



'Fans of Martina Cole will love this' *Heat*

KEVIN LEWIS

**FALLEN  
ANGEL**

A D. I. Stacey Collins Thriller



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Friday

# Prologue

‘He won’t kill my little boy, will he?’

It was just before three on a sticky July afternoon, but, despite the stifling heat, all the windows in the small terraced house on the outskirts of Croydon were firmly closed, turning the living room into a makeshift sauna.

Christina Eliot’s voice cracked as she spoke. Her eyes bloodshot, desperately looking for signs of reassurance, she searched the blank faces of the four men in the pastel-coloured living room, but there was none to be found. Beads of sweat ran down her forehead, her face was pale and drawn, and her usually immaculate shoulder-length brown hair had clumped into sticky strands behind her ears.

David sat beside his wife, his thick-set features struggling to cope with the heat. Dark wet patches had formed under his arms and at the base of his spine. The other men in the room were not faring much better. When one had tried to open the window, Christina had immediately asked him to close it. She couldn’t bear to hear the happy sounds of the children – many of them Daniel’s friends – playing outside.

It had been a little more than forty-eight hours since her eight-year-old son, Daniel, had gone missing. The sheer horror Christina and her husband David had experienced when they realized their only son could not be

found had subsequently been replaced by an absolute and all-consuming terror when they discovered he had been kidnapped.

The first contact had been through a text message to Christina's mobile phone – a number Daniel had long ago learned off by heart in case of an emergency. I HAVE YOUR SON. CALL THE POLICE AND HE DIES. The message went on to provide a user name and password for a Hotmail account. At first they thought it was some kind of sick joke, until they logged on and found two messages sitting in the draft email section. The first contained a short video clip of a terrified Daniel in a bare room pleading for his mother. The second laid out the kidnapper's demands.

The instructions had been crystal clear: if Daniel's parents ever wanted to see their son again, they would have to pay a ransom of £25,000 and follow the kidnapper's rules to the letter. The drop-off was to be made by David Eliot on Friday. The money was to be in used bills with random number sequences, and under no circumstances were the police to be involved. A single slip or deviation from any of these instructions, and Daniel would die.

Why on earth would anyone kidnap their son? She was a secretary on thirteen thousand a year, he a mechanic on not much more. Their home was partly owned by a housing association, and Daniel attended the local state school. How could they be expected to raise £25,000? What sick bastard would do something like this?

During the next few hours they had maxed out their credit cards, borrowed from friends and family, and with-

drawn their small savings before finally requesting an urgent meeting with their bank manager. Their desperation to get hold of such a large sum of money and their refusal to leave the manager's office led to the police being called and the Eliots being escorted out of the building. It was at this point that Christina broke down and told the officers of the kidnap demand. Shortly afterwards an unmarked car carrying two plain-clothes police officers posing as insurance salesmen arrived at the door of their home.

With little money to give the kidnapper and fearing for the safety of their son, the Eliots soon agreed to let the police take over the case. Detective Chief Inspector Colin Blackwell, one of the officers posing as a salesman, had sat down with the parents and explained that, while he was not able to make any promises, in the entire history of the Metropolitan Police's Kidnap and Extortion Unit they had never lost a single soul and that they were not about to start now.

As for the money, Blackwell had produced £5,000 and suggested handing this over, along with a handwritten note from the mother explaining that this was all they could afford in the short term. It was a technique the police had used in the past to draw the kidnappers out, force them to engage in negotiations and therefore buy them more time to track down the victim.

Neither Christina nor David had been convinced. If Blackwell had access to a special fund for these kind of cases, then why not simply pay all the money?

DCI Blackwell had been in the force for nearly thirty years and had spent the last seven as the head of the

kidnapping unit. In his experience the whole thing stank of opportunism – the relatively small amount of cash being asked for pointed to someone desperate for money who had made the mistake of thinking this might be an easy way to get hold of it. Most of the cases Blackwell dealt with involved rival gangs kidnapping one another as part of their brutal turf wars. This was amateur hour. ‘Whoever did this is completely out of their depth,’ he reassured them. ‘We’re going to be ahead of him every step of the way.’

