

**Copyrighted Material**

# I

The sign said: *Welcome to Black Gale.*

It was weather-beaten, rinsed pale over the time that it had stood guard at the gated entrance to the village. Purple crocuses were dotted like jewels along the grass bank it was on, and beyond the sign was a mud track littered with stones, leading to three homes in a semicircle and a farm. The farm itself was modest, surrounded by a crumbling drystone wall dotted with moss and half covered by weeds, which also hemmed in the other homes. But on the other side of the wall, the farm's fields unfurled across the moors like a huge patchwork quilt.

I'd met Ross Perry just outside Grassington, a market town twenty miles south of Black Gale, and had followed him up here. The further I drove, the higher I climbed, daffodils dotted along the banks of the narrow, one-lane roads. Even in March, though, winter hadn't quite vanished. As I pulled my Audi in next to Ross's Range Rover, I looked north, towards the heart of the moors, and could see hills still painted with ribbons of snow.

Ross waited for me next to his vehicle, dressed in a smart black suit and a bright red windbreaker. Stitched into the breast pocket of the windbreaker was CONNOR & PERRY PROPERTY | YORKSHIRE. I'd done a little reading up on Ross: he was young, twenty-six, but already the co-owner of an estate agency, and one of West Yorkshire's most eligible bachelors according to a list in a local magazine. He was stocky, dark-haired and olive-skinned, the latter an endowment from his mother, Francesca, who had been born and raised in Florence.

The three houses were all roughly the same size and the same build too – a mix of stone and render, with slate roofs and double garages, and then a U-shaped garden that wrapped around the front and sides of each. The gates separated them from each other by

wooden fences, wild flowers and vines weaving their way through the slats, so that each property maintained a degree of privacy. But the privacy was more of an illusion than anything: the buildings were beautifully constructed – big, four-bedroomed homes – but they were close enough to one another that it would have been almost impossible to live here if you didn't get on with your neighbours.

The farmhouse fanned out behind one of the houses, a bungalow all on one level. It too was built from stone but it had a thatched roof and was a little less pristine, hay bales randomly, untidily scattered, tractor tyres piled up. There was an overturned animal trough close to the front door and two ruptured water butts. But nothing could quite impair the view: in whatever direction you looked, hills rolled into the distance and the dark spring sky seemed to go on for ever.

'Which one was your mum and dad's?' I asked Ross.

'That one,' he said, gesturing to the house closest to us. I'd seen pictures of the house already in the research I'd done, in the police file I'd managed to get hold of as well, but as they all looked the same, I wanted to be sure. 'They moved in three and a half years ago,' he added.

'They were obviously looking for somewhere quiet.'

Ross smiled, but it was sad and seemed hard to form.

'They loved this part of the world,' he said softly, his eyes scanning the hills. The nearest village was a mile to the east. In between it was just fields and stone walls. Other houses were dotted further out, like smudges against the morning and, way off into the distance – little more than a few strokes of a brush – was the ashen hint of a town. Chimneys. Roofs. Telegraph poles.

'Before this,' I said, 'they lived near Manchester – is that right?'

'About twenty miles away, in a village called Denshaw.'

'They seemed happy there?'

'They were in the same house for twenty-one years. The house I grew up in.' He glanced at me. 'They always seemed happy wherever they were.'

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His mouth flattened – an attempt to appear stoic – and then his eyes instantly betrayed him as he looked at their home again. He started to blink a little faster, obviously not wanting to stand here, in front of me, in tears. I saved him any embarrassment by moving past him, closer to the house. At the side I could see a grey Mercedes, parked outside a garage, and then a glimpse of the back garden.

‘How come the car’s still here?’ I asked Ross.

He shrugged. ‘The police did take it away for a while and then – after they’d completed all the tests they needed to do – they gave it back. I know it sounds weird, but I didn’t know what to do with it once they returned it. I didn’t want to drive it, because it would only . . .’ He stopped. *Bring back bad memories.* ‘But I didn’t want to sell it on in case Mum and Dad just walked through the front door one day.’

None of that sounded odd. I’d heard something similar, on repeat, in every missing persons case I’d ever worked. The idea that loved ones might suddenly resurface, out of the blue, even after decades, was powerful and impossible to let go of.

I turned back to the house and saw a garden room with skylights and a grey slate roof at the rear, and then somewhere, out of sight, I heard a weathervane move, its gentle squawk like a bird that had injured itself.

‘What about the neighbours?’ I asked. ‘Everybody got on?’

‘Yeah,’ Ross replied, stepping in alongside me again, his composure restored, ‘they got on well. That’s why Mum and Dad loved it here so much. It wasn’t just the house, it was everything. The eight of them – the four couples – they were always getting together as a group. Dinner parties, nights out, pub lunches. I mean, literally the first year they moved in – when I was in Australia for Christmas – they all got together on Boxing Day.’

I looked to my right, down the remainder of the track, past the third house to where the farm was visible. Each of the properties had driveways and two out of the three had cars parked on them. The Perrys had the Mercedes; the people in the second house

had a Porsche Cayenne. There was plenty of money up here, and plenty more at the farm: it might have been less pristine than the houses, but as well as a tractor, and all the farm equipment, there was a new Land Rover Defender parked outside.

‘I just don’t understand what happened to them,’ Ross said.

For a moment, as I looked at him, he was perfectly framed, his parents’ house behind him, the grass too long out front, weeds running rampant, the dark windows giving just a hint of the empty hallways within. He told me over the phone that he’d been trying to keep the house together, the lawn mowed, the rooms tidy, but it was hard when even the process of unlocking the front door hurt. His parents had been gone two and a half years, with no answers and no trace.

But they weren’t the only ones.

As I looked again at the other two houses, and then back in the direction of the farm, I saw windows that were just as dark as the Perrys’ and gardens just as overgrown. That was what made the scale of this case so intimidating.

It wasn’t just the Perrys that had disappeared.

It was the whole village.

Before I'd met Ross Perry, I'd met someone else.

I'd arrived late at the drab motorway hotel where he was staying. The drive up from London had been bad, the journey pockmarked by constant roadworks, and as I crossed the empty car park, rain hammering against the tarmac, I glimpsed him at one of the windows, partially formed behind a white gauze curtain. He looked like a ghost, a shape drifting in and out of existence, and in some ways that was what he'd become; but this ghost was what had first got me interested in Black Gale.

His obsession had now become mine.

The foyer was unremarkable, the woman behind the counter uninterested in who I was and why I might be there. She never looked up, didn't even move, her face washed white by the glow from her monitor. Bland music was being piped out of a speaker close to me, but mostly all I could hear above the rain and traffic was the intermittent sound of her fingers across the keyboard.

He was sitting halfway down a corridor housing a row of vending machines, holding a plastic cup of coffee, steam spiraling out of it. He had his legs crossed and, either because of the angle he was at, or because of the light, he appeared smaller than the last time I'd seen him. I tried to remember when that was and realized, despite talking to him on the phone four times a week, every week, for three and a half years, I hadn't actually seen him in the flesh for thirteen months. Before today, we hadn't had much choice: he'd been living off the grid in a fisherman's cottage in south Devon that had once belonged to my parents and now belonged to me, and he'd been doing it in secret, and under the alias Bryan Kennedy. His real name was carved into a headstone in a cemetery in north London, and buried under the earth beneath was a body **Copyrighted Material** supposed to be his. It was all a lie.

