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Catching a killer

Last year, over six months, cameras shadowed the investigation into the disappearance of Natalie Hemming, recording footage of the police, the victim's family – and the suspect. The result is a unique insight into what it takes to be a major crime detective in Britain today

William Leith

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Superintendent Simon Steel (left) and Detective Inspector Stuart Blaik, of Thames Valley Police, who worked on the Natalie Hemming murder case

JUDE EDGINTON

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This is how a murder investigation begins. At 4.06pm on Tuesday, May 3, 2016, Margaret Hammond calls 999. She's worried about her 31-year-old daughter, Natalie. Margaret, 72, who lives in Hemel Hempstead, hasn't seen Natalie since Sunday afternoon. More worryingly, she hasn't been able to reach her by phone. And they're always talking, Natalie and Margaret – twice a day, sometimes more.

Particularly now, when there is so much to talk about, so much to arrange.

Margaret tried calling on Sunday evening, and on Monday, and again on Tuesday morning. But Natalie's phone was dead. She hadn't been in touch with anybody - not her sisters, Kerry and Jo. Not her best friend, Becky. Another thing: she hadn't turned up for work. She seemed to have vanished into a void. So Margaret had gone to Natalie's house in Milton Keynes and knocked on the door. She'd spoken to Natalie's partner, Paul.

Paul had been unfriendly. He said that Natalie had come home on Sunday afternoon upset about something. So upset that she wanted to go away somewhere and not see anybody for a while. Then, he said, she'd walked out of the house and not come back.

But what about her car, said Margaret. Why would she not take her car? There it was, outside the house.

Problems with the clutch, said Paul.



Natalie
Hemming
SOUTH WEST
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But Margaret knows the car is an automatic. This is why she calls the police. She says her daughter's missing. She says she's talked to Paul. She's very worried. "What's your specific concern?" says the woman at the police station.

"Him," says Margaret.

Paul Hemming has worried Margaret for years. He's volatile. He's mean. He hits Natalie. He threatens her. They're supposed to be partners - they have a boy, six, and girl, two. Plus Natalie's 11-year-old daughter. They live together. But Paul is more like a stalker than a partner. He won't let Natalie have any privacy. He's always looking at her phone. He's jealous to the point of craziness. He wants to control Natalie - her finances, where she goes, whom

she sees. He's 42. Eleven years her senior. They've been a couple for ten years.

They were going to get married. Natalie took Paul's name, and they arranged the wedding. But Paul cancelled it and didn't tell her. He just waited for her to find out. Kerry and Jo call him "controlling" and "manipulative". There is something not quite right with Paul. He needs to be in charge. He needs to know everything. It's like an addiction. And when he can't get his fix, he lashes out. Every so often, Natalie leaves him. Then he begs her to come back. Let's put it all in the past, he says. Let's start afresh. Please come back to me. And she does. And he torments her all over again.

These are some of the reasons why Margaret calls the police at 4.06pm on May 3. But there's something else. Something that makes Margaret even more worried about Paul. For three months, Natalie has been in the process of leaving Paul. She says she's finished with him for good. She's told Becky and Kerry and Jo. She's told Paul. Paul is angry, hurt and resentful. He wants her back.

But this time, she won't come back. Natalie has met another man - a colleague from work called Simon. Natalie is a receptionist at a Mercedes dealership in Milton Keynes. Simon is a technician. On Saturday, April 30, for the

first time, Simon and Natalie went on a date. Natalie dropped off her children at Margaret's house. Simon picked her up. They went for a meal at Jamie's Italian in St Albans. Then they spent the night at St Michael's Manor Hotel.

**“
Natalie's six-year-
old says he heard a
noise from the
living room.
Something was
being smashed**

Paul didn't know where Natalie was on Saturday night. But he had his suspicions. He went to Margaret's house. He talked to Margaret.

