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Fall from Grace

Written by Tim Weaver

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Fall From Grace

TIM WEAVER



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For Sharlé

Author's Note

For the purposes of the story, I have made some small alterations to the working practices and structure of the Metropolitan Police. My hope is that it's done subtly enough not to cause any offence.

PART ONE

1978

I

It took them an hour to get to the beach, a small, horseshoe-shaped bay on the southern tip of the county. The father had wanted to get there early, to avoid having to fight for a space in the tiny car park, and because someone in their village had told him that there were five spaces – tucked away beneath the slant of a vast, ninety-foot rock face – that stayed in the shade all day. When they arrived and saw there were two spaces still empty, the father drummed out a victory beat on the wheel of the Hillman Avenger and started whistling to himself. His wife, in the passenger seat next to him, broke out into a smile.

'I think we can safely say you're happy.'

'Is it too early for an ice cream?'

She rolled her eyes. 'We've only just had breakfast.'

'That was over an hour ago,' he joked, and after he parked up and turned off the engine he looked over his shoulder, towards the back seat. His son was up on his knees, fingers pressed to the glass, looking out at the cove.

'What do you think, my boy?'

'Are there rocks to climb here, Dad?'

His father laughed. 'Yes, son. There are rocks to climb.'

The tide was on its way out, a swathe of wrinkled beach left in its wake. Beyond the blanket of sand was water as clear as glass, much of it contained within the gentle arc

of the cove, the rest out in the channel, where the boy thought it looked like the world went on for ever. Excited now, he helped his dad take two deckchairs and all the food down to the sand, then came back for his bucket and spade, and made a break for the water's edge. Behind him, his mother called after him, telling him not to wander off too far, and he shouted back to her that he wouldn't. As the father set up, the mother continued to watch the boy, a trail of his footprints leading all the way down to the sea.

'He's so grown up now,' she said.

'He's only eight, Marie.'

'I know.' She stopped, watching the boy dipping his toe into the water. 'But don't you think the time's going so fast? I mean, it seems like only yesterday the nurses were handing him to me for the first time. Now look at him.'

'He's fine.'

'I know. I don't mean he's not fine. I just mean . . . before we know it, he'll be married, with his own kids. Maybe he won't even stay in this area.'

'Of course he will.'

'There are no opportunities for him here, Tom.'

'What are you talking about? He'll take over the business.'

'He says he doesn't want it.'

'He's only eight.' He came up behind his wife and put his arms around her waist. 'He doesn't know what he wants. When I was eight, I wanted to be an astronaut.'

'I just don't want him to forget us.'

He kissed his wife on the cheek. 'He won't forget his old mum.'

At the water's edge, the boy turned back to them and

waved his mother towards him. 'Mum!' the boy shouted. 'Mum, come and look at this!'

'See?' the boy's father said. 'I told you.'

She smiled again, kissed her husband on the cheek and headed down to where her son was standing in a foot of water, pointing to something out beyond the edge of the cove. At first, as she followed his line of sight, she couldn't tell what had got his attention. But then it emerged, on its own out in the channel, like a lonely, drifting ship.

The island.

She'd tried to forget how close they were to it here.

'What's the matter, sweetheart?'

But she already knew. The island sat like a fin above the water, a craggy sliver of land a quarter of a mile out to sea, awkward, broken, ominous. Even from this distance, even as light bounced off the water and the sun beat down, there remained something dark about it; all the stories it had to tell, all the memories it wished it could forget.

Instinctively, she put a hand on her son's shoulder.

'What *is* that place, Mum?' the boy asked.

She looked out across the channel, unsure how to respond.

'Mum?'

'It's . . . It's, uh . . .'

'What?' the boy said. 'What is it?'

And then slowly, automatically, she brought him into her, pressing him to her hip, and she said to her son, 'It's somewhere bad, sweetheart. It's somewhere very bad.'

2013

2

The address I'd been given overlooked a railway switchyard in Pimlico. Built from London stock brick, the two-storey building was a quarter of a mile south of Victoria station, almost on the banks of the Thames. There was no signage on it and its windows were dark, giving the impression it was empty. But it wasn't empty. As I got closer, I could see the hardwood front door had been freshly painted in a muted blue and a security camera was fixed to the wall, its lens focused on the entrance. Embedded in a space next to the door was a number pad with an intercom. I buzzed once and waited.

