

**THE  
WOODS  
ARE  
ALWAYS  
WATCHING**

A NOVEL

**BY  
STEPHANIE PERKINS**

DUTTON BOOKS

**DUTTON BOOKS**

An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, New York



First published in the United States of America by Dutton Books,  
an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, 2021

Copyright © 2021 by Stephanie Perkins

Penguin supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin to continue to publish books for every reader.

Dutton is a registered trademark of Penguin Random House LLC.

Visit us online at [penguinrandomhouse.com](http://penguinrandomhouse.com).

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 9780525426028

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

SKY

Edited by Julie Strauss-Gabel

Design by Anna Booth

Text set in Minion Pro

This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places, and events are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or places or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content.

*For Jarrod, best friend & true love*



**THE  
WOODS  
ARE  
ALWAYS  
WATCHING**



**TOGETHER**





**NEENA CUT THE** engine, and the speakers went silent. Mid-lyric. The trail was straight ahead, but her gaze could only follow it to its first bend. The overhanging forest, a drab and washed-out green that presaged the end of summer, obscured the rest of the path.

“How many days do you think we’ll last?” she asked.

“How many hours,” Josie said.

“If I die out there? I’d be honored if you ate my body.”

“I would *never* let a bear get to your body first.”

“Oh my God.” Incredulity tainted Neena’s laughter. “Would you please stop it with the bears?”

“Only if you promise not to mention their existence for the next seventy-two hours.”

“I didn’t! *You* brought them up. Again.”

Josie shuddered, darkening. “I’m serious. I don’t know if I can do this.”

“Just think of them as big Winnie-the-Poohs.”

“Shut your hole.”

“Paddingtons. Baloos. Fozzies.”

It was a joke—it was always a joke—but Josie jerked open the passenger-side door and got out. It slammed shut behind her. Neena grabbed her phone off the charger and followed her best friend into the parking lot.

“Berenstains,” she said, digging in. Neena always dug in.

Her hiking boots crunched against the wet gravel. The rain had just stopped. In these mountains, it rained most afternoons during the summer—violent downpours in the early season, irksome drizzles in the late—but cleared quickly. It was the third week of August. The Little South Chickadee River burred nearby. Insects hummed and clicked their wings. The lazy breeze smelled of sun-warmed pine.

Josie pivoted with sudden interest. “Ooh, did you ever have a thing for Brother Bear? I mean, before you realized they were über-Christian hillbillies.”

“What are you talking about?” Neena asked, confused.

“Brother Bear. With the red shirt and blue pants.”

“I know who Brother Bear is. The Berenstain Bears were Christian?”

“There were numerous books with the word ‘God’ in the title.”

“Huh,” Neena said. “I guess my parents didn’t check those out from the library.” She popped the Subaru’s hatch. Everyone in Asheville drove a Subaru, the preferred mode of transportation for modern hippies and outdoorsmen, among which the girls were neither. Neena’s parents had purchased the Impreza because it had a high safety rating. Their backpacks crowded its hatch like monstrous, bloated caterpillars. Very hungry caterpillars. Neena realized her thoughts might be stuck on picture books.

She moaned. “I don’t wanna.”

Josie copied Neena’s moan. “I don’t wanna, either.”

The packs didn’t budge, refusing to help. These were not their school backpacks, retired from service and recently replaced by

more stylish backpacks for college. Josie's brother and his girlfriend had loaned them a pair of backpacking packs: a boggling assemblage of padded straps, hip belts, bungee cords, mesh pockets, and bulging compartments. Neena prickled with renewed trepidation. Not only were these packs borrowed, but so was the equipment inside them. Even her boots—an outmoded pair, heavy and ugly—were borrowed from Josie's mom, who wore the same size.

Unfortunately, they had no one to blame but themselves. The trip had been concocted only two days ago during their morning shift at Kmart, a pre-Amazon relic where customers often exclaimed in astonishment, “I thought you went under years ago!”

Alas. The chain clung on for its meager life. Their particular location had a whopping 1.5-star rating on Yelp. Its shelves were largely empty and in permanent disarray. Clothing hung askew on broken racks, dented cans lingered past expiration dates, sports equipment was shellacked in off-putting colors, and the book selection was a smattering of religious overstock and failed themed-mystery series. *The Thanksgiving Murders. The Body on the Badminton Court. 'Til Death Do Us Sudoku.* The store was like a former roommate had never returned to pick up the last of his boxes.

That Saturday shift had been Neena's last. In one week, she would be moving to California for college. Josie was staying in North Carolina.

“We should do something,” Neena had said.

“We are doing something,” Josie had replied flatly. “We're restocking the shampoo aisle.”

“Something significant. Something just the two of us.”

“It's always just the two of us.”

Though her gaze had remained detached, Josie's eyelids twitched at her own slip. It wouldn't *always* be just the two of them. The impending separation pressed against them like a loaded shotgun.

Josie was acting glum and bitter, as she had been all summer. Neena longed for the old Josie, who was lively and game. She needed the old Josie. She'd tried again. "Something big, I mean. Maybe we could drive to Dollywood."

"Roller coasters give you migraines."

"We could go camping. Like Galen and Kyle."

"We hate Galen and Kyle," Josie had said. They hated everybody; it was one of the things that had sealed their friendship. But their teenage redneck coworkers were particularly loathsome. They spat watery brown dip onto the break-room floor, ignored calls to the registers for backup, and viewed feminism as a threat to their masculinity. "And we don't know shit about camping. Nature is for . . . other people."

Their classmates had all taken advantage of the mountain lifestyle. They had always been off tubing and kayaking down the French Broad River, hiking and camping along the Blue Ridge Parkway. A lot of beer, weed, and sex had been involved. It was a local rite of passage. Neena and Josie had never been interested in any of that, excepting the sex. But, regrettably, neither of them had ever had a boyfriend.

"Yeah," Neena had said, "but if they can do it, so can we. Didn't you used to go camping with your family?"

"When I was a kid. And my dad and Win did all the work."

Josie's father had died when she was in the eighth grade. Win was Winston, Josie's older brother. It was unnecessary to point out that Neena had never been camping. Everyone in her family was strictly an indoor type. Despite this, Neena unexpectedly latched onto the idea. "Okay, but Win goes all the time. We could borrow his gear." Her reasoning crumbled into pleading. "I mean, haven't you ever wondered if *maybe* we missed out on a vital high school experience?"

Josie had snorted with disdain. But she'd stopped restocking.

“Soon I won’t even have the option to do things like this anymore,” Neena had said. “Not in the city. This is my last chance.”

Neena wasn’t sure why Josie had eventually come around. Maybe because Neena had continued to monologue, hyping the excursion with notions of enlightenment. Being in the woods would be freeing! A technology detox! A chance to commune with Mother Earth, Mother Nature . . . whatever her name was! But by the time Neena had clocked out for the last time from the not-so-superstore, Josie had switched enough shifts so they could do it. Of course, they still needed permission. They had wanted to leave the next morning, but it took longer than that just to convince Neena’s parents.

*I won’t see Josie again until Thanksgiving.*

*You will not see us until Thanksgiving, either.*

*I’m an adult.*

*You are eighteen.*

*I’ve never gotten into trouble.*

*You have never been given the chance, because we keep you safe.*

Neena’s father had relented first. Maybe it was because he’d spent more time with Josie, driving the girls around before Neena had gotten her license. Fixing them hot dogs and jhal muri after school. Watching every season of endless sitcoms with them. As the primary witness to their friendship, perhaps he held deeper compassion for their situation.

*Our daughter is right,* Baba had said, wearily rubbing his brow. Neena had been surprised to be right. *She is responsible and trustworthy. She has earned this.*

The trip would last three days, and the girls had decided to go backpacking, which, best they could tell, meant “hiking with camping.” Camping-only sounded boring. Josie’s brother had helped them select a trail, and, ever the diligent students, they crammed their research—reading articles, watching videos, scouring message

boards. They'd organized an itinerary and printed out copies for their families. They'd downloaded trail-map apps onto their phones and marked the waypoints.