That had been on Wednesday. Since then a team of specialists from Blackwell’s unit, officially known as SCD7 (Specialist Crime Directorate), had begun to monitor all communications in and out of the Eliots’ house from the fifth floor of their high-tech base at New Scotland Yard. There had been daily emails containing more disturbing video images of Daniel and regular threats about what would happen to him if the kidnapper’s demands were not met. All they were waiting for were the final details of the drop-off.

At 3.08 p.m. Christina’s mobile rang. Everyone sat up as a charge of adrenalin shot through the room. They all looked at the phone as it vibrated on the glass coffee table. Christina turned to face Blackwell, who was already talking quietly down the phone to colleagues back at base. ‘Are you ready?’ he asked the person at the other end of the phone. When he received the acknowledgement he wanted, he nodded at Christina, doing his best to give a look of encouragement.

Christina picked up the phone and flipped it open. ‘Hello?’ Her voice was quiet, nervous.

At first the person on the other end of the line said nothing, and all she could hear was the sound of breathing – heavy, certainly, but slow, very slow. And then, at last: ‘Do you have the money?’ The man’s voice was deep, controlled and measured. It sent the same chill down her spine as it had when she heard it on the videos.

‘Yes.’

‘Good. Now listen carefully. Embankment underground station. There is a line of three telephone boxes on the left of the news-stand. The middle phone will ring at precisely 5 p.m. Your husband better be there to answer it.’

‘He will.’

‘You understand what will happen if he doesn’t make it.’

‘Yes, I understand.’

DCI Blackwell was drawing letters in the air with his finger, signalling for Christina to ask the kidnapper a specific question, one she could only barely bring herself to say out loud.

‘How do I know . . . how do I know that you haven’t . . .’

The kidnapper grunted, and Christina heard the sound of his hand closing around the bottom of the phone’s handset. Suddenly the sound of breathing was gone, replaced by a new, lighter voice. A scared voice. The voice of a small child.

‘Mummy?’

‘Daniel? Daniel! I’m here, my darling . . .’

But the boy was gone, and the kidnapper was back on the line. ‘I’ll be watching. If I see any sign of the police, any sign of a trap, if you deviate from my instructions in

the smallest way, the next time you see your son, he'll be in a box.'

Christina felt her stomach twist. 'He's just a little boy,' she sobbed.

But there was no response. The line was already dead.

As Christina was being comforted by the family liaison officer, Blackwell was still on the line to New Scotland Yard.

'Do you have anything?'

He could hear the sound of fingers frantically tapping against a keyboard before he got his answer. 'Mast 2275. Elephant and Castle. Phone's a Sony Ericsson K750i, unregistered.' Another pause, more finger tapping. 'The phone's moving south. Requesting CCTV coverage. Wait. The signal is gone. Battery's been taken out. I'm sorry, sir, we've lost him.'

There was something about the call that set Blackwell's mind racing. The kidnapping unit had the ability to trace phones even when they had been switched off – unless the battery was removed. Very few people knew about this, and yet the kidnapper had taken out his phone's battery, ensuring that this could not be done. The incident left Blackwell unsettled in a way he had never been throughout his whole career. Maybe this guy wasn't such an amateur after all.

Blackwell chased the thoughts out of his mind and refocused his attention on the delivery of the ransom money. Despite the kidnapper's demands, David Eliot would not be making the drop. Instead a member of Blackwell's team would go in his place. Earlier, DCI

Blackwell had explained to the parents that in every case of this kind, the point at which the kidnapper attempted to collect the money was when he became the most vulnerable. It was their best chance of catching whoever was responsible.

David and Christina stood by the living-room window, neither touching the other, as they watched Blackwell and his team head off for the vicinity of the drop-off site. All that was left of the unit was the family liaison officer. Blackwell had seemed calm, confident and more than a match for whoever had taken their son.

