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Opening Extract from...

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Written by James Long

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CHAPTER 1

Joanna's father Toby had wanted to call her Melissa but he played no part in the final decision because he died more or less in childbirth. Her mother Fleur dismissed the name out of hand and even Toby's death did not change her mind.

So it was that Joanna Mary Driscoll was born at 8.15 in the morning on the last Wednesday in May of 1994, breathing in the air of the York Hospital Maternity Unit with a puzzled and anxious look in her pale blue eyes. Toby would have picked her up and comforted her but he had been dead for over an hour by that time, driving straight into an oncoming petrol tanker as he left the hospital car park in an unreasoning panic. He was racing home to collect Fleur's bag of vital accessories – left behind by him, as she pointed out, when her waters broke.

They didn't tell Fleur about the accident until after Jo had been delivered, and something began to go wrong between mother and daughter as soon as they did. Fleur, the few remaining soft parts of her beginning to harden

over, looked grimly at her baby with blame already hanging in the air between them.

Fleur had been the main wage earner in the marriage and she went back to work as soon as she could, so Jo was cared for by a succession of nannies mostly too young to show her more than an inept sentimentality. Over the next few years, the ones who were old enough to understand rapidly fell foul of Fleur when they dared to imply she might do well to spend a bit more time with her daughter. It was just after one of these had left, fired abruptly the previous evening as soon as she had finished the ironing, that Fleur found she had no alternative but to take Jo with her on her day's business.

That was why Jo, as a toddler, quite baffled by the world, found herself in the village of Stamford Bridge, a few miles outside York, tagging along as her mother strode round a ramshackle Georgian mansion. Fleur was barking questions at the cowed girl from the estate agents, who was starting to understand why her more experienced colleagues had suddenly found pressing alternative duties.

Jo started to cry when she looked out of the patio doors across the farmland behind the house. Irritated, Fleur asked her what was wrong, but she couldn't explain because she didn't know. At four years and two months old, how do you decode a tide of adult grief without any protecting drainage channel of words or concepts? All Jo knew was that the bit that she was just starting to understand as herself was shredded by a turmoil of utter sorrow bowling down at her from across that bleak field.

Fleur tried to reason with her but reason had nothing to do with this. Crying turned to howling and then into such an utter loss of control that the young estate agent found herself propelled forward to bend down and clutch the tiny girl to stop her damaging herself while the mother's mouth tightened in anger as she stood and watched.

After ten minutes, all the muscles Jo was using to cry and writhe were so worn out that she heaved to a halt, rolled over towards the window and stared out in a dull torpor. That was when Fleur finally picked her up, taking care to keep the child's tear-stained cheeks away from her silk blouse.

'No more?' she said. 'You've finished then?' and the little girl pointed with an unsteady finger out across the fields as if that explained everything.

Driving back home to York brought a change in Jo that her mother was too annoyed and too busy with her own thoughts to recognise. Sitting strapped in her child seat, Jo tried to turn her head to look behind, then stared out of the window when a bend in the road allowed a brief glimpse of the receding village. She had a picture of a bridge in her head but it faded away so sharply that she gave a little sniff of surprise. It left something behind. All at once, and for the first time, Jo felt her separateness, aware suddenly that she was one single person, different to this mother in the front seat. Furrowing her brow, she began to explore herself, trying to test out where she stopped and started.

That night, Jo lay in her bed knowing she was alone, that beyond the tips of her fingers and her toes nobody else was there who knew what she was feeling in the exact way she felt it. She wanted Francesca to read her the rest of *The Gruffalo* but Francesca had been sent away. She picked up the book from her bedside table, struggling with both hands, and opened it to look at the pictures, trying to find the last one they had looked at together before Francesca had kissed her goodnight and gone to finish the ironing – before she had heard loud voices downstairs and her mother shouting. She let the book fall on the bedcover and saw the bridge again, in shape after shape, all imagined, all wooden, all sad. Clutching the woollen doll another lost nanny had bought her, she held it squashed against her chest, fearing that if she let it go someone might come and bury it in the earth by that bridge. Then she began to cry silently, keeping the sobs inside for fear of footsteps on the stairs.

