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The Keeper

Written by Luke Delaney

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THE KEEPER

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Thomas Keller walked along the quiet suburban street in Anerley, south-east London, an area that provided affordable housing to those attracted to the capital who discovered that they could only afford to live on its edges, financially excluded from the very things they had come to London for in the first place. He knew Oakfield Road well, having walked its length several times over the previous few weeks and he knew in which house Louise Russell lived.

Keller was cautious. Although confident he would draw little attention in his Post Office uniform, this was not his normal route. Someone might realize he shouldn't be there and that the mail had already been delivered earlier that morning, but he couldn't wait any longer – he needed Louise Russell *today*.

As he approached number 22 he made sure to drop post through the letter boxes of neighbouring houses, just in case some bored resident had nothing to do other than spy on the street where nothing happened anyway. As he posted junk mail his eyes flicked at the windows and doors of the street's ugly new brick houses, built for practicality with no thought of individuality or warmth. Their design provided excellent privacy, however, and that had made Louise Russell even more attractive to him.

His excitement and fear were rising to levels he could barely control, the blood pumping through his arteries and veins so fast it hurt his head and blurred his vision. He quickly checked inside his postal delivery sack, shuffling the contents around, moving the junk mail aside, touching the items he had brought with him for reassurance – the electric stun-gun he'd bought on one of his rare holidays outside of Britain, the washing-up liquid bottle that contained chloroform, a clean flannel, a roll of heavy-duty tape and a thin blanket. He would need them all soon, very soon.

Only a few steps to the front door now and he could sense the woman inside, could taste and smell her. The architecture of the soulless house meant that once he had reached the front door he could not be seen from the street and nor could Louise Russell's red Ford Fiesta. He held his hand up to ring the doorbell, but paused to steady himself before pressing the button attached to the door frame, in case he needed to persuade her to open the door to him. After what felt like hours he finally pressed it and waited, until a jerky shadow moved from the bowels of the house towards the front door. He stared at the opaque glass window in the door as the shadow took on colour and the door began to open without hesitation or caution. He hadn't had to speak after all. Now at last she was standing in front of him with nothing between the two of them, nothing that could keep them apart any longer.

He stood silently, in awe of her. It felt as if her clear, shining green eyes were pulling him forward, towards her glowing skin, her pretty feminine face. She was only a little smaller than he, about five foot six and slim, with straight brown hair cut into what was nearly a bob. She was about the same age as he was, twenty-eight years old. He began to tremble, but not with fear any more, with joy. She smiled and spoke to him. 'Hi. Do you have something for me?'

'I've come to take you home, Sam,' he told her. 'Just like I promised I would.'

Louise Russell smiled through her confusion. 'I'm sorry,' she said, 'I don't think I understand.'

She saw his arm moving quickly towards her and tried to step back, away from the threatening-looking black box he held in his hand, but he'd anticipated she would and he stepped forward to match her stride. When the box touched her chest it felt as if she'd been hit by a wrecking ball. Her feet left the ground as she catapulted backwards and landed hard on the hallway floor. For a few blissful moments she remembered nothing as her world turned to black, but unconsciousness spared her from reality all too briefly. When her eyes opened again she somehow knew she hadn't been out for long and that she was still unable to command her own movements as her body remained in spasm, her teeth clenched together, preventing her from screaming or begging.

But her eyes were her own and they could see everything as the man dressed like a postman busied himself around her prone body. His stained, buckled teeth repulsed her, as did the odour of his unwashed body. As his head passed close to her face she could see and smell his short, unkempt brown hair, strands of which had stuck to his forehead with sweat. His skin was pale and unhealthy and appeared quite grey, marked with acne and chicken-pox scars. His hands were bony and ugly, too long and thin, the skin almost transparent like an old person's. Long dirty fingernails fidgeted at things he was taking from his post-bag.

Everything about him made her want to turn from him, to push him away, but she was trapped in the unrelenting grip of whatever he'd touched her with, unable to do anything but watch the nightmare she was at the centre of. And all the time he spoke to her using the name of another as the pictures adorning the walls she knew so well stared down at her – happy photographs of her with her husband, her family, her friends. How many times had she passed the pictures and not taken time to look? Now, paralysed on

the floor of her own home, her sanctuary, the same pictures mocked her from above. This couldn't be happening, not here – not in her home.

