

THE STOLEN CHILD

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I've been searching for you since you were born. There hasn't been a single day when I haven't missed you or thought about you. Seven years. It's taken me seven years. I would never have given up – I hope you realize that when you're older and understand what I've been through. Sometimes I thought I would never find you, but I always knew that God was on my side, and He would help me put this wrong right.

As the Lord says, 'My success can only come from Him. In Him I trust, and unto Him I look.'

I never gave up looking for you but, at times, I was sad and felt hopeless.

On one of those occasions, I visited my parents in Yorkshire: where we come from, you and I. They don't make me happy, my parents, your grandparents, but we are getting on better now. My mother told me some details about your fake mother she'd never mentioned before. I was able to track her down. That was how I found you. It was two years ago. I was walking home along the edge of the river, past the park, feeling the weight of my life pressing down on my shoulders. I knew you lived here by that stage, you see, but I hadn't managed to find your address yet.

I saw a little girl standing at the top of a slide. I couldn't see your face – your hair was haloed by light. I felt my breath catch, my heart beat quicken. You slid down, your dress rising. I remember you were wearing shoes with clear sequins and

embroidered strawberries. I felt the old sadness rise in me, you seemed about the same age as my daughter, and I was reminded, yet again, of what I had lost.

You turned to look at me. I don't think you realized our connection; maybe I caught your eye because I was standing so still, watching you. The shock of recognition hit me, like a blow to my chest; a left hook to my stomach. You smiled. Your green eyes glowed. You still had your baby teeth. You were – and are – so beautiful. I was absolutely certain, like I know the feel of the breath in my body, the beat of my heart. You, the little girl on the slide, were my daughter. You were five years old. I had finally found you.

I sat on a park bench and pretended to read a paper. I watched you and watched you, drinking you in, like a thirsty man craves water in a desert. You have the same colour eyes as me. You certainly don't look like your adopted mother, father or your baby brother. I was relieved to see that you were healthy and happy – although you are painfully small and thin for your age. I've been worrying all this time – what if your pretend parents didn't care for you or didn't love you? They do. They do love you – I can see that. But then, they're well off. They can afford to buy you nice things.

I followed you home. I couldn't bear to lose you again. Over the next year, it took hard work to get close to you, but I was energized, I had a purpose once more. And nothing was going to get between me and my daughter again.

Later, when I was able to speak to you, you told me that you left London when you were little. It's ironic that you've been here all along while I was on the other side of the world. Now that I know you better, I can see you're not as happy as you looked then, that carefree day in the park. You're troubled. It's sad to see it in a child – but how could you not be? For your

entire life, you've been in mourning for your real parents. You lost something so profound, the day you were born, that you have never been able to recover.

I watch you: in the playground, walking home from school, in your bedroom at night. You are like a beautiful bowl that has been cracked. There's a fragment missing. I will heal you. I will mend you. I am your flesh and blood. I'm the lost piece in your life. No one can love you as much as I do. No one else knows how you feel like I do; no one else sees your loss.

Every day is a bitter-sweet joy. I watch you as often as I can, but I have to maintain my distance. Your fake parents touch you, hug you, kiss you. I can never get close enough. Even when I'm right next to you, I'm not near enough. The relief I felt on finding you was tarnished, because the old bitterness and rage rose up again.

They stole you from me. They took you away for seven years. Your entire lifetime. A life sentence. The waiting has been endless. The watching. The planning. Now, finally, I'm almost ready. I've got a few things to take care of and then we can be reunited.

Make no mistake, my darling. I am coming for you.
I will take you back.