

The Chair

Chapter One

Excerpt from the novella

Inspired by a true story

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FRIDAY NIGHT

"There's a chair that wants to kill me. It was across the street when I looked out of the window last night and it was there this morning. Waiting. The obvious explanation, the one that gets you killed if you start to believe it, is that someone pulled it out of the new skip opposite my flat and decided they didn't like it after all. Maybe they started thinking about who had died in it. Or maybe it was broken - I'd not got close enough to see. Perhaps it was just ugly.

"Nobody pulled it out of the skip. It climbed out. By itself. I know how that sounds, but fortunately nobody is reading this and nobody ever will. This is just to keep a record of events and to help me rationalise. I know what is up and I know what is down and I know the sound of something throwing itself at the walls of a metal skip for three hours and twenty minutes until it manages to free itself.

"I didn't see it land and then right itself on the pavement, but I know it happened. The same way that I know it's looking longingly up at my living room window, even while I'm here at the office.

"It knows where I live and it knows I'm due home. It knows that I'll do almost anything to avoid it."

*

"What are you writing?"

I snapped my journal shut in response to the question. It made a dull, warm sound in the sterile office that was slowly emptying after an eight-hour day.

Hayley was on her way out of the building, with her rucksack full of textbooks on her shoulder. Being the studious type, my furious note-making had caught her attention. She gave me a smile while she waited for my answer.

She had on a striped grey and black wool dress under a military style winter coat. Beneath her beret, her hair was tied back in a neat ponytail, and her eyes glistened; severe, blue eyes - clever and clear and cool.

While we still knew very little about each other, I made a lot of rapid-fire decisions about our future together. I'd read that people end up with partners of roughly the same level of attractiveness, so I was punching above my weight.

"It's a journal," I said.

"Exciting day at the office?" she asked.

"Always."

"Must have been. You're normally first out of here in the evening."

"And last to arrive in the morning," I said. "I know. Lazy bastard."

"You convinced the management to create your own department, and then you ran it all by yourself, so you don't have to answer to anyone. It's genius, actually."

"Thank you. It really is also lazy."

"Wanna train me up?"

"There's barely enough work for one person," I said quietly.

"Things weren't the same here while you were away."

"I doubt anyone really noticed."

"I noticed," she said and while I was thinking about that, she added: "Anything about me in your journal?"

"I could tell you," I replied, "but then ..."

"... you'd have to kill me, right? Sounds like it would almost be worth it." She came closer, but her eyes were on me, not on the book. "What's so exciting that you couldn't write that at home?"

"I'm in no hurry to get back," I said, thinking of the chair outside my flat and how it was facing my window, not hiding the fact that it wanted to get inside.

She glanced at people packing up for the weekend.

"We can't stay here all night," she said.

She started walking, her black leather boot heels thudding against the grey carpet tiles.

"Do you want to do something tonight?" I asked.

The words sort of spilled out like one long word. The guy sitting next to me dropped his pen.

My heart was hammering.

My philosophy at that point, more than ever, was that you need to do what scares you. You need to make a list of whatever is holding you back and confront those things one by one, crossing them off the list before they did the same to you.

If you're not paying close attention, your fears grow up around you, hatching out of wood, seeping out of the cracks, climbing out of skips. Before you know it they cast bigger shadows than you do. They take control of parts of you that you'd taken for granted. They develop capital letters and paralyse you so that you're Afraid to walk back to your flat after work. The emptiness you cultivated becomes the place they grow. They start to know you better than you know yourself.

Considering my beliefs on the subject of fear, I should really have been heading home to deal with the chair – to throw a cover over it, or douse it with petrol, or to saw its legs off, or something. But sometimes you have to work up to confronting your greatest fears. Taking smaller risks along the way can make you feel strong, especially when you manage to come out whole on the other side. Usually.

I thought all these things and more while her eyes remained fixed on mine and I wondered how much of me she really saw. I tried to keep my thoughts light while my body felt leaden and sweaty.

She wasn't smiling any more. She looked perplexed.

