

They should have been dead.

That was what people kept telling me in the days before I went out to see the scene for myself. I spoke to family and friends, to the medics and fire crews who were actually there on the night it happened, and they all said the same thing – there was no way Cate and Aiden Gascoigne should have been able to survive a crash like that.

On the morning I was due to drive down to what was left of the scene, I got up early and, over breakfast, used my laptop to repeatedly inch back and forth along the road where it had happened. It was on the eastern edges of the Surrey Hills and the route I saw online was a sloped two-lane stretch of tarmac, hemmed in by trees on both sides, with a ravine to the west – the Gascoignes’ right as they travelled down the hill – although the ravine wouldn’t have been visible from their vehicle. Top to bottom, the road was less than a mile long, with a junction for the M25 at one end and a village called Gatton at the other. There were two minor bends en route, the road itself was in good condition, and the night the Gascoignes had plunged ninety feet into the ravine, it had been a dry evening in early January. No frost, no ice, not a hint of rain.

So it wasn’t the weather that had caused the accident.

And it wasn’t the layout or the quality of the road either.

Their car had been a black Land Rover Discovery, two years old. The history on it showed no issues and it had only just been through its service, so everything – including the

tyres – had been checked literally days beforehand. Yet three minutes after exiting the M25, and only ten seconds after a CCTV camera halfway down Gatton Hill captured the two of them on film – apparently untroubled inside the car – Aiden Gascoigne lost control of the vehicle and the Land Rover nose-dived off the road.

The photographs of the scene in the casework, taken by forensic techs in the aftermath, were certainly better than nothing, but the portrait they painted wasn't as lucid as it could have been. The crash had happened at dusk, so a lot of the shots were too dark, even when I adjusted the levels on them, or they were the opposite: bleached by a flash, or over-saturated because of the big mobile lights that had been craned in and erected in the gully. Other pictures in the file were physical prints that had been pinned to a board somewhere in an office at Thames Valley Police. Overall, they were better quality but, by the time the case wrapped up – still unresolved – and the pictures were scanned in and then taken down from those boards, they'd accumulated a mesh of hairs, creases and pale coffee-coloured water damage.

There was, however, one clear shot.

It had been taken from the flank of the ravine, about twenty-five feet up from the crash, by an accident investigator. They had climbed part of the way up a sloping carpet of scree to try and get a better angle on the wreckage. There were a couple of trees in the way – both stripped to the bone by winter – and a very light spotting of frost at the foot of the chasm, although none around the Land Rover itself. Instead, there was only a pitch-black ring, the grass, ferns and overhanging branches all scorched by the fire that had started in the engine and ripped through the car.

The Land Rover – on its roof – barely looked like a car at all. It had been transformed into a ragged tangle of metal,

the front concertinaed all the way into the dashboard, every single window smashed. Investigators had drawn an illustration of how they believed the descent had gone, the impact points on the slope of the ravine, but in the end, maybe it didn't matter all that much. The damage was obvious from just a single photograph, its severity stark and brutal, and however many times the Land Rover had turned, whichever part of its chassis had crunched against the scree – however hard its roof had hit the floor of the gully at the end – there should only have been one outcome for the husband who'd been driving, and the wife beside him.

They should have been dead.

But that was the thing. That was why the photographs of the crushed, charred Land Rover had spent so long pinned to a board at Thames Valley Police. It was why the media began labelling it 'The Mystery of Gatton Hill' and why the CCTV footage of the Gascoignes had got over three million views on YouTube. Everyone knew they should have been dead, that the accident should have crushed them or broken them in half; it should have severed limbs, and arteries. It should have started turning their bodies to ash.

But it didn't.

Because when members of the emergency services got to the bottom of the ravine ten minutes after the crash, there was something wrong with the Land Rover.

It was empty.

The Gascoignes had vanished.

PART ONE

The Crash

I

The family lived near Runnymede, in a house on the banks of the Thames.

It was half a mile from the motorway, less than three from Heathrow Airport, but it was easy to imagine that you were in the countryside somewhere, and London was a distant memory. The weather helped: it was the first Monday in July, searingly hot even this early, and as boats glided lazily past me, there was almost no traffic noise at all. All I could hear was birdsong and the sound of kids on their way to school as they played in the long grass that lined the fringes of the river.

I got out of my car and took in the house itself, a mock-Tudor mansion with a double garage and a black wrought-iron gate at the front. The gate had been left ajar and, in the middle of the gravel driveway, an old retriever was lying down, panting in the sun. The second I arrived at the gate, its gaze pinged to me.

‘Hey,’ I said, and got down on to my haunches.

It was a girl. She eyed me for a second, clearly wondering if I was worth getting up for, and then she must have decided that I was because she hauled herself to her feet, one of her legs stiff, and trotted across to me. I ran a hand through her hair, along her flank, and she rested her muzzle against my thigh.

‘She’s never been much of a guard dog.’ I looked up. A man in his late sixties was coming down the driveway towards me, a half-smile on his face. ‘But we still love her, don’t we,

Jess?’ He was smartly dressed in a powder-blue button-down shirt and cream chinos. ‘I’m sure you’ve guessed this already,’ he said, ‘but I’m Martin Clark.’

He held out his hand to me.

‘David Raker,’ I said, standing. ‘But I’m sure you knew that too.’

We shook hands.

‘Thanks for coming, Mr Raker.’

‘David.’

He nodded. ‘Martin.’

I gave Jess another stroke and glanced at the river again. All that lay between the Clarks and the water on this side of the house was a band of long grass, a knot of oak trees and an old, rickety jetty at which a rowing boat bobbed gently. ‘This is a beautiful spot,’ I said.

He smiled. ‘We’ve always loved it.’

‘How long have you been here?’

‘We moved here from Islington when the girls were still young. It was a happy home for a long, long time . . .’ Something flickered in his expression. *But not any more.* He cleared his throat, forced a smile. ‘We used to take the girls out on the river a lot.’ He pointed to the rowing boat.

