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PART ONE

Inside

ONE

The screaming started at three in the morning. Tabitha had never heard a human being howl in that way before. It was like the screeching of an animal caught in a trap and it was answered by shouts, distant, echoing. Tabitha couldn't tell whether they were cries of comfort or anger or mockery. The screams subsided into sobs but even these were amplified by the metal, the doors, the stairs and floors. Tabitha felt they were echoing inside her head.

She sensed a movement from the bunk above her. The other woman must be awake.

'Someone's in trouble.'

There was silence. Tabitha wondered if the woman was ignoring her or really was asleep, but then a voice came out of the darkness. She was speaking slowly, as if she were talking to herself. Her voice was low and gravelly, a smoker's morning voice.

'Everyone's in trouble,' she said. 'That's why they're here. That's why they're crying, when they think about their children or what they did. Or what they did to

their children. When there's real trouble, you don't hear any screams. You just hear the screws running along the corridors. When it's really bad, you hear a helicopter landing out on the field. That's happened three times, four times, since I've been here.'

'What's that for?' asked Tabitha.

'What do you think?'

Tabitha tried not to think about what a helicopter landing in the middle of the night meant. She tried not to think at all. But she failed. As she lay staring up at the bottom of the bunk above her, as she heard the sobs and the shouts and then another burst of crying from someone else, she had a sudden feeling of absolute clarity piercing the murk: this was real.

Up to now, it had all been so strange, so completely outside her experience, that it had felt like a lopsided fairy tale about someone else going to prison, someone she was reading about or watching in a film, even when she herself was experiencing it. When she was sitting in the tiny, windowless compartment in the van that brought her from the court; when she took her clothes off and squatted and was stared at and examined and heard a woman laugh about her small breasts and hairy armpits; when she stood in the shower afterwards. She had been issued with sheets and an itchy blue blanket and a thin towel and escorted through door after door. The doors really were made of heavy metal. They really did clang shut. The warders really did carry huge bunches of keys attached on chains to their belts. The prison was so prison-like.

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Yesterday afternoon, as she was escorted through the central hall, lined with cells on both sides and on the floor above, she felt stared at by women standing in groups. She wanted to say: this isn't real. I'm not one of you. I don't belong here.

She lay there on her bunk trying not to think of that, trying not to replay it in her mind, over and over again. But even that was better than thinking of where she was, right now, this minute, in this space.

Tabitha had never liked lifts. What if they fell? What if they got stuck? She always took the stairs. When she went to London, she hated the Underground. Once she had been on a train in the rush hour, standing up, crammed among the hot bodies, and the train had stopped between tunnels. There had been a muffled announcement, which she couldn't understand. It had stopped for five minutes, ten minutes. It was in the summer and the heat was stifling. Gradually Tabitha had thought of the solid clay and brick between her and the surface. And then she had thought of how she was in the middle of a train that was stuffed with people in carriage after carriage in front of her and carriage after carriage behind her. She had felt an impulse, which she could barely stifle, to scream and scream and fight her way out.

Now she was in a cell, four paces long, three paces wide. There was a tiny, barred window. It looked out on a yard, beyond that a wall topped with barbed wire, and beyond that, you could just make out the hills, hazy in the distance. Yesterday she had looked out of

that window and she had thought she saw a little shape moving on that hill. Someone walking. Someone outside. Someone free. But now it was dark and there was nothing but the spotlights illuminating the yard. The door of the cell would stay locked until the middle of the morning. When she thought about it, she felt like she was buried alive and wanted to yell for someone to come and rescue her. Perhaps that was what that woman had been howling about.

If Tabitha couldn't scream, then perhaps she could cry. But she knew that if she cried, she wouldn't be able to stop. And probably it wasn't good to be seen crying.

It was very cold, and the single blanket was inadequate. She drew her knees up almost to her chest and lay hugging herself in the darkness. She smelled different. Of prison soap and hair that needed washing, something slightly mouldy. She closed her eyes and thought of the sea, waves swelling and cresting on to the rocky shore. Thoughts came in long dark curls and she tried to push them away. There was another scream, then someone banged on a door far away.

Although it felt impossible, she must have slept a little because she was woken by the woman sliding down from the top bunk. It seemed to take a long time. Her feet came first, long, with purple-painted toenails, a tattoo of a spider on the right ankle. Then her legs in grey jogging pants, on and on. Then a black tee shirt riding up to show a ring in the belly button. Finally, a smooth oval face, long thick dark hair with a fringe, circular hoops in her earlobes. She was very tall, maybe

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six feet, and looked strong; in her late twenties perhaps, although it was hard to judge. Tabitha hadn't seen her last night, not really. She'd just climbed into her bed and pulled the blanket over her head and lain there.

'Hi,' she said now.

The woman didn't reply. She went across the cell and opened the little curtain.

That was another thing. The cell had been built for one person. Now it had bunk beds, two chairs, two narrow tables, two tiny chests, a sink and a lavatory with a little curtain rigged up in front of it. The woman tugged her trousers down and sat on the bowl. Her face was quite expressionless; it was as if she were alone. Tabitha turned to the wall, wrapping herself in the blanket so that she couldn't hear.