They couldn't help but feel confident that Daniel would be home soon.

The waiting was the worst part. The agony and uncertainty seemed to go on for ever. At first Christina and David sat in silence, watching the hands of the cheap carriage clock that sat on their mantelpiece drift slowly around its face. When Christina could bear it no longer, she opened the laptop computer that had been sitting on the coffee table.

David stood up and looked down at her, the horror visible on his face. 'Jesus fucking Christ, not again,' he raged. 'Just leave it alone.'

'I want to see my son,' she said, her voice wavering dangerously. 'I need to see my son.'

Christina pressed a few keys, and the screen was suddenly filled with a dark, grainy video clip, along with the sound of a key unlocking a door. The room was dimly lit by a bare bulb hanging from the centre of the ceiling. The camera shook as its operator walked in, but when it stopped, the screen was filled with the image of Daniel

lying on a stained mattress that had been thrown into the far corner of the room. His eyes were red from crying, but the look of exhausted terror on his face made him almost unrecognizable, even to his mother.

It was the second of three videos the kidnapper had sent, a new one every day as stark proof that the boy was still alive, each one tormenting the parents further.

Christina didn't know how many times she had watched them, paused them and examined them closely in an attempt somehow to feel closer to her son. She had observed, even in the poor light, how dirty his face had been, how his lips, normally so pure and angelic, seemed red and raw. At first she could not work out why this should be, but then DCI Blackwell had gently explained that the marks were mostly caused by pulling off the tape that had been used to silence him. Her son gazed into the camera without saying anything, and it was almost as though he was looking directly at her. She stretched out her hand and touched her fingers to the screen, gently caressing the image of Daniel's cheek.

The man behind the camera spoke in a voice lacking in any emotion. 'Say something.' You could read nothing into it – God knows she had tried. And at New Scotland Yard they had tried even harder, listening for any outside noise – a bus, a plane, anything that would help to narrow down the search. Christina held her breath, knowing with such pain what was about to happen but unable to tear her eyes away.

'Say something, Daniel.' She whispered the words under her breath in an unconscious echo of Daniel's captor. She continued to watch as the camera moved

closer to her son. His eyes winced as a hand appeared in front of him. It dealt him a quick but brutal blow on the side of the head, jolting the camera in the process. For a moment Daniel disappeared from the picture. There was a childish whimper, followed by the words that she had repeated so many times in her head: 'No. Don't hit me again. I want my mummy.'

She knew she was playing into the kidnapper's hands, yet Daniel's agonized words were her only source of comfort, her only contact with her missing son. This time, however, as they replayed yet again, her husband slammed his fist on the table. 'For fuck's sake,' he said through gritted teeth. 'Turn it off.' But it was too late. The video finished there, stuck on the final frame of Daniel lying face down on his bed.

David got up and stormed out of the room, leaving the family liaison officer to comfort his weeping wife. By the time he returned, clutching a glass of scotch, Christina was sitting rigid on the sofa, her pale, drawn features transfixed once more by the hands on the carriage clock. Her lips moved as she silently counted off each second. As she reached 5.03 and fourteen seconds, her phone rang. Instantly alert, her heart in her mouth, she snatched it off the table. 'Do you have him?' she said breathlessly, expecting to hear Blackwell's voice on the other end of the line.

She was coldly interrupted. 'Be quiet,' said the voice with its subdued authority. 'If you speak again, I will hang up.' The man paused to allow his ultimatum to sink in. 'You've failed to follow my instructions,' he said flatly.

Daniel's mother started to feel dizzy, as though her

mind had suddenly been divorced from her body and she was experiencing the conversation from another place.

‘I told you what would happen.’

A choked sob escaped Christina’s lips. It was like no sound she had ever made before.

‘You know exactly what this means.’

Christina’s body started to bend over, almost as though there were physical pains in her abdomen that were making her do so. She knew, with a dreadful certainty, what she was about to hear.

‘Daniel is going to die.’

