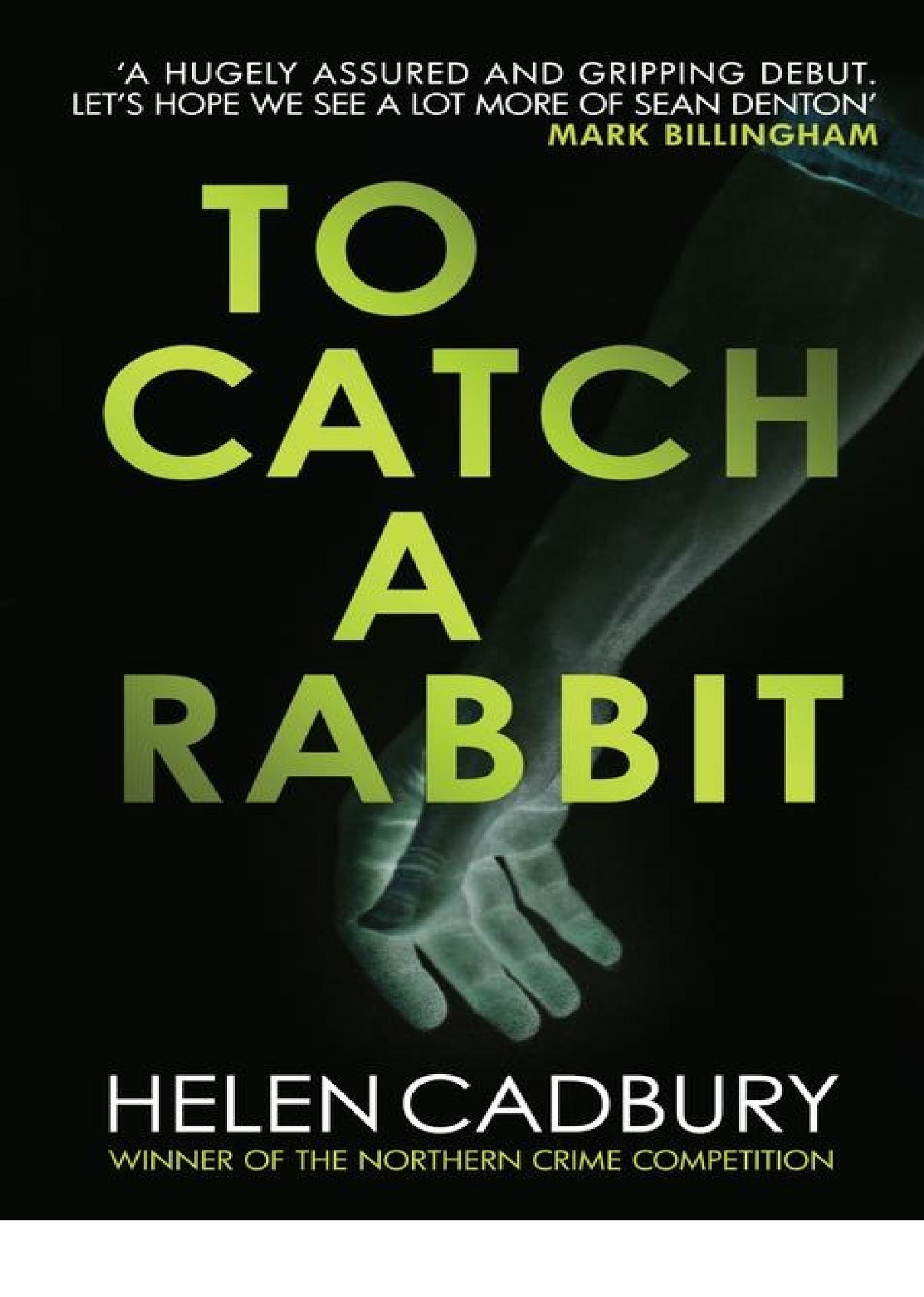


'A HUGEY ASSURED AND GRIPPING DEBUT.
LET'S HOPE WE SEE A LOT MORE OF SEAN DENTON'
MARK BILLINGHAM



**TO
CATCH
A
RABBIT**

HELEN CADBURY

WINNER OF THE NORTHERN CRIME COMPETITION



To Catch a Rabbit

HELEN CADBURY

for Josh, Isaac and Reuben

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SUMMER

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By Helen Cadbury

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CHAPTER ONE

There were two of them. As they came closer, Sean could see that the larger boy had been crying. He was wiping something from his mouth with the back of his hand. The smaller boy was pale, with a hard face. Behind him, a Staffordshire bull terrier pulled on a rope. It wanted to get back up the hill, but the boys were heading straight for Sean.

There had been a frost and Sean's breath hung ahead of him in the still air. He rolled his shoulders back and let his arms fall by his sides. He'd been on a course on dealing with young people. It was important to get the body language right. An open gesture, the trainer said. You had to get the facial expression right too. He adjusted his smile to *inquisitive but friendly*.

'You a copper?'

'Police Community Support Officer Denton. Call me Sean.'

'That a copper?'

'More or less.'

They edged closer, the skinny one shifting his weight from side to side like a toddler needing to pee. Sean thought about crouching down. Height can be an intimidating factor, the trainer had said, but he didn't like the look of the dog.

'She found summat.'

'Who?'

'Ruby did.' The dog squatted on the cracked pavement and a trickle of piss snaked towards Sean's foot. 'Over the ring road. Brandon said you have to go on the fields if you want to catch a rabbit.'

The sickly one gave a numb nod and rubbed his face on his sleeve.

'What did she find?'

'I'll have to show you.'

He turned and let the dog pull him back up the slope towards the bypass. 'Come on,' he called back over his shoulder. 'You better have a look.'

There was a whimper but it wasn't from the dog. Brandon wasn't moving.

'You stay here then, you big pussy, me and the copper'll sort this.'

Sean wasn't sure whether he should go on his own. He was meant to be on patrol with his partner, Carly Jayson, but she had phoned in poorly so there was no one free to cover. It couldn't do any harm to see what the boy had found. He decided to follow; the dog setting the pace. It was an ugly animal, with back legs too thin for its barrel body, a bit of whippet thrown in with the bull terrier.

