

Insane & Out

T J Price

Copywrite 2012 T J Price

Smashwords Edition

This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return to Smashwords.com and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

Table of Contents

- One: The Wolfman Cometh
- Two: Bequest of the Forgotten
- Three: Spick and Span Mausoleum
- Four: Blackened Hearts
- Five: Mutually Assured Corruption
- Six: A Smooth Exit North
- Seven: The Call of Spring
- Eight: An Off-Season Spell
- Nine: Street Crime
- Ten: Reinventing the Wheel
- Eleven: Temporary Sanity
- Twelve: The Dreaming Sentinel Reveals Himself
- Thirteen: A Curious Calm
- Fourteen: The Post-Dated Revelation
- Fifteen: The Living Nightmare
- Sixteen: Dirty Work
- Seventeen: An Unspeakable Cure
- Eighteen: Countdown to Death Strike!
- Nineteen: Payout
- Twenty: Resurrection

One: **The Wolfman Cometh**

It was the Wolfman who woke Jason.

‘This is it. Orbaton. You’re here.’

The strange creature, his face wreathed by a tangle of dirty red hair, had joined the train a few stops earlier. Having sat opposite Jason, he had stared at him as if to pose a question. But the question never came.

To escape this mindless scrutiny, Jason had closed his eyes and . . . within moments found himself looking out over an owl-haunted forest from the crest of a lonely and magnetic hill. The bum was there too, grinning as he shamelessly transmogrified himself by the light of the pregnant moon into a . . .

Jason looked up dumbly into the Wolfman’s mild brown eyes and realised he had fallen asleep and the train had halted at his station.

‘Oh – thanks.’ He stood up and followed the other commuters already shuffling out of the carriage.

He hadn’t got far along the crowded platform when the Wolfman fell into step beside him and exclaimed with a cheerless wonder, ‘Look at all these bodies!’

Recalling that if it weren’t for the Wolfman he’d still be asleep, heading for somewhere he didn’t want to be, Jason smiled and asked genially, ‘How did you know I was getting off here?’

The Wolfman stared at him, frankly confounded.

‘I didn’t know. How could I?’

‘Just a lucky guess then?’

‘It could be – I am very lucky.’

‘Really?’ Jason cast a tolerant eye over new companion – he was wearing a thick, crimson woollen pullover that bristled like it was alive and on top of that a brown suit, shiny with ingrained dirt. His slack mouth, panting white vapour onto the winter air, revealed large and crooked teeth.

‘Of course I’m lucky. Nobody else guessed you wanted Orbaton, did they?’

‘No, they didn’t.’

‘Just me.’

‘Yes. Thanks again.’

They went through the ticket barriers and down the short walkway that ran into the station concourse.

The Wolfman said, ‘This is the way out, here.’

The concourse thronged with jostling travellers and was criss-crossed by queues. Jason found it easier to follow the Wolfman. They reached a set of palm-smearred glass doors and these opened on to a car park where taxis waited in clouds of grey diesel fumes. The air was raw with cold.

‘I’m looking for Ledgebow Street,’ Jason said in the general direction of the Wolfman, wondering whether he ought to take a taxi. All he could see beyond the car park was a broad, anonymous road that disappeared over the hump of a bridge.

‘Ledgebow Street?’ The Wolfman exclaimed. ‘That’s incredible.’

‘Why?’

‘I’m walking down there!’

‘Oh?’

Perhaps, Jason thought, a taxi would be best.

The Wolfman had gone a few yards ahead when he noticed Jason wasn't keeping up.

'Come on! It's not far,' he said, giving Jason a big, beckoning wave – as if he were on the other side of the road.

Jason remembered that he didn't have much money to spare.

'Well, if it's not far . . .'

They crossed the bridge, which arched over the city's six-lane ring road, and passed through a churning bus station. Heaving double-decker buses, groaning with passengers, lurched away on either side.

'I'm going to the park,' the Wolfman announced. 'And I'm getting some lager on the way.' He turned to Jason and narrowed his eyes. 'From *Siddhu's*.'

'Are you?'

The Wolfman's gaze lingered. 'You got a girlfriend?'

Taken aback, Jason shook his head.

'I've got two. One lives next door, and the other one lives in the Lozells. That's where I'm going.'

'I thought you were going to the park.'

'Me, I like to have time to myself, to do what I want to do. I'm going to the park first and then I'm going to the Lozells. Do you know the Lozells?'

'No.'

They entered the city centre. The elegant Edwardian buildings that still predominated here were converted at street level into gaudy bars and shops. The sidewalks teemed with shoppers and the roads throbbed with a continuous stream of cars.

'Busy place,' Jason murmured.

'That's why I like the park.'

Jason noticed then that the Wolfman was sweating. It was close to freezing and yet, by his own account, he would soon be taking his ease in the park, cooling down with a can of lager – from *Siddhu's* – and doing what he wanted to do while his two girlfriends eagerly awaited his return.

All at once Jason longed to be rid of him.

'Is the park far?' He asked, as they crossed at traffic lights.

The Wolfman turned to him and shook his head. His gaze lingered again.

'This is Ledgebow Street – here.'

'Oh.' Jason slowed his pace, in order to check the doorways for the address he wanted.

The Wolfman slowed down too and also checked the doorways.

'I'm looking for Ulfrun Chambers,' Jason remarked irritably.

'This is it,' the Wolfman said straight away, pointing to an elaborate marble portal that stood between a tobacconist and a betting shop. The large, panelled wooden doors stood wide open. The words *Ulfrun Chambers* were carved into the stone lintel above.

'Yes, this looks like it. Thanks.'

The Wolfman gaped at the door.

'I've never noticed this place before and I walk down here every day.'

'Thanks for waking me up on the train.'

The Wolfman turned to him.

'It goes to Wales.'

'Really? I didn't want to go there. Anyway, see you around.'

'I'll be in the park, after I've been to Siddhu's.'

Jason nodded and, watched closely by the Wolfman, he strode over the threshold.

Two: **Bequest of the Forgotten**

He found himself in a tiled hallway. The noise of the traffic outside reverberated all around, as if he had entered a cave. There was a wooden plaque attached to the wall where *Sigurmi and Watson*, his uncle's legal executors, were listed. They were situated on the second floor. He climbed the stone steps, worn smooth over the years, and trailed his hand over the cold brass handrail. The air smelled of dust and polish.

There was an open door on the second landing and beyond it a plain young woman sat tapping at a computer. She looked round as soon as he walked in and gave him a reflex smile.

'Hello, I have an appointment with David Lempit for two-thirty. My name is Jason Carver.'

'What is it concerning, please?'

'The estate of Vincent Redmel. I'm a little early.'

The receptionist called Lempit on the intercom and very soon a man with a ready smile appeared from the direction of the stairwell. He was about Jason's age – thirty or so – and wore a suit that was perhaps just a trifle short for his long and gawky frame. His hair was jet black and below his pallid, almost waxy complexion glowed an unhealthy tinge of hectic red.

'Mr Carver?' Jason stood up and took the large, bony hand offered to him. 'Hi, I'm Dave Lempit. How'd you do?'

Jason pumped the hand, responding to David's cheerful cordiality.

'I'm good, thanks. Early, I'm afraid.'

'Glad you are. This way, we've got a little conference room on the next floor that we use for meetings.'

They climbed to the third storey.

Wheezing somewhat, David said, 'We're up and down these stairs all day. That's why we're fighting fit in this firm. Just on the right there, first door.'

They entered a cramped, dingy little room occupied by an old wooden desk and a couple of chairs. A set of dented metal shelves, stuffed with a chaotic mass of old computer printouts and battered cardboard files, leaned against one wall.

'Take a pew, Jason.'

'Thanks.'

'You're welcome. Apologies for the dust.' David picked up a file from the rest and dropped into the other chair with a groan of relief. 'Give me a couple of seconds. I have a nice surprise for you.' He frowned into the file and started to flip through the papers inside. His expression grew sad and Jason sensed this was David's default expression when he was alone. A moment later, he said, 'Here it is. This is the surveyor's valuation of your uncle's house. Your house, rather.' He pulled a slim document from the file and opened it. 'One hundred and seventy-five thousand pounds.'

'Really? I shouldn't have thought it was worth that much. Of course, it's years since I was there last. In fact, it's been so long I don't even remember what my uncle looked like.'

David acknowledged this amazing fact with a little shake of the head. His eyes were brown and kind, like the Wolfman's, only animated by reason.

'But he remembered you, Jason. I don't think we said so in our letter, but he left you everything he had. Apart from his car. That was stolen while he was in hospital, apparently.'

'As it happens, a car is the one thing I don't need. I've just come out of a divorce.' Jason smiled blandly. 'I lost the house, but I kept the car.'

‘Oh.’ David’s eyes rested on the file. ‘Maybe your uncle knew you’d appreciate having his place.’

‘I doubt he knew anything about me. He lost contact with the family a long time ago. Not that there’s much of a family left to contact anymore.’

David nodded slightly, his eyes lowered. ‘I know – families can fall apart.’

‘Something you’re used to seeing, I suppose, as a solicitor.’

‘We aren’t immune. I went through a divorce a couple of years ago.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry about that.’

David smiled.

‘Don’t be. Anyway, your uncle left you a good, solid Edwardian property. We have the deeds here. If you like we can store them – twelve pounds a year?’

‘Yes, fine. Thanks.’

‘There’s a list of contents. We should go over it, really. I don’t think there’s much of tremendous value.’ David took a form from the file. ‘This is interesting, however. Some cash. Thirty pounds, delivered in blank envelopes. A tenner in each. One was put through the door after Mr Redmel’s death. We have no idea what it’s for – but it’s yours now.’

‘Lucky me.’

‘I’ll get it for you now, and the house keys too.’ David stood up and hesitated. ‘You came by train, didn’t you? I could drive you down to the house, if you want to go see it straight away. That’ll save your getting a taxi.’

‘Well, if it’s no trouble.’

‘No, it’s no trouble at all. While we’re there, I can go through the contents with you and close the file today. Anyway, I like to get out of the office when I can.’

David fetched the cash and the keys and Jason signed for them. They left the room and went down the echoing stairs. As they stepped out onto the street, a rust-flecked truck laboured past, chugging out black fumes.

David took a deep breath.

‘Ah, the fresh air! You can’t beat it.’

They walked back the way Jason had come with the Wolfman – so far as the traffic lights. From there they went right, and then right again, bringing them into a narrow, silent street lined by an assortment of faceless buildings. Large, steel-shuttered entrances stood against the pavement. Halfway down, they came to a confined patch of waste ground lying between a warehouse and an old dilapidated building of indeterminate use.

‘The firm rents this land,’ David said, referring to the wilderness of weeds on which four cars stood where there was only room for three. ‘It’s the executive car park.’ He grinned. ‘You have to put in ten years to get a spot here.’

David’s car was the dented Mercedes. They got in and David shunted back and forth over the weeds six or seven times before they escaped onto the road. From there, they wove through a shadowy labyrinth of back streets. As they got further from the city centre, the shop fronts and the pedestrians began to take on a shabbier appearance. At last they reached the ring road, onto which they filtered and quickly accelerated.

David, while keeping his eye trained on the traffic, pointed through one corner of the windscreen. ‘See that great big place there?’

Jason craned forward and saw a looming office block, built from brown concrete and sporting row upon row of black, iodised windows.

‘Yeah?’

‘That is the devil’s *pied a terre* in Orbaton.’

‘How’s that?’

‘*Her Majesty’s Revenues and Customs*. The tax office.’

‘Ah, the house of the damned. I should have recognised it.’

They left the ring road via a flyover that shot between boarded-up factories and followed a long street where lopped plane trees pointed like arthritic fingers from the crumpled sidewalks. They turned left at a Sikh temple into an old suburb.

‘I don’t know whether you recognise any of this,’ David said. ‘We’re in the Lucyfield’s district now.’

The roads were narrower and the houses looked ill kept and sullen, bunched up tightly, shoulder to shoulder and teetering over narrow pavements.

They turned onto a side street that was closed off at the other end by the tall, spiked railings of a litter-shrewn public park. There was a turning area and, having reversed on this, David drove back and parked up near the junction.

‘Oh yes, that’s the place. I remember it now,’ Jason said, once they had climbed out of the car.

He was looking across the street at a low, dismal house that crouched behind a wildly overgrown privet hedge.

David chuckled and pointed at the big, blank gable of the house right beside them.

‘Lucky for you, *this* is it. That side of the road is where the poor part of Lucyfields begins. On this side, you almost belong to the Goldthorn Hill district, which is a different story.’

They walked around to the front of his uncle’s house, which was semidetached and faced the main road. There were four steep steps of concrete to the front door.

David stood aside and, with a curious smile, said, ‘You first.’

Three: Spick and Span Mausoleum

Jason entered and found himself in a silent hallway. There were two doors on the left, and a third at the other end of the passage. The stairs rose on the right to a bright landing.

The interior gave an immediately pleasing impression. The carpet was light blue and showed no signs of wear. The newel post and bannisters were a perfect white, like they had been painted yesterday and the walls were covered in a tasteful wall paper that looked freshly hung.

David knelt down and scooped a blank envelope from the floor. He handed it to Jason. 'See what you find in that.'

It contained a ten-pound note. Jason held it up quizzically for David to see.

'Another one! Is there a letter with it? No? Excellent! So, the mystery continues.'

'Perhaps he was blackmailing someone.'

'Maybe.' David laughed and closed the front door. 'We'll start in the drawing room, shall we? First on the left.'

Jason was once again struck by the immaculate appearance of everything. The furniture of the drawing room may well have been brand new and there wasn't a particle of dirt anywhere. The only inconsistency was a pile of damp ashes that lay heaped on the iron grate of the fireplace. They gave off a faint but sharp odour. Apart from a stopped clock and two identical glass jugs on the mantelpiece shelf, there were no ornaments. And no photographs.

Jason glanced back at David. 'Is anything here worth much?'

David smiled. 'No antiques, but as you can see, it's not bad stuff. All very useable. Better than the rubbish I've got at home, anyway.' He opened the file he had brought with him. 'Shall we run through the contents down here first?'

Jason nodded absently, while looking curiously at the fireplace. 'It looks like someone burned a lot of paper, doesn't it?'

David's mild gaze fixed itself on the grate for a moment.

'Let's hope it wasn't a big bag of money.'

They went through the items in the room and David ticked them off in his inventory. It didn't take long.

Next came the rear living room, which was as pristine as the front. The window looked out onto the small backyard.

After that, they went into the kitchen, which lay beyond the door at the end of the passageway. It was sparklingly hygienic, the fridge, washer, cooker – all gleaming white. The cupboards were made of healthy looking pine and the pinkish marble work top was spotless.

There was no reason why his uncle's house shouldn't be so beautifully clean as this, and yet Jason was nagged by the feeling that it was all contrived.

As David continued to run through the inventory, item by item, Jason only half listened. Taking a look through the window in the back door, he said, 'What are they? Garages?'

An uneven, scruffy collection of flat roofs poked over the top of the courtyard wall.

'Pardon? Oh, that's right, those are the garages. One of them will belong to this place.'

'That's good. How do you get to them?'

'There's a gully running behind the house. It comes off Melleville Close, where we just parked.'

'Ah, I see. Well, I'll look some other time.'

They went upstairs, where there were three large bedrooms and a bathroom.

The first front bedroom was perfectly empty. Jason's uncle had slept in the second front bedroom. A fresh pair of pyjamas were still folded neatly on a bedside chair. Like downstairs, the furniture looked shop new. His uncle had never married, but he slept in a king-sized bed. The duvet didn't have a wrinkle in it.

David went through the contents as methodically as ever.

Jason let him carry on, although he was indifferent to the inventory by now, because he had decided to eradicate every trace of his uncle from the house.

They glanced into the bathroom on their way to the rear bedroom and Jason pointed to the gap between the shower unit and the pedestal wash basin.

'A bathtub used to sit there.'

'You remember that?'

Jason frowned. 'No . . . except, I must remember it.' He abruptly pulled the door shut. 'Back bedroom?'

David led the way. It was furnished with a double bed, without sheets. Nothing else. The window looked down on the huddle of back yards and the higgledy-piggledy row of garages.

'That's everything, Jason. Could you sign this downstairs? I'll give you a copy.'

'Sure, let's go.'

As they went back along the landing, Jason came to a sudden halt outside the bathroom. He could hear water gushing into the bath.

'Listen. There's someone in there!'

He thrust the door open hard enough to make it bang against the wall.

The room was empty.

'But –'

'That's coming from next door. The shared walls are thin between these old terrace houses.'

Jason gave David a surreptitious glance, but saw no sign that David knew how spooked he was. 'Yes, yes, of course. That's right.'

'You can be sure this place is solid, though. They built these houses to last forever.'

Somehow that didn't comfort Jason.

They returned to the front living room, where David had left his file, and Jason signed three copies of the inventory.

'That's that then,' David said. 'You've seen everything apart from the garage. Did you want to check it over before I pop you back, or are you staying on here a while?' He glanced at his watch. 'It's three now.'

'I'll come back with you. I don't have much time here in Orbaton. But, yes, if you don't mind, I'll take a peek at the garage.'

They went to the kitchen and halted at the back door. To unlock it, Jason found he had to hunt through the bunch of keys David had given him.

'I see there are more keys than there are doors.'

'Perhaps he owned another house or two.'

'Yeah, that'd be nice. Sadly, I don't recall hearing that he had others. I don't remember this one really. I thought I did, before we got here.'

'You used to visit him, then?'

'Well, Mom used to. Or rather, she'd drop me off here when she went up town to go shopping with my aunty.' He paused, trying to glimpse something that danced just out of sight. Danced and somehow mocked. 'She must have told me that sometime, but I . . . Anyway, it was a long way back. We left Orbaton when I wasn't much more than seven.'

'I think that's it,' David said, pointing to one of the keys.

It fitted.

The courtyard was paved with brick-sized blocks and enclosed by a five-foot high wall. It

stretched about twelve feet from the back door. Aside from the trashcan in one corner, it was bare. A wooden gate, fitted with a Suffolk latch, opened onto the gully.

They went through.

The ground was matted over by half-dead weeds. Drifts of rancid litter lay against the walls. The garages were made of anything that could be nailed together, just so long as it was splintered and rotting. In addition, they were sprayed over with some of the most hopeless, cack-handed graffiti Jason had ever seen. There wasn't a single coherent statement or recognisable symbol, except maybe a heart shape – but even that was upside down.

'This one must be yours,' David said, pointing out the first garage on the gully. The two doors hung at a slant and were held together by a rusted hasp and staple. These in turn were secured by a heavy and well-oiled padlock.

Jason examined the bunch of keys and found one for a padlock, but it didn't fit.

'Oh, it doesn't matter, I'll just have to saw it off,' he said. 'But I tell you this, I'm going to have to change these doors, they're rubbish.'

He gave one of them an idle kick.

At that very moment, a voice bellowed out behind them. 'Oi, what you up to?'

Even before Jason turned round, he hated the owner of that voice.

It had a piping, jeering quality that was somehow worse than the mere aggression of the tone.

When he did turn, he found himself looking at a large, burly man in his early sixties, with an oversized face set low down in fat, broad shoulders. The face was lined and coarse, but the mouth was full-lipped and almost sensuous, and the eyebrows were very fine and mobile, like a woman's. He wore an old boiler suit over a white tee shirt and this bulged with powerful muscles. Behind him, the gate to next door's courtyard stood open.

This was his new neighbour.

'Who are you?' Jason asked, matching the bellicose volume of the man's voice.

The man looked startled. Then his scowl mellowed into a crafty smile.

'Are you something or other to do with Vincent Redmel?'

Jason didn't see why that should be his business and chose not to answer.

'That's right,' David said, 'I'm his legal executor and this is his nephew, Jason Carver, who's inherited the property. We're just taking a look at the garage.'

The man's smile broadened.

'There's no access to the garage.'

'Who says so?' Jason snapped.

'I've rented that garage for the past twenty years,' the man said equitably, 'and I can prove it. I've got documents.'

'What documents?'

'I've got a right in law to carry on using it, so long as I pay the rent.'

'But Mr Redmel is dead,' David pointed out.

'But I've continued to pay the rent – ten pounds a month.'

'Ah,' David glanced round at Jason. 'We were wondering where the money came from.'

The man favoured David with a small, disdainful smile. Seeing this, Jason sensed that he interpreted David's courteous manner as weakness.

'What's wrong with using your own garage?' He asked the man coldly.

'I keep my wife's car in there.'

'Your wife can move hers, can't she? She can rent a garage, or you can. But not mine. Mine isn't for rent anymore.'

The man replied with serene authority, 'Sorry, mate. That's how it is, and that's how it stays.'

'Don't call me mate!'

‘Listen, mate – ’

‘No, you listen – my garage isn’t for rent anymore.’

‘Calm down and let me explain it to you, mate.’ The man’s eyes flashed. ‘I been renting this garage for twenty years and I have the right to keep renting it. If you think I’m wrong, then you’ll just have to prove it.’

Jason’s mind blazed neon white. But he kept his voice low.

‘Arrogant fucker, aren’t you?’

The man leaned back, wide-eyed, as if Jason had slapped him.

David said quickly. ‘Wait, everyone. No one knew that you – ’

‘No!’ The man glowered ferociously at Jason. Rage appeared as natural to him as it was unnatural to Jason. For Jason, it was a mere historical legacy.

And sure enough, he already felt ridiculous.

David persisted. ‘Sir, lets just calm down.’

‘Calm down? He swore at *me* – ’ But something in David’s steady, docile gaze disarmed him. ‘Okay – you’re a solicitor?’

‘That’s right.’

‘Well, tell your client I’ve got documents and I can get witnesses to prove that I’ve rented this garage for at least twenty years. My name’s Dennis Brodan, if you’d like to contact me in the future. I’m perfectly willing to answer your questions.’

‘Yeah?’ Jason said, ‘My uncle had a car, so why would he rent his garage out?’

Brodan stared at him and spoke with scalding contempt, ‘Redmel had two cars, and he parked them both outside on the street.’ He smiled to himself. ‘He was all right, old Vincent.’

Jason turned to David.

‘Okay, we’ll have to discuss this in private.’

David nodded, eager walk away. But Jason did not move, instead he stared down the gully and waited. He was determined not to be the one to leave the scene first. That would be too much like they had been seen off by this old man like a pair of schoolboys.

Abruptly, Brodan began to rock from side to side.

Jason couldn’t stop himself looking round. Brodan was throwing him a baleful glare as he turned to leave and Jason saw then that he was a semi cripple and had to walk with an exaggerated swagger. In contrast to the powerful upper body, he had thin, bowed legs that made walking a painful effort.

‘I will leave you gentlemen to your business,’ he sneered, and sidled away into his back yard. The gate closed behind him.

Jason found David giving him a rueful look. He became aware of the sordidness of the gully around them.

‘Lost the plot, didn’t I? I’m sorry about that. I’ve got this temper just lately. Well, it’s since – ’ He didn’t want to mention his divorce again, but the word passed between them in a silent glance.

‘I don’t know. He was a pretty provocative customer, wasn’t he?’ David said, blinking at him.

‘He can’t continue to rent the garage, can he?’

‘I can’t be sure, off hand.’

‘But that’s absurd,’ Jason exclaimed. ‘He doesn’t own it.’

‘He may have acquired the right to use it.’

‘Right? How about my right to use my own garage?’

‘Really, these situations are best resolved through mediation.’

‘*Mediation?*’

David’s harmless gaze slipped away and Jason realised he’d started to shout.

He shook his head helplessly.

‘Jason, I know it’s aggravating when he’s obviously such awkward character,’ David said gently, ‘but I mention mediation because these situations are so horribly tricky to resolve in court. A judge may easily go against reasonable expectations . . . you never know. And in court, the man could give a very different impression.’ David paused, frowning against the icy wind that was beginning to gust up the gully, shaking the litter amongst the weeds. ‘See, he strikes me as somebody who might stick at it through to the bitter end. These old devils can be most obstinate.’

