

Copycat Ripper

Bryan Stark

Chapter 1

Detective Chief Inspector John Anderson walked across the grass and stood just inside the taped-off area, well away from the activity in the centre of the park. He was not pleased. Five minutes later Comben joined him. Anderson waited but his new Detective Sergeant said nothing.

Then Anderson raised his left hand so that the sleeve of his coat slipped easily over the thin disc of his watch and fell back down his arm. Black hands and black Arabic figures showed up well on the dulled-metal dial and showed it was a few minutes past six. He nodded in Comben's direction. The younger man raised his own hand but had to push his sleeve over the bulk that Anderson imagined was some sort of multi-functioning computer. The figures could have been read from a yard away but Anderson stooped and read off 06.04.

'Sorry sir,' said Comben.

Anderson didn't reply; he'd made his point. He did expect his sergeants to be quicker off the mark. He had no doubt that Comben slept sounder and longer than he did himself and it *was* true that the phone call from the station hadn't woken him: the first light of dawn creeping round his curtains had done that. But he *had* taken his time getting there: two – or was it three – cups of Lavazza, a shower and then he always took a little time deciding what to wear.

He felt the pang of an unhealed wound as he thought about his clothes and he was not quick enough to stop his mouth twitching into a grimace. Whenever he stood in front of his wardrobe, he still yearned to put on the suits that hung to the left – the pre-Comben clothes – but he never did. He had his old Detective Sergeant, Patricia Fielding, to thank for that and now, as a newly promoted Detective Inspector, she reminded him about it every time they met in the station. Not that she said anything – she wouldn't say anything – but her eyes were more expressive than words could ever be, as they examined the texture and shade of his suits.

Anderson dragged his mind away from the unpleasantness. He was in time to put his arm

out and restrain his sergeant as the man turned towards the centre of the park. ‘Let the scene-of-crime officers do their job,’ he said. ‘This isn’t a TV show and the fewer people tramping over the ground the better.’

Anderson turned away from the hubbub and looked behind him at the rows of houses across the street. There was no sign of movement: no early worker opening doors and glumly setting out; no sounds of cars being started up; milk bottles stood untouched on doorsteps. This was not working-class land and the occupants were not expected in their offices before ten, if they worked at all. It was the best street in the neighbourhood, overlooking Queen’s Park; Anderson held no hope of anyone across there having seen anything over here. They had canvassed the street before, after they found the first body and nothing had come out of it. Still, they would have to do it again.

Anderson turned back and saw that the activity had died down, so he sent Comben across. The Detective Sergeant came back and told Anderson what he already knew from the phone call earlier: it was a second strangulation of a middle-aged woman and she had died elsewhere. The murderer had carried the body to the park, pushed it over the railings, climbed over himself and then dragged it across the grass. Only after he had been done all this, had he mutilated the corpse. However, this one was different and Anderson had to trek across to see.

The first had multiple stab wounds; this one had been partly eviscerated. A memory tugged at Anderson’s mind but he didn’t struggle to bring it to the surface. It would come soon enough.

As he leaned forward, the tails of his long coat struggled towards the corpse — not far, since he had fastened each button carefully before walking across, although it wasn’t cold. He drew the coat back and, as he did so, he wondered what had happened to him. When was it that he became more worried about contaminating his coat than the tragedy that lay before him?

He looked up at the faces around him. No, he wasn’t the only one. He was surrounded by

cool, unemotional expressions. Familiarity, that was what it was. Homicides hadn't yet reached American levels but they were getting there.

Clarissa looked again at the story she had been reading. This was the writer's second attempt. The first had contained a violent murder and this one did too but was more special. It contained details of a slashed throat and an abdomen sliced from top to bottom. She was sure that she knew where the idea had come from.

She walked into Mark's room. Sugden's book was easy to find on Mark's bookshelf: it looked forlorn and lonely with only two or three others to keep it company. She flicked over a few pages and there it was — Martha and now Poole with intestines hanging around all over the place. Her anonymous writer was basing his stories on Jack the Ripper and putting them into a modern setting. Well she supposed it was a legitimate strategy, although it wasn't a genre she favoured. Still, she was there to criticise quality not subject matter.

She didn't like being too critical of students' work, they were too easily discouraged but she judged that the gory descriptions had taken over in the second story and that the plot and the characterisation had become sketchy. So that was what she decided to write on the typescript. But had her distaste for the subject matter spilled over and influenced her critical judgement? She had a little struggle with herself and decided it hadn't.

