CASE #1

The Shadow at the Door

I

When I was thirteen, I discovered an old house in the woods behind my parents' farm. I'd been down there countless times before, into that knot of branches, but I'd never come across the building before. It was like it appeared there one day, emerging from the earth, shaking the dirt from its roots and forming like a tree.

I headed back to the farm, buzzing with excitement, and told my dad everything. He said he would come and see once he was done for the day, but I couldn't wait for him – I had to go and find the house again – so I went into the village and grabbed my friend Lee instead, and for the next couple of days, he and I claimed the house as our little secret. Then, as time wore on, we got bored of just the two of us knowing, so we brought other friends to see it, and the more of us there were, the braver we got.

Eventually, after a week of standing outside, staring at the memory of what it had been – its windows gone, its stone walls blistered and broken – we decided we'd go inside.

There were seven of us in all. We passed through the gaping mouth at its front – no longer a door, just a hole in the brickwork – and found ourselves in a hallway. Most of the wallpaper had been ripped away, the plaster too, exposing the old bones of the structure – its warped wooden struts, its decaying cavities – and as we moved into what would once have been a living room, the whole place seemed to darken. Shadows grew longer. The sounds of the woods disappeared behind us.

We were teenagers, knowing nothing of the world, its

strangeness and danger, but all of us felt something change then: a gentle shift we couldn't put into words. Instinctively, we looked at each other – and then, a second later, we bolted. We ran as fast as we could out of the woods and didn't stop until we made it to the farm.

Four years later, six weeks before I left south Devon for London and university, I was out with Dad, shooting air rifles at targets he set up in the woods, and I stumbled across the house again, completely by accident. It was the only other time growing up that I ever came into contact with it. By then, it was barely visible any more, nature having claimed it back. Its roof had begun to collapse and thin, crooked branches were inching through its façade like skeletal fingers.

Dad watched me stop, seeing that something had caught my attention, and then he moved closer to me, rifle at his side, head turned in the direction of the house. We both stood there in silence, watching it, as if it were coming alive. After a while, when he said nothing, I looked at him. He was staring at me.

'That's the Montgomery place,' he said quietly.

'Who were the Montgomerys?'

'They used to live here – back in the fifties.'

'Why did they leave?'

His eyes flicked to me. *They didn't.*

'Are they dead?'

He still didn't reply, but I knew I was right. They were all dead. In his face, I could see that he was trying to work out how I'd known. But I hadn't. All I recalled was the inside of that building years before and how it had felt to us as kids – its long shadows, its hush, as if the memory of the family were still lingering.

'Dad? Did the Montgomery family all die?'

'Yes.'

'How?'

My father's mouth flattened, his lips blanching, and I saw the conflict in him. Did he tell me the truth, or did he sugar-coat it? Eventually, his eyes came back to me, taking me in: the boy he'd brought up, just weeks away from becoming a man.

'He shot himself,' Dad said.

'Who?'

'William Montgomery. The husband.' A pause. 'The father. His wife and children died. They left this place one morning and never came home again.'

'Why?'

'A car accident.'

I frowned at him, unsure of exactly how it all fitted together. But then, suddenly, it snapped into focus and I understood, and it was maybe the first time in my life that I'd ever felt that pull; that emotional connection to the tragedy of others.

'Was William Montgomery the one driving the car?'

Dad's eyes moved back to the house.

'Yes,' he replied. 'His wife and kids all died. He survived.'

I'm not sure I ever gave a single thought to that moment in the decades that followed, not until our final conversation. By then, Mum had been gone for nearly a year, and – because it was clear he'd be unable to cope on his own – I'd helped Dad sell the farm and moved him into an old fisherman's cottage, perched in the hills overlooking the beach in the next village. Dad had been up and down health-wise, heart-sore about Mum's passing, but that day had been one of his better ones. The three of us – me, my dad and my late wife, Derryn – all sat at the window, gazing out at the dark sea.

'Do you believe in ghosts, son?'

Dad had asked it without looking at me, and when I turned to Derryn, she gave a gentle nod of the head and started to

get up, as if glimpsing the intimacy of this moment. Once we were alone, I touched Dad on the arm. He flinched, his bones so small against my fingers, his skin so meagre.

'Are you okay, Dad?'

He turned to me.

'Can I get you anything?'

'*Do* you?'

'Do I what?'

'Do you believe in ghosts?'

I smiled at him, but he didn't smile back. His eyes returned to the window, to the sea, evening moving in, the sky beginning to look like it was sketched in charcoal.

'You remember that house?' he asked. 'The Montgomery place.'

It took me a few moments to catch up.

'The place in the woods?'

He looked back at me, his eyes milky.

'The reason Montgomery put a gun in his mouth was because he was haunted by the memories of what had happened to his family.' He stopped and stared into his empty coffee mug, as if searching for the words in there. 'I guess what I'm saying is, you'll realize as you get older that ghosts aren't things that go bump in the night. They're not apparitions. They're *feelings*. They're things you can't let go of. They're fear, and heartache, and regret. Ghosts, they're just things you've done – or haven't.'

I studied him, confused, a little stunned. 'Dad, I . . . uh . . . I don't . . .' I stopped again, unsure what to say. I'd never heard him talk like this in my entire life.