He'd faked his own death, I'd helped him do it, and if anyone ever found out the truth, we were both going to prison. So, in the time since, he'd steered clear of the Internet and mobile phones – anything that put him on the map – all of his bills paid by me because he didn't have a bank account, and we'd agreed never to meet up unless it was absolutely necessary.

I'd spent the three days before coming up from London – and the entire drive out to see Ross Perry – wondering if what we were doing here qualified as necessary.

In the end, I'd come anyway.

He got up and walked towards me. In the time since he'd moved to Devon, he'd been working on a fishing trawler, being paid cash in hand to go out into the English Channel casting for hake, cod and herring. It had made him slender, sinewy, a stark contrast to how he'd looked before he'd fooled the world into thinking he was dead. Back then, he'd been a cop; even further back, he'd been a good one. He'd worked murders at the Met for nearly two decades, overweight and restless, and had existed on bad food and adrenalin. For a while, towards the end, booze had crept in too. He was in his early fifties now, his red hair shaved off, his face covered by a thick beard, but it was hard to say if he looked older or younger: physically, he was in better condition, but his face was marked by more lines than ever, cut into him like nicks from a blade. It gave him the weary look of someone permanently scarred by their history.

'Sounds like you had a relaxing trip up,' he said as we shook hands. He'd called me twice on the hotel's payphone to find out where I was; the second time I'd been sitting in a four-mile tail-back. He picked up his machine coffee and rocked it towards me in a *cheers* motion: 'Still, after all this time, at least we get to meet somewhere really glamorous.'

I smiled and then looked through the curtain to the empty car park. Rain continued to hammer against the ground – a fierce, relentless drumbeat.

'Did you get a taxi home yesterday?' he asked him.

‘Yeah, from the station at Knaresborough.’ He took a sip from his coffee, his eyes scanning the foyer over the rim of the cup, and then – very quietly, his voice deliberately dialled down – he said, ‘I checked in at three yesterday and then sat at the window in my room for the entire evening, watching. There were only two other people staying here last night, and they’ve both already left. No one’s checked in this afternoon. There are four cars around the back, all belonging to staff, including her.’ He gestured to the woman at the front desk. ‘She’s the most unresponsive person I’ve ever met. Literally doesn’t give a shit who comes and goes because she’s too busy playing solitaire on her computer. It’s dead here. I’ll be fine.’

I nodded, but checked the car park again anyway.

‘Have they closed all the supermarkets in London, Raker?’

I frowned. ‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean, you’re looking lean.’

‘I’ve been running a lot,’ I said.

‘Yeah?’

‘I’m doing the New York marathon in November.’

He broke out into a smile. ‘You serious?’

‘I’ve done London, I did Paris with Derryn in 2006. I did the Two Oceans when we were in Cape Town. I’m enjoying all the training. It’s keeping me focused.’

He nodded but didn’t say anything.

We both knew why.

In November 2009, my wife, Derryn, had died – aged only thirty-four – after a long battle with cancer, and then, three months ago, I’d landed a case over Christmas that had been related to her death. The case had taken everything from me – in fact, it had almost destroyed me – and I’d spent the months since trying to recover from it and return to some sort of equilibrium. So, while I’d always been a runner, mostly I’d do short distances and had only ever used it to supplement gym work – but now I was doing fifteen-mile runs as standard, from my home in Ealing, south into Kew and then out across the northern fringes



of Richmond Park. I liked the singular, solitary nature of running, the time it gave me alone, the way it cleared my head and calmed my thinking; and because I liked it, I'd kept doing more of it.

'We'd better go through the case again,' I said.

'Everything's in the room.'

We headed for the lift. As soon as the doors slid shut, I said to him, 'Your new ID will be ready in a couple of days.'

He only nodded this time.

By now, it was just routine: another new name for another pretend life.

His room was right at the end of a corridor on the second floor. He removed a DO NOT DISTURB sign from the handle, took out a keycard and swiped it through the reader. We both instinctively checked the corridor, and then I followed him inside.

'So are you going to start calling me by whatever name I get next?' he asked, popping the card into the power socket. The lights in the bathroom and bedroom flickered into life. Before this, we'd tried to get into a routine of only calling him by the name we'd arranged last, Bryan Kennedy – but it had never felt natural.

'No,' I said. 'To me, you'll just be Colm Healy.'

*Colm Healy.*

His real name weighed heavy on the air. There were so many miles attached to it, such anger and tragedy and sadness, and yet – as a smile formed at the edges of his mouth – it was clear that this was what he'd always wanted; he wanted to go back, even if it was only when the two of us were alone, to return to the part of his life that had made the most sense, when he'd had the structure of a family and a career.

'Thanks, Raker,' he said quietly.

I looked at the walls.

He'd moved aside a desk, the TV, a corner table and chair. He'd taken down a painting. In its place, he'd filled the entire wall, every inch of copy-righted material, pictures, printouts,

a cascade of paper, of headlines and handwritten notes that meant nothing to anyone except us. This was no one else's obsession but ours.

At the top, on hotel stationery, was a title for it all.

*Black Gale.*

When he'd first floated the idea of looking into what happened at the village, I'd said no. I'd said no a month later when he tried again, even though I knew he was going stir-crazy stuck in a hotel room in the north-east; he'd moved there from Devon as a safety measure when a journalist had started sniffing around my life. Eventually it dawned on me that giving Healy something to get his teeth into made sense, as it was then less likely that he would get careless, and at the time I'd taken ownership of all the information that was now pinned to the wall of this room. So as a peace offering, perhaps as an apology too, I'd couriered everything back to him in Newcastle in an effort to keep him focused, but also to send him a message: I still wasn't ready to get involved. Missing people had always been my life, as essential to me as the blood in my veins, but my last case had almost killed me. I hadn't felt ready for something on this scale, and the idea of working a case with Healy seemed a bad way of acclimatizing.

But that was just the problem: when something was in your blood you could never really get rid of it. I could deny it for a while – or try to – but the compulsion would always remain. So when we'd talked on the phone three nights ago and he'd mentioned Black Gale again, this time I let him tell me about it. I put the phone down afterwards and went looking myself. And then the next day I woke up and I realized something: this job had nearly destroyed me before, but it had saved me as well. It had brought me out of the darkness after my wife had died. It had given me focus, and maintained me, and taught me how to live. It was like breath.

It was how I felt normal.

'We came here once with the kids,' Healy said, the distance in his voice instantly bridging the gap, as if more laced with the

anguish of events long past. He was looking at a picture of Black Gale. 'I mean, not here, but the Yorkshire Dales. We stayed at some place near Malham Cove.' Another smile, there and gone again. 'Leanne was always easy; she'd just go along with whatever Gemma and I decided. But the boys . . .' He made a noise through his teeth: amused, then more emotional. 'All they did all week was whine. Every walk, every place we took them.'

I watched him for a moment, the dull light of the room reflected in his eyes. There was no animosity in his voice. Just sadness because of what came after, the things he'd lost.

The family.

'I wish I could come with you,' Healy said.

It was hard to remain silent, harder still to insist that he didn't, but that the best place for him was right here, inside a room booked in a false name, where no one would remember him or ask questions about who he was. When a man wasn't supposed to exist, you risked absolutely everything even by driving into the middle of nowhere.

Even so, it hurt me to deny him the chance; if it wasn't for Healy, we wouldn't have ever got this far. Before he was forced to relocate, in his evenings, at weekends, alone inside my parents' old cottage, with no access to the Internet, he'd spent the money that he'd earned on the trawler paying for photocopies and books, and on bus tickets to the local library. There, he'd kept his sanity by reading newspapers, using their computers to get online, even sitting at ancient microfiche readers, in order to study old, unsolved cases. That was where he'd found this one. If the world hadn't believed him dead, this would have been the sort of case he would have worked. Instead, he'd called me, telling me to look into it, knowing the whole time that – whatever contribution he made – he'd always exist in the shadows.

