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opening extract from

The Wrong Hands

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Chapter 1

I was going to start with the plane crash because that's how come I met Jennifer. But you need to know about my hands first.

I was born with disaster areas for hands. My fingers had these folds of flesh between them that looked like the inside of an umbrella when it's closed up. They could get really clogged with dirt if I didn't scrub them properly every night with a scrubbing brush. It was Doc Morrison who told me I had to do that. Mum took me to see him when I was five. Not about my hands; I think I had mumps or something. But Doc Morrison noticed the hands. He picked them up as if they were CDs and turned them over and over. That moment, with this doc frowning and staring, staring and frowning, was when I first started to feel bad about them.

Mum said, 'Oh, we've been through that. No one can find anything wrong.' She meant, after I was born I'd been taken to see loads of doctors and hospitals about my hands and no one had a clue why they were like they were. But it didn't matter because they weren't doing any harm to anyone.

Doc Morrison said, 'I can't say I've seen anything

quite like it. On the other hand—ha! ha! no pun intended—if they function normally—'

Mum said, 'He doesn't seem to have any trouble.' And she smiled at me.

Doc Morrison said, 'There's a lot to be said for leaving well alone. Just make sure he keeps them clean. A good scrub between the fingers every night. Otherwise there could be a hygiene problem.'

This is how we thought of my hands, me and my mum and dad. As things to be scrubbed. The only time they were mentioned was when Mum reminded me each night to clean them properly. Dad never talked about them even once. But I would catch him staring at them; when I reached out to grab the marg, for instance.

Actually he did mention them once, or nearly mention them. I had this nervous habit of stretching my fingers apart. The skin in between would sort of rustle as it stretched. I can tell you what it sounded like because once I heard the almost identical sound. It sounded like dry leaves swirling around in a hallway when someone opens the front door. It was quite loud, and it used to drive Dad nuts. Usually, when I did it, he would just go still and stare at me until I had to look away. Once he exploded. 'For God's sake stop that.'

'Stop what?' I said.

He exploded again. He thought I was being a smart-arse but I wasn't. I just didn't know what else to say.

'You know what,' he said. 'Otherwise I'll make you wear gloves. If I can find a pair that's big enough.'

I stopped stretching my fingers apart when I was around Dad.

On my first day at school a big crowd gathered round me in the playground, trying to get a look at them. Because there were so many people, all jostling to clock them, someone said, 'Just hold 'em up high, you spakky,' so I lifted my arms and everyone laughed. They got a bit bored with my hands after a day or two but at least once a day, for my whole time at primary school, some kid would remember to shout, 'Oi, Spakky, hands,' and I would lift them up, and everyone would laugh. Including me, I wasn't stupid. And I wasn't being a wimp, not totally. I was quite strong, especially in my hands, even if I was weedy looking. But you don't stand a chance against five of them. And anyway, all I had to do was lift my hands, and after we'd all had our little laugh it shut them up, for a while anyway.

The name Spakky stuck right through primary school and on to secondary school. That first day at Sir Roger de Coverley comprehensive wasn't great. It was like walking out in front of a 67,000 crowd at Old Trafford, except they weren't cheering they were laughing. Plus, a lot of them had their phones out and they were taking pictures and zapping them off to mates, maybe even all over the world. All these kids I'd never seen before, from primary schools all over town, they all seemed to know. They all seemed to be waiting. They even chanted like a footie crowd. 'Spak-ky! Spak-ky!' A really bad thing was, girls were doing it, too. I liked girls, so that was sad. At primary school it had been mostly blokes.

Every day wasn't great. It was like waking up and looking in the mirror and finding a spot the size of a plate on your forehead. A volcano of a plook with red sides and a yellow hole where the lava's about to spurt

out. No, it was worse than that. It was like having *two* volcanoes, fresh and smoking, every day. I liked it in winter when it was really cold. Then I could wear gloves. Once the heating in the classroom broke down and I could wear them indoors too. That was brilliant, to have my hands covered up all day for a proper reason. I wore this trackie top all the time, even in summer when it was hot. It had these big pockets in the front that were more like holes where I could bury my hands.

It's a funny thing about names. When I came down to London, they didn't call me anything except my real name, Graham (not counting the things Uncle George and Derek sometimes called me, like Junior Joe, or Joe Strummer, or Charlie Arse-Face). I'd never been to London before but the name thing made me feel at home straightaway. And my real home was the place where they called me bad names and pretty much hated me, even my own parents. Dad anyway. Mum was more complicated.

