

Above Suspicion

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Chapter One

Detective Chief Inspector Langton stared at the women's dead faces. All six of them appeared to have the same joyless, haunted expression. They were all of similar ages and worked in the same profession. The first victim on the file had been strangled twelve years ago.

It was six months ago that the last victim was found; she had been dead for at least eighteen months. Langton had been brought into Queen's Park to oversee the case. Without a suspect or a witness, he had begun to cross-reference the way the victim had been murdered, and subsequently discovered five identical unsolved cases.

He was certain that they had all been killed by the same person, but to date he had no clues as to who that person might be. It was turning into the most frustrating, dead-end case he had ever worked on. The only thing he was sure about, and that he and the profilers agreed on, was that there would be another victim.

Due to the length of time between each gruesome

discovery, there had been little media coverage. Langton wanted to keep it that way; hype and panic would do his investigation more harm than good, and police warnings usually had little effect on the prostitutes. Despite the Yorkshire Ripper being headline news for years, he was finally caught with a tart about to do the business in his car. Police warnings didn't mean much to the street girls when they needed money for drugs or rent, or their kids or their pimps.

Langton leafed through the latest batch of missing persons' files. A photograph caught his eye. 'Melissa Stephens', he read. According to the report sheet, she was seventeen. The photo showed a stunningly pretty girl with shoulder-length blonde hair and the sweetest of smiles. Compared to the other women on file, this girl looked like an innocent angel. How had the photo ended up in this folder?

Langton put the girl's details to one side and went back to the files of missing prostitutes in their late thirties and early forties. He studied the photos of their beat-up looking faces intently. He took note that many of the women in this file were European; some were Russian.

Langton's detective sergeant, Mike Lewis, interrupted his concentration. 'She doesn't fit the profile.' He leaned across the desk and picked up Melissa's photograph.

'Yeah, I know. That's why I put her to one side.'

At first, the team had concentrated their search on the local area, but now the net had spread to include Manchester, Liverpool and Glasgow. They were moni-

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toring missing persons for women with similar profiles to the victims. It was sick, but it was all Langton could do; a fresh victim might provide the vital clue that would lead them to the serial killer.

'Did you hear about Hudson?' asked Lewis.

'No. What about him?'

'He called in sick. He was taken to hospital. May be serious.'

'Shit! The Boss is already checking us out. We'll lose half the team if we don't get a result soon.'

'He might be out for a while.'

Langton lit a cigarette. 'Get someone in to cover him, and fast.'

'OK.'

An hour later Lewis placed half a dozen folders on Langton's desk.

'Christ! Is this all you could come up with?' Langton complained.

'It's all they've got.'

'Leave them with me. I'll get back to you.'

Lewis shut the door and went back to his desk. Langton started to glance through possible replacements for Hudson. The first file belonged to an officer he had worked with before, and didn't get along with. He opened the next one.

Detective Sergeant Anna Travis's file was certainly impressive. After graduating from Oxford University in economics she had done the usual eighteen weeks' training at Hendon, then taken a uniform posting with a response team. Towards the end of her probationary

period she had been attached to the local borough CID Robbery and Burglary Squad before switching to the Crime Squad. A memo from her superintendent underlined in red that Travis was a very 'proactive' officer.

Langton flicked through the rest of her CV with less interest. Travis had moved quickly up to the Home Office's High Potential Scheme. The list of attachments she had covered made him smile: robbery, burglary, CID, Community Safety Unit. About the only thing she hadn't worked on yet was a murder team, though he noticed she had applied three times without success.

He was beginning to feel his age. Slightly depressed, he read on. The glowing recommendations from her superiors he took with a pinch of salt; he needed someone with street knowledge and initiative, not just an impressive CV. It was the last paragraph that seized his attention. He straightened up as he read the words: 'Anna Travis is the daughter of the late Detective Chief Superintendent Jack Travis'. Langton started tapping the file thoughtfully with his pen: Jack Travis had been his mentor.

In the outside office, Mike Lewis answered the phone promptly. Then put his head through the open door of Langton's room.

'Gov?'

Langton looked up from his desk, distracted. 'Who is it?'

'Wouldn't say. You want to take it or not?'

