Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

---

**Opening Extract from...**

# Cut Adrift

Written by Chris Simms

Published by Orion

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

# Cut Adrift

CHRIS SIMMS



An Orion paperback

First published in Great Britain in 2010
by Orion
This paperback edition published in 2011
by Orion Books Ltd,
Orion House, 5 Upper Saint Martin's Lane
London, WC2H 9EA

An Hachette UK company

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Copyright © Chris Simms 2010

The right of Chris Simms to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

All the characters in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

*A Pair of Brown Eyes* © Words & Music by Shane MacGowan. All rights administered by Perfect Songs Ltd, London W11 1ET. Reproduced by permission.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-4091-0321-9

Typeset by Deltatype Ltd, Birkenhead, Merseyside

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

The Orion Publishing Group's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

www.orionbooks.co.uk

# Prologue

Graceful and white, the sheet of sea water rose above the bow of the ship and was shredded by the wind. Instants later the haze of droplets struck the windscreen of the bridge, filling it with a sound like wet cement hitting the inside of a mixer. All visibility momentarily lost, the vessel continued its sickening lurch and the man gripping the metal railing felt the same fear as when his torturers' footsteps used to halt outside his cell.

Then the wiper swept the sliding layer of liquid from the glass and he glimpsed sky again. He lifted his fingers to the network of thin scars that encircled his throat. The skin had been left to heal badly, the tissue so heavily puckered in places it seemed to drag the corners of his mouth down to expose a jagged row of lower teeth. 'How far west do you intend to go?'

Keeping both hands on the ship's wheel, the master glanced at the radar screen. 'As far as I need to avoid that whore of a storm.'

To their right, a black anvil of cloud pressed down on the horizon. Snakes of foam had begun to streak the sea around the ship and every time a crest formed, its tip appeared to smoke in the gathering gale.

The man's fingers lowered from his ruined throat. 'And we're already six hours outside the shipping lane?'

'At least.'

'So this will cost us a full day, maybe more?'

'Better that,' the master replied, 'than we sail into the vicious bitch over there. See? There is already movement on the containers up on deck. I can't afford to have any go over the side.'

Cursing, the man braced himself as the ship now began to roll sideways. They'd been delayed by almost two days getting through the Suez Canal. Now this. The people in America who

awaited their arrival would not be happy.

A chair, broken free of its restraining clips, rolled across the gleaming floor to bump into the backs of his legs. He kicked at it, sending it crashing over on its side.

Below them, sea water that had been sloshing aimlessly around the deck began streaming to starboard as the heel of the vessel increased. But, before it could pour from the ship's deck, another wave hit. Vapour exploded up then was whipped towards the bridge as if being sucked into the vent of a monstrous machine. Their view of the forty-foot metal containers lined up across the deck disappeared. Then, as the wiper swept back across the glass, the man blinked with astonishment. He could see two women. Wearing jeans and thin tops, they clung to the corner of a container, hair whipping about as they waved frantically at the bridge with their free hands.

The man's thick eyebrows bunched, forming a solid line across his brow. 'What . . . ?'

Beside him, the master's face turned white.

A mass of cardboard boxes appeared from nowhere and began washing about the deck. A third woman appeared from one of the narrow gaps running between the rows of containers, this one clutching a suitcase. Several of the wooden pallets on which freight was placed inside the containers glided into view, followed by a mass of yellow objects. Ducks. Hundreds and hundreds of grinning plastic ducks.

'The doors to one of the containers must have come loose.'

'Come loose?' The man turned to the master, fury thickening his voice. 'How many people have you got down there?'

'Me? They're not mine.'

'Whose, then?'

'Mykosowski. He gave the instructions.'

'Mykosowski?' The man thought about the ship's owner, probably sitting in his London office and contemplating how much money he'd make this month. The stupid, greedy bastard. 'How many?'

The master's cheeks puffed out momentarily, air escaping from his lips with a fleshy pop. 'Just under fifty.'

'In one container?'

'Two. About twenty women in one, all the men in another.'

'This was to be a clean ship. That was the condition. No risks, nothing illegal.' He shook his head, cursing under his breath. 'Where did you pick them up?'

