

A young girl in a teal jacket and white skirt is walking on a dark pavement. She is stepping on blue chalk drawings of a grid and a large 'X' on the ground. The scene is dimly lit, with the girl's shadow cast on the pavement.

Nine missing children.
The hunt is on.
But has time run out?

IN SAFE HANDS

A DCI ANNA TATE THRILLER

J. P. CARTER

A DCI Anna Tate Crime Thriller

J. P. Carter

In Safe Hands

«HarperCollins»

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In Safe Hands / J. Carter — «HarperCollins», — (A DCI Anna Tate Crime Thriller)

How far would you go to save the ones you love? The first book in a gripping new crime series featuring DCI Anna Tate. When nine children are snatched from a nursery school in South London, their distressed parents have no idea if they will ever see them again. The community in the surrounding area is in shock. How could this happen right under their noses? No one in the quiet suburban street saw anything – or at least that’s what they’re saying. But DCI Anna Tate knows that nothing is impossible, and she also knows that time is quickly running out. It’s unclear if the kidnappers are desperate for money or set on revenge, but the ransom is going up by £1 million daily. And they know that one little boy in particular is fighting for his life. It’s one of the most disturbing cases DCI Anna Tate has ever worked on – not only because nine children are being held hostage, but because she’s pretty sure that someone close to them is lying... The first book in a gripping new crime series, perfect for fans of Angela Marsons’ Detective Kim Stone Series and LJ Ross’ DCI Ryan Mystery series. What others are saying about *IN SAFE HANDS*: ‘What a page turner!’ Reader review ‘If you’re looking for a book that will delight you whilst creeping you out, entertain while keeping you awake **NEEDING** to know what will happen, then you need this book.’ Reader review ‘A very fast paced book ... I raced through it in one sitting... I can’t wait to see what Anna Tate does next!’ Reader review ‘Full of suspense with a full cast of well developed characters, the story was engaging and original. Really looking forward to the next book in the series’ Reader review ‘*In Safe Hands*, is hard hitting, gripping, suspenseful, chilling... A cat and mouse, race against the clock that felt like a whirlwind... it’s such a corker of a read!’ Dash Fan Book Reviews ‘A totally different book with a different premise to the norm... The story twists and turns and I will certainly be reading the next one in the series’ Reader review

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Содержание

| | |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| | 7 |
| Copyright | 8 |
| Dedication | 9 |
| PROLOGUE | 11 |
| CHAPTER ONE | 13 |
| CHAPTER TWO | 15 |
| CHAPTER THREE | 18 |
| CHAPTER FOUR | 21 |
| CHAPTER FIVE | 24 |
| CHAPTER SIX | 26 |
| CHAPTER SEVEN | 29 |
| CHAPTER EIGHT | 32 |
| CHAPTER NINE | 35 |
| CHAPTER TEN | 38 |
| CHAPTER ELEVEN | 42 |
| CHAPTER TWELVE | 44 |
| Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. | 47 |

IN SAFE HANDS

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Dedication

This one is for my loving wife Catherine

[Contents](#)

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter One: Day one](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven: July 2009](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen: July 2009](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two: Day two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-One](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Three](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Four](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Five](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Six](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Forty](#)
[Chapter Forty-One: Day three](#)
[Chapter Forty-Two](#)
[Chapter Forty-Three](#)
[Chapter Forty-Four](#)
[Chapter Forty-Five](#)
[Chapter Forty-Six](#)
[Chapter Forty-Seven](#)
[Chapter Forty-Eight](#)
[Chapter Forty-Nine](#)
[Chapter Fifty](#)
[Chapter Fifty-One](#)
[Chapter Fifty-Two](#)
[Chapter Fifty-Three](#)
[Chapter Fifty-Four](#)
[Chapter Fifty-Five](#)
[Chapter Fifty-Six](#)
[Chapter Fifty-Seven](#)
[Chapter Fifty-Eight](#)
[Chapter Fifty-Nine: Day four](#)
[Epilogue](#)
[Acknowledgements](#)
[Keep Reading ...](#)
[About the Author](#)
[About the Publisher](#)

PROLOGUE

Tasha Norris loved her job as a nursery school teacher. Watching the children at play always filled her with a deep sense of wellbeing.

Today was no exception. There were only nine of the little mites in this morning, but their squeals and laughter had already lifted her spirits. They were so entertaining, so happy, and so excited to have been let loose in the nursery's bright and airy playroom.

Tasha's colleague, Paige, was trying to get them together so that they could listen to the first story of the day. But as usual, they weren't taking any notice.

Four-year-old Grace was lost in a world of her own as she pretended to cook a meal on the toy stove, concentrating hard as she boiled a wooden egg in a little saucepan. And five-year-old Sahib was too busy racing around the room on a red fire engine to pay the teacher any attention. Meanwhile, Daniel and Liam, both aged three, were fully focused on seeing who could build the highest tower using wooden bricks. Little Molly sat at a table next to them, seemingly oblivious to her surroundings as she worked on her latest masterpiece – a painting of her entire family, including mum, dad, brother and pet goldfish Flipper.

Just being here with them made Tasha realise yet again how much she wanted a child of her own. She and Steve had been married for less than a year, so she had to try and be patient. Aged twenty-three, Tasha knew she had plenty of time to keep trying, and in the meantime she would enjoy looking after other people's children. She couldn't imagine doing anything else for a living, and she was so grateful to Sarah Ramsay for taking her on seven months ago. Tasha had loved every minute of every working day. And she'd learned so much about toddlers, tantrums and those tearful confessions that challenge you to keep a straight face.

Paige was now clapping her hands to get the children's attention. But the only one who responded was four-year-old Simone, who rushed into the large plastic playhouse while shouting, 'You can't catch me, you can't catch me.'

As always, getting all the kids to stop what they were doing became a team effort. Emma, the other teacher on duty, tried to coax Sahib off the fire engine after he rammed it into one of the doors. And Tasha played her part by trying to convince Molly that her picture was finished and she should leave it to dry.

Sarah emerged from her office to help out. She was the owner of the Peabody Nursery chain and the most experienced at dealing with groups of pre-schoolers. To Tasha she was the perfect role model. She'd built up a successful business doing what she enjoyed and went to great lengths to make the staff as well as the children feel comfortable.

'It's time for a story, boys and girls,' she said aloud. 'Who wants to know what happens to the naughty monkey?'

Two of the children reacted by jumping up and down on the spot. Three others put their hands in the air but carried on with what they were doing. The rest ignored her.

'I see we're in for one of those mornings,' she said with a broad smile. 'It must be the warm weather.'

Before she could try again she was distracted by the sound of the front doorbell ringing.

'Do you want me to go and answer it?' Tasha asked, having persuaded Molly to stand up and step away from her paints.

Sarah shook her head. 'No, I'll get it. You carry on trying to round up the little munchkins.'

It didn't take long. As soon as a couple of them were sitting cross-legged in front of the storyteller's chair, the others followed suit. Tasha volunteered to be this morning's reader, and Emma handed her the book that had been chosen by one of the children.

But just as Tasha was about to begin reading, Sarah came back into the room with several visitors in tow. And from the look on her boss's face, Tasha sensed straight away that something was wrong.

Minutes later, the nightmare began.

CHAPTER ONE

Day one

It was a quiet morning so Detective Chief Inspector Anna Tate was taking the opportunity to get to grips with the pile of paperwork on her desk. There were witness statements, forensic reports, and dozens of crime scene photographs.

All the documents and pictures related to the eleven ongoing cases that were being dealt with by the Major Investigation Team based in Wandsworth, South London.

The team were making slow progress on most of them, partly because they had run out of leads and partly because resources were almost at breaking point. But it was the same story all across London, which had been hit by a perfect storm of soaring crime and police manpower cuts.

For Anna the quiet days were the hardest because she had too much time to dwell on the personal issues that made her life so difficult. This morning her thoughts kept switching between her troubled past and the argument she'd had the previous evening with Tom over their future together.

It was why she was finding it difficult to concentrate on the file she was currently wading through. This one dealt with the murder of a teenage girl in Battersea. Her body had been found four months ago and they were still no nearer to finding her killer.

Anna sighed as she picked up a photograph of the girl's body lying in a narrow alley. She'd been badly beaten and sexually assaulted, and it had happened only three days before her sixteenth birthday.

Anna was still staring at the photo half a minute later when her office door was thrust open and Detective Inspector Max Walker came rushing in. His face was pinched and tense and his bald head was shiny with perspiration.

He held up a sheet of paper and said, 'We've got a live one, guv. Call just came in and it sounds pretty serious.'

Anna was at once alert. Even though he was still in his early thirties, Walker was one of the most experienced members of her team, and he was not prone to exaggeration.

'There's an ongoing incident at a nursery school in Peabody Street, Rotherhithe,' he said. 'Three men with guns entered the place and locked the all-female staff in a storeroom. There are four of them and one has been badly beaten.'

Anna jumped to her feet.

'Who called it in?'

'One of the women from inside the room. She used a phone the men didn't know they had.'

'Jesus. If it's a nursery then there must be children.'

Walker nodded. 'There are nine kids apparently, but the staff have no idea what's happening to them because they were put into another room.'

Anna felt her chest contract as the adrenalin fizzed through her veins.

'Have shots been fired?' she asked.

Walker shook his head. 'Not so far.'

'Thank God for that.' She grabbed her jacket from the back of her chair. 'We'd better get over there fast.'

Minutes later they were in an unmarked pool car that was among dozens of police vehicles from all over South London converging on the Peabody Nursery School in Rotherhithe. Walker was driving while Anna concentrated on the constant stream of updates over the radio.

She learned that an armed response team was being dispatched and that the three men who had descended on the nursery had posed as detectives from Rotherhithe CID.

She also took a call on her phone from her boss, Detective Chief Superintendent Bill Nash.

‘I’ve just been told what’s going down,’ he said. ‘I’m in a meeting at the Yard so I’ll be monitoring the situation from here. Meanwhile, you’re authorised to assume the role of senior investigating officer. Everyone will know by the time you get there.’

‘Thank you, sir,’ Anna said. ‘I’ll keep you posted.’

Information was continuing to come from the woman who had called it in. She’d identified herself as Sarah Ramsay, the owner and manager of the nursery. The emergency operator had kept her on the line so that she was effectively providing a running commentary. But what she had to say was useful only up to a point. She didn’t know if the armed men were still on the premises or if the children were being held hostage.

Not knowing what to expect when they got there was causing Anna’s stomach to twist with grim apprehension.

‘We should be there in under ten minutes, guv,’ Walker said as he stamped on the accelerator, propelling them through a set of red lights with the siren blaring.

