

The
Truth
Will Out

Jane Isaac

Legend Press Ltd, The Old Fire Station, 140 Tabernacle Street,
London, EC2A 4SD
info@legend-paperbooks.co.uk | www.legendpress.co.uk

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Set in Times

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Jane Isaac studied creative writing with The Writers Bureau and the London School of Journalism. She was runner-up ‘Writer of the Year 2013’ with The Writers Bureau. Jane lives in rural Northamptonshire with her husband, daughter and dog, Bollo.

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Chapter One

Eva Carradine's foot tapped a staccato rhythm as she sat back in her chair and waited for her computer to connect. Green velvet curtains shrouded the window beside her. An umbrella lamp and gas fire combined with the light of her laptop produced a soft hue in the room, just enough for her to view the buttons on her keyboard.

Naomi's face appeared on the screen in front of her. No pleasantries were exchanged. No gestures made. "I can't do this anymore."

Eva's stomach fisted. She stared at her friend's crumpled face. "Naomi, don't... We said we wouldn't talk about this. We promised." The image on her laptop flickered as Naomi reached across and took a glug from a glass of red. Crisp classical notes rose and fell in the background. "How was work?"

Naomi shook her head. "Hopeless. I can't concentrate." Her glass clattered as it hit the hard surface.

Eva flinched. "You need to get a grip." She took a deep breath, "Everything's going to be okay."

"What if it's not?"

Suddenly Naomi turned. For a split second she halted, her head inclined.

"Naomi, what is it?"

She whisked back to face Eva. “There’s somebody in the house...”

The gloved hand appeared from nowhere. It stretched across Naomi’s mouth gripping her head back tightly, pulling her skin taut across her cheekbones.

Eva stared at the computer screen in horror. “Naomi?”

Naomi was pulled away, out of view. Eva heard crashing noises as blurred movements flashed across the screen. Urgent voices were muffled by the tranquil sound of Beethoven’s 6th, still playing distantly in the background. It was surreal, almost in slow motion, as if it were taking place underwater.

Eva’s throat constricted. She leant in closer. “Naomi!”

A flash in the distance. Somebody approached the screen. The hand. It loomed towards her...

As it drew nearer, Eva felt the paralysis of fear take over. Just as the hand reached her, she scooted back, adrenaline igniting every muscle in her body with a sudden kick of energy. She fell over her chair, sending a coffee mug and a pile of magazines crashing to the floor in her scramble to get as far away as possible. A movement flashed over the Skype box on the screen before it went blank.

Naomi! A sharp pain spiked Eva’s lower back. She pressed her hand to it.

What should she do? Call an ambulance? The police? No! Not the police. Definitely, not the police...

Ten minutes later, Eva opened her front door and glanced nervously up and down the street. A light carpet of snow covered everything in sight; an icy draft pinched at every bare patch of skin. She rushed past the maple out front, whipping its branches angrily against the relentless wind. By the time she had secured her case, locked her front door and reached

the comfort of the driver's seat, her teeth were chattering incessantly.

Eva wiped a palm across her forehead, pushing strands of hair out of her face. In desperation, she pulled her mobile phone out of her pocket and dialled Naomi's number for the umpteenth time. The phone rang out – one, two, three – when it reached six and the answer phone kicked in, the muscles in Eva's hands were trembling violently.

She glanced at the clock. The ambulance would be there by now. Eva yearned to see Naomi, make sure she was okay. But going over there could mean... A shiver skittered down her spine. She dialled another number, cursing as it switched to voicemail, leaving a desperate message. Come on, Jules. He had to be there. He promised.

Eva drew a shaky breath and ignited the engine. It was going to be a very long night.

Chapter Two

Detective Chief Inspector Helen Lavery rubbed her forehead and forced herself to take another look at the photograph of sixteen-year-old Kieran Harvey that filled her computer screen. His buckled frame was closed into a foetal position, a hand stretched towards the curb, beautiful blond hair soaked in blood.

She clicked a button and brought up another image next to it. Leon Stratton looked younger than his seventeen years, his lithe body contorted on the tarmac, arm wedged unnaturally under his body, a gaping hole in the centre of his chest.

