Eliza Jabore began globetrotting at seventeen and spent the next decade devoted to traveling. She met her husband abroad and, after many years of adventure, finally planted roots back in her hometown in Iowa where she has two kids, two cats, and a dog. *Backstabbers* is her debut novel.

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ELIZA JABORE

BACK STABBERS

SPHERE

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SPHERE

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To my daughters—may you know many adventures

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CHAPTER ONE

"This was the best decision I ever made. I feel so alive!" Florence Marsh sent that message to her brother a little over five years ago, on June 17, 2019. She was never heard from again.

According to her wilderness permit, Florence had planned a seventy-eight-mile loop hike of the Bones Hollow Trail through Olympic National Park in Washington.

Despite the case being closed after the death of Wendy Whitmore in 2018, Florence is believed by many to have been the ninth and final victim of the Bones Hollow Hunter. The eight other hikers' bodies were each discovered naked, pinned against a tree with an arrow through the heart and a single tooth missing. But Florence Marsh's body was never found.

Who was the Bones Hollow Hunter, and why do people suspect Florence was his ninth victim?

These are the questions we explore together on episode nine of Serial Killers USA: the Bones Hollow Hunter. As always, my sweet Little Savages, I'm your host, Laurie Wolff. Let's dive in.

*

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"Why are we listening to this?" I asked again, like I had at least once a day. Laurie Wolff's husky voice had serenaded us almost constantly since we started hiking the Bones Hollow Trail three days ago.

"Why wouldn't we?" Zoe grunted, the exertion of hiking the rugged terrain audible in her voice. The two-foot-wide trail moved steadily downhill through the old-growth forest in a series of switchbacks. Giant evergreen roots and moss-covered rocks and boulders protruded onto the muddy path, threatening to trip us with every step. "We're literally *in* the Hunter's old stomping grounds. It's no different than having a guidebook, Jade; we need to be prepared. He's dormant, not dead. Besides, it's great research for when I start my own podcast one day. And I catch something new every time I listen to it."

"Me too," Stefanie said, breathing heavy. She always took her cues from Zoe. We both did. "And noise is good. It keeps the bears away."

The Hunter's victims all had a few things in common, Laurie Wolff continued. *Young women between the ages of twenty and thirty-five hiking the Bones Hollow Trail alone. Aged thirty, Florence Marsh fit this profile.*

I looked to my two best friends, aged twenty-eight. "Noise also attracts," I said.

According to Florence's wilderness permit, she expected to take two days to reach Bones Hollow Valley, where she would rest for one day before hiking back. Her family says that she easily trekked twenty miles a day, regardless of terrain, and would have finished the loop in that time frame with ease. A torrential rainstorm rolled through on her second day. Being the experienced hiker that she was, it is believed that Florence knew to shelter in place and wait for the weather to pass.

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"You're supposed to shelter in place? Shit, I wouldn't have known that." It was mid-July and yet the cool, misty air chilled the sweat on my neck. Goose bumps prickled my flesh. "Seriously, guys, I can't listen to this anymore. All I'm hearing is that a super-experienced hiker bit the dust in some gruesome way and now we're following in her footsteps. If *Florence* got killed out here, what the hell kind of chance do we stand? We've never been backcountry camping like this before!"

"We've camped before," Stef said, defensive.

"Yeah, at campgrounds in state parks. A little different than hiking across the wilderness for eight days, don't you think?"

"We all pop our cherry sometime," Zoe said. "Stop worrying so much."

"C'mon," Stef said. "You know that telling our sweet baby Jade to stop worrying is like telling a fish not to swim." She blew me a kiss.

I smiled, snarky, and flipped her the finger. "I'm not a worrier, I'm just sensible. And Zoe would probably be dead without me by now."

"That's probably true," Zoe sighed. "But that's why I love you so much. I need someone who helps me question my impulses. Even if it drives me fucking crazy." She weaved her arm around my neck for a quick hug, nearly toppling us both.

The ball of aggravation that had knotted my stomach softened now. Zoe and I often said that we balanced each other out. I brought her back down to Earth while she challenged me to reach for new heights. It was one of the reasons we were such good friends.

Stef snorted, laughing. "Oh my god, remember when she stopped you from picking up that snake?"

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"She wasn't just going to pick it up," I reminded her. "She was going to push it into that glass bottle! Idiot."

Zoe tossed her hands into the air. "It didn't seem so dumb at the time! But okay, fine. That one was venomous. You saved my life. I freely admit it."

