

Darkest of Webs

By

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Chapter 1

An icy wind whipped around Samuel's legs in the small car park, swirling and lifting the fallen leaves into the night sky. He had parked on a side street a short walk away. As he stepped towards the glowing entrance, clusters of people waited inside. His feet slowed. He glanced back towards the dark street.

Come back in the morning. The thought pressed against him. His wife's abduction had happened almost a month ago. Another night wouldn't make much difference.

He turned to leave, but the image blazed across his eyes again. What he had seen sent tremors right to his core. He had loved her once. He had to tell someone.

But how could he confide in them? They were the old bill, the filth, the pigs. They treated people like him like shit on their shoes. Hadn't they locked him up for two days when he reported his wife missing? Threatening him until he reached a point where he almost confessed just to breathe fresh air again. The same people who had called him a nigger and a coon when the interview recording stopped.

His feet carried him back towards his car and safety. The image flashed again, burning like a branding iron, searing what he witnessed into his brain. Samuel steeled himself, turned, and climbed the steps. His hands shook as he pushed open the door and walked into Brixton Police Station.

People lounged on the benches. Nobody stood at the counter. He pushed and pulled at the glass door. It didn't budge. Through the glass, he couldn't see anyone behind the counter, but there was an office at the back. Movement flickered in the shadows.

He knocked on the glass. A head peered around the office doorway, looked at him, and disappeared again. He waited, shifting his weight from foot to foot. No one came. His knuckles hovered over the glass. He waited some more. Still, no one appeared.

"Yah need ta make some noise, man." The voice came from behind.

He turned. A scruffy youth ambled towards him, clothes hanging on his frame. The youth pounded on the glass with such force Samuel believed it would shatter, then reclaimed his spot on the bench. A body quickly followed the same head that had peered out moments before, looking none too pleased. There was a buzz, and the door unlocked with a metallic click.

"Was that you?" The officer's eyes made Samuel's stomach clench.

"No, but I need to speak to a detective about something I saw."

"You want to report a crime?" The officer reached for a paper form and rested one hand against the counter.

Samuel sighed. "I've already reported it, almost a month ago. I have an update."

"If you can't come back in the morning, which would be best, I can take note of your name and phone number and get someone from CID to call you when they're free tomorrow."

"Why won't you listen to me?" His voice rose slightly, frustration bubbling to the surface. "I need to speak to a detective now. They took my wife from my home over three weeks ago, and I saw her tonight."

"OK, keep yer hair on. Where did you see her? Was she with another man?"

"It's complicated. There must be a detective working during the night."

"There is, but he's out just now. You can wait for him to come back on the benches. Can't say how long he'll be, though."

"I'll wait. Please tell him it's urgent."

"What's your name?"

"Samuel Jackson."

"You don't look like him."

The words hit him as they always did. "You're not the first to say that. Please tell the detective. I'll be on the bench."

Dawn crept into Brixton before Samuel heard the detective open a door and call his name. He roused himself and followed the officer to an interview room.

"I'm Detective Simmons. It's been a long and busy night, so let's get on with it. I need to go home and get in my pit. I hear you've seen your wife, who was abducted a month ago. Is that right?"

"It is."

Samuel told his story. Neither he nor Detective Simmons went home anytime soon.

The car seat pressed against his back as he watched the dark house. His gloved hands gripped the wheel. Leather stretched tight across his knuckles.

Twelve hours since the plane had touched down. Another twelve hours until he'd board a flight out. The boss had been direct: take the target out. "Make it look messy. Send a message." The words echoed in his mind like a recording.

The file contained everything. Name, address, photograph. But names created connections. Connections bred hesitation. The target was just that—a target.

The driveway sat empty. Windows stared back at him like dead eyes. He'd been there three hours already. The balaclava bunched around his ears, rolled up to look like an ordinary winter hat. Ready to pull down when the moment came.

Coffee steam rose from the thermos cap. Warmth spread through him. The plastic pee bottle sat wedged between his seat and door—basic operational planning. Two wraps of speed nestled in his jacket pocket. Insurance against fatigue.

At four in the morning, he tore open the first wrap. Bitter powder hit his tongue. Energy surged through his veins. The world sharpened. Every shadow became defined. Every sound amplified.

