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Opening Extract from...

CHANGELING

Written by **Matt Wesolowski**

Published By **Orenda Books**

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PRAISE FOR MATT WESOLOWSKI

'Few books creep me out, but *Changeling* is insidiously terrifying … Featuring possibly the creepiest woods since *Blair Witch*, it cleverly strikes the balance between supernatural, superstition and reality until, like the characters, you're unsure of what to believe. A genuine chiller with a whammy of an ending' C J Tudor

'Just getting my breath back after reading the last few pages of this. Matt Wesolowski is one of most exciting new writers of the past few years. Never disappoints. This is a creepy, chilling read that is ridiculously difficult to put down. The ending is just incredible' Luca Veste

'I loved it. The combination of Matt's style of writing and his imagination is superb, and a tough subject was beautifully tackled. I loved the first two in the Six Stories series, but *Changeling* is frighteningly wonderful and one of the best books I have read in years' Khurrum Rahman

'Mysterious, always. Intense, yes. Twisty and turny, totally. But emotional too. What an ending! I want to read it all over again. Wesolowski's best so far' Louise Beech

'Bold, clever and genuinely chilling with a terrific twist that provides an explosive final punch' Deidre O'Brien, *Sunday Mirror*

'A genuine genre-bending debut' Carla McKay, *Daily Mail*

'With a unique structure, an ingenious plot and so much suspense you can't put it down, this is the very epitome of a must-read' *Heat*

'This is one of the best novels I've read this year, perhaps in memory' *Nudge*

'He's fashioned a thriller that slowly drip-feeds us plenty of gothic horror while keeping us guessing right up to the end' *The Crack*

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'King's podcasts draw strangely personal warnings to desist, but he persists, provoking further tragedy. Through this unusual format, Wesolowski skilfully draws readers into a story of increasing depth and force' *Publishers Weekly*

'Sharp as a butcher's knife, cutting straight through to the nerve of its reader. A read-in-one-sitting experience that will surely inspire many authors to explore new methods of narration' *Irish Times*

'A wonderfully distinctive, intense, and piercing read … provokes thoughts and rattles feelings, creating an original and enthralling read, highly recommended' LoveReading

'The execution perfectly allows the reader to see and believe every event as the mystery develops … as surprising as it is good, and should appeal to readers who enjoy crime with an eerie, dark vibe' *Mystery Scene*

'Thanks to Wesolowski's mixture of supernatural elements and first-class plotting, this is one of the most addictive of new crime novels' *Sunday Express*

'This is a compelling story in an original format … It's a whydunnit and an intelligent psychological thriller that pushes at the edges of the supernatural crime genre … Matt Wesolowski knows what to deliver and what to leave to our imaginations' Crime Fiction Lover

'It's a relentless and original work of modern rural noir which beguiles and unnerves in equal measure. Matt Wesolowski is a major talent' Eva Dolan

'Wesolowski evokes the ominous landscape and eerie atmosphere of the area with sharp, direct prose … Impeccably crafted and gripping from start to finish' Doug Johnstone, *Big Issue*

'His unique storytelling shows a great deal of understanding of how young people might deal with secrets, unspoken feelings, unrequited love, fear of being an outcast and most importantly with a desperate desire to belong' Crime Review

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'A new style of mystery, one that encapsulates the twenty-first century, the internet, and social media, even as its characters struggle to recall – or forget – a time before such things … a dazzling fictional mystery' Foreword Reviews

'Wonderfully horrifying … the suspense crackles' James Oswald

'Its plotting, pacing, and unique content make it one of the most impressive books I've read recently. Wesolowski is a major new talent in crime fiction, and I cannot wait to see what he does next' Crime by the Book

'A complex and subtle mystery, unfolding like dark origami to reveal the black heart inside' Michael Marshall Smith

'Original, inventive and brilliantly clever' Fiona Cummins

'For fans of thrills, chills and an up-to-date take on the darker side of society' J.S. Collyer

'Wonderfully atmospheric. Matt Wesolowski is a skilled storyteller with a unique voice. Definitely one to watch' Mari Hannah

'A stunning piece of writing – chock full of atmosphere, human insight and beautiful writing. Take a note of this guy's name. He's going to be huge!' Michael J. Malone

'A tight, claustrophobic mystery' David F. Ross

'A remarkable debut from a fine new fictional voice' Shelley Day

'The literary equivalent of dark metal – gritty, dark, often shocking, and always exciting. A masterful debut' Kati Hiekkapelto

'There's a disquiet, an unease that runs throughout *Changeling*, suffusing the story that Wesolowksi is telling and imbuing it with an unsettling sense of darkness. *Changeling* is a chilling read, a sinister story and the best *Six Stories* yet' The Tattooed Book Geek

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'The writing is top notch as ever and I really think Matt has surpassed himself this time. Wentshire Forest certainly felt very creep and real to me. Hauntingly atmospheric and lyrically pitch perfect' The Book Trail

'The most remarkable and memorable psychological thriller and mystery series I have read in a long time. If you need me I will be nursing my book hangover for quite a while' Always Trust in Books

'*Changeling* is an intense, dark and utterly absorbing book. The pages crackle with tension, the characters have real depth and the writing is truly stunning. Matt Wesolowski has to be one of the most imaginative and talented young writers out there at the moment' Bibliophile Book Club

'The plotting is ingenious, and the way those six stories mesh together is played to perfection' Espresso Coco

'*Changeling* gave me goosebumps and the sound of tapping is forever going to creep me out! … Once again I forgot it was fiction and wanted to find out more about the mystery of the missing child and the creepy woods. That's how good Matt is' Not Another Book Blogger

'*Changeling* is definitely my favourite of the three *Six Stories* books so far. I'm not sure if that's down to the emotional subject matter, chilling storyline or overall creepiness of the prose … Matt Weselowski is one of the best emerging horror/crime writers. Bring on the next one! (I hope there is a next one…)' Off-the-Shelf Books

'*Changeling* is the BEST book I have read in a very long time, if not ever. I devoured it in three and a half hours! Matt Wesolowski you are a genius. I don't know how I'm supposed to read anything else ever again' Thirty Pages In

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'Just finished *Changeling* and WOW. Just WOW. What an utterly brilliant book. I'll need time to digest it before I review but congrats Matt Wesolowski, *Changeling* is just brilliant from first page to last' Shelf of Unread Books

'*Changeling* by Matt Wesolowski is SO good. The beauty of the podcast-style narrative means that the book just flew by. I also had to keep reminding myself that it is fiction and not a real-life case; you really do forget that. Wonderful stuff' Beardy Book Blogger

'If ever a series of books was going to shake up the psychological thriller genre then this is it. This book is both inspiring and depressing in equal measure. Inspiring because of the sheer creativity and how assured and confident the writing appears' Jen Med's Book Reviews

'Compelling, intelligent and beautifully written – each voice is distinct, each setting is brought vividly to life. Matt Wesolowski has crafted a cautionary and chilling tale that cements his place as one of the freshest writers around today' Hair Past a Freckle