They passed the recreation ground, where a stack of old pallets, broken chairs and cardboard boxes waited for Bonfire Night. After scrambling up the embankment, Sean looked back. Brandon was sitting on the wall of the rec, bent over. It looked like he was throwing up. The dog sniffed at the dual carriageway and Sean looked at his watch: 08.12 hours. The boy was talking again, as fast as he walked. A gap opened up between the cars and they crossed over.

'We was throwing sticks and she's no good at that, so she went off to sniff around that old snack bar van up there and she wouldn't come back when we shouted for her.'

Sean realised that he should be writing this down. Sounded like evidence, but he wasn't sure o

what. They climbed over the battered metal barrier in the centre of the dual carriageway and reached the lay-by on the other side, crunching over loose stones and broken glass. A hedge had swallowed up the broken remains of a wooden fence. The boy stepped through a gap in it and onto a well-trodden path along the field edge. There, hidden from the road, was a grubby, box-like trailer with faded red lettering. Sean spelt it out in his head: REFRESHMENTS. The boy stopped and yanked hard on the dog's rope.

'Ruby! Stay!'

Sean looked over at whatever it was the dog was straining towards. A pair of feet, naked, an odd colour. Wrong colour. Blue-black like ulcers. He got closer. The girl was sitting on a step at the back of the trailer, leaning on the edge of an open door. She seemed to have folded forwards, as if she was resting her head on her knees. He went closer still, the boy's nervous chatter behind him.

'Brandon thought it were some lass, fallen asleep, said she's going to be cold. He poked a stick at her. She's dead, isn't she?'

The girl was wearing a T-shirt and knickers. Her straight black hair was spread over her face and her cheek rested against her knee. As Sean got nearer, he noticed her blue lips were parted, and he could see her teeth. It was the smell that made the vomit rise in his throat. He turned away fast, drawing quick breaths to keep his breakfast down.

He called it in, as calmly as he could. Gave directions as the boy watched.

'What happens now?' the boy said.

'Some police officers will come.'

'And take her away?'

'Yes. They might want to speak to you.'

'What for?' He pulled the dog closer, coiling the rope in his bony hands.

'Just to ask you some questions.'

'I've told you. Dog found her. There's nowt else.'

'I know, but—'

The boy yanked the dog, 'Hup, Ruby! Hup!'

They ran along the path, her tail wagging with this new game.

'I don't even know your name!' Sean called.

'It's Declan,' he called back. 'But I ain't talking to no other coppers.'

He and Ruby scrambled through the broken fence. Sean looked back at the dead girl. She could wait. He went after Declan but, as he reached the end of the path, his foot slipped on an ice-coated puddle and his leg twisted under him. His knee went down on the jutting edge of a stone. He checked his radio was still in the pocket of his vest and pulled himself up, rubbed his knee and limped towards the lay-by, just in time to see Declan dodging the traffic to the other side. He didn't even know where he lived.

He'd been in the job less than two months. He hoped they'd take that into account back at the station. He got out his notebook, made a wild guess at how to spell the boys' names. What else should he write down? No idea. He tried not to look at the body again, but he needed to see if there was a registration plate. She was there, still and dead, just the wind lifting two strands of hair and blowing it back over her shoulder.

The plate was missing. The only detail he could record was the brand name of the vehicle itself. *Motorhead*? No. He looked again and the word reformed: *Motorchef*. That made more sense. He could feel a hysterical laugh bubbling up inside him. It was just shock. He forced himself to look past the body and saw that the van's interior fittings had been stripped out, the catering equipment

replaced by a mattress.

~~By the time he heard vehicles pulling into the lay-by he was shaking. He hadn't noticed the colour at first, but the longer he stood, the less feeling he had in his feet. Two men got out of their unmarked cars and seemed to be sharing a joke as they shook hands. He recognised Detective Chief Inspector Barry 'Burger' King, limping from a barely recovered stress fracture in his right leg. There was a rumour at Doncaster Central that he'd broken it standing still, his own weight cracking the bone. The other man was thin. He was wearing a green waxed jacket and a tweed flat cap, a black medical bag in his hand. A little rhyme danced across Sean's memory, *Miss Polly had a dolly who was sick sick sick, she called to the doctor to come quick quick quick, the doctor came with his bag and his hat ...*~~

'You've checked for vital signs, I take it?' Burger asked when he reached him. Sean hesitated. It hadn't seemed necessary to check the pulse of someone who was already in a state of rigor mortis. 'And given her mouth-to-mouth? You know you're supposed to do everything possible to preserve life?'

Sean tasted sick rising again as Burger wheezed a laugh through his teeth.

'Huggins can take a look at her. Pathologist.' He added, in answer to a question Sean hadn't voiced.

Huggins approached the body, while Burger held back, casting his eyes over the trailer and taking out a cigarette. The pathologist had a go at lifting her head away from her knees. Sean wanted him to be careful with her, almost called out. But what was the point? She was dead, wasn't she? Her neck was stiff, but Huggins got it far enough up to move her right arm away. The skin inside her elbow was peppered with puncture wounds.

'A tenner says it's a straightforward smack OD. This estate's awash with it,' said DCI King.

'I'm not arguing, Barry. I'll give you an estimated time of death and certify it. Then I need to be off. Crying shame, a young girl like this.' Huggins's fingers reached out and touched her hair.

Another car pulled in and a young woman got out. She had a roll of incident tape, which she started wrapping over the gap in the fence between the field edge and the lay-by.

'Not now, Lizzie. How the hell d'you think we'll get the body through?' Huggins shook his head and mumbled to no one in particular. 'Graduate training scheme, fast-track, I ask you.' He took another look at the body, then at Sean. 'You'll have to check in your shoe size and brand with the lovely Lizzie Morrison. She's our new crime scene manager; very keen on tread patterns.'

'Anyone else been up here?' Burger stared out across the road towards the Chasebridge estate.

Sean assumed the question was directed at him. 'Two young lads and a dog, sir, they found the body.'

'How old?' Burger eyed the estate with an impassive stare.

'About ten, sir.'

'And the dog?'

'Sir?'

Sean felt himself blush as he realised he was having the mick taken again. Burger let out a belly laugh and Huggins smirked. Only Lizzie looked suitably serious, as if she disapproved of the whole lot of them. He almost felt sorry for her, having to work with this team. The laughter was definitely a bloke's joke, and Lizzie didn't look like she was one of the lads.

'Have a look for footprints will you, love? See if there's a couple of kiddy's sizes in there.'

