
SECOND
SIGHT

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SECOND SIGHT



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1.

I couldn't believe what I was seeing. The woman, fish-eyed before Mara Knight's state-of-the-art doorbell camera, was supposed to be serving a five-year prison sentence for grievous bodily harm. Instead, she was here, glaring urgently at us from the vast, wall-mounted TV screen in Mara's vaster living room.

And what Kelly Keogan was saying was even more unlikely than the fact that she was here at all.

'Please,' she begged, lank tendrils of hair flanking a bleached-out face, 'it's my son, Tayte. He's having these visions. Of the future. And… and I know it sounds crazy, but they've been coming true. All of them. You *have* to believe me.'

She paused, glancing rapidly over each shoulder as though somebody else might be out there too. Watching.

'And now… now he says he's seen his own death,' Kelly went on. 'That a man is going to *kill* him.'

Mara rose abruptly from the wingback chair she always sat in, its upholstery dark as a slice of night. She snatched what looked like a remote control from the table next to her. 'One second,' she said into it. 'I'll come and let you in.' She switched off the television.

I found myself momentarily rooted to the plum-velvet sofa

I'd settled on with my dog, Jasper, for some Saturday night TV. But now, Jasper seemed to have sensed something was afoot. His little, shaggy, biscuit-coloured body was poised bolt upright, ears cocked. 'Wait!' I started, springing to my feet. 'Shouldn't we ring Taylor before we let Kelly in? She's supposed to be in prison.'

DC Luke Taylor was one of the detectives who'd worked the last case Mara assisted the police with: the Angel Devereaux investigation. This investigation — into the death of a magician's wife — had been the thing that had brought Mara and me together, just two weeks before. So much had happened in those two weeks that it felt like a lifetime had passed. For one, I'd handed in my notice at my previous job to begin working with Mara on a regular basis.

Though DC Taylor hadn't been in charge of the Angel Devereaux case, for some reason he was the man who instantly sprang to mind as the right person to contact. Probably because he was an old friend of Mara's, and the officer she'd recommended should reexamine Kelly Keogan's files. Had he done so already? Had he been able to prove that Kelly's conviction was unsafe, as Mara suspected? Even so, surely Kelly couldn't have been released from prison *that* quickly—?

I was just about to voice all this to Mara when I stopped dead. 'Hang on a minute… Did she say, my *son* Tayte?'

'She did,' Mara confirmed, moving into the hallway. 'The woman I'm about to let in *isn't* Kelly Keogan.'

I followed Mara across the colossal, glossy chequerboard that formed her hall floor, past the glass case at the foot of the stairs that gleamed in the light from the chandelier. The

life-size automaton butler the case housed — eerily named "Montgomery"— sat there as he always did. Seeing everything, revealing nothing. And giving me the creeps into the bargain.

At the front entrance, Mara reached up to unbolt one of the great pairs of double doors.

'So if that *isn't* Kelly,' I asked, 'then who—?'

The huge studded door swung inwards. Outside, the usually mellow cream stone of the porch was flooded by a security light. In the middle of its yellow glare stood Kelly. Who, it turned out, wasn't Kelly after all.

'Hi,' said the woman uncertainly. 'Mara?'

Now we were face to face, I realised she didn't bear as much of a resemblance to the woman I'd met in prison a fortnight ago as I'd initially thought. She was a little smaller, younger. She had the same dark hair as Kelly, but whereas Kelly's was long, this woman's fell just past her shoulders. She had none of Kelly's hard-edged defiance, either. Instead, her posture gave the impression of someone worn down, her face etched with a profound and immediate fear.

'I'm Kayleigh,' the woman said.

'You're Tayte's mum!' I blurted, her identity finally registering. 'Which must mean you're Kelly's sister?'

What had Mara told me in the car after I'd become her unwitting accomplice in a prison break? That Tayte was Kelly's nephew, her sister's son. That she and the boy were close.

Kayleigh nodded anxiously and wrung her hands. 'Look, I know this all sounds mad,' she mumbled apologetically. Her voice was similar to her sister's. London accent, though a little smoother.

'Not at all,' interrupted Mara, shutting the door. 'Come through.'

It was when Kayleigh reached the living room that the bizarre gothic grandeur of her surroundings hit her for the first time. She froze, gazing at the eight metre high ceiling, the galleried walkway, the ornate carvings and panelling which covered the room's back wall; a hangover from the building's past life as a chapel. The fire crackling in the substantial hearth lent the woodwork a treacly glow.

Mara's house, I recalled, had had the same effect on me when I'd first visited. And that was without its endless array of odd and opulent objects: the furniture, props, and paintings arranged artfully in every room. A giant, Tracey Emin-style pink neon of the queen of spades. A taxidermy rabbit stretching up on its haunches, white and star-limbed as a snowflake beneath its dome of glass. And a black and chrome cabinet looming by a doorway, a circular saw protruding from its side.

'Whoa,' Kayleigh managed finally. 'Er… nice place. That a magical dog?'

