

The One Who Is Two

Book 1 of White Rabbit

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The four books of the White Rabbit series

1. The One Who Is Two

2. Friends and Enemies

3. Red Tape

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Chapter 1

Cadwallader stood with his back to the window, leaning against the sink units, conscious of the curve of the moulded laminate against his buttocks. He crossed his arms and then uncrossed them quickly. Glancing expectantly at his wife, he tried, unsuccessfully, to think of something to say.

'It's time you left,' she said, 'It's ten past already.'

A heaviness pulled at his guts as his spirits sank even lower.

'I thought maybe a quick cuppa before I go. As it's my birthday.' He wanted to sound casual, but his voice came out pleading, like a sad child.

'Please, Simon, you know what we agreed. He'll be here soon.'

'Oh, I see. He's coming here today, is he? On my – on a Sunday.' As he spoke, whining and hurt, he could see her face harden, her eyes glittering with sudden anger.

'Where and when I see Geoffrey is none of your business,' she said, her voice quiet and tight, 'And it wasn't me that started all this, was it?'

Cowed by the force of her anger, he looked down at his shoes with his mouth set in a sullen frown, like a schoolboy resenting his punishment.

'Was it?' she hissed.

Again he didn't reply, aware that his silence was confirming his guilt. Her reproach bore down on him, crushing him like a weight. After a long silence he looked up, feeling silly and shamed.

'Right then,' he said, 'I'll just say goodbye to the kids.' He could see his daughter through the door to the living room, sitting on a cushion three feet from the television, staring zombie-like at a gyrating pop singer. 'Laura, darling,' he called, 'Daddy's going now.'

'Bye,' the girl said, not turning from the flickering screen.

'No goodbye kiss?'

He waited, but she showed no sign of having heard him – and another small stab of pain jabbed into his chest. He crossed the room and bent to press his lips to her long yellow hair. She

seemed to ignore him, but then lifted her face briefly to plant a perfunctory kiss on his proffered cheek before turning quickly back to the television.

'Bye-bye, sweetie,' he murmured to the back of her head, 'See you next week.'

'You won't find Alex,' said his wife, as he came back into the kitchen, 'He'll be over the road. Ian's got a new computer game.'

Sensing her growing anxiety for him to be gone, he picked up his jacket from the back of the kitchen chair and, keeping his eyes fixed on the white melamine of the table, pulled it on.

Sundays were always bad, but this one, his birthday, had been worse than most. Naturally, he hadn't expected anything from his wife, but he had been shocked by the children's indifference. A cheap card from Alex, probably bought that morning by Stephanie from the newsagents at the bottom of the road, and a scrawled picture from Laura, five minutes of half-hearted effort, bad even by her standards. And then a few hours wandering around Lego-Land, acutely aware that his sole contribution to their pleasure was as the provider of funds. He remembered the same day in previous years – the attention, the affection, the presents bought with carefully saved pocket money, the meticulously drawn birthday cards – and the contrast was brutally stark.

'Right then,' he said, fighting to keep the misery out of his voice, 'I'll be off. I'll see you next Sunday, usual time.'

As he spoke, Stephanie seemed to remember something. She turned to the living room door, calling above the pop singer's warbling. 'Laura, you haven't given Daddy his present.'

'It's on the sideboard,' said the girl, without enthusiasm.

'She's made you a present,' explained Stephanie, 'I'll just fetch it.'

Cadwallader waited by the back door, slightly cheered that his daughter's indifference was less complete than he had thought. Something at the corner of his vision caught his attention: a flash of white in the doorway to the living room. It was a large white rabbit, looking up at him with blank, pink eyes, its ears erect, its fur glossy and unnaturally brilliant as if it had just been washed and tumble-dried.

'Here you are.' His wife came in from the hall and handed him a small package crudely wrapped in what looked like recycled Christmas paper. Inside was a small medicine bottle, brown glass with a black plastic screw-top. Holding it up to the window, he could see it was filled with a turbid liquid.

'What is it?' he asked, genuinely puzzled.

'Perfume. Actually after-shave, as it's for you.'

He unscrewed the top and sniffed at the bottle. It had an aromatic smell, strangely familiar.

'Squashed geranium leaves,' explained Stephanie, 'It's a new fad at school. She made about two pints of the stuff last week – I had to put the poor plant in my bedroom, before she reduced it to a bare twig.'

Cadwallader smiled and, up-turning the bottle onto his forefinger, dabbed the liquid behind each ear in a mock-female gesture. Stephanie watched him, unsmiling, her expression anxious and irritated. She glanced up at the clock.

'Please go now, I don't want a scene.'

He felt his tiny bubble of pleasure burst.

'Thank you for the present, darling, it's lovely,' he called, slipping the bottle into his jacket pocket.

'OK.' The girl replied without turning round.

As he opened the back door, Cadwallader remembered the rabbit.

'Oh, I nearly forgot to ask. Her new rabbit, what's its name?'

'Loofah.'

'Loofah? You mean, like a bath sponge?'

'Exactly. Like a bath sponge.'

'I don't get it.'

'She had a bath sponge in the shape of a rabbit. A pink one. You bought it for her, two Christmases ago.' More reproach, implicit in her tone, for not remembering the pink sponge. 'She called that "Loofah" too, if you remember – and now she's got a live version.'

'It's a silly name,' he said, defensively, 'Why couldn't she call it something normal – like Flopsy or Thumper?'

'It's Laura's rabbit and she can call it what she wants. Anyway, I happen to think that Loofah is a very imaginative name.'

'Well, whatever. But I don't think you should have it running round the house. It's not hygienic.'

'What are you talking about? The rabbit's in the garden. It never comes into the house.'

'Stephanie, it was right there, in the living room. I saw it myself.'

'Then what's that?' she said, looking out of the back window.

He moved back into the room and followed her gaze. The rabbit, dazzling in the grey light of the autumn afternoon, was sitting in the middle of the lawn, looking straight at him with solid inscrutability.

'Laura,' his wife called through to the living room, 'It's time to put Loofah back in his hutch. He's been out long enough.'

'I'm telling you the rabbit was in the house, sitting right there – I saw it when you went to get the present.'

'Then he must have a key for the patio doors,' she said, humourlessly, 'Now, Simon, will you please go. If you won't stick to our agreement, I'll have to get the solicitors involved – and neither of us want that, do we?'

Cadwallader unlocked the driver's door and then turned back to look at the house.

In the great scheme of things it wasn't much – a three bedroom detached house in a modern estate on the edge of Rickmansworth – but it had been the centre of his life for five years. He had decorated it himself, he had fitted out the bathroom and installed the new kitchen units. The flower beds he had laid out were flourishing and the Norwegian maple he had planted in the front lawn, and had watered lovingly through two summers of drought, was beginning to look like a real tree, standing clear of its now redundant stake, its trunk thickening and its branches spreading.

And now what was it, this house that had once been his? Home to a woman who held him in contempt and to two children who were quickly forgetting who he was.

He scanned the little close of neat suburban homes, each surrounded by a pocket-handkerchief of carefully tended garden, each struggling in vain to proclaim individuality: the grand front doors with brass fittings, the carriage-style porch lights, the mock-Jacobean leaded windows. He remembered how he had come to despise these facile pretensions, how he had felt suffocated by the primness and by the essential vacuity of the place, and how he had wanted to escape from it all, to get away. Anyhow, anywhere, just away.

And so he had gone. Leaving *haus frau* Stephanie for the arms an exciting new partner, escaping the suffocating prison of suburban pettiness for the thrilling promise of limitless freedom, he had turned his back on this cosy little world, and at the time that had felt so completely right, his path having the sharp clarity of a spiritual epiphany. Now, however,

everything had changed, now this world was turning its back on him as firmly as he had turned his back on it – and that didn't feel quite so good. Because for all its prim cosiness and its smug security, it didn't seem so bad now, not so bad at all; not now that his life was bereft of all vestiges of cosiness and security. Even the dull roar of the M25, the eternal background to life on the estate that had once so irritated him, now sounded more like the purr of a friendly cat.

Shivering in the brisk wind, he felt the first splatterings of a cold drizzle on his face. He opened the car door, fumbling with his keys. Then, as he slid into the driver's seat, a new misery struck home like a knife wound in the guts. He should have told her today, if only because of the mortgage payments. Soon all that would remain of seven years work would be a few items of obsolete hardware and three boxes of promotional tee-shirts in the company's rather lurid livery. Because somehow, in the midst of a boom in the software linkage systems market, he had managed to drive his once thriving business into the ground.

The A412 was depressingly quiet for a Sunday afternoon, and he would be back in no time, back to his cold and poky Uxbridge flat, empty now of the new woman, his palace of freedom turned prison of loneliness. But he couldn't face it, not just yet, not feeling like he did. Seeing the children had unsettled him – more so than usual – and he needed time to collect himself, to ready himself for the grim wretchedness of the flat.

There was the possibility of stopping for a drink. The analgesia of the alcohol had appeal, but the pubs he passed did not. The first had been crassly modernised and was now the haunt of local wide boys, drinking bottled lager and radiating aggression like gamma rays. The 'Whip and Collar' was usually OK, but at this time it would be full of happy families finishing off their Sunday lunches: not the place for a domestic pariah such as himself. There was nowhere else before the motorway.

He thought briefly about going back into the town centre, but he hadn't the energy to turn the car. And so he drove on, gripping the wheel and staring straight ahead, clenching his jaws against the rising tide of misery. Soon he had left the outskirts of the town and was approaching the motorway access roundabout, sucked forward by his own lassitude.

Suddenly something snatched his eye, a dazzle of white in the grass verge on the right. For a moment it fixed him, the shaft of brilliance piercing his brain like a silver blade. Then without warning his hands spun the wheel, swerving the car across the road in front of an oncoming BMW. He stamped the brake in a desperate reflex and the front left wheel bounced onto the verge. The car shuddered to a halt as the BMW screamed past, bellowing outrage. The whiteness vanished into the tall grass; it could have been a rabbit, but he wasn't sure.

Cadwallader was breathing hard. The car was slewed across the entrance to a small lane and the engine had stalled. He lifted his hands off the wheel: they were trembling. He felt a warm flush of self-pity. Was there nothing, not even his driving, that was safe from his own lunacy?

As he stared up the lane, letting the misery wash over him, recognition clicked into place: he'd been here before, with the children. There was a path at the end that led up to some woods beside the motorway. He started the engine and pulled forward. Although battered by the ceaseless roar of traffic, it would do for a time-killing stroll.

Cadwallader pulled up onto the verge and turned off the engine. For a long while he didn't move, but sat slumped over the wheel watching the fine drizzle settle on the windscreen.

When he eventually did get out of the car, he felt instantly cold in the chill easterly wind. He leaned across to the passenger seat and picked up the ski hat and scarf that he hadn't needed in the morning. His shoes, fawn slip-ons with absurd little zippers down the front, were unsuitable for

November rambling but then he wasn't going far. Despite himself, he grinned. The shoes were comical, caricature old man's shoes, hand-me-downs from his ageing father. His wearing them was somehow symbolic, although of what he wasn't quite sure. He locked the car and headed up the lane, hat pulled down and scarf wrapped up to his chin.

His vision quickly blurred as the drizzle settled on his glasses. And although it wasn't late, the dim light was already fading. Enclosed by the hedges, the lane was in near nocturnal darkness and he began to walk faster.

As he emerged into the open, a track led off to the left to pass through a tunnel under the motorway spur road: this was the route leading up to the woods. The road itself ran straight ahead, plunging into a scrappy copse some fifty yards further on. He had intended to follow the track, but he now saw something in the trees, a flash of red. Pausing briefly, he was held by the sudden colour, and then set off towards it, making a diversion despite the inexorably advancing darkness.

What he had thought was a copse was in fact a clearing where the road ended, pitted hard-core surrounded by twisted damaged trees. There was a wire fence at the back, behind which the motorway thundered, blind, oblivious and eternal. Straight ahead of him, up against the fence, stood a derelict fire engine. Huge and imposing, it was bizarrely out of place, its massive engine lying half-disassembled on the ground beside it like the guts of a disembowelled beast. The ladders were missing, but the white hose reels were still intact, as were the water units, a mass of brass pipe-work and spigots. To the left of the fire engine was a decrepit caravan, chocked up on bricks with its wheels missing. It lay in a sea of detritus: Calor gas canisters, a doll's pram with a torn hood, two rusting bicycles and an electric cooker.

Then, in front of the caravan, he noticed a child, a small girl: he hadn't seen her at first, in the fading grey light. He had assumed he was alone and the sight of another person gave him a strange, shivering shock. She was his daughter's age, thin and pale, with dark hair hanging about her face in damp straggles. Apparently oblivious to the rain, she sat on a stained mattress with her arm around the neck of a large black dog, a greyhound cross of some sort. Neither the child nor the dog moved nor made a sound. For a moment he was transfixed by the stillness of their gaze, filled with a growing unease. Then he turned and walked quickly back along the road as if fleeing from some nameless danger.

The track was heavily pot-holed and, especially in the deep gloom under the spur road bridge, he had to take care to avoid puddles. After this the way rose steeply; it was still rough walking on thin soles, but dry. At the crest of the ridge the track turned sharp left to run along the top of the motorway cutting. There was now no barrier from the road and the monotonous roar intensified.

Out of the lee of the ridge he was exposed to the full bitterness of the wind. Shivering, he thrust his hands into his jacket pockets. He felt something: the crumpled wrapping paper of Laura's present. But there was no sign of the bottle. He stopped, checking the inside pocket and then his jeans. Nothing. It was gone. There was another uprush of self-pity; he had lost it already, his only birthday present, the only sign, paltry though it was, that any creature on earth was aware of his existence. He touched the skin behind his left ear and then held the finger under his nose, smelling the residual perfume of the geranium leaves. For some moments he stood staring at the pitted concrete of the path, gutted by sorrow.

After a hundred yards or so, at the start of the woods, the track joined a narrow farm road that swung in from the left. He walked slowly now, like a mourner at a funeral. Why had he let all of

this happen? this was the big question. For he had let it happen, watching blankly, like a rabbit in the headlights of a car, as the whole thing fell apart. His marriage and his children and his home, and now his business, each slipping through numbed fingers and crashing, one by one, to the cold concrete floor.

It was strangely peaceful in the woods. The stately beeches soared skywards like gothic pillars, their branches meshing over the road like vaulting. The manic roar of the traffic, though undiminished in intensity, seemed to lose its relevance in the cathedral calm. The air here was still, though he could still hear the wind in the high branches of the trees, far, far above. As he walked the tree trunks loomed out of the half-light, vast impassive sentinels, aware of his presence though indifferent to it.

Whatever it was that had done for him, it had crept up on him like a murderer in the night, unnoticed and unrecognised. It had led him away from the path into the dark, dark forest, where he now stumbled blindly forward with a quiet panic screaming through his skull. He stopped and stared up at the swaying branches far above, clawed silhouettes against the grey sky. He felt suddenly severed from his life and a strange calm flooded over him. A scrap of floating seaweed swept along by the currents and tides, carried by the blind forces of the ocean, he had lost control of his life.

He reached a junction which he did not recognise: he had come further than he intended. The road itself swung right, heading out of the wood, back into the fading light of the afternoon. An unmetalled track branched off straight ahead, leading on through the trees. Cadwallader followed the road, feeling suddenly exposed as he left the sanctuary of the woods.

After fifty yards, the road crossed a single lane bridge over the motorway. Here the roar reached a manic crescendo, the scream of the engines and the thunder of tyres on concrete like a never-ending onrush of enraged beasts, bellowing their fury into the gloaming. He stared down at the two-way river of light – white flowing towards him, red away – which stretched to infinity, winding away over the distant hills like a luminous snake. The brief peace of the cathedral had dissolved in the corrosive acid of misery; he had lost everything, every single thing that had mattered to him, and in return he gained nothing but anguish. And now he was trapped: even if he saw a way out the mess, he knew that he wouldn't have the strength to take it.

So what now? He hadn't a clue, not a single scintilla of an inkling.

Leaning forward against the metal parapet, he allowed himself to sink into the endless flow of lights, relaxing into his misery as into the arms of an old friend. In a strange way he liked it here, flowing with the lights, his thoughts numbed by the incessant roar. Perhaps he could stay forever, gazing down onto the motorway, shielding himself from pain until death finally carried him away.

'Don't jump.'

Although the voice was smooth and soft, like velvet, he heard her clearly above the traffic noise. And oddly he was not surprised, as if he had been expecting her. He turned slowly.

A girl approaches from the far side of the bridge, further away than her voice had sounded. She comes towards him slowly, gliding across the tarmac, watching him with half a smile in her eyes. Small and slim with flowing dark hair, she is barefoot and wears nothing but a light gown of a shimmering white that flows around her body and thighs like molten silver. She is surrounded by warm brightness, like a pool of sunlight, that moves with her.

He has a vague feeling of knowing her, she seems so familiar, and yet also he is certain that he has never seen her before in his life; and for some reason he cannot fathom he is also certain that she was expecting him, waiting for him here at the bridge.

She stands close in front of him and he is enveloped in her capsule of light; he feels the sun-warmth on his skin, he sees the colours that are too bright, the light that shimmers, undulating and dream-like.

'I wasn't going to,' he says quietly.

She smiles up at him and puts her face to his neck, as if smelling something. She sighs, closing her eyes in ecstasy. Then, without warning, she reaches up to him, slides her arms around his neck and pulls him forward, locking her lips onto his. At first he hesitates, holding back, but a fuzzy warmth trickles through him: he closes his eyes and flows into her. Inside him icy concretions of angst and misery slowly begin to melt, softening and falling away. He holds her waist, pulling her slim body against his, and then time stops.

After an era, or possibly two, she pulls back.

'Come,' she says, and taking his hand, leads him across the bridge, back towards the woods. He walks beside her, swimming in her travelling pool of summer.

In the woods it is warm and dry. The trees they pass are in full leaf, clothed in the emerald green of spring, and dappled sunlight filters through the foliage. Is this how it's supposed to be? he thinks vaguely as she leads him to a patch of soft grass. They are surrounded by the tall, green trees, shimmering in the sunlight and the gentle breeze. She kisses him again and pulls at the tie of her gown which falls open and then off her shoulders. Her body fills his soul, he is aware of nothing else: the dappled light on her golden skin, her small breasts, her belly and her soft round thighs.

She lies down on the grass, pulling him down with her. He is dimly aware that he is no longer wearing his jacket or his sweater. Locking her mouth on his, she places his hand over her breast and begins to pull at his belt. She swirls around him like mist, the feeling and sight of her body blending with the velvet heat in his brain. Her hands slide over his skin and into his soul, her limbs encircle him and he is sucked down into her, sinking, floating and flowing away.

Chapter 2

Swirling colours, light and sound as a single sensation. Floating, falling, with tiny fibrils of awareness beginning to coalesce. Then something solid emerging from the confusion: a woman, a boy, and a yellow-haired girl. They are watching him, unsmiling. A tendril of anxiety grows, undulating at the base of his consciousness.

The tendril is a plant, a sea plant, swaying gently in the deep blue water. Then the plant grows a bud and the bud bursts into an orange flower, a bright orange flower that gets bigger and bigger, filling the sea.

Orange-red brightness, completely amorphous. He can't see anything else – why can't he see anything else? Then suddenly the orangeness condenses, becoming a reticular pattern of black against dazzling brilliance. He has opened his eyes.

He looks up at the branches and the leaves swaying above him, scattering the brightness of the sun. Slowly, the gentle rocking lulls him and the flickering brightness seeps into him, filling the hollow cavities of his mind with rolling light and warmth. The tendril dissolves into nothingness and his breath flows quietly like the evening tide. Then, though at first imperceptibly, it changes.

The swaying becomes slow and deliberate and the dazzling pattern of silhouettes presses down on him, threatening to suffocate, to crush. He sits up quickly, blinking.

He is surrounded by trees, their huge trunks crowding in on him like menacing strangers. He shrinks back, cowering and afraid. Something is missing. The woman and the two children, where are they? He looks around quickly, but he cannot see them. Panic flares, though it is fast dulled by confusion. Were they ever really here, or was they just part of a dream? He tries to picture them in his mind, to bring them back – but sees only shadows. And now the memory of the dream is fading and he can feel them slipping away, sliding out of his mind like sand through a sieve. He sinks back into himself; he is aware that he has lost something, but he doesn't know what.

He hears a voice, a laugh, light and happy like music, spilling and tumbling through the viscous air. Sitting up again and he looks around. He is on a patch of grass, brilliant green, each blade blazing with luminosity. Directly ahead of him, on a road leading out of the trees, there is a girl, small and pretty, barefoot and dressed in white. She turns to him, waves farewell, and then is away into the brilliant sunlight.

Her smile fills him with a sudden warmth, melting his fear. The trees are friendly now and pull back, giving him space. He feels the spongy grass under his body and the cool dampness on his hands. The green light shines up through him as if he were transparent, made of soft glass. The girl is his friend, and he knows she likes him. But who is she? The question plops into his mind, hovers expectantly for a few moments in the translucent jelly of his awareness, then fades to nothing, leaving no trace of an answer.

After this he closes his eyes and an image of the girl is all around him, bathing him in golden light. It is a delightful memory, fuzzy and warm, though also insubstantial, shimmering in his mind like a mirage. He tries to focus, but everything is fluid and slippery, each thought sliding away as he reaches for it, like fish in a turbid pool. The girl is there, blurred and confused, and also what could be a woman and a child, or possibly two children. But he can't see them at all now, they are too indistinct. Perhaps they were nothing after all, phantasms and no more than that. There are other images, but far away out of reach and already sliding into the blur: a neat red house and something dying, something he knows is his.

Suddenly he is aware of a sensation, a cold wetness on his skin, and he opens his eyes. A slug, a black slug as big as a man's foot, is crawling over the back of his hand. He can feel the muscular waves that ripple along its belly as it propels itself over his skin on a bed of slime. He watches, fascinated, as the sunlight glistens on the slime-covered body, encasing it with rainbow coloured jewels. Its eye stalks move slowly to and fro and its breathing hole is a vast dark cavern in the side of its shining carapace. Eventually it slides onto the grass, leaving a sheet of shining wet diamond across his skin. The spell breaks and he sees that there are more of the giant molluscs, scattered around him on the grass. Indeed he is surrounded by them, a broken circle, all moving slowly away from him back into the woods, their shining trails radiating out from where he is sitting like shimmering silver spokes of a rimless wheel.

Standing, he teeters slightly, unsure of his feet. There is a looseness around his waist: his belt is undone and his jeans are open. He feels suddenly guilty, like a criminal, and another tendril of anxiety begins to undulate quietly at the base of his awareness. With fumbling sausage fingers, he pulls up the zip and buckles the belt.

He looks around at the swaying trees, their grey trunks flowing and swirling like molten plastic, at the dark green undergrowth with its tendrils of briar twisting and coiling into a filigree of gothic intricacy, and at the grass at his feet, the blades curling and flowing in waves like the

cilia on a protozoan membrane. All is moving – and at the same time perfectly still, as if embedded in clear resin.

He notices some discarded clothing scattered about his feet: a ludicrous blue hat with a little red man embroidered into it, a purple scarf, and a dark blue jersey with patches of smooth cloth on the shoulders and elbows. There is also a black coat with a dark red lining. Of leather, the back and sleeves are shiny, like the slugs, though the front is smooth suede; he can feel the texture of this in his mind, like a girl's skin, soft and subtle. Smiling at the thought, he looks up the road. His own girl is now far away, a shimmering patch of white in the bright daylight. He feels suddenly alone – the trees close in menacingly – and he doesn't want to lose her.

The clothes might be his, they might not. But either way, he doesn't want them, clinging and stifling on this bright warm day. Except for the coat, that is: for he likes the coat, with its slug-shiny sleeves and its girl-skin front. It is amazingly heavy and clings desperately to the ground as he picks it up. When he puts it on the lining material grips the bare skin of his arms, squeezing him affectionately. Then, uncertainly, he steps out of the widening circle of great molluscs and follows the girl up the road.

The smooth plastic blackness of the road arched in front of him like the back of a whale breaking through the waves, and the trees parted as he advanced, stepping aside like courtiers. The girl was ahead of him, his white-clad target, his goal. He knew he could reach her – just a few yards of tarmac separated them – but as he hurried towards her, he felt something begin to change. It was imperceptible at first, just a strange sense of threatened instability as of an ornament teetering on the edge of a mantelpiece, but then he noticed the colours that swirled around him becoming brighter still, absurdly bright, and then gradually melting away from the objects that gave them existence. Once liberated from the bonds of form, they flowed freely, first blending into one another then separating in a mad whirling dance, like the paints on a deranged artist's palette. Again he was alone, this time in a realm beyond existence, a realm of formless, flowing colour; he shivered, giddy with panic. But then, in the midst of the swirling mess, there was something solid, a firm blob of white that refused to blend, a whiteness that belonged to something, the whiteness of an object. He focussed on the girl's gown, anchoring his mind in the swirling maelstrom. And then, slowly coalescing around the rock of whiteness, the rest unmixed itself and swam back into place: the green returned to the grass, the black to the tarmac, and the blue to the brilliant sky that gave it birth. The road was back where he had left it and the girl was still there, far ahead of him, walking away.

As his nascent panic ebbed quickly away, he stepped out of the shade and was immersed in light, dazzling and white. It blazed over him and through him, illuminating every atom in his body. With a sudden rush of excitement, he became light; he was light itself, a splinter of the sun shining across the surface of the earth. But then, as he sped forward at sunbeam velocity, he felt his feet thudding onto the warm tarmac, his body lurching forward with each step. He wasn't light at all, he was earth. His limbs became sacks of sand and his body filled with concrete. He took a step, hauling his leg forward, dragging the huge weight of his foot over the ground. Finally he stopped walking, for he must remain still to let the earth flow into him, to become one with the soil and the bedrock. As his petrification neared completeness, however, something flickered across the granite mass that was his brain: a dazzle of whiteness. The girl was standing at a gate at the top of the road, a beacon of brightness. The earth melted and flowed out of him like lava, releasing its grip.

He was now between two fences which appeared to converge ahead of him, funnelling him towards the girl, the focussed angularity hard grey metal tearing into his fragile vision. A vague shadow scudded across his mind, possibly a memory. Of a bridge? No, he was on a bridge now; it wasn't a memory at all. He peered gingerly over one of the parapets; a river shimmered twenty miles below, a river of colours and shapes which flowed both ways at once, a river of sound that echoed through him in falling crescendos of noise, each throb and pulse perfectly in place as if played by a vast orchestra.

He could have been lost forever in the endless flow of colour and sound, but again the girl pulled him back, an image of her coalescing in his mind to call him away. Starting forward again, he quickened his pace. Even as he walked, though, he could feel the river as it coursed by far beneath him. It wouldn't let him go, it was tugging at him, pulling him towards itself with a strange force. And there was nothing between him and it except for several miles of empty, free-fall space – and a flimsy little bridge. Suddenly he saw falling, a horrible plunging into the gaping chasm. Then the tarmac veered away from him and he was on a knife-edge with sheer drops on either side. For a moment he teetered, swaying wildly and fighting for balance with windmilling arms.

But he did not fall. Forcing his eyes straight ahead, he nailed his vision to the whiteness of the girl's clothes, resisting the magnetic force of the abyss that pulled him to gaze into its terrible vertiginous eyes. His heart hammered in his throat and he ceased breathing – and gradually he regained his balance. Then, putting each foot in front of the other with a tightrope walker's care, he edged slowly forward, staying directly between the parapets.

At last he reached firm ground. The solidity of the earth under his feet caressed him, enclosing him in a warm blanket of gravity. Relief washed through him and he breathed deeply, feeling suddenly light, like gossamer in the breeze. He laughed out loud, spinning around like a dancer.

At the gate the road turned sharply to the right. When he reached it, the girl had moved on; she was not more than thirty yards away from him, now moving with molluscan slowness, gazing around at the trees and the sky. He made to follow her but stopped dead. For on the other side of the gate were two people – a woman and a man – sinking slowly behind the crest of a low grassy hill.

The woman had flowing hair as black as the night itself and wore a tiny dress of the brightest of bright reds, like a splash of freshly spilled blood against the brilliant blue of the sky. He caught her profile as she turned to speak to her companion: magazine model loveliness, with tanned skin and sculptured features.

But for all the woman's allure, it was the man who caught his attention. For some reason, the disappearing torso filled his consciousness, hammering its presence into the back of his brain. The short hair was thinning from the forehead, and he wore glasses and a lime green tee-shirt with a flash of orange on the front. Slung casually over his left shoulder the man carried a jacket, a black jacket with a red lining. He felt something he couldn't identify, a tightness inside, cold and dark, which blossomed quickly into a unplumbed, all-encompassing loathing. Standing rock still, he was turned to stone, unable not to watch, boiling black blood pumping furiously through his skull. Then a moment later the man was gone, vanished behind the hill, and the terrible spell was broken. The empty grass rolled towards him like the ocean swell; he was breathing hard and he was afraid.

The girl in white! He turned quickly and relaxed; she was still there, standing at the side of the road and pulling a flower from the hedge. She felt so close that he could reach out and touch her, pluck her out of his field of vision like taking a picture off a wall. As he watched the scene coalesced into a moving tableau of unbearable beauty: the girl in her dazzling white gown floating on the plastic river of tarmac as it flowed slowly between the undulating green banks, her dark hair flowing over her face to meet the startling blueness of the flower, a splinter of sky in her hand.

Then another figure appeared behind her, a discordant pulse of ugliness, and the tableau shattered. It was a small fat man in a dark suit and a bowler hat. His chubby face was creased with worry and his stubby pin-striped legs sliced together like scissors as he walked briskly up the road, carrying a battered leather briefcase in one hand and an umbrella in the other.

He shook his head and blinked vigorously, trying to get rid of this new, unwelcome blot, trying to restore the harmony. But the man caught his eye and raised the umbrella in greeting, then hurried forward to meet him. The ugly stain spread quickly across the loveliness, growing larger, closer, but he couldn't escape, he was trapped like a light-blinded rabbit. Then, when all seemed lost, the girl intervened; as the little man trotted past her, she stepped forward and took his arm, stopping him.

The cool wash of relief quickly ebbed away, however, as the girl leaned up to whisper to her chubby new friend, her body touching his with a revolting familiarity. The fat man tried to pull away, indicating at him with the briefcase. But she held her prey, talking softly to him and turning him away. He struggled again and this time she kissed him, pressing her lips onto the quivering pink jowls. The little man's struggles now became feeble, like an exhausted salmon, and as he collapsed into her control she took his umbrella and led him away down the road like an obedient puppy.

His short-lived relief was now replaced by a sharp sense of betrayal. How could she desert him like this? It couldn't be true; there must be some mistake. Any minute now she would send the little man on his way and come back to him, he knew she would, she was bound to. But even as these thoughts jabbed through his mind, the girl was stepping off the road, leading her man into the woods on the left. The incongruous pair was now encased in a horrible and exclusive intimacy and, choking on jealousy and betrayal, he watched helplessly as they disappeared into the enveloping greenery.

Now he was really alone. Completely alone. Utterly alone. He stared blankly up the empty road as the hot tarmac arched and rolled towards him, and the hedges and trees twisted and swayed with slow deliberation. A cold snake of fear slithered up his spine. It was all now so oppressively close, the trees and the sky crowding against him, the tarmac smothering his awareness with a crawling intimacy. He pushed at the air, fighting for space, but still it pressed in on him, the whole of creation forming an existential rugby scrum with him at its centre. Then suddenly, just as he was about to collapse under the great weight, it lurched back, the trees and the sky hurling themselves away from him, stretching into the dizzy distance, further than he could ever hope to reach. He staggered forward into the gaping void – and it was all back again, crushing in on him, tight and suffocating. The fear-snake coiled into his skull and a hurricane of panic whirled through his brain.

He spun round to escape the hideous oscillations, first turning back to the gate then over towards the bridge. But it wouldn't stop, the oppressive closeness and dizzying distance still alternated wildly – and then blended, combining into one hideous blur of suffocation and vertigo. He jammed his eyes closed to shut it out – but they were all still there, the gate, the road, the

field, writhing on the undersides of his eyelids. A scream ripped through his skull, but the noise coagulated silently in the plastic air. He ran forward, but his feet refused to obey.

And then gravity was no more. As a panorama of tarmac slid by under him he could see the tiny stones, each embedded in its coat of black tar, each so different from, and yet at the same time so alike, those that surrounded it. They moved past in slow motion, coming gently towards him with an unhurried languor like hundreds of black, luminous friends.

Then, with an explosion of light and colour and jolted twisting limbs, gravity made a comeback.

An ocean of black-coated boulders stretched out into infinity and then came rolling back in slow, gentle waves. Warm hardness caressed his cheek, comforting and calming like a mother's hand. He liked it down here, cuddled to the plastic tarmac; down here it was safe, away from the panic and the fear. As he focused on the coagulated boulders in front of his face and stared into the weird twisted gaps between them, he thought of melting into liquid and seeping down into the vast network of caverns beneath the surface of the road, of spending eternity as a thousand subterranean rivulets tricking deeper and deeper into the hard flesh of the earth.

There was a blurred movement at the edge of his vision and he refocused. A creature was approaching, clambering over the sea of boulders. Clearly intent on matters of vital importance it moved quickly, following some invisible path across the featureless if uneven plain of the road. It got closer and closer until – as big as a rhinoceros – it paused under the jutting overhang of his nose, sensing his presence with bobbing antennae. Then, with quiet deliberation, it turned and hurried away, going up past his eyebrows and out of sight beyond the top of his head.