Anna did a Google search for the Peabody Nursery in Rotherhithe. She discovered that it was one of a chain of half a dozen Peabody Nurseries across London that catered for children between the ages of three and five. The one in Rotherhithe was the first, hence the name of the chain. There were exterior photos of the single-storey building and the bright and cheerful rooms inside.

It had its own website that described it as a school where parents could ‘*leave their little ones in the knowledge that they would always be safe and secure*’.

Anna reflected on the horrible irony of this statement as Walker steered them through the traffic at breakneck speed. She could no longer distinguish whether the pulsing in her ears and the hard pounding in her chest were caused by the shrill siren of the police car, or the sheer dread she felt as they got closer to Rotherhithe. Anna swallowed hard as she gripped the corner of her seat, concentrating on the road in front of her and pushing thoughts of what they might find when they reached their destination to the back of her mind.

CHAPTER TWO

They got to Peabody Street just minutes after the armed response team. Two squad cars had also just arrived and were being used to cordon off the road at both ends.

A uniformed officer waved them down and gestured for Walker to park against the kerb behind one of the ARVs.

Anna climbed out and flashed her warrant card, then hurried over to where the armed officers had gathered on the pavement in front of the nursery school. It was sandwiched between a three-storey block of flats and a church community centre. The small, red-brick building was set back behind a five-foot-high wall, and the front door stood half open. There were two cars parked on the forecourt, but no sign of life.

The armed officers – members of Scotland Yard’s specialist firearms command – were waiting behind the wall for the signal to go in. All six were kitted out in black helmets, visors and Kevlar body armour. They carried assault rifles and Glock 17 pistols.

Anna approached the team leader and was pleased to discover that they knew each other. Jason Fuller was a tall, middle-aged guy with craggy features and a strong jawline. Their paths had crossed more than a few times over the years.

‘I heard you were on your way,’ he said. ‘And I’m guessing you know about as much as I do.’

Anna nodded. ‘Four female staff members locked in a storeroom by three men who turned up armed with guns. It happened about forty minutes ago. And there were nine children here at the time who were apparently put into another room.’

‘And we don’t know if the perps are still inside or if we’re dealing with a hostage situation.’

‘That about sums it up,’ Anna said. ‘But we can’t afford to hang around waiting for something to happen. We have to go in.’

‘I agree, but not before we’re ready. There are no sounds coming from inside, and so far we haven’t spotted movement at any of the windows. I’ve got my men checking the rear of the building and I want to see if we’ll get a response through a megaphone appeal first.’

Anna knew that he was right to be cautious. If the three men were still inside then God only knew how they were going to react when they stormed the building. The counter-terrorism unit were also on standby, though the very thought of this being a terrorist attack caused the blood to stiffen in Anna’s veins. Behind her, a police radio crackled and she heard a disembodied voice informing everyone that the women were still locked in the storeroom.

Walker was standing right behind her with several uniforms. She saw that two more squad cars and an ambulance had turned up. Neighbours had also started to gather beyond the cordons.

The scene was bathed in bright August sunshine and the temperature was rising. Anna’s blouse was already sticking to her back beneath her jacket.

She’d been a copper for seventeen years and had never experienced a situation quite like this before, where nine infants were thought to be involved and at risk. Nine toddlers, presumed to be between the ages of three and five; completely helpless and vulnerable. Were they still in the building, locked up in a different room from that in which the staff were being held captive? And, if so, had they been harmed in any way? Or were they about to be?

Anna swallowed hard as an icy dread formed in her throat. There were too many unanswered questions at this stage. Too much they didn’t know. It might have appeared to the onlookers that they had the situation under control but that was far from the truth.

‘There’s more info on the woman who’s been beaten up,’ Walker said, as he stepped up beside her while holding his phone against his ear. ‘Her name’s Tasha Norris and one of the gunman smashed her over the head with the butt of his pistol. She’s unconscious and in a bad way apparently.’

All the more reason to go in, Anna thought. She turned back to Fuller and saw that he'd been handed a megaphone.

'I just heard from our guys around the back,' he told her. 'The garden's empty but the rear door is wide open. Nobody is visible, though.'

He raised the megaphone to his mouth and faced the nursery. As he spoke through it, his voice drowned out all other sound.

'This building is surrounded by armed police,' he said. 'I urge everyone inside to drop your weapons and leave through the front door with your arms in the air, otherwise we will be forced to enter the building.'

There was no response, and the silence that followed screamed in Anna's ears.

'We have no choice now but to go in,' she said after about twenty seconds.

That was Fuller's cue to mobilise his team. He waved his hand and gave instructions through his headset microphone.

His officers responded by rushing through the open gate and across the forecourt. Anna watched from beyond the wall. As always, she was impressed by their slick professionalism and the fact that they were prepared to put their own lives on the line. The raw tension in the air was palpable and Anna found herself holding her breath as she waited for something to happen.

Thankfully the team encountered no resistance as they approached the building. They paused only briefly before stepping through the open door. The absence of gunfire prompted Anna to follow them, and Walker and several uniforms were close behind.

She heard shouting from inside as she got close to the entrance and assumed it was Fuller's men announcing their presence.

She stayed outside until the all-clear was given after less than a minute. Her internal dialogue was on prayer mode as she stepped inside: *Please, God, let the children be unharmed ...*

Passing through the doorway, she noticed the security camera above it and the password-protected panel on the wall. She logged the information in her brain to consider later when it came to determining how the men had got into the building.

A short corridor led to a door giving access to a large, brightly coloured playroom. It was crammed with toys, miniature vehicles, a playhouse and several tables cluttered with crayons, drawing paper and books.

But Anna's attention was seized by loud cries coming from one of the four other rooms that led off the playroom.

'It must be the storeroom,' Fuller said, pointing to the closed door. 'We can't find the key so we're gonna have to break it open.'

One of his men was telling those inside to calm down and step away from the door. The same officer then used his boot to kick at it three times before it gave way.

There was a light on inside the storeroom and it revealed a sight that made every muscle in Anna's body go stiff.

A woman was lying on the floor with the back of her head resting in a small pool of her own blood. Two other women were kneeling beside her and a third was standing over them with a mobile phone in her hand.

'Tasha needs to get to a hospital,' one of them cried out. 'We can't wake her up.'

The distraught women all appeared to be in their twenties or early thirties and were casually dressed in matching blue T-shirts and jeans. Their eyes were cloudy with fear and their faces awash with tears.

'Stay calm and step out,' Anna said, keeping her voice low so as not to inflame an already stressful situation. 'We'll call the paramedics.'

The women quickly exited the room, and Anna half expected them to break down in floods of tears. But instead all three dashed across the playroom to one of the other doors that had a sign on it which read: *Quiet Room*.

The first to reach it peered inside and then let out an anguished cry that sent a bolt of ice down Anna's spine.

'Oh my God,' the woman screamed. 'They're gone.'

Anna stepped forward and looked into the room, which contained a sofa, a few chairs and a low table.

One of the other women turned to the nearest uniformed officer and said, 'Have you searched the rest of the building? Are the children here?'

The officer shook his head. 'I'm afraid not.'

The woman's hand flew to her mouth. 'Those men must have taken them,' she said, her voice cracking with emotion. 'They've been abducted.'

Anna closed her eyes, steadied her breathing. That word: *abducted*. As always, it stirred up painful memories and caused an ache to swell in her chest. She shook her head, swallowed hard, and realised that this case was going to be an emotional rollercoaster.

CHAPTER THREE

Ruth Brady checked her watch and saw that she had time for one more cup of coffee. She didn't have to be at the restaurant until midday and it would only take her roughly forty-five minutes to get there.

She put the kettle on and as it started to boil she decided to phone her husband to let him know about her change of plan.

She went back into the living room, fished her mobile from her handbag, and speed-dialled Ethan's number. While she waited for him to answer she stepped over to the window and looked out on a lovely bright morning. Their two-storey town house was in the heart of Bermondsey and overlooked a busy main road. But rush hour was over and the traffic was moving freely.

When Ethan didn't answer she assumed that he must be in a meeting, so she tapped out a short text message.

Had to drop Liam off at the nursery after all. Will explain why later. Will you be able to pick him up at 4pm if I'm not back in time? Xx

She hadn't planned on taking Liam to the nursery today. Ethan had bought them tickets for the Shrek Adventure attraction in central London. He'd had to pull out himself but had insisted that she should go and treat their son to a fun day out.

And she'd intended to do just that until she got the call from Howard Browning, the editor of a new London-based magazine. Browning had invited her to a meeting at a restaurant close to his office across the Thames in Wapping. He wanted to talk about some feature ideas Ruth had submitted. As a freelance journalist keen to increase the income from her work, it was too good an opportunity for her to pass up.

Ethan earned a good salary as a computer programmer, but living in London was expensive. There was the usual mortgage and bills, but council tax and parking fees were extortionate in comparison to other parts of the country. Plus there were the costs associated with Liam's condition, a condition that blighted his life and theirs.

She still turned cold whenever she thought back to how the hospital consultant broke the news to them shortly after their son was born three years ago.

'I'm sorry to have to tell you that Liam has cystic fibrosis,' he said, and when he saw the confusion on their faces, he added, 'It's a condition that can be treated but not cured. And life expectancy is in the mid-forties.'

In the weeks that followed they found out all they could about cystic fibrosis, or CF. While Ruth had become used to reeling off the same line as means of explanation: 'It causes mucus to clog vital arteries and the digestive system, making it difficult to breathe and digest food', she didn't think she would ever come to terms with the fact that Liam's life would be short and difficult, a journey he'd only just started.

Coping with it wasn't easy. Ruth hadn't been able to return to her full-time position as a staff journalist after maternity leave because looking after Liam was a job in itself, with frequent trips to the hospital for check-ups and physiotherapy sessions. They also had to administer regular doses of medication and do their best to ensure he didn't fall victim to infections.

And that was one of their concerns when they decided to enrol their son in the Peabody Nursery School. They wanted him to grow and develop and learn how to socialise with other children and adults, but they also wanted to make sure that he was in safe hands.

'We'll take good care of him, Mr and Mrs Brady,' the nursery owner, Sarah Ramsay, had assured them. 'We know how to respond to the needs of children with serious conditions who are nevertheless able to lead relatively normal lives.'

That had been seven months ago and not once had they had to call Ruth to say that he'd had any difficulties, or taken a turn for the worse.

Still, she couldn't help feeling guilty for not taking him to see Shrek today. And Ethan was surely going to be annoyed, having gone to the trouble of buying the tickets.

