

I Saw It First

The light in the sky had come down somewhere in the trees.

The problem was that those trees were part of Howlmoor Forest.

Alex had been on his skateboard, cruising back and forth on the tatty halfpipe he'd built in his mum's tiny back garden, when he'd seen the light burst through the clouds. At first he'd thought it was a plane, jetting through the night sky to somewhere far more exciting than Shiver Point, or a firework set off on the other side of town, but it was too fast for a plane and too bright to be a firework. An odd sense of dread washed over Alex, a strange feeling that the light up in the sky wasn't quite normal.

A heartbeat later it was gone. The glow sank towards the horizon, vanishing into the dark mass of the forest with a curious green flash. Alex rubbed at his eyes to check he wasn't dreaming, and glanced down at his watch.

Five minutes past midnight, and still no sign of his mum.

This was the way life had been since they had moved to Shiver Point a few months ago. His mum's shifts at the hospital were running later and later, and Alex found himself staying up hours past his bedtime to see her when she got home.

He fought back a yawn, studying the distant trees once more. Had there *really* been something in the sky?

Suddenly a memory popped into Alex's brain, the voice of his geography teacher, Mr Williams, delivering pretty much the only interesting lesson all term. The topic of the lesson had been *meteors*, and one of the class had asked the teacher if a lump of space rock would be valuable.

'I'd imagine so,' Mr Williams had said, staring up at the classroom ceiling as if a fiery meteorite was about to smash through the tiles and make a big runny mess of several of Alex's classmates. 'They're rare, but sometimes they do come down, in which case they're called *meteorites*. If you found a piece of one, you might get a few thousand pounds for it at an auction.'

The teacher's answer had drawn a series of gasps and mutters from the class, most of them probably wondering how many milkshakes they could get from Chilling Shakes, Shiver Point's premiere cafe, with that much cash, and if it was possible to buy your way out of having to go to school. As the other pupils had huddled together, excitedly planning their purchases, Alex had known exactly how he'd spend that kind of money.

A few minutes later the bell had gone, ending the discussion. While the rest of the class had scrambled outside,

heading off to lunchtime clubs or to kick a ball around the field, Alex had been the last to leave. It wasn't the fact that he still hadn't made any friends in Shiver Point, or that he spent every lunchtime and break on his own. No, he was daydreaming about how finding something like a meteor could turn things around for him and his mum.

The memory faded away and Alex turned his attention back towards Howlmoor Forest. The woodlands stretched on for *miles*, and he wasn't convinced that stumbling around in the darkness, losing his way and getting freaked out until morning, was the best idea he'd ever had. But . . . what if that thing from the sky turned out to be worth a lot of money?


Before Alex had time to think things through any further he had vaulted the garden fence, leaped onto his skateboard and was tearing his way towards town. When his mum was at work she asked the old lady next door, Alison, to keep an eye on Alex, but he was pretty sure she'd never seen him sneak out. Not that he did it much. Well, not very much. Anyway, the one time Alex *had* needed her, when he'd set the toaster on fire, Alison had been fast asleep in her chair in front of *Antiques Roadshow*, impossible to rouse no matter how hard Alex hammered on the door.

Shiver Point was deserted, the only noise the rattle of Alex's skateboard and the screech of his wheels whenever he turned a corner. The streets took on a haunted edge at this time of night, the darkened windows seeming to glare as Alex flew past, the shadows beyond the street lights groping towards him. He felt a shiver of fright as he realised how alone he was and made his skateboard go a little bit quicker.


He soared past Point Academy, scowling in the school's direction, then crouched lower as he gained speed downhill, the scruffy houses of their neighbourhood giving way to the bigger, more expensive properties of Elm Grove, with their plush gardens and manicured lawns. Shiver Point wasn't big, and that was part of Alex's problem with the town; there was no mall, no skate park and hardly any coffee shops or fast-food joints to hang out in, like he used to do with his friends back home. Kids in his class went on about Chilling Shakes on the high street, or its neighbour the Night Owl Cinema, but neither was worth the fuss. From Alex's experience, the milkshakes really weren't all that special, and the only films the Night Owl showed were ancient. Moving here had been like going back in time, to an era before Netflix and Starbucks came into the world.

Alex was approaching the seafront now, the cries of the gulls echoing mournfully through the darkness. His mum had made a big deal about how great it would be living by the seaside, but even that was a disappointment. The pier was grey and dull, a layer of rust covering the abandoned rides and amusements, and the ocean was a murky brown. If Alex had his way he'd have kept on skating until he left Shiver Point far behind. But maybe, just maybe, what he'd seen in the sky would give him another escape route . . .