She pointed at what had become one of the largest and most incongruous items in a room full of large and incongruous items. The ten-foot tall, custom-printed canine birthday banner that Mara had ordered during the course of our previous case. A ten-foot tall canine birthday banner complete with an enormous likeness of Jasper, clad in a polka-dot party hat, one paw held endearingly aloft.

'Something like that,' I offered.

From the plum-coloured sofa, Jasper's tail thumped proudly.

'I saw you on Talent Quest last week,' Kayleigh told Mara,

perching awkwardly on the edge of a chaise. ‘Couldn’t believe it when my sister said she knew you. Never met anyone famous before.’

Talent Quest was one of the most popular TV shows in the country. Just one week earlier, during the climax of the Angel Devereaux investigation, Mara had made a sensational live appearance on the show, in front of an audience of millions. Not only that, but the ensuing online videos had since gone viral.

Mara waved Kayleigh’s comment away. ‘Make yourself comfortable. Can I get you a drink?’

Kayleigh shook her head. ‘No. Thanks, though. I can’t stay long.’

I dropped back onto the velvet sofa beside Jasper, as Mara poured herself a measure from her drinks cabinet. Playing host to a generous collection of bottles and glasses, the cabinet was divided into three by an ominous series of slits. Slits into which blades had once been thrust to slice people in half as part of a stage magic act. Well, not half exactly. Thirds.

Reinstating herself in the wingback chair, Mara observed our guest with a quiet intensity. ‘Start at the beginning,’ she told Kayleigh. ‘You said your son has been having visions.’

Kayleigh’s brow knotted, and she swallowed hard. ‘Yeah, that’s right. I thought it was nothing at first, just a kid’s imagination. But the thing is, Tayte’s… his *visions*… It’s just they’ve all been coming true.’ Her voice cracked, and she covered her face with her hands.

I leant forwards, touching Kayleigh’s arm in an effort to reassure her. ‘You mean your son tells you he sees something that’s about to happen, and then it does?’

'Yeah, and more than once, too…' her words faltered, and she forced a shaky breath.

'Take your time,' said Mara. 'Tell us as much as you can. When did all this start? Tayte's seven now, isn't he?'

'He is.' Kayleigh wiped her fingers across her cheeks before re-clasping her hands. 'And it started 'bout a month ago.'

'And what was the first vision Tayte had?' Mara asked, taking a sip from her glass. 'Can you remember?'

Kayleigh sighed heavily, narrowing her eyes in recollection. 'It was just little stuff at first. He woke up one morning, said he'd seen something. A fox. It sounded silly. But he said he'd had a vision of a fox in a park, taking people's glasses.'

I almost did a double-take. This wasn't the kind of prediction I'd expected Kayleigh to share.

'I told Tayte it was just a dream he'd had,' she went on. 'But the next day I saw it in the *Metro*. On Facebook as well. It was exactly how Tayte had described it. A fox was nicking people's glasses. In the park, over in the next borough. It'd happened twice in the same afternoon.'

I thought back to handing in my notice just days before, on my journalist's job at a local newspaper called the Morden Mercury. I vaguely remembered the story about the fox, how people kept reporting their stolen glasses to the police, despite thefts by animals not strictly being a police matter. Since it hadn't happened in our area of London, we didn't include it in the Mercury, much to the chagrin of my boss, Jeff. He'd been desperate to cover the story, even having a headline on standby in case something similar kicked off in Morden. Naturally, it consisted of several of his trademark cringeworthy puns. *Fur fox*

sake: vixen vanishes with varifocals!

'Like I said, I thought it was just the same daft stuff loads of kids come up with.'

Kayleigh wasn't talking about Jeff's pun.

'Then, last Thursday,' she continued, 'I was nipping out to Greggs for some sausage rolls for tea. Tayte said not to bother going, because they wouldn't have any. And even though a couple of his, like, *visions* as he calls them, had come true by then, I still didn't think nothing of it, really. Not when it was sausage rolls he was on about. But when I get to Greggs, the woman behind the counter tells me there ain't any sausage rolls. They're completely sold out. I couldn't believe it.'

Mara and I exchanged a glance. As trivial, almost comical, as these predictions were, I had to admit the coincidence was unnerving.

'And you said there had been other things?' Mara asked. 'Other visions of Tayte's that have also come true?'

Kayleigh moved her hands from her lap to grip the front of the cushion she was sitting on. 'Yeah,' she murmured, knuckles tightening. 'Terrible things. Things there just ain't no way of explaining.' She hesitated, steeling herself for the next part. 'There was a boy, on our estate. His name was Prince. My eldest knew him. They were a similar age. Anyway, a few weeks ago, Tayte comes to me in tears. He says he's had another one of his visions. He says Prince is going to be stabbed.'

I searched my mind for recent news reports of stabbings on London estates. Sadly, they weren't uncommon. Many of these places were beset by problems, their residents struggling along against a backdrop of gang violence, addiction, police tension,

unemployment. The only recent stabbing I could recall, however, was the one on the news channels I'd glimpsed while we were trying to uncover the truth about the death of Angel Devereaux. And that stabbing had occurred on the notorious Harrowbrook Estate.

