
THE
MAGICIAN'S
WIFE

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THE MAGICIAN'S WIFE



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PROLOGUE

I knew how the trick was supposed to be done. I'd seen similar illusions on TV before.

It had always gone like this…

A sudden flare of lights. A burst of music. A magician striding out to meet his audience, while a large box, black as a club, sits on a raised platform stage right.

A magician who beckons flamboyantly, his wife shimmying towards him from the wings, her blonde hair a halo, the sequins of her leotard dazzling, sheathing her body like she is something mythical; a luminous-skinned fairy, a mermaid with wet shining scales.

The woman climbs the stairs and into the waiting box and, as the front is closed up before her, she waves a silk handkerchief over the top of the box, a handkerchief the startling red of a fresh heart. She continues to wave it as she is fully enclosed within the box, as the stairs are moved away. As a second box, identical to the first, is wheeled to fill stage left. As this new box is also shown to be empty and both boxes are hoisted in the air.

The soundtrack swells then, and, like a conductor, the magician gives his signal, commanding two things to happen together, as quickly as the blinking of an eye. The waving hand

disappears. The first box shudders apart. Yet now it is empty. The woman is no longer inside.

As the music reaches its crescendo, the magician gestures at the second box, wand blurring towards it like a baton. High above the stage, the box collapses, its base and sides dropping away, and in a cloudburst of glitter the magician's wife is revealed. She is perched upon a trapeze, her tapered legs crossed, slender feet pointed, white smile wide and ravishing as her sequins. And in that moment it becomes apparent: it is this woman who really holds the magic. Her reappearance is the climax. The story cannot end without it.

And so, I knew this is how the trick was supposed to be done.

But on Saturday, the 15th of March 2014, that wasn't what happened. Because that night, in front of the blazing lights and the gazing lenses, the glare of the audience and the scrutiny of the unseen millions watching on TVs and tablets and smartphones, something went very wrong. For when the sides of the second box waterfalled apart, the trapeze was unoccupied.

The magician's wife was not there.

She had suddenly, inexplicably, completely… vanished.

1.♠

As the man talked, my mind drifted to the message burning a hole in my pocket. The message that had been hand-delivered through my letterbox the previous morning. The message I'd read a hundred times already.

> **Very well, Clare, let's meet. I'll be at HMP Ferndon this Saturday. Come between 3-5 pm. Signed, a well-wisher.**

The words had been neatly hand-inked on a sheet of writing paper; the creamy, expensive kind. The paper was bordered purple and embossed with the initials "M.K." which, though I didn't realise it at the time, rendered the anonymous signature redundant: "a well-wisher". Despite the very nice paper and the very elegant handwriting, each time I read that signature I couldn't help but wonder what on earth I might be getting myself into.

M.K. Mara Knight.

I suppose I never expected her to answer me at all.

I had contacted Mara the previous day, five days after Angel Devereaux — the wife and assistant of magician Dex Devereaux — had abruptly vanished in front of millions on the first round

of the TV show Talent Quest.

Nobody seemed to care at first, despite Angel Devereaux having disappeared on live TV. But as the week had gone on, with still no sign of Angel, the local paper I worked for was very keen to cover the story. The Devereauxs, it turned out, also lived in Morden, the same area of south London as me.

It was exactly the kind of case I had always wanted to cover. A sudden, baffling disappearance with zero leads. Maybe my coverage of the story could spark that lead, that memory. Maybe *I* could be the one to help bring this woman back. It was the very reason I'd worked two jobs and a night shift to fund my journalism diploma a few years earlier. To try to make a difference. So other people didn't have to go through the same thing I had.

But my boss at the Morden Mercury had other ideas.

'Not only are the Devereauxs local, but that Angel's a fine figure of a woman… for her age,' Jeff Tych said, crossing his legs. 'No, think I'll follow this one up myself, Clare. You take the story about that graphics place down the road. The owner's about to go to print on his hundredth pet birthday banner. You like dogs. And you're good with nutters.'

So, that is where I found myself the Saturday everything changed. Sitting behind the counter of Presto Print, nursing a cold mug of tea, while its owner pondered aloud whether a satin finish was more popular amongst corgis or cockapoos. Mr Chen was certainly a little eccentric, but it was unkind to call him a nutter.