It was less than fifteen minutes before Alex found the town streets morphing into country lanes, the yellow glare of the streetlights replaced by the shadows that loomed at the edge of Howlmoor Forest. As he screeched to a stop and peered into the dark expanse of woodland, he wasn't



sure his plan was so great after all. He didn't believe in ghosts and ghouls and things that went bump in the night, but he wasn't totally thrilled at the idea of venturing into the woods either. Alex had never liked forests, not since his mum had read him the story of Hansel and Gretel, and he couldn't shake the idea that hidden eyes might be watching him from the gloom, just waiting to pounce and drag him screaming to a creepy cabin deep in the woods.



It was only the thought of his mum, and how things had been lately, that made him pick up his board and push his way into the trees. Since they'd moved to Shiver Point it felt like Alex barely saw his mum; she seemed to spend more time with her patients than she ever did with him. And when she wasn't tired from working nights, she was moody and snappish, and didn't respond well to Alex's complaints about how dull Shiver Point was. She used to be his best friend, only recently it felt like she was a stranger, and a grumpy one at that.



But a sudden influx of cash from a chunk of space rock would change *everything*. Alex pictured the auction hall, the sound of the hammer crashing down as his find sold for thousands. His mum would get a job where he actually saw her, the two of them would move back to their old home, to Alex's friends, to the way things were before . . .

Or at least that was what Alex tried to convince himself of as the trees closed in around him. The further he crept on, the more menacing things became. The trees blocked out the moonlight, banishing Shiver Point from view and concealing everything in shadows. Gnarled branches groped

at Alex's clothes and dragged cobwebs over his face, and leaves tickled against the collar of his shirt like spiders. The whispers and rustles of tiny creatures in the undergrowth were magnified by the darkness. Alex told himself it was just his imagination, but he was sure that at any moment he'd feel cold breath on the back of his neck and bony fingers biting into his wrists.

He held his skateboard in front of him like a shield and forced himself to put one foot in front of the other.

He wished he wasn't on his own.

He wished he'd brought a torch.

But more than anything, he wished he'd gone to the toilet before he left home.

Alex had been creeping through the woods for what felt like forever when he came to the conclusion that he was in serious danger of getting lost and that his get-rich-quick scheme had crashed and burned.

'What am I doing?' he whispered to himself, wincing in fright at how loud his words sounded. 'Do I want to end up on a Missing poster pinned up in the school hallway?'

He was just about to turn around and try to find his way back to the road, when something caught his eye – a glimmer of light in the distance. He paused, his pulse starting to throb in his temples. It was green, just like the light in the sky . . . and that could only mean one thing.

He'd found where the light had come down!

Alex quickened his pace, no longer caring how much noise he made. As he grew closer though, confusion washed over him. There was a clearing up ahead, a space where

the trees didn't grow, but it looked as if a group of figures stood there, staring into the light.

The disappointment hit Alex like a sledgehammer. Someone else had got to the crash site first! Alex powered forward anyway, his excitement replaced by anger that any chance of transforming his life was fading away. But when he burst into the open and saw what the others were looking at, all Alex could do was stare too.

If there were any doubts in his mind that what he'd seen in the sky had just been his imagination, they quickly faded. Dozens of pieces of charred, jagged rock sat in the middle of the clearing, the grass around them scorched and blackened. Each chunk gave off a bright green shimmer, reminding Alex of the luminous radioactive waste he'd seen in science-fiction films. A series of gooey black splodges dotted the burnt ground, like splats of sludgy oil.

'What . . . what happened?' Alex heard himself ask, making the figures jump at the sound of the voice that had crept up on them.

They spun to face him and he squinted at their faces, realising that he vaguely recognised them all from Point Academy.

'It's a meteor, or at least it was,' replied a neat-looking blonde girl Alex recognised as Sophia Smith. She was in Alex's English class and seemed to know everything about everything, except how to get along with people. 'You know, a piece of rock or matter from outer space that drifts through the universe, looking for a planet to collide with.'

'Aren't meteors dangerous? Didn't they, like, kill the

dinosaurs?’

The words came from the mouth of a tall boy with a gap-toothed smile. Alex didn’t know Oli Foster that well, but then it was hard to know someone who spent so much time in the Cooler, Point Academy’s detention block for disruptive pupils. Despite the danger of the situation Oli seemed unfazed by it all, scratching at his curly hair as he stared at the crash site.

