

I

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 make-up 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.

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 boy-friends. 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 a 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.

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 a 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.’

4

The canteen was long and narrow, the floor tiled in old hardwood, the ceilings high and sculptured in white plaster. Along one side were four huge windows. Light poured in, even as rain started spattering against the glass. Opposite was the kitchen, with big women in white uniforms cleaning out huge vats full of half-finished food.

On the walk over, Lindsey had done all the talking. The last time she'd seen Megan was before the Carvers went to Florida.

'She seemed fine,' she said, turning to her friend. 'Didn't she, Kay?'

Kaitlin glanced at me, then at her friend, and nodded.

'So how come you didn't see her between the time she got back and the time she disappeared?' I asked Lindsey.

'I was on a student exchange in Italy.'

'What about you, Kaitlin?'

Kaitlin glanced briefly at me. She looked nervous, like she might be in trouble. The police had probably been to her home, asking questions and trying to work the angles. Sometimes that had the opposite effect. You ended up pushing harder because you felt like they were closing up, but they were only closing up because they felt like they weren't helping. Maybe, in some way, Kaitlin felt responsible. If she'd met Megan outside the penultimate class of the day, instead of by the lockers, she might never have

vanished. Instead she said goodbye to her friend after lunch and never saw her again.

‘Can you tell me what happened?’ I asked her, after we were all seated.

‘I told the police.’

‘I know you did. I know you helped them out a lot. I’m just trying to see if there are any small things that they might have missed. You’re not in trouble. I’m just here to help Megan’s parents and find out what happened to her.’

She nodded but still seemed nervous. Her hands were flat to her legs, one of them rubbing the top of her thigh gently.

‘Where are you from, by the way?’

She looked at me, frowned. ‘Tufnell Park.’

‘No. I mean, originally.’

She was still frowning. ‘South Africa.’

‘I thought so. Nice part of the world. I used to live in South Africa.’

For the first time something shifted in her expression: the hardness, the stillness, replaced by a slight softening of the muscles. ‘What part?’ she asked.

‘Johannesburg.’

She nodded, but her face hardly moved this time, as if she wasn’t actually listening to me. I studied her for a moment, the look in her face, her hand moving against her leg, and for the first time wondered if it was shyness preventing her from opening up or something else.

‘Kaitlin?’

She turned and faced me.

‘Can you go over what happened?’

‘I spent lunchtime with Meg,’ she said quietly. ‘Then,

first period, I had History, and she had Physics. Between periods, we were meant to meet at the lockers in the Science block, but I waited there and she didn't turn up.'

'Why meet at the lockers?'

She frowned, looked at Lindsey. 'We always did that.'

'Before Biology?'

'Yes. Unless we had a free period together before. If we had a free period, Linds, Meg and me would probably go to the library or the Sixth Form block.'

'Did Megan seem all right that day?'

'Fine.'

'She didn't seem off colour or worried about anything?'

'No.'

'Just like her normal self?'

'Pretty much.'

I paused. 'Pretty much?'

Kaitlin shrugged. 'Like I told the police, she said she'd had a headache for a couple of days. Nothing major. Just kind of a fuzzy head.'

I wrote that down, and then we started talking about Megan generally – what she was like, her personality, how she'd scored straight As in her GCSEs. Lindsey did all of the talking. It didn't amount to much. Most of it dovetailed with what the Carvers had already told me: serious about school, serious about making a career for herself, serious about not letting anything get in the way. Basically the most unlikely runaway you could get.

'Did Megan get on all right with the teachers here?'

'Who gets on with *teachers*?', Lindsey said.

'She wasn't close to one of them in particular?'

Lindsey frowned.

‘I’m looking for reasons why she might have disappeared.’

Her mouth formed an O, as if she suddenly got the line of questioning, then she shook her head. ‘I don’t think so. In science, a lot of the teachers are women anyway.’

I nodded. ‘Her dad said she used to work in a video store . . .’

