

**BREAKDOWN by Chloe Banks**  
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She had thought she was alone in the carriage.

“Ticket please, Miss.”

It was only then that Jenny realised that the train wasn't moving. How long had they been stopped? She peered out of the window, but there was nothing but blackness. They couldn't be at a station then.

“I'm sorry.” She began to scrabble in her handbag. “I was in a bit of a rush and I didn't quite have time...”

Her mad dash for the train as the warning beeps had sounded had driven any thought of a ticket out of her head. In the dark of the deserted station she had noticed nothing except the doors that threatened to close and cut off her escape.

“That's alright, Miss.” He smiled at her. “I can do your ticket. Where to?”

“Where are we headed?”

“Newcastle's the end of the line, but that's a long way off yet.”

“I'll go there.”

“Return?”

“One-way.”

She tried not to catch his eye. If it hadn't been for his uniform, the gloom of the carriage might have made him appear threatening. As it was, the smart navy and red spoke of calm authority and he tapped at the machine at his waist with practised speed.

“Why have we stopped?” she asked, more to break the silence than because she cared.

“There's been a breakdown, Miss. It's being seen to.”

When the wheezing machine finally spat out a ticket, the guard did not hand it

over. Instead, to her surprise, he slid into the seat on the other side of the plastic table.

“Mind if I sit here for a bit? There’s not much for me to do until we get moving.”

She did mind.

“No. Go ahead.”

He pulled a cigarette packet from his breast pocket and selected his pleasure.

“Are you allowed to smoke in here?”

“Nope.” He shrugged and flicked the wheel of his lighter. “But who’s to know? Want one?”

She had given up. Only last week she had sworn she had smoked her last ciggie. But she had screwed up now anyway hadn’t she? What did it matter anymore?

They puffed in silence for a minute, she savouring the guilty taste, he watching her.

“So what’s wrong?”

His tone had changed; the quiet respectfulness was gone. The question caught her off-guard, in mid-drag, and to her horror she nearly burst into tears.

“Nothing.” She turned her head away. “I’m absolutely fine.”

“That’s funny. You’re the first absolutely fine person I’ve ever met travelling on a late night train they don’t even know the destination of.”

“Sometimes the destination doesn’t matter.”

“It’s the journey that counts?”

“No. It’s the leaving that counts.”

Jenny took a long steady drag and let the smoke trickle from the corner of her mouth.

“What are you running away from?”

She should have said, “It’s none of your business.” She could have said, “Leave me alone.”

Instead, she found herself telling him the truth.

“My daughter.”

“Teenage pregnancy is it? Staying out all night? Drink and drugs?”

Despite herself, she smiled.

“She’s four.”

“Why are you running away from a four-year-old?”

“Because she can’t run away from me. And I’m not good for her.”

“Makes sense.” He leaned back in his seat and looked out of his window, though there was nothing to see. “You always hear people saying stuff like, ‘I wish I’d never known my mum’ and ‘I’m glad my mum walked out on me when I was four’, don’t you?”

“You don’t understand.”

“Why don’t you explain?”

“Because it’s none of your business.” She did say it this time.

“Isn’t that why you want to tell me about it?”

“I don’t want to...” she began angrily, but stopped.

She did want to tell him.

And so, in the dim light of the stopped train Jenny began to tell the guard everything, starting from her own motherless childhood and spilling forwards through time. He didn’t speak or even look at her. His gaze remained fixed on the nothingness beyond the glass, making it easy.

As her story raced through her teenage years she expected him to be shocked. But the alcohol and pregnancies, the drugs and abortions didn’t seem to have any effect on him. Her adulthood battles to give up the drink, her inability to hold down a job because of it, her desperate efforts to turn her life around after having Georgia, elicited no response. Eventually she talked herself into silence.

“Nice sob story,” he said, still without looking at her. “But none of it explains why

you've ditched your daughter."

Jenny didn't know what she had expected. Sympathy? Maybe not sympathy, but certainly not this.

"I haven't ditched her," she said defensively. "I've left her with my dad, he'll take care of her."

"And he's fine with you taking a one-way ticket to nowhere and leaving him holding the baby is he?"

"He'll understand. He knows I'm a crap mum."

"You haven't told him you've gone." It wasn't a question.

"I left him a note."

Suddenly it seemed important that this man understood her. She needed him to understand why she had left an apology pinned to Georgia's door and slipped out in the night, never to return.

"A note?" He raised an eyebrow. "That's good. At least she'll know you had time to write a note before you walked out of her life."

"You think I didn't try with her?" She was suddenly angry. "I tried so hard not to screw things up for once in my life. I got a steady job, gave up alcohol. I *wanted* to be a good mum."

"And now you're bored of that game?"

"It was one drink!" She was shouting now. "One lousy drink. Only it's never just one is it? I couldn't stop, even when I lost my job. I screwed up, just like I always do. And today I finally realised that I'm never going to stop screwing up. Ever."

"You could get help."

Jenny squeezed her eyes shut, trying to hold back the tears.

"It's too late." She shook her head. "I'll never be a good mum. I'll never be anything other than a screw up."

“I guess it’s fair enough.” Finally he turned to look her in the eye. “Your mum leaving you made your life easy didn’t it? It makes sense that you should want the same thing for your daughter.”

She wanted to say something cutting, but on the periphery of her thoughts the slightest doubt was lurking.

“I’m sure when she’s having her first abortion she’ll be grateful,” the guard continued. “When she’s struggling to ditch the drink she’ll be glad she never had a mother.”

“She won’t be like that,” Jenny whispered. “She’s smart. She’ll be OK.”

“She might be.” The train juddered into life and the guard got to his feet. “I guess you’ll never know.”

Jenny found herself reaching for his arm, wanting him to stay.

“I can’t go back. I’ve got a one-way ticket. It’s too late.” She looked up at him. “Isn’t it?”

He shook himself free.

“I don’t know, Miss.” The respectful tone was back. “It’s not for me to say.”

And he tossed her ticket on to the table and strode past her to the door at the other end of the carriage.

As the train began to pick up speed, Jenny wasn’t thinking of the strange guard or even of their conversation. She was suddenly thinking of Georgia, asleep in her bedroom, and of her dad, waking to find a note pinned to the door. She was so lost in thought, she didn’t notice another uniformed man slip into the carriage.

“Ticket please, Miss.”

“The other guard did it already.”

“Ain’t no guard but me, Miss, so if I could just take a look…”

He gestured at the slip of paper on the table but she didn’t pick it up.

“There must be another guard. He was just here.”

“Must have been somebody else, what did he look like?”

She found she didn't know.

“I was talking to him while the train was delayed. He gave me this ticket!”

“Delayed?” The guard looked confused. “There's been no delay, Miss. Bang on time we are.”

“He went that way!” Jenny insisted, pointing over her shoulder. “He said there had been a...” she hesitated, “... a breakdown.”

“I think you must be mistaken, Miss.” The guard spoke gently, warily. “Nobody could have gone that way; this is the last carriage of the train.”

He leant over her and picked up her ticket.

“That all appears to be in order.” He handed it back to her. “Have a good journey, Miss.”

The guard disappeared back through the door, shaking his head at the crackpots he had to deal with on the late night shifts. And in the brightly-lit carriage he left behind, Jenny could only sit and stare at the return ticket in her hands.