

Chapter one

It was the boy's curly blond hair that caught Angie's attention, distracting her from the goblin thoughts that had plagued her since she received that letter from the hospital. The letter that told her the results were through. Angie could guess what those results were: she had cancer. The summons to see the consultant was just so that they could break the news gently. Give her a leaflet, telling her that she wasn't alone – and that was a joke, because Angie had spent a lifetime of being alone. But she did wonder how long she had left to live.

Poor old Aunty Mo had a bleed, her menopause had been and gone by then, and just three months later they were burying her. Loitering by the spider plant, in an attempt to lose her sherry glass before Uncle Jim refilled it, Angie overheard Mum say that Gran had died of the same thing in her fifties and it was a curse on the women in their family. Not on Mum. It was a weak heart that carried her off, and she was well into her seventies. But if anyone was to be cursed it was Angie. It shouldn't have come as a surprise, but it did. How was she to know that time was running out? There should be some kind of official warning.

Angie had lain awake most of last night. Best not borrow another library book, which was a pity as she'd been meaning to read *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. And it wasn't worth doing anything about that damp patch in the corner of the ceiling. Instead of dwelling on what she couldn't do, maybe she should make the most of what time she had left. Angie caught her breath – *the time that she had left*. Was her life ending because she had wasted it? *I'll make the most of every moment, if only you'll give me more time*, Angie bargained with a God that she had ignored since Sunday school.

Angie had overheard the girls in the factory, where she worked as a machinist, talk about their bucket lists, the things that they wanted to do before they were too old, or died. Brenda wanted to ride an elephant and Sonia talked endlessly about visiting New York. Angie had never given it much thought until now. What did you put on a bucket list when

you hadn't done anything? Hadn't moved from the terraced house in Dagenham where she had grown up, hadn't had an interesting job, hadn't fallen in love or married, hadn't had a child, hadn't gone abroad.

Angie buried herself under the duvet. How did you make up for forty wasted years? One fateful day had robbed her of the life she might otherwise have had. So much had been stolen from her and now time was running out. Angie kicked her legs and wailed. She pounded her fists into the mattress. Too late. Too late.

The digital clock clicked to 3.42 am and Angie hoisted the slipped duvet back onto the bed. She may have wasted forty years but she wasn't going to waste another day. Another hour. Another minute. From here on – every moment of every day was going to be *lived*. But how?

4.25 am. She knew what she had to do. She would go back to Jaywick Sands. It wouldn't change what had happened all of those years ago but she didn't want to die without saying goodbye to what was her favourite place in the world. Top of her bucket list: go back to Jaywick Sands. It was a pity that the other things she had missed out on weren't so easy to find.

With a sense of purpose, Angie got up and waited for the world to rouse itself, so that she could start her journey. The hospital appointment was for nine o'clock. She would hear what they had to say, and then take straight off. With a bit of luck, she could be on a train to Clacton by ten-thirty,

The Tube carriage was packed, barely room to breathe. Squashed near the door, Angie spied the pretty child holding his mum's hand. Angie wondered idly whether his mum's hair was that golden colour when she was a girl, instead of the nut brown that swung in a ponytail as she fussed with her bag. Some women dyed their hair. Brenda, at the factory, had been peroxide and then auburn. Mahogany she called it. Why would anyone choose to be

that colour? Angie hated her own red hair but could see no point in trying to look like someone else. She was born Angie Winkle and Angie Winkle had frizzy red hair.

The train was coming to a halt, like a roulette wheel picking which passengers would be favoured with the coveted doors. Slowly, slowly. They were going to be lucky. The doors would open right in front of the boy and his mum. Angie tried to imagine being that woman; a swingy ponytail, pert breasts. But, it was having a child that Angie envied most. What was it like being a mum? Holding a tiny warm hand in yours? If only she had done things differently. But it was too late; the crumpled letter in her pocket, a reminder of the years she had wasted. Overhandled, overthought, overread, the letter scorched her thigh. It wasn't fair.

What was the girl doing messing around with her child's backpack when she should have been ready waiting to get on? The zombies were ready – lined up, their eyes fixed on the exact spot where the doors would open, ready for the off. But oblivious to her fortune in standing in exactly the right place to bag a space on the crowded train, his mum was releasing the red and green rucksack from the boy's back.