I smiled politely and glanced at the clock on the wall. I should have left Presto Print thirty minutes ago. It was well past one,

which didn't leave long to run back to the flat, grab my car keys and negotiate the perils of the M25. Especially if I was to be in with a chance of making it to HMP Ferndon in time to spend a good hour with Mara Knight.

My gaze wandered from the clock to the pinboard below it, across the mass of overlapping order slips tacked there, all jostling for position and stamped in red: "COMPLETE". Little records of lives and loved ones: birthdays, stag nights, retirements. "I ♥ HAPPY WOMEN", one order read. Strange, the things some people wanted printing onto banners. As my eyes traced the handwriting on the slips, I thought about the note in my pocket again.

Mara Knight hadn't been easy to track down. She had no social media and no website. In fact, I wouldn't have known about her at all if it wasn't for her husband, Travers. Like Dex Devereaux, he was a professional magician. Unlike Dex Devereaux, Travers had performed at most of the world's biggest venues, had had a residency in Vegas, entertained royalty, supported a host of good causes and, for a time, had even worked with the Metropolitan Police in an advisory capacity, with the job title: "Forensic Illusionist".

Then, nearly five months ago, in the middle of a magic show no less, Travers Knight had mysteriously vanished. He'd been performing his famous *"Buried Alive"* trick on a live TV special shot on location in Highgate Cemetery. The cameras filmed him going into an ordinary wooden coffin, from which he was meant to escape. But he didn't escape, and when panicked crew members dug the coffin out… it was empty. This wasn't supposed to happen.

To date, Travers Knight had never been found.

Just like Angel.

Despite what Jeff had said about me not working the story, I couldn't stop thinking about Angel. I couldn't stop thinking that there were others out there, too, who couldn't stop thinking about Angel. The consensus from Talent Quest was that she had simply run away, albeit in the middle of a live performance on national television. But as the days ticked by, I couldn't help thinking there might be more to it than that. So, I decided to go ahead and investigate Angel's disappearance. See what I could find.

I wanted Mara's help as what had happened to Dex Devereaux had happened to her. Not only that, but she'd been married to Travers for years, even worked with him for a while, according to an old version of his website. She knew all about magicians, illusions… how distractions are created, how people can be made to disappear.

Or perhaps there was something more, pulling me to Mara, even then. I just didn't know about it at the time.

What I did know about was HMP Ferndon. I'd come across it in my newspaper work before. It was a high-security women's prison in Hertfordshire, and I kept asking myself why Mara had suggested we meet *there*, of all places, before the notion grabbed me. When a woman disappears, the first person of interest to the police is her husband. So, does that mean when a man disappears, the first person of interest to the police is his wife?

Although it seemed utterly impossible, and there'd been nothing about it in the papers, the thought buzzed incessantly

around my head. Is that why Mara Knight had suggested meeting at HMP Ferndon? Because she was now *in* HMP Ferndon?

'I'm terribly sorry, Mr Chen,' I said, swallowing down the rest of the stone cold tea and trying not to retch. 'Thank you very much for your time, but there's somewhere I really must be.'

2.

Racing out of Presto Print, I puffed my way up the hill to the flat. I cursed at the wet patches seeping under my arms when I let myself in, despite the cold spring. There was no time to change.

I dumped my bag in the "entrance hall", which was how the small square of floor between the front door, the bedroom and the living room had been described in the estate agent's brochure. In reality, the area barely accommodated a doormat. "My Clarey-Bird", that doormat read. A present from my boyfriend for my thirtieth last year, not long after we moved in.

'A mat from Matt,' he'd told me, gesturing from the floor to himself and grinning puppyishly.

Clarey-Bird was the title of one of Matt's songs, which he'd written in my honour. I didn't have the heart to tell him I'd never been sure about the song, much less the doormat.

All of a sudden, the door to the living room nosed open and a familiar shape came bounding towards me. My dog, Jasper. A cocker-terrier mix with the pinkest tongue known to man and a pale creamy-beige coat; a stark contrast to the oily grey it had been when I'd rescued him, not long after my birthday.

I rubbed Jasper's cheeks, kissing his head before turning to the hall mirror to give myself a once-over. I cringed at the

mess looking back at me more than I'd cringed at the doormat. My chin-length brown hair was tangled and my cheeks flushed; a film of sweat sheening my face. Cursing again, I dipped into my bag, hurriedly swiping a bit of powder over my forehead and nose. The action caused a memory to rise, and I shivered, despite the sweat—

'Cla?'