But Neena's parents still wouldn't give their final blessing until the girls proved they could use the equipment. Earlier that morning, all three parents had stood in Josie's overgrown backyard, scrutinizing them as they pitched the tent, lit the stove, and filtered water under Win's tutelage. The girls were unskilled and clumsy, and everyone had a good chuckle at their expense, but they'd passed the test. They excelled at passing tests.

And now they were here. And so were their enormous backpacks.

"Do you remember how we're supposed to put them on?" Neena tried to recall Win's backpack demonstration, but it blurred with all his other demonstrations and instructions.

Josie frowned. "Something to do with the knees. Or a knee? There's definitely some kind of knee-to-shoulder transfer. I think."

They glanced at each other. The absurdity of not even knowing the very first step broke them into nervous, hysterical giggles.

Neena reached for her pack. "Here goes nothing."

Literally nothing went. The pack was leaden.

"Well," Neena said. "Shit."

They cracked up harder. Using all four hands, together the girls scooted and grunted the behemoth forward, until Neena's pack was half on the car, half off. They were in tears from laughing.

"Was it this heavy when we put it in here?" Josie asked.

"I think it birthed a baby hippopotamus." Neena unzipped the pack's hip-belt pocket and squeezed her phone inside. Service didn't exist out here, but they'd packed a charging device so they could still use their cameras and GPS. They had been surprised to learn that

GPS would still work. Win had explained that it connected to satellites, not cell towers. The girls' last texts had been sent from a remote highway on the outskirts of Canton, just past a guzzling old paper mill. The cell signals had vanished soon after. Their families did not expect to hear from them again until they returned.

Josie pointed at the pack's straps, which were dangling above the ground. "Can you get underneath, maybe? Could you try to slip those on?"

Neena glanced around to ensure that no one else was watching. But it was a Monday, a weekday, and this wasn't a popular trail. Another Subaru was parked at the east end of the lot, because of course it was, and two pickups were parked at the west. The rest of the lot was empty—the weekend hikers and campers had already gone home.

Crouching below her target, Neena turtled it onto her body. Her arms threaded through the straps, her right foot took a labored step, the pack dislodged . . . and then slowly, steadily pushed her straight into the ground.

Josie lost her mind. She buckled over again, clutching her abdomen.

The crush was so alarming that Neena laughed, too, out of shock. Her clothes sponged up the sodden earth. "I don't recommend this method."

"I've never seen actual slow motion in real life."

"Hey. Help a gal out?"

It took a full minute for Josie to roll Neena over, and then for Neena to rock back and forth to gain some momentum. But, finally, Neena heaved upward.

Josie grabbed Neena's flailing hands. Their matching rings caught in the sunlight, glittering like miniature galaxies. The rings were all stone, no metal—carved ultramarine with clouds of white calcite and

flecks of gold pyrite. Last winter, the girls had purchased them at a mineral shop downtown because the sign had claimed that lapis lazuli was a symbol of friendship. The rings had adorned their right index fingers ever since.

Josie lifted Neena to her feet and didn't let go until Neena was steady. "You look fantastic," she said. "Like you're ready to summit Everest."

Dampness muddied Neena's clothing. Gravel stuck to her cheek. "Ugh, this thing weighs a thousand pounds. People do this for fun?" She brushed the grit from her jeans.

Josie was wearing jeans, too, to shield her legs from ticks, which were abundant here and carried Lyme disease. "Cotton kills," Win had warned, a favorite refrain of the outdoor community. But it was either jeans or leggings—the girls didn't own any other types of pants—and leggings weren't warm enough. He'd also said it got cold out here at night, even in August, even though they were only fifty-five minutes from home.

Josie was pretending her pants were more about the weather and less about the bloodsuckers. Ticks were like teensy vampires, when she thought about it.

She needed to stop thinking about it.

Neena snapped her hip belt together. "Your turn."

Josie wished it weren't. She had only agreed to this trip because Neena had begged, and because their days together were at an end. The trip almost hadn't even happened. Josie had allowed Neena to believe that Neena's parents were the holdup, but the truth was that Josie's mother had been equally resistant. She'd only relented after Win had intervened. Josie had overheard his muffled appeal from the other side of her bedroom wall. *Her best friend is moving away. Just let her have this.* It stung to hear her circumstances described so plainly.



*Everything* about this summer stung because Neena was leaving, and Josie was staying.

Neena was going to attend the University of Southern California, and Josie was going to attend the University of North Carolina Asheville.

Neena was going to live in a dormitory, and Josie was going to keep living at home with her mother.

Neena was going to have new friends and new experiences, and Josie was going to be surrounded by all the same people and places.

It wasn't that Josie didn't love their hometown. Asheville was beautiful and open-minded and had multiple concert venues, independent cinemas, and organic farmers' markets. It had Arts and Crafts neighborhoods and an Art Deco downtown. It had character and history and integrity. But it was also small—the kind of city that adults chose to live in *after* they'd explored the rest of the world. Neena was about to see the world without her. Josie was about to become a human Kmart. Abandoned and forgotten, but still here.

“Sorry I can't help you anymore,” Neena said, shuffling toward her. Josie startled. “What?”

“With your pack. We should have moved yours, too, before I put on mine.”

Sometimes Josie believed, sincerely, that Neena could read her mind. She was glad this wasn't one of the occasions. Putting on a show of false enthusiasm and roaring with exaggerated strength, Josie hefted her pack to the edge of the hatch.

Neena blinked at her. Mystified. “How'd you do that?”

“You've got the food. I've got the tent. The food weighs more.”

“Fuck that. You're taking the food tomorrow.”

Josie grinned, for real. “After we've already eaten some? No problem.”

“You devious, devious wench.”

“That was the deal. You got the lady backpack, so you got the extra pounds.” Josie shoved her pack into an upright position. It took several attempts before it stayed.

“I got the lady backpack because I’m shorter than you. And I still think the lady backpack should necessitate fewer pounds.”

“The lady backpack distributes the weight more evenly across the lady’s body.”

Neena waddled in a circle. Her hands were posed like she was modeling. “Now, tell me. Is it this luscious shade of purple that makes it a lady backpack?”

“Luscious lavender.”

“*Ladies in Lavender* . . . wasn’t that a movie with Judi Dench?”

“And Maggie Smith. They nurse a sexy, young violinist back to health.”

“When we’re old,” Neena said, “I want us to be surrounded by sexy, young violinists.”

“I’d settle for us just being Dames,” Josie said. Her pack was navy blue and stained from years of rugged use. Win had started solo backpacking after their father’s death. Their father had loved the outdoors, and, in his grief, her brother had found refuge there. He’d been seventeen then, only a few months younger than Josie was now. It was a surprising realization. Now Win was twenty-two, but it seemed like he’d been an adult forever.

Meegan, owner of the lavender pack, had only taken up backpacking when she and Win started dating. Josie hoped she would never stoop to something like that. But if a guy ever showed any interest in her, maybe she’d take up a dumb hobby to impress him, too.

“Obviously we’ll be Dames,” Neena said.

Josie loved talking with Neena like this. Like their future was certain. Like they would always be friends. She backed up neatly into

her upright pack, slipped the straps over her shoulders, snapped it all together, and stood.

“Aw,” Neena said. “That’s not fair.”

Compared to Neena, Josie was tall. Practically brawny. She had the type of body that could have real, natural strength if she put forth even a modicum of effort. But she never had, so it didn’t. The burden on her back—the sheer resistance to her effort—was staggering. She balked. “Oh my God. People do this for fun?”

“That’s what I said!”

Panic flooded through Josie. It hadn’t occurred to her that they might not be physically capable of this trip. “How are we supposed to carry these for three days?”

Neena shook her head. “I have no idea.”

“How?”

“I don’t know,” Neena said. But the joking had stopped. Whenever one of them freaked out—and, admittedly, it was usually Josie—the other went calm. “We just will.”

