

*For Melissa
and all the things I couldn't understand.*

Chapter One

JENNIFER

APRIL, THE YEAR IT HAPPENED

I run my fingers along the rough fibers of the rope, and I remember everything.

As the coarse braid grazes the surface of my skin, I am once again asleep and dreaming on the morning everything fell to pieces.

It still feels so real.

I can still smell the salt air and hear the crash of waves before me. The water is cold, like icicles slamming against my legs, numbing them. The wet sand crunches under my knees, grit collecting under my fingernails as I grab it by the handful. My left sleeve looks shredded, as if someone pulled a piece of it away.

I am still here.

Tara is gone.

She is in the churning water somewhere, lost, the current pulling her toward the unknown.

I don't know why we are at the beach. I don't know where my sister Tara is.

My phone rings.

Half-awake, I reach for it. But I am of two worlds right now. Eyelids heavy, mind fuzzy, I am both sleepy and no longer asleep. The phone

rings in my ears, but the beach still appears in my mind. It is hard to understand what I am dreaming and what is real.

Just a few minutes ago, in my mind, it was a cloudless night, and the full moon shone a bright ray of light across the choppy surface of the water. I was in the ocean with Tara, where I was trying to swim against the rip currents toward the shore. She kept reaching for me, but I kept pushing her off to save myself. When I made it to the beach, I looked back, and Tara had disappeared, the only sounds remaining the crashing of waves and my pulse beating like a bomb about to explode.

I can't see.

I can't breathe.

She was my sister, and she was there for a moment. She was grasping at my arms and legs to use me as an anchor that would pull her safely to shore. Then she was gone. Now I am alone on the beach, kneeling in the sand, confused and tired.

I don't remember why we were in the water.

I don't remember if she called my name as I made it toward the shore or if she went down silently.

My T-shirt is damp from sweat, and my hands shake from the memory of my struggle in the sea. I can still feel the force of the cold water pushing me further and further away from shore. I can still smell the sea air and feel the seaweed clutch at my ankles like handcuffs, threatening to pull me under the water's surface. I can still see that my sister is not there. I can feel that the darkness has swallowed her up.

The phone is still ringing.

I take a breath before answering it.

My mother's voice is agitated on the other end of the phone.

"Dad and I can't find Tara."

I am disoriented. My mother's call confuses me. I am still in that in-between time, partway from dreaming to being awake, between imagination and reality.

"Jen, did you hear me? Tara is missing."

And I am suddenly afraid that my mother sees into my dreams and is devastated that I left my sister in the water to die so I could survive. In my mind, I see my mother joining me in my dream, looking for Tara from the sand, waiting for her head to surface above the waterline. I

imagine I'm watching my mother stumble by the waterline, grasping at shells and reeds as if she can tow Tara back ashore with them. I can hear her calling for Tara, cursing the currents that pull her daughter further and further away.

It can't be true. It was just a dream.

My mother asks, "Jennifer, are you there?"

I reply, "What do you mean she's missing, Mom? Where is she supposed to be?"

She says, "Tara didn't come home last night and isn't in the guest room now. I can't get in touch with her. We've called and texted her all morning."

I don't understand why this warrants a phone call. I am not convinced that anything is unusual, despite the dream lingering in my mind. But my mother is quietly insistent in her concern for my sister's whereabouts.

"She was supposed to go to the city with me today. We were going to meet Leslie and her mother for dinner and a show. We bought the tickets months ago."

My sister didn't often commit to spending time with our family, but I assume her best friend Leslie's inclusion in the plans made them both more appealing and likely to happen. Yet, despite Tara's promise to go to New York with my mother later today, I am still not worried.

I sit up and rub my eyes. I try to be patient as I fumble for my glasses. The world around me is a collection of vague shapes without them, disorienting me even more. I put my glasses on as if they would help sharpen my mental focus, with my mind still fuzzy.

I look at my clock, and it's only eight a.m.

"Mom, it's early. You know she never wakes up this early. There's plenty of time for Tara to come home from wherever she is. She probably drank too much and is crashing on someone's couch."

"Maybe. But what if something happened to her?"

My irritation is growing in equal measure to my mother's concern, but I try to comfort her as best I can.

I say, "I'm sure she'll be home any minute."

My mother presses the point and says, "Jen, you're not taking this very seriously. Why can't we get in touch with her?"

"Mom," I insist. "This has happened so many times before—"

My mother cuts me off and says, "Jen, I want to know where your sister is. She's my daughter, and I'm worried. Something isn't right."

It is happening again.

Tara's whereabouts are unknown.

My parents are worried.

My day will become consumed by my sister.

It is my family's pattern, one artfully perfected after years of practice.

