SCARLETT IN KNOWARE

Chapter 1

The Journey to Knoware

IT WOULD HAVE BEEN A BEAUTIFUL sight from the station platform – the last of the daylight had drained away, leaving a crimson streak across the horizon. Soft pinks and purples crowned the darkening rural landscape and flecked everything with a rosy, golden light. Bare trees were silhouetted against the soft hues of the on-coming night, swallows swooped and darted, the platform hanging baskets cascaded with violets – but Scarlett was busy staring at her phone, so she saw none of these things. She whistled away to herself in her G-Star blue jeans, red Converse trainers and her favourite red puffer jacket, the hood of which was pulled up, hiding her long, dark hair.

Why did she have to go to her dad's this weekend? All her friends looked like they were already having such a good time. Her iPhone pinged and peeped and shook as messages from various apps popped up, reminding her of what a good time she was missing. Her thumbs scrolled and swiped and typed; her face illuminated by the harsh, blue glow of the screen in the fading daylight. Photos of all of them in Lily's bedroom laughing and dancing and not looking like they were missing her in the slightest filled her notifications. She watched a video of them all singing, and chuckled, but her laugh stuttered and got stuck in her throat as a tinge of jealousy rose up within her. Seeing her dad was great ... at least it had been at first.

Since her parents had split up, her dad had moved out to the next village along. Now, if the small town where she currently lived with her mum was remote, then her dad's village of Mournt may as well have been in the middle of Siberia. In fact, she was quite sure there were isolated villages in the middle of the Amazon rainforest that had more to do on a Saturday night than Mournt did. You had to climb to the roof to get a mobile phone signal and not a soul in the village, apart from her dad, had ever even heard of broadband. Mournt had one tiny shop that never seemed to be open and besides, she was banned from going in it now because of the whole misunderstanding about how she forgot to pay for the chewing gum that ended up in her pocket.

Travelling to Mournt to see her dad always felt like she was travelling back in time, as if the world got slower and greyer the closer to Mournt you got. As much as she hated to admit it, traveling to her dad's just made her feel she was missing out on everything. Poppy's fifteenth birthday – missed it. Bonfire night at school – missed it. Lily's sleepover – missing it.

Why couldn't her dad have found a flat the other side of town, or at least moved to the city? Somewhere a bit closer to life, to people, to music. But her dad had told her he was a country boy at heart. He had met Scarlett's mother when they were both students in their twenties. There were plenty of photos proving her mum and dad had loved each other once, but none of these photos were on the mantelpiece or windowsills anymore. Their love only existed in boxes on the top of her mum's wardrobe now. That left Scarlett travelling between the two of them and wondering when her life would begin.

Ambling along towards her, lit up by the track's floodlights, came her train. The only train. She guessed by its distance it would still be another eight or so minutes until it arrived. This was always the train's final journey of the week and it seemed to know it. It barely got above a walking pace as it trundled from the city, through the towns and villages to the last two stops on the line; her

mum's sleepy town and the edge of the known world, the middle of nowhere, the village that time forgot – Mournt.

Her dad would already be waiting for her there probably, dressed in his ripped jeans with his brown suede jacket, grinning as her train pulled in. The best part of his week, he would say, but she was having to miss out on another party.

Scarlett sent replies to all her messages and opened all the photos and videos she could as they came pouring in, knowing that her signal would cut out virtually as soon as the train left the station. Suddenly a photo popped up of Daisy. Daisy was there. She'd been in Dubai for the last year and now was back. Everyone was getting to see her and catch up and she would have to wait until Monday. The evening was just getting worse and any second now she would have to get on the train and sever her umbilical cord to the real world for the next two days. Reluctantly, the old train dragged itself alongside the platform and sighed and sagged as it stopped.

It was a single carriage vehicle that looked as though it was the uncared-for baby of a Victorian steam train and a fairground ride. It was made from iron, painted a dull burgundy with wooden panels of walnut. It must have been the only train in the country that still had handles on the doors you had to open yourself. Brass handles! And good luck to you if you had a bike or a backpack or were pregnant because the single door to get on wasn't wide enough for modern humans. Perhaps when it was designed in the dark ages for people whose average size was four-foot-tall it was fine, but trying to get in with an overnight bag, even one as modestly sized as hers, meant getting on sideways. After chucking her backpack into the carriage, she squeezed in after it, trying not to scuff or tear her red puffer jacket as she got on.

Fortunately for her there was never anyone in the carriage for this final stretch before the train could collapse and rest for the night. The whole carriage was hers – Queen of dated and dusty upholstery. She could sing and dance and do acrobatics the whole way if she wanted to. She didn't. Instead, she took a photo of herself looking suitably sad among the empty orange and brown leather chairs titled: ENJOY YOUR NIGHT GIRLS! I WISH I NEVER HAD TO GO TO MY DAD'S!

Scraping over the tracks, the train began to drag itself out of the station like a reluctant donkey on its last legs and her phone-signal bar dropped to zero and flashed a NO SERVICE sign. Madly, she tried to mash the send button, but a message popped up saying her photo had failed to deliver. That was it, contact lost. She'd hear nothing of the party now until Sunday night.

Putting her phone in her pocket with a sigh, she pressed her forehead against the glass and stared out of the window whistling Jonas Blue's 'Rise' to herself. It seemed fitting. She'd always been told she had a good whistle.

Fields, illuminated now only by twilight, bounced slowly by and were replaced with woodland. Unlike on any previous occasion she had travelled to her dad's though, the train began to slow with a terrible whine of metal against metal. The old train could hardly have been travelling much more than a jogging pace, but it still seemed to take an age to grind to a halt.

Scarlett peered out the window to try to see what the matter was. Ahead of them was a red signal light burning out of the darkness. It was then that she saw, for the first time, that the railway track broke off into a separate line here. A branch of track separated from the one they were on and stretched off into the distance. It would have been impossible to see the other track in the dark had it not been illuminated by white overhead lights. Why had she never noticed this track before?

This was all very odd. Why was the light red? There was only one track and only one train, so it wasn't waiting for another train to pass. And where did this other track branch off to? There were no other stops on the map. There wasn't even another village or farmhouse between her mum's town and Mournt. She got her phone out to google where it went, then put it back in her pocket with a huff as she remembered she had no signal. Where did that line go?

It couldn't have been for another train, as there weren't any others. Maybe there was a repair shed or something further along? But it seemed strange to waste all that electricity to light up a bit of track that was never used.

he wait at the red light continued to drag on. Yawning, she stretched out and put her feet up on the seat opposite. There was no one around to give her dirty looks after all. Puffs of dust lazily swirled into the air around her trainers. Besides, the week had been a busy one, what with almost getting caught sneaking out to the cinema by her mum the night before, and she felt unusually tired. In fact, she could barely keep her eyes open. Feeling dozy and fuzzy and warm, she tried not to sleep by coming up with a compromise with herself. She would just close one eye and keep the other half open. It worked for almost a minute and, just as she was drifting off again, she imagined she saw, through her half-closed eye, the train began to move again, heading onto the other set of tracks that stretched off into the woods. Then she was fast asleep.