

The Back Road

Rachel Abbott

Prologue

From the moment the cupboard door was slammed shut trapping them both inside, she knew something was different. It should have seemed just like every other day, but somehow it didn't. She felt the familiar pain and discomfort - the same as always. So what was it?

The girl soundlessly inched her feet across the confined space searching for her sister's toes with her own, both to seek and to give comfort. She had to try to make her sister feel safe. It would soon be over. But the fingers of an undefined dread were crawling up her spine.

Then her sister made a strange gurgling sound. She'd never made that sound before. It was as if something was stuck deep in her throat and she was trying to force it out. The girl silently willed her sister to stop.

Shh. Be still. Be quiet.

She rested her chin on her bony raised knees, and repeated the words over and over in her head, praying that her little sister would hear her thoughts and understand. If either of them made a noise, The Mother would be angry, and it would all be so much worse. Worse than suffering in silence.

She had tried to say that they would be good. They didn't need to be put in here. But The Mother always said the same thing.

'I am The Mother. You are The Daughter. You do what I say. *Don't* argue. I've told you what happens to bad children. The Bogeyman gets them, and eats them for his dinner.' And then she laughed. The girl was scared of The Bogeyman. Perhaps he would be even worse than The Mother.

She lifted her head slightly. A narrow crack in the wooden door let in a dusty sliver of light, illuminating a slender fragment of her sister's face. It was white and shiny - a bit like a boiled egg when the shell was peeled away. She had never seen a face look

like that before. Her sister lurched forward and bent over. Her hair was sticking to her forehead in damp curls, and she was making a noise in her throat. An awful noise. And there was a horrid smell too.

They had to be as silent as baby mice or they would get a beating. Luckily at that moment the strange sounds coming from her sister wouldn't be heard. It sounded like The Grunter was here today. He made noises all the time - like a pig she'd once seen on the television. She hated the noise, but it was better than The Shouter. He always cried out, using words that sounded mean. She didn't know what they meant, but he sounded nasty when he shouted them. Then there was The Moaner. She had once tried to peep through the crack in the door because The Moaner sounded as if he was in pain, but she didn't like what she saw, so she never looked again. It didn't stop her mind from working though, and every time she heard The Moaner, all she could see in her head was an ugly white bottom, rising and falling.

The Grunter never lasted long. Her sister was going to have to stop making that sound very soon.

The pig noises from the room outside the cupboard were much stronger and coming closer together now, and that meant The Grunter had nearly finished - he always got very loud just before the end. She didn't have much time. She needed to soothe her sister before it was too late. She hated to see her punished. The girl tried to shuffle across the confined space, but the bindings on her wrists and ankles were rubbing on the bruises and sores and she had to stifle a gasp of pain. As she got closer, her sister looked at her through eyes that had the bright shine of unshed tears, and then her little body shook with a huge force.

The girl realised with horror that her sister was being sick - but the wide brown parcel tape across her mouth was preventing the vomit from escaping. Then she watched as the little girl's eyes rolled upwards and out of sight leaving only the glossy white showing, and she slumped over against a pile of old, dirty shoes.

Somebody had to help her sister. The girl knew she was going to be in trouble and that her punishment would hurt, but she didn't care. She threw herself sideways and rolled onto her back with her legs in the air, kicking out with her bound bare feet

against the wooden cupboard door. And she kept kicking. She heard a shout of surprise and a growl of anger from the room beyond, and the door was wrenched open. A man with a huge red face and a fat blue nose leered down into the small opening of the cupboard, his trousers and a pair of dirty white underpants round his ankles.

Finally, she had met The Grunter.

1

Day One: Friday

Ellie Saunders took a couple of onions out of the vegetable rack, and started to peel them. Cooking always soothed her, and tonight she needed to do something to stop her mind from wandering. Not that chicken liver paté required much concentration; she could probably make it in her sleep. But it was better than staring at the walls and wondering what was happening elsewhere.

‘Stop it Ellie,’ she muttered out loud. ‘You’re being ridiculous.’ She chopped the onions with more force than was entirely necessary, and ripped off a piece of kitchen roll to wipe her streaming eyes.

Transferring the chicken livers from their plastic bag to a plate, Ellie jumped as her mobile started to vibrate on the worktop next to her.