As she wrote, she heard his footsteps on the path but she didn't get up. Then came the rattle of his key in the lock, the sound of the door slamming behind him and there he was. She could see him out of the corner of her eye, standing in the doorway of her study. But she didn't stir until he flung the newspaper on to her desk, which he did every evening. Then and only then did she jerk her head back in mock surprise.

'I'm home from work darling,' he said, 'what's for dinner?'

She looked up at him through her reading glasses. The outline of his face was blurred — another sign of ageing: needing two sets of glasses.

‘Work’, every evening he insisted on using that word, as though she didn’t know where he had been all day. Yes, he went out to work and she stayed at home, so apparently she must cook. It didn’t matter that she owned the house and paid for everything in it and that his money – hard-earned money she was sure he would say – paid solely for *his* amusements: entertainment that excluded *her*.

Was this the price for marrying a younger man? She took off her reading glasses and put her others on to get him into focus. The effort was worth it. She could see why she had to have him. It was part of her spree when she was best selling author of the year. She had decided to spend: the house, clothes, a divorce and then a beautiful new man to adorn the whole edifice. And there he was — blond hair, square shoulders and firm muscles, kept that way by adequate but not excessive exercise. Six foot two of male pulchritude without an unsightly bulge — it was a pity that he didn’t choose to use his body to please her.

During her first marriage, she had learnt the truth of the old saying that if you put a sixpence in a pot for every time you made love during the first year of a marriage and then took one out each time subsequently, it would take ten years to empty the pot. This time it applied equally to the number of evenings they spent together. She didn’t know who he was fucking but she was damn sure she wasn’t going to subsidise it for much longer.

She might not have published for a year – her last effort had been refused: she had wanted to do something better but her publisher did not agree – and she may now be occupied earning peanuts teaching others to write but she had no intention of becoming a dutiful housewife. Nor had she the inclination to keep her husband in the style to which he wished to become accustomed. Not that she couldn’t have, had she wanted. The royalties kept flooding in and she

could hardly keep pace spending them. That she supposed had been one of the motives for marrying. Rich men marry so that their spouses can spend, so she did too. Very feminist – or perhaps post-feminist – of her she imagined, but now she had changed her mind.

He smiled and left the room. She had not said a word.

Thank god for take-away. The number was top of her pre-programmed list; she pressed the button. This time she varied the order; very confusing for them but after a repetition or two, they got the message.

She glanced down at her desk. Black huge headlines had caught her eye. She couldn't read them but one of the words suggested something to her. Back came her reading glasses: **SECOND RIPPER VICTIM.** It caused her to read on. There was no doubt: a modern Jack was copying the Ripper of a century before and he had reached number two last night — *after* she had received the second story. She used her diary to check but it was as she had thought: *both* typescripts had reached her before the actual murders.

How the first real murder had escaped her she didn't know. It was true that she hardly ever glanced at the daily paper or the evening one Mark brought home but the radio must have been full of it.

She took the copy of the first story and the original of the second downstairs with the paper and handed them to Mark. He was sitting in an armchair a glass poised in his left hand; his head back on the rest as though the day had been almost too much.

'Chinese again, I suppose,' he said.

'Look at this,' she said, 'it's important.'

The doorbell rang and she left the room. She needed to find her handbag before going to the front door, and then it took a little time to fumble in her purse and add a tip. By the time she called Mark into the kitchen, he had had plenty of time to scan the pieces and absorb their

meaning.

‘You didn’t remember this the first time.’

Clarissa heard the reproach in his voice. Was he saying she was responsible in some way?

‘No, I thought nothing of it. Why should I?’

‘The police have been here. I mentioned it to you.’

‘Well, I don’t remember,’ she said.

‘It’s clear he’s the Ripper. You must ring the police immediately.’

‘I don’t know who he is.’

It was a surprising fact that John Anderson had got used to: the few difficult cases that came his way kept him on the ‘right’ side of Queen’s Park. Murder didn’t often take him to the ‘other side of the tracks’. In those areas, there were plenty of muggings and burglaries but few murders that needed solving. Violent deaths, when they occurred, mostly resulted in immediate arrests.

This side of the train station – an enclave of bourgeois occupation – was where the interesting deaths happened. This was where his special expertise was called for. But this case was different. The killings had not been carried out where the bodies had been found — in the park opposite where he was now standing. So, what big cat was bringing home dead trophies for which mummy owner? And would the pathway he was walking up lead him to the killer?

