

# C. J. TUDDOR

AUTHOR OF *THE CHALK MAN*

# THE DRIIFT

A NOVEL





## About the Author

**C. J. Tudor's** love of writing, especially the dark and macabre, started young. When her peers were reading Judy Blume, she was devouring Stephen King and James Herbert.

Over the years she has had a variety of jobs, including trainee reporter, radio scriptwriter, dog walker, voiceover artist, television presenter, copywriter and, now, author.

C. J. Tudor's first novel, *The Chalk Man*, was a *Sunday Times* bestseller and sold in over forty countries. Her second novel, *The Taking of Annie Thorne*, was also a *Sunday Times* bestseller as was her third novel, *The Other People*. All three books are in development for TV. Her fourth novel, *The Burning Girls*, was a Richard and Judy Book Club selection and has been adapted for television by award-winning screenwriter Hans Rosenfeldt (creator of *The Bridge* and *Marcella*). It will debut on Paramount Plus in 2023. *The Drift* is her fifth novel and has also been optioned for the screen. C.J. Tudor is also the author of *A Sliver of Darkness*, a collection of short stories.

She lives in Sussex with her family.

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C.J. Tudor

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THE DRIFT



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*For my family*

*They circled the body in the snow. Scavengers. Looking for anything they might strip from the corpse.*

*It was half buried, frozen in the drift. Legs and arms splayed. A perfect snow angel. Bright blue eyes surrounded by frosty lashes stared up at an equally bright blue sky. The storm had passed.*

*Eventually, one of the group grew braver. It landed on the chest of the dead human and poked tentatively at its face, pecking at the lips and nose. Then it stuck its beak into one of the blue eyes. It tugged and tugged, and finally pulled the eye free with a small pop.*

*Satisfied with its prize, it hopped away and flapped off into a nearby pine tree.*

*The rest of the crows, emboldened, descended upon the corpse in a bluster of black wings.*

*Within minutes, the body was completely faceless, unrecognizable.*

*Later that night bigger predators would come. By morning, there would be nothing left but a ragged carcass.*

*A week later, a hunter would shoot a wolf. A sickly-looking thing, but wolf meat was as good as any to feed his family.*

*Soon afterwards, the hunter would fall ill and die. Then his family. Then his family's friends.*

*And the crows would fall from the sky.*





THE EARTH IS FULL OF DEAD  
GOOD GUYS

# Hannah

A watch alarm was beeping. Someone was being sick. Loudly, close by. Several people were sprawled at odd, impossible angles over the uprooted coach seats. Blood pooled in eyes and dripped from gaping mouths.

Hannah noted this dispassionately, clinically. Her father's nature kicking in, her mother would have said. Always able to detach. Sometimes, this lack of emotional empathy made life difficult. Other times, like now, that side was useful.

She unclipped her seatbelt and eased herself out of her seat. Wearing the belt had probably saved her life when the coach tipped over. It had rolled twice down a steep slope, causing most of the carnage, and then come to rest softly, propped half on its side, embedded in a snowdrift.

She hurt. Bruises, scrapes, but nothing seemed to be broken. No massive bleeding. Of course, she could have internal injuries. Impossible to know for sure. But for now, in this immediate moment, she was okay. Or as okay as she could be.

Others were moving. Hannah could hear groans, crying. The hurler had stopped, for now. She looked around the coach, assessing. There were a dozen students on board. They hadn't really needed such a big coach, but it was what the Academy had provided. Of the students, she'd say almost half were dead (mostly those who hadn't bothered with their seatbelts).

There was something else, Hannah thought, as she took in the scene. A problem she hadn't fully comprehended yet. Snowstorm outside, coach tipped over and half buried in a drift. What was it? Her thoughts were interrupted by a voice shouting:

'Hey. HEY! Can someone help over here? My sister, she's trapped.'

Hannah turned. At the back of the coach an overweight young man with a mass of dark curls was crouched over an injured girl, cradling her head on his lap.

Hannah hesitated. She told herself she was just gathering her wits, preparing. Not that she was hoping someone else would move forward, step up, so she didn't have to. She didn't like close physical or emotional contact. But no one else was in any fit state to help, and as she had medical knowledge, it was her duty. She started to move forward, awkwardly, stumbling her way along the lopsided gangway, stepping over bodies.

She reached the man and his sister. Straight away, she could tell, as they said in the movies, that the girl wasn't going to make it. This had nothing to do with the stuff Hannah had learned in the classroom during her medical training. That was just a plain, honest gut reaction. Hannah was pretty sure the girl's brother knew it too, but he was clinging to hope, as people do in these situations, because it was all they had.