'Genre busting, it's a crime story, a psychological thriller, a coming-of-age story. It will appeal to readers of all ages and genders. Gripping, fascinating and wholly entertaining, Matt Wesolowski is a very welcome new voice in fiction. An absolute triumph and highly recommended by me' Random Things through My Letterbox

'Refreshingly different with its quirky structure and clarity of description, and Wesolowski taps in perfectly to both the teenager's experiences, but also intuitively counterbalancing it with their later perspective on events as adults. Highly recommended' Raven Crime Reads

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matt Wesolowski is an author from Newcastle upon Tyne in the UK. He is an English tutor for young people in care. Matt started his writing career in horror, and his short horror fiction has been published in numerous UK- and US-based anthologies such as *Midnight Movie Creature*, *Selfies from the End of the World*, *Cold Iron* and many more. His novella, *The Black Land*, a horror set on the Northumberland coast, was published in 2013. Matt was a winner of the Pitch Perfect competition at Bloody Scotland Crime Writing Festival in 2015. His debut thriller, *Six Stories*, was an Amazon bestseller in the USA, Canada, the UK and Australia, and a WHSmith Fresh Talent pick, and TV rights were sold to a major Hollywood studio. A prequel, *Hydra*, was published in 2018 and became an international bestseller.

Follow Matt on Twitter *@ConcreteKraken*.

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Changeling

MATT WESOLOWSKI



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Changeling

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They stole little Bridget
For seven years long;
When she came down again
Her friends were all gone.
They took her lightly back,
Between the night and morrow,
They thought that she was fast asleep,
But she was dead with sorrow.
They have kept her ever since
Deep within the lake,
On a bed of fig-leaves,
Watching till she wake.

—William Allingham, 'The Faeries'

'Nurse had told me all about them long ago, but she called them by another name, and I did not know what she meant, or what her tales of them were about, only that they were very queer. And there were two kinds, the bright and the dark, and both were very lovely and very wonderful, and some people saw only one kind, and some only the other, but some saw them both.'

—Arthur Machen, 'The White People'

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SCOTT KING AUDIO LOG 1
00:00:00

A Letter

When the letter comes, the handwriting on the front sends a tingle of fear from the base of your spine, up to the knobbly occiput at the back of your skull. As if an icy finger has been placed delicately on each nerve ending. The handwriting is frail and spidery; the letters are either too big or too small. It's like a child tried to write in copperplate.

You can hardly bear to hold the creased, yellowed envelope. You stand in the hall with it, balancing the edges against your fingertips.

But you open the letter because that's what you do: you look at things that shouldn't be looked at, you read things that are best left unread.

Dear Mr King,

I am writing to you as a recent convert to your show. I have always been interested in true crime but I am new to podcasts. I am an old dog learning new tricks! I have listened to every series of *Six Stories* to date and I have been entertained and fascinated by the cold cases you investigate. You have brought me great comfort as well as company and for that I want to thank you.

I am sorry about the bad things that have happened to you during the last few years and hope you are keeping well. It's sometimes what happens, though, when we raise our heads above the parapet. When we make ourselves known, we can be judged.

But I digress. The reason for my writing is, I imagine, probably quite common. You've seen many requests like this, I'm certain. But I will not be able to rest knowing I did not ask.

You see, I want to suggest a case – one that I think would fit

perfectly into *Six Stories* – just as *Six Stories* has slotted perfectly into my life. I am an old person – in more than just year – and your podcasts have brought me comfort in my old age. I am reaching out to you to help you like I feel you have reached out to me and helped me.

You're old enough to remember Alfie Marsden – the little boy who disappeared in 1988. I write this as a statement, not a question.

You sigh. Alfie Marsden. You've heard that name, as have most people. You don't need to have been alive when he disappeared to know about him. The little boy who vanished in a wood.

It's not the first time someone's suggested you scratch through this particular shallow grave. But this one is worse than a grave. There's nothing but a hole – an empty space where a child has been.

It's been thirty years since Alfie Marsden disappeared and his name still carries a faint resonance. Alfie Marsden is no longer the name of a missing boy, he is a euphemism for caution, for keeping your children close.

You realise you're clenching your teeth. That place – Wentshire Forest. The name thrums through you like a heartbeat and you can hear yourself whispering it:

Wentshire Forest, Wentshire Forest, Wentshire Forest.

You've heard all the stories about the place. Apart from the missing boy, you know of the strange things that are said to go on in that darkness between the leaves.

You shiver and nearly drop the letter.

Alfie Marsden. It's a case that's tailor-made for Six Stories*, right?*

Maybe that's why you don't want to touch it. Maybe that's why even the thought of looking into Alfie Marsden and Wentshire Forest fills you with…

What?

They say that there's a curse – that going in there does something to you. But that's all nonsense. And you can't even get into the forest anymore, can you? Didn't the army or the air force buy it up?

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You find yourself pulling out your phone to check this. But then you stop.

Leave it alone.

I think that Alfie Marsden and what happened to him shouldn't be forgotten. Anyone can see that this is already happening. There are young people these days that don't even know the name. I have a home help – a lovely boy not long into his twenties. He's the one who told me about you: Mr King and your podcasts. He had no idea who Alfie Marsden was, and this made me rather sad.

I imagine you've probably had this suggested to you before and my voice is one of many who implore you to look over another cold case, another dead child. But I think I have something I can offer in return.

I'm sure this is something else you've heard from people asking you to investigate cases – especially ones that are close to their hearts. I'm afraid I'm no different: I was close to the Alfie Marsden case and I can offer you insights that I believe have not surfaced before. I don't want anything in return, save to speak to you in person and tell you what I know.

So I'll leave you with the choice: reply to me or not.

Thank you for reading.

There's a name.
An address.
And a choice.



1st August 2018, 12:05 p.m.

I'm going to do this like I've always done it: start recording now, at the point of conception. It works best this way; on the nights I can't sleep I listen back to myself gabbling on like this. Sometimes it helps. Also, it's a record. For my own safety.

OK. Alfie Marsden. There's a whole thread on the Six Stories *Reddit about him. Let's just pull it up:*

'A missing kid and a forest full of ghosts, someone's said. 'What's NOT Six Stories *about it???' That's true, to be fair.*

So why is it that I. Just. Can't?

I've read about it. Christ, hasn't everyone? I've pulled up some YouTube videos here. There's that press conference – the parents. I just can't bear to watch those two in that grainy old footage.

I've got that other video up as well, the one everyone's seen. That psychic who talked to the Sun. *The one who said the kid was somewhere in the woods. How could anyone do that?*

I can't watch that one either. It makes me feel awful, as if a storm cloud has floated in through my ear and parked itself in the middle of my brain.

I'll bring up Google Maps. That's proactive. I'll type in the postcode, find out who sent that letter.

Where is it? Oh, OK. Have I even heard of this place? Let's zoom in. Here we go: a nondescript row of houses, flanked by hedges and pavements.

So it's right here, in one of these houses, that I'll apparently hear something new about the Alfie Marsden disappearance.