Helen's stomach knotted every time she looked at them. Kieran reminded her of Matthew whilst Leon's dark hair and skinny body looked just like Robert. Her own boys - just a few years younger than these dead shells.

She turned the photos around on the screen, as if looking at them from another angle would offer up some new clue they hadn't already discovered. Their backgrounds suggested a link, but no murder weapon had been discovered. Both shootings occurred within a month of each other, a year ago in Roxten. Yet, despite huge police efforts, they still hadn't been able to produce a credible suspect for either crime.

Helen massaged the back of her neck. She hated homicide cold case review; the burning sense of injustice got underneath

her skin and slunk about like a worm trying to find its way out.

The press had cranked up the pressure. They pounced on the shooting of fifteen-year-old Germaine Long in nearby London two weeks earlier, claiming that the UK was developing an escalating culture of gang related gun crime.

In an effort to placate, the Home Secretary had declared that incidents involving firearms in the UK were at their lowest for twenty years. But, like a cornered wasp, the press fought hard, whipping the public into a frenzy and forcing the newly elected Police Commissioners to focus on every unsolved firearms incident. They wanted results and fast.

She looked back at the photos and considered the linking factors. Both boys shared previous records for assault and possession of cannabis. Intelligence indicated that both were linked to a group who called themselves the 'East Side Boys', which, it was suspected, were responsible for a significant amount of acquisitive crime in Roxten. She switched to the map on her laptop.

Once a quaint village on Hampton's periphery, Roxten was swallowed into the midland's city during the 1970s when migrants flooded into the town as it expanded to accommodate London overspill. A contemporary architect was commissioned to design several new cutting edge estates to make maximum use of the space available. Housing estates grandly named 'The Royal Albert' and 'The Queen Victoria', which later became known generically as 'the rabbit warren', were comprised of numerous alleys and back entrances making them particularly difficult to police.

When austerity tightened the screws during the depression of the 1980s, a cloud of darkness descended on Roxten and the rabbit warren, now the less salubrious area, was dragged into a pit of gloom.

Helen yawned. The rabbit warren was where both boys had lived, where both murders had been committed. And, after

working Roxten for a year as an immediate response sergeant during her ten-year career, she knew more than anybody that getting evidence out of residents of the rabbit warren was near on impossible.

She stretched out her arms, glanced at the clock. Twenty past eight. Her eyes brushed a photo in a rustic frame on the corner of the desk. As she picked it up and fingered the outline of her late husband, a familiar longing flooded her chest. Briefly, she allowed herself to wonder how different her life would have been if he hadn't died so suddenly ten years ago. She wouldn't be squirreled in her study, working her evenings away before curling up to watch the late news and venturing off to bed, alone.

The buzz of her mobile interrupted her thoughts.

“Ma’am, this is Inspector Staples in the control room. We have the body of a young woman at eight Brooke Street, Hampton. Cause of death is gunshot wounds to the chest.”

Brooke Street was located off Hampton High Street in the centre of the city. Red-bricked terraces lined the curbside with front doors that opened directly onto narrow strips of pavement. By the time Helen arrived it was a hive of activity. Police cars parked at angles blocked off either end, an ambulance sat in situ, filling the middle of the road. Uniformed officers swarmed around neighbouring terraces, assiduously searching out witnesses and taking statements. In spite of the inclement weather, the pavement was littered with nosey residents desperately trying to get a handle on what was happening. Helen even recognised a few members of the local press and raised her eyes to the heavens. It didn't take long for the vultures to descend.

She slipped through the rubberneckers and made her way

up to number eight through a cloud of cotton wool puffs. The earlier rain had turned to snow, thick flakes falling like feathers from the sky. It was hard to believe it was the middle of March; the clocks would be going forward in a couple of weeks.

Helen nodded and flashed her badge at the uniformed officer at the entrance to number eight. He was stamping his feet, blowing into his hands in an effort to keep warm. She pitied his position, recalling being ordered to guard a crime scene once as a probationer. By the time relief arrived, she had been bored out of her brain and desperate for the toilet.