After the ant had gone, he lay watching the waves lumbering towards him across the tarmac. The slow rolling gradually seeped into him and his thoughts rocked gently in time with the waves. The boulders melted into each other and a heavy curtain of darkness began its inexorable descent.

But he didn't want to sleep, he had only just woken up.

Suddenly galvanised, he scrambled to his feet, shaking his head to dissipate the heaviness. But as soon as he was up, it started again; the trees and the sky hurled themselves in at him, before veering away with dizzy insanity. The snake of fear was quickly awake, slithering up his throat. Now, however, he sensed something inside, a tiny pebble of hardness that the fear couldn't touch. And so this time he caught the snake, seizing its scaly neck. It twisted, trying to bite him – a slab of sky crashed down – but he held it. Then, with teeth-gritting effort, he forced it back down into its slimy cave; the oscillations slowed, and stopped.

He relaxed and for a moment all was stable. Then – suddenly – the trees crushed in, swerving giddily up to his face. Again the fear rose, but again – and with less difficulty – he forced it down, restoring equilibrium. A butterfly of lightness fluttered across his chest and he breathed deeply, savouring the viscous air; he had won, and having won once he knew he could win again.

The empty road flowed slowly away between its flower-decked grassy banks. But without her the scene looked as barren and derelict as industrial waste land. A heaviness pulled at his throat and he turned away.

Where to now? Without the girl to guide him, he was at something of a loss. He looked around aimlessly, wondering what to do. The wooden fence next to the gate was breached by a stile, and beside the stile was a tall signpost. Perhaps this might help.

Unfortunately the sign was blank. It was a piece of wood, one end carved into a hand with the forefinger pointing across the field behind the fence, but with no words to give direction. Despite its unhelpfulness, however, he found himself entranced by the quality of the workmanship: for in addition to the forefinger, the other three fingers had also been carved, curled into the palm and gripped by the thumb, each with its nail and joint creases. Then, as he gazed up admiringly, it moved; the hand twisted upwards and the forefinger wagged, beckoning him forward.

His tiny tremor of surprise faded leaving a residue of confusion; he'd seen good wood carving before, but nothing quite this lifelike. The sign seemed to sense his lapse in attention and beckoned more vigorously, this time with an edge of impatience. His puzzlement gelled quickly around a hard pulse of indignation. Who on earth did it think it was? he thought. Then, as if to add insult to injury, as he went to turn away the wooden fingers snapped imperiously and the whole hand waved him forward and pointed across the stile.

He stormed back towards the bridge, seething. Nicely carved or not, he was damned if he was going to be ordered about by a wooden signpost – he would go this way instead. But as reached the beginning of the metal parapets, his tempest of outrage faltered. He gazed into the dizzying abyss and felt it sucking him forward, spinning him with vertigo. Perhaps not the bridge, after all.

He turned again and headed up the road towards where the girl in white had disappeared, deliberately not looking at the sign as he strode past it. A few yards beyond the stile, however, he lost confidence. The road stretched out into the dark unknown, its trees and hedges pressing in menacingly, like assassins awaiting their victim.

There was, of course, the field.

The field, with its open blue skies and its little grassy knoll where the woman in the blood-spill dress had wandered, carefree as a sky lark. Sunlit pastures opened out before him, enticing and safe.

'I'm going this way because that's what I want to do,' he said, trying to sound assured, 'I hope you understand that this is my decision, and my decision alone.'

The sign did not respond, but he sensed an arrogant smugness in the curl of the fingers. He gritted his teeth but refused the challenge; he wasn't going to let himself get rattled by some pompous, puffed up piece of wood. And so, taking an angry grip on the waist-high cross-bar of the stile, he swung himself up onto the first step.

And nearly fell off again – for the wood was like rubber, swaying and buckling under his weight. For a few precarious moments he teetered to and fro, fighting for balance, and then lunged forwards, gripping the cross-bar with both hands. He managed to swing his left leg over onto the swaying foot-piece on the far side and then stood astride the stile as it bucked like a rodeo bronco, trying to throw him off. After a short while it seemed to tire and he saw his chance. But his optimism was misplaced – just as he'd got his right leg over, the foot-piece plunged suddenly and tumbled him onto the grass.

As he picked himself up, he glanced up at the sign. Although it looked motionless, there could have been a slight vibration, a quiver of suppressed mirth. Muttering silent imprecations, he stomped away across the grass, hammering his anger into the innocent turf.

Once in the field, the path was easy to see, running over the crest of the little knoll. He walked quickly, still propelled by the rocket fuel of indignation though glad to be underway, to be finally away from the bloody thing. Then, as he looked towards the slope, he thought saw something, a diaphanous patch of colour vanishing over the horizon as if the woman's dress had left an after-image in the shimmering air. He stopped stone dead – for beside the red ghost was another, in lime green.

As he stared at the now empty sky, a weird coldness trickled inside him and his confidence ebbed like a falling tide. Perhaps the bridge was the best option after all. It wasn't that dangerous – he'd managed it once, he could do so again. Also there was something nice the other side, although he couldn't quite remember what; a mirage teardrop, black and shiny, crawled slowly across his mind and was gone.

Back to the stile, the sign held an imperious palm against him.

'I think I've come the wrong way,' he said, 'It might be better if I just went back over there.'

It pointed over his shoulder, quivering with impatience.

'I'm not sure that I should. I really think – .' His voice tailed feebly away as the sign stabbed the air with its finger. He looked up, pleading, but it remained impervious, pointing implacably across the field.

This time when he set off along the path there were no coloured ghosts, and his apprehension – together with the hazy miasma of the memory – gradually evaporated. He liked walking on the grass; its soft springiness seemed to propel him forward in long, fluid bounces. A gentle breeze cooled his face and the china-blue sky arched over him like a vast upturned cereal bowl. To his left the ground fell away steeply and in the distance he could see the two-way river snaking across the rolling hills. It was all so pretty and bright, like a Toy-Town film set. He could have reached out and cupped one of the far hills under the palm of his hand.

Something caught his eye to the right: a splash of colour. He turned quickly, in time to see two rabbits diving into the hedgerow, alarmed by his approach. They were lovely creatures, one a rich dark blue, the other emerald green – brighter even than the grass – and each showing its bob-tail, a flash of dazzling white against the coloured fur.

He was moving quickly now. Although he could feel the turf under his soles at each step, he seemed to be gliding over the surface of the field. He was a yacht sailing across the open sea; shimmering waves flowed across the grass, sweeping over the crest of the hill, crossing and recrossing each other, forming intricate whorled patterns as they swirled and eddied around his feet. Here and there exotic plants thrust up through the ripples: thistles with leaves like razor-wire and colour-burst flowers of brilliant pink; yellow ragwort crawling with black and vermilion caterpillars, too poisonous even to look at; and rose-bay willow-herb, spilling its feather-cloud seeds into the wind.

His velocity increased. The waves swept under him at giddy speed and the taller plants streaked by like telegraph poles from a train window. He ought not go so fast, he could easily trip, but he felt sucked forward by his own momentum and he couldn't slow his legs.

Faster and faster and faster. The world blurred into parallel lines of speeding colour, closing around him in a tunnel of slippery speed. Everything became speed – and the speed became fear, a high velocity terror that roared in his ears, his eyes, his brain. And still he got faster, a human rocket hurtling towards the crest of the hill.

Towards the crest of the hill?

He should have half way to Jupiter by now, not still heading up the hill. Steeling himself for a fatal fall, he glanced behind. The stile, with its obnoxious signpost, was right there, no more than fifteen yards away. He turned back to the path. The crest of the small hill lay ahead of him – and he was standing stock still, washed by the gentle ripples of the grass.

He breathed deeply and his panic melted away. When his galloping heartbeat had returned to normal, he tried again. Putting his left foot carefully forward, he made a single step. That felt fine, everything was normal and he had moved about a yard. Another single step: again all OK,

another yard forward. Then another, and another. He grinned, and with a surge of confidence, strode out for the top of the hill. But no sooner had he begun to walk normally, than – with a flare of naked panic – he was sucked into the tunnel of uncontrolled velocity.

He caught himself, stopped walking and was instantly still, though again no further forward than when he first started. How on earth was he meant to get anywhere? he wondered, gritting his teeth. Again he started walking – and again he was sucked into the tunnel of speed, and again when he stopped he had made no progress. This time his frustration snapped. As the grass swirled innocently around his feet, he clenched his fists and glared at the hill in front of him.

'This – is – ridiculous!' he shouted, 'Will you please stop this – at once!'

The waves seemed to pause, quivering slightly – with contrition perhaps? He started forward again, stomping crossly on the chastened ripples. And nothing happened. No acceleration, no sliding into the tunnel of speed: he was walking normally, moving like a person not a cyclotroned sub-atomic particle. This time he could feel the drag of his own weight pulling him back at each step, this time he was making effort, climbing the hill rather than sliding up it. At last he seemed to be getting somewhere.

He climbed onwards, pulling himself up the slope. Soon he was panting, heaving himself up with straining muscles, enjoying the exertion of exercise. The slope rose steeply in front of him and the summit beckoned ahead. He couldn't move quickly now, but took each step one at a time, steadily winning altitude with sweat and effort.

He paused for breath, panting hard, looking up the near vertical bank ahead of him. Not far to the top now, surely. He was certainly enjoying the climb, though he didn't remember the mountain being so – .

Mountain? What mountain?

He turned and, instead of a distant view of the road and the bridge far below, there was the stile, exactly where he had left it, fifteen yards behind. He spun round angrily to confront the mountainside and in front of him was a harmless little slope, leading to the crest of a small hill a few paces away.

'That's it,' he hissed, glaring at the grass, 'I've had it up to here with you and your silly games. I'm going back to the bridge, signpost or no signpost.'

But as he turned to march back to the stile, something felt different; the ground was flat, there was no slope. He looked around – and saw he was on top of the hill.

'Thank you so much,' he said to the grass, 'So good of you to oblige.'

On the other side of the knoll, the field banked away to the bottom of wide valley. The opposite slope was coated in thick woodland, a dense emerald green, the foliage plastic and fluid, close and yet so far away. Beyond the wood were more hills, rolling into the distance: some wooded, some a patchwork of fields, some with tiny Trumpton villages clustered on their slopes.

He was gazing out over the view – sensing the great distance, yet knowing he could pluck like a flower one of the tiny trees from the furthest hill – when he noticed someone in the field ahead of him. A middle-aged man, slightly overweight and wearing a light fawn anorak and dark blue slacks, was scampering around on the grass, coming up the hill towards him in a meandering series of zigzags and circles. The man paused apprehensively for a moment when he saw him, but then ran forward excitedly, clearly delighted with his discovery.

'Good afternoon. Lovely day, isn't it?'

The man did not respond, but ran around him, sniffing at his coat.

'Bit of a chill in the breeze, though,' he said, with growing embarrassment. The man grinned and got onto his hands and knees to sniff at his shoes.

There was a distant bark. The man paused briefly, but quickly went back to his excited sniffing and scrabbling. A large yellow dog – a retriever – was walking sedately beside the hedgerow at the top of the field. It stopped, looked across at them and barked again, this time with an edge of irritation. The man stopped sniffing and, a little crestfallen, looked up. Another bark. With obvious reluctance, he got to his feet and began to amble slowly away, stopping once or twice to sniff at a tussock. When he eventually reached the dog, the pair walked on side by side, the man occasionally running forward a few paces to investigate the hedgerow, although quickly falling back into line.

Where to now? he thought, turning away from the incongruous duo. The path he was on swept down into the valley where another stile led into the woods. Of course he didn't have to stick to this particular path, or to any path at all for that matter. It was a big field and he could go anywhere he wanted. But as he looked out over the open grass, across the uncharted expanse of swirling waves and whirlpool eddies, he shuddered. Despite everything, it might be better to stick with the devil he was, by now, getting to know rather well. And so, with one last look around the little hilltop he had won with such difficulty, he started down the path towards the woods.

He hadn't gone more than six paces before he noticed the slope getting steeper, falling away in front of him. After a few more steps he was on a steep bank, gazing down into the valley bottom miles below, giddy with vertigo. His feet began to slip on the near vertical grass, he was about to fall – .

'Just you stop that!' he snapped, 'Right this minute!'

Chapter 3

The stile into the woods was considerably better behaved than its colleague at the top of the field: some swaying of the foot-piece and a slightly rubbery cross-bar, but nothing he couldn't handle. Once over he found himself in bright woodland. The trees were small, slender and tightly packed, jostling each other like rush-hour Tube passengers in the fight to reach the sun. Between the trunks grew clumps of writhing bramble and swaying ferns with neon-bright leaves cut into fractal patterns of sub-atomic perfection. To his right a sea of bluebells stretched into the distance, flooding the ground between the trees; the fleshy leaves undulated like fronds of seaweed and the blueness of the flowers coalesced into a rippling ocean.

Here and there trees had fallen, losers in the battle for space. Some still refused to die and lay propped at odd angles against reluctant neighbours, their spindly branches reaching up in vain desperation to the lost light. Others had given up the struggle, lapsing into the quiet dignity of death. These lay rotting into the leaf mould, sprouting fungi in a final efflorescence of life: yellow shells, each as neat and fresh as a baby's ear; tight clusters of orange parasols, like crowds of tiny geishas; and huge slabs of flesh, red and raw. The leaf canopy was low and broken, shattering the sunlight into dappled patches. Birdsong echoed languorously through the liquid air, seeming to emanate from the trees and plants themselves.

The intricate beauty was too powerful for him and it swamped all his other thoughts, pouring in through his eyes and his ears, filling his skull, his body, his soul. It possessed him. He became his senses, he was no more than what he saw and heard: the writhing branches and the coiling briars, the dazzling, flowing colours and the swimming sounds. He had ceased to exist – he was the wood, the wood was him.

After an era (or possibly two) there was a sensation. Was it vision? No – then it must be hearing. But it was neither; a butterfly had settled on what seemed to be his hand – so he did have a body after all. The great insect hung there, nonchalantly opening and closing its electric blue wings. Not blue, green. Wait, surely it was yellow, metallic yellow – or orange? As the creature flew off into the liquid air, a flash of red flickered in the broken sunlight.

With his independent existence rekindled, he looked all about and saw that he was now in the midst of the wood – there was no stile behind him, there was no path in front of him. He wasn't concerned though, for he liked the wood, it was his friend. Perhaps he could stay here forever. If he stood still long enough, he might even become a tree himself. But as he began to subside once more into the liquid stillness, he noticed a movement in the distance; flying shapes were flitting through the trunks. As they got closer, he saw that they were hovering, like bees, and a quiet buzzing murmured in the turgid air, only just audible.

They were not bees, however, they were tiny people, each about two feet in length. A family of five – a man, a woman and three children – dressed casually for a pleasant day out. They flew horizontally, like swimmers buoyed up by the liquid air. Above the shoulders of each was a diaphanous blur, only just visible, which could have been buzzing membrane wings or a half-existent helicopter blade. And in place of eyes were jewelled visors: curved discs of crystal, the surfaces broken into hundreds of glittering hexagons that shivered the sunlight into the flashing colours of the rainbow.

They came closer and closer, hovering to and fro through the shimmering air, unconcerned by his presence. He hoped they would come closer still, possibly even close enough to speak to, but after investigating a clump of foam-splashed elder they drifted away through the trees, carried by some mysterious purpose. He watched until the last flicker of movement vanished into the distant blur of trunks, and then it was time he moved on too. Lifting his left foot he stepped out into the uncharted sea of ferns and bracken.

And like the Red Sea the undergrowth parted, moving politely aside to reveal a path that wound away between the trees. He puzzled for a moment before starting forward, wondering why they had kept it hidden from him; soon, however, he was lost again in the colour and the sound, both too real and too strong, again overpowering his senses.

A sudden burst of brilliance snatched his attention. It was a plant with flowers that opened and closed rhythmically, flashing beacons of violet and yellow. He stopped to peer through the undergrowth, but it crouched shyly behind a briar, keeping out of full view.

It was no more than a few yards off the path and he decided to get a closer look. As he stepped into the greenery, the vegetation again parted, revealing another path. This he followed, though with the beginnings of a tiny tickle of worry. The plant seemed to have moved and was now behind a fallen birch trunk some feet away from the new path. He could see it better in its new position; the flowers seemed to be human hands with violet palms and sun-bright yellow fingers that closed quickly into tight green bud-fists. He wasn't certain, but he thought the hands were signalling to him, beckoning him closer. And so again he stepped towards it and yet another path opened up in front of him. And again the plant was still further away, crouching in a clump of ferns.

The tickle of worry became an itch; he could so easily get lost in this network of new paths. The plant was now beckoning with all its might, urging him forward into the undergrowth. This time, however, he ignored it and went to retrace his steps. It was then that he saw there was no

path behind him – and when he turned back, the path he had been following had also disappeared. Once again he was standing in a swirling sea of unbroken undergrowth.

He was lost now and he knew it. The itch became a slithery worm of fear, gnawing at his bowels. The paths had all disappeared and he would be stuck in the wood forever like a doomed Amazonian explorer. The trees, crooked and bent like crones, eyed him darkly and edged closer. Bat wings of panic flapped in his skull and he shrunk into his coat, lost and alone. Something pulled at his leg; a bramble was coiling around his calf, gripping his jeans with fish hook thorns. He wrenched it off, lacerating his hands, and twisted away into a birch branch that clawed at his face, going for his eyes. He beat wildly at the dry twig talons and an embryo scream formed in his throat.

But the scream was never born. For, materialising from nowhere, a tiny flame flared in the darkness of his fear. He swept the birch branch aside and stood taller, pushing out his chest. The briars quivered uncertainly, then pulled back. His courage grew. Something touched his shoulder and he spun round: a tree branch, caught in act of grabbing at him, was snatched away.

He kicked at a clump of ferns and turned slowly about, glaring ominously at the wood. It cringed and grinned obsequiously, once again all innocent prettiness. These plants were like bullies everywhere, he thought with a smile, cowards to a man. Then, throwing back his shoulders and setting his jaw, he stepped boldly forward.

He walked purposefully, as if he knew where he was going, paths opening up in front of him, sycophantically leading wherever he wanted to go. The colours flashed and blazed, the branches twisted and coiled, and the birdsong echoed, all much as before. Now, however, he was less enthralled by the experience, for he knew that the wood was not to be trusted.

Leathery heart shaped leaves slid in and out of focus, and trailing tendrils groped sinuously along the ground, coiling around the trunks of neighbouring trees. It was the bush's flowers, however, that had halted his purposeful stride through the woods: pink hand-sized blooms with thick fleshy petals folded together in a vertical calyx, each nestling a bed of densely packed leaves. He found himself transfixed, looking from one flower to another, held by a force he could not explain.

And the flowers seemed to react to his attention. The petals trembled and swelled, becoming turgid and beginning to open. Something touched his legs and pulled at his left arm – it was the plant's tendrils, coiling around him like the tentacles of some carnivorous sea-creature. A particular flower now drew him, a large bloom growing at waist height. Slowly but inexorably the petals spread under his fascinated gaze to reveal the purple heart of the flower, a smooth throated orifice that glistened with clear nectar. When the flower was fully open, the whole plant began to tremble. He felt warm honey trickle down his spine and the tendrils pulled more firmly, dragging him forward.

His fascination was a slimy thing that slithered around in his skull like an overexcited mollusc. As the open flower throbbed with turgidity the nectar dripped off the petals in great wet globs. The honey pooled in his belly and he felt strangely weak, unable to do anything but stare into the drooling flower. He was trapped, as surely as a shrimp in the tentacles of a sea-anemone.

'Come on, girls, don't dally now!'

It was a woman's voice, not far away and coming his way. The shock snapped his trance and he pulled back from the plant. Burning with sudden shame, he started tearing the tendrils off his arms and legs. But it was too late; trotting down the path towards him came two Cavalier King Charles spaniels dressed in miniature school uniforms – grey pleated skirts, white blouses, lime-

green blazers with orange piping – with their owner a few paces behind. Crawling with embarrassment, he stood with his back to the plant, trying to hide the spread-open, dripping flowers.

'Good afternoon!' he said, forcing a broad breezy smile, 'Such a lovely day, isn't it?'

She was a large and buxom woman, late fifties with her greying hair in a tight bun, wearing a matching tweed skirt and jacket. She eyed him quizzically, but did not return his greeting. His smile became foolish and fixed. The dogs were sniffing around his feet, their tails wagging happily under their skirt hems. He brushed away a tendril which was reaching around his shoulder, hoping she wouldn't notice.

'For the time of year, that is,' he bumbled, 'The weather, I mean.'

She strode up to him, standing too close. She had a strong, determined face, the face of a woman who would stand no nonsense. He squirmed, avoiding her eyes.

'It's your pollen they're after,' she said, in a confidential stage-whisper.

'What?' he said, almost too surprised to speak. He tried to back away, but she pressed closer, almost touching his face with hers.

'The flowers – they suck it out of you.' She spoke slowly, carefully enunciating each syllable. 'Every last drop.'

She stepped back, allowing him to digest her words. One of the dogs had found a fallen log and was sniffing at a toadstool growing vertically out of it.

'You should let them, you know. Does them good.' She had noticed the toadstool – a huge thing, with a thick white stalk and a black oily cap – and a strange smile spread across her face. 'My husband says so. He always lets them.'

'Er... that's nice.' He wasn't certain, but he thought the fungus quivered slightly as she stepped towards it. Soft paws padded at his knees; the other dog was jumping up at him, wanting attention. He leaned down to pat her head, being careful not to dislodge her hair-band. The bush thankfully seemed to have lost interest in him and the remaining tendrils were now draped limply around his ankles.

'Marvellous shirt, by the way,' said the woman, 'Matches the blazers.'

She bent down and caressed the enormous toadstool. This responded by pushing up at her with a series of tiny excited squeaks, its cap glistening with moisture. The jacket lining clung to his arms like dead skin and he wriggled uncomfortably.

'The what?'

She hitched up her skirt and swung her leg over the log. The toadstool was now going frantic, throbbing and squeaking, oozing black slime from its cap. He tried to look away but seemed to lack the will.

'The blazers – the girls' coats.'

'Yes, of course,' he said vaguely.

With a smile of quiet contentment, she lowered herself onto the log. The toadstool's excited little squeaks reached a crescendo – before being muffled to silence. The dog wagged its tail and yelped with excitement, enjoying the game. A clammy shudder crawled over his skin as his discomfort reached a climax of its own.

'Um – it has been nice talking to you.' He kicked off the last plant tendril. 'But I really must be off.'

'The other way,' she said, as he started up the path, 'I told you before.'

'Sorry?'

'I've already told you: that way.' She raised herself a few inches off the log and pointed to the path down which she herself had come. 'Then ask at the village.' Closing her eyes, she lowered herself again, sighing deeply. The dog scampered around her feet, pawing at her knees.

'Ask what?'

Three quick moans but no reply.

'About the woman.' He started with surprise – the voice was female, but it came from near his feet, from the second dog who was sitting on the path, looking up at him.

'The Woman Who Looks Both Ways,' she added, with a significant smile, and then trotted over to join her sister and her mistress.

At first the woods were filled with a manic lewdness; the trees twisted suggestively, the ferns undulated like street girls, lascivious and brazen, and the birdsong trickled into his ears, the honeyed cooing of depraved courtesans. But he hurried on, averting his eyes from the pornographic writhing, repelled rather than beguiled.

The prurience soon evaporated. The undulations of the vegetation became once again innocently graceful, a gorgeous dance of colour and no more. He began to breathe more easily and slowed his pace to a calm stroll. The path turned to the left and, oblivious to his wishes, started up a steep bank, apparently leading somewhere of its own choice rather than his. This new-found assertiveness on the part of the path was also something of a relief; all in all, he did prefer the traditional system, with the paths themselves deciding on their own routes, restrictive though it was.

The trees were thinner here, the trunks interspersed with tall stands of fern in dazzling green patterns, reminiscent of fashionable wallpaper from the mid-sixties. As he struggled up the steep incline he heard the yap of an excited spaniel, thankfully far behind.

Despite their unappealing mistress, though, he had liked the dogs, such sweet little things in their pretty uniforms. What was it that she had said about his shirt and their coats? He stopped and pulled open his jacket. Indeed she was right – his tee-shirt, in lime green with orange lettering, was in the same colour scheme as the blazers. He stretched the shirt out by the hem to read what it said. Unfortunately this was easier in theory than in practice, for not only was the writing upside down, but the letters kept swimming about, like goldfish in a lime green pond, changing positions with each other and slipping away round the back out of sight, or just crumpling themselves up in shapeless orange blobs.

Eventually, however, with a superhuman effort of concentration, he succeeded, nailing down the letters one by one and forcing each to divulge its identity. The first word was 'SEEKER' in big bold capitals and under this were the words 'LINKAGE SYSTEMS', in capital italics. The last line started with three dots, followed by 'finding solutions' in lower case and then another three dots.

SEEKER

LINKAGE SYSTEMS

...finding solutions...

The words made no sense at all and yet somehow seemed to be of great significance. He felt that he *ought* to know what they meant and he sensed something hovering, diaphanous and half-existent, at the edge of his mind that held the secret. As he tried to grasp it, however, it slithered out of reach and was gone.

Still, the woman had been dead right in saying that it was a nice tee-shirt – the smooth satiny greenness contrasted perfectly with the swimming orange blobs: a perfect combination of colours. Then a sudden darkness scudded through his soul. He had seen these colours somewhere else, somewhere before the dogs. But where? The ferns had stopped smiling – they were watching him now, edging menacingly closer. Again he sensed something hovering at the edge of his awareness, just out of reach. This time, however, the something was more solid, uncomfortably solid, and he knew that if he wanted he could seize it and its secret would be his. His skin crawled at the thought. For this time he very much didn't want to remember, this time he wanted to get away, to leave whatever it was far behind.

He paused, wrenching turgid air into his lungs.

He had to get away, he had to go quickly – but, like an enemy, the steepness of the path was dragging him back; even the dead weight of his body was against him, working in treacherous alliance with gravity to slow his progress to a slug's pace. And now, to add insult to injury, he had been forced to stop for breath while his chest heaved maniacally and the air rattled in his throat.

He waited with fuming impatience, desperate to be off, but the panting didn't ease. In fact it seemed to grow more manic still until he was rasping like a labouring engine. Indeed it seemed that the longer he waited the harder became the panting – which surely couldn't be right. Eventually his patience cracked; he'd given it long enough and if his body wouldn't co-operate of its own free will then he had no choice but to impose his will on it. And so he clamped his mouth shut, forcing his chest to be still. For a moment all was quiet. Then he felt the pressure to breathe building irresistibly, like a head of steam, and though he fought against it until engorged veins throbbed against his skull and his chest was about to explode in the end he could hold it no more and it burst out of him, heaving and sucking at the air like a thing possessed.

So – he couldn't control his own respiratory system; like an obstinate animal it went its own way, regardless of his wishes. Then he noticed his heart thumping against his rib-cage, completely oblivious to him, another animal with a will of its own. He shuddered. They were all in there, living inside him: the spongy pink lungs, filled with foam and phlegm; the windpipe with its white hoops of springy gristle; and the purple coils of intestine, writhing like a nest of worms and filled with their liquid ordure. This then was his body, a collection of loathsome alien parasites. Fingering his face – damp greasy skin, flesh, teeth – and grabbing at his legs – thick white bones, huge slabs of meat – he whimpered with disgust. He wanted to pull himself apart, to be rid of the whole foetid mess. The panic of revulsion roared in his ears and he opened his mouth to scream.

But he caught himself in time. It was another trick, just another of the wood's silly tricks, no more than that. And a nasty one this time. He looked around himself, sneering at the surrounding trees and undergrowth: a contemptible collection of overgrown weeds. OK, so the first field had played tricks on him too, with its simulated acceleration and fake vertigo, but at least it had stuck to regular practical jokes, none of this porno mag and video nasty stuff.

He stepped off the swaying stile into an open, friendly-looking field. Breathing deeply, he gazed up at the unbroken ceramic sky with a warm breeze on his face. The foul miasma of the wood began to seep out of his skin and away into the cleansing air. It was a good field this one, a decent and honest field.

At the far end, a group of animals grazed together, crossing the field in unison, heads down munching grass. It was a herd of dogs – black Labradors if he wasn't mistaken – with floppy ears hanging around munching jaws, glossy coats shining in the sun, and tails wagging with quiet contentment. And not more than thirty yards away, in the shade of a handsome oak, two horses were sitting either side of a flat topped tree stump poring with intense concentration over a chess board. How did they pick up the pieces with their hooves? he wondered. He thought of going over to ask, but didn't want to disturb the game. There was a flash of yellow to his right as a single rabbit dashed for the cover of a nettle patch.

He sensed that he wasn't going to get any trouble from this field and he was right. The dogs looked up lazily as he passed, grass ripples swirled about his feet in the usual way and the thistles danced with gay abandon, but nothing tried to impede his smooth progress as he followed the path to a gate in the far hedge.

Once over the gate, he found himself standing on the smooth, plastic surface of a road. And then he was flummoxed – for the road, as is the norm for its kind, ran in two directions, either of which could have been the correct one for him to follow. On this occasion, however, he was lucky; a few yards to the right was a T-junction, and at the junction was a signpost, a proper black and white road signpost, assiduously designating each of the three routes.

He rubbed his eyes and stared closely at one of the three signs, but was still unable to decipher anything, not one single word. There were certainly letters there – he could see an 'S' and at least three 'E's – but they just seemed to swim around in front of his eyes, like alphabetical tadpoles.

As with the tee-shirt, he decided to be systematic, to read one letter at a time. And indeed, when he looked carefully at the first, it was as clear as day, a nice crisp 'T'. He moved on to the second and saw an unambiguous 'F', then the third, a definite 'Q'. But as he focussed on the fourth letter, a tiny doubt whispered sharply in his ear: what place name in England begins 'TFQ'? Perhaps he had made a mistake. He went back to check the beginning – but this time the first letter was a 'G' and the 'T' had moved, he could see it about four letters on. Then, as he watched, the 'F' swapped places with the 'Q' which barged into the 'G', pushing it off the end of the sign – and once again the whole thing was all a complete mess.

'This is ludicrous,' he muttered, 'What on earth is the good of a signpost that won't say where it's pointing? The other one might have been rude, but at least it knew what it was doing. You're just pathetic.'

He was about to turn away in disgust, but then noticed that the swimming letters were quivering sadly, as if the sign were about to burst into tears. A needle of remorse jabbed at his conscience.

'I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be rude. But signposts do normally show place names. It's their job, you know.'

The sign trembled with silent sobs, its letters running like wet ink. He sighed, wishing he had kept his big mouth shut.

'Look, there's no need to get upset. I'm sure you could do it if you wanted to.'

It seemed to brighten a little. Maybe that's all it needed, a bit of encouragement.

'Go on, give it a try. It's not that difficult, really it isn't.'

It now had an air of eager expectancy, like a dog waiting for its next command. He pointed to one of the roads.

'Where does this one go, for example?'

The sign looked puzzled, its letters swimming anxiously.

'Go on, then,' he encouraged, 'All you have to do is tell me.'

He waited, but nothing legible appeared. The sign began to tremble, again on the verge of tears.

'Please don't get upset again,' he said, 'What if I make some suggestions and you tell me which is right? Do you think that would help?'

It brightened again.

'Alright then, we'll start with this one.' He pointed to one of the three directions. 'Now let me see – where could this road possibly go to?'

He thought hard, struggling to apply the turbid swirl of his mind to the geography of the area. Words that could have been place names swam around enticingly, each trying to tempt him with its topographical pertinence.

'Does it go to Manchester?' he asked, grabbing the nearest. And within a split second, 'MANCHESTER' had appeared, in crisp neat letters. On its own initiative, the sign had added a tidy little '2½m' at the end.

'Brilliant!' he exclaimed, delighted with the accuracy of his intuition. The sign quivered with pride.

'What about this one?' He pointed to the next road. 'Blackburn, perhaps?'

And there it was – 'BLACKBURN 3m' – in clear black and white. So he'd been right twice: not bad, considering he didn't know the area. But then he always had been good at getting his bearings.

'Now, what about the last one,' he said, 'It seems to be going south. Where to, I wonder.' The letters swam expectantly. 'What about Bristol?'

No sooner was the word out of his mouth than it was up on the sign: 'BRISTOL 1½m'.

'Great! All done. It wasn't that hard, was it?'

But even as he spoke, the maggot of doubt began to gnaw. If he was two and a half miles from Manchester, could Bristol really be just a mile and half away? The signpost stood in the sunshine as proud as a peacock, displaying its three directions to all the world. He almost didn't say anything, it looked so happy.

'Do you really mean Bristol?' he asked, gently, 'You don't mean Birmingham, do you?'

'BIRMINGHAM 3½m': it had changed before his mouth was closed.

Oh dear.

'Or Glasgow?'

'GLASGOW 4m'.

'Look, I don't want to be rude,' he said, losing heart, 'but I think you've missed the point here.'

'TAUNTON 2m', followed quickly by 'NEWCASTLE-UNDER-LYME ½m'.

'No, no, no. You're just guessing now.'

'KENILWORTH 5m'. 'STOCKBRIDGE 6½m'. 'WHITELEAF 11m'.

'It doesn't matter. Let's forget it shall we? I'm sorry to have bothered you.' The sign quivered anxiously, flicking up names like a deranged railway departures board.

'PARIS 3m'. 'LAGOS 5½m'. 'NEW DELHI 3m'.

'Don't get upset. It's all OK. I'm just going over here, that's all.'