At first the crowd flowed around the boy and his mum. But then they caught the child up in their wake and swept him like a piece of flotsam into the carriage. Angie kept close to the little blond head, keeping an eye until his mum got on. The boy could only be three or four years old.

Angie craned her neck to keep his mum in sight. People were forcing their way into the carriage, but she was waiting for some kind of invitation. For someone to say, *room for you here*. What was the matter with her? Just get on. Get on! Angie felt the mum's panic, but there was nothing she could do to help. The doors started to close. An ashen face, mouth in an O, eyes wide; the realisation that she had lost her child.

Something or someone must have stopped the doors from closing because they opened again. Just for a few seconds. With a look of relief, the mum smiled thinking they had opened for her. Angie desperately wanted to shout out, *Help that woman. She's been separated from her child.* But she couldn't. Everyone would look at her. *Get on! Get on! You stupid woman, get on the train!*

The doors closed against the bent backs of commuters as they took up the shape of the carriage. His mum had missed her chance. How could she be so careless? The boy was very still. A soft toy masked his face. Angie wondered whether he even knew that his mum was still on the platform watching the train disappear into the tunnel.

Don't worry, angel. I'll keep you safe. Angie rested a hand on the boy's shoulder and a warmth flooded through her, as though her soul was being nourished. The boy glanced up at Angie and smiled. No one else seemed to have noticed what had just happened. If they had, they were pretending to be busy, studying the back pressed up against them.

Don't worry, mate, I'll look after you. The train lurched as it twisted through the tunnel and Angie steadied the boy, holding him close, until it came to a stop.

'Come on, darling.' Angie led the boy off the train. He was far too trusting; his mum should have told him about Stranger Danger.

The letter in her pocket cooled. Directions to the hospital scrawled on the corporate red and blue paper temporarily forgotten, as she focused on the child.

She crouched down. 'It's alright, sweetheart, we'll get you back to your mum.' She wasn't sure how, as there were no guards on the platform. The golden-haired angel offered Angie his raggedy bunny.

'Who's this?' Angie flicked a soggy ear.

The boy yawned.

'Reckon you could do with a little nap. Where was your mum taking you?'

The boy sucked his thumb.

Several trains had come and gone with no sign of the boy's mum. The commuters had thinned to a trickle, just a few stragglers scattered the platform. A gust of air threw up a discarded newspaper and Angie's wraparound skirt flapped open. A fast train was approaching. As Angie cradled the boy to keep him safe, his baby scent of vanilla and soap triggered a memory. Angie squashed it back to a safe place.

Sometime after the train had passed and the air had settled, a blanket of burnt rubber and oil, Angie was still hugging the boy. She imagined them captured in a photograph. A summer garden replacing the dismal grey of the platform – grandma and grandson. A birthday celebration, her fiftieth. There would be an expensive cake with sugar roses and lots of friends and family toasting her with bubbly wine. She would allow her grandson to have the teeniest sip and his face would pucker, making them all laugh.

The boy interrupted her daydream, as he pointed to the rail tracks. 'There.' Angie peered over as a black rat darted into the shadows.

Still no guard. Angie didn't have a plan. She knew that she wouldn't leave the boy until she could hand him back to his mum. The little love wound his fingers in Angie's hair. He had better be careful, her hair was known to harbor all sorts of lost property. Only this morning, she had discovered a pair of tweezers in there, from where she had been coaxing a denim collar right side out.

'What's your name?'

The boy offered Angie his toy. 'Kroliky.' Angie wasn't sure if that was the bunny's name or the boy's.

'Licky?' she asked.

The boy laughed. 'Licky.'

'Okay, Licky, let's go and ask a guard to help us find your mum.'

Angie wasn't one to volunteer to do anything. The thought of being the centre of attention made her stomach flip. But needs must. They couldn't wait on the platform all day.

A black man collecting rubbish in a big cellophane sack directed Angie to an office. It was hard getting him to talk – another one who avoids the limelight. *We're like those rats hiding in the shadows, while everyone else gets on with their life. Funny how we see each other when nobody else does.*

Three uniformed staff milled around the doorway of the office. *So that's where all the guards were hiding.* She tried coughing but remained invisible. For the boy's sake she summoned her courage.