Natalie wasn't at her mum's house. But her car was. Paul was agitated. He drove off. Natalie came back to her mum's the next day. She'd had a wonderful night with Simon. She texted Becky to say they'd had sex three times. She sent Simon a WhatsApp message: "That was the most amazing night I've ever had." She sent him another message: "My mum thanks you for getting me home in one piece." Then she put the children in the car and drove home.

Then she vanished.

It's Tuesday evening. Natalie has now been

missing for more than 50 hours. The police interview Paul Hemming at home. Footage from the interviewing officer's bodycam shows a smallish, slight man sitting on a sofa in a dressing gown. His manner is evasive and wheedling. The police ask to search the house. "Can't be done in the morning, no?" he says.

How would he describe his relationship with Natalie? Hemming looks thoughtful, as if he's been asked to solve a difficult puzzle. "At the moment," he says, "it's ... all right."

He says he wants to hold on to his phone. "So many people have been calling me." Then he says, "If someone calls me ..." He pauses for a while, until a thought occurs to him.

"Or if Natalie calls me," he says.



Forensics officers near Rickmansworth in Hertfordshire, where Natalie's body was found in May 2016
SOUTH BEDS NEWS AGENCY

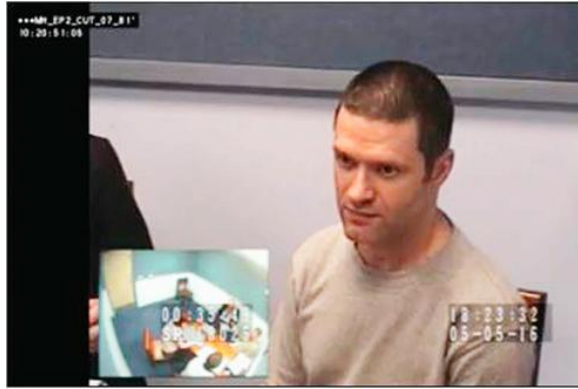
The police search the house. There is footage of the cupboard under the stairs, of the sitting room, the bathroom, the children's playroom. It's a four-bedroom house on a new estate in

Milton Keynes. There's no evidence of Natalie anywhere. She has vanished. Hemming is arrested and taken to Milton Keynes police station at dawn. After being cautioned, he says, "Have you found Natalie, then?"

I'm watching all of this. I can see the look on Hemming's face as he is being questioned. I can see the way he holds his head, the movements of his eyes. I can also see, and hear, the cops who are questioning him. I've never seen anything quite like this before. This is not a man who has committed a traffic offence. His girlfriend has disappeared. He can't give an explanation. So this is what a man looks like when the police come knocking.

What I'm watching is *Catching A Killer*, a film by Anna Hall. She has made gritty documentaries before, such as *The Hunt for Britain's Sex Gangs*. Hall tells stories about nasty people doing nasty things, and the consequences of these nasty things. She asked Thames Valley Police if they would co-operate on a film about domestic violence. They said yes. So she made a film called *Behind Closed Doors*. Then she asked if Thames Valley would co-operate on a film about the Major Crime Unit - the team who deal with murders. Again, they said yes. They said if she was there for a year, looking at domestic abuse cases, they

would almost certainly get a murder.



Paul Hemming
being
questioned

So when Natalie disappears, Anna is ready. She has a film crew on stand-by. For the first time in the UK, a murder case, involving the police, the suspect and the victim's family, will be followed on film from start to finish. Early on the morning of Wednesday, May 4, the crew is already in place. They will film the case from this point until the trial of Paul Hemming at Luton Crown Court in October 2016.

This is what happens when Paul Hemming is arrested. He is locked in a cell. It's just him in a narrow room, lying back on a narrow bed in slippers, reading a newspaper. He is served tea and food. Everybody is very polite to him, as if he were an important guest. Meanwhile, the police collect evidence. They interview Hemming again and again. They appoint a senior investigating officer to lead the case. He is Detective Chief Inspector Simon Steel.

I talk to Steel in an interview room at Thames Valley's headquarters outside Oxford.

