

DARREN YOUNG

CHILD TAKEN

'A well told story from a very
promising new writer'

PETER JAMES



Never, ever look away...

DARREN YOUNG

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RedDoor

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Prologue



I want to tell you what happened that day.

Tell you my side of the story. It won't be easy for you to hear. It might help if you put yourself in my position. So I need you to imagine you are me; and I need you to imagine you're at home.

Home, if you can picture it, is a large, sprawling 1920s house that sits alone atop the cliffs on a remote stretch of the North Devon coast. It's a picturesque place, but in need of some love and attention that you never quite have the time to get around to giving it. On a good day – and the day you are imagining is a ridiculously hot one in August – the views are stunning, but the place can appear a little ominous when it's dark or rainy.

You have lived there since you bought it on a whim a few years ago, knowing full well it would become a money pit that you'd never get around to finishing, but she loved it at first sight, so you put in an offer. *She*, by the way, is your wife. She's out at the moment, so imagine you are sitting all alone, in the sweltering heat, waiting for her.

Just popping to the shops, she said when she left over an hour ago, but you know that she never 'just pops' anywhere, and it's already past midday. But she won't be much longer because she knows you worry about her when she's away from the house. You love her dearly and you can't wait for her to get home, but you're worried too. You always are; she's been through a lot and you'll be glad when she's back. That's why you're here, after all. It's why you took that day, and a few others, off work. To keep an eye on her.

You know she isn't perfect; but how many of us are anywhere even close? You know she has her 'moments'; you see them all the time. It's been like it ever since... Only two hours ago you said the wrong thing at the wrong time and spent the next ten minutes picking up cereal from all four corners of the kitchen floor and wiping milk from the walls and tiles, getting a tiny fragment of the shattered ceramic dish in your finger. But it doesn't make you love her any less.

You begin to tidy things so she doesn't think you've just sat there worrying – you put a magazine in the rack, and slot the remaining breakfast dish and two cups into the dishwasher. You have missed her for every single second she's been gone: from the moment she stepped out of the door, got into her car and you heard it disappear into the distance.

Imagine you hear it again. The car pulling back on to the drive, tyres slowly rolling across loose gravel. There's that tingle of anticipation that some relationships might eventually lose but not yours. You look at your reflection in the kitchen cupboard's glass door and you run your hand through your hair because she prefers it to be a little untidy.

There are footsteps on the gravel; imagine you hear a key turning in the door and her walking in, a reddish sun-kissed tinge on her pale skin, vest top and shorts, her brown hair bobbing up and down on her shoulders; the most beautiful thing in the world. But when you look at her face, into her big brown eyes, they're full of concern – you'll quickly come to realise it's guilt – and you look down and with her, hiding behind her legs, is a small child. A young, pretty little girl with blonde curls and a face that would melt even the frostiest of hearts. Imagine it if you can. Your wife, standing there; a child you've never laid eyes on, holding hands with her as if their being together is the most ordinary, unremarkable thing in the whole world.

Well, that's what happened to me.

What would you have done?



I want to tell you what happened that day.

Tell you my side of the story.

You see, if it wasn't *my* story, or if I had been one of the other mothers on the beach that day – an observer rather than in the centre of it – I think I'd have been saying what they were surely all thinking. That I couldn't believe a mother didn't know where her child was.

But at least hear what I have to say before you think it too.

Of course no one on the beach actually said those words. It might have been absolutely chaotic on that sand, people everywhere, noise everywhere – completely overwhelming, to be honest – but all these strangers kept coming up to me, telling me we'd find her and that she couldn't have gone far, even though they had no idea how far she might have gone. But they were so convinced – and convincing – that I went along with it and became one of them, doing what they did. Calling, shouting her name, reassuring myself that it would all turn out just fine, as they reassured me it would.

