

THE PERFECT MAN...
OR A PERFECT STRANGER?



THE
**SIXTH
WINDOW**
Rachel Abbott

THE SIXTH WINDOW

RACHEL ABBOTT

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Prologue

It had been a night like so many others over the past few weeks, and as the woman looked down on the narrow street below her second-floor window, still dark at this pre-dawn hour, she finally admitted that she couldn't take any more.

She raised her eyes to seek out the stars in the gaps between the buildings, but the sky was never completely black in central Manchester, the heavens polluted with endless street lights and overly bright shop windows. The incessant rumble of traffic created nothing more than background music that she had long ago learned to filter out, but sleep had eluded her once again because she never knew when the cries of the dead would pierce the silence and shatter any semblance of calm.

As the first resident in the north wing of this newly converted building, she had relished the isolation and was almost resentful of people gradually moving into the other apartments in her wing, while the south wing remained practically empty. Perhaps she should have made more effort to befriend her neighbours, to ask if they too heard the voices. But they wouldn't understand, she was sure of that. They probably didn't know or even care about the history of this building, a history that had fascinated and horrified her in equal measure.

She grasped the black tourmaline pendant where it hung against the skin of her chest, willing it to protect her from whatever was happening in this room. She felt the spirits around her – the spirits of children who had lived and died here. The building had been leased in the nineteenth century to accommodate the overflow from the huge New Bridge Street workhouse, and now those poor lost souls circled her, trying to tell her something, she was sure.

She had an affinity with the dead. It was something she had always known, but nobody believed her. This time, though, she knew these children wanted something from her and she was unable to help them.

At first she had heard laughter – the faintest echo of the happy sound reverberating around her sitting room. She hadn't minded that. It had made her smile. But days later it had turned to crying – heart-wrenching sobs that made her want to reach out and touch the poor dead child. And it wasn't just one voice she heard. Over the weeks she had sensed different cries, always starting with joy but ending with tears.

Only the long hours between nightfall and dawn were strangely silent, the spirits resting perhaps. During that time the woman prowled the apartment, unable to soothe the souls trapped within these walls.

She fingered the tourmaline again, and reached down to rub the smooth blue angelite crystal resting in a bowl on the table, a stone she had selected from her treasured gems to help her communicate with angels. But it wasn't working, and the effort of trying to make contact, to free the spirits of these children from captivity, was

draining her of energy.

It was time to leave them to their sadness.

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Fifteen miles to the north of Manchester, Bernie Gray turned up the collar of his bright green hi-vis jacket against the thin drizzle that had plagued them for the last two days. He didn't mind the rain and barely noticed it. He had other things on his mind.

He gave the dog lead in his left hand a gentle tug. Their new puppy, bought for his daughter two weeks earlier as a much-wanted Christmas present, was slightly more reluctant to go for a walk than she had been. Two minutes ago Zena had been prancing around in excitement, weaving between his legs. But that was in the warmth of the kitchen. She obviously had different thoughts now she was outside.

Bernie had been on dog-walking duty each morning since Zena had arrived on Christmas Eve, and although it was not yet 6am, he felt the exercise was doing him good, even though for now it was just a short loop until the puppy's little legs grew stronger. Most mornings Bernie saw it as an opportunity to prepare himself for the day ahead. It also gave him time to focus on the persistent worry that hardly let go of him for a second.

This morning, though, he was thinking about the conversation he had had with his daughter, Scarlett. Not really a conversation. It was more of an accusation, and he needed to find a way to fix it.

'Come on, Zena,' he said softly as he coaxed the little chocolate Labrador along their usual route – following the road, down the path behind the church, out into the lane beyond, then back towards home. The circuit took no more than fifteen minutes and he never met anyone when he was out – the early hour and the chilly, damp mornings saw to that.