'Where do you live?' I asked Kayleigh, already knowing the answer.

'Harrowbrook—' she started, and a chill snaked its way down my spine.

There was a boy, on our estate. His name was Prince. Past tense.

I remembered the headlines, the reports of a teenage boy's death. Harrowbrook had been in the news for weeks before the murder. It was a deeply troubled place, a hotbed of gang violence and vandalism.

'I didn't… know what to do,' Kayleigh stammered, tears welling in her eyes. 'I went to Prince's mum straightaway. I texted her, tried to warn her. She told me to get lost, said her son wasn't involved in any trouble. But the next day… the next day Prince was stabbed. He died… on the way to hospital…' Her words faded into a heavy silence.

Mara put down her glass to steeple her fingers, elegant brows drawn together in concentration. 'And you say Tayte's also had a vision of his *own* death?' she ventured after she'd given Kayleigh a few seconds to compose herself.

'Yeah, and I'm beside myself, aren't I? I've got no bloody idea what to do!' Kayleigh's voice was ragged with fear. 'He told me yesterday. He keeps saying a man is going to kill him.' She choked the statement out. 'He's given me the time, the date, even the

place. He says it's going to happen on Thursday. *This* Thursday.'

It was Saturday night. Thursday was less than a week away. The ticking clock of the Angel Devereaux investigation had only just stopped, for another to take its place.

I reached for Kayleigh's arm again as the woman burst into tears.

Mara shifted forwards in her chair, her voice gentle but firm. 'We will help you get to the bottom of what's happening to your son, Kayleigh. You have my word.'

Relief broke over Kayleigh's face. 'Thank you,' she whispered. 'I didn't know who else to turn to. The police… they wouldn't believe me. Then I rang Kelly in prison, and she said… that it all sounded like a horrible magic trick. And that I should speak to you.' She dabbed her eyes.

'I know it probably doesn't sound very reassuring right now,' said Mara. 'And I understand how frightened you must be. But I promise that predicting the future is completely impossible. That said, something is clearly happening to Tayte to make him believe in these… visions of his.'

'About his visions,' added Kayleigh. 'There's… one more thing you should know. Something I should have said at the start.'

Mara and I waited; the room charged with anticipation.

'Tayte's visions,' said Kayleigh, eyes fixed on a point somewhere beyond the window. 'This is what's extra weird about them. They only started *after* he had the operation.'

'Operation?'

Kayleigh's chin trembled. 'He had a cornea transplant. Six weeks ago.'

The statement landed with the weight of something solid. I stared first at Kayleigh and then at Mara, whose lips had parted in a rare display of surprise.

A cornea transplant.

Tayte had been given a dead person's eyes. Eyes which were now seeing things that hadn't yet happened.

2.

In the space of a sentence, the case had gone from the distinctly strange to the downright surreal. A child receiving "visions" of the future through the eyes of the dead? And a dead what, exactly? A dead clairvoyant? A dead prophet? A dead mentalist?

'Tayte had a cornea transplant?' Mara asked, still mildly thrown by the revelation.

'Six weeks ago,' reiterated Kayleigh. 'The visions literally started straight after.'

'Was Tayte losing his sight?' I said. 'Was that why he needed the transplant?'

'Yeah, he was diagnosed with a condition,' Kayleigh replied. 'Couple of years ago. Keratoconus, it's called. It's something that's worse in kids than adults, they said. Doctors told me there was a chance of him going totally blind. I was scared to death. About him losing his sight, then about him having the op.' She drew her arms around herself and shivered. 'I really hoped everything would be okay when he came home. But now I'm scared all over. What if… what if whatever he's seeing can't be stopped?'

I felt a new rush of sympathy for Kayleigh. This woman had been through enough with her son's health without him now

apparently being plagued by psychic premonitions of his own murder. My mind churned, trying to hook itself on a rational explanation, find a foothold of logic amidst the mounting impossibility of it all. But there was none.

'We'll do our best,' Mara said softly. 'Are you sure I can't get you a drink?'

Kayleigh, momentarily lost in thought, shook her head.

'I think a good place to start with all this would be for us to come and see Tayte,' Mara announced. 'If he's still recovering from his operation, then easiest all round if we visit him at home. How does tomorrow morning sound?'

'Thanks, that's great.' A flush of relief returned to Kayleigh's cheeks before her expression clouded. 'I need to warn you, though, about the estate. You've probably heard already. It's got… a bit of a reputation.'

I recalled for the umpteenth time the hemming tower blocks, the degradation, the hostile youths that had crowded the car when I'd last found myself at Harrowbrook.

'We'll be fine,' Mara replied, with a dismissiveness that suggested she found the prospect of returning to the Harrowbrook Estate about as threatening as an outing to Sainsbury's. But then she'd somehow managed to survive a solo trip there, on foot and in the dark. I wondered once more how the hell she'd made it home safely that night.

'Well, if you're sure,' said Kayleigh.