Josie was sure that if Neena could have shrugged right now, she would have shrugged. Not condescendingly. The gesture would have been comforting. Josie’s panic dulled back into an uneasy, unidentifiable dread. “Right. People do this all the time.”

“Yeah. And we’re people,” Neena said. “Surely we can do this, too.”

“Did you see us in gym class?”

Neena slammed the hatch closed. Birds squawked and took to the humid air. “I kept my eyes closed in gym class.”

“That explains a lot.”

After double-checking that they had everything, Josie stuffed the car keys into the top of Neena’s pack.

“Oh, jeez,” Neena said. “Don’t look.”

Moving to investigate, Josie whacked Neena with her pack. “What?”

Neena oofed.

“Sorry. What? I don’t see any— Oh.”

“I told you not to look.”

A plywood notice board stood beside the trail. In large type on a sheet of copy paper protected by plastic, a faded sign read: BEAR CANISTERS REQUIRED.

“It’s okay,” Neena said. “We’ve got one.”

A second notice with smaller type was tacked beside it, and Josie toddled over to read it. The unwelcome words raked across her skin so viciously that she felt marked. “It says if we don’t have a canister we can get fined. Or even get jail time.”

“Again. We have a canister.”

“It’s from the Forest Service. ‘Emergency requirement to use bear-resistant canisters in . . .’ And great. It lists Frazier Mountain, Deep Fork, Misty Rock Wilderness, and Burnt Balsam Knob. That’s our whole itinerary.”

Neena sidled up to her and pointed. “What are those?” Several different sets of handwriting were scrawled directly onto the splintered plywood.

*5/20 bear walked through Misty Rock campsite at 9:40 PM*

*6/2 Meadow Ridge Cove 2x bears*

*6-9 saw one bear cross Misty Rock Creek*

*6/17 meadow ridge cove 1 bear 6 pm*

*6/29 1 bear in Misty Rock Wilderness*

*7-7 Burnt Balsam 2 bears*

Josie’s head wrenched away, trying to avoid absorbing the information. Primal anxiety swelled within. In her mind, a lumbering beast snuffled outside their flimsy tent. The hackles of its shadow rose. A ferocious claw slashed through the defenseless nylon, attacking with frenzied black eyes and snarling white teeth.

“No activity since July,” Neena said. “See? They’re already hibernating.”

“We’re so getting *Revenant*-ed.”

“That was a movie.”

“Based on a true story!”

“Okay, but it happened, like, two hundred years ago in Canada or Alaska or whatever. And he was attacked by a grizzly bear. No one gets hurt by black bears.”

Actually, in this decade alone, ten people had been killed by black bears in North America. Josie had looked it up. None of them had been on this part of the continent, but still. In recent years, black bear traffic had increased significantly throughout Asheville. Heavy rains due to climate change meant it took longer for nuts and berries to ripen, which meant that bears were emerging from the woods in search of other food. Trash cans were gashed with claw marks. People were hospitalized after accidentally interrupting feasts. And then there was the man who had weaponized his own mountain bike to fend off an aggressive mama bear. That had happened here, inside this very forest. Where there were no cars or houses or buildings to provide protective shelter.

“Oh, shit.” Neena punched Josie’s arm. “Smokey Bear. How did we forget him? He’s a park ranger. He saves lives. Think of them as helpful Smokeys.”

But Josie didn’t want to think about bears at all. She desperately wanted to *stop* thinking about them. She couldn’t admit, not even to Neena, that *The Wizard of Oz* had frightened her as a child—not because of the Wicked Witch or her squadron of flying monkeys, but when Dorothy and her friends had chanted, “Lions and tigers and bears! Oh my!” as they’d skipped into the dark wood, they had introduced Josie to the concept of being eaten alive. Flesh ripping. Teeth

gnashing. Watching your own meaty chunks be swallowed down the throat of another carnivorous mammal.

*Lions . . .*

Black panthers had long been part of state folklore, but they were as likely to be discovered as Bigfoot. Bobcats did live here, though they only attacked humans if they were sick or rabid. However, once upon a time, mountain lions had also lived here—and some believed they still did. Sightings of long-tailed cats with tawny-colored fur remained rampant among hunters, though experts claimed if they did exist, they were simply exotic pets that had been released. This didn't make Josie feel any better. A pet mountain lion was still a mountain lion.

*. . . and tigers . . .*

At least there weren't any tigers. Although Josie had once read that there were more tigers in captivity in the United States than in the wilds of Asia, a fact that distressed her on multiple counts.

*. . . and bears!*

But bears. There were definitely bears out here. *Oh my.*

Josie shifted to her mental checklist: *Keep the campsite clean. Make noise. Place everything that smells out of reach. Watch out for scat and tracks and rubbed tree bark. Urinate far away from the tent.* Her palms were clammy. She didn't want to do this. Why were they doing this?

"Where's your phone?" Neena asked. "We need to commemorate the moment." She nodded toward the other sign, the one beside the notice board. It was large and proud and distinctly American with its National Forest typeface and specific shade of brown.

WADE HARTE TRAILHEAD, it said. PISGAH NATIONAL FOREST.

Josie tugged the phone out from her jeans—her hip belt didn't have a handy pocket like Neena's—and they took dozens of selfies in front of the sign, hoping that at least one would make them look

good. Giant smiles. Sunglasses on, sunglasses off. The screen blurred because Josie's glasses were prescription. To conserve the battery, she switched the phone to airplane mode, and then Neena stowed it in the top of Josie's pack so that it wouldn't dig into her thigh. It barely fit. Josie wondered if the weight would lighten as they consumed the food or if it would grow heavier with their exhaustion.

"Nothing to it but to do it," Neena said, quoting their least-favorite teacher because they liked reminding each other how awful he was.

"Keep calm and carry on," Josie said as they set off down the trail.

"Too blessed to be stressed."

"Oh God. Why do they all have to rhyme?"

Their banter continued as they rounded the first bend. Josie glanced back. The burbling river softened and then silenced. Neena's car disappeared.

The woods swallowed them whole.

**ROBUST EVERGREENS TOWERED** overhead and deciduous hardwoods preened, dappling the midday light. Rhododendrons spiraled with leathery leaves. Wildflowers dipped their heads in greeting. *Those*, smooth and red. *These*, frilly and white. A weedy vine tangled to form a wall of electric-orange blooms. It was a dramatic contrast from the tired vegetation that had edged the parking lot, yellowed by car exhaust and human presence. The inner forest was lush and vigorously alive. Even the air smelled better here, pristine with fresh oxygen and perfumed by rainy loam.

Neena would have been awed, if only her backpack wasn't trying to murder her.

The Wade Harte Trail had been challenging from the start. It began with a climb and then continued to a steeper climb. The ascent was unrelenting. Roots, rocks, and downed trees were scattered everywhere across the path, treacherous obstacles lying in wait to roll their ankles. It was exactly what Neena had expected but also somehow worse. Hunching and huffing beneath her pack, its straps dug



nastily into her shoulders. No amount of adjusting them or cinching the belt helped. Her limbs dragged with unparalleled fatigue. They had been walking for eight minutes.

“Fuuuuuuuuuck,” Neena said, for the fifth time.

“At least we’re only doing half the trail. Can you imagine?”

“Who is Wade Harte, anyway?”

“No idea, but I read somewhere”—though neither girl had much life experience, they’d always read something, somewhere—“that hikers call this a mini-AT.”

“A mini-what?”

“Appalachian Trail.” Josie pronounced it correctly, like a Southerner. *Latch-un*, not *lay-shun*.

“Oh. Doesn’t that run nearby? Or am I thinking of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail?”

“Both, I think.”

Neena bragged. “Look at us, knowing stuff about hiking.”

“We’re hiking geniuses.”

The girls were traipsing up Frazier Mountain, the tallest of several mountains that crested six thousand feet in these woods, but they weren’t hiking to its peak. Thank God. They planned to ascend two-thirds of the way up the mountain before descending into a clearing called Deep Fork, where they would set up camp and spend the night. Measured from the parking lot, the elevation gain was over two thousand feet.

