

# Skin

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Extract

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# 1

Human skin is an organ. The biggest organ in the body, it comprises the dermis, the epidermis and a subcutaneous fatty layer. If it were to be removed intact and spread out it would cover an area just under two square metres. It has weight too: with all that protein and adherent fat, it has enormous bulk. The skin of a healthy adult male would weigh ten to fifteen kilos, depending on his size. The same as a large toddler.

The skin of a woman, on the other hand, would weigh marginally less. It would cover a smaller area too.

Most middle-aged men, even the ones who live alone in a remote part of Somerset, wouldn't have given any thought to what a woman would look like without her skin. Neither would they have cause to wonder what her skin would look like stretched and pinned out on a workbench.

But, then, most men are not like this man.

This man is a different sort of person altogether.

## 2

Deep in the rain-soaked Mendip Hills of Somerset lie eight flooded limestone quarries. Long disused, they have been numbered by the owners from one to eight, and are arranged in a horseshoe shape. Number eight, at the most south-easterly point, nearly touches the end of what is called locally the Elf's Grotto system, a network of dripping caves and passages that reach deep into the ground. Local folklore has it there are secret exits from this cave system leading into the old Roman lead mines, that in ancient times the elves of Elf's Grotto used the tunnels as escape routes. Some say that because of all the twentieth-century blasting, these tunnels now open directly into the flooded quarries.

Sergeant 'Flea' Marley, the head of Avon and Somerset's underwater search unit, slid into quarry number eight at just after four on a clear May afternoon. She wasn't thinking about secret entrances. She wasn't looking for holes in the wall. She was thinking about a woman who'd been missing for three days. The woman's name was Lucy Mahoney, and the professionals on the surface believed her corpse might be down here, somewhere in this vast expanse of water, curled in the weeds on one of these ledges.

Flea descended to ten metres, wiggling her jaw from side to side to equalize the pressure in her ears. At this depth the water was

an eerie, almost petrol blue – just the faintest milky limestone dust hanging where her fins had stirred it up. Perfect. Usually the water she dived was ‘nil vis’ – like swimming through soup, everything having to be done by touch alone – but down here she could see at least three metres ahead. She moved away from her entry point, handholding herself along the quarry wall until the pressure on her lifeline was constant. She could see every detail, every wafting plant, every quarried boulder on the floor. Every place a body might have come to rest.

‘Sarge?’ PC Wellard, her surface attendant, spoke into the comms mike. His voice came into her ear as if he was standing right next to her. ‘See anything?’

‘Yes,’ she murmured. ‘Into the future.’

‘Eh?’

‘I can see into the future, Wellard. I see me coming out of here in an hour freezing cold. I see disappointment on everyone’s face that I’m empty-handed.’

‘How come?’

‘Dunno. Just don’t think she’s down here. It feels wrong. How long’s she been missing?’

‘Two and a half days.’

‘And her car. Where was it parked?’

‘Half a mile away. On the B3135.’

‘They thought she was depressed?’

‘Her ex was interviewed for the misper report. He’s adamant she wasn’t.’

‘And there’s nothing else linking her to the quarry? No belongings? She’d not been here before or anything?’

‘No.’

Flea finned on, the umbilical lead – the air and communication line that linked her to the surface – trailing gently behind. Quarry number eight was a notorious suicide spot. Maybe the police search adviser, Stuart Pearce, disagreed with the family about

Lucy Mahoney's state of mind. Maybe that was why he'd put this particular pin in the map and detailed them to do this search. Either that or he was grasping at straws. She'd encountered Stuart Pearce before. She thought it was the latter.

'Could she swim, Wellard? I forgot to ask.'

'Yeah. She was a good swimmer.'

'Then if she's a suicide she'll have weighted herself down. A rucksack or something. Which means she'll be near the edge. Let's run this pendulum search pattern out to ten metres. No way she'll be further out than that. Then we'll switch to the other side of the quarry.'

