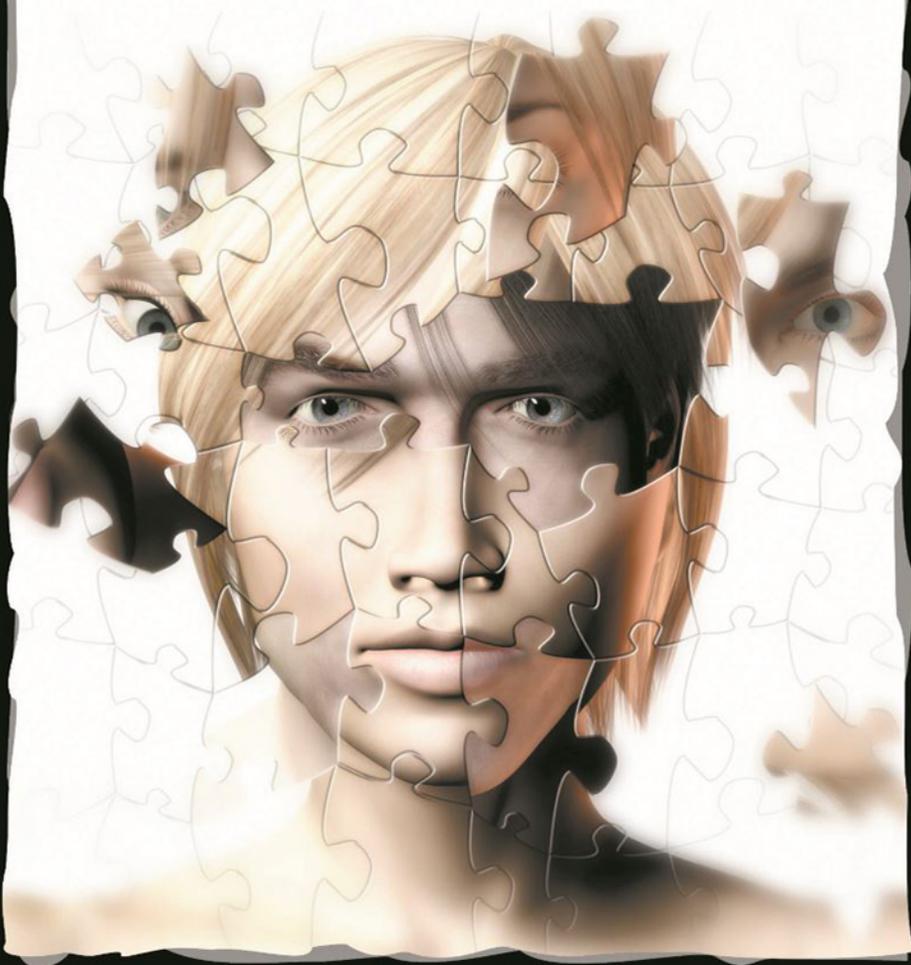


Morgan Bruce



Pieces of the
Puzzle

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a novel by
Morgan Bruce



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This novel is a work of fiction. Although references are made to localities in England and France in the last years of the 20th century – the time when the story is set – in general, the names, characters, locations and incidents portrayed in it, relating to the main story, are the work of the author’s imagination. In this regard, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead is entirely coincidental.

Thanks for support in completing this novel must go to my family. Most particularly, from my two daughters, Tanith and Kerensa, who have given me the encouragement to fulfill a dream of being a writer and helped with story ideas and suggestions. Thanks must also go to teaching colleagues Liz McDiarmid, and Rod McLeay who, along with my sister Janine, helped with proof readings and also made suggestions regarding various aspects of the story. Further, very special, thanks must also go to another ex-teaching colleague, Barry Spence, who reviewed – and in many cases corrected – all my French translations.

(There were some rather amusing moments created by my temporary use of ‘Google’ language translations – such as, “Come on. My room’s up here.”, becoming the French equivalent of “Advance! It is above!”)

NB. Reference is made to the Eurostar train leaving from Waterloo station. Please understand that at the time this novel is set, St. Pancras station was undergoing renovation and was not yet in use as the London terminus for the Eurostar.

