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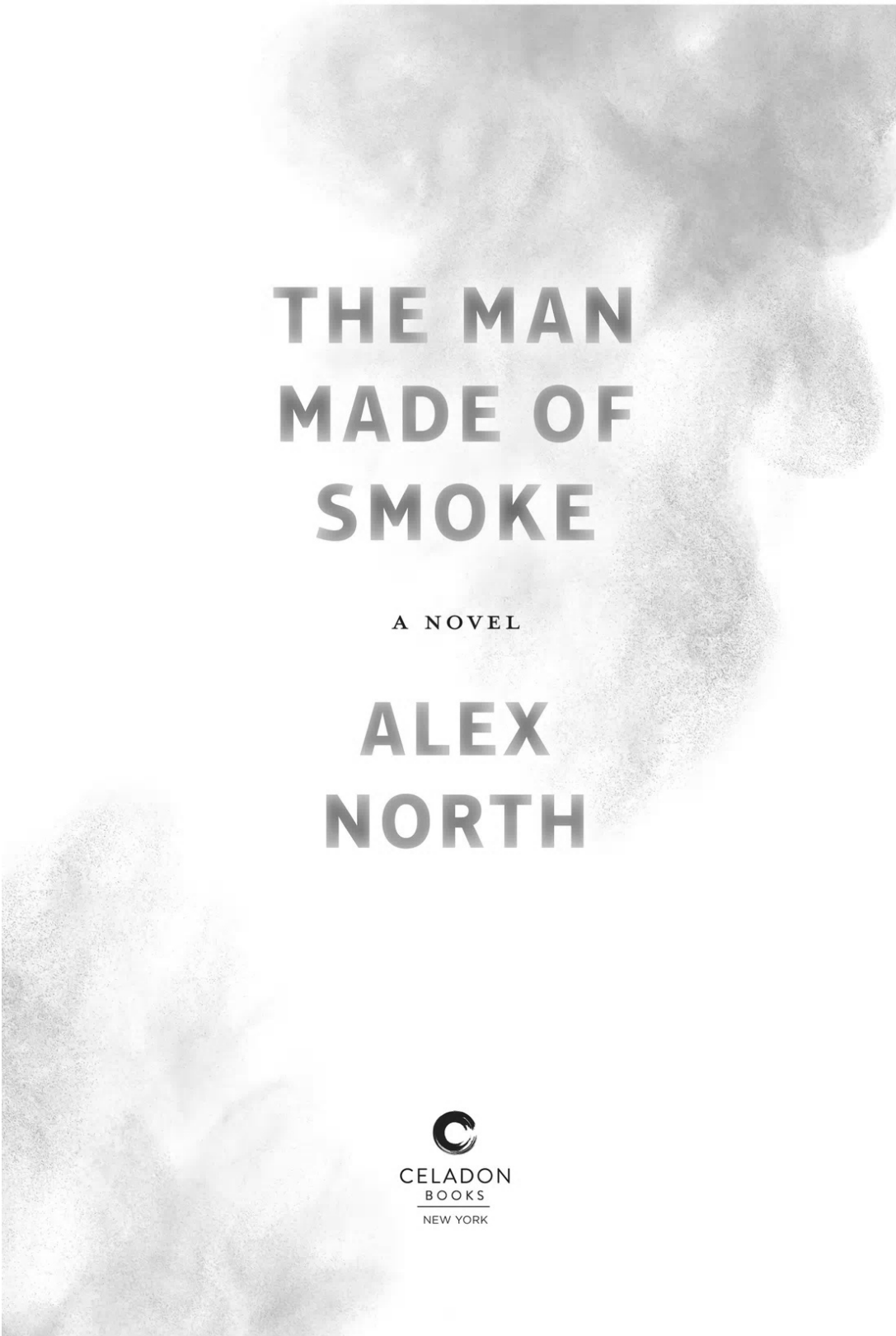
THE BESTSELLING

AUTHOR OF THE WHISPER MAN

THE MAN
MADE OF
SMOKE

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THE MAN MADE OF SMOKE

A NOVEL

ALEX
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CELADON
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For Lynn and Zack

It could be anywhere, this place.

