

Prologue

I move the muddy toe of my boot an inch closer to the edge of the trail, testing the ground for stability, fearing the earth may break away beneath me.

Dark dirt, twisted roots, sharp rocks, and muscular scrub come in and out of focus, layering vertigo and a roiling nausea on top of my abject fear and panic. The sound of raging water fills my ears. Or is that the blood threatening to burst my eardrums? I remember hearing the creek down there, before all the shouting had drowned it out.

“No, no, no, no,” I whisper, chant, pray, plead as if the words were an eraser that would, if rubbed briskly across the scene below, make all of this disappear.

After this week of trying to protect my sister, I may have just killed her. Shit.

I manage one more small step. If I’m not careful, if I don’t stop to breathe, to watch my feet, to step around the gnarled root reaching up through the ground like a claw from a grave, I will suffer Lily’s fate.

My hands are shaking. Sweat rolls down my chest, between my breasts. The pain from my earlier fall bites at my back. I’d said I was fine, but I am not fine. None of this is fine.

I always imagined I’d be prepared for these situations, when disasters happen in a flash, without warning. Twenty-two years of motherhood taught me to be vigilant. Prepared to leap in, a Band-Aid, a Tylenol, a needle and thread, all in my Mother’s Survival Kit. But now I am frozen. This is no skinned knee.

If Lily were okay, she’d be shouting at me. Yelling obscenities up the mountain, blaming this on me, and demanding that I get her *the hell out of here right now!* I don’t hear anything from my sister. Again, it could be the swarm of bees in my brain that won’t shut the hell up long

enough to suss out the situation. Or it could be the worst. My mother would be so disappointed in me if she could see us now. Lily's my baby sister.

One more tiny step toward the edge. It feels like hours that Lily has been down there, but I know it's only seconds. I just need to peer over and see what's what, even if it's as bad as my worst fear. *Do it, you coward.*

The early morning sun does nothing to warm me; my teeth chatter in my jaw. "What's the point of twenty hours of sunlight if it can't do its job?" I grumble.

This wasn't my idea. I came out here to keep an eye on her. But Lily is like Jell-O. Goo in my hands, oozing out of my grip no matter how I tighten it.

Now the toes of both boots are on the ledge. One dizzy spell, one slip of the foot, a little weight too far in one direction or the other, and down I'll go. With excruciating effort, I slow my breathing, keep my eyes on a focal point, a tree with a twisted trunk, growing out of the slanted earth on the other side of the gully. I've been working on my fear of heights all week, but this is going to do me in. Finally, I will myself to peer down into the ravine that swallowed Lily. I scan the muddy, leaf-strewn forest floor, and I ask myself the question I've been muttering since we arrived in Alaska. *Why the hell did I agree to any of this?*

Chapter One

Lily is late.

I'm saying this like it is news. It's not news. It's a regular occurrence. I can set my watch by her, if I put it ahead at least half an hour.

The coffee shop is crowded and loud, packed with gig workers, telecommuters, and budding novelists. How any of them can concentrate, with the noise of the to-go customers and the piped-in Billie Eilish and the few actual socializers who aren't trying to make their living in this space between work-from-home and sitting in an actual office is beyond me.

There was one table left when I walked in, and I couldn't afford to stand on the long line and lose it. Now I'm sitting facing the door, ready to wave my sister over when she finally shows up. I plan to chastise her, although what's the point? Next time we say ten, I'll show up at ten thirty, instead of the five minutes early I generally need to quiet the scurry of squirrels scrambling my brain at the very thought of being late myself.

Two women, holding Venti iced somethings in one hand and square, brown pastry bags in the other, scan the shop looking for seating. Their eyes land on my table, empty but for the napkin I have been folding and unfolding. It's clear from the pressed lips they don't think I deserve this coveted spot. *Paying customers only*, I'll bet they're thinking. They glance at each other, their nostrils flaring with not-so-secret indignation, but I only sit up straighter and lift my chin. Possession is nine-tenths of the law, ladies.