I'd brought a backpack with me from the car and, as I looked at the walls again, reminding myself of the timeline that Healy had constructed of what had happened out at Black Gale two and a half years ago, I

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‘What’s this?’ he asked, taking it from me.

‘A printout of the police investigation. One of my old sources at the Met mailed it over to me, but it just came through this morning so I haven’t had a chance to look at it properly.’

He unzipped the bag, pulling out a stack of paper.

‘I thought you could go over it while I’m out,’ I said.

‘This file could be the jackpot, Raker,’ Healy said, his face coloured with excitement, his fingers fanning the pages of the file.

I stepped closer to the wall. ‘Maybe.’

A cut-out of a front page was pinned in the centre.

*Or maybe not.*

The photograph was of the farmhouse at Black Gale, shot from the bottom of the mud track with the other homes on the fringes of the frame.

Under that was a simple, two-word headline.

GHOST HOUSE.

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I was still thinking of the hotel room with the Black Gale case pinned to its walls when Ross Perry asked me, ‘Do you want to go inside the house?’

I looked at the other homes in the village and then back to his parents’ place. I did want to search it, but first I wanted to spend a little longer outside, looking at the view and getting a sense of Black Gale itself. All the power was off in the homes anyway, which meant they were unlikely to be any warmer. We moved closer, beneath the shelter of the Perrys’ porch.

‘When did you realize something was up?’ I asked him.

‘I called Mum on the 1st of November,’ Ross said. ‘As I’m sure you know, this would have been the end of 2015.’

‘But she didn’t respond?’

‘No. She didn’t pick up the landline or her mobile phone, so I tried Dad’s mobile instead. But he didn’t answer either. Mum was useless on her phone, but for Dad not to answer . . . that was unusual.’ He shrugged, eyes watering. It was hard to tell if it was tears or the cold. ‘Anyway, I guess I didn’t think too much about it at the time. Mum had been to the doctor’s a couple of days before because she needed to talk to them about her blood pressure pills – they were making her light-headed – so I was only checking in on how things went. I just figured the two of them were out to lunch or something.’ He shrugged a second time, but it was less certain now. ‘There was a country club in Skipton they loved.’

The wind picked up again, rattling the fence posts that separated the houses. Rain dotted my skin, and then sleet. I started making notes, sheltering my notebook from the weather.

I tried them again in the evening and then again the following morning. Nothing. In no time at all was I carried by that point . . .

His voice trailed off, his gaze fixed on a space beyond me. ‘I don’t know. Maybe I was. It wasn’t like we talked every day. It’s just, after you send someone two or three texts and you leave them a few messages, you do start to wonder.’ His eyes strayed back towards me. ‘I live south of Leeds, so it’s a seventy-mile drive up here. It wasn’t like I could just pop round to see if they were all right. It was a Monday, the branch was open, so I had clients and viewings. I would have been busy.’

He said it like it was a decision anyone could understand him making, but his voice betrayed him. He’d spent every day of the last two and a half years wishing he’d reacted faster, because driving seventy miles was nothing when you were doing it for the people you loved. Would it have made a difference if he’d dropped everything and come here on Monday 2 November? Or, as the police suspected, were the Perrys and the rest of the families in Black Gale long gone by that time? The not knowing was the problem. It was the prickle in his skin, the irritant.

‘So when did you finally come up here?’

‘When Rina Blake called me on Tuesday the 3rd.’

I flipped back to some details I’d logged the night before, at home in London as I’d gone over Internet accounts of the Black Gale disappearances. Chris and Laura Gibbs, and their teenaged son Mark, were the family who’d lived at the farm. Patrick and Francesca Perry I already knew about. In the house next to theirs had been seventy-year-old Randolph Solomon and his sixty-four-year-old girlfriend Emiline Wilson. And then, finally, in the last house, was a retired couple called John and Freda Davey. He was sixty-eight, she was sixty-five, and Rina Blake was their daughter.

‘How did you know Rina?’ I asked.

‘We’d met a few times when we’d both been up here visiting our parents. She knew I ran my own estate agency in Leeds, so she knew where to find me. She called me and said she’d been trying to get hold of her mum and dad and neither of them had responded. She and Freda were in touch every day – literally, every day. She said

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Rina's day was going. I think she could be a bit of a mother-hen type sometimes, but Rina said she never minded. She said Freda had been a great mum.'

'Rina lives in Cambridge, right?'

'Right. So she was even further away than me.' Ross looked out at the moors; a storm was coming towards us, the clouds pregnant with it. 'She said she'd tried calling my parents on their home number, then the Gibbises, then Randolph and Emiline, but couldn't get through to any of them, so she asked if I could speak to Mum and Dad – maybe try their mobiles – and see if they could check in on *ber* folks. That was when I said to her, "I can't get hold of my parents either." I started to panic. We both did.'

'So then you headed up here?'

He nodded. 'The moment I got here, I knew something wasn't right. It was so quiet. Normally, Chris and Laura were out on the farm: Chris would be repairing machinery, or be working on the tractor, or in the sheds. Mark would be there too, a lot of the time. He was nineteen, at agricultural college, but whenever he wasn't down in Bradford he was helping his parents out.' He stopped, pointing to the house next to his mum and dad's. 'Emiline, she was always outside as well. Loved her garden; would be out there rain or shine. But that day there was no one around. The houses were all locked up. It was dead.'

I stayed silent, looking out at the moors.

The police had done three separate searches of the surrounding area in the weeks following the disappearances – the second and third time with cadaver dogs – and had found nothing. No bodies, no clothing, nothing belonging to any of the nine missing Black Gale residents. Two months in, they took a helicopter out, with cameras capable of revealing recently disturbed earth – and, in turn, potential grave sites – but that came up short too. Before that, they'd found no unidentified tyre tracks in the surface mud on the road in and out of the village, and therefore no evidence that any vehicles – other than Ross's, and the ones belonging to the village – had been on the date of the

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disappearance, or the days that followed. CCTV coverage was virtually non-existent this far out and there were no witnesses to anything suspicious in the villages that circled Black Gale. The police concluded that the last physical contact anyone had had with the village was when a postman delivered mail to the Daveys and the Gibbs on Saturday 31 October.

Or, at least, that was the last contact they knew about.

‘They reckon it happened on or just after Halloween night,’ Ross said, his voice muted. He looked from one house to the next as if willing someone – *anyone* – to come to the front door. His eyes eventually landed on the farm. ‘I couldn’t see it from the outside, but when the police broke down the doors on the farm it was obvious that the Gibbses had thrown a dinner party. Although everything had been packed away – all the plates, all the food, the booze – it was still done out in a Halloween theme: you know, cobwebs, pumpkins, that sort of thing.’

‘But the rest of the house was tidy?’

‘Yes. Immaculate.’

‘All the houses were tidy, right?’

‘Yes,’ he said again. ‘They’d all been left spotless.’

But not suspiciously clean – not deliberately wiped down in order to hide evidence – just hoovered and dusted, items packed away, electrical items switched off, as if the occupants were all going away on holiday. Which they weren’t, at least not abroad: in the file, investigators said all nine of the missing villagers had taken their wallets or purses with them, their mobile phones too, which never pinged a single tower after Halloween night, and were never switched on. But they hadn’t taken their passports.

‘And they didn’t take any clothes with them, correct?’

