

9

Emily

I'm trembling standing here and it's not because it's cold. It takes every bit of my concentration not to run back to the gate and leave. There are images in my head. Ashlee stumbling drunk on one of these pathways. Someone following. Hands on a neck. Dad's hands brushing her neck in our kitchen. Rain washing everything away.

Someone else might think these woods were still and silent right now, but they're not. Dad taught me that. For one thing there are two swallows wheeling high above me, which is strange because they should have left long ago. They belong to a summertime with Dad in it.

I do what Dad did to calm his mind, just make myself focus on the forest around me. I listen to a bird shaking its

wings out above me. I smell earth, rotting and sweet. There's the taste of smoke and pine needles. A breeze whisks around the back of my neck promising rain. I hear the trees creak.

Once when people asked what I wanted to be when I grew up, I would say a tree. It used to make Dad laugh, and I liked that, but it was more than this too. It was knowing that, as a tree, I would only feel wind on my bark, animals on my branches. I could stretch down deep into the earth and this would be all I'd need. I breathe in, this place feels fragile and desperate. Its ancient air wants to be sucked down into my lungs, doesn't want to let go. I take a few steps towards the red-gold trees and it feels as if I'm walking into a blaze of fire.

Then I see a twitch of movement up ahead.

I squint. Stop.

There's a darker shape between the trees.

A dark shape in these woods could be anything, or anyone. A deer? A bird watcher? Maybe a tramp or a jogger. It could be someone more sinister. I take my phone out, just in case. But when I look up again, the shape has disappeared in the dappled light. Now I'm not sure I've seen anything at all. I peer to the space through the trees where I thought the shadow was but, with the branches swaying, shadowy shapes are everywhere now. Maybe I imagined it. It could be my mind playing tricks on me because I'm back here again, because I'm feeling nervous.

Then I realise who else it could be: Joe. He could have

followed me from the bus stop, it would be just like him to worry. I call his phone, still squinting into the undergrowth. I don't hear it ring but he's often got it on silent. It goes through to his voicemail; I don't leave a message. I don't shout out his name either, don't want to break the silence of this wood unless I have to. Anyway, there are shadows and shapes everywhere now. That shadow I thought I'd seen could have been nothing at all.

I walk on. I don't know this part of Darkwood so well, but I guess the edge of the quarry will be on my left soon, and then the caves, then the boulders that lead up to the Leap. Its summit has the best view of anywhere. From there it's easy to see how huge these woods are, how they stretch into and separate parts of the town, how they seep into farmland like sea on a shore, how they retreat into darkness.

Maybe that shadow I'd seen was Damon, getting up to the Leap before me. There aren't even any birds darting across this path now. Wiggling my fingers apart, I think about how it would feel to have Damon walking beside me, his fingers threaded through mine. And, before I can help it, I'm remembering that time again, late afternoon last November. That day where I'd been sat on the edge of the bike trail, waiting until dusk for when I'd go collect Dad from the bunker. When I'd been watching the first of the starlings begin to flock and form a roost.

That day Damon had appeared out of nowhere. He'd been running hard. I hadn't recognised him, just saw a madman. I'd stood up fast as he'd stumbled over me.

‘What are you doing?’ I’d said.

‘What are you?’

He’d put his hands on his knees and his head down between them and breathed and breathed. When he’d looked back, I’d pointed out the starlings I’d been watching, explained a little as the sky darkened, as the birds turned. ‘When one starling changes direction,’ I’d said, ‘each of the other birds does too. These birds are the most highly-tuned pack of animals there is.’

He’d calmed down then. ‘That all you been doing? Just watching birds?’

I hadn’t said about Dad, about how I’d really been in Darkwood to fetch him. I hadn’t said I’d been putting it off as long as I could. But I’d wanted to. I’d wanted Damon to stay and watch the starlings: talk. I could tell he was thinking about it.

But then it all changed. His mate arrived.