I genuinely believe Tara is somewhere—perhaps sleeping off too many Chardonnays—immune to the storm of concern slowly brewing in my parents' minds.

For the sake of peace and moving on this morning, I hope my sister will be reasonable with her emotions and leave a small trail of meager breadcrumbs to keep us satisfied and hopeful as we try to catch up with her, wherever she is and whatever she is doing.

She could appear at their house any minute now.

I can see Tara now, as I've seen her so many times before, creeping in the front door in the early morning with tousled hair and slept-in makeup. She would pass me sitting on the couch and say something like "What are you looking at?" if I asked her questions about where she'd been.

While her behavior has often been slightly irresponsible and often frustrating, it's also been consistent. So, I'm not sure why today is different. I can't imagine that it's different.

We've been down this road so many times before.

Tara has been drifting in and out of our daily lives for years, orchestrating absences to prove her point when family discussions went wrong. She has long exercised her perceived right of rebellion. She has so often made us wonder when—and if—we'll see her next. Yet Tara's absences were not only physical. They could also be emotional; she would simply go through her daily routines of life without the need to talk to us or return our calls or texts.

I assume she has seen my parents' attempts to contact her and turned away from them as she often does when she feels bitter or slighted about something. Tara has inflicted this treatment on all of us,

cycling between rage and detachment, only peppering in a presence measured and temporary. It always seems to be our fault, even if we're not aware of the source of her anger. Even if we are, unwittingly, the source of it ourselves.

I honestly don't care anymore.

My father has taken the phone from my mother. "Look, Jen, I think your mom might be overreacting. I'm sure Tara is fine. But maybe reach out to her?"

"I agree, Dad. And I will text her as soon as we hang up."

My father has always been less likely to jump to conclusions than my mother. While she has always envisioned some disaster awaiting us, he has always been more likely to chalk it up to one of us simply being irresponsible. So much like Tara and I are, my parents are so different in their personalities. But when dealing with Tara, they are very similar in that they put love first. No matter what Tara does, they find a way to keep loving her. Even when she is unlovable, they have told me so many times that they are her parents, and while they can't explain why she behaves the way she does, there is some goodness in my sister and that she is their daughter and that is the end of it.

My father hands the phone back to my mother.

"Jen, it's Mom again. I'm not overreacting. I know how Tara is, but this doesn't feel right today."

Tara has always played by her own rules, defying my parents' authority and living just beyond the boundaries they have set to keep her safe. Go where you say you're going, make good decisions, hang out with the right people, come home when you say you're coming home. Simple tenets she has so often thrown aside over the years.

Basic rules she has thrown aside once again today.

I need more information.

I ask, "Mom, did you see her last night? Did anything happen?"

She replies, "We saw her yesterday afternoon. I asked her if she would be home for dinner, but she said she wouldn't be around last night. She didn't say anything about not being here this morning."

"Well then, I don't know what's going on. But I think you might be overreacting." I say.

"Jennifer?"

"Yes?"

"Can you please come over?" My mother pleads with me.

I challenge her, "Do you need me to come over? Can't I just try to get in touch with her—"

She cuts me off before I can continue. She says, "I'm very worried."

I tell myself that this will be the last time. But, if this happens again, I will need to put my foot down and insist that we no longer operate this way. It just isn't fair.

I tell her, "I'll be there in an hour."

I press the button to hang up, wishing I could slam the receiver down onto its cradle. It would be such a powerful and satisfying punctuation to a frustrating phone call, a gesture that cell phones have erased, where no matter how hard I press the disconnect button, it doesn't have the same effect.

My mother's request to come over infuriates me, and I feel guilty for it. But, like so many times before, I know that we will put everything aside to extend our olive branches for some unknown slight, a gesture intended to draw Tara back into our orbit, if even just for another short while.

And, honestly, I have no interest in having my sister around. I don't want to try to get her back from wherever she is right now. I don't want to do the work it requires and then suffer for it.

That work entails spending our time trying to solve Tara's mysterious disappearing act, only to be told we're ridiculous and that she's an adult and doesn't need to tell us where she is all the time. And maybe Tara's right—perhaps we play the role of seeker too much. But today, my mother feels the need to seek.

But I still see no evidence to indicate that Tara is in trouble. She is in her thirties, for fuck's sake. She's not a defiant teenager staying out past her curfew.

The guilt creeps into my mind again. I am directing my frustration at my mother when I feel it instead for Tara.

All my mother has ever wanted is family harmony. So, for her, family peace is the most important thing. My mother tempers worry with comfort. She is the only child of a single mother. My grandmother set firm boundaries around my mother to protect her, a feeling

of protection my mother has always blanketed upon Tara and me. Despite us being adults, she still does this because she's incredibly kind and sensitive and places the value of family above all else. Which is part of the reason my mother refuses to turn my sister away, even when she's had enough of her behavior. Even when Tara's behavior tortures her.