A rest area in the countryside, just off the motorway. There's a low-budget hotel on one side of the car park, gas pumps on the other. Inside the single-story building at the far end, there is a food counter, a shabby amusement arcade, and a shop with snacks and newspapers and a selection of bestselling books. Outside the entrance, a van is selling flowers. The bunches rest in battered metal buckets, wilting in the afternoon heat.

After parking, the man sits in the darkness of his van for a time.

Then he gets out and walks slowly toward the main building.

The first witness to see him is a teenager dressed in creased kitchen whites, who is leaning against the wall of the hotel, smoking a cigarette. Hours later, he will give the police the same vague description as others who are present here this afternoon. The man is tall. Long green coat; dirty jeans; work boots thick with dried mud. The teenager will mention brown tufty hair, and a sun-weathered face. But the main thing he will remember is a sense of threat that he can't quite put into words.

"He was someone you don't want to look at," he tells the police.

The man stops briefly at the flower van. A young woman is working inside. From behind the counter, she can really see only the man's upper body, and so she wouldn't be able to describe his face even if, like the young man outside the hotel, she had been prepared to look at him for long enough.

She will be clear about the words, at least.

"Nobody sees," the man says. "And nobody cares."

Inside the main building, the man approaches the food counter and stands there for a moment without ordering. Another teenager is working there, but he's too busy and distracted to pay the man much attention. He's scanning the racks of burgers and hot dogs wrapped in greasy paper, making a mental count. A smart kid, this one. He's only been there for two weeks, but he knows what sells and when, and has been trying to get the guy working the grills in the back up to speed.

"Nobody sees," the man says. "And nobody cares."

The middle-aged man in charge of the arcade catches only a glimpse of him, because he's concentrating on a boy who wants to come in and play on

the machines. It's gambling, so adults only. If you ask him, it's stupid to have an amusement arcade when you know there are going to be families coming in and kids running loose, but nobody asks him. He seems to spend half his life telling children that they can't come in. That's something he'll think about a lot after today.

The man enters the shop next, loitering in the aisles for a minute before leaving. The teenage boy behind the counter barely notices him; he's keeping an eye on a kid he suspects of being a potential shoplifter. At home, this teenager is obsessed with true crime, and spends a lot of his time reading lurid accounts of serial killers, the more violent the better. In the years to come, this afternoon will loom large in his memory.

"Nobody sees," the man says. "And nobody cares."

It's not really true. After today, a great many people will care. They will watch the television coverage, read the newspaper reports, and scan the websites. A few years from now, they will buy copies of *The Man Made of Smoke* by Terrence O'Hare, billed as the definitive account of the Pied Piper killer and the children he took away.

But right now, I suppose, the man is correct.

Finally, he walks down the concourse toward the back of the rest area, where the crowd is sparse and the lights are flickering.

And he waits.

★ ★ ★

"Why are we stopping?" my mother said as the car slowed.

"Snack situation evaluation."

My father craned his neck to look back at us.

"Plus, I feel like stretching my legs a little. That okay with the troops?"

"Fine by me," I called.

"Me too," Sarah said.

Sarah was sitting beside me on the back seat of the car. We were both twelve, and my dad and hers had been friends once, before he left the island for somewhere better. While my family didn't have much money, Sarah's mother had next to nothing, and my parents often brought her with us on days out like this. We had been friends for a long time. When we were eight or nine, I remembered she'd knock excitedly on the door every morning in the summer holidays.

Want to go on an adventure, Dan?

Which I always did. Sarah was pretty cool for a girl, I thought. We both liked the same superhero comics and TV shows, and exploring the woods on the island, and we insulted each other horribly, even though we'd never let anyone else get away with it. But in the last six months or so, I'd started to feel a little awkward around her. I wasn't sure how to describe it. It was as though the two of us had spent years playing a game for fun, whereas it was beginning to feel like it was developing new rules I didn't understand. That there were things I wanted to say that I didn't have the words for yet.

My father took the turnoff for the rest area.

My mother said nothing. Which meant that she didn't approve. She probably figured we were only an hour away from the island, so why not keep going? My mother was a woman who was always impatient to be somewhere else, even when she'd just arrived. When I think back to those times, it felt like she never knew what to make of me, as though a family had formed around her by accident. When she was frustrated with me, she'd tell me that I was *just like my father*, and I wouldn't know how to take that. It wasn't true, for one thing. But it also seemed like it should have been a good thing if it was, and yet she never seemed to mean it that way.

