

95 REVOLUTIONS
JACK KELLY

To my dad.

PROLOGUE

How the fuck do you properly format a suicide letter? Search engines won't tell you—they swarm your screen with crisis hotlines instead. And it's not like you can ask someone, because the people who've written them don't exactly stick around for encores like jaded rockstars.

I've never written one myself. I've read a lot of them, though. They're all fucking depressing. They're apologetic and dull, and it always baffles me how they read as a cry for help. Talk to someone, for fuck's sake! I mean, if you can. I guess it's not always that easy. Or it is, but it just doesn't seem like it. That's what it was like for Lydia. She didn't have anyone to talk to. Or, at least that's how she felt, I think.

Funny. In a world where the population has doubled in half a century, people seem to be getting lonelier and lonelier. I reckon it's because of the fu—I mustn't ramble. I do that sometimes. But this isn't about me. This is about Lydia Levy and her story.

The story of a girl who very nearly cheated death, and lived to tell the tale. And as with all stories, this one started with a blank page.

CHAPTER ONE

THE BLANK MESSAGE

Lydia perched on her settee, hunched over the coffee table, pen in hand, tapping its nib against the blank page that had been staring back at her for what seemed like an eternity. She didn't know what to write, or even what she wanted to write. Explaining her depression wasn't going to change anything, not now. Her mind was made up. She tapped the pen harder hoping the words would just come to her. But they didn't. She didn't even know who she was writing to. Her mum, maybe, although they hadn't spoken in ages. Perhaps, her secondary school mates who promised to stay in touch but never did? No. Any goodbyes would be immaterial at this point, so what was the point?

Lydia let her pen fall. It bounced off the glass coffee table with a demoralising pang and rolled beneath the settee. Her phone vibrated atop the table, playing *Wake Up Boo* by The Boo Radleys. It wasn't a *beautiful morning*, as the song suggested. It was, in fact, a depressing evening. Lydia shuddered as she grabbed her phone, silencing the alarm as she glanced at the time – 19:27. Lydia stood up and wandered over

to her window, which offered a view of the usually bustling outskirts of Manchester city centre.

Her flat was close enough to city to feel like she was a part of it, but far enough away to avoid the chaos: particularly of university life and the trivial problems that plagued her classmates, whom she avoided as much as possible. No longer concerned with passing her first year, integrating into a new friendship group, or charming anyone into bed on a wild night out, Lydia found solace in her unassuming ground-floor flat.

Lydia watched groups of strangers making their way towards the city centre. Some of them looked a little familiar but she didn't know them. She watched them from the shadows as they strutted down the street. They wore designer clothes and flashy accessories, desperate to tell the tale of a perfect life. Their hair was styled, their makeup immaculate and each of them wore a smile. Their every move seemed carefully choreographed, as if they were backing dancers in a well-rehearsed concert. As much as Lydia loathed them, she couldn't help but feel a twinge of jealousy. It wasn't their smiles, struts, or style that she envied, but rather the speed and determination with which they marched to wherever they were going—they all had purpose.

She turned back to her living room, spotting her radio—a sleek, retro-inspired boombox adorned with neon-coloured buttons and a shiny chrome finish. She flicked it on. A burst of static shot Lydia in the ears. Unperturbed, she turned the knob to a specific station, and a forgotten ‘90s track by The Bluetones blared from the speakers. Lydia hadn’t forgotten it though. It was *Slight Return*, one of her favourites, although she hadn’t heard it in a while. Taking one final look at the outside world, Lydia clutched the radio and retreated back to the comforting sanctuary of her flat.

Her living space was filled with nostalgic knickknacks of the ‘90s; similar in style to the radio she clutched. Every nook overflowed with relics; a Tamagotchi, a Beanie Baby, a lava lamp, pogs, a stash of VHS tapes and a well-worn cassette tape of Nirvana’s *Nevermind*. Though Lydia was a noughties baby, she had always been captivated by the decade that preceded her.

Lydia vividly remembered an advert from her childhood for the Internet. It didn’t mean much to her as a young girl, but for one reason or another it always stuck with her, particularly as she got older and the world around her changed. The advert’s slogan popped into her head whenever she did the most mundane of

tasks, like brushing her teeth or washing dishes—*the world is at your fingertips*.

Who the fuck wants the world at their fingertips? she often thought. It seemed to Lydia that an ever more connected world was only driving people further apart. Not only that, but if everything the world has to offer was one simple click away, then the thrill of an adventure and the spark of curiosity were being drained from her world. She hated the notion.

As a young girl, she had watched Knebworth 1996 on VHS at least a hundred times, mesmerised by the enigmatic Gallagher brothers who managed to look ten feet tall despite the tiny box of a telly Lydia watched it on. Even with a dodgy Scart cable and a mere 14-inch screen, Lydia didn't need 2000 pixels to recognise the power of 250,000 people singing along to every single word. Now *that* was true connection.

But it seemed to Lydia that those days were gone and they weren't coming back. She was born twenty years too late, and it was shit. But there was nothing she could do about it. Her eyes darted around her flat as she looked at the collection of memorabilia that she had somehow squeezed in every space possible. At one point they made her happy, but they hadn't recently. She liked having them around though—although she

was concerned that when she had killed herself, the house clearers would just toss all of it into a skip.

In the drawers were stacks of *Smash Hits* magazines, on the walls were iconic 90s film posters, but the pièce de résistance was a 1996 limited edition Crosley Cruiser in mustard yellow, signed by Damon Albarn himself. The record player took pride of place in the centre of a five-by-five cube display cabinet, surrounded by twenty-four other cubes brimming with vinyl records. As she wandered over to the cabinet, she couldn't help but caress her fingers on the spines of her records. They felt satisfyingly smooth and slightly dusty. Each record sleeve felt heavy, guarding songs that rarely graced the airwaves or streaming services. But that only made them more special. It made them like secret messages. Secret messages written by poets of the world that had somehow left them behind. Surely, they wouldn't throw them out, not her records—and certainly not her Crosley Cruiser!

Lydia's record collection was meticulously organised, but not in any conventional way. Not alphabetised, and not sorted by year or genre—instead, it was arranged precisely how Lydia had decided, in a system that only she understood. It was as if she had created her own Dewey Decimal System for her cherished music. *OK Computer* by Radiohead was the

eighteenth record in the sixth cube. *Nevermind* by Nirvana was in the thirty-third record in the fifteenth cube. She took immense pride in her collection. She loved every single record in her collection, but she had a particular fondness for the ones inscribed with 'To Lydia, Love Dad x'. She wished he could see her collection now, in all its glory.

She was tempted to play one of her records on her mustard Crosley Cruiser, but she didn't. Instead, she picked up her radio and carried it with her as she walked into the bathroom, which was adjacent to her living room. She applied a touch of makeup, gazing at her reflection in the bathroom mirror as the radio rested against the tap. *Slight Return* began to wistfully near its climax. Lydia sang along the chorus reprise, as she parted her two-toned hair with precision; so that the blonde strands fell perfectly to the left and the brunette to the right. Lydia studied herself in the mirror, observing her features intently the way one does only when they're certain nobody else is watching. She looked deep into her eyes as if she was having a staring contest with herself. Her eyes began to water and she blinked.

Am I really going to do it? she thought. The idea of death terrified her, but so did the idea of living. A few months back she had bought a rope. She had found

it in her favourite nostalgia shop in the city centre, whilst she was looking for albums that she could add to her record collection. It was at the bottom of one of the crates she had been going through. It caught her off guard, and called to her. The idea of suicide came to her in that moment—seemingly out of nowhere, and it seemed to make total sense. Part of her hoped she'd never have to use it, but she bought it anyway, and since then any hope of her life changing had disintegrated and her suicide seemed inevitable. It was the only way she could think to escape her head. But typically, now that she needed the rope, she couldn't find it. But she didn't need it. Not really. There were other ways.

