

## AUTUMN

At twenty-five past eight that morning Autumn let herself out of the kitchen door. The garden was filled with mist that rolled away from her in fat coils. She breathed out and her breath hung in front of her, like a dragon's. Her mum hadn't wanted her to walk to school by herself. What would Granny say? She would have wanted her to go on her own, she concluded. She was fearless. Autumn wished that she herself was.

Her granny always said, *Get back on the horse.*

She didn't mean a real one. She meant, if you fell or were frightened by something, then you needed to pick yourself up and do it again straight away to conquer your fear. Besides, thought Autumn, it wouldn't be so bad. She lifted her satchel over her head, so the strap was across her body, and opened the garden door. She almost never saw anyone walking to school this way. She didn't know where Levi lived, but it wasn't near Wolferton Place or she'd have seen him before. He'd followed her on Friday deliberately to tear up her paintings and then he'd gone back up Briar Lane towards Ashley Road.

Sometimes people were out walking their dogs. When they saw her, they almost always grabbed hold of their dog and said, *Don't mind him, he's friendly.*

Mum said not to talk to strangers, but she always said hello and stroked the dog's head when people did that. She heard the chink of a stone behind her and wondered if someone was out with their dog now. She looked over her shoulder but she couldn't see anything through the mist. She opened the

swinging gate from the lane outside their house into the allotments and let herself in. The gate shut with a metallic clink.

Most of the vegetables in the allotments had died back but one, tended by a Jamaican man, was full of squash. They lay among the dying leaves, rimmed with frost, huge, orange and alien, half hidden by the mist. They reminded her of the fairy stories she'd read as a young child, of white horses and gold carriages that turned into mice and pumpkins on the stroke of midnight. Earlier in the season the Jamaican man had grown a crop of custard whites – *cucurbits*, her mum had said – which looked like creamy spaceships. Behind her the gate closed softly, as if whoever had come through had held it so that it wouldn't bang.

Autumn left the allotments and entered the wood leading to the nature reserve. It was cold and she wrapped her scarf more tightly around herself. The mist was entwined around the trunks of the trees and she walked in her own capsule of grey space. The snap of a twig startled her. She stopped and looked around. She half expected a dog to burst through the fog towards her. Sometimes she saw a Siberian husky here, like a white wolf with blue eyes; a canine changeling.

If it was a dog walker, she thought she'd have heard the sound of the dog's lead or its collar, the animal panting as it trotted up the hill. But there was silence. A couple of magpies chattered in the branches and, in the distance, she could hear the traffic on the road outside school.

*Two for joy...*

She turned to start walking again and then she heard it. The definite sound of footfalls, the soft rustle of frozen leaves.

*Epecially strange men*, her mum had said in one of her frequent warnings about talking to people she didn't know.

Autumn started to walk more quickly. Her breath came in short gasps, a private fog floating around her head. At the top, as if it were a magic line, she could see where the mist ended and the nature reserve, rising above it, glowed green, dull as an uncut gem, through the stark, bare branches. She couldn't be certain, but it sounded as if the person behind her was walking faster too.

She was wheezing as she burst out of the wood and into the meadow. She half ran along the path and then stopped. Behind her the wood was wreathed in fog, the path a dark tunnel descending into its depths. She could see a shape emerging through the mist, moving steadily and swiftly towards her. There was no friendly rattle of a lead or the scrabble of a dog's paws on the stones. It was someone who was on their own. She looked around. There was no one else here. A few magpies arrowed across the sky and a wren broke out into a loud, chattering alarm call. In the distance, a siren blared. Should she run? Walk calmly on? Wait to see who it was?

He was wearing something black – a coat, a hat. She half expected the man to emerge from the wood and smile.

*Sorry to have startled you.*

But what if he were not a friendly man? What if he was one of those men her mum warned her about? Could she run fast enough to get away from him? She only had a half-formed sense of what could happen if a man caught her.

*He'll hurt me.*

But she didn't know how or why, which made the possibility of what might happen so much worse.

She was backing away now, half turning, ready to run, her heart pounding in her chest, when he stepped free of the mist. She couldn't move. For a moment he simply stood at the edge of the wood and stared at her. Then he started to walk quickly towards her, not taking his eyes off her.

It was Levi.