

PART 1

CHAPTERS
1-8

Danger lies closer
than you think

Groomed

CASEY WATSON

THE SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Casey Watson

**Groomed: Part 1 of 3: Danger
lies closer than you think**

«HarperCollins»

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It's late on Friday night when Casey's mobile starts to ring. She is expecting it to be her daughter Riley. But it isn't Riley. It's a woman from the Emergency Duty Team. So begins Casey and Mike's latest fostering challenge – a fifteen-year-old girl called Keeley who's run away from her long-term foster home 25 miles away. The Jonathan Ross Show has just started when Casey gets the call. She thinks it will be Riley – telling her that her favourite actor is going to be on TV. But it's something far more urgent: a fifteen-year-old girl who has run away from her foster family and accused her foster father of sexual abuse. The family deny in vehemently, but such an allegation can never be taken lightly, so a new home must be found for Keeley. Keeley is polite, but she's sharp, and she has all the hallmarks of a child who has been in the system a long time, and knows how to play it. Whether the allegation is true or not, Casey knows there will be no winners here. If it is true, then a young girl's life has been torn asunder. If not, then the heartache for the family will only be surpassed by the bleak outlook for Keeley. In the short term, it's a case of providing a safe, supportive home for a vulnerable child. But with the dangerous world of the internet at her disposal, it seems this strong-minded youngster has her own ideas of where that safe place should be...

Содержание

Copyright	7
Contents	8
Dedication	9
Acknowledgements	10
Chapter 1	11
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	14

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CASEY

THE *SUNDAY TIMES*



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HarperElement

An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*

1 London Bridge Street

London SE1 9GF

www.harpercollins.co.uk

First published by HarperElement 2017

FIRST EDITION

© Casey Watson 2017

A catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library

Cover image © Jan Bickerton (posed by model)

Cover layout © HarperCollins*Publishers* 2017

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Source ISBN: 9780008127600

Ebook Edition © September 2017 ISBN: 9780008217631

Version: 2017-08-18

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Moving Memoirs eNewsletter](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

Dedication

This book is dedicated to the army of passionate foster carers out there, each doing their bit to ensure that our children are kept as safe as possible in such a changing and often scary world. As technology is reinvented and becomes ever more complicated for those of us who were not brought up amid such advances, we can only try to keep up, in the hope that we continue to learn alongside our young people.

Acknowledgements

I remain endlessly grateful to my team at HarperCollins for their continuing support, and I'm especially excited to see the return of my editor, the very lovely Vicky Eribo, and look forward to sharing my new stories with her. As always, nothing would be possible without my wonderful agent, Andrew Lownie, the very best agent in the world in my opinion, and my grateful thanks also to the lovely Lynne, my friend and mentor forever.

Chapter 1

Mid-September. To me, always a melancholy time of year. Summer clinging on in bursts, the sun still trying to keep the air warm – but undermined by the chill creep of autumn once it sets, increasingly bullying its way into its rightful place.

I try to like autumn, what with the spectacular colours and all those lovely piles of crispy leaves. But it's not my favourite. In fact it's my least favourite season; sandwiched as it is between summer and Christmas, which isn't a season but, to my mind, ought to be. It always seems to take much too long to arrive and, once it does arrive, is always over much too quickly.

Still, autumn has a plus point, and that's the telly. And amid a slew of programmes that had returned from their summer break was the Saturday night ritual of *The Jonathan Ross Show*, a family favourite since way back when. Which was why, when my mobile buzzed, given the day and the timing, I thought it must be Riley who was calling.

Mike laughed. 'She knows you *so* well,' he said, chuckling, as I got off the sofa to go and fetch it. 'Heaven forbid you miss lover-boy.'

He was referring to the actor James McAvoy, who was one of the guests that night, and of course he was absolutely right.

'Cheek,' I called back to him as I disappeared into the kitchen. 'I just happen to think he's a particularly fine actor.'