We parked.

"Careful getting out your side, Daniel," my father said.

"Yeah."

I glanced to my right.

The spaces here were narrow, and my father had parked close to the vehicle beside us. It was an old camper van. The sides were streaked with dirt, as though it had spent its long life being driven back and forth through fields without ever once being cleaned. There was a rusted metal grille screwed over the black window in the side. Staring at the glass behind it was like looking into a night sky: a kind of fathomless darkness dotted with pale, misty constellations of mold.

I edged carefully out of the car.

The space was so tight that my elbow almost touched the grimy side of the van, which made my skin crawl slightly. The vehicle seemed to tower over me, and the shadow it cast felt colder than it should. As I moved to the front, I noticed there were patterns in the dirt along the bottom of the van that looked like children's handprints.

The metal was ticking slightly in the heat.

The four of us walked across the tarmac and into the rest area. My father bought us sandwiches from the shop and then we sat in the small area next to the arcade, Sarah and I side by side across from my mother and my father.

“Did you enjoy the zoo, Sarah?” he said.

She nodded as she ate.

“Really did, Mr. Garvie. Thank you so much.”

“Not at all. A pleasure to have you along. Right, my son?”

He looked at me. I had a mouthful of sandwich and used it as an excuse not to answer for a second.

I was thinking about what Sarah just said. Just as I had begun to think about her differently recently, I’d also started to look at her more: secretly and sideways, when she didn’t realize. Maybe I was trying to catch sight of whatever it was that was changing between us. Regardless, my gaze had kept finding her today. Sarah loved animals more than anything; she could name all the birds on the island and even identify most of the tracks we found in the woods. So I’d imagined she would love the zoo. All those exotic creatures we never dreamed we’d get to see in real life.

But while she *had* seemed to be enjoying it at times, there were also moments when I’d seen her frowning a bit, a hint of sadness pinching her face as she stared into the enclosures. I wondered now if it hadn’t been the animals she was looking at right then, but the cages.

Our friendship dictated that I should answer my father’s question by saying something sarcastic and awful about her, but instead I found myself wanting to tell her something else.

I see you, maybe.

I care.

I swallowed the food.

“Honestly?” I said. “I thought the plan was to *leave* her there.”

My mother looked shocked. “Daniel!”

“*What?*” I raised my hands. “We all agreed. No?”

Sarah kicked me under the table.

“At least the zoo would take me,” she said. “I don’t remember them having an enclosure for *rats*.”

My mother shook her head.

Ten minutes later, we were done and it was time to leave. As my father took our rubbish to the bin, I thought of the journey ahead. An hour to the

coast, then the ferry back to the island, and the small, ordinary world awaiting us there. It made my heart sink a little. As we walked toward the exit, I found myself dawdling behind the other three, reluctant to leave.

Ahead of me, my father looked so broad and strong. It was the opposite of how I thought of myself, but it felt like I might become that too if I tried. My mother: perhaps she would settle and stop searching for a place that could never be better, only different. And Sarah ... if the words I wanted to say to her were out of reach right now, perhaps it would only be a matter of time before I found them.

For a moment, it felt like all of that was possible.

I didn't know the term *liminal spaces* back then, but a part of me was already drawn to them: places that weren't starting points or destinations, but stopgaps a step sideways from reality, like the crossing points between worlds in a fairy tale. And a part of me recognized that I was in one right then. A place where magic could happen.

I didn't know that my mother was going to leave us before the end of the year. Or how badly my relationship with my father was about to fracture and shatter. Or that I would never tell Sarah how I felt. All I knew right then was that I didn't want to leave here and for this moment to end.

My father turned back.

"You okay, Daniel?"

"Yeah," I said.

I glanced behind me, back up the concourse. To where the crowds were sparse and the lights were flickering.

"I think I might just go to the toilet first," I said.

★ ★ ★

Coins clattering in the arcade; shouts from behind the food counter; mingled conversations. All that noise disappeared as I closed the door to the men's toilets and started down the corridor beyond. There was only the unsettling hum of the bulbs flickering overhead.