The words became a blur, changing too fast to read, and the poor thing began to tremble with grief.

Sitting down on the grass verge about ten yards away from the miserable sign, he carefully avoided eye contact with it. He heard what could have been a suppressed sob – and winced.

But why should he feel guilty? The sign couldn't do its job and that was that. He wasn't responsible for the professional failings of the public infrastructure. Didn't the Council have

training programmes for this sort of thing? He kicked at the roadside gravel and pulled crossly at the scrubby grass beside him. He only wanted to know where the roads went to and surely that wasn't too much to ask. Otherwise how was he supposed to know how to get to where he was going?

The tumble of thoughts ceased abruptly and then a question mark popped up in his head: where exactly *was* he going? This was not followed by an immediate answer.

Releasing the unjustly punished grass, he peered into the slithering pool of his brain where a hundred thoughts and memories wriggled around like eels, always just sliding out of his grip and disappearing into the turbid water. He caught one: a woman in a tweed suit with an unhealthy interest in fungi. The memory oozed a cold, clinging slime – but it did answer his question: 'ask at the village'.

But before he could put the memory back into the water, another blob of the slime splattered against the inside of his skull: 'I've already told you'. Her words were as clear as when she had first said them and he shivered quickly as a strange chill crawled over his skin. Why had she said that? She had only seen him once, so how could she have told him *already*? She must be mistaking him for someone else.

Something slipped into his mind, a creeping dangerous thing, unwelcome as a pernicious disease: a man walking beside a woman in a red dress. The image was crystal clear – and in glorious technicolour. Hardly daring to do so, he looked down to his chest. Then he knew where he had seen these colours – lime green and fluorescent orange – before the dogs' blazers.

There was a faint rumbling at the edge of his mind. With fumbling fingers, he pulled up the jacket zip to hide the loathsome tee-shirt. *The roar of a jungle animal, far away but getting nearer.* Strange implications began to coalesce, too foul to even contemplate. *The noise was louder, the creature was closing fast.* In a hurricane of sudden panic he leapt to his feet, covering his ears to block out his thoughts. *The enraged beast roared through his brain, it was nearly on him.* In a whirl of bat-face images, he ran into the road, crushed by the escalating roar.

Suddenly it was there, hurtling towards him: a shining red monster with silver teeth and flashing eyes, devouring the tarmac and bellowing its fury through his jellied mind. It screamed as he staggered out of its path, and then tore past, disappearing up the road.

For some moments he stood on the verge, panting hard, his brain pumping with liquid fear. He didn't like this loathsome place, he didn't like it at all. He ran back to the road junction – which way, which bloody way? He looked up at the signpost – and saw a swimming blur.

'The village! Which way is the village?'

The flustered letters spun even faster. Crawling with frustration, he pointed to one of the roads.

'Is it this one?' he shouted, 'Is this the way to the village?'

And there it was: 'THE VILLAGE 6½m'.

'Thank you, thank you so much,' he said with relief, and was away.

Chapter 4

Driven by wild panic, he stumbled in potholes and slipped on patches of loose stones on the broken tarmac. Towering trees and sinister hedges slid past in a blur of movement and menace, whilst gates and stiles beckoned innocently towards malign fields and predatory paths.

He stopped, panting for breath, and heard a menacing roar echoing between the dark hedges, distant but getting quickly closer. Another beast, thirsty for his blood! He leapt onto the verge

and scabbled desperately to get through the hedge as the monster veered into sight – and then tore past, ignoring him. A woman inside stared blankly ahead, oblivious to the turmoil she had caused.

For it was a car, an ordinary domestic car. Trembling with relief, he stepped back into the road with as much dignity as he could muster and started brushing loose twigs and leaves from his jacket. It was then that he saw that there had been a witness to his mistake.

The little girl watched silently as he approached. Although he was trying to look as nonchalant as possible, he could feel his cheeks burning, a blatant act of betrayal. She was standing in the driveway of a white bungalow which was set well back from the road in well-trimmed gardens, with two cars parked in front of the house. Her ginger hair was gathered into two fuzzy bunches and she wore a frilly pink dress.

'Hello,' he said with exaggerated good cheer. The girl watched him blankly and did not return his smile.

'Um – there was something in the hedge, something I wanted to look at.' Still she just stared.

'You don't think I was scared of the car, do you?' he said with a little laugh. No response.

'I mean, a car – what's to be scared of, eh?' he continued, displaying his sangfroid with a shrug.

'My name is Peony,' she said, 'What's your name?'

Then she gave him a hard stare, clutching her Barbie doll close to her chest. He opened his mouth to answer – but nothing happened.

'You don't know who you are,' she said.

'Of course I do!'

But when he tried again, still nothing came. He grinned sheepishly, half-hoping she would enlighten him.

'You're silly,' she said, in a matter-of-fact voice.

'That's not fair! I am *not* silly!'

'You *are* silly. You're silly because you don't know who you are.'

'I *do* know who I am,' he said, trying to sound emphatic.

She looked at him suspiciously.

'I'm – I'm – ,' he stuttered.

She turned away with a haughty toss of her bunches. Then something popped into his mind, appearing from nowhere like a magician's rabbit.

'I'm Loofah!' he cried.

She turned back, frowning with doubt.

'Yes, that's who I am,' he went on, with growing confidence, 'Loofah!'

'That's a silly name. Like a bath sponge,' she said firmly, 'Anyway, I know who you are – you're The Seeker.'

'The Seeker? What does that – ?'

'Hold Chantelle,' she interrupted, holding out the doll. It was Loofah who now looked blank, stunned with confusion.

'Hold Chantelle!' she commanded. And then added, in a softer tone, 'You can play with her if you like.'

'Thank you,' he said, taking the proffered doll, 'But I don't know how to...' she turned and walked purposefully across the lawn to her swing '...play with dolls,' he trailed, into the empty air.

The girl started swinging, humming to herself and kicking out her legs to gain height. The Seeker: what on earth did she mean by that? Hi-tech missiles came to mind, and a magic dragon called 'Puff'. Then Loofah remembered his tee-shirt – that baleful garment which seemed to be

playing a persistently and uncomfortably prominent role in events – and the enigmatic logo she must have read.

Something tickled his hand, a movement. He looked down at the doll. And it looked at him, with huge china-blue eyes. Then, smiling lasciviously with a flutter of spider-like eyelashes, it wriggled its tiny plastic buttocks against his palm.

'Ooh, big boy,' it said in a sultry squeak, and with tiny hands pushed his finger up to touch its breasts.

'What – ?'

'Take me, I'm yours,' it simpered, pulling up the hem of its absurdly short dress.

'Look, I don't think – .'

It wriggled again, purring and taking hold of its skimpy white knickers in its minuscule hands.

'Please, don't do that.'

It smiled and started to ease the knickers down over long anorexic legs of orange plastic.

'Stop!' Loofah grabbed at its hand, but it pulled free, wriggling angrily and again grabbing for its panties.

'No!' Pushing its hands away, he tried to pull the hem of the dress down. The doll struggled furiously, opening its legs.

'What are you doing to Chantelle's dress?'

Loofah looked up. Peony was standing directly in front of him.

'Nothing, nothing at all,' he said, trying to force the plastic legs closed. The doll squeaked in distress.

'You're hurting her!' It squeaked more loudly. 'What are you doing? What are you doing?' cried the girl.

'Nothing. Really. Here, you can have her back – take her.'

Loofah held out the doll. It was whimpering now, with its dress rucked up and its knickers half-way down its plastic thighs. The girl's eyes widened with horror.

'It wasn't me,' he began, 'It was her...'

The girl began to cry, backing away from him. He stepped forward, holding out the whimpering doll.

'Daddy!' the girl shouted and turned to run.

'No, please, come back,' he said, 'It's alright, I haven't done anything.'

As she fled up the drive a man appeared round the side of the house, carrying a set of electric hedge clippers.

'Oh my God,' muttered Loofah, backing towards the road.

'She Who Looks Both Ways.' The squeaked words clicked into his consciousness.

'Uh?' he said, holding up the doll.

'You must find her,' it squeaked. Then, with a lascivious leer, it pushed his thumb under the hem of its crumpled skirt. Loofah looked up; the girl was standing next to the parked cars, sobbing her heart out, and the man with the clippers was storming down the drive towards him. With a curse, he dropped the doll onto the grass verge and ran.

The pistons of his legs pumped furiously against the tarmac. The man was behind him, closing quickly. He ran faster, straining every fibre of his being.

And yet he was hardly moving; the hedgerow crawled past a leaf at a time and the tarmac slid under him in languorous slow motion. He was suspended in a clear syrup, fighting against the inertia of the viscous liquid – and he could already feel the teeth of the hedge clippers tearing

through the leather of his jacket, biting into the skin of his shoulders. Every muscle strained to breaking point and his lungs screamed for mercy. He gazed up the endless tunnel of road and hedgerows, and all was still, like a picture. Motionless now, he was held – helpless – in an invisible spider's web of stalled time. The whirling metal fangs sprayed fountains of blood and shredded flesh across the hot tarmac.

It was hopeless, he was doomed. Chest heaving and staggering with exhaustion, he stopped struggling and turned to face his fate.

But there was no righteous father's fist to meet him, no avenging garden implement to rip into his bowels. The driveway was far behind him, a tiny gap in the distant bank of hedgerow, and there was nobody following. He laughed with sudden relief, panting hard and hot with the exertion of his escape. An ascending roar from behind announced the approach of another car. As he stumbled onto the verge it hurled itself past like a metal angel of Hell, all flashing steel and glinting paint-work, belched fumes and gratuitous aggression.

It then that he realised why he was hot – his jacket was done up to his throat. As he stepped back onto the tarmac, he undid the zip and opened the front, cooled by the breeze through the thin cotton of his tee-shirt.

What a nasty little girl, though, trying to make out that he didn't know who he was. Loofah. A name to be proud of; it was so distinguished, so elegant, so... imaginative. Not like Peony – fancy being called after some silly garden flower! Or Chantelle – an Essex doll's name if ever there was one.

It was odd, though, very odd. The doll had talked about a woman looking two ways, as had the little schoolgirl spaniel. Who was this strange creature? he wondered. A circus act, or perhaps the unfortunate result of some genetic experiment. Or possibly she was something to do with a road safety campaign, although wasn't he a bit old for that sort of thing?

'Coo-ee!' A elderly lady was standing by a gate in a white picket fence, smiling and waving across at him.

'What a lovely day!' she called. With cotton-wool hair and a floral print dress, she beamed dizzy kindness through Mary Whitehouse spectacles.

'Delightful, isn't it?' said Loofah, crossing the road, 'Could you tell me, am I right for the village?'

'I've just put the kettle on,' was the reply, 'Can I offer you a cup of tea?'

'I'd better not, actually. I have to get to the village, fairly quickly I think.'

But she was already ambling slowly up her garden path. He hesitated for a moment, worrying in a foggy sort of a way about continuing his journey, and then followed, drawn by her simple niceness, so refreshing after the woman in the wood and nasty little Peony.

The front garden was as neat as a new pin, with a billiard table lawn and tidy beds of flowers, their colours and patterns glowing and flowing in the sunlight. The house was of ancient brick with a red-tiled roof, and clematis and honeysuckle twisted and coiled around the solid timber porch.

'Do make yourself at home,' the old lady said, pushing open the front door and beckoning Loofah in ahead of her.

'I really shouldn't stop.' As he walked through the porch, a tendril of honeysuckle lashed viciously at his throat.

'Come through to the kitchen while I make the tea.'

The hall was an oasis of pleasantness, with rose patterned wallpaper and a faint scent of lavender and cleanness in the cool, still air. He noticed a mirror mounted in a gold-painted wrought metal frame and a pot of dried flowers on a decorative glass shelf.

'Oh, just look at him,' said the old lady as she passed the staircase, beaming a shaft of pure love at a fluffy ginger cat curled up on the fourth step. Wanting to be polite, Loofah forced a fond smile.

'You're a cat lover. I can tell, you know.' The cat watched him with green-eyed indifference. 'Why not say hello while I get the tea?'

As he leaned over to stroke the cat, he caught sight of his reflection in the mirror. And then looked again. It seemed to be him – there were his glasses and his tee-shirt – but his face was not as he remembered it. The death-white skin was wrinkled like old parchment, the eyes were ogling and bloodshot, filled with malicious lust, and the nose was swollen and veined with excess.

The sybaritic lips parted in horror – was this vision of loathsome depravity really him? And even as he looked, the image was degenerating further, the nose growing in rubicund bulbosity and the foul mouth twisting into a debauched leer, with warts and chancres sprouting like weeds. A dull sickness crawled through his brain. He watched, stunned, as he decayed in front of his own eyes, rotted out from inside by the corruption of his putrid, stinking soul...

A sudden flash of pain cut through his horror-trance – Loofah snatched his hand away as the cat raked its claws through his skin.

'Get your filthy paw off me, you fucking piece of shit,' it hissed, eyes glowing with a pale green venom.

'I can see you two are getting along like old friends,' the old lady said, standing in the kitchen doorway, 'If only they could talk, eh?'

'I think maybe I should be getting along,' said Loofah, clutching his injured hand.

'Would you mind just giving me a hand with the tray? I'm not as nimble as I used to be.'

'Actually...' he began, but she had already turned away.

Entering the kitchen was like stepping into the sky: white walls, blue painted cupboards with white porcelain knobs, blue and white floor tiles. His hostess stood by the fridge, taking biscuits from a willow patterned tin and laying them carefully around the rim of a plate.

'Could you pour the water into the pot?' she said, 'The kettle's just boiled.'

An old-fashioned hob kettle, shining like polished chrome, stood on a gas ring with wisps of steam forming intricate patterns in the air around its spout. Beside this, a round blue tea-pot waited expectantly on the scrubbed pine work surface, three crisp tea-bags nestling in its dark depths.

'I do like a cup of tea and a nice little chat, don't you?' the old lady said, 'People these days are always rushing around, no time for anything.'

Loofah reached over to lift the kettle from the hob. But as he touched the wooden handle, a jet of steam spat from the spout, scalding his wrist. He pulled his hand away with a cry and the kettle sneered with delight, a glint of malice in its mirrored shine.

'Of course it was different in my day, we had time for each other then. How are you doing with that tea?'

'Um...'

'Got to let it brew properly. We don't want it all weak and wan, do we?'

He reached for the kettle again. It spat another jet but this time he was on his guard. He snatched his hand away – and a drawer at his waist shot open, crashing into his hip bone with a thud of pain and a clutter of cutlery.

'Looking for teaspoons? Next drawer along.'

The first drawer snapped closed and the second opened, revealing a tray of silver teaspoons that glinted like treasure. Reaching in to take one, he realised his mistake a split second too late; the drawer slammed shut, trapping his fingers.

'Mind you,' his hostess continued, taking blue china cups from the cupboard above the fridge, 'I've always been the neighbourly type.'

Gritting his teeth against the agony, Loofah wrenched at the handle with his free hand. The drawer started chewing, grinding his fingers against the edge of the work surface. With blood spurting from under his nails and searing jolts of pain firing up his arm, one by one his knuckle bones were cracked and crumbled to gravel.

"Open house" my Billy used to call it – people popping in and out all day long.'

With a final, desperate effort he managed to haul the drawer open and pull his hand free. Blind with pain, he clutched his ruined fingers while the drawers – three of them in a row – grinned at him, mocking his agony.

'Ready for pouring, is it?' the old lady said, crossing to the cooker, 'Oh, you've not made it yet!'

She smiled him an understanding smile. 'You men. All the same, aren't you? Don't know one end of a kitchen from the other.'

As she took the kettle from the hob, there was a roar behind him. Loofah spun round; the washing machine was shaking with insane wrath, murder blazing from its control dial and powder slot, and from the spinning fury of its window. It lurched at him with a savage metal growl and he staggered backwards, nearly falling into the fanged jaws of the dish washer, which snapped closed, missing him by inches.

'Be ready in a couple of minutes,' the old lady said, putting the lid on the tea-pot.

'Actually, I really must be...'

But he was interrupted by a low, gurgling growl from the washing machine. Its spinning had now slowed and through the round glass he could see its contents: purple loops of bruised intestine, torn shreds of liver, a spongy lobe of lung, all churning in a soup of blood, urine and gut fluid.

'Oh look, there's the washing just finished. I'd better hang it out before I sit down.' She pressed the machine's door-catch. 'Got to get the best of this glorious drying weather, haven't we?'

Loofah watched with rigid fascination as the door swung open and out flowed... two sheets, a pillow case, and a pale yellow bath towel.

The back garden was as prim and proper as the front: barbered lawns, colour-splashed flower beds and perfectly coiffured shrubs, all enclosed by a protective wall of beech trees whose every green leaf had been polished to a glossy shine. Loofah examined his hand, pulling fingers and flexing joints. Feeling somewhat cheated, he still couldn't quite accept that the drawer's torture had left no permanent mark.

'I couldn't be doing with one of those new tumble dryers,' the old lady said, 'Nothing like proper fresh air. You can't beat Mother Nature, as my Billy used to say.'

She was pegging out the flapping sheets on an old fashioned clothes-line stretched between two posts and supported in the middle by a notched pole. The tea-tray lay waiting for them on a white painted iron table on the patio. Loofah was quietly dreading his tea; would it poison him or make do with merely slicing his mouth open with a razor-sharp cup rim?

'You and my Billy would have got on like a house on fire. He always liked a man to talk to, did my Billy. Mind you – .' But she was interrupted by the determined ring of a telephone from the open French windows.

'I'd better get that,' she said, 'I'm expecting a call from my daughter Margaret. She phones me every day, you know. Still remembers her old mother, not like some these days.'

Half way across the lawn she turned. 'Could you be a dear and hang out the last two sheets?' she called, 'Then we can have our tea.'

The sheets in question – one pink, one yellow – lay damply in the plastic basket while the rest of the laundry flapped gaily in the breeze like a of a flotilla of small yachts in full sail. Loofah backed away, shaking his head.

'Actually, I'm not very good with washing... ' he began. But she was too far away and didn't hear.

For a few moments he kept his distance, peering anxiously into the basket and waiting for something to happen. Nothing did. Two little sheets, he thought, two harmless little sheets. He took some wooden pegs from the tin and gingerly picked up a fold of yellow cotton. Still nothing: no teeth, no claws, just damp cloth. And so, opening it out, he threw the sheet over the line and pushed on the pegs. No problem. Loofah smiled to himself; he was getting too jumpy, he thought, letting himself get rattled by a bit of mischievous domestic hardware.

As he threw the second sheet over the line, the wet material suddenly billowed out – it could have been caught by the wind – and slapped over his face, turning the world damp pink. Fumbling blindly, he managed to get one peg on the line. The wet cotton was now wrapped around his throat and as he tried to pull it away, it tightened. He let go – but the material tightened further. A thrill of panic shivered through the damp pinkness.

Like the hungry protoplasm of an oversized amoeba, ballooning clouds of flapping cloth now completely engulfed him, smothering his face and wrapping themselves ever more tightly around his arms and torso. Gasping for air, he pulled at the wet material around his neck as it tried to throttle him, but to no avail; his struggle for breath resulted in little more than a strangled rattle in his throat. As his suffocated lungs cried out in mute agony, panic flared wildly and in mad desperation he grabbed a billow at random, hauling the material to where he thought the line was. But as he brought up a peg, pain stabbed sharply through his thumb. Somehow managing to pull a pink cloud away from his face, he saw that the peg was actually a seagull's head, which ogled him maliciously with its black beady eye while pecking at his fingers with its hard yellow beak.

The pecking hurt, but it goaded rather than deterred. The flaring flame of panic became a focussed jet of white hot anger – was he really going to let a bit of laundry get the better of him? The wet noose around his neck tightened again, then another billow of sheet slapped sharply across his face. Spitting a curse, he snatched it over the line and rammed home the squawking beak.

The battle – a whirling struggle of flapping cotton and snapping beaks – was soon over and he stood back, triumphantly viewing the field of his victory. The laundry fluttered in the breeze, as innocent as a young girl's smile, the only incongruity being the row of seagull heads that glared at him with impotent hatred, their beaks gagged open on the line.

'Get out of my garden!' The old lady was standing behind him on the lawn with her hands on her hips and her face blazing with cold fury.

'I've... er... pegged out the sheets,' said Loofah, lamely.

'I don't want the likes of you touching my sheets,' she spat, advancing menacingly, 'And I don't want the likes of you in my garden. Get out this minute!'

'But – I thought we were going to have tea?'

'You're not drinking my tea, you dirty horrible man. I know all about you now, you can't fool me.'

'I don't understand,' he stammered, backing away.

'Don't you try to play the innocent with me,' she snarled, 'That was Miss Leggett on the phone, from the Company. They've got the measure of you, don't you worry about that.'

'I think there's been a mistake. I don't know any Miss Leggett.'

'Well she knows you. And she wants to see you.'

Loofah stepped backwards as she advanced again, her old face a mask of righteous anger.

'At once!' she added, in a quavering shriek.

He stumbled into the road, hurt and confused, as the old lady stormed back up her garden path. The front door slammed shut with a dreadful finality.

As the shock of his abrupt expulsion subsided, a potent sense of injustice welled up like an oil strike. After being scratched by a foul-mouthed cat, strangled by a sheet, and attacked by half a dozen domestic appliances, he had now been wrongly condemned *in absentia* as some form of moral leper – it was utterly outrageous. Who was this woman Leggett anyway? And what right did she have to go passing judgement on him?

Then, in the midst of his righteous seething, the face from the old lady's mirror winked at him and green saliva trickled over its lascivious, leering lips. Loofah shuddered. No, he wasn't like that, he wasn't like that at all, he thought, nervously fingering his nose. Miss Leggett must have made a mistake, she must be confusing him with someone – . His brain stopped dead. 'I've already told you,' whispered a voice in his head and he shivered with a strange dread.

Something in his hand wriggled through his distraction – he was still holding one of the pegs.

'She Who Is Two, She Who Is Two,' it squawked, fixing him with its black bead of an eye.

'Unh? What about her?'

'You're The Seeker – you must find her!' And with that, it clamped itself viciously around his forefinger.

'Ow! You bloody thing!' Loofah cried, wrenching the peg off and then hurling it – squawking furiously – onto its mistress's front lawn.

As he set off up the road clutching his throbbing finger, he heard a car approach from behind, although this time with an assured purr rather than a bellicose roar. He stepped onto the verge out of its way, but instead of driving past, it pulled up alongside him. It was the emblem on the front door that Loofah noticed first: a victor's laurel wreath embracing a large ornate 'S', all in glittering gold leaf. And below this, in neat official lettering, were the words: 'The Company – courtesy vehicle'.

Chapter 5

The car was a vast thing, a huge metal predator. Its polished bodywork radiated blackness like a dark sun and its tinted windows watched him silently. Purring dangerously to itself beside the verge, it emanated power, a sinister, irresistible power – it had come for him, Loofah knew that at once. With the gentle click of well-machined metal, the back door swung smoothly open. The inside was a dark capsule of padded grey leather, a luxurious cell. He felt the pull of the vehicle's mechanical power and of the compelling authority of wealth. It was commanding him to get in and it clearly would not recognise refusal.

Yet the car scared him, its baleful authority chilled his blood, and so he hesitated, grinning nervously at his own reflection in the tinted windows. Perhaps he should run away and hide in the hedge, and then go and find out more about the mysterious double woman to whom everybody seemed to attach such importance. But then what would be the penalty for defying the owners of a vehicle like this? It might be best just to go and see Miss Leggett and sort out the silly mistake about his supposed wrongdoing. And so Loofah vacillated, too frightened to get into the car, too frightened not to.

At this moment someone called to him in a thin bleating voice, akin to the whining of a sick sheep. A short fat man in a dark suit was hurrying up the road, carrying an old leather briefcase and hailing Loofah with his umbrella.

'Hello there! Wait a moment, please, I need to talk to you.'

A blurred image that could have been a memory drifted across Loofah's mind like a wisp of mist, of a girl in white, his pretty young angel, somehow linked in foul and unholy union with a repugnant little toad – the same repugnant little toad that was now trotting up the road towards him. Without further hesitation he climbed into car.

As Loofah sank into the seat, the rich cool leather enveloped him like the embrace of a highborn mistress. The door closed by itself, with an expensive click sealing him into a muffled world of purring engine and deep upholstery, of wealth and authority.

The little man reached the car just as it glided away. Loofah could hear his distant muffled shouts, he could see his anxious face and his pudgy little hands pressed against the tinted glass. But in reality Loofah was a thousand miles away, secure within his capsule of power. His own mother could have been beating on the window and he would have done exactly what he did now; he turned coolly away as the car sped forward, leaving the little toad sprawled in the road, kicking his feet and beating his chubby fists on the tarmac.

The acceleration pushed him back into the caressing softness of the leather and he felt the vehicle's power surge through him, an electric thrill of omnipotence. There was no driver, Loofah noted casually, just the steering wheel rotating smoothly by itself and the gear-stick moving to and fro between the empty front seats as they picked up speed. He trusted the car, completely and utterly – within its protective sphere he was beyond all danger. He knew now that he had made the right decision. After all, what counted for more – a car like this, or a dressed-up dog, a sex-crazed toy, and a bad tempered peg?

From the inside of his omnipotent conveyance Loofah watched the world slide past with supercilious detachment. Trees and hedges which had threatened and attacked; fields and paths where he had stumbled in confused fear; houses full of malice and horror: they were now no more than images flickering harmlessly on the other side of the glass. They turned out of the lane onto a bigger road – there were other cars here, but ordinary domestic vehicles, small pathetic things that scuttled out the way as the awesome limousine swept past. Soon it was not fields sliding across the tinted windows, but large detached houses, aspiring mansions set in opulent gardens protected by high walls of laurel and copper beech.

Three electronic beeps prodded discretely into the muffled silence and then a voice addressed him.

'That was the time signal. And now the news, brought to you by the Company and by the grace of Mr Stobart, our Chief Executive.' It was a radio, moulded into the polished walnut fascia. 'Corporate results for the quarter were released today. Performance targets have yet again been exceeded in all sectors. In a written statement, the Chief Executive thanked all staff for their magnificent effort: a big "well done!" for everybody.'

A village green slid past, then two small shops – 'eight-til-late' – and more houses: massive and arrogant, oozing a miasma of smug affluence into the tinted afternoon.

'Mr Stobart goes on to warn that this success must not be an excuse for complacency. The targets for the next quarter have been set higher than ever, but management is confident of even greater efforts from the team to maintain our unbeaten run of success.' The radio spoke in a soothing, confidential voice, as if it were a close and caring friend. 'Adding her praise to that of the Chief Executive, Miss Leggett, Under Manager for this sector, has asked staff to remember that our achievement would not have been possible without Mr Stobart's wise and masterful leadership.'

They were now gliding down a hill, flanked on each side by detached houses: closed and exclusive, silent guardians of privilege.

'Earlier today children of staff enjoyed a party in the village hall. The occasion was an advance celebration of Mr Stobart's birthday, which is now only two months away. Entertainments included a bouncy castle and a paddling pool, together with soft drinks and ice cream in a choice three flavours: vanilla, strawberry, and chocolate. As they left, each child was presented with a red balloon printed in yellow with Mr Stobart's initials – and paid for out the Chief Executive's own pocket! I'll wager there were some happy young faces around the village after that little lot!'

Happy children skipped past on the tinted glass and Loofah smiled. What a nice news bulletin, he thought. And what a nice man Mr Stobart sounded; perhaps he might get to meet him as well as Miss Leggett. Protected by the car and cuddled by the friendly radio, he felt so warm and safe. He couldn't think why the old lady had got so upset after Miss Leggett's phone call, but there was sure to be some simple, harmless explanation.

'The next item is not quite so pleasant.'

A black and white pub slid by, fronted by a picture of two big kindly horses pulling a cart full of hay.

'All staff are asked to be on the lookout for a criminal presently at large in the area. This deviant has been committing various acts of public disorder, including acts of indecency involving plants, animals, and under-age girls.'

A single storey garage squatted beside a roundabout. Masses of cars were whirling all about, so many silly little toys. A creeping unease began to chill Loofah's flesh.

'Miss Leggett is leading the hunt for this degenerate. She has warned that while he remains at large, everybody is at risk. In particular, parents are being advised to keep children indoors until the pervert has been apprehended.'

Another pub – a slim grey dog – and a church made of red Lego. He dreaded what was coming next.

'The following description has been issued: a man in his late thirties with receding hair and glasses, wearing a black leather jacket, a green tee-shirt with orange lettering, and ludicrous fawn zip-up shoes.'

Loofah was now looking out onto a high street full of people and cars. While they were paused at a pedestrian crossing, shoppers peered through the tinted glass with dinosaur faces, hostile and predatory, searching the inside of the limousine. He pulled his jacket across the tee-shirt, cringing into the stiff leather of his padded cell.

'Any sightings of the deviant should be reported immediately to senior management. The Under Manager has stressed that this person is not be approached under any circumstances.'

Even the car itself was watching him, he could sense its cold suspicion.

'It's not me, you know,' Loofah said defensively, 'There's been an error. A mix up. A case of mistaken identity.'

The indicator flashed and the great car swung between low brick walls embedded with the 'S' emblem in yellow metal and a carved granite sign: 'The Company – Sector Office'. The leather of the seats, the hard curve of the steering wheel, the lights and dials of the instrument panel: he was crushed by their quiet revulsion.

'Honestly. It'll all be cleared up. You'll see.'

The car swept into a courtyard of red brick office buildings with shallow, Swiss chalet, roofs. After circling a floral display with a stainless steel fountain it pulled up outside the main entrance: tall doors of brown glass with the corporate logo embossed in gold. The car door swung brusquely open, ordering him out.

'A mistake, nothing more,' Loofah pleaded, 'You believe me, don't you?'

The door glided closed behind him. The impenetrable black carapace sealing itself against him was the vehicle's reply.

With the limousine gone, Loofah was alone in the courtyard. Apart from the echoing trickle of water in the steel bowl of the fountain, there was no movement, no sound. The hard walls of the offices towered over him, casting cold, dark shadows. He could see no-one through the brown glass windows, but he could feel a thousand eyes boring into him, seeing through his clothes, through his skin and his flesh, through into the foulness, the filthy slime, that slithered inside. As he stood there in that deserted courtyard, he was tried, convicted and sentenced – without right of appeal.

Sensing movement behind, he turned. One of the glass doors stood open, beckoning him into the foyer. The ominous crush of buildings pressed down on him, forcing him back into its gaping mouth. He looked around quickly for a possible escape route but the courtyard was now completely closed, the entrance way through which the limousine had come and gone having somehow been sealed over by brick and glass. He was trapped, there was nowhere else to go.

And so, with the enthusiasm of a condemned man going to the gallows, Loofah entered the Office.

The foyer proclaimed the substance and might of the organisation: cream marble floors, too perfect to walk on, a steel and grey granite staircase, and white wood doors leading into the pulsing heart of the building. Immense abstract paintings graced the walls, the colours blending and flowing into shapes that no human eye had ever witnessed, every instant forming a fresh tableau of perfection. And, far away, a receptionist sat behind her desk, a vast satin-smooth plateau of white wood, carefully studying the pages of a document. Though he hardly dared to desecrate the foyer's magnificence, Loofah was sucked in by its irresistible power.

He walked quickly but nervously, his resonating footsteps violating the sacred quiet as he penetrated the empty acres. Soon he was deep into the foyer, a solitary traveller on the marble steppes. The airship-hanger space pressed down on him, crushing him with its vast expansiveness, shrinking him from man to tiny ant. And it seemed that with every step the vastness was becoming vaster still. The polished floor stretched out in front of him, expanding as he walked, and the desk veered away towards the retreating horizon. The walls and the ceiling, already remote, pulled outwards and each step of his thin-soled loafers became an artillery detonation that reverberated through the now infinite hollowness.

For hour after long hour he walked, both crushed to nothing by the vastness and simultaneously sucked out into it, the particles of his tiny being dispersing into the great vacuum

as sparsely as the atoms of a deep-space hydrogen cloud. His tiny insect legs made no impact on the expanding miles, the trek across the marble-floored tundra was endless. The steady swing of his legs and the detonation of his footsteps, the echoing space and the infinite plain focused on the vanishing point desk: this was how it would be until time itself ceased, this was his life for now and for always, this was existence itself.

Then, quite suddenly, he was there, standing at the desk, looking down on the receptionist's immaculate coiffure.

She was a hard and angular woman, no longer young yet not old either, with a face chiselled from the same marble as the floor, polished and cold. Wearing a two-piece grey suit with pearl ear-studs, her scarlet lips were permanently moulded into a disdainful sneer. Although she still pored over her document without looking up, he sensed that she was aware of his presence; something in the disposition of her shoulders was deliberately set against him, a barrier.

Loofah waited, she ignored. In the massive silence he felt his own heart beating; the space pressed down, screaming his own insignificance at him. As he waited, Loofah searched inside himself for the determination to demand her attention, to challenge this corporate annihilation of his existence. And yet the longer he delayed, the more impossible seemed taking action – in no time, he knew, it would be utterly inconceivable and he would be trapped with her for eternity inside this bizarre tableau. Just as he was resigning himself to this fate, however, a slender grey telephone purred discretely at her elbow. The receptionist picked up the receiver with a painted claw and held it to a flint-hard cheek.

'Sector Office. Can I help you?' Her voice was silk and saccharine sweetness. 'Yes, of course, Mr Holmes, no trouble at all – I'll see to it right away. My pleasure. Goodbye then, and thank you for calling.' Replacing the receiver, she returned to her document.

