

CHAPTER ONE

April 2015

Jeff

Jeff pelted up the ramp towards Piccadilly station, dodging round all the people dragging suitcases or pushing buggies. He couldn't miss this train. He couldn't. His heart hammered in his chest, a pain there, so it hurt to breathe. He ran in through the automatic doors and up to the bank of electronic departure boards, forcing his eyes to slow down, to concentrate. London? London? London Euston? There! *10.35. Platform 7. On time.* Shit! His eyes flew to the clock at the base of the screens. *10.32.* No! It said on the website the doors closed two minutes before departure. He turned and raced to the gate. He could see the train, but the platform was empty.

If he missed it now . . . The thought made him feel sick. No interview, no hope of a fresh start. And he'd be sanctioned.

No money.

He reached the first carriage, hit the door-release button.

He could hear his mum going on about it: 'Missed the train. Honestly, Jeff, I sometimes despair, I really do.' His gran, disappointed but trying to hide it. Maybe she'd understand, make him feel all right about it. More than his mum ever would.

If he hadn't had to go back for his phone, if he hadn't had to charge it in the first place, he'd have been all right. But he'd missed the bus and the next one was late. He'd done a survey once when he was getting the bus for a week-long skills course the Job Centre had

forced him to take. In the morning it was late four times. Eighty per cent of the time. Jeff had emailed the company, pointing this out. He got a reply eventually saying his feedback was valued and they were continually striving to improve their service.

The train made a noise, a whirring sigh. Jeff jabbed the button again and the door opened. He climbed on with shaking legs. He was sweating now. Brilliant. He'd turn up stinking and that'd be a great first impression. 'What about the Manchester lad?' they'd say.

'The one with the BO? I don't think so, do you?'

He'd used half a can of his stepdad's deodorant. *48 hours*, it said, *bio active ultra*. What did that even mean?

Jeff felt in his coat pocket for his ticket and seat reservation. They weren't there. He felt the blood drain from his face. He went through each pocket in turn. An announcement came over the PA: 'Any passengers not intending to travel with us today . . . ?'

For a moment his vision blurred in panic. He felt the waves rising, the shivering, clenching in his head, in his guts. No. Not this. Not now. Calm, he told himself. Just calm down.

He went through every pocket again. Phone. Key. Lighter. They'd kick him off. Oh, God. They'd make him get off at the next station and that'd be the end of it. Baccy, papers. Phone. Oh, shit! Relief drenched him as he opened his phone case and pulled the tickets out. Tucked in there, along with the tenner Nana had given him. 'It probably won't buy you more than a butty and a brew,' she said, 'but there you are.'

Jeff took off his specs to read the reservation: B22. He glanced around. This was coach A.

The train began to move as he made his way through the coach. Other people were taking their seats. There was a putrid smell near the toilet. He was still out of breath. In coach B a family of four were blocking the aisle with enough gear to stock a car-boot sale. The woman, who was holding a baby, smiled and said, 'Sorry,' as the bloke loaded stuff into the luggage area. The little kid with them was asking a ton of questions and not waiting for any answers.

Finally they were done. ‘Come on,’ the dad said, ‘Nineteen, twenty, twenty-three, twenty-four.’

Jeff followed them. He was boiling. He’d shed a layer, soon as. He scanned the numbers on the edges of the seats. Everything was unfamiliar. He’d not done many long train journeys: no need. And no money.

Ahead, the family found their seats and started a debate about who would sit where.

‘You sit where I tell you to, Eddie,’ the dad said to the little kid. And the little kid said, ‘But I want to look out.’

Jeff counted off the numbers, passed a guy on his own in 15, and on the other side, in 17, a middle-aged woman on the phone, and behind her was Jeff’s seat: 22. By the window. Facing backwards. With a girl in it. A woman. A mass of shiny black curly hair, dark skin, pink lipstick, lots of makeup. Wearing a black-and-white-checked skirt and jacket, little ankle boots.

‘That’s my seat,’ Jeff said.

She looked up. ‘Sorry?’

‘You’re in my seat.’ Jeff held up his ticket. ‘B twenty-two.’

‘The reservations aren’t working,’ she said.

‘What?’ Jeff said.

She pointed a manicured finger at a small LED panel above the window, which was showing blank. ‘The reservations are off.’

‘That’s still my seat,’ he said.

‘You can sit there.’ She nodded to the vacant seat beside her.

‘It might be reserved,’ Jeff said.

‘I don’t see anyone,’ she said.

‘They could get on at Stockport,’ Jeff said. ‘And if they’ve got a reservation and I’m sitting in their seat then they’ve every right to ask me to move. Like I’m asking you.’

‘Are you serious?’ she said.

Jeff didn’t reply. He felt the heat creep up his neck and into his face. He unzipped his parka and stuffed it up on the luggage rack.

‘Right then,’ she huffed. She made a show of putting her magazine and water into a bag that was the size of a trunk, metal

studs and rivets on it, like some piece of medieval furniture, then slammed up the tray table and climbed into the aisle.

‘Thanks,’ Jeff said to his neighbour. Though he didn’t know why. Wasn’t that she’d been particularly helpful. The opposite in fact.

The little boy began to snivel. ‘I want the window.’

‘You won’t get anything if you make that noise,’ his mum said.

Jeff sat in the seat, which was still warm. He felt pervy thinking that. Why had he even noticed it? He opened the tray table and set his phone down. He took off his specs and rubbed them on his shirt.