The line clicked dead, Christina dropped her phone, and an awful, inhuman scream filled the room.

# I

Father Patrick Connelly, the stooped and elderly incumbent of the church of St Andrew's in Peckham High Street, was uncomfortably warm as he hurried along the path towards his place of worship.

The last service of the day was never particularly well attended, this being a part of London where gods other than his were worshipped, especially by the young. Friday night Mass had long seemed – Lord help him – something of a chore after the rest of the day's ministry. It was therefore one of the shortest of the week.

He looked up at the church as he approached. The white stone walls, rendered black by the fumes and dirt of London living, always saddened him, and he found it a relief to get inside, where the rich colours of the Victorian interior and the quiet dignity of the altar would fill him with the inner warmth that had comforted him ever since he joined the Catholic Church. Outside all seemed chaotic; inside was a place of peace.

The key to the heavy front door of the church was pleasingly large and chunky. It was a shame that he had to keep the place locked when it was unattended. While the gangs of youths that roamed the streets were happy enough to let him pass through their territory unmolested – he had no mobile phone and never carried enough money to make him a worthwhile target – they would

never be able to resist the temptation of the valuable ornaments within.

As Father Connelly inserted the key into the lock, the door swung open. His first reaction was one of horror. Had he really forgotten to lock up again? Eager to check whether his mistake had allowed in any vandals, he headed for the light switches, his footsteps echoing gently off the stone floor. As he flicked on the first switch, the church filled with a faint electric hum and its front section lit up, revealing the ornate splendour. Nothing seemed out of place but there was an unusual odour in the air. It was a strong, metallic smell like nothing he had ever known. Father Connelly took a large lungful and tried to make it out as he continued to turn on the lights.

Then something in the centre aisle caught his eye. As he moved closer, he could see that it was a puddle of dark liquid. In front of it was a piece of paper. He bent down to pick it up and immediately recognized it as a page from the Bible. One passage had been underlined in what looked like red ink.

*By the disobedience of one man, many were made sinners.*

The text only barely permeated his consciousness, for, as he read, a drop of liquid hit the side of his cheek. He instinctively reached up to wipe it away, then stared hard at the sticky red stain that covered his fingers.

As he raised his head, another drop of blood fell on to his face.

Something was above him.

Hanging from the rafters was a body. Apart from the

bare feet, which pointed listlessly at the stone floor, it was fully clothed. The face had been horrifically disfigured with deep, diagonal slashes. One hand was missing, and the mouth hung open as if emitting a desperate, silent scream.

But it was none of these things that made Father Connelly turn to one side and retch over the wooden pews. It was not the death, or the blood, or the disfigurement that unsettled him so. It was the fact that the corpse hanging there so dreadfully above him was that of a child.

‘Holy Mother of God,’ he whispered to himself, making the sign of the cross with a trembling hand. He turned and ran as fast as his legs would carry him, stumbling occasionally in his robes as he tried to wipe the blood from his face, and screaming for help in a voice that echoed helplessly off the walls around him.

Stacey Collins could not remember how the argument had started – she was just desperate for it to end.

Her daughter, Sophie, was one of only three pupils from her school who had been selected to play at a gala concert later that evening at the Fairfield Halls in Croydon. Despite this, Sophie had not spoken to her mother since she had got home earlier that day, ignoring her in the way that only a twelve-year-old could.

They were sitting at the table in the kitchen eating pizza with Stacey's parents. Sophie had barely eaten a slice and was just playing with the rest. The silence grew more and more uncomfortable, until Stacey could bear it no longer.

She turned to face her daughter. 'What's wrong, Sophie?' Her voice, with its tinge of a South London accent, was calm.

Sophie continued to ignore her.

'Please, Sophie,' she persisted. 'We're trying to have a nice time together before the show starts.' But Sophie just shrugged without looking up at her mother and continued to play with her food.

'Are you ever going to talk to me?' The words came out a bit more fiercely than she had intended, yet Sophie continued to ignore her.

