THE MILLION-COPY BESTSELLER

TIM WEAVER

CHASING THE DEAD

She's buried her son.
Now she's seen him alive

'Unsettling, brilliantly plotted...these books are unputdownable. If you haven't yet met Raker, you're in for a treat' MICK HERRON

PENGUIN BOOKS

Chasing the Dead

Tim Weaver is the *Sunday Times* bestselling author of the David Raker Missing Persons series. Weaver has been nominated for a National Book Award, selected for the Richard and Judy Book Club, and shortlisted for the Crime Writers' Association Dagger in the Library Award, which considers an author's entire body of work. His seventh novel, *Broken Heart*, was longlisted for the Crime Writers' Association Ian Fleming Steel Dagger Award.

He is also the host and producer of the chart-topping *Missing* podcast, which features experts in the field discussing missing persons investigations from every angle. A former journalist and magazine editor, he lives near Bath with his wife and daughter.

Find out more about Tim Weaver and his writing at:
TimWeaverBooks.com
@TimWeaverBooks

By the same author

Chasing the Dead
The Dead Tracks
Vanished
Never Coming Back
Fall From Grace
What Remains
Broken Heart
I am Missing

Chasing the Dead

TIM WEAVER

PENGUIN BOOKS

PENGUIN BOOKS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Penguin Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com.

Penguin Random House UK

First published 2010
Updated and reissued in this edition 2015
001

Set in 13/15.25 pt Garamond MT Std
Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–1–405–91269–3

www.greenpenguin.co.uk

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

For Sharlé

‘And the sea became as the blood of a dead man:
and every living soul died in the sea’
Revelation 16:3

PART ONE

I

Sometimes, towards the end, it was like she was drowning: she would wake me by tugging at the cusp of my shirt, her eyes flickering, begging me to pull her to the surface. I always liked those moments, despite her suffering, because it meant she'd lasted another day.

Her skin was like canvas in those last months, stretched tight against her bones. She'd lost all her hair as well, except for some bristles around the tops of her ears. But I never cared about that; about any of it. If I'd been given a choice between having Derryn for a day as she was when I'd first met her, or having her for the rest of my life as she was at the end, I would have taken her as she was at the end, without even pausing for thought. Because, in the moments when I thought about a life without her, I could barely even breathe.

She was thirty-two, seven years younger than me, when she first found the lump. Four months later, she collapsed in the supermarket. I'd been a newspaper journalist for eighteen years but, after she collapsed a second time – this time on the Underground – I

resigned, went freelance and refused to travel. It wasn't a hard decision. I didn't want to be on the other side of the world when the third call came through telling me that, this time, she'd fallen and died.

On the day I left the paper, Derryn took me to a plot she'd chosen for herself in a cemetery in north London. She looked at her grave, up at me, and then smiled. I remember that clearly. A smile shot through with so much pain and fear I wanted to break something. I wanted to hit out until all I felt was numb. Instead, I took her hand, brought her into me, and tried to treasure every second of whatever time we had left.

When it became clear the chemotherapy wasn't working, she decided to stop. I cried that day, really cried, probably for the first time since I was a kid – but, looking back, she made the right decision. She still had some dignity. Without hospital visits and the time it took her to recover from them, our lives became more spontaneous, and that was an exciting way to live for a while. She read a lot and she started writing a journal, and I did some work on the house, painting walls and fixing rooms. And a month after she stopped her chemo, I started to plough some money into creating a study. As Derryn reminded me, I'd need a place to work.

Except the work never came. There was a little – sympathy commissions mostly – but my refusal to

travel turned me into a last resort. I'd become the type of freelancer I'd always loathed. I didn't want to be that person, was even conscious of it happening. But, with each passing day, Derryn became a little more important to me, and I found that difficult to let go.

Then one day I got home and found a letter on the living-room table. It was from one of Derryn's friends.

She was desperate.

Her daughter had disappeared, and the police didn't seem to be interested. I was the only person she thought could help.

The offer she made was huge – more than I'd deserve from what would amount to a few phone calls – but the whole idea left me paralysed by uncertainty. I definitely needed the money, and had sources inside the Met who would have found her daughter in days. But I wasn't sure I wanted my new life to join up with my old one. I wasn't sure I wanted any of it back.

So I said no.