‘What about if I refuse to accept the rent and I remove the car?’

David was categorical. ‘Whatever you do, do not touch anything. Not even the padlock. The padlock is his property and if you damage it you’ll be liable. He could even sue.’

Jason turned away from the garage. ‘Let’s get out of the cold, shall we?’

But when they were back in the kitchen, David said, ‘I don’t mean that it’s a totally open and shut case. If you were to sell, then the judge might take account of the fact that not having access to the garage might affect the value of the sale.’

‘Yes, I see what you mean. But actually, I shan’t be selling up straight away. I’m living in rented digs in London just now, so it makes sense to relocate here for a while, especially as I can work from home.’ he glanced around the kitchen, trying to define the unease with which the house filled him. ‘But yes, perhaps in a year’s time, once I’ve got things sorted, I’ll sell . . . so, thinking about it, I will have to solve the garage problem eventually.’ He gave David a tentative smile. ‘Perhaps I could ask you to look into my position?’

‘I could, *if* you wanted. But take my free advice – don’t be eager to provoke a feud. It could cost you an awful lot more than it’s worth.’

Four: **Blackened Hearts**

There was no one else on the train, which hummed with a vile, sonorous drone, just like it was being pulled by a billion meat flies.

Jason stared through the window at the endless vista of derelict houses. The gardens were overgrown by huge, fleshy weeds, through which he could see brightly coloured plastic toys still lying wherever the last children had abandoned them. On the washing lines, the shirts and dresses were black as they rotted away. The sky was yellow, and everyone in the world was dead.

Jason opened his eyes and almost laughed. The end of the world was his best nightmare to date.

The familiar grey light fringing the curtains told him it was six-thirty in the morning – just like it did every morning. There was no need for him to get up yet, but going back to sleep once he'd woken up hadn't been an option for many months, no matter how tired he felt – and he felt very tired indeed.

With a weary sigh, he rolled out of bed and slipped into track bottoms and a tee shirt before he left the room. After all, one couldn't walk around naked in a family home, most especially when it wasn't your family – or your home.

The house was owned by a couple who came from what was once Yugoslavia. They looked very old, but they had two young daughters – lively, vivacious girls who slept downstairs. His landlord and his wife slept in the rear bedroom next to the bathroom. The bedroom next to Jason's was rented to three young Australian women of unremitting rudeness. As tenants, they all shared a gas cooker and a refrigerator, which stood on the landing.

He filled the kettle in the bathroom and put it on the hob to boil, then he went back to the bathroom to clean up. The whistle of the kettle would disturb the Australian women, who slept in late because they waitressed evenings. Still, this was an equal opportunities household, and they always made a point of slamming their bedroom door when they came home late.

He brewed a pot of tea, pulled aside the curtains, turned the radio on for the news – just loud enough for the Australian women to hear – and listened to it while sitting slumped on the bed. The room was beginning to emerge in the morning light. It looked like the neat bedroom in the neat suburban house that it was. By moving in he had made no difference to his surroundings, and when he left there would be no evidence to show that he had ever been here.

At last, he roused himself, put his work suit on and went out.

The quiet London back street, like all the rest in the city, was parked up solid on both sides. Jason's car, which stood in front of the house, hadn't moved for weeks. He had lost the confidence to drive since his divorce. But that had to change, and change right now. Because if he didn't even have the guts to drive to work, rather than walk in like some washed up loser, then how could he hope to dominate this morning's meeting?

If he failed, today of all days, Freya would have him beat all over again.

The street was still deserted. The cool air resonated with the distant and restless activity of the city.

Jason stared at his distorted reflection in the side window of his car, his hand resting on the freezing cold door handle and waited for the balance between failure and success to tip

one way or the other. A full minute might have passed and yet, he couldn't move.

And now he heard footsteps approaching from behind.

The hard, busy heels snapped on the cold pavement and Jason found himself gripped by the irrational conviction that the footsteps belonged to Freya, coming so savour her victory.

He scrambled into the car and turned the ignition key. The engine churned as if the parts weren't connected. He tried again, knowing it was futile, like everything else in his life.

The engine came alive. He stared in surprise for a moment, not moving, then he caught sight of something looming up in the wing mirror and he pulled away with a lurch.

His office was five miles away, but the traffic was so heavy and slow that the last mile took him half an hour.

Eventually, the road broadened out into a huge junction controlled by lights, and beside this stood the ten-storey building where he worked, surrounded by a windy, desolate expanse of car park. Jason had to take a right in front of three lanes of roaring, oncoming traffic to reach the entrance. It was a manoeuvre that required a basic willingness for everyone involved to make allowances for one's fellow man.

The horns blared from behind, while the cars coming from the side, having been forced to slow, never stopped inching forward, their sullen drivers refusing to meet his angry eyes. At this moment, Jason happened to remember the nightmare that had woken him up that morning – a vision of the world turned into a gigantic corpse.

That's right, you bastards, he thought to himself with sudden glee, your honking days are numbered.

He got across the road and parked in his usual space, from where he could see his window on the fifth storey. One little blank glass eye amongst many others. The view from up there, upon which he had gazed so often, encompassed the lower end of Kensington High Street – a wealthy area, with cleaner streets and brighter sunshine than other places in London. Freya had always loved Kensington High Street, and he remembered yet again with repugnance how he had once found her snobbery so harmless – attractive even.

Jason pushed her memory aside before it could solidify into an image of her face, so full of derision for him and his mundane career.

There was a time when Jason had loved his job. As a tax official, specialising in small-business tax avoidance, he could not deny he had found his true vocation in life. Freya, on the other hand, had been a talented graphic designer, but had not been so lucky in finding her perfect job. She had become a buyer in the print department of a large investment bank, work which she loathed. For this reason she could always say with some justice that she was meant for better things.

Jason slipped into his small office without having to stop and chat with anyone and closed the door with relief. He stood by his desk and absently flipped open one of the document files that lay upon it. But he didn't read anything. Rather, he gazed through the window and occasionally glanced at the wall clock.

When it finally reached nine o'clock, he left his office, his heart beating faster than it needed to, and climbed upstairs to the common room. It was on the top storey of the building and the last place where staff were still allowed to smoke.

Roger, his immediate superior, was sitting there alone, hunched in one of the fusty armchairs and drawing on a cigarette.

'Morning,' Jason said, giving Roger a nod as he went to the dented and rusted coffee machine. 'Great to be back.'

'Is it really?' Roger spoke with a precise enunciation and his dry-cured throat resonated the words as smoothly as fine cedar. 'But you had a nice time, I hope?' It was a meaningless question, though posed politely. Roger didn't actually know what a nice time was outside the office.

‘Yeah, brilliant,’ Jason answered as a way of dismissing the subject. He fussed at the coffee machine. ‘Oh – by the way, I’d better have the Carlotti file.’

Roger expelled two funnels of smoke from his nostrils. He loved smoking.

‘Pardon? Did you say the Carlotti file?’

‘Yes.’

‘I’ve put it on your desk, Jason. Didn’t you see it?’

Jason shot Roger backward glance. He was in his late fifties, but looked older. His thin, lined, grey-skinned face was topped off by a shock of straw-like hair, cut in a style that was probably no different from that of his schooldays. He always looked dishevelled and he moved in an abrupt, clumsy way. But his eyes, even behind thick lenses, were sharp and unwavering.

Unnerved, Jason couldn’t answer for a moment.

‘The filing clerk must have dumped something on top of it.’

He took his plastic cup of coffee and sat opposite Roger, who drew hard on his cigarette with desiccated lips and examined him dispassionately. His cigarettes fumed more than other people’s cigarettes, crackling loudly as they burned. When he exhaled, smoke didn’t only stream from his nostrils, it also seemed to seep from his stringy, fibrous flesh. Jason couldn’t help thinking the man was alight and smouldering away on the inside, day by day turning to charcoal.

However, while he was undoubtedly full of black fire, his smiles were always cold.

He smiled now.

‘Since you’ve mentioned Carlotti, Jason, lets run over a few points to bear in mind during the interview.’

Jason smiled back and told himself there was no need to worry. Roger, as his mentor, was only doing his job – helping him find his feet in his new grade as a full tax inspector.

But wasn’t it ironic how his divorce had led to this advance in his career? The long hours at work, spent avoiding the loneliness and humiliation of his rented room, had paid dividends. And from the beginning, Roger had been impressed by Jason’s tireless attention to detail. Roger had been working on the Carlotti case for years, and yet Jason knew as much about it now as Roger did, a mere six months after his promotion.

Carlotti owned a small chain of shops, selling imported designer fashions for women. Long ago, Roger had traced large sums of money moving between Carlotti’s bank accounts and various accounts registered in Italy and the Carribean. Roger could have let Carlotti know that he was under suspicion and frightened him into paying his taxes in full. But then, to Roger’s mind, Carlotti would not have fulfilled his true potential. In a sense, Roger had taken Carlotti under his wing, turning a blind eye to the discrepancies in Carlotti’s accounts. He cultivated and nursed Carlotti’s ambition, lulling him into an unfounded belief in his ability to run rings round Roger and defraud the Revenue and Customs Department.

And sure enough, Carlotti had blossomed under Roger’s subtle tutelage. Once, he had been no more than a typical medium-sized businessman, bending the rules a little. Under Roger’s supine guidance, he had fledged into a money launderer with criminal connections. It had been a simple strategy. Roger had allowed to Carlotti grow until he would find it impossible to justify his wealth, given his declared income. Very soon, Roger was going to land Carlotti with an enormous tax bill. If he paid it, he would incriminate himself and the Revenue would investigate him. If he didn’t pay up, well, that would inevitably trigger an investigation too.

Roger shrank from bad manners and he would never lower himself to say such a vulgar thing, but the fact was – Carlotti was truly fucked.

Naturally, Carlotti had not the slightest suspicion that he was truly fucked. He’d only know that when it was too late, in April, three months from now.

Unless, perhaps . . . just perhaps, Jason tipped him off.

For a price.

Trouble was, Jason could scarcely make an offer like that with anyone else around. Least of all Roger. And Roger, of course, had been *exceptionally* reluctant to allow Jason to interview Carlotti alone, even though, as his mentor, he was supposed to give him as much experience of handling clients alone as possible. But then, Roger had a lot invested in Carlotti. He talked about Carlotti almost as jealously as a fond father would about a favourite son.

Jason, therefore, had needed to employ the utmost care not to push Roger too hard. With his merciless and unwavering stare, the wily devil had unmatched form in seeing through the eager-to-please dissemblers of this world. It was no surprise that the most painstaking and gentle persistence was required before he relented. Even then, he had allotted Jason a purely routine interview with Carlotti, and that was only on condition that he see Jason beforehand to lay down the strictest guidelines.

And that's what he did now – lay down the guidelines. It was a chat that lasted three whole cigarettes.

The underlying message, however, was simple, Jason was expected to treat Carlotti with the delicacy afforded the terminally ill. On absolutely no account should the patient suspect that wasn't going to see spring next year.

When Jason got back to his desk, he straight away examined the Carlotti file to check that nothing unpredictable had occurred during his trip to Orbaton. It didn't take long to see that, just as Roger had said, there were no changes.

He was almost disappointed. The insane leap into the unknown, the crazy gamble in which he had everything to lose, could not be cancelled due to unforeseen circumstances.

To put it mildly, the time until the interview weighed heavy. He was almost physically sick with anxiety and needed to open the window to inhale the raw winter air. But this could not relieve the pain in his chest. There was a tightening knot in there, choking off his limited supply of conviction.

When the clerk on the reception desk finally phoned to say that Mr Albert Carlotti had arrived, Jason no longer knew whether he had the resolve to go through with it.

Five: **Mutually Assured Corruption**

Albert Carlotti stood out amongst the drab crowd in the reception concourse. A tall, thick-set man of twenty-nine, he was wearing a tan overcoat and dark-blue suit that looked like they'd been purchased that morning. There was a stark contrast between his very pale complexion and his jet black, glossy hair, which was slicked back. The handsome features were so pronounced they were almost ugly.

He was busy surveying the dowdy surroundings with derision and when Jason got his attention by introducing himself, his expression did not change.

'And where's Roger?'

'Mr Anderson? He's not available today. But that's not a problem – we both work on your case, Mr Carlotti. In fact, I've probably done more work on you than Mr Anderson has. An awful lot more.'

Carlotti met Jason's faint smile for a moment and then his eyes sank. His face became tense and displeased.

'But Roger asked me to come talk with him today. He said just him and me, see? That's why I came without my accountant, Abdul.'

'I know that he did, Mr Carlotti. I'm Roger's colleague and, like I say, I deal with your case too. There's nothing to choose between us – at the moment.'

Carlotti's black eyes narrowed.

'What?'

The knot in Jason's chest tightened even more. He was sure then he couldn't go through with it. 'Let's go sit down in my office.' He turned and went to the door of the reception room, opening it for Carlotti, who followed at his own, slower pace.

They did not speak again till they entered his office.

Carlotti took in the cheerless interior with a single, sweeping glance of distaste and pulled his coat off. 'Can I hang this up somewhere?'

'There's a hook on the door.'

Carlotti's suit looked more purple than blue. With his crisp white silk shirt and crimson tie he cut a dazzling, almost lurid figure against the dull beige backdrop of Jason's office. He hesitated as Jason asked him to take a chair – there was one facing the desk – and frowning, he complained, 'It's cold in here.'

Jason noticed for the first time how high pitched Carlotti's voice was for someone with such a deep chest.

'Yes, it is a little chill. The central heating system is very poor here.'

'They don't care if you freeze, maybe?' Carlotti grinned and lowered himself into the chair.

'I have no idea whether they care or not. Probably not. However, this is an old building, relatively speaking and, as it happens, the Revenue will be selling it off next year. They're getting a nice new place ready for us out towards Kew.' He sat behind his desk, which he had cleared except for Carlotti's file. The fat bundle of documents was five inches thick. He patted it. 'You've kept Roger busy, Mr Carlotti.'

Carlotti's eyes slid unwillingly down to the file. 'Is that all there is?'

'Oh, it's enough. And if you wanted to buy it, well, you'd be looking at a hundred grand.'

'If I wanted to buy it?' Carlotti's face was blank.

Jason almost burst out laughing. His audacity elated him. For a moment back there, he

really believed he'd run out of that commodity. 'Well, you would want to buy it, I think,' he grinned. 'A copy, I mean. If the original vanished that would look very, very strange indeed. But with a copy you would know how to stay out of jail. That must be worth hundred thousand, wouldn't you say?'

Carlotti jerked back in his seat, like he was jabbing down on the brake of his speeding sports car. A Mercedes, as Jason knew. Perhaps his driving technique made this his automatic response to any sudden shock.

Carlotti looked like he went far too fast as a rule.

'What the fuck – ' he leaned forward. 'Are you threatening me?'

'Threaten? Why do you say that?'

'You're asking for money. You want a kickback.'

'No, I'm asking whether you want to buy information. You don't have to if you don't want to, Mr Carlotti.'

'I don't need to buy anything off you.'

'Oh yes you do.' Jason smiled quietly. 'You need to know what Roger knows.'

'And what is it that Roger knows?'

'About the accounts in Monaco, for instance. Off the top of my head there's one in the name of Sendino, and another under Taravoci, but that's just the tip of the iceberg, isn't it?'

Carlotti's face went grey. 'I don't know those names.'

Jason laughed a little. 'Okay.'

'Okay?' Carlotti echoed stupidly. His eyes searched the room. 'What is this?'

'I've told you.'

'You want money. It's blackmail.'

'Only in exchange for my help. This isn't blackmail.'

'You want to *help* me?'

This was baffling. Carlotti was scared, and yet he continued to sneer at him. Jason was getting very sick of being sneered at.

'You're right, I don't care on a personal level. But you should still think about letting me *assist* you, because Roger's got you nailed. You haven't got a hope, apart from me.'

'No kidding.'

'Okay, Carlotti, lets just say you're totally fucking *dead*.'

Carlotti's jaw dropped. Jason had never seen a jaw drop before. It was funny.

'You swore.' Carlotti's voice was hushed.

Jason chuckled. 'Did I?'

Carlotti said something.

'Pardon?'

'You're just trying to freak me out. You can't act like this.'

Jason saw then that Carlotti wasn't merely scared, he was terrified. He felt disgusted. The man looked so commonplace all of a sudden.

A soft, snide voice at the back of his mind murmured, *Easy to crush a man, isn't it?*

Suddenly, he wasn't amused anymore.

'Mr Carlotti – Albert, let me explain it a little. Roger has been on your case for the past four years and come April, three months from now, he'll be hitting you with a seven-hundred and fifty thousand pound tax bill.' Jason raised his hand to stop Carlotti interrupting. 'A moment, please. Roger reckons he can justify it. He's turned a blind eye while you've brought property and goods that you shouldn't be able to afford. He's tracked oceans of cash sloshing around accounts that he can link to you. When you get that bill for seven-hundred and fifty thousand, lets suppose, for an easy life, you pay up. Please!' Jason looked pained as Carlotti tried to interrupt again, 'Please don't say you *can't*, Albert. True, you'd have to sell off some assets, but you could manage it. Well, if you do that, Roger's only going to say,

“Hang on, Albert, dear boy, you shouldn’t be able to afford seven-hundred and fifty thousand – not on your declared income.” See what I mean now?”

‘Then what if I say I can’t pay?’

‘Ah, that’s when Roger passes your file onto the fraud unit. They work with the police.’

Carlotti shook his head in confusion. ‘But if I did pay, then that’s all he wants, isn’t it. The money?’

Jason looked at Carlotti with genuine pity.

‘The money doesn’t actually mean anything to Roger. I’m sorry, Albert, but I just don’t think he likes you. If he did, he would have stopped you when you were still small time. But that’s all in the past. No, Albert, he has a dream, I think, and that’s to put you in prison.’

‘But that’s not fair!’ Carlotti writhed in his seat.

Jason bowed his head for a moment. Another time and place and he had been the one hollering that it wasn’t fair. The only answer he’d got was a big fat smile. Saying something wasn’t fair always makes a swine smile.

‘Albert, you should have paid your tax.’

Carlotti blustered, ‘But I will. I was going to. Let me talk to Roger.’

‘Talk to Roger and you’re finished,’ Jason snapped. ‘Do you think *he’s* got a couple of girlfriends on the go? Or a little holiday home in Miami? No, he’s far too busy proving that *you* have. He knows which restaurants you eat at, the shops you go to.’ He glanced in the file. ‘He knows about your little apartment in Paphos. Yeah, very nice for you. You spent a whole month there last September. With Natalie. Oh, that’s nothing. He could reel off your life for the past three years from memory.’ Jason laughed at the way Carlotti was gawping at him. ‘They probably wouldn’t let Roger past the door at the places you go to. That’s not a nice thought, is it, if you happen to be Roger? Don’t get me wrong, I’m not saying he actually *hates* you. Men like Roger don’t get too emotional, not in any way you’d understand. But you should know this much – he’s really, really set on giving you one hell of a knock, Albert. One hell of a knock.’

Carlotti’s voice was pinched almost to nothing.

‘And how would you stop him?’

‘From reading your file, I see that there is a way of anticipating Roger’s attack. You’ll still have to sell a lot of assets, I’m not saying you’ll get away with not paying the tax you owe, but at least you’ll avoid a full investigation. And jail.’

Carlotti blanched. ‘Not jail. That can’t happen!’

‘Calm down, Albert.’ Jason found Carlotti’s fear of prison pitiful. ‘I’m willing to help you. Trust me.’

‘But I *don’t* trust you. You’ve got to be trying to set me up.’

‘You mean entrapment? Don’t be stupid, that’s against the law. It would destroy the Revenue’s case.’

‘Stupid, eh? So you’re telling me that for a hundred thousand you’re going to put your whole career on the line? Bullshit.’

‘Put my *career* on the line?’ Jason scoffed. ‘That’s a joke.’

Carlotti stared for a moment in surprise. Then his eyes widened.

‘Wait – you’ve done this before, haven’t you? You’re fiddling the system! Oh shit, they’ll catch you and fuck knows what happens to me then.’

Jason was shaking his head.

‘No one’s getting caught. This is a one off – I’m leaving the Civil Service.’ He favoured with Carlotti a sour smile. ‘So, just call this a handmade redundancy package.’

‘That’s just bullshit. You *have* to get out. That’s right, isn’t it? They’re on your trail already. They know you’re bent.’

Jason looked down at the file and tried to keep his voice level.

‘No, Albert, I’m above suspicion. I’ve never done anything like this before.’ He looked straight into Carlotti’s eyes. ‘My career here is perfectly safe and sound. It’s me that’s kaput. I got promotion a few months ago and I still earn less than the office cleaners. That’s because I have to pay most of my wages in maintenance for my son. My ex wife claims she can’t work anymore. She got the house and everything else, including seventy-five per cent of my wages. Meanwhile, I get to live in a fucked up, shitty bedsit in Shepherd’s Bush.’

Carlotti watched intently as Jason spoke and, by the time he’d finished speaking, a look of repugnance had suffused his face. He shook his head.

‘Good story. It might even be true.’

‘Of course it’s true.’

‘Yeah? If you leave your job, a hundred thousand pounds isn’t going to last that long. You’re asking for peanuts. No, it just doesn’t stack up.’

‘It does stack up,’ Jason insisted quietly, holding Carlotti’s stare. ‘I’ve got assets my wife doesn’t know anything about. I’ve inherited a house, so I won’t need to rent and I’ll be able to work part time. That means I won’t earn enough for her to claim off me anymore. See? The extra hundred thousand will make life a lot easier – that’s all.’

‘For how long?’

‘Till the kid’s older and I won’t have to pay maintenance. Look, unlike you, I’m not aiming to get rich – or get caught.’ Carlotti winced at that. ‘I want justice. I gave the system everything and it turned round and dumped me in the gutter. Her and the system. Can’t you understand what it’s like to have someone pissing all over you?’

‘Oh yeah, you bet.’

That derisory tone of voice . . .

Brodan’s jeering smile flickered briefly in Jason’s mind and he instantly felt that hot neon anger burn bright inside his skull, threatening to blot out his reason.

‘Okay, Carlotti,’ he snapped, ‘it’s no deal. Look after your own fucking neck. Bye’

He began to collect the papers of the file together, ready to take it back to Roger.

‘What’s this?’ Carlotti was baffled. ‘Interview over?’

‘I’ve made my proposal, I don’t have anything else to say.’

After a pause, Carlotti stood up abruptly, but instead of striding out of the office, he mouthed some words silently and motioned that Jason should follow him. Jason stared dumbly for a moment, before it dawned on him that Carlotti suspected the room was bugged.

He sighed and rose from his desk, gesturing that Carlotti should lead the way.

Carlotti took Jason to the stairwell, which was behind a set of fire doors opposite the elevators.

‘Honestly,’ Jason said, as they walked down to the first landing between floors, ‘there’s no need for this.’

Their foot steps rang hollow on the concrete steps. When they reached the landing, Carlotti span round and seemed on the verge of taking him by the throat. ‘Do you know about Markhovsky, yes or no?’ He hissed.

Jason was too astonished even to shake his head.

Carlotti leaned right forward into his face, glaring ferociously, so that Jason stepped back and knocked his head against the grimy wall.

He cried out in pain and rubbed the back of his head.

Carlotti stared at him closely, fascinated. He murmured to himself, ‘You don’t, do you?’

‘Who’s Markhovsky?’

Carlotti span away. ‘That fucking Roger. He just doesn’t know what he’s doing.’

‘I think he does.’

Carlotti scowled at him. ‘You sure you don’t know about Markovsky?’

‘No. The name’s not in the file. I can show you, if you like.’

'Can you?'

'Is it a criminal connection?'

'What do you think?'

'Of course we have a suspicion about some illegal imports. Genuine leather Italian shoes, from China.'

'Is *that* all?'