"... or we could do something next week?" I said, backtracking. So much for coming out unharmed.

"No," she said. "I was meant to be studying, but I can take a night off."

"You'd do that?" I said, frowning.

"Apart from more textbooks, I've got nothing waiting for me."

That could have been good or bad. If I'd had nothing but books waiting for me, I'd have been home already. For a moment, though, I was glad that the chair had settled outside my flat. If I hadn't been avoiding going home, I might not have had the courage to ask Hayley out.

The last group of office staff was filing out of the door, leaving Hayley, the guy at the next desk and me. The women said goodbye when they saw me looking and then they went back to their hushed conversation. They could see that something was still going on between me and Hayley and I was glad. I didn't care to know the content of their whispers though. They could go on thinking they knew everything about me that there was to know. It had worked for me for such a long time.

Hayley didn't appear to be aware of anyone else in the room. Her attention was focussed entirely on our conversation, not on what other people were thinking, and I envied her that.

"Shall we continue this outside?" Hayley said.

I slid my journal deep into the belly of my bag and then logged out of my machine.

"I've forgotten to log out," Hayley said thoughtfully, prompted by my activity.

The IT guys upstairs were doing another major upgrade of the network that evening, part of removing all the systems that didn't work well together and wiping the drives clean so they could start again with something better, something new.

Her desk was way on the other side of the office and I knew exactly where to look. On many occasions, I'd been aware of her footfall as she performed the long walk from her desk to the water cooler, from the water cooler back to her desk.

"I also need to pee like a racehorse," she noted.

I laughed out loud, because I hadn't heard it put like that before.

"Could you log off for me?" she added, backing towards the door. "I'll meet you outside."

"Sure," I said on automatic, because it was the normal thing to say. "No problem."

I was good at hiding my anxiety. I poured it into my journal, so that I could keep smiling even when something like this was happening. All I wanted to do was follow her out of the room. I wanted to be the one waiting safely outside.

Continuing to smile, I was aware of uniform, blue fabric crowding my peripheral vision.

"See you out there," I agreed and she strode out of the room.

That left me and the guy in the cubicle next to mine.

"I don't know how you managed that," he said with a grin. "She's so hot."

"Thanks," I said. "I think."

As the guy whose name I didn't even know put his bag over his shoulder, I finally looked across the office at the sea of chairs and almost doubled over in terror.

"Could you wait a minute?" I said to him, not knowing how I was going to explain that I couldn't possibly walk across this room just to log out of a computer. Not even for Hayley. She'd made such a simple, reasonable request, but there was no fucking way. There just wasn't.

"Got a train to catch," he said and he went towards the exit as quickly as I would have liked to.

The moment he left the room, I felt the familiar shift.

It was as if the awareness of every chair in the room, every unwatched chair in the building, turned towards me. They communicated silently with each other over distance. I don't know how, but I could feel their knowing. I could feel that they had been conversing about me.

I'd managed to avoid this happening in the office until now. I'd always imagined that this would be the worst possible place to be 'alone'.

On similar occasions, when I'd talked myself into standing alone in any furnished room, I reminded myself of the possibility that my fear was imagined. There was some comfort in the idea that I could be insane. Not completely mad. Functional, but with a piece missing, or a piece extra, depending on how you looked at it.

I kept my eyes on the floor. The shitty, grey tiles.

Any observer would have been quick to assure me that it was impossible to be harmed by office furniture. They'd mean well. But I'd seen things that I couldn't explain and it was hard to ignore the evidence of my own eyes, no matter how much I wanted to believe that I was safe.

The room, conspicuously empty of human life now, was about half the size of a football field. Glaring striplights lit every corner and I was grateful for that. Still unable to look up for the time being, I listened out for anything approaching. All I heard was the hum of computers on standby. No doubt all of them had been successfully readied for upgrade apart from Hayley's.

Thinking of the IT team upstairs reassured me somewhat. Sure, I was alone in the room, but I wasn't alone in the building. Perhaps that would go in my favour.