'Course you do,' he answered as I reappeared in the doorway. 'Just like I admire Fiona Bruce for her brilliant journalism.'

But by this time I already knew that it wasn't Riley calling. The display on the phone said no number ID. Perhaps it was James McAvoy declaring his undying devotion.

It wasn't.

'Hello, is that Mrs Watson?' asked a female voice. 'Casey Watson?' I told her yes. 'Ah, good,' she said. 'Helena Curry here. EDT. Very glad to have managed to get hold of you. Am I right in thinking you might be available and free at the moment?'

I gestured with my hand that Mike should pause the TV. 'Yes,' I told her. 'We don't have anyone else in at the moment. Well, apart from our long-term foster son, of course.'

'Tyler,' she supplied, before I could. She'd done her homework.

Not that we thought of Tyler in that way any more. He was our permanent foster child these days, and just as he called us mum and dad, so the 'foster' tag had long since disappeared from the 'son' bit, at least in our heads.

With football training in the morning, Tyler was already up in his bedroom, having just gone up to catch up with one of his favourite crime programmes on his new laptop – the surprise sixteenth birthday present we'd presented him a couple of weeks back. To say he was pleased would be the understatement of the year. If not the century.

But it looked like our own viewing plans were about to be scuppered, EDT being short for emergency duty team, the go-to people for any child who was placed into local authority care out of office hours.

Not that this child – or rather teenager – had just come into care. Helena Curry went on to explain that the girl, whose name was Keeley and who was fifteen years old, had actually been in care since she was ten. 'She's run away from her foster family, basically,' she said. Her voice sounded tired. 'Was picked up by the police a couple of hours ago.'

'Oh dear,' I said, imagining this most complicated of scenarios. It was dispiriting enough when a child entered the system in the first place, but there was an added sadness when a child was already in the system – particularly if they'd been in care long term. You tried to stay optimistic but experience had long since shown me that a downward spiral could so easily happen.

‘I know,’ Helena agreed. ‘She refused point blank to return, and when they tried to insist she made quite a serious allegation against the male carer. So here we are. In need of alternative accommodation – and with specialist carers, which you and your husband, of course, are.’

‘Ah,’ I said, trying to work out what this might mean for us. ‘So it wasn’t just a case of fetching up at W for Watson, then?’

She laughed. ‘Not in this case, no. No, given the circumstances, and the length of time the girl has been in care ...’ There was a pause. It felt a pregnant one. ‘And from what’s on her file ...’

I was impressed. This was what should always happen, obviously, when emergency carers were sought, but, in my experience, often wasn’t the case. ‘So, just temporarily?’ I asked.

‘In the first instance, yes. Just for the weekend. Though you don’t need me to tell you, assuming she’s *not* going back, that specialist carers such as yourselves will be sought. So ...’

‘So she could be our next long-term placement,’ I finished for her.

‘Exactly,’ she said. ‘So, are you happy to take her?’

‘Yes, of course,’ I said, looking at Mike for a confirmatory nod. Which he gave. We’d been talking about our next placement only the other day; as in who, and most importantly, *when* it might be. With the school summer holidays done with, I was getting itchy fostering feet. ‘I’ll call my link worker and leave a voicemail for him to ring me in the morning. What time were you thinking of?’ I added, glancing at the clock on the mantelpiece. It was already nearly a quarter to eleven.

Helena explained that Keeley was still with the police, but they were ready and waiting to take her anywhere it was decided she was going to go. ‘Certainly within the hour, I’d say,’ she finished.

‘And do you have any more you can tell me now?’ I asked, thinking about the file she’d already alluded to.

‘Lots, I imagine, but not right now,’ she said. ‘Can I call you back once I’ve been back to the police and told them what’s happening? Give me a chance to have a skim through and see what might be useful.’