‘See you round,’ Damon had said. And they were gone, running fast, one chasing the other, shouting through the trees with their voices echoing back.

I wonder if Damon even remembers all that. Remembers me.

A woodpecker makes a sudden laugh, and I jump. These are stupid thoughts, all of them, and the woodpecker knows it. Before I move off again I push upright a leaning sapling blown sideways. If it grows straight, it’ll be an oak.

When I start the climb up the Leap, I get another stupid thought. Perhaps there is a different reason why Damon

wants to meet me up there. In town they call this place the Jump, Lover's Leap . . . Suicide Drop. People have killed themselves falling from these rocks; there have been accidents. What if Damon is planning to jump off? It would be one way for him to escape the nightmare that must be his life right now. Pushing me off the edge might be another.

Now these stupid thoughts won't go away. I get this image of Damon throwing himself off the Leap like some sort of deranged superhero and that's it then, I just run, straight up the path towards the summit. My feet skid in mud and a branch brushes my neck and I keep going. Because I'm also thinking: Damon has lost two people, his girlfriend and his dad. Could that be enough to send him over? I'm remembering the jagged rocks on the other side of the Leap, that steep vertical slide . . . how once a person started falling that would be it.

I tumble on to the summit, my head darting sideways: looking. The light is brighter up here without the tree cover, blinding me for a second, but I see him. He's standing on the ledge, looking over. Then, as I heave to get my breath, he turns towards me and I see his face. He's angry, frowning.

10

Damon

She arrives like a bullet from a gun. 'Hey!' she shouts, so loud it almost tips me off.

She raises her arms like she's going to catch me, like she's trying to play hero. She looks so much like her dad. I could snap her thin arms that she's stretching towards me. I could step out of the way. *Keep coming, I'm thinking, keep coming and I'll watch you fall.* I look over the edge again, and she skids still.

'It's not me who should jump,' I say.

Her eyes dart down, stare at where my feet are: how close to the edge. I could tightrope walk the whole way around this summit, dare her to do it too. Follow the leader. It's a kind of detention.

‘Reckon you could jump because of what your dad did?’ I ask.

Her eyes widen. Now I’m playing with her – being a bastard – but I don’t want her to come any closer. Don’t want her to feel sorry for me neither. There are dark rings under her eyes. I’m glad if this means she’s not sleeping: she should be suffering. She doesn’t look away from me. She’s got nerve, this girl.

‘Why don’t you believe it?’ I just go ahead and ask her this too. ‘If it wasn’t your dad that killed Ashlee, who did?’

‘Plenty of people use these woods. All the time they do! Anyone could have been there that night.’ She’s looking at me hard like she knows something.

‘Police don’t think so,’ I snap. ‘Your dad don’t even think so.’

Still, she keeps eye contact. ‘My dad doesn’t know what he thinks.’

I make this weird laugh-noise in my throat. ‘He knows he’s guilty. Even if he says he can’t remember, he admitted it yesterday. Manslaughter?’ I try to stare her out, try to get this into her thick skull.

She shrugs. ‘He’s not well.’

The casual way she says this makes me want to shake her: it’s *because* her dad’s not well that all this happened. Can’t she see that?

‘What kind of psycho would kill a girl like Ashlee?’ I say. ‘She was perfect, did no one no harm. The longer they lock him up the better.’

She keeps quiet.

‘So which is it?’ I hiss, frustrated at her now. ‘Murder or manslaughter?’

Her face goes blank, switches to a mask that looks like she’s practised a million times. I keep going.

‘Did he meet Ashlee before that night? Because that’s what the papers are saying. Did he chase her there like a bastard? Or do you believe those lies about your dad being in a flashback when he did it?’

Emily Shepherd won’t tell me anything. Although, there, behind her mask, just for a second, I glimpse it: pain. Total screw-with-your-head pain. She doesn’t know what to believe neither. She’s hurting with it too.

‘You’re not tough,’ I say. ‘So stop pretending it.’

She sticks her chin out. ‘Neither are you.’