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CH. 1 – A KIDNAPPING?

A wave of suffocatingly humid air – moist warmth combined with a pungent smell of chlorine – suddenly assaulted Carolyn, as her two sons pushed, rather impatiently, ahead of her through the second set of double doors that led into the foyer of the pool complex. She recoiled, momentarily, and then followed after them. It was an odour she didn't really like – a smell that provoked long-buried memories of the dank and dingy, wet-floored and freezing-cold changing rooms and the unheated, icy pools of her years at school.

“Okay you two, go and get yourselves changed. And be quick about it,” she said, brusquely – more than a little impatient at having to keep a reluctantly given promise she'd made to her sons. A promise that she would've very much preferred to have broken... more especially now that they were running so late.

The only real problem with renegeing on her promise, however, was the knowledge that she'd forgone a similar undertaking to them the previous weekend and did not like the thought of unleashing a string of accusations over broken promises; as if it was becoming too much of a habit. In the circumstances, even if they stayed for just a little while, it would, at least, 'keep the peace' at home for another day or two.

In many ways, she was already well aware that, over the last few months, there had become far too much tension within the family than was healthy, or even acceptable. Especially between

herself and Alex. Ever since she'd gone back to work – ostensibly to raise some extra money for an extended holiday abroad – as a 'family unit' they'd been under some strain; had not been quite so much 'together'... to put it in more modern parlance.

Perhaps it was just that that decision had, eventually, meant everyone having to carry a greater workload around the house. It certainly hadn't taken long for the boys to show some small amount of resentment to the fact that, because of the extra pressures created by her employment, she always seemed to be a little short-tempered and rather 'rushed. Over the last few weeks, they had made much of their quiet 'grumblings' to Alex about how things had been a lot better when mum wasn't working. That the little after-school snacks she'd once always prepared for them no longer appeared; that she never had time to help with them with their homework; and that the clothes that they preferred, and, in many ways needed for school and sports, were never washed and dried in time for re-use, now that laundry was done once or twice a week, rather than on a daily basis. His resultant 'I told you so's, whenever any small crisis developed – even if just expressed in the privacy of their bedroom – she found more than enough subtle annoyance, without the likelihood of giving him the chance to find something new to criticise.

"Go on. Hurry up," she, quickly, continued. "You haven't got all that long. Once you've had a swim, we've got to head into the city to pick up your dad from his work and then go and get some tea. Maybe pizzas? Okay?" Her sons gave vague nods of acceptance. Perhaps knowing that it wasn't worth creating an argument over.

"I'll give him a call and tell him that we'll be just a little later than planned," she added. "I'm sure he'll appreciate the extra time he can spend at work. Especially if it means not having to go in again, tomorrow."

“Are we still going to pick up a video?” Joshua asked, expectantly. Carolyn responded with a slightly exaggerated sigh. Having to drive into the city centre to pick up Alex would be bad enough without the extra hassle of spending ages waiting for Joshua and Jordan to actually decide on a DVD that they would both enjoy.

“I doubt we’ll have time,” she replied, rather bluntly. “Given how long you two usually take to make a choice. And, anyway, it’s probably for the best if we don’t. Jordan’s going to need a nice early night. Especially if Mr. Peterson wants him back at the ground by eight-thirty in the morning.”

“But...” Joshua began... his face reflecting some disappointment. Carolyn quickly cut his protest short.

“No ‘buts’, Josh. This weekend is important for Jordan. Now you just hurry up and go with him. And make sure he gets changed okay.” Joshua gave a drawn-out sigh of exasperation, as he turned and watched his younger brother start to head towards the changing room doors.

“Why do we always have to have our whole weekend spoiled just because of Jordan?” he muttered, as if he wasn’t all that sure whether he should really be venting such opinions aloud. He’d also wanted to ask why Dad couldn’t just get the train like he usually did, but knew it would be difficult to ask too many questions like that, without sounding cheeky. Carolyn exhaled strongly and said nothing. Perhaps, in some way, not wanting to create an unnecessary argument in public.