By seven-thirty, paranoia crept in. The car stood out like a beacon. Suburban streets meant curious neighbours. Dog walkers. Joggers. People who noticed things.

He fired the engine and cruised to the end of the cul-de-sac. The new position meant a longer walk to the house. Fifteen metres. Maybe twenty. Too much exposure. But police sirens would create bigger problems. British officers carried radios, not guns. Local response teams posed manageable risks. But mess attracted attention. The wrong kind of mess.

Christine's footsteps echoed softly on the vinyl floor as she entered the Major Investigation Team room. She'd expected to find the team scattered around their desks, but only Pritch's head was visible over his double monitors, and the sound of fingers dancing across his keyboard.

He glanced up at her approach, a half-smile tugging at his mouth.

"Where is everybody?" Christine asked.

Pritch shrugged, his attention already drifting back to the screen. "Probably out doing detective stuff, I expect. I don't know half the time what they do. I just sit here tapping away at my keyboard." His smile widened. "I'm a mushroom, fed on shit and kept in the dark."

Christine moved closer to his desk. "What are you working on?"

A sheepish expression crossed his face. "Just ordering some gear on Amazon."

"And here I was thinking you were saving the world."

Pritch's eyes flicked towards the DCI's office. "The boss is in there. He's off the phone now and said he wanted to see you when you arrived."

Christine turned. Through the half-glass door, she caught sight of DCI Steve Balcombe waving her over from his desk.

"OK, keep up the good work," she called over her shoulder as she crossed the room.

She knocked on the doorframe. Balcombe beckoned her in with a wave.

"Pritch said you wanted to see me?"

"Yes, I did. Take a seat. We have another detective sergeant joining us later this week: Zara Malik. Do you know her?"

Christine shook her head as she settled into the chair opposite his desk.

"DS Malik comes highly recommended from the National Crime Agency. She's coming to the end of her stint there, and her boss reached out to me to see if she'd be a good fit here. If she works out, she'll be another DS on the team."

"It'll be great to have another woman on the team to help me keep the boys in check." The words came easily, but her thoughts drifted to last year's trauma, to Lucy's shadow that still lingered in quiet moments.

"And that brings me to my second point. We can't have three detective sergeants on the team. Pete has been here forever and will probably get his old-age pension delivered to his desk out there. So we need to talk about your future on the team."

The blood drained from Christine's face. Heat prickled along her scalp. She liked it here. The team worked well together. Hadn't she proved herself last year with the serial killer case that had nearly destroyed her?

"But—" she began.

The DCI raised his hand. "Andy Kerr has finished his secondment and, rather than coming back here, has accepted a permanent post in the squad he was working for. I've pulled a few strings, and the Detective Inspector post on MIT is yours if you want it."

Relief flooded through her like warm water. Her thoughts scattered, last year's darkness evaporating. She pushed herself up from the chair as Balcombe stood and extended his hand.

"Of course I would. You gave me a nasty turn there."

"Sorry, but the team made me do it," he said, nodding towards the incident room.

Muffled voices drifted through the glass. Christine turned to see the team gathered outside the office, watching. Pete started clapping, and the applause spread through the group. Even the DCI joined in.

Christine opened the office door. When the noise died down, she grinned. "You're all a bunch of bastards."

They crowded around her, hands reaching out, voices overlapping with congratulations. After working her way through the group, she headed for Pete Rabbet's desk.

Pete looked up as she approached. "Are you okay with this? The post should be yours."

"The boss spoke with me, and I told him I didn't want it. Charlotte, my daughter, is going to secondary school next year, and we're thinking of moving up north to be closer to my wife's family. I'm fifty-five next year, and I'll have my thirty in, so I can get my pension. I'll be around for a while yet, though."

Christine studied his face. No trace of resentment or disappointment. Just Pete being Pete. "Can I give you a hug?"

A flush crept up Pete's neck as he rose from his chair. "If you like."

She wrapped her arms around him, breathing in the familiar scent of his aftershave. When she stepped back, she straightened her shoulders.

"I'm an inspector now; I can't be giving hugs to the staff. Get on with your work."

They both laughed.

"Do you know this Zara Malik?"

"I've heard of her," Pete said, "but I've never met her. I think she'll be here on Wednesday. It's quiet at present, but something juicy will come in. It always does. London's not short of serious crime. How are you getting on with the search for your birth mother?"