It's like an urban myth, a legend that has refused to die; this case has resurfaced again and again in my life. This case has an inexorable pull. Whether I like it or not.

So this is why I'm recording now. This letter will be the place where I'm going to start.

Can you hear that? The ice-cream van outside? That little twinkly tune that means summer and laughter and holidays? The call to seven-year-olds across the country.

I'm going to turn off before the tears come.

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Episode 1: The Party Palace

—Nine-nine-nine emergency. Which service do you require?

—Police. I need the police.

—Can you tell me the nature of the emergency, sir?

—My boy … they've got my little boy [indistinguishable]. He's gone! Oh God, please hurry! [A noise that sounds like wind interspersed with indistinguishable shouting.]

—Sir. Sir?

—I'm here. I'm here. Please hurry!

—Sir? I'm having trouble hearing. I need you to give me some details: can you tell me where you're calling from?

—Are they coming?

—Sir, I can get the police dispatched quicker if you remain calm. Sir … can you hear me?

—Yes. Yes, I'm here. I'm calling from a phone box. I don't know [indistinguishable].

—Can you tell me the area, sir? Can you give me an address?

—I don't know. I can't think!

—You need to tell me where you are, sir. Can you see any landmarks?

—Baxter's … Baxter's Buildings. That's what the sign says. Over the way.

—Baxter's Buildings. Can you tell me which road you're on?

—I'm not. It's … my son! He's gone!

—I know. It's OK, sir, just be calm and tell me where you are.

—He was asleep. Strapped in. I don't understand how he could just have gone!

—Can you stay calm and tell me where you are? Baxter's Buildings, that's all I have.

—Wentshire! Wentshire Forest Pass…

—Thank you. I think I know where you mean. Are you near the development? The place they're building that resort?

—I see it! Through the trees, the sign.

—Sir. I'm alerting local services as we speak. Is your vehicle on the road?

—The layby. In the parking place.

—So now we know where you are, can you tell me again what's happened? You said your son is missing, correct?

—I was out of the car for a minute – five minutes! The engine, it was coming from the engine! [Burst of static]

—How old is your son, sir?

—Seven. He's got, um, blond hair – sandy, short. He's little – three, four foot tall? He's called Alfie! Oh God!

—You're doing really well. So, he's called Alfie. We're going to help you find him, OK?

—He's wearing a red knitted jumper with a … with a lion on it [sobbing]

—Can you tell me your name, sir?

—Sorrel. Sorrel Marsden.

—OK, Sorrel, a car is on its way. Is there a road sign or anything? What about inside the phone box? Are there any details, a place name, or a number?

—There's nothing here. Just this road, and the phone box. And the building site. Diggers. There's no one here, though – it's empty.

—OK, OK, you're doing great, Sorrel. Keep talking to me. The police are on their way.

—Please hurry! There it is again. It's … [indistinguishable]

—Sorrel, I need to know what happened with your son. You said he was in his chair and then he was gone, is that right?

[indistinguishable crackling and wind before a violent tapping noise]

—Sorrel? Hello? *Hello?*

—Please … [indistinguishable] have to help me! [indistinguishable] can't believe he's gone!

[indistinguishable crackling, tapping and wind noises]

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What you have just heard is the full 999 call from the night of 24th December 1988. Christmas Eve. The night that seven-year-old Alfie Marsden disappeared, never to be seen again.

Alfie Marsden was officially declared 'presumed dead' in March 1995, seven years and three months after his father, Sorrel, made that call.

It is now just over thirty years since Alfie vanished. He has been legally dead for twenty-three of those years.

Some say that Alfie's disappearance in 1988 was one controversy too many for Wentshire Forest and led to the majority of the site being closed to the public. But this only meant the ghoulish draw of the forest intensified, as did the speculation in the press. Descriptions of the various alleged occurrences between the tangled branches of one of England's most ancient woods became distorted and bloated. With story upon story, claim upon claim, Wentshire Forest had become a place synonymous with horror.



—I'll tell you something: that child disappearing, bless his little soul, was what stopped us in the end. Not any of that other nonsense.

It was out of respect for that poor family – his mother and father. Who would want to go stay in Wentshire Forest after that?

The voice you've just heard is seventy-year-old Sir Harrison Baxter, co-founder of Baxter's Homes. You'll know the name – pretty much every town in the UK has at least one Baxter's development. What you may not know, however, is that before Baxter's Homes, there was a smaller, burgeoning enterprise known as Baxter and Blackwood's Great Escapes.

Baxter's became a public limited company in 1990, and after the death of his business partner, Humphrey Blackwood, Sir Harrison retired. Today, he lives in comfort on the Devonshire coast. His former company still thrives today, rivalling Barrett Homes in the UK property

development market. Sir Baxter is forthcoming and spritely, staring out over the English Riviera with a glass of orange juice in his hand.

—Back then, we made luxury holiday parks. Great Escapes, we called them. Lovely little log-cabin communities. We had them designed and built by a small firm Humphrey discovered on holiday in Norway. We expanded the designs and helped the firm build up their workforce, then brought them over to the UK to make our holiday homes.

But after what happened to Alfie Marsden, God bless him – after what happened at Wentshire – we lost all our impetus. That's when we moved into property development. It was a natural direction to take, and had nothing – I tell you, *nothing* – to do with anything else.

It should be mentioned that Wentshire Forest's reputation as a hotspot for paranormal activity was established long before Sir Harrison decided to clear a spot of land and create Baxter and Blackwood's biggest and most ambitious holiday resort so far.

—We actually got further than was reported, you know. We'd levelled the land, drained it and begun building the cabins before everything got halted to look for the child. I'll tell you now, not one contractor reported *anything* out of the ordinary on that site. Not to me anyway. All of that stuff is just hokum, made up by cranks and the media.

I believe he's still going, isn't he? The father? Still looking? Best of luck to him, I say. The poor man.

I pray to God that one day he finds some peace. I pray that one day he'll find what he's looking for.

But I believe that day may never come.



Welcome to Six Stories.

I'm Scott King.

A great many of you presumed that this series would not make a comeback after the controversy surrounding the death of Arla Macleod in 2018, and the incident with Brian Mings the previous year. I have done a lot of soul-searching about both those incidents and have come to a simple conclusion:

The show must go on.

Over the next six weeks, we will be looking back at the disappearance of Alfie Marsden on Christmas Eve, 1988. We'll be doing so through six different perspectives, seeing the events that unfolded through six different pairs of eyes. You know, by now, that, after that, it's up to you. I don't pretend to have the answers to any of the cases I cover. I am not here to offer opinion; I simply rake up old graves.

Let's start by stating the facts.

Sorrel Marsden was driving his seven-year-old son, Alfie, along the A road known as Wentshire Forest Pass, travelling from the home of his ex-partner in Audlem, Cheshire, to his own home in Wrexham, North Wales. At 11:05 p.m., a 999 operator received the call you heard at the top of the episode. Sorrel Marsden's story has not changed since that day. Whether his story is fact remains to be seen. What is true is that, at some point in the evening, he stopped his Fiat Panda because of a strange sound coming from the engine. Sorrel claims that Alfie was asleep in his booster seat and did not wake when he pulled the car over to the side of the road. Sometime while Sorrel was looking under the car's bonnet, Alfie disappeared.