"I would've thought most people knew that, like, basically everything in Australia is poisonous. But you're welcome."

"Well, we all know I'm not most people," Zoe said with pride.

Laurie Wolff went on: *The search party never found a single item that belonged to Florence. Not even her grandfather's antique silver compass that she never left home without. She vanished without a trace. Plenty of other hikers in Olympic National Park go missing, but normally they leave evidence behind. So, was she just another unfortunate traveler like the police and the park rangers want us to believe? Or was she the next victim of the Bones Hollow Hunter? Well, my Little Savages, what do you think?*

I stared into the rich coniferous forest around us. Wide cedars and firs reached their needlepoint noses up to the clouds. Mammoth trees, ferns, and white-flowering hemlock stretched as far as the eye could see, every inch of rock and earth dripping with emerald moss. The forest vibrated with scuttling critters and birdsong. Eagles soared overhead in clear blue sky. Out of sight, we heard a stream bubbling through the growth down to Bones Hollow, where we'd camp tonight.

Everything around us felt so alive, in a way that was both magical and unsettling. I couldn't shake the feeling that, somewhere out there, predators lurked behind this vibrant greenery. Bears, cougars, or worse. Some invisible beast could be hunting us right now.

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Shadows moved behind a wide cedar. A twinge of panic momentarily coiled tight around my lungs. Okay, maybe my friends were right; maybe I did worry too much. But that was why our annual adventures together were so good for me. Stef and Zoe loved to push me out of my comfort zone, and I got to challenge myself.

Once a year between April and September, the Bones Hollow Hunter pierced one unlucky woman through the heart with his bow and arrow and left her body posed in the exact same way. Florence Marsh fit his profile, and her family have always maintained that she was too experienced a hiker to go missing, not to mention without a trace. They are convinced that the Bones Hollow Hunter was involved. But if the Hunter killed her, why hadn't he positioned her body?

There are some of us that agree with the Marsh family. The police might want to tie this case up with a nice little bow, but not everyone is so convinced. Perhaps the Hunter isn't dormant at all.

I hated this podcast. I couldn't understand why my friends liked it so much.

"Don't you guys think it's tacky, though?" I said, panting between words. "How Laurie Wolff uses those cheesy intros to every episode, like just get on with it! No one who has decided to listen to this stupid serial killer podcast chooses to start the series with episode nine. And don't even get me started on her ending credits song. I mean, '*I Think We're Alone Now*', really? It's so disrespectful to the actual victims. Just like calling her fan base 'Little Savages.'" I paused to catch my breath. "Not to mention that it's outrageously annoying that we've come out here to enjoy nature and can't unplug for even half a day."

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"Oh my god, fine!" Zoe stopped and reached into her backpack's side pocket. "If you're not going to stop complaining." She switched off her phone. As none of us had signal out here, Zoe had taken the liberty of downloading the full season of *Serial Killers USA: the Bones Hollow Hunter* before we left. "Happy now?"

"Yes," I said. But then I wasn't so sure. The silence was at once blissful and foreboding.

A thick branch snapped somewhere in the dense foliage, loud like a bone cracking. I screamed. On instinct, my friends screamed with me. Laughter immediately followed. Our backpacks threatened to catapult us down the sloping trail, and we anchored ourselves against one another, giggling uncontrollably.

By the time I caught my breath, my knees felt ready to buckle. I unclipped my waistbelt and the chafed skin on my hips stung with relief. I hefted my backpack, the size of a small child, onto the ground and sat atop it. The others followed suit. We rubbed our sore calves and shoulders, kneading impenetrable knots. I checked my watch to see that it was nine a.m. and we'd been hiking for two and a half hours.

"Did you think it was the Hunter?" Stef said, still laughing. "When you screamed, I won't lie, for a second I thought it was him."

"Oh please, we both know what you're scared of, Stef," Zoe said. "All that hocus-pocus bullshit and evil spirits."

"Don't play," Stef said, serious now. "It's no joke. We're hiking toward an ancient burial ground."

"Rumored," I pointed out. An important distinction.

"I'm just saying," Stef said, looking around for invisible ears. "Be respectful."

Wiping sweat from my brow, I restrained myself from

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taking a swig of water. Streams and creeks were plentiful in this forest, always audible nearby, but it took time to refill our hydration packs using the tiny filter pouch in Stefanie's backpack. She carried purifier tablets, too, but it was best to reserve those. Zoe had said we were about seven miles from Bones Hollow, and if we were careful we wouldn't need to refill our hydration packs until tonight. I watched as Stef tipped her bottle to her lips.