Her stomach clenched.

He nodded, and Christine crossed back to Pritch's desk.

"You knew, didn't you?"

"Yes, Ma'am. We all did."

"You can cut that out for a start." The smile escaped before she could stop it. "You said you were getting close to finding the hospital where they sent my mother?"

"I found it. I need to locate the nursing home they sent her to after leaving the mental hospital. Should have it in about ten to fifteen minutes. Just waiting for a call back." He glanced up from his screen. "Public records only. Nothing from police files."

"Let me know as soon as you have it."

"Will do."

Ten o'clock brought the familiar crash. His hands trembled slightly. The second wrap disappeared under his tongue. Chemical fire spread through his system. Focus returned. Most commuters had left for work. The suburban streets lay muted.

11:23. A grey saloon car turned onto the road. His pulse quickened. Same make and model as in the file. Same licence plate.

The car door clicked shut behind him. His feet found the pavement. Not too fast. Not too slow. Just another pedestrian. The balaclava slipped down his face as his hand found the pistol grip. Plastic warmed under his fingers.

The target fumbled with house keys. Perfect positioning. Clean shot. His finger tightened on the trigger.

Movement flickered at the edge of his vision. A woman emerged from the neighbouring house. Her mouth opened. The scream built in her throat.

The pistol swung toward her. His finger squeezed. The suppressor muffled the shot to a soft thud. A red hole appeared below her left eye. She crumpled to the ground.

The target spun around. Keys scattered across the doorstep. The man's eyes found his fallen neighbour. Panic twisted his features. He threw himself against the front door.

The second shot caught him in the back of the skull. The expanding bullet did its work. Bone fragments mixed with brain matter. The body pitched forward against the door.

He rolled the corpse over. Two more shots. One through each eye. The message would be clear enough.

The laptop lay where the target had dropped it. Four brass casings glinted on the concrete. He pocketed them and picked up the computer. The woman's body sprawled across her front garden. Blood pooled beneath her head.

His car door closed quietly. The engine turned over. The scrapyard waited. Then the airport. Then home.

Chapter 2

Christine pressed her back against the bus shelter, a damp chill seeping through her leather jacket. She'd grown her blonde hair longer, so it brushed her shoulders, but this morning she'd tied it back in a ponytail. The cold bit through the leather. She pulled the zipper to her neck and snapped the popper shut.

A uniformed nurse pushed through the doors of the building Christine had watched for over an hour. The nurse climbed into a small blue car and drove away. Christine let out a breath. Was she ready for this? Dave and Pritch would call her a wuss. The question clawed at her: could she face the truth about herself? Pritch had found the place this morning after hours of searching. She was determined, but could she put herself through the heartache after what had happened last year? Her world had flipped inside out. Reality and unreality had tangled until she couldn't tell what was real anymore.

Christine sucked in a breath. The steel that had helped her score a victory against the darkness strengthened her now. She pushed off from the shelter and crossed the street.

The metal door handle felt cold against her palm. Inside, a young woman looked up from behind the reception desk.

"Can I help you?"

"I hope you can. I'd like to see Ruth Bennett."

"And you are?"

"I'm Christine Bennett, her daughter."

The young woman—Sindy, according to her name badge—raised her eyebrows. "I didn't think Miss Bennett had any relatives. Let me call the manager. Take a seat over there. She won't keep you waiting long."

Christine lowered herself into a plastic chair. Her pulse hammered in her ears. After a few minutes, a middle-aged woman in a blue uniform approached. Dark brown hair framed her warm smile.

"Christine Bennett?" The woman extended her hand.

Christine stood and gripped it firmly.

"I'm Cynthia Robertson. Chief nurse and manager here. We can talk in my office. Follow me."

Christine trailed her down a narrow corridor to an open door bearing the manager's name.

"Take a seat." Mrs Robertson gestured to a chair facing her desk. "You've not been here before, have you?"

"No, I only found out today where my mother was."

"Maybe you should explain that to me?"

Christine had rehearsed this. "About a year after I was born, my mother went into a mental hospital. Sandra Woolfe adopted me shortly after I entered the care system. I didn't know who or where my birth mother was until this morning."

"Your adopted mother never told you?"