The table stalkers wander off to stare someone else down, and I pull my list from my bag. This one is written on the back of a gas bill envelope. Coupons that I may or may not remember to use are clipped to it with my favorite pen du jour. For the hundredth time I think I need a

better system, like a cute new spiral notebook with a Zen llama or cheerfully hand-drawn flowers on the cover. All my problems would be solved if I could keep all my lists in one place. Of course, every time I remember that I've been wanting a cute new spiral notebook, the thought flies out of my head moments later as all my other to-dos shove their way in. That's why we keep lists, people! I unfold the envelope and add a Number Seven: *Cute New Notebook*.

At ten seventeen Lily steps up to the glass front door of Bean There Done That. A man, hands filled with coffees tucked into two cardboard carriers, risks dumping them on the floor to open the door for my sister, who is perfectly capable of it getting herself. That's how it goes with Lily.

I often forget how beautiful my sister is, so every time I see her, even though it's often daily, I'm caught off guard, hit with a weird sense of jealousy mixed with pride, as if I'm somehow responsible for how she turned out.

Lily flashes the door holder a smile that he will interpret as being just for him. I wave and she looks my way but is stopped by a middle-aged woman with a large, square designer bag and an oversize pair of sunglasses. One of her customers, most likely. She looks well-heeled, well-coifed, and well-appointed. "Exactly the kind of person who would pay anything for a good night's sleep" was the line Lily and Eric had used in their pitch to us. Sweet Dreams has been a success, earning my sister and her husband the cover of *New Jersey Magazine*, making the shop a Small Business of Bergen Country Award winner, and enjoying a steady stream of devoted local and out-of-town customers.

I see Lily isn't wearing her work uniform, her nap dress—a cozy, flowing garment meant to let customers know she could curl up to sleep any time, and with her help, they can too. Instead, Lily's in a matching set of sweats, which manages to look effortlessly chic on her, not baggy and

sloppy as it would on me. That means she didn't go in today. I frown. It's Tuesday. I know she's on the schedule. I helped her make it. Lily and Eric had said they were looking for silent investors. Tim and I weren't supposed to be involved in the day to day of the store. But that's Lily. And that's me.

The woman holds her hands in prayer, clearing thanking Lily for whatever miracle cure she had sold her. My sister smiles and squeezes the customer's shoulders. She could sell sand to a fish, my sister. I watch the woman leave and Lily's face settle back to its off-duty mode, but instead of coming over to the table I've staked out and fought for, she heads for the coffee line. My cell phone rings. It's Lily calling me from twenty feet away.

"Come stand here with me," she says instead of hello.

"I don't want to lose the table. Get me something."

"No. You come here. I need to talk to you."

"I want a Grande skim latte."

"Get it yourself," she says and then hangs up and turns her back on me.

Lily is, and forever will be, the baby of the family. Holding tight to the constructs of our birth order. Born when I was eight, during the time when, my mother was always quick to remind us, my parents were in the throes of a messy divorce. She was a Band-Aid baby, arriving nine months after whatever reconciliation followed a particularly bad fight. But even a baby as beautiful as Lily, with wide eyes and a head of strawberry blond curls, wasn't enough to stick things back together. On top of the colic, and the little clenched fists, and the crying until she was purple in the face, I remember the shouting, and stomping, and dinners as my mother and I took turns bouncing the baby while the other one swallowed fast bites of food. Then one day, it got quiet. My father was gone. My mother wouldn't talk about it, despite treating me like an

adult in so many other ways. Instead, she ground her resentment into a fine powder, sprinkled it over our lives, and handed the baby to me.

I learned quickly how to change a diaper, shake formula onto my wrist to test the temperature, and play peekaboo on rewind and repeat. “Go to your Big Sister. Where’s your Big Sister? Ask your Big Sister,” Mom would say so often that by the time Lily could talk, no one called me Bridget anymore. It was “Big Sister,” then “Big Sis,” then finally, and to this day, plain old “Big.”

