

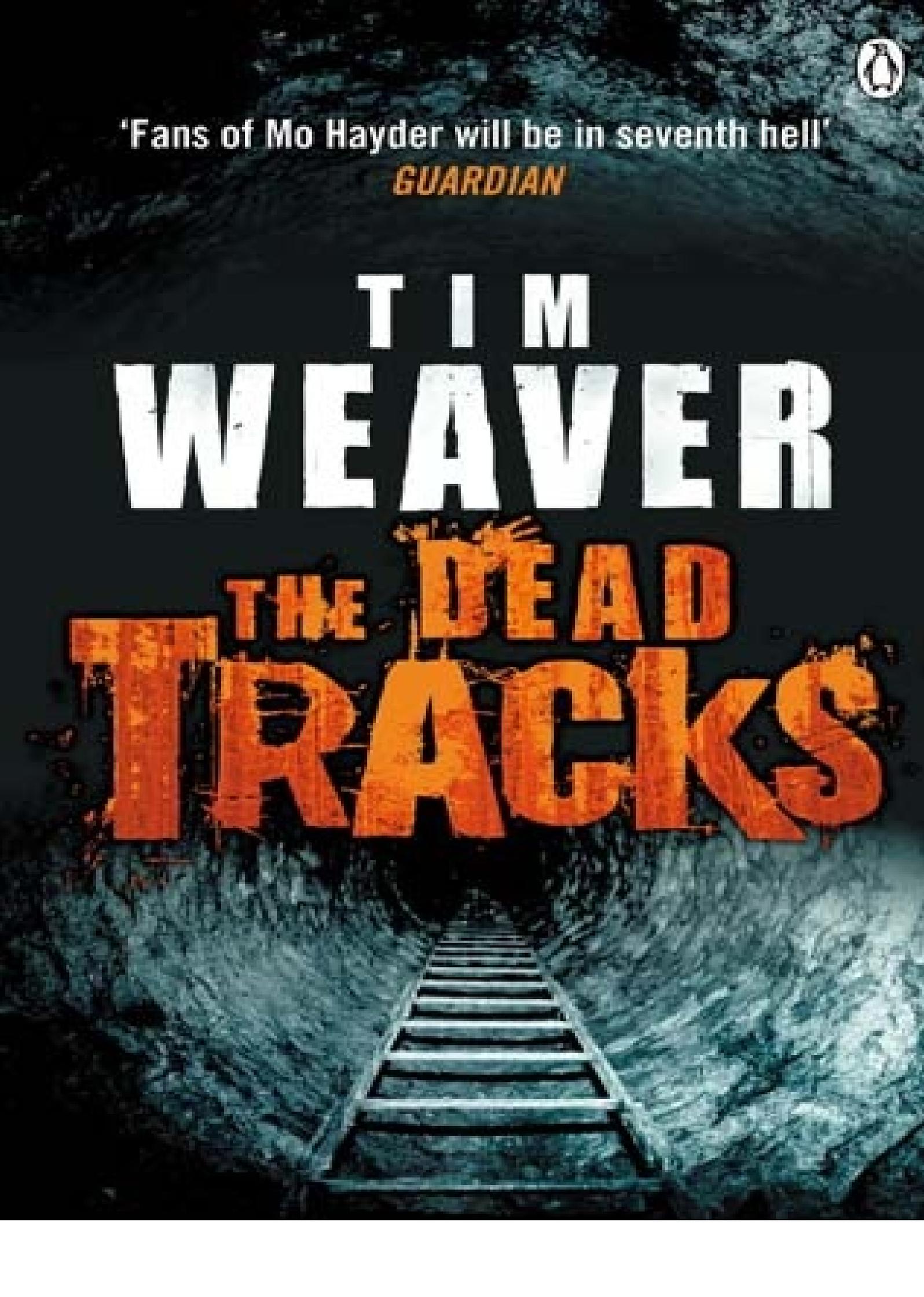


'Fans of Mo Hayder will be in seventh hell'

GUARDIAN

TIM
WEAVER

THE DEAD
TRACKS



The Dead Tracks



'Fans of Mo Hayder will be in seventh hell'

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'All faces shall gather blackness...'

Joel 2:6

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PART ONE

Chapter One

We met in a restaurant on the Thames called Boneacres. They were sitting in a booth at the back. Rain was running down the windows and both of them were staring out at a queue of people waiting in line for the Eye. The woman looked up first. Caroline Carver. She'd been crying. The whites of her eyes were stained red and some of her makeup had run. She was slim and well dressed, in her mid forties, but didn't wear it well: there were lines in her face — thick and dark like oil paint - that looked as if they'd been carved with a scalpel, and though she smiled as I approached, it wasn't warm. She'd been past warm. Most of the parents I dealt with were like that. The longer their kids were missing, the colder their lives became.