Mara handed Kayleigh a piece of paper, on which the other woman jotted down her address.

When she'd finished doing so, Kayleigh checked her phone. 'It's getting late. I should go.'

It struck me then that I had no idea how Kayleigh had got to Mara's house in the first place. No car had set off the cameras on Mara's drive, and it was too long a walk from the bus stop.

Mara rose from her chair. 'It's quite a way back to Harrowbrook. You're welcome to one of the spare rooms if you need it.'

It was a nice gesture from Mara, a woman who'd informed me the second time I'd slept over that she "couldn't stand" having guests. That said, Jasper and I were due to stay in one of her spare rooms overnight ourselves. I'd been up there already to see that a brand new dog bed had materialised since my last visit. I was touched. Perhaps Mara enjoyed guests more than she'd been letting on. More likely, she was lonely. Rattling around in this huge house by herself since her husband's disappearance five months ago. Travers Knight had vanished from inside a sealed coffin while performing a live TV magic special entitled *Buried Alive*. The special had been filmed on location in Highgate Cemetery. Travers's disappearance remained unexplained.

Kayleigh's gaze darted around the room, taking in everything from the plush upholstery to the crimson velvet curtains generously swagged either side of the windows. For a second, she looked tempted.

'Appreciate the offer, but I can't,' she said. 'Sorry. Mum's at mine, looking after the kids. I gave Tayte his bath and got him to bed just before I left, but I've got three others besides. I need to get back to them.'

'Of course,' replied Mara, extracting her mobile from her pocket. 'In that case, I'll call you a car.'

Kayleigh's eyes widened. 'No, it's okay,' she said, getting to her feet. 'A friend gave me a lift. They're out by your gates, waiting for me.'

On Mara's front step, Kayleigh turned to us, the cold night eddying in through the open door. 'Thanks again,' she murmured. 'For helping. For believing what I said. Sometimes I think I'm going mad.'

With a final, watery smile, she hurried across the expanse of gravel driveway and was gone, melting into the tunnel of trees that led to the road.

Mara closed and secured the door; the noise of the bolts sliding heavily home echoing around the hall.

She stilled for a moment, her back to me. 'Well,' she said. 'That really wasn't how I envisaged the evening going.'

'Unexpected doesn't even cover it,' I agreed, my mind reeling.

We drifted back into the living room, the sumptuousness of the space a stark contrast to the world Kayleigh had just described.

The large television on the wall was displaying the views from Mara's security cameras once more. Clearly, they'd been activated by Kayleigh retreating down the drive. One camera was angled through the bars of Mara's front gates. A pale-coloured car was moving off into the road from where it had been parked. The taillights fuzzed the picture, but the middle of the number plate was just about legible. *O BTJ*.

Mara refilled my glass as I hovered by the TV, watching the car depart.

'A seven-year-old boy having visions of the future through a dead person's corneas,' I said, testing the notion aloud to see if

it sounded any less impossible. It didn't. 'A fox stealing glasses… Greggs running out of sausage rolls… a fatal stabbing on Tayte's estate… and now his own death. You couldn't make it up.'

I replayed Tayte's predictions in my head. The first two were the type of trivially kooky happenings covered by local newspapers every day. Strange though they were, I thought they could probably be more easily explained than Tayte's more disturbing premonitions.

'What do you think of the glasses-stealing fox and Greggs, then?' I asked Mara, reinstalling myself at Jasper's side. 'Those two things could just be coincidences? Stuff like that must happen all the time.'

Mara took a swig of her drink, jabbing the poker into the fire with her other hand. 'That's certainly what was going through my mind. How many fox stories do you think you covered while you were at the Mercury? Foxes getting up to mischief… riding on London buses… swiping people's packed lunches? I'm sure Jeff would have had a field day with all that, throwing out puns like there was no tomorrow… *zero fox given*.'

I snorted. 'Come to think of it, I do remember something about commuters being out-*foxed*.'

A smile passed over Mara's lips. 'Sounds like a case of *paw* and order.'

My snort turned into a full-blown laugh. 'Quite a few London foxes having a *brush* with the law?'

'Being *fox-trotted* off to the police station, no doubt,' Mara returned. 'I shall have to ask Dhita about that the next time I see her.'

I stopped laughing abruptly, remembering what had brought

us to this topic. A frightened mother with a frightened little boy. A boy who'd just been through major surgery.

'As for the pastries…' Mara went on, picking up where we left off before the spirit of Jeff had the chance to totally overtake us. 'Shops have busy days… they sell out. They also have supply problems. A delivery's delayed for some reason. The lorry breaks down, say. The next thing you know — no sausage rolls.'

'Greggs do all their baking in-store, actually.'

Mara eyed me over the rim of her glass. 'We should ask them for sponsorship.'

We lapsed into silence, the other two visions Kayleigh had mentioned looming between us. The fire popped and, despite the soporific warmth of the room and the cosiness of the sofa, I shuddered. Those two remaining predictions were chilling. That such a young child was convinced he'd somehow *seen* his own death. That he'd already correctly foreseen the death of one of his brother's friends…

'I know we were full on with the Angel Devereaux case at the time,' I commented, 'but that boy being stabbed was a major news story a couple of weeks ago.'