‘That’s right.’

‘No suitcases?’

‘Nothing,’ Ross said. ‘Nothing’s missing from any of the cupboards – or not that you can tell, anyway. I mean, when you go on holiday, normally you make *some* sort of dent in your wardrobe, but in Mum and Dad’s room, in the bedrooms of all the



others, it doesn't look like anything's been removed at all. And, like I just said, no suitcases got taken either. No other baggage. It's all so . . .' He shook his head. 'Weird.'

It was certainly weird if it really had been a holiday. But the fact that none of them had used any ATM machines, or credit cards, and that their phones were off – and never came back on – from around 10 p.m. on Halloween night, *and* were all last geo-located to Black Gale, didn't really fit with the idea of a trip, whether it was planned or a last-minute getaway. So why take the wallets? Why take their mobiles?

'The police got hold of a load of photos from the Cloud,' Ross said. 'It's how they knew the dinner took place on Halloween. Metadata, or whatever.' He gave a forced smile. 'On Chris Gibbs's phone there were all these pictures. You know, selfies, that sort of thing. The police showed me a few of them. They looked like they were having a laugh. Relaxed. Like I said, everyone always got on well.'

I'd seen some of the photos that Chris Gibbs had taken too.

On the police database, there would have been the option to view the photos in a higher resolution, but I'd had to make do with the low-res printouts I'd been given. They'd be good enough for now, though. Even pixellated, they backed up exactly what Ross was saying about the Halloween dinner: the four couples – and Mark Gibbs too, who appeared in a number of the shots – had all been having a good time.

'They all had Halloween masks,' Ross said. 'In one of the pictures, I think Chris must have set his phone on a timer because there's all nine of them, with masks on.' He went to say something else and his breath caught. 'Mum and Dad . . .'

I waited for him.

'They wore these stupid zombie masks.'

It seemed a trivial, almost comical detail at first, but this was exactly the kind of thing that swelled and intensified the longer a person was missing. It became the element that the families fixated on when they were defuncted the laptops in which they tried

to find rational answers. Was there something in that choice of mask? Had it been a sign? Did it mean something? Ross's parents were out there somewhere, maybe dead, maybe alive. The more he thought about that, the more it became significant.

To Ross Perry, the choice of mask was some kind of portent.

In the sky around us, the storm had started to break: there was a charge in the air, and though I could almost feel it on my skin, I wasn't thinking about it.

I was thinking about the Halloween party.

For the media, it had been a gift: three couples, and the farmer and his family, all vanishing into thin air, never to be seen again, on the same night the world celebrated monsters, and ghosts, and the unexplained. It had allowed journalists to push the idea that Halloween might, in some way, be responsible for what had happened at Black Gale, that something this strange, this uncharted, could only ever have occurred on the last night of October. And the longer the police went without something tangible to counter it with – some compelling piece of evidence, some theory that altered the narrative – the more the idea began to take hold.

Two and half years on, the disappearances had long faded from the headlines, and from most people's memories as well, but in the online accounts of that night the concept of Halloween was still deeply embedded, not least because you almost always found the same image republished. It had become synonymous with the case: a front page from one of the country's biggest tabloids, published on 5 November, two days after Ross called the police. The headline was GHOST HOUSE. Under that was a subhead: *Like something out of the Twilight Zone . . .* Beneath both of those was the now familiar image of the farm, abandoned and dark.

It didn't look like a home any more.

It looked like a mausoleum.

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Inside, the Perry house was clean, the downstairs rooms orderly and attractive. Ross hadn't just kept an eye on the property, he'd kept it looking the same as the day his mum and dad were last there. A refillable air freshener had been left running in the hallway, presumably in an effort to offset the musty aroma of a house without fresh air, but otherwise it appeared exactly like the photos attached to North Yorkshire Police's original investigation.

I wiped my feet on the mat, and then took in the layout: stairs ahead of me, a kitchen beyond that which, in turn, led to the garden room; a large living room on the left with leather sofas in it. The hallway floors were oak, and on the wall beneath the incline of the staircase was a nest of family photographs, shaped like a tree. I could see Patrick and Francesca Perry at the centre, and then what I assumed were extended family at the edges, but mostly I could see Ross. As their only child, he was the dominant fixture in the tree, the pictures charting his life, from the day he was born, to a shot, only a couple of years old, of him in a suit, holding a trophy up at some sort of industry awards ceremony, his parents flanking him, proud, smiling.

I walked to the wall and looked more closely at the Perrys. In a shot similar to the one that had run most often in the media, they were outside a villa in Spain, Patrick in a polo shirt and shorts, Francesca in a dress, but in others the two of them were in the Alps, in Thailand, New York, Dubai. They were attractive, still young-looking even as they got to their late forties, Patrick handsome, tall and athletic, with silver-flecked hair, Francesca dark-eyed, dark-haired and slender.

'They loved to travel,' Ross said from behind me. 'Even after so many years of being married, they never lost that spark. They just loved spending time together.'

That was pretty clear, but while the majority of the photographs of the two of them had been taken on holidays, there were a few that weren't. In one, Patrick was in a pair of shorts, a vest and a hard hat, in the space that would eventually become their porch. Off to the side of the shot, I could see a vague image of the other two houses, less developed than the Perrys' – in fact, little more than concrete beds at that stage.

'Is it right that Chris Gibbs built these homes?' I asked.

'Sort of,' Ross replied. 'I mean, he didn't build them all himself – he brought a firm in to do it – but it's his land and, once they were finished, he sold them through us. That was how Mum and Dad ended up here: as soon as Chris came to me with the properties, I phoned Dad because I knew they would love the house and the area it was in. They were big walkers, always outdoors. It wasn't that they weren't happy in Denshaw, but Dad was working from home by that stage, so there was no need to be so close to the city.'

'I read that your dad was a journalist.'

'Yeah, for the *Manchester Evening News*.'

'Why did he leave?'

'They made him redundant in 2010. He was forty-five, at a bit of a crossroads in terms of his career, so he took the redundancy money, put it in the bank and then caned it for a year as a freelancer. At the end of that, he took out a loan and put in everything he'd earned to set up his PR business.' Ross glanced at one of the photographs of his father; a flicker of a smile. 'He nailed it, David. I knew he would. He didn't stretch himself thin, didn't take on too many clients – he wanted everyone to feel like they were getting the personal touch. By the end of 2014, he was turning *down* work.'

'They didn't struggle to afford this place, then?'

'No, definitely not.'

'I'm guessing Chris Gibbs didn't do too badly out of it either.'

Ross nodded. 'He didn't have to pay for the plot, so that

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instantly saves a lot. The houses cost £250,000 to build – and he sold them for four hundred grand each.’

*A profit of almost a million.*

I’d already wondered if money might be at the heart of this case, and now I thought about it again. Patrick Perry’s PR business was flying; Chris Gibbs had made almost seven figures on the houses. Jealousy often shadowed financial success.

‘So Chris had a lot of cash burning a hole in his pocket?’ I asked.

‘He said there was no money in farming any more, so I think he saw it as clever business. A nest egg for Mark. But you know what? Chris was never money-oriented. I know that’s easy to say when you’ve got nine hundred grand sitting in your account, but he wasn’t. He bought himself that Land Rover out there, farm machinery or whatever, but Dad said he never lorded it over anyone. You’d never have known that he had all that cash. Mum and Dad really liked him, and Laura too. They were just normal people.’