Sorrel Marsden's account of what happened that night has been held up to the light, speculated upon and debated. Yet it has never been proved. Nor has it been discredited.

But let's stay with the facts for now.

Let's slip between the trees.



Wentshire Forest straddles the border of England and Wales, bleeding into both countries like a green ink blot on the map. Predominantly oak, some of the trees at the forest's heart are more than five hundred years old, and the whole site is classed as 'ancient woodland'. Wentshire Forest was a declining National Park with little tourism when it was purchased in 1999 by the Ministry of Defence. Wentshire Air Force Base now squats amid the trees. The woodland on either side of Wentshire Forest Pass is now enclosed by barbed-wire-topped fences and the occasional security camera. A fine of £1000 has been levied on a couple of occasions against those who have attempted to creep in.

Wentshire Forest Pass is a former Roman road. It was once known as the 'Cripple's Road' and, uncharacteristically for a Roman route, snakes up and around the steep incline before descending into either England on one side and Wales on the other. An archaeological dig conducted in the early eighties discovered what are thought to be Iron Age weapons.

Famously, or perhaps infamously, a Bronze-Age skeleton known as the 'Wentshire Cripple' was found in the early 1900s beneath a burial mound at the top of the hill, alongside an array of pots and animals. The skeleton was first thought to be a chieftain of the Pobl y goedwig *' or 'People of the Forest'. These forest people were a Celtic tribe, an offshoot of the war-like Deceangli. The origins of the skeleton, however, are a focus of debate. Recent CT scanning and modern archaeological research techniques have revealed that the deceased, a woman, had both legs purposefully broken before she died. Marks on her teeth and the position of her jaw suggests a stone was placed in her mouth post-mortem. And why it might have been done is unknown. It is also unclear whether the road was named after the skeleton or vice versa.*

'The Wentshire Witch' is a cautionary local folktale about the forest, but its origins are unclear, although it's difficult not to connect it to the 'Wentshire Cripple'.

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Extract from 'The Wentshire Witch', *Border tales: New Versions* by Felicity Kilbracken

(Ellie Hill Publishing, 1981)

And thereupon, the traveller heard such beautiful singing, which drifted out to him between the trees. He heard lyres and lutes and the sound of breath in wooden pipes, all of these sounds swirling and whirling and dancing in his mind. He was sure he could smell roasted meat, and his mouth began to water as, in his mind's eye, he could see a merry camp of folk all laughing and singing. The thought stirred his heart, as well as his nose and stomach. The traveller quite forgot his journey, he even forgot his horse, and found himself walking into the trees, his feet barely touching the ground as the music guided him deeper and deeper into the forest.

From the folds of her hollow oak tree, black and dead at the centre of the forest, and on which no leaves grew, the Wentshire Witch kept calling, kept singing her song, rubbing her belly and smacking her lips as she heard the traveller approach. She would not go hungry today…

Perhaps, like many cautionary tales, the story of the witch was dreamed up to keep young children from getting lost in the forest. As we will come to see, it does share many elements with the folklore surrounding the forest and the rumours about what dwells beneath its branches.

I ask Sir Harrison about whether the history of the site had any influence on his purchase.

—Tommyrot, the lot of it. The only horror story that ever happened in Wentshire Forest was the disappearance of that poor little boy.

It clearly pains Sir Harrison more to talk about Alfie Marsden than it does his failed business.

—I went there personally to join the search for that boy, I even paid for a load of extra bodies to assist, most of whom declined the money but searched anyway. The issues with the equipment were … unfortunate. I found the backlash to that particularly upsetting – personally I mean. It was beyond our control.

The disappearance of Alfie Marsden prompted waves of sympathy and would fill the front pages of the British press for months.

Sir Harrison's contractors were the first to assist the police in the search of Wentshire Forest, but the issues with their equipment, which Sir Harrison mentions, would remain a bone of contention for years to come, and their first good intentions would be widely forgotten. These contractors searched through the night for the missing boy, but their lack of judgement and their malfunctioning equipment ended up doing more harm than good. For example, the brakes and engine of a flatbed truck gave up the ghost only metres from Sorrel Marsden's car, sending the vehicle almost onto its side, blocking the road and obliterating any forensics that might have otherwise been salvaged. With no single person to blame, the vitriol and outrage seeped its way back to Blackwood and Baxter, and their company was condemned for hindering the search.

Local and national searches for Alfie went on for years after he vanished. Sorrel Marsden still makes a yearly pilgrimage to the area, and walks the Wentshire Forest Pass in search of his son. A bus stop, erected after Alfie disappeared, but which then fell into disuse, now serves as a small memorial to the boy. The local people treat Sorrel Marsden with great sympathy. On cold days, people are known to drive up to the pass with food and hot drinks, which are passed through the windows of vehicles to the shuffling pensioner, a shadow bound to the forest by his grief.

But back to that night.

As I've mentioned, Sorrel Marsden placed the call to the emergency services at 11:05 p.m. He was at the edge of the Baxter's development site, not far from the pass. The contractors had recently demolished a row of abandoned buildings. Back in 1988, phone boxes were much more

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common, and it was not particularly strange that one stood in such a remote location.

Officers from Heddlu Gogledd Cymru *(North Wales Police) arrived approximately an hour later to find Sorrel Marsden curled into a ball inside the phone box.*

While a statement was being taken from Sorrel, the first responders began a preliminary hunt for Alfie, and more police and the ambulance service were called to the scene. A perimeter was quickly established and that was when Sir Harrison's company was asked to assist.

—Those lights … that was the start of it. There was not a single piece of equipment that behaved as it should that night. Some people even thought we'd deliberately sabotaged it all! Humphrey himself drove down there on Christmas Eve to try and help. We did all we could. But that forest, it was as if it was against us from the start.

These are pertinent words, as we will discover.

Sir Harrison now explains to me the effect the calamity surrounding the initial search for Alfie Marsden and the resulting negative press had on his business partner.

—That was the beginning of the end for Humphrey. It ripped him open – the idea that anyone would think we'd done any of this for our own gain. When I got to the site myself, I could already see what it was doing to Humphrey, the newspaper reporters around him like vultures.

—Do you think that's what killed him in the end?

—Doubtless. He used to dream about that little boy, you know? Humphrey said he used to dread going to sleep, because he kept hearing his little voice crying from the forest and he couldn't do anything to help him.

Humphrey Blackwood was found dead at his home the following

year, a cocktail of prescription medicine and alcohol in his system. His death was reported as suicide.

Back to the night of 1988.

The initial search effort had already been hindered by the weather and the denseness of the forest. The pass was closed so that a new team of officers could comb the area, but this was only after a huge delay while they moved the contractor's vehicles and equipment. The half-constructed development in the forest was searched first. One of the most famous – and poignant – photographs of the time shows a rough line of police in oilskins, drenched through, heads down, sticks in their hands, pushing through the relentless forest. The oak trees in that photograph rear up all around them like claws. Between the trees great swathes of hedge woundwort and ferns lap at their shins, as if trying to push them back. The searchers' faces are grim, eyes downcast. It is an image of futility.