But, when I took the letter through to the back garden, Derryn was gently rocking in her chair with the tiniest hint of a smile on her face.

'What's so funny?'

'You're not sure if you should do it.'

'I'm sure,' I said. 'I'm sure I *shouldn't* do it.'

She just nodded.

'Do you think I should do it?'

'It's perfect for you.'

'What, chasing around after missing kids?'

'It's perfect for you,' she said. 'Take this chance, David.'

And that was how it began. I pushed the doubt down with the sadness and the anger and found the girl three days later in a bedsit in Walthamstow. Then, more work followed, more missing people, and I could see the ripples of the career I'd left behind returning to me. Asking questions, making calls, trying to pick up the trail. I'd always liked the investigative parts of journalism, the dirty work, the digging, more than I'd liked the writing. And, after a while, a few cases in to my new career, I knew it was the reason I never felt out of my depth working missing persons, because the process, the course of the chase, was exactly the same. Most of it was just about caring enough. The police didn't have time to find every person who left home and never returned – and I think sometimes they failed to understand why people disappeared in the first place. Most of them didn't leave just to prove a point. They left because their lives had taken an uncontrollable turn, and the only way to contend with that was to run. What followed, the traps they fell into after, were the reasons they could never go back.

But despite the hundreds of people that went missing every day of every year, I'm not sure I ever expected to make a living out of trying to find them. It never felt like a job; not in the way journalism had. And yet, after a while, when the money really started coming in, Derryn persuaded me to rent some office space down the road from our home, in an effort to get me out, but also – more than that, I think – to convince me I could make a career out of what I was doing.

She called it a long-term plan.

Two months later, she died.

2

When I opened the door to my office, it was cold and there were four envelopes on the floor inside. I tossed the mail on to the desk and opened the blinds.

Morning light erupted in, revealing photos of Derryn everywhere.

In one, my favourite, we were in a deserted coastal town in Florida, sand sloping away to the sea, jellyfish scattered like cellophane across the beach. In the fading light, she looked beautiful. Her eyes flashed blue and green. Freckles were scattered along her nose and under the curve of her cheekbones. Her blonde hair was bleached by the sun, and her skin had browned all the way along her arms.

I pulled the picture towards me.

Next to her, my eyes were dark, my hair darker. I towered over her at six-two, her head resting against my chest, her body fitting in against mine. If, in the years since the photograph had been taken, there had been any physical change in me, it was subtle enough for people not to notice. I worked out, I looked after myself, the same now as I did then. Yet, *I* could see the difference clearly. The version of me in the

photograph lacked the weight of bereavement. I was oblivious to what was coming. I had a spark, a lustre. Grief was only a word, like any other.

Back then, I wouldn't have been able to identify with the families of the missing, because I wouldn't have understood them.

But I understood them now.

I turned around in my chair and looked up at them all, at the faces of the people I traced. Their smiles filled an entire corkboard on the wall behind me.

Every space. Every corner.

They were all I had now.

I spent most of the day sitting at my desk with the lights off, unsure exactly of why I'd come in. It was exactly a year since Derryn had been carried out of our house on a stretcher. The telephone rang a couple of times, but I left it, listening to it echo around the office. I knew I wasn't in the right state of mind to consider taking on any work, so when the clock hit four, I started to pack up.

That was when Mary Towne arrived.

I heard her coming up the stairs, slowly taking one step at a time, and then the top door clicked and creaked open. I'd known Mary for a few years. She used to work in A&E with Derryn. Her life had been tragic, just the same as mine: her husband suffered from Alzheimer's, and her son had left home six years

earlier without telling anyone. He eventually turned up dead.

'Hi, Mary.'

I startled her.

Sitting on the far side of the waiting area, she looked up. Her skin was darkened by creases, every one of her fifty years etched into her face. She'd been beautiful once, but her life had been pushed and pulled around and now she wore the heartache like a cloak. Her small figure had become slightly stooped. The colour had started to drain from her cheeks and her lips. Thick ribbons of grey had begun to emerge from her hairline.

'Hello, David,' she said quietly. 'How are you?'

'Good.' I shook her hand. 'It's been a while.'

'Yes.' She looked down into her lap. 'A year.'

She meant Derryn's funeral.

'How's Malcolm?'

Malcolm was her husband. She glanced at me and shrugged.