She hastily swallowed the sharp rebuke that had surfaced in her thoughts. It irritated her, to no insignificant degree, that Joshua was being uncharacteristically ‘stroppy’ and uncooperative lately, but maybe it was just because of his age. Maybe it was just the beginnings of the ‘teenage moods’ that her friends with older children were always harping on about.

“Because it’s part of his special football tournament, Josh,” she eventually responded, with measured calmness. “It’s the ‘trials’, and it’s only for this one weekend in the year. And you are being a little unfair. He’s not really always spoiling your fun, is he?”

“I suppose not,” the boy conceded, exhaling rather ostentatiously as his gaze dropped towards his shoes; his softer voice tone perhaps indicating that his cautious answer was likely more to avoid any argument that might erupt, than because he actually believed in what he was saying. Not that he could really understand why the ‘tournament’ – in reality just a glorified name for the lower grade team selections – was all that important in Jordan’s case. His younger brother was hopeless at football. Hopeless with a capital H... and, perhaps, even more than that: a capital O, capital P, capital E, and so on. He would, as usual, end up in the very lowest-ranked team... essentially, the ‘rejects’. A team consisting of the boys who hadn’t yet realised that they would never ever make it as footballers, but were still placed in a team. Mainly out of sympathy, but also because their parents were still willing to pay the club’s fees. They would be entered into the lowest grade of competition with the hope that, next year, after a season with little success, they might all take the hint and just ‘drop out’.

That was how it had been for the last three years. Ever since Jordan had first decided he wanted to be a part of a football team. And if anything, despite having been enrolled in a fair number of special coaching courses, in that time he’d just got progressively worse, rather than better. As far as Joshua could work out, that situation was unlikely to change. His brother just seemed destined to be a totally uncoordinated ‘geek’. The boy whom the coach almost automatically listed on the ‘subs’ bench; even before he began to think of deciding on a starting lineup.

The boy always destined to be the last person chosen, and even then reluctantly, for any 'pickup' game, despite his enthusiasm. Not that his having to wear glasses, in order to even see the ball properly, helped.

"Anyway," Carolyn quickly continued, giving a nod towards the changing room door, "you'd better get in there and see how he's getting on. He's only little. He still needs looking after."

"Well, why does it always have to be me? Why can't someone else do it?" Joshua whined, with a rather overstated shrug of his shoulders. Carolyn eyed him with some annoyance.

"Don't be stupid, Josh. Your dad's not here and I can't go into the men's changing rooms, can I?" she replied, her voice echoing her inner sense of exasperation at his reluctance to simply do as he was asked. "And he's much too old for me to be able to take him into the 'ladies' changing rooms. Besides, as I'm sure I already told you, I'm not going swimming today, because I don't want to take the risk of aggravating my chest. I'm sure I still haven't got properly over the congestion from having the 'flu last weekend."

"You should've got one of those immunity injections. Like you made us have," Joshua muttered. Carolyn gave him a sharp look.

"Yes, I know. And, yes, I probably should have. I'll think about it for next year. Okay?" she snapped. "Now, how about you just do as you're told and go and keep an eye on Jordan. Make sure he's okay getting changed." Joshua gave another exaggerated sigh.

"Mum. He's nine. He knows how to put his own trunks on."

"It's not that I'm worried about. It's other people," Carolyn said, in a stern whisper. "Now please don't argue about it, Josh. Just do it!"

Joshua shrugged his shoulders in a small show of annoyance and headed, irritatedly, through the doors leading to the men's

changing room; a little surprised to find his younger brother still waiting on the other side, rather than already getting changed. Strangely enough, given the number of vehicles in the car park, and the loud clamour coming from the pools, the changing rooms, at least for the moment, seemed quite deserted. He gave Jordan a small shove towards one of the ‘cubicle-lined’ alcoves that divided up the room.

“Go on, shrimp. Get yourself changed. And be quick about it. Because of your silly tournament, we’ve hardly got any time for a swim as it is.”

“It’s not my fault,” Jordan said, meekly, as he carefully put his sports bag onto the bench seat under the row of cubicles – after checking it wasn’t wet.