"No, she died just over ten years ago. I found out she wasn't my birth mother a few months ago."

"So what makes you think Ruth Bennett is your birth mother? We have to be careful, you understand."

"I understand completely. I'm a police officer." Christine slid her warrant card across the desk. "Sandra raised me as Christine Woolfe. We have a computer expert on my team. He did some digging online and found my mother's name, the hospital that admitted her, my birth name, and then found this place."

Mrs Robertson's eyes widened as she read the card. "That must have been a lot to take in... I've never seen a police warrant card except on TV. Is there someone I can call to verify who you say you are?"

"Of course. Dial 101 and ask to be put through to DCI Steve Balcombe at the major incident team."

Christine waited while Mrs Robertson made the call. Satisfied, the manager replaced the phone.

"I have to tell you your mother is not very well. Not well at all. She has some lucid moments, but she's lost in her own thoughts much of the time. She has dementia and some breathing issues. But enough of that; come with me. I'll take you to her."

Christine's mobile rang as she left the nursing home. The DCI.

"Hi boss, what's up?"

She listened, then replied, "OK, I'll meet you there. Get someone to text me the address."

As she drove through the streets of south London, the visit replayed in her mind. Her mother was frail and very unwell. But worst of all, she had no memory of ever having a daughter named Christine or anything else. Christine had shown her baby pictures of herself—presumably taken by Sandra Woolfe. Her mother had sat there, blank-faced. Mrs Robertson said her mother had better days than this, but not many. Christine was welcome to return anytime. It wasn't the family reunion she'd hoped for.

She drove on autopilot towards the scene. Police tape flapped in the wind. The flashing lights of ambulances and marked cars pulsed like a heartbeat. Ironic, she thought, as she approached the scene of a double murder. She parked about fifty yards away and walked towards the controlled chaos of a murder investigation.

The boss had said they had two bodies, both shot. A postman had stumbled upon the scene while delivering a parcel. Christine spotted DC Dave Wilde talking to the postman while the DCI and DC Kumar Singh examined a black man lying on a driveway. Two SOCOs worked around them while another pair collected evidence from a white female victim.

Christine showed her warrant card to the uniformed officer and gave her details for the MI log. She ducked under the tape and nodded to Dave as she passed.

"Boss, what do we know so far?"

"Hi Christine. We think this man was the intended victim. He took a shot to the back of the head and then either fell onto his back, or the killer turned him and shot into both of his eyes. The woman, who we believe was this man's neighbour, was collateral damage. The doctor's already been and left. No doubt about the cause of death."

"Do we know the identities of the victims?"

Kumar replied, "The car on the drive is registered to a Samuel Jackson, so the working theory is that it's him until proved otherwise. We don't know who the female is."

Dave, who had excused himself from the postman, added, "I can help with that. The female victim is Janice Montgomery. The postman had a parcel for her. She lives at number 12 with her husband and two school-age children. The postman could also help with the identification of Mr Jackson. He lived here at number 8 and, until about three weeks ago, lived here with his wife. He hasn't seen her since. I've got the postman's details, and the SOCOs have swabbed his hands and clothing for gunshot residue and searched his van. Can I let him go after I take a statement from him?"

The DCI nodded. "Did you check the parcel he had for the female victim?"

"I did. Clothing from Marks and Sparks."

"OK, after the statement, let him go."

Christine's mind raced. "I'll speak to the forensic team and see if they found a mobile phone or keys to the house belonging to the female victim. We need to contact her husband. We won't be finished here before the end of school, and I'm worried her kids might wander down the cul-de-sac."

"Good thought," the boss replied.

She wandered over to the SOCOs, who were now standing around their van in discussion.

"Have you found a mobile or house keys belonging to the female victim?"

"Both," one of the team replied. "There's an ICE number on the lock screen."

Christine jotted the number down and walked back to the boss and Kumar. The DCI looked up as she approached.

"There's an 'in case of emergency' number on her lock screen. I'm hoping it's her husband. Is it OK to make the call?"

"I think so. Find out where he is. If he's close by, send a car for him. If he's further away, ask him which school his kids go to and tell him to come home. Let him know there's been an incident."

"Right, boss."

Christine reached into her coat pocket for her mobile and keyed in the ICE number.

It rang and rang, almost to the point where she was about to disconnect. The person must have turned off their answerphone message.