'Karachi.'

'Pakistan? They were already onboard when you docked at Umm Qasr?'

The master nodded. 'Once we were clear of Iraqi waters, they were moved to a pair of containers up on deck.'

'Where are they going?'

'The deal is to drop them off the British coast before we dock at Felixstowe.'

Bottom teeth exposed in a silent snarl, the man glanced down once more. The deck was now completely covered in a bright yellow layer of ducks, dozens cascading into the sea, boxes and wooden pallets following them. More heads were now peeping from between the rows of containers. Arabs. Possibly Chinese. A man wearing a Pakistani shalwar stepped forward, waving a lit distress flare above his head.

Nervously, the master of the ship ran a hand over his mouth. 'They've opened the other container. Shit.'

Several cardboard boxes had split open, leaking bunches of skipping ropes. They washed about among the ducks like the tentacles of ocean creatures seeking prey.

The man slammed a fist against the side of an anglepoise lamp, sending it swinging on its hinge into the console. The bulb inside shattered and shards of glass fell onto the master's chart. 'Drop them off in what?'

'There's a lifeboat in each container. No markings, nothing to link them to this ship once we set them down. After we were well clear, they were meant to light those distress flares—'

'That's not going to happen.'

'What?'

'Are there any other ships nearby?'

The master examined the radar once again. 'No. We're on our own out here.'

'Slow the ship down and bring her round.' He turned to a shaven-headed man who had, until that moment, been standing silently by the door to the bridge, back pressed against the wall, knees slightly flexed in readiness for the ship's roll. The top of one of his ears was missing. 'Marat, get the others. Put your wet-weather gear on and meet me on the forward deck.'

The master raised a hand. 'What are you doing?'

'Getting rid of them,' the man with throat scars replied.

'What?'

'We lock them back in their containers and dump them overboard.'

'You cannot.'

Still looking at his colleague, the man motioned with his chin. 'Marat, go.'

'Wait,' the master blustered. 'I am in charge here. I will not let you do this.'

The edges of his charts began to flap furiously as Marat stepped out into the gale. Once the door had clicked shut, the man turned to the master, eyes sliding contemptuously over the insignia on the shoulders of his white shirt. 'Your rank means nothing to me.'

'I am master of this ship!'

The man took a step closer and the open collar of his khaki shirt parted slightly, showing more of the ugly latticework of scars that enmeshed his throat. 'You answer to Mykosowski, same as me. My orders are to ensure that nothing puts the delivery of that container below deck at risk. Nothing.' He glanced down at the huddles of people clinging to whatever they could find on the deck below. 'Not them. Not any pirate ship off the African coast. Not even you.'

'But you can't just throw them overboard,' the master whispered.

The man stepped closer, his bottom teeth showing like points. 'You want maybe to join them?'

The master's eyes dropped and he turned away without another word.

# One

*Sixteen days later*

Using the main blade of his penknife, Oliver Brookes worked at the tablet of driftwood. The machinations of the sea had worn its edges smooth, salt water had bleached and softened it. He prised a rusty nail out, shaved the burr from the rim of the hole and then looked into it. An eye. The hole would make a good eye.

He held the piece of timber at arm's length, looking beyond the flow of its faded grain to the very nature of the thing. It was a turtle, he decided. That was the shape trying to get out. Tomorrow he would pare the extraneous wood away and watch the animal gradually emerge.

In the corner of the room, an ancient-looking radio played soft music. There was no television, computer or phone. There was no electric toaster, microwave or coffee-making machine in the narrow kitchen off to the side. No halogen lights, stereo system or burglar alarm.

Every available surface was covered by driftwood sculptures. Dolphins, basking sharks, hermit crabs. Gulls and puffins and kittiwakes hung from the roof's low beams. Shoals of sea bass, herring and mackerel milled in the corners of the flagstone floor.

The front door was open, allowing a breeze to blow in off the sea just beyond. He placed the piece of wood on the table to the side of his tatty armchair and stood, feeling the stiffness in his hip bones as he did so.