‘They must have loved it,’ I said.

‘They did. We all did. It takes on a bit of water now, so you can’t go very far, but back then, the four of us used to row miles.’ The four of them. Him, his wife Sue, and his two daughters: Georgia, who was the eldest by two years, and Catherine.

Cate, for short.

‘Why don’t you come in, David?’

I followed Martin into the house, Jess plodding along behind us. Immediately inside was a foyer with a staircase in the centre. It was lovely, made from glass and timber, and

gently spiralled up to the first-floor landing. Circling the staircase like the spokes of a wheel were five doors. I could see a living room, a kitchen and an office from where I was. There was light pouring in from all directions thanks to a series of windows high up on the walls of the foyer.

He led me into the living room, which then opened out on to a deck elevated over a sloping garden. The garden was immaculate and hemmed in by perfectly sculpted laurel bushes. It only added to the sense of being somewhere remote. Even the soft drone of a plane, taking off from Heathrow, couldn't tarnish the effect.

A woman was waiting for us out on the deck, standing to the side of some grey patio furniture, hands in front of her. She looked worried, or scared, or both.

'Mrs Clark?'

She smiled. 'Sue, please.'

'David.'

We shook hands. Her skin was clammy.

'Can I get you something to drink, David?'

'Something cold would be lovely, thank you.'

Sue disappeared into the house and Martin gestured to one of the patio chairs. Above me, I saw that the deck had a cover, which appeared to be able to slide back and forth along its runners, depending on where the Clarks wanted their shade. It was another smart, expensive feature. But that, and the pristine house, and the flawless garden, were all just illusions. Everything here was near perfect on the surface but turbulent as a storm below. The house, the garden, it was all distraction.

'I hope you don't mind,' Martin said, 'but I did a little reading up about you. I saw some of the cases you've had. It seems like it can get pretty hairy at times.'

'At times. But not always.'

‘I suppose there are all sorts of reasons why people go missing.’

‘No two cases are exactly the same.’

‘Do you ever get a gut feeling one way or another?’

‘About where a case is going to go?’

He nodded. ‘Do you ever sit down like this and hear the story from the family and then think to yourself, “This is going to be a difficult one to crack”?’

As Jess wandered out from the living room and slumped on to the decking, I turned Martin’s question over. In a disappearance, especially when it came to runaways, sometimes the object wasn’t to vanish, it was simply to break free. In those cases, I was usually employed by children’s homes, or councils, or foster families. Occasionally, you might get work from the biological family, but generally – by the time a teenager reached the stage when they were trying to escape – the biological family had long been erased from the picture. Those searches tended to stick to a rigid pattern, tended to involve doing the same things on repeat, so I suppose it was true that in those cases I’d get an idea right out of the gate of where things would go.

But it wasn’t always like that.

Sometimes you caught a case where there was no pattern and no recognizable shape to it, where the answers appeared unreliable or non-existent. And in almost all the investigations that I’d never had a gut feeling about – and which had hurt me the most – there was always a liar at the centre.

Liars were why cases were unpredictable.

Liars got you killed.

Looking at Martin, I said, ‘Sometimes you might get a feel for where a case is going to go, yes – but every case is different. I try not to prejudge them. And even if they *are* tricky to crack, it doesn’t mean I won’t.’

It was an attempt to reassure him because the catalyst for the question was obvious: he'd spent the last two and a half years facing down nothing but failure, of being tortured with dead ends and unanswered questions, and now he wasn't sure if he'd made the right choice. What if my search just brought them more suffering?

What if I never found Cate and Aiden Gascoigne?

'I guess you know a little about them already?' he asked.

'Only through what you told me on the phone and what's been reported.'

He put a hand flat to the table that separated us and looked out at the garden. 'The reports were pretty accurate. I probably read every single one of them – I suppose I was trying to find some sort of answer, some explanation of where Cate and Aiden might have gone. But what the media put out there matched what the police told us.'

He looked at me, a shimmer in his face.

The car was empty.

'So, as I understand it,' I said, 'Cate and Aiden were heading to some friends in Reigate. A CCTV camera confirmed they exited the M25 at the Gatton Hill turn-off. From there, they crossed the roundabout and connected to Gatton Hill itself, and halfway down *that*, another surveillance camera filmed them again.'

'That's right.'

'Ten seconds later, something happened.'

We looked at each other. *Something happened.* That made it sound minor: a mishap, not a sudden catastrophic event where a car plunged ninety feet into a gully.

'No one saw them leave the road?'

'No. The first witnesses arrived after.'

One, travelling south from the motorway, was a student called Zoe Simmons. She told police she saw tyre marks on

the road and a piece of the Land Rover's bumper; when she started to slow her Suzuki, she saw the spot where the car had exited the road. The other driver – heading north – was a 61-year-old retiree called Audrey Calvert. Even before Simmons had seen the tyre marks and the bumper, Calvert was already slowing her Fiat 500 because – for a few seconds, as she travelled up the hill – the layout of the road allowed her a brief, uninterrupted view down the slope of the ravine, into the foot of the gully.

There she could see a vehicle.

It was on its roof.

Both she and Simmons parked up, dialled 999 and, about two minutes after the crash, walked up to where the tyre marks bled off: some of the foliage had been torn, allowing them both to see down the slant of the ravine.

Soon after that, the Land Rover caught fire.

I'd requested a copy of the police investigation from a contact of mine in the Met, so I'd confirm all this for certain in the next twenty-four hours. But the details reported by the media *did* seem to be pretty accurate; as I continued to go back over the events of that day with Martin, he basically repeated what I already knew.

'The witnesses never saw Cate and Aiden get out of the car?'

'No,' Martin said.

According to the media, in nine minutes, the witnesses never took their eyes off the car and at no time did they see the Gascoignes leave the vehicle. Both women had been upset because they believed Cate and Aiden were still inside and there was nothing either of them could do. It was too dangerous to go down the slope, so they just stood there the entire time, watching the car cremate.