'It'll be all right, Sam,' he promised. 'We'll get you home as soon as we can, OK. I'll get you in the car and then it's only a short trip. Please don't be scared. There's no need to be scared. I'm here to look after you now.'

He was touching her, his damp hands stroking her hair, her face and all the time he smiled at her, his heavy breaths invading her senses and turning her stomach. She watched through wild eyes as he took hold of her arms and crossed them at the wrists over her chest, his fingers lingering on her breasts. She watched as he began to unroll a length of wide, black tape from a thick roll he'd brought with him. She prayed silently inside her frozen body, prayed that her husband would appear in the doorway and beat this animal away from her. She prayed to be free from this hell and the hell that was about to happen because now she knew, she understood clearly, he was going to take her with him. Her pain and terror weren't going to be over quickly, in a place she had no fear of. No, he was going to take her away from here, to a place she could only imagine the horror of. A place she might never leave, alive or dead.

Through her physical and mental agony she suddenly began to feel her body's control returning to her, the muscles relaxing, her jaw and hands beginning to unclench, her spine beginning to loosen and straighten, the unbearable cramp in her buttocks finally receding, but she was betrayed by her own recovery as her lungs allowed a long breath to escape. He heard her.

'No, no. Not yet, Sam,' he told her. 'Soon, but for the moment you need to relax and let me take care of everything. I swear to you everything will be just the way we wanted it to be. You believe that, don't you, Sam?'

His voice was a menacing mix of apparent genuine concern,

even compassion and a threatening tone that matched the deep hate in his eyes. If she could have answered him she would have agreed with anything he said, so long as he would let her live. She felt rape was a certainty now, her mind instinctively preparing her for that, but her very life, her existence, she would do everything she could to preserve that: she would do anything he asked.

Carefully placing the tape on the floor next to her, he took a washing-up liquid bottle from his bag and a rag. He squirted a clear liquid on the rag. 'Don't fight this, Sam. Just breathe normally, it's better that way.' Even before the rag covered her mouth and nose she could smell its pungent hospital aroma. She tried to hold her breath but could only manage a few seconds, then the chloroform fumes were sweeping into her lungs and invading her bloodstream. She sensed unconsciousness and welcomed it, but before the sanctity of sleep could descend he pulled it away. 'Not too much,' he said. 'You can have some more when you're in the car, OK?'

Louise tried to look at him, to focus on his movements, but his image was distorted and his voice warped. She blinked to clear her sight as the first effects of the chloroform began to lessen. She recovered in time to see him binding her wrists together with the tape, the pain of the adhesive being pressed into her skin cutting through even the chloroform. Then his hands moved towards her face, holding something between them. She tried to turn away, but it was useless as she felt the tape being plastered across her mouth, the panic of impending suffocation pressing down on her empty lungs like a ton weight, the effects of the chloroform preventing her thinking rationally or calming herself so she could breathe.

'Relax,' he assured her. 'Relax and breathe through your nose, Sam.' She tried, but panic and fear still refused to allow any normal sense of self-preservation to ignite.

Suddenly he moved away from her, rifling through her handbag and then the set of drawers next to the front door.

Moments later he returned, having found what he was looking for – her car keys.

‘We need to go now, Sam,’ he told her. ‘Before they try and stop us again. Before they try and keep us apart. We need to hide from them, together.’

He struggled to get her to her feet, pulling her torso off the ground by gripping and tugging at her top, her near dead weight almost too much for his slight physique to bear. Finally he managed to wrap her right arm around his neck and began to haul her from the ground.

‘You have to help me, Sam. Help me get you up.’

Through her confusion and fear she could hear the growing anger in his voice and something told her she had to get up if she was to survive the next few moments of this hell. She struggled to make her legs work, the tape around her wrists preventing her from using her arms for balance or leverage, her unsteady feet slipping on the wooden floor.

‘That’s good, Sam,’ the madman encouraged her. ‘Almost there, just a little bit more.’

She sensed she was on her feet now, but the world was spinning wildly, making her unsure of anything as she began to walk, moving forward into the bright light beyond the home that should have been her refuge. The light and air helped clear her mind further and she could see she was standing at the rear of her own car while this man fumbled with her keys. She heard the alarm being deactivated and the hatchback door popping open. ‘You’ll be safe in here, Sam. Don’t worry, we haven’t got far to go.’

