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The Last Train Home

Sometimes we find love
where we least expect . . .

ELLE COOK

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The Last Train Home

Elle Cook worked as a journalist and in PR before becoming a full-time novelist. She is the author of *The Man I Never Met* and *The Last Train Home.* She is also the author of five historical time-slip novels under her real name, Lorna Cook. *The Forgotten Village*, *The Forbidden Promise*, *The Girl from the Island*, *The Dressmaker's Secret* and *The Hidden Letters* have sold over 300,000 copies combined. She lives in coastal Essex with her husband and two daughters.

Praise for *The Last Train Home*:

'A heart-warming, heart-wrenching tale of two star-crossed lovers that made me laugh, cry and sigh in all the right places'
Virginia Heath

'Brimming with emotion and heart'
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Caroline Khoury

'I absolutely devoured this funny, moving, unputdownable novel'
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The Man I Never Met

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The Last Train Home

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For the marvel that is Becky Ritchie, because of far too many reasons to list here, but mainly because you're a superstar agent and I'm so flipping lucky to have you.

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Never go in search of love.
Go in search of life.
And life will find you the love you seek.

Atticus

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Chapter 1

Abbie

October 2005

Why is it that so many of us can talk to the person opposite us on a train when it's midnight and everyone's been out having fun, but you would *never* in a hundred years do the same thing on the morning commute? And how is it that every train journey is the same as all the other journeys that have come before, until it's not? An ordinary day that becomes unlike any other. Because of a moment. Because of a person. Because of an event beyond anyone's control.

I dash down the Underground stairs at Tottenham Court Road and run onto the Central Line Tube just as the doors close. I lean back on the glass partition and breathe in with a sense of triumph. When I look back at this exact moment, I often wonder if it's fate that I made it in time. That I was supposed to be there, on the last eastbound train of the night. Supposed to meet Tom.

How different everything might have been if I hadn't run a bit faster, hadn't downed my drink and left the pub a little bit earlier. In the end, perhaps it was always meant to be like this.

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'That was lucky. I didn't think you were going to make it in time.' I look up to see where the voice came from. There's a man about my age wearing a deep-grey suit, standing and looking up at me from his newspaper. He looks vaguely familiar, as if I might have passed him in the street. Maybe.

I give him a quick, polite smile, sharing in my silent joy that I didn't get stuck on the platform, missing the last train and having to get a taxi all the way home, or (and I think this might be worse) stuck between the doors as they closed, bouncing off me, prompting everyone to glance up and stare at the person causing the delay. That's happened to me before and it is humiliating.

There are no free seats, so I stay where I am as the train leaves the station.

'I didn't think I was going to make that, either,' I confess over the noise of other intoxicated and buoyant travellers making their way home on one of the last Tubes of the night. I'm breathless. I can hear it in my own voice. I open my nearly empty water bottle and drink the last of it.

'I've got one I've not opened yet,' he says in a slightly slurred voice. 'Do you want it?'

'Ah, that's really sweet, but it's OK. I'm sure I'll make it home without dehydrating.' No matter how parched and tipsy I am, I can't take someone's water bottle from them when I've only just met them. That's so weird.

He smiles, glances back down at his newspaper and I find myself watching him absent-mindedly as a bunch of blokes, dressed in matching football T-shirts with Hawaiian garlands draped round their necks, make their way towards us through the busy carriage, singing drunkenly. The man opposite me looks up. *Everyone* looks up with amused expressions. It's

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hard not to share in their joy, as they've brought the revelry in this carriage up about a hundred points.

They amble past, cheering and singing, and find a space further down the carriage. I'm still watching them and chuckling to myself when the man who offered me his water says, 'What do we think? Are they on a stag-do or on their way home from a match?'

Overcoming my reservations about conversing with strangers is easy when I'm half a bottle of wine and three cocktails into the night. 'Hmm, tough one,' I reply with an expression that pretends I'm really thinking about it. 'The Hawaiian garlands are throwing me.'

'Me too,' he says.

'Shall we ask them?' I offer.

'Go for it,' he replies with a smile that makes the sides of his blue eyes crinkle. 'Tenner says it's a stag-do.'

'But what if I also think it's a stag-do – then who wins the money?'

He narrows his eyes. 'I think I'm too drunk to understand what you've just asked me.'

'Excuse me!' I call down to the group of jubilant men. 'Have you had a really good night out or is one of you getting married?'

They cheer loudly and shove one of their number towards me. 'This is Jonno,' one cheers. 'He's just lost his virginity, so we're celebrating—'

'Sod off!' Jonno looks incensed and rolls his eyes. 'I'm getting married in a week. It's my stag-do.'

'Congratulations,' we say in unison.

Jonno leans forward and clinks his can of lager with us. 'Cheers,' he says loudly and we cheers him in return.