'The ground's pretty hard, so I don't think there'll be anything in the mud. Maybe something in the frost itself.' Lizzie said. She had the kind of voice that Sean's nan would have called 'proper'

‘Where are the SOCOs? They should be here by now.’

~~‘I don’t think we’ll need them.’~~ DCI King headed back to the car with the doctor. ‘This one’s low priority. You and Plastic Percy can manage.’

Bastard, Sean thought. Not proper police, plastic police. Pig. Percy. He couldn’t meet her eye, didn’t want her to see how much it bothered him. Burger walked Huggins back to his car and Sean watched Lizzie pull on a white cover-all suit and tuck her dark hair neatly under the hood. He was glad someone was taking this poor girl’s death seriously.

‘Make yourself useful and lend us a hand, will you?’ She tossed a packet of latex gloves to Sean. ‘As soon as this is signed off, we can get the morgue van up here.’

He struggled into a second white suit. It was hot over his uniform and his movements felt as subtle as a Teletubby’s. Lizzie issued instructions and Sean did as he was told. He tried to switch off mentally, shut down his feelings, as he held the dead girl’s head in both his hands, while Lizzie looked in the mouth and ears. He turned away to catch his breath. Lizzie gestured to him to steady the body by the shoulders while she lifted the T-shirt away from the girl’s skin and looked for any signs of injury. Even through the cloth and the gloves, he could feel hard, cold flesh. Burger lit up another cigarette.

‘Nothing obvious, sir.’ Lizzie didn’t look up as she spoke. ‘Except the needle marks. Discolouration of the skin could be septicaemia, post-mortem. Dirty needle could have done that as she was losing consciousness. Face is bloated, so hard to say, but features look East Asian.’

‘Good, well, let’s get her on the slab and see what’s what.’ Burger flicked the ash off the end of his cigarette.

A grey Mercedes van pulled up in the lay-by and two men got out. The stretcher they carried had a built-in body bag, like a suit carrier from a smart dry-cleaners. Once the body was on the stretcher and zipped in, Lizzie fetched some evidence bags from the car and gave Sean some paper towels. Where the girl had been was now a sticky mess on the step. He was becoming an expert at not breathing through his nose.

‘Sir, am I looking for anything in particular inside?’ Lizzie asked.

‘Whatever takes your fancy, love,’ Burger shrugged. ‘I’m going to sit in the car and keep warm. The lad’ll give you a hand.’

‘Right.’ She stood in the open doorway and paused for a moment to survey the interior of the trailer. ‘There’s not much room, so you stay there. Open me up one of the larger bags.’

Sean fiddled to separate the plastic, fumbling in the latex gloves. Lizzie reappeared in the doorway with a bundled-up sheet, which she slid into the bag. ‘Take this back to the car and get the sharps box, I think I’ve found the murder weapon.’

‘But I thought it was a drug overdose.’

‘Duh! I’m talking about the needle. If this were a murder, they’d have sent me an actual team instead of having to make do with a ... Sorry, I didn’t catch your name?’

‘Sean Denton, I’m the—’

‘PCSO, yes I know. Well, it must be nice to do a bit of proper policing for a change.’

She smiled a tight smile and he was reminded of the girls in the top set at his secondary school who dated older boys and played in the orchestra; unattainable middle-class girls who ignored boys like Sean or, worse still, pitied them.

Burger was sitting in the passenger seat of the unmarked police car, holding a cigarette in one hand and hanging out of the open door talking into a mobile phone. Lizzie’s car was parked further along the lay-by. Sean looked for a way to get round Burger without disturbing him, but the

detective had parked right in front of the gap to the field. Sean found another section of hedge low enough to climb over. A bramble caught his trousers and nearly had him down for a second time, but not before he heard a snatch of Burger's conversation.

'Looks a lot like her. That's all I'm saying. No. I'll keep you out of it. Just thought you might want to know.'

On the loose Tarmac of the lay-by, Sean's footsteps gave him away.

'Hang on.' Burger said to his caller.

Sean kept walking towards Lizzie's car and if there was any more to the conversation, he didn't hear it. He stowed the evidence bag in the boot and took out the yellow plastic sharps box. When he turned back, Burger was out of the car and watching him.

'If you pick up fag ends, you'll burn your fingers,' the detective growled.

'Sir?' Sean eyed the gap in the fence and the ragged section of hedge he'd just crossed. He opted for the gap, even though it meant squeezing past Burger, who showed no sign of moving.

'You weren't earwiggling, were you?' the DCI said.

'No, sir.' He was close now, breathing in the cigarette smoke that hung around them both.

'Good.' Burger suddenly grabbed Sean's ear and twisted it tightly. 'Because you've got to learn to mind your own fucking business in this job.'

Then he let go, lowered himself back into the car and slammed the door. Sean heard the radio come on, a talent-show singer belting out a ballad. His ear was burning.

When Lizzie had retrieved everything she thought relevant, she told Sean to tape off the snack bar trailer with blue-and-white incident tape. He stood back and looked at it. It was like a huge gift wrapped present. Christ. He tried to shake the thought away. He wasn't a sicko. He silently promised himself that he would never be that disrespectful or cynical, how ever many bodies he saw, and he made another promise, that he would never forget this dark-haired dead girl; his first.

BONFIRE NIGHT: 6 a.m.

‘Now then, Phil, mate.’ On the other end of the phone, Johnny Mackenzie sounded like he’d been wide awake for hours. ‘I knew you’d be up.’

‘I wasn’t.’

‘I’ve got a job on today,’ Mackenzie said. ‘Need a driver.’

Philip Holroyd took his phone out to the landing and sat at the top of the stairs. Stacey was working late last night and he wanted to let her sleep. The glass above the front door framed a perfect, shiny rectangle of night sky and the cold air made the hairs on his legs stand up like a tiny forest.

‘Be up at the farm in fifteen minutes,’ Johnny was saying. ‘I’ll see you right on this one. Stacey said you could do with a bob or two.’

‘I’ll be there.’ He shivered and flipped the phone shut.

Stacey’s eyes flickered under a crust of yesterday’s mascara as Phil crossed the bedroom and scooped his clothes up from the floor. She half-smiled in her sleep and the little worry-line between her eyebrows almost disappeared. He went to get dressed in the bathroom. He was buttoning up his shirt when Holly appeared in the doorway, rubbing her eyes.

‘What you doing?’