She realized his intentions but only managed to mumble ‘No,’ behind her taped mouth before he grasped her shoulders and steered her towards the opening, making her lose her balance and fall into the back of the car. She lay there, her eyes pleading with the man not to take her from her home. It was the last thing she remembered before the chloroform-soaked rag once more pressed into her face, only

this time he held it there until unconsciousness rescued her from perdition.

He looked at her for as long as he dared, all the while smiling, almost laughing with happiness. He had her back now, now and for ever. Pulling the thin blanket from his sack, he carefully spread it over her prostrate body before closing the hatch door. He jumped into the driver's seat and struggled to put the key in the ignition, excitement making his hands shake almost uncontrollably. At last he managed to start the car and drive away calmly, slowly so as not to draw attention. Within minutes he would swap Louise Russell's car for his own and then, soon after that, he would be at home with Sam. At home with Sam for the rest of her life.

Detective Inspector Sean Corrigan sat inside court three at the Central Criminal Court, otherwise known as the Old Bailey, named after the City of London street it dominated. Despite all the romance and mystique of the famous old court, Sean disliked it, as did most seasoned detectives. It was difficult to get to and there was absolutely no parking within miles. Getting several large bags of exhibits to and from the Bailey was a logistical nightmare no cop looked forward to. Other courts across London might be more difficult to get a conviction at, but at least they provided some damn parking.

It was Wednesday afternoon and he'd been hanging around the court doing little more than nothing since Monday morning. Sean scanned the courtroom, oblivious to its fine architecture. It was the people inside the room he was interested in.

Finally the judge put the Probation Service report to one side and looked over the court before speaking. 'I have considered all submissions in this matter, and have given particular weight to the psychological reports in relation to Mr Gibran's mental state now and at the time these crimes – these serious

and terrible crimes – were committed. In the case of this defendant, on the basis of the opinions of the expert witnesses for the defence, namely those of the psychologists who examined Mr Gibran, it is my conclusion that Mr Gibran is not fit to stand trial at this time and should be treated for what are apparently serious psychological conditions. Does anybody have any further submissions before we conclude this matter?’

Sean felt his excitement turn to heavy disappointment, his stomach knotted and empty. His attention was immediately pulled back to proceedings as the prosecution barrister leapt to his feet.

‘My Lord,’ he pleaded. ‘If I could draw your attention to page twelve of the probation report, it may assist the court.’

The court fell silent again except for more shuffling of papers as the judge found page twelve and read. After a few minutes he spoke to the prosecuting barrister. ‘Yes, thank you Mr Parnell, that does indeed assist the court.’

The judge looked to the back of the court where Gibran sat motionless and calm. ‘Mr Gibran,’ the judge addressed him, speaking as softly as distance would allow, already treating him like a psychiatric patient instead of a calculating murderer. ‘It is the decision of the court that in this case you will not be standing trial for the crimes you have been charged with. There exist serious doubts as to your ability to comprehend what would be happening to you, and as a result you would not be in a position to defend yourself adequately from those charges. I have therefore decided that you should receive further psychiatric treatment. However, in view of serious concerns expressed by the Probation Service that you pose both a danger to yourself and the public . . .’

Sean’s emptiness left him as quickly as it had come, squeezed out by the excitement again spreading through his core. He didn’t care who the turnkeys were, prison officers or nurses, so long as Gibran was locked away behind bars, for ever.

The judge continued: ‘. . . I cannot ignore the risk you represent and must balance that with your need to receive treatment. As a result I am ordering you to be detained under the Mental Health Act in a secure psychiatric unit for an indefinite period. Should you in the future be deemed to have made sufficient progress towards recovery then it will be considered again as to whether you should stand trial or indeed be released back into the community. Very good.’

With that the judge stood to signify an end to proceedings. Everyone in the court rose simultaneously to show their respect. Sean was the last to his feet, a suppressed smile thinning his lips as he looked to the dock and whispered under his breath, ‘Have fun in Broadmoor, you fuck.’ His eyes remained locked on Gibran’s as the guards led the defendant from the dock towards the holding cells beneath the old court. Sean knew it would almost certainly be the last time he ever saw Sebastian Gibran.