He recognised the woman who opened the door of one of the large and prestigious houses lining the park but was still surprised. He shouldn’t have been. Knowing the ways of advertising, he should have understood. Her novels dealt with very young people in love and very young people think that anyone over thirty is passed it. He hadn’t read Clarissa Downing but no one could pass a bookshop without seeing her image in the window. But it was an image of a woman a decade younger than the one who stood at her threshold. Then there was the

husband hovering behind her, obviously as young as she had been in the photo.

Inside their own living room, they sat together on the settee. Detective Sergeant Comben and Anderson himself sat opposite on chairs. But there was something wrong with the couple: a sort of magical force field kept them apart. The settee was a two-seater and even strangers find it difficult to sit down in comfort without touching each other. Clarissa and her husband managed it.

Anderson let her tell her story.

‘At first, I thought the writer shy. Many new members are and that was why I allow people, who want me to read something, to put them in a box one week and collect them the next. Those who wish to discuss their piece or read them out loud can do so but there’s no pressure on those who don’t.’

She had seemed so stiff between the front door and the living room but now, telling a story, she was animated. Anderson could see much more of the young woman who had written those early books. Her eyes glinted with enthusiasm; her limbs moved with welcoming, reaching movements. She lent forward in her eagerness. She was enjoying the drama.

Anderson supposed that it was the author in her. He must be careful to separate the truth from the fiction that might creep in to make a good story.

‘I got the first piece three weeks ago. Neither of the two stories were signed but one *was* collected.’

‘You couldn’t make up your mind who wrote it during the discussions that took place?’ asked Comben.

Anderson leaned back in his chair as he waited for her answer. He was happy to let Comben lead. While he did so, he compared the two young men: both were in their early thirties but the husband – Mark somebody – obviously paid attention to his appearance. The old-fashioned

word 'gigolo' slipped involuntarily into his mind when he looked at him. He had the same build as Comben but with blond hair compared to Comben's dark brown and his was a self-conscious handsomness, while Comben's was thoughtless.

Anderson had to stop himself falling into the natural prejudice of a man of his own age. Why shouldn't a rich woman in her forties take herself a young lover? Men did it all the time and no one thought it wrong.

Clarissa answered Comben's question. 'No, it wasn't possible. I wonder whether he was there at all.'

'He?' Anderson asked.

'Don't you think it must be a man?'

Anderson smiled at her answer. Her novels were firmly set in a more pleasant era than London was in the twentieth-first century. 'We mustn't jump to conclusions. The writer may not be the killer and anyway we can't eliminate half the population just yet.'

Comben waited for a while and then continued. 'Still he or she must have come to your classes some time to have left his stories and then collect one of them.'

Clarissa nodded but was silent.

'I must ask you why you didn't come forward before,' said Anderson. 'My officers knocked on your door soon after the first murder.'

'My wife never listens to me,' said Mark. 'I spoke to a policeman and mentioned it to Clarissa over a fortnight ago.'

So he does speak. Anderson scolded himself for being so ungenerous towards the man. Was it envy for his youth? Or was it jealousy? A woman of Clarissa's maturity should have an older man — forty-four would be a good age and it just happened to be his own.

'I'm sorry,' Clarissa said. 'Do you think the second murder's my fault?'

Anderson looked sternly at her and she leaned forward, as though pleading to be exonerated. He smiled and then let her off the hook. 'You mustn't blame yourself. Your information is useful but I don't think he's going to be that easy to find. As I said before, the writer may not even be the killer.'

'Is my wife in danger?' asked Mark. 'If so, can you protect her?'

'You look as though you can look after your wife,' said Comben.

'But I'm out at work all day,' Mark said.

So she makes him work. Anderson imagined that Clarissa Downing could well afford to keep her husband in luxury without that. 'How long have you been married?' he asked.

'Is that relevant?' Clarissa asked.

It gave him the opportunity to say what all TV detectives say but he left it to Comben.

'Everything's relevant in a murder investigation. We like to have the whole background. It's just routine.'

Clarissa was enjoying his visit, although calling Anderson's interrogation 'a visit' was stretching the meaning of the term. She hadn't felt inspected in that way for some time but there was no mistake: he was looking at her with a distinctly hungry gaze. She didn't imagine he had a loving wife at home. If he had a wife at all, theirs would be a very dull affair.

She allowed herself an expansiveness as she told her story. It was a good story, apart from the poor victims that was. She wondered whether Mark noticed her new found vibrancy, because she did feel it herself and Anderson's half smile encouraged it. After she stopped talking, she wondered whether she had made anything up. Had she been carried away into misleading them?

They rose and so did she, stretching herself to show off her best feature. It was as though she were a teenager again and delighted in her new-grown breasts and the way the boys looked at

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