'It was,' said Mara. 'If Tayte did indeed predict that it was Prince who was going to be stabbed, it's a bit trickier to put that one down to coincidence. For example, Tayte didn't just know a random boy would be stabbed, he correctly pinpointed *who*.'

'So you do think there's truth in it, then?' I asked. 'You think Tayte genuinely can see the future?'

Mara lowered her glass and fixed me with a gaze, the kind that made you feel she was looking not just at you, but straight through you, at some possibility revealing itself in the distance.

'I believe that second sight — or predicting the future — is, and always will be, impossible,' she replied. 'But what I also believe is that Kayleigh is terrified, and that something is happening to her son we don't yet understand.'

I hummed in agreement. 'And what about the cornea donor?' I added, unable to stop myself from voicing the thoughts I'd had earlier.

'What about them?'

'Okay, I know you're going to hate this — and it's probably totally unscientific — but what if Tayte's visions are something to do with his new corneas? There have been loads of cases of weird personality changes in people who've had organ transplants.'

'That's true,' said Mara. 'But it stands to reason there are psychological shifts in a person who's gone through something so major. And been given a new lease of life in the process. A second chance, so to speak.'

I couldn't argue with that. I recalled an article I'd stumbled across a year or so ago. 'There was one boy,' I told Mara, neglecting to divulge that the article had been on LADbible, 'who had a heart transplant. Beforehand, he was fine with water. But after his surgery, he suddenly became petrified of it. Neither he nor his family knew how his donor had died. Turned out she'd drowned. In a swimming pool.' I let the words hang there.

Mara was quiet for a minute, considering. 'That sounds like something you'd find on LADbible,' she said.

'So, what if…' I continued, undeterred. 'What if those corneas came from a person with psychic abilities who passed on? Now Tayte has inherited their skills?'

'A psychic who passed on?' repeated Mara.

'A psychic who's ceased to be, one who had a donor card? A mentalist who met their maker.'

I thought Mara might appreciate the suggestion that Tayte's donor had been a mind-reading magician. I was wrong.

'This isn't the dead parrot sketch, Clare,' she replied. 'Nor is it the Twilight Zone.' She swirled the dark liquid around in her glass. 'An effect is being created somehow, and it's our job to find the method. Like a magic trick. Tomorrow, we're going to begin searching for the trapdoor.'

'I thought you hated the fact that magic tricks always seem to be explained by a trapdoor?'

'I do,' clipped Mara. 'It's deeply unimaginative. Not to mention unrealistic.'

'Now I'm hoping we really do find a trapdoor tomorrow.'

Mara gave a low trill of amusement. 'That *would* be a surprise.'

I watched her; the confidence in her tone doing little to quell the unease coiling in my stomach. A trip to the Harrowbrook Estate. A boy who could see his own death. I might have been marginally terrified by what we were about to get ourselves into, but if I was being honest, I also couldn't wait to get started.

3.

It was mid-morning when the grim reality of the Harrowbrook Estate swung into view up ahead.

I swallowed hard. The place seemed even more forbidding in the flat light of an overcast Sunday; an insipid grey-brown mass rising before us. It looked like a series of gigantic stacked boxes, their facades gridded by grimy concrete walkways, the windows inscrutable or boarded blankly, giving them the appearance of vacant eyes.

The late nineteenth-century terraces around us petered out as we neared one of the entrances to the estate. I turned the car in, unsure where to head next. The place was so large it was disorienting. I didn't recognise anything from that Thursday night two weeks ago, when the rain had lashed down and Mara had vanished into the night.

'Park here, is my advice,' she said steadily. 'I think we should avoid driving into the centre of the estate.'

Her voice was calm, even though my pulse was rocketing.

We'd agreed in advance that taking my little old Ford Fiesta was better than going in one of the newer, flashier cars Mara kept shrouded in her underground garage. Nonetheless, I worried whether my vehicle would still be in one piece by the

time we left Kayleigh's. I was just glad we hadn't brought Jasper. Despite her self-confessed ignorance of all things canine, Mara had made a few calls before we left the house, booking him in with a good dog sitter for a couple of hours.

'What about parking here? In view of the security cameras?' I glanced around. One camera was dangling precariously from its wire, the spaces where two others should have been nothing more than rough holes in the walls, from which stubby cut wires protruded. 'Oh. There are no cameras.'

'Here should be fine.'

I took a breath and got out of the car. A few spaces away lay the blackened remains of a burnt-out moped. Concrete walls scarred with graffiti engulfed us on almost every side. The car nearest to us, I realised, had no wheels. It was propped up on bricks.

'Not a very good sign,' I observed.

'Speaking of which, do you see any?' asked Mara. 'We're looking for a block called "Ratchford".'