She slid out from the booth and we both shook hands, then she made way for her husband. James Carver. He was huge; a bear of a man. He didn't get up, just reached across the table and swallowed my hand in his. I knew a little about them already, mostly from Caroline's initial phone call a couple of days before. She'd told me they lived in an old church — converted into a four-bedroom home — from which he ran his building firm, a business he'd built up over fifteen years. Judging by the property's two-million-pound price tag, the name brands they were sporting and some of his celebrity clients, it was keeping them pretty comfortable.

He smiled at me, more genuine than his wife, and gestured to the other side of the booth. I slid in. The menu was open. The restaurant had been their suggestion, and when I looked at the prices, I was glad they were paying.

'Thanks for coming,' Carver said.

I nodded. 'It seems like a nice place.'

Both of them looked around, as if they hadn't thought about it before. Carver smiled. Caroline's eyes snapped back to the menu.

'We used to come in here before we were married,' he said. 'Back when it was a steak and seafood place.' His wife glanced at him, and he reached over and took her hand. 'Caroline tells me you used to be a journalist.'

'Once upon a time.'

'Must have been interesting.'

'Yeah, it was fun.'

He glanced at my left hand. Two of my fingernails were sunken and cracked, a blob of white scarring prominent in the centre where the veneer would never grow back.

Those your battle scars?' he asked.

I glanced at the nails. 'No. They got added more recently.'

'So why did you give it all up?'

I looked at him, then across to Caroline. 'My wife was dying.'

A real conversation stopper. They shifted uncomfortably. Caroline turned her gaze back to the table, then picked up her menu. He cleared his throat. Before the silence got too long, Carver reached into his jacket and brought out a photograph. Something moved in his eyes, a sadness, and then he turned it

around and placed it in front of me.

'That's Megan,' he said.

When Caroline had originally called, I gave her directions to the office - but she said she wanted to meet somewhere neutral, as if coming to see me was confirmation her daughter was gone for good. After we'd arranged a time and a place, she told me a little about Megan: a good girl, part of a close family, no boyfriends, no reason to leave.

She'd been gone nearly seven months.

Two hundred thousand people go missing in the UK each year — thirty thousand in London alone — but the most powerful media story of them all is the young white female from a middle-class, two-parent family. When Megan first disappeared, there was a lot of media coverage: locally, nationally, some of it even playing out abroad. It ran for weeks, one headline after the next, every TV channel in the country reporting from outside the gates of her home. There was a name for cases like hers that unravelled in the full glare of the camera lens: MWWS.

Missing White Woman Syndrome.

In the photograph they'd handed me, Megan was sitting with her mum on a beach. The sand was white, flecked with small stones and twigs and falling away to a sapphire sea. Behind Caroline and Megan, playing, was a small boy, probably four years old. He was half turned to the camera, his eyes looking into the hole he was digging.

Carver pointed at the boy. 'That's our son. Leigh.' He looked at me and could see what I was thinking: there was a thirteen-year age gap between their kids. 'I guess you could say...' He glanced at his wife. 'Leigh was a very pleasant surprise.'

'How old is the photograph?'

'About eight months.'

'Just before she disappeared?'

'Yes, our last holiday together, in Florida.'

Megan was very much her father's daughter. She had the same face, right down to identical creases next to the eyes, and was built like him too. Big, but not fat. She was an attractive seventeen-year-old girl: long blonde hair, beautifully kept, and olive skin that had browned appealingly in the sun.

'Tell me what happened the day she went missing.'

Both of them nodded but made no move to start. They knew this was where it began; the pain of scooping up memories, of going over old ground, of talking about their daughter in the past tense. I got out a pad and a pen as a gentle nudge. Carver turned to his wife, but she gestured for him to tell the story.

'I'm not sure there's a lot to it,' he said finally. His voice was unsteady at first, but he began to find more rhythm. 'We dropped Meg off at school, and when we went to pick her up again later, she didn't come back out.'

'Did she seem okay when you dropped her off that morning?'

'Yes.'

'Nothing was up?'

He shook his head. 'No.'

'Megan didn't have a boyfriend at the time, is that right?'

'That's right,' Caroline said sharply.

Carver looked at his wife, then squeezed her hand. 'Not one that she told us about. That doesn't mean there wasn't one.'

'Did she have any boyfriends before then?'

'A couple,' Caroline said, 'but nothing serious.'

'Did you meet them?'

'Briefly. But she used to say that when she finally brought a boy home for longer than a few minutes, we'd know it was the real thing' She attempted a smile. 'Hopefully we'll still get to see that day.'