Leaves rustled behind us. "Relax," Zoe said, seeing the tension in my shoulders. She massaged them now. "It's probably just the bear."

We'd seen a beefy black bear eating huckleberries in a meadow on our first day. All three of us had frozen. Stef and I clung to each other, unable to move until it had shuffled all the way across the meadow and out of sight. Even then, I was nervous to go on. I imagined it turning to see us and giving chase, its lumbering gait too fast to outrun. But Zoe had said, "Black bears rarely attack humans unprovoked, don't worry." How she knew this, I couldn't be sure. But then Zoe had a way of sounding confident in just about everything she said, justified or not.

"Why would you say bear?" I asked. "It's not funny."

"You're right. It's probably a cougar. Except, wait, you'd never hear a cougar."

I rolled my eyes. "I seriously hate you sometimes."

"Oh, come on," Zoe put her arm around me. "You've got nothing to worry about. We're out here in one of the most beautiful places on Earth. Breathe it in; enjoy it! If anything tries something—a bear, or a cougar, or the *Hunter*," she wiggled her fingers like she spoke of the boogie man and not a real-life serial killer who had prowled this trail, "there's three of us. Strength in numbers, girl. We're perfectly safe."

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We'd been friends for seventeen years, since middle school, and I could still never tell if Zoe was tough as nails or just the best poker-faced bluffer. Nothing seemed to faze her. Maybe that was why she could listen to true crime podcasts like they were lullabies while I lay awake at night envisioning an arrow through my heart. Zoe often talked about starting her own program one day; she saw it as her chance to be a real-life hero, solving cold cases. Whereas just imagining the gruesome research involved in such a project terrified me.

"Thanks," I said. My friend was right. We were surrounded by breathtaking beauty; nature so untouched and pure, it was like stepping back in time. I needed to appreciate this experience.

Zoe nudged me with her shoulder. "You want to see her again, don't you?"

Stefanie nodded emphatically. "Yes, yes, yes."

Zoe reached into her shorts pocket and withdrew a three-and-a-half-inch folding knife she'd affectionately named Ripley. "Here she is." She unfolded it and passed the knife to me.

Ripley's weight in my palm momentarily soothed my nerves. I traced the ridge of its black handle. But when my eyes came to the serrated blade, I had to admit to myself I'd never be able to use a knife, even if I were in danger. But it was reassuring Zoe had it.

I passed it to Stefanie and she smiled, switching it between her hands before twisting the blade in the air, stabbing at the nothingness. "Is it weird that just holding this makes me feel like a badass? Maybe this is what the Hunter feels like." She sliced at a dangling fir branch.

I cringed at the thought of the killer with this knife. But,

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at the same time, I understood what she meant. Having the knife meant we stood a chance against a predator like him.

Zoe had the map spread across her lap. The pink streak she'd dyed into her pale blonde hair fell from her ponytail into her eyes; she tucked it behind her ear, then again when it fell once more. The small black tattoos that littered her arms looked like a map in and of themselves, and they were in a way. A map of everywhere we'd gone together, a new one for every trip. She'd designed each one herself. A jaguar for Costa Rica. A seashell for Sicily. She'd told us that she planned to get a wide cedar for the Bones Hollow Trail. Stef had admired her ink for years now and finally said she was ready to take the plunge. Naturally, she planned to get the same cedar that Zoe would design.

Zoe glanced at her compass as Stef continued stabbing at the air. Another branch cracked in the forest, but this time I didn't scream. I searched the trees and the endless expanse of gray-brown trunks and branches and the vibrant greenery for any trace of movement, for the shadow of antlers passing by in the thick. Or worse, steam off a bear's large snout, or the glint of a predator's eyes.

I silently repeated my mantra:

1. The Hunter's victims were always single female travelers. We were a trio. We didn't fit the profile. And,

2. He hadn't killed anyone in years, even if you believed he killed Florence Marsh.

Though, I supposed if he *had* changed his methods for Florence, there might be a whole trail of other missing women no one had even linked to him, since the police had stopped searching . . .

Dammit, Jade, don't think like that. Cling to the mantra!

There was nothing to be afraid of. We were out here to

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conquer fear anyway. To look the wilderness in the face and say that we could hack it. We could do this. Together.

The Bones Hollow Trail was full of dualities. It was punishing and rewarding all at once, and not just physically. We hadn't seen another hiker since we first set off three days ago and the isolation made me feel both soothed and vulnerable. The three neatly stacked rocks that marked the trail were the only indication that another soul had once stepped foot here. I was terrified of seeing another face, and yet, at the same time, I longed for it.