'You're a long way from home,' I said.

'I know. I needed to see you.'

'Why?'

'I wanted to discuss something with you.'

I tried to imagine what.

'I couldn't get you on the telephone.'

'No.'

'I called a couple of times.'

'It's kind of a . . .' I looked back to my office. To the pictures of Derryn. 'It's kind of a difficult time for me at the moment. Today, in particular.'

She nodded. 'I know it is. I'm sorry about the timing, David. It's just . . . I know you care about what you're doing. This job. I need someone like that. Someone who cares.' She glanced at me again. 'Do you remember Alex?'

Alex was her son.

'Of course.'

'Do you remember what happened to him?'

'He died.'

'I mean, the details.'

I paused, looking at her, wondering where this was going.

'David?'

'Why don't we go through?' I said, and led her out of the waiting area and back to my desk. She looked around at the photos on the walls, her eyes moving between them. 'Take a seat,' I said, pulling a chair out for her.

She nodded her thanks.

I sat down opposite her. 'So tell me about Alex.'

'He died in a car crash,' she said quietly.

'I remember that, yes.'

'He was, uh . . . he was drunk. He drove a Toyota, like his father used to have, right into the side of a lorry. It was only a small car. It ended up fifty feet

from the road, in the middle of a field; burnt to a shell, like him. They had to identify him from dental records.' She stopped, composing herself. 'But you know what the worst bit was? Before he died, he'd just disappeared. He was gone five years before that crash. Five years. After everything we'd done as a family, he just . . . vanished. The next time I saw him . . .'

She couldn't finish the sentence.

'I'm sorry,' I said.

'Five years after he disappeared, the only thing he left me with was the memory of his body lying on a mortuary slab. I'll never get that image out of my head. I used to open my eyes in the middle of the night and see him standing like that next to my bed.' Her eyes glistened. 'I don't think you ever met him in person – but I'm sure you heard about him through Derryn.'

She took out a photograph and handed it to me. She was in it, her arms around a man in his early twenties. He was handsome. Black hair, green eyes, probably five-eleven, but broad, like he might once have been a swimmer.

The two of them were smiling.

'This is Alex. *Was* Alex. This is the last picture we ever took of him.' She nodded towards the photograph. 'That was a couple of days before he left.'

'It's a nice picture.'

'He was gone five years before he died.'

'Yes, you said.'

'In all that time, we never once heard from him.'

'I'm really sorry, Mary,' I said again, just to say something.

'I know,' she said quietly. 'That's why you can help me.'

I eyed her. 'What do you mean?'

'I don't want to sound like a mother who can't get over the fact that her son is dead. Believe me, I know he's dead. I saw him lying there with my own eyes.' She paused. I thought she might cry, but then she pulled her hair back from her face, and her eyes were darker, more focused. 'Three months ago, I left work late, and when I got to the station I'd missed my train. It was pulling out as I arrived. If I miss my train, the next one doesn't leave for fifty minutes. I've missed it before. When that happens I always walk to a nice coffee place I know close to the station and sit in one of the booths and watch the world go by.'

She stopped, studying me.

'Okay,' I said, pushing gently.

'I was thinking about some work I had on, some patients I had seen that day, when I . . .' Her eyes narrowed, as if deciding whether she could trust me – and then they glistened again, and she took a long breath. 'I saw him,' she said.

'Saw who?'

'Alex.'

It took a moment for it to hit me.

She's saying she saw her dead son.

'I, uh . . . I don't understand,' I said.

'I saw Alex.'

'You *saw* him?'

'Yes.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean, I saw him.'

I was shaking my head. 'Wh– *How*?'

'He was walking on the other side of the street.'

'It was someone who looked like Alex.'

'No,' she replied softly, controlled, 'it was Alex.'

'But he's dead.'

'I know he's dead.'

'Then how could it possibly be him?'

'It was him, David.'

'How is that possible?'

'I don't know,' she said, eyes never leaving mine. 'I don't know how it could be him. But it *was* him. It was my son.' She stopped, swallowed. 'It was Alex.'

3

I stared at her, unsure what to say.

