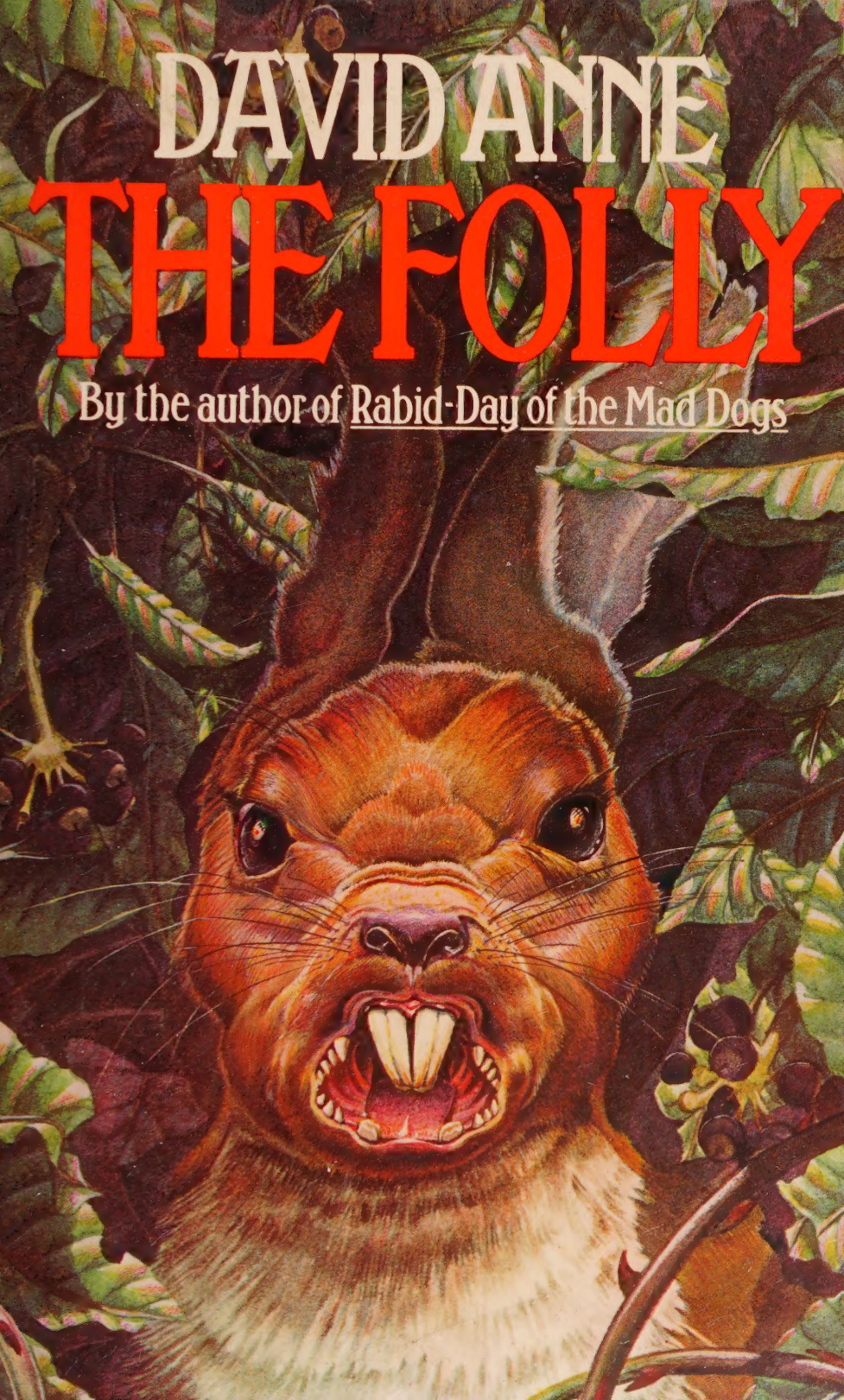


# DAVID ANNE THE FOLLY

By the author of Rabid-Day of the Mad Dogs



For countless centuries Man has manipulated the forces of Nature with little thought for the environment or for the suffering of animals so ruthlessly exploited . . . but sometimes, as David Anne shows in his stunning new thriller, Nature can take her own revenge.

The quiet village of Frickley, in the heart of the English countryside, situated a few miles from the Government Research Station of Porton Down, witnesses a series of inexplicable deaths – the victims so badly mutilated as to be unidentifiable. Among the dead are the parents of Guy Corling, chief crime reporter on one of Fleet Street's leading dailies, who propelled by his personal and professional feelings starts to uncover the grotesque story of one man's folly.

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*By the same author*

RABID—(Day of the Mad Dogs)

# *THE FOLLY*

David Anne

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1978

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## PROLOGUE

The Folly, quite simply, was a monument of madness. No-one knew why it had been built but that, of course, is the way with follies. A solid tower, standing just under one hundred feet high, it had been the fevered brainchild of Sir Norman Hattrell, or 'Norman the Mad', who had it constructed at the end of the eighteenth century.

Sir Norman, the great-grandfather of the present landlord, Sir Mark Hattrell, had many crazed notions, most of which he indulged in. Including murdering his wife. Rumour had it at the time that Sir Norman built the Folly as a monument to the Devil, which was why it had no windows.

Legend further adds that it was at the Folly, during one of Norman the Mad's grisly Black Magic rituals, that the unfortunate Lady Hattrell met her horrific and untimely end. Which led the older inhabitants of the nearby village to whisper of 'hauntings up at the Folly', and the 'evil which chained poor Lady Hattrell's soul to the spot'.

After his wife's death, Sir Norman began to stay in the Folly for longer and longer periods, living in filth and squalor, coming out only occasionally. He took to drink and one morning was found dead. Some said the gin finally got him but others, emphasising the froth which had been found round his mouth, said the Devil had taken his own.

For in those days epileptic fits were taken as a sign of possession of evil spirits. And a man who died from choking on his own vomit during such a fit was surely paying the price for his

involvement with the Dark Forces. So even if the physicians said Sir Norman's death was due to illness, the look of terror on the man's face convinced those who knew, or thought they knew, otherwise.

The Folly was cleaned out and locked up after Sir Norman's death. Only occasionally would it be opened when a curious visitor to the Manor insisted on seeing it. Too far from the village to be a regular attraction for schoolchildren or courting lovers, it stood at the edge of the woods near Frickley Manor, weeds, bushes and wild grass growing in uncultivated profusion around it.

During school holidays, however, the odd brave schoolboy ventured out to look at it, but remembering the stories, soon turned tail and fled. For the tales, which had mainly died out at the turn of the century, began to proliferate once more in the 1950s.

Many swore they heard sounds and saw lights round the dark tower. One man was convinced he had seen a 'yellowish figure' floating over the long grass. But as many of these reports came from people who either had no business to be there in the first place or were drunkards, not much notice was taken of them.

But people still stayed away from the Folly. For it was one thing to laugh at the tales in the warmth and security of home, or round a pub table. It was another to walk past the building, even in daylight. For it was generally agreed there *was* 'something rum' about the Folly. Something that brought a shiver to the spine. Something to be avoided.

And so it was left to the woods and the elements. Slowly it began to crumble, the weeds and creepers growing higher. And when the moon was full it could be seen for miles around, a black velvet finger pointing to the heavens in mockery.

A dying memory of one man's madness . . .



## CHAPTER ONE

They came in from the chilled spring night, the regulars of The Goat, to sit round the huge log fire. There were four of them, local men who had been going through the evening ritual of drinking and conversing for more years than they could remember. In late spring, summer and early autumn they sat outside on wooden benches gazing up the High Street of Frickley, nodding to passers-by and leisurely discussing whatever came to mind.

Walter Price, the schoolmaster, a tall, gaunt man who looked every inch the teacher with his black suit shiny at the bottom and elbows, and never pressed trousers; John Aitkens, the local postmaster, whose bluff face and toothy grin were common sights in Frickley as he trudged his rounds; Paul Garner, who farmed a smallholding nearby, a squat, strong man who worried a lot and spoke little. And Pat Donnolly, the oldest of the four, and a farm labourer who worked for Sir Mark Hattrell. Donnolly was small, with a sharp, pointed nose, bright eyes and a shock of white hair. Like most men in their seventies, he always looked as if he needed a shave, white stubble covering most of his face.

These were the four who met almost every night in the same place to discuss nothing in particular and everything in general. Until that Saturday night in spring.

They settled round the fire with their pints of beer. Price pulled out a large handkerchief and polished his spectacles, holding them up to the light to inspect them.

‘You can’t stick to the old ways, Pat,’ he said, with a slight Midlands accent. ‘Science and technology mean progress. Even in farming. If Sir Mark wants to modernise his farm with the latest techniques, he’s quite right. It’s progress.’

Donnolly scowled.

‘Progress!’ he spat. ‘There’s nought wrong with the old ways. They was good enough for my father and grandfather. And they should be good enough for Sir Mark Hattrell. Gentlemen farmers! Stuff ’em!’ he said loudly.

‘What do you reckon, Paul?’

Garner nodded slowly.

‘It’s all money, isn’t it?’ he said. ‘These gentlemen farmers want to come and try and run a place like mine for a week. That’d show ’em.’

The cause of this philosophical discussion was the decision of Sir Mark to introduce automatic milking machines for the small dairy herd he kept. Donnolly had not stopped talking about it for three days.

‘I don’t see what all the fuss is about,’ John Aitkens said, smiling. ‘You’ve still got your job, Pat. He’s not replacing you with a robot. Mind you, that’s not such a bad idea,’ he laughed.

