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Opening Extract from...

The Stranger Child

Written by Rachel Abbot

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Prologue

Another ten minutes, and she would be safely home.

Caroline Joseph gave a shudder of relief that the long journey would soon be over. She never enjoyed driving at night and always felt slightly out of control. Each pair of approaching headlights seemed to draw her towards them, their white light illuminating the car's interior as she gripped the steering wheel, struggling to point the car straight ahead.

Not long now, though. She was looking forward to giving Natasha a warm bath, a mug of hot chocolate, and tucking her up in bed. Then she could devote the remnants of the evening to David. Something was troubling him, and Caroline thought that maybe if they settled in front of the fire with a glass of wine when Natasha was asleep, she might be able to coax the problem out of him. It had to be something to do with work.

She glanced in her rear-view mirror at her precious daughter. Tasha was six – or six and three-quarters, as she liked to boast – although her slight frame made her appear younger. Her pale blonde hair fell in soft waves to her shoulders, and her delicate features were bathed intermittently in yellow light as they passed each streetlamp. Her eyes were closed, and Caroline smiled at how peaceful she looked.

Today Tasha had been her usual sweet-natured self, playing happily with her young cousins while the adults scurried around doing Caroline's father's bidding. He had issued one of his edicts – this time declaring that Caroline, along with her siblings and their families, must come for a pre-Christmas dinner. As

usual, everybody had obeyed. Everybody, that is, except David.

The turnoff to the lanes leading to their house was fast approaching, and Caroline took a final glance at Natasha. Once they were off the main road and away from the brightly lit shop windows and the amber glow of the tall streetlamps, the back of the car would be in dark shadow. She had slept for most of the journey, but was beginning to stir.

'You okay, Tasha?' Caroline asked. The child just murmured in response, not quite awake enough to answer as she rubbed her eyes with her knuckles. Caroline smiled. She braked slightly and changed gear to take the turning. All she had to do was get through the last couple of miles of this journey along the narrow, hedge-lined lanes, deep in darkness, then she could relax. She felt a flash of irritation towards David. He knew she hated driving at night, and he could have made the effort – for Natasha, if not for her. They had both missed him today.

A sudden movement to her left caught Caroline's eye, and her head spun towards it, her heart thumping in her chest. An owl swooped low over the hedgerows, its white breast catching the full beam of her headlights, bright against the black sky. She let out a breath.

There was no moon, and the black tarmac on the narrow lanes that led to their home was glinting with fragments of frost. Everything around her seemed perfectly still, as if the world had come to a stop, and now that the owl had fled she was the only thing still moving. Caroline knew that if she opened her window there would be no sound other than the quiet hum of her engine. There was no light at all ahead or behind, and for a moment her natural fear of the dark threatened to swamp her.

She leaned forwards and switched the radio on at a low volume, reassured by the jolliness of the predictable festive songs. She would be sick of the sound of them soon, but right now their cheery ordinariness relaxed her.

She smiled as the phone on the seat by her side started to ring. Certain that it would be David asking when she would be back, she barely glanced at the screen, but at the last moment she saw the call was from a blocked number. She prodded the screen and cancelled the call. Whoever it was could wait until she got home. She steered one-handed round a sharp bend as she placed the phone back on the seat, and the car slid a little on the frosty road. She felt a small jolt of fear. But the car held, and she breathed again.

Caroline took the next few bends cautiously, but her tense shoulders relaxed as she came to a brief stretch of straight road with tall hedgerows shielding deep ditches on either side. Caroline leaned closer to the windscreen, peering into the night. Her headlights were picking up a darker shadow – something in the lane ahead. She braked slightly and changed down a gear, slowing in anticipation.

She dropped down to second gear to approach the obstruction, finally recognising in horror that it was a car, slewed sideways across the road, its front wheels buried in the ditch on the right-hand side of the road. She thought she could see a shadow inside, as if somebody was slumped over the steering wheel.

As Caroline crawled slowly towards it, her heart suddenly thumping, she pushed the button to lower her window. It looked like somebody needed help.

The phone rang again.

Her first thought was to ignore it, but if there had been an accident she might need to summon assistance. She snatched the phone off the seat and answered the call, realising as she did so that her hand was shaking.

'Hello?'

'Caroline, are you home yet?'