The events of the past few months raced through Sean’s mind as he gathered his files, stuffing them into his old, worn-out briefcase that looked more like a child’s oversized satchel. He headed for the exit keen to avoid the handful of journalists who had been allowed into the court, stopping en route to shake the prosecuting counsel’s hand and to thank him for his efforts, as unimpressive as they were. He walked from the courtroom at a decent pace, scanning the second-floor hallway for journalists or family members of Gibran’s victims, neither of whom he wanted to speak to now, at least not until he’d spoken to one of his own. He walked briskly through the main part of the court open to the public and into the bowels of the Bailey, a labyrinth of short airless, lightless corridors that eventually led him to a Victorian staircase that he climbed until he reached an inconsequential-looking door. Sean pushed the door open and entered without hesitation, immediately hit by the noise of the chitter-chatter that could barely be heard from the other side of the door.

The little 'police only' canteen was enshrined in the force's myth and legend, as well as serving the best carvery meat in London. It didn't take long for Sean to find Detective Sergeant Sally Jones sitting alone in the tiny warm room, nursing a coffee. She sensed Sean enter and looked straight at him. He knew she would be reading his face, seeking answers to her questions before she asked them. Sean wound and weaved his way through the tightly packed tables and chairs, apologizing when necessary for disturbing the rushed meals of busy detectives. He reached Sally and sat heavily opposite her.

'Well?' Sally asked impatiently.

'Not fit to stand trial.'

'For fuck's sake!' Sally's response was loud enough to make the other detectives in the canteen look up, albeit briefly. Sean looked around the room, a visual warning to everyone not to interfere. 'Jesus Christ,' Sally continued. 'What's the fucking point?'

Sean noticed Sally unconsciously rubbing the right side of her chest, as if she could feel Gibran hammering the knife into her all over again. 'Come on, Sally,' he encouraged. 'We always knew this was a possibility. Once we'd seen the psychiatric reports it was practically a certainty.'

'I know,' Sally agreed with a sigh, still rubbing her chest. 'I was fooling myself that common sense might break out in the judicial system. I should have known better.'

'It's entirely possible he is actually mad.'

'He is completely fucking mad,' Sally agreed again. 'But he's also absolutely capable of standing trial. He knew what he was doing when he did what he did. There were no voices in his head. He's as clever as he is dangerous, he's faked his psych results, made a joke out of their so-called tests. He should stand trial for what he did to . . .' Her voice tailed off as she looked down at the cold coffee on the table in front of her.

‘He’s not getting away with it,’ Sean assured her. ‘While we’re sitting here he’s already on his merry way to the secure wing at Broadmoor. Once you go in there you never come out.’ Some of England’s most notorious murderers and criminals were locked up in Broadmoor; their faces flashed through Sean’s mind: Peter Sutcliffe aka the Yorkshire Ripper, Michael Peterson aka Charles Bronson, Kenneth Erskine aka the Stockwell Strangler, Robert Napper the killer of Rachel Nickell. Sally’s voice brought him back.

‘Gibran killed a police officer and damn nearly killed me. He’ll be a bloody god in there.’

‘Don’t be so sure.’ Sean’s phone began to vibrate in his jacket pocket. The number said ‘Withheld’ meaning it was probably someone calling from their Murder Investigation Team incident room back at Peckham police station. Sean answered without ceremony and recognized the strange mixture of Glaswegian and Cockney at the other end immediately. DS Dave Donnelly wouldn’t have called unless there was good reason.

‘Guv’nor, Superintendent Featherstone wants to see you back here ASAP. Apparently something’s come up that requires our “specialized skill set”.’

‘Meaning we’re the only soldiers left in the box,’ Sean answered.

‘So cynical for one so young.’

‘We’ll be about an hour, travelling time from the Bailey,’ Sean informed him. ‘We’re all finished here anyway.’

‘Finished already?’ said Donnelly. ‘That doesn’t sound good.’

‘I’ll explain when I see you.’ Sean hung up.

‘Problem?’ Sally asked.

‘When is it ever anything else?’