“It is so,” Joshua retorted, a little irritably.

“It isn’t.”

“It is.”

“Isn’t!”

“Is!”

“Isn’t!” Jordan shouted, angrily.

“Forget it,” said Joshua finally, and with an exasperated shake of his head. Effectively ending the argument by turning his back on his younger brother and starting to take off his shirt. “Just stop farting around and get yourself changed. Go on. And don’t worry about anyone wanting to look at you. It’s not as if you’ve got anything big enough to see, anyway.”

“Piss off,” Jordan replied, as he picked up his sports bag and slung it over his shoulder.

“Piss off, yourself, shrimp.”

“Mum won’t like you teasing me.”

“So, are you going to go off bawling to Mummy again?” Joshua sneered. “Just like some silly little girl?”

“I didn’t say that,” Jordan half-whimpered.

“Well, you do most of the time,” Joshua retorted. Well aware of just how easy it was to ‘wind-up’ his younger brother. “It’s a wonder you don’t still get her to wipe your bum for you.”

“I don’t get her to do that!”

“You still get her to help you with your sheets when you wet the bed.”

“Do not.”

“Do so! Every time you have one of your little ‘accidents’,” Joshua mocked.

“Shut up,” Jordan muttered, in a rather subdued manner. Feeling rather embarrassed that mention was being made of his nighttime ‘problem’ in circumstances where someone from his school might overhear.

“So... you gonna start crying now, are you? Just like a little baby?” Joshua teased, as his younger brother’s eyes quickly welled a little with tears. Jordan hastily wiped at his eyes, picked up his sports bag, and start walking away down the row of cubicles.

“Hey, where are you going?” Joshua called, suddenly a little cautious of how his mother would react to his teasing of his younger brother, as Jordan hesitated a little and looked into another alcove.

“Away from you!” he retorted, turning to poke a tongue out at his older brother. Joshua gave a shrug.

“Have it your way then, if you must. Just don’t take too bloody long about it,” he shouted, as Jordan moved slowly on towards the other end of the room and turned into another alcove. “Just remember that, because of your stupid tournament running late, we’ve only got about half an hour... at the most.” There was no response to his comment.

Looking quickly around, to make sure no one was watching him, Joshua quickly removed his jeans and underpants, and quickly slipped into his speedos. He’d rather have been wearing

a pair of long, denim shorts, but the pools were very strict on the wearing of proper swimming attire; ostensibly, for health and cleanliness reasons. Cut off jeans – as he liked to wear at the beach – were certainly not permitted.

Eventually, having completed changing, he picked his clothes up off the floor – a little thankful that it wasn't awash with water. He shoved them, roughly, into his sports bag, and then looked down the middle aisle of the changing room. Jordan was nowhere in sight.

“Hurry up, will you,” he called impatiently.

“Piss off,” came the softly distant reply.

With a sigh, Joshua slumped down on the wooden seating. He could just picture it in his mind. Jordan was probably just sitting in a corner of an alcove of lockers, crying... again. Not that he really cared. Apart from the fact that it would cause him problems with Carolyn if Jordan came out of the changing rooms with reddened eyes. He waited a few more minutes, then grabbed his bag and headed out the door to the foyer.

“Where's Jordan?” Carolyn hastily asked, as he reappeared.

“He's still stuffing around, as usual,” Joshua muttered, a little impatiently. “He decided that he wanted to get changed in private.”

“Were you hassling him again?” Carolyn asked.

“No,” Joshua retorted, quietly, aware that he hadn't actually done as he'd been asked. “Not really. He just didn't want people staring at him.”

“Maybe you'd better go back in and check that he's okay?” Carolyn suggested.

“Mum. Stop flippin' panicking,” Joshua replied, with an air of some exasperation. “You treat him like he's a baby. He'll be out in a minute or two.” He dropped his sports bag beside her and

began heading off towards the main pool complex. “Just tell him I’ll be over in the wave pool.”