Donnolly grunted and gulped his beer. A man who knew and understood the old ways of farming, he was naturally suspicious of any form of change, especially if it had anything to do with machines. The most he would acknowledge was cross-breeding, and that grudgingly.

He did not say much the rest of the night, feeling the others—with perhaps the exception of Paul Garner—did not understand what he was trying to say about upsetting the balance of nature.

‘You can’t muck about with nature, I tell you,’ he kept muttering. ‘Nature’ll get her own back, just you wait and see. Just wait.’

Donnolly drank steadily. Unlike the others, he had no wife or children waiting for him when he returned home to his small tied-cottage. His wife had died four years previously and he had been living on his own ever since. Not that he enjoyed it, but after living almost a lifetime in the employ of the Hattrells, he did not know what else to do. And anyway, he was too old for change.

Donnolly had married young, not for love or any similar emotion, but because the girl he was going out with thought she was pregnant. In those days that was not considered sinful, but part of the country way.

In fact the girl had not been pregnant. And never was. The marriage had been childless, a source of constant disappointment to Donnolly. But it had lasted, each partner growing accustomed to the other, having no great ambitions, not even thinking about their lot, going from day to day without questioning until suddenly old age was upon them and illness crept between them.

The doctors told Donnolly it was a form of leukaemia that killed Doris, his wife. He had nodded slowly at the news, not knowing what leukaemia was. All he knew was that Doris was dead. And for a man who had never cooked, sewn or looked after his creature comforts in his life, this was frightening, but he soon learned the basic skills and life went on. It was the way of the country.

That night he thought about Doris. She had always been a neat dresser, keeping her figure until the very end. And she kept a neat house, he thought ruefully, remembering the present mess in the cottage. Pat Donnolly was not a tidy man, but apart from the state of the cottage, he missed her presence more than he would openly admit. He missed her warm body at night, her uncomplaining cheery face, her bustling about the place. Sex had been regular, but never important, so he did not miss, or even think about, that side of the relationship.

So when Dan Smythe, the landlord of The Goat, shouted for last orders, Donnolly was beginning to feel depressed.

‘Cheer up, lad,’ John Aitkens said, nudging him in the ribs. ‘They’re only bloody machines, after all.’

Donnolly smiled weakly. ‘Aye, reckon you’re right after all,’ he said quietly. ‘All bloody machines.’

‘Have one for the road,’ Price suggested. ‘You’ll feel better for another sup.’

Donnolly nodded.

‘If you’re buying, then I’ll have a large whisky,’ he grinned.

‘Eee, you old bugger!’ Aitkens laughed. ‘Getting our sympathy just for a whisky!’

Donnolly sipped at the whisky, knowing he should just have ordered another pint. Beer and spirits never agreed with him, but that night he felt he wanted to get drunk.

Dan Smythe came round clearing the tables.

‘Have you no homes to go to?’ he asked, beaming. ‘No wonder. Don’t know how your wives put up with the likes of you. I’d sling you out,’ he added and then looked at Donnolly.

‘Sorry, Pat,’ he said, lowering his voice. ‘I forgot for a minute. Sorry.’

‘No harm done,’ Donnolly muttered. ‘Give us a bottle of ale to take back with me and I’ll forgive you.’

Smythe laughed and brought the bottle for Donnolly.

‘See you on Monday, lads,’ he shouted as the four ambled out into the cool night air.

They wished each other goodnight, and went their separate ways. The village was quiet as Donnolly walked through it. One or two people, out with their dogs, nodded at him as they passed by.

‘Bloody air,’ he mumbled as he swayed against a wall. ‘It’s true it’s not the drink that does it, it’s the fresh air.’

He clutched his bottle of ale tightly in his pocket.

‘Aye, that’s all I’ve got when I get home,’ he muttered.



'A bloody bottle. Oh, Doris, I miss you lass, wherever you are.'

Soon he was on the outskirts of the village, going through the unlit country roads towards Frickley Manor. It was a fine night. A full moon and star-studded sky silvered the landscape. The woods to his left looked solid black, their velvet outline pierced by the solid black bone that was the Folly. Donnolly glanced at the tower.

'Stupid thing,' he said. 'I suppose they called *that* progress in its day.' He chuckled.

'Norman the Mad! Norman the Randy more like it. All those naked women dancing about in the moonlight outside the Folly.'

Suddenly he felt cold and shivered. Quickening his steps, he hurried along the narrow road. He did not see the branch sticking out from the hedgerow. He stumbled over it and fell.

'Bugger!' he spluttered as he felt a wet patch seep down his trousers. 'The bloody ale!' He felt around the outside of his coat pocket. The grating of broken glass confirmed the worst.

'Blast and hell!' he swore. 'Now I haven't even got that when I get back. Bugger it!'

He staggered to his feet and stumbled on, moving from side to side in the road. His body felt heavy and he stared glassily ahead, hands swinging loosely at his sides. The thought of the cold, empty cottage made him more depressed. Feeling tired, he sat down by the side of the road and looked up at the sky.

The full moon, a brilliant white, hung large and low. A wind had sprung up and white clouds scudded across the sky as the trees, not yet in full leaf, rustled noisily about him. Listless, he gazed at the moon and thought about the tales he had heard about madmen and werewolves. Tales which as a child he had been terrified of, but now saw them as so much nonsense.

But he stood up and shambled quickly towards the cottage,

which was only a few hundred yards round the next bend. He felt better when the low-roofed house came into view. He would soon get the fire on, have a cup of tea and probably fall asleep in the big armchair by the fireplace.

Things could be worse, he told himself. He could have nowhere to go.

The small cottage was surrounded by a low white wooden fence. A neat garden in front and a large vegetable patch at the back reflected Donnolly's natural love of the earth and anything to do with it. He pushed open the gate and walked round the house to enter by the kitchen at the back.

His shadow stretched out to the side of him and he waved his hands in the air, chuckling at the shapes on the ground. He began looking for his keys in his trouser pockets but paused when he realised with sickening suddenness they were in his coat. In the pocket with the broken glass.

Sighing, he took his coat off and laid it on the ground. A dog barked in the distance and he quickly turned. Picking the coat up by the hem he held it upside down shaking out glass, a pipe knife and the keys. On his hands and knees, he leant forward to grab them. From the corner of his eye, he thought he saw a dark shape move across the garden. He looked round.

'Rory, is that you Rory? C'mere boy,' he said. 'Daddy's home. Want a bone?'

There was no movement. The wind had dropped and the garden was still as marble. Donnolly frowned. Where was the dog? Rory usually came bounding to meet him. Probably out hunting rabbits, he smiled and reached down to pick up the keys. He put his hand tightly round them but immediately dropped them. A thin sliver of glass was embedded in the heel of his palm.

Holding his hand up to the light of the moon he gingerly pulled it out. A thin trickle of blood began to ooze down his hand.

‘Damn it! That’s all I bloody well need!’ he said.

He found the keys again and carefully picked them up. He was looking for the right key when he thought he saw another shape move across the vegetable patch.

‘Rory, stop mucking about! It’s me. Pat.’

Silence.

He found the key and had just inserted it in the keyhole when he heard a scuffling, sniffing noise behind him.

‘Ro . . .’ he started to say as he turned, but his voice trailed off into a gasp as he felt a sharp, biting pain shoot through the back of his leg.

‘What the bloody . . .’ he said, twisting round.

He got no further. A dark object sprang out of the dark and landed on his thigh, knocking him to the ground. He tried to sit up but the pain in his legs made it difficult. Propped on his elbows, his mouth fell open in a silent scream of terror as the dark, unidentifiable shape tore chunks of flesh from his thigh. Another creature gnawed furiously at his calf.

The whole ground seemed to be moving as streams of animals poured towards Donnolly. Finally the scream broke in his throat. But it was too late. His body was quickly covered by the creatures and the scream lost.

Donnolly kicked and punched in useless attempts to fight them off.

The smell almost suffocating him, Donnolly tried feebly to push the creatures away. His drunken mind could not grasp what was happening. He tried to roll over but dozens of pairs of teeth sank into his body. He felt hot, choking breath on his face. His hand shot up to protect his eyes and his fingers closed round thick, soft fur.

Donnolly screamed again and again until the sheer weight of the creatures forced the breath out of him. And then he gave up, his strength gone. He lay there in excruciating pain and shuddered in agonising convulsions as one of the animals

sunk its teeth into his stomach and ripped at his intestines. He felt the warm blood run down his side.

His head fell back and a vague, blurred image of his wife filled his mind. And then he was only aware of a vivid red as his throat was sliced by razor-sharp teeth. And finally, he felt himself slipping away from the torment into blackness, melting into death.

The clouds raced across the moon for a few moments, flinging Donnolly's body into shadow. But the squeaking, grunting, hellish creatures did not stop their frantic ripping, tearing, and biting.

For it was their first feast of human flesh. . . .



## CHAPTER TWO

The night on which Hubert and Jane Corling died started like any other Sunday evening for the couple. Quietly. Jane tidied up in the kitchen of the two-storied cottage that the Corlings had managed to save from demolition. Hubert lay in the small room next to the master bedroom. He listened to the quiet hiss of the gas heater in the room and watched the full moon rise over the woods, behind which stood Frickley Manor.

Their small cairn terrier dog, Wiggy, lay curled on the bed, its weight pressing down on Hubert's shins. But he could not feel it. He could not feel anything. His useless, wasted legs had not felt anything in them for over two years. A stroke had paralysed his legs, his right side and impaired his speech. At seventy-two, Hubert Corling was a cripple, unable to perform even the simplest tasks human dignity demanded.