Lydia's ground-floor flat was part of a five-storey building. Her plan was to climb those five stories up to the rooftop, a place where her flatmates rarely ventured, if ever. Once she reached the top all she had to do was jump. At around fourteen feet per floor, those five storeys would be a seventy-foot drop. She wasn't an expert in suicide, but it sounded high enough to do the job. Despite her fear of heights, this method had always seemed the most logical to her, because once that leap was taken, there would be no turning back.

With her hair perfectly parted and makeup applied as though she were joining the rest of the city for a good and proper night out, Lydia looked at her

reflection. Presentable, easily identifiable, provided she didn't land face-first. She spluttered out a weak cough at the thought of impact. She began to hyperventilate. She squeezed her eyes shut and gripped the sink with both of her hands, trying to steady her breathing. After a few deep breaths, she regained her composure. She looked back into the bathroom mirror, looking far less resolute than she had before.

A noise came from the living room. It wasn't a thud or a bang, but something subtle—a faint scratching sound. It was barely audible but Lydia heard it. She was sure of it. She stood like a statue, internally trying to drown out the sound of the radio. She waited for the sound to return, and it did; this time louder. *Perhaps the neighbours are doing something upstairs*, Lydia thought.

Carefully and silently, she reached for the radio, turning the music down as low as possible without switching it off entirely. With the music barely audible, she could hear the scratches and faint tapping of wood much more clearly. It sounded like someone was rummaging through her living room.

She could hear someone breathing, soft and quiet. *Trying to remain unnoticed*, she thought. What did she have to be scared of? Once you overcome the fear of death, it becomes increasingly difficult to be spooked.

She held her breath, and crept towards the bathroom door. With her heart pounding in her chest, she crept closer to the door, her nose nearly brushing the wooden frame. She peeked hesitantly around the door, and suddenly, a loud crash echoed through the room.

Lydia gasped, and retreated a few steps back into the bathroom. The sounds of footsteps scurrying hit Lydia's ears. Whoever was out there wasn't trying to remain quiet, anymore. Lydia couldn't help but notice the cowering reflection of herself in the bathroom mirror. She stood tall and rushed to the bathroom door and flung it open.

'All right, fucker!' she said with authority, as she burst into the living room. Her flat was empty, but the front door was wide open. Footsteps echoed down the corridor outside. She dashed through her front door and peered into the foyer. Empty.

What the fuck? Lydia thought. She realised her hands were trembling. She shook them out and walked back into her flat, closing the door firmly behind her and turning the latch to ensure it was definitely locked. *Odd, I'm sure I locked it,* thought Lydia, *I always lock it.*

Lydia checked the door frame. There were no signs of forced entry—whoever had come in had walked through the front door with ease. Not only had

the intruder entered Lydia's flat effortlessly, but they also seemed to have had little difficulty gaining access to the building, which required a code to enter. A code that only Lydia, her landlord, and her neighbours knew. Lydia shuddered.

Why the fuck would anyone want to break into her flat? She had nothing of significant value to steal—at least nothing valuable to the common burglar. Her TV was like a box, and nobody wanted to an old Tamagotchi badly enough to break the law.

On the floor, a marbled photo frame lay smashed into several jagged pieces.

'For fuck's sake,' Lydia muttered under her breath. She knelt down to assess the extent of the damage. She swept a few of the larger shards beneath the display cabinet with her fingers and lifted the 6x4 photograph that had been completely separated from its frame.

In the photograph Lydia was much younger, arm in arm with her parents. It looked as if they had been on a picturesque staycation in the Lake District, but Lydia couldn't recall any memories from the holiday. All three of them looked happy, with Lydia's dad grinning widely as his family posed for the camera. She flipped over the photograph to reveal an inscription she had never noticed before.

‘Liddy. You’ll always have my love no matter what. And your mother’s too, even if she doesn’t show it sometimes. May God bless you and everything you do in life. We’re so proud. With love, Dad.’

Lydia’s eyes welled up, but she pursed her lips together to suppress any tears. With a resolute sigh, she carefully put away the photograph in a drawer and rose to her feet. She quickly retrieved the radio from her bathroom and brought it into the living room, turning up the volume as she placed it onto the coffee table. A melodic jingle played through the speakers.

‘Sit back and relax with the evening show with Caroline Stone,’ an overly eager man’s voice reverberated from the radio. Lydia slumped deeply into her sofa; her eyes affixed to the radio.

‘Hello everyone, Caroline Stone here, and we’ve got a special show for you tonight. It’s just gone half seven, and we’re already counting down the hours until a new year is upon us. We’re broadcasting live from just outside the nation’s capital, and I’ve got the perfect spot in the studio to watch the cars, coaches, and chaos as everybody makes their way into London.’

As Lydia listened, she couldn’t help but feel a sense of warmth and comfort hearing her mum’s voice. It was silky and soothing. Lydia’s face scrunched up. She felt so far away from her mum. She and her mum

hadn't been on speaking terms since Lydia left for university. Her dad said it was because they were so alike: independent and free-thinking, but stubborn nonetheless. He often joked that neither would extend even the smallest olive twig, let alone the whole branch.

She did miss her mum, but she found solace in being able to hear her voice on the airwaves, even if only intermittently between songs. The first song Caroline played was *Torn* by Natalie Imbruglia, and Lydia couldn't help but smile as the opening acoustic guitar sounded through her flat. It was one of her favourites. She swayed slowly, dancing along to the song whilst lying on her sofa. Rarely, did Lydia dislike her mum's song choices. They were the tunes she had grown up listening to, the vinyl records that her mum and dad had played for her throughout her life—some in the very studio that her mother broadcast from. Some families have games, some have movies—but Lydia's family had music.

'The crowds look, once again, like they'll gather in force to see out the year. Maybe to see the elaborate firework show, or maybe to hear the beautiful chimes of Big Ben roar through the nation's capital. Or perhaps they gather to share the celebration of the new year with as many people as possible, because after all, who wants to be alone on New Year's Eve?'

As Lydia listened to her mum's words she could only imagine if her mum was as lonely as she was tonight. She could see her sat in her cosy, quirky studio surrounded by chaotic piles of records. She used to love digging through her mum's crates, as if they were a treasure trove filled with hidden gems. But she hadn't done that in a long time.

'Well, I'm not sure who wants to, but for the next five hours, I will be alone. But it's going to be fun. I'm going to be taking some calls, playing some great music, and let's see in the New Year togeth—'

Lydia turned the radio off. She placed it on her upright piano. The lid of the piano was closed and had gathered dust. Lydia tapped at the dusty lid. She hadn't played it for at least a month. She hadn't felt like it. Ironically, she chose this flat specifically because of the Chappell upright piano that sat in the living room. She thought for a moment about lifting the lid, tinkering with the keys, filling her flat with music—*her* music—but the urge passed as quickly as it came. Instead, Lydia glanced around her flat as if to say goodbye, then switched off the lights.

She started up the five flights of stairs to the roof. The staircase wound gracefully around the building's walls, forming a spiral that seemed to make the fifth floor look miles away. Her legs felt heavier with each

step she took. She tried to tread quietly, hoping to avoid drawing any attention from the peculiar characters that lived in the building. There was *Cat*, an eccentric woman who seemed to have an ever-growing collection of feline companions. She lived on the second floor but her cats roamed freely from floor to floor. *Peter the Pump*, lived on the third floor. He made fitness YouTube videos at all hours of the day, and always tried to recruit Lydia for a video or two, despite her evident reluctance. Mr Havers lived on the fourth floor, and was the only neighbour she actually knew by name. He was nice but erratic—he never knew what day of the week it was and always looked like he was lost. On the fifth floor was *Mystic Marge*, the self-proclaimed psychic who constantly attempted to predict Lydia's future, usually in the form of boys she would date. *Nice one, Marge but wrong again*. As she ascended to the top floor, she had successfully evaded them all, except for a couple of wandering cats.