It isn't really possible to shorten my name, but that didn't stop Matt from trying.

Pretending I hadn't heard, I dashed into the bathroom, where everything dripped with steam and damp towels littered the floor. I rolled on some deodorant, scrabbled around for my perfume. I couldn't find it. Unsurprising, given the state of the place.

'You off out again?' Matt said when I cut into the living room for the car keys.

I supposed I didn't look like I was. I glanced down at my nondescript cardigan and jeans, at the black and white Converse I'd been wearing since uni.

'Where are you going anyway?' Matt said, absentmindedly plucking a couple of strings on his guitar. 'That paint shop?'

'Print shop. And I've been already.'

Tentatively, Matt strummed a succession of chords. '*In the paint shop… where love takes flight*,' he started to sing. '*Brushstrokes dancing… in the soft moonlight. With every colour, our hearts unite…* Hey, I need to write this down…'

'I'll see you later—'

'In the paint shop, girl everything just feels so right…'

'Bye, Matt!' I called. 'Don't forget to walk Jasper!' I shut the

door, hoping he'd be finished by the time I got back, since the next round of Talent Quest was on and I wanted to watch it live. See if there would be any mention of Dex or Angel Devereaux.

In the hall, I picked up my bag again and noticed something was lying next to it on the floor. I guessed it must have been there when I arrived.

Lifting up the square of card, I read the words printed across the top of it in bold black letters.

> **This is your final reminder. We have your parcel from...**

Below this, someone had written "Luxe Lumina" in biro. "Please collect by 5pm."

I frowned. I certainly hadn't ordered anything from Luxe Lumina, a well-known luxury cosmetics brand. One of their eyeliners alone would probably have cleaned out a week of my wages. Then I remembered. I'd entered a promotional giveaway a few weeks ago on social media, to win a bottle of their new perfume, Parma Violet. My luck must be changing, I thought.

The parcel needed collecting that day, and the collection point given was the off-licence next door. Still self-conscious of the sticky patches now drying on my top, I decided to pick up the parcel straight away. I gave Jasper a final cuddle, then left.

I tore the box open as soon as I got in the car and, after giving myself a liberal spritz of Parma Violet and chucking the bottle in my handbag, I set off for Hertfordshire.

3.

By the time I reached the junction for the M25, my eyes had just about stopped watering, though I still had to make the rest of the journey with the windows down. Luxe Lumina's new perfume was not good. No wonder they were giving it away.

The visitors' car park at HMP Ferndon was pretty full when I arrived, but I managed to find a space not too far from the barriers, which were raised. I grabbed my handbag and locked the car, and as I followed the signs to the Visitors' Reception Centre, I could feel the pulse start to kick in my neck. I had never visited a prison before and had no idea what to expect.

Whatever it was, it wasn't the scene that greeted me inside. The reception was cheerful, welcoming even. Filled with children's tables and soft play, variegated pot plants and piles of glossy magazines. A wall-mounted TV was playing a rolling news channel. I joined the queue to sign in as the headline summaries scrolled across its screen. *Met Police investigate another large-scale drugs racket on the Harrowbrook Estate… First same-sex marriages in the UK to take place in a week's time… Champion race horse stolen from stables…*

When I finally reached the desk, a kindly lady with a grandmotherly hairstyle at odds with her snakeskin manicure

directed me through a series of forms. Who I was, who I was there to see. She took a copy of my driver's licence and, once I'd filled out all the relevant papers, asked me to take a seat.

I glanced behind me. More chairs had been filled in the five minutes or so that I'd been at the desk. 'Thanks very much, but I'll stand.'

The woman looked mildly apologetic. 'Ms Knight is being brought over from B Wing, and the director's instructed that you see her in one of the closed rooms. Room Three.' She gave an ominous pause. 'I'm afraid there might be a bit of a wait.'

Could I have been correct in thinking Mara *was* incarcerated here? But for what, exactly? And was that why she'd told me to come between three and five, because these were the prison's visiting hours?

I checked my watch. It was after four, and I hoped there wasn't going to be too much of a wait or I'd never get through everything I wanted to ask Mara before the visiting time was up.

'Okay, thank you,' I told the woman, who obviously hadn't noticed that every chair was now full and the only vacant seats were a row of small patterned stools. As I neared them, it became apparent that these weren't for adults at all.