Sitting across the table, Stacey's own mother shot her

a disapproving look. ‘Just let her be. You’re always nagging at her.’

‘Thanks, Gran.’ The young girl’s voice was quiet and soft.

The four were cramped around the small kitchen table. Stacey’s father, John, was in his wheelchair, as he had been for the past twenty-two years. Her mother, Penny, spent far more time with Sophie than Stacey was able to. She was grateful for that – of course she was – but sometimes it felt, with her parents always around, as if she had never left home.

Sophie got down from the table abruptly. Her pizza was hardly eaten, and she managed to look somewhat guilty as she caught her mother’s eye. ‘Where do you think you’re going?’ Stacey asked.

Sophie scuffed her way to the door before replying, ‘My room.’

‘What about the rest of your dinner?’

‘Not hungry,’ Sophie called back, already slamming the door to her bedroom.

The irony of the situation wasn’t lost on Stacey. She was a detective inspector within the Met’s murder squad whose work involved tracking down and capturing some of London’s most dangerous criminals. She could square up to a drug-crazed killer any day of the week. So why couldn’t she get a twelve-year-old kid – her own daughter no less – to do what she wanted?

As these thoughts ran through her head, her mother made her way upstairs to see Sophie, while her father manoeuvred his way uncomfortably around the kitchen until he was beside her. Something about his bulky wheel-

chair always made whatever room he was in seem smaller than it actually was. She always noticed the look of desperate concentration on his face as he tried to propel himself to wherever he wanted to be; she had to fight the urge to rush over and help him. That would never do. He hated not being able to do things for himself and was stubborn in his insistence on maintaining what independence he had.

As he drew the wheelchair alongside Stacey, the familiar fragrance of his cheap aftershave reached her nose. Ever since he had been confined to the wheelchair, he had taken the same care in his presentation as he had beforehand; he couldn't afford much, but, as he always said, when you lose your dignity, you lose your self-respect. And if he lost his respect, it would be the end of him. 'Watch how you talk to your mum,' he said softly. 'She's only trying to help.'

'I know, Dad. I'm sorry. It's just Sophie. She's like this all the time at the moment. I wish she could be a bit . . .' She struggled to find the word. 'Nicer,' she said, her voice barely masking her frustration.

'Like mother, like daughter,' he observed pointedly. 'Don't forget that when you were her age, you gave us just as much back-chat, if not more. Your mother and me thought you'd be spending your fifteenth birthday in borstal.'

Stacey smiled, even though she knew her dad wasn't joking. A silence fell between them again. 'Are you coming back to stay the night after the show?'

'No, love. We'll go home. I didn't bring my pills. Anyway, it'll be good for you and Sophie to spend some time together.'

‘I’m sure she’ll be thrilled.’

‘You’d be surprised,’ her father said, ignoring Stacey’s sarcasm. ‘You’ve hardly seen her for the last three weeks. She misses you. And I expect she’s nervous. It’s a big night for her.’

‘Well, she’s got a funny way of showing it . . .’ she started to say, before being checked by her father’s disapproving glance. ‘All right, Dad,’ she said with uncharacteristic humility. ‘I’ll go and see how she is.’

As her father moved aside to let Stacey through, they were distracted by a low buzzing sound. Stacey reached for the mobile on the kitchen worktop, flipped open the phone and answered it. ‘DI Collins,’ she said firmly.

She listened for a few moments. ‘I can’t. It’s my daughter’s gala concert tonight – surely there must be someone else?’ She continued to listen. ‘Okay,’ she said in a resigned voice, ‘I’ll be there in ten minutes.’ She turned to her father. ‘I’m sorry, Dad, I have to go.’

John just sighed as Stacey knelt down to him. ‘Please’ – she placed her hand on his arm – ‘please explain this for me – she’ll take it better from you than from me. I’ll try to get to the concert as quickly as I can.’ Stacey got up and kissed her father on the head.

‘Go and do what you have to do.’

‘I love you, Dad.’

‘I love you too, darling.’