The closest things I'd seen to a sign so far were the ghosted areas of dirty walls formed by letters that had obviously fallen off some time ago. The graffiti crowded the spaces they'd left. Spiky tags, their skirts of dried paint drips making them look like they were melting. Multi-coloured bubble writing spelling words I couldn't decipher. Garish smiling faces.

'There's something here, written in aerosol,' I told Mara, checking the car was locked for the hundredth time. 'Not sure if it's a sign, though.' I sounded the word out. 'A-cab.' It rang a distant bell.

'All cops are bastards,' Mara replied, the acronym only then

registering. 'While we're here, best not to mention we work with…' she mouthed her last words, 'those bastards.'

Since we were no closer to finding the Ratchford block, we decided to head along the single-lane roadway stretching in front of us. On our left, a bus shelter rose from a heap of crushed ice. When we got closer, I saw it wasn't ice at all, but the smashed glass that had once formed the bus shelter's windows. A little way further, a pile of rubbish had been dumped. Abandoned mattresses, almost worn through to their springs. Screwed mountains of soiled blankets discarded around them.

We were flanked on our right by what looked like a derelict parade of shops, most of their frontages boarded over. "Nails by V," one sign read. "JJ's Hair & Beauty," another. A newsagent-cum-corner shop was there, too; its window boarded up like the rest. It took me a moment to realise that this shop, at least, was still open. Next to it was an entrance, identified by one of the remaining unvandalised signs as the "Harrowbrook Estate Enterprise Centre and Community Cafe". The smell of old frying fat and cigarettes drifted from the opening.

We turned the corner, still following the roadway. Several net curtains trembled above us, but we didn't see another soul. For some reason, this felt more threatening than Harrowbrook being alive with balaclavaed youths. The place was eerily quiet, even for a Sunday morning.

Eventually we found it: a large beige tower block, the letters forming the word "Ratchford" mounted to the side.

'This is it,' I said, squinting upwards. Kayleigh's flat was on the third floor.

The door into the block had stuck, so Mara put her shoulder

to it, flying inwards when it finally gave, her deep-green coat swelling behind her. Inside, we were faced with a dark and musty entrance, a metal lift to our right, the bottom of a concrete stairwell to our left.

We quickly realised the lift was out of order. A halfhearted attempt had been made to cordon off its doors with hazard tape. The tape was sun-bleached and ragged, as though it might have been put there some time ago.

'Looks like it's the stairs, then,' Mara remarked.

I wondered how long the lift had been out of action. Kayleigh had said she had three other kids besides Tayte. Had she been forced to cart prams and pushchairs and shopping up these stairs, year after year? I suddenly felt bad for complaining about the flat in Morden that I rented with my boyfriend, Matt. Sure, it felt small, especially compared to Mara's house. It could be cold in the winter; the outside would have benefited from a lick of paint; the garden had seen better days. But despite its flaws, the flat was safe and quiet, and I felt lucky to have it.

The Ratchford stairwell stank of urine; the walls a tapestry of overlapping tags. We climbed to the third floor and proceeded along the concrete walkway that bordered the doors to each flat. At last, we found Kayleigh's. The eighth door along.

A woman opened it before we had a chance to knock. She was older than Kayleigh, in her late fifties perhaps, and with the same dark hair, only hers was cut short and streaked silver. Her face, though lined with worry, had an obstinance to it, a resilience. The kind of toughness forged from a life that had been far from easy.

'You're Mara,' the woman said at once. 'I recognise you from

the telly.' Her voice carried the same London accent as her daughters, but with a huskier, more gravelly edge. 'I'm Terri. Kayleigh's mum.'

Mara offered a smile. 'Hi Terri. This is my assistant, Clare.'

Terri ushered us inside, onto a dated, umber-coloured carpet covering a short and narrow hallway. The decor was shabby; the hallway made narrower still by the multitude of coats ballooning from pegs along the wall. But bleak as Harrowbrook might be, and cramped and worn though Kayleigh's flat was, the place was immaculately clean. Children's paintings had been lovingly taped to the walls, and the scent of freshly washed laundry wafted towards us.

'Come through to the kitchen,' said Terri. 'There's more space in there.'

We passed two doorways on our left. From the first of these, a girl of about ten peered at us with wide, curious eyes.

'Are you going to come and meet these ladies, Leonie?' Terri asked the child, but the door nosed shyly shut. 'Don't take it personally,' Terri told us. 'She's a bit scared of strangers, living here.'

The kitchen, when we reached it, was just as constricted as the hallway. A tiny table was squeezed into its centre. Clean crockery, saucepans, cereal boxes and children's plastic beakers were piled around what space there was on the worktops, like the fitted cupboards weren't large or numerous enough to hold everything. Kayleigh stood at one of these worktops with her back to us, boiling the kettle.

She turned when she heard Mara and me enter, relief briefly masking anxiety. 'Oh,' she uttered. 'You came.'

'Of course,' said Mara.

Kayleigh's cheeks went suddenly red, and she stared at her feet. 'Look, I'm sorry the place isn't as grand as yours—'

Mara stopped her quickly. 'Absolutely no need to apologise.'

