

COUNTLESS



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For Emily

PART ONE
THE THING



Chapter 1

The cigarette between my fingers is thin, insubstantial. Like me.

I'm hunched up on a square of frozen grass outside Dewhurst House, waiting. Felicity is always late, which is a joke seeing as I'd catch hell if it were me.

Her car finally rattles round the corner. I take a final drag, watch the lit end flare to my fingertips, then drop it next to the others as Felicity reaches my side.

She pretends not to notice, instead saying, 'What are you doing out here? You'll freeze!' in a fake jolly voice.

We go inside, Felicity's hand on my shoulder blade like I'm about to do a runner. Wouldn't be the first time. Or she might be doing a bone check. We exchange a quick look and I duck my head down.

‘Do you want a coffee? You look cold. Black if you must!’

Felicity’s rapid sentences are already giving me a headache. Bet she hates our sessions about as much as I do. Which is quite a lot, when it comes down to it. Still, she’s lasted longer than most of my key workers – two years and counting – and she’s all right really. Better than some.

‘So ...’ Felicity leans forward with a Concerned Look on her face. ‘How are things?’

‘All right.’

‘And how are you getting on at the Yewlings?’

‘Fine.’ I try not to let the sarcasm into my voice but here it comes – drip, drip, like it’s trying to form a stalactite. An image of my teeny flat in the Yewlings, Tower Block of Dreams, flashes into my head. I attempt a tight smile, the skin forming hard bunches on my cheeks. ‘Really well actually.’

Felicity’s not buying it.

‘OK, shall we get it over with?’ she says, and waves her hand at the scales.

I stand on them backwards, making my face into a mask like we’re in a play, and listen to Felicity’s pen scratch numbers down.

‘What have you been up to?’ she says.

I crane my head round, trying to spot the figure she’s

written, but she's already shifted the book. I slink back to my seat and pick at a loose thread where the chair fabric is ripped and leaking bits of foam. I must have sat here a million times.

'College?'

I look up at Felicity's expectant face. I've been doing this a lot recently, tuning out.

'Sorry, what was that?' I say.

Felicity holds in a sigh. Barely. 'I was asking if you've been attending college?'

My silence says it all. I do mean to go, but half the time I end up circling town or staring out of the window until it's way past the point where showing up might actually make a difference.

I pull my hoodie down lower and curl my knees up to my chest. I can feel my stomach all wrong where I've pressed my thighs against it. I give the thread another tug and it comes away in my hand.

I take a deep breath. I've put this off for weeks, but I'm going to go crazy for real if I don't ask. 'There's something ...'

'Mmm?' Felicity says.

I start to wind the thread on my finger, count how many times it goes round. 'It's nothing really. I just don't feel ... right. Like, more than normal, I mean. I'm tired all the

time. And there's something else.' I take another big breath then speak in a rush. 'My stomach ... it's kind of swollen. I was thinking, could it be ... Have I done something permanent, with Nia?'

'Hedda, we've talked about this. You need to stop referring to your eating disorder by that name,' Felicity says. Which is spectacularly missing the point in my opinion.

'Right, yeah, sorry. But about what I was saying. Could it be ... cancer?'

'I don't think ... Well, we could certainly arrange for a check-up.' Felicity gives me a closer look, frowns, then glances again at her book of doom. 'Is there anything that's concerning you at the moment? College, home, friends?' I'm already shaking my head when she adds, 'Boyfriends?' Though she's more or less smiling at this last one.

I don't smile. Instead, I feel my face go hot. Silence stretches as wide as an ocean.

When I look up, Felicity has this expression on her face like she's just seen Elvis. Slowly, she leans forward, and in a gentle voice I've never heard her use before she says, 'Have you done a pregnancy test?'

Chapter 2

What. The. F? WTFWTFWTF. No, no, no, no. This can't be right.

I look at the instructions again. The stick I can't hold steady. I'm wedged inside the shopping centre toilets, in the furthest cubicle from the door. I stare at the Boots bag at my feet until it blurs. The seat is beginning to hurt my backside, but I can't move.

There is a cross in the window. I check the instructions one more time. A cross means I'm ... but I can't be, can I?

I think there's a chance I might have left my body because my head is expanding and my ears are making the noise that happens before you faint and little black dots are tracking from left to right across my eyes. I lean forward and watch them and think, *Left to right*. It's always left to

right. You'd think they might go up or diagonally or something from time to time.

It takes a while for them to clear, but when they do the little blue cross is still there. Then I pull up my clothes, turn round and vomit. A section of my brain makes an automatic calculation: volume of food in versus volume out. Converted into calories, minus resting metabolic rate. Target weight, weight at clinic, actual weight. All the numbers marching in a comforting row, orderly.