I looked at the pictures of Ross again. He was an only child. John and Freda Davey’s daughter, Rina Blake, had a brother, Ian, but he was in Singapore. Randolph Solomon and Emiline Wilson had never married and never had kids. Chris Gibbs had a sister who lived in London called Tori, but his parents were both gone. Laura Gibbs didn’t have any siblings and her mother was in a nursing home in Leeds and had late-stage dementia. What that meant was that there were surprisingly few family connections left behind: Ross Perry, Tori Gibbs, Rina Blake, and then her brother who lived and worked seven thousand miles away and who, with the best will in the world, was going to be of little help in the search for answers. It was why everything had begun to drift. It was *always* the reason cases began to drift. The fewer people directly connected to a disappearance, the more difficult it was for it to stay afloat.

‘Have you got keys to the other houses?’ I asked.

‘Yes,’ Ross replied and reached into his coat pocket. ‘Because

Tori's in London and Rina's in Cambridge, they like me to check on the properties when I come up here. I tend to come every couple of weeks or so, just to make sure everything's all right.' He handed me a set of keys. 'The one for Randolph and Emiline's place is on there too. It's still complicated, obviously, because we don't know if any of them are . . .' He trailed off. *Dead*. He couldn't say the word and I didn't blame him. That was the best and worst bit about a disappearance: there was always the chance they were still alive, so you always had hope, but it was the hope that so often inflicted the most damage. 'What I mean is,' he continued, his voice low, affected by what lay unspoken, 'in Randolph and Emiline's will, they state that they want any money from the sale of the house to go to charity, but nothing can be done until we know for sure what happened to them. So, in the meantime, the key is with their solicitors, and because I've worked with the firm before, and recommended them to clients of mine – and because I'm checking on the properties every fortnight or so – Randolph and Emiline's solicitor gave me a copy of the key.'

He looked around the house, his expression dropping slightly, as if he hadn't noticed before how dark it was, how quiet and uninhabited. As I walked through to the kitchen, modern and smelling of surface cleaner, I heard the vent flicker into life. I heard a fence post creak softly in the garden, the weathervane again, and a rumble of thunder. But then all of those noises died away and in their place came an almost suffocating quiet. For a moment, the moors were absolutely soundless, and so were the houses.

I had to find a way to make these walls talk.

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I headed upstairs.

At the top there were skylights, so it immediately felt lighter and less closed in than downstairs, even if the air was still dry. The main bedroom had an en suite and a walk-in wardrobe, and there were two spare bedrooms either side of it.

The fourth room was an office.

I stopped in the doorway and looked around. On the walls were some framed art, an autographed Manchester United shirt, and a three-tiered bookcase. There was another free-standing bookcase below that. The shelves were filled with classic literature, but there were a few sports biographies in the one on the wall and some books on journalism in both. On top of the mounted bookcase were two picture frames – glossy reprints of *Manchester Evening News* front pages. One was about a violent gangland shooting, the other was about how the leader of Manchester City Council had illegally redirected taxpayers' money to the account of his mistress. The stories had been written in the 1990s and Patrick's byline was on both.

There was a computer on the desk, but the hard drive had been removed from the tower and was sitting next to it, still wrapped in an evidence bag. The fact that it had been returned suggested nothing had been found on it by the forensics team.

I returned to each of the bedrooms, looking for personal possessions that had been left, keepsakes, photographs of any worth, but nothing caught my eye. Heading back to the office, I grabbed the tower and the hard drive and, downstairs, placed them next to the front door. After that, I started searching the living room. I was getting a good sense of the Perrys – what films they liked, the authors they read, the type of art they liked hanging on the walls – but it didn't answer any questions about how and why

they had vanished. The only item of interest was a shoebox of photographs in the sideboard. They were different from the pictures on the wall: less staged, more authentic maybe, which in turn meant that they might carry some tiny hints or clues.

After going through the kitchen again, I did another circuit of the house, this time going back to front in order to check access points. None of the windows or the doors had been tampered with. I was looking for clear indications that someone had come back in the aftermath of the disappearances and tried to get into the property, for whatever reason, but there was nothing as conspicuous as a jimmed window and no suggestion the locks had been picked. I grabbed everything and headed outside.

It was raining hard now, chattering off the stone of the cottages and slapping against the mud. As quickly as I could, I loaded the PC, the hard drive and the photos into the Audi and then waited under the porch for Ross to finish a call. I could hear snatches because he had it on speaker, but I wasn't really listening. Instead, I was trying to build a picture of what might have happened here two and a half years ago.

One of the theories the police had initially floated was the idea that the villagers had all headed out on to the moors as part of a dare, or a game, fuelled by booze. From what had been found in the recycling bins at the back of the farmhouse, at least three bottles of wine, eighteen bottles of lager and a bottle of rum had been consumed that night, so even if not all of them were drinking at the same rate, most of the neighbours were likely to have been pretty well oiled by the evening's end. Perhaps they were trying to frighten each other with their Halloween masks. Perhaps it was a drunken game of hide-and-seek. The moors at night, unlit by street lamps or nearby towns, would have been the perfect setting for that kind of thing, especially when there was enough alcohol in the blood. Police surmised that a game could be the sort of thing you might suddenly decide to do when you're intoxicated, the kind of unplanned change of direction that felt

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like the funniest, most important thing in the world after four or five drinks. But it wasn't a theory that held up to any real scrutiny.

And it was why the cops had ditched it soon after.

A game of hide-and-seek in Halloween masks might have fitted the profile of a group of people in their teens, maybe even in their twenties or thirties, but it was harder to picture a group in their fifties, sixties and seventies heading out on to the moors after dinner, in the dark. Randolph Solomon's medical records showed that he'd had a hip replacement the previous June, and old medication found in John and Freda Davey's bathroom confirmed that she'd had oral chemotherapy the year before and was – at the time of her disappearance – taking painkillers for an ongoing muscle complaint.

And even if they had – even if, for whatever reason, all nine of them went out on to the moors that night, and got lost in a drunken haze, or were injured – why hadn't the police found them in the three searches they'd conducted? Conversely, if someone had come to the house, maybe a group of people, and taken all nine of them against their will – an idea that had to be considered given the length of time they'd been missing, even if it was hard to know what the catalyst for that might be – where was the evidence of it? Where were the tyre tracks from another car? Where were the footprints belonging to other people? Where were the trails on the moors? Where were the signs of a struggle?

And, in the end, all of that ignored something else.

If this had happened straight after – or around the same time as – they'd eaten, why were the houses so tidy? Why were all the bottles of booze already in the Gibbises' recycling bins, all the food packed up and all the plates washed and put away? It was just about possible to accept that the Perrys, the Daveys and Randolph Solomon and Emiline Wilson might leave their homes totally spotless before heading down to the farmhouse for dinner, but there was no way I could get on board with the idea that they'd then helped clear up at the Gibbises' after eating – while probably quietly indulging in slipping down kitchen

surfaces, and *then* decided that the perfect epilogue was to head out to the moors with their wallets and phones.

Which was probably why the investigation had ultimately stalled, and why the news stories eventually petered out: the Halloween tie-in made for good copy, but it was largely irrelevant if they had actually left the next morning, not on 31 October, which would also explain how the residents had found the time to clean their houses. There was no explanation for why they left en masse, or where they went, but there were also no signs of a struggle, no upturned furniture, no blood, no damage of any kind. Nothing at the scene implied an actual crime – and to the police, to the media, that was the problem. The crime itself was like oxygen.

When it was there, a case and a story continued to breathe.

When it wasn't, everything withered and died.

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## 6

Thunder rumbled above the village, a low sound like an old engine trying to fire, and, finally, Ross hurried over to me, shielding his hair from the rain with his coat.