"Hello?"

"Is that Mr Montgomery?"

"It is. Who is this?"

"My name is Detective Inspector Woolfe." The title felt alien on her tongue. "There's been an incident where you live. Where are you now?"

"What type of incident? Is my wife all right?"

"Where are you?" Christine repeated.

"I work in Wimbledon, just popped out for lunch. I'm coming home right now." The line went dead before she could respond.

She walked back to the boss. "I think we should get the bodies covered up. He's only in Wimbledon. I told him there had been an incident where he lived, and he told me he was coming home before hanging up."

"OK, inform the uniforms manning the cordon and head over there yourself to intercept him. On the way, tell the SOCOs to cover the bodies."

After about fifteen minutes, she heard and saw a silver estate car career into the cul-de-sac, brakes screaming as it skidded to a halt inches from the rear bumper of an ambulance.

The driver's door flew open. A man in his forties stumbled out, his face draining of colour as he took in the scene. His gaze swept over the ambulances, police vehicles, and forensic vans before settling on the white-suited figures moving between the cordoned areas. His mouth opened, closed, opened again, like a fish gasping for air.

He lurched towards the police tape, hands fumbling to lift it.

Christine strode over, warrant card already in her palm. "I'm Detective Inspector Christine—"

"Has anything happened to my wife?" The words tumbled out before she could finish. His eyes darted to the tarpaulins, lingering on the one covering the body outside what must be his front door. "Oh Christ, no. No, no, no."

He bolted towards the house. Christine caught his arm, feeling the tremor running through him.

"Mr Montgomery." She kept her voice steady, professional. "Let me explain what we think has happened here."

She guided him to the nearest patrol car, opened the passenger door, and eased him onto the seat. His legs seemed to give way beneath him.

"Mr Montgomery, can you give me your first name, please?"

"Stephen." The word came out as barely a whisper. His head kept turning towards the tarpaulins, drawn like a magnet to the shapes beneath.

"And your wife's name?"

"Janice." His hands gripped the door frame. "Where is my wife? I demand you tell me."

But there was no force behind the words—only the desperate hope of a man clinging to a rapidly sinking ship.

Christine crouched beside the car, bringing herself to his eye level. "Stephen, your wife is dead. She was shot and killed this morning."

The change was immediate and devastating. Stephen's shoulders sagged, his face crumpling inward as if someone had punctured him. He tried to stand, but Christine's gentle pressure on his shoulder kept him seated.

"Are you sure?" His voice cracked on the last word.

"The postman identified her, and I got your mobile number off her lock screen. I can take you over in a bit if you'd like."

Stephen's hands flew to his hair, fingers raking through the greying strands. "Oh, my God. What am I going to tell the kids? Does the school know?" He checked his watch, panic flaring in his reddened eyes. "They'll be home in an hour."

As Christine drove to the MIT office, Stephen Montgomery's face flashed before her, twisted in grief as he stared at his wife's lifeless body. She'd only shown him the right side of his wife's face to hide the bullet wound. They'd called a family liaison officer to drive him to the school to collect his children. A double murder. He didn't know the truth—didn't understand that his wife had just been in the wrong place at the wrong time. At least, that was what they thought.

It didn't have the hallmarks of a gang-related killing, though. It could be an initiation—a way to prove oneself worthy of gang status. But it felt wrong. Whoever had done this was comfortable with their weapon. SOCOs hadn't found any shell casings, so the suspect either picked up their brass or used a revolver. She knew revolvers could have a suppressor, but most of the noise came from the cylinder. Silenced automatics were much more common.

Dave and Kumar remained at the scene to begin house-to-house inquiries with the uniforms, as it was getting near the time people would arrive home. Christine had volunteered to help Pete set up the incident room after the boss had told her they officially had the case. He'd left the scene to brief the detective superintendent.

When Christine arrived back in the incident room, Pete had already marked up the whiteboard with the victims' names and address details. She filled him and Pritch in on the details of the shootings.

Pete said, "We've got a search team lined up for Jackson's place after the SOCOs finish. They'll take his car for examination."

When the boss returned, he said, "Dave and Kumar are still at the scene doing house-to-house with the uniforms. They'll be there for some time. I suggest you all head home. I have a few calls to make, but I won't be far behind."