'I know what you're thinking,' she said, 'but I'm not crazy. My mother, my sister, they've been gone for years, and I don't see them. I swear to you, David, I saw Alex that day. I *saw* him.' She moved forward in her seat, bringing her handbag with her. 'I'll pay you up front,' she said quickly. 'If that's the only way I can persuade you that I'm telling you the truth, I will pay you money up front.'

'Have you reported this?'

'To the *police*?'

'Yes.'

She sat back again. 'Of course not.'

'You should.'

'What's the point?'

'Because that's what you do, Mary.'

'My son is dead, David. You think they'd believe me?'

'Why did you think *I* would believe you?'

She glanced around the room. 'I know some of your pain, David, believe me. My cousin died of cancer. In many ways, that terrible disease takes the whole family with it. You care for someone for so

long, you see them like that, you get used to having them like that, and then, when they're suddenly not there, you lose not only them, but what their illness brought to your life. You lose the routine.'

I didn't say anything.

'I don't know you as well as I knew Derryn, but I know this: I took a chance on you believing me, because if, just for a moment, we reversed this situation and you'd seen the person you loved, I know you'd take a chance on me believing you.'

'Mary . . .'

She looked at me, half-expecting my reaction.

'You have to go to the police.'

'No.'

'Think about what you're–'

'Don't insult me like that,' she said, her voice raised for the first time. 'You can do anything, but don't insult me by telling me to *think* about what I'm saying. Do you honestly believe I've spent the last three months doing anything *but* that? I can't go to the police.' She sat forward in her seat again and the fingers of one of her hands clawed at the ends of her raincoat. 'Deep down, you know I can't.'

'Mary,' I replied softly, 'how can he be alive?'

'I don't know.'

'He can't be.'

'You don't understand,' she said.

She was pointing out the difference between us: I

watched someone I love die; she'd done the same – but her loved one had somehow returned. We both understood the moment – and because of that she seemed to gain in confidence.

'It was him.'

'He was a distance away. How could you be sure?'

'I followed him.'

'You *followed* him? Did you speak to him?'

'No.'

'Did you get close to him?'

'I could see the scar on his cheek where he fell playing football at school.'

'Did he seem . . . injured?'

'No. He seemed healthy.'

'What was he doing?'

'He was carrying a backpack over his shoulder. He'd shaved his hair. He always had long hair, like in the photograph I gave you. When I saw him, he'd shaved it off. He looked different, thinner, but it was him.'

'How long did you follow him for?'

'About half a mile. He ended up going into a library off Tottenham Court Road for about fifteen minutes.'

'What was he doing in there?'

'I didn't go in.'

'Why not?'

She stopped. 'I don't know. When I lost sight of him, I started to disbelieve what I'd seen.'

'Did he come back out?'

'Yes.'

'Did he see you?'

'No. I followed him to the Underground, and that's where I lost him. You know what it's like. I lost him in the crowds. I just wanted to speak to him, but I lost him.'

'Have you seen him since?'

'No.'

I sat back in my chair. 'You said this happened three months ago?'

She nodded. '5 September.'

'What about Malcolm?'

'What about him?'

'Have you said anything to him?'

She shook her head. 'What would be the point? He has Alzheimer's. Most days, he can't even remember my name.'

I glanced at the photo of Derryn on my desk. 'Switch positions with me, Mary. Think about how this sounds.'

'I know how it *sounds*,' she replied. 'It sounds impossible. I've been carrying this around with me for three months, David. Why do you think I haven't done anything about it until now? People would think I had lost my mind. Look at you: you're the only person I thought might believe me, and you think I'm lying too.'

'I don't think you're ly–'

'Please, David.'

'I *don't* think you're lying,' I said. 'But I think maybe you're confused.'

Anger passed across her eyes, and then it was gone again, replaced by an acceptance that it had to be this way. She looked down into her lap, into the bag perched on her lap. 'The only way I can think to persuade you is by paying you.'

'Mary . . .'

'You know people.'

'This is different.'

'You *know* people,' she said again.

'You need to go to the police.'

Silence. Her hand moved to her face.

'Come on, Mary. Can you see what I'm saying?'

She didn't move.

'I know a few guys at the Met,' I said.

She shook her head gently.

'This is what they get paid to do.'

She looked up, tears in her eyes.

'I've got some names here,' I went on, opening the top drawer of my desk and taking out a diary I used when I was still at the paper. 'Let me see.' I could hear her sniffing, could see her wiping the tears from her face, but I didn't look up. 'There's a guy I know who works in Southwark who can–'

'I'm not interested.'

