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A NOVEL

THE  
WHISPER  
MAN



ALEX NORTH

THE  
WHISPER MAN

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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 and a half after he had left his father's house. He should have been home by 6:20, but

there had been little coordination between the parents as to the exact time of his return, so it wasn't until Neil's mother had finally called her ex-husband that their son's absence was discovered. By the time the police arrived on the scene at 7:51, the shadows were lengthening, and approaching two of those forty-eight hours had already been lost. Now it was closer to three.

In the vast majority of cases, Pete knew, a missing child is found quickly and safely and returned to his or her family. Cases were divided into five distinct categories: throwaway; runaway; accident or misadventure; family abduction; nonfamily abduction. The law of probability was telling Pete right now that the disappearance of Neil Spencer would turn out to be an accident of some kind, and that the boy was going to be found soon. And yet, the farther he walked, the more gut instinct was telling him differently. There was an uncomfortable feeling curling around his heart. But then, a child going missing always made him feel like this. It didn't mean anything. It was just the bad memories of twenty years ago surfacing, bringing bad feelings along with them.

The beam of his flashlight passed over something gray.

Pete stopped immediately, then played it back to where it had been. There was an old television set lodged at the base of one of the bushes, its screen broken in several places, as though someone had used it for target practice. He stared at it for a moment.

"Anything?"

An anonymous voice calling from one side.

"No," he shouted back.

He reached the far side of the waste ground at the same time as the other officers, the search having turned up nothing. After the relative darkness behind him, Pete found the bleached brightness of the streetlights here made him feel oddly queasy. There was a quiet hum of life in the air that had been absent in the silence of the waste ground.

A few moments later, stuck for anything better to do right now, he turned around and walked back the way he'd come.

He wasn't really sure where he was going, but found himself heading off to the side, in the direction of the old quarry that ran along one edge. It was dangerous ground in the dark, so he headed toward the cluster of flashlights where the quarry search team were about to start work. While other officers were working their way along the edge, shining their beams down the steep sides and calling Neil's name, the ones here were consulting maps and preparing to pick their way down the rough path that led into the area below. A couple of them looked up as he reached them.

“Sir?” One of them recognized him. “I didn’t know you were on duty tonight.”

“I’m not.” Pete bent the wire of the fence up and ducked under to join them, even more careful of his footing now. “I live locally.”

“Yes, sir.”

The officer sounded dubious. It was unusual for a DI to turn up for what was ostensibly grunt work like this. DI Amanda Beck was coordinating the burgeoning investigation from back at the department, and the search team here was comprised mainly of rank and file. Pete figured he had more years on the clock than any of them, but tonight he was just part of the crowd. A child was missing, which meant that a child needed to be found. The officer was maybe too young to remember what had happened with Frank Carter two decades earlier, and to understand why it was no surprise to find Pete Willis out in circumstances like this.

“Watch yourself, sir. The ground’s a bit shaky here.”

“I’m fine.”

Young enough to discount him as some old man as well, apparently. Presumably he’d never seen Pete in the department’s gym, which he visited every morning before heading upstairs to work. Despite the disparity in their ages, Pete would have bet he could outlift the younger man on every machine. He was watching the ground, all right. Watching everything—including himself—was second nature to him.

“Okay, sir, well, we’re about to head down. Just coordinating.”

“I’m not in charge here.” Pete pointed his flashlight down the path, scanning the rough terrain. The beam of light only penetrated a short distance. The bed of the quarry below was nothing but an enormous black hole. “You report to DI Beck, not to me.”

“Yes, sir.”

Pete continued staring down, thinking about Neil Spencer. The most likely routes the boy would have taken had been identified. The streets had been searched. Most of his friends had already been contacted, all to no avail. And the waste ground was clear. If the boy’s disappearance really was the result of an accident or misadventure, then the quarry was the only remaining place that made sense for him to be found.

And yet the black world below felt entirely empty.

He couldn’t know for sure—not through reason. But his instinct was telling him that Neil Spencer wasn’t going to be found here.

That maybe he wasn’t going to be found at all.

## Three

“Do you remember what I told you?” the little girl said.

He did, but right now Jake was doing his best to ignore her. All the other children in the 567 Club were outside playing in the sun. He could hear the shouting and the sound of the soccer ball skittering back and forth. Whereas he was sitting inside, working on his drawing. He would much rather have been left alone to finish it.