I told her I’d appreciate it – information is power, after all – and she promised she’d call back as soon as she could and, if that proved impossible, that she’d call again first thing in the morning. ‘Sorry to interrupt your evening,’ she finished. ‘Hope you weren’t in the middle of anything important.’

Mike had un-paused the telly while we’d been talking, in favour of recording it for later, so I was able to watch James McAvoy smile disarmingly as he took his seat on the famous sofa. Smiling – I swear – right at me. No, not important at all, I thought, as I said goodbye and pushed my mobile into my pocket, before briefing Mike on the few details he hadn’t already picked up.

‘So come on then, kiddo,’ I said to him, pulling on his arm. ‘We have work to do upstairs before she gets here. If you can drag yourself away from this, that is.’

Mike groaned. ‘*Work*? What kind of work? It’s nearly eleven o’clock at night, love. You can’t seriously be considering a spring bloody clean. It’s pink, so as far as I’m concerned it’s fine as it is.’

Which it was, more or less. And this being a girl was handy. Our third long-term girl placement in a row, as it happened. Well, bar a couple of short stays, of course. And yes, perhaps a bit *too* pink – it was as pink as it was plastered in butterflies and flowers – but no, it didn’t really need anything doing to it. Bar the usual.

‘*I obviously* don’t mean the whole change-the-décor thing,’ I told him. ‘But I’ll still have to have a dust and freshen up in there. It’ll be stuffy. Come on! James’ll have to wait.’

‘And what about her?’ Mike asked as he got to his feet. ‘Any inklings of what we might expect?’

‘Not as yet,’ I said. ‘Like I said, the woman’s going to call me back.’

‘But what’s your gut instinct?’ he said, as he followed me into the kitchen.

‘I’m not sure,’ I said, as I rooted in the cleaning cupboard. ‘We’ll see soon enough.’

I handed Mike the air freshener and polish.

Trouble. The word sprang to mind then. I expected trouble. She was fifteen and had made a serious allegation against a male carer. However that panned out, whether it was substantiated or otherwise, there would be trouble aplenty, and for all concerned.

I handed Mike a duster. And kept my thoughts to myself.

Within half an hour the spare room was suitably freshened and, with the addition of the fairy lights Mike had wound through the headboard of the bed, looked positively cheerful.

I sent him off to update Tyler – assuming he wasn't already asleep – and tell him we could do all the meet-and-greet stuff in the morning.

'Lovely!' I said to myself, feeling my usual prickle of anticipation. A quick whizz round downstairs and we'd be ready to receive our visitor.

'And put the kettle on!' Mike whispered, following me from the landing as I headed down the stairs. 'It's probably going to be a long night and I'm going to need coffee.'

'Not necessarily,' I said, as we regrouped in the kitchen. 'The poor girl is probably exhausted and just wants her bed.'

'So say you,' Mike said. 'She might not even want to be brought here. Out of the frying pan and all that ...'

I sprayed some air freshener on the kitchen counter. 'And into our delightfully fragrant and lovely home.'

By the police. Which was a second thought that struck me, and wasn't wonderful. As foster carers we had to be ever sensitive to the fact that we weren't necessarily the most popular of neighbours. Indeed, in our former home, if not exactly hounded out, we had been at one point the subject of a petition urging us to move, after a child in our care went on a neighbourhood nicking spree. And the sight of police cars outside this house never went down terribly well either. Much less the armoured security van that had famously delivered one boy a while back.

But, with any luck, our latest charge would be delivered more discreetly and not give cause for any tongues to start wagging.

But it wasn't our night for that kind of luck. Within the hour, as Helena had promised (though, sadly, before the promised phone call), there was an enormous squad car pulling up outside the house. It was definitely a proper, full-blown police car.

No sirens, thank goodness, but, under the glow of the streetlamps – not to mention our neighbour's carriage lamps – it was about as inconspicuous as a polar bear.

'Trouble,' Mike said, coming up behind me at the window. 'Seriously. I can feel it in my bones.'

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