But that was the thing.

The Gascoignes *weren't* inside.

'We just need to know what happened,' Martin said quietly.

'I know.'

'If she's . . . if she's . . . ' He stopped.

Dead.

As Sue came back out on to the deck, she saw her husband and the tray she was holding wobbled in her grip. She set it down and went to him, as if drawn to him, his torment, because they were both trapped in it, moths fluttering in endless darkness.

'I'll find out what happened to her,' I said.

You shouldn't be making promises.

But it was too late.

Their pain had already become mine.

'I'll find out what happened to Cate and Aiden.'

‘The last time we saw her was a week before she disappeared.’

I had my notebook out on the table and my phone recording beside that. Martin and Sue had gathered themselves again, their tears gone for now, the two of them slipping on the same disguises they’d worn every day since Cate vanished – a show of strength that dissolved the moment they were alone again.

‘So let’s go back to the 3rd of January,’ I said.

Martin nodded. ‘Two years, six months and one day.’

He glanced at Sue, taking her hand, and she looked back at him: for them, this was a sentence, every day a mark on a cell wall.

‘You saw Cate and Aiden over Christmas?’

‘Right,’ Martin said. ‘They came to stay with us on Christmas Eve and were here all the way through until the Saturday, the 28th. Georgia was here too for Christmas Day with her boyfriend, Will, and our little granddaughter, Talia. It was so nice.’ He blinked a couple of times. ‘I mean, we just loved having them all.’

‘Where did Cate and Aiden go after they left here?’

‘They went to some friends near Bristol for New Year.’

I asked for the name of the friends, just in case. Cate and Aiden had returned safely to London on New Year’s Day, and Aiden had returned to work on the 2nd at the design agency in Soho where he was the creative director, so I didn’t expect that line of enquiry to be relevant. But these were all boxes that needed to be ticked.

‘Cate and Aiden lived in Twickenham, is that right?’

‘Yes.’

‘How long had they been there?’

‘Ooooh, what would you say, Sue?’

‘Seven years,’ she replied without hesitation, and then smiled, although it was a little sad, the pain flickering in and out. ‘Mart isn’t the only one who can remember dates,’ she added, trying to make light of the fact that this was yet more time, more events in her daughter’s life, she’d marked out on that same wall.

‘How long had they been together?’

‘Almost nine years,’ Sue replied again, ‘five married.’

‘Where did they meet?’

‘It was through some work Cate did at Aiden’s company,’ Martin said, picking things up again. ‘They were creating this campaign which needed some photography. Aiden found Cate online, they worked on that project together – and then Aiden asked her out.’

‘Cate was a full-time photographer, correct?’

‘Yes. She made a really good career out of it.’

‘What sort of stuff did she photograph?’

‘We have some pictures inside if you’d like to see them.’

‘That would be great.’

Martin hauled himself out of his seat and headed back inside the house, and then Sue also got up, going to a sideboard in the living room, bringing back more photographs. Except none of these were professional shots, and none of them were taken by Cate. They were all taken by Martin and Sue.

They were all of their daughter.

I’d seen pictures of Cate already, of Aiden as well. They were a good-looking couple, both thirty-eight at the time they went missing: Cate was tall and fair-skinned with a beauty spot

above the left arc of her lips; Aiden was athletic, shaven-headed, bearded, his eyes brown, his skin olive. I knew already that both his parents were dead, that he was an only child, and that his father had been Irish and his mother was from Turkey.

I kept going through the pictures. They seemed to cover most of the nine years Cate and Aiden had been together, but there were also shots of Cate with her sister Georgia – she looked much more like Martin, whereas Cate was the spitting image of Sue.

As Martin returned to the deck weighed down with albums and opened the first of them, he and Sue physically leaned in, drawing themselves closer to the portraits mounted inside. I studied the two of them: both appeared to be fit and healthy, their skin lightly tanned from the long spell of hot weather, their clothes smart, brand names. Sue was in a dark blue cotton dress and had a thin gold chain at her neck with one half of a heart as a pendant. Unlike her husband, who had lost most of his hair – and what remained had coloured silver – hers was thick, honey blonde, cut into a modern style that allowed her fringe to hang longer on one side of her face. I wondered if the fact that she and Cate were so alike physically made it harder for them.

For Martin, because every day he could see the echoes of Cate in his wife.

For Sue, because those echoes were written into her.

‘This is some of the stuff she used to do,’ Martin said, and pushed the albums across the table towards me. There was a grimace on his face now, and as soon as I saw the first page of the first album I realized why.

It was a photograph of a helicopter crash.

The site had mostly been cleared but some of the wreckage remained, perhaps because it was in a narrow chasm between two sheer rock faces. In the background was a

jagged wall of peaks, some snow-capped, and a handwritten note was underneath: *'Fragments Pt 1' – Beinn Sionnach, Scotland, October 2015*. I turned the page and across the next spread were two more shots, each a variation on the first. *'Fragments Pt 2'* had been taken a month later, this time under bright clear skies; the full horror of the accident – the scorched angle of the rotors, the crushed, blackened cockpit, the snapped tail – impossible to look away from. The scale of the destruction, the perfection of its framing in the chasm, was hard to articulate. I didn't want to think of it as beautiful, because people would have died – and yet it was. There was something about the shot, about the third one as well, that was almost hypnotic: *'Fragments Pt 3'* had been photographed the following month and the crash seemed to have mutated again, a thick blanket of snow hiding the worst of it now, with only the occasional twist of metal reaching out.

Sue pursed her lips, her eyes on the pictures, as Martin poured himself some more iced water. 'It wasn't all like that,' Sue said. 'She photographed lots of other things – but she always said she was drawn to the tragic. In fact, one of her exhibitions was actually *called* that. Well, "Tragic, Drawn".'

'Where did she exhibit?' I asked.