It was a voice she vaguely recognised, but couldn't quite place. Her eyes did not leave the obstruction ahead as she drew to a halt and released her seatbelt.

'Not yet. Why? Who is this?'

'Just listen to me. Whatever you do, you must *not* stop the car. Whatever happens, do not under any circumstances stop the car.' The man was speaking low and fast. 'Go home. Go straight home. Are you listening to me?'

The panic in the voice on the phone reflected Caroline's own rising anxiety. She hesitated.

'But there's a car across the road, and it looks like somebody's in it. Maybe they're ill, or they've had an accident. Why can't I stop? What's going on?'

'Just do as I'm telling you, Caroline. Do *not* get out of the car. Put your foot down now and get past that car and don't stop again for anybody or anything. Just *do* it.'

The voice was tense, urgent. Caroline felt fear rise in her throat. *What was this*? She glanced in the rear-view mirror, and made her decision. She flung the mobile phone onto the seat beside her and grabbed the steering wheel with both hands. The stationary car was long and low, taking up most of the width of the road with its back wheels slightly off the ground as the bonnet angled down into the ditch. There wasn't much space to get round the boot of the car, but she could do it. She had to do it.

She rammed her foot hard to the floor. The tyres skidded on the frosty road, but they gripped, and she swung the car to the left. Her nearside wheels rose up on the bank below the hedge and the car hovered at a perilous angle. She pulled the steering wheel back round to the right and her car landed with a bump, facing the opposite side of the road. Caroline pulled the wheel back round to the left to straighten up, the engine roaring as she accelerated.

Suddenly she felt herself begin to slide. She spun the steering wheel madly in one direction and then the other, but whatever she did, the car took no notice. Black ice, and she was travelling too fast. She remembered being told to steer into a skid, but that didn't feel right.

A name flashed into her head. She suddenly realised who had called her. *But why him*? She called out his name, but she knew that by then there was nothing he could do. Her eyes were drawn to the mirror, to the shadowy rear of the car, where all she could see were the whites of Natasha's wide, terrified eyes.

She slammed her foot on the brakes, but nothing happened. The car slid sideways, hit the bank again, rose up at an angle and flipped, turning over and over, crashing through the hedge and into the ditch, Caroline's broken body coming to rest half in and half out of the open window.

❖

The policeman drove along the narrow lanes, enjoying a rare moment of peace in the run-up to Christmas. An anonymous caller had phoned to say there was a car off the road somewhere around here, but according to the dispatcher the caller hadn't been able to give any details. The policeman was hoping this would be nothing more than some idiot dumping his car because it had run out of juice or broken down. He had had enough of dealing with drunks in the current party season, and a nice little abandoned vehicle should keep him out of the way for a while – maybe even to the end of his shift.

The realisation that his optimism was unfounded crept up on him slowly. It was the lights that convinced him. Nobody dumped their car with the lights on, and yet up ahead he could see a stationary white light, shining brightly, illuminating the bare trees at the side of the road. As he got closer, the dazzling beams from the twin headlights blinded him. He shielded his eyes slightly with the back of his hand, approaching as cautiously as possible in case there was a body he couldn't see lying in the road. He pulled up about twenty metres from the car and switched off his engine.

He knew immediately that it was bad. The car was upside down, the front end resting up the bank at one side of the lane. But it was the noise that chilled him. Cutting through the silence

of the surrounding countryside, the gentle purr of an expensive engine provided a subtle backing track to the unmistakable sound of Bing Crosby's 'White Christmas'. The mellow music was escaping into the frosty night air from an open window through which jutted a woman's head at such an implausible angle that the policeman didn't need to approach the car to know she was dead.

He moved slowly towards the upended car to turn off the engine, and with it the music. He was able to breathe again. Now it was just a single-vehicle road traffic accident, although a tragic one. He reached for his radio.

While he waited for the paramedics to arrive, knowing that there was nothing they could do other than confirm what he already knew, the policeman organised the closing of the road, called for the specialist team to investigate the crash and asked for a PNC check on the car to determine ownership. He grabbed a powerful torch from his boot and shone it around the lane, in the ditches, along the bank, searching for anybody who might have crawled out of the car and could be injured, or anything on the road that could have caused the car to swerve. There was nothing. The road was empty.

For the policeman, it was a relief when the silence was disturbed by the sound of sirens, growing ever nearer, and a few minutes later the ambulance pulled up, its lights picking out a lone cyclist who was approaching the scene hesitantly.