I had always shared my mother's vision, which is why, despite every time Tara has pushed me away, I had never stopped trying to make her love me, even when it seemed impossible. To this day, I persist in seeking her approval even when raging against her unacceptable behavior. It's irrational and painful, proving endlessly fruitless and exhausting.

I have never known what to do about Tara.

My parents have never known what to do about Tara.

And we still don't.

My sister has created an environment where no one wins; she is either in trouble or not. In either scenario, it's emotional chaos. She'll become angry that we made a big deal over nothing. Or it won't be nothing. I don't know which scenario is worse.

All the other families I know don't deal with shit like this, at least from what I've seen firsthand. With no real-life examples that I can use to explain our family dynamic, I have always turned to the stories I've seen in movies or on TV to explain just how broken our situation is.

I think about this one episode of *The Sopranos* that has always struck a nerve in me. Adriana is a young woman engaged to the mob boss's nephew. She becomes trapped in an impossible choice to become an FBI informant or go to jail for selling cocaine. She will lose her life either way. Adriana is a beautifully pathetic character, positioned between two terrible options with no apparent way out. Die physically or die emotionally—a tragic victim of circumstance, of forces greater than her comprehension. She tries resisting the currents that throw her around like a rowboat in a monsoon, breaking her into pieces with every wave that crashes down.

Someone like my parents. Like me.

People who must choose between two painful but inevitable outcomes. But either path incurs a type of death. We can choose to separate from Tara forever or keep her in our lives and pay the emotional

price that feels increasingly dear. It's a type of emotional death because we lose either way.

My parents and I have chosen to die emotionally in our relationship with Tara. Consistent happiness simply does not exist when you love my sister. And while my parents' emotional death isn't necessarily more significant than mine, it is different. They have two daughters who are rarely happy at the same time or for the same reasons. While my happiness rests on harmony and order within our home, it often seems like Tara relies upon chaos. So, my parents have to choose. And so often, they choose her.

When I contact Tara, I will let her have it. I can't be her tracker, putting everything aside to hunt her down once again. I want to let her go.

But my parents need me to help them more than I need peace or emotional resolution.

So, once again, I relent.

I walk into the kitchen to make coffee as I consider my options. If I call Tara, there is very little chance she'll answer. If she does, she'll be irritated that I called. She will manipulate my concern into yet another disagreement, miscommunication, and misreading of my intentions. I decide to text her first, hoping that even a one-word response would reassure my mother that there was nothing to be worried about.

Hey, where are you? Mom and Dad are worried.

I keep it short and to the point. It's all I have the energy to write. I need this to be over to get on with my day.

I also call Tara's phone because it might be more challenging to avoid a call than a text. But Tara has perfected the art of avoidance. The phone rings again and again, and she does not pick up. I am not surprised; Tara can go days without responding to calls or texts. Then she'll resurface and text me but be economical with her words. One minute, she's there; most minutes, she's not.

I think about the dream I woke from earlier. In it, Tara had disappeared into the water. I try to remember if she disappeared because she chose to or because I pushed her away. My memory of the details fades

as each minute passes, but the power of her disappearance remains the same.

Tara was there in the dream and reality, and now she's not.

Before heading over to my parents' house, I prepare for my day, which will include my usual Saturday morning errands and seeing some friends for dinner. First, I start my shopping list, noting that I need coffee, yogurt, Windex. I search for a coupon for Bed Bath and Beyond, remembering that I need to replace the guest room comforter. I call the new Thai restaurant around the corner to make a reservation for tonight.

I quickly scroll my work email, remembering that I have a department meeting on Monday for which I need to prepare. I also need to write the final exam questions for the Constitutional Law seminar I'm teaching this semester. I add these additional tasks to my list, confident I can finish them this afternoon, even if it pushes off my other errands. Of course, I can always hit the Bed Bath and Beyond near the Rutgers campus on Monday if I don't get to it today.

I check my phone for texts, and there are none. I reach out to a few of Tara's friends, young women we have known since grade school. I rarely contact any of them aside from Leslie. Most of them show me the same level of disinterest and animosity that Tara does, likely because she has written me as the enemy in her story. I am the wicked sister who has continually done Tara wrong through my words and actions. I am the villain in her narrative, paired with her through some existential error—an outsider to her life.

I have their numbers on my phone because I sent the invites for Tara's college graduation party a few years back. I remember it so clearly. It was one of the beautiful, peaceful resting spots in our family's emotional marathon. The conversation that day was as light as the breeze that swayed the cap and gown decorations that hung above us. One of those times that made me optimistic that Tara had turned a corner, that things could be different between us.