'But this guy will help y–'

She held up a hand. 'I'm not explaining this to anyone else.'

'Why not?'

'Can you imagine how many times I've played this conversation over in my head? I don't think I can muster the strength to do it again. And, anyway, what would be the point? If you don't believe me, what makes you think your contact in the police force will?'

'It's his job.'

'He would laugh in my face.'

'He wouldn't laugh in your face, Mary. Not this guy.'

'The way you looked at me, I can't deal with that again.'

'Mary . . .'

She shook her head. 'Imagine if it was Derryn.'

I didn't respond.

'*Imagine*,' she repeated.

And then, very calmly, she got up and left.

4

I was brought up on a farm in south Devon. My dad used to hunt pheasant and rabbits with an old bolt rifle. On a Sunday morning, when the rest of the village – including my mum – were on their way to church, he used to drag me out to the woods and we'd fire guns.

When I was old enough, we progressed to a replica Beretta he'd got mail order. It only fired pellets, but he used to set up targets in the forest for me: human-sized targets that I had to hit. Ten targets: ten points for a head shot, five for the body. I got the full one hundred points for the first time on my sixteenth birthday. He celebrated by letting me wear his favourite hunting jacket and taking me to the pub with his friends. The whole village soon got to hear about how his only child was going to be the British army's top marksman one day.

That never happened, of course. But ten years later I found a jammed Beretta, just like the one he'd let me use, on the streets of Alexandra, a township in Johannesburg – except this one was real. There was one bullet left in the clip.

I removed it, and kept it.

Later the same day, I found out that a bullet, maybe even from the gun I'd found, had ended the life of a photographer I'd shared an office with for two years. He'd dragged himself a third of a mile along a street – gunfire crackling around him, people leaping over his body – and died in the middle of the road.

Sometimes, even fifteen years on, I return to that bullet, set in a block of glass now, and sitting on a shelf in the spare room. It reminds me of my dad, and our Sunday mornings in the forest. It reminds me of the photographer who left this world, alone, in the middle of a dust-blown street. But mostly, it reminds me of the way life can be taken away – and of the distance you might be prepared to crawl in order to cling on to it.

It had just gone nine in the evening when I called Mary and told her I'd take the case. She started crying. I listened to her for a minute or so, her tears broken up by the sound of her thanking me, and then I told her I'd drive out to her house the next morning.

When I put the phone down, I looked along the hallway, into the bowels of my house, and beyond into the darkness of our bedroom, untouched since Derryn died. Her books still sat below the windowsill, the covers creased, the pages folded at the edges

where she couldn't find a bookmark. Her spider plant was perched above it, its long, thin arms fingering the tops of the novels on the highest shelf.

Since she'd been gone I hadn't spent a single night in there. I went in to shower, to water her plant, but I slept in the living room on the sofa, and always with the TV on. Its sounds comforted me. The people, the programmes, the familiarity of it – they helped fill some of the space Derryn used to occupy.

5

I got to Mary's house, a cavernous mock-Tudor cottage an hour west of London, just before ten the next morning. It was picture-perfect suburbia, right at the end of a tree-lined cul-de-sac: shuttered windows, a wide teak-coloured front porch and empty flower baskets swinging gently in the breeze.

I stepped up to the door and rang the bell.

A few moments later, it opened a sliver and Mary looked out through the gap. 'Oh, David,' she said as if she'd forgotten I was coming, and pulled the door back. Behind her I could see her husband, facing me, on the stairs. He didn't move; didn't even register me. He was looking down at a playing card, turning it over in his hands. Face up. Face down.

'Would you like some coffee or tea?'

'Coffee. Thanks.'

She nodded. 'Malcolm, this is David.'

Malcolm didn't move.

'Malcolm.'

Nothing.

'*Malcolm*.'

He flinched, as if a jolt of electricity had passed

through him, and he looked up. Not to see who had called him but to see what the noise was.

He didn't recognize his name.

'Malcolm, come here,' Mary said, waving him towards her.

He got up, and shuffled across to us.

