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"This extraordinary novel is powerful, shocking, uplifting, funny and beautifully written. Every page of the book is bursting with life, observation, feeling and conviction. It is a collaboration between two remarkable writers, fusing the best of both."

The Sunday Times, Book of the Week

"This is a hero that the reader is compelled to cheer on, while questioning how society is serving the lost Becks of today."

Observer

"Powerful and harrowing but ultimately uplifting."

The Bookseller

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Daily Mail

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The Scotsman

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Literary Review

"Has the stoic quality and soul of a Steinbeck tale."

Publishers Weekly (starred review)

"Heartbreaking, hopeful and inspired."

**Kirkus Reviews (starred review)

The Paul Faustino novels KEEPER, THE PENALTY, EXPOSURE

"Profound, lyrical yet compulsively addictive."

Phil Earle

"Glorious, cartwheeling, magical, frightening."

Frank Cottrell Boyce

"Totally electrifying."

The Times

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Patrick Ness

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Daniel Hahn, The Oxford Companion to Children's Literature

TAMAR

"Beautifully crafted, with a finale that took my breath away."

Publishing News

"Gorgeously detailed prose ... simply superb."

**Kirkus Reviews (starred review)



MAL PEET

WITH MEG ROSOFF

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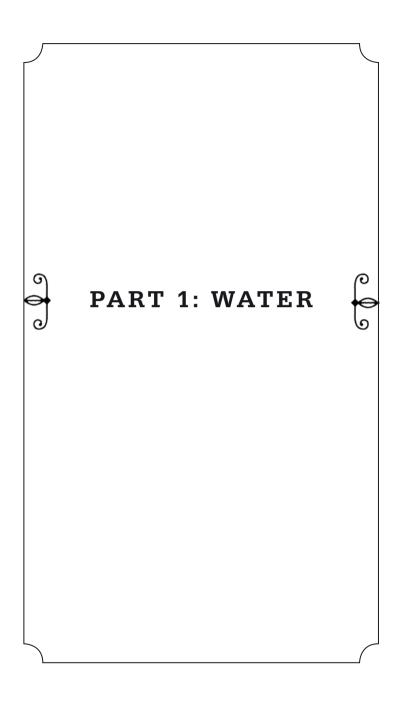
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1.1 AN ACCIDENTAL CHILD

His mother met his father in Liverpool on a frigid night in 1907. She was not a prostitute but in times of need, short of other forms of employment, she would sell herself to men. She never spent the proceeds frivolously. Every last farthing of the five shillings she charged would be spent on rent and on food for her family, which consisted of her frail parents, who were addicted to patent medicines, and an older brother who was wrong in the head. Thus she made financial expiation for her sin. Spiritual expiation took the form of full and frank confession through the grille of a curtained box in Saint Ignatius, a church distant from her neighbourhood. She was a devout Catholic and performed her penances scrupulously. She would promise to sin no more, and meant it every time. Her name was Anne Beck.

His father happened to be standing outside a pub when Anne happened to be passing on her way home. Twenty minutes earlier she had been sacked from her job as a chambermaid at the Imperial Hotel for slapping the undermanager who was groping her in the linen room. Beck's father was on the street because the pub operated a colour bar, and he was African, from a country called in those days the Gold Coast. The landlord had refused to serve him. This often happened when his ship docked in England, and he accepted it more or less philosophically.

His white shipmates had protested but instead of moving on had brought him a pint and a baked potato to enjoy with his magazine serial in the drizzle. He'd perched the pint on the pub's window ledge, gripping the pulpy pages of his ha'penny dreadfuller in one hand while he gingerly conveyed the hot crumbly flesh of the potato to his mouth with the other. That's when Anne came by.

He was handsome and she was impressed that he could read. She was also hungry.

"Wan' some?" Smiling at her, showing his beautiful teeth, looking infinitely sad. Even sadder than she.

Anne shared his potato and his beer while he haltingly read her the adventures of Sexton Blake, and then she took him home. She was perfectly honest with him, telling him that it would cost money. He showed her the various coins he had in his pockets and she picked out British ones that added up to more or less five bob. She led him up the backs, lifting her skirt and alerting him to dog mess. They entered her house by the scullery door. Inside, it was quiet because her parents had passed out downstairs and her brother was locked in his room. She lit a bit of candle she found next to

the sink and took him up to her room, where, despite her rudimentary precautions, he got her pregnant.

She never knew his name. Or, rather, never mastered the trick of pronouncing it in the short time she knew him. His ship departed for Belfast the following day.

A month before Beck's eleventh birthday, his great-grandparents and his mother and his daft kindly uncle all died in the flu epidemic. Anne was the last to go.

Just before the fever stilled her heart she tightened her clasp on the boy's hand and whispered, "There's three pound and seven shillin' put away. It's in..."

He was an odd-looking kid with his mother's green-flecked hazel eyes and a deep shade of his father's colouring and hair that stuck out all ways. He was taken to the Catholic orphanage run by the methodically cruel Sisters of Mercy. The shame of his mixed race meant that he was also victimized by the other orphans. He lived in that dire and loveless establishment for three and a half years; at the end of that time he had become a hard little bastard who had learned to cry silently and dry-eyed.

Christian names were not used in the orphanage and eventually Beck forgot that he had one.