He turned left onto the path and looked up at the church tower, standing starkly against the dark blue of a sky that wasn't going to lighten any time soon. He looked down at his feet, trying to avoid the worst of the puddles, which Zena, now accustomed to the cold, happily trotted through, her brand-new collar with its blue LEDs reflecting off the black water.

He was going to have to decide what to tell Scarlett – how to answer her questions. Not with the whole truth, obviously. But he was sure he could think of an explanation that she might accept, some watered-down version of the truth that a thirteen-year-old might understand. When he had seen her face that morning and heard the disgust in her voice, his guts had knotted. He couldn't lose Scarlett. He knew he was out of options. He had to put this right and accept the consequences.

Bernie turned onto the narrow lane that ran back towards home. The drystone walls on either side of the single track created a wind tunnel, and he bent forward slightly to keep the worst of the drizzle off his face. He looked down at Zena, and smiled at the sight of her. With her wet fur she looked like a drowned rat. As he watched, she lifted her head and her ears went up. Zena stopped.

'Come on, Zena,' Bernie said, raising his voice slightly against the wind. 'Get a move on.'

What had she heard? Her head was cocked slightly to one side, but it wasn't until a pale glow relieved the darkness surrounding him that he realised there was a car on the lane ahead, approaching slowly, its dimmed headlamps creating gleaming pools of warm yellow light on the lane.

Bernie lifted his head and held his hand out, asking the driver to stop. There was no grass verge to move to so the car could pass, no farm gate to slip through.

The car drew to a halt about ten metres ahead. Bernie nodded his thanks, hoping the driver could see the small amount of his face that was peering out from beneath the hood of his green jacket. He picked Zena up so they could squeeze through the narrow gap between the car and the wall.

As he grasped her wriggling body he heard a sound he wasn't expecting. The driver was revving his engine, probably indicating that Bernie should hurry up. Holding Zena close to his chest, he started to move towards the car – but not as quickly as the car moved towards him, its headlamps now on full beam, blinding him.

There was nowhere to go.

Bernie's last thought before the car hit him and Zena was that now he would never get the chance to put things right with his daughter.

1

Eighteen Months Later

The sound of a door closing upstairs should have given Natalie Gray sufficient warning that she wasn't going to be alone for much longer, but her eyes were locked on to the computer screen and her heart was pounding.

'Oh God,' she whispered as she stared at the images in front of her. 'Please tell me this is work-related.'

Her words were barely audible, but finally Ed's cheerful whistling penetrated her consciousness as it grew ever closer and she quickly and silently closed the lid of his laptop and hurried across to the kettle, snatching it off its base and thrusting it under the cold tap, as if she had been standing by the sink all the time.

She shouldn't have been looking at Ed's computer, but she had wanted to check the weather for the day. She had gone to his browser history to see if the forecast site was there, and it probably was. But she hadn't made it that far.

'Do you want a cup of tea, Ed?' she asked. Trying for bright and cheerful, her voice sounded brittle to her own ears, but she needed to think about what she had seen before she made any rash judgements. Their relationship was so new, and any accusation right now could fracture it into a million shattered pieces.

'That would be lovely. Yes please, darling.'

As she composed her face and turned towards Ed she was surprised to see him in a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. He was a big man with a broad, muscular frame, and he carried all his clothes well – from today's attire to his formal police uniform.

'I thought you were on duty this morning,' she said, pulling a mug from the rack and adding a teabag, trying desperately to be her normal chatty self. Usually she loved working in this kitchen with its shiny white units and black granite worktop, but right now she would have given anything to be miles away.

'I should have been, but I told one of the lads I'd do his nights this week. His wife's just had their third, and he's volunteered for the midnight feed to give her a bit of sleep. You don't mind, do you, Nat?' He gave her a worried glance. 'I know it means you'll be on your own at night, but I couldn't refuse him.'

Natalie gave him a smile and hoped it didn't look as shaky as she felt. A small voice in her head told her she was being stupid, overreacting. There was bound to be an explanation.

