

BLOOD LIST

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PROLOGUE...

KIRKBY-OVER-SANDS. A SMALL TOWN OUTSIDE

KIRKDALE, CUMBRIA 1982

Forty-seven-year-old Maggie Rowlands stared at her much younger sister in sheer disbelief. The red weals on the girl's face glared back defiantly, the eyes matched, and the suitcase hanging from her clenched fist spoke volumes; but when the younger woman opened her mouth there was no defiance in her voice, only urgency – *and pain*.

“Mags I need a place to stay – *please* – just till Davie and I can get on our feet – be together *properly*. He hasn't got a flat or even a regular job yet, *you're the only one I can turn to*.”

The older woman snorted. *Not again* she thought disparagingly.

“And what about your face, did your precious *Davie* do that too?” The girl smarted then, and not from the vicious marks across her cheek. Stiffening, she lifted her chin;

“You know *damn well* who did that – or has the distance made you forget *your* childhood so easily?” The young woman had suddenly found that defiance, just as she always did when her sister scoffed, when she’d not believed in her.

Rose remained on the doorstep, the tension between them overwhelming; air thick with resentment, with repetitions – *with decisions*.

“Maggie are you *gonna* let me in or not? *At least put a brew on and give me something t’ eat.*”

“That Davie of yours is no good. He’s uneducated, no money and no prospects; a useless waste of time just like the other three before him. I don’t know where you *find* them Rose, really I don’t. Since you were seventeen you’ve made bad choices in men and taken no advice from anyone. Every time there’s upheaval at home and every time you come to me. *Why Rose? You never listen to a bloody word I say!*”

“Mummy, I’m *thirs-ty*, want a... Auntie *Ro-sie!*” A small child had wandered into the hall holding a bright red beaker, on seeing her Aunt her eyes lit up and she let the cup fall. With arms outstretched she rushed towards the door in pure joy, auburn curls bouncing with every step. Rose dropped her suitcase in anticipation and swung the three-year-old up into her arms for a long hug.

“Hello darlin’ heart, you gotta kiss for Rosie then?” The child obligingly puckered her lips and planted a wet mouth on the sore cheekbone. She traced a finger along the mark and kissed it again.

“All better!” she announced importantly then sat back in her arms.

“You cummin’ to stay – like last time?”

Rose Emmerson looked questioningly at her sister as the toddler twisted around and looked pleadingly at her mother. The hope in that little girl’s eyes brightening the hallway like nothing else could.

“No, she is *not*. Now go into the lounge and play with your toys. I’ll get you another drink in a minute.”

“But *mummee* I wan—”

“*Now Em!*”


Rose kissed the top of the child’s head then put her down gently, watching sadly as she ran off along the passage to disappear into the front room. The door slammed with frustration and both women jumped at the sudden bang. Maggie rolled her eyes, *the sooner that one went to school...*

“You have to go Rose,” she blurted out suddenly, arms crossed, and avoiding direct eye contact. “If I don’t stop this repeated bouncing back and forth now it’ll never end. D’ya *hear* me now?”

“But it’s *different* this time I –”

“It’s *always* different though isn’t it? *Every* time, and now it’s got to *stop*. It’s unsettling for...” she looked over her shoulder, “for everyone. I suggest you go back to mum and dad, knuckle down at the factory and behave like a daughter they can be proud of; instead of all this... this *nonsense!*”

Rosemary Emmerson stood in shocked silence.



Tears glistened then ran free and unashamedly as she bent down to pick up her case. On hearing the door click shut before she'd even straightened herself – an overwhelming fear unfurled. Stirring coldly it slid upwards – *rising like a cobra from her belly.*

ONE

KIRKDALE, CUMBRIA

PRESENT DAY

Charlotte Peterson threw two tablets to the back of her throat, took a large gulp of water and swallowed. She stared hard at the bottom of the glass, then back to the oversized container of anti-depressants before stuffing it deep into a large Prada bag.

Reaching across the table, she automatically picked up a box and poured herself a small bowl of muesli, quite oblivious to its bland appearance. As the milk fell from the bottle she heard the click of the front door and winced edgily. For the second time that month Miles had arrived home from somewhere unknown the night before, let himself in and gone straight upstairs to change for work.

She set the bottle back on the table and lifted a spoonful halfway to her mouth; it hovered there briefly before she replaced it on top of the fruited oats. Pushing the bowl away she sat motionless for

a moment – *then reached purposefully back into the designer bag.*

A mile across town Missandra Gale yawned widely. Stretching her lean young body she rolled over to snuggle closer, stroking his chin, savouring the last few minutes before the radio alarm. Nuzzling into the nape of his neck she tickled it seductively with her hot tongue.

He lifted a bare shoulder in sleepy response as she worked her way up to his rough morning cheek. His eyelids flickered in the hot August sun that streamed through the gap in the curtains, and long legs stirred beneath the quilt. She loved this time of day the most, those first few minutes of morning; *well, as much as she adored the last few minutes before dropping off at night anyway!*

All too soon the excited tones of DJ Tony Frizzell launched the breakfast hour as Andrew Gale tried to force his groggy brain to wake up. He turned over slowly and leaning up on one elbow gazed down into her brilliant green eyes. A gentle hand followed a soft smile as he began to stroke her pale shoulders.