And the ultimate irony for the man who had won an OBE, an MC, and risen to the rank of Brigadier in the Army which had been his career, was that his mind was still alert and aware.

The Corlings had been married for nearly forty years when the stroke hit Hubert. Their life, as an Army couple, had not been predictable, but neither had it been eventful. They had one child, Guy, now a high-flying, ambitious journalist with a Fleet Street newspaper. There had been no emotional upheavals, no trials of their love for each other. It was a placid existence and as the years went by their dependence on one another became an accepted fact.

And as old age rapidly approached, the Corlings lived a life not so much of contentment, but of resignation. Jane, once a modest beauty, tended to Hubert's basic needs, helped out by a district nurse who called twice a week to help her bathe him and change the bed clothes.

While many women would have felt bitter about the situation, Jane Corling did not, could not, think in these terms. Hubert was her husband, 'In sickness and in health', and that was all there was to it. Nothing more. She reckoned she had had a good life with Hubert, she had a son whom she admired as well as loved and if Fate had decided to play one of its blind tricks on them there was nothing she could do about it. So there was no point in thinking about it. So she didn't.

Finally satisfied that the kitchen was spick and span, Jane settled down in front of the gas fire and began reading. The cottage was still and silent. An occasional bird, frightened by a fox or cat would squawk in the woods. And other night animals and insects would suddenly shatter the black silence around the house, chirping, growling or rustling through the undergrowth. Normal night sounds for those who lived in the country.

Rosemary Cottage was the last house in Frickley village, standing on its outskirts. After Hubert was demobbed, they had bought it for a few hundred pounds and sunk every penny into modernising it. They ran out of money before it was completed, but at least it was habitable, if not luxurious. The other cottages around had been left to crumble into ruin, the local Council refusing to pay for any improvements. And so the Corlings were forced into a state of isolation, made worse by Hubert's stroke.

Few visitors called, and of course Jane would not think of going to the pub alone on Saturday nights, a trip she and Hubert had made regularly before his paralysis.

She heard the village clock strike eleven and, surprised that

the night had passed so quickly, she put some milk on the cooker for Hubert's drinking chocolate.

She put out the downstairs lights and walked through the hall in the gloom. The stairs creaked as she went up to the bedrooms, carefully balancing the cup in one hand. Hubert's room was stuffy and the small night-light at the side of his bed gave off an overall yellowish glow. She laid the cup on the table. Hubert lay with his eyes closed, but when she put her hand behind his neck to support him, he opened them. They were glazed, pained, weary eyes.

He mumbled something, droplets of spittle forming at the side of the twisted mouth. Jane could only make out the word bed. She smiled.

'Yes, dear,' she said softly, the smile playing round her lips. 'It's my bedtime. I've brought your chocolate. Do you want it?'

A slight nod, the eyes staring helplessly at her.

She cupped his head in her left hand and slowly lifted the chocolate to his mouth. He slurped at it and then lay back, feeling her warm hand pressing into his neck. For a second an old feeling of desire came over him as he remembered her warm body, her firm breasts and soft thighs. Dead memories now belonging to dead days.

Jane instinctively leant forward and kissed him gently on the forehead. 'I love you Hubert,' she said quietly.

Hubert eventually finished the chocolate, Jane wiping the spills from his chin every few minutes. She kissed him again, put the light out and went through to her own bedroom. Hubert mumbled something just as she was leaving.

'Thank you, darling,' she replied. 'Sleep well. Come on, Wiggy!' she added. 'Your bed's downstairs.'

The dog jumped off the bed and scurried down to the kitchen. Jane looked at the bedroom once more to check. Hubert watched her, her face soft in the dull light. God, how he

loved that woman. At least she could understand some of the things he said to her.

Like the 'God bless you, love,' he had mumbled a few moments earlier.

Hubert could not sleep. He listened as Jane prepared for bed, heard her padding quietly about the large bedroom as she removed her clothes. It brought back more memories of times when they were young and of the first night she had undressed in front of him with the light on. Sex between them was like their life together. Uncomplicated. Saturday nights and holidays and sometimes after a party at camp.

But that was a lifetime ago and the thoughts were as dead as his legs. Hubert suddenly felt very tired, his body heavy, his brain weary. His eyes slowly closed and he spiralled into sleep.

He was snoring lightly when Jane looked in for the last time that night. She smiled softly and stood looking at him for a few seconds. She returned to her own room, took two of her sleeping tablets and lay waiting for the pills to take effect, normally about fifteen minutes.

She was just drifting off to sleep when she felt an irritating, tickling sensation inside her right nostril. Jane wrinkled her nose, trying to ease the itch, but sneezed uncontrollably. Feeling a warm gush come from the nostril, she switched on the bedside lamp, fearing the worst.

'Blast it,' she muttered as she looked down and saw blood on the white sheet. Jane had been prone to nose-bleeds years before, due to a small bone in her nose being slightly out of alignment. It had been cauterised twice, with success, but lately the old trouble had returned. Grabbing a handful of tissues from the bedside table, she put her head back and dabbed at her nose.

Eventually the bleeding slowed to a trickle, and she turned



the light off, fighting to stay awake until it stopped altogether. She limply threw the blood-stained tissues on the floor, her body heavy with sleep. Soon she was breathing deeply and regularly, at last asleep.

The house was silent. No trees stirred in the silent, moon-washed night. Even the creatures of the outside seemed to have stopped their grovelling and scratching. It was almost a perfect spring night.

Jane was the first to hear it. She fought out of her drugged sleep, wondering if she had been dreaming. No, there it was again. A low growling noise. And another. A gnawing, biting sound, like mice chewing soft wood. Jane hated mice. The sight of one brought a lump of fear to her throat.

Living in the country had been difficult at first because of her phobia about mice and rats. But after the cottage had been pest-proofed by a London company, the few mice they had seen disappeared.

But there it was again: the growl, the biting, and the sounds of tearing. She felt the flesh on her rib cage creep. Cold sweat ran down the back of her neck and between her breasts.

Again. The growl. The ghastly sounds. And then her body sighed and she forced a smile in the darkness. It was probably Wiggy. The dog was no doubt chasing a spider and scraping the ground with his paws. Sleep began to roll heavily over her once more. The sleep of relief.

But she was startled out of it a few minutes later by the new sounds from below. A quick snapping, tearing of wood. No doubt about it now. And Wiggy's whimpering. A thudding sound. The dog's yelp, cut off suddenly in the middle of its cry, a gurgling noise, half bark and half growl. As if the dog's throat had been torn open. And then silence.

Jane lay, her cotton nightdress soaked with the sweat of fear. A shaft of moonlight cut across the bedroom, lighting up the door which led to the top landing. Her eyes were riveted

on that door. Outside, nothing moved. No sound came from the stairs. The cottage seemed cocooned in black silence.

To Jane, an age had passed since hearing the grisly sounds. In fact, it was less than two minutes. And then the silence was broken. At first it was a quiet *thump-thump*. Then a pattering across the stone floor of dozens of padded feet.

Jane was sobbing with fear, trying to gulp air down her restricted throat. Her wet body refused to move. The sounds grew nearer. And then stopped outside her thin hardboard door.

Her eyes stared unblinkingly at the foot of the door. She imagined rats or mice standing outside, their filthy grey-brown bodies heaving, their heads lifted slightly, whiskers quivering in anticipation. But even her wildest imaginings did not prepare her for what happened next.

The lower centre panel of the door was shattered as two long teeth, shining horribly white in the moonlight, burst through it with a crash. The teeth were withdrawn and then seconds later the whole panel splintered as a dark brown creature flung itself into the room.

The crash ended Jane's hypnotic state. She tried to pull the bedcovers back. It was too late. More creatures poured into the room and surrounded the bed, a choking, fetid smell coming from their bodies. Creatures from the spawning-ground of hell.

Jane crouched on the bed, sheets clutched instinctively in front of her breasts. Her nose was bleeding again, staining the sheets. She was shaking and whimpering. All strength drained from her body, she became mesmerised once again. She watched as a large beast hopped near the bed, landing with a *plop* a few feet away from her. It stood for a few moments in the moonlight. Jane could not believe her eyes.

At first she thought it was a rabbit. But the shape of the head! The length of the teeth! No rabbit ever looked like the

horror in front of Jane. It could not be a rat. Its body was covered with thick fur. And yet . . .

For Jane Corling, it did not really matter what it was. With one enormous leap it landed on the bed. And then all hell broke loose. The creature sunk its teeth into Jane's fleshy arm and she actually *heard* them scrape her bone. She felt agonising pain as a dripping lump of flesh was torn away.

She tried to get out of bed, but one of the creatures bit her ankle and she fell back on the bed, about a dozen animals swarming over her. One was straddled across her face, maddened by the smell and taste of the blood which now poured from her nose.

She opened her mouth in an attempt to cry out. It filled with the soft fur from the underbelly of the monster. Blind panic made her close her mouth and she bit into the underside, tasting the warm, sticky blood that flowed out of the creature's stomach.

With a squeal the animal hopped off her face. The realisation of what she had done, the sheer agony she felt as the animals devoured her, her lifelong terror of mice and rats – for now her mind convinced her that was what they were – proved too much.

Her sanity left her, and with the strength of a madwoman, she began to fight them. There was no battle. One bite through her throat ended her desperate attempt. Her last image in life was of the door between her and Hubert's room opening and the crippled, twisted, wasted figure of the man that had been her husband dragging himself along the floor by his elbows . . .