He was drawn and tired, stripped of life. His black hair was starting to grey. The skin around his face sagged. He was probably in his early fifties, only a few years older than Mary, but there could have been a decade between them. He might have been a rugby player once, a powerful physical force, but not any more. Here, inside these walls, his life was ebbing away, his weight was going with it.

'This man's name is David.'

I reached out and had to awkwardly pull his hand out from his side to shake it. He looked like he wasn't sure what I was doing to him.

When I let go, his hand dropped away, and he made his way towards the television, shuffling slowly. I followed him and sat down, expecting Mary to do the same. Instead, she headed for the kitchen and disappeared inside.

I glanced at Malcolm Towne.

He was looking at me with a strange expression, like my presence had registered with him but he didn't know what to say to me. Then he turned back to the screen.

Mary returned, holding a tray.

She set it down. 'There's some sugar there, and some milk.' She picked up a muffin, placed it on to a side plate and handed it to her husband. 'Eat this, Malc,' she said, making an eating gesture. He took the plate from her, laid it in his lap and looked at it. 'I wasn't sure how you took it,' she said to me.

'That's fine.'

'There's blueberry muffins, and a couple of raspberry ones too. Have whichever you like. Malcolm prefers the raspberry ones – don't you, Malc?'

I looked at him. He was staring blankly at his plate. *You can't remember what muffin you prefer when you can't even remember your own name*. Mary glanced at me, as if she knew what I was thinking. But she didn't seem to care.

'When was he diagnosed?' I asked.

She shrugged. 'Officially, two years ago. But it started about twelve months before that. Back then it was just forgetting little bits and pieces, like you or I would forget things, except they wouldn't come back to him. They just went. Then it became bigger things, like names and events, and then, the past eighteen months, he started forgetting me and, eventually, he forgot we even had a son.'

I nodded, broke off a piece of blueberry muffin. 'Well, I'm going to need a couple of things from you,' I said. 'First up, any photos you can lay your hands

on. A good selection. Then I'll need addresses for his friends, his work, his girlfriend if he had one.' I nodded my head towards the stairs. 'I'd also like to have a look around his room if you don't mind. I think that would be helpful.'

'Yes, of course,' Mary said.

'Was Alex living away from home when he disappeared?'

She nodded. 'Yes. But he'd come back here for a holiday for a few weeks just before he vanished.'

'Where was he living?'

'Bristol. He'd gone to university there.'

'And after university?'

'He got a job down there, as a data clerk.' The disappointment showed in her eyes, and then she shrugged. 'I asked him to come back home after he graduated; that we'd find something for him in London. The job he had down in Bristol was terrible. They used to dump files on his desk, and he'd input this data, all day, every day. Plus the pay was awful. He deserved better than that.'

'But he didn't want to come back?'

'He was qualified to degree level. He had a first in English. He could have got himself into a graduate programme here on five times the salary. And, if he had moved back, he'd have paid less rent and it would have been a much better springboard for finding work. He could have devoted his days to filling out

application forms and going for interviews at companies that deserved him.'

'But he didn't want to come back?' I asked again.

'No. He wanted to stay there.'

'Why?'

'He'd built a life for himself in Bristol, I suppose.'

'What about after he disappeared – you never spoke to him?'

'No.'

'Not even by telephone?'

'Never,' Mary reaffirmed, quieter this time.

I made her run over her story again: where she saw Alex, when, how long she followed him for, what he looked like. I took down a description of what he was wearing and the places she'd seen him too. Even with all of that, it didn't leave me a lot to go on.

'So, Alex was gone for five years before he died, right?'

'Right.'

'Where did he crash the car?'

'Just outside Bristol, up towards the motorway.'

'What happened with it?'

'The car?'

'No personal items were retrieved from it?'

'It was just a shell.'

I moved on. 'Did Alex have a bank account?'

'Yes.'

'Did he withdraw any money before he left?'

'Half of it.'

'Which was how much?'

'Five thousand pounds.'

'That's it?'

'That's it.'

'Did you check his statements?'

'Regularly – but it was pointless. He left his card behind when he went, and he never applied for a replacement as far as I know.'

'Did he have a girlfriend?'

'Yes – down in Bristol.'

'Is she still there?'

'No,' Mary said. 'Her parents live in north London. After Alex disappeared, Kathy moved back there.'

'Have you spoken to her at all?'

'Not since the funeral.'

'You never spoke to her after that?'

