

Chapter One

I'm staring into the thick part of the wood, only it looks thicker than it used to be.

'Where are we? Why isn't the path through the wood familiar?'

Alicia's staring at me. 'What're you on about, Ellis? You *are* a strange boy.'

'How can the woods have changed so quickly?'

I came here just yesterday, searching for Karl, calling his name, trying to make sense of everything that's happened. I come here every day, wanting to find Karl.

Karl and I have known these woods all our lives. This was our place, our secret place. We talked about things here. We did things here. I know that if Karl ever found his way back, he'd turn up in these woods. I'm still searching for him and that's why I've brought that city girl, Alicia, here. If I come here often enough, he'll show up. I'll hear his heavy tread in the undergrowth. He'll be whistling a tune, hands in his pockets, a half-smile across his broad open face. It'll be as if he never disappeared – a bad dream.

But it isn't like that. There's the ongoing police inquiry, there were sniffer dogs combing these woods, there were helicopters flying low over our tiny village.

No body found. My best friend, Karl Winterbourn, is missing and I still don't have a clue about his disappearance. Neither do the police.

Karl went two months ago and I still can't believe he isn't around anymore. Mum won't let me wander into the woods on my own anymore. Too risky, she says, after Karl's disappearance. I know what she's thinking; there might be a murderer on the loose. Somebody in the village might not be what they seem – someone with huge guilty secrets.

I keep hold of one fact – no body found. Karl's still alive, I just know he is. I can't explain why but, as my granddad says about things, I feel it in my bones. Yes, Karl's out there somewhere and I will find him. The only place near the village that might hold secrets is Franklin Woods. All the fields around here are flat and the spring sowing hasn't happened yet. Nobody could hide anything in the dark, rich soil. All the hedgerows were searched and searched again. The only place that might hold surprises is this wood.

I have pangs of regret. Just this morning I'd had what Mum calls a "disagreement" with her. I was spreading marmalade over my toast and watching Mum eating her cereal.

'What time's Alicia coming?' I asked as I took a big bite of toast, nosily crunching it and slurping my tea, calculated to annoy. 'She'll spoil my fun. Does she have to come? There are...'

Mum placed her spoon carefully down beside her cereal bowl. She stared at me with her bright blue eyes.

'We discussed this last night, Ellis. You're a big boy now, you need to keep to agreements. You told me you'd treat her kindly this time. It'd do you good to be with someone and I'd have time to chat to my sister.'

I crunched another piece of toast and thought of Karl. If he'd been around we'd have spent our days climbing trees in Franklin Woods. It wasn't fair that I couldn't go there anymore.

I could understand why, with Karl missing. But I wanted Mum to back down, to promise to look after Alicia herself. I seized the moment.

'I'll take her into Franklin Woods. I'm a boy, so I'm not playing any silly girl games. She can do the sort of things I like doing for a change.'

Mum glared at me. 'You're not taking Alicia into that wood. Not with...'

I pushed my plate away, leaving half a slice of toast untouched.

'I'm *not* going to child mind my silly cousin while you chat with auntie, that's for sure!'

I looked straight at Mum, searching into her blue eyes. Mum looked away and I saw tears welling up into her eyes.

'Please, Ellis.' I knew Mum was begging me to stop, but I couldn't back down. I had to win the argument, it'd gone too far already.

'There's other things I want to do today. I was going swimming with my mates,' I lied.

Mum grabbed her half empty cereal bowl and walked over to the kitchen sink. From the back she still looked young – dressed as she did in her denim shirt and light blue jeans. She still retained her slim figure. Her short fair hair showed streaks of grey but Karl used to tease me and tell me he'd go out with Mum when he was older. I think he half meant it, too.

I felt bad. I hadn't wanted to upset Mum and I'd rather just say sorry but I couldn't bring myself to apologise. The trouble was, we were too much alike – Mum and I. I'd inherited her blue eyes, her fair skin and hair. We dressed alike, always in blue. I looked down at my *blue* jeans, T-shirt and there was my *blue* denim jacket from behind the kitchen chair.

