Dark Angel

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CHAPTER ONE

September 1948

North London

There was no shortage of greenery in the North London suburb of Wood Park. Sprawling trees and lush grass wherever you looked. Well-mown lawns in front of the houses. Playing fields for the children to run about in. Dappled woods nearby, reeking of leaf mould. The adults with enough wealth to buy homes here loved the fact that they were in London yet had so much space around them. Relished the social status that went with the mortgage.

For their older teenage offspring, however, the place bore a different image. Many felt stifled by the suburb. There was nothing to do. No pub or cinema for miles. No cosy gathering place where boy-girl relationships could fumble into life away from the inhibiting eyes of parents.

Two worlds. The adults coping with the aftermath of war, grateful to be living in peace, somewhere free of bomb damage. The young, aflame with hormones, longing for a new world filled with choice and excitement. A generation gap, which in some Wood Park homes was chasm-wide.

Then, on Tuesday, 14 September 1948, tragedy struck the community, uniting parents with their disaffected offspring in shared horror at what had been done to one of their own. At the epicentre of the crisis was the Sedley family, but the disaster gripped each resident, forcing them to confront the fact that an unspeakable evil had emerged within their idyll of a community.

The police had been called late the previous night, three hours after fourteen-year-old Sara Sedley had failed to reappear at her home for bedtime. Her mother was distraught, imagining the worst.

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'Probably at a friend's and forgotten to phone,' the pinched-faced detective suggested, trying to calm the situation. He'd recognised the girl's mother as Maureen Stuart who'd played a Spitfire pilot's wife in a war film he'd seen at the Odeon a couple of weeks back. A flighty character. With her husband shot down and locked up in Stalag Luft something-or-other, both his legs severed in the crash, she'd gone off on a dirty weekend with his best mate. A woman not to be trusted. Which was what the detective felt about women in general and actresses in particular. Temperamental creatures. Burdened with overactive imaginations. And the missing daughter, he guessed, was probably a similar type.

The Sedley family - Stuart was the actress's stage name - had of course already rung everyone they could think of. Sara's friends from school, the woman who ran the tap dancing class. But nobody had seen the girl.

Tom Sedley, Sara's stocky, fair-haired, seventeen-year-old brother, had found himself taking charge of the crisis when his younger sister disappeared. Their father, Michael, was in Manchester on BBC business, producing a play to be broadcast live the following night, and couldn't get away. His absence had added to their mother's hysteria. Tom coped with his own growing sense of panic by organising things - ringing people and touring the neighbourhood on his bike in case Sara was wandering about in a daze. His mother imagined that she might have tripped on a paving stone and banged her head.

Now it was an hour before sunset on the day after Sara's disappearance. She'd been missing for nearly twenty-four hours. The police had decided to search the parkland and woods bordering the suburb, rounding up volunteers to help. There'd been no shortage of takers. Most of the fathers weren't back from work yet, but some twenty mothers and older teenagers home from school were now spread in a line at the edge of the long grass which bordered the open space of the park. Each volunteer ten paces from the next.

Tom, slight of build and shorter than most of his peers, stood in the middle of the line, close to the police Inspector. His sister's disappearance had wrung him dry. At first he'd been angry at her for causing such anxiety. Much as he loved her, she'd become an attention-seeking flirt in the last few months. Recently he'd taken to growling warnings about her behaviour, saying she'd get into trouble if she didn't become more ladylike.

When midnight came last night he'd begun to fear the worst. In the hours of darkness he'd sat with his mother, waiting for the phone to ring or a knock at the door. He was angry at his father for not being there. He was often angry at his father. It was as if a wall stood between them. Or as though they were different species. The man was artistically pretentious, whereas Tom was down-to-earth. Unreliable as a parent when Tom wanted someone

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to depend on. There was no point of contact. They had little in common except blood.

And now it had come to this. A search.

'For what, exactly?' he'd asked, hoping to be fobbed of with some lie. But the policemen's faces were deadly serious. 'For anything,' they'd replied. 'Anything relevant.'

Tom had been close to tears several times that day, visualising just what sort of 'trouble' his sister might have got herself into. He knew a little about prostitutes. Had seen them plying their trade in Soho where he and his friend Marcus sometimes went to look at foreign films, dirtying their chins to look old enough to get membership of the clubs where they were shown. Some of the girls in Wardour Street had been young. Almost as young as him and Marcus. Was this how they got there? Kidnapped from the suburbs, indoctrinated with the tricks of the trade, then put up for rent by some swarthy thug?

