



Under November Skies

J.E. Pocknell.

Thanks to my wife Emma for putting up with me and for her patience in all things.

SILENT WITNESS

TOO LITTLE, TOO LATE

CHILDHOOD REQUIEM

MAKING CRIME PAY

CAGES DON'T ALWAYS HAVE BARS

COMING UP FOR AIR

EPILOGUE

Silent Witness.

It was an odd time of year. If it wasn't for the pre-occupation of feeding, he would have felt at a loose end – his work having been done.

The deer moved slowly; pinned back to a certain degree by the strength of the wind. He had moved quite a distance since the rutting season had concluded. It had been a tough time. For those few weeks, feeding had become secondary. All his time and energy had been spent protecting his small harem; mating, and rutting with potential intruders.

The red stag was an imposing figure. A creature in his prime of eight years. He stood at a huge 119 centimetres to his shoulder. His magnificent antlers gave a good indication of his age, although a couple of tines were missing; damaged during the autumns battles, but still his full crown looked handsome. Gradually he was gaining the weight he had lost during the rutting season. It was not just the mating and fighting that took its toll. It was all the other activities that took place and were exclusive to this particular period in the red deer calendar too. There was the roaring and barking; being totally alert to rival stag's and the so-called thrashing and wiping that was necessary to attract prospective hinds. This involved leaving his scent, licking and sniffing attractive hinds. Still, it was over for another year and the hinds were as free of him as he was of them. He was now totally focused on continuing to replace the 15 kilograms that he had lost.

His journey so far had been a strange one. Normally by now he would have found himself amongst a herd of fellow stags, he began to suspect that he had wandered too far. The strong winds were partly to blame. They had played havoc with his ability to pick up scent of any kind.

The magnificent beast stopped grazing on the wet grass, momentarily lifting his head to survey the scene around him. His thick coat glistened as the moon briefly appeared from behind a cloudy sky. As his head rose up, his crown of antlers pointed towards the sky like swaying branches of a winter tree. The rain that soaked his fur parted his coat in places to reveal small gouged scars and a few more recent cuts and minor wounds gathered from his yearly battles. He was proud of the most recent ones, gained while protecting his harem of fourteen hinds; the most he had ever achieved, much to his satisfaction.

Even though the wind was gusting he was sure he had picked up a scent, but because of the strength of the cross winds it had gone as quickly as it had arrived. The stag lowered his head once more, stretching his powerful neck forward. He grazed continually on the move; searching out the most nutritious grasses. He moved his huge bulk in a gracious manner almost as if every move had been planned in advance. Just a few minutes more and the red male would move from the open ground, move back towards the woodland, and seeking shelter from the harsh wet November weather. There he would lie down and ruminate at his leisure in relative safety. He started to edge his way towards the trees. He was just a few metres short of the woods when something startled him. The stag's muscles tightened, his head snapped up from the ground and his jet black eyes scanned the area for any miniscule sign of trouble. His nostrils flared and plumes of his warm breath, like smoke, carried away by the near gale force wind, bellowed from them.

Suddenly a bird broke cover – a pheasant, screeching into the darkness. It was not a solitary or by no means rare occurrence but there was certainly something different about this, the stag felt sure of it. A huge gust of wind rushed across him and he held his legs firm, hooves sticking fast in the sodden earth beneath him. He caught the strange but familiar stench that all of his kind feared the most. It was man.

The red deer turned in the boggy ground, still managing to maintain a certain amount of grace and poise. He started to run. The sense of danger had been reinforced by several distant warning barks from fellow deer that were in the vicinity. In the distance the muffled sound of an expelled weapon could just be heard above the unforgiving weather. The stag sped blindly on, desperately trying to put some distance between himself and the hunters. He kept to the periphery of the woodland. He dared not enter them in case he injured himself in the mayhem; running head first in to a tree or a branch or failing to see obstacles on the forest floor. Neither did he fancy the idea of finding himself cornered by the hunters in a copse of trees. Thankfully the moon had disappeared from view for the time being so at least he was not lit up beneath Mother Nature's very own spot light. He heard several more shots ring out – still muffled but closer now. Panic was setting in. The beautiful red animal decided to take drastic action. He turned left, heading back down in to the fields he had spent the day grazing on. The sodden and uneven surface which dipped up and down proved to be no problem for this awesome creature; his impeccable balance allowed him to glide across the soggy terrain with reasonable ease. He felt his heart pounding beneath the thick muscular flesh as he raced down the field.

