

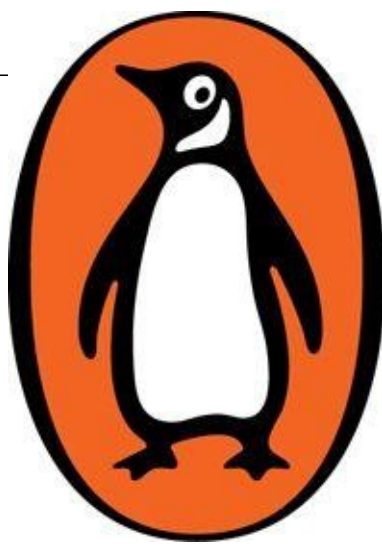
TIM WEAVER

NEVER COMING BACK

A family vanishes.
A terrifying past is revealed.

A DAVID RAKER THRILLER





Tim Weaver

NEVER COMING BACK



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For Erin



DECEMBER 2007

When the night came, it came fast. The sky yellowed, like a week-old bruise, and then the sun began its descent into the desert floor, dropping out of the clouds as if it were falling. The further it fell, the quicker the sky changed, until the sun was gone from view and all that remained was a smear of red cloud, like a bloodstain above the Mojave.

The city limits emerged from the darkness about twenty minutes later: to start with just small, single-storey satellite towns, street lights flickering in the shadows either side of the Interstate; then, as the 15 carved its way through the Southern Highlands, a brighter, more persistent glow. Housing estates, strip malls and vast tracts of undeveloped land, illuminated by billboards and the orange tang of sodium lights; and then the neon: casinos, motels and diners, unfurling beyond the freeway. Finally as I came off the Interstate at Exit 36, I saw the Strip for the first time, its dazzling, monolithic structures rising out of the flatness of the desert, like a star going supernova.

Even a quarter of a mile short of its parking garage, I knew the Mandalay Bay would be a step up from the last time I'd stayed in Las Vegas. On my first trip to the city five years before, the newspaper had taken care of the booking and left me to rot in a downtown grind joint called The George. 'George', I later found out, was casino lingo for a good tipper. Except the only people doing the gambling at The George were the homeless, placing 25c minimum bets on the blackjack tables out front so they could scrape together enough for a bottle of something strong. This time, as I nosed the hired Dodge Stratus into a space on a huge rooftop car park, I passed eight-storey signs advertising a televised UFC fight at the hotel in January, and I knew I'd made the right decision to book it myself: last time out, the only fighting I'd seen anywhere close to The George was of the fully drunk kind.

I turned off the ignition and as the engine and radio died, the sound of the Las Vegas Freeway filled the car; a low, unbroken hum, like the rumble of an approaching storm. Further off, disguised against the sky except for the metronomic wink of its tail light, was a plane making its final approach into McCarran. As I sat there, a feeling of familiarity washed over me, of being in this city, of hearing these same sounds, five years before. I remembered a lot from that trip, but mostly I just remembered the noise and the lights.

I opened the door of the Dodge and got out.

The night was cool, but not unpleasant. Popping the trunk, I grabbed my overnight bag and headed across the lot. Inside, the hotel was just as loud, the cars and planes and video screens replaced by the incessant *ding, ding, ding* of slot machines. I waited in line for the front desk, watching as a young couple in their twenties started arguing with one another. By the time I was handed my room card, I was ready for silence – or as close as I could get.

I showered, changed, and raided the minibar, then called Derryn to let her know I'd arrived okay. We chatted for a while. She'd found it hard to adapt to our new life on the West Coast initially: we had no friends here, she had no job, and in our Santa Monica apartment block our neighbours operated a hermetically sealed clique. Gradually, though, things were changing. Back home, she'd been an A&E nurse for twelve years before giving it up to come out to the States with me, and that experience had landed her a short-term contract at a surgery a block from where we lived. She was only taking

blood and helping doctors patch up wounds – much more sedate than the work she'd been doing back in London – but she loved it. It got her out meeting people, and it brought in a little money, plus she got weekends off too, which meant she could go to the beach.

'You going to spend all our money, Raker?' she asked after a while.

'Not tonight. Maybe tomorrow.'

'Do you even know how to play cards?'

'I know how to play Snap.'