From where I was standing, the river was mostly obscured by the rusting iron struts of a railway bridge, but in between I could see a slow procession of sightseeing trips carving along the water. This close to Christmas, the vessels all had fairy lights winking in their windows, and some of the tourists – braving the chill of winter – stood on the decks, wearing Santa hats. Otherwise, there seemed a strange kind of hush to the morning, a greyness, like the city had slipped into hibernation.

A couple of seconds later, a ping came from the intercom and the door bumped away from its frame. Inside was a short corridor with polished oak floors and a big arched window, light bleeding out across the walls and ceiling. Everything was finished in the same neutral

off-white colour, except for two blue doors at the end and a marble counter on the right. Behind it sat a smartly dressed woman in her early twenties.

'Mr Raker?'

I nodded. 'Was that just a lucky guess?'

She smiled, reached under the counter and brought out a visitors' ledger. 'I was told to expect you about this time,' she said, and laid a fountain pen on top. 'If you can just sign and date it, I'll show you where you need to go.'

I signed my name. 'It's 12 December today, right?'

'That's right, sir.' Once I was done, she gestured towards the first blue door. 'Head through there to find our meeting rooms. Yours is Dickens. When you've finished, feel free to use our facilities. We have a bar in the basement, and that second door takes you into our restaurant. We serve food between twelve and four, although you'll need to ensure your representative is with you, as we only serve guests when they dine with a member.'

'Okay.'

'Is there anything else, Mr Raker?'

'No, I think that's fine.'

I headed through the first blue door.

Another corridor revealed eight further doors, four on each side, all closed, all with brass plates. Each was named after a British writer, and Dickens was the fourth down on the left. As I approached, I could hear the hum of conversation in one of the rooms. The others were completely silent. At Dickens, I knocked twice.

'Come in.'

The meeting room was small but immaculate: more oak flooring, chocolate-coloured walls, a twelve-foot

table, and floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out over a pristine garden. Above it, I could just make out the railway bridge, but otherwise it was easy to forget that the building was surrounded by industry and roads.

'Mr Raker.'

DCI Melanie Craw got up from a seat at the head of the table, a laptop and a closed file in front of her, and came around to greet me. We shook hands, then she pushed the door shut and directed me to the table. I took a seat, removing my jacket.

'Would you like something to drink?' she asked.

'Water would be fine. Thank you.'

Craw was in her early forties, slim, with a short, practical haircut, and cool, unreadable eyes. No jewellery, except for a wedding band. Never skirts, only trousers, and always the same subdued colours. She was stoic and steady, difficult to break down, but she wasn't unfeeling. She had an understanding of people, of what made them tick. We'd never had a working relationship, just a caustic, often bitter series of confrontations, but I admired her all the same. I couldn't honestly have said if the feeling was mutual.

As she went to a cabinet in the far corner, where a jug of iced water and some glasses were sitting on top, a brief, uncomfortable silence settled between us.

Perhaps it wasn't so surprising. I found missing people for a living, and through my work had come into conflict with Craw when she'd been the SIO on a case that had almost cost me my life. I'd been stabbed in the chest and left to die in the shadows of a cemetery by a man we'd both ended up trying to find. Through luck or fate, or a

little of both, I'd been discovered, spent a month strapped to a hospital bed, and the next four recovering at the old place my parents had left me in south Devon.

Afterwards, I'd wondered if I ever wanted to return to London.

In the end, I had, not only because the city was where most of my work was, but because, once the physical pain was gone, the only thing I had to face down were the memories of what had happened to me – and those memories were all here. As she handed me a glass of water, I imagined – eighteen months on – Melanie Craw was different as well. Things had changed for me. It seemed impossible they hadn't changed for her too.

'Thanks for coming,' she said. 'You found it okay, obviously.'

'It looks derelict from the road.'

She smiled, sitting down. 'I think that's why people like it.'

'Are you a member here?'

'Through my husband. These sorts of places . . . I guess it's a male thing. I don't really get it, but it's always made him happy. I find it's useful for meetings like these.'

'Meetings like what?'

She nodded. 'I wanted to offer you some work.' She saw the surprise in my face, nodded again, as if to reassure me, and pushed the file across the table.

I glanced at it, then back to her.

