



An airport worker accidentally uncovers a pedophilia ring operating through a Dutch airport. When his attempts to get help from the authorities fails, he struggles to smuggle a young victim to safety outside the country before they are both captured by either the police or the criminals.

Unaccompanied Minor:

One man's journey from bystander to anti-child trafficking activist

by Kitania Kavey & Claire Nagel

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KITANIA KAVEY & CLAIRE NAGEL

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UNACCOMPANIED
MINOR



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ISBN 978-1-64438-869-3

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

Unaccompanied Minor is a work of fiction. The incidents, dialogue, and all characters, with the exception of Rob Waterlander, are products of the author's imaginations or used fictitiously. However, child trafficking is not fictitious. For more information, there are organizations dedicated to recognizing and stopping child trafficking using airlines, as well as general anti-trafficking organizations located worldwide.

Printed on acid-free paper.

Booklocker.com, Inc.
2019

First Edition

Chapter One

Rob wasn't a man prone to introspection. It was not like him to brood like this as he sat stiffly, waiting for his next transport client.

He watched holiday travelers swarm through the airport, undeterred by the icy, windy weather outside which threatened to delay flights. Normally he felt at ease in the maze of cavernous white-tiled concourses lined with shops and glass walls that showcased the runways. Today the duty-free shops were garishly decorated with Christmas-themed displays that made the overcast gray day outside seem even more dismal to him.

Rob's electric cart was parked across from the gate where a flight from Delhi was due to arrive. He sat up a little straighter, as if that might strengthen him against his emotional disquiet. He wanted very much to return to his usual calm, detached state. But that glimpse of a

young girl skipping down the concourse kept popping back into his mind. She looked so like his daughter – at least how she had looked a few years ago. Maaika had always been daddy's girl, greeting him each time he returned home with exuberant smiles and kisses. He missed her so much.

It had all fallen apart, the family he'd assumed would always be there. His life was quite different back then. He worked in construction, handling sales. That job afforded him a nice lifestyle. Sure, it kept him on the road a lot, but it more than paid the bills. It never occurred to him that his wife was not satisfied. After all, he'd bought her a house and didn't complain all that much about her frequent spending sprees.

Then, out of the blue, she left him for a man who could buy her a bigger house, even more baubles, more shoes, more skirts and blouses and dresses and jewelry and other frippery. The worst of it was that she had taken his children, luring them away with promises of more stuff. His son was a bit older then, just starting high school, and a carbon copy of his wife - easily seduced by the prestige money could give him with his shallow friends.

While his son had gone along with his mother and refused to have contact with him, Maaika, who still had the angelic innocence of a child, wanted to keep in touch. They had exchanged emails and the occasional call at first, but his ex-wife finally managed to drive a wedge between them and all contact had stopped. Somehow she made it seem that the family falling apart was entirely Rob's fault. He had not paid enough attention to her or the children, spent too much time away from home, didn't provide enough luxuries, and on and on. Now he had not seen his children in over two years! He felt like he was missing a piece of his soul, and today that loss weighed on him even more than it normally did.

He tried again to rein in his thoughts. The ruling on their contentious divorce had favored his wife, who sold the family home and kept custody of the kids. He moved out and gave up his old job, trying in his own way for a fresh start. He'd been good at sales once, but after the divorce, his self-confidence was shattered. He closed himself off and had tried to shutter his emotions in order to get through each day since then.

Now he had a small but decent apartment and a job as a passenger assistant that suited him fairly well,

except for the money, of course. But with only himself to provide for, it was adequate. By adhering to a strict budget and living a simple lifestyle, he had even managed to put aside a few extra Euros.

His job required only that he be competent and reliable, and cordial during the time it took to ferry his clients from one part of the airport to another. He could slip cordiality on like a raincoat when it was required, and peel it off again when it was no longer needed. Since there was a strict no-tipping policy, he didn't have to worry about schmoozing, he could just keep everything cool and polite.

Rob found the work satisfactory, and his performance reviews were decent. For the rest, he had built up a wall around his emotions, and had long ago stopped trying to analyze what had gone wrong in his marriage. The only thing that he couldn't mute was the guilt that maybe he could have done something differently.

The flight from Delhi arrived and there was no time now to continue brooding over the past. Rob smoothed his unwrinkled uniform and straightened his I.D. badge. Nearing his fifties, he had held on to a trim physique.

Unaccompanied Minor

Time had worn a few lines into his face, but he kept his head shaved smooth to conceal a receding hairline and graying hair. He looked okay for his age; in fact, his only complaint was that he was shorter than average. One might not have noticed his height in another country, but the Netherlands generally had a taller population than the rest of the world. Nevertheless, he didn't stand out in a crowd for reasons either good or bad, and that suited him just fine.

