

Read an Excerpt

SUMMIT LAKE

Chapter One

PART I The Morning Falls

Becca Eckersley

Summit Lake

February 17, 2012

The night of her death

The winter night sucked the sky black by the time she left the café. She walked the dark streets of Summit Lake and pulled her scarf tight against the cold. It felt good to finally tell someone. It made it real. Spilling her secret relieved the pressure from a long-held burden, and Becca Eckersley relaxed a bit. She finally believed it would all work out.

When she reached the lake, the dock creaked under her feet until she stepped onto the wraparound deck of her parents' stilt house. Carefree and liberated after her time at Millie's Coffee House, Becca never felt his presence. Didn't notice him in the shadows, hidden under the cover of darkness. She keyed the side door to the mudroom and locked it behind her, then undraped her scarf and slipped out of her heavy coat. She set the alarm and headed to the bathroom where she climbed under the hot flow of water and let the stress drain from her body. It was a test run, her coffeehouse confession. Practice. She'd kept too many secrets over the last year, this being the biggest and most foolish of them all. The others could be blamed on youth,

chalked up to inexperience. But hiding this last part of her life was pure immaturity, explained only by fear and naïveté. The relief she felt from finally telling someone confirmed her decision. Her parents needed to know. It was time.

Exhausted from law school and the frantic pace of her life, it was easy to imagine crawling under the covers and sleeping until morning. But she came to Summit Lake to get her work done. To get back on track. Sleeping was not an option. She took ten minutes to blow-dry her hair and climb into comfortable sweats and thick wool socks. At the kitchen island she turned on her iPod, pulled out her textbook, notes, and laptop, and got to work.

Earlier, the shower and hair dryer had washed out the noise of the door handle rattling from outside and the two strong shoulder thrusts testing the strength of the deadbolt. But now, after an hour of Constitutional Law, Becca heard it. A rattle or vibration at the door. She turned down the iPod and listened. A half a minute of silence passed, then a loud rap at the door. Three loud knuckle-to-wood claps that startled her. She checked her watch and froze with anticipation, knowing he wasn't supposed to arrive until tomorrow. Unless he was surprising her, which he was known to do.

Becca ran to the mudroom door and pulled the curtains to the side. What she saw confused her, and in that confusion her thoughts ran sideways. Excitement filled her gut and emotion stirred her heart, and with so much clouding her mind, no single thought shouted loud enough to give her pause. Tears welled in her eyes and a smile came to her face. She punched the code on the alarm system, bringing the red light to green, then released the deadbolt and twisted the handle. She was surprised when he forced the door open and, like built-up water against a bulkhead, pushed and slid into the mudroom. More surprising still was his aggression. Unprepared for the onslaught he threw at her, she felt her heels skid and drag across the tile floor until he slammed her against the wall. Clutching her shoulders, then a fistful of hair at the base of her skull, he

wrestled her through mudroom and into the kitchen. Panic wiped her mind blank—all the ideas and images there just seconds before, erased now—allowing her primitive instincts to take over. Becca Eckersley fought for her life.

The violent flurry continued through the kitchen, Becca grasping and kicking at anything that might help her. She saw her textbook and laptop scatter to the floor as her wool-stockinged feet struggled for traction on the cold tile. As he jerked her through the room, Becca's legs frantically scissored back and forth. A wild kick met the kitchen hutch, sending dishes shattering across the floor. With the chaos in the kitchen still settling—bowls rolling, stools bouncing—she felt the carpet of the family room under her feet. It gave her leverage and Becca used every bit of it to pull away from his grip, but her resistance only fueled her attacker's rage. He wrenched her head backward, ripping a clump of hair from her scalp and sending her into a free fall. When she landed, Becca felt her head crack against the wood frame of the couch as he heaved himself on top of her. The pain in her head vibrated down her spine. Her vision blurred and the noise of the world began to fade, until his ice-cold hands thrust into her sweatpants. This snapped her back to consciousness. As the weight of his body pinned her down, she punched and clawed until her knuckles broke and her nails became thick with skin and blood.

When she felt her underwear rip away, she screamed a piercing, shrill cry. But it lasted only a few seconds, until his hands found her throat and crushed her voice into raspy gasps. He was vicious and possessed as he silenced her, his hands clamping with a powerful rage around her neck. She sucked for air, but it would not come, and soon her arms fell like deflated balloons to her sides. And though her body could no longer respond to the panicked calls from her mind, she still resisted by never breaking eye contact with him. Until her vision faded like her voice.

Broken and bleeding, she lay there, her chest barely rising with shallow breaths. She drifted in and out, waking each time he brutalized her in angry, violent waves. It went on for an eternity before

he left her. Before he fled through the sliding glass door of the family room, leaving it wide open and allowing the cold night air to fill the room and creep over her naked body. Becca's eyelids fell to slivers. All that was left now was white halogen glowing in the doorframe, bright against the dark night. Becca lay motionless; unable to blink or look away had the desire come to her. It did not. She was strangely content in her paralysis. Tears slid down her cheeks and climbed the curve of her earlobes before dripping silently to the floor. The worst was over. The pain was gone. His fists no longer pummeled her, and her throat was finally free from his crushing grip. His hot breath gone from her face, he was no longer on top of her, and his absence was all the freedom she wanted.

On the floor with her legs splayed and arms like two broken tree limbs attached to her sides, she faced the wide-open patio door. The lighthouse in the distance—with its bright beacon calling out to lost boats in the night—was all she knew and all she needed. It was life and she clung to its swaying image.

Far away a siren bounced through the night, low at first, then gathering strength. Help was coming, although she knew it was too late. Still, she welcomed the siren and the aid it would bring. It was not herself she was hoping to save.