Lydia paused for a moment as she rubbed her legs in an attempt to give them new life. She opened the fire door that led to the roof. A ferociously cold gust of wind blasted into Lydia's face. The fire door slammed shut behind her, leaving her alone on the rooftop. She made her way towards the building's ledge, stopping a few footsteps away.

From the top of the block of flats, Manchester was a beautiful sight to behold, particularly tonight. The streets shone below her like a web of glowing, golden ribbons, winding their way through the city like an intricate maze. The air was filled with the sounds of the city; the hum of traffic, excited chatter and the sound of a bass drum in the distance, presumably from one of the city's night clubs eager to get the celebrations underway. The bass drum sounded like a heartbeat, Manchester's heartbeat, but as much as Lydia loved the city she still felt like an outsider. Suspended above the life below, lurking in the shadows, she was a spectator to the beauty and the chaos, but a spectator only. She wouldn't be missed.

She inched closer to the ledge. The wind whipped her two-toned hair around her face. She looked down at the street below, the cold air nipping at her cheeks and making her eyes water. The ground seemed to sway beneath her, urging her to jump. Her foot dangled over the ledge. She thought about a stranger finding her body, a dog walker perhaps or somebody coming back from a night club. She thought about the police officers arriving begrudgingly to the scene, putting up tape to section off the area, as passers-by stretched to get a glimpse. She thought about her mum being called

during her show to be told the news that her daughter had been found dead, sobbing uncontrollably as she...

No. Lydia didn't want to think about any of them. She strained her eyes at the people below. They were all blissfully unaware of Lydia, on their way to parties and night clubs. She wished she was as blissfully unaware as them, instead of trapped in her head. She didn't want to think about them either. It was just her, and she was ready.

'5, 4, 3,'. Her heart steadied as the thought of escape drew near. She was calm, unafraid, and ready to take that final step. '2,1,'. Her foot lifted from the floor. BUZZ! Her phone vibrated in her pocket, startling her back to safer ground.

'Fuck!' she huffed. Lydia took a step forward and began counting down again '5, 4, 3,'. *Who*—before she could finish the thought, Lydia had already pulled out her phone to see what the notification was. It was a text message.

The message simply read, 7, 27. Lydia repeated the numbers aloud as if hearing them would prompt something within her.

'Seven, Twenty-Seven.' Whatever the numbers were, they meant very little to Lydia. She checked to see who it was from but she didn't recognise the number.

She called it and held the phone to her ear. It began to ring. She gulped, unsure what she would say to this person. It continued to ring, but there was no answer. There wasn't even an answering machine message. She searched the number but there were no results. *Odd*, she thought, as she went to put her phone back in her pocket.

The wind suddenly blew a strong gust towards Lydia as if pushing her to the edge. She tried to stand strong, summoning every ounce of willpower to combat its power, but the wind was formidable. Her feet scraped along the floor toward the edge. She dropped to the floor, clawing at the concrete roof top beneath her. Her phone dropped, and trickled towards the ledge. She grasped towards it but her the phone had already begun its descent to the concrete below. She peered over the ledge, watching her phone get further and further away until it completely disappeared. The thought of that being her, falling to her death, invaded her mind. She gagged, as if she was going to be sick. But she wasn't.

The once silent city roared back to life around her; the noise flooding her senses and leaving her feeling trapped within her own thoughts. She blinked sharply, and felt a migraine in her head. She rubbed her temple. *I can't do it*, Lydia thought. She wanted to, but

she just couldn't. She needed an easier way. She needed her rope. But she didn't want to spend her last few hours alive rummaging through her flat. She just wanted it to be over. By midnight, at the very latest!

She stood up and brushed herself off. As much as her mind should have been brainstorming a viable way in which she could kill herself, she couldn't help but think about the text message. 7, 27. It was probably just an error message, or a scam, but she couldn't shake the feeling that the message had arrived at the precise moment she needed it. As if whoever had sent it was watching her. She looked around the rooftop. It was empty. She was sure of it.

CHAPTER TWO

ARRANGEMENT THEORY

Lydia stood outside her favourite nostalgia shop; her nose pressed tightly against the glass window. Tucked away in a quiet alley just off Manchester's main walkway, the nostalgia shop was a treasure trove waiting to be explored. She strained to get a glimpse into the darkness of what treasures the closed shop had in its depths. She could spot some records that she hadn't seen before, but besides that there were no new additions.

Aptly named *The Time Machine*, this hidden gem of a shop had been visited on many Saturday mornings, where Lydia would rummage through old records and peruse forgotten relics—some of which now proudly sat in her flat. It was Lydia's secret refuge in the bustling city, a place where she could lose herself among remnants of the past without the risk of encountering anyone from university.

It wasn't merely the contents of the shop that captivated Lydia—the signs, the layout, and even the entire alley, where the shop was situated, appeared as though they had been frozen in time since the early nineties. Whilst the rest of Manchester had been swept

up into the 21st century, this alley remained hidden; forgotten and untouched by the passage of time. That's why she liked it so much. Standing there, she felt as if she was in the nineties.

Growing up in the noughties, Lydia's parents lovingly shared the decade they cherished with their only child. Her mum would play Oasis and Blur records for Lydia to dance and sing along to before tea. Her dad would organise elaborate movie marathons on the weekends, showcasing some of the best family favourites the nineties had to offer. She began collecting records and VHS tapes at the age of six, and for the next few years she was noticeably disappointed when a relative gifted her a CD or DVD for a birthday or Christmas present. As Lydia grew older, she yearned for more, and her dad and mum were happy to oblige. The music became more obscure as Lydia's knowledge expanded. By age eleven, she knew Elastica's entire discography by heart. By twelve, she had watched *Pulp Fiction*, *Fight Club*, and *Heat* at least three times each. But even with all the music, all the movies and everything else, she wasn't in the nineties. Saturday mornings at the nostalgia shop were as close to the nineties as Lydia could ever get.

Her eyes traced the rows of vintage toys and souvenirs. The reflections of the streetlights danced

across the window, casting a warm glow over her face. Despite the late hour, she didn't seem to notice the cold, her thoughts enveloped in the comforts of a life she could have led. Lydia's eyes fixated on a pile of discarded photographs, their edges worn and some even folded or torn from being placed under books, records, and other miscellaneous items.

Suddenly, one of the books atop the photographs shifted—only an inch or two to the left, but enough for Lydia to notice it. Her eyes widened, unsure of what she thought she had seen. Pressing her nose even closer to the glass, she held her hands to her eyebrows and squinted her eyes, trying to see clearly what might have caused the movement—if it had really happened. As Lydia surveyed the darkness of the enchanting shop, a vintage vase tumbled to the ground, shattering to the floor into a thousand tiny pieces. Lydia didn't move.

From behind the broken vase, a piece of paper floated through the shop, like a feather caught in a gentle breeze. It wasn't a windy night, not at the moment at least—and there certainly wouldn't be any wind inside the closed shop. Lydia's eyes followed the piece of paper as it glided amidst the knick-knacks and twirled through the air before suddenly darting towards her. It came at her like a bullet. It pressed against the glass pane, directly in front of her eyes. She jumped,

taking a step back from the window pane. Her eyes drew towards the paper.