Her breath caught, and her arm froze in mid-air. She knew without looking who it would be. Should she answer? Would it be worse to speak to him, or to ignore him? She didn’t want to speak to him ever again, but couldn’t predict what he would do if she started to avoid him altogether.

Snapping out of her momentary paralysis, she wiped her hands nervously on a tea towel and picked up the phone.

‘Hello,’ she said softly.

‘Why are you crying, Ellie?’

He was here. Ellie nearly dropped the phone as her eyes flew in panic to the huge bi-folding glass doors that lined one wall of the kitchen, leading out to the side of the house. But the combination of the stormy skies and the brightly lit room made it impossible to see into the murky depths of the garden beyond.

The voice continued.

'I'm watching you. I love watching you cook. But don't be sad. It's going to be okay, I promise you.'

Ellie's heart pounded but she tried not to let her voice waver. 'I'm *not* crying, and I'm *not* sad. Where are you? Please - you shouldn't *be* here. There's nothing more to say. I've said it all before.'

There was a sigh of exasperation from the other end of the phone.

'Why don't you let me in, and we can talk? I'm right here.'

The voice was quiet and persuasive, but Ellie shivered in fear. She turned her back on the window so that her expression would be hidden from the watcher in the grounds. He mustn't see that he was getting to her.

'Of course I can't let you in. Max will be home any minute now. Please don't do this. Please.'

A quiet tutting sound told her everything she needed to know, even without him speaking.

'You know he's not going to be home for a long time yet. He's at the party - and he's with *her*. We both know that. I've *seen* him with her, Ellie. It's obvious to a blind man how close they are. But I'm here for you, darling. I would never hurt you like he's doing. So let me in. I just want to touch you and hold you.' He laughed gently and his voice dropped an octave. 'What I'd really like to do is lick your silky skin and cover every inch of your body with my lips. You taste delicious, do you know that? The velvety smooth texture of your flesh reminds me of Italian ice-cream. Hazelnut, I think. Cool on the lips, a dark creamy colour, and a slight nutty flavour. Let me in so I can taste you again.'

'No!'

Ellie slammed the phone down on the worktop, and leaned against her hands, which were the only things stopping her from collapsing. What would she give to be able to crumple to the floor and lie there until this was all over? But he was watching, and she had to stop showing weakness.

She could hear the tinny echo of his voice through the phone, but couldn't make out the words. She had to end this, once and for all.

She picked up the phone again.

'Listen,' she said, in what she hoped was a firm and decisive tone. 'I love my husband. What happened between us was nothing - just a mistake. Please, *please* leave me alone.'

She was hoping for anger or hurt, but all she got back was more of the soothing tones.

'Come on, Ellie. You know it wasn't like that. You were so sad, and I made you feel better. I know I did. And I can make you feel better again. Remember what it was like? Remember the burning feeling of our flesh as our bodies touched? What are you scared of? Nobody will know - just you and me.'

Ellie's forced calm had dissolved, and terror ripped through her. *What if Max finds out? He will never, ever forgive me.* But she couldn't say that, because then she knew she would have lost. She took a breath, and forced her voice into an even tone.

'I'm not scared. I just want this to stop. I'm going to hang up now, and turn my phone off. Then I'm going to close all the blinds so you can't watch me. I'm sorry. I never meant to hurt you, or lead you on. But don't call again.'

Ellie disconnected, and very deliberately held her phone up so that if he was watching he would see that she was switching it off. With her head down so she didn't risk making eye contact with him wherever he was hiding in the dark garden, she strode briskly towards the windows and closed the blinds.

Immediately, the house phone began to ring. She marched across the kitchen and switched it off. She could still hear it ringing upstairs, so picked up her iPod remote, selected a Coldplay album and set the volume so it was loud enough to be heard in the back garden.

Her display of bravado was short-lived though, and tears of despair were seeping from the corners of her eyes as she grabbed a handful of garlic and crushed the life out of it with the side of a very sharp knife.

2

Indicating left, Leo Harris swung her Audi Cabriolet from the main road onto the high street of Little Melham. Most people thought she was mad having a soft top and living in Manchester, but tonight the Cheshire air was warm and muggy and it was great to have the roof down. The drive from her home had only taken about half an hour, and once out of the city traffic and into the countryside the wind in her hair felt good after the stuffy heat of town. Rain was threatening again though, and the dark sky belied the fact that it was a summer evening. It had been stormy off and on all day, and it suited her mood. The odd flash of distant lightning against a black and turbulent sky was almost a mirror of her emotions.