Hubert had wakened when the door panel had smashed. At first he thought Jane had dropped a glass, but when the sound was repeated, he knew he was wrong. Then he heard the creaking of the stairs, the *thump-thump* from the hall and his wife's bedroom.

He went to press the alarm bell that activated a light bulb by Jane's bed, then remembered that it was not working. He lay back, his breath rasping, his voice coming out in incoherent, broken sobs. He took a deep breath and was still. He listened. Through the silence came the quiet whimpering of his wife. And then the sounds of a struggle. A horrible, wet tearing noise, reminding him of a time in North Africa when he had seen a man's side torn away by a large piece of shrapnel. But this was no battlefield.

A scuffling from the next room, followed by a loud squeal forced him into action. He put his left hand under the bed and grasped the steel support. Pulling on it, he rolled himself over, landing on the floor with a heavy thump.

His heart pounded wildly in his chest and a stabbing pain shot across his head from temple to temple. He forced himself round on his stomach and placed both elbows on the ground. Using them he crawled to the door, his dead legs trailing behind him.

He was almost at the door when a white pain flashed across his eyes and through his head. He fell forward, his tongue between his teeth and felt a new pain in his mouth. He had almost bitten through his tongue. Swallowing his own blood, he pulled himself up again, and resumed his bizarre journey.

In a few minutes he was at the door. He pushed it open, and using every remaining ounce of energy he had left he crawled through the opening.

Nothing he had seen in a lifetime as a professional soldier compared to what he saw in that bedroom. His wife's body was covered by scores of dark animals, who ignored him in their frenzied attack on Jane. He heard the crunching of bone and the tearing of flesh. He smelt the filthy creatures, but above that he smelt the foul smell of human blood and innards, a smell he knew and recognised from war-time battlefields of destruction.

And he was helpless.

He stared in horror as the animals slowly became aware of another human being in the room. He watched, his mouth dribbling, unintelligible sounds coming from his throat, as they turned, whiskers and teeth red with blood, and began moving towards him.

The creatures surrounded him. One of them darted forward and sunk its teeth into his right leg. He felt nothing. He did not feel the others saw at his legs or bite into his right side. But he felt the pain at the back of his neck as the razor-sharp teeth went through the top of his spine.

His head fell forward and he felt his right ear being torn off. The pain was excruciating. He looked up at the bed where Jane lay. He could not even recognise the bloodied mess of bone, flesh and hair that lay there.

Something was gnawing at his cheek. He could take it no longer. He knew it was the end. His mouth fell open and he tried to scream. To his shocked amazement he actually heard his own voice yelling in terror.

It was the first manly sound he had made in two years. But it did not matter. A few minutes later he was dead. Carrion for the creatures of hell.



## CHAPTER THREE

'How the hell do I know where he is at this time of the morning?' Victor Henthorne yelled down the telephone.

'You're the gamekeeper, that's why!' the cultured voice at the other end barked. 'I told that drunken lout we were running a test on the new machines first thing this morning. The bloody cows are still roaming around the fields! Everything's set up. I'll fire him for this, wait and see!'

Henthorne sighed.

'Pat Donnolly's never missed a day's work as long as I've been keeper with you, or as long as my father was keeper here either. If he's not turned up then ...'

'Don't give me any more of your flannel, Henthorne. All I know is that Irish layabout has ruined a damned important experiment. I don't give two damns about how long he's worked for my family. Or, if it comes to that, how long you've worked for us. If the work isn't done then I'll find other people who're willing to do it. And that goes for you, too,' the voice raged. 'And you know how difficult it is trying to get a job as a head keeper at your age. Now get out and find that god-damned no-good labourer!'

The telephone went dead in Henthorne's hand.

'What's wrong, Victor?' his wife asked sleepily in the bed beside him.

'It's Sir Mark. He's screaming mad because Pat Donnolly didn't turn up for some test with the new milking machines.'

‘Is that all?’ Mary Henthorne asked.

‘I don’t know,’ Victor said quietly, his dark blue eyes looking troubled.

‘I’ve never heard Hattrell sound the way he did. He was like a madman, he theatened me with the sack.’ He shook his head. ‘He’s getting worse, y’know. There’s something wrong with that man. It’s not normal. And something else,’ he added, swinging himself out of bed. ‘He hadn’t even told me about the test. I don’t like it Mary, I don’t like it at all.’

‘Oh, you know his moods. Just go and get Donnolly and everything’ll be fine. Pat’s probably forgotten. You know what he’s like. What time is it anyway?’

‘Ten past seven,’ he answered, stretching himself.

‘Another merry Monday.’

He went to the bathroom to wash and shave. He turned the cold tap on and splashed his face and chest – the invigorating blast of icy water wakened him. He caught sight of himself in the mirror as he towelled his body dry.

At forty-seven, he was a lean, wiry man with not a trace of fat on his body. His dark brown hair, now tinged at the front with grey, made him look younger than he really was. The only indication that he was middle-aged were the wrinkles around his eyes and mouth, a sign that like most country workers, he spent most of his time outside, his skin well weather-beaten.

Mary had a large mug of tea and a slice of bread ready for him when he went down to the kitchen. He picked the mug up by the side, the thickened, calloused skin of his fingers not even registering the heat of the tea. He sipped at it slowly, a troubled look on his face.

‘Things are getting bad, Mary,’ he said. ‘That man should see a doctor. ’Phoning me up at seven in the morning like that and talking to me as if I’ve just started here.’

‘Forget your pride, Victor. I know how you feel. He’s a funny

one, that Sir Mark,' she nodded. 'Probably gets it from his great-grandfather, Norman the Mad.'

Victor grunted, sipped at his tea and stuffed the bread in his mouth.

'See you later,' he mumbled, and left to find Pat Donnolly.

When Mary heard his car drive off, she crossed her arms on the table and laid her head on them. She too, hoped everything was going to work out. Jobs *were* hard to find at Victor's age.

But when their fifteen-year-old daughter and seven-year-old son came down for breakfast, she was smiling as if nothing had happened. It was bad enough having her husband threatened without the threat of a move hanging over the children.

The sun had been up for about an hour as Victor Henthorne drove towards the Donnolly cottage. It was a crisp, sharp morning. The trees were beginning to bud and the promise of warm days and long nights was not too far away. A good morning – the sort of morning that made the gamekeeper glad he worked so close to Nature.

The labourer's cottage came into view. It looked peaceful enough, nestling at the foot of a small hill, surrounded by the fastidiously neat garden that was Donnolly's pride and joy.

Victor drove to the side of the house and switched the engine off. He sat for a few moments drinking in the sudden silence. Nothing moved. Stillness for miles around. The keeper was beginning to feel better, convinced that Sir Mark had just woken in a bad mood. Henthorne opened the car door. Stillness. His feet crunched on the hard earth as he approached the gate of the cottage. And then he stopped. Something *was* wrong.

It was *too* quiet. Normally Rory, Donnolly's dog, would

have been barking long before anyone got near the gate. But everything was as still as . . . Henthorne put the comparison out of his head, and quickening his step walked round the cottage to the back door. A noise above him made him look up. Three carrion crows flapped their way wearily off the roof and settled in a nearby tree.

'Bloody scavengers,' he muttered, as he walked on. He rounded the corner, expecting to find the kitchen door open and to hear the familiar sounds of Donnolly making his breakfast.

At first Victor's mind did not register what he saw. But when it did, the keeper had to support himself with one hand on the cottage wall to stop himself from throwing up. The remains of Pat Donnolly lay in front of the kitchen door, his almost fleshless arms flung across his face as if in defence.

But worse, much worse, was the sight of two crows perched on the body, one on the chest and the other on the pelvis, pecking furiously at the last shreds of the dead man's insides.

Shaking and fighting his nausea, Victor slowly approached the decimated corpse. The crows hopped a few yards away and then flew up to join their cousins in the tree where they all sat balefully watching the keeper.

Going back to his car, he picked up his shot-gun and loaded it. Carrying it at the trail he returned to the scene of the slaughter.

There was no doubt about it, he thought as he stood over the remains. They were definitely those of Donnolly. Henthorne recognised the torn shreds of the old man's coat. And the thick hair at the top of the head, looking more shocking because of the two empty eye sockets pecked clean by the crows.

Raising the rifle, he looked carefully around him. Nothing stirred. He turned to the door, and noticing the keys in the lock, turned them and pushed the door slowly open. The gun

before him, he walked stealthily into the darkened cottage. There was a chill in the air and Henthorne shivered.

The place was deserted. Nothing moved. Not even the old man's dog was there. Later, Henthorne was to remember that he was particularly troubled by this fact.

But then, such a thought helped him keep a grip of his sanity after what he had just seen.

It was only when the police searched the area the following morning, that the chewed remains of the dog were found near some bushes about five hundred yards from the back of the house. Only the tail and a severed head allowed Victor to make a positive identification. He knew instinctively whatever had killed Donnolly had attacked the dog first. And his concern became edged with fear.

For other horrors were coming to light, disrupting the normally placid existence of the gamekeeper . . .

Strangely enough, Victor did not immediately telephone the police. Instead, he called Sir Mark Hattrell. Three generations of serving the Hattrells had left its mark on Henthorne.

'He's what?' Sir Mark demanded when the keeper gave him the news.

'Dead. Outside his back door. Whatever did it didn't leave much, I tell you.'

'What exactly are you saying? What happened to the man?'

Victor breathed in deeply.

'It looks . . . it looks as if he's been eaten, sir. There's hardly any flesh on his body and there're bits of bone about the place. What was left the crows have got.'

