

Field of Reeds

A novel by Andrew Starling

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"St Peter at the gates of heaven and hell. He's a busy man. Dead Christians popping up in front of him at six a minute. So his judgements have to be fast. I think he goes on clothes.

"There's a backlog. Millions waiting to be judged. I see it as a great sports hall up there with bare concrete walls, no windows, something from the sixties. Half of them are singing - hymns, tribal chants, salsa. Dancing. Hell of a commotion. St Peter's in his chair, trying to do his best. They line up to stand in front of him. He looks at the next one for a few seconds, says, 'Nice suit, right hand door'."

The Professor

1 *Foxglove, Kite and Balloons*

It was Spencer's turn. The bishop seemed the best piece to move, not for any great strategic reason but because of the shape of its hat. He lifted the bishop from its square, moved it diagonally a couple of spaces through the air like a real chess player might do, and inserted it in his left nostril. It fitted nicely. When he took his hand away it stayed there. As an afterthought he took the second black bishop from the board and used it to plug his right nostril. This one stayed in place too. Perhaps it had something to do with those grooves on the bishops' hats.

"S that how you feel about religion?" slurred the Professor. Their quart of Jack Daniel's was almost empty. An average nine year old could have beaten them both at chess, but happily they were finding it difficult to beat each other. They were sitting in their favourite chess-playing spot in the middle of the biggest disused lot in the city, ten acres of raw earth and rubble half a mile from the bay. The moon was close to new and still feeble. A few bright stars were beating the city glare.

"Agnostic defence." Spencer's voice sounded very strange inside his head, very nasal and disembodied. He liked the sound of it. Well-distanced from reality.

"Hundreds of years old, this game is," said the Professor. "It's easy to forget that. Two empires fighting each other. The king, his consort, his castles, knights and clerics, all at war."

The chess pieces belonged to the Professor, but if he disapproved of Spencer's unorthodox move, it didn't show. His eyes were open wide, as innocent as a child's. A change in the light caught his bulging cheeks, veins like scarecrow's hands clutching the cheekbones beneath the skin. His coat was open, showing off the single baby-pin that secured his fly. Apart from the ruined cheeks and trousers he looked like an ageing cherub. How strange, thought Spencer, that I can see your face and you can see mine, yet we rarely see our own. Even when they shaved it was usually blind. It wasn't as hard as mirror-people might imagine.

Behind the Professor was the contractors' yellow machinery, a big conference of hydraulic arms and dozer blades, a Japanese army resting from its daily battle with the soil. They were all Komatsu's and Hitachi's. Whatever happened to good old Caterpillar? Spencer had a brief vision of himself patrolling the fence around that Japanese compound, in uniform, with his flashlight and sidearm. A vision that would go back to a comfortable apartment in the small hours when the shift was over and snuggle up with an adorable girlfriend for the overlap hours, until she rose complainingly for work.

All history now. Can't change history. And it had never been his compound to guard.

He took the bishops from his nose and wiped them on his coat. Instead of putting them on their squares he put them to one side, on the red plastic crate the board was resting on, signifying that the game was a draw under rule 142C, the excess Jack Daniel's rule. If the Professor was right, and this was a war of empires, these two had just declared a ceasefire.

The Professor's description intrigued him. Two warring empires. A curious thought, except that wasn't the way wars were fought these days. Modern wars were fought by multinational companies for the hearts and wallets of the world's consumers, for dollars rather than land. Maybe it was time to bring the game up to date, invent a new set of pieces. The pawns as Mexicans and Chinese stooped over sweatshop tables. The bishops in advertising, with TVs for heads and passing out magazines. The knights as company accountants with tall stacks of cash, but taking it in rather than handing it out. The rooks as company attorneys, holding writs. The queen as chief executive officer in a high-backed chair. And the king? The king nothing more than a squiggly line on a chart - that most crucial yet vulnerable element of any company, its stock market share price.

A stronger flash of light caught the Professor's face. Spencer turned to see where it had come from. A raised freeway passed a dozen yards behind him, its concrete stilts holding the twin decks too high for the cars and trucks to be seen. Only their ghosts were visible; headlights turning the night air white or reflecting off the bottom of the upper deck, casting shadows circling behind the pieces on the board. But the light hadn't come from there. A white limousine was crawling down the contractors' track through the centre of the lot, between the broken concrete and banks of earth, its twin white eyes rising and falling with the bumps. Spencer didn't feel much one way or the other about its approach, except that it was an intrusion. Some half-lost memory told him it was a car he vaguely knew.

It came to a standstill a few yards from where they were sitting, engine off, looking faintly ridiculous amongst all the raw earth and rubble. The big rear door clicked and opened wide, showing

the backside of a pair of jeans, which reversed out awkwardly. The figure stood upright and turned, smiling.

Spencer groaned and looked away.

The Professor stared. "You're George Stiles. I've seen you in the papers." He said it quietly. A secret thought accidentally said out loud.

"You must read the business pages, then." George shut the limousine door with a nudge of his bum. One hand was holding a folding mahogany chair, the other clutched a limousine-bar decanter. A small cut-glass spirit tumbler, upside down, rolled around the stopper. "And who are you?" he asked, amiably.

The Professor collected himself. "I'm the Professor." He motioned at Spencer. "And this gentleman is Gent." His voice was much clearer than it had been a few minutes ago. Spencer guessed he wasn't the only one sobered up by the arrival of the car.

"Is that what you call him?" George walked across to join them. He shook the chair gently. It opened gracefully like a folding umbrella. "Is that what you call him?" he repeated. "Gent and I already know each other, don't we, Spen?"

Spencer self-consciously toyed with the knot of his tie. It felt cool and silky to the touch. So did his suit, especially at the seat and elbows, even from the inside. From a distance he looked half-way respectable, but not close up. He looked at the sky rather than at George.

George sat down. The decanter and glass clinked as he poured himself a drink. "Armagnac. Forty years old. I don't think a drink's mature unless it's a little older than me. Maybe I'll have to change my mind when I'm seventy. Would you like some, Professor?"

The Professor grasped the decanter. He was eager to take it but didn't know what to do with it next. He held it but didn't raise it to his lips.

"Come on, it's not formal-night. You can drink straight from the bottle. Nobody cares." George ran his free hand through his fair hair. "Or do you want a glass from the car?"

God, I wish I hated you, thought Spencer. It would be so much easier if I hated you. But you're such a goddamn charmer.

George sprawled on his chair, looking very relaxed. He'd barely changed since Spencer had last seen him - what was it? - two years ago. He had that round, boyish kind of face that doesn't age, just melts a little as time passes. He was still slim, nearing forty yet not pregnant with approaching middle-age. That posture across the chair was typical George. It was hard to remember ever seeing him sat upright. The check shirt and jeans were trademarks too. He always wore casual clothes, even

for business. When you were as rich and powerful as George you didn't have to live by the normal rules.

The Professor drank from the decanter and offered it to Spencer, who took it gratefully.

"Gent mentioned you a couple of times," the Professor told George as Spencer drank. "Said he knew you." He glanced at Spencer, looking for clues on how to deal with this cold reunion. "I guess I believed him."

"We went to high-school together. Spencer worked for Foxglove for a long time. What would it be, Spen, ten years?"

Spencer decided it was time to end his silence. He put on a smile. It probably looked false but it was the best he could do. He gave the decanter back to George. The armagnac was fine if you could live with the flavour. It was a sipping drink. In big gulps it tasted thick and raisiny. "How's the battle for control of the Universe?"

"I'm winning," came the standard reply.

This had always been their opening exchange as teenagers, when George had bought his first humble computer and started selling programs to change the screen display. There was a certain sharpness to it. Even all those years ago Spencer had recognised George's ambition. Given the difference in their circumstances now, it was doubly acidic. Yet Spencer wondered if he'd said it to re-establish a withered bond.

"That where you worked on security, isn't it?" the Professor asked Spencer. "Foxglove."

"Until George fired me."

George sipped his drink from the perfect glass. The security lights of the contractors' compound crawled around it, reflected from fifty yards away. Spencer started putting the chess pieces back in their tattered plastic bag.

"I'm not here to open old wounds," said George, gently.

"You think they've closed, then, do you?" Spencer sucked his lip. That was more than he'd wanted to say.

A heavy silence followed, weighed down by the unsaid, but George had never been one to stay silent for long. "Do you ever think about your old colleagues? You knew some of them a long time, must wonder what they're up to these days."

Spencer didn't respond. Like anybody who'd worked with a group of people for many years, he was curious. The answer was yes, but he didn't want to say it.

"Sammy's got another grandchild." George laughed. "Little family of rabbits he produced there."

Spencer had a soft spot for Sammy. He'd worked on security too. It couldn't be more than a few months before he was due to retire, thought Spencer, but still he said nothing. He concentrated on putting the chess pieces away.

"Ever wonder about Bry? She's still at Foxglove, still thinks about you from time to time. I know."

Spencer's hands stopped moving. That really hurt. If George hadn't fired him he might never have lost Bry.

George's tone became more serious, more demanding. "I'd like you to come back and work for me, Spencer. What do you say?"

Spencer snorted. "A drunk as security chief? Yeah, really."

"Not on security, no. I have something else in mind."

"No way." Spencer went back to clearing the chess pieces again. Only three to go. He wanted there to be more.

"A Foxglove employee has gone missing. A very important one. Raymond Kite came to work for me on a project called Balloons. We haven't seen him for more than a month. He stopped coming into work. The lease lapsed on his apartment. He's disappeared."

"Then call the police, put an advert in the paper, hire a detective agency. No. Why don't you just *buy* one? You can afford it."

As founder of Foxglove - now the largest software company in the world following the sudden collapse of Microsoft - George Stiles could afford an agency or two. The Wall Street Journal put his fortune at seven billion dollars. Yet Spencer could remember him as a young man with nothing but debts to his name, a garage-electronics freak with no garage. George's first PC, second-hand of course, had sat on top of his parents' washing machine in the utility room. There was nowhere else for it to go. On spin cycle the keyboard couldn't be used and the screen was a blur. They'd had a good laugh about that, back in the days before George had to be taken seriously. His big break had come with the Magic Ear, a piece of software that finally allowed everybody to talk to their computers direct without going through the irritating middleman of a keyboard. And it worked, without close-up microphones or any of the other limitations the competition was still saddled with. It learned the user's voice and after a few weeks became more accurate than a typist. It came as standard now with almost every new personal computer, and every Magic Ear sold added roughly fifty dollars to George's personal wealth. A few detective agencies would cost him little more than his spare change.

"You knew some of the same people Raymond knew," replied George. "Anyway, I need somebody I can trust."

The chess bag was full. Spencer drew the strings at the top and gave it to the Professor. A plane was coming in over the bay, murmuring, its engines cut back low. Spencer looked into George's grey eyes. Did he really mean what he'd just said? For a moment he wished he was truly sober so he could tell. It passed. A pointless thought. He'd never been able to tell.

"A thousand dollars a day," said George. "A thousand dollars a day and all expenses. And I mean all - clothes, car, hotel, the works. 'Course you'll have to get off the bottle first. I've lined up a detox centre. Should only take a few days."

"No way." Spencer shook his head. "No way, no way, no way." It wasn't even worth thinking about. There were so many reasons why he shouldn't go back. Like... and if they'd just give him a minute he'd think of them. Suddenly he felt very drunk.

George sipped his drink, saying nothing more. Waiting.

God, he could be so irritatingly cool when he wanted to be. The patient fox. Foxglove. A fox wearing boxing gloves, or kid gloves, or gauntlets. A whole goddamn drawer full. They'd been together when George had come up with the name. They were both twenty-one. George earned two thousand dollars a year from selling display-modifiers, before anybody had even thought of the expression "screen-saver", and was up to his still-freckled brows in debt, but he knew he was going to be big, that he needed a company name. He'd come up with it through reading a piece in Reader's Digest that said a drug was extracted from foxglove flowers, a drug called digitalis. Digital is. A cute little connection for a computer company.

Spencer abandoned his disordered thoughts and looked up at the freeway, at the phantom cars that couldn't be seen. He turned to the limousine, dirt-streaked and motionless - the driver, another crazy bastard, switched off along with the engine. Loyal employee.

No. He wasn't going to give in. Not this time.

"Nice sky," said George. He caught Spencer's startled look and laughed. "I've mellowed a little."

Spencer raised his eyes heavenward. Yes, it was nice up there. He could see Orion. A satellite was passing through it, blinking on and off as satellites appear to do, like mechanical fireflies. Fireflies advertising for mates. Maybe it would find a mate up there, something exotic - Russian or French - or a space-shuttle to dock with. Good old sexy American technology.

"What do you say, Spen?"

"Definitely not. No way. Not a chance."

He could hear George inhale. A satisfied breath. Bastard. The one giveaway sign in his whole unreadable personality, the loud breath he always made when he closed a deal. He was so sure of himself, so confident in his powers of persuasion, in his manipulative words, that he'd already decided he'd be able to turn Spencer round.

But Spencer wasn't going to give in. He was sure of that. He wasn't going to fall for the Stile charm yet again. No, not this time. This time George had got it wrong.

2 *Michael's eyes*

The top floor of the Merchant Building was very plush, all dark wood panelling and high ceilings. Two dickie-bowed waiters in red waistcoats stood by the elevator doors offering champagne. Others burrowed through the crowd carrying drinks on silver trays: chardonnay, mineral water, orange juice. None appeared to be taller than five foot two. Presumably this was supposed to make the guests feel comfortably superior but Spencer found it freakish and distracting.

Though not distracting enough. He wanted them to perform cartwheels, juggle five full glasses at a time, spin trays on the tips of their outstretched toes like a true circus act of caterers. Sober life was leaving a gap in his mind where alcohol had once been. It needed filling with something diverting.

How George had persuaded him to come back to reality and look for Raymond Kite was still a mystery. He put it down to the uneven battle between a manipulative captain of industry and a drunken bum. It was something he didn't want to think about too hard, along with his week in detox, that literally sickening transition from intoxication to sobriety. As a drunk he'd spent most of his time trying to block out the awfulness of the past, and now, as a regular sober member of society, here he was doing exactly the same. Inevitably the memories would come back, it wasn't so easy without the drug. At least it was only the past few days he was trying to block out, rather than months or years. And he could live with the present. That made a change. He could smell his armpits without thinking Pepperoni, stroke his chin without hurting his hand, feel machine-conditioned air on his teeth and catch himself in the mirrors on the wood-panelled walls without questioning their quality.

There were too many people in the room for him to snatch more than a glimpse of himself here, but back at the hotel he hadn't spared the mirror. It had surprised him when he'd moved and the face in the mirror moved too. He found that he actually quite liked what he saw, even if it did seem to belong to a stranger. It was like discovering in the attic some fondly remembered and battered old school satchel.

He'd excused himself from potential vanity by wearing the most striking suit in the closet, a suit that simply had to be checked out for suitability. It was intended to be some odd form of camouflage amongst the eccentric types he expected to be at the exhibition, an Armani cotton number in a muted shade of turquoise that proclaimed: now here's a difficult colour, and didn't we manage to bring it off well? Strangely, it was a colour that Spencer felt he'd worn before, though he couldn't remember when, or why. And it was a colour that demanded a why.

When he'd arrived at his room in the Ana Hotel, fresh from detox, clothes had been waiting for him in the closet. Some anonymous Foxglove employee had done their job exceptionally well. Everything fitted exactly. Not only that, but the styles were right. They were precisely *him*. He never wore jeans. Chinos were as casual as he got. Nor did he like teeshirts. He felt more comfortable in slightly smarter clothes, somewhere on the crossover line between work and play. He couldn't remember when he'd first started to dress this way, or why. Perhaps it was a side-effect of having to wear a uniform or just part of the psychological quirkiness that had turned him towards security work in the first place. He'd be the last person able to answer that question. Even as a drunk he'd been relatively well-dressed. Filthy most of the time, and higher than a frightened skunk, but not casual. Twice he'd found suits in the dumpsters and worn them till they'd fallen apart. That was how he'd got his street-name: Gent, short for gentleman.

George, no doubt, would be attending the show in his usual workshirt and denims. It was a peculiar place for him to have chosen to meet, an exhibition and sale of the works of Michael Sorden, the photographer. Spencer hadn't heard of Michael Sorden before, but then photography had never been a passion. Nor had it been for George, as far as he could remember.

George was being very secretive about the search for Raymond Kite. He didn't want it to look too obvious that Spencer was working for him or that he wanted Raymond found. He'd arranged for them to come across each other as if by accident at the exhibition, like a pair of ridiculous cold war spies. He'd said nothing more about Raymond. Everything would be explained at the show, that was George's line. And he could take whatever line he liked since he was paying the bills.

Spencer couldn't decide whether he liked the venue or not. The jump from streetlife to elegant culture was extreme. Maybe it was the kind of immersion in deep water that he needed, but right now the shock wasn't doing much for the balance of his mind. Even when his life had run at its most regular he'd never felt truly comfortable at this type of event.

He stood quite still for a while, an organic statue to be ignored, a chameleon in bright cotton clothing. The suit was the perfect choice for blending in with the delicate petals of the punters on the

top floor. A few bland businessmen had slipped in, their greys and whites now as stark as neon, and plenty of electronics industry people from the valley attempting to mix business-style with cool, but all were easily out-numbered and out-hipped by the peculiarly-dressed arty crowd with its pony-tails and Indian beads and fringed shirts and other determinedly unique items of clothing. The place was ridiculously busy. The elevator had been packed to capacity and now, here in the ante-room before he'd even reached Michael Sorden's pictures, there were scores of people milling around. In fact such a forest of bodies that he didn't see Bry until she was standing right next to him.

He jumped like he'd been jabbed with a pin.

"Spencer. You're looking well."

Blank, thought Spencer. I'm feeling blank and thinking blank and surely I must be looking it too. Seeing God appear on television would have been less of a shock than finding his ex-girlfriend by his side.

"I, er." He had absolutely no idea what to say.

"You've even got a tan." She seemed very calm in comparison.

"Unhealthy outdoor living," he muttered.

She looked lovely, as always. She was wearing a lime green dress in high-necked oriental style, modest in a sense but also very tight-fitting. Her dark hair was gathered in a studiedly-ineffective bun, leaving wisps and trails around her face and neck. Spencer had always found her beautiful. Not the beauty seen within half a second of looking at a pin-up girl, but the slower beauty that creeps up on you as you notice more and more exquisite details. The eyelashes, the earlobes, the crook of an arm, a perfectly-placed dimple on the bottom. He'd spent over four years getting to know those details, shared an apartment with them, shared a bed, hopes and dreams. Too many memories. He couldn't talk to her right now. He'd have to make his excuses and look for her later when he'd recovered, when the debris had cleared.

"Have you seen George?" he asked. "I'm supposed to meet him here." It was the obvious escape route, with the added advantage of being true.

"He's in Germany."

"What?"

"Or at least on his way. He flew there this afternoon. I'm standing in for him." She seemed amused by the idea.

"Oh." So much for pre-arranged plans. So much for the grand diversion of searching for Raymond Kite. What was he supposed to do now?

The whole aim of coming to the show was to meet George and get a proper briefing. All he knew about Raymond so far was a vague physical description - a fairly tall, skinny man with blond straggly hair. Hardly the fat dossier from which to mount a manhunt. George hadn't even supplied a photograph.

Spencer wondered if he should ask Bry about Raymond, and decided against it. She was head of public relations for Foxglove; that's how they'd met. He couldn't imagine she was involved in the search, not when George was trying to keep it hidden.

"Did George tell you why I was coming?"

Bry gave him a puzzled look. "Yes, of course. To meet Michael Sorden."

"Right." A definite underhand play from grandmaster Stiles. But where was it going to lead? It was very frustrating for George not to be there, and seemed odd that he should have chosen Bry as his replacement, given their history. For the moment, Spencer decided to ride with it, if only to find out why he was supposed to meet the photographer. He didn't have any other plans for the evening.

"Still playing the clarinet?" All that history, and all he could come up with was small-talk. He still wasn't sure how he felt about being with her. All those mixed emotions an old partner brings on. Regrets, sentimentality, confusion, the residue of love. Even fear, wondering if somebody who knows enough to hurt can still be trusted with all that intimate knowledge.

"When I get time to practise."

"Still eating your food raw?"

"Like an animal. How about you? Still tidier than a talkshow toupee?"

It wasn't the best line she'd ever come up with but Spencer laughed anyway. It was true, he'd always been obsessively tidy. And she'd always made fun of it. Wit was one of her charms he'd fallen for. Yet behind it a very complicated and not always happy person was hiding. It had taken him a year to discover that dark interior. Intimate knowledge worked both ways.

"How's Teresa?" Bry's sister suffered from multiple sclerosis. An attack had left her bedridden just before their relationship ended.

"In remission. Still no feeling in her left foot, but otherwise walking around normally."

Spencer plucked a glass from the silver tray of a passing dwarf, a glass of mineral water. Alcohol did not appeal. Bry took a glass of chardonnay. He realised that they hadn't made physical contact, hadn't shaken hands or pecked cheeks, as ex-lovers ought to do. As cold as you always were - she'd be saying to herself. But it was too late to correct that now.

"Nice suit," said Bry. "I love the colour." So that was why it was so familiar. It was Bry's favourite. "I got the size right too. I wasn't sure I could remember. Is the other stuff OK?"

"You bought the clothes in my room?" Very curious.

"George asked me to."

"They're fine. No. More than fine. They're perfect." It would have been Bry who left the brown envelope on the desk too. Five hundred dollars and a Foxglove Amex card. It wouldn't have been hard for her to guess the contents.

"I wish I could get George to smarten up sometimes. I get bored with his denims and workshirts. I buy him decent things but he won't wear them. It took me two months to persuade him to wear a suit for a single day. One day. Can you believe that? He would have married me in jeans if I'd let him."

An enormous landslide. Boulders falling in slow motion into place above Spencer's head in a dry-stone jigsaw, a cracked prison ceiling. People opening their mouths all around but no sound coming out. Miming nonsense.

The dust settled. A wave of idle chatter returned to his ears. He could see the ring on her finger now. Why hadn't he looked before?

"He didn't tell you?"

Spencer shook his head.

Bry frowned. The frown changed to a questioning, sympathetic look. Her voice softened, truly sincere. "Oh, Spen, I'm so sorry. I thought you already knew. That was a dreadful way to find out. I can't believe he didn't tell you."

"Nice catch," said Spencer, emptily. Already his mind was busy with its reconciliations. Hardening. You should have been mine but I drank and you bitched. Too late. Can't change history.

"A compliment for a fisherwoman," said Bry, unamused. The soft tone had gone.

"Sorry." She was right. That hadn't been a nice thing to say. The surprise had caught him off guard. But he was dealing with it now. Coping, just.

Ha, George. At this moment he just had to be sprawled across the first class seat of a plane somewhere over the Atlantic, glass of armagnac in one hand, looking at his watch and sniggering to himself, the wily bastard.

"How long?"

"A year last Monday."

"Do you like being married? Is it good?"

"Shall we go through and meet Michael? It might take a while to find him."

Obviously not good for Bry's hearing.

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Stationed by the doorway from the ante-room into the main viewing chamber was an oyster bar - wild oysters, rock oysters, two labels of champagne - which Bry completely ignored. Spencer remembered that she didn't like oysters or champagne. Champagne gave her a headache. They walked past it at speed and into the display area, where he came to an immediate standstill.

Michael Sorden's pictures were extraordinary. They were all of eyes. Human eyes. Sometimes photographed in pairs but more often individually, and enormous, anything up to six foot by four for a single eye. Browns, blues, greens, hazels, all displayed on a maze of poster-panels. Roughly thirty of them were staring at Spencer right now. The mass of people, the hundreds of viewers, seemed insignificant beneath their gaze.

Bry, who always walked like she'd left her purse somewhere and was heading back to retrieve it, had to retrace her steps to join him.

"Curious, aren't they?" she said, seeing his expression.

"Really. But would you want one in your lounge?"

"We tried to find a place for one at Carmetta." Carmetta was George's mansion south of Quartz Valley. "But it dominated every room we put it in. Eventually George hung it in his study. I think he's taken it down now."

"Very beautiful. Does he sell enough to make a living?"

Bry shook her head.

Spencer looked around the room, at its elaborate high ceiling, at its tall windows and velvet drapes, at the dark wood panelling with two fireplaces set into it, flames decadently dancing in the hearths on this warm and pleasant evening. A trace of artifice, certainly, but more than a trace of money too. "It must cost a fortune to hire this place."

"It's a sponsored show."

Spencer was curious that he hadn't seen any signs. "Who's the sponsor?" Whoever they were, they believed in low-key publicity.

"Foxglove. Didn't George tell you?"

Spencer sighed resignedly. "No."

They moved further into the room and stopped in front of the first picture. The detail, the resolution, was astonishing. Veins stood out like forks of lightning. And the iris, hazel-coloured and

more fibrous than a fan of hair, seemed to carry on behind the print as if there were some kind of dome back there to accommodate it.

"Brilliant," said Spencer. "Weird but brilliant. I wonder why nobody's done it before?"

"Probably because they couldn't afford to. The photography equipment costs a fortune, so I'm told."

"Do you do the publicity for him, for Michael Sorden?" If Foxglove was sponsoring the show then it seemed likely that Bry would be involved.

"I delegate most of it. It's not exactly core business."

"No," agreed Spencer.

He was tempted to ask her how work was going, but decided against it. Put to anybody else, the question would have seemed perfectly decent and sociable, but to Bry it was likely to appear unkind. Bry's attitude to work was at best ambivalent. When they'd lived together, almost every weekday morning she'd mooched around for the first twenty minutes as if she had a funeral to attend. She described work as pimping time for money. She'd never come to terms with it, with the waste of her life she felt it represented. Spencer occasionally felt the same way too, but had never been able to understand the profound depth of her despair until his own job had gone so drastically wrong. The paradox was, in her day to day work none of this showed. She was invariably witty and charming, very popular with everybody she did business with, including all those tungsten-nosed journalists - the wolf-pack as she called them, privately. She did a fine job. That's why George had moved her to the top of the ladder in less than two years. The greatest tribute to her skills was that her more experienced colleagues, the ones she'd leapfrogged to reach this high position, bore almost no resentment towards her. They'd seen the inevitability of it even before it was apparent to George.

"Work's still the same," said Bry quietly. She had a habit of doing that, of hearing things he hadn't said. "Shall we carry on looking for Michael?" she added, more cheerfully.

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They found Michael Sorden almost in the centre of the gallery, chatting to a conservatively-dressed woman in her early thirties. Bry introduced Spencer to them both. The woman's name was Jill, Dr Jill Freedy, director of the Institute of Movement. It was an enigmatic name for an organisation but Spencer didn't pursue it. He didn't have much interest in her. She was wearing a tweed two-piece that somehow seemed to reach out to the walls and blend in with the wood panelling. She wasn't slim, yet her movements were appealingly delicate. Spencer decided she had an elegance that some men might find attractive, but he wasn't one of them.

He felt he ought to say something intelligent to Michael Sorden about the pictures. He didn't want to simply say - I think your pictures are wonderful. So instead he said: "Tell me, what do you do about pupil size? People find big pupils attractive, don't they?"

Michael appreciated the thoughtful introduction. "Yes. That's true. So the more naturally attractive the eye is, the smaller I make the pupil - using more light. And with the plainer eyes I use dim lighting to dilate the pupil. That way there's always a conflict in the way you perceive the final picture."

He talked quickly but seemed more self-aware than other artistic types Spencer had met; casually very smart in his white linen suit and blue turtle-neck. His hair was sparse and wavy and swept back from his forehead. Its colour was so extravagant that Spencer felt it had to be natural. Straw blond at the front, muted orange in the middle and almost black at the rear. Surely nobody would have their hair dyed that way. His face was ruddy with bushy eyebrows and bright blue eyes. There was something furtively mystical about them, like they'd witnessed the secrets of the occult but didn't want it to show, at least not here in polite society.

"Otherwise," Michael continued, "everybody would buy the prints with large pupils and I'd be left with a permanent collection of the small ones." He smiled at his own witticism.

Spencer nodded. "But what about the colour? Some colours must be more popular than others."

"Capricorn," replied Michael, obscurely. "There's a certain coloration that's green, amber and hazel all at the same time. Amber near the centre, green towards the outside. It's found mostly in Capricorns, in Capricorn women. That sells with almost no pupil at all. I brought three tonight. They've all been spotted."

So far Spencer had only seen two prints with the little red spot in the corner that signified a sale.

"And what's your favourite?" Bry asked Jill. She was doing her PR lady facilitator-of-the-conversation bit.

"There's an orange-brown with black streaks." Jill turned to Michael. "Where is it?"

"Ah. Karen Riscarti's eye. I'm not sure." He gestured over the heads of the crowd towards the corner furthest from the door. "Over there, I think."

"It gives the impression of movement," Jill continued. "I don't know why."

"Nor do I," said Michael, chuckling to himself.

In his peripheral vision, Spencer could see Bry adjusting her hair. She had a habit of doing this when she was with other people but thought they weren't looking, like a peculiar version of hide and seek. He wondered if he might be next to be asked about his favourite picture, so he began studying

the dozen or so he could see with the intention of choosing one, but at that moment the proceedings were interrupted by the arrival of Pierre - an outsize Frenchman with a huge moustache that completely hid both his lips. The luxuriant back-brushed growth on top of his head was a perfect match for it.

"Hi," said Pierre, to the company in general. He turned to Spencer and shook his hand warmly. "Spencer. It's good to see you again." He had the most beautiful French voice. A voice that could sell perfume or mesmerise wolves. Spencer had once suggested to him that he could make a fortune doing radio commercials or maybe even TV, but he seemed content to work for Foxglove, to live by his expert ears rather than his excellent vocal chords. "Are you back in the city for long?"

"A while," said Spencer, which was as honest as he could be.

Although Pierre was behaving as if Spencer hadn't totally lost the plot two years ago and disappeared like an errant genie into a bottle of tequila, he was also scrutinising him thoroughly, as if checking the sober ghost were real.

"How's the farm?" asked Spencer.

"Better than living in the city. The grapes last year were perfect. Finally I managed to make wine that is drinkable, though I don't think it will win prizes."

He was an interesting mixture, Pierre. A beautiful voice, a full English vocabulary, yet phrasing too close to text-book formal. He was the only Frenchman Spencer had met who adored junk food, as his flying-boat stomach testified, yet he couldn't abide the city and lived a two hour drive away in a farmhouse surrounded by vines. He also wasn't a fan of big social occasions. The showing must have been important for him to come.

"And the farmhouse - still big enough for your CDs?"

Pierre sighed wistfully. "I've always preferred the purity of gramophone records." He shrugged. "But what can you do? The world is run by commercial Philistines."

"You could always transfer them to vinyl. You still have the arcade machine?"

The question was barely necessary. The vinyl disc recorder was Pierre's most treasured possession. Once it might have earned its living in a nickel recording booth, probably on an amusement pier, now it had retired to Pierre's lounge. The red vinyl discs it recorded lasted just three minutes, so the idea of transferring CDs to them was a joke. Pierre smiled and nodded appropriately.

Spencer decided they were getting on well enough for him to push a little. "It would be nice to see it again." Carefully he avoided looking at Bry.

Pierre glanced at her briefly, then looked at Spencer for what seemed an embarrassingly long time before answering. "Yes, of course. Why don't you drop by?"

"Tomorrow afternoon?"

Pierre nodded but didn't say anything.

The other members of the group had waited patiently for this little private conversation to come to an end, and now Bry stepped in as facilitator again. "Do you know what FOTI means?" she asked Pierre. If she felt upset by Spencer's insensitivity, it didn't show.

"Flypaper Of The Iris," replied Pierre, without hesitation.

"What's that?" asked Spencer.

"It's what Michael calls his photos," explained Bry. "Fotis. Clever, isn't it?"

Spencer wasn't sure whether it was clever or a little contrived. And maybe Bry thought so too, but she was in PR mode so it was impossible to tell.

Michael wanted to expand. He touched Spencer on the arm and turned him to inspect the closest picture. The colour of the iris was grey. Almost, though not quite, monochrome. Strangely this enhanced the texture and detail of the eye, in the same way that a black and white photograph is sometimes more revealing than a colour one.

Michael ran his fingers along the radii of the iris, from the pupil towards the outer white. "The eye of Mr David Ludlow. You see these lines? Like the fibres of a fruit with a stone in the middle, or, for the more scientific, the vanes of a turbine. No two eyes are the same. An iridologist can read these lines and tell you if you were seriously ill as a teenager, or whether you once broke your left leg. It sounds incredible but it's true. Everything that happens to you can be seen in your eyes. Your life history is there."

He glanced at Spencer to check that he was paying attention, then turned back to the picture. "I see it like this: these hairs, as they seem, these radial hairs that fan out from the pupil - some of them appearing to be deep inside, as if the eye were a cavern - I think they're sticky, like a spider's web, or like flypaper. And everything that comes into the eye, all those beams of light, all the things the eye sees, some of them stick to the flypaper and stay there. Kitchen stools, lovers' bodies, mothers' smiles, broken cars, apricots, stars. And when you look into an eye you can see what that eye has seen. Whether it's seen good things or bad. Nice sunsets or wicked actions. Not literally of course. But in a sense. You can see."

Michael stopped. He was waiting for a reaction.

Spencer, though a little bewildered, gave him an honest one. "I think that's a nice idea." He turned to the others, whom he guessed had both seen this presentation before. They were looking at him rather than at Michael. "That's neat, isn't it? Flypaper of the iris. I like that." Behind Jill he could see a dark green eye. He'd noticed it before, but now he was looking at it in a different perspective. Suddenly it seemed very sad. "It's almost like you can look into a person's eye and see their soul."

It wasn't supposed to be a comment of great perception but it appeared to stop Pierre and Jill dead in their tracks. They were perfectly still for a moment, as if on freeze-frame, not even breathing. Then, just as suddenly, they re-animated and carried on as if nothing had happened. Bry hadn't been affected. Spencer wondered if his imagination had been playing tricks on him. After all, he'd been sober for less than a week.

Bry certainly noticed the hiatus. "Has anybody seen that new exhibit at the modern art museum? It's quite peculiar. Cheap household fixtures - plastic door handles, gilt faucets, fluorescent light fittings - laid out in the shape of a huge pistol on a gallery floor. You have to walk over a raised gangway to view it." It was supposed to be a smooth and lubricating introduction into a new topic of conversation and, as usual for Bry, it worked.

"I think it looks very tacky," said Jill. "Which is hardly surprising when you consider what it's made from."

"I haven't seen it," said Pierre. "But I read about it in the local paper. I think that's as close as I need to get."

Michael took an entirely different view, and for the next few minutes held forth about it being a grand metaphor for the negative effect of modern surroundings on the mind.

Spencer had no informed opinion to give but was quite happy to watch and listen as his companions carried on talking. He felt pleasantly detached. It was such an archetypal conversation for the educated, moneyed classes to be holding. So classic it was amusing. He hadn't come across this kind of thing for two years. The panhandlers on Bourse Street were more interested in the quality of the garbage behind the Giant Eagle store on Dixon, or the parentage of the bum who'd got to that big stoogie on the sidewalk before them.

He'd noticed that the gallery of eyes and the fact that they'd been discussing eyes in some detail had made him self-conscious about eye-contact. He wondered whether other people around the room were suffering from the same problem. It seemed likely that they were. An entire room full of people thinking too hard about eye-contact with strangers.

Michael, Pierre and Jill didn't seem to be having any difficulties, at least when talking between themselves. Clearly they knew each other well. Bry was more of an outsider, and although she was professionally good at hiding it, Spencer could see she was having to work harder on her eye-contact with Jill, and to a lesser extent with Michael. Pierre wasn't an issue. She'd known Pierre through work for a long time, and of course there'd been those visits to the farm together.

He couldn't help trying to fathom what it was she saw in George, why she'd married him. It had been troubling him ever since he'd heard the ridiculous news. There was the money, of course, the security, but that had never been high on her list. She liked depth. George had a little of that, but not a lot. He was a charmer, admittedly, and playful sometimes. Maybe that was enough. And he'd caught her on the rebound.

George's absence was still frustrating.

Jill announced she had to leave for the airport. She'd been looking at her watch ever since Spencer's comment about souls. When she'd gone, there was a moment's awkward silence, soon tackled, as always, by Bry.

"What's your favourite eye colour, Pierre?"

"Green. I find green eyes fascinate me, and they look so unworldly."

"Spencer?" prompted Bry.

Don't you remember? - thought Spencer. Hazel, the colour of yours. But she might find this embarrassing if he said it in company. So instead he said: "Blue. Good old Californian beach-bum blue."

"I like brown," said Michael. "I think it's the most difficult colour to read and that makes it the most interesting, especially in the blow-ups. But if you like blue then you must see these." Abruptly he walked away, leaving Pierre and Bry and Spencer to follow his trail.

He stopped by a pair of the wildest ice-blue eyes that Spencer had ever seen. Two irises full of electricity, two fairytale mosaics on the bottom of a sunny swimming pool floor, the eyes of an individual who walked on the edge of the sane world and who might be a genius or could just as easily be in psychiatric care.

"What do you think?" asked Michael.

"Unbelievable," said Spencer. "I think they're male, though I don't know why."

"Correct."

"Do you know the person?"

"I have that pleasure."

"Is he - how shall I put this - well-balanced?"

"He makes the rest of us seem only marginally sane."

Michael had given names to go with other eyes, so Spencer felt free to ask: "And what's his name?"

"Raymond." Michael hesitated, then felt obliged to carry on. "Raymond Kite."

3 *The voice*

The elusive Mr Kite. Missing for five weeks and not a word.

For all Spencer knew, he could be looking for somebody who'd already gone to the Professor's great sports hall in the sky. Yet he couldn't help feeling happy about Raymond's disappearance. It was a stroke of good fortune, at least from his own point of view. A week ago he'd been destitute and now he was part of the Foxglove empire again. The company Amex, that lovely membership card for the adult sweetshop, sat snugly in his new jacket. He was driving a hired Trooper down the freeway on a beautiful afternoon. He hadn't driven for two years and was enjoying it. He would have whistled to himself if he'd been the whistling kind.

Yesterday's exhibition had gone far better than he'd hoped. Michael Sorden's mention of Raymond was a perfect lead. A lead that he'd been able to purchase too. Nobody else's red spot was on the picture, so Spencer had attached one of his own. At three thousand dollars he wasn't sure he'd go through with the sale, even with George's money, but it was a great way to find out more from Michael about Raymond. He'd follow that up tomorrow when Michael had finished dismantling the show. Today he was going to concentrate on Pierre. He hadn't forced the invitation to the farm for purely social reasons. Raymond was a project leader at Foxglove, and Pierre, with his extraordinary audio skills, worked across most of Foxglove's projects. Pierre would almost certainly know something about Raymond.

Spencer found it strange to be driving to the farm alone. He must have done the journey dozens of times with Bry all those years ago, but couldn't recall ever going by himself. It was also strange to be going with a business-reason in mind, to find out about Raymond Kite, however well that reason might be disguised. The visits before had always been purely social, dominated by Pierre's two passions in life.- music and wine.

On all the various formats combined, Pierre claimed to have five versions of the complete works of Mahler, plus at least three each of Wagner and Verdi. He had Mozart concertos and Bach fugues that hadn't been re-recorded since 1910. He could tell the mood of a flautist by the timbre of the instrument, by the way the changeable human airways affected its final tone.

As a hobby he collected old gramophones. Three of them stood in his lounge, their big polished trumpets snaking into the air like oversize cobras and turning the place into an antiques showroom. Spencer assumed they would still be there. He couldn't see Pierre parting with them. Everything at the farm had an air of permanence. That was part of its appeal. The vinyl disc recorder would be there too. It looked innocuous enough, a slim up-ended trunk, nothing like as pretty as the gramophones, but Pierre had a devious habit of brushing past it and switching it on without anybody noticing so it recorded three minutes of inane conversation. Then he'd wait half an hour and play it back on one of the gramophones, much to Bry's amusement, since it was usually Spencer who got caught out saying the stupidest things. Invariably they were drunk at the time. When Pierre decided to have a serious drink he launched into it with such gusto that even Spencer felt intimidated. Then, when the evening drew to a close, Spencer and Bry would stagger to the guest bedroom and laugh in bed and possibly even try to make love if they hadn't been too outrageous with the brandy and the wine.

Fond memories. Innocent times.

Spencer took a wistful breath and put them to one side.

He passed over the Silver Stile bridge. Already the fog was sweeping into the bay beneath its massive span, like a smoke-screened invading armada. But overhead the sun was shining, lighting up the hills and what was left of the blue bay water. It was a nice day for a drive.

The one issue that was still bothering him was the lack of contact with George. He'd tried phoning George's PA, Valerie, to get a number in Germany, but hadn't got very far. It made no difference that she remembered Spencer from his years at Foxglove. George, she said, had described his excursion as a Richter-seven trip. If the big one hit California while he was away, he wouldn't expect to be disturbed by a phone call for anything less than a seven. She took Spencer's number and said she'd pass it on to George when he rang in. Spencer had to leave it at that. He didn't want to make her suspicious. Under the terms of his secretive arrangement with George he wasn't supposed to phone Foxglove at all

Valerie's reaction had been a disappointment but no great surprise. His expectations had been modest because when he'd asked Bry a similar question at the show, her answer had been very droll. "Yes. That would be useful. If you find out where he's staying, do let me know."

Schubert's Ninth played on the car radio. Spencer was listening to CLASSFM in an attempt to get into Pierre's classical frame of mind. He gave up and switched to RAMXFM. Steely Dan played Rikki Don't Lose That Number. Pierre would approve of Steely Dan too.

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The farm was some way off the main Sanoosa valley and relatively isolated. The big winemakers hadn't thought Pierre's plot was worth buying and most of his wine proved them right. Usually he sold his grapes cheap for bulking, but in a drought year he could produce something drinkable and then the process quite excited him, like an astronomer fascinated only by the visits of a five-yearly comet.

Perhaps the big winemakers were also put off by the state of the farm. It was a rambling, inefficient-looking place, which was just the way Pierre liked it. There were three tumbledown outbuildings and a Mediterranean-style villa with large decks at front and rear. The whole farm had a French feel about it, a little corner of France transported to north-west America. Many of the vines were old and the rows had developed dog-legs, as if they'd managed to transform the stoop of age into something horizontal. Pierre liked that too.

Spencer was a big fan of the farm's irregular charm and quirks. As it came into view he felt uplifted, like a traveller arriving home after a difficult journey. He parked the Trooper in front of Pierre's Cherokee and walked along the chalk track past the villa and slightly uphill to the outbuildings. There was a small garden between two of them, partly devoted to flowers and partly to vegetables - eggplant, capsicum, ladies fingers, tomatoes. Here he stopped in the sunlight and stared at the plants for a while. This was his favourite place on the farm. It had a timeless, soothing air about it, an air of primitive cultivation, mankind tilling the land to produce food. The smell was gorgeous too; thick and verdant. As he stood there in silent contemplation, a spider the size of a beer-coaster crawled slowly from one green lattice to the next. He walked back to the villa and let himself in. The door was unlocked, as always.

"Pierre?"

No response. Pierre probably had his headphones on. He had a large sound-studio on the farm and often said he could accomplish more work there than in Foxglove's laboratories. Apart from the vines there were no distractions.

Spencer walked through the country-style kitchen to the lounge. The three gramophones greeted him like wide-mouthed dogs rising to welcome an old friend. The pier machine was still there. He carried on through into the studio and was surprised to find no Pierre. He checked the bedrooms, the bathroom and finally walked out on to both the big decks and yelled out to the fields. But no sign of Pierre.

This was puzzling. He looked at his watch. Ten past two. Pierre had been expecting him at two. He walked back into the kitchen, took a Coke from the fridge, then went back to the lounge and waited.

This was the room where they'd spent their pleasant evenings. It was beautifully cluttered. The three big gramophones were on separate tables carefully positioned around the bare wooden floor, along with the free-standing pier machine. Three easy chairs and a large brown sofa - markedly upright yet very comfortable - were arranged in the space remaining. Fortunately the room was large enough to absorb all this without anything having to touch the walls, which were packed from floor to ceiling with shelves of vinyl albums and tapes and CDs and stacks of sheet music. On the chimney breast was a grand old picture of Pierre's parents, grey-haired and smiling against the backdrop of a golden cornfield somewhere near Toulouse. Elsewhere on the wall were two enormous speakers. By the patio window were two more, and facing into the disused fireplace was a bass woofer in the shape of a deep sea Nautilus. Spencer felt something had changed, something small but significant. He couldn't identify it yet he knew he didn't like it.

Sliding doors separated the lounge from the studio. Right now these were wide open. In the evening Pierre would close them, symbolically shutting off work for the day. The studio looked relatively businesslike. Its central feature was a thirty-two track mixing desk. There were no windows and the heaving shelves of tapes, CDs and papers filled every inch of wall without exception. In theory the clutter here was all work-related. Pierre attempted a strict separation of work material in the studio and non-work material in the lounge, but inevitably the two became mixed up, diffusing into each other's territories like sea and fresh water in an estuary. Curiously, what really distinguished the studio from the lounge was the lack of colour there. The mixing desk and most of the tape and CD covers were monochrome, grey and white, whereas the lounge had many colours on its walls and an overall golden glow from the patio window lighting up the wood of the floor and the gramophones.

Finally Spencer realised what was troubling him about the appearance of the rooms. The rows of tapes and CDs on the shelves were ragged and disorderly. That was very unusual for Pierre. Spencer

tried to tell himself that it was of no consequence, but the thought wasn't convincing. He wanted to tidy them, for distraction apart from anything else, but resisted the temptation. Instead he leafed through the rock albums in Pierre's collection. There were some cherished first pressings: Abbey Road, Blond on Blond, Led Zeppelin I, The Joker. He also fingered through the row of small red vinyl discs from the amusement-arcade machine. The first group was blank - Pierre had commissioned a batch of four hundred so he wouldn't run out - the rest had the date and participants diligently written on their covers. Spencer found one of the later recordings of himself and Bry and would have listened to it if he could have got Pierre's absence off his mind.

After fifteen minutes he abandoned waiting and went to check the outbuildings. Pierre's bicycle, the one he used to roam the vineyards, was still there; an old vineyard tractor, a spraying attachment, more gramophones in various stages of repair, but no sign of Pierre. Eventually he went back to the lounge. Feeling restless, he picked out the little red disc again and started winding up one of the gramophones. Pierre always left them unwound. It was supposed to be better for their springs.

He couldn't say why, but when he'd finished winding he had the urge to look inside the pier machine itself, perhaps because it was the source of what he was about to listen to, or simply for sentimental reasons. There was a disc on the turntable and it wasn't a blank, he could tell by the uneven reflections on its surface. This too was strange because Pierre always left a blank ready on the turntable. It was part of his catch-you-unawares game. In fact it was so out of character that Spencer knew he had to listen to the disc on the turntable rather than the one from the shelves. So he moved it from the recording machine to the wound-up gramophone, flicked off the little felt pad brake, and lowered the needle.

*

"What are you doing Pierre? Please don't walk around in your condition. Sit down. You're making Alex nervous." This was an exceptional voice. Cold, authoritative. Spencer had never heard it before. He couldn't place the accent, it was too neutral, but there was a touch of Boston haughtiness in there. The crackling of the recording added to its old-world pretensions.

"Not as nervous as he's making me." That was Pierre, and the way he talked left Spencer mortified. It was dreadful. There was something badly wrong. Pierre's normally calm and beautiful tone was missing. His French accent was far stronger than normal and there was a waver there, so strong it sounded like a recording fault. But it wasn't. Pierre was petrified and he was hurting.

"Ah," exclaimed the cold voice, "the early Deutsche recording of Haydn's 101. A little slow for my liking. I never liked the Berlin Philharmonic in that era. Too pedestrian." No music was playing in the background. Spencer assumed the man was looking through the shelves.

"For God's sake," said Pierre. Still the same awful tone, but a little more defiant. "How can you injure me and then pretend you are a man of culture, Mr - how did you call yourself? - Kohl."

A sickened feeling had developed in Spencer's stomach. An immobilising fear. He'd caught it from Pierre through the record, like a sound-transmissible disease.

"Please don't blaspheme, Pierre," said Kohl, icily calm. "It isn't polite. And in answer to your question, many cultured people have been involved in wars. There is a long history of that. Also I didn't shoot you, I asked Diamond to. For a scientist you are negligent with the facts."