Tom glanced up and down the line. Marcus was there, trying without much success to smile reassuringly at him. Marcus Warwick who lived opposite the Sedley house in the Close. The same age as him, Marcus had been Tom's closest friend for as long as he could remember. And next to Marcus, Binnie. Binnie Rowbotham, the tall, slender girl who lived next door. Columbine, her parents had christened her, a name which made her cringe if it was ever used accidentally by her friends. For Tom, Binnie epitomised what a female should be like. Considerate. Gentle. Caring. And with that indefinable air of mystery that made girls different from boys. She looked very tense today. Pale. Paler than usual, even. Everyone's face showing the anxiety they all felt. Everyone knowing it was twenty-four hours since Sara had last been seen walking out of the garden, telling her mother she was off around the corner to see a friend whose cat had just had kittens. Back in half an hour . . . She'd never arrived at her destination.

Tom Sedley's heart thudded like a steam hammer. Until they'd begun lining up for the search, he'd been able to kid himself that things would turn out all right. That there could still be some simple explanation for Sara vanishing. But the seriousness of what they were now doing filled him with dread. The blue-black uniforms. The grim faces as the Inspector quietly briefed his men. And an unspoken certainty in the minds of those around him that this could only end one way.

Tom gulped air, fighting to control his emotions. He'd been strong up to now because of the need to comfort his mother. But she wasn't with the search party, unable to cope with people staring at her tear-streaked face. Even at a time like this there was her image as a film star to consider. She was sitting at home being comforted by an actress friend with the help of a bottle of

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amontillado. Waiting for Tom to tell her that nothing untoward had been found.

Tom stared across the grass. In the middle of the park some two hundred yards away was a large clump of trees, known simply as 'the woods'. Neighbours walked dogs there. On the far side was a small amphitheatre where local amateurs performed Shakespeare in August. But above all, the woods were their territory, the playground for the boys of Wood Park. Rival gangs had formed when they were younger, each with their own camps amongst the trees and bushes, but with a common purpose. To keep out the girls. They'd spun their sisters stories about wild dogs, snakes, and old men in mackintoshes. When a few girls had dared venture in, they'd been hounded out with animal noises and wild charges from the bushes. In later years, when he and his contemporaries reached their mid-teens, the woods had become a place to smoke and to ogle pictures of bare-breasted women in the magazines left behind by the Americans who'd had a camp in the parkland at the end of the war.

And it was towards the woods that they would soon be heading. That male domain which Sara would never have entered on her own, but where Tom sensed this dreadful mystery would be resolved.

The police Inspector blew his whistle and raised an arm. Like a football referee, Tom thought. A hawk-faced ref. He caught Marcus's eye, saw his forced smile. Binnie's expression was a blank, her pale skin, round spectacles and small, thin-lipped mouth a mask of forced calm. The Inspector dropped his long, thin hand and they were off.

Tom noted how close Binnie was keeping to Marcus. He felt a little jealous of the attention she was giving him, despite being pretty sure his friend wouldn't respond to it. The two of them had often discussed Binnie behind her back, Marcus saying how unkissable she was, with her plain round face and owlish glasses. How with her flat chest and straight hips she looked more like a boy than a girl, a fact that didn't bother Tom particularly.

Binnie's crush on Marcus had emerged during the summer holidays. Tom worried that she would get hurt. There was a wild, almost dangerous side to Marcus which Binnie in her trusting way seemed unaware of. Tom feared she'd be damaged by Marcus. Robbed of the sweetness that he so prized in her.

Tom looked along the rest of the line, at all those other faces he'd grown up with but whose owners he hardly knew. For years he'd felt a misfit in the neighbourhood, and in the Sedley household. Mother a famous actress, father a drama producer, little sister a budding performer, dressing up and trying out greasepaint. The whole acting business bored him. Model aeroplanes, trains and crystal sets had been his own preferred playthings.

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He'd once overheard his mother describe him to a friend as dull. 'God knows where that one came from. Reads something called Practical Wireless, would you believe. I have the oddest of feelings he might've been switched at birth.'