I glare at her. ‘I should give you your detention. If you’re not giving me any answers.’

I consider the options. My signature sports detentions involve a heap of running and a heap more sit-ups straight after. But I need something more for this girl. She should feel scared, like Ashlee must’ve felt that night. She should suffer.

‘My dad . . .’ she says, so quietly it’s like I haven’t heard her at all, ‘he couldn’t have, he wouldn’t . . . after the army stopped, he couldn’t do anything . . .’

She reaches out and tries to put her fingers on my shirt. I leap back.

‘You mean after he got discharged,’ I say. ‘After he got discharged for killing a civilian?’

Her mask’s dropping now.

‘Is that why he killed Ashlee?’ I continue. ‘He got a taste for it?’

She won’t look at me. ‘Dad was scared,’ she whispers. ‘If he’d heard someone in the woods while he was there, he would have been scared of them too. He *couldn’t* have stalked anyone.’

‘Maybe you didn’t know your dad! Did you ever think of that?’

‘It was someone else,’ she says, folding her arms. ‘Other people use these woods; other people were there that night.’

She stares harder now. She knows something. She knows I’m one of those other people.

‘He must’ve talked to Ashlee before,’ I say fast.

‘No! He’d never seen her until—’

‘Til he walked out of these woods with her dead?’

She shuts up at that. I watch the wind pull dark hair from her eyes, from his eyes. The guilt – again – heavy in my guts. It’s my fault Ashlee was in these woods that night. My fault that Shepherd found her.

‘He murdered her,’ I say, feeling my mouth twist nasty. ‘He watched her and he stalked her. *That’s* what happened.’

I want Emily Shepherd to accept this. I want her to tell me that Shepherd used to roam around these woods at night – that he used to hang round near Ashlee’s shortcut track and that he was a weirdo. I want her to admit that her dad’s murder charge is right.

She waits. She’s not scared of me, not one bit. Maybe she should be.

‘If this is all detention is,’ she says, ‘. . . then I think I should go.’

I hold up my hand. ‘Wait.’

‘Why should I?’

‘Because I’m telling you to. Because I haven’t said it’s over.’

She frowns. ‘Why should I stay here when you think my dad is a . . .?’

I wait for her to say it: *murderer, killer, stalker, psycho*; anything like that. When she doesn’t, I tell her. ‘Everyone thinks he’s guilty, that he’s a monster. It’s obvious!’

She keeps her frown. My heart is hammering. Just thinking about her dad being innocent of murder gets me kind of panicky.

‘Refer me for a suspension, then, if you’re not going to do anything,’ she says, and again there’s that challenge in her words, in her blue-grey eyes . . . in those eyes that look too vivid, too startling, to belong to a murderer’s daughter.

I’m not giving her what she wants, though, no way. I bend ‘til I’m looking her square in those killer’s eyes. ‘Why’d you hit that girl today? Are you violent too? Are you like him?’

I want her to be, because, if she is, there’s no doubt her father murdered Ashlee, no doubt that he’s a liar. That they both are.

Her eyes flare. ‘I didn’t hit her! I pushed her and she fell.’

Now I’ve struck a nerve. Now she wants to push me too.

‘Why don’t you try it?’ I say.

I want her to snap; maybe I want her to hit me so I can hit her back. I go closer, ’til I feel her breath land hot and fast on my skin. She should be dead instead of Ashlee. She should be the one hurting instead of me.

‘Do it,’ I say. ‘Push me! Show me you got killer’s blood like your dad.’

But she turns away. ‘You don’t have to be like this.’

She’s disappointed. I see it in her eyes. Maybe because I’m not who she recognises from school, because I’m not that prefect with the perfect girlfriend and the perfect life. Not any more.

‘Sports detention,’ I repeat, and my voice sounds kind of empty. ‘Or can’t you handle it now? Aren’t you tough enough?’

‘I can handle whatever you want to give me. I don’t care.’