'Yes, I told you.'

Some of the tension left Carlotti's voice. 'I hope that's straight up.'

'Like I say, you can see the file,' Jason said. He realised now that it was Markovsky who had terrified Carlotti all along, not Roger.

'Okay, it's something. But this is still really bad for me. Roger doesn't realise he's putting my life on the line. If I get prosecuted, Markovsky will assume I'll squeal on him, just to cut a deal. I wouldn't, but that's how these people think. They won't take any chances. I'm not joking, he'll have me killed before I get to court.'

Jason did not answer. Roger wouldn't allow a little thing like Carlotti's getting killed deter him from doing his job.

Carlotti gave him a curiously accusatory look.

'Is that the best you can do, offer me a copy of the file?'

'What else can I do?'

'You said Roger couldn't touch me if I sold assets and moved stuff around.'

'Of course I can give you a plan of action to pass on to your accountant, if he's not sure how best to proceed.'

Carlotti shook his head.

'No, guy, this is the deal, you have to stay in touch and advise us both every step of the way. Me and Abdul. You know Roger and how he works. There can't be any mistakes.'

'All right.'

'And listen up, if you don't stop Roger, then you're dead too.'

'Right.'

'I'm not joking. Listen, this isn't about importing some shitty shoes. It's really bad. It's –

'No, honestly, I don't care.'

'Sure you don't care. But Markovsky will shoot you in the face. I'll make sure about that, trust me. I'll tell him you know his name.'

Jason smiled. 'I want fifty thousand up front.'

'What I just said, it's not a joke.'

'Okay, okay. If you want to know, Albert, I'm not afraid to die.'

Carlotti's black eyes searched Jason's face wonderingly for a moment. He half laughed.

'I've forgotten your name.'

'Jason.'

'Jason? So, we're partners now, are we?'

'We're in business all right.'

'Divorce has a lot to answer for, eh?'

'I suppose.'

His expression softened a little. 'Why did it happen?'

'She was seeing someone else.'

'Did you have the kid tested?'

'What?'

'A paternity test. The kid might not be yours.'

Jason turned and began to climb the stairs. Carlotti followed and attached himself to his side.

‘Doesn’t matter. It’s too late anyway, we’re in business, you and I.’
‘Yes, you’re right. It’s too late.’

Six: A Smooth Exit North

Carlotti, dressed like he had somewhere better to go, visited him in his room the following evening. He handed the cash over in a plastic bundle.

‘Shit, this place is worse than your office. Where’re you going to put the money? Under your pile of dirty shirts?’ He sat on the end of the bed and shook his head. ‘I know you said you were screwed, but this is . . . you really *are* screwed, aren’t you?’

‘That doesn’t mean I can’t do the job. I’ll be starting after this weekend.’

‘Why not start straight away?’

‘I have pop up North to sort out my house in Orbaton. This will be useful,’ Jason added, weighing the cash in one hand.

‘I think sorting my problem out is more important than your redecorating.’

‘Relax, I’m on top of it. But Albert, you have to follow my instructions exactly. I can’t help you if you do something unpredictable. That will give Roger the advantage again. And me too, while he’s at it. Want a cup of tea?’

Carlotti glanced around the room and smiled at him very slightly.

‘No.’

He left and Jason lay back on the bed, noting how the ache of loneliness had been made more acute by Carlotti’s departure. It was like being electrocuted slowly.

Really, Jason couldn’t help liking Carlotti. But he couldn’t avoid feeling some sympathy with Roger too. He would be sitting alone now, out in some far-flung satellite suburb, not doing anything and not wanted while he wasn’t at work, inured to the pain of his heart – an organ every bit as redundant as an inflamed appendix and, no doubt, regarded with as much distaste by whoever he might dare to contemplate as a possible lover or friend. Society never offered its sweets to the likes of Roger. Rather, in return for his grinding, dusty toil, he must take whatever gratification he might find in the sacrifice of someone more alive than he was.

Jason turned the money over and over in his hands and then tossed it onto the chair beside the bed. He sat up, took a notepad and pen from beside the pillow and began to work on his plan to save Carlotti.

During the weeks that followed, his evenings were spent in the meticulous sabotage of Roger’s case against Carlotti, which he had to admit was a thing of beauty in its subtle intricacy. Dismantling it was an absorbing intellectual challenge that distracted him from the ugly world for a while. When David phoned from Orbaton, it was as if a two-dimensional character from an old black-and-white late-night TV show had come alive and was trying to inveigle him into a ludicrous fictional plot. One that revolved around the average cost of garage rentals in the Lucyfields District.

‘You see,’ David said with an absurd enthusiasm, ‘Mr Brodan will have to pay the going rate, or at least a court would say it was entirely reasonable you asked him to pay the going rate, even though that more than triples the rent. What I’m thinking is, Mr Brodan may very well decide the rent’s too high now and he’ll vacate your garage.’

I was desperate to get that sorted out, wasn’t I? Jason told himself. That desperation seemed shameful and ridiculous now.

‘That’s super. Would you write him then, on my behalf, and tell him about the rent increase? I’m thinking he would take it more seriously coming from my solicitor.’

‘Naturally, if you like. So anyway, I’ll be seeing you soon, I expect?’

‘That’s right . . . you will.’

Jason was forced to recall then that, yes indeed, he would be joining the cast of the *We Hate Lucyfields Show*.

After that, he buried himself deeper in his work. The rehabilitation of the Carlotti file was a masterpiece of reverse engineering. He tried not to think about it too much, but there was no getting away from it – he would have made a magnificent tax inspector.

And so, it was only towards the end of March that Roger could even have begun to suspect something was amiss, and that Carlotti had slipped away from him. Jason kept a close eye on Roger for signs of unease, but the cunning fellow gave nothing away. His impassive face seemed more dried out than ever, like it was woven out of lengths of coarse old rope through which blood could never flow – only smoke. He was no more expressive than a coconut husk. Likewise, when Jason handed his resignation in to the Revenue, Roger did not even refer to the fact, although he had been the one to recommend him for promotion in the first place and had believed, in his own words, that Jason was a great asset to the Civil Service.

Just as secretly as he'd worked on Carlotti's file, Jason had already begun searching for a job in Orbaton. The peculiar thing was, getting a part-time position (in order to avoid paying maintenance to Freya) was more difficult than he had anticipated. Even when employers had advertised part-time positions they were puzzled, if not downright suspicious, about his motives for applying for the job. Why didn't a young, qualified person want to work full time?

He was obliged to fabricate a story about going back to college to improve his qualifications and, at last, he was offered a post with a firm of accountants called *Denbigh and Co*. His role would be to provide advice to clients on how to minimise their tax bills. But even here the understanding was *Denbigh and Co* would be offering him a full-time post after he finished his course.

When Jason's last day came and his other colleagues in the office took him to a restaurant – a cheap Italian place always chosen for such occasions – Roger happened to have one of his almost unheard of days off work and wasn't present to wish him well for the future.

Jason chose not to dwell on what that meant.

The following day he rose early and within ten minutes he had taken everything he owned from his rented room and put it in his car. As a farewell to the Australian women in the next room he let his door slam behind him three times in a sort of salute to the atrociously rude. That done, he left the house, got in the car and started the engine. As he pulled away, he was appalled to realise he had just done all that had been necessary to uproot himself from London and there was no longer a single trace of him left in the vast metropolis that he had lived in for most of his life and which he still loved.

On the other hand, Orbaton, the dismal, dirty and sprawling city he was driving towards had a home and job all waiting for him.

His uncle's house stood on Esquillax Street. The side road, where Jason parked his car (and where David had parked on that first day) was called Melville Close. Up North in England, it seemed, the day was over by four. It was dark when he arrived and cold rain, or perhaps sleet, was coursing through the sour orange light of the street lamps.

He hurried indoors with his few possessions and was pleased to find that the house had been redecorated and refurnished according to his specifications. There wasn't a stick of his uncle's furniture left.

He hadn't concerned himself with what the builders had done with it.

And so, once again Jason owned his own furniture and property, and the new heating system had the place warm and cosy within a few minutes. He had entered the house by the back door, so he only noticed after he'd eaten that there were a couple of letters waiting for him at the foot of the front door. One was David's bill for his legal advice. The other was a

blank envelope containing thirty-five pounds instead of ten. Brodan had payed the increased rent for the garage without demur.

Jason stared down at the bank notes in his hand and tried to decide how he felt about this. He told himself, at last, that he'd rather have the money than the garage, and anyway, Brodan wasn't young and the situation would resolve itself.

He thrust the matter to the back of his mind.

Straight away he felt exhausted, although it was still before six. Perhaps – he told himself – it was on account of the long drive and the fact he'd just eaten, but it was all he could do to stumble up the stairs and crawl into the brand new bed in the rear bedroom, which had replaced his uncle's brand new bed. Within moments he was fast asleep, dreaming nothing.

Seven: The Call of Spring

Denbigh and Co. had eleven full-time employees and was located in an office block built in the most perfunctory of architectural styles on the eastern edge of the city, where most of the industrial estates lay.

Jason had quickly settled into his new job. He had a small room to himself on the top floor and his desk faced the window, from which he could contemplate an expanse of waste land, overgrown by winter weeds and strewn with litter no one would ever pick up and which would last forever.

Beyond this drear and pointless terrain lay a small public park, surrounded by wickedly spiked metal railings. To the right was the dead end of an old terraced street that led away to an area of town that Jason would never need, or want to visit.

The chief accountants of *Denbigh and Co* were men in late middle-age. The secretaries were all women who were a little older. Except for Lydia. She was in her twenties.

Lydia was about six feet tall, with most of her huge bulk concentrated in her upper body, which narrowed down to a pair of elegant little feet. Her big round face, with its colourless, protuberant eyes and small nose (so upturned that the perfectly circular nostrils looked forward) was framed by thin, reddish hair, which she wore quite long. True, her mouth was full and attractive, but her teeth, which she often showed in a slow, yet ready smile, were widely splayed. Despite her size, she moved with exceptional grace and the long, dark, flowing dresses that she favoured streamed around her in leisurely undulations.

Jason found he could not avoid an absorbed contemplation of Lydia's movements at the beginning of the day because, not long after setting himself down at his desk with his morning cup of coffee, he would look up and, without fail, catch sight of her as she walked to work.

He might see her just as she emerged from the end of the terraced street, or when she was crossing the park, or maybe while she picked her nimble way over the littered waste ground, her long dresses flowing around her hypnotically. Whatever it was, once he had seen her, he simply could not tear his eyes away until she was out of sight again.

The weeks passed, becoming ever more quiet and uneventful. The sight of Lydia shaping her course to work each morning left Jason feeling more and more depressed. He knew why – she personified provincial existence. A nice person, locked away inside almost comical ugliness and leading the most blunted of lives, with nothing different to look forward to.

Hadn't he escaped his rented room and Freya's clutches merely to condemn himself to a similar fate?

The satisfaction he had felt in cutting off the maintenance payments did not bring a lasting sense of triumph. Freed from that source of resentment, he found that he had no thoughts or ideas to occupy his mind. Time weighed most heavily at home – he worked only three days a week. The only people he saw were strangers, spotted from his windows. He didn't even see Brodan, his neighbour. The old guy might have ceased to exist, except Jason would hear a door slam sometimes behind the thin walls. But that would be only very early or late. Otherwise, the only sound was of Brodan running his bath, always between three and four in the afternoon. Furthermore, the rent for the garage was now posted, rather than delivered by hand, as if Brodan wanted to avoid meeting Jason face to face. Or even giving in a more definite clue as to his movements.

In his loneliness, Jason felt an all-too familiar gloom beginning to steal over him, freezing

his emotions. He went through the motions of his existence without experiencing the usual sensations of living and it began to dawn on him that perhaps somewhere along the way, during the breakdown, or the divorce, or the falling down, permanent damage had been wrought.

Perhaps he could no longer feel anything except a lust for revenge.

However, in the world beyond the house and his office, the nights were rapidly drawing out, the earth was stirring and the weeds becoming more luxuriant, obscuring the litter on the waste ground. The air filled with the anticipation of spring. There were glittering showers in the sunshine, creamy bursts of hawthorn blossom, sweet, liquid birdsong and . . . the beeping of his home phone.

‘Hey, Jase!’ It was Carlotti.

‘Hi there, Albert. Everything all right?’

‘Yeah, everything’s great. How are you?’

‘I’m good.’

‘You sure? What happened with the maintenance payments?’

‘Oh, the agency are still sending me letters demanding money. They’re confused, that’s all. They’ll work it out eventually.’

‘That’s right, Jase, you’ve fucked them over.’ By now, having got to know him well, Jason could tell by the tone of his voice that Carlotti was grinning.

‘Yeah, I’ve evened the score.’

‘Not quite – met anyone yet in your new town?’

For no reason Jason could think of the image of Lydia’s round, ugly face floated into his mind. ‘No,’ he said.

‘Well get on with it. You’ll feel better.’

‘You’re right.’

‘Of course I am. Anyway, what I’m calling about is I want you to do the tax return form instead of Abdul. Roger’s sent a letter asking for it back already.’

‘Already? Oh, a bit early then,’ Jason mused. ‘Hm, he’s not a happy bunny is he? Never mind though, Abdul only has to follow my instructions about filling it in –’

‘Abdul’s an excellent accountant, I’m not saying anything different – a *very* excellent accountant. It’s just that I want you to fill in duplicate tax return form. Then *he* can copy out what you write in his handwriting and triple check everything at the same time. Just an extra layer of security on top of everything we’ve agreed. Do you see what I mean?’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ Jason said absently, thinking about Roger and those glass-clear eyes of his trying to peer at them through the aether.

‘Jase – of course I’ll pay extra and everything.’

‘Not at all, Albert! I want to help. It’ll be my pleasure.’

There was a pause. ‘I knew you would,’ Carlotti’s voice was momentarily softened by gratitude. He went on briskly, ‘So, why don’t you come down for a couple of days?’

‘Oh – but Albert, we probably shouldn’t be seen together.’

‘No problem. A friend of a friend has got a flat right on the seafront, down in Brighton. I thought you could work there instead of at home. You see, I’m thinking, how about if your place got raided and they found all my papers there? I know I’m being paranoid, but what about if it did happen like that? We’d be fucked, wouldn’t we? Both of us. And this way, I’m thinking you’d be really relaxed down there, like on holiday. It’s in a great spot, this apartment. Sea views, and all that. And there’s the city at night. Pity you can’t bring someone down. But you can in the future. Anytime you want to use this place, you call me. It’ll be no problem at all. So come down Jase, to be on the safe side, eh?’

While listening to this, Jason began to wonder whether Carlotti was planning to kill him – perhaps out of fear of the mysterious Markhovsky – mysterious because Carlotti had

instructed him never to repeat the name to anyone – not even back to him.

‘Okay. I’ve got the next few days off. How about if I drive down tomorrow?’

‘Yes,’ Carlotti said without hesitation. ‘Hey, you’re worried about Roger too, aren’t you? This is early for him to be asking for the return and the accounts, am I right?’

‘It is a little early, sure.’

‘That letter’s a bad sign, isn’t it?’

‘No, I’m not worried by the letter. He won’t have a thing on you when I’ve finished, I promise.’

Carlotti slowed to a near stutter, like he was welling up with emotion. ‘I am thankful your help, I really am.’

Jason felt sure now that Carlotti was going to murder him. For extra peace of mind. Jason could appreciate that peace of mind couldn’t always be bought with mere money.

‘I know you are, Albert. Give me the address.’

They agreed to meet in Brighton at ten.

Eight: An Off-Season Spell

Next morning Jason left at six and arrived just after nine. Carlotti was already at the apartment, which looked over the sea from the third storey. He was not wearing a suit for once, rather he was in a worn roll-neck sweater and old jeans. He seemed far younger, almost boyish, and he greeted Jason with unfeigned pleasure.

‘What do you want to do, friend?’ He asked. ‘I thought we could go for a stroll along the front and get a quick drink.’

‘Yes, I’d like to stretch my legs. Where are the papers?’

Carlotti indicated a heap of documents on the coffee table. ‘We’ll talk about them later, come on.’

Outside the apartment complex, they passed by Jason’s car.

‘That yours?’ Carlotti asked with a smile.

‘Yeah,’ Jason half laughed. ‘The old work horse.’

‘That’s mine, there,’ Carlotti pointed at a spotless, silver BMW Escort. He grinned, curious to see his reaction.

Jason shrugged modestly. ‘Very nice, Albert.’

Carlotti’s grin softened into a private smile. Jason’s response had pleased him for some reason.

They crossed the road to the promenade and headed towards the pier, which hovered above the glittering waves. The air here had a clarity that reminded Jason how gloomy Orbaton was. The wind was cool, rather than biting, and smelled clean as it blew off the sea, driving the shades of Orbaton from his mind. The promenade was broad, so that the crowd could break into little groups with space between them. It was like he’d arrived at a more advanced civilisation. The people strolled without urgency, enjoying themselves, rather than always hurrying to get away from where they were. Jason noticed that he and Carlotti were walking at the same relaxed pace. Everyone appeared healthier and better dressed. Even the Brighton drug addicts looked tidier and less degenerate than the Orbaton addicts.

Carlotti filled his lungs.

‘It’s good here. I like Brighton. It looks like the place to settle down and have a family.’ He shot Jason a glance. ‘You should find someone else and try again. Second time lucky, isn’t it?’

‘Third.’ Jason smiled.

‘Better still, you get more practice. Anyway, what I always say is – it’s not what you do you regret, it’s what you don’t do. Yeah?’ Carlotti waited for an answer and Jason nodded dutifully. He went on in a graver tone. ‘Abdul thinks we ought to try and claim some tax back, the way the books look now. What do you think?’

‘Oh yes, you should,’ Jason said. ‘I ought to have advised you on that before. It’s natural to think they’ll go easier on you for not asking for a reduction, but if that’s what the figures suggest, then it’d be suspicious not to make the claim.’

They reached the entrance to the pier and leaned casually against the railing to look out over the sea.

Carlotti was silent for a while. When he spoke, it was in a more serious tone. ‘You say you’ve put me in the clear, but what if you haven’t?’

‘I have.’ Jason smiled at the sea. It was so beautiful, it almost made him want to live.

‘How can you be sure?’

‘If there’s something I’ve missed, we’ll hear about it pretty soon.’

‘But could you give me a warning, Jason, if I tell you everything Roger says to me in the meeting?’

‘Sure, keep me informed and I’ll let you know what I think. After all, it’s my neck too. But I tell you, I’ve done everything possible. He’s got nothing on us.’

Carlotti didn’t respond. After a while he said, ‘I didn’t have time to take breakfast.’

They retraced their steps and crossed the coast road and walked into the town. They had a drink and a bite to eat at café that overlooked a small public garden, in and out of which a flock of seagulls flapped, calling in their rough, alarmed voices.

Jason noticed how the young woman serving at the tables seemed more attentive to Carlotti than any of the other patrons, but Carlotti gave her no more than a glance, even though she was beautiful. Instead, he stared at the gulls.

‘Everything’s moving fast now,’ he remarked. Then he glanced at his watch. ‘I’ll have to rush back to London soon.’

‘I’ll get the form filled in by tomorrow.’

‘No, don’t hurry it. If you take two, three weeks even, I don’t care.’ Carlotti turned to him. ‘Roger troubles me.’

‘Does he?’ Jason stared back.

‘In the last meeting we had I noticed a change.’

‘Oh?’

‘He acted different.’

‘Different? How?’

‘I can’t pin it down. It was the way he spoke, mainly, like he was in on a joke and I was out.’

‘Forget it, he used to spook me sometimes just working with him.’

Carlotti turned to gaze at the seagulls.

‘He said, *Getting stung for taxes isn’t the worst that could happen to you*, like it was hilarious. What’s funny about that, Jason?’

‘Nothing. But then, Roger isn’t a funny man. What you got to remember is, there’s nothing in the file I haven’t got covered, and if it’s not in there he can’t use it to sting you with, can he?’

‘But you say Roger’s been waiting years to get me.’

‘He has.’

Carlotti turned to him. ‘Then, if he hasn’t got anything to use against me, why isn’t he angry? Why is he having this private joke?’

Jason searched Carlotti’s face, disquieted by the fear he saw there.

‘People don’t always act the way you expect them to. Isn’t it the case that sometimes people burst out laughing when they face death?’

Carlotti glanced away.

‘Okay, Jase, I’ll let it go.’ He nodded at the door. ‘Let’s make a move.’

They parted outside the apartment complex. Carlotti was paranoid about phones and he told Jason to call him from a public land line when he was through with the books.

Jason was smiling as he waved Carlotti off, but he had picked up some of Carlotti’s anxiety. He set to work on the books straightaway, combing through everything that Carlotti’s accountant, Abdul, had done under his direction, and reassuring himself that, after all, there was nothing to be concerned about.

But even then, Jason spent the next two days reviewing, over and over again, each step he had advised Carlotti to take. Each time he reached the same conclusions.

One: there was nothing that Roger could latch onto.

Two: Roger wouldn’t believe any of it for a second.

Jason also spent a few hours each day wandering around Brighton, which, as a city, was too big and wealthy to have an off season like smaller seaside towns. Any ghostliness was restricted to more remote sections of the front, where the open air amusement parks were shut down for the winter. Jason took care to avoid these.

By Sunday, he didn't see any reason to analyse Carlotti's papers again. If he had slipped up he couldn't find where.

Once he'd spent the afternoon filling in the duplicate tax return for Abdul to copy, he phoned Carlotti from a pay phone in town and got through to him in a bar, although it was only ten in the morning. Carlotti was too pressed by circumstances (there was a lot of raucous female laughter) to drive down that day, and he didn't want Jason to drive up to London. Instead, he asked whether he would wait in Brighton till Monday morning. He stressed it was for the best, adding in as low a voice as he could manage in a busy bar, 'It might look suspicious if I left now.'

Jason agreed, of course. He was supposed to be at work, Monday, but he could phone in sick.

He had enjoyed his stay, and that evening he went for a long stroll, trying in some indefinable manner to fix and preserve his mellow mood so that he could take it back with him.

Carlotti had promised he'd be at the apartment by eleven, but he was knocking the door at half eight, just when Jason was finishing his breakfast.

'Incredible news,' Carlotti said, beaming. 'Markhovsky's dead!' He laughed when Jason looked blank. 'Yeah, well, you never met him. Just thank God you never will.'

Jason asked quietly. 'Did you kill him, Albert?'

'What?' Carlotti was stunned. 'No, I didn't.' After a moment, he added regretfully, 'I ain't got the guts.' He looked around the apartment. 'How did it go?'

'Abdul's done all right. He's done good, in fact. I didn't have anything to change. You can send the form in when he's copied it. Here – this is everything, the papers and forms. However, I will say –'

Carlotti said. 'Sorry to rush, Jason, but I'm really, really pressed today. Are you ready now? Yeah? Come on, bring everything and tell me on the way.'

Jason picked up the documents, wondering whether this was it, when Carlotti himself, or a lackey of Markkovsky liquidated him.

They left the apartment.

Carlotti asked, 'What were you going to say, Jason?'

'Just that you'll have to be so careful from now on. I was thinking about Roger, you see. He can't do anything about it yet, but –'

Carlotti laughed delightedly, like a kid. 'You're too modest, Jase. You've fucked him. You're the man.' His fear of Roger, it seemed, had been swept away by the death of Markhovsky.'

'Yes, but –'

'Later Jason. Look at this first.' By then they had left the building and come out into the apartment-complex car park. Jason couldn't see anything in front of him except Carlotti's car. Carlotti grinned at Jason's perplexity, savouring it. All of a sudden, he tossed something over to Jason, saying, 'Catch!'

Jason reacted without thinking and caught with his free hand what turned out to be a car key.

'Enjoy your bonus,' Carlotti said, 'My car is now your car.'

'You're kidding, Albert,' Jason said, unable to stop himself grinning broadly, like Carlotti. 'But you know I can't –'

'Yes, you can. This is my gift and it's just a waste of time to try saying no.'

