

# THE MEN IN THE TREES

## BY MARSH MYERS

### CHAPTER ONE

Rose dreamt all night of ghosts. No, she corrected herself, not ghosts — spirits. Those wispy creatures found in fairy tales who resided in trees or under the loamy earth. She dreamt they had crept around her in the dark, crouched over her and sniffed at her face like a house cat might examine a dead mouse. They had softly touched her hair, whispered about her, watched her sleep. The dreams finally roused her around 4 a.m. and she'd spent the last few hours sitting with her back to the wall, her sleeping bag pulled in tightly around her, waiting for the sun to finally rise.

Rose didn't believe in supernatural beings. She prided herself on being an educated woman with a reasonable mind, so dreaming about fluttering spirits who congregated around her as she slept was both unusual and disconcerting. She immediately began to look for a reasonable explanation behind the images, and to suppress the undeniable emotional reaction she'd had to them. Rose understood the science behind the human mind, how it constantly collected information, filing it away as chemical codes among its furrows and channels. Most of that information would simply sit there, rarely if ever utilized during the normal course of a human life. But at night, during the dream state, the subconscious mind would sometimes find those bits of information, combine them with emotion, and distill out dreams.

So, Rose told herself, creeping spirits weren't really anything paranormal as much as they were symbols for... what? Curiosity? Adventure? Anxiety? She had plenty of all three in her life right now, perhaps more than most people her age who were using their retirement years to take it easy, not uproot their lives completely. And certainly sleeping in an empty house hadn't helped.

By the time the first light of dawn broke through the windows on the other side of the room, Rose had rationalized her dreams to the point where she could wriggle out of the sleeping bag, climb wearily to her feet and stretch. The wind had picked up again and around her the house creaked like a ship at sea. The gusts blew the morning dew off the trees nearby; the drops hitting the living room windows with a hollow *plunk, plunk, plunk*. Immediately Rose noted that it sounded like tapping fingers, then just as quickly felt ashamed for scaring herself again. She shivered and clumsily pulled on several more layers of clothing, although it made little difference. Everything felt damp and no matter how many shirts, sweaters and jackets she cloaked herself in, she always felt

cold. It took her several minutes to roll up the sleeping bag and tuck it into one of the weathered cardboard cartons sitting near the front door. One more quick inventory of the boxes seemed compulsory, although it was nearly impossible that Rose would've missed anything. Every shelf, every closet, every dark corner had been inspected and anything of value had been located and carefully packed for transport. And if she had found something more, where would she have put it? Her car was already so jammed full of clutter it took considerable ingenuity and some brute strength to find room for the sleeping bag and the last two boxes.

She paused at the driver's side door and took one last look at the house. In the sunlight, it didn't seem nearly as menacing as it had a few hours before. It still creaked in the wind, but whatever spirits she'd imagined creeping through the place had receded into the shadows and now the place just looked gray, derelict and sad. She swung herself into the seat and started the engine. It rattled noisily, sputtered a little, but to her relief didn't fail.

"Hang in there," she said, patting the dashboard gently. "Still a ways to go yet..."

And with that, she drove away.

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