She paused briefly to gown herself up and sign into the crime scene log, then moved into the house. Immediately the smell of burnt carbon tainted her nose, like the smell that lingers in the air on fireworks night. Shards of glass crunched under her feet as she crossed the threshold and glanced around, trying to look past the devastation. The lounge resembled a war zone. The cream silk curtains were spattered with blood. Soft, black cushions were scattered around the room haphazardly. A black fur rug lay scrunched up in a corner. She could see that the glass beneath her feet had largely belonged to a mirror that lay in pieces on the shiny laminate flooring, in front of the fireplace. Only a rosewood piano, gleaming under the lights on the far wall seemed to have escaped.

Her eyes rested on the body of a young woman, crumpled on the floor next to an old desk and an upturned chair in the corner. Tumbled over her face and shoulders were vibrant locks of ginger hair, mingled with congealed blood. A spray of red covered the wall behind her.

Crime scene investigators moved about busily like an army of white clothed ants. She nodded to a few of them, then headed straight across to the body and crouched down to take a closer look. Beneath the strands of hair that partially obscured the face were green, glassy eyes. In spite of the

purple patches across her cheek and the split in her lip she could see that this had once been a very attractive lady. And so young. Helen felt a pang in her chest.

The victim's legs were curled up, her right arm flung out to the side. She wore black jeans and a loose vest top, which bore two bullet holes in the centre; a few patches around the bottom and one of the shoulder straps, the only clue to its original lime green colour.

Helen became aware of a close presence and looked up to see Sergeant Sean Pemberton tower over her. Almost as wide as he was tall, his bald head glowed under the bright lighting.

He lifted his head in greeting, "Ma'am," he said, an underlying growl exposing his Yorkshire roots.

Helen stood, barely reaching his shoulder. "Hi, Sean."

After working on an incident with Sean Pemberton last year, she'd fought to acquire his services to fill a permanent DS post in the Homicide and Serious Crime Squad. Pemberton was a seasoned, no nonsense detective whose approach to policing reminded her of her late father, James Lavery, who had managed murder investigations for fifteen years before his retirement.

"Thanks for getting everything set up here." She gave a sideways nod. "What do we know about the victim?"

He turned a page of the notebook in his hand. "Naomi Spence. According to a neighbour across the road she'd lived here a couple of years. Hospitality graduate, worked at Memington Hall hotel as an events planner. Not known to us. Likely cause of death would be the gunshot wounds to the chest, although by the looks of her she put up a pretty good fight. PC Havant was first on scene. Used to be with firearms. He reckons the size of the bullet holes are consistent with a small calibre hand gun."

Helen scanned the body. "There are two bullet wounds to the front, but only one exited, so at least two rounds were

discharged,” Pemberton said. “It’s possible the other is lodged in there somewhere but the autopsy will confirm that. Can’t find the shells.”

She followed his arm and her eyes rested on a bullet lodged into the skirting board, which somebody was meticulously photographing from different angles. “Okay, make sure you get that off to ballistics as soon as,” Helen said. She lowered her voice to continue, “See if you can speak to that mate of yours in the testing lab and pull some strings?”

He nodded. “Sure.”

“Any sign of a break in?” she asked, her voice resuming its normal level.

“It doesn’t look like it, we’ve checked front and rear. Both were locked when uniform arrived. They had to force entry themselves.”

“So we think she may have known her attacker?”

“In the absence of another route... ” He wrinkled his nose and nodded. “Wouldn’t have been difficult to let themselves out. There’s only an old Yale lock on the front door.”

“What about keys?” she asked. It wouldn’t be the first time an assailant made off in the victim’s car.

Pemberton smiled knowingly. “Two sets hanging up in the kitchen. Car keys too,” he said, second guessing her next question. “Looks like she owned the red Fiesta parked up the road.”

Helen looked back at the body. “Any suspects?”

“Not at this point. The informant was female. She phoned an ambulance from a mobile number. Pay as you go, not registered so we can’t trace it. Didn’t identify herself. She’d left the scene by the time we arrived.”

“Strange.” Helen looked around the room. This didn’t fit the usual profile of a female murderer. Although women accounted for around a quarter of UK murders each year, they usually lacked the gratuitous violence adopted by male

killers. And they rarely used firearms. She looked back at the bruising across Naomi's arm and face. "Any witnesses?"

"Not as yet. I've got uniform started on house to house, so hopefully that'll dig up something soon."