But Ruth was confident that Liam would be having just as much fun playing with his little friends, including his best pal Daniel, a little boy whose parents had moved from Ghana to the UK only a year ago. The pair were inseparable, and when she'd dropped Liam off this morning he had run straight over to Daniel who had surrounded himself with piles of colourful wooden bricks.

She'd noticed that there were relatively few children in – only nine as opposed to the usual twenty or so. Sarah Ramsay had explained that attendance always fell off once the holiday season got underway.

Ruth put her phone back in her bag and returned to the kitchen to pour her coffee, which she drank with a couple of digestive biscuits.

Before leaving the house she checked her reflection in the hall mirror, and contemplated the fact that the woman staring back at her looked older than twenty-nine. The last few years had taken their toll with the strain of looking after Liam.

Her long, ash-blond hair was still in good shape, but there were bags beneath her eyes that seemed more pronounced through her wire-framed glasses. She'd also lost weight without meaning to, and she was sure that it made her look slightly emaciated.

Still, she'd never been one to fret about her appearance so she hadn't allowed any of that stuff to dent her self-confidence.

She always made an effort to look smart, and today she was hoping that the new trouser suit she was wearing would impress Howard Browning. She wanted to come across as a sharp and savvy journalist who could write interesting and original features for his new magazine.

It was approaching eleven o'clock when she left the house and went outside. Their car – a Peugeot 308 – was parked in a designated bay at the rear of the block. Because they lived in London it didn't get used much and there were still only seven thousand miles on the clock. Ethan travelled on the tube to work and when they went out as a family they used public transport.

Ruth was feeling upbeat and confident as she climbed in behind the wheel and started the engine. It helped that it was such a pleasant Monday morning. Up until the weekend August had been a washout and heavy showers had blasted London and the South East.

She switched on the radio and caught a top-of-the-hour news bulletin. There was a sense of real urgency in the announcer's voice as he told listeners about a breaking story in South London. Intrigued, Ruth paused before backing out of the bay.

'Reports are coming in of a serious ongoing incident at a nursery school in Peabody Street, Rotherhithe. Armed police have been called there and the street has been cordoned off. It's understood the incident involves children and staff members. That's all we know at the moment, but we'll bring you further details as soon as we have them.'

Ruth froze as she tried to process what she had just heard. She couldn't believe it. Or rather she didn't want to believe it. Surely it had to be a terrible mistake – or a cruel example of fake news.

Nevertheless the announcer's words sat cold inside her, and her heart started banging in her throat.

She took out her phone and her hand shook as she scrolled through her contacts for the Peabody Nursery number. But after tapping the call icon all she got was the engaged tone.

She knew what she had to do. The nursery was only about a mile away and she could be there in minutes, traffic permitting.

As she shoved the gearstick into reverse the fear and dread swelled up inside her. She started yelling at herself not to panic, that everything was going to be all right and that Liam was perfectly safe.

But there was a voice inside her head that said otherwise. It was telling her that something bad had happened to her precious little boy.

CHAPTER FOUR

The paramedics who attended to Tasha Norris confirmed that her condition was serious and that it was touch and go as to whether she'd survive.

She was the only one who'd been attacked and it was because she put up a fight when they were being forced into the storeroom.

She'd received two vicious blows to the head and one to the face. Her nose was shattered and there were two open wounds below her unruly mop of dark brown hair.

As Tasha was being stretchered out of the building, Anna was approached by Sarah Ramsay, who was understandably still shocked and confused after the ordeal.

'One of us should go with her to the hospital,' she said. 'We can't let her go by herself.'

'You and your colleagues need to stay here so that you can give me more details about what happened,' Anna said. 'But don't worry. She's in good hands and will be accompanied by one of my officers.'

'Then someone should call her husband,' Sarah said, as she took a mobile phone from her jeans pocket and held it up. 'This belongs to her. His number will be on it.'

'What's his name?'

'Steve. Steve Norris. They live in Salter Road.'

Anna took the phone from her and gave it to DI Walker, who was standing beside her.

'Make the call, Max,' she said. 'And then phone the office and get more bodies down here, fast. Tell them to drop everything else.'

Anna returned her attention to Sarah, who was still struggling to compose herself. She was a tall, sinewy woman of about thirty, with thick, lustrous black hair and a pale, flawless complexion. Black rivulets of mascara stained her cheeks.

Just thirty minutes had elapsed since she and the two teachers who worked for her had emerged from the cramped storeroom. So far they had given only a brief account of what had happened because of the state they were all in. Anna now needed them to flesh out their story; every detail could be pivotal to the investigation and to the search for the children.

'I'd like you to join your colleagues,' Anna said. 'I want to go through everything again from the moment the three men turned up.'

Sarah nodded. 'Of course, but I don't think there's much more I can tell you that would be helpful. It happened so quickly.'

'Let me be the judge of that, Miss Ramsay. I'll come and talk to you in just a minute. There are a few things I have to do first.'

Anna asked a PC to escort Sarah next door to the community centre, which had been commandeered because the nursery was now a crime scene and forensic officers would soon be all over it, looking for any evidence the men had left behind.

Sarah's two colleagues were already there, but Sarah hadn't yet joined them because she'd been asked to provide a list of the children who'd been taken. The list, complete with photographs, was now being circulated, and the parents were being informed as a matter of urgency.

There were four boys and five girls. Their innocence shone through in each photograph and Anna blinked away the tears that began filling her eyes as she stared at them, desperately trying to keep her mind on the next steps of the case to avoid thinking of what awful things might soon be happening to them.

She paused for a moment to take stock of the situation. She was still in the playroom, surrounded by detectives and uniformed officers who were waiting to be told what to do.

This was a high-impact crime that was going to appal the nation and present MIT with its toughest ever challenge. As the SIO, Anna would be under considerable pressure to resolve it quickly.

But she knew already that it wasn't going to be easy. It was obvious that the gang had carefully planned the crime and had executed it with shocking precision.

She felt sure that it would have involved more than just three men. It was likely that they'd had at least one other person waiting outside while they went into the building. He or she might have been tasked with looking after whatever vehicle was used to take the children away.

Anna had already made it clear to everyone that she was in charge and had called DCS Nash to update him. Now she began issuing instructions to those around her.

'Someone should check the security camera at the front entrance,' she said. 'It should have picked up the men when they arrived. I also want details of all CCTV cameras located within a half-mile radius of Peabody Street. And start questioning neighbours. I can't believe the kids weren't seen being led out of the building and into a large van or small coach. It would have taken time, especially if some of the children were upset and didn't want to go.'

She was told that a couple of the parents had got in touch before being contacted because the story had broken and was being carried on TV and radio bulletins.

'We should make preparations to talk to them in the community centre,' Anna said. 'My guess is they'll be desperate to come here and see for themselves what's going on. I know I would. It'll suit us because we can speak to them all together as well as individually and that'll save time.'

'I'll put the wheels in motion,' Walker said. 'Meanwhile, I just spoke to Tasha Norris's husband. He was at work but now he's on his way to the hospital.'

'Well, let's hope that the poor woman pulls through,' Anna said. 'If she doesn't then we could find ourselves dealing with a murder as well as a kidnapping.'

Anna left it at that for the time being and went outside. Two support vehicles were now parked on the community centre forecourt, and more people had joined the crowds at either end of the street. Some were holding mobile phones aloft to take photos of what was going on.

Anna was gagging for a cigarette but there was no time. She needed to have another conversation with Sarah Ramsay and the teachers, then bring a semblance of order to the investigation. Right now, things were a bit chaotic and too many questions remained unanswered.

As she walked towards the community centre she spotted a Sky News van with a large satellite dish perched on the roof. It never ceased to amaze her how quickly the media managed to turn up at crime scenes. She suspected that they were regularly monitoring police radio frequencies.

It suddenly occurred to her that the sooner they appealed for help from the public, the better. The Yard's media liaison team would probably tell her to hold fire until she had more information. But she saw no need to.

She made it known that she wanted to give the media a short statement and told uniform to allow the TV crew and any press people through the cordon.

It transpired that there were two newspaper reporters present as well as the Sky crew. Anna introduced herself and explained that she was only prepared to make a brief statement and was not in a position to answer lots of questions.

'The facts are these,' she said, making a point of not looking directly into the camera. 'Three men with pistols burst into the Peabody Nursery here in Rotherhithe just before nine this morning. There were nine children inside at the time and the men herded them into one of the side rooms. The men then forced the four members of staff, all female, into a separate room. One of the women is on her way to hospital to be treated for a serious head injury.'

'The police were alerted at nine twenty-three a.m. from a mobile belonging to a member of staff. We arrived at the scene approximately fifteen minutes later to find that none of the children were present at the nursery. We are therefore treating this as a serious abduction and are appealing for anyone who might have information to come forward.'

'The kidnapers would almost certainly have put the children into a small bus or large van. Hopefully we'll soon know more about that after we've examined CCTV footage. But in the meantime

we'd like to hear from anyone who saw the children being led away or saw anything else that appeared suspicious this morning in Peabody Street.'

'Have you got descriptions of the men?' the Sky reporter asked as she thrust her microphone towards Anna.

'They were all white,' Anna said. 'Two of them looked to be in their late twenties or thirties and one was older, perhaps mid to late fifties. They were wearing suits and they were posing as detectives from a local police station, which is how they gained access to the building.'

'Is it possible this is a terrorist attack?' This from a young fresh-faced hack who identified himself as Luke Dennis from the *Evening Standard*.

Anna's expression remained neutral. 'At this stage we don't know who they are or what their motive is. But we'll be liaising with the Anti-Terrorism Command as well as the Met's Kidnap Unit. Currently the Major Investigation Team, of which I'm the senior officer, is leading the operation.'

The same reporter then asked a second question that completely threw Anna.

'Can you please confirm that you're the same detective whose own daughter was abducted ten years ago and who recently gave an interview to a Sunday magazine?'

Anna drew a sharp breath and felt an uncomfortable tightness in her chest.

She could see where the reporter was going with this and she wasn't happy. It was a good human interest angle to the story, the sort of thing the papers loved, but Anna refused to let it be pursued.

'That has no relevance to the investigation,' she said brusquely.

The reporter raised his brow. 'Well, I beg to differ, DCI Tate. Surely you can see—'

She shook her head. 'All I can see is you trying to make something out of nothing, Mr Dennis. What happened to my own daughter has no bearing on this case whatsoever. And I'm not prepared to waste precious time talking about it.'

'But the families will want to know that—'

He didn't get to finish what he was saying because he was suddenly distracted by an ear-splitting scream.