She sat down next to him, spent some time rummaging in her bag – you’d need a headlamp and a map to find anything in there – pulled out the magazine and water again. And her own phone.

Jeff closed his eyes. His back was stiff as a plank, his jaw tight. *Calm. Calm.*

He could smell her perfume. Or shampoo or something. It was sweet, like honey, but with some spice in too. Like those things his nana stuck in oranges at Christmas. Began with a C . . . or an L? He opened his phone, launched the browser, typed in *orange Christmas spice*. Picked a link, ignoring the ones that were obviously cakes, tapped on the picture. Cloves, they were. And the thing was called a pomander. It reminded Jeff of the ebony mace in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, a nifty piece of kit. Whatever the girl was wearing, it was a nice smell, not too strong. His mum wore perfume by the bucketful, powerful enough to choke any person inhaling the fumes. A walking chemical weapon.

Did he smell? Jeff leant down towards his phone as though he was examining something close without the zoom and sniffed as near as he could get, without looking like a total tit, to his right armpit. He caught the greeny smell of his stepdad Sean’s deodorant and, thankfully, nothing worse. He couldn’t sniff his left side without drawing attention. Maybe later. He could go to the bog and do it. Mind you, with the reek in there . . .

He wanted a smoke. Two hours, eight minutes, the journey was.

No chance till then. If he'd not forgotten his phone, he'd have got the earlier 86 and would have had time for a rollie on the walk between Piccadilly Gardens and the station. That was if the earlier 86 had come on time. But if it was still like it had been in November then he would have had only a one-in-five chance of its being on time. Two hours and counting.

The kid across the way was still shrieking, and Jeff felt like telling the dad to just swap seats and shut him up. Kids love looking out of the window. The twins always wanted to sit at the front upstairs on the bus or by the windows in the car. Quite often Jeff would end up in the middle, a sister either side, knees up to his chin, blocking the sight line from the rear-view mirror, to keep the peace. They weren't much bother, the twins. Happy most of the time in each other's company, only occasionally bugging Jeff to play on the Wii with them or to let them have a go on one of his role-play games. They had their own made-up language, which Jeff thought was totally cool and drove his mother demented. Not that there was far to drive her. Maybe demented wasn't quite right. 'A drama queen,' Nana said to him on the quiet. 'Don't let it get to you, lad, she always was a drama queen. Centre of her own universe. She can't help it.'

The announcement came that they were pulling into Stockport and Jeff sat up straighter, watching.

'Waiting to see me get kicked out?' the girl said. Woman.

He didn't know if she expected an answer.

'That you?' She nodded to his left hand, the tattoo. JEFF. Letter on each finger, blurry ink, a muddy blue colour. He'd done it himself when he was seventeen and in a bad way. If he was ever dead rich he'd have it removed. His mum had gone ape when she'd seen it. Totally ape. Sean had had to calm her down. She'd wanted to take Jeff to A and E, convinced he'd get blood poisoning. Went on about it so much he'd begun to feel queasy.

Jeff gave a nod, turned his hand over to hide it.

'In case you forget?' she said. Like he hadn't heard that before. 'Short for Jeffrey, is it?'

‘Just Jeff,’ Jeff said.

She gave a little grunt. Not impressed.

Her lips were full, a darker outline round the edge. Her teeth really white. He wondered if she bleached them, had them done at the dentist, maybe. Jeff’s were stained a bit, from the smokes, but they cleaned up all right when he had a scale and polish.

‘What’s yours, then?’ Jeff said, before she could go on.

A man in a long black coat and a white scarf, carrying a leather laptop bag, stopped beside them and said to her, ‘I think that’s my seat.’

Jeff felt disappointed. Which was stupid.

‘The reservations aren’t working,’ she said, ‘so no one knows what’s reserved and what isn’t.’

‘Well, I know this is my seat,’ the bloke said, ‘because it’s printed here on my coupon. C twenty-one. So you’ll have to move.’

‘This is B twenty-one, mate,’ she said crisply. ‘You want to get yourself into the next coach before someone nicks your place.’

‘Oh, good God,’ the man said, as though it was her fault he’d got it wrong, and he swept off with his laptop bag banging the seats.

‘Knob,’ she muttered. Then, ‘Do you have to do that?’ she rounded on Jeff, startling him. ‘With the leg. We won’t get there any faster.’

He never noticed when he was doing it. Jiggling, his mum called it. Like biting his nails. Where did she get off on telling a complete stranger what to do? Jeff put his heel hard on the floor. Looked out of the window.

‘It’s Holly,’ she said.

‘What?’

‘My name. It’s Holly.’

‘Figures,’ Jeff said, glancing at her. ‘Prickly as hell.’

Her eyes went even larger than they already were and her mouth hung open.

Jeff swallowed. Bad move, he thought. What were you thinking, dickhead?

Then she laughed, a big hoot of a laugh, loud enough to stop

the kid crying for a minute. Jeff felt himself start to smile and his cheeks glow warm again.

‘You cheeky sod,’ Holly said, through her laughter, her eyes dancing.

Jeff felt the knot in his stomach loosen. He’d got the train. He hadn’t missed it. He hadn’t lost his ticket. There was no delay. All he had to do now was sit tight and go over his practice interview questions.

It’s all going to be all right, he thought.

Holly shook her head and picked up her magazine, her chuckle dying away.

He got out his headphones and opened his phone, launched *Grand Theft Auto* to see if he could complete his final mission. It’s going to be all right. There was practically no chance he’d get the apprenticeship but it was a start. Yeah, he could live with that.