'A gallery in London,' Martin replied. 'We can get the name for you if you like. She did a lot of work for photo agencies too, covering big news events, but the stuff she did for herself, that was her real passion.'

'We don't want to give you the wrong impression of who Cate was,' Sue added quickly. 'She wasn't some emotional vampire who went around feeding off other people's misery. She was the complete *opposite* of that. She was so kind, and gracious, and funny. But she always used to say that she found a certain beauty in things that other people might not. You'll see it repeated throughout that album.'

I started turning pages. More mundane images followed that I assumed had been shot for magazine covers or for websites. But then the mood started to change again. An abandoned railway station, the roof collapsing in on itself, every blade of grass at its front crested by gold light. An old house on the edge of the sea: empty and dark, windows gone, the swell of a wave captured at its rise, almost as if it were about to swallow the house whole. And then a roller-coaster track – almost entirely rusted through – disappearing into the dark of a dilapidated building.

‘I know they’re not to everyone’s tastes,’ Martin said.

‘I think they’re amazing.’

Both of them seemed surprised – and perhaps it was true, not everyone would find them appealing. But in the time I’d been working missing persons, even before that when I was a journalist, I’d been to many places like this, to forsaken houses, to lost villages, into the darkness of old hospitals and boarded stations. I’d searched for people in them and I’d hunted killers in their shadows, and in all of them I’d found a kind of symmetry. Because, in a way, after the death of my wife, Derryn, these places had echoed my own life: the emptiness I felt, the parts of me I didn’t want to go into.

‘You must have been so proud of her,’ I said, my gaze still on the last shot of the roller coaster and the building, my thoughts on my own daughter now. Annabel was a teacher down in Devon, and every time we talked on video-call, or I went to visit her, I’d listen to her and think to myself, *I’m so lucky to have this.*

I’m so lucky to be in this moment with her.

I looked up at the Clarks, their eyes glimmering even in the shade; they were so proud of their daughter, they could barely even put it into words.

But Cate was gone.

There was no moment to be in any more.

I turned another page and found a portrait of her and Aiden. Cate had set it up in a hall of mirrors somewhere, and they were both sitting down, cross-legged, their backs to one another, looking into reflections that repeated endlessly.

‘What was Aiden like?’ I asked.

‘He was a lovely kid,’ Sue said without any hesitation. ‘Very kind, good-natured. He absolutely worshipped the ground Cate walked on, which made us very happy. She’d have to boss him around sometimes because he was so laid-back’ – both of them were smiling – ‘but I don’t think he minded too much. He was close to his parents, so when they died shortly after one another, he took it really hard. He got very down. But I never had any worries about them: him and Cate, they were always rock solid. They were both creative, both shared the same sort of passion for art, and books, and travel. Most of the time, they were glued at the hip.’

‘So they seemed okay in the days before they disappeared?’

‘Yes,’ Sue said. ‘I talked to Cate the day before she went missing and we had a text conversation on the morning of the crash.’

Sue took out her phone, found the messages and slid it across the table towards me. Their last text exchange was short, perfunctory, a question from Sue about what Cate was up to, a reply about how they were meeting friends in Reigate for dinner. As I scrolled down, I noticed that next to every single reply Cate had ever sent her mum was a red heart: Sue had saved them all.

Every message. Every word.

‘I understand their mobiles were in the car?’

‘What was left of them after the fire, yes,’ Sue said.

‘Wallets, purses?’

‘Fragments of them were in the car too,’ Sue confirmed.

It seemed highly unlikely any of the bank cards would have been taken out and used over the past two and a half years. The police would have put an alert on both Cate and Aiden's accounts and any activity on them would immediately have been flagged.

I asked if they'd be all right with me downloading the conversations between them and Cate. I didn't expect to find much, but it needed to be checked off. Mobile phone statements for Cate and Aiden were where my interests really lay, because it would give me an idea of who they were talking to and how often in the days preceding the crash. But there was just as much chance that the phone statements I'd requested would go absolutely nowhere, the same as everything else had in the hunt for answers about the Gascoignes so far.

At the moment, a lot rested on two major unanswered questions.

One was the cause of the crash. Was it a lapse in concentration by Aiden? Did he take his eyes off the road? Could they have been arguing, or laughing, or distracted? I knew already from media reports that there had been no phone calls to them in the seconds before the accident, but it could have been something that happened outside the car. Maybe the slight bend in the road surprised Aiden, or perhaps an animal ran out in front of them. Police said that, although it was cold, they found no evidence of ice, and – as had been underlined already – there had been no evidence of a mechanical failure in the vehicle either.

Yet something had happened.

One thing I was absolutely certain about was that they didn't exit the Land Rover in the time between them being captured on CCTV and the point at which the Land Rover came off the road. The timings were set in stone because crash data captured from the car showed the impact

happened 11.9 seconds after they passed the camera. That just wasn't enough time to slow to a halt, get out, push the car to the edge of the ravine – for whatever reason – and then roll it off. And even if they *had* somehow done that, there was no way that could have resulted in the kind of damage the Land Rover sustained. It was damage that could only have come from leaving the road at thirty-plus miles per hour.

In the same way, I was pretty dismissive of the idea that they might have leapt from the car as it was moving. Even if the car had only been doing thirty miles per hour, if they leapt from it, they'd probably be travelling about forty feet per second in the air: that meant they'd land like a dead weight at the same speed the car was going – at best, they'd painfully tear skin, twist ankles, maybe suffer a minor fracture or break; at worst, they'd injure themselves so badly it would be impossible for them to even get up off the tarmac. And that didn't factor in the car itself; in order to get it into the ravine, Aiden would have to direct it that way, and he would have had to have done that at the last minute given the bends in the road. That, in turn, would have given him and Cate almost no time to exit the car.