Old trails left by a dirty mop had dried on the tiled floor like swirls of faint, ghostly hair, and the air smelled stale. The hum from above me grew louder as I walked, and my heart started beating a little harder. It felt like I was entering a place in which I didn't belong yet, and I had to fight the urge to turn around and head back out. But that was stupid; I wasn't a little boy anymore. There was nothing here to be frightened of.

And then I heard someone whistling.

I faltered. The sound was coming from ahead of me, around the corner. It was neither casual nor mindless, clearly a deliberate and purposeful tune, and I recognized it from somewhere without being able to name it. It was familiar in an odd, unnerving way, as though I'd heard it in a dream, or a nightmare, or in some different life altogether.

Everything is fine, I told myself.

There's nothing to be scared of.

I reached the end of the corridor and turned to the right. The toilets were long and narrow, with four cubicles on the right-hand side, a urinal along the wall opposite, and a sink and mirror on the far wall. The door of the cubicle farthest from me was closed. The whistling was coming from whoever was in there, and a little boy was standing outside it.

The atmosphere had already put me on edge, but the sight of the boy made my breath catch in my throat. Because I felt it immediately: something wrong was happening here. The boy was small and skinny, wearing old clothes that were at least a couple of sizes too large, and which hung loosely off his thin frame. One of his cheeks was streaked with dirt. As he turned his head to look at me now, it seemed to move in slow motion. Along with the otherworldly whistling and the flickering light, I was suddenly convinced I was looking at a ghost.

Then I registered the expression on his face.

Terrified. Desperate.

His eyes begging: *please help me*.

The two of us stared at each other for what felt like an age, that whistled music continuing from behind the closed door. I held the boy's gaze, unable to break it. But I had no idea how to react. What to do or what to say. Nothing in my life so far had prepared me for the strangeness of this encounter.

I could see the fear on the boy's face.

Please help me.

And I wanted to. The boy was small and emaciated, and his expression reminded me of how I felt facing the bullies in the schoolyard, desperate for someone to come and help me, rescue me, make it stop. I had the uncanny sensation that I was looking into a fairground mirror, in which the reflection was only very slightly distorted. And I felt an immediate, deep connection to the boy. I knew that I had to help him.

But then the whistling stopped.

The silence lent an instant charge to the air. The urge to help shifted inside me, like an animal that had been frozen in headlights jerking back to life. All I knew for certain right then was that there was something dangerous on the other side of that closed door. That a monster was about to emerge, and I needed to get away from it as quickly as I could.

It was blind panic. I reacted without thinking, stepping into the nearest cubicle and pulling the door closed quickly. I clicked the lock down just as I heard the door at the far end of the toilets creaking open on its old hinges.

Then nothing aside from the hum of the lights.

I sat down as quietly as I could on the toilet seat, then lifted my feet off the floor, brought my knees up to my chest, and wrapped my arms around them. It was dark in the cubicle, but the door didn't go all the way to the ground. At the bottom, there was a letterbox of pale green light flickering weakly on the tiles.

I waited, my heart beating hard.

For a few seconds, there was nothing. But then I heard slow, purposeful footsteps, and I held my breath. A shadow broke the light beneath the cubicle door and stopped there. I stared down at the muddy tips of a pair of enormous, weathered work boots.

I heard slow breathing from the other side of the thin wood.

And then what sounded like fingernails tracing lazy circles on it.

"Nobody sees," a man's voice said.

I wanted to squeeze my eyes shut but I didn't dare. Instead, I looked down at the tips of his boots, not blinking. My vision began to sparkle.

Please, I thought.

Little dots of light danced in front of my eyes.

Please.

"And nobody cares."

The boots moved away.

I kept staring down at the gap. A few seconds later, a weaker shadow passed across the tiles: the boy, presumably, following silently and obediently behind. I waited until I heard the distant sound of the door back to the concourse opening and closing. Until all that remained was the pounding of my heart and the hum of the lights above.

Finally, I opened the door to the cubicle.

The toilets were empty now. But whoever had been outside the door had left something behind. There was a small square of white paper on the tiles of the floor, and without understanding how or why, I was sure that it had been placed there for me.

I reached down carefully, my hands shaking.

It was heavier than paper. Some kind of thin card. The back was perfectly white, but when I turned it over I realized it was a photograph.

It took me a second to make sense of what I was seeing.

And when I did, I began to scream.