'Excuse me. Could you make an announcement over the speaker?' Blood pumped in angry bursts. It throbbed in her neck, strangling her voice. Everyone was looking at her. Angie clutched the boy tight, drawing strength from a maternal urge to do the right thing.

'Please could you say that his mum should wait at Liverpool Street Station and I'll take him back?' She sounded too loud and brash.

The man in the office whipped round to face her. Angie had become important. 'How did you come to have this child?' He made it sound like she'd kidnapped the boy or something.

A heat rose in Angie's chest, as it always did when she became the focus of attention. 'He got separated from his mum. Can you tell her to wait at Liverpool Street?'

Angie had already turned when he replied. 'I think it's best you leave the child in our care. We'll alert the police and see that he's safely returned.'

She couldn't hand the boy over, not when she had promised to help him find his mum. She squeezed the boy and he wriggled against her. 'No, you don't understand. I'm a friend of his mum. I'll go back and meet her at Liverpool Street Station – by that statue. The one with the kids.'

He smiled, all cheerful, like they were mates. ‘Why don’t you both stay here with me and I’ll make an announcement for Liverpool Street and other stations on this line.’

If she did that, then it would all be over. If she could just cherish his warm weight a little longer, his baby breath on her neck. ‘Well, if you can’t be bothered to help me,’ she blustered. ‘I just wanted a simple announcement to be made while I took him back.’

The man got a call on his phone. Behind him a bank of CCTV screens showed commuters getting on and off trains. Another phone rang. The man covered the mouthpiece and turned to Angie. ‘Okay, I’ll make an announcement that you’ll be standing by the statue on Liverpool Street Station at the entrance to the Underground.’

Angie left him before he changed his mind. ‘We’re going to get another train. Find your mum. I bet she’s waiting at Liverpool Street,’ Angie chirped to the boy, as they waited on the platform. ‘I don’t think your name’s Licky. What is it?’

The boy gave Angie his bunny. ‘Licky.’

‘Ah, this is Licky. How do you do, Licky?’ She flopped the rabbit’s head up and down. The boy laughed and snatched him back.

‘My name’s Angie.’ She pointed to her chest. ‘Angie. What’s your name?’ She tapped the boy’s chest.

‘Danek.’ He spoke clearly, despite his accent.

‘Okay, Danny boy, here comes our train. Now, hold my hand tight. You don’t want to get lost again.’

A blast of diesel and warm air preceded the train. Angie’s cardigan twisted around her and the letter worked loose. It slipped from her pocket and was swept up on a gush of air – a ball of red and blue. It skittered in a zigzag between the feet of commuters until Angie could see it no more. It was a sign; she wasn’t meant to go to the hospital – not today. Today, she had been sent a little boy to take care of. Make every second count.

Chapter two

Nikoleta crumpled in pain and then howled. The people around her, the ones who'd been waiting three rows deep to squash onto the next train, shifted slightly, as though proximity would taint them or make them responsible in some way.

The dinosaur rucksack dangled from her wrist. Two minutes ago, it had been on Danek's back. They were a unit, the two of them. The next hour or so, their journey to Earl's Court, finding the apartment Kamil had rented, was as certain in her mind as the past – getting on the scheduled flight from Warsaw early that morning, travelling to London on the seven forty-two from Stansted. She had held the directions in her head, every stage of the journey. But now it was unravelling, as though a thread was being pulled with Danek as he disappeared into the tunnel. Leaving Nikoleta bereft, lost, and very, very afraid. What had she done?

'This can't be happening, *Matko Boska*. Kamil will go crazy.'

She searched for someone – anyone – to acknowledge what had just happened but people turned their heads. It was a nightmare. She had only been in England a few hours and she had lost Kamil's only son. Danek was the centre of Kamil's world. From the day they first met, Nikoleta knew that however much Kamil loved her, she would always come second to his beloved son. That was one of the things she loved about Kamil – his love for Danek. Nikoleta adored Danek too; he was a beautiful child. And now she had lost him – in a foreign city, with nobody to turn to for help. She felt sick – paralysed with fear and disbelief. *Please someone help me.*

Nikoleta was still pleading with the faceless commuters when another train pulled in. Just as before, commuters crushed into the full carriages, their places on the platform were taken up by new arrivals until only Nikoleta knew that a few minutes ago she had been holding Danek's hand. As before, the commuters stared ahead. Kamil said that the English

were kind and welcoming but to Nikoleta they seemed cold and heartless. She had to find someone in authority.