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'Where have you guys been?' the man opposite me asks Jonno, who is now swaying from side to side as the train carriage takes us through the network of tunnels carrying me towards Liverpool Street to catch my overground train home.

Jonno lists an American restaurant and a few bars near Oxford Street, then his mates start singing a song about him losing his virginity and Jonno turns back and gamely joins in.

'I remember those days,' the man opposite says to me. 'All those tourist traps luring me into London because we didn't know anywhere better to go.'

'Same,' I reply. 'I used to love getting dressed up and catching the train to go clubbing at Fabric.'

He makes a face. 'Fabric. I think I just travelled back in time.'

'Ha,' I laugh, noticing his playful smile. He's quite good-looking and fun, a combination I can really get behind. 'Where have you been tonight then?' I ask. The train doors open for the next station and someone does exactly what I did earlier and only just makes it into the carriage in time, slicing through the middle of our chat before we move off again.

He tells me the name of a private members' club. 'A friend goes there and I was thinking about joining, but I'm not sure I'd use it enough, so . . .'

'That sounds like a wild Thursday night out,' I deadpan.

'He thought I needed cheering up. I've recently called time on a relationship, and apparently extortionately priced drinks in graveyard-quiet surroundings are always the answer.'

'Sounds awful,' I say. 'I've never set foot in a private members' club, and this has probably confirmed that I'm not sure I'm supposed to.'

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His eyes crinkle again as he smiles. 'It's not the most appropriate place to get wasted,' he agrees. 'Where've you been then?'

'A bar near my friend's work in Bond Street,' I say and then realise this also doesn't sound too wild.

'A few drinks after work in a bar turns into a few drinks in another bar, turns into going to a members' club,' he says knowingly.

'Oh,' I say teasingly, 'I see how easily it all gets out of hand.'

'Thursday's the new Friday – or so I keep hearing.' He chuckles and I lean back, relaxing against the glass partition. He watches me with that smile still on his face and I wonder if this silly chat is going to lead somewhere even flirtier. Probably not. I'm getting off in a few stops.

'Where are you headed then?' I ask over the increasing noise of the Tube as it speeds up over the tracks.

We have to lean in to hear each other, and there's a faint scent of pine or something similar on his skin as he dips his head and says, 'I'm off to meet someone at Bank.'

'Off to carry on the partying?'

'Something like that. You?'

'Home. Bed.'

'Home and bed sounds like a good idea,' he says wistfully.

Out of the corner of my eye I can see people giving each other looks. We're the drunk people on the train who can't stop talking, although Jonno and his crew are still going strong further down the carriage, still loudly trying to make something rhyme with the word 'virginity'.

'I really want to join in with the word "affinity",' I tell the guy. 'But I might not be drunk enough to take part in a stag-do singalong.'

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'I am definitely drunk enough,' he says, as if trying to work himself up to chiming in, and then bottles it. 'No, I can't do it. What about the word "infinity"?' he suggests to me.

'"Infinity" works. I think.'

'Flexibility?' He's on a roll now.

'In the city?' I suggest, but fail to make it rhyme.

'Losing your virginity with flexibility to infinity in the city?' he says, and I laugh.

'We have a hit on our hands here,' I say. 'But I'm not sure it all rhymes.'

'Maybe it doesn't need to rhyme,' he says. 'Maybe it *shouldn't* rhyme. Also,' he says as if it's a huge secret, 'perhaps there are no words that truly rhyme with "virginity".'

'It's probably for the best or else there'd be more songs about it,' I say.

'Which would be weird,' he says.

'Which would be weird,' I echo.

I glance over at the guy who got on the train at the last stop. He is doing his best not to laugh at us, which in turn makes me smile. The train pulls into Chancery Lane station, he gets off, the doors close and we head off again.

'Are we the weirdos on the train?' my new friend says, echoing my thoughts.

'I think so, yes.'

'I can't believe I'm twenty-seven and I've never been the weirdo on the train before,' he says, opening his bottle and taking a sip. He sounds quite plummy, sort of posh, now that I'm paying attention. Although that might just be his slurring confusing me.

'Congratulations,' I say. 'I'm twenty-four and I think this is my first time too. Or maybe we *have* been the weirdos on the train, but we never realised it.'

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'Profound,' he says with a mock-serious face.

'I know,' I return with a matching expression.

He drops his newspaper as he drinks and I bend to pick it up for him, passing it back. I look at the front page for a second as the train speeds up. The headline's talking about plans for the Olympics, now that London has won the bid to host them in 2012. That's for ever away.

Seven years.

A lot can happen in seven years.

A lot can happen in seven seconds.