I told him what I'd removed from his parents' house.

'Did the police say anything about your dad's PC?'

'Just that they didn't find anything on it.'

I nodded. 'And you've left the house as is?'

Yes,' he said. 'I've kept it tidy but I haven't changed anything.'

I looked at an alarm box, high up on the front of the house, and to similar ones on the other two. When we'd entered earlier, Ross had put in a code. He'd told me that he knew the codes for the other properties too.

'When you arrived here on the 3rd of November,' I said, 'was the alarm set?'

'No. None of the houses had their alarms on.'

It was hard to know whether that meant anything or not. The couples were going to a dinner party less than a minute's walk away and the houses were in a remote location where the threat of crime was minuscule. They'd locked up their homes that night but there were almost certainly times before that when they'd popped in to visit each other and hadn't even bothered doing that much. There were probably times when they'd gone further afield and never bothered setting the alarm either, because of how low risk the area was. I'd noted that the Perrys' alarm – and most likely the others too, because they were all fitted by the same firm – had a police response function on it, which meant that if the alarm went off in suspicious circumstances, the security company informed the cops. But that was irrelevant if they'd never been set in the first place.

I walked over to **Copyrighted Material** Freda Dery's home. Their house

was much less contemporary, the furniture more functional, perhaps a reflection of the fifteen-year age gap between them and the Perrys. It was lovingly put together, though, photos of their kids – Rina Blake and her brother, Ian – absolutely everywhere, along with pictures of their grandchildren: Rina had a girl and a boy, although the boy wasn't in any of the pictures here because he was only about a month old; Ian had one boy, and in most shots was in Singapore, where he'd lived and worked since 1999.

I lingered next to a photograph of John and Freda on what looked like a cruise ship. He was a big guy, bald, a little overweight, maybe six three. He might have been a rugby league player once, because he had a Leeds Rhinos shirt on and was built like a prop. Freda couldn't have been more different: she was youthful and attractive, mid-height, the top of her head about level with her husband's chin, and had lovely eyes, like the ocean in a brochure. But she was pale and absolutely stick-thin. It could have been her natural build, but it was more likely that at the time the photograph was taken, she'd been sick and was in recovery. In 2013 she'd had treatment for cancer, and according to her medical records had – for a second time – been referred to the oncology department at Harrogate District Hospital in the months before she vanished. Police had managed to confirm with staff there that the cancer had returned and that they were, at the time of Freda's disappearance, exploring the options available to her. There had been an interesting side note too, which had caught my attention in the police file: one of the nurses, who'd known the Daveys through mutual friends, remembered Freda saying that she and John might go on a holiday before she began the ordeal of more chemo.

I wandered through the house, going through drawers, repeating exactly the same steps as with the Perrys' – and in the bedroom found an iPad inside another evidence bag – but there was little else that caught my attention. Both of them had been retired for a while, so their disappearance was unlikely to be linked to anything that had happened in their jobs, and their time as pensioners seemed to have been spent as they liked to travel,

they were both in a bowls team, they went down to Cambridge a lot to see Rina.

I went to the house next door.

Of all the couples at Black Gale, Randolph Solomon and Emiline Wilson were probably the least known. They had no kids and little in the way of close family, so, unlike the others, they had no one fighting to keep their story above water. Randolph had had a brother who'd died when still young, and Emiline was an only child whose parents were both long gone. They were active socially – he was a huge Middlesbrough fan and, until his hip replacement, had always attended home games with mates; she met a group of friends from school in Kendal once a week – and Emiline also had a part-time job at the library in Grassington. But none of that was much help in finding out what had happened to them: they'd said nothing out of the ordinary to people they'd known or worked with in the weeks leading up to Halloween – nothing about taking a holiday; no emergency trips – and Emiline hadn't put in for any time off at the library.

Again, I moved through the house, picking up a Dell laptop from upstairs, and then stopped to look at pictures of the two of them in the living room. Their holidays didn't appear to have been as exotic as the Perrys', a mix of package deals to Spain and Portugal, and some city breaks to places like Berlin and Venice, but there were some shots from a trip they'd made to the States, maybe five or six years back. I got the sense though that, the trip to the US apart, foreign holidays weren't as important to them, something backed up by another picture I found loose in one of the drawers: Randolph and Emiline standing either side of a 2012 Volkswagen camper van, a Caravan Club sticker in the window. It was parked on their driveway. I took the photo out, removed some of the others from their frames as well, and then pocketed them all.

Finally, I headed to the farmhouse.

Inside it was lovely: big rooms with beamed ceilings, white walls, bright, modern furniture, a lot of flagstone floors and

carpets, with log burners in both the living room and the kitchen. Despite the power and heating being off, it was easy to imagine it as a home people loved coming to. Quiet as it was now, its former life echoed throughout.

The kitchen was divided by an island, the cabinets on one side, a long oak table on the other. The table was where the four couples – and, presumably, at some point – Mark Gibbs had congregated for the Halloween dinner. It was hard to know whether he'd spent all night with his parents; the only thing that was certain was that, when everyone upped and left, he left with them. I found it hard to imagine that a nineteen-year-old kid would voluntarily want to hang out for an entire evening with his mum and dad and a bunch of people three – and in Randolph Solomon's case, almost four – times as old as him, but he'd appeared in some of the photographs that his father had taken on the night of the disappearances. Maybe he came down for dinner, or just to say hello. Maybe he spent the rest of the time upstairs in his bedroom studying, or playing video games, or texting his friends.

None of the Halloween decorations were up any more, Tori Gibbs attending to her brother and sister-in-law's house the same way Ross had done to his parents', but the rest of the place looked untouched. Clean surfaces, clean carpets, beds made.

I went to the kitchen sink and looked out over the land at the back of the house. Two and a half years ago, there would have been hundreds of sheep, a few chickens in a pen too, but now the fields were empty and the runs were unfilled. The Gibbises had owned three dogs too, but those had been found new owners. In the media, on the twelve-month anniversary of the disappearances, Ross, Rina Blake and Tori Gibbs had tried to re-engage people by giving interviews to the local media, including the *Yorkshire Evening Post*, and it had been in that story that I'd read about Tori Gibbs having to sell off her brother's livestock. She'd admitted to having no idea how much she should ask for them, and hadn't even really been sure it was the right thing to do. *What if he and Laura return tomorrow? she'd said. Chris would have an*

*absolute fit. This is his livelihood.* But Chris Gibbs didn't return home, and neither did the rest of them – so the sheep were sold and the moors became still.

I looked around the rest of the house – the living room, the bedrooms – grabbed an iPad from what appeared to be Laura's bedside cabinet and a laptop belonging to Mark, and then ended up in a utility room at the back of the property. It had a sloped tiled roof and was glassed in on three sides, the views presumably spectacular on a clear day. Today wasn't that day: a fog had begun dragging across the fields, following the swirling curtain of rain.

There was a washing machine and tumble dryer, shelves full of powders and soaps, and a shoe rack, the Gibbises' footwear – their mud-caked wellies, their walking boots, their old trainers – stacked in a mess of upturned soles and snaking laces. For some reason, the image gave me pause, the way they were all discarded there, one on top of the other. It was so mundane: whenever it was they dumped their shoes here, the three of them could hardly have imagined that they might never do it again.

I locked up and went to the barns beyond the house, to a workshop in which Chris Gibbs had kept tools, and took pictures on my phone. After that, I returned to my car, loading everything in, ensuring it was all secure for the drive back. Ross wandered over, this time holding an umbrella. I held up the property keys.