I paused for a moment while Carver shifted up the booth and slid his arm around his wife. He looked into her eyes, and back to me.

'She never expressed a need to travel or leave London?' I asked.

Carver shook his head. 'Not unless you count university.'

'What about her friends - have you spoken to them?'

'Not personally. The police did that in the weeks after she disappeared.'

'No one knew anything?'

'No.'

I picked up the pen. 'I'll take the names and addresses of her closest friends, anyway. It'll be worth seeing them a second time.'

Caroline reached down to her handbag, opened it and brought out a green address book, small enough to slip into a jacket pocket. She handed it to me.

'All the addresses you need will be in there, including her school,' she said. That's Meg's book. She used to call it her Book of Life. Names, numbers, notes.'

I nodded my thanks and took it from her. 'What sort of stage would you say you're at with the police?'

'We're not really at a stage. We speak to them once a fortnight.' Carver stopped, shrugged. He glanced at his wife. 'To start with we made a lot of headway in a short space of time. The police told us they had some good leads. I guess we got our hopes up.'

'Did they tell you what leads they had?'

'No. It was difficult for them at the beginning' He paused. 'We put out that reward for information, so they had to field a lot of calls. Jamie Hart told us he didn't want to give us false hope, so he said he and his team would sort through the calls and collate the paperwork and then come back to us.'

'Jamie Hart was heading up the investigation?' 'Right.'

The waiter arrived to take our orders as I wrote Hart's name on my pad. I'd heard of him: once during my paper days when he'd led a task force trying to find a serial rapist; and once in a Times news story I'd pulled out of the archives on a previous case.

'So, did Hart get back to you?' I asked after the waiter was gone.

Carver rocked his head from side to side. The answer was no but he was trying to be diplomatic. 'Not in the way we would have hoped.'

'How do you mean?'

~~'At the beginning, they were calling us every day, asking us questions, coming to the house and taking things away. Then, a couple of months into the investigation, it all ground to a halt. The calls stopped coming as often.~~

Officers stopped coming to the house. Now all we hear is that there's nothing new to report.' His mouth flattened. A flicker of pain. 'They would tell us if there was something worth knowing, wouldn't they?'

'They should do.'

He paused for a moment, his hand moving to his drink.

'What was the date of Megan's disappearance?'

'Monday 3 April,' Carver said.

It was now 19 October. One hundred and ninety-nine days and they hadn't heard a thing. The police tended not to get interested for forty-eight hours after a disappearance, but in my experience the first couple of days were crucial in missing persons. The longer you left it, the more you were playing with percentages. Sometimes you found the person five days, or a week, or two weeks after they vanished. But most of the time, if they didn't resurface in the first forty eight hours it was either because they'd disappeared for good and didn't want to come home again — or their body was waiting to be found.

'When was the last time anyone saw her?'

'The afternoon of the third,' Carver said. 'She went to her first class after lunch, but didn't make the next one. She was supposed to meet her friend Kaitlin at their lockers because they both did Biology. But Megan never arrived.'

'Biology was the last lesson of the day?'

'Yes.'

'Does the school have CCTV?'

'Yes - but very limited coverage. Jamie told us they checked all the cameras, but none of them revealed anything'

'Have you told him you've come to me?'

Carver shook his head. 'No.'

It was better that way. The best approach was going to be cold-calling Hart. The police, understandably, didn't like outsiders stepping on their toes — especially on active cases - and if they picked up my scent, they'd close ranks and circle the wagons before I even got near.

'So what's the next stage?' Carver asked.

'At a time that's convenient for you, I'd like to come and speak to you at the house; have a look around Megan's bedroom. I don't expect to find anything significant, but it's something I like to do.'

They nodded. Neither of them spoke.

'After that, I'll start working my way through this,' I said, placing a hand on her Book of Life. 'The police have had a look at this presumably?'

'Yes,' Carver said.

'Did they find anything?'

He shrugged. 'They gave it back to us.'

Which meant no. A moment later, the waiter returned with our meals.

'Do you think there's a chance she's alive?' Caroline asked after he was gone.

~~We both looked at her, Carver turning in his seat, shifting his bulk, as if he was~~ surprised and disappointed by the question. Maybe she'd never asked it before. Or maybe he didn't want to know the answer.

I looked at her, then at him, then back to her.

'There's always a chance.'

Yes,' she replied. 'But do you think she's alive?'

I looked down at my meal, a lobster broken into pieces, not wanting my eyes to betray me. But I had to look at her eventually. And when I did, she must have seen the answer, because she slowly nodded, then started to cry.

Outside, James Carver shook my hand and we watched his wife slowly wander off along Victoria Embankment, the Houses of Parliament framed behind her. Boats moved on the Thames, the water dark and grey. Autumn was finally clawing its way out of hibernation after a warm, muggy summer.