At that moment there's an earth-shattering bang, followed by creaking and the noise of metal twisting. It's a sound unlike anything I've ever heard before. The man in front clutches the handrail and I do the same. There's confusion and crying and I reach up to touch my head and I'm sure there's blood, but the lights have gone out in the carriage and I can barely see anything. A few people issue a shocked kind of scream. And then there's crying. I think it's me. I think it's everyone.

And then there's nothing.

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Chapter 2

Abbie

I'm half walking, half leaning against this man as he holds me, walks us over the tracks far away from our train, assuring me the live rail is switched off. How does he know that? Has someone told him? Have I blacked out? I must have, because I don't even know how I got out, how I'm on the tracks, walking. He must have pulled me from the carriage. I lift my head up and find I'm still looking down at the tracks as we walk. It's easier to look down. It hurts to lift my head. My legs are leaden, just about starting to work again, and for some reason I trust this man to take me out of here. I look up at him. He's staring intently straight ahead, while I concentrate on putting one foot in front of the other. I'm finally an active participant in my own rescue.

Someone in hi-viz runs towards us. Ahead of us the men from the stag-party lean against each other, walking in the same direction as us towards the next train platform. It's getting lighter as we walk through the tunnel because the station lights ahead glow like a guiding beacon. We don't have far to go. We stumble along, arm-in-arm, and he turns, pulls my hand to help me, and instinctively I walk with him

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as we climb up the little steps at the platform's edge. Station workers are there to check we're OK. The man next to me tells them that we are, even though I'm not sure I am. He's still having to hold me up and then he asks, 'What happened?'

'Train derailed,' someone answers.

The train derailed? How does that even happen?

'There are other people still in there,' the man holding me tells them, and I watch the station workers as they run towards the stricken train.

'Where are the paramedics?' I ask. Only a whisper comes out.

'What?' he asks, still holding me.

I can't remember what I've just tried to ask.

'Actually you're not OK, are you? We need to get you looked at,' he says.

Everything is fuggy and I'm only aware of the pain in my head, shooting into the back of my eyes.

'You were out for a while,' he says.

'Out?' I turn round and see a steady stream of passengers behind us making their way slowly along the tracks, climbing up onto the platform.

And then we're up the escalator at St Paul's station, at street level, into the open air, where lights from empty offices punctuate what passes for darkness in this city. Every street looks the same like this, littered with offices and coffee shops, pubs and bars. There's hardly anyone about at this time of night and something tells me we should probably go back and wait for the paramedics, although if people are still inside the derailed train, they presumably need help more than we do.

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I look up and see the recognisable white Portland stone of St Paul's Cathedral up ahead. I'm back in the City again, vaguely near where I work, off Ludgate Hill. A late-night jogger pays little attention to us and I realise we're properly alone now, me and the guy from the train. We stop walking, unsure where we should go, what we should do. Paramedics rush past, blue lights swirling, sirens whirring. My clothes are dirty with train grime or something like it. His are the same.

'Come on,' he says. But I don't think he knows where we're going. Is he in shock? Am I in shock? What just happened? We pass the locked gates of St Paul's Churchyard and turn further down the road and soon we're on the patch of grass to the side of the cathedral, a quieter green space with the odd taxi driving past us. I've been across town tonight with a friend and have ended up back near where I work. I must have said it out loud because he replies, 'Me too.' He continues, 'I'm not even normally on the Tube.' His tone is quieter now, contemplative.

My head is thumping and I sit down on the patch of grass where I sometimes come in the summer and eat my lunch, and he crouches in front of me, sweeping hair back from my face.

He grimaces. 'That looks nasty.'

I touch my cut and blood comes away on my hand. It's sticky, the flow has eased off. 'Do you think we should go back?' I ask.

'And do what?' He runs his hand over his face. If anything, he's moved dirt around rather than removed it. I never realised how filthy the Tube tracks must be.

'We should go back to help others?' I suggest.

'No,' he replies gently, still crouched in front of me. 'I don't think you're in any condition to go back. I do think you

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need to be seen, though. We need to make that a priority. Let's rest for a minute until we work out which way's up.'

'The train derailed?' I say, baffled. 'Really? After everything that happened this summer, do we believe that?'

He knows what I'm talking about. I wasn't in London the day of the July bombings. I was at home, sick. I woke up to frenzied calls from my boss checking I was OK, as I was the only person from the office not accounted for that morning. Is it happening all over again?

'I saw it,' he says. 'I saw the other carriages behind ours. They must have . . . come off the tracks. I don't know. It *was* a mess, though. We were lucky.'

I wince as a searing pain shoots through my skull, and he looks at me with concern.

'I'll be fine,' I say. 'I want to go home. I need to ring my mum, let her know what's happened, so she knows I'll be home a bit later.' Mercifully I've still got my cross-shoulder bag. I'm missing my jacket, though. I think it was draped over my arm when the train derailed. I open my bag and pull out my phone. It's completely smashed, the screen unreadable, the buttons not lighting up under my fingers.

