

## 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. Kooparoona 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.

## CHAPTER 1

### MURPHY

#### *The morning before*

Murphy sighed. 'We are not having this conversation again.' He was shirtless, sitting at their rickety dining table, speaking loudly over the thumping Jon Bellion song playing from the bluetooth speaker in the corner. 'Camping is *good* for you.'

'I can help out at home,' wheedled his 16-year-old daughter, Jasmine. She was leaning on the table, their chubby black-and-white cat Myrtle squirming in her arms. 'I can mow the lawns. I can clean the windows —'

'School. *Get.*' Murphy lifted a clump of the sweet, sticky marijuana that covered the table and placed it on the electric scales.

The kitchen was falling apart, the cupboard doors loose and the fittings cracked, the wallpaper and the brown lino floor both peeling. Feline-safe houseplants covered most surfaces – devils ivy crawled above the cupboards, where the cats couldn't reach. They were Jasmine's additions, her latest attempt to purify the air of cigarettes and weed.

'I can —'

'Get,' said Murphy again.

Jasmine was short and lithe like her late mother, her clear blue eyes smudged with shadow and dark liner. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail: once ginger like her mum's, it was now dyed raven black.

Murphy, by comparison, was tall, bearded, and built like a lumberjack. Celtic tattoos covered a solid chest, big arms, thick legs. He was clad only in the crumpled Calvin Klein boxer-briefs he had slept in.

The cat mewled and leapt out of Jasmine's arms. Named Myrtle after the Harry Potter character, the cat walked a few feet away, fell onto her side, and appeared to fall immediately asleep.

'Look, Dad, I don't think you understand what I'm offering here . . .'

'I know exactly what you're offering, sweetheart.'

'But it's *hiking*, Dad!'

'And it won't kill you.'

'You don't know that —'

'She *could* stay and clean her room, lad,' offered her uncle, Butch. He was in the kitchen with them, cooking breakfast, bopping along to the music, a joint in one hand and a pan frying bacon in the other. As always, he wore a navy singlet and dirty footy shorts.

'Don't,' warned Murphy, focused on his task. He added more weed to the scale, until it was exactly an ounce.

The family resemblance between Butch and his younger brother Murphy was obvious, but Butch was much rounder in the cheeks and body. He also had daggers and a Mexican sugar skull tattooed on his neck. Butch had earned his nickname in high school for his size, but both of them were an identical six-foot-three. No one called them by their first names unless they wanted a fight.

'Uncle Butch, can I stay home?' Jasmine skipped to his side, light as a feather. 'Please? Can I?'

'Sure thing, Jaz,' said Butch, taking a drag from his joint. 'Artypay at the Urphys-may.'

'Your teacher called me *specifically* to check you'd be there,' Murphy said. He put the ounce into a ziplock bag and sealed it with a vacuum tool, his movements careful and deliberate. 'You've wagged too many days this year already. So you *are* going to school, and you *are* going on the camp, *and you are going to like it.*'

'Yeah, Jaz, if *Miss Ellis* says so . . .' said Butch.

'That's the only reason he's making me go,' said Jasmine in disgust. 'He just wants to get in her pants.'

Murphy turned back to his work, taking the sealed ziplock bag and slapping a sticker onto it – one of the 'THE CAPTAIN' stickers they'd bought in bulk online at The Mad Hueys – that now identified it as the best bush bud in Northern Tasmania. Even though identifying their product was risky, it had the added benefit of shoving it in the face of Sergeant Doble, their rival and constant pain in the arse, who seized as much of their product out on the streets as he could.

'What makes you think I'm not in her pants already?' said Murphy.

'Dad, gross.'

'Ayyy, Murphy, I had dibs,' said Butch, winking at Jasmine.

'And don't think that if you miss the bus I'll let you off,' Murphy continued loudly. 'I'll still drive you up.' He flashed a white smile with crooked teeth. 'Just in my undies. I'll even hop out to kiss you goodbye in front of all your little girlfriends.'

'You're such a creep. Please, Dad, it won't matter if you tell them I'm sick or something . . .'

Murphy glanced her way, pausing. Her pale face, mouth a little too tight; up on her toes like she was about to fly out the window. 'Jasmine,' he said finally. 'It's only one night. Nothing's going to happen to me. I'll still be right here when you get back.'

'Dad, I'm not —'

'Sweetheart, I'm not going anywhere. I promise.'

Jasmine's sadness turned to something else, cold and resigned. 'Fine.' She lifted one of the bags out of the box, pinched between two fingers. 'Then I'm taking one of these.'

He took it from her hand. 'Nice try.'

'Hypocrite. Uncle Butch said you took weed to all *your* school camps.'

'Shhh,' said Butch in a loud stage whisper.

'If you come back with even a *whiff* of it, you are grounded until you're thirty-eight,' said Murphy, glaring at Butch. 'Your uncle should keep his mouth shut.'