Someone brings us tea and biscuits. Steel reminds me of the football manager Pep Guardiola: nice-looking, forties, fit, bald, trim grey beard. But he doesn't wave his arms around. He's the most measured, calm person imaginable. He is supremely professional. Since the Hemming case, he's been promoted. He's now Superintendent Simon Steel.

Steel tells me about his approach to detective work. He is meticulous. He collects facts and constructs hypotheses. He arranges interviews and searches. I take him back to May 2016.

"We have a mother of three children, who's now not with her children," he says. "Which is hugely out of character. We deal with lots of missing people, but to leave your three children was another factor that caused significant concern. In the very early days, we had a number of hypotheses. One of them being that Paul has killed Natalie."

Was that hypothesis way out in front?

"No. I think I was very clear. We develop hypotheses, and evidence will inform them. You've got, in no particular order, that Natalie had been murdered and Paul Hemming was the offender. Natalie could have been injured, Paul Hemming the offender. Natalie could

have gone of her own free will, and been safe and well. Natalie could have gone of her own free will, however ended up being caused harm by a third party, as yet unknown. Natalie could have been injured somewhere, purely accidental. And all I do is develop those lines of inquiry and look for proof of life.”



Police search ground during the murder investigation

Back to May 2016. There is no proof of life. The days go by. The probability that Natalie is alive is shrinking by the hour. After 72 hours, there is still no phone contact, no activity on Facebook or WhatsApp, no use of bank cards or ATMs, no purchases. She has vanished.

Steel's team collect evidence. They create a timeline. There is CCTV. On Saturday, Natalie and Simon walk into the St Michael's Manor Hotel at 22.47. They check in. A camera films the couple walking to their room at 22.58. The next morning, they walk past the same camera at 11.38. They leave at 11.43. Natalie looks up at Simon's face. She is beaming. They walk out of the hotel. They link hands. They

kiss.

Then they go their separate ways. She will drive to her mum's house. Then she will go home to Paul. That night, Simon will send her a message: "Are you OK? Just need to know that and then I'll leave you be." Natalie will not reply.

A breakthrough. Steel's team finds traffic pictures of Paul Hemming's car driving around the countryside south of Milton Keynes on Sunday night, between 10pm and 1am. The numberplate has been photographed, but the pictures are too dark for the driver to be identified. Some pictures only show headlights. But, Simon Steel tells me, it's possible to identify a car's model just from headlights.

Steel's team try to work out the car's route. When they've done that, they will fly a helicopter over certain parts of it. They will send out search teams.

What happened on Sunday night? Natalie went home. She parked her car. She entered the house. That's when the trail goes cold. When questioned, Hemming is adamant: Natalie left the house. She wanted to "clear her head". Then he went to bed early. He woke up. It was a bank holiday Monday. He took the

children to Whipsnade Zoo.

“
It came in cycles.
Jealousy, rage,
violence, apology.
Natalie kept
leaving. Paul kept
begging her to
start afresh

A shocking
moment. One of
the children,
Paul and
Natalie's six-
year-old son,
tells the police he
heard a noise on
Sunday night.
The noise woke
him up. It came

from the living room. It was “like thunder”.
Something was being smashed. So he went
downstairs to investigate. He saw his mum
lying down, covered in a blanket. He saw wet
patches on the floor. He saw something that
made him think someone had been sick.

On May 5, Hemming gives the police his
version of what happened on the night Natalie
vanished. “She just wasn't herself,” he says.
He says he stroked her face. “Just trying to be
a little bit ... sensitive is the word for it.

“She said, ‘I didn't enjoy last night. Something
happened.’ She said, ‘I've been flirting with a
guy at work’ - which I knew about anyway.
And I was like, ‘It doesn't matter. We'll just put
it all in the past. We'll start afresh.’ And she
was like, ‘When we went back to his house, we

kissed and cuddled, and he kept trying to go further and further and further, and I kept saying no, no, no, no, and he kept going further and further and further ... In the end, he made me panic so much that I just gave in.’”