Due to the ascent, today’s hike would be more physically challenging, but tomorrow’s mileage would be more than double. In the morning, they would head into the Misty Rock Wilderness, which sounded like a location on a Tolkien map, and then eat lunch at Burnt Balsam Knob, which sounded like a penis that had been caught in a forest fire. After that, they’d turn around and come back,

looping onto a different trail for scenic variation. Tomorrow night, they'd sleep somewhere back in the Misty Rock Wilderness before returning to the trailhead on Wednesday afternoon.

Round trip, the journey was nearly twenty miles. A through-hike on the Wade Harte was just over thirty—stretching from Frazier Mountain in the north to the town of Brevard in the south—but Neena and Josie had wanted this trip to be theirs, completely. They didn't want another person dropping them off at one end and picking them up at the other.

The trail would eventually cross through a protected wilderness area where signs and trail markers weren't allowed, but, so far, the path had been well-worn and easy to follow. Neena prided herself on a strong internal compass. Her parents, however, had also made them pack an actual compass, a printed trail map, and further print-outs about the trail sections and water sources.

But mainly they were relying on technology. Their phones already had compass apps, and GPS was even easier.

Neena wobbled over another supine tree decomposing across the trail. Behind her, Josie's footsteps halted. "Did you look?" Josie asked.

"At what?"

"You should always look before stepping over a log. In case of snakes."

Neena shuffled around to face her, wielding a deadly stare.

"I know." Josie blushed as she peered over the log. "But seriously, timber rattlesnakes and copperheads. You need to be careful."

Neena wondered if their entire trip would be peppered with lists of lethal fauna. She changed the subject to something far more pressing. "I need to pee."

"Yes!" Josie's response was exuberant. "I'm dying, but I was afraid to say something. I mean, if it weren't for the trees, we'd still be able to see your car."

The girls had “pre-hydrated”—they despised this word, cudged into the English language by coaches and jocks—by consuming a liter of water each on the road. Supposedly, this would give them a head start on fluid loss. Win had advised them to drink slowly, because chugging would make the liquid pass faster, but that didn’t seem to have mattered. Their bladders were already bursting.

Neena unsnapped the sternum strap and hip belt, slid out, and gasped as the pack almost ripped her arms from their sockets. The pack thudded straight to the ground. She teetered with the drastic shift in her center of gravity.

Josie made a similar gasp and teeter.

“Okay,” Neena said, massaging her shoulders. “We’ll find a better way to do that.” But the freedom was rapturous. They were like a sagging mule team lugging supplies into the Grand Canyon. Two liters of water per day, per person, was required, so they’d secured one-liter bottles to both sides of each pack, which they planned to refill along the way. Only luck had kept the bottles from cracking in the fall.

“Do you need the shovel?” Josie asked.

“Thankfully”—Neena shuddered—“not yet.” Win had been remarkably unperturbed as he’d given them the instructions about defecating in the woods.

“Toilet paper or are you gonna air-dry?”

“We have to bury it if we use it, right?”

Josie scratched behind an ear. “Probably?”

They decided to air-dry.

Neena climbed uphill, off the path, and ducked behind a boulder—but not before first checking for venomous snakes. *Damn you, Josie.* Positioning herself so that the stream would travel downhill, Neena tugged her jeans and underwear down to her knees.

The forest canopy swayed overhead. The wind chilled her exposed flesh.

Josie piped up from behind a nearby conifer. “I read that this land used to be part of the Biltmore Estate, and the Vanderbilts were the ones who sold it to the Forest Service.” The Biltmore was the largest privately owned house in the United States, and, at the time of its construction, the Vanderbilts were the country’s wealthiest family thanks to the fortune they’d made in shipping and railroads. Now their house was Asheville’s main tourist attraction. It looked like the *Downton Abbey* house on steroids. “Apparently, Pisgah was one of the first national forests in the east.”

“How was this even theirs to sell? Surely, it belonged to the Cherokees.” Neena’s parents were Indian, but strangers often mistook this for American Indian, which, around here, meant Cherokee. Unless they presumed her family was Mexican. Which also happened to a ludicrous degree.

“Surely.”

“What does ‘Pisgah’ even mean? It sounds so ugly. I used to think it was *Pig-sah*.”

“I did, too,” Josie said. “I think it’s biblical.”

Neena’s squat was careful. Her legs trembled. Nature finally overtook performance anxiety, and she sighed with relief as the trickle turned into a gush. But when she waded her hips to shake off, a watery red droplet splashed onto her thigh. “Shit,” she whispered.

“What?” Josie called out.

“When you’re done, I need the toilet paper.”

“Oh, you *have to shit*. I thought you saw something.”

“No,” Neena said. “I’m spotting.”

“Oh! Shit.”

Neena’s period wasn’t supposed to start for another week. Hopefully, this was as heavy as her flow would get. Foliage rustled, footsteps scuffled, and a pack unzipped. Josie hustled up the bank. “I

have something better,” she said. An arm materialized around the boulder holding out a puffy object in a rosy pink wrapper.

The sight instantly soothed Neena. “You’re a gem.”

“Be prepared,” Josie said. “The Boy Scouts were talking about menstruation, right? I’m not looking,” she added, shuffling backward until Neena could grab it.

Neena was grateful they subscribed to the same philosophy regarding privacy. While they didn’t mind peeing beside each other in public stalls, neither wanted to be seen with her pants down. Their philosophies split, however, when it came to products. Though a real pad was far superior to folded toilet paper, Neena still felt as if she were wearing an adult diaper. But Josie’s periods were lighter, and Neena knew tampons were uncomfortable for her—Josie said it was like hard-packing her vagina with dry cotton balls.

It was a lot to know about another girl, but Neena Chandrasekhar and Josie Gordon were as familiar with each other’s cycles as they were with their own, having been best friends since freshman year.

They’d attended the same middle school but had only known each other by name. That changed one day when their Honors Biology teacher had removed his scuffed dress shoes to display an eleventh toe. While the other students scrambled from their lab chairs in a mad rush to gawk, Neena and Josie’s disbelieving eyes had met across the room as if to say, *What does this have to do with dissecting fetal pigs?*

The funny and bizarre often kick-started great friendships.

Before they found each other, they’d had different best friends, but those attachments had fallen apart around the same time. As their exes rose into bigger crowds—Neena’s to the cross-county team, Josie’s to a group of girls who didn’t *do* anything, but who were moderately more attractive—Neena and Josie became a new twosome. To

this day, they still talked about Grace and Sarah the way others might pore over a painful romantic breakup. Because that's what it had felt like to lose the person who had once been each girl's *most important* person. The losses were devastating.

Though their bond had strengthened over being dumped, it was solidified by a shared sense of humor and passion for the same TV shows. Josie was the first classmate Neena had met who not only watched all the best current sitcoms, but all the old ones, too. They were willing to try anything from any country or decade. They loved good comedy with the fervor of televangelists. Josie didn't even mind whenever Neena insisted on listening to the commentary features, and it was within these tracks that Neena had begun to realize *people* were making these shows—*writers*, not just the actors and comedians in front of the camera. Neena wanted to be one of those people.

Her plan was to major in economics at USC, but to study film and television production on the side. Maybe, eventually, she could even convince her parents to let her double major. Because what she wanted more than anything was to be a showrunner someday—to write and sell a pilot and have her hand in every aspect of its production. And she was willing to work twice as hard as the other students, pursuing two careers at once, if it kept her parents happy.

They didn't hide that they would have rather she attend MIT, like her brother, Darshan, or at least—at least—one of the Ivy Leagues. It embarrassed Neena that her parents fell into this cliché. Briefly, she had even considered disguising her intentions, but she wasn't the type of teenager who lied to her parents. And, perhaps because of this honesty, they had reluctantly given their support.