'He was dead. We had nothing to talk about.'

I paused, letting her gather herself again.

'So, did he meet Kathy at university?'

'No. They met at a party Alex went to in London. When he went to uni, she followed him down there.'

'So, she wasn't a student?'

'No. She worked as a waitress.'

I took down her address. I'd have to invent a plausible story if I was about to start cold-calling old

friends. After all, Alex had been dead for over a year.

As if reading my mind, Mary said, 'What are you going to tell her?'

'The same as I'll tell everyone. That you've asked me to put a timetable together of your son's last movements. There's some truth in that, anyway.'

Mary got up and went to a drawer in the living room. She pulled it open and took out a letter-sized envelope with an elastic band around it. She looked at it for a moment, then pushed the drawer shut and returned, laying the envelope on the table in front of me, and opening a corner so I could see the money inside.

'I hope you can see now that this isn't a joke,' she said.

'Why do you think Alex took so little cash with him?'

She looked up from the envelope and for a moment seemed unsure of the commitment she'd just made. Perhaps now the baton had been passed on, she'd had a moment of clarity about everything she believed she'd seen.

I repeated the question. 'Why so little money?'

'I've no idea. Maybe that was all he could get out at once. Or maybe he just needed enough to give him a start somewhere.' She looked around the room. 'I don't really understand a lot of what Alex did. He had a good life.'

'Do you think he became bored of it?'

She shrugged and bowed her head.

I watched her for a moment, and realized there were two mysteries: why Mary believed she had seen Alex walking around more than a year after he'd died – and why Alex had left everything behind in the first place.

6

His room was small. There were music posters on the walls, textbooks on the shelves, a TV in the corner, dust on the screen, and a VCR next to it with old tapes perched on top. I went through them. Alex had had a soft spot for action movies.

'He was a big film buff.'

I turned. Mary was standing in the doorway.

'Yeah, I can see. He had good taste.'

'You think?'

'Are you kidding?' I picked up a copy of *Die Hard* and held it up. 'I was a teenager in the eighties. This is my *Citizen Kane*.'

She smiled. 'Maybe you two would have got on.'

'We would have definitely got on. I must have watched this about fifty times. It's the best antidepressant on the market.'

She smiled again, then looked around the room, stopping on a photograph of Alex close by. Her eyes dulled a little, the smile slipping from her face.

'I don't know if I'll ever have the strength to clear this room out.'

'I know the feeling.'

She nodded at me, almost a thank you, as if it was a relief to know she wasn't alone. I looked towards the corner of the room, where two wardrobes were positioned against the far wall. 'What's in those?' I asked.

'Just some of the clothes he left behind.'

'Can I look?'

'Of course.'

There wasn't much hanging up, just some old shirts and a musty suit. I pushed them along the runner, and on the floor I found a photograph album.

'Is that Alex's?'

'Yes.'

I opened up the album and some photographs spilled out. One was of Alex and a girl in her late teens: long hair, bright eyes, pretty. 'Is this Kathy?'

Mary nodded. I set the picture aside and looked through the rest. Alex and Mary. Mary and Malcolm. I held up a photograph of Malcolm and Alex at a caravan park somewhere. It was hot. Both of them were stripped down to their shorts, and were perched next to a smoking barbecue with bottles of beer.

'You said they were close?'

'Yes.'

'You don't think Malcolm would remember anything?'

'You're welcome to try,' she said, but then stopped again, a sudden sadness washing over her. I understood why: she'd realized again, as she must have done countless times, that her son was dead, and her husband had no memory of her.

She was completely alone.

I felt so sorry for her in that moment, the loneliness written clearly in her face, but it also made me wonder what that sense of isolation might do. Would it make you believe something was true even if, deep down, you knew it wasn't?

Would it make you see someone who wasn't there?

A memory. A ghost.

A son.

7

I left Mary's just after midday. Once I hit the motorway, the traffic started to build; three lanes of slowly moving cars feeding back into the centre of the city.

What should have been a forty-five minute drive to Kathy Simmons's family home in Finsbury Park turned into a mammoth two-hour expedition through London gridlock. I stopped once, to get something to eat, and then chewed on a sandwich as I inched through Hammersmith, following the curve of the Thames. By the time I had finally parked up, it was just after two.