The perimeter was widened further and further as the days passed. Cadaver dogs were brought to the forest and people from the surrounding communities arrive to aid in the search.

No trace of Alfie was ever found.



Let's now go over the statement given to police by Sorrel Marsden.

Sorrel Marsden was driving seven-year-old Alfie back to his home in Wrexham from his ex-partner's home in Audlem.

Sorrel's former partner, and mother of Alfie, Sonia Lewis, was, allegedly, an alcoholic. According to Sorrel, he and Sonia had been trying, for Alfie's sake, to spend Christmas together. Sorrel says he had an additional reason: Christmas was always a bad time for Sonia, so he couldn't trust her to be alone with their son.

Sorrel states that he bathed Alfie, read him a story and put him down to sleep at around 8:30 p.m. According to Sorrel, Sonia had been drinking for most of the day and by 9 p.m. was 'a mess'. Sorrel began wrapping presents to fill the boy's stocking when Sonia became argumentative and

abusive. Sorrel says she was angry because he was being 'too loud' with the wrapping paper and began to raise her voice. Alfie woke up, crying, at around 10 p.m., whereupon Sonia threw a pair of scissors at Sorrel. At that point Sorrel decided that his and his son's safety was in jeopardy. Sorrel dressed Alfie and put him in the car. Sonia was, by this point, 'shrieking and delusional' and 'could not be reasoned with'.

At around 10:30 p.m., Sorrel was driving along Wentshire Forest Pass when he heard a strange noise coming from his car. He describes it as a 'tapping noise' coming from the engine.

Sorrel states that he was afraid of driving any further in case he had an accident. So he stopped. At this point Alfie was still asleep. After looking under the bonnet of the car, Sorrel states he went to check on Alfie, but found the car door open, Alfie's seat belt undone and the child nowhere to be seen.

Sorrel says he panicked and began searching in the nearby forest for his son, but the persistent rain and the darkness made this impossible.

This is when he decided that the most sensible course of action was to alert the emergency services. Sorrel, like anyone else in the area surrounding Wentshire Forest, knew about the Baxter and Blackwood development and thought he might find a phone box at the site. You heard the call he made at the start of this episode.

When the forensic search was eventually conducted at the site, it was found that Sorrel's car had no mechanical problems whatsoever. The persistent rain and the complications with the contractors' vehicles left little else for the police to examine.

The most unpleasant and disturbing element of Sorrel's story is the empty car seat. What drove Alfie Marsden into the darkness of Wentshire Forest? Some have questioned whether he was driven *in there at all, suggesting instead that he was lured. If that is the case, then who or what could entice a child away from his father? And this is when the idea of the Wentshire Witch is inevitably raised…*

Aside from the witch, however, there are other stories that abound about the inhabitants of Wentshire Forest.

—Hey Scott. First of all, it's a pleasure to see you're still here, if it is you, that is!

—Who knows anymore, right?

[laughter]

The voice you're hearing may be familiar – if you're a fan of paranormal podcasts that is. It's Howie Dove, host of the long-running They're Out There.

—Seriously man, I'm honoured to be on.

—So, They're Out There *covered Wentshire Forest a year or so ago, didn't it?*

—Correct. I steered away from the Alfie Marsden disappearance as much as possible though.

—OK, so your podcast looked into the history and folklore of Wentshire Forest. I'm going to play an extract from it now.

Audio extract from *They're Out There*, Episode 19: Wentshire Forest

The earliest known inhabitants of that part of North Wales were the Deceangli or the Tegeingl, who were a Celtic tribe, obliterated by the Roman invaders in around AD 48. According to the records of General Pullius Ostorius Scapula, an attempt to clear the forest to construct a silver mine was thwarted by some sort of resistance from what were known only as 'forest people', who held the oak trees 'as dear as a dwelling or a palace' and defended them 'with terror'.

The Romans were able to build their road around the Celts' forest but not through it, so were unable to make it a straight route.

So what do we know about these 'forest people'? Almost nothing. There is a passage in Tacitus's *The Annals* that mentions something about 'forest ablaze' or 'forest lights' … but these terms seem at odds with the idea that these people held the trees sacred.

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—Howie, Wentshire Forest is a popular UFO hotspot, is it not?

—Yeah. Although, claims of bright lights above a military air force base, to me, at least, are not exactly surprising. And with the witch story and the UFOs, it's like people are trying to layer stories upon stories to obscure other stories.

—How do you mean?

—There's a lot more to Wentshire Forest. During the fourteenth century, the black plague was spreading across Europe, killing thousands. A passage in the writings of a local scholar states that in this area, the *'Pobl y goedwig'* were 'unaffected'.

—The what?

—The 'people of the forest'. There's no more detail than that, it's incredibly frustrating. I did, however, read a medieval account from a pastor in a nearby village that spoke of local children being sent into the forest in exchange for some sort of 'cure'.

—That sounds significant, given Sorrel Marsden's story…

—Sorry, Scott, but I'd say it's just coincidence.

—You did discover other accounts of people being lured into Wentshire Forest though, didn't you?

—I did. During the mid-1900s, there was another pastor, this time down in Pontypool – that's South Wales, the other end of the country. His name was Edmund Jones and he firmly believed that the '*Tylwyth Teg*' were part and parcel of Christianity.

—Tylwyth Teg?

—The fairy folk.

—Jones stated that they favoured the oak trees, and those who cut them down 'lost their lives by a strange aching pain'. He was also apparently 'led astray' by the 'old woman of the mountain' on Llanliddel Bryn near Pontypool. He says the same thing happened to him in Wentshire, but this time, it was a 'dancing company with music' that tried to 'entice him to join their merriment between the royal oaks'. According to Jones, he held tight to an iron cross around his throat and recited scripture until they went away.

—The story of the Wentshire Witch has something about being lured into the forest with music, does it not?

—It does.

—Was there any more detail about these 'fair folk'?

—Yes, and this is another pertinent point for your investigation. Jones claimed that the *Tylwyth Teg* have an admiration for 'lovely children' and will do their best to 'take' them or else exchange them for their own babies.

—Changelings?

—Precisely. In fact, Edmund Jones said he had first-hand experience of a baby that had been swapped for one of the *Tylwyth Teg*. When he described the changeling, he said there was 'something diabolical in its aspect'.

—Poor kid.

—These folk beliefs were strong at the time, but that's all they were: folk beliefs and superstitions. It was easier back then to blame birth defects or mental illness on witches and fairies.

—I suppose another big question, then, is whether Sorrel Marsden had any knowledge of these stories?

—I'm sure both Sorrel and Sonia will have known about the Wentshire Witch. But as far as I know, neither of them ever mentioned anything about fairies. Sorrel still sticks to his story, doesn't he?

—I believe so, yes.

