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Catching a Killer exposes the mind of an abuser for the first time - and you need to watch



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Catching a Killer follows the murder investigation into Natalie Hemming CREDIT: PRODUCTION COMPANY

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It isn't easy to leave a manipulative man. It's a simple thing to say but the harsh reality is exposed in a groundbreaking documentary made for Channel 4, *Catching a Killer*, which follows a real-life murder investigation. The victim, 31-year-old Natalie Hemming, was killed last year by her ex-partner when she finally made up her mind to leave him after enduring years of abuse.

'Cold and calculating,' 42-year-old Paul Hemming then tried to persuade detectives that someone else was responsible for her disappearance. The murder inquiry began with a call to Thames Valley police from Natalie's distraught mother, Margaret. Her daughter had disappeared after her first date with a new man, which she had tried to keep secret from her former partner. From the outset, Natalie's mother feared that Paul Hemming was responsible.

Detectives took the unusual step of allowing a documentary-maker, Anna Hall, to film their inquiry. The 90-minute film, which airs tonight, is a rare opportunity to see how an unrepentant abuser operates.

“This is believed to be the first time that a murder investigation has been filmed from start to finish”

Under questioning, Hemming uses exactly the same techniques – dishonesty and tears – that he used on women. He lies from the moment he is woken up by police officers investigating Natalie's disappearance, even refusing to hand over his mobile phone in case his former partner – who is in reality already dead – should call him.

When he's arrested the following day, he wipes away tears and comes up with a story Natalie has gone away because she was raped by another man. According to Hemming, they were on good terms when she left the house and had agreed to 'start afresh'.

Not a word of it is true, but Natalie's mother and sister go through hell before her body is found in a wood in Hertfordshire three weeks later.

Even then, Hemming does not confess. On the first day of his trial, he changes his story, admitting manslaughter and claiming that he 'accidentally' killed Natalie by throwing a jade egg at her head during a row. The jury aren't taken in and convict him of murder. He's currently serving life with a recommendation that he should be locked up for a minimum of 20 years.



Paul and Natalie CREDIT: PRODUCTION COMPANY

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Home Office figures show that two women are killed by a current or former partner every week. What is going on is sometimes known by family members - Natalie's sister Jo tried on many occasions to persuade her to leave Hemming - but less often to the authorities.

Research carried out in London by the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime suggests that most victims of domestic homicide are not previously known to the police, suggesting either that they keep hoping for the best - or don't know what help is available.

That's one of many reasons why the documentary is so important, showing the determination of Thames Valley Police, led by Superintendent Simon Steel, to gather the evidence they need to convict Hemming. While it is true that some police forces are more effective than others, the film confirms that official attitudes to domestic violence have changed out of all recognition in recent years.

Natalie's story is familiar, but no less tragic and compelling for that.

“Now viewers can see for themselves the techniques used by an accomplished liar and abuser”

She was a 21-year-old single mother, struggling with post-natal depression, when she met Hemming. He was 11 years older and already on file for violently assaulting a previous girlfriend. But men like Hemming target vulnerable women

and he swept Natalie off her feet, presenting her with a £2,500 engagement ring.

They never married but went on to have two children together, despite escalating violence on Hemming's part. On one occasion, he injured her so badly that she had to go to A&E and gave a statement to police. Hemming bombarded her with tears and promises that he would change, and Natalie eventually withdrew her complaint.

When a woman is murdered by a partner, outsiders often ask why she didn't leave him years ago. Now viewers can see for themselves the techniques used by an accomplished liar and abuser, offering unusual insights into the mentality of such men. Last year, Radio 4 soap *The Archers* was praised for a plotline depicting domestic abuse in real time. This film is the next logical step in our education.

Women are most at risk when they finally find the courage to leave – something that murder detectives know all too well. The general public doesn't, and that's why documentaries like this one perform an important public service.