‘Duh, that was an asteroid, not a meteorite,’ hissed Sophia, taking a step towards the rocks, then thinking better of it when one of the chunks crackled and hissed, as if it was still sizzling from burning its way through the atmosphere. ‘And if it was going to kill us, we’d be squashed already – us and the whole town. The one that killed the dinosaurs was six miles wide and sent up so much dust it blocked out the sun.’

‘OK, Little Miss Wikipedia,’ Oli fired back. ‘If I wanted a science lesson, I’d have listened in class.’

‘Don’t you usually get thrown out of class?’ Sophia murmured under her breath.

‘What are you all doing here?’ Alex interrupted, wondering if there was some way he could persuade them to get lost and let him have the rocks. The meteorite was his – he’d seen it first and he was pretty sure he needed the money a lot more than they did.

‘I was up late, reading about osmosis before tomorrow’s science lesson,’ Sophia announced proudly, like she expected Alex to pin an achievement badge on the lapel of her blazer as a reward for the work she’d put in.

‘I was at my telescope,’ exclaimed a short boy with a

beanie on his head and a set of binoculars on a string around his neck. ‘I’d heard there was going to be a meteor shower and I’ve been looking forward to it all week.’

Alex had only ever spoken to Mo Bhaiyat once before, when they’d both forgotten their PE kit. As punishment Mr Brown, had forced them to pick the used gum from underneath the tables in his classroom, one foul, squishy lump at a time. While Alex had kept his head down and tried to get through the gum torture as quickly as he could, Mo had spent the time babbling on about the birdwatching club he was setting up at the school and explaining how he was looking for new members, an invitation Alex very much avoided.

Oli looked at Mo like he’d just admitted to sucking his thumb. ‘I was up late, fragging aliens on my Xbox, trying to stay king of the leader board. When I saw that thing in the sky I thought I’d been sucked into the game like in those Jumanji films.’

The last member of the group had a set of goggles on her head, like a mad scientist or a Ghostbuster. Alex was pretty sure her name was Riley Ogunleye and that she lived in a creepy old cottage right next to Shadow Hill cemetery. He’d skated past there sometimes and seen her vanishing through the gate once or twice, but other than that she was a mystery.

A crash from deeper in the woods made them all spin round. Despite the torches the others had all been organised enough to bring, it was still impossible to see more than a few metres ahead, the thick wall of trees circling the clearing

all but impenetrable.

‘Maybe we should go,’ stuttered Mo, his eyes wide behind the thick lenses of his glasses. ‘I haven’t been this scared since Bethany Blight hid that false widow spider in my lunch box.’

Alex shivered at the mention of Bethany Blight. Most of the kids at Point Academy seemed pleasant enough, but not Bethany. He’d met bullies before, but none quite as bad.

Riley turned back to the crash site, seemingly unflustered, and slid the strange goggles down over her eyes to study the black slime on the ground.

‘It looks like some kind of liquid,’ she mused. ‘But where did it come from?’

Another noise came from somewhere in the trees, sounding like the crack of something heavy coming down on a fallen branch.

Mo let out a shrill whine, like a hiss of air being let out of a balloon. ‘You think . . . that someone else has found the crash site too? Or could it be a boar? I’ve heard they come out in Howlmoor after dark, looking for lost hikers to trample.’

Sophia rolled her eyes, pulling a small notebook out of her pocket. ‘Are there any forest-dwelling creatures you’re *not* scared of? The Gruffalo? Peppa Pig? I think we need to –’

Nobody heard the rest of what Sophia had to say. The words were drowned out by a chilling, high-pitched shriek, echoing through the trees like a banshee’s wail. Alex had no idea what could make a sound like that, and he didn’t want to find out.

‘Please tell me that was someone’s stomach,’ he breathed,

trying his best to keep the jitter from his voice but not quite succeeding.

‘Dude, my stomach hasn’t ever made that kind of noise, not even when I ate three of those disgusting vegan hot dogs from the canteen,’ replied Oli, arming himself with a large stick from the ground.

As Alex glanced around the trees edging their little clearing, his eye caught on movement. Just there . . . a thin, dark shadow, creeping through the undergrowth, moving in their direction.

‘Guys?’ he whispered.

The others turned to face him, torch beams piercing the shadows.

Alex’s heartbeat started to hammer in his chest. ‘Hello?’ he called. ‘Is there somebody else out there?’

‘What do we do?’ whispered Mo, the torch in his hand trembling as if there was an earthquake.

Alex squinted, trying to get a better look at the silhouette, and caught a hint of something pale, glinting in the moonlight. *Teeth*, whispered a voice deep in Alex’s mind. *All the better to eat you with.*

‘What do we do?’ Mo asked again, louder this time.

This time Alex didn’t need to think about the answer at all.

‘Run!’