The sun had almost set and the brine-filled draught swirling round his front room now carried with it a pinch of cold. Time to shut the door, draw the curtains and climb into bed. As usual, he paused in the doorway to survey the bay that curved away on each side of his cottage. To the right, the nearest sign of human

life were the twinkling lights of Combe Martin, a good mile along the jagged coast.

He was just about to pull the wooden door closed when he spotted a dark form in the shallows. His eyes narrowed. A moment later there was movement as the whale raised its fluke in a futile wave. To Oliver Brookes it was a beckoning; a plea for help.

Leaving the door open, he walked straight through to his bedroom, yanked the eiderdown from the bed and peeled the sheet from the mattress. He reached down and removed a second, folded sheet from the drawer built into the base of the bed. Leaving them on his armchair, he stepped into the kitchen where he dragged out the bucket and hurricane lamp from below a trough-like sink. Then he marched back through the cottage, dumping the sheets into the bucket on the way.

His front garden was crowded with larger sculptures, some of driftwood, others incorporating the flotsam and jetsam regularly washed up on the beach. Gnarled lengths of rope, plastic containers of all shapes and sizes, fragments of sack bearing the remnants of foreign words. He removed a large shovel from the stone shed that held his supply of wood for the winter, slipped through the waist-high gate and was immediately on the strip of grass that bordered the beach. He stepped down the gentle bank and on to the expanse of coarse yellow sand.

After ten strides he reached the band of seaweed deposited by that afternoon's unusually high tide. Stepping across the spongy bed, he reached sand again and walked slowly towards the stranded whale, the fast-retreating tide now two metres behind it.

Its slender body was about five metres long and dark grey in colour. The fluke moved again, the pointed tips gouging deep ruts in the sand. The sea water filling them was red with blood. He examined the hooked dorsal fin set far down its back, the white band on the upper side of each flipper and the fringe of porcelain white which he knew covered its underside. A young minke, just a few years old.

Putting his things down, he slowly approached the head of

the animal, gaze moving along the ridge that stretched from its blowhole down the head to the midpoint of its upper jaw. A mass of dents and nicks covered the animal's shiny blubber, reminding him of the bodywork on a battered car.

An eye, so small for such a large creature, stared at him without blinking. He looked into the black pupil, barely darker than the iris which surrounded it. What places you've been, he thought. The crushing silence of lightless depths. Air exploded from the animal's blowhole and moments later he felt a few specks of moisture settle on his face.

'Calm now,' he cooed in a deep and gentle voice. 'Shush.' Slowly, he extended a hand and placed it on the smooth, warm flesh above the animal's eye. 'I'll not hurt you, my friend. I'll not hurt you.'

The eye slowly closed and he felt the creature had somehow understood him. Brookes straightened up and looked out to sea. The sun had now almost dipped below the horizon and he knew the tide would not return for another twelve hours. He turned to the distant lights of Combe Martin, the hill called Little Hangman looming high above the village. To get there involved climbing the steep cliff path, walking through wooded slopes and then following sheep trails across empty heathland. By the time he had made it to the village and persuaded whoever was in the Focsle Inn to help, the whale would be dead. Looking back at the creature, he sighed at the enormity of the task before him.

He walked round to the fluke, quickly spotting the small lacerations to the right-hand edge. He knew the blood was mixing with sea water, making the bleeding appear far more serious than it actually was. Still, the object causing the wounds needed to be removed. Ready to move back at the first twitch of the tail, he reached into the crimson water and quickly felt around. His fingers closed on a thin, jagged lump and he dug around it, pulled the thing out then scrabbled clear. It was slate, common to that stretch of the north Devon coast.

After flinging it far away, he picked up the bucket, walked down to the shallows and tipped the sheets into the water. Once they were soaked he fished them out, walked back to the whale,

lifted one up and tore a hole in its middle. He draped it over the whale so the dorsal fin protruded through the slit. The other sheet he draped further up the animal, positioning the corners of the dripping cloth over the fins. That left only the head exposed, along with the areas around the creature's eyes and blowhole.

He trudged back up the beach, scooped an armful of damp bladderwrack, carried it back to the shrouded whale and began stringing it across the creature's head. An eye opened, following the movements of his arms before more air burst from its blowhole.