They were all so active, so sure, so purposeful and so damn orderly, in the way they set about finding her, that for a time I got swept along in their overconfidence. Most of them were so good at giving orders, marshalling extra resources and spreading newcomers, that they could have been headmistresses, organising their staff and pupils in the playground when the whistle blows at the end of break time. They had found this common purpose on that beach, some of

them tuned into a kind of shared sense of duty as a parent; but there was no hiding the fact that it was a task, and one that would eventually end. One they'd go home from, back to the normality of their lives.

I wouldn't. Part of me is still on that beach. Maybe it always will be.

I'm embarrassed to admit it, but at the moment they got busy searching for her, despite going along with it, all I actually wanted to do was lie down on the sand and scream until either my lungs burst or the tide came in and covered me over. I had already broken down inside; I could have burrowed with my hands like a rabbit into that sand and then got everyone to cover me up using the kids' buckets and shovels.

But of course I couldn't do that, could I?

So I dutifully followed the others. Shouting, looking, asking. Trouble was, we weren't even searching in the right place. The swarm of helpers, even Todd, bless him, were close to the sea, on the sand that was closest to the sea, but for some reason my eyes were being drawn away from the beach, across the promenade and the sand dunes, across the full-to-the-brim pay-and-display car park behind it and to the road that snaked up the hill and over it towards the dot of a town on the horizon.

A voice inside me, right away, said that it was those places, not the beach itself, where we should be looking. Even before the first police officers arrived, I felt it so strongly.

But the others wouldn't have listened anyway. They kept searching among the people on the beach, on the sand or in the water. And I watched them do it. Watched them as they looked at me with those pitying eyes as we all desperately cried out her name, over and over.

If I'd been one of them I'd have thought the same thing. *How could such a thing happen?*

But it did happen. I wasn't one of the others, observing. It happened to me.

And as my eyes wandered again, across at the road that led off the car park and up the hill, I had this sinking feeling that we were already too late.

I might not have known where she was.

But I knew she'd been taken.

Thirty minutes earlier...

‘Hello sweetheart, are you lost?’

Jessica was too young to really know what *lost* meant, but as it happened, at the moment the question was put to her, her family were little more than fifty yards away to her right.

A silhouette had asked the question. A tall, black shape, blocking the midday sun and the girl’s view of the ice-cream van ahead. The silhouette crouched down on one knee, at the girl’s eye level. She could see the silhouette’s face now that she was close up. Her face was as soft and warm as her voice.

‘Well, we can’t have you walking all alone in this crowd,’ the woman said. ‘Where’s your mummy?’

The child didn’t answer but looked instinctively towards the packed beach. It was different now somehow; lots of people – people she didn’t know – were now between her and her parents, moving in all directions. Some were headed for the sand and others away from it. She knew that somewhere among them, behind them, her mother was there; they’d been together only a few seconds earlier.

But that was before she had seen the ice-cream van.

The woman followed the young girl’s gaze. Two weeks of continuous sun, cloudless skies and higher-than-usual temperatures had brought thousands of people to the beach, and it was as full then as it had been at any point that summer. Young children, some just like the girl, others older, ran around playing and shouting; bat and ball games were in full flow. Dotted across towels and sunbeds were exhausted parents just glad not to be at work.

‘Can you see her, sweetheart?’

The girl looked at the swarm of activity and noise and shook her head. She looked as though she might cry but was trying her hardest not to. The woman took her hand, leaned in closer and whispered, ‘Don’t get upset. We’ll find her.’

The girl wrinkled up her nose. The woman’s warm smile made her feel safe, and she looked towards the van again.

‘Tell you what, why don’t we get you a nice big ice-cream and then go and look for your mummy?’

The girl looked at her and back into the crowd, expecting her mother to come out of the masses at any moment with a face like thunder and ready to give her the biggest telling-off of her young life. She’d never expected to get as far as she had, but with each step, anticipating being called back at any moment, there had been nothing, and by the time she had got close to the van it had been too late.