'I'm going out, I'm going to do the things I like doing.' I knew when I spoke there was a gruffness in my voice.

'You've upset me,' said Mum as she ran hot water in the sink for washing up. 'You're supposed to be the man of the house but you carry on like a baby. You're getting just like your dad.'

I recognised it was now Mum's turn to say hurtful things. Things she didn't mean. Like me, she'd gone too far. According to Mum, Dad was a waster who'd walked out on us when I was a baby. He was mean and selfish. He didn't even bother to send me a birthday card last week when I turned thirteen.

I wonder, do I look like Mum but think like Dad? Perhaps I am selfish? Perhaps I am mean, perhaps I do only care about myself?

'I'll take Alicia to Franklin Woods. There'd be the two of us!'

Mum glared at me, a cereal bowl in her hand.

'Lightening never strikes twice in the same place,' I said.

Mum didn't waiver.

'No you're not taking her into the woods.'

I was about to storm out of the kitchen when I heard a car draw up the drive. My aunt and cousin had arrived.

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Alicia breaks into my thoughts; 'So you don't know where we are?'

I look about me, I'm puzzled. We *should* be near the old gate, where Karl and I made wishes about the future, when we were younger. But the gate's vanished like a morning mist. There isn't even a fence. I don't answer the city girl because I'm confused. She takes it that I'm snubbing her and shrugs her shoulders in annoyance.

I call to Alicia but she's stormed off ahead of me, having a tantrum. She knows she's not wanted. She's my cousin, my age and Mum always makes me stick around to entertain her. Entertain her? She's always telling me how well she's doing at school – in all the top sets and top of most things. She'd be top of the bragging class too... if there was a bragging class. Me? I'm bottom set for most things to do with a pen but top at all the practical stuff that teachers don't care about – well, most of them don't. They tell me to stop kicking a football around the classroom, tell me I'm useless. Don't they know footballers earn tons more than they'll ever do?

The problem with Alicia and me is simple, we have nothing in common. She likes reading and watching films. I hate sitting down, I get the fidgets. I like walking, playing football, exploring. So I do resent Alicia and she knows it. Alicia turns round and pulls a face at me.

‘Do you know where we are, Ellis?’

I’m not so sure. Doubts are creeping in along with some nightmarish thoughts that we’re both trapped in these thick woods forever. I’m trying to quickly dismiss my thoughts. I need to stay strong. I don’t like Alicia but I don’t want to scare her.

I’m feeling guilty. I brought Alicia here, disobeying Mum.

‘Well, *where* are we?’

I stop walking and peer into the old elm trees on each side of the winding path.

‘Why isn’t this part of the wood full of birdsong? Everything seems silent... dead.’

Alicia walks back to me. There’s a funny expression on her face. She’s noticing the changes.

It should be spring but the leaves are showered around our feet like a ripped and torn evening dress. Something’s happened and I can’t explain how the early buds on the trees at home can become dried and withered leaves here. I look around me and Alicia grabs my arm. She’s tugging at my jacket sleeve.

‘Come on Ellis, keep going.’

Cold fear clutches the pit of my stomach. The woods appear to stretch on forever. They might go on for miles... but they shouldn’t, something’s wrong. Nothing makes sense.

‘You don’t know where we are do you, Ellis?’ I thought you knew these woods!’

‘Shush,’ I hiss, putting my finger to my lips. Alicia looks pale. It’s as if she’s eaten a rotten egg and she’s feeling sick. ‘Do you hear anything?’

Alicia is listening and she’s shaking with fright. There’s a sound like a baying dog, only worse.

‘Animals,’ I say.

‘Don’t state the obvious, Ellis.’

I’m forcing myself to stay calm.

At any other time Alicia would have laughed at me. She doesn’t laugh though, she’s listening. The only noise is the rustling of dead leaves. What’s happened to the cawing of crows? What’s happened to the small bird song? And there is a slight but chilly breeze, blowing my cousin’s long brown hair across her eyes.