"That detour I told you guys about is coming up," Zoe said, looking at Stef. They'd been trying to sell me on a detour to a hidden waterfall since day one. It was supposed to be the most spectacular waterfall, an untouched gem in the wilderness unlike the rest we'd seen. Obscured by a canopy of moss, secluded and unmarred by regular pedestrian traffic.

"Think how nice it'll be to shower in a crisp, clean waterfall all to ourselves," Stef said, pleading. "Come on, come on, come on. We've got to do it."

The blisters on my feet pulsed at the thought of a half-a-day hike further downhill, which was where Zoe had told us it would be, down in a hidden gulch surrounded by forest. It would mean an eventual half day back up this same terrain. But I couldn't argue that the picture they'd painted of this secret waterfall sounded rather majestic. Besides, it would be a good spot to replenish our water supply and wash away this thick coat of grime from my skin.

"You just want to wash your face again," I said to Stef. She was the only one of us who had brought an actual skincare "regime" with her; two different lotions, one for the morning and one for night. Such a waste of packing space.

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"You're just jealous of my flawless complexion," she said. "And, actually, I'm much more interested in washing this swamp crotch." She plucked the black spandex bicycle shorts from between her butt cheeks. The three of us laughed.

"Okay, that does sound nice," I said, keenly aware of the sweat pooling between my own thighs. "Can we please just move now?"

We saddled up again, feeling mildly revitalized. There was a spark in Zoe and Stefanie's eyes that I drew fervor from. They'd been excited about this waterfall since we first started the trail. I'd seen a few anecdotal references to hidden waterfalls when I looked up Bones Hollow, but I'd left the majority of the research to Zoe. This entire trip had been her idea, and she had a knack for finding hidden treasures. Knowing her, it would probably be the most beautiful thing we'd ever seen in our lives.

Every year, we saved money to go on an adventure together: backpacking all across Europe, touring the ancient ruins of Southeast Asia, exploring the jungles of South America. It was an unbreakable pact we'd made when we were young, that once a year the three of us would travel someplace new together. Though we were active and enjoyed the outdoors, we'd never hiked for such a distance through unmaintained wilderness like this before. It was Zoe who had convinced us that we needed this challenge. That we could trek for eight days alone through the wild, carrying only the necessities on our backs. Her confidence was so infuriatingly unearned and yet so unwavering that one couldn't help but feel swayed by it. I loved that about Zoe. Most of the time.

The Bones Hollow Trail had been chosen for its isolation. She said there was hardly anywhere else we could go in the country where we'd be surrounded by such a vast, ancient

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forest, still almost completely untouched by man. Of course, Stef had been the one to discover the trail's spiritual history, a burial ground rumored to be in Bones Hollow Valley. More people had mysteriously vanished from this trail than any other in the Pacific Northwest, even without taking a serial killer into account. Most conspiracy sites attributed this to Sasquatch, but Stefanie had found the one website dedicated to hauntings and sent us all a link. I'd never been too worried about ghostly apparitions. I was much more afraid of the proven, tangible dangers that existed in the world.

Still, the Bones Hollow Trail had already lived up to Zoe's promise. On the first day, it had given us a stunning view atop a grassy peak overlooking Mount Olympus and a range of glaciers. Then it wound us through a gorgeous wildflower meadow, by breathtakingly blue lakes, and past crystal-clear rivers. The astounding beauty of this rugged wilderness made up for the stress of its potential threats. The air here in the old-growth forest smelled clean and moist, like cedar and pine and moss. Each breath was revitalizing. And, sure, I longed for a margarita on the beach at least once a day, but the experience had already made me stronger, and not just physically.

My patience with little inconveniences like blisters and pebbles in shoes expanded every day, built up like a new muscle. My pathological need for structure—which had shackled me back home—melted away here, cleansed by the pure forest air.

Even the spiders that normally sent me screaming when I was alone in my apartment no longer fazed me. Yesterday, Zoe saw me brush a disgusting eight-legged monster from my shoulder like it was nothing more than a ladybug. I didn't even yelp. She gave me a knowing smile. She knew better than anyone what an achievement this was for me.

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The first time Stef had ever invited us to her parent's cabin on Lake Michigan for the weekend was the summer after eighth grade. That night, as we all curled into sleeping bags on the den floor, our stomachs full of popcorn and bubbling with cherry Coke, I glimpsed a large spider skittering across the ceiling. I jolted upright like I'd been stunned by a cattle prod.