This brief conversation seemed to temporarily liquefy the constraining superstructure of the situation, creating a brief window of opportunity. Seizing the moment Loofah coughed softly, the sound echoing round the foyer like a rifle shot. For two or three minutes, nothing. Then, with careful precision, the receptionist laid her document on the desk and looked up.

'Can I help you, sir?' she said, her voice dripping with contempt.

'Miss Leggett... I've come to see Miss Leggett.'

'Do you have an appointment?'

'I... er... don't really know. I think so.'

With a sniff of distaste, she got up from her seat and stalked out from behind the desk, her heels cracking like bones on the hard floor.

'Please take a seat.' She indicated a row of tubular steel and grey leather easy chairs opposite the reception desk and then vanished through a door behind her desk into the bowels of the building.

Forced to sit almost horizontal in the low seat, Loofah fidgeted with his fingers, crossing and uncrossing his legs. He noticed a glossy journal on the glass-topped coffee table beside his chair: 'The Company – Sector Newsletter'. 'Celebration Party!' exclaimed the main headline, with a big colour picture of happy smiling children holding red balloons. At the bottom of the page though, in bold capitals, was another headline: 'Warning! Pervert on the loose!'. He quickly replaced the journal, face down, glancing nervously around.

He sat and he sat, and then he sat some more, squirming uncomfortably in the impossible chair. The metal and the marble of the foyer pressed in upon him, digging into the soft flesh of his senses, and the vast paintings became dark, sinister shapes, beings of abstraction that watched him with cold suspicion. And underlying everything, emanating from the floors, the walls, the

furniture, was the slow throb of arrogant power, a power that crushed him to dust, that reduced him to nothing.

After another eternity the door swished open and the receptionist returned.

'Miss Leggett has asked me to say that she is very busy,' she said.

'Oh. OK,' said Loofah, adding hopefully as he struggled up from the seat: 'Perhaps I should come back later?'

'But she will see you shortly.'

'Will she? That's good,' he said, sinking back despondently.

The receptionist moved forward until she was standing over him, a power-dressed bird of prey.

'May I offer you a cup of coffee?' she asked in a tone more suited to offering poison.

The idea of drinking – or indeed performing any bodily function – in such a place was beyond conception.

'No, thank you,' he replied quickly.

'Tea?' Loofah shook his head. 'Mineral water, either sparkling or still?'

'No, I'm fine. Really.'

A small sigh of annoyance. 'Then perhaps you would like to copulate with me?' she said, coldly. With this she turned and walked haughtily back to the desk, bent over it and hitched her skirt up over her buttocks.

Stocking tops, straps of black lace stretched over ceramic flesh, crisp white knickers. Loofah looked from the woman to the steel and granite staircase, and then back to the woman. Why hadn't he just said "yes" to the coffee?

'It's OK, I'll just wait,' he managed to say, 'But thank you anyway.'

Her shoulders tightened with irritation. She stood up, straightening her skirt.

'Very well then: someone a little... *younger*,' she said tightly, pouring all her revulsion into the final word, 'One of our junior secretaries perhaps.'

'Please – no.'

Ignoring him, she picked up the telephone, pressed three buttons and muttered into the receiver.

'I'm quite happy just waiting, honestly.'

The door beside the stairs opened and three girls came in, all big hair and short skirts, Benidorm tans and white stilettos. They chatted and giggled together, casting Loofah occasional glances of distaste as, with expressions of studied ennui, they lined up like beauty queens, with one leg forward, hands on hips. Then, at a nod from the receptionist, they hitched up their skirts in unison, revealing expanses of satin-smooth, olive-brown thigh.

'If you would care to choose. Any one of the girls will be pleased to oblige you.'

'I'm sure they're lovely girls, but... ' he stammered.

'Or all three, if that's what you would prefer.'

'I think I would rather...'

'I assure you that these are our most attractive girls. Ladies, please,' she said, again nodding to the secretaries. Sighing with bored aggravation, they began to unbutton their blouses, opening up vistas of soft curve and tightly filled lace.

'Stop, please. I don't want a girl, any girl!' cried Loofah.

All four started, staring at him with amazed contempt.

'Thank you, ladies,' the receptionist said slowly, 'So sorry to have... *wasted*... your time.'

The girls filed out, muttering to each other and bristling with indignation.

'I'm sorry,' Loofah called after them, 'but I'm just not... like that.'

The receptionist stared at him with wide-eyed revulsion.

'I see,' she said, 'I will see what I can do.'

She swung round behind the desk and again picked up the phone. Realisation dawned on him in the pause that followed – but too late. The door opened and three young men trooped in: gelled hair, sharp cut suits and garish ties, with sidelong sneers at Loofah followed by shared guffaws.

'Oh my God,' he whimpered, to no-one in particular.

'Our Sales Team,' said the receptionist, 'Very busy young men but always happy to oblige a visitor to the Company.'

Then he saw it, on the far side of the foyer, a bolt hole: two doors, side by side, with a little silhouetted figure on each.

'Please excuse me,' he muttered, and fled.

Loofah stumbled back into the hush of the marble temple, while behind him the washroom door swung closed on the gurgling horrors within. For a few moments he stood manically smearing his palms against the denim of his jeans and shaking his head to expel the clammy, disinfectant scented images. Then he recollected where he was and, hiding his hands behind his back, forced an assured smile.

The foyer, however, was now empty. The receptionist sat behind her desk, writing in a diary. The power still throbbed and the silence still oppressed, but the Sales Team had – thankfully – returned to their selling.

A pungent tang tickled his sinuses and he looked down. A pool of turbid yellow liquid was oozing from under the door and, like a hungry amoeba, was sliding quietly across the polished marble towards his feet. Looking anxiously around, he hurried away, frantically practising denials and devising excuses.

As he again approached the desk the receptionist looked up and sneered discretely before returning to her work.

'Erm... excuse me,' he said, tentatively.

No response.

'Erm... sorry to bother you. Miss Leggett – can she see me yet?'

The brash effrontery of his persistence seemed to bear fruit. She laid her pen on the desk and with a vexed sigh pushed herself up and walked slowly towards the white-wood door beside the stairs. At the door she paused.

'Follow me,' she snapped, without turning.

Chapter 6

Loofah followed the receptionist through corridors – carpeted arteries of pulsing power – and open plan offices where computer screens flickered and telephones buzzed. Young men in white shirts with polished shoes ignored him, while power dressed businesswomen and mini-skirted secretaries looked at him blankly, with hard plastic faces. Everywhere was the blur of corporate activity, the metabolism of organisation.

They turned into a more significant corridor: apparently the aorta of the organism, this was wider than the others with deeper carpets and a soft throbbing silence. 'Miss P R M Leggett,' said a discrete brushed aluminium nameplate on a door at the far end, 'Under Manager'.

The receptionist knocked. After a long pause, there was a muffled 'come', the impatience distinct even through three inches of wood. Opening the door, she ushered him in.

'Your visitor, Miss Leggett,' said the receptionist with a deferential smile, her voice sweet and respectful. Then she was gone, the door closing quietly behind her.

Loofah was standing on a thick pale grey carpet, surrounded by potted rainforest plants and white wood furniture. At the far side of the opulent room, a woman in early middle age sat at an acre of desk in a grey leather executive chair, scrawling red ink comments in a ring-bound report. The muffled silence was disturbed only by the quiet heartbeat of corporate might.

After long enough to be uncomfortable, the woman closed the report and looked up.

'Well?' she snapped.

A plump body squeezed into a dark suit, short dark hair in a loose perm. Her face was flesh-heavy with small, hard eyes. Loofah looked at her blankly.

'I am extremely busy and I am sure you are too,' said Miss Leggett, 'I suggest we don't waste any more of each other's time than is absolutely necessary.'

Loofah nodded in acquiescence and smiled weakly. She watched him with irritable expectancy for a few moments, and then grunted.

'Close the door after you,' she said, returning to her report.

Without thinking, he turned to go. But as he reached for the door handle, he stopped.

'Erm.'

With sigh of profound irritation, the Under Manager looked up.

'What is it?'

'I think – .'

'Yes?'

' – that it was you that wanted to see me.'

The porcine eyes narrowed menacingly.

'Ah... you,' she said, as if mouthing a morsel of dog's excrement.

Laying down the report once again, she got up and came slowly round the desk, tight pin-stripe stretching over ample thighs, and looked Loofah up and down as if he had just disgraced himself on her carpet. He winced under the baleful glare of her naked hostility.

'You,' she repeated, 'You've been giving us a considerable amount of trouble, haven't you?'

'I... er...'

'You – and the other one.'

Something clicked in his fuddled consciousness, triggering a shudder of cold dread.

'The... other one?' he asked, in a small voice.

She stared at him hard, without replying. Then, turning her back on him, she returned to her seat.

'I don't know why you've come here, you and the other one,' she said, 'doing what you're doing, behaving like... that.'

'Which other one?'

'What right have you, coming here, upsetting everyone, causing all sorts of unpleasantness?'

Again she stared at him, waiting for an answer. Loofah cringed into his jacket, shivering with guilt.

'Well?' she demanded.

'I'm – I'm sorry,' he stammered.

'And I'm sorry too. Sorry that I'm now going to have to waste my valuable time sorting out the mess that you've caused, the pair of you, coming here where you don't belong and where you're not wanted.'

'The pair of us?' he whispered, stabbed by another shock of the weird dread.

'But sorry's not good enough, is it?'

'It isn't?'

'It makes me angry, that's what it does. When I think of all we do, me and my people, working tirelessly, giving of ourselves for the Company...' The Under Manager paused, savouring her indignation. 'And Mr Stobart,' she continued, edging towards some sort of climax, 'What about Mr Stobart?'

Loofah grinned lamely, wishing he had something to say.

'Do you have any idea, any inkling, of the importance of the work of that noble man? Not just for his staff and customers, but for the whole community, for every single one of us.'

Staring at the carpet, he braced himself for the next blast of righteous wrath. He could feel his cheeks glowing, twin beacons signalling his guilt.

'Well?' she demanded.

'Oh, sorry. I thought that was a rhetorical –.'

'I want you to think about that, I want you think about that very hard. About Mr Stobart and his work, and about the rest of us, his people, all doing our duty, all toiling our socks off. And then I want you to think about what you're doing – coming here without so much as by your leave and throwing a great big spanner in the works.'

The Under Manager paused, giving Loofah the opportunity to squirm in silence under the white heat of her outrage.

'Not to mention the other business,' she went on, shuddering with revulsion, 'You don't think you'll get away with it, do you? You won't, you know, people like you never do.' Giving him one last long look of abhorrence, she pressed a button on the desk telephone. 'There's nothing I can do for the moment. I have to discuss the whole matter with Mr Stobart – as if he didn't have enough on his plate already. In the meantime I'm putting you in Market Realignment. Report to Mr Sutton.'

The door opened and a secretary sidled deferentially into the room; she could have been one from the foyer line-up, but it was hard to tell.

'Do try to make yourself useful,' Miss Leggett said as he was leaving, 'It would be nice if you could make some form of contribution, however minimal – to make up for at least a fraction of the trouble you've both caused.'

Loofah sat on a small swivel chair at a desk wedged between two padded room dividers. Brutal fluorescent light had turned his hands into poor quality plastic mouldings, blue and purple. A computer hummed to itself on the desk in front of him, with goldfish, newts and sea-horses swimming aimlessly in its aquarium monitor. He was in the midst of a swirling sea of room dividers, desks and busy people, all jagged and flat under the white flickering light. The air was a stifling buzz of urgent exchanges, air conditioning, and business machines.

He sat uselessly, acutely aware of his own unworthiness, struggling to prevent an explosion of panic or a slide of despair. The Under Manager's castigations jabbed through his brain again and again, tearing at the anxious veil of his consciousness like a leopard's claw. He cringed under a broadside of guilt – could he really be as awful as that?

People rushed by: the men all identical with immaculate hairstyles and razor-creased trousers, the products of some junior executive cloning kit, and the women either hard-faced viragos in shoulder-padded suits or painted floozies in tight tops and short skirts. They cast him silent looks as they passed, their mannequin faces masks of hostile curiosity.

Then the interminable nagging in his head changed its script: 'The other one – the pair of you – the other one – the pair of you'. Loofah convulsed with cold dread and his mind veered away in desperate avoidance. Shrinking into his seat, he stared into the screen-saver fish tank, blanking his thoughts and wishing himself into a newt, wriggling happily behind the glass.

'Settling in OK?'

Loofah spun round to face a tall young man with dark hair, a neatly trimmed moustache, and a sunset-red tie.

'Um... fine, Mr... er...'

'Sutton. David Sutton. Dave.'

'Pleased to meet you. My name is –.'

'Yeah, right. We don't stand on formality here. Do the job and do it well, and no-one will care how you do it. Initiative. Individual responsibility. Results count, not appearances. Clear? Clear.'

'That's great... er... Dave.'

'Mr Sutton to you. I run a tight ship in this department. Familiarity breeds contempt and all that.'

'Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean –.'

'Just remember who's in charge round here. As long as you're on my manor you do what I say and you do it exactly how I tell you to. Jump to it, ask no questions – got me? You want to do things your way, then say so now – and sling your hook. Clear? Clear.'

Fluorescent light glinted unpleasantly on the lenses of the marketing executive's window-sized tortoiseshell-rimmed spectacles.

'Clear as crystal, Mr... um... Sutton,' said Loofah, with an appeasing smile.

'That's great – let's keep it that way. And if you have any problems, just ask. You're one of the team now. Part of the family. Know what the Chief says? "Our biggest asset is our people", that's what. Just think about it.' The marketing executive paused to flash a greasy smile. 'Now – how are you doing with those figures?'

For a good five minutes Loofah stared blankly at the twin anxious faces that peered out of him from Sutton's eye sockets.

'W – which figures?' he eventually managed to stammer.

'The figures for the Pre-Strategy Planning meeting... that I needed two hours ago.' Sutton leaned forward menacingly, wafting him with aftershave: petrochemical, like an industrial accident. Loofah grinned, trying not to scream.

'Well?' Sutton demanded, when no response was forthcoming.

And then, to Loofah's amazement, his mouth opened and he started to speak.

'Oh, *those* figures,' he said, not recognising his own voice, 'No problem, no problem whatsoever. Already in hand. Ready in no time.'

'Great. One hundred and ten percent performance. I like it,' said Sutton, 'But never forget that nobody's indispensable. That means me. That means you. You're not up to scratch, you're out. No arguments, no second chance. Clear?'

'Er... I think so –.'

'By the way, you got any ties?'

'You mean... a family?'

'Informality. Initiative. Results, not appearances. But wear a tie, OK? The Chief can't stand shabbiness. Sloppy dress equals sloppy work, right? Right.'

'Oh, I see. But I haven't got a –.'

'Cup of coffee?'

'Yes please,' said Loofah quickly, the flint-faced receptionist flashing through his mind. 'Brilliant,' said Sutton, 'Go to it.' And he was gone.

Loofah stared at the computer screen in a state of rising panic. The whole might of the Company was bearing down on him and he didn't even know where to begin. He had already searched through the foggy corridors of his mind for inspiration, but without success. And so he gazed into the monitor-aquarium, wondering what it would be like to be a water snail or a piece of duck-weed and to live a harmless aquatic life free of the cares of corporate existence.

The goldfish swam to and fro aimlessly and the sea-horses hovered, more like ceramic decorations than living animals. Three or four newts hung suspended in the water, perfectly still, gripping slender weed fronds with tiny suckered feet and watching the fish with bored dog-like faces. A large black tadpole wiggled up to the front of the screen and looked out at him.

'Bloody... bugger,' it said in a high pitched electronic squeak with a distinct West Country burr, 'Bugger... bloody... damn and bugger.'

'What's wrong?' asked Loofah.

'Nothing's wrong. I'm the bugging cursor, aren't I?' said the tadpole with a titter, 'That's a good one, ain't it? I always likes that one.'

'It is a good one. A cursing cursor – very funny indeed.' Loofah forced a laugh, for inane though it was, the tadpole did offer a tiny glint of hope. 'I wonder if you could help me,' he went on after the merriment had died down, 'You see I need some figures for Mr Sutton and I don't really know where to begin.'

'No problem, my dear,' squeaked the tadpole. And suddenly the aquarium was gone and the image of a young woman appeared – circa 1964, Bond girl sex appeal, wearing nothing but a lurid pink bikini with yellow frills – mincing seductively forward, lips pouting and hips swaying. The scene froze with the screen completely filled with sun-tanned belly and confectionery breasts. Then, like an emergent tropical parasite, out of her navel wiggled the tadpole.

'This what you wanted?' it squeaked, trying to suppress a giggle.

'A figure – ha! ha! – I get it.' Loofah's grin was beginning to hurt. 'But I was actually hoping for some numbers.'

'Numbers? Well, why didn't you just say?'

They were back in the aquarium. Something was sinking slowly through the water: white shapes, like pieces of spaghetti. And indeed it was spaghetti, in the shape of numerals; there was even a slight tinge of tomato sauce in the water towards the top of the screen. The tadpole took a quick bite out of a passing '5', while an ill-fated '9' was savaged in a piranha attack by three of the goldfish. The newts looked on with haughty indifference.

'That's great,' said Loofah as the tadpole chewed contentedly, 'But I think I'll need to do some calculations. You know, sums, stuff like that.'

The tadpole swallowed and then peered out at him.

'My dear, this is just the screen-save,' it said, as if speaking to a child, 'You can't do sums in the screen-save, now can you?'

'Everything on target?' said a voice from behind, announcing the unwelcome return of the marketing executive.

'Yes. Completely. One hundred percent,' said Loofah, grinning, 'Just working on a few... um... ideas.'

'Ideas? Brilliant. I like ideas. Run 'em up the flagpole, see if anyone salutes, right? Right. The Company needs ideas, the lifeblood of innovation as I always say. And where do ideas come

from? From our people, that's who. You and me. The team.'

The computer screen was reflected in Sutton's glasses, hiding his eyes.

'Only little ideas, mind you, nothing too –.'

'But remember this: in my department we worship one god and one god only. The bottom line. That's where it all happens. That's all that counts. Sales. Targets. Results. You want to daydream, you do it in your own time. Clear? Clear.'

Sutton flashed an assassin's smile, goldfish swimming across his eye sockets. Then, in a billow of aftershave, he was gone.

When Loofah looked back to the computer, the tadpole too had vanished. Although it had been little if any help, now he was completely alone. And so he gazed into the screen, drifting gently among the ceramic sea-horses and inscrutable newts, attempting to apply the nebulous mist that was his mind to the problem of what to do next.

Amazingly it was not long before a shaft of light, albeit a faint one, managed to penetrate the fog. Computer, screen, cursor: Loofah realised that there was a vague familiarity about the combination. Although wasn't there usually something else? He glanced down the desk. Ah, of course: keyboard. He'd done this before, he was sure of it now. Sensing his sudden surge of confidence, the screen cleared, the fish, the newts and the water all collapsing to nothing to leave a plain black background with a small blinking vertical bar in the top left-hand corner. Another tiny clear thought emerged from the swirling mists: 'log in'. Loofah smiled and started typing: 'HELLO. MY NAME IS –'.

But the computer interrupted him.

'I know who you are,' displayed the screen in sharp white lettering, 'Let's get going, shall we? We've got a lot to get through.'

'Oh. Right,' said Loofah, taken aback by its assertiveness, 'Of course, let's get going.'

He took his hands off the keyboard and waited.

'Well?' displayed the screen, eventually.

'Well what?'

'Jesus!' – the expletive flashed briefly – 'Look, just get on with it, will you? I'm a very busy machine, I haven't got all day.'

'Oh. Sorry,' Loofah stammered, then struggled to remember what he was supposed to be doing, 'Of course, that's it. I need the figures. The figures for Mr Sutton.'

The computer's cooling motor changed pitch in a sigh of exasperation and it blinked the cursor on and off as if drumming its fingers on the desk. The screen, however, remained blank.

'The figures?' Loofah repeated, very tentatively.

'I don't believe this,' the screen flashed, apparently to itself, then adding, 'Haven't you ever used a computer before?'

'Yes, of course I have. Lots of times.'

'Then you should know that you can't *talk* to me.'

'Oh, yes. Sorry.'

'And do you know why that is?'

'Um...'

'Because I'm a fucking machine, that's why. I haven't got any ears, have I? I can't fucking hear you.' It paused to let the words sink in, before finishing, in bold capitals, with: 'USE THE KEYBOARD, WILL YOU?'

Loofah did not like this machine one little bit. Now completely flustered, he could hardly think straight, and yet he had to keep going; the marketing executive would be back soon and

progress with the required figures was minimal to say the least. And so he struggled with his swimming thoughts, like a manic fisherman groping for eels in a muddy pond. Soon he felt something slithering past his fingers, grabbed it and pulled it, wriggling, into the daylight. It was a clear, concise sentence, right there in the front of his brain ready for typing: 'Please let me have the figures for Mr Sutton'. Sighing with relief, he reached for the keys.

'PLEASE – LET – ME – HAVE – THE – ,' he typed, the words flashing neatly onto the screen. Suddenly – in a reflex – he jerked his hands away. Teeth snapped shut, missing his fingertips by millimetres. It was only then that he noticed that the keyboard was non-standard, not a Qwerty model. In fact it was a huge grinning mouth, with two rows of yellowing tombstone teeth, flecked with saliva and rimmed with purplish lips, the full lips of dissolution, a Sybarite's lips that quivered in excited expectation.

An angry beep came from the machine and under his half-finished sentence, the words 'What? Let you have what?' appeared.

'The fig – ,' Loofah began aloud, but stopped himself. He looked down at the keyboard. The teeth glinted in the light from the screen, waiting for him.

'For God's sake, get on with it,' flashed the screen, 'or I'm shutting down.'

Oh no, he couldn't have that. The keyboard smirked ominously, but he didn't seem to have much choice. He stabbed at a tooth near where 'F' should have been – and to his delight the screen showed an 'F'! Hardly believing his luck, he went for 'I' – and got an 'I'. Then a 'G' and a 'U'. Then a... the teeth snapped suddenly, brushing his fingertips as he snatched his hands away. The mouth grinned up at him, enjoying the joke.

""PLEASE LET ME HAVE THE FIGU" – What the fuck's that supposed to mean?" flashed the screen.

Loofah looked from the screen to the keyboard, and then back to the screen, squirming with repressed panic.

'Right. That's it,' flashed the screen after a few seconds, 'I'm shutting down. You'll find paper and a pen in the top drawer.'

'No, wait,' Loofah cried, but then – quickly recollecting – he dived for the keys, managing to type out 'RES' before the teeth snapped again.

""RES?"" flashed the screen, blankly, 'Not a command I know. If it's Fortran or Cobol or anything else from the Dark Ages, forget it. I'm state of the art, me, I'm not pissing around with any of that dinosaur crap.'

Loofah tried again, pecking out the letters on the snapping teeth: 'FIGURES'.

'SYNTAX!' flashed the screen in bold capitals, adding for its own benefit, 'What a fucking game.'

Loofah sighed deeply.

'PLEASE LET ME HAVE THE FIGURES,' he typed, nearly losing a finger after the fourth word.

'What? Any figures? Be more specific, will you? I'm a computer, not a mind reader.'

'THE FIGURES FOR MR SUTTON.'

There was a pause and then the hard disc engaged, whirring hopefully for a second or two.

'No can do,' flashed the screen.

'I don't believe this!' muttered Loofah, slumping into his chair like a melting jelly.

'Don't get shitty with me. It's in another programme, that's all.'

'Which programme?' he snapped.

'Key – board,' it flashed, in a sing-song sort of way.

'WHICH PROGRAMME?' he typed, still dodging the teeth, which never seemed to tire of their jolly little game.

'Syntax.'

'GIVE ME THE PROGRAMME WITH THE FIGURES FOR MR SUTTON.'

The hard disc engaged briefly. 'Specify a path.'

'WHAT?' typed Loofah, exasperated.

'You must specify the path for the programme you require, giving the correct Directory, any Sub-Directories and the appropriate file-name. Please ensure you use the correct syntax at all –.'

'Just give me the bloody programme, will you!' he shouted, nearly banging his fists down on the keyboard – though thinking better of it.

The screen swam with indignation. Loofah immediately regretted his outburst; it was going to leave him high and dry. And indeed after a few moments of silent seething, the machine became deadly calm.

'Programme requested: Skylight 3.4,' it flashed coldly, 'Operating system closing down. Have a nice day.'

'No, wait...!' But it was too late – the screen cleared and was then immediately filled by a cheery looking window, framed by floral curtains. The view out of the window was of a trim little garden, with rolling green hills, blue sky and fluffy white clouds in the background. Two bluebirds sang in the hedge and lambs gambolled in the nearest field.

But despite the pristine prettiness, Loofah cursed silently. A nice view was all very well, but without the figures he was done and he knew it. Squirming with frustration, he searched the screen, hunting desperately for some clue. And then, with a quick flood of relief, he saw it, floating in the sky just above the bird table: a tiny little pictograph comprising some symbolic numbers superimposed on each other and under this the crucial identifier: 'The figures for Mr Sutton'.

Loofah prodded the screen hopefully, touching the icon. Nothing happened. Perhaps it needed a typed command. But as he went down for the keyboard, he saw that the whole mouth had closed and vast pair of lips was now smirking up at him like some warped cosmetics advert.

It was then he noticed something else on the screen, poised over a rose bush to the left of the lawn: an ornate Gothic arrow. Of course, the pointer! – it was all coming back to him. Problem solved... well, nearly. Oh no, not 'nearly' at all – for how was he going to move the pointer? As his tiny flame of hope guttered, he looked glumly from the Playschool screen to the depraved keyboard.

And there beside it, sitting on a neat pad in grey plastic, was a large brown rat.

It was squatting on its haunches with its skin-and-gristle tail curled behind it, cleaning its front paws. It paused briefly when it noticed Loofah watching, cast him a disinterested glance, and then returned to its grooming.

Somehow he knew what to do.

With a hard swallow, he gritted his teeth, then reached out and snatched hold of the surprised animal. Squeaking furiously, this struggled frantically to get its head round to bite him, but Loofah was too quick for it and held its head between thumb and forefinger so that it couldn't turn. As he eyed with distaste the vicious yellow teeth, impotently bared, and felt the hot wriggling body in his hand with the coarse greasy coat against his skin, a wave of giddy nausea rolled languorously up his gullet. Modern technology isn't all it's cracked up to be, he thought, grimly. Then, fighting his revulsion, he swept the indignant animal over the plastic pad, guiding the pointer across the screen towards the 'figures' icon.

Which promptly dodged out of the way, sliding down across the sky and coming to rest on the lawn. Loofah sighed with exasperation. The rat again struggled to escape, but he tightened his grip and swept it back over the pad. But again the elusive icon skidded away across the screen, this time ending up under one of the lambs.

And so he gave chase. To a chorus of angry squeaks, he swept the outraged rodent to and fro, pursuing the icon across the lawn, into the hedges, and back into the sky. He chased it around the bluebirds, through a rose bush and across the window sill. At one point it even hid behind the curtains and he had to flush it out, probing blind with the pointer.

At last, as the icon hovered at the edge of the lawn panting for breath, he saw he had it cornered. Loofah eased in a little closer and then, with an anguished howl from the rat, he hurled the pointer across the grass. The icon dodged – he swung to intercept – it dodged again, but this time it had no escape. As he pounced, certain of success, it hurled itself back into the edge of the screen...

And slid off the glass onto the plastic casing of the monitor, leaving the pointer quivering uselessly on a flowerbed.

Loofah watched, flabbergasted, as the errant icon slid down the side of the computer and down onto the desk. In a last effort of desperation he tried to swat it with the rat itself, dispensing with the stranded pointer. But he missed and the icon skidded effortlessly across the white wood veneer of the desk and down a metal leg onto the floor, before skating across the carpet between the legs of a passing secretary and away into the depths of the office.

Sudden pain stabbed in Loofah's left thumb; the rat had finally managed to get its head free and had sunk its yellow incisors into his flesh. Stifling a cry, he dropped it onto the desk, while the secretary stared at him with puzzled disapproval.

'Technical problems,' he said, grinning sheepishly. With a contemptuous flick of her bob, she turned and stalked away.

As he sucked at his injured thumb, there was an insistent purr from the desk behind him. He turned to answer it, but it was a fax machine not a telephone. The ringing stopped and the machine began chuntering to itself, spewing shiny paper onto the desk.

Chapter 7

He was now in something of a predicament: the keyboard smirked, tight-lipped, the pointer hovered uselessly in a bed of electronic begonias, and the rat glared at him malevolently from the corner of the desk, teeth bared. Looking from one to the other, he prayed for inspiration.

'Finished?' The marketing executive materialised behind him, smiling with smarmy malice.

'Er... hello, Mr Sutton.'

'Well? Where are they? The figures?'

'Actually, Mr Sutton, I've been having one or two problems with the computer.'

'Problems? What sort of problems?'

'Well, the keyboard for a start...'

Sutton leaned forward, looking over the computer. The mouth grinned up at him, now open lipped, the tombstone teeth glinting in the screen-light. Even the rat was back on its pad, innocently cleaning its whiskers.

'Looks OK to me,' said Sutton. On the desk behind him, the fax machine was rolling out a vast streamer of glossy paper, which was draping itself elegantly into a loosely folded pile.

'Yes. Right. Maybe I can – .'

'Listen. In this Company we like to be flexible. We care for people. We don't expect the impossible. If you've got problems let me know, I'll see what I can do. Sort things out, right?' Sutton grinned with reptilian compassion. 'I'm that kind of manager. Fluffy. Touchy-feely. Warm and cuddly. Door's always open and all that stuff. No place for the Hitler act in the modern company, right? Right.'

'No, definitely not,' agreed Loofah.

'But understand this: I'm looking for results, not excuses. And if I don't get results, head roll. PDQ. No questions asked. Savvy?'

'Yes, I do understand.'

'Now, about these figures?'

Loofah's brain raced under the marketing executive's icy grin: he was cornered. He opened his mouth, not knowing what he was going to say. Then something caught his attention on the growing fax paper mountain behind Sutton's back, two little words that fired into his skull like rifle bullets: '... The Seeker...'. Suddenly his voice started working.

'But Mr Sutton,' he said, 'the figures *will* be ready – exactly when you asked for them.'

Sutton's smile lost its edge. 'Right. Good. And when was that?'

'Two hours ago, if I'm not mistaken.'

Sutton looked at his watch and his brow furrowed briefly with puzzlement. He hesitated and then grinned.

'Plenty of time, right? Brilliant. Press on. Keep up the good work. Clear? Clear.'

Loofah was at the fax machine as soon as Sutton was out of sight. It was quiet now, the pile of paper complete. He glanced around quickly; young executives and secretaries dashed about excitedly, but no-one was paying him any attention. He tore the streamer free and, gathering the folded pile together, quickly hid it on his lap under the desk.

The rat, still on its pad, had stopped its grooming and was eyeing him suspiciously.

'Who's a pretty boy, then?' cooed Loofah, smiling it a sickly smile. Embarrassed, the rat turned quickly away.

Fumbling under the desk, he tried unsuccessfully to find the start of the streamer; however, it seemed to have formed itself into a loop and he couldn't find a cut edge. Eventually he gave up and pulled up the nearest fold, holding it close against the desk and shielding it with his body.

'IMPORTANT NOTICE,' he read, 'THE SEEKER HAS LANDED!'

Suddenly very nervous, he again looked around to make sure he wasn't being watched before reading on.

'Earlier today, Government sources let it be known that The Seeker has finally arrived. Although expected for some time, officials are said to be delighted by...' – the next three lines were blurred and unreadable – '...will be passing through various areas over the next few days and can be recognised by his unusual but stylish apparel: body-cut leather jacket in midnight black, designer sleeved singlet in lime green bearing his title in sun-kiss orange, 501s in traditional blue, and hand-stitched Italian casuals in desert fawn, with side zips by YKK.'

Beep! Beep! Beep! Loofah looked up quickly, pushing the fax under the desk. The Skylight screen had cleared and the operating system was back, blinking its cursor with a degree of urgency.

'What have you got there?' it flashed.

'Oh, nothing,' replied Loofah, trying to sound casual.

'It doesn't look like nothing.'

'Oh, you mean these?' he said, pointing to his lap, 'Just some papers. Notes about Mr Sutton's figures.'

The rat scampered forward and peered over the edge of the desk. Pulling his chair in to hide the fax, Loofah gave the animal an affectionate though tentative pat on the head.

'Company employees are not permitted to receive private communications during working hours,' flashed the screen, 'Or at any other time, for that matter. Show me the paper.'

'Now that you're back,' said Loofah, ignoring its demand, 'perhaps we can work on those figures?'

'Company employees must not rely on business machines to carry out tasks that are their own responsibility...'

'And then I can put these papers in the bin.'

The machine hesitated, then the hard disc whirred as it considered its options.

'Very well,' it flashed. The disc whirred again and the screen was filled with columns of numbers, mostly six or seven figure, though some longer.

'To proceed,' it displayed along the bottom edge of the screen, 'add columns one and four together, subtract the square root of the result from column three, and then multiply the exponential of the cube of the result by -.'

'Yes, yes, yes,' interrupted Loofah, 'I'll get started right away.'

The rat was still hovering over the edge of the desk and so, using his jacket as a shield, he spun the chair to face away from the desk and snatched up a piece of the fax.

'An official spokesperson confirmed that, as expected, the main purpose of The Seeker's visit is to enable him to undertake his search for The Woman Who...' Although the rest of the sentence was smudged, he knew to whom it referred. The skin of his forearms prickled coldly against the lining of his jacket.

