

## Chapter One: Obsession

Woodlands have always been dangerous places, both revered and held in superstitious awe. Their resources provided food and shelter but when the sun set, the treeline marked the point where the safe world ended, and the wilderness began. A liminal zone where history, passed down by word of mouth, became folklore. Since before men were even fully human, they had looked out from their campfires as night closed in, fearful, watching furtive shadows flitting among the trees, predatory eyes reflecting the flickering of their torches, and they had held their spears close.

So deep-seated and pervasive was this experience that even in the twenty-first century the human psyche can still find the memory buried in the collective unconscious of the human race. According to Carl Jung, the forest is a universal archetype that manifests in symbolic form in dreams or in times of crisis.

Today, the gentle, cultivated English landscape that is so familiar to us seems remote, both in time and character, to the untamed wildness of the past, and we think we are safe from the irrational terrors that haunted our ancestors. Yet as the sun dips below the horizon and shadows deepen, the psyche is easily drawn back to the wellspring of unconscious fears that reside within us all, triggered by the heightening of the other senses in response to the closing in of the visible world.

With the coming of dawn, the boundaries are pushed back once more and the fears recede, driven like the morning mist before the light. But like a soldier's nightmares, they are never truly banished, lingering instead on the periphery, waiting. Always waiting ... for a glimpse of something out of the corner of the eye, a moving shadow barely seen, or a scream in the night.

After leaving the carpark at the ramblers track, with a police escort, Marcus and James were taken back to the police station in separate vehicles. There they were placed in separate rooms to be interviewed about what they had been doing out on the Kent Downs the previous night. James had withdrawn into himself and meekly answered all their questions as politely as he could. He kept his darker theories about what had really gone on

during their night-time vigil to himself, because he didn't want to give the officers any reason to disbelieve him.

Marcus had also calmed down after being told he was not under arrest. He understood that the interviews were standard procedure and simply had to be endured. Eager to get it over and done with, he was as co-operative as he could be and offered to share their video and audio recordings with the investigators.

Later in the afternoon, the medical officer made his initial report into Tim Wheeler's death, stating that as far as he could tell, there were no signs of foul play at the scene. There would be a toxicology report, of course, and because of the peculiar circumstances of Tim's death, the coroner would perform an autopsy, but there was no indication that a crime had been committed. With no reason to detain them any further, the guys were free to go on the understanding that they would make themselves available for further questioning if necessary.

The detective took them back to the carpark, where they picked up their van. James and Marcus drove down to the village in silence and parked outside The Dog and Whistle pub.

"We should go and tell Wilfred what's happened," Marcus said quietly, breaking the tension.

"Yeah," James replied, nodding. "It's the least we can do."

"Then we go home. I don't know how to feel. I'm kind of numb right now," Marcus said.

James nodded again. "Yeah. Even though they're saying it looks like he died of natural causes, it doesn't feel right somehow."

"I know." Marcus shook his head. "But they're probably right. The dude was sick. We don't know what medication he was taking, or what other conditions he was suffering from, apart from PTSD."

Everything Marcus said was true, but James remained unconvinced. "We were right there, dude. The police said he died sometime between eleven and two in the morning. He could have been karking it while we were cacking it in the woods," James said, his voice cracking. "We both know there was something else out there last night."

Marcus shook his head again. "Do we? The police don't seem to think so. We were there with audio monitors and three different types of night-vision equipment, and we

didn't see a thing." He was trying to be realistic and unemotional to calm his friend down, but it didn't work.

James rounded on him. "All I know is we were running around like headless chickens because something scared us out of our wits, and the same thing happened to Tim! That detective said he'd been with the police for more than ten years, but he'd never seen such an expression of terror on someone's face. It was as if he'd been frightened to death."

"A heart attack can do that. Cause your face to become distorted," Marcus rationalised.

James realised he was overreacting and took a deep breath. "Yeah, you're probably right, but I can't help feeling that when we were in the woods, we experienced some kind of projection of the man's mental and emotional terror as he lay dying," James murmured as he brushed angry tears from his eyes, his face flushed with emotion.

"How is that possible?" Marcus asked. It seemed unlikely to him.