So if they were still inside the car when it landed, whatever happened in the ravine happened inside those first two minutes. Because after two minutes, once they'd dialled 999, the witnesses got to the lookout point and were peering down at the burning vehicle. They didn't take their eyes off the scene until the fire crews and police arrived – and that was when the car was found to be empty. So the Gascoignes *had* to have crawled, dragged or climbed their way out of the vehicle in the first two minutes, before the witnesses got to the edge of the gully. There was simply no other window of time in which to get out of the car without being seen.

And that was the second major unanswered question.

Where did they go?

Did they hide in the gully? That would seem hard to do, especially with cops and fire crews at the scene, but until I took a drive out and had a look at the ravine myself, I couldn't discount it. Did they exit at the other side? That, from some of the photographs I'd seen in newspapers, seemed possible because the opposite bank was much less steep. But with both theories the question was why? Why hide? Why go anywhere at all after the crash? And, even then, how were they in any state to do so?

'You said you wanted to talk to Georgia?' Sue asked.

'Yes,' I said. 'She lives in Hounslow, doesn't she?'

'Yes.' She pushed a set of keys across the table towards me. 'These are for Cate's place. The silver one with the blue dot on it is for the front door, and the alarm code is 0188. I'm sure Georgia would be happy to meet you there if you want.'

'Thank you,' I said, and made a note of the code.

I looked at Sue, at Martin, their expressions anguished now, the searing light of summer making no impact on the sudden pallor of their skin.

'Georgia's the one who looks after it for us,' Sue said softly.

And then she stopped and the rest of the sentence played out on her face.

Because we can't go back to where Cate lived.

To us, that house is haunted.

I got straight on to the motorway and headed south to Gatton Hill. On the way, I called Georgia to set up a time to meet at Cate and Aiden's house. I hadn't spoken to her before, but it was clear that her parents had already prepped her because, as soon as I gave her my name, she knew who I was. We didn't talk for long – she was on a shift at the Marylebone gastropub she worked in – so we quickly agreed on 5 p.m.

After that, I dialled an old friend of mine and the source at the Met who was getting me the casework on Cate and Aiden's disappearance: Ewan Tasker. He'd spent a large proportion of his career working in the NCIS and SOCA – precursors to the National Crime Agency – and much of his supposed retirement shuttling back and forth to the Met, where he had an advisory role, and for twice-weekly meetings at Scotland Yard. We were going to meet at the scene.

I drove the rest of the way in silence, with not even the radio for company, going over everything Martin and Sue had said. They were hurting and they were lost, and I'd seen both those things, on repeat, in every case I'd ever worked. But they also carried a perpetual sense of dislocation that was unique to missing persons searches. They would have received comfort from others, from people who had also had to suddenly and painfully say goodbye to the ones they'd loved – but the warm words, even if well intended, could never recognize the singular nature of a disappearance, where there was no body to bury and no answers. When the person you loved was missing, you didn't move forward and you

didn't move on. You were on a Ferris wheel that you could never get off.

I left the motorway and turned on to the two-lane road that was Gatton Hill. It was quiet, so I slowed a little, wanting to get a sense for the place. I'd seen photos of it online, had been back and forth using Street View, and had pored over newspaper reports and photographs released to the media – but being in a place was different.

It was where the small details were.

Straight away there was a gentle gradient to the slope, which then became marginally steeper as it fed into the first of the two bends on the hill. The first bend wasn't sharp and was signposted in advance, so I doubted it would have presented much of a problem to Aiden, even if he hadn't been paying full attention. Just before it, I spotted the CCTV camera the Gascoignes had passed ten seconds before the crash. It marked a subtle change in topography: once I was past the camera, the trees started to clot together on one side – the side that the unseen ravine was on – and on the other a high red-mud bank rose up from the tarmac.

In my head I counted down the ten seconds, assuming that the foliage damaged where the Land Rover had come off the road would have mostly grown back.

I was wrong.

The impact point was still obvious, a torn, pronounced hole in a series of vines and branches, and while the tyre marks had mostly washed out of the asphalt, I could still see a very faint echo of them, a pale almost ghostly arc suddenly veering right.

I knew, from my research, that the layby the witnesses had stopped at was five hundred feet further down the hill, so I parked there and returned on foot, following a narrow trail up the edges of the road.

It was so hot I was already sweating by the time I got back, and as I looked down the sloping carpet of scree, I realized that, although there was little growth here at the edge of the road, there was tons further down. It was tricky to even see the gully clearly; once you cleared the shelf of scree, it was just brush – tangled, dense.

My phone buzzed in my pocket.

Going to be late. Accident on the A23. E

I texted Ewan Tasker back and asked him how long he thought he might be and, as I waited for a response, weighed up getting down into the ravine.

Tasker replied. He wasn't sure.

Could be ten minutes. Could be an hour.

I let him know I was parked up and going to take a closer look at the scene and then pocketed my phone. Stepping off the road, the ground immediately started to cant and I moved on to the bed of scree. The sun was beating down hard and – even after only a few steps – I could feel sweat streaming down my face and back. Just as bad as the heat was the unreliability of the scree itself; the rocks moved constantly, shifting, my ankles turning and jarring, my whole body lurching as I tried to balance. If I'd ever been willing to believe that Cate and Aiden had, for whatever reason, leapt from their car as it was moving and made a break into the ravine itself to hide, I dispelled it once and for all. The scree was a nightmare. There was no way they'd be able to get down, even uninjured, in the time before the witnesses arrived.

When I reached the bottom, I heaved a sigh of relief and looked back up in the direction I'd come from. I knew that fire crews and police had used ladders to move up and down the scree, and that the brush had been cut down here in order to make access easier. I also knew that a lot of what had

existed here had been burned away by the fire, which had helped investigators too. It made me wonder if it was worth coming back with a pair of shears, or a blade, because – as it was right now – it was going to be difficult to get a proper sense for the area where the Land Rover had come to rest; everything that had burned had regrown, the fire just a memory now. Even as I palmed away some of it, pushing at the heavily laden branches hanging down like arms, it made no difference to my sightlines. It was just too dense on the ravine floor.