Anna, along with everyone else, turned towards the sound and saw a woman struggling with a police officer in the road between two squad cars.

She knew instinctively that the woman would turn out to be the mother of one of the nine children – and that she had rushed here to confront what was her and every other parent's worst nightmare.

CHAPTER FIVE

Ruth screamed again, this time at the stupid fucking copper who was holding her back. He had her arm in a vice-like grip and was squeezing so hard it hurt.

‘You need to calm down, madam,’ he was saying. ‘This area has been closed off to members of the public.’

‘But I want to see my son,’ she told him for the third time. ‘I need to know that he’s all right. He’s in the nursery.’

The officer put his other arm around her shoulders and his voice softened.

‘Look, let me sit you in one of the patrol cars while I go and find someone to help you.’

‘You can help by letting me through,’ she yelled at him. ‘I need to know what’s going on. Is Liam OK? Has he been hurt? Please let me go inside so that I can find out.’

‘I’m sorry, but that’s just not possible.’

She was suddenly aware that she was attracting a lot of attention. Other people were coming towards her, including a man who was holding what looked like a large video camera. It made her panic even more, and a wave of fear crashed over her like a wave.

‘Will someone please tell me what is happening?’ she cried. ‘My name is Ruth Brady and my son Liam is here in the nursery. Why won’t you let me see him? He’s three years old for heaven’s sake.’

She was hyperventilating now, unable to get her breathing under control. Tears of frustration blurred her vision, and her heart was pumping so fast it was making her dizzy.

The policeman released his grip on her arm and said something to her that she didn’t understand.

Then she heard another voice. A woman’s voice. It was calmer, clearer, friendlier.

‘Just try to relax and take some deep breaths,’ the woman was saying. ‘You’re going to be all right. I promise. My name is Anna. Detective Anna Tate. And I’m going to explain everything to you.’

Ruth gradually started to breathe normally again as she was taken under the wing of the detective with the strong but kindly voice.

The woman held onto her elbow and steered her away from the group of people who had gathered in the road. A couple of individuals tried to ask her questions but they were prevented from doing so by police officers who shouted at them to step back.

When Ruth realised that she wasn’t being escorted into the nursery she stopped walking and turned to the detective.

‘Where are you taking me?’ she said, her voice high and shrill.

‘Next door to the community centre,’ the detective said. ‘The people who manage it have made it available to us.’

Ruth shook her head. ‘But I don’t understand. Why are you stopping people from going into the nursery? Where are the children? Where’s my son?’

Detective Tate sucked in a breath and cleared her throat. For some reason the woman seemed familiar to Ruth, though she was sure they had never met.

Ruth guessed that Tate was in her early forties. She had an attractive face, but the lines around her mouth and the sagging skin beneath her eyes told Ruth that Detective Tate hadn’t had an easy life.

‘The thing is, a serious crime has been committed here,’ the detective said. ‘I’m really sorry to have to tell you that your son and the other children who were here this morning have been abducted by three men who entered the nursery posing as police officers. The staff were locked in the storeroom. We’re going to do everything we can to get the children back safely.’

Ruth felt a tight spasm in her chest as the shock resonated through her. Her centre of gravity seemed to tilt, and she had to lean against Tate for support.

On the drive here, she had tried to brace herself for bad news, but this wasn’t what she had expected to hear. This was simply beyond belief.

She attempted to speak, to ask another question, but all she managed to do was make a strange noise in the back of her throat.

‘Let me get you into the centre,’ Detective Tate said. ‘You’re in shock and you need to sit down.’

Ruth felt the detective’s arm around her waist and then she was gently urged along the pavement to the community centre, a building she had seen many times but had never set foot in before.

She walked quickly, autopilot taking over, while at the same time her mind flooded with images of Liam. She saw him as he was this morning, dressed in his favourite Superman T-shirt and baggy denim jeans with the drawstring waistband.

She recalled how she had kissed him goodbye and told him that either mummy or daddy would pick him up later. And she remembered how excited he’d been as he rushed across the playroom to join his little pal Daniel.

But then Ruth remembered something else. She remembered that today she was supposed to have taken Liam to the Shrek Adventure on the South Bank. But she had decided not to because she’d elected to meet up with a magazine editor instead. A hot spike of guilt sliced through her chest.

CHAPTER SIX

Anna's heart ached for Ruth Brady. The poor mother's anguish brought it home to her just how traumatic this case was going to be.

Ruth was only the first of the frantic parents who would be turning up demanding answers. It was likely that they all lived within a short distance of Peabody Street and had enrolled their children in the nursery so that they could go to work or pursue other interests. They couldn't possibly have imagined that something like this would ever happen.

Ruth was clearly finding it hard to handle the news. Her breath was now ragged and distorted, her eyes dull with shock. It was as though she had fallen into an almost trance-like state.

But as they approached the entrance to the community centre her mobile phone rang and it jolted the woman out of herself. She stopped to rummage frantically through her leather handbag that hung on a long strap over her right shoulder.

When she found it she glanced at the caller ID and said, 'Oh God, it's my husband. I tried to phone him on the way here.'

She answered it and started to speak, but was obviously interrupted as she stopped mid-sentence to listen to what the person on the other end of the line had to say.

Anna could hear a raised voice but she couldn't make out the words. Ruth reacted by clenching her eyes shut and gritting her teeth.

After a moment her eyes snapped open and she yelled into the phone.

'Look, I know and I'm sorry, Ethan. But they've all been taken. Liam is gone. Our baby's gone, and I'm scared we'll never see him again.'

Her words gave way to uncontrollable sobs, and Anna reached out to grab the phone when it looked like it was going to slip through Ruth's fingers onto the ground.

She raised it to her own ear and said, 'I'm DCI Tate, Mr Brady. Your wife is with me and she'll be looked after. But I suggest you get over here as quickly as you can. We'll be in the community centre next door to the nursery.'

'I'm on my way,' Ethan Brady said. 'But can you please tell me what you know?'

'Not over the phone, Mr Brady. It will have to wait until you get here.'

Anna hung up and held onto the phone because Ruth was still crying, with her head now in her hands.

She pulled a hanky from her pocket and gave it to her, and then she tried to console her by gently rubbing her back.

It was several minutes before Ruth managed to stop crying and as soon as she did Anna handed her back her phone and ushered her into the community centre.

They entered a spacious reception area that was swarming with police officers, some in high-vis jackets.

There was a small cafeteria to the right and straight ahead an open door revealed a large hall with some rows of seating and a makeshift stage.

Anna led Ruth to the cafeteria and pulled out a chair for her at one of the tables. Then she looked around, spotted a WPC, and called her over.

'This is Mrs Ruth Brady,' Anna said to the officer. 'She's the mother of one of the children and I'd like you to stay with her for a while. Her husband will be here shortly.'

'Of course, ma'am. There's someone behind the counter making tea so shall I go and fetch her one?'

'That's a good idea. Thank you.'

Anna turned back to Ruth, who was drying her eyes with the hanky, and said, 'I'm expecting the other parents to start turning up now and I'm going to arrange for you all to move into a room where I can keep you up to date with progress and answer your questions. Would that be OK?'

Ruth looked up and nodded.

'If you're wondering why my husband was cross with me on the phone, it's because Liam wasn't meant to be coming here today,' she said. 'Ethan bought us tickets for the Shrek Adventure, but then shortly after he left for work this morning I got invited to a lunch meeting in connection with my work as a freelance journalist. I felt it was important so I agreed to go and brought Liam here.' Her eyes filled with tears once more. 'It's my fault that he's been taken. If only I hadn't been so selfish.'

'You shouldn't blame yourself, Mrs Brady,' Anna said. 'You weren't to know that this would happen.'

'Well, that's not going to stop me feeling responsible. I put myself before Liam and now I have no idea where he is and what's happening to him.'

'You need to remain positive,' Anna said. 'We'll be throwing all our resources into this investigation. Every police officer in London is on the lookout for the children and the men who took them.'

Ruth shook her head, clearly unconvinced.

'I have more reason than the other mothers to be concerned,' she said. 'My son is not well. He has cystic fibrosis. If he doesn't get his medication he'll become very ill, very fast.'

Anna tried to review in her head what she knew about cystic fibrosis. Her limited understanding of the disease came from reading magazines in which sufferers explained how it had affected their lives.

'A bag with his medication inside is kept in the nursery,' Ruth said. 'But I rather doubt that the kidnappers were told about it before they took him away.'

'I'll ask Sarah Ramsay about that,' Anna said. 'I'm going to speak to her now along with the two teachers who were here with her.'

Ruth frowned. 'Why only two teachers? There were three here when I dropped Liam off. Emma, Tasha and Paige.'

'Tasha is on her way to hospital.'

'Oh Jesus. Is she badly hurt?'

Anna nodded. 'She's suffered a serious head injury, but she's receiving the best possible care now.'

The WPC returned then with a steaming mug of tea which she placed on the table in front of Ruth.

'Get that down you,' Anna said. 'I'll be back in a few minutes. In the meantime, if there's anything you need, just ask the officer here.'

Anna turned to go but Ruth reached out and grabbed the bottom of her jacket.

'I've just remembered something,' Ruth said. 'It's something I saw when I dropped Liam off.'

Anna looked down at her. 'And what was that, Mrs Brady?'

'A minibus. I saw a minibus. It was parked at the kerb in front of the nursery when I arrived. I parked my own car right behind it.'

'Was it there when you left?'

Ruth thought about it and nodded. 'It was. Definitely.'

'Did you see if there was anyone inside?'

Ruth shook her head. 'No, I didn't. The windows were tinted. That struck me as unusual.'

'Had you seen the vehicle there before?'

'I don't know for certain. The nursery occasionally arranges for the children to go on short visits such as to the park, and they get taken in buses similar to that one.'

'And how big was it?'

‘I would say big enough for about a dozen people.’

Anna experienced a surge of adrenalin. She was willing to bet that the minibus Ruth saw was the one used by the kidnappers, and that this was a significant lead.

She got Ruth to describe the vehicle in more detail and then phoned the information straight through to central control.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Anna spent the next ten minutes soliciting updates from members of her team, including DI Walker who had some bad news to impart.

‘The recorder for the outside security camera has been removed along with the hard drive,’ he said. ‘It was kept in a cupboard in the office so it wouldn’t have been difficult to find. All they had to do was unplug it.’

‘Shit,’ Anna said.

It was a serious blow but not a complete surprise. The gang would have spotted the camera at the entrance and taken steps to ensure the tape of them showing up did not get into the hands of the police.

Another detective told her that a mobile incident van had arrived and was being positioned outside on the forecourt. Once it was set up they’d be able to receive feeds from central control and monitor footage from CCTV cameras. It would enable them to carry out essential tasks without having to return to base.

