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Opening Extract from...

No Other Darkness

Written by Sarah Hilary

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PART ONE

1

Now

DS Noah Jake watched Debbie Tanner swinging between the station's desks with her cake tin, like a burlesque dancer collecting big tips. DS Ron Carling dipped a hand into the tin with his stare on DC Tanner's chest as if someone had stuck it there: googly eyes. Debbie had a stupendous chest; it managed to make her plain white shirt look like a basque.

'Muffins,' she said. 'Home-made.'

Carling took a muffin from the tin, making appropriate noises of approval. He'd put on three pounds since Debbie joined the unit.

Noah's phone buzzed: a text from Dan. Not work-safe, not remotely. Noah wiped the text with his thumb, holding in a smile. The cake tin landed under his nose.

'Take two,' Debbie said. 'Unless Dan doesn't have a sweet tooth.' She gave a conspiratorial smile. 'But he's going out with the best-looking DS in London, so I'm guessing he does.' She proffered the tin. 'I made them fresh this morning.'

'Thanks, but it's a bit soon after breakfast for me.'

What time did she get up, to bake a tin of muffins before 9 a.m.?

'I'll leave one for later.' She plucked a muffin and placed it next to Noah's keyboard, where it pouted at him from its paper cup. 'Next time I'll make a Jamaican batch. Banana pecan. Maybe your mum has a recipe?'

'DS Jake, a minute?' DI Marnie Rome beckoned from the doorway to her office, looking pin-neat in a charcoal suit, her short red curls tidied back from her face.

Noah got to his feet, pocketing his phone.

DC Tanner followed him into Marnie's office, swinging her tin. 'Muffin? I make them with courgette. It's much better for you than butter. Not that *you* need to watch your figure.' She patronised Marnie's flat chest with a sympathetic smile, reaching her free hand for the pot plant on the edge of the desk, feeling with her fingers for the soil packed around its roots.

Marnie sat behind her desk, nodding at Noah to take the chair on the other side.

The plant was a cactus which, when it was in the mood, gave out spidery white flowers. It was giving them out now, but Debbie checked the soil anyway, as if someone as busy as DI Rome couldn't be relied on to look after a cactus. Noah winced at the familiarity, but Marnie simply said, 'How's the paperwork going, detective?'

'I'm right on top of it,' Debbie promised. She turned on her heel and wove her way back to her desk, prow and stern swaying dizzily. No wonder Ron Carling and the others stared.

Noah didn't stare. He was watching DI Rome. She had her case face on: a new line, thin as a thread, at the bridge of her nose. 'What's happened?'

'Bodies,' she said. 'In Snaresbrook . . .'

'How many bodies?'

'Two.' She held his gaze steadily and with a measure of sympathy. 'Young children.'

His first case with dead children; well, he'd known it would happen sooner or later. 'Snaresbrook, that's . . .'

'Out east, past Leytonstone . . . Not our usual stamping ground.' Marnie put back her chair and stood, waiting while Noah did the same. 'But it's under the Met's jurisdiction and I know this place, or rather I know the street. So they put the call through to here.'

'What place? I mean, how do you know it?'

'Blackthorn Road.' Marnie picked up her bag. 'I headed up an investigation there eighteen months ago.'

Before Noah's time with the major incident team. 'What was the case?'

'Domestic, with complications.' Clipping the words back, her eyes already in Snaresbrook, working this new case.

'Complications?' Noah echoed.

'A missing child. For a while it looked like an abduction, or worse.'

'But it wasn't?'

Marnie shook her head. 'We found her safe and well. There's no obvious connection between that and . . . this.'

The way she said *this* made Noah's skin creep. 'Except it happened on the same street.'

'Four houses down. And some time ago, judging by what they've found. And where they found it.'

She read his look of wary enquiry. 'Underground. This was a burial, but not in the usual sense. I don't know much more than that. I've asked DS Carling to take a first look at Missing Persons. You and I need to get over there.'

Noah's imagination was conjuring images, each worse than the one before.

A burial, but not in the usual sense . . .

Marnie touched his elbow briefly before she nodded at the door. 'Let's find out.'

2

Sweat made Marnie's shirt cling to the small of her back. Instinct pinched shut her nose in protest at the smell: sweet and bloated by rot. A bluebottle brushed at her wrist and she flinched through the latex glove. It hadn't hatched down here; if it had, the whole place would be foul with flies. A solitary bluebottle had followed her down, seeking the source of the smell, sweeping the dark with its droning before it settled, as she had, by the side of the bed. Useless to bat it away; it had found what flies like best: dead meat.

Every one of Marnie's muscles screamed at her to get out, away, her blood flooded by adrenalin, skin twitchy with distress. She stayed where she was, crouched by the side of the makeshift bed. She couldn't leave them, not yet; it was scary down here in the dark.