'And we're glad to help,' I added.

'Want a drink?' Kayleigh asked.

'Maybe later,' said Mara. 'Let's speak to Tayte first. Where can we find him?'

Kayleigh began pouring hot water into a pair of mugs. 'He's in his room. His brother's in there too. Keeping him company.' She stirred the tea and handed a mug to her mum. 'I'll take you in now.'

Mara and I followed Kayleigh the couple of steps from the kitchen to the nearest door off the hall. The tight space felt even dimmer, more claustrophobic than it had just moments before. Kayleigh reached for the door handle and hesitated.

'Just to warn you,' she said. 'I try to keep the room dark.'

'Is that what the doctors advised?' asked Mara.

Kayleigh was quiet for a second. 'Well, they said for him to wear dark glasses in daylight for a week or two. And an eye shield at night to stop him rubbing his eyes, making them sore…'

Mara waited.

'No, the dark room… Well, I suppose it's me being extra careful,' admitted Kayleigh.

As her fingers tightened on the door handle, I noticed the atmosphere had changed. There was a tension in the air, as though despite Kayleigh wanting to do everything she could to protect her son, she was also the tiniest bit fearful of entering his room. It felt strange, hovering on that humble threshold in a

tower block in west London. It was more like we were about to enter the lair of a formidable ancient mystic than a seven-year-old child.

I recalled what Mara had said the previous night. That Kayleigh was a terrified mother, that something was happening to her son we didn't yet understand. Was it any wonder she was wary when that same boy had been coming out with such disturbing predictions, including his own imminent death? Perhaps it was only Kayleigh's natural, heightened concern as a mother that was causing such a sense of unease in the flat. Perhaps Mara would get to the bottom of what was happening here in a heartbeat.

Kayleigh slowly depressed the handle. 'Tayte, love?'

The door creaked inwards and, all of a sudden, a child burst through the gap in the direction of the kitchen. The unexpected movement gave me a start. But the boy was too tall to be Tayte.

'Just getting some crisps!' he called as he barrelled past us.

'You'll be lucky, sweetheart,' answered Terri. 'We can't go shopping 'til tomorrow.'

Kayleigh, who was as startled as I by the child's sudden eruption from the bedroom, explained the boy was Deon, her twelve-year-old son.

Turning back to the gloom now yawning at us from the room's open door, we edged inside. I squinted, my eyes adjusting by slow degrees to the low light. Heavy curtains, like two thick navy blankets, were drawn across the window. A single bed took up the space to our right, while a bunk bed had been pushed against the wall opposite the door. Furniture sat hunched in the darkness, wardrobe doors skewed and ajar like they no longer

closed; drawer fronts loose and hanging like crooked, gaping mouths. There was no movement whatsoever, and I couldn't see Tayte. The air was close and still.

Then I saw him. A boy, sitting cross-legged on the floor, his hands folded in his lap, his back to the window. The slim fingers of light stealing in through the curtains backlit the child, giving his small form an uncanny, spectral glow.

'Tayte?' said Kayleigh, lowering her voice as if in reverence. 'Some friends have come to see you.' She fell back slightly, indicating for Mara and me to go closer.

As we did, the boy angled his chin upwards — a deliberate, unhurried motion — and that is when I saw his eyes for the first time. They were large and arresting in the span of his face, appearing to hold a knowledge far beyond his seven years. Moreover, although Tayte was dark like his siblings, his eyes weren't brown, but rather a rare, ashy shade of grey. It seemed like their natural colour to me, rather than any scarring from the operation. But it rendered them even more extraordinary.

Mara lowered herself to the floor. She sat just in front of the boy, her long legs crossed like his, her coat pooling around her.

'Hello, Tayte,' she said softly. 'I'm Mara. And this is my friend, Clare.'

I raised a hand, uncertain whether he could see it, and dropped down at Mara's side.

'I have a present for you, Tayte,' Mara went on. She carefully stretched out her forearms, twisting her wrists to show the backs and palms of her hands. Then, caressing the cuffs of her coat, she made a minute, rapid gesture. A little paper bag appeared from nowhere, the telltale yellow-and-red design of a sherbet

dip-dab, a sweet I'd loved myself as a kid. I'd seen a succession of displays of Mara's sleight of hand by now, but they never failed to impress me. She held the dip-dab out to the boy.

Tayte looked hard at the bag, unblinking. 'That came from up your sleeve,' he said.

Mara gave a short laugh. 'Your mum told us you were a very clever little boy,' she replied. Her smile flattened again. 'She also told us that something has been happening to you, Tayte. That you're able to see things? That you have… visions.'

Tayte nodded solemnly.

'Do you think you could tell us about them?' Mara asked, gently placing the bag of sherbet at the child's knee. 'You saw a fox, didn't you? Doing something funny?'

Tayte's brows dipped dramatically, his expression still grave. 'Not funny.'

'Okay, not funny,' said Mara, 'you're right. But could you tell us what you *did* see the fox doing?'

Tayte remained motionless, his hands clasped. 'It was stealing people's glasses,' he replied. 'In a park.'