It wasn't that he didn't like playing with the little girl. Of course he did. Most of the time she was the only one who *wanted* to play with him, and normally he was more than happy to see her. But she wasn't acting particularly playful this afternoon. In fact, she was being all *serious*, and he didn't like that one bit.

“Do you remember?”

“I guess.”

“*Say* it, then.”

He sighed, put the pencil down, and looked at her. As always, she was wearing a blue-and-white-checked dress, and he could see the hash of a graze on her right knee that never seemed to heal. While the other girls here had neat hair, cut level at the shoulders or tied back in a tight ponytail, the little girl's was spread out messily to one side and looked like she hadn't brushed it in a long time.

From the expression on her face now, it was obvious she wasn't going to give up, so he repeated what she'd told him.

“If you leave a door half open...”

It should have been surprising that he *did* remember it all, really, because he hadn't made any special effort to make the words stick. But for some reason, they had. It was something about the rhythm. Sometimes he'd hear a song on the radio and it would end up going around and around in his brain

for hours. Daddy had called it an *earworm*, which had made Jake imagine the sounds burrowing into the side of his head and squirming around in his mind.

When he was finished, the little girl nodded to herself, satisfied. Jake picked up his pencil again.

“What does it mean, anyway?” he said.

“It’s a warning.” She wrinkled her nose. “Well—kind of, anyway. Children used to say it when I was little.”

“Yes, but what does it *mean*?”

“It’s just good advice,” she said. “There are a lot of bad people in the world, after all. A lot of bad *things*. So it’s good to remember.”

Jake frowned, and then started drawing again. Bad people. There was a slightly older boy called Carl here at the 567 Club who Jake thought was bad. Last week, Carl had cornered him while he was building a LEGO fortress, and then stood too close, looming over him like a big shadow.

*Why’s it always your dad who picks you up?* Carl had demanded, even though he already knew the answer. *Is it because your mum’s dead?*

Jake hadn’t answered.

*What did she look like when you found her?*

Again, he hadn’t answered. Apart from in nightmares, he didn’t think about what it was like to find Mummy that day. It made his breath go funny and not work properly. But one thing he couldn’t escape was the knowledge that she wasn’t here anymore.

It reminded him of a time long gone when he had peered around the kitchen door and seen her chopping a big red pepper in half and pulling out the middle. *Hey, gorgeous boy.* That was what she’d said when she’d seen him. She always called him that. The feeling inside when he remembered she was dead had the kind of sound the pepper had, like something ripping with a *pock* and leaving a hollow.

*I really like seeing you cry like a baby,* Carl had declared, and then walked away like Jake didn’t even exist. It wasn’t nice to imagine the world was full of people like that, and Jake didn’t want to believe it. He drew circles on the sheet of paper now. Force fields around the little stick figures battling there.

“Are you all right, Jake?”

He looked up. It was Sharon, one of the grown-ups who worked at the 567 Club. She had been washing up at the far side of the room, but had come

over now, and was leaning down with her hands between her knees.

"Yes," he said.

"That's a nice picture."

"It's not finished yet."

"What is it going to be?"

He thought about how to explain the battle he was drawing—all the different sides fighting it out, with the lines between them and the scribbles over the ones who had lost—but it was too difficult.

"Just a battle."

"Are you sure you don't want to go outside and play with the other children? It's such a lovely day."

"No, thank you."

"We've got some spare sunscreen." She looked around. "There's probably a hat somewhere too."

"I need to finish my drawing."

Sharon stood back up again, sighing quietly to herself, but with a kind expression on her face. She was worried about him, and while she didn't need to be, he supposed that was still kind of nice. Jake could always tell when people were concerned about him. Daddy often was, except for those times when he lost his patience. Sometimes he shouted, and said things like, *It's just because I want you to talk to me, I want to know what you're thinking and feeling*, and it was scary when that happened, because Jake felt like he was disappointing Daddy and making him sad. But he didn't know how to be different from how he was.

Around and around—another force field, the lines overlapping. Or maybe it was a portal instead? So that the little figure inside could disappear away from the battle and go somewhere better. Jake turned the pencil around and began carefully erasing the person from the page.

*There.*

*You're safe now, wherever you are.*

One time after Daddy lost his temper, Jake found a note on his bed. There was what he had to admit was a very good picture of the two of them smiling, and underneath that Daddy had written: *I'm sorry. I want you to remember that even when we argue we still love each other very much. XXX.* Jake had put the note into his Packet of Special Things, along with all the other important things he needed to keep. He checked now. The Packet was on the table in front of him, right beside the drawing.