‘I was thinking it could be traced.’

‘Oh, I’ve sorted that. Officially I’ve sold it to someone else, and you’ll be taking it over from him, see? The papers are in the glove compartment. By the way, the rest of the cash is in the boot.’

Jason had not always believed Carlotti would pay the other half of the bribe, and in fact he’d privately written it off. Now he was too moved to speak for a moment. Carlotti smiled at him now with undisguised warmth.

In return, Jason could do no more than give a helpless shrug. ‘Well, I’d better get rid of my piece of junk.’

‘Oh, leave that here,’ Carlotti’s tone was businesslike. ‘I’ll get it scrapped. I know someone local.’

‘But the paperwork?’

‘It’s going to disappear with a lot of other rusty scrap, so if I were you, I’d claim the insurance on it,’ Carlotti said, glancing at his watch. ‘After all, you’re a free spirit now, like me.’ He tapped Jason on the arm. ‘By the way, you can give me a lift. I’ll give you directions.’

A few minutes later they reached the Hanover district of Brighton, where large stuccoed Victorian terrace houses, many of them painted in bright pastel colours, rose at a steep incline towards the crown of the hill that overlooked the city. Carlotti asked Jason to stop in a deserted street. He turned to him and they shook hands.

‘Goodbye, friend.’

Carlotti was always most grave when he uttered the word friend.

‘Thank you, Albert.’

‘I’ll call if I need anything.’ Carlotti smiled at him one last time and jumped out of the car. Moments later, he was gone and Jason set off on the long journey North.

Nine: **Street Crime**

Jason drove for a few miles and parked on a quiet side street, where he quickly checked the money. It was packed into a cheap briefcase. He stuffed three hundred in his wallet and hid the rest under the passenger seat.

Setting off again, he spontaneously diverted from his route so that he could approach London from the South West. When he reached the outskirts of the capital, a couple of hours later, he parked in Ealing, not too far from an underground station. From there he took the tube into Central London and did a little shopping.

Walking around the familiar streets, which seemed to smile back at him in mutual recognition, Jason found himself in a positively festive mood.

With a certain surprise, it dawned on him that he was no longer depressed. He had outwitted the whole system now, not only Freya and he suddenly wondered if he'd been living in a trance. Why he hadn't already put the house in Orbaton on the market and moved back to London, where he actually belonged?

For that matter, why should he bother going back to Orbaton at all? Couldn't he rent a room and arrange everything from here?

Well, it was tempting, except, he kept only a small balance in his bank account. He had plenty of cash, but paying rent in cash wasn't convenient nowadays. People were suspicious. They might start asking questions. And then, it struck him that he had been reckless to leave most of the fifty thousand lying in his car. A good car like that was a magnet for thieves.

He stopped dead in the street.

For that matter, it may have already been stolen.

Straight away he heard Freya's swooping laugh, echoing deep inside his head, where he couldn't block it out.

Loser!

Sick with dread, Jason scurried back to the tube, counting the seconds. Naturally there was a train delay. It took an hour to get back to Ealing.

As he turned the corner of the road where he had parked the car his heart was racing so fast it hurt. He was utterly convinced it had been stolen and that Freya had won after all.

But the car was there.

He stood looking at it for a long time. Or rather, he looked into himself, appalled by how fragile his new-found confidence had been.

He climbed in and resumed his journey. His spirits gradually revived once more as he began to plan his permanent return to London. Meanwhile, the further North he went, the more the sun flickered on and off in a broken sky and then, as the afternoon wore on, it sank without trace.

He reached the outer fringe of Orbaton by about half seven, pausing again and again at traffic lights as he progressed through the innumerable run-down outer districts of the city, with their tatty open spaces surrounded by rows of small, inadequate housing. The darkness obscured the details, but as he waited for another set of lights to change, he glanced across the way and saw a run-down corner shop that was lit by a single bare bulb. The customers inside were nothing but restless shadows.

He reached home and had just turned the car round at the end of Melville Close when he saw another car creeping out of the gully. He stopped and switched off his headlamps. Somehow he knew straightaway who it was . . . and indeed, by the light of the street lamp, he

could just make out the bulbous outline of Brodan's head in the car. The car instantly halted and although he could not see for sure, Jason sensed Brodan was looking back at him, with a long, slow stare. However, there was no street lamp at the other end of Melville Close, where Jason sat in his own car, and so he could not be seen.

At last – but only at a crawl – Brodan's car turned towards Esquillax Street and, after pausing for thirty seconds or so at the junction, even though there was no traffic to wait for, it slipped away.

Jason drove forward and parked in his usual place, under the street lamp beside his house. But as he switched the engine off, he realised that he now had a new source of unease. His new car. While he had been driving his old Ford, he wasn't the least concerned about it being stolen, but the BMW was going to cause him infinitely more worry on that score.

As Jason deliberated over what to do about this highly unpleasant situation, he noted it was a direct consequence of Brodan's grubby little power game in the matter of the garage. The image of that gross face, with its oddly refined eyebrows raised in sardonic superiority, came back to him now. It was as if Brodan were gloating because Jason was in danger of having his spotless BMW stolen.

He pushed the image out of his mind with a deliberate effort and told himself that tomorrow he would rent a secure place to put the car – assuming that it didn't get stolen that very night, of course.

It was this remote possibility, which was to keep him awake till morning.

He was unable to rest for more than an hour without going out to check the car was still there. At half four, exhausted and in a foul mood, he made strong coffee and sat downstairs to read.

Soon afterwards Brodan's car was to be heard revving in the gully.

His neighbour had been away all night. Jason went to the kitchen window, from where he could see the top of the garage doors, lit by the street lamp. He watched them open and then five minutes later, close again.

Brodan's car, at least, was secure from theft.

Jason fought down his indignation. He reminded himself that he had forced Brodan to pay the full rent for the garage and that, in turn, would cover the rent for a garage in which to park his BMW. Meanwhile, he tried not to dwell on the inanity of finding a garage to rent when he could look out of his kitchen window and see the garage he actually owned.

Instead, he concentrated on making the practical arrangements.

First he needed to put the BMW away safe till he found a local garage for rent. At nine o'clock, he phoned a commercial garage and booked storage space for a week.

Then he phoned the police to report the theft of his old car, the Ford that Albert Carlotti should be scrapping.

Jason had expected to speak to some indifferent police clerk who would do no more than note down the details and give a vague promise that the matter would be looked into. As it turned out, he was put straight through to the Stolen Vehicles Department where he spoke to a woman who could not have been more enthusiastic about finding his stolen car. Jason struggled to sound like he wanted it found. The policewoman even asked in soothing tones, 'Would you like someone to come out and see you later?'

'I'm going to work right now. I'm a little late as it is so no, there's no need really.'

'My name's Abigail, if you change your mind.'

'Okay.'

'And remember, if you think you've forgotten anything, any scrap of information that might help us locate your car, you'll give me a ring from work?'

'Yes. I will.'

'Unfortunately, we can't send anyone out to see you at work.'

‘Ah, pity. So, is that all?’

‘Just remember, Mr Carver, phone your insurance firm. Normally, people do that first, before calling us.’

‘Normally I would have too,’ Jason assured her, ‘but I’m very tired. I had a very restless night.’

‘But you’re sure you didn’t hear anything? I mean, if you were awake –’

‘Like I say, the car is parked on a side street.’

‘That’s right. I have typed that into our report.’

‘Good.’

She read, ‘Caller claimed he parked vehicle in side street, not directly outside house.’

‘I didn’t say the last part.’

‘But it means the same thing, doesn’t it?’

‘I suppose.’

‘Well, I won’t keep you. You’ll have to hurry because you don’t have a car to drive to work, do you?’

‘No, that’s right, I don’t. I’ll take a taxi.’

‘That’s sort of like driving into work, isn’t it, only it’s in someone else’s car.’

‘And someone else is driving it too. Is that everything?’

‘So far,’

‘Goodbye, then.’

‘Goodbye, Mr Carver.’

He was already an hour late, so he decided he would call his car insurance company from work.

He drove to the garage, where he would store his BMW for the time being and took a taxi to *Denbigh and Co*.

When he arrived in his little office he found Lydia depositing some files on his desk. She turned her great, flowing bulk towards him, her pale, round, wintery-sun face beaming a placid smile.

‘Hello, Jason, has your car broken down?’

‘No, it was stolen,’ he answered hotly, before he could even wonder how she knew about his car problems.

Lydia’s smile did not waver. ‘It’ll turn up.’

‘No, I very much doubt it.’

‘Oh, I’m sure it will, Jason. An older car like that, only mindless joy riders would have bothered with it. They might burn it out, but the police will find it all right.’

He shook his head in perplexity. ‘And why are you so certain of that?’

‘My uncle’s in the police. He always says the one thing they can be sure of finding is an older car that’s been stolen. It’d be strange if they didn’t.’

‘Perhaps they, the thieves in question, just scrapped it. Even an old car is worth something for scrap.’

Lydia’s ghoulish and yet somehow benign face didn’t alter its expression, even though he was beginning to sound a little cross. ‘Did you enjoy your holiday?’ She asked.

‘What holiday?’

‘Didn’t you go away?’

‘Why do you think I went away?’

‘Because Eric asked me to call you last Friday to see whether you could come in and your mobile was switched off, which is just what I’d do if I went away for a few days, you know, to really get away from it all with a nice friend and not be bothered by anyone. And then, you called in sick yesterday, so it was like you might be recovering from getting away from it all.’

He decided now that it was best not to lie to Lydia.

'I *did* go away for a couple of days.' He paused. Lydia's impassive gaze did not waver. 'I know someone in Brighton,' he added.

'I've never been to Brighton.'

Jason sat at his desk.

'No?'

He couldn't think of anything else to say.

In all probability, Lydia hadn't been to a great many places and he doubted somehow she ever would. His heart sank – she kept reminding him that life was tragic.

'Thank you,' he murmured, attending to papers on his desk. However, as she was turning away, he glanced up quickly and asked, 'By the way, Lydia, why did you think my car had broken down?'

'Because I saw you arrive in a taxi.'

He stared at her. 'Yes, I took a taxi because . . . my car's been stolen.'

Smiling, she said, 'Well, see you later, Jason.' And she rippled out of his office.

It was strange that so one so placid had ratcheted up his agitation. He was already exhausted and tense after a night spent watching over his car. It took an effort to get Lydia and her uncle out of his mind.

Then he remembered he had to phone his insurance company and inform them about the theft of his car.

He spoke to someone in a call centre who neither sounded interested, or bored, but was punctilious in taking all the details and thanking him for his call. At least the insurance company was easy to lie to. Jason appreciated good customer relations and he told himself he would use that company again.

At last, he settled down to work.

Throughout the day, and one by one, the various partners of *Denbigh and Co.* drifted in to ask about his little break in Brighton and, with far greater interest, to ask about the theft of his car. They were all most impressed by his sanguine attitude to the loss.

Mervyn, who the partner who had taken him on, seemed particularly encouraged by Jason's stoic indifference to the theft, perhaps because it proved he was a well-grounded character and a good choice for the firm.

Mervyn was about fifty-five, slim, without a grey hair on his head. However, whenever he smiled his face rolled up into a shocking mass of wrinkles. One had to be wary about Mervyn's smiles. They came at odd moments and disappeared without warning, leaving the other person smiling in mid air.

Smiling in mid air now, Jason began to worry that he appeared *too* indifferent about losing his old car.

'Actually, I wanted to get rid of it anyway.'

'So, it's worked out for the best,' Mervyn said, eager to conclude the matter on that happy note.

But Jason felt constrained to make his real point. 'I'll probably get a BMW next. Secondhand of course.'

'Of course.' Mervyn gave him another of his dangerous smiles. 'Still, a better marque like that is going to raise your insurance premiums, no?'

'I expect so.'

'Just thinking, Jason . . . it's an expensive car to run on part-time wages, isn't it? But you do know, don't you, that any time you want to go full time, you can just say the word.' He fixed Jason with a meaningful look. 'We're all very impressed with your work here, old son.'

'Thanks.'

Mervyn's intense stare continued for a moment longer, then he had to get back to work. But as he was leaving he said he would keep an ear open at his golf club – someone might

want sell their BMW. They all seemed to have BMWs at his golf club.

Jason wondered whether this also constituted an offer to get him in at the golf club – so long as he went full time at work.

But it was not nearly so tempting an offer as a new garage near to Esquillax Street would have been. He almost phoned David, since he had already researched the rental cost of garages in the area and therefore he might still have a list of landlords. They had talked about meeting for a drink anyway. On the other hand, David was a bit boring and worthy, the idea of phoning him slightly dispirited him.

After work, he went home by taxi and popped straight out again to get a paper and check for local garage rentals. There was a little parade of shops at the end of Esquillax Street, where a traffic roundabout merged five roads. The shops stood between two of the junctions. One was a newsagent. Just as he was about to go in and buy a paper, he noticed some cards in the window. These were private adverts, and sure enough between *Third-Hand Wheelchair for Sale, Fifteen Pounds or Nearest Offer* and, *Rubber Wardrobe Available, Call This Number* – was a card offering a garage to rent for thirty pounds per week. There was no address, just a local landline number and the name *Bector*.

Jason called the number on his mobile and got through to a child who spoke English, but spoke it with painful slowness. Getting nowhere, he was passed on to an older voice that spoke very fast, but spoke almost no English. Jason explained where he was several times, and repeated the word ‘garage’ over and over. At last, the voice shouted, ‘Number four, Hallam Street!’

The connection went dead.

He asked in the shop and got directions for Hallam Street. First he needed Clark Road, which ran opposite to Esquillax Street, on the other side of the fiendish road intersection. After that, Hallam Street was five minutes walk away, on the right.

He followed the instructions, found Hallam Street, a quiet road lined by semis and some larger, older detached houses boasting mature trees in their gardens, and reaching number four, a house with a particularly exhausted air, he knocked on the battered door.

It opened.

‘Mr Bector?’ Jason asked.

Bector nodded, smiling. He couldn’t have been over forty, but he was overweight and all the colour of his skin seemed to have collected under his eyes. He looked ill, but he also looked happy. Strange to say, he wasn’t the one who had spoken to him on the phone, his English was perfect.

Bector showed Jason the garage, a flat roofed, prefabricated building, plonked next to the garage that was part of the house. He began to expatiate on how very safe the area was and reassure Jason that they had never been burgled. Jason asked whether he wouldn’t disturb the family when he came and went.

In response, Bector waved his hand dismissively and smiled broadly.

‘You come and go whenever you bloody well like. It’s your damn business, innit?’

He started saying again how safe the area was, but Jason interrupted to say he would take it, starting next Monday. Bector paused to think about this, wondering perhaps about the week he was going to miss, but Jason had enough cash on him to pay for two weeks in advance.

When he walked back home, Jason timed himself and found it took him just under ten minutes, from garage door to front door.

Ten minutes wasn’t long.

Except, when Jason thought about it, the true figure was twenty minutes, because he would be walking both to and from the garage. And then, over the three days he went to work, that would add up to an hour each week – as a minimum, because he was bound to use

the car when he wasn't at work. That meant another forty minutes walking between the house and the garage.

Or one hour and forty minutes each week.

Or six hours and forty minutes each month.

In other words, more than a whole half day!

He tried to be rational about having to walk so far to the garage, but the calculations worked themselves out in his head without his having to try. And anyway, what vexed and tormented him about being forced to walk wasn't the effort involved, or even the time wasted. No, what he could not endure was the knowledge that Brodan had got him tramping up and down the street while he himself could put his feet up and relax at home.

By Christ, that son of a bitch knew what he was doing all right!

The issue wasn't about a garage, Jason saw that now, it was about power. Every time he took his car out of Jason's garage, Brodan could relish the helplessness of his neighbour.

This was a pleasure that Brodan must have thought well worth paying the extra rent for.

And it got worse.

The skin of Jason's scalp burned and prickled at the thought of it.

What if Brodan should find out about his having to rent a garage down the road? Then he could also revel in the thought of causing him still greater inconvenience, couldn't he?

In fact, he could virtually see the bastard scoffing at him right now.

Jason had never entirely got Brodan out of his mind since that incident in the gully. He could remember every detail of that big, ugly, sneering mug, with its snout-like nose and full-lipped mouth. The truly aggravating feature, however, were those fine, mobile eyebrows. They were the eyebrows of a ruthless satirist, arched in sadistic delight at the wounds he inflicted on lesser mortals . . . such as Jason.

Ten: Reinventing the Wheel

He did not sleep well that night, even though he was dog tired, and rose next morning in a haze of fatigue. After breakfast, he phoned for a taxi to take him to work. The driver was of the squat bullfrog species, with cold, sour eyes and a neck that was wider than his cranium. The silent type, thank God – except when he almost ran over a cyclist. Then he blared his horn hard and long.

Seeing the cyclist inspired Jason.

When they reached *Denbigh's*, he paid the exact fare without a word, then hurried straight to his office where the first thing he did was log on to search for local bicycle shops.

He liked the look of mountain bikes, but he decided he would buy a racer, since the whole point was to get to and from his garage in the shortest possible time.

From then on, and throughout the day, Jason's thoughts returned to the tantalising possibility of being able to get to his rented garage quicker than Brodan could get to his.

There was a mass of bicycle research data available on the net. It was all too tempting to extrapolate and calculate journey times. The trouble was, his reckoning was based on guesswork (for instance, he didn't know the exact distance to be covered, his own weight, the quality of the road surface, wind speeds, atmospheric humidity, et cetera, et cetera) and therefore his results were always problematic. Indeed, as his growing mental weariness began to deliquesce his brain he produced increasingly wild projections, ranging from between twenty seconds and three-quarters of an hour.

By early noon he could feel the blood pulsing in the veins of his eyeballs. The not knowing was unbearable. It was absolutely imperative that he carry out a real-life test.

Springing up from his desk, he hurriedly gathered the case files he was working on and crammed them into his briefcase.

On his way out, just as he was about to break out into a run, he met Mervyn in the corridor.

'I've got a migraine coming on,' Jason explained.

Mervyn's eyes seemed to retract into his skull as the loose skin of his face wrinkled up into what looked like a giant ball of elastic bands . . . he was giving Jason a look of sympathy.

'Krissy, our daughter gets them. Whatever you do, Jason, you mustn't try and work through one, even during the early stages. There'll only be hell to pay in the end.'

'I'm going home now,' Jason said. At that, Mervyn's face unwrinkled in an instant. Jason went on, 'But I've got the Hennessy file, and Singh's too. If I lie down now, it'll ease up and, as I'm an insomniac, I'm pretty sure I'll be able to finish them by tomorrow morning. Naturally, I'll be at the end of my landline both night and day. You can give me a call if anything transpires.'

'Bless you, Jase.'

Jason took a taxi to the best bicycle retailer in the city – according to their website.

The shop happened to be on the same back street where the tax office stood, the one David had pointed out to him that first day. It towered up – eight storeys of brown concrete and iodised glass, its gigantic club foot of blue industrial brick stamping down hard on the street. Gazing up at it, Jason reflected that Roger might call on that monster at any time and ask it to turn its attention on him and his provincial little life here.

But such thoughts were a little too abstract to slow Jason up – he had pressing matters to attend to.

In the shop, he bought the lightest, most aerodynamic design of bicycle they held in stock and pushed it till he got onto the other side of the ring road, which had four fast moving lanes to traverse. When he finally mounted it, he felt insecure and exposed at first, even on the quieter roads. However, once he was moving along, he gained confidence with amazing rapidity.

It was still quite early in the afternoon and the traffic wasn't so bad around Lucyfields. He thought he should practise a little and so he cruised around the area, riding up and down Esquillax Street a couple of times. Now and then, he wondered whether Brodan was watching him.

After half an hour, he felt ready to take the trial run. He took the bike into the hallway of his house, where he would store it, and began from scratch, timing himself by his wristwatch.

He set off at a fair pace. Esquillax Street was almost straight and he felt a surge of triumph as he reached the traffic island in two minutes, compared to six it took to walk. The traffic island was the tricky part. With five roads leading to it, he had to look out in four different directions. And even though it wasn't rush hour, he still had to wait for a car. Once across, he put on a spurt down Clark Road and took the right turn into Hallam Street. He noted that this turn would hold him up if there were traffic coming from the opposite direction. From there he raced up to the rented garage and almost fell off as he cut a tight circle on the driveway. Just then, he caught sight of Bector standing outside his own garage. The dark patches under Bector's eyes shone bright puce in the low sun as he gawked at Jason. He had an adjustable spanner in his right hand, which he held out, as if in supplication.

Jason forced a smile and shouted, 'Just testing. Thank you!'

Bector did not have a chance to reply, Jason was already haring back towards Clark Road.

When he got back to his house, he tumbled off the bike in his eagerness to get the front door open. As soon as he pulled the bike after him into the hallway, he let it drop with a loud clatter and checked his watch.

He'd done it in six minutes and twenty seconds – three minutes and ten seconds each way.

That was a total saving of thirteen minutes and forty seconds.

Jason took a moody comfort from the result. It wasn't bad, but whether it was an actual success or not hinged on how long Brodan took to get his car out of the garage.

Still, at least his thirst for knowledge had been temporarily quenched.

He settled down and spent the rest of the afternoon and early evening working on the Singh file. Then, once he'd dined lightly, he put a chair in his courtyard just before seven. He knew by direct observation that Brodan left about that time for what must be his night shift.

When his neighbour's back door opened, Jason took a note of the precise time by the luminous dial of his watch. It was dark, except for the orange street light that shone between the bare branches of a tall plane tree on Melville Close.

Moments after the key in the back door turned came the sharp clank of the gate latch. Jason noted then that for a big man with a bad hip Brodan moved with startling agility.

After that, came the opening of the garage doors, and then the shunting of the car out into the gully, and then the closing of the garage doors, and finally the *clop!* of the car door.

Brodan took two minutes and forty-five seconds to retrieve his car.

Subtracting that from the time it took Jason to reach his rented garage on his bicycle – three minutes ten seconds – left a difference of twenty-five seconds in Brodan's favour.

Even Brodan could not be smug about such a small margin of superiority.

Could he?

No, surely not!

Jason allowed himself a tentative satisfaction. The arrogant sneer was at long last slipping from Brodan's coarse face.

That night Jason slept better than he had for weeks.

Eleven: **Temporary Sanity**

Now that he was cycling to and from the garage at rush hour, when the traffic was most dangerous, Jason soon noticed how drivers had a tendency to risk his neck to get to where they were going as soon as possible.

The most hazardous part of the route was the traffic roundabout with its five paths to destruction. When negotiating this, he had a mere split second to get into the correct lane and take precedence – at least according to the lawful rules of the road – before a car, or motorbike, or lorry edged their front wheels over the line, in which case they could take precedence. This roundabout was always going to be the main hindrance to Jason's ability to achieve time parity with Brodan. If he could just sail across it then he might even beat Brodan in the race to their respective cars.

After three weeks, Jason had shaved his time down to an average of three minutes. A mere fifteen seconds behind Brodan. True, he needed a following wind and no rain, but then Brodan sometimes had a bad day with his hip, so that the pain slowed up his waddle to the garage, bringing him down to three minutes twenty-two seconds and thus allowing Jason the better margin. Sometimes Brodan's car did not start first time, once again giving Jason the advantage. Now and then, Brodan's wife, who Jason had never seen or heard, seemed to detain him, no doubt by asking him to buy some item from the shops.

But these variables were a result of mere trifles for Brodan. Jason, on the other hand, had to face and do battle with the eternal traffic roundabout. This often delayed him, and the frustration of being delayed never failed to conjure Brodan's smirking face and those wicked eyebrows arched in mocking derision.

