IT WAS SUPPOSED TO BE just a game. A bit of scary fun. A lark. Every kid in the town knew the place as The Werehouse. They also knew the terrifying double dare linked to it; if you entered on the night of the dark of the moon and placed your hand upon the cursed stone; if you spoke the rhyme and walked into the empty house; if you did all these things, then you would never been seen again. The rhyme had a sinister name. It was called The Malison. In the playgrounds children sang its words while skipping, or shouted them as warnings. But this was OK. This was outside. The words had no power there. But within the shadow of that dark, derelict house, within those dangerous, desolate gardens, that was another thing altogether. Every kid knew The Malison. It went like this:

Stone! Stone! The Devil's Stone  
Will You Touch The Devil's Stone?  
Enter This House Those Who Dare  
When The Moon Is Dark: But, Ware!  
Speak The Curse And Enter Within-  
Then All Your Nightmares Will Begin.

And it wasn’t as if there was no proof. Around here children went missing all the time. Kids with names like Scott and Lakelyn and Joseph. Every one of them vanished without a trace, and, if the backstreet gossip was to be believed, every one of them had disappeared inside that house.

You’re not sure why you were picked as the next kid to go, but there it was. The next Dead Moon you would face the terrifying task. Most kids didn’t have the guts to complete the dare. Most weren’t even brave enough to get as far as touching the stone. So all you had to do was enter the garden and speak the rhyme; you didn’t have to actually go inside the house. Nobody ever did that.

At the time of the dark of the moon all the kids gathered on the thatched pub. When you arrived with your friends from school, the night was cold and full with the threat of rainstorms. As midnight approached everyone was outside, the whole street. You couldn’t miss it. The road was a dead end. You couldn’t help but notice the deserted house, surrounded by a huge hedge, which no one would have been able to see but for the big, rusted sign that read DANGEROUS BUILDING. KEEP OUT. The warning made what was going to happen very real. Real real. But everyone was there and it would mean a lifetime of jibes and jeers to back out now.
Ducking under the sign, you had braved the thorns and brambles, pushed open the rusted gate and scrambled down weed-strangled steps and into the jungle of the garden. Ahead the boarded and broken house loomed. Ivy crawled over every patch of brickwork and everything smelled rotten and diseased. It looked exactly like a crouching, waiting monster, a monster that swallowed children as easy as Jelly Babies. Summoning all your courage you had waded forwards through the undergrowth until your foot kicked something hard. Crouching down you clawed at the soil to reveal the fallen standing stone, then brushed aside the grime and dirt to reveal part of an engraved spiral design.

Glancing at your phone you waited for the stroke of midnight and when it was time, you reached out gingerly and placed your palm flat against the rock. There was not a whisper, only the sound of the early morning birdsong. The air had turned as black as ink. It was like staring into a monster’s eyes. Through chattering teeth you started to speak the words:

“Stone! Stone! O Devil’s Stone! I Dare To Touch The Devil’s Stone!”

But, at that exact moment, something broke. It was a sound like the night cracking open, splintering into fragments as sharp as shark’s teeth. Terrified, you shouted out, scrabbling backwards in alarm. What you saw through that awful crack in the night had sent you running in fear for the gate. As you reached the hedge, you clawed for the way back onto the street but could find no way through that impenetrable hedge. Panicking, you thrashed at the foliage, ripping your hands and arms to ribbons, but still you could not find the way out.

Just before you were going to start screaming in terror, hands reached out of the darkness. It was Sam, your best friend, reaching through the hedge to save you. As everyone drew back, he had stepped forwards, and hauled you to safety. Yet in doing so he had fallen forwards into that impossible, unnatural darkness like the infinite nothingness between the stars. As you had stood, bursting with relief that you were free of that dreadful place, all the other kids were mocking, calling you names, laughing like loons. But the laughing all stopped when they looked back to the house. For Sam was gone.

The house had swallowed him whole.

In the days afterwards, no one could explain where Sam had gone. The boarded-up house was opened, the gardens cleared and combed, but there was no trace, no clue as to what had happened or where they had gone.

That was until the next Dead Moon, when the raven arrived at your window with the first letter clutched in its ebony claws...