‘Yeah,’ Lindsey replied. ‘She did two weekends a month. But I think that place closed down about three months ago.’

‘Okay. But did she ever meet anyone while she was there?’

‘I don’t think so.’ She paused, looked at Kaitlin, got no help and turned to me again. ‘No one apart from Charlie – but she already knew him.’

‘Who’s Charlie?’

‘Charlie Bryant.’

‘*Charles* Bryant?’

Lindsey nodded again.

‘The kid whose mum died?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Were the two of them friendly?’

‘They went out for a while.’

‘For how long?’

‘I don’t know . . . couple of months.’

‘When was this?’

‘After his mum died.’

‘A year ago?’

‘Yeah. He was hard work, though.’ She paused, as if she might have just realized why. ‘I mean, he’d just lost his mum. You can understand that.’

‘Is that why they split up?’

‘Megan said she felt sorry for him, but she didn’t really fancy him. After a couple of months, she called it off.’

‘How did he take it?’

‘He was upset. He really, really liked her. But he seemed to be okay.’

‘Was he still working in the video store when Megan disappeared?’

‘I think so.’

‘So they still spoke?’

‘Yeah.’

‘And got on pretty well?’

‘Yeah, I’d say so ...’ Lindsey glanced at Kaitlin. ‘Wouldn’t you, Kay?’

Kaitlin looked at me and nodded. I underlined Charles Bryant’s name. ‘Does the name A. J. Grant mean anything to either of you?’ The blank expressions told me everything I needed to know. I changed tack. ‘Did you have any favourite pubs or clubs you used to go to?’

‘Tiko’s,’ Lindsey said immediately.

‘That’s a club?’

‘Yeah. In the West End.’

I made a note of it. ‘Any others?’

They looked at each other. ‘Not really,’ Lindsey continued. ‘I mean, we go to lots of places, but Tiko’s is the place with the best music.’

I took out Megan’s digital camera and scrolled through to the picture of her standing in front of the block of flats. ‘Did either of you take this?’

They studied it, Lindsey holding the camera.

‘Where is she?’

I shrugged. 'I don't know. You don't recognize it?'

'No,' Lindsey said, shaking her head.

'Kaitlin?'

'No,' she said.

I nodded, took the camera back and briefly glanced at Kaitlin. Her eyes had left mine, and she'd gone cold again. Shut down.

Something was definitely up.

Bothwick wasn't there when I got back. I glanced at the reception where one of the secretaries was taking a phone call, and then quickly moved inside his office, pushing the door shut behind me. I didn't have much time.

Two files were perched on the edge of the desk, where he'd left them. Kaitlin and Lindsey. I left Lindsey's where it was and picked up Kaitlin's. A school photograph of her, probably a couple of years younger. Below that, a list of the subjects she was taking and an attendance record. At a quick glance, it looked pretty good. No long absences, no comments in the spaces provided. On the next page was her home address in Tufnell Park, and on the final one her last school report. At the bottom: A for Drama.

So she definitely wasn't shy.

I snapped the file closed, placed it back on the desk and opened up the top drawer of the filing cabinet. The Bryant file was about eight in. Inside was a photo of him. He was a handsome kid; dark hair, bright eyes. Underneath was a top sheet with his address on. He lived with his father near Highgate Wood.

Then, outside, I could hear footsteps.

Bothwick.

I closed the file, dropped it back into the cabinet drawer and closed it as quietly as I could. A second later, he appeared in the doorway. 'Ah!' he said. 'Sorry about that.'

'No problem.'

'Did you get everything you needed?'

I smiled, briefly eyeing the files again to see they were definitely where he'd left them. Then I shook his hand and told him I did.

Lindsey was right: the video store Megan used to work in was shut. Not just shut for the day. Shut for good. I drove past it and headed along Holloway Road to the Bryant home in Highgate, a three-storey townhouse with a double garage and a wrought-iron porch.