The page was torn and slightly yellowed with age. It had writing on it, but Lydia's eyes felt blurry. She couldn't quite make it out. She took a step closer. It was a page from the Bible. Lydia didn't care much for religion, and had never read the Bible in her life, save for the occasional funeral or school exam. Rows upon rows of text, all meaningless to her, filled the page. She scanned through it until her eyes fell to the bottom of the page—*Book of Proverbs, an Old Testament Book of Wisdom*. Something caught her eye on the page. With a faint pen line, a sentence had been struck through and replaced. Next to the line, handwritten in ink.

'Book of Proverbs 7:27: Her house knows only a way to the grave, a place where Death waits.' Lydia whispered. The words didn't mean much—but the number. The number! There it was, again. She looked around the street, but it was empty. She couldn't shake the feeling that somebody was watching her.

'Hello?' she called out hesitantly. No response. She was alone.

Lydia looked back at the page, racking her brain, trying to solve some meaning behind it. *Was it a secret code? A television channel, perhaps? A phone number,*

perhaps, she thought to herself. She stared at the page as it dropped to the floor with a whimper. From behind where the page had stuck to the glass, a pair of red eyes emerged from the shadows. Lydia screamed and stumbled backwards.

She lost her footing on the kerb and fell bottom-first onto the cobbled stones in the alley. Her hands softened her fall, but she was shaken, more from what she had seen than the fall itself. She looked back at the window of the shop, only to find the familiar vintage antiques and trinkets she was used to seeing. No monsters, ghosts, or demons—just an empty shop.

‘Isn’t that Lydia Levy?’ a voice boomed from several feet away

‘Oh yeah, looks like it,’ said a second voice, higher pitched and now much closer.

Lydia looked up to see two faces she vaguely recognised looming over her. Sarah and Adam were from Lydia’s music composition class. Adam sported a thick, well-groomed beard, a flannel shirt buttoned all the way to the top, thick-rimmed glasses, and a pair of triple black Vans on his feet. Sarah had long, straight hair styled in a messy bun—a few of her hairs fluttered in the gentle city breeze. She wore dangly earrings and a pair of black ankle boots with chunky heels. Both were dressed to impress.

‘What are you doing down there?’ Adam asked, frowning. Sarah offered Lydia her hand. Lydia held it as she stood up. Sarah’s hand felt warm and pleasant. Lydia realised she was still holding onto her hand. She pulled her hand away and offered Sarah an awkward smile.

‘I fell,’ replied Lydia, feeling embarrassed. She couldn’t possibly tell them what she had seen. She didn’t know either of them that well—she was actually surprised that they even knew her name—and the truth was, she wasn’t entirely sure what she had seen. Her mind could have been playing tricks on her. It wouldn’t be the first time. The last thing Lydia needed was for everyone to think she was losing it, especially if a few days later people found out that she had killed herself. That wasn’t a legacy she wanted to leave behind.

‘Where are you guys off to, all dressed up?’ Lydia asked.

‘Mr Chamber’s New Year’s Eve Party,’ answered Sarah. ‘It’s a bit of a weird one, but we thought we might as well make an early appearance before the Heaton Park fireworks. It’s right by it.’

Of course! thought Lydia. Everyone on music comp had been invited to Mr Chamber’s party during the final lecture before the Christmas break. Lydia was invited, too, but had no intention of going. It was bad

enough seeing Mr Chambers in university, let alone out of *working hours*.

‘Oh, is that tonight?’ asked Lydia, trying to seem unbothered.

‘Is the New Year’s Eve party on tonight?’ Adam smirked. Sarah playfully punched him in his stomach which wiped the smirk off his face in a flash.

‘You’re coming too, right?’ asked Sarah, her eyes lingering on Lydia just a little longer than necessary. Lydia hesitated, unsure of what to say. She hadn’t planned on it. In fact, it was probably the last place she wanted to be. But if there were really a demon lurking in the shadows, watching Lydia’s every move, then she didn’t want to be alone. Not just yet. Not until she could make sense of her own plans for the evening.



At the party, Lydia found herself seated on a plush two-seater sofa, wedged snugly in between Sarah and Adam. Mr Chamber’s home was a harmonious blend of modern and traditional design. Rich mahogany floors sprawled throughout the expansive open space, with the living room seamlessly flowing into the lounge and kitchen. Sophisticated artwork adorned the walls—the

kind Lydia knew was high-brow simply because she couldn't make heads or tails of it.

Tactically arranged coffee table books were scattered throughout the home, each more pretentious than the last: *Mozart in Motion*, *Palette Art*, *The Grand Grimoire*, *Chateau Life*. Mr Chamber's home was an image of perfection, reminiscent of a show home or a glimpse into the lives of the well-to-do. It was like a life-sized Cluedo board, and Lydia couldn't help but think a murder would certainly liven up this party.

Lydia looked around the room where everybody seemed eager to see in the new year at a party such as this one, and no one seemed more delighted than the host himself. Lydia watched as Mr Chambers effortlessly mingled with guests. In his fifties, though not obviously so, Mr Chambers was something of a silver fox. His ruggedly handsome face and salt-and-pepper hair only added to his charm. He dressed well, but in a way that suggested he wasn't trying too hard, and he always seemed to have a neat whiskey in hand, as if to punctuate his suave demeanour.

She averted her eyes downward to make sure he didn't see her watching him. If he did, then he might come over and talk to her, and she really didn't want to talk to Mr Chambers. In fact, there was nobody at the party she wanted to talk to, and probably nobody who

cared much about talking to her, but she really didn't want to speak Mr Chambers, under any circumstances.

The atmosphere was lively, and everyone seemed to be soaking it in. Everyone, that is, except for Lydia, Adam, and Sarah —and whilst Lydia wasn't exactly friends with Adam and Sarah, she would rather be sandwiched between them than out fending for herself. Adam and Sarah both stared intently at their phone screens, tapping and swiping, utterly engrossed. Lydia sat with a detached expression as if waiting for a bus. Lydia had never been the type to get lost in her phone like Sarah and Adam, and seemingly everybody else her age. Her mobile wasn't flashy like everyone else's; she didn't need apps, likes, or validation from people she barely knew. To her, it all seemed disingenuous and meaningless. But it was fine. She needed to strategise anyway. She needed a better way to kill herself—jumping off a rooftop was now entirely out of the question. She needed a method that was as simple as it was painless.

'Lydia? Lydia?'

'What?' Lydia replied, now back in the room.

'Drink' Adam asked, tinkling an imaginary glass.

'Oh. No,' said Lydia awkwardly, 'I quit. A few weeks ago, I quit,' she continued, almost nonsensically, but she didn't know what else to say.

‘Has no one ever told you that you’re meant to quit after midnight?’ Adam scoffed. Sarah laughed too, albeit half-heartedly, finally tearing her attention away from her phone. She gave Lydia a playful nudge, as if to remind her that Adam was just joking around. Lydia forced out a smile.

‘Having said that, I might get a head start on my New Year’s resolution early, too.’ said Adam.

‘Oh yeah? What’s your New Year’s resolution?’ asked Sarah.

‘One thousand matches.’

Adam proudly tilted his phone to show Sarah and Lydia the dating app on his screen.

‘God, Adam. I’m surprised your finger hasn’t fallen off,’ scoffed Sarah.

‘At least his wrist is getting a little break,’ said Lydia in a deadpan tone. Sarah laughed, placing her hand on Lydia’s knee as she did so. Adam smirked too.

‘Yeah, yeah. Well, I’m getting a drink.’ Adam rose from the sofa and headed towards the kitchen.

