

But this was different. This time — for the first time ever — Zach had disappeared online too. No Instagram, no Facebook, no Twitter, no blog. Not even a mail.

Totally offline.

The police hadn't been that interested when she'd tried to report him missing. Not with his track record.

And she could understand that.

But Luke and the other guys felt the same as she did. *Something was wrong.*

Which was why she and Luke were both here now.

Because Luke had remembered the stoned conversation, he'd had with Zach weeks back about Blackwood House, and how it sat right on their doorstep and, because the locals said it was haunted, wasn't that the coolest reason ever to take a night-time tour?

“What time is it?” she said, as she jolted the car round another tight bend, with still no

sign that the lane was reaching anywhere soon.

“Um, ten to five.”

“And you’re sure security clocks off at five?” she said.

“That’s what Zach said. I think.”

Megan hunched a bit more over the wheel, concentrating hard.

“Yeah. Kind of thing Zach gets right,” she said.

“Usually,” said Luke.

“*Always*,” said Megan, as they rounded another corner. “Look. There it is.”

Ahead she could see a five-bar gate — and beyond it, across an overgrown meadow, the dark shape of a large building, surrounded on the other three sides by woods.

The place somehow ... ominous. And so dark, like it was sucking the light out of the evening sky. Her heart seemed to skip a beat.

“Blackwood House?” said Luke.

“Gotta be,” said Megan.

And she stopped the car and turned the engine off. Without saying a word, she climbed out and stood there, listening.

Silence. Just the rustle of wind in the tall trees all around. In the distance, she heard a pheasant squawk.

Up above, through gaps in the swaying branches, she saw scudding clouds, casting looming shadows in the late afternoon sun.

Out there in the field it might be still warm, but here in the woods, with the sun barely penetrating, the air already felt dank and cold.

Had Zach stood here too, a week ago, alone, ready to cross that meadow and enter Blackwood House?

She shivered. "Come on," she said.

Crouching, with Luke behind her, she made her way down the muddy lane to the gate.

From here, staying low, she could see the layout of the house more clearly.

It looked much older than most of the manor houses around Cherringham; all gables and attic windows, stone parapets, ivy on red brickwork. At first sight, impressive, imposing.

But as she looked closer, she noticed slates missing on the roof; windows cracked; ivy out of control, pulling gutters loose; the garden unkempt, flowers going to seed.

The house empty. Abandoned.

Beside her, she heard Luke give a low whistle.

“Whoa. Must be twenty or more bedrooms,” he said. “And look — is that a pool?”

Megan shifted position to see better through the various garages and outbuildings — glimpsed mildewed tiles, a broken chrome ladder, brown water and leaves.

“Once upon a time ...” She looked around. “Okay. No sign of security.”

Then she heard the sound of a car starting up, from somewhere near the house — and after a few seconds saw a big four-by-four with a rack of lights over the cab, nose away from the buildings and edge onto the meadow.

“Damn,” said Luke, ducking down.

“Security. If he comes this way, we’ve had it.”

Megan crouched low with Luke at the edge of the gate, hidden by the end of a drystone wall.

She watched as the vehicle sped across the meadow towards them, then stopped just yards away, the engine still running.

Through a gap in the wall she saw the driver step out. Mostly a silhouette. But still she could see a big guy, boots, jeans, T-shirt, army haircut.

He walked towards the gate. Megan pressed herself tight against the stone, praying he wouldn’t peer over, or climb the wall.