‘Getting ready for work, sweetheart. Daddy’s got a job today.’

‘Can I come?’

‘No, ’fraid not. I’ll bring you something back.’

‘A rabbit,’ Holly said decisively and turned to go back to her bedroom.

Phil cleaned his teeth and hoped he’d be back home in time to take Holly to the fireworks at the pub. His daughter was five and fearless. She’d been talking about it for days. As he dragged Stacey’s hairbrush back through his thick hair, he fancied he was receding a bit at the temples and around his widow’s peak, but at thirty-two there was still no sign of any grey. Picking up a purple hair elastic, he pulled his ponytail up and through. He sat on the edge of the bath, rolled a cigarette, licked it, sealed it and tucked it behind his ear. Tiptoeing down the stairs so he didn’t wake the dog, he stepped into his trainers and let himself out of the front door.

Up at the farm, puddles filled the cracked concrete of the farmyard, lit only by the neon light from the office window. He dropped the butt of his cigarette and heard it hiss in the silence. He leant his bike up against the prefab wall, opened the office door and stepped into Mackenzie’s world.

CHAPTER TWO

In the office of The Refugee and Migrants' Advice Centre in York (known as RAMA), Karen Friedman flicked the kettle on. It ticked and rumbled gently as the element fought with the build-up of limescale. Like most of the office fittings, it had seen better days. She went back to her desk while the water boiled and opened up a black box-file marked *Asylum Refusal 3rd Quarter*. The box was almost full. Her fingers thumbed through its contents until she pulled out a clear plastic wallet stuffed with documents. There was a sticker on the front in Jaz Kumar's spidery writing.

Rudo and Florence Moyo/ Zimbabwe/ Claim refused 18/10/07

She'd tried to show him how to do the labels on the computer, but Jaz, her boss, was a Luddite at heart. Karen pulled the papers out of their cover and spread them out in front of her. There was a letter from a St Jude's Church, with a cheerful rainbow-coloured logo, offering to sponsor Mr and Mrs Moyo and their daughter, Elizabeth. The Reverend Wheatley was big on warmth, but short on details. She opened a photocopy of the Moyos' asylum application form, meticulously filled out in black ink.

... and then I was hit many times across my back until I was bleeding ...

... all this time I didn't know where I was ...

... that was when they took my daughter to be questioned. She was fourteen years old ...

The bubbling roar of the kettle reached its peak. Karen got up and crossed the uneven floor to where a box of peppermint tea and three mugs were lined up on the windowsill. She wondered if she would ever get used to the details of man's inhumanity to man. Nearly a year into the job, her caseload still gave her nightmares. Her face frowned back at her in the window. It was already dark outside. She'd give it another half hour and then she'd have to go home.

The night sky over York was peppered with coloured fireworks. Karen got off the bus and hurried up the path that cut through to the school playing field. As she emerged opposite an embankment full of spectators, a rocket whistled up and burst into a shower of stars, bathing the faces of the crowd in green fluorescence. She spotted her own children, Sophie and Ben, open-mouthed, staring upwards. Behind them, one hand on Ben's shoulder, was Max. Her husband's bald head reflected the light from the sky, turning from green to pink. Even in the chill of a November evening he didn't wear a hat and if he felt the cold, he certainly didn't admit it.

The first time she saw him, he was on the dance floor at a wedding, wearing a tight 1950s suit that was somehow beyond fashion. She'd liked his smile and the way he flung his legs out when he danced. Sometimes she wondered how long they would have stayed together if she hadn't found herself pregnant within just a few months, but it had worked out all right, for the most part. He'd done well, bought them a Victorian house on a good road, got the children into a good school. His word: good. She had to believe it was; it was costing them enough. Looking at him now, stiff and upright, under an immaculate black overcoat, she understood why people often misjudged his age.

Still in his early thirties, and four years her junior, he looked ten years older. She couldn't pinpoint exactly when it had begun, but along the way he'd morphed from an idealistic young architect into a middle-aged company man. Karen wasn't stupid, she'd changed too, aged certainly, but after twelve years of marriage and three pregnancies, going back to work had made her feel younger.

A huge explosion was followed by a burst of silver. The crowd let out 'oohs' and 'ahs', as stars fell like a waterfall. Karen looked up too and when she looked back towards the embankment, she could no longer see Ben. Max and their daughter Sophie were still watching the sky, but beside them was a gap. A taller boy pushed forward to get a better view. Karen scanned the crowd, but she still couldn't see her son. She hurried round the side of the field, avoiding the launching area of used tubes and a taper-wielding teacher. She stumbled on unseen tussocks of long grass, glancing towards the embankment. There were parents and children she recognised: her next-door neighbour and his new wife, a group of mothers whom Karen knew by sight. There was still no sign of Ben. She had almost reached the crowd when everyone began clapping. The display was over. People began to move, the stillness of the watchers undone as they broke ranks. People surrounded her saying goodnight to one another, catching up on gossip. Dry-mouthed, she pushed on.

'Max!' she called.

Her husband turned. He nodded, gave her a wave.

'Have you got Ben? Where's Ben?' She was at Max's side.

'He's here somewhere.' Max shrugged, he went to kiss her on the cheek, but she was already turning away.

'Sophie? Where did Ben go?'

Her daughter was looking down at her phone, thumbs dancing over the screen. 'Oh, hi, Mum Dunno. He was here a minute ago.'

Karen pushed between clusters of families, swallowing the urge to shout. The lights of the school building only reached the top of the embankment. Here, on the field, the dark deepened towards the river. She spotted a small boy in her son's class.

'Do you know where Ben is?'

'Yes,' the boy pointed behind her. At the same moment she felt a tug at her sleeve.

'Mummy, you came!' It was Ben, his eyes wide in the darkness. 'You missed it.'

'There you are!' She pulled him close and stroked his hair.

'You missed the Roman candle, it was awesome.'

She tried to calm her breathing, hide her fear from him. 'How come there's no bonfire?'

'Don't know. Daddy said it was the healthy safety Nazis took it away.'

'Health and safety, and not Nazis, not real ones.'

Karen took his hand and they wove through the other families, back to their own.