Carolyn waited. Shuffling impatiently from one foot to the other. Her attention focused on the doors to the male changing rooms as Joshua disappeared towards the swimming area. The minutes seemed to tick by with quickly increasing rapidity, but Jordan still didn’t appear.

“And the last time you saw him was?” Detective Inspector Stuart Graham asked, somehow seeming to leave the question dangling, even as he waited for an answer. Joshua continued to feel embarrassed, as he looked around the changing room. Aware that all the attention was focused on him, and that everyone else was fully clothed, while he was still dressed in only his wet swimming trunks. He felt rather awkward, being the only person there dressed in just speedos. Like he was standing there in just his underwear. Even his boxers would have, at least, given him a little more cover.

“Just after I got in here,” he said quietly. “He said he wanted to get changed on his own... without anyone watching. Then he went off down to the far end of the room. Down by the last row of lockers, I think. I got changed and waited, here, for him to come back. Then, when he seemed to be taking too long a time, I decided to head out to the pools. I just figured he’d be out any minute.”

“Is there any likelihood that he might have decided to leave the changing rooms by the other doors? The ones at the far end?” D.I. Stuart Graham suggested. “And then gone around to the pools area by himself?” Joshua gave an unsure shrug of his shoulders.

“It’s possible,” he said, softly, looking towards the far end of the changing rooms. “But I wouldn’t have thought so. He usually likes to bring all his stuff out for mum to look after. Anyway, he knows mum would have an ‘epi’ if he did that. She likes to know where he is at all times.” He gave a quick glance over to where his Dad was now talking, quietly, with one of the other police officers.

“But, it could possibly have happened?” the D.I. asked, recapturing the boy’s attention.

“I... I suppose so.” Joshua gave a further slight flex of his shoulders, as if to emphasise the tentativeness of his reply.

“Do you know if anyone might have seen him after you left him? Was there anyone else in here? Perhaps someone else who might also have been getting changed... in one of the other alcoves?” D.I. Stuart Graham continued, as he glanced up from his notebook. Joshua looked around as if expecting someone else to suddenly volunteer that information.

“No,” he eventually replied, hoping that the single answer would serve all three questions. He felt, suddenly, a strange sense of guilt. If he hadn’t been in such a bad mood, for no good reason, this whole circumstance would not be happening. He hastily tried to clarify his answer—aware of the seriousness of the situation. “There was no one else in here. Well, not that I ... we noticed.”

“And when you, eventually, came back in to look for him, you didn’t find any sign of his spare clothes, his towel, or his sports bag, or anything like that?”

“No,” Joshua murmured. “Nothing... nothing at all.”

“So what’s he likely to be wearing?” D.I. Stuart Graham queried. Joshua gave a slight shrug.

“He was still wearing his football gear when I last saw him. But he’s got red swimming trunks. You know, speedos... with

white stripes on the sides. They have this silly rule, here, that you can't wear...." The rest of the sentence faded into nothing. At this moment, the pool's, slightly old-fashioned, policy on swimming attire was really irrelevant... unimportant.

A small silence ensued as Stuart Graham began to, rather carefully, scrutinise whatever notes he'd, so far, made. Shuffling back and forth, with stoic bemusement, it seemed, between two or three pages of rather hastily scribbled observations. At the same time, he still seemed to be watching Joshua rather intently.

"You two didn't have any sort of argument? Or, something like that?" he, finally, asked. Joshua, once again, flexed his shoulders slightly. This time, to D.I. Stuart Graham, the action seemed a small, but rather meaningful, gesture of confirmation.

"Not really," Joshua murmured, at the same time wondering just how the police officer had been able to, so quickly, deduce what had actually occurred. "I just badgered him a bit. Like, to get him to hurry up and he, sort of, went off to the other end of the room in a bit of a sulk."

"So he wasn't happy?" D.I. Stuart Graham queried.

"I suppose not," Joshua replied softly.

"He was a bit upset?"

"Sort of."

"So, really, you'd had a bit of an argument?" Somehow, the question seemed more a statement of fact.

"It wasn't really like that," Joshua answered quietly. Unbidden tears suddenly began to flow down his cheeks. "It was just the usual sort of 'ribbing' we always do. I... I didn't really mean anything by it."