I ventured a look at the desk where the woman was still watching me with concern. Not wanting to disappoint her, I cautiously lowered myself into a sort of semi-balanced half-squat. At least I was small enough for the thing to accommodate me, one of the few times my size has ever come in handy. I issued an awkward smile to the woman, who seemed satisfied I was seated and continued with her work.

On the table before me lay a stack of colouring-in sheets. Beyond that, a row of faces tilted in my direction, multiple pairs

of eyebrows raised. I was in one of the highest security women's prisons in the country, perched on a children's seat in the shape of a toadstool and feeling like the caterpillar from Alice in bloody Wonderland. At least my embarrassment quota for the afternoon had hit its limit. Things surely couldn't get any worse.

I checked my watch again, praying I wasn't going to have to stay in this position for very much longer — my backside already growing numb — when I heard a woman's voice behind me.

'Oh, love, have you run out of crayons?'

I felt a hand on my shoulder and tensed. It was blatantly obvious that the question was intended for me.

I turned to see a reddish blush creep its way up the woman's neck. 'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I thought you were… well…'

Sensing a few sniggers bubbling up around me, I murmured to her not to worry, and she scuttled away.

I was clearly wrong. I was in one of the highest security women's prisons in the country, perched on a children's seat in the shape of a toadstool while being mistaken for an actual child. Of course things could get worse.

I willed whoever was bringing Mara Knight from B Wing to hurry up, ran my mind back over what the woman at the desk had said. The prison director had been very specific. Rather than us meeting in the same area where all the other prisoners received their visitors, I was to be speaking with Mara in one of the closed rooms. Why? Was she not only an inmate here but a dangerous one at that?

In an attempt to steady myself, I took a breath, sensing my legs had begun to tremble. But whether that was down to the ridiculous way I was seated or what was about to happen, I had no idea.

4.

Another ten minutes passed before my name was finally called, by which time I had lost the feeling in both buttocks.

Sitting on that toadstool and being reminded of the caterpillar and his hookah had caused the nerves rippling in the seat of my stomach to intensify. A couple of nights ago, I'd returned to the flat after work to witness Matt furiously attempting to fan clouds of musky-smelling smoke through the living room window. Though I'd tried not to breathe, I once read that cannabis, even from passive smoking, can stay in the system for up to ninety days. Not only was I apparently visiting a dangerous criminal detained in one of Her Majesty's harshest penitentiaries — a place swarming with officers — I was potentially doing it with a banned substance in my system. I tried not to breathe again, in case anyone could still smell it on me.

The woman who had mistaken me for a child led me across to the main building, unable to meet my eye. A sturdy set of glazed double doors slid apart ahead of me as the woman left, revealing a much more austere room than the last. The floor was covered with mottled linoleum, an energy-sapping shade of grey, the walls an off-white and heavily scuffed. And the air was thick with that particular, pervasive disinfectant you only seem

to get in institutions.

A warden sat just inside the vestibule. He checked through the forms I'd completed in the Visitors' Reception Centre, squinting silently between me and the papers on his desk, like he couldn't make sense of why I should be there. I almost felt the same and shifted my feet uncomfortably.

'Right,' he declared brusquely after a few moments had passed. 'Your bag, please.'

'Oh… yes.' I slipped it from my shoulder and handed it over.

'That way.'

He indicated to an airport-style metal detector and, as I walked through it, a second warden took my handbag away.

'You can have this back after it's been scanned,' the man explained. 'But you'll be asked to store it in a locker before you enter Room Three.'

I attempted a smile and told him that was fine, finding myself in a short corridor. While the bottom half of one of its walls was solid, the upper half was made from toughened glass, and through it I could see the second warden, rummaging amongst the chaos of my bag.

Once the warden had finished, he handed my bag back to me and lightly patted me down, then led me towards an airlock comprising two hefty sets of doors.

The man touched the pass that hung on a lanyard around his neck to the panel positioned at the side of each door. A green light flashed, and he pressed the pad of his finger to the biometric reader beneath. With each action he performed, my heart pounded harder, as though it would be impossible for me to ever get back through those doors again. The air between

them seemed heavy, drained of oxygen, and I realised just how rapidly I was breathing.

'Carry on to the officer at the next desk,' the second warden directed, his voice startling in the confined space. 'Down to the right.'

He retraced his steps as the doors to the airlock sucked sharply closed behind him, and I started to edge in the direction he'd pointed.

