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WRITTEN STONE LANE

A. J. Hartley

Illustrated by Janet Pickering

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To my family. As usual.

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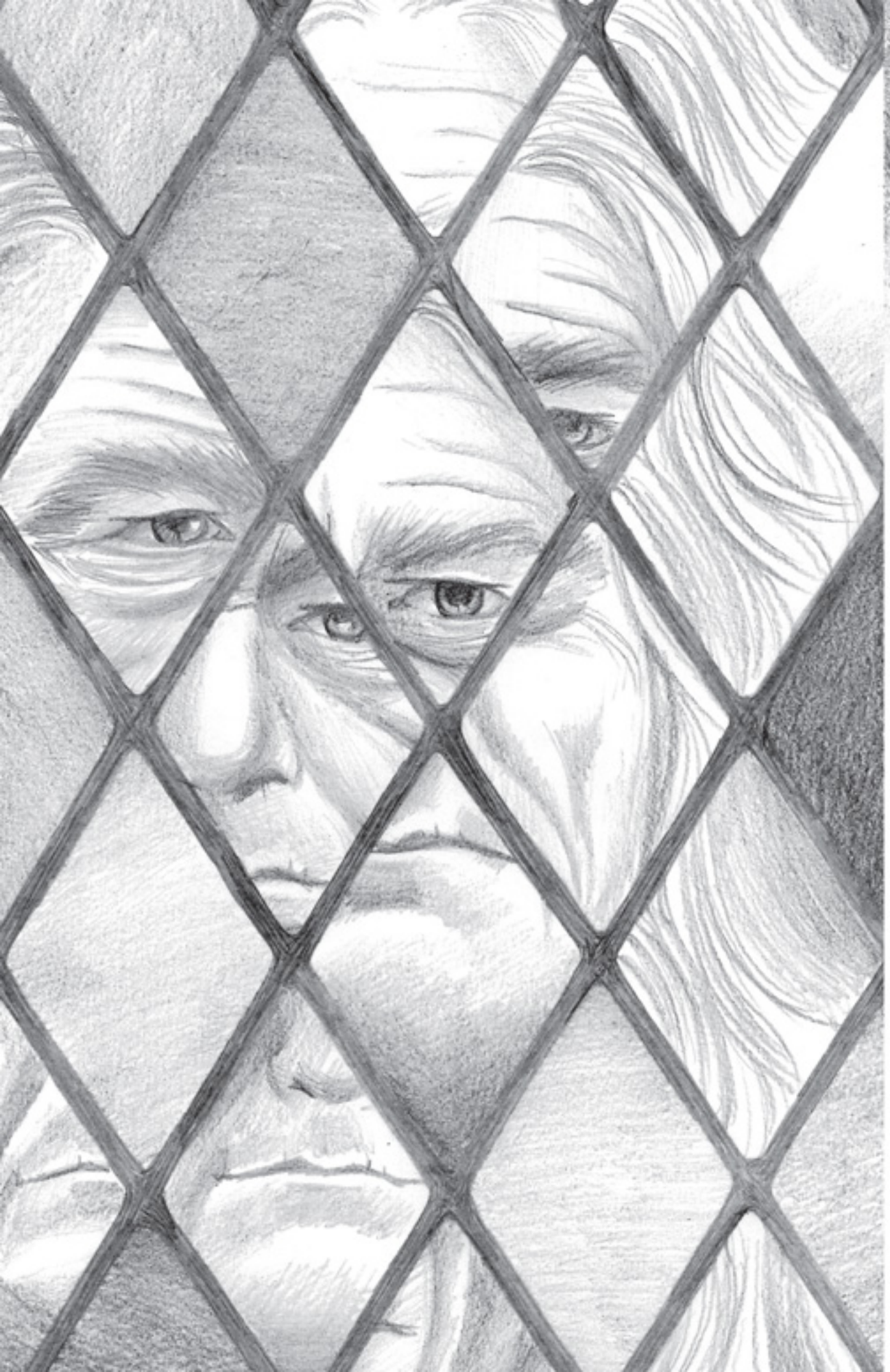
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PROLOGUE

Preston, Lancashire, England.

Ralph Radcliffe considered his face in the fragmented reflection of the leaded windows, the way the bubbled and uneven glass transformed him into something monstrous with each fractional turn of his head. For a moment he became quite still, looking into his own eyes hoping to see only determined singularity of purpose, and not the ghosting of dread he had fought over the last year to beat back. Instead he saw only weariness and resignation.

His time was over but – with a little luck – the nightmare would end, if not for him, then for his friends, his family, for the village and the land that ranged from the fell down to the River Ribble.

And that is worth something.