'I don't mind at all, but you'll have Scarlett under your feet during the day. If she's got friends round or she's playing her music too loud when you're trying to sleep, feel free to ask her to keep it down. It's your house, and she needs to respect that.'

'No, it's *our* house. I love having Scarlett here, and her friends are always welcome. I love having you *both* here.'

Ed moved around the kitchen island. 'Come here, Nat.' He smiled and pulled her gently towards him.

She put her arms around his waist and rested her head on his shoulder. Ed's hugs had seen her through the darkest times, and his broad shoulders had been cried on more often than she could count. There was something about being held in these strong arms that had always made her feel she had reached a place of safety. But not today.

It was eighteen months now since Natalie's husband Bernie had died when a stolen car of joyriders had ploughed into him and their beautiful chocolate-brown Labrador puppy, killing them both. During months of crippling grief for the man she had been in love with since she was seventeen, Ed had been her saviour in so many ways. He had been hurting almost as much as she had, because Bernie and Ed – different as they were – had been best friends since they were five years old.

She would never forget the dreadful moment when Megan, Bernie's friend and colleague, had arrived to give her the shocking news. Biting her cheek to prevent her emotion from showing and quieter than Natalie had ever known her, Megan had moved discreetly around the house, answering the phone, calling friends and family to save Natalie that painful process.

From the start, though, Natalie had felt that nobody could comfort her the way Ed could. He had rushed to be with her as soon as he heard, and since then had been there for her every step of the way. But right now, with his arms holding her close, she could feel her body stiffen with tension as alarm bells rang at the back of her mind. What she had seen on Ed's laptop had left her questioning everything she knew about him.

Why had he never married? His slightly olive skin and high cheekbones gave him an exotic look, and he was a kind and thoughtful man. He would have been a catch for anyone, so why had every relationship he'd ever had ended within weeks, or at best months?

Putting her hands on Ed's hips, she pushed him gently away.

'Is there something the matter, Nat?' he asked, bending slightly so that his eyes looked into hers. At five feet ten inches herself, he didn't have to bend too far, but Natalie couldn't meet his probing gaze, and she turned her back on him to reach for a tea towel to wipe her already dry hands.

'No, it's nothing. Just thinking about work.'

'Okay. Well I'll pop upstairs and have a word with Scarlett, see if there's anything she'd like to do today. I thought I might treat her to lunch, or maybe there's something she'd like to see at the pictures if she's not planning to meet up with her friends. We could make a day of it. I'll be back for my cup of tea in a minute.'

Ed walked towards the door, and Natalie felt a rising tide of panic.

'Wait!'

Ed turned, a puzzled expression on his face. 'What's up?'

'Nothing. Nothing. I just remembered that I said Scarlett could come with me

today. A bit of work experience, you know. Look, can you get the eggs on and I'll go and wake her up? Thanks, love.'

Natalie pushed past Ed and scurried towards the stairs. She couldn't look at him. He would be wondering what on earth was the matter, and the truth was she wasn't sure she knew.

*

As she ran up the stairs, Natalie could feel her heart thudding.

'Calm down,' she whispered under her breath. She didn't want Scarlett to see her like this. She would know something was wrong.

She reached the wide landing and turned left towards her daughter's room. Ed's house was so much bigger and more solid-feeling than their modern semi, and she had been glad to move here. Since Bernie died, their house had felt cold and empty, and night after night, unable to sleep and missing the warmth of her husband's body next to hers in their bed, she had paced the floor until the early hours, wondering what the future would hold for herself and her daughter. She worried that she wouldn't be enough for Scarlett on her own. How could she hope to provide the same amount of love as two parents?

She stopped and rested a hand on a chest of drawers, taking a deep breath to steady herself. Had it all been a huge mistake? Should they have stayed in their own house?