Anna also learned that a police forensic artist was on his way over to produce computer-generated e-fits of the three kidnappers. She was keen to get these out to the media as soon as possible, along with the description of the minibus. Every minute that passed gave the bastards time to cover their tracks and go to ground.

Sarah Ramsay and the two teachers were waiting in one of the community centre’s four meeting rooms when Anna eventually got back to them. They were sitting around a table along with an MIT detective named Bellingham who’d been eliciting information from them about the children who’d been taken.

The teachers’ names were Emma Stevens and Paige Quinlan. Anna had to remind herself which one was which. Paige was the one with lank, shoulder-length brown hair and a porcelain complexion. She was wearing a wedding ring and what might be considered too much make-up for a day shift at a nursery. Emma was the smallest of the three women at about five two. She had compact features and short fair hair and wasn’t wearing any jewellery. Anna had already ascertained that she was divorced, thirty years old, and living by herself.

It was Sarah who spoke first, asking if there was any news on Tasha Norris.

‘All I know is that she arrived at the hospital and is in surgery,’ Anna said. ‘I’m told she has a depressed cranial fracture with internal bleeding. Her husband should be there by now.’

‘We’re all praying for her,’ Emma said. ‘It was horrible what that man did to her.’

Anna could tell from their faces how desperately concerned they were for their colleague. And they had good reason to be. By all accounts the twenty-three-year-old teacher was in a bad way and the surgeons were fighting to save her life.

Anna then took a seat and apologised for keeping them waiting.

‘A lot’s been happening,’ she said, and went on to tell them that it was believed the children had been taken away in a grey minibus that had been parked on the road outside in front of the nursery.

‘It was Mrs Ruth Brady who saw it when she dropped her son Liam off,’ she said. ‘She arrived here just a few minutes ago and told me that the bus had tinted windows so she couldn’t see inside. But we’re assuming it was the vehicle used by the kidnappers.’ Anna looked at Sarah, adding, ‘Mrs Brady said that you sometimes use minibuses to take the children out. Did you arrange for one to be here this morning? And does this particular vehicle sound familiar?’

Sarah shook her head. ‘We didn’t book a bus for today and we have an arrangement with a local firm called Cresta Transport. We use them exclusively and they only have dark blue buses.’

‘Did any of you see the bus outside?’ Anna asked.

The three women shook their heads in unison.

‘We were all here by seven thirty,’ Sarah said. ‘There’s a lot of preparation work we have to do before the morning session begins. I’m sure that if it had been outside we would have seen it.’

‘My officers have already established that there are no traffic cameras in Peabody Street,’ Anna said. ‘But there are plenty in this area so I’m confident that we’ll soon have footage of the grey minibus and hopefully be able to track its movements across London.’

‘What about our own security camera?’ Emma asked. ‘Those men should be on tape.’

‘Unfortunately they took the digital recorder that was in the office,’ Anna said. ‘For that reason I need you to provide us with more detailed descriptions. A computer artist will be here shortly and I’d appreciate it if you would help him work up e-fit images of the men. At the same time you’ll need to provide us with fingerprint and DNA samples. Our forensic team will be examining every surface in the nursery in the hope that the men left traces of themselves behind.’

Anna could tell that Emma and Paige were struggling to hold it together. Their eyes were red and puffy and they were finding it hard to focus. Sarah, on the other hand, appeared to have recovered from the initial shock. She had wiped the trails of mascara from her cheeks and tidied up her hair. And it seemed like she was trying hard to keep a lid on her emotions.

‘I’d like you to take me through again precisely what happened,’ Anna said. ‘But first tell me about the children. I know that Liam Brady has cystic fibrosis. But is he the only one of the nine with a serious condition?’

Sarah nodded. ‘He is. And I’m sorry I didn’t think to mention that earlier. I should have.’

‘His mother told me about the bag with his medication inside. Where do you keep it?’

‘In the first aid cupboard in the kitchen,’ Sarah said.

‘And I don’t suppose the kidnappers would have known about it?’

Sarah shrugged. ‘I don’t see how. We never got the opportunity to tell them because we had no idea what was going to happen.’

Anna made a note on her pad and said, ‘Now is it correct that there are usually more than nine children here?’

Sarah said it was, adding, ‘It’s the summer break so lots of families are away on holiday.’

‘So if there had been more kids here today then just three men would presumably have struggled to take them away.’

‘I suppose so,’ Sarah answered. ‘Even nine children can be quite a handful. Especially given that the boys and girls here this morning are little extroverts. And they were all in a playful mood, so as long as the men didn’t shout at them or appear threatening they would probably have gone with them without a fuss.’

Anna was surprised. ‘Really?’

Sarah nodded. ‘Those men would only have had to say to the kids that they were going for a ride to somewhere special. They might even have given them sweets. That’s all it would have taken to win their trust. After all, we’re talking about children aged between three and five.’

Anna then repeated a question she had asked earlier – whether the women had recognised any of the men. The answer from all three was an emphatic no.

‘So you’re all sure that they had never been inside the nursery before?’

‘We’re positive,’ Paige said. ‘We’d remember.’

‘You told me the men were white and wearing suits,’ Anna said, as she consulted her notes. ‘Two were in their twenties or thirties and one quite a bit older, perhaps in his fifties.’

‘That’s right,’ Sarah said.

‘OK, so now let’s go through it again. You were all in the playroom and about to tell the children a story when the doorbell rang.’

‘I went to answer it,’ Sarah said. ‘The men were standing outside. I could see them through the glass doors. I spoke to them through the intercom and asked them who they were and what they wanted. At that point all three held up identity cards and the older guy said he was Detective Inspector

Roger Milton from Rotherhithe CID. He was the only one of them to speak and he had a South London accent. He introduced the others as DS Willis and DC Moore and said he needed to talk to the proprietor Sarah Ramsay about a private matter.'

'So he didn't know that was you,' Anna said.

'Apparently not. He said they wouldn't keep me long so, like a fool, I opened the doors. I know it was a stupid thing to do. I should have called the police station to confirm that they were who they said they were but I was caught off-guard and I didn't think. I was curious and I should have been suspicious.'

'So what happened then?'

'As soon as the doors were open all three of them burst in and at the same time produced pistols from under their jackets. They warned me that if I moved or screamed they would shoot me.'

Anna looked at her notes again.

'You told me earlier that this man Milton then asked you how many children and staff were in.'

'That's correct.'

'And then he told you to walk back into the playroom and to herd the children into one of the smaller rooms so that he could speak to you and the teachers.'

'They put their guns back under their jackets and made me act as though nothing was wrong,' Sarah said. 'I had to tell Emma, Paige and Tasha that they were police officers and wanted to talk to us without the children being present.'

'We thought it was strange,' Emma said. 'But the fact is they looked like policemen and so we thought we ought to comply. I ushered the kids into the Quiet Room and one of the younger men went inside with them.'

'That was when they whipped out their guns,' Paige said. 'It was terrifying. The one calling himself Milton said that if we didn't do as we were told he would shoot Sarah in the head and then start picking off the children. So we felt we had no choice.'

'So what did Tasha do?' Anna asked.

'She didn't do anything until we were inside the storeroom,' Sarah said. 'Milton took a plastic bag from his pocket and told us to put our mobile phones inside it. I did and so did Emma. Paige didn't have hers with her and as the guy was telling her to turn around Tasha leapt at him.'

'But she wasn't fast enough. He managed to step back and hit her with the butt of his gun. Not once but three times. She collapsed on the floor and he backed out of the room and locked the door behind him. We were all screaming and shouting and trying to revive Tasha. After about ten minutes I realised she had her mobile phone in her jeans pocket so I used it to call the emergency service.'

Anna was satisfied that their story was consistent with the one they had told earlier. It was far more detailed now, though, and raised many more questions.

Were the guns the men used real or fake?

Had the children happily trooped out of the nursery and got on the bus believing they were in for a special treat?

Had one or more of the men visited the nursery before today to check the interior layout?

Or had they received information from someone who was familiar with it – someone such as a parent or even a member of staff?

This last question was an uncomfortable one and filled Anna with a shuddering sense of unease.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Ruth had been joined by three other mothers and two fathers who had rushed straight to Peabody Street after being told what had happened to their children.

They were gathered in the community centre cafeteria where a bald detective inspector named Walker had told them that his boss, DCI Anna Tate, would soon provide them with an update. But this had done nothing to quell their distress and anger.

Daniel Neville's mum Belinda was so anxious that she'd vomited on the floor. And Grace Tenant's dad Kenneth had threatened to punch a uniformed officer who told him he couldn't go next door into the nursery.

Ruth was beside herself with worry and only half aware of what was going on around her. Her voice was hoarse from crying and there was a lead weight in her chest.

Every time she closed her eyes she saw Liam's face, and tears began to form, while at the same time various disturbing scenarios played out in her mind.

What if Liam and the others had been snatched by child sex traffickers who were going to smuggle them out of the country? Or maybe the three kidnappers were part of an abhorrent paedophile ring based in London that preyed on young, defenceless kids.

She also feared that Liam and his friends might be the latest victims of ruthless terrorists who planned to kill them in order to draw attention to their ghastly cause.

These days the news was full of so many despicable crimes that nothing could be ruled out. Only a month ago the papers were dominated by the story of a married couple in Leeds who had allowed men to have sex with their six-year-old daughter in return for cash. And about a year ago there was an armed siege at a nursery school in Paris where fifteen children were held hostage for eleven hours by a Somalian man with a rifle. He was eventually shot and killed by commandos who stormed the building and released the children. It turned out his aim had been to get back at the French government for refusing to grant him asylum.

Ruth was desperate to know why Liam had been taken. She could imagine that by now he'd be asking for his mummy. And if he got upset he would get into an awful state and struggle to breathe. His cystic fibrosis was a life-threatening curse. His daily regimen included tablets to loosen the mucus in his lungs and keep his airways clear. And then there were the enzyme supplements, which replaced those his pancreas failed to make.

Usually the drugs were administered by the nursery staff and Ruth ensured that the bag she left with them was replenished on a regular basis. But Liam wouldn't be able to tell his captors what he needed to keep him alive. And since he had never once had to do without his medication for a whole day, Ruth didn't know how quickly his condition would deteriorate. It was a frightening thought, and the sense of hopelessness she felt was paralysing.

By the time Ethan turned up, Ruth was smothered in a dark blanket of despair. She couldn't think straight, and her brain was starting to blur at the edges.

Her husband was escorted into the community centre along with two other sets of parents who had arrived at the same time.