There’s something about her expression that gets me. Why can’t she believe what everyone else does? Why does she have to believe nothing – not murder, not manslaughter! Maybe it shouldn’t bother me, but it does.

‘A running game, then,’ I say. ‘I run. You chase. Then we swap over.’

She snorts something like a laugh. ‘Fine.’

I take a step back and look at her skinny body, her pale skin, grey-blue eyes. I could run her ’til she’s in the middle of this wood; I could get her lost; make her feel completely alone. Then she might get scared, might believe what her dad did. Then I can drop this whole

thing and never have to speak to her again; stop asking these questions that she don't have answers for anyway.

Before I realise what I'm doing I feel my fingers curling into the shape of a gun, then my hand comes up towards her. It's so natural, to do this here in these woods, that I don't even realise I'm doing it 'til I'm aiming my finger-gun at her.

'You're chasing me first,' I say.

Her mouth opens a little as I aim my hand at the middle of where her ribs are. She's looking at it almost like it's a real gun I'm pointing and if she moves or tries to run, I'll shoot. I look down the barrel of my arm towards her and she's trapped in my firing line. One twitch of my finger, then *bang*. I imagine what that would be like, to see her body smash apart. I try to imagine wanting it.

'I'm It,' I explain. 'I run.'

My heart is beating like bullets, feels like I could kill her with just them. I move my 'finger-gun' back, rest my fingers against my temple this time. That's when I jerk my fingers upward in one quick movement and shoot, right through my skull. I point my fingers back at her fast and shoot again. Shoot her. Bang. Straight through the ribs. Through her heart. Still holding her gaze, I drop my arm.

'You're chasing first,' I say again.

And I turn and step off from the Leap. Right off the edge.

11

Emily

I'm so shocked I just stand there.
'Damon?'

Then I run – scramble – to the edge of the Leap. He's done it, he's really jumped: right on to the jagged rocks below. This is why he brought me here, what he was going to do all this time – I'll get to the edge and see Damon sprawled and twisted, bloody and broken. I'm not going to know what to do. What if he's dead? What if people think I pushed him?

I skid on the stone, slippery from the light rain that's just started. I've never been good with heights, just like Dad isn't, but I make myself do this. I drop to my hands and knees and crawl. I breathe in quickly and look over

the edge.

He's not on the rocks. Not anywhere. It's as if he's just disappeared. Has he fallen into a crevice, slipped somewhere I can't see? The image of Damon pointing his fingers like a gun is still lasered into my mind: that wink of his left eye, his concentration. The way he'd shot me. The way he'd pointed those fingers at his head as if he were shooting himself too. I was trapped, held still by his stare. He could have killed me or kissed me then; I would've stayed.

I crawl a little further so I'm half hanging over the rock, my body juddering against it as my heart thuds. One slip and I'd be joining Damon. But I look and look, and there are only rocks below. I stay still, listen. Rain gets in my ears but, even so, I hear him . . . I hear something. It's a light breathing, like an animal's. It's coming from somewhere very close. I grab on to a spindly plant growing in the rock and, pulling against it first to check it's strong enough to hold my weight, I use it as a kind of anchor so I can lean over the edge. Directly underneath me is an opening, a kind of cave, but it's too dark to see inside straight away.

'I told you, I'm It.' Damon's voice comes back from the dark. 'I'm It and you're chasing.'

I squint to see Damon's hunched body. He's directly underneath me, just a layer of rock between us.

'What are you waiting for?' he says. 'Tag me!'

In front of the cave's opening is a tiny dirt ledge, I suppose it would be possible to jump on to it lightly and

quickly and then springboard into the cave: if you had guts and weren't scared of heights, if you had the right sort of balance and had nothing to lose.

'I thought you were dead,' I say.

'Really?'

This seems to please Damon, and he shuffles closer to where I'm hanging. I grab more of the plant, painfully aware that my life is relying on the strength of a weed's root system. If this plant uproots, I'm gone. Damon comes so close I see freckles on his nose, millions of them.