'Maybe I exaggerated, Jaz,' said Butch. 'As I remember, he wasn't always smoking: sometimes his lips were attached to one of the Lindsay girls, and not always her —'

'Ew!' Jasmine squealed. 'I'm going!'

She pulled her camping pack over her shoulders. She picked up Myrtle from the floor and rubbed her face against the cat's, singing a few lines from James Blunt's 'Goodbye My Lover'. Myrtle meowed, and Jasmine squeezed her once more before she let her back onto the ground.

'Just so you know, Dad, I don't think Miss Ellis is your type. *Love you!*' Jasmine slammed the door behind her: not out of anger, but because slamming it was the only way to get the dicky door fully closed.

'She gets that from you, dickhead,' said Murphy after a moment. He weighed out the next ounce.

'You mean her sticky fingers?' said Butch. 'I barely saw her lift that bag and stuff it up her sleeve.'

'No, I meant her — *what?*'

'Nothing,' said Butch, his smile growing wider.

'Shit!' Murphy ran to the door, knocking over his chair, leaping over a hissing Myrtle, stumbling out onto the street. The ever-present valley breeze of Limestone Creek brought the country town smell of diesel, smoke and gumtree.

Up the end of the street, Jasmine was already climbing into the bus. It was a good fifty metres — she must have run the whole way to get so far ahead of him. She scampered up inside.

Murphy sprinted towards the bus, dodging over broken pavers, a Jack Russell running to a nearby fence and yapping at him.

The bus pulled away. A magpie called from a gumtree above as he slowed, bare feet aching from the hard pavement.

Across the street were two young women in matching Adidas jogging gear. They giggled. Peggie and Darcy, the housemates from down the road. He knew them, of course: he knew nearly everyone who lived around here. They had their phones out, the cameras pointed his way.

He realised he was still in his undies.

He hurried back home.

The door was shut.

He pushed it.

Locked.

'Butch, don't be a knob.' He pounded on the door with his fist, glancing back at Peggie and Darcy, who were waving at him.

The window beside the door opened and Butch's face appeared. 'Hey, everyone!' he shouted. 'Murph is outside in his undies!'

'I'm gonna punch you in the balls.'

*'There's a man who is starkers outside! Someone call the cops! Hey, how you going, ladies? Murphy's looking a bit cold, hey?'*

Peggie and Darcy laughed, a kookaburra took up the call, and the Jack Russell kept barking.

'You're dead, Butch,' said Murphy. He stalked around the side of the house and pulled himself over the peeling white fence.

Their backyard was a tangle of weeds, long grass and scraggly bush. There was a chicken coop in the far corner, a shed in the other, and a rusty Hills Hoist stood in the middle. There was no back fence, the yard backing onto a line of blackberry bushes and white gums. Their property here in the outskirts of Limestone Creek bordered the Western Tiers National Park. One and a half kilometres away, hidden in all that scrub and bush, was his and Butch's marijuana crop, the route leading there rigged up with homemade booby traps.

Beyond that rose the Great Western Tiers, steep inclines of blue-grey streaked with columns of rock. Away to the west was Devils Gullet: a rugged prehistoric gorge, with a lookout on the cliffs that offered views of the misty mountains of Tasmania. That lookout was to be one of the locations on Jasmine's school hike, even though she had been there countless times before. Murphy had even taken her camping to the same spot on Western Bluff where they'd be sleeping tonight: it was only a twenty-minute trip if you had a dirt-bike and knew the forestry roads. That was back when Jasmine's mum, Sara, was alive.

Murphy stomped in through the back door and into the kitchen.

Butch wolf-whistled at the sight of him, arms folded across his singlet, joint between his fingers. 'Why the *hell* are you single?'

'Dickhead. I'll get you back for that.' Murphy shot his hand out to try and whack Butch in the groin, who dodged just in time. 'The Hilux keys.' Murphy patted the wall where they usually hung. 'Where'd you put them?'

'It's fine, Murph, she's a smart kid, she won't get caught.'

'Where are the bloody keys?'

Butch laughed. 'Mate. Calm *down*. You think you're gonna keep Jasmine away from the bud forever when it's her old man's job to *grow it*? She's sixteen, it's school camp, she's had a tough year: let her loosen up a bit.'

'Where are the *fucking keys*, Butch?'

Butch sighed as he went back to cooking the eggs and bacon. 'Don't worry about it, lad. I was only joking.'

'What?'

'She didn't take anything . . . should've seen your face though.' He cackled. 'I should've filmed you out there.'

'You're a fucking goose, mate.' He punched Butch in the shoulder, hard. Their other cat, Gus the Muss, skittered away, knocking over a large potted sword fern, scattering potting mix.

Butch winced, nearly dropping his plate, but the grin crept back onto his face. 'Skinner is comin' round tonight and we've got a bloody *truckload* of bud to bag.' He shoved the joint into his mouth and then pressed the other plate into Murphy's hands. 'Get your strength up, lad.'