Prologue

The girl's breath plumed around her pinched face as she hopped from foot to foot, and she clapped her skinny arms with her hands.

'Hurry up. I'm freezing to bleedin' death here.'

'I'm going as fast as I can,' the lad grunted, yanking the crowbar backwards and forwards. 'The fucker who put this sheeting up must have used foot-long screws, it's that tight.'

'I should have done it myself,' she sniped. 'I'd have had it off ages ago, me.'

'If you reckon you can do it any faster, be my guest.' The lad paused and offered the crowbar to her. Sneering when she flashed him a dirty look, he said, 'Thought not. Now shut the fuck up, or I'll sack it off and go home. You're the one who's rattlin', not me.'

'Just get on with it and quit being a dickhead,' she muttered, hunching her bony shoulders.

The lad repositioned the end of the crowbar in the gap between the metal sheet and the wall and gave one last tug. Almost falling off the wheelie bin he was perched on when a rivet popped out and the corner of the sheeting sprang away from the wall, he dropped

the bar onto the grass and pulled it the rest of the way off with his hands.

'And we're in!' he said when he'd unveiled the broken window in its rotten frame. 'Happy now?'

'I will be when you find something to flog,' the girl replied, casting a nervous glance back at the road when he elbowed the rest of the glass out of the frame. 'What's in there?' she asked when he'd hauled himself up onto the sill. 'Can you see anything?'

'Nah, it's too dark,' he said. 'Chuck us the lighter.'

'Don't waste the gas, 'cos there's not much left,' she cautioned, tossing the disposable lighter up to him.

The lighter flared like a beacon in the pitch darkness, momentarily illuminating the lad's gaunt features before he dropped down off the sill, landing with a thud on the other side of the wall. A car turned onto the lane and drove slowly past the overgrown hedgerow fronting the old cottage. As its headlights pierced holes in the dense thicket, the girl pulled her hood up and squatted down in the shadows of the bin.

Standing up again when the car had passed, the girl listened for sounds of movement inside the cottage. Unnerved by the absolute silence after several minutes, she was about to climb up onto the bin to see what was taking the lad so long, when his face appeared at the window.

'What's happened?' she asked when she saw the panic in his bulging eyes. 'You didn't get caught, did you?'

'There's a fuckin' stiff in the cellar!' the lad hissed as he struggled to push a holdall out through the gap. 'I went down there to have a

mooch, and found it trussed up on a mattress with gaffer tape over its fuckin' gob!'

'You're kidding?'

'Do I look like I'm fuckin' kidding? Come in and take a look for yourself if you don't believe me.'

'Fuck off!' she cried, buckling under the weight of the bag when it landed in her arms. 'Shit, this weighs a bleeding ton. What's in it?'

'No idea; I didn't stop to check,' the lad said, breathing heavily as he scrambled out and dropped down beside her. 'We'll check it when we get back to the gaff.'

'What about that in there?' She jerked her head in the direction of the cottage. 'Was it a man or a woman?'

'Dunno,' he muttered, already kicking a path through the tall weeds to get to the gate. 'I shit myself when I saw it and the lighter flew out of my hand, so I couldn't get a proper look.'

'But it was deffo dead?' she asked, stumbling along behind him.

'Looked like it,' he said, turning to take the bag off her and looping the strap over his shoulder. 'Smelled like it, an' all.'

'Don't you think we should call the police?' she asked, banging into him when he stopped to yank the broken gate aside before stepping out on to the pavement.

'What, and have 'em think I had summat to do with it?' he grunted. 'No chance! Let's just get the fuck out of here before we get caught.'

PART ONE

1

Ellie Fisher's train was idling at the platform, and she heard its heavy doors slamming shut as she raced across the metal footbridge and clattered down the steps at the far side. Letting out a wail of frustration when it began to slide smoothly away before she reached the bottom, she paused to catch her breath before continuing on down; cursing her boss with every step for making her stay behind to file some invoices. It wasn't even her job to deal with the stupid invoices, but the girl whose job it *was* had pulled a sickie today, and the other two girls who shared the office had disappeared as soon as the clock hit five thirty, so she'd been a sitting duck.