'Madam!'

Something about the tone of the voice, brittle but self-assured, a little upper-class, pulled me up short.

Come on, Clare, I told myself. *Get a grip. You're supposed to be a hardened journalist, an investigator of crime, a seeker of truth. You're supposed to be a grown woman, despite the episode with the toadstool.*

My best efforts to quash my nerves dwindled, and I turned shakily.

'Left is right, Madam,' the warden said, smiling yet completely contradicting what the other warden had just told me. 'Bag check.'

'But it's just been…'

Her smile vanished instantaneously, and she glared at me as though issuing a challenge. A challenge coloured with the faintest trace of… *amusement*? This woman was odd, I thought, her quick-change demeanour more fickle than the weather.

'Of course.' I passed her my handbag and watched as she unzipped it, the cluttered contents threatening to disgorge themselves once more.

'Organised,' she muttered sarcastically, cocking her head.

I didn't have the chance to respond as, even if I'd dared, at the far end of the corridor there suddenly came a piercing shriek.

'I told you, it wasn't!'

'Liar!'

I looked up to see two women, each clasping the other's hair, ferociously grappling back and forth and flinging insults between them. I stood and watched open-mouthed. This shocking hand-to-hand violence all appeared to be down to a missing vape. Or not so much that the vape was missing, rather than whether its flavour was *Infinite Tangerine Bliss* or *Celestial Peach Symphony*. The whole thing was simultaneously disturbingly vicious and utterly ridiculous.

I forced down an uneasy laugh. If the visitors could get that heated over something so innocuous, what on earth were the inmates capable of?

Seconds later, several wardens rounded the corner, and together they wrestled the women apart. Of course, I realised. These women *were* inmates. I'd forgotten that prisoners at HMP Ferndon were permitted to wear their own clothes.

The two of them were still screaming at each other as they were taken away. In all the furore, I didn't even realise the warden had finished checking my bag and was impatiently jiggling it out to me.

'Not right to have left it here,' she said. 'Right?'

'Er… right,' I replied. Feeling myself gaping like a goldfish again at the fight I'd just witnessed, I took my handbag and slowly turned to continue down the corridor. I bore right, as the last warden had instructed, and saw another ahead of me.

'You here for Mara Knight?' he asked.

'I... yes,' I answered, no longer certain what I was doing there.

'This way.'

I glanced behind me, but the woman who'd checked my bag had gone.

'Mara Knight,' the warden remarked, clicking his tongue like he couldn't believe it.

'You know her well?'

He wheezed a laugh. 'Nah, not well. But whenever our paths do cross, she keeps showing me card tricks.'

'Oh?'

He laughed again, fuller this time. 'Did one for me a while back. Absolutely amazing, it was. She gave me the whole pack of playing cards to hold. Next thing I know, the cards have gone and I'm holding a block of glass instead!'

I crooked an eyebrow, unsure how else to respond.

'Swear to God. She did another one for me just this afternoon, as a matter of fact.'

Temporarily forgetting my nerves, I wondered whether I really was in some kind of Wonderland. Toadstools, a fracas that seemed to blow up out of nowhere, a warden speaking in riddles, and now a magician's wife with a constant supply of tricks up her sleeve. So Mara Knight really *did* know a lot about magic.

'She sealed the queen of spades inside a card box, nice and secure. You won't believe what happened next!'

'What happened?'

'Sorry, no bags past this point.'

'Yes,' I replied. 'The warden who did the first bag check already told me.'

He frowned at this. 'The *first* bag check?'

'Though I do have permission to—' I thought back to the day before, when I'd received that message from Mara. I'd phoned the number on the prison's website and explained I was a writer, asked if I could take my mobile in with me so I could record our conversation. No phones, I was told, but a small recording device was fine. So I'd bought a secondhand dictaphone instead. I fished it out of my bag and held it up for the warden to see.

'Yeah, you can take that in with you,' he said. 'And I'll pop your bag in the Room Three locker.'

'Nice and secure—'

'That's right.'

'No, you said it a minute ago — about the playing card. Nice and secure inside the box. So what happened next?'

A wave of recognition crossed his face. 'Oh, I see,' he chuckled. 'Well, she'd vanished.'

'Vanished?'

'The queen of spades. Turns out she was never in there at all.'

5.