The girl was pretty, with pale skin and thick, wavy, dark hair. The sort of hair Hannah had always wished she'd been blessed with, instead of the fine, mousy strands that she could never do anything with and always ended up yanking back into an untidy ponytail. Hannah realized it was probably odd to feel envy when the girl was dying, but human nature was unpredictable.

The girl's eyes were glazed, her breath short and wheezy. Hannah could see that her left leg was trapped beneath two coach seats that had been forced together in the crash. A mess of mangled metal and crushed bone; she probably had multiple fractures. But the blood loss was the real problem, and that was before you got to the wheezy hitch of the girl's breathing, which made Hannah think she could have other, less visible, injuries. Those were the ones that would get you. The British princess – Diana – had died from a small tear in the vein of her lung that no one knew was slowly, fatally, bleeding out.

'We need to get her leg free,' the man was saying. 'Can you help me move this seat?'

Hannah looked at the seat. She could tell him that it wouldn't make any difference. She could tell him that the best he could do would be to stay here with his sister for however long she had left. But she remembered her father telling her: *'In extreme situations, feeling like you are doing something makes a difference psychologically, even if it has no effect on the outcome.'*

She shook her head. 'We can't move the seat yet.'

'Why?'

‘It may be the only thing stopping that leg from bleeding out more than it is.’

‘Then what?’

‘Are you wearing a belt?’

‘Err, yeah.’

‘I need you to take it off and make a tourniquet here, above the knee. Then we can try to move the seat, right?’

‘Okay.’ He looked dazed, but nonetheless fumbled beneath his coat to take off his belt. His stomach spilt over his jeans. His sister stared up, lips moving but unable to force words out. Every effort concentrated on fighting the pain, sucking in those vital gasps of oxygen.

‘You look a little young for a doctor,’ the man said, handing her the belt.

‘Medical student.’

‘Ah, right.’ He nodded. ‘One of Grant’s.’

The Academy did not specialize in medicine. Generally, it specialized in parents rich enough to buy their offspring an obscenely expensive college education. But a few years ago it had been chosen by the Department as the location for a new medical research centre. An extra wing had been built and Professor Grant, one of the world’s leading virologists, installed to oversee the development. Now, brilliant young students from around the world were selected to study at the isolated mountaintop campus.

‘Wrap the belt around here,’ Hannah instructed. ‘Pull really, really tight. Okay. Good.’

The girl groaned a little, but that was a good sign. If she was still conscious enough to feel discomfort, her brain hadn’t started shutting down yet.

‘It’s okay,’ the man whispered into the girl’s hair, tucking some of his own dark mane behind his ear. ‘S’okay.’

‘Right,’ Hannah said. ‘Let’s try and lift this.’

The man laid his sister’s head gently down and joined Hannah in trying to heave up the coach seat. It was no good. It creaked and gave a little, but not enough. They needed another person. Two to lift. One to pull the girl’s leg out from underneath the twisted metal.

Hannah could hear more voices, movement around the coach, people coming to, ascertaining whether their companions were still alive, or not.

She turned and yelled: ‘Hey, we need a hand here! Can someone help?’

‘Kind of busy over here,’ one smart Alec from further up the coach replied.

But then a tall, slim figure stood and made his way towards them. Pale, short blond hair, matted on one side with blood. It looked bad, but Hannah knew that even small headwounds bled like bastards.

‘You called?’ His voice was cultured, with a slight German accent.

‘We need some help lifting this chair so we can free her leg,’ Hannah said.

The blond man looked at the girl, then back at Hannah, and she saw the cool appraisal in his eyes. She shook her head slightly and he nodded, understanding.

‘Right then. Heft-ho!’

Hannah allowed the two men to do the lifting while she eased the girl’s leg out from underneath the seats. It took a couple of attempts, but finally, the leg was free.

The girl’s brother moved his sister to a slightly more comfortable position, whipped off his jacket and placed it underneath her head. Beneath his coat, he was wearing a baggy sweatshirt that read: *Excuse me for a moment while I overthink this*. Weird, Hannah thought, the small stuff you noticed.

She felt a hand touch her arm and turned back to the blond-haired man. Aryan, Hannah thought. He’d look at home in lederhosen and a hat with a feather in it.

‘How many do you think are dead?’ he asked.

‘Four or five – others may be injured.’

He glanced at the girl and nodded. ‘D’you remember what happened?’

Hannah tried to think. She had been sitting on the coach, dozing. It was snowing heavily outside. A horn blare. A squeal of brakes and suddenly they were swerving off the road, rolling and rolling, and then blackness. Crazy that they had even tried to make the journey in this storm, but the Academy had been eager to get the students out to the Retreat. To safety.

‘Not much,’ she admitted.

She looked around the coach again. Her eyes skirted over the bodies, the people sitting around, moaning, crying. She was trying to recall what she had missed before.