The next morning, in the boardroom at RAMA, Florence Moyo sat with her elbows on the table and her head resting on her hands, as if it was too heavy to be held by her neck alone. She was a large woman, her eyes heavily lidded and circled by shadows. Karen stole glances at her in between taking notes. Mrs Moyo was five months' pregnant and Mr Moyo was explaining to Jaz that they had reached the end of their patience and their hope. The refusal of their claim meant he had lost his right to work and soon they would lose their accommodation too. They had a teenage daughter settled in a local school. They couldn't go back to Zimbabwe, even if they wanted to. There were things that were hard to say out loud. A silence grew in the room.

'Shall I ...?' Karen stood up.

Jaz finished her sentence. 'Get the leaflet, yes.'

~~They had a leaflet to help people through the appeal process, step by step. As Karen left the room to get a copy from the shelf, Rudo turned to Jaz Kumar and began to lift his sweater.~~

'You see what they did to me in my own country? How can I go back?'

She pulled a chair up in front of the tall bookshelf in the office. As she put one foot on it to test it wasn't going to wobble, a breath, no more than that, made her turn.

'Can I help you, perhaps?' Florence Moyo's voice was low, each consonant clearly enunciated. 'Maybe I should steady that chair. It doesn't look very safe.'

'No. No, it's fine, really.' It came out more snappily than she'd intended.

'You have children?'

Karen nodded.

'So you understand. It's a habit. You will do anything to make sure they are safe. You find yourself mothering everyone. I'm sorry.'

Yes, of course, Karen thought, of course you would do anything to keep your children safe. But you can't always. She pushed the thought away.

'My daughter is only fifteen,' Mrs Moyo continued, her hands resting on the chair back, 'but she has the look of someone twice her age. She has seen too much. Here she can be normal again.'

Karen stood on the chair and reached for a magazine box on the top shelf. 'Yes, of course.'

'She works hard in school. Goes to the Girl Guides. She helps out.'

'Nice. That's nice.' Karen took a copy of the leaflet. She hesitated about getting the whole box down and putting it somewhere more convenient, but the office was so tiny, there wasn't a spare inch. 'Thank you.' She stepped down. 'I wish my daughter would do something like that, but my husband, I mean, we don't go to church or anything and they seem, mainly to ... excuse me.'

Mrs Moyo's body filled the doorway, as if she wanted to hold Karen there, to forge some connection between them. Later Karen realised that it was to protect her from hearing what the men were talking about in the boardroom. Little did Mrs Moyo know that Karen would be writing it all up for Jaz as soon as they had left and she would soon know every painful detail.

CHAPTER THREE

At nine in the morning, there was only one other occupant in the staff canteen and Sean Denton thought it would be rude to ignore her. But he wasn't at all sure whether she would acknowledge him. Crime Scene Manager Lizzie Morrison might just think it was beneath her to share a table with a PCSO.

'All right?'

He hovered, ready to go on to the next table, depending on the response. She was probably too well brought up to tell him to get lost, but she might still freeze him out. He wouldn't mind having a chat with her. In fact, if he was honest, he'd been looking for an opportunity for the last three days. If he could just talk to her about that dead girl, then maybe he wouldn't feel so bloody haunted. The girl's face was there in front of him when he closed his eyes at night. When he woke there was a second or two when everything felt the same as it always had, until it dawned on him that everything had changed. He'd seen a body. He needed to know whether Lizzie still saw her too.

She was reading the paper and flashed him an automatic smile before returning to the page in front of her. He sat down.

'I've been thinking,' he ventured, 'about that girl.'

'Have you? There's a SOCO going down this afternoon to dust for prints. We'll see if he finds anything, but it's down as an overdose, nothing suspicious, so don't hold your breath.' She met his gaze. 'There was DNA from over fifteen different subjects on the bedsheet. Semen.'

He swore under his breath and saw her smile. She'd meant to shock him and she'd succeeded.

'The prints on the needle were hers.'

'So,' he blew on his coffee, squinting through the steam, 'we're looking at an accidental overdose by a woman who was, what, on the game?'

'Pretty good.'

'What are they dusting for?'

'Rule out foul play,' she said. 'Mind you, I had to push to get Burger to agree.'

'Why was she outside?'

'There's another question you need to ask first.'

'How long had she been dead?' he offered.

'Good question. Twelve to eighteen hours. It's not easy to be exact, especially at this time of year. One day can be sunny and the next freezing; decomposition can be slowed or accelerated depending.'

He thought back to the weather on the day before they found her.

'It was sunny.' He'd helped his nan peg out the washing in the back garden; it was what she called a good drying day. 'Maybe the girl sat on the step to shoot up and enjoy the last of the afternoon sun.'

'You'd make a great detective.' Lizzie's smile seemed genuine.

Sean took a sip of coffee and occupied himself with the little plastic stirrer. He wasn't going to tell her that he didn't think he could pass all the tests. It wouldn't have crossed her university-educated mind.

'I never thought ... I don't know, that I'd be doing that sort of work, as a support officer I mean.'

‘Yeah, well. It looks like our friend Burger doesn’t exactly follow procedure.’ Lizzie folded her paper and stood up.

‘Who was she?’

Lizzie shrugged. ‘We don’t know. She had no ID. Burger says she’s not known to the police. She was in her mid-twenties, probably Chinese, and her clothes were all from British shops.’

‘I wonder if anyone will come for her?’

‘Don’t hold your breath. Unless someone in Vice can ID her. A drug-addicted prostitute from the Chinese community isn’t likely to have stayed close to her family.’

He shook his head. Chasebridge wasn’t just his beat; it was where he grew up. He’d played all over the estate, crossed the potato field behind the lay-by with his mates, and gone off exploring in the woods. Who would have thought there’d be a brothel in a snack bar trailer, right under his nose?

That evening he was on duty at the Doncaster Rovers Community Fireworks Display. It was supposed to be a perk to be rostered for events like that, but as his feet turned numb he longed for the boredom of his first job, night-time shelf-stacking at Pets At Home. At least that had been warm.

He had a surprise at the Keepmoat Stadium. Up in the VIP box, a familiar face was looking down at him, although it took him a moment to recognise her, fully made-up and with the collar of an expensive camel coat pulled up to her ears. It was Lizzie Morrison and she actually waved. Later, as the spectators were leaving, milling around in front of the ground, she detached herself from a group and came over.

‘Fancy meeting you here!’ She smiled broadly and Sean was taken aback. Maybe she’d been on the champagne.

‘I bet you were a sight warmer up there than we were down on the pitch,’ he said, taking in how pretty her face looked with a spot of lipstick. ‘How did you wangle a ticket?’