The warden pointed amiably at a chair that was bolted to the floor. ‘Take a seat,’ he said, leaving the room. ‘Won’t be long.’

The fact the chair was adult-sized would have been a comfort, if my pulse hadn’t at that point been hammering through my body. Would Mara be able to help shed any light on the Devereauxs? Would she be hostile? Dangerous, even?

I didn’t know why I thought that. I was there at her invitation, after all. But being inside a high-security prison is oppressive. It makes you paranoid, even as a visitor. Maybe that’s what she’d intended. Maybe she wanted to scare me away from the case for some reason, throw me off the scent?

Yes, I concluded. Paranoid.

I looked nervously around. Room Three was as claustrophobic as the airlock I’d passed through earlier: a tight, square box; walls, ceiling and floor the same cheerless grey and peppered with stains. There was a table before me, also bolted down, and another chair facing mine, with a second door into the room just behind it.

I stared at that door for some long seconds, presuming Mara Knight would be escorted through it from her cell. I preempted the sound of her footsteps, her jangling chains, but heard

nothing. *Her jangling chains?* She wasn't Jacob Marley. I was letting my thoughts run away with me again.

In an effort to distract myself, I fiddled with the dictaphone. I checked the chair opposite. I smoothed down my clothing. I checked the chair opposite again. I didn't know why I kept doing it, since I was well aware nobody had entered, let alone sat down. Yet I had the distinct expectation that, each time I looked up, Mara would be sitting there watching me, as though she'd materialised from thin air.

Then the door did open, giving me a start. I took a breath.

A new warden entered this time, his arm bent behind himself as though leading someone by the hand. He drew level with the table, and the woman emerged from behind him, her own arm hanging from his in cuffs.

This, at last, was Mara Knight.

And my suspicions were confirmed. She *was* a prisoner here.

The warden released the handcuff from her wrist and took his place by the door. Mara sank into the chair opposite, her head slightly bowed, lank sections of loose black hair falling forwards to partly obscure her face. Though I'd seen only a handful of photographs of her, she looked rougher around the edges in person. Her nose was a little larger and less straight, her eyebrows sharper and thinner. Her complexion was the white of raw pastry rather than the light olive I'd seen in the photos. It was difficult to age her, also. From the photos, I'd have put Mara around her mid-thirties, but this woman could have been anything from twenty-five to forty.

Mara's eyes remained cast down to the edge of the table, where her fingers worked at a loose flake of veneer. I observed

her pick away at it, the nails on each hand bitten to the quick. A tattoo peeped from just below the cuff of the hoodie she wore: two crisscrossing initials bordered by a heart. *T.K.*

Travers Knight. Her husband.

'Mara Knight—' I blurted, the single syllable of the woman's surname veering rather embarrassingly upwards in pitch.

Very slowly, she angled her face towards me, like a sunflower finding the light. Or rather more like something nocturnal finding the moon, so dark was her expression. She held my gaze boldly.

'I'm Clare,' I stammered. 'It's very nice to meet you. Thank you for agreeing to talk to me.' I partially extended a hand, intending to shake hers, before considering it too formal. And so my forearm was left hovering in the space between us like a spare part.

She did not move, and her expression remained unchanged.

I grasped my dictaphone, vaguely aware that I was gripping it far tighter than necessary, and held it up to her.

'I'll be recording our conversation today. I hope you don't mind?' It was a somewhat pathetic attempt at a breezy tone, as I internally pleaded she didn't. I wanted to remember every detail of the conversation to come, in case I noticed something important in it later that might have escaped me at the time.

Mara shrugged, like she wasn't bothered one way or the other.

Grateful, I pressed record, watching as the tiny blinking circle appeared on the dictaphone's screen. 'I'm here with Mara Knight,' I said. 'Mara, would you be able to please say something so I can check you can be heard?'

When the woman opposite moved her chest like she might be trying to regurgitate part of her lunch, I knew what was coming. Craning her neck forwards, she parted her lips and gave an ungodly burp.

An excruciating silence ensued. This was not how I'd expected the interview to start.

Recognising she wasn't going to say anything else, I stopped the recording and, flustered, rewound it. I pressed play, and the burp rang out emphatically for a second time.

'Thank you. I can definitely hear that.'

Snickering to herself, the woman went back to picking at the tabletop.