Then we hear the howling.

I turn and glance at my cousin. Her expression betrays my own fear. Alicia looks at me and recognises I’m trying to control the panic that is rising within me.

‘I don’t think we’re in Franklin Woods anymore,’ I say. ‘It’s as if we’ve missed out on a whole summer and late autumn has come early to the woods.’

Alicia’s looking directly into my eyes and they show I’m serious.

‘How *can* the woods have changed?’ she asks.

I shake my head. ‘I don’t know, but they have.’

We’ve wandered around the woods for an hour. We’ve been stuck here for ages. We’ve crossed several paths that shouldn’t have been here. Usually all paths lead out of Franklin Woods – either across Franklin Farm and fields or by the housing estate where my house stands. It doesn’t matter which path you follow, every path leads to safety. Normally!

The howling has started again. But there couldn’t be wild animals in the woods. Probably Old Farmer Gifford’s dogs! He likes to hunt rabbits in the woods and he’s probably raised a new breed of dog this spring. I laugh at my own fears and imaginations. Alicia doesn’t find it funny but there has to be a logical explanation!

I need to think what to do. I have to take charge of the situation, after all Alicia’s a city kid. I’m the one who’s used to the country.

‘Walk!’ I tell Alicia.

The howling has increased. If there's a beast in the woods it must be near. Something snarls close by and a twig cracks. The slight breeze of earlier is now an icy winter wind. A storm's brewing and we both shiver in the sudden cold.

'Walk quickly,' I urge and we both increase our pace.

The trees are rustling and I kind of think the trees are talking; murmuring, conspiring against us. Something is following us, slinking along behind us. Goose pimples cover my arms and I instinctively sense danger close by.

'Run,' I whisper to Alicia and she immediately does! Maybe she's seen too many horror films 'cause I didn't know she could run so fast.

I get this feeling the strange autumn woods are against us, like they might have been against Karl, too. This place is unfriendly, hostile, menacing. The snarls are ever near us, closer and closer. I overtake Alicia as we run along the path. We pass tree upon tree as the path narrows. Alicia's clothes tear on brambles and my blue denim jacket catches on a branch, which slows me up. I abandon the jacket, wondering if Mum will believe me when I tell her why. Will we even make it home? It's hard to explain but it's as though someone, or some force, is trying to hold on to us – push us back, make us await some cruel end.

All the time we hear the pad, pad of animals and hear the low growls of the beasts that follow us. Suddenly, I see one peering out of the wood – or at least I see a snub nose, it's dog-like but not dog.

'Wolves,' I hiss as Alicia stops running and bends down, doubling up, gasping for breath. She can't run any more, can't catch her breath. She must have a stitch. Typical city girl, she can't run again. I know she's done for.

I skew to a halt beside her. Alicia tries to straighten up, staring into the forest, looking into the angry yellow eyes of a large adult wolf. Three other wolves pad quickly onto the path, blocking the way ahead. The big wolf bares its teeth. It's hungry and it means business. Alicia's legs buckle and it takes all her strength not to collapse in a heap. I feel ghost-white and I'm sure my eyes betray my fear. I quickly step back, away from the snarling, baying pack. The wolves are about to attack, their hackles raised. Although I'm scared, I stand in front of Alicia. The big wolf moves forward, slowly, sniffing its prey, sizing up our strength.

Alicia moves slowly off the path, she has her back to a tree. Ideas come quickly, half forgotten facts – like wolves can't climb trees. But how do you grab a branch, swing onto it and climb upwards before the wolf gets your ankles? How do you climb quickly enough to avoid the beast's snapping jaws? You'd never make it! And what about Alicia? However much I resent her, I can't leave her to the mercy of four hungry wolves!

The animals all move forward; their big yellow eyes glowing in the forest gloom. One snarls; the big wolf leaps towards us.

Chapter Two

What are they waiting for? Why don't the angry wolf pack attack us? Have they heard something? A rustling perhaps?