‘My dad,’ she nodded over her shoulder to a cluster of men with Doncaster Rovers scarves tucked into their dark coats. ‘He’s on the board.’

‘Fancy that.’ Sean thought he might have frostbite in his toes.

Back home in front of the gas fire, he rubbed his feet in his hands. He’d been planning to drop into the pub for a game of pool on the way home, but didn’t think he’d stop shivering enough to hit the ball straight. His nan had waited up for him. Maureen was his mum’s mum, and she’d had looked after him since he was twelve. She still hadn’t got used to the fact he’d grown up. She had offered to run him a bath, but he’d settled for a can of lager and a packet of crisps.

He stared at the telly, a nice flatscreen he’d got on instalments when he started the job, trying to make out the flavour on his tongue. Worcester sauce, maybe. He washed it back with a mouthful of lager, cold and fizzing in his throat.

‘Carole popped round with them. A whole box was only three pound. They’re a bit too spicy for me, but I thought you might like them.’

‘Carole?’

‘From bingo. She gets them wholesale.’

He didn’t know why she bothered with bingo: a bunch of old women staring at a set of numbers. She’d be seventy next year and she said it kept her young, said he ought to give it a go, but he wasn’t tempted. The living room table was covered in home-decoration magazines and she’d marked several pages of wallpapers. That was going to be their next project together. She directed

he did the labouring. She entered competitions on TV makeover programmes, but she hadn't won yet.

'Any trouble at the fireworks?' she said and passed him another packet of crisps. The writing on the back looked foreign. Arabic or something.

'Not really. Had to ask a feller to put his sparklers out, but he wasn't too fussed.'

'It's been like World War I round here, some of these bangers they've got now, sound like they could take your head off.' The cat jumped up onto her lap, turned a few times before he settled. 'He's been right funny all night, but at least he's indoors. Better when they do it properly organised, much less bother for everyone.'

The feeling was coming back into his feet. A thousand pinpricks of returning blood made his eyes water and he wished he'd been less distracted when he spoke to Lizzie Morrison. He should have asked her how the SOCO got on taking prints at the trailer. On his bedroom wall, above the chest of drawers, was a sheet of flipchart paper that he'd taken from one of the conference rooms at the station. He'd helped himself to a set of marker pens too. It wasn't stealing; it was just bringing work home. The bosses did it all the time. In the centre of the sheet of paper was a photograph. It wasn't very good quality. Sean had taken it on his mobile, not at the scene, he hadn't thought of it then, but later, when the girl's picture was on the incident board. He'd given her a name, Su-Mai, which sounded sort of Chinese, and written it underneath in green. Then he'd used different colours to draw lines out from the picture in a clock pattern. At the end of each line he was going to write all the information gathered so far. Right now, all the lines were empty.

The following morning, Sean was glad of a late start. At the station he went straight to the canteen for a cup of coffee. Standing in the queue, he was aware of an argument going on at one of the tables. DCI Barry 'Burger' King was tucking into his lunch, or possibly his second breakfast, when a middle-aged man in a navy boiler suit, carrying a heavy, black case, approached him. The man's epaulets said Scene of Crime Officer.

'Donald, mate!' Burger waved him over. 'Donald the Duck, how did you get on, any good prints?'

'Next time, give me the right bloody address. I've been up and down that stretch of road all morning and there's no snack bar van or catering trailer, or whatever you want to call it. Not there, not anywhere. No trailer means no prints.'

'I don't know what you're talking about,' a gobble of something flew out of King's mouth across the table in front of him. He studied a map that was thrust under his nose and jabbed at it with a ketchup-covered fork. 'Right there, bit of a hedge, broken fence, just inside the field. You'd have to slow down to see it. What speed were you doing?'

'Very funny. I pulled up at every single lay-by along a three-mile stretch. There are six in case you're interested. Then I went back and checked them all again. There's nothing.'

King caught sight of Sean and beckoned to him.

'Here, take Percy with you. He knows it. He's a native.'

The SOCO looked less than impressed when Sean asked if he could go and transfer his coffee into a disposable cup.

As they pulled out of the car park, the SOCO broke the silence.

'Chaplin, Donald. No jokes about the name if you don't mind.'

Sean wasn't about to make one. 'Denton, Sean. Not Percy.'

Chaplin flicked on the radio. Classic FM. It was loud, but he turned it up louder.

‘Helps the stress,’ Chaplin shouted. ‘Blood pressure, you know. Not helped by arseholes like our friend King.’

‘How come you didn’t go yesterday?’

‘What?’

‘Lizzie Morrison said you were going yesterday.’

‘Violent burglary in a house at Bessacar!’ Donald shouted back. ‘And a nasty knife crime the day you found the body. Stretched resources, mate, it’s a sign of the times. Smack ODs just don’t cut it.’

Not a priority. Poor Su-Mai. They drove the rest of the way without speaking, listening to some tune like a film score blasting out of the speakers. Sean showed Chaplin where to stop and they pulled up onto the gravel of the lay-by. Sean twisted round in his seat and stared back through the gap in the fence. There was nothing there, just a space where only three days ago there’d been a mucky old snack bar trailer with the word REFRESHMENTS peeling off its side. He got out of the car.

‘So it was definitely here?’ Donald followed him.

‘You can check my notes, if you can read my writing.’

The same break in the fence, the trodden grass, even a shred of incident tape caught in the hedge told Sean he hadn’t imagined it. There was a rectangle of yellow-brown grass and four matching dents where the stands had been. If the soft tyres had left a smudge, last night’s hard frost had covered it over.

Back at the station Barry King shrugged it off.

‘The farmer probably moved it. I’ll get someone to ring him. He won’t have been too pleased about having a mobile brothel on his land.’

‘We’ll have to find it,’ Sean realised he’d spoken out of turn as soon as King fixed him with a pointed stare.

‘Oh, we will, will we? Well, sunshine, I think you’ll find it’s not in your job description to tell me how to allocate this department’s meagre resources. We had a major burglary last night, violence to the person and kiddies in the house. No, I’m not putting any more manpower into a dead junkie. Let’s get on with protecting the public from real criminals.’