Dismayed to see that she had a thirty-minute wait for the next train when she checked the electronic timetable above the shuttered coffee-shop door, Ellie reached into her handbag for her phone as she heard it ping. There was a message from her husband, Matt, on the screen, reminding her to pick up a couple of bottles of wine on the way home. She contemplated calling him to let him know she was going to be late, but immediately

changed her mind. He was going to be mad enough without pre-warning him and giving him time to stew on it.

A train whizzed by on the opposite side of the tracks, leaving an icy gust of wind in its wake that snatched the hair off Ellie's shoulders. Shivering, she pulled her collar up around her chin and gazed out over the tracks. The nights were drawing in much earlier as autumn gave way to winter, and the sky was already a stormy slate-grey. Unnerved by the deepening shadows, she was toying with the idea of heading out onto the road to catch a bus instead, when she heard footsteps on the bridge. Glancing up, she frowned when she saw a hooded figure in dark clothes climbing over the barrier rail.

The ghostly wail of a train horn in the distance reached her as she watched the figure find its footing on the narrow ledge that ran along the outside of the bridge, and the hairs on the back of her neck bristled as she instinctively guessed what was about to happen. Heart in her mouth, she looked around for a guard, or even a cleaner, but the station was deserted.

'Hey . . . !' she yelled when she looked up at the bridge and saw the figure holding onto the rail and leaning out over the tracks. 'What are you doing? Get down from there!'

Her words were whisked away by the wind, and the figure didn't look round. Panicking, Ellie fumbled her phone back out of her bag and dialled 999 as she ran toward the steps.

'Police!' she spluttered when her call was answered. 'I'm at Long Lane train station, and someone's just climbed over the railing on the bridge. I think they're going to jump!'

After giving her name and explaining that there was no one else around – and that, *no*, she did *not* think it was a railway employee doing maintenance work – she thanked the operator when he assured her that a unit was on its way, and shoved the phone into her pocket.

The figure turned its head when she reached the top of the steps, and she saw that it was a young man. Dark hollows surrounded his eyes, his cheeks looked gaunt, and he seemed to be shaking even more violently than she was. Afraid that she might spook him and cause him to lose his footing, she held out her hand as she slowly approached him.

'Please don't jump; I only want to talk to you.'

'Stay back!' he ordered, readjusting his grip on the rail. 'I mean it . . . stay back or I'll do it right now.'

'My name's Ellie,' she persisted, edging closer. 'I want to help.'

The man let out a low growl and stared up at the sky for a moment before looking down at the tracks. 'Leave me alone.'

'*No*!' she cried. 'Whatever's wrong, it can't be bad enough to kill yourself over.'

'What would you know?' he grunted. 'You've got no idea how shit my life is.'

'So tell me,' she urged. 'I bet it's not half as bad as you think, and problems are always easier if you share them.'

The sound of a high-speed engine heading their way cut through the howling wind, and she swallowed nervously.

'Okay, you obviously don't want to tell me your problems,

so I'll tell you mine . . . I've got a really boring job, and my boss kept me behind today to do some work that someone else was supposed to do, so now I've missed my train and I'm going to be late home, and my husband's going to go mad, 'cos I've got my sister and her new boyfriend coming round for dinner and he can't stand her. I know she can be a bit of a witch, but I haven't seen her in months, so I'm hoping we—'

Ellie's words had been shooting out like machine-gun fire, but she abruptly stopped speaking when she saw the man's body tense, and her legs turned to jelly when she looked in the direction the train was coming from and saw the beam of its headlights slicing through the darkness.

The man's eyes were squeezed shut when she turned to him, and his fingers were loosening their grip on the rail. Aware that she had no time to waste, she lunged at him and threw her arms around his neck, yelling: 'If you jump, you'll take me over with you, so you won't just be killing yourself, you'll be killing me as well! Is that what you want?'