I could tell she was smiling. 'I'd love to be a fly on the wall when you sidle up to the blackjack table pretending you know what you're doing.'

'I *do* know what I'm doing.'

'You can't even play Monopoly.'

'My biggest fan talks me up again.'

She laughed. 'You'll have to take me with you next time.'

'I will.'

'I'd love to see Vegas.'

I turned on the bed and looked out through the window. Millions of lights winked back through the glass. 'I know. I'll bring you here one day, I promise.'

At one-thirty, I was still awake, even if I didn't understand why. I'd been up until four the previous night filing a story, was fried after the five-hour drive down from LA – but I just couldn't drop off. Eventually, I gave up trying, got dressed and headed downstairs.

When the elevator doors opened, it was like time had stood still: the foyer, the sounds of the slots, the music being piped through speakers, it was all exactly the same as I'd left it. The only thing missing was the couple screaming at one another. This was the reason casinos didn't put clocks up: day, night, it was all the same, like being in stasis. You came in and your body clock disengaged. I looked at my watch again and saw it was closing in on two – but it may as well have been mid-morning. Men and women were wandering around in tracksuits and shorts like they'd just come from the tennis courts.

I headed to a bar next to the hotel lobby. Even at one-fifty in the morning I had plenty of company: a couple in their sixties, a woman talking on her phone in a booth, a guy leaning over a laptop, and a group of five men sitting at one of the tables, laughing raucously at something one of them had said. Sliding in at the stools, I ordered a beer, picked at a bowl of nuts and flicked through a copy of the *Las Vegas Sun* that had been left behind. The front-page story neatly echoed the one I'd been sent down to follow up: Las Vegas, the bulletproof city. While some analysts were predicting a recession inside the next twelve months, America's gaming capital was set to make a record eight billion dollars.

About ten minutes later, as I got to the sports pages, a guy sat down beside me at the bar and ordered another round of drinks. I looked up, he looked back at me, and then he returned to his table with a tray full of shots. A couple of seconds later, a faint memory surfaced, and – as I tried to grasp it – a feeling of recognition washed over me: I knew him. I turned on my stool and glanced back over my shoulder. The man placed the tray down on the table – and then looked back at me. *He knows me too*. There was a moment of hesitation for both of us, paused at each end of the room – but then it seemed to click for him, a smile broke out on his face and he returned to me.

'David?'

As soon as he spoke, the memory became fully formed: Lee Wilkins. We'd grown up together, lived in the same village, gone to the same school – and we'd left the same sixth-form college and never spoken since. Now, almost twenty years later, here he was: different from how I remembered, but not that different. More weight around his face and middle, hair shaved, dark stubble lining his jaw, but

otherwise the same guy: five-ten, stocky, a scar to the left of his nose where he'd fallen out of a tree we'd been climbing.

'Lee?'

'Yes!' An even bigger smile spread across his face and we shook hands. 'Bloody hell,' he said. 'I thought when I saw you, "He looks familiar," but I just never figured ...'

'Are you on holiday here?'

'No,' he said, perching himself on the stool next to me. 'I live here now. Been in Vegas for two years; been in the States for seven.'

'Doing what?'

'You remember I wanted to be an actor?'

'I remember that, yeah.'

He stopped; smiled. 'Well, it didn't work out.'

'Oh.'

'No, I mean it didn't work out in the way I thought it would. I spent my first five years in LA trying to catch a break, waiting tables and turning up at auditions. Got some minor roles here and there but nothing anyone would have seen me in. Then I started compèring at this comedy club in West Hollywood, and things got a little crazy. Ended up going down so well, I *became* the act. That went on for a year, then I was offered a job down here in Vegas, as the main compère at this big comedy club just off the Strip. A few months back, I was offered an even *better* job by the guy who runs the entertainment in the MGM hotels, so now I travel between here, the Luxor, New York, the Mirage, the Grand, all of them. It's been pretty amazing.'

'Wow. That's incredible, Lee. Congratulations.'

'Right place, right time, I guess.'

'Or you're just really good at it.'

He shrugged. 'I can't believe it's you. *Here*.'

'I know.'

'So what are *you* doing in Vegas?'

'You remember I wanted to be a journalist?'

'Yeah.'

'Well, that *did* work out.'