“*Morning Missy,*” he breathed huskily, “who needs a cruddy old clock when they have a real live wake up call, *hub?*” Stretching once more, the white Persian closed her eyes and smiled in sheer delight, purring even louder as he ran his fingers lightly over her soft fur. *Life was certainly sweet when your best friend was Andrew Gale.*

“Guess you want some breakfast then kiddo?” He scratched the back of his head and yawned, “Let’s hope our cupboard isn’t bare then.”

To the strains of an old Beatles song drifting from Tony Frizzel’s early morning slot, Andrew threw back the duvet, stood up and stretched in a final attempt to wake up, then walked the very short walk to the tiny kitchen. He reminded himself yet again, that it really *was* time to look for a larger place.

Missy reclined princess-style on the crumpled quilt, and washed an immaculately clean paw. *Yes, life was very sweet indeed.*

“You’re in luck Missy cat!” called Andrew from the depths of the fridge, the cupboard having indeed been bare. “Gina must have dropped off some fish last night while I was at the gym.” This of course was not news to Missy who had enjoyed a glorious half hour of Gina’s undivided attention. Had Andrew not dumped his holdall on the lounge table when he’d got in, he would’ve seen her fishy note which now sat under said bag.

The sound of metal fork against metal bowl soon reached her antennae ears and her appearance in the kitchen was instant. She entwined herself around his legs meowing hungrily as he placed the dish on the floor.

Cat fed, Andrew gathered together a typical (when on a semi-health kick), Gale breakfast – strong Italian coffee and a couple of slices of rye toast. Soon the aroma

of both filled his one-bedroom flat as he moved into the lounge and plonked himself on the sofa. It was then that he noticed the corner of Gina's note protruding from beneath his sports bag. He pulled it out and read as he ate;

*Coley in fridge for Missy, see you in Carpenters
tomorrow lunchtime*

Luv G x

*P.S. Your sports gear won't get washed on the coffee
table!!*

A broad grin developed as he sipped his coffee. She knew him well – washing machines were *not* his strong point!

Andrew checked the time and realised it was getting short; he wasn't the tidiest person in the world, or the greatest at laundry, but he *was* known for his punctuality. After a top speed shave and shower he dried and dressed even faster, eating and drinking as he went.

He flew out of the flat taking the stairs to the ground floor two at a time, mindful of the weekend's games he would need to write up that morning. Senior sports reporter at the *Kirkdale Courier* wasn't the greatest job in the world, but he enjoyed it for the most part. One day he would make crime editor – *if* Stella Gray ever retired!

Andrew pointed the tired Ford down the narrow side street that fronted the office and drove to the end. The car's clock was on side, he would just make it by nine if he didn't hang around with Frizzell's morning quiz.

The Saloon swung into the little car park behind the large Georgian cottage that had housed the *Courier* for the past fifteen years, and then came to a sudden halt almost colliding with a rear bumper. Andrew was so used to his morning *'drive and arrive'*, that when he cut the corner on auto pilot he expected to turn straight into his bay. However, today he nearly slammed into the boot of a rather smart black and yellow Mini Cooper. A Mini Cooper that sat very smugly in his space. Suitably surprised, he reversed and drove straight into Rachel's bay. *It'll teach her for treating work like one long holiday* he thought mischievously. Now she would have to do the 'squeeze' between the Grays' Mercedes and an oak tree that was even more ancient than the building; nerve-racking at the best of times but when you park like Rachel Dern *nigh on impossible!*

He threw a glance at the Cooper as he walked half facing the yellow intruder, and half toward the gabled office door. *Well whoever it is, if they're going to be a permanent fixture, they'll need to get a bike.*

He depressed the black iron latch remembering to bend his head as he entered the office. At six foot five a million bruises over the years were a painful testimony to old fashioned doorways.

“Andrew!” Peter Gray yelled from the top of the office as soon as he saw him. “Have you got the Kickers game written up? We need to set the back page.” But Andrew’s attention wasn’t on his boss.

Ms. Mini Cooper, who had bedded her car down for the day in his bay, now appeared to be occupying his work station. Peter noticed Andrew’s inquisitive gaze travel from the new face back to his own in the editor’s suite. Realising the oversight he hurried down the steps into the main office where the young woman stood up, anticipating the overlooked introduction.

“I’m sorry guys, apologies, apologies,” gushed Peter, “I should’ve introduced you first. Jenny Flood, this is Andrew Gale, Andrew – Jenny. Jenny’s joined us from a position in Bradenthorpe – great potential – we’re lucky to have her.”

Andrew held out a hand. “Welcome to the Cuddly Courier, I’ve only one question:” he said in feigned annoyance, “when are you getting a bike?” Jenny looked puzzled and threw a glance at Peter who shrugged, his expression matched hers.