So here's the background, and then I'll get on to the terrible thing that happened. Me and my mum and dad lived on the outskirts of a medium-sized town in the flat, industrial part of Yorkshire. When I mentioned the place to people in London they either said they hadn't heard of it, or they thought it was in the Dales because that was the only bit of Yorkshire they knew. But there were no olde tea shoppes round our way. From my bedroom window I could see two coal pits and the cooling towers of a power station. These big towers .

looked like giant mugs of hot coffee, with great clouds of steam rising off them in slow motion. Between the house and the nearest of the coal pits was a motorway and a railway. The railway went to London. Trains screamed along it at night. When I heard them I would think of all-night gambling; fat, rich blokes stepping out of a giant hotel into Park Lane and not knowing what time of day it was, or even what day it was full stop.

Our house was a brick cube on an estate of about fifty or a hundred identical brick cubes. The people who lived in them all worked in things to do with railways or power stations or coal pits. They drove company cars like Vauxhall Vectras, and wore suits and carried clip-boards and kept hard hats and wellies in the boot for site visits. My dad sold cement. His perk was getting free cement to build a rockery. A huge flatbed lorry turned up just to deliver one bag of cement.

We had a different front door from everyone else's. It was wood-coloured with panes of mock old-fashioned glass like the bottom of bottles. Then other houses got different things, like shutters that were only for show (too narrow to cover the windows and anyway they were nailed to the wall). And slowly the houses began to look a bit different from each other. But that didn't fool me. To me, they were always the same.

I remember being about seven and stepping out from the side gate of our house practically straight into open fields. I was quite happy then; I mean, waking up in the morning wasn't too bad and I could go for nearly a whole hour during the day without thinking about my hands. I tagged along with other kids on the estate. At

school they were some of the major ones shouting Spakky etc., but in the holidays they were quite shy and hardly mentioned my hands. We skidded about on our bikes and went down to the railway crossing to watch the express trains scream by to London. Next to the railway crossing was a little stream where we fished for sticklebacks with bright green nets on the end of bamboo poles. We put the fish in old jam jars and took them home but they never lived more than a few days. I made a stickleback graveyard at the bottom of the garden. I was just floating through that summer like the dandelion clocks through the fields. But good things, even just OK things, never last. (Hey, pay attention! His name is Graham Sinclair. This is his wisdom.)

I was riding my bike down a lane between two fields when a man came out of the bushes and held his hand up. The way he did it reminded me of a traffic cop in a comedy film I once saw set in Italy (he got knocked down by a runaway Fiat). The man who came out of the bushes had grey stubble that looked like you could strike a match on it. He said he worked for the secret service and was on an undercover mission to spy on some criminals who were operating in the neighbourhood. He said I looked good secret service material. Would I like to join him? I didn't ask for his ID but he offered me a card anyway. It could have been anything. I was embarrassed to hold it for too long or read it properly in case he clocked my hands and made a comment. I handed it back and said I had to be going. Then he said, 'Before you join you'll have to have a medical. Just to make sure you're A1 health-wise.'

I wasn't daft, even then. I got back on my bike and rode home. I waited two days before telling Mum, I'm not sure why. The police came round. Dad exploded because I'd waited before telling them. The police never found anyone. After that I wasn't allowed to go out into the fields and play on my own.

Which wasn't such a big deal as it happened because the open ground and fields were disappearing anyway, so even if I'd been allowed to play in them, they wouldn't have been there because they were being covered by more houses. And roads. Even the little stream was covered over. The wood that protected the magical oak tree was cut down, including the magical oak tree obviously. These old blocks of stone that we said were the gateway to the centre of the Earth—carted off on a flatbed lorry.

It was like a dream that there had ever been anything around us but more houses. Each house had a spindly little tree in the front garden. The trees were strapped to poles by a piece of green rubber that went grey in the winter and then rotted off. Next to the trees were these manhole covers with big dimples in them that looked like the tray Mum made Yorkshire puddings in. We had roast beef and Yorkshire every Sunday. When it was raining the windows steamed up and I would be told off for making portholes in the steam to see out of. At night I listened to the trains going to London. All curled up in what is called the foetal position, with my hands between my knees.

* * *

When I was twelve, at the end of my first year at Sir Roger de Coverley, I made a friend called Brian. We weren't real friends. I knew that even then. But nobody else would have us so we just sort of joined up. Brian was big and clumsy and quite rude. Not just to me but to everyone, which is partly why no one liked him. I know we looked funny together because people used to laugh at us as we went by, even adults sometimes. I must have been ten centimetres shorter than Brian, plus I was thin and weedy-looking compared to him (except for the hands, of course). There was one thing I was grateful to him for. He never mentioned the hands. I don't think that was because he was kind, though. He just didn't want me mentioning anything to get my own back, like his gigantic feet or the way he walked on tiptoe, tipped forward on his huge feet, the way loonies do.

