



# OFF THE RAILS

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.

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## 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?'