There were plenty of pictures online – and, I was assuming, in the casework Ewan Tasker was bringing to me – that chronicled the way the gully had looked that night. And while I would have liked to have had an unobstructed view of the ravine – just to satisfy my curiosity – it was going to be impossible to do so without a major clearing operation.

But the opposite bank was different.

I'd hardly seen any pictures of it at all in news reports, but if the car had landed here with the Gascoignes still inside – which I believed to be the case – the opposite bank seemed an obvious place for them to have gone. It was easy to reach, simple to climb, and provided the quickest route out.

I headed up the bank.

There were trees all the way up, weaved through with more growth, but – compared to edging my way down the scree – it was a simple ascent. The undergrowth was thick but it wasn't as unyielding as in the ravine and I could walk it, unhindered.

At the apex of the bank, I stopped and checked my watch. It had taken me fifty seconds to get to the top.

Was it realistic to think that Cate and Aiden could both have crawled out of the vehicle in the first sixty to seventy seconds after it hit the ravine? Because, factoring in the fifty

seconds it took to climb the bank, that was what would have had to have happened. There was maybe *some* wriggle room in terms of exactly when the eyewitnesses got to the ravine edge – the two-minute time frame was an estimate by investigators, based on data, 999 calls, CCTV footage and statements – but I doubted it was far off. All of which meant that, even if the Gascoignes really had managed to escape the crushed vehicle inside that time frame, they'd then *immediately* have had to traverse the gradient of the bank in fifty seconds or less, in order to disappear from view before the witnesses arrived. I just didn't see it. They'd have been dazed, at worst badly injured, perhaps completely trapped by the malformed vehicle. Plunging ninety feet into a ravine was going to be incredibly traumatic, physically and emotionally. It wasn't the sort of thing you'd simply shrug off.

And yet . . .

From the top of the bank I studied where it went from here.

Dropping away in front of me was another much sharper slope dominated by hundreds of pine trees. It looked like a sustainable forest: the trees were in straight tightly packed rows and, off to the right, I could see piles of timber. In the distance, at the bottom of the slope, it looked like there might be some kind of access road, although it was hard to be sure. The pine trees were so close together they were keeping out the sun, so all I could see was a faint grey trail.

I followed one row of trees all the way down. It *was* an access road, a mixture of gravel and mud, coming from my right and snaking off into more trees to my left. There were no signposts anywhere, and when I looked back up the slope – to the top of the bank – I could barely make it out. I must have travelled half a mile, maybe more.

I looked at my watch.

It had taken me six minutes to get down to the access road.

I carried on walking – following the road to the left as it dipped down – further into the woods. Fifteen minutes later, after a couple of switchbacks, I arrived in a car park. It belonged to the Forestry Commission and was off a tree-fringed B-road, with signs for Reigate and Crawley next to the exit gate. I looked for CCTV cameras but there weren't any, and took in the car park properly. It was empty except for a single green Toyota, an old couple in the front, sharing coffee from a flask.

I grabbed my notebook and wrote down *21 minutes from the top of the bank to the car park*. It was a mile and a half, maybe a little more, but that would feel a long way with the sort of injuries you might sustain in a major car wreck. Plus, if the Gascoignes came here, why hadn't there been a sighting of them?

Perhaps no one was parked here that day.

'Perhaps,' I echoed quietly, but – like the timings back at the ravine – it didn't feel right. They could have left a second car here to pick up, but if they did, if that was the plan, why do something as insanely dangerous as driving the first one off a road into a ravine? Why would anyone choose to make that the starting point for a disappearance?

It risked failure from the first second.

I returned the way I'd come and, at the point I joined the access road, walked the other way to see where it went. It ended in an impasse, at a swathe of forest whose trees had been felled. It looked barren and there were no surprises or hiding places.

It was simply a dead end.

I hoped it wasn't a sign of things to come.

4

When I got back to the ravine, I could see Ewan Tasker waiting for me at the lookout. He waved but didn't attempt to come down: he was six-three and sixteen stone, but he was also seventy-three and, although he was in good health, he wasn't about to put it all on the line by negotiating his way down a carpet of scree.

I took some photographs of the ravine floor, trying to push back some of the brush in an attempt at clearer shots, and then started the climb back up to the road. It wasn't quite as arduous as coming down, but by the time I got to the top, the sweat was pouring off me and I had cuts on my shin, forearm and hand where one of the loose rocks had tilted and taken me with it.

Tasker said hello to me. I pointed to his blue tailored shorts and boat shoes and said, 'What time do you set sail?'

He laughed. 'Cheeky bastard.'

We embraced. Not only had it been a while since we'd seen each other in the flesh, but Tasker was also my best friend. He'd started out as a source back when I'd been a journalist, and now he was so much more than that I sometimes forgot that was the way things had begun for us. After Derryn died, Tasker had been immense, the person who'd been there for me when it was darkest.

In his hands was a brown A4 envelope. He passed it to me and then looked down through the trees to the bottom of the gully. 'Looks like you should have brought your machete.'

'It's like the Amazon down there now,' I said, peeling the

flap on the envelope and sliding out the file. It was eighty pages, all black-and-white printouts except for a colour section at the back featuring photographs. ‘I really appreciate this, Task.’

‘As always –’

‘I didn’t get it from you.’

His eyes were still on the ravine. ‘So they really just disappeared?’

I looked down into the gully myself. ‘Their car comes off the road, hits the bottom of the ravine on its roof. Two minutes later, there are two eyewitnesses standing in exactly this spot here. Pretty soon after that, it all goes up in flames.’ I leafed through the file again, trying to find a timeline of events. ‘It says here the response time was nine minutes, forty-three seconds and, by the time the fire crew arrived, the Land Rover was an inferno. The eyewitnesses told investigators the vehicle had “been on fire for approximately eight minutes”.’

‘Was that backed up by the FSI?’