There was a pause. Spencer could hear the clatter of plastic cases - tapes or CDs. And he could hear Pierre's breathing. It was unnaturally heavy.

"Diamond," said Kohl, "pass Pierre a sanitary towel. He's bleeding."

"Keep away from me," muttered Pierre. "I don't need your help."

Another pause, then Kohl again. His voice was quieter, he'd moved elsewhere in the room. "Please concentrate, Pierre. I asked you three questions. Your answers to all three have been unsatisfactory. You have one minute to provide satisfactory answers or Diamond will shoot you again."

"You are a sadist," said Pierre. Spencer had to admire his courage. "An ordinary sadist. You think you are special but really you are a sick man. You need help."

"I think not," said Kohl, unmoved. "A sadist would always go for the eyes or genitals. Think about that, Pierre. We are not sadists. We shoot to show we are serious, not for the pain. You are the sick man here."

There was something about Kohl's voice, about its confidence, about his logic, that made him more intimidating than any thoughtless lunatic could be.

"I don't know where Raymond is, so I can't tell you." Pierre sounded fearful again rather than defiant. Perhaps he was being threatened directly with a gun. Perhaps he'd realised he didn't have much of his minute left. "I haven't seen him for almost six weeks now. I can't tell you something I don't know."

"Balloons," prompted Kohl.

"There are only three of us with any knowledge of Balloons. There's no fourth man on the project, unless you include George. If you're looking for a fourth man, it must be George."

"I don't think that's true, Pierre."

"And yes, I have a recording of Raymond's voice, but it's at Foxglove."

"That's also difficult to believe."

"You're not even looking in the right place, Kohl." A stronger tone again. "Recordings for work are kept in the studio, not here in the lounge."

Kohl didn't comment on this, nor did he bring up the one minute deadline. The noise from the plastic cases continued in the background. Spencer wondered where Pierre had been sitting. It was probably the sofa. There were no bloodstains. Looking at the sofa he could almost see the outline of Pierre sitting there, like a ghost, with his lips curled in anguish but still hidden beneath his thick moustache. Recorded voices and silent visions. No other reality.

"Do you like Oldsmobiles?" asked Pierre.

It was such a ridiculous question that Spencer caught himself about to smile.

"I just wondered if you'd chosen it or if it had been chosen for you," continued Pierre, apparently rambling now in his fear. "A black Oldsmobile is a fairly ordinary car."

Still no response. If one came it would have to be from Kohl. Spencer realised the other two hadn't said a single word.

"Half past one on a Tuesday and a black Oldsmobile arrives," muttered Pierre, "delivering Kohl, Alex, Diamond and their guns."

Spencer looked at his watch. About an hour ago. Then it suddenly struck him that Pierre was talking to him, not to Kohl but to him, through the medium of the recording machine. Pierre appeared to be ranting, unhinged by fear, even deranged, but that was cheap pantomime. He was leaving clues on the recording. That was the whole point of brushing past the machine with a bullet in his body and switching it on. He'd wanted Spencer to discover it, to listen to it, to find out what had happened to him.

"I can't work out if you're Mafia or agency," said Pierre. Surely he was pushing his luck. "I don't think you're Mafia because you would have a better car."

And still no answer from Kohl.

"But then if you were agency there would be no need for all this. Foxglove has a good relationship with the agency. We have nothing to hide."

"I fear you have," said Kohl. "Something very unpleasant to hide. Ah! And not just this." Finally a change of tone. Kohl was obviously pleased. "R. Kite. Very properly labelled, but hidden amongst

the Vivaldi." A cassette case clattered in the background. "You said you didn't have a copy at home, Pierre."

"I didn't say that, exactly."

"But you were being deceptive."

"Did you expect a guided tour?"

"I have to wonder about your responses to my other questions."

No more words for a while. Pierre didn't attempt to justify his answers. It was impossible to guess what was going through his mind at this time. All that could be heard was his breathing.

Kohl snorted. It was clear on the recording. "Diamond."

"*Merde!*" Pierre's voice. Anguished. "This is crazy. You..."

A shot rang out. It was distorted but it was a crack rather than a boom. Small calibre. Spencer stood with his mouth open.

Pierre yelped and screamed something in French that Spencer couldn't understand. But at the end of it he added the word Fuck, as if it belonged there. Then in English: "For God's sake!"

"Yes," said Kohl. "Foxglove isn't very open about the project, Pierre. But we know what you're doing. Do you feel like God?"

Spencer was having difficulty standing. It wasn't just the shooting, or Pierre's pain - he was breathing so heavily it dominated the recording like a drum-beat - it was Kohl's voice. So uninvolved, so sure of itself. The voice of a surgeon explaining an operation, a judge talking to a man he'd already condemned. It was impossible to deal with.

"What are you talking about?" Pierre was immensely distressed now. His voice quite the opposite of Kohl's; forced, uneven, high.

"Where would Raymond Kite hide, Pierre?"

"I have no idea. If I knew, I would have found him."

"Difficult to get on with the Devil's work when you're missing a key demon?" Suddenly Kohl sounded much louder. He must have been standing right next to the machine, nearly touching it.

"Raymond is no demon. He's..." Pierre tailed off. He was almost whimpering.

"Go on. He's... no angel."

"Fuck you."

Spencer closed his eyes, though it didn't help. Pierre knew he was going to die. Beneath the anguish, his voice had changed. He was giving up with the flattery of living.

"Did you think you could do your experiments without anybody noticing? What use are human bodies for electronics research, Pierre?" Kohl had moved away from the machine. Spencer could imagine him standing over Pierre, his face emotionless, sallow. Only a fleshless face could belong to a voice that austere.

"That's not my area."

"But it is Raymond's. And you worked very closely with Raymond."

"Everything is legal."

"But not always moral. Do you feel tainted?"

"You're insane."

"No. The world is insane. Full of scientists playing God. I represent order."

"Jesus!" Too much nonsense. Too much pain. Pierre wasn't listening any more. He was groaning with every breath.

"Who died for your sins," said Kohl, quietly.

The words came to a stop. All that Spencer could hear was the rasp of Pierre's tormented breathing. It was impossible to bear. Spencer's teeth were clenched and his eyes shut tight in sympathetic agony. He wanted to be there. He wanted to stop it. He wanted to turn back time and arrive early, take Pierre away from here, take him anywhere.

He jumped. There was a second, muffled shot. Then silence. The silence of death, of relief from living.

Kohl broke it once, so casually the words sounded obscene. "Check for stains."

The record carried on broadcasting mild noises of movement. Then it reached the end of the groove and clicked and clicked and clicked until the spring wound down and the clicking slowed to a torturous slow beat and there was one final muted tick and then nothing. Spencer stood perfectly still. Quite paralysed.

He came to life slowly, like a sleeper awakening, opening first one eye and then the other. Abruptly he made a dash for the bathroom to empty the contents of his stomach into the toilet bowl in a violent, gushing vomit that never came. He stood there expectantly for a while and then knelt down, wondering whether hearing a murder yet not seeing one should leave him with only half a reaction. Was this how he should feel? Nauseous but not sick at the death of a friend. Had alcohol numbed him or detox or... things that had happened before? For one dreadful moment, soon pushed aside, he could see a part of himself in Kohl. And hated it.

It was ridiculous, but kneeling on the floor with his hands on the toilet bowl he couldn't help remembering the last time he'd been in this position. A week ago, in detox. He laughed. Sharp. Hysterical. Then found himself and began cleaning things; wiping the bowl, bleaching it, flushing it, walking round the house with tissue paper cleaning the doorhandles, walking out to the outbuildings and cleaning their handles too, going back to wipe the gramophone handle, its switch, the pier machine, his Coke can, the fridge door, his fingers. He caught himself wiping his fingers. Did he expect to wipe the prints off those too?

The lounge was empty. Recently there had been four people in it. Then three and a body. Strange that it should seem so peaceful now. The small red disc had taken him into a different world, a little window of violence opening inside the bigger window of a sunny, ramshackle vineyard day. He recalled the tape amongst the Vivaldi and checked the shelves. There was a gap. It had been taken.

There was something else - something that he didn't want to do but had to be done. Slowly he walked back to the gramophone and with tissue fingers lifted the red disc from the turntable and put it in his jacket pocket. Then walked out to the car.

There he sat for a full minute, remembering how to drive.

4 *Weather in the head*

On a small table beneath a spotlight is a bottle of Cuervo Gold tequila. On another small table stands a bottle of Evian water. Between the two sits a monk wearing a brown habit. The monk has a grey verge of hair, otherwise he's bald. A spotlight shines off his crown, which is round and smooth and looks like an art deco teapot. There are two more monks in the dim background, watching. They make Spencer feel like he's the heretic up before the Grand Inquisition.

The monk under the light says something to him, but Spencer needs a drink before he can listen. A pair of woodpeckers tap at his temples. He has a big *chuchaqui* to shift. Only a decent shot of liquor can do this. He makes a move on the tequila but the monk grabs his arm. His grip is very firm. He sits Spencer down in a chair facing him.

"Heaven or hell, Spencer?" he says. He has an accent and although Spencer knows he should be able to place it, he can't. "I want you to think about this choice. Heaven?" The monk points to the Evian. "Or hell?" He points to the tequila.

"Hell," says Spencer, laughing. But he's wondering what the fuck's going on. He has an accent himself and it's very easy to place. He's talking in the voice of Pierre.

He reaches for the tequila again and to his surprise the monk doesn't stop him. Spencer unscrews the cap, lifts the bottle and pours four fingers down his throat in a frog-serenade of gulping. He grins at all three monks, takes another hit and sets the bottle on his knee. The monks grin back at him. Grin like hell. "Nice suit," says the monk with the art-deco skull.

Chuchaqui is one of the Professor's words. "I've got a grand *chuchaqui* to shift," the Professor would say. It means hangover in some South American Indian language. Quechuan, if Spencer remembers correctly. The Professor has a stock of strange foreign words and myths from around the world. That's one of the reasons Spencer likes his company.

An hour after he first twists the cap, in a pristine toilet Spencer throws up the entire bottle of tequila; kneeling on the floor, arms embracing the porcelain. The violence of his vomit appals him. Kneeling by the white enamel, he feels like he's wringing himself out, twisting his body from feet to forehead to force out every drop of moisture. He wipes his fingers across his mouth, dirtying them on a sick-sodden moustache that he's never grown.

*

A cold sweat covered Spencer when he awoke at the Ana Hotel. His unsettled mind had mixed real memories of his week in detox with a judgement scene starring Pierre. Two bad memories rolled into a single bad dream. His damp clothes disgusted his skin.

The curtains were closed and the lamps were off but a mute TV illuminated the room with its shot-sequence version of lightning. A pretty woman in a leotard was silently fighting a curious V-shaped exerciser with round handles, something like a cross between a shooting stick and pair of shears. All the colours seemed to be there on screen, yet the outcome in the room was blue. Blue walls that should have been magnolia; the fallen blue obelisk of the desk, ridiculously long; two blue armchairs, pleasant in full light then turning into squatting headless gorillas, hands on knees, as the TV passed through a phase of darkness; the angular dark cube of the mini-bar.

When he'd got back from Pierre's, Spencer had laid on the bed and hopped through the fifty-seven channels looking for a Bogart movie or a Vietnam classic, hoping it might improve his mood, and finished up on the shopping channel because it was so awful that God-help-us it was even funny for a while. Somehow he'd drifted off amongst the golf-carts, gruesome jewellery and bizarre kitchenware.

He got off the bed and with disdainful fingers peeled away his damp clothes. His watch, on the bedside table, showed five thirty p.m. He'd been asleep for less than an hour and felt worse now than when he'd come in, too many thoughts going through his mind for any of them to make sense, like an overloaded Foxglove computer array. Some strong emotion in there but too much confusion to know what. Grief, irritation, self-pity? Bad weather in the head, that was the way the monks had described it.

They were Irish. He could remember that easily now he was awake. The three of them had run the detox centre with Spencer as their single patient - attention only George's money could buy. Father Kenneth was the eldest, the one with the verge of hair and the strong grip that left warning bruises on Spencer's arm. The two in the dream's background were Father Dougal and Father Liam. Father Dougal played perpetually with the tassels of the cord around his habit. His hands were truly

enormous. They made Spencer think of elephants' feet. Father Liam was the youngest. His hair was full and dark and almost, but not quite, cut in a fashionable flat-top. All three had impressive physiques. When the sleeve of Father Liam's habit rode up it revealed the blue of a tattoo on his muscular forearm.

The concept of weather in the head had been introduced by Father Kenneth, the one with the rim of hair, on the first day of Spencer's detoxification. Feverish with the DTs, Spencer hadn't been sure whether it was Father Kenneth himself standing next to the bed, or a red devil with steaming skin carrying a tray of waffles and maple syrup and speaking in the voice of Father Kenneth.

"How are you feeling?"

"What do you think I feel like, asshole? Where the hell am I?"

"In detox. The first few days are the worst. Try to think of it as bad weather in the head. Sometimes you're confused by the thunder and wind. Depression is a day of grey drizzle. Then one day you're up and the sun is shining."

"Fuck off."

Father Kenneth placed the tray by the bed and left as requested.

It was Father Kenneth, too, who had defined the weather in Spencer's head right now. The description had come much later during Spencer's stay, when the DTs were less troublesome but sobriety was beginning to present its own set of problems, like not being able to find his balance in the real world.

"How's the weather today?" asked Father Kenneth.

Spencer was staring out of the big window of his detox centre bedroom. It looked on to a pleasant garden with shrubs and beyond to a low ridge. No roads, never any people. It was sunny outside, as it had been every day since he'd arrived. But that wasn't what Father Kenneth was asking.

"What kind of weather would you call it, Father, when you feel wound-up, restless, on the brink of some big emotion, but you're not sure what it is?"

Father Kenneth thought about it. "I would say, an occluded front. Yes, that's what I would say."

Spencer turned away from the window. "Then that's how I feel. Occluded."

Not pleasant memories.

On TV a gardener smiled for the camera as he demonstrated a combined rake and hoe, rolling the shaft in his hand to switch from one head to the other. Spencer sat nude on the edge of the bed, staring at the dark cube of the mini-bar.

He shook his head, picked up the telephone and dialled George's number at Foxglove. Valerie, George's PA, answered. For some reason, perhaps because the curtains were closed, he hadn't been expecting her. For once in his life he'd wanted voicemail. Was it worth staying on the line? Should he put the phone down and turn into an anonymous statistic? Valerie was far too strong to be disturbed by silence. She would shrug it off. He sat there for many seconds, as mute as the TV.

"Hello?" said Valerie, for the second time.

"Hi." His lungs had to pump themselves up. It took effort to get the word out. "It's Spencer again. Did George call in?"

"He did."

"Did you ask him to ring me?"

"I passed on your message, yes." Valerie clipped her words in mild rebuke.

"Thank you. I'll wait for his call."

"Goodbye."

The dialling tone came back before he'd moved the phone more than a few inches from his ear.

Damn the man. Why the hell hadn't he called? There were so many questions that George should be answering. Raymond's project was clearly far from ordinary. Why was Kohl so opposed to it? Who was he working for? What of the bodies that Kohl had mentioned? Pandora's box had been broken into and the contents would have to be explained.

Spencer so desperately needed to tell somebody about Pierre's death. That was the real reason he wanted to talk to George. The awful knowledge was eating him up, as unshared secrets do. The good citizen in him had wanted to pick up the phone in Pierre's lounge and tell the police, but he knew how suspicious they'd be. It wouldn't take them long to discover that for the last two years he'd been a bum, a derelict, a wino, a disreputable member of society who deserved to be locked up at the first sign of trouble. That's why he'd put so much effort into wiping his visit away.

He caught himself staring at the mini-bar again. Five thirty-five. He must make another call.

He brightened with confidence from an era gone by. There were things he could find out about Raymond Kite even without George's assistance. From time to time he'd had to investigate employees before, as Foxglove's Head of Security. Suspected expenses fraud was the usual reason, though sometimes it was dubious CV details and once there'd been a full-scale case of embezzlement. There was a very simple, though admittedly illegal, way to find out about people. He'd used a crooked credit agency, Hatrim and Son - No Longer Trading. He'd been using the place for eight years and for all that time the No Longer Trading sign had been hanging in the dirty front

window as a deterrent against straight, genuine clients accidentally wandering in and asking for something legal. Neither old man Hatrim or his son had operating licences, which saved them a lot of worry over having them withdrawn.

Spencer picked up the handset again and phoned old man Hatrim. He asked for the credit card histories, medical records and social security details of Foxglove's Raymond Kite. The old man grunted something and asked Spencer to hold the line. He came back a minute later to ask if the work should be debited to Spencer's new Foxglove Amex card. Spencer said yes, thanks, and rang off. He knew he didn't have to give the card number.

That goddamn mini-bar. Why the hell did the thing have to be so close to the telephone?

If he didn't keep using the phone, he'd drink. He picked it up again. Actually it was quite fun making calls in the nude. He hadn't done it for a long time. There was a thrill involved, the thrill of minor deception. If only he could stay up with the thrill and not come down again.

There was one more person he could call about Raymond, though he wasn't sure that he should, and that was Michael Sorden, the photographer. He was due to visit Michael Sorden at his studio in Beaumont tomorrow morning and hand over the money for the picture he'd red-spotted. Right now, tomorrow seemed too far away. He took out Michael's business card and phoned the number.

Michael sounded like the phone call had woken him. It took him a while to remember who Spencer was. "Ah, yes. The picture of...er, the blue eyes."

Spencer could imagine him brushing his hand through his ridiculous multi-coloured hair as he came to wakefulness. It was the ideal time to catch somebody. "I have to say, I've been wondering if I made the right choice."

"The price, is it? I'm sure I could come down a little."

"Partly."

"How about two thousand?"

Rather a big jump, thought Spencer, three to two in the space of a few sleepy seconds. Michael had seemed very keen to sell the picture the night before. Unnaturally keen, as if he couldn't wait to get rid of it.

"Can you tell me more about the subject?"

Michael didn't answer.

"You've got to admit he looks a little strange. I just want to know a bit more about him if he's going to be staring at me every day."

The response at the other end was a tremendous noise, like thunder arriving slowly. In combination with the lightning of the TV Spencer found it very unsettling. Eventually he recognised the rhythmic rattle of a train. The studio had to be right next to the tracks, if not actually on them.

"One of the penalties of low rent," said Michael, when the noise had passed. "You get used to it, even get worried when they're late." Thankfully, during the pause he'd obviously decided to be more forthcoming. "Raymond Kite is a genius. A charismatic genius. There aren't many of those."

"What kind of genius?"

"Electronics. The neural-computer interface."

"Connecting computers to brains," translated Spencer. What was George trying to do? Get a direct line? Think, and thy computer shall perform? "Could he do that - make connections?"

"About ten years ago a Naval research institute laid the groundwork. It's possible to do on tissue, but not on a live person. Too invasive..." Michael suddenly stopped.

"You seem to know a lot about it."

No response from Michael.

"When did you last see him?"

After a few seconds, Michael said: "You worked for Foxglove, didn't you?"

"I did."

"On security?"

"And you work for Foxglove too. We have that in common."

"How did you know?"

"It's not hard to guess. You knew Raymond. George is no patron of the arts. He wouldn't have supported your show if it wasn't business."

"He's a lot better than you think. Quite a mellow man these days. He even got married."

"I know."

Michael paused. Another sound arrived down the line. This one Spencer recognised immediately. To anybody else it would have sounded gentler than the train. It was the delicate rattle of ice in a tumbler.

God no, thought Spencer. I can't believe you've done that to me. He turned to the TV. An inanely grinning man in a college boy blazer was hawking a combination lampshade-base and cocktail-shaker.

"If you want to know more about Raymond, then you should ask George," decided Michael.

Spencer let the subject drop. He'd not lost a battle, he'd just lost two.

"Are you still coming tomorrow morning?" asked Michael.

Michael clearly wasn't going to tell him more about Raymond. What the hell could he get out of this? There was just one possibility. A wild one. He sighed down the line. "I've got car problems. I guess that's my real reason for calling. Any chance you can bring the picture to my hotel? It's the Ana, downtown."

Michael deliberated. "OK. If that's the way it is. But not tomorrow morning. Too much traffic. How about seven this evening?"

No. Seven was too early for monkey-business. "Can you make it nine? Room 2316."

"Hold on. I'll write that down." There was a clink as the tumbler reached a table. Spencer just knew it contained alcohol. A bourbon and Coke, maybe. That sounded about right for Michael.

"What's that again?"

"The Ana. 2316."

Excellent. A man who needs to write things down.

"Fine. I'll see you at nine."

As Spencer rang off, his eyes inevitably came back to the mini-bar. Taking a drink to celebrate a devious plan would be quite different to using alcohol to block out confusion. Any fool could see that. He squatted down and opened the door.

The light came on, illuminating his nudity. Bright little bottles fluttered their eyelashes and winked at him, reflecting the flickering TV, rows of enticing Michael Sorden miniatures. His own eyes gazed back with sadness and desire, a kind of cross between a Mexican stand-off and a come-on. Need, mixed with memories of detoxification.

The three monks had run the most peculiar detox centre imaginable. The tequila and nausea of the dream had been real too. They'd allowed him to drink whatever he wanted, yet every time he drank he got sick. Brutally sick. This was a puzzle because he was never sick on alcohol. He was a drunk, not a bulimic. Alcoholism and bulimia are impractical to combine.

It was Father Dougal who'd solved the riddle of his sickness, on the morning of the third day in detox, when he'd come into Spencer's bedroom to change the sheets.

"I'm fine," said Spencer to Father Dougal.

Father Dougal had a large, wide face to match his hands. Spencer couldn't take his eyes off them. They made the clean sheet he was putting on the bed look like a big handkerchief.

"Really, I'm fine. I'm not seeing pink elephants. I haven't got the shakes. Look. See? The craving's gone. You can let me go now."

"Maybe in a few days," said dour Father Dougal.

"No. Now. Please?" This wasn't going to work. He could see this wasn't going to work. "Your hands are like a transvestite's."

Father Dougal stopped fitting the sheet and looked quizzically at Spencer.

"Transvestites have big hands," explained Spencer. "It's like... there's a third sex, more male than male, and you've had a sex-change from double-male to male."

"Sure, a few more days," said Father Dougal, nodding to himself and carrying on with the bedding.

"You're poisoning me," mumbled Spencer.

"Yes, we are," agreed Father Dougal.

That had Spencer stumped. He hadn't been expecting an admission.

"We're poisoning you to stop you poisoning yourself."

"You bastards."

Father Dougal waved his double-male hand at the corner of the room, at the stack of plastic bottles: Tanqueray, Chivas Regal, Quervo, Woods Dark, Becks, Molson, Chablis, Burgundy; enough to stock a neighbourhood bar. "All that drink over there, Spencer, it's all adulterated. A touch of the juice of a mushroom we grow back at the monastery in Ireland. Shaggy cap, fine on its own but not good for the stomach with alcohol." Father Dougal's hand returned to the sheet to clear it of ripples. "Do you remember being a youth, Spencer, and getting so drunk that next day you were sick enough for the world to end? What would it be now? Whiskey, Thunderbird wine?"

Spencer thought back. Mary Macintyr's party, aged sixteen. "Gin."

"And how long was it before you could drink gin again?"

Almost a year, but Spencer wasn't going to answer. He was beginning to understand, and he didn't like it.

"So now you know why we let you have any drop of the devil you like."

"Then you're a fucking idiot for telling me, aren't you? Because now I'm not going to touch a single bottle and your system's fucked!"

Father Dougal had finished with the bedding. He held the dirty sheet in his paw. He cocked his large head to one side. "Ah, but that's not the nature of addiction, now, is it? You already know what's doing you harm, but you take it anyway. When I've left the room, you'll run over to a bottle in the corner there, crack the cap, drink your drink and be as sick as a cat on the moult. Isn't that the truth, now, Spencer?"

It was true. Spencer felt like crying with the stupidity of it. "Maybe I'll fight my way out."

Father Dougal was big enough to pick Spencer up and bounce him round the room like a basketball, yet he managed to look unthreatening. He grinned. "You're not the violent kind, Spencer, I know. When you came here, sure, you were drunk as a skunk and as playful as a puppy. If a man so full of fuel is as gentle as the angels then he's never a trouble sober."

All this passed through Spencer's mind as he held his staring competition with the miniatures in the mini-bar. By the time he'd reached the end of his memoirs the bottles had got bored and looked away. He closed the door again. The battle had been won with remarkable ease. He had the monks to thank for that, he knew.

He moved away from the mini-bar to the bathroom and began his mildly obsessive ablutions: the little bead of toothpaste, shampooed pubes, running the towel between his wet toes like a fluffy white felling-saw. Feeling clean and slightly heroic after his won battle, he put on fresh clothes and went back to lie on the bed again. He set the alarm on his watch for eight o'clock, just in case.

The weather in his head was better. More cool and misty than occluded. Less ups and downs. That battle with the mini-bar must have been on his mind even though he hadn't seen it coming. Unfortunately, now it was over he was able to think more clearly about Pierre.

As he closed his eyes his brain took to replaying the record from the farm, adding vision too, imagining Pierre wounded on the sofa with Alex and Diamond slouched nearby on easy chairs; Kohl intrusively fingering through the plastic cases on the shelves. A three minute video replaying over and over again in his head, repeating the horror of his friend's death.

Listening to the recording had been so traumatic that he could remember almost every word from beginning to end. But as he replayed them in his mind, the significance of the words changed. There was a section where Pierre mentioned the agency, just after he'd brought up the Oldsmobile, and although Spencer had ignored this at first, the more he thought about it the more significant it seemed.

Agency involvement was a definite possibility. The CIA had close connections with the electronics industry. He'd had to deal with them himself as Foxglove's head of security. Nothing major, just their requests for information about employees, or, conversely, for him to stop digging so hard into somebody's background - an acknowledgement that he was about to unearth a place-man, a part-time agency informer within the company.

George always liked to know who these informers were, but he tolerated them. The CIA was generally viewed as a friend, as an ally in the commercial war of the world - Consumer World War Three, as George described it - fought with money and technology but few guns.

Post cold-war, the CIA had recognised this changeover from arms to commerce, and a proportion of its resources was now devoted to direct support for US industry, especially electronics. The Germans and Japanese had won the consumer car war, the Japanese stood victorious in the theatre of cameras and hi-fi. But America dominated the PC battlefield with its processors and software and the CIA wanted it to stay that way.

In its new role the agency was very well behaved; quietly it gathered electronics industry intelligence, assessed competitors and watched for anti-American activity, with barely a cloak or a dagger creeping into play from its dusty cold-war armoury, which made Spencer wonder if he was being stupid even to think about agency involvement in Pierre's death. Was he seeing a conspiracy where there was none to be found? Kohl was a ruthless operator, a compassionless killer. Surely the agency wouldn't let him loose on the domestic electronics scene. He was too much of a maniac.

And yet, in its other manifestations this was the same agency that forced coups and backed terrorists and deposed presidents in foreign lands; that had been implicated in drug smuggling and the excesses of tyrants around the world - though admittedly only tyrants with a firm belief in the free market system - an agency that employed drug-smugglers, arms-runners, insurgents and third-world dictators, yes. But maniacs?

Hold on there.

Spencer's busy mind began to run in circles on the question of mania and what level was acceptable to the CIA. Which was good, because it was a very intense and ultimately boring thing to think about and without him realising it he was transported into a less rational, dreamy world, where the shade of a man's shirt gave away his degree of lunacy. This made the character assessments of espionage so much easier. Dictators, he noticed, always wore pink or yellow - the darker the shade, the more despotic. Drug-smugglers wore green. Arms-runners were in bold red and white stripes, and battalions of insurgents with beards and berets wore children's cream pyjamas spotted with teddy-bears, like they were waiting en-masse to be put to bed.

Kohl's sallow face, an imagined face, appeared to him and saluted, but in dim light so it wasn't clear what he was wearing. Something dark. There was the sense of a dark shirt, maybe blue. Then the vision faded away.

5 *On impulse*

He reached blindly for the bedside lamp, wondering what had woken him so suddenly. A knock on the door, presumably, because there it was again. And even in the first muddles of consciousness he knew exactly who was doing the knocking, whose signature tune that was. It was the one person who could get him off the bed to answer the door.

"Spem."

"Bry."

"I'm sorry, I should have called. Did I wake you?"

Spencer rubbed the corners of his eyes, wondering which part of his anatomy gave away the fact that he'd been sleeping; his ruffled hair, his puffy eyes or his wrinkled clothes.

Bry was looking wonderful, as always. She was wearing a cherry-red business two-piece with a hip-hugging skirt. Her hair was half up and half down, as if she couldn't decide. Usually this meant she had something on her mind. Spencer wasn't sure if he could deal with this right now. Without waiting to be asked, she walked inside and settled herself in the easy chair between the bed and the mini-bar.

"Been sleeping on the job, have we?" she teased.

"Sleeping it off, more like." Careful, thought Spencer. Nothing's happened, remember.

"Nice room," said Bry.

Spencer closed the door. "I thought you didn't like rooms like this. Didn't you always say hotel rooms were too anonymous, too sanitised?" Their apartment together had been full of wall-hangings and South American tapestries. The bathroom fittings were antiques. The carpets belonged in a Turkish bazaar. Bry wanted the furniture to say something, to tell a story. He wondered how George was dealing with that now. With George's money the furniture could be recounting an epic.

"Just making small talk," complained Bry, frowning.

"Sorry." Spencer was still in a daze, unclear on social conventions but aware enough to sense that he might have broken one.

He walked across the room and began opening the curtains, then realised that it was dark outside and he must look really stupid. He turned round and smiled sheepishly. Bry was grinning. She was about to say something, probably something about their time together, something about seeing him like this before, but then she changed her mind. He turned and began to pull the curtains closed again.

"No," said Bry. "Open them. You're right, the room is boring, but the view's good. Leave them open."

Spencer hesitated for a moment, then did as he was asked. It was true, the night-time view was probably the best feature of the room. They were on the twenty-third floor and from here most of the city's urban towers were visible; a bar-chart of white dots on a black background, some with raggedly tapered tops, like mini-charts capping a single bar, and over to the right the rebellious curving statistical spike of the Pan-Am building.

He moved back to sit on the bed close to Bry's chair, even though there were two more chairs in the room.

"Is George still in Germany?"

Bry nodded. "Back tomorrow morning." She gazed through the window with a far-away look and fiddled distractedly with her left ear. "I didn't figure you for an art collector."

"Uh?"

"The picture. You bought a picture last night, or at least reserved one."

"Oh, that. Well I said I liked them. That one especially. It was extraordinary."

"All you need to do now is buy a wall to hang it on."

Spencer didn't like the position he was in. He didn't feel he could tell her the truth, certainly not at this stage, but nor did he want to lie to her. When they'd lived together he hadn't been in the habit of deceiving her and he wouldn't be comfortable doing so now. It was also risky. She could be uncannily perceptive.

Her voice was firm. "What are you up to, Spen?"

"I'm not supposed to talk about it." Immediately he disliked the way that sounded. It was the answer according to the gospel of George, and a murder had surely invalidated that. Out of everybody in the world, surely she was somebody that both he and George could trust. He sat upright, suddenly much more awake.

"Have you met Raymond Kite?" he asked.

Bry's chin rose very slowly. A sign of comprehension. "I've met him. Yes."

"Recently?"

"No. He went missing, a few weeks back."

"So now you know what I'm doing."

A full nod from Bry, and a hand moving up to correct the hair it displaced. "Is that why you went to the showing? To buy the picture of his eyes?"

"Kind of." Though he hadn't known it at the time. "What do you know about him?"

Bry crossed her legs. Spencer watched. It was a nervous movement, he could see that, but sensual too. She couldn't do it any other way.

"Not a lot. George's always kept him away from the bright light of publicity. I'm not sure why. He's very likeable. A bit weird, I suppose. A touch of the mad scientist, but there's an innocent, childish side too. I always want to comb his hair for him. It's such a mess."

"How much time have you spent with him?"

She leaned forward, resting her chin on her hand, her elbow on her knee. "Probably no more than ten or fifteen minutes. As I say, George's quite protective with him. Anyway, Raymond's not the social occasion type."

"And what do you know about Balloons?"

"Not much. I know it's tied in with Michael Sorden's pictures and plenty of electronics are needed to take them. That's how George got involved with Michael."

This was going to be tricky but it had to be asked. "What about Pierre? He works on Balloons, and he only does voices, sounds."

"I wondered about that too," said Bry, thoughtfully. "Maybe you should ask him - whenever he reappears. He seems to have gone away for a few days."

Spencer avoided her eye. Time to move away from the subject of Pierre. "And about the bodies, too. Why would they need human bodies for a picture project?"

It was intended to shock, and it worked. Bry looked very startled for a few seconds, then annoyed. "That's ludicrous, Spen. Where on earth did you hear that?"

Good point. From a homicidal maniac. But Spencer couldn't say that. He tried to get away with no response at all, and Bry allowed it, perhaps because she hadn't quite finished telling him off.

"That sounded like work, Spen. It's the kind of silly question journalists put to me as head of PR, just to see what reaction they get."

Spencer looked at her. Contradicting her sternness, she smiled warmly at him. He still couldn't work out her mood. He was out of practice, that was the problem. Nor was he sure why she was here. He realised that he should be offering her a drink, but he couldn't face the prospect of watching her sip a vodka and tonic when he needed one himself, so remained the bad host. "Who else works on the project?"

"I'm not sure. It isn't my area."

"Do you ever get to see any of the results?"

Bry shook her head. "I only deal with results we publicise."

"Do you think the project is what it claims to be?"

"It doesn't claim to be anything."

"You know what I mean. Is it really about pictures, or are they trying to do something else? Maybe make artificial eyes, get a direct line to the brain. Something like that?"

"Spencer," complained Bry, "it's like you're interrogating me. Why don't you ask George these questions?"

It wasn't going to be the right thing to say, but he was going to say it anyway. "Why don't you?"

Bry pursed her lips. She was mad. He wondered if she were going to get up and walk out. But she didn't. "Why on Earth should I? Why are you being so insensitive? Have you had a really bad time today or is there some kind of jealousy thing going on here?"

What? What was that outburst all about? Spencer tried to think about what she'd just said but for some reason he couldn't grasp it.

Bry watched him struggle. Her face softened. "No. I don't."

"You don't what?"

"I don't think it's what it claims to be." Bry stretched out her crossed legs, wiggled her feet and leaned back in her chair. "I don't think it's about pictures. I did think at one stage it might be about iris recognition. You know an iris is like a fingerprint, no two are the same, so they can be used for identification, for security. That would explain Pierre's involvement. He's got a lot of experience differentiating voice-prints."

"Sounds good to me."

"Do you think George is the same person he was two years ago?"

Spencer rubbed his chin. This seemed to be a completely new direction for the conversation to go. He tried to stay with it. "Not quite. He's mellowed a little."

Bry nodded. "He went down to the Balloons project one afternoon and came back a different man."

"Go on."

"More sensitive. More philosophical. It was a good thing, I suppose, but eerie." She uncrossed her legs and brushed something invisible from her skirt. "I don't think iris recognition would have done that to him."

Spencer had to be careful how he phrased this. "Have you thought about asking him what happened?"

Bry shifted in her seat but didn't hesitate to answer. "No, we don't talk about things like that. A lot of couples don't."

"Oh," grunted Spencer. Was there a trace of bitterness there, or was that his imagination? He could recall many hours of listening to Bry talk about myths and beliefs and what people thought they were living for. Sometimes angrily, because she was feeling aimless, and other times in almost serene contemplation. He couldn't quite match her for depth but liked to listen and join in. She'd clearly enjoyed this kind of discussion and must be missing it now.

"Sorry," he said.

Bry rose from her chair and walked towards the window. She stood with her hands clasped behind her back, contemplating the city. The pose was peculiarly feminine. Spencer's eyes moved from her hips to the bar-chart blocks of high-rise window lights beyond the glass. They were like stars in a way. Man-made stars. It was a long time since he'd had this kind of view; the side of the sky from on high. For the last two years, when he'd looked at the sky it had been its underside he'd seen, its belly, but this wasn't so easy to view from inside a building. Now he was looking at the sky's ragged edge. He'd swapped Orion and the scattered constellations for man-made blocks of regularised stars; pretty in their own way too, but much more conformist.

Bry wasn't quite standing still. Her feet kept moving. Spencer caught her watching him in the reflection of the glass. He lowered his eyes to break the contact and plumped the pillow on the bed, which still showed the depression his head had left. "So what's it like, being rich?" he asked.

Bry thought before she answered. "Better than being poor."

"That's not much of an answer," complained Spencer.

"It wasn't much of a question, was it?" Bry turned, facing him but with her eyes closed, one hand on her brow. "Shall we change the subject? We've been discussing work and George or his money

since I got here." She walked back to the chair, elegantly seated herself, placed her forearms on the armrests and smiled at him expectantly.

"How are the trivia-monsters? Still functioning?" he asked.

Bry liked that. She laughed. "Yes, they are." Trivia monsters was her pet name for her parents. Just as she and Spencer had started their relationship, her parents had retired to a Cape Cod style clapboard house in Virginia. Over the next two years, what little remained of their sense of reality had slowly disappeared. The last time Spencer had seen them, the old man was obsessed by the quality of the yellow colour on TV pictures, claiming a grand conspiracy by Japanese industry to have yellow muted. In the last year he'd bought six different TVs. Meanwhile Bry's mother raised minks in a refrigerated shed, intending to grow her own fur coat, but instead populating the surrounding countryside with escapees. And these were the more accessible points of their characters. Bry said not only had they lost their sense of values within the world, but even within their lounge.

"Functioning is exactly the right word for it. Pa's suing the mail service. He's decided the local mailman moonlights as a cat-burglar." She shook her head. "Do you remember that time we visited and mother wouldn't let us bring anything metal into the house. What was all that about?" She laughed again.

Spencer leaned forward from the edge of the bed. He placed his hand just above Bry's knee, leaned forward more and kissed her full on the lips. She let his tongue into her mouth. His kiss was passionate. But brief. After a few seconds he realised, to his horror, that in every aspect she was utterly motionless.

He withdrew. She glared at him.

"Why?" she asked, very quietly.

Spencer was confused. Embarrassed too. "I just got the impression that..."

"That what?"

"That... there was still something going for us."

"Did I give you that impression?"

"I think," Spencer squirmed on the bed, "generally..."

"But specifically? Can you give me an example?"

Well of course. He thought about it. Thought about it for a long time. Damn. She'd always been a sexy woman, just in her everyday actions. Why had he foolishly thought she was fanning the old flame? "Sorry," he mumbled, feeling terrible. What a misjudgement.

"I *am* married."

It would have been much easier if she'd been angry with him. But she wasn't. She was upset; it was obvious in her voice. He couldn't cope with that. "Bry, I..."

"I don't know why I came." She fixed his eyes with hers. "I think I made a mistake." She got up and moved to the door. Spencer left the bed.

"I shouldn't have come," she said. "George doesn't know I'm here. I never came." Her hand was on the door-handle.

"I'm really sorry. I just... I didn't think you were happy with George."

"That's pretty presumptuous of you, wouldn't you say?"

Unbelievable. He'd just made things worse. "Stop, stop," pleaded Spencer. He was confused. Everything should have been fine, but it wasn't, and he couldn't explain himself properly. Whatever happened, he mustn't let her leave like this. He had to make some kind of amends. He wanted to give her something, but there was nothing to give. He wanted to show her... what? Trust?

And then he thought of something to give. Pure impulse. Something valuable and a reminder of good times spent together. Yet also bizarre. He opened the closet, reached into his jacket pocket and brought out the red vinyl disc. "Give this to George, will you? As soon as he gets back. It's very important."

She looked at him quizzically. "It's one of Pierre's."

"I know."

Bry put the disc in her purse without further thought and opened the door. "I came to..." Whatever she wanted to say, it was a struggle. She was mumbling. "I came to... I can't believe I'm saying this after what just happened, but I wasn't very happy with the way our relationship ended. I don't think I dealt with it very well."

She didn't look at him. She closed the door behind her and was gone.

Spencer was still for a moment, perplexed. He had no idea she was going to say that. No idea at all. He went back to lie on the bed.

What a strange woman she could be. He'd made a fool of himself and she'd doubly confused him by being the one to make the final apology.

Their parting two years ago, the circumstances, their behaviour at the time; he'd blocked all that out, swept it into a cave and filled the mouth with a boulder, and now she'd opened the tomb.

It was true, their relationship had ended very badly. After his incident at the fence she'd transformed into a dragon. No, a dragoness. It had taken a couple of weeks but eventually the chrysalis had fallen away and a fire-breather had emerged. He'd been sacked, most of his colleagues

had turned against him and finally so had his girlfriend. She'd lost her twelve or fifteen thousand dollars along with everybody else at Foxglove but she hadn't cared so much about that and he hadn't expected her to. What had bugged her were the extra hours in the office, the extra days, the seven-day weeks of slavery when she was already pissed-off with being a five-day slave. Teresa, her sister, had suffered her first attack of multiple sclerosis the week before and lay in hospital, her left leg numb and immobile, her vision and future unclear. The timing couldn't have been worse. More than anything, Bry resented being unable to comfort her sister, not having the time. And all because of Spencer's little disaster at the fence. She couldn't handle that. That too was true.

Disaster? Wrong word. Her word. Not disaster, incident at the fence.

Bry's joining the mass-hysteria had been the final straw. He'd picked up the bottle again, it seemed the only thing to do, the only solution. And he wasn't even a terrible drunk. Not maudlin, not aggressive. Even that hadn't satisfied Bry. At the end of their final fight, after she'd been working twenty twelve-hour days in a row and was utterly live-wired, connected by a wet string to the thunderous skies, after she'd raved and screamed and finally slapped him on the face as he lay there on the sofa and its West African tribal knit cover, and he'd meekly accepted the blow and done nothing in return, she'd said, very quietly: "You can't even be a proper fucking drunk, can you?" And he'd known it was time to leave.

All history now. Can't change history. And she'd come with an apology on her mind and he'd made a complete idiot of himself by making a pass at her. What a fool.

He laughed. Ha! And he'd given her the stupid disc. What a ridiculous thing to do. It wasn't even a gift for her, but something to pass on to George. Elevating her status to trusted messenger. What a joke. Here, I trust you, be involved.

She hadn't even told George she was visiting him. So how would she explain receiving the disk? By lying, of course. By lying to her husband. That was some twisted game he'd got her involved in.

"Jesus!" Spencer shot upright and glared at his beeping watch. Eight o'clock. Michael Sorden was due in an hour. He'd have to get moving.

6 *Michael's indulgence*

A few minutes later he was in the hired Trooper speeding towards the derelict lot where he'd been plucked from drunken life by George Stiles. There was no guarantee that the Professor would be there, but the chances were good. The Professor didn't run with the regular panhandling crowd. He couldn't stand the squabbling, couldn't get on with all those Vietnam veterans. He liked poetry, wrote a lot himself, and he loved his chess. He'd be out on the deserted lot playing solo rather than sit with a crowd of uncultured bums.

The night was clear and the moon was close to full. On the way, Spencer stopped off at Art's Liquor Mart on 17th and Eden to buy a bottle of Wild Turkey and at a gas station for two flashlights. When he reached the entrance to the lot the moonlight was bright enough for him to make out a familiar figure sitting on a hard-standing a few hundred yards away, between the raised freeway and the contractors' compound. A figure that looked very solitary. Spencer manoeuvred the Trooper down the dirt track through the lot, coming to a stop next to the raised foundation of concrete, just as George's limo had done.

"Hi, Prof."

"Gent!"

Spencer climbed out of the car, abruptly conscious of his clean clothes and decent transport. It hadn't crossed his mind that he might feel distanced from the Professor, he'd been so much looking forward to seeing him again. Yet what a difference George's money had created; Spencer looking like a regular moneyed member of society and the Professor still in his dumpster clothes. It made him suddenly aware that a similar imbalance existed between himself and George Stiles. Different values, expectations, lifestyles. The awareness of who can pay and who cannot. A steep slope for a relationship; the poorer person at the bottom, a proud receiver, and the richer at the top, grasping his giant bean-bag of wealth with its leaky corner, smiling but aware of the stream of beans spilling

down. How much easier when the slope is shallow. Millionaires keeping the company of other millionaires. Derelicts in a huddle elsewhere.

No, not distanced in a week.

He pulled up a crate and with practised ease sat gently on a corner. The Professor hunched close to his feeble fire, even though he was wearing a long coat and the evening wasn't cold. Spencer regarded the fire respectfully, recognising it as his replacement in a way, in terms of the Professor's social arrangements. Then it brought to mind the two fires on the fifteenth floor of the Merchant Building - an association he didn't like. He opened the whiskey and passed it to the Professor, who raised it straight to his lips and drank.

"Thanks," said the Professor when he'd fully refuelled. "Always the man with the bottle, Gent. Praise you." He wiped his mouth gently with the back of two middle fingers and offered the bottle back to Spencer.

Spencer shook his head. "The detox worked. I've gone straight, Prof, at least for the moment."

The Professor smiled broadly and set the bottle on the ground. "Good man. I always thought you had it in you." Only the Professor would say that, bless him. Most vagrants resented a successful attempt to stop drinking, on the grounds that there's nothing worse than somebody trying to act superior.

"Thought you'd had a good bath, a good night's sleep." The Professor was mildly drunk, but not gone. His voice had the harsh crackle of anybody who spends the winter careering from one respiratory disease to another. Spencer hadn't recognised that before, but he could hear it now. The cherubic face was tempered brown, with purple-veined alcoholic highlights behind the mild savannah of stubble. Sometimes he appeared to have a big set of yellow teeth and sometimes none, as if they were retractable.

"Been watching television?"

Spencer nodded.

"Getting yourself programmed. Think this, think that."

"I'm trying to be careful," promised Spencer.

"Buy this. Buy that." The Prof spat copiously into the little fire, half-killing it. "Buy a house. Buy a car. Get married. Have kids. Die."

This wasn't personal. It was the Professor's recurring crusade against society in general. He himself had said that he would never be able to cope with the real world because he could never

block out the bad parts of it, like normal people did, like Spencer sometimes managed to do and sometimes didn't. Alcohol could block them out. That was a problem too.

"I saw a billboard yesterday," continued the Professor. "It said, Vote For Jim. That's the governor's election, I guess. But what a message, eh? Vote For Jim."

Spencer nodded sympathetically.

"I mean, what does that say to you? What does it tell you about Jim, about his policies? The fuck, nothing. But they spend millions on billboards like that, because they work. People see Vote For Jim and they vote for Jim. That's democracy for you. There's something worth fighting for."

The tirade was now part-way through. Spencer had heard it all before. There was still Vietnam to go. The monologue wouldn't be finished until Vietnam had been dealt with. Spencer could see it coming and although he was in a hurry he allowed space for it to arrive.

"Used to teach students back in the sixties; bright boys from northern California and Washington State. Meanwhile the fellas from Michigan and West Virginia weren't in class. They'd been sent out the room to drop napalm on Vietnamese villagers. Not pens and books, mind you, like they should have, but thousand-pounders and machine gun bullets. Couldn't deal with a system like that; educated half its youth and sent the rest to the other side of the world to kill foreigners who didn't follow market forces. Shit and garbage. That's what that was. World gone mad."

There. Vietnam all done. The irony was, the Professor now often found himself in the company of bitter Vietnam vets on the streets. There were so many in the city it was impossible to avoid them. Some of them sympathised with the Professor's anti-war views, others felt he made their sacrifices seem more meaningless than they already appeared. None could accept the idea that Vietnam had turned him into an alcoholic without him ever having to go there.

Spencer waited in case there was an epilogue to follow, but the voice was silent. Traffic on the raised freeway hummed by, not revealing itself. Two planes were coming in over the bay, distant gliding gulls. Looking into the fire, Spencer might have imagined objects, people, or seen memories, but instead he sensed something far more abstract. Impermanence. Time passing. It was definitely an abstract fire, no knowledge of language required. He could have been a caveman with a mind full of grunts and the fire would still have been the same.

He was tempted to stay and enjoy the tranquillity of his flame-gazing, but there was work to be done. "Prof, I need to get inside a building, a studio."

It seemed ridiculous that here he was sitting with a man of great learning, an ex-academic, a one-time teacher of history, myth and culture throughout the world, and all he wanted from him was his house-breaking skills. But the fact was, the Professor was extremely good at it.

