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Never Coming Back

Written by Tim Weaver

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Never Coming Back

TIM WEAVER

PENGUIN BOOKS

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ALWAYS LEARNING PEARSON

For Erin

PART ONE

December 2007

1

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

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

Even a quarter of a mile short of its parking garage, I knew the Mandalay Bay would be a step up from the last time I'd stayed in Las Vegas. On my first trip to the city five years before, the newspaper had taken care of the booking and left me to rot in a downtown grind joint called The George. 'George', I later found out, was casino lingo for a good tipper. Except the only people doing the

gambling at The George were the homeless, placing 25c minimum bets on the blackjack tables out front so they could scrape together enough for a bottle of something strong. This time, as I nosed the hired Dodge Stratus into a space on a huge rooftop car park, I passed eight-storey signs advertising a televised UFC fight at the hotel in January, and I knew I'd made the right decision to book it myself: last time out, the only fighting I'd seen anywhere close to The George was of the fully drunk kind.

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

I opened the door of the Dodge and got out.

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

I showered, changed, and raided the minibar, then called Derryn to let her know I'd arrived okay. We chatted for a while. She'd found it hard to adapt to our new life on

the West Coast initially: we had no friends here, she had no job, and in our Santa Monica apartment block our neighbours operated a hermetically sealed clique. Gradually, though, things were changing. Back home, she'd been an A&E nurse for twelve years before giving it up to come out to the States with me, and that experience had landed her a short-term contract at a surgery a block from where we lived. She was only taking blood and helping doctors patch up wounds – much more sedate than the work she'd been doing back in London – but she loved it. It got her out meeting people, and it brought in a little money, plus she got weekends off too, which meant she could go to the beach.

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

'Not tonight. Maybe tomorrow.'

'Do you even know how to play cards?'

'I know how to play Snap.'

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

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

'You can't even play Monopoly.'

'My biggest fan talks me up again.'

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

'I will.'

'I'd love to see Vegas.'

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

*

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

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

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

About ten minutes later, as I got to the sports pages, a guy sat down beside me at the bar and ordered another

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

'David?'

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

'Lee?'

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

'Are you on holiday here?'

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

'Doing what?'

'You remember I wanted to be an actor?'

'I remember that, yeah.'

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

'Oh.'

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

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

'Right place, right time, I guess.'

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

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

'I know.'

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

'You remember I wanted to be a journalist?'

'Yeah.'

'Well, that *did* work out.'

'Fantastic. Are you working now?'

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

'You live here?'

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

'Doing what?'

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

'Are you a correspondent or something?'

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

'Anyone's better than Bush, right?'

'I guess we'll see next year.'

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

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

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

'Noisy.'

He laughed. 'Yeah, I guess it is.'

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

'And then Mum died.'

Lee gave a solemn nod of the head.

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

'Is he still around?'

'No. He died almost two years ago.'

I hadn't been back home since.

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

'Derryn.'

'Shit.' He laughed. 'Sorry. Derryn.'

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

'Wow.'

'Yeah, it's been good.'

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

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

And I never saw him again.

A couple of minutes later, after picking up where I'd left off with the *Las Vegas Sun*, I looked up in the direction Lee

had gone and saw a man standing next to me. I hadn't seen him approach. His body was facing the bar but his head was turned towards the paper, reading one of the stories on the front page. A second later, he glanced at me and realized he'd been caught out. 'Oh,' he said. 'Sorry. That's incredibly rude of me.'

He was English.

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

I pushed the paper towards him. 'Here.'

'That's really good of you,' he said. 'Thanks.'

'No problem.'

He smiled. 'You're English.'

'Yeah. Looks like we both are.'

He was in his late forties, thin and wiry, with a tan and a smooth, hairless face. As he smiled, I could see he'd had his teeth done. They had an unnatural sheen to them that you could only get away with on the West Coast. He perched himself on the edge of one of the stools, still smiling. 'Are you out here with work or something?'

'Just for a couple of days.'

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

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

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

'If I was a whale?'

'Right. You'd be living off your complimentaries – your

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

'Don't worry about it.'

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

He leaned in towards me.

'Any idea?'

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

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

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

'Call what?'

'The mathematical advantage?'

I glanced over the man's shoulder. Still no sign of Lee. It must have been five or six minutes since he'd left. The man moved in closer when he didn't get a response, his

fingers inches from mine. I glanced down at his missing nails, then back up at him.

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

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

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

'You off to bed?' he said.

'Something like that.'

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

'What the hell is the matter with you?'

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

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

I went to leave.

'Someone will always have the edge over you, David.'

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

'You're just flesh and bones like everyone else.'

'How do you know my name?'

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

'*What?* I don't even know you.'

'No,' he said. 'But you know Lee Wilkins.'

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

Inside ten, he was gone.

PART TWO

November 2012

2

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

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

The village was set in a bowl, with coves cut into the faces of the hills on either side. In order to get to the coves, you had to climb over a series of rocks that rose up out of the shingle at both ends of the beach. To the boy, the rocks – hewed and polished by the relentless power of the sea – looked like the tail of a dragon, the bulk of the

creature still submerged somewhere beneath. On the other side of the tail, in the coves beyond, hundreds of rock pools had formed in the grooves and chasms of the beach. That's where the crabs would be, washed up and spat out by the tide.

The boy started the climb.

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

Placing the bucket down on the shingle, he removed his backpack, unzipped it and started taking out the equipment. Crab line. Short-handled net. Bait. He attached the bait to the line, grabbed the net and the bucket, and made his way across the cove to the rocks at the back. *As long as*

you're careful. He placed his feet down just as deliberately as before, not wanting to have to explain to his dad how he had managed to snap the line, or cut himself, or both. Halfway across, he heard the sea crash again behind him, an even louder and longer roar than before, and when he looked back he saw a wave rolling in towards him. He wasn't worried about getting wet, but he *was* worried about getting knocked over, so he reached forward and grabbed hold of a thin column of stone. The sea washed in, almost knee high, soaking his trousers and boots, and flattening out in the space ahead of him. Once it started drawing out again, he looked to the backpack and saw it was safe, perched in a high groove where he'd placed it after getting the equipment out. He headed to the rock pools right at the back of the cove where it would be too far for the sea to reach him. There, he could drop the line into the pools without fear of being soaked a second time. High tide had been an hour ago. The waves may have been loud, may have been fierce, but they were slowly retreating. In another hour, they'd be weakened. An hour after that, they'd hardly make it to him at all.

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

Then he noticed something.

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

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

He reached forward.

Then stopped.

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

Then, a second later, it hit him.

A whimper sounded in his throat as he scuffled back on

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

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

And he told her how the seashells had been fingernails.

How the strips of meat had been fingers.

And how the bait had been a hand.