Her father had instilled a love of comedy in Neena, but this time it was her mother who had argued on Neena's behalf. *What did you expect, filling her head with Mindy Kaling and that Fleabag woman, day after day?* Ma had said to him, her stacked bangles jangling with

each emotional finger jab. And Neena had been granted permission to study film production as long as it didn't interfere with her economics classes.

Despite this, she was afraid. Soon she would be dropped off in America's second-most-populous city, and she would be alone. No Ma and Baba. No Josie. She was scared to move somewhere so unfamiliar, and she was scared of not being able to make any new friends. People in LA were undeniably more sophisticated and worldly, and she worried that she would appear plain and backwoods by comparison. That the other students would all have better clothes than her, better skin, better hair.

But, most of all, Neena was afraid of failure. Of not being good enough and getting stuck in the economics department forever. Or maybe being *just* good enough to find employment someday as a writer's assistant, but never good enough to climb any higher.

She also feared that if she admitted any of this to her parents, they would change their minds about letting her go. And whenever she broached the topic with Josie, Josie quickly shut it down with tight-lipped petulance. Because even though everything felt scary, she knew it was also exciting. One day, it would even feel normal.

Meanwhile, Josie would still be living in this version of normal. The depressed mother, the filthy house. It was why Neena kept trying—to buoy Josie's mood, to keep her active and *doing*. Not only had this trip been Neena's idea, but she'd also had to reach for her pack first. Step onto the trail first. Hell, she'd even had to announce her intention to pee first.

As Neena zipped up her pants, Josie's gaze remained tactfully averted. They trudged back down the bank, and then Neena tucked the empty pink wrapper into her top pouch. All trash had to be carried out of the forest.

Neither girl wanted to struggle into her pack again.

“Do we really need food? Or water? Or shelter?” Neena asked.

Josie squinched her nose in concentration. “There’s a correct way to do this. I know it. We just have to remember.”

Neena stood aside, idle and useless, while Josie grunted through several flawed attempts. But then, miraculously, she hoisted her pack onto a knee, turned her upper body sideways, slipped the pack onto one shoulder and then efficiently onto the other.

“How’d you do that?” Neena asked, despite witnessing the marvel.

Josie beamed. The thirty-something pounds of discomfort only mildly tarnished her smile. “Told you it had something to do with the knees.”

She guided Neena into the lavender pack, and they basked in newfound confidence. Their endorphins were finally kicking in. The righteous pleasure of their hard work was certain to propel them up the rest of the mountainside.

It wasn’t to be. Once again, the trail was instantly grueling. Nonstop switchbacks kept the incline constant and demanding. Twenty feet up from their resting place, Neena gasped—bug-eyed and wretchedly out of shape. Her clothes, muddied from earlier in the parking lot, were drenched with sweat. No doubt this trip would be a disaster, but, even so, Neena was still hoping for a *lighthearted* disaster. At the very least, this would make a funny story she could tell at parties. Assuming she ever started going to parties. Her borrowed boots slipped on a tottering rock. Her heart catapulted in panic.

“Are you okay?” Josie asked behind her.

Neena steadied herself and held up a hand that meant, *Yes, too breathless to speak.*

As her best friend literally walked her first mile in somebody



else's shoes, Josie tromped forward in her own. Her sturdy hiking shoes, more like sneakers than boots, had only been worn twice, including today. They had been preserved in closet dust ever since her mother, in one of her sporadic attempts to *be* a mother, decided they needed to get out of the house. She had surprised Josie with a name-brand pair, purchased off the clearance rack at DSW. They had driven out of the city to hike, but, after only a few steps toward Looking Glass Rock, her mother had crumpled into the dirt. Inconsolable. Win had to pick them up because Josie was afraid to drive. Later, she learned the trail had been one of her father's regular haunts. Now these mountains felt haunted in a different way.

The untested shoes pinched her toes and rubbed her heels. Josie comforted herself by remembering the Band-Aids. If necessary, they could be slapped over any blisters later tonight. She had packed more than enough for three days.

The girls were returning home on Wednesday because Thursday was Josie's freshman orientation. Unlike Neena, Josie had no idea what she wanted to study. She wasn't excited about college. It felt like being sentenced to four more years of high school. Though her situation wasn't uncommon—most teenagers didn't know what they wanted to do with their lives—it was impossible not to compare herself to her best friend, and it was inevitable that she had interpreted this uncertainty as a personal shortcoming.

But, secretly, Josie wondered if this trip was about to change everything. This wasn't as outlandish as it sounded. It wasn't unreasonable to hope that her passion might turn out to be the same one as the rest of her family. Surely the outdoors coursed through her blood, too; she'd only been denied the opportunity to discover it. Josie imagined these mountains becoming her sanctuary. Envisioned herself as such a natural that she would be mystically compelled to

through-hike the Appalachian Trail, like in *A Walk in the Woods*, or the Pacific Crest Trail, like in *Wild*. Would this trip be the turning point when she stopped envying everyone else's adventures and started having her own?

The trail dipped unexpectedly. Josie fell.

Neena spun around at the sharp cry. "Oh my God. Are you okay?"

The pack was so huge that the spill didn't hurt. Josie landed on padding. But the drop had startled her, and unwanted tears sprung to her eyes. "I'm fine. I'm fine." She laughed to disguise her embarrassment. *Of course I'm the one who can't catch herself*, she thought, conveniently forgetting Neena's incident in the parking lot. Her mind was skilled at self-sabotage. "Uh, remind me again why we're here?"

"Because we're becoming one with nature. We're soaking in Gaia's bounty! And tonight, we'll sleep beneath the stars like . . . sumptuous pagan goddesses."

"This backpack," Josie said as Neena helped her stand, "does make me feel mega Zen."

Neena burst into laughter. Her outrageous cackle had been the soundtrack to their entire friendship. Normally, it was Josie's favorite music. But in her humiliation, it grated.

The path worn into the mountain was only one person wide, and, as always, Josie fell in line behind Neena. An ancient oak surveilled them from the woody depths. The unusual tree was stripped bare—struck by lightning or disease, Josie couldn't tell. A single arthritic branch remained, pointing like a crooked arm and knobby forefinger back the way they came. A strange revulsion drifted over her.

"Maybe it's just because hiking is terrible," she said, "but doesn't it look like that tree is telling us to go back?"

"That tree is an asshole," Neena said.

The forest returned to tranquility. Strenuous, laborious tranquility. Panting and puffing and chattering like wheezy songbirds, the

girls crossed through a velveteen outcrop of mossy green boulders. Ferns carpeted the shady groves. Tumbling cascades of a nearby stream, present but unseen, were amplified throughout the canopy.

The combination of sublime beauty and severe exhaustion began to soften Josie's fatalism. A tenuous but arresting sense of empowerment manifested in its place, and, although she didn't realize it, the same sensation was happening inside Neena. It was their first taste of adulthood. A preview of what was to be forever. They were here without parents, teachers, or supervisors. They were going to feed themselves and build their own shelter, and no one could tell them where to go or what to do.

Gnawing disquiet gradually slowed Josie's pace. Her instincts perceived the subtle shifts in the trees before her ears understood: shuffling leaves and crunching dead wood.

She stopped. Stiffened.

The faint noises grew more distinct. Neena halted. She glanced back at Josie, and the girls exchanged mirrored expressions of wide-eyed alarm.

Josie's nerves pulsed. *Bear.*

A man's timbre rumbled down the mountainside. But as Josie slackened with relief, Neena compressed with fear. The voice was heading toward them, broadening and becoming cavernous. The southern half of the trail was often used for day hikes because it was easily accessible from the parkway, but the northern half, their half, was less traveled. More isolated. It wasn't that Neena hadn't expected to run into anybody out here, but the sudden approach of an unknown man cowed her. She felt disarmed in the most literal sense—like his presence stripped away any weapons she thought she'd had.

The voice grew louder.

Neena couldn't pick out any of his words, only his tone. The boom was commanding and confident. Almost sardonic. It reduced

her back into a child.