'Ghosts, the ones you should be *really* scared of, they're not haunting the rooms of your house, son.' He took a long, abrasive breath. 'They're haunting the rooms of your head.'

PART ONE

The Watcher

2

The house was tucked away in a narrow cul-de-sac about a quarter of a mile south of Wimbledon Common. It was a modest two-storey, three-bedroom home, but it was set behind a brick wall that separated the property from the pavement and hid most of it from view, unless you were seven feet tall. A wooden door – locked, with a letterbox cut into it – filled a space at the far end of the wall, and at the other end was a set of double gates with an intercom mounted to the side. I knew the house was modest because it had been on the market four years ago and I'd tracked down some photos of the interior in an image search, but from this side of the wall, and with an attractive gabled roof visible, it would have been easy to believe it was larger and grander, and owned by a family much wealthier than the Conisters.

I parked on the street, grabbed my notebook, and then paused as I locked the car. I started thinking about my dad again, about the final conversation I'd had with him at the kitchen table in his home in south Devon, and about the things he'd said to me at the end. *Ghosts aren't haunting the rooms of your house, son. They're haunting the rooms of your head.* I wasn't sure if his voice had resurfaced after so much time because of what I'd found out about the Conister family over the last few days, or if it was still residue from the pain and distress of a case I'd had three years ago and could never forget. But, whichever it was, as I approached the gates, I could suddenly picture my father clearly, light painting one side of a gaunt, exhausted face.

I pushed the buzzer.

After a moment, a female voice said, 'Hello?'

'Mrs Conister? It's David Raker.'

Another short buzz and then one of the gates slowly fanned back to reveal a small, oval-shaped driveway. I stepped through and pushed the gate shut behind me. A five-year-old Astra was parked next to a metal stand to which a couple of bicycles were chained. Beyond that was the front door, shadowed under a first floor that pushed outward from the house and rested on top of two white pillars.

Margaret Conister was standing in the doorway, dressed in a pair of leggings and a vest top. It was a warm day at the start of July and she was a little flushed, but almost as soon as she saw me she started to apologize for the sheen of sweat on her face and arms: 'I went for a run,' she explained, 'and the time just got away from me. I started to panic that I was going to be late.' We shook hands and I told her she needn't have worried. 'That's kind of you,' she said, smiling, 'but it isn't a great first impression.'

'I don't judge people on their timekeeping.'

She smiled again. She was an attractive woman: forty-seven, petite and slim, her dark hair scraped back into a ponytail, her cheeks rouged, her eyes dark as chocolate. 'Come in,' she said, gesturing to the hallway. From the front step, I could see it ran all the way through to a big living room at the back that extended into a conservatory; to the left was a kitchen with an oak table at one end; to the right was some kind of office – poky, dark, cluttered.

'Have you been running long?' I asked, trying to put her at ease. This was always how the families started: a little nervous, a little worried about how every tiny thing they said or did might impact on my attitude, or how hard I worked for them.

'Yes, since I was teenager,' she said.

'I've just started to pick it up in the last couple of years,' I told her. 'I like the way it clears your head.' In the living room, I glimpsed someone on one of the sofas, partially obscured by the door frame: a pair of crossed legs, female. 'That's why I said not to worry about being late. I can't tell you how many times I've gone out for an hour – and got home after two.' She smiled again in response: she'd finally begun to relax.

'Can I get you something to drink, Mr Raker?'

'David,' I said. 'Some tea would be great.'

I followed her into the kitchen and, as we talked politely while the kettle boiled, I spotted a series of photos in a collage on the wall. The one in the centre was of Margaret Conister, her two children and her husband: they were on holiday somewhere, the skies blue, a white wall at one edge of the picture, a palm tree at the other. Her children – Seb, who Margaret had told me on the phone was fifteen, and Katie, who was twenty – were both five or six years younger in the photo; her husband, Paul, who was the same age as his wife, was such a tall man – his upper arms like the spidering limbs of a tree – that his hand rested easily on Seb's shoulder, despite both Margaret and Katie being between them. The other photos were of the same ilk, snapshots of a family's life, of kids growing up, of holidays. There was one from Paul and Margaret's wedding day; one of the kids in school uniforms; another of Paul in the garden. I pointed to the picture in the centre.

'Where was that taken?' I asked.

'Oh,' she said. 'Spain. Marbella.' Her eyes lingered on the picture. 'We had a couple of weeks in a villa down there. It belonged to Paul's old boss.' She paused, a flicker in her expression. 'Beautiful place. We felt like we were royalty for a fortnight.'

It took a moment for her to tear her gaze away.

'After you called me yesterday, I did a little digging around,' I said to her, 'and I was surprised to find that there wasn't much reported in the media about Paul. Not the details of his disappearance, anyway. I guess it just . . . it struck me as a little odd.'

Margaret nodded. 'Odd, because of what happened to him?'

'Right.'

This time, she just shrugged. 'I think people had a hard time believing what we were telling them. And, after a while, I think they believed we might be making it up.'

That was the impression I'd got from the stories in the media as well, and it was definitely the reaction that people had had on Internet forums, true-crime websites and social media threads: whatever had taken place in this house that night, three months ago, couldn't possibly have happened the way Margaret or her kids had described it.