‘Don’t worry.’ The woman held out her hand and the young girl gratefully took it. They walked towards the ice-cream van, but instead of joining the queue they walked past it. The girl hesitated until she felt the woman’s hand squeeze hers and they continued walking. After a few more steps, the child glanced back at the van.

‘I know a much better one.’

They walked off the concrete promenade, past the beach café and shop and across the sand dunes to the car park behind it. There were about eighty cars crammed on, some in legitimate spaces, and others pushing the boundaries of car park etiquette – and physics – to the very limit. They reached a small blue hatchback in the corner and the woman opened the driver’s door. The young girl stopped and looked anxiously around, every not-yet-fully-formed instinct in her body telling her that something wasn’t right. The woman knelt down again and put her hand on her shoulder.

‘It’s only a short drive, to the best ice-cream ever,’ she said excitedly, ‘and then I’ll take you straight to your mummy, OK?’

She lowered the back of the chair and helped the child into the seat behind it and leaned in to fasten the seatbelt. The young girl wasn't completely sure what had been said to her, but she had heard enough words in the sentence to placate her. Besides, she needed her new friend more than ever now, because she knew she was in a lot of trouble for wandering off as she had.

The woman smiled and ran her hand through the girl's mop of blonde curls and grinned at her. 'It'll be OK.'

Then she put the driver's seat back into its original position and climbed inside. The car was warm and the seats sticky. The steering wheel was almost too hot to touch, and the inside of the vehicle began to smell of sun lotion.

The woman turned the key and the engine kicked into life; she wound down her window to let in some cooler air. In the distance she could just make out the sound of a woman shouting. Shouting out a name; each cry sounding more desperate than the one before.

It was coming from the beach.

Part One

Twenty years later...

1 | Danni

‘Can you check the amount and enter your PIN, please?’

The customer looked at her, confused.

Danielle Edwards checked the screen and quickly worked out why: she was asking the woman to do something she had already done. She had to press a button now, so that a receipt printed off. Her head throbbed and her vision was blurry as she did it, and she felt as though she was swaying in a strong wind. It didn’t help that the customer had just had two separate fillings, one in each side of her mouth, rendering almost half of the alphabet impossible for her to pronounce.

‘Sorry,’ Danni said, and handed her the receipt. ‘See you in six months.’

The customer said something that sounded a little like *thank you* and left the waiting area for the door to the car park. Alone, Danni took several deep breaths and put her head down on the reception desk. When she lifted it, there was a forehead-shaped pool of perspiration in its place, and when she put her finger on the back of her neck it was wet and hot to her touch.

When the dentist, who was also the owner of the practice and her boss, finished with his next patient, Danni quickly sorted their payment and next appointment before admitting how ill she felt, and was immediately sent home.

In under half an hour, her car was slowing down outside her house where she lived with her parents and she was looking forward to an afternoon of nothing more taxing than

pulling the bedcovers over her head and sleeping the fever off. But, as she pulled on to the drive, her mother's estate car was in its usual parking spot, alongside the neatly manicured hedge where there was just enough room to put a car and still open the door to get out. Danni frowned – her mother was supposed to be at work all day; she'd seen her leave that morning. She parked next to the estate car, got out, and opened the front door with her keys.

‘Mum?’

There was no reply. The house felt empty and cold; no lights on, no sound. Danni listened carefully and called again. She kicked off her shoes and stood still, listening, and heard what she thought was the very faint sound of water and someone crying.

She ran up the stairs two at a time, and as she got closer to the bathroom, its door slightly ajar, she heard it much more clearly: sobbing, and the noise of water, dripping on to the floor.

‘Mum?’ she called, a little louder, and knocked on the door, but there was no reply. She pushed the door open and saw her mother lying in the bath, her head just above the clear water. The bath was full, almost to the very rim, so that even the slightest movement created a tiny ripple that sent a droplet of water over the edge and on to the white ceramic tiles below.