Jason could endure this goading only for long and one morning he succumbed to the maddening provocation. He fudged out from Esquillax Street onto the roundabout, perhaps a heartbeat before a dinky little Japanese car emerged from the adjacent road. The car hadn't dreamed of stopping and being forced to stop after all, or rather squeal to a halt about half an inch behind Jason's rear wheel, caused it to let out an enraged parp from its snivelling little horn.

Jason swivelled on his seat and gave the driver the finger. He caught a glimpse of a long, thin face bobbing behind the windscreen. It was contorted by fury. The engine revved in violent protest and the car screeched away, taking the road straight ahead, while Jason continued for Clark Road.

If he'd been just a second slower then the car would have smashed into him.

The furious stupidity of the driver incensed him, but as usual his anger quickly waned and he felt ashamed of making the crude gesture. It was a mark of failure, he told himself, to react like that, or even react at all and, stung by remorse, he slowed down a little.

Perhaps because he wasn't rushing like a lunatic, when Jason reached his rented garage at Bector's, he noticed a couple of Bector's kids and an old guy he'd never seen before, grinning at him mockingly from the bedroom window. He knew straightaway that they must have watched him before. After all, he reflected now, he must have been a very entertaining sight each morning as he tore towards the garage, wrenched the door open, reversed the car out at fifty miles an hour, flung the bike in the garage, slammed the door down again and lurched away on screeching tyres.

Nought to seventy in two seconds.

Jason's brush with death had not only slowed him down, it led him now to consider more

carefully what he was doing. His reflex excuse was to blame Brodan for everything. But the unpalatable truth was that Brodan could not be blamed for harrying him to his death like this.

He was doing that to himself.

From then on, he decided he would walk to his garage. In fact, he would make a point of strolling at a nice, civilised pace. By rights, he should be enjoying his own life too much to bother about Brodan. After all, he was still young, and if he could only motivate himself, then by this time next year he could be back in London.

That evening, when Jason returned from work and was putting the car in the garage, he snatched a sly glance at the bedroom window of Bector's house. The kids weren't there. Pity. If they had been then they would have seen that he was not going to race anymore. He would ride the bike home one last time, going at a leisurely tempo and then store it in the hallway, for use on sunny afternoons when he had nothing better to do. Yes, from now on he'd walk. The streets, with their mature plane trees and pretty front gardens, were far from unpleasant. It was already late spring. The weather had been most clement and all in all a short walk wasn't such a chore, was it?

In fact, it made more sense to assume Brodan, who had a crook hip, would envy him for being able to walk without suffering pain.

Jason cycled away at an easy pace and approached the roundabout without any thought of shooting across. And for the first time ever he found the way clear. He circled round the island and was executing a graceful turn into Esquillax Street when the distant roar of a rusty, oil-guzzling engine gained on him with baffling speed and in the next instant the whole of his right side exploded in white, blazing pain. A giant's hand seem to pluck him off his bike and dash him onto the pavement, where he lay inert, his eyes still open and his vision filled by the crumbling surface of the asphalt – so close, like he was looking at it through a microscope. He found the power to move gone, as if were glued to the ground.

Soon the loudest noise was not the traffic, but the excited jabbering of human voices.

Twelve: **The Dreaming Sentinel Reveals Himself**

He sat at his desk, which was covered in a great drift of filthy litter, and gazed through the broken window at a yellowish sky polluted by the gigantic stench that rose from the sweltering, vapid earth.

The air vibrated with the hum of billions upon billions of meat flies. The weeds and the trees, even the metal railings of the park, seemed to be wilting in the sickly heat. The roofs of the terraced houses sagged like giant saddles. All the windows were shattered and gaping. Everyone in the world was dead.

Actually, Jason was feeling relaxed and at ease. He had his case load under complete control. Nobody was paying any tax this year.

Just then, just as he put his feet up on the desk, something caught his eye. He stared in horror and amazement. Lydia had just emerged from the road by the park as if nothing had changed. A moment later she was crossing the wretched patch of waste ground, smiling to herself as usual, even though her every step stirred up a dark cloud of insects.

As she neared, he screamed when he saw what was wrong with her face.

He woke with a start.

'How are you feeling, Mr Carver?' A doctor and a nurse were looking down at him from either side of his hospital bed. The doctor, a hawk-faced woman in her late thirties, was the one who'd spoken.

'A lot better now, thanks.'

The doctor nodded.

'Do you have anyone who can be with you tonight?'

'No, I live alone.'

'Then I suggest that you stay in for tonight, Mr Carver. I'd like to see that you're through the worse of the concussion. Not that I think there's anything to worry about. You're fine, I'm sure.' She favoured him with a brief, bleak smile. The nurse was watching him without emotion. 'I'll look in on you in the morning.'

They walked away from his bed.

Jason stared dully at their retreating backs. His eye ranged over the ward and counted six beds. Two were unoccupied, including the one next to his, although this was the bed that had all the most expensive medical equipment positioned around it.

Gradually, he became aware that the whole of his right side throbbed. Not only this, when he closed his eyes to try and rest, he found himself plagued by the eerie sensation that his body was split from top to bottom. He knew this was an illusion, of course, but it nagged at him like an actual physical condition. Worse, whenever he moved, he was sure he could hear the two halves of himself, the bones, tendons and fissured organs, creaking and snapping against each other.

And yet, he was dreadfully tired and by keeping himself absolutely still the illusion didn't bother him too much.

At some unknowable time later, he began to drift out of consciousness.

By degrees voices reached him though the numbed darkness. In a weary glance, he saw that it was the visitors' hour. He tried to get back to sleep.

A chair scraped beside the bed and his eyes opened automatically.

The great billowing form of Lydia was floating beside him. Her broad, moon-like face, with its placid smile and small, protuberant eyes, quite colourless, contemplated him with

what appeared to be fondness.

Jason gave her an embarrassed smile, because he didn't feel any fondness in return.

'Hello Lydia.'

'I'm sorry, I didn't mean to wake you.'

'No matter, I wasn't really asleep.'

'It's such a relief to sit down, I've traipsed from the other end of the hospital. I was over there to chat with Aunty Luria.'

'Luria?'

'She works as a nurse in the terminal ward.'

'Ah.' He nodded, feeling that he knew she'd say that.

'How are you feeling?'

'Fine, fine. Strange that you're here, Lydia, I had a dream about you.'

'Oh?' This pleased her. 'Something nice, I hope.'

'I saw you walking to work.'

'Oh well.'

'How did you know I was here?'

'When you didn't turn up this morning, Mervyn asked me to phone. He said you suffer from bad migraines and he was worried. I called, but you weren't answering your land line, and your mobile wasn't on. I was a little bit worried too, to be honest, but the thing is, I was supposed to call my aunty anyway – Luria – because we're going to Alton Towers next week, all being well.'

'Alton Towers?'

'It's a very nice place. There's fun rides, a zoo full of dinosaurs and great big gardens.'

'That is nice.'

'So, when I phoned Aunty to say everything was okay for Alton Towers, I thought, why not ask her to check for your name on the computer system? I know it sounds like I was being . . . ' She hunted for the right word.

'Morbid?' Jason said.

'No, pessimistic. So, Aunty looked on the computer system and there you were. It was horrible, Jason, because the fact is all this has happened before.'

'What?'

'To someone I used to know. I was supposed to meet him and when there was no answer on the mobile I thought he'd just, you know, stood me up. But no – he'd been run over on his motorbike instead.'

'I don't have a motorbike, I have a bicycle.'

'It was a motorbike with a very small engine. So small, I thought of it as a bicycle.'

'Did you tell Mervyn I was in hospital?'

'Yes, and they all send their love.'

'I may be away for a couple of weeks, but if they courier the files to me, I can work from home.'

'You should rest, really,' Lydia said, casting a wistful glance over his prone form.

'I'll be home tomorrow morning, it isn't so serious.'

Lydia seemed alarmed by this. 'You're staying in two nights?'

'The doctor said the extra night is only because I'll be alone at home,' Jason said, recalling just then the doctor's indifferent demeanor and her cold, perfunctory question about how he felt. It was such a pitiful parody of having someone care about him.

Lydia began to talk about how she wished she had a place of her own, like he did.

'Where do you live?' He asked.

'With my sister and brother-in-law. I've mentioned them before.'

'Of course.'

‘They’ve got two toddlers and that’s why I’m always saying I’d like some peace and quiet, even though I really like looking after them. Their kids, I mean. Or any kids . . .

‘I’ll probably sell up next year,’ Jason remarked. ‘The house is okay, but I don’t like the Lucyfields area . . . in fact, I don’t like Orbaton much.’

‘That’s a shame.’

‘But I like working at Denbigh’s . . . so, perhaps don’t say anything to the others, eh?’

‘I shan’t,’ she murmured. Glancing around then, she added, ‘Tell me if anyone else is coming to see you. I don’t want to be in the way.’

‘No, I haven’t told anyone I’m here.’

‘This is a small ward. The terminal ward, where my aunty works, is much bigger.’

‘It can’t be called the terminal ward, surely.’

‘No, no, it’s not. It’s called the Eric Ghuergurdy Ward, after the famous Eric Ghuergurdy. It’s the end of the visiting hour, Jason.’

He thanked her for coming and, wearing a dutiful smile, he watched her leave.

Once she was gone – but not a second before – he experienced a little stab of remorse for not appreciating her kindness more. She might be ugly on the outside, but that wasn’t so awful as he felt just then – ugly on the inside.

Something he had suspected all along came to him as a complete certainty now.

Hospital couldn’t help him anymore.

He called for the nurse and told her that he was discharging himself. Her blank expression did not change, as it would not have changed if he had gasped and expired on the spot. But still, his leaving presented her with an administrative problem and she asked him whether he shouldn’t listen to the doctor’s advice and stay for another night. Judging by her tone, her real question was: Why don’t you stay where you are till the end of my shift so I don’t have to go and get the discharge forms and your clothes?

Jason repeated what he was going to do and added that he couldn’t care less what the doctor thought. He kept his expression as blank as the nurse’s and she got the message.

An hour later he was back home.

His head swam a little after the taxi ride through Orbaton city centre and his right arm and leg ached to the bone. Whenever he closed his eyes in pain, he could hear the crunching of the fissure that divided his body. He felt he was only held together by some viscid cords of flesh. Limping, he went to the kitchen where he kept some medicine and when he found he didn’t have any pain killers the pain abruptly grew much worse. Riding the bike was out of the question, and so he hobbled slowly up Esquillax Street, past the traffic roundabout, over the spot where he had lain like a broken puppet, and on to the little parade of shops.

It was past seven in the evening by now and the chemist was closed, but the newsagent’s was still open. Jason asked the guy behind the counter for the strongest painkillers he stocked. The clerk, a thick-bodied Turk, stared with dispassionate curiosity into Jason’s suffering face and brought up a plain white box.

He lowered his voice. ‘These are codeine. Only one at a time, eh?’

Jason nodded. He understood and sympathised that the newsagent didn’t want a customer to die on him. He sold the news, he didn’t want to feature in it.

Jason went back down Esquillax Street and as he neared his house, he saw Brodan’s car nose out from Melville Close. It turned and slunk away up towards the town.

He couldn’t be sure at first, but the more Jason thought about it, the more convinced he was that Brodan had seen him shuffling along the pavement, even more of an invalid than him now.

Back home, he took a couple of the codeine tablets. Almost instantly, the pain began to ooze out of his bones and flesh. It was reduced to a faint pressure on the surface of his skin – bearable, but ever ready to invade him once again. He realised then that he was hungry, but

the codeine made him too drowsy to bother cooking, so he went upstairs to lie on the bed for an hour or so.

All at once it was dark and the house and the streets all around were immersed in silence.

Having woken, Jason lay inert on his bed and made no attempt to rise. Almost at once he heard a car approaching from the far distance, the sound carrying perhaps for half a mile in the utter silence of the night. He glanced at the red figures of the alarm clock and was not the least surprised to see that it was half four in the morning.

But he already knew what the time would be, didn't he? Just as he knew the car coming closer and closer was Brodan's.

It slowed at the front of the house, changed gear and crept into Melville Close.

Jason pushed himself upright and looked through the window.

The car turned into the gully. The light from the headlamps danced as the wheels dipped and rose in the runnels of the gully. It came to a halt and, while the engine was left idling, the door opened and Brodan's dark figure slowly emerged.

With his mind's eye, Jason could see every crease in Brodan's pain-racked face as he struggled out of the driver's seat. He was sure he heard Brodan grunt as he did so. Now he was waddling to the wooden doors of the garage. Soon there would be a scraping sound as they were dragged open over the dried mud and weeds of the gully.

As he listened, Jason closed his eyes. But the scene remained perfectly clear. The car door clapped shut now. The engine revved and subsided, revved and subsided as Brodan manoeuvred it into the garage, going backwards and forwards, six, seven, eight times before he could finally park the car inside.

Jason opened his eyes again and craned down at the scene.

The light from the street lamp in Melville Close illuminated the upper portions of the garages as well as part of Brodan's courtyard. Because of the way Jason's house projected out to the right, his own courtyard was left in pitch darkness.

Brodan pulled the doors of the garage shut and snapped the padlock's shackle. He turned and his big, exaggerated face bobbed in the thin, orange light as he swayed from side to side in his peculiar walk. The sight should have been ludicrous, but Brodan managed to make himself look almost regal in his bearing, as if he swaggered rather than hobbled. He opened his gate, the latch clacking sharply as he pressed it with his thick thumb.

Jason did not bother to watch him cross the illuminated half of his courtyard on his way to the back door. He was suddenly lost in thought, gazing sightlessly at the inscrutable faces of the garages while he wondered how on earth Brodan's car could have woken him, even while it was still so far away.

In a heartbeat, he crossed over from blissful ignorance to fatal knowledge.

And now he knew.

He had stood at this very window, night after night, ever since he had come to live here and in a waking trace he had watched Brodan's movements with wrapt absorption.

In that moment, he had a vision of himself, fixed ghostlike in his strange, solitary vigil. The loneliness of the image made him shudder, causing the two halves of his body to grate nauseously against each other.

But that is not a real memory, he heard himself cry in despair, terrified for his sanity, I only dreamed it. I haven't walked in my sleep for years –

His thoughts were cut short.

Brodan had swaggered back into view and was now staring up at him.

Jason froze and the hairs on the back of neck stood up. Brodan seemed to be watching him intently, his unwavering eyes sunk in black pits of shadow.

But Jason knew he was invisible, cloaked in darkness and he stared back with cold hatred.

When Brodan finally turned away, the lamplight fell full upon his face, revealing in stark

clarity his pencil-line eyebrows arched high into his forehead. It was the look of a man pretending that whatever he was doing it wouldn't be of the slightest interest to anyone else.

Jason leaned forward, fascinated, till his forehead was practically pressing against the window pane. He watched as Brodan carefully surveyed the gully, stretching his neck to peer over the fence. And then he cocked his head, as if listening for anyone skulking around outside his gate. He had to patience to wait, motionless, for several minutes.

Now he turned back again, giving Jason's window a cursory glance on the way to making a closer examination of the upper windows of the house to the other side of his. But he did not linger on these as he had with Jason's. In the blink of an eye, he was gone, having knelt down with remarkable speed, so that he was hidden by the courtyard wall.

Jason stared at the vacant spot that Brodan had left behind and waited. His blood pulsed as thickly as sand at his bruised temple and, in the suspended moment, this was the only sign that time was passing. Brodan might never have been there. Jason remained at his post though, even as the pain of his injuries had begun to burrow deeper into his right side. He was determined to beat Brodan at his game, whatever it was.

All at once, Brodan did reappear, his face contorted by the painful effort of standing up. Casting a sullen glance around the courtyard, he headed back towards his house. The sound of the back door opening and closing followed. It had a disconcerting familiarity for Jason, as if he had heard it many times before in the silence of the night.

Then he remembered that, of course, he had.

He could not bear to think about that anymore.

Instead, he went downstairs, took a couple of codeine capsules and after a moment's thought, took another.

It would have been so easy to take the rest.

Thirteen: A Curious Calm

He slept through till eleven in the morning.

A dose of deathlike oblivion seemed to have made all the difference – he woke feeling thoroughly reinvigorated. And, to his puzzlement, in a really good mood.

The skin of his arm and leg on the right side was inky black with bruising, but the pain was no longer digging down to his bones. It was vanquished entirely by a single codeine tablet.

After breakfast, he phoned David's office.

David was in a meeting. His secretary took a message and he returned the call within an hour. His jolly tone sounded a little less laboured than usual, and he seemed delighted to hear from Jason. He didn't hurry to find out what he wanted, as if he considered this to be a social call. Jason remembered then, with a twinge of guilt, how he had prevaricated over calling David and he wondered why he hadn't cultivated him as a friend earlier. Hearing his voice again cheered him up.

'I thought we should meet,' Jason said, once he had explained about the accident. 'I'd like to hire your services again. I want to make sure I get full compensation from the driver's insurance. I don't want to use one of these ambulance chasing firms.'

'This is awful,' David said, still taking stock of the news. 'You're not badly hurt, Jason?'

'No, like I say, some bruising and mild concussion. I was lucky.'

'Yes, you were lucky. Thank Heavens.'

'How about if we talk it over a drink up town? Unless you'd prefer that I came to the office.'

'No, no, I'd love to,' David said. He hesitated. 'But maybe not this week, so soon after the accident?'

'Next week will do. When you're free.'

'I'm not free much these days,' David said, his voice growing softer as he dwelt on some pleasing fact. 'But how about Tuesday week, at the *Posada*?'

Jason didn't know this pub. David explained it was just a few doors down from his office on Ledgebow Street.

They set the time for seven.

Fourteen: **The Post-Dated Revelation**

Jason arrived a few minutes early and found David was already standing at the bar.

The *Posada* dated from Victorian times and exhibited traces of the typical heavy and lush interior design of the period, which now looked like some corner of the tropics had been petrified.

David greeted him with undisguised pleasure.

‘We used to come here a lot as students,’ he said, once he had ordered a drink for Jason. ‘It’s got some ambience at least.’

Jason agreed, remembering the more stolid type of student from his own days at college – the disingenuous, harmless souls he used to find rather boring and had never associated with. They would have frequented an old-fashioned place like this.

They sat at a table to the rear of the pub, which was divided off from the main bar by an elaborate wooden partition. There weren’t many patrons in yet, just a scattering of middle-aged men, some in suits. David had changed into a thick black pullover and faded blue jeans, making him appear younger. He enthused about how the place got so packed on Fridays and Saturdays that it was almost impossible to move.

‘I’ve never understood why they do that,’ Jason said, thinking meanwhile about how detached he was from society in Orbaton. ‘I mean, it seems self defeating, because the more people cram into a room, the less bearable it gets. So, you wouldn’t think they’d come back again.’

‘Yes, I suppose. But then, they do come back again, and again. It must be because no one likes an empty, echoing sort of place. After all, they’re here to get out the house.’

‘There’s that to be said for it. And after all, conviviality is – ’

Jason became aware of someone standing at their table.

He glanced up to see a woman smiling down at him.

‘I’m sorry,’ she whispered to David, ‘I’m *way* early, Cheryl’s not in.’ She smiled at Jason again. ‘Cheryl’s my daughter. It’s Jason isn’t it? I’m a friend of David’s.’ They shook hands. ‘I’m Janey. Hi. Nice to meet you.’ Her smile faded. ‘But look here, I’m so guilty of interrupting. I know you have business to discuss.’

Jason, who had stood up, looked at David.

‘That’s not a problem.’ He smiled. ‘Sit down, please, I’ll get you a drink.’

David was roused to indignation.

‘You’ll do no such thing. I’m buying the drinks tonight.’

‘You sure?’ Janey continued her apology to Jason. ‘Because I can go sit at the bar for a while, no problem.’

‘We’re not discussing anything that confidential – but in any case, I’d rather you joined us.’

She relented and sat down and David went to buy the drinks.

Janey had soft brown hair, cut in a youthful style, and her trim figure, clothed trendily, projected an impression of youth that was belied by her face. She must have been beautiful once, and her features were quite well preserved. Nevertheless, she had the face of an old woman.

As soon as she sat down she launched into an explanation of why she was early. It was because she had gone to see her daughter, Cheryl, who was having her third child. But she wasn’t at home. That’s when she remembered Cheryl was actually at her other daughter’s

place, because her husband was back from abroad and . . . it was a long story.

All at once, she stopped speaking and picked up her handbag, a large, misshapen thing of canvass that she had left on the floor.

She set it on the table between them.

‘Jason, do you smoke?’

‘No, I never have.’

She took out a painted tin, a packet of papers and a lighter from her handbag.

‘I’m afraid I’m a total tobacco junkie,’ she sighed. ‘I wish I could give it up. I really, really do.’ She began to roll a cigarette, her quick moving fingers working busily while she spoke. ‘How long have you known David?’

‘Lets see, not more than six months. He was my uncle’s executor, that’s how I met him.’

‘Your uncle’s dead? What a shame.’

‘He left me his house.’

‘Did he?’ The news gripped her. ‘His house? You have his house now? Really? Gosh.’ For a moment, her eyes focussed on something far away. ‘Still, it’s a shame about your loss.’

‘It was no loss. I didn’t know him.’

David returned with the drinks. His face glowed with pleasure as they thanked him. He sat down and leaned close to Janey, perhaps unconsciously. Jason sensed that he yearned to touch her. Perhaps he was waiting for a signal and if he got one he would throw his arms around her.

‘Jason was just telling me about his house,’ Janey said. She had lit her cigarette and was savouring the thick fumes. ‘I can’t tell you, Jason, how much I’d like to inherit a house. But I shouldn’t say that, should I, because there’s no one I’d like to die . . . except my ex husband. And his girlfriend, of course. Still, there’s a good chance they will both die soon, because they’re pouring this stuff,’ she tapped her glass, ‘down their necks night and day.’

‘They must be thirsty.’

‘Yes, they’re both thirsty customers. They suit each other. The trouble is, even if they do die, I won’t inherit a house, because they don’t own one and even if they did he wouldn’t leave it to me.’

‘So, everyone around this table is divorced then,’ Jason observed.

‘My word, you too?’ Janey exclaimed, not without some satisfaction. ‘We’re starting a little club tonight, are we?’

David gave Janey a dutiful smile, but did not respond. He was busy basking in her presence.

‘Oh, I wouldn’t define myself by a minor little event like my divorce,’ Jason said.

But Janey didn’t listen. Her eyes were appraising him.

‘Jason, have you been in a fight?’

‘No, I was in a traffic accident.’

‘My God. How awful!’

‘I was knocked off my bike by a van. The police have got witnesses. They may prosecute, but probably not.’ He was looking from Janey to David and back again, irritated, after all, that she was there and had to be included in the conversation. ‘But it’s not quite so straightforward. You see, I’ve had to rent out a garage.’ He concentrated on David now. ‘And that’s Brodan’s fault, isn’t it? I ride a bike to get to the garage where I keep my car. Daft, I know, but I haven’t found a garage to rent any closer to home. Dave, I was thinking, I’d like you to deal with the insurance company, you know, for the normal procedure of the thing. But also, I think perhaps there’s an angle on this that would work in my favour. I mean, if I took Brodan to court concerning the garage, then maybe I’d have more of a case in the light of this accident?’

David frowned into thin air as he searched for an answer.

‘This all sounds strange,’ Janey said, frowning. ‘And it seems so terrible for you. Are you working now?’

‘Yes, I’m in an accountancy firm.’

‘You won’t lose your job, will you?’

‘Oh no. More likely to get a promotion.’

‘Oh? I only ask because I recently lost my job and it’s just the worst thing – next to getting run over, I suppose . . . my mind keeps going round and round, *get a job, get a job*, and yet, I’m already losing the will to do it. It’s so hard, especially at my age. And I was virtually volunteering for the last one. I didn’t get paid much at all.’ She began to roll another cigarette as she spoke, her long, nimble fingers seeming to have a mind of their own. ‘I worked with heroin addicts, as a sort of mentor.’