Margaret turned to the photograph again.

'I don't necessarily blame them,' she said quietly, caught somewhere between talking to me, to herself, and to the ghost that was her husband's image. 'I mean, it sounds outlandish, even to my ears. But I swear to you, that was what happened.' She glanced at me and there were tears in her eyes. 'The night he went missing, Paul went upstairs just after eight to take his blood-pressure pill, the same as he did every night.'

I nodded, indicating for her to continue. She'd told me the rest over the phone already, but I wanted to hear it again.

'I heard the floorboards creak in the bedroom,' she said, her words starting to break up, 'and then the squeak of his bedside drawer being opened and shut. That was where his pills were. It always made that same squeak. He'd been

meaning to fix it for years.' She stopped, wiped her eyes. 'And then, after that, nothing.'

'He never came back down again?'

'No.' She shook her head. 'He went upstairs – and he just vanished.'

3

I'd glimpsed Katie, Margaret's daughter, in the living room, and as we moved through to the conservatory, Margaret introduced us. Katie looked like her dad – tall, a little awkward, her features plainer than her mother's – and she was quiet and polite. She was twenty years old, so her mobile phone was glued to her hand, but when we started talking, she spoke like someone much older. That could happen sometimes when a parent went missing: kids were forced to grow up faster when they realized the only place you found a genuine happy ending was on Netflix.

'We read about some of your cases,' Katie said to me as she sat, tucking her legs under herself. She was wearing a black T-shirt with Robert De Niro's face on it and a quote underneath: *You talkin' to me?* 'That one up in Yorkshire sounded bad.'

She didn't have to say anything else.

The case she was referring to was the one I'd worked three years ago, where a whole village had vanished. An ex-detective called Joline Kader and I had almost died at the hands of a killer we'd never seen coming. I'd escaped with minor injuries, unlike Jo – who'd spent weeks in hospital recovering from hers – but the trauma continued to hang on, even all this time later: I was still waking up in the night, drenched in sweat, the ordeal playing out behind my eyes.

'What happened to you must have been terrible,' Margaret said.

'It was,' I replied, looking between them.

What else was there to say?

And then I thought of my dad again. *Ghosts are fear, and heartache, and regret.* I flipped my notebook open and went to a fresh page. 'So, Mrs Conister, I –'

'Maggie,' she said.

'Maggie. Paul disappeared on the 8th of April, right?'

'Yes. Just after the Easter weekend.'

'And you said he went upstairs that night at around 8 p.m.?'

She nodded. 'Yes, that's right.'

'What were you doing before that?'

'Just watching TV.'

'And where were you, Katie?'

'I was at my friend's house.'

I asked for the name of the friend and their address, just so I could check it off. I'd already put in a request with one of my contacts for a copy of the missing persons report, but a lot of this information was in the public domain anyway: Paul going upstairs; Maggie staying downstairs; Katie at a friend's house; their son, Seb, in his room, with headphones on, playing *Call of Duty* online with some school friends. In the newspapers, he'd been quoted as saying, 'I didn't hear a thing. I didn't even know Dad was upstairs.' Internet logs and interviews with his friends confirmed as much.

'And Seb was playing videogames, right?'

'Yes,' Katie replied.

I turned to Maggie again: 'So Paul comes upstairs. You said you heard some of the floorboards creaking, and then him opening and closing the drawer. After that?'

'It just went quiet.'

'Immediately?'

'The drawer was the last thing I heard.'

'Even above the sound of the TV?'

'I'd paused the TV. But even if I hadn't, the drawer's very loud. Like I say, Paul had been meaning to fix it.'

'But no sound of movement once the drawer was closed?'

'Nothing I remember,' she said.

'I believe you told the police that all the windows were still shut?'

'Yes. It was April, but it was cold that night.'

'Were they locked?'

'With a key? No. I know you told me you'd like to go up and look for yourself,' she said, gesturing towards the stairs, 'and when you do, you'll see why it would have been impossible for him to climb out of a window and then lock it from the outside.'

I'd noticed already that all the windows were new – uPVC with chrome handles – and there was no way to secure the windows in place unless you were on the inside of the house. If he'd used a window to exit the home, all he'd have been able to do was push it back against the frame. It would have been obvious what he'd done.

That night, none of the windows had been opened.

'Weird question,' I said, 'but did you check his pill tray?'

'Yes. He'd taken his pill.'

'What was he on?'

'Five milligrams of amlodipine.'

I noted it down. 'Any chance the pills could have been tampered with?'

She looked at me, as if confused by the question. It wouldn't have explained how or why he disappeared, but it might have provided a block upon which to build.

'No,' she replied. 'Why?'

'I'm just looking for angles,' I admitted.

'The pills were all in a sealed silver tray. If they'd been tampered with, there would have been damage to the foil.

But I don't know . . . I'm not sure I ever thought to check. I do know the police said he'd taken his pill that night, so you could ask them?'