He thought it deliberately, forcefully, trying to suppress the doubts which he knew would chase the notion through his head,

worrying at it, stealing its force and clarity till it had sapped the strength he needed to do the deed. The door behind him creaked open and a flicker of light and colour in the glass made him turn.

It was his wife, Constance. She entered and stood in the doorway, regarding him steadily. She took in his clothes, his bearing, the sword he had left discarded on the bed, knowing he had no further use for it.

"You mean to go through with it, then?" she said.

"I must," he answered. "For you as much or more than all the rest."

"Then let me come with you. I will stand at your side and let the creature do its worst."

Ralph shook his head.

"That cannot be," he said. "The monster's bargain has been made. Only my blood will satisfy it."

"It will trick us, Ralph! You know it can't be trusted. And it wants revenge for your return."

"Aye, that's so," said Ralph. "But this is all we have to offer it."

"And what of the boy? Surely Thomas should not be sacrificed when we fought so hard to bring him back before?"

"His time, like mine, is spent," said Ralph, implacable. "We have had twelve months longer than was allotted to us. Now we must face death with the calm and resolution we could not muster before."

"He's but a child, husband! How can you look your brother in his face?"

"Robert understands."

"And is willing to sacrifice his son?"

"The child is dead already! So am I."

"You came back!" she retorted, her face pleading, her eyes full of tears, though they had been over the point too many times for her to think he would change his mind.

"Thomas died a year since, wife!" Ralph retorted. "Robert knows that. So do you. We cheated mortality then, Thomas and I, and what did we achieve?"

"We got you back," said Constance, simply. "Was not that enough?"

"For me, my love," he answered, crossing to her and taking her hands tenderly in his. "And I wish with all my heart that that was all that mattered. But you have seen the consequences of our trickery. The horrors we have seen, and now my brother Edward's son, dead before the blossom of his youth had chance to fall. It is a judgment on us for our misdeed, and I pray the Lord we can repay the fault, if not to Edward then to those who might yet lose more. The boggart knows what we did and calls it treachery. So long as Thomas and I live, it will plague us, tear down all we hold dear and carry off all those we love to God knows what torment. Compared to such terrors, death is welcome. I am ashamed that I have fled from it so long."

Constance was pale and silent, but as he spoke the tears had begun to flow freely and now she sat rigid. Ralph slipped his arm around her shoulders and squeezed her to his black doublet, but it was a moment before she softened enough to lay her head against his neck. Time seemed to stop and he felt a stillness in

the universe, a harmony and peace he had not thought possible on this of all days.

It was a cold night, but the window above the box seat was open. The darkness beyond the candle light of the room was thick and impenetrable. No owl called or fox barked. The cattle were still and the night itself seemed to be waiting, its eyes covered as if in dread of what was to come.

Somewhere out there it would be watching, waiting for him to step outside and meet it at last.

A year, he thought. A year that began with the joy of a life he thought he had lost forever. But that joy had given way to anxiety, and finally to horror and the certainty that his return had come at too high a price. Worse, it was a price born heaviest by those he loved. So he had agreed to the boggart's bargain: a year of life for him and Thomas in return for their going willingly to death at the demon's hands after which, the creature promised peace for the village.

And did he trust its word?

Not for a second. Even if the spirit meant to be faithful now, Ralph saw the hunger and malice burning within it. His blood and that of Robert's boy, Thomas, would satisfy it for a while, but it would be back soon enough, all deals forgotten, and ravenous for more.

But Ralph had one last card to play. He turned to look out through the open window and down to the old standing stone. Even from here he felt the power of it. Constance felt the shift in his focus and she followed his gaze.

"You think that will bind it?" she said.

"Perhaps," he said, "but once in place, the stone must never move. Never, you hear me? And that falls to you, wife. See that it lies there forever."

Her face hardened with resolve, but she could not suppress a pang of doubt.

"Forever is a long time, husband," she answered.

"Aye," he agreed, getting to his feet and turning to the door and the thing waiting for him out there in the dark. "It is at that."





CHAPTER ONE

Ribbleton, Preston, Lancashire.

September 15th, 1978.

9:23 pm.

Preston nodded again, still smiling, then he took another step forward and extended his hand.

"Hi," he said. "I'm Preston."

"Tracey," said the girl with the chestnut hair and the clever eyes, taking his hand and shaking it once.

The touch of her, the warm reality of her palm against his, was like a bolt of electricity through his body. She seemed to flinch as if feeling it too, though maybe that was just a reaction to the intensity of his grip. He let go quickly.

"You have cold hands," she said.

"It's a cold night," he shot back, quite comfortable, as if he had known her all his life.

"No gloves?" she said. "Shouldn't you 'Be Prepared'? You're a scout," she added with that playfully skeptical smile.

"No," said Preston.