Louise Russell’s eyes began to flicker open, her mind desperately trying to drag her from the chloroform-induced sleep

that held nothing but nightmares of smothering, darkness, a monster in her own home. She tried to see into the gloom of her surroundings, the blinking of her eyes beginning to slow until finally they remained frozen wide open with terror. My God, he had taken her, taken her away from her home, her husband, her life. The fear fired through her like electricity, making her want to jump up and run or fight, but the effects of the chloroform weighed her down. She managed to push herself on to her hands and knees before slumping on to her side, using her forearm as a makeshift pillow. Her breathing was too rapid and irregular, her heartbeat the same. She tried to concentrate on conquering her fear, to slow the rise and fall of her chest. After a few minutes of lying still and calm her breathing became more relaxed and her eyes better able to focus on her new surroundings.

There were no windows in the room and she couldn't see a door, only the foot of a flight of stairs she imagined would lead to a door and a way out. One low-voltage bulb hung from the high ceiling, smeared with dirt, its light just enough for her to see as her eyes began to adjust. As far as she could tell the room was little more than thirty feet wide and long, with cold unpainted walls that looked as if they'd been white-washed years ago, but now the red and greys of old brick were showing through. The floor appeared to be solid concrete and she could feel the cold emanating from it. The only noise in the room was water running down a wall and dripping on to the floor. She felt as if she must be underground, in a cellar or the old wartime bunker of a large house. The room smelled of urine, human excrement and unwashed bodies and, more than anything else, absolute fear.

Louise pulled the duvet that covered her up to her neck against the coldness of her discoveries only to add to her chill. She looked under the duvet and realized all her clothes had been taken and the duvet left in their place. The duvet smelled clean and comforting against the cold stench of the

room, but who would do this, take her from her home, take her clothes, but care enough to leave her a clean duvet to cover herself and keep out the cold? Who and why? She closed her eyes and prayed he hadn't touched her. Her hand slowly moved down her body and between her legs. Fighting the repulsion she touched herself gently. She felt no pain, no soreness, and she was dry. She was sure he hadn't raped her. So why was she here?

As her eyes adjusted further to the gloom she discovered she was lying on a thin single mattress, old and stained. He had left a plastic beaker of what looked and smelled like fresh water, but the thing she noticed most, the one thing that brought tears stinging from her eyes, was when she realized she wasn't just in this terrible room, she was locked in a cage inside the room. All around her was thick wire mesh interwoven through its solid metal frame, no more than six feet long and four feet wide. She was locked inside some sort of animal cage, which meant there were only two possibilities: he'd left her there to die, or he would be coming back, coming back to see the animal he'd caught and caged, coming back to feed his prize, coming back to do whatever he wanted to her.

She wiped her tears on the duvet and once again tried to take in all of her surroundings, looking for any sign of hope. One end of her cage was clearly the way out as it was blocked with a padlocked door. She also noticed what appeared to be a hatch in the side, presumably for the safe passage of food between her and her keeper. Fear swept up from the depths of her despair and overwhelmed her. She virtually leapt at the door, pushing her fingers through the wire mesh and closing her fists around it, shaking the cage wildly, tears pouring down her cheeks as she filled her lungs ready to scream for help. She froze. She'd heard something, something moving. She wasn't alone.

She looked deep into the room, her eyes almost completely

adjusted to the low light levels now, listening for more sounds, praying they wouldn't come, but they did, something moving. Her eyes focused on where the sounds had come from and she could see it, on the opposite side of the room, another cage, as far as she could tell identical to the one she was locked inside. My God was it an animal in there? Was she being kept with a wild animal? Was that why he'd taken her, to give her to this animal? Driven by panic she started shaking her cage door again, although she knew it was futile. The sound of a voice made her stop. A quiet, weak voice. The voice of another woman.

'You shouldn't do that,' the voice whispered. 'He might hear you. You never know when he's listening. If he hears you doing that he'll punish you. He'll punish us both.'

Louise froze, the terrible realization she was not the first he'd taken paralysing her mind and body. She lay absolutely still, listening, disbelieving, waiting for the voice to speak again, beginning to think she had imagined it. She could wait no longer. 'Hello,' she called into the gloom. 'Who are you? How did you get here?' She waited for an answer. 'My name's Louise Russell. Can you tell me your name?'

A short, sharp 'Sssssh,' was the only reply. Louise waited in silence for an eternity.

'We need to help each other,' Louise told the voice.