'I want you to find someone.'

It was my turn to smile this time. I had a long and illustrious history of making enemies at the Met, Craw

among them, not intentionally and not with any sense of enjoyment, but as a by-product of what I did. In the end, I'd accepted it as collateral damage. I didn't do this job to make friends, I did it in order to bring home the missing.

'I can't see the Met signing off on this,' I said to her.

'Well, you're right about that.'

'So why am I here?'

'This isn't for the Met.'

I studied her, instantly suspicious of her intentions. The idea of Craw asking for my help – even as time dulled the memory of our last encounter – seemed utterly perverse; the type of thing she'd have refused to do, even if someone had held a gun to her head. But there was no movement in her face. No hint she wasn't serious.

So I opened the file.

A man in his early sixties looked up at me, his picture stapled to the front page of a missing persons report. He was sitting on the edge of a rock, somewhere on moorland, a vast green valley sweeping into the distance behind him. It looked like the picture had been cropped: along one edge was the outline of a second person; along the bottom of the shot, I could make out the curve of a rucksack. His name was Leonard Franks.

He'd been missing since 3 March.

He was sixty-two, six foot one, had grey hair and blue eyes – but I knew his physical description wouldn't be what got him found now. Once people were removed from their routines, they changed quickly: sometimes because they wanted to, sometimes because it was forced on them. But mostly, this far on, they weren't making any

choices at all – because, by now, the majority of missing people were decaying in a hole somewhere, waiting to be found. Even if I gave the families I worked for the benefit of the doubt, and started from the assumption the victim was alive, Franks had been gone nine months, and after that amount of time, a disappearance was never about the way someone looked. It was about the way they thought. Their exit. Their reasons for going.

Their final destination.

I looked at his address. 'He lived in Postbridge?'

'About a mile north of it, yes.'

That was right in the heart of Dartmoor, about thirty-five miles north of the village in which I'd grown up. And yet, as I returned to his profile, I saw that he'd been born in London and spent his entire life in the city.

'So he retired to Devon?'

She nodded again. 'Two years ago.'

I started to leaf through the rest of the file and saw for the first time that he'd been a police officer, retiring at sixty as Detective Chief Superintendent of the Homicide and Serious Crime Command. It was a senior post, and he seemed to have been highly rated. According to the file, he'd put in for retirement at fifty-five, after thirty years of pensionable service, but had been asked by the Assistant Commissioner to stay on.

'How did he go missing?' I asked.

'He and his wife lived in this place, like an old hunting lodge,' Craw said, 'and there was a woodshed at the side of the building, and another for tools at the back. Not much else apart from that. They were pretty isolated up

there. Their nearest neighbours were about a mile away, there was open moorland in all directions, and it was so quiet you could hear a car making an approach five minutes before it even came into view.'

She looked across the table at the picture of Franks.

'Anyway, the two of them were sitting in front of the fire late afternoon, and it started to die out, so she asked him to get some more logs. It was early March, still pretty cold then, especially up on the moors. She goes to put the kettle on and cut them both a slice of cake, while he goes out to the woodshed. He'd done it a thousand times before; the woodshed was literally at the end of the veranda, less than ten feet from the front door.' She stopped; looked at me. 'Except this time he never came back.'

I frowned. 'He went out to the woodshed and didn't return?'

'Correct.'

'So where did he go?'

She shrugged.

'Did his wife go out and look for him?'

'Yes.'

'And she didn't find him?'

'It wasn't dark, so she could see clearly in all directions. There were no cars. No people. They were up there on their own. It was like he'd just vanished into thin air.'

My eyes dropped to the picture of Franks and, as I studied his face, for the first time something registered with me. A physical similarity.

'So who is he?' I asked.

3

Craw was utterly still.

'Dad should have retired at fifty-five, just like he'd wanted to, but they offered him a lot of money to stay on, and I think, deep down, he worried about being bored in retirement. He didn't know anything else *except* the Met. It had been his entire life. So he took the offer, and committed to five more years.' She looked at me, impassive at first, but then shrugged and I could see from her face that, in her opinion, Franks's decision had been a bad one. 'Eighteen months in, he started to regret it. He wouldn't back out – that wasn't the type of person he was; he didn't let people down – but, slowly, he grew to hate London. In those last years, he used to complain about everything: the constant noise, having to live on top of people, the crush on the Tube, city politics. So he counted down the time until he turned sixty, then he and Mum upped sticks and were gone.'