The FSI was the fire scene investigator, who worked in conjunction with the SIO from Thames Valley Police, the forensic teams and the fire crews to establish exactly what had happened and why. I flipped back a couple of pages, trying to find the answer. ‘Here we go. The FSI found the witnesses statements to be “accurate”.’

Tasker waved a hand at the ravine. ‘You can discount any idea of your couple somehow climbing out of the car *after* the fire crew arrived. They didn’t hide out down there and evade every fireman, copper and forensic technician at the scene. I mean, those things sound ridiculous even *before* you consider the fact that – in order to do any of that – they’d have had to have crawled out of a burning wreck.’

‘It *had* to have happened in that first two minutes,’ I said.

‘Thing I can’t figure out, though – or *one* of the things – is how. It would have required them to basically have sustained no serious injuries at all, *and* to be lucid enough to have instigated an immediate escape. And even if that was the plan – to vanish, I mean – there are about a million easier ways of setting it up than veering off the edge of a sheer drop.’

‘Any blood found around the car?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said, holding up the file. ‘I’ll need to check. But if there was, if there was some convenient trail leading away from the scene, I seriously doubt we’d be standing here two and a half years later still trying to work out where they went.’

Tasker nodded.

I briefly went through all the reasons why I didn’t think it was possible that the Gascoignes could have exited the car before it left the road, and then, reluctantly, said, ‘Of course there might be something else that I need to face up to.’

Tasker looked at me. ‘What’s that?’

‘The eyewitnesses.’ I glanced at the file in my hands. ‘The only account of what went on in that ravine during those first eleven minutes is provided by them.’

We both stood there for a moment, silent.

‘What if they were lying?’

I went to a local pub for a proper catch-up with Tasker and then drove back up the motorway towards Twickenham, where Cate and Aiden had lived.

It was still a couple of hours before I was due to meet Georgia at the house, so I found a parking space and headed to a coffee shop on King Street. The temperature hadn't eased even a fraction, so I decided against sitting outside and found a space inside in a corner booth at the back, got out my laptop and connected to the Wi-Fi.

I laid the file for the crash investigation out on the table.

Much of what I read – although covered in greater detail, down to things like paint flakes from the car and precise angles of impact – matched what I already knew, which at least proved that Martin and Sue's recall of events was reliable, and that the media had reported the facts as they were. But that also meant that I was adding little new to the overall picture.

I found mobile phone records included for both Cate and Aiden, as well as for their landline, but they only went back a month, to 1 December, and I always liked to go back further. I'd requested two additional months – the October and November before the accident – through another source of mine, but was still waiting on those, so for now I concentrated on what I had and looked for anomalies.

I searched for frequently dialled numbers, recurrent incoming calls, calls at odd times of the day and night, but nothing stood out. I double-checked for calls made in the thirty

minutes before the crash too, and – just as had been stated in the media – there hadn't been any. I hadn't expected the crash to have been caused by Aiden trying to take an incoming call, but now I had my proof.

I paused on a photo of Cate and Aiden at her parents, the Christmas before they disappeared. Alongside the picture was a note from one of the investigators, listing some of the possible motivations for why one or both of the Gascoignes might have organized their own disappearance. It was a pretty standard list: money issues, although bank statements contradicted that theory; and domestic problems, of which there was no evidence either. Martin and Sue certainly didn't paint a picture of Cate and Aiden having had a turbulent, unpredictable marriage, and even if they had, it was more likely that only one of them would vanish in those circumstances – after all, it wasn't much of an escape from a spouse if the spouse came with you.

As well as theories about why they might have disappeared, the investigators also worked through ideas of how, and then where, Cate and Aiden might have gone.

All of it went nowhere.

The police, like me, dismissed the concept of them finding a hiding spot in the ravine somewhere and watching the whole thing play out: the way the fire had burned, its radius and ferocity, and the number of emergency services personnel in the gully at the time made it impossible for two people to find cover and not be noticed. They had also, like me, walked the pines beyond the ravine, even going as far as drawing a map of the area, with all the trails, including the one that eventually led to the car park. Again, they couldn't definitively dismiss the idea of Cate and Aiden making it to the car park, but – considering everything – it seemed unlikely.

The police spoke to three separate experts – a fire scene investigator with over twenty years in the service; a two-decade veteran of crash scene investigations; and then a trauma specialist from the Royal London Hospital – and their basic overview was pretty similar: Cate and Aiden would probably have been severely injured. More likely, the trauma specialist commented, ‘we’re talking spinal injuries and neurological damage, both of which impair rapid, lucid decision-making.’

I flicked through to the witness statements.

As my eyes lingered on the names of Zoe Simmons and Audrey Calvert, I thought back to what I’d asked Tasker earlier: what if they were lying?

I read Simmons’s statement first: she’d approached from the north, seen a piece of the Land Rover’s bumper, and, when she slowed some more, saw the tear in the greenery where the car had gone off the road. She told police she didn’t really know the area, she lived in Horsham and was coming back from visiting friends in Croydon. Given that she had no record and no red flags, and that what she’d said in her interview tallied with indisputable evidence like surveillance footage, it was easy enough to see why the cops had trusted her account of that day. Of course, they trusted it because they saw no reason for her to lie.

Audrey Calvert’s statement mirrored Simmons’s closely.

Sixty-one, she had a grown-up son, was retired and lived in Streatham. She told police that she’d been to see an old friend for lunch, who lived close to Gatwick Airport – so her route home, via Gatton Hill, made sense. I couldn’t find anything at all online for Audrey Calvert, but Zoe Simmons I found quickly and easily: like most kids her age, her life was played out on social media. It looked like she had Instagram and TikTok accounts, and there may well have been other

apps she was using, but for now I scrolled through her wall of photographs.

Almost immediately, I noticed something.

Before the accident, her Instagram was absolutely full of pictures of her, her mates, parties, pub gardens, memes, the life of a young woman in her late teens and early twenties playing out on repeat. She was posting something at least twice every week. But after the date Cate and Aiden disappeared, it all stopped.