‘I’m not surprised,’ Jason said, adding quickly, ‘I mean – there seem to be a lot of addicts milling around the town centre. I was surprised by how many I’ve seen. I lived in London for years, but there seem to be more up here. Or perhaps they’re simply more visible.’ Janey drew on her cigarette as he spoke, but kept her intelligent eyes on him. ‘Do any of them ever get cured?’ He asked. ‘Do they ever kick the habit?’

‘Not to my knowledge.’ She smiled.

There was a brief pause between them.

David had been waiting to give Jason his answer and he spoke now.

‘About the garage, Jason, I’m going to have to see what I can find out. Maybe the accident *will* help, but we won’t know for sure till it’s tested in court.’

‘You can give me an idea though. Research it?’

‘Yes . . . but you know, it might sort itself out. The wretched fellow might peg it and the garage will revert to you.’

‘True,’ Jason said, trying not to sound dismissive. Then he had a thought. ‘But if he did die, then wouldn’t his wife be able to continue paying the rent and keep hold of it?’

David looked surprised.

‘Didn’t you know? Mrs Brodan is dead.’

Jason could only respond with a slow shake of the head.

‘Ah, well I expect you and he never talk to each other.’

‘No. We haven’t crossed paths at all since that first day.’ Jason felt his cheeks colour at the recollection of that encounter.

‘I only found out myself by chance,’ David went on, ‘through an acquaintance who works in the law firm that represented Mr Brodan.’

‘Hang on, though,’ Jason said, knotting up on the inside. ‘Surely that means Brodan doesn’t need my garage. Didn’t he say that his wife parked her car in their garage?’

‘Did he?’

Jason felt his blood tingle.

‘Yes. And that’s why he needed to rent *my* garage. To put *his* car in, see?’

‘Ah.’

‘This is just so frustrating. The whole situation’s crazy.’ He noticed Janey examining him. ‘It’s a dispute between me and the old guy next door. It’s over this garage of mine. I really don’t feel I can win. The whole issue is about power really, not legal possession.’

She continued to stare at him, somehow not understanding what he said.

‘But Jason,’ David murmured, urging patience, ‘that won’t change anything. He’s still rented your garage for twenty years. He could always say he uses his own garage for storage.’

‘Yes, I understand that, I suppose.’ Jason stifled his anger with difficulty. He even forced out a laugh. ‘Honestly, the man’s a kind of evil genius. You can’t beat him.’

Janey suddenly exclaimed, ‘Oh, I see – it’s a neighbour dispute! You hear a lot about that, don’t you? I think it’s ghastly how people can be driven to the brink by horrible neighbours.’

‘A lot of them, in my experience, are as bad as each other,’ David remarked. ‘Though of course, Bodan’s awkward enough for two. But anyway, thinking about it the other day, Jason, I did have a rather interesting idea. True, it’s a bit of a long shot, but still, what we could do is . . .’

Jason pretended to listen, smiling vaguely. But he simply couldn’t pay attention to what David was saying. Right now, his mind was too busy burning with a . . . brilliant insight!

It had struck like a bolt of lightning!

It was the key to the key!

And this was the shape of it –

Because he lived alone, Jason had taken the precaution of concealing a spare house key in his backyard, in case he should mislay the original while he was out. Now that he had learned that Mrs Brodan was dead and that Brodan lived alone, he realised Brodan must have done the very same thing.

This explained the puzzling pantomime that Jason had witnessed from his bedroom window. Brodan must have lost his key. When he had realised this, he had taken a good look round to make certain no one was watching before he retrieved the spare.

It was so obvious.

‘Yes, you’re right,’ he said, joyfully seizing on Janey’s remark, having forgotten that David had been putting forward a new idea to resolve the quarrel. ‘A neighbour dispute is really, really ghastly. And Brodan is horrible and he has sent me close to the brink. I almost got my neck broke because of him. And yet, if I’d died in that accident, no one would accuse him of murder. In fact, if I came back from beyond the grave and hired David here to fight my case in court, I’m absolutely certain the law would *still* side with Brodan. I’d be there, rotting six feet under, and he’d *still* be renting my garage. What a brilliant joke on me! Hilarious, isn’t it? In fact –’ and this was especially droll. ‘The whole thing’s *side-splitting*.’

David and Janey looked bemused.

Was that *him* laughing unstopably, fiendishly?

As soon as he asked himself that question, the laughter stopped.

‘Oh well,’ he added with a rictus grin. ‘You have to see the funny side, or you’d go mad.’

‘Well, that is definitely the way to look at it.’ David said, greeting this more enlightened attitude with relief. ‘It’s sure to be sorted out eventually. I’ll see what else I can come up with. True, as I said, that was a long shot I was talking about just now.’

Jason nodded, as if he knew what David had been talking about.

David smiled thinly. ‘Oh well, if it doesn’t seem the way ahead, something else will turn up. There is always a way, if you look hard enough.’

‘Yes. There is. Something will turn up. It may have already, for all we know. The key to the situation may be in our pockets by tomorrow. You just never know.’

Janey stood up.

‘The key to *this* situation is, more booze.’

She turned and went to the bar before Jason could protest that he would buy the drinks this time. Perhaps she wanted to give him and David a chance to conduct their increasingly cryptic conversation in private. However, neither of them were inclined to talk. David beamed at the crowd that was now swelling by the minute. He looked to be entirely at peace with the world now that he had found Janey’s love, while Jason . . .

Jason was filled by his own rapture as he mused over the possibilities of possessing a key to Brodan’s house. The potential power it gave him over his implacable enemy intoxicated him far more than the beer he had consumed.

His gaze happened to fall on Janey’s canvas hand bag, which she’d left on the table and which had sagged, as if in the heat, and he saw, amongst the mass of accessories within, a pair of leopard skin handcuffs.

Janey came back and they resumed their conversation. This began to lose its brilliancy as the alcohol took effect and their minds were more inclined to wander. Jason could tell that David and Janey were looking forward to being alone together and, now that he came to think of it, he himself longed to get back home too.

Because, by now, a dire suspicion had arisen from nowhere and seized him in an icy grasp. Could it be that, after all, his intuition about Brodan was wrong and there *wasn't* a key in his courtyard?

In his blurry mind, Jason could almost feel Brodan's exultation at having trounced him once again. The big cumbersome bastard had danced adroitly out of his reach, taunting him and inflicting sharp, puncturing thrusts into Jason's essence, so that his selfhood seemed to leak away. He found the presence of David and Janey less and less bearable as he struggled to maintain the illusion that he was a whole human being. He could see himself, laughing and talking – it was like watching a third rate actor in a third rate show.

After they had finished the next round of drinks, which Jason had bought, it was agreed that it was time to leave. They had to force their way through the press of the crowd – mature, rather seedy individuals, many with alert, knowing glances.

Jason said goodbye to David and Janey outside, on Ledgebow Street. He paused to watch them cross the road and pass out of sight by the museum and the civic centre, from where they would head to the rundown area where Janey lived in a terraced house. Finally he could drop his smiling front. It was like spitting something vile out of his mouth.

Turning drunkenly, he began to hurry down Ledgebow Street on towards the train station, from where he could catch a taxi.

Fifteen: **The Living Nightmare**

Back home, he made coffee and washed his face in cold water. The time was half eleven and he promised himself to wait until twelve to allow his head to clear.

A few minutes later, he snatched up the torch he kept in the kitchen cupboard and slipped outside the back door into the semi darkness.

The street lamp on Melville Close lit the upper courses of the courtyard walls. Jason kept his head lowered, moving with exaggerated caution. Out in the gully, the tangled weeds hindered his hesitant steps and his feet chafed through drifts of litter. When he found the latch of Brodan's gate, it clacked loudly under the pressure of his thumb.

From somewhere near came the sound of young men yammering and taunting each other. Maybe they were on Melville Close. Maybe they were heading for the gully.

He slipped into Brodan's rear yard, closed the gate behind him and crouched down. Moments later, the hectoring voices faded away. He stood up slowly and examined the unlit windows of the house next door with the same deliberate and unhurried caution that Brodan had shown. His neighbours seemed to be sound asleep. Satisfied, he knelt where he had seen Brodan kneel and switched the torch on. Many of the paving blocks were deteriorated through frost, their edges cracked and broken away. Jason tried to shift them, one after the other, but they were all lodged tight. He realised that after Brodan had ducked out of sight, he must have crawled to some other spot to remove the key and then crawled back before standing again.

The man's sneakiness was extraordinary.

Jason found, therefore, that he had no choice but to try and remove each and every block of the courtyard.

He began in the right-hand corner, where the wall met the back of the house. Brodan had been facing that way when he knelt down.

Now and then, as he tested the blocks, a car would pass by on the main road, or a siren would wail in the distance, and he would freeze till it was quiet again.

He moved from left to right and back again. In the middle of the fourth row a block shifted in his hand. He could only just get a grip with the tips of his fingers. Again and again he managed to lift the block half an inch before the pain of gripping it became too great and he had to let it slip back. At last, he admitted that even Brodan could not have extracted this block with his bare hands. The key must be somewhere else. Except . . . perhaps Brodan carried a knife, or some other implement to help him raise the block. That would make sense. If the block were too easy to lift, it would be easy to discover by chance.

Brodan was too devious not to have foreseen that possibility.

Jason stood up, leaving the torch on and balanced upright on the glass lens, creating a tiny arc of light so that he could find it easily. He went back to his house, not troubling to conceal himself any longer and returned with a couple of cutlery knives. Even with the help of these, he struggled to get the block out.

There was nothing underneath.

He sat on the ground and stared at the hole, unable to think or act in his disappointment. Brodan had not replaced the key. Once again, he had proved himself too clever to be defeated.

At that moment he heard Freya's hooting laughter. It came and went in a heartbeat, echoing from the past – the sound that had accompanied all his failures ever since.

The alcohol in his blood seemed to have turned to lead, so that every movement was an effort. He replaced the block and slipped the knives into his pocket and began to push himself up onto his feet.

The block below his hand shifted.

In the next instant he was back down on his knees, examining the block by the light of the torch. The action of many winters had split off the upper edges of the block, creating a ready-made grip. Jason could force his fingers into the gaps on either side without difficulty and he lifted it free.

The key gleamed in the trembling light of the touch.

He felt like crying and laughing. He knew his jubilation was ridiculous, just as his despair had been when he thought he would never find the key, but he couldn't help himself.

If he hadn't heard Freya's laugh a moment before, this victory might well have been enough. He would have been satisfied simply to have outwitted Brodan. But now he needed more. A greater demonstration of his superior cunning was required. Something to show Freya just how wrong she was.

Jason unlocked the back door of Brodan's house.

The tumblers fell loud and clear in the stillness of the night. A gentle push and the door swung wide. He flicked the torch around in the darkness. The faint disc of light illuminated cupboards, a sink and a fridge. An ordinary kitchen. Jason never doubted that he was going to step inside. And yet, at the moment that he did so, he knew it was to be a fatal mistake.

But why? Moving through the warm, silky darkness, what he saw by the light of the torch was nothing more sinister than the unexceptional house of an elderly couple.

Confronted by such utterly conventional domesticity, which was tricked out by the small feminine touches of his dead wife, Jason felt disgust at himself for allowing Brodan to become so monestrous in his imagination. And yet, when he tried to turn and leave, some queasy compulsion would not permit him to do so. It was as if he couldn't help hunting for something unpleasant, deadly even, amongst the chintz-covered furniture and cute-eyed china dogs.

Eventually he reached the bathroom.

This too was thoroughly ordinary. And yet, having come to an abrupt stop at the doorway, he remained there, mesmerised as he ran the torchlight back and forth over the tub. This was the one part of the house that he already had some knowledge of, in a sense. Every day, at about three, Brodan ran his bath and the sound of the cascading water could be heard in Jason's bathroom next door. His uncle had replaced his bathtub with a shower, but at one time, he realised now, the two bathtubs had once stood next to each other on either side of the wall. Brodan's looked to be the original Edwardian installation, made of enamelled metal, though skirted by a contemporary bath panel.

At length, a faint sound – a kind of mechanical voice – called out through the night from somewhere very far away.

Still wrapt in his own indistinct thoughts, Jason sighed and mumbled to himself that he knew who that was.

His thoughts wandered. The illusionary sensation that he was split in two returned briefly, having faded away over the past few days. He remembered lying on the pavement and the way his life force had seeped away through the great split that had riven his body. It seemed impossible to believe that he hadn't died.

The mechanical voice was closer, a low complaint that was both mournful and menacing. It was not a voice at all.

It was the sound of Brodan's car, driving down the empty street outside.

Jason wondered why Brodan was back so early.

He gravitated to the rear bedroom window and stood there, perfectly still. A dreaming

sentinel coldly observing the beast's return.

Already, the car was slowly turning into Melville Close.

The headlamps cast up great dancing cones of light into the air as Brodan negotiated the head of the gully. Jason observed each stage of the nightly ritual, his mouth slightly ajar, like a child listening intently to a fairy tale.

The car stopped and the engine grumbled as it idled. Brodan began to ease his big, cumbersome body out of the driver's seat. The ogre with the wicked queen's eyes.

Jason had seen all this over and over again, and yet, he was troubled. Something was wrong.

To begin with, Brodan had parked further away from the garage than was his habit. But then, as he looked again, he noticed with a curious perplexity that the garage seemed to be standing further back down the gully than it should be . . .

All at once, his mind shrieked out a single, insanely ridiculous fact.

He was still in Brodan's house!

Jason whimpered and tottered backwards from the window. Immediately, his foot struck the corner of the bed and he stumbled, twisted round and fell to his hands and knees. The thump sent waves of old pain through his side and resounded throughout the house. The torch, which he had switched off, rolled from his hand. Already, he could hear the car protesting as it was shunted to and fro. He swept the floor with his arms in desperate circles. The torch was gone. The noise of the car engine became subdued – Brodan had already got the car into the garage.

Which meant he wouldn't be able to see the bedroom window.

Jason leapt up, scabbled at the wall beside the door and flipped the switch. The room blazed with a light that seemed to tingle on his flesh. He spotted the torch by the leg of the bed. He snatched it up and chopped at the light switch with the edge of his free hand. The light vanished.

Then he was out of the room and plunging down the stairs, gripping the banister with one hand and lighting the steps with the torch in the other. At the foot of the stairs, next to the front door, he had an agonising few seconds of indecision. Shouldn't he leave by the front door? It wasn't bolted, the lock was on a safety catch.

But he hadn't replaced the paving block in the courtyard!

Brodan would

He threw himself down the hallway and was out in the backyard within seconds. The cold night air burned raw in his lungs as he gulped it down. There was the chunky thud of the car door as it was slammed shut inside the garage.

Jason seemed to feel the sound in his guts. He closed the back door with a wildly trembling hand and pushed the key into the lock. The metal teeth grated over the tumblers.

It took him all his strength now to wait and be still.

The interval was unbroken by any sound. Somehow Brodan was moving as silently as a cat. Perhaps he had heard something and he was already at the gate. Jason's nerve was close to snapping. Then, at last, there came the rattle and slither of the first garage door as Brodan pushed it over the undergrowth of weeds in the gully. As it banged shut, Jason turned the key. As he knew it would, the lock's tumblers fell loud and clear – a sound was always able to hear from next door. He was sure Brodan must have heard it. And yes, there was a pause. Jason raised himself just enough to see the top of Brodan's head over the wall. The wily monster had it cocked attentively. But he wasn't moving. Jason sank to his knees and felt around for the paving block. Suddenly, Brodan was closing the other garage door, which meant he was facing the opposite way. Jason flicked the torch on, picked up the block and slipped it into the cavity where it had come.

Now Brodan was pushing the hasp over the staple so that he could refit the padlock. The

metal parts clanked together.

Jason bit the key between his teeth, stuffed the torch into his jacket and launched himself at the wall between Brodan's courtyard and his own.

It was five feet high. By jumping and pushing down on the top with his hands he got his torso over. His legs flopped behind him helplessly. For a single crazy moment, he found himself staring at his neighbour's broad back, visible in the watery orange light from the street lamp. Brodan was bent over the padlock. A loud click proclaimed it had fastened. Brodan began to turn. Jason clung to the wall with his left hand and let his body fall forward. He was wrenched round at the waist and his legs followed him down like lifeless weights. He plunged forward, and in doing so he lost his grip on the top of the wall and slipped.

For a second he was a floating bundle of useless limbs, and then he slapped down onto the ground and all the breath in his body was expelled with a whoosh. He spat out the key as his injuries seared him with their old ferocity – the weeks of healing nullified. For an unending moment of time, he all he knew was a blazing white pain.

At length, he became aware of a suspended silence.

Very slowly, he placed his hand over the key – it glinted greyly in the darkness. He waited, scarcely breathing now, before he turned his head just enough to look up to the top of the wall.

He really had expected to see Brodan leering down at him. But of course, Brodan had gone into his house while he'd been lying there, faint with pain.

He began to climb to his feet. Every movement was torture and he let out a muted groan of protest at the hurt.

An answering snigger sounded in Brodan's courtyard. He was still there, listening and gloating. Jason flinched horribly. It was as if Brodan had reached over and laid an intimate hand upon him – leaving an open wound.

Jason found himself clenching one of the cutlery knives. He was already heading towards the gate. Never had he known such blissful certainty.

He was going to kill Brodan.

Kill him.

Kill him now!

A key turned next door and Brodan slunk into his house, deftly placing himself out of reach.

Sixteen: **Dirty Work**

It was Jason's first back at work since the accident. The partners visited him in a single body, gathering around his desk to welcome him back and express how very glad they were that he was well again.

Accompanying Mervyn were Frank, Elias and Jeff, all late middle-aged men afflicted by the hideous decay typical of their advanced years and looking far more ill than Jason. A common defect was a lack of back teeth, so that their grins revealed gaping holes.

There was something a shade nervous in these grins.

But then, the old foxes knew, didn't they?

Failure is contagious.

When they'd gone, five minutes later, Jason settled down to begin work for the morning. At some point, he happened to glance at the window and Lydia promptly appeared from the road beyond the park. Her huge, undulating form, in its long, shapeless black dress, glided over the waste ground, where a path had been worn through the flourishing mass of summer weeds and trash.

Jason turned back to the case he had in progress and tried not to think about anything else.

'Sorry I didn't bring any files to your house, Jason. I know you asked me to, but I thought giving you a nice rest was best.'

Lydia was beside him now, holding a mass of bound papers against her vast bosom. Her thin, pale red hair seemed to be laid strand by strand over her wide, velvet-draped shoulders.

'You were right. A rest was best,' Jason answered, not able to recall asking her to send him the files.

'I thought you'd call the office again if you really wanted them.'

'I would have, yes.' He gave her a fake smile and in doing so he was struck by the realisation that the partners, Mervyn, etcetera, had given him the same fake smile. They were scared they would catch the hopeless-failure virus from him. And now, he was scared of catching the virus off Lydia.

'Anyway, it might have been risky to allow any documentation out of the office,' Lydia added. 'It's packed with sensitive information.' She placed the case notes she'd brought upon his desk. Her hands were larger than a man's and yet very feminine. By far the most attractive thing about her. 'Also, Mervyn said that he didn't trust the local taxi firms to deliver them.'

No, that's not true, Jason told himself, *what bothers Mervyn is having his precious files infected by my bad luck.*

'But as I said to him, there's no one here at night, is there? And the burglar alarm hasn't been fixed for months. And around here, I told him, everyone gets burgled eventually.'

'Then they should get the alarm fixed.'

'Oh, to be fair, it hardly makes any difference. The thieves might as well have the keys, the way they slip in and out without leaving a trace behind.'

'Is that so?'

He hadn't given it any thought before now, but surely he must have left an awful lot of fingerprints in Brodan's house last night.

But, did that matter?

Well, of course not!

Except . . . what if Brodan were burgled in the near future?

Ridiculous!

Absurd, too . . . but . . . no – it *could* happen!

After all, nowhere in Orbaton was a crime-free zone. And then, acting on sheer brute instinct, Brodan was bound to set the police on Jason's trail. The real burglar would have worn gloves and it would be Jason who got arraigned on the evidence. He just knew he wouldn't be able to take the pressure when the police interrogated him. He'd snap like a rotten branch and end up confessing to everything, Not just the crime, but *everything*.

Perhaps he should get in there tonight and wipe the surfaces down?

How about that?

Yes indeedy . . . that struck him now as a very good idea.

He scowled at the window. 'Thank you, Lydia,' he said, desperate to get away from her so that he could think more clearly. 'I'll just pop down and get myself a cup of tea.'

'Would you like me to go and make one for you, Jason?'

'Not at all, Lydia, I think we should share the domestic chores. I think we men should make the tea and clean the house – especially clean the house – just as much as you . . . women.'

She favoured him with one of her widest, moon-irradiated smiles as he hurried away.

Downstairs there was a small alcove with a fridge in one corner and a shelf in the other with a kettle on it. Mervyn was already there, waiting for the kettle to boil. Jason was surprised by how mouldy Mervyn looked under the stark light of the fluorescent strip. His hair was black without a trace of grey, but it only grew at the sides. Never mind, Mervyn combed it over his naked white skull.

He quipped, 'Thirsty work?'

'A bit parched.'

'Good show. You're all right for a cup, Jason, I always put loads too much water in.' The kettle was beginning to sing and cluck to itself. Mervyn's gaze lingered for a second, and he became troubled. 'You do still look a little peaky, Jason.'

Jason instantly broke out into an unstoppable yawn. 'Really? I feel fitter than ever,'

Staring down Jason's gullet, Mervyn confided, 'I've been worried about Andrew Wiles.'

'Oh, that guy – he's his own worst enemy.'

The yawn had made him feel very tired.

Mervyn became animated.

'I told him the Revenue would be watching his backyard like a damned hawk. They're bound to send someone in with a bundle of cash. They'll catch him out, you mark my word.'

'But he will insist on pushing his luck, won't he?'

'He doesn't realise that if you provoke the powers that be, they won't leave you in peace till they get what they want.' The kettle boiled and Mervyn filled his cup. 'I was just thinking, maybe it would be an idea if you had a chat with him, I mean as an ex-inspector in the Revenue. Try and give him an insight into what they can do. Shake him up a bit. I'd hate to see him cop it, old Andrew Wiles.'

Jason nodded absently, busy thinking about how he would remove his fingerprints from Brodan's house . . . The trouble was, by going in again, he would be leaving even more traces of himself behind. Nowadays, they could identify someone by a strand of hair, or a fleck of dandruff, couldn't they?

He saw now that it would be necessary to buy gloves and a hair net.

Damn it, he had been far too impetuous – just walking into his house like that was madness. And he lived in a Neighbourhood Watch area, didn't he? Yes he did. And so, even under the cover of darkness, he might so easily have been spotted. Right then, that meant that he must also buy some kind of disguise. And also, he would need cleaning materials to wipe

down all the surfaces that he may have touched. Or was it better to use whatever cleaning materials Brodan already had so the bastard didn't notice any difference in the odour of the house? Absolutely. Great idea!

Furthermore, a small vacuum cleaner would come in handy, to remove the hair and dandruff that may have strayed off his hair and clothes.

By God, he had to start planning ahead, thinking it through and anticipating. When it came to Brodan, he needed to raise his game in every way . . .

Mervyn had gone.

Jason stared at the empty space that his boss had left behind for a moment and then set about making himself a cup of tea, still chiding himself in a low mutter for going into Brodan's house unprepared. The alcohol had distorted his judgement and made him reckless and stupid. Drink had always done that to him. He had been tipsy when he had proposed to Freya.

But, on the other hand, she had been stinking drunk when she'd accepted.

That particular bitter little daydream lasted till Jason noticed he was staring down into an empty cup.

The alcove was damp and smelled of sour milk. On the floor, spilled granules of instant coffee and sugar lay mixed with the dust. *Look at that, old chum, that's was what life has crumbled into.* Whose life? *Yours. They don't look like anyone else's remains, do they?*

Jason went back to his office and phoned Lydia and asked her to come to his office. He wrote a list of names and when she arrived, sweeping up to his desk with the majesty of an ocean liner, he said, 'Collect these files for me, please. No one else needs them at present and I can work on them at home. Get them now please, Lydia, because I'm going out straight away.'