The lavatory flushed and taps were running. Tabitha waited till the woman was done, then climbed out of her bed and washed herself under her arms, splashed water on her face. Then she pulled on canvas trousers, a tee shirt and a sweatshirt. She slid out her trainers from under the bed.

'I'm Tabitha,' she said.

The woman was methodically brushing her hair. She looked down at her. *She must be almost a foot taller than me*, thought Tabitha.

'You told me that last night.'

There was a pause.

'What's your name?' asked Tabitha.

'Michaela. I told you that as well.'

There was a rattling sound at the door and it was

unlocked and pushed inwards. A stringy, colourless woman was standing next to a trolley with two stainless steel urns on it.

‘Tea,’ said Michaela.

‘Tea,’ repeated Tabitha.

The woman filled two mugs and handed them across.

Tabitha’s breakfast pack was on the table. She opened it and laid it out: a plastic bowl, a plastic spoon, a miniature pack of Rice Krispies, a small carton of UHT milk, two slices of brown bread wrapped in polythene, foil-wrapped butter, a little tub of raspberry jam. There was no knife so she spread the butter and the jam on the bread with the handle of her spoon.

She couldn’t remember when she had last had a meal and she ate the sandwiches in quick bites. The bread was dry but she helped it down with gulps of her tea. She tipped the cereal into the bowl and poured the milk over it. The milk was warm and had a sour under-taste. It almost made her gag, but she ate it all and when she was finished she tipped the bowl to drink the last of the milk. She still felt hungry.

She sat on the lavatory behind the thin curtain. She felt like an animal. As she sat there, her trousers around her ankles, she felt as if lights were flashing and there was a ringing in her ears. She suddenly thought of smashing her face into the wall, over and over again, something that might bring relief, that might make all of this stop.

Instead, she wiped herself, pulled up her trousers, washed her hands and sat back on her bed against the

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wall. She didn't have anything to read and she didn't have anything to do. The day felt shapeless and vast. Anyway, if she had sat there reading, that would feel like this was now her life instead of a nightmarish mistake, a mistake that would be corrected when everyone realised that she didn't belong here and let her go.

Michaela was leaning over the sink, brushing her teeth. She was taking a long time over it. She spat into the sink, bent down and drank straight from the tap. She stood up, leaned her head back and gargled noisily. Tabitha felt like everything was turned up too high: the noises, the smells, the physical proximity of the other woman. Michaela pulled her hair back in a ponytail, then walked out of the cell. A few seconds later she walked back in. She leaned back on the desk and looked down at Tabitha.

'Don't just sit there.'

Tabitha didn't reply. It felt too much of an effort.

'It's worse if you do that. I know, I've been here for fourteen months.'

'What did you do?'

Michaela stared at her, her face quite expressionless. 'Did they give you the bit of paper with all the shit about exercise and showers and when the library's open?'

'I've got it somewhere,' said Tabitha. 'But I don't care about all that. It's just a mistake.'

'Yeah? Well, don't think you can just hide in here and get through without anyone noticing. It's like a school playground. The little girl who stands in the corner wanting to be left alone, she's the one who gets

picked on. You need to get up. You need to get up and get a shower.'

'I don't feel like it. Not today.'

Michaela reached under the little table that was reserved for Tabitha.

'Here.' She tossed Tabitha the towel she'd been issued with on her arrival. 'You take the towel and the soap and you have a shower.'

She went out of the cell, leaving the door open. Tabitha got to her feet. She was cold to her bones. She looked out of the little barred window again: the sky was white. *It might snow*, she thought. That would be something: feathery flakes falling thickly just a few inches from where she stood, covering everything in a blanket of unfamiliarity.

She took the towel and the soap from the side of the sink and walked into the central hall that was echoey with sounds: footfall and doors and voices raised, laughter, coughs, the slap of a mop. A very thin woman with long white hair and her face a muddle of wrinkles hobbled towards her. She wore a thick brown dress to her shins and her hands were swollen with arthritis. She was holding a bundle of papers clutched to her chest.

'You're here too,' she said, smiling.

'Yes, I'm here too,' said Tabitha. She walked the length of the hall and into the little wing reserved for showers. The showers were in a row of stalls. Along the far wall was a wooden bench and hooks. Women were pulling clothes on and off. The tiled floor was wet and there was the smell of soap and sweat and bodies. She

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had a memory of school changing rooms that was so pungent it hurt. She slowly took her clothes off, looking at the wall so she didn't catch anyone's eye. Before she took off her knickers, she wrapped herself in the thin worn towel, like a shy teenager on a beach, and then eased them down.

Inside a free stall she pulled the curtain across and hung the towel from a hook. She turned the tap and a tiny trickle of water emerged from the shower head. She tried to twist the tap further but it wouldn't go.

'You need to bang it,' said a voice. 'Bang the pipe.'

She tapped the pipe. Nothing happened.

'Harder,' said the voice. 'Really hard.'

She made a fist and hit the pipe. There was a little spluttering, coughing sound and the trickle became a faint stream, just enough to wet herself all over. But there was nothing good about it, nothing to lose herself in, nothing to comfort her.