

I'VE never seen anything like it. So weird looking: all grey and scrunched up, half-buried in the undergrowth so I can't tell how big it is.

'What is it?'

Jay drops his bike to the floor with a thud and picks up the biggest stick ever. He's approaching the thing as if he's gonna poke it. I step in front of him, my heart racing.

'Don't, you'll hurt it.'

He sneers, flicking his long black hair out of his face. 'Just seeing if it's dead.'

Jay's the hardest in school. Proper mental. Set fire to the library once. They never worked out it was him. But I know. I still ain't letting him harm it. The creature's frozen, like that painting of a mythical beast in woodland we saw in art. It could be dead.

'It's an alien,' says Prof. We call him that cos he loves science, which we're all rubbish at. He also watches strange old TV shows, like The X-Files. 'We gotta capture it for tests. See what it's made of.'

'See.' Jay has a glint in his eye that makes me nervous. 'Could be an alien.' Just cos Prof is the oldest at nearly 14, Jay assumes he's smartest.

'You can't dissect it. That's horrible.' Those two just enjoy cutting things up; one out of curiosity, the other spite.

'Won't hurt it if it's dead.' Jay gives his best psycho grin. 'A real alien, Prof. And you thought it were boring, riding through Brindle Heath.'

I thought we'd bond, cycling through the countryside. Become proper friends. It's been a summer of war and retribution on TV and in my house. I wanted to get outside, away

from it all, be in a gang having adventures. We were having fun, skidding carefree along the path, until Prof pointed this creature out as we entered the wood. Claims he can see things others can't.

'It's not an alien,' I declare.

'How'd you know, Mark?' Jay thinks that I think I know everything. I don't. Haven't got a clue what this thing is.

'Cos they don't exist. And this is Manchester not Roswell.'

'You don't know nothing,' says Jay. I resist the urge to tell him that's a double negative. He wouldn't get it. Plus I don't want to wind him up.

I look around at the thick, bushy Maple trees surrounding us. I like the colour of the maroon leaves but it's really dark around the trunks below. Makes it difficult to see properly. This thing is nestled in the brambles beneath the trees, where it's dank and rotten. I'd loved hearing the birds singing as we rode here, though I'd never tell my mates that. It's silent now; no bird song, nothing rustling in the leaves. We're all alone.

'Just leave it, guys.' Lee's still right back on the path, not even got off his bike. He's so quiet I'd forgotten him. Should have known he'd be too chicken to look. Never wants to get involved. He's the youngest, almost a year younger than Prof, but that's no excuse. 'Let's just pretend we didn't see anything and carry on. It's not our problem.'

'You're such a wuss.' Jay looks at him in disgust. 'This is proper mad.'

'I'll get a photo.' I pull my mobile from my pocket. Snap away. When I look at what I've captured a chill shudders through me. 'There's nothing there.'

Prof leans over to look as I swipe through pictures of darkness.

‘Cos there’s not enough light,’ he says. ‘And your phone’s crap.’

I stare at the creature. Something about it sends another wave of chills through me. Its body’s bloated, like a pig. Can’t tell if it’s got two or four limbs as they’re hidden beneath it.

‘Might be a foetus,’ says Prof, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

‘A what?’ Jay really is as stinking thick as dog muck.

‘What you are before you’re born.’ Prof loves educating others. ‘An alien looking thing, all curled up and pink.’

‘It’s too big to be a foetus unless an elephant gave birth,’ I say. They shake their heads as if I’m Mr Know-it-all but I’m only saying what’s obvious. ‘And it’s hairy.’

‘It’s something illogical,’ says Prof. ‘Might be Big Foot’s aborted child.’

‘Yeah, its lovechild with your mum.’ Jay does his horrible hyena laugh. ‘And she’d still love it more than you.’

‘You’re idiots.’ I shake my head. I feel a bit sick.

‘Then what is it smart arse?’ My heart pounds again. Mustn’t make Jay mad.

‘Some kind of animal.’

‘I know what.’ Jay’s as excited as when he completed Grand Theft Auto V. ‘It’s a Chupacabra.’

‘What the hell’s that?’ Amazing, he’s actually got Prof stumped.

‘Saw it on telly. A legendary, blood-sucking beast. It’s well sick.’

‘We’re not in Mexico either.’ I sigh. The creature’s side moves in and out, as if it’s mimicking me.

‘It’s alive,’ I shriek. ‘Look, its breathing.’

We creep closer, watching the movement. What is it? I can only define it by what it’s not: too big for a fox but it’s not like any dog or wolf I’ve ever seen.

‘Dare you to touch it.’ Jay thinks I’m not brave enough. I’ll show him. I get close. It smells gross, same as one of Jay’s farts after he’s wolfed down an egg sandwich. Makes me want to puke. The hair’s in patches and it’s covered in scabs. Might have a disease. I shouldn’t touch it but I’m not backing down. Holding my breath, I gently run my hand over its side. Its body jolts and I almost piss myself. But then it stays still. Its coarse, dry hair scrapes against my skin. It’s not nice. I sense it relax, its breathing becoming regular under my touch, as if I’m soothing it. I’m gonna have to breathe so I step back. I tilt my head sideways to study it as I do. It is ghoulish looking.