'I don't know what you want to do about money,' he said.

'Let's talk tomorrow.'

He nodded. 'I'll be around, but Caroline might not be - she's got some work at a school in South Hackney.'

That's fine. I'll catch up with her when she's free.'

I watched Carver head after his wife. When he got to her, he reached for her hand. She responded, but coolly, her fingers hard and rigid. When he spoke, she just shrugged and continued walking. They headed down to Westminster Pier and, as they crossed the road towards the tube station, she looked back over her shoulder at me. For a second I could see the truth: that something had remained hidden in our conversation; a trace of a secret, buried out of her husband's sight.

I just had to find out what.

The day had started to darken by five-thirty. I stopped in at the office on the way back from the restaurant. I'd left some notes in there, including some I'd made that morning on Megan Carver. By the time I got home, at just gone seven, the house was black. I hadn't set the alarm, so when

I got in the sensors beeped gently as I moved around: first in the kitchen, then in the living room, then in the main bedroom at the end of the hall. I dumped my stuff, showered, and then spent a moment on the edge of the bed, looking at some photographs of Derryn and me.

One, right at the bottom of the pile, was of the two of us at the entrance to Imperial Beach in San Diego, back when I'd been seconded to the US to cover the 2004 elections. I was pulling her into the crook of my arm, sunglasses covering my eyes, dark hair wet from the surf. In the wetsuit I looked broad, well built and lean, every inch of my six-two. Next to me, Derryn seemed smaller than she really was, as if relying on me to keep her protected from something off camera. I liked the photo. It made me remember what it felt like to be the person she needed.

I put the pictures back into my bedside cabinet and got dressed, looking around the room at the things of hers that still remained. We'd bought the house when we still had plans to start a family, but as the ink was drying on the contracts, we found out she had breast cancer. Everything seemed to go fast after that. She battled on for two years, but our time together was short.

Some days I can handle the lack of time, can simply appreciate every moment we had together and be grateful for it. But some days all I feel inside is anger for what happened to her — and for the way I was left alone. On those days I find a way to push that feeling down and suppress it. Because, in the work I do, there are people who come at you through the chinks in your armour.

And people who feed on that weakness.

Chapter Two

The Carvers' house was an old Saxon church in Dartmouth Park, overlooking Hampstead Heath. There were three stained-glass windows at the front, and a half-oval oak door that tapered to a point at the top. It was a beautiful building. Vines crawled up the steel-grey brickwork, the roof a mass of dark tile and yellow moss. Two potted firs stood either side of the door. The whole place was set behind imposing gateposts and an attractive gravel drive that curved around to a back garden. There was an intercom on one of the posts outside, but James Carver had already left the gate ajar, anticipating my arrival.

The gravel was a useful alarm call. Carver looked up as I moved through the gates, half bent over a bucket of water, washing down the back of a black Range Rover Sport with tinted windows and spotless steel rims. In the double garage behind him was a Ford pick-up with building supplies in the bed and a gleaming red Suzuki motorbike.

'David,' he said, dropping a sponge into the bucket.

We shook hands. 'I like the car.'

I nodded at the Range Rover, soapsuds sliding down its bumper. He glanced back at it, but didn't say anything. I figured he was trying to play down the fact that his supercharged five-litre all-terrain vehicle was worth more than some people's houses. Or maybe he genuinely didn't care any more. Money didn't mean a lot when it couldn't buy back the only thing that mattered to you.

He ushered me through the front door.

Inside it was huge. Oak floorboards and thick carpets. A living room that led into a diner that led into a kitchen. The kitchen was open plan, steel and glass, the walls painted cream. Above, the ceiling soared up into an ornate cove, and there was a balcony that ran across three sides of the interior wall, with a staircase up to it. Off the balcony, I could make out two bedrooms and a bathroom.

'You designed this?'

He nodded. 'Well, the balcony portion of it. The church has been here a lot longer than any of us.'

'It's beautiful.'

'Thank you. We've been very fortunate.' A pause. The significance of what he'd said hit home. 'In some ways, anyway.'

I followed him across to the kitchen.

'You want some coffee?'

'Black would be great.'

He removed two mugs from a cupboard. 'I don't know what you want to do,' he said, filling both. 'Megan's room is upstairs. You're welcome to head up there and have a look around. Or, if you prefer, I can show you.'

'I might have a look around by myself,' I said, taking the coffee from him. 'But I do have some questions for you.'

'Sure.' He smiled, and I realized it was a defence mechanism. A way to hide the pain. 'Whatever it takes.'