'I said be quiet,' the voice answered, sounding afraid rather than angry. 'Please, he might be listening.'

'I don't care,' Louise insisted. 'Please, please. I need to know your name.' Frustration brought more tears into her eyes. She waited, staring at the coiled shape lying on the floor in the other cage, until eventually the shape began to unfold and take on a human form.

Louise looked at the young woman now sitting, legs folded under herself in the cage opposite. She looked around and confirmed to herself there were no more cages in the room, her eyes soon returning to the other woman. Louise could

see that she was still pretty, despite her unkempt appearance – her short brown hair tangled and her face pale and dirty, any signs of make-up long since washed away by tears and sweat. She had bruises on her body and face, as well as a badly split lip. She looked to be in her late twenties, slim and as far as Louise could tell from a sitting position, about the same height as she was. In fact almost everything about her was similar to Louise. She couldn't help but notice the other woman had no mattress or duvet, no covers or bedding of any kind, and all she had to wear were her filthy-looking knickers and bra. She looked cold, despite the fact the room was reasonably warm, although Louise couldn't see an obvious source of heating. She guessed the room might be next to a boiler room or maybe the fact they were underground, as she suspected, kept it warmer than outside. But why was this other woman apparently being treated so much worse than she was? Was she being punished? Was that why she wouldn't speak, for fear of further punishment? What would he do to her next – remove her underwear, the final humiliation?

'My name's Karen Green.'

The sound of the voice froze Louise. It took her a few seconds to find her own voice.

'I'm Louise. Louise Russell,' she answered. 'How long have you been here for?'

'I don't know. He's got my watch.'

'Can you remember what day it was when he took you?'

'Thursday morning,' Karen told her. 'What day is it now?'

'I don't know. I can't be sure. I remember it was Tuesday morning when he . . .'

Louise struggled to find the word.

'When he attacked me. Do you know how long I've been here for?'

'Quite a while. Maybe even a day. You've been out the whole time.'

Louise slumped against the wire mesh of her cage, trying

to comprehend the fact she could have been missing for a day and still not been found. And then a more chilling thought swept over her; Karen had been missing for almost a week and yet here she was, rotting in a mesh cage and, up until now, alone – except for him.

‘Do you know what he wants?’ she asked Karen in a sudden panic. ‘Why are we here?’

‘No. I don’t know what he wants, but he always calls me Sam.’

Louise remembered he had called her Sam too. *I’ve come to take you home, Sam. Just like I promised I would.* She felt the sickness rising in her stomach, the foul, bitter bile pushing up through her throat and into her mouth. They were replacements for someone else – replacements for whoever the hell Sam was.

Another wave of exhausting fear washed over her, a tangible, physical pain. They were being held by someone who was insane, someone impossible to reason or rationalize with. Hope drained from her.

Louise looked across at Karen and was reminded of her lack of clothing and the only thing she feared almost as much as death itself. ‘Has he touched you?’ she asked. There was a long silence and she watched Karen shrinking and coiling into the foetal position, hugging herself silently.

‘Not at first,’ Karen answered in little more than a tearful whisper. ‘When I woke up he’d taken my clothes, but I don’t think he’d touched me. He left me a mattress and duvet, like he has for you, but later he took them away and he . . . he started to hurt me. At first he was almost gentle. He injected me with something that stopped me struggling and then he did it. But now he’s always angry with me. He does it to punish me, but I haven’t done anything wrong. I haven’t done anything to make him angry.’

Louise listened as if she was listening to her own future being described, her body stiff with panic, her muscles

cramping with tension. 'What happened to your clothes?' she asked. 'You said he took them when he brought you here, but he gave you back your underwear. Why didn't he give you the rest back?'

'These aren't mine,' Karen explained. 'My first few days here he let me wash, then he gave me some clothes and made me wear them. But last night – I think it was night, he came and took them off me, except for what I'm wearing. I didn't know why he took them until he brought you here.'

Louise too realized why he had taken the clothes and knew that soon she would be wearing them. She retched bile, capillaries in her eyes rupturing, leaving them pink and glassy. The silence was suddenly shattered by the metallic clank of something small and heavy hitting against what sounded like sheet metal. A padlock being opened, Louise guessed, and for a second dared to believe it could be their rescuers. The fear and dread she heard in Karen's voice soon chased her hopes away as she instinctively backed into the furthest corner of her cage.