There wasn't a single light on anywhere inside.

I rang the doorbell and waited. Nothing. No movement. No sound from inside. As rain started to fall, spitting at first, then coming harder, I stepped down from the porch and wandered around to the side. A path led parallel to the property, behind a locked gate. I could see a sliver of garden but not much else. Walking back to the front door, I rang the doorbell again – but when no one answered for a second time, I headed back to the car in the rain.

Three weeks after Christmas, a leaflet got posted through my door. It was advertising a support group for widows and widowers under forty-five. I wasn't a great believer in fate. In fact, I hardly believed in it at all. But I understood why people might when that leaflet landed on my doormat. At the time I was fresh off a case that had almost killed me, and I'd spent Christmas alone watching old home movies of Derryn. Physically and emotionally, I was low. So in the second week of January, I decided, on the spur of the moment, to go along, not expecting it to make much of a difference. Nine months later, it was still part of my weekly routine.

Most Tuesdays we met in a community college in Acton, in a room that smelt of stale coffee. But once a month, we all chipped in and went for a meal somewhere. If I hadn't already agreed to go, I might have cancelled it to concentrate on the Carver case, but it was too late to back out now. Instead, I headed from the Bryant house to my office in Ealing, picked up a change of clothes and some deodorant, and then drove to the restaurant. It was a Thai place in Kew, close to the river.

Something sizzled in the kitchen as I entered, the smell of coconut and soy sauce filling the air. There were fourteen of them sitting at a big table by one of the windows. The woman who ran the group was a short, dumpy 32-year-old called Jenny. Her husband had suffered a heart

attack running for a train at King's Cross. She saw me, came over and pecked me on the cheek. I'd liked Jenny pretty much from the first time I'd talked to her. She was lively, quick-witted and fun, but she had an understanding of people; an ability to read and connect with them. We walked to the table together, and I apologized to everyone for being late, shaking hands and saying hellos to some of the regulars. There were two spaces left: one was in the middle next to an accountant called Roger, who, after a couple of glasses of red wine, always started talking about the brake horsepower of his Mazda RX-8; the other was right at the end, next to two faces I hadn't seen before.

'David, we've got a couple of new arrivals tonight,' Jenny said. She leaned in to me as we walked towards them. 'I was hoping you could keep them entertained for me.'

Jenny introduced them as Aron Crane and Jill White. They'd both lost their partners, and had got to know each other by sharing a morning coffee-shop routine. I wondered whether they'd since got together, but they sat apart from one another at the table, and – as we got talking – reminisced about their partners in a way that made it obvious they weren't a couple.

We ordered, and spent the next half an hour drifting through polite conversation: the weather, the traffic, a local MP who had been caught with a rent boy and his trousers round his ankles in a toilet in Bayswater. Both of them seemed pleasant enough. She was closer to my age, maybe just the wrong side of forty, and had deep blue eyes – how you imagined the sea would look in places you couldn't afford to go – slight imperfections in her skin, like acne scars, and a small mark just above the bump of

her chin. Both she was acutely aware of. When she talked, her hands automatically went to her face, the fingers of one hand resting against the curve of her jaw, the other tucking her blonde hair behind her ears. It was an appealing quality: a kind of underlying shyness.

He was in his mid-to-late thirties, dark brown hair, the same colour eyes and a slightly bent nose, as if it had once been broken and not reset properly. He was dressed conservatively – collared shirt, grey trousers, plain jacket – and if I'd had to take a guess, I would have said he was a City suit, burning in the fires of middle-management hell. He had a put-upon look, as if he could never quite get his head above water.

'So what is it you do, David?' he asked as the food arrived.

'I find missing people.'

'Like an investigator?'

'Yeah, a bit like one.' I smiled. 'Except I don't have a badge to flash and I don't get to kick down doors. Much.'

