



A short story

By

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Detective Constable Kenwood drove while Detective Sergeant Sally Brooking brooded in the passenger seat. “You know why the DI sent *us*?” she asked.

“Because a little kid’s missing, and you’re the best he’s got?”

“Ha. Good answer, but wrong. It’s because I’m the only *woman*.”

Kenwood gave her that man look, the one where they daren’t say anything because it’s sure to be wrong. Further confirmation that her new partner had the right instincts for plain clothes.

“The boss got it all wrong. Bloody males.”

Kenwood fixed his attention on the last corner before the Big Bear Day Care Centre.

“Women are worse than men,” Sally went. “Especially hysterical mothers. They’ll want a big strong *man* to save the day.”

The freshly-minted detective took a hand off the wheel in shock. “You want *me* to take the lead?”

“I said a *big, strong* man. Until you can wipe your own ass, you get to stand behind me and try to look older.” Sally laid on the sarcasm because it would be expected. The macho jerks in the detective squad would never let her forget it if she betrayed even a glimpse of empathy.

It also helped Sally avoid her desperate fear that when she looked into the mum’s eyes, the desperate woman would morph into her sister Kate, the missing kid would be her little nephew, Rory, and she’d crack up.

She took a deep breath as Kenwood piloted the car into the day care’s only available space, a disabled bay.

As they climbed out, a young woman in an apron unlatched the childproof gate and charged straight for Kenwood.

As expected.

“Are you the police?”

He pulled out his ID. “Detective Constable Kenwood.”

He gestured across the bonnet to Sally.

“Detective Sergeant Brooking.” She tried hard not to emphasise the superior rank. “What have we got here?”

“He was kidnapped! Dillon. He’s only three!”

Sally placed a hand on the woman’s shoulder and looked her in the eye. “It’s going to be fine.” Such a stupid thing to say when Sally was just as worried, but it usually worked to calm people down. “Is Dillon’s mum here?”

The centre filled most of a quarter acre block in an upmarket suburb. Its walls were cheery pastel shades of blue and pink daubed with outsize teddy bears, dolls and farm animals. The children were outside enjoying an expanse carpeted with pelletised rubber, swinging on undersized climbing frames or fighting over tricycles.

Inside, a pretty, mid-thirties woman slumped on a toddler-sized chair in the middle of the main room, bawling into tissues, flanked by comforters. On one side, a grey-haired, frowning lady in a Big Bear tee-shirt. On the other, a toned gym-bunny wearing a designer purple sweatshirt over name brand spandex.

Behind them, perched on a play table strewn with Lego blocks, crayons and colouring sheets, sat a scowling girl in primary school uniform.

Sally announced herself, flashed her ID and introduced Kenwood.

The mother looked up from her tissues. Tears streaked her makeup. “Where’s Dillon? Have you found him?”

“Not quite yet. I’m hoping you can help us.”

Spandex Lady scoffed. “Shouldn’t you be doing something? Her son’s been abducted!”

Dillon’s mum burst into tears again.

The older day care lady patted her on the back and cooed.

“Can somebody get Mrs Ward a cup of tea?” Sally asked.

“She doesn’t need tea! She needs her son back!” Spandex Lady yelled.

“I know. That’s what we’re here for, but you’d be surprised how much a hot drink can help.” Sally felt like an idiot saying it but, damn it, the folksy stuff worked, and Spandex Lady might get the hint.

Sally looked at Kenwood, taking it all in with a lopsided grin.

“I’ll get tea.” The younger day care employee ran to oblige.

“Put lots of sugar in,” Sally said. “Now. Please be assured every police car in the city has been called to this area, and we’ve alerted the radio stations that a boy’s missing. We’ll find Dillon soon enough.” Unless some slimy pedophile had already hidden him in a cave. Sally forced what she hoped was a reassuring smile but felt like a grimace. *Oh God, the poor woman. What if it were Rory?*

Sally jammed down on the thought. Rory was safe, and Dillon Ward needed her.

She sneaked another glance at Kenwood. She would not crumple and confirm all the tired stereotypes. “Mrs Ward, the person who rang the emergency line didn’t give many details.”

“What do you expect?” Spandex Lady spluttered.