The relationship with Ed had sneaked up on Natalie. Three months after the anniversary of Bernie's death Ed had called in, as he often did, to check she and Scarlett were all right, and as he was leaving his farewell hug had turned into something more. Natalie hadn't wanted to let go of him, and gradually his arms had tightened around her. She had become conscious of every inch of his body, from the feel of his thighs pressed against hers to the warmth of his chest through the thin fabric of her T-shirt.

Ed had given a low groan and eased back.

'Natalie,' he'd said, and for a moment she thought she'd made a mistake. But his eyes were dark with longing and she reached up to kiss him gently on the mouth. It felt as if she had surfaced from the depths of despair into a bright and exciting new world – a safe one too, because that was how he made her feel. Steady Eddie, Bernie had called him. But even though he lacked her husband's spontaneity, Ed made her feel cherished and brought warmth back into her heart.

They began to spend every spare moment together, but she'd had to admit to Ed that she didn't feel comfortable with him staying at her house, sleeping on Bernie's side of the bed.

'I know what you mean,' Ed had said when she told him of her reservations. 'This is Bernie's house – and yours and Scarlett's, obviously. Look, this might be a big step, but when you feel the time's right, why don't you both come and live with me? My house has more space, and if you're not ready to sleep next to me every night you can have your own bedroom. I don't want to rush you.'

Natalie had known Ed for as long as she had known Bernie, so it had seemed an easy decision, and two months later she and Scarlett had moved in.

Megan had cautioned her against the move.

'Are you certain it's not too soon, Nat? I know it's difficult adjusting to being alone, but please make sure you're ready for this.'

Natalie had ignored her advice. But had Megan been right?

She heard Ed in the hall below. She hadn't had time to process what she had seen – to decide what she should do – but if he found her here, leaning against the furniture and staring into thin air, he would know something was wrong.

At the far end of the landing Scarlett's door was ajar, and as Natalie hurried towards it she could see her daughter's red wavy hair spread over the pillow. Just her nose was poking above the bedclothes, the freckles that she hated so much showing against the pale cream of her skin. Natalie's breath caught in her throat. Scarlett was so beautiful, even if she couldn't see it herself. She blamed Natalie for the red hair and her father for skin that couldn't bear too much sun.

As if sensing that she was being watched, Scarlett's eyes slowly opened. She stretched her arms above her head and yawned.

'What are you doing lurking in the doorway, Mum?'

Natalie painted a smile on her face and walked over to the bed. She sat on the edge and reached out a hand to gently push the hair away from Scarlet's forehead.

'You need to get up, sweetheart. You're coming into work with me today.'

Scarlett's look of horror said it all. 'What? Why?'

'Because Ed will have things to do, and besides, I like having you with me.'

'But I'm on holiday! Why can't I stay at home and chill? I'm fifteen, Mum. I *am* old enough to be left alone, you know, or I could go to Gracie's. I said I'd call her when I was up.'

Natalie knew she had probably been overprotective of Scarlett recently and she didn't want to stifle the girl. But this was different. She stood up and moved away from the bed.

'Well, you can have a look round the shops, and if there are any tops you like I'll come out with you at lunchtime and we'll see if there's anything worth buying. You need some things for the summer anyway. Does that make it sound any more enticing?'

Scarlett shrugged. 'A bit, I suppose.'

Natalie hated what she was doing and turned away before Scarlett could sense her confusion. 'Just get up, love. We're out of here in thirty minutes. Okay?'

She didn't wait for her daughter's reply. She made her way downstairs to get on with the breakfast, forcing the images she had seen on Ed's computer from her mind.

As she reached the bottom of the stairs, she was surprised to see him walking towards her, jangling his car keys.

'Are you going out?'

'Sorry, Nat. I've bollocksed things up a bit. I was supposed to pick Joe up on my

way to shift this morning, and when I agreed to swap to nights I forgot to tell him. His wife's gone off in his car, so now he's stuck.'

That was typical of Ed. He took on everyone else's problems and never let anyone down. So why couldn't she just trust him?