'Yeah, yeah,' said Langton, reaching for the phone. 'Stay.'

Mike leafed through some paperwork while Langton spoke tersely: 'How old? Who's on it? OK, thanks. Get back to me. I appreciate it.'

Langton put the phone down. 'Body just found on Clapham Common. I don't think it fits with any of ours – she's young, apparently – but they're only just on the callout.' He rocked back in his chair thoughtfully.

'Mike, do you know DCI Hedges? Crew-cut, square head, and full of himself?'

'Yeah. A right arsehole.'

'It's his case, his area. I want you to stand by. If we get any more details I might want to crash in on it.'

Lewis looked at the photos spread out on the desk: 'Are you thinking maybe it's the missing angel?'

'Maybe.' He held out a file, and stood up. 'Get this Anna Travis on the team.'

'What, the rookie?'

'Yep.'

'She's never been on a murder team.'

Langton shrugged himself into his coat. 'Her father was Jack Travis. Maybe taking on his penpusher of a daughter will be good karma.'

He stopped at the door. 'Anyway, rate we're going, we might not even have a case. If the chief puts them all on file, we'll be stuck with a skeleton team until they've all been shelved and sent over to the dead file warehouse. G'night.'

'Night.'

Lewis returned to his desk in the incident room and dialled Anna Travis's number.

By quarter to eight the next morning Anna Travis was sitting in a patrol car speeding to the murder site. Although all she had been told was that she was replacing an officer on sick leave, Anna was excited to be finally working in the field for which she had trained so hard.

With Anna in the patrol car were Lewis and another seasoned detective, DC Barolli. Mike Lewis had square shoulders, and a body running to fat. His round face and red cheeks gave him a look of perpetual good humour. Barolli was smaller, with dark, Italian looks but an East London accent.

As they drew up to the Clapham Common parking area, she noticed the presence of the forensic van, and numerous unmarked cars. Although police cordons allowed no one but officers entry, an exception was made for the catering van which was already in place and serving pies and sandwiches to the teams setting up the base.

What surprised her was the lack of a sense of urgency. Lewis and Barolli went straight from the car to 'Teapot One' to get some coffee. Unsure of the procedure, Anna just hovered nearby. When she looked further across the common towards the yellow ribbons cordoning off the car park, she could see white-suited forensic officers moving around.

'Is this the murder site?' she asked Lewis.

'Pretty obvious. Yeah.'

'Shouldn't we go and sort of make our presence known to DCI Langton?' she said hesitantly.

'You had your breakfast, then?' Lewis asked.

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'Yes, before I got the callout.' Actually, she'd had just a cup of black coffee; she had been too nervous to eat. Anna waited while Lewis and Barolli queued up for their bacon sandwiches. They made short work of them, after which the three began to make their way to the murder site. Anna let them lead, deliberately falling behind. After eight hundred yards, they slithered down a sloping bank. She noticed both officers tense up. Lewis removed a handkerchief from his pocket and shook it out; Barolli unwrapped chewing gum.

They approached a group which stood by a clump of trees in a small hollow. There the forensic officers were kneeling or moving deliberately around the area. Anna stepped onto the duckboards placed strategically along the muddy incline. Though the two detectives nodded towards various people, no one spoke. The quiet was unsettling. Then it hit her. The smell was like dead flowers left too long to rot in water, when their stems become soggy and discoloured. Soon it was overpowering.

'You took your time,' DCI Langton barked at the two detectives. He turned to light a cigarette and she saw a tall rangy man in a forensic-issue white paper suit, five o'clock shadow already breaking the surface of his angular chin. Langton had a hawk nose and hard piercing eyes which made it difficult to meet his gaze. Neither detective answered him now, both turning to look instead towards the white tent which had just been erected. Langton inhaled deeply, then the smoke streamed from his nostrils.

'Is it a possible?' she overheard Lewis ask his superior quietly.

'Yeah. But you watch. The dickhead in charge is going to hang on to the case if we can't prove it – and fast.'

Now Langton's gaze fell on Anna. He stared unapologetically at her.

'You the new DS?'

'Yes, sir.'

'I knew your father. Good man.'