“I...don’t understand,” she stumbled, “I don’t need a bike I’ve a –”

“A rather neat Mini Cooper, I know – *it’s in my bay.*”

“Now, stop teasing Andy,” Peter interrupted fully aware now. “We’ll sort something, no hassling it’s only her first day.”

“So... err what exactly is she going to be doing, or

has the lovely Rachel finally started at lunchtime once too often?”

“No – Miss Dern is still with us Andy – hanging on by a thread mind but she’s still with us. Stella was very friendly with her mother, same class at school and all that *soooo.....* well you know how it is. Young Jenny’s going to take some of the strain off Stella, learn on the job so to speak, take over when she retires.” *Yeah right,* thought Andrew, *that’ll be the day, Stella Gray would still be chasing a story twelve feet under.* Neither had it escaped him that *he* wanted crime editor – if Stella ever let go.

“Anyway Mr. Gale, Kickers report please!” Peter bellowed over his shoulder as he strode back up the main office to his own.

Jenny apologised for the parking mix-up and moved to the reception area to wait for Stella. Andrew was now at his desk, a home from home with messy drawers and yellow Post-it notes dancing across his computer screen. He looked over at Jenny as he began to tap out a brief Kickers resume. It wasn’t grabbing his attention.

“Fancy a coffee?”

She looked up and smiled, “Milky, no sugar... *thanks.*” He pushed back his chair and made his way down to the little kitchen. As he walked, something through the window caught his eye, a predictable scene had ensued and he beckoned Jenny over. They watched in anticipation as Rachel Dern fought hard to squeeze

her car in the only available space between Peter's maroon Mercedes and the large oak tree. As Andrew predicted she would make a complete hash of it. The sound of crunching headlamps spectacularly hit the air as they both winced and then attempted to stifle their laughter.

Andrew made the coffees and passed one to Jenny, feeling their tension too had broken. As he stirred, the door of the *Courier* suddenly burst open. In swept a furious Rachel twenty minutes late and exceedingly hot under the collar, or in her case bubblegum pink bandeau. The latch handle still reverberated from its collision with the stone wall whilst she stood with elbows out, fluorescent nails flashing on full black leathered hips.

"Well thanks a *bunch* Andrew Gale, thanks a *bloody bunch!*"

"Calm *down* Rachel, have a decaf." He pulled a stool out and passed her a mug he'd already filled, saccharined and set on the counter. She took it sulkily and sat down, her usually full pink mouth now set in a thin concrete line.

She's steaming a damn sight more than that decaf thought Jenny. Eventually Rachel relaxed, but then her bottom lip began to tremble. Dropping her head, a free hand tried to prevent a tear from escaping. The tear won. Overly laden black mascara began to streak as it was followed by several more. She placed the mug on the work surface and struggled into her pocket for a

tissue. Andrew noticed this would not be easy, her skirt was pretty tight and she wasn't really getting anywhere. He tore off a piece of kitchen roll and slid it along the work top. Rachel smiled weakly and picked it up. Jenny said nothing.

“So... who is it this time... *hmmm?*” he questioned gently, trying to look underneath her blonde fringe. “You get yourself into such a state each time Rachee; you really must find someone decent, preferably working and *definitely* single.” Rachel groaned, looking skyward to imply that was *exactly* what she wanted but it was simply not achievable. A bitter divorce endured three years previously involving her husband's secretary, had led to Rachel bedding half the town's married men since. It was as if she was carrying out some kind of spurned wife's revenge but there was never a happy ending. Habitually 'falling in love' with all the wrong men meant Rachel was regularly disappointed; it appeared that was exactly what had happened the night before resulting in her pre-coffee parking fiasco and subsequent outburst. She appeared un-phased by Jenny's presence despite her being a stranger; this new girl had a sympathetic face and had begun to make all the right noises – Andrew was always nice to her. Right then, being with two people that cared was all that mattered.

She fiddled with the thick tissue replacement and between sobs and gulps relayed her latest romantic disaster. It was pretty much the usual stuff:-

Girl meets married man; girl falls in love; married man has his cake and eats it until wife gets suspicious; married man dumps loved up girl; girl ends up in tears...

As the three drank and Jenny and Andrew did their best to console Rachel, Stella Gray swept through the front door, past the kitchen and into the main office. Noticing it wasn't exactly a hive of activity she retraced her steps and found her entire full-time staff nursing mugs of coffee. One look at her late friend's daughter was all she needed to understand why no work was getting done.

"*Ye Gods girl not another one?!*" she questioned exasperatedly. The usually bubbly blonde who was anything but that morning, looked up at her 'Aunty' Stella and winced as a fresh tear rolled south. "Will you never learn Rachel?! *If your poor mother could see you now she'd turn in her grave!*" Andrew patted his soulful colleague on the shoulder, ushered her past his boss leaving her to settle in the latest member of the paper.

As Jenny sat talking with her new employer, she wondered just how this new post would work out. All things considered they weren't quite what she'd expected. But then to be fair..... *neither was she.*