—Do you think you'll interview him?

—It's an interview that the world would want, but I very much doubt Sorrel Marsden would talk to me.

—Poor fella. Can you even imagine losing your kid like that? Have the whole world speculating on whether you killed him or not.

—I still hope he'll speak to me, though.

—I get it, man.

Sorrel was the prime suspect in Alfie's disappearance, and was even questioned officially for his murder, before being released. In fact, no evidence that any wrongdoing occurred has ever emerged.

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—So when did you first meet Sorrel Marsden?

—It was in the kitchens at the Crown Royal in Penmaenmawr. We were just a pair of boys, like – only seventeen.

Darren Morgan is in his mid-sixties but looks ten years younger. His frame is statuesque: rugby player's shoulders and a square jaw. We talk over a pint in his local pub in Conwy, where he lives with his wife.

—Grotty little commis chef, I was, when I left school.

—You were good friends with Sorrel Marsden?

—That's right. Best friends, I would say. It's amazing what a kitchen can do … it makes or breaks you.

—An intense environment then?

—Oh, it was brutal. That's what brought us together, see? Chef burning your backside, while you're deep in the shit in the middle of service. You've only got each other you to rely on, see?

—You became close quickly?

—I'm not sure if close was the right word for it. We were mates, but we were never *close*. Sorrel wasn't an easy man to get to know; he put up a lot of front. He was short as well, and always had a bit of rage, didn't he?

But kitchens are more or less like the military, and I think he liked that. You have to wear uniform, do what you're told and put up with a big fat fucker shouting in your face. You also spend half your wages on booze at the end of the night to wind down. Ironic.

—Do you remember those times well?

—They're all a bit blurry really. I remember seventy-six because that was the year we both moved away.

The two friends separated naturally: Sorrel had found temporary work in Wrexham and Darren found a more permanent job in Conwy, where he met his wife-to-be. Darren doesn't know much about what

Sorrel did during the time they were apart, save that he never stayed anywhere long. There's nothing untoward about this, high turnover being common in the catering industry. But while Darren was putting down roots, Sorrel was still drifting in the wind.

A few years later, and purely by chance, Darren and Sorrel were brought together.

—We were back together again. The old team. Living in a shared house in Shrewsbury, I think. We were in our mid-twenties by that point. Working in hotels.

—*Was Sorrel still the same?*

—More or less. Moodier though … Angry.

—*What had happened to make him that way?*

—The thing about kitchens, right – well, not just kitchens, the whole catering industry – it's incestuous, you see. Chefs shag the waitresses, waitresses shag the chefs. It's just how it goes. Thing with Sorrel, though, he could never get on board with all that. He was always trying to have a *proper* relationship, you know? Boyfriend-girlfriend, kids and marriage, that sort of thing. He was only in his early twenties.

—*Would Sorrel ever bring girls home too?*

—Sort of. We'd bring a load of folk back and have a good drink, play some records. Then one of us might get lucky.

—*I understand.*

—Sorrel, though, he was always funny about it. He always had this belief that if one of the girls stayed over with him, that they were *his* afterwards.

—*Perhaps he wanted more than a one-night stand.*

—Aye. More than just a shag. That was how his mind worked. I think that was how he'd been brought up – to have respect, you know? He never really talked about his family, though. I think his gran brought him up.

—*Did Sorrel ever have a stable girlfriend around this time?*

—See, the way he was – that was why he ended up going with

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… I don't know how to put it … girls that weren't so good for him…

—*What did he tell you, if anything, about these relationships?*

—He would say he was sick and tired of dating 'psychos'. They always seemed to be messing him about, he said. They would always be phoning him, crying and screaming and making a fuss.

—*Why? Did you ever know what was going on?*

—He seemed to attract the damaged ones – broken girls, girls with problems. And when you try and be nice, you end up getting hurt, that's what Sorrel used to say. I think he wanted to look after them, be a father figure.

—*Can you remember any of these women?*

—Yeah. The last one he ever spent any amount of time with – the one before Sonia – Mad Mary, we called her. Oh, dear me! She was one of the chambermaids at the hotel where we were. Just another one passing through.

—*Did everyone know her by this name?*

—Not at first, no. Only afterwards; only after Sorrel had been with her. That's when everyone found out. I think it was because of him.

—*So she seemed fairly reasonable when they met?*

—She was a character, like. She was only our age, but she'd … lived a life. She was one with the drugs and that, you see – she had a habit. Acid I think, LSD. She was bad news, that one. You could tell that just from looking at her.

—*But Sorrel fell for her like he did the others – straightaway?*

—Oh yeah, big time. You could see it happening. He was all over her – giving her lots of attention, lots of compliments. He was always in and out the kitchen, making sure she was OK – sometimes having a go at people if they were mean to her, that sort of thing.

—*So they dated?*

—Yes, and she was very … receptive, shall we say, to Sorrel's old-fashioned charm. She liked him putting his arm around her when they were out. If we were in the pub and anyone looked at her, he

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was straight over, in their face. Threw it all back in his face though, she did, in the end.

Darren tells me that, much as he did later with Sonia, Sorrel distanced himself a little from his friends while he and Maryanne were together. Darren would see her sometimes in the boarding house where the two were staying, or in the pub after shifts. On her days off, she would come to the house and stay in Sorrel's room or they would spend the afternoon in the pub.

—*When did you notice things beginning to unravel between them?*

—Sorrel would tell me little things. He would say she was always on at him about other women. He started to feel like he couldn't even talk to a waitress without Maryanne finding out.

—*Did you see this first-hand?*

—You don't really notice unless you're looking, do you? Sorrel was always trying to do his best for her, but I think he found it hard. He was everything to her. Her parents weren't in the picture, and she seemed to be all alone, save for the bad lot she bought drugs off. And he found them hard to manage.

—*What was wrong?*

—He says they were talking about him behind his back. Whenever he went anywhere with her they were whispering about him, bitching.

With people like them, druggies and losers, it was the drugs, see – made them all paranoid. And he and I reckoned they were jealous. I think that was true. No one else was like him. All the young girls in the restaurants and the bars, they used to flock round him, you know.

—*What about when Sorrel and Maryanne were together – how did they seem then?*

—Oh they used to have rows. I could hear her screaming at him in the night. He would always look tired the next day – ground down, fed up.

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—But the two of you never talked about it?

—Not properly. He would say things occasionally – tell me he thought she was losing it. I think he tried his best with her, you know? But it was when she told him she was pregnant – that's when it all went out the window.

—Pregnant?

—They'd broken up, see? He ended it, I think, but she wasn't having it. I wasn't there, but he told me the whole story. She came to the house on his day off with a pillow under her jumper; she was screaming and told him it was his.

—What happened?

—He told me he pulled the pillow out and threw it at her, told her to get out and never come back. She was hardly ever in work anyway. After that, everyone started talking about her, calling her 'Mad Mary'.

Darren tells me more about the many other times Sorrel Marsden tried to cultivate a stable relationship with the various waiting staff and occasionally with fellow chefs who passed through the hotel system. All these relationships ended disastrously. Darren puts this down to unstable people trying to take advantage of Sorrel's good nature.

