

# RITUAL

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Somewhere in the middle of the remote Kalahari desert in South Africa, nestling among the dry ochre veld, is a small weed-covered pool at the bottom of a crater. Ordinary except for its stillness – the casual observer wouldn't pay it much attention, wouldn't give it a second thought. Unless they were to swim in it. Or dip a toe into it. Then they'd notice something wrong. Something different.

First they'd notice the water was cold. Freezing, in fact. The sort of cold that doesn't belong to this planet. The sort of cold that comes from centuries and centuries of silence, from the most ancient recesses of the universe. And, second, they'd notice that it was almost empty of life, only a few colourless canefish living in it. Last, if they were foolish enough to try to swim in it they'd discover its fatal secret: there are no sides to this pool and no bottom – just a straight, cold line to the heart of the earth. Maybe that's when it would come to them, repeated over and over again over in the whispered ancestral languages of the Kalahari people, *This is the path to hell.*

This is Bushman's Hole. This is Boesmansgat.

# 1

13 May

Just after lunch on a Tuesday in May and nine feet under water in Bristol's 'floating harbour', police diver Sergeant 'Flea' Marley closed her gloved fingers round a human hand. She was half taken off-guard to find it so easily and her legs kicked a bit, whirring up silt and engine oil from the bottom, tipping her bodyweight back and upping her buoyancy so she started to rise. She had to tilt down and wedge her left hand under the pontoon tanks, then dump a little air from her suit so she was stabilized enough to get to the bottom and take a little time to feel the object.

It was pitch dark down there, like having her face in mud, no point in trying to see what she was holding. With most river and harbour diving everything had to be done by touch, so she had to be patient, allow the thing to feed its shape from her fingers up her arm, download an image in her

mind. She palpated it gently, closing her eyes, counting the fingers to reassure herself it was human, then worked out which digit was which: the ring finger first, bent away from her, and from that she could figure out which way the hand was lying – palm upward. Her thoughts raced, as she tried to picture how the body would be – on its side probably. She gave the hand an experimental tug. Instead of there being a weight behind it, it floated free of the silt, coming away easily. At the place where a wrist should be there was just raw bone and gristle.

‘Sarge?’ PC Rich Dundas said, into her earpiece. His voice seemed so close in the claustrophobic darkness that she startled. He was up on the quay, tracking her progress with her surface attendant who was meting out her lifeline and controlling the coms panel. ‘How you doing there? You’re bang over the hotspot. See anything?’

The witness had reported a hand, just a hand, no body, and that had bothered everyone in the team. No one had ever known a corpse to float on its back – decomposition saw to that, made them float face down, arms and legs dangling downwards in the water. The last thing to be visible would be a hand. But now she was getting a different picture: at its weakest point, the wrist, this hand had been severed. It was just a hand, no body. So there hadn’t been a corpse floating, against all physical laws, on its back. But there

was still something wrong about the witness statement. She turned the hand over, settling the mental picture of the way it was lying – little details she'd need for her own witness statement. It hadn't been buried. She couldn't even say it was buried in the silt. It was just lying on top of it.

'Sarge? You hear me?'

'Yeah,' she said. 'I hear you.'

She picked up the hand. She cupped it gently, and slowly let herself sink to hover above the silt at the bottom of the harbour.

'Sarge?'

'Yeah, Dundas. Yeah. I'm with you.'

'Got anything?'

She swallowed. She turned the hand round so its fingers lay across her own. She should tell Dundas it was 'five bells'. A find. But she didn't. 'No,' she said, instead. 'Nothing yet. Not yet.'

'What's happening?'

'Nothing. I'm going to move along a bit here. I'll let you know when I've got something.'

'OK.'

She dug one arm into the muck at the bottom and forced herself to think clearly. First she pulled gently at the lifeline, dragging it down, feeling for the next three-metre tag. On the surface it would appear to be paying out naturally – it would look as if she was sculling along the bottom. When she got to the tag she sandwiched the line between her knees to keep up the pressure and lay down in the

silt the way she taught the team to rest if they got a CO<sub>2</sub> overload, face down so the mask didn't lift, knees lightly in the sludge. The hand she held close to her forehead, as if she was praying. In her coms helmet there was silence, just a hiss of static. Now she'd got to the target she had time. She unplugged the mic from her mask, took a second to close her eyes and check her balance. She focused on a red spot in her mind's eye, watched it, waited for it to dance. But it didn't. Stayed steady. She kept herself very, very still, waiting, as she always did, for something to come to her.