'Uh, Sarge, there's a problem with that. You do that pattern and it'll take you to deeper than fifty metres.'

Wellard had the quarry schematic. Flea had already studied it surfaceside. When the quarry company had made finger-shaped holes to pack explosives they'd used ten-metre-long drills, which meant that the quarry, before they'd turned off the pumps and allowed it to flood, had been blasted away in ten-metre slices. At one end it was between twenty and thirty metres. At the other end it was deeper. It dropped to more than fifty metres. The Health and Safety Executive's rules were clear: no police diver was cleared to dive deeper than fifty. Ever.

'Sarge? Did you hear me? You'll be down to fifty metres at the end of this arc. Maybe more.'

She cleared her throat. 'Did you eat all the banana bread?'

'Eh?'

That morning before work she'd baked banana bread for the team. It wasn't the sort of thing she usually did. She was the boss but she'd never been mumsy with them – she was the second youngest, only Wellard was younger. And it wasn't because she loved cooking either. They'd had a bad, bad time recently: one of them was on compassionate leave and probably wouldn't be back after what he'd gone through earlier that week. And then

there'd been her foul moods, too: a nightmare to live with for the last two years. She had to give them something in return every now and then.

'We ate it. But, Sarge, some of those pockets are way over fifty deep. We're supposed to get one of those maniac techie divers in to do something like this.'

'Whose side are you on, Wellard? Ours or the HSE's?'

Silence. Or, rather, the sound of Wellard's silent grumbling. When it came to being an old woman Wellard had the whole team beat hands down. 'OK. But if you're going to do it I'm turning this voice panel down. The whole quarry can hear you and we've got a viewing gallery today.'

'Who?'

'There's a traffic unit cruised by to get a look, sitting up there on the grout dunes. Think they're having their coffee.'

'I don't suppose the audience includes that tit of a search adviser, does it?'

'Not yet.'

'Nice,' she said, sarcastic now. 'Just, it's sometimes considered etiquette for the search adviser to get his arse out of bed when he's hauled a team out like this.'

She slowed. In the darkening water ahead a net was slung across her path. Beyond it was the fifty-metre section, where the water was darker and bluer. Colder. It was such uncertain territory that the company had rigged up netting to prevent access to the recreational divers who sometimes used the quarry for practice. She gripped the net, clicked on her divelight and shone it through to where the quarry floor dropped precipitously away.

She might have had only one previous encounter with Pearce but it was enough. She wasn't going to let him get one up on her. Even if it meant breaking all her professional rules and going deeper than fifty, she was damned if she wasn't going to complete the search. There was a sign set in concrete to her right, the words

covered in algae. *Danger: depths exceeding fifty metres. Random checks on dive computers are in force in this quarry. Do not dive beyond your capabilities.*

Good place to hang your dive computer, she thought, touching the sign. Just take your wrist unit off, hang it on one of the nails, then collect it on the way back up. No one checking later would be any the wiser that you'd gone deeper than fifty, and the surface unit didn't generate a computerized dive record. It was the sort of trick Dad had pulled when he was alive. An extreme-sports diver, he'd do anything to push the limits, get to the depth he wanted to be.

She used her dive knife to make a cut in the netting, then carefully slipped off her dive computer and hooked it on to the sign. Switching on her torch she slid through into the enclosure, following the beam down into the darkness.

With her compass lubber line set hard against the north-west notch she began to swim down, down and down, following the lie of the rock, keeping about two metres from the bottom. Wellard paid out the lifeline behind her. The schematic was accurate – it was deep here. She went slowly, letting the torch guide her, doing sums in her head. No computer. She'd have to work out bottom times and decompression stops in her head.

A movement in the dark to her right. She whipped the torch towards it and stared into the beam, keeping herself steady in the water, letting herself float horizontally. There weren't any fish in quarry number eight. It had been flooded for years now and the company hadn't introduced any stock. No nearby rivers so there probably wouldn't even be crayfish. And, anyway, that movement hadn't been a fish. It had been too big.