'Why Devon?'

She shrugged. 'They'd just always loved it.'

'You don't have any other family down there?'

'No.' She ran a finger along the edge of her laptop, briefly caught in a memory. Her expression softened for a moment, presumably recalling her father, but then there was a flicker of pain. 'About a year ago, Dad gets chatting to this guy who recently moved to their village with his

wife. Derek Cortez. They get friendly and it turns out that Cortez used to be a cop too: he ran CID at Plymouth for a long time. He tells Dad that he's also retired, but that he's doing some consultation work for the CCRU.'

She could see I was familiar with it: the Criminal Case Review Unit. Their official remit: unresolved cases of homicide.

Cold cases.

'Cortez went through files,' she continued, 'gave the police his take on things and then made a little money on the side. All perfectly legit – we do the same at the Met.' Her hands moved to her glass of water. She pulled it towards her but didn't take a drink. 'So you can probably guess what happens next. Cortez says, if Dad wants, he can speak to his guy at Devon and Cornwall Police and get Dad involved too. Dad probably would have said no on the spot, because he was two years out of the force and pretty happy in retirement – *but* he and Mum had this big kitchen renovation they needed to do, and they weren't going to turn away a little extra money to help pay for it. And, at the end of the day, it was cold-case work, so there was no pressure on him. Anything he dug up was a bonus and he knew the veranda was the only office he had to commute to. So he tells Cortez he'll take a few cases. If it goes well, he'll do more. If not, no hard feelings.'

I leaned forward and made a couple of notes.

It had been cold in the room when I'd entered, but now it was beginning to thaw, an air-conditioning unit on the wall humming gently in the silence.

'So what happened next?'

She didn't respond, eyes fixed on a space between us. A

memory flashed in my head, of us sitting together in the house of a killer eighteen months before. This was that moment repeated, a point in time relived, just with the two of us on opposite sides. People connected, lives were bound to one another; if this proved anything, it was that.

'He'd been at the Met for thirty-five years by the time he retired,' she said, fingers knitted together on the table in front of her. 'I've been there nineteen this year. But the weird thing is, we never really talked about work. It suited us both: Dad didn't ever bring any of his cases home because he wanted a clear division between his life with Mum and his life in the office; and I didn't want anyone at the Met accusing me of getting special treatment from him. It's why I didn't use the Franks surname when I started as a uniform. Craw was Mum's maiden name. It was better that way. I never expected any favours, and I never wanted them. Everything I've achieved, I've achieved without a single second of help from Dad, *or* from the family name.' She paused, looking at me. The muscles in her face tensed, as if she was trying to subdue her emotions. 'But then something changed. On his sixty-second birthday – this was 23 February – my husband and I took the kids down there to see him, and he started talking to me about this case he'd taken on.'

'What was the case?'

'He mentioned this consultation work that Cortez had put him forward for. We were on our own, just the two of us – Bill, my husband, was upstairs; Mum and the kids were already in bed. I remember thinking I was surprised that he'd considered taking on the work, but I was *more* surprised that he'd even brought it up in the first place.

Like I said, we'd never talked about his job before he retired, *ever*, and yet two minutes later he's telling me about this case he was working.' Her eyes flicked to the picture of her father. 'For whatever reason, it had really got to him.'

I saw the subtext immediately: he'd worked at the Met for thirty-five years, he'd run the entire Homicide command, he'd seen everything there was to see, all the misery people wrought, all the darkness – and yet, at the end, there had been one case he couldn't get on top of. All cops had them, and not always because they were the most horrific, or engendered the most anger. Sometimes the case stuck for other reasons.

'In what way had it got to him?'

She started at the sound of my voice, my question catching her deep in thought. When she finally regained her composure, a little of the steel returned. 'That's just the problem,' she said. 'I never got those details out of him. He didn't mention a victim, *if* there even was one. He never talked about specifics, never named names. He just said the case had been preying on his mind. In total, he probably only spent a minute telling me about it, but that was a minute more than he'd ever spent talking about anything else he'd ever done at the Met.'

'So he didn't give you any details at all?'

She shook her head.

'You don't remember *anything* he said?'