In the holidays I would cycle to Brian's house when his mum and dad and older brother were out. We would look at porn mags belonging to his brother. Silently, sitting side by side on his brother's bed with Brian turning the pages. One day he met me in the driveway with his bike. He'd been waiting for me. He said he'd found something secret. I followed him and he went down near the railway line. It was all built up now. Closes and Drives and Avenues and Boulevards. He took me through a gap in a hedge. 'See,' he said.

It was a ditch. Deep and dry. 'Let's make a den,' he said. He kicked at the sandy soil with his size 10 trainers.

'A den?' I said. Dens were for childhood, and childhood had gone, in case he hadn't noticed. We were

reading porn mags now. 'We're not kids any more, Brian,' I said.

'Not kids, no,' Brian said, 'but you've got secrets, haven't you?' and for a split second I thought he knew. I felt myself blushing. Somehow he'd discovered my secret, and that was what all this was about. He didn't really want to be my friend, he just wanted to get close to me so he could find out more about my secret. But I was being paranoid. (Then I was, anyway. But as they say, just because you're paranoid it doesn't mean to say they're not out to get you. I told Jennifer that and she pretended she thought it was really funny. She pretended she hadn't heard it before. But I'm sure she was just being polite because it's quite a common saying and a woman her age would have known it.)

But Brian didn't know about my secret. He didn't even see me blush, he was so desperate to make out he had thrilling secrets of his own. He raised his eyebrows, he puffed out his cheeks and did a spooky thing with his eyes so that one looked up and the other looked down and his head looked like an old doll with those eyeballs that roll. 'OK,' I said.

We got on quite well when we were fixing the den. We waited until it got quite dark and then we lifted some planks from a building site where they were still building a house. We put the planks across the top of the ditch at its blocked-off end to make a roof. We put sacking on the planks and chucked some soil and weeds on it and then we had to go home because it was almost dark and soon my dad would get in his car and cruise the streets slowly like an American cop in a film,

pretending to look for me and hoping it would take a long time so he could really lose his temper and stop me going out again for about a week. That's what he was like.

The next day we went back. We wondered if any of the workmen had spotted the planks but they hadn't. We collected ferns and grass and bits of old brick and stuff and put that on the sacking, too, until you really couldn't tell there were planks underneath, it just looked like a bit of scrubby old field. Then we stepped back and looked at it. Our den. The entrance was like a filled-in D lying on its curved side. We jumped into the ditch and crouched down. We shuffled along and looked right in. It was dark so your eyes couldn't see anything for about ten seconds, and it smelt of worms.

Brian had brought some gear with him, a bit of old carpet and other stuff in a placky bag. We crawled into the den and unrolled the carpet and pushed its edges up against the soft, soily sides of the den. Then we got right on the carpet. Brian rustled in the carrier bag and clicked on a torch which lit up the inside of the bag as he was bringing it out. He shone the torch back into the bag and brought out a candle and a box of matches. 'Just in case,' he said. We lay back side by side. Brian shone the torch against the roof planks. Little puffs of soil were falling from the roof, you could see them fall. Some landed in my eye and some more on my lip, which I coughed away. We didn't say anything.

Where they were building the new house, on the other side of the hedge, you could hear a cement mixer chugging. The workmen were listening to a radio

playing Elvis Presley. They were whistling and one of them barked like a dog. It sounded so close we held our breath. Brian shone the torch on my face and I started to giggle. Then he started to. It seemed funny, that the workmen were so close and didn't know we were here. Plus, we had nicked some of their stuff to make the den and they didn't know that either. We had to pinch our nostrils together to stop ourselves laughing.

Brian clicked off the torch. When I turned my head I could see the whites of his eyes, glowing in the dark. I didn't plan to do what I did next. I just had all this soil and general crap between my fingers and it was really itching. So I did that stretching thing with my hands. The rustling and crackling sounded extra-loud in the den. I could sense Brian's whole body go tense, like he was giving off static electricity. He clicked on the torch and said, 'Sshh, wassat?' The whites of his eyes were flashing at me.

I didn't say anything. I couldn't believe Brian couldn't hear my heart thumping. Because I was going to tell him, I really was. I was going to show him and I was going to tell him. He was my new friend, my first real friend. And I felt happy then, lying in that den with the workmen whistling outside and a little puff of soil falling on my bare knee, tickling my bare knee just enough so it felt good but not so I needed to itch it. I didn't know, until that moment, how much I needed to tell someone my secret. I opened my mouth to say it. Then I closed it. How would I put it? I thought of the sentence I would say. My heart was thumping away. But then it

stopped thumping quite so hard because I knew the moment had passed. I had chickened out.