Spencer had watched him in action over the past two years. The Professor had been his streetlife mentor. Together they'd clambered through the timber frames behind the stage-set facade of society, through the soup-kitchens, flophouses, culverts and abandoned lots of the world behind the painted screens. Each day they'd parted company to hustle dollars for the bottles and met up later to drink the spoils. When it rained or was too cold to sleep outdoors, the Professor would casually run his eye across a row of buildings, choose one, walk up to it, and let himself in. He did it with ludicrous ease. He could stand two hundred yards from a building, dead drunk, glance at it and identify the single fatal flaw in its security. Pure intuition.

Spencer, as an ex security guard, had first been appalled, then amused by the irony. He'd learned more from the Professor about security in two months than he had at Foxglove in ten years. But still he didn't have the Professor's intuition.

The Professor's angry mood had entirely gone, fully relieved by the diatribe. He looked at Spencer quizzically. "Thought you'd have a hotel room?"

"I do. And the man whose studio I want to break into is on his way there right now." Spencer produced the two flashlights.

The Professor's eyebrows rose a fraction. "Do we have to go in your car?"

Spencer nodded.

"But Gent, I haven't been in a car for *years*."

*

While Spencer drove, the Professor fiddled with the car radio and electric window, making up for lost time. When he'd finished he took a long draught of Wild Turkey to celebrate. "Suppose you'll be using your real name now. Always known you as Gent. What did the man call you?"

"Spen or Spencer." It came out nasally at first. Spencer had been clenching the muscles behind his nose and breathing through his mouth. The Professor's smell was fine in the open air, but here in the car it was taking some getting used to.

"I remember. Spencer de Gresseur. French, isn't it? French family?"

Spencer shook his head. He was sure they'd discussed this before. Many days on the streets there'd been nothing to do but talk. Clearly he'd been more sober than the Professor when they'd discussed his name. "No. Never was. About three generations ago somebody in the family decided they wanted

a French-sounding name, so they chose Degresseur - single word. My father learned to speak French and found out what it means."

"De-greaser," remembered the Professor. "The stuff you clean engines with."

"And now the French use the same word for the greysuits who go into companies and fire people so the owners can make a profit. They're de-greasers too. An even worse connection. So my father had it changed to de Gresseur, two words, and a few letters further down the phone book." He looked at his watch. Quarter to nine. Beaumont was twenty minutes away. They weren't doing badly for time.

"Sounds the same."

Spencer shook his head again. "The English pronunciation does. But not the French. To the French we now come from a town called Gresseur, or an aristocratic family of Gresseurs. I can deal with that."

"Your father still around?"

Spencer paused. He hadn't been expecting this question, although he had a vague memory of the Professor asking it once before. He couldn't recall how he'd dealt with it then. Probably by silence. It was very close to an area he couldn't deal with, at least not well. At length, he said, "No."

"Mother?"

"No." It was a conversation that usually stopped there. Most people were sensitive enough not to continue after two abrupt replies. But on this occasion it was Spencer who kept the subject alive. What the hell. It was the Prof, and he was in the mood for talking, for unburdening himself. Maybe he should have told the Professor a long time ago. Strange that sobriety should make him more open.

"My folks both died when I was twenty. I was at college in Boston. They flew east to see me and stopped off at Washington DC to do the sights and go to the theatre - A Midsummer Night's Dream, of all things." He could hear his own voice turning uneven, as it invariably did when he told the tale. It must have been years since he last recounted it. "When the show finished they went back to the parking lot to pick up the car and somebody shot them as they unlocked it. Took their valuables, stole the car and left them to die on the concrete. My sister too. Mandy. She was seventeen."

"Christ, that's awful," said the Professor, very quietly.

"It was."

Awful in a way that was hard to describe. Like having your heart extracted with a sharpened coal-scuttle. Like waking up to a world of perpetual night where the people are all ghosts and you're waiting for a tidal wave of mud to hit the darkened madhouse you're living in. Everybody screaming,

mouths wide open, unable to form words. He'd loved his parents dearly and his sister too. Even now it was impossible to talk about it without a vacuum forming inside. More than a decade had passed, almost two. When would it be easy?

"I flunked college." He had to keep talking. "I started drinking. That was the first time. I wanted to become a cop, for all the wrong reasons. But of course they wouldn't have me. They could see how much was going on in my head. Then George came along, George Stiles, and asked me to do security for Foxglove. I took it. It was close to being a cop. After a while I straightened out."

"Christ," repeated the Professor, reaching for the bottle. "I feel pathetic."

Spencer stared at the road ahead. The highway was real again. The pain had passed through him like wind through a tunnel, leaving emptiness. He shook his head and said softly, as if to himself, "I think part of me went with them, and never came back."

The Professor alternately drank and looked repeatedly at Spencer, as if wondering whether the conversation could be carried on. Eventually he decided that it could.

"Do you have any beliefs?"

"You mean, do I think my parents are in heaven?" Spencer was feeling better now, almost back in equilibrium.

The Professor nodded a little too vigorously. A rare lapse into the actions of a drunk.

"I think they live on in my genes," answered Spencer. "In my memories. In other people's memories."

"But not as souls in heaven?"

Spencer thought about it. He'd thought about it before. It was just too seductive, too easy, a pleasant dream that people wanted to be true because it made death less awful. Unprovable. But then not provable either way. "That's an unknown. Isn't it?"

The Professor nodded again, appreciating the answer. "Always will be."

*

Beaumont was a run-down industrial area where the buildings were big and old and too close together. The industrialists had moved out many years ago and the artists had moved into the workshops they'd left behind - but not quite enough of them to create an atmosphere. For a long time the area had lived on the borderline of taking off as a chic cultural centre and being demolished for redevelopment. Many of the old warehouses were empty. Grasses and flowers were recolonising the gaps in the cracked concrete and brickwork. Tarmac on the streets had worn away revealing patches of cobblestone.

Michael's studio had clearly been built for commercial use rather than anything artistic. It was big and it wasn't pretty. A multitude of windows lined up in orderly rows. A long piece of steel had escaped into the street from the disused factory opposite and lay in the gutter, bent and useless.

Although the sky was now clear, at some point earlier in the evening it must have rained here. The street was still damp. The few antique streetlights that Beaumont possessed had wide circular canopies attached to buildings. They shone off the wet tarmac and cobblestones but barely reflected from the dirty windows. Somewhere behind Michael's studio was a modern industrial lot with halogen lamps on tall pylons, lighting up the tops of buildings and making the streetlamps seem even more feeble in comparison, like props in an arc-lit stage play.

There were no people in sight and only one car, an old Ford station-wagon parked right outside the studio entrance. Spencer pulled up behind it, wondering if it was Michael's. Maybe Michael was wiser than he looked. Maybe somebody had tried to pull this trick on him before.

"Better try the door-buzzer," suggested the Professor, clearly suspicious too.

"How's the building look?"

He was expecting a caustic response, something along the lines of it hardly being worth the trip, but instead the Professor said, "Wrong."

Spencer got out of the car and walked to the studio door. The Professor followed. They could hear the buzzer ringing but nobody answered. Spencer listened hard but heard no movement inside; in fact, very little sound of any kind. No traffic noise. The only thing that could be heard was a single foghorn in the distant bay, bleating almost continuously like a lost baritone lamb. An eerie, mournful sound.

"Seems OK," said Spencer.

"Not really."

Spencer looked at the solid door, at its two keyholes. "Come on maestro. Do your magic."

The Professor grasped the doorhandle and opened the door. It was unlocked. For a while they looked at each other. The Professor frowned. He shook his head.

"I'll go in alone," said Spencer. "You stay in the car."

"I don't stay in cars, Gent. Too claustrophobic."

"You were OK on the way here."

"There's a good reason to be in a moving car. It takes you places. A parked one's useless."

Spencer puzzled over the logic. He handed the Professor a flashlight and walked inside. Two people work faster than one, and the Professor had plenty of experience exploring strange buildings.

The lights inside were off. Spencer didn't switch them on, instead he lit his flashlight. The Professor followed behind, holding his torch in one hand and whiskey in the other.

The first room was a forlorn-looking reception area with two old leather sofas and bare walls. A strange contrast to the plush exhibition. At the far side of the room was a door that led through into the studio itself. This took up most of the building. All the floors had been knocked through to leave a huge rectangular space. It might have looked better if the final ceiling had gone too - breaking up the squareness inside with the peak of a roof - but unfortunately it was still there. The strong security lights from the nearby lot shafted in through the multitude of windows, creating the impression of a cathedral, but all monochrome, mainly blue, a cathedral lit by a blue moon. Spencer played his flashlight around the room.

"Whaaaa!" The Professor had just seen his first eye picture. By torchlight they were more intimidating than ever. An eye in a small bright circle, shafts of blue behind.

Spencer put his finger to his lips, then, apparently contradicting himself, shouted loudly for Michael.

No answer.

Eyes were neatly stacked against the walls like so many finished industrial products, but there were enough mounted on stands to bring back that you're-being-watched feeling of the gallery. It was much stronger here. A creepy sensation.

"Michael?"

Again, no reply.

"Wild pics," said the Professor, respectfully.

Both torch beams danced around the studio. The Professor's seemed drawn, as if by magnetic attraction, to the eyes, and flitted unceasingly from one to another. Spencer's light was more workmanlike, investigating dark corners and walls. Looking back, above the reception area he could see a mezzanine floor, separated from the studio only by its height and a meagre wooden banister. The walls there were panelled and decorated with a single band of conventional pictures. At each end was an assortment of old filing cabinets, exactly what he was looking for, and in the centre an elaborate standard lamp surrounded by a selection of easy-chairs. It looked far cosier than elsewhere in the building. A homely lounge for a resting artist.

He led the way up the steep wooden stairs. At the top he checked the carefully arranged furniture with his flashlight and headed for the filing cabinets to his left. The Professor followed behind. Still the Professor's flashlight seemed drawn to pictures, this time to the band around the panelled walls.

Spencer opened the top drawer. It wasn't locked. Names were listed alphabetically. T for Tassinski. In Tassinski's file he found a page of personal details, a table of demographic statistics and a description of eyes. Just as he'd hoped, Michael Sorden was a rational, businesslike artist who'd documented all those staring photos downstairs.

"These are amazing," exclaimed the Professor.

Spencer looked up, following the scan of the Professor's light, and was instantly distracted. The Professor was right. The pictures were fascinating. They formed a thin band. Not as overt as the photos of eyes, yet still quietly bizarre. The first, on the left, was a classical religious painting with Christ and his disciples at a table, then a picture of a stained glass window from a church, followed by a dozen eastern images. Spencer didn't recognise them, Hindu maybe. The next one was of an eye - but a drawing not a photograph. Eastern again. Then a coin beneath a tongue, three magistrates sitting at a judicial bench, a picture of a modern T-junction with traffic lights, looking wildly out of place. Another eye drawing. And finally two more pictures a little too far away to see clearly. They showed something in detail, a weird script, like Hebrew but more pictorial.

The Professor's light came back to the first of the images. "Leonardo's The Last Supper of Christ. From Milan. A fresco rather than a canvas."

Spencer managed to recover his attention and concentrate on the drawers. K for Kite might be bottom-left.

"This stained glass window I've never seen before." The Professor had moved on to the second picture. "It shows St Peter at the gates of heaven and hell, white stones and black stones in front of him - I guess they're good and bad deeds." The Professor snorted. "And I always thought he went on clothes. 'Nice suit, right hand door.'"

"I remember."

"Buddhas," said the Professor, moving on quickly through the next half-dozen. "And demons holding swords and bowls of blood. No! No!" He sounded excited. "They're all Buddhas!"

Spencer couldn't resist. He looked up at the pictures again. They exerted a powerful draw, an almost supernatural attraction, way beyond rationality. A hypnotic spell. Mesmeric. They were trying to tell him a story.

The Professor flashed his light across a long sequence: multiple images of Buddha in various guises and with oddly coloured skin, and then an equal number of demons holding skulls and weapons and bloody bowls. "They look like demons," explained the Professor. "But they're not, they're bad Buddhas, wrathful Buddhas. It's the Bardo Thodol."

"The what?"

"The Tibetan Book of the Dead. Nice Buddhas and bad Buddhas. They're what you see when you die, assuming, of course, you're a Tibetan Buddhist."

Spencer forced himself back to the drawers. M for Magudu. Try the drawer above. "I thought Buddhists went for reincarnation?"

"They do. But first they get a chance to get out of the nasty cycle of life and death, to reach Nirvana. That's what they're all aiming for."

"And how do the Buddhas fit in?" There it was. K for Kite. Raymond Kite. The single crooked suspension file in the drawer.

"What's wrong?" asked the Professor. He'd heard Spencer's sigh.

"I've drawn a blank." What a disappointment. The file was empty. Clearly Michael Sorden truly was wiser than he seemed.

The Professor paused, then decided it was better for him to talk than stay silent. "When a Tibetan dies, they see a white light. They're supposed to leave their bodies behind and freely leap into this light, spiritually speaking. The problem is, usually they're scared shitless and won't make the jump. So the Buddhas appear as apparitions to persuade them. Good Buddhas and then bad Buddhas. A different one each day. This happens over weeks and weeks and through all this somebody is supposed to sit with the body and read the Bardo Thodol, like a guide book, because they think the body can still hear. At the end, if they still haven't made the leap, they get reincarnated."

"Weird." Spencer scratched his temple by his right ear. "And how do they work out the reincarnations - who gets to be a fly and who gets to be a dolphin?"

"It depends how you lived your life. If you were full of lust you come back as a dog. If you were selfish you come back as a pig. Too materialist and you come back as an ant. There are a lot of ants in the world, you might have noticed."

Spencer was about to close the filing cabinet drawer. There wasn't much point in looking further. If Michael had taken the precaution of hiding Raymond Kite's papers, he wouldn't have put them where they could easily be found. It would take hours to search the studio, and he didn't have hours. For a moment he wondered if Michael might have changed his mind and taken them with him to the hotel, intending to hand them over. Automatically he straightened the file on its runners. He closed the drawer and yet it remained open in his mind. Some idea was piecing itself together in the background. He didn't need to think about it. It had its own momentum. He looked up at the pictures, and caught the enchantment he'd felt before within a few seconds.

"You used to teach this stuff, right?"

"Mainly I taught history. But I did a year on comparative religion. Then it was cut from the course-list. People complained I was turning their children against Christ."

"Were you?"

The Prof grinned. His yellow teeth showed in the torchlight. "Just putting him in perspective." He brought the bottle to his mouth and took a drink, still smiling with his eyes.

A train was approaching. The tracks were so nearby that in the silence of the clear night they could be heard singing to themselves before it arrived. It made a tremendous noise. Its silhouette was clear in the windows, backlit by the strong pylon lamps, a prop in a giant shadow play. The shadow itself crossed the floor of the studio, climbing jerkily across the racks of eyes to reach the far wall.

"Felt like it was coming right through the room," said the Professor.

"Cheap rent. What about the rest of the pictures?"

Next in the sequence, after the Buddhist eye drawing, was the coin under the tongue, then three Mediterranean-looking judges and the modern road junction - a T with traffic lights.

The Professor laughed. "A few liberties taken there. You know what the coin under the tongue is for, don't you?"

"I should, but I can't remember."

"To pay the ferryman, Charon, to ferry your soul across the River Styx. At the other side you wander through the Fields of Asphodel, full of lost souls twittering like bats. Then you come to a T-junction where there are three judges. Let me think now... Minos, Rhadamanthys and Aeacus. All chosen because they were such fine upstanding citizens. I suppose Aeacus really was quite well-behaved. Minos was a true philanderer. His wife, Pasiphae, wasn't slow either. She had sex with a bull and gave birth to the minotaur. Rhadamanthys and Minos were brothers and they had a big falling out because they both had the hots for the same youth..."

"...Prof," interrupted Spencer. "What was wrong when we first arrived? Why didn't you like the look of the place?" The idea forming in the murky back of his mind was almost complete. All it needed was a magic touch from the Professor.

"The car out front. It belongs there. It's like... stains on the road, maybe, I don't know. And the unlocked door. It's not the right district, the right kind of place."

The crooked file, thought Spencer. That's what triggered this. The entire studio is neat and well-arranged. Why one crooked file?

"Greek," started the Professor, when it became clear that Spencer wasn't about to share his thoughts. "This is the Greek afterlife myth. Whoever put these together was pretty obsessed by afterlives, don't you think?"

"Or final judgements," suggested Spencer.

The Professor nodded. "Or judgements."

Spencer adjusted the bottle in the Professor's hand. It was about to dribble on the floor. "And who made it through to Greek heaven?"

"Heroes. It was all about heroism in those days."

"The same for women?"

"From what I remember, women didn't get a look-in. But if the men were heroes they went to the Fields of Elysium, full of singing and drinking and dancing and orgies and general merriment."

"But no women."

"That's right. Orgies without women. That's the Ancient Greeks for you. And the real superheroes could go through to the Paradise Isles, which were even nicer. And from there, unbelievably, they could be reincarnated and come back to the real world, if they wanted."

"Like a Buddhist?"

"Exactly."

Amazing, thought Spencer. And what a curious set of pictures to have on your wall, Michael Sorden.

On your wall. On your wall.

"Shit!"

Pierre's car had been outside his house. His door had been unlocked - though that was normal enough. But the tapes and CDs on his wall had been ragged and disorderly. One crooked file. The Raymond Kite connection...

Was he blowing this out of proportion or were they in much more danger than he'd thought?

"Prof, I'm starting to think something's wrong too."

Spencer moved to the balcony and played his torch beam over the floor of the studio below. The Professor followed his lead.

No. Pierre had been in his lounge.

Spencer turned round to look at the mezzanine again. It wasn't large. He shone his flashlight at the carpet, at the seats. Then remembered Kohl's words. "Check for stains." He moved further along the

balcony rail to the far end of the floor, where he could see the one area he hadn't yet checked - behind the second set of filing cabinets.

There he stood in silence until the Professor joined him.

"Jesus!" breathed the Professor.

Michael Sorden hadn't gone to Spencer's hotel. He'd been here all the time, in the corner, where he couldn't easily be seen. He lay on his back in a nice burgundy suit, feet splayed apart, arms by his side. His eyes were open, unblinking, dry. They'd become one of his own pictures now.

Some people are immune to the sight of death but Spencer wasn't one of them. He hadn't seen enough bodies to be immunised. The doctors, misguided or not, had decided he was in no state to see his parents and sister. He'd seen one corpse in a vagrants' hang-out at dawn, but not for long; he'd fled along with everybody else the moment they'd realised. And one on a beach in Mexico, drowned. A policeman had come along and tied a label to the drowned body's big toe and thrown a blanket over it, then disappeared again. The tide had come in and tried to drown the body all over again, pulling it out into the water and pushing it back on to the sand in some gross necrophiliac sex game. Along with half a dozen other gringos, Spencer sat on the dunes and watched the Mexican Sunday afternoon promenaders casually step over it like it was an awkward drift of seaweed.

Right now he found it difficult to make full contact with Michael's eyes. Wasn't it the gypsies who said that the moment of death could be seen in a dead man's gaze? Michael would have agreed with that, no doubt. Spencer guessed he must believe it too, otherwise he wouldn't be so frightened of looking. He glanced repeatedly but couldn't maintain contact.

Fighting the shock, he knelt and felt for a pulse at the neck, knowing he wouldn't find one. The skin was cool but still warmer than the room. He tried raising an arm and it moved with ease. No rigor mortis. Now that he was dead and unmoving, the blond, orange and black hair on Michael's head looked ridiculous, like a carpet-hair wig.

Raising the arm had shifted Michael's jacket. Spencer noticed a trace of blood on the cream silk shirt and moved the lapels to see where it came from. On each side of the chest, just below the collar bone and closer to the arm than the sternum, was a small puncture wound, a wound from a stiletto blade or a small calibre pistol. The two wounds in perfect symmetry.

Spencer didn't feel well. It wasn't the blood. There wasn't too much of that. It was the memory of the recording and Pierre's voice, hurting. The shots in the background. Small calibre. Michael must have been hurting too. Artistic pleasure had been taken in the preciseness of these wounds. They'd

been placed to cause pain and immobility but not much bleeding. The crimson stains reached the trousers but hadn't penetrated the jacket.

Spencer took a deep breath to keep the nausea at bay.

Yet would they have been fatal? He looked over the body for more signs of violence. He didn't find any until he came to the left ear, plugged with what looked like a first-aid dressing. Tentatively he eased the plug away. A stream of thick red blood flowed down the ear and on to the floor. Spencer put the plug back, hurriedly, then smelled his fingers. Cordite and singed flesh. The killer had put a pistol to Michael's ear and fired a slug of lead into his brain, then calmly stuffed the ear to stem the bleeding.

Where were Kohl and his gang now? They'd taken Pierre's body away. Why hadn't they taken this one? Maybe they still intended to.

"Out," he said, quietly. "We have to get out, right now."

Spencer took a tissue from his pocket, just as he'd done at Pierre's, and walked back across the mezzanine to the filing cabinets he'd been searching through. He began wiping their metal surfaces. "Did you touch anything, Prof?"

"I don't think so."

When he'd finished with the cabinets, Spencer ushered the Professor down the steep stairs. Their flashlights caught the eyes again. Silent witnesses, glaring at them as if they were the guilty parties, had killed their father, their maker. My God, thought Spencer, I shouldn't have been trying to trick him, I should have been trying to warn him.

"The police?" The Professor sounded unsure.

"And what will the police make of the pair of us?"

The Professor nodded.

Spencer wiped the doorhandles as they passed into reception, and the street-door handles as they moved outside into the damp evening. He was wiping the buzzer, caressing it gently with tissue like a child's eyelid so it wouldn't yell out, when he realised he'd forgotten something.

"Get out of sight, Prof. Just for a minute. I have to go back in."

He didn't look at the Professor. He opened the door with tissue fingers and walked back into the miserable reception, then through to the studio, up the stairs and back to Michael. He searched Michael's jacket. Nothing. Somewhere, Michael Sorden had written down Spencer's hotel room details. Spencer wanted them back. He searched the trouser pockets. Nothing. How could a man have nothing at all in his pockets?

Because somebody had emptied them.

He went back down the stairs and shone the flashlight around, searching for the picture of Raymond Kite's eyes. All kinds of eyes stared back at him, but not Raymond's. It would be on its own, maybe, with his address attached, if he was lucky.

Another train came by, sounding urgent, too loud.

Spencer couldn't work out whether to keep on looking and risk being found, or get out and risk leaving his address behind. Maybe he should get the hell out and drive away. He could always come back.

He stepped through reception, carefully opened the front door with the tissue still in his hand, and came out onto the shining street.

"Spencer! So here you are. We've just been to your hotel. That wasn't a very nice trick to play on Mr Sorden, was it?" The surprise winded Spencer like a blow to the stomach. Kohl's voice, that unmistakable ice-breaker bow of sound. There were three of them, presumably the three from Pierre's farm. The Oldsmobile was there too. The train must have swamped the sound of its arrival. He could see straight away the situation was hopeless.

"We had a delivery to make." Kohl was holding the picture of Raymond Kite's eyes. "A fool's errand. But never mind. We've found the fool." He was well into his forties yet very athletic-looking, dressed in a plain dark suit and roll-neck sweater. His face was thin and angular with high cheekbones and a narrow yet square jaw.

The other two were distinctive but less imposing. They stood either side of Spencer, blocking his escape. One was large, almost ape-like, with a bald head that appeared to come to a point. If he was an ape then the other one had to be an overgrown weasel.

As Spencer scanned them he searched for the Professor too, as subtly as he could. It took a while to find him, he was so well camouflaged. He was lying on his back fifty feet away in the gateway of the factory opposite, eyes almost closed, mouth open, bottle in hand, looking for all the world like a comatose drunk. Even if the gang had seen him they would have ignored him. Irrelevant street-furniture. It was a brilliant disguise. The hand on the bottle moved, barely perceptibly, to give a thumbs-up sign.

Spencer forced himself not to smile, which wasn't hard because at that moment the building behind him seemed to collapse on his neck, turning off the feeble streetlights and security lamps and the moon and everything else as he sank towards the ground and oblivion.

7 Kohl's theatre

In the background was the noise of a train. Spencer couldn't see it but he found the noise very unpleasant because he was running down a railway line and he was frightened the train would hit him. He was running away from the big man with the pointy head and dark suit, and also away from the red vinyl record. The record was hovering in the air by the side of the big man and it was folded into the shape of a clam, a mouth, and it was speaking in Kohl's cold voice, saying, "After him, Diamond. Another sanitary towel, Diamond, he's bleeding." Spencer couldn't escape because there were steep embankments on either side. The noise of the train was getting louder but still he couldn't see it, even though it was so close it was making the track vibrate. The embankments were getting higher as he ran. He ran into a tunnel, Kohl's voice echoing behind him along with the footsteps of his pursuer. The tunnel stank. Almost a pleasant smell but so strong it was overpowering. The noise of the train was even louder in the tunnel. Just yards away. Impossibly close and getting closer, the tunnel walls shaking themselves into a blur. And still he couldn't see it. Yet surely it was almost on him now. On top of him. And suddenly it was. No pain, no presence, but the noise of the train running right into him and through him and out the other side as if he wasn't really there.

*

Spencer woke with a start, feeling clammy and ill at ease. What a lot of dreams he was having. He put it down to sobriety and the aggravation of waking up four times in one day. The strong smell was still in his nostrils. Smelling salts, that's what it was. A shadowy figure was moving away from him.

"Thank you, Diamond." Kohl's voice. Unmistakable. "Spencer, are you with us?"

Diamond reached his seat and sat down. Spencer recognised him as the goon with the pointy head. All credit to the dream. He hadn't consciously known that this was Diamond - one of the names from the record - but the dream had guessed and got it right, as dreams often do.

He found himself sitting on a simple wooden chair in the centre of a large and empty attic. The floorboards were bare. Two of the walls were long and sloped heavily to follow the line of the peaked roof; the other two were gable ends. The train from his dream was a real one and was still clattering noisily by, right outside.

Three figures were facing him. At first, he couldn't see them well because of the awkward lighting. They were sitting in a widely spaced row beneath a single long window set high into a sloping wall. The window was full of harsh blue-white light, slightly diffused by a layer of grime but still filling Spencer's eyes with glare. There was no other lighting in the room.

The figure on the left was Diamond. In the centre was Kohl, then the weasel-man - presumably that was Alex. He looked bigger now he was sitting down, as short-legged people do.

It took a while to remember Kohl's question.

"I'm awake, if that's what you mean."

Or half-awake, at least. The gang were so confident, he noticed, that they hadn't even bothered to restrain him. He felt the back of his neck. There was an ache there but no big bruise. Very professional.

"Good," said Kohl. "It's getting late."

Spencer looked at his watch. Half past ten. He must have been out for more than an hour. "Late for what?"

"Late for drinking."

Kohl's hair was well groomed. It appeared to be black, though it was difficult to tell under the weird light. His eyes were dark yet piercing. Spencer couldn't make out their colour but the mystery just added to their impact. Every aspect of Kohl's appearance, even down to his slim fingers and the single gold ring on the left little digit, radiated intellect and power. He was far more good-looking than his age or homicidal tendencies should have allowed him to be.

"Look by the side of your chair. You'll find a bottle."

Spencer looked. A bottle of Mescal, full of mind-bending alkaloids in addition to the regular forty percent alcohol. He couldn't see it from this angle but there would be a little agave cactus worm lying pickled at the bottom, a maguey. He'd swallowed a few of those worms in his time.

"I don't drink."

"Spencer, you seem to have forgotten something." There was even more menace in Kohl's voice than usual. "You are a drunk. You appear to think you might be a private investigator of some kind,

but everybody knows you are really a drunk. You think you are Philip Marlowe when really you are Raymond Chandler. So start drinking."

Spencer ignored him. He looked at Diamond, seated on Kohl's right, at Diamond's large hands, at his face - small features too close together in a lake of flesh, no eyebrows to speak of and even less hair. The bald pointed dome dominated the face like a beautiful stupa rising from a nondescript temple. Surely its jewel shape had to be the inspiration for his name, though Spencer couldn't imagine any of them having the wit to invent it.

Alex, on Kohl's left, had small hands at the end of short arms, as well as short legs. He really did look like a weasel. His features were pinched and sharp; a heavy brow, long nose and prominent jaw - not large or pointed or jutting, but curiously arranged as if his entire face were directed there.

Spencer suddenly realised where he was. The train, the shape of the room, the light through the high window. He hadn't been moved far. He was in the attic of Michael Sorden's studio.

"Diamond," ordered Kohl, "show Mr de Gresseur that he needs a drink."

Diamond rose from his seat, surprisingly quickly for such a big man, and drew a small pistol, a .22. He walked across to Spencer and placed the barrel against Spencer's chest, just below the left collar bone. It was done without the slightest hint of drama, but Spencer's adrenaline glands found it dramatic enough. His heart pumped rapidly. These people didn't have a history of bluffing.

"Make your choice, Spencer," said Kohl. "Heaven or hell?"

"What?"

That caught Spencer unawares. The resemblance was so uncanny it was frightening. Three large men in an oddly lit room. Three Grand Inquisitors.

"OK, OK," said Spencer, figuring he could deal with the mescal better than he could deal with a hole in the chest. "I get the message."

There was an awkward moment when he thought Diamond might shoot him anyway, out of habit, but it passed. Spencer reached for the bottle, unscrewed the cap and took a generous swig to show willing.

The mescal tasted vile. It burned his throat and then his belly. He gagged. For a second it was touch and go whether his stomach would press the reject button. Too many memories of detox. It was difficult to believe he'd once drunk this stuff by the bucketful.

"And again," demanded Kohl.

Spencer took another draught. It went down easier than the first, like broken glass after razor-wire. He screwed his eyes tight shut as he drank. It wasn't pleasant.

"Good," said Kohl. "Now keep drinking until the bottle's empty. You have twenty minutes. I don't want you being sick."

Kohl picked up a briefcase from behind his chair, opened it on his lap and began leafing through papers. Diamond turned and walked back to his seat. On Kohl's other side, Alex toyed with a small pistol. He appeared to be chewing something. No, that wasn't right. Only one cheek was moving. He had a twitch. It wasn't obvious under the ghoulish lighting but he had a nervous twitch, just in front of his right ear.

Spencer took another drink. His stomach felt more neutral about this one. Kohl carried on fiddling with the papers. He selected one, took out a gold pen and started writing, as if it were the most natural thing to be doing in the circumstances, as if he were a lawyer in chambers or a businessman on a plane. Spencer watched him.

That same thought flashed through his mind that he'd had when he heard the record. There's a little bit of you in me. A coldness. And again it was a thought so awful it was banished in a moment, crushed, burned, buried completely in the hope that it would never reappear.

Kohl's hair was brushed back, showing two small inlets of baldness on either side of his forehead. He was close to fifty, Spencer guessed, but there was no trace of grey. His skin fitted tight over the ridge-poles of his face; the skin of a man who avoids the sun and never fails to work-out every day. Spencer kept expecting him to put the briefcase down, but he didn't. He just carried on writing as if Spencer wasn't there.

In a way, this was more intimidating than a gun at the chest. It was as if Spencer had already ceased to exist, as if they'd already dispensed with him and he was just another corpse, one that happened to be drinking. He was beginning to understand where this scenario might lead, why Diamond hadn't shot him, but it was too unpleasant to put into words. It was worse than simple death.

Dutifully he carried on drinking. It was getting easier and it helped with the nerves. Even just the familiar arm action was reassuring. Diamond and Alex watched him. Diamond was just a regular bruiser but Alex looked truly mean. He'd perfected an air of menace that made up for his slightly smaller size. His twitch ticked off the seconds of Spencer's time.

Another train rattled by. Blue sparks flashed in the window. Mechanical thunder and lightning. The floor and Spencer's seat trembled beneath him.

He'd already looked around the room for a door and hadn't found one. Now he noticed Diamond's chair was standing on a large trapdoor. He could see its outline in the floorboards. This was far from

perfect. He couldn't imagine Diamond moving his chair to one side for a polite 'excuse me', and yet he knew he had to get out of the room before the bottle of mescal was empty.

At least the liquor was beginning to taste OK. The alcohol rush was coming through and even if life wasn't currently a bowl of cherries he was definitely about to make it a lot more interesting. "I didn't realise kidnappers had paperwork. Must be a real pain. There you are wanting to go out and snatch another body and instead you have to stay in the office and fill out a B2473."

"Shut up and drink," said Kohl.

"No. I feel as an abducted citizen it's my right to be interrogated. I demand an interrogation."

Kohl sighed. He put his pen and papers away and set the briefcase down. It was close to an act of kindness. "We already know all we need to know about you, Mr de Gresseur. Curious name. A French version of Gunk, I guess."

Spencer let the insult pass. Gunk was the proprietary name of an engine de-greaser. It had been a have-a-go nickname at high-school. Kohl could have been more original.

"But you don't know how much I know." Was this a good line to follow? He wasn't sure. What the hell. He was a third of the way through the bottle now. Twenty minutes wasn't a long time and he didn't want to miss deadline and find out what the penalty-clauses were. But then completion on time wasn't something to look forward to either.

"I fear that we do, and that you know very little. You went to Pierre's yesterday but couldn't find him. You reserved the picture of Raymond Kite's eyes with Michael Sorden. You gave him your address and said you would see him at your hotel at nine this evening. You wanted him there so you could break into his studio and find Raymond Kite's file." Kohl tapped the briefcase by his side. "Fortunately, we were slightly ahead of you."

Where, wondered Spencer, had all that information come from? How did they know he'd been to see Pierre? From Michael Sorden, of course. Michael had been there when he'd squeezed out the invitation. And they knew he hadn't found Pierre because they'd found him first. But they didn't know about the recording.

"Which leaves us with just one question, Spencer - why haven't you attempted to get in touch with the fourth player on Balloons?"

Spencer stared at Kohl blankly. By the time he'd thought of an answer it was too late. Kohl was smiling. He'd got the answer to the question he'd really been posing - did Spencer know about the fourth player? Obviously not. Yet how much did Kohl know? It wasn't clear whether he'd asked the question to show how little Spencer knew or as a bluff to get more information.

Another train rumbled by, interrupting the reluctant interrogation. Spencer listened to it carefully - as carefully as he could after so much mescal. It was running behind the wall with the window, directly behind Kohl and his goons.

"You see," added Kohl, contemplatively, "that's what happens when you employ amateurs. Did you ever wonder, Spencer, why George brought you into this, when he could afford to buy any little private practice of ex-FBI agents? Doesn't that strike you as peculiar?"

"It had crossed my mind."

"Mine too. And the only answer I can come up with is that you're so - how shall I say this? - so eminently disposable."

That's what Spencer had been thinking too, but hearing it from Kohl was still very unpleasant. Goosebumps came out on his forearms.

"Who are you?" he asked. An impudent question could hardly make things worse. "You sound like agency, but you don't act it. I can't see agency people killing Foxglove employees and fighting battles with George Stiles. That doesn't figure."

"We are connected with the agency. It's true. But we are, you might say, off-duty. Our work isn't officially sanctioned. But then neither is a lot of agency work."

The candidness of the answer added to Spencer's gloom. The only reason for Kohl to reveal anything was because he knew Spencer wouldn't be passing the information on.

Spencer reached for the bottle by his side, knocking it over but catching it before it spilled. Kohl wouldn't like spillage. Not a good play.

There was one thing that he knew he had on his side, and that was their ignorance of drunkenness. None of them would know how drunks behaved, not properly. They were too fit and healthy to know. They didn't move in the right social circles. And they wanted him drunk. That gave him a great deal of freedom. Unfortunately it might be the only advantage he had, so he would have to make good use of it. He took a long drink. Rushing-time.

"White heeeeat," he sang, suddenly, in monotone. "White liiiight. Do you know who that is?"

No response. And a little closer than he'd intended to thoughts of escape.

He answered his own question. "Lou Reed." No matter. He sang again. "And a mainer, from ma vein, leads to a cenner in ma head..." Not a good idea to finish off that song. How did it go? - And then I'm better off dead.

"There are more," he was singing again, "questions than answers. Who's that?"

"Desmond Dekker." Incredibly, that was Alex. These were the only words that Spencer would ever hear him say.

"A murmur from the audience, there." .

"Who's the killer here?" he asked. Who delivers that wonderful shot to the ear?"

Kohl answered. He seemed bored, like he was answering to relieve his boredom. "Diamond is the man who's good at missing vital organs. Alex is the man to hit them. Wasp and bee. Different stings."

A disturbingly graphic answer. Spencer took another draft and tried not to let it unsettle him. The mescal helped. Two thirds of the bottle had gone. It was beginning to taste rather pleasant.

"So, tell me, what's it like to kill people for a living? How's the job satisfaction?"

This was directed at Alex, but Kohl answered again, addressing the moral text beneath the question. "Many people have jobs that involve the deaths of others, Spencer. An auto-worker and car accidents. A banker who won't give a credit to stop a famine. A store-keeper selling cigarettes. The only difference between them and us is that we're less random. More specific. You understand?"

Kohl had found a perverse logic to justify his actions. Spencer could remember him managing a similar piece of mental gymnastics on the disc recording. A murderer with credo. The worst kind.

"I'm going to be found with the bodies, aren't I?" said Spencer very quietly. He hadn't wanted to say it, he didn't want them to know he'd worked it out, but alcohol has a habit of becoming a truth-drug sometimes. "Drunk, dead, your man Alex's gun in my pocket, my address in Michael's. Spencer de Gresseur, the big fuck-up disposable drunk. His final blunder."

"Drink seems to heighten your powers of perception, Spencer. Timing is everything. No bodies, no serious investigation. Now we can provide three bodies and a story to go with them. Very satisfactory."

In the harsh white light, Kohl, Diamond and Alex looked like statues, unmoving totems lit by a moon.

It'll look as if I killed Pierre, thought Spencer; a thought that saddened him a great deal. Bry at the morgue identifying the bodies, including his, wondering how he'd come so low to murder an old friend, shaking her head in disbelief. Bry crying.

My God, Bry, how did I ever get my life in such a mess? Where did it all begin?

At the fence probably, she'd say, with the incident at the fence. The pack of cards all tumbled down from there.

It wasn't a moment to re-live right now, or it wouldn't have been for a person less full of Mescal, self-pity and its close relation, masochism.

*

Two youths broke into the Foxglove building one night. Boy, they were fast. By the time he caught up with them they were already on their way out. They were running down the middle of the double fence around the compound. They had to get back to the corner where they'd climbed the outer wire and got in. Spencer was running alongside them, but inside the compound. He couldn't get to them because there was still a fence in the way.

"Stop!" he yelled, and drew his gun.

But they wouldn't stop. And as they ran they talked to him, so close they didn't have to shout.

It had all happened two years ago but he could see it in front of his eyes right now, harsh lights and darkness beyond them. Not so dissimilar from the attic in a negative way. All that contrast. He could hear the running footsteps, muffled on the grass, the panting voices.

"Hey, man, we ain't taken nothing."

"Don't shoot, man, we ain't carrying. We're just kids."

And they were just kids. About fifteen, and he could see they didn't have guns. No bags. No bulges in their pockets. If they'd taken anything it had to be so small it was worthless. But he still threatened them with the gun and told them to stop. At the corner of the compound he had the gun on them, both hands. He still couldn't reach them because of the inner fence, but with the gun he couldn't miss. He was a decent shot too, could have hit them in the shoulder or the thigh, didn't have to kill them. They were still talking but they wouldn't stay still. They started climbing.

He had to shoot them, but he couldn't.

He let them go. He couldn't bring himself to shoot unarmed kids who didn't seem to have stolen anything. The police came and looked for them but they'd got away. Never found.

It wouldn't have been a big deal on its own, but it turned out that they had stolen something. A single disk. And on that disk was a program - the Mark II version of the Magic Ear. Spencer hadn't even known a Mark II existed. George had been developing it secretly and at the same time telling everybody it didn't exist. He was playing a commercial game. The aim was to get everybody to carry on buying Mark I and then suddenly release a better version, out of the blue, so they'd have to buy that too. They'd all have to upgrade. Foxglove would get two sales where it should only have had one.

A review of the Mark II appeared in a computer magazine a week later. George was furious but there was nothing he could do. The magazine had made sure its ass was well-covered before it ran the piece, and George didn't want to get into some long battle with the media. Not worthwhile.

The Mark II had to be released early. The game was over. Foxglove lost almost a billion dollars through not getting those double sales. It was a big deal.

The worst thing was, Foxglove operated a profit-share scheme, so almost everybody Spencer worked with lost twelve or fifteen thousand dollars because he didn't shoot those kids. That was the difficult part. That's what really pissed him off. He was a social lemon. Even in bars in the city people would point to him and say - That's the fella who lost everybody at Foxglove a nice bonus. Good shot too. Just didn't have the guts to do it.

Nobody cared about the details. They just saw that he'd lost a lot of money. They didn't care about the kids. They didn't care that those bonuses would have come from ripping off Foxglove customers. They just saw the missing cheques.

Spencer couldn't see that he'd done anything wrong. But George said he had to go, he'd lost a lot of money, everybody in the company expected him to be fired and George had to go along with it. They had a big argument. Spencer lost.

And that wasn't the end of it. A few weeks later he lost Bry over the same affair. She didn't care about the money, but she was in charge of publicity for the rushed launch of Mark II and she had to work every hour she was awake. Her sister was ill and she couldn't take care of her. She really hated that. Blamed the man who wouldn't fire the gun, though she'd never fired one herself. She was wired to hell. He started drinking. Bang! They blew themselves up.

One day you're happy, the next the whole pack of cards falls down.

It still felt like an injustice, that he'd done the right thing but been punished for it. He'd never managed to reconcile it in his mind. No guilt, but seen as guilty.

The falling cards turned into two years drinking on the streets. Brought to an end by George offering the chalice of a sober return, a chalice that had now turned out to be poisoned.

Spencer slouched in his attic chair for the best part of a minute, feeling drunk and sorry for himself. Unable to do anything about anything. But that was surely no way to act. He sat upright, suddenly animated. "I see three evil Buddhas under the white light of Nirvana. Do you think I'm drunk?" he asked, sniggering.

Another train passed by, but in the wrong direction. Left to right. Spencer wanted one that went right to left. They sounded closer. There should be one soon.

"Yes," answered Kohl. "But keep on drinking. You might become amusing again."

Spencer gave him a weak smile and took another swig. There was an inch left in the bottom of the bottle. He stood up, causing Diamond and Alex to shift in their chairs. Diamond still had the gun in his hand but didn't wave it. Kohl didn't tell him to sit down again.

"I'm sober," he declared. "Just watch."

Diamond tried to hide a wry smile. Spencer turned his back to him and walked carefully along a single crack between the attic floorboards, one foot precisely in front of the other. At least that was the theory. It suited him that he couldn't do it too well. He was looking to entertain, not impress. "Back in the old days, you might remember, before breath-tests came along, when highway patrol thought you were drunk, they made you walk down the white line in the middle of the road." After a few yards the slope of the ceiling met his head, making a clear noise and destroying any slight credibility he might have had. He turned round, losing his balance and line, and laughed, a drunk's secret snigger. "Shit. I'm gonna do that again." Alex raised his eyes in disbelief.

Too easy. A drunk acting like a drunk. But there was a point to all this nonsense if they'd allow him to reach it. Spencer went back to his chair, picked it up and walked to the gap between Kohl and Diamond. There he put it down, a few safe feet in front of them. Diamond had the little .22 trained on him, but didn't look worried, more amused. Kohl looked at his watch and said, "Three minutes, Spencer," like he was casting for a show, which would have been fine if the role hadn't been for a dead person.

Spencer turned round and walked back to the bottle on the floor. He drank the last of the mescal, put the bottle down and carried on to where he'd bumped his head. He turned to the audience. "I'll do it faster this time." He had to shout above the rattle of another approaching train. Maybe he was going to finish up with a bullet from Diamond in his gut as well as the mescal, but it was worth a try.

He followed the crack between the floorboards back towards the chair between Diamond and Alex, one random foot barely in front of the other, about as badly as he could manage without falling over; a pathetic, wobbling figure, arms flapping madly, a speeding up clown. He reached the chair at a stumbling trot, and catching them all by surprise placed his right foot on the seat and launched himself, with all his might, past Diamond's puzzled face through that dirty pane of glass high on the warehouse wall that shattered into jigsaw chandeliers as he passed through it, arms protecting head, and on into that promise of eternal life, that blue-white light, shards of glass tinkling down the tiles of the warehouse roof as he rolled and tumbled a dozen times down its cool slope and off the edge into the beautiful sweet-smelling free-fall air.

There he hung for a while, weightless, unreal, everlasting, plugged into the beauty of the Universe and its eternity, while the planet shifted position and rose to meet him.

The domed roof of the moving train made contact first, collecting his body, limp and relaxed as only a drunk's can be, with a thud that would have dismayed a meteorite.

The impact took every ounce of breath out of him. He slid along the train roof as it dragged him up to speed, losing a piece of his ear and a slice of thumb in the process. Finally he came to rest in a fond embrace with the curve of steel. His lungs worked again.

"Oh fuck," he exhaled .

8 *Hero on a bronco*

One good thing about the mescal was that he felt no pain. Being semi-conscious helped too. Spencer was flying solo in a twilight world, riding a big steel bronco through the oils of a nightmare painting by Hieronymus Bosch. Monstrous buildings and weird lights appeared in the darkness. He had no brain to think about them with, only eyes to watch them flit by. His body lay awkwardly on its stomach, a paralysed slug of a thing glued to the train roof, arms and legs spread around it like discarded laundry.

After a few minutes the monochrome buildings and open lots on either side of the track gave way to embankments, and for Spencer a sensation of *deja vu*, a subconscious memory of a dream. And what came after the embankments in the dream? He lifted his eyes and looked straight ahead, where he could see the tunnel entrance swallowing the bronco like some gross concrete fellatio artiste performing on whole animals. Demonstrating extremes: triple speed, a tricky fit. No way was there room for Spencer's body in that tiny gap between the train and the tunnel roof. In fact - wasn't the tunnel smaller than the train?

He had the good sense to get his head down, to press it side-on to the metal, squashing his bloodied ear. Then *whoosh!* - and he was inside, still whole, unscathed. His top ear popped and flapped in the boundary-layer breeze like a lop-sided butterfly. And this new world, the narrow World of the Gap, though claustrophobic and loud, was oddly comforting. Secure, in its own peculiar way. Not a place to worry about pursuers.

After a couple of centuries the train slowed and the tunnel opened out into something wider and well-lit. The metal beast stopped and hissed, opening the doors in its side. There were footfalls and shuffles and voices, careless voices, echoing off the station walls like a colony of alto bats all atwittering in their cavern. The beast hissed once more and groaned and started on its way. The fellatio artiste welcomed it to her tight lips again. A pimple on the side of her mouth turned from

green to red. The few internal lights still glimmering in Spencer's mind faded to brown, flickered and went out, overcome by the cradle-rock ride and the wheels' shrill lullabies.

*

He awoke feeling unwell. There was an adolescent jack-hammer in his head that wanted to go out cruising with its friends but had been grounded by its parents, so now it was trashing its bedroom. His bladder had broken the dam-burst glass and pushed the red button; the sirens were wailing and even now the body's emergency services were gathering around his urethra wondering if there was anything they could do or whether they should get the hell out before they all drowned.

The mescal was writing its memoirs and now there was just pain. His shins had been disked for welding and a short-sighted picador's spears were deep in his sides. His torn ear was numb - ears can be good that way - but his damaged thumb hurt doubly in compensation. And yet he was deliriously happy.

He was alive. By now his corpse should have joined Michael's and Pierre's, and it hadn't. He was alive and he should be dead. Now there was something to smile about. His fingers moved. So did his toes. Every limb ached like he'd swum to Alaska and back but none seemed to be broken. Considering what his body had been through it had come out of it very well.

There was something strange in his mouth. He hooked it out with a finger. It was a button, stripped from his shirt when he'd been dragged along the roof of the train. What an extraordinary place for it to finish up. He raised his head to look around, grinning wildly.

The train had stopped moving. He was in a depot, outdoors. Floodlights overwhelmed the stars but he could make out the moon. He could tell from its phase and position that dawn was still two hours away. All those drunken nights sleeping rough had at least taught him something. He didn't bother with the effort of checking his watch.