The nagging voice in my head, however, reminded me that they were far enough from this floor that they wouldn't notice if anything untoward happened to me in here. They didn't answer their phones and were cited as saying that there was no such thing as an urgent email. At least two of them worked with headphones on. There could be a massacre down here and nobody would know until the next shift.

Increasingly nervous, I spied Hayley's desk in the distance. Reaching her computer would have meant walking the length of the office and there was no way I was going to do that by myself.

It doesn't matter if the thing you fear exists or not. Fear is real. Fear makes you forget to breathe and sticks your shirt to your neck, your chest, your back. It edges you towards the wall, while the dozen desk islands in the room seem to grow in stature, each one surrounded by groups of blue swivel chairs.

Most teams worked in groups of eight, which meant there were almost a hundred chairs in here and only one of me.

"She'll be back any second," I said out loud. "You know that."

The chairs didn't respond. They knew I was afraid and that was dangerous.

I threw my bag onto my shoulder and hurried through the exit without a look back.

*

I suggested a taxi, because I was exhilarated to have escaped the office unhurt and things like that made me want to spend money. Partly, though, I felt bad that I'd asked Hayley out and didn't have any wheels to back up the offer. It wouldn't have been like this a year ago. Then it would have been all about the wheels.

Every spare penny used to go on beer and doing up crap-looking cars for racing unsuspecting arseholes. I'd target people who didn't like to be left standing by a Skoda or a Datsun. I used to love the horrified looks on people's faces when I cut them up at the lights and left them for dead.

I don't think that would have impressed Hayley much though. On that note, nor would failing to log off her computer. I was going to say something, but then it was actually raining. Grey clouds continued to gather above us, muscling out the last of the light.

"I don't mind getting wet," she said. "You?"

After that, I couldn't think about much else.

We let a black cab roll past us with its yellow 'taxi' light gleaming through the sparkling night. I was glad that we were walking. Crowds battling the worsening rain gave me an excuse to take her hand. Nobody was looking where they were going. Half of the blurred faces were masked by uniform black umbrellas. I navigated shoals of commuters across a busy intersection near Tower Bridge where I insisted on waiting for the traffic lights to change although people marched into the road around us and tutted at me for stopping. I, however, knew that drivers didn't stop their cars just because there were objects in front of them. Sometimes they sped up. Sometimes they were looking at their phones, or the rear view mirror, or they were arguing with their best friend about how women weren't the answer to their problems and looking at him with a raised eyebrow instead of noticing the bend in the road. Sometimes the road was wet and as the car swerved off the highway and over a pavement, it became pretty clear that they were driving too fast for the conditions, and then it was also clear - while spinning out of control - that it's too late to do anything about that and so they just instinctively loosen their grip on the wheel and smash through the barrier, writing off the car at that point, and continuing to bounce down the steep bank, towards a tree, with the brakes not seeming to have any effect at all.

I waited for the green man, squeezed Hayley's hand and led her across the road. She was evidently aware of my caution, because she said: "I heard you wrote your car off."

To her credit, she had at least waited until we were safely on the other side of the road before announcing that. Nonetheless, I tripped on cracked paving and my entire body spasmed with the shock of hearing her refer to my accident out loud.

"Was it bad?" she said. "I mean, were you hurt? You came back to work the week after. I wouldn't have known anything had happened except for a couple of people talking about it."

"Only a couple? What did they say?"

"They said you were lucky to be alive. I don't speculate about that kind of thing myself. I think what they meant was, you could have died."

"The car was a mess," I said. "I was alright for the most part."

"You've been quiet since the accident," she said. "Not so much of a lad."

"Oh, yeah?"

"I have to admit, I like it. As long as you're okay, I mean."

I almost said that the accident was nothing to write home about, but I didn't want her thinking about my journal again. That was firmly for my eyes only. She'd think I was insane if she read that.

I tried to sound brave as I talked about lacerations and bruising, but I was lying about being hurt, because being pulled injury-free from a car that was crumpled like a cardboard box under a boot heel only makes a great story when you don't leave your best friend smashed against the dashboard and sort of pinned there like a bloody butterfly in a mad collection. My dying passenger ruined an otherwise good story.

