

For Lynn and Zack

Jake.

There is so much I want to tell you, but we've always found it hard to talk to each other, haven't we?

So I'll have to write to you instead.

I remember when Rebecca and I first brought you home from the hospital. It was dark and it was snowing, and I'd never driven so carefully in my life. You were two days old and strapped in a carrier in the backseat, Rebecca dozing beside you, and every now and then I'd look in the rearview mirror to check that you were safe.

Because you know what, Jake? I was *absolutely fucking terrified*. I grew up as an only child, completely unused to babies, and there I was, responsible for one of my own. You were so impossibly small and vulnerable, and I so unprepared, that it seemed ludicrous they'd allowed you out of the hospital with me. From the very beginning, we didn't fit. Rebecca held you easily and naturally, as though she'd been born to you rather than the other way around. Whereas I always felt awkward, scared of this fragile weight in my arms, unable to tell what you wanted when you cried. I didn't understand you at all. That never changed.

When you were a little older, Rebecca told me it was because you and I were so alike, but I don't know if that's true. I hope it isn't. I'd have always wanted better for you than that.

But regardless, we can't talk to each other, which means I'll have to try to write all this down instead. The truth about everything that happened in Featherbank.

Mister Night. The boy in the floor. The butterflies. The little girl with the strange dress.

And the Whisper Man, of course.

It's not going to be easy, and I need to start with an apology. Because over the years I've told you many times that there's no such thing as monsters.

I'm sorry that I lied.

Part One

July

One

The abduction of a child by a stranger is every parent's worst nightmare. But statistically it is a highly unusual event. Children are actually most at risk of harm and abuse from a family member behind closed doors, and while the outside world might seem threatening, the truth is that most strangers are decent people, whereas the home can be the most dangerous place of all.

The man stalking six-year-old Neil Spencer across the waste ground understood that only too well.

Moving quietly, parallel to Neil behind a line of bushes, he kept a constant watch on the boy. Neil was walking slowly, unaware of the danger he was in. Occasionally he kicked at the dusty ground, throwing up chalky white mist around his sneakers. The man, treading far more carefully, could hear the *scuff* each time. And he made no sound at all.

It was a warm evening. The sun had been beating down hard and unrestrained for most of the day, but it was six o'clock now and the sky was hazier. The temperature had dropped and the air had a golden hue to it. It was the sort of evening when you might sit out on the patio, perhaps sipping cold white wine and watching the sun set, without thinking about fetching a coat until it was too dark and too late to bother.

Even the waste ground was beautiful, bathed in the amber light. It was a patch of shrubland, edging the village of Featherbank on one side, with an old disused quarry on the other. The undulating ground was mostly parched and dead, although bushes grew in tough thickets here and there, lending the area a maze-like quality. The village's children played here sometimes, although it was not particularly safe. Over the years, many of them had been tempted to clamber down into the quarry, where the steep sides were prone to crumbling away. The council put up fences and signs, but the local

feeling was that they should do more. Children found ways over fences, after all.

They had a habit of ignoring warning signs.

The man knew a lot about Neil Spencer. He had studied the boy and his family carefully, like a project. The boy performed poorly at school, both academically and socially, and was well behind his peers in reading, writing, and math. His clothes were mostly hand-me-downs. In his manner he seemed a little too grown-up for his age—already displaying anger and resentment toward the world. In a few years he would be perceived as a bully and a troublemaker, but for now he was still young enough for people to forgive his more disruptive behavior. *He doesn't mean it*, they would say. *It's not his fault*. It had not yet reached the point where Neil was considered solely responsible for his actions, and so instead people were forced to look elsewhere.

The man had looked. It wasn't hard to see.

Neil had spent today at his father's house. His mother and father were separated, which the man considered a good thing. Both parents were alcoholics, functioning to wavering degrees. Both found life considerably easier when their son was at the other's house, and both struggled to entertain him when he was with them. In general, Neil was left to occupy and fend for himself, which obviously went some way toward explaining the hardness the man had seen developing in the boy. Neil was an afterthought in his parents' lives. Certainly he was not loved.

Not for the first time, Neil's father had been too drunk that evening to drive him back to his mother's house, and apparently also too ambivalent to walk with him. The boy was nearly seven, his father reasoned, and had been fine alone all day. And so Neil was walking home by himself.

He had no idea yet that he would be going to a very different home. The man thought about the room he had prepared and tried to suppress his excitement.

Halfway across the waste ground, Neil stopped.

The man stopped close by, then peered through the shrubs to see what had caught the boy's attention.

An old television had been dumped against one of the bushes, its gray screen bulging but intact. The man watched as Neil gave it an exploratory nudge with his foot, but it was too heavy to move. The thing must have

looked like something out of another age to the boy, with grilles and buttons down the side of the screen and a back the size of a drum. There were some rocks on the other side of the path. The man watched, fascinated, as Neil walked over, selected one, and then threw it at the glass with all his strength.

Pock.

A loud noise in this otherwise silent place. The glass didn't shatter, but the stone went through, leaving a hole starred at the edges like a gunshot. Neil picked up a second rock and repeated the action, missing this time, then tried again. Another hole appeared in the screen.

He seemed to like this game.

And the man could understand why. This casual destruction was much like the increasing aggression the boy showed in school. It was an attempt to make an impact on a world that seemed so oblivious to his existence. It stemmed from a desire to be seen. To be noticed. To be loved.

Because that was all any child wanted, deep down.

The man's heart, beating more quickly now, ached at the thought of that. He stepped silently out from the bushes behind the boy, and then whispered his name.

Two

Neil. Neil. Neil.

Detective Inspector Pete Willis moved carefully over the waste ground, listening as the officers around him called the missing boy's name at regular intervals. In between, there was absolute silence. Pete looked up, imagining the words fluttering into the blackness up there, disappearing into the night sky as completely as Neil Spencer had vanished from the earth below it.

He swept the beam of his flashlight over the dusty ground in a conical pattern, checking his footing as well as looking for any sign of the boy. Blue tracksuit pants, Minecraft T-shirt, black trainers, army-style backpack, water bottle. The alert had come through just as he'd been sitting down to eat the dinner he'd labored over preparing, and the thought of the plate there on his table right now, untouched and growing cold, made his stomach grumble.

But a little boy was missing and needed to be found.

The other officers were invisible, but he could see the flashlights as they fanned out across the area. Pete checked his watch. 8:53 P.M. The day was almost done, and although it had been hot this afternoon, the temperature had dropped over the last couple of hours, and the cold air was making him shiver. In his rush to leave, he'd forgotten his coat, and the shirt he was wearing offered scant protection against the elements. Old bones too—he was fifty-six, after all—but it was no night for young ones to be out either. Especially lost and alone. Hurt, most likely. And scared.

Neil. Neil. Neil.

He added his own voice: "Neil!"

Nothing.

The first forty-eight hours following a disappearance are the most crucial. The boy had been reported missing at 7:39 P.M., well over an hour