

# UNDERWORLD

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## CHAPTER 1

“I saw it!” she said. “I tell you, I saw it.”

“Saw what?” asked Joe’s mum.

“Some sort of animal,” said Mrs Burke.

It was Monday morning, just after eight o’clock. Joe and his mum were leaving home. Joe was on his way to school. His mum was on her way to work at the local supermarket.

Mrs Burke lived next door to them, at number 77. She knew their normal routine, so she was waiting on her doorstep to stop them as they left the house.

“I just wondered if you’d seen it?” she said to Joe and his mum. “This animal?”

“When was this?” asked Joe.

“Last night,” said Mrs Burke. “About half past eleven. I was just going to bed. I looked out the front here. I always take a look out the front last thing at night. And I saw it. Over there.”

She pointed across the road. Opposite the houses was a large stretch of grass. Beyond that were trees. This was Oakshot Wood. Oakshot Road, where Joe lived, snaked around the wood and led down to the centre of town.

“By the trees?” asked Joe.

“Yes,” said Mrs Burke. “It ran along the edge of the wood. Well, no, not ran. Not ran, exactly. It more sort of hopped.”

“What was it, a kangaroo?” laughed Joe.

“It’s no laughing matter,” said Mrs Burke. “It scared the life out of me. It was about a metre high. Not very tall. It was kind of stooped over. I was so scared because I’ve never seen anything like that before. That’s why I thought I’d ask you if you’d seen it too.”

“It must have been a dog,” said Joe’s mum.  
“Something like that.”

“No, no,” said Mrs Burke. “It was on its hind legs. It was sort of walking, sort of hopping. What’s the word I want? Lolloping, that’s it. Swaying a bit. Rather like you see monkeys walk.”

“Well it can’t have been an ape,” said Joe’s mum.  
“We’d have heard if something had escaped from somewhere.”

“And there are no zoos or wildlife parks for miles,” said Joe.

Mrs Burke shook her head. “I don’t know. I really don’t know. It scared me half to death. It

definitely wasn't a monkey or a dog. I only saw its shape. It had funny-shaped ears. And its arms were kind of bent up."

"Sorry, we've got to go," said Joe's mum. "We'll be late."

"Oh, yes, sorry Mrs Harris, I don't want to keep you," smiled Mrs Burke. "I just thought I'd ask."

Joe and his mum hurried away.

"She must be going a bit batty," whispered Joe's mum.

Joe shrugged. "Just a dog or something. After all, it was night. The street lamps aren't exactly bright!"

"Her eyesight must be going," added his mum.

They parted at the corner of Walker Street. Joe's mum went left towards the supermarket. Joe carried on along Oakshot Road.

A hundred metres on he came to a roadblock. Police were diverting cars. People on foot were being led around the block in small groups by police officers.

The reason for the roadblock was a noisy demo. A large group of locals, holding placards and chanting slogans, was marching across Oakshot Road. They were heading towards the wood.

Joe saw some pupils from his school. They were watching the protesters march while they waited for the police to escort them past the demo. Joe walked over to them.

“Hi,” he said. “Is this about the fracking?”

“Yes,” nodded a boy from his year group.

“They’re drilling again today.”

Joe could hear the steady whine of the drills. It was coming from inside Oakshot Wood. A mining company had been drilling into the ground there for more than a month. They were

mining for shale gas by pumping water into rocks deep underground.

Joe checked his watch. “I hope this isn’t going to take long.”

“They’re right to protest!” said a voice behind him.

He turned to find Sarah Jones. She also lived in Oakshot Road, a few doors along from Joe. She was in his tutor group at school, but the two of them had never got on well. Joe was a quiet, laid-back guy, with a small circle of friends. Sarah was sporty and opinionated, always first with her hand up in class.

“OK,” shrugged Joe.

“No, it’s not OK,” said Sarah. “Fracking is dangerous. It pollutes water supplies, for one thing.”

“And,” said Joe, “if these test holes they’re drilling work out, it will also bring hundreds of



jobs to the town.”

“At the expense of the environment,” said Sarah.  
“Oakshot Wood is historic woodland.”

Joe was getting cross now. He felt like arguing, just for the sake of it. “Fracking takes place all over the world. It’s no worse than coal mining or drilling for oil. You’d be the first to complain if the gas ran out and your central heating got turned off.”

Sarah was about to reply, but didn’t. Instead she shook her head angrily and stormed off.

“I think it’s going to be one of those days,” muttered Joe to himself.

The police led Joe and the others around the protest. They continued on their way to school. Joe thought no more about the fracking, or about what Mrs Burke had seen.

However, on his way home that day, he passed a horrible sight.