The girl made a face, her eyes moving over his uniform.

"So what's that, a costume?" she said.

"I mean, I was a scout," said Preston. "But I quit. Tonight. Just now in fact."

It wasn't a lie: not really. He made the decision as he spoke, and he would stick to it. He was done with scouts. He was done with a lot of things. Preston Oldcorn had been gone long enough to know that now he was back he would not waste a second of life. Because while Tracey obviously had no recollection of what they had been through together, Preston remembered every detail of it.

Preston Oldcorn had been dead, trapped in an endless moment for what had felt like months, years even, killed by a spectre called the Leech which had turned out to be a boy, bullied to death on a train and bent on revenge. But in his final conflict with the thing which had killed him, Preston had stumbled into the other boy's own time and, in changing the past, had saved them both. The Leech, now simply a boy again, had been able to move on to whatever came after death, and Preston had woken up in the same time and place where he had been killed, only a few hundred yards from this very spot.

Logically he knew he shouldn't be able to remember, that if the ghost which killed him had never existed and Preston had never died, none of what had happened in that awful nine twenty-

two limbo should have stayed with him, but it did. Every moment of it. He remembered the ghost dogs and the Roman legionaries, the spectre which had emerged from the painting at the Harris Library, Dolly Bannister and Margaret Banks, his friend Roarer, who was gone now, and all that that happened in the Miley tunnel as he made his fateful way to Cold Bath Street. He could see it all, bright and certain and real as brick and pain and darkness. And he remembered Tracey's part in it all. She had been older for most of it. Not much older than she was now. A year or two, perhaps. But he looked into her face now, a face that was already dear to him, and he could tell that as far as she was concerned they were meeting for the first time, and all their strange history together was, to her, blank. Time had unravelled, and one strand of it was gone from every mind in the world but his.

"You got a phone number?" he said. "I need to go home, but I'd like to call you."

Tracey raised an eyebrow. Over her shoulder, her father was watching them closely.

"Pretty forward for an almost ex-scout," she said.

"Yeah," said Preston, shrugging and smiling, though even he was surprised at what he had said. "Life's short, you know?"

"Ah," said Tracey, dry as toast, "adolescent wisdom."

"So what do you say?"

She considered him frankly, then fired a question back.

"Best song in the charts right now?" she demanded. "And if you say 'You're the one that I want', this conversation ends here."

Preston, who had felt so composed, so ready for this, for life,

gaped, wrong footed, and thought back. It all seemed so long ago, listening to music in his room before he had been trapped in that nine twenty-two no-place. He thought about arguing with Roarer over which Elvis was best, Presley or Costello, and then something else came to mind, something caustically exotic, vibrant and odd.

"Hong Kong Garden," he said.

"Siouxsie and the Banshees," said Tracey thoughtfully, approving. "Alright then."

She pulled a notebook from her back pocket and scribbled down a phone number in blue biro, watching him out of the corner of her eye. Behind her, her father frowned and adjusted his stance to look Preston over. They were house-hunting. In the other time line, Preston's grief-stricken parents had moved and sold them the house on Langdale Road so that Tracey had grown up in his room, but not now. Now he was back, alive, and his parents would stay where they were. If Tracey was ever to see his room, Preston would have to show it to her himself.

Feeling Tracey's father watching him, Preston met his eyes and gave him a nod, partly respectful, partly man-to-man matey. He had never done anything like it before in his life. And then he was thanking her and saying it was nice to meet her, taking her hand and shaking it like he was at a job interview. He walked away, but – driven by a rash and boundless joy – the walk became a run when he turned down Stuart Road and made for home. His heart thumped in his chest as he made the corner of Langdale Road and he laughed aloud with delight.

In under a minute he was home, down the side and through the back door into the wash house. The kitchen was quiet but the battery clock on the far wall above the old teak dining table was ticking round as it should and Preston could hear the television in the front room. He was usually home in time to catch the end of the nine o'clock news but judging by the noisy soundtrack, 'Target' – the noisy police show his dad sometimes watched – had already started.

Preston burst in so suddenly that his parents looked up, startled, his mum where she always was, on the end of the couch by the gas fire, his father in the armchair just inside the door, his pipe cradled absently in his left hand.

It was as if he had never been away.

But he had. For so very, very long.

"Alright, love?" said his mum, putting down a white paper bag: a quarter of pear drops from Cuffs. One of her few extravagances. "How was scouts?"

Preston, suddenly incapable of speech, said nothing, but hugged each of them in turn, snatching them into embraces fierce and out of character, as if defying the world to ever force his family apart again. Then his father asked if he'd been drinking and Preston laughed and wept a little so that his mum began to worry, and he just held them hard and told them it was all right. At last, it was all right.