'I know,' Brookes murmured. 'As wigs go, it's not fooling anyone.'

He stepped back then looked at the spade. Have I got the strength to do this on my own? He put his hands on his hips. You've got no choice. There's no one else to help. He stooped to pick the tool up.

By the time the eastern sky began to lighten, Brookes was sitting by the whale, arms resting on his knees. His head lolled slightly as sleep momentarily took him. The whale's breathing had grown more and more ragged as the night wore on. Now it coughed and Brookes' head came up. He looked at the blowhole, saw the lumps of white phlegm sliding down into the wreath of seaweed that circled it. The animal didn't have long left.

He studied the pit he'd dug round the creature then examined the channel, flanked by piles of sand leading down the beach. At last the tide had turned: water was starting to creep into the far end of the channel. Turning his head, he saw the eye watching him.

'Soon, my friend, soon. Are you feeling a bit dry, there?' He picked up the bucket, stepped down into the pit and filled it with brackish water. 'Here you go,' he said, smoothing his wet palm around the animal's eye. Slowly, it closed, allowing him to dribble water over the lids. He walked round, moistened the creature's other eye then sluiced the remaining water across its back, worried at how hot the animal had become.

By now a tongue of sea water was pushing up the channel.

Lumps of sand were beginning to collapse into it, leaving behind a light froth which was then carried towards them. 'Come on, come on,' Brookes whispered.

A few minutes later, the sun cleared the crest of the moors behind him, bathing the pale sand in a golden glow. Water had begun to fan out into the pit, trickling around his bare feet. Five minutes later, it had reached his ankles. He splashed his way over to the animal and rubbed gently above the whale's eye. Slowly, it opened. 'Now, you have to try. I can't shift you.' He pointed to their right, towards the open sea. 'That way, OK? That way.'

Water was now sloshing at his calf muscles, lapping at the whale's belly. The creature's fluke moved. Brookes lifted off the damp sheets and threw them onto the mound of sand behind them. He swept the seaweed from the whale's head.

Slowly, he walked backwards to the top of the channel, water pushing at the backs of his knees, soaking the turn-ups of his trousers. He clapped, beckoning the creature towards him, watching as the level of water inched over its flippers, then up to its eyes. Soon just its dorsal fin and upper back were showing.

He clapped louder. 'Come on! Come on! To me, to me, to me!'

Water churned and the fluke broke through, thrashing from side to side as the creature struggled to swing itself round in the shallows.

'Yes! Yes!' Brookes roared, slapping the waist-high water with his palms, trying to guide the animal from the circular pool.

The dorsal fin inched towards him, fluke struggling to power the whale forward. He stepped to the side and reached out a hand, trailing it along the animal's smooth side as it sensed the deeper channel and began nudging its way down it.

'Go!' he shouted tiredly, wading along beside it and weakly punching the air. 'Go!'

The animal made the sea proper, and with its fluke finally able to work freely, quickly disappeared beneath the waves. About thirty metres out, it resurfaced, blew a cloud of vapour into the air then sank from sight once more. Hands on hips, Brookes waded backwards out of the sea, eyes continually scanning its

surface. Minutes later, his face broke into a smile as the sun lit another cloud of vapour, this one rising about two hundred metres out to sea.

As he turned to retrieve his things from the rapidly encroaching tide, something bumped against his ankle. He looked down and saw a yellow duck bobbing its way past him. He spotted another, looked along the shoreline to his left and realised there were perhaps a dozen more of the things being washed up on the beach. Stiffly, he bent down and picked it out of the water.

The yellow plastic had been bleached by the sun and the blue paint at the edge of one eye had come away, giving the thing a cross-eyed look. It grinned up at him. Frowning, Brookes turned it over, feeling the faint rattle of droplets within. He studied the lettering stamped on its underside. Trademark and copyright stamps, then lettering: Kyou Inc, Made in China. No surprise, he said to himself. Everything seems to be made there, nowadays. He stepped clear of the water, dropped the duck into his bucket alongside the hurricane lamp, scooped up his sheets and spade then trudged slowly back up the beach.