

“Simon Toyne is one of my favorites, bringing a lean  
muscularity and textured richness to his thrillers.”

—#1 *New York Times* bestselling author **GREGG HURWITZ**

# THE CLEARING

A  
NOVEL

SIMON  
TOYNE

AUTHOR OF *DARK OBJECTS*

## **Dedication**

*This is dedicated to all the readers, booksellers, librarians, reviewers, and bloggers who have read and recommended my books over the past ten years. A book without a reader is only a half-formed thing. So thanks to all of you for helping to make my stories whole.*

# Epigraph

The charcoal burner has tales to tell.  
He lives in the forest, alone in the forest,  
He sits in the forest, alone in the forest.

A. A. Milne

Even on the brightest day,  
the forest is filled with shadows.

Traditional saying—Anon.

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# Prologue

**G**reen-dappled sunlight and ancient smells. Earth. Moss. Rot.

He breathes it in, all of it, filling himself with the warm forest air and the faint smell of woodsmoke that clings to his clothes.

The whine of tiny insect wings rises by his right ear, but he does not move to brush it away. He stands in the shadows, hidden by leaves, matching the stillness of the green that surrounds and swallows him.

He learned the art of stillness from the forest just as he learned many things, ancient secrets whispered by the wind through high-reaching branches and murmured in the gentle flow of water in the brooks and streams that feed the roots beneath. The forest's secrets are his now, and his are theirs. He is the forest, and the forest is him. He knows what nourishes, what poisons, what gives life—and what brings death.

He looks up, his attention caught by a new noise, the soft sound of movement from something scuffing closer over dusty ground and dry leaves. He turns his head slightly, his ears fixing on the soft sound like a bat tracking a fluttering moth, until he sees it.

The rabbit is young and small, its lithe body moving steadily through slashes of sunlight that dapple the narrow path, which winds its way through the forest and past the shadowy spot where he stands so silent and still.

The rabbit stops and looks around as if sensing something. It's a doe, a juvenile on the cusp of adulthood, still timid and uncertain. It looks back, sniffing the air, eyes wide and alert as she scans the pathway, tilting her head slightly to reveal a mark on her neck then looks forward again, almost directly at him, though he knows she cannot see or smell him. He is standing downwind of her, veiled with leaves, the forest keeping him hidden like one of its many secrets.

The rabbit listens for a moment longer before moving again, hurrying up the path, drawing closer to where he stands waiting. He follows her with his eyes, raising the pipe to his lips, so slowly that the movement is lost in the constant, restless shifting of the forest. He takes a breath, fills his lungs, and holds it, his eyes unblinking as the rabbit draws nearer. She passes by so close he can hear her rapid breathing and see the mark clearly on her neck, a star outlined in fading blue ink. He follows her with the end of the pipe as she starts to move away, then pushes the air from his lungs in a sharp and concentrated breath.

The rabbit does not react to the sting of the dart immediately. She

hurries on for a moment or two before starting to weave, staggering a little and then a lot until she stumbles, falls, then lies perfectly still, half on and half off the path.

He emerges from the shadowy leaves and stands for a moment, listening to the soft creaks and whispers of the forest and watching the breath from her pink, open mouth lifting tiny puffs of dust from the path's surface.

A new sound pierces the woodland whispers, harsh and unnatural and accompanied by a low buzzing noise. His hand tightens around the pipe and the noise comes again. He takes another step closer to the rabbit and sees the source of it, lying on the ground by the rabbit's paw, the rectangular screen glowing in the gloom of the forest floor with the single word "MUM" displayed on it.

He raises his boot and brings it down hard, silencing the rabbit's phone with a swift crunch then kicks it away into the thick bracken. He grabs the rabbit under her arms and drags her off the path, her dark hair falling over the tattooed star on her neck as she disappears into the shadowy green of the forest.



# Part 1

*Day One*

*June 25*

*The morning after Midsummer's Eve*

**M**addie!

Adele violently shakes out another black bin-liner.

Where the hell was Maddie?!!

She scans the campsite, looking for her sister through the bone-colored bell tents and artfully rusted camper vans, staggering closer wearing last night's clothes and a blank expression. But all she sees are a few casualties from the Midsummer's Eve revelries lying on the ground where they'd passed out the night before, smoke from dying fires drifting across them like gunsmoke from a lost battle.