‘Mum!’

Danni's mother didn't seem to hear or see her or even know that she was there. She seemed listless, almost unconscious, except she was crying, or had just stopped; she stared ahead at the taps; her make-up had left grey lines down her cheeks as it ran into the water.

Danni's first thought was to look around for pills or alcohol but there was nothing obviously out of place. She put her fingertips into the water. It was tepid, and had been run at least an hour ago, maybe more, and she quickly pulled up her sleeve and plunged her arm into it to take out the plug

and begin to drain the water out. She grabbed the biggest bath towel off the rail and spoke softly to her mother. 'You'll catch a cold.'

She put her hands under her arms and tried to lift her, but to begin with her mother didn't budge and she was impossible to move like that, so Danni kept talking, gently encouraging her, and finally she began to respond so that she could lift her to a standing position and wrap the towel around her body. Then she carefully helped her step out on to the tiles and sat her down on the toilet seat. She began to pat her dry.

'Danni?'

'It's OK. You're OK.'

Patricia Edwards mumbled incoherently as Danni finished drying her, stood her up and led her into the master bedroom and helped her into some thick pyjamas. They both heard another car pulling on to the drive, and for the first time since she'd arrived home Danni saw her mother begin to find her bearings. A look of genuine horror spread across her face. They listened as the front door opened.

'Pat? Danni?'

Danni went to the top of the stairs and looked over. Her father was standing at the bottom, looking up. He wore corduroy trousers and a dark jacket, complete with elbow patches, over a casual shirt, making him look like a college lecturer.

'We're up here, Dad,' she called down.

'What's wrong? I stopped at the shop but they said your mum had come home.'

Danni glanced back at the bedroom, where her mother was sitting on the bed, watching her, listening to her conversation. Her face was begging Danni to say nothing.

'She's feeling sick. I've been sent home too; we must have the same thing.'

'Is she all right?'

'I've just got her into bed. But I'd stay away from us both unless you want it too.'

He took off his jacket and hung it over the banister. ‘I’ll make some tea.’

Danni went back to her mother and helped her under the bedclothes. She didn’t ask, and her mother didn’t offer anything by way of an explanation either, but she nodded a silent *thank you* as Danni plumped up a pillow and put it behind her. Then Danni went into her own room and began getting undressed and into her own bed. In the commotion she had forgotten how poorly she felt herself, and she lay under the covers as a wave of nausea swept over her.

The door knocked and her father brought in a cup of tea. ‘How are you feeling?’

‘Not great. But I’ll sleep it off.’

He kissed the top of her head and left her, telling her he was working in his study and to just shout if she needed anything. Danni nodded and tried to sleep, but it proved difficult. All she could think about was what might have happened had she not come home when she did. She lay awake most of the night and had every intention of asking her mother about the incident the next day.

But when she woke, late and after barely an hour’s sleep, there was no opportunity before Patricia left for work. And that evening, and for the rest of the week, her mother managed to avoid her or change the subject if they did end up alone together. It was strange for Danni – they’d always told each other most things; they were more like friends that way – but she could see her mother’s obvious discomfort, so she waited. Before she knew it, another week, then a month, then several months had passed, and Danni began to wonder if she had blown it out of proportion. By the time a year had gone by, she had all but forgotten about it.

But she was about to get a reminder.

'How could such a thing happen?
But it did happen.
I wasn't one of the others, observing.
It happened to me.'

One hot summer's day, two-year-old Jessica Preston disappears from the beach. The police are convinced she drowned, but Sandra Preston won't give up hope that her daughter is still alive. After all, a mother's instinct is never wrong.

IS IT?

Twenty years later, another child goes missing, and Sandra is approached by a young journalist who raises questions about what really happened to Jessica Preston all those years ago. But when the journalist discovers someone with an explosive secret, it threatens not only to reveal what's been covered up for so long, but puts both their lives in danger.

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