'Good God man! Eaten? Are you sure?'

For a few seconds Victor didn't answer.

'I'll be right over,' Hattrell said.

'I'll see you in about ten minutes. Will I call the police, or will you?'

There was a few moments silence.



‘You’d better call them,’ Sir Mark said in a quiet voice. ‘They’ll have to know sooner or later.’

The white Jaguar slowed to a halt beside Henthorne’s Land-Rover five minutes later. A tall man wearing a light brown sports jacket and trousers to match leapt out. The trousers were tucked into a pair of knee-high dark brown leather boots. The face was pale compared to Victor’s, and the sandy hair receding. The angular face, the thin moustache, the erect head all bore the stamp of English aristocracy. And the narrow blue piercing eyes. Eyes which at that moment glittered angrily.

‘Over here, Sir Mark,’ Victor shouted, leaning round the corner from the back of the house.

Hattrell said nothing as he stalked past the keeper, stopping before the mound covered by an old potato sack in front of the back door. The keeper had done this to keep the crows away.

‘Is this him?’ Hattrell asked, his voice emotionless.

‘Aye, Sir. That’s him, at least what’s left of him, poor devil.’

Sir Mark saw Henthorne’s rifle leaning next to the door and picked it up. Holding the butt, he flicked the sack away with the muzzle.

He stared at the bloodied remains, now caked hard and bruised black, in silence for a few minutes. His thin lips pressed tightly together. His eyes never flickered. Then he looked slowly around the quiet countryside, his eyes almost slits, as if looking for something. The only sound was Victor’s heavy breathing.

Sir Mark walked into the house, the keeper following.

‘The police are coming, are they?’ Sir Mark asked, looking around the kitchen.

‘Aye.’

‘He probably got drunk and fell down outside. The crows must have finished him off,’ Sir Mark commented.

‘No crows did that to him, you can be sure. I’ve seen crows finish off lambs and rabbits and suchlike. But nought like this.’

Sir Mark swung on Victor, his mouth in a sneer.

‘Oh, you’re a detective now, are you?’ he spat. ‘You just stick to your job and let the police handle it. The man was practically an alcoholic. Look at the state of this place! He could have broken a leg or cut himself when he fell. Foxes, crows, anything could have done that out there!’

The keeper said nothing. Inside he was seething. Had he followed his instinct he would have smashed his fist across his boss’s face. A feeling which surprised even Victor, for he was basically a non-violent man.

‘Anyway, you stay here,’ Hattrell continued. ‘I’ve got to go back to the Manor and attend to some important business.’

Victor was in front of the door. He didn’t move.

‘Sir Mark,’ he said flatly. ‘A man’s just been killed. A man who worked for you most of his life. And you’re going back to the Manor?’

‘I can’t bring him back. What can I do now? If the police need me you know where I am,’ he added, pushing his way past Henthorne.

As the keeper watched Hattrell’s car drive away, he wished he had followed his instinct a few minutes earlier . . .

The police arrived not long after. Sergeant Brown had never handled a murder case in his twenty-eight years as village constable and sergeant. So he called for the CID, leaving strict instructions for nothing to be touched. While they waited, Brown, and another constable Peter Holly, and Victor sat in the police car. Brown took a statement from the keeper.

The clear morning sky was beginning to cloud over.

‘They’d better get here soon, or there’ll be nothing left for them to look at,’ Victor commented, looking at the rain clouds appearing over the western horizon.

Two white Rovers pulled up about half-an-hour later. Four

detectives, a fingerprint expert and a photographer got out. The rest of the day was spent following the routine for every murder case. Everything in and around the cottage was checked and double-checked and collated. Victor Henthorne gave more exhaustive reports on Pat Donnolly. No, he didn't think the old man had any enemies. Yes, he was very popular. Yes, he lived on his own. No, he didn't have a girl friend (Victor couldn't even smile at this). And so on, and so on.

The rain came in mid-afternoon, and by the time it ended, dusk had fallen. For the gamekeeper, the day was over. Sir Mark had not even called by once, though the detectives said they would contact him later.

Victor drove along the quiet country lane towards his cottage. Although he lived only two miles from Donnolly's place, the drive seemed longer than he ever remembered it. His head thumped, his body felt heavy and he wanted to sleep. To forget the day that had just ended.

Once home, he headed straight for the drinks cupboard and poured himself some brown ale. His wife came through from the kitchen.

'I heard in the village today. It's terrible,' she said. 'What ...'

'Later, love. Please. I'm not feeling good,' he said slouching in an easy chair.

She nodded and left him. At that moment Victor wanted to be alone, to think out the crazy, bizarre day. But he couldn't. All he saw before him was the sneering, callous face of Sir Mark Hattrell. The keeper grasped the edge of the chair until his knuckles were white. The anger he had felt for the landowner was turning to blind hatred. And frustration. There was nothing he could do about the situation. Sir Mark was only a few years older, which meant Victor Henthorne would have to bow and scrape and take orders until he retired. Little wonder he felt bitter.

He sat in the gloom drinking steadily. Suddenly the lights flashed on.

'Dad! Dad! I didn't know you were back!' Tommy, the seven-year-old yelled, rushing across the room to where Henthorne sat blinking in the light. Tears streamed down the boy's face, and he flung himself on his father, spilling some of his drink.

'What is it, son, what is it?'

'It's Dora! Something's happened to her! Come quickly, Dad! Come quickly!' the boy said, tugging at his father's arm.

'I'm tired, Tommy. Can't it wait until tomorrow?' he asked wearily. The last thing he felt like at that moment was looking at Tommy's pet rabbit.

'Has she had her babies yet?' he asked his son. 'She's about due isn't she?'

'Oh, come quickly. *Please.*'

Victor realised that it was unfair to take his feelings out on the boy, so he slowly stood up and followed the lad into the back garden, picking a torch up from the kitchen on the way.

A breeze had sprung up and billows of clouds scudded across the sky. Tommy was whimpering as he led the way to the hutch at the foot of the long garden. Henthorne flashed his torch on the hutch. It was just over seven feet long, standard construction, wire mesh on one side, a plywood box on the other for the doe's litter.

The beam of light shone through the wire onto an empty space.

'Is she in the compartment?' Victor asked.

'That's it, Dad,' the boy began to weep. 'That's what I've been trying to tell you. She's not there, either. She's dead! She's been killed! Just when she was going to have her litter!' he wailed.

Henthorne frowned, opened the thin door and shone his torch in. One paw, a gnawed head on which the eyes bulged in terror and some fur was all that remained of Dora.

‘My God!’ Victor muttered. ‘What the hell ...’

‘What did it, Dad? What did it to Dora and her babies?’ Tommy blubbered.

‘I don’t know, son, I don’t know.’

He directed the light to the back of the cage. A gaping, jagged six-inch hole told him what he wanted to know.

He placed a hand on his son’s shoulder.

‘I’m sorry, Tommy,’ he said quietly. ‘But it looks as if some sort of animal’s got in. Rats or a fox, maybe,’ he muttered. ‘Tomorrow we’ll buy you another rabbit and I’ll build you a new, stronger hutch.’

The boy nodded, sniffed and ran back into the house. Victor returned to the front room where he refilled his glass with something a bit stronger and thought once more about Sir Mark Hattrell and Pat Donnolly’s death.

He did not even connect the deaths of the farm labourer and his son’s pet. Which was surprising. For it is not every day that a man sees two living creatures that have been eaten to death ...



## CHAPTER FOUR

Fleet Street was quiet as far as news was concerned that Tuesday morning in spring. There had been a fire which had demolished half-a-million pounds worth of furniture in North London; a famous pop singer had landed at Heathrow wearing nothing but a fur coat and a smile and carrying a half-empty bottle of cognac claiming she was a 'Liberated Woman'; a politician was being sued for divorce after having been found in bed with his secretary; and a lion at Chessington Zoo was having a plaster put on a broken leg. It was, in short, an ordinary day for the good people of Britain. And a boring day for the news-hungry, sensation-seeking hacks of Fleet Street.

The editorial conference of *The Planet*, a popular, middle-of-the-road national daily newspaper with a healthy circulation, reflected the lack of any 'big' story. Jack Fraser, the Editor, decided the next day's lead feature should be an article on the care of Royal babies, written by an ex-nanny to the first family in the land.

It was stirring stuff and the groans of the hardened, cynical journalists in the room showed their opinion. But, as Jack Fraser reminded them, the story would appeal strongly to their readers.

'What have you lined up, Guy?' Fraser asked Guy Corling, *The Planet's* chief crime reporter. 'Anything exciting, juicy which shows up the moral corruption of everyone in this country except our readers?'

Guy shook his head.

'I'm still chasing the Autograph Rapist,' he said. Hoots of laughter all round. The Autograph Rapist, who had been terrorising women in Sussex for the past few months, was so called because after forcing the ladies to have intercourse with him, he insisted they signed their name in a large autograph book before disappearing. The people had no leads on him at all and every paper in the country was hoping for an exclusive.

'The Commissioner of Police is commenting on the latest crime statistics,' Guy continued. 'We should get something there. But that's at twelve-thirty today. The evenings'll have the story first.'

And so the care of Royal babies was definitely decided upon.

Guy was preparing his material for the Press conference at Scotland Yard when the News Editor came rushing across.

'Guy! This has just come over the wire,' he said excitedly.

'The police have just issued a definitive description of the Autograph Rapist. Here it is.' He handed Guy a typed sheet.

'Fraser wants you in his office at once.'