He'd come straight from work but had discarded his suit jacket and tie, and his white shirt hung over his belt. His face was taut with tension and his skin sheened with perspiration.

As soon as he spotted Ruth he rushed straight to her and the relief she felt was overwhelming. He put his arms around her and pulled her close, and she sobbed into his shoulder.

'I got here as quickly as I could,' he said. 'Is there any more news?'

She continued to sob, and when she didn't respond to his question Ethan eased her gently away from him.

‘You need to speak to me, Ruth,’ he said, his voice clipped. ‘Have the police found out where Liam is?’

Ruth swallowed hard and sucked air through her teeth. Her mind was turning somersaults and she could hear the blood thundering in her ears.

‘No, they haven’t,’ she said eventually, wiping at her eyes. ‘The officer in charge is going to update us soon. They’ve been waiting for more parents to get here.’

Ruth lifted her head to look at her husband’s face. She didn’t like what she saw. His jaw was tight and blood vessels bulged at his temples. He shifted his gaze away from her, as though unable to look her in the eyes.

‘I’m so sorry,’ she said. ‘I know that Liam wasn’t meant to be here today. And trust me, nothing you can say will make me feel any worse than I do right now.’

He turned back to her and spoke quietly, but not so quietly that those around them couldn’t hear. ‘So what was so important that you couldn’t spend the day with our son?’

‘I was invited to lunch with that magazine editor I told you about,’ she said. ‘I thought it would be an opportunity to secure some more work. I told Liam I’d take him to see Shrek another time.’

Ethan’s nostrils flared and he ran a hand across his forehead.

‘But now there might not be another time,’ he said. ‘Who knows what’s going to happen to our boy?’

Tears welled up in his eyes then and his face suddenly crumpled like a paper bag. Ruth hadn’t seen him cry since the doctor broke the news to them that Liam had cystic fibrosis. That was three years ago. Since then he had been a devoted father and had done everything possible to ensure that Liam enjoyed life despite his illness. He’d been overprotective for sure and had never given up searching for that elusive cure. He had even been talking recently about remortgaging the house to raise money for experimental treatment for CF that was being pioneered in the United States.

So Ruth could well appreciate how he felt now and she told herself that it was understandable that he would take it out on her. After all, she was to blame. If she hadn’t agreed to meet Howard Browning then she would be having fun with Liam right now instead of standing in a room surrounded by police officers and other distraught parents.

Ethan’s whole body was shaking as Ruth reached out and pulled him into an embrace.

‘We both have to stay strong,’ she said. ‘The police are doing everything they can. And that Detective Tate seems to be on top of things.’

As if on cue, Anna Tate emerged from one of the side rooms. Trailing behind her were Sarah Ramsay and the two teachers, Emma and Paige.

The sight of the nursery owner sent a rush of heat through Ruth’s body. She let go of Ethan and bolted across the room, her head filled with a fiery rage.

Sarah saw her coming and stopped walking. Ruth got to within a couple of feet of her and pointed an accusing finger.

‘It’s about bloody time you showed your face,’ she screamed. ‘We entrusted our children to your care. You were supposed to look after them. So why did you let those men walk in and take them away? If any harm comes to Liam I swear I will make sure you suffer.’

Ruth was about to lunge forward and strike Sarah when Detective Tate stepped between them, holding up her hands.

At the same time Ethan grabbed Ruth from behind and pulled her back.

‘Please calm down, Mrs Brady,’ the detective said. ‘This won’t help the situation.’

‘But she needs to know how I feel,’ Ruth shouted. ‘How we all feel. That woman and her staff undertook to keep our kids safe and they failed.’

Paige Quinlan stepped out from behind Sarah. ‘It wasn’t our fault, Ruth,’ she said. ‘The men had guns. They threatened to shoot us.’

‘That’s no excuse,’ Ruth responded. ‘You should have protected our kids, no matter what.’

Detective Tate came forward and placed a hand on Ruth's shoulder.

'I can understand that you're angry and very worried, Mrs Brady,' she said. 'But this really isn't the time or place to start attributing blame. We all need to focus one hundred per cent on getting the children back.'

For the second time that morning, it was the detective who took the wind out of Ruth's sails. She felt her anger subside along with the pounding of her heart.

'Look, I'm going to organise a room for you and the other parents so that I can fill you all in on what we're doing,' Tate said. 'I also intend to assign a specific officer to each family. But you need to bear with me for a few more minutes.'

The detective then turned and motioned for Sarah and the teachers to follow her as she stepped away from the cafeteria.

Ruth felt Ethan's hand on her back and when he spoke he sounded resigned rather than angry.

'Come and sit down, Ruth. I want you to tell me everything you know about what happened.'

And so she sat on one of the chairs and told him what the detective had said to her earlier about the kidnapping. And as she spoke the other parents gathered round to listen.

But it all proved too much for Daniel's mother, Belinda. She threw up again, only this time it went all over the table.

CHAPTER NINE

Anna could have asked the members of her team to deal with the parents while she got on with the investigation. But she chose not to, and not just because she knew from personal experience the hell they were going through.

She wanted to engage with them so that she could suss them out. After all, she couldn't rule out the possibility that one or more of them was somehow involved in the abductions. It was unlikely but not impossible given that the kidnappers had seemed to know what to expect when they entered the nursery.

But first she had to make sure that Sarah, Emma and Paige were out of harm's way. Ruth Brady wouldn't be the only parent to point the finger of blame at them, and next time it might actually get physical.

DI Walker, her trusted wingman, was on hand to help her sort things out.

'I've already arranged for one of the other meeting rooms to be made available,' he said. 'It's on the other side of the hall. I'll take them straight there and alert the techies.'

Anna thanked the three women for being so patient.

'We'll get your fingerprints and DNA samples and you can help us put together the e-fits,' she said. Then she took Sarah to one side and told her that she needed to stay on the premises so that they could have another conversation.

'There are questions I want to ask you about the nursery, Miss Ramsay,' she said. 'For instance, I'd like the names of everyone who has access to the building, including cleaners, workmen and other staff members not in today, plus former employees. Also, have you or any of the staff been threatened at any time? And is there anyone that you know of who has a grudge against you or the business? Perhaps you could start giving it some thought.'

Sarah didn't react other than to nod and blow out her cheeks.

'And don't let what just happened get to you,' Anna said. 'Ruth and the other parents are in a fearful state and they need to vent their anger and frustration. Unfortunately you're an easy target.'

'I'm sure I'd feel exactly the same if I were in their position,' Sarah said. Then she followed Walker and the others towards the hall.

Anna looked at her watch. It was approaching midday, which meant that almost three hours had passed since the children were taken. The kidnappers had had plenty of time to put distance between themselves and Peabody Street. Were they still in London? she wondered. Or had they fled the capital and driven to a pre-arranged secret location in the sticks?

She was pleased to see so many Met personnel on the scene. They were still arriving at the community centre – uniforms, civilian support staff, crime scene coordinators and computer technicians.

At the same time, things were happening outside. Several police helicopters had taken to the skies, ready to respond to a sighting or a tip-off from a member of the public. Beat coppers were on high alert and armed tactical teams were cruising the streets.

Meanwhile, counter-terrorism officers were searching for likely suspects on their watch lists, but the latest word from them was that they didn't think this was the work of extremists.

Having the community centre right next door to the nursery was a godsend and Anna made a mental note to seek out and thank the management for letting them set up camp here.

She decided to see what progress was being made before going back to talk to the parents. After slipping outside she resisted the urge to light up a cigarette and headed for the mobile incident van on the forecourt.

The sun was still shining proudly in a clear blue sky and the temperature was continuing to rise.

There were more people on the street now, too. The Sky News team had been joined by crews from the BBC and ITV. The kidnapping had sparked a media frenzy, and Anna knew that soon she would have to mount a press conference and answer a barrage of questions.

The mobile incident van – or command centre as it was also known – was already operational. It was more like a small lorry than a van, and inside there was a desk, some chairs and a computer station with three screens.

An officer sat in front of the screens operating a keyboard, and DC Megan Sweeny from MIT stood behind him. She was a new addition to Anna's team, having joined only a few months ago, but she had already made a big impression and seemed destined to rise swiftly through the ranks.

'So what have you got for me, Megan?' Anna asked her.

DC Sweeny grinned and pointed to one of the screens which showed a freeze-frame of a grey minibus.

'We're pretty sure that's the vehicle we're looking for, guv,' she said. 'It's the first hit we've had from traffic cameras in the area. This particular camera is located in Manor Road, which is just half a mile from here. We can't see inside the bus because of the tinted windows but we've managed to blow up and identify the registration. It turns out the bus was stolen a week ago from an industrial site in Greenwich.'

'Bingo,' Anna said. 'You need to keep at it, though. I want to know where the fuck it's going.'

'Will do, guv.'

'And I'm assuming this image is being circulated.'

'Of course. The alert went out as soon as we got it.'

'Well done, Megan. Let me know as soon as you get another hit.'

'I've got something else for you, guv,' she said, and picked up a sheet of paper from the desk. 'Sarah Ramsay provided us with a list of the nine children but we've added to it. So now it includes the names of their parents and their addresses.'

Anna glanced at the sheet which included head-and-shoulder shots of the children.

Daniel Neville, aged 3 (parents Belinda and Wesley)

Liam Brady, aged 3 (parents Ruth and Ethan)

Grace Tenant, aged 4 (parents Laura and Kenneth)

Simone Green, aged 4 (parents Wendy and Phil – divorced)

Toby Chandler, aged 4 (parents Rebecca and James)

Abdul Ahmed, aged 4 (mother Melek – father deceased)

Justine Brooks, aged 4 (parents Rachel and William)

Molly Wilson, aged 5 (parents Janet and Ben – divorced)

Sahib Hussein, aged 5 (parents Sabina and Rafi)

Below was a list of addresses, all of them within a couple of miles of the nursery.

'This is great, Megan,' Anna said. 'I want everyone involved in the case to have a copy. But don't release it to the media until I say so.'

Anna then went in search of the crime scene manager for an update on the forensic sweep of the nursery. But on the way she was collared by an anxious-looking PC. He was with a thin, grey-haired woman who must have been in her late sixties or early seventies.

'You need to speak to this lady, ma'am,' he said. 'Her name is Felicity Bradshaw and she lives on Peabody Street a few doors down from the nursery. She actually saw the children being taken away.'

Anna felt a jolt of anticipation as she introduced herself.

'Please tell me exactly what you saw, Mrs Bradshaw,' she said.

The woman spoke in a voice that was loud and clear, though charged with emotion.