I'd never spoken of my crippling arachnophobia, and I wasn't about to now, so when Stef asked what was wrong, I'd said I needed a drink of water. But I already knew I wouldn't sleep that night. I would sit, terrified until dawn, staring at the ceiling with bloodshot eyes like a sentinel, waiting for the arachnid to descend.

"Hey, will you stay up with me for a while?" Zoe had whispered when Stef eventually left to pee. "You're a better listener. I love Stef, you know that. But her mom is like, perfect in her eyes. She doesn't get the stuff that goes on in my house. The way a parent can let you down. Not the way you do."

It was true. Stef had a way of dismissing Zoe or me when we tried to talk about our mothers. Mine was overbearing. Zoe's was a secret pill fiend. Stefanie's was her *best friend*. She couldn't understand.

"Yeah, of course," I'd said, my secret relief so immense I could've cried.

Once Stefanie was snoring softly, Zoe leaned in close and murmured, "I have a secret." We'd scooted our sleeping bags so close together that we were nearly nose to nose. "I knew we'd be best friends before we'd ever even said a word to each other."

"What? Why?" I'd asked in disbelief.

"Remember when Mr Welch wanted to send me to the

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principal's office for asking why he even wanted to be a teacher, since he was so shit at it?"

"Yeah . . ." I muffled my giggle, remembering how cool I'd thought Zoe was at the time, saying out loud what every kid in that class already thought. Mr Welch was the worst teacher imaginable, a bitter old baseball coach who resented every second he spent in the classroom, taking out his spite on all of us.

"You were the only one to stand up for me. 'If she goes, then I should go too'. That's what you'd said. Even though we'd never spoken a word to each other." We both snickered softly.

Getting sent to the principal together was the birth of our friendship. We emerged from the office basically inseparable. Stef and Zoe were already friends by that point, so we became a fast trio.

We fell asleep that night reminiscing. I realized the next morning that Zoe never did vent about her mom. She'd never needed to. She'd known that I was scared, without my ever having said a word, and knew exactly what I needed in order to get through the night.

Though eventually I confessed the real reason I couldn't sleep that night, Zoe never once made fun of me. She never told Stefanie about my arachnophobia either. I felt proud, now, with Zoe seeing how far I'd come since that night. Witnessing me brush the spider away like it was nothing.

But I didn't come on these trips just for the personal growth. Nothing brought you closer to someone than traveling alongside them. These annual adventures were our sacred time together, without interruption or distraction from the outside world and all its adult responsibilities. This was how we kept our friendship fortified.

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"I haven't told anyone else this yet," Stefanie said, as if reading my mind, "but I think I'm gonna break up with Jeff."

Zoe and I exchanged a quick look of relief. We'd never liked Jeff. He was far too controlling, always trying to convince Stefanie that he should tag along for our travels, or she should back out of our plans last minute. Last year, he'd bought her a Caribbean cruise for the same dates as our Costa Rica trip. Stef had tried to laugh it off at the time, saying he'd simply forgotten. But Zoe and I knew the truth. Jeff was an asshole.

Still, I said, "Why? Did something happen?"

"I don't know. I just feel like he's about to propose and it's gotten me thinking. Is he really the guy I want to spend the rest of my life with?"

"Well, I'll be the first to say it. Good fucking riddance!" Zoe fist-pumped the air. "You know I've always hated the mustache. No one named Jeff should have a mustache."

"And let's be honest," I said, "Stef and Jeff? Just imagine those wedding invitations."

I could hear the release of tension in Stefanie's laugh. "I know you guys never liked him. It's okay; it's not like you hid it well."

"Um, excuse me, I listened to him talk stocks and bonds at your birthday dinner for over an hour," Zoe said. "If that's not hiding it well, I don't know what is." She stopped to give Stefanie a hug.

"Don't worry," I said, hugging her now too. "It'll be okay. You're better off without him."

Stef swiped at a tear, frustrated with herself. "You know I hate being alone."

"You're never alone." Zoe squeezed her arm. "You have us."

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We reached the end of our current trail. It continued with another switchback further down toward the valley, but Zoe pointed to a mossy boulder on the path, nestled into the massive roots of a fir. She consulted her compass and nodded, sure of herself. "Oh, here it is! See? This boulder looks like an egg in a wicker basket. That's the landmark. It's this way." Zoe pointed to the trees descending off-trail to our left.