Guy glanced at the sheet as he rushed along to Fraser's office. The Editor looked up in surprise when Guy burst in.

'Are you running it on the first page?' he asked Fraser.

'Running what?'

'This. The Rapist description,' Guy said, putting the sheet in front of Fraser. 'You wanted to see me about it.'

'I didn't even know we had this,' the Editor said quietly. 'What's it say?' He read it over quickly, while a horrible feeling of imminent disaster crept over Guy.

'Have you read it?' Fraser asked without looking up.

'I . . . I . . . just got it. I was told you wanted to see me at once,' Guy stammered.

'Let me read it to you,' Fraser went on, his head still bowed.

'"Age: About forty-five. Height: Around five feet ten inches. Colour of hair (or what there is left): Silver grey. Breath always

smells of whisky. Is known to frequent The Duck's Wings, a common meeting place for out-of-work rapists . . ." Shall I go on, Guy? I've just picked out a few lines.'

Guy swallowed and shook his head. He would have rather been in a front firing line in the middle of battle at that moment. The description he had been given fitted Jack Fraser perfectly.

The Editor raised his head. Unsmiling, he handed the sheet of paper back to Guy, who, despite his mastery of words, couldn't think of a single thing to say. He walked back to his desk. The other reporters had their heads down, writing or typing. As one, they all turned when Guy was seated and yelled: 'April Fool!'

For it was the First of April. But the news that came in for Guy a little later caused no-one to laugh and left many of the reporters feeling just that little bit low.

Jack Fraser came out of his office just as Guy was leaving for Scotland Yard.

'I'm sorry, Jack. I didn't mean . . .'

'That's okay, lad. Forget it,' Fraser said, his face unsmiling. 'Can you come into my office for a few minutes?'

They walked by the grinning reporters. But the older hacks knew by Fraser's face that something was wrong.

'Sit down, Guy,' Fraser said when he had closed the door behind them.

The buzzer on Fraser's desk intercom shrilled.

'I said no interruptions for the next fifteen minutes!' the Editor thundered into the speaker.

Guy felt nervous.

Fraser's slate grey eyes stared straight at Guy. He breathed in deeply as if unsure what to say.

'I've got some bad news for you, Guy,' Fraser said in a flat monotone and then, without waiting for any reaction, 'your parents are dead.'

Guy stared back at Fraser. At first the words did not register.

Guy Corling, the man who dealt with death almost daily as part of his job, the man who had seen more corpses in most of the bizarre variations of death, the reporter whose duty it was sometimes to tell families of a loss, could not make sense of Jack Fraser's words. Personal grief, he was finding out, was larger than the printed headlines in *The Planet*.

'My parents are dead?' he echoed in a hollow voice.

Fraser nodded. It was difficult for him to break, and also to believe, the news. He was an old friend of Guy's father, and had served with him in the Army.

'Are you sure?' Guy asked flatly.

Fraser nodded again.

'Jock McGovern, our stringer down in Andover came through with the news fifteen minutes ago. They were found by a neighbour according to Jock. That's all he knew.'

'No more details? That's everything? How did they die?' Guy blurted out.

Fraser shrugged.

'I'm telling you everything I know. Jock's a good man. If there was anything else, he'd have told me.'

'What do the police say?'

The Editor sighed.

'Well, it seems as if there's a fair bit of police activity down there already. They found a farm labourer . . .' Fraser glanced at a sheet of paper in front of him, '... name of Donnolly. But Jock says the police think there's no connection between the three deaths.'

'That's what they say,' murmured Guy.

'Jock said the same thing,' Fraser nodded slightly. 'Anyway, you'd better drop what you're doing and get down there. Keep in touch with me.' He picked up a 'phone.

'Did you get those train times, Dorothy?' he asked his secretary, and then wrote some figures on his pad. 'Call McGovern and tell him to be at the station.'

Guy sat, not quite believing this was happening, thinking strangely enough of the story he was meant to write that afternoon about the new crime statistics. But death is impossible to grasp suddenly.

Guy found himself alone in a first class compartment on the train to Andover. A few newspapers lay on his lap, unopened and unread. His mind was filled with images and thoughts of his parents. Memories of Army schools where they taught a boy to be tough and face life. Where they taught lads to be self-sufficient and not depend on their parents for everything, who in any case, were probably serving abroad at the time. Where they taught the children of soldiers that all life was a battle and the man with guts and bravery was the ultimate winner.

Where they taught you everything except how to cope with personal grief. And the fact that at thirty-five years of age, all the family you'd ever known was wiped out with shocking suddenness.

And as was natural, Guy began to feel the first glimmerings of guilt, feelings he had known time and time again, feelings that an only child who leaves the parental home knows only too well. What if he had stayed? Would they still be alive? His crazy ambition, his driving need to find bigger and better assignments, his mad quest to find out what made people tick – all these drove him to London. To newspapers. Where life's rich pageant proved itself to be a circus of freaks.

And again, as was natural in the circumstances, he wondered if he had done enough for his parents. The cynical realisation that the night before he was at a party, getting very drunk and trying to entice the new copy-typist into bed, was not lost on him.

Guy Corling, in short, was feeling the misplaced guilt that most people do after the death of a loved one.

He stretched his legs and closed his eyes. Sleep, of course, was impossible. The bizarre thought that he was an orphan



kept coming back. Orphans were usually scraggy, little waifs of creatures. Not grown men weighing in at 164 pounds, just under six feet tall with a strong physique.

Orphans did not dress smartly, though casually, in the latest fashions. They were not keen keep-fit addicts. Nor had they fractured Roman noses, the result of boxing in the middle-weight championships. True, according to the dictates of Hollywood, orphans inevitably had blue eyes, and attracted beautiful ladies who took them under their wings. And they did have fair, curly hair which always looked as if it needed combing.

But they did not have affairs with married ladies.

Guy's thoughts turned to the lovely Anne Hattrell, wife of Sir Mark. The woman he was in love with. The woman who was in love with him. Through his numbness he felt an exhilaration – and hated himself for it – at the thought of seeing her again. But it was a passing thought, and the fact of his parents' death brought him back to earth.

Jock McGovern was waiting at Andover station as the train pulled in. It was impossible to miss him. A large, bluff Scotsman with white hair and goatee beard to match, the old reporter always wore a tan overcoat about three sizes too large for him which came down to his ankles. Winter and summer he would flap about in the coat, which seemed big enough to carry a portable typewriter, and looking like a walking tent.

He shook Guy's hand and the men walked in silence to Jock's car. There was nothing to say. Jock had known Guy almost all of the younger reporter's life. McGovern was a newspaper man of the old school. He'd seen all he wanted to of life and was quite happy to be local stringer down in the country. His experiences had bred a cynicism which made him appear outwardly as tough as old leather. To friends however, he was one of the warmest-hearted individuals around.

Nearly forty years as a reporter had taught McGovern something else. When to keep his mouth shut and avoid useless

platitudes. Which was why the men remained silent until they hit the country roads leading to Frickley.

‘How, Jock, how did they die?’ Guy asked.

The old reporter stared ahead for a few seconds, as if he had not heard the question. Then he glanced to the left at the fields with their fresh green shoots beginning to sprout, row upon neat row.

‘Looks as if we’re going to have a good harvest this year,’ he commented.

‘For God’s sake, man!’ Guy exploded, releasing the feelings he had kept bottled up since hearing of the tragedy. ‘I’m a big boy now! Chief crime reporter. I’ve seen it all, Jock. You don’t have to pussyfoot with me. Give me the story. In God’s name what’s happened?’

Jock did not take his eyes from the road as he sighed.

‘Och, lad’s its a terrible business. A terrible business.’

‘In the name of God, Jock! Will you please tell me what’s going on?’ Guy demanded. His fists were tightly clenched and again he could not believe this was happening.

‘Jock, you’re in the business,’ he said, quieter this time. ‘One reporter to another. What’s the story. Spill it.’

The Scotsman’s face was immobile. No emotion showed on the rough skin as he answered. Only the dark brown eyes, surrounded by the wrinkles of experience, revealed what the old man felt.

‘I’ve just come from the police before picking you up,’ he said in a low voice. ‘It looks as if they were eaten alive.’

He paused. The quiet hum of the engine seemed a million miles away to Guy. The twisting, turning road was part of a nightmare. A picture of his mother collecting tomatoes in their back garden floated across his brain. His father in uniform picking him up from Army school. The smell of home cooking. A holiday in Brighton where he had buried his father in sand while his mother laughed and clapped her hands. Memories jolted by one word. *Eaten*, the man had said. *Eaten*.

He looked at Jock. The old man's eyes had narrowed. Guy found himself shaking. And then he started screaming. Jock drove on.

'Eaten? Eaten? Are you crazy?' he yelled. 'This is rural England, man. Not bloody Borneo! People don't get eaten alive in their homes. Are you out of your head? Have you been out of touch too long? Are you going mad?'

Jock drove on in silence.

'Answer me, Jock. For God's sake, answer me! Who told you?'

'The police,' Jock murmured.

'Have you seen the bodies? What do you think?' He was still screaming, forcing the tension and pain out.

'I've been over to your ... um, the house,' Jock replied quietly, his eyes never leaving the road. 'They were fumigating it. I'm sorry, Guy, I'm sorry.' And he turned and looked at the young man's face twisted with pain and horror and he knew that in forty years of reporting death and destruction, he had not seen everything.

Gradually Guy controlled himself. A cold calm came over him. Now he wanted the truth for himself. Determination replaced his anger and frustration. The old school training was re-asserting itself.