'I was walking back from the shops,' she said. 'I saw the minibus parked outside the nursery. It hadn't been there when I walked past the spot earlier so I assumed it had only just arrived. And it struck me that it was a different colour to the buses that are usually parked outside. They're blue.'

‘Anyway, I was just approaching it when the children came marching out of the nursery so I stopped to watch them. As usual they were all wide-eyed and in a state of high excitement. They didn’t look at all distressed. They were in a line and holding hands and three men in suits were with them. One of the men actually smiled at me and I smiled back.

‘The children were talking and laughing as they were herded onto the bus and I enjoyed watching them. The men then got on with them, but I couldn’t see them once they were inside because the windows were blacked out. As soon as the door closed the bus drove off and I assumed they were going on an outing.’

‘Did you notice anything else?’ Anna said. ‘Anything at all?’

Mrs Bradshaw thought about it for a beat and said, ‘Actually I forgot to mention the young woman who was there.’

‘Woman?’

‘That’s right. She was standing just inside the door and it looked as though she was welcoming the kids on board the bus.’

‘Can you describe her for me?’

‘I didn’t really pay her much attention, but I think she had short reddish hair and was wearing a yellow top and jeans. I suppose she must have been in her early twenties or perhaps even younger. But I do remember that she was greeting the kids with a big smile while handing out what looked like sweets from a bag.’

CHAPTER TEN

The parents had been moved from the cafeteria to the largest of the meeting rooms. It looked out on the forecourt so they could see all the activity through the slatted blinds. The room had been due to host a lunch for a group of local pensioners. The lunch had been cancelled and the chairs and tables rearranged so that the parents could sit facing Anna when she spoke to them.

By the time she got there twelve people had turned up – four married couples, two divorced wives without their ex-husbands and two husbands without their wives. That left five of the parents who were still absent. Anna was told that the police hadn't yet been able to contact the parents of four-year-old Toby Chandler or Phil Green, the father of Simone Green, who was also four. But the mother of Abdul Ahmed had been informed and was on her way to Peabody Street. Meanwhile, Molly Wilson's mother was stuck at home with two other children and a family liaison officer was with her.

Anna's plan was to provide them with an update and then later her team of detectives would interview them individually. She wanted to find out as much as possible about them and their children. She needed to know if any of them had their suspicions about who might be involved in the kidnapping. She wanted details of where they lived and worked, and access to their phone records. She also needed to check whether any of them were on the criminal records database.

Doing all that here rather than in their homes would speed up the process considerably. Time was a major factor now and it was already working against them. But at least they were beginning to make some progress. They had identified the minibus believed to have been used and were now tracking it across London.

And they had a witness who had seen the children boarding the vehicle. The same witness had also revealed that there was a fourth gang member – a young woman who'd been waiting on the bus to greet the children. No doubt her role had been to make them feel comfortable in the presence of so many strangers.

Anna felt ill-at-ease as she stood before her audience of desperate mothers and fathers, and she was aware that beads of sweat were gathering on her forehead.

She began by giving the parents the option of staying in the community centre for as long as they wanted or being taken home to wait for news there.

'You might find that being here together for a time will help you cope with the situation,' she said. 'Officers are available to answer your questions and we can be of assistance when it comes to talking to the media. They are likely to hound you for interviews, which we would advise you to decline for the time being. Just let it be known what you'd prefer to do.'

She then asked them to introduce themselves and the first to respond was Ethan Brady, who said, 'I'm Liam Brady's father. You've already met my wife so you know that our son has cystic fibrosis. If he doesn't get his medication he could die. So you need to do whatever you can to get him back quickly.'

Ethan Brady was much taller than his wife and came across as far more assertive. His narrow face sported designer stubble and his dark eyes had a piercing quality even from a distance.

He was about to say something else when one of the other fathers leapt to his feet and fixed Ethan with a hostile stare.

'That's typical of you, Brady,' the man shouted. 'But this time it's not all about your precious fucking son. The rest of us have as much reason to worry as you do.'

'I'm not saying you don't,' Ethan reacted. 'But you know how ill Liam is.'

'Sure we do, because you and your wife never stop telling us. I've told you before that I don't think a kid with cystic fibrosis should be allowed in the nursery anyway. It's too risky. And the staff ignore our kids because they spend too much time fretting over him.'

Anna was taken aback by the outburst and stepped in to stop things getting out of hand.

‘Please would you not raise your voice or be disrespectful to others, sir,’ she said. ‘One of the reasons for bringing you together like this is so that you can offer support to each other.’

The man puffed out his chest and appeared keen to carry on his rant but his wife took hold of his arm and pulled him back onto his seat. Ethan glared at the back of the guy’s head but remained silent, much to Anna’s relief.

‘OK, so let’s now moderate the tone and can you please carry on telling me who you are,’ she said.

Mr Angry turned out to be Kenneth Tenant, father of four-year-old Grace, the same man who had apparently threatened a PC when he was refused entry into the nursery earlier.

He was a rough-looking individual with stern features and a downturned mouth. His behaviour revealed what Anna took to be simmering tensions between him and the Brady couple. She just hoped the situation they were in did not make matters between them much worse. The last thing she needed was the parents turning on each other as the pressure on them mounted, as it surely would.

They got through the rest of the introductions quickly and with no more awkward moments. Anna then tried to inject an element of optimism into the proceedings by telling them that the minibus had been picked up on a traffic camera. She also told them what the neighbour, Mrs Bradshaw, had seen.

They were shocked to hear that a young woman had been involved. And all were adamant that they had no idea who the perps were.

‘This is a very unusual case in that so many children were taken,’ Anna said. ‘We don’t yet know what the motive is, but it’s possible that we’ll hear from the kidnappers soon if their intention is to demand a ransom.’

‘And what if that’s not what they want?’ asked Simone Green’s mother, Wendy, who had reverted to her maiden name of Ryan. ‘What if they took the kids because they want to ...’ Her voice broke. ‘What if they want to do bad things to them?’

‘I think that’s extremely unlikely,’ Anna said, but stopped short of ruling it out altogether. ‘And for what it’s worth, we also think it’s doubtful that the kidnappers are terrorists. I’m sure if they were we would have heard from them by now.’

She was then asked to explain how the children had been taken so she talked them through what she’d been told. There was sympathy expressed for Tasha Norris, but a good deal of vitriol was directed at all the staff, especially Sarah Ramsay.

The others echoed what Ruth Brady had said earlier and Toby Chandler’s mother, Rebecca, revealed that she had raised the issue of security with Sarah Ramsay on several occasions.

‘Before we moved here from Stratford we sent our daughter to a nursery that had much tougher procedures in place,’ she said. ‘It had a fingerprint entry system and a webcam so that we could watch our kids from home. I told Sarah that I didn’t think her nursery was as secure as it should be. She disagreed and told me that it met government requirements and that she took safety seriously.’

‘But that’s total bollocks,’ said Daniel Neville’s dad, Wesley. ‘At the end of the day she’s a businesswoman who doesn’t even have a kid of her own. With her it’s all about money and what happened at her nursery in Lewisham last year cost her a small fortune. So the last thing she wants is to have to fork out on expensive security equipment.’

‘Could you tell us what happened in Lewisham, Mr Neville?’ Anna asked.

Wesley, a pot-bellied black man with sunglasses perched on his head, said, ‘A little girl died after choking on a grape at the Peabody Nursery there. The inquest returned a verdict of accidental death and she had to pay a three-hundred-thousand-pound fine for gross negligence.’

Anna hadn’t heard about the case and it annoyed her that nobody back at the station had made her aware of it. Surely officers researching the nurseries would have unearthed the information before now. She would have to ask Sarah about it when she next spoke to her. Right now, however, she couldn’t see how it would have a bearing on what had happened this morning.

She checked her watch, saw that she had been with the parents for forty-five minutes, and decided it was time for her detectives to talk to them individually.

She finished off by telling them that she and her team were doing everything possible to find the children.

‘Scores of officers are already involved in the search,’ she said. ‘We’ve set up a mobile command outside on the forecourt and for the time being we’re using this community centre as a base for our operations. Officers all across London are on the lookout for the minibus and I’ve already issued a short television appeal for information.’

Kenneth Tenant shot to his feet again and this time he locked his angry gaze on Anna.

‘I just watched the interview you gave on the telly earlier,’ he said. ‘One of the reporters asked you a question that you didn’t answer because you got interrupted. So I’ll ask it now. Is it true that your own kid was snatched ten years ago?’

Anna drew a deep, steady breath and said, ‘It is true that my daughter was taken from me, Mr Tenant, but as I made clear to that reporter it has absolutely no relevance to what’s happening now.’

‘Well, it’s relevant as far as I’m concerned,’ he said.

‘And why is that, Mr Tenant?’

‘Surely that’s bloody obvious.’

She held his gaze and said, ‘Not to me it isn’t, Mr Tenant. So perhaps you could explain what you mean.’

His wife tried to say something to him but he gestured for her to be quiet.

Then his eyes narrowed and he said, ‘If you’ve been searching for your own little girl for ten years and still haven’t found her, then why should we trust that you’re up to the job of finding our kids?’

She’d known where he was going with his accusation as soon as he began the sentence; each of his words felt like a blow to her stomach, but Anna knew she had to roll with the punches. The man was clearly distressed and aggression was obviously a coping mechanism that helped him avoid becoming outwardly emotional.

‘I have been appointed as the senior officer on this case and I can assure you, as will the entire MIT that have chosen me to be the leader of this investigation, that I am up to the job, Mr Tenant,’ she said, keeping her voice low and even. ‘The circumstances surrounding my own daughter’s abduction were entirely different to this. And for reasons that you may or may not be aware of, for most of the last ten years I’ve been the only person looking for her. But in the search for your children and the people who took them I have the support of every police officer in the country and access to an unlimited amount of resources. Plus, I hope you can take comfort from the fact that, because of what I’ve experienced, I can more fully appreciate exactly what you and the other parents are going through.’

Tenant’s whole demeanour changed in an instant and blood coloured his cheeks. He ran a hand through his thin brown hair and blew out a long, slow breath.

Then he shook his head and said, ‘I’m a fucking dickhead and I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have had a go at you like that. I’m just worked up and my mind’s all over the place.’

‘No need to apologise, Mr Tenant,’ Anna said. ‘Just please understand that myself and my colleagues will not rest until we find your children.’

After telling the other detectives to stay with the parents until the family liaison officers arrived, she made a swift exit from the room.

She went straight outside and round to the side of the building where she rested her back against the wall and fired up a fag, her first of the day.

