Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Chasing the Dead

Written by Tim Weaver

Published by Penguin Books Ltd

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Chasing the Dead

TIM WEAVER



PENGUIN BOOKS

PENGUIN BOOKS

Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England
Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA
Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario,
Canada M4P 2Y3 (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)
Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd)
Penguin Group (Australia), 707 Collins Street, Melbourne, Victoria 3008, Australia
(a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)
Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre,
Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India
Penguin Group (NZ) , 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, Auckland 0632, New Zealand
(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)
Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, Block D, Rosebank Office Park,
181 Jan Smuts Avenue, Parktown North, Gauteng 2193, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

www.penguin.com

First published 2010
Reissued in this edition 2013
001

Copyright © Tim Weaver, 2010
All rights reserved

The moral right of the author has been asserted

Set in 11.75/14 pt Garamond MT Std
Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed in England by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Except in the United States of America, this book is sold subject
to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent,
re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's
prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in
which it is published and without a similar condition including this
condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser

ISBN: 978–1–405–91269–3

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



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

ALWAYS LEARNING PEARSON

For Sharlé

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

Revelation 16:3

PART ONE

I

Sometimes, towards the end, she would wake me by tugging at the cusp of my shirt, her eyes moving like marbles in a jar, her voice begging me to pull her to the surface. I always liked that feeling, despite her suffering, because it meant she'd lasted another day.

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

She was thirty-two, seven years younger than me, when she first found the lump. Four months later, she collapsed in the supermarket. I'd been a newspaper journalist for eighteen years but, after it happened a second time on the Underground, I resigned, went freelance and refused to travel. It wasn't a hard decision. I didn't want to be on the other side of the world when the third call came through telling me this time she'd fallen and died.

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

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

Except the work never came. There was a little – sympathy commissions mostly – but my refusal to travel turned me into a last resort. I'd become the type of freelancer I'd always loathed. I didn't want to be that person, was even conscious of it happening. But at the end of every day Derryn became a little more important to me, and I found that difficult to let go.

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

She was desperate. Her daughter had disappeared, and the police didn't seem to be interested. I was the only person she thought could help. The offer she made was huge – more than I'd deserve from what would amount to a few phone calls – but the whole idea left me with a strange feeling. I needed more money, and had sources inside the Met who would have found her daughter in days. But I wasn't sure I wanted my new life to join up with my old one. I wasn't sure I wanted any of it back.

So I said no. But, when I took the letter through to the back garden, Derryn was gently rocking in her chair with the tiniest hint of a smile on her face.

'What's so funny?'

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

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

She nodded.

'Do you think I should do it?'

'It's perfect for you.'

'What, chasing after missing kids?'

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

And that was how it began.

I pushed the doubt down with the sadness and the anger and found the girl three days later in a bedsit in Walthamstow. Then, more work followed, more missing kids, and I could see the ripples of the career I'd left behind coming back again. Asking questions, making calls, trying to pick up the trail. I'd always liked the investigative parts of journalism, the dirty work, the digging,

more than I'd liked the writing. And, after a while, I knew it was the reason I never felt out of my depth working runaways, because the process, the course of the chase, was the same. Most of tracking down missing persons is about caring enough. The police didn't have time to find every kid that left home – and I think sometimes they failed to understand why kids disappeared in the first place. Most of them didn't leave just to prove a point. They left because their lives had taken an uncontrollable turn, and the only way to contend with that was to run. What followed, the traps they fell into afterwards, were the reasons they could never go back.

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

Two months later, she died.

2

When I opened the door to my office, it was cold and there were four envelopes on the floor inside. I tossed the mail on to the desk and opened the blinds. Morning light erupted in, revealing photos of Derryn everywhere. In one, my favourite, we were in a deserted coastal town in Florida, sand sloping away to the sea, jellyfish scattered like cellophane across the beach. In the fading light, she looked beautiful. Her eyes flashed blue and green. Freckles were scattered along her nose and under the curve of her cheekbones. Her blonde hair was bleached by the sun, and her skin had browned all the way up her arms.

I sat down at my desk and pulled the picture towards me.

Next to her, my eyes were dark, my hair darker, stubble lining the ridge of my chin and the areas around my mouth. I towered over her at six-two. In the picture, I was pulling her into me, her head resting against the muscles in my arms and chest, her body fitting in against mine.