We moved through to the living room. At the back of the room, the Carvers' son Leigh was on all fours directing a plastic car under a telephone stand. He looked up as we entered, and when his father told him to say hello, he mumbled something and returned to the car.

I removed a pen and pad. 'So let's talk a little more about 3 April.'

'The day she went missing.'

'Right. Did you always drop her off at school?'

'Most mornings.'

'Some mornings you didn't?'

'Occasionally Caroline did. If my business has a contract further afield I like to go along to the site for the first couple of weeks. After that, I tend to leave it to the foreman to take care of, and do all the paperwork from home. That's when I took...' He paused. 'When I take Megan to school and drop Leigh off at nursery.'

'So you had a site visit on 3 April?'

'Yes.'

'Which is why Caroline dropped her off?'

'Correct.'

'Did she pick Megan up as well?'

'No, that was me.'

'What happened?'

'I parked up outside,' he said. 'Same spot, every day. But Megan never came out. It was as simple as that. She went in, and never came out.'

I took down some notes. 'What was Megan studying?'

The sciences — Physics, Chemistry, Biology.'

'Did you ever meet her teachers?'

'A couple of times.'

'What were they like?'

'They seemed nice. She was a good student.'

He gave me their names and I added them to my pad.

Then I changed direction, trying to keep him from becoming too emotional.

'Did Megan have a part-time job anywhere?'

'She worked at a video store on alternate weekends.'

'Did she like it?'

'Yeah. It earned her some money.'

'Who else worked there?'

'Names? I don't know. You'd have to go and ask.'

'What about places she used to go?'

'You mean pubs and clubs?'

'I mean anything,' I said. 'Anywhere she liked to go.'

'You'd have to ask her friends about the places they used to go on a weekend. When they all got paid, they'd often go into the city. But I'm not sure where they used to go.'

'What about places you used to take her?'

'We often used to head up country - the Peak District, the Lake District, the Yorkshire Dales. Caroline and I love the open spaces there. London suffocates you

after a while. We started taking Meg up north as soon as she was old enough to walk.'

'Do you think she could have gone to one of those places?'

He shrugged. 'I don't know whether she would have gone north when I don't know why she left in the first place.'

I'd asked them both about boyfriends the day before, but I wanted to ask them again individually. What you learned quickly in missing persons was that every marriage had secrets — and that one half of the couple always knew more than the other, especially when kids were involved. 'As far as you know, she didn't have a boyfriend?'

'As far as I know.'

'What's your gut feeling?'

'My gut feeling is it's a possibility she met someone.' He moved a little in his seat, coming to the edge of it. 'Do you think that's our best hope?'

'I think it's worth pursuing. Kids Megan's age tend to disappear for two reasons: either they're unhappy at home, or they've run away with someone - probably someone their parents don't approve of. It doesn't sound like she was unhappy at home, so that's why I'm asking about boyfriends. We may find out Megan hasn't run off with someone.' I paused, looked at him. 'Or we may find out she has.'

'But if she'd run off with someone, wouldn't she have seen the press conferences we did? The Megan I know wouldn't have ignored them. She wouldn't have ignored the pain she was putting us through. She would have called us.'

I looked at him, then away - but he'd seen the answer, and it wasn't the one he wanted. It was the one where she didn't come home alive.

Megan's room was beautifully presented and had barely been touched since her disappearance. A big bay window looked out over Hampstead Heath, wardrobes either side of it. A three-tiered bookcase was on the right, full of science textbooks. Opposite the window, close to the door, was a small desk with top-of-the-range MacBook sitting on it, still open. Photographs surrounded the laptop: Megan with her friends; Megan holding Leigh when he was a baby; Megan with her mum and dad. There was also a rocking chair in one corner of the room, soft toys looking out, and a poster of a square-jawed Hollywood heart-throb on the wall above that.

I booted up the MacBook and went through it. The desktop was virtually empty, everything tidied into folders. Homework assignments. Word documents. University prospectuses as PDF files. Clicking on Safari, I moved through her bookmarks, her history, her cookies and her download history — but, unless you counted a few illegal songs, nothing stood out. There was a link to her Facebook profile in the browser — the email and password automatically logged — but the only activity in the last seven months was the creation of a group dedicated to her memory. Judging by the comments, most people were assuming she wasn't coming home.

Both wardrobes were full of clothes and shoes, but the second one had a couple of plastic storage boxes stacked towards the back. I took them out and flipped the lid off the top one: it was full of pictures. The younger Megan got in the photographs, the less like her father she became. As a young girl, she was a little paler with strikingly white hair, and without any of the similarities that were so startling in more recent pictures. Later pictures were less worn by age, her parents older, her face starting to mirror some of the shape of her father's.

I opened up the next box.