'Thank you,' she said softly.

Detective Chief Superintendent Jack Travis had retired two years ago, only to die from cancer six months later. Anna still missed him terribly. She had adored her generous, loving and supportive father, and it was a source of grief for her that he was gone before she made it in plain clothes. She felt that grief even more keenly now that she was on the Murder Squad which had become such a prominent part of his adult life. His nickname had been 'Jack the Knife', for his ability to cut through the dross. More than anything, Anna wanted to be as successful as Jack Travis.

The smoke trailed from Langton's cigarette as he pointed to the tent. 'I think it might be our angel, the missing girl.' He headed towards the open tent flap. 'Want to take a look?' he asked Anna over his shoulder.

Lewis and Barolli were given white paper suits and overshoes so as not to contaminate the area. 'They're short of masks,' Langton explained as he delved into a cardboard box and handed Anna her suit packet. 'Gown up, then keep to the duckboards.' He squeezed the butt of his cigarette, placing it in his pocket.

Anna hastily opened the packet and removed her

paper suit. She hauled it up over her skirt and jacket, then closed the Velcro, which stuck to her tweed jacket. As she balanced on one foot and then the other to fit the overshoes over her low-heeled court shoes, she kept taking deep breaths to ward off the strong stench, breathing through her mouth in short sharp intakes, then hissing out the air.

Behind her, she was aware of one officer grumbling to another.

'What's he doing here; this isn't his turf, is it?'

'No, but he wanted to take a look. He's handling that dead-end case over at Queen's Park. Cheeky sod; I'd like to know how he got here so fucking fast. Plus he's got those two goons with him. Don't know who he thinks he is. DCI Hedges is going apeshit.'

When Anna stepped into the tent, she remembered what she'd been told: no training ever prepares you. They can show you mortuary shots, you can discuss post mortems (she'd even been present at one), but not until you confront your first real corpse does the impact hit you. They always say it's the first one that stays with you for the rest of your career.

'You think it's her?' she heard Lewis whisper.

'Maybe,' Langton said. 'Right age, right colouring.'

'She's been here for a while.' Barolli was sniffing with disgust. 'In pretty good shape, though. No decomposition. It's the bad weather. She's been covered in snow, but yesterday was a freak day, almost seventy degrees.'

While Langton chatted with his two detectives, Anna edged across the duckboards to move closer.

'We think she's maybe a student, reported missing six

weeks ago,' Langton broke off mid-conversation to explain to Anna, 'but we won't know for sure until they've done the post mortem.' He turned back to address his detectives. Langton became a blur; she could see his lips moving, hear him faintly, but as those in front parted ranks to give her a clear view of the corpse, Anna wanted to vomit. Now she was close up, the stench was thick and heavy, worsened by the confines of the tent.

The victim lay on her back, her long, blonde hair splayed around her head. Her face was swollen, her eyes sunken and crawling with maggots, which explored her nostrils and fed in her mouth, squirming and wriggling: a sickening, seething mass. Around the girl's neck was what looked like a black scarf. It had been knotted so tightly her neck was ballooning. The victim's skin tone was bluish and puffy. Her arms were behind her back, her body slightly arched. Her T-shirt had been drawn up over her breasts, her skirt pushed up around her belly. Both legs were spread-eagled, one shoe on, the other close to her side. The knees were scraped and the bloody scratches were covered in flies and maggots, which clustered all around the body. Rising above it was the buzzing sound of bluebottles. Bloating by their feeding frenzy, they clung to the detectives' white suits.

'This weather's got them out early,' Langton said, swatting a fly off his suit.

Anna could feel her legs start to buckle. She breathed deeply, trying hard not to faint.

'Let's go.'

Langton watched Anna stumble ahead of him,

desperate to get out of the tent. He knew exactly what was going to happen next. She made it as far as a tree and stood there retching. Her stomach heaved while her eyes streamed tears.

The other two detectives were stripping off their white suits and dumping them in a waste disposal bin provided.

'See you back at the car park,' Langton called out, but Anna couldn't lift her head.

When she finally joined them, they were sitting on a picnic bench. Langton was eating a sandwich and the others were drinking coffee. Anna's face was almost as blue as the dead girl's as she perched on the edge of the bench.

