

FRIDAY NIGHT

1. EMILY

Something was draped across Dad's outstretched arms. A deer? A fawn that was injured? It was sprawled and long-legged, something that had been caught in a poacher's trap maybe. A mistake. So this is where Dad had been all this time: in the woods and cutting this creature free. I breathed out slowly, squinted at the mist that hovered around Dad like a ghost. I took my hand from my bedroom window, leaving the memory of my skin on the glass. Then I raced down the stairs, through the hall, and into the kitchen out back. Throwing open the door to the garden, I waited for him there.

It was ages since Dad had brought back something injured, and he'd never brought back a deer, though I could remember helping him free a roe deer from a snare in the woods once. Back then his hands had moved quickly and gently, darting from the wire on the doe's leg and then to her neck for a pulse, stroking her constantly. This was something like that again. Saving another deer could be a good thing for

Dad, something to take his mind off everything else, to help bring him out of his dark place.

I heard Dad's feet scuff on the cobbles in the lane, saw his movement. I tried to pick out the shape of the deer's body, but it was all wrong. The legs weren't long enough, neither was its neck. I took a step toward them. And that's when it made sense: the shape.

It wasn't a deer Dad was carrying. It was a girl.

Her neck was tilted back, her bare arms glowing in the moonlight. Her clothes were soaking. The garden gate creaked as Dad maneuvered through, struggling. How long had he been carrying her? From where? I moved backward into the kitchen. Dad had saved people when he'd been a soldier — carried them to safety — maybe he was being a hero again now.

Then I saw that this girl's skin was gray, blue around the lips like smudged lipstick. Her long hair was plastered across her face, dark from the rain. I saw her green short-sleeved shirt and the silver bangle on her arm. I wanted to sweep the wet hair from her face, but my hand was half raised when I stopped myself. I recognized her. I knew this girl.

"What happened?" I said.

Dad didn't answer. His face was red and damp; he wheezed as he pushed past me. The girl's fingers trailed over my arm, and they were cold — dead cold — like a stone found in a cave. Dad laid her carefully on the kitchen table,

as if he were putting her to bed. He turned her head to the side and stretched out one of her arms so she was in the recovery position. He touched her neck gently, just like he'd touched the neck of the trapped roe deer so long ago. But this deer didn't move, didn't struggle or try to stop him.

Her name was Ashlee Parker.

I made myself bring my fingers to her wrist, waited long enough to be sure. I knew I should be panicking, should be calling an ambulance . . . but Ashlee Parker's eyes were staring at me, fixed in position, brown and big.

"She's got model's eyes," Kirsty had said once. "She's beautiful. It's no wonder Damon Hilary follows her everywhere."

Damon Hilary. Something twisted inside me when I thought about him — of how he'd react to this.

I rested the tip of my finger on Ashlee's cheek. I wanted to help her struggle and leap free, disappear into the trees. I could only hope that everything screaming through my head was wrong.

"Is she . . . ?" I hesitated. "Is she . . . OK?"

Dad didn't answer. I don't know what he thought, whether he hoped she would wake up. But I'd seen the small red marks on her neck, the blue speckles of bruises spreading out like flowers. I could see she wasn't breathing at all.

What had she been doing in the woods?

How had she got like this?

I can't remember how long we stood there, with the moon and stars shining through the kitchen window like spotlights. It felt like forever. Eventually there was a creak upstairs: Mum was up.

"Everything all right down there?" she called.

Maybe she'd been waiting for Dad to return too, pretending to sleep like I'd been earlier, listening to the summer storm. I heard her slippers treading in the hall, then the kitchen door swung inward and immediately Mum was complaining about Dad keeping us up, lecturing him about staying out during thunder.

"You know how you get when the weather's like this . . ." she was saying. "You shouldn't . . ."

Then she saw Ashlee.

She made a tight gasping sound as if she'd sucked up all the oxygen in the room at once. She looked at Dad, then back to Ashlee. She stepped across and felt for a pulse.

"Who is she?" she said, her voice low. When he kept quiet, she strode across the room and grabbed Dad by the shoulders. "What's happened?"

She moved toward the telephone on the windowsill, her eyes running over Dad's muddy face and wet clothes, then over Ashlee again. The wheezing sound from Dad's chest got louder.

"Was she in the woods?" Mum's voice rose. "With you?" Her fingers were shaking as she pressed the numbers on the phone. "We need an ambulance . . . police."