“I’m sure it’s fine,” Josie said, although doubt had already crept in. “He’s probably someone like Win.”

Immobilized by dread, Neena didn’t respond. Humans were far more dangerous than bears. She knew plenty of stories about hikers who had disappeared, plucked off the earth by their own careless mishaps . . . or by other hikers.

“I used to think that if I said hello to somebody,” the voice said, “and they didn’t respond . . .”

Josie gestured toward the trees. Neena nodded but then shook her head. It’s what they *should* have done—hidden—but the voice was too close now. They were out of time. Neena strained to listen for the sounds of a woman, hoping he wasn’t talking to another man. Or worse, himself. But *was* that worse? Would she rather run into two men or one possibly deranged man?

“. . . it meant I was a ghost,” the voice finished.

He emerged into view. Neena shuddered from the release of tension. His companion was a girl, and he wasn’t even a man. They were teenagers, maybe twenty at the oldest. The atmosphere brightened. The trees shook out their nervous leaves.

“I’d love to see a ghost,” the girl said.

“But that’s the problem,” the boy said. “Nobody *could* see me.”

The two jumped as they rounded the switchback, startled to discover Neena and Josie on the other side. “Oh! We didn’t see you,” the girl said, which made her laugh. An accidental callback. They both looked at ease, the type of people who hiked difficult trails and made their own gorp. Neither wore a backpacking pack, but the boy had an enviably small daypack. He was white, and the girl’s features were East Asian. Her hair was pinned up in a thick crown braid. A Heidi milkmaid braid.

“I like your hair,” Josie said. Her own strawberry blonde locks

were in two long plaits—a much more simple style. Josie usually wore her hair loose or in a ponytail, and Neena suspected she'd done the braids to look outdoorsy. It was cute, though. Sweet. Neena's black hair was snipped into a blunt bob, too short to do anything but hang.

Heidi's smile grew. "Thanks."

Normally, this was when the two parties would nod and move along, but a conversation had already been started. It seemed polite to talk a little bit longer.

"Are you headed to the summit?" the boy asked. He was tall and strapping, and his irises sparkled in a warm chestnut brown. The whole package reminded Neena of Win. A long time ago, she'd had a crush on Win. If she was being honest, she still did, though not in any serious way. Just in the way that when he was around, he was pleasing to look at. Perhaps for this reason, Neena felt tongue-tied.

"No," Josie said. "We're doing the Wade Harte."

Neena was glad when Josie didn't clarify they were only doing part of the Wade Harte, and equally glad that the couple didn't comment about how defeated they already looked. These two must have arrived at the crack of dawn to have already summited and be on their way back down. Neena felt envious that their torture was almost over.

Concern flickered across the boy's face. "You aren't staying in Deep Fork tonight, are you?"

"Yeah." Josie frowned. "Why?"

"Oh man. You haven't heard?" When the girls gave him a puzzled look, he glanced at Heidi. Her eyes flashed a warning at him.

"Heard what?" Josie asked.

"No, nothing. It's fine. It's just . . ." The boy appeared torn between regret at bringing it up and a pressing need to continue. Unconsciously, Neena leaned in. "Weird stuff happens there," he finished. "Be careful, is all I'm saying."

“What kind of weird stuff?” she asked. Voice rediscovered.

“Unexplained noises in the night. Items stolen from tents.”

Neena’s pulse thumped.

“A buddy of mine once swore that someone took a picture of him while he was sleeping.” As the boy gripped the straps of his backpack, his eyes darted into the woods behind them. “He’d been out here hiking solo, and he didn’t find it on his phone until he got home. I would have thought he was messing with me, except his hands were shaking when he showed me the picture. He looked dead asleep in it . . . I don’t know.” His cadence was changing, dropping into a redneck lilt. “Some folks say when the mist creeps in after midnight, there’s a man who likes to play tricks on campers—”

Heidi thwacked him across the chest. “He’s joking,” she said as he collapsed into laughter. “I’m sorry. My boyfriend has a horrible sense of humor.” And then to him, “God, you almost had me, too. You’re such a dick.” But she grinned as she scolded him.

“Sorry,” he said to Neena. “I couldn’t resist.”

The hot shame of gullibility flared inside her. But then she was laughing, too. She admired his boldness and showmanship. Josie glanced at her, less amused, as their bodies all shifted and resumed walking—interaction complete.

“Safe travels,” Heidi called from behind them.

“Lock your tent flaps,” the boy said.

As soon as they were out of earshot, Josie muttered, “That was odd.”

“I liked him. I thought it was funny.”

“Really?” Josie’s brow wrinkled. “He reminded me of my brother.”

Neena was grateful that her dark brown skin could hide a blush. “Speaking of photos,” she said, backpedaling, and they took another series of selfies to mark their progress. This time, their screened reflections were disheveled. Distant. And when Neena tucked her

phone away again, her hand felt naked. Even in a relaxed state, her fingers were still gripped as if they were holding a rectangle. Nurture overtaking nature. The compulsion arose to Google if other people had this problem, too, but she knew she couldn't.

For a moment, Neena wished they could turn around and follow the couple out. She wanted to slump in her car and lose herself in the comfort of her phone. But Josie was behind her, as always, and the thought of abandoning this trip that she herself had insisted on made her feel guilty. And then resentful for feeling guilty.

The girls slogged deeper into the lonesome infinity of forest.

**THEY KEPT PLODDING**, kept resting. The humid air became moist rather than fresh, and the water they drank evaporated into sweat that attracted hovering clouds of gnats. Stagnant pockets of the unseen stream bred and released mosquitos. Their arms itched with round, angry bites. Despite their being on a mountainside, there were no views. No sweeping vistas. The trees and rhododendrons enclosed them in a cramped realm.

Uneasiness settled underneath Josie's skin. It was as if something was watching them from behind the trees, always ducking out of sight before she could name it. When the stream finally did reveal itself, the girls crossed it, and then they crossed it again a half hour later. Sometime after, a small—almost trivial—grassy clearing appeared, which Josie guessed was an empty campsite . . . which made her realize she wasn't even positive what a campsite was *supposed* to look like.

Neena didn't seem concerned. "I'm sure it'll be obvious later."

They trekked beside a third prong of the stream, one that was



wider and prettier, and declared themselves overdue for their first real break with sitting. Glorious, glorious sitting. Proud of their cleverness, the girls shed their packs by backing up and releasing them onto waist-high boulders.

Neena inhaled with pleasure. The water warbled in an agreeable manner. “Is a creek the same thing as a stream? Or do you think there’s a scientific difference?”

“I don’t know.” Josie removed her phone from its zippered prison. A comforting rush swept over her hand, which had been tingling with emptiness since the trailhead. “I’ll look it up— Oh.”

Neena laughed once through her nose. “I keep doing that, too.”

“How did anyone know anything before the internet?”

“Our parents were idiots.”

“Or,” Josie said, “were they smarter because they actually had to retain information?”

“No.”

“Your parents, maybe.”

“No,” Neena repeated. “We’re smarter because we figured out a way where we don’t *have* to.”

“We are so smart to have figured that out.”

“We should figure out,” Neena said, “where we packed the snacks.”

The snacks were near the top of Josie’s pack, where she had carefully separated out this afternoon’s allocation—two single-serving bags of chips and a sandwich-size Ziploc of dried apricots—from the rest of their food. The chips were Cheetos and Nacho Cheese Doritos because the girls believed in chips that stained their fingertips orange. It was only a coincidence that the fruit was orange, too.

Josie had been in charge of snacks because she had the snack house. Neena had the meal house. When Josie’s father was alive, her parents had bought from bulk bins and had cooked giant pots of

organic comfort food. Naturally, Josie had developed a taste for junk. Now she missed the rice and beans. Her mother shopped only sporadically, and the groceries were haphazard, as if she'd forgotten the purpose of shopping. Though she still patronized the same stores as before, everything became convenient to consume. Josie's kitchen cabinets were scattered with nuts and bananas and granola—squirrel food—while an under-the-bed tub in her bedroom was stuffed with Frito-Lay variety packs and Campbell's soup and Top Ramen, purchased with her Kmart employee discount.

