

PROLOGUE

The little stretch of woodland had seemed pretty, in the beginning. A touch eerie, of course, as all forests should be, but it had still shone with that certain loveliness.

Enchanting. That was the word. In its embrace, Betsy had felt herself become a fairy tale.

The rustling of the leaves was a soft applause; the gurgle of the river a quiet lullaby. The scent of honeysuckle and splintered wood hung in the air, thick as honey. The long grasses touched her bare ankles. Dragonflies and songbirds whispered and sung their soporific lullabies. Told her to lay down upon the soft, dew gilded earth. She had flowed into the forest's embrace as if falling into an illustration in a picture book.

Betsy – or *Lizzie* as she had still been then – had felt sure that any passing bears would be kindly souls: great affable lumps painted in a scrumptious chocolate brown. Had no doubt that the red squirrels would chatter in the treetops like dog toys: bright eyed; coquettishly hugging luxurious tails. She could have conjured up a perfect gingerbread cottage for herself, given time. Could have thought her way inside a red, hooded cape. By the time she left she had been looking for a trail of breadcrumbs.

Later, Betsy had hoped they might perhaps picnic here. She and Jude: pleasure *al fresco*.

It didn't matter that this was where his last real lover had died.

It was their place now.

Theirs.

She saw a tartan blanket, a thermos of tea; triangular sandwiches packed in opaque Tupperware, all plucked from a wicker hamper. She'd visualized *him*, leaning against the old beech tree, both arms around her like lengths of tarred rope, telling her the names of the plants and plucking stray twigs and silvery catkins from her hair. She saw herself barefoot; dirty-kneed in a ragamuffin dress, a tartan shawl pinned with a sprig of holly. Fantasy, of course, but one of her best . . .

'Sweet chestnut,' he'd said, slapping a random tree trunk. 'This one's ash. The brambles have bound their branches. They're holding hands, look. And up there; that bracket of mushrooms – they can cure sore throats. Taste OK, too. Nice in a stir-fry. They tend to explode if you let the fat get too hot, but I like a meal that offers an element of danger . . .'

Come back, Liz.

Liz!

Oh for God's sake . . . Betsy!

The words come from within her: a chorus of voices, each gasping as if running out of air. She registers pain, suddenly. Pain and loss and fear. There's a fire in her gut: bees swarming inside her skull. She can taste blood; raw liver and old coins. Her gorge rises.

And now she realizes that she is moving . . .

step,

step,

crunch,

crunch,

. . . her stumbling footsteps a chomp of molar upon stone. And the woodland. The place they had called 'the dingle'. Not in her memory but here, now: *there*, up and down: in front and behind.

She is a captive. She is being shepherded to the place where she will die.

‘Slow it down. I don’t know why you’re in such a rush. There’s nothing good up ahead for you.’

Betsy emerges back into her own dreadful reality. Registers the sound of the voice; loud as a breaking bone. Knows herself, suddenly, through the throb of pain and the screeching of fear in her head.

Elizabeth Zahavi.

34.

A size 12, before lunch. A 14 after.

Pretty, once you get past the scowl.

Professional dabbler, mother of none.

‘Mad.’

‘Bonkers.’

‘Off her fucking head . . .’

Lizzie, all her life. Betsy, these past few months. Happy months, mostly. Happier than the years that came before, with Jay, and Anya, and the feeling of being nothing and everything; of being at once dreadful and unappreciated, trapped and unwanted; loving; unloved.

She screws up her eyes. Opens them into a cold, damp dark ness. Feels fresh panic claw its way up her aching throat. He’d called this place the dingle – a name that always made her laugh. A funny, happy little word, for a woodland hundreds of years old. It made her think of fairies and bluebells and smelled of crushed honeysuckle and elderflower. Here, in the charcoal depths of winter, the forest has been mercilessly disrobed. The trees stand bare and straight against the night sky; their trunks and branches a jumbled manuscript of stark crotchets and frantic semi-quavers: black on black. The ground is hard as iron in

places; soft as bog cotton in others. Betsy's breath, when it comes, hangs about her face like an unwrapped shroud. She shivers like an animal stripped of fur.

She strains her hearing, alert for the sound of footsteps; for help. She fancies she can hear the chuckling of the brook, leading down to the cold, black pool beyond the glade. Cocks her head. Hopes for any distraction from the slow, painful plod of foot following foot. She had thought she heard a solitary robin as they passed the fallen alders, tripping clumsily over the exposed, wormy roots. The sound had become a scream; a vixen's widowed wail, and some part of her had taken temporary leave; retreating into a safe place, far within, where this wasn't happening, and nobody else was going to die.

A memory falls like a dead leaf.

Anya.

