

PROLOGUE

ELIZA

Present day, the Great Western Tiers, Tasmania

The rain woke her.

She needs you.

Eliza opened her eyes. She was facedown in the gravel of the hiking track, the smell of wet earth in her nose.

You have to get up.

She sucked a breath through her teeth. Everything ached. The back of her head stung. Her glasses dug into her temple, the left lens cracked. Her puffer jacket and hiking tights were soaked through to the skin.

The icy mountain rain grew heavy, slapping against the gum leaves with the wind. A yellow wattlebird called off in the bush: the sound like a cork pulled from a bottle.

Get up. She needs you.

At the edge of the track grew a native laurel, peppered with white flowers. She leaned on it, dragging herself to her feet, spiky leaves cutting her palm, the crushed flowers releasing their sweet wild scent.

Her hiking boots were gone, her socks were gone, her feet numb and tinged blue in the alpine cold.

She spun, scanning the fog. The motion caused her skull to throb. She put her hand to the back of her head and it came away red.

She realised her honey hair was stuck to her cheeks by something sticky-brown. She pinched it away from her cheek, confused.

A human voice – distant, but growing closer.

Eliza froze. All her half-thoughts snapped into one decision. She lifted a white gum branch off the track: thick and smooth. She stepped into the ferns at the edge of the path, her clothes catching on the laurel. Was there a place she could hide? Did she really want to leave the track?

The sound of breaking branches behind her. ‘Miss Ellis!’

Eliza shouted, spun, and swung her stick.

The figure – a teenage girl – scrambled back with a yelp.

‘Jasmine!’ Eliza could have cried with relief. ‘No . . . Carmen?’

‘You tried to hit me!’ Carmen backed away, her long dark hair slick against her face. ‘What the hell is wrong with you?’

The stick fell from Eliza’s frozen fingers. ‘I’m sorry.’ She grabbed Carmen’s wrist and pulled her closer, into the cover beneath the trees.

‘You’re freezing, Miss Ellis.’

The rain stopped, like a tap turned off. The bush was suddenly fog-quiet, save for gentle dripping. Waiting.

‘Where are the others?’ whispered Eliza.

‘Everyone’s at the bus, but they can’t find Jasmine, Cierra, Bree or Georgia. Mr North says we need to call off the hike because of the storm. He’s already called the bus.’ Carmen seemed unaware her own voice had grown hushed. ‘You weren’t answering your phone. He sent me and Mr Michaels to find you.’

‘No one has seen those girls?’

‘Aren’t they with you? Is it true there was a fight?’ Carmen peered closer. ‘Is that blood on your face?’

‘Where’s Mr Michaels?’

Carmen was looking at the blood, at the bruise on Eliza's face, at her cracked glasses. Realisation dawned.

'*Carmen*. Where is Jack – where is Mr Michaels?'

'We split up, he took another track. We've been looking for you for ages,' said Carmen. 'What's happened? *What's happened?*'

'You were on this path *alone?*' shouted Eliza, and Carmen scurried another step back, panicked.

Eliza's world lurched and she steadied herself against a gum tree.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket – maybe it had been buzzing the whole time and she hadn't noticed. She had to see to Carmen's safety first.

'Where's your phone, Carmen?'

'We left them at school,' said Carmen, voice shaking. 'We handed them to Mr North before we left. Oh, God. Don't you remember? Oh God, help . . . w-what happened to you? *Where are the others?*'

'Carmen, I need you to listen carefully . . . in just a moment, I need you to run back to Mr Michaels. *Run*. Don't stop for anything.' She picked up the stick she had dropped and handed it to Carmen. 'If you see anyone you don't know . . .'

'Miss Ellis?'

'If you can't find Mr Michaels, just run back to the bus. Stay away from *anyone* else. *Do you understand me?*'

'Wh-what's going on?' Carmen whimpered.

'Just wait there a moment.' Eliza answered her phone. 'Tom?' she said. 'Are all the girls back?'

'Eliza! Finally! Where the hell are you?'

'The *girls*, Tom.'

'We're still missing Georgia, Bree, Jasmine and Cierra. I sent Carmen and Jack to find you. Are they with you?'

'I'm sending Carmen to find Jack, and then back to you. If she's not there in the next fifteen minutes, lock the other girls in the bus and come looking. I don't know where we are right now.'

‘We’re j-just off the Lake Nameless trail,’ stammered Carmen. ‘W-west of it.’

Suddenly the rain started again, this time with ice in the water. Eliza’s skin stung in the sleet.

‘Carmen’s coming from the western track of the Lake Nameless trail. And call the police. *Now.*’

‘What the hell’s going on? Where are the others?’ said Tom.

‘I’ll find them,’ said Eliza. ‘Just call the police, Tom.’

‘Eliza, you shouldn’t —’

‘Tom. Call the police.’ She ended the call and looked at Carmen. ‘Go.’

Carmen hesitated, then crashed through the branches and sprinted off down the track. Eliza watched her disappear around a corner, then stepped back out onto the track.

Lightning flashed overhead and three seconds later it was followed by a long, echoing boom, pressing down on her eardrums, startling the yellow wattlebird into another cry.

The sleet grew heavier, making the bushland feel threatening in the cloud-gloom wet. This was a bad place to be in a storm: it was said anything could happen in the Great Western Tiers. Kooparooona Niara in language, or ‘Mountain of Spirits’, they were the stark bluffs that bordered the Central Plateau. They were dense, claustrophobic, and dangerous. You could walk in circles for days and never see a path right beneath you, you could freeze to death in the snowstorms that came from nowhere, you could fall off a fog-hidden cliff or into one of countless ravines and never be found.

Warmth and feeling slowly re-entered her bare feet, stinging against the sharp gravel and icy water. She’d walked barely a minute when she heard the sound of a different bird – a yellow-throated honeyeater – far up ahead, a harsh raspy call that keeps other birds away from its territory. Or warns about the presence of people.

Eliza stopped and shivered.

This is your fault. You deserve this.

She tried to shut out memories of the old rhyme, the one they'd banned students from saying, the one even she and her sister used to whisper at night, giggling with the thrill of fear. The town of Limestone Creek, nestled at the base of the Tiers, had only ever known one monster; the bodies of those girls had never been found.

She stepped off the path again, into a copse of mountain needle-bush that scratched her skin, and walked beside the trail, creeping low to the ground. Her feet stung. Her jacket snagged and tore. She'd lost an earring – now a golden hoop dangled from only her left ear.

And then, a minute later, she heard heavy footsteps in the scrub, matching her every step.

She didn't stop. She kept creeping.

'Just your imagination,' she whispered.

The scrunch-thud of footsteps, the scratch of ferns and branches.

She didn't look.

If she didn't look, she would be okay.

The legend said that if you didn't see his face, he wouldn't take you.