Sarah looked at Lydia. Sarah smiled at her awkwardly. Lydia smiled back, but she couldn’t help but notice that Sarah’s hand remained gently on her knee. Lydia felt hot all of a sudden, as if she were melting. All she could feel was Sarah’s hand on her knee. Lydia felt nervous, but she quite liked it. Sarah

seemed friendly, and she smelled nice—or at least, Lydia thought so.

‘Let’s take a selfie,’ Sarah said enthusiastically, raising her phone and snuggling up to Lydia, who seemingly had no choice but to join in the photo. Lydia was caught off guard but managed to force out a smile as Sarah snapped a few pictures. Sarah pulled back slightly, and Lydia looked around, somewhat embarrassed. Sarah inspected the photos, once again engrossed in her phone. ‘God, I’m so ugly!’

‘What?!’ said Lydia ‘You’re not,’

Lydia thought that Sarah was very attractive, and Lydia suspected that Sarah thought it too. Lydia glanced down at the photo on the phone as Sarah began to edit it with a professional-looking app. She repositioned her eyebrows and added volume to her lips. As Sarah experimented with several filters and effects, Lydia wondered if she had even heard her.

‘I don’t even know if I can post this,’ said Sarah.

‘Are you kidding?’ said Lydia. Sarah finally looked up at her. ‘You’re really pretty, Sarah.’

‘You think so?’ Their eyes locked, and for a moment, it was as if they were the only people at the party. Sarah smiled, and Lydia moved in a little closer. Lydia didn’t know if Sarah was into girls. But she didn’t seem to repel as Lydia wiggled closer—and she

did have her hand on her knee! *Maybe she likes me*, thought Lydia. *Maybe I like her*. Lydia was confused. Only moments ago, she was contemplating the most efficient method of suicide and now she was trying to make out with a girl she hardly knew.

‘Guess who,’ a deep voice interrupted Lydia’s train of thought. A rugged pair of hands covered Sarah’s eyes.

‘Josh!’ Sarah playfully exclaimed, grasping his hands and pulling them away from her face. ‘Lydia, this is my boyfriend, Josh.’ Lydia slumped into the sofa, hoping it would swallow her. Nevertheless, she managed to force a smile as she replied.

‘Nice to meet you,’ said Lydia. Josh was undeniably good-looking and radiated self-assurance. He was tall, and well-defined with a strong jawline and high cheekbones. Sarah’s type was obviously a lot different to Lydia’s. Josh seemed like the type who played rugby or polo, and Lydia couldn’t help but imagine him, six years down the line, in an executive office with a receding hairline. At least that’s what she hoped. ‘I’m just going to see where Adam is with our drinks. I’ll catch up with you two later.’ Lydia pushed herself up off the settee.

Lydia walked through the large house, passing through the guests, briefly hearing snippets of the

mundane conversations that seemed to plague the party. From the opposite end of the room Mr Chambers emerged. Still desperate to avoid him, Lydia stumbled into the opposite direction of the corridor. As she looked back it was clear that he was coming in the same direction. He was coming right towards Lydia. She found a set of sliding doors slightly ajar, camouflaged amongst the bookcases in the hallway. She gently pushed them open to reveal Mr Chamber's study within. The room was dark and completely empty. She stepped inside and closed the doors behind her, leaving them slightly ajar just as she had found them. She hid behind the door as Mr Chambers walked by. She let out a sigh of relief.

The hidden room seemed like a secret sanctuary—a tranquil space where the music from the lounge was barely audible, even with the doors slightly ajar. Mr Chamber's study was an extensive library brimming with books and sheet music from centuries past. Towering shelves held ancient tomes and rare manuscripts, safeguarding a treasure trove of musical knowledge that had been concealed for generations. The air was dense with the musty scent of aged paper and leather-bound volumes.

The only illumination in the room came from a few streetlamps outside, their light filtering through the

windows and casting a warm, inviting glow across the space. As Lydia ventured further in, she chose not to turn on any lights or lamps, even though she knew their locations. Instead, she paused to examine a piece of art nestled in between two towering bookcases.

The image depicted a valiant knight towering above demons and distraught villagers. The title, *Don Giovanni*, was inscribed at the bottom, just above Mozart's name. She let out a small chuckle, before exploring the rest of the room.

In a shadowy corner of the room rested a baby grand piano. It gleamed a stunning black, absorbing the dim light from the street lamps outside. She approached the piano and took a seat on the polished bench. Atop the piano was a half-drunk bottle of whiskey. Hanson's, it read on the label—presumably Mr Chamber's preferred choice of brand. With the lightest of touches, she caressed the ivory keys, producing a soft, secretive sound. She played a brief melancholic melody.

Lydia's gaze fell upon the sheet music resting on the music shelf of the piano. The title on the open page read *Nocturne No. 7 in C Sharp Minor, Op. 27*. Lydia wasn't familiar with the piece. She ran her finger along the notes, humming out the tune before placing her fingers on the keys. She began with her left hand, striking a deep C sharp octave, soon joined by a

melodic right hand. But as Lydia focused on the sheet music, she struck a discordant note—a D, to be precise. The unexpected sound brought her to an abrupt halt, and she stared at the title once more: *Nocturne No. 7 in C Sharp Minor, Op. 27*.

That fucking number again, Lydia thought. 7, 27. *Why was it following her? One coincidence is a coincidence, two coincidences are a clue, and three coincidences are just plain fucking weird.* As hard as she strained to find an answer, she didn't know what the numbers meant. Tentatively, she resumed playing the nocturne, hoping it might offer some insight into the mystery surrounding the recurring numbers, or perhaps ignite a spark of inspiration. Once again, she started with her left hand, the deep C sharp octaves soon accompanied by a sombre melody.

'Chopin, Nocturne No. 7. I thought I might find you in here.' Lydia slowly lifted her hands from the piano, recognising that all too familiar voice. She turned to see Mr Chambers standing behind her.

Despite his charm and effortless charisma, there was something a little unsettling about Mr Chambers, at least to Lydia. He always seemed to know precisely what to say to get his way, and he wasn't above expressing things he didn't necessarily believe in order to manipulate others. Lydia wanted to tell him to leave

her alone, but she didn't. She could have, but part of her didn't want to. Part of her wanted him to find her at some point. As much as Lydia wanted to avoid him, she didn't dislike Mr Chambers. In fact, he had devoted a lot of time to her and seemed to genuinely like her. Sometimes she felt as though he was the only person who did, herself included.

'It's a lovely piece,' Lydia murmured, still perched on the piano stool.

'You know, it sounds even better with four hands. That's how it was meant to be played when Chopin composed it.' Mr Chambers squeezed himself onto the stool beside Lydia, placing his whiskey glass atop the piano. 'Do you mind? You play what's written.'

Lydia reached across Mr Chambers to play the left hand, her arm brushing against his tight torso. He pushed his body towards the piano, as if it were an excuse to get closer to Lydia. Lydia felt nervous, but she was comfortable. She played the sombre right-hand melody that accompanied the left. Not long after, Mr Chambers joined in with an accompanying tune in the centre of the piano, nestled between Lydia's left and right hands. It sounded nice. It sounded more uplifting with the melody Mr Chambers played. It wasn't a complex melody but it sounded impressive, and even

more so, Mr Chambers played it from memory. His eyes were closed as if he was lost in the beauty of the music. He turned the page as they continued to play in perfect harmony.

They stopped playing. Mr Chambers stroked Lydia's right hand with his own. He looked at her, but she shyly averted her gaze. Lydia checked to see if he was still looking. He was. And soon Lydia felt obliged to look back into his eyes. In that moment, a flurry of emotions coursed through her—a mix of admiration, curiosity, and a subtle hint of apprehension towards Mr Chambers. Her cheeks flushed and her fingers fidgeted ever so slightly. They shared a silent, lingering moment, a moment away from the party, the guests, and everything else happening around them.

