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Opening extract from

Unrest

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Chapter One

OUTSIDE

It started the way it always did.

I sat up in bed, unsure of what had woken me. My first thought: the new family who had moved in upstairs. Rowdy, my dad called them, amongst other things. Not even a month since they'd arrived and they'd managed to upset everyone, crashing up the stairs at all hours with their swearing, slurring, burping.

Not this time, though. I strained my ears, and there was only the hum of silence. Our flat, and the rest of the block were totally quiet. The room was dark, apart from the light left on in the hallway. Dad had left the light on overnight for the past six months, even though neither one of us ever spoke about it.

Something moved on the other side of the door, disturbing the right angle of light cracking in through the doorframe. A figure, moving past in the direction of Dad's bedroom. I wondered how long he had been there, watching me through the gap, and whether he had come into my room while I was still asleep. I knew he lay awake some nights, thinking. Worrying. About me, about Mum. About the accident, and how different things nearly were. The familiar guilt crept up on me. Before I knew it I was out of bed and across the room, shivering in only my boxers. The flat was freezing. I darted out into the hallway, squinting at the sudden brightness, my hand reaching along the wall for the light switch. I wanted to show him, in the smallest possible way, that tonight I was all right. I glanced at the clock at the far end of the hall.

Three in the morning.

I should have known then. The time was the first signal. That was the problem, though. I never knew until it was too late.

My fingers found the light switch just as my toes met the puddle. I froze, my hand hovering in place, and looked down. The laminate flooring was dotted with small patches of

water, each the size of a footprint, leading to the bathroom. I was standing in one, and it was ice cold.

Down the hallway, the bathroom door clicked softly shut. My eyes trailed over the watery footprints. My ears caught a low noise – a stifled sob – coming from the bathroom, and a faint trickle of running water. Then my hand was away from the light switch and out in front of me, reaching for the bathroom door as I followed the wet trail.

I wanted to ask Dad why he was crying, even though I knew the answer, deep down. A dense wall of steam wafted over me as I pushed the door open. It wasn't warm, but instead cool and damp. I shivered again. The door continued to open without a sound, and some of the steam cleared from the bathroom as it entered the hall.

I took a step inside, clouds of water vapour clinging to my skin. The trickling sound came from the bath. One of the taps was running. Through the haze I could just make out an arm draped along the side of the tub.

‘Why are you up so late?’ I asked. ‘And why are you crying?’

No response came. It was only then I noticed how slender the arm on the side of the bathtub was. How pale, and hairless, and smooth . . . and *female*. I stumbled forward in surprise, glimpsing - without meaning to - more than I was meant to see.

The woman in the bath was facing forward, but she didn't see me. Her eyes were dull and empty, and her long hair trailed like seaweed. The water had a pinkish tinge to it, and lapped softly at the overflow. The running tap was keeping the water warm, and the slow, steady trickle kept it at a level designed not to flood.

Most of the steam had now evaporated through the open door, making everything horribly clear and easy to see. The slight curve of a smile on the colourless lips; the razor blade on the edge of the tub. The incision on her inner left wrist, red and grinning.

Too late I realised. I remembered.

This has happened before. Which could only mean one thing . . .

I turned, staggering from the bathroom and raced for my room, zigzagging one way to leap over the cat, and the other to avoid tripping over my football boots. I should have been

leaving the horror behind when I left the bathroom, but now I had remembered, I knew there was more.

Light from the hall streamed across my bed as I reached the door. I wanted to fall into it and huddle under the covers until I'd stopped shaking from what I had seen in the bathroom. Two things stopped me.

First, there was a shadow by the side of the bed. A tall, thin shadow that was somehow a shade darker than all the others in the room, and vaguely human. It was motionless and faceless yet somehow, I knew what it was staring at.

In the place where the shadow was focussing, a body lay in my bed. I saw the short, dark hair spread over the pillow. Already I knew who it was.

Me. Asleep.

A whimper tried to force its way out of my throat, but didn't quite make it. I knew I needed to get back to myself, back *into* myself, but the shadow at the bedside was even more terrifying than the woman in the bathtub.