'Mum?' she whispered, hating the way her voice sounded so hopeful, so hissy in the helmet. 'Mum?'

She waited. Nothing. As it always was. She concentrated hard, pressing lightly on the bones of the hand, making this stranger's piece of flesh seem half familiar.

'Mum?'

Something came into her eyes, stinging. She opened them, but there was nothing: just the usual stuffy blackness of the mask, the vague brownish light of silt dancing in front of the face-plate, and the all-enveloping sound of her breathing. She fought the tears, wanting to say it aloud: Mum, please help. I saw you last night. I did see you. And I know you're trying to tell me something – I just can't hear it properly. Please, tell me what you were trying to say. 'Mum?' she whispered,

and then, feeling ashamed of herself, ‘Mummy?’

Her own voice came back, echoing round her head, except this time, instead of *Mummy*, it sounded like *Idiot, you idiot*. She put her head back, breathing hard, trying hard not to let any tears come. What was she expecting? Why was it always here, under water, that she came to cry, the worst place – crying in a mask she couldn’t pull off like sport divers could. Maybe it was obvious she’d feel closer to Mum somewhere like this, but there was more to it than that. Ever since she could remember, the water had been the place she could concentrate, feel a sort of peace floating up, as if she could open channels down here that she couldn’t open on the surface.

She waited for a few minutes longer, until the tears had gone somewhere safe, and she knew she wouldn’t blind herself or make a fool of herself when she surfaced. Then she sighed and held up the severed hand. She had to bring it close to her mask, had to let it brush the Perspex visor, because that was how close you had to get to things in this sort of visibility. And then, looking at the hand close up, she realized what else was worrying her.

She plugged in the coms lead. ‘Dundas? You there?’

‘What’s up?’

She turned the hand, less than a centimetre from the visor, examining its greying flesh, its

ragged ends. It had been an old guy who'd seen the hand. Just for a second. He'd been out with his toddler granddaughter who'd wanted to test-run new pink wellies in the storm. They'd been huddled under an umbrella, watching the rain land in the water when he'd seen it. And here it was – at the exact same hotspot he'd told the team it would be, tucked up under the pontoon. No way could he have seen it down here in this visibility. You couldn't see down five inches from the pontoon.

'Flea?'

'Yeah, I was thinking – anyone up there ever known it be anything other than nil vis down here?'

A pause while Dundas consulted the team on the quayside. Then he came back. 'Negative, Sarge. No one.'

'Definitely nil vis about a hundred per cent of the time, then?'

'I'd say that's a high likelihood, Sarge. Why?'

She placed the hand back on the floor of the harbour. She'd come back to it with a limb kit – no way could she swim to the surface with it and lose forensic evidence – but now she held on to the search line and tried to think. She tried to catch an idea of how the witness had been able to see it, tried to hold on to the idea and work it out, but she couldn't nail it. Probably something to do with what she'd got up to last night. That or she

was getting older. Twenty-nine next month. Hey, Mum, how about that. I'm nearly twenty-nine. Never thought I'd get this far, did you?

'Sarge?'

She paid out the rope slowly, working against the surface attendant's pressure, making it look as if she was crawling back along the base of the quay. She adjusted the coms lead so the connection was secure.

'Yeah, sorry,' she said. 'Zoned out a bit there. Five bells, Rich. I've got the target. Coming up now.'

She stood on the harbour in the freezing cold, mask in her hand, her breath white in the air, and shivered while Dundas hosed her down. She'd been back down to recover the hand with the limb kit, the dive was over and this was the bit she hated, the shock of coming out of the water, the shock of being back with the sounds and the light and the people – and the air, like a slap in the face. It made her teeth chatter. And the harbour was dismal even though it was spring. The rain had stopped and now the weak afternoon sun picked out windows, the spiky cranes in the Great Western Dock opposite, oily rainbows floating on the water. They'd screened off an area of treated pine deck at the rear of a waterfront restaurant, the Moat, and her team in their fluorescent yellow surface jackets moved round the outdoor tables,

sorting their gear: air cylinders, communications system, standby raft, body board – all laid out between the standing pools of rainwater on the deck.