I can hear a crunching of leaves, twigs are snapping. I know my heart's pounding. The wolves are backing off and Alicia is standing still. Does something else – something bigger and more ferocious – lurk in the woods? Is there *something* really dangerous and much stronger than the wolves?

I can hear Alicia's shallow breathing. I sense her fear so I know the wolves are picking it up too. I brought her here, she's my responsibility. If I leave her and run then... then I'm no better than my good-for-nothing dad.

Do I hear large paws padding on foliage in the undergrowth or do I hear footsteps?

A big old man is stepping from the woods. He's thick set and dressed in a ragged brown tunic. A cape is lightly thrown over his shoulders, making a jacket of warmth. A thick sword swings from his right hand. He is walking towards us and his long grey hair is blowing freely in the wind. His lined face has a serious look. It's as if he's stepped straight out of a play – a drama about life in the time of the Celts. The wolves sniff the cold frosty air, catch his scent and run off into the woods.

'Am I dreaming? This can't be happening,' whispers Alicia.

The strong old man watches the wolves as they flee into the thickest part of the woods.

'Ah, they don't like Prendiville,' says the old man as a way of introduction. He places his sword into the scabbard. 'They know me from years ago, they do.'

The cold, forbidding trees seem to sing a new song and the wind drops as quickly as it had picked up. Shards of sunlight beam through the trees like friendly torches, spreading a fine warm glow onto Alicia's pale and frightened face. I expect I look much the same, I know my knees are shaking.

My fears evaporate as the howls of the wolves retreat into the depths of the forest.

'How did you do that?' I ask Prendiville as I look up at his rugged but kind face. 'How did you make those wolves back off?'

The old man wheezes out a laugh and slaps his sides. 'Like I said before, those creatures, they know me from way back.'

He looks into us, as if he can understand our thoughts. He's taking in our clothes, the way we look and I'm sure he can sense what was left of our fear – like the wolves sensed that we were afraid.

'You two don't come from these parts, do you?' he asks as he offers us a handshake.

'We were walking through Franklin Woods when...'

Prendiville silences Alicia with a finger to his lips.

'I don't know any Franklin Woods but I'll bet you're earthlings,' he says. We both nod. 'I can tell by the way you're both dressed; strange clothes, no regulation uniforms.'

I still get the idea we're in a play or one of those reality shows. I'm a bit of a questioner, I want to know everything; everything that's nothing to do with school work, that is!

'Where are we? How did we get here? How can we get back to Franklin Woods?'

The old man smiles and begins to walk along the leaf-strewn path. Alicia runs quickly, to keep up with him. I hang back, thinking. Is this for real? Can we trust Prendiville? And for an old man, Prendiville puts on a good pace.

Karl disappeared in Franklin Woods and I'm sure Karl came this way, it's the only explanation. Police combing the woods, helicopters flying over the whole area and no body found. Karl here is the only logical explanation. Following the old man is the only way to find Karl – and then what?

'No time to lose, earthlings, we must make it to my cottage before dark. Expect you'll want those questions answered, eh?' I nod. 'When we're at the cottage, I'll make you some supper and tell you everything. We must hurry now, the way is tough going and finding my cottage may be harder than you can imagine.' Prendiville hesitates, 'And another thing, when you go through the marshes don't be afraid of the Will o' Wisps, they're just marsh gas. They're not lost souls, like some say – just marsh gas I tell you. Worry more about the songs you might hear and the things that go round in your head. Take no notice and just keep going, trust me and follow me or you'll meet danger.'

I hear no songs as we walk along the path but I do hear low growls and know there is something nearby. I stop to listen, the growls don't belong to a wolf or dog. They're something else and something dangerous.

'Don't concern yourselves about the animal noises,' says Prendiville quickly, 'they're wild cats, nothing to be afraid of.'

I'm sure wild cats don't growl in the way a dog or a wolf might growl, but I keep quiet.