Mr Chambers smiled at Lydia and gave her hand a gentle tap as he pulled his own away.

‘Very nice. I really do like that one.’ he said.

Mr Chambers stood up from the piano, grabbing his whiskey. He glanced at his wristwatch. ‘I’m just going to say a few words, but please don’t go anywhere. Make yourself comfortable, even,’ he said playfully. Lydia nodded as Mr Chambers disappeared through the sliding doors.

Lydia remained seated, but with the sliding doors left open, the sounds of the party filled the room. She

heard the clink of a glass as the music gradually faded out. Lydia stood up from the piano stool and walked to the sliding doors, peering her head out to watch Mr Chambers, who had effortlessly captured the attention of the entire party. The guests all ceased their conversations, turning towards him with eager smiles on their faces.

‘I know there’s still a few hours left before the new year, but I just wanted to say something before I’ve had too many of these,’ Mr Chambers said, gesturing to his drink, ‘and I can’t get my words out.’ The room let out a joyful laugh. ‘Or before you’ve all had too much of whatever you’re drinking and can’t understand me. But that’s how it should be, which is why I thought it best to get this out of the way now. I just wanted to thank you all for coming tonight as we celebrate the next movement, if you will, in all of our lives. Whether that next movement, for many of my students here tonight, is merely the blossoming of an opening motif—or for the likes of myself and a few other faculty members, a brass-filled march towards a rollicking hurrah.’ The faculty members chuckled lightly, as everyone at the party seemingly hung on his every word.

‘New Year always reminds me of a quote from one of my favourite composers, Claude Debussy—a

great man and an even better composer. Debussy said, ‘Works of art make rules and not the other way around.’ So, for my students, not only should you start to believe that one day the people who follow in your footsteps will adhere to the rules you create, but you should also know that to achieve this, you have to be unafraid to break the rules of your predecessors. You must be completely and utterly fearless when it comes to breaking a few rules—especially the fun ones.’ The room let out a wry laugh once more. Lydia poked her head further out from behind the sliding doors.

‘It’s about being unafraid to do something different. It’s about being courageous enough to take a leap without having any idea where you’ll land. It’s about forging a path for yourself, rather than sitting idly by and waiting for the train to whisk you away.’ Lydia felt a smile forming on her face, her lips curling into her cheeks.

‘If you want to sidestep mediocrity, if you want to be truly remarkable, if you want to pass my class, that’s what I urge you to do in the coming year. Thank you, and I hope you all have a fantastic end to the year.’

The room filled with applause and cheers. Lydia, still half tucked in the sliding doors, joined in, clapping her hands together. The guests of the party raised their

glasses in celebration, and faculty members swarmed Mr. Chambers with pats on the back and shoulders.

‘That’s it!’ she whispered. *Waiting for a train to take you there*, Mr Chamber’s words echoing in her mind. If she was unafraid to take the leap, she needed something to summon death to her. She strode past the smiling faces and left the party, knowing exactly where she was going and more importantly, how she was going to kill herself.

CHAPTER THREE

**STRANGERS ON A TRAIN
(PLATFORM)**

The exterior of East Didsbury station loomed like a forgotten relic; its once-bustling platform was now reduced to a ghost of its former self. The station's weathered concrete structure held a certain texture, marked by patches of chipped paint and layers of grime that seemed to whisper tales of the past. Faded posters for concerts been and gone adorned the walls, surrounded by the scrawls of unimaginative graffiti. A handful of aimless souls wandered through the fading evening light. The station had become a sad testament to the transportation chaos that gripped the city, with the majority of trains abruptly cancelled with little or no warning. The remaining few charged through the station with urgency, as if they didn't want to be there, either.

As Lydia walked towards Platform 1, she felt heavy with anticipation. She felt a migraine in the back of her head—only made worse by the loud sounds of trains thundering past. Lydia climbed the grime-streaked staircase, each step feeling like a silent

surrender to the inevitable. She reached the southbound platform.

The platform was desolate, its emptiness marked by a solitary bench and a weary vending machine with an annoyingly loud hum. As Lydia looked around the platform, her gaze fell upon a homeless woman. She wore tattered rags that barely shielded her from the elements—particularly on this cold December evening. Her hair was messy and she looked in dire need of a shower. Her weary eyes fixed on the passing trains, but it was clear she wasn't waiting for one. Lydia couldn't help but feel sorry for the woman. She seemed to have given up. Lydia could relate to the sentiment.

Lydia tried her best to avoid eye contact with the woman, but she couldn't help but stare—wondering perhaps why this woman hadn't jumped in front of a train herself. The tracks were right there. She'd only have to walk a few metres. Lydia felt horrible for even thinking it, but the thought still remained. Was it possible that this woman held out more hope for humanity than Lydia herself did? Lydia was ready to jump. That's why she was at this shithole in the first place. But for a moment, albeit brief, she felt selfish for wanting to kill herself—when this stranger, who seemingly had nothing to live for, still chose to.

Lydia shook her head to escape the thought. Her gaze turned to the electronic notice board, scanning the list of cancellations and delays for any sign of hope. It was New Year's Eve, and if she were to make her escape, it would have to be soon. Lydia looked at the arrivals board: Birmingham New Street – 21:48. Twelve minutes.

The only alternative was a tram stop. Tonight, the trams were operating with a remarkable precision, their punctuality a stark contrast to the disorder of the trains. However, Lydia doubted that a tram could offer the salvation she sought. They don't go fast enough to kill someone on impact. She shuddered at the thought of spending the next few weeks confined to a sterile hospital bed, pissed at a bloody tram for not travelling fast enough to kill her.

Moreover, the tram stops teemed with life—thronged of people swarmed the platforms as they went about their New Year's Eve celebrations. The prospect of stage fright paralysed her. The weight of hundreds of eyes scrutinising her every move. She couldn't bear the thought of drawing unwanted attention to herself or, even worse, encountering someone she knew amidst the sea of faces, pleading at her to *change her mind*. Or worse still, Lydia hated the thought that people would be more interested in filming her. The idea that her

suicide would be a Tik Tok live, or a meme, or any viral joke made her feel sick.

In the end, the possibility of being observed by a homeless woman, a janitor, and a few unassuming strangers seemed an acceptable compromise. She could endure their fleeting curiosity; it was a small price to pay for the escape she so desperately craved. And so, with a resolute sigh, Lydia decided that waiting on the desolate platform was not only fine—but it was necessary.

Lydia thought about buying the homeless woman a chocolate bar from the vending machine. She rummaged in her purse for some change. She took out her set of keys to get a better view, when- ‘LET’S FUCKING HAVE IT YER DICKHEAD!’ Lydia turned sharply. Two boisterous teenagers burst onto the scene, their energetic cheering and chanting disrupting the sombre mood.

Lydia couldn’t help but glance at the intruders as they swaggered up the stairs, their youthful exuberance impossible to ignore. Noticing her, one of the teens quickly averted his gaze, while the other fixed her with a confident smirk. Lydia instinctively moved towards the bench, hoping to put some distance between herself and the boys as they sauntered past. She quickly put her

keys into her pocket and tucked away her bag out of sight, beneath the bench.

The two boys were tall, their short, clipped hair and baby-faced features suggesting they were no older than fifteen or sixteen. Dressed in the latest sportswear fashion, they wore hoodies and tracksuit bottoms without coats, seemingly impervious to the biting chill of a Manchester winter. The scent of alcohol clung to them, their inebriation evident in their mischievous grins and demeanour.