Beep! Beep! Beep! The machine cut brutally into his reverie.

'What are you doing?' flashed the screen.

'Thinking,' said Loofah, 'About the figures.'

'Put all paperwork in the waste receptacle and turn to face the desk.'

Staring blankly at the command, he tried to think what to do next; he knew he couldn't stall the obnoxious machine and its rodent henchman for much longer. He glanced quickly at the fax.

'Leave the office immediately,' he read, a simple imperative.

Leave the office? Leave the office? It was actually telling him to disobey instructions, to defy the Under Manager. He couldn't do that... could he?

Beep! Beep!

The vast metal monster of the Company limousine sounded its horn and loomed up in front of him, purring with malign omnipotence. In place of headlights were two hard piggy little eyes that bored into him like baleful lasers. The radiator grille snarled at him, muttering under its motorised breath: 'pervert', 'criminal', 'ludicrous shoes'.

Beep! Beep!

This time, however, the car's horn had an edge of panic. With a sound of metal grinding on metal, the great vehicle shuddered to a halt and the bonnet flew open in a cloud of steam and hissing water. Then two cheery faces popped up from the ruined engine compartment, emerging out of the billowing mist; it was the two little spaniels, one with a seagull head peg clamped over her nose, the other with a loose moralled doll riding between her ears, holding onto her hair-band for balance. 'Delighted to see you,' said the first dog. 'And in such a stylish outfit,' added the second.

Beep! Beep! Beep!

As the image faded Loofah glanced absently at the screaming computer.

'Turn round at once,' flashed the screen, 'That is an order. Failure to comply will result in...'

Missing the rest, he looked back to the fax.

'Tell it that you must confer with your line manager,' he read.

Beep! Beep! Beep! Beep!

'I'm going to see Mr Sutton,' said Loofah, ignoring the machine's increasingly desperate efforts to gain his attention, 'I won't be long.'

'Do not leave. There is no need to disturb Mr Sutton until the figures are finished. You should continue with the calculations...' it was displaying as he stood up, crumpling the fax under his jacket.

In no time Loofah was at sea in an ocean of desks, potted plants and room dividers, fighting to control a rising tide of anxiety. He couldn't quite remember why, but he knew he was doing something he wasn't supposed to be doing, he knew he was disobeying orders. The sound of telephones, computer cooling fans and business chatter washed over him, while Identikit executives and pleasure doll secretaries cast suspicious glances as he passed. Their faces, leering at him with reptilian hostility, were lurid cubist sculptures under the harsh fluorescent light. Why was he here, he thought, why wasn't he back at his desk working on...

'Those figures ready yet?' Sutton darted from behind a room divider like an attacking barracuda. Loofah looked at him blankly, opening and closing his mouth like a drowning fish. This was it, he was done for.

'Er...' he said.

'Right. Brilliant. That them?' The marketing executive pointed at the crumpled paper half-hidden under Loofah's jacket.

'This?' said Loofah weakly. But as he held up the fax, he caught the words on the uppermost section: 'Important message. Report to the Under Manager. Very urgent. Top priority.'

'Actually, no,' he said quickly, pulling the paper close to his chest, 'definitely not.'

Sutton's eyes widened with surprise – then narrowed with suspicion.

'The fact is,' Loofah went on, 'it's a message from Miss Leggett. The Under Manager.'

'A fax?' asked Sutton, dubiously.

'An internal fax. She needs to see me straight away. Very urgent. Top priority.'

'Best if I take a look. Right?' said Sutton, holding out his hand for the fax.

'Sorry, Mist... um... Dave.' Loofah looked the marketing executive straight in the eye. 'No can do. It's confidential, you see. Commercially sensitive. My eyes only, that sort of thing.'

For a few moments Sutton's his hand hung awkwardly in the space between them. Then, with a slight shrug, he retrieved it.

'Right. That's it then,' he said, 'Favoured personnel. Blue-eyed boy. Off you go.' The marketing executive paused to examine his fingernails, eyes moistening behind glittering lenses. 'Best not to forget old friends, though, eh?' he went on, looking up with an ingratiating smile, 'Everyone needs friends. Even at the top. *Especially* at the top. Right? Right.'

With this, he shook Loofah's hand warmly and then disappeared into the controlled maelstrom of the office.

'Straight on to the ornamental fig,' read the now very crumpled fax, 'then hang a right. On past the coffee machine and left at the grey filing cabinets. Then ask again.'

Loofah pulled open the white wood door at the end of the corridor and found himself in the foyer. The main entrance beckoned, a mere thousand miles away across the Great Marble Plain; he was nearly free. There was, of course, one last obstacle – perched like Scylla on her cliff, the flint-faced receptionist hovered over his route, ready to strike – but the time to hesitate was passed. And so, with a quick glance at the fax, he set a straight course for the exit, striding out briskly with shoulders back and eyes forward.

Once out of the security of the corridor, however, he was exposed and vulnerable. He felt again the pressure of the space and the silence, the acres of marble stretching out on all sides and the ceiling and the staircase soaring away into the stratosphere over his head. His courage evaporated under the throbbing sun of corporate power and his bold stride had soon decayed into a feeble mince. And then Scylla struck.

'Would sir care to sign out?' called the receptionist, in a chilling tone.

'Er... ' He quickly read a single word on the crumpled paper: '...no.' Delivered in a quavering bleat, his defiance lost some of its effect.

'No? It is normal procedure for all persons leaving the Office – .'

'Special instructions from the Under Manager,' he read, 'Overrides all previous orders.'

'This is all highly irregular,' said the receptionist, 'I'm sure Miss Leggett would have informed me. Perhaps I'd better just check with her secretary.'

Terror flared up as she reached for her telephone; Loofah grappled with the crackling paper, searching for instructions. She snatched up the receiver. In a blind panic he fumbled and festoons of paper tumbled onto the marble in a glossy white waterfall. A scarlet-tipped talon stabbed into the keypad. He went to pick up the fallen fax – but knew there was no time.

'It's OK,' he said in a high voice, the improvised words falling unbidden from his mouth, 'Here it is – in black and white.'

The receptionist paused mid-dial. Picking up the formless, crackling mass between both hands, Loofah carried it over to the desk. She considered for a moment – and then replaced the receiver.

'*These* are Miss Leggett's special instructions?' she asked in a tone of frank disbelief.

'Er... yes.'

His heart was fluttering like a trapped sparrow while, with a grimace akin to revulsion, she pulled a creased loop from the pile and examined it. Loofah considered his options: run for the door; confess, surrender and take his punishment like a man; or sit down, pull his jacket over his head and metamorphose into a screen-save newt...

'Well, this all seems to be in order, sir,' said the receptionist, looking up from the fax with a pleasant smile.

'It is?'

'Yes, sir, no problem at all. Have a nice day and do visit us again soon.'

Loofah stopped at the end of the office driveway and scrutinised the surface of the fax – now a huge sphere of crumpled paper, a light-weight medicine ball – for further instructions. At first he found nothing, just screwed up creases and smudged figures. Then, in tiny typescript on a postage-stamp section of uncrushed paper, he read: 'Fax message terminates. Further information available by telephone. Any problems with this transmission should be reported to the sender.'

Chapter 8

The road was all but deserted: a man with a dog passed by on the other side, ignoring him, and a woman with a push-chair turned into a driveway a hundred yards ahead. He was menaced by a few passing cars; these howled their fury at him, but screamed past in pursuit of other prey.

Loofah was standing on the pavement, staring up at a grand old house of red brick. The building spoke of genteel Victorian prosperity, of top hats and frock coats, and ladies with wasp waists in crinoline and bonnets. 'Greenpastures Veterinary Clinic' proclaimed the brutally functional sign that had thrust itself out of the flowerbed.

It was a pleasant street – unpretentiously respectable, basking quietly in the suburban sunshine – but unease crawled over Loofah's skin like an army of termites. He knew he was being watched: not by the absent residents but by the houses themselves, by the gardens and the trees, even by the lamp-posts and by the grinning pillar box that squatted menacingly on the opposite pavement like a scarlet toad. He looked around quickly, forcing himself not to run, then climbed the three steps to the blue painted door in the once elegant porch.

He was in a waiting room; bags of dog food and cat litter crouched sullenly on a shabby display stand and a cartoon puppy grinned down at him from over a marble fireplace. At the far side of the room, a green uniformed nurse sat behind a dark wood reception desk.

A door to another room opened in a blaze of fluorescent whiteness and a waft of disinfectant, and a man emerged clutching a leather lead and an empty, dog-less collar. Closing the door behind him with gentle solemnity, he smiled sadly at the nurse and left.

Loofah crossed to reception desk, treading softly, while strange muffled noises gurgled out from the behind the closed door and bubbled through his skull like boiling mud. The nurse gave him a tight lipped smile that failed to reach her darting, angry eyes.

'Sorry to bother you...' he began, but was interrupted by a sonorous voice from the other room: 'Next!'

'That's you, Mrs Frimpton,' the nurse said pleasantly, speaking to someone behind him.

An elderly woman with cotton wool hair and Mary Whitehouse spectacles was sitting on an upright chair with a white wire basket on her knees; a fluffy ginger cat gazed out at Loofah with pale green malice. He turned quickly away as the old lady got up.

'Is your animal on a lead, sir?' snapped the nurse, addressing him.

'My animal?' blurted Loofah, praying that Mrs Frimpton wouldn't recognise him.

'Your animal,' confirmed the nurse.

His animal: he looked quickly around the floor, found nothing, then slapped his pockets. Where had he put it? Had it run away? A cold worm of panic wriggled across his belly and he winced under the nurse's angry glare. Behind his back, the old lady knocked politely and opened the consulting room door. Then he remembered: he didn't have a pet. He wanted to use the phone, that's all – a quick call, local, give them fifty pee to cover it – because he hadn't managed to find a call-box since leaving the Office.

'Actually, I just wondered if I could –.'

'We do ask clients to keep their dogs on a lead at all times,' interrupted the nurse, looking suspiciously around the floor at his feet.

'Of course,' he said, 'but –.'

'Because we don't want any fighting between patients, do we?'

'Naturally, no –.'

'And cats in baskets – do you have a basket?'

'No, but you see –.'

'*Most* of our clients are quite happy to follow our few simple little rules.'

'That's nice, but –.'

'Although there are one or two exceptions,' she finished, giving him a meaningful glare.

Loofah squirmed with embarrassment, longing hopelessly for a dog on a lead or a cat in a basket. Behind him the consulting room door opened and closed. He turned quickly to examine the cartoon puppy over the fireplace as the old lady came over to the reception desk. More muffled gulping noises bubbled out from the closed consulting room.

'Everything alright, Mrs Frimpton?' said the nurse, 'We've sorted little Ginger out, have we?'

'Oh yes,' she replied, 'He's so wonderful is your Mr Abbott.'

At that moment there was a loud belch from behind the door, followed by a gurgled 'Next!'

'The veterinary surgeon will see you now, sir,' said the nurse, addressing Loofah's back.

'The veterinary surgeon,' he said slowly, to the grinning puppy.

'Yes, sir. It's your turn.'

The old lady was searching in her purse and thankfully didn't look up as Loofah crossed the room behind her. He noticed that her cat basket was now empty.

As Loofah pushed open the consulting room door harsh fluorescent light assaulted his eyes and he inhaled neat disinfectant and surgical spirit. Shining metal instruments glistened menacingly on a stainless steel tray, and tubs of pills and bottles of coloured liquid were neatly arrayed on glass shelves, like clinical soldiers awaiting the call to arms. A black rubber topped examination table occupied the middle of the room and behind this squatted a mountain.

A mountain of flesh, that is, a living pyramid: roll upon quivering roll of fat, vast cascades of blubber and entire land-slips of lard, all tumbling together into a shuddering, quaking vastness of bloated humanity.

The body – the lower two thirds of the pyramid – was encased in a green clinical jacket. The buttons of this were hanging on for dear life, going far beyond the call of duty, and the material, moulded to the flesh as it strained to contain the trembling rolls of jelly, was stretched to tear-point and was decorated with an overlapping profusion of stains: huge patches of reeking sweat, shiny slides of grease and discrete blobs of some nameless matter, dried and cracked like desert mud.

Above the green collar was the head, the top third of the pyramid. The flesh-folds here were naked, rolling and tumbling over each other in joyous abandon, slick with sebum and sweat. The eyes were invisible, engulfed by rolls of fat, but between two quivering cheeks, each the size of an elephant's buttock, was a pair of lips, full and sensual, cherub pink, trembling with eager depravity. And from between the lips protruded a tail, a fluffy ginger tail.

The creature gulped – the folds of flesh convulsed and shivered, a quivering wave cascaded down the shuddering flanks, and a gout of blood-stained saliva spilled over the chin – and the tail slid between the lips and disappeared. The mountain belched and then it spoke, the words slurring and gurgling in its throat.

'What have you got for me then?'

As Loofah charged out of the waiting room, pushing past an alarmed Mrs Frimpton, he heard the nurse calling after him: did he want to settle up now or should she send an account?

Despite the afternoon sun, he now walked in darkness, following the road up a steep hill. The houses were larger here and stood back from the road, shielded by sheer walls of laurel and yew, guarded by silent sentries of beech and sycamore. Clutches of expensive cars, fluorescing affluence, were clustered together on sweeping driveways of freshly washed gravel. Each house was a fortress of wealth and power, arrogant and dangerously jealous of any intrusion. Unarmed and defenceless, Loofah hurried onwards through the dark corridor between the tall hedges and

overhanging trees, as luxury cars glided up and down the hill, watchful and threatening, patrolling their territory.

As he hurried past a towering cliff of yew a dark face peered out from the shadows, glaring fury from its little eyes. Miss Leggett had been right – he was an alien here, an outsider, he had no business being here at all. A car slowed as it passed him, then accelerated up the hill, while a massive beech eyed him suspiciously from the opposite side of the road. Why had he ever left the bright safety of the Office? he wondered to himself, and just when he was beginning to master the idiosyncrasies of the computer system and win favour with his appointed line manager.

The hill went on forever, the fortresses getting more massive and dangerous the higher he climbed. No, he should never have come to this lethal place, he should have ignored the mischievous fax and stayed at his desk, getting on with his work while the Under Manager sorted out the little mix-up about the unpleasant things he was supposed to have done. Loofah halted suddenly, cowering under the malevolent gaze of a mock-Jacobean mansion as a cold fluid pooled in his belly. A misunderstanding, that's all it was, a case of mistaken identity, because he hadn't done anything unpleasant, nothing at all, he was certain of that. Just at the moment, however, he caught a glimpsed reflection in the dark tinted side-window of a passing BMW, the same image of utter depravity he had seen in Mrs Frimpton's hall mirror. A pair of sycamores loomed down out of the darkness and the road swayed under his quaking feet. With a little whimper, he cringed down into his jacket and hurried on.

He reached a turning off to the right which seemed to lead into woodland and away from the dark realm of the fortresses. But as he was pondering whether to take this escape route, he noticed the little cubicle of glass and painted metal on a curve in the road ahead. Loofah hesitated, staring blankly into the middle distance. Then, with a last longing glance at the sunlit woods, he crossed the side road and continued reluctantly up the ominous hill.

The call-box door was made of some super-dense form of translucent lead and it was only by bracing his feet against the pavement that he somehow managed to haul it open. It swung closed behind him with inexorable force, sealing him into the sarcophagus of the cubicle. The telephone waited expectantly: a box of moulded grey plastic with metal push-buttons and its receiver hanging at the side, joined to it by an umbilical cord of shining metal rings.

Suddenly a four-by-four, a behemoth of arrogant aggression and shining paint-work, came thundering towards him in a blaze of fury and mechanised loathing. Instinctively Loofah cowered, but as the terrible machine tore past its roar of hatred was muffled to an impotent whisper and its malevolence thudded to nothing against the three-inch walls of his transparent tank. Watching it disappear around the corner, he felt himself smile with relief; for the dark danger of the hill was outside and inside the phone box he realised that he was far beyond its baleful reach. Relaxing against a side wall, he folded his arms and casually surveyed the scene outside, now no more threatening than a truculent kitten. The sun's warmth glowed from a red tiled roof on the other side of the road and a towering copper beech shimmered like melting plastic in the hazy brilliance. On reflection perhaps becoming a unit of corporate human resource was not for him, perhaps he had been right to obey the fax after all. It was then that he remembered why he had been looking for a call-box in the first place.

Of course the fax hadn't provided a number to call or even the name of the person he was to speak to. However, after checking the call-box in vain for a directory, he decided to telephone operator services; they were so helpful these days and he felt sure they would be able to point him in the right direction. But as he went to reach for the receiver he stopped abruptly, leaving his hand hanging in the air – for there was a low pitched hiss coming from the handset and the

sides of the telephone were moving slowly in and out as if it were breathing. A shadow closed over the tight glass walls and there was another hiss, sharp and savage. Loofah jerked his hand back as the receiver reared into the air above the box and, balancing on its coiling ringed cable, twisted round to face him.

For a few moments it hovered in front of him, swaying slightly on its writhing cable neck with a continuous low hiss from the ear-piece as of a steam boiler about to blow. Then suddenly it darted forward at his face. An involuntary convulsion of his muscles hurled him to the side and it missed, instantly pulling back like a recoiling spring.

Again it hovered, poised to attack. The dangerous bulb of the ear-piece faced him, hissing menacingly, and the hand section curved away like the arched carapace of some alien predator, with the mouth-piece glowering dangerously underneath. A strange dizziness fluttered inside Loofah's skull and his legs trembled like a pair of jean-clad blancmanges.

'Actually, I've changed my mind,' he said, 'I think I'll send an e-mail instead.'

Not daring to take his eyes off the receiver, he felt for the edge of the door behind his back and pushed. Nothing. He braced himself and pushed again, but the door did not shift.

The hissing stopped. In a split second of deadly silence the receiver edged back slightly, tensing its spring, and then struck, an arrow loosed at his face. Again he dodged, but this time it nearly had him, brushing against his cheek. Choking back a cry, he heaved his whole weight back against the door, but to no avail. The receiver pulled back and hovered, swivelling to follow his every movement with its ear-piece.

It struck again, but off centre, going to his left. He dodged easily, but this time it recoiled and attacked immediately, driving him into the corner. Unable to move right or left, he went down, collapsing onto his knees as it breezed past his temple.

He was trapped now, with the receiver veering above him, poised for the kill. With final desperation, he heaved at the door but still without success. His skin was cold seaweed and a steam piston thundered against his ribcage. Unbalanced and cornered, he knew he was a nanosecond from death. But though his skull was filled with a whirlwind of screaming banshees, at the epicentre of the storm was a pool of ice-cold calm. Countless millions of years of Darwinian evolution did not fail him; the primal instinct to survive came to the fore and, quelling his panic, took control. Not taking his eyes off the receiver, he braced himself against the glass walls, his muscles becoming steel springs tensed for action.

The hissing stopped; there was a moment of absolute stillness then the strike as the plastic missile hurtled towards him. Loofah threw himself sideways and upwards into the opposite corner of the cubicle, but at the same time swung round with his right arm, grabbing for the receiver. It saw his intention and tried to pull back, but too late; his grip closed around the curved plastic of the handle.

Instantly it was in a frenzy, thrashing from side to side and smashing itself against the glass walls to crush his hand. But he held on, desperately struggling to keep his balance. It darted forward suddenly, and he stopped it three inches from his face; for seconds it loomed massively above him, hissing furious venom into his eyes.

Soon it seemed to tire and, squaring his balance, he lunged forward with his left hand and seized the receiver in a double-handed grip. It fought him again, the force of its thrashing threatening to wrench his arms from their sockets. Then it slowed, exhausted, and with a sudden pulse of strength, he jerked the receiver backwards, smashing the ear-piece on the top edge of the box with a crack of splintering plastic. It was stunned and lost power; he smashed it down again – the receiver split with a hiss of pain – and then again – plastic shards showered across the box and wriggling coloured wires spewed from the shattered ear-piece.

As the immediate danger passed, fear was swamped by an upsurge of white hot fury. With a savage curse Loofah wrenched the receiver downwards and the cable mounting ripped away from the side of the box, pulling lengths of squirming yellow and red wires after it. Then, holding the receiver at arm's length as the amputated cable lashed around in its death throes, he seized the top of the box with his free hand and with a whole-body wrench hauled it backwards. With a sickening squeal the holding bolts tore through their mountings and the box came free, hurtling into Loofah, who lost his balance and staggered backwards into the once-immovable door which now swung open, catapulting him into space.

Floating gently through a languorous blur of green and black, and the blue of bright sky with little dapplings of sunlight. Floating and falling, then a violent wave of shuddering hardness with jolts of electric pain that scrambled everything to nothing.

A plane of rough warm hardness, gouts of throbbing pain, and blackness: there was nothing else in all creation. Then, like water filling a pond, thought flooded back into his shaken brain. Loofah opened his eyes and an undulating sheet of sun-dappled tarmac stretched into infinity from under his face. As he struggled painfully to his feet he heard someone call out and through the glass walls of the ruined call-box he saw, not more than fifty yards distant, two middle-aged men hurrying up the hill towards him.

'It's alright,' Loofah called, 'I'm OK – nothing more than a few bruises.'

'You won't be OK for long!' shouted one of the men, his face contorted with indignant anger.

'You bloody vandal!' chimed in the other, waving a clenched fist in the air.

Loofah looked from the shattered telephone on the floor of the call-box to the rapidly approaching outraged citizens – and ran.

He crouched down behind the brick gatepost as his steam-engine panting gradually eased. His pursuers had been overweight and under-exercised, and he had quickly outpaced them, stretching his lead to fifty, then a hundred yards and more, and eventually losing sight of them around the long curve of the hill. It seemed unlikely that they would still be keeping up the chase, but it was probably best to stay out of sight while he caught his breath. His chosen hiding place was in the entrance of a gravelled driveway which curved expansively around the front of a neo-Tudor mansion: a jigsaw puzzle of herringbone brickwork, black timbers and white painted plaster, with a profusion of intricately bricked chimneys that towered into the sky like aerial monuments. Two German built cars shimmered complacently in the sunlight, oozing affluence across the gravel.

As he waited, a slithering clamminess crept over Loofah's skin; for though he was out of sight of the road, he knew the house had him under close surveillance, watching him with every one of the empty eyes of its uncountable windows. Best not to hang around too long, he thought, with a worried glance at the cars that even now might be silently readying themselves for attack. And so he edged forward and peered around the gatepost; apart from a single patrolling Mercedes the dark corridor of the road was empty. With a small sigh of relief, Loofah got up from his crouch and, affecting an air of casual innocence, prepared himself for the ongoing dangers of the endless hill. It was only then that he realised there was something in his left hand – he was still holding the shattered telephone receiver trailing its now lifeless cable.

With a sudden flare of panic, he pulled back behind the gatepost, quickly hiding the evidence of his crime under his jacket. He glanced nervously towards the house – it had certainly seen the receiver and was probably even now in communication with the appropriate authorities via its own telephone system. The two cars seemed to have edged closer, tensed for a lethal pounce.

For an era he stood paralysed by the panic, clutching his jacket across his chest and looking from the glowering house to the road outside and back in quick succession. Then finally someone – he knew not who – made a decision: drop the damned thing, yelled a voice inside his skull, and run. He pulled the receiver out from under his jacket and went to throw it into the laurel hedging behind the gatepost.

'Is that you, Seeker?' said another voice, this one female and tiny, coming from a million miles away.

Again he was paralysed into immobility, though this time by sheer surprise.

'Seeker?' The voice was coming from the receiver's ear-piece: someone was speaking on the telephone. Vandal-proof telecommunication engineering had obviously come a long way, he thought, viewing the shattered plastic and severed wires with new respect, then held the receiver to his face.

'Hello? Is somebody there?'

'Hello, Seeker,' said the voice: it was a gentle caress, a splinter of golden sunshine beaming into his ear.

'It's you, isn't it? I remember you from... from... before,' he said, struggling to hold the diaphanous image of a white-clad nymph that now drifted through his consciousness.

'You must find She Who Is Two,' said the girl.

'But I don't know where she is – in fact I don't know anything about her at all.'

'You are The Seeker – if you try, you will find her.'

First the spaniel in the woods, then the lascivious doll and the seagull peg, and now his nymph: the double woman was obviously high on many agendas.

'I don't understand. Why must I find her?'

'Don't worry. You will be – ' began the girl, but was interrupted.

'This is the operator. You have another call waiting. Please hold the line while I transfer you.'

Before Loofah could object, there was a loud click and three beeps, before another voice cut in, a voice he also recognised.

'This is the Under Manager. You have been extremely foolish. I want you to know that your actions have caused a great deal of aggravation for a lot of very busy people, myself included. Mr Stobart himself has asked me to say how disgusted he is with your behaviour.'

Loofah shivered with cold horror and his jaw dropped. 'What – ?' he stammered.

'You are to proceed to the cinema immediately,' said Miss Leggett.

'But I don't under – '

'We know where you are and I advise you not make any more trouble. I will not be responsible for the consequences if you disobey me again. Goodbye.' Then there was another click, followed by the buzz of the dialling tone.

The transition from hill of dark mansions to high street was brutally abrupt; one minute he was floating through the ominous though quiet realm of the fortresses of opulence, the next he was at the epicentre of an artillery bombardment of motor car noise, angry faces and dazzle. Staggering like a pole-axed steer, he was sucked into the insane mêlée, carried by a momentum that wasn't his own.

He passed shop fronts, all ablaze with reflected dazzle that carved into the soft jelly of his brain like broken glass, then teetered for a moment on the kerb, gazing in blank horror into the river of death beyond, where cars screamed to and fro in a manic hunt for stray pedestrians. People clutching carrier bags pushed past him, bellowing fury into his face as they rushed

desperately from one purchasing experience to the next, driven by the deadly certainty that their lives would end if anything should hinder this enterprise.

A fat man grunted angrily and barged into him, sending him reeling into a sheet of hot glass. For a minute he stared into the shop, watching rows of print dresses undulating to themselves like headless dancing girls. Then a young woman pushed him away, sending him back out into the pavement where two housewives bounced him from one to the other like a rugby ball as they raced each other to the door of a chemist's shop which was offering discounts on selected items of oral hygiene care.

Soon there was nothing except the screaming blur of noise and colour and light that whirled around him in an endless hurricane. Occasional faces emerged from the manic swirl, leering at him with twisted fury before blending back in the mayhem. He was out of control, a leaf in a storm, a human billiard ball cannoning from collision to collision.

Then suddenly something crystallised out the whirling mess; an ornamental black metal sign pointing up a side road on the opposite side of the street. Loofah narrowed his eyes to make out the tiny gold letters, but somehow he already knew what it said: 'To the Cinema'.

As he stared across at the ominous sign, an icy anaconda coiled around his intestines and squeezed. He shook his head slowly; he would not obey, he was a free man and non-one could force him – but the snake squeezed tighter, twisting itself into a hard knot. Mustering every fibre of determination he turned his back on the sign, and nearly collided with a mother leading a little girl by the hand. He began to stammer apologies, but stopped; both mother and daughter were glaring at him with the same, and all too familiar, puff-angry face. As he looked quickly around, he saw he was in a sea of them, some in business suits, some with children's bodies, some carrying shopping bags, others pushing prams – but all staring at him with the same porcine eyes set in the same corporate manager's irate face. He slumped down into his jacket and the anaconda relaxed – it had won. With the resigned torpor of a condemned man, he turned slowly and stepped into the road.

With a roar of naked fury a metal beast loomed out the manic blur and hurtled towards him, baring in its snarling radiator grille. Loofah leapt back to the safety of the pavement, tripping on the curb as chrome teeth snapped closed inches from his left thigh.

'That was very, very foolish.'

A huge pelican was standing over him, looking down on him with solemn reproach and shaking its head from side to side, its bill-pouch swaying like a flabby yellow udder.

'It was, wasn't it?' agreed Loofah, getting to his feet and feeling every bit as foolish as the bird clearly thought he ought.

'Remember the Highway Code,' the pelican continued, in its officious monotone, 'You should always use a designated crossing. Why do you think the Parish Council bothers to employ me?'

It was odd being reprimanded by a pelican, particularly one dressed in a neat green jacket with 'Parish Council Highways Dept' embroidered on its breast pocket. But he tried not to smile; this was clearly a bird that took itself very seriously indeed.

'I am sorry,' he said, 'I just... forgot.'

'We'll say no more about it for now, but please don't forget again. Now, if you'll just climb aboard, we'll soon have you safely across.'

With this the pelican squatted down, clearly intending for him to climb on its back.

'Gerraway from that fuckin' bird,' slurred an angry voice from behind, just Loofah was about to mount.

This was a zebra that was trotting – rather unsteadily – up the pavement towards him.

'Oh no, not again,' muttered the pelican.

'Don't trust him,' slurred the zebra, stumbling up to Loofah and breathing whisky fumes in his face, 'Bloody Johnny-come-lately. Couldn't cross a fuckin' – a fuckin' – a fuckin' something that's easy to cross.'

The zebra was also wearing the green council jacket, though its was distinctly grubby and frayed at the sleeves.

'What do you think you're doing?' said the pelican, in a frosty tone, 'You've been warned about this sort of thing – on more than one occasion.'

'Trying to keep the fucking roads safe, aren't I? Before you useless new boys get everybody run over,' said the zebra, leering threateningly at the pelican with its bloodshot eyes.

'You have no right to wear that uniform and you know it. Let me remind you that impersonating a council official is a criminal offence. Now take off that jacket and go home.'

'No, I won't go 'ome. Got to keep the roads safe. Got to get this bloke across. On you get, mate, I'll look after to you.'

'The gentleman will do no such thing.' The pelican turned to Loofah. 'Forced to take early retirement two years ago,' it said, speaking in a confidential tone, 'Reduced competence. Very sad, very sad indeed. Became a danger to pedestrians – a pensioner and her poodle crippled for life. Lucky no-one was killed.'

'That wasn't my fault!' bellowed the zebra, 'That was a drunken driver!'

'It was the drinking that did it alright, though the driver was sober. No go home before I call the authorities.'

The zebra blinked at Loofah with swimming eyes and then burst into tears.

'Thirty years,' it sobbed, 'thirty years of tireless service I've given this town, man and foal, getting people across the road through rain and shine. And then along comes this overgrown seagull with its fancy new ideas and I'm out, tossed aside like a piece of used toilet paper.'

'Come along now, don't make trouble. The gentleman hasn't got all day...'

'Well, I'm not having it, I'm not! Get up, sir, I'll show you how to cross a road – properly, like it used to be done,' blubbered the zebra, stumbling unsteadily towards him, dipping its back for him to mount, 'We don't need this puffed up penguin.'

'Pelican!' corrected the pelican, 'Now please come away from this dreadful creature, sir,' it continued, taking Loofah's jacket sleeve in its beak, 'and we'll get you safely across.'

'Pelican! Pelican!' mocked the zebra, imitating the bird's pompous voice, and then pulled at Loofah's other sleeve with its teeth.

For a few moments he was pulled to and fro between them, like a disputed morsel of food.

'I'm warning you,' said the pelican, releasing the jacket, 'As an official of the Parish Council I order you to leave this pedestrian alone.'

'Fuck off, big mouth.'

As this the pelican huffed angrily and pecked at the zebra's head, catching it just above the left eye. With a whinny of fury the zebra reared up, kicking out with its front legs. As the pelican spun round to aim another peck, Loofah backed away, watching the fighting animals with bemused alarm.

'Go on, go for it, my son,' hissed a voice by his shoulder, 'You don't need that pair of wankers.'

A jay – an ordinary-sized jay – was perched on a parking meter beside his left shoulder.

'Sorry? Go for what?'

'Across,' hissed the jay, 'To the other side. Go on, my son, you'll be alright.'

'You mean... just run across?'

'Course I do. You'll be fine: trust your old china here.' It winked at him, an evil glint flashing in its black little eye; 'trust' was not the word that immediately sprang to mind.

'That's a bit dangerous isn't it? What about all the cars?'

'Who's scared of a few cars?' it sneered, 'You a pansy or something?'

'No, of course I'm not. But I still think I ought to –.'

'Go with one of them?' interrupted the jay, nodding towards the pelican and the zebra. These were now brawling openly on the pavement, as passers-by, tutting with disapproval, skirted round to avoid flying hooves and wings. It was not a re-assuring sight.

'Go on, my son,' continued the luridly coloured avian wide-boy, 'Show us what you're made of.'

Loofah glanced anxiously at the road, into the manic river of screaming cars.

'I'm not so sure...'

'Poof!'

'Look, just because –.'

'You're yellow, aren't you?' sneered the jay, 'I knew it when I first saw you.'

For a long moment Loofah just glared at the bird, jaws clenched. Then, deep inside, something snapped.

'Yellow?' he spat, 'Yellow? I'll show you who's bloody well yellow.'

And with this he stepped off the curb, striding out between two parked cars. Behind him, as the jay cackled with delight, the pelican and the zebra yelled a desperate 'stop' with a single voice – but Loofah ignored them and, fixing his eyes on the cinema sign, marched resolutely into the traffic.

A wild howling of brakes and skidding wheels shredded the air, followed by the rhythmic thump of metal on metal, the crunch of crumbling headlight assemblies and the agonised scream of fender mountings tearing free. Chrome radiators, snarling with shocked fury, screeched to a halt either side of his path, forming a smouldering guard of honour. Enraged motorists bellowed and pedestrians shrieked from the pavement.

