

## PROLOGUE

**I**t wasn't until the train went past that she saw the small body lying in the long grass by the side of the wood.

She couldn't tell how long she'd been searching for her daughter. It was dusk, but it had seemed darker as she ran through the wood, tripping on hooked tree roots, her feet crunching through crisp, curled ash leaves. Around a tight bend, she stopped. Blocking the path was a dog. It was looking directly at her, as if it had been waiting for her. The dog was built like a wolf, but white with uncanny blue eyes. In the twilight, its ghostly fur seemed to glow. A woman, all in black, with dreadlocks bound by silver coils, jerked its lead; the dog's pink tongue lolled over its sharp teeth. She hauled the animal ungraciously out of Laura's way.

At the edge of the wood, Laura paused, trying to catch her breath, wondering which way to go, where to look next. This part had once been an orchard and was now overrun by sycamore saplings with diseased leaves, but there were a couple of crooked apples left with a few remaining fruit on the uppermost branches, small and hard and a poisonous green. Out of the shelter of the trees she felt the rain, light and cold, sweep across her face; the wind rustled through the leaves. Somewhere overhead, a crow cawed.

She ran blindly across the meadow, through puddles of freezing mud. There were ranks of rosebay willowherb, the last seeds clinging to the desiccated stems, and clumps of hemlock,

architectural against the clouded night sky. The white underbelly of wheeling seagulls reflected what little light was left.

She kept catching the image as if out of the corner of her eye: a small girl with a tan satchel and a red coat, running, running through the grass. Autumn had been missing since school had finished. No one had seen her nine-year-old daughter after she'd left the classroom.

At the meadow's edge, she followed a concrete path that led across a bridge suspended over a railway. There were bars all the way around to prevent people falling onto the track. She was more exposed to the elements now: the wind and rain howled through the metal cage enclosing her. It seemed impossible that someone could fall or be shoved from the bridge. She forced herself to look down. She had to prepare for the worst.

There was no sign of her daughter, no sign of a small body crumpled by the railway. She pushed her damp hair out of her eyes and turned back towards the darkening expanse of grass, the skyline dominated by bare-knuckled branches, stark against the orange glow of the city. In her haste, she hadn't thought to bring a torch. She turned her mobile on and used the frail light from the screen to comb the ground. After a few moments, the phone chirped. She hoped against hope that it was a text from Mrs Sibson to say that she'd found her, that Autumn was safe. There was an image of a red flashing battery. She turned her phone off. If she didn't find her daughter soon, she would need enough charge to ring the police.

She ran up to the peak of Narrowways' one sharp hill. The tiny, urban nature reserve, bisected by three railway lines, spread below her, an unfolding of black shapes: choppy grass, thorny shrubs, spear-tipped metal fences, the dark bulk of the wood and, straight ahead of her, a chasm through the stone cliffs to the train tracks below.

The lines began to sing, a shrill, electric song, and then the cacophony of the train roared out of the darkness. The carriages

were almost empty and painfully bright as they hurtled along the tracks to the heart of the city. In the fleeting light she saw the meadow, dotted with stunted hawthorns, their twisted limbs dense with red berries, and then a shape: aching familiar, child-sized, shockingly still.

She ran down the hill. In the blackness of the night and in the rain and the wind, it felt as if she were falling, falling towards her daughter. She found the satchel first, in a thick clump of clover. And then there was Autumn, abandoned below a tangled briar. She was wearing the red coat her grandmother had bought her a week ago. Laura knelt next to her and cupped the child's cold face in her hands and felt her hair, wet against her wrists.

She switched on her phone and, in the last few seconds before it died and the screen went blank, in that one moment lit by the eerie electronic light, she saw that she was kneeling in a circle of grass where every blade was coated with red. Autumn's hair was sticky with it; her face and neck were bright red. Only one small, pale spot on her cheek was visible where her skin, free of blood, gleamed, as polished as bone.