The bluebottle had gone quiet, crawling. She made no attempt to knock it away, grateful at some level for the sound it made, an almost human sound. It was too quiet down here.

High overhead, the sky squatted.

A small square of sky, too far away for warmth or light. Marnie had to rely on a trio of police torches, their focus turned to flood, burning at intervals around the room.

If you could call it a room. Thirty feet by fifty of cemented walls and floor, bruised by damp, the ceiling supported by two cement pillars.

Twelve feet underground.

It was a pit.

A burial, but not in the usual sense . . .

Marnie had instructed Noah to stay with the family who'd found the pit, up in the clean air of the garden at number 14 Blackthorn Road. Then she'd climbed down, because she needed to see what they were dealing with.

You entered the pit from a manhole, by way of a rusting ladder. The rungs of the ladder had bitten her gloved palms, shedding sharp flakes of orange iron.

White torchlight burned on the raw walls, and on the makeshift bed.

Marnie couldn't look at the bed, not properly. She wasn't ready.

Instead, she looked around the floor, at the mess of tin cans and clothes, picture books and toys. Keeping very still out of respect for the crime scene, waiting for Fran Lennox and Forensics. Her eyes scanned the dark, making a mental inventory ahead of the official one.

Two small pairs of black trainers with Velcro fastenings stood at the foot of the bed. Two blue anoraks, camouflage-patterned, hung from a nail knocked into the wall. A handful of picture books lay on the cement floor. The books were swollen, the way a telephone directory swells if it's left in the rain on the doorstep of an empty house. Ink had run across the covers, making monsters of ducks and puppies and robots.

A low pyramid of food cans was stacked against one wall. Damp had stripped the labels away and eaten into the tin. The cans had ring-pulls in their lids, tricky for small fingers. The soft toys – a monkey in a striped T-shirt, a squirrel with a red tail – sagged with damp. An abandoned jigsaw puzzle

had peeled into pieces of green card. The lid of the box showed a busy farmyard under a blue sky. The jigsaw was simple enough for pre-schoolers, but thanks to the damp, its sky was indistinguishable from grass, its corners gone for ever.

Marnie's eyes burned, looking at the jigsaw. How cruel would you have to be to put a picture of grass and sky down here where there was only grey cement and creeping damp?

She listened for sounds from the garden overhead, but it was quiet. The cement was thick, with three feet of soil above it, stopping sound from getting in, or out.

The river ran not far from the foot of the garden; she could smell it. Had it flooded down here then drained away? Was she looking at death by drowning? She didn't think so.

Not poison, either. The bodies were too . . .

She struggled for the right word. Peaceful? Relaxed? Neither word was right, but poison would have looked different. The bodies on the bed were curled together. Sleeping, except that they weren't. A watch hung off one little, brittle wrist. It had long ago stopped ticking.

What was she seeing? A slow starvation? Sickness? Suffocation?

Probably not suffocation; damp and mould meant the air had been getting in, by accident or design. Design, she guessed. This was a bunker, most probably intended for storage, although she couldn't rule out Cold War paranoia. It'd been built for the living, not the dead.

Which hadn't stopped someone doing . . . this.

She touched her hand to the side of the makeshift bed, even though it made no difference now. She was too late. By her best guess, some years too late. Four, five years? Fran Lennox would know. She was on her way with a full forensic team. The trail was cold, too cold for twenty minutes to make a difference. Soon Marnie would start bagging and tagging. She'd be a detective. Right now, she wanted to be

a human being. An appalled human being, sitting in silence with two other, smaller ones. Just for a minute; Fran would be here soon.

Marnie murmured it to the little bodies on the bed: 'She's coming. She'll be here soon.'

She looked away from the bed, to the wall where the food cans were stacked. The bunker was organised like living space: the food kept as far as possible from the corner where a bucket was covered with a mouldy towel. The bed was segregated from the play area by a space for getting dressed and undressed. The degree of organisation said this was a long-term arrangement. Permanent, the way a life sentence is permanent. Pitiful.

She tried to imagine bagging and tagging the contents of the bunker. Most of it would fall apart the second it was touched. Rust had eaten under the ring-pulls on the tins, growing ghostly green flowers. The tins touched a memory, frail, in the back of her head. Steel wants to be iron oxide. She'd learned that at school, remembered the teacher telling the class, 'We dig it up and beat it into steel, but it doesn't last. Steel wants to be iron oxide.' Kettles, cans and cars, the foundations of a thousand high-rises, all with the same ruddy heart lusting to be iron oxide again, to corrode or collapse. It was happening down here, in the dark. She could taste the iron on her tongue, its flavour like blood.