I generally thought it best to avoid the details. I was loathe to tell it as it happened. The accident was my fault. I'd been in the driving seat. I hadn't been watching the road. I'd been yelling at Charlie, who I now admit should never have been in the car. That was my fault too.

The accident was journal material only. Like the chairs. Nobody needed to know that stuff or how I felt about it. Except for Charlie perhaps, but I was working up to talking to him again. He'd survived the crash, no thanks to me. I didn't know if he'd want to hear from me, and I was afraid to find out.

Charlie and the chairs. Even though I avoided them, I knew they were out there. Monsters I'd created when I took my eyes off the road.

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I held the door for Hayley and she strolled into the cinema without a word, like we'd been coming here every weekend for months already. In fact, this was only the third time we'd been outside of work together, including the Christmas party and a wine-tasting event where we'd both done too much tasting; I'd offered to walk her home and then I'd fallen asleep in the supermarket toilet.

It wasn't a glorious track record, but she seemed willing to give me another chance. Especially now that I was so 'quiet' after the accident. At least something good had come from the mental trauma of that car crash.

This was the first time we'd been alone together without people gawking. Perhaps our familiarity was the reason for feeling that words weren't necessary between us. I wished that all relationships could be nurtured, maintained and repaired without words.

She took my arm. It felt natural. We laughed easily about movie posters, and about popcorn, about discarding the day to day bullshit our lives had become. Neither of us talked about the office. The cooler, the emails, the phonecalls, the machines whirring in front of empty chairs – they all seemed very far away.

We didn't talk about car crashes anymore. We'd closed that book for the night.

We didn't discuss who was going to pay or, when the time came, where we preferred to sit. Spending time with her was as good as being by myself, only without the emptiness. And without the simmering sense of dread beneath every action.

I don't know why we fit so well into each other's puzzles, but we didn't let each other go the whole time we were together, except when we removed our coats to get more comfortable. We held onto each other like established lovers, but as if coincidence could separate us as easily as it had brought us together.

I have to admit that I felt guilty about giving Charlie such a hard time about marrying Jeanette. We'd been mates for years and he'd never had a serious girlfriend, but then he got married and he started talking about having kids and we were too young for that kind of thing. Basically, she'd fucked him and then she'd fucked him up. I was in the process of telling him so, at my most eloquent, when I destroyed both our lives by spinning off the road.

Now, here I was, fucking hypocrite, going from 0-60 with Hayley.

There was a tightness to her grip on my arm that belied her cool exterior. And I'd responded by squeezing her forearm.

Feeling a sudden ache that I hadn't expected – maybe not love, but something real – I almost said:

“Are you fucking with me?”

But I decided to go with it and enjoy the moment instead.

We moved along the row at the very back of the cinema, which worked for me because having all the chairs in the room within sight was more important than being able to see the screen. There was nothing behind us but a wall and emergency exits on either side.

Like many cinemas, this one had started its life as a theatre for the stage. Little remained of the original building or its fixtures aside from its location next to the church beside Tower Bridge. I remembered the 'for sale' sign going up in front of the old place, and then the heavy, black graffiti, claiming the building before it was sold. The new owners didn't get rid of the graffiti. They just put a new sign over the tags and swear words. It was going to be a cinema. A few weeks later, demolition started.

Workmen in hard hats ripped fixtures from their moorings, destroying windows and walls, floors and foundations. They discarded sculpted flowers and busts, vases, paintings on threadbare canvas and beautiful bits of pillar. They dumped it all in skips amid plaster, rubble and glass. The theatre became a modern ruin.

A whole mound of seats grew outside the gutted building, many of the legs still attached. I started taking another route home, but sometimes, curious, I'd approach the site from across the road to see if the seats were still there. Some of them were stacked in towers, like monuments. Most were just piled on top of each other any old how, in an orgy of velour and steel. The whole lot shifted and creaked. The ground was littered with the bolts that had once fixed the seats in place.