'Here,' he says, standing up and pulling his BlackBerry from his pocket. 'What's the number?'

I put the phone back in my bag and stare at the one he hands me. 'I don't know,' I confess. 'I can't remember.'

He crouches down, concerned.

'It's not because of the head injury,' I say. 'We moved house a few weeks ago and it's a new number.'

'Do you have a boyfriend or . . . someone else whose number you know?'

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I shake my head, which sends the searing pain behind my eyes again. 'No boyfriend,' I say. There's never been anyone properly serious. Relationships have always fizzled out fairly rapidly, for various reasons.

'OK,' he replies distractedly, fiddling with his phone. 'I think I'm just going to search and see if there's any news about it.'

He's got one of those new phones with the internet on. 'Nothing yet,' he says.

'Don't *you* need to ring anyone?' I ask.

He shakes his head and sits down next to me. 'My parents don't live here. And they wouldn't worry about seeing news of a Tube derailment. Never in a million years would they think I might be on it.'

'Oh,' I say, because what else can I say? My parents are total worriers, expectantly awaiting a text from me that I'm on my way home and then listening out from their bed for the late-night click of the front door when I come home from a night out, before ever allowing themselves to fully embrace sleep.

I take a tissue from my bag to mop my head.

We sit in silence and I try to process what's happened – what's happening now, here. This man's presence makes me feel oddly safe. I turn to look at him but he's staring straight ahead, frown lines temporarily on his face. I wish I'd taken that bottle of water from him when he'd offered. I'm so thirsty. He's not holding it now. He must have dropped it in the confusion. My mouth is dusty and tastes tangy, like dirt and metal.

'Thank you,' I say eventually. 'For getting me off the train.'

'It's OK.'

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'Were many people . . .'

He looks at me.

'Badly hurt?' I ask.

'Some.' He nods, looks at his hands, which only now do I notice are smothered in cuts.

'Was anyone—' I was going to say 'dead', but he doesn't give me the chance.

'Can you walk?' he cuts in.

'I think so.' My head still hurts, but I'm not shaking any more.

'We should go.'

'Where?'

'Hospital. Your head.'

'I'm OK,' I say. 'I don't want to go to hospital.'

It's only then that I notice more sirens. The street is alive with sirens and flashing lights everywhere, bouncing off the darkness of closed shop windows across the street. If I wanted to go to hospital, I could simply go and ask someone driving an emergency vehicle to take me.

I rise and walk past him, skirting the gates of the cathedral and into Paternoster Square. I look at my own hands, which are black with dirt. 'I need some water. And a shower. And then I need to go home.'

With my back towards the cathedral, I begin walking towards the City. Everything's gone a bit blurry and I stop.

'You're joking,' he says, catching up with me. 'You've just been involved in a train crash. You've banged your head. If you won't go to hospital, then come back to mine and I can clean you up and then see what's what. I'm not letting you go home on your own. What if you black out or . . . I don't know.'

'Where do you live?' I ask.

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'Literally round the corner. About five roads in that direction.' He points somewhere vaguely towards Fleet Street. 'Do you think you can walk?'

'I can.'

We move off, neither of us speaking, but I wobble so obviously that he puts his arm around my shoulders and pulls me against him for support as we walk. I'm woozy and the closeness is comforting, necessary.

After a minute I ask in confusion, 'Do you live at work?'

'What do you mean?' he asks.

'You said you work near here and you live here too?' Funny how the mind picks up on the most random details.

'Oh, right, no. I live in a flat a few blocks from my office.'

We pass an all-night convenience store and I break away from him and head as purposefully as my legs will allow. 'I need water,' I say, entering the shop and walking straight towards the open fridge shelves.

He enters the shop behind me and pulls down a huge bottle of Evian. I grab one for myself and we turn to pay. He takes mine from me and puts it with his.

We both pause and look up at the TV screen positioned behind the counter. The man serving barely glances at us; instead he tots up how much we owe and mumbles the amount, while still staring at the twenty-four-hour news channel on the screen. Neither of us pays immediately. Instead we watch the presenter talk about the derailment. Eventually I pull out my purse and put a couple of pounds on the counter, and we turn and leave.

His flat is a tiny one-bed apartment on a lane running parallel to the river. It's modern and soulless and must have

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cost him a fortune. We stand in his open-plan kitchen/living room and he gives me painkillers, which I down with my water.

'What's your name?' I ask. It's strange not to know this most basic detail, given what we've just been through together.

He looks back at me. 'Tom. What's yours?'

'Abbie.'

He holds the phone to his ear, confirms he's reached Directory Enquiries and hands it to me, so I can see if my parents have already registered their new number. I write it down and then give Tom a look, silently asking if I can use the phone again.

'Of course.'