It's a mess, it was always going to be a mess, and it all needs cleaning up before eleven, when the council refuse lorry arrives. That's why she'd asked her older and supposedly wiser sister to help this morning, why she'd allowed her to crash on her floor in exchange for a promise that she would help with the post-Midsummer's Eve clear-up. And yet here she very much was not.

Adele wrenches the lid off one of the bins, her long brown hair scraped back and already sticking to her skin with the rising heat of the day, her thin, wiry body nut-brown from having to work outside all summer. She recoils at the stench that billows out along with a squadron of angry flies then violently twists the top of the bag into a knot, imagining it's Maddie's neck.

*I'll be there—Maddie had said. I won't stay out long but I promised to meet someone.*

Adele lifts the heavy, stinking bag out of the bin and dumps it on the ground to be picked up by the honey-wagon, an old, repurposed electric milk float Maddie should be driving but obviously isn't because she's not here. She fits a new liner into the bin and lets the lid fall with a loud bang.

Movement catches her eye in a dark pool of shadow beneath a sycamore tree as a man wearing a Cinderman costume of charcoal-blackened sacking lifts his head, roused by the sound of the banging bin.

"Morning!" Adele calls to him, loud and bright.

He winces as if the word is made of sharp metal, then looks up, eyes screwed tight against the brightness, trying to remember how he ended up under this tree. He looks so wretched with bits of twig and leaves in the greasy tangle of his hair that Adele pulls the bottle of water from her belt and tosses it over.

"Drink!" she commands.

He reaches to pick it up, spots a puddle of puke on the grass nearby

with flies lined up along the edge of it, and turns away, blowing his cheeks out as if he's about to add to it. He unscrews the cap and takes a tiny sip of water before lying slowly back down on the ground, hugging the bottle to his chest.

Adele yanks another bin liner from her belt and marches past him, heading to the next overflowing bin that needs emptying, scanning the campsite for Maddie again as she works the phone from her pocket.

No missed calls.

No texts.

She taps the screen to unlock it but it won't respond to her fingers inside the rubber glove, so she shakes her hand violently until the glove flies off, finds the last number she dialed, and calls it again, her fingers leaving steamy fingerprints on the screen. She holds the phone to her ear and screws her nose up against the foul smell of rubber and rotting garbage coming from her hand.

*Hey, leave me a message and I'll call you back.*

Maddie's smiling, childish-sounding voice cuts in without it ringing, which shows that her phone is still switched off.

Adele disconnects without leaving a message because she's left several already and instead scrolls through her contacts, looking for the names of people who might have been with Maddie last night, or might still be with her, or might at least know where she got to. She spots a contact for Ronan, one of Maddie's ex-boyfriends, and taps the contact to call him. Again, voicemail cuts in without it even ringing, because of course, all of Maddie's loser friends will still be sleeping off their hangovers this morning.

*Yo, this is me, do the thing after the thing.*

Adele clenches her jaw, waits for the tone, then forces her voice to be light.

"Hey, this is Adele, Maddie's sister. If you're with her, could you get her to give me a call, please? Thanks. Tell her I'm not mad, I'm just checking in."

She is mad of course and getting madder with every stinking bag she has to deal with, but inflicting her mood on Maddie's friends isn't going to accomplish anything. She scrolls through her contacts looking for more friends, ex-boyfriends, possible current boyfriends, though Maddie stays pretty tight-lipped about her love life. She says Adele is too judgy, which is true, because who wouldn't be judgy about the guys Maddie tends to go for? Laid-back, amiable losers are still losers.

She calls a couple more numbers, leaves a couple more messages, then

snatches the glove back up off the ground, works her hand back into it and scans the campsite one last time.

“Where the fuck are you, Maddie!?”

## 2

She wakes to dark beyond blackness and the heavy smell of earth.

She is on her back, arms by her sides, legs stretched out, staring straight up at—nothing. She studies the black, blinking slowly a few times to check that her eyes are actually open, but it looks the same either way.

She raises her hand in front of her face, moves it a little, touches her palm to her nose to prove it is there, then reaches up slowly and carefully into the blackness, both wanting and not wanting to touch something. She stretches up until she can reach no further then moves her arm in a slow and widening circle, feeling the faint chill rinse of cold air across her skin but touching nothing but darkness.

She lets her arm fall back down to her side, feeling in her pocket for her phone so she might use its light to see with, but the pocket is empty.

She takes deep breaths, flooding her lungs with damp-smelling air, and tries to remember where she is. She remembers walking through the forest but then nothing. She was there and now she is here, wherever “here” is.

