis’s lips twitched. “She didn’t mean to upset you, Glenda. And she won’t do it again, will you, Skylar?”

“No way,” Skylar vowed. “That screaming old lady scared the shit out of me!”

As Dennis fought a sudden coughing spasm, Glenda closed her eyes and stretched her arms upward, lifting her hands towards the sky. Finally she lowered her arms and opened her eyes.

“I’m sorry,” she said, her voice edged with anger. “I simply can’t live with all that... that negative energy.” She began walking toward the rear of her car. “I have their things in the trunk.”

“What part of living in camp aren’t you getting, Glenda?” he shouted after her.

She responded with another benign smile. “Andrea and I grew up in logging camps, Dennis. The children will be fine. Besides, I’ve asked Spirit to help them.”

“*Spirit?*”

“My spiritual guide,” she said as if that explained it. She extracted four large plastic garbage bags from the trunk of her

car and put them on the pier. “I’ve included some blankets and their school things. You’ll have to contact the correspondence branch about courses for them.” She slammed the lid on the trunk, then pulled a bottle of pills from her pocket. “This is Skylar’s Ritalin. Make sure she takes it.”

As soon as he took the bottle from her hand, Glenda turned back to her car and climbed in behind the wheel. Dennis shoved the Ritalin into the pocket of his jeans. “Well, thanks for nothing!” he called out. Then he glared at the children. “Come on, grab yourselves a bag and follow me.”

He walked several steps before he realized his middle child wasn’t moving.

“Come on, Skylar. I haven’t got all day.”

Skylar tilted her chin. “We’re hungry.”

Her siblings nodded.

“Yeah! I’m starving,” the boy insisted.

Julie said quietly, “We only had porridge for breakfast, Daddy.”

Dennis stared at the three of them, then shook his head in defeat. It was almost a three-hour drive from Glenda’s home in Campbell River to Port Hardy. They probably *were* starving. “All right! We’ll stow your gear and then we’ll go for hamburgers, okay?”

Without a word, Skylar hoisted her bag over her shoulder and half-dragged, half-carried it toward the ramp.

Three burger-and-milkshake combos later, and with the children wearing ill-fitting life jackets, Dennis steered the zodiac out of the harbour and headed across the strait.