The ground staff only paid attention to his uniform and I.D. badge, which was clearly visible hanging from a cord around his neck. They waved him through without a word. Rob entered the plane to pick up an unaccompanied minor, glancing at his PDA to check the details: a ten-year-old girl, Naima Gupta. He'd best be prepared for a cranky kid after such a long flight.

The blue seats with bright red accents filling the cabin did nothing to chase away the somber weather glowering through every window. Rob caught the attention of the head stewardess in the central galley. He'd worked with Anna before and found her to be efficient. She was well-kept and pleasant enough to look at, but the Nordic type did not interest him. Since his divorce, he hadn't been interested in anyone.

“You've got a U.M. for me?” He didn't bother with polite formalities, and reserved idle pleasantries for the clients.

“Yes, a young lady.” Anna was a multi-tasker and also economical with words. She handed him the girl's documents and gestured towards the rear of the cabin.

There were a few remaining passengers who were still retrieving luggage from the overhead bins.

Rob craned his neck to see past the stragglers to the spot Anna had indicated. That had to be her – the exotic-looking kid clutching a small pink backpack. She was sitting silently with her eyes closed, and looked younger than ten. He checked the documents in his hand to confirm the girl's passport and information were in good order.

Anna touched his sleeve and changed her tone to sound a bit warmer. “It's Rob, isn't it? Could you do me a favor?” She smiled automatically, as she had to thousands of passengers on hundreds of flights, a smile that didn't reach her cool blue eyes and icy blonde hair.

Unaccompanied Minor

“Sure.” He was still thinking that the girl looked younger than ten.

“There's an older woman who also needs assistance. Would you mind? I'll bring her to you.”

It wasn't said as a question, really, and Rob answered, “No problem,” only out of habit.

Anna had already moved off towards the front of the plane, and Rob approached the child at the rear. She was thin, but her face still held the roundness of baby fat. She had thick dark hair, worn in a single loose braid. She sat very still, but somehow seemed to be at attention, her body in no way relaxed or slumped as one might expect from a sleeping child. “Hi there, Naima. I'm Rob.”

As he spoke her name, her eyes flew open. They dominated her face, huge and black. And full of... fear. Thinking he had startled her, he reached out a hand and said, “It's all right, I'm here to take you to your family.”

She stared at him for a moment. She had a dreamy look about her, as though she were half-asleep. Perhaps she had been asleep and had a nightmare?

Rob continued to hold out his hand in what he hoped was a non-threatening manner. Neither of them moved, and the sound of the wind blustering outside seemed to fill the cabin. Then, resignedly, she took his hand and stood up. She wore a short denim skirt and a light jacket more suitable for a tropical climate.

“Is your carry-on in the overhead bin?”

She appeared puzzled by his question. He almost always chose to speak in English instead of Dutch, and while he had conversational ability in German and French, he doubted either would be helpful if she only spoke one of the Indian dialects.

“Do you have a suitcase? How about a coat?” He made a few pantomimes to try to make things clearer for her.

She shook her head and clutched her backpack. She shook her head even more vehemently when Rob offered to carry it for her. Hopefully she at least understood his intentions.

He took a step back and she moved unsteadily into the aisle ahead of him. Surely she must have brought

Unaccompanied Minor

more with her than just the little backpack. He could see there was a design on it, some sort of animal character. As he ushered her toward the exit he was reminded of Maaika's first day of school, so long ago now. She had also worn a little backpack, black with a red ladybug on it, from what he recalled.

Naima wanted to run, to try once more to escape, but she sensed that this was not the time.

The fear welled up again. She'd been walking home from the potato fields where she had done a good day's work. She'd been proud of herself. She had harvested eight big bags! Soon she would be home and helping her mother prepare the family supper. Sure, she was tired, but she was happy.

She didn't think much of it as the car approached down the dusty road until it pulled up alongside her. Without warning, a man came out of the car, grabbed her, clapped his hand over her mouth and dragged her into the car. She'd struggled, but then there was the prick in her arm. Things were pretty hazy from then on.

There was a long car ride, confusing images of city streets, and confinement in a small room. There was a

mean, angry-looking woman telling her with gestures that she must eat the plate of strange food and drink the bitter tea provided once a day. Pure terror as a man's rough hands pushed her legs apart, and then the pain. Later—how much later?—another car ride. The woman dragging her along through the airport where everyone spoke a language she did not understand.

Finally on the plane, and blessedly alone for the first time in many days, she'd slept as much as she could, waking only to eat the food brought by the nice woman in the pretty uniform.

As her mind began to feel less foggy, she figured out that it had been the bitter tea that made her feel so confused and out of it. If she was ever going to be able to escape she would need to think clearly. So she hid two bottles of water and a couple packages of snacks in her backpack. For now, she would play along and pretend she was still the sleepy, obedient little girl.