Nikoleta battled her way through a relentless stream of people. Her mind had gone blank. Years of English classes at school – multiple-choice tests. It was all there, somewhere, but her frantic brain scrambled everything she knew.

‘Please, please,’ she cried in Polish.

Nobody looked at her. They averted their eyes as though embarrassed by her distress or stared ahead, their eyes wide and glazed like mad dogs. Danek was being carried further and further away. She was losing valuable time.

A man bumped against her and said something. Nikoleta turned to smile; at last someone who cared. But the man tutted and pointed at her wheelie case.

Nikoleta pursed her lips. She had to toughen up. London was nothing like home. All these people from different nationalities none of them stopped to see her and listen. *Matko Boska! Please let Danek be safe. Please someone take care of him.* No time to pray. No time to panic or cry. She lifted her case – thank goodness she’d only brought hand luggage – and climbed back up the stone stairs and over the bridge. Here there was more space, as people swarmed like ants from the ticket office.

Just a few minutes ago, she’d bought a ticket. Danek was excited about the train journey. He had never travelled on a train under the ground. Nikoleta hitched his dinky rucksack back up her shoulder. She had promised Danek a milkshake when they got to Earl’s Court, a proper American-style one, thick and creamy. She’d tried one as a child in Warsaw when the first McDonald’s arrived, back in the early 1990s. Now there were bigger, better versions. She had been as excited as Danek to try everything new. But now all of that faded and Nikoleta was ashamed of her childish wishes. What kind of mother was she, to lose Danek within a few hours of arriving in the capital? How would she ever forgive herself?

Nikoleta had laughed at her parents when they said that London was a dangerous city. 'It's no more dangerous than Warsaw or Krakow,' she had scoffed. But when Nikoleta checked it out on the internet she saw that Poland had a much lower crime rate than England. And London had more crime hotspots than anywhere else in the country, not that she would admit this to her parents. They were anxious enough about Nikoleta and Kamil's plans.

Someone would stop and help her. A man in a uniform leant against the ticket barrier.

'Please, please help me.' Nikoleta spoke slowly, self-conscious because of her accent.

The man pointed to the machine and said something Nikoleta didn't understand.

'My boy. I've lost my little boy. He got on the train without me.' The words tumbled out, part English and part Polish. She sounded hysterical. She *was* hysterical.

People turned to stare, as they passed through the metal gates. The man in uniform lunged between them. He checked tickets and released the barrier, never losing concentration.

'Push it in there.'

It took Nikoleta a couple of seconds to realise the man in a denim jacket had spoken in Polish. When she tried to find him, he was already merging into the crowd. Nikoleta dragged her case behind her, not caring any more if she ran over people's toes or tripped them up.

'Please, please, wait!' Nikoleta could no longer see his faded blue back. She called louder. 'Please help me!' She stumbled on in her high heels, scanning the sea of people, desperately seeking a blue denim jacket.

'What? What do you want?'

Nikoleta nearly bumped into the man who had stopped in front of her. His body was still, but his eyes flicked with impatience, his gaze on the way ahead, mentally he was still surging forward with the crowd. Never mind the roughness of his words, Polish had never sounded more beautiful.

‘I have lost my little boy. He got on the train without me. The doors closed before I could get on.’

Said out loud, Nikoleta was stabbed again with the physical pain – the shock of being separated. She trembled. Her brain, arms, and legs felt numb as though icy water filled her veins. Danek was only four years old. A four-year-old abandoned in a foreign city, prey to any sick person. Nikoleta had handed Danek over. She might as well have sold him to the highest bidder.

The man’s eyes widened. There, she had shocked him. It was a truly awful thing to do. Nikoleta hugged her arms. She couldn’t fill the void, the empty space. Her breath came in short gasps. For a second or more they shared the horror; their eyes locked. But then he looked away and physically shook himself, as though shedding the burden.

‘That’s terrible. I am sorry to hear of your troubles but I don’t know how I can help you.’

In Poland he may have been an old classmate, the son of her mother’s friend. Everyone there was a friend of a friend. People didn’t always get along, there was a lot of suspicion, especially amongst the older generation. But, when one of their own was in danger they helped. This man would not turn his back on her if they were in Poland. His mother would be ashamed if he did. Nikoleta relaxed, confident that he would do the right thing. That he would help her find Danek.