On the day the pile disappeared, I stood across the street, looking over my shoulders, not quite able to breathe. I imagined the seats dispersing like spiderlings through the city streets, but I refused to run. You don't want to get into a spiral with fear. It took over an hour, but I made myself enter the worksite and I forced myself to walk this way home every evening after work as an act of defiance.

As the new building went up, I saw that it would be like all the other cinemas in the chain. Every corridor would be well-lit. There would be CCTV cameras on the walls. It was going to be safe, even for me, despite what I knew was waiting in every single screen room.

I felt like this cinema was mine. I'd faced my phobia here and survived. Every time I went in, it was an achievement. Perhaps never more so than tonight.

While the adverts and then trailers rolled, I enjoyed the feel of Hayley's long fingers resting gently in my hand, her cool palm warmed by mine, and I let my eyes drift luxuriously over the familiar setting.

There was something disappointing and yet reassuring about the non-descript decor; the freshly painted walls and glowing spotlights. There were rooms like this all over London, all over the UK,

all over the world, and not one of them contained something that could hurt me. Nothing bad had ever happened to me in a cinema, despite the sheer numbers of seats.

Here, the chairs were covered in a blue synthetic fabric, with those seats that you pull down and that spring back up when you stand.

Every seat was bolted to the ground and attached to its neighbour.

To the right of the dark room was the 'reserved' section for large groups like classes of film students or for when filmmakers attended their movie premieres. Those chairs were red and that bothered me, but I reminded myself that they too were fixed to the floor. Like the others, they faced the screen in their silent regiment.

Hayley handed me the popcorn while she shrugged off her coat and crossed her legs, which took my mind off everything but her until the lights dimmed and an image flickered to life on the screen.

Even then, I was still acutely aware of her proximity to me. Not just her body, and the feel of her arm on the armrest, and her smell – soap, no perfume – but her presence. I felt more solid, being a part of her evening. It was like taking a night off from being inside my head. I wondered if my presence was doing anything for her and she answered with a smile, illuminated by the garish cinema screen.

We made fun of the messages for fizzy drinks, fragrances and cars, making suggestions as to who the advertisers thought we were and what they thought we needed, who they thought we needed to be. We vowed to buy one each of all the products mentioned as soon as we left the cinema in order to solve all our problems.

"Fuck, it's so simple," she said.

I wanted to ask her about her problems. I wanted to hear all about them, but this wasn't the time or the place. Perhaps afterwards.

I was feeling special when the spotlights dimmed and the film started. The curtains opened a bit wider, revealing more screen, and some of the lights went out completely.

We weren't long into the movie before Hayley laughed at something and I took that as a natural opportunity to put my hand on her knee. I kept it there and it felt like an unknown appendage, like something I could lose if I weren't careful, until she rested her head on my shoulder, her black hair tickling the skin of my cheek. That was when I knew that she would come home with me if I asked her. That was when I knew that I would invite her. That was when I saw something scuttle in front of the screen.

I leaned forward, choking on popcorn I'd been toying with in my mouth. My hand squeezed Hayley's thigh so hard that she yelped and people turned in their chairs to glare at us.

"Shhh!" they said.

"Steady," Hayley hissed. "I'm planning to use this leg later."

The running object - why skirt around it, it was a fucking cinema seat! - went from right to left. I searched the shadows for light glinting off some part of its metallic frame. Staring into the darkness, I knew that it would be able to hide in low light like this as long as it kept still. They were masters of patience. They crept. They shunted. They rolled an inch at a time and then waited for hours if necessary until they could move again. They almost never let you see them move; they started on one side of a room and when you turned your back, which I no longer did, they crept to the other. The cinema chair had wanted me to see it. If my date in the cinema was a power play, the chair had trumped me with a masterful stroke.

Body rigid, I searched the rows with my eyes, in a panic at first, but then systematically. Right to left. Next row. Left to right. All the way from row A to row U, where we sat.

The chair's movement had been silent, or rather its run had been masked by the rumbling soundtrack of the movie, so there was no way to prevent it sneaking up on me now but to keep turning left and right, like I was watching a tennis match.