A digital camera was inside. I took it out, switched it on and started cycling through the photographs. There were twenty-eight in all, mostly of Leigh. A couple near the end were of Megan and what must have been her friends, and in the final one she was standing outside what looked like the entrance to a block of flats. I used the zoom and moved in closer: the entrance doors had glass panels in them that reflected back the day's light in two creamy blocks. A sliver of a brick wall on the right-hand side. Nothing else.

I returned to her MacBook and booted up iPhoto, hoping to find a bigger version — but none of the pictures on the camera were on the computer. She hadn't got around to downloading them. I checked the date on the camera: 6 March. Twenty-eight days before she disappeared. Zooming in again, I studied the photo a second time, but the reflection in the glass would have been the most useful identifier of where she was and it was full of light. Then, when I came back to her face, I noticed something.

Her smile.

It was a smile I hadn't seen in any of the other pictures of her. For the first time, she didn't look like a girl. She looked like a woman.

Because she's posing for someone she's attracted to.

'Find anything?'

I turned. Carver was standing in the doorway.

'I'm not sure,' I said, and held up the camera and the storage box. 'Can I take these?'

'Of course.' He came further in. 'I've been through those pictures hundreds of times. So have the police. Some days you feel like you've missed something. You think you've let something slip by. Then, when you go back, you only find what you found before. But maybe this whole thing needs a fresh pair of eyes.'

He moved further in and picked up an early photograph of Megan. I watched his eyes move across the picture, soaking up the memories. When he finally looked up, I could see he was trying to prevent his eyes filling with tears.

'Do you know where this is?' I asked him, handing him the camera.

He looked at the picture and studied it; shook his head.

'No.'

'You didn't take it?'

'No.'

'Any idea who might have?'

He shrugged. 'Maybe one of her friends.'

The phone started ringing downstairs. Carver apologized and disappeared.

After he was gone, I went through the rest of the box. More photos, some letters, old jewellery.

Every trace of a life Megan had left behind.

It was almost lunch by the time I left. The sun had gone in, clouds scattered across the sky. In the distance I could see rain moving up from the heart of the city.

I opened my old BMW 3 Series, threw my pad on to the passenger seat and turned back to Carver, who had walked me out.

'I'd like to speak to your wife,' I said. Alone.

'Of course. It's just, I'm out on a site visit tomorrow...'

'That's fine. I'd like to keep things moving if possible, so if you can tell her that I'm going to call in, that would be great.'

'Sure. No problem.'

Afterwards, as I drove off, I watched him in the rear-view mirror disappearing back through the gates of his house. He looked like he'd had the wind knocked out of him. Give it a few weeks, and it might look like he'd had his heart ripped out too.

Chapter Three

There was a diner half a mile down the road from Megan's school. I sat at the window, ordered a bacon sandwich, then took out Megan's Book of Life. The previous night, when I'd glanced at it, it had been difficult to gain any kind of clarity. It was just sixty pages of random notes. The book was sectioned alphabetically, but none of her entries corresponded to the relevant letter. Where names should have been, there were phone numbers. Where phone numbers were supposed to be, there were names.

I flipped back to the start. On the first page she'd written her name and Megan's Book of Life in red ballpoint. Contact Me! had been scribbled underneath that, with two numbers alongside: one I recognized as her home phone number, the other her mobile. The police would have been through her phone records, and checked her last calls, incoming and outgoing. They would have been through her email too. I'd need to get hold of her phone records through my contacts, but the police had passed on login details for Megan's email to her parents, presumably at the Carvers' request. They, in turn, had passed them on to me. If there was anything worth finding there, or anything crucial to the investigation, it was hard to believe the police would have been giving the login out, even to her parents, but — like her phone records — it was something else that needed to be ticked off the list.

Midway through the book, I spotted a name I recognized. Kaitlin. Carver had mentioned her over lunch the day before. She was the girl Megan was supposed to have met up with on the way to her Biology class. Except Megan never arrived. Kaitlin's name was in a big heart, as was a third — Lindsey Watson. I wrote down the names and phone numbers for both of them.

When I was done, a waitress with a face like the weather appeared at my table and threw my plate down in front of me without saying anything. Once she was gone, I took a bite of the sandwich and watched a news report playing out on a TV in the corner of the diner. A camera panned along the Thames. It looked like London City Airport.

.. taken to intensive care with hypothermia. Her condition was originally described as critical, but she has continued to improve, and hospital staff told Sky News they expected her to be released tomorrow. Police still haven't issued personal details for the woman, but sources have told us they believe her to be in the region of forty- five to fifty years of age. In other news, a farmer in...'

I finished my sandwich and moved through the book again, front to back. There were a lot of names. Maybe as many as thirty. Only six were male. I added the guys to the list, then paid the bill and headed for Megan's school.