'Mind if I keep these for a day or two?'

'No,' he said, 'of course not.'

I didn't really want to have to return here with Healy, because any journey with him, anywhere, represented a risk – but I couldn't help thinking it might be useful to get a second pair of eyes on these places. Nine people, four houses, eight rooms in each of the new-builds, ten in the farmhouse, plus barns, a workshop, and that was without even stepping on to the surrounding moorland: I'd been thorough, and was pretty confident nothing major had been overlooked – but that was a lot of ground to cover.

I dug the photograph of Randolph and Emiline's Volkswagen

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camper van out of my pocket and said, ‘You mentioned your mum and dad’s car to me earlier.’

He nodded.

‘And the Daveys’ and the Gibbsses’ vehicles are obviously still here too.’

‘I think Rina and Tori feel the same way as I do.’

‘You all want to keep the cars here in case your families return?’

‘Right.’

I handed him the picture of the Volkswagen.

‘Any idea where Randolph and Emiline’s camper van went?’

‘No,’ he said. ‘It was gone when I got here.’

I’d read the same thing in the official investigation. The other vehicles had all been taken away for testing – and returned afterwards – but the police had never had the opportunity with the camper van. It hadn’t been parked here on the day Ross came to the village and realized everyone was missing – and it had never been found in the time since. I studied the photo again. Could they all have left in one vehicle?

‘Thank you.’

I looked up at Ross. ‘Sorry?’

‘I just wanted to say thank you,’ he repeated quietly. ‘When you called me up out of the blue the other day, when I phoned Rina and Tori and told them that you had offered to look into what happened up here, it was just . . . it just felt so . . . it just felt . . .’

He cut himself short, embarrassed about becoming emotional again, and then looked away from me. I’d worked a lot of cases, and seen a lot of people cry; from the outside looking in, the idea of a brawny twenty-six-year-old man being reduced to tears so easily might have seemed unusual. But I saw it all the time. You grieved for a disappearance just like you grieved for someone you loved when they died, but they weren’t exactly the same thing – not quite. When someone died, you walked an upward trajectory, a path out of the darkness, however slow: the grief got easier eventually, or you buried it effectively enough for it not to destroy you every day. When someone vanished, the trajectory



went in the other direction: the longer you went without answers, the worse it got. There was no certainty in a disappearance. All of the demons, all of the pain, were in the unanswered questions.

*What happened to the person I loved most in this world?*

*What if someone had hurt them?*

‘You don’t need to thank me, Ross.’

‘I want to,’ he said, holding up a hand. ‘It’s just, we thought it was the end of the road, I guess. The police haven’t called for a year. They seem to have forgotten us. I mean, I know they have to move on, I get that, but Rina, Tori and me, we just stay where we are. We’re stuck.’

He swallowed and expelled a long breath.

‘I know you’re not doing this for free,’ he said, his voice barely audible above the rain, ‘I know we’re all paying you, so I suppose this is just a job for you as well –’

‘This isn’t just a job for me,’ I said.

He looked at me, blinked.

‘It’s not just a job,’ I repeated, more softly.

He wiped at his eyes, the rain disguising his tear trails, unsure if I meant it, or if I was just repeating myself for his benefit. But I wasn’t. I meant every single word.

This wasn’t just a job to me.

Missing people were my life.

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# Joline

1985

*Los Angeles | Tuesday 23 July*

Her pager started buzzing just before 5 a.m.

Jo didn't register it to start with. Ethan had been up most of the night with a summer cold, his nose blocked, his eyes streaming, and she and Ira had taken it in turns to go through to their son. She'd done the last run, just before 3 a.m., and when she'd returned to bed, she'd struggled to fall asleep again. It was just so hot in the house, so hot everywhere in the city right now, and neither the ceiling fan in their room nor the pedestal fan they'd brought in from the garage seemed to make any difference at all. If anything, as she'd lain there staring into the darkness, they'd made everything worse, recirculating hot air and masking all the sounds beyond the house: the traffic, their neighbours, doors closing, approaching footsteps. Ordinarily, that wouldn't have mattered, but these weren't ordinary times.

People wanted to be able to hear everything now.

Every creak; every whisper.

She hauled herself up, trying to work out how much sleep she'd had. Ten until ten fifty, one to two thirty, and four until almost five.

*Just over three hours.*

'Urgh,' she said softly, and started rolling the stiffness out of her neck. Next to her, Ira moved, the sheet twisted around him, and when he moved again she felt his hand brush against the small of her back. Taking his fingers in hers, she scooped up the pager and checked the number. It was the night-shift supervisor.

'What time is it?' Copyrighted Material

‘Way too early.’

She leaned over, kissed Ira on the cheek and went through to the phone in the living room. As she did, she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror: she was only thirty-four but this morning she looked about ten years older, her eyes puffy and tired, her skin pale, her black hair escaping its braid and plastered to her face where she’d sweated during the night. *Well, you look like shit*, she thought, and – thanks to three hours’ sleep – she felt like it too. Ignoring her dishevelled image, she dialled the night supervisor. He picked up after two rings.

‘Rise and shine, Kader.’

‘Urgh,’ she said again.

‘I got something for you.’

‘Is it a pay rise?’

‘Funny. You got a pen?’

‘Yeah.’ She grabbed one off the table. ‘Shoot.’

‘Ten-oh-five La Cienega. A motel called the Star Inn.’

She wrote it on the back of her hand.

‘And what am I going to find there?’ Jo asked.

‘A body in a bathtub.’

They lived in a bungalow in North Hollywood, a block from Laurel Canyon Boulevard. Whenever she went out to the car, especially this early in the morning, she could usually smell eucalyptus on the air, cypress too, and hear the fronds of the palm tree in her yard snapping in the breeze. One or two of her neighbours would normally be up as well: Ricardo, opposite them, always rose early – she’d often come out and find him on his front porch, with a coffee and a newspaper; there was a young guy in his twenties too, five houses down from them, a jogger whose name she didn’t know, but who always headed east towards the freeway and North Hollywood Park. Not this morning, though.

It was already in the low seventies and there wasn’t a breath of wind, not even a murmur. But there were no people outside either, no sounds **Copyrighted Material** coming from open windows or from doorways

that had been left ajar. Every single window in the road was shut; every last door locked. For months now, when people slept, their houses were sealed like a tomb and they kept a gun under their pillow.

It was why, before leaving the house, Jo had watched Ethan for a while, standing inside his bedroom as she'd quietly eaten her breakfast, worried about his cold, but worrying more about what sort of world they would be sending their son out into. Would it always be this bad? Deep down, as she'd stood there watching him, she'd known the answer. She saw it every day when she went to work. Nothing got better. Perhaps the best she could hope for was that it stayed the same.

By the time she was done with her breakfast, the emotion had formed like a lump at the bottom of her throat, and when she leaned over the crib and kissed her son lightly on the cheek, a tear blurred in one of her eyes. *I love you so much, baby boy.* She straightened, cleared her head, made sure Ethan's windows were definitely locked, and then did the same with all the windows and doors in their home, the sound of the fans disguising her movement as she went from room to room. She finished in the kitchen, where, bleary-eyed, Ira was busy making eggs.

'I've got to go to a scene in Hollywood first, but I'll be in the office after that.' She put her bowl in the sink. 'Any emergencies, just page me.'

'Emergencies? Like, emergency food orders? Because I was talking to a client yesterday and he said there's a new Italian place on Ventura that does killer takeout.'

'Is that a fact?'