'Are you feeling all right?'

'Never better, but I'd rather work at home today. If Mervyn gets anxious about the files being out of the building, tell him I'll be keeping them under my bed tonight.'

To his surprise, Lydia gave him a grave nod of complete understanding before she left.

Jason had been joking about keeping the files under the bed. But on reflection, he thought he might do just that anyway, because while he was busy cleaning Brodan's house, his own house might get burgled and the files stolen. Come to think of it, maybe under the bed wasn't such a safe place for the files. Perhaps he ought to take them with him to Brodan's, just to be sure to keep an eye on that at all times and under all circumstances.

He left *Denbigh's* and drove into the town centre where the only parking was the NCP multi storey, and even then he had to go to the top floor to find a free space. From there, he could see the unpopulated land of Victoria and Edwardian rooftops, sprouting the copper cupola, stone knosps and urns that ornamented that forgotten country.

And high above it all, floating in the Bromide-coloured haze of car fumes, was the central business tower, the futuristic lord of an antique vista, wearing a gleaming, thorny crown of aerials.

Jason went down the nearest exit and hurried on towards the main shopping mall. There were several everything-for-a-pound stores here, and he was surprised to find they had all the things that he required. Not only that, in addition to the yellow washing up gloves, the hairnet, the hand-held vacuum cleaner and the fun-for-all-the-kids-beard-and-glasses disguise, he discovered that they also sold disposable coveralls too. He hadn't thought of getting these, but they would be useful in preventing any identifying fibres from his clothes from falling in Brodan's house.

Perfect for that extra peace of mind.

Fab.

He bought five.

His last stop was a locksmith's booth, where he obtained a copy of Brodan's key.

As soon as he was home again, Jason settled down to work on the files. There should be no suspicion at the office that he was doing anything else.

But no one called and gradually the anxiety of the morning began to subside.

With his false beard, gloves, vacuum cleaner and disposable coveralls close to hand, Jason felt calm and confident about having the situation under complete control.

At half six – without having to look at the clock – he went upstairs to the rear bedroom and watched Brodan go through the labourious process of shunting his car out and locking up. The man had never looked so odious. He seemed to linger at the doors of the garage so as to relish the moment when he refitted the padlock, caressing the badge of his ownership to Jason's property.

Jason remained at the window long after Brodan had gone, lost in one displeasing daydream after another.

He woke up and went downstairs, where he put the vacuum and coveralls in a sports bag, pulled on the yellow washing up gloves and stood before the mirror to fit the false beard and glasses. Satisfied that he was suitably disguised, he left the house by the back door.

It was still light, but he had never seen anyone apart from Brodan use the gully. Even if he hadn't been disguised, he doubted whether anyone else in the street would recognise him anyway.

Having replaced the original key under the paving block in Brodan's back yard, he went in, locking the door behind him. After all, one never knew. The area wasn't safe and it wouldn't be so great if some local youths tried their luck on the off chance and got in as well. He hadn't foreseen this possibility before now. And then, thinking about it, he remembered that he'd neglected to hide the files from work, which he'd left on the table in his living room.

He paused.

Was he being too precipitate his onward sprint to get things done?

Uneasy about not having the situation under his full control after all, he wondered whether he should perhaps go back and conceal the files – if only under his bed. And yet, what were the statistical chances of his being burgled while performing a crime-scene clean up next door while wearing false beard and glasses? Surely incalculable.

Or *could* one calculate it?

Abruptly, he shouted out a laugh and said, 'Idiot, don't you know it's too late for you anyway?'

He drew on his disposable overalls and opened the cupboards under the sink, where he was lucky enough to find dusters and polish. He took a can of polish and a duster and went to the front room to begin work. The large bay window here was draped with net curtains so that he could look out onto the street and not be seen, which was the first thing he did.

Brodan's car was parked on the road outside the house.

Jason gaped at it, too astonished even to feel afraid.

Then the truth shone upon him, like a vile, green spotlight. *Brodan had known all along.* He had planted the spare key in order to ensnare him.

The sickening shame at being duped like this was soon joined by abject terror. Brodan could be armed and intent on killing him. He would claim that he was defending himself from what he thought to be a common burglar.

The lock to the back door rattled and the tumblers clacked.

Brodan was coming in.

Jason crouched and grabbed the bag and the cleaning things and scuttled behind the sofa. Already, he could hear the heavy tread in the hallway. As he grovelled in his hiding place, the footsteps paused at the door to the room, which was half shut. There was a faint sigh. Next, a

step creaked under a great weight.

Brodan was going upstairs.

Jason held his breath, clutching the sports bag to his stomach and squeezing his eyes shut tight. This was his chance to escape, if only he could force himself to move.

He began to rise.

The dull thumping tread of Brodan upstairs came to an abrupt halt. The silence was perfect, like the surface of a tranquil pool that the slightest movement would disturb. Jason was crushed by the way Brodan had outmanoeuvred him. He could no longer believe he would ever escape.

Brodan seemed omnipotent.

The aching silence continued, almost as if Brodan were bating him. And then – all at once – he was clumping down the stairs, his tread heavier than before. And faster. As Jason crouched even lower behind the sofa, the door to the room was shoved aside, so that it banged against a chair. Jason experienced the noise as a physical blow. He was only just able to stifle a cry of pain.

Brodan emitted a grunt – a thick guttural noise that may have indicated satisfaction. Jason squeezed himself into an inert lump of flesh and a sly scraping noise filled the air, like a thick fingernail being drawn across the fabric of the sofa.

Jason gave an involuntary shudder, even as he understood that Brodan had, in fact, merely opened a drawer in the sideboard. He rummaged around, murmuring to himself in fretful irritation. For the shortest instant Jason heard in that voice the frailty of an old man who had lost his wife and who regularly found himself mislaying things. A flicker of understanding – sympathy almost – came alight and instantly gutted out in the rising darkness of Jason's dying soul.

Brodan opened another drawer, and then another. He muttered peevishly and left the room. Once again, he climbed the stairs, but with a more labourious tread than before.

Jason sat up, with the sports bag on his lap. He felt a little more dignified like that. Already the shame of being cowed by Brodan was transforming his fear and regret into anger. But still he didn't move.

Brodan came back down the stairs, having spent less than a minute in the bedroom above. He must have found what he was looking for. Even so, when he reached the hallway, he paused. The house fell silent yet again. At first, Jason guessed Brodan was checking his pockets before he left. But the silence and stillness wore on interminably.

Brodan was taunting him for just a little longer. With every second Jason edged closer to blind rage. He would rise up and, taking the handheld vacuum cleaner, he would go into the hall and smash Brodan's sneering face till it trickled off his skull.

Jason was already on his feet when Brodan's heavy footfalls sounded down the hallway. Abruptly checked, he remained stock still, listening to the back door being locked from outside.

He slowly turned an empty gaze onto the window.

Brodan appeared outside, his head bobbing up and down as he rocked in his progress along the pavement. He got into his car and drove away.

Jason's frustrated rage slowly condensed into a cold malice. It passed through his mind that vandalising the old bastard's house might even the score.

But somehow, that wouldn't be enough. Jason did not know yet what punishment would fit the crime, but before he carried it out, he needed to expunge any evidence that he'd been here.

And so, he set to work giving the house the best damned clean it had ever had.

The hours passed. Diligently wiping down the many surfaces that he might have touched the night before was astonishingly labourious. All the more so because he worked entirely by

torchlight. The more things he cleaned, the more things he saw that should be cleaned in the interest of complete peace of mind.

It was already way past midnight before he could start to go over his tracks with the vacuum cleaner. That took another hour.

He was so fatigued that he could scarcely stand when he heard Brodan's car return.

But then, he had expected him back early all along.

The front door opened with a crash. Gales of laughter filled the house. These were a mixture of Brodan's coarse bellow and a mocking shriek which went through him like a knife.

It was Freya.

Jason scurried, as always, behind the sofa. Freya and Brodan came straight into the drawing room, laughing so hard they could only just about blurt out jagged bits of sentences. But even these invoked further hilarity. The laughter subsided, and they began to whisper. Their whispers thickened in their mounting desire. Then they were speaking aloud, exchanging the crudest obscenities. Freya's precise diction added a certain spice. Jason thought he heard her mutter, breathless with excitement. 'Looks like your maid has gone over every inch of your furniture, Dennis.'

A hush fell upon the room. The air became fetid. Jason heard now that they were kissing and pawing each other, gasping whenever they freed their mouths. They became ever more frantic. A moment of silence then the sofa gave a lurch. Brodan roared out a triumphant howl and jeered as each thrust struck Jason through the sofa.

'You're next!' He brayed.

Freya screamed in ecstasy.

Seventeen: **An Unspeakable Cure**

The same old nightmares had been keeping Jason awake just lately.

Even three codeine tablets could not bring about full oblivion anymore. And when he did sleep, he had started to bleed from the nose. The blood poured out, leaving his pillows a sopping crimson.

The painful mental fatigue must have begun to show in his face. At work, Mervyn sidled up to his desk one day, just when Jason happened to be staring vacantly through the window and suggested that he take a holiday soon.

The focus of Jason's attention lagged.

'What holiday?'

Mervyn's mouldy face beamed with remembered pleasure.

'June and I would always recommend Spain. Benalmedena. We're going again this year.' His dreamy look hardened. Perhaps he was worried Jason would turn up in Benalmedena while he and his wife, June, were there. 'But it is a little bit sedate. A young lad like you would probably prefer one of the hot spots, eh? Perhaps in Greece?'

Jason didn't answer. He was looking at Mervyn, at the face that appeared to be some huge, decayed fruit, and he wondered why they were engaged in such a personal conversation. So too did Mervyn, going by the little frown that had begun to fret his mottled brow. 'You see the fact is, Jason, you've made a few mistakes with the Wiles account.'

'Have I?'

'Oh, minor, silly mistakes that don't matter as such – only, you have been putting a lot of work in, I mean for a part timer, and really, as a full timer, strange to say, you'd be under a lot less pressure, don't you think?'

'Full time?'

'We said at the interview it was very much a possibility. And as it goes, we're more eager than ever before to see you here full time. You've proved yourself twice over, Jason.'

'You were saying I needed to get away.'

Mervyn smiled, till his eyes vanished.

'As a full timer, you'd be due five weeks annual leave, excluding public holidays.'

Jason was nodding to himself.

'Come to think of it, I do need to get away. Very much so.'

'Are you going to consider it then?'

'Oh yes, I'm going to think about it hard.'

'Splendid.'

It was Thursday, and as usual Jason left work at twelve o'clock. He had got into the habit in eating up town, in one of the many cheap burger joints that dotted the city centre. From there he could look out on the crowds thronging the pedestrianised zone.

He had begun to notice that there were more and more people wandering around Orbaton who looked like Brodan. Jason could spend an hour, or two, or three watching the crowds from the big, greasy windows of a burger joint and pick out every few minutes someone who bore a strong family resemblance. There were Brodan-type men, of course, but also Brodan-type women, and many, many Brodan-type kids. Even a pit-bull terrier, tethered by a chain to an electric wheelchair, was Brodan-like.

Mervyn had never been more right, Jason told himself – he needed to get away. A long way away.

It was the only way to save himself.

Of course, he had intended to put his house on the market when he came back from Brighton, in the hope of returning to live London as soon as possible. But with all the local difficulties in commuting to his rented garage, not to mention being smashed into two bits by a van, somehow he hadn't quite got round to it.

And now Brodan was conducting a torrid affair with his ex wife.

But then, Brodan was the city's major stud – his genes were everywhere.

That's right – the situation was intolerable. The devil of it was, though, if Jason sold the house at this juncture, he would get less for it than he should have on account of the dispute over the garage. Brodan would therefore have committed the final outrage of costing him money.

So here was the dilemma. Orbaton was destroying him, but if he left Orbaton it would be as a whipped cur, not as a man. He wouldn't be saving himself anyway.

He went home, parking on Melville Close, too tired to walk from the rented garage. If some fucker wanted to steal his car, let them.

The phone was ringing as he opened his front door.

'Jason, how you doing?' It was Albert Carlotti, speaking in a strange parody of his brash, cocky tone.

'What's up, Albert?'

'Nothing's up,' Carlotti cried. 'Everything's great! I'd just like to thank you for what you did for me.'

'I didn't do anything.'

'I know you didn't,' Carlotti half laughed and half wept, and then he screamed. 'Oh, Jesus Christ!' His voice fell away into sobs.

Just then, Jason thought he caught a faint, creaky whisper murmuring something in the background. Carlotti broke into a hacking cough. It sounded so bad he might have been choking.

He managed to stop, and spluttered, 'Fucking smoke.' To this he added, in a stuttering gabble, like he was terrified of speaking out of turn. 'It's me, Jason. It's my fault, I've got to give up smoking.'

'You don't smoke, Albert.'

'I've started! I've started! I smoke a pack a day. More some days.' He began to laugh – or cry. 'Guy, I've breathed nothing but smoke for weeks and weeks.'

His voice fell away in stifled sobs. Again Jason heard, or thought he heard, a thick, raspy whisper, urging Albert Carlotti to go on. 'So, anyway, Jason, we're just wondering how you are.'

'Roger's with you, isn't he?'

Carlotti did not answer at first. His breath came in rough, juddering gasps. He was steeling himself for what he was about to say. 'Yes, Jason, he's here. He's told me to tell you he knows everything, but . . . But he's fucking bluffing! I ain't talked, Jase, I swear! Just get out the fuck out of there while you can . . .'

Roger's voice came through, precise and pitiless. 'That was a mistake, Albert.'

Carlotti screamed – a long, drawn out a howl of agony and this time Jason heard the end of Roger's cigarette hissing as it sank into Carlotti's flesh.

The line went dead.

Jason put the receiver down and bowed his head.

How could the courage and loyalty of a friend like that fail to shame him?

And what would poor Albert say if he ever found out that all his brave defiance under extreme torture was being wasted protecting a miserable failure like him?

Eh?

Jason saw himself again, cowering behind Brodan's sofa as it rocked and shook, bashing against his head as Brodan serviced his wife like a rutting bull.

No, a coward like him didn't deserve the friendship of a great guy like Albert Carlotti

Hot, bitter tears welled up in his eyes and he turned away from the phone. He felt dirty. These days he couldn't seem to shift the night's muck-sweat from his body. He went to the stairs and climbed to the landing. As he entered the bathroom, he heard the churning of water as it gushed from both faucets. Brodan was filling his tub next door, just as he did every day at around three in the afternoon. Jason paused to listen, the tears running unheeded down to his chin. At length, the flow of water stopped.

He put his ear against the wall. Some glass object clinked as it was placed on the edge of the bath tub. Then came splashing, as Brodan tested the water by hand. This was followed by a deep gulping sound as he thrust one foot in, and then the other. A low, satisfied sigh of contentment followed as he lowered himself down into the water.

Jason pressed himself against the wall in an agony of impotent rage, longing to be able to reach through and strangle the son of a bitch. The anguish was impossible to bear any longer.

A burst of laughter echoed behind the wall, resonating in his inner ear. Jason jumped back and raised his fist, so as to put it through the bricks and plaster and knock Brodan's ugly laughing head off his shoulders.

He froze dead.

In a moment of pure, incandescent genius, the perfect method of murdering Brodan had illuminated his brain.

The idea was so brilliant, so simple and foolproof that he wanted to run out into the street and tell everyone he met about it. He wanted to call David and Janey to let them know that he'd outsmarted Brodan after all . . . Hang about. That would be a mistake, wouldn't it? He laughed out loud. In an irrepressibly jolly mood. His sense of relief he felt couldn't have been stronger if he'd been cured of a terminal illness. Well, he *had*, hadn't he?

Once more, the world was a very beautiful place, replete with opportunity and potential.

When he began to calm down, his exhaustion after weeks of sleepless nights abruptly caught up with him. Weariness ran through his veins like pure morphine. He didn't have the strength to shower. Indeed, it was even too much of an effort to pull his clothes off. But at least he knew, as he sank onto his bed, that this time he wouldn't dream.

Eighteen: **Countdown to *Death Strike!***

Jason ate a huge breakfast next morning. He had a fleeting awareness of feeding something deep inside himself that was stark staring mad. However, he was far too buoyant to let that bring him down. Anyhoo, there were *so* many urgent things to do. And the sooner he killed Brodan the sooner he could put the house on the market and leave Orbaton for good.

Things were starting to go his way.

For a start, his car hadn't been stolen in the night, even though it wasn't locked up in a rented garage.

As he drove to the nearest retail park, he pictured the London apartment he would buy soon. Or perhaps he would live in Brighton instead of London. He could get a place that overlooked the sea and which had a little terraced garden that he could tend every day. And when he thought about it, wasn't that all he wanted? Not money, or women, or power, just an innocent and carefree solitude.

But dwelling on the future took his thoughts back into the past. Immediately, Jason felt the sheer waste of the last few years open out within him, so that his soul blew and danced about in the great void, like an empty chips packet floating on the wind in a deserted city.

He trained his thoughts back onto the present and forced them to stay there. In any case, the roads, thronging with relentless traffic, required all his attention now.

He drove fast, or rather, he wanted to. Skirting one traffic island after another, he soon found himself halting at lights and behind buses that halted at bus stops, and lorries that stopped outside shops, or behind buses that had stopped at bus stops, till finally and at long last he was able to turn into the retail park.

By then, his wayward thoughts had become a blurred background as the scheme to kill Brodan elaborated and clarified itself in his mind with outstanding beauty.

He parked in a sea of cars, as near as possible to the hardware superstore. It was ten o'clock in the morning.

In twelve hours he would begin implementation.

He could only operate by night, and with extreme caution, of course. Maybe four hours to set the exterminating mechanism up, after which he would have to wait till four o'clock the following afternoon. That meant another thirty hours to go in total.

Thirty hours and then Brodan would be very, *very* dead.

He walked into the hardware store, taking a trolley and pushing it up and down the aisles, pausing to deliberate, with an all consuming absorption, on the various items he needed. (He showed particularly stunning foresight, for instance, in purchasing a small bottle of liquid paper.)

When he was sure he had everything, he glanced at his watch. It was already twelve o'clock.

Twenty-eight hours to *Death Strike*.

He paid by card. Cash would have been more prudent perhaps, he told himself when it was too late. If there was ever going to be a police investigation . . . irritated, he brushed the idea away. No one would ever suspect.

He loaded up the purchases into the back of the car.

A MacDonald's lay across the way and he hurried over to eat, taking pleasure in the fact that Freya wouldn't have been seen dead in a burger joint.

His appetite had never been healthier. The place was loud and busy – the many young

children around generated most of the bustle. No wonder Freya didn't like MacDonald's. Yes, she would consider herself a cut above these people – loud, vulgar, dressed in bright, nylon sportswear, low-skilled, uneducated. But still, she would have to admit that she wasn't so high and mighty when it came to having children by her husband, rather than some guy at work the husband didn't know anything about.

Quite a few people in MacDonald's were a cut above her in that respect.

Jason devoured his meal and was still hungry. He considered getting another. The trouble was, he couldn't stick the people around him – the angry-eyed, wobbly-armed mothers, balling at their screaming kids, and the men, all hulking, dopey-looking bastards, ignoring it all.

Some of them looked a little bit like Brodan.

He left.

As he was driving away from the retail park, he realised that he still had the day and most of the evening to pass before he could begin to effectuate his plan. He knew waiting around at home would be torture and so, before he got halfway, he turned and headed towards the office instead.

He had never worked a four-day week before and he didn't call ahead to tell the partners that he'd be in. And yet, although he stole into his office without anyone spotting him and kept really, really quiet, Mervyn dropped by later, delighted to see him.

'You look like you've been on holiday already,' he declared.

'I had a very good night last night. I think I've finally got used to this damned heat.'

'It's set to get hotter,' Mervyn chortled. 'Of course, this is nothing compared to Spain, as you probably know . . .'

Jason stopped listening. A movement in the corner of his eye drew it to the window and he saw a dark, voluminous figure, drifting like a sad ghost from the dead-end street and out across the park, drawing ever closer in a slow, stately fashion that always filled him with a sense of personal doom.

'You're late,' Jason murmured to himself. Then he glanced round to find Mervyn was smiling at him. His ancient face – as inhuman as the fruiting body of a monestrous fungus – was inscrutable. In that bland smile, Jason could see all the cunning of the mouldy old beast.

'She had to pop home,' Mervyn remarked, also glancing at the woeful figure. 'Her mom wasn't feeling well.'

'I thought she didn't look very happy,' Jason said, yearning for Mervyn to go away.

Lydia was picking her way over the waste ground now. The massed ranks of summer nettles had almost swallowed up the clumps of decayed litter and rubbish.

'She's a sweet person. A very sweet person indeed,' Mervyn said with disturbing wistfulness. 'We'd be at a loss here without her. And yet, I wish she could find someone to start a family with. She'd make a wonderful mother.'

After a vacuous rather than a pregnant pause (and just to irritate him, Jason supposed) Mervyn asked again whether he had decided on a holiday destination yet.

'Oh yes, it'll be Brighton.'

'Not abroad?'

'Not this year. The week after next, if that's all right. By the way, I could work the full five days next week.'

'That would be fabulous!' Mervyn beamed at him.

'It will be,' Jason assured him. 'The tax office has gone too far in his country. How many lives has it ruined already? They have to be stopped, even if it takes a revolution.'

'I'm not so sure about a revolution.'

'A quiet revolution. It'll be amazing. The old order will disappear overnight, just as it is wallowing in its warm self satisfaction. And once the padlock of vested interest has been

sundered there will be a reckoning – ’

‘I absolutely love the idea of the rolling back the tax regime, Jason, but,’ and Mervyn had to laugh a little, ‘overturning the system completely, I’d say, would put us out of a job.’

‘You make a very good point. The electric bath should be a one off – ’

‘The electric bath?’

‘I mean the electric chair.’

But Mervyn seemed to find this equally alarming.

‘I’m merely fantasizing, of course,’ Jason assured him. ‘I’m happy to give the Tax Department a bloody nose and leave it at that.’

‘That’s the ticket!’ Mervyn waved happily and turned to the door.

‘But *Brodan* will have to die,’ Jason muttered, when Mervyn was out in the corridor.

‘What’s that about Morgan?’ Mervyn thrust his head back into the office.

Morgan was *Denbigh*’s most valued client.

‘I was just thinking aloud. You know, about what I’m going to tackle next week.’

‘You want to give Morgan a try?’

‘That’s it!’

‘I’d have thought there wasn’t much more we could do for him.’

Jason shook his head, smiling to himself.

‘Morgan is in for a *great* surprise.’

‘*Really?*’

‘Yup.’

‘Excellent!’

Jason stayed at his desk till just after five.

By the time he had driven home, unloaded the equipment and materials, parked his car in the rented garage and walked back down Esquillax Street, it was six o’clock.

Twenty-two hours to *Death Strike*.

The first hint of nervous excitement set in. His appetite deserted him. He couldn’t sit still to rest for a single second. Instead, he concentrated on setting out the tools and preparing the materials he would need.

However, he was just cutting up the roll of glass fibre he had bought and Sellotaping the pieces over with plastic covers made with bin bags when some impulse made him leave off and go upstairs.

He found himself staring down from the window of the rear bedroom. Brodan was shunting his car out of the garage. He observed the ritual without emotion and when it was over he went back downstairs and continued his preparations.

Once he had finished packing the fibre glass in plastic sheeting, he took the chisels and brick hammer he had bought that morning up to the bathroom and, using these, he began to hack away a two-foot section of the tiles and plaster from the lower part of the wall between his house and Brodan’s. He stopped when he had exposed a couple of square feet of the bricks and mortar underneath. Then he swept up and bagged the debris. It was eight o’clock before he finished.