'Let go,' he croaked, his voice strangled by the pressure of her arms crushing his windpipe. 'I need to do this.'

'No you *don't*,' she cried, her face contorting with pain as her muscles began to cramp. 'Stop this now, I'm begging you. *I DON'T WANT TO SEE YOU DIE, YOU SELFISH BASTARD*!'

Her last words came out on a scream, but they were swallowed up by the wind and the thunderous roar of the express train rushing by below. Almost losing her grip when the man's

body suddenly sagged, she cried out with relief when he turned and scrambled over the barrier.

'Oh, thank God!' she gasped, slumping down beside him when he sank to his haunches. 'It's okay, you're safe now. It's going to be all right.'

'No, it's not,' he groaned, wiping his nose on his sleeve. 'You should have let me jump.'

'I couldn't have lived with myself,' Ellie said, releasing a shaky breath as her racing heart began to slow down. Casting a sneaky glance at her watch and wishing that the police would hurry up, she asked, 'Why did you want to do it? Is it money? A girl? Drugs?'

The man rested his elbows on his knees and dropped his face into his hands. 'Forget it. It's not your problem.'

'I think it kind of is, seeing as you nearly took me with you,' Ellie reminded him. 'At least tell me your name so I know who to curse when I have nightmares about this in the future.'

'Just leave me alone,' he moaned. 'There wasn't supposed to be anyone around when I did it, so why did you have to turn up and ruin everything?'

'I'm glad I did,' Ellie said unapologetically. 'And when you get over whatever's making you feel like this, I'm sure *you*'ll be glad, too.'

'No, I won't,' he said. 'Everything's fucked up.'

Ellie saw the yellow stains on his fingers and, figuring that he probably needed a smoke as much as she did, reached into her

handbag for her cigarettes. 'Here,' she said, lighting two and passing one to him.

'Cheers,' he muttered.

'You're welcome,' she said, sighing as the nicotine soothed her jangling nerves. 'I'm actually supposed to be giving up,' she admitted, squinting when the wind blew the smoke into her eyes. 'My husband thinks I've already stopped, so I have to buy them on the sly and hide them. Almost thirty years old, and I'm sneaking around like a naughty schoolgirl. Crazy, or what?'

The man gave her a puzzled look and took a deep drag on his cigarette.

Jumping when her phone suddenly started ringing, Ellie muttered, 'Speak of the devil,' when she took it out and saw Matt's name on the screen. Unable to face talking to him, because he'd want to know what she was doing, and she could hardly explain while she was sitting right next to the man, she pressed *Ignore* and switched it to silent before shoving it into her pocket.

'That your hubby?' the man asked.

Ellie nodded and took another pull on her cigarette as the phone began to vibrate against her hip.

'Why didn't you answer it?'

'I'll talk to him when I get home,' she said, wondering where the police had got to. They might no longer be needed, but *they* didn't know that, and she dreaded to think what could have happened if she hadn't been here.

'Sorry if I scared you,' the man apologized quietly. 'I honestly didn't think anyone would be around.'

He was staring down at his filthy trainers as he spoke, and Ellie's heart went out to him when she heard the misery in his voice. She'd once read that the people who threatened to commit suicide were the ones who didn't mean it. The fact that they'd pre-warned others of their intentions was a sign that they desperately wanted someone to talk them out of it, whereas the ones who *really* meant it told nobody; they simply crept away and did it.

'My name's Gareth,' he went on. 'And my nan died last week.'

'I'm so sorry,' Ellie said softly. 'Were you close?'

'Yeah, very.' He sniffed. 'She was more like my mum than my nan. I could tell her anything, and she never put me down or made me feel stupid.'

'Is that why you tried to jump?'

'Part of it, yeah. That, and finding out my girlfriend's been screwing around behind my back.'