Betsy raises heavy eyes, sniffs wetly, foully, and spits blood. She stares ahead. Mist rises from the mulch of the woodland floor; shapeless wisps that coil around the bases of the rain blackened trees. The moon is a leering eye, half-hooded by a skein of thick cloud. The forest seems older here. Thicker. The trees have fatter trunks and their branches fork off at odd angles, like limbs that have been broken and improperly set. She hears the creak of ancient branches; sees moonlight reflecting back off iron-grey bark. The air feels somehow heavier. When Betsy licks her lips she tastes raw meat. Tastes the blood that runs from her broken nose in gory plaits.

'*Anya,*' she says, desperately, as she glances to her right and sees the girl. Her hands are tied. Betsy's too.

She glances back.

He's half a dozen steps behind, one hand holding the rope that binds her wrists, the other gripping the stock of the shotgun. It's pointing at the small of her back. If he shot her from this range she'd all but evaporate; disappear in a spray of red meat and white bone.

‘That’s it, ladies. Not far now.’

They emerge in a small clearing. The trees form a tight mesh, snarled up with blackberries and thorns. She shakes her head, trying to clear her thoughts – hot wasps buzzing inside her skin.

‘Please,’ she says: an undirected prayer; a comforting invocation, a beseeching for a mercy that will not be found. ‘Please, I didn’t . . . she didn’t . . .’

‘Don’t bother. I told you. There’s no other way.’

The clouds uncouple for a moment and a little yellow light anoints the clearing. There is a hole in the earth; a yawning maw of disturbed ground. A mound of loose stones has been built into a cairn at the far end of the hole. The digger sits there like a metal dinosaur: extended neck, teeth like swords; the rusting paint looking like blood in the moonlight. There’s a shove in her back and she starts towards it, her feet moving over damp grass. The light reveals the wildflowers that rise from the flattened ground; purple foxgloves, violet knapweed; a constellation of gold and yellow blooms, winking like the lights of a distant town. She reaches the edge of the hole and leans forward. She gasps, sucking in a lungful of cold air. She smells decay. Spoiled meat and sour milk. She catches a taste of her own scent; all sweat and churned roots.

‘Fucking thing . . .’

She glances back. The rope has snagged on a snarl of brambles. The raw skin at her wrists sings with pain. She almost falls, but manages to keep her feet. It’s instinct more than anything else. She doesn’t want to fall. As long as she’s standing, she’s still alive. Each step is another heartbeat, each stumble another thump of her pulse.

‘Why are you doing this? You don’t have to. You can still stop.’

Anya’s voice is eerie in its calmness. She’s nine years old. There are tears streaking the dirt on her face but there is no tremble as she speaks. Betsy wonders if maybe something

came loose when she was hit. Maybe there's a part of the brain that deals with fear, and Anya's has somehow suffered a dislocation.

Betsy feels a sudden urge of something fiery and primal; a raw and perfect need to protect the child from what is to come. Words spill out of her like blood.

'Anya,' she hisses. 'Anya, please, look at me. It's going to be OK. I promise, it's going to be OK. They're trying to scare us, that's all . . .'

She stops talking as she sees what lies ahead. The digger is all right angles and points; damp earth clinging to the teeth of the bucket that has clawed a trench into the earth. She spies a twist of deeper darkness. Even in the swirl of her terror, she identifies it as a yew tree: its circumference vast, its branches splayed out like the fingers of an upturned hand. There are great scars in the trunk; the bark ripped away and the wood exposed. She finds her vision blurring as she gazes into the face of the ancient tree. Sees knotholes become eyes, a porcine snout, a hanging mouth of obsidian black.

'You can't,' she whispers, and the cold wind snatches the words away. 'She's a child. She's done nothing wrong. Let her go and I'll do what you want . . .'

Betsy feels as though somebody has cut a vein at her ankles. Feels her energy, her hope, gurgling into the ground that will soon close over her, and the child she has failed.

'Liz? Liz, what's going to happen . . .?'

She looks into Anya's pale, frightened face: big circular eyes in a mask of blood and dirt. She wants to speak, but nothing comes.

She feels the pressure at her wrists suddenly slacken, and then someone is beside her; the barrel of the shotgun pressed beneath the hinge of her jaw.

'Tacitus.' The whisper wet, in her ear. 'You remember, I'm sure.'

And she does.

They slice the culprit's navel, and secure it to the trunk of a sacred tree. Then they force them backwards, until their guts are unwound about the trunk – decorating it like tinsel at Christmas. As far as the old tribes were concerned, the life of the tree was equal to the life of a man. Maybe they were right.

Betsy needs to see. Whatever it costs her, she needs to look into this killer's eyes and make one last desperate plea. Needs to explain. She understands how it feels to be filled with the whispers of something incessant and demonic; the uncontrollable impulse to sabotage; to cause pain, to do harm.

She turns, her mouth opening, a babble of pathetic entreaty spilling from her bloodied lips.

She experiences a moment of sensory overload; heat and noise and pain and a sensation of being both within herself and without. Then blackness.

Silence.

Then nothing at all.