'Yes, ma'am.'

They smiled at each other.

'He'll be fine,' Ira said. 'It's only a cold.'

'I know. I just don't like seeing him like this.'

Ira nodded at her cereal bowl. 'Is that what passes for washing-up these days?'

Jo winked at him. 'I'll have you go get a manservant.'

Kissing her husband goodbye, she headed outside, locking the screen door, checking and double-checking it. Popping the locks on their Oldsmobile, she looked out at their street. Four of the houses had been repainted in the last week alone; Ricardo was halfway through doing the same, the original beige exterior giving way to a tepid coral. Because most of the attacks had taken place in beige or yellow homes, people had started to think it was a colour thing: they now had a blue home in their road, a green one, white, grey. Jo had been in a meeting yesterday where Lieutenant Hayesfield had told her there was such a run on guard dogs that animals had to be brought in from neighbouring states. Locksmiths were working twenty-four hours a day. Gun-shop owners were turning up in the mornings to find people already waiting in line. The city was in a perpetual state of fear and panic and it was all down to one man.

The media had dubbed him the ‘Night Stalker’.

So far he’d killed eleven people, raped four women, attempted to rape another, beaten a sixteen-year-old girl so badly with a tyre iron she’d needed 478 stitches in her scalp, and gouged out the eyes of one of the victims when she tried to shoot him. He didn’t just break into homes, he ravaged them, physically and psychologically. He’d brought terror to the whole city, not just because of the sheer brutality of his crimes, or because he was a satanist, scrawling pentagrams on the walls and making his victims swear allegiance to the devil, but because his hunting ground seemed to be everywhere: he’d started off in Glassell Park, four miles from Downtown, but had since spread out to Monrovia, seventeen miles east of there, Whittier, fifteen miles south, and then twelve miles to the north in Sun Valley. Because of that, the whole thing was a jurisdictional nightmare, with the LA County Sheriff, the LAPD and eight other separate police departments involved. Yet Jo wasn’t a part of any of it. Hayesfield had expanded the twenty-five-strong team of detectives at the Sheriff’s Department without ever asking Jo to join, and for reasons she knew had nothing to do with her abilities as a cop and everything to do

with her being female and having given birth eighteen months ago.

Before she'd had Ethan, most of the men she'd worked with more or less treated her the same, at least to her face. That didn't mean she hadn't overheard discussions about the size of her breasts, the shape of her ass, how she would perform in bed and what her favourite position might be; about how she wouldn't be strong enough to pick up a Remington, the department's shotgun of choice, or how the kickback would probably burst her right tit; and then there were all the barbed comments – dressed up as light-hearted fun – about how she'd never be as effective as a man in chasing down a suspect because, again, her tits would get in the way; and in a high-speed pursuit she wouldn't be able to keep up, or just crash the car completely, because everyone knew how bad women drivers were. It was generally done out of earshot, or when they thought she wasn't around, but even when it wasn't, even when her male colleagues said things directly to her face, all she could do was swear at them or ignore them, because there was no recourse. There was no system of complaint, not even the basic framework for it. There were no other female Homicide detectives to go into battle with, and every senior position was held by a man. So, unless she wanted her career to be over, there had never been any point in protesting about the discrimination before, and – with so much focus on the Stalker, so much tension inside the department, and resources so stretched – it would have been even more suicidal to say something now. All of which meant that, for the past year, she'd not only had to endure all the usual comments, repeated jokes, sniggers and put-downs, she'd had to work some investigations entirely by herself – without a partner – because so many other detectives had been seconded to the Stalker. Worse, it meant she was catching all the shitty cases no one else wanted or got given, and she was having to watch one of the biggest manhunts in the entire history of Los Angeles play out from the opposite side of a squad room. And it was making her angry. It was making her angry.

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Starting up the car, she pulled off the driveway and headed south, into the Hills, trying to calm herself by listening to the radio. Tears for Fears played for a while, but when the music stopped, the DJ began talking about the Night Stalker. She switched stations, but the same thing happened again, and then again, over and over, the lulls between songs, the gaps between ads, dedicated to the actions of a depraved animal.

Finally, she turned the radio off completely.

For twenty minutes she revelled in the quiet, the drive into West Hollywood filled with nothing more than the low throb of the engine and the repetitive sounds of the freeway. She thought about the day ahead, about the men she worked with, about the things in her life that she *could* control, and then a picture of her son filled her head, an image of Ethan asleep in his bed, and everything settled. He was her ballast.

Her son was everything.

And, in that moment, Joline Kader found some peace.

She would never find it again.

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We talked about what I'd found out at Black Gale over dinner in Healy's hotel room, although dinner was something of a misnomer: we were five miles from the nearest town of any size and wedged between the motorway and the main building of a service station, so we'd had to make do with Burger King.

'What did you find in the file?' I asked him.

'It's a pretty thin case,' Healy replied through a mouthful of burger, 'but not because of sloppy police work. They worked all the angles you'd expect them to, they tried to tie available evidence to the biggest questions, but the lack of an obvious crime means some of it feels desperate. I mean, it's not hard to see why they dropped the idea of it being a pissed-up game of hide-and-seek.' He reached over and picked up a thick sheaf of papers; on top was a gallery of low-res shots extracted from Chris Gibbs's phone. Healy waved it in his hand. 'They were pretty well oiled even before they ate, judging by these pictures. Maybe not hardly-able-to-stand bad, but we're clearly in warm-glow-and-stupid-grin territory. The empty bottles in the recycling bins seem to back that up too. And when you're half-stewed, some spontaneous Halloween game *is* the sort of nutty shite some people might find fun. But I don't know . . .'

'Not this group?'

'No.'

'I agree. I think we can dismiss the idea of a game.'

I looked at the printouts that Healy had in his hands, in particular the photo that Chris Gibbs had taken on his mobile phone using the timer: nine faces, partly obscured behind party wear, but all of them recognizable. I tried to force myself to see something in the shot, some minor giveaway, something to help me make sense of what had happened afterwards, but there was nothing.



And that was something else that had begun to occur to me as I drove back from Black Gale: everyone had gone. The four couples liked each other, that much seemed to be indisputable, but was it really normal for nine individuals – including a kid of nineteen – to operate with such a hive-mind mentality? Wasn't it more realistic to suppose that one or two of them might have decided they didn't want to leave the village that night?

'What if someone forced them to leave?' Healy asked, as if he knew where my thoughts were at.

'There were no foreign tyre tracks in the village.'

'Maybe whoever it was came in on foot.'

'One person versus nine?'

'The person could have been armed.'

'Still,' I said, 'it's not great odds. You only have to make one mistake, turn your back at the wrong moment. Even with a gun, it's tricky to herd nine people around.'

'Maybe there was *more* than one attacker.'

'If there was, there should have been evidence of it.'

He'd started nodding before I'd even finished my sentence because he already knew it was unlikely to have happened in that way: there wasn't only a lack of tyre tracks, but forensic techs had meticulously matched footprints in and around the properties to footwear left behind in the four homes. That still left the shoes that the nine villagers were wearing at the time they exited the village – which, of course, the investigators couldn't match in the same way – but there were no prints leading up to Black Gale's main gate, suggesting they hadn't left on foot, and the unmatched moulds taken from the scene belonged to nine people and nine pairs of shoes. So, in essence, the police had nine shoe prints they couldn't definitively link to the missing villagers, but it was almost one hundred per cent likely that it *was* them, especially as those footprints all moved in the same patterns around the homes, in repeated loops.

'What's your thinking on the timing?' Healy asked me. 'Did

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