As she drove slowly through the village she looked at the pretty shop fronts, noticing the new wine bar with its aluminium tables and chairs outside on the wide pavement, a line of huge planters separating customers from pedestrians. There was even a trendy looking restaurant squashed between the greengrocer's and the baker's, and she glimpsed high backed dark red chairs and white tablecloths through the soft light in the window.

A perfect place to live.

Smiling at the irony of her thoughts, she turned off the main street and down the lane towards the house.

As she saw the open gates ahead, her foot jerked off the accelerator. An automatic reflex. Fighting the compulsion to turn the car around and go home, her foot found its way back to the pedal, and the car moved steadily forward. She hoped that the driver of a lone car parked in the lay-by down the lane hadn't noticed this strange behaviour. She turned into the bottom of the drive and stopped.

A chilling thought struck her. The first time she had arrived here by car had been twenty-two years ago. She had been with her father, and they had stopped in almost this exact position. She remembered feeling as if she'd been crying for days, but it had only been a few hours. Her father had tried to talk to her but she had refused to acknowledge what he was saying, and in the end he'd left her out here in the car while he went into the house alone.

She remembered that her weeping had finally subsided into occasional hiccupping sobs. That was when she'd heard the scream. She had never heard anything like it in her young life, but it sounded as if somebody's soul was being ripped from their body. It went on and on.

Leo closed her eyes as the memory stabbed at her gut.

Seven years later she had walked down this drive for the very last time without a backward glance, shunning both the house and everybody in it. For a while that had even included Ellie, but her sister had refused to give up on her and for that - and so much more - Leo owed her. She had never imagined for a minute that after all this time she would be back here, sitting in this exact spot, trying to find the courage to walk through the front door. She'd put the visit off for so long, but tonight, driven by a strange and compelling impulse, she had thrown some clothes into a bag, grabbed her car keys, and set off, not knowing whether she would make it to her final destination or not. Just the thought of Ellie's inevitable astonishment and relief when she opened the door was enough to spur Leo on.

The one good bit of news was that the house was impossible to recognise from the horrors of the early years of her life. Clever concealed lighting provided subtle illumination in the gardens, which were a picture with open lawns and wide beds filled with roses; a far cry from the neglected and unloved garden of her childhood. The cracked tarmac had been lifted and the drive re-laid with old cobbles, and the window frames were painted a pale cream that sat beautifully against the old red brick. But the biggest change of all was an impressive new atrium, linking the long low house to the adjoining barn. Flooded with light to compensate for the dark and gloomy clouds, it looked warm and inviting even to Leo.

She leaned back heavily against the headrest. She couldn't just sit here, though. She had to get a grip of herself.

She flicked the switch to operate the electric roof. Even if she failed to make it through the front door and had to beat a hasty retreat, rain wasn't far away. And anyway, it wasted a few more moments.

With the roof firmly in place, she completed the journey up the drive and parked in front of the house. Acting more decisively than she felt, she swung her legs out of the car, grabbed her bag from the back seat and walked determinedly to the front door to ring the bell. She didn't have long to wait.

'Leo! God, *Leo!* What a fantastic surprise. I was beginning to think we would never see you again.'

Leo looked at Ellie, and knew that her decision to come had been the right one. Ellie's long chocolate brown hair framed her oval face and fell in waves to her shoulders. Her brown eyes were shining, but not with the pleasure that Leo had been expecting. The remnants of tears hung in slightly red-rimmed eyes, and although her wide and generous mouth was smiling, it was clear to Leo that this was an effort. Usually her smile could light up a room.

'Come in, come in - it's so great to see you. Welcome to the transformed Willow Farm.'

This was the moment Leo had been dreading. She had expected her senses to be bombarded as she stepped over the threshold, but was amazed that - for the moment - she felt nothing. No racing pulse, and none of the once familiar unease.

And then she got it. The house didn't smell the same. Gone were the musty odours of neglect, and the sense that the house was short of air. A cool breeze was blowing through an open window, carrying the light perfume of roses. She looked at her sister, and waited for Ellie's usual hundred watt smile. But it didn't come.