I chewed at my lip, not only anxious and afraid, but confused. Every chair in here was meant to be bolted to the ground and attached to at least one neighbour. That fact, which now seemed more like a theory, was one of the key things that had always prevented me losing my shit in here. The other was that chairs had never moved before when other people were present.

It had to be said that nobody else seemed to be reacting as though they'd seen something incredible moving at the front of the room. Their necks were tilted back, staring up at the images.

I pretended to relax, for Hayley's sake, but while scanning the room, I saw it again. The chair was silhouetted briefly as it juddered along on two legs between the aisles and dove into the shadows between two rows of comrades. There was no doubt in my mind that it wanted me to see it. I'd got too comfortable.

"Up here," Hayley said and she adjusted my hand so that it was high on her thigh.

I was expecting her to ask me what was wrong, but it must have been too dark for her to see the expression on my face. Gently, she started to stroke my crotch, her eyes on mine.

"You weren't watching the film, were you?" she breathed.

"No," I admitted. "No, I wasn't."

"Me neither." She turned her body towards me, her knee jabbing into my thigh, and then started to undo my fly.

"Hayley. I ..."

"Shh."

She lowered her head and took me into her mouth.

The screen kept flickering, tricking me into thinking that the chairs around us were shifting. Or masking any that were able to move.

I was almost sure that nothing would happen as long as I was with Hayley, but then I'd been sure that they wouldn't move while the cinema was occupied and I'd been dead wrong about that.

"Hayley. Listen."

"Relax," she said from my lap and continued sucking, teasing, pulling. Her mouth was warm. My balls must have been like ice.

I'd wanted this. This and more.

"Hayley!" I grabbed her and lifted her from my lap, at which point she gave up, sitting back in her chair with a thud and staring at the screen but not seeing it at all.

"What's up with you?" she hissed.

"I'm sorry," I said. I tried to make out the expression on her face. I think she was angry. I checked the aisles. Back to her.

She was forcing her way past me, spilling the popcorn all over the floor, hurrying out of the cinema with her coat in her arms.

"Hayley, wait!"

"Enjoy the film," she said.

I followed her, but at the glowing exit, I glanced back. I didn't see anything untoward, just a few people looking back over their shoulders to see what the fuss was about. I thought I heard laughter. It could have come from any of the moviegoers, but I knew that it hadn't. I rushed out of the imposing darkness and into the light, my world tilting.

"If I could take that back," I said, "I would."

"No more than I would," she said. She burst out of the cinema doors and into the courtyard, heading immediately towards the bridge.

"You took me by surprise, that's all," I said. "It wasn't your fault. It was all me."

"You don't have to explain," she said, throwing on her coat and hauling her bag onto her shoulder. "Goodnight, Alan. Let's just pretend this didn't happen, okay?"

"This is the first time I've been myself with anyone since my accident." Yes. I used my accident to score points, but I meant it. "I don't want to go back to pretending."

"I'd much rather forget about tonight."

"Can we forget about it over a drink?" I said. "We could walk to my flat from here."

She laughed at that momentarily and I knew that I had her.

We stood there in the rain - her with her arms folded; me with my mouth open, wishing I knew what else to say now that I had her attention.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I thought someone was watching us."

"It's a cinema," she said. "Nobody's there to watch us."

"Let me make it up to you. Let's go back to mine, put on a DVD and then not watch it."

Perhaps, like me, she was weighing up my offer against the likelihood of an agonising walk to her bus stop, during which I would not stop asking her to change her mind. Persistent fucker, me, and not enamoured with the idea of going home alone.

Hayley's dark eyes seemed hard and glassy. Perhaps she was already past my demands for her to change her mind and was already on the bus, using her card and then heading upstairs to sit at the back with the naughty kids and not look back at me at all.

She hadn't got as far as thinking about me walking home by myself, but I had. My brain was all over that one, sending pulses up and down my spine, making my hair stand on end and my knees give. I thought of the chair beside the skip, with its bottom lip all ragged from being eaten by mice. I imagined the chair shuffling underneath its shroud of cloudy plastic, making a sound like a rat in a nest of carrier bags.