I could, but I wasn't going to. I had a long, complicated history with the Met and I highly suspected that – even if I got lucky and found a cop who was initially receptive to me – I wouldn't get anywhere fast. The search for Paul Conister was three months old and had already hit a wall, and even a receptive cop would quickly tire of me sniffing around a case they'd come up short on. And, in truth, whether Paul had taken his pill that night or not felt like background noise. Because even if the pill *had* somehow been switched it would presumably have been done in order to disable him – or, worse, kill him. And if that was the case, Paul would have been right there on the bedroom floor.

'Are there any other exits upstairs?' I asked.

Maggie shook her head.

'No escape routes in the loft?'

'No, nothing like that. And, anyway, if he'd got up into the loft, I would have known. We've got a ladder that opens out and it makes this loud rattle when it does.'

'What about the front door?' I asked. 'Was that locked?'

'Yes. We always lock it after it gets dark.'

'The same with the conservatory doors?'

'Yes.'

'So no one could have got in?'

'Absolutely not.'

But could someone have got out?

'There were no keys missing?'

She frowned. 'For the doors?'

'I'm wondering whether it might have been possible for Paul to have, say, taken a key off his keyring, exited the house – and then locked up again from the outside.'

But Maggie had already started shaking her head.

'No,' she said. 'No keys missing.'

Although that didn't necessarily mean he might not have had one cut in the days beforehand, so I said, 'So you don't think it's possible that he might have just walked out?'

'Why would he do that?'

'I don't know. I'm just thinking aloud.'

'I would have heard the conservatory doors opening, and the front door . . .' She came to a halt. 'I guess it's possible he could have walked out, but I'm one hundred per cent certain that I would have heard something. The front door is old. It makes this soft creaking noise when you open and close it.'

Maggie took me to the front door. It had barely swung a couple of inches out on its hinges when it started making a long, low moan.

All these fixtures and fittings, all the noises they made, and after Paul took his pill she didn't hear a thing.

'So how long did you wait before going to check on him?'

Maggie paused, clearly trying to be as accurate as possible. 'I don't know. I told the police it was maybe ten minutes, but it could have been longer. We were in the middle of an ad break in this programme on Channel 4 about diets, so I paused it when he went to take his pill, and just grabbed my phone and started answering some emails.' She stopped again, her skin a little greyer, her eyes downcast. What if she hadn't got lost in answering emails? What if she hadn't waited ten minutes, or fifteen, or twenty?

Would it have made any difference?

'And when you went upstairs?' I said.

'I checked our bedroom first, but the light was off. Then I went to the ensuite and he wasn't there, so I looked in Katie's room and then knocked on the door of Seb's. Like we said just now, he hadn't seen Paul; he hadn't even heard him come

up. Paul wasn't in the main bathroom, so I went back downstairs and checked the kitchen and the office . . .'

But he wasn't in those either.

'I went back upstairs.' She took a long breath. 'I don't know if I was in full panic mode by then, but I definitely remember being confused. Paul was a lovely man, a wonderful father, but he wasn't the type of guy to play practical jokes, so I knew he wasn't going to be hiding under the bed. I checked anyway – I checked *everywhere* – and that was when I started to test the windows, to see if any of them had been opened. I couldn't imagine why they would be, why he might have used them, but they were all just like I told you: secure, the handles down. They hadn't been opened. There was no sign of . . .' She trailed off.

I finished writing and looked up at Maggie. She was staring at Katie. Katie was staring back at her. They were both on the verge of tears and had a look in their eyes that I'd seen over and over: a powerful mixture of confusion and disbelief.

'There was no sign of Dad anywhere,' Katie said, finishing off the sentence for her mother. They both started to cry. 'It was like he just went up in a puff of smoke.'

4

I gave them both a few minutes to recover their composure and headed upstairs.

At the top of the steps, there were two rooms on the right and two on the left. On the far left was the main bedroom, where Paul and Maggie had slept; next to that was Katie's room; the family bathroom was just off to my right, and the door to Seb's room was beyond that. Directly above me was the loft hatch: I reached up, pulled the lever on the hatch and a metal ladder slid down.

I climbed up.

It was warm, airless, the heat of the day trapped inside. Flicking on a light switch mounted to one of the struts, I saw that the attic ran the length of the house but that only about a third of it had been boarded over. Most of it was being used for storage, the boxes gathering dust. Just as Maggie had described, there was no skylight and no way out. So could Paul have used it as a temporary hiding place? Why would he even do that? Why would he want his wife to think he'd disappeared? As I looked around, I figured the theory was possible – there was certainly enough room up here – but I couldn't see the motivation for doing so yet. I needed to find out more about Paul, about the marriage, about him as a father and a husband, and once I returned to the living room, I'd try to drill down into that detail. But, even if I *did* manage to zero in on a reason for him to come up here, to hide, wait for a point at which he could exit the house unseen, it didn't explain why Maggie hadn't heard the ladder. I'd

noted the harsh, metallic rattle it had made as I'd opened it out. I'd noted too that there was no way to lock the hatch from inside the attic.

He hadn't come up here.