The coach had landed, tilted on its right-hand side. From where Hannah stood, looking up the coach towards the driver’s cab, the windows on her

left were intact, facing up towards the darkening sky. Snow whisked around in lacy sheets, large flakes already beginning to settle. The worst of the damage was on the right: crushed metal, smashed glass. That entire side of the coach was buried in a thick drift, meaning ...

*The door, she thought. The door is buried. We can't get out.*

'We're trapped,' she said.

The blond man nodded, as if pleased she had reached the same conclusion. 'Although, even if we could get out, we wouldn't last for long in these conditions.'

'What about the emergency exit?' Hannah asked.

'I have already tried that ... it appears to be jammed.'

'What?'

The man took her elbow and guided her a little way along the coach. On their left, three steps led to the toilet and another door. A sign above it read: IN EMERGENCY PULL RED HANDLE. PUSH DOOR TO EXIT. The blond man pulled at the handle and pushed at the door. It didn't give.

He stepped aside and gestured for Hannah to attempt it. She did. Several times, in increasing frustration. The door was stuck firm.

'Shit,' she cursed. 'How?'

'Who knows? Perhaps it was damaged in the crash?'

'Wait –' Hannah remembered something. 'Shouldn't there be a hammer on board, to break the windows?'

'Correct. That is the other conundrum.'

Hannah frowned. 'What d'you mean?'

The man stepped back and pointed towards a case mounted just above the windows on their left. Where the hammer should be there was an empty space.

'There should be another up here, for the skylights.' He gestured towards the roof. 'That has also been removed.'

Hannah's head spun. 'But why?'

The blond man smiled without humour. 'Who knows? Maybe some *Arschgeige* stole them for a prank. Maybe no one checked this coach before it left –' He let the sentence hang.

'We need to call for help,' Hannah said, trying to batten down the panic. Which was when the other realization hit.

'Our phones.'

All phones had been confiscated when the students boarded and stowed away with the luggage. No communication en route.

No one must know where they were going.

Hannah stared at the blond man. No way to call for help. No way of knowing how long it might take for rescue to come. How long until they were missed? And even then, who would come to their aid in this storm?

She glanced back out of the windows, looking towards the sky. Already snow was piling up, cutting out the faint grey light.

They were trapped. With the dead. And if rescue didn't come soon, they would be buried with them.

# Meg

Rocking. Gentle at first. A lullaby. *Rock-a-bye baby*. Then harder. Rougher. Her head banged against glass. Her body rolled back the other way and she was falling. On to the floor. Hard.

‘Ow. Shit.’

Her heart spiked and her eyes shot open.

‘What the fuck?’

She rubbed at her throbbing elbow and stared around. Her eyes felt like someone had rubbed grit into them. Her brain felt like wet sludge.

*You’ve fallen out of bed. But where?*

She sat up. Not a bed. A wooden bench. Running around the side of an oval-shaped room. A room that was moving from side to side. Outside, grey sky, swirling flakes of snow. Glass all around. Nausea swept over her. She fought it down.

There were more people in here, sprawled on the wooden benches. Five of them. Bundled up in identical blue snowsuits. Like her, Meg realized. All of them here in this small, swaying room. Buffeted by the wind, snow caking the glass.

*This isn’t a room. Rooms don’t move, stupid.*

She pushed herself to her feet. Her legs felt shaky. Nausea bubbled again. *Got to get a handle on that*, she thought. There was nowhere to be sick. She walked unsteadily to one side of the room-that-was-not-a-room. She stared out of the glass, pressing her hands and nose against it like a child staring out at the first snow of Christmas.

Below – *way below* – the snow-tipped forest. Above, a frenzy of flakes in a vast grey sky.

‘Fuck.’

More rocking. The roar of the wind, muted by the thick glass all around, like a hungry animal contained behind bars. Fresh white splatters hit the



glass, distorting her vision. But Meg had seen enough.

A groan from behind her. Another of the blue-clad bodies was waking up, unfurling like an ungainly caterpillar. He or she – it was hard to tell with the hood on – sat up. The others were stirring now too. For one moment, Meg had an insane notion that when they turned their faces towards her they would be decomposed, living dead.

The man – mid-thirties, heavy beard – stared at her blearily. He pushed back his hood and rubbed at his head, which was shorn to dark stubble.

‘What the fuck?’ He looked around. ‘Where am I?’

‘You’re on a cable car.’

‘A *what?*’

‘Cable car. You know, a car that hangs on cables –’

He stared at her aggressively. ‘I know what a cable car is. I want to know what the hell I’m doing on one.’

Meg stared calmly back. ‘I don’t know. D’you remember getting here?’

‘No. You?’

‘No.’