"Are you crazy? You didn't say the detour was off-trail, Zoe. We'll get lost."

"Come on, where's your sense of adventure?" Stef asked.

"Here!" I gestured all around me. "Here, it's here. This is enough adventure for me. I don't need more."

Zoe slapped my backpack. "Sorry, you've been outvoted." Then she skipped down through the trees, with Stef a few paces behind her.

I skidded down the muddy slope after my friends. My backpack snagged on the branches every few paces, like the forest was reaching down to grab me.

. . .

We'd been hiking down this absurd detour for over an hour. It was nearly midday, and already it was clear we weren't hiking back up this incline before nightfall. It was too steep and too far. If we wanted to take our time at the falls, we'd need to camp there for the night—but Zoe assured us that she had read this was possible. The farther down we hiked, the more my muscles screamed and the more the waterfall sounded like bliss. But I still couldn't stop checking over my shoulder. The ache in my bones reminded me just how fragile they were. A twig crunched beneath my muddy boot and I wondered how easily my legs could make that same sound.

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"No way Florence is the last victim," Stef mused as we marched along.

I resented how much the Hunter dominated our conversations. "Because she wasn't found?" I asked.

"No," she said, pausing to crouch down and massage her calves, "the Hunter totally killed her. I just mean, no way is Florence his last. Guys like him never stop. Once they get a taste for it, it's an addiction. It's only a matter of time before they kill again."

"Yeah, but serial killers have an MO," Zoe pointed out, breathing heavy. "That's part of their addiction, too. So why wouldn't she have been displayed like all the others?"

"Don't either of you think we should at least consider that maybe, just maybe, that Lars guy was guilty?"

Lars Brunner had been the only suspect in the case. A late-thirties Swiss-German national with a history of mental illness, he'd entered the country in 2011 shortly before the first victim was found, and had been traveling on his expired visa ever since. He'd been hiking the Bones Hollow Trail alone when he supposedly found the eighth victim, Wendy Whitmore's, body in 2018 and called the police—an act that would later be interpreted as a killer desperate to be caught.

Police were immediately suspicious of the hippie-haired vagabond and labeled him a person of interest and brought him in for questioning. When they discovered that Lars was lying about his alibi for Rae Fischer's murder the previous year, and then that he had no alibis for any of the other victims as he claimed to have been traveling off-grid, they issued an arrest warrant. But they were never able to serve it. Lars Brunner hanged himself from a bigleaf maple here in Olympic National Park. It's why so many still argued that Florence Marsh couldn't be a Bones Hollow Hunter victim.

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"Come on, you have to admit that it's at least *possible* that Lars was the guy," I said.

"No way," Zoe said, definitive. "They railroaded the first guy they could find. It's so obvious that Lars lied about his alibi because he was trying to cover up another crime—I've read that there was a string of robberies on the trail that year; all the hikers' guides were littered with warnings about some crazy dude with a machete. The thief was taking all their gear, sometimes even their clothes. It'd make sense if it was Lars since he was living off-grid and probably needed the supplies. So, it was either confess to armed robbery—which would have only made him look more guilty of these murders anyway—or try his luck with a false alibi. He was up shit creek. But the cops had nothing on him, no real evidence at all."

"Tale as old as time," Stefanie said, as if she knew about such things. "It's just lazy policing, plain and simple, charging the first patsy they catch. Even that detective for the case said so, when he came on the podcast. His boss basically told him that the case was closed. It's utter bullshit."

"Then why did Lars kill himself?" I asked.

"Well, he'd already been checked into a mental health facility once back in Switzerland for a suicide attempt. Maybe the poor kid decided he'd rather die than go to prison for murders that he didn't commit," Zoe said. "That's *if* he even killed himself. Tons of people don't think Lars committed suicide. Laurie Wolff clearly doesn't. She talks about a theory that the real killer is the one who strung him up."

"The Hunter case was never officially closed for a reason," Stef agreed. "He's still out here somewhere. I can just feel it."

"Maybe not. Even if it wasn't Lars, maybe the real killer is dead," I volunteered, hopeful. "Maybe Florence fought

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back and killed him. Or maybe it just all went so wrong that he finally hung up his hat for good. Or!" I was animated now, rejuvenated by my sudden theory but painfully out of breath. "Maybe it wasn't even the Hunter and she died of natural causes. Like a bad fall or hunger or hypothermia or any number of the other dangers out here." Strange that this seemed a hopeful situation, but under the circumstances, it most certainly did.