To each side, long rows of trains were slumbering. The floodlights shone off their curved metal roofs as off waves in a sea of cooking foil. In the distance he could see the splayed cable of railway lines joining at the entrance to the depot, a score of miniature junctions. And he could hear voices too. Voices and the sound of a scuffle.

"Keep still, dog-breath."

"Who are you calling dog-breath, dick-brain?"

"Boys, boys. More action, less talk."

The three voices weren't far away. The third was definitely gay, very camp, and Spencer was fairly sure the other two were gay too, though distinctly butch. He shifted position to see what was going on. It hurt to move.

Between his train and the next, two men were locked in battle on the dirt floor. They were both powerfully built. One had the gay trademark yard-broom moustache, the other was dotted with tattoos, including two tattooed hands on his buttocks, fingers facing out, like the imprint of somebody doing press-ups there. It was easy to see all the tattoos because he wasn't wearing any clothes. Neither was his opponent. They were wrestling on the dirt in the nude. It gave them a curious eighteenth century quality, like bare-knuckle boxers in a gallery painting, despite the surroundings of the gleaming metal trains.

Spencer had to lean a long way to see the third figure. Leaning hurt so much he could only dart out for a brief glimpse, like a soldier peeking out from cover at a sniper.

He had a much slighter build, this one. He was also in the nude, sitting on the ground and watching the other two intently, and as far as Spencer could tell he was holding his penis in his hand and masturbating.

Spencer shifted back to his old position. Whatever they were up to it probably wasn't a good idea to think about in detail, or get involved, or reveal his presence. But there was one slight problem - he desperately needed a pee.

Something he'd noticed was that all three of them had relatively dark skin, and there was certainly enough of it on view. Evenly dark, like a Mexican or a Mediterranean rather than a sun-tanned Northerner. That was an important thing to notice but he didn't know why. It went with the twittering he'd heard in the station and the fact that the depot included junctions of tracks - all three items significant in some obscure way.

"Gotcha, sucker. Now get out of that."

"You dick-bitch, Frankie."

"He's got you, Garth!" - the effeminate voice now very excited - "Squeal, Garth. He's got you."

Spencer was so desperate that he would have to pee right now, no matter what. He wanted to lie on his side, on his right side, but it was too painful. So instead he hunched awkwardly on his chest with his left leg out and hip raised, undid his fly and sighed with pain and satisfaction as an arc of twinkling liquid left under pressure, bounced prematurely on the steel roof and made its way to the ground.

"What the fuck?" A butch voice.

Spencer was past caring, but he'd hoped that by peeing on the opposite side of the car to the three of them he'd gain some time. They'd have to get to that side to see what was going on. But they weren't so easily fooled. He heard noises dead ahead and looked up to find himself staring at the owner of the bushy moustache. Just his face was showing, poking up between Spencer's car and the next. He didn't look happy.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

Pretty obvious, thought Spencer. "Trainspotting."

"Why you on top of the train?"

"All the seats were full."

"You a goddamn voyeur?" He pronounced the word very southern; voy-ee-ur.

"It's no business of mine what a man gets up to in the privacy of his own marshalling yard."

"Get the fuck down from there, pervert."

That's a bit rich, thought Spencer. He wondered if it would have been wiser for him to take a less flippant line. He wasn't in good shape to take on three peeved gentlemen, or even just this one gymnasium biker. But after his recent ordeal he was feeling, well, a little bit immortal.

He finished his pee, waiting patiently for it to come to an end like an over-long advert, fastened his fly and tried to work out how he was going to reach the ground. He tried crawling towards the angry face, but his body wasn't up to it. Nor would it be able to manage the climb down; he'd probably end up impaled on the couplings. No, far better to select a plain patch of earth to the side and trust to his cat-like instincts for the fall, as recently demonstrated at the warehouse.

Still staying on his stomach, he moved his feet to the edge of the car and tried to ease himself slowly over, hoping to grip the lip with his fingers and partially break the descent. It was a long way down, a good twelve feet. But there was no lip to grip on to. So instead he slid on his belly, at first in slow motion and then very rapidly, down the curve of the roof and into the air, flying without grace to land like a half-empty sack of gravel at the feet of the two men on the ground.

This time there was no alcohol, or not enough, to soften the fall. Every aching bone in his body jarred. It was worse than the blind drop from the warehouse. He hadn't been expecting to get up and run away, but he had been intending to remain conscious, and even that little victory would be denied. He gazed up with glazed eyes at the two faces before he began to fade away. They didn't look impressed. He stayed awake just long enough to hear the effeminate voice announce: "Superman orbits Krypton."

*

Spencer was getting pissed-off with waking up so often. Once every twenty-four hours was fine. Actually quite desirable. But five times? He could see his watch by the side of the bed. Midday. He'd been exaggerating. Five times in thirty hours. But he was still pissed-off.

He didn't recognise the room. It smelled faintly of Jasmine. Sunlight was filtering in through deep folds of cream curtains. Everything was cream edged in brown: the pillowcase, the bedspread, the carpet, even the door. A nice enough idea overdone. But he did recognise the man sitting on the side of his bed holding a tray. It was the effeminate gay from the train depot, the masturbator. On the tray were soup, bread and coffee. Oh coffee, how sweet that smell.

"And how are we today?" asked the camp voice.

"I'm fine," said Spencer. His body had been tumble-dried with a couple of cannonballs and the jack-hammer had snuck in a few friends for a pogo party, but otherwise he was alive.

"I'm Nathan."

Spencer sat upright and shook Nathan's delicate hand. He'd been right about the dark skin. "What happened?"

"Railroad security came along." Nathan shrugged. "We drove home."

Spencer had intended the question in a broader sense. Like, what happened after we got home? But he didn't press the issue. He'd already checked his nerve-endings for signs of unusual sexual activity and come up with a zero report. Nathan himself was coming across as a carer rather than anything disagreeable.

"Frankie carried you," added Nathan.

"The man with the moustache or the one with the tattoos?"

"Moustache."

Spencer felt a little guilty about his glib performance on the roof of the train. He took the coffee and tried not to scald his lips. "What were they fighting about?"

"About me," answered Nathan, proudly.

Spencer sipped his coffee silently, not sure if he wanted to continue this conversation.

"Fighting for my favours."

No, he didn't want to continue it.

"It's just a game," added Nathan, chuckling. "We all get off on it, so we play it out. Nobody's harmed."

"Where am I?"

"Paradise," Nathan smiled, showing his teeth. "That's our name for home." He could see Spencer wasn't impressed. "Fidel district."

The gay quarter. That figured. "And where are the other two?"

"Garth is at work. He's a clerk at the Court of Justice. Frankie's flown to New York. He's a tax adjudicator. I'm hausfrau." He looked very pleased with his vocation.

Spencer contemplated what a curious and different life some people lead.

"Did you fall through a window?" asked Nathan.

"I jumped through one to get away from a man with a gun." Three men, actually, but who's counting?

"Oh, how exciting! We thought it might be something like that. Last night we took enough glass from your body to make a lampshade."

Nathan indicated the small bedside table. Behind Spencer's watch were a dozen shards of glass, looking like a small collection of pebbles brought back by a child from the sea.

So that was why his sides felt so sore. Spencer looked down at his torso. It was patterned with short railway tracks leading nowhere. "Who did the stitching?"

"Frankie. He's studying needlework." Nathan registered Spencer's look of alarm. "Don't worry, I was a hospital porter once. Everything was done properly. All sterilised and cleaned."

"It's very good." It really was neat. They hadn't needed to apply any dressings; there was no leakage, no blood. He noticed there were more tracks on his arms. He could feel a couple on his legs too. He took another sip of coffee. It was doing a good job - livening him up, placating his stomach. "I'm very grateful for what you've done, really I am, so please don't take this the wrong way. I'm just curious why. Most people would either leave a drunk where he was or give him a kicking."

Nathan looked thoughtful. "Not many bums carry four hundred dollars in cash and a Foxglove Amex card, or wear new slacks from Macy's. We figured whoever you were you were one interesting dude. Kind of respectable, but sitting on top of a railway train with a body full of liquor and glass. Not your average asshole."

The four hundred dollars and Amex card were on the bedside table too. Spencer had forgotten they were his.

"In fact," added Nathan, "we decided you were a regular hero."

9 *Mrs Stiles' friend*

Despite Nathan's kindness, Spencer didn't want to hang around Paradise too long. He had far too many things to do. His clothes were wrecked, so he gave Nathan money to go out and buy him new ones - with misgivings. An hour later he was standing on a corner in Fidel, waiting for Bry to collect him.

When he'd called from Nathan's, she hadn't been keen. "Spen, I'm at work. You remember work. You know, kind of soul-destroying, takes up half your life. I can't just swan off for two hours to pick you up."

Though from Bry that wasn't a strong negative. If she'd been truly pissed-off about his clumsy pass at the hotel and wanted nothing more to do with him, she'd have found far more forceful ways to express herself. As far as Spencer could sense, she was simply being as caustic and disinterested as she usually was when she switched from work-mode to personal affairs, as if she felt a need to demonstrate that the charm of business had been fully disengaged.

"Come on, Bry. If it wasn't important, I wouldn't have called you, would I?"

"I suppose not, no."

He needed help from somebody he could trust. That's why he'd called. It was a bonus that seeing her now, while he was vulnerable, might help their reconciliation. A time of need was always a good opportunity to cancel a dispute.

"I'll tell you how important it is. Don't tell anybody where you're going. Or better still, do, but lie. And watch out for people following you." A little melodramatic, perhaps, but not far from the truth.

There was a silence at the other end. "You're serious, aren't you?"

"I am."

He was hoping she wouldn't be late. Standing on a corner in Fidel wearing a pair of jeans that were too tight and a plain white teeshirt wasn't his idea of fun. Nathan may have been kind, but he was also mischievous. Spencer was surprised at the number of admiring glances he was getting, especially with his hungover face and torn ear and grazed neck. A horrible thought crossed his mind that maybe these kind of wounds had some special sexual significance, like dress-codes that show the

wearer's inclinations. His mind was still running through the outrageous possibilities when Bry's car, a white Mercedes coupe, drew alongside. He checked the traffic behind it for pointed heads and weasely faces and got in.

"Jesus Christ, Spencer, you look like shit!"

Not so long ago he'd been feeling pleased with his miraculous escape. Now he was back to earth with a bump, again.

"The guys in Fidel don't think so."

"And you stink of liquor. I can't fucking believe it. You didn't even last a week."

"I didn't choose to drink. I was forced to."

"Don't tell me - and then you were pushed through a window." Bry shook her head. Her brow was fierce and her lips pursed so tightly that the corrugations of age were appearing prematurely above and below them. "God, you're a mess."

"I jumped through one," protested Spencer. "I jumped from a fourth floor window to escape three men with guns who were getting me drunk before they killed me. I landed on the roof of a train, where I spent half the night. The other half I spent with three gays." He was following one of Bry's own business rules: in extreme circumstances, try telling the truth.

She looked at him quizzically. Then looked at him again, this time in surprise. "Sorry," she said quietly. "Are you all right?"

"I am, but I nearly wasn't."

"Is this all part of the Kite business?"

"It is."

Bry's driving was awful. She sawed at the wheel as if they were racing on loose dirt. "They really tried to kill you?"

"I'm sure they would have done if I hadn't got away."

"Have you contacted the police?"

"That wouldn't do any good."

Bry raised her hand to flick a stray strand of hair into place behind her right ear. It was up today. Severely up. When they'd lived together she'd worn it this way to show a lack of interest in sex, conversation, or the entire outside world, depending on circumstances. The movement made Spencer notice her earrings. Silver lions, tiny ones, the metal dulled and tarnished in a way that added perspective. He'd bought them for her, what, five years ago? It was curious that she should be wearing them today.

Bry had already turned right once. Now they were heading up Larkin and she had her right-turn indicator on again. This would take them downtown, the same direction as the Ana Hotel.

"I can't go back to the hotel," said Spencer.

"Why not?"

"They'll be looking for me there."

"So we'll get you another one."

"I'm not sure."

Spencer's mind was working overtime. On the train he'd felt safe, and at Nathan's, even on the street in Fidel where nobody would dream of looking for him. But now they were leaving the district, he didn't feel safe at all. Once again he'd moved from an unreal world of drunkenness and peculiarity back into the real universe and the transition made him feel less secure rather than more. Kohl would be furious at having lost him, and Kohl was a powerful man - on official agency business or otherwise. The hotel would be under surveillance. They'd be monitoring his credit card use. That was one of the reasons he'd wanted Bry to meet him. She could book him into another hotel on one of her cards. But maybe it wasn't that simple.

The big complication was the police. Bry's mention of them had set him thinking. Even without his body, Kohl and the gang might well have taken their story to the police, or even the Feds. They could produce the bodies of Michael and Pierre and a handwritten address, add a slightly imaginative story and turn Spencer into a fugitive. The police could be checking hotels for him right now. A big complication indeed.

What he wanted to do most of all at this moment was track down the Professor and check he was OK. But that too was hardly straightforward. The Professor had regular panhandling patches for rush-hours, and evening haunts, but in the middle of the day he could be anywhere.

Bry turned right anyway.

"What the hell are you mixed up in?" she asked. She'd obviously been thinking things over too. The indignation had returned to her voice. "And George," she added, spreading her disapproval more fairly.

"Looking for Raymond Kite."

"It seems to have got out of control."

"I agree."

She glanced at him. "But you're going to carry on?"

"Yes."

"Well I think it's stupid." Her head nodded forward to emphasise the word.

Spencer fiddled with the bandage on his thumb. "If I walked out now, if George let me, the situation would still be stupid. In fact it would be even more out of control."

No. That was no good. Her reaction, her anger, was emotional, and he was trying to deal with it using logic. An approach guaranteed to fail.

"I'm not very happy about it myself," he added. "But opting out would just put other people in danger, especially Raymond."

Bry seemed more satisfied with this answer, though her driving was still far from normal. The wheels squealed as she stopped for a red light. That's great, thought Spencer, let's draw attention to ourselves.

"Who's they?" asked Bry in a calmer tone.

"You mean, the people looking for me?"

"Mmmm."

He'd already thought this one through, though he knew she wasn't going to like the answer. "I know this is corny, but it's better if I don't tell you. Dangerous knowledge. Sorry."

"You sound like George."

That was cutting, though he wasn't sure which man came out of it worst. The car behind honked. The light had been green for some time.

"Drive properly, will you?" said Spencer, as neutrally as he could manage. "There's a patrol car over there."

"Where?"

"Bry!"

"What?"

"You almost side-swiped the car next to us. Please will you concentrate? You're a very good driver. Really. I know. But right now you're all over the place."

"It's hard to concentrate when you're sitting there covered in wounds and telling me about people trying to murder you."

"Just drive. I'll shut up."

They drove in silence, but not for long.

"I found out something more about Balloons," began Bry.

Spencer waited. She teased him, holding off for his response.

"Well? Go on."

"They had a lot of curious people visiting Balloons in the past: a priest, a Kenyan tribesman, an Afghani, a couple of derelicts, a Texan oil magnate. I can't remember the rest. Amused the hell out of us all. Who would turn up next? They came to have their eyes photographed by Michael Sorden. I know that's true. I've seen some of the pictures. But here's the strange part - none of their names are in the visitors book."

Spencer idly toyed with the sticking plaster that covered the wound to his ear. "Meaning?"

"Well don't you find it odd that somebody is trying to hide their identities, make sure they can't be traced? If they just came to have their pictures taken, then why the secrecy?"

"Yeah. I see your point."

"And I still think it's odd that Pierre and Raymond should be working on a project devoted to eyes."

"Me too."

Bry peered in the mirror, trying not to look obvious about it. "He's following us."

"Who is?"

"The patrol car."

"I can't believe this is happening."

"What's wrong? It's just a police car. They won't bother us. They probably just think I'm drunk." She sniggered in nervous relief. "They'll have me walking down the lines in the road to see if I'm sober."

This stopped Spencer dead for a moment. Then he recovered. Of course she didn't know anything about his play-acting at the warehouse. She'd simply remembered him telling that tale when they were a couple.

"I wish I were," he said, with a sigh.

"Wish you were what?"

"Drunk."

Bry fixed him with her big hazel eyes, but Spencer had already retired into his conspiratorial internal world. Would Kohl really have contacted the police? The more he thought about it the more likely it seemed. Spencer's only defence would be the vinyl record from Pierre's, and Kohl didn't know that existed. Nor did Bry know why he had to avoid the police. He'd have to say more.

"Unfortunately" - and if he'd thought it through he would have said it far less abruptly - "the police might be looking for me. Hey! Watch the road."

"Spencer!"

"I'm not doing anything illegal, honestly. I'm just up against very powerful people, that's all."

"Christ Almighty," growled Bry. "I'm so glad you called. Fugitive Cabs Incorporated. Thank you for choosing to do business with us. Have a nice day."

She said nothing more for a while. She was thinking. She pulled at her hair, then realised she'd taken her hand off the wheel and put it back before Spencer could say anything.

"You can't go to a hotel," she announced. "It would be too dangerous. George and I have a town pad. It's not huge, but it's quiet and hardly anybody knows about it. In Rushmore Square. You can stay there tonight, until we work something out."

"Is George back from Germany?"

"Yes. But he has a dinner this evening in Saragown - some Japanese consular official - so he won't be around. Tomorrow he's flying off on business again for a day. It's a busy week for him. That gives you two clear nights. It's a start." She started indicating left to go up forty-third, which would take them to Stonewright and from there towards Rushmore.

"Thanks." Somewhere safe to stay would be very useful. He found it curious that she hadn't said what she was doing that evening.

They made the left turn.

"Is he still following us?" asked Spencer.

"Right on our tail."

"Is there anything we can do to get rid of him?"

Bry looked at him coldly. "You're not carrying a gun are you?" Then looked more closely at his tight-fitting clothes. "No. Sorry. Obviously not. You've just got to roll with it, Spen. We can't run from him. If you're picked up, I'll have Tony Halfinger down the precinct within half an hour. But stop worrying. It's not going to happen."

That would certainly give the Foxglove attorney a break from corporate affairs, thought Spencer. A double murder charge and a claimed frame-up by the agency. And just one piece of evidence for the defence, your honour. Thinking of which...

"Did you give the record to George?"

"Of course."

"But you didn't say I gave it to you. How did you say you got hold of it?"

"A courier to home. I don't know if George believed me. He didn't seem to care."

So that little game had passed off without incident. Clearly she hadn't listened to it herself, otherwise their conversation would have been following a very different and more anguished track.

Overall, she wasn't giving him much of a hard time. She didn't seem too upset about their last messed-up meeting. She was aloof, but he could sense cracks forming in the facade.

They turned left on to Stonewright. They were on the edge of Missionary district now. No more offices. The shops on either side were unattractive, purely functional, their windows merely glass backs to shelves that faced inward, showing the backs of packets and wrappers rather than any kind of thoughtful display. It gave Spencer the impression that he was looking into the rears of places and their fronts were somewhere inside.

"Are we still being followed?" It was frustrating not being able to see.

"Yes. He'll be checking my registration. When he finds out who I am, he'll probably go away."

"How many in the car?"

"Two." Bry glared at him. A glare that said - and you can forget any hair-brained schemes.

"Just in case. If I do get picked up, I'll need that record I gave you to put me in the clear. I mean, *really* need it. Get it copied. And forget the courier business, just tell the truth. I'm sorry if that gives you any problems with George, but I'll be deep in the shit. You with me?"

Bry nodded. There was something on her mind. He could tell.

"And don't believe the charges," he added. "They're not true. Come on, what is it?"

"Is George in any danger?" She said it softly and without looking at him.

That's from the heart, thought Spencer. You're such a lovely, caring person and he really doesn't deserve you. Can't change history.

"No. He's too powerful. The people I'm up against won't touch him. Not personally. He's got too many friends in Washington."

He watched Bry think this one through, watched her wonder what kind of people George's Washington contacts could protect him from. He'd given away more than he intended there, but maybe it was good for her to have some idea.

"He's not started wearing jackets, has he?"

Bry looked puzzled. "You know he hates jackets."

Good. That confirmed that George didn't think he was in any danger too.

When they were both twenty-three and Foxglove was rated the fastest growing company in America, some nutcase with a grudge against capitalism had decided he should target George Stiles. He made threatening calls, sent letters, even one half-assed bomb, concealed in a hollowed-out copy of Das Kapital. The police had suggested George should start carrying a gun, and he'd hated it.

Spencer had taught him how to shoot. He learned well but would never reach the same standard. On their fifth day at the range he'd complained, "This guy is really starting to piss me off, Spencer. I don't mind the gun, that's not the problem, or learning how to use it, but I've got nowhere to put the stupid thing, so I have to wear a goddamn jacket all the time. It's driving me nuts."

Bry waited for the explanation, but Spencer didn't give it. "The same goes for you," he added, going one step back in the conversation. "They won't touch George's wife. It's part of the rules."

Protected by marriage to George Stiles. Weird world.

Bry glanced at him sideways, then turned her attention back to the road to pass a beaten-up trolley bus. It was a flawless manoeuvre. "But George and I can't protect you?"

"No. I'm afraid not. In this kind of game you and George are king and queen, the rest of us are pawns." Yes. Pawn Michael. Pawn Pierre. Two pieces removed from the board.

"Queens can be taken."

Spencer wished he'd chosen a different analogy. But she'd said it as an aside, and in any case he couldn't think of an answer, so he let it pass.

They'd come some way down Stonewright and the surroundings had improved. The shop fronts were much prettier and there were fewer of them - just small clusters on the corners where blocks met. This was delicatessen and coffee-shop land, inner suburbia, with long residential streets of tall nineteenth-century houses off to either side.

"I'd better pull in," said Bry, looking in the rear-view mirror.

"Why? He's stopped following us?"

"No. He's switched his lights on."

"What!" Even without looking round, Spencer could see the red lights reflecting in house windows and off street-signs. "Shit! Bry. What the fuck do I do now?"

"Play it cool." Bry seemed cool enough; perversely, more relaxed than she had been a minute ago. "There's no point playing it any other way."

She brought the car to a halt. The lights were so close behind that Spencer could see them reflected in the dashboard, a slowly repeating pattern of flickers, as if Bry had parked close to a Christmas tree.

"I have to tell you something," said Bry, with an exquisite sense of timing. "Not only has Pierre disappeared, but Michael seems to have gone missing too."

"Really?"

"Oh. You already knew."

Shit. How did she do that? She was wasted in public relations. She should be doing interrogations for Homicide. Bad example.

Bry wound down her window and put her hands on the steering wheel. Spencer held his together in his lap, hoping that would stop them moving around too much. He hid his bandaged thumb. A policeman came to Bry's side of the car and stood level with the central pillar. He bent down to look inside the car, one hand resting on his gun. He was middle-aged and a little overweight with a chubby close-shaven face and a passable tan; a genuine city cop or a very well-casted impostor.

"Driver's licence, please, ma'am."

"It's in my purse."

The cop nodded. Bry searched through her purse and gave him the licence. He stood upright and looked at it for no more than two seconds, then gave it back. Clearly he already knew who she was.

Spencer noticed a shadow and turned, alarmed to find the second cop standing in the same position on his side of the car. He couldn't see the face, but the hand was definitely on the gun. This was not normal procedure.

The first cop was back in Bry's window, but he was looking at Spencer even though he was talking to Bry. "Are you all right, Mrs. Stiles?"

It was the first time Spencer had heard her referred to by that name. It made her sound like a stranger.

"Fine, thank you, officer."

"No problems of any kind?"

"Well," said Bry, and she paused. Spencer went through a hundred emotions. She wasn't going to give him away? Surely not? "I've just received some bad news. Personal news. I think my driving went a little off-line for a while back there. Sorry about that."

"That's OK, ma'am. But nothing here that we need to get involved in?"

"No, thank you, officer."

Spencer felt like he was undergoing military inspection. The cop was still eyeing him.

"Your friend been in an accident?"

It was discomfiting to be talked about in the third person. And the cop had emphasised the word friend. What did that mean?

"Yes," replied Bry. "That's part of the bad news. One of my relatives was involved too. I'm just on my way to see her."

Don't push it, Bry. Don't push it.

"Sorry to hear that, Mrs. Stiles. Drive carefully now. Have a nice day."

And the pair of them were gone.

Bry was trying hard not to laugh, but the effort was almost choking her.

"What's so goddamn funny?" demanded Spencer. He was smiling too, but only in relief.

"Nothing. Oh, nothing." She was too overcome to drive. A few seconds later the police car crawled past them. She put on a serious face to wave to the cops, who waved back, then returned to her chortling.

"Come on, Bry. Share the joke."

She'd recovered enough to put the car in drive. They set off, slowly. She looked at him. "God, you do look rough."

"Is that it?" he said, mildly. "Is that what's so funny?"

She shook her head. "Have you any idea why they stopped me?"

"Because of your driving, I suppose."

Her head shook again, then stopped as if she'd changed her mind. "Partly. But that's not the main reason. That just got their attention."

"I don't get it."

"Protecting their prominent citizens?" suggested Bry.

"No. Lost on me."

She turned to him again and grinned, still waiting for him to click. But he didn't. "They thought you might be holding a gun on me. A kidnapping. A car-jack. God, I hate that word."

Spencer's head moved back to meet the head-rest. She was right, of course. They'd seen her erratic driving and thought she might be signalling them, watched him as the car crossed the lights and decided he didn't belong with a nice lady in a white Mercedes. How bizarre. Did he really look that bad? He probably did.

"At least you now know there's no warrant out for you," added Bry.

"Hell of a way to find out." Very true though, thought Spencer. So Kohl hadn't contacted the police. Should he feel happy about that? It was nice not to be on the run but hard to think of a good reason why Kohl hadn't taken that option. Unless... It would certainly fit in with his attitude at the warehouse. He didn't want Spencer grabbed by the police because he didn't want him found alive.

Bry speeded up to thirty-five. She pointed straight ahead. In the distance Stonewright rose to meet the horizon, forming a visible street-wide slot in the continuous ragged line of houses. "The apartment's two minutes away."

10 *God's finger*

The Stiles' town pad was the penthouse of a large old house overlooking Rushmore Square. It was curious that they'd just taken one floor. A definite hideaway.

The sensation of standing at a doorway with Bry while she fiddled with a key was so familiar that it made Spencer feel awkward for a while. He guessed she was experiencing something similar because she didn't bother with the formality of asking him in, and when he followed her through the door she ignored him for five minutes as she potted about, checking the flowers and the central heating, as if he had some business of his own to be getting on with.

The apartment was far bigger than the one he and Bry had shared and the furnishings were clearly more expensive, but it was still decorated in the familiar Bry style, with wall-hangings and rugs and curious items dotted here and there. In one corner of the big lounge was a Napoleonic soldier puppet mounted on a box with a handle. When Spencer turned the handle, the puppet marched, rather jaggedly, he thought.

On the wall were two hairy African tribal masks, trying to outdo each other in scariness, and a pair of ivory tusks. The tusks must have been a concession to George, since Bry wouldn't otherwise have tolerated them. There were paintings too. What looked like a Monet. My God, thought Spencer, it couldn't be an original, could it? No, don't be stupid. And a Vermeer, Bry's favourite. There was a lot to see in the room yet it wasn't cluttered. That was typical Bry too.

Below the puppet was a clarinet on a stand. Spencer checked it for the dust of idleness, then realised the apartment would have a cleaner. He stared at the instrument for a long time. It was the one item in the room that Bry had carried through from her past life, the one item he was familiar with. It bounced around inside his head dislodging memories, though it was a memory within a memory that came free first. The clarinet made him think of Father Liam.

Father Liam had produced a tin whistle from the folds on his habit on Spencer's second day of detox. His whistle was magical. He played reels and haunting soft lullabies, adding trills and flourishes at every turn and twisting the notes into flats and sharps that rose and fell like a human voice. Spencer had never imagined that an instrument so simple, a metal tube costing no more than a few dollars, could be coaxed into such richness and subtlety. He was spellbound.

Father Liam glanced at him and stopped playing. "I'm sorry. Am I upsetting you?"

"It's just... It reminds me of someone. Somebody playing the clarinet - an old girlfriend."

"Now then. And aren't I the insensitive one?"

"Not your fault," mumbled Spencer. "You're very good. Really."

The weather was rain.

Thinking of the flute reminded him of how bored he'd been the rest of the time. It hadn't been easy for the monks to keep him entertained. They'd played Monopoly and Cluedo and so many different card games that Spencer lost count. Father Kenneth liked to play draughts and Dutch whist. Father Dougal taught him piquet and was the finger-painting expert, perhaps because he was naturally equipped with such broad brushes. Spencer had found the finger-painting funny to begin with; laughed and held up his multi-coloured hands and sang, "Mammy, how I love you, how I love you," but it turned out to be mildly diverting.

Father Liam preferred jigsaw puzzles and chess. If he lost, his forfeit was to play the flute for twenty minutes. Spencer couldn't remember him winning a game.

*

From Bry's lounge window there was a wonderful view over Rushmore Square - as much as its topography allowed. It was small for a park but big for a square, and out of it grew a significant hill, as if God's finger had risen through the Earth and for these few blocks the houses had fallen away to reveal the grassy shape of his fingertip. There were trees on the slopes and on the peak - pines with spreading branches. Children were playing on the close-cropped parkland grass, mothers were taking full baby-buggies for a roll. There was very little traffic on the road surrounding the square. It was all rather idyllic. In combination with the irregular charm of the lounge it should have had a calming effect on Spencer after the trauma of the drive. He pretended that it did, in the hope that the pretence might turn genuine.

"Nice view," he said. "Nice place."

Bry stopped pottering and joined him at the window. "I love it. I'd prefer to live here than Carmetta. But George says we have to live in the big house for the image, to keep the visitors happy.

I find that strange. One of the ten richest men on the planet and other people decide where he lives. Where I live too."

She seemed very relaxed here on home territory. Open and friendly. Assuming he didn't blot his copy book again, it looked likely that he'd got away with his mistake in the hotel room.

"At least you can come here when you feel like it."

"I like the size. It's possible to become part of this place. The problem with Carmetta is you can never make it feel like home. It's like being principal guest in a large hotel."

Spencer had visited Carmetta a few times and could only agree with her.

"The one hitch we have here is film crews," continued Bry. "They set up in the park, filming the houses. It's a conservation area, no satellite dishes or anything modern and vulgar, so they can pretend they're in any era they like."

Spencer looked at the pretty houses through the window, at their classic fire-escapes and elaborately painted frontages. They looked glorious in the sunlight. "Why's that a problem?"

"George plays games with them. He puts on a pair of sunglasses and shorts and wanders down the street, trying to get in camera-shot if he can. They have no idea who he is. They're not expecting a well-known face so they don't see one. They've balled him out a few times. He seems to enjoy it."

It took a moment for Spencer to figure that one out. "It's just his method of gambling. Money means nothing. Business is easy. He enjoys the risk."

"He's the little boy from Mad comics, grown up." Immediately, too immediately, Bry changed the subject. "I'm sorry, I should have shown you round."

So she did. They looked at the master-bedroom, briefly, then at the guest-bedroom where Spencer would be staying. It was surprisingly bare: a wide single bed, a chest of drawers below the window, a built-in wardrobe next to the door. Spencer got the impression it was rarely used. He glanced at Bry but she avoided his eye until they'd left the room. She showed him the bathroom next to the bedroom then marched back across the lounge into the enormous kitchen. "Remember to take out your garbage. I'm sure I don't have to tell you to keep the place tidy. You're probably the tidiest person I know." She looked at him very briefly, wandered back into the lounge and sat on the sofa.

Spencer took a chair. It was wonderfully comfortable. He'd forgotten how wrecked and in need of rest his body was. If only his mind could find a pleasant armchair of its own.

"I've been thinking about it, and I don't think I'm going to tell George you're staying here. He probably wouldn't mind. But then again..." She didn't bother to finish the sentence.

Spencer didn't care either way. If she was trying to say something subtle it was lost on him. The comfort of the chair had taken him over. He was looking at the TV and the stereo and most of his body was voting for a quiet afternoon watching *The African Queen* on video or snoozing with an undemanding melody in the background, preferably with piano. Unfortunately his mind was still off on some dangerous ride at the funfair.

The booze, damn it. That was why his mind was such a mess. He'd been straight for a week and then Kohl had forced him to get drunk again. It wasn't just his body that was injured. So was his brain. The alcohol craving was back.

"What are you going to do?" she asked, as if she could see the dilemma in his expression.

"Carry on looking for Raymond Kite. He's the key to me getting out of this mess. How about you?"

Bry didn't answer. She rose and moved to stand by the window again. She picked up a bowl of pot-pourri from a small round table, gently shook it and inhaled the smell.

Any moment now he expected her to answer his question and say she had to rush off back to work, but instead she returned to the sofa, settling there easily, staring into her lap, no sign of further movement.

Back to work. Now there was a thought.

"Is George in the office this afternoon?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Is he busy?"

"I don't know. I'm not his PA. He usually is."

"Sorry. It's just... I wondered if you could take me back to Foxglove with you, smuggle me in. They'll be watching the place, but I need to see George."

"Spencer! Jesus Christ."

"After all, I am working for him."

Bry shook her head in disbelief. "Can't it wait?"

"No." Spencer was quite excited by the idea. It was obvious, now he'd thought of it. So many things had happened that George needed to know about. And he had questions too, dozens of them. Questions that only George could answer. About the two deaths, the CIA's involvement, Raymond Kite's work, the fourth player, Kohl's mention of bodies. "No. It can't."

Bry stopped shaking her head. She looked at him and slowly a smile began to break out on her face.

"What's up?" asked Spencer.

"I'm not sure that I've ever seen you in jeans and a teeshirt before. Actually they suit you."

"Break a leg."

*

On their way down to Foxglove, they stopped off at North Valley Mall for Bry to buy Spencer yet more new chinos and a collared shirt. He was beginning to wonder about this sartorial consumerism. Since he'd left the mansion he hadn't worn a single item of clothing twice. In fact there were new clothes in his abandoned room at the Ana that he still hadn't used. It was a throwaway lifestyle, in a strange sense something that he'd experienced before during his time on the streets, though viewed then through the other end of life's binoculars.

He was still very aware of the closeness of that past existence. As they walked into the mall, a pair of security guards were gently ejecting a bum. Spencer didn't feel he could interfere, but the incident brought on mixed emotions. He couldn't be sure, but he thought he'd seen the bum before, more than a year ago, lying on a side-street near Bourse in the small hours, his face swollen and bruised from a beating, a casualty of society's disregard, of uncivil war.

As they stepped out of the mall, with Spencer in his new clothes, the same man was panhandling by the door, and smiling. Spencer gave him five dollars.

"It amazes me," he said to Bry as they made their way back to the car, "the resilience of people like that. You'd think they'd just give up if they went through what he goes through... I mean, everything, all the shit that happens to him every day. You'd think they'd throw in the towel. But they don't. Sometimes it takes them a while but they keep bouncing back. I respect them for that."

He wouldn't have said it if he'd known the look she was going to give him. The admiration embarrassed him.

"I mean," he stammered, "I mean, that's how I see other people."

*

Bry couldn't take him all the way into the heart of Foxglove, but she drove him most of the way there, through Quartz Valley down Highway 71, through its never-ending mixture of flat scrubland and dusty wide lots and electronics factories with their landscaping and eucalyptus trees.

As security chief, Spencer had made sure it wasn't easy for people to be smuggled in or out of Foxglove. The car park was external and everybody had to walk into the central complex through the main reception, even George and Bry. The walk from the car park to reception was very exposed - more than enough for Spencer to be spotted by the agency or its many Foxglove place-men.

So a few miles from Foxglove, at a restaurant called The Engine, he transferred from Bry's car into a Foxglove security Jeep - the one vehicle that could go into the pedestrianised centre without raising suspicion.

Sammy was the driver - a genial old chap with a full head of snow-white hair and photos of his seven grandchildren in his wallet. Spencer was glad it was Sammy. They'd worked together at Foxglove for almost a decade. They shook hands warmly, holding each other by the elbows and grinning. As they cruised slowly down the wide boulevards between electronics company estates in the direction of Foxglove, Spencer asked Sammy about his wife and Sammy asked Spencer about his cuts and bruises. He said he'd picked them up trying to burgle an electronics company. Sammy laughed and left the subject alone.

With Spencer hiding in the back under a blanket, they drove across the Foxglove car park and through the secure internal gates into the grassy central plaza. Sammy parked next to a fire door and they took a devious route on foot to George's office via bare concrete stairs.

"He's expecting you," said Sammy as they stood in the corridor by George's office door. "Good luck."

"Thanks."

Spencer wanted to say more than a single word but he couldn't think of anything. For a while he stood at the doorway absentmindedly picking blanket hairs from his new clothes. Then he knocked on the door and walked straight in, without waiting for an answer.

11 *Familiarity and lies*

George stood near the window at the far end of the enormous office with his back to Spencer. He turned only briefly after Spencer closed the door. "Come in," he said, his round, boyish face grinning to show the boldness amused him.

Spencer moved across the room and down the small set of steps to join him. The area by the window was lower than the rest of the room and the size of a normal office in itself. Here there was a large circular table where meetings were held and meals were served. There was also a bar. The Venetian blinds were down but not closed. Strips of sunlight beamed in, spreading across the floor and furniture like wet yellow ribbons laid out to dry.

As Spencer approached, George moved closer to the window. Yellow stripes segmented his jeans and workshirt. Spencer stood by the window too. It looked out on to the central plaza of the complex, on to the trees and landscaped grass. Sammy's security car could be seen crawling along a broad footpath. From the rear, moving so slowly, it looked like a hearse.

George didn't add to his facetious greeting. This was classic George. He liked to talk but he also liked to begin with silence, as if it added weight to his subsequent words. He spoke only when Sammy's car had disappeared through an archway and tall automatic gates had closed behind it. He looked at Spencer's injuries, at the plaster on his ear, his grazed neck, his bandaged thumb, and ignored them. "Were you followed?"

"I don't think so. No."

George held out his hand. Spencer shook it. The shake was firm but there was no warmth. George's shake was always businesslike, never personal.

"Shame I couldn't make it to Michael Sorden's show."

"A shame," repeated Spencer.

"How did you feel about seeing Bry?"

The question caught Spencer off guard. He'd come here to find out about Kohl, about Balloons, to tell George about Michael, not to discuss Bry.

After waiting a few seconds and getting no reply, George walked away. "Let's sit at my desk."

"It was good to see her." How forced did that sound? Spencer followed George's footsteps up the stairs.

"I thought it would be better if the news came from her, rather than me."

Spencer was annoyed. He wasn't sure why, but he was annoyed. Maybe it was because George had taken control after such a short time, maybe it was something more. He was unsettled too by the familiarity of the office. He wished George had redecorated since his last visit, but everything looked almost the same.

In the upper section, near the door, stood the same big leather sofa; three easy chairs, the coffee table and TV. In better circumstances Spencer had jokingly asked why there was no bed in the room and George had stroked his chin over this, contemplating it seriously for a while. He'd never lost his teenage garage-electronics mentality. The place was one third office, one third laboratory and one third home.

George's desk was over to the far left, tucked away in what might have been called an alcove if it hadn't been so large. The white laboratory bench was to its right, taking up an entire wall. In the middle of the bench, squeezed incongruously between two computers, stood a curious domed ornament with feathers on its sides. This was new. Some of the pictures on the wall had changed. There were plants in the room, a dozen of them. There hadn't been plants before. Otherwise everything was irritatingly close to the way it had looked two years ago when George had brought him upstairs to fire him over the incident at the boundary wire.

George threw himself into his angular green leather chair, flowing into its contours like a human bean-bag cast against stairs. "You, better than anybody, would know why I found her attractive."

Spencer settled into one of the three chairs on the guest side of the desk. "Can't change history," he muttered, hoping his teeth didn't sound too clenched. He wished George would change the fucking subject.

Thankfully George obliged. "You look in a bad way, Spen. What's the story?"

Relieved to get on to the main agenda, Spencer launched into a full and passionate account of his adventures so far, starting with his visit to Pierre's farm, the picture of Raymond Kite's eyes, Michael Sorden's studio, and the nightmare of Kohl and his thugs, ending in his dramatic escape. He didn't mention Bry's involvement.

George looked suitably impressed. Even surprised. "Poor Michael." He fingered his sandy hair. "Wow. That's some story, Spen. Far worse than I imagined." He was thinking hard. Normally it didn't show, but it did now. His brow was deeply furrowed.

"You heard the record?" asked Spencer.

"I did. Very nasty people. Very nasty indeed."

"Who the hell are they? They told me they were agency, off-duty, but it's hard to believe."

He was hoping George would discount the agency story, find some crucial flaw in it, but he didn't. "I'm afraid they were telling the truth, Spen. They are agency. About the time Raymond disappeared, I got a warning he was in danger. An unofficial warning, from the top. They told me to stand well clear."

"Great. Thanks for letting me know."

"I wasn't sure how seriously to take it. But after I heard the record I made some calls to Washington. The news was not good." George hesitated. "It's a religious thing."

"What?"

George shifted sideways across the big chair, bringing his right knee on to the seat. He put his hands behind his head after fingering his hair again. Did he do this as often before he was with Bry, wondered Spencer, or was it a habit of hers he'd picked up?

"As you know, Spen, I've never had much time for religion. But it's everywhere nowadays, on TV, the moral majority, even in business. Looks like the agency's got its share. Kohl says he's doing God's work and there are people high up who believe him. He's got their support, unofficially."

Spencer shook his head, more in disappointment than disbelief. "God Bless America."

"Like the President says."

George glanced at the picture on his desk. There were four photos on the teak and green leather monster, all angled so they could be seen by visitors and host alike. Predictably one of Bry, looking very glamorous in a dark green chiffon gown. George posing with the President, even wearing a suit for God's sake, and the President looking very happy to be with him. George with the Prime Minister of Japan. And finally a photo of a plate of food, seafood of the long antennae type, lobsters and giant prawns, just to prove that George didn't take his formal business desk too seriously.

"So I'm up against - we're up against - religious fundamentalists with CIA backing?"

George nodded. "Crusaders In Authority."

Spencer wiped his hand down his face, from brow to chin. "Can't you pull strings, put a stop to it?"

"No, too much top support. And this isn't official action. You can't stop something that isn't happening."

"Except by getting to Raymond Kite first."

George seemed to ignore this comment. Spencer might have followed it up, but there was something else on his mind. "So what's Raymond Kite doing that they find so ungodly?"

"Beats me," said George, without hesitation. "I think there's been a mix-up somewhere down the line."

"Balloons," said Spencer, sharply. "You know it's Balloons. You heard it on the recording."

"Of course it's Balloons," said George, as if that were so obvious he hadn't bothered to state it. "I just can't see what interest they would have in the Balloons project."

"Maybe if I knew more about it" - Spencer leaned forward to emphasise the point - "I might be able to help you out."

"I thought you already knew," said George, seeming surprised. "It was mainly to get new photos of eyes for Michael Sorden."

Spencer didn't like that answer at all. He was still unsettled and it made him mad. He couldn't help it showing. "Don't give me that. I nearly got killed because of the goddamn project. Don't bullshit me."

George spread his palms in a gesture of innocence. "I said mainly. Yes, there was another angle. We were recording voices too while the photos were being taken. We were trying to profile eyes and voices together, build a data bank. If we could find matches, there would be plenty of applications - security, voice-overs, artificial speech."

One of the new additions to George's office was hanging on the wall behind his chair, a painting of Carmetta, his mansion. Or was it a photograph? Hard to tell. It looked like a photograph but the colours were too vivid, more like acrylics. It wasn't a pretty house. It mixed Georgian and Tudor styles as if the architect hadn't been able to decide between the two, or perhaps thought he was taking the best of both, like a chef making a single dish combining his excellent steak au poivre with his stunning tiramisu. There were twenty-three windows at the front. Spencer had counted them when he first visited the place nine years ago.

Carmetta was the perfect building to look at while George was speaking. Everything was well-built, each individual feature, but there was something subtly wrong about the whole. Spencer simply didn't believe George's explanation. It was another lie.

"No, I don't buy it. The agency wouldn't be interested and Raymond Kite wouldn't have worked on it. He was a neural interface expert. Connecting electronics and human tissue, that was his speciality."

George ruminated, looking resentful that his tale hadn't been swallowed. He was only saved from further attack by a bird flying across the picture.

There was no mistake. A bird flew across Carmetta from left to right. Such a bizarre thing to see that it had almost reached the right hand frame before Spencer was sure it was there. He stared at the picture in disbelief.

George turned. For some reason he seemed displeased to see the picture there. "Computer, show reception."

A Magic Ear in one of the five computers in the room heard and obeyed. The picture immediately changed to show the lobby of the Foxglove building, as if through a wide-angle window. One of the two receptionists was registering a visitor. Spencer could remember the receptionist's name - Sandra.

George stood up and turned to Spencer, his hand on the edge of the picture frame, smiling too broadly. "What do you think? They'll be everywhere in a few years. No more clumsy cathode rays. Just a flat screen in the lounge. Paintings, CCTV, networks, Internet, all hanging on the wall. We'll put this one out at four hundred dollars. Over a million pixels. Each one controlled by its own transistor." George put his forefinger to the screen. "Glass transistors. You look right through them."

Spencer waited impatiently. If George thought this was anything more than a minor distraction, he was wrong.

"Thirteen hundred contacts along the bottom edge, a thousand along the side. You send a signal down this way." George's hand moved horizontally across the screen. "And down that." A vertical sweep this time. "And you get a point of coloured light where they meet. Like co-ordinates on a graph, like eastings and northings on a map."

Keep going, George. You're just telling me that I'm on the right track, that I've moved from warm to hot. Or was there some double distraction going on here? Why had George been so keen to take Carmetta off the screen? "Useful for keeping an eye on comings and goings at home, too?"

"A house that size needs security, Spencer. You know better than I do about that kind of stuff."

A telephone rang on George's desk. More frustration for Spencer. At least George seemed more pleased by this diversion. He threw himself back into his seat and answered it. "Yes?" He grunted a few times. "Thank you, Sammy." He put the handset down.

"Computer, show Foxglove approach." George kicked his free foot against the desk and twirled his chair to view the screen: "I think you'd better take a look at this, Spen."

Spencer looked up at the screen and had the cardiac equivalent of a sneeze. It showed the public road that ran parallel to the front of the Foxglove building, separated from it by the company car park. The road was lined with slim-leafed trees. In the middle-ground, near the car park entrance, were two cars. One was empty. Its driver was by the door of the other, talking to two men inside.

"Recognise them?" asked George.

"The man in the passenger seat - that's Kohl. Diamond's next to him. The guy talking to them is Alex."

"Didn't take them long to hear about your visit, did it? Sammy says the second car arrived a few seconds ago."

Spencer found it odd to be looking at the gang on the screen, in safety, but with danger so close by. He wasn't sure what to make of it. It was also odd to be watching Alex talking at length when he'd been so quiet at the warehouse, as if he'd been putting on a tough facade there for Spencer's sake and was acting normally now, behaving like the loquacious old woman he might well be in real life, for all Spencer knew.

Diamond looked oddly normal because the roof of the car obscured the top of his head. Without the bald peak he looked like an average tag-wrestler approaching retirement.

Kohl's face, seen in daylight for the first time, even though in a car, appeared more unnatural than it had at the warehouse, more forcibly well-maintained, lacking the wrinkles and flaps that by rights ought to be there. Unquestionably it still radiated power.

Spencer watched them through the glass transistors like a tourist viewing great white sharks in an aquarium.

"They'll wait," said George, answering the unstated question. "They can see the car park - who's getting in and out of cars. But they'll target any vehicle coming out of the internal gate. You won't be able to get out the way you got in."

Very true. It was going to be difficult leaving.

George held his finger and thumb to his chin for a while, then smiled his most childish, mischievous smile. "I fancy giving them the finger."

He leaned forward and pressed a couple of keys on a telephone. "I'm going to order you a cab." Still grinning, he picked up the handset. "Walter, George Stiles here. Can you do me a pick-up from

Foxglove in ten minutes?...No. Spencer de Gresseur...I'm not sure, maybe International, maybe the Pan Am building...Yeah. OK." He put the phone down, looking very pleased with himself.

Spencer was less amused. Apart from the impossibility of getting away in a cab, he wasn't happy to be dismissed in a matter of minutes, simply because Kohl was waiting outside. "Balloons. You were giving me some bullshit about Balloons. But I guess ten minutes is long enough to hear the real story."