"No one is blaming you, kid," the police officer replied calmly and with surprising sympathy. "I'm just trying to get a more accurate picture of what actually happened, leading up to the last time you saw him." Joshua sniffed and wiped the back of his

hand across his eyes. He felt weak, and totally stupid, in starting to cry. The policeman would think he was soft.

“So,” Stuart Graham quietly continued, “if he was rather upset and possibly angry with you, is it likely that he would, perhaps, have decided to make his own way home?” Joshua shook his head vigorously.

“No way,” he sniffed. “Jordan doesn’t go anywhere on his own. He doesn’t even sneeze without asking mum’s permission.” Stuart Graham stopped writing and gave him a strange look.

“Sorry,” Joshua said, a little apologetically. “It’s just that ... that Mum still treats him a bit like a baby. You know, be... because he’s the youngest, he always gets special treatment. It just gets a bit irritating at times.”

“No doubt,” the D.I. replied, with a slight raise of his eyebrows. “Do you resent that?” Joshua cast a quick look towards Alex, perhaps thankful that Carolyn was being comforted elsewhere.

“Not really,” he replied, with a slight shrug. “It just gets a little bit annoying at times. Especially when mum does everything for him and then expects me to cope on my own. No matter what it is, she still looks after him, and helps him, and then she’s always too busy to even listen to what I need.” He looked across at Alex. His Dad didn’t seem to be angry at what he was saying. “Like this weekend,” he, quickly, continued. “We all had to turn up at Jordan’s football trials – except for Dad having to work – but nobody bothered to hang around for my trials two weeks ago. Not even when they knew that I had a good chance of making the top team. I mean, Dad was busy at work – he often works on Saturdays, so I could understand that – but Mum just went off with Jordan for a special trip into town. And then, afterwards, when I told her that I’d made the top team, she didn’t really say anything nice at all. Didn’t even seem all that pleased. All she could talk about was the new clothes and shoes she’d

got for Jordan.” Despite his attempts to stop them, tears, once again, began to flood down his cheeks. “It’s not fair,” he sniffled, wiping the back of his hand across his cheeks. “But that doesn’t mean I wanted something to happen to Jordan. H... he... he’s my brother.” He felt his Dad’s arms enfold him as further tears began to course down his cheeks.

“Mum, there’s someone coming up the path,” Joshua called from the top of the stairs, as a shadow suddenly loomed outside the opaque glass. When they’d finally arrived home, perhaps about an hour earlier, he’d very quickly decided to make himself scarce. Mainly to avoid the looks and comments apportioning blame that were, it appeared, now being constantly focused in his direction. His silent journey home in the car had been an extremely tense affair. Not that it had been without words. Carolyn had certainly let him know that he was solely to blame for his brother’s disappearance and that he would, without doubt, eventually be called to account for his disobedience.

He’d quickly decided that it was better not to say anything. Any attempt to justify his own actions, he’d felt sure, would have simply inflamed the situation. Maybe that wasn’t really the case, but it still seemed that way... at least in his mind. As things stood, he was a little thankful that, for the moment, there was still a police officer still in the house, directing the enquiry. He felt certain that the officer’s presence was the only thing that was stopping his mum from really having a go at him.

Having changed back into his jeans as soon as he’d got home – the trip home in the car in just his speedos and a couple of towels having him wary of being punished in just his trunks – he now watched, from where he sat on the top step of the stairs

leading to the landing, as at the Detective Inspector's bidding, his parents entered into the hallway in anticipation of the doorbell. Almost before the echo of its sound had finished, they'd opened the door. The sight of a stranger – a courier driver – instead of a smiling police officer accompanied by a small boy with a white-blond spiky haircut and glasses immediately dashed the faint hopes that had briefly arisen.

“Mr. and Mrs. Kimpton?” the young man enquired. They nodded a simultaneous reply. “Can you sign for this, please?” Alex quickly took the pad that was offered and signed the ‘notification of delivery’ form, while Carolyn took the box that was handed to her.