"You're going to be moving to the new house soon," the little girl said.

“Am I?”

“Your daddy went to the bank today.”

“I know. But he says he’s not sure it’s going to happen. They might not give him the thing he needs.”

“The *mortgage*,” the little girl said patiently. “But they will.”

“How do you know?”

“He’s a famous writer, isn’t he? He’s good at making things up.” She looked at the picture he was drawing and smiled to herself. “Just like you.”

Jake wondered about the smile. It was a strange one, as though she were happy but also sad about something. Come to think of it, that was how he felt about moving. He didn’t like it in the house anymore, and he knew it was making Daddy miserable too, but moving still felt like something they maybe shouldn’t do, even though *he* was the one who’d spotted the new house on Daddy’s iPad when they were looking together.

“I’ll see you after I move, won’t I?” he said.

“Of course you will. You *know* that you will.” But then the little girl leaned forward, speaking more urgently. “*Whatever happens, though*, remember what I told you. It’s important. You have to promise me, Jake.”

“I promise. What does it *mean*, though?”

For a moment he thought she might be going to try to explain it more, but then the buzzer went on at the far side of the room.

“Too late,” she whispered. “Your daddy’s here.”

## Four

Most of the children seemed to be playing outside the 567 Club when I arrived. I could hear the mingled laughter as I parked. They all looked so happy—so *normal*—and for a moment my gaze moved between them, searching for Jake, hoping to see him among them.

But, of course, my son wasn't there.

I found him inside instead, sitting with his back to me, hunched over a drawing. My heart broke a little at the sight of him. Jake was small for his age, and his posture right then made him seem tinier and more vulnerable than ever. As though he were trying to disappear into the picture in front of him.

Who could blame him? He hated it here, I knew, even if he never objected to coming or complained about it afterward. But it felt like I had no choice. There had been so many unbearable occasions since Rebecca's death: the first haircut I had to take him to; ordering his school clothes; fumbling the wrapping of his Christmas presents because I couldn't see properly through the tears. An endless list. But for some reason, holidays had been the hardest. As much as I loved Jake, I found it impossible to spend all day, every day with him. It didn't feel like there was enough left of *me* to fill all those hours, and while I despised myself for failing to be the father he needed, the truth was that sometimes I needed time to myself. To forget about the gulf between us. To ignore my growing inability to cope. To be able to collapse and cry for a while, knowing he wouldn't walk in and find me.

"Hey, mate."

I put my hand on his shoulder. He didn't look up.

"Hi, Daddy."

"What have you been up to?"

“Nothing much.” There was an almost imperceptible shrug under my hand. His body seemed barely there, somehow even lighter and softer than the fabric of the T-shirt he was wearing. “Playing with someone a bit.”

“Someone?” I said.

“A girl.”

“That’s nice.” I leaned over and looked at the sheet of paper. “And drawing too, I see.”

“Do you like it?”

“Of course. I love it.”

I actually had no idea what it was meant to be—a battle of some kind, although it was impossible to work out which side was which, or what was going on. Jake very rarely drew anything static. His pictures came to life, an animation unfolding on the page, so that the end result was like a film where you could see all the scenes at once, superimposed on top of each other.

He was creative, though, and I liked that. It was one of the ways in which he was like me: a connection we had—although the truth was that I’d barely written a word in the ten months since Rebecca died.

“Are we going to move to the new house, Daddy?”

“Yes.”

“So the person at the bank listened to you?”

“Let’s just say that I was convincingly creative about the perilous state of my finances.”

“What does *perilous* mean?”

It was almost a surprise that he didn’t know. A long time ago, Rebecca and I had agreed to talk to Jake like he was an adult, and when he didn’t know a word we’d explain it to him. He absorbed it all, and often came out with strange things as a result. But this wasn’t a word I wanted to explain to him right now.

“It means it’s something for me and the person at the bank to worry about,” I said. “Not you.”

“When are we going?”

“As soon as possible.”

“How will we take everything?”

“We’ll rent a van.” I thought about money, and fought down a hint of panic. “Or maybe we’ll just use the car—really pack it up and do a few trips. We might not be able to take *everything* with us, but we can sort through your toys and see what you want to keep.”

“I want to keep all of them.”