“Everyone is upset. I know. But could you please tell me what Dillon looks like? What was he wearing?”

The primary school girl thrust out her hand roughly a metre off the floor and rattled off a description. “He’s about this high. He’s got curly hair the same colour as mine. He was wearing his superman shirt and black shorts, and he’s a menace!”

“Jess!” Spandex Lady said.

“Well, he is. He’s always getting lost, and now I’m late for assembly practice.”

“Thanks, Jess.” Sally pointedly focused on the mother. “And the car?”

“I ... I don’t know.” Mrs Ward cast around for someone to help. “I was on the way to Jess's school. Mrs Wysoki called to tell me what happened.” She nodded to the grey-haired lady.

Sally pushed on. “The triple-0 caller—”

“That was me.” Mrs Wysoki raised her hand. “But I didn’t see it happen.”

“Okay. Who did?”

“Simon. Should I get him?”

Sally nodded and pivoted to Kenwood, but before she could tell him to call in the boy’s description, he had his phone at his ear and was walking into a corner for some privacy.

“I’m so worried.” Mrs Ward sniffed.

“I know, love.” Sally’s heart melted for the mum.

Spandex Lady muscled in again. “You don’t *know*, and she’s not your *love*!”

Sally drilled Spandex Lady with the one-more-word-and-you’ll-be-under-arrest look, but it bounced right off. Clearly, Mrs Ward’s friend was a woman used to getting her way. At least the hostility focused Sally’s mind on the job. The boy’s mum looked about to collapse.

The younger day care worker came back with a mug for Dillon’s mum as Mrs Wysoki hauled in an over-excited boy. She had him by the wrist, wriggling like a trout on the hook.

“Are you a policeman?” he asked

“She’s a police *woman*,” Mrs Wysoki corrected.

“Have you got a uniform?”

“No. I’m a detective. Did you see Dillon get in a car?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Did you see who he went with?”

“He went in a green car, but his mummy’s got a red car.”

Mrs Ward nodded vigorously.

“You know about cars, Simon?” Sally asked.

“Yes. Daddy’s car is a Land Rover, but Mummy’s is a Merc’.”

“And what sort of car did Dillon go in?”

“A green one.”

“Was it like daddy’s or mummy’s?”

“No.”

“And did you see who took Dillon?”

“No.”

Brilliant. A green car which wasn’t a Land Rover or Mercedes but might well be, because the witness statement came from a three-year-old. “Thank you, Simon. You did really well to tell Mrs Wysoki.”

“You mustn’t go with strangers,” Simon said.

“Absolutely right.” Sally treated him to the fun-aunty grin she used with Rory. Mrs Ward fell on the startled kid. “Thank goodness you saw it.”

The day care leader extricated the boy with some difficulty and shooed him away. “Julie,” she asked her younger colleague. “Get Simon a biscuit from the lunch table and take him back to the swings, would you?”

“Mrs Ward,” Sally asked. “Do you know anyone who drives a green car?”

“What’s that got to do with anything?” Spandex Lady asked.

There were times when Sally longed for bygone days when police could slap people. “Dillon may have gone with someone he knew. His dad, for instance. His grandma. An uncle.”

“His dad’s at work.” Mrs Ward blinked like a confused owl.

Sally girded herself. Dillon’s mum must be dying inside, but detectives had a job to do. “Is there any reason why another member of your family might have come to pick up Dillon?” The interfering friend opened her mouth to object again, but Sally talked over her. “I’m sorry to have to ask this, but I need to know if you’re having any family problems. Angry partners have been known to grab the children.”

“Dad would never go without *me!*” Jess crossed her arms and glared at Sally, who couldn’t help but smile.

“Of course, but daddy could be waiting for you at the primary school, couldn’t he?”

“Oh, yeah. Dad’s car’s grey.”

“Thank you.” The sister might be the youngest and least sympathetic, but at least she hadn’t lost her head.

“Jack and I don’t have any problems,” Mrs Ward said. “It won’t be anyone we know.”

“All right.” Sally closed her notebook and signalled to Kenwood.

“What happens now?” Spandex Lady remained determined to question everything.