Lost in that misery, someone quietly spoke a name inside her head, touched her on the forehead – behind the forehead where it really hurt, kissing the tears away from the inside. In the filtered evening gloom of the curtained room someone was there with her, giving her courage, telling her she was not alone after all and everything really would be all right. Something like a story without words filled the room, sealed off the rest of the house and brought her safety. It was a story about friendship and love, a promise of the future – even better than *The Gruffalo*, thought Jo as she fell asleep.

When she woke in the morning, she was so delighted by the visit that she told her mother about it at breakfast. A week later, her mother took her to a large, quiet house near the Minster where a quiet man sat in a quiet room and asked her lots of questions with long, quiet silences in between.

'Your mother tells me you have a new friend.'

She nodded.

'She says your new friend is called "Girly". Is that right?'

It was near enough, so she nodded again.

'Is that Girly?' he asked, and it took her a moment to realise that he was pointing at the woolly doll. She was so surprised at his mistake that she laughed out loud.

'That's a toy,' she pointed out in a kind voice so he would not feel hurt. You would have thought a grown-up would know that.

Afterwards she sat in the waiting room, watching *Antiques Roadshow* on television while the quiet man talked to her mother.

'It's nothing to worry about, Mrs Driscoll,' he said. 'A high proportion, perhaps even a majority of children of Joanna's age have imaginary friends. It can be a reaction to all kinds of things – a bit of stress, a bit of loneliness, sometimes neither of those. It's often the more intelligent children who need to have someone they can talk to. It may be an animal or a fairy or another child.'

'This one isn't any of those,' said Fleur. 'She talks as if it's a grown woman.'

The psychiatrist was about to suggest this might be a

mother substitute but he looked at the jut of Fleur's jaw and thought better of it.

'There's another thing. She keeps eating grass.'

'Grass?'

'Well, plants and leaves. Things from the garden and the hedges. I told her she would poison herself and she just said no, she wouldn't, and it made her feel better.'

'That's probably harmless,' said the psychiatrist uneasily. 'Animals do it. Let's look at the other side of all this. What is it you *like* about your daughter?'

'Like?'

'Yes. Well, all right. What pleases you? What does she do right?'

All that came into Fleur's head was that her daughter was surprisingly good at predicting the weather but that felt more like an irritation than an accomplishment, starting from the fine, warm day when Jo had developed a wobbly bottom lip when she wasn't allowed to bring her raincoat with her and they had both been soaked by a downpour that seemed to come from nowhere.

'She's very tidy,' Fleur said, but it didn't seem an adequate response.

Back home, Fleur often found herself wanting to shout 'Don't watch me like that' when she saw her daughter's eyes following her. What she meant was 'Don't need me like that', which you might say was not her fault, going straight back to her own mother and her mother's father and grandfather, and on backwards veering between genders for thirty, forty, fifty generations – all the way

back to one who started the whole chain reaction without any parental influence whatsoever. Perhaps any one of them could have broken the chain by deciding to do it differently. Could have done, but didn't.

Jo became a very quiet little girl when she was at home. At school, she could talk to her secret friend in her head, but she learned to close that door when she knew her mother was around and that meant that at home she was only half a person. At night, when her mother was downstairs, she could talk again, sometimes out loud, and her friend would be there to reassure her, to go over the events of the day with her and show her how to smooth away the sharp parts. She didn't know that Fleur could creep up the stairs, leaving the television turned up to cover her. She didn't know that from the other side of the thin plywood that had turned the old doorway between their rooms into a clothes cupboard, her mother could hear anything she said and write down what she heard. That was why, once or twice a year for the next five years, Fleur would take her daughter to another quiet specialist and then another, always hoping they would take it more seriously than they did. She wanted them to treat her daughter like you treat an old house for woodworm, as if a spray from some magic chemical might make her normal.