'He's coming,' Karen told her. 'Don't speak to me now. He's coming.'

Sean and Sally entered their murder inquiry incident room at Peckham police station shortly before four on Wednesday afternoon. The office was both unusually busy and quiet, the detectives from Sean's team taking advantage of the lull between new investigations to catch up on severely overdue paperwork. They hadn't picked up a murder case in weeks, despite there being no shortage to go around. The other Murder teams working South London were getting more than a little annoyed that the regular flow of violent death seemed to be passing Sean's team by. Though glad of the respite, Sean increasingly had the feeling he was being saved for something he knew he wasn't going to like.

As they crossed the room he saw Detective Superintendent

Featherstone through the Perspex of his partitioned office. He caught DS Donnelly's eye as he walked and with a barely noticeable twitch of his head indicated for Donnelly to follow them. As Sean approached Featherstone, he began to get the feeling this was the day he'd been dreading. They entered the office and Featherstone stood to greet them. 'A little bird tells me it didn't go so good at court today,' was Featherstone's hello.

'Depends on your point of view,' Sean answered.

'And what's yours?' Featherstone asked.

'Well, he'll probably spend the rest of his life banged up with the worst of the worst in Broadmoor. That sounds like a result to me.'

'And who would disagree with that point of view?' Featherstone enquired. Sean said nothing, but his eyes flicked towards Sally. 'Nobody gets out of Broadmoor, Sally. That bastard will rot in there. Think of it this way: he's got a life sentence and we didn't even have to go to trial. All it takes is a couple of dimwits on the jury who like the look of him and he walks free. Trust me, Sally, this is an outstanding result.'

Sally was unmoved. 'He should have stood trial,' was all she said.

Sean decided it was time to move the conversation on. Cops never dwelt on old cases long. It didn't matter whether they'd had a good result or a disastrous one; within a few hours of the court's decision the case, though not forgotten, was put aside, rarely to be mentioned again. However, the investigation surrounding Gibran had been significantly different from anything any of them had dealt with. And bad as it had been for the rest of them, it had been much, much worse for Sally – she had almost died, almost been killed in her own home. Physically she had survived, just, but Sean felt that something had died inside her. She'd spent two months in intensive care and then another three with the

hospital general population. A month later she'd gone back to work, but it was too soon and she couldn't cope physically or mentally. A few weeks later she'd returned again and he couldn't persuade her to take more time off, no matter how hard he tried. That was two months ago; nine months after she was attacked. She couldn't hope to have truly recovered in that time.

'There's no point dwelling on what did or didn't happen any longer than we have to. What's done is done. We can't appeal a decision made at committal so we all need to move on.' Sean glanced at Sally, who was silently staring at the floor, then turned to Featherstone. 'I assume you've gathered us together for a reason, boss.'

'Indeed. I've got a missing person for you to find.'

Featherstone's words were greeted with disbelieving silence.

'A what?' Sean queried.

'A missing person,' Featherstone repeated.

'Must be someone very important to have an MIT assigned to their case,' Donnelly surmised.

'Important, no,' Featherstone told them. 'Or at least, not to the general public. No doubt she's important to her family and friends, and certainly to her husband who reported her missing.'

'Are we talking foul play?' Sean asked. 'Is the husband a suspect?'

'Yes to the foul play, no to the husband. He's not a suspect.'

'How long's she been missing for?' Sean continued.

'Best guess is yesterday morning. The husband, John Russell, left her at about eight thirty to go to work and hasn't seen her since,' Featherstone explained. 'He got home at about six that evening and both his wife and her car were missing. Her handbag was there, her mobile phone etc, but Louise wasn't. Clearly something's happened to her and clearly she could be at risk.'

Sean didn't like what he was hearing. Women who ran

off with secret lovers didn't leave their handbags and phones behind. 'How far have we got?' he asked.

'About as far as I've just described,' Featherstone told them. 'The local uniform inspector who picked up the missing persons report didn't like the look of it so he passed it up to their CID office who in turn thought it might be something we'd be interested in.'

'And when or if they find her body, we will be interested,' Donnelly chipped in.