'Where are ... where are they now?' he asked hoarsely.

'The mortuary.'

'Take me there.'

'I don't think ...'

'Take me there,' Guy repeated. The voice no longer hysterical. But cold and determined.

Jock nodded almost imperceptibly. Fifteen minutes later they were at the mortuary.

A tall, lean man wearing a three-piece suit and a hat was just leaving as Jock and Guy entered the building.

'Hello, Jock,' he nodded at the reporter.

'Superintendent Hatcher, this is Guy Corling,' Jock said.

The policeman held out his hand.

'I'm sorry, Mr Corling. We're doing ...'

'... everything you can. I know. Are you in charge of the investigations?'

Hatcher nodded.

'Can I see my parents?'

The Inspector frowned.

'I don't think that's possible, sir. Or advisable.'

'And why the hell not?' Guy snapped.

'It's not good, Mr Corling. It's not good.'

'What do you mean?'

The policeman shook his head.

'Look, Inspector,' Guy said angrily. 'I'm chief crime reporter with *The Planet*. I've seen more murder victims than I want to. It's my job. And this time I feel I've got a right.'

The two men stared at each other for a few moments.

'I don't know what you do, Mr Corling. But believe me when I tell you it's for your own good.'

'I'll decide that, thank you!'

Hatcher sighed. He had spent thirty years in the police force and the bereaved of murder victims always reacted in the same way when he told them. They seemed to blame him. Tomorrow Guy Corling would be fine. He reached a decision.

'All right, Mr Corling,' he said. 'You want to know. There's not enough left to make a proper identification. We brought them here in polythene bags,' he added before turning away leaving Guy staring ahead in shocked disbelief.

His eyes were burning as he fought back the tears. He asked Jock McGovern to drive him to the nearest pub where he tried very hard to become drunk. But found he could not.

## CHAPTER FIVE

She was waiting at Jock McGovern's house when Guy finally left the pub. Her green eyes were red-rimmed with crying. Her blonde hair was tousled and her make-up smeared. Her body looked small as she crouched by the open fire and her hands were clasped together with worry. She looked tired and tense—but still beautiful.

'Anne,' Guy said simply.

She said nothing but sat by the fire, watching his face, uncertain of his mood and state after the day's news.

He smiled softly at her. She rose, her hands still clasped in front of her and then before he knew it, she was pressed close to him. He lowered his head feeling her cheek against his. Her warm, soft, tear-splashed cheek. He had never been more aware of her warmth and softness than now. He wanted her as he had never wanted her before. He needed her to bring sanity back into the nightmare. Needed her to help him climb that mountain out of the valley of darkness and horror where people's bodies were carried away in plastic bags.

She felt it too. And kissed him gently on his face, took his hand in hers and softly brushed it with kisses. He put his other hand round her waist and pulled her even closer. Her breasts flattened against his chest. He wanted to be part of her, ease the pain that gnawed his insides.

Jock McGovern came in from the kitchen and mumbled something about going out for cigarettes. They did not even notice him.



They heard the outside door slam loudly (deliberately by Jock) and pressed desperately into one another. He wanted to feel her soft lips cover his body. He wanted to explore her warmth and softness with his mouth. Slowly they sank to the floor, and soon were naked. Not a word had been spoken. They both knew what the other felt.

And then they climbed that mountain.

Wednesday dawned grey and miserable. A light drizzle fell persistently through the morning. Victor Henthorne moved through the fields of Frickley Manor, his gum-boots squelching in the mud, rain streaming from his Barbour jacket. The muzzle of his rifle jutted out from the coat. His face was grim and his eyebrows furrowed in a frown. He was worried – very worried.

Donnolly's death had upset him more than he admitted. The Corlings' deaths did not mean much to him, as he had never known the Brigadier that well.

The police had issued a general statement that the Corlings had died of 'unnatural causes' which made a topic of conversation for Frickley village for the next three months.

No, Victor's worry was more basic, more natural for a game-keeper. He was worried about rabbits. Or the lack of them. The estate was normally a breeding ground for the creatures. Now they had all disappeared. Or almost. All that remained were small piles of splintered, chewed-up bones and bits of skin and fur scattered over the land.

Myxomatosis? The killer disease that had just about wiped out the rabbit in Britain in 1954. The disease that was believed to have been introduced from France by a landowner who hated rabbits. The sickness it was rumoured was deliberately started by one man. The man Victor Henthorne worked for. Sir Mark Hattrell.

But there were no putrefying corpses, or mouldering

carcasses. Just the virtual disappearance of a healthy rabbit population. Not even a band of super-rats, the rats which thrived on Warfarin, thought to be man's ultimate answer to the filthy rodents, could account for the annihilation of so many rabbits in so short a time.

The rabbits would probably re-appear before long, Victor reckoned. Another of nature's strange mysteries. For after having worked all of his life with nature, the gamekeeper still felt he had a lot to learn about her ways. But he was wrong. The rabbits did not come back. And by the time the day was through, he was to believe they might never return.

The rain stopped in the early afternoon. The grass smelt damp and the earth in the furrowed fields glistened black and rich. Henthorne did not stop for lunch. That's the way of the country. He called in for a quick pint at the local before returning to carry out a routine examination of a thickly-wooded part of the estate known aptly as Thicket Wood.

He trekked across the fields, his rifle nestling in the crook of his hand, feeling easier now his coat had been left in a gamekeeper's hut. He was thinking of the past two days' events: wondering about the vanished rabbits; reminding himself that he had to buy Tommy another doe and the mountain of work that was facing him now that summer was almost on them. Ordinary thoughts for a gamekeeper on what he thought was an ordinary day.

And then he saw it. In the centre of a field, a crowd of crows and magpies round it. A dead bullock. Or what was left of it – a rib-cage, a tail and a head. And its guts. Pulled and spread out by the bloody beaks of the crows and magpies. Blue, red, brown innards of the once healthy, handsome beast. Now fly food.

He walked slowly towards it. The crows and magpies spread their wings, hopped a few yards and flew lazily away. The only sound was the buzzing of flies around the gory mess.

Victor Henthorne was frightened. He had seen dead animals all his life. Thousands of them. But never like this: broken, violated, an insult to life in death. It was unnatural. A crow croaked, its cry sounding eerie in the silence.

He tightened his grasp on his twelve-bore. Icy tingles ran up and down his spine. The bullock's head lay upright, its chin resting in the wet grass. Its fearful, bulging eyes seemed to look straight at Victor. He turned away. In the far corner of the field the rest of the herd grazed. Death meant nothing to them.

Victor went straight to the Manor and demanded to see Sir Mark.

'He's at a meeting, I'm afraid, Victor,' Madge Jensen, Hattrell's housekeeper, told him.

'Blow the meeting. This is important!' Victor snapped.

Sir Mark was scowling when he came out to meet Victor in the large hall of the Manor.

'What is it now, man?' he asked. 'I'm busy.'

'There's a dead bullock in the eighteen-acre field, sir.'

'Bloody hell!' Sir Mark thundered. 'You call me out of a meeting to tell me that! What's got into you? A dead bullock! My God!'

Apart from the value of the beast, Victor was shocked by Sir Mark's attitude. Again the gamekeeper felt the gap between those who have been brought up with the land, and those who inherit it, using it for their own purposes, feeling nothing for it.

'You haven't seen it, sir,' he said eventually, in a quiet, controlled voice.

Sir Mark looked quizzically at the gamekeeper.

'What do you mean?' he asked, his eyes narrowing, his voice lower.

'It's been eaten. Last night. Any meat that's left hasn't started to rot. And there's no smell. It was last night all right. And by the looks of it the poor beast never had a chance.'

Sir Mark stared at Victor for a few seconds. He opened his mouth as if to say something, changed his mind and walked back to his study.

'Wait there,' he said at the door. 'I'll come and look at it.'

They drove out in Victor's Land-Rover. Sir Mark was silent most of the way. And angry. His long, carefully manicured fingers drummed nervously on the seat.

'Eaten. Bullocks being eaten. In the middle of rural England,' Sir Mark muttered to himself. 'And that rumour about the Corlings being eaten. Bloody place's gone mad. Too little to do with their time the people around here. Just sit around and make up fanciful stories.'

Victor glanced at Sir Mark. The landowner looked tired. Dark patches showed clearly under his eyes. Sir Mark's hair, normally beautifully groomed, was growing long. He had not shaved that morning. If Victor hadn't known better, he would have said his boss was beginning to crack up. Perhaps that stuff about Norman the Mad being passed on wasn't so crazy after all . . .

When Sir Mark saw the bullock he was visibly shaken. His jaws clenched, he walked round the carcass, poking at it with a bit of stick.

'Well?' Victor finally asked.

'Well what?' Sir Mark retorted, gaining control of himself again, re-asserting his position.

'What do you reckon?' Victor queried.

'Okay, okay! So it's been eaten. You know we do have foxes and badgers and the occasional wild dog in the country. Or have you forgotten that?'

Victor stared at Sir Mark, his face immobile.

'There's been an accident, Henthorne. That's all. You're making out as if it's a major calamity.' He paused. 'Now take your gun and go hunting, Mr Gamekeeper,' he added, emphasising each word as if speaking to a child.

‘Find the wild dogs that did this and shoot the bastards!’

Victor controlled his temper. Two minutes satisfaction at smashing the leering face of Sir Mark Hattrell would not make up for years of worry if he lost his job.

‘What are you going to do about the beast?’ he asked.

‘What are *you* going to do, you mean? *You’re* going to get the bulldozer and dig a hole. Then *you’re* going to bury it and fill in the hole. And then find those dogs.’