'Fantastic. Are you working now?'

'Yeah.' I looked around me. 'Well, I'm working tomorrow.'

'You live here?'

'No. I'm just down from LA for the night.'

'Doing what?'

I tapped the front page of the *Sun*. 'Writing about money.'

'Are you a correspondent or something?'

'Just until the elections are over next year, and then I head back to London. The paper's pretty excited about the idea of Obama, which is why I'm out here so early.'

'Anyone's better than Bush, right?'

'I guess we'll see next year.'

'How come you're based on the West Coast?'

'I was based in DC last time I was out, but this time I'm here for much longer. So, I'm spending six months in LA to cover the build-up from California, and then I move to DC to cover the last six months from Capitol Hill.' I nodded at the *Sun* again. 'Thing is, at the moment, it's still early days, so there's nothing to talk about. Which is why I'm down here trying to justify my existence.'

'Not a bad place to come for a night.'

‘Noisy.’

He laughed. ‘Yeah, I guess it is.’

We ordered more beers and sat at the bar and talked, covering the nineteen years since we’d left home. I’d grown up on a farm, in the hills surrounding our village, but when I headed to London and dawned on my parents that I wasn’t going to be taking over the running of it any time soon, they started winding it down and paying into a cottage.

‘And then Mum died.’

Lee gave a solemn nod of the head.

I shrugged. ‘It was pretty much all downhill from there: I helped Dad get the farm sold and moved him into the village, but he could never really handle it on his own.’

‘Is he still around?’

‘No. He died almost two years ago.’

I hadn’t been back home since.

The conversation moved on and got brighter, Lee telling me how his mum had remarried and now lived in Torquay, how his sister was a teacher, how he was still single and loving it, even if his mum wanted him to settle down. ‘They flew out earlier in the year, and Mum basically asked me when I was going to get married, once a day for three weeks.’ He rolled his eyes, and then asked, ‘So how long have you been married to Diane?’ He was busy polishing off his fifth bottle of beer, so I forgave him the slip-up. We were both a little worse for wear: him – two bottles ahead of me – on alcohol, me on lack of sleep.

‘Derryn.’

‘Shit.’ He laughed. ‘Sorry. Derryn.’

The bar was quieter now, all the men he’d been drinking with earlier off in the casino somewhere. ‘It’ll be thirteen years this year.’

‘Wow.’

‘Yeah, it’s been good.’

He nodded. ‘I admire you, man. Envy you too.’ He nodded a second time and then sank the rest of his beer. ‘And now I’ve got to use the can.’

He rocked from side to side slightly as he shifted away from the bar, and patted me gently on the shoulder as he passed. Then he headed to the toilets.

And I never saw him again.

A couple of minutes later, after picking up where I’d left off with the *Las Vegas Sun*, I looked up in the direction Lee had gone and saw a man standing next to me. I hadn’t seen him approach. His body was facing the bar but his head was turned towards the paper, reading one of the stories on the front page. A second later, he glanced at me and realized he’d been caught out. ‘Oh,’ he said. ‘Sorry. That’s incredibly rude of me.’

He was English.

I looked over his shoulder, in the direction of the toilets. No sign of Lee. When my eyes fell on the man again, his head had tilted – like a bird – as if he was studying me.

I pushed the paper towards him. ‘Here.’

‘That’s really good of you,’ he said. ‘Thanks.’

‘No problem.’

He smiled. ‘You’re English.’

‘Yeah. Looks like we both are.’

He was in his late forties, thin and wiry, with a tan and a smooth, hairless face. As he smiled, I could see he’d had his teeth done. They had an unnatural sheen to them that you could only get away

with on the West Coast. He perched himself on the edge of one of the stools, still smiling. 'Are you out here with work or something?'

'Just for a couple of days.'

'Ah, I didn't think you looked like a whale.'

'Whale' was what casinos termed the world's biggest gamblers. He was dressed smartly: pale blue open-necked shirt, black jacket, denims, black leather shoes polished to a shine. His dark hair was slicked back from his forehead and glistened under the lights.

'You wouldn't be sitting here for a start,' he said.

'If I was a whale?'

'Right. You'd be living off your complimentarys – your free flight and free suite and free food from the restaurant – not drinking alone in the bar at the foyer.' He seemed to realize what he'd just said. 'Wait, I didn't mean that how it sounded. Sorry.'