When Jo was nine, Fleur went to a parents' evening at her school. It was an expensive private school and she went because she had recently bought the vicarage next door. As a speculation it looked like being rapidly rendered

unprofitable by unexpected problems in the roof and she thought perhaps the head might see it as a worthwhile investment to help the school's expansion. That meant serving her time by sitting down to listen to Mrs Hedges, Jo's teacher, and it soon became apparent that Mrs Hedges had something to say.

'I'm very interested in an expression Joanna used in class, Mrs Driscoll. It's not one I've heard before.'

Fleur's first thought was that her daughter had used a swear word because it would not have surprised her at all that Mrs Hedges hadn't heard it. Mrs Hedges seemed to have only a small fingerhold on the real world that Fleur inhabited, the world of business. She had no time for the whimsical and indulgent take on childhood that Mrs Hedges had displayed on the few occasions they had met. She did not see it as a teacher's function to show undue fondness for the children in her care nor to bring them up in the belief that the world was a benevolent place only distinguished from fairy tales by the absence of talking rabbits.

'What did she say?'

'We were discussing proverbs, you see? It's such a good way to get them to look at language and culture and history.'

The only proverb that immediately came to Fleur's mind was 'A fool and his money are soon parted', a statement of which she thoroughly approved, so she simply raised her eyebrows and Mrs Hedges, sensing a chill without understanding why, floundered on.

'I asked them if they knew any proverbs and she put her hand up, you see? She doesn't often do that so I went straight to her and she said this odd thing.'

'Which was?'

'She said, "The mist on the hill bringeth water to the mill." Now, I wonder, is that something you say in your family?'

'No. Why on earth would anyone say something like that?'

Mrs Hedges opened a folder and Fleur noted grimly that the cover was decorated with stuck-on pictures of roses. 'Then she said, "Women's jars bring men's wars." At least I think that's what it was and, um, yes, "The hasty hand catches frogs for fish."'

'And is that supposed to mean something? It sounds like nonsense.' Fleur looked across the school hall to where Jo and a group of other children were being rehearsed in some entertainment that she feared the parents would be expected to sit through at the end of the evening.

'I was hoping you could tell me,' said the teacher. 'I took the one about mist and mills to mean that good things come out of bad and I looked up the frogs one on the internet. It says it's very old and Sir Walter Scott used it in *Ivanhoe*. I wondered if you'd been reading *Ivanhoe* to her or something like that?'

'No.' Fleur hadn't been reading anything to Jo and wasn't sure if *Ivanhoe* was a poem or a book.

'And the women's jars thing? I can't find any trace of that.'

'I have no idea. Does this matter?'

'Well, yes, I think perhaps it does. Since then her writing has really taken off. She's turning out to be very imaginative. She has been writing some lovely stories.'

Mrs Hedges delved into the rose-covered folder again and any other mother there would have smiled and reached for the papers she brought out and been thrilled that their daughter was showing early literary talent but Fleur, who was not any other mother, had something more pressing on her mind. She looked across the room and saw Justin Reynolds, a member of the Council Planning Committee, just getting to his feet from another session at another table. She left Mrs Hedges stunned by the speed of her departure, though somewhat relieved.

In the car on the way home, as Jo waited without success for any mention of the songs she had sung in her first ever public performance, her mother said, 'I've arranged for Maria Reynolds to come and play.'

'With me?' asked Jo, surprised.

'Well, of course, with you. Who do you think she's coming to play with? Me?'

To Jo that somehow seemed less unlikely. The closest she had ever come to Maria Reynolds was in the brief moment before Maria had pushed her over in the playground. She said nothing.

'Where do you get all these sayings from?' her mother asked. 'All this stuff you've been spouting in class about mists and frogs and jars. Have you been reading books?' It sounded like an accusation.

'Someone told me.'

'What someone?'

But Jo had learned not to mention the friend she talked to every night when she went to bed – the friend who was there for comfort and for wisdom, who spoke to her from inside her head.