Loofah looked neither to right nor to left, he did not hurry and he did not flinch. As he stepped onto the pavement a crowd of onlookers parted to let him through, watching him with silent wide-eyed amazement. Yellow? – pah!

Chapter 9

The cacophony of irate shouting and hissing radiator steam slid gently away as the blessed quiet of the side road enveloped him like a cool but soft blanket. The balm of his relief, however, was incomplete. The cinema, his objective, was no more than a hundred yards up from the high street, nestling incongruously beside a hair-care salon. It was a strange low building, with a squat octagonal tower in brick and red tile over the foyer. The features board proclaimed that 'Aliens 1' and 'Aliens 2' were currently showing, both rated 'XXXX'. As Loofah drew closer to the heavy glass doors of the entrance, the cool quiet became a pulsing cold silence.

'One, please,' he said to the bored girl in the ticket kiosk.

'What for?' she asked, staring indifferently at her nails.

'Um. Aliens 1, please.'

She looked up.

'And what's wrong with Aliens 2?' she asked, with a hint of indignance.

'Nothing, nothing at all. It's just that I haven't seen –.'

'Aliens 2 is perfectly good, you know.'

'I'm sure it is, but –.'

'State of the art special effects. Award-winning cinematography.'

'Yes, but –.'

'Acclaimed at festivals across the globe.'

Loofah gave in.

'Alright then,' he said with a sigh, 'One for Aliens 2, please.'

The ticket seller gave him a long, penetrating look.

'You've changed your mind, then?' she asked.

'Yes, I've changed my mind.'

'So you don't want to see Aliens 1?'

'No, I don't want to see Aliens 1.'

'Sure?'

'Positive.'

'Then you can't go in,' she said, with smug finality.

Loofah stared at her blankly. 'Sorry?' he said, eventually.

'You can't go in,' she repeated.

'Why on earth not?'

'Because they're on together.'

'You mean they're on after each other on the same screen? Or on different screens at the same time? Either way, I don't see that –.'

'No, I mean they're on together,' she interrupted, 'On the same screen at the same time. In the same film, in fact.'

'I don't think I understand.'

'One film, two aliens. Seems simple enough to me.'

'But I don't mind seeing two aliens – even in the same film.'

'You just said you didn't want to see Aliens 1. You were quite definite about that.'

'Yes, but –.'

'And whatever happens, we don't want unhappy customers. We can't have you exposed to aliens you don't want to see, now can we?'

Even in the thick glass of the ticket booth that separated them, Loofah could make out a faint image of the ubiquitous reproachful features that now seemed to haunt him.

'But I have to go in.'

'Well you can't.'

'Please – it's very important,' he begged, gripping the worn mahogany of the counter.

'No, definitely not.'

He gave her a pleading look, to which she responded with tight-lipped determination and a slow shake of her head. With a sigh he gave up.

'Unless...' she said behind him, just as he was hauling open the glass entrance door.

'The Screen' declared the illuminated sign above the double swing doors. And, as if to back up this bold assertion, muffled music and voices percolated gently through the thick chrome-clad wood and out into the stiff air of the corridor.

Loofah paused to examine his ticket; 'Aliens 2' it said, with 'definitely not aliens 1' scrawled underneath in blue biro. It was going to be difficult, he thought, closing his eyes and pushing his fingers in his ears every time the first alien made an appearance. Still, this is what he had agreed with the ticket seller and whatever happened he didn't want to contravene the terms of his

admission and get himself thrown out; he only hoped that the wretched thing didn't spend much time on screen, otherwise he wouldn't be seeing much of the film.

When the massive doors swung closed behind him, they did not so much seal out the other world as negate its existence; the flickering darkness that now swallowed him was the universe in its entirety. At first he was disorientated and stumbled clumsily towards the seating area, nearly tripping on the sticky carpet. But gradually, as the velvet blackness swirled over him and around him like warm sump oil, his awkwardness seemed to dissolve and blend into its flow, and soon he was being carried with the current down through the auditorium towards the rectangular window of colour and light and noise.

Lying on the warm silver sand, he was enjoying the shade of the swaying palm tree. Two laughing girls in bikinis splashed out of the tumbling waves and ran up the shore waving to him, rushing to be at his side. A few yards away a black barman in a Hawaiian shirt smiled him a dazzling smile and plopped a slice of fruit into a frosted glass full of ice cubes and blue liquid. He felt that warm glow of happiness inside, for he knew that he had chosen well: the right one, the bright one, the taste of paradise, the drink for people like him...

'Your ticket, sir?' said the usherette, hauling him back into the darkness.

As Loofah settled into his seat, the camera was panning across a livid orange desert, past sun-blasted buttes and dried up river beds. It focused briefly on a yellow lizard slithering across a slab of sandstone, before picking up on a vapour trail of red dust hurtling across the valley bottom. The camera zoomed in just as the car skidded to a halt.

'The car for every occasion,' said a sincere voice on the soundtrack and someone tapped his right shoulder.

'Are you comfy enough?' whispered a man's voice in his ear.

'Yes, I'm fine thanks,' replied Loofah.

The car was now in a drive in front of an opulent suburban mansion. The camera panned over it, sliding lovingly over the paint-work and the glinting window-screen. But despite the stylish camera-work the car was somehow strangely blank: nondescript in colour, ordinary in shape, basically featureless. Loofah was not impressed.

A rattle of paper in his lap. 'Would you like a sweetie?' asked the woman in the next seat, holding out a small bag.

'No, thank you.'

A man emerged from the house; immaculately groomed in a crisp dark business suit, he had chiselled good looks and a hard mantle of cool assertiveness.

'For business,' said the soundtrack, as the man strode up to the car.

'Or a crisp? They're prawn cocktail – very tasty.' This was the man next to the sweet-lady, leaning across her to proffer the packet.

'No, I'm OK,' said Loofah, 'Thank you.'

The businessman got into the car and shut the door.

'Are you sure the seat's soft enough?' whispered the man behind him, leaning forward, 'You don't want a cushion or anything?'

'I'm fine, honestly.'

The businessman pushed the key into the ignition and instantly the car seemed to change. The paint-work, which had been a sort of muddy blue, suddenly became a sleek velvety navy, while the bodywork moulded itself into smooth opulent curves, with discrete but assertive fenders and light assemblies. The transformed vehicle purred out of the drive, radiating wealth, power, and dominance.

'They're lovely sweets,' said his neighbour, 'Lemon bon-bons.'

'I'm sure they're very nice,' replied Loofah, 'but I'm afraid I've not got much of a sweet tooth and –.'

'Excuse me, sir, we do ask patrons not to talk during the programme.' The usherette was in the aisle beside him, shining her torch onto his lap. Loofah looked quickly to his neighbours – who were both sitting bolt upright, silently watching the screen.

'Oh. Sorry,' he said, with a sheepish grin.

In the next scene the car was parked outside a pub – a sixties built, down-market looking place – and again it looked nondescript, uninteresting. A gaggle of youths burst out of the pub and swaggered across the car park, shouting and tussling with each other like a pack of rutting bucks.

'Or a night out with the lads,' said the soundtrack, as the man on the seat in front turned round.

'Can you see alright?' he said, in a loud whisper.

'Yes, perfectly.'

The youths piled into the car, swinging shoulders and flexing biceps.

'I'm a bit tall, you see. I usually sit at the back.'

'It's alright, really. I'm quite tall myself, you see.'

The doors slammed closed and instantly the car changed; the paint-work now shone in a deep, metallic black with a pattern of red and orange flames down the side, the radiator grille snarled with carnivorous chrome teeth, and the headlight assemblies glinted like leopards' eyes. Spraying gravel, it screamed out of the car park with a throaty roar, a blue haze pumping from its twin silvered exhausts.

'I get them from a little shop in the village,' whispered his neighbour, 'A proper old fashioned sweet shop.'

'That's nice,' said Loofah, his patience beginning to wear thin.

'I always bring a spare cushion with me,' said the man behind, 'I find the seats are always too hard in these places.'

'If you don't mind, I would very much like to –.' Loofah began, turning round and coming face to face with the usherette's torch.

'Sir, our other patrons are trying to enjoy the programme,' she said, sharply.

'Yes, I'm sorry,' he said, 'But you see this gentleman...'

The man in the seat behind was now watching the screen intently.

'Thank you for your co-operation,' said the usherette and was gone.

The car – back once more to its original blandness – was now parked outside what seemed to be some kind of theme park and was filling up with excited young children.

'And even a day out with the kids,' said the soundtrack.

As the smiling young mother climbed into the driver's seat and closed the door, the man in front again turned round and leaned over the back of the seat.

'Of course I never wear a hat in the cinema,' he said, 'But some people do, you know – it can be very annoying.'

'I always go for the bon-bons,' said the lady beside him, 'But they do do a lovely toffee. Nigel always prefers a toffee, don't you darling?'

'Not always, my sweet,' said her partner, 'I often like something savoury. Like peanuts. Or crisps.'

The car changed again, the bodywork swelling out into a jolly bubbly balloon and the paint-work acquiring a glossy shine like a new pair of shoes. The headlights were a pair of cheery eyes and the radiator a friendly toothy grin.

'I don't know why they can't upholster them properly,' whispered the man behind, 'Cutting costs, no doubt.'

'Proteus – every car you ever wanted,' said the soundtrack, as the camera zoomed away from car, now back speeding across the original desert valley.

'You should try their truffles. They're absolute heaven.'

'Prawn cocktail is my favourite, but –.'

'Please be quiet!' hissed Loofah, 'I'm trying to watch –.'

'Sir, I am going to have to ask you to leave,' snapped the usherette, shining the torch into his face.

'But these people won't stop talking to –.'

'Shhh!' His neighbour leaned towards him, shushing crossly, while the man in front turned to glare.

'This isn't fair!' whined Loofah.

'Please sir – if there's any more trouble I shall have to call the manager,' said the usherette, before stalking away into the darkness.

With a disgruntled sigh, Loofah slumped back into his seat, resentment bubbling in his skull like superheated bile. For a few seconds he stared at the screen, then the boiler ruptured in a hissing explosion of corrosive steam – Under Manger's instructions or not, up with this he would not put.

He started to get up, but then stopped half-way out of his seat. During his altercation with the usherette the adverts had finished and the main feature appeared to have started. The camera was panning quickly over a smiling scene of rolling hills, patchwork fields and woods, before zooming in on a bridge over a strange, two-way river. And coming across the bridge was a human figure: a man in a black jacket.

'Aliens,' said a slow, portentous voice, 'They come from somewhere else.'

As the camera focused in on the man on the bridge, his jacket fell open – to reveal a lime green tee-shirt with a flash of orange lettering. A creeping coldness like wet seaweed slithered over Loofah's skin and he sank back into his seat.

'And now that they are here,' continued the voice, 'no-one is safe.'

The next scene showed the same man walking in a wood, followed by a close-up of an unusually flowered plant – the memory oozed through Loofah's skull like warm slime and he shuddered. In the next shot he was standing close in front of the plant as it wrapped its tendrils around his back and clutched at his buttocks. Loofah cringed into his jacket while the scene cut to a woman striding up a footpath with two jolly schoolgirl dogs at her heels, obviously through the same wood.

'A pleasant walk in a public wood –' as the camera followed the woman she suddenly came upon him, still entangled with the plant – turned into a confrontation with depravity!

That's not right! What about the toadstool?

But the scene had already changed: a pretty little girl holding a doll was now smiling into the camera. Peony! Loofah guessed what was coming next and winced.

'Even a little girl and her favourite toy are not safe –' cut to him holding the doll, fiddling between its opened legs and pulling at its knickers: followed instantly by Peony's anguished face as she burst into tears – from... the Aliens!

Loofah squirmed with shame. And yet it hadn't been like that – a cold thread of doubt coiled around in his squirming brain – had it?

'Animals!' exclaimed the soundtrack, as the scene cut to a silver grey dog, a Weimaraner, wearing a black lace suspender belt and stockings which was clambering over him as he lay writhing on the grass, licking his face with its obscene pink tongue.

Loofah shook his head to dispel dark clouds of confusion, for he had no recollection whatsoever of the Weimaraner. He remembered the two little spaniels, of course, but they were too far young to be wearing titillating lingerie.

'And public property.'

He now wrestled with a parking meter, trying to wrench it out of its mountings and smashing at it with a broken house brick. But surely this was wrong – it had been a telephone, hadn't it?

'The Aliens are here!' said the voice, as the soundtrack dissolved into a climax of dark music.

There he was – filling the screen now, grinning out into the cinema – with his dark hair and glasses, the black jacket and the green and orange tee-shirt, and the embarrassing fawn slip-ons.

'Brought here by the forces of darkness for one purpose and one purpose alone,' said the soundtrack, ominously, as the music dropped in volume, becoming slow and sinister, 'To commit... evil.'

The next scene was of a whitewashed country cottage with a thatched roof basking in a summer afternoon. Roses bloomed and vegetables flourished in the neat garden that stretched down to a sleepy river with a golden cornfield beyond. But all was not well, something was moving in the hollyhocks – it was him, stalking towards the cottage.

Was that Mrs Frimpton's garden? – though he didn't remember any hollyhocks.

They were now inside the cottage, where a young woman in a floral print dress and a Laura Ashley apron was rolling pastry on a scrubbed pine table. She smiled down at her young daughter who was playing with her teddy on the quarry-tiled floor.

'A young mother bakes for her family,' said the soundtrack, 'unaware of the danger that lurks.'

Outside again. He had reached the back door where, animal-like, he crouched briefly to listen. Then he pushed the door open and slid silently into the cottage.

What was going on? Loofah had never been to that cottage, he'd never set eyes on that woman.

'Another unsuspecting victim.'

Had he?

The camera panned back, showing the entire cottage basking innocently in the sunshine. A moment later a woman's shriek tore through the scene like a panther's claw.

Surely this was a mistake? It must be somebody else – an actor perhaps, who just happened to look like him. Squirming with horror, Loofah wriggled down into his seat, not wanting to watch but unable to look away. There was a low muttering from beside him: the sweet-lady and her husband were leaning forward, staring at him open-mouthed. As soon as he turned towards them, however, they snapped back to face the screen.

A litter of Labrador puppies now frolicked on a sun-dappled lawn: golden yellow bundles of innocent joy racing around the grass and tumbling over each other with yelps of happiness.

'There is no limit to their foulness,' said the soundtrack.

Cut to a different angle, of him crouched behind a hedge peeping out at the puppies. He was clutching a huge axe, fingering its glittering blade to feel the sharpness. Turning towards the camera, he grinned a wicked grin, the light glinting on his spectacles.

The man in front turned round to look at him, then turned back quickly.

'It's not me, you know,' said Loofah to the back of his head, 'It looks like me but it isn't.'

The creature on screen now crept forward and disappeared round the side of the hedge. The camera held the same angle, of an empty wall of privet, while the soundtrack carried the happy yelps of the puppies playing on the other side, out of view.

'It's somebody else,' Loofah said, turning to the couple beside him. They stared at him with a shared expression of blank horror.

Suddenly the happy yelping stopped and the cinema was filled with screams and howls, interspersed with manic laughter and the swish and sickening crunch of the axe. Then came silence – followed by one last satanic chuckle.

'It just looks like me, that's all,' Loofah went on, with growing desperation, 'I like puppies, I really do.' He leaned forward as he spoke and they backed away, the woman gasping with fear.

The new scene opened on a school playground with young children on swings, playing hopscotch, and jumping skipping ropes, to a background tinkle of merry laughter and happy shouts. It was a scene of innocent pleasure under a china blue sky in a secure, safe world.

But not so safe – the dark rhythm of the music gave that away. The camera panned away from the children towards a corrugated iron bicycle shed and as the view shifted to behind the shed, the music reached a sinister crescendo; for there was the familiar figure, peering out at the children, giggling to himself and lovingly fondling... a chain-saw!

Loofah couldn't bear any more and turned away. A bubbling mess of mud was now swirling around in his skull, swamping everything in its dark confusion; little Peony and her doll were in there somewhere, he was fairly sure of that, but he couldn't remember the puppies, he couldn't remember the children. No, it must be someone else. But then the likeness was too perfect, he knew that it couldn't be an actor. The auditorium was now rolling like a storm-tossed dinghy and a wave of dizzy nausea rushed up his gullet.

On the soundtrack a chain-saw engine sprang to life and a gasp of horror rippled round the auditorium. A tide of angry muttering now rose up around him and hostile faces were briefly illuminated by the screen-light as they turned to stare. Loofah sank back into his seat, keeping his eyes lowered, avoiding the horrors on the screen. As children started screaming above the ululating whine of the engine, his skull became a cauldron in which an unholy brew of sharp guilt, muddy confusion and blank horror boiled merrily together.

A man two rows in front turned, blazing him a look of pure hatred. Then the cauldron boiled over and, bellowing like a dying buffalo and covering his ears with his hands, Loofah leapt from his seat. He charged up the aisle, preceded by a bow wave of fury and loathing, at any moment expecting his way to be blocked by outraged and vengeful citizens. To his surprise he passed the back row unimpeded, but as he stumbled down a darkened corridor towards the exit sign, the usherette emerged from the shadows in front of him, carrying an illuminated tray.

'Ice cream, sir?'

'No – thank you.' He tried to get past her, but she moved across the corridor, blocking his way.

'Kia-Ora? Peanuts?'

'No, nothing thank you,' said Loofah, stepping sideways.

'They're jungle fresh!' she exclaimed with a cheery smile, again blocking him.

For a few seconds they waltzed together in the corridor, the usherette nimbly matching Loofah step for step.

'Please – I must get away!' he cried, as his frustration burst.

'Of course, sir,' she said with exaggerated politeness, 'We wouldn't want to hinder the great quest, would we?'

Her words were like a sharp slap across the face. 'Quest? What quest?' he asked.

The usherette glanced quickly around and then leaned forward confidentially.

'For the Seeker there is only one quest, one *true* quest that is,' she whispered, 'Though some would have it otherwise.'

With this she smiled knowingly and stepped back out of the way.

'I hope you enjoyed the film, sir,' she continued more loudly, 'You can't beat a bit of horror, can you? Though people do sometimes get a bit carried away, don't they? – and start taking it all a bit too seriously. But after all it's only make-believe, isn't it?'

As the usherette disappeared into the darkness Loofah hesitated, struggling to extract meaning from her final words, but then a volley of infant screams burst out from the auditorium, pursuing him like hounds from hell, and with a cry of his own he ran.

Bursting out into the full brightness of the day, he was dazzled and staggered to a halt, shielding his eyes from the glare.

'That way!' bellowed an uncomfortably familiar voice.

Standing beside the glass entrance doors was rather heavy woman in a burgundy commissionaire's uniform, pointing imperiously in the direction of the high street. Without thinking Loofah went to obey, but then wavered – there were people up there, lots of people, he would be recognised, lynched, torn apart. He turned to go the other way but the woman grasped his arm, digging her fingers into his flesh, and pulled him back round.

'I said that way!' she shouted and pushed him forward. It was only when he stumbled out into the dreaded high street, propelled by the woman's command, that the tortured mud pool that was his mind registered her identity.

Sucked into the milling crowd, Loofah was soon afloat in a sea of blank strangers which flowed around him in endless eddies. Now here he had no definite idea of where to go next and so was carried by the aimless currents of the throng, being swept this way and that up and down the pavement. Occasional individuals loomed out of the amorphous mass like circling sharks to stare at him briefly, cold and predatory, before disappearing back into the crowd. He moved like a shambling tramp, avoiding eye contact by staring at the pavement and into shop windows, hiding his face. Although the vengeful citizens' attack that he had so dreaded had not yet materialised, he knew it would not be long before the sharks smelt the fresh blood of his guilt and moved in for the kill.

But a different fate awaited him. The crowd, as if directed by some Old Testament choreographer, suddenly parted in front of him and there, at the end of the corridor of open seabed, was a figure he recognised: the fat man in the dark suit, his bowler bobbing amongst the shoppers like a black velvet ping-pong ball. His little friend saw him and with an oily grin waved his umbrella. This time Loofah didn't run, but like a rabbit caught in the headlights of a car, dumbly awaited his fate.

'I am so pleased to meet you at last,' said the little man, with an unctuous smile.

Loofah did not reply but stared blankly into the chubby face.

'Look,' continued his companion, 'I think we should go somewhere we can talk, somewhere – what shall we say? – out of the public gaze. There's someone who would very much like to meet you, someone I know you will...'

He stopped suddenly, the grin vanishing from his pudgy lips. Then he turned quickly on his heel and without another word vanished into the lapping waters. Puzzlement had hardly registered in Loofah's numbed brain, when he felt a firm grip on his left shoulder.

'Would you mind coming with us, sir?' said a deep, slow voice behind him, 'There's one or two questions we'd like you to answer.'

Chapter 10

'Have you ever had this sort of feeling for a child's toy before? Or was it just this one in particular that took your fancy?'

The policeman smiled and leaned forward in his chair, tapping the table beside the out of focus black and white photograph of Loofah holding Peony's doll.

'They do make them very realistic, don't they? Nice curvy bodies, legs that go on forever, pretty little faces. Perhaps you just got a bit – what shall we say? – carried away. Being away from home, on your own and a bit lonely.'

'But... but it was a doll, just a little plastic doll,' Loofah said, 'Why would I want to – ?'

'Molest it? Pull its little panties off?' interrupted the second policeman, 'That's what we want to know.'

There were three of them in the room with him: a massive uniformed constable who stood impassively beside the iron door with his arms folded across his huge chest, a silent guardian of righteousness, and the two detectives – Inspector Truscott and Detective Sergeant Meadows – who sat facing him across the harsh wooden table. Truscott was a big man too, but with a small head, round like a ping-pong ball balanced on his well-padded slab of a torso. He smiled a lot, big wide grins that spanned the whole of his small face, though somehow always managing to miss out the eyes.

'But it wasn't like that,' pleaded Loofah, 'I've already told you – I was trying to keep its knickers on, not take them off.'

Both detectives watched him silently. He looked from one to the other, from Truscott the pin-headed bear to Meadows, hard and thin with a narrow face and a permanent sneer, like a sour tempered heron.

'It was getting sort of aroused, you see, squeaking and moaning and rubbing itself against me, and the little girl was on her swing and – .'

'Your sort make me sick!' spat Meadows, turning away.

It had been like this since the beginning of time itself: a windowless white cube flooded with a dead fluorescent light that percolated into every crevice of his being, Truscott with his cheerless grins and endless questions, with occasional spurts of bile from Meadows, interjected like venomous punctuation – and all under the inscrutable gaze of the guardian of the door.

They had now lapsed into another era of silence. Loofah watched the anxious patterns squirm and flow in the grain of the table top while Truscott smiled at his hands and Meadows stared at the floor, his face twisted with disgust.

Eventually Truscott spoke.

'Let's talk about the dog, shall we?' he said, 'For a start, where did you get the under-wear? And how did you know her size?'

'I've told you already: that wasn't me,' said Loofah, 'At least I don't think it was.'

The Inspector didn't reply, but with a cheerful smile opened the tattered folder on the table in front of him and pushed a second photograph towards Loofah; although blurred, it was clearly his face that the Weimaraner was licking.

'I think it was somebody else, actually,' said Loofah, lamely.

Meadows spun round and loomed across the table, lizard eyes blazing with hatred.

'Bollocks, you slag!' he spat, with drops of spittle bouncing off his lips, 'If that isn't you, who the fuck is it?'

Loofah stared blankly at the policeman's face, the force of its loathing cutting into him like a laser. He could not answer the question.

Truscott pulled more photographs out of the folder.

'There's a lot here,' he said, 'Forcing a dog, a harmless house-pet, to perform acts of a lewd nature. Wrecking a parking meter...'

'With forty minutes still on the clock,' added Meadows.

'Breaking into a house to assault a young mother...'

'And her little daughter.'

'Tampering with Mrs Frimpton's laundry,' said Truscott, enunciating each word with disbelief.

'Slaughtering a litter of puppies with an axe,' spat Meadows with even more venom than usual, clearly a dog lover.

'And a playground full of school children with a chain-saw.'

'Acts of gross indecency.'

'Robbery.'

'Rape.'

'Arson.'

'Murder.'

'Genocide.'

'Jay-walking'

'All documented.'

'Plenty of witnesses.'

'Photographic and forensic evidence.'

The detectives stopped suddenly, watching him closely.

'I... I...' spluttered Loofah, 'I think I remember the sheet and the doll. But the puppies and the chain-saw...'

'Just look at the photographs,' said Truscott, 'Is it the same person or isn't it?'

'I don't know...'

'Is it or isn't it, scumbag?' snapped Meadows.

'They do look very similar...'

'The same! The same! The same!' Meadows stabbed at each photograph with his finger, his voice rising to a shout.

Loofah looked from one to the other, his mouth opening and closing like a goldfish. Could they be right? Perhaps it was him in all the pictures, perhaps he really had done all those terrible things.

'But... why don't I remember?' he eventually stammered.

Truscott leaned forward and smiled affectionately.

'Terrible crimes, too terrible to think about. The mind blocks out, refuses to remember. It's a common phenomenon, almost universal in fact. Believe me, we see it all the time.'

Loofah glanced anxiously at the photographs, at the poor little puppies, at the ravished young mother, at the chain-sawed children. Images flashed through his mind: the cold glint on the axe blade, the scent of hollyhocks in the cottage garden, the savage whine of the chain-saw. He could remember! – so it was true. No, he was forgetting the cinema – he had seen these things in the cinema.

Or had he?

'Best to come clean, you know,' continued Truscott, 'Saves everybody's time – the judge doesn't miss his lunch, the jury can go home to their families. Then everyone's happy, everyone's on your side. Here, do yourself a favour – sign the statement, make a clean breast of it.'

With this he pushed a thick, neatly typed document across the table. Loofah took the offered pen and held it over the paper, poised to sign. It did seem the best thing to do, to bring this eternity in the white cube of hell to an end. And after all he was guilty... well, probably.

As he went to sign, however, his hand wouldn't obey him. He stopped and looked up at Truscott.

'Are you sure there's no-one else it could have been?' he said, in little more than a bleat. 'Pathetic scumbag!' spat Meadows.

Truscott sighed and smiled sadly. 'Right then,' he said with resignation, 'let's start again.'

Hours or even days later a metallic knock on the iron door echoed through the electric white silence. Nobody spoke. Truscott and Meadows stared at Loofah blankly, the Inspector with the remains of a meaningless grin fixed to his face.

The uniformed giant opened the door a crack and muttered with somebody on the outside. Then he closed the door, crossed to the table and whispered briefly in Truscott's ear. The smile did not so much as flicker and the dead, cold eyes never once left Loofah. The constable resumed his position by the door, folded his arms, and focused again on the empty middle-distance.

Another age of nothing – the bare hostility of the room stripped him naked with the jagged brilliance of its lethal whiteness and the silent stillness became fixed, petrified into an anxious, ominous tableau. Then Truscott leaned forward, shattering the stillness; it was a slow and deliberate movement, but Loofah jumped at its suddenness.

'You're a lucky boy, a very lucky boy,' said the Inspector, increasing the curve of his grin. Then he gathered up the papers and photographs into the brown folder, and both he and Meadows stood up. As he was going out of the door, Truscott turned, almost as an afterthought.

'You've got a visitor,' he said.

'A visitor?'

'Your brief.' Truscott smiled. 'But don't fret yourself,' he added, 'We'll be back.'

The two empty chairs on the other side of the table seemed no less threaten-ing than Truscott and Meadows, and the silent colossus beside the door crushed him with its rock-like presence – did it have thoughts? what went on inside that enormous stone skull?

Loofah squirmed, the hardness of the wooden seat digging into his flesh. He was done for and he knew it. He *had* been so sure – well, fairly sure, anyway – that it wasn't him with dog in underwear or at the primary school chain-saw massacre, but now...? Unwelcome images swam in his mind, of him pulling the kickers off Peony's doll, drooling with lust, of him ripping apart Mrs Frimpton's laundry and treading the shreds into her flower beds, of him ravishing a young mother on her pastry-strewn kitchen table, and of him standing in a school playground, reaching out to the young children, fountains of blood and gore spraying into the air as he dubbed them with his howling blade. He shrivelled inside, fighting sobs.

After an eternity there was another knock. The constable unfolded his arms and opened the door, then stood aside to let someone enter.

It was the Under Manager, with a black suit stretched tightly over the plump curves of her body and a white neckerchief pinned under her chubby chin with a discrete gold pin. She carried a black leather document case, slim and elegant.

'Go away,' she said to the constable, with all her customary politeness.

The door closed on the departing policeman with a chilling finality. Then Miss Leggett sat down opposite Loofah and eyed him with distaste.

'Well?' she demanded, 'What have you got to say for yourself?'

'I – .'

'Please be quiet. We have a lot to get through and I would rather you did not waste any more of my time than is absolutely necessary. Is that clear?'

'Ye –.'

'You're in trouble. A great deal of trouble.'

'Yes, I know –.'

'I've seen the charge-sheet. Not a pleasant read. A thoroughly revolting read, in fact.' She shuddered and then stared hard at him to drive home his guilt. 'You're going away for a long time,' she went on, 'for a very long time indeed.'

She paused for breath, then leaned forward, pushing her face into his.

'And can you say you don't deserve it? Can you honestly say you shouldn't be locked away, that the decent people out there shouldn't be protected from your... your... uhhh!' she spluttered, unable to find a word to encapsulate his vileness, glaring at him with utter revulsion.

Unable to meet her gaze, Loofah looked down at his hands and shook his head sadly.

'We are very disappointed, Mr Stobart and I, very disappointed indeed. We have given you every chance and yet time and time again you have let us down, betrayed our trust.' Throwing herself back into her chair, she slapped both palms on the table. 'Well as far as I'm concerned you can now have what's coming to you, your just deserts.'

She indulged herself with a long, hard glare and Loofah trembled under the baleful force of her righteous indignation.

'The Chief Executive, however, takes a somewhat different view,' she went on, 'He is a compassionate man, a forgiving, gentle-hearted man; too much so, I sometimes think. And – against my advice, I needn't tell you – he has decided that you are to be given another chance. You don't deserve it and you know it, but that's what he's like, Mr Stobart, generous to a fault.'

She waited, allowing him to digest the full extent of the Chief Executive's magnanimity.

'But understand this,' she added with her own quiet menace, 'This is the last chance you get – you betray us again and you're on your own. Is that absolutely clear?'

Loofah nodded sheepishly.

'Good,' she said, and then laid her document case on the table, unzipped it, and pulled out a mass of papers and photographs. These she proceeded to sort through, pondering each of several typed sheets and photographs in turn, shaking her head and from time to time and shuddering with revulsion.

Eventually she chose a photograph and pushed it across the table towards him. Loofah had seen it before: him with the Weimaraner in stockings.

'Disgusting.' She rolled the word over her tongue before spitting it across the table at him.

'I'm sorry,' Loofah stammered, 'I don't know what came over me.'

She picked another photograph, the one of him struggling with the screaming young mother as he ravished her on the stripped pine kitchen table, with her little daughter looking on and sucking her thumb.

'Unbelievable,' whispered Miss Leggett in blank horror.

The next showed him holding the chain-saw, blood and gore splattered over his tee-shirt and jacket, with tiny limbs and abdominal organs scattered over the hopscotch squares at his feet like the pieces in some macabre board game. This time she made no comment – none was needed.

'I just don't know what to say,' said Loofah, unable to look, shaking with sobs.

The Under Manager pushed the Weimaraner picture across the table.

'Tell me,' she said, 'How did you get the stockings on without laddering them?'

He looked at her blankly.

'On her claws, man, on her claws.'

'Um... I don't really know. Perhaps she put them on herself?'

'You can't remember who put her stockings on? Why not? It's an act of considerable intimacy, not usually forgotten.'

'I... I don't –.'

'What's that?' she interrupted, indicating a detail in the photograph of the rape scene.

Loofah looked closely; the young mother was lying on something, crushing it with her shoulder.

'It seems to be a pie. Or maybe a tart.'

'But what sort of pie? Apple? Lemon meringue? Or something savoury perhaps, like cheese and onion? Come on – what was it?'

'I don't know, I just can't... remember.'

Miss Leggett pointed to his chest.

'Your tee-shirt looks nice and clean,' she said.

Loofah glanced down at the luminous green and orange cotton and felt a small rush of relief; apparently inadequate personal cleanliness was one of the few charges that was not being levelled against him.

'Thank you,' he said, 'I never wear them for more than one day.'

'And how did you get the stains out?'

'Sorry?'

She tapped the chain-saw picture – here his tee-shirt was covered with infant blood.

'I suppose I washed it.'

'How exactly? Hand wash? Or perhaps in a machine, presumably preceded by an overnight soak in view of the heavy soiling?'

'I... I can't –.'

'You can't remember? There's not a lot you can remember about these crimes, is there?'

'I'm sorry, I will try harder...'

'And why's that, do you suppose?'

'I don't know.'

'Then I'll tell you – because you didn't commit them, that's why.'

He stared at her in frank disbelief. 'Are you sure?' he asked quietly.

'Positive,' she said, 'Because I know who *did* do them.'

Loofah's guts liquefied – somehow he *knew* what was coming next.

'Him,' said the Under Manager, pushing another photograph across the table.

An artillery shell screamed down through Loofah's skull and chest and exploded near the base of his spine, spraying guts and torn shreds of liver across the cell, and he slumped forward against the table edge, pole-axed. The photograph, in full colour, showed a man with thinning dark hair and glasses wearing a black leather jacket and a lime green tee-shirt with orange lettering. Iron bands tightened around his chest and he struggled to breathe, while every muscle in his body now went into tetanic spasm. At first there was only the terrible photograph – all mental processes had ceased – but then, very slowly, like an amphibian crawling out of the primal swamp, a clear image emerged from the pulped mess in his head, an image of this foul creature with the woman in red, and of himself watching as it casually strolled away over the crest of a low hill. Yes, he had seen it before.