Physically, I'm the same now. I work out when I can. I take pride in my appearance. I still want to be attractive. But maybe, temporarily, some of the lustre has rubbed away. And, like the parents of the people I trace, some of the spark in my eyes too.

I turned around in my chair and looked up at them. At the people I traced.

Their faces filled an entire corkboard on the wall behind me. Every space. Every corner. There were no pictures of Derryn behind my desk.

Only pictures of the missing.

After I found the first girl, her mother put up a notice; to start with, on the board in the hospital ward where she worked with Derryn, and then in some shop windows, with my name and number and what I did. I think she felt sorry at the thought of me – somewhere along the line – being on my own. Sometimes, even now, people would call me, asking for my help, telling me they'd seen an advert in the hospital. And I guess I liked the idea of it still being there. Somewhere in that labyrinth of corridors, or burnt yellow by the sun in a shop window. There was a symmetry to it. As if Derryn still somehow lived on in what I did.

I spent most of the day sitting at my desk with the lights off. The telephone rang a couple of times, but I left it, listening to it echo around the office. A year ago, to the day, Derryn had been carried out of our house on a stretcher. She'd died seven hours later. Because of that, I knew I wasn't in the right state of mind to consider taking on any work, so when the clock hit four, I started to pack up.

That was when Mary Towne arrived.

I could hear someone coming up the stairs, slowly taking one step at a time. Eventually the top door

clicked and creaked open. She was sitting in the waiting area when I looked through. I'd known Mary for a few years. She used to work in A&E with Derryn. Her life had been fairly tragic as well: her husband suffered from Alzheimer's, and her son had left home six years earlier without telling anyone. He eventually turned up dead.

'Hi, Mary.'

I startled her. She looked up. Her skin was darkened by creases, every one of her fifty years etched into her face. She must have been beautiful once, but her life had been pushed and pulled around and now she wore the heartache like an overcoat. Her small figure had become slightly stooped. The colour had started to drain from her cheeks and her lips. Thick ribbons of grey had begun to emerge from her hairline.

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

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

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

She meant Derryn's funeral.

'How's Malcolm?'

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

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

'I know. I needed to see you.'

'Why?'

'I wanted to discuss something with you.'

I tried to imagine what.

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

'No.'

'I called a couple of times.'

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

She nodded. 'I know it is. I'm sorry about the timing, David. It's just . . . I know you care about what you're doing. This job. I need someone like that. Someone who cares.' She glanced at me again. 'That's why people like you. You understand loss.'

'I'm not sure you ever understand loss.' I looked up, could see the sadness in her face, and wondered where this was going. 'Look, Mary, at the moment I'm not tracing anything – just the lines on my desk.'

She nodded once more. 'You remember what happened to Alex?'

Alex was her son.

'Of course.'

'You remember all the details?'

'Most of them.'

'Would you mind if I went back over them?' she asked.

I paused, looked at her.

'*Please*.'

I nodded. 'Why don't we go through?'

I led her out of the waiting area and back to my desk. She looked around at the photos on the walls, her eyes moving between them.

'Take a seat,' I said, pulling a chair out for her.

She nodded her thanks.

'So, tell me about Alex.'

'You remember that he died in a car crash just over a year ago,' she said quietly, as I sat down opposite her. 'And, uh . . . that he was drunk. He drove a Toyota, like his father used to have, right into the side of a lorry. It was only a small car. It ended up fifty feet from the road, in the middle of a field; burnt to a shell, like him. They had to identify him from dental records.'

I didn't know about the dental records.

She composed herself. 'But you know what the worst bit was? That before he died, he'd just disappeared. We hadn't seen him for five years. After everything we'd done as a family, he just . . . disappeared.'

'I'm sorry,' I said.

'The only thing he left me with was the memory of his body lying on a mortuary slab. I'll never get that image out of my head. I used to open my eyes in the middle of the night and see him standing like that next to my bed.'

Her eyes glistened.

'I'm sorry, Mary,' I said again.

'You met Alex, didn't you?'

She took out a photograph. I hadn't ever met him, only heard about him through Derryn. She handed me the picture. She was in it, her arms around a man in his early twenties. Handsome. Black hair. Green eyes. Probably five-eleven, but built like he might once have been a swimmer. There was a huge smile on his face.