George tapped a finger on his desk and hummed to himself momentarily, then got up from his chair and strolled past a tall aspidistra to the long white bench, where he stood with one hand on a computer monitor, his eyes focusing somewhere through the window at the far side of the room.

"You got me there, Spen. Really we were trying to measure attractiveness, sexual attractiveness, across different cultures. We've been working on alterations to vocal chords. That's where Raymond Kite fits in. Eyes and voices go together. If you change one but not the other, you produce a freak, a robot. Everybody knows there's something wrong. They have to match. Coloured contact lenses don't work if you've got the wrong voice. We've been building up the world's only data-bank of matches and buying-up all the vocal chord research we can. It's a long-term thing, but in a decade everybody will be taking their teenage kids for eye and voice work, like now they take them to the orthodontist, get their teeth fixed."

"Stop jerking me off, George!" Spencer said it loud. One false story was bad enough. A whole sequence was an insult. "Cosmetic surgery's been around for decades. This isn't big enough to kill for, and you know it. Stop feeding me lines and tell me what Balloons is about."

"That's the whole story," said George, firmly. "Take it or leave it." His voice had entirely changed. That was George the company president speaking.

"Then show me the files," challenged Spencer. "You can access Balloons files on one of these machines."

"That won't be necessary."

Spencer felt the blood rush to his cheeks. He sprang from his chair and faced George across the bench. He'd had enough. Diamond's blow to the neck, Kohl's intimidation, the booze, the fall, the train, the police. And now here he was getting the run-around from the one man who should definitely be on his side. "How the fuck do you expect me to find Raymond Kite if I don't know what he was working on?"

George looked at Spencer's face, studying it with patient intensity. "There is a flip side to that. If you were to stop looking for Raymond Kite, why would you need to know?"

Startled, Spencer took a step back. "What? What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that we've got ourselves in too deep, that we can't fight the agency." George swept a hand in the direction of the flat screen. "We shouldn't be dumb enough to try. Two people have died already. You're next on the list. Time for a strategic withdrawal."

It was the last thing Spencer had been expecting. Such an alien thought that his mind refused to work with it. "We can't give up now." Half plea, half astonishment. "These bastards killed Pierre! They tortured him. We can't just walk away!"

"I don't think we have any choice." George moved away from the bench and back to the desk. He folded himself into his chair. "They're too powerful for us, Spen. And brutal with it. It doesn't matter what we should and shouldn't be doing. On a practical level, we don't have the ability to fight them. It's that simple. It's too dangerous to carry on. Especially for you."

"No." Spencer moved back to the desk too, and leaned across it. "No. You're wrong. I have to go deeper to get out. It's like being caught at the bottom of a waterfall. You have to swim down to get clear and reach the surface."

George shook his head. "Top of the waterfall, Spen. Where you swim for the side and get the hell out."

"I'm not stopping now."

"And I can't let you go over the edge."

Spencer looked at George incredulously. "You're firing me!"

"You need to disappear for a while. Mexico. Australia. I'll give you the money."

"I won't need it, I'm not going anywhere."

"I knew you'd be difficult about this."

"About being fired? Well you should know. You've got the *fucking experience!*" He sighed, lowered his head and collapsed back into his chair. Unbelievable. Same office, same decorations, same result. At least he'd been expecting it last time, even though he didn't think he deserved it. Really didn't think he'd deserved it. But this was worse.

"Take a vacation, Spen. Let this thing blow over. You can use the Amex for a few more hours. Buy yourself an airline ticket, get some cash. I'll wire more where you're going."

"I'm carrying on."

George turned and raised a warning hand. "No you're not. I'm telling you - stay out of this."

That was George at his most forceful again. Ominous. Resolute. It was a threat and Spencer couldn't ignore it. He knew he couldn't fight Kohl and George at the same time. Even little David

would have thrown away the catapult faced with two Goliaths. The game had just been declared over. He'd lost.

George sucked in a loud breath. His terminal giveaway sign. He'd closed the deal. He stayed silent for a while, allowing his ultimatum to soak in.

There was a burst of activity on the flat screen. George's telephone was obviously bugged. Kohl and his crew were readying themselves for the arrival of Spencer's cab. Moving quickly, Alex went back to his car. Kohl scanned the reception area with binoculars. It struck Spencer as ironic that the eavesdroppers themselves were being spied on with a security camera. A little parasitic circle of fleas on fleas. And doubly ironic that they should still be after him now, when he no longer posed a threat.

The fight had gone out of him. He was feeling down. Out of control. He felt like a beach ball in a passing game between George and Kohl. His bruised body was complaining too, adding its aching voice to the forces ranged against him. "I need the record back. The record from Pierre's. If anything goes wrong, if the police get involved, it's the only evidence I've got for my side of the story."

George's fingers tapped on the side of his chair. "That might be difficult."

Spencer looked at him but said nothing.

"Unfortunately I don't have it any more."

"I simply don't believe you."

"I sent it to the agency. It was part of the deal."

This just couldn't be right. "What deal?"

"My deal with the agency. "

"A deal." Spencer nodded in mock appreciation. "The lives of two employees, the evidence, and me off the job. What do you get in return? California?"

"Kohl's isolation."

"His *what?*"

"This is power politics, Spencer." George spoke quickly, dismissively. "It's run by different rules. I know what I'm doing. Lie low and stay out of it."

No, no, no, no, no. This couldn't be happening. Even if this was truth it was bullshit. And it probably wasn't true. Should he cry, laugh, throw up, lean over the desk and throttle George Stiles? It was all too much. No information. No job. No reason to stay sober. No vinyl disc. Everything going backwards. Back to zero and beyond. Danger and no gain. Kohl outside. George almost doing Kohl's work for him here in the office. The stupid, smug, rich, scheming asshole.

"It does seem to make it even more essential that you lie low for a while," said George, completely misreading Spencer's silence.

Not survivable. The string snapped. Spencer stayed perfectly still in his seat and spoke quietly, with the clarity of anger. "You asshole."

George looked startled. Clearly it was a long time since anybody had called him names. After a few seconds his smile returned.

Spencer wanted to slap him, take that imperious grin off his face. "Everything you say, everything you do, is false. No truth. There's no truth in your life. It's just one round after another of manipulation. Even your fucking house is trying to be something it isn't. And what's this room? Is it an office? Is it a condo? Do you walk in each morning and decide what it should be today, like a child with dressing-up clothes? Or is it the world you do that to? A world full of customers and computers. Nothing else. An unreal world, like the landscaped plaza out there, like the false fucking ceiling hiding all the wires and shit and stuff you don't want to see." He wanted to say more, but the anger was leaving him. He couldn't do it without the anger. Abruptly he stopped.

"You sound like Bry."

Spencer closed his eyes. That was unbelievable. With four simple words George had probably caused more pain than Spencer had managed to produce with his entire speech.

"But she's got more understanding of the philosophy of business." George re-arranged his collar, as if Spencer had leaned across the desk in his rage and taken hold of it and it needed tidying. "You may not believe this, but sometimes it even upsets me that there's no truth in my life. That's one of the penalties of power. It's based on falsehoods."

Spencer opened his eyes. George's reaction seemed surprisingly mild.

"We go back a long way, you and I." George was full of himself. If anything, the episode had enlivened him, not subdued him. "If somebody's going to abuse me, I'd prefer it to be you. It might even have done me some good." He lay back in his chair, quite relaxed again, looking evenly into Spencer's face. "You're right. I am doing you over. I can't stop it. But at the same time, I apologise. I'm sorry things haven't worked out. I had high hopes. On many counts."

"Me too."

Spencer felt embarrassed about how close he'd come to hitting George. He hoped it had nothing to do with his feelings for Bry. His mind refused to answer the question either way.

George folded his palms behind his head, causing his body to flow over the seat even more. He could be annoyingly casual at times. "And you're right about the office. It's a dog's breakfast. But I'm

stuck with it now. It's part of my image, like a pop-star's hat. People expect to see it. They'd be disappointed if they didn't."

Spencer looked around once more at the familiar surroundings. On the wall behind the long bench was an enormous photograph. A photograph he knew well. It had been hanging there a long time, ever since George had made the journey, what was it, six years ago? It showed the edge of the Antarctic ice-pack, the cliff of ice and the broken-off icebergs drifting away. Blue ice. Only Antarctic ice is blue.

George had always been keen on the tales of Scott and Amundsen and the other explorers. Finally he'd fulfilled his ambition and taken a trip there, but had come back a disappointed man, telling Spencer it was a cold, inhospitable place where there was nothing to see. It was the explorers and their stories of failure and success that he'd been interested in, not the place itself. They may as well have been exploring the moon.

That abortive trip, that missed beauty, the photo itself with its bulk of ice and broken fragments, all seemed so appropriate to Spencer and summed up in some indescribable way how he felt about what was happening here in this office today.

"I should go back," said George, following Spencer's eyes. "I went too early."

"You've started thinking about things," said Spencer. "You never used to."

"Yes, this old dog has changed his spots, or at least some of them. But it's hard to mix thinking with business, even at my level. There," said George emphatically, "I've never told anybody that before."

"Not even Bry?"

"Bry has her own agendas." Dismissed in a single sentence.

"Well here's something I wasn't going to tell you. I was thinking about your marriage to Bry, and I wondered if you'd set me up to be fired over that incident at the fence, two years ago, just to get me out of the running and leave the field clear."

George fingered his chin and frowned. "That's one of the problems of being a manipulative bastard. People think you're operating when you're not."

"What the hell's going on?" demanded Spencer, frowning too. And he wasn't referring to George's words - he'd barely been able to hear them. He was looking up at the ceiling. A helicopter was approaching. He'd been trying to ignore it, but it had got louder and louder until it seemed to be hovering right above them. The chop-chop-chop was fluttering his eardrums.

Kohl?

"Ah," said George, smiling broadly. "Your cab has arrived. Shall we go up to the roof and get you on board? We can wave to the people in the street below. I'm sure they'll be very amused."

12 *Lionkiller, is the lion dead?*

Spencer was worried that Kohl might somehow interfere with the flight, get it recalled or redirected, but the moment he saw Kohl's face he knew this fear was groundless. Kohl definitely did not look the victorious player as the helicopter overflew him.

It wasn't a long flight but it was a noisy one. Spencer put the headset on for the first five minutes, but after a few starting pleasantries through the intercom the pilot began a non-stop diatribe on the swindlery of taxation and the latent communism of schoolteachers as if he were a normal cabby on four wheels. So Spencer took the headset off and listened to the chopping of the blades, which was equally monotonous but far less depressing.

Quartz Valley scrolled beneath him like the screen of a jet fight arcade game. Over to the left he could see the huge bank of fog that hid the cold Pacific. It rolled in mightily across the coastal hills and abruptly dwindled to nothing, eaten up by the heat of the land. Ahead, the landmark towers of downtown blocks grew larger at surprising speed.

They flew to the Pan Am terminal in the centre of the city. Spencer's choice. He wanted to see the Professor. He wanted to check that the Professor had got away from Beaumont OK. But more than that, he wanted to get drunk with him.

The meeting with George had gone very badly, apart from inspiring a very odd sort of closeness between them. He'd come away with none of his questions answered, knowing nothing more about Balloons. He'd been fed bullshit in neatly arranged piles by the champion manipulator and worst of all once again he'd been fired. The game, the battle, was over and he'd lost. The time had come once more to say goodbye to all things real.

He took the elevator down from the helipad and passed through the lobby, then walked round the side of the Pan Am building and along Holme, through the heart of the financial district. It was prime time to find the Professor. Office workers, in cars and on foot, were swarming from their concrete

holes to make the journey home. The sun was too low in the sky to reach most of the streets between the skyscrapers. An occasional broad ray slipped through, overindulging itself in a patch of glare.

He hadn't walked more than two hundred yards before he recognised the familiar crackling voice. It was reciting poetry.

"...modern poets, modern fools
 Writing by two golden rules,
 Don't use words if they're short on size
 When long ones could be utilised,
 And adjectives must chaperone
 Poor nouns that should be left alone.
 The end result is purple verse
 That's hard to read, and even worse
 Is proud and haughty, over-dressed.
 Would old grand masters be impressed
 By those who claim to know the art
 Yet flaunt words like a painted tart,
 To whom their act bears close relation,
 Intellectual masturbation."

"Very good." Spencer dropped a five dollar bill in the hat on the sidewalk. Roughly ten dollars in change was already there. "Still knocking 'em dead with the poetry, Prof?"

"Gent!"

Spencer smiled. "It's good to see you." It truly was.

The Professor raised himself awkwardly from his sitting position on the sidewalk. He felt the need to embrace Spencer. The smell was overpowering.

"Gent! Gent! I was worried sick about you. God bless you. I didn't know whether to call the cops or what to do. You know how they are with people like us... like me." He snuffled and released himself, then stepped back to take a look. "You've been in the wars, Gent. You're looking rough."

"Thanks." That was a little ironic, coming from the Professor. He looked far worse in daylight than Spencer recalled. The red veins on his big cheeks stood out like winter rose bushes behind curved glass. His lips were chapped and his hair lay in a basketworker's discard pile. "I had an accident. I'll tell you about it in a moment. How's business?"

"Fair." The Professor looked at his hat. "I cleared the till about twenty minutes ago."

Spencer did a quick calculation. Roughly thirty dollars an hour, not counting his own contribution. Pretty fair for a panhandler. "The punters go for that kind of verse, do they?"

"It gets their attention. I mix the more contentious works with the pastoral - sheep grazing on the mountainside, babbling brooks, that kind of thing. It strikes a chord here in the concrete jungle."

Spencer smiled and shook his head. Only the Prof could get away with this. The police weren't keen on panhandlers in the financial district. Generally they hassled and herded them towards the seedier circumstances of Bourse Street, like uniformed shepherds returning strays to the deadbeat flock. They tolerated the Professor as a special case, as a performing intellectual bum.

"You thirsty?" asked Spencer. "I'll get a bottle." An entry-pass to join the flock again.

"I'll ask my secretary." The Professor paused to allow space for the imaginary question and answer. He nodded. "Yes. I'm overdue a liquor break." Then made a theatrical sweeping gesture with his hand. "Lead the way, my friend."

They walked up the slope of Holme towards Lingham Hill. The traffic was bad. Freshly-started engines coughed out noxious fumes. Spencer bought a quart of Jack Daniel's from Vibram's deli along the way. As they walked he began to recount - for the second time today - the tale of how he'd got his injuries, of the attic and jumping through the window; the train, the depot, the gays: and not for idle amusement or to unburden himself, but because he knew it would amuse the Professor to hear a tale he already knew, one that he'd already recounted to Spencer himself, though in a more mythical version.

He'd barely begun when the Professor came to an astonished standstill. "Three evil figures, and you jumped into the white light to escape them?" The Professor could hardly believe what he was hearing.

"I'm not sure I would have thought about doing it if you hadn't told me that stuff... what was it?"

"The Tibetan Book of the Dead. The leap into the white light of Nirvana."

"Come on, Prof, keep moving." They carried on walking, the Professor's eyes still open wide.

"And then on the train," continued Spencer, "I don't remember the journey so well, but the sound of people in the station was unreal."

"Lost souls in the Fields of Asphodel, twittering like bats."

"Exactly. Plenty of junctions at the depot, and three gays who judged me to be OK."

"Uncanny." The Professor looked as if he'd seen a ghost, or perhaps just heard one. "First the Tibetan then the Greek legend. A curious interpretation but definitely the Greek afterlife legend."

They reached the small park at the top of Lingham hill and walked inside. A mixture of trees, slopes and hedges managed to isolate it from the cars and fumes outside. Even the four storey houses that overlooked it seemed remote, unobtrusive. There were hotels at two opposite corners of the park but their tower blocks were set back from the street and seemed distant too. The place was an escape, a relief from the city, complete with flowerbeds, pleasant smells and fluttering leaves. Other people had discovered the refuge too. A group of four were practising Tai Chi. Half a dozen mothers with baby carts chatted and ignored their scattered children. On the far side of the park two youths defied regulations with a baseball.

Spencer chose a bench in the shadow of a hedge. He unscrewed the cap and passed the bottle to the Prof, who started his liquor break in earnest.

When he'd done, the Professor wiped his lips with the back of his fingers. He rested the bottle on his lap. Spencer held out his hand to take it back. The Professor cut short his satisfied sigh.

"What else happened?"

"I got fired. It's over. I'm coming back."

The Professor held on to the bottle. The whirling of cogs was almost audible as he tried to work out what to say. "Why did you go in the first place?"

Spencer had been so sure that whatever the Professor said to dissuade him could make no difference. Yet it was a question he had no answer for. So he answered a different one. "I can't fight the CIA and George Stiles. Just give me the bottle, Prof."

"It's your destiny to follow this business through. Can't you see that?"

"I don't believe in destiny. Give me the fucking bottle."

"But I do. And it's my destiny to make sure you keep going."

It was Spencer's turn to be astonished. The Professor had never been so awkward before. "I bought the goddamn thing. Hand it over."

Still the Professor held on. "I will. But first you do something for me. For old times' sake." He sounded nervous.

It made Spencer feel guilty, too aggressive. "Go on."

"I want you to answer the question. That's all. Why did you straighten out? I'm not asking you why you want to drink again. Just that one question, then you can have the bottle."

"Jesus!" Spencer shook his head, but he couldn't refuse the old man. Too precious. It wasn't even a difficult question. But there was some blockage in his mind that wouldn't let the real answer through.

"I was offered a chalice. It looked nice. I didn't know it was poisoned."

"You went back to the real world to kill a lion. The tribe had taken your warrior membership card away. You wanted it back."

"You're talking nonsense, Prof. The bottle. I want the bottle back."

The Professor didn't have the confidence to refuse. He handed it over. Spencer raised it to his mouth.

"This man, Kohl, would he smile if he saw you doing that?"

Spencer snatched the bottle down as if it had scalded his lips. He glared at the Professor, who said nothing more.

The noise of the traffic sounded much louder, the children too. The sting of the Professor's words was followed by some strange slow relief, the beginning of realisation. "I wanted to prove myself, I guess."

The Professor nodded. "Warrior and lion."

"Change history."

"Not change it, override it. You want to go back, but you want to go with an entry pass. You want to do something that people respect, something that changes things. Like finding your man Raymond. That would give you entry."

"I don't feel guilty for the past." Spencer was still holding the bottle. To the Professor's clear disappointment, he raised it to his lips again and took a swig.

"You're not convinced."

Spencer handed the bottle back. He smiled. "Oh yes I am. I was just thinking about Kohl again. For me to take a small drink, but nothing more, that's the most difficult thing I can do. If he saw me doing that, it would piss him off the most."

The Professor grinned and gave in to a much longer temptation.

When he'd finished drinking, he began folding up his hat. It was a special hat. He rarely wore it. When it wasn't being used for panhandling he folded it up and inserted it inside his coat where it magically disappeared leaving no lumps or bulges. "So you don't believe in destiny?"

Spencer laughed. "Only good destinies."

"And do you think the pictures on the wall showed a good destiny?"

"The what?"

"That studio we were in. The eye man."

"Michael Sorden?"

"Yes, him, the fortune teller. The pictures on his wall. They're the story of his avenging angel, his own private Book of the Dead, a compilation of others. They show the journey of the man who'll avenge him." He turned to look at Spencer's face. "That's you, in case you didn't realise."

That was a little too much for Spencer. "I'm not a great believer in this mystical stuff, Prof."

"Your rational mind isn't. But those pictures had a big effect on you when you saw them, didn't they?"

"Yes. That's true, but..."

"Like a brilliant painting, stunning music, a great film. You get a change in perception from things like that, a slight re-wiring of the brain. Michael's pictures did the same. That's as mystical as it gets."

"Maybe," said Spencer reluctantly. "But I can't see how Michael Sorden could have known I'd step into the frame. That it would be me. That I'd be so interested in his death."

"I don't suppose he did. He was making preparations for his death and he probably didn't even know it at the time. Maybe he dreamed that sequence of pictures and had no idea why he liked them."

Spencer considered this and rejected it. "No. That's too weird for me."

"Weird compared to what? Compared to reading a Tibetan book to a dead person? Compared to St Peter with a big ledger at the gates of Heaven? - Hey, nice suit - right hand door. Yet people believe in those things. They can be pretty weird about death, Gent. There's a whole different area of the mind at work there and rationality doesn't come into it. It's weird and it's very powerful. With some people it becomes an obsession. Michael Sorden's not even an extreme."

The Prof took another hit from the bottle. Spencer didn't have anything to say. His eyes roamed around the park. He found the group practising Tai Chi pleasantly distracting. Soothing. Graceful. Lunging and parrying, following the ancient self-defence movements now transformed into a meditative art. The lead figure of the four was a surprisingly tall oriental - Korean or maybe half-Japanese, it was hard to tell.

To his other side, the older children belonging to the mothers with baby carts were trying to play Frisbee. They weren't very good but occasionally fluked a throw. The Frisbee and the children's movements seemed extraordinarily crude after watching the Tai Chi.

"Can you remember the last few pictures?" asked the Prof. "I got distracted by that... by that..." He didn't finish the sentence.

Spencer tried to recall them. "The last two were some weird script, kind of pictorial. The one before was an eye."

"What kind of eye?"

"A line drawing. Very simple."

"A loop with pointed ends and a circle in the middle?"

"That's right."

The Prof leaned back and laughed. "How dumb can I get? Of course. Hieroglyphs."

"Egyptian writing?"

"One of the Ancient Egyptian scripts, yes. The Egyptian Book of the Dead was the original, the oldest. It goes back to at least 2500 B.C., more like 3000. And it's based on the Coffin Texts, which are another 2000 years older. We're looking at a 7000 year old history here, Gent. Most of the other myths took some ideas from it. That's the way religion goes. Mix and match. Borrow a few ideas from the past, maybe disguise them a little."

Spencer took hold of the bottle, but only to move it back six inches so it was better hidden. "You think the missing pictures showed the Egyptian Book of the Dead?"

"It seems likely. It fits the time sequence. Christian, Buddhist, Greek, Egyptian. Each one older than the last, each one borrowing a little from the ones that went before. I don't know which version of the Egyptian it would be. Probably Osiris. I'd better tell you about it. I have a feeling you'll need to know."

Spencer didn't respond. He was watching the two youths by the hedge on the far side of the park, pitching and catching with the glove and baseball. Would those actions one day be transformed into a graceful meditation, maybe a thousand years from now? It wasn't a truly ridiculous idea. There was potential in the stylised movements and repetition.

"It starts with a journey in a barque," began the Prof. "A barge across a river representing the Milky Way. Egyptians were into their stars, big time. This journey takes the deceased to the Hall of Judgement where the god Osiris presides. You can't miss him, he wears a white helmet shaped like a huge bowling pin, sometimes with feathers down the sides. Then comes the negative confession. Forty-two gods each ask the deceased if he's committed a specific sin - robbery, murder, blasphemy, homosexuality."

"What?" Spencer wasn't concentrating. One of the young children had fluked a brilliant Frisbee throw. The lurid orange plastic disc sailed across the park and struck the adolescent baseball pitcher on the head.

"Yes." The Prof was oblivious to what was happening by the hedge. "That's a specific question. It's certainly different to the Greek myths in that respect. And if the deceased gives the right answers to the forty-two questions then the next stage of the judgement is to extract his heart and weigh it on

a scale against the Feather of Maat, see if it's heavy with sin. I think that's where the expression light-hearted comes from. Are you listening?"

"Yes," said Spencer, distractedly. The youth was holding the Frisbee now. He looked around with a frown on his face to see if anybody was watching him. Spencer was, but he was too far away to count, and the mothers were too engrossed in their conversation. The small child was standing nervously in front of the pitcher asking for his Frisbee back. It could go either way.

The Prof took a drink and continued. "If the heart is too heavy, it's gobbled up by Ammit, the godly monster - part hippo, part leopard, part crocodile. And if it's light then the deceased goes to heaven."

It was ridiculously important to Spencer how the youth would react. Would he give the Frisbee back? Would he clip the youngster around the ear?

"The rest of the book is a series of spells to give the deceased a good time in heaven: a spell to create a shabti - something like a clone - to do his agricultural work for him; a spell to give him access to the world of the living. That's terribly important. So important that the Egyptians didn't call it The Book of the Dead, they called it The Book of Coming Forth by Day. And spells to avoid the perils of the afterlife, like being eaten by crocodiles or caught in a net."

The youth gave the Frisbee back with nothing more than a glare. Spencer was so relieved he reached for the Jack Daniel's bottle before he realised what he was doing. On contact, his fingers sprang away from it as if it were a bomb.

"Here's a curious thing about those old Egyptians." The Professor took hold of the bottle to keep it out of Spencer's accidental range. "They had some idea that bodies are made up of molecules and that you get them from your food, and that plants and animals take them back when you die. They had a kind of reincarnation theory, I think it was for the poor who couldn't afford tombs and fancy texts. They reckoned that 2000 years after you died, all those molecules would work themselves back to one place, and the same body would be formed again, identical, through its food and drink. What do you think of that?"

"Amazing." Spencer was trying to imagine it, imagine all those molecules in pigs and frogs and loaves of bread, all migrating back to the place where they could form the new body.

"And here's another thing. Hieroglyphic symbols represent words. Put them together and they make a sentence. And the word represented by the hieroglyphic eye, unbelievably, is I - me, myself, I. Don't you find it curious that thousands of years later we have a language where eye and I sound exactly the same, even though the spellings are different?"

"I do." This was typical of the odd stuff the Prof came out with. Odd and interesting. "Weird world."

"Weird if you take the time to look at it. Unfortunately most people don't have the time." The Prof sighed and tapped his hat through the breast of his coat. "That's why they pay the poet to tell them what's going on."

"You mean fortunately," corrected Spencer. "Fortunately they don't have the time. Otherwise you poets would be out of a living."

The Professor shrugged away his contribution to society's well-being. "They're too busy chasing money and success. And if they can't get those, they choose some other goal, like fitting out the perfect kitchen. Everybody likes to live with an aim in mind, even if it's a futile one, something you have to make up, like religion."

"Can't leave it alone, can you, Prof? You know, it's strange that you're so keen on all the myths yet you hate the faiths."

"When you know all the myths, it makes it so obvious that they're made up. They all follow on from each other. They all fill people's need for an afterlife. Then the church - whichever it is at the time - adds on a judgement scene to make sure everybody behaves themselves while they're alive."

Spencer again watched the young children playing. They'd found a better use for the Frisbee now. They were rolling it along the ground like a hoop, trying to follow its curving path and tap it along before it fell on its side. Many times it looked as if they would collide with each other, but they never quite did, miraculously.

He could remember his thoughts from the last time the Professor had brought up the subject of the afterlife. He hadn't stated them then. They sounded too clumsy. But what the Professor had just said seemed to make them more valid. "A nice fantasy, but too seductive. Something the human mind would have to create to reduce the horror of death."

"Exactly. A pleasant dream."

13 *The man on top*

When he parted company from the Professor, Spencer hired another Trooper. There was still a rental car in his name on the street outside Michael Sorden's studio, but he felt it was too risky to go back for that one. He didn't have to worry about rental charges piling up. The magical Foxy Amex was taking care of that side of things.

George had said the card wouldn't be valid much longer, so he made the most of its deathbed hours and gave it a good thrashing, as his mother - a gleeful shopaholic - used to say. On the drive back to the apartment he stopped off to buy yet more new clothes and a mobile phone, made a large cash withdrawal and signed off with a take-away from Oshi Dashi, a Japanese restaurant on Missionary. He'd never understood the thrill of retail therapy before. The buzz his mother seemed to get from flagellated plastic had always puzzled him. But now he'd finally found the secret - somebody else would be paying the credit card bill.

He lay on the bed in the guest room of the Rushmore Square apartment feeling happy and relaxed, well satisfied by the sashimi and tempura and still basking in a post-shopping afterglow. It amused the hell out of him that he was still staying in George's apartment after the man had fired him. It was one of the few secrets he'd kept from George during their peculiarly one-sided meeting, one of his few little victories.

The only other victory was an accidental one. He'd given in to George so genuinely, with such a realistic mix of dejection and anger, that George would surely be convinced the issue was dead, that he'd got his way. He wouldn't bother with any kind of follow-up, any interference.

It was still less than twenty-four hours since Spencer's jump from the warehouse. His mind was in better shape than it had been for a while, thanks to the Professor, but his body felt worse than ever. He'd abused it more than the card, barely given it a moment's rest, and now it had reached its organic equivalent of a credit limit. In the mistaken belief that he'd had his full quota of excitement for the

day, he switched the lights off and lay fully clothed in the early evening darkness, not caring whether sleep took him or not, which guaranteed, of course, that it did.

*

He wasn't sure what woke him. It might have been the closing of the front door or it could have been the light going on in the lounge. As he collected himself he remembered that Bry had said earlier that George was busy that evening but she hadn't said what her own plans were. He'd wondered at the time if she might drop by. He was about to call out her name but something strange about the footfalls in the lounge stopped him. He looked at his watch. Nine thirty. Rather late for Bry to come visiting.

"Can you smell Japanese food?"

My God. George's voice. Spencer sat upright. He stifled a groan. His body had stiffened ridiculously while he'd slept. His flesh had turned into fibreglass. It wasn't keen on being folded.

"Strange, that," said George. "I was supposed to be dining with a Japanese consular official this evening. That's where Bry thinks I am, in a Japanese restaurant in Saragown. Maybe I should wave my clothes around, try and get more of this smell on them."

A woman's shoes clip-clipped on the tiled kitchen floor, light and regular. That's why the footfalls had sounded strange. There were two sets.

Spencer wasn't sure what to do, but he knew he had to do something, and fast. The guest bedroom door led straight into the lounge and it was partially open. This had been an advantage so far - he probably wouldn't have woken up if it had been closed - but now it was a liability. If George walked five paces and glanced through the open door then yet another game would be over. He wasn't too bothered about George throwing him out, but he very much wanted to stay and satisfy his curiosity. What was George doing? He held his breath to mute his vocal chords and slowly rolled off the bed and on to the floor. It was a manoeuvre his body did not enjoy.

"Can I get you anything?" asked the woman. "A coffee? Tea?"

Spencer was furiously trying to analyse that voice, paint a character around it: well-educated, self-confident, friendly, thirties? It wasn't sexy. The idea of a hooker had flitted through his mind for a moment, but the voice didn't fit, unless George was into some very weird stuff indeed. Hold on, hadn't he heard it before?

"I think I'll have an armagnac," said George.

"I'll get it for you." Mild yet assertive. A mothering tone. "You stay there."

A wish was granted. There were no drawers beneath the bed, just a dark void. Spencer turned awkwardly on the floor to bring his head to the lounge end and began shuffling into the gloom. From the kitchen came the sound of a kettle being filled and switched on. The shoes clip-clipped on the tiles again. A decanter clinked on a glass.

"There you are."

"Thanks," said George. "What made you choose China?"

"You said I needed to go somewhere far away, and I don't have any footage of the Chinese yet, at least not in China."

Spencer knew that voice. Restrained and self-aware. He knew it for sure. Yet still he couldn't place it.

"Is it in your purse?" asked George.

There was no answer. Presumably the woman had either nodded or shaken her head. Spencer didn't know what the "it" was that George had referred to, though presumably it wasn't China.

He was fully under the bed now and feeling quite secure. There wasn't much in the apartment that could give him away - some new clothes in the wardrobe, take-away wrappers in the trash-can with clothing tags beneath them, not the kind of stuff that would bother George even if he found it. He didn't have a domestically-suspicious mind. Too much living in the grand hotel atmosphere of Carmetta. The kitchenware Spencer had used was safely back in the cupboards and drawers. He'd grabbed the new mobile on his way down to the floor and switched it off, not that anybody had the number.

He could hear fumbling in the lounge, presumably with the woman's purse, though he wasn't sure who was doing the fumbling because the next time he heard her voice it was from the kitchen again.

"We haven't got much time," she said. "I've got to be at the airport in an hour and a half."

"I know." George sounded wistful. "Never enough time. There never is."

Spencer had been so busy listening to the woman that he hadn't given any attention to George's tone, but now he noticed it was less happy and relaxed than usual.

George was walking about. His shadow crossed the bedroom doorway. Spencer instinctively ducked his head, though he didn't need to.

From George's new position came the distinctive sound of a video clattering into its plastic case. Spencer hoped to God they weren't about to watch a video. George had a fondness for heroic action movies, and Spencer didn't fancy an hour and a half under the bed listening to gunfire.

A second case clattered. Surely, as both of them had said, they didn't have time?

"I wish you'd told me this morning that I needed to bring it," said the woman. "I had to make a special trip."

"Sorry. I didn't know until this afternoon."

Beneath the bed, Spencer was frowning. It was so rare for anybody to criticise George as if he were a normal fallible human being. Even stranger for him to apologise so readily.

"This whole business is getting you down, isn't it?" she said. She was still in the kitchen and though her voice was loud it was clearly sympathetic.

"I'll be a lot happier when you're safe. I'm glad you agreed to leave." George's shadow crossed the doorway again, this time in the opposite direction.

"As you said - if Michael and Pierre have gone into hiding, then I should too. It makes sense."

If Spencer had any more attention to give, it was right there now.

"But now I know I'm going," she continued, "I'm quite looking forward to it. I rarely get any time to myself."

"Right," said George, without enthusiasm.

The woman finished making her coffee. Even in the bedroom the smell was noticeable. She came back into the lounge and spoke in a quieter voice. "The institute can take care of itself. I wouldn't be much of a businesswoman if it collapsed the moment I left."

"I'm sure that won't happen."

There was a pause, then the sound of a cup on a saucer. "What's bothering you?" she said, very gently.

"The whole Balloons item." George allowed himself a rare sigh. "Things are much worse than I thought. You remember I hired that old friend of mine, Spencer, to look for Raymond?"

"The guy I met at Michael's show? Yes."

Yes! Yes! Yes! And twice more yes. Jill Freedy. Dr Jill Freedy. That's who she was. The woman in awful clothes who ran an institute. An institute with a memorable name. The Institute of Movement.

"I didn't get to know him too well," continued Jill. "I left early. You remember?"

Spencer frowned once again. Why would George remember that she'd left early, when he wasn't even there?

"He did a good job. Too good. Almost got himself killed. In fact I had to fire him today."

"Did he find Raymond?" Jill sounded alarmed.

A curious thought had formed in Spencer's mind - that Jill was the fourth player in Balloons. She knew so much. And it would explain her familiarity with George.

"No, no. He has no idea. But he did find the other people who are looking. A very nasty crew. Very nasty indeed."

"Oh dear." She sounded concerned. "I hope Raymond's going to be all right."

"Me too," agreed George. "Me too."

"Is everything safe at Foxglove?"

"I'm not sure any more. The place is too big. Too many people. It's been years since I felt in control. Sometimes I feel like Dr Frankenstein - the creator of a corporate monster with a mind of its own."

Spencer stifled a groan, and it was nothing to do with the conversation. He couldn't imagine anything more fascinating to listen to. But as he'd been shimmying around, trying to get more comfortable beneath the bed, something had come into his line of sight that he really didn't want to see. The battery charger for the mobile. It was on the floor on the far side of the bedroom, plugged into a wall socket. It was too risky for him to crawl across and get it now.

"Too many place-men," continued George. "Weston's OK on security but he doesn't spot them like Spencer did. I had to wipe Raymond's company file. Yours too."

There were sounds of movements but neither of them said anything more for a while. Spencer cursed himself for paying so little attention to Jill at Michael Sorden's show. And cursed George yet again for not telling him about Raymond's file.

"That's better." George broke the silence. "More relaxed."

"Because you're with me," purred Jill, sounding very feminine. "I like that."

"Bry's so unpredictable." There was a childish whine in George's voice. Spencer hadn't heard it since they were teenagers.

"I can never quite work her out," puzzled Jill. "Two completely different sides. You never know whether you're being patronised or analysed."

"Tell me about it." The whine was still there. "She can be very difficult. Very difficult. And she swears. Really swears. I hate that in a woman. She didn't do it before we were married."

Of course she did - Spencer wanted to tell him. How could you not know that? Ah, the two of you don't talk, do you? Not really.

"I think we should change the subject. I don't like criticising people who can't answer back. She's a very interesting and attractive woman. I'm sure many men would be pleased to take her from you."

George snorted. "I'm still working on that."

They were quiet again for a while. Spencer tried to make sense of those last few comments. It was hard to tell whether Jill was being noble or extremely cutting. George's words he couldn't fathom at all.

"I'll miss you," said George, so quietly it was difficult to hear.

"I suppose this means we won't be seeing each other for a while."

"It looks that way."

Jill giggled. It sounded odd. Spencer hadn't imagined her as the giggling type.

There were sounds of movement. Suddenly the bedroom door opened wide. Spencer was quite blinded for an instant, then he could see two pairs of shoes six inches from his face: George's tan loafers and Jill's beige courts with modest but quite elegant two inch heels. The toes of the two styles were touching. There was more giggling and a groan from George. Jill's woollen skirt dropped into view, obscuring her shoes. She stepped out of it. George's hand came down and yanked off his loafers. "Here, let me get that for you," said Jill, sounding much sexier now. Then all the feet arced away and the mattress bowed down to touch Spencer on the backside for an instant as the pair tumbled into the bed.

It was difficult for him to handle. Most of all he felt sorry for Bry. She'd only been married to George for a year. What on Earth did he see in tweedy Jill Freedy that he couldn't find in Bry? Something Oedipal, perhaps? But then in Spencer's experience people's sexual inclinations were rarely worth second-guessing. They were always weirder than you could safely imagine. At least George - in common with many unfaithful partners - wasn't using the marital bed.

He listened to the noises above, not wanting to hear them yet not wanting to miss them - a classic dilemma for a healthy but moral mind. It was all very straightforward and strangely innocent. They sounded like schoolchildren. Actually it was rather sweet. After a while he found himself smiling.

Pretty soon the bottom of the mattress was bouncing up and down like the middle of a diaphragm pump. It came so low it kept hitting Spencer on the bum, making him feel like an active and very unwilling participant. A *menage a trois* conducted through the condom of a mattress. His smile soon faded. The blows on the bum pressed his genitals hard against the carpet. Of all the ways George had screwed him, this had to be the most displeasing. The pair on top grunted like pigs in a turnip field. It was a very tedious activity to listen to, especially from such an uncomfortable position. A lot of groans and squelches and squeaks above a very consistent rhythm, but nothing to get your teeth into. No plot, no melody. He began to pray that George suffered from premature ejaculation. He couldn't

wait for the finale. It was like being stuck in a cinema watching a film he didn't like but in the centre of a row and too close to the credits to justify leaving. And with somebody's spastic knee knocking his spine from the row behind.

It lasted twenty-five minutes. Spencer timed it. Finally Jill wailed for the gabba-gabba god that women call to and George the pig found an extremely large and very juicy turnip in the field and it was all over, bar the post-coital cuddle, which George immediately announced - very fairly but rather unromantically - couldn't go past ten minutes or Jill would miss her plane. Jill murmured a regretful acknowledgement and did something that sounded matronly with the bedclothes. Spencer pulled faces underneath the bed and wished they'd both get the hell out - maybe finish the post-coital stuff by telephone.

After a ten minute sample of eternity, the mattress shifted and George's feet appeared on the carpet, still with socks on. Spencer wondered rather flippantly whether this was Jill's prime attractive feature - that she was the only woman in the world who would tolerate being made love to by a man still wearing his socks. But he was brought back to Earth very quickly when Jill's feet, still stockinged, joined George's and she said: "Oh. Another battery-charger. That wasn't there before."

Spencer held his breath. What would George make of it?

"Probably one of Bry's," was the answer. "I bet she's forgotten where she put it. She'll have another one by now."

"Why would she leave it in here?"

"Maybe she thinks it looks ugly - doesn't fit with the furnishings. I don't know."

Clearly he didn't care either. That seemed to be the end of the matter. The pair got dressed. Spencer's ordeal was over; apart from one final twist that really had him biting his tongue and wanting to get out from under the bed right now and explode at George. But he managed to resist.

"How's Raymond?" asked Jill, as she stepped out of the room.

"Oh, he's fine," replied George. "Same as ever. Kite the happy innocent. I called by to see him for ten minutes this evening."

14 *Walk this way*

Finally Spencer's body had its well-deserved rest. But his mind remained active while he slept. He dreamed tremulous dreams. In one of them he was being chased by Kohl and Diamond again. Kohl was still the red vinyl record folded into the shape of a mouth, but now the record was cracked, splintered into a hundred pieces all loosely hanging together in the air, and Kohl's cold voice was full of broken crackles too, which actually made it sound less menacing. "Get him Diamond," it was saying. "Shoot him Diamond." And Diamond was wrapped in bandages like an Egyptian mummy, some of them trailing as he ran; his pointed head still very distinct beneath the wrapping. Spencer wasn't running along a railway line. He was swimming along a canal, still with embankments on either side and a tunnel ahead, and swimming fast enough to outpace the running mummy, which was impossible of course but then this was a dream. George was standing on the left embankment, watching impassively, and the blue sky was full of childish kites and gaily coloured balloons moving in all directions and often overlapping. When they overlapped they sometimes copulated, briefly.

Finally Spencer swam into the tunnel and to his surprise it was perfectly safe in there. It was dark but there was no danger. Very peaceful.

He remembered this dream when he woke up and tried to make some sense of it for the first few minutes, but then it started to slip away, as dreams do, leaking from his mind and refusing to be recollected, so he had to give up.

He looked at his watch. His right arm was unbelievably stiff. Half past twelve. He'd been asleep for more than thirteen hours. He'd have to get moving. There were important things he needed to do today, starting with a drive to Hatrim and Son - No Longer Trading - in Elmland, to pick up the results of his records search into Raymond Kite.

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The good news in Elmland was that Raymond Kite's recorded history was not straightforward.

Old man Hatrim wasn't in. His son said the old man was taking a vacation. When Spencer had last paid a visit, the old man was around but the son had been taking a holiday. It seemed that the old man and the son took it in turns to go on vacation, anything from a year to eighteen months, depending on the judge.

Hatrim Junior was a handsome but distracted young man who bounced around the office without apparent purpose while he talked. As he handed over the sheaf of papers he volunteered a few comments on Mr Kite's details. The main irregularities he'd noticed were gaps in Raymond's credit card use, breaks lasting many weeks, which could mean anything but definitely meant something. Also he was suspicious of the medical records. He couldn't point to anything specific, but had a hunch they'd been - as he put it - doctored.

It was a thorough job. Almost all Raymond Kite's financial and medical records for the last four years were there, a huge volume of material, almost three hundred sheets, too many papers for Spencer to look through right now. He'd have to leave it until he got back to the apartment.

It struck him that the average mall-weary citizen would be appalled to know how easy it was for a stranger with a few thousand dollars to look through the electronic trash-can of their life, at the accidental intimacy of the details to be found there: a certain taste in restaurants, clothes, holiday destinations, a favoured gas-station and amount of fuel consumed. Salary from bank records, amount of mortgage, standing orders, insurance, subscriptions to magazines, hobby groups. Modern life leaves an electronic trail, a set of billing footprints in the ether, transactional spoor.

For the moment, it was enough to know that Raymond's spoor showed the electronic equivalent of a distinctive limp.

*

Jill Freedy was on his mind. As the fourth player in Balloons she was still a mystery. He felt he ought to find out more about her, even if she'd removed herself from the scene by flying off to China, so from Elmland he drove to her institute, the place with the mysterious name, the Institute of Movement.

It was at 354 Westway, amongst the factories and distribution agencies of the airport approach roads, housed in a very plain building, a square concrete box sitting like an island in the middle of a blacktop sea. The sea was its parking lot, currently half full. There were no windows in the front wall apart from those in the entrance doors. Air-conditioning units and water tank perched on the roof added to the unsightliness. It brought to mind the kind of roadhouse that Spencer always tried to

avoid, the kind with all its odd shapes on the outside and a perfectly square interior ominously equipped with a stage.

He parked in the tarmac marina and made his way inside. The reception area was surprisingly pleasant. It was large and well fitted-out with a lush blue carpet and black leatherette seats. The walls were dark and the lighting subdued. To the left was a reception counter with an office behind. The seats didn't face the counter, they faced the far wall where a video was showing. Spencer could see the backs of the half dozen people watching it.

"Can I help you?" asked the receptionist, showing her perfect teeth. She was in her mid-twenties and very pretty beneath the make-up. Her blond hair fitted closely around her face like a customised helmet.

"A friend told me about the institute," said Spencer, breezily, "and I thought I'd drop by, see what you were about."

The receptionist spotted his torn ear and grazed neck but did her best to avoid looking at them. "Here is a list of our courses," she said, handing him a brochure. "You may wish to take a seat and enjoy our presentation - The Politics Of Ambulation. This will give you an insight into the work of the institute." She must have said those same words a thousand times before. All the polish of inflexion had been worn away.

"Thanks. I think I will."

Spencer was about to move from the counter, but then decided he wasn't satisfied with this little social encounter. The poor girl was probably forced to repeat that single approved response, client after client, day after day. He wanted to give her the chance to jump out of auto mode and say something original, something she'd made up herself. So he asked her: "Does the video play all day?"

"The presentation is shown continuously during office hours for the benefit of our patrons." Again the monotone.

"That must drive you nuts," said Spencer, hopefully.

She glared at him and said nothing. Spencer recognised his mistake and moved off to take a seat and watch the video. He chose a place on the far side of the room, well away from the counter.

On-screen a man was ambling down a street, walking with his elbows distant from his body. His shoulders twisted with each firm stride. "And this is the Action Man," said the voice-over. It was Jill Freedy. "A physical man with a great deal of bodily self-awareness. He'd be happy to take on the world."

Then Jill herself came on-screen, looking just as bland as Spencer remembered her from Michael Sorden's show. He still couldn't understand what George saw in her, though he had to admit the spinsterly image boosted her credibility as a presenter, or at least it must have done for most viewers. Personally he was finding it difficult to take her seriously after hearing her bedroom repertoire the night before. The memory amused him. He smiled. Or was it a leer?

"Quite similar to the Ambling Bear," she said. "I'm sure you'll agree, but much faster, more determined."

So the Movement in question, the mysterious part of the institute's title, was Walking, or Ambulation as the receptionist had called it.

"And now we come to a fascinating section," said Jill. "The Jive Walks."

The camera moved to the street again. A run-down street. Three black youths, filmed from the rear, were liling along in aggressive style. Then a different street and two cocky white youths with almost the same walk. It looked like New York to Spencer. Maybe Queens.

"Surprisingly," said Jill's voice, "the Jive is essentially a symptom of insecurity. It presents an aggressive face to what is seen as a hostile world. My personal favourite is this lively example."

This time the jiver was filmed below the waist only. The jive was wildly exaggerated. Very springy. Very complex. The camera moved in to show a single foot in slow motion.

"Note the movement of the heel," said Jill. "It lifts up, then pauses and comes down a little before rising to lift the foot from the floor. This gives the classic double uplift reflected in the movement of the upper body. I call this walk the Bouncy Bobber."

There was something about the presentation that Spencer didn't like. He couldn't quite pin-point it. A subtle mockery, perhaps. The film was categorising walks, trying to tie them in with psychological profiles, with character-types, and that was fine but he wasn't happy about the tone. He was about to follow up this train of thought in some depth when a voice at the reception counter stopped him dead. His heartbeat rose in tempo like a waltzing band breaking into salsa. It wasn't just a voice, it was *the* voice. It was Kohl's. The voice of Antarctic winter.

"I realise Dr Freedy is away," it was saying. "But it is extremely important that I get in touch with her. I'd just like you to give me a number where I can contact her."

I bet you would, thought Spencer. So he wasn't the only person to find out that Jill Freedy was the fourth player in Balloons. Despite the temptation he didn't turn to look. Rather he turned the other way. He guessed that Kohl must have glanced around the room when he came in and must have seen

him already, but only from the back, and not recognised him. If Kohl realised who he was, the consequences would be, well, not worth contemplating.

"What do you mean, nobody knows?" Kohl was protesting. "She's the director of this institute, isn't she? How can you not know where she is?"

Spencer was caught in a dilemma. It was risky for him to leave and equally risky to stay. If Kohl saw him he'd have no chance. His body was still recovering from the falls and wasn't up to anything spectacular. It would be in far worse shape if Kohl got his hands on it.