She grimaced. 'Look, what you have to understand is that Dad opening up isn't like *other* people opening up. Dad opening up is him telling me he was working a case; it's him looking at me the way he did when he talked about

it. It isn't him spilling all the details about every investigation he worked in thirty-five years at the Met.'

She paused, frustrated. For a brief moment, I thought she might be about to tell me that maybe this was a bad idea – but, instead, she crossed her arms and leaned back.

'The only thing I can tell you is that, the way he talked about it – or, rather, talked around it – made it sound like it had some connection to a case he'd already worked at the Met. He didn't tell me that outright, but that's what it felt like. He talked about it like he was already familiar with it. But when I tried to probe, he redirected the conversation, as if it didn't matter. It wasn't the content of the conversation, it was more . . .' She stopped, head rocking from side to side, trying to pull the words into focus. She ran a hand through her hair. 'It was more his tone, this . . . *sadness* he had. In the nine months he's been gone, it's never what he said that night that's stuck with me. It's the way he looked.'

'So you went down to see him on 23 February for his birthday – then, eight days later, on 3 March, he was gone?'

She nodded. 'Yes.'

'Do you have a copy of the case he was working?'

'No.'

'It wasn't at the house?'

'No. That was the first thing I looked for after Mum called me up and told me he was gone. I headed down there, and turned that place over trying to find out where it was.'

'Could he have kept it somewhere else?'

'It's a possibility. But why?'

Except she knew why; we both did. It was just a part of her didn't want to have to think about it: the realization

that whatever was in that file might have been enough for Franks to head out to the woodshed and never return. There were all sorts of reasons he might have kept the file somewhere else, away from the house: his wife, his sanity, his protection. Maybe the file had put him in danger. Or maybe he felt so burdened by its contents, so distressed by whatever he'd learned, that he'd been unable to get past it.

But had that been enough for him to walk out of the door, turn his back on his life, leave his wife, daughter and grandkids behind? Given his thirty-five years at the Met, I found the idea difficult to swallow – but I didn't know him, so I couldn't discount it yet.

Everyone had a tipping point.

I looked at her. 'Otherwise, did your dad generally seem okay? You didn't have any other worries about him? Your mum never mentioned him acting differently?'

'You mean was he suicidal?'

She wasn't on the attack exactly, but it was clear what she was telling me: *I've already been down this road, already considered this – and the answer is no*.

'People who instigate their own disappearance aren't necessarily suicidal,' I said. 'Sometimes they do it so they can start again; escape one life for another.'

'That wasn't Dad.'

'Sometimes they do it for the good of their family.'

'What good was he doing Mum?'

'That's just the point, though: we don't know what was in the file. Maybe it was a selfless act. Maybe he felt that, by walking away, he was lessening the risk to you all.'

She didn't say anything, but it was clear she wasn't

convinced. I understood her frustration, the doubts she had about him leaving voluntarily – but she, more than anyone, knew everything needed to be considered.

'Financially they were okay?'

'They were fine. He'd taken on the consultation work to help pay for the kitchen renovation – but they could have got by without it. He had a thirty-five-year pension.'

'No problems between the two of them?'

'They were fine.'

'Would they have told you if there were?'

'They were *fine*,' she said, placing her hands flat to the table, fingers spread, her wedding ring making a soft *ping* against the veneer.

'I understand,' I said. 'But would they have *told* you if there were?'

A fleeting smile broke out at the fact that she was the one being questioned now. 'Mum would. Dad was much more private. He internalized everything.'

That sounds familiar, I thought. *That sounds like Craw*.

'Have you got any brothers or sisters?'

'One brother. Carl.'

'Where does he live?'

'He met an Aussie girl eight years ago and emigrated to Sydney in 2010. I can arrange something over Skype,' she added, but we both knew him being on the other side of the world cut down on the likelihood he knew anything or, worse, was involved. As if to confirm as much, she said, 'He hasn't been back to the UK since he moved.'

'Okay. So who set up the missing persons file for you?'

'After Mum called me and I headed down there, I drove her to Newton Abbot. The local copper was a guy called

Reed. Iain Reed.' She stopped, watching me make a note of the name, the room so quiet now I could hear the nib of the pen against the paper. 'He seemed pretty bright, and said he'd speak to everyone. But then a couple of weeks later, he called me up and it was obvious the search was already hitting the skids. They'd taken prints from the house, a DNA sample, checked Dad's car, spoken to his friends, to Derek Cortez, to anyone who might be even vaguely relevant – and they'd come up with nothing. So I started calling a few people myself, and I began with Cortez.'