'This is Alex. *Was* Alex. This is the last picture we ever took of him, down in Brighton.' She nodded

towards the photograph and smiled. 'That was a couple of days before he left.'

'It's a nice picture.'

'He was gone five years before he died.'

'Yes, you said.'

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

'I'm really sorry, Mary,' I said for a third time, feeling like I should say something more.

'I know,' she said quietly. 'That's why you're my only hope.'

I looked at her, intrigued.

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

It took a few moments for it to hit me. *She's saying she saw her dead son.*

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

'I saw Alex.'

'You *saw* Alex?'

'Yes.'

'What do you mean, you saw him?'

'I mean, I saw him.'

I was shaking my head. 'Wh– *How?*'

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

'It was someone who looked like Alex.'

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

'But . . . he's dead.'

'I know he's dead.'

'Then how could it possibly be him?'

'It was him, David.'

'How is that *possible*?'

'I know what you're thinking,' she said, 'but I'm not crazy. I don't see my mother or my sister. I swear to you, David, I saw Alex that day. I *saw* him.' She moved forward in her seat. 'I'll pay you up front,' she said quickly. 'It's the only way I can think to persuade you that what I am saying is true. I will pay you money up front. *My* money.'

'Have you reported this?'

'To the *police*?'

'Yes.'

She sat back again. 'Of course not.'

'You should.'

'What's the point?'

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

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

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

She glanced around the room. 'I know some of your pain, David, believe me. My cousin died of cancer. In many ways, the disease takes the whole family with it. You care for someone for so long, you see them like that, you get used to having them like that, and then, when they're suddenly not there, you lose not only them, but what their illness brought to your life. You lose the *routine*.'

She smiled.

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

'Mary . . .'

She looked at me as if she'd half expected that reaction.

'You have to go to the police.'

'Please, David . . .'

'Think about what you're–'

'*Don't insult me like that*,' she said, her voice raised for the first time. 'You can do anything, but don't insult me by telling me to think about what I'm saying. Do you think I've spent the last three months thinking about anything else?'

'This is more than just a few phone calls.'

'I can't go to the police.' She sat forward in her seat again and the fingers of one of her hands clawed at the ends of her raincoat, as if she was trying to prevent something from ending. 'Deep down, you know I can't.'

'But how can he be alive?'

'I don't know.'

'He *can't* be alive, Mary.'

'You can't begin to understand what this is like,' she said quietly.

I nodded. Paused. She was pointing out the difference between having someone you love die, like I had, and having someone you love die then somehow come back. We both understood the moment – and because of that she seemed to gain in confidence.

'It was him.'

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

'I followed him.'

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

'No.'

'Did you get close to him?'

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

'Did he seem . . . injured?'

'No. He seemed healthy.'

'What was he doing?'

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

'How long did you follow him for?'

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

'What was he doing in there?'

'I didn't go in.'

'Why not?'

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

'Did he come back out?'

'Yes.'

'Did he see you?'

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

'Have you seen him since?'

'No.'

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

She nodded. 'Fifth of September.'

'What about Malcolm?'

'What about him?'

'Have you said anything to him?'

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

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

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

'I don't think you're ly–'

'Please, David.'

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

Anger passed across her eyes, as if she could tell what I was thinking. Then it was gone again, replaced by an acceptance that it had to be this way. She looked down into her lap, and into the handbag perched on the floor next to her. 'The only way I can think to persuade you is by paying you.'

'Mary, this is beyond what I can do.'

'You know people.'

'I know *some* people. I have a few sources from my newspaper days. This is more than that. This is a full-blown investigation.'

Her hand moved to her face.

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

She didn't move.

'I'd be wasting your money. Why don't you try a proper investigator?'

She shook her head gently.

'This is what they get paid to do.'

She looked up, tears in her eyes.

'I've got some names here.' I opened the top drawer of my desk and took out a diary I used when I was still at the paper. 'Let me see.' I could hear her sniffing, could see her wiping the tears from her face, but I didn't look up. 'There's a guy I know.'

She held a hand up. 'I'm not interested.'

'But this guy will help y–'

'I'm not explaining this to anyone else.'

'Why not?'

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

'It's his job.'

'He would laugh in my face.'

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

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

'Mary . . .'

She finally lowered her hand. 'Imagine if it was Derryn.'

'Mary . . .'

'*Imagine*,' she repeated, then, very calmly, got up and left.