'Don't look like that, darling,' he said. 'It's my fault, so I'd better sort it. I'll only be about forty minutes, but you'll probably have gone by the time I get back.'

Ed leaned down and gave her a gentle kiss on the lips. 'I'll see you tonight, and I'll cook before I go to work. I'll make you my famous lasagne.' He gave Natalie a smile, and when hers was less cheerful than normal he looked puzzled. 'Don't be cross – it's only breakfast I'm missing.'

Natalie shook her head and tried to widen her smile as he opened the front door. With one last grin he was gone.

The smile dropping from her face, Natalie quickly walked through to the kitchen, leaving the door open so she would be able to hear Scarlett coming downstairs. She strode across to the table and lifted the lid of the laptop. The screen sprang to life and Natalie took a deep breath. She shouldn't be doing this. She had never spied on Bernie in all their time together – she had never felt the need – and this felt so wrong. But she hadn't been spying that morning. She had never intended to scrutinise Ed's browser history, but this time there was no excuse. She was actively checking it out. Her hands were shaking so much that she clicked the wrong option and silently cursed herself. Scarlett would be down soon – she needed to be quick.

She took a breath to calm herself and this time managed to steer the mouse to the history button. She clicked and the list of recent sites was displayed. There were ten items, but the site she had been looking at earlier had gone.

Ed had deleted it.

2

It seemed remarkably quiet in the office for a Monday morning, and DCI Tom Douglas couldn't help wondering what particular set of circumstances had deterred the underworld of Greater Manchester from causing the usual weekend chaos.

His thoughts were interrupted as footsteps approached his office, and he struggled to hide his pleasure as he studiously pretended to focus on the spreadsheet of crime figures in front of him.

The footsteps stopped, and still he didn't look up.

'Ta-dah!'

Tom slowly raised his eyes to the figure standing in the doorway, posed with arms spread out from her body as if taking a curtain call on stage.

Tom said nothing.

'Glad to see me back?' Becky Robinson grinned at him expectantly.

Tom was struck by how much thinner she was than before her illness, but her dark hair was as shiny and bouncy as ever, and it seemed she had lost none of her sparkle.

'Beside myself with joy,' Tom said in a bored voice, dropping his head back to the paperwork to hide his smile.

'Huh. Well, I'll just go again, shall I?' Becky asked.

Tom didn't have a chance to answer before another body appeared in the doorway, dressed in a dazzling white shirt and a pair of trousers with creases so sharp you could cut yourself.

'Oh. Sorry, sir, ma'am. I hadn't realised you were busy. I came to see if you would like coffee, sir?'

'Thanks, Keith. That would be great.' Tom nodded at the newcomer.

'Ma'am?'

'I'm good, thanks.'

Tom raised his eyebrows and gave Becky a smile as Keith spun on his heel and marched off to make the coffee.

'See how well I've been looked after?'

For a moment Tom thought she was taking him seriously and he felt a stab of remorse. He pushed his chair back and stood up, not quite sure whether he should give Becky a hug or shake her hand. Since she had nearly died after throwing herself in a river in an abortive rescue mission, their relationship had changed. He had realised how much she brightened his days and how much he relied on her spirited determination to get the job done. He covered his momentary confusion by circumventing his desk to pull out a chair for her.

'Sit,' he said. 'And seriously, you've no idea how glad I am to have you back.'

'Keith not cutting the mustard, then?' she asked as she sat down, her grin

spreading.

Tom compromised on the hug by giving Becky's shoulder a quick squeeze as he walked back around his desk.

'Keith's a perfectly competent DS who we decided might benefit from a temporary DI position in your absence. He makes an excellent cup of coffee.' Tom said no more. He wasn't in the habit of denigrating any of his team, but Keith's obsequiousness had driven him to distraction. 'Are you now fully recovered at last?'

'Well, I do apologise for the inconvenience of my absence. But sadly the contents of the River Irwell didn't agree with my delicate constitution.'