—Did Sorrel find it difficult to cultivate friendships too?

—You all get along, have a drink and that after work but you don't really have proper *friends* in that sort of environment. And if you do, it's rare.

—You were Sorrel's only real friend?

—There was someone else, now I come to think of it; another chef. I think she might have been the only woman Sorrel didn't try and put the moves on. I forget her name – Winnie. Wendy maybe? She never tried to mess him about. I think that's why they were mates. Like him and me, they were equals. Of course he forgot all about her when Sonia came along. Poor woman, I wonder what became of her.

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I wonder what it was inside Sorrel that made him yearn to settle down.

I think of that Christmas Eve back in 1988 – Sorrel desperately clinging to an ideal of a perfect family Christmas for his little boy, despite knowing that Sonia was more or less consumed by her alcohol dependency.

Darren and Sorrel eventually moved away from Shrewsbury in early 1981, this time taking seasonal work at a holiday resort in Prestatyn, North Wales. Both men were now in their early thirties.

—*This was when Sorrel met Sonia, is that right?*

—It was indeed. It was her home town. Mad Mary joined us there too … unfortunately.

—*Sonia was only young when Sorrel got to know her, correct?*

—Oh yes. This was – what? – Eighty-one, eighty-two? I remember it well: Dayton's, the holiday park. It was great there. We got to live in and, I tell you, it was like a holiday for us too. Sonia was working there, and Sorrel and me were in the kitchens.

—*What did Sonia do?*

—She was working with the kids and that, and doing the entertainment in the evening. They only picked the young, pretty ones for that. I tell you what, though, they liked to party – we all did. That's why we called our apartment 'the Party Palace'.

—*You two would throw parties there, I take it?*

—That was all Sorrel. He was single again, escaping from another crazy one, no doubt. So the whole Party Palace thing was all for his benefit.

—*Was that where Sorrel first got together with Sonia?*

—Oh, yeah. He was after her from the first moment he saw her. I could see when he was showing off, laying on the compliments, puffing out his chest.

—*There was a bit of an age difference between Sorrel and Sonia, wasn't there? He was, what? mid-thirties? She was much younger?*

—Aye, but, you know, when he met her, I really thought that she was the one for him, despite her age.

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Sonia Lewis was nineteen years old in 1981. She came from Prestatyn and worked at the holiday camp full-time. Sonia didn't live in like the others, so she spent her nights staying on the floors of the friends she made there.

—I always felt a bit sorry for her, you know? She wasn't like the others – she was younger, she'd never really been anywhere. Staying in our scabby apartment instead of at her parents' house was an adventure for her…

—*So, Sonia wasn't transient like most of the workers there?*

—Pretty much everyone who worked at Dayton's moved on to somewhere else. Sonia and the older people, they were the only ones who stayed. I kept my eye out for her, I did. She was like a lost little lamb.

—*Do you think that appealed to Sorrel?*

—I think so, after what he'd been through with Maryanne. He was good to Sonia; he looked out for her. And he was smitten with her from the off. And as soon as he worked his charm, well, she was just besotted with him.

—*Did their age gap ever bother him … or anyone else?*

—I only remember one time anyone else getting funny about it. It was one of the old ones – a cleaner – been there for a hundred years, thought she owned the place. Sylvia, she was called. Face like an old boot. Sonia had taken our clothes to the laundrette, see? But she came back crying her eyes out. I'm sat in the living room, smoking my first fag of the day, trying to shake off my hangover. Sorrel's still asleep, I can hear him snoring.

She sits down, and I ask her what's the matter? Turns out Sonia's been walking down the path to the laundrette and that little witch Sylvia pops out from nowhere with her mop and bucket and gives Sonia an earful!

—*What did she say?*

—She had a right go, apparently. Told the poor girl she should be ashamed of herself. Said that Sorrel was old enough to be her father!

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—*That's harsh!*

—I know. Little Sonia was in pieces. I told her that Sylvia was nothing but a dried-up little ratbag with no friends and she should take no notice of her. That made her laugh.

—*How did Sorrel take it?*

—You know what? We never told him. Sonia thought that was best. She didn't want no trouble, she said. I thought he wouldn't have cared one bit. He said that Sonia was 'the one' and he didn't give a stuff about her age. But I did what she thought was best.

—*Did you ever hear any other negative comments from the other staff about the two of them?*

—Well, what can I say? She was pretty, and he was like a cat that got the cream, always showing her off. I think he was proud of how young she was compared to him. And I think she couldn't believe it herself. He wasn't a big fan of her friends, though, the young 'uns, like. And I think the feeling was mutual.

—*Did you notice any signs in those early days that there might have been any problems between Sonia and Sorrel?*

—They had their ups and downs, but what couple doesn't? I think he found her hard to deal with sometimes. He told me she'd get a bee in her bonnet, get in a sulk over little things. She would start an argument then turn on the tears. That drove him nuts. I hoped she wouldn't be another Mad Mary!

—*How often would these arguments happen?*

—Like I say, all we did back then was work hard, and when we finished we went on the drink. So there were arguments – it was inevitable. On her days off, Sonia would come and sit in our chalet like a good little girl, waiting for Sorrel to finish his shift. He would come back tired, and she would be on his case.

Then we'd all start drinking. That's when it got bad, see?

There were always people coming and going at the Party Palace, and he would get attention off a lot of the women. He had the gift of the gab, see, and Sonia was still a girl, more or less. So it upset her when women more Sorrel's age tried it on.

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—How bad did the arguments get?

—I remember one time I went to the toilet in the middle of the night and found poor Sonia curled up under a towel in the bath!

—What?

—I know! I didn't know what to do. And I was bursting for the loo! I had to wake her up. I remember it quite well actually: she was all sleepy and soft – looked even younger. They'd had a row. Then he'd fallen asleep, and was snoring his head off in his room. I was close to asking her if she wanted my bed and I'd go in the bath.

—Why didn't you?

—I just thought it wasn't worth the aggro. It wasn't like Sorrel was jealous, it was more like … I knew that he'd dwell on it. So she left the bathroom, I did my business, and she came back in. I remember asking her if she was OK. I said it twice: 'Are you OK? Really, though?' And she said yes. That was it.

—Did Sorrel mention it? Did you mention it to him?

—Like I say, we never talked about those sorts of things. Everything just moved on, and they seemed happy. Then one day, out of nowhere, he announced that they were moving in together!

—Wow. That was a little premature, don't you think? Especially with the relationships Sorrel had had before.

—I thought so too at first. He never said anything and suddenly he's gone and got himself a sous-chef job somewhere else. Him and Sonia were going to buy a house. Crazy. I'd never seen Sorrel settle so easily and with someone so nice. Maybe he'd finally had some luck!

—What about you?

—I had to move on, didn't I? When the summer season at Dayton's ended, I was off on my merry way. My Briallen found she was pregnant, and my days at the Party Palace were at an end.

—Did you and Sorrel stay in touch?