Leo picked her small suitcase up to avoid the inevitable sisterly hug and leaned forward to peck Ellie on the cheek.

'Oh, before I forget. I found this on the step,' Leo said, holding out a yellow rose.

Ellie stared at it with a look that Leo couldn't interpret. She didn't take the rose, but she seemed mesmerised by it.

'Are you okay, Ellie?' Leo gave her sister a concerned frown.

Ellie waved her hand in front of her eyes, as if fanning away the tears.

'Oh yes - the eyes. Sorry - I've been peeling onions, and they got to me a bit. Chuck that rose on the garden, will you. It's probably one I dropped when I was cutting some for the house earlier. Anyway, I'm fine. And I am so pleased to see you. I can't tell you what it means that you've come, and I hope you're going to stay for a while.'

'I've brought a few things with me, in the hope that you could put up with me for a few days,' Leo said, lifting her case a bit higher as evidence. 'I couldn't keep making excuses - at least not if I wanted to see you and Max more often. Not to mention the twins. Where are they all?'

'I've only just put the twins to bed - but we can pop up in a minute and see if they're still awake. They'll be delighted to see you. Max is at his school's end of term barbecue. Staff only. No partners allowed. It's at the rugby club and it will go on forever, so God knows what state he'll be in when he comes home. For a load of teachers, their behaviour can sometimes be pretty appalling. A good job the students don't see them.'

Leo gazed around her, and was staggered by how beautiful the old house was looking. The wide hallway was no longer full of clutter, and instead of the dreary faded wallpaper that had adorned the walls when she had lived there, they were now painted a pale honey colour, and hung with a couple of large modern landscapes. A tall side table stood against one wall, made from a dark wood that seemed old, but was fashioned with clean straight lines. And the alcove that had previously housed a battered roll top desk, piled high with dusty old correspondence and torn envelopes, now had a new floor to ceiling window looking out over the garden, with a comfortable armchair and a low table displaying a huge vase of apricot and yellow roses, the source of the delicate fragrance she had noticed.

Leo glanced at Ellie, who was looking at her with a nervous expression. She probably wasn't sure if Leo was going to turn tail and run.

'It's okay, Ellie. I'm all right. Really I am. This is quite stunning, and I would never guess that it was the same house. Relax.'

Ellie smiled with relief. She grabbed Leo's hand and pulled her farther in.

'This is only the start of it - if you like the hallway, wait until you see the dining room and the kitchen. I'm delighted with the whole place. I'm only just getting used to it, and it's sometimes hard to remember that it's our house. We nearly didn't do it, you know. I think Max wanted to sell it, but I couldn't - you know that. It had such huge potential, and we've exorcised the ghosts - and I mean that quite literally. Max danced around, demanding that all spiritual entities be evicted, in the name of a higher power - that higher power, of course, being him. You know what he's like. He even found some Islamic verse that is supposed to repair the damage caused by witchcraft, and given that he always referred to my mother as The Old Witch it seemed very appropriate. I laughed so much I could never again think of there being a single spook left.'

Leo could well imagine this scene. Always the clown, Max could bring a smile to anybody's face.

She dumped her bag at the bottom of the stairs as Ellie dragged her forward past open doorways through which she glimpsed rooms that she barely recognised. There was nothing here to remind her of the past, and although she hadn't been here for such a long time, she could remember every inch of how it used to be.

'It's amazing. You're right. You *have* transformed it.' Never one for going over the top, Leo did her best to reassure her sister that she loved the place. But her words didn't accurately convey her astonishment at the difference.

The room in which they were now standing was completely new in every way. If you could call it a 'room'. They were in the atrium that Leo had noticed from the drive. She remembered the old barn, of course, but she didn't recall it ever being used for much because in her lifetime this had never been a working farm. And now

Ellie and Max had created this incredible atrium dining room, complete with old flagged floor, to connect the barn to the main house. Its pitched roof was constructed of aged oak beams, with huge panes of glass between. The dark and sombre clouds gave way to a burst of sunshine, which bounced the warm tones of evening light from the walls for a moment, and Leo could imagine the parties that Ellie and Max would host.

Her sister must have been reading her mind.