Aron laughed. Jill gave a thin smile, as if I'd just offended her. I tried to work out what I'd said. *Maybe the police comment.*

Aron looked at her, then back at me. 'Jill's husband used to be a policeman. He was . . .' He looked at her again and she nodded, giving him permission to tell the story. 'He died while on duty. Shot.' He paused. 'And she's still trying to find out who did it.'

'Oh, I'm really sorry,' I said.

She held up a hand. 'It's okay. It's been nearly a year – I really should be better at hiding my emotions.' She smiled for real this time.

The conversation moved back into more general subjects – films, sport, more on the weather – before it led to why we were all in London. Jill was in marketing, and had only recently moved to the city after her husband got a job with the Met; Aron confirmed what I’d suspected – that he was in finance – and worked for an investment bank in Canary Wharf. Eventually, things came full circle and returned to my work.

‘So do you enjoy what you do?’ Jill asked.

‘Yeah, most of the time.’ I held up my left hand and wiggled the fingers where the nails were damaged. ‘Though not always. Sometimes it just hurts.’

‘How did you do that?’

I paused, looking down at my fingers. ‘Some people just prefer to remain hidden,’ I said, trying to make light of it, trying to deflect any further questions.

It was just easier that way.

Outside, while a couple of them – including Aron – were sorting out the bill, I got talking to Jill on her own. The night was cold. Above us, the skies opened for a moment and the moon moved into view; then it was gone again behind banks of dark cloud.

‘Thank you for keeping us company tonight, David,’ she said. ‘I realize it’s probably not fun being lumbered with the new people.’

‘It was good to meet you both.’

‘I’m really glad Aron persuaded me to come along. I wasn’t sure about it, I must admit. But I think this’ll be good for me. As you know, we were fairly new to the city when Frank died; I mean, we have friends dotted all

around the country, but not too many here in London. And I've basically spent the last year not going out.'

'Everyone here will understand that part.' I glanced inside at Aron and then back to Jill. 'So did you two just bump into each other?'

'Pretty much. Aron gets his morning coffee from the same place as me. I just said hello one day and then, after that, we gradually started chatting and, well . . . here we are.' She stopped. Studied me, as if turning something over in her head. 'Actually, we were thinking of going out for a drink Friday night. You're quite welcome to come.'

She looked at me, her eyes dancing in the light from the restaurant. I looked inside at Aron, laughing at something Jenny had said to him, then back to Jill.

'I don't want to step on any toes.'

Her eyes followed mine. '*Aron?*'

I nodded.

'Oh, no – we're just friends. I'm not ready for anything like that.' She glanced inside. 'Why don't I take your number? I can drop you a text, or give you a call, and if you decide you'd like to come along, then you can. But there's no pressure.'

I gave her my number. As she was putting it into her phone, she looked in at Aron again. Maybe she wasn't ready. Maybe he wasn't either. But they definitely felt something for one another, even if it was only a kinship. And I didn't want to get in the way, because I knew a little of how that felt; of finally finding a connection with someone in the shadows left behind.

6

My parents had been gone for three years by the time Derryn died, and I'd been an only child. No brothers. No sisters. I'd relied mostly on friends at first, and – for a while – they would drop in on rotation. But then things gradually started to change. Before Derryn died, we'd all joke around, laugh at each other, get into beer-fuelled arguments about football and films. After I buried her, none of that seemed to matter any more.

Only one person ever understood that.

When I got home just after eleven, I looked across the fence into next door's front room and saw my neighbour Liz leaning over her laptop. Liz had been different from everyone else, despite the fact she'd never had any right to be. She'd moved in three weeks after Derryn died and didn't know me at all. But, as we started to talk, she became the person who would sit there and listen to me – night after night, week after week – working my way back through my marriage.