Langton passed her a paper napkin.

'Sorry,' she murmured, wiping her face.

'We'll get over to the station. Nothing much we can do here; right now, she doesn't belong to us.'

'Sorry?' she said.

Langton gave a sigh. 'The little girl isn't ours. The local police called in the murder team for this area, so by rights it's their case, not mine. We're not allowed to take it unless we prove a connection. Fucking red tape! The arsehole in charge is a right little prick.'

'You still think it's the same bloke?' Lewis asked.

'Looks like it, but let's not jump to conclusions,' Langton said. She noticed Langton could smoke and eat at the same time. He was chewing his sandwich while smoke drifted from his nose.

Lewis persisted. 'Looks like the same bloke to me, way he tied her hands.'

Barolli chipped in. 'I agree.' Anna noticed he was still chewing gum. 'They only found her last night. How did you call us here so fast? You get a tip-off?'

'Heard the callout over the radio. Got here almost the same time as the SOCO lads.'

Lewis knew his gov wasn't telling the truth, because he'd been with him at the station when he had received the tip-off. It was obvious he was protecting his source.

'I've already had a run-in with DCI Hedges.'

Both detectives followed his gaze to the blond man getting coffee at Teapot One. Feeling their scrutiny, the man glanced their way before returning to his mug of coffee.

Anna wanted to say something, but felt too wretched even to attempt to string a sentence together. They drove towards the station. Queen's Park was a good distance from Clapham Common. The police station local to the murder site would automatically be setting up their own incident room.

Anna had never been to the Queen's Park station, so she had no idea where she was going when she followed Mike Lewis up one flight of stairs towards the incident room. The station itself was old and rundown; the walls of the stone corridors were painted in lavatorial green, as were the stone stairwells. The second floor had worn lino on the floors and paint peeling from the ceiling and walls. Numerous offices led off to glass-panelled doors, interview rooms, filing sections. There was a sense that things were up in the air, with filing cabinets left at various intervals down the corridor. It was all confusing

and bore no resemblance to the training manual, nor to workshops she'd been in at the college.

Barolli had disappeared to the toilet; she had no idea where Langton had gone.

'You're replacing Danny, aren't you?' Lewis panted as he reached the top of the flight of stairs.

'I think so,' she answered.

'He got some kind of stomach bug. One minute he was fine, next buckled up in agony. I thought it was appendicitis, but it's some intestinal bug. Did you know him?' Now Lewis was barging down the narrow corridor.

'No,' she said, trying to keep up.

Lewis reached double doors at the end and banged them open. The doors swung back and Anna would have been clipped if he had not grabbed a door in time.

'Sorry,' he said absent-mindedly.

Anna had not anticipated the number of people she found working on a case where the body had only just been discovered. Eight desks were lined up, four to four on either side of the room. The desks were manned by male and female uniformed officers and two clerical workers. There were stacks of filing cabinets, overflowing files and masses of paperwork. Running along the length of one wall was a whiteboard covered in dates and names scribbled with felt-tip pen by various hands. Besides this was the unnerving display of numerous mortuary and life shots of the different women.

On one desk was a missing persons file. Anna opened it and found herself staring at a photograph of a stunning-looking young woman, Melissa Stephens – age seventeen, last seen in early February. There was a

list including her eye colour, clothes she was last seen wearing and other details.

'Has the victim from this morning been identified?' she asked Mike Lewis. He was sitting on the edge of a desk, talking to one of the female officers.

'Not yet,' he replied over his shoulder, then went back to his conversation.

Anna moved along to the board to look at the other photographs. Side by side were six photographs of victims. Beneath them were descriptions, locations and ongoing enquiries. These women's faces were hard and old compared to Melissa Stephens, with tough-eyed stares.

'Are these all ongoing cases?' she asked Lewis.

He did not hear her as he was talking to Barolli, who had just arrived.

Anna continued reading. Each of the victims had been raped and strangled and their bodies dumped in various local beauty spots: Richmond Park, Epping Forest, Hampstead Heath. All of them had their hands tied behind their backs and they had all been strangled with their own tights.