I climbed back down and closed the hatch, then went into Paul and Maggie's bedroom. It was a good size with a pretty bay window that looked out across a series of rooftops towards Wimbledon Common. There were wardrobes against one wall, a dressing table next to the window, and the door to the ensuite in the corner. I opened up the wardrobes and found Paul's clothes: a couple of suits, some trousers, some shirts, name-brand sweaters. Below, lined up, were four pairs of his shoes. They sat on a big box and, when I flipped the lid up, I could see more of Paul's clothes packed away inside. Three months in, it was clear Maggie hadn't wanted to consign any of her husband's belongings to storage yet. That wasn't unusual. If anything, in missing persons, it was more unusual when families got rid of things quickly.

I went through the wardrobe, checked the dressing table and then tried the drawers in the bedside tables. One didn't make any noise at all; one caught on its runner and gave out an irritated squeak. This was the one Paul's pills had been in. They were still in there now, along with piles of junk. I sifted through the junk first, found nothing, and then opened up the box of pills. It contained a half-used tray: one row gone, the other still waiting to be taken.

I put them back and walked over to the ensuite. The units were modern, full of clean lines. A bath was on my right and a shower beyond that, its glass door folded back and, in a basket next to the toilet, were a series of crossword books. I picked a couple out: some were almost entirely full, others newer and had barely been started; a pen with *Tarrington Motors* printed on it had been clipped to one of the pages.

That was where Paul had worked: a used-car dealership with showrooms all across the south-east, including the main branch in Croydon, where Paul had been employed as the sales director. I'd pulled finances for the Conisters through an old source I'd used as a journalist, and while they weren't rolling in money, they were doing pretty well: Paul was making £62,100 a year, plus bonuses; Maggie was on £38,983 as Head of English at a school in Putney; they had savings, a few, decent-sized investments, no debt, no suspicious activity in their bank accounts, and they'd been able to afford a £750,000 house in Wimbledon. There were bigger houses on their road, and there were better-paying jobs in their fields of work, but whatever had happened to Paul Conister, I didn't think it was to do with money.

I took some pictures of the ensuite and the main bedroom on my phone and then moved along the hallway to Katie's room. It was untidy, drawers still open, a few clothes spilling out, and her bed was unmade. At any other time, going through the underwear drawer of a twenty-year-old would have felt completely inappropriate, but this was just work: it was a black-and-white search for evidence, minutiae, any small clue I could use in my search for Paul Conister. When I was done with her chest of drawers and her wardrobe, I went to a series of canvases stacked against the wall, in the corner of the room. Katie was studying at the Slade School of Fine Art, and I could see why.

I dropped to my haunches.

She used oils and specialized in portraits. I didn't recognize most of the people she'd painted, but I recognized her father: he was right at the back of the pile, half turned to her, a smile on his face. It was clearly him: with what amounted to little more than a few brushstrokes, she'd brilliantly captured his slightly uneven nose, his thinning hairline, the

stubble that was in evidence in all the photographs I'd seen of him, and the way it was darkest around the wheel of his chin. She had talent, that much was obvious, but perhaps that talent felt more like a curse now. I was willing to bet that it was the reason her father was buried at the back of the pile: she'd painted him so perfectly, it hurt her to look at it.

Again, I took photographs and then finished up in Seb's room: it too was a mess, but the mess was mostly centred on his desk, where there were videogame boxes, a television, a headset, an Xbox and a controller.

I went back through the rooms again, examining the windows, and saw that all of them – as Maggie had already told me – would have been impossible to lock from the outside. The main bedroom, as well as Katie's, looked out over the back garden, and directly beneath the sills was the conservatory. It went from one edge of the house to the other and, through the glass roof, I could see Katie on her phone, in the same seat as before. Maggie had moved outside, into the sun-dappled garden, and was cutting the heads off dead flowers. I watched them for a while, and then returned my thoughts to the conservatory: Paul must have got out somehow, but if he'd exited out of either the main bedroom or Katie's, he'd have landed on the conservatory. Would it have been strong enough to take his weight? Probably, but if he went that way, he would have dropped down into the garden, and – given that the living room and conservatory were joined, and that the TV was in the living room – Maggie would surely have seen him at some point. It was early April when he disappeared, so the garden would have been dark by eight thirty, but I still felt sure Maggie would have clocked the movement out there, even if she'd been engrossed in answering emails.

Unless he waited until she came looking for him.

That would have given him the opportunity he needed,

because while she was on the stairs, she'd have had no view of the garden or the conservatory, and he could have made a break for it then. But even if he had, it still didn't explain how he had re-secured the window from the outside.

I moved back out to the landing.

Seb's room was the only one that looked out over the front of the house: on the other side of his window was a slanted roof, which was much more accessible than the conservatory, and from there it was only a small drop on to the pillared porch, and perhaps another ten to twelve feet on to the driveway. As I studied this other route out, I realized that, if I was willing to believe that Paul's escape – for whatever reason – had happened here, it meant he'd made it out of the house that night by creeping *behind* his son without Seb ever noticing he was there.

I glanced at the desk.

At the games, the headset.

All of it was tucked away in the corner, and when Seb was seated and facing the monitor, absorbed in *Call of Duty*, his back faced the door and most of the window.

That made the idea conceivable, just about.

But, again, it didn't explain how the window was secure when Maggie had come up to look for Paul – unless I was willing to believe something much more troubling.

That Paul really *had* come out this way.

And his son had helped cover it up.

5

'Did Paul ever have any run-ins with anyone?'