She spreads her fingers and starts feeling around at her sides for her missing phone then widens her search, her palms skimming across the cold ground, reaching further and further until something brushes across the back of her right hand and she yanks it away. The sound of her gasp pushes back the dead silence and makes her realize that there are no other sounds here: no scratch of animals, no rustle of leaves, nothing.

She listens hard, studying the thundering quiet, listening out for the dry click of legs, or the patter of dislodged earth that might suggest that whatever her hand touched is alive and crawling closer.

She hears the thud of her own heartbeat and the whisper of blood in her ears but nothing more, so carefully, slowly, she reaches out again, feeling ahead with her fingers for whatever is there, tensing against the moment of its rediscovery.

She finds it again and freezes but forces herself to keep her hand where it is, stretched out in the dark with the unseen thing touching the back of it. She keeps as still as she can, ready to snatch it away at the first sign the thing is alive, but whatever it is, it remains perfectly still.

She takes a deep breath then slowly turns her hand, trembling slightly with the effort of reaching out until her fingers close around something cold and thin and fibrous. She tests it, squeezing it lightly and rubbing it between her fingertips. There are small hairs growing out of it and she almost drops it in revulsion but then a thought surfaces and she takes a firmer hold instead and gives it a hard, sharp tug. She feels it tighten in her

hand and dirt patters down from where the thing is anchored in the earth.

She feels her way further up and along it, her fingers mapping the twisting fibers growing steadily thicker the higher she goes. The hairs grow thicker too, branching out from the main tendril and tickling the back of her hand until the whole gnarly thing disappears abruptly into a wall of crumbling earth and she knows in an instant what it is, and where she is, and fear takes flight in her chest.

The thing she is holding in her hand is a root. A growing root, the root of something big.

She was walking through the forest and she's still there.

But she is no longer in the forest.

She is under it.

### 3

Adele hears the low roar of the municipal refuse lorry before she sees it, like a prehistoric animal rumbling closer through the forest telling her she's out of time. She floors the "go" pedal on the honey-wagon but the ancient electric engine just carries on at its standard four miles an hour. The repurposed milk float is part of the eco-friendly credentials of the campsite, a nice idea in principle but a total pain in practice. Even totally empty it barely manages to go faster than walking pace and it has a habit of running out of power unexpectedly, meaning it has to be towed back to the charging station by a 4x4, which totally cancels out its eco benefits. She creeps onto the paved loading area behind the splintery storage shed the owner Bill insists on calling the "Sanitation Station," yanks up the handbrake, and pulls her phone from her pocket.

11:16.

No new messages. No missed calls.

The lorry is running late but even so she has only managed to empty about two-thirds of the bins dotted around the campsite. An hour earlier she was furious at Maddie for leaving her to do all the work; now she just feels worried and a little sick in her stomach. The phone buzzes suddenly in her hand and she stabs the answer button when she sees who it is.

"Hey, Ronan."

"Yo!" The voice sounds dry and creaky, like it's worn out from a heavy night and badly needs oiling. "What's up?"

"Nothing much, I just . . . is Maddie with you?"

"Huh?"

"Maddie. Have you seen her at all?"

"Nah, man, she bailed."

"Bailed from what?"

"She was supposed to meet us at the beacon fire after the Cinderfield Parade but never showed."

"Which beacon fire?"

"The big one over at The Clearing."

Adele feels the blood drain from her face at the mention of the place and her eyes automatically flick over to the shadowy edge of the forest.

"Are you sure it was the one at The Clearing?"

"Yeah, man. I bumped into her at the parade and she said she was gonna meet us there, said she might bring some dude with her, but I guess she musta changed her mind."

Adele's eyes find the darkest shadows and she quickly looks away,

staring down at the brightest piece of sun-scorched ground instead.

“Did this dude have a name?”

“Yeah, sure.”

She waits for a beat then remembers this is a hungover Ronan she’s speaking to.

“Do you know what his name is?” she prompts.

“Nah, man, Maddie never said, but he gots to have a name, right? Everybody got a name.”

Adele shakes her head. Maddie actually went out with this clown for about three months, and he wasn’t even the densest of her boyfriends, not by a long way. A low IQ seemed to be like catnip to her sister.

“Listen,” she says, fighting to keep the frustration out of her voice, “if you see Maddie or she calls you, tell her I need to speak to her, OK?”

“You got it.”

Adele hangs up and stares at her phone.

The Clearing.