“Were you expecting a delivery from your work?” she quietly asked Alex. Wondering why he hadn't simply brought it with him when he'd left work. Having handed back the pad and closed the door, Alex gave her a slightly curious look.

“No. I thought it might be something for you,” he replied. After a moment's hesitation, perhaps with them both trying to decide whether it was something that they should just leave for another day, they quickly opened the box... their hearts sinking as they instantly recognised some of Jordan's clothing and his towel.

“Oh my God!” Carolyn screamed, as she grabbed the T-shirt from the top of the box, then turned towards the door... hearing only the sound of the courier van accelerating away down the street... back towards the main road.

“It's his clothes,” Alex quickly explained to the, slightly startled, Detective Inspector.

“It's what he was wearing,” Carolyn quickly added, as they hurried back into the front room. She dropped the T-shirt onto the coffee table and hastily rummaged through the rest of the box's contents.

“Definitely?” Detective Inspector Stuart Graham queried, as he, rather hastily, came over to also examine the items.

“Yes,” Alex responded, as Carolyn, having hastily checked over the pair of underpants, jacket and towel, slumped into a chair and, with her head on her arms, dissolved into another flood of tears.

“I’ll get someone to check out where the delivery came from,” the police officer continued, as he quickly grabbed his cellphone and tapped out a series of numbers. He looked at the docket Alex was holding. “Rapid Couriers – they’re a reputable company. They’ll just be doing a job. But, with a bit of luck, they should have some details of where the order originated. And, hopefully, who paid for it.” As he waited for a response, he walked back out into the entryway for a bit of privacy.

“There’s a note. In the bottom of the box,” Alex continued, as he reached for the slip of folded paper that lay, half-hidden, beneath the clothes Carolyn had dropped back into the box.

“Don’t touch it,” D.I. Stuart Graham quickly exclaimed. “We might be able to check it for fingerprints or something. Just leave the box on the table. I’ll get the note out as soon as I finish this call.”

Alex and Carolyn waited, anxiously, beside the coffee table while Stuart Graham completed arrangements for getting someone at headquarters to make a check on the source of the delivery. Out of curiosity, Joshua came down, a little cautiously, from where he’d been seated, and sat on the third to bottom stair. Still keeping out of the way, but close enough to be able to more clearly see and hear what was about to unfold. Not that his deciding to be out of the way was all that uncommon. He, generally, liked the solitude of his own room, especially when he was playing computer games, but in the present situation, it was more to avoid the looks that his mother kept giving him. Looks

that told him that she was still holding him entirely to account for everything that had happened at the pools.

For a while, everything remained rather static, as Detective-Inspector Stuart Graham's phone call remained the centre of attention. With all of them trying to avoid being seen to be obviously eavesdropping but, at the same time, being equally curious to know what progress he was making.

After four... or maybe five, minutes – although it seemed very much longer – Detective-Inspector Stuart Graham finished his phone call, came over and carefully lifted the paper out of the box. Holding it by just the edge of a corner, with the tip of his thumbnail and first fingernail. He placed it on the table and used the end of his pen to open it. Trying to avoid the possibility of adding extra, possibly contaminating, fingerprints.

"It might help us know what we're dealing with," he commented as, almost painstakingly it seemed, he unfolded the note onto the coffee table. Alex and Carolyn crowded around, almost in desperation to see what it would reveal. Joshua left his place on the stairs and came quietly into the room to join them; keeping himself between the police officer and his dad. The four of them then read what was written... in silence... slowly and carefully. Trying to comprehend any cryptic message hidden behind the simplicity of the words.

'We're sorry it has to be done this way, but please do not worry. Jordan will be returned to you, unharmed, as soon as is possible. We promise you that. However, what we have to do may take some time, so please be patient. I'm sorry we cannot tell you more at this time, but please, trust in us. We promise that Jordan will not be harmed in any way.'

"It's certainly nothing like what I'd expect for a ransom note." Stuart Graham, eventually, commented, at the same time

scratching at his chin with the end of his pen. “The ‘what we have to do’ bit is rather perplexing. Although, the use of ‘we’ does seem to confirm the idea that more than one person is involved.”