The path ends abruptly and we're now following a grass track that descends rapidly. Either side of us is marsh, with strange yellow plants growing all around us.

'Another thing, don't stray from the grass track, you'd lose yourselves in the marshes and die in the cold wet swamps. And don't let those yellow plants lead you astray. Don't allow them to encourage you to wander from the pathway. They'd be happy to lure you into the marshes.'

'They're just plants,' says Alicia.

'Nothing in this place is what it seems,' retorts Prendiville. 'Most things are unfriendly, unpleasant and mean you harm.'

Prendiville moves ahead of us. Alicia stamps her foot hard on the floor and almost trips. I try not to laugh but she catches my facial expression.

'Why did you bring me here, Ellis?'

I wonder about telling her the truth but decide against it.

'Bet your mum doesn't know we're here. I heard her tell mine that she hasn't let you near the woods since your best friend disappeared.'

'So why did you come with me then?' I snap.

She shrugs her shoulders. 'What else was I supposed to do, Ellis? Sit and listen to your mum and mine natter like two old grannies.'

I want to move ahead of her. 'Thought that'd be your scene,' I said. That'd silence her, for a minute or two. We walk quietly, the only noises we hear are the buzzing of insects and the occasional drone of a fly. I can feel her annoyance.

'*You* brought me here. It's *your* responsibility to get me back to your house,' Alicia says.

I'm feeling anger and regret building up within me.

'I didn't *know* the woods would change and we'd find ourselves in another world, did I?'

'Nevertheless, Ellis.'

'I took you into Franklin Woods to find Karl. Don't you want to help me find my best mate?'

She scoffs and I don't know what the scoff means. She's silent now. A tactic she's employed before. A kind of bullying? I look into her brown eyes. I can almost smell hostility.

'You know, I used to bully this small boy once. He had an annoying way of coughing before he spoke and... and he had dull lifeless ginger hair and a pale freckly face,' I say.

'So you bullied him because of his appearance. Typical, Ellis.' And at that moment, by her bearing, Alicia looks superior. I want to hate her.

'Oh, just listen to what I'm saying will you!'

Alicia stops walking and stares at me, at my harshness.

‘This boy, Marcus is his name, bought me gifts to stop the bullying. I had pockets full of sweets, a toy car, a couple of conkers. The more he gave me, the more I bullied. I hit him, I twisted his arm until he yelled in pain. One day, Karl came over and asked me what I was doing.’

‘I’m glad somebody did!’

‘I told Karl all about Marcus, I thought he might want to join in, so there’d be two of us sharing the spoils. He just said that I was cruel and it was unworthy of me... that there were higher things in life. So I never bullied Marcus again.’

‘It took someone else to show you that you were wrong?’

I gulp some air, trying to keep my anger at bay.

‘At least I *learned* my lesson. But this silence of yours, isn’t it a form of bullying?’

She glares at me. ‘I’m silent because I’m angry with you not because I’m bullying you. *You* are in the wrong! *You* shouldn’t have bought me to Franklin Woods without spelling out the dangers.’

‘I didn’t know there were any dangers – nothing specific.’

‘Ah, but you *thought* there was something going on in the woods. You *thought* your friend Karl disappeared here. So you put *me* in danger while you tested out a theory. Idiot!’

I can’t argue with her, she always wins. Prendiville is quite a way ahead of us. I hope he doesn’t hear us quarrelling. I outpace Alicia in an effort to catch up with Prendiville.

We’re quite a way along the track and we do see the little green lights that flare up, they look eerie... ghost-like as they die down. To me, they do appear like lost souls who’d strayed into the marshes and died. I keep telling myself it’s just marsh gas, easy to explain and nothing to fear. Looking behind, I can tell that the old man and I are gaining ground on Alicia. I can only just make out Alicia’s red suede jacket and I don’t think she can see Prendiville, who’s further ahead. I don’t understand why the light’s fading so quickly and realise Alicia is lagging further behind. Stranger than that, I can read her mind, get into her mind as if I am her.