Newcross Secondary School was a huge red-brick Victorian building midway between Tufnell Park and Holloway Road. I left the car out front, and headed for the entrance. Inside, the place was deserted. I passed a couple of classrooms and

saw lessons had already started, kids looking on, half interested, inside. The main reception was at the far end of a long corridor that eventually opened up on to big windows with views of the school's football pitches. The interior decor had time-travelled in from 1974. A couple of thin sliding glass panels on a chunk of fake granite separated three secretaries from the outside world. They were all perched at teak desks on faded medical-green chairs.

I knocked on the glass. All three were fierce-looking women. Two of them paid me no attention whatsoever, the other glanced in my direction, eyed me, then decided I was at least worth getting up for. She slid the glass panel back, glancing at the pad in my hands. Her eyes — like Carver's the day before - drifted across my fingernails. What no one got to see were the other, even worse scars from the same case. It had been almost ten months and, although I'd made a full recovery, some days I could still feel the places I'd been beaten and tortured. My back. My hands. My feet. Perhaps a dull ache would always be there, like a residue, reminding me of how close I'd been to dying and how I was going to make sure it never happened again.

I got out a business card and placed it down on the counter in front of the woman. 'My name's David Raker. I'm doing some work for the parents of Megan Carver.'

The name instantly registered. Behind her, both women looked up.

'What do you mean, "work"?''

'I mean I'm trying to find out where she went.'

They all nodded in sync. I had their attention now.

'Is the headmaster around?'

'Did you make an appointment?'

I shook my head. 'No.'

She frowned, but being here because of Megan seemed to soften her. She ran a finger down a diary.

'Take a seat while I page him.'

I smiled my thanks and sat down in a cramped waiting area to the right of the reception. More medical-green chairs. Posters warning of the dangers of drugs. A vase of fake blue flowers. Some kids passed by, looked at me, then carried on. Everything smelt of furniture polish.

A telephone rang; a long, unbroken noise. One of the receptionists picked it up. The glass panel was now closed, but she was looking at me as she spoke. 'Okay,' she said a couple of times, and put the phone down. She leaned forward, and slid open the glass. 'He'll be five minutes.'

Fifteen minutes later, he finally arrived.

He walked straight up to the reception area, a hurried, flustered look on his face — like he'd run full pelt from wherever he'd come from — and followed his secretaries' eyes across the hall to where I was sitting. He came over. 'Steven Bothwick.'

I stood and shook his hand. 'David Raker.'

'Nice to meet you,' he said, using a finger to slide some hair away from his face. He was losing what he had left, and not doing a great job of disguising it.

'I'm here about Megan Carver,' I said.

'Yes,' he replied. 'A lovely girl.'

He directed me to a door further along the corridor with his name on it. His office was small, crammed with books and folders. A big window behind his desk looked out over the football pitches. Bothwick pulled a chair out from the wall and placed it down on the other side of his desk. 'Would you like something to drink?'

'No, I'm fine, thanks.'

He nodded, pushing some folders out of his immediate way and shuffling in under the desk. He was in his fifties and barely scraping five-eight, but had an intensity about him, a determination, his expression fixed and strong.

I reached into my pocket and got out another business card. 'Just so you're clear, I'm not a police officer. I used to be a journalist.'

A frown worked its way across his face. 'A journalist?'

'Used to be. For two years, I've been tracing missing people. That's my job now. The Carvers came to me and asked me to look into Megan's disappearance for them.'

'Why?'

'Because the police investigation has hit a brick wall.'

He nodded. 'I feel so sorry for her family. Megan was a fantastic student with bright future. When the police came here, I told them the same.' He took my card and looked at it. 'Yours is quite a big career change.'

'Not as big as you might think.' I watched him look at what was written on it — DAVID RAKER, MISSING PERSONS INVESTIGATOR - and across the desk at me.

He handed me back my card. 'So what can I help you with?'

'I've got a couple of questions.'

'Okay.'

I took out my pad and set it down on the desk.

'Her parents told me they dropped her off on the morning of 3 April, and she never came out again that afternoon. Do pupils have to sign in?'

'Well, we take a register first thing in the morning and again after lunch, yes. But only for those in years seven through to eleven.'

'That's eleven to sixteen years of age, right?' 'Right.'

'So Megan was too old?'

'Yes. Our A-level students are treated more like adults. We encourage them to turn up to class - but we won't come down on absences.'

'So say I missed a couple of days of school — would anyone notice? And who would it get reported to — you?'

Yes. If a pupil was continually missing lessons, the teacher would inform me.'

'But a few absences here and there...?'