Maddie had never said anything about going to The Clearing. Then again, if she had, they would have got into an argument about it and Adele would have told her not to go, which is probably why Maddie hadn’t told her.

The bin lorry arrives in a cloud of dust and stench, lets out a loud hydraulic hiss, and shudders to a halt. Three large men wearing yellow high-vis jackets, orange trousers, and not much else step out of the cab. The largest of the three jabs a gloved thumb at the metal bins lined up behind the shed. “Them bags are supposed to be in the skips, love,” he says, “not on the back of your noddy car.”

“Sorry.” Adele unspools the charging cable that connects the electric vehicle to the solar panels on the roof and plugs it in. “I’m on my own this morning so I’m struggling a bit.”

“Don’t worry, darlin’” —he throws her a wink—“we’ll give you a hand.”

He starts plucking the bags off the back of the honey-wagon and dumping them on the ground by the business end of the lorry where the other two bears begin feeding them into the truck.

Adele glances back at the trees, her eyes drawn to the shadows shifting between fingers of sunlight. The Clearing is deep in the forest, a place neither she nor Maddie ever go, not anymore; they had promised each other. The shadows continue to shift, transforming into figures that watch her as if waiting for her to return.

She looks away, shivering despite the heat, and scrolls through her



contacts looking for an old entry:

Grizz—The Clearing

**H**er thumb moves to the call symbol and hovers above it for a few long seconds before she changes her mind. That door has stayed closed for a long time now and she won't risk opening it again until she absolutely has to.

She stuffs her phone back in her pocket, her anger at Maddie entirely gone now and transformed into something else, something more like worry. Maddie had gone into the forest to meet someone at The Clearing. And now she is missing.

She looks out across the campsite, willing Maddie to emerge from the forest, shoes in hand, doing the walk of shame. It's getting busier now, tent fronts unzipped and tied open, knots of people huddled around gas cookers and rekindled fires, frying up breakfasts and hangover cures. Everyone looks pretty chill. No one looks like they'd give two shits if she didn't end up finishing her jobs that morning. She turns to the man in the high-vis vest. "Where you off to next?"

"Got one more stop at Wendell's Dairy then we're back to the dump to offload."

Adele nods. The municipal tip was on the far side of Cinderfield, about a half a mile down the road. Cinderfield was also where the nearest police station was. She could call but she knew from experience that her call would be diverted to some generic call center where someone on minimum wage would read from a crib sheet, give her a crime number, then fob her off with no way of following any of it up. It was harder to ignore someone who was standing right in front of you, especially when that someone was her.

"You couldn't give me a lift into town, could you?"

The man in the high-vis vest peers at her like he's not sure he heard right. "You want a lift? With us? On the wagon?"

"Yeah, if that's OK."

He shakes his head and sucks air through tobacco-stained teeth. "Well, technically only authorized council personnel are allowed to ride on the wagon."

"Oh, come on," Adele says, giving him the full beam of her smile. "I smell like a bin bag, so if anyone asks, tell them you chucked me on the wagon by mistake."

## 4

She takes deep breaths that taste of earth, eyes wide and staring at the darkness, and tries to stay calm, tries not to panic, tries to remember. She was walking through the forest, and then she was here. That's it. That's all she can recall.

She starts feeling her way along the wall of earth with the roots growing out of it, building a map of the space in her mind as her hands move along it, dirt pattering to the ground at the touch of her fingertips.

Every few steps she stops and listens, turning her head as her ears search the darkness for something, anything, to grip onto: the distant sound of birdsong, a whisper of breeze, anything that might hint at a way out.

Once, when she and her sister had been at The Clearing for maybe a year, Grizz had led a bunch of them into the woods after a huge rainstorm. She'd taken them to a distant part of the forest where a huge oak had been swallowed whole by the ground. Only the crown was still visible, a green, leafy dome arching over the mud and storm-shredded leaves on the forest floor.

Grizz told them that there had once been coal and iron ore mines all over the forest and that many of the old tunnels did not appear on any maps, their locations taken to the grave by the black-market miners who'd dug them in secret to steal a living from the land. The floodwater from the storm must have run through one of these old tunnels, she explained, wearing away the old wooden supports until the weight of the tree and the earth above had caused it to collapse, dragging the great tree down.

Maybe she is in one of those tunnels now, somehow had fallen into a forgotten mine dug by long-dead hands. Maybe she had stepped on a mat of loose leaf mulch covering a sinkhole that had been opened up by the drying earth. She could easily have banged her head on the way down, knocking her unconscious and fogging her memory.