James thought about it for a moment, recovering his composure before answering. "Well, paranormal literature is full of examples of places and objects that seem to have been imprinted with powerful emotional states," he said. "What could be more powerful than a poor, tormented man's last anguished moments, alone in the dark with his nightmares?" It was an unsettling thought, and not one that Marcus wanted to acknowledge.

After visiting Wilfred to tell him the tragic news, they got into the van and set off back to Boughton Chapel. Marcus didn't feel like driving, so James took the wheel, thankful that he had something to take his mind off the day's dreadful events. With a conscious effort, he forced himself to concentrate on getting them home safely, and he barely spoke during the trip. The drive home seemed to take forever. Marcus withdrew into his own world, staring vacantly out of the window at the passing vehicles. At one point, James asked if he would like to listen to the radio, but Marcus only shook his head and continued to stare into the distance as though he couldn't bring himself to meet James's eye.

Intuitively, James knew that they would have to talk about what had happened to come to terms with it, but this was not the time. He didn't have the words, and after trying so hard to rationalise it away, it was obvious that Marcus was retreating into himself. He was surprised at this reaction because he had always felt that Marcus had got it all together. He was level-headed and cool, and nothing seemed to faze him. Perhaps he had just pushed

himself too far and needed a bit of time to recover his equilibrium, James reasoned. After all, neither of them had got much sleep recently, and it had been a hell of a shock.

James dropped Marcus off at his house, then took the van home and parked it on the street. He opened the gate and walked up the path. His mum, Laura, met him at the door.

“Are you alright, dear?” she enquired in a slightly frantic tone. “We were so worried. The police were round asking questions.”

“I’m fine, Mum, just really tired,” James replied.

Satisfied that he was safe and well, Laura decided to let him have a piece of her mind. “Well, this is what you get gallivanting round the countryside looking for monsters! When are you going to get a proper job? I can’t leave you alone for two minutes before you’re in trouble with the police.”

James was stung by her words, but he knew that she was simply worried about him. “I’m not in trouble with the police, Mum. We were just helping them with their inquiries.”

“I know. It’s all over the telly!” she said, gesticulating, her hands windmilling.

“There’s nothing to it, Mum,” James explained. He felt absolutely drained. “A poor man died of natural causes, and the police interviewed us because we had met him and knew why he was out on the Downs. That’s all.”

Laura wasn’t ready to let it go yet. “Well, tell that to Mrs Baines. She’s been on the phone all day bending my ear. She thinks you’re a bad influence on her son and have led him into the wrong company.” Laura turned and stumped off towards the door.

“Really?” James said, his voice weary as he sighed.

“Mr Baines is worried that the scandal will ruin his council re-election campaign,” she called back over her shoulder.

“What scandal?” James snapped. “A poor man died, and we offered to help the police because we knew him. We did the right thing, as any decent person would.”

Laura turned back towards him and waved her finger. “Well, you know how mud sticks. If people think there’s more to it, his reputation might be tarnished.”

“His reputation!” James exploded. He couldn’t take any more. “Is that what’s important here? That council is so corrupt I’m surprised anyone can see him under all the crap. But none of it ever sticks to him; he’s like Teflon. This will just slide off him like water off a duck’s back, but in the meantime our friend is dead. Tim Wheeler went to Afghanistan and his life changed forever. It ruined his health and cost him his career. He had an

experience that no one should ever have, and the worst part was that no one believed him or tried to understand. The military said he was mentally ill and threw him on the trash heap. They took everything from him, but he dedicated himself to proving that they were wrong, and in the process, tried to regain his reputation. That dedication was what took him out week after week in search of an answer. In the end, his obsession led to his death, but there was nothing scandalous or tawdry about it. Just a man, pushed beyond his limits, desperately seeking redemption. That's why we wanted to help him, and I would do it again in a heartbeat."

Laura looked at him in shocked surprise and he realised he had become very angry. His mum didn't deserve that. She was just upset.

"I'm sorry, Mum. I didn't mean to shout like that. It's been a long day, and we lost a friend. I'm going to my room now. I'll see you in the morning. Goodnight."

"Goodnight, dear," she replied, stepping out of his way.