'And can you explain what seeing that was like, Tayte?' Mara continued. 'Was it like you were there in the park with the fox? Or was it more like you were seeing it in your head, like it was a dream?'

'Not like a dream,' Tayte said emphatically. 'Like I could see it. Like I was with the fox.'

'Okaaay…' said Mara.

'He doesn't see this stuff at night, when he's asleep. It's always during the day.' Kayleigh moved towards her son, taking hold of his hand. 'Can you tell the lady about Prince?' she encouraged.

'Can you do that, Tay?'

'I know it's scary,' I chipped in. 'But it's very important.'

Tayte gave a single, controlled nod.

I thought again how, despite him being so young, he seemed like such an old soul, wise beyond his years. Haunted.

'I saw a knife,' Tayte said, slowly and carefully. 'Lots of shouting. Naughty words. They said Prince's name. They stabbed him… with a butterfly.'

They stabbed him with a *butterfly?* What the heck did that mean? But there was more.

'Then the butterfly got hidden. Put to bed. By the newsagent.' The child's voice rose as the sentences broke from his lips.

'And tell these ladies what you told me this morning, Taytay,' Terri interrupted from the door, clearly anxious about her grandson becoming distressed as he relived the other boy's death. 'Do you remember, love? About the car?' She nursed her mug of tea pensively.

I worried Tayte might start to feel pressurised, outnumbered by all these adults in his bedroom — two of whom were strangers — trying to prise such troubling information from him. Then Terri's words sank in. *What you told me this morning*. This was a new one then. A brand new prediction that we hadn't yet heard. Tayte's visions were *still* occurring. Mara and I shared a glance.

'I remember,' Tayte said. 'A car was stolen. But I know where it is. Under the railway bridge. On Blackthorn Common.'

My jaw dropped.

Mara took the information in for a moment, then pulled out her mobile. 'Do you know what colour the car is, Tayte?'

'Blue.'

'Can you remember the make?' I asked.

'Toy Yoda,' replied Tayte earnestly.

'He means Toyota,' clarified Kayleigh.

Mara nodded and began typing on her phone. I assumed she was sending the details about the car to one of her contacts at the Met. DC Taylor, or his bosses, DI Graham Paulson or DCI Adhita Anand. Checking whether a vehicle fitting this description had been reported stolen.

A few moments of silence elapsed.

'See, this is the kind of thing that happens all the time,' Kayleigh cried, a fresh wave of despair twisting her face. 'These visions. They're things he couldn't possibly know.'

As I watched Mara slip her mobile back in her pocket, something struck me. 'Does Tayte have access to a phone?' I asked, turning to Kayleigh. 'Or a tablet?'

Kayleigh shook her head vehemently. 'No, nothing. We don't have a tablet or computer, or anything. There's my mobile, but Tay's never on it. Anyway, I'd worry the glare could damage his eyes.'

I pursed my lips in thought. This ruled out the possibility that Tayte might have been finding these stories online. I looked from mother to son, at the obvious unrest — or rather, fear — that bound them together. Was this boy *really* having psychic visions as a result of a cornea transplant? No, that was impossible. Mara was right; there had to be a rational explanation. All we needed to do was find it. A task that right now seemed easier said than done.

Mara linked her fingers together on her lap, mirroring Tayte's position, and leant towards him. 'Now, Tayte,' she said sombrely. 'I know this might be difficult for you, but can you tell us about the last thing you saw, before the car? The thing that's making your mum so worried?'

There was a beat of recognition before Tayte's eyes widened alarmingly, both hands shooting up to cover his face in a show of undeniable anguish. It was shocking to see, not least as since we'd arrived the boy had been so calm. Tayte's palms moved to clamp his ears, and his head swung rapidly left and right. The atmosphere in the room, at first so pensive and other-worldly, changed once more. It was downright uncomfortable now, weighty and oppressive.

Kayleigh wrapped an arm around her son. 'It's alright, sweetheart. We know you're scared, but you can tell them.'

'As my friend Clare said earlier,' Mara added, 'it's very important that you do. So we can try to help you.'

Tayte's head snapped up at this, his huge eyes swimming with tears. 'It's about me,' he murmured. 'A man wants to kill me. And I know when.'

A cold dread wrung my gut at hearing a child say those words.

'When, Tayte?' said Mara.

'Thursday,' Kayleigh answered, her voice breaking.

'Do you remember the time, Tayte?' asked Mara.

'They said eight,' the boy replied, fat tears spilling down his cheeks. 'Eight o'clock. Night-time.'

'And where, Tayte? Do you know where?'

The boy's chin trembled as the words spewed from him in a

hail of sobs. ‘In the capital… Capital I.’

Capital I? I had no idea where this was. I frowned, glanced at Mara, but her focus on Tayte was unwavering.

‘And was there anything else?’ she persisted. ‘Anything at all that you can remember?’

‘Yes,’ Tayte choked, expression warped with terror. ‘The man said I have foreign eyes. He wants them back… he wants *my* eyes.’