'What did you make of him?'

'I was off the clock, so it wasn't like I could drag him into an interview room and beat it out of him. All I had to go on was my gut. But, for me, Cortez checked out. He was a straight arrow; the sort of old-fashioned copper who probably didn't take a risk in the entire time he was on the force. I seriously doubt he was involved in anything, beyond being the one who put Dad forward to Devon and Cornwall Police in the first place.'

'Did Cortez know what was in the file?'

'No,' she said. 'Cortez said he would never have been shown the cold-case files Dad was being sent. That's not how the process worked. Only Dad would see them.'

'Does that seem likely to you?'

'It checks out. His part was to pass on Dad's address and a recommendation to his contact at the CCRU – and it was up to the CCRU to engage with Dad individually.'

'So who was your dad's contact at the CCRU?'

'His name was DCI Gavin Clark.'

'Did you speak to him?'

'Yes. He was different from Cortez, more officious – I guess because he was still on the force. I didn't tell him what I did for a living to start with, but when he blanked me, I gave it the whole "blue blood" thing. "Show some solidarity. We're all in this together." Eventually, he went for it.' For a moment it looked like some of the fight had left her. 'Thing is, Clark said he never ended up mailing Dad a single case.'

That stopped me. 'What?'

'Cortez had passed on a recommendation to Clark; Clark had spoken to Dad on the phone and got a good reference from the Met. He said he was keen to use Dad's experience, but he was still waiting on paperwork to be signed off before he could mail anything out.'

'So, wait: your dad *wasn't* working a CCRU case at the end?'

'No.'

'Do you think Clark was lying?'

'No. I don't think he was lying, I don't think Cortez was lying, and I don't think Dad would lie to me either. However this case had got to him, it was real.'

'So you think another cold case just happened to land in his lap at the *exact* point in time he'd agreed to help the CCRU? That he was sent *another* file by *another* cop, who had somehow found out about his availability – and all under Clark's nose?'

She must have seen the incredulity in my face, but it didn't knock her off balance: 'I don't believe that file was sent to him by someone else from the CCRU. I don't think it was even a CCRU file. In fact, I'm not sure it was a cop who mailed it to him.'

'Then who?'

'I think it might have been a civilian.'

I frowned. 'A civilian who had a police file?'

'Maybe it wasn't an official police file.'

She'd never mentioned Franks looking at a *police* file, only that he'd been looking into a cold case. It still felt like a stretch, though. If it wasn't Clark who had sent it, it was someone who knew Franks was open to consultation work, who'd come to him at the same time *and* who had enough authority to entice him out of retirement. Even leaving aside the coincidence of the timing, what civilian had that kind of clout?

I let it go for now and looped things back around to Franks's missing persons file. 'So when this local cop, Reed, hit a dead end, why not go searching yourself?'

A moment of defeat flashed in her face. 'I did. But every database search is monitored and audited. When I got back to the office after Dad went missing, my super called me in. I'd told him what had happened to Dad, and he'd been good about giving me time off, but the first thing he said was, "Print off your dad's file, if you haven't already; keep a copy of it – but don't use any more police resources to find him." I didn't blame him. I would have done the same. A distracted cop with a separate agenda is dangerous.'

'So you just stopped the search?'

'No. I spoke to everyone Sergeant Reed spoke to, canvassed the village in case anyone saw anything, I went through Mum and Dad's house, their finances, their entire life – but I had to do most of it remotely. I tried to get down to Devon, but it depended what shifts I was

working and what cases were landing in my lap. When I couldn't get down there, I checked in with Reed, and that went on until about a month ago when it became apparent that the search for Dad was dead in the water. I remember getting down to Devon three weeks ago and seeing Mum's face, and it suddenly dawned on me: we'd be a year, two years, five years, ten years down the line and we'd still be in the same place.' She looked from the file to me. 'I'd searched that database top to bottom before I got told to back off, and I'd found nothing. Nothing. I'd reached the end of the road and didn't have any more options. So I collected up everything I had – which didn't amount to a hell of a lot, as you can see from what I've given you – and I called you.'