'I don't know,' she said.

'You're getting very secretive. I don't like it.'

That evening Jo sat in her room, getting ready to do her homework. Mrs Hedges had asked her to write another story.

She settled in her chair and opened her exercise book. 'What shall we write about this time?' she asked into the silence of her room and listened to the answer, smiling to herself.

Fleur came in much later, noticing the light still on. She had been on the phone for most of the evening trying to sort out the problems at the Durston barn conversion where the highways department were kicking up about access on to the lane. She tutted when she saw Jo lying asleep with most of her clothes still on, unbuttoned all she could and rolled her daughter under the duvet. Then she saw the open exercise book.

'My Cottage,' she read. 'My cottage stands where it has always stood, under the edge of the hill, and it is made out of the bones of the hill. All its stones came out of the hill and its beams are made from the trees that grew on the hill. One day it will sink back into the hill but only if I am not there to save it.'

They lived in the heart of York, in a house made of good Victorian brick. Fleur tutted again. Mrs Hedges might like it, but imagination didn't put bread on the table.

Jo wriggled away from the noise her mother made, burrowing miles down to the place where she really lived, in the cottage room under the eaves where the evening air, blown by birds' wings, carried in the scent of kindly thatch.

After school the next day Maria Reynolds came to play. She loomed over Jo, blotting out the light and hissing murderous and mysterious words of ill omen at her whenever they were by themselves.

'Have you been saved?' she said. 'You're going to burn in the fire. Did you know that?'

For once Jo tried to stay as near her mother as possible to keep this fat malevolence under some sort of restraint, but Fleur shut herself away in her study, leaving her daughter to endure the pinches and the mean taunts. Even when Maria's father came to fetch her, the misery did not end because Fleur poured him a glass of sherry and shut him inside with her. Jo set up the skittles just outside the window for safety and she could see them talking inside – saw her mother unfolding plans, laughing and smiling as she never normally did. They were at it for half an hour and whenever they were both looking the other way, Maria would throw the hard wooden ball at Jo instead of at the skittles.

'I'm going to heaven,' she said. 'I've been saved. You haven't. You're a sinner. You deserve what's coming to you.'

At the weekend, Fleur announced that they were going out for a picnic, which was not something they had ever done before.

'Where are we going?' Jo asked.

'It's by a river. There's a field I want to see.'

It was usually houses and old barns her mother wanted to see and Jo was very used by now to hanging around while Fleur talked to men with clipboards and tape measures who got out of battered vans. 'It's what keeps us fed, my dear,' was what Fleur always said if she thought she caught a look of boredom. 'Your father didn't provide for us, so I have to.'

A field sounded good until she asked the next question, looking at the hamper her mother was loading. 'Will we eat all this food?'

'We will, and Mr Reynolds will, and Maria and her little brother.'

It took them nearly half an hour to drive there. 'Now, what I want you to do is take Maria and her brother off and give me some time to talk to their father,' said Fleur.

'Isn't their mother coming?' Jo asked hopefully.

'She's coming a bit later,' said Fleur, 'when she's finished doing something or other for their church. They're very religious, you know. There's no need to make a face. There's nothing wrong with believing in things.'

The picnic was indeed in a field on the edge of a river, but what Fleur hadn't said was that the river flowed through a village that felt a bit like a small town because it had factories and a big caravan site on that side. The

field was a bit further down the river but it wasn't the sort of field that promised fun even if Jo had been by herself. Maria's brother was called Simeon 'With an "e", he told her, 'like in the Bible,' and he joined in the game of bullying Jo with a zeal that showed how accustomed he was to being the usual target.

'You don't go to church, do you?' he asked as soon as they were by themselves.

'I've been to church,' Jo said. 'I've been to a wedding and a christening.'

'That's not real church. That's misusing the church's solemn fabric for earthly ends. If you don't go to real church, you'll go to hell. You have to be saved.'

'She won't be saved,' said Maria with contempt. 'Who would bother to save her?'