I checked her posts again just to be sure.

But I was right.

Before the accident two and a half years ago, she'd posted three hundred and forty-six photographs over a period of thirty-four months. That was ten every month.

Since the accident, she'd posted nothing.

Not one single picture.

6

I got to the Gascoignes' house a couple of minutes early. Georgia hadn't arrived yet, so I walked along the street, getting a sense for the road and its surroundings.

The area was nice, mostly terraced houses. Cate and Aiden's, and the ones either side of it, were easy to spot because thick sweeps of emerald-green ivy were growing between the ground and first floors. It was now two and a half years since they'd lived here, but none of the ivy had overgrown, which seemed to back up what Martin and Sue had said to me: Georgia looked after things here.

She was the only one who could enter this ghost house.
'David?'

I turned, recognizing Georgia straight away from the pictures that Martin and Sue had shown me. Physically she didn't share much with her sister, her brown hair threaded through with silver, the angles of her face a little less striking, but she had a beautiful smile and the most perfectly blue eyes.

'Georgia,' I said, shaking her hand. 'I really appreciate you meeting me here.'

'I'm sorry I'm late,' she replied, her cheeks flushed. The heat of the day had eased off a little, but it was still warm. 'I was only meant to be covering a few hours.'

'Honestly, don't worry.'

She started going through her bag.

'Your parents gave me keys if it's easier,' I said.

'Ah, brilliant. I've got the other set in here somewhere – but alongside my first boyfriend, this bag has to be one of

the worst decisions I've ever made.' She smiled, took the keys from me and then unlocked the house, punching in the alarm code on a pad just inside the door. Handing me back Martin and Sue's set, she said, 'Come in.'

The house had the appearance of a country cottage, with red-tiled floors in the hallway, an ornate wooden staircase and – through a living-room door on my left – a large stone fireplace with a wood burner. The furniture was rustic, a theme that continued through to the kitchen, where there was an Aga, a big dresser, shelves decorated with plates and jars, and a white ceiling with dark beams.

'They always wanted to live in the sticks,' Georgia said.

That much was clear. What was also clear was that, in the time her sister and brother-in-law had been missing, Georgia had shown the house a lot of love. It smelled nice, despite how long it had gone without being lived in, the floors and carpets were all clean, the worktops spotless. It wasn't all that unusual in missing persons cases to find family members treating an empty home with the same care as their own, as if it were soon going to be lived in again.

'I'm afraid the water is off, so I can't offer you a cup of tea.'

I told her not to worry and we went to the end of the hallway where the living room wrapped around from the left into a sunroom with a set of huge bifold doors. The garden, like the house, was well kept, although it was simple, perhaps deliberately so: the flower beds were empty, the patio clean. I didn't know Cate, but I imagined it would have meant a lot to her to see how much effort had been put in by her sister.

The angle of the sun had created a shaded corner in the living room, so we sat at the table and enjoyed what little breeze wafted through the doors from outside.

'How did it go with Mum and Dad?' Georgia asked.

'It was good,' I said, and then started to ask her the same

sorts of questions I'd asked her parents: when she last saw Cate, how she seemed, any changes in her sister or moments that stuck.

'You two were close?'

'Very. I mean, don't get me wrong, we were sisters, and as teenaged girls in the same house we had our fair share of meltdowns.' But a flicker of a smile edged across her lips: even the meltdowns were good memories for her now. 'Cate went to university here in London, to do her photography, and I . . .' She stopped. 'I wasn't as academic, put it that way. I suppose I gave Mum and Dad a few more sleepless nights than Cate did.'

'In what way?'

'Oh, typical teenage stuff, the type of thing that'll give me a coronary when my own daughter gets to that age.' She laughed a little. 'I liked the bad boys, let's just say that. Probably went to too many parties and didn't work hard enough at school. But Cate . . . she only had two boyfriends before Aiden, both long-term. And she worked her arse off at school. She got As across the board at GCSE and A level.'

'What were those two relationships like before Aiden?'

'In what sense?'

'I mean, were they good? Turbulent? Did they end badly? I'm just looking for angles.'

'Oh, I see. Well, she was with Aiden for nine years – so I suppose any fallout from her exes would have happened way before the accident.' It was true, but I asked again if the relationships were good. 'Yeah, I don't remember them *not* being.'

'Why did they end?'

'The first was at school, but they split about two or three months after they both went to different universities on opposite sides of the country. The other one she went out with for about five years in her mid-twenties. They split

because he got drunk and shagged some woman on a stag do – and Cate found out.’

On the surface, it was true that neither relationship seemed relevant, but I got the men’s names from Georgia anyway, and made a note to follow up on it.

‘So you said Cate always knew that she wanted to be a photographer?’

‘Oh, she always knew *exactly* what she wanted to be, from as far back as I can remember. She always loved taking pictures, even when we were kids. Mum and Dad bought her this second-hand Polaroid camera back when she was maybe nine or ten, and she just took it everywhere with her. I mean, *everywhere*. It used to piss me off actually’ – Georgia was smiling again – ‘because you’d hear the whir of that bloody thing, and then turn around, and you’d realize she’d been watching you for ages, just trying to line up the perfect shot.’ She’d been pretty stoic up until now, but as the memory formed and played out in her head, there was the first glimmer in her eyes.

She looked at me and then away again, as if embarrassed, so I gave her a few moments. ‘She loved stories,’ she said finally. ‘She used to say all the time that her pictures were stories, not photographs. She’d never press the button until she saw it.’

I thought of the shots Cate had taken of the downed helicopter, and what Sue had said: *She was drawn to the tragic*.

‘She loved writing too,’ Georgia added.

‘What did she write?’

‘It was all tied into the things she photographed. Often, when she took a picture, she then went and really dug down into the details behind it. So, for example, one of my favourite series was the one she took at that theme park. Did you ever see them?’

‘I saw the picture of the roller coaster.’