'Who...? Or what...?' he asked quietly.

'A nasty piece of work,' said Miss Leggett, 'A very nasty piece of work indeed. What you see here is degenerate criminal scum of the worst kind. A completely depraved psychopath, capable of anything, absolutely anything.'

The creature seemed to be alive, peering at Loofah through a rectangular hole in the table and ready to spring out and seize him. His whole body shivered and his jaw clamped tight – it was a foul and loathsome thing, a monster. Black bile flooded into his veins, pumping pure hatred into every cell in his body.

'And there are others,' the Under Manager went on.

'Others?'

'Other anti-social elements, other scum. Enemies of the Company, enemies of all decent, law-abiding people. This thing helps them, it does their nastiness for them.'

The mess in Loofah's brain had started to clear, the swirling mixture of fact and fiction was beginning to separate. Of course he hadn't done those terrible things, the policemen had confused him, that's all. The concrete slab of guilt that had been crushing him became suddenly lighter.

'And so I'm... I'm innocent?'

She gave him a long hard look, then shook her head, almost imperceptibly.

'Not... quite,' she said.

'I don't understand.'

Miss Leggett did not reply.

'But I'm not guilty, I know that now. The police have been trying to frame me, trying to pin *its* crimes on me.'

'Two sides of the same coin,' she now said, enunciating each word with great care whilst tapping the photograph with her forefinger, 'Two halves of the same whole.'

'So I'm not innocent?'

'You don't belong here – and *it* doesn't belong here, either. And as long as you're here – and it's here with you – you're in trouble, big trouble.'

'I don't follow you. What sort of trouble?'

By way of reply Miss Leggett swept a pudgy hand over the photographs.

'But if I didn't do those things...'

'Two sides of the same coin,' she repeated, 'Two halves of the same whole. And Inspector Truscott isn't fussed which half he gets.' She leaned forward, narrowing her little eyes to menacing slits. 'And in any case, what about the other matters on the charge sheet? I'm sure you haven't forgotten about the little girl's doll, have you? Or the telephone kiosk? Or poor Mrs Frimpton's laundry?'

The slab crushed down again; the trap, which had opened briefly to show a glimpse of clear blue sky, slammed shut.

'So that's it, then,' said Loofah, as his heart dive-bombed, 'I'm done for.'

'Have you listened to anything I've just said?' snapped the Under Manager, 'We're giving you another chance.'

'Another chance?' he repeated in a dull tone, unconvinced.

'Help us to get rid of it, that's all we want.'

'Get rid of it?'

'Help us to get it out of here, to send it back where it came from,' she said, 'And you with it – back home, back where you belong.'

'But... how?'

'All you have to do is catch it, no more than that. We'll do the rest.'

With his brain now whirling with the implications of what she was saying, he glanced again at the photograph and shivered. She couldn't be serious – how could he possibly go near such a creature, let alone get hold of it?

'You mean I have to actually *touch* it?' he asked quietly.

I've cleared everything with Truscott – if you co-operate with us, all charges will be dropped. It's not normal procedure, of course, but Mr Stobart's name does carry a lot of weight, as I am sure you appreciate. I just hope you're grateful that you've been given this opportunity to –.'

'Hold on to it?'

'Is there a problem?' she asked in disbelief, her tiny eyes blazing with sudden anger.

'But it's horrible,' he said, 'I don't think I could –.'

'What do you think this is? A party game?' She was on her feet now, leaning across the table.

'It's just that –.'

'Look at this!' she shouted, sweeping her hand across the photographs of the degraded dog, the ravished young mother, and the chain-sawed school children, 'Has this sort of thing got to carry on – because you're a bit squeamish? How many more innocent victims have got to be debauched, tortured and murdered – because of *you*?'

'I'm a bit –.'

'You're no better than it, are you? In fact you're probably worse. I don't know what I'm going to tell Mr Stobart – his kindness thrown back in his face.' She paused. 'But I know what I'm going to tell Inspector Truscott,' she added quietly, then stood up and strode towards the door.

'Wait!' She stopped and turned. 'Why me? Can't somebody else do it?'

Miss Leggett stepped back to the table and tapped the single colour photograph of the creature.

'The other side of the same coin,' she said, 'Your pigeon, I'm afraid.'

Loofah glanced down at the photograph and then back to the Under Manager. But as the words of his final plea for clemency were collecting themselves into sentences ready for delivery, her left breast purred at him with a gentle electronic murmur.

Turning away from him, she held the mobile to her face, muttering angrily into the mouth-piece for a few seconds, then snapped it closed and returned it to her inside jacket pocket.

'Right. No time to waste.' She spoke quickly, with a new edge of agitation. 'The enemy has been sighted. It seems it's in the neighbouring town, doing some shopping.'

Chapter 11

Loofah stepped out into the afternoon with the warm sun on his face and the fresh air of freedom in his lungs. A man passed him on the pavement, being towed by a black and white mongrel on a braided leather lead, and they exchanged smiles and muttered politenesses about the weather while a pig-tailed schoolgirl ran by in the other direction, her satchel bouncing on her hip with each step.

Following the desk sergeant's directions he found his way back to the high street and took a right, heading for the station. Truscott and Meadows had already left, rushing to the scene of the reported sighting, and Loofah was to catch the train to the next town where the two policemen would meet him. Miss Leggett would have driven him there, but she had had to get back to the Office urgently – there'd been 'developments', whatever that meant. Even so, it was strange that she was sending him unaccompanied; the Under Manager must realise that, with the appalling charge sheet being held against him (however unjustly) coupled with his knowledge of the creature's existence and ongoing depredations, he had no real choice but to co-operate. No, she could be sure that this time he was going to obey orders – he shuddered as a cold hand clutched as his bowels – however loathsome this was going to be for him.

Just as the shudder was fading, a shop window caught the full brightness of the sun and beamed it over him as he passed, momentarily bathing him in warmth and golden light. Despite

the horrors to come hanging over him, he felt the brightness flood his soul – however illusory his freedom might be, it was infinitely preferable to the endless nightmare of the police cell.

The high street was less busy than before. As he strode up the half-empty pavement, past shops and parked cars that glowed luminously in the sunshine, shoppers passed him with friendly smiles, one young mother even encouraging him to stop and tickle her baby under its chubby little chin. Irrespective of any police charge sheet, she must have sensed his innocence (well, relatively speaking), she must have known that it was safe to let him near her child. After the last shop, there was a bridge over a vast wooded gulf in which, miles below, the twin lines of a railway track glittered. The great abyss yawned and tried to suck him down into its dizzying depths, but Loofah's vertigo broke like a wave against the solid brick parapet of the bridge and he passed calmly over, with only the tiniest frisson fluttering in his abdomen.

At the end of the bridge he turned into a small road that sloped steeply down towards the railway and the station. As soon as he was on the incline, he began to slide down the flowing tarmac, picking up speed with each long skating step, and for a split second he saw himself being sucked into another vortex of uncontrolled speed. This time, however, he strangled his panic before it had drawn its first breath; holding control with consummate ease, he slalomed smoothly down the hill, an Alpine skier with the warm sun of his face and the wind in his hair.

Loofah swept elegantly to a halt in front of the station, an ancient building of red brick with green woodwork, built at the dawn of time and designed to last until nightfall. The stone floored foyer was cool and dark, with in one wall an arched glass hatch, the shape of a church window. But instead of a stained-glass angel, this framed a lank booking clerk, drooping with boredom and sorrow, who peered out at the world from sunken eyes in a sunken face, his blue shirt a shroud draped around his collapsed chest, his tie a hangman's noose.

'One for Synge Green?' drawled the clerk, his voice dripping with misery. A lock of greasy hair had fallen across his forehead, giving him the look of a defeated dictator denied the Luger, now sealed for eternity in his final bunker.

'I'm going to the next town, actually. A single, please.'

'Synge Green is very nice at this time of year. The Garden of Remembrance is not to be missed.'

'I'm sure it's lovely. But I have to go the town. I've got some business there, very urgent business.'

'As grand a display of herbaceous borders you're ever likely to see,' said the clerk, as if announcing a death, 'First planted in nineteen fifty-one – been winning awards ever since.'

The clerk reached towards the ticket machine by his side. But in mid-flight his arm seemed to become too heavy, gradually slowing in its trajectory and starting to fall back to the counter.

'It's obviously worth a visit,' said Loofah, following the gentle decline of the clerk's arm, 'but not today.'

The clerk reached across and grasped the falling arm by the elbow. This, however, seemed to bend in the middle, drooping like a wilting plant, and the hand continued its inexorable descent towards the counter.

'And a fine set of public lavatories,' he said, staring mournfully at his pliable limb, 'Always clean. Usually got soap and paper as well.'

'I'll certainly remember that if I'm ever passing through.'

The clerk now held up his other hand, examining first the knuckles and then the palm.

'Not that you always need the full monty, of course,' he said, as his fingers began to bend slowly backwards, 'But it's nice to know it's there if you need it.'

The whole hand was now drooping and the fingers were elongating, dripping slowly towards the counter like hot wax. As the clerk followed this process this with sorrowful fascination, his face began to slip downwards into his shirt-front.

'I wonder if I could have my ticket,' said Loofah, concerned that the rapidly melting transport official would soon be unable to press the buttons on his machine.

'The war memorial's worth a look, too,' said the clerk, speaking slowly now, and with obvious difficulty, 'In the centre of the village, right near the green. They're all on it, every single one. More from the first than the second, mind you.'

As he finished the sentence his jaw swayed uneasily from side to side, before falling open onto his tie. At the same time his right ear slipped down the side of his face onto his collar and his whole head tilted to the right. One arm had now melted over into an elegant arch, the liquid fingers pooling and mixing on the counter.

'My ticket, if you don't mind,' said Loofah. The Under Manager would not thank him for missing the train.

'Burgh – eargh,' slurred the clerk, his tongue lolling uselessly out of his mouth as his head fell sideways onto his shoulder and his eyes and nose began to flow across his face.

'Please! I mustn't miss the train!' cried Loofah, gripping the counter, watching helplessly as the clerk slumped forward, his head lolling off his shoulder and running down his shirt front.

'You'll have to use the machine,' said a voice behind him. The speaker was a middle-aged woman in a violet suit, clutching a bouffant Pekinese to her bosom. With a polite smile she indicated a ticket machine at the other side of the foyer.

'Oh, thank goodness!' Loofah sighed with relief. 'But what about...?' he added, glancing back at the ticket window; the transport official was now a shapeless molten mass flowing across the counter, with strands of lank hair and teeth decorating his waxy surface. The woman peered through the glass and sniffed with distaste, holding the dog to her face as if to ward off evil.

'I blame the government,' she said then turned away and stalked elegantly out towards the platforms.

The ticket machine was a daunting cliff face of buttons, display panels, flashing lights, and slots. Loofah checked the main display panel for guidance, but it was blank. Then he began examining the various printed hieroglyphics scattered over the metal frontage of the machine, but these swam in front of his eyes, indecipherable.

A low noise like distant thunder rumbled through the stone floor announced the imminent approach of the train. Loofah shivered, recognising the first green shoot of a newly germinated seed of panic. As he stared at the machine, defying comprehension in front of him, the rumble got a little louder, now echoing gently around the foyer. A still small yet promising young plant pushing upwards into the greenhouse of his consciousness, the panic grew.

Finally, in desperation, he pressed a button at random and letters flashed instantly on the main display panel: 'One for Synge Green?'

'I'm going to the next town, actually,' he said out loud, 'A single, please.'

'Synge Green is very nice at this time of year,' flashed the panel, 'The Garden of Remembrance is not to be missed.'

The rumble became a roar, vibrating through the soles of his shoes, while vigorous tendrils of anxiety coiled around his intestines.

'I'm sure it's lovely. But I have to go the town,' said Loofah, the lines coming out of his mouth in their own accord, 'I've got some business there, very urgent business.'

'As grand a display of herbaceous borders you're ever likely to see,' flashed the panel. Metal squealed like fingernails on glass as the train braked. 'First planted in nineteen fifty-one – been winning awards ever since.'

With one last dying shriek the braking stopped – the train was in the platform.

'It's obviously worth a visit,' Loofah recited, speaking like an automaton, 'but not today.'

'And a fine set of public lavatories,' flashed the panel, 'Always clean. Usually got soap and paper as well.'

'I'll certainly remember that if I'm ever passing through.'

A tannoy announced destinations. A different voice in Loofah's head screamed but he remained immobile, fixed to the panel.

'Not that you always need the full monty, of course. But it's nice to know it's there if you need it.'

'I wonder if I could have my ticket.' While Loofah spoke calmly and slowly to the machine, his skull threatened to burst. The foyer door swung open as the first alighting passengers pushed through to the exit.

'The war memorial's worth a look, too,' flashed the panel, 'In the centre of the village, right near the green. They're all on it, every single one. More from the first than the second, mind you.'

'My ticket, if you don't mind.'

The guard's whistle echoed up from the platform and people filed past him, heading for the car park.

'Burgh – eargh,' flashed the panel, spelling out each word with phonetic accuracy.

'Please,' recited Loofah, 'I mustn't miss the train.'

But the panel was now blank. The foyer throbbed as the engine revved, and then, without any warning, the machine chuntered quietly to itself and a small rectangle of card emerged from one of its numerous slots.

For a split nanosecond Loofah just stared at the proffered ticket – and then the spell broke.

The engine noise slowed as the driver engaged his gears. Smashing through the foyer doors, he barged past a businessman, cannoned into a gaggle of school boys, before launching himself down the wooden stairs to the platform, aware that his feet were not touching the steps. Fellow travellers dived out his way, cursing him as he sailed past.

As Loofah swung out onto the platform the train was already moving out of the station. With a cry of dismay, he charged after it, chasing the last carriage as it rattled along the platform. It gained on him, accelerating inexorably away, but with the manic energy of desperation he pumped his legs faster, hurling himself over the asphalt.

He was closing on it, but the end of the platform now loomed ahead, rushing to meet him like a long lost friend. With a last push of screaming effort he drew level to the rear set of doors and reached out for the handle – but there was none; the double automatic doors were sealed against him, impregnable. The end of the platform was now upon him, but just as he was about to give up, he noticed the electronic press-buttons beside the door and in mad desperation lunged at the side of the train – and went hurtling into space with the weed-strewn hard-core of the tracks far below.

But he didn't fall – a sudden gust seized him its arms and for a few moments he was suspended in nothing, flying beside the train, carried by its slipstream. Then the doors swished open and he was scooped up like a trawled fish and dropped, flapping and gasping for breath, onto the hard floor of the carriage.

The doors slid closed behind him, shutting out the swirling roar. Still panting hard, Loofah pushed himself up. A businessman in a dark suit was glaring down at him from the nearest seat, the pages off his pink newspaper blown in folds over his lap. With a sigh of profound irritation, he brushed the paper straight and returned to the serried columns of figures that covered the page he was reading.

A muffled rattle of the wheels speeding over the rails and a slight swaying of the carriage was all that disturbed the hermetically sealed stillness and steep scrub covered banks of the cutting slipped quietly passed the carriage windows like pictures on a cinema screen. Loofah climbed to his feet and brushed the dust off his jeans.

The irritated businessman was not alone – in fact the carriage was filled with them, all in dark suits, all staring avidly at their pink newspapers, never looking up and moving only to turn the pages. As Loofah moved down the aisle to find a suitable seat, it was like passing through a colony of sea creatures – polyps or sea-anemones – with pin-striped bodies and pink petal gills, each in its own rock cranny. All was quiet and still, with just an occasional flurry of pink as an individual opened and closed its gills.

Loofah chose a bench with three places, with a single polyp by the window, his well polished black leather executive case on the seat beside him. Loofah went to sit of the on aisle seat, but as he did so, the pink newspaper dropped suddenly and he was met by a cold territorial stare. With a sheepish grin he moved on – and the paper flicked back into place. He noticed now how evenly the creatures were spaced throughout the carriage, each surrounded by a ring of free seats and empty air space, presumably essential for adequate oxygen supply.

He tried another three seater, this time with no executive case, but again as he was about to sit down, the paper screen fell and he was face to face with the threatening gaze of an angry polyp. This time he considered braving the glare and asserting his ticket holder's right to a seat. But then he conscious that he was the alien in this colony, his jeans and leather jacket contrasting awkwardly with the stylish pin-stripe. Also, whilst there was no apparent connection between individuals, there was always the chance that the colony would unite against him if he threatened the life space of one of their number. And so, with valorous discretion, he decided against the challenge and passed on.

At the end of the compartment an electric door slid open and with a rush of coldness and a manic scream of metal wheels and rails he was sucked briefly into the airlock between carriages before another door open and closed, sealing him into the next speeding capsule.

This carriage, however, was not silent. For it was awash with small children of every size and shape, running in the aisle, clambering over the seats, or banging vigorously on the small tables in front of their places while throwing food and plastic drink cartons onto the floor. And almost all were shouting, yelling at the tops of their not so little voices with manic urgency for reasons that, although obscure to the outside world, were presumably apparent to themselves.

In actual fact there were some who were not shouting – these were crying, howling out their souls in anguish, their faces twisted in blank agony. The few adults among this jagged chaos were patiently doling out food and toys, keeping the maelstrom fuelled, although apparently oblivious to it.

Loofah moved quickly up the aisle, slipping on dropped fruit and dodging hurled toys and drink cans. A ten year old boy veered up in front of him and shouted into his face, and a small girl threw orange juice on his legs and then held out her polystyrene cup to a man beside her, screaming for a refill. No free seats, Loofah noted without regret, and stepped quickly into the airlock at the end of the carriage.

The next compartment was full of young executives, Sutton analogues and their shoulder-padded female equivalents, all barking incessantly into mobile phones, glancing indifferently at Loofah as he drifted past.

'Tell Jason it's no go on the Anderson deal...'

'I've got to get back to Simon by three at the latest...'

'I've been on to Frankfurt this morning...'

'The figures just don't add up...'

'Unrealistic targets...'

'Sales results...'

'Bottom line...'

'Do lunch...'

'PDQ...'

It was a kennel of dogs, with each animal trying out-bark the others, all struggling to raise the cackle of their own jargon above the general cacophony. Loofah moved on to the next compartment.

Here old ladies with fluffy white hair and silly but kindly grins sat beside old men with shining pates and tufts of grey above their ears; the seats were littered with thermos flasks, plastic sandwich boxes and library books. Loofah perched briefly next to the aisle being showed photographs of grandchildren and listening to stories about operations, radium cream, and home help. He thumbed through a spare copy of 'People's Friend' and then, as the next hospital story gathered momentum, made his excuses and left.

The next carriage was dimly lit, with just a gentle murmur of voices and the rustle of clothes disturbing the tumescent silence. Couples lay sprawled across the seats, their mouths locked together in endless union, their limbs entwined while feverish hands groped under rumped blouses. Shirt collars were smeared with lipstick, hair was ruffled by wandering fingers, and the occasional dislodged stiletto lay forgotten in the aisle. Loofah passed swiftly through, disquieted by an intimacy he did not share.

His ears were battered by teenagers with ghetto blasters and then torn by football cheers as he dodged switch-blade thrusts and hurled beer bottles. There were dog of lovers, nursing mothers, and train spotters in matching blue anoraks. He was tempted to dally in a carriage full of secretary-clones with generous chests and frugal skirts, but he remembered the Office line-up with an uncomfortable shudder, and hurried on through soldiers on furlough, holidaymakers in lurid beach clothes, and exhibitionists who leered at him as he passed, disappointed by his gender but displaying their wares anyway.

And then the airlock sealed behind him as he faced row upon row of... empty seats. At first Loofah didn't trust what he saw and hovered tentatively in aisle, expecting to be assaulted by gangs of toddlers creeping out from under the seats, or by trapeze artists hiding in the luggage racks. But nothing materialised, he was really alone. And so, choosing a window seat near the centre of the carriage, he at last sat down.

The train had left the cutting – emerald green fields and dark green copses like heads of broccoli now floated past the window by as if carried by some unseen river. Although the outside world seemed so close, in reality it was all so far, far away. Loofah relaxed into his seat and pressed a palm against the triple thick, hyper-reinforced glass. The hermetic silence of the carriage was a self-contained world, completely severed from that which was sliding past his face. There were dangers out there, he knew that – the treacherous woods, the telephone, the

policemen and the Under Manager – but in here he was safe and secure, a deep space astronaut sealed within his capsule.

The train moved smoothly now, as if gliding on a cushion of air, with not even the slightest vibration of wheel on rail. It crossed fields and slipped through hedges, meandering among the uninterested farm animals and the unseeing trees. Loofah noted, without undue concern, that the train was apparently no longer bound by tracks, but was cruising at will through the landscape on a route of its own choice. It glided over a small river then across a road and into a housing estate, passing so close between the houses that he was able to see a family at their dining table enjoying slices of chicken and roast potatoes, oblivious to the train floating over their front lawn.

Moving freely and easily, the train slipped through the world without touching it and Loofah, passing untouched through the painful chaos of life in his hermetic capsule of safety, smiled to himself with carefree contentment. Gradually, his bones and flesh dissolved into his vision then this itself flowed out to blend into the sliding landscape; gradually, he ceased to be anything more than what he saw. The fields and woods slipping past were now him, and he was the endlessly unrolling panorama of houses and roads, people, farm animals and cars.

Something happened that was not vision, and with an unwelcome jolt he was catapulted out of the gliding landscape.

'Tickets please,' repeated a tired voice.

The carriage was now half full, with a miscellany of people who he had not seen arrive occupying the seats around him, passing the time in reading, watching the scenery, and chatting quietly together. A uniformed guard was standing in the aisle, waiting with bored resignation.

'Your ticket, sir.'

'Yes of course, sorry,' said Loofah, fumbling in his jeans.

The guard took the ticket and punched it. 'Synge Green next stop, sir,' he said.

'Thank you,' said Loofah, absently taking the ticket. Then he remembered. 'No, wait,' he exclaimed, 'I'm not going to Synge Green, I'm going to...'

But the guard had gone. He examined the ticket – and indeed it was for Synge Green, a single, exactly as the booking clerk and the ticket machine had suggested. How infuriating – now he was going to have to pay an excess when he got to the town.

After pocketing the offending ticket, Loofah surveyed the carriage without much interest. Beside him a young man in a pale anorak was unfurling tiny headphones and plugging them into his ears. A woman opposite flicked the pages of a glossy magazine whilst her companion, a tubby man in a blue sweatshirt, read a newspaper, one of the smaller variety with oversized headlines. On the other side of the aisle a father was pointing out passing sights of interest to his two young daughters. Loofah was about to turn back to the window when something caught him, seizing him by the throat; the man with the sweatshirt had refolded his paper to read the sport on the back page and there on the front, under a three inch screaming headline: 'Criminal pervert at large', was a picture of a man leering into the camera, a man with dark thinning hair and glasses, wearing a black jacket and pale tee-shirt.

The safe capsule of the train shattered and once again he was unprotected from the jagged horrors of the outside world. He could not escape its crimes – for all that he tried to convince himself that it, and not he, was the perpetrator of evil, the guilt seemed to stick to him like napalm, burning into the flesh of his soul. Fighting to contain a flash-flood of panic, Loofah squirmed in his seat and peered around the carriage like a frightened rabbit, dreading recognition and ready to bolt.

'Like to see a proper paper?' The young man in the pale anorak was leaning towards him, proffering a folded up newspaper. 'You might want to read some *real* news,' he said, with a knowing smile and a quick nod towards the tubby man and his tabloid.

With a muttered thanks Loofah took the newspaper and gingerly unfolded it. It was a broadsheet, opening out into an expanse of paper the size of a galleon's mainsail. He nervously scanned the front page; it was all politics, finance, and foreign affairs: nothing of great interest, but then nothing about perverts and criminals either. He relaxed a little, calmed by the paper's reassuring restraint and maturity.

Now unfurling the sail, he skimmed a small article on page two about a football match. He had started to read about an industrial dispute at a major car company when something on the next page caught his attention – yet another picture of him. His guts had just begun to liquefy when he noticed the headline of the accompanying article: 'Government confirms arrival of The Seeker'.

Pulling the paper towards his chest, he tried to fold it back on itself, though with only partial success and soon floating sheets of newsprint filled the carriage, engulfing both Loofah and his neighbours like Mrs Frimpton's laundry. Realising that exerting any form of discipline over the paper was going to prove impossible, he allowed most of it its freedom whilst keeping hold only of the small section containing the relevant article – this he scanned quickly, to get the gist: '...the Seeker has arrived... government sources have expressed considerable satisfaction at the news... great things expected over the coming days and weeks... side-zip shoes in the latest Italian style...' All in all it was essentially the same as the fax, nothing really new. But then a particular sentence towards the end of the piece caught his eye: '...the Seeker is expected in Synge Green later today, where he is hoping to discover emergent propensities as his next step in the quest to find –.'

'Daddy! Daddy! Look at the funny man!'

Loofah looked up quickly, his stomach clenching. But the girl didn't mean him – she was pointing across the carriage at the window next to his seat. The train was now passing through woods, gliding smoothly between the trunks of the oak and birch on a bed of moss and dried leaves, and there among the trees walking parallel to it was a man – a man with dark thinning hair and a black jacket.

'It's him – the one from the paper.' Speaking in a shocked whisper and gripping her husband's arm, the woman opposite was also pointing out of the window. Together they looked from the figure in the woods to the tabloid – and then, very slowly, across at Loofah. A pair of jaws dropped in unison.

Instantly Loofah was on his feet, pushing the flapping mess of newsprint towards the young man beside him, then banging against knees and legs as he dived for the aisle. As he reached the doors at the centre of the carriage the creature was still in view, although now walking away into the trees. What was it doing here, he wondered, strolling in the woods when it was supposed to be in the next town doing its shopping? And where were Truscott and Meadows? – had it somehow managed to give them the slip?

Soon, however, all of these lesser questions faded to insignificance as the one big dilemma of the situation assertively elbowed its way to the front of his mind: should he try to get off the train and give chase, or get to the next town to meet the two policemen as instructed? As the train slid past a stand of rhododendron, the glossy foliage moulded itself into a fleshy face that glared at Loofah with its angry little eyes. Indeed, disobeying the Under Manager again was certainly not a prospect he relished. On the other hand, how would she react if she knew that he had seen the creature but allowed it to go on its way unmolested? And, what's more, to go on its way to

commit further crimes – for which he would undoubtedly be held responsible. Loofah squirmed with indecision – he even looked to the rhododendron bush for guidance, though got nothing from it other than blank unwavering fury.

But in no time the creature would be out of sight – if was going to give chase, he had to decide now. As Loofah stood by the train doors watching the plump leather-clad back waddling among the birch trunks, he realised that the titanic horror that should have been engendered by the sight of this, the foulest and most loathsome entity in the known universe, had not materialised. In fact, now he that had had the time to have a good look at the creature, it didn't seem especially formidable at all. It seemed that he had overestimated his enemy – or maybe it was just that Loofah was made of sterner stuff than he realised. Either way, perhaps a confrontation would not be quite as terrible as he had anticipated. He squared his shoulders, gritted his teeth and focussed on his enemy with narrowed gimlet eyes. Yes, he could do it, he knew could – and the decision was made.

He pressed the red button above the doors, ignoring its blustering threats of dire consequences for wrongful use. As the doors swished open, there was a rush of air and a blur of trees hurtling past. A video clip of his eggshell body smashing into a speeding trunk flashed across Loofah's vision and he jerked back. But his surge of gritty determination refused to let him even contemplate reversing his hard won decision and so, with a muttered prayer, he stepped forward into the hurtling roar.

His trepidation was unfounded, for as he passed through the open doors the speed seemed to evaporate into the air and he stepped gently down onto a soft mattress of moss and leaves, and out into the sun-dappled afternoon. Watching the train wind smoothly away between the trunks like a silver snake, Loofah's determination faltered briefly as an icy hand fingered through his intestines; he was stranded now, all alone in this strange place with only his most bitter enemy for company.

And when he turned away from the departing train to give chase to this enemy, Loofah was disconcerted to see that the creature had apparently seen him alight and to his amazement and horror was now trotting towards him on its stubby little legs, waving cheerily as if to a long lost friend. It must be confusing him with somebody else, Loofah reasoned after the initial shock had subsided, but either way if the little monster thought it was heading a jolly social get-together then it was sadly mistaken. As his enemy passed out sight behind a rhododendron bush to avoid some brambles, he set his jaw, clenched his fists, and rushed forward to meet it.

It was then that Loofah saw that it was he who was mistaken.

'Hello again!' said the little fat man, smiling an oily smile as he emerged from behind the bush, 'I'm delighted see you. A most unexpected – though very welcome – surprise!'

For indeed it was his old friend, minus the bowler and wearing a tee-shirt and jacket over the usual suit.

'You probably didn't recognise me, did you? But you see I always wear something over the old suit when I've left the hat behind. Gets a bit chilly otherwise, don't you know.'

Loofah stared at the familiar clothes on the fat little body; it was insulting, like being imitated by a third rate impressionist.

'Now then, my dear fellow, we've got an awful lot to talk about. Why don't we just – ?'

'Sorry,' interrupted Loofah, 'I've just remembered – I have a... er... dental appointment. Must dash.'

'Hang on, old chap. Don't rush away!'

He heard steps behind him as the fat man tried to follow and broke into a run. In the distance, he caught a glimpse of silver metal among the far trees.

Loofah skirted a low hill, leaping lumps of bracken and fallen branches. Ahead – far, far ahead – the train flitted between oak trunks and then passed behind a thick stand of birch. His panic flared and he leapt after it, redoubling his already superhuman effort. For in the bracken, in the trunks of the trees, in the foliage of the young saplings still struggling to make their mark on the wood, even in the liquid air itself, was the same face, puffy with fury, goading him mercilessly onwards with the laser sharpness of its piggy little eyes.

At last he reached the birch thicket – ghostly trunks loomed out of the deep shade and flew towards him in machine gun fire succession, while dark animal faces leered from the peeling white bark and dry twigs like birds' feet clawed at his hair and jacket. Then suddenly he was in a patch of brambles where thorned tendrils tore at his jeans then tightened across his thighs like asylum restraining straps, bringing him to a struggling standstill. Panic screamed through his skull and he fought like a maniac, lacerating his hands as he ripped and pulled at the tangle of barbed cables.

And then he was free, out into open oak-wood – and there was the train, across a shallow valley, a languorous metal eel winding between the trunks. The Under Manager was inside its head now, bellowing remonstrance and threat directly into the squirming jelly of his brain. He sprinted down into the valley, his momentum carrying him faster than his feet as he flew over the soft ground. In the shallow dip at the bottom a broad strip of black mud had been camouflaged by dried leaves, probably deliberately. He sank to his ankles with the mud clinging to his shoes with secret sticky hands, and within three paces he was slowed to a struggling stagger, having to haul each leg forward one at a time while the huge oaks mocked his distress with haughty indifference. After an era of struggle he reached the far side, but as he was about to step out onto the dry land with a last violent tug the mud wrenched off his left shoe. In his mad desperation he ran on with one bare foot, but it was no good, he knew he would be crippled in yards. So, cursing vehemently, he turned back to fight the quagmire for his stolen footwear.

By the time he won the fight and pulled on the shoe, however, the silver eel was out of sight over the ridge. With legs heavy with incipient despair, he started up the modest incline.

At the top of the ridge the wood opened out into a long sweeping slope of oak, with occasional black clumps of rhododendron clustered around the mocking trunks like cancerous growths. Panting for breath and with a rapidly sinking heart, Loofah scanned the slope. At first he saw nothing, but then, just as the last vestiges of hope were trickling away, a flash of silver glinted briefly among the distant trees.

He hurled himself forward in one last desperate attempt, and as he accelerated down the incline like a reckless tobogganist he caught another glint just beyond a large clump of rhododendron, a splurge of rampant malignancy spreading through the wood at the bottom of the slope. Hope rekindled – it seemed closer now, much, much closer.

The rhododendron thicket loomed towards him, a wall of darkness shielding a sinister heart. He rounded it, like a motorcyclist leaning into the corner, then staggered to a halt – for no more than fifty yards ahead of him, standing in a vast arena of open woodland, was a silver motor car, its engine purring gently in the warm air with the sunlight glinting on its carapace and windscreen. There was no sign of the train.

Loofah stumbled forward a few steps and then stopped again, staring blankly at the car as it sat meditatively under the trees like an oversized silver beetle. He had missed the train, the fat toad was somewhere behind him, no doubt hard on his heels, and yet again he was about to incur the wrath of the Under Manager – and yet he was too drained to feel anything. He gazed up into the

broken canopy: jagged branches and clumps of foliage black against the harsh white of the sun. Birdsong echoed around him and a gentle breeze ruffled the high leaves – despite everything, it was beautiful.

'Hello!' called a voice. A woman in a white summer dress with pale orange stripes was standing beside the open driver's door of the car, waving to him.

'You look a bit lost,' she called, 'Can I offer you a lift?'

Chapter 12

The car glided through the trees on a cushion of air.

'You'll like Synge Green – it's lovely at this time of year.'

'So I've heard,' said Loofah, 'By all accounts the Garden of Remembrance is not to be missed.'