I was back downstairs, in the heat of the conservatory. The sun had skittered behind clouds but it was still warm; while I'd been upstairs, someone had brought in a fan and now it was doing rotations, back and forth.

'No.' Maggie shook her head. 'Paul was quiet, understated, but he was fun. Like I said earlier, he wasn't the type to play big, elaborate practical jokes, and he wasn't the type of man who would ever choose to be front and centre of the action, but he had a great sense of humour.' She looked at Katie. 'Didn't he, Kay?'

A smile traced Katie's lips. 'It depends if you like dad jokes.'

But it was said with affection.

'He was just a really kind person,' she added.

'How did he find working in sales?'

Maggie could see where I was heading. 'You mean, you can't be kind and gentle if you're a salesman?' It was her turn to smile. 'I know, it seems an alien concept to me too, but Paul seemed to manage it. He started out at a showroom down in Leatherhead but he hated it there. They sold these rusted-out old bangers and he had to stand on the forecourt and pretend they were brilliant. That always made him uncomfortable. That was part of the reason he went for the job at Tarrington. Paul told me that, within the second-hand car industry, they'd always had a good reputation – honest, no sales crap, no hard selling, you know the sort of stuff.'

'And from there he worked his way up?'

'He was a good salesman – a successful one, I mean – *because* he didn't bother with the usual rubbish. People warmed to him and they trusted him not to screw them over. That was what got him the numbers, and eventually got him promotions.'

'So no run-ins with anyone at work?'

'No.'

'He didn't mention any difficult customers?'

'No, nothing like that.'

'Would he have done, do you think?'

She nodded. 'Definitely. Even as the kids got older, we've always had the rule that we sit down to dinner together, as a four. Dinner is where we tend to thrash things out, get things off our chests. Of course, we talk about lots of other things as well, but Paul would leave his work at the dinner table if he could, even if he'd had a bad day. He hated bringing his work home. Once we'd eaten, we'd just settle down in front of the box, or maybe he'd help the kids with their homework, or he'd go upstairs and play *Fifa* with Seb – he was terrible at it, but he made himself learn the basics because he said it would only be a few years before both the kids had left home.' She paused, a tremor passing through her throat, because her new reality had come into focus: eventually, the kids were still going to leave home.

And now it would only be her left behind.

I gave her a moment, watched her wipe her eyes again, waited as Katie brought a box of tissues over, then said, 'What about a social life? Did he go out with mates?'

'A little here and there,' Maggie said.

'He didn't have lots of friends?'

'No, it wasn't that. There was a whole crowd of them that grew up going to Fulham games at Craven Cottage, so he'd

meet up with them and go along to home games on a Saturday. He'd meet up with a few of the guys at other times too, although a lot of them started their families later than us, so they're a bit more tied down. He'd have work events, the occasional dinner – he wasn't *a*social at all. What I meant was that he generally preferred quiet nights in. He liked to read as well. The dream for him was a holiday with the kids somewhere nice and hot where he could sit in the shade at the pool, with a big beer and a good book.'

I changed direction. 'When was the last time the police were in touch?'

Maggie took a long breath, as if the answer hurt, and then Katie said, 'Mum is too nice to say, so I'll say it for her: it feels like they've totally forgotten about us. In fact, they probably have. The last call we had from anyone was – what, Mum? May?'

Maggie nodded. 'Late May, yeah.'

Over six weeks ago.

'What did they say?' I asked.

'Nothing,' Maggie continued. 'They just told us they were still looking for Paul – but it felt like a lie and that's clearly what it was, because we've heard absolutely nothing since.' She stopped, obviously trying to control her frustration. 'Look, I know they have a tough job, but I honestly believe that part of the problem we've had with them is trying to convince them that it actually happened how we said it did. I mean, I called them about an hour after Paul went upstairs. That's how seriously *I* was taking it.'

'You only waited an hour?'

'Yes. I *knew* something was up. I mean, I've been proven right, haven't I? But I just knew. Paul disappearing like that. It wasn't normal. So that's why I called the police so soon after – and initially they were really good about it. In fact,

they sent someone around straight away. I remember thinking that was one tiny crumb of comfort, because it meant they were taking it as seriously as we were – as we needed them to. But then, when this guy, this detective, started asking us questions, I could see it changing. He just looked at Katie and me like we were insane.'

I turned to Katie. 'You came home from your friend's?'

'As soon as Mum called me.'

'I remember saying to him,' Maggie went on, '"This is what happened – Paul went upstairs and he disappeared," and the guy was just, like, "I'm sure he did." I think, because it seems so bizarre and unlikely to them, they've basically written it off as some minor domestic thing. Like he got pissed off with us all and just walked out.'

'You said this guy was a detective?'

'Yes.'

'What was his name?'

'Uh, Fox,' Maggie said. 'Darren Fox.'

I wrote down his name. I didn't plan on calling him – not unless I had no other choice – but it was useful to build a trail from the night Paul vanished. I'd noted Fox's name down for another reason too: it was highly unusual for the Met to send *anyone* out in circumstances like this, especially after only a few hours. Usually, they'd ask the family to come to the station and fill in the missing persons report there. In fact, off the top of my head, I struggled to recall a single time I'd ever heard of this happening, and I'd definitely never heard of a detective being asked to do the initial form-filling, unless the victim happened to be especially high profile. The donkey work was always done by uniforms, then, if alarm bells started ringing, that was when it got kicked up the chain. I circled Darren Fox's name and said to Maggie, 'This detective – had you ever met him before? Ever heard Paul talk of him?'