When they reached the galley area, Anna had already returned with a very short, slightly rotund Indian woman dressed in a beautiful sari. She had a winter coat under one arm and was clutching a can of soda along with her large purse in the other. A well-

worn carry-on suitcase rested at her feet. “Mrs. Leek, this is Rob. He will make sure you get through customs, help you get your luggage and escort you to your waiting party.”

Mrs. Leek smiled up at Rob coquettishly, then, noticing the child, bent down and spoke to her sweetly in rapid Hindi. Naima just stood there mutely, still looking half-asleep. Rob wondered if Naima understood anything going on around her, and hoped the pantomiming would keep working, especially if Mrs. Leek also wasn't fluent in English.

Rob nodded a cursory goodbye to Anna, picked up Mrs. Leek's carry-on and shepherded her and Naima off of the plane and to his cart. Mrs. Leek settled herself immediately into the front passenger seat, so Naima climbed automatically into the back seat, hanging tightly onto her backpack. Rob loaded the luggage, slipped into the driver's seat and took off smoothly.

The whole time Mrs. Leek kept up a steady stream of chatter. Since it was all in Hindi, Rob had no idea what she was saying, so he just nodded occasionally as he wove expertly through the airport. Naima also seemed not to understand a word that was said. That

apparently didn't bother Mrs. Leek one bit. She was cheerful and animated all the way through customs and baggage claim, a sharp contrast to Naima, who barely looked up and never uttered a word.

They left the electric cart at customs and proceeded on foot. Passenger Assistants could bring their clients to a priority customs agent, thus avoiding the long lines. Rob showed Naima's passport to the agent who gave it a cursory glance and a stamp. Mrs. Leek was also ushered through without delay. There was an extra fee for passenger assistance, but the convenience was well worth it.

Rob now carried Mrs. Leek's coat and small suitcase and he picked up a huge wheeled suitcase for her in baggage claim. Even with the crush of travelers he was adept at finding his way through the chaos without incident. He also managed to keep an eye on Naima, who followed closely, eyes downcast. She still had only her backpack, as she'd had no luggage to collect.

They wended their way through the throng towards arrivals, where a slew of welcoming families and friends waited excitedly. Suddenly, Mrs. Leek shrieked

and waddled swiftly toward a large group of Indian folks who were waving wildly. She had found her family.

Rob watched with a benign smile as the family embraced Mrs. Leek and showered her with kisses. He handed over her coat and suitcases, and then turned his attention to his other charge.

“It's Naima, right?” He tried to sound fatherly, comforting, but the child just stood there, clutching her backpack to her chest. He checked the paperwork again. Something still didn't feel right. This kid was too quiet. And where was her winter clothing, her luggage? He squatted down beside her. “Naima. Am I saying it right?” She nodded, eyes still downcast. Maybe she did get a few words in English. Rob tried again, remembered what was written on her UM form, but not sure if he would be able to pantomime what he wanted to ask. “Is your sister here to pick you up?”

That seemed to get her attention. She looked up and began to survey the crowd. When she saw two people step slightly forward and begin to wave toward Rob, she pulled back. She looked into Rob's eyes with what he interpreted as both fear and resignation. Still, she

said nothing and Rob could only squat there as the throng moved around them.

His back was slightly to the welcoming crowd, and he was able to surreptitiously recheck Naima's paperwork before he stood up. He was still facing Naima, but could see the couple in his peripheral vision.

The woman looked to be in her thirties and was bordering on obese, with a pale complexion and beady eyes. Her winter coat was grubby and seemed to be a style from a decade ago. Her makeup was gaudy and applied with a heavy hand, which did nothing to improve her appearance. The man with her was short, swarthy, and shifty-eyed, and kept himself partially concealed behind his partner.

The woman drew a piece of paper from her pocket, glanced at it, nodded to herself and then beckoned again to Rob. "Oi, 'ere we are," she called out. Her voice sounded brash and a bit too loud even in the din that filled the arrivals hall. She had a distinctly British accent, which in itself wasn't unusual in a Dutch airport, but it nevertheless rubbed Rob the wrong way for no reason he could put his finger on.

Unaccompanied Minor

Rob took Naima's hand without thinking and together they walked slowly toward the strange couple. There was no way these two characters could be related to Naima, but his paperwork mentioned a pickup from a sister. He tried to keep his misgivings out of his voice. "Hello, I'm Rob. I work for the Passenger Assistant Services. Are you Bertha Robbins, Naima's sister?"

"At's me, love."

"May I see your ID, please?"

This woman who could not possibly be Naima's sister, handed him an ID. He carefully matched the name on the card to his paperwork. "Okay, thanks." He returned the ID card. His job was done.