As the party continued that summer day, I watched Tara mingling with friends, glowing with her achievement, moving quickly through the crowd, and accepting her accolades. I felt like she was on the verge of something different that day. I had hoped she had finally found herself

after so many years of searching. Of course, it's impossible to know if she felt that way, but I have been a perpetual student of my sister's expressions and mannerisms, and amid the champagne and cake and balloons, I was sure I could see a spark of hope in her.

I had hoped it was real.

I had hoped it wasn't a carrot I would devour, not knowing the stick would soon follow.

But the stick soon came. As it always did.

I've kept her friend's numbers on my phone for years, knowing I would need them for something someday. But then, it was just a feeling. And today is the day.

I send out a few texts.

Hey, have you talked to Tara today? My parents
need to get in touch with her.

Can you please text me if you hear from Tara? I
want to talk to her.

My phone finally dings, and I hope it is Tara, so we can simply be done with this today.

It's my best friend, Joanna. We text for a few minutes as I wait for other responses.

Are we on for dinner tonight?

I just made the reservation for 7 — Tara drama going on. I'll text you later.

What now?

Her usual disappearing act. Same annoying shit.
I'm done.

Sorry Jen. She'll turn up, like she always does.
We'll drink all the wine later.

Thanks. See you there.

I should also text Matt, Tara's ex-boyfriend. It's a long shot, but I reach out to Matt anyway.

Have you talked to Tara at all today?

When I asked Tara why she and Matt broke up back in January, she told me to mind my own fucking business. Of course, it is not unusual for her to withhold information like that, especially if it is painful and she perceives it as making her look foolish or guilty. But I imagine Tara did something that was finally a bridge too far for Matt.

It wouldn't be the first time she overstepped with him.

I overheard Tara telling our cousin Pamela once that she smacked Matt in the face during one of their fights. Another time, she threw a bottle into his new flat-screen TV. No matter how I imagine it, this latest fight was indeed something like that; a disagreement brought to a fever pitch by Tara, who likely had no end game for resolving it peacefully.

It would make total sense that she is either with him now or distancing herself from some new development in their occasionally tumultuous relationship. As I wait for Matt's response, I can see Tara now, standing wild-eyed on his front lawn, slashing his tires, keying the driver's side door of his car. I spin the scenarios beyond Matt alone. I can see her driving to a motel in Pennsylvania to hide out for a few days and make everyone worry about her. I can see her leaving a bar last night and getting pulled over, now too proud to make the call to ask to get bailed out. I can see her doing many things to explain why she hasn't appeared yet.

I'm not sure if or when Matt will respond. I don't know how frequently Matt and Tara were in contact, if at all. My sister lived with him until recently when a fight sent her back to live at our parents' house while they worked it out.

I find it ironic that Tara now lives with our parents again, even temporarily. I don't know why she just didn't buy her own house or rent an apartment. Tara certainly has the money. It just seems so odd that she

ran back to my parents after all those years of running from them. I don't understand it.

Just like I don't understand why they would take her in. I know it's because they love her and won't give up on her. And that is the decision they've made, as they've told me many times. I guess we all have to live with our choices whether others understand them or not.

I hear my phone beep and see it's a text from Matt.

I haven't heard from her in a while. I'll let you know if I do. Sorry Jen.

Not what I wanted to hear, but not surprising either. My phone beeps again, and it's a text from my father.

Would you please come now? Police called and want to talk to us.

My hands begin to shake as I put down the dishes I had started unloading from the dishwasher. I feel uneasy, a dread beginning to build as I wonder what has happened to my sister.

The mention of police causes concern for me, but only because I can imagine the gravity of what Tara must have done to require the police to be involved. My first instinct is that Tara has once again fucked a situation up beyond repair. When Tara's emotions erupt, they can be destructive. I imagine that she has once again unleashed her rage on someone or something and crossed some physical or legal boundaries that the police could not ignore.

But my mind goes further than that.

Visions of car accidents and aneurysms and abductions take over my mind. I get dressed in a hurry as I endlessly spin out potential tragedies that might have transpired. Any of these would devastate my parents beyond repair; Tara's stroke of bad luck would plague our whole family with a sadness triggered by never having had the time to make things right between us.

I shake it off. The police would have come to the house if the news was that bad.

I am again in my dream, and I see Tara sink below the water's surface. I wonder what it means. My breathing quickens, making me feel lightheaded.

Tara has always made us work so hard for peace. She has never made it easy to be her parent or her sister. She has never been considerate about how her actions affect our feelings. She has always been selfish and temperamental.

And today is no different.