‘Looks same as that maths teacher, whatsisface.’ Jay chuckles.

‘Nah, too pretty for him,’ snorts Prof.

An eye opens: a yellow orb of fiery anger. We all shriek and jump back, even Jay.

‘Christ, it’s looking at us.’ I’ve never heard Jay’s voice quiver before.

‘Leave it guys. Could be dangerous.’ Lee sounds like a little girl.

I shiver. It was really hot, riding in the afternoon sun. But its heat can’t enter here; a canopy of leaves acts as a barrier. The light of the open field’s gone in the shadows of the wood. There’s only darkness and coldness.

‘We should kill it.’ Jay’s voice is venomous. I spot the glint of a knife tucked into his belt. The creature could get shanked.

‘You can’t,’ I cry out.

‘It’s evil,’ he says. It might not be the evil one round here. Before I realise what he’s doing, Jay surges forward and pokes the thing in its haunches with the stick. The creature lets out a howl that echoes through the wood and makes the hairs on my arms and neck stand on end. It writhes around, kicking up dirt.

‘It’s injured.’ Streaks of pain shoot through me. ‘We should get help, maybe the RSPCA or something.’

‘We gotta find out what it is first.’ Prof is adamant.

‘I’ll phone my dad. He might know what it is and what to do.’ I hold my mobile with trembling fingers. But they laugh at my suggestion.

‘Don’t bother,’ says Jay. ‘He won’t help.’

‘An adult will know what’s best.’

‘Adults know less than you,’ explains Prof. ‘My brother’s twenty-three. He’s always messing up, drinking too much, getting into fights, getting arrested. Mum says adults are no better than children.’

‘Your bro’s a dick,’ I reply. They all laugh and I feel better.

‘My rents don’t tell me what to do.’ Jay spits out the words. They land in gobs on the ground.

He talks rot. Everyone knows his parents abandoned him and he’s in care. I agree with Prof. Adults react badly when they’re faced with something they don’t like or understand. They end up starting fights and wars and destroying things, including each other. Adults are just kids with bigger problems.

I look at my phone. Can’t get a signal in this crappy place anyway.

‘We should give it a name,’ says Jay. ‘But what?’

I reckon it was just resting; it looks lively now. I can see its head: flared nostrils, curled lip, bared teeth, flattened ears and narrowed eyes.

‘Hostile,’ says Prof, automatically. Don’t know if he’s describing it or naming it but Jay nods his head.

‘Yeah. Hostile. I like that.’ Bet he doesn’t know what it means.

‘We should get going. Just leave it now. It might have rabies.’

‘Shut it, Lee,’ snaps Jay. ‘I ain’t scared.’

He moves towards it. I can see the creature’s legs now, they’re poised. Its body’s braced. I don’t think quickly enough to shout a warning. Jay’s too close. It’s too late. Faster than anything ever, the creature leaps forward and seizes his arm in its massive jaws. He drops the stick. Sharp fangs pierce soft skin and dig into bone. Jay screams as blood pours. It knocks him to the ground as easily as a lion on an antelope. Clammers on top of him. I feel weak and helpless.

‘Get it off.’ Jay struggles under its weight. It’s almost as big as him. Soil and swearing spray up from the ground.

‘Christ, it’s gonna eat him alive.’ Prof’s just stood there gawping.

I hear the squeal of rubber grinding against earth behind us and turn to see Lee cycling away as fast as his skinny legs can pedal. He’s just gone. I turn back to Jay. The creature’s still clamped to his arm. Dizziness makes me sway but I gotta do something.

I pick up the stick. Don't want to hurt it but what can I do? I whack it hard. Still it doesn't let go. Getting as close as I dare, I jab it in the head. It releases its grip. Jay crawls away. Hostile faces me, glaring, blood staining its yellow teeth. *What is it?*

Jay's clutching his arm, blood dripping from it, vivid red against his pale, freckled skin. Looks proper gory. The beast sizes me up. Begins to circle me. I'm frozen, transfixed by its mad eyes. It stops within feet of me, staring at my throat. Its legs are poised, body braced, back arched. I won't be able to stop it. My heart and breathing wait.

I hear Jay sobbing.

Suddenly, the beast turns and runs. Scrabbles through bushes into undergrowth and freedom. Bending over, hands on knees, I gulp air. Look up. Jay's scrunched into a whimpering ball. He's writhed so much he's almost buried himself in the dirt. And gone a weird grey colour.

'Damn it,' shouts Prof. 'It's got away. Now we'll never know what it was.'

'We gotta get him to hospital.' I point at Jay.

Prof just looks at him the same as he looked at that creature, as if he's something from another planet. He finally nods and takes off his t-shirt, using it as a bandage to wrap around Jay's wound. He grabs one arm and I grab the other as we heave Jay up.

'You fat bastard,' says Prof, grunting. 'It's gonna take us ages to get you anywhere.'

We haul him away as best we can. Blood's already soaking through Prof's t-shirt and he doesn't look too clever himself anymore. I might barf. I can see Lee's tyre tracks on the path, all black and snaking. A cold wind blows. It's the end of summer.