'You're meant to be chasing me,' he repeats. He ducks out from the cave, clings to the rock face on the other side. 'Or don't you want to play in these woods after what your dad did here?'

'He didn't,' I say. 'You're not being fair.'

He thinks about this. 'Catch me and I might be. If not . . .' He breathes out fast. 'I could make your life hell for you, y'know, hurt you for what your dad did . . .' He scrambles around the cliff face, arms and legs splayed wide, until he reaches what looks like a small animal path a few metres away. 'This is your detention, remember?' he says. 'So chase me. Do it!'

He begins to run, down that path that I can now see weaves away from the sharp rocks and heads towards the bottom of the Leap; he's half out of control. I shouldn't follow him. I know he's only trying to get his own back, just like Mina said he would. I can see how full of anger he is. But what's the alternative? Stay here? Go home and find Mum already half cut on wine, sprawled on the sofa?

Damon Hilary telling on me? And then, meeting the Head in his stuffy office with Mum called in. Suspension. Expulsion? Mum in tears. Then someone leaking all this to the papers and them latching on to me as an evil psycho too: *like father, like daughter*. Then there will be more graffiti on our house. More things muttered at me in supermarkets. More hate.

Damon's running faster now, weaving down that tiny path with an ease that surprises me.

There are things I still want to say to him too.

Stomach against the rock, I slide feet first over the edge. Using the plant as support, I stretch down until the tips of my trainers touch the dirt ledge below. Then I let go, throw my body towards the cave and away from that drop and those sharp rocks. I turn and see Damon hanging on to a thin tree-trunk halfway down the hill, watching me with a hand held to his eyes. I choose my route, then run – skid – towards him.

Running down this path feels amazing, even though I could fall and slide in a tangled mess, even though this is one of the most stupid things I've ever done. It's as if my legs are moving without me telling them to, whirring underneath me. It's much steeper than Damon made it look and I grab on to dried bracken to steady myself, feeling it rip the palms of my hands. Damon pushes himself off the trunk and waits on the path. At this rate I'm going to barrel straight into him. I slip in my shoes, mud skate down, but I keep my balance somehow. As I get closer, he's off.

‘You won’t catch me like that!’ he shouts. ‘Faster!’

At the bottom he turns left on to the bike trail and I’m quicker now after him, digging my toes into the soft ground. It’s more sheltered here, my shoes don’t skid so much. Damon runs backwards, watching me. If I catch him, I’ll make him listen to me. I’ll wipe that nasty, judging expression off his face. I launch myself at him and – almost – I get him. He raises his eyebrows as he stumbles back.

‘You’re quicker than you look,’ he says, slightly breathless, maybe even a little impressed.

His teeth are shining. When he darts sideways I’m with him, anticipating his moves. I reach out and my fingers brush his shoulder as he whirls away. There’s a glimmer of curiosity in his eyes. Is he waiting to see when I’ll give up? He could easily take off and leave me here, but for some reason he stays, just out of reach, scrambling out of the way when I get too close. Is this how he gives all his detentions?

‘Tag!’ I shout as I grab him.

He shakes his head, shakes his arm from my grip. ‘You have to keep hold ten seconds. You must remember the rules from Junior School! Give up?’

‘No!’ Though I’m sweating and panting hard.

He shrugs. ‘Catch me then.’

He runs faster down the bike trail. But I know where this trail curves, where there’s a shortcut I can use to head him off. It’s a shortcut I remember from ages ago, from when Dad had found an injured rabbit there. A few metres

more and I dart down it: I'll be back on the bike trail before Damon even realises.

I leap brambles and branches. This shortcut is so wildly overgrown I can only focus on being fast, not quiet, on getting back to the bike trail before Damon gets there. I don't look to the sides, don't want to remember the click of that rabbit's neck as Dad twisted it dead, or the soft, limp warmth of lifeless rabbit in my palms straight after.