'That's awful.' Ellie frowned. 'But now you know she's a cheat, is she worth losing your life over?'

'She was all I had left,' Gareth said plaintively. 'No one else gives a toss, but Lynn's been great, and I really thought we had something – you know?'

Ellie nodded and waited for him to go on.

'The council turned up at my nan's this morning and gave me a week to get out,' he told her. 'I went round to Lynn's to ask if I could stay there for a bit, but she didn't answer the door, so

I figured she'd probably gone shopping. I know where she keeps her spare key, so I let myself in. And that's when I caught her – in bed with some bloke.'

Ellie heard the bitterness in his voice and sneaked a glance at her watch. Her train was due in ten minutes, and she absolutely couldn't miss it. But she didn't want to leave him while he was still feeling like this.

'I know it's painful,' she said. 'And you probably won't believe me when I say that it'll get easier in time, but I promise it will. I've lost people I cared about, and it feels like you're never going to smile again. But life does go on. It *has* to.'

'Easy to say when you've got somewhere to live,' Gareth muttered. 'This time next week I'll be homeless.'

'Isn't there someone you can stay with?' Ellie asked. 'What about your parents?'

'They've never given a shit about me.'

'Friends, then? Or how about a hostel?'

Before Gareth could reply to that, he heard the wail of a police siren in the near distance and gave Ellie an accusing look. 'Did you call the pigs?'

'Sorry, but I had to,' she admitted. 'Don't worry; they'll probably go once they've seen that you're okay.'

'No they won't,' he said, scrambling to his feet. 'You don't know those bastards like I do. They'll have me sectioned for this.'

'I'm sure they won't,' Ellie said, frowning as she too got up. 'Look, my train will be here soon and I'll have to get going, but

I can spare a few more minutes if you'd rather not speak to them on your own?'

'Nah, I'd best go before they get here,' he said, taking a last drag on the cigarette before flicking the butt over the railing.

'Will you be okay?' she asked. 'You're not going to try anything like this again are you?'

Gareth shoved his hands into his pockets and shook his head. 'I've lost my nerve now. Anyhow, I reckon my nan must have sent you to save me, so I can't, can I?'

'Anyone would have done the same,' Ellie said modestly.

'No they wouldn't,' he countered. 'You're one of the good ones, and I won't forget this.'

When he turned and walked away, Ellie watched until he'd been swallowed by the shadows and then started making her way down to the platform. Her phone began to vibrate again as her train came into view, and she quickened her step as she pulled it out of her pocket. Sure that it would be Matt, and that she was about to get an earful for ignoring his calls, she was relieved to see an unknown number on the screen.

It was the operator she'd spoken to when she rang the police. After apologizing for the delay and explaining that the officers had been diverted to an emergency in the town centre, he asked what was happening.

'Everything's okay now,' she told him. 'I talked to the man and he climbed over the railing. He was upset about something, but we had a chat and he seemed fine when he left.'

'Did you get his name?' the operator asked.

'I think it might have been Dave,' Ellie lied, remembering Gareth's reaction when he'd realized she had reported him to the police. 'Anyway, sorry for wasting your time, but my train's here, so I'll have to go.'

As soon as she'd cut the call, her phone vibrated again. It was a message from Matt.

They're here! it read. **Where the fuck are you????**

Sorry, train delayed, she replied. **Be home soon xx**

Sighing, she slipped the phone into her bag and wearily boarded the train. Glad that the carriage was empty, she flopped into a window seat and rested her head on the glass of the window. She had never experienced anything quite as terrifying as that in her entire life before, and she was still shaking from the rush of adrenalin that had coursed through her body when she'd thrown her arms around Gareth's neck. She could only imagine how low he must have been feeling to contemplate killing himself, and she hoped his girlfriend would be ashamed of herself when she realized how deeply she'd hurt him. But, more importantly, she hoped that Gareth had meant it when he'd said he didn't have the nerve to try it again, because it would be a tragedy if he lost his life at his young age.