'Paul? Why would he be talking about a policeman?'

'I don't know,' I admitted. 'Again, I'm just thinking aloud here.'

Maggie shook her head. 'No. Never.'

'Okay. And Paul left his mobile phone behind, is that right?'

Maggie nodded. 'Yes.'

'He didn't take anything – an iPad, a laptop?'

'No.'

'What about Seb?' I asked. 'He definitely didn't hear anything?'

'No,' Maggie said again.

'He didn't hear his dad out on the landing?'

Or actually in his bedroom.

'No, he was playing his game,' Maggie said.

'He's at school today, I guess?'

'Yeah. He finishes at three thirty, but he's got football from four until six. Did you want to speak to him? I'd be happy to bring him to you. You're only in Ealing, right?'

'Do you think he'd maybe have ten minutes after school?'

She shrugged. 'I'm sure he would. It's a school football match, so all he'll be doing is hanging around there until it starts. I can text him and ask him to meet you.'

'Great.'

'At the front of the school?'

'Wherever suits him.'

'I know he'll want to help you,' Maggie said.

I just nodded. *I guess we'll see.*

6

Seb Conister was every inch the fifteen-year-old boy: he followed a wave of other kids out of the school gates, one shirt tail out, his tie loosened, his shoes frilled with mud. On his back was a plain blue rucksack with graffiti – in what looked like white Tippex – all over it. He stopped, looking for me, and when I raised a hand, he trudged over, his dark fringe falling in front of his eyes.

'Hi, Seb. I'm David.'

I held out a hand to him and he shook it, tentatively.

'Where's the best place for us to talk?'

He glanced over his shoulder, to the crowds pouring out of the entrance, but I didn't see anything suspicious in it: not only was it likely to be embarrassing for him to have an adult waiting outside, especially in his fourth year of senior school, he was probably also keen to avoid questions among his peers about why. Maggie had told me that Seb had taken his father's disappearance hard, that he'd been bullied about it at school as well, and my being here could exacerbate both of those things.

There was a teachers' car park at the side of the school with a low wall circling it. I suggested we move there, where he was unlikely to be seen by any of his mates, and where he could still keep an eye on the football pitches.

'Thanks for talking to me, Seb,' I said.

He shrugged. 'Mum said I had to.' He looked up at me from under his fringe. 'I've got football at four.'

'I know. I won't make you late, I promise.' He glanced

from me to the football pitches as if he didn't believe me. I asked, 'Has your mum told you much about me?'

'She said you find people.'

'That's right. People like your dad.'

'Are you as useless as the police?'

'I wouldn't be standing here if I thought I was.'

'So they've just given up?'

'I don't know,' I said. 'I hope not.'

'But they have.'

'I think they've hit a dead end.'

'And you're going to find Dad, are you?'

'I hope so.'

He just shook his head.

'You don't think I can?' I asked him.

'I don't know. But it's a bit fucking late now.'

He looked up at me again. He acted like he didn't care about me taking on his father's case, or wasn't affected by the failure of the Met to find Paul, but he did. It was laced to the anger in his words. He was a kid who was hurting, who'd been hurt repeatedly since April, and he didn't know how to handle it. I thought again about the idea that he had some knowledge of his father's disappearance, that he may somehow have been involved, and – here, now – it suddenly felt less credible. He didn't seem like a boy who was harbouring a secret. He seemed like a boy who was grieving.

'Your mum said you didn't hear anything that night?'

He shook his head.

'You had headphones on?'

'Head*set*.'

'Headset,' I corrected myself. 'When did you realize something was up?'

'I don't know. When Mum came in, I guess.'

'Your dad hadn't been into your room before that?'

He looked at me like I was trying to trick him. 'No,' he said. 'Of course he didn't come into my room.'

I changed tack. 'Were you and your dad close?'

He shrugged again and this time I waited him out. When I didn't ask a follow-up question, his eyes shifted to me and he seemed so young for a second: a kid, scared and confused, wanting to hit out at someone, anyone, at any*thing*, but not exactly certain why.

'He was my dad,' he said softly.

I didn't say anything.

'I don't know if we were close or not.' He shrugged yet again: it was a defence mechanism, a way to cope. 'We had arguments about all sorts of shit – mostly about how much time I spent playing games – but, you know . . .' He halted.

He was my dad. I loved him.

'When was the last time you saw him?'

'At dinner.'

'So you finished dinner and then went upstairs?'

'I had to wash up. Mum and Dad always make us do chores.'

'Where did your dad go while you were washing up?'

He opened his hands out. *I don't know.*

I didn't blame him for not remembering: not only was I asking him to go back in his life three months, but what his dad and his mum were doing in the minutes and hours after dinner that night wouldn't have seemed remotely important at the time. It was just routine, and we look least closely at the people we know best.