After work, Sean walked up through the estate as it was going dark. He stood and looked across the ring road. The air was heavy with exhaust fumes and the scent of frying onions was coming from one of the blocks behind him. Eventually there was a long enough gap in the rush-hour traffic to risk crossing. There was still no trailer, just a flicker of blue-and-white tape from the hedgerow. It had been a crime scene, his crime scene, and now some idiot had moved the evidence and nothing more was going to be done about it. Su-Mai was dead and nobody except Sean gave a tinker’s cuss.

BONFIRE NIGHT: 6.45 a.m.

Phil rammed the van into gear and pulled away. The engine ground against itself then roared with the effort. When Mackenzie told him the van had seen better days, he hadn't been wrong. But it still had a cassette player and Phil reckoned he had time to stop off and grab some sounds. The light was on in the bedroom and the dog greeted him with a thud of his tail against his legs. Upstairs, Stacey was sitting in bed with Holly curled around her.

'Sorry, did I wake you?'

'No. This one did. Said you'd gone a-hunting. Don't squash me, Holly,' Stacey shifted her daughter off her legs.

'Johnny Mac's got a job for me.'

'Good. He's going places, you know?'

'Yeah?' Phil rummaged in a box on the top shelf of the wardrobe.

'He might have something permanent soon. He'll need someone to run the office full-time.'

'Here it is. I knew I put these tapes somewhere.'

'Are you listening, Phil?'

'I can hear you.' He turned and looked at her. Stacey was prettier when she didn't frown, but it seemed to be her default expression these days. 'I can't see how answering the phone for Mackenzie is a fantastic career move.'

'The bills don't pay themselves,' she said. 'Maybe I should apply for it.'

'Maybe you should.' He bent down and kissed her on the forehead. 'I need to go. I should be back before you have to be at the pub. Bye, little chicken.' But Holly rolled away and stuck her thumb in her mouth.

As he left Moorsby-on-Humber, the sky was growing lighter. Phil reached over to the passenger seat and grabbed a tape from the carrier bag. The delicate percussive opening of Betty LaVette's 'Let Me Down Easy' made him smile. Any second now the vocal would kick in with a swift boot to his guts. It was one of those tunes that landed him back at another time in his life, over a decade ago. A girl called Katie, kissing him goodbye at the airport in Ibiza, the salt still on her lips from her morning swim. She said she'd wait for him, wished she could come with him, but he was on his way home for a funeral. His mother was dead and he had to face it on his own.

He hit eject and failed to catch the tape. It skittered across the floor under the pedals. He grabbed another. The call and response of Chris Kenner's 'Land Of A Thousand Dances' shuddered through the speakers. Rewind to six months before his mum died. Chuck Everett's Soul Bar in Playa d'enchilada. Bossa. Chuck made him these tapes when they were getting a band together for the bar. For a blissful few months they'd played in paradise to packed houses; Phil on trombone, bigging up the brass sound. But when Phil got back from that wet, English funeral, he found that his so-called mate, Chuck, had moved in with Katie. No. Chris Kenner had to go too. Phil managed to get the action right this time and caught the tape. He dug a little deeper in the bag, finally settling on Beverley Knight. Good driving music, 'Moving On Up (On The Right Side)'. Phil laughed, the van wasn't moving up on anyone. A few bars in to the song, he was overtaken by a hearse. When the Humber Bridge came into view, his heart lifted. You really felt like you were going somewhere on that bridge, even if it was only Hull on the other side. People knocked Hull, but Phil liked it. A port

was always full of possibilities; it was a way in and a way out.

~~He had the instructions in Mackenzie's wobbly handwriting: pick up the stock from a warehouse on the industrial estate and take it to an address in Doncaster. Easy money. He thought Stacey would be happy for once that he'd got some work. But somehow it was never enough. She didn't seem to understand that he needed to be flexible in case any bookings came in. And whatever else Johnny Mackenzie was, he was certainly flexible. He always had something on the go and was good for a bit of cash in hand.~~

Phil sang along, drumming the wheel with his index fingers. Driving jobs were all right. Even in this old heap of junk he could get into the music, be with his thoughts and get paid for it. He'd done his fair share of bar work but he hated it, it was all too rushed. That was how he met Stacey. He'd come back from playing a stint with an Abba cover band on the Hull–Rotterdam ferry. He'd been trying to hitch south; thought he might stay with the old man until he got straightened out. The ferry company had fired him for smoking spliffs in the staff restroom, but he was ready to leave anyway. The playlist was driving him nuts. He'd hitched a lift with a Dutchman in a refrigerated tulip truck. Just the other side of the Humber Bridge, the driver decided he needed a pie and a pint. The Volunteer Arms in Moorsby-on-Humber was warm and the jukebox played Otis Redding and Aretha Franklin. As the Dutchman was coming to the end of his third pint, Phil saw the sign above the bar: Staff Wanted. The barmaid had a wide smile and a great laugh. Her name was Stacey. He decided to stay.

CHAPTER FOUR

The RAMA office was one floor up above a doll shop in an uneven row of buildings just outside York's city wall. As Karen came round the corner, with a half-eaten sandwich in one hand and a carton of orange juice in the other, a man was looking at the dolls in the shop window. She let herself in at the office door and he turned round.

'Is your boss in?' he said.

Her mouth was full of dry chicken and granary bread.

'Well, is he in? Your boss? Jasvinder Kumar? My name's Moon. DCI Charlie Moon. Human Trafficking Service.'

He was very tall. Long arms hung from wide shoulders, the rest of his body hidden under a black puffa jacket. He held a police ID card out to her.

She swallowed the last of her mouthful. 'He's getting some lunch. Do you want to come up?' He nodded and followed her up the wooden stairs. 'He won't be long. Take a seat.'

DCI Moon crossed the room and sat down on the rattan garden chair that usually had Jaz's coat slung over it. One big hand ran through his hair, leaving it just as messy as when he'd come in.

'Nice place.' He looked around, taking in the beamed ceiling. 'Small, but perfectly formed.'

She wondered about sending him into the boardroom, to sit at the oval table where they'd interviewed the Moyos in the morning, but she felt like keeping an eye on him. Watching the detective. He looked like he was prepared to wait; took out his Blackberry and checked his messages. Even sitting down he gave the impression of height.

'Charlie!' Jaz bounded into the room, his coat half off, looked for a place to put it and decided the floor would do. The two men shook hands then pulled together in a backslapping man-hug. Jaz seemed to disappear into DCI Moon's arms. 'Has Karen given you a coffee?'