She shone her torch on the nearest of the cans, to check whether any attempt had been made to open it, and to see what kind of food it contained.

In the wreckage of one peeling label she read: *Peaches*.

She must've eaten tinned peaches as a child. Syrupy, slippy, a pink taste although the fruit was orange. She reached out and touched a fingertip, just a tip, to the nearest can. Rust whispered under her gloved touch, like feathers.

They wouldn't get fingerprints from anything in here.

In which case, how would they find whoever did this?

She needed to know who was responsible for what she couldn't look at, not yet.

Her mobile phone pressed hard into her hip as she crouched by the side of the bed. The torchlight didn't make a difference, not really. It just stirred at the shadows, like a stick stirring at mud. She looked around for child-sized torches. Surely they weren't expected to get dressed in the dark, or to use the bucket in the dark, and why allow them books unless . . .

Under the pillows.

They'd put the torches under their pillows, to keep them safe and close at hand. They'd cuddled together because of the dark. Scared . . .

Scared.

The word wasn't big enough.

She eased upright, far enough to stop the phone bruising her hip.

She'd invited Noah Jake to this party; his first case with dead children. She felt a pang of regret. She'd attended plenty of crime scenes. They were never pretty. But this one was up there – *down here* – with the worst. Her body was cramping, sending a scramble of distress signals to her brain. She should go up, back into the fresh air.

You can't leave them alone down here.

She couldn't. Not until the forensic team arrived.

The family up there – the family who had found the bunker – how much did they know?

The pit was in their garden, where their kids played. Marnie hadn't met any of the kids, but she'd met their dad, Terry. He'd been digging a new vegetable patch when he found the pit, was still grey with shock when Marnie and Noah arrived, his spade abandoned, its cutting edge silvered by contact with the manhole cover.

'We only moved in a year ago.' His voice was knocked to

the back of his throat. 'There was nothing on the searches to suggest anything like this. I checked the survey for soil contamination, sewerage pipes. There was nothing. It's why I thought it was okay to climb down . . .' He kept wiping his hands on his jeans. His eyes were blown wide, his nose pinched shut. A handsome man, grey with shock. Terry Doyle.

He'd waited in the garden for Marnie and Noah. His wife, Beth, had stayed inside the house, a long way from the bodies, thanks to the length of the garden. Marnie had caught a glimpse of the woman's face, a toddler at her hip, his thumb wedged in a wet mouth.

'How long . . .' Terry had whispered to Marnie and Noah as they stood at the side of the pit. 'How long have they been down there?'

'We'll find out. Mr Doyle? Please wait with your wife in the house. DS Jake will take care of you.'

'I couldn't . . . I didn't like to leave them.' His eyes were all pupils, struggling to adjust to the light after being down in the dark. 'It didn't seem right, to leave them. They're so little . . .'

'I understand. DS Jake?'

Noah had taken the man's arm, unobtrusively, steering him back towards the house, where his wife was waiting. Marnie had climbed down into the pit, rigging police torches to break up the blackness. At the foot of the ladder, she'd listened for the sound of the two men walking back up to the house. It was just possible to hear their footfall overhead, which made her wonder whether anyone might've heard crying, or calling, from the bunker. Not the Doyles, who only bought the house a year ago. Before that, for years, it was all fields.

She'd been in Blackthorn Road when the houses were brand new, eighteen months ago.

The bodies had been here a lot longer than that.

Terry hadn't wanted to leave them. Marnie liked him for that. Most people would have been revolted, by the smell apart from anything else. He was distressed, but in the same way Marnie was. He didn't try and run, even though he'd seen what she was seeing.

How far down had he climbed before he realised what he'd found? They'd need to swab him for DNA, just in case. Fran would be able to answer his question about how long the bodies had been here. She'd be able to answer Marnie's questions too, about how they died. If they got lucky, Fran would find evidence of who had done this, so that Marnie could start doing her job properly instead of crouching here, knowing she was too late . . .

A shadow fell on her from above. It climbed the walls for a second, as if scared by the torchlight, before settling on her neck. Where it settled, she burned with scrutiny.

She looked up, blind, at the open square of the manhole.

When her eyes adjusted, she saw the shape of a head and shoulders.

Not tall enough for Noah, or Terry Doyle.

A boy?

A teenage boy, his face blotted out by the sky.

Marnie's skin shivered.

Memory snatched her, for a second. From the dark that stank of death and the pitiful little huddle she'd first seen in Terry Doyle's eyes, to another place where she'd crouched, afraid to look and afraid to leave. The bluebottle, buzzing at her wrist, brought her back.

She blinked, and when she looked again, the boy was gone.

Just the ghost of him, a retinal imprint, against the squatting sky.