In turning away from Kohl he'd also turned side-on to the video screen and was now facing a blank wall. A ridiculous position. He opened the brochure and began to study it intently, close to his face, as if struggling in the poor light. He could smell the print on the page, and even the leatherette of the seat. He hadn't noticed that smell when he sat down.

The brochure offered ten courses, including Deportment, Active Alexander Technique, Nude Movement and Shallow Wading - the last held in a swimming centre. All the courses were aimed at one thing: improving locomotion. According to the institute, the way people walked was a reflection of their character, and usually a subconscious reflection that gave away a lot of information. For example it could give away a general attitude to the world, a type of upbringing, a physical self-image or level of sensuality. And the principle of the institute was that walks could be changed, that it was possible to alter a walk to present a better image, or take on a neutral style that gave nothing away.

This certainly struck a chord with Spencer. He remembered that as a security guard he'd paid a lot of attention to the motion of people who approached him. If they were going to cause trouble or just generally be awkward it was usually signalled in the way they walked. This was especially true of people with some kind of mental imbalance.

"Well surely somebody knows where she is." Kohl was still pushing the receptionist hard. "What about her assistant, her secretary?"

The Politics Of Ambulation moved on to power-walks: the Strut, the Busy Bee, the Proprietor. Spencer couldn't see them on the screen, but could hear Jill's voice describing them.

"The Busy Bee has far too much to do and flits from flower to flower feeling indispensable..."

That could be Bry sometimes, when things overwhelmed her. Spencer realised he'd never seen Kohl walk, never seen him in motion. He also realised it was impossible even to pretend to concentrate on the brochure with Kohl in the same room. He simply wasn't a camouflage animal. He needed to flee, not hide. He'd have to make a break for it soon.

The receptionist mumbled something to Kohl that Spencer couldn't make out. Surely she'd realise soon that she wasn't up to dealing with this belligerent and imposing man. She'd have to bring in a more senior colleague. While Kohl waited for the reinforcements to arrive, he'd look around, as waiting people do, and the danger would be intensified. The break had to be now, while Kohl was busy with his bullying, or never. Spencer rose slowly and didn't look in Kohl's direction. He tried to keep his face turned away. He had no idea whether Kohl was watching him.

Jill moved on to the Deadbeat Shuffle, describing it as a clear sign of low self-esteem. No, no, no. Spencer disagreed. Low social-esteem. Not quite the same thing. He felt he'd seen enough deadbeats to know. Then it occurred to him that he himself could have a Deadbeat Shuffle and not even realise it. Very few people would know what category their own walk fell into, unless they were unfortunate enough to be on Jill's video. That was half the reason why walks gave so much away.

It was a disastrous thought. He concentrated so hard on how he was walking that he forgot how to do it normally. It was like thinking too much about how to ride a bicycle or swim. The coordination fell away in an instant and wouldn't return. But he was half-way to the door now and had to walk properly in some style or other, otherwise he would draw attention to himself, so in desperation he decided to copy one of the walks he'd seen on screen, and chose the Ambling Bear because it looked relatively easy.

"No, I don't mind waiting," Kohl was saying, while sounding as if he minded a lot.

Spencer was glad he hadn't chosen a more difficult style, because it was hard enough to bring off the Bear. Consciously trying to walk in a particular style was tougher than it looked. All credit to actors. But he managed to lumber the rest of the way to the door, legs moving heavily, arms and shoulders swinging. There was a huge temptation to look at Kohl, to see if he was watching. Surely Kohl had noticed it was a journey of two halves, of two different styles, a split Marathon - as it felt. But Spencer resisted the urge to turn. He opened the door and was beginning to think he was home and free when Kohl finally became suspicious. He called, very loudly, "Excuse me!"

Still Spencer didn't look round. That was the oldest trick in the book and he wasn't going to fall for it. He walked through the doorway and felt a sudden surge of panic. What if Diamond and Alex were waiting outside?

But they weren't. He kept up the amble all the way to the car in case Kohl was watching through the door, although every muscle in his body, even the most abused ones, wanted to break into a run. At any moment he expected to hear Kohl's footsteps behind, checking to find out why his commanding voice had been disobeyed.

But it didn't happen. From behind, at least, a false walk was clearly a decent disguise. He got to the car, sat well back to keep his head in the shadow of the roof, and quietly drove away, heart still thumping like the jungle drums of Borneo.

15 *Changed history*

Back at the Rushmore Square apartment, Spencer poured himself a large and ancient armagnac from one of George's decanters to ease his nerves. He didn't want to think about the close call with Kohl, so to distract himself he spread Raymond Kite's records over the floor of the lounge and lay on his belly sifting through them while he sipped his smooth medicine.

The breaks in Raymond's credit card use lasted between four and six weeks and occurred roughly, but not exactly, once a year. It was as if he went on vacation somewhere that didn't take plastic money or where every expense was paid. Vacations would have made a neat explanation if the breaks hadn't been so long. Valley employers, Foxglove included, didn't allow their managers that kind of freedom. Anything more than a whole week was seen as desertion. A second problem was that some pre-vacation spending should have shown up - new clothes, maybe airline tickets - but it wasn't there. Business travel as an explanation was a non-starter too. Raymond's company cards followed exactly the same patterns as his others.

His previous employer was Warren Logic, a company famous throughout the valley for its attempts to implant microchips in rabbits' brains. The outfit had capitalised easily during an electronics boom, and collapsed three years later when the backers had realised that there really was nothing more to the company than producing highly intelligent rabbits. Yet even this oddball enterprise was run on typical valley lines and wouldn't have allowed Raymond such long breaks without a very good reason.

An even greater puzzle was posed by the medical records. They showed very little sick leave, just one week for influenza two years ago. A year before that, Raymond had suffered whiplash injuries in a car accident, but hadn't taken time off work. Curiously, smack in the middle of a big gap in credit card use, he'd visited his doctor to have a mole removed. Most curious of all, it was clear from the bank records that he paid very high medical insurance, five times higher than normal, presumably

because he was high risk, yet there was nothing in the medical records to suggest why. Nothing at all. As Hatrim had said, the records didn't look right. They were abnormally normal.

Spencer began to drift off into wondering how Raymond walked. Clearly The Politics of Ambulation was still on his mind. Would his walk be off-the-wall or abnormally normal too? What category would Jill slot him into: Air-Head Float, Computer-Nerd Mince, or something magnificent - a Regal Papal Stroll? It was impossible to guess without seeing Raymond in motion.

Ambulation was certainly an interesting way of categorising people, of partially defining them, of trying to guess something about their personalities. It was surely no coincidence that it shared something here with the two existing elements of Balloons - eyes and voices, Michael and Pierre's specialities. Eyes and voices fitted categories too and were commonly used as guides to personality. George had talked about measuring them as part of Balloons, though it was difficult to know whether anything he'd said was true. Jill Freedy and ambulation could be a simple extension of this. Spencer tried to figure out how it all fitted together, what Balloons was truly about, but George's explanation of altering attractiveness kept bulldozing its way into his thoughts and refusing to go away even though he had no faith in it, so he didn't make much progress.

Something else still exercising his mind was George's final comment to Jill about seeing Raymond Kite for ten minutes before he came to the apartment. What on Earth was George up to? He appeared to have hired Spencer to find somebody whose whereabouts he already knew. That didn't make sense. But then with George anything was possible. It was probably part of some grand devious plan.

On a more practical level, at least it told Spencer that Raymond wasn't very far away. George wouldn't make a long detour to see somebody for just ten minutes. Raymond couldn't be more than half an hour off a line drawn between Foxglove and Rushmore Square. Unfortunately that covered most of the valley and the city too, but it was still good to know that Raymond was close by.

He turned his attention back to the medical records. The more he looked at them the more false they seemed. The day after he'd been to the doctor to complain about his whiplash injury, Raymond had played golf. It was there on a credit card bill. That couldn't be right. It was as if these were somebody else's records, copied and filed under Raymond's name. But who would do such a thing? Raymond was a computer whiz-kid, that's why Foxglove had employed him. Perhaps he'd hacked into a computer and done it himself. But why? Because his real medical records gave too much away?

Spencer was still lost in thought over the issue when a key slipped into the lock of the apartment door and it suddenly opened.

16 *Creased papers*

"Well don't look so surprised. This is my apartment."

Spencer was still kneeling on the floor amongst the Raymond Kite papers. He let out a big sigh of relief.

"Who were you expecting?" Bry was in an odd mood. Spencer could hear it in her voice. It was playful, slightly dangerous. And her hair was down.

"I don't know. Maybe George." That was one bad option. The other was Kohl. It was the thought of Kohl walking through the door that had worried him most. Was he getting paranoid? Clearly his nerves weren't in good shape.

"George's in Japan. He's gone for the day. He won't be back until tomorrow lunchtime." Bry looked at him hard, apparently trying to assess his state of mind, then she looked at the papers on the floor. Spencer had sorted them chronologically into long rows so he could easily cross-reference the records for any date. There was barely any floor-space left.

"What are you doing?" she asked, still sounding dry and mischievous. These kind of moods could last for hours and be very entertaining or suddenly turn into a sad and aimless anger, like a thunderstorm following a warm and pleasant day.

"Looking at Raymond Kite's credit card histories."

"How did you get hold of those?"

"Through a crooked agency." The question had been conversational. It didn't require a detailed answer.

She stepped gingerly through the papers and knelt on the floor next to him. He could smell her perfume. It was strange not being able to recognise it. She was probably using more expensive brands these days. He wanted to tell her how good she looked, how nice she smelled, but instead he told her about the gaps in Raymond's spending and his strange medical records. She looked through the

papers with him for more than twenty minutes but didn't come up with anything new. Yet it was still useful to have somebody to share his theories with, somebody to confirm the inconsistencies were real.

"George fired you, didn't he?" She stood up and moved towards the kitchen.

"He did. I don't know what he's playing at. He knows a lot more than he's telling me."

"But you're not giving up, are you?" She was out of sight now, filling the kettle.

"No I'm not."

"I didn't think you would." It sounded as if she approved, even though it was her husband who'd fired him. "Coffee?"

"OK." He'd been ignoring the glass of armagnac since Bry's arrival, as if somebody else had left it there.

He wondered whether he should clear the papers away, but their draw was too great. He was still on his knees looking through them five minutes later when Bry came back into the lounge with their drinks. Her hips seemed to be swinging more than usual, presumably with the effort of keeping the coffee cups steady. She handed him his coffee and looked at him, very intensely, and for a second he was sure she was going to say something about their past. But she didn't.

"You're obsessed by this, aren't you?"

"Yes. I am." He could see now that he'd worked himself into a stalemate on the records. His mind was no longer making fresh moves, merely repeating old ones. He gave up and moved to the sofa to drink his coffee. Bry sat on the sofa too.

"I would have called to let you know I was coming. But I guess you wouldn't have answered the phone here in the apartment. At least I hope not."

"No," agreed Spencer. That reminded him that he should give Bry the number of his new mobile. He did it right away, before he forgot. She wrote it down in the pocket book of her purse.

They drank their coffees and didn't say anything more for a while.

Spencer wasn't comfortable with the silence. Nor had he been satisfied by their conversation. They both had important things to say but weren't saying them. He knew he should mention the institute at some point, but that would mean talking about Jill Freedy and he wasn't sure how well he could handle that. Bry had a habit of hearing more in his voice than he intended to say. Or did he really want to tell her everything? Was that why he was reluctant - because he might blurt out the details of George's affair without any consideration of timing? Strangely he sensed that whatever Bry was withholding it wasn't criticism of his pass at the hotel room.

"I think I've discovered who the fourth player in Balloons is," he began. It was the best introduction he could think of. It narrowed the subject down from the start. Yet he didn't risk eye contact. "The director of the Institute of Movement, Dr Jill Freedy. You remember? She was at Michael Sorden's show."

"The fourth player?" Bry frowned. She thought about this for a while. "You know, you could be right. I've seen her at Foxglove once or twice." Not a trace of suspicion there. "What does she do? I mean, what does the institute do?"

Spencer lifted the brochure from the floor and described the presentation - the Politics of Ambulation. Bry seemed quite taken by it, especially the power walks - the Proprietor, the Strut, the Busy Bee.

"I'm trying to work out how it fits in with the Balloons project."

"Mmmm," murmured Bry, distractedly, with the coffee cup at her lips.

"Eyes, voice, movement. I can see a connection but I can't see where it all leads."

When she lowered her coffee cup he could see that her face had fallen. The mischievous smile had disappeared. With no warning at all, her mood had changed. The storm had arrived.

"What are you thinking about?" If he was very quick he might bring her out of it, though the chances weren't good. Otherwise she'd probably leave. Her way of dealing with a storm was to stay away from other people until it rained itself out.

"It's just that - you're getting involved in all these interesting things, and my life is so boring." She sighed noisily. "I go to work and it's the same shit, day after day. Being nice to people I dislike, telling half-truths, fixing other people's screw-ups because I'm in charge. It drives me insane. I'm wasting my life."

The same old Bry complaint, then. No change there. Spencer had heard it a score of times when they'd lived together, though perhaps he hadn't been so sympathetic then. He hadn't disliked his security job, simply seen it as most people do, as an unfortunate but necessary compromise in life, right up until the moment it demanded he shoot two fifteen year-olds.

Yet there was one obvious difference in Bry's life now. She was rich.

"Why don't you just give it up? You don't need the money."

"Because with George everything is about success. He only respects successful people. If I gave up work it would be the beginning of the end."

There's some truth in that, thought Spencer. And then he realised it was probably another reason why he himself was finding it so difficult to deal with George - because he had no title to go with his

job, no formal position worthy of respect. George's casual attitude to life hid the fact that he was obsessed with status. Even his casualness was really a status game itself. He was so important that he could break all the rules of formality and get away with it. Only a man at the very top could do that.

"I'm not making the world a better place," continued Bry, rather loudly. "I'm not adding truth and beauty. I'm a make-up artist hiding the warts and wrinkles of a big corporation, trying to make its ugly face seductive."

"Very few people do anything worthwhile. Most of us are just cogs in the machine."

That line of reasoning didn't satisfy Bry in the slightest. "Great. So I shouldn't worry if I'm wasting away in the mechanism, because a lot of other people are stuck there too. And what about you? You're not part of the machine. George's kicked you out of the machine but you're still whirling round. I'm just saying that what you're doing's more interesting than what I'm doing, that's all."

Spencer couldn't think of a reply to this, so he said nothing.

"And it pisses me off," added Bry, emphatically.

"Sorry."

Bry carried on in a quieter voice. Less angry, more sullen. "It's so fucking soul-less. Computers. The whole computer business. I hate it."

"But most of your work is with people, not computers."

"I think it's because you only use one side of the brain with a computer - the rational side. Really we should all have lopsided heads. Maybe they are, inside."

"People," he repeated. "You're dealing with people. That's your job."

"With journalists. Not quite the same thing. Charming the beasts. Feeding them easy stories and keeping them away from the embarrassing details. What did you used to call public relations?"

Spencer didn't really want to answer this, but he couldn't see an easy way out. It would infuriate her if he said he couldn't remember. "Organised lying."

"And I called it commercial diplomacy. That's the whole P.R. battle in a nutshell, isn't it? Lying or diplomacy. Ugly words versus pleasant words. Sometimes I think you have it right. I've got a big press-conference tomorrow, and I would say that about eighty percent of what I'll be presenting is pure hype, commercial unreality. I think it damages me, you know, speaking nonsense most of the time."

"No," said Spencer, shaking his head rapidly. "It gives you the power to tell bullshit from truth, to tell crap from candour, not many people have that. You do."

This time he got through. Bry looked at him blankly, then turned away. "I think it's probably the press conference that's bothering me. Too much stress."

"You're not really any happier than you were two years ago, are you?" said Spencer, as gently as he could.

Bry shook her head. "No. I'm not. I thought marrying George would change things. But if anything it just means I've got less time. It sounds crazy, but we never get a chance to spend any of that money. Not really. We probably manage two evenings a week together, and one of those will be business. I don't like the lifestyle."

Bry got up from the sofa, presumably forced off it by her nervous energy. She didn't seem to have any particular activity in mind. She walked two paces, avoiding the papers on the floor, and stopped. "You must feel very alive, living on the edge."

"What do you mean?"

"Being in danger. People say it's when they feel they're really alive, really conscious of living - skydivers, rock-climbers, people like that."

It hadn't struck Spencer before, but it was true. The feeling wasn't easy to describe. An awareness of life and living, like a focus where before there'd been a blur. "I suppose so."

"I wouldn't know," said Bry, bitterly.

Spencer swallowed hard. Suddenly he felt nervous. He could feel his heart pump. A strange thought had occurred to him, arriving in his mind like a firework - one that isn't very pretty but makes a loud noise. She was down. She didn't go down much further than this. And she was always strong, never fragile, even when she was down. So in a perverse way this was the time when she was least sensitive, when she could feel the least additional pain.

"How well do you know Jill Freedy?" he asked.

"What?" The change of subject had Bry confused for an instant. "Hardly at all. I've met her perhaps..." She thought for a moment. "Three times? I admire her in a way. But I don't think we could ever be friends."

"I hate having to tell you this." Spencer forced the words past the frog in his throat. "And I'm really sorry. But I think George knows her extremely well."

There. He'd said it. Or had he been too afraid, too obscure? No. He looked at Bry and could see straight away she understood. The boulder was in motion and couldn't be stopped. God knows what the consequences would be.

Bry visibly stiffened, like she'd been stung by an insect but was trying not to let it show. Her face coloured. If she'd looked stormy before, she was a tempest now. She strode the two paces back to Spencer and slapped him so hard that it knocked him off balance and he sprawled across the sofa. He sat up quickly, knowing there was more to come. He grabbed her wrists as she tried to pull his hair.

"I know!" she yelled. She was screaming at him, so loud it hurt his ears. "I know! I know! I fucking know!"

"Bry! Bry?" he pleaded, softly. "Don't kill the messenger."

She muttered unintelligible curses. He had her wrists securely but he couldn't keep them still. They were moving way beyond her strength. It was all he could do to keep them away from his body.

Suddenly they went limp.

"How did you know?" he asked, confused.

"I didn't know who." She still looked and sounded fearsome, glaring down at him. At least the physical battle had stopped. "But I knew."

"How?"

"Oh fuck." She spat out the words. "When will men ever learn? You don't know, in a rational sense, you feel it. You can even tell when they've had sex, for Christ's sake. He had sex last night. I knew."

Spencer released her hands. It was still intimidating, having her standing there over him. He stood up awkwardly. There was barely enough space for him between her and the sofa. She didn't move. Her eyes stared steadily into his. He hoped his timing was right, not for what he'd said but for what he was about to do, because if he got it wrong, there'd be no recovery from it, ever.

He pressed his lips to hers and moved his tongue between them. She squeaked like a rubber duck underfoot, struggled for a moment and went still as his tongue carried on working. She was thinking. He could tell. Not thinking in a rational sense but with that other side of the brain. Then she forced his tongue out with hers and probed the forgotten landscape of his mouth, hesitantly at first, then with feeling.

Their arms wrapped around each other like four lemurs' tails. A big loving hug, clearing away all the fears and disappointments of two years for two people. All erased as if by magic. Yes, by magic.

Bry released first. They separated, but only by inches. They said nothing but talked with their eyes, dilated pupils locked, a conversation without words, discussing the ineffable. All their history was in that gaze. They met, courted, mated, moved in together, then split but could barely remember why.

Bry brought her lips to Spencer's again, more passionately. His hands made their way down her back and over her buttocks, tracing spiralling light circles either side of the crease between them, circles edging lower and lower until they reached those two familiar, sensitive spots where her buttocks tucked into her thighs. The most delicate of fingertip circles there. The wingtip touch of rotating butterflies.

Bry spasmed involuntarily, pushing her pelvis into Spencer's.

Her fingers moved from a tight grip on his shoulders to below his ears. Catching him unawares, she drew the tips lightly down both sides of his neck and into his collar. A direct hit on his own weakest flesh. He grunted and raised his shoulders in pointless defence. His fingers stalled.

The kiss moved from soft to brutal quickly, bruising, carnal by consent. Spencer's hands on her breasts, hers descending to grapple with his belt buckle, his fly.

She twisted and slowly pulled him to the floor in a falling tango flourish, leading him down with gently magnetic lips. She straddled him, using his hands to push up her skirt, then her own to push her panties to one side. And magically, without guidance or clumsy manoeuvring, he was inside her, little spasms rocking her body and gripping him in brief, electric contractions. She groaned muted animal sounds.

The Raymond Kite papers rustled and crumpled beneath their bodies, neglected in passion.

*

We are the only man and woman in the world, you and I. My name is Adam and you are Eve. Two snakes rise up from the ground and coil around each other in a plaited embrace, as snakes do when they make love. I am a mountain and the mist is creeping over me. I am a leaf unfolding in that dewy fog revealing a red-eyed frog ignoring a humming bird tasting the diamond-shine water of an orchid's waking pee. Two dragonflies dancing back to back. Velvet hairs cleaning a vinyl groove. Yes! A wide-eyed dark-haired little girl asleep on her father's chest on a night bus, her arms embracing his neck. A hair on that chest.

How much power in an earthquake compared to a locomotive?

If this is an animal it tastes so good it must soon become extinct.

I am a vintage wine, a Black Forest dark bread, a moth setting out on the ultimate journey to the bright white light of the moon. I am a floating heart-shaped balloon. I am marsh-grass staying still in the teeth of a howling wind, a small boy swimming nude in a sunny reservoir, in the clear-watered eye of a field of reeds. The reservoir water rises and falls, breathing like a tide; up and down, up and down. Breathing deeply. Sighing with pleasure. The water distinctly moans.

It moans for a long time.

*

Strangely, after the power of their union, after the fusion heat of their joining like two halves of a critical mass, after the spiritual flash-weld, orgasm itself came as a feeble physical sensation; the reservoir dam finally giving way, the concrete splintering into a thousand parts, all sinking undramatically into the water, which bears them away uncomplainingly off down the tree-lined valley, until Spencer hears Bry's final howl above the sound of his own earthy groan and the reservoir runs dry.

They lay there side by side on the Raymond Kite papers as if they were a bed. Both exhausted, satisfied, brainless, panting for breath. Too tired even to hold each other.

Bry recovered first. "I'm going to take a shower and then I'm going to go."

Spencer was too mindless to be more than slightly surprised. He raised one knee for her to grasp on her way up. She hesitated, then accepted.

He listened to the running water for a while, then fastened his pants and regarded the crumpled papers with amusement. There was still some armagnac in the glass he'd abandoned. He sat on the floor and sipped it, straightening out the papers and tidying them into a stack.

Bry came out of the bathroom fully dressed. She didn't look at him. She wasn't smiling and she moved briskly, yet her movements couldn't hide the fact that her body had recently found pleasure.

She walked across to Spencer and kissed him on the forehead. "We'll talk tomorrow. Don't forget you'll have to move out soon." Then she headed for the door and passed through it without the slightest hesitation, clearly as confused, in her own special way, as he was.

17 *It's what you do, it's not where you do it*

Bry was in touch far sooner than expected. At ten past eight the following morning Spencer's mobile rang, waking him. He started what would turn out to be the biggest day of his life with a groan.

"Yes, Bry?" he said, sounding sleepy and miserable. Nobody else had the number.

"You're on TV." She was full of excitement and speaking rapidly. "At least I think it's you. I don't think I'd get it wrong."

"What?"

"Channel 10. The News."

"Why on Earth would I be on TV?"

"I don't know," protested Bry. "Why don't you get off your lazy ass and find out?"

Spencer rose from the bed. His body felt slightly better than yesterday. The quality of movement had risen from bad to poor. He struggled through to the lounge, still holding the mobile to his undamaged ear.

"They're asking if you're the phantom video-watcher or something along those lines."

If that was an explanation it was hardly complete. Spencer found the remote and switched on Channel 10. He watched a dozen young and very beautiful people in the sunshine, laughing and smiling to the accompaniment of feel-good rock music and throwing their arms about for no particular reason.

"It's a soft-drinks commercial," he said, puzzled.

Bry sighed down the line. "It's the commercial break. You're on after. I saw you on the coming-up-next trailer."

"Oh." Spencer rubbed his eyes. He still wasn't fully awake.

The soft-drinks commercial climaxed out. Channel Ten news restarted. There were two anchormen, both in their sixties although they looked younger. Solid. Reliable. The kind of people you could trust to give good information. A joint byline flashed beneath them: With Ted Veger and Yul Samuels.

"Police are baffled by a break-in at the Institute of Movement, on Westway," began Ted. Spencer was definitely awake now. The institute came on screen, looking uglier than ever. "The incident happened in the small hours of this morning. The burglars successfully disarmed a sophisticated alarm system and police describe them as professionals. But there was one thing they forgot to do."

"You watching?" asked Bry.

"You bet."

The picture returned to the studio. It was Yul's turn to speak. "They forgot to steal anything. Staff at the institute, which runs courses aimed at improving personal carriage, double-checked property in the laboratory section - the only area disturbed by the intruders - but nothing appears to be missing. Valuable electronic equipment worth half a million dollars was ignored by the thieves, who felt they had something better to do with their time."

A brief shot of the laboratory followed. It looked like a cross between the Foxglove labs that Spencer was familiar with and a movie-maker's editing suite.

"They stayed for more than two hours and watched videos," said Ted, "but never more than one minute of each. Laboratory personnel are still busy rewinding the institute's entire collection of videos, some of them watched for just twenty seconds. The motive for the break-in remains a mystery. Police have been working on the theory that a member of the gang visited the institute earlier to assess security."

And there was Spencer on screen, on a security video of mercifully poor quality, talking to the receptionist with the helmet of hair. There was no soundtrack, but he could see himself mouthing the unfortunate words, 'That must drive you nuts.'

"They are interested in talking to this man, described as erratic and possibly dangerous."

"Bullshit!" yelled Spencer, indignantly. This was ridiculous.

"Staff were suspicious of his strange behaviour when he visited the institute yesterday, especially the way he walked. Studying odd walks happens to be a speciality of the institute."

The on-screen Spencer attempted the Ambling Bear, side-on to the camera. The Spencer in the Rushmore Square apartment shielded his eyes from the embarrassing spectacle with his free hand.

"Oh no." He could hear laughter, a cackling somewhere in the distance. It was coming from the mobile. He'd forgotten about Bry. "Something funny?" he asked, with mock innocence.

Bry whooped and gurgled down the line, unable to speak.

Yul gave the details of the police telephone numbers to call with information. Spencer could see Kohl in the foreground of the picture, glaring off-screen at the receptionist.

Bry was still audible on the phone. The sound of her laughter was beginning to bug Spencer. Finally she stopped. "Did you get those numbers?" she asked, feigning seriousness. "I'd better phone. I think I know him."

"Break a leg."

The news moved on to the biggest divorce settlement ever, one billion dollars to the ex-wife of Jean-Paul Reglier, the stock-market tycoon. A few seconds later it switched to a transplant of brain tissue from a pig into a human. Five people in a shopping mall were stopped and vox-popped on the issue of xenotransplantation. One short sentence each.

"I'd better go," said Bry. "I've still got this damned press-conference to amuse me. Oh, and I forgot; the cleaner comes in at mid-day. Can you move out by then? I'll give you a call later, see what you're about."

"OK." There wasn't much else Spencer could say.

Bry rang off. Spencer hit the remote to kill the TV.

They'd got their reconnaissance man on film all right, but they'd been too busy looking at Spencer to notice him. The intruders last night had been Kohl and the gang. Professional. Nothing stolen. They hadn't found what they were looking for.

"Jesus!" breathed Spencer. It couldn't be true. His mind had made a quantum leap and he was already on his way across the lounge towards George's collection of videos.

Could it really be this simple?

Michael Sorden, who was into eyes, had taken pictures of them, including Raymond Kite's - a picture that Kohl had taken from the studio along with Raymond's file. Pierre, who was into voices, recorded them, and Kohl had taken a tape of Raymond's voice from the farm. Jill was into walks and filmed them, and on the night that he'd overheard George and Jill together, George had been fiddling with a video tape, a tape he seemed to have taken from Jill's purse and which she hadn't brought for their entertainment.

Could it really be true?

He started looking through the tapes, methodically. He slipped each one out of its case and checked that the cover matched the contents. George had been fiddling with two tapes - possibly swopping them over. He didn't have to look far. He found what he was looking for in *Born on the Fourth of July*. The tape inside had a numbered code on the label and nothing more. It would be the ideal place to conceal something that even Bry wouldn't find. She hated the film, found it ridiculously sentimental.

Could this be the tape that Kohl had broken into the institute to find?

He put the tape in the machine and pressed the controls, trying hard not to fumble through excitement. For ten seconds he watched snow, followed by twenty seconds of garbage that appeared to be a check sequence, with colour and contrast charts and a clock, then a skinny man with dishevelled blond hair walked across the screen, quite purposefully, or perhaps distracted by something on the other side. His shoulders were hunched yet not stooped. He moved with a deceptive loose-limbed elegance. Spencer knew at once it was Raymond Kite even before the computerised titlework came on-screen. It showed Raymond's name and the period of filming - July and August a year ago.

Spencer had no idea how he'd recognised Raymond. He'd never seen a photograph except the one of his eyes and the figure on screen was too small for that to help. There were no clues on the soundtrack - the tape was completely silent. But he'd known, intuitively, that this was the man he was looking for. The recognition had been instant.

Raymond's face was a match for his slender body. His cheekbones were high and full. His nose was long. Despite the sun-bleached appearance of his straggly hair, his skin was pale. He wasn't handsome in a classical sense, he was too close to gaunt, but there was still something beautiful about his features.

Jill had filmed him walking normally, trotting, running, walking backwards, sideways, up stairs, down stairs, over obstacles and beneath them, all in perfect silence. His walk belonged to a delicate animal, an antelope, a strolling water-buck. Yet it was also full of humanity. Quite bursting with it. Sometimes he appeared to be a child, other times - and it was impossible to define the changes - like a sprightly old man. He could be Gandhi, calmly leading the multitudes. He could be Einstein in contemplation. He could be a Cheyenne tribal chief. Whoever he was, or appeared to be, it was somebody important, somebody who managed to combine power with humility. Spencer had never seen anyone move with such magnetic appeal.

Raymond marched and looked amused by it. He goose-stepped for a moment. He put one hand inside his shirt and strolled, Emperor Napoleon looking over the battlefield. He walked diagonally, tracing curves with his feet and laughing. He sat down, stood up, sat motionless and started swaying. He pulled faces for the camera - grotesque mouths, crossed eyes. Yes, those eyes from the gallery picture, in close-up now, ice-blue and dazzling beneath light brows, full of life and mischief and knowledge, yet not truly of this world. Blue worm-holes into a different universe.

Jill had also filmed the movements of his hands. They were long and delicate, almost feminine. She'd filmed them as he played board games - Ludo, Solitaire - fitted pieces of a jigsaw puzzle and daubed finger-paint on pristine white card. She'd filmed his feet too, and his knees, his pelvis, his neck.

Abruptly the film stopped. Spencer looked at his watch and realised to his amazement that he'd been watching the movements of Raymond Kite for half an hour. He'd been mesmerised. Time had passed at unusual speed.

He tried to recall what he'd seen, hoping to spot clues that might give away Raymond's hiding place, but he realised he'd been so engrossed in watching the man that he hadn't noticed anything else. He wiped his thumb and forefinger across his eyes and pressed the button to rewind the tape. This time he'd look at the backgrounds.

The first was a bare room. It looked artificial, somehow, like a stage. It was featureless and told him nothing. The second setting was Foxglove. A window was in shot and through it he could see a Foxglove office, though he couldn't work out exactly which one. Raymond was shuffling and grinning moronically. It was a wonderful act.

Twenty minutes later the tape came to an end and Spencer cursed. Once again he'd been watching Raymond Kite and ignoring the backgrounds. It took him another forty-five minutes to get the backgrounds for every shot. He had to keep rewinding to the various points where he lost concentration. It surprised him that a silent film with no plot could be so distracting.

And depressing, ultimately.

The breakthrough he'd been hoping for wasn't there. Not a single decent clue on the entire tape. The backgrounds were all carefully anonymous. He'd recognised Foxglove once or twice, and what he thought might be the laboratory from the Institute of Movement, but there was nothing like a hotel or somebody's home. With a plaintive sigh he switched the TV off and lay back heavily on the sofa. He'd been full of expectations and they hadn't been fulfilled. The video was a big let-down.

It was ten o'clock. He couldn't afford to lounge around feeling sorry for himself for long. He needed to take a shower and tidy the place so he was ready to leave well before Bry's cleaner arrived. He put the video back where he'd found it and went to the bathroom to start his ablution routine: the little bead of toothpaste, shampooed pubes, the felling-saw towel between his toes.

Washing was still a problem with the mass of railway track stitches covering his torso and branching off to his legs and arms. Trying to keep them dry turned a shower into an exercise in choreography and hydraulics. It took five times longer than normal. He'd dealt with it quite well before, but today found it very frustrating.

His mind kept re-running the tape - still finding no clues. How could it be so useless after slipping into his hands so easily? It struck him that maybe he'd fallen into a trap. A trap of attitude. He'd listened too well to the Professor and his talk of destiny. He'd thought his discovery of the tape was fate, something special, when it wasn't, it was purely logical. The institute wasn't safe - that had been proved last night. First homes weren't safe - as proved at Pierre's. George was concerned about security at Foxglove. So the little-known Rushmore Square apartment had been chosen simply as a relatively secure hiding place. No destiny involved. Yet still he couldn't quite believe it.

When he'd carefully towelled himself dry he went to the bedroom to dress - a smart casual suit today, it was beginning to feel like a big day - then returned to deal with the shower cubicle. He didn't want to leave any evidence that the apartment had recently been used. It wouldn't be fair on Bry. There wasn't much else he needed to do. The kitchen was in good order. He'd straightened the bed. He was such a tidy person there was almost no sign of his presence even while he was still there. He knew his tidiness was obsessive. Always tidying the present because the past can never be put in order. Can't tidy history. If Jill were to film his movements it would be doing something like this - towelling dry the surfaces of a shower cubicle. The thought amused him.

Then his wiping slowed. Maybe he'd been looking for the wrong things in the Raymond Kite tape. Maybe the locations weren't so important. Maybe the clue lay in what Raymond was doing; pulling faces, walking moronically and managing it very well, acting like Napoleon, solving jigsaw puzzles and finger-painting - just as Spencer had done all that time ago, so it seemed, with the monks in the mansion. A man with time on his hands. A man familiar with lunatic acts. A man who paid high medical insurance and disappeared for periods of time when he didn't spend any money.

The wiping stopped.

A mad genius. That had been Spencer's first impression when he'd seen the picture of Raymond Kite's eyes.

Frantically he stabbed at the last few droplets of water. He rushed back to the bedroom, grabbed his new clothes from the wardrobe, picked up the Raymond Kite papers, remembered the battery recharger - just - stole the towel because it was still wet and swept out of the apartment to the car, almost at a run.

He knew where Raymond was. Not exactly, but within an asylum or two.

18 *The Napoleonic pretender*

The Sharpe Hospital was on a quiet sidestreet near Candlewick Park. It was the city's main mental institution and Spencer felt it was the most likely place to find Raymond. He knew of one other but that was out past Elmland, an hour's drive away.

The building was pale and long, with office-style windows and occasional recesses to break up the monotony of its length as it carried on and on into the distance. It wasn't especially pretty but nor was it an eyesore. A few eucalyptus trees had been planted on the grassy bank outside to give shade. Their height made the six floors appear smaller.

Spencer parked on the street and walked back to the entrance behind the empty ambulance bay. He asked the woman at the front desk for Raymond Kite. She was in her late forties and noticeably bright-eyed and alert, as if some universal mechanism were compensating for the presence of so many troubled people in the rest of the building. She checked her computer and directed him to the Magnolia Ward. It was that easy.

He followed a long corridor heading for the southern end of the building. Surprisingly few people were around. There was an air of tranquillity about the place, even in the corridor. Two male nurses and one female passed him in the opposite direction, each giving him a brief smile. Two other people passed by in ordinary street clothes. They seemed normal. Through a doorway to the left he spied a man in white trousers mopping a floor. Ordinary enough except he was wearing a US Navy shirt and sailor's cap. The man noticed Spencer and said "Hi."

A cleaner in odd clothes, he decided, not a patient. He was looking forward to seeing his first patient. He'd never visited a mental institution before.

Magnolia Ward was on the right, through an open double doorway leading straight into the dayroom. There seemed to be no security of any kind. If a patient had wanted to walk out of the

place, there was nothing to stop them apart from the length of the corridor and the friendly receptionist.

The ward was relatively peaceful too. Half a dozen patients were watching television - Warner Brothers cartoons, Loony Tunes, a curious input from the sane world outside. Half of them showed no reaction to what was happening on-screen. The others were over-emotional. They writhed in pleasure when a chicken or rabbit fell a hundred feet or was splattered by a cannonball. Two patients were playing chess. Another four sat motionless with their backs to the wall. One of these was talking to himself, perpetually, talking nonsense. The strange thing was, after a few seconds Spencer stopped noticing it.

There was a single nurse in the room. He seemed to be trying to persuade one of the inert patients watching TV to do something, bending over him and speaking quietly in his ear. Another appeared briefly from a side-door and disappeared again. It was nothing like Spencer had imagined. There was no bedlam. It was the lounge of a large country house with weird house-guests. There was even a garden outside, with grass and flowers and open patio doors leading out to it.

The nurse saw Spencer but ignored him for a minute. Then he looked again and cocked his head as if to say - Can I help you?

"Raymond Kite," said Spencer.

Still the nurse said nothing. He pointed to the garden. Spencer walked through the dayroom and out into the open air.

It was nice outside. The garden was well cared for and far larger than it appeared from indoors. The grass was dark green and close-cropped. What Spencer had assumed were flowerbeds turned out to be flowering shrubs - presumably less liable to damage by patients. A tall brick wall surrounded the garden on all sides, mostly camouflaged by a band of bushes and trees, their leaves moving contentedly in the breeze. When his eyes had adjusted to the light he could make out Raymond Kite sitting on a park-bench at the bottom of the garden, close to the left hand wall. The bench looked like it ought to be the other way round, facing into the garden rather than towards the wall, but Raymond appeared to be quite happy there, staring into the shrubbery.

Spencer walked over to him. He had the strange feeling of not belonging, that this was a community of a sort, with members who were familiar with each other even if they weren't always familiar with reality, and he wasn't one of them.

"Raymond?" he said, when he was within easy earshot.

Raymond didn't turn. He started saying, in a poetic voice that Spencer could easily hear and which startled him with its beauty: "Imagine a world where virtual reality is so cheap that cigarette lighters are filled with it. The fluid flows and settles but isn't real. The lighter is a dud but you can't tell until you try to use the flame, which is virtual too. Imagine how the rest of the world is by then - imagine how much of it is real."

This caught Spencer off-guard - confused him. Was this wisdom or jabbering? A picture of the virtual lighter had come into his mind, but he forcibly threw it away. He hadn't come this far to be distracted by a manic fiction. "I'm Spencer de Gresseur. Ex of Foxglove."

Raymond turned to him, smiling, fixing Spencer with his amazing eyes. "And you've thrown the lighter away. Never mind. It was a disposable."

Spencer felt odd. Woozy. Like he was drunk. It was as if Raymond Kite had gone into his mind, seen what was there and stepped out again, leaving it blank. All in the space of a few seconds. It was a scary feeling and quite unreal. Surely it was unreal. He found he'd lost the ability to speak. Rather than stand there like a dummy, he offered his hand.

Raymond shook it weakly. "Welcome to the Napoleon factory."

What? Oh, yes. A place that turns out Napoleons.

Raymond obviously hadn't shaved for a day or two. His beard growth was light and the stubble seemed to suit him, adding extra tone to his pale features. His hair was exactly as it had been on the video, a blonde trailing mop with lost centre-parting.

"How d'you manage to find me?" The question was straightforward. He'd switched to the normal rules of social engagement. This was very noticeable after the trauma of their first exchange.

"Do you mind if I sit?" Spencer was still in shock. Was it just the eyes, the voice? Was it no more than a clever mind game? Raymond appeared friendly and benign now, but a few seconds ago he'd seemed obscenely powerful.

"I'm sorry," said Raymond, seeing Spencer's distress. "That was an act. Remember, you have to be crazy to stay here."

Spencer looked at him, at his delicate features; his cheekbones, his long nose, his thin neck. He seemed so fragile, his manner so charming now. He remembered that Raymond had asked him how he'd been found. He ought to answer. "The tape that Jill Freedy made. The things you did."

"George mentioned you. I liked what I heard. I'm glad you found me."

"Why are you here?" Spencer regretted asking the question so bluntly, but he still wasn't thinking straight and it had come out without forethought.

"I'm playing hide and seek," said Raymond, mischievously. "You win."

For a moment, Spencer feared that Raymond was messing with his mind again. But no, that was just an amusing answer, nothing more. He couldn't work out what to make of the man. Was he powerful or childishly weak? Was he crazy or sane? He appeared to be everything at the same time. "But you've been here before." It was phrased somewhere between a question and an observation.

"This is true," agreed Raymond. "Sometimes I find reality impossible to cope with. We have that in common, you and I, along with most of the people in this place. I come here to recover, to recharge for another sortie into the outside world, like a human mobile phone."

"It's a nice place."

"I like it. This is my bench." Raymond patted the seat. Patted it for an exceptionally long time.

Still Spencer felt it was facing the wrong way. It was odd to be looking at trees and a wall when there was so much space in the other direction.

"And they let you stay, even though you're not..." Spencer didn't finish the sentence. He wasn't sure how to put it.

"Crazy? The barrier separating lunacy from sanity is a fragile one." Raymond managed to make the grand words sound unpretentious. "Especially for me. Sometimes I need to be here. Right now I'm pretending I need to be here. The doctors like me. We have a gentleman's agreement. I can stay."

Spencer was becoming more comfortable in Raymond's company, possibly because he'd abandoned trying to understand the man in normal terms. He didn't fit conveniently into categories. He was serene yet nervous, strong yet delicate, rational yet too precious for the real world. He had incredible presence. It was a peculiar quality to experience and very difficult to describe: something like standing next to a bull elephant and closing your eyes, and being very aware that the elephant is still there even though you can no longer see it. That same feeling but with the eyes open.

"There are other people looking for you. Agency people, definitely not on your side."

"I know. George mentioned them."

"I think they might find you, soon."

Raymond grinned. "And you're the man with the white hat, come to save me."

Spencer didn't respond. He'd got used to Raymond's playful phrasing. Now his anxieties had faded he felt surprisingly calm. Actually it was rather soothing, sitting on the bench looking at the fluttering of leaves. He was beginning to understand why the bench faced this way.

"I'd like you to tell me about Balloons."

"Of course."

But Raymond didn't say anything more for a while. He stared into the foliage. Spencer guessed he was meditating. He didn't mind. It was so appropriate to the place that it was impossible to object.

"I want you to think of a map," began Raymond, eventually. Still he stared straight ahead. "You can define any point on a map with a grid reference: 531 east, 417 north. Or in reverse you can draw a map if you have a list of all the things to go on it and all their grid references."

A curious introduction to a scientific research project, but Spencer played along. "OK."

"You can build a picture the same way. Points on a grid and the correct coloured dot at each one of them. That's how flat screens work."

Spencer recalled his meeting with George. "I'm familiar with that."

"Now take a big leap and imagine reality is defined the same way, as points on a grid. All the matter, everything. All the atoms have a grid reference. Reality is built up through little signals on the grid, one from this direction, one from that, meeting up and saying - we'll have an oxygen atom here, a carbon atom there - like the features on the map you're drawing or the dots on the flat screen. You can't see the grid but it's always there, sending those messages. It even defines your body - all your body's atoms. It may sound a weird idea but it's not too far from the way modern physics sees the world, some of the old Eastern religions too."

Raymond paused, waiting for a response. Spencer said nothing. His eyes were already beginning to glaze over with the effort of ingesting so much science.

Raymond turned to look at him. "Forget it." He waved his hand and got up from the bench.

"No, really!" Spencer snapped back into the real world, worried that Raymond had taken offence. "I was listening. Carry on. Carry on."

Raymond shook his head. "It's a shit explanation. You stay there and I'll get some things from the dayroom. I can explain it better then. Back in a moment."

He turned and walked away. Spencer was tempted to follow him, but he knew he shouldn't. It would show a lack of trust. Raymond's thin pale baggy trousers and white blouson shirt flapped as he walked, emphasising his thinness.

Spencer looked around. There was nobody else in the garden. He faced forward and watched the leaves dance in the shrubbery for a long, long time. They seemed to be saying something to him. He couldn't understand what it was but that didn't bother him. It was just nice that they were communicating. He felt a similar sensation to the one he'd experienced when he'd stared into the Professor's fire; that humankind had been doing this sort of thing for hundreds of thousands of years and it was still perfectly valid, just nobody had the time to do it any more.

Raymond was with him again. His footsteps were silent on the grass but there was a clatter as he opened a chessboard on the bench. Spencer stared at the board. The last time he'd seen one was in the monk's mansion. And before that, in the empty lot with the Professor the evening George had arrived.

Raymond sat down with the board between them. He put three pieces in the centre. A white queen, a black knight and a black bishop. He didn't appear to have any others.

"Want some?" He offered Spencer a stick of bubble-gum. "It's illicit. People sneak out here for a cigarette. Me, I'm a secret bubble-gum man. They don't like it indoors. The loons find too many interesting places to stick it. Great imaginations. The best. Inside electric sockets. On light switches. Under sample jars." He was chewing already. Spencer shook his head.

"Right. I was talking about reality being formed on a grid system."

"Hmmm."

"So here's our grid." He ran his forefinger across the chessboard, along a column and down a file. "And here are the bodies defined on it." He rearranged the pieces on the board so there were three or four squares between them. "You with me?"

Spencer nodded. "Except the bodies are three-dimensional and the grid's two."

Raymond whistled as he inhaled. "Quite right. Quite right. You're going to have to indulge me on that one. Reality is three dimensional but it's going to be too complicated to think of it that way. Imagine everything as two dimensional. Reality, the grid, the chess pieces. Think of the pieces as little circles, or better still as little dots."

"OK." That was easy enough.

"Now comes the difficult part. We've got a grid and we've got bodies defined on it, but what about spiritual things? What about the human soul? Are you religious?"

Spencer shook his head mildly. "No, not really."

"Me neither. But we both know there's something more to us than flesh and blood, or even complex signals in the brain. There's something extra; an awareness, a spiritual depth - what religious people call the soul. With a deeply spiritual person you can sense it. The problem is, how does that show up on the grid? The grid only defines atoms and molecules. The answer is, you have to add a third dimension - a spiritual dimension."

Raymond paused. He chewed rapidly and then started to blow a bubble with his gum. The bubble grew. Spencer watched as Raymond crossed his eyes in mock effort, just as he'd done on Jill's video. When the bubble was the size of a golfball he moved his thumb and forefinger to his lips and removed it very delicately, like the butt of a fragile cigarette. Gently he brought the bubble down

below the seat of the bench, where it could still be seen between the slats until it disappeared beneath the chessboard. With his other hand he held the chessboard down. Then both hands came free, leaving the bubble under the chessboard. When Spencer shifted his head he could see it there, right below the queen.

"That's the queen's soul," said Raymond, watching Spencer's eyes.

Spencer had the strange sensation of being on the cusp of understanding something, that he hadn't quite got it yet but a revelation was imminent.

"What's all this got to do with your work at Foxglove - with the project?"

"That thing I attached under the board." Raymond gazed steadily at Spencer. "That's a balloon."

It took a moment to sink in, then Spencer's eyes opened wide. He turned to look at Raymond. "You've been working on the human soul!" He was incredulous. "Is that what the Balloons project is about? Working on souls?"

Raymond nodded. "Measuring them. That's exactly what Balloons is about."

It was such a revelation that it quite filled up Spencer's head. He knew he wouldn't be able to absorb anything more for a while. He also realised that he'd come to warn Raymond of danger, yet was doing nothing about it. "You need to leave this place. If you stay, I think they might find you, like I did."

Raymond shrugged. "I guessed."

"Can you leave?"

"If I leave officially, it'll take a while."

"How about unofficially? Just a walk down that corridor."

Raymond grinned. "That's not as easy as it looks. The nurses aren't slow. There's an alarm. You get a nice impression of freedom, but believe me, it's not real."

"Is there another way out?"