‘He was agreeing with you.’ Dundas turned off the hose and nodded to the restaurant’s plate-glass window where, his reflection smudged and dull, the crime-scene manager was looking down to where the hand lay at his feet in the opened yellow limb bag. ‘He thinks you’re right.’

‘I know.’ Flea sighed, putting down her mask and pulling off the two pairs of gloves all police divers wore for protection. ‘But you’d never know it to look at him, eh?’

It wasn’t the first, nor would it be the last body part she would fish out of the mud around Bristol, and except for what it said about the sadness and loneliness of death, usually a severed hand wasn’t remarkable. There’d be an explanation for it, something depressing and mundane, probably suicide. The press often watched the police operation with their zoom lenses from the other side of the harbour, but today there was no one at Redcliffe wharf. It was just too commonplace even for them. Only she, Dundas and the CSM knew that this hand wasn’t commonplace at all, that when the press heard what had slipped by them they’d be tying themselves in knots to get an interview.

It wasn’t decomposed. In fact, it was completely uninjured apart from the separation wound. So

damn fresh all the alarm bells had gone off at once. She'd pointed it out to the CSM, asked how on earth it could have got separated from its owner when to look at it there was no way it had just come apart from the body, not without some very particular injury, and if *she* had to take a guess those didn't look like fish bites but blade marks on the bones. And he'd said he couldn't possibly comment before the post-mortem, but wasn't she clever? Too clever by half to be spending her life under the water.

'Anyone spoken to the harbour master?' Flea asked now, as her surface attendant helped her off with her harness and cylinders. 'Asked what flow's been through here today?'

'Yes,' said Dundas, bending to coil away the jet-wash hose. She looked at the top of his head, at the vivid red beanie he always wore – otherwise, he said, he could heat a stadium with the warmth that came off his bald scalp. Under his fluorescent all-weather gear she knew he was tall and heftily built. Sometimes it was hard being a woman on her own, making decisions for nine men, half of them older than she was, but Dundas she never doubted. He was on her side through it all. A genius technician, he had a father's way with the staff and the gear, and, at times, a filthy, filthy mouth on him. Just now he was concentrating, and when he did that he was so good she could kiss him.

‘There’s been flow today, but not until after the sighting,’ he said.

‘The sluices?’

‘Yeah. Open this afternoon for twenty minutes at fourteen hundred. The harbour master had the dredger come down from the feeder canal to offload for a bit.’

‘And the call came in at?’

‘Thirteen fifty-five. Just as they were opening the sluices. Otherwise the harbour master would’ve waited. In fact, I’m sure he’d have waited, when I think how much they love us down here. How they’re always trying to bend over backwards for us.’

Flea hooked her fingers under the neoprene dry hood and rolled it up her neck, going gently over her face and head so it didn’t snag too much, because whenever she inspected her hoods they always seemed to be full of hairs pulled out by the roots, little pearls of skin attached. Sometimes she wondered why she wasn’t as bald as Dundas. She dropped the hood, wiped her nose and looked sideways across the water, up to Perrot’s bridge, the sunlight splashing gold on the twin horns, beyond it St Augustine’s Reach where the river Frome rose from underground and let into the harbour.

‘I dunno,’ she muttered. ‘It sounds backwards to me.’

‘What’s that?’

She shrugged, looked at the piece of grey flesh on the deck between the two men's feet and tried to work out how the witness could have seen the hand. But it wasn't happening. Her head kept seesawing – trying to take her with it. She reached out and sank on to one of the chairs, her hand to her forehead, knowing the blood had gone out of her face.

'All right there, Flea, old girl? Christ, you're really not looking much of it.'

She laughed and ran her fingers down her face. 'Yeah, well, don't feel much of it.'

Dundas squatted down in front of her. 'What's going on?'

She shook her head, looked down at her legs in the black dry suit, at the pools of water gathering round her dive boots. She had more diving hours under her belt than any of the team, and she was supposed to be in charge so it was wrong, all wrong, what she'd done last night.