For the past few days, I had been mentally running over all the questions I wanted to ask Mara. But I realised now I was ready to start the interview, I couldn't recall a single one of them. *Ask her about the Devereauxs*, I willed myself. *Open your mouth and ask: do you know Dex and Angel Devereaux?*

'Do you—' I began, looking up to see Mara Knight had once more fixed her eyes on mine. Her irises were much murkier than I'd expected, even under the room's strip lighting, her expression half-nonchalant, half-threatening.

'Do you want to see a magic trick?'

It was the first time she'd spoken, and it struck me how low her voice was, a touch gravelly. A smoker's voice, carrying with it more than a hint of Cockney. I didn't know where Mara was from, but had expected something more neutral, less accented.

I thought back to what the warden had told me in the corridor, that this woman was always showing him tricks. I wondered whether, like the tattoo on her hand, it might have

been some memorial to her husband. I wondered whether being in HMP Ferndon had actually driven her mad. The grin that was spreading across her face hinted it was a distinct possibility.

'Okay… yes,' I mumbled. 'Of course.'

I recalled the film *The Dark Knight*, how the Joker asked this very same question before skewering someone's eyeball on the end of a pencil. I held my breath as Mara jammed a hand in her pocket, and was relieved when the item she pulled out revealed itself to be a deck of playing cards.

She removed them from the box clumsily. 'Think of a card,' she said, as though delivering a script. 'Any card.'

'Er… The queen of spades?' I immediately knew that I should have picked something less obvious. My brain must have instinctively leapt back to what the warden had said, about Mara making this particular card disappear.

Suddenly, she slammed the entire deck down on the tabletop with such force I almost left my skin.

'Now!' she announced, nodding at it. 'Take a look through the pack. See if it's there.'

Aware of the time slipping by and the multitude of questions backed up inside my head, I hastily picked the cards up and sifted through them. The three other queens peered back at me sullenly. But there was no queen of spades.

I shook my head, confused. This woman didn't handle the cards like someone adept at doing tricks. Yet the card I'd chosen was missing. There was a pause.

'It's not there!' she declared, dropping back in her chair and folding her arms triumphantly.

'It isn't, no…' I answered, waiting for the rest.

'What?'

'Aren't you going to make her appear? The queen of spades?'

'Oh, that not enough for you?' she replied, with genuine surprise. 'I can't bring her back, can I? Don't work like that.'

I opened my mouth to ask what she meant, before deciding it made more sense to try to get on with my questions. 'Mara, I'm here to talk to you about the Devereauxs. Dex and Angel. I assume you know them?'

'You know what assume does?' she said.

I tried to mask my disappointment. Why couldn't anyone in this place seem to give a straight answer? 'Makes an ass of u and me?'

'Nope,' she replied, looking pleased with herself. 'It lands you in the shit.'

'So you *don't* know Dex and Angel?'

She blew out a sigh. 'Never heard of them.'

The Devereauxs had been performing together for nearly twenty years. How was it, then, that this woman — who'd been around the world of magic for almost as long — had never heard of them? 'Okaaay,' I said slowly. 'Have you been watching the latest series of Talent Quest?'

'Nope,' she repeated unhelpfully.

I glanced between her and my dictaphone. 'As I mentioned when I emailed you, I'm investigating the disappearance of Angel Devereaux. She vanished on live TV a week ago. On the show Talent Quest. And I'm here because I thought that with your knowledge of stage magic, you might be able to help.'

'Not me,' she said, just as unhelpfully.

I pressed on, my frustration rising. 'The trick the Devereauxs

were performing the night Angel vanished was a teleportation. Angel got into a box on stage and disappeared. She was supposed to reappear in a second box, but never did. I'm sure you're familiar with teleportation?'

She chewed the side of her thumbnail. 'I am.'

'Great. So you know how it works?'

'Yeah. You say, "Beam me up, Scotty," then some bloke presses a button and it sods you off somewhere else.'

I looked at her agape.

'Star Trek,' she clarified, as though I was an idiot.

I understood the reference, of course, but not what was happening. Either Mara Knight was being deliberately evasive — which was odd, given she was the one who'd asked me here — or incarceration really had done something awful to her mind. 'So you don't know the Devereauxs and you don't know anything about the teleportation illusion?'

'Like I said.'

'But your husband performed that same illusion himself, didn't he?'

She stiffened at this. 'Did he?'