A couple more shots rang out – much louder now and the human scent was more potent; filling his wet nostrils. The hunters were closing in. Fear gripped the prime stag as he became fully aware of the direction he had raced towards. He knew that place- he had seen it before. It was another one of man's traps; a hard surface where noisy beasts raced along at speeds that were unimaginable to him. Two years before he had witnessed a hind totally undisturbed, wander on to a strange pathway such as this and he had watched in horror as her body was tossed in to the air by a mechanical monster that did not fair much better; it swerved and hit a tree. It had not been a pretty sight and it had left him spooked.

Even as he continued moving he understood that he had only two options. He either risked the danger directly below him on that foreign pathway or he turned tail and risked being hunted down by the human's with their noisy weapons. It was a no win situation. He knew what a human bullet could do. Only last year a senior stag had been destroyed near to him by one of those bangs. It had struck the top of his head and the speed with which he had crashed to the ground had shocked all the deer present. It's legs had buckled beneath him instantly and he had flopped down on his side within a blink of an eye. The crown stag barely had a chance to see his own blood seeping in to the acrid earth, before he had gone.

His impressive chest was now burning; he was running out of stamina – not to mention time. He slowed to a trot as he neared the man made path. He was more than a little apprehensive about stepping hoof on to it.

The rain and wind showed no sign of giving up and sadly for the stag, neither did the hunters. He however, was beginning to resign himself to his fate. He was barely at a stand still when it happened. At any other time, in any other place he would have been startled by the event and vacated the area at lightening speed.

The human metal monsters smashed together; two loud bangs and then a slight delay before a third. Even with the rain pounding and the wind howling, the noise was deafening. The hulks of metal that the stag felt sure was some kind of predator had failed. They had expected him to cross, been sure they would cut him down but instead they had collided, smashed, skidded and slid. It was all over very quickly. The stag was momentarily mesmerised, a few seconds later and they may have got him. He saw flames start to lick their way across one of the three wrecks and this frightened him into making a move. He veered right and left the scene of carnage. Thankfully, either because they had found another target or because they had heard the collision, the hunters seemed not to be nearby. After a few minutes, the tired deer slowed to a canter and then to a trot once more. He stopped once and looked back at the mayhem on the man made pathway. Preoccupied by that particular scene he nearly jumped out of his skin as suddenly from nowhere a human male rushed passed him through the hedgerow. The man looked as petrified as he guessed he probably did but he was oblivious to the animal's presence which filled the stag with a certain amount of relief. He wondered briefly what the man was doing. He looked like the hunted – certainly he was not one of the hunters. Was he pray like himself then? The deer moved further away, the night would be a long and unsettled one, he would not relax. After this episode he would fret all night. Still a certain part of him understood that he'd had a lucky escape. He could have ended up with a foreign object in his head killing him instantly or ended up as a mangled mess on tarmac.

Battered by the elements the stag moved back towards the woodland. He was shattered, the physical demands of the chase had taken it's toll. He moved around the forest skirting around to the far side just in case the hunters were still nearby. He stood at the brow of a hill; he was briefly bathed in white gold moonlight as the wind rushed through his mane. The stag held his neck up perfectly straight, displaying his antlers; a classic stack of a dozen or more tines. A perfect specimen in his prime. A prime that was so nearly snatched.

He watched from afar as the flash of blue lights moved closer through the darkness, occasionally becoming slim shafts as the light was hidden behind the trees. The faint sound of sirens took a little longer to reach his sensitive hearing in these weather conditions but it was enough for him to know that the area would soon become one of heightened activity. Not that he knew it's name but he stared at the odd orange lights over Tarringworth in the distance that broke the darkness between land and sky. From experience he understood that man would dwell in the areas of that artificial glow. It was time for him to disappear. He moved in towards the woodland still maintaining a high degree of alertness in case of hunters and then all at once he slipped into their welcoming cover and like a ghost the beautiful red stag was gone.....