I shove the test into the sanitary bin and slam it shut. This is a mistake. It has to be. I don't even have periods most of the time, thanks to Nia.

Except this time, it isn't down to her at all.

I get out of the shopping centre and pace through town, past crappy pound shops and boarded-up windows and jarring spaces where buildings have been knocked down but not yet rebuilt, turning my head at the sickly grease smell of Maccie D's. Sharp wind burns my face. I spot myself, a long smear like a ghost in a shop window, and pull my hat down lower to cover my ears.

I keep going, until I get to the decaying buildings that count as this town's library and duck in. The smell here isn't much better: stained carpets that need to be torn out, damp and mildew round the metal windows. But there's also that good book smell and I try to focus on that. I

burrow between shelves, head turned to one side, eyes glancing off the spines, then head for the trolley where the returned books sit waiting to go back on the shelves. I grab one and check it out, face down without properly looking at it. I'll see what I've got when I get back to the flat.

On the way out, I see a woman with a stack of books balanced in heavy arms staring at me. I catch a familiar mixture of disgust and envy battling it out in her eyes. I stare back. *I know what you're thinking.* One of the books tumbles from her arms and crashes to the floor.

I walk fast through an underpass full of graffiti and oily puddles, up a maze of side streets, tatty terraced houses with weeds poking through the front gardens, then on, out of town, along a cycle path. My arms swing in time to my feet. In my head, I count the steps.

The flat's a couple of miles back at an angle from Dewhurst; it's like two neighbouring spokes of a bike wheel, with the town centre in the middle and the adolescent unit sticking out on one spoke, the Yewlings on another. If you add in the detour to Boots, I'll have walked five miles today, but Nia's voice still needles under the thud of my footsteps.

Fat cow. You should do six tomorrow, she says, and I know I will.

I skirt a group of boys kicking a ball over the cracked concrete wasteland at the bottom of the tower block and have to use both hands to get the heavy door to the flats open. No need for my key; the lock is knackered and so is the intercom. The door bangs shut, the sound echoing up the dark stairwell, which smells like wee as usual. The lift doors have a scrawled *out of order* sign taped to them, but I'd always take the stairs anyway.

Eight flights, eight steps per flight, which makes sixty-four. If it was six hundred and four it still wouldn't be enough. Halfway up, a couple of girls sit over a plastic bottle of supermarket cider and I flatten myself against the wall to go past them, head down, then run up the rest of the stairs. They're silent as I go by, but I hear laughter float up behind me.

I'm dizzy again when I get to my door and I fumble the key in the lock, which means I get a big waft of stale smoke and cooking from next door and I swear I didn't even mean to be sick that time. I glance into the toilet, see it's mainly water, stained pink. I run back to slam and lock the front door, take off my rucksack. My shoes. Hop on the scales. Then off. Then back on again. And once more. Repeat the number in my head while I wait for the kettle to boil.

I am not pregnant. I can't be. It must be a false positive or something. You can get those with lots of things, right?

I drink hot tea, black with half a sugar, and take the box back out of the Boots bag. There's two tests left. I guess there's only one thing for it. I rip off the packaging, wee on one and then the other and shove them on the side of the sink before washing my hands, scrubbing knuckles that stand out.

I have a scared little impulse to call Mum, but instead I turn away from the tests and go into the kitchen/living room/whatever space, sit at the tiny table and folding chair. I don't speak to Mum much these days. She wrote me off a while ago, to be honest, and I can't blame her.

My phone goes with a text from Laurel. Now I'm not sure which I'd least like to look at – the message or the tests.

It has to be three minutes by now. I go back to the bathroom and stare at the two unmistakable crosses. My brain begins doing calculations from when it happened: the day they buried Molly. If this is real, that would mean I'm far along. Very far. I can't breathe properly, thinking about what this means.

*There's a **Thing** inside you. A parasite, Nia says.*

Then I pass out, feeling the crack of my skull against the sink as I go down.

Crap Things about the Unit, Number One:

You don't want to go back.

Except sometimes, it's all you want to do

I was twelve the first time I got admitted to a unit. After a while all the admissions kind of blur into one, but I do remember lying in my room on bed rest, on a mattress that hurt my hips and knees, and the sound of someone crying so hard I couldn't focus on my book. *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* – the last book I ever took into a unit from home, back in the days when I still read books I actually liked.

The crying went on and on, the sound floating through my door, which was propped open so I didn't get up to any of the little tricks you get to know on a unit. Tricks to try and stop them shoving all that weight on to you. Half of them hadn't even occurred to me then, truthfully.

Looking back, I was so innocent, a deer with eyes so wide open they hurt. The things you pick up when you're on a unit. The people you pick up. Your constant companions, your best enemies. People you never want to see again, can't bear to leave behind.

Like Nia, when I think about it.