Raymond looked at him. He was powerful again. Spencer could feel himself shrinking in comparison.

"Over the wall." Raymond pointed through the shrubbery.

"That'll get us outside?"

Raymond nodded.

But how? Looking closely at the trees, Spencer realised they'd been carefully pruned to make climbing next to impossible.

Raymond patted the seat again. "This is my bench."

Spencer understood. He smiled. "Let's get it over there." They each took an arm. The bench was heavy but movable. Raymond led the way through the undergrowth.

With the bench on its end, next to the wall, the slats of its backrest formed a ladder. It was a shame the bench wasn't longer, because the wall was very high - twice the height of a man - and there was still quite a gap at the top. Spencer decided that despite his injuries he was probably stronger than Raymond, so he went first, intending to pull Raymond up. But Raymond turned out to be surprisingly agile and didn't need his help.

In a few seconds they were both on top of the wall. There they paused, sitting astride it facing each other. Spencer felt like a child again. It didn't take much imagination to see Raymond as a child too. Two dirty-kneed boys sitting high on a fence where they weren't supposed to be, eating stolen apples and exchanging stories. He could have stayed there for a while if three adults with guns hadn't been looking for them. Certainly he would have preferred not to make the drop on the other side. It reminded him too much of his recent falls. The impact made him groan. Joints and muscles that had been repairing themselves complained bitterly about the set-back.

They walked quickly down the street in the direction of Spencer's car. A woman exercising her chihuahua on the opposite sidewalk, having watched their assault-course jump now stood motionless and gazed at them, but one small look from Raymond and she was on her way so fast her dog choked on its lead.

19 *No mana*

They'd only been in the car five minutes and Raymond had already gone through all the radio channels and the contents of the glove box. The radio was now playing The Carpenters. "Jambalaya, crawfish pie, billy-gumbo." Karen Carpenter's apple-pie voice, sweet and soothingly clear. Pierre had always claimed he could hear in that voice that she was a pill-popper. He'd had to wait a decade to be proved right.

Ah. Poor Pierre.

Spencer could see from the road-signs that he was heading south, though he wasn't sure why he was bothering to look at them. He had no destination in mind. It was like reading the labels on foodstuffs he had no intention of buying.

Raymond asked if they could stop for a burger. He said he hadn't had fast food for more than a month and had a perverse craving for it, like a masochist for the whip, but Spencer dissuaded him. It was like having a child in the car; an overgrown, highly intelligent, slightly manic child.

"Balloons!" prompted Spencer. His mind was ready to digest more. Not just ready, but eager. "Come on, what's the rest of the story? Balloons!" Also there was a chance that talking might calm Raymond down.

Raymond adjusted his seat for the third time. He kept his head between his knees and inspected the mechanism as he spoke. "Ah, yes. Balloons. What do you want to know?"

Well everything of course, thought Spencer. "You said you were measuring them."

"Exactly." Raymond sat upright. He adjusted his seatbelt. "The bigger the balloon, the more spiritual the person."

"Big in what way?" Spencer was impatient. "Tall? Wide? I'm lost on dimensions. We started off with two-dimensional reality. You asked me to indulge you on that. Then you added a balloon as a third, as a spiritual dimension. Right?"

It was remarkable how few red lights there were on the route to nowhere. They were driving through the heart of downtown but hadn't had to stop once yet. Not for anything.

"I explained it that way for simplicity. Most of us can imagine adding a third dimension to two, but it's hard to start with three and imagine adding a fourth, which is what we should really have done. We aren't capable of that. Do you follow me?"

"I do." Spencer tapped the steering wheel with his fingers. "But shouldn't the soul just be a piece of string hanging down? A string would be a third dimension."

Raymond stroked the stubble on his chin but didn't say anything.

"Or am I being dumb?"

Raymond shook his head. "Absolutely not. It's just a difficult question to answer." He thought about it for a while. "Have you ever felt somebody's presence? Especially a spiritual person. If you're near them you can feel they're there."

"Sure." That was a very easy question to answer with Raymond sitting close by.

"That's because their balloon has overlapped with yours. Pieces of string couldn't do that. Couldn't overlap. That's why it has to be balloons."

Spencer nodded. It was a decent answer. He had an image in his mind of balloons beneath a two-dimensional grid, something more sophisticated than the chessboard and bubble-gum, more like a survey map and party balloons. The balloons moved about as people shifted position on the map above them. He could see them partially merging sometimes; red ones, blue ones, yellow ones. Or was that taking it too far? "Are they different colours?"

"It's a nice idea. But I don't know the answer. Even if they are, the colours don't mean anything. The project didn't find balloons with different qualities, even in people from different cultures. It's like there are no good and bad balloons, only different sizes. Your mobile is ringing."

"I know, I know." Spencer was trying to ignore it. He wanted Raymond to carry on. But he had to answer it. It could only be Bry. He put it to his ear. "Yes?"

"Christ, what's your problem?" Bry sounded odd. Indignant and at the same time relieved.

Spencer realised he'd been very abrupt. "Sorry, Bry. You caught me in the middle of something. What's happening?"

"The apartment's been broken into. I got a call from the cleaner. It's almost the same story as the institute. They went straight for the video tapes."

That was close. He couldn't have missed them by much. If they'd found the tape and reached the same conclusion they'd probably be at the hospital by now.

"I wasn't sure if you'd left," added Bry. "I was worried about you."

He liked that. Her concern. He wanted to say something nice to her, but it was difficult with Raymond sitting next to him. Incredibly, she read his hesitation perfectly.

"Is there somebody with you? Have you found Raymond?"

How did she do that? Spencer scratched his temple with the aerial of the mobile, then put it back to his ear. "Yes. He's with me now."

"Where are you?"

"In limbo. Just about to drive on to the freeway. Talking about Balloons."

"Where are you going?"

Spencer was about to say that he had no idea. But at that moment, one came to him. He looked across at Raymond as he spoke. "We're coming to Foxglove. We're going to look at Raymond's work."

Raymond smiled broadly. An idiotic smile.

"Is that a good idea?" asked Bry.

"We think so. Can you help us get in?"

"I don't think you need my help, do you? Raymond's still a Foxglove manager. He can sign you in as a guest."

That hadn't occurred to Spencer. He found it hard to think of the extraordinary man sitting next to him as a responsible project leader somewhere near the top of the Foxglove ladder. Briefly he checked with Raymond, then reported back to Bry: "Yeah. Raymond says that shouldn't be a problem."

"Good. I've still got a press-conference here in the city, but it shouldn't last too long. Don't forget, George will be back in an hour or so."

"At Foxglove?"

"He should be. His plane's landing about now."

Spencer considered this. "If you speak to him, tell him where we're going."

"My guess is other people will tell him first."

A trace of resentment there? Spencer let it pass.

"And Spen, we still need to talk. I've been thinking about last night."

"And?"

"I love you."

She rang off. Spencer was in a daze. Quite misty-eyed. He took a deep breath. He couldn't say anything for a while.

Raymond quietly regarded him but left him in peace for several minutes. Eventually he asked, "Was that Bry Stiles?"

"It was."

"Do you know her well?"

There didn't seem to be any hidden agenda there, so Spencer answered honestly, "Yes, I do."

"I've met her two or three times. I like her. Sometimes she seems quite sad."

Was that paradoxical? Spencer looked puzzled.

"Awareness," explained Raymond. "Sad through awareness. Depth. Fear of the shallows."

How perceptive, thought Spencer. It made him want to tell Raymond more. "She feels like she's losing her soul through work."

"And she is."

They stayed quiet for some time. Raymond popped a stick of bubble-gum. The radio played Frank Zappa's Bobby Brown - "Watch me now, I'm goin' down."

Bry's phone call and having Raymond in the car made the outside world seem rather irrelevant to Spencer. Very trivial. They were on the edge of Quartz Valley now. They'd been heading in the right direction for Foxglove all along. The low concrete buildings and dusty lots flitted by, unsightly products of a modern imagination. The few bits of greenery seemed artificial too, not real trees but fibreglass ones. All the real trees were back at the asylum.

Finally Spencer's mind moved off life and love and how things might have been and back to the topic of Balloons. He was still coming to terms with the fact that the project was about souls, that Foxglove had become scientifically involved in such ethereal matters. Yet the underlying idea that souls existed, that there was something measurable there for Foxglove to work with, barely troubled him at all. Like many people who'd given up on formal religion, he'd never reduced humankind to pure rational chemistry. He'd simply rejected the formal structures of viewing, not the celestial landscape itself. Though it was certainly curious to think of souls as definable measurable things. The implications were mind-boggling.

"Just different sizes, right? No good and bad. So how does poor old St Peter make his judgements at the pearly gates?"

"Uh?" Raymond had retired into his own private world. He'd been staring intently through the side-window, looking very serious, almost melancholy. "Ah, yes. St Peter. When we started the

project, I guess we thought we might be able to help him. We could issue little cards for people to take with them on their final journey. He'd just read them at the gates. Good soul - welcome. Bad soul - bugger off. But it didn't work out that way. The card would simply say, Soul Size 62, please admit, certified by Foxglove Corporation. The more we got into the project the more convinced I became that that's the way it is. I'm not the first to say it, but it seems to me that all this judging of good and bad souls is just a way for religions to get people to follow their rules. I think the bottom line is, you've got a well-developed soul or you haven't. That's it."

Spencer had to ask the question. "But they are eternal?"

Raymond shrugged and spread his open palms, not looking very positive. "That's anybody's guess and everybody's hope. We certainly didn't find an answer. No evidence either way. It's an unknown."

"Always will be," suggested Spencer.

Raymond stared dead ahead down the uninspiring road and shook his head. "I don't know the answer to that one either."

The radio was still on. Commercials arrived for the third time in fifteen minutes and Raymond lunged at the switch to kill them. Then he stared through the side-window again, still glum. He licked his fingers and took his gum from his mouth, rolled it in the wrapper and put it in the ashtray.

"Just look at that shit." He pointed to a haulage depot on his right. A perfectly ordinary haulage depot with semi-trailers on the blacktop, a plain warehouse in the centre and retired hulks of machinery dumped next to the boundary fence. "Look how ugly it is. There's proof that we can't even think in three dimensions, never mind four. Sometimes in the hospital I forget how fucked-up the world is outside."

He sounded quite upset by it. Quite animated. "You know, in the old days, the ancients used to see something spiritual in everything around them, in the rocks and trees and animals. The Native Americans saw the world that way, so did most of the other tribes in the world. The word for it is *mana* - the spirit that's in everything. But I swear I can't see any *mana* in that." He pointed his thumb over his shoulder. The depot was behind them now.

Spencer could understand what he meant, although he was nowhere near as distressed by it. He glanced sideways at Raymond. There was a touch of the Professor there. Sensitivity and not enough blocking mechanisms. So a touch of himself, too.

"We've built ourselves a world without *mana*." Raymond was still passionate. "We've removed it. Replaced it with concrete and tarmac. Now we try to find spiritual satisfaction in automobiles and washing machines. You think about it - that's what a lot of advertising is about. Persuading us there's

mana in kitchenware and a brand of clothes. The rot started when we stopped seeing it in our surroundings and started seeing it in gods. Then we changed from a collection of gods to a single god and now there's not a trace of *mana* left in anything else."

He glared silently out of the window again. The bile-bucket appeared to have been emptied, though he didn't seem any happier for it.

"The people who are after you are religious," said Spencer.

"George told me. It figures. Science and religion have never gotten along."

"They think you're playing God."

This amused Raymond greatly. Quite changed his mood. He laughed and laughed and then suddenly stopped. "They're dead right," he said. The extraordinary power had returned. He was smiling again. "But I bet they don't know which god I'm playing."

20 *Raymond's sense of humour*

Sandra - the receptionist Spencer had recognised on George's flat screen - was on the desk at Foxglove when they arrived. She made a big fuss over the return of her two prodigal sons. Raymond she hadn't seen for six weeks, Spencer for two years. If there'd been a fatted calf grazing on the Foxglove grounds, Spencer felt sure she would have herded it into the corporate kitchens.

Sandra's social skills were very acute and she didn't ask either of them where they'd been, so they didn't have to answer - in a lunatic asylum and getting drunk. She gave Spencer his guest pass and he clipped it to the lapel of his suit. It was quite a novelty. He'd never worn a Foxglove guest pass before.

Now they'd actually reached the complex, Spencer was starting to feel more nervous and insecure. When Kohl found out that Raymond had left the hospital, surely Foxglove would be first on his visiting list, the one place he knew his two fugitives had in common. Was it really a good idea for them to come here? He'd asked Raymond this as they parked the car and Raymond had shrugged as if to say it was inevitable, there was no point thinking about it. And despite his misgivings Spencer had accepted Raymond's casual shrug as a definitive judgement on the matter.

From reception they made their way on foot to the central plaza, where Spencer had been delivered by Sammy's car last time. Raymond dawdled along the paths through the greenery of the square with Spencer impatiently pacing him. A lot of people in the offices and labs could see them - they waved and brought their colleagues to the window. Raymond waved back, even though Spencer was probably the better known of the two.

At first Spencer couldn't understand why Raymond was making such a slow spectacle of their arrival. It was like a politician's walkabout or the arrival of a prophet - now there was a scary thought; the straggly blonde hair was right, and there was a hint of a beard - but then he realised what

Raymond was doing. They didn't stand a chance of sneaking through the complex without being recognised. It would be pointless to try. So they might as well have the entire complex buzzing with their presence and become public property. This could only complicate matters for Kohl.

On the far side of the plaza, Raymond entered a building and led them through it, coming out into the open air beneath a covered walkway on the other side. To his amazement, Spencer noticed that Raymond had picked up a trace of a jive-walk since they'd left the asylum, a lightly bobbing gait in one of Jill Freedy's aggressively insecure categories. Trust Raymond to choose a style full of contradictions.

They were at the rear of the complex now, not far from the corner of the double fence where Spencer had let the two youths escape. The land here had been undeveloped when he'd last seen it. The walkway was new to him. So were the two small buildings it led to. They were curious structures. One was hexagonal, two storeys high. It appeared to be unused. The one Raymond walked towards was pyramidal, a little higher than the other and covered in heavily-smoked glass. It reminded Spencer of something he'd once seen on an arts programme - the entrance lobby of the Louvre in Paris.

Raymond entered a code in the keypad by the double doors of the pyramid and ushered Spencer through. "Welcome to the heart of the Balloons project," he announced, grandly. "Or perhaps not the heart, more the torso."

The interior was divided into small rooms with awkward shapes and odd little corridors that barely seemed necessary; like Spencer had imagined - when he was a child listening to nursery rhymes - the home of the old-woman-who-lived-in-a-shoe must look like inside. It was very disorienting. There didn't appear to be any people but there was plenty of lab machinery and computer equipment. They turned a corner and climbed a set of stairs, Raymond leading the way up to a more spacious room covering the entire top floor. The surround of glass and the mass of electronics gave the impression of an air-traffic control room, even though the windows were angled in rather than out.

Raymond moved around the room switching equipment on. Sometimes he talked through the start sequences using a Magic Ear and sometimes he tapped a keyboard. The equipment clearly hadn't been switched on for a long time. It gave off a strong smell of burning dust, a smell that Spencer had always disliked. George had once mentioned that particles of human skin were a big component of dust. It was the smell of a human barbecue.

A security monitor was the last item activated - a smaller version of the screen in George's office. It displayed a sequence showing the outside of the pyramid, the entrance doors downstairs, Foxglove reception, and finally the rear half of the entire complex filmed from a roof pylon. Raymond made an adjustment and left it flipping through the cycle at one change a second.

"So. I'll give you the regular guided tour."

"Why are there no people here?" It had been puzzling Spencer since he'd entered the building.

"The project is on hold." Raymond crossed the room. "It has been for a month."

"Ever since you disappeared?"

"From roughly that time, yes. I think Michael and Pierre did some work here for a while, but it wasn't central to the project. Come here, let me show you something." Raymond was standing by a stereo-microscope. Spencer joined him. "Take a look at that."

Spencer stooped to put his eyes against the two eyepieces. He was expecting to see something highly magnified, but instead he could see a flower, a beautiful white orchid apparently six inches from his nose. It was on a light grey background that dimmed and brightened then after a few seconds stabilised. "What's that all about?"

Raymond didn't answer, instead he moved across the floor of the lab to another stereo-microscope and beckoned Spencer to join him again. Raymond looked into the eyepieces first, then pushed his blonde hair away from his face and motioned Spencer to take a turn.

This was more of a surprise. Spencer looked for a few seconds and said, a little bewildered, "They're my eyes." Through the microscope he could see his own eyes staring back at him, much larger than life and perfectly still. He tried moving his eyeballs but the eyes he could see didn't change. It was like looking at one of Michael Sorden's pictures, but the fact that it was his own eyes made it doubly bizarre, doubly powerful.

Back at the Exchange Building show he'd seen characters behind the photographs of eyes. When he'd looked at the pictures hard, his mind had been transported beyond them, into a deeper world of people and histories and complex abstractions, like entering a waking dream. But with his own eyes that process was accelerated and far stronger. The dream-world arrived with a force that could be sensed, like an imminent faint but with overwhelming strength, not weakness. It was like looking right into a mind, his own mind, at the pretty patterns deep at the bottom of the mental kaleidoscope, abstract shapes of memories, meanings, perceptions. Changing. Turning. Engulfing. Actually it was a little disturbing. He pulled away from the microscope.

"Damn." Raymond scrutinised Spencer's face. "I let you look at that a little too long. Not to worry."

"What's going on?" asked Spencer, suspiciously.

"You'll feel fine in a moment." Which didn't answer the question. "Michael was the expert with eyes. I'm just the amateur. I should be more careful. Have you worked out what the first microscope was for?"

Spencer thought about it. "You used it to photograph my eyes. Then showed the picture in the second microscope."

"That's right. What else have we done since we've been in this room?"

There hadn't been a lot of activity. Spencer tried to think back. And then it struck him. "We've talked."

"And the machines have been recording your voice. Anything else?"

Spencer smiled. "And I moved across the room, from one microscope to the other."

"Quite unselfconsciously," agreed Raymond.

"And you filmed my movement."

Raymond nodded. "The combination was Pierre's idea. A clever man. I'll miss him. The computers should have analysed everything by now. Shall we look at the results?"

"If that's all you need," said Spencer, without much conviction. Should he be impressed that it was all over so quickly? He didn't feel impressed.

Raymond nodded. "I'll explain later." He moved to a computer near the security monitor and tapped at the keyboard. A bar-chart came up on-screen. Spencer watched closely although he didn't expect to comprehend what he was looking at.

"Not bad." Raymond pointed at the bars. "You've scored 85 for the eyes, 70 for the voice, and 41 for the movement. That's a weighted average of 70. I think the movement let you down there."

"Probably my injuries. I'm still walking like an old man."

"It's still a decent score. Puts you well above average, though not in the same league as a Sioux or Cherokee Indian."

The significance of the average was just beginning to dawn on Spencer. A smile was forming on his face. "Are you telling me that's the size of my balloon? I'm a 70?"

"That's right," confirmed Raymond. "Size 70, please admit, certified by Foxglove Corporation."

Spencer had something to say, but no confidence to say it. He wanted to say that this had been a ridiculous exercise and he was very disappointed by it. He had some faith in each of the elements -

the eyes, the voice, the movements; especially the eyes - and a great deal of faith in Raymond too after their short time together, yet the final result seemed to him to be a fabrication, a number plucked out of thin air. He knew he couldn't explain it properly, so he was reluctant to try.

"And what do you score?"

Raymond huffed. "Phew. Around a 90." He said it very light-heartedly, with more good humour than modesty demanded.

"How many people have you put through this?"

"More than two hundred. The cover-story is Michael Sorden's photographs of eyes. We pay people to have their eyes photographed, and take the other measurements at the same time without telling them. I think you're only the second or third person I've told."

It bothered Spencer a great deal that two people had died and he'd risked his life for this fairytale. Also there was something odd about Raymond's behaviour. He was keeping a straight face, yet beneath it he seemed highly amused. It was this conflict within Raymond that gave Spencer the courage to come out with what he wanted to say.

"I'm not at all convinced."

Raymond burst out laughing. Great helpless bellows of laughter. He shook his head and patted Spencer on the shoulder, unable to speak. He carried on like this until he was able to fit a few words between his gleeful sobs. "You're right," he spluttered. "It doesn't work."

Why this failure should be so amusing had Spencer slightly puzzled. Maybe Raymond had a soft spot for the folly of human endeavour. Certainly Raymond's mirth was infectious. As he looked around the pyramidal room at all the useless and very expensive equipment, while he waited for Raymond to dry his eyes and come back to Planet Earth, Spencer found himself smiling too.

"I didn't think it would fool you," said Raymond, nasally. He had a tissue to his nose. He blew it. His voice cleared again. "George wanted to jazz it up a little. More razzmatazz. More time before the result was read. He felt with better presentation it could be quite convincing."

Spencer shook his head. "Fairground amusement stuff."

"That's pretty much what I told him." Raymond was still glowing, still enjoying himself. "The odd thing is, it's not as dumb as it appears. The results are quite good, really. Seventy percent of the time it's fairly accurate. It's not very good on older people, and we never found a way to properly compensate for that. But its worst faults are at the top and bottom ends, where it can be so wildly out it's funny." He chortled to himself.

Spencer was frowning. A thought had occurred to him and although it was a wild one he was going to say it this time. Straight off. "The only way you could know that for sure is if you'd found a true measure, something to reference this against."

Raymond jerked back, his head to one side. More serious now. "Wow. No wonder George thinks so much of you. I wish you'd been here when I came on the project. We could have done business. You're dead right."

"Shit!" spat Spencer. And it was nothing to do with what Raymond was saying. His eyes had been wandering and he'd looked at the security screen.

"What's wrong?" asked Raymond, seeing his alarm.

Spencer waited for the screen cycle to come round to the pylon view again, the one that showed the rear half of the Foxglove complex. He put his finger to the screen. "Look."

Three figures were climbing the inner boundary wire. It wasn't hard to guess who they were.

Raymond tapped at the screen controls, stopping the cycle and zooming in. The faces weren't clear but Spencer could make out Kohl's athletic shape, Alex's short legs and Diamond's bulkiness, though currently not the shape of his head, hidden by a hat. They were using a portable assault-ladder to climb the fence with ridiculous ease. Diamond and Kohl were already over. Alex was at the top, about to jump down and join them.

"This is the gang looking for you." Though Spencer didn't imagine introductions were necessary.

Looking for you, not us. That was curious.

Raymond appeared to be more casual than ever. He wandered around the room, adjusting equipment.

"We have to leave," said Spencer, urgently. "We have to go, right now." Maybe it was already too late. The gang were walking towards the pyramid. Not running, but walking, and casually talking to each other. They were dressed in dark blue fatigues, with body armour and peaked caps. If anybody could see them now from the main building, they would assume they were FBI agents on a low-key raid, heading for that pyramidal building where all the weird stuff went on. They were carrying 9mm machine-pistols. Horizontal shower-heads. Definitely not FBI standard issue.

"Shit!" repeated Spencer. "Raymond. We've got to get out of here. Now!"

Spencer realised it was the first time he'd seen the gang in motion. They all walked confidently. Kohl was simply imposing, Diamond surely a retired boxer, and Alex had the smooth stepless glide of something with claws that chases gazelles when it feels hungry.

"Weren't you expecting them?" asked Raymond, still fiddling with the equipment. "It would be surprising if they hadn't showed up. Especially after your conversation with Bry on the mobile. Almost certainly monitored. I assumed you were letting them know where to find us."

Spencer felt himself colouring. He exhaled heavily. Was that the biggest mistake he'd ever made? Or was he making it now, entrusting himself to a fatalist? The gang were at the pyramid doors. Kohl was at the keypad. He appeared to know the code. "Raymond!" Spencer couldn't believe this was happening. "They're inside. For God's sake, Raymond!"

"Keep your voice down," pleaded Raymond. "You'll upset the microphones. Come on." He trotted down the stairs, barely rushing. At the bottom he turned right into an area they hadn't been through before. They passed along another of the odd little corridors. Raymond took the third door on the right. It was marked SD.

Inside, the room was dominated by an enormous black tank, like an outdoor coal or gravel bunker, embedded in the sunken floor. The top half of the side facing them sloped inwards. There was a twin-doored hatch there with a steel ladder leading up to it.

"Get in," said Raymond. "We haven't got all day."

"What the hell is it?"

"A sensory deprivation tank."

"Raymond!"

"What?"

"We can't hide in a sensory deprivation tank. That's ridiculous."

"Of course we can. Stop wasting time."

Reluctantly, Spencer climbed the ladder, opened the hatch and looked inside. He could see water about three feet down. There was another ladder just inside the lip of the hatchway, a mirror image of the one he was standing on.

"I can't believe I'm doing this," he said to himself, as he turned awkwardly in the hatchway and began to climb down the internal ladder. Raymond was close behind, so close he almost got in the way.

The sixth rung was below the waterline. Spencer hesitated for a second, sighed, and put his foot in the water.

21 *Soul-Care*

There was a faint swirling sound. But, astonishingly, no sensation of wetness. Puzzled, Spencer withdrew his foot and put it back in the water, more forcefully this time.

A louder noise but still no soaking.

"Get a move on," whispered Raymond, urgently. "I can hear them on the stairs."

Spencer threw caution to the wind and scampered down the next ten rungs at speed. His whole body was below the waterline now. He could see it swirling above him where he'd passed through it. Yet he was still dry and breathing normally. And very confused.

Raymond's foot arrived close to his hands, pressuring him to go lower. Another four rungs and his foot hit terra-firma. It was very dark down there. Carefully holding on to the ladder, he shuffled sideways to make room for Raymond. He heard the hatch doors close quietly above, then Raymond joined him at the bottom.

"Lights," said Raymond softly. The darkness was replaced by a gentle glow. They were standing on a small ledge at the side of a long cavern, a little wider than a railway tunnel. The lights were tiny dots in its curved ceiling. Beyond the ledge was water. Spencer dipped his shoe in it and got his toes wet. Real water. He looked directly above at the tank waterline, now barely visible.

"A hologram," said Raymond. "That should keep them busy for a while."

"You could have mentioned that earlier." That was one mystery solved. A bigger one was occupying his mind now. "What do we do next?"

The ledge was small and petered out after a few feet in both directions. To the left, the narrow cavern soon ended in a blank wall. To the right it seemed to burrow on into infinity. It looked like they were in for a long swim.

"Bark," said Raymond. At least that's what Spencer thought he said. Before he could query it Raymond added: "That's B,A,R,Q,U,E. I'm calling for the Barque of Ra."

They waited in silence. Spencer was sure he'd heard that expression before, but in the heat of the moment he couldn't place it. He strained to hear any noise from above, but the silence was almost perfect. If he held his breath he could hear Raymond's deep and steady breathing.

A small barge appeared through the gloom and silently, gracefully, made its way towards them. It stopped next to the ledge and they stepped in, Raymond first. Immediately it set off again, back the way it had come, back into obscurity.

Even in the dim light, Spencer could see the boat was well appointed. Ridiculously so. The long, low seats were lined with velvet and covered with gold-tasselled cushions. They could have graced an Arab harem. There were little curtains to hide the inside surface of the wooden hull. Where wood showed, it had been heavily varnished and trimmed with gold. On the prow stood a carved falcon carrying, bizarrely, a flail beneath its wing, like a sergeant-major's baton.

Spencer reclined on one of the very comfortable seats with his hands behind his head and chuckled to himself. What a contrast to the humdrum Foxglove world somewhere above them. Clearly George had spared no expense on the Balloons project. Yet he was no spendthrift, he was a businessman. If he'd invested millions of dollars in equipment and buildings and salaries and expensive details like velvet cushions and gold trimmings, he'd expect to get it back with interest.

"What's the story, Raymond? All this must have cost a fortune."

"This is the razzmatazz. This is the flashy presentation. George's idea."

Raymond lounged on a facing seat. The furnishings were so exotic that Spencer could easily have imagined a hookah pipe at their feet between them. "But what was George's angle? How was he going to make money out of this?"

Raymond laid on his back and closed his eyes. "Soul-Care. That was the name of the service. People have a weakness for immortality. And the richer they are, the bigger the weakness. They build monuments and institutes to keep their names alive. They spend a fortune on avoiding death. Most of it goes to the hospitals. But they still know they're going to die some time. The idea was - and this was George's, not mine - that Foxglove would offer a Soul-Care program, so they could spend their money in this life making sure they were in good shape for the next."

Like Raymond's, Spencer's face was facing the cavern ceiling. But his eyes were open. He was watching the tiny lights go by and looking for a pattern. He couldn't see one. They were set out with admirable randomness.

"And it would be based on science, not religion," continued Raymond. "We'd measure the soul scientifically, so people could see how well they were doing, whether their soul was improving year by year, like a body-builder with his tape-measure. George knew he'd be able to charge a fortune. He reckoned five thousand measurements a year would bring in one and a half billion dollars. That's big business and almost all profit. The money's out there. There are more than six million millionaires in the world, all wondering what happens when they die."

"And this Soul-Care, it was all part of Balloons?"

"That's right."

"It's a shame," began Spencer, contemplatively, "that the eyes, voice, movement combination doesn't work. You almost *want* it to work."

"I think that's because it's so close to the way we judge people ourselves, subconsciously. When you meet somebody for the first time, you don't get your first impression from what they say, but the way they say it. The first eye-contact, body-language, movement."

"Like I say, a shame."

"But there's something deeper too. Something you can't rationalise. It's the same with Balloons. Eyes, voice, movement is a good start, but not the whole story. Are you still listening?"

"No," replied Spencer, with perfect honesty. When he'd stopped looking for it, the pattern in the lights had come to him. First he'd recognised Canus Major, then Cassiopeia, and finally Orion. They were set out like constellations.

And now he'd remembered where he'd heard about the Barque of Ra. In the park, with the Professor. It was a big realisation.

"Here we are," said Raymond.

The narrow cavern had opened out on one side and become brighter. Spencer turned. "Jesus!" he whispered.

"Impressive, isn't it?" said Raymond, proudly. "It's based on the burial chamber of Rameses II. We've taken a few liberties with the wall decorations, and the gods of course, but I think it's got the genuine feel. Plenty of *mana*."

Spencer was dumbstruck. The water-channel for the barque ran down one side of a tall chamber about seventy feet square. Across the middle of the room was a gathering of huge Egyptian gods, each mannequin at least eight feet tall and resplendent in a brightly-coloured robe. Dead centre was an enormous set of balancing scales, with a feather in one pan and a heart in the other. The two seemed to be in perfect balance. The entire floor was marble and the walls were covered in

hieroglyphs and coloured vignettes. Everything was dramatically lit by spotlights buried in the curved black ceiling, again, set out like constellations. It looked like an outrageous stage set or a feature from Disneyland.

"That is astonishing," said Spencer very slowly.

"Thank you. Shall we join them?"

The barque came to a standstill half-way down the channel, level with the scales. Raymond hopped out onto the quayside steps and headed for the centre of the room. Spencer followed him. Beyond the central line he noticed another group of gods in the background, dozens of them, seated in a jury box.

"Ever heard of the Egyptian Book of the Dead?" Raymond stopped by the scales. "Their version of the afterlife judgement?"

"Er... Strange coincidence. A friend of mine mentioned it a few days ago, though I don't recall much of it." Spencer pointed beyond Raymond. "I remember this is important, the weighing of the dead person's heart against a feather."

"The feather of Maat. That's the goddess Maat standing over there. The one with a feather where her head should be."

Spencer looked at the figure standing on the far right of the central group. Instead of a head she had a large purple feather, combed to leave two gaps that indicated her mouth and eyes. Her mauve dress began below her breasts, which were bare. There were two other female gods in the main group and these were bare-breasted too. It wasn't erotic. Perhaps it might have been if the figures hadn't been so intimidatingly large.

"The other two females are Isis and Nephthys," said Raymond. These stood either side of a throne directly behind the scales. "The male god next to Maat is Ra, with the falcon head. On the other side we've got Horus, also with a falcon head, and Toth, with the head of a baboon. He's writing down the result of the weighing. The one kneeling and checking the scales is Anubis." Anubis had the long nosed and tall-eared face of a jackal.

In one corner of the room, isolated from the centre group and the jury box, a lone figure crouched on a high platform looking very fearsome. It had no human characteristics at all. Spencer could vaguely remember the Professor mentioning a monster.

Raymond followed his eyes. "That's Ammit - the backside of a hippo, leopard's forequarters and crocodile head. He gobbles up any hearts that are too heavy. He's the Egyptian equivalent of hell."

Raymond passed beyond the standing gods and approached the jury box at the back of the chamber. He rested his arm on the wood like a television lawyer making his final, brilliant, verdict-swinging speech. "And these are the forty-two gods who ask the questions of the negative confession - whether the deceased has committed murder, theft, perjury, blasphemy, stuff like that."

"Homosexuality," added Spencer.

"Indeed." Raymond looked startled for a moment. "Your friend is obviously a historian." He walked back to the throne between Isis and Nephthys, directly behind the scales. His fingers gripped the shoulder of the throne. "Which just leaves one more god, who sits here. Osiris, the King of the Hall of Judgement."

The throne was empty. There was a kind of imprint of somebody sitting there; two depressions for the buttocks and thighs, a hint of arms resting on the armrests and finger marks where they gripped the ends. A truly enormous helmet shaped like a bowling pin was positioned directly over the space where the head should be, one large feather decorating each side. But there was no actual figure. No arms, no legs, no face.

Quite casually, Raymond moved to sit in the empty throne and wormed his head inside the helmet until it came down to his brow. He grinned, but his voice was resonant, unworldly. It was the poetic sorcerer's voice that had so unsettled Spencer at the asylum. "Playing at god. Now you know which god I'm playing."

Spencer took a sharp breath. Raymond looked very much at home there. Dangerously at home. The combination of Raymond's own personal power, his spectacular eyes shining from beneath the helmet, the setting, and the way he had so easily slipped into that seat, like a detonator into its slot, was overwhelming. If Spencer hadn't felt that he knew Raymond a little already, at least enough to know that he was no ogre, he would have struggled to cope. As it was, the fright passed within a few seconds.

A side-panel of the throne detached itself and smoothly swivelled into place above Raymond's knees - in the manner of a table unfolding from an armrest on an airliner. But this wasn't a table, it was a keyboard and screen. Raymond tapped and Kohl appeared on the display. He was moving around the top room of the pyramid, frowning. Diamond and Alex weren't with him. Raymond scanned the cameras and found them in different rooms downstairs, methodically searching every space large enough for a human being to hide. He switched back to Kohl.

"He's the leader." It was a statement rather than a question. His tone was mild and gentle again.

"His name's Kohl," confirmed Spencer.

"Let's see what his voice measurement is. I left the equipment on." A set of bar-charts appeared next to Kohl. "My God." Raymond chuckled to himself. "See. I told you it went wrong at the extremes. It's measured him as a 97. That's ridiculous."

Spencer shook his head. "No. You've never heard him speak. The machines got it right this time. Believe me."

Raymond looked at Spencer quizzically, moving only his eyes - his head still immobilised by the helmet.

"I think we should call security." Spencer glanced at his watch. One thirty. "And maybe George too. He should be back any moment now."

"No phone," said Raymond, bluntly.

"Then use the computer."

"Separate network."

Spencer moved so he had a full view of Raymond's face. "Do we have any way of contacting the outside world?"

Raymond dragged his attention away from the screen to return Spencer's gaze for a moment. "No. Even if you hadn't left your mobile in the car, it wouldn't have worked here - we're too far underground."

Spencer narrowed his eyes. Yes, he had forgotten the mobile. No doubt George would hear they were at the complex and would come and find them, but they couldn't rely on him turning up in time. "Then maybe we should just get out of here and let Foxglove security deal with this."

"That's not so easy either. The way we came in is the way out too. Damn!" Raymond pointed to the screen. Alex was standing on the ladder of the sensory deprivation tank, slamming the hatch doors and looking puzzled. "I wonder what's wrong? The doors make the right noise, as if the tank is full of water. Everything makes the right noise. Pierre did the sound set-up."

Spencer looked more closely. He could make out the perpetual chewing movement, the twitch in front of Alex's right ear, and see that Alex had his free hand on the side of the tank as he slammed the hatch doors. "He can feel the vibrations. They're carrying on too long. The water should deaden them."

"These people aren't stupid, are they?"

Spencer shook his head. Alex was speaking into a miniature walkie-talkie. The first word he said was Kohl. It was easy to lip-read. It looked the same as gold or goal, and in the circumstances meant pretty much the same thing.

"What now?" asked Spencer.

"I've still got a few surprises left." Raymond appeared unconcerned. "You'd better sit here. We might run out of time later." He ducked his head from beneath the enormous helmet and got off the throne. Spencer didn't move.

"Well come on," urged Raymond. "Hop in the hot seat while it's still warm. It's not every day you get offered a thirty thousand dollar freebie."

Spencer was still standing. He touched the huge helmet. "This is the measurer, isn't it?"

"It is. And if you don't get under it right away, it'll shut itself down and I'll have to start the sequence again. So please..."

Spencer did as he was asked.

The throne was reasonably comfortable, though he couldn't imagine that it suited him as well as it did Raymond. The helmet was slightly more awkward and much warmer than he'd expected. "Do you have to press start or something?"

"No. It's already on."

There was no physical sensation. No buzzing or humming or blinding flashes across the mind's internal eye. And yet - how could this be? - Spencer could feel the machine was working. It was that presence feeling again. Raymond sitting next to him in the car. The silent and unseen bull elephant by his side. He couldn't describe what was happening, but something was definitely going on. He didn't feel like he was being harmed, more gently interrogated, yet even free to question back. The sensation wasn't unpleasant. It was also very convincing. If the eye-voice-movement combination had left him cold, by comparison this was a furnace.

"Can I talk?"

"Certainly. It makes no difference." Raymond was standing next to him, still watching the screen. Kohl and the gang had already tested the holographic water and found that it lacked wetness. Diamond was part way down the internal ladder. Just his face and shoulders were still showing through the hatch.

"When you were sitting here, was it measuring you?"

"In a way, yes." Raymond tapped the Osiris helmet. "It needs to sense my measurements to be fully activated. That's my safety mechanism."

Raymond switched cameras. Diamond and Kohl were both at the bottom of the ladder, standing on the ledge. Above them, Alex's foot was coming into view.

"Too many scientists lose control of their inventions. Nobel and explosives. Oppenheimer and the atom bomb. That's why I made sure this won't work unless I'm here to operate it. My measurements act as a key. A key nobody can duplicate."

Spencer looked at him doubtfully. "Come on, Raymond. How many people in this complex can hot-wire a computer?"

Raymond shook his head. "The computer itself, maybe. But not the measurer." He tapped the helmet again. "That's my specialty area, the whole reason I was hired. If anybody else touches it, they'll destroy it. That's why the project shut down when I went into hiding."

Alex had reached the ledge and Diamond - why did it always have to be Diamond in the lead? Spencer almost felt sorry for him - was sliding into the water of the cavern. It covered his belly by the time his feet hit the bottom.

Still Raymond seemed unconcerned. Or was he talking faster? "That's long enough, Spencer. Hop out. We'll look at the result."

They changed places. Raymond tapped and another bar-chart came up. "I should be more of a showman here, but I don't think we've got the time. Seventy-six."

"The true size of my balloon."

"Really quite decent. I'm impressed." Raymond was definitely talking quickly. His tapping was more furious too. "Two minutes," he said to himself.

Spencer contemplated the measurement of his soul. On a personal level it was nice to have notched up a reasonable score; after the trials and failures of life, after all the booze, to still be a decent-sized spiritual being. He felt intuitively the measurement was right. It was an odd sensation. In a way, no big deal. Like a doctor pointing to his knee and saying - This is yours. Yet of course the implications for society as a whole were staggering. Religion, morality, values, all due for a seismic shift. Nothing would ever be the same.

"So you can take the measurement. Where's the queue of millionaires?"

Raymond snorted. "One slight problem there. The results." He hesitated, fingers poised over the keyboard. He jabbed a key and brought up Kohl and the gang in the tunnel, sternly wading through the water with their peculiar automatic pistols upright, all magazines and handgrips and barely any barrel. "Yes. We've got time." He tapped again. "We managed to get a hundred and fifty trials through here. Told them we were secretly building a theme park - and they believed it. Let me show you our top scorers."

He prodded a single key and sequence of faces passed before Spencer's eyes. Very unfamiliar faces. Raymond roll-called them through: "A Sudanese Dinka tribesman, a shaman from the western edge of the Amazon, an Irishwoman from a laundry in Idaho, two tribal elders - one Hopi, one Navajo - an Afghani goatherd, an Indonesian sea-gypsy, a retired couple from Alabama, a Chinese fisherman... Notice anything?"

Spencer frowned. "Well... many of them are foreign."

"Now let's look at a selection from the bottom quartile."

Another sequence of faces ran across the display. These seemed less exotic, perhaps because they were mainly Caucasian. Raymond didn't bother to describe them all, but he did jab at the screen three times, each time at a power-dressed male.

"President and CEO of Litank Chemicals... This next guy's got two blocks of Manhattan... This one a big GM franchise. All multi-millionaires. Getting the message, yet?"

Spencer nodded. "I think so."

"I was half expecting it, but George certainly wasn't. One or two top executives did well, but as exceptions, not the rule. Most of the people who could afford to pay, the ones who'd be our potential customers, came out below average." Raymond laughed.

"Why's that so funny?"

"We'd produced the most un-commercial service imaginable. Soul-Care, a service that allows the rich to pay thirty thousand dollars to be told they're full of shit. They'd be expecting their souls to be as big as their egos, to be in great shape for an immortal afterlife. And we'd be telling them they weren't, that they were in terrible shape, that Kashmiri swineherds and African bushmen were doing much better. They would just love that, wouldn't they? It was hopeless. George could see straight away it was a huge problem, businesswise..."

A loud rumble interrupted Raymond. It came from the tunnel and sounded like wet thunder. A few seconds later, waves more than a foot high swept in through the white portal of the narrow cavern mouth and along the channel down the side of the chamber, sending the barque into wild gyrations as it struggled and failed to keep its place by the quayside. Water lapped up the wide steps and a few adventurous wavelets made it to the top level, spreading across the marble chamber floor but falling short of the gods gathered by the scales. The water splashed and chopped chaotically, though with gradually decreasing violence. Eventually the boat made its way back to its moored position where it rocked and yawed gently as if vexed by some emotional dilemma.

"What's going on?" asked Spencer, wondering if he should be adding fear of drowning to his worries.

"The hexagonal building you saw earlier. There's an aquarium in it." Raymond pointed to the channel, now permanently higher as if a tide had come in. "Or at least there was. It's down here now."

On the display, Kohl and the others were up to their armpits in water, right on the borderline between being able to wade and having to swim. The timing was bad for them. They'd made some distance from the ledge, which was now submerged. They carried on with their guns held above their heads, little dribbles of water running down their faces from when the waves had washed over them.

"It's not stopped them."

"Patience," remarked Raymond quietly.

22 *The spells*

Raymond and Spencer's on-screen view of the dimly-lit tunnel was probably clearer than Kohl's. The camera's electronic wizardry beefed-up the brightness, showing little mounds and peaks on the water, left-overs from the waves. Spencer couldn't be sure, but he thought he could see smooth wakes appearing on this squally-pond surface, as if something large were swimming beneath. Kohl and his men probably couldn't see these wakes in the gloom. They carried on wading, purposefully, slowly, nervously.

Then all hell broke loose. Diamond's face erupted into shock and disappeared beneath the surface. Alex's too. A gun was held above the water like the sword Excaliber. Huge arcs of spray obscured the picture. Through the mouth of the tunnel, near the quayside, came the sound of rapid automatic pistol fire, brief bursts loosing thirty bullets a second and sounding like short and loud trouser-flies being unzipped. Spencer couldn't make head or tail of what was going on. The camera picture was wildly confused, a view inside a giant washing machine. Then he could make out a tail, all two yards of it. And finally a head.

"Crocodiles?"

"One of the perils of the Egyptian afterlife." It was flippant but Raymond wasn't smiling. Three people were fighting for their lives, and although those people were killers themselves, it was still sobering to watch. Kohl's head went under, but not his gun. Alex reappeared, looking horrified. There was more firing. Diamond's head broke the surface like a submarine-fired ballistic missile. He'd lost his hat. He took a much-needed breath and twisted to fire a brief burst into the water by his side. The pace of the battle slowed. There was one more burst from somebody else, possibly Kohl, and it was over.

The humans had won, but at a cost. Kohl, who seemed to have suffered least, was holding Alex, keeping him afloat on the surface of the water. Diamond's face was twisted in pain, yet he was

moving around freely, so obviously he wasn't too badly injured. Alex was the worst. He was unconscious and bleeding heavily from the pelvis and left thigh. Kohl checked his pulse and breathing but it wasn't at all clear from his reaction whether Alex was still alive.

One of the crocodiles was dead, floating grotesquely on its back, its pale stomach riddled with a dozen holes like a novelty advent calendar. The other was still alive, just, but too full of lead to have any appetite left. It swam awkwardly away, its tail paralysed, to die in peace.

Spencer breathed out. His eyes were open wide. The violence had affected him in the strangest of ways. He didn't feel any sympathy for the gang. He was imagining Raymond and himself in place of the crocodiles, swimming the cavern. Kohl and the crew would have riddled them with bullets in just the same way.

"Get back, you crocodile of the East," began Raymond, in his weird necromantic voice, "who lives on those who are mutilated. Detestation of you is in my belly, and I have gone away, for I am Osiris."

Spencer looked at Raymond's face. It was blank.

"Spell thirty-two," explained Raymond, speaking normally again. "Did your friend tell you about the spells?"

"He mentioned them."

"To protect the soul and give it an easier time in the afterlife. There are almost two-hundred in the Book of the Dead." He motioned with his thumb at the hieroglyphs and pretty vignettes that covered the chamber walls. "All there. Numbers thirty-one and thirty-two protect against crocodiles - against crocodiles that steal magic. They're over here, I think." He gesticulated again, this time over his shoulder. His head was still inside the helmet, so he couldn't look round.

Spencer's eyes were on the quayside, where the water was still lapping in the aftermath of the battle, reminding him that it hadn't been so far away. "If the crocodiles had won," he reflected, "and decided to come in here, I think we might have needed more than an ancient spell to stop them."

"I agree. That's why I've got this." Raymond reached down to his left and produced a handgun from the underside of the throne. A .38 Remington.

Spencer had never been so happy in his life to see a firearm. It was no match for 9mm machine-pistols and nor would it have been perfect for crocodiles, but it was certainly a step in the right direction.

"Is it full?" he asked.

"Yes. Seven rounds."

Raymond handed it to Spencer, who weighed it in his hand. It was cool to the touch. Decent balance. A shooting gun, not merely for show.

"Why didn't you get this out earlier? It's kind of important right now."

"There you are. A gun in your hand for five seconds and already you're in charge."

That wasn't the way Spencer saw it, but he could just about follow how Raymond, if he was sensitive about guns, could see it that way. He didn't say anything but offered the gun back.

"No, no," protested Raymond. "You keep it. The reason I didn't get it out earlier is that I can't stand guns. I don't trust people with them. Myself most of all. Most folks think that they can be trusted with guns but other people can't. I've never been able to figure the maths on that. Can you use it?"

A valid question. Technically, Spencer could use it. But would he actually shoot somebody with it? History wasn't so positive on that. He looked again at the gun. "Yeah. I think so."

"Good. Because I think you might have to."

The gang had been busy sorting out their weapons and reloading. Now they set off again, Diamond in the lead, Kohl pulling Alex along the water. Spencer was pleased to see that only Diamond still had his machine pistol, the other two big guns must have gone underwater at some point. Kohl now held a relatively feeble automatic in his hand. Raymond kept glancing nervously at the one Spencer was holding, until he slipped it into the inside pocket of his jacket, out of harm's way.

"I've got one more trick," said Raymond. "Half a minute from now. But I think they're too far apart." He stared at the screen silently. Spencer stayed quiet to let him concentrate, but then Raymond decided he wanted to pick up their earlier conversation.