'Oh, nothing,' she said, trying to keep it light. 'Nothing, really. The usual – I just can't sleep.'

'Still crap, then?'

She smiled at him, feeling the light catch at the raindrops in her eyes. As the unit leader she was a trainer too, and that meant sometimes putting herself in the water, at the bottom of the chain of command, giving the others a chance to be dive supervisor. In her heart she didn't like it. In her heart she was only really happy on days like today

when she'd put Dundas in as dive supervisor. He had a son – Jonah – a grown-up son who stole money from him and his ex-wife to feed a drug habit, yet gave his father all the feelings of guilt that Flea's brother Thom gave her, always. She and Dundas had a lot in common.

'Yeah,' she said eventually. 'It's still crap. Even after all this time.'

'Two years,' he said, putting a hand under her arm and helping her to stand up, 'is not a long time. But I can tell you one thing that'd help.'

'What?'

'*Eating* something for a change. Stupid thought, I know, but maybe it'd help you sleep.'

She gave him a weak smile and put a hand on his shoulder, letting him pick her up. 'You're right. I'd better eat. Is there anything in the van?'

## 2

The Station had been the police boathouse before it was sold and renovated, and because of that the new owner said it'd be all wrong if he couldn't return the favour now and let the police use it in their hour of need. He'd given them a room at the back of the restaurant, next to the kitchens, and it was warmer in there than in the van. It used to be the police locker room; now it was the staff's changing area. Their street clothes hung on hooks, outdoor boots and bags tucked underneath the bench that ran all the way round.

While Dundas went off to ferret in the kitchens, Flea slung down her black holdall and began to get undressed. She peeled the dry suit and the force-issue navy thermals down to her waist. Keeping the thermals on, she rolled the dry suit down to her ankles, kicking off the dive boots. She paused and stared at her feet because she was

alone and could afford to. She flexed them and inspected the little part between her toes, rubbing at the flaps of skin, making them go red. Webs. Webbing on her feet like a frog. ‘Frog girl’, they should call her. She took the piece of skin between the big toe and the next one and dug in her nails. Pain bolted up her body and lit her brain white, but she held on. She closed her eyes and concentrated on it, letting the heat move round her veins. The force counsellor at their six-month meeting had told Flea she needed to show someone her feet and talk about the way this problem had developed – and just remind me now? When did this skin appear? Was it about the time of the accident?

But she hadn’t shown anyone. Not the counsellor, not the doctor. One day she’d need an operation, she supposed. She’d wait, though, until there was pain, or loss of movement, or something that might stop her diving.

A sound behind her, and she fumbled her socks out of her holdall and pulled them on quickly. Dundas came in holding a ciabatta wrapped in a flower-sprigged paper napkin, raising an eyebrow when he saw her sitting in her bra and rolled-down thermals, her hands wrapped protectively round her feet.

‘Uh – maybe get some clothes on? The deputy SIO’s coming down to tie things up. Told him where to find us.’

She pulled on a T-shirt, picked up a towel and began to rub her hair vigorously. ‘Where’s the SIO, then?’

‘Got a meeting about Operation Atrium – not interested in us lollygagging around with a hand on the harbour front. Doesn’t think the Major Crime Unit should be bothering with us. He was off twenty minutes ago.’

‘I’m glad. Don’t like him,’ she said, thinking about the briefing earlier on. The on-call senior investigating officer had been okayish, but she’d never forgotten the look on his face when he’d first seen her at a dive briefing three years ago: just like all the other SIOs, sort of depressed because there he was, waiting for someone with a bit of authority, someone who’d answer the questions about the water, and what he got instead of reassurance was Flea – twenty-six and skinny, with lots of hair and these blue child’s eyes that were so wide spaced she looked as if she wouldn’t be able to open a bank account, let alone pull a dead body out of the mud under four metres of water. But they mostly did that to her, the senior ranks. At first it had been a challenge. Now it just pissed her off.

‘Well?’ She dropped the towel. ‘Who’s his deputy, then? Someone out of Kingswood?’

‘Someone new. No one I’ve heard of.’

‘What’s his name?’

‘Can’t remember. One of those who sounds like

a wasted old Irish soak. Old-school – beer and takeways. High blood pressure. Type who every year sends someone younger with a snide ID to do his bleep test for him.’