The thought of the chair screwed me up like a piece of paper and let me tumble to the floor.

Perhaps it wouldn't stop with stretching, shifting and waiting. Perhaps it was ready to make its move on me tonight, as the chair in the cinema had evidently been. Perhaps all chairs would be bolder now.

I didn't want to face the armchair alone tonight after seeing its animate brethren in the cinema. What I'd seen only increased the chance that the armchair would blunder its way across the street to cut off my path. Even if I made it inside ... imagine waking to the sound of something pounding on the glass door.

"You don't get away that easily," I joked.

I extended my hand, gentle, but like I wouldn't take no for an answer.

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Our hips bumped as we walked. As we approached my flat, which was only fifteen minutes on the other side of the bridge, I realised that I was just as pleased to be spending the evening with her as I was glad to have someone watching my back as I let myself into the flat. I would have thought that the latter sensation of relief would have outweighed the excitement of being on a date, but it wasn't so.

The armchair was still beside the skip. Puddles would have formed among the ridges and troughs of the plastic sheet. I wondered about that plastic sheet. Had the chair come from some place that was being decorated? Or had someone simply hated the sight of it? Maybe the plastic was a barrier between the chair and the world it affronted.

"Are you okay?" asked Hayley. "You seem tense again."

Aware of the chair watching us from beneath its plastic veil, I made extra efforts not to fumble my key fob, run inside or trip over my feet. I'd done all of those things the night before. I gave Hayley a squeeze and refused the chair a second glance. Fucking cuntin'g thing. I put it out of my mind.

As much as possible.

*

Having followed me up the stairs to the second floor, Hayley stared at the comatose lift at the end of the hall. The light was on above it and I assured her that if you pushed the 'call lift' button, the arrow lit up, but the lift never arrived; we hadn't just climbed two sets of stairs for no reason.

The lift had been out of service for months and I was grateful for that, because it meant that nothing on wheels or wooden or plastic legs could get up here. There was no way a chair could climb stairs and use a door handle. In addition, the door to the corridor had a spring - it needed a fair amount of pressure to get it open and then it would shut firmly by itself afterwards.

Every evening I looked at the broken lift and entered the flat with a smile.

"That's more exercise than I've had in weeks," Hayley said, massaging her thighs as she walked in.

"That's why I'm in such great physical condition," I said.

I noticed the dull thump of her boot heels on my Ikea rug, which I had to admit looked more and more like a dead cow, but at the time I'd simply wanted things to be black and white and soft.

Perhaps the glass coffee table could have done with a mug or a crumb-laden plate. This was all too much like a show home. It didn't look like someone lived here, and she'd be right if that were what she was thinking. I didn't so much live here as hide.

Her boot heels studded the bare boards. So sexy. She glanced into the bedroom, where you could sort of see my bed, too neatly-made, and movie posters on the walls where the car posters had been: Pulp Fiction above the bed with Mia Wallace gazing out of her world into ours, and the edge of Suspiria. From her angle, she probably couldn't see the beautiful woman dancing and dripping with blood. I hadn't thought much about the effect the poster might have on female visitors; the stark black, white and red had matched my colour scheme and I thought it was a cool movie. I hadn't thought about this place as a shag pad, evidently.

I had a poster for Vertigo for the same aesthetic reasons, with a silhouette of James Stewart spinning down into a hole. I wished I'd stopped with that.

There were more potted plants in there though, flowering. At least something in this flat was flourishing.

Hayley peeked through the open door on the other side of the flat to the kitchen. Small. Functional. Everything in its place.

"Most guys live like pigs," she said. "Do you really live alone?"

"I couldn't live any more alone than this," I said.

"I know what you mean."

She surveyed my bookshelves and I mentally riffled through my book collection ahead of her, wishing I had more exciting reading tastes, though I didn't know quite what that might involve.

There were a load of books about cars and racing up there that were no longer relevant to my life at all, mostly gifts from people who had known me as I was a year ago, before the accident, confident, optimistic, whole.