‘Please, tell me what to do. I’ve just arrived in England and everything is so confusing. We have to find him before it is too late.’

The man steered Nikoleta to one side, away from the stream of commuters. Nikoleta could tell, from the way he checked his phone and looked everywhere but at her stricken face, that he didn’t want to be there. That he regretted ever having opened his mouth.

‘Which Tube line were you getting on?’

Nikoleta looked at him blankly.

‘Which platform were you on?’

Nikoleta pointed back behind her. *Think, think*. The man shook his head and checked his watch.

‘Platform one!’ Thank goodness she remembered. They would find Danek.

‘Where were you going to?’ the man asked.

Why did it matter? They were losing time.

‘Earl’s Court.’ At least she remembered the station. The shock of losing Danek seemed to have wiped her mind.

‘You should have got the Central line to Holborn and then changed to the Piccadilly line.’

Now he was looking interested – smug even. What was the matter with him? Danek was on a train heading to God knows where and he was showing off his knowledge of the London Underground.

‘How will we find him?’

The man held up his hands. ‘No. I’m sorry but I can’t help you. I’m already late for work.’ He backed away, bumping into a stout woman.

Nikoleta shadowed him as he weaved between bodies. ‘What shall I do? Where will I find him? He is so little.’

The man stopped. ‘Someone probably got off the train with him at the next station. Go one stop on the same line. I bet he’s waiting for you now.’

‘Thank you. Thank you.’

It wasn’t too late. Of course, some kind soul would have seen what happened. There were more good people in the world than bad. She had read somewhere that most people

were kind. You only had to look at how people behaved when there was a disaster. People were basically good. Danek would be safe.

Nikoleta's body wasn't listening. Her legs wobbled, slowing her pace. It was like being in a dream when you desperately needed to get somewhere but your body was too heavy to move.

Why hadn't she thought of taking the Tube one stop at a time to see if Danek was waiting for her? Several trains must have gone by since they got separated. If only she had caught the next one. What was the matter with her? Of course she should have caught the next train. At least she would have been following him.

As the train pulled into Moorgate, Nikoleta was waiting at the doors. Blurred faces whipped by too fast for her to see if Danek was amongst them. As the train slowed down, she scanned the platform. Mostly adults. There was a woman with a pushchair. The train jarred, then stopped. Nikoleta elbowed her way off the train as others started to board. *Please God let him be here waiting for me.*

The platform was quieter than Liverpool Street. Danek should be easy to find. A black man with grey hair chased a ball of red and blue paper as it blew past her. He picked it up with a long stick. But no Danek.

There was an announcement over the loud speaker. Nikoleta understood the words 'lost', 'boy' and 'wait.' The message must be for her. A young woman was sitting on a bench, listening to music through headphones. Nikoleta touched her sleeve.

'Excuse me, what did that announcement say?'

The girl pulled the plugs from her ears. 'Sorry, what was that?'

Nikoleta tried again. The girl shrugged. A train pulled in and the girl got on.

Nikoleta cursed her rubbish English teacher and her own disinterest in the subject. If she knew then that one day Danek's life would depend on it, she would have studied the language every minute of every day.

‘Where are you from?’

Nikoleta spun around to see a middle-aged woman dressed in a smart jacket and trousers. ‘Toresnica. You speak Polish!’

The woman shrugged. ‘Of course. You were asking about the announcement?’

‘Yes, yes. I got separated from my little boy, Danek. I need to get help. I thought maybe –’

The woman interrupted. ‘Yes. The announcement, it said that your child has been taken to Liverpool Street Station. You are to wait by the statue of the refugee children at the entrance to the Tube.’

‘Thank you!’ Nikoleta forgot herself and hugged the woman, who stiffened and then took a step back.

‘I’m sorry. I’m just so happy. Thank goodness he’s safe. I can’t thank you enough.’

Which way to Liverpool Street Station? In her hurry, Nikoleta had forgotten to ask. There were so many platforms, which one would take her back?

It was hopeless. She was rushing along a tunnel that could be taking her in the wrong direction. Ahead, a busker played ‘Johnny B. Good’. Nikoleta turned back, irritating the commuters who had to step to one side. Nobody would hear her over the electric guitar.