She smiled and peered down at her arms, flexing her biceps. ‘Don’t say the bleep word. Annual medical in two weeks’ time.’

‘Up to Napier Miles, is it, Sarge? Need to start eating, then.’ He pushed the ciabatta at her. ‘Protein drinks. Ice-cream. McDonald’s. Look at you. Underweight is the new overweight – didn’t you know?’

She took the sandwich and began to eat. Dundas watched her. It was funny the way he seemed protective of her when she was his boss. Dundas never wasted time lecturing his son. Instead he saved it for Flea. She chewed, thinking he was someone she could tell – explain what was really going on, explain what had happened last night.

She was trying to sort out the words, get them into a line, when behind them the door opened and a voice said, ‘You the divers? The ones pulled the hand up?’

A man in his mid-thirties, medium height, wearing a grey suit, stood in the doorway holding a cup of machine coffee. He had a determined sort of face and lots of dark hair cut short. ‘Where is it, then?’ he said, leaning inwards, one hand on the doorframe, looking round the changing room.

‘There’s no one on the quayside except your team.’

Neither of them spoke.

‘Hello?’

Flea came back to herself with a jolt. She swallowed her mouthful and hastily wiped crumbs from her mouth with the back of her hand. ‘Yeah, sorry. You are?’

‘DI Jack Caffery. Deputy SIO. Who are you?’

‘She’s Flea,’ Dundas said. ‘Sergeant Flea Marley.’

Caffery gave him a strange look. Then he studied her, and she could see right away he was holding something in under his expression. She thought she knew what. Men didn’t like working alongside a girl who just squeaked in at under five five in her diving boots. Either that or she had crumbs on her T-shirt.

‘Flea?’ he said. ‘*Flea?*’

‘It’s a nickname.’ She got to her feet, holding out her hand to shake. ‘The name’s Phoebe Marley. Unit Sergeant Phoebe Marley.’

He looked down at her hand, as if it was something alien. Then, as if he’d remembered where he was, he shook it firmly. He released it quickly, and the moment he did Flea stepped away, out of his space. She sat down and self-consciously brushed the front of her T-shirt, off balance again. That was something else that pissed her off. She wasn’t very good around men.

At least, not this sort of man. They made her think about things she'd put behind her.

'So?' he said. '*Flea*. Where's this hand you pulled out of the water?'

'Coroner's let it go,' said Dundas. 'Didn't anyone say?'

'No.'

'Well, he did. The CSM sent someone to Southmeads with it. But it won't be done till tomorrow.'

'Pull a lot of hands out of the water round here, then?'

'Yup,' said Dundas. 'Got a collection up at Southmeads. Feet, hands, a leg or two.'

'And where are they coming from?'

'Suicides, mostly. Down in the Avon nine times out of ten. She's got a tidal race on her like you've never seen – things get bashed around a bit, hit with trees, debris. Get pieces turning up round here, right, left and arsenal.'

Caffery shot his hand out from his suit sleeve and checked his watch. 'OK, then. I'm done here.'

He had the door open and was halfway out when he went a little still, his back to them, his hand on the door, facing out into the kitchen corridor, maybe feeling the two of them watching him silently.

He took a few beats, then turned back.

'What?' he said, looking from Dundas to Flea

and back again. 'It's a suicide. What do you usually do with a suicide?'

'If we haven't got a hotspot? If we haven't got a witness?'

'Yeah?'

'We, uh, wait for it to float.' Flea went softly on the word 'float': in the team they used it so often they'd got easy with it, forgot sometimes what it meant: that a corpse had to get so full of decomposition gases it rose to the surface. 'We let it float, then do a surface snatch. In this weather that'd be in a couple of weeks' time.'

'That's what I thought. It's what they do in London.' He started to go again, but this time he must have seen Dundas throw a glance across at Flea, because he paused. He closed the door and came back into the room. 'OK,' he said slowly. 'You're trying to explain something to me. Only problem is, I haven't a clue what.'

Flea took a breath. She turned her chair, put her elbows on her knees and sat canted forward, meeting his eye. 'Didn't the CSM tell you? Didn't he say we don't think it's a suicide?'