'Don't worry about it.'

'I mean, I'm one to talk, right? I'm here too.' He laughed briefly, then flipped the newspaper closed. 'Do you know how much casinos pay in comps to the high rollers?'

He leaned in towards me.

'Any idea?'

'Wouldn't have a clue,' I said.

'Anywhere between three thousand and five thousand dollars. But do you know how much the high rollers will lose at the tables?' He lowered his voice, like he was imparting some ancient secret. '*Twice that much*. No one beats the house. High rollers come in here with their credit lines, and their casino-paid hotel rooms and five-star meals, thinking they're going to defy the odds, that the casino's losing out. But every game here – *every game in every single casino in the city* – is designed to give the house a mathematical advantage.'

The man shifted from side to side, one hand pressed against the stool between us, the other flat to the marble of the bar. He was missing nails on the first two fingers of one hand, like they'd been torn off. 'You know what they call that?' he asked quietly.

'Call what?'

'The mathematical advantage?'

I glanced over the man's shoulder. Still no sign of Lee. It must have been five or six minutes since he'd left. The man moved in closer when he didn't get a response, his fingers inches from mine. I glanced down at his missing nails, then back up at him.

'It's called "the edge",' he said.

He finally moved his other hand off the stool and on to the marble, as if waiting for service. At the other end of the bar, the barman started to come over but then the man made eye contact with him – a tiny, fractional swivel of the head – and the barman stopped immediately, as if he'd been hit by a truck. When I looked back at the man, something had changed in him – something subtle – and a flutter of alarm took flight in my chest.

We stayed like that for a moment, the *ding, ding, ding* of the slots ringing around us, then I slid off the stool, pulled a couple of ten-dollar bills out and left them on the counter for the barman. I turned back to the man. He was about five inches shorter than me, but it didn't make me feel any easier around him.

'You off to bed?' he said.

'Something like that.'

I went to step around him – but then he grabbed me by the arm and pulled me into him. His grip was like a vice. I stumbled, completely knocked off balance. Then instinct kicked in: I pushed back at him and ripped my arm free.

‘What the hell is the matter with you?’

He realigned himself: both hands flat to the counter. ‘Let me give you a piece of advice.’

‘Let me give *you* one: don’t *ever* touch me.’

I went to leave.

‘Someone will always have the edge over you, David.’

I stopped. Turned back to him. ‘What did you say?’

‘You’re just flesh and bones like everyone else.’

‘How do you know my name?’

There was a threat in him now, as if he’d completely changed his appearance somehow. His eyes seemed darker. His face was twisted up like an animal about to strike. ‘Go back home to your wife,’ he said, looking me up and down. Then he leaned in and dropped his voice to a whisper: ‘And do both of you a favour: stay out of our business.’

‘*What?* I don’t even know you.’

‘No,’ he said. ‘But you know Lee Wilkins.’

He nodded once, eyes fixed on mine, then pushed past me and headed out into the casino. Inside a couple of seconds, he was disappearing into the crowds.

Inside ten, he was gone.



NOVEMBER 2012

The boy trudged across the shingle beach, six feet from where the waves were breaking on the shore. Their noise was immense: a roar, like an animal, and then a deep, visceral boom which passed right through him. When the tide began its retreat again, sucked back into the sea, the pebbles became caught in the wash and he could hear a soft, chattering sound, as if thousands of voices were calling from beyond the sea wall. On the other side of the eight-foot wall was the village: old fishermen's cottages, a pub, a few shops and businesses. This side of it were boats, lined up on the beach, masts chiming in the wind.

He adjusted the straps of the backpack and heard the equipment clatter around inside: the line, a new net he'd bought with the money from his paper round, and some old bacon his mum had given him that morning. He was carrying the bucket in his hand. It was early November, freezing cold, but this was always the best time to go crabbing. At this time of year there were no tourists – which meant he didn't have to share the crabs.

The village was set in a bowl, with coves cut into the faces of the hills on either side. In order to get to the coves, you had to climb over a series of rocks that rose up out of the shingle at both ends of the beach. To the boy, the rocks – hewed and polished by the relentless power of the sea – looked like the tail of a dragon, the bulk of the creature still submerged somewhere beneath. On the other side of the tail, in the coves beyond, hundreds of rock pools had formed in the grooves and chasms of the beach. That's where the crabs would be, washed up and spat out by the tide.