"Maybe it was a cougar!" Zoe said, a little too exuberantly.

How quickly my optimism could be stolen. I shuddered. "I seriously hate you."

She stopped walking long enough to plant a kiss on my cheek.

"I do," I maintained, but smiling now. "I hate you."

"There's actually a whole online community devoted to this," Zoe said.

"Why am I not surprised?"

"Most people think that the Hunter has way more victims than those found. All the other women who have mysteriously vanished from this trail, they weren't taken by ghosts or Bigfoot. They were the Hunter. Some people think that he might mount the special ones on his bedroom walls." Her tone changed, lurid now. "So, if we found his place, we'd find Florence."

"I think I like Stef's evil spirits theory better," I croaked, throat dry.

Zoe's eyes gleamed, excited by the intrigue of it all. "Hell, maybe we're both right and the Hunter has been sacrificing women to the spirits."

"Don't joke about that shit," Stef said, gravely serious. "It's not—"

Stefanie didn't see the rock. Her boot caught on it and

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she pitched forward headfirst, the slick mud and the weight of her backpack propelling her like a bowling ball down the steep hill. She caught herself on a tree trunk just before she rolled a second time.

It all happened as if I was sat in the back row of a theater seeing it play out on the screen. I watched it, unable to move, unable to help. Her scream ripped me from my trance.

Blood trickled down the side of Stefanie's face from a cut on her forehead. Leaves and muddy clumps dangled from her loose black ponytail. She clutched her ankle, howling, and Zoe was already by her side. Slowly, she undid the laces from Stef's low-rise hiking shoe and rolled down her thick wool sock. Stef's ankle had swelled like a black and purple balloon. Zoe gingerly pressed two fingertips to the wound and Stefanie screamed.

"Oh my god, oh my god," I gasped, again and again. "Shit!"

"Come on, you're all right." Zoe was our coach in times of need, the one who urged us onward when our legs buckled. "Let's get you upright."

Stefanie put an arm around each of us and we hoisted her upward. The extra weight of her with her bag was almost too much for me to bear. I steadied myself against a nearby tree, careful so that I didn't catapult forward now as well.

"Can you put any weight on it?" Zoe asked.

Stefanie tried now, breathing deep. She screeched in pain. "No! Fuck, fuck, fuck! Put me down. Put me back down."

We eased her back down onto the muddy, mossy hill. She leaned backward onto her pack, holding her face. "I can't walk. I can't fucking walk."

"This is bad," I said, turning to Zoe. "This is really, really bad."

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Zoe braced herself on a mossy fir trunk, like she was trying to draw strength from it, resolve. Then she took out her map and studied it, sweat beading between her knitted brows. "We can't go back up. It would take us three days hiking back up the Bones Hollow Trail the way we came to get to our car. Probably longer, given her ankle. But if we keep going south now, we'll hit the falls and if we keep going south from there, eventually we'll hit an access road."

Stefanie sucked in a deep breath, composing herself. "Okay, get me up. I can do it." She bit her lip, holding back the tears, as Zoe and I gently eased her back upright. But as soon as we propped her on her feet, Stef screamed again. "Put me down!"

"She'll have to take her backpack off," Zoe said. "We can't carry her with it."

I shook my head. "No way! That's a third of our food. We'll have to divide it between us."

"I don't fucking care about the food!" Stefanie screeched. "Just get me out of this forest!" As we eased her out of her shoulder straps, she moaned. "Oh god, I think it's broken. I think it's fucking broken."

"It's not broken," Zoe said with a certainty I knew she couldn't feel. "You'll be fine. Ice-cold waterfall is all you need. You'll see. Then we'll find a way back to civilization. Everything's going to be fine. Everything's going to be fine." She kept saying it as we hauled Stefanie back up. "We'll leave your bag here and come back for it."

"Obviously we aren't coming back for her backpack. She needs to go to a hospital."

"Dammit, Jade, work with me! This is a fucking crisis. We have to get her help before dark."

"Fine!"

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Slowly, the three of us began to maneuver down the rocky, muddy slope, blanketed in slick emerald moss. It hadn't been easy with just our own weight to bear, and now it felt impossible. Zoe had been right not to split up the food in Stef's backpack. I couldn't have handled an extra ounce on my knees as I remained in a half squat, half lunge down the steep hill. Sometimes one or both of us would start to stumble and Stefanie would slip to the ground, screaming. She couldn't put even a little weight on it, and every time her foot touched the earth, she cried.

