

Chapter One

Karl stared out at the flat, black landscape of the Fens as the train clattered and lurched along. Rain streaked the windows, so that fat drops slanted across his field of vision, blurring the dull view. Nearly home. His iPod was out of battery and he'd eaten the crisps he'd bought on the way from school

to the station. Daniel, sitting next to him, was silent and messing with his phone, texting some girl he'd met at half term. The fat woman opposite huffed and puffed and shifted in her seat – in both the seats she filled. And Karl stared out of the window.

The wide ditches ran like deep cuts through the fields here. Green banks on either side, the lips of these great wounds, rose up to the edge and then the ditch – dykes they were called, weren't they? – the dyke severed one field from the next. In the nearest field, a band of bedraggled and drenched migrant workers stooped over, picking onions. Karl couldn't see their gang-master.

Daniel looked up from texting the girl he was after.

'Losers,' he said. 'Look at them. They live in caravans and spend their days scouring

the mud for shitty onions. Why don't they stay at home? At least it might be sunny at home.'

Karl stared at the line of workers. Perhaps they were losers. But his life didn't seem much more exciting than theirs just now. A long round of GCSE coursework and arguments with his parents and the endless train journeys to and from school. He couldn't wait to leave in the summer – four months to go. He was practically counting the days. Then he saw her. She raised her head, glanced unseeing towards the train, pushed her long, black hair back over her shoulders and put a hand to the small of her back.

'Look!' Karl poked Daniel, who had turned back to his phone. 'Isn't that the girl we met on Saturday? At the market? Eleni?'

Daniel lifted his head again, but they were too far past to be sure.

‘Nah, can’t be.’

‘It could be. Her friend, she didn’t speak much English. Remember? They spoke together in Serbian or something. If they’re migrants camping on the farm that would be why they wouldn’t say where they live.’

Daniel ignored him, pressing the buttons on his phone in quick succession.

The train was slowing, stopping. Karl kept his face close to the window. A dyke just a few metres away was clogged with rubbish: an old fridge-freezer, a broken supermarket trolley, a pet basket. There was a battered, red estate car drawn up close to it and a swarthy man opening the hatch. More rubbish, no doubt. Another man, wiry and blond, got out of the passenger side and between them they

hauled something long and heavy out of the boot. Now the train was still, the rain pounded on the window and ran straight down. It turned the scene outside into a rippling blur as though someone had poured acid over it and fuzzied the edges. The thing was a rolled-up carpet. The men dumped it at the top of the dyke, and it rolled and slithered down the slope. Without looking back, the men jumped back in the car, then sped off, the tyres slipping once on the muddy road.

The train juddered and pulled itself back into action. Karl watched the car, the only patch of colour, as it shrank to a dot. As the train started to rumble along the track, he glanced back at the dyke. The carpet was loosely rolled, as though bundled around something. It had come partly undone as it fell down the slope of the

dyke. And there, sticking out of the end, was a leg, ending in a scruffy trainer.

Karl's skin prickled and his hands sweated.

'Daniel! Look!' He grabbed his friend's arm, but Daniel shook him off.

'I'm busy,' he grumbled.

'But look! It's important!'

Daniel sighed and leaned over Karl to look out of the window. Karl felt him tense as he saw the foot.

'Shit,' said Daniel.

The fat woman shuffled her bulk and tutted under her breath. Karl looked over at her.

'Did you see that? In the dyke?'

It took her a moment to realise he was talking to her, then she glanced out of the window, but the dyke was disappearing from view.

'People's always dumping rubbish in the

dykes. It's a scandal.'

'But the carpet—' he began.

'Did you see the carpet?' Daniel added. 'And the leg? Did you see a leg?' He was on the edge of his seat now, his phone forgotten in his hand.

'All kinds. They dumps all kinds. It's a scandal,' she repeated. She wasn't really listening, or she hadn't really looked.

Daniel opened his mouth to try again, but Karl shook his head. There was nothing to see now.

Karl turned back to the rainy window while she jabbered on. He carried on staring even when the dyke and its bundle lay far behind them. Every now and then, Daniel caught his eye in their reflections in the window.