Slowly, the shadow's head moved. Its focus changed, no longer on the me in bed, but on the me at the door. I lurched forward, scrambling for the opposite side of the bed and approached my sleeping body. I was weightless, light as air.

I needed to get back in. I *had* to get back in.

My sleeping body's mouth was open. I'd done it that way before. I leaned over it, trying to prise it wider while pushing my face into the tiny, impossible cavity. I felt the prickle of the shadow figure's stare on my back and knew it had taken a step towards me. Towards *us*.

I pushed again, desperate, my hands clamped round the side of my body's face. Something warm leaked over my fingers and I knew it was tears from my sleeping self's eyes. Just as I thought it was never going to work, that I'd never get back in, it happened. I felt a scratching sensation, then a rush of tightness all over, and then . . .

I was back in my body, jolted awake - for real this time. Heart thudding. Gasping, trembling, crying. Alone in the room. There was no shadow, though the feeling it brought still drenched me in sweat.

I wanted to collapse back into the covers, but there was one last thing I had to know. Shaking, I eased off the bed and crept down the hall. This time, there was no woman in the bathroom. It was empty – and so was my bed when I returned to it.

It ended the way it always ends. With me, burrowed under the covers, too afraid to sleep again until dawn.

Chapter Two

TRACES

‘It happened again last night.’

Dad stood by the window in the living room, smoking what was probably the fifth of his twenty a day. His free hand held the nicotine-yellowed net curtain to one side, offering a clear view of the green in front of the flats. ‘Green’ it wasn’t. The tiny area of grass with its one tree and miserable NO BALL GAMES sign were dwarfed by ugly grey high-rise blocks all around.

I saw Dad tense. He let the curtain fall and turned to face me as I sat on the couch, flicking cigarette ash from the cushion.

‘Want some breakfast?’ he asked, ignoring what I had said.

I shook my head. ‘I’m not hungry.’ I felt sick from lack of sleep, but already it was after eleven.

‘Some coffee, then. Get yourself washed. You look like death warmed up.’ He shuffled out of the room, leaving ash like a trail of breadcrumbs on the grotty carpet.

I got up and went into the bathroom, shutting the door against the clinks and clanks from the kitchen. I couldn’t help but look into the tub. A grimy tidemark sat much lower than the water level I had seen – or thought I’d seen - in the night. In the cold morning light, I wasn’t sure any more.

I walked to the sink and filled it. The boiler was broken, leaving us with no hot water or heat for a week now. I splashed ice water on my face, missing warm showers. I could have boiled up some water in the kettle, as I had been doing, but the coldness was at least helping to jerk me out of the sleepy-eyed state I was in.

After washing I towelled myself dry, flossed and brushed my teeth. I put my toothbrush back into the beaker, avoiding my reflection. I didn’t need to look in the mirror to know Dad was right: I looked like death. I felt like it, too. The ‘warmed up’ bit had been optimism on his part.

I used to be good looking. Blue eyes – *really* blue, and dark, almost black hair. Good teeth. Not any more. My bloodshot eyes screamed out for rest. My hair was too long and, most days, greasy enough to fry chips in. My teeth were still all right, but getting stained from the amount of coffee I was guzzling to try and stay awake. I hadn't done any sport for months, not since the accident. Oddly, I hadn't put on weight, but lost it. I hid my body under layers of clothes, but nothing short of a mask was going to conceal the hollowness of my cheeks or the shadows under my eyes that sometimes looked deep enough to be smudges.

I knew what I looked like. Haunted, homeless even. That part wasn't the shock. What was shocking was that I didn't even care.

Dad knocked on the door. 'Elliott?'

'Yeah?'

'Your coffee's out here.'

I came out of the bathroom and nearly kicked over the mug on the floor. I picked it up and followed Dad into the kitchen. The smell of burnt toast filled the room. I sat down at the table, sipping the bitter coffee. There wasn't enough milk in it; we must have run out again. I reached for the sugar and dropped in another spoonful.

'Did you look in on me late last night?' I asked, stirring. 'When I was in bed?'