The man hopped off his bike and stood some distance away. The policeman walked towards him.

'I'm sorry, sir – you need to keep back.'

'Okay, officer. I'm just trying to get home.'

'I understand, but I can't let you along this stretch of road at the moment, sir. I'm sure you appreciate that.'

'Is anybody hurt? That looks like Caroline Joseph's car. Am I right?' the cyclist asked.

'I can't confirm that at the moment, sir.'

The man peered around the policeman to get a better look at the car.

'Is that her I can see? Oh my God. She's dead, isn't she?' He looked at the policeman, his mouth half open in shock. 'Poor David. That's her husband. He's going to be devastated.'

The policeman didn't comment. All he could do was keep the man as far away as possible until reinforcements arrived, but even from this distance the woman's head was all too visible.

'She didn't have Natasha with her, did she?' the cyclist asked, his voice shaking. 'Her little girl? Cutest kid.'

The policeman shook his head with some relief.

'No, sir. The child seat is in the back but thankfully it's empty. There was nobody else in the car.'

HUNT FOR MISSING GIRL SCALED DOWN

A police spokesperson has confirmed that, as of today, the search for missing Natasha Joseph has been scaled down.

Detective Inspector Philippa Stanley of the Greater Manchester Police gave the following statement.

'Teams of professionals and volunteers have been searching the local area for over two weeks. We believe that every inch of the countryside surrounding the site of the accident has been covered. In addition to the teams on the ground checking any and every place that a young child might have crawled into to keep warm, we have employed sniffer dogs and helicopters with infrared detectors. I'm sorry to say that we have found nothing.'

Natasha Joseph – known to her family as Tasha – went missing after her mother's car crashed on Littlebarn Lane as they returned from a family party. Caroline Joseph was driving, and no other

cars were involved. When police arrived at the scene of the accident, there was no sign of the missing Natasha. Mrs Joseph was pronounced dead by the paramedics.

The police are now pursuing other lines of enquiry. In particular they are continuing to ask members of the public who were anywhere in the vicinity of the accident to come forward.

'Whether people believe they know anything or not, it is always surprising how the smallest piece of information – the sighting of a specific car or a person acting in a suspicious way – can help, particularly when coupled with other intelligence that we have gathered. We are accessing the ANPR (Automatic Number Plate Recognition) system where appropriate, and have also secured CCTV footage from petrol station forecourts and other cameras in the nearby town. But we would urge anybody who was out that night in the surrounding area to come forward. Our trained interviewers will help you to piece together each moment of that evening, and we are hopeful that the one vital piece of information we need is out there.'

The police have confirmed that while the physical search of the local area has been reduced, the team of detectives working the case remains at the highest level.

David Joseph, husband of Caroline and father of Natasha, and a successful Manchester businessman, issued an emotional plea on television last week.

'Somebody must know where my little girl is. She has lost her mother, and poor Tasha must be heartbroken, confused and so very scared. Please help me to find her. I need my little girl. I have lost everything.'

To speak to somebody in confidence, please call 0800 6125736 or 0161 7913785.

1

Six years later

DCI Tom Douglas found himself humming a tune as he walked down the corridor to his office. He always enjoyed the first day back at work after a holiday, in much the same way as he had loved going back to school after the long summer break when he was a child. It was the sense of anticipation, the knowledge that the day would bring challenges that he was keen to face. He enjoyed the camaraderie of his team – not quite friends, but supportive allies who he knew had his back. It wasn't the easiest job in the world, but he wasn't often bored, and there was a lot to be said for that.

He pushed open the door to his office and reached his left foot out to manoeuvre his doorstopper into place. His foot met thin air. Looking down, there was no sign of the fat pig that he used to hold the door open. He hung his jacket on the coat stand and crouched down to look for it under the desk.

He heard a brief knock on the door and muttered, 'Come in.'

The door opened, and he heard a voice he recognised well, trying to control a degree of mirth.

'You okay down there?'

'I'm fine – but somebody's nicked my bloody pig.'

Tom stood up, brushing the knees of his suit trousers to get rid of the dust from an un-vacuumed floor. 'Honestly, you'd have thought at police headquarters you'd be reasonably confident of finding upright, law-abiding citizens, wouldn't you? I thought he might have been kicked under here, or something, but he's nowhere to be seen.'