'God the Father would,' said Simeon. 'He saves anyone who wants to be saved.'

'Not her,' said his sister. 'Don't talk about what you don't know about.'

'He'd save her.'

'Who says so?'

'I say so.'

Words came to Jo's mouth. ' "They say so" is half a liar,' she said quietly.

'What does that mean? That doesn't mean anything. Are you saying I'm a liar?' Maria stepped up to her, inflating herself and butting Jo with her stomach so that she had to step back.

'I don't think a real god would be like that,' Jo answered

bravely. 'God tempers the wind to a shorn lamb.'

Simeon made a loopy sign with his hand. 'You say stupid things,' he said, and Maria pushed her so that she fell over backwards, then kicked her and walked off laughing. Jo felt tears coming to her eyes with the pain of the kick and reached out in her mind to her private friend, the wise and gentle one who was always there for her, but instead of that comforting strength she could only feel distant misery.

That was a shock. It was the first time there had been any distance at all between them. She could not remember the time before her friend. That calm, consoling voice had always been somewhere just there. If she could have reached inside her skull, she could have put her finger on the exact spot, towards the back and a little to the right. Now she could feel someone still close by, but not *with* her – and it was someone who was hurting even more than she was. Jo got to her feet and ran along the edge of the field, with the water flowing just beside her, past the twisted shopping trolley wedged among the stones and the pool where dark fish flicked their tails, all the way to the far hedge where she knew her friend was, where she was needed.

She knelt close to the riverbank right by her friend but there was a wall between them and she knew this best of friends didn't want to drag her into whatever was happening. She persisted, opening herself up to the misery next to her until she broke through the barrier and found out, much too fast, what death and the sorrow of death felt like.

Fleur eventually found her there, curled up in a ball and weeping. The Reynoldses were close behind her, the father and the mother, with Maria and Simeon hanging back behind them, grinning.

'What's going on?' Fleur demanded, and Jo was too carried away to observe her usual silent discretion.

'He was killed,' she got out between sobs. 'They killed him. He did it to save him.'

'Who did it to save who?'

'He did. Her son. Her brave, brave son.'

'Whose son. Who is *her*?'

But before Jo could find a way not to answer that, they both became aware of a mumbling from behind them. Fleur turned sharply to find Justin Reynolds' wife, Leah, making the sign of the cross over and over again as she recited an incantation in a language Fleur did not recognise at all.

'What on earth are you doing?' she demanded.

'Asking the help of the Lord for your poor daughter in her affliction. The Lord will come to her aid.'

Fleur remembered just in time that she needed the Reynoldses and choked back her words.

Leah Reynolds, warming to her task, gesticulated ever more violently, then knelt and put her hands on Jo's head. Jo twisted to escape but the woman wrapped one arm right round her and held the girl's head back against her chest with the other hand. Her husband watched with an expression of pride on his face.

'She's done this before,' he said. 'Casting out. She has

special powers.' Fleur thought hard about his position on the Planning Committee and did her best to smile, as Leah Reynolds continued to intone.

'Let me go,' said Jo quietly. Leah Reynolds ignored her. 'What?' said Jo. There was a silence, then she said, 'You have no right to restrain me. Please take your hands away.'

Leah Reynolds went on speaking in a monotone. Fleur thought perhaps it was Latin and then Jo started to laugh and laugh, not hysterically but in adult amusement. 'Oh you silly woman,' said the child. 'Go on. Just get it over with.'

Next week, her mother took Jo to a new person in a new office – a woman this time who was far less quiet and told her more than she asked her. After she saw the woman, her mother started to give her tablets and Jo could hear her friend telling her not to take them, to hide them in her mouth and spit them out later, and that worked for a week or so until her mother caught her and then she was forced to drink a whole glass of water and it was impossible not to swallow. The tablets made her feel sleepy and dull and not at all herself. The worst thing was that they pushed her friend away so she could only feel her, waiting anxiously, too far off to talk – her friend Gally.