I locked the car and moved up the drive.

It was a yellow-bricked semi-detached, with a courtyard full of fir trees and a small patch of grass at the front. A Mercedes and a Micra were parked outside, and the garage was open. It was rammed with junk – some of it in boxes, some on the floor – and shelves full of machinery parts and tools. There was no one inside. As I turned back to the house, a curtain twitched at the front window.

'Can I help you?'

I span around.

A middle-aged man with a garden sprayer attached to his back was standing at the side of the house, where an entrance ran parallel to the garage.

'Mr Simmons?'

'Who's asking?'

'My name's David Raker. Is Kathy in today, sir?'

He eyed me suspiciously. 'Why?'

'I'd like to speak with her.'

'Why?'

'Is she in today, sir?'

'First you tell me why you're here.'

'I was hoping to speak to her about Alex Towne.'

A flash of recognition in his eyes. 'What's he got to do with anything?'

'That's what I was hoping to ask Kathy.'

Behind me I heard the door opening. A woman in her late twenties stepped out on to the porch. Kathy. Her hair was short now, dyed blonde, but a little maturity had made her even prettier. She held out her hand and smiled.

'I'm Kathy,' she said.

'Nice to meet you Kathy. I'm David.'

I glanced around at her father, whose gaze was fixed on me. Water tumbled out of the hose on to the toes of his boots.

'What are you, an investigator or something?' she asked.

'Kind of.'

She frowned, but seemed intrigued.

'Where's Kathy fit into all this?' her father said.

I glanced at him, and then back to Kathy. 'I'm doing some work for Mary Towne. It's to do with Alex. Can I speak with you?'

She looked unsure.

'Here,' I said, removing a business card and handing it to her. 'Unofficial investigators have to make do with one of these.'

She smiled, taking the card. 'Do you want to go inside?'

'That would be great.'

I followed her into the house, leaving her father standing outside with his garden sprayer. Inside, we moved through a hallway decorated with floral wallpaper and black-and-white photographs, and into an adjoining kitchen.

'Do you want a drink?'

'Water would be fine.'

It was a huge open area with polished mahogany floors and steel worktops. The central unit doubled up as a table, chairs sitting underneath. Kathy filled a glass with bottled mineral water then moved across and set it down.

'Sorry to turn up unannounced like this.'

She was facing away from me slightly. Her skin

shone in the light coming from outside, her hair tucked behind her ears. 'It's just a surprise to hear his name again after all this time.'

'I understand. I think Mary feels like she needs some closure on his disappearance. She wants to know where he went for those five years.'

Kathy nodded. We pulled a couple of chairs out and sat down.

'So, you and Alex met at a party?'

She smiled. 'A friend of a friend was having a house-warming.'

I placed my notepad between us, so she could see I was ready to start. 'You liked him from the beginning?'

'Yeah, we really clicked.'

'Which was why you ended up following him to Bristol?'

'I applied for a job there. It was supposed to be a marketing position. Alex had already got his place at university, and we wanted to be close to one another.'

'What happened with the job?'

'It wasn't marketing. It was cold-calling; selling central heating. I gave it a week. In the interview, the MD told me I could earn in commission what my friends earned in a year. I never stuck around long enough to find out.'

'So, you started waitressing?'

'Yes.'

'What did the two of you used to do together?'

'We used to go away a lot. Alex loved the sea.'

'You used to go to the coast?'

She nodded.

'How often?'

'Most weekends. Some weeks too. After uni, Alex got a job in an insurance company. He had a kind of love-hate thing going on with it. Some Monday mornings he wouldn't want to go in. So we bought an old VW Camper van and took off when we wanted.'

'Did his parents know about him skipping work?'

'No.'

'I didn't think so,' I said, smiling. 'What about your job?'

'They were pretty good to me there. They let me come and go as I pleased – they sometimes even let me choose my own hours. So, if we disappeared for a couple of days, when I got back I worked for a couple of days to make up for it. The pay was terrible, but it was useful.'

She began to drift, and as I waited for her to come back, I checked the notes I'd already made. 'Alex didn't contact you in the five years before he died?'

'No.' A pause. 'At first, I just used to wait by the phone, from the moment I got home until three or four o'clock in the morning, begging, praying for him to call. But he never did.'

'When was the last time you spoke to him?'