'I think if anybody kicked your pig, you'd find them limping around with a broken toe. And nobody steals from a detective chief inspector unless they're very stupid – although on that basis I suppose we have a few candidates to consider. I'll ask around for you.'

Tom pulled out his chair and sat down, indicating that Becky should do the same. 'How've you been, Becky? Anything exciting happened while I've been away?'

'Run of the mill stuff, on the whole,' Becky replied, as she grabbed a chair. 'Except for a particularly violent rape, which we thought was stranger rape but wasn't.'

'Who was it, then?'

'Her bastard boyfriend. He'd worn a mask and everything and was waiting for her on her way back from work. He beat her to a pulp, raped her viciously and then left her.'

'What gave him away?'

'She did. To start with, when she came round in hospital she said she had no idea who it was, but we could see she was hiding something. Turns out she was terrified that if she named her boyfriend, he would kill her. Finally she caved and told us, but said she wasn't pressing charges because there was no evidence other than her word.'

Becky leaned back and folded her arms.

'But we got him. He'd been smart enough to wear a condom, but then stupidly chucked the used one in a bin, fifty metres down the road. Said his girlfriend had it coming to her because of the way she was flirting with other guys in the pub where she works.'

Becky's lip curled in disgust, and Tom had a quick mental image of the icy determination with which she would have interrogated this guy. For all her personal vulnerability, his inspector had an uncanny ability to get the truth out of people.

'Anyway, how was the holiday?' Becky asked.

'Good, thanks. Leo and I had a few days in Florence, then we

went to my cottage in Cheshire. I had a pile of my brother's papers to sort out, and Leo had to study for an exam, so it was one of those easy weeks that seem to disappear and be gone in no time.'

On the whole, Tom tried to keep his personal life private and had only recently started to occasionally mention Leo to his colleagues. He had been vaguely amused to find that one or two of them hadn't realised that Leo was short for Leonora, and he'd seen the odd startled expression until Becky put them all straight.

Only a handful of people knew about the Cheshire home that Tom had bought when he left the Met. He rarely mentioned his brother Jack, either, although he knew Becky was aware of the tragic accident that had cut short his life a few years ago, just as she knew Jack had left Tom a fortune from the sale of his internet security business. She never raised the subject, though, unless Tom did.

Tom's phone interrupted any further discussion about holidays.

'Tom Douglas,' he answered. He listened as his boss, Detective Superintendent Philippa Stanley, gave him the kind of news that he hated more than any other. His cheery mood disappeared in a flash.

He hung up the phone. 'Grab your coat, Becky. We've got a body, and I'm sorry to say it's a young girl, barely in her teens by all accounts.'

2

For once, Tom had relinquished control and agreed that Becky could drive them to the scene, but he regretted that decision a few minutes into the journey. Becky's one-handed steering and apparent lack of regard for other motorists had been a bone of contention between them since they first met, and nothing had changed. He had tried to get her on to an advanced driving course, but she couldn't see the need. As she said, she had never had an accident, and Tom could only assume it was because everybody saw her coming and simply got out of her way.

Now, as they screeched to a halt on a long straight road behind several other police vehicles, he was glad to get out of the car.

The road was lined with well-established trees that shielded some large detached properties from view on the right-hand side. On the left, a dense area of woodland was separated from the pavement by a solid wall. About fifty metres ahead, a uniformed officer was standing guard at an old-fashioned kissing gate that opened onto a narrow dirt path leading into the wood. A thin strip of crime scene tape was already in place.

Without a word, they pulled on their protective clothing and then made their way towards the path.

After a brief word with the policeman to establish their identities, Tom and Becky walked in single file along the muddy path, overgrown brambles catching at the legs of their suits, until they reached an arched tunnel. Tom assumed that an old, disused railway line ran above, and he saw Becky wrinkle her nose as they entered the dark and gloomy space. Based on the smell and

the rubbish lying on the ground, it would seem the tunnel was regularly used for less than salubrious activities, and as they picked their way over broken bottles and beer cans, keeping to the centre of the path to avoid some of the unpleasant detritus littering the area further out towards the walls, Tom looked around. If the girl had been murdered, why kill her out in the open and not in here, where there was less chance of being seen? The place had crime scene written all over it – and if not this crime, he was sure the tunnel had witnessed its fair share of depravity.