She hadn't. Somewhere between curiosity and a lingering irritation at having her lunch break interrupted she'd forgotten that part of her job description. She asked Moon how he liked it.

'Strong, and a tiny bit of milk.'

There was an upward inflection in his voice. Not local. Welsh maybe. Another 'blow-in'. The city was full of them, people like her and Max and Jaz. He looked like he'd want the good stuff, so she went into the boardroom where they kept the coffee machine. There was an old photograph above the fireplace captioned: 'Nineteenth-century Slum Housing for Irish Railway Workers, Just Inside the City Walls.' Two muddy-faced children were staring, hollow-eyed, at the photographer. Part of an earlier wave of immigration to York, it must have been even harder for them.

When she brought the coffee through, they were reminiscing about a case they'd worked on. It sounded like Jaz had been defending someone Charlie had arrested.

'I still can't believe you thought he was legit.' Moon was saying.

'I thought he had a reasonable asylum claim. My job was to make sure the law was applied fairly.' Jaz interlaced his fingers and tried to hide a smile.

'He was a pimp for God's sake!' DCI Moon took the coffee and thanked her.

'Well at least you can be sure I'm on the side of the angels now,' Jaz replied. 'You were saying ...?'

'We need to track down anyone connected to a haulage firm in Grimsby belonging to a guy

called Xhoui Li, or anyone who could have come in on one of his trucks.'

'There's a girl at HMP Moreton Hall,' Jaz said. 'She was picked up in a Chinese restaurant by Immigration. Her solicitor approached me about her grounds for appeal. The dates fit and, if I remember rightly, she named Grimsby as her port of entry. Karen, could you ...?'

She was already crossing the sloping wooden floor to get the file from the boardroom. The sound of her mobile stopped her. It hardly ever rang during the day. The two men watched as she fumbled to silence it. The name on the screen read Dad. In her haste, she hit the screen and realised she hadn't stopped the call, but answered it on speakerphone. The sound of her father's voice saying *Hello, hello, Karen* filled the room. She looked helplessly at Jaz, mouthed, 'It's on the table, middle stack,' and slipped out through the other door to the landing at the top of the stairs.

'I'll call you back, Dad. I'm at work.'

'Wait, no, listen. Karen, please.'

It was a tone she didn't recognise. Later she would say that she knew something was wrong the moment she heard her father's voice. She stood against the wall, turning her back to the office door.

'What is it? What's up?'

'Is Philip with you?'

'Phil? Why would he be?'

'I'm sorry. Yes, it's a long shot. Stacey phoned. She thought he might be here. But he's not. I thought he might have come to you.'

'I don't understand.'

'He's gone missing. Didn't come back from a job yesterday. Stacey's had no message from him and his phone's just going to voicemail.'

'Do you think he might have turned up at our house? I can go home if you like.'

'Could you? I tried your home number but, obviously, you're not there.'

Why would her brother come to York? He made no secret of hating Max. She spoke to him on the phone every couple of months, but they hadn't seen each other since they went to her father's house in Hertfordshire, just before Christmas. Phil had brought little Holly down, but his wife had stayed at home. It was too near London and London – according to Stacey – was full of terrorists.

'I'll call you back when I get home,' she said.

Karen leant against the cool plaster of the wall, trying to make sense of what her father had told her. When she went back into the office, the detective was alone again. She could hear Jaz in the boardroom shuffling papers.

'I'm sorry about that. I don't normally leave it on.'

'These things happen,' the detective said. 'You OK? You look like you've seen a ghost.'

'I'll be all right.'

'Got it!' Jaz emerged, waving a manila folder.

'You know, we haven't been properly introduced.' Moon offered his hand and she took it. It was as if he was offering her some of his strength and, just for a moment, she held on.

'God, I'm so sorry! This is Karen, Charlie Moon. Charlie, Karen Friedman. Karen's my right hand woman.' Jaz put the folder on her desk and began to shuffle through it.

'Karen's had a bit of bad news,' Charlie Moon said.

She wondered if he'd heard every word through the door.

'If no one minds, I think I need to go, I'll make up the hours.'

Jaz shrugged. He was reading the file of the restaurant girl.

'I've left all the papers for Mr and Mrs Moyo on your desk,' she said, as she put her coat on.

‘Brilliant. Did you make another appointment for them?’

‘It’s in the diary.’

‘Right, Charlie mate,’ Jaz said. ‘I can give you ten minutes, then you’ll have to piss off.’

The two men turned their attention to the papers and she said goodbye. As she reached the door Moon looked up briefly and she caught his eye.

In the doorway to the street, she hesitated. The air outside was cold and the light sudden. She could still smell last night’s bonfires. Philip was missing. She wasn’t sure what that meant or what she was expected to do about it. Missing people were posters in bus stops, appeals in the paper, they weren’t your family. He could be anywhere. In every face, every body, every passing car, there was the possibility of Philip. Maybe she should have asked the detective’s advice, but she wasn’t sure what to ask. There was no point in causing a fuss if her brother turned up again in a day or two. People wandered off all the time, had rows or went to find themselves.

Around the corner from the office, waiting for the lights to change, Karen noticed several sleeping bags in the porch of the Methodist church. It was hard to see which of the filthy cocoons were occupied and which were empty. These people were missing too, even though they were right here in front of her. Somewhere a sister or a mother might be looking for them, but just didn’t know to look on these particular church steps, in this particular city. They might, even now, be pasting up pictures at bus stops in another part of the country or another part of the world.

Her father’s words, ‘gone missing’, rebounded in her head. One boy, sitting against a stone pillar with his knees drawn up, looked about fourteen. An old man was bent over, rearranging the contents of several plastic bags, his oversized suit jacket tied at the waist with a bungee. He reminded Karen of Philip at their mother’s funeral. Phil only just made it back from Ibiza in time and she’d met him at the airport. He smelt of stale beer, cigarettes and several nights on the dance floor. He arrived at the crematorium in a suit borrowed from one of their dad’s party comrades who was Phil’s height but three stone heavier. Her brother’s tanned neck towered above the starched white shirt collar which circled his throat like the ruff of a buzzard. The jacket hung from his bony shoulders and a tight belt gathered and bunched the extra fabric of the trousers round his waist. He looked like an elegant tramp, a Heathcliff, in that neat, suburban cemetery.

As she watched, the old man on the church steps looked up at her and she turned away towards the bus stop.

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