"Good." Helen swept her eyes across the room again. Whoever did this steamrolled through the victim's lounge, then fired two bullets. They certainly weren't discreet in their actions. "Anything missing?"

"Doesn't look like it. Odd though. They've turned the whole house upside down looking for something."

Looking for something... Helen could see the flat-screen television and DVD player were still in situ. A Wii games console lay on its side on the floor.

"What about her handbag?" she said.

"We found that in the cupboard under the stairs." Pemberton pointed towards the hallway. "Twenty pounds in cash, along with a few coppers, credit cards, all there." He hesitated. "No mobile phone though."

So, this wasn't a burglary gone wrong, Helen thought. The offender was looking for something specific, something worth killing for.

She looked down, glimpsed something on the floor and bent down to examine it. The frame was broken, the edge torn, but it was definitely a picture of the victim, with the same flaming hair pulled back from her face with sunglasses. She had her arm around a blond girl. They were both in jeans and bright fleece tops, smiling broadly. Both girls looked in their early twenties. The photo oozed youth, vitality, opportunity.

She looked back at the body. "What about time of death?"

"Pathologist's best guess is between six and eight o'clock at this stage."

"He's already been?" Helen flashed her eyes to the door.

"You just missed him. Dr Gooding arrived same time as me, about eight forty."

“Great.” She rolled her eyes. Out of the two pathologists that covered their area, Gooding was the least thorough. And he hated being on call. They were unlikely to get anything solid out of him until the morning. She turned and called across the room, “Alan, okay if I take a look around?”

Alan Jones was the CSI supervisor, a slim, bespectacled man with sharp, pointy features. He was bent over the bullet in the skirting board, examining the surrounding area. He glanced sideways. “Yes, but stay on the white paper. We’ve taken some preliminary photos, but they’ve been all over the house.” He sniffed. “Looks like we’ll be here for days.”

“Okay.” She gave Pemberton a quick nod and wandered out through the hallway into the kitchen alone.

Many of the cupboard doors were open. Broken dishes, pans and tins of food spilled out onto the floor. Again, Helen tried to look past the devastation. The galley style kitchen was partially fitted with pine veneer cupboards. It looked like somebody had run out of money to finish it off. A folding table sat in the far corner with two collapsible chairs leant against it. No dishes in the sink, no coffee cups on the side. Two wine glasses sat on the drainer.

She rubbed her purple, gloved hands together. The pungent aroma of red wine filled the air. A drawer hung out containing appliance instructions. Another drawer that looked as though it had been derailed in the search contained a messy host of mobile phone chargers. A third, an array of new birthday cards.

Helen made her way up the steep stairs, carefully keeping her feet to the metre wide strip of white paper rolled over the carpet, her knees aching as she reached the landing. She counted three rooms on the first floor. She bypassed the bathroom and headed for the spare bedroom. The pink floral duvet and pillows were pulled off the bed and the empty drawer beneath sat askew with blankets, throws and spare

pillows strewn across the floor.

She moved into the main bedroom. Books had been swept from the bookshelf and jumpers, t-shirts, underwear from a nearby chest of drawers filled the floor. She opened the closet. At the bottom, shoes had been tipped out of boxes and sat haphazardly on top of one another. Helen looked up to see dresses, suits and casual wear hanging neatly from their rail. The stark contrast between the orderly hung clothes and the disarray of shoes surprised Helen. She stared at them for a moment, her eyes working from one to another. The arrangement of the clothes was the real Naomi, before someone had blasted through her home in their search.

As she stared at the hangers she thought about her own wardrobe, packed tightly, about three quarters of the clothes never seeing the light of day - either they didn't fit her anymore, or she hadn't found the time to sort them out. But Naomi was tidy, ordered. No doubt the rest of the house usually followed the same suit.

Helen sighed and remembered her own mother nagging at her when she was a child. 'A tidy house is a tidy mind,' she used to say. Well Naomi Spence had a very tidy mind. So what went wrong?

She headed back towards the top of the stairs and entered the bathroom. Towels spilled out of the linen cupboard in the corner. The contents of the medicine cabinet filled the white sink, door still ajar. Even the top to the toilet cistern had been removed.

Speckles of white on the windowsill caught her eye. Helen leant forward, focusing on the area. There were more grains, white in colour.