Beyond the tunnel, another officer was waiting to point them in the right direction, and ahead they could see two white tents, erected either side of an oak tree and taped together to enclose its thick trunk. Standing just outside the scene perimeter tape, Tom spotted the oversized figure of Jumoke Osoba, better known to Tom as Jumbo. He was glad to see that – for whatever reason – this girl had been allocated the best crime scene manager that Tom had ever met. For once, Jumbo's huge, infectious grin was missing. Tom nodded his head in acknowledgement.

'What do we know, Jumbo?'

'Young girl – at a guess I'd say she's about twelve, but could be a bit older. Luckily for us, a Home Office pathologist was already in the area, so we haven't had to wait. He's with her now, and he'll be able to tell you more. It's James Adams, by the way, and he knows what he's about, thank God. Before we got the tents up I could see the girl had been there a few days at least – so it's not a pretty sight.' He looked at Tom with understanding. 'You going in?'

Tom nodded, and as he lifted the perimeter tape to stoop under it, he turned to Becky.

'I don't think this needs both of us, Becky. You talk to Jumbo. He can fill you in on anything we've learned up to now.' There was no disguising the look of relief on Becky's face. She had seen her share of bodies, but kids were always different – especially ones who had been dead a while.

As Tom entered the tent, his eyes were dragged to the body in front of him. From where he was standing, he could see that putrefaction was advanced. Given that it was early March and cold for the time of year, that meant the girl had been here for a while, slumped against the oak tree, partially buried in rotting leaf litter, wearing nothing more than a thin white nightie. On her feet were a pair of trainers, grey with age and splitting around the sole. What looked like a blue anorak was bunched up a few feet from the body, and the neck of the nightdress was ripped.

Tom looked around, but there was nothing more that he could see. It would be down to Jumbo's team and James Adams to collect the evidence, and Tom's job to work out what had happened to her. He spoke briefly to the pathologist and left him to his work.

Stepping back outside the tent, Tom took a deep breath of cold, clean air, closing his eyes for a second as he thought about the girl's family. If she had been reported missing they would identify her soon enough.

He made his way back along the approach path, careful as always not to deviate from the stepping plates and contaminate the scene. He could tell from Becky's body language that she was eager to speak to him. Hopefully, the team back at base had been doing their work and had a name for this kid.

'What have you found, Becky?' he asked.

'Nothing. Absolutely big fat zero. I've just had a call to say that no girl in the age range ten to fourteen has been reported missing in the last two weeks. We've drawn a blank so far. We're going to have to go back through kids that have been missing for longer that fit the profile and extend the search to neighbouring forces.'

'She can't have been missing for long, because I don't think she's been living rough,' Tom said, shaking his head. 'She's wearing a white nightie, for God's sake. How many street kids put on a nightie to go to bed? What do you think, Jumbo?'

Jumbo had been standing quietly by, listening to the conversation.

'We've found no personal effects, but until we move the body we can't search the area immediately around her. There's no ID in her anorak pockets. But I'm with Tom. She's not a street kid.'

'Was the anorak on the ground, away from the body?' Tom asked.

'Just where you saw it,' Jumbo answered. 'It was all photographed, of course, but I put it back when I'd checked the pockets so you could see it in situ.'

Becky's radio beeped and she moved to one side to leave Tom and Jumbo to talk as she pulled out her notebook and answered the call.

'If she's left home in the last week or so, obviously nobody's bothered to let us know. It makes me sick to think of all the runaways that aren't even reported,' Tom said. 'The parents or carers are probably expecting her to come back after a few nights of sleeping rough.'

'Yeah, and most of these kids have no idea how many predators are out there, waiting for the opportunity their isolation presents.'

The two men stopped talking as they heard a rise in Becky's tone. She turned round and came towards them.

'Has her ethnicity been established? They did a trawl of *all* girls, and we have a few that have gone missing that might fit the bill. It's all down to the ethnicity.'

Tom looked at Jumbo.

'James was certain she was white – although quite how he could tell, I don't know. Is there somebody in mind?'

Becky spoke into her radio again and all three listened to the response.

'We've been looking through old cases – kids who have been missing for months or even years. We've come up with three possibles: Amy Davidson, Hailey Wilson and Natasha Joseph.'