This is not a confession. It’s a muddled story, a fantasy, told by a jealous, violent man. It’s about a woman who has been flirting, and who then enters a house, where a man is forceful with her, he is violent, she screams and screams, but he won’t stop, he won’t stop, he keeps on forcing, striking her, and she screams, and she panics, and then, in the end, she gives in.

Not a confession. A muddled story. A fantasy that sounds like a confession.

The police ask Hemming to account for the six-year-old’s statement. “The boy said he went downstairs when he heard the noise and peeked through a gap in the door. He thought it was his mum being sick. He said it was really loud, like thunder, and it sounded like three glasses smashing. What was the noise that he heard?”

Hemming, startled, says: “No comment.”

In Simon Steel’s terms, hypothesis number

one is looking more and more likely. Spots of blood are found on the Hemmings' coffee table. Blood is found in the boot of Hemming's car. There is CCTV of Hemming's car being driven around the countryside on the Monday night, and also on the Tuesday morning. The evidence against him is building. There are things he can't explain. The noise. The blood. The movements of the car. This is no longer a missing person inquiry. Now it's a murder inquiry.



Natalie's body is found

Nikki Smith and Natalie Golding are family liaison officers - they talk to the families of people in murder inquiries. They are detectives, but they come across like people from the caring professions. They are steeped in empathy. Their job is to collect information, while at the same time being supportive at crucial moments. When a missing person inquiry becomes a murder inquiry, that's a crucial moment.

I talk to Smith and Golding at Thames Valley

Police HQ. “They knew something horrible had happened,” says Smith. “But they just wanted to keep that hope. And then when we had to say about the change of status in the investigation, yes, that was ... We say to the family, ‘There’s no proof of life. We now believe that she is dead.’ ”

They both remember the crucial moment. Smith says: “For me, you feel like you’re just tearing their world apart. Because you’ve got to give that news, that it’s now a murder investigation. We build up a professional relationship with them ... and then to tell them that. And they don’t believe it, but they do believe it, if you know what I mean, so you have to tell them over again, and ...”

Golding: “They all had realised, by the stage we did that, that it was more than likely that Natalie was dead.”

In the film, you see this drawn-out moment. They believe it, but they don’t believe it. It’s harrowing in the extreme. And you’re seeing it on TV. I ask Anna Hall about this. Is this OK? Hall asked Natalie’s family if it was OK. Jo asked if any of her films had made a difference. Yes, said Hall. The family said yes. A police officer had told her that a woman, a victim of domestic abuse, had left her abuser after watching *Behind Closed Doors*.

“Somebody might watch this and the penny might drop,” says Hall.

Back at the police station, Hemming maintains his innocence. But his statements make it seem more and more likely that he is guilty. “In my heart,” he says, “I know she’s not dead. In my heart, I know that. I wish she would walk through the door. But I cannot make miracles happen.”

Hemming is charged with murder. Asked if he wants to reply to the charge, he thinks for a moment, and then says: “I’m not guilty.”

**“
He’ll never tell the
truth. Because he
would lose that
element of control**

Forty miles from Milton Keynes, a man mowing a meadow notices something. It’s a female body, unclothed, in a

bush. The woman has been dead for a number of days. The police take the body for DNA testing. But they know who it is. For Nikki Smith and Natalie Golding, it’s another crucial moment.

Golding says: “We told them that we had found somebody we believed to be Natalie, but it had to be confirmed through formal identification.” This was one of the hardest

moments for Margaret and the family. But it seemed certain that Natalie had been found.

“It was a bittersweet moment,” says Smith.

“We’ve got her. I think that was what I said to Margaret. We’ve got her back now. She’s in our care now.”

I’m talking to Kerry and Jo, Natalie’s older sisters, in Jo’s house in Yorkshire. Between them they are looking after their sister’s children. Margaret is upstairs in bed. Her health has declined since the murder of her youngest daughter.