The girls washed their hands with globs of sanitizer and settled onto a flat boulder that touched the stream. Unlike the other rocks, which wore fuzzy sweaters of verdant moss, this rock was bare and had perfect indentations for two human bottoms. Trees dipped their exposed roots into the water as it flowed and bubbled past. The girls' matching blue stones of lapis lazuli shimmered in the refracted light, but Josie's swollen finger throbbed around her ring. Her aching feet groaned in her shoes.

"This part, I understand," Neena said. "This part where I'm sitting."

"The whole thing should be this part."

"Remember when we thought camping—staying in *one place* for *three whole days*—would be boring?"

Josie loosened her laces. "We were so naive. Staying in one place is the best."

They divvied up the bounty by mixing the chips half-and-half. The apricots were placed between them. To Josie, dried fruit tasted like sadness and neglect. But today they were as delicious as candy because they gave her another reason not to move.

Her first bottle of water was already a third empty, so she took prudent sips, luxuriating as it swelled and replenished her cells. She and Neena would refill their bottles at a spring near the

campsite tonight. Neither wanted to refill now because they didn't want to carry the extra weight. Neena downed the rest of her first bottle. Recklessly, she unscrewed the lid off her second and began to chug.

"Hey!" Josie stopped her. "Save some for later."

"I am."

"I know, but . . . save some *extra*. For *in case*."

"In case of what?"

"Anything," Josie said.

"You are such a mom," Neena said, thinking of her own mother and realizing belatedly that she'd made the slam worse. She cringed but didn't apologize. She was embarrassed, but she also worried that acknowledging the subject might hurt Josie further. Unlike Josie's mom, Neena's was constantly butting in with her concerns, thoughts, and opinions. It was maddening, but Neena knew enough to be grateful.

Ma was the only person besides Josie who texted her regularly. Though she worked considerable hours as a neurologist, she was always available by phone. This afternoon was already the longest they'd gone without talking in . . . who knew how many years. Forever. This trip was a trial run for their upcoming separation. Except, even then, they would still be texting and FaceTiming.

Neena glossed over her blunder by stretching out on the rock. "Oh my God." Her tormented muscles whimpered in relief. "Lying down is even better. You have to try this."

"I'll never get up if I lie down," Josie said as she lowered herself.

They ate on their backs like otters, orange crumbs littering their bellies and chests, pacified by the babbling stream and its soft, cooling aroma. Neena sniffed the breeze. The scent was rich with minerals. Compared to Josie, Neena was always more aware of her breath.

Her asthma required two puffs in the morning and two at night on a steroid inhaler, and she had a rescue inhaler for when she was sick or before exercise. She'd used the rescue inhaler on the drive here, so her lungs were okay. Of greater concern were the bruises she felt blossoming below her shoulder blades.

Her head turned toward Josie. "Oh no. Are you a little pink?"

Josie bolted upright, pressing her thumb into her forearm. A white print was left behind. Swearing, she scuttled off the rock and fumbled through her pack. Her skin was fair and freckled and already slathered in SPF.

"Maybe it's just warm from the exercise," Neena said.

"No," Josie said, reapplying. "I'm definitely burning."

The chemical tang of sunscreen mixed into the air. Neena examined the bottle without picking it up because she didn't want to get her hands greasy. "A *hundred?*"

Josie snorted. "SPF 100+. Don't forget the 'plus'—it's important."

Neena shook her head when Josie offered the bottle. She was already wearing some, and the whole trail had been in the shade. She was fine. Josie packed up the sunscreen along with their empty food bags. The sight made Neena flinch. "My hips hurt," she said. "And my back." *We don't have to leave now, do we?*

"Mine too," Josie said. "And my feet." *Hell no.*

They watched the water. After a few minutes, Josie began to wander and collect stones. Neena observed as Josie stacked the pile, biggest to littlest, into a satisfying decorative cairn. She croaked to her feet and joined in. Selecting, balancing. The process was both meditative and addictive, like solving a puzzle. Soon the girls had constructed an entire village out of stacked stone—a hamlet overlooking the sea. They took dozens of photographs from every angle. Neena admired their sprawling creation with pride.

"Godzilla time." Josie reached out to topple the stacks.

Neena thrust out both hands to stop her. “What are you doing?”

“Leave No Trace.” When Neena didn’t respond, Josie went on. “Leave No Trace? It’s a thing. Like, an ethical code of honor. You’ve really never heard of it?”

Neena had not.

“It means that whatever you bring into nature, you carry out. It doesn’t only apply to garbage. You’re supposed to leave everything the way you found it. So, if we let these stones stand, we’d be leaving behind proof of human impact. It’d be like carving our names into a tree. Or throwing the Doritos bag into the ferns.”

“But . . .” Neena hesitated. Wondering if this made her a lesser person. “What if I *like* the idea of leaving something behind?”

“Then you’d be ruining the view for the next people who sat here.”

Josie’s pronouncement felt harsh—that their pretty stone towers could ruin anybody’s view.

“Imagine if everybody who sat here left one of these,” she continued. “This place would be nothing *but* stacked stones. It’d be the same as a crowd of people.”

“Okay,” Neena said, “so the next hiker who sits here gets peeved and knocks them down. Who cares? Just . . . let’s not do it ourselves.”

“We’re not leaving them.”

“Why not?”

“Because I just said!”

There was a burst of irritated silence. Once again, it was like being trapped in a loop with her mother. Neena hated feeling like a child.

“Fine,” Neena said. Childishly. “Whatever.”

Resisting the urge to add that moving rocks around also could also contribute to erosion, Josie tried to spin the ring on her index finger, a nervous habit. The ring didn’t budge. Her fingers had fattened into sausages, swollen from hanging at her sides during the hike.

“How about we leave one?” she finally said. “This one.” She pointed to Neena’s tallest cairn. “I like the round stone on top. It seems like it should roll away, but it doesn’t.”

Neena shrugged.

Josie sighed. But correctly interpreting the ennui as acceptance, she dismantled the nearest tower. The rocks tumbled to the earth and splooshed into the water.

Neena joined in the demolition until they were all gone except the one. “You sure?” she asked, rearing back to kick it.

“Don’t,” Josie said.

“I wasn’t going to,” Neena lied. She glanced at her phone, which was still in her hand. “*Shit*. It’s a quarter till five.”

Josie was equally startled. “What?”

The girls had read that the average backpacker could hike two miles per hour, including breaks, so they’d lowered their own estimation to one and a half. This meant that with three hours of hiking—plenty of padding for their 4.2-mile day—they would arrive at their destination around 5:45 p.m., which would give them three additional hours to set up camp, make dinner, and hang out before it got dark. Sunset was at 8:15, but Win said they’d have light on the mountain for at least an additional half hour.

Neena flushed with stress. “I knew we were behind schedule, but . . . How many miles have we hiked so far?”

“Almost two,” Josie said.

Neena erupted. “Not even half?” She did the math, calculating from the time they’d left the trailhead. “We’re traveling less than a mile per hour.” Panic made her turn on Josie again. “You’ve had your phone out since we stopped here. Why didn’t you notice how slowly we were traveling?”

“So have you! Why didn’t *you* notice?”

Neena didn't like the accusation directed back onto her. It was neither of their faults. Or they were both at fault. Whatever. "Okay," she said, trying to convince herself as much as Josie. "We're okay. We'll be fine." True, they would no longer have any time to relax at the campsite, but they could still easily make it there before dark. Neena squirmed at the thought of *not* making it before dark.

"Yeah." Josie sounded even less assured as they strapped into their packs. "We'll just walk a little faster."

Their spirits picked up in earnest as, at long last, the elevation took a dip. Unfortunately, this downhill respite was only a blink before the trail resumed its murderous ascent. The girls tunneled upward through a dense tract of mountain laurel. Branches on either side of the path interlocked overhead, creating a human-size passageway that canopied them in flora. Green sunlight strained through the leaves.