'No. I went to bed before you. You know that.'

'Yeah, but—'

'I heard you before,' he interrupted. 'You said "it happened again." So, which one was it?'

I tasted the coffee again. Still grim.

'The first kind. The girl, in the bath—'

He cut across me again. 'The out-of-body thing?'

I nodded. 'I saw her, Dad. Felt the wet footprints in the hall, like before. Everything was just . . . like before. The blood in the water, the shadow in the bedroom.' I stopped there. Dad's face was already starting to look greyer, like his hair.

‘Why don’t you call Dr Finch?’ he said eventually. ‘See if he could get you in today, or maybe tomorrow. There might be a cancellation.’

‘What’s the point?’

‘Talking about it might help.’

‘I’m talking now, and it’s not helping.’

Dad reached for his cigarettes again and lit up. A cloud of smoke billowed in my direction, reminding me of the steam in the bathroom.

‘You know what I mean,’ he said, calmer after the first drag. ‘Talking with a *professional*.’

‘I *have* talked,’ I said. ‘And talked, and talked. All he does is tell me what it says in his books. That none of it’s real, and that it’s all chemical imbalances in the brain.’

Dad breathed out a lungful of smoke. ‘Then maybe you should start listening.’

‘Maybe *you* should!’

‘I’ve listened, Elliott. For the past six months, I’ve listened, and what you’re telling me isn’t new. All of us – me, you, Adam and your mum – we all heard about what happened here within weeks of moving in. That sort of thing’s bound to get round.’

‘But it never bothered me,’ I said. ‘Four years we’ve lived here. Four years I’ve known a woman topped herself in the bath. Then suddenly, now I’ve got this . . . this *condition*, I’m seeing her.’

‘You *think* you’re seeing her.’

‘No, I—’

‘Why is it you see her when she’s in the bath, dying? Why do you think that is, eh?’ he demanded. ‘When people talk about Tess Fielding they don’t talk about anything else but how she died. If she’s a ghost – if that’s what you’re seeing – why’s it always her death? Why not any other glimpses of her life before that, when she lived here?’

I shrugged, not meeting his eyes. ‘Perhaps it’s not the everyday events that leave traces. Perhaps it’s the violent ones.’

‘Traces?’ Dad shook his head. ‘If you paid more attention to the books Finch gave you instead of that mumbo jumbo paranormal stuff . . .’ He stubbed his cigarette out in the overflowing ashtray. ‘It’s not surprising you’re preoccupied with death, not after what happened to you. That’s why you’ve become fixated on the story of Tess. You might have *thought* living in her flat didn’t affect you, and maybe it didn’t. But now your mind’s up to its own tricks, and Tess is an easy one for it to play.’

I got up, dumped my coffee in the sink and left the mug in the bowl.

‘Where are you going?’ Dad asked.

‘Adam’s.’

He muttered something then. It sounded like, ‘Where else?’

‘What?’

Dad raised an eyebrow. ‘You’re going out like that?’

I looked down at my torn jeans and rumpled t-shirt. ‘So?’

He shrugged. ‘Nothing. It’s your life.’

And what a poxy life it is, I thought.

I grabbed my keys from the counter and didn’t answer. The bang of the door echoed through the block as I pulled it shut and started down the three flights of stairs. At the bottom there was a strong smell of urine. I moved more quickly, glad to escape the block, and jogged to the car. The lights flashed as I unlocked it, and then I clambered into the driver’s seat.

The car purred into life, the engine drowned out by Kurt Cobain screaming through the speakers. I kept it on, loud, as I swung round the green and eased out of the road. The noise would help me stay awake.

Before the accident I’d enjoyed driving. As soon as I’d passed my test I’d been on the road. Glad of the freedom and the possibilities. Glad of the admiring looks it drew from girls - and the envious ones from blokes. All right, so it wasn’t exactly a Ferrari, but it was decent and I hadn’t done anything stupid like blacking out the windows and putting on one of those massive exhausts like all the other typical boy racers. I didn’t even race. That’s why what happened to me was so unfair.