The boy started the climb.

Carrying the bucket at the same time made it harder. Normally his dad hauled all the equipment for him, but he was away with work and had told the boy he was big enough now – at almost thirteen – to go by himself. 'As long as you're careful,' his dad kept saying. The sea spray and the rain could make climbing more difficult but he was doing okay: after five minutes he'd got up on to the top of the tail and was looking down at the first of the coves. It dropped down about sixty feet from where he was, a thin sliver of shingle running from the shoreline to where the hills at the back started their steep ascent. The rest was just rock pools, sea washing over them, foam bubbling in the clefts and rifts. He started down, bucket – gripped in his hand still – clattering against the rock, his eyes fixed on where he was placing his feet. Wind roared in, once, twice, pulling him around like it had reached out and grabbed him – but then he jumped the last few feet, on to the shingle, and the wind died instantly as he stepped into the protection of the cove. All he could hear now was the sea breaking on the beach behind him.

Placing the bucket down on the shingle, he removed his backpack, unzipped it and started taking out the equipment. Crab line. Short-handled net. Bait. He attached the bait to the line, grabbed the net and the bucket, and made his way across the cove to the rocks at the back. *As long as you're careful.* He placed his feet down just as deliberately as before, not wanting to have to explain to his dad how he had managed to snap the line, or cut himself, or both. Halfway across, he heard the sea crash again behind him, an even louder and longer roar than before, and when he looked back he saw a wave rolling in towards him. He wasn't worried about getting wet, but he *was* worried about getting

knocked over, so he reached forward and grabbed hold of a thin column of stone. The sea washed in, almost knee high, soaking his trousers and boots, and flattening out in the space ahead of him. Once it started drawing out again, he looked to the backpack and saw it was safe, perched in a high groove where he'd placed it after getting the equipment out. He headed to the rock pools right at the back of the cove where it would be too far for the sea to reach him. There, he could drop the line into the pool without fear of being soaked a second time. High tide had been an hour ago. The waves may have been loud, may have been fierce, but they were slowly retreating. In another hour, they'd be weakened. An hour after that, they'd hardly make it to him at all.

He placed the bucket down next to him, made sure the bait was secure and sat next to the deepest rock pool in the cove. It was about five feet down. The boy dropped the line in, feeding it out of a box his dad had made for him. It was like a fishing reel, with a small handle on the side that he could use to draw the line back in. He held the box with his left hand, and let the line run over the first two fingers of his right hand so he could feel any movement, however slight, if a crab went for the bait.

Then he noticed something.

Twenty feet away from him, right at the back of the cove, between the last of the rock pools and the sharp incline of the hill, it looked like someone had left some bait behind. He shifted on the rock, trying to get a better view from where he was sitting, but all he could see was a white slab of meat. Chicken maybe, or pork. His dad always said bacon was best, but the boy had caught loads of crabs with pieces of old chicken. Oily fish was good too, but not as good as meat. Generally, crabs weren't fussy eaters.

As his eyes moved around the cove, he realized there was even more of the bait, a foot to the left of the other lot, just below his eye line. He placed the line box down – securing it in a crevice it couldn't escape from – and got to his feet. The surface down to the bait was slick with seawater. He took a couple of careful steps, then dropped down on to his backside and slid the rest of the way. Up close, he realized the bait was wrapped in plastic – like the type he kept his bacon in – and was longer than he'd first thought: it dropped away into a gully, the rest of it half-disguised by shadows. Beneath the plastic, he could see evenly cut strips of meat, identical seashells – bizarrely – attached to each one.

He reached forward.

Then stopped.

He glanced between his hand – still hovering over the plastic covering – and the meat inside; back and forth, as if his mind had made some sort of connection but he hadn't quite caught up.

Then, a second later, it hit him.

A whimper sounded in his throat as he scuffled back on his hands, reversing as far from the bait as he could. He tried to gain purchase on the rocks but his feet kept slipping, the heels of his boots sliding off the surface. 'Dad!' he yelled, an automatic reaction, even though his dad was at work, miles away, and the boy was out here on his own. 'Dad!' he screamed again, tears forming in his eyes as he desperately tried to claw his way back up to where he'd left his line.