The swarthy man with the shifty eyes reached out and pulled Naima close, away from Rob. It was definitely not a welcoming hug. More like taking possession. Naima did not resist, but kept her eyes on Rob. Was she trying to tell him something? What should he do? Wanting to stall for just a little more time, Rob asked, "Naima didn't have any luggage checked?"

Bertha seemed to be about to answer, but was cut off by her companion.

“No.” said the man belligerently. His voice matched his gruff exterior.

“Just a short visit, then?” Rob knew he was overstepping his bounds, but the words just slipped out before he could stop them.

Bertha attempted to maneuver her bulk to block off more of the swarthy man and Naima from Rob's view, but they were all still standing closely, confined by the crowds around them. Rob caught a whiff of Bertha's unpleasant, sweaty body odor that she had attempted to conceal with some cheap body spray.

“Oh, no,” Bertha declared. “She'll be ‘ere a while. She can use my things.” The swarthy man gave her a nasty look and Bertha stopped talking abruptly.

“I see.” Rob tried to wipe the puzzled look off his face. He could not see how this chubby woman's clothes could possibly fit tiny Naima. Maybe the backpack contained all the toiletries a young girl might need, but certainly there wasn't room for even a couple

of changes of winter clothes. For goodness sake, the child's shoes were what looked like hand-me-down sandals, completely unfit for the weather outside.

“Is that all then?” snapped the man as he draped his jacket over Naima's thin shoulders. He glared at everything but Rob, never directly making eye contact. His voice also had an accent, but it hinted at an Eastern European origin, definitely not British. His fingers pinned his jacket tightly around Naima's shoulders and Rob could see that, unexpectedly, the man's hands were baby-smooth with clean and well-manicured nails.

Rob could not think of a way to stall any longer. He leaned over towards Naima. He really wanted to scoop her up and take her away from these unsettling people, but all he could think of to do was say, “Nice meeting you, Naima.” He hoped that she could hear him over the din and that she would understand. He was confused by his feeling of uneasiness and he had already breached the carefully controlled assistant/client code of conduct.

Naima's gaze dropped and she allowed herself to be pulled away. Rob stood stock still and watched as this implausible trio merged into the undulating crowd.

Then a voice interrupted his pensive thoughts. “Excuse me, I seem to have missed my party. Is it possible I could make an announcement over the loudspeaker?”

A neatly-dressed businessman required his attention. Inwardly Rob tried to silence his thoughts while he jolted his body into action. He pasted a generic, polite smile on his face. “Sure, come with me, please.” After a final glance toward where he had last seen Naima, Rob got back to the distractions of normal work. Nonetheless, for the rest of his shift and all the way on the train ride home, he could not get the sight of the terrified little girl out of his mind.

He knew there was something wrong. That woman could not possibly be Naima's sister. And that man - he'd never have allowed a man like that to touch his daughter. It made his skin crawl.

Naima kept up her pretended sleepiness as they walked through the airport. As soon as they stepped out into the wintry blast, she began to shiver. She had never experienced anything like this cold. Her thin little shoes and denim skirt afforded no warmth.

Unaccompanied Minor

Several times as they walked what seemed like forever across the parking lot to a car she stumbled and would have fallen had the nasty man not painfully jerked her upright. He unlocked the car and roughly pushed her into the back seat. He got in the driver's seat and the lady got in the front seat beside him.

As the car began to warm up and her teeth stopped chattering, Naima assessed her situation. The car door appeared to be locked. How to open it? If she did figure that out, could she open it, jump out and run away fast enough to escape? But then what?

Rob was still adrift in his thoughts when he arrived home. The orderliness and simplicity of his apartment usually had a soothing effect on him. Some people might call it stark or even sterile, but it suited him perfectly. There were no pictures to remind him of his former life, to cause the bitterness to rise in his throat. It was a place of calm, if not really of peace, with walls as blank as he wished his mind to be.

Tonight, however, as he prepared his dinner he kept thinking about Naima. She had pierced the armor he had so carefully built up to shield himself from the pain, anger, and resentment that simmered beneath the

surface, trapped there by past events. His body made dinner automatically, while he berated himself in his head.

“Put the kid out of your mind. You did your job. It's none of your business. Nothing you can do anyway. So what if that Bertha clearly wasn't blood-related to Naima? But the child had no winter clothing, and there was no way she could possibly use Bertha's clothes. What was this woman doing here, passing herself off as Naima's sister? STOP! Pull yourself together! You checked the documentation. The papers were all in good order. It's NONE of your business.”

Although he had not really convinced himself, Rob finished his supper and picked up a book on nutrition he had begun last week. It did not quite accomplish the purpose of quieting his mind, so he put it aside and instead prepared for bed. Routine always helped to settle him.

Finally under his covers with the sound of the wind muffled, he had the feeling he was wrapped in a cocoon, insulated and at last, quiet. The shell he had so carefully crafted was back in place.



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