When the crowd thinned and it was quieter, she asked an elderly man. ‘Liverpool Street?’

He frowned at her.

‘It is just one stop.’ She held up one finger. ‘Liverpool Street?’

‘Ah, that way.’ The man pointed to a sign: Northern line Southbound.

‘Thank you,’ she called over her shoulder. Just one stop. Please Mother of God let him be there.

Liverpool Street Station looked different. Maybe she had arrived in another part of the station. Nikoleta followed the signs to the way out. The statue of the children must be near the entrance. But there were so many exits. She tried one and then another. There was no statue. Nikoleta’s stomach lurched. The sign said Old Street Station.

Chapter three

‘The next train leaving from platform twelve is the ten seventeen to Clacton calling at...’

From her waiting place by the statue, Angie heard the announcement. Her rail ticket was good for any train outside of rush hour but if she let the train go she would have to wait another hour. As it was, she wouldn’t have much time in Jaywick. Finding Danny was an unexpected joy but she had to give him back and be on her way. She had set her heart on going back to Jaywick and deep down Angie was afraid that if she didn’t seize the day, as it were, then her nerves would get the better of her and she would slope back into the shadows. *Come on, Danny’s mum, what’s keeping you?*

Danny was perched next to a bronze boy on the plinth of the statue as he concentrated on nibbling a Mars bar. Angie folded back the wrapper to make it easier for him. ‘Ever had a toffee apple, Danny? It tastes better than that and healthier too. You’d love Jaywick Sands.’

Angie fished in her enormous handbag for a tissue. She couldn’t see the point in dainty bags that hardly held anything. Danny offered up his face like a sunflower searching the sun. His big eyes and chocolate-smeared smile twisted her heart; he was so trusting and innocent. She wouldn’t let him down.

It was ten thirty-three. They’d been waiting at the statue for nearly an hour. In that time, they had named the bronze boy *Lost Boy* and made up a story about him and his sister. How they were waiting for some kind person to give them a home in London. You’d think his mum would be frantic. What could be more important than finding her child?

Maybe she had decided to do a bit of shopping to take advantage of the free childcare. It wouldn’t surprise her. The girls at the factory were always going on about ‘me time’ – whatever that was supposed to mean. Selfish, that’s what it was. Having a child to love and

care for was the most precious gift in the world, especially this little darling. The bronze boy and his sister looked pissed off too; they waited with their suitcase, forlorn and unwanted.

‘Where’s your mum got to, Danny boy?’ Angie wanted the toilet but daren’t leave in case she missed his mum.

‘You look after me,’ Danny said, the emphasis on ‘you’.

‘I will, love. Angie will look after you until we find your mum.’

It was no good; she had to go to the toilet. Danny would just have to visit the ladies’ with her. ‘I expect your mum will be there waiting when we get back.’

In the toilets Angie wasn’t sure what to do with Danny. She couldn’t leave him outside the cubicle, someone might snatch him, but she couldn’t bring him in with her, could she? What did mums and grandmas do? There were no other children around or mums who might have given her a clue.

Desperate now, Angie dived into a cubicle taking Danny with her. ‘Close your eyes, Danny, and see how far you can count before I shout “ready!”’

Angie showed Danny how to cover his eyes and started him off counting, as she hooked down her knickers.

‘One, two,’ Danny repeated after her.

She was nearly done when the toilet door swung open and Danny darted out of sight. Angie waddled to the door, her knickers around her knees. Danny hadn’t gone far. He passed Angie two pieces of toilet paper neatly folded in a square.

‘Thank you, love.’ Angie took his offering and finished her business with the door open. Everyone had seen everything anyway. But Danny was right. There wasn’t any toilet paper in her cubicle. ‘Clever boy. Now, you’d better spend a penny too.’

She wasn’t bad at this, looking after the boy. She would have been a good mum. How could she have gone fifty-odd years without experiencing this? No nieces and nephews, no

friends with kids. No friends – full stop. Who would trust the weird woman with frizzy hair to look after their kid anyway? She knew what they all thought of her at the factory. So, she didn't watch *East Enders* and couldn't give a monkey's whether it was the lottery rollover week or how much Brenda had won at bingo but she saw the way they smirked at each other. Weirdo Winkle. Nobody in their right mind would trust her to look after their kid. But she was doing a better job than Danny's own mum. She hadn't lost him on a crowded Tube.