“But how are we going to get him back?” Carolyn promptly asked. “It doesn’t even tell us what they want.”

“It may just be the first contact,” D.I. Stuart Graham replied. “Sometimes kidnappers take a little while to reveal their real demands. It’s like some sort of a game. They like to make sure they have everyone’s full attention.”

“So what do we do now?” Alex asked. Stuart Graham shrugged his shoulders.

“We wait,” he said. “For something further. At least the note, in some ways, does seem to confirm that the issue is some form of planned kidnapping and is, therefore, not likely to be the actions of some opportunistic molester.”

“So he’s probably still alive?” Carolyn asked anxiously. D.I. Stuart Graham nodded.

“It would seem that way. They specifically mention him by name and even promise, more than once, that he won’t be harmed.”

“But, we can’t be sure about that, can we?” Carolyn questioned, rather nervously. D.I. Graham, once again, shrugged his shoulders just a little. It seemed a strangely noncommittal gesture for a police officer.

“No,” he, eventually, replied. “But, as puzzling as it is, it’s still important. It does tell us that we’re, most probably, not dealing with someone who has designs on hurting him. In general circumstances, a child molester is hardly going to bother to make any form of contact. They would, most likely, feel that doing anything like that – even just to taunt – would make it far too easy for them to be discovered. This sort of clear reassurance of his return is rather unusual. Nothing at all like what you would expect.”

“But nothing, in these sort of cases, is ever that certain, is it?” Alex asked, nervously.

“Well, no,” Stuart Graham replied. “Obviously, there are never any guarantees. But the message doesn’t seem all that threatening. In fact, to be honest, I don’t know quite what to make of it. As I just said, it’s most certainly not at all what I would have expected. The specific use of his name almost seems to suppose that their taking him was not a random event. It’s almost as if they knew exactly who he was, and, therefore, why they wanted him.”

“So it’s not really a ransom note at all,” Alex interrupted, rather quietly – maybe just voicing his own inner thoughts aloud. “All they really tell us is not to worry and then, sort of, that they promise us that he will be returned.” Carolyn quickly turned to him.

“Then why would they have taken him in the first place? What would be the purpose, if they just intend to return him, unharmed?” she countered. “It doesn’t make any sense. If they’re not asking for a ransom, why take him at all? And if it is a kidnapping, why did they single us out? It’s not as if we’ve got loads of money, or we’re famous or anything.”

Alex spread his hands in a gesture of ‘unknowing’. Unable to voice answers to any of his wife’s questions. Almost as one, they turned towards D.I. Stuart Graham, their eyes searching his face for possible answers.

“I suppose we’ll find that out eventually,” he said almost casually. “Look, in some cases, notes of this type are often just the work of some other stupid idiot desperate for a bit of attention.”

“But the clothes are definitely Jordan’s,” Carolyn responded. She snatched the T-shirt off the table, clutching it tightly in her hand as she proffered it towards the police officer. “Look! There’s even the juice stain on the front of his T-shirt that I couldn’t

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properly get out in the wash.” She quickly dropped the T-shirt back onto the table and held up Jordan’s red and blue ‘Superman’ underpants. “And these are most definitely his. See? They’ve even got his nametag sewn into the back of the waistband for when he goes swimming at school. If they say they don’t intend to hurt him, why on earth have they taken all his clothes off?” D.I. Stuart Graham seemed suddenly moved into action by Carolyn’s new question.

“Of course,” he quickly replied. “You’re absolutely right. If the clothing is Jordan’s then the note is definitely genuine.” He looked towards the box and the pile of jumbled clothing. “And in that regard, I’d best check on how things are going with tracking where the delivery came from. It might just turn out to be our best lead, for the moment.”

“They haven’t returned his shorts, or his football top,” Joshua, commented, softly, as he looked at the clothing on the table. “Or his sports bag, speedos and shoes and socks.”

“Joshua’s right,” Alex rather hastily added, looking to confirm his elder son’s observation. “Perhaps it’s just some sort of indication that they needed to have him dressed less noticeably.”



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