Mind reading is a useful skill, but how come it’s possible? She’s remembering the wolves, recalling how they snarled and moved forward in a pack. She’s seeing their savage teeth. She wonders what other horrors are just around the corner. I feel sorry for her. Recalling the wolf attack, fear clutches at her like the sharp talons of a savage bird of prey.

Then she hears voices, the voices of a singing choir. Beautiful voices, wonderful songs. Songs that sadden her; like memories of home and happiness and security – songs of yesterday. Voices asking her to leave the track, to join them in the marsh, voices asking her to be with them forever. She’ll never know fear again, she’ll be happy.

Alicia’s foot leaves the track. She wants to join her school friends and sing with them forever. She wants to be with her friends again. I annoy her and she’s a little bit afraid of me. She knows I don’t like her. She knows I want to be with my friends. A little part of her thinks I’m responsible for Karl’s disappearance and that’s why she’s wary of me. I want to shout at her, scream at her, tell her I want Karl back and I’ve nothing to do with the mysterious reason why he’s vanished. I think he’s here, in this strange place. But I hold back. I want to carry on reading her mind. To her, I’m a country bumpkin who has no future ‘cause I don’t care about school work and I won’t conform. To her, I’ll never make it in life, I’ll end up a nobody. She sees me as a selfish country kid and she’s upset ‘cause I don’t even try to like her.

Then I feel this strong, warm glow. It’s coming from her; it has to be coming from her. The warm glow forms into thoughts – her thoughts, kind thoughts. She knows I would have defended her against the wolves. I wouldn’t have left her and I wouldn’t have run away. She’s thinking I’m not all bad. She’s thinking I do have some virtues. She’s thinking I’m brave. Not as bad as my old man! I’m surprised. Her thoughts please me.

She's thinking about her friends again. Caroline, Jack, Suzie, Amelia. She wills herself to be with them at the ice-rink. In her mind, she's only a short way from them, they're all going skating then they're off to see the latest blockbuster. She's sad because they're so near. They're all calling her. I can hear their voices. They're pleading with her. She can join them, all she needs to do is walk across those gas-filled swamps.

Those innocent looking yellow plants are like sirens. They're calling her, calling and calling. She's walking over to them. I should grab her, I should bring her back onto the path. But it's like I'm paralysed. I'm in some dream; the sort of dream where you want to do something to help but you just can't move. I'm watching her walk to her death.

Prendiville pushes me aside. He has a firm grip on her wrist and the grip tightens. She's thinking, it isn't fair, why should Prendiville stop me. She tries to twist and turn and plunge into the marshes. She wants to follow the melodious voices but Prendiville holds her in a vice-like grip.

'Told you not to listen to those voices,' says Prendiville in a grim tone.

Alicia's thoughts leave me as suddenly as they came. I can no longer read her mind. Mindreading – that'd be a useful talent and I'd really know what everyone thinks about me. There'd be no pretences.

My own mind is doing something now. I vaguely see Prendiville helping Alicia to walk along the pathway. He's blocked her ears with his large flat hands. It's as if I'm watching a film in slow motion. Reality is fading from me. I want to block my ears but don't have the energy. Something's happening and I haven't the strength to resist.

I hear a chanting. At first it sounds like voices at a crowded football match. My team are ahead and the excited crowd want more goals. The voices change to a choir singing in an old Cathedral. The acoustics are brilliant. I'll join them, all I have to do is wade out to them.

'Ah, so the Quibbles are enchanting you, too,' Prendiville says. He grabs hold of my hand. His voice echoes inside my head and the spell is broken. I stand back on the track, I'm in shock as I look out across the cold wet swamp. An early owl hoots and something strange and far away mimics a human laugh.

'No, they didn't fool me,' I lie.

Prendiville laughs. 'I'll lead you through the marshes or the Quibbles will get the both of you.'

'Quibbles?' says Alicia, the fear returning to her voice. 'Are they those small yellow plants?'

And she points to the flower-sirens that had almost led us to our deaths.