"Everything's going to be okay," Zoe kept saying. "We're going to find a road. We'll flag down a car. We'll be sleeping with our heads on fresh cotton pillows in a hotel tonight." But this couldn't have sounded any less probable to me. Still, I gritted my teeth and kept silent as she continued, "Think about that hot shower you'll have tomorrow. Cause damn, girl, you really need one."

Stef managed a feeble laugh. "You're the ones with your pits in my face."

"God, it'll be good to wash this trail stank away."

I desperately wanted to buy into this misplaced optimism. I forced myself to imagine the hot water blast from a hotel shower that I knew did not await us. It was useless, though. We were in the middle of the wilderness, three days from where we'd started the trail, utterly isolated, and one of us couldn't walk. The only sliver of hope I could glean from the situation was that we were walking toward a crisp fresh waterfall to filter into our dwindling hydration packs.

Shit.

"The water filter!" I stopped so abruptly that the others nearly fell like dominoes. How the fuck had I not thought of this, how the fuck had I let this happen! Oh god oh god

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oh god! "The water filter and purifier tabs are in Stefanie's backpack."

Stefanie's face went white as mine felt. "Oh fuck."

"I'll run back up the hill," I decided. "I'll go and come back."

"Don't be stupid," Zoe snapped, a little too brusque. Her agitation was showing. She took a breath, and when she spoke again, it was with more poise. "Even if nothing went wrong, it would take you hours. We have our stovetop; we'll just boil the water when we reach the falls. It'll be fine."

"Yeah, seriously, it's a bad idea," Stef said. "We've all seen that horror movie before. We can't split up. That's how people get lost. Or eaten by a bear."

I hated horror movies. I never watched them. But the thought of getting eaten by a bear was enough to convince me they were right.

Carefully, we picked our way through ferns and hemlock, stepping over stones. Soft, blue-green cedar needles brushed our faces. It took us another two hours to get to a place where the hill tapered into flat land. Why was it taking so long to find this waterfall? Were we lost? I longed to see the three neatly stacked rocks that marked the Bones Hollow Trail, or any indication that we were stepping foot where others had gone before.

Finally, we emerged from the dense trees and ferns, having reached the end of that treacherous downhill slope. Now we found ourselves on a section of some unmarked path that sliced through the forest from east to west. A minor step up from being off-trail, I supposed, though I couldn't tell if this thin strip of earth was a footpath made by humans or deer. We stopped here, easing Stefanie onto the ground, and both Zoe and I ripped our backpacks from our bodies. The

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enflamed skin on my hips and shoulders was angry, rubbed pink and raw. Drenched in sweat, I grabbed my water now and took a greedy gulp, safe again in the knowledge that we'd be able to replenish tonight.

"How much farther?" I asked. "We've got to be getting close now, right? You said it'd be half a day's hike."

Zoe already had her map and compass out. I didn't like the puzzled expression knitted between her brows. "Um . . ." She glanced around. "We just need to keep going south. Not much farther I don't think."

That meant veering back off-trail. To the south of the unmarked path we stood on now was another densely forested hill, sloping down seemingly forever. My knotted calves shuddered at the sight. "You don't *think*?"

"I don't really know. It's hard to tell."

"Give me the map." I hadn't demanded this since our first day, but now I did, hand outstretched. Zoe had refused when I'd asked before, insisting there was only room for one captain aboard a ship. There was no more time for those foolish games now. "Seriously, I'm not kidding. Give me the fucking map, Zoe."

Stefanie sounded a hair's breadth away from panic. "Are we lost?"

"No, we're not lost," Zoe said. "We just have to keep going, that's all. If we keep going south from the boulder that looks like an egg in a basket, we will hit the waterfall. We *will*."

"I can't hear a waterfall, can you?" I listened keenly now. I couldn't even hear the bubbling creeks and streams that had serenaded us back on the Bones Hollow Trail. "Shouldn't we be able to hear it if it was close?"

Zoe snapped her map shut. "Can you just lay off me for one fucking minute. We need to keep walking. We'll find it."

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"And then what? We wander for how much longer until we find a road, and then wait for a car to come along? There's no one out here, that was the whole point of this fucking hike! Stef can't walk!"

"Calm down, Jade. We're camping at the falls and I can rest there," Stefanie said. "Maybe my ankle will be better tomorrow."

"Fat chance," I said.

"Jade! You're not helping!" Zoe crouched down and slid back into her shoulder straps with a grimace. "Let's get moving."

So, we did. We followed Zoe. Like always. We followed her wherever she wanted to lead us.

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