Brian said, 'Oh no. It's chuffing rats.'

Brian said, 'I'm off.' He left behind the candle and matches. And the carpet. I asked him if he was coming back. He said he didn't know. I heard him tugging his bike through the hedge. Then there was silence. Not even the workmen making a noise. Friday. They must have knocked off early. I lay back in the almost dark and thought about what I almost did, i.e. tell Brian. I was glad now that I hadn't told him. I decided I didn't like him. But I still wanted to tell somebody. It was like going to the end of the diving board and looking down into the swimming pool. There would be a next time, and next time I would dive off the diving board.

I got the candle and made a hole in the soil to the side of the carpet for it to stand in. I was going to light it, then I heard a noise outside. I thought Brian had come back to get his bit of carpet. That would be typical Brian; I was surprised he hadn't taken it in the first place. The noise stopped, then started again. Somebody coming through the hedge. Walking about outside. But nobody came into the den. I said, 'Brian?' and the noise stopped. I crawled to the den's entrance and looked out.

I was surprised how dark it was. You could still see but everything was at that stage where it goes black and white, just shapes and sky. Right in front of the den was the silhouette of a person. I thought of the man who

came out of the bushes. I had to stop myself making a noise. Then I saw it was a girl. She was looking away from the den, turning her head sideways like she was trying to catch a sound with her ears. She moved away from the den, walking slowly. Then she stopped and looked down. She pulled something up from the ground. It was my bike. I'd just dumped it there and chucked some grass and stuff over it. She pulled the bike right up and leant on the handlebars. Then she turned round and began to push the bike towards the hedge. I could hear the wheels ticking. I knew who the girl was. Kylie Blounce.

Kylie lived in the next street to mine. She'd been in my class at primary school and was at Sir Roger de Coverley but not in the same class. I was quite afraid of her because she was very sarcastic, especially about my hands. She didn't call me Spakky like everyone else. She called me Flipper and this was worse somehow. Like she was so grossed out by me she'd taken the trouble to work out her own insult rather than using the normal one. It wasn't just my hands that got her going, either. Whatever I did or said she was sarcastic.

Now here she was, Little Miss Sarky, pushing my bike towards the hedge. I didn't know what to do. I didn't want to say anything because she would just be sarcastic again. She would say something like, 'Dens are pathetic; don't you know anything, Flipper?' Plus, I would give away the den and we'd never be able to use it again. But she was nicking my bike. And even though I would know where it was, i.e. in Kylie's dad's garage, I wouldn't be able to get it back, because how would I

explain how I knew it was there? I would have to wait until I saw Kylie riding it, which may be never.

I came out of the den. 'Kylie,' I said.

Kylie wasn't sarcastic at all. She didn't even call me Flipper. It was like I'd met a different Kylie. She came into the den and I lit the candle. We lay side by side and I looked at her. Something happened when I was looking at her. It was like my blood went heavy. Her skin in the candlelight was silky like it was out of focus a bit. I realized I'd never looked at her closely before. She had cheekbones that looked like the ends of Mum's padded coathangers, silky and hard at the same time. I didn't smell worms any more, I smelt apples. Kylie smelt of apples.

We didn't really say anything. We just kept looking at each other and grinning and once, out of nowhere, I gave this big laugh and I felt snot come out of my nose a bit and I had to wipe it away with the back of my hand. Which freaked me because I'd been keeping my hands out of view but I couldn't do anything else. But Kylie didn't seem to notice. She just said, 'What?' She didn't really say it actually, more just mouthed it.

Maybe we could have carried on like that for ages. Maybe we would have ended up being really close friends. But then I said what I said and everything changed. I didn't really know what I meant by it, it just came out. Sometimes you get days where it's really sunny and hot and then it just switches, the sky goes dark and it chucks it down. And then it goes sunny and hot again.

And when it's dark and raining you can't remember what it was like when it was hot and sunny, and vice versa.

It was like it was hot and sunny in that den (even though obviously it was really dark and we had a candle on the go) and then I said, 'I want to show you something', and it was instantly dark and rainy.

I thought it would switch back, like weather can. But it didn't. Kylie said she had to be going. She sat up on her shins. She had this very fine hair on her arms like the gold threads inside electric wires. Soil from the roof of the den had got caught in the hair and she was brushing it off. She wasn't looking at me now. I was sure she was going to say something sarcastic, call me Flipper. 'No,' I said, 'please don't go, Kylie.'

I reached out my hand and held her wrist. I stopped her brushing her arm. She was looking at my hand now. Really looking, like she was inspecting a plate of spaghetti for broken glass. And I felt like I was walking along that diving board again. I could feel the board shaking under my feet, and I knew that this time I was going to dive.