He shrugged. They may get reported, or they may not. It depends on the student. Some contribute so little to lessons that their presence may be felt less. I guess a teacher may not, in that instance, notice them as quickly. But Megan... I think we'd have seen straight away if she'd been missing a lot of school time.'

'She was a good student?'

'In the top three per cent here, yes.'

'And never got into any trouble?'

He shook his head. 'Absolutely not.'

'I understand she had Physics and then Biology for the last two periods of the day, and that she attended the Physics part of that?' 'Right.'

'Her teacher confirmed that?'

'Yes. And the fifteen other students who were in there with her.'

'How long's the walk between classrooms?'

'No walk at all. They're in the same block. Chemistry's on the top floor, Physics on the second and Biology on the ground.'

'There's no CCTV in that part of the school, right?'

'Sadly not. We have cameras, but we can't afford to have them in every building — not on the budget we're handed.' He turned in his chair and pointed to a diagram on the wall. It was a plan of the school campus with tiny CCTV icons scattered across it. 'Those are the cameras we have. One at the entrance, one on the car park, one at reception, one outside the English and Maths block, and one trained on the playing fields.'

'Why only English and Maths?'

'It's the block furthest away from here.'

'Are there multiple entrances to the school?'

'Not really. Well, not official entrances, anyway. Some of the students live in the estates beyond the football pitches, so they climb over the fence and come across the fields. There's a rear car park behind the Sixth Form block as well, where some of the students in Years 11 and 12 park their cars, if they're lucky enough to have them. That's fenced off too, but only to about waist height.'

'So if she was going to leave the school grounds, and not be caught on CCTV, her best bet would have been jumping the fence at the back of the Sixth Form car park?'

'Correct. I think that's what the police concluded too.'

I reached down and got out Megan's Book of Life. 'Would it be possible to speak to a couple of students?'

'Megan's friends?'

'Yes.' I looked down at the pad. 'Lindsey Watson and Kaitlin Devonish?'

He nodded, picked up the phone and punched in a four-digit number. On the other side of the door, I heard a phone ring in reception. 'Linda, I need Lindsey Watson and Kaitlin Devonish sent around as soon as possible, please.' He put the phone down. 'Anyone else?'

I looked down at the pad, turned it around and slid it across the desk to him. 'The six people at the bottom,' I said, pointing to the boys' names. 'Are any of them students here?'

He removed a pair of glasses from the top pocket of his jacket and popped them on, studying the names for a moment. 'Yes.'

'All of them?'

'I recognize all of them but one.'

'Who's the odd one out?'

'Anthony "A. J." Grant.'

'You don't recognize that name?'

'No,' he replied, taking off his glasses. He got up and went to a filing cabinet at the back of the room. It had three drawers, each filled with the same Manila folders, each folder tabbed. Presumably he liked doing things the old-fashioned way. He went to G, but didn't find anything.

'He's definitely not a student here.'

'Every student in the school is in there?'

'Every current student, yes.'

I brought the pad back across towards me and put a question mark next to A. J. Grant. The other names on here — I pushed it back towards him — are they all in the same year as Megan?'

'Yes.'

'Is it going to be possible to speak to them?'

'Certainly — but only Lindsey and Kaitlin today. Four of them are on a field trip to Normandy. The other... Well, the truth is, I don't know where Charles Bryant is. He missed a lot of school last year because his mother died. This week is the one-year anniversary of her passing, and he hasn't been in at all. I've tried calling his father, but have had no response. I even sent one of the teachers round to his house, but no one was home. I've no idea where he is, and to be honest, I think this week he's best left alone.'

'Would it be possible to get an address for him?'

'I can't give out addresses, I'm afraid.'

There was a knock at the door. Bothwick looked up.

'Come in.'

Two girls entered. They shuffled forward, their eyes flitting between the both of us. One was beautiful: petite with a dusting of make-up, slim and womanly. The other was plainer, bigger, dressed more conservatively, but smiling.

'Kaitlin, Lindsey, this is Mr Raker. He's looking into Megan's disappearance for her mum and dad.'

I stood. 'David.'

'Lindsey,' the bigger girl beamed.

The other girl hesitated.

'Kaitlin,' she said quietly. She had an accent.

I turned to Bothwick. 'Is it okay if I take them somewhere?'

He looked completely taken aback, as if I'd threatened to burn down the school. What do you mean?'

'I mean, is it okay if I take the girls for a coffee?'

'Why?'

'I'd just like to speak to them in private.' He eyed me suspiciously. 'I'd prefer them to stay on school premises.'

'Fine. So is there somewhere we can go where we won't get interrupted?'

'You could go to the canteen.' 'There won't be any kids in there?' 'We've already had lunch.' I looked at my watch. Two-thirty. 'Okay, we'll go there.'

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