

## PROLOGUE



Claire McCann wasn't good with directions.

Without a GPS she was helpless. She couldn't remember landmarks except in her own familiar neighborhood on the less fashionable outskirts of Nashville; and this long-delayed road trip to visit her twin sister Moira in West Virginia was already a major challenge to her long-distance navigational skills. Still, she had done well at first. The weather was the hay-scented warmth of early summer, and no accidents blocked the interstate. As I-40 rose into the high country of the Smokies, the road opened up to reveal glimpses of miles of folded mountains, painted purple and green and gold as the sun set, views breathtaking enough to make the drive worthwhile.

But not long after, the broad vistas shrank as road construction forced a detour onto a narrow, winding two-lane road through the mountains. Dense forest closed in again to either side as shadows gathered. Claire began to worry as the road wound on and on without a sign of civilization—no towns, no turnoffs, not even a Mom-and-Pop gas-and-go on the side of the road.

She waited for a straight stretch of road and checked her phone. The GPS gave her a location, if she could believe it, but it wasn't great news. She must have missed the sign for the detour back to the interstate, God knew when. This was national forest land—which explained all the nothing-but-trees, she supposed—and according to the map there wasn't an off-road for another 20 miles. She checked the gas gauge. At least she had enough to make it that far—maybe. Probably. The needle wasn't quite on Empty, and Dad always swore there was another 30 miles in the tank once you hit E anyway, right? Damn it, something had told her to top it up when she'd stopped outside of Knoxville, but she'd had half a tank then and now here she was.

She kept driving as night fell, the darkness deepening under the crowded growth of tall trees, her breath quickening with nerves the longer she went without seeing the sign for the exit she was anticipating. She had been climbing in a series of switchbacks, but now the road leveled out a bit to follow a high ridge.

The forest expanded on either side of the road, dense, impenetrable. "Scary," she mumbled to herself.

At last, Claire saw what she'd been looking for: a rusty, battered sign indicating a turnoff to the right to "Allenville 3 miles." Only some local smart ass had put a bullet through the middle of the second "l" in the town name, so it read "Alienville." She laughed, half in relief, half in appreciation of the joke, and slowed down for the turn. She was suddenly exhausted, and it occurred to her this might be the only town for miles. She would probably have to settle for a No-Tell Motel—Lord knows she couldn't afford much more than that anyway—and she really hoped the little town hadn't rolled up *all* the sidewalks by this hour. She was hungry and thirsty, and a bathroom would be welcome, too.

Of course, Moira would already be worried about her. Her sister had been expecting her in West Virginia tonight. But then her uptight twin had always been the Worry Wart of the family, the one who Took Care of Things. Their hippie parents, second-generation members of The Co-op commune, had been conscientious about their commitments to the community, but less bothered about traditional family obligations like rules, health insurance and formal

education. Claire, the free spirit, hadn't minded, but Moira craved structure, and left home as soon as she could to find it.

They hadn't seen each other in—well, Claire couldn't remember how long—and Moira would be pacing the floor if Claire was late. So, while she still had a cellphone signal, she pulled to the shoulder and texted her sister.

**--Hey Hit a snag Road construction detour Will overnite in Allenville NC C U tomorrow 400 Lv U CeCe**

She started to get back on the road and drive but realized her need to pee was urgent now and wouldn't wait the three miles to town. Sighing, she turned off the car, grabbed her phone to serve as a flashlight, and stepped out onto the gravel of the shoulder. Cool air, full of the scent of pines and damp earth, filled the night, punctuated with the sound of tree frogs. Claire could see the dark silhouettes of the treetops against the lighter purple of the strip of starry sky over the road, but lower she could see almost nothing in the shadows among the trees. She pressed the icon for the light on her phone, giving her just enough to see the ground at her feet, and made her way to the back of the car. She laid the phone on the hood, where the dingy white of the old Toyota reflected the light, and got on with it. She didn't want to be out here any longer than necessary.

She was just buttoning her jeans when she heard it: a huffing, a shuffling, maybe even a growl in the woods. *Shit! That's gotta be a bear!*

In a forest like this there had to be bears. Fuck, even in the rolling farmland of Tennessee close to The Co-op there were bears; she'd been taught to treat them with respect. And this one was close. Even though she couldn't see it, she could hear it making its way through the underbrush close to the road, branches snapping, leaves rustling. The tree frogs had fallen silent—that couldn't be a good sign.

She turned and snatched at the phone but missed. The fucking thing slid off the hood and fell to the gravel. She couldn't see it! She groped along the ground, but the light had gone out and the plastic case was invisible in the night, even though it was bright pink and sparkly, too.

The bear! Where was it? She couldn't hear it in the woods anymore. Had it gone?

Claire stood up and looked toward the edge of the forest not thirty feet away. And as she watched in horror, a shadow emerged. Huge—more than ten feet tall on two legs—shaggy, claws and teeth gleaming in the limited light. Like a bear—but not a bear. The thing roared and fell to four legs, and she could see a long tail, like a cat. Then it ran toward her, faster than she could move. Much faster.

Frozen in place, Claire screamed.