My dad answers our home phone groggily and I tell him what's happened. He listens in disbelief as to why I'm not home yet and springs into action.

'Are you hurt?' he asks.

'No, I'm fine. I was lucky.'

'Where are you?'

'I'm at someone's flat. But I'm OK, honestly. Don't worry. My phone's broken, so I'll ring you again soon, OK? I need to work out . . .' I don't know what I need to work out. How do I get home? Tom's given me some privacy and I assume he's gone to the bathroom, as he's not anywhere else in this tiny flat.

'If you tell me where you are, I'll come and get you,' Dad says.

'I'm not really sure. It's near St Paul's. I can ask Tom what street he lives on when he gets out of the bathroom.'

'Who's Tom?' my dad asks quickly, ever protective.

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'Guy I work with,' I lie, because I don't want my dad to think I'm in a stranger's flat and I've no idea where it actually is. Which is what's happened.

I say goodbye to my dad and promise to ring him back shortly with more detail on where Tom lives. When he gets out the bathroom I'm going to ask if I can have a shower. I feel so grimy. Also, I really want to sit down, but I'm aware that I'm filthy and Tom's sofa is pristine white.

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Chapter 3

Tom

I should ring my parents. I said I wouldn't, but I don't want the first thing they feel to be panic when they see messages on their phone from their friends checking if I'm OK, having seen news about the derailment. Their friends may worry, even if *they* probably won't. I pick up my landline and dial their number – working out the local time where they are. They're living the kind of life I can only dream of, as part of a British expat community in the Virgin Islands.

The shower's still running in my bathroom. The girl, Abbie, has been in there ages. I'll go and knock in a minute and check she's not slumped, passed out, drowning.

My parents don't pick up immediately, so I ring again. 'Hey,' I say when my mum eventually answers. 'I just want you to know I'm OK.'

'Why wouldn't you be?' she asks.

'When you switch on the news, you'll probably see. But I'm fine. I'm at home. I'm OK.'

'What's happened?' she asks.

'The train I was on got derailed.' Simple facts, no over-embellishment.

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'But you're all right?' So cool, calm, unfazed by the daily goings-on in my world.

'Really. I'm good. I'll call you later, OK? I've got to go and check Abbie's all right.'

'Who's Abbie?'

'She's just a girl I helped get off the train.'

'You're a good boy,' my mum says.

I make a face that I'm glad she can't see. 'Yeah, I know.'

When I'm off the phone I go to knock on the bathroom door as Abbie switches the shower off. Then the door opens and she appears in the towel I've given her, which is unexpected. I thought she'd get dressed.

'Um,' she says, 'could I borrow some clothes? Mine are . . .'

'Sure. Of course.' I go to my bedroom and grab a T-shirt and some sports shorts that are far too small for me, but might be OK for Abbie, and hold them out to her. She takes them, mutters thanks and goes back into the bathroom to change. Her blonde hair is darker now it's wet. I put my hand through my own dark hair and although I washed my hands the moment I got home, they're grimy again.

I sit back in front of the TV and watch addictively. The news moves to and from the derailment, as other news from around the globe interrupts the cycle of doom on my doorstep that I can't stop watching. How weird to be wrapped up in something so serious and then to be home moments later, watching live coverage of it.

Abbie appears wearing my clothes. Why do men's clothes always look better on women?

'I need to call my dad back and tell him where you live, so he can come and get me.' But instead of doing that, she

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adopts the same look of pure bafflement as me as we watch a reporter on camera talk about how many derailments there have been on the Underground in the last few years. There are more than I'd imagined – three in 2003 alone. Three. And one last year. How did I not know this? Blue flashing lights are still showing on the TV. I'll never forget what I saw. So many injured people, but I'd only had one pair of hands and Abbie was slumped on the floor, blood all over her head. It seemed natural that I'd help her. I turn to Abbie. I don't think she saw all the injured.

'How do you feel?' I ask.

Her hand goes instinctively to her head. 'I think it looks worse than it is,' she replies.

It looks awful.

'Do you feel groggy or . . . anything?'

'No. I'm fine. It hurts. But I'm fine.'

I touch her face, tipping her head down so I can look at her wound. 'It actually looks a bit better, now you've cleaned the smeared blood off.'

Her hair's wet. She's used my eucalyptus and pine shampoo. It smells better on her than it does on me.

'I should shower,' I say as the news reporter repeats something they've said already.

Abbie sits on the edge of the sofa, looking uncomfortable in clothes that aren't hers.

When I emerge from the bathroom, feeling so much better than I did a few minutes ago, she's fast asleep. I watch her every now and again to check she's breathing and sit back down in fresh clothes, watching the endless reports running.

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Chapter 4

Abbie

I'm woken up with the words 'Your parents are on the phone.'