We talk about Paul and Natalie. When they got together, she was 21 and he was 32. “He was forever the charmer when you first met him,” says Kerry. “He was always there to make us feel welcome. As you walked in, he’d give you a hug and a kiss.” She remembers bringing her new baby to show Natalie, and that Paul had given her clean towels.

Paul had various sales jobs, and ended up working for Ramezani, an upmarket rug company in Wembley; some of the rugs are worth tens of thousands. In police interviews, he’s ingratiating and also a bit brittle, a combination of oily and pushy. In any case, he

was a good salesman. He owned a four-bedroom house on a new estate in Milton Keynes. “He’d always been into sales,” says Kerry. “He had the gift of the gab.”

But there was another side to Paul Hemming. “Natalie always said that he had a split personality,” says Kerry. “She’d never say anything when he was around. We were very lucky if she would ever come anywhere without him. It was a control thing. He didn’t really want her anywhere where he wasn’t with her and knowing what she was doing. Or if she was with us, and not with him, he’d be constantly on the phone. Ringing, texting. ‘What are you doing? What are you up to? Where are you going?’ Even when we went on day trips, to places like Chessington [theme park], he’d be constantly messaging her.”

There was a warning sign. It was Natalie’s birthday. She got a text from an ex. Paul snatched the phone. He read the text. Then he hurled the phone at her, cutting her head open.

It came in cycles. Jealousy, rage, violence, apology. Natalie kept leaving. Paul kept begging her to start afresh. They lived in Hemel Hempstead. They got engaged. Paul cancelled the wedding - in secret. Natalie left him again. He begged her for one final chance.

He bought the Milton Keynes house in April 2015. Said he was a changed man.



Nikki Smith
comforts
Natalie
Hemming's
sister Jo

But he didn't change. He blew his final chance. By early 2016, Natalie told him she was going to leave. She started looking at flats. She began to flirt with a guy from work. He asked her out. She said yes.

Jo tells me that Paul had been "sullen" for months. Natalie had been increasingly stressed. A few weeks before her death, she'd collapsed at work. Paul refused to take her to the hospital. Simon took her. "Simon was just nice to her," Jo tells me. "He would bring her a sandwich. Little gestures that meant a lot to her." At home, Natalie was "trying to keep her head down". She'd told Paul it was over. She wanted to get her own flat. Paul knew she wanted to leave. But he never quite believed it, until she came home on the afternoon of May 1.

On the first day of his trial, Paul Hemming

changed his plea. He admitted manslaughter. He said he'd lost his temper and flung a replica Fabergé egg. The egg had hit Natalie in the head. Then he'd panicked, he said. He put her body in the boot of his car and drove around, looking for a quiet spot to dispose of it. When Natalie was found, she had a fractured skull and a broken bone in her forearm. She'd been trying to protect her head while blows rained down. He was given a life sentence for murder.

“I don't believe he'll ever tell the truth,” Jo tells me. “I don't believe he'll ever be honest. Because if he is, he would lose that last element of control. By him not telling us what actually happened that night, he maintains that.”

“We've all got our own theories. The one that stands out for me is they had, in their downstairs toilet, this godawful ... I think it's called a shillelagh. An Irish walking stick. This big ugly wooden thing. It was in their downstairs toilet. We always used to joke about it. But when we watched the footage, it's not there. It's not in that toilet.”




When Jo thinks about Natalie, she thinks about her last night. “I think with Simon that he just was nice to her,” she says. “She knew she had big changes ahead. Just somebody

buying you a coffee can make a big difference.”

In the CCTV footage, Natalie and Simon are seen walking out of the hotel. “She looks so happy,” says Jo. “That smile. I’ve not seen her smile like that for such a long time. Just that brief glimpse ... She was glowing. She was happy. She knew there was a better life out there.”

Natalie says goodbye to Simon and gets into her car.

Catching a Killer is on Channel 4 on June 1

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Dwayne Welch 16 hours ago

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