The boys seemed eager to cause a commotion, and looked disappointed by the lack of people to witness their antics. One of the boys had ginger hair, and the other was blonde. Blondie seemed to be the leader. He swaggered towards Lydia with confidence, whereas Ginger followed a few feet behind him like an obedient lapdog. Lydia put her head down, her eyes firmly focused on the ground beneath the bench. She could just make out two sets of white trainers in her periphery but they glided on by. When it felt safe again, Lydia looked up, curious to see what they were up to.

‘What a ball, and he’s through on goal with just the keeper to beat!’ Blondie exclaimed theatrically, sending a discarded can skittering across the platform with a well-placed kick. Ginger watched, a smug smirk gracing his face. With a sudden burst of force, Blondie

aimed his next kick at the haggard homeless woman who looked unfazed by Blondie's antics as she nestled against the brick wall.

'He shoots! But it's saved by the goalkeeper!' Blondie shouted as the can struck the homeless woman squarely in the chest, 'Now that's world class.'. Ginger's coy laughter echoed through the air. Both of Lydia's fists clenched tightly. She watched, but she didn't do anything—except silently wish they'd just piss off.

Lydia tried to make eye contact with the homeless woman but the woman looked too deflated to lift her head, let alone plead with the boys to stop. Lydia's legs felt like concrete, as if she had somehow morphed into part of the bench she sat on. Blondie continued to torment the homeless woman, his cruel taunts escalating with each passing moment. Soon, Ginger joined in, boldly snatching her blanket away.

'It's not even cold, you fucking softy,' he sneered, seeking approval from Blondie. Lydia's teeth began to grind together.

'Give it here,' Blondie demanded, his tone assertive. As Ginger's smile faltered, he reluctantly handed over the homeless woman's blanket, his gaze downcast in submission. With the blanket now in his grasp, Blondie shot a devilish smirk towards Ginger

before hurling the homeless woman's blanket onto the train tracks.

'Go get it.' Blondie hissed, leaning down to confront the homeless woman, 'and while you're down there, you may as well wait for the train to come. It's not like you've got anything to live for anyway. It would be a right laugh for us to see you get hit by a train.' He said it quietly and softly but it was just loud enough for Lydia to hear. Her stomach felt funny, and she could only imagine what was going through the homeless woman's mind. She shook her head.

Lydia inched forward, as if ready to stand up, but she couldn't. She looked at the homeless woman, who still wouldn't tilt her neck towards Lydia or the boys. She was frail. She looked like she hadn't had a proper meal or a warm bed in months. But why did it have to be tonight? And what could Lydia realistically do? If things escalated, it would be two against one—and given the lanky physiques of Blondie and Ginger, they would overpower her with ease. The desolate station seemed like the perfect setting for a horror story—one that would end with a news article detailing her assault and subsequent hospitalisation. Lydia didn't want to recover; she wanted out. She tried to avert her eyes, she tried to mind her own business, but she couldn't.

Blondie began pushing the homeless woman, trying to get her to move. That was it.

‘Leave her alone!’ Lydia shouted, rising from the bench. Her strides grew shorter as she drew closer to the boys. Blondie rose to his feet; both he and Ginger took a few paces to confront Lydia, their imposing figures towering over her.

‘What the fuck do you think you’re doing?’ Blondie whispered menacingly. Lydia stood her ground, though she hesitated to meet his eyes. When she finally did, they bore into her like razor-sharp blades.

‘I’ll—I’ll call the police if you two don’t leave right now.’ Lydia stammered, feeling nervous and embarrassed. They knew she was scared; she could tell. It was obvious. Not just to Blondie and Ginger, but even to the homeless woman who Lydia spotted in the corner of her eye watching on in disbelief and awe, as if on the front row at Knebworth ’96. Lydia tapped her pocket, feigning readiness to pull out her phone. *Fuck!* Lydia’s stomach dropped. She didn’t have a phone.

‘If you were going to call the police, you would have rung them already, probably from way back where you were,’ Blondie snapped, ‘No, I don’t think you’re going to call the police. But we’re good lads. We’re going to give you the opportunity to turn around and

fuck off. Now, we don't usually offer this sort of deal on the regular, but I like you. So, go on. Fuck off.'

Lydia and Blondie continued to lock eyes, standing a couple of metres apart, fists clenched and unwilling to make any sudden movements. Lydia thought that to the homeless woman, she and Blondie must look like cowboys in a duel—although the homeless woman didn't look like much of a Clint Eastwood fan. Lydia could make out Ginger from the corner of her eye. He was anxious. His legs were shaking and he didn't know where to put his hands. She looked at him properly. His eyes burned into Lydia, as if silently pleading for Lydia to take Blondie's offer, fearful of what Blondie might do to her if she stayed. Lydia could tell that Ginger wasn't a killer; perhaps Blondie wasn't either.

Blondie slowly moved his hand to his waist. He lifted his hoodie to reveal a nine-inch blade tucked snugly into his tracksuit bottoms. He flashed a menacing smirk at Lydia, who stared at the knife, her reflection shimmering against its cold steel edge. Sure, Lydia had a death wish, but she didn't want to be killed by some random, egomaniacal chav. If she were to exit this world early, it would be by her hand and her hand alone.

Fear coursed through Lydia's veins, but rather than scream she forced out a smile—as wide as she could muster. She remembered seeing it in a cowboy film when she was younger. She couldn't remember much else about the film, but her dad really liked it for some reason. In the film, bandits threatened to kill this cowboy but instead of running or screaming he just laughed. A weird, sort of crazed laugh. A laugh that said; 'Bring it on, you piss-ants.'. The bandits ended up running away themselves, and Lydia hoped the trick might have the same effect on Blondie. It did not.

Blondie took a few steps towards Lydia. Her hand darted towards her back pocket. In a flash, she pulled out a set of keys. A small canister of mace spray hung from the keyring. She aimed it at Blondie like a loaded gun. He halted in his tracks.

'What's that? Your inhaler?' Blondie mocked, his voice dripping with sarcasm. Ginger let out a nervous chuckle.

'It's mace,' Lydia replied, her voice steady and firm.

'Do you really think that little thing can stop me from ramming a knife in your throat?' Blondie retorted, his words erasing the smile from Ginger's face. Lydia swallowed hard but held her ground.

‘I’m not sure. But we can find out together if you want?’ said Lydia.

‘Come on, mate. She’s not bloody worth it. Neither of them are.’ Ginger interjected, seemingly desperate to defuse the situation. He walked towards Blondie and subtly tilted his head to the left. Lydia refused to blink. Her eyes began to water. Blondie stared back at her. His gaze shifted from Lydia’s fierce eyes to the small can of mace spray connected to her keys. He smiled menacingly. *Shit*, thought Lydia. She pressed her finger readily against the tab of the mace. Blondie laughed as he placed his hoody over the knife. He strode past Lydia towards the exit of the platform. Ginger trailed a few steps behind him, until they both disappeared down the steps.

Lydia let out a massive sigh of relief. Her heart was racing. She tucked her keys and mace into her jacket pocket. The platform was now completely empty, except for her and the homeless woman. The homeless woman gazed at Lydia through tear-filled eyes. Lydia jumped onto the tracks to retrieve the homeless woman’s blanket. It felt odd, being in a space that was typically off-limits and marked by danger. There was a strange allure to it and a hint of excitement tinged inside of Lydia. She had often gazed down at the tracks, imagining herself standing upon them. She’d

done it all of her life, even before the depths of her despair; whenever she was waiting for a train, the intrusive thought always seemed to find a way to the forefront of her mind. She couldn't help it, and by the time she actually got on the train she had forgotten all about it, and the thought never crossed her mind again, until she stood on the platform again.