She turned to the door and shouted for Pemberton.

Within seconds he had taken the stairs, two at a time, and was standing next to her. "What is it, ma'am?"

"What does that look like to you?" She pointed at the

grains of powder.

He bent down to take a closer look. “Are we thinking cocaine? It’s definitely the remnants of a line of something.”

“Ask CSI to come up here and bag it up, will you? I think we might have a victim with a habit.”

As Pemberton disappeared, Helen chewed the side of her mouth. She was just wondering if the killer could have been searching for drugs, when she heard a faint noise. Her body stiffened to listen. Nothing. Just as Pemberton walked back in, it came again. She tried to place it. Pemberton moved towards the windowsill and she grabbed his arm to hold him still. He looked at her curiously, opened his mouth to speak, but she shook her head to silence him. It seemed to be coming from the landing. She let go of his arm and followed her ears out there, eyes darting about, searching for the source. “What was that?”

“What?”

There it was again. A faint tap. A scratch. She stopped.

“It’s just CSI...”

“It’s coming from up there.” Her eyes rested on the loft hatch. The cover sat crooked. She narrowed her eyes to focus on a few small tufts of fibreglass that poked through the hole. When she looked down she could see more wisps littering the floor beneath.

“It’s been disturbed recently,” she said quietly.

They both stood still and listened to the intermittent rustling that grew louder and softer, then louder again. It was a strain to hear it at times, with all the noise from downstairs.

“Something’s up there. Let’s take a look.” She grabbed a chair from Naomi’s bedroom and placed it underneath the hatch.

Pemberton met her gaze. He continued in a hushed tone, “You’re not suggesting...?”

“More likely a mouse or rat.”

“Can’t stand rats.” He shook his shoulders.

Helen snorted, smiling fleetingly at how a bear of a man like Pemberton could be frightened of such a small creature. Rats weren’t her favourite animals either, something to do with the tails, but it wasn’t the possibility of facing a rat that bothered her right now. Whatever the killer was looking for could be hidden up there.

“Hold up.” Pemberton said. He reached out his arm to stop her as she tried to board the chair. “You’re never going to see, even if you stand on that.”

She looked at him and raised a brow.

He rolled his eyes and pulled a small Maglite torch out of his pocket. “I can’t believe I’m doing this.”

The chair wobbled as he climbed on. Helen had to clasp it with both hands to keep it steady. He lifted the hatch slowly, and raised his head through the open space. A raw draft wafted through the gap. All was quiet. She watched him shine the torch.

“Well, well, well...” he said.

“What is it?”

Suddenly there was a fluttering noise. It grew urgent and louder until within a split second, Pemberton had toppled off the chair and onto the floor. Helen just managed to duck out of the way in time.

The whole house shook under Pemberton’s weight.

She gaped at him for a moment, letting out a sigh of relief when he raised his head and rubbed the back of it. “Sean, are you okay?”

He squirmed around on the floor for a bit, twisted his back this way and that then swung his feet around to a seated position. “No harm done. Good job it was a soft landing.”

She stared at him and the thin carpet beneath.

“Believe me,” he continued, grinning. “When you’re this size, it’s always a soft landing.”

“Everyone alright up there?” Alan shouted from below.

“Yes, thank you,” she called back. “Sergeant Pemberton’s just testing out the floorboards.”

“Make sure you keep to the white paper!” Steve called back.

Pemberton pulled a face as he shuffled back onto the paper. She watched him rub the base of his back. “Sure you’re okay?”

“Fine.”

They turned their attention to the source of the noise. A small blackbird fluttered around their heads in panic. “Must have been looking for a warm place to roost, away from the snow,” he said. “Come in through a gap in the roof tiles, I bet, and got stuck.”

She pressed her lips together. “Anyway,” she looked back up at the hatch, “what did you see up there?”

He rubbed his back some more, but when he met her gaze she could see a twinkle of recognition in his eye. “I think we need to get the ladders in and take a closer look.”

Eva screwed up her eyes to focus on the road as she drove north, the soft snowflakes almost mesmerising her as they floated into the windscreen. Naomi. Why hadn’t she responded to her calls, her messages? Unless she couldn’t. A hard lump expanded in her throat as her mind switched back to last Friday, the day this nightmare began.