I open my eyes to find a man's hand on my shoulder. He's smiling down at me and I look up at him, for a moment too confused to remember who he is, where I am. And then I realise and I run to the bathroom to be sick.

'She's just gone to the bathroom. I'll get her to call you back in a sec,' I hear him say calmly.

He runs in, pulls my hair back and holds it as I throw up into the toilet.

'This is definitely not good. We're going to hospital.'

'No,' I snap. 'I'm not throwing up because of—'

'Concussion?' he volunteers, still holding my hair.

'I just . . . I couldn't work out who you were or any of it, and then I remembered. I thought it was a dream. Or a nightmare. I don't need to be sick any more.'

'OK,' he says, letting go of my hair and standing. He opens his bathroom cabinet and reaches for mouthwash. 'Here,' he continues, handing it to me along with a clean tooth mug.

I wash my mouth out and then emerge from the bathroom, feeling ridiculous. I'm struggling to remember the finer

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details of what happened. I was sitting on the train. And now I'm here. Everything in between is in danger of vanishing. This man – I can't remember his name – pulled me out. I do my best to recall something, anything. And then his name comes to me. 'Tom,' I say to myself.

'Yeah?' he replies, lifting his head from his task in the kitchen. The kettle boils.

I shake my head. 'Nothing.'

'I've made tea,' he says, pouring hot water into two mugs.

'How long was I asleep?'

He hands me a steaming mug, and even though it's about a hundred degrees in here, I wrap my hands around it comfortingly.

'You're shivering,' he says, removing the cup from my hands and guiding me towards the sofa. He pulls a throw off the back and puts it over me. I look at the tea on the glass coffee table longingly and he hands it back to me, not quite letting go.

'I won't drop it,' I say. Though I'm not sure of that at all. I stare at the TV. He's muted it, but the breaking-news banner streaming along the bottom of the broadcast is giving an estimated number of severely injured. It's into the twenties now. I can barely speak. Emotionally I feel numb as I ask, 'Can you turn it up?'

'They've been saying the same thing for ages now.' He sits next to me and worries at his hand. He's got cuts, and I want to ask him what he had to do to get me out of the train, but he speaks first. 'Call your parents. Tell them where you are.'

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Chapter 5

Tom

'Dad dialled 1471,' she tells me after she finishes the call with her parents. 'That's how he knew your number to ring me back . . .' She trails off, then starts up again. 'He's on his way to get me. It'll take him an hour or so to get in from Enfield, I think.'

'You're welcome to stay here as long as you need. You know that, right?' I say honestly.

'Thanks,' she says, hovering near the desk.

'Do you . . . want to sit down?'

She smiles, sighs exhaustedly. 'Yes, please.'

We sit and watch the news until we can't bear it any more. There's an injury toll and the numbers are rising. I think of what I saw on the train; what I wish I hadn't seen.

There's nothing new on the screen. It's just regurgitated pictures of a scene I'm now very familiar with. I can't watch this any more. And Abbie confesses that neither can she. We mute it and leave it running, in case of any new updates. Although what else they can have to say about this is beyond me. I wonder about people asleep, who have no idea what's happened. When they wake in a few hours' time will they be

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worried that friends, relatives, loved ones have been involved or will they simply get on with their day, wonder how their journey to work might be affected.

As if she can hear me thinking, Abbie says, 'We're so lucky to be alive.'

I pick at the cuts on my hand again. I'm sure there's bits of broken glass in there. 'Yeah.'

'Thank you,' she says, turning to me. She puts her hand on mine, stilling my action. It's nice, soft, comforting. It's something else as well – something I can't identify. And then it's gone, as she lifts her hand away.

I fumble for something to say. 'You'd have been fine without me,' I tell her. The emergency services and the train workers would have got her out. Or she'd have woken up and got herself out. She didn't need me.

'I'm not sure,' she says. And then she surprises me by saying, 'Do you work in the building opposite me?'

'I don't know. Do I?'

She smiles, ever so faintly. 'The big new financial one, with all the glass. I'm in the little courtyard office. I'm *sure* I recognise you. I'm sure you've been standing out the front, smoking, a few times when I've been on my way to get coffee.'

'I've been trying to quit,' I confess.

'How's that working for you?' She smiles.

'Not great.'

'You've not had one all evening, unless you had a secret smoke when I was passed out with concussion on your sofa?'

'I thought you didn't have a head injury?' I smile. 'And no, I didn't smoke at all today, but now you've mentioned it, it's all I can think about.'

'Sorry,' she says.

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I'm picking at the glass in my hand again, making it bleed, and she puts her hand back on mine to still me. Oddly, it is actually very calming, as if she's cast a magic spell over me.

'Just have a bloody cigarette,' she says and follows me as I light up, hanging out of my window, looking into the lane below. It's dark; only the dim streetlights shine in this dark space, giving the alley full of Victorian buildings a Dickensian glow that I've always quite liked, in this city of steel and concrete. It's calm, quiet.