'The idea is we find her before it comes to that,' Featherstone snapped back.

'That's not our brief,' Donnelly continued to argue. 'We deal with murders, nothing else. Why don't they give it to the Serious Crime Group or even leave it with the local CID?'

'Because,' Featherstone explained, 'the powers that be, sitting in their ivory towers in Scotland Yard, have decided to trial a new policy with vulnerable MISPERs who at first sight appear to have come to harm. It's an extension of the murder suppression and prevention programme.'

'Then why not give it to the Murder Suppression Unit?' Donnelly refused to back down. 'Seems tailor-made for them.'

'Not quite their remit,' Featherstone continued. 'They need a suspect to concentrate on before they'll take a job.'

'And we need a body,' Donnelly insisted.

Sean broke the argument up with a question. 'How old is she?'

'Sorry?' Featherstone's mind was still tussling with Donnelly.

'How old is the missing woman?'

Featherstone flicked through the file he'd been holding throughout the meeting. 'Thirty.'

'Prime running-away-with-another-man age,' Donnelly sniffed.

'She hasn't run away,' Sally joined in. 'A woman wouldn't leave so many personal belongings behind unless something had happened.'

'Like what?' Donnelly asked.

'Like she was taken,' Sally answered.

Sean sensed another argument was about to flare. 'We'll look into it,' he announced.

'What?' Donnelly turned to him, indignant.

'Look at it this way,' Sean told Donnelly. 'If we can find her before something happens to her, we'll save ourselves a lot of work.'

'Good,' Featherstone said. 'I want to be regularly updated on this one, Sean. The powers that be are keen for a positive result to keep the media off their backs.' He handed the missing persons report to Sean who passed it on to Sally. 'There are a few photographs of her in the file. The only distinguishing mark is a scar from when she had her appendix removed when she was a teenager.'

'Get some copies of this run up please, Sally, and spread them around the team,' Sean told her. 'Dave can give you a hand.'

Donnelly looked as displeased as he felt. 'Waste of our time,' he insisted. 'She'll be home in a couple of days smelling of aftershave and demanding a divorce.'

Sean gave him a hard look. 'I don't think so,' was all he said. Donnelly knew when to stop pushing and left the office in Sally's wake.

Featherstone waited until they were well out of earshot before speaking again. 'How's Sally?' he asked.

Sean sucked a breath in through his teeth. 'She's getting there,' he answered.

'Bollocks,' snapped Featherstone. 'Any fool can see she's struggling, unsurprisingly.'

'She'll be OK,' Sean assured him, a little disappointed in Featherstone's lack of faith in Sally's ability to recover. 'She needs some time and a decent investigation to take her mind off what happened, that's all.'

'Is that why you so readily agreed to take on a missing persons inquiry?' Featherstone asked. 'To help Sally.'

Sean avoided the question. 'I didn't realize I had a choice.'

'For what it's worth,' Featherstone told him, 'you did have a choice.' Sean said nothing as Featherstone headed out of his office. 'Make sure you keep me posted and if there's anything I can do, give me a call. I know you're allergic to the media, so if you need me to deal with them, no problem.'

Featherstone was halfway out the door when Sean stopped him with a question. 'Do you think she's already dead? Is that why you want me to take this on?'

'I was hoping you would tell me that, Sean,' Featherstone answered. 'And her name's Louise Russell and she's someone's wife, someone's daughter – and if we do our jobs properly, one day she might be someone's mother. I think we all need to remember that, don't you?'

Sean said nothing as he watched Featherstone close the door behind him.

He suddenly felt very alone, sitting in his small warm office, surrounded by cheap furniture and out-dated computers with monitors that belonged in a museum. Even the view out of his window offered nothing but the sight of sprawling Peckham council estates and the travellers' caravan site on the wasteland next to the police station itself. He started to think about Louise Russell, to imagine what had happened to her and why. Where was she now? Was she still alive and if so why? Had somebody taken her, taken her to do horrific things to her? Should they expect a ransom note? No, he didn't think so. This felt like madness, as if madness had come into Louise Russell's life without any warning or reason.

Sean rubbed his face and tried to chase the questions away. She's a missing person, he told himself. Stop treating her like she's dead. But he knew it was pointless – he'd already begun. He'd already begun to think like him. Like the madman who'd taken her.