Tom knew what an understatement that was. After treating Becky for shock and monitoring her vital signs for a couple of days, the hospital had let her go home and, being Becky, she had come straight back to work. But a few days later she had been taken seriously ill again. It turned out she had ingested some vicious parasite. It took time for it to work its way out of her system, and it had left her weak and underweight. In the three months she had been off Tom had missed her, and he was delighted to see her looking bright and cheerful again.

A sharp knock on the open door diverted his attention for a moment.

'Your coffee, sir.' Keith placed the coffee, in a cup and saucer rather than in his usual mug, on the desk. 'Are you sure I can't get you anything, ma'am?'

Becky shook her head.

'DI Robinson will come and find you when we've finished, Keith, and you can do your handover. Thanks for the coffee.'

'My pleasure, sir.' For a moment Keith looked as if he was about to click his heels together and salute, but he just lowered his head in acknowledgement and reversed out of the door, closing it softly behind him.

Becky grinned at Tom, but he ignored her and stuck to business.

'Keith will bring you up to date on any current cases, but it's been slightly less hectic than usual for some reason. I don't suppose the peace will last, though.'

As if on cue, Tom's phone rang. He shrugged his shoulders and picked it up.

*

Becky watched Tom's look of concentration as he listened to whoever was on the other end of the call. He picked up a pen and started to doodle on his pad – not, as Becky knew, because he wasn't listening. But the more intense the conversation, the more expressive his doodles became. He broke off in the middle of constructing a particularly elaborate elliptical shape to write a few words on his pad and lifted his eyes to look at Becky.

Must be a case, Becky thought.

She wasn't sure if she was pleased or not. She was keen to get back into the swing of things, but there was something she had to say to Tom, something that was going to be difficult, and she had no way of knowing how he was going to respond. She valued their relationship, but what she was about to do might be going a step too far,

and if it all went wrong – if Tom reacted badly – it could seriously screw things up. She could lose him.

He put the phone down, closed his eyes and shook his head slowly.

‘What’s up?’ she asked. ‘New case?’

‘No. Not new. Philippa wants to talk to me about the death of a police officer eighteen months ago. Hit-and-run. It was a stolen car, and it was found burned out on Blackstone Edge so it’s always been assumed it was joyriders, although nobody was ever caught.’

‘So why are they looking again now?’

Tom shrugged. ‘Who knows? Maybe someone has developed a conscience and decided to come clean.’

He smiled at Becky’s expression of disbelief.

‘I know, not very likely, but I’d better go and talk to Philippa about it.’

Becky knew that once Tom disappeared behind the door of Detective Superintendent Philippa Stanley’s office he was likely to be there for a while. Although Philippa was Tom’s boss, it had once been the other way round and they had an intriguing relationship, taking every available opportunity to share thoughts and ideas. Philippa, in theory, scoffed at Tom’s famous gut feelings about cases because she went strictly by the book – at least most of the time – but that never stopped her from asking his opinion. Philippa scared the hell out of Becky, so she kept all contact with the woman to a minimum.

She stood up to leave and turned at the doorway, hoping and praying she wasn’t about to blush.

‘Tom, I know today’s not ideal if you’re going to be tied up with Philippa, but do you think that tomorrow – or maybe later in the week – we could meet up out of work for a drink? There’s something I’d like to talk to you about.’

Tom looked up from his desk, where he had been attempting to reorder the chaotic pile of papers before leaving. ‘Sure,’ he said with a slight note of surprise. ‘Will Mark be joining us?’

‘No,’ Becky said. Mark, her boyfriend, had to be kept out of this. ‘If you can spare the time, I’d really like to buy you a drink. And I might need one myself. Later in the week?’

She could sense his puzzlement, but as he reached for his jacket he nodded. ‘Okay. Whenever you like. I haven’t got any plans after today.’

Becky let out a long breath. Mission stage one completed, she thought.

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