'You just said you get a million suicides out here.'

'Yes – in the Avon. If it was in the Avon we'd understand it. But it's not. This was in the harbour.'

She got up and stood, half holding the chair as if it would protect her. She didn't show it, but she

was conscious of the way he was tall and sort of lean under his suit. She knew if she got closer she'd stare or something, because she'd already noticed a few things about him – like the point above his collar where his five o'clock shadow started. 'We're not the pathologists,' she said. 'We shouldn't be telling you anything. But something's not right.' She licked her lips and glanced sideways at Dundas. 'I mean, first off it's been in the water less than a day. A body's not ready to come to bits in rough water until a long, long time after it's floated. This one's way too fresh for that.'

Caffery put his head on one side, raised his eyebrows.

'Yes. And if it was wildlife chewed it off – fish, the harbour rats, maybe – there'd be bites all over it. There aren't any. The only injury is . . .' she held up her hand and circled a thumb and finger round her wrist ' . . . is here. Right here where it came away from the arm. The CSM's with me on all of this.'

Caffery stood in front of her, looking at her hair and her thin arms in the thermals. She hated it. She never quite felt her skin was on properly when she was surface-side, where other people did sophisticated things with their relationships – and that was why she'd always be better under the water. Mum, she thought, Mum, you'd know how to do this. You'd know to look normal, not surly like me.

‘Well?’ he said, studying her thoughtfully. ‘What could have made an injury like that?’

‘Could have been a boating accident, maybe. But those happen further out – in the estuary. Then there’s people coming off Clifton Bridge. Suicide Bridge, we call it. If someone takes a dive round here, nine times out of ten it’s off there. They can get dragged up and down the river and sometimes, *sometimes*, if the tide’s right, they’ll get washed quite a long way upstream.’ She shrugged. ‘I suppose theoretically if they’d come off the bridge, got cut by a boat out in the river, a stray hand might’ve *just* got past the stop gates, ended up in the harbour. Or come up through the Cut.’ She pushed her hair behind her ears. ‘But no. That’s impossible.’

‘Impossible,’ said Dundas. ‘It’s about a million to one. And even if it came from the Frome River or higher up the Avon, down through Netham lock and into the feeder canal . . .’

‘. . . it would only have happened if there was flow in the harbour, which is usually when the sluice gates are open.’

‘Which happened only once in the last two days. After the sighting was called in. We checked.’

‘You’re saying it was dumped?’

‘We’re not saying anything. Not our job.’

‘But it was dumped?’

They exchanged a glance. ‘It’s not our job,’ they said simultaneously.

Caffery looked from Flea to Dundas and back. 'OK,' he said. 'It was dumped.' He checked his watch again. 'Right – so what shifts are you two on today? What do I need to do to keep you in the water?'

'Oh, I shouldn't worry about that if I were you.' Dundas smiled, getting his all-weather gear off the hook and pulling it on. 'We haven't signed off with the harbour master yet. And, anyway, we're always interested in overtime. Aren't we, Sarge?'

# 3

## 25 November

All he's ever wanted to do is get off the gear. It'd sound crazy to anyone who's seen him spending 100 per cent of his time and energy on scoring to hear that actually what he wants, what he really wants more than anything, is to see a way through it all and get clean. It's November and he's standing with Bag Man, the one they call 'BM', in the shadow of the tower block, over by the waste disposals where most of the dealing is done. A grey autumn wind is whipping up the litter and the plastic bags. BM is wearing a grey hoodie with 'Malcolm X' written on the breast pocket, even though he's white, and Mossy is raging because BM's just told him there's no more credit.

'What?' Mossy says, because he and BM have serious history and there's no reason for him to go cold like this so suddenly. 'What the fuck're you talking about?'

‘Sorry,’ BM says, looking at him really straight. ‘S all gone too far. Can’t help you this time, man, not any more. This is the end of the line.’ He pinches Mossy’s arm and pulls him closer. ‘It’s time you got yourself into counselling.’

‘Counselling? What d’you mean, counselling?’

‘Don’t push me, mate. Given you a tip. Don’t push me more.’