Turning to him, his companion smiled affably. In a cosy sort of a way, she was an attractive woman, with dark page-boy hair and inexhaustible good cheer. He noted, with minimal concern, that the car seemed to be making its own way among the swirling trunks; she was paying scant attention to the windscreen in front and spun the steering wheel to and fro with random abandon. He hadn't once seen her touch the gear stick.

The car soon left the woods, bursting out into a blaze of brilliant sunshine. They chatted pleasantly about the weather and then she asked him questions about his home and family, being completely unfazed by his vacant non-answers. He noticed they were now on a road, a sluggish river of luminous grey channelled between the rolling fields by low hedges. The grassy hills shimmered like satin in the noon light while a herd of grazing dogs – black Labradors again – looked up with bovine indifference, chewing phlegmatically on mouthfuls of buttercup and clover as they watched the car slide past.

With the bright sun in his face, Loofah began to relax into the warm glow of his driver's unchallenging good humour. All was not lost, after all. He knew that there was a station in Synge Green; he might even be able to catch the very next train.

A pink car of fluorescent rubber appeared around a bend ahead, wobbling happily towards them. Like a friendly dog, their own car rushed straight towards it, but just before the two met in a cordial embrace, the pink car bounced off the road and into a hedge, apparently having pressing business in the field beyond. As he watched the last flash of pink rubber disappear into a rose-bush cloud of hawthorn petals, Loofah became aware that his companion was looking at him, her forehead crinkled with the unaccustomed effort of thought.

'Please don't think me rude,' she said, 'But haven't I seen you somewhere before?'

Loofah tensed suddenly; he shielded his eyes from the harsh dazzle as another car swerved into view, with death glinting off its night-black body-work.

'No, no, definitely not,' he stammered, turning away from her, 'You're thinking of somebody else.'

'Really? I was so sure it was you.'

'There is someone who looks a bit like me – perhaps it's him you've seen. A criminal, wanted by the police – him, I mean, not me – I do hope they get him soon. He's an evil man, a complete and utter fiend.' As the black car tore past, screaming hatred into the dazzle-bright day, her genial eyes bored into the side of his face like a pair of gamma-ray lasers. 'It's not me, honestly it's not. I'm perfectly innocent, really I am. A decent sort of chap, in fact. Never touched a chain-saw. Love puppies, wouldn't dream of hurting one. And you can't blame me for what happened with the doll, it was all her fault, you see...'

Squirming in his seat like an earthworm under torture, he trailed off into silence. Any minute now she would stop the car and angrily order him to get out. Already he could see her face, twisted with revulsion, and he could see himself standing in the road, watching the silver car disappear in a haze of dust.

But she didn't stop the car. Instead she smiled him another friendly smile.

'I had a dog once,' she said, 'A West Highland Terrier called Hamish, a dear little thing. The only thing was, he hated mirrors. Every time he saw one he'd go bonkers: barking at it, hiding from it and then rushing out at it, trying to bite the glass. It was as if there was some horrible big monster in there, grinning out at him.'

She glanced disinterestedly at the road and laughed. Through a gap in the hedge, Loofah caught a glimpse of a pair of ambitious bullocks sitting across a conference table, arguing over a spreadsheet.

'But of course it was nothing,' she went on, 'just his own reflection, getting crosser and crosser and crosser. Because if Hamish got cross, the reflection got cross too and so he got even crosser, and so on and so on. Wasn't he a silly-billy?' She started to laugh again, but then her face fell. 'Mind you, it all ended very sadly for poor little Hamish. One day he got so wound up that he completely blew his top. Ran straight into the mirror, smashed it and cut his throat on the broken glass.'

They sat in silence for a while, mourning the unfortunate but foolish dog. The car climbed to the crest of hill; on the right, a long wall of dark woods glowered ominously, whilst on the left, open fields rolled into the distance like mid-ocean waves.

'Oh dear,' said his companion, tapping at the instrument panel, 'we're nearly out of petrol – I'd better fill up pretty soon or we'll run out.'

The garage was at a cross-roads, opposite a black and white pub with a rusting farm implement on its front lawn. It was an old fashioned, rustic affair: the pumps were self-service, but there was no space-age shelter to keep off the rain and the small glass and metal kiosk offered no more than three different types of oil with the smallest selection of confectionery imaginable. Next to the kiosk was a green painted wooden workshop: 'Cartwright and Sons – Bodywork'.

The car slid to a halt beside one of the outermost pumps and his companion got out. 'K2 petroleum,' said the pump, 'Additive free – suitable for vegetarians'. An affluent looking woman emerged from the kiosk, pushing a receipt into her purse. She was heavily pregnant, though incongruously dressed in a body-cut business suit of brilliant blue. Loofah was struck by the expression on her face, which indicated a deep inner tranquillity and contentment – her fuel purchasing experience had clearly afforded satisfaction at every level.

There were several cars on the forecourt, each parked alongside its own bank of pumps. Loofah watched without much interest as the woman with the next car, a shimmering orange saloon, unlocked her fuel cap and lifted the pump nozzle out of its holster. She held it for a moment, as if trying to decide whether to fill her tank or not. Then the thing moved, the loop of black pipe curling against her calves. The motorist smiled, obviously pleased with the attention, and ran her hand over the pipe, stroking it like a pet snake as it coiled around her, caressing her thighs and buttocks.

He quickly averted his gaze – which immediately alighted on another lady motorist on the other side of the forecourt standing beside her car with a loop of the black pipe curling between her legs and pushing up under her skirt, while the metal pump nozzle hovered in front of her face as she caressed it lovingly with her fingertips. Something smooth and silky and not altogether pleasant wriggled to wakefulness in Loofah's head and he shuddered.

The woman with the orange car had now released her pump, which now hovered expectantly as she leaned back against the boot of her car. She lifted her skirt and, as the nozzle edged forward under the hem, she lay back over the car, stretching out her arms and closing her eyes.

The silk-skinned creature coiled around the inside of Loofah's skull; again he looked away, but this time his eyes were snagged on the side mirror, where a middle-aged lady was spread-eagled over the bonnet of a family estate car with the black pipe coiled under her skirt, pulsing rhythmically. He tried not to watch, but failed, as the digits on the pump advanced steadily and the woman writhed and twisted, gripping a wheel arch with one hand while rubbing maniacally at the paint-work with her other.

A hard thud against the windscreen shattered his trance. His own driver was lying on her back across the bonnet, rolling her head from side to side, striking out with her hands. Her parted knees were visible above the heaving horizon of her bosom, together with a coil of black pulsating pipe.

He tore his eyes away, only to have them fix again, again on the driver of the orange car. She was now in full cry, beating a clenched fist against the right rear light assembly and clutching at her rapidly distending abdomen as it strained against the light cotton of her top. Loofah forced himself to examine his fingernails, but was soon inexorably dragged back to the side mirror. The middle-aged woman with estate car had now rolled over and was sitting up on her bonnet. The hose's pulsations were slower and she was calmer, contentedly stroking the growing taut roundness of her belly.

A shriek from in front indicated that his own driver was anything but calm. She was twisted round, staring into the car but seeing nothing, with her mouth fixed in a rictus of frenzy. Loofah felt hot and cold together and the lining of his jacket clung to his skin like sheets of slug-slime. While the silky creature slithered frantically over the sulcate surface of his brain he squeezed his eyes closed and struggled manfully to blot out images of throbbing black tubes and swelling bellies. A knocking on the window beside him penetrated the seething mélange. Another lady motorist losing control in the throes of refuelling, no doubt – he didn't look. Then more knocking, rapid and impatient. Eventually he opened his eyes.

The window was filled by a pair of blue overalls, heavily soiled with sump oil and engine coolant. The mechanic bent down and peered into the car; his thin creased face was as oil-grimed as his overalls and a limp roll-up was stuck to his lower lip. Loofah wound down the window.

'Check you oil, mate?' asked the mechanic, without any apparent interest. The estate car cruised past behind him, the driver smiling with placid fulfilment as she headed for the exit.

'Erm... I don't think so, thank you,' said Loofah.

The mechanic did not react; the roll-up dangled while the dead eyes in the grime-creased face studied Loofah with supreme indifference. Then he gripped each lapel of his overalls and with a machine-gun popping of press-studs wrenched the front open to reveal a magnificent pair of bronzed breasts, all smooth satin-soft curves, firm and round, with nut-brown nipples as big as tax discs. The driver's door opened and slammed as Loofah's companion got back into the car.

'Are you sure, mate?' said the mechanic, the roll-up jiggling precariously on his lip as he spoke. Loofah looked from the breasts to the cigarette and then back to the breasts. He nodded weakly, just as the engine revved into life and gears crunched.

'Straight on for Synge Green,' said the mechanic, as they pulled away, 'You can't miss it.'

Spraying gravel, the car screeched out of the forecourt and into the road. Loofah was thrown against the door and grabbed onto the dashboard for support. Hedges and trees tore past in a green blur and a throaty roar throbbed out from the engine compartment. She was driving much faster now, spinning the wheel like a roulette croupier to throw the car into bends and braking

either at the last minute or not at all. He also noticed that she was in a state of some disarray – hair ruffled, face flushed, dress rumpled around her thighs – and with a distant glaze across her eyes. It was quite apparent that refuelling had not brought her the degree of inner tranquillity that the other motorists had seemed to glean from the experience.

'I only got half a tank,' said his companion, as if by way of explanation, absently stroking her semi-swollen belly, 'It's so expensive at these little country places.'

As the vehicle continued to accelerate, Loofah noted with alarm that her driving technique was even more eccentric than before. She now holding the previously ignored the gear stick, absently massaging the knob with her palm – and this seemed to be responding to her attention, the shaft thickening and pushing up from its mounting in the floor console. With her right hand she caressed the steering wheel, which became pliable in her grip, a smooth hoop of coiling firmness.

She swerved the car around a tractor, crashing Loofah first into the passenger door, then across the seat towards her, then finally back into the door. The steering column was now reaching towards her and she rubbed her half-gravid belly against the hub, sighing with pleasure.

The car banked into a right-hand corner, the wheels thudding into the verge. She wriggled down into her seat and gripped the steering column between her knees, with the flexible rim of the wheel pressing into her lap and the hub against her chest. Her left hand was now tightly gripped to the swelling gear lever, pulling at it rhythmically. Loofah's own hands were clamped – wet palmed and white knuckled – onto the dashboard as he stared through the windscreen into the epicentre of the deadly vortex of speed.

'You'll like Synge Green,' gasped his companion, pumping vigorously on the accelerator, 'It's lovely at this time of year.'

'Yes, I know,' said Loofah, through gritted teeth, 'The Garden of Remembrance –.'

'I was thinking more of the emergent propensities,' she interrupted. She had now wrapped her thighs around the skin-like plastic moulding of the steering column, and to his consternation Loofah noticed that wires and cable ties appeared to growing out of the column and were coiling, like the vigorous tendrils of some tropical creeper, around her legs. An oncoming car loomed across the windscreen and swerved onto the verge with a screeching of tyres. From somewhere behind came a wailing howl.

'Emergent propensities? What emergent propensities?' asked Loofah, as soon as his clenched jaw muscles would allow.

But as a reply all he got was long, ululating moan. Coloured wires and plastic bands were now wrapped around the bare flesh of her thighs, binding her into the extending steering assembly, and now he saw that the indicator and wiper stalks were reaching round her body like insect mandibles. She cried out again, writhing into the machinery and pumping the accelerator with blind vigour.

Why, oh why hadn't she filled up? thought Loofah, remembering the placid contentment of the other garage customers. The siren was closer now, coming up fast on their tail.

A hedgerow hurtled towards the windscreen – it was a sharp bend, but the car seemed to accelerate rather than brake. Suddenly tyres shrieked in panic and foliage thudded against the bodywork. Invisible fists punched him from one side to the other, then everything ended in a blur of whirling hedge and twisting tarmac, and a blaze of white pulsing fear, pure and icy hot.

Then stillness.

The car had stopped, slewed across the road. The siren pulled up behind and died in a falling howl.

Silence. Silence and stillness. He was alive and he breathed again, the fear leaving him in a long exhalation, pale and clammy.

He heard a car door open and close behind them; this was followed by three quick cries from his companion and then footsteps on the tarmac, coming towards them. Loofah unclipped his seat-belt with shaking, sweat-slippery fingers, fumbled for the door handle and climbed out, coming face to face with a policewoman, her small angry eyes blazing out from under the peak of her cap, her uniform tight over the ample flesh of her heavy body.

The Under Manager glared at him without speaking, allowing the cold fury in her eyes to chill his soul. Then a low shivering moan came from inside the car and she bent down to peer through the open door.

The lady driver was thrust back in her seat, writhing slowly with her pale legs wrapped around the pulsating trunk of throbbing metal, plastic casing, and cable that was once the steering column. It was now difficult to tell where woman ended and car began, for the snake's nest of coloured wires that tied her legs to the column seemed have grafted themselves onto her, and the steering wheel and indicator stalks were now fused into the flesh of her thighs, their black plastic blending seamlessly into her white skin. Indeed, even as they watched, sheathed cables were extending from the column and feeling their way under the loose material of her dress before plugging themselves into the soft tissue of her chest and belly. She rolled her head slowly from side to side and moaned again, eyes closed in silent ecstasy, tightening her thighs around the pulsing metal and plastic of the steering column as this grew itself into her, fusing her to the car in an unholy union of flesh and machinery.

With a grunt of profound disgust, Miss Leggett slowly shook her head.

'It's nothing to do with me,' Loofah blurted, 'Honestly it's not.'

The Under Manager did not reply, but eyed him with hostile scepticism.

'It just sort of happened, After the petrol station. She didn't fill up, you see, it was too expensive.'

Still no reply. Loofah was aware that his cheeks were beginning to feel hot.

'It wasn't me, it really wasn't. I'm innocent. Honestly.' His babbling trailed away under her relentless gaze and he looked down at his feet, a second sun burning in his face.

'You've failed again, haven't you?' said Miss Leggett, eventually.

'I have?'

'You were supposed to be in the next town by now. Instead I find that yet again you've been...' she glanced quickly towards the open car door '...distracted, and that yet again I have to spend the day chasing after you.'

'But it wasn't my fault,' Loofah whined, 'You see, I saw it from the train and I went after it.'

'What on earth are you talking about?'

'I saw it from the train and got off to chase it.'

'It?'

'The thing, the creature. I chased it.'

'You chased it?' repeated the Under Manager in frank disbelief, 'And did you catch it?'

'It was somebody else,' Loofah mumbled, examining his fingernails.

'Somebody else?' she exclaimed, 'How could you possibly make a mistake like that?'

'He was in disguise, dressed like me... I mean like *it*.' His voice faltered as he mentioned the creature. 'It was that little fat man.'

Her eyes narrowed suddenly. 'Little fat man?' she repeated quietly.

Loofah nodded. 'He's always popping up, wanting to take me off somewhere or other. I've no idea who he is.'

'Wears a suit and a bowler hat?'

'Usually, though this time he was dressed like *it* – to get me off the train, I'm sure of it. Do you know who he is, then?' She did not reply, but stared distractedly over his left shoulder, her brow creased with worry. Loofah persisted. 'Please tell me who he is, Miss Leggett. And why does he keep trying to stop me?'

'Get in the car,' she snapped, turning abruptly away.

Chapter 13

Like an arrested felon he was alone on the back seat of the police car. A massive wall of uniform towered over the back of the seat in front; the constable from the station was driving, staring expressionlessly at the road and handling the gear-stick and steering wheel with mechanical detachment.

'But who are they?' asked Loofah, 'And why did they bring us here? I don't really understand.'

'You don't need to understand,' snapped the Under Manager from the front passenger seat, without turning.

'But...' he began, but then stopped, sinking back into the seat.

The police car glided smoothly along the narrow road. Dark woods slid over the glass beside Loofah's head, followed by a sudden blur of high hedges, a brilliant green flash of open fields then more woods. Perhaps Miss Leggett was right, perhaps he shouldn't interfere, perhaps he should just go along with what she wanted and try to keep out of trouble. He sighed deeply and stared at the window, hoping to be carried away by the endless river of colour and blurred shape pouring through his eyes. But unease squirmed in his belly like a restless tapeworm and his fingers remained tightly gripped to the river's grassy bank. He had to try again.

'But Miss Leggett,' Loofah said, leaning forward, 'I would be able to help you much more if I were properly in the picture.' He waited for a response, but none came. 'Just for example: if I had known that these people might be trying to stop me from getting near the...' he winced, '...the creature, I could have been on my guard. If you had told me before that the little man was working for them then –.'

'You failed to inform us that this enemy agent had previously approached you,' she snapped, spinning round to blast him with a furious glare.

'But I didn't know he was an enemy agent, did I? Because you never told me anything about any enemy agents. You never told me much about anything, for that matter.'

She sighed with exasperation and turned back to face the front.

'It's really very, very simple,' she said, addressing the windscreen and clearly struggling to control her temper, 'You and the other one have been brought here by undesirable elements. These same elements are now using the creature to further their own evil ends. Presumably you remember what that means... or do I need to show you the photographs again?'

Loofah cringed with guilt as fresh puppy blood and severed infant organs splattered against the speeding windscreen.

'And if you will now for once co-operate, we can bring this foulness to an end,' she went on, 'And at the same time get you away from here – and back where you belong.'

'All I have to do is catch it,' Loofah said quietly, 'And it's got to be me... no-one else will do.' 'Exactly.'

The chill miasma of a desecrated tomb wafted through his soul and he shuddered. Yes, it was out there, somewhere beyond the coloured blur of the side window his nemesis was waiting for

him. The bravado that had accompanied the false train sighting has now evaporated – he knew that the next encounter would be for real.

He held a hand in front of his face. The skin flowed over the palm, shades of red, green and blue flowing and blending together like oil on water, with the fingers coming in and out of focus of their own accord, fronds of seaweed undulating in the liquid air. Then, as he stared at the window, the blur poured off the glass and in through his eyes sockets, and then swirled in his skull like swamp fog. Loofah gazed into the murk, trying desperately to make sense of the half-formed shapes that lurked there.

Peony's spoilt little face loomed out of the fog, followed quickly by Mrs Frimpton's winged-frame spectacles and the ruined telephone kiosk. Perhaps he was, as Miss Leggett repeatedly insisted, no more than a trouble-maker, an abuser of little girl's dolls, a laundry tamperer, a gratuitous vandal. Slime-covered octopus tentacles probed through his abdomen, worming between the steaming loops of his intestines. Or possibly even worse – another face appeared, peeping out from behind a blood-wet axe blade – for was he not, in some weird way, bound up with *it*, together with all its vile crimes? The tentacles gripped hard and he doubled forward, clutching at his belly.

But now something new was floating out of the fog – it was a girl, the diaphanous whiteness of her gown flowing in a light mist over her golden body. She turned to him and her smile was like warm balm poured over the icy knot of his guts. Then she swam forward and her mouth started moving as if she were chanting some sacred mantra and, although he heard no sound, he knew the words she spoke. And she was not alone; the little schoolgirl dogs were there too, wagging her tails, and also the seagull peg and the cinema usherette with her tray of ice-creams, all drifting in the fog around the girl, all chanting in unison with her, monotonously and insistently. He saw that they were all smiling benignly, all wishing him well – even the wicked little peg had a benevolent glint in its beady black eye. And why? Because he was the long awaited quester for the mysterious female Janus whose title they chanted.

Loofah again leaned forward. 'I have one more question, Miss Leggett.' As he spoke, the police radio under the dashboard came to life, buzzing and then crackling incoherently. 'Who is – ?'

'Be quiet!' snapped the Under Manager and snatched up the handset, 'Shower curtain to towel rail, shower curtain to towel rail. Repeat your message. Over.'

The radio crackled again and this time words emerged, bobbing like corks out of the liquid noise. 'Towel rail to shower curtain, towel rail to shower curtain. Bath sponge has been sighted. I repeat, bath sponge has been sighted. Proceed at one to plug hole – soap dish and rubber duck are already at the scene. Over and out.'

The Under Manager tensed visibly as the message came through and as soon it was finished she turned to the monolithic constable.

'Well?' she hissed, 'What are you waiting for?'

For a few seconds he showed no sign of having heard her. Then his hand seemed to tighten, ever so slightly, on the steering wheel, easing it gently to the right. And suddenly Loofah was at the centre of a howling tornado of wrenching G-force, whirling hedgerow and screaming tyres as they spun across the tarmac in a fairground terror-ride. This time, however, the car did not come to stop, but flew out of the spin like a loosed arrow, the acceleration hurling him back into the hard vinyl.

The landscape tore past in an unfocused blur. Loofah sat, paralysed, awaiting with dread certainty the sickening crunch of impact. His stunned gaze was sucked through the windscreen

and out into the narrowing tunnel of tarmac, trees and hedges down which they hurtled. Feeling himself tumbling forward into the deadly vortex, he clenched his eyes tight shut. But the screaming orange darkness was no refuge, for it was filled with images of his soft body and hard metal coming together in a slow motion ballet, of jagged steel violating his sacred flesh, of shards of shattered bone bursting through his jeans and of liberated intestines writhing like a mass of landed eels sliding across the seat vinyl – images of flesh and metal, skin and plastic, fusing together into a hideous chimera of man and machine.

Death, however, did not come and eventually Loofah opened his eyes. The lethal vortex still spun wildly across the windscreen and although the constable and Miss Leggett were sitting side by side staring into it, they were both suffused in an aura of profound *sangfroid*. The slight possibility that violent impact might not be absolutely inevitable now lurked at the very edge of Loofah's trembling awareness. Smearing sweat-slippery palms on his jeans, he tried to restart his stalled breathing.

The police siren howled and other cars, small weak things, scuttled out of their way like frightened chickens. They flew down a long hill between stands of dark forest, then swept effortlessly up the other side, scudding from crest to crest over the slow waves of tarmac that rolled down towards them. Loofah noticed a face in the rear-view mirror – deathly white skin stretched tight, mouth pulled into a rictus grin of terror – and hoped it wasn't him.

'What's going on?' His attempt to sound casual was thwarted by his voice, which disobeyed orders and came out as a high-pitched quaver.

'Visual contact with target re-established,' replied the Under Manager, 'We'll be there very soon.'

The meaning of her words trickled down his spine like cold, clammy mucous and a small army of soft-bodied invertebrates crawled under his skin. Although the speeding landscape still whirled across the windscreen, inside the car all was still, deadly still. The face in the mirror stared out at him like the death-mask of a murder victim and Loofah remembered his interrupted question.

'Miss Leggett,' he said, quietly and slowly, 'Who is The Woman Who Looks Both Ways?'

Her back tensed, but she did not turn or reply. Then suddenly Loofah was thrown forward, nearly crashing into the towering wall of the constable's back. The car swerved to the left and screeched to a halt in a tidal wave of flying gravel.

They were in a large unmetalled lay-by parked behind an unmarked saloon and another police car. Uniformed officers milled around and a big man in a sheepskin coat rushed to meet Miss Leggett as she leapt out of the car. Loofah instantly recognised the small round head with its eternal grin.

After a rapid exchange with Truscott, the Under Manager strode back to the car and pulled open the back door.

'Get out!' she said, her voice hard with urgency.

Loofah did not move.

'Be quick!' she cried, 'It's getting away!'

He turned slowly to face her. 'Miss Leggett,' he said, 'you haven't answered my question.'

They marched him quickly across the pot-holed gravel, Truscott one side and the Under Manager the other. From behind came the whooping roar of vehicles on the road – ahead was a dark wall of conifer woods, dense and ominous.

'So the... the thing is helping them to find her?' Loofah asked, 'To find the double woman?'

'This way,' said Truscott, steering them towards a pathway into the wood at the end of the lay-by, 'Meadows is in there already – he's got it under surveillance.'

'But I don't understand,' Loofah continued, stopping, 'Why do they want to find her?'

'Hurry up, will you?' snapped Miss Leggett, pulling at his arm. But he resisted, mule-stubborn, bringing the whole party to a sudden halt. She sighed with exasperation.

'I've already told you – the two-faced witch is a foul evil creature, but has certain... powers. If your friend in there manages to find her for them there will be no end to the havoc they will be able to wreak.' She turned to Loofah, at last warming to her theme. 'Just think about it, will you? All of Mr Stobart's good works – the community projects, the work with children and old people and homeless animals – all thrown into jeopardy, set back by years.' She paused dramatically. 'It just doesn't bear thinking about.'

'And all because of The Woman Who Looks Both Ways? She sounds very... unpleasant,' said Loofah – as the nymph in his head, lovely as ever, whispered her endless mantra.

'Now will you please hurry,' said Miss Leggett, a faint tone of desperation in her voice, 'Before we lose it.'

He now allowed them to lead him forward and was swallowed into the green half-light. The roar of the road became a faint hum, muffled in the mausoleum quiet of the trees.

They walked in single file as the path wound through the tightly packed trunks, Truscott leading, Loofah in the middle, with the Under Manager coming up behind. The dark silence throbbed with the growing dread of what he was about to face. And yet, despite the heavy pulse, he could still clearly hear the noiseless whispers of the nymph and her friends, nibbling through his brains like an infestation of hungry mice.

There was a noise ahead. Truscott dropped to a crouch, signalling for Loofah to do the same. The footsteps got closer – crunching pine needles, breaking twigs – and the pulse of dread roared to a sudden crescendo. Then a figure appeared from behind a screen of narrow trunks; it was Meadows – Loofah breathed again.

His relief, however, was short-lived.

'Up ahead,' hissed the Detective Sergeant, his malicious eyes darting from side to side like those of an excited lizard, 'No time to lose!'

'Right then,' said Miss Leggett from behind, 'away you go.'

Loofah became aware of three pairs of eyes focused on him. He looked from one to the other: Meadows sneering with reptilian malice, Truscott smiling him a smile of empty benevolence, and the Under Manager sighing with repressed impatience.

'Me?' he said weakly.

'Of course *you*,' snapped Miss Leggett, 'We've been through all this already.'

'But alone?' whimpered Loofah, 'I thought you might come with me, to show me what to do.'

'You know what to do. Now get going!' With this she pushed him forward into Truscott, who manhandled him towards Meadows, who propelled him, with some momentum, up the path.

Loofah stumbled forward a few yards then stopped and looked back over his shoulder. All three were watching him, crouched beside the path. He opened his mouth for one last appeal, but the Under Manager angrily waved him away. And so, swallowing hard, he turned and began to edge slowly forward, walking on tiptoe with pantomime stealth.

The rod-straight trunks formed an impenetrable palisade either side of him and chaos of branches meshed over the path, blotting out the light. He was in a corridor, a twisting dimly lit corridor. Miss Leggett and her cohorts were out of sight after the first turn in the path and he could see nothing ahead beyond the first bend. He was going too fast – his enemy could be around the next bend, or perhaps the one after that – but when Loofah he tried to slow down the

sinuous walls of the corridor seemed to propel him forward, channelling him like a tube train. The dreadful silence throbbed louder with every step.

He turned a corner and unexpectedly staggered out into open woodland; at last he was free of the horrid corridor of conifers and out among mature deciduous trees, stolid oak and reassuring beech, keeping a respectable distance from each other, giving themselves – and him – space to breathe. The sunlight dappled through the branches and the air was clear and fresh. No longer propelled towards his doom by the walls of the corridor, Loofah slowed his pace to a stroll and inhaled deeply, forcing down his fear and trying to enjoy his unexpected liberation.

Yet although he was free of the conifers, the pulse of dread seemed to have increased in intensity. And as if in reaction to this increase the endless silent mantra about the double-faced woman was now echoing round the cavern of his cranium with renewed urgency. It was then that he noticed a fresh sensation – a discomfort in the pit of his stomach as a tiny maggot of doubt gnawed its way steadily through the underside of his liver. Loofah could still feel the unwavering will of the Under Manager forcing him onwards to his date with destiny, like some science fiction force-field beam controlled from her hiding place a hundreds behind. The reasons for following this will were both numerous and compelling, and yet...

Despite the crystal-clarity of the liquid air under the trees, he realised that the inside of his skull was an impenetrable fog of ignorance and confusion – and the paltry few facts that he had managed to wring out of Miss Leggett had only added to the obfuscation rather than dispersed it. Like a delightful hologram, the diaphanous image of the chanting nymph was now rotating slowly in the sun-dappled light, the maggot growing in size and vigour with each repetition of her mantra. Then a clear thought congealed out of the swirling obscurity: perhaps he should defy the will – the puff-angry face glared at him from a small clump of dog's mercury, but he ignored it – and try to find out more before committing himself to something as momentous and hideously irrevocable as a confrontation with...

Suddenly he stopped, paralysed into total stillness. For a long moment he just stared, unable to look away, then at last managed to snap his eyes closed, squeezing the lids together in an effort to block out the image that still glowed on his retinas. For it was there, ahead of him on the path, among the trees at the top of the gentle hill that sloped up from where he was standing. It had had its back to him and so he hadn't seen either its face or the fateful tee-shirt – but this time he knew with absolute certainty.

For an eternity he stood in blackness as a whirling storm of chaos roared through his skull. As he struggled to bring some sort of order, naked fear tore through like a scream, blotting out all else, and when, welling up from core of his being like an oil strike, came a dark plume of hatred.

A deep and ominous hatred, unfathomable as an ocean trough, it flowed through him, first calming the storm and then crystallising into a deadly ice around the hideous image. This thing was an offence and an aberration, by its very being it negated him, it poisoned his life. He wanted it dead, he wanted it gone, indeed he wanted it never to have lived, he wanted its very existence blotted out from time itself.

A fresh image now filled his mind, as clear as a video picture. He was sitting across its chest, pinning it to the ground, and as it cringed with terror he brought a massive stone down onto its face, crunching its spectacles into its jelly-eyes, spattering its brains across the leaves. The image could become reality – he could actually feel his hands ripping open its belly and coiling up its steaming intestines like a washing line – no, it *must* become reality. The need to kill pulsed through him like an urgent heartbeat, quelling any remnants of uncertainty.

He opened his eyes. It was still there, now disappearing from view over the brow of the hill. Red hot blood pumped through his ears and as he launched himself forward, a beast's roar tore from his throat.

The creature turned. For a moment it just stared at him with puzzled surprise – then recognition dawned and its face twisted into a mask of hatred, a hatred so powerful that the creature's eyes actually glowed with the pale light of its loathing. It seemed to hesitate, but instead of charging forward to meet him in savage combat on the sun-dappled hillock, it spun away and leapt off the path into the trees.

At the top of the hill, he swerved off the path in pursuit. His legs pumped like steam pistons, powered by the white heat of his own hatred, and his vision narrowed into a focused tunnel – he saw nothing but the fleeing black jacket. He screamed again, a formless noise of fury, and hurled himself after it.

He breathed easily and he did not tire – the death-lust had transcended his body's limitations – and yet he was getting no closer. When he went faster it went faster, when he doubled the manic power of his express train legs it found equivalent strength, and so the distance between them remained the same, the bobbing black back in his tunnel of loathing grew no larger.

For an infinity he was swerving between the looming trunks and leaping over fallen branches and patches of undergrowth, enveloped in his loathing, aware of nothing but the figure in front. It was always there, never closer, never further, as if it were etched onto the lenses of his spectacles. They were tied together, he and it, locked forever in this endless chase.

And then without warning it went down, tripping on a tree root and sailing out into the air, a diver without a pool, before crashing full length on the soft ground crumpling into a tumble of twisting limbs. For a brief moment he faltered but then, with a howl of triumph, he lunged forward for the kill.

As he charged the creature struggled to its feet and started to run, but stumbled to a halt after a few paces – it had lost a shoe in the fall – and turned to face him. The distance between them closed rapidly; it hunched down, clenching its fists, ready for his murderous onslaught, and with mad fury shrieking through his skull he focussed the laser of his loathing on its hideous face, now visible at last.

But then something happened – a wave of strangeness flooded over him, filling his veins with masses of tiny eels, and the furious energy ebbed from his charge. His momentum sapped, he stumbled to a halt with no more than twenty yards separating them.

For an era he knew nothing. Marooned in pool of stalled time, he was staring into a mirror, gazing into his own soul. Tree trunks spun around him in a dizzying waltz and the forest floor swayed under his feet, while his whole being squirmed and twisted like a worm on a pin.

Something moved at the edge of the pool, a flash of white. He turned from mirror to see a girl in a white gown floating through the trees towards him. She smiled, flooding him with sunshine, and when she was at his side she reached up to coil her slender arms around his neck. His eyes slid closed and, with lips trembling for the soft warmth of her kiss, he folded her in his arms and...

His arms closed on nothing, his lips remained cold. He opened his eyes – and saw the girl, twenty yards away, reaching up to kiss him. No, it was not him that she was kissing – *it was the other one!* A sword-thrust of naked pain sliced into his guts and he staggered backwards. Then, as their lips met, he bellowed like a speared bull and hurled himself at them, insane with jealous rage.

But as he leapt to tear them apart, he fell into a wall of emptiness.

It was a pure white emptiness, sweetly perfumed. For a moment he was a disembodied consciousness afloat in a world of abstract whiteness. Then, however, dry leaves crunched under his soles as he moved, indicating the existence of legs and feet. Sensing something at the end of an arm, he lifted it to his face and a hand coalesced out of the whiteness a few inches from his face.

As he lowered his hand, Loofah glimpsed a vague image quickly dissolving into the fog, an image of a little white dog thrashing out its death throes among the blood-soaked shards of a broken mirror. He exhaled into the opaque air, with an odd feeling of being lucky to be alive.

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*The story continues in **Friends and Enemies**,
the second book of **White Rabbit**...*

*Please contact **Stuart Oldfield** via **Facebook** for details*