'We've invited a few people over for dinner tomorrow to celebrate the fact that the house is now finally finished, and I'm looking forward to christening this room.'

Leo's heart sank. Ellie loved to entertain, but she preferred to deal with people one at a time, and the idea of a big dinner party the following day filled her with dismay.

'Oh, Ellie - I'm sorry. I should have called before just turning up. I can always either go back home tomorrow or stay in my room while your guests are here. I'm good at keeping quiet, as you might remember!'

Ellie smiled and looked as if she were about to try for another hug. Leo took a step backwards, and saw a flicker of disappointment in her sister's eyes.

'Don't be silly, Leo. There's no way that you are going to rush straight off now that we've got you here. Stay as long as you like. There's plenty of food, and we already have an odd man coming. I don't mean that he's odd-odd, just that he's an odd number. He's actually rather nice, but he's on his own and only recently moved into the cottage next door. He's a policeman, so you'd better watch your step,' Ellie said with a smile. 'Come on. The kitchen's through here now, in the old barn. And beyond my dream kitchen is Max's dream media suite. But I'll let him show you that tomorrow.'

Leo could just make out the vague smell of onions, and persuaded herself that they really were the cause of Ellie's tears. She couldn't help but feel slightly disappointed that she wasn't going to have Max, Ellie and the twins to herself all weekend, but perhaps this was a better reintroduction to her old home. She

certainly couldn't remember a single party of any description in the years that she had lived here.

*

What bloody awful timing, Ellie thought. She had waited so long for Leo to break through the barriers that had prevented her from visiting during the renovation. Now she was here - and Ellie couldn't help wishing she wasn't.

She loved her sister, and Leo's dreadful memories of her life in this house had almost been enough to stop Ellie from moving here. Almost. Max hadn't been madly enthusiastic either, although he had gone along with it. Perhaps he simply didn't care where they lived anymore. In the end, neither of them had fought her. They knew why it was so important to her, even though they thought she was chasing rainbows.

She opened a drawer and pulled out a couple of napkins and grabbed some cutlery to put on a tray. They could take supper through to the sitting room - away from the kitchen and the memory of the earlier phone call - and she would open a decent bottle of wine. For the first time in her adult life, Ellie felt that she didn't need to worry about money, and yet life didn't seem better. It felt infinitely worse.

Their newfound riches were all thanks to her mother. If that hadn't been so sad, it would have been enough to make Ellie laugh. Her mother had pleaded poverty since their father had disappeared all those years ago, but when she died she had left Ellie not only the house but a vast sum of money that she had clearly been squirreling away for God knows how long. But not a penny for Leo.

Ellie mentally shook herself. Leo would be down any moment, and she needed to get her head together. The twins had been overjoyed to see their aunt, and Ellie could only imagine how many stories they had demanded. Leo was totally unlike her cynical and unyielding self with the children, but Ellie couldn't watch tonight. It would have made her emotional, and that would have been hard to explain.

She moved to the fridge and opened the door, hunting out some bits and pieces for supper. They could eat the paté, even though it was still a bit warm, and she'd made some houmous for the twins at lunch time. There was still some of that left.

Her mind drifted.

She stood gazing into the fridge, feeling a cool draught of air on her cheeks and staring blindly at the shelves of food. Nobody could see into the kitchen now, but she could sense *him*, skulking outside in the darkening night. She could feel his eyes penetrating the closed blinds, and was sure that if she drew them back, his face would be pressed hard against the window, his features distorted as they crushed against the glass. She glanced over her shoulder, almost expecting to see him lurking in a dark corner somewhere.

Snap out of it. Her eyes came back into focus, and she surveyed the contents of the fridge. Cheese. They had a ton of it, bought for the dinner party the following night. They could eat some of that too, and she would get some more tomorrow from the deli in the village.

Uncovering dishes and unwrapping cheese, Ellie thought about her predicament. Why wouldn't he accept that it was over? She just wanted him out of her life.

She knew Leo would help her if she asked. But for the last twenty odd years Leo had been secure in the knowledge that she could rely on Ellie; the one person she believed was beyond reproach. Ellie couldn't be responsible for destroying the last of her sister's illusions.

Putting the final plate of food on a tray, Ellie threw a last nervous glance at the closed blinds as she switched off the lights, painted a smile on her face, and went in search of Leo.