I hold the cigarette out of the window, which does no good at all because the smell is now filling my flat. I might as well be seated on the sofa with the windows closed. She gently takes it from me, holds it to her lips and inhales and I watch her, almost mesmerised.

'Nope,' she says, handing it back to me. 'These are still disgusting.'

I smile, inhale again. 'You're wrong. They're amazing. I've missed them this past week.'

'A week? Is that how long you'd quit for?'

'Sort of,' I say, out of the side of my mouth as I exhale. I flick ash, checking there's no one walking underneath the window as I do so. 'Bit hit-and-miss really. Job's been a bit stressful lately. And then . . . today.'

'What do you do?' she asks, taking the cigarette from me and trying again. She makes a face and I lift it out of her fingers when she offers.

'Analyst.'

'What's that?' I start to tell her and she interrupts me. 'Actually, I don't think my brain can take it. Tell me another time.'

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I laugh. 'OK.'

We stand in companionable silence, passing my cigarette back and forth until it's finished and I stub it out on the windowsill, chucking it into the street. She gives me a look of horror. 'I'll pick it up later,' I lie. 'What do you do?'

'Retail journalist,' she says, returning to the sofa and sitting down slowly.

'What does that involve?'

She launches into a vague monologue and then I interrupt her. 'Actually, my brain can't take it. Tell me another time.'

A cushion flies through the air and hits me. 'Funny,' she says and then her face drops and she looks sad. 'It feels odd,' she says, 'making small talk after . . .'

I'm quiet and then, 'Yeah, I know.' At the bottom of the screen they're confirming a new death toll. The numbers are mounting. 'Fuck this. Are you hungry?'

'I guess.'

We stand in the kitchen – she's a bit steadier on her feet now – and make cheese on toast. It's the only food I have in. And Crunchy Nut cornflakes.

'Is all your food beige?' she queries as she looks in the fridge for me.

I ignore her. I don't really keep a rolling stock of supplies, because the corner shop and the canteen at work serve me well enough. And I'm out a lot.

She reaches for the cheese inside the fridge door, then spies two beers. 'Can I have one?' she asks.

'Sure.' I pop the lids on both and we drink while the toastie-maker sets to work. 'It's four a.m.,' I tell her. 'We should be closer to breakfast than to beer. Actually, do you think you should be drinking with your head inj—'

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'Fuck off,' she teases, taking a deep swig.

'Fair enough.' I turn back to the toastie-maker and check it's not incinerating our food.

We eat standing up in the kitchen, and I watch her every now and again to check she's not about to fall over. Finally something clicks. 'You work on the same floor as me.'

She pauses and narrows her eyes.

'I mean . . . across the street, you're on the same floor as me. I think I've seen you from my office window.'

'Have you?' she says, her food halfway to her mouth.

'I recognise you, now I think about it. I recognise your profile. I see you laugh a lot on the phone. I didn't realise it was you until just now.'

She shifts on her feet, unsure if I'm taking the piss about her laughing.

I tell her I'm not and that I meant it kindly. 'Honestly,' I say. She plays with her hair a lot when she's on the phone, but I'm definitely not going to say that out loud. She's looking over my shoulder at the muted TV as the breaking-news banner keeps on rolling.

She stares at it as the casualty figure increases. 'Can we watch something else now?'

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Chapter 6

Abbie

My dad arrives soon after. Tom and I have been cocooned in his flat and it's only as I leave, stepping into the street to greet my dad, that I realise I'd felt safe there. Dad holds me tightly in the street, his estate car practically wedged in the narrow lane outside Tom's. His tyres screeched against the edge of the kerb as he entered the road. Tom comes down, shakes hands with my dad, but my father swerves his handshake and embraces him as if he's a man who's saved his only daughter from a train crash. Which he has. I told my dad on the phone what Tom did because I had to, really. He deserves some recognition.

Tom and I had spent the last half-hour watching part of *The Matrix*. It was already in his DVD player and he just pushed play. It was easier to drift away watching Keanu Reeves save the world than think about the actual world outside.

At one point Tom drifted off to sleep and I watched his chest rise and fall, his head nodding to one side as he rested against the sofa. I thought back to the few times I'd seen him smoking outside his building before, laughing with his colleagues and intermittently checking his phone.

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He has 'hero' written all over him. But that may be because of what he did for me today. He's tall, dark and I want to say handsome, but he's not traditionally handsome. He's good-looking, but I think it's because he looks a bit serious rather than Abercrombie-model handsome.

And now he's standing barefoot in the cold, dark street saying goodbye to me and fielding gushing remarks from my dad. Tom looks embarrassed, but has the good grace to say, 'You're welcome' in all the right places.