Thirty seconds later, he got there – but he didn't even stop for the line. He didn't stop for his bait, his bucket, or his backpack either. He just clambered across the rocks, back over the dragon's tail, and ran as fast as he could along the shingle to his house at the end of the sea wall. His mum was in the kitchen, organizing cakes for his sister's birthday, and when she looked at the boy, at his tears, at the wide-eyed terror in his eyes, she grabbed him, brought him in close and made him recount what he'd seen.

And he told her how the seashells had been fingernails.

How the strips of meat had been fingers.

And how the bait had been a hand.

Half a mile away, as the boy was telling his mother what he'd found, Colm Healy pulled his Vauxhal up alongside a cottage he'd been staying at for the last four months. On the passenger seat were two shopping bags. He grabbed them, got out and headed inside.

After putting the food away and making himself a coffee, he sat at the window and smoked a cigarette. The view, even in late autumn, was beautiful: the gentle curve of the shingle beach; a long line of pastel-coloured fishermen's cottages; the high sea wall and the masts rising up from behind it. Sea spray dotted the glass and wind cut in from the water, swirling and buffeting the cottage – yet, to Healy, after twenty-six years in the Met, and even longer in the city, this was as close to silence as he had ever known.

A minute later, the silence broke.

On the table in front of him, his phone started buzzing, quietly turning circles. He didn't have a ringtone these days, which he preferred because it meant he missed a lot of calls. His ex-wife. The people he'd worked with. Men and women from his old life he'd happily never see again. But there was always a risk he might miss the one call he cared about: the call from his boys. So he brought the phone towards him and turned it over.

Liz Feeny.

He thought about letting it go to voicemail. Any conversation with Feeny was a conversation without a conclusion. She'd been phoning him constantly for the past couple of months, looking for any kind of closure, any kind of answer. But there wasn't one.

There was no happy ending.

He pushed Answer and flicked to speakerphone. 'Liz.'

'Colm.'

Her voice was soft. It sounded like she'd already been crying. 'This isn't really a good time,' he said, lying. He looked around the kitchen. Dishes stacked up in the sink. Cereal boxes left on the worktops. 'I'm right in the middle of something here.'

'Why do you still answer my calls?'

'What do you mean?'

'When David described you, he always said you were difficult to break down. Angry. Aloof. When I first started calling you, that was the man I expected to find.'

Healy didn't say anything.

'But I've never *found* that man.' She paused. 'You've never been like that. I know you hate talking to me, but you still answer my calls.' Another pause, this time for longer. She sniffed, stopped, sniffed again. 'Why do you answer my calls, Colm?'

'I don't know,' he said.

'Do you feel sorry for me – is that it?'

There was nothing in the question, no malice, but there was no right answer: yes, and she would cling on to it and use it as some kind of excuse to call him more often; no, and he would be telling her never to call again. *So? If you hate her calling so much, just tell her.* Except he couldn't do that.

Because, deep down, he wasn't sure he *did* hate her calling.

Reaching across the table, he lit another cigarette and opened the window. Smoke drifted out through the gap, vanishing into the rain. For a moment his thoughts turned to David Raker. Everything Raker had told Liz was right. And maybe when the pressure was turned up, Healy would become that man again. But here, in this place, miles away from the life he'd once known, Healy felt like a different man. She may only have been using him, may only have been calling him because he was a vessel for something else – some sort of connection to Raker – but, in her own way, she needed him. And that was the first time anyone had needed Healy, for whatever reason, for a very long time.

'Colm?'

'It's hard to understand,' he said.

'What is?'

'Why what happened, happened.'

'Is it hard for *you* to understand?'

He looked out through the window. 'Yes.'

'You mean that?'

'Yes.'

She didn't sound like she believed him.

'Listen, Liz, I know this is tough to hear, but—'

'I know what you're going to say,' she cut in, her voice quiet. 'I know what you're going to tell me to do. Accept it. Move on. Try to forget about what happened to him.'

He didn't respond. She'd second-guessed him.

'*Right?*'

'Right.'