I watch my sister waiting in the line with her back to me. The customer in front of her, a man with the name of a lawn service on his back, turns around to talk to her. Lily tucks her hair behind her ear as she responds to the guy who’s blissfully unaware that he’s now holding up the line. She takes after our father, magnificently tall and lanky, all elbows and knees. My father often reminded me of a baby giraffe, never knowing quite where to put his limbs, but on Lily, it makes her appear fluid and swanlike. I, on the other hand, am all my mother. “You’ve got pulkies, like the women on our side,” she’d say to me as if it were a badge of honor. The last thing I wanted to hear was that I inherited my Russian peasant ancestors’ chubby thighs.

It takes another ten minutes, enough time for me to add three items to my list, for Lily to get her order and sit down. She’s got my drink, as I knew she would, and a slice of banana bread that she slides to the middle of the table for us to share.

“You’re late,” I say. “Mom needs to be at the doctor by eleven thirty.” I unfold my list and run my finger down it. Yup, Number Two: *Mom to Dr. Carrazone @11:30*. “She’s got three appointments this week I’ve got to bring her to.” It’s been nonstop for me since we took away her driver’s license. “Seriously, if you can take time away from the shop, you can bring her to one of these doctors for me.”

Lily pinches off a chunk of banana bread, but instead of eating it she squishes it between her thumb and finger.

“Shit, Big. Don’t screw with me today.”

Oh right, the smiles and the charm for the door holder, and the customer, and the lawn service guy stop with me. Fine.

“You’re the one who wanted to meet up.”

Lily sinks back into her seat. When a lock of auburn hair falls over one eye, she lets it hang. Suddenly, my lovely, vibrant sister looks deflated.

“What’s the matter? Why didn’t you go to work today? Are you sick?”

She seemed perfectly fine when she walked into the coffee shop. I lean across the table, reaching out my wrist to place it on Lily’s forehead. She jerks her head away from my hand.

“Quit it.”

“Lil, if you’re sick, you shouldn’t be out.”

“I’m not sick.” She looks around the coffee shop as if there are spies among us. A woman who has tucked herself in at the end of the line waves to her, presses her palms together and tucks them up to her cheek with a small knowing smile. Another satisfied customer. Lily puts on a wide, fake smile.

“Lily!” I demand. The suspense is killing me. And the drama is unnecessary.

She snaps back to me and sighs theatrically.

“I can’t go to work, Big. I can’t ever go to work again.”

“Never?”

That’s going to be a problem. Lily is the heart and soul of Sweet Dreams. She and Eric run it almost entirely on their own, save for a few part-time employees (with a reluctant me in the

background.) They have a loyal following of insomniacs, the overworked and overtired, the anxious and the worried, who have come to count on them for their inventory of expensive pillows, high-thread-count sheets, sleep masks, essential oils, and white noise machines. And while Eric is the nuts-and-bolts business side of the shop, it is charismatic and engaging Lily, the woman who looks like she never lost a minute of sleep in her life, who customers count on to sell them the just-right-thing to send them to dreamland. *Never going back* is not an option.

“Listen, Lily,” I say. “If you need some time off, I’m sure Willa can fill in for you. I’m sure she’d like more hours.”

“No!” she spits back at me. “Stop trying to solve . . . Jesus, here. Look at this.”

She pulls some folded paper out of the pocket of her sweats and hands it to me. I open it up. And then open it again. And again. It’s a CVS receipt the length of my arm. She’s earned her two-buck bonus. Crest toothpaste is buy one, get one free.

“Oh,” I say. “Can I have this L’Oréal coupon?”

She grabs the receipt out of my hands, shakes it at me, and says, “I found this in Eric’s pants when I was doing laundry this morning.”

She hands it back to me again. “Look what he bought.”

I take out my readers and scan the small print near the top. “Old Spice deodorant,” I read off, “Gillette razors. And . . . oh . . .” I stop. Oh no. I put the paper back down on the table.

“Read it,” she says. Her eyes are dark and determined.

“Lily.”

“Read. It.”

“And . . .” My face flushes and my eyes burn. “. . . Trojan Ultra-Thin Lubricated Condoms.”

“Condoms,” she says, crumpling the receipt into a ball and tossing it across the table. It falls on the floor and bounces off my shoe.

“Oh, Lily, honey. This is bad. This is really bad.”