I had no clue how to continue. All I knew was how exasperated I was. That I had rushed around and driven all the way to Hertfordshire to chase a complete dead end. That I must have been a fool to ever think I could help to get to the bottom of something that was nothing to do with me.

'Why are you in here, Mara?' I said, shocking myself with my directness.

'This and that.'

A pregnant pause.

'Is it to do with the disappearance of your husband? Is it to do with Travers?'

She fixed her dark eyes on me, and her forehead buckled into a mournful scowl, making me instantly regret the question.

'I'm sorry,' I added quickly. 'But what I mean is, I can help. Find your husband. It's what I'd like to do, what *I like* to do. To help. Would you want that?'

Mara lowered her head to her chest, and again her hair fell forwards. Though I couldn't see her face, I was sure she was weeping, and was overwhelmed by guilt. I should never have asked her about Travers; I should have stuck to the Devereauxs, to what might have happened to Angel.

A long silence stretched between us.

'I'm sorry, Mara,' I said. 'I think this may have been a mistake. I shouldn't have bothered you.' I pressed the stop button on the dictaphone. 'I'll leave you in peace now. Thank you.'

I caught the warden's eye to indicate I had finished and checked my watch. Although I'd only been in there for fifteen minutes, there wasn't much time to make the drive back to south London through the evening traffic before Talent Quest started.

To my surprise, as I did this, Mara leant across to me, studying my watch too. Her demeanour, I noticed, had totally changed. I thought my last questions had upset her, but I now saw she was wearing a self-satisfied smile.

The guard steered her to her feet, securing her wrist back inside the cuff.

'Bye, Clare,' she said, as she was escorted through the door. 'Mara Knight is glad you came.'

6.♠

The woman continued to talk about herself in the third person as she was led away, my mind turning the strange exchange that had just occurred over and over until the door behind me opened.

It was the same warden who'd shown me into the room fifteen minutes earlier.

'Ready?' he asked.

I followed as he drew a key from his belt and twisted it into the front of the locker in which he'd stored my handbag.

'So, Mara Knight,' he said, guiding me towards the two sets of sliding doors that formed the air lock. 'Quite something, isn't she?'

That's one way of putting it, I thought. 'Mm-hmm,' I said instead.

'She show you a card trick?'

'She did, yes.'

'Good, isn't she?'

He reached for the security pass hanging around his neck and lifted it to the reader mounted next to the door. No sooner had I opened my mouth to respond to his question than it issued a flat, defiant beep, flashing red.

Pulling a face, the warden tried again. The same thing happened. When the reader failed to show a green light for a third time, he attempted to clean the card's barcode against the front of his shirt.

'Well, I'll be…' His voice faded.

I glanced towards him as he shook his head and held the security pass aloft. There was no barcode. In fact, the pass wasn't a pass at all. Though it was a card. A card I recognised.

The queen of spades.

'How the hell's she done that?' the man asked himself, running his fingers along his jaw.

Behind the glass of the furthest sliding door, one of the other wardens from earlier came into view. The man next to me signalled to him, and slid the queen of spades out of his lanyard.

Using his own pass — which evidently still worked fine and *hadn't* been replaced by a playing card — the other warden approached us through the airlock.

He accompanied me back the way he'd just come, and we left the victim of Mara's card trick hovering at the reader. He held the queen of spades between his thumb and forefinger, studying first the front and then the back as though awestruck.

In the half-glazed corridor, the warden indicated for me to walk back through the metal detector, which I did. The air was thick with a strange smell. The man who'd checked my paperwork when I entered the building was still sitting at the front desk. But this time he looked like he'd been crying.

I made my way back to my car, along two thinnish bands of well-tended lawn. "Keep off the Grass", a sign read, and my thoughts briefly returned to Matt's illicit joint as I dived a hand

into my bag to rootle for the car key. I pressed the button and got in, swinging the bag onto the passenger seat before pulling the door closed. It slammed more loudly than usual, but the noise was completely eclipsed moments later when, as I drove towards the car park barrier, an ear-splitting series of peals echoed from all around. I jabbed a foot onto the brake, realising a noise such as that could mean only one thing.

A prisoner had escaped.

I began to panic, finding that no matter how hard I willed myself, I could not move. My heart was racing, knuckles whitening on the wheel, feet stiff above the pedals.

Then, the barrier up ahead started to lower as the prison was plunged into lockdown.

'Well?' said a voice from the back seat. 'What are you waiting for? Drive.'