She looks up and studies the darkness again, searching for any hint of light. But the darkness is total, and her fear starts to rise again, and she still feels woozy, so she closes her eyes and breathes through her mouth. At least with her eyes closed the darkness feels more normal, and if she can't smell the earth either, she can almost pretend she's not here at all.

## 5

**M**allory Stoker Hawthorn Kingston, eighteenth Earl of Dean, paces in the dusty privacy of his study, red-eyed and sleep deprived, trying to remember how to act normal. He looks out across the green lawns of Cinderfield Abbey stretching away beyond the large, mullioned window to where a huge marquee is being erected between the Heritage Center and the forest. The Earl hates weddings, finds them vulgar and awful, but as weddings are about the only thing keeping the whole ship from sinking at the moment, he has no option but to put up with them.

He looks past the marquee to where the foresters' huts sit amidst smoking piles of blackened turf. They will have to douse them if the wind doesn't shift. Can't risk a bit of smoke getting in the nostrils of the wedding guests. Can't risk the angry emails, bad reviews online, and requests for refunds that would follow. He watches the groundsman tidying the lawn around the big tent, pruning in the orchard, and tending to the charcoal burns, wetting down the sacks that cover them. There are only three groundsmen now, where once there was an army.

His eyes settle on a cracked pane of Tudor glass, one of many in the medieval window that he can't afford to fix. Little repairs like these confront him wherever he goes in the Abbey, tiny reminders of the steady decay that is only getting worse.

He turns away and collapses into the chair behind his desk in a cloud of antique dust and surveys the paperwork littering the desktop. It's bills mainly. He had started to sort them into piles of lessening urgency to try to give himself something to focus on, but as they all seemed to be final demands, it had ended up making him feel even more anxious, so he'd given up. He spots his phone in among the unpaid bills, picks it up, and checks his email.

There are six new messages in his inbox, mostly spam from catering and hospitality companies trying to sell him things, also an inquiry for another bloody wedding in two summers' time. Hopefully by next year he can tell them all to piss off, either that or the whole thing will have imploded and tacky weddings with awful guests and hideous brides will be the least of his worries. He finds a number in his contacts and dials it, taking deep breaths and blowing them out as he waits for it to connect.

"Hello?" The voice sounds guarded.

"Hi, it's Mal. Sorry to call you out of the blue like this but, something happened last night, something . . ." His voice trails off as he searches for the right words.

“What kind of something?”

“Something bad. It’s . . . I don’t know where to begin really. I . . .”

“Don’t say anything else.” The voice is suddenly all business. “Not on the phone. Let’s meet somewhere.”

“Right. OK. Why don’t you come over to the Abbey?”

“No. Somewhere neutral and out of the way.”

“OK, how about . . . the well? St. Anthony’s Well.”

“That’ll probably be a bit busy today, although . . . actually, that might work. We can mingle with out-of-towners, hide in plain sight. Meet me there in half an hour, and don’t say anything to anyone until you’ve spoken to me.”

“OK, fine. I’ll see you at the we . . .”

A click tells the Earl that he’s already gone.

He checks the time and finds his son Sebastian’s number and pauses for a second, then dials it. Talking to his son will be OK. He already knows everything anyway.

The phone connects and a flat male voice answers. “Hello?”

The Earl clears his throat. “Hey, Seb, it’s me—how you holding up?”

“I’m . . . fine.”

“Good, good. That’s good. Are you back in London?”

“Yes.”

The Earl nods. His son was always fairly monosyllabic and hard to read, which makes it hard to gauge his current emotional state. His mother, Aurora, had been the same. Mallory never had the slightest idea how she was feeling from the first moment their parents thrust them together in their teens to the day she swallowed a fatal overdose of sleeping tablets, soon after Sebastian’s birth. The doctors said it was postnatal depression, but he had always wondered if, like him, she had been worn down by the burden of her own ancestral expectation and simply checked out in grateful relief the moment she had done her duty and provided him with an heir.

“You still there, Seb?”

“Yes.”

“You know . . . what happened last night, it was—well, it was . . . unfortunate, but no one’s blaming you. You were not to know. I mean, nobody knew, so . . . it was just . . .” An image flashes into his head of Aurora’s lifeless body, fully dressed and neatly laid out on the bed, the note in her thin, porcelain-white hand containing just two words—Sorry Mallory.

“Listen, Seb. I just wanted to say that if you need to talk to anyone