'The victim this morning and all these victims – are these ongoing cases? I mean, are they connected?'

Barolli came over to join her. 'Hasn't anyone filled you in on why the governor got us out of bed so early this morning?'

'No. I was just called at seven to say I'd be joining Langton's team. Nobody's told me anything about the enquiry.'

'You're replacing Danny, aren't you?'

'Mike mentioned he was in hospital.'

Barolli indicated the victims' photos. 'This investigation has been going on for months; six months to be precise. Five of the cases are years old. Their cases were left on file, until the gov dug them up.'

'Six months?' she said, shocked.

'Yeah.' He jabbed the board. 'This was our most recent victim and by the time she was found, she'd been dead over a year. We started grouping them together a few months back: they've got the same MO, as you can see.'

'You mean it's the same killer?'

'We think so, though so far we've come up with fuck all. But if the stiff found this morning is connected, we might get some leads. There again, we might not and we won't get the case. The gov is really wanting it as we'll be bound to get more evidence with it being fresh.'

Then the swing doors banged open and all eyes turned towards Langton.

'It's Melissa. The dental records match.' Langton moved further into the room, which fell silent. He looked haggard, his eyes sunken and his five o'clock shadow was now even darker. 'They moved fast for us, but we'll have to wait for any further results. I'm going over to the lab now. Until we get those details, I won't know if I need to set up a strategy meeting with ACPO. Mike, you want to come with me?'

Feeling a bit like a schoolgirl, Anna raised her hand. 'Could I come too, sir?'

Langton gave her a slow, studied stare. 'You been to a post mortem before?'

'Yes.'

'You keel over on me and I'll send you packing, understand?' He pointed at Barolli. 'You handle things for me here. Anything they get in, we need to know immediately. Start up a board.'

Barolli's black stencil pen was in his hand as he looked at Melissa's photograph. He made a note of the dental records on the board as identification, then he wrote *Melissa Stephens* in large letters, *Victim 7*, with a question mark.

Langton sat in the front seat of the car, head leaning on the headrest, his eyes closed. Anna wondered if he was asleep. She leaned back, intent on keeping her mouth shut. Finally, he spoke. 'This will be a big media show. She's young and she was beautiful. I've got to convince the commander in charge of Pan London Homicide to award me the case. What we've been working on isn't exactly high profile – six old tarts, or old drippers as your dad used to call them, don't warrant *Crime Night* specials or reconstructions – but if they give it to me, I'll get the team I need and with the Holmes database to help, I'll get a result.'

Anna nodded, still a little confused. 'Thank you.'

Anna and Langton walked across the car park to the hospital. He knew exactly where he was going and walked fast, pushing doors vigorously without looking behind him, expecting her to make it through after him. Finally, they reached the mortuary, where Langton pointed to a door marked 'Ladies'.

'Gown up in there and then come straight through,' he said.

Anna tied a mask around her head, slipped her feet into overshoes and then tied the green ribbons of her protective gown. She entered the morgue, shivering. It was freezing cold.

Though recently modernized, the morgue had retained its Victorian tiles, though the swill area and the steel tables and equipment were up to date. At one table a group of assistants cut away the filthy, torn clothes from the corpse of a junkie found that morning. The floor was white tiled and slippery. A second table was empty, being swilled down with a high-powered water jet. On the third table, or 'slab', lay their victim, covered by a green plastic sheet.

While his assistant listed the victim's clothes, the pathologist, Dr Vernon Henson, spoke quietly to Langton. Anna watched as a black T-shirt and pink skirt were placed in an evidence bag for the forensic lab.

'No underwear?' Langton said quietly.

'No panties,' said Henson. 'But there's a bra. You probably want to have a look at the way it was tied.'

Langton gestured for Anna to move beside him as Henson was removing the plastic sheet from the body. It was at this moment that a gowned-up DCI Hedges walked in, snapping on rubber gloves. He glared at Langton. 'You still breathing down my neck, Jimmy? Or are you just here for the thrill?'

'I'm here, Brian, because if this girl is mine, you'll have to give her up.'

Hedges shrugged. 'You'll have to prove it first. Right now, this is my case. So, if you don't mind, butt out of my way.'