

**\* WARNING – GRAPHIC CONTENT \***

Chapter 5

The first thing Claire noticed was the smell. It was almost indescribably horrid. Metallic might be an element of it, and rotten must form some part, plus something like the taste of a tablet without its coating. It wasn't overpowering so much as penetrating, cutting straight through the nose and sickening the mind. To Claire, it was like a having a dirty sock stuck halfway down her throat and being unable to vomit it up.

Claire had never been around death before, but she instinctively knew this was its mark, its odour. It was foreign and foul and every element of her being rejected it.

And in that moment she understood MacPhillamy's warning. She would never be free of this smell. It was more than just some image she could compartmentalise; it was visceral, three dimensional, assaulting all the senses at once. It would sink into her and sit under her skin until blessed senility freed her of its taint.

Then she saw the bodies. The interior of the carriage was a scene of unimaginable carnage. Restless chaos filled the interior, misshapen black bodies lying strewn and broken on the chairs and floor. Dark red blood slashed the walls and floor—even the roof— and it seemed no viewpoint was free of the angry rouge flashes.

She couldn't tell how many bodies filled the space, for they were so awkwardly arranged and dismantled that what was seen peeking out from under a seat could belong to a mashed face further down the aisle. Flesh was jammed into corners and contorted shapes were draped over the backs of the train's seats. Corrupted ebony limbs lay like broken sticks, twisted and askew. Blood-soaked and torn clothing inadequately covered the bodies, creating a gaudy rash of sickly colours.

The men—she assumed they were male, from the style of the rags that were loosely covering their bodies—looked dead. But they were nothing like the neatly felled heroes of the silver screen, or the calmly limp shape of a person who had slumped into unconsciousness at a school fete. No element of the bodies suggested any strength or life; they were sinking into the very floor of the carriage, unable to resist gravity's pull. Their blood felt gravity's draw, too, eagerly oozing from the bodies in a crawling search for a way out of the train.

And this was only her initial impression, the first ten seconds of shock and bewilderment before the brain caught up. Slowly the details started to reveal themselves to her, rude little surprises that flitted into her vision. A sneaker, torn from a foot, the ankle it used to support twisted at an obscene angle, swollen and purple-black. A hand, fingers snapped backwards and sideways, like they had been caught and mulched in an industrial machine. A flank, exposed dark skin punctured and deflated, the wounding implement long since removed.

Then, a face. Her first face—or what was left of it. The dark, budded hair caught her eye first, then the rise of cheekbones and what might have been a nose. A slick film of blood covered the whole. But the worst part was the shape of it—it was just *wrong*. The angles were both bloated and sunken, the relative positions absurd. She realised an eyeball lay loose from its socket, and she found herself suddenly turning away.

The movement only revealed more atrocity. Claire's eyes were drawn to the line of a body, a thin-black tangle of limbs that looked smaller than the other corpses. Draped chest-upwards over the back of a seat, the head was hidden behind the chair, the stick legs hanging like limp puppet limbs.

Hypnotised, Claire followed the line of the legs to the floor, stumbling across a hessian bag on the ground, its contents expelled over the floor like innards. She saw a green box among the mess, its lid spliced off, a mashed plastic wrapped sandwich still inside.

A lunch box. A child's lunch box. The dark-skinned body was that of a boy.

Instinctively, Claire went to step towards the body of the child, but Morris put a gentle hand on her arm. "Don't," he said. "We can only look from here."

Morris felt Claire shaking. Her arm was trembling in short, needy jerks. Turning to look at her, Morris saw her bottom lip quivering, and her skin had turned a shade as ghostly as the workshops themselves. Claire's head was shaking, slowly and almost imperceptibly, as though trying to deny the existence of what was in front of her.

"Let's go speak to Seb," Morris suggested. "We've seen enough for now."

Claire stammered an empty reply. "Shouldn't we...don't we have to..."

"There is nothing else we can do now," Morris said. "It's over to forensics now. We just needed to see this thing for ourselves." It felt like a lie even as he said it.

He began to guide Claire away from the mess, back towards the door. She didn't resist.