'Expect you want to know more about them yellow plants we call the Quibbles, eh?' We both nod. 'The Quibbles are man-eating plants. They sing sad, lost songs inside your head – least that's what they does to me, but I'm older than you two spring chicks and I've more to regret. Then the Quibbles take you off the track and you plunge into the bog – to die amongst them. Once you're dead, they eat you whole. Sometimes, they start eating you before you're *quite* dead!'

Alicia shudders, I find myself looking down at my dirty trainers.

'Come on, let's get out of this place,' says Prendiville.

The sad singing continues as we three companions trudge through the marshes, keeping to the grassy track. I bet Alicia's thoughts are for home, for her school friends. She's probably thinking of her mother awaiting her return and how concerned she'll be. For once, I'm concentrating on the homework I haven't done and the trouble I'll be in if I can't find time to write up the science experiment I'd worked on in class. I stop myself from laughing aloud; if I can't get back to earth, I won't need to hand in any work! I'm keeping my mind occupied, ignoring the marsh sirens. I'm sure Alicia is doing the same!

The marshes end abruptly and without any warning. Suddenly, we come to a clearing and beyond the clearing is another wood. Alicia takes a deep breath and I sink to my knees. We've survived the marshes and it's not quite nightfall – although daylight's fading.

I'm sure Karl came this way, although I can't prove it. I want to ask Prendiville if he's seen Karl. I take a crumpled piece of paper from my pocket. That creased paper, two months old, it's so familiar. The first newspaper report about Karl's disappearance. Karl! I just hope the Quibbles didn't eat him whole. I hope he escaped the marshes.

'My cottage is over in those woods,' says Prendiville. As he speaks I see plumes of smoke rise from the middle of the woods. Prendiville draws his heavy sword from the scabbard. He's shaking with anger.

'Lord Hewell's men, led no doubt by Captain Curack,' he mutters. 'They're trouble and trouble is all they'll ever be until someone stops them from doing their evil. Now they've torched *my* cottage.'

Prendiville grabs hold of us and roughly but firmly raises me up from my knees. 'See the path at the far end of the clearing?' We nod like puppets on a string. 'You'll need to keep to that there path, it'll lead you through the woods. There is only one path through the woods and it'll take you to the city. Don't stay longer than you have to in that terrible place, but seek out the White Knight. He'll help you; he'll get you back to your Franklin Woods. Understand, earthlings?'

We sort of understand... but how can we survive without the old man? Prendiville looks at us, when he speaks his voice is full of care.

'Avoid Lord Hewell's men and you'll be fine. I have work to do. I can't let them destroy the other homesteads. I know what to do. If I can, I'll be back to help you both.'

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Prendiville relaxes his grip on me and we both watch him disappear into the gloom.

He returns as quickly as he vanished. 'You won't find the White Knight in the city – but follow the pathway through the city and head for the white capped mountains. If you're lucky, you might find help but avoid creatures you don't know or recognise and, remember this, you need to climb the highest mountain. Look for the mountain range, it's about fifteen miles out of the city. Once you find the mountain range look for that high peak. Unless I'm very much mistaken, you'll find a man known only as the White Knight. Understand?' We both nod. 'Alternatively, if you can find a boat...'

Prendiville looks down at us and frowns. 'Oh, but I'm asking you to attempt something that's *far* too dangerous. Can either of you handle a sword?' he asks. We both shake our heads. 'Thought not! Then wait for me. I'll find you wherever you are,' he says.

'How will you find us?' Alicia asks.

Prendiville smiles and surprises us as he hugs us both. 'I have ways and means of finding people.'

He smiles again and quickly disappears into the woods. We don't have time to wave a last goodbye. There are so many questions I want to ask the old man and now he's gone.

Darkness descends suddenly and without warning. All we can do is look up into the night sky and watch the twinkling stars cross the heavens. I have to admit, I'm scared. We're alone in an alien world. Which twinkling star is our sun and how many light years away is our home?