It was the end of their week’s holiday. They were driving through France, en route to the ferry port, breaking the journey intermittently to photograph pleasant views, ancient churches, old farmhouses.

They stopped for lunch in a little town on the top of a hill, an hour north of Paris. It was a bright spring day, the sky a

milky blue. Neither of them spoke French apart from the odd word and she recalled her chagrin at not being able to read the menu or converse with the locals. When she was young, her mother and stepfather had taken language courses before their annual holidays. It was one of her stepfather's pet peeves and she could still hear his words now, 'If a visitor to another country makes an effort to speak a little of the language they will be treated with respect by the locals.' He would have been very disappointed.

She remembered their apprehension at what they'd chosen to eat. Afterwards they howled with laughter when *croque-monsieur* turned out to be a toasted cheese and ham sandwich. It was a rare moment of real belly laughter. Tears flooded Naomi's eyes and ran down her cheeks. Eva's breath caught in her throat. The merriment continued back in the car afterwards as they drove down the road to the petrol station.

Naomi refuelled the car and Eva leant back in her seat. She wound the window halfway and stretched her hands to the roof, enjoying the rush of fresh air on her face. As Naomi rejoined her, she ignited the engine and tried to wind the window lever. It wouldn't budge.

She pressed harder. It moved an inch and then faltered. This was a special edition Mini, only 20,000 miles on the clock. The shiny blue paintwork and Paul Smith interior were in excellent condition. She pushed again and heard a single clunk.

"Oh, great!" Naomi said. "That's all we need!"

Eva sighed as they both jumped out. Naomi was right to be frustrated. This was a car they were delivering to the UK for a friend, a bargain struck in return for a free holiday. He would not be pleased if it was delivered with a faulty window. They both played with the winder to no avail. Eva tried to prise the door panel apart, flinching and jumping back as she caught her nail.

They stared at each other. “We can’t leave it like this,” Naomi said.

Eva scanned their surroundings. They were in the middle of the small French town. Opposite was a patisserie with a colourful window display, flanked by a boulangerie on one side, a coiffure on the other. She turned and glimpsed a garage, set back from the road, a single grey car parked out front. She couldn’t read the sign but it had to be worth a try.

They drove across and parked next to what they now recognised as an old grey Peugeot outside. Although the workshop door was open, it looked deserted. They left the car and stepped over pools of dried oil in the entrance into a dimly lit garage. The walls were lined with cans containing lubricants and ancient-looking tools. A strong smell of diesel hung in the air.

“Hello?” Naomi called out. Her voice echoed back at her. The girls glanced across at each other, bewildered. Eva had just decided to give up and retreat to the car when she heard a scraping noise and spied a body rolling out from beneath the single Renault parked at the far end, bright torch in hand.

They crossed the garage and towered over the olive skinned man who stood to face them. Smears of grease covered his blue overalls, oil marks were set into the crows’ feet around his eyes. He spoke in a deep French accent and both girls stared at him, momentarily baffled. Eva pointed to the Mini and the French man followed as they walked across to it. With a series of strange noises and actions she showed him the window.

He nodded and moved into the workshop. When he returned he held a screwdriver and jemmy. He pointed at the lever and nodded in approval. Eva imagined that he didn’t get many modern cars with electric windows in here. In fact, she couldn’t imagine he got many cars in here at all. The girls stared as he unscrewed five screws and prised at the panel.

The process took less than three minutes.

The panel wobbled as he lifted it away, and then he gasped. Eva jolted forward. Tucked into the door casing were several brown parcels, tightly wrapped in shrink-wrap, bound in the centre with duct tape.

The world closed in around Eva. She was aware of the French man's presence. Excited words spilled out of his mouth, his arms waved about animatedly. Naomi clutched her arm...

A car swerved in front, snapping Eva's attention to the present and forcing her to brake. In normal circumstances she would curse the driver. But not right now. Right now, she was still reeling from the memories of last Friday. Tears welled up in her eyes. How could their lives change irrevocably in the course of one day? And now this. She lifted a hand from the steering wheel and raked her fingers through her long blond hair. Not for the first time, did she wish they hadn't taken that holiday.