'Well, it's not so easy for me,' she said. 'I'm still here in London with all the memories, living next door to his empty house. I haven't got myself a nice little holiday cottage in Devon to disappear to and forget about everything that happened.'

'I haven't forgotten about what happened.'

'Haven't you?'

'No.'

Outside, the wind came again – harder and more forceful than before. The house seemed to wheeze like the foundations had shifted.

'He was so similar to you,' she said.

'Yeah, you said that before.'

'He was chasing after ghosts, just like you.'

'Look,' Healy said, trying to maintain the composure in his voice, 'I know what it's like to lose someone. Remember that. I've been where you are – I've been through *worse* than you – so I know how it is.'

She cleared her throat, but didn't say anything.

'You can't forget about it. I understand that. But you need to try. You need to start processing what happened. Sooner or later, you need to start facing it down.'

Silence on the line.

'Because Raker's gone, Liz. And he's never coming back.'

An hour later, Healy was sitting in the corner of the pub, a small, dark, two-room building with pebbledash walls and a thatched roof. A fire was going in the corner and locals were lining the bar, perched on stools. They all had their backs to him, which he liked, and there was no music being played or TV on – just the murmur of conversation – which he liked even more. Nothing made him more depressed than being forced to listen to some landlord’s CD collection. When he looked up from the paper he was reading, he could see the regulars were all in; a mix of old sea dogs, their skin etched and weathered like the rocks on the beach, and younger couples in their thirties, part of the new money that the affluent surrounding areas had brought in. Healy was neither, but he had fitted in pretty well here by keeping himself to himself and only speaking when he was forced to.

About ten minutes later, as he sank the last of his beer, a man in his fifties entered the bar. Healy recognized him, just from having been in and around the village for the last four months, but he didn’t know him. Didn’t know his name, or what he did. The man was wearing a green waxed jacket – soaked through from the rain – and had wild, grubby hair, and a beard like coils of twine. As he came in, his wellingtons slapped against the stone floor, puddles of water and mud following in his wake as he moved first to the bar, eyes scanning the locals, and then out into the middle of the room. A couple of the regulars greeted him, but the man didn’t respond in any way; instead he continued looking around the bar, into the barely lit coves, where other regulars – alone, like Healy – were hunched over their drinks, either reading or just staring into space.

Then the man locked eyes with Healy.

He came over, stopping in front of the table Healy was sitting at, and stood there, rain dripping off him. The locals had all turned on their stools. There was no gentle hum of conversation any more. Just silence.

Healy closed his newspaper. ‘You all right, pal?’

‘You the copper?’ the man said.

‘Not any more.’

‘You used to be, though, right?’

Healy looked out beyond the man. All eyes were on him.

‘I used to be.’

‘You need to come and see this.’

‘See what?’

For the first time, the man seemed to realize everyone inside the bar was listening to their conversation. He turned back to Healy. ‘It’s better if you see it yourself.’

Three of them climbed up over the rocks and down towards the cove. The boy followed behind, reticence in every step, as if he were returning to a place he’d vowed never to go again. Healy followed the man who’d come to get him, and behind them both was the boy’s father, still suited and booted, having just returned home from work. He’d wanted to come out here to prevent his son having to see anything more than he already had. Healy knew less than anyone. He hadn’t got much out of any of the locals – many of whom he could see behind them, watching from the other side of the sea wall.

but he doubted anything he was about to find was good. He'd worked murders at the Met long enough to see the connections, however small, between crimes; he knew that people handled death differently, but once you'd discovered a body – bereft of life; hollow and empty – it always left something of itself in the person who'd found it. Some held it together, some broke down, but everyone had that same look; a memory, deep and resonant, that would never fade.

When he'd left the pub, he'd told the landlord to call the police, but he and the villagers seemed reluctant, as if inviting the police in would shatter the equilibrium. Healy could understand it on some level: one of the reasons he'd come here in the first place was because he'd had enough of the city; its darkness and corruption. The people in the village had stayed here their whole lives because they'd wanted to avoid the same thing.