'Why me?'

'What do you mean?'

I smiled, because she knew what I meant. 'A year and a half ago, you were telling me you'd make it your life's work to put me behind bars.'

She nodded. 'Look, there's a bunch of ex-cops who are doing the private thing now. I could have asked them. But it's too incestuous at the Met. I need someone on the outside, with no connections to the force, who I know . . .' She paused, choosing her words carefully. But I saw where this was headed: up until now, the search for Leonard Franks had been played entirely by the book – now it was time for something else. 'I don't necessarily agree with the way you work, and I can't condone it as a police officer. But, as a civilian, as a daughter, I've got to the point where I couldn't care less. You know how to find missing people, you know the Devon area well, and – whatever your

methods – you're effective, and you care about people. And that's what I need now.'

I started leafing through the file again. The missing persons report was the only official paperwork; everything else Craw had collated herself. As I came across Franks's phone bills, I said, 'What happened to your father's mobile?'

'He left it at the house.'

'His wallet?'

I could tell before she replied what the answer was. 'Same.'

More dead ends to add to the others she'd collected over the past nine months.

'This file contains everything you have?'

'Everything.'

Her eyes lingered on me, and it was like her thoughts were being projected. She'd made the commitment; now she was wondering whether she'd done the right thing.

A moment later, she said, 'I can't support you with any police resources. If you need to get hold of me, call my personal number, not my landline at the office. I don't want to know what you do, how you get your information or who you talk to. I just want to know what happened to my father.'

'Is your mother still living down in Devon?'

'No.' Craw shook her head. 'She's living with me.'

'Here in London?'

'She started to find their place down there too quiet, too big, too upsetting, so I moved her up here a fortnight ago. It didn't feel like I had much choice. We've put the

house down in Dartmoor on the market; now we're trying to get her something in the city.'

'I'll need to speak to her.'

She nodded at the file. 'There's a list of numbers at the back, including Mum's mobile. She knows I've come to meet you today, but if you hit any snags, let me know. I think it's best I'm not around when you speak to her. I'm sure you feel the same way.'

I nodded, respecting Craw a little more for that: retreating from the case probably went against every emotion she felt as a daughter, and every professional instinct she had as a cop. But it was the right thing to do, and she was lucid enough to see it. If she was circling the case, she was trying to influence it, however unwittingly. She'd asked for my take, and she'd get it – but not on her terms, and not based on whatever conclusion she'd already reached about her father's disappearance.

'What about your kids and your husband?' I said.

'What about them?'

'Is it worth speaking to them?'

'You can speak to them if you like, but I think it'll be a waste of time. No one else was there on the veranda the night Dad mentioned the case to me, and Bill stayed here in London and looked after the girls when I went down to Dartmoor in the days after Dad went missing. I can gather them together for you to speak to at the house if you want – but to be honest, if you want a character witness, you'd be better off with the people at the Met who spent thirty-five years with Dad. And if you want to know what actually happened on the day he disappeared, what his life was like at the end, I think there's only one place to start.'

'His name's Leonard Franks.'

'No. I mean, who is he to you?'

She paused for a moment, eyes still on the picture of Franks, hands flat to the table. 'He's my father,' she said quietly.

'Your mum.'

She nodded.

'Okay,' I said. 'One other thing. People will ask who I'm working for. I get that you want to keep it on the QT – I see the risks – but if I'm getting answers out of people, I need to be able to give them a name. It's just easier. So how do you want to play it?'

'I guess you're going to have to tell them you're working for Mum.'

'Will she be aware that that's the case?'

'Yes.'

'Okay. What's her first name?'

'Ellie.'

I wrote it down. 'I'll keep you up to date.'

'Thank you,' she said, but there was little of the gratitude in her face that she'd just given voice to. She'd opened herself up – and now she'd closed herself down again.

As I went to stand, she held her hand up.

'Anything you find out, however insignificant you might think it, I'd appreciate hearing.' She stopped again, a flash in her face that, on anyone else, might have looked like vulnerability. 'He's been gone two hundred and eighty-four days, so every scenario going through your head now, I've already accepted. I just want the truth.'

I nodded again.

But this time it was me who didn't say anything.

Because everyone wanted the truth until they got it.