“I’m afraid we have to be patient.” Sally made sure she had Mrs Ward’s attention. “We’ll pass all this information to the senior officers coordinating the search, and my colleague and I will check this building and the surroundings.”

“Why?” Mrs Wysoki joined the offended opposition alongside Mrs Ward’s friend.

Sally sighed. A bit of trust would be appreciated. “We have to check every possibility. Simon might not have seen what he thinks he saw.”

“Simon doesn’t tell lies.” Mrs Wysoki jutted out her chin.

Sally spread her hands. “You’re right. I’ve got a nephew about Dillon and Simon’s age. He hasn’t got a dishonest bone in his body.” *Until he does something naughty.* She’d keep that to herself. “I’m sure Simon’s the same, but sometimes my nephew gets things mixed up. What if Simon saw another boy and thought it was Dillon? He didn’t see who took Dillon away, and I’d have thought if your son went against his will, Simon would have seen them getting Dillon into the car, don’t you think?”

Mrs Ward nodded.

“So, Detective Constable Kenwood and I will make sure Dillon isn’t under a table having a snooze, eh?”

At that moment, a small boy in a Superman shirt burst into the day care centre, followed by a tiny woman waving her arms.

“Dillon!” Mrs Ward swept her son into her arms.

Spandex Lady bristled at the newly arrived woman. “What did you do to him, Kendra?”

“Nothing, nothing,” Kendra gaped in horror. “He just turned up in the back seat. They broke into the music on the radio to say a boy had gone missing from Big Bear, and I was so worried thinking it might be my Lacy, which of course it couldn’t because it was a boy, but I almost drove off the road. Then I heard *giggling*, so I stopped, and *he* jumped up.” She shoved a palm towards the boy being smothered in kisses.

Spandex Lady turned on the detectives. “Aren’t you going to arrest her?”

“On what charge?” Sally asked.

“Kidnapping!”

“But she brought Dillon back.”

Spandex Lady turned on Kendra. “Did you even bother to put him in the car seat?”

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It took fifteen minutes to subdue the angry friend, get details from Kendra, the accused kidnapper, settle Mrs Ward and see her off with the huffy daughter.

“What do you think of that?” Sally asked Kenwood as they clipped their seat belts.

“The most ridiculous story I’ve ever heard.”

“So, we should take Kendra down to the station for questioning?”

Kenwood ground his teeth and concentrated on backing out of the disabled bay.

“What would you have done?” Sally asked. “Assuming it’s a couple of years time and you’ve learned to walk and chew gum.”

“The same. You did great. It might be unbelievable, but she was telling the truth.”

“You think so?”

He nodded. “Yes. I do.”

“I think so too. You’ve got good instincts — or we’re both idiots. Worst case, she’s a nutter who took the kid but changed her mind and brought him back. I’m not sure the Criminal Code covers that.”

“Unlikely she’d want to grab the boy. She’s already a mum. She’s got a kid at the centre.”

“Good thinking, but all the parents around here have heaps of money and Kendra’s new to the centre. What if she’s a professional kidnapper who’s placed a girl at Big Bear as cover?”

Kenwood glanced her way. “You *are* taking the piss, aren’t you?”

Sally laughed. “At least we’ll know where to look if another kid gets abducted.”

“What about that friend in the gym gear?” Kenwood asked. “And the little sister.” He chuckled. “My sister would have reacted exactly the same way if I got kidnapped.”

“A good judge of character, your sister, is she?”

Sally’s phone rang. The DI, so she took the call. “Hey, Boss. I called operations. We’ve cleared it.”

“No, you haven’t. Dillon Ward’s gone again.”

“What?”

“Big Bear Day Care just rang. The moment the other woman left, Dillon Ward disappeared again. They’ve searched the centre. He’s gone.”

Sally’s heart soared into her throat. Kendra was a nutter who kidnapped little boys, and she’d joked about it. She slapped Kenwood’s arm. “Turn around. Dillon’s gone missing again.”

Giggles erupted in the back seat.

Kenwood hit the brakes.

They both turned around to find Dillon Ward, crouched in the footwell grinning from ear to ear.

Sally fixed him with a glare. “Young man, *your* sister is a good judge of character. You *are* a menace!”

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