She picked up the one remaining Get Well Soon card. It was from my mum. I'd torn the others up and thrown them away as soon as they came out of their envelopes, but that one I'd kept, long enough for it to send a shower of dust into the air when Hayley blew on it. I'd kept it partly because it had a picture of a sports car on it, and I thought it was funny that my mum didn't get the irony of that or maybe she did and she was just rubbing it in. I'd thrown out my model cars, even the Ferrari F40 and the Trans Am like the car out of Knight Rider. I'd torn a poster of a Porsche off the back of the wall. It was like I'd grown up overnight, grown up into nothing. I made space and did nothing to fill it. Anything to do with fast cars, crashing them and almost killing friends had to go.

Someone was leaving their banger in my designated parking space round the back of the building. People in this building had been crucified on the public announcement board for less, but my once fiercely-guarded parking space didn't matter to me anymore. I couldn't imagine driving through the streets of London again for a good long time.

Mum had known that I hadn't been injured, but she'd given me the card anyway.

I didn't feel that I could put that card away until I was feeling well. Physically I was fine; other parts of me had been damaged. My ego, my future, my optimism: those things had cracked. Mum thought she knew how I could fix them.

"It says 'Talk to him'," read Hayley, waving the card around like she needed to do that to illustrate a point. "Is this about the accident? Who's 'him'?"

"Charlie," I said, a chill passing through me and threatening to carry me away.

She's going to make me phone him, I thought. If I don't get that card out of her hand, she's going to realise that Charlie was my passenger and that I haven't talked to him since the accident and then she'll think I'm a monster and she'll tell me that I need to go and see him. Any part of that was enough to ruin this evening.

"Sometimes you need to face your fears head on," she said. "They're probably not as bad as you think."

I wondered if she'd somehow snuck a peak at my journal and I glanced at my bag, next to hers on the floor. It was all closed up, like it was supposed to be.

"Don't let it consume you," she said, probing. "Don't wait until it's too late. I could help. You can talk to me about anything. Any time."

Suddenly, I had a thought, a flicker of memory. "What are you studying?" I asked.

"Psychology," she said.

It hadn't seemed important before the accident, but now it brought me out in a cold sweat.

"PTSD this term," she admitted.

Oh shit.

"Do you think I'd make a good case study?" I heard myself say.

Stop talking, I told myself.

"Is there something you want to tell me?" she asked, adding with a smile: "Lover-Patient confidentiality."

Looking at her form - like something cut from the office and pasted into my flat with the edges unfeathered, solid and real in a flat that had become almost ethereal to me over the months, like in a dream where nothing happens but there's a door that might open and the worst thing in the world might come out - I realised that I wanted to protect her, from anything and everything. From me.

I'd already established in my mind that I was not like other guys. I was borderline nuts. I knew that. But she wasn't like other women either or at least I didn't feel about her the way I felt about anyone else I'd dated. For a start, I'd asked her to come into the flat. That was a first.

I felt like I could be vulnerable with her, which was reassuring, but that I wasn't vulnerable at all, which was unexpected and exciting. I felt like I could do anything, as long as she was watching.

I promised myself that if tonight went well, I'd phone him. No, I'd text him. No, I'd phone him. Then see him. If it let me have her, even if only for a few months, I'd do anything the universe demanded.

"What are you thinking?" she asked.

"Come here," I said.

She turned her smiling face up at me, deliberately tight-lipped. A last act of resistance since our failed adventure in the back row of the cinema.

I pressed my lips to hers, wondering what I would do and how ridiculous this might be if she didn't open her mouth in return, but she did, and soon it was unclear who was kissing who. The flat disappeared, spiralling down the same hole as James Stewart. Hayley was Mia Wallace, open,

making me the best version of me I'd ever been, when maybe I should have just said goodnight,
jerked off and gone to bed, alone.

I was the dancer in the dark, oblivious to the blood.

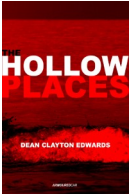
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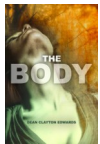
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