He was home.

* * *

Tracey's parents drove back to Longridge in disappointed silence. The house they had come to inspect wasn't right, as the one before it hadn't been right, which was to say that neither were what they wanted while being all they could afford. So they drove out of Ribbleton, over the motorway and through the leafy seclusion of Grimsargh, up to the Alston Reservoir where they turned onto Lower Lane, past the Corporation Arms to the little narrow and weedy road where the old farm houses stood. Tracey knew the roads all too well, and gazed out of the window into the darkness looking at nothing, thinking vaguely about the odd boy she had met who her mum and dad were pointedly not talking about, though she had caught their surreptitious glances. They didn't think she had time for boys, not with her school work to do, her future riding on those magical *qualifications*, which were what they called her upcoming O-Level exams. She suspected they were right, not that it had ever given her much concern either way. She wasn't interested in boys.

Or girls, she added hastily in her head knowing that if her friend Carol Drinkwater could hear this internal monologue she would have already made several *nudge-nudge-say-no-more* jokes. She had sort of fancied Howard Flynn for a while last year, but had never said anything to him and then one day she had woken up and realised she didn't actually like him anymore. Why the funny-looking boy scout had made any impression on her at all, she couldn't say.

Probably because he didn't have time to get boring, she thought, knowing herself a little too well. Give her a half hour to actually

talk to him and she'd probably never want to see him again.

On Written Stone Lane itself the nettles and hawthorn rattled the sides of the aging Austin Allegro and Tracey's father made a familiar tsk of annoyance.

"They want to cut them 'edges back more," he muttered to no one in particular. "Scratching up mi paintwork."

Written Stone Lane was supposed to have once been part of the Roman road to Lancaster but it was now little more than a track between two farms, named after the curious old sandstone slab some eight feet long, two feet wide, and a foot and a half deep, surrounded by ancient hollies. It lay lengthways on a raised bank where the lane curved toward Cottam House Farm on the right, while immediately to the left were the buildings of the other farm – a small cottage of which was where Tracey's family had been living for the last eight months. Tracey's room was the closest to the written stone. It was weedy and overgrown with ivy but the rock was clearly carved in block capitals proclaiming

RAVFFE: RADCLIFFE:
LAID: THIS STONE TO LYE:
FOR: EVER: A.D. 1655.

Why Mr. Radcliffe – Ralph, was the way Tracey read his first name – had placed the stone, no one knew, but there were garbled stories about what had happened to a local farmer who tried to move it. All nonsense of course. Tracey, like her parents, was a hard headed realist unimpressed and unintimidated by

tales of the supernatural. "Used to keep the people down," her father liked to pronounce about ghost stories and the like. "Slaves to church and the so-called nobility." Tracey wasn't sure how campfire stories about graveyard apparitions were supposed to keep the masses downtrodden – another of her father's phrases – but she gave them no credence either. She wondered vaguely if the almost ex-scout did.

Well, there's your test, she thought vaguely. *If he turns out to be a credulous idiot, he's not worth your time.*

She nodded to herself at that. Real life was hard enough without a lot of superstitious rubbish getting in the way.

And besides, she reminded herself, as they parked and got out of the car, *he might not even call.*

She looked away from the dark car window so she wouldn't catch her sly, smiling reflection as she thought it through, because she didn't really believe he would for a minute. And then, as if for luck, she touched the ancient stone while her father unlocked the cottage door.

* * *

Preston sat up in the lounge talking to his slightly baffled parents, asking about their days, grinning, soaking them in. When their confusion started sliding towards alarm he assured them that all was well and went up to his room. There he lay on his bed with the light off, pulling out rattling cassettes at random, listening to a song or two from each on his headphones, laughing silently

with an excess of joy so acute that tears ran down his face until, finally exhausted, he properly slept for the first time in a very long while.

But some eight miles away something that had slept long in the earth, stewing in bitterness and muffled rage woke and, finding its ancient bonds strangely fractured, began to stir.





CHAPTER TWO

Agnes Tattershawl had had about as much as she could stand. It wasn't right, a woman of her age, having to walk home at this time of night. And her with a bad back and all. Was it her fault if she had missed her bus because it actually left on time, for once? Now she had to walk all the way along to Ward Green Lane, barely able to see her hand in front of her face. The chips were getting colder with every step, and would she get any sympathy from Joe, shiftless lump that he was? Not on your nelly.

So here I am, trekking halfway across the Pennines for his tea. There ought to be a law.

All the way up Kestor to Little Lane then down Fell Brow to Dilworth, past the Corporation Arms and on. Still the Stonebridge chippy on Derby Road did a nice cod, chips and mushy peas, and the newspaper package, sharp with vinegar, kept her hands warm.