About three or four months in, I started to realize she felt something for me. She never said anything, or even really acted on it. But it was there. A sense that, when I was ready, she would be waiting. When I had needed it, she'd given me practical help too. She was a brilliant solicitor, running her own firm out of offices in the city. When my case before Christmas had gone bad, she'd sat with me in

a police interview room as they tried to unravel what had happened and why. In the aftermath, I'd lied to the police and, deep down, I knew Liz could tell. But she never confronted me, and never mentioned it. She understood how the loss of my wife had changed the need for me to confide in someone, and seemed willing to ride it out.

As I stepped up on to the porch, my security light kicked in. Next door, she clocked the movement. Her eyes narrowed, and then I passed into the full glow of the light. She broke out into a smile and got to her feet, waving me towards her. I nodded, moved back down the drive, and up the path to her front porch. The door was already open, framing her as she stood in the kitchen searching in a cupboard.

'Hello, Mr Raker,' she said, looking up as she brought down a top-of-the-range grinder. On the counter was a bag of coffee beans, wrapped in silver foil.

'Elizabeth. How are you?'

She shook her head. She hated being called Elizabeth.

'I'm good. You?'

'Fine. You been in court today?'

'Tomorrow.'

'Oh – so are you sure you want me bothering you?'

'You're a nice distraction,' she said, and flashed me a smile.

The house was tidy and still had that 'just moved in' feel, even though she had lived there for nearly two years. The living room had a gorgeous open fireplace, finished in black marble with a stone surround. Logs were piled up in alcoves either side, and a small wooden angel, its wings spread, was standing where a fire should have been. The

rest of the room was minimalist: two sofas, both black, a TV in the corner, a pot plant next to that. There was a Denon sound system beneath the front window. On the only shelf, high above the sofas, were four pictures, all of Liz and her daughter. She'd married young, had her daughter shortly after, and divorced soon after that. Despite Liz only being forty-three, her daughter Katie was already in her third year of university at Warwick.

I sat in the living room. She closed the top on the grinder and set it in motion, the noise like tractor wheels on stony ground, the smell of coffee filling the house. When she came through, she pulled the kitchen door most of the way shut and perched herself opposite me.

'So what have you been up to?'

'It was support group night.'

'Ah, right, of course. How was that?'

'Pretty good. I wasn't sat next to Roger this week.'

She smiled. 'He's the Mazda RX-8 guy, right?'

'Right.'

'Where did you eat?'

'Some Thai place in Kew.'

'Oh, I know where you mean. I took a client there once. He'd been charged with receiving stolen goods.' She paused, and broke out into another smile. 'Shifty so-and-so, he was. Luckily, what jail time I saved him was made up for by the big fat bill I posted through his letterbox at the end of the trial.'

'Are you expensive?'

'If only you knew *how* expensive.' She winked. 'You find yourself in possession of any dodgy DVD players, David, you know where to come.'

She smiled again, and we looked at each other, the noise of the coffee grinder filling the silence.

‘So are you on a case at the moment?’

‘You remember Megan Carver?’

She paused for a moment. She knew the name, but couldn’t think where from. ‘Wasn’t she that girl who disappeared?’

‘Right.’

‘Wow. Big case.’

‘Big enough. I’m trying to find her.’

‘If she’s even still alive.’

‘Yeah, well, I think there’s a distinct possibility she’s not.’

She didn’t pursue it any further, although as her eyes lingered on me I knew she wanted to. It was more than a natural curiosity. There were obvious parallels between our work – the damaged clients, the unravelling of lies and half-truths, the building of a case – but, deep down, I knew her reasons were much simpler than that: she wanted to feel we were moving somewhere.

‘Oh, I almost forgot,’ she said after a while, and disappeared down the hallway.

I looked up at one of the photos on the shelf again. In it, Liz had her arm around Katie’s neck, and was dressed in a skirt and vest. She looked fantastic. Dark, playful eyes; long chocolate-coloured hair; slim, gentle curves. We’d never talked about the relationships she’d had since her daughter was born, but it seemed impossible that there wouldn’t have been some. She was beautiful without ever suggesting she knew it, which only made her more attractive.