In the last twenty-four hours, however, Tom knew he'd grown immeasurably in his mother's eyes. As they sat through the night in their living room, its walls hung with framed theatre posters, she'd told him he was 'mature beyond his years'. This, the reward for assuring her she wasn't to blame for Sara's disappearance. Telling her she was not a lousy parent. That, even if her work meant being away from them a lot, leaving them in the hands of au pairs, he and Sara had always liked the fact she had a glamorous career, because it set them apart from the crowd. Made them special, too.

Even to his own ears Tom had sounded grown-up last night. Coming out with the very words his father might have spoken if he'd been there.

'She's simply run away for a bit, Mum. Some silly girly reason. You know what Sara's like. She'll be back.'

But now, twenty-four hours later, he was ceasing to believe it.

During the morning, as news of Sara's disappearance spread, he'd seen it grip the neighbourhood. Passers-by slowed their pace and sneaked glances at the house, hoping to spot some famous face who'd come to give succour to the family. Despite what he'd told her, he hated his mother's fame for the rubbernecking it provoked.

The cul-de-sac where they all lived had been like a nest for him and his friends, a safe playground, which had made Sara's disappearance all the more shocking. A close community shattered. One of their young missing. Men in blue asking questions door-to-door, like in some 'B' movie. The stir caused had been the first real disturbance to the calm of the place since an errant V2 had destroyed the tennis club and a few nearby houses in 1944.

Half a dozen law officers were coordinating the search. They'd been allowed to remove their helmets. Most looked not much older than himself, Tom thought, as the line moved slowly forward. 'If you find anything, don't touch it,' the Inspector ordered. 'Call one of my officers. Let us decide what's interesting and what isn't.' The policeman's manner was brusque. Almost contemptuous. As if he had little time for civilians and was only using their help because he had to.

On either side of him people swished at the long grass with sticks. Tom watched Marcus Warwick beat at the cow-parsley and nettles with an old

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cricket stump. Then, to his alarm, Marcus dropped to his knees and called out to one of the officers.

'There's a cig packet here. Don't know if it's important. You said report anything.'

A police constable picked it up with a gloved hand and put it in a brown paper bag. Capstan Full Strength, Tom noticed. His and Marcus's choice, if ever they could afford it. Roll-ups were their usual fare.

Another shout went up. A child's sock fished from the grass on the end of a stick. Alarm flickered along the line until they saw how small it was.

Tom had heard Marcus lie to the police about his age when they'd asked an hour ago. 'Eighteen and above, please,' the Inspector had shouted as they'd gathered to help. Binnie Rowbotham was standing next to him and had lied as well. He knew that as his closest friends they couldn't not be involved in the search for Sara. They'd all grown up together. He and Marcus as two musketeers, with Binnie as a would-be third. They'd all watched Sara develop into a physically precocious teenager, Binnie trying not to be jealous of her shapely chest.

It was true that Binnie was beanpole-thin, and with her short, light brown hair and the dungarees and blue check shirt she was wearing today she could have been mistaken for a boy. Tom felt quite comfortable with her androgynous looks, however. He would never admit it and hoped soon to develop a taste for them, but he found women's breasts intimidating. He watched her now, wondering if her all too obvious infatuation with Marcus was the cause of the open space that had come between him and his friend in recent weeks. Marcus had begun avoiding him. Finding excuses why they couldn't spend time together. Stopped coming to the house. He didn't blame Binnie for that, but suspected that her desire to be with Marcus could have something to do with it.

He kept his eyes on them, looking for clues as to what there was between them. What secrets they shared. What they were excluding him from. Their faces revealed nothing, though, except the tension they were all under. They hardly spoke to one another, although at one point Tom heard Binnie say her stomach felt as if there was a brick in it.

Tom looked down at the ground, pushing aside the nettles with his feet. Soon they would be through the overgrown edge of the park and on to the trimmed grass of the recreation ground. He scanned the line again. He knew so many people here by sight but not by name. He knew Marcus better than anyone in the world. Next year they would both be leaving school and doing their National Service. Tom had discussed things, done things with Marcus

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he'd not done with anyone else. If it was all right to love someone of the same sex, then Tom would happily say he loved Marcus.

Which was more than Marcus would say about his own brother, Sebastian, whom Tom spotted further along the line, making his number with the dour police Inspector. Sebastian, two years older than them, an Oxford undergraduate already. Someone who considered himself a man of the world and who treated his younger brother like a child. Showing how adult he was by talking to the man in charge of this whole affair, Detective Inspector Wilkie. Even sharing a joke with him.

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