The blood was beating in her ears and adrenalin charging through her body. It wasn’t that she was hurt by what Kenneth Tenant had said. It was that his words had made her realise just how hard it was going to be to head up this particular investigation.

She wasn't going to be able to squeeze the memories to one side like she usually did while working. It had started already. She was being reminded of how it had felt after her daughter had been taken from her. As each moment had passed, she'd known that she was less and less likely to see Chloe ever again. Anna had walked around in a fog for weeks, out of sync with her surroundings, and the pain was constant, crushing and unbearable.

She closed her eyes and dragged heavily on the cigarette, then let the smoke drift from her nostrils.

She tried to keep the memories at bay by focusing on the nine children who were missing. But she couldn't. Her hands started to shake and the cigarette fell from her fingers as her back slid down the wall. When she hit the ground she put her head in her hands and her mind spiralled back through the years to when her life was changed forever.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

July 2009

It was the end of Anna's first week as a detective constable in the Met. She was feeling tired but upbeat as she left the station in Eltham and headed home at the height of the Friday evening rush hour.

She knew it might take her up to an hour to get to Vauxhall, but that was OK because she had the whole weekend to look forward to. She'd be able to relax and unwind while spending quality time with Chloe.

She still found it hard to believe that her daughter was two already, and would soon be three. The time had flown by; it seemed like only yesterday that she'd given birth to her little bundle of joy.

Back then everything was perfect. She and Matthew had just celebrated their third wedding anniversary, and the future had looked really bright.

But that was before he began to change. It started when he was overlooked for a promotion at work. It was a big blow to his ego and he didn't try to hide the fact that he was jealous of his wife's success as a copper.

He became argumentative and controlling. And then he embarked on an affair with a woman in his office which lasted for five months. When Anna found out, he was contrite and begged her to forgive him. But she couldn't because she knew she would never trust him again. She also knew that Matthew Dobson was no longer the man she had married.

At Anna's insistence, he moved out into a rented flat. And he wasn't happy when she applied for a divorce. Throughout the process he pleaded with her to take him back. But the voice of reason in her head convinced her not to.

The divorce was finalised six months ago but Matthew had not given up trying to win her back. When his widowed mother died two months later, leaving him and his sister a sizeable inheritance – over a quarter of a million pounds each – he actually believed it would make her change her mind. But, of course, it didn't and he was mortified.

They'd been granted joint custody of Chloe. Matthew had her every other weekend and occasionally, by mutual agreement, on weekdays. Chloe had actually spent the last two nights with him at his flat in Chiswick. He'd asked to have her so that he could take her to his sister Charlotte's birthday party.

But by now Chloe would be back home where Anna's mother would be taking care of her. Without her mother's help Anna would never have been able to hold down a full-time job, especially one that entailed such unsocial hours.

The drive home was slow and uneventful, and she was relieved when she pulled up outside her terraced house at just before seven. She couldn't wait to see Chloe, and was glad she'd told her mother to keep her up so that she could read her a bedtime story.

For that reason she expected to see her daughter in her mother's arms when the door flew open as she approached it. But her mother was alone and had a face like thunder.

'Why haven't you answered your bloody phone?' her mother said. 'I've called and sent you two messages.'

Anna felt her heart miss a beat. Her phone was in her handbag, but she knew without looking what had happened.

'Oh shit,' she said. 'I had a meeting just before I left the office and put it on silent. And because I was in such a hurry to get away I didn't think to check it.'

'Well, you should have.'

'Why mum? What's wrong? Where's Chloe?'

'That's just it,' her mother said. 'You told me that Matthew was supposed to bring her back at three but he hasn't shown up yet. I've tried ringing him but there's no answer. And quite frankly I'm worried. You know I don't trust that man.'

CHAPTER TWELVE

Anna's eyes snapped open to the roar of a helicopter overhead. The flashback to the worst day of her life was thankfully cut short, but Chloe's face was still there in her head. Her button nose and dimpled chin. The bright, cheeky smile that lit up the lives of all those who came into contact with her.

She would be twelve now, and in three months she'd become a teenager. And yet Anna had no idea where she was or if she was happy. All she had were memories and questions. Lots of questions.

What does she look like now?

Does she ever ask about her mother?

Does she even remember her mother?

Is she being taken care of?

Is she healthy?

Is she alive?

Anna had never given up hope of one day being reunited with her baby. Nine years ago she'd set up a website dedicated to finding her. She'd launched pages on Facebook and Twitter and they now had a combined following of fourteen thousand people.

A month ago she'd marked the tenth anniversary of Chloe's abduction with a fresh appeal through social media and she'd managed to get one of the popular Sunday supplements to run an interview with her. She'd even got them to publish an age-progression photo of Chloe and her shit of a father. But so far nothing had come of it except for dozens of sympathy messages and some cruel comments from internet trolls.

Anna remained undeterred, though. The search would go on, even though her lone efforts were time-consuming and soul-destroying. She could never imagine herself giving up.

And neither could she ever countenance forgiving her ex-husband. The bastard had shattered her life into a million pieces and changed her forever. She used to be an easy-going and tolerant individual with a positive attitude to life. Now she was short-tempered, impatient, and found it hard to trust people. It was as though losing Chloe had unleashed a darkness that had been lurking inside her.

She swallowed back the lump that had risen in her throat and started to pull her thoughts together. She owed it to the parents of those nine stolen children to stay fully focused. They were depending on her to stop their lives imploding, to save them from the kind of abject misery that she was all too familiar with. She was determined not to let them down.

She had allowed herself to be thrown off-track briefly by what Kenneth Tenant and that reporter had said. But she wasn't going to let it happen again, even if some other bright spark questioned her ability to lead this investigation.

She pushed herself away from the wall and walked back around to the front of the community centre, where she almost bumped into none other than DI Walker.

'So there you are, guv,' he said. 'I've been looking for you, and it just occurred to me that you'd probably sneaked off for a quiet puff.'

'And you were right,' she said. 'Which just goes to show what a great detective you are.'

He smiled as he polished his glistening bald head with the palm of his hand.

'I heard what happened with the parents,' he said. 'Wish I'd been there to put that prick in his place.'

'It was no big deal, Max. The poor sod is all messed up. And to be fair to him he did apologise.'

'Not the point,' Walker said. 'There was no need to bring it up. He was out of order.'

Walker was one of only a handful of her colleagues who actually encouraged her to continue searching for Chloe. Unlike some of the others, he didn't regard it as a waste of time. It was probably because he had two daughters of his own aged six and eight and he'd told her that he could never imagine being separated from them.

‘So why were you looking for me, Max?’ Anna said, glancing at her watch. ‘For the record, I slipped around the back only five minutes ago.’

Max pointed towards the mobile incident van. ‘Which is why you weren’t there to greet our esteemed leader when he arrived three minutes ago.’

DCS Nash was standing outside the van speaking to a couple of detectives. He didn’t ordinarily turn up at crime scenes but understandably this one was an exception.

He was a tall, broad-shouldered man with a commanding presence and a short beard that didn’t quite suit him. He’d been Anna’s boss for three years and they got on reasonably well. He was one of those officers who liked to delegate most of the hard work while at the same time taking credit for it.

‘There you are, Anna,’ he said as she approached him. ‘I came straight from the Yard as soon as I realised how serious this is. For obvious reasons, the Commissioner himself is taking a personal interest in the case and I want to make sure that we’re on top of things.’

‘We’re getting there, sir,’ she said. ‘It’s a strange one, though, and as yet I’m not sure what to make of it.’

‘Well, the world’s media is camped out there on the road and we need to stage a formal press conference as soon as possible. In the meantime I’ve said I’ll go and update them after I’ve spoken to you. So talk me through it, Anna. And do it while you show me the crime scene.’

This time they had to don hooded white paper suits and shoe covers to enter the nursery. The SOCOs were busy dusting for prints and searching for clues, but Anna doubted that the kidnappers had left many behind, if any at all. They were quite clearly professionals, who’d had this abduction intricately planned.

She explained to Nash how the men had gained access to the building and what had happened once they were inside. She showed him the storeroom and the Quiet Room. And while in the playroom she drew his attention to the dozens of pictures on the walls that had been drawn or painted by the children. Names were scrawled on the bottom of each one, and Anna spotted works of art by some of those who’d been taken, including Daniel, Liam, Simone, Molly and Grace.

And there were a few group photographs of the kids with the staff. They were gathered in the garden on a sunny day, standing in front of a large Christmas tree and sitting around a table containing a birthday cake with four candles on it.

‘I’m pretty sure that those men knew what to expect before they came in here,’ Anna said to Nash. ‘So the question is, had they been here before to look around? Or did someone provide them with all the information they needed?’

‘So what’s your impression of the owner?’ Nash asked.

‘I haven’t yet formed one,’ she said. ‘But I intend to speak to her again before I get the troops together for a briefing. I want to ask her about an incident last year at one of the Peabody Nurseries. Apparently she was fined three hundred thousand pounds after a child choked to death on a grape.’

‘I can vaguely recall that case,’ he said. ‘But I didn’t realise the nursery involved received such a whopping fine.’

‘Well it could mean that she’s got serious money problems,’ Anna said. ‘So maybe she decided to arrange for the kids to be taken so that she can now hold them to ransom?’

Nash shrugged. ‘It sounds a bit far-fetched to me, Anna.’

‘Perhaps, but we shouldn’t rule it out. After all, this wasn’t a difficult crime to commit. All those blokes had to do was get inside the nursery and she made it bloody easy for them.’

Back at the community centre, Nash said he was satisfied that Anna had everything under control.

‘I’ll bring the Commissioner up to date and make sure you get everything you need,’ he added. ‘But before I go, I want to know that you’re happy to remain at the helm of this one. I know the circumstances are close to your heart and I saw the news clip where the reporter put you on the spot earlier. It won’t surprise me if the press continue to make a big thing of what happened to you. I can

see the headlines now – detective whose own daughter was kidnapped by her ex leads hunt for the nursery school kidnappers.’

‘I can live with it, sir,’ Anna said. ‘And I guarantee that it won’t be a distraction.’

Nash gave a stiff nod. ‘And that’s exactly what I intend to tell anyone who asks me if it’s an issue, including those reporters out front. But if it does become one, then you need to tell me, Anna.’

‘You’ll be the first to know, sir, but please don’t hold your breath.’

Nash grinned, showing white, even teeth. ‘Just keep me updated,’ he said. ‘And rest assured that I’ve got your back.’

After Nash went off to speak to the media Anna went to find DI Walker. She told him to round up the team for a full briefing in the hall.

‘I’ll be along as soon as I’ve had another word with Sarah Ramsay,’ she said.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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