"The Soul-Care measurements. George wanted to fix the results, at least at first. He wanted me to falsify them so rich clients came out better. Technically it was easy. The way George saw it, the clients were suckers anyway, believing in all that afterlife stuff, and they may as well die happy, so he couldn't see any harm in it. That's George all over. But I wouldn't play ball. He offered me a cut of the proceeds, enough to make me a very rich man. Then he threatened to go it alone and use the gear in the pyramid, but we both knew that was a non-starter. Finally he tried to humour me by letting me measure him with the helmet. It was business ploy but the measurement had a deeply personal effect on him. He's not the same person. Did you notice that?"

"I did. He's more thoughtful. What did he score?"

"Just 41. Quite a way below average. He was upset by that, I know. It changed his values. He still tried to persuade me to fix the results but his heart had gone out of it. He was almost happy when I turned him down. He saw the project in a new way, as something interesting but not commercial. Like art, I used to say. I tried to persuade him to go public with the machine, with the results, but he was very much against it. He felt there could be big repercussion. All damage and no gain. Then he heard I was in danger and he was very good about that. Very protective. He visited me once a week at the asylum. He didn't have to."

"He's a curious man," agreed Spencer. "A charmer when he wants to be. What puzzles me is that he hired me to find you when he already knew where you were."

Raymond, his head still immobilised by the Osiris helmet, raised his eyes to look at Spencer for a brief moment and then lowered them to the screen again. "I know the answer to that one. Can you keep a secret? I wouldn't want you to say this came from me."

Spencer didn't have to think about that for long. Keeping a secret from George? It would be a pleasure. "I can."

"He wanted to fool everybody into thinking that he didn't know where I was, that my disappearance was a mystery to him, just as it was to everybody else. That way he could visit me safely. Nobody would think of following him. Hiring you was pretty convincing. Why would he hire somebody to find me if he knew where I was? It was a feint, and a very clever one. You did your job well."

"Shit!" spat Spencer. No wonder George had fired him. He'd actually finished the job he'd really been hired to do - keeping suspicion off George. Suckered again. "He is the slimiest..."

"...Or at least that's what he told me."

Spencer looked closely at Raymond, who was still concentrating on the screen. "Did you believe him?"

"As much as you can believe anything George says. I don't think he even knows what the truth is any more. That's what makes him so brilliant at deception."

Raymond jabbed a button on the console. There was pandemonium in the cavern. Too much water to see what was happening, but somehow Diamond was above it, rising. The water cleared. Still it dripped from the roof. Diamond was up there, caught in a net. Kohl was looking up at him.

"O you fishermen, children of your fathers," began Raymond, half-lapsing into his mystical voice, "you takers of the catch, who go around about in the abode of the waters, you shall not catch me in this net of yours in which you catch the inert ones."

He spoke normally again. "Spell 153A, for escaping the fisherman's net. They either need that or a pair of bolt-cutters. The net's steel chain."

Diamond was helpless up there. He could move round to face Kohl but he couldn't get out. And he was too high above the water for Kohl to help him. Their mouths worked for a time. Diamond began dismantling his machine pistol and feeding the pieces through the net. Kohl caught them in turn with a single hand - the magazine, the stock, the handgrip, the barrel - and placed them on the chest of Alex where he reassembled them. He threw his automatic up to Diamond's hand poking through the net then moved on, dragging Alex behind, relentless.

"This is one mean dude," observed Raymond, wide-eyed.

Spencer nodded. When Kohl and Diamond had spoken, he'd heard their voices from the mouth of the cavern. Not distinctly, but they were far too close. He was getting very edgy now. Soon he might have to prove himself with the gun.

"Can you keep another secret?" asked Raymond.

"I guess so."

"George's 41. Now there's one result that I definitely fixed. Really he was a 64."

Spencer laughed. All the tension forgotten. Free and happy as a bird. It was worth everything just to hear this. The old fox out-foxed, deceived by his own would-be method of deception. He wanted to lift Raymond from the throne and hug him. Oh, you wonderful man.

"We'd better take cover," said Raymond. "They'll be here any moment."

But where to take cover? So much for that instant of relief. Spencer realised with mounting panic that he hadn't assessed the battlefield. The jury-box at the back of the chamber looked best, but the gods there were packed in tighter than charter flight passengers. There was no space to stand between them. And in any case the scales and central group of gods would obscure his view. The throne looked good but his feet would be visible beneath it. He'd have to choose one of the central figures. He plumped for Isis, to the rear-left of the throne. Her dress might not cover her breasts but the low hemline made her ideal to hide behind.

Raymond ducked out of the Osiris helmet and moved behind Nephthys on the throne's opposite side. "Staying in the family," he said quietly. "These two ladies are Osiris's sisters." He was grinning like an excited child. A bizarrely inappropriate mood. "Though that didn't stop Osiris and Isis marrying."

Spencer found it odd to receive a history lesson just prior to shooting somebody, or getting shot. Very odd indeed.

Silently they waited for Kohl to arrive. Spencer braced the pistol against Isis's upper arm, then hid, then braced again, practising the change in position until he was happy that he was naturally bringing the gun to bear on the tunnel mouth every time. He tapped Isis on the shoulder as if to get her attention. She sounded moderately solid. "What are they made of?" he whispered.

"Plaster of Paris."

Hmmm. So, a half second burst from a 9mm and Isis would go the way of her religion. Scattered pieces of history. Spencer thought about running for the jury-box but it was too late. Here was Kohl. Or rather here was Alex. Kohl, unseen, was lifting Alex's inert body on to the first of the submerged steps, right by the cavern mouth. Blood was dribbling from Alex's wounds and turning the water around him red. Spencer had the body in his sights. If he pressed the trigger now he couldn't miss. But he didn't need to fire. Alex was nothing more than a rag doll being operated from behind. No doubt Kohl intended Alex to be a distraction, but it was clear that Alex posed no threat. His cheek had stopped twitching.

Nothing more happened. No sign of Kohl.

Spencer didn't like it at all. Where was Kohl? He'd had this all figured out and now it was sliding from his grasp. He wanted to whine, to moan, stamp his feet in frustration. Kohl was up to something. But what? Where was the bastard?

The holes in Alex's thigh leaked more blood. They were gunshot wounds. Too many bullets had been fired in the cavern. He'd got his share. Spencer didn't feel sorry for him.

Where the fuck was Kohl?

A small popping noise in the tunnel mouth made Spencer jump. A few seconds later, thick smoke began drifting into the chamber, sliding along the water and climbing over Alex like Pacific fog over the coastal hills. Or was it gas? Spencer had a moment of panic thinking it might be gas, but it wasn't, it was smoke, dense white smoke, now spreading to the barque and running over it, moving on down the channel, sticking to the water like cold morning mist.

This wasn't going to work, Spencer realised. He'd been relying on getting the first shot in at the cavern mouth, but it wasn't going to happen that way. Kohl had obscured seventy feet of quayside with a smoke-grenade. When it cleared he could be anywhere - at either side of the boat, the far end of the cavern, or even next to Alex. Far too much to cover. Just his head and his gun would appear above the waterline, shrouded in mist. An impossible target. Impossible odds.

"Raymond," he whispered, motioning with his thumb, "go behind the jury-box." At least he could get Raymond into a safer spot. Out here on the front line he was a liability.

Raymond sized up his run, briefly nodded, then skittered along the marble to the more protected position. Spencer didn't follow. Getting further away from Kohl would only heighten the difference in firepower.

As if on cue, Kohl's head and gun appeared through the thinning smoke at the far end of the quay. A minuscule target, even smaller than Spencer had expected. Kohl fired immediately, a deafening burst that removed Isis's head and chest. Her arms crashed to the floor. He carried on firing, working down Isis's torso, her breasts, belly, pelvis, the bullets eating away at the plaster like hungry termites until Spencer was on his hands and knees behind a two-foot stump, coughing in a cloud of plaster dust.

"The game's up, Spencer." That undeniable voice. "I could kill you right now, but I'm not going to. Come out where I can see you."

Spencer stared at the marble floor, trying to work out how to turn the situation round, how to get the upper hand on Kohl, but coming up with a sickening blank. There was no solution. He was outgunned, out-positioned. However much he hated it, he couldn't deny that Kohl had won.

Escapes and close calls and now, in the final round, a depressingly simple defeat. It made everything before seem so pointless. He'd played the game, as Kohl said, and suddenly he'd lost.

"You leave me no choice, Spencer."

Not a man to bluff. Spencer crawled forwards into Kohl's view.

"Release the gun." Kohl extracted himself from the water and dripped across the floor - still radiating power and authority despite his soaking clothes. He picked up Spencer's weapon from the floor and toyed with it. He seemed very pleased to see it, as if it were a present he'd always wanted but didn't expect. The sternness returned as he looked Spencer in the eye. "We have unfinished business."

No mistaking that cold look. Whatever Kohl's reason for keeping him alive, it wasn't permanent. What a stupid place to die. What a pathetic last stand.

Spencer lowered his eyes, his head, upset with himself for being such a pushover. He should have listened to George - We can't fight the agency, Spencer. We shouldn't be dumb enough to try. Two people have died already. You're next.

Most of all he was sad that he would never get the chance to answer Bry's precious words with his own, to tell her that he loved her too. If he could have managed that, then it wouldn't seem so bad, having to die. But now was just too early. He needed her to know.

"Where's Raymond?"

Kohl didn't need an answer. He didn't bother to look around. He pocketed the handgun and fired the machine-pistol directly into the jury-box. White eyes of bullet-holes appeared in the wooden rails. The animist heads of a dozen weird Egyptian gods exploded above their shoulders like puff-ball toadstools or smashed on the ground. Heads of dogs, birds, bulls, monkeys, snakes and the likeness of man.

How could we ever, thought Spencer, have deluded ourselves into thinking we could win?

"Show yourself, Raymond."

Raymond rose slowly from behind the jury-box and confidently strode the thirty paces to stand in front of Kohl. The pair regarded each other, Raymond's expression as blank and cold as Kohl's.

Why are we still alive? Why haven't you killed us both?

As if prompted by Spencer's unspoken questions, Kohl waved the barrel of his pistol at the throne. "The helmet of Osiris, I believe, legendary King of Ancient Egypt, slain by his brother Seth. Is that the measurer?"

"It is," replied Raymond.

"Then measure me."

23 Rushes and reeds

Raymond moved to sit on the Osiris throne. At some point over the last few minutes the computer console had quietly folded itself away into the safety of the throne's side, but a few seconds after Raymond's head came under the helmet it reappeared again. Raymond tapped at it for a while.

"All set," he said, getting up from the throne and offering it to Kohl.

Kohl took his place quite regally, looking almost as at home in the seat of power as Raymond had. "Both of you stand in front of me," he commanded. Then in a milder tone he asked Spencer, "Did Raymond tell you how this works?"

"Partly."

"A very small part, I suspect. I'm sure he didn't give you the details."

Spencer looked at Raymond, who was a little agitated. He wouldn't meet Spencer's eye. What was Kohl's game? It wasn't too much of a surprise that he was curious about the measurer, but what was he up to now?

"I'm sure he could show you if you asked him," continued Kohl. "Why don't you ask him?"

Spencer looked at Raymond again, but didn't say anything. Raymond met his gaze this time, his cloudless blue eyes untypically sheepish, then he shrugged and from his standing position keyed something into the console.

With a faint hydraulic whirr, the outer casing of the enormous Osiris helmet rose slowly, following a gentle arc that lifted it clear of the throne. An inner helmet was revealed beneath. The same bowling pin shape, just a little smaller, and transparent. Everything inside it was visible.

Spencer's mouth opened but nothing came out. Not even air. He'd stopped breathing.

"What do you see?" Kohl was still under the inner helmet and couldn't see what was above him, though it sounded like he had some idea what was there.

"I..." Spencer was having difficulty with the words. He knew Kohl was forcing him to do this, making him describe what was there, making it doubly real. He'd been expecting a mass of electronics, but that wasn't what he could see. "Brains." He counted them. Six at the base of the helmet, circling Kohl's head. Three above, covering the top of his skull, and two more in a vertical line above these, the top one nestling in the teat of the pin. "Eleven brains."

"And what animal are they from?"

Spencer looked at Raymond again, who pointedly avoided his eye. "They look to be human."

"And are they alive?"

Red tubes were everywhere inside the helmet. Some bright red, some purple. Two of each were connected to every brain. Where its spinal cortex would normally be there was a cluster of man-made hardware with a string of optical fibre looping away from it and leading back to the throne. The whole set-up was bathed in liquid the colour of weak urine.

"Yes," murmured Spencer. "I think they are." He was feeling slightly nauseous. A few minutes ago he'd been sitting under that thing.

"They're the only sensors that really work," mumbled Raymond. "People can sense something spiritual, a presence. Electronics can't. It's all in the brain. I've never liked it, but there it is. Means to an end."

"But does the end justify the means?" asked Kohl. "What do you think, Spencer?"

He could see what Kohl's game was now. It was right there in his words. Justification. He wanted to justify himself, he wanted to prove to Spencer he was in the right, that Spencer's biggest mistake had been taking the wrong side all along.

Raymond was still muttering to himself, very subdued. "Can't duplicate everything the brain can do. Only sensor that works. No choice, really."

"Well?" urged Kohl, refusing to allow Spencer his silence. "Do you approve, Spencer? Listen to your inner voice. What does it tell you about what you're looking at?"

It tells me it's obscene. But Spencer didn't want to say that. He didn't want to answer the question. "Where did you get them?" he asked Raymond.

"It's legal." Raymond was still very meek. "From hospitals. For research. We've got the paperwork."

Of course. Kohl's mention of bodies on the recording from Pierre's. Another piece of the puzzle had slipped into place.

"But is it moral?" asked Kohl. "Exactly what kind of research did you say they were for?"

Raymond didn't answer.

Kohl had them both now. His eyes turned back to Spencer. "You still haven't answered your question, Spencer. What is your little voice saying?"

Was it worth trying to flatter Kohl? If Spencer repented now, however falsely, would he be forgiven? No. The look Kohl had given him earlier was too final, too irreversible. Kohl, seeing himself as an ethical warrior, some kind of Christian Samurai, simply wanted Spencer to understand why he was about to be killed. "It's saying that two wrongs don't make a right. I can see the machine's a problem, but I don't think killing people was the solution."

Kohl distinctly scowled. He'd never done it before. It was deathly.

"That's more than enough time," said Raymond, calmly filling the silence. He motioned for Kohl to get out of the throne. Kohl ducked his head from beneath the helmet, losing his fierce face in the process, and moved away to stand by the shattered stump of Isis. Raymond wiped the damp seat with his forearm and took Kohl's place. Immediately he lowered the outer casing of the helmet, hiding the unpleasant spectacle it revealed.

Good idea, thought Spencer. Out of sight and out of mind. Or perhaps that wasn't the best expression in the circumstances.

A bar chart came up on the console display. Raymond stroked his stubble.

"Well?" asked Kohl.

"Eighty-two. That's damned high."

Kohl's empty expression didn't change.

"Do you think it works?" Spencer asked Kohl. "Do you believe the result?"

Momentarily Kohl narrowed his eyes. "Yes, I do."

Whether this was a change of heart for Kohl or whether he'd known all along that the measurer worked was impossible to tell. Yet Spencer felt that actually hearing the result had affected Kohl in some way. He just wasn't sure how. Kohl was certainly looking deep and introspective at this moment. Raymond looked thoughtful too.

"Barque!" A faint but commanding voice in the far distance. The barge moved off from the quayside.

Raymond jabbed at the console keyboard. The submerged ledge showed on the display.

George! Bry! A hundred thoughts passed through Spencer's mind. No guns, no security guards, no police, just George standing on the submerged ledge, looking down at his wet feet, Bry half-obscured behind him. What the hell are you doing, George? Where's your back-up, your men with guns? And

Bry - great to see you, but not here. You should not be here. George had probably said that to her too, and no doubt she'd decided to ignore him.

"That's George's voice. I can't override it," said Raymond.

They both looked at Kohl, who as usual was giving nothing away.

"Diamond's still in the cavern," said Spencer.

"Diamond won't shoot Mr and Mrs Stiles," announced Kohl.

There it was again. Mrs Stiles. Like an itch. At least Kohl's confirmation was a danger removed. It also made Spencer think twice about their arrival. Maybe it wasn't as dumb as it seemed. The two people Kohl couldn't threaten, presenting no threat themselves. Two neutrals. Peacemakers, maybe. Police or armed guards might have triggered a strong reaction from Kohl, but he didn't seem upset to see George and Bry. George's manipulative skills, his authority, might just be a match for Kohl. There was certainly a chance. Their only chance. They'd better grasp it with both hands.

"Does Kohl's result surprise you, Raymond?" asked Spencer, mischievously. "Or does it fit the pattern? Poor third-worlders at the top, rich first-worlders at the bottom. That was the pattern, wasn't it?"

Raymond didn't answer for a while, and then said: "No, that's not quite the pattern, and no, I don't think it fits. But then a few exceptions are inevitable." He glanced at Kohl. "At least my beliefs allow for exceptions.

"Rich and poor is too simple. It's more to do with environment. Rich people work in cities and live in suburbs - all artificial. The poor who do well live out in the wilds, not ghettos. I have this theory that we pick up spirituality from our surroundings. You remember, Spencer, I talked about the reality grid, all those little signals coming along in different directions to create our atoms?" Spencer nodded. It seemed that Raymond too had recognised the need to keep Kohl distracted until George and Bry arrived. "Well my theory is that those signals are affected by whatever they pass through before they reach us. If it's mountains and trees and things with a lot of *mana*, then a little bit of that is still in the signals when they form you, and you pick it up. It becomes part of you. And if they're forming you in the middle of a concrete jungle, then there's no *mana* in them and so you don't get any. That's the real pattern. But I don't think you live out in the woods, do you Kohl? More a suburban man."

"You don't believe this pagan drivel, do you?" Kohl asked Spencer, derisively.

Raymond answered before Spencer could, and aggressively too. "Most of the measurements back me up on this, Kohl. Wilds are better than cities. The more elaborate the shelter, the more divorced

from nature, the lower the result. Ninety percent of the time it's true." His voice lowered. "But then along comes a man like you, and you score well. You're an exception, along with the woman from the laundry in Idaho, a retired couple in Alabama, a drugged-out night-time musician from L.A...."

"You're completely missing the point, aren't you?" interrupted Kohl, equally forcefully. "Science has distracted you from what's really going on here. All you're talking about is how receptive people are. You can live in a big city, you can be rich, live a life surrounded by concrete and landscaping. It might make it more difficult to be receptive, but not impossible. That's all that your silly patterns show. I like the atmosphere in a church. I like to relax in a beautiful garden. I know it's God's work and I'm receptive to it. But you've got so tied up with your measurements that you've lost touch with what it is that's being received, and that is - The Presence of God."

"*Mana*, spirituality, that's what's being received. You call it God, I don't." Raymond watched the screen as George and Bry stepped into the barque. It set off from the submerged ledge. "I'm talking science and you're talking Christianity - a two thousand year old myth."

"Not a myth," retorted Kohl. "You should read more, Raymond. You won't find Christian faith in a book on mythology. But you will find *mana* there. That's a myth, not a faith, certainly not science. You'll find it in there along with all this Egyptian nonsense - weighing souls, spells to give the spirit a better time in the Field of Rushes."

"Field of Reeds."

"Field of Rushes."

"Reeds."

"The Field of Reeds, Raymond, was an alternative name for Greek heaven, for the Elysium Fields. You really should read more. The Egyptian afterlife was called the Field of Rushes."

"No it wasn't. It was called the Field of Reeds."

"Rushes. Plants of the genus Juncaceae, not Phragmites."

"The Field of Reeds."

"Rushes."

"Reeds."

Distracting or not, Spencer couldn't stand it any longer. "Listen to the pair of you!" He shook his head in disgust. "Can't you see you both believe in the same thing? Rushes, reeds, what's it matter? Fucking water plants. There's a spirit, a soul, one of you says it comes from *mana*, the other from God. Neither of you knows for sure, and you certainly don't know what happens to it when you die, so you make up the details." He swept his arm around the room. "Just like everybody else has been

doing for thousands of years. This is the Egyptian version, there's a Greek, a Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Moslem, God knows what else. Why can't you see that almost everything you're saying is the same? People are more than flesh and blood, pure chemistry, brain-cells. But you don't have a clue what that extra bit is, or where it goes, any more than the Egyptians did, so you make it up. But it's not important. Rushes, reeds, *mana*, God. You're talking about the same things, but using different language, that's all."

Kohl was not pleased. "How can you mention Christian beliefs and this ancient Egyptian fairytale in the same breath?"

"And how would you," Raymond asked Kohl, "expect the Egyptians to get it right, thousands of years before Christ was even born?"

Spencer could see this was getting out of control. In his own way, Raymond was as dogmatic as Kohl. It was just less obvious because his views were less conventional. But they both had their faiths and neither was going to give ground to the other. "OK, let's leave it for now."

Kohl ignored him and answered Raymond. "That's a ridiculous argument. There's every chance that people will get it wrong before they get it right."

"Do you truly believe," asked Raymond, "in St Peter or Christ or God sitting in judgement on people and deciding whether they go to heaven?"

"I do."

"Well it's not in the Bible." Raymond turned to Spencer. "The Bible makes a connection between how a life is lived and whether the soul goes to heaven, but there's no mention of the mechanism, no judgement scene. That was added on a few centuries later, based on the Greek myths." He gestured at the scales and the line of Egyptian gods. "And they were based on this."

"Damn you! It isn't stated anywhere in black and white because it isn't a myth. *This* is a myth."

Kohl was clearly angry. Spencer could see this had gone too far. Two bulls with locked horns. He should have seen they were too similar, both too strong. "Raymond..."

"...Along with so much of the rest of Christian beliefs. Osiris, for example, led a difficult life, was betrayed and killed in his thirties with great cruelty, and then resurrected. Ring any bells, Kohl?"

"How dare you! How dare you?" Kohl's face had coloured. "You put science above faith. You produce this... " he stared at the Osiris helmet, "...abomination, and then presume to tell me that my beliefs are wrong, just a re-hash of something that went before? You've been meddling in God's realm for too long, Raymond, you and everybody else associated with this infernal project. And I'm here to stop it. I should have known better than to try rationalising with you. You want a judgement

scene? You think this melodramatic Egyptian rubbish is as valid as anything else? Get out of the throne."

Raymond, too late, realised his mistake. He stayed transfixed in his seat.

"I said *Get Out!*" yelled Kohl.

Raymond jumped out. Kohl, still furious, took his place. He sat on the edge of the throne, keeping his head free of the helmet. "We'll have our judgement scene, and I know exactly what the result will be."

Great, thought Spencer, we started off with a calm fanatic with a gun and now we've got an angry one. As a warm-up act for George, they couldn't have done much worse. He watched Kohl's grim face, watched it, to his surprise, go blank as the barque arrived.

24 Weighing hearts

George stood imperiously in the centre of the craft, eager to disembark. Bry sat at the rear, viewing with distaste the bloodstained water and Alex. She caught Spencer's eye for the briefest of moments.

The high aquarium tide had submerged the first few quayside steps. When the barge came to a halt there was a pause while George assessed the leap to shore before making it. He calmly walked across the wet marble floor. This surely had to be the walk that Jill Freedy had named *The Proprietor*. George's chest was out and his stride was firm. He put on the sternest expression his boyish looks could carry. Over his usual check shirt he was wearing a pale linen jacket, which made him look - at least in Spencer's eyes - dressed up.

He stopped when he reached Toth, the baboon-headed god writing down the result of the weighing. He looked at the thin film of plaster dust covering the heart and feather in the pans of the scales. He glanced at the kneeling figure of Anubis and slowly regarded the remains of Isis.

For a long time George didn't say anything. Here it was again, the silent approach, guaranteed to get everybody's attention. Finally he turned to Kohl, still sitting in the throne a few yards from Toth. "You must be Mr Kohl. George Stiles." Very statesmanlike. "I guess there's been a mix up here, somewhere down the line. I'm sure we'll have it sorted out in a few minutes."

Kohl said nothing. George looked at the machine-pistol, at Alex, then at Spencer's face. Raymond chose this moment, of all moments, to wriggle his hands around in his pockets to find a stick of bubble-gum, which he casually threw into his mouth like an elongated pill. Bry rose to stand in the barge, ready to step ashore.

"Stay in the boat, Bry," said Spencer, quietly.

"Come and join us," responded George. "There's no danger. Spencer's just a little wound up, that's all."

Bry hesitated, then stepped out carefully onto the marble. George gave Spencer a meaningful smile, then turned to Kohl. "A certain amount of compromise is called for. We can come to arrangement over Michael and Pierre. I'm not looking to make life difficult. I've been in touch with Washington. Everybody's aware of the situation."

"That was a mistake." Kohl was trying for his usual cold, emotionless clarity but his anger wouldn't allow it. The result was an uncomfortable mixture.

Bry stood next to Anubis, the jackal-headed god kneeling by the scales. She was the furthest from Kohl and didn't make eye contact with him. She seemed ill at ease, unusually meek. Spencer guessed she'd probably recognised Kohl's mood. George might have recognised it too, but would try to ignore it, ride over it.

"We need to get your colleague to hospital," said George.

"He's dead." And clearly, as far as Kohl was concerned, not worth a waste of words.

George ruminated for a second. "Of course you and I might need to discuss the arrangements in detail. I'm a reasonable man. Not vindictive."

"You're a businessman, Mr Stiles. You shouldn't meddle in spiritual matters."

George spread his palms, showing openness. "So let's talk business."

"I intend to."

Kohl's smile looked more false than anything else in the room. He hadn't relaxed his grip on the machine-pistol. It still pointed dead ahead, right between Raymond and Spencer. "We were about to embark on a round of confessions and judgements. Your presence here makes it even more appropriate." The irritation in his tone had gone, replaced by something more sickening - the sound of pleasure flowering from anger. "We shall follow the theme that you and Raymond so cleverly created here, the theme of Egyptian afterlife judgement."

George looked down at the marble floor, trying to hide his dislike of Kohl's intention. "Is this really necessary? We could move to my office, talk in comfort."

"I'm asking for a small indulgence, Mr Stiles. Are you not prepared to make *any* compromises?"

George hesitated. "Of course."

"Right." Kohl scanned them slowly, the judge surveying his court, the Grand Inquisitor viewing his heretics, only stopping when he felt satisfied that his authority had been reaffirmed. "Who's first?"

He seemed serious about playing the charade through. Spencer recalled the man had shown a mild love of the theatrical before, in Michael Sorden's attic, with the bottle of Mescal, the deadline, the

arrangement of the chairs. Spencer hadn't dealt with that little episode too badly, and he certainly didn't want Bry to go first, or, on his recent performance, Raymond. "I'll start."

"No," instructed George, in his presidential voice. "I will. This is my responsibility."

Spencer might have argued, but he could see that George had the strongest position, was in the least danger.

"Excellent," said Kohl. "Let's begin with the man at the top." He curled an arm to point at the helmet of Osiris above his head. "You take responsibility for this machine, for the Balloons project?"

"I do."

"And are you an expert in spiritual matters?"

"Of course not."

"Then surely you're not qualified to interfere with people's beliefs?"

George looked at Raymond, perhaps wondering whether to bring him into the proceedings as Foxglove's spiritual expert, and deciding against it. "I don't interfere with people's beliefs. The machine is simply a tool. What people read into the results is up to them."

"But the mere presence of the tool changes the landscape. Previously God was the measurer of souls, now you are."

George ran a hand through his hair, unsure what to say. This wasn't the kind of discussion he normally entered into. As he'd once said to Spencer, he'd never had much time for religion. "That's not the intention. The machine is a tool, not a replacement for God, a faith, religion, or anything along those lines."

"And yet it *has* replaced one of God's duties."

George stayed silent.

Kohl filled the vacuum, his voice stern and reproachful. "Do you think this machine shows respect for God?"

George blinked heavily, close to a grimace.

Kohl answered his own question. "I think not. Would even Osiris approve?"

"Surely that's not..." George stopped himself before he said anything too dismissive.

"Declaration thirty-two." Kohl's voice took on some of the strange quality of Raymond's when he'd recited the spells. "O Accuser who came forth from Wetjenet, I have not washed out the picture of a God. Thirty-eight. O Commander of mankind who came forth from your house, I have not reviled God. Forty-two. O Serpent who brings and gives, who came forth from the Silent Land, I have not blasphemed God."

"What's this?" George sounded more exasperated than he might have liked.

"The negative confession," answered Raymond, still chewing his gum. "The declaration of innocence." He pointed to the jury box and its butchered gods. "The dead soul telling the forty-two gods of the evils he hasn't done."

"Or in your case - *has* done," added Kohl. "And tell me, the brains inside the machine. When you applied for cadavers, what kind of research did you say they were for?"

George's mouth twitched. He was losing patience, trying not to let it show. "Does it matter? The machine's not going public. What more do you want? Now let's tidy up and get out of here."

"Declaration one. O Far-strider who came forth from Heliopolis, I have done no falsehood. Nine. O Bone-breaker who came forth from... Raymond?"

"Heracleopolis."

"...Heracleopolis, I have not told lies. Twenty-six. O You of the altar, who came forth from the secret place, I have not hoodwinked. It's not looking good, George. That's six out of forty-two, and you're not supposed to get a single one wrong. Shall we try some of the others? How about business ethics? O Nosey who came forth from Hermopolis, I have not been rapacious. O Bringer of your offering who came forth from Sais, I have not been unduly active."

"OK, OK." George held up his hands in submission. "According to some five thousand year old rule-book, I've sinned. I admit it. Now can we get back to reality? The police will be here soon. If we both want to come out of this with no further problems, it might be a good idea to get our stories straight. Let's talk business. What do you say?"

"You called the police?"

"Not exactly. They called me. They're looking for Raymond."

Whether this was true, or one of George's convenient half-truths, wasn't clear to Spencer. It might also have been unclear to Kohl. But did it matter? Kohl didn't seem interested in rationality. He was proving George's guilt under a system he'd discounted as nonsensical myth just a few minutes before.

"I see." Kohl stared at the scales in contemplation. "Well, we have the confession. The heart has been weighed and found heavy with sin. Now it must be consumed by the monster Ammit." Kohl let his machine-pistol rest on his lap. He reached into his pocket for the Remington and turned to George. "This is Ammit." He pointed the gun at George's chest.

Was he serious? Spencer had a terrible feeling that he was. The trial - if it could be called that - was a sham, no more substantial than the Professor's idea of judgement: nice suit, right hand door.

Like any good inquisitor, Kohl had already made his judgement on Foxglove and the Balloons project weeks ago. He'd already passed sentence on two co-conspirators and executed it. He was also very cold and emotionless about his killing. The casualness of his words, the lack of imminent danger - these counted for nothing.

Spencer glanced at the others to see if they shared his reaction. Raymond, who'd surely seen his share of lunatic acts, didn't seem concerned, but then Raymond had never shown concern about anything so far, apart from the disappearance of *mana*. Bry looked very worried, and her intuition was strong. George seemed more annoyed than anything else - annoyed that Kohl should push the bluff so far.

It struck Spencer that the debris on the floor, gods' heads shattered by the jury box, Alex in the background, bullet holes in the pretty vignettes on the wall - all this destruction had taken away the magnificence of the hall. It looked as it really was, a myth exposed, a human fabrication, a pretence created by men with hydraulic diggers and concrete shuttering, a folly beneath the landscaped grass of an electronics company. Still the spotlights shone down on the brightly-clothed mannequins, but even the giants looked mortal now, frightened of dying.

No, this was stupid. How could Kohl ever shoot George? He'd never get away with it. George had friends in the highest places. Not just contacts, but friends. If anything happened to him they'd want Kohl's head delivered on a silver platter, agency or not, and they'd have the power to get it.

Kohl decided the issue, irreversibly and with great brutality.

Ammit came to life, barking twice, the echo of the first shot merging into the second, drowning out George's gasp as the air left his lungs with the first impact and he began to double-up, only to straighten again as the second bullet hit him higher in the chest. He collapsed to the floor telescopically, like a demolished stack.

Bry shrieked, but not loudly. She dropped to George's side, resting his head on her hand. He was still conscious, his eyes open wide in shock, breathing heavily.

Kohl watched them both, waiting for Bry to look up at him, to fix him with accusing eyes, maybe curse him. But she didn't, she cut him out, behaved as if he wasn't there.

With his words, Kohl had mauled them all in turn: Spencer and his inner voice, Raymond and the brains, George and his ungodliness, but not Bry. She'd stayed quiet and he'd never held dominion over her. And now, with the strength of her non-reaction, her simple but surely so difficult ignorance of him, she'd won the battle between them, however pointless that battle might be.

Kohl could see it. His eyebrows raised in mild surprise, maybe even admiration.

Bry might not have been glaring, but Spencer certainly was.

Kohl turned to him and answered another question, cruelly. "Heat of the moment. Amateurish. That's why you didn't go for the head." He waited for the words to sink in. They sank. "I can hardly kill George Stiles, but he could easily be murdered by his wife's jealous lover."

A smooth and so rapid play of hands and he'd changed guns. Fiercely he glared back at Spencer, the muzzle of the machine-pistol at Spencer's belly.

Spencer came back to some level of self-control, the surge of blood drained from his temples. Had he looked that obvious? He'd been on the verge of jumping Kohl and damn the consequences. It must have been semaphored on his face. Kohl had even looked frightened for a moment, recognising that his small pistol and combat training might not be a match for all that fury.

"I've been thinking about last night," said Kohl, not even bothering to mimic Bry's voice. "And I love you." This was revenge, a dish best served straight in the face and twisted there like a slapstick pie, revenge for Spencer's escape from the attic, for making a fool of him. "We've got that on tape, Spencer. Wife's jealous lover kills industry boss. It'll make a good headline. Or they might say industry couple. Your final act of rage, the murder of the woman you love. Such a destructive side! Now you know why I was so pleased to find you with a gun."

Spencer closed his eyes, blocking out the sight of Kohl. He was screaming inside with frustration. If he watched that sneering face for a moment longer, he'd walk right into the gun.

The neatness made it doubly appalling. Spencer framed as the murderer of George and Bry, just as he had been for Michael and Pierre. Kohl bringing him to justice, lethally. Raymond's death conveniently disguised as an accident amongst all the gunplay.

George!

In all this anger and self-pity he'd neglected George - the real victim. He turned, not caring what Kohl's reaction would be, and knelt on the floor by George's side, opposite Bry. She was talking quietly to her husband, comforting him.

Kohl's attempt at amateurism had left George half alive. His arms and legs lay as still as a mannequin's. His chest heaved in short panting breaths. Blood soaked his shirt and pale jacket - which Bry wouldn't let slip from his body, as if it might stem the flow or keep him warm. Obsessively she fiddled with the lapels.

Yet the obvious trauma of George's body was nothing compared to the theatre of his face. Some great struggle was going on inside George Stiles. Not a mere physical battle but something far deeper. It was there in his fearful eyes, it seemed to rage across his forehead, burrowing around

behind it like a war of mad moles, making the flesh rise and fall in an agitated simmer, turning the skin on the surface alternately pink and grey.

Spencer knew he could see it only because he was so close, because he was involved. No camera would have picked it up. It was visible yet at the same time not real, not made of light.

Finally the conflict subsided. George's forehead turned uniform grey. His eyes seemed distant, flat. Their fearfulness had gone. He was still alive and yet the battle of his life had been lost, the battle of future life. George knew he was going to die. The struggle on his brow had ceased when he'd come to terms with it, stopped fighting and accepted it was so.

Everybody else could see it too. Raymond, standing at George's feet, closed his eyes and performed a small oriental bow, no doubt signifying something important under his own strange system of beliefs. Bry was crying, silently, very privately. Spencer had the strange feeling of seeing George still freckled in his teens, and their lives since then compressed into a single day, high-school in the morning, Foxglove in the afternoon, the shortness of life horribly magnified.

"Confessions and judgements..." murmured George. It was an old man's voice, worn-out, full of pebbles and honey. "...Jill." He looked up at Bry.

"Please don't," pleaded Bry. Spencer watched her anguished face. She wasn't sobbing yet the tears flowed so fast they formed unchanging rivers, only breaking into drops as they left her chin. She shook her head, scattering them. "I don't mind."

George waited for more. They hadn't been the right words. They weren't what she meant. Bry obliged, her tone uneven. "You're forgiven. Really."

"I wanted to marry Jill." George needed Bry to hear this, but even facing death he couldn't say it to her directly. He spoke to Spencer. "I was going to divorce."

Poor George. Lived his life on half-truths, and now, the one time when he shouldn't be telling the truth, he couldn't keep it secret. He'd always had the most perverse kind of integrity.

"I needed Bry to be unfaithful... for the divorce settlement... expensive for a man like me. Selfish."

Spencer was listening, concentrating, hearing every word George said. Yet at the same time he was distracted by the peculiar sensation of watching George leave. Part of him had already gone, moved off elsewhere. It was like viewing a line of refugees crossing a border and disappearing into distant mountains. Like watching a family moving out of a house. Tea-chests, furniture, a piano, taken through the front door and along the path to a succession of vans. The house looks broadly the same but gradually it's becoming empty. No longer a home. The home part of it is being taken away.

"That's why I brought you back, Spencer. Left you together. Security cameras, Rushmore Square. Ah, shit." He pulled a regretful face. He smiled sheepishly, very innocently, at Bry. "I've been really stupid."

How Bry was managing to survive George's revelations, Spencer couldn't imagine. Yet still she held his head in one hand, stroked his hair with the other, still distraught, not hardened nor softened to ruin, still full of compassion. Maybe they were both so used to George's machinations that it seemed only natural that he should reveal one last scheme on his deathbed. A grand comedian saving the best one-liner for his final words.

George's scheming was one of the few defences against the guilt that was beginning to settle on Spencer. Should he feel bad about the scene with Bry at Rushmore Square? Maybe a little, but it had been part of George's plan. And what about not giving up the search for Raymond? Would George have ended his life here if Spencer had been less persistent and given in? That was a harder one to answer, yet George's manipulations, his twisted reasons for Spencer's involvement, they surely added confusion and doubt.

He didn't want to be responsible for George's death. He'd never lost a slight sense of responsibility for the death of his own parents, never forgotten that they'd been on their way to see him when they'd died. To see *him*. Oddly, George was his last connection with them, the one person still in his life who'd met them. An era about to be crushed and cast aside as if it never existed, about to be disconnected from anything living. Apart from himself.

George had been silent for a while, collecting himself for a full string of words.

"I wanted it to work, Bry, you and I, and it nearly did, but you were still in love with his memory. You never became mine."

Bry inhaled sharply, so close to George's deal-is-done sigh. For a moment, Spencer felt sure she'd lose it, break down, but she didn't, she held on. A time too precious to lose.

Very little was left in George's house now. The carpets and curtains had gone, everything carried down the path. All that remained were the bricks and plaster and the memory of the life that had once been lived there. It was still George, just, but a strangely empty version, shallow-eyed, distant-voiced. He breathed hard, winding himself up. That last sentence had almost finished him. He seemed to want to say more, to be gathering himself for a final few words.

Instead he grunted, pop-eyed, like he was going to be sick, then shivered through the final massacre of life's rearguard.

His breathing... didn't stop, exactly, more drew to a close, as daylight turns into dusk and becomes night without passing a clear moment where one ends and the next begins.

For a moment, Spencer had a clear understanding of Raymond's obsession with surroundings. The dancing leaves of the asylum. The Professor's feeble fire. And here nothing more than a manufactured underworld. What a curious place to die.

Bry, cheeks still streaming, took her hand from George's hair and placed it on his chest. She held it there for a few seconds, re-arranged his jacket one final time, then reached for Spencer's hand and placed it on George's still heart, her own above it.

Her eyes met Spencer's for the first time since she'd stepped out of the barque, and in that instant, that brief locked gaze, they said all they wanted to say but couldn't phrase. Half a day of conversation on life, love, death, loss; on all the world's abstractions.

"Very touching," said Kohl. "Time's up."

He was right, but the gaze had a more practical side to it too, and if he'd had any idea of the plans those eyes had been making he would never have used those words. Bry saying, your time has come, Spencer, to put the past behind you, here's your gift, use it well. And Spencer saying thank you, I won't let you down.

Spencer now knew why she'd fussed so much over George's jacket. His hand, where Bry had placed it, wasn't resting on George's smooth chest, it was resting on something hard and metallic in his inside pocket. It was resting on a gun, the same gun that he'd carried when the nutcase had sent threatening letters all those years ago.

Poor George. Wise enough to bring a firearm but not wise enough to use it. You thought you could out-talk the maniac, maybe we did too. By the time you knew different it was too late to do anything about it, too late to draw. The same man who'd sacked him for not firing his gun at the fence had lost his life over not firing his own. The madness of irony.

"Come on," said Kohl.

But I shall fire it for you, George.

Spencer was kneeling with his back to Kohl, his hand on George's chest obscured, but not enough for him to fiddle around and get hold of the gun. A change of position would do it. He leaned forward to kiss Bry - something he wanted to do anyway, just in case things didn't work out.

Bry, recognising the play, took her hand away from his but didn't move to meet him, giving him an excuse for extra movement. His fingers found the gun easily. He checked the safety catch. If he'd

got his guns right, it was now off. He prayed he'd got his guns right. His lips met Bry's. Not a trace of sexuality. One for luck.

A little luck would come in handy. Kohl wouldn't be expecting trouble. He'd assume that if George had a gun he'd already have used it. But he was still armed with a powerful weapon, probably pointing right now at Spencer's back, and he was wearing body armour.

"I'll go next." Spencer didn't turn. He didn't want to see Kohl's face, or Kohl to see his.

"Very noble of you, Spencer. Having just seen a man die, you realise there's something else beyond. You've seen the movement."

"I didn't need the lesson."

"I've been put on this Earth for a reason, Spencer. To move on to the next world those people who are making a mess of this one. It's not a dramatic task."

The unseen voice. All it needed was a few crackles and he'd sound just like the recording from Pierre's. Justifying himself.

"So you didn't kill George, you simply moved him on to the next world?"

"As you saw."

"I saw him *leave*, but I don't know where he went."

"I do."

"Jesus, Kohl! It's fine to *believe* in that stuff, but not to *act* on it. Don't you see the difference?"

"That difference is only for non-believers."

Spencer looked at the vignettes, the coloured pictures amongst the hieroglyphs covering the cavern's sides, an almost continuous band of them, and for the first time recognised their connection with the pictures around Michael Sorden's wall. Men's dreams. Avenging angel. "So if the situation here were reversed, and I killed you, I'd simply be moving you on?"

"If you believe."

"No. Surely if *you* believe?"

Kohl was quiet for a while. He didn't seem to have a ready answer. Spencer wanted to see his face as he struggled to find one. But he'd see it in a second.

"There's something of me in you, Spencer. I saw it when we first met. We're not dissimilar."

Spencer caught himself making George's noise. The inverted sigh. A sudden rush of adrenaline had his heart pumping in his head. He could feel the arteries bulge in his neck with every beat. "I thought there was too much of you in me, Kohl. But now I think there's just the right amount."

He took a deep breath. I do this for you, George, Michael, Pierre. And for Bry and Raymond. And myself too. I kill my lion.

It seemed to take Spencer an age to turn, as if his body were a swingbridge powered by a hamster on a wheel, his arm the shadow on a sundial, rising imperceptibly each minute, the gun impossibly weighing the shadow down, until a lazy afternoon passes by and the gun is in place, the trigger finger, arthritic and torpid, crawls back towards the palm, the bullet leaves the barrel, wipes its eyes in the bright light, yawns, stretches, and wanders off lamely in the direction of Kohl's skull.

But however slow it seemed, Kohl was slower. A dark red circle appeared on his forehead. He looked surprised. If George's balloon had deflated slowly, visibly, Kohl's popped. One moment it was there, the next it had gone. His eyes were open but not receiving, not sending, frozen at that last moment of living time.

Yet even in death Kohl was relentless. His pilotless body, still erect on the throne, had its final movement of revenge. Reflexively his hands clenched, finger still on the trigger, sending the machine-pistol on a wild firing arc under the power of its own recoil.

Spencer counted the bullets into his body.

One two three four.

And dark.

25 Some dreams come true, others shouldn't

Bry's perfume. Far better than smelling salts. Her face came into focus, then a plasma bottle in the background hanging from a rail above his bed. Somewhere to his left a cardiac monitor clicked its steady confirmation.

Reality was a slippery thing but he was getting a finger-hold.

She'd kissed him on the forehead. The sensation was still there.

"Do I turn into a prince now?" A weak voice for a weak joke. "Ouch." That wasn't a specific ouch, more a general comment on his body as a whole. So much discomfort so widely spread it was difficult to regionalise. At least he could be sure he wasn't dreaming. Dreams never contained this much pain.

"You already did." She kissed him lightly on the lips, then carefully settled her hips, sitting awkwardly on the very edge of the bed and taking him in with her eyes, one hand close to his shoulder but unsure of touching. "Welcome back. We weren't sure there for a while, but they say you'll be OK now." She stiffened, blocking an emotion she didn't want to show. "How do you feel?"

No. That was too difficult to answer. "How long have I been here?"

"Five days You were.... the first few days weren't good."

Marzipan. He could smell marzipan. Why would a hospital smell of marzipan? It wouldn't. "My nose has gone wrong. I can smell marzipan."

Bry giggled and shook her head, relieved to hear trivia.

He looked her up and down, scanning slowly so his eyes didn't get ahead of his brain. "No injuries? He missed you?"

"Somebody moved to shield me. Don't you remember?"

Not really, but he was glad that he had.

"I owe him a big thank you."

Spencer tried to move his hand, to bring it out from beneath the sheets and touch hers, but the transfer of effort almost cost him his grip on reality. He relaxed, waited for his vision to clear. "What did the police say?"

"Not interested, at least not in us. They're battling it out with the agency. Kohl's been disowned." Memories of the violence, of George's death, arrived and saddened her. "George's people in Washington have got involved. They want agency heads. It's all on a different level."

That could be worse. Sometimes it was nice to be a sleepy old pawn and let the big pieces make the plays.

"And I've resigned." She smiled, came close to laughing. "God, I'm happy I did that. I suppose I own the company now, but I sure as hell don't want to run it. Everybody tells me I should. But why? Why should I? It's not what I want to do."

He was pleased for her, happy that she was ditching the job that she'd hated so long, but he was finding it hard to listen. "I had the strangest dream."

"Go on."

Was this a good idea? The dream was calling him back. Interfering with the here and now. He shouldn't talk about it. Not while his head was so fuzzy. He'd tell her soon. He closed his eyes, relieving the strain on their lids. "Can you find somebody for me? A man on the streets. He's called the Professor."

"Sure. I can arrange that."

"And the monks from Ireland. A detox program."

Bry didn't respond for a while. He wondered if what he'd said made sense. He couldn't tell.

"Doctors?"

"Monks."

"You're looking very tired, Spen. I think you should rest."

"Yes. Very tired."

Losing grip. Another kiss. Sleeping Beauty's relapse. Frogs. Bry's voice somewhere in the distance there. Fading. The Projectionist of Dreams reloading the reel. A loose end of celluloid click, click, clicking as it travels round and round.

The projectionist's voice. "You want to see this again, Spencer?"

"Yes, I do."

*

He was back in the concrete hall with no windows, something like a sports hall from the sixties. There were millions of people around. Half of them were singing - hymns, tribal chants, salsa. Dancing. Hell of a commotion.

Standing next to him were George, in his jeans and linen jacket, and Kohl, still in blue fatigues and body armour. They were lined up in front of St Peter. Spencer found he had a gun in his hand. He grunted and threw it to the floor in disgust. Nobody seemed to notice. They were too busy listening to St Peter. He was talking sternly to Kohl.

"I'll deal with you later. You've got a lot of explaining to do, sending me so much work. Who do you think you were? God's little bloody helper?"

For George his tone was far milder. "Not a bad life, George, but a bit unclear in patches. I'd like you to find a piece of paper and write down your morality, your attitude to truth, then come back to me. OK?"

George began, "I'm sure we can sort this out right now..." then tailed off under St Peter's gaze. He nodded.

St Peter turned to Spencer, looked at the gun on the floor, ignored it, asked kindly, "Spencer, are you dying or dreaming?"

Spencer thought about it. Death, now there was a big escape. But did he need escapes any more? "Dreaming."

St Peter sighed. "Spencer, I can't waste time on people who're dreaming. Come back when you're dying. OK?"

The bare concrete walls became fuzzy, indistinct. The projectionist's reel clicked. Bry said something nice in the background. St Peter's voice merged with it, fading out. "Nice suit, though."

THE END

Andrew Starling

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