

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.