Her heart beat low in her chest. She kept her breathing steady – too deep and she'd start to rise, too shallow and she'd lose buoyancy. Nothing should, or could, be moving down here: there were no currents in the quarry. Everything should be motionless.

She began to swim towards where she'd seen the movement.

'Sarge?' Surfaceside, Wellard had noticed the diversion instantly. 'Everything OK?'

'Yeah, yeah. Give me another bar.'

As she went deeper it was Wellard's job, as the panel operator, to increase the pressure of the air reaching her down the umbilical lead. She turned and shone the torch behind her, trying to see how far back the netting was. She was probably at about forty-seven metres deep and still going down. Just another three metres to the HSE limit. 'Yeah – up it to sixteen.'

'Sixteen bar? That'll put you at—'

'I know what it'll put me at. Let me worry about it, not you.'

She swam on, her hands out now because she wasn't sure what she was going to see. Forty-eight metres, forty-nine. She was at the place where the movement had been.

'Sarge? Do you know what depth you're at?'

'Just hold it,' she whispered. 'Hold me steady.'

She turned the torch upwards and looked up. It was uncomfortable with her mask wanting to lift off and let water in. She pressed it to her face with her fingertips and stared into the effervescent silvery stream of bubbles marching determinedly above her in a long column – up towards a surface that was too far away to see. Something was in that column. She was sure of it. Something dark was swimming up through the procession of darkness and air. A shiver went through her. Were those the naked soles of someone's feet?

'Sarge – that's it. You're over fifty. Can you hear me?'

'Hey, Wellard,' she whispered, looking up to where the bubbles had cleared now, dispersed into nothing but frosty jags of light. Now, suddenly, everything looked as it should. The water was empty. 'Is there anyone else in here?'

'Anyone else?'

'Yeah,' she hissed, not wanting to sound scared. She hoped he'd



turned the comms panel down. Didn't want her voice broadcast across the water to every person on the quarryside. 'Is anyone swimming around in here with me? You'd have seen them getting in.'

There was a pause, a hesitation. Then the voice, a little cautious. 'Boss? You know you're well over, don't you? Maybe it's time to put the standby in.'

Narcosis, he meant. At this depth it would be easy to succumb to the disorienting, poisonous effect that nitrogen could have at high pressure – her reactions and thoughts were as they'd be if she'd been in the pub all afternoon. A hallucination like this would be classic narcosis stuff. She stared up after the bubbles. It had been something dark, the size of a large turtle. But not with a shell. It was something smooth and hairless, with agility and strength. With the feet of a human being.

'I'm not narked, Wellard, I swear. I'm fine. Just reassure me there's no one else swimming around down here. That's all.'

'There's no one in there. OK? And the standby's getting ready now.'

'No.' Her umbilical had snagged on a ledge or a rock behind her. Irritably she lifted her shoulders, waved her right hand in the air to free it and felt it pop easily away from the rock or ledge, freeing her. 'No need for anyone else. I'm nearly done here anyway.'

Wellard was right, of course. If this was narcosis she should get out. But she wanted one more minute to check that she'd searched everything, so, tilting herself back down, liking the way it eased the pressure on her mask, she pointed the torch ahead. There, about ten yards away, was the bottom of the wall, the edge of the quarry. She'd come as far as she could and there wasn't any doubt about it: Lucy Mahoney wasn't here. Good. She'd been right. She was going to enjoy surfacing and sending Pearce the message that he'd been wrong.

The rubber seals of her mask sucked tight against her face. And locked.

She groped at the mask. Tried to take a breath. Nothing came, just more tightening of the seals and a familiar pressure under her sternum. She knew this feeling well from all her training sessions. No air was getting through. She fumbled at the side of the mask above her right ear. This wasn't going to be a problem. The surface crew were pumping air down to her – she couldn't run out. But just occasionally the umbilical got tangled with the positive/negative pressure lever on the mask and cut off the supply. It was easy to solve. If you kept calm. Easy.