Time marched forward as their pace slowed down. The tunnel was endless and claustrophobic. Out of breath, they had no choice but to take frequent breaks. After an hour—around the time they had originally planned to reach their campsite—the climb intensified. The incline grew hellishly steep. The terrain became rockier.

It felt more precarious, which forced their steps to be more cautious.

Another hour passed. Despite the perspiration and heat and suffering, Neena felt the temperature begin to drop. A warning of the night to come. They'd planned for three hours at camp before nightfall, but now they were looking at half that.

Their salvation would arrive in the form of a spring, which would also be their water source for the night. Shortly after the spring, the path would fork—the trail to Frazier Mountain's summit on one side, the Wade Harte Trail on the other. Their instructions were to take a

right, and then the Deep Fork campsite would be immediately ahead. But as Neena peeked through a rare break in the tangled thicket, the only thing above them was more trail.

Josie's phone had been lodged permanently in hand since the stream, monitoring their movements, a single dot blinking east-bound across a digitized landscape. Neena had pretended not to notice how often Josie checked their progress, despite the path being well trod. Now she wondered if they had both missed something. What if they'd already passed the spring and the fork? The spring was supposed to be small but reliable. But what if it had dried up? Or what if the fork wasn't an obvious split? Even more troubling, if the spring *had* dried up, did that mean they would have to trek all the way back down to the stream to refill? Or could they keep hiking until the next source tomorrow?

Restlessly, they fiddled with the stays and sternum straps—open, closed, up, down—shifting to distribute the weight to their hips and elsewhere—but any relief was temporary.

"Try this," Neena said. With deliberate and mindful footfalls, the earth lent support from beneath. "Walking with a slow roll helps. A little," she added.

"I'm. Already. Doing that."

Neena circled around at the unexpected growl in Josie's throat.

Josie's cheeks were crimson. "Sorry," she grumbled. "These shoes. I don't know how I'm supposed to wear them for two more days."

"We've gotta be close. What does your phone say?"

"I don't know. It says we're in *green*."

Neena grabbed the map. The dot showed them in the correct area of forest, yet . . . how could they be in the right place, on a straight-forward trail, and still feel lost?

Josie swore.



“Calm down,” Neena said, instantly regretting it. She handed back the phone. “I’m sure the spring is just ahead.”

*Calm down?* Josie could throttle Neena. The gnarled laurel branches twisted all around them. Her skin was filthy and disgusting, and her braids had frizzed loose. She wasn’t even walking anymore—she was hobbling in singular steps. One hobble. Then another. Each brutal motion was a betrayal, her blisters begging her to stop.

“God, I’m starving,” Neena whined.

Hunger clawed at Josie, too. A faerie feast shimmered ahead of her, an absurdly long table piled high with silver platters of golden-cooked geese, fruits and breads and butters, cheeses and cakes, tureens of soup and goblets of wine.

Suddenly, Neena stumbled backward to a halt. “Oh, holy—”

Josie almost smashed into her, ripped from dreamland into reality: tufts of mottled fur and blood and viscera, festering black flies and squiggling yellow maggots.

“Ugh.” This was muffled by Neena’s arm, which covered her mouth and nose.

The smell was horrendous. Josie shielded her airways but couldn’t pry away her gaze. A white-tailed deer lay a few feet off trail, its unmoving frame crushing the thick brush. Its eye sockets had been pecked clean, and its muscles were skinny and emaciated. It looked as if it had died of starvation. Scavengers had ripped open the meager carcass, plundering it to expose a grotesque pinwheel of color. Pinks and purples and browns, everything tinged with gray death. Brushed with venous scarlet.

The girls moved along, shaken. But the repulsive stench lingered. Exhaustion plummeted their tanks back to empty. They straggled onward until, at last, Neena crested another slope. “The spring,” she said. “I see it! This has to be it.”

Water was trickling out of a white PVC pipe that jutted from the earth. Josie had no idea how the system worked, and the spring was minimal and low-flowing, but the water was clear. And it existed. She wanted to weep.

The girls gave feeble hurrahs and exchanged a weak high five.

“Do we refill now?” Neena asked.

Josie’s thoughts unclouded enough to form a plan. “Let’s find the campsite first, so we can shed our packs.”

“Good call. Yes,” Neena mumbled like a zombie. “Shed first. Then filter.”

The ground leveled out after the next switchback, and the path forked. The girls released another wilted whoop. Ninety minutes of light remained. Setting up camp would be a hustle—and they were in no condition to hustle—but they were here. They could do it.

Following the Wade Harte to the right, they expected to find the Deep Fork clearing after the turn. Instead, the girls stared into an abyss of more tunnel.

“I guess the clearing isn’t *immediately* after the fork?” Neena said.

Josie bit her lip and glanced back behind them. Unsure.

“It’s probably just up here.” Neena plodded forward with a drained sigh. “I’ll keep going, if you want to stay.”

But Josie followed. “We’re not separating.”

Secretly, Neena was relieved. As daylight sank into twilight, she didn’t want to be alone, either. The darkness itself didn’t frighten her; it was what the darkness concealed. Her brain liked to play tricks. Create specters. She didn’t believe in the supernatural, but she did believe in hidden men. Murderers peering in through windows, rapists waiting underneath beds, kidnappers crouched behind closet doors.

When she was young, her brother had turned off the lights while she was fetching a hula hoop from the basement. He’d locked the

door and ignored her cries for help, finding her terror to be hilarious. Ma had discovered her an hour later, catatonic on the top step. Darshan wasn't a monster anymore—he was kind and thoughtful, as far from monstrous as possible—but his joke had done permanent damage.

The girls hiked in silence on flat but uneven ground. As the distance from the fork grew, so did Neena's apprehension. "Should we turn around? Try the other path?"

"Win definitely said it was the right fork," Josie said. But she pulled out the printed instructions from Neena's top pouch to confirm. "Yeah. It says right."

"Maybe he remembered wrong. We should have seen the clearing by now."

"He's not wrong," Josie snapped.

The girls stewed in frustrated nervousness. From the forested depths, an owl hooted at the encroaching night.

"Well?" Neena said. "What do you want to do?"

Retracing their steps, they tried the left fork but encountered another compact tunnel. The path was steep and craggy, and, after a few minutes of arduous upward trekking, there was still no clearing. No space anywhere for a tent. The pitch rose in Josie's voice. "Where are we supposed to sleep? We only have an hour of light left."

"I guess we could stretch out our sleeping bags on the trail?"

"On the *trail*? Without a tent?"

"I don't know! I don't want to do that, either." Neena gestured, harassed, in the direction they'd come from, signaling for Josie to turn around.

"You don't think we should look any further up here?" Josie asked.

"I don't know." Neena repeated it, because it was the only true thing. She would have screamed it, if she had the energy. "Do you?"

Josie stared up the trail. Her gaze darkened with unseeing. “Shit,” she whispered and then stomped back down.

Neena followed close behind, bumping and dragging her body. She nearly crashed into Josie when Josie stopped abruptly at the fork.

“Now what?” Josie asked.

“Now what *what?*”

“Should we try the other way again? Maybe we didn’t walk far enough.”

“I still think we should set up camp here at the fork, where there’s the most room.” Neena imagined them trapped, unprepared, on the trail—pointy black treetops silhouetting themselves against an obsidian sky. “We’re running out of time.”

“I *know* we’re running out of time.” Josie shed her pack and scurried up the right path without a goodbye, no longer concerned about being alone. The excruciating rub of inflexible shoes against inflamed flesh fueled her indignation. Neena didn’t understand how serious this was. She never took anything seriously.

“Josie,” Neena shouted. “Josie!”

“What?”

“Josie!”

As Josie skittered down the mountain, her glasses slid down her nose. She shoved them back up. “*What?*” The question shook with a fury that dissolved the instant she saw.

Neena was holding aside a willowy vine as if it were a theater curtain. The new growth had concealed a third path.