Mossy does try, though, just a bit more, tries to convince BM to give him something, just a little something. But BM’s determined and digs in his heels, and in the end the only avenue for Mossy is to slouch away, half thinking about killing BM and half thinking about what he’s said about counselling. He surprises himself to find that by the afternoon he’s in the West of the City, going into a counselling session in a weird little clinic with an old woman receptionist who is honestly totally scary. One day this action alone, the action of walking into that clinic, will be enough for Mossy to blame everything on BM.

The session’s weird. Everyone dotted around the room – not meeting each other’s eyes. One of them’s got a two-litre bottle of spring water and keeps sucking it like it’ll save his life. Mossy sits there with his elbows on his knees and pretends to be interested in them, talking in their monotones about how life isn’t fair, because that’s what he’s noticed about people on H. They always feel self-pity and he hopes he doesn’t sound like that. But

all the time he's looking at them, what he's really wondering is whether one has some gear and which one'll feel sorry enough for him to share a bit. So he wheels out the story – like how he was abused by his uncle, how he learned to jack up when he was thirteen, and all the stuff with the drug treatment and testing orders he's served and the prostitution and how that came really early, when he wasn't even fifteen, and he rambles on, even though he can feel the moderator, a worked-out guy who got clean years ago and owes something to society, staring at him, staring into his eyes, and Mossy thinks he's getting sympathy here, thinks he's maybe the only one here who has a really good reason to be this hooked. But then, when he's finished, the moderator goes: 'Mossy? Mossy? Where'd you get a name like that?'

He shrugs. 'Dunno. Mates made it up. Cos I'm skin and bones, me, like that model. Y'know, Kate Moss.'

There's a bit of a silence and no one looks at him, except the moderator, who stares a bit more.

'You don't think that could be considered offensive?' he goes, and there's sort of a note in his voice that Mossy knows is all wrong, like a warning. So it's time to get out, and he mumbles something about not meaning to offend no one, and waits for the subject to change. Then he gets up, quiet as he can, stashes the plastic chair

against the wall, and goes outside. He walks away from the clinic, lights a roll-up and finds a place a little down the road where he can see the front of the clinic and everyone coming out of the doors, and he waits, feeling the cramps coming slowly through him from front to back. They're the worst of the agonies, the cramps, the first to come and the last to leave. He sits down and hugs his belly, wondering if there's a karsi round here. It's a warm day and that helps, and if he keeps humming it'll take his mind off it.

After a while the doors open. He can feel the moderator staring at him, but he's not going to be intimidated, so he waits while the others come out. He's like a hyena, picking off the softest-looking ones who go round the edge of the pack, the ones who'll fall for a story – you can spot them, something about the hope in their eyes: like they really believe people can be redeemed. Mossy waits till they pass, then falls into stride next to them, hands in his pockets, head down a little so he can sway it a little sideways and mutter, 'Got anything to help me, there? Hmm? Just a little? I'll pay you back. Can promise you that.' But they mutter and cross the road heads down, like they don't want to be seen with him, leaving him standing there, the sweats starting, and the itching, and when he walks back to his spot he can feel his kneebones rubbing each other raw. Is that because he's too thin or is it something else?

Is it because of something weird his skin is doing?

When they've disappeared he tries to bum some money from a passer-by, but she walks past, eyes on the distance, so after a while he decides to go down the docks, see if there's anything happening down there. Maybe one of them from the Barton Hill estate'll be there in a good mood. If not, he'll think again.

He's just got up and is ambling along when it happens. One minute he's on his own thinking bad thoughts, next minute, walking next to him is this tiny, skinny black guy with his hair real tight against his skull and a bit of a moustache. He's wearing jeans that've been factory faded down the front of the legs and an olive-green Kappa jacket, the hood sort of draped round his head, and Mossy recognizes him from the counselling session – he was sitting in the corner. But the main thing Mossy notices is the way he walks: like he's oiled. Like he wasn't born here on the dry Bristol streets, but in a better place. Like he's used to walking the bush day after day after day.

'You looking for something?' he goes. 'You looking for something?'

Mossy stops. 'Yeah,' he goes, 'but I'm skint.'

And what's weird is that instead of the whack to the head he expects the skinny guy looks Mossy in the eyes and says, 'No worries about the money. No worries. I know someone who can help you.'

And that, of course, is how it all starts.