'It's kinder this way,' Dad had said. 'Trust me. Put it out of its misery.'

But I'd felt really sick at the way Dad had acted like that death was so necessary, that it was hopeless to even think about trying to save it.

I keep my eyes straight ahead. I'll grab Damon for longer than ten seconds and I'll make him listen: see things from my side. Suddenly I'm bursting on to that trail and I'm spinning around left and I'm waiting. Damon's coming straight for me, but he's looking back over his shoulder. My chest heaves. When he sees me he skids in the earth, waving his arms about to slow himself, his mouth opening in surprise. He doesn't have time to stop, not really.

And I don't think.

I do something really stupid.

I launch myself at him.

I feel the hardness of his chest against me, hear the air leave his throat, and then he's falling back against the ground and I'm on top, pushing. I get a flash of memory of what happened with Kirsty today, a twist of fear at what

I am. Then I'm pinning his arms, putting my knees on his shoulders. I'm doing what Dad taught me to do once: *disable the enemy as quickly as possible.*

'Dad wasn't the only one in the woods that night!' I scream it into his face. 'And Dad couldn't have chased anyone . . . not on these paths, not at night. He's scared! When he's in the woods, he doesn't leave that bunker – there's *no way* he could have stalked Ashlee!'

I'm trying to make Damon see Dad as I do – make him see how Dad can't be a killer, certainly not a murderer.

'Dad gets scared in thunderstorms,' I add. 'Loud noises give him flashbacks. And he *was* in a flashback that night, but he didn't kill Ashlee. Not murder, not manslaughter!' I push into Damon's chest so hard he can't say anything back. Not until I'm finished. 'Dad's scared of heights,' I explain, 'of getting lost, of people, he's scared of everything!'

Damon is breathing funny. Perhaps I've winded him. I don't get off him to check.

'There was someone else,' I say. 'There must've been. Dad just found Ashlee that night, he was trying to help!'

'Ridiculous,' Damon hisses.

'No! Dad doesn't remember anything – that's got to mean he didn't do it!'

Damon shakes his head. 'No one else knows where that bunker is – Ashlee didn't.'

I lean closer, place my palms against Damon's cheeks to keep his face still. 'What did you see that night anyway? You were in the woods, you were in the car park at least!'

Why didn't you see Dad if he was really watching and stalking her? You should've been a witness to that . . . if it happened.'

Damon's eyes narrow. 'Get off me.'

I don't move. 'Why didn't you walk Ashlee all the way home, anyway? What kind of boyfriend leaves his drunk girlfriend in the woods after dark?'

'You don't know what I did.' His face is red – mad! His voice is fierce.

'You're the last one who saw her alive, though,' I say. 'So why don't you know anything? You should be the one giving me answers!'

'Get the fuck off me!'

I shake my head. 'I caught you. I did my detention.' I'm surprised at how confident I sound – surprised at the things I'm saying to him too. But I have to make him see. 'I'll get off you if you admit that it might not have been Dad who killed her, that there are other possibilities . . .'

Damon looks even more furious than he did in the courtroom. I feel his breath against my skin, see his copper-coloured eyes glaring, and the sweat beading above his lips. I watch his top lip rise, see a glint of his straight perfect teeth underneath. There's a beating feeling inside me, in my ears and chest. For a second I want to lean further into him, press my lips on his, taste his sweat and tag him that way . . . win like this. Show him. I want him to admit that I could be right. Perhaps Damon sees this because, so quickly, he's pushing me off him and I fall hard on to the track. He crawls away, breathing heavily.

‘Freak!’ he spits. ‘Psycho! You’re just the same as him – the fucking same!’

He gets up. He actually runs from me! I sit in the dirt, watching him go. I don’t know what the hell I just did. Why did I even say that stuff? Why did I get so mad? Why did I want to touch his lips like that too?

I grab a bundle of damp cold leaves and squeeze them, hard. My breath is coming heavy and fast and my hands are quivering, and I’m thinking over and over, *Who am I?*