'Can you remember what your dad was like in the weeks before he disappeared?' I got out my notebook and flipped to a page I'd filled with the answers Maggie and Katie had given me to the same question. *He just seemed normal*, Katie had said. *He was just Paul*, Maggie had added afterwards. *He*

never changed. Every day he was just solid. Dependable. He never panicked about anything, hardly ever lost his temper. He would always see clearly. I'd underlined that last part, because somehow it seemed important: was he seeing clearly the night he went missing? Was that why he vanished so suddenly? What could have been the catalyst?

'He was normal,' Seb answered, echoing his sister.

'He didn't seem quieter? Angrier? More emotional?'

He shook his head.

'You don't remember him saying anything to you?'

'Like what?'

'Like maybe he was worried about something?'

'No.' Stark, definitive.

From a building at the edge of the football pitches, boys started to emerge. Seb noticed them and scooped his bag off the floor. It wasn't zipped all the way up and I could see an orange kit inside.

'I've got to go,' he said. He got down off the wall.

'If you think of anything,' I said, 'here's my number.'

I handed him a business card.

He took it, studied it for a moment and then glanced at me. This time, there was something different about him. I couldn't put my finger on what, but it passed across his face like a change of light, and – even though he already had his bag over his shoulder, and even though he knew he was going to be late for his football match – he didn't move. Instead, he gently rocked from foot to foot, as if uncertain.

'Is everything okay, Seb?'

'I saw someone,' he said.

'What do you mean?'

'The night Dad went missing.'

I took a step closer. 'Who did you see?'

'I don't know,' he said, his voice trailing off. He'd been

staring at the floor, but now he looked up. 'It was before Dad went missing. I was in my bedroom, waiting for my friends to get online, and I looked out and saw a guy outside the house.'

'You didn't know who the guy was?'

'No. It was too dark.'

'You haven't seen him since?'

'No.'

I wondered for a moment whether it had been Darren Fox, the detective who'd come to the house that night, and whether Seb had got his times mixed up. Maybe he'd been mistaken; maybe he'd looked out and seen the man outside the house *after* Paul went missing, not before. But, if it had been, Seb would have recognized the cop as soon as he came inside the house.

'So what was this man doing?'

Seb shrugged. 'Nothing.'

'Just standing there?'

'Yeah. Just standing on the opposite side of the road.'

'Could he have been waiting for someone?'

Seb's eyes shifted again, out to the football field, and his expression dissolved. 'This is why I didn't say anything,' he muttered, 'because he *could* have been waiting for someone.'

'But you don't believe he was?'

'No,' he said, shaking his head.

'What do you think he was doing?'

'I think he was watching our house.'

7

On a normal day, Wimbledon to Ealing should only have taken me forty minutes, but it wasn't a normal day: traffic was backed up all along Gunnersbury Avenue, so it was after five thirty when I finally got home, hot, frustrated, and still thinking about what Seb had told me. I pulled on to the driveway to find the FOR SALE sign had fallen over for the hundredth time: it seemed a pretty accurate metaphor for the entire selling process. I'd had a slew of offers since putting the house on the market back in January, but only one – in March – had come remotely close to the asking price; I'd accepted that, and everything had gone like clockwork until early June when, a week shy of exchanging contracts, the buyer suddenly pulled out.

I righted the FOR SALE sign and headed to the house.

It wasn't that I hated it here – it was the house that my wife, Derryn, and I were going to start a family in, and her memory was still written into every surface – it was just that I'd had a case that had tainted some of those memories. It had tainted them so profoundly I couldn't get past them any more, and selling and starting over again somewhere else – albeit without the woman I loved – felt like the next best option.

On the floor, in the hallway, was a plain, brown A4 envelope. I picked it up. Written on the front was *Raker*. There were no other markings, but I knew what it was even before I ripped it open: a missing persons report, two months of mobile phone statements for Paul Conister, and the same for the landline at the house too.

I showered and changed, grabbed a beer from the fridge and went through to the back deck. Sunlight was cutting across the garden, painting one half of the decking a pale orange. I sat in the shade with my laptop and started with the phones. Both statements – mobile and landline – covered February, March and the days leading up to 8 April, when Paul went missing. I started with the mobile, because that was normally where the bulk of activity was located, but very quickly the search ground to a halt: I pulled my laptop in and cross-checked numbers on the statements with Google searches, and a lot of the calls were work-related. Personal calls tended to be with Maggie, the kids, and the friends Paul attended Fulham matches with, whose contact details Maggie had given me. There were a few question marks – numbers that I couldn't find an immediate match for, and which I would have to chase up – but I was surprised how little there was to get my teeth into. I was less surprised by how little there was on the landline statements: only six outgoing calls were made, all to Maggie's mother. Incoming calls were few and far between too: there had only been five, and four of the numbers were withheld, which probably meant they were sales calls. These days, decent leads in landline statements were virtually non-existent.

I spent thirty minutes on the phone to Maggie, and then another ten talking to a second contact of mine, ticking off the remaining queries I'd been left with.

Inside an hour I was done.

The phones were worthless.

I turned to the missing persons report.

Paul had vanished on the night of Thursday 8 April. The night before he'd been to a Tarrington Motors corporate event at a central London restaurant called Bartinelli's, on the bank of the Thames. I'd been to Bartinelli's before a number