Healy watched as the man from the pub stepped down on to the sand of the cove, feet sinking into the shingle, the dad following in his wake. 'Don't go any further!' Healy shouted to them, trying to prevent them contaminating any evidence that was down there. The rain and the wind would have damaged the scene already, but they had to preserve what they could. Healy shouted again for them to stop. This time they listened, but didn't look back, as if unwilling to cede control to Healy. Finally, alongside Healy came the boy – maybe only twelve or thirteen – his face ghostly white, his hands rolled into fists at his side, eyes fixed off to his right, at the highest point of the cove, where something was sitting. Healy tried to get a better view of what it was, then dropped down a couple of feet to a platform gouged out of the rock. All the time, rain jagged in, almost horizontal, swirled around by the wind rolling off the sea.

Dread slithered through his stomach as he made the last jump down into the cove, and his boots started disappearing into the fine shingle. He looked at the man from the pub, then at the dad, then at the boy – cowed and frightened – waiting in the space behind them all. Waves crashed on the beach. 'Stay here,' Healy said to them all, including the boy. 'Don't follow me. We need to preserve whatever's here.'

He waited for a moment, watching to see whether they were paying attention, and then he started making his way towards the back of the cove. Sea spray stalked him as he moved. He climbed towards a raised platform of rock at the far end of the cove and, as he did, he got a better view of what the boy had found.

It wasn't crab bait.

He doubted the boy had even seen the whole thing: it required a level of elevation, a physical height, the boy simply wouldn't have. Healy took another step forward. The wind and the rain masked the stench of decay, but it was there, in the background; accumulating, getting worse.

I thought it was a piece of sliced meat at first, the kid had told Healy, chewing his bottom lip as they left the pub. *I thought it had shells stuck to it*. But it wasn't shells and it wasn't sliced meat. Healy looked back to where the men and the boy were waiting. Clouds sloped over the hills either side of the beach, dark and twisted and pregnant with even heavier rain. Then the smell came again and he turned back to it, wrapped loosely in plastic, most of it – apart from an arm – washed up into the shadows of a gully.

Pale and skinny.

Bloodless.

Soon after, the police descended on the village. Healy had made the call himself, from inside the cove and then waited for them on the main beach. He'd sent the locals back to the other side of the sea wall. The first responders found him – two uniforms with about five years' experience between them – and as he explained who he was and what he'd discovered, he saw the colour drain from their faces. In that part of the world, most cops would go their whole lives without seeing a major crime scene; but for these two it had taken less than three years. He took one of them back over the rocks and down the other side to see the body while the other one stayed and called in CID and forensics. Healy pointed to where the arm snaked out from the shadows. Perched on top of the rocks, the uniform eyed it nervously for a second before nodding and retreating to the safety of the beach.

Healy followed.

Scene of crime turned up forty minutes later, forensics in tow. Inside an hour they had a tent erected as close to the cove as possible, and the SOCO – a weather-beaten guy in his early sixties – had set up an incident room in the village hall. Techs did their best to preserve evidence, to scour the cove for what had been left behind with the body, but the whole time the wind and rain carved in across the bay. Healy watched from the sea wall with the others, until eventually a plain-clothes detective came up the beach towards him, flanked by a second. Both were dressed in grey suits and police-issue raincoats.

'Can I have a word, Mr Healy?' the older one said, a guy in his forties with prematurely silver hair and a salt and pepper beard. It was the type of question that wasn't really a question. The other one, skinny and tall and in his thirties, said nothing, just followed behind.

The inside of the village hall was small and cramped, wet footprints criss-crossing at the entrance. A trail of rubber mats had been laid out, branching off in one direction to a forensics set-up, where techs had placed evidence bags under the watchful eye of a uniform; and in the other direction to a room beyond a serving hatch that had a table and four chairs in it. Everything smelt musty, of disrepair and age, and beyond the serving hatch it was worse: boiled food and furniture polish. Healy sat down at the table and the younger detective – without even being asked – disappeared back into the hall to get them all a cup of tea.

'You've got him well trained,' Healy said.

The detective looked up, a wry smile on his face, and leaned back in his seat. 'DCI Colin Rocastle,' he said, placing a hand on his chest. 'That's DC Stuart McInnes.'

'Colm Healy.'

'I'm told you used to work for the Met.'

'Twenty-six years.'

'That's a long time.'

'The Met would probably say too long.'

Rocastle smiled. 'You don't look retirement age.'

But Healy understood: *So, why did you leave?*

'I'd just had enough.'

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