Twenty-one hours to *Death Strike*.

He had fixed on ten o’clock for the time he would make his sortie next door. By then it would be just getting dark. The old couple next door to Brodan’s would have gone to bed. Still, he couldn’t take any chances tonight – he would wear his false beard and glasses. If Brodan disturbed him during this operation Jason would not be able to cover his tracks and hide, he would be obliged to kill him and make it look like the handiwork of a burglar. For which purpose he had purchased one medium-sized monkey wrench – ideal for bashing Brodan’s skull in . . .

Ten o’clock.

Nineteen hours to *Death Strike*.

Outside, Jason began by dropping the four pads of covered fibre glass over the wall and into Brodan's courtyard. Meanwhile he listened, intent on any activity in the gully and in the side street. There were the usual disembodied cries – the yells and shouts echoing in the terraced streets on the opposite side of Esquillax Street – and of course the general groan of traffic. Nothing too close. Nothing of importance.

He made his first sortie then. He transferred the fibre glass pads into Brodan's kitchen and locked the door after him.

He bee-lined upstairs to the bathroom. Carrying the fibre glass padding meant it was difficult to hold his torch. Brodan, though, had left the curtains open and there was just enough light from the street to see by. The blinds in the bathroom were open too. He took a risk for the sake of speed and efficiency and drew the blind down and switched the light on. Now he had to get the bath panel off.

Jason had bought an electric screwdriver. The screws in the bath panel had been painted over white, together with the rest of the panel and he had to dig the bit in hard to get it to bite. The paint around the rim of the screw head cracked, of course, as he drew the screws out. He pulled the bath panel away, revealing the clawed feet that the metal tub stood on. It must have been as old as the house itself. The claws gripped bare wooden boards. Behind the belly of the bath, the wall was the original, unpainted plaster. It disintegrated to powder as he prodded it with the screwdriver. He marked the most convenient spot and measured how far it was from the corner of the room in which the head of the bath lay. Two foot four and a half inches. Next he packed the fibre glass cushions under the tub, and replaced the bath panel. The last thing he had to do was dab liquid paper over the screw heads, just in case Brodan returned before he could return to finish the job.

He left straight away, putting the light out and pulling up the blind.

Back in his own bathroom, he measured two foot four and a half inches from the corner and three inches from the floor. This came to about the middle of the area of brick he'd exposed. He chose the nearest joint between the bricks.

Jason had bought the most powerful hand drill he could find in the hardware store. The half-inch bit sank into the wall, howling rather than whining as it pulverised the mortar and brick in a cloud of dust. For some reason a face mask was the one item Jason had forgotten to buy. He felt the dust racking the back of his throat. He had to close his eyes against the flying grains, but he pushed harder and harder. The drill juddered against something buried in the brick on Brodan's side of the wall. Maybe a pebble. The noise grew to a screech, and a reek of ozone stung his nostrils. Jason couldn't stop. He had planned on making one hole. If he were to stop now the project's perfection would be compromised. On no account could he allow himself to be thwarted by Brodan ever again. The drill began to wobble in his hands, almost to squirm. Then it leapt, the snout thumping into the brickwork.

It was through.

Jason pulled the drill bit out of the wall and let his finger off the trigger. In the silence he found he was mumbling something to himself over and over again – *just a little DIY, that's all. Just a little –*

The cable he'd brought was waiting in a coil on the landing, ready to feed through the hole.

He ran two feet of it through. Racing downstairs to the kitchen, he put on the disguise and coveralls and the hair net and left with his sports bag, which he had already packed for this phase of the operation.

He paused in the courtyard, near the gate to the gully, and looked up at the windows of Brodan's other neighbours. There was no sign of activity from the old couple. The noise from the drill should have been muffled by the fibre glass and the bath panel. And yet, Jason found

it difficult to believe they hadn't heard anything. His own ears still rang – the noise had been terrific towards the end.

While he was examining the house, the loud, incoherent voices of youths jabbering in Melville Close drifted over to him. They seemed so close that for an unnerving moment he was convinced they were jeering at him from the gully. He retreated into the shadows and shared a bitter smile with himself. Events seemed to collude with Brodan at any opportunity in order to frustrate him. Even now, when the goal was so very close. The voices darted and stabbed at each other. An urgent discussion was under way, made up of angry assertions and retorts.

Oh, when would the asteroid/plague/climate catastrophe arrive and restore sweet silence to this suffering earth?

Jason soon lost patience waiting for any of those eventualities. He went into the kitchen and got a chair, which he placed in the corner of the courtyard against the wall, where the light of the street lamp didn't reach, and checking first that none of the youths were in the gully, he climbed over the wall with the sports bag and dropped into Brodan's courtyard.

Impatient to get the job finished, shaking with nervous energy, he let himself into the house, locked the door after him as before and ran up the stairs. In the bathroom, he pulled down the blind and put on the light.

The bath panel was easy to remove second time around. Jason eased it to one side and, kneeling next to the tub, he pulled the cushions of fibre glass out. The cable projected from the wall precisely where he had planned it to be. Using the tools he had brought that morning, he stripped it to the wire core and, using a soldering iron and the smallest dab of solder required, he fixed the cable core to the hot water pipe. This alone took him almost half an hour, because of the awkward position of the pipes and the small amount of room he had to work in. The night was sultry and by then he was covered in a film of oily sweat. Once, he almost dropped the soldering iron on the linoleum and cursed himself aloud. Even the tiniest burn mark would have ruined everything. Brodan was far too sharp to miss anything like that.

And for this very reason, Jason took the most extreme care to leave the bath panel looking just as he had found it. Having replaced the screws, he opened the small can of white gloss paint he had brought along and using a darning needle, he applied the paint with fanatical patience, drop by drop. It was more than an hour later before he was satisfied that the screw heads did not look like they had been disturbed.

At long last, Jason packed up. He put the light off and pulled the blind up and then, carrying the fibre glass cushions and sports bag, he left the house. Outside the voices had disappeared from Melville Close and he went back home via the gully without the slightest attempt to hide himself in the darkness. He felt too pleased with himself to skulk like a mere thief.

By then, however, Jason was bone-tired and after a shower, he struggled to stay awake. Nevertheless, he did stay awake so that he could watch Brodan come back from work and park his car in his (Jason's) garage for the last time.

Four-thirty.

Eleven and a half hours to *Death Strike*.

Jason slept like the night before, without a glimmer of consciousness, just like he was dead already.

He woke a little after two in the afternoon. He lay inert for a while, musing over last night's work, till it dawned on him that zero hour was approaching fast and he had still to wire up the cable to the mains via a switch. His head was clogged by sleep as he stumbled to the landing, where he had left his tools. Moving with clumsy slowness he began to strip the cable.

A door thumped next door and straightaway the gushing of water sounded as clearly as if

a bath were being drawn in his own bathroom. Brodan, in his infinite deviousness, was having his bath early on *this* day of all days!

Jason fumbled as he hurried to connect the switch and then a plug for the landing socket. He had already put thicker fuse wire in the mains box, to make sure Brodan got an extended dose of juice.

He finished the wiring just as Brodan turned the taps off.

It was bath time.

Jason kneeled by the wall, with the switch in his hand, and listened. There was the dull snap as the door of Brodan's wall cabinet was opened. Then a pause. Jason's heart banged deep in his chest. He was wide awake now, but no thoughts went through his head. Every nerve trembled for the cue of a single sound. He closed his eyes, blocking everything else out.

At last – the gulp of water as Brodan put one foot into the tub, and then the next. A groan of pleasure followed as he settled in. And . . . there it was – the sound of the water swilling around that big helpless body!

Zero hours to *Death Strike!*

With an involuntary cry of exultation, Jason threw the switch.

The air was rent by a scream, so loud and so filled with horror that it might have been torn from a giant's mouth as he was eviscerated in hell.

The switch fell from Jason's hands and clattered on the tiled floor.

The stark silence that followed encompassed the streets. Jason felt everyone stop, turn and fix him with innumerable staring eyes.

The world hung by a thread, till . . .

Someone blinked.

A car door slammed somewhere on the main road and children began to shout in the park as they resumed their games. Other sounds followed. He had been wrong. The world had not been disturbed.

Jason, however, still had Brodan's scream echoing his head.

It grew louder.

Louder.

With a mounting dread, Jason discovered that he wasn't free of Brodan after all. He clasped his hands to his ears and moaned. The two of them were bound together more tightly than ever before.

Nineteen: Payout

Gradually, an inner silence prevailed once more. Perhaps a greater silence than ever before. The silence of the grave. *Hold on*, Jason told himself in a voice that was no longer entirely his own, *this sickening premonition of doom might well be premature*. That's right. The operation wasn't over yet, was it?

Wouldn't he feel better when the cleanup phase had been completed?

Of course he would!

And he was in *total* control, wasn't he?

Incontrovertibly, old chap! Brodan was dead and a dead man could not hinder him.

Jason took hold of the cable running through the wall and tugged. He almost laughed as it resisted. He pulled – hard, and then again, this time till his hands hurt so much he cried out.

The cable would not move.

Now he did laugh – so hard in fact, he could not pull anymore. It was *too* hilarious. He had to sit back on the floor and rock from side to side, the tears streaming down his face.

He'd been so meticulous about soldering the wire core of the cable to the water pipe, just enough so that a mere tug would free it, but he'd failed to take account of the angle at which the cable ran from the hole in the wall to the pipe. This kinked the cable, making it catch the edge of the brickwork. The combination of the solder and the kink were enough to keep the cable in place, even when Jason braced himself against the wall and strained with all his might.

His laughter died away, leaving nothing behind.

It was some time later before he dragged himself up onto his feet and trudged downstairs.

He was muttering to himself, 'Great! Just so fucking great!'

On the way out he grabbed the electric screwdriver and the key to Brodan's back door. He was pissed off now and didn't give a damn if anyone saw him in the gully. Anyway, how could he be blamed for making sure the job got finished when some ridiculous little foul up had spoiled such a magnificently conceived operation? It seemed to Jason that if anyone else had a better idea for killing Brodan than him *then* they might have a right to criticise, but to be frank, he couldn't imagine any of the bozos in this fucking town ever having a better idea than him about *anything*.

In Brodan's courtyard, he started to insert his spare key into the lock, but straightaway it was blocked.

Baffled, he stared down at the key dumbly for a moment before he realised Brodan's key must still be in the other side of the lock. He was at a complete loss for a moment. But the obvious solution occurred to him soon enough – he must simply widen the hole in the wall so that he could manhandle the cable through more easily.

Back in his bathroom, Jason examined the exposed section of wall and decided he could remove some bricks whole using a bolster and a lump hammer to chop through the joints. The bricks could then be replaced later. It would be necessary to buy the tools, and cement and sand before he could begin. Going into work today was out of the question.

Jason tramped downstairs and phoned *Denbigh's* in the hall.

Lydia's voice answered, talking over him as he tried to explain that he wouldn't be coming to the office till tomorrow. It was like he wasn't there. He fell silent. It was Lydia who wasn't there. He had been trying to talk to an answermachine message. The office was closed. It was Saturday.

Jason shook his head at his stupidity and shut his eyes tight, feeling utterly drained. But then he remembered something.

Actually, the truth was – he was a genius!

Hadn't he put his plan into action on the very best day of the week? Brodan did not work over the weekend and he would not be missed till Monday evening. That meant Jason had forty-eight long, long hours to sort this problem out.

Even so, the inexorable flow of events was biting at his heels. The quicker he cleaned this mess up and got the evidence out of the way, the safer he would feel.

He left the house, walked to his rented garage and drove to the hardware store. While searching for the tools and materials he needed, his eye happened to be caught by a pair of long, thin pliers. It struck him then that he could use these to turn Brodan's key from the outside. He was sure he had heard that this was an old burglars' trick.

Suddenly, Jason couldn't believe just how fantastic he was becoming.

It was five o'clock when he got back. He didn't go to the trouble of parking his car in the rented garage, but left it in Melville Close. In fact, he didn't even waste time locking the thing. He went straight round to Brodan's back door and shoved the long-nosed pliers into the keyhole. He was able to grip the shaft of the key, but the key simply refused to turn. He grunted with the effort. Any moment now and he'd break the lock.

As he struggled like his life depended upon it, a detached part of his mind listened to a lazy, but persistent conversation drifting over to him from the opened kitchen window next door. It must have been from a radio.

In sudden, mindless frustration he began to jerk the pliers around and abruptly the lock slid open with ease.

'God damn.'

He had been struggling the turn the key the wrong way. He had forgotten he was working back to front.

Perhaps he should have remembered that.

He'd also forgotten to bring the electric screw driver in order to remove the bath panel. And he'd need the paint too. Berating himself under his breath for his carelessness and promising to do better in the future, he trudged back to his house.

He had the screwdriver in one hand and was just sorting out a pair of disposable gloves from a drawer in the kitchen when there was a knock at the front door.

'A visitor! Just who might it be, I ask myself.' He trilled.

It was David, dressed in casual clothes and sporting a new, trendy hair cut. He was still deathly pale, and still boiling with the same unhealthy heat that produced a hectic flush just below the surface of his skin.

He was smiling.

'Hello there.'

'Hey, Dave!'

'I've just dropped by to give you my congratulations.'

Jason clasped him by the hand and shook it.

'Thanks! Come in, come in.' He ushered David into the living room. 'It's gone pretty smoothly, on the whole. Great job, really. Just a little, tiny glitch at the end, but I'm sorting that.'

David had been looking around the room admiringly. He turned to Jason.

'Glitch?'

'Oh, it's a nothing. Like I say, I'm right on top of it. Coffee?'

'Um? Oh – I don't want to bother you.'

'It's no bother at all. I insist.'

'Coffee would be nice. Or anything, so long as it's warm and wet.'

‘The best coffee I’ve got – coming up. Take a pew, as you say.’

Returning from the kitchen with two steaming mugs, Jason found David waiting for him in a state of perplexity.

‘You said glitch.’

‘Honestly, I shouldn’t have mentioned it. Here you are, old chap.’

‘Thanks. But you should mention it, since I’m responsible for sorting everything out, no?’

‘Now why would you be responsible for getting the cable out the wall?’ Jason chided good-naturedly, as he sat.

‘Jason,’ David laughed. ‘I was talking about the insurance claim for your accident. That’s why I’m here. It’s gone through, so far as I know.’

Jason smiled too and stared at him through the vapours of his coffee.

‘Then, what am I talking about, I wonder?’

‘Going by the screwdriver in your hand, I’d say you’re still up to your eyeballs in doing up the house. You’ve done a brilliant job, by the way. Smashing.’

Jason looked at the screwdriver, which was indeed still in his hand. He couldn’t understand how he’d kept hold of it even while carrying the mugs of coffee.

‘You’re spot on, Holmes. It’s all good down here, but upstairs it’s just a damned mess. A horrible mess. Specifically, the bathroom.’

David nodded and sipped his coffee.

Coffee really does zip through the water works, doesn’t it? Jason thought dreamily.

‘So, I take it you haven’t had a letter from the insurance firm yet?’

‘No.’

‘They’re so lax. That’s why I tried to phone you, to tell you the good news.’

‘My mobile’s playing up.’

‘I phoned here too, but there wasn’t an answer.’

‘We’ve had a power surge. Actually, it was my fault. Been messing with the electrics.’

‘Um. Dangerous, messing with the electrics.’

‘It is. But ironically, I was trying to disconnect the cable for safety reasons when it happened.’

‘The cable?’

‘*The* cable.’

‘Sounds like something that would carry a lot of electricity. Be careful.’

Even though it was steaming hot, David was gulping his coffee like it was cold water. The whole mugful would be in his bladder within minutes.

That’s right, he had minutes before David asked to use the bathroom. In fact, David was already broaching some mildly undignified subject . . .

Eh? What is it? What’s he talking about?

Janey. He was talking about Janey, using an affected casualness that did not disguise his rather embarrassing contentment. True, she had gone back to working with heroin addicts, which was worrying, but then, on the plus side, in another three years she could retire and start drawing her pension.

Jason nodded politely and smiled, but his thoughts relentlessly pursued their own course and at some point he mused aloud. ‘I’d like to say I’ve disconnected the water too. That way I could say the loos don’t flush.’

‘What? Oh, well, water’s getting very expensive these days.’

‘And electricity too. Where do people find the money to pay the bills?’

‘In your case, from the insurance firm. They’ve agreed to pay out the full ten thousand.’

‘Marvellous!’

‘I thought I’d let you know the figure. Normally, that’s the first thing people ask . . .’

‘Thank you very much, David. You did really well.’

‘No prob. But you haven’t had a letter. That’s annoying. Actually, I thought that the glitch you mentioned was something to do with the insurance.’

‘No, that’s the electrical glitch,’ Jason sighed, wishing that he was talking about a water glitch instead. Having a fully functional loo had never been so inconvenient. David had just crossed his legs, like he was contemplating a visit to the bathroom this very moment. ‘The problem is,’ Jason went on, ‘in so many ways, I really don’t know what I’m doing. If you went up there now, to the bathroom, I think you’d be shocked. It’s like a wretched crime scene. You’d have to wonder what the hell I’d been up to.’

David chuckled. ‘It’s not that bad, surely.’

‘Oh yes it is.’

David raised his eyebrows in conventional amazement and finished his coffee.

‘Anyway, I think you should expect the cheque from the insurance company any day now. Maybe you should get a professional in to clean everything up.’

‘That’s an idea. But I shan’t.’

‘And why should you? Looking around, you’ve done so well down here. I’m sure you’ll get it fixed up just as well upstairs. In fact, I’m sure it isn’t as bad as you think.’ David was blinking as he spoke. Did this mean he was about to ask to use the bathroom?

‘You’re right. When you’re in the middle of doing stuff, it can seem like an impossible task to finish it.’

‘That’ll be it.’ David placed his mug firmly on the coffee table. ‘Thanks for the drink. I needed it.’

‘No trouble.’

‘Well,’ he patted his knees. ‘I shan’t hold you up any longer.’

‘But I was just thinking, Dave, I should treat you to a meal out. I know this really good Mexican place, up town. Behind Broad Street.’

‘No – honestly.’

‘But it would be my pleasure. I can’t thank you enough, really.’

‘I couldn’t. I don’t –’

‘You’ve been a rock. I couldn’t have got anywhere in this town without your help. It really would be an honour.’

‘But –’

‘I’ll get my coat.’

‘Well –’

As Jason dragged on his coat in the hallway, David joined him and glanced whistfully up the stairs.

‘I wonder whether I could possibly –’

‘No, I insist. I’m paying!’ Jason yanked the door open and ushered the poor man out. ‘By *God*, I’m paying.’

Twenty: **Resurrection**

Jason came back drunk. Still laughing to himself, he staggered upstairs and seemed to swirl round and around as he sank into bed.

He dreamed.

Was it him, or someone else, lost and wandering through the grounds of a sprawling stately mansion that floated, dark and ominous, behind an endless maze of yew?

It was a burning hot summer's day and vast, immaculate lawns stretched out towards black woods and a distant magnetic hill. On either side of the lawns, intricate gardens blazed in lurid technicolour. He avoided looking back at the monumental house itself, though he could feel it silently staring down at him. Rather, he hurried away, crossing a large stone-paved terrace and descended a set of concrete steps to a winding, gravelled track. He followed this.

The limpid sky had the clarity of pure turquoise crystal and the tall, trimmed yews stood so sharply defined against the ethereal blue that they might have been cut out of metal. As so often in his dreams – even those that weren't nightmares – Jason was aware that there was no one else left alive in the world.

He came to a remote part of the grounds, where a brick outhouse had been demolished and rebuilt as a garden wall. The whole area was untended and the grass and climbing plants had run wild. A huge ash tree waited beyond the wall and waved gently at the empty sky – somnolent and sad. In the corner of the wall a peculiar, single-stemmed plant, almost five feet tall and bearing a single yellow flower, stood in the hot, heavy silence.

Its scent was loneliness and it was waiting for all eternity to die.

Jason started and woke in darkness. Pain knifed through his head. He rolled out of bed and staggered to the bathroom. When he put the light on, he could not keep his eyes open against the glare. He felt his way to the wall cabinet and fumbled out the box of codeine tablets. He took two, drinking water from the sink faucet to get them down and splashing more water onto his face to wash away the blood that streamed from his nose.

When he could open his eyes again the first thing he saw was the cable running out of the wall. Or rather, what he saw was a filthy stinger, as if from a gigantic insect, thrust into the house and pumping poison into it. In fact, the waves of nausea undulating within him put the notion in his mind that the stinger was stuck deep into his own body. He could not bear to delay any longer. He had to wrench the dirty thing out.

Brodan must be torn from his flesh.

He stumbled downstairs and grabbed the electric screwdriver from where he'd dropped it on the sideboard that afternoon. He noticed that his upper lip felt wet. His nose wouldn't stop bleeding. He staunched the flow with a ball of paper towel in the kitchen, picked up the torch he kept in a drawer and left the house.

These were the last hours of the night and the city was as dormant as it ever got. Traffic still moved in the far distance, but it was languid. The streets around were silent. Jason felt his way through the gully. Breathing in the cold night air helped against the nausea and slowed the blood flowing from his nose.

The silky darkness inside Brodan's house seemed tangible. Perhaps, Jason told himself, the dead emanate darkness, just as they emitted an odour of decay. He was moving fast now. Hurling forwards. It was like he was being swallowed up. He only thought about putting his torch on when he had already reached the stairs. But really, he didn't need to see where he was going anymore.

The bathroom door was open. The torch beam danced ahead of him as he sought out Brodan.

It found him.

Brodan's chest and belly had bloated to a huge size, leaving his contorted limbs looking long and thin. The head had been thrown back so that it lolled over the end of the bath. Jason stared down into the half lidded eyes. The attitude of the body, the expression of the distended face – death had turned Brodan's terror into a parody of ecstasy. The trembling ray of the torch and the darting shadows it raised brought the corpse's features to life. Jason looked deep into that face, leering up at him in the throws of sexual rapture and a million screaming mouths bloomed inside his brain.

He had finally remembered.

And Brodan had pulled off his last and greatest trick. In death he looked exactly like Jason's Uncle Vincent.

Jason saw now that he had been doomed all along. If only his mother hadn't left him with Vincent so that she could go into Orbaton town with her friends for the night. If only his father hadn't gone away. If only he hadn't been born . . .

Of course he had always remembered, deep down, what had happened.

He could hear his mother now, screaming at his uncle.

Later she'd asked him what he had given him to drink. That's right, he had been sick, hadn't he? Like he was now. Uncle Vincent must have drugged him. Well, his mom never left him with Uncle Vincent again. But of course, it was too late by then. If only the drug had been stronger, so that he had never wakened again. All these years the vile sensations and flickered images from that trance-like state had lain just under the surface, undermining his personality, like the torment from an incurable physical disease. Being married to Freya, or anyone else would have always ended in the same jeering retorts at his failure to be a man. And he would always have got divorced, and he would always have accepted his uncle's bequest and he would always have killed Brodan and he would always be here, in the house of the dead and not seeing any reason to ever leave.

He was in hell, encased in the thick, evil carapace of the past – unchangeable for eternity. Never again would he escape. The despair was beyond endurance. Yet he had to endure it. His whole existence, the flesh and bones of his body, had been turned into the substance of pure suffering.

A tremendous, resonating crash reverberated from beyond and in that instant the light of day blazed all around him.

Hell had been split apart.

His uncle had got into the bath and at this precise moment Jason was still just beyond his filthy claws. A miracle had saved him – just as it was always supposed to have.

There was a deafening, unstoppable hammering at the front door.

Jason cried out in blissful joy. His mother had come back early!

He dashed from the bathroom. Uncle Vincent was paralysed by sheer terror and Jason didn't have to run, but he ran anyway, leaping down the stairs, three at a time, his heart singing, liberated from horror as he bounded breathlessly to the door, which was already splintering apart under the thunderous rain of avenging blows from outside.

End