‘The last thing I remember is ...’ His eyes widened. ‘Are you ... are you going to the Retreat?’

*The Retreat.* The deliberately ambiguous name made it sound like a health spa. But it didn’t imbue Meg with any feelings of wellbeing. On the contrary, it sent schisms of ice jittering down her spine. *The Retreat.*

She didn’t reply. She looked back outside.

‘Right now, we’re not going anywhere.’

They both stared into the grey void, more patches of snow obscuring the glass. A snowstorm. A bad one.

‘We’re stuck.’

‘*Stuck?* Did you say we’re *stuck?*’

Meg turned. A woman stood behind her, around her own age. Red hair. Pinched features. Panic in her voice. Possibly a problem.

Meg didn’t answer right away. She regarded the other people in the car. One was still curled up asleep, hood over his face. Some people could sleep through anything. The other two – a short, stout man with a mop of dark curls and an older, silver-haired man with glasses – were sitting up, stretching and looking around. They seemed dazed but calm. Good.

‘It looks that way,’ she said to the woman. ‘Probably just a power outage.’

‘Power outage. Oh, great. Bloody marvellous.’

‘I’m sure the car will be moving again soon.’ This from the bearded man. His previous aggression had dissipated. He offered the woman a small smile. ‘We’ll be fine.’

A lie. Even if the car started moving, even if they reached their destination, they were not going to be fine. But lies were the grease that oiled daily life. The woman smiled back at the man. Comforted. Job done.

‘Did you say we’re on a cable car?’ the older man asked. ‘I don’t remember anyone mentioning getting on a cable car.’

‘Does anyone remember anything?’ Meg asked, looking around.

They glanced at each other.

‘We were in our rooms.’

‘They brought some breakfast.’

‘Tasted like crap.’

‘Then ... I must have fallen asleep again –’

More confused looks.

‘No one remembers a thing after that?’ Meg said. ‘Not till they woke up here?’

They shook their heads.

The bearded man exhaled slowly. ‘They drugged us.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ the red-haired woman said. ‘Why would they do that?’

‘Well, obviously so we wouldn’t know where we’re going, or how we got here,’ the short man said.

‘I just ... I can’t believe they would do that.’

Funny, Meg thought. Even now, after everything that had happened, people struggled to believe the things that ‘they’ would do. But then, you can’t see the eye of the storm when you’re inside it.

‘Okay,’ the bearded man said. ‘Seeing as we’re literally stuck here with time to kill, why don’t we introduce ourselves? I’m Sean.’

‘Meg,’ said Meg.

‘Sarah,’ the red-haired woman offered.

‘Karl.’ The short man gave a small wave.

‘Max.’ The older man smiled. ‘Good to meet you all.’

‘I guess we’re all here for the same reason then?’ Sean said.

‘We’re not supposed to talk about it,’ Sarah said.

‘Well, I think it’s pretty safe to assume –’

‘To assume makes an “ass” out of “you” and “me”.’

Meg stared at Sarah. ‘My boss used to say that.’

‘Really?’

‘Yeah. Used to annoy the fuck out of me.’

Sarah’s lips pursed. Max broke in. ‘So, what do you ... I mean, what did you all do, before?’

‘I taught,’ Sarah said.

*Quelle surprise*, Meg thought.

‘I used to be a lawyer,’ Max said. He held his hands up. ‘I know – sue me.’

‘I worked in bouncy castles,’ Karl said.

They looked at him. And burst into laughter. A sudden, nervous release.

‘Hey!’ Karl looked affronted, but only mildly. ‘There’s good money in bouncy castles. At least, there used to be.’

‘What about you?’ Meg asked Sean.

‘Me? Oh, this and that. I’ve had a few jobs.’

A gust of wind caused the cable car to sway harder.

‘Oh God.’ Sarah clutched at her neck. She wore a small silver crucifix. Meg wondered how many more reasons she could find to dislike the woman.

‘So we’re an eclectic bunch,’ Max said.

‘And “ass” or not, I *assume* we’re all heading to the Retreat?’ Karl said, raising his bushy eyebrows.

Slowly, one by one, they all nodded.

‘Volunteers?’

More nods. Only two types of people went to places like the Retreat. Volunteers and those who had no choice.

‘So, is now the time to discuss our reasons?’ Max said. ‘Or shall we save that for when we get there?’

‘*If* we get there,’ Sarah said, looking at the steel cables above them nervously.

Sean was eyeing the sleeping figure in the corner. ‘Do you think we should wake up Sleeping Beauty?’

Meg frowned. Then she stood and walked over to the prone figure. She shook his shoulder gently. He rolled off the bench and hit the floor with a thud.

Behind her, Sarah screamed.

Meg suddenly realized two things.  
She knew this man.  
And he wasn't asleep. He was dead.