And then we're saying goodbye, and it feels rushed after everything we've been through tonight. Almost as if it shouldn't be like this. I have my clothes in a bundle under my arm and I'm still wearing Tom's things. 'I'll work out a way to give these back to you soon,' I say.

'Don't worry about it. Don't go to work today, will you?' he says softly and my dad agrees. 'Get your head looked at. Give yourself the weekend to recover. I'm sure your boss will understand.'

'Maybe.'

And then he pulls his phone from his pocket. 'What's your number? I assume you can remember your own, if not that of your immediate family,' he says with a knowing smile.

I tell him and he saves it into his phone. I don't take his because my phone is still in my bag in shattered pieces.

'Get some rest,' he says.

I look up at him and smile, despite the wave of all-out exhaustion that washes over me. 'Thank you,' I say, as my dad heads towards the driver's side of the car.

Tom opens the passenger door for me. 'It was nothing,' he replies. 'Anyone would have done it.'

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And then I'm inside the car and Tom closes my door. I raise my hand to wave goodbye and he does the same, and then the car moves off. I turn round to glance at him through the rear window, but he's already looking away. Just before I face the front, I notice him stoop, pick up the cigarette end that he dropped from his window and then head back inside.

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Chapter 7

Abbie

Safely at home, later that day, I wake from a nap, curled up in a little ball. My sheets and pyjamas are soaked with sweat and I shower immediately. I'd showered at Tom's, I showered when I got home. I can't stop showering – it's as if the grime and blood and dirt engulf me the moment I've finished washing them all off. I'm not sure what's wrong with me. My dad took me to A&E on the way home and we sat there for hours this morning until he adopted his best headmaster's voice, explained to the receptionist that I'd been on the derailed Tube and probably had concussion. I was triaged, examined and then sent home with a relatively clean bill of health, which is what I had assumed would happen – but it gave my mum and dad peace of mind. I'm sure it'll make Tom happy to know I went too.

I wonder how he is today. I don't have his number to call him – and I don't think I have the strength to yet, in any case. Yesterday was awful and I'm not ready to confront it all again by contacting Tom. I probably should try to track him down at his office after the weekend, to give him back his clothes and check he's OK. I wonder if he's a stronger person than I

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am and has woken up, got dressed and gone to work without a second thought.

There's no way I could have done that today. When I told my boss what happened, there was no question of me returning to the office this afternoon. And she was surprised when I volunteered to work from home for the rest of today because I need something to keep me from thinking about it all. Although I'm fairly junior, I have an article to finish editing – I've been working on it for about a week and I am so close to filing it. I asked if she could log into my computer to email me my notes and what I've written so far, so that I could do something productive this afternoon. I've had enough of napping. At first she said no, but relented when it was clear I needed to be busy. But I'm jittery and I can't type anything coherent, so I give up, and Mum and I head into town, find a phone shop and sort out a replacement mobile.

And then we come home and I turn on the news. The focus has moved on to other matters now. I wonder what Tom saw last night that he didn't want me to see. I really wish I had his number.

I bin my clothes that had sat in the footwell of my dad's car on the journey home last night. They're black with dirt, and even if I could get them clean in the wash, I don't want them any more. I don't know why. I just don't.

I take the SIM card out of my old phone, lacerating my fingers in the process, and bin the remnants, before popping the SIM in the new one and charging it up. Then, when it's got enough juice in it, I call my best friend Natasha.

'Finally,' she says when I ring. I texted her from my mum's phone and gave her a debrief earlier today, and she's been patiently awaiting my call so that we can have

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a proper chat. She works in the head office of a major bank over in Canary Wharf, and I can hear the hustle and bustle of people shouting and swearing in the background. It's a stark contrast to my office, where we all type away quietly and where the silence is often broken only by a phone ringing or someone asking if anyone wants a coffee. Every time we skive off work for a few minutes to talk to each other in the working day, her office always sounds very . . . masculine.

'How are you?' she asks. 'Or are you already sick of people asking you that?'

'I'm fine,' I fib. Although I am, I guess. I tell her everything that happened, although I'd passed out for most of it. I mention Tom, because how could I not? His role in it, how we ended up at his flat for the rest of the night, how we work across the courtyard from each other. She's silent at that, obviously restraining herself from asking, 'Is he single', because I know how her mind works. She's forever trying to hook me up with people from her office. And because Natasha says nothing, I circle back, finish with, 'I'm not exactly laid up in hospital like so many others are. And I'm not dead, so I should count my lucky stars.'

'Sweetheart, it's not only about that, you know. It's big, what you went through. You and that guy, and everyone else on the train. Don't try to brush it off. Give it the time it deserves.'

'Yeah.'

'Is your mum pacing like she normally does when there's big stuff happening?' We've known each other since school, and my parents love Natasha, treating her like she's another daughter whenever they see her.

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