Heart thudding she found the lever, flicked it down and went for another breath. Her ribs tried. Wouldn't inflate. Quickly she snapped the lever back down.

Nothing.

Up. Nothing.

'Sarge?' Wellard sounded panicky. 'What's going on? What's happening?'

But there was no air in her lungs to answer. Her arms were aching. Her head was pounding as if it had swollen to twice its size. Someone could have been standing on her chest. Her head jerked back, her mouth gaped. She groped for the switch block on the side of her vest. Tried to get her air supply to transfer to the Scuba bail-out system.

'Sarge? I've opened all my valves but there's air haemorrhaging from somewhere. Have you got pressure?'

She knew what would be happening up there. The standby diver would be fumbling himself into his equipment, getting his fingers tangled in the mask spiders in his panic, forgetting everything. Legs like jelly. He wouldn't be in time for her. She had seconds left, not minutes.

Numbly she batted at the switchblock again. Couldn't find it. Her head swelled harder and tighter now. Her limbs were tingling.

‘I’m going to have to pull you out, Sarge – having to make assumptions here.’

She’d stopped listening. Time had slowed and it was in a different world – on a distant planet – that Wellard was pulling frantically at the lifeline, dragging her out. She knew her limp body was jerking backwards in the water. She felt her fingers lose their grip on the torch, felt it bump lazily against her leg as it sank. She didn’t try to stop it.

In the gloom, about ten metres away, something that looked like a white jellyfish had appeared. Not the same thing she’d hallucinated earlier, but something else, something that billowed, moving up and down in eerie corkscrew shapes, like a cloud of hair. It seemed to hover, buffeted by unseen currents, as if it had been on its way somewhere – to the bottom maybe – but had stopped its descent to watch her. As if it was interested in what was happening. Interested in her struggle.

The top of the shape lifted, seemed to lengthen and slip out into long, tendril-like hair and now she knew what she was looking at.

Mum.

Mum, who had been dead two years. The long blonde hair that she’d always kept in a knot at the back of her neck lifted and wallowed in the gloom, wafting around her face.

‘Wake up, Flea. Look after yourself.’

Flea didn’t answer. She wasn’t capable. In the real world her body had tilted on to its side and was twitching like a fish with a broken swim bladder.

‘Look after yourself.’

Mum turned in the water, her small white hands propelling her body around so her head was facing Flea’s, her hair floating in a cloud around her, her thin white legs trailing like wisps. She came forward until her sweet, pale face was close up to Flea’s, her hands on her shoulders. ‘Listen.’ Her voice was sharp. ‘Wake up. Now. Look after yourself.’

She shook her, and when Flea didn't respond, she closed her fingers around her hand, moved her fingers across and flicked the lever on the switching block to SCUBA.

Air flooded the mask. Her lungs inflated in one blast and her head shot back. Light poured into her eyes. Another breath. She threw her arms out and coughed, the air dry in her parched lungs. Another breath, panicky, feeling her heart beat again, feeling blood hammer in her temples. And another. Flailing blindly, the equipment gauges, the emergency sports valve bobbing around her like tentacles as she righted herself in the water. In Wellard's panic he'd pulled her along the bottom. Silt had come up and was billowing around her like smoke. She hung limply in the milky water, letting him bump her along the wall.

*Mum?*

But the water rushed past her and all she could hear was Wellard's frantic voice screaming into the communications panel. 'Are you there, Sarge? Answer me, for Christ's sake.'

'I'm OK.' She coughed. 'You can stop dragging me now.'

He let go the tension on the line abruptly and she came to a halt. She floated face down, still holding the bail-out toggle, staring into the place where Mum had been. The water was empty. It had been another hallucination.

She began to tremble. She'd been close. She'd broken the HSE's rules, she'd cocked up an emergency procedure and the whole team had heard her going into narcosis. She'd even bloody wet herself in the process. She could feel it running down the inside of her thermals.

But it didn't matter. It really didn't matter. She was alive. Alive. And she was going to stay that way.