As Angie balanced Danny on the toilet, her hand brushed the sharp wing of his shoulder blade. He was fragile as a bird, and she was afraid he would break. 'Do a little tinkle for Nana Angie.'

Danny beamed as he obliged. He really was a little angel. His T-shirt rode up when Angie lifted him off the toilet, his skin baby soft beneath her touch, but then her finger detected a scratch. Angie lifted Danny's T-shirt. There was a faint trace of welt marks low on his back. Brushing a finger across the telltale lines, Angie said, 'What's this on your back, Danny? It looks like someone has taken a belt to you.'

Danny wriggled free. Angie tried again. 'Did someone hurt your back, sweetheart?'

'I was a naughty boy.' Danny hung his head.

Angie hugged the little mite. His mum didn't deserve to have him back.

When they emerged from the toilets, the woman with the ponytail was waiting by the statue. She had her back to them, Danny's rucksack slung over one shoulder, as she spoke on her phone. Angie was hit by a wave of disappointment; she would have to say goodbye to Danny. He would never finish the Mars bar tucked away in her bag. She would be forgotten by the morning. Just the old woman in a story about the day Danny got lost. Angie picked Danny up and hugged him tight.

'Look who's over there,' she said, her voice a little hoarse.

Danny twisted around. He should have cried out in joy and struggled to be free of Angie so that he could run to his mum, but he didn't.

'Your mummy,' Angie prompted. Maybe Danny hadn't seen her.

'That's not my mummy.'

Of course it wasn't. An irresponsible au pair who didn't care tuppence about Danny. Maybe she was his stepmum, his dad a great oaf of a man who beat Danny. The boy was undernourished, and whoever that woman was, she wasn't taking very good care of Danny.

'The next train leaving platform nine is the eleven seventeen to Clacton.' Angie dithered, a little toing and froing on the spot. *If the girl turns around and sees us by the time I count to ten, then I will say goodbye to Danny.* Angie hadn't thought through what she would do if the girl didn't turn around.

'You look after me,' Danny said, his chubby hands soft on her cheeks and Angie was torn.

Seven, eight. The girl turned enough for Angie to see her profile. She was smiling. Her charge was missing *and she was smiling* – laughing at something, as she spoke on the phone. The train was leaving in four minutes, what was she to do?

Then Angie made a decision – a huge decision. There was no time to dither; once the girl saw them the decision would be taken out of her hands. Danny was clinging to her and she had promised him that she would look after him. The train to Clacton was about to leave and if she didn't go to Jaywick today then she might never go. So, with Danny jiggling on her hip, Angie ran for the train. The guard was about to blow his whistle, as she lumbered through the open barrier. And then they were off, out of the station, on their way to Jaywick.

What had she done? Kidnapped a child? Abducted him? Angie went cold. She had done a terrible thing. But had she? Was it really so bad? In a way she was rescuing the boy. They would have a wonderful day together at Jaywick Sands. When the police came looking

for them, she would hand Danny over and point out the marks on his back. ‘Thank you for being so vigilant,’ the policeman would say. ‘If there were more responsible citizens like you, Miss Winkle, the world would be a better place.’

Besides, Danny had been sent to her for a reason. Last night, she vowed that she would make the most of every minute of every day – do the things she had missed out on. She didn’t think that being a mum – well, a grandma – was the sort of thing she could include on her bucket list, but someone up there thought otherwise and had sent her this beautiful boy to look after. Who was she to question the whys and wherefores? It was meant to happen.

Angie sank into the seat and cuddled Danny to her. All of her life she had been hiding in the shadows, ashamed and afraid. She hadn’t trusted herself to make the right decisions, not on anything big that mattered. So, without realising it, she *had* made a decision – a decision to let life pass her by. Well, all of that was going to change. She may only have months left to live but she was going to live them in full volume.

‘We are going to the seaside, Danny. What do you think of that? We are going to have ourselves a perfect day!’

Danny was already asleep. But Angie’s heart thumped reminding her that she was still alive. A lion’s roar filled her belly – all of the power she had suppressed the past forty years. It was time to start living without regret.