Now that she was actually on the train tracks, they appeared ordinary and unremarkable—just as she had imagined them to be. Yet, the peculiarity remained. Glancing down the tracks, Lydia felt a subtle yearning for a train to suddenly emerge. She secretly hoped that she wouldn't have enough time to react, to ponder or attempt to evade its path. Maybe then the homeless woman could tell everyone of Lydia's heroics. That way nobody would know she committed suicide. Maybe that would be better. But the train never materialised. Lydia made her way back to the platform, and approached the homeless woman. As she draped the blanket over the shivering woman, she gently rubbed her shoulders.

'Don't get yourself killed for me, dear,' the homeless woman whispered, 'I'm not worth it.'

'You're worth more than the likes of them,' said Lydia, 'You're frozen! Is there anywhere you could stay tonight?'

The homeless woman shivered as she clutched her worn blanket tighter around her body. She managed a weak, yet appreciative smile in Lydia's direction.

'I'll be all right. You've done enough. More than most people would have.'

Lydia reached into the inside pocket of her jacket and pulled out her purse. She took out the five twenty-pound notes in the inner pocket and handed them to the woman. Lydia hadn't used cash in a long time, and she certainly wasn't going to spend them tonight. The homeless woman's eyes lit up.

'I know it's not life-changing,' said Lydia, 'but it might be enough for a night or two. A hot meal, even.' The homeless woman stared at Lydia as if she were on the verge of tears. Lydia could tell that the homeless woman wanted to question Lydia further. Lydia walked away before she could, heading to the platform's edge.

A sultry voice came from the tannoy above. 'Attention passengers, the next train approaching the platform is a direct service to Manchester Piccadilly and will not be stopping at this station. Please ensure you are behind the yellow line for your safety. Thank you for your cooperation.'

This was it; Lydia's. The sound of the approaching train grew louder and more distinct, its hum intensifying. Through the mist, the train's lights

appeared like the sinister eyes of a lurking demon, reminiscent of what Lydia thought she had seen at the nostalgia shop. She scanned the platform once more, ensuring she was alone. She was.

Lydia took a few measured steps toward the yellow line, the train now roaring in her ears, the wind biting at her skin. Her foot crossed the yellow line, her toes hovering precariously over the edge. She was anxious, just as she was atop the building, but this time she was ready. The fear was gone and Lydia felt weightless, her eyes closed tightly.

The train charged closer to Lydia, its thundering presence drowning out all other sounds, the gusts around her nearly hurricane-like.

‘Lydia’ a voice whispered. She couldn’t tell if it were a voice in her head or somebody trying to warrant her attention. She tried to ignore it. ‘Lydia’ the voice cried again. Her eyes shot open.

On the opposite side of the platform a man stood, as if he were simply waiting for his train to commute to work. He was a plump gentleman, perhaps in his mid-forties. He looked harmless, but he stared at Lydia with an awkward, quizzical expression on his face. He attempted a smile, but it was equally awkward. *Who the fu—*

The train zoomed past, thundering through the platform. Lydia jolted backwards. She lost her balance and fell bottom-first onto the platform floor. She tried to scramble to her feet but it was too late. She looked up as the train left the station.

Fuck! she sighed. She could still see the innocuous gentleman through each window of the train, as it zipped by in a blur. He was still staring. He was still smiling. Lydia rose to her feet and dusted herself off. She looked across to the opposite side of the platform, expecting an awkward confrontation with the stranger who had nearly witnessed her jump in front of the speeding train. But the platform was empty. The man, like the train, had vanished as suddenly as he had appeared, *Shit!* she exhaled.

‘Attention passengers. The next incoming train is the service from Liverpool Lime Street and will be terminating here. Please note that due to the holiday season, this will be the last train tonight.’

Lydia couldn’t risk any more interruptions. She was certain that if she hadn’t been interrupted, she would have made the leap. It wasn’t like the rooftop experience. This time, it would have been easier, over more quickly. Lydia jumped down to the tracks and followed them out of the platform, venturing into the darkness of the night. She felt aggrieved that the night

hadn't gone to plan. First her life was a mess, and now her death was becoming one, too. It was fucking annoying. It felt as if she was being pranked and thousands of strangers were watching her, pissing their pants at how pathetic she was.

She walked down the tracks until she found herself in a grassy, remote area—a countryside oasis hidden within the urban landscape of Manchester suburbia. This was it. She was alone. No more distractions. She could hear the train rumble in the distance. She looked down the track. Through the mist she could just about make out the headlights. She laid herself down onto the tracks. *Brilliant*, she thought. Now she wouldn't even have to jump.

Lydia gazed up at the star-filled sky. In spite of her depression, she couldn't help but feel a sense of awe and wonder. The vast expanse of stars seemed to stretch on forever, each one glowing brightly against the dark canvas, and Lydia felt so small and insignificant laying beneath them. She hadn't looked up at the stars in a long time. She did a lot when she was younger. It was the only part of her family staycation in the Lake District that she could still remember, albeit vaguely.

She remembered her dad telling her that stars were secret messages from God. He said that whenever he felt a little depressed, the stars reminded him of the

natural beauty in this world. Lydia wasn't religious, neither was her mum—but her dad was. Particularly towards the end. Lydia didn't believe that stars were messages from God, or that they were reminders of the beauty in the world; she never had—and besides, technically speaking, stars aren't part of this world. But she still liked looking at them. She never corrected her dad, or told him what she really thought about religion, or the stars. If they made him happy, they made her happy. After he died, Lydia remembered looking up at the stars every night for months. Hoping that maybe somehow her dad would send her a secret message. But he never did.

The roar of the train intensified. It sounded like feedback from an amp when an electric guitar gets too close. It scolded Lydia's ears. She clenched her fists, her nails digging deep into her palms. She tilted her neck towards the oncoming train. It was close. It was fast. Her heart pounded in her chest. The track beneath her vibrated, the tremors seeping into her bones.

Lydia glanced back at the stars one last time, knowing that if any secret message were to appear now, it would be too late for her to reply. She looked back at the train. It was closing in on her. She shut her eyes as tightly as she could.

And then everything fell silent, and darkness enveloped her.

It's done, Lydia thought. I'm dead.

'You all right there, love?' shouted a voice. The voice was cheery, with a distinct Northern accent.

Lydia opened her eyes. She was still lying on the tracks amidst the hidden countryside on the outskirts of Manchester. She looked down the track. The train was gone. She looked the other way. It wasn't there either.

'What are you doing down there?'

Lydia pushed herself upright, her heart and head still pounding. She gawked at the man standing before her.

'You!' she snarled. It was the same innocuous looking gentleman that she had seen on the opposite platform. A hundred questions swirled in her mind as she tried to make sense of his sudden appearance. The gentleman was annoyingly upbeat, almost swaying back-and-forth at the same tempo in which Lydia's migraine pulsed against her temple. His eyes crinkled at the corners as he looked at Lydia, who didn't know what to say. He once again offered Lydia an awkward smile. The gentle curve of his lips somehow made Lydia ever more infuriated. She wanted to scream as loud as she could, but she refrained. She didn't speak. She waited for him to say something, or perhaps scurry

away like some unwanted pest in the garden. But he didn't.

Instead, he chuckled. It grated on Lydia's ears. He took a few steps towards Lydia, towering above her as she sat on the tracks. The moon cast a gentle light behind him, turning his face into a dark silhouette against the night sky, as if he were adorned with a halo. Extending a hand to help Lydia to her feet, he introduced himself, his voice warm and cheerful.

'The name's Hugh.'