—Sort of. I found a job back here in Conwy. Thought I'd make an honest woman of Briallen, lay down some roots. We both moved on. So we only saw each other now and then.

Darren recalls the occasional barbeque and party at the flat in Prestatyn where Sorrel and Sonia lived. Sorrel was now in his early forties, Sonia in her early twenties.

—I couldn't keep up with the two of them anymore. As far as I could see they were still partying, drinking. I think it was better for him because he could choose who came round to see them – *his* mates, men his age. Sonia would totter around in her skimpy dresses; Sorrel was cock of the walk.

—*Was it a happy home?*

—As far as I could see. He was very protective of her still, very attentive. The drinking was a worry sometimes. With her more than him. Always pissed, she was, just *legless*; you couldn't get much sense out of her. So it took me right by surprise when they told me they were trying for a baby. I mean, they were still the life and soul of the party, them two. I didn't know if she would be able to just *stop* like that. I worried a bit, I suppose. I could see my own life was about to change, you see, with the little one coming. Sleepless nights, nappies, all that.

—*I would have thought that was perfect for Sorrel. You said he always wanted to settle down.*

—That's what he always wanted, yes. I think he thought with Sonia, that he could … I dunno, *tame* her, I suppose. He could make a wife and mother out of her.

—*When was the last time you saw the two of them?*

—I was up there in Prestatyn for a jolly. Sorrel and Sonia were having one of their parties. He was loving it, strutting round. I was so happy for him, that he'd found happiness at last. Sonia though, she was quiet.

—*Why do you think that was?*

—I think it was all a bit much for her, poor lass. She was pregnant by then. Bless Sorrel, he was by her side, just like always, looking after her. That gave me hope.

There was one moment, though, when I wondered if everything was right in paradise.

—*Go on.*

—Well, I came across Sonia on my way to the toilet. I'd had a few myself, see? I was half-cut, babbling some rubbish about how happy I was for her. And she gave me this look. It was just for a second – just a moment.

—*What did you see in that look?*

—I remembered the early days, back in Prestatyn, at Dayton's – how I used to feel sorry for her, you know? I says to her, 'Everything alright, bach?' And I saw then, just this sort of sadness in her eyes. I was sure she was about to say something, when Sorrel comes along and takes her in his arms, kissing her, telling her how lucky they were, all that.

—*What do you think she was going to tell you?*

—You know, looking back now and knowing what happened with them and their kiddie, I think she wasn't cut out to be a mother. Sounds harsh, don't it? But I reckon she knew it herself. And that was what she wanted to say to me.

—*What makes you think Sonia wasn't cut out for motherhood? You mentioned the drinking, but was there anything else in her personality that made you feel this way?*

—Her age had to come into it. Sorrel was having to look after her. He was like a father more than anything. And I think Sonia was ashamed of herself a bit. It was like she was Sorrel's *daughter* rather than his lover.

After the birth of Alfie, Darren and Sorrel drifted even further apart. Aside from a few odd phone calls, the two fell out of touch completely. So, unfortunately, Darren cannot shed any light on Sorrel and Sonia's relationship during the seven years after Alfie was born. However, Darren has helped us build a little bit of history around the couple.

I feel we're at a point where we have all we can get from Darren, but there are two more threads I want to explore with him.

—*Can I ask: what do you think happened to Alfie that night?*

—Oh well, that's just such a puzzle, isn't it? You know how I felt the day Alfie went missing? You know that feeling – that sudden guilt when you realise you've forgotten something important, like your mam's birthday? It was like that.

I saw it on the news and I felt like I should have had some idea, some insight. I remember sitting by the phone, sometimes picking it up, sometimes dialling Sorrel's area code then putting it down again. What was I going to say to him? Briallen and me, we talked about going up there, lending a hand. We didn't, though.

I did wonder if I should try and speak to Sonia rather than Sorrel, but I didn't want to get between them. I sometimes wonder, though, about Sonia, about what became of her.

After Alfie's disappearance, Sonia Lewis seemed to vanish, shunning media attention. In fact, as far as I am aware, Sonia has never spoken out about the night in question, nor has she attended the small memorials on the ten- and twenty-year anniversaries of her son's disappearance. Apparently she now lives alone in some remote location. She has been dubbed 'uncaring' and 'a disgrace to motherhood' by the press.

Darren has become a little emotional and overwhelmed. I get from him the sense of hopelessness that pervades the case of Alfie Marsden. I decide to change tack.

—What do you take from some of the more … 'paranormal' theories that abounded when Alfie wasn't found?

—Load of rubbish, isn't it? I tell you something: there's folk out there that have no shame, no morals and no consideration. I heard about that psychic who said Alfie was still in the wood 'crying out for his mammy and daddy'. That made me feel sick. That was the only time I felt like going down there – so I could find that psychic. They prey on the weak and vulnerable, those people.

—What do you make of Sorrel's story?

—I wish I had an answer. He just told the facts of what happened, didn't he?

—If you had to come up with a theory, what would you say happened that night?

—Only Sorrel knows what went on that night. And I have no reason not to believe him. Maybe the boy woke up and got scared? Maybe he ran off and got lost? I don't think Sorrel could have done anything different. He was in that situation by himself, no one to help him. The man I knew would have done anything for Sonia and that boy.

I just think that maybe he was telling the truth…



Darren's utter bemusement about what happened to the son of his old friend suggests he's coming from the same place as the rest of us. But I do feel that there's a part of Darren that can't allow him to face the possibility that Sorrel might have played a part in what happened to Alfie.

So what conclusions, if any, can we draw from this first episode?

We now have a little understanding about the types of people that Sorrel and Sonia were, and about their uneasy relationship. Their story is a little unconventional and there are elements that are troubling – such as the arguments they had, and, of course, Sonia's descent into alcoholism. Their age gap, perhaps, could also be seen as controversial.

From Darren's account, it sounds as if Sorrel rowed like mad to keep his relationship off the rocks but ultimately ran out of strength, watching in anguish as his dreams of a happy family were dashed, all of which accentuates the tragedy of Alfie's short life.

We have also begun to build from Darren Morgan's account a picture of Sorrel Marsden. This is a foothold – a start, I hope.

In addition, Darren mentions the 'psychic' who tried to assist in the Alfie Marsden case and curses the false hope that person gave to Sorrel and Sonia. Sir Harrison also discounted any talk of paranormal involvement in this case. As we all know, though, there are some stories that beg to be told.

So in episode two, we are going to stray slightly from our initial path

of reason and convention. We are going to go against the grain of Darren's final sentiments, and of Sir Harrison's assurances. I want to look back at a few of the stranger things claimed about the forest itself.

We will hear an account from someone who actually experienced preternatural occurrences in Wentshire Forest. And we will question what, if anything these occurrences may have to do with Alfie Marsden.

So, we'll be heading into uncertain territory – into the mystery of the forest. We're beneath different trees this series, but our feet are sounding against the same darkness and once again we're facing our fears head-on.

I hope you'll join me.

This has been Six Stories *with me, Scott King.*

Until next time…