He walked away.

‘I’ll walk back. You get on with the work.’

It took Victor an hour to complete the burial. The job made him feel sick. Sir Mark made him feel angry. He was in a foul mood as he finally made his way back to Thicket Wood.

The sun was setting and the sky was clear, promising the night would be fine. Victor reached Thicket Wood just as the sun dipped. Half-an-hour’s reasonable light left, he figured. Time to see if the pheasants were in good shape and check if any of the herd had wandered into the woods by accident.

Sod it, thought Victor as he stood by the edge of the wood. The pheasants had been breeding here for years and the only time a cow wandered into the woods was when eighteen acres had not been completely fenced. He decided to have a smoke instead. He sat on a tree-stump, pulled out his pipe and looked around.

The woods stood on top of a hill and from it one could see almost all of Frickley Manor estate. To the west it stretched as far as the Army camps at Amesbury. Turning a little to the south, the dark shapes of the Porton Down complex could be made out and the RAF station at Boscombe Down.

The rest of the view was unspoiled. Victor began to relax as he puffed at his pipe, curling his hand round the warm bowl. This was peace. The North Star twinkled in the deepening gloom. The tobacco in his pipe crackled and burnt. There were



no other sounds. No birds chirped. No creatures scurried about the undergrowth. *Nothing moved.*

The same strange feeling of dread that had come over Victor when he discovered the bullock, returned. He laid his pipe down. And listened. Nothing. Absolute silence. He sat in the dying light, almost a shadow himself.

And then he heard it.

A quiet, desperate panting from behind him. He froze. His heart pounded. He felt sweat under his armpits. His underclothes seemed to stick to his body. Slowly he turned his head, trying to keep his body still and not make a sound.

In the gloom of a clearing immediately behind him stood a fox. Victor's body sagged with relief. He smiled. A fox.

But then his body went rigid again. The fox's eyes glittered in the remaining light. It was mesmerised like a mouse with a cat. And then it began panting again. A pitiful, mournful, fear-filled sound breaking through the silence of the darkening woods.

Victor had seen this before. When there were fox-hunts on the estate. When the fox, finally trapped, would stand totally exhausted. And wait to die. But he had never seen the look of terror as on this creature. Saliva dribbled from the loosely-hung jaws.

Then they came. At first there were two. Victor thought the light was playing a trick with his eyes. But then there were more. Six, twelve, they poured out of the thicket, making no sound except an occasional snap of a twig.

Rabbits. Huge rabbits, their eyes looking glassy and dead. The clearing around the fox was covered with them. Victor watched, his breathing shallow, his throat tight, as the fox lay on the ground, its forepaws extended and its head between them. Waiting to die.

Victor saw a dark patch on the fox's rear leg. Blood. The animal had been shot - or bitten. He stared at the ugly wound,

feeling this was the focal point for all the creatures surrounding their victim. All standing still. Like a bizarre stone grouping.

From the corner of his eye he noticed a movement. The largest of the rabbits stood on its hind legs. Through the chilled night came a sound that was to cause Victor nightmares for years to come. A hollow sound. Something between a bark and a grunt. A sound that scraped on the very nerve ends of hearing. The sound of death. From the very bowels of hell itself.

The other rabbits as one snarled in unison, baring their teeth, long, razor-sharp teeth. And then they pounced. There was a short agonising scream of pain from the fox and then it was silent.

The night filled with the sound of tearing flesh, cracking bones and the hellish squeaks of the creatures. It was over in a few minutes. The rabbits sat cleaning themselves, their dark fur spattered with blood.

A breeze sprang up—away from the rabbits, luckily for Victor—and he was aware of their smell. Only once had Victor smelled anything like it. During his National Service in Korea when his outfit was being shelled. His friend next to him was blown up, his body split open, his bowels ruptured. And a similar smell came wafting across that spring night in rural England.

Victor dared not move. Every nerve in his body was tingling and his flesh was creeping. Cold and hot, cold and hot, the fear came in waves. But the rabbits were not aware of him. With a bound they disappeared back into the undergrowth of the wood. All that remained in the twilight was the whitened skeleton of the fox, its head still intact. The tail was missing.

Victor remained where he was for a full five minutes. Not a religious man, he nevertheless raised his head to the stars and said a silent prayer of thanks. He lowered his head, gazing at

the black woods in front of him. In the distance, looking like a finger of the devil, the top of the Folly jutted from above the trees.

Victor shivered.

'I've got to speak to him. I *must* speak to him,' Victor yelled down the telephone. His wife stood beside him in their front room, her face creased with concern at his appearance.

He had run all the way home, bursting in on Mary and the children. His face was grey and his hands shook. For about ten minutes he couldn't speak. His body was shaken by convulsions every minute or so. Gradually he calmed down, but still would not tell his family what had happened.

Instead he went to the front room and telephoned Frickley Manor, taking a large whisky just before he did.

Sir Mark was at another meeting. Eventually he came to the telephone.

'What the hell is it now?' Sir Mark demanded. 'Have you got rid of the bullock?'

'Yes, yes,' Victor said shakily. 'But I now know what killed it. I've seen for myself.'

'Dogs? I told you it...'

'No! Not dogs. It's... it's...' he faltered, suddenly realising how crazy the next statement was going to sound.

'It's what, man? Have you lost your tongue?'

Victor breathed in deeply.

'It's rabbits.'

There was a silence at the other end.

'Say that again,' Sir Mark asked, his voice quieter.

'Rabbits – big ones. With teeth more like wolves. A pack of the monsters. I saw them demolish a fox.'

'Victor, I think it's time you had a holiday. A long one. Maybe the job's getting to you. At your age, you know...'

'Are you calling me a liar?' Victor interrupted, taking all he

could from his boss. 'Are you saying I'm going nuts in the head?'

'Don't speak to me like that! I pay your wages and don't you forget it.'

'I don't give a mouse's backside what you do at this minute,' Victor shouted down the receiver. He noticed Mary sink slowly to a chair, her mouth open. 'Nobody calls Victor Henthorne a liar and a fool.'

Sir Mark did not reply immediately.

'Look, Victor, old chap. I'm sorry. I... I didn't mean to sound so rough. It's just that... it's just that your story *is* hard to believe. What do you say to coming over to the Manor and having a drink. We'll have a chat about it.'

Victor did not answer.

'Come on, Victor. Don't sulk,' Sir Mark went on. 'I've already apologised for flying off the handle.'

Victor knew what it must have taken for Sir Mark to say sorry.

'Very well, *Sir*,' he said. 'I'll be there in about ten minutes.'

He put the telephone down and looked at Mary.

'It'll be all right, love. Don't worry. That aristocratic bastard understands me a little better now. And I understand him,' he added grimly.

But as Victor drove across to have drinks with the now charming, mannerly lord of the Manor, he did not realise how little he understood Sir Mark.

In fact, as subsequent events were to prove, he did not know him at all.

## CHAPTER SIX

Life returned almost to normal in Frickley over the next few days. The shocking deaths settled in people's minds to become mere memories as the more important business of keeping alive from day to day took over. Only those directly involved took longer to break out of their numbness. Guy Corling was one, and Victor Henthorne another, quiet and subdued, his nights were filled with images of torn bodies and cattle.

Because of the unnatural death, there had to be a post mortem for the Corlings. The cremation was fixed for the following Monday. Guy visited Rosemary Cottage, and arranged for painters and decorators to start work immediately. The regular cleaning lady, a Mrs Bradshaw, disposed of the Corlings' clothes, leaving the personal trinkets for Guy.

By the weekend, Rosemary Cottage was ready to be moved into. A few coats of paint, new curtains and wallpaper had managed to kill the more obvious memories for Guy. The only ones left were in his head. But even these were pushed out by the thought, the constantly recurring thought, of his parents being taken to the mortuary in plastic bags.

He could not see Anne for a couple of days after that night at Jock McGovern's. Sir Mark, it seemed, was ill and Anne had to stay by him. Guy understood this. He was not a child. He could wait for what he knew would come to him one day.

His shock gave way to anger. Anger that his parents had been murdered in such a foul way. And the anger became



determination. He would find out how they died. No matter how long it took him.

Guy was used to waiting. He had waited for years to get Anne Hattrell. Waited to wreak revenge on Sir Mark, whom he detested almost to the point of pathological obsession. It had not always been so. In fact, years ago, the two men had been friends despite Sir Mark being fifteen years older than Guy. The wealthy, handsome, dashing aristocrat with the world, and half the women in it, at his feet. And the tough, rugged, hard-headed, ambitious young son of an Army Brigadier. They had made a good team, enjoying life to the full.

Then two things happened. Sir Mark's father died, and not long after, his mother. The death duties were crippling. The Lamborghini, the E-type Jaguar used for weekends had to go. The playing had to stop. Sir Mark was faced with responsibility. And in all fairness he shouldered it. But, as in everything else, he wanted things his own way.

He was determined, like most young men taking over the family firm, that the old ways would have to go. Productivity, the watch-word of the sixties, became his passion. Anything which interfered with the smooth running of his farms and estate had to be 'eliminated', as he was fond of saying. Anything. Like rabbits. Which plundered the crops and competed with the cows and sheep for the grass.

Cynics thought it no coincidence that the myxomatosis epidemic of 1954 had started near a farm in Sussex owned by Sir Mark. Not long beforehand the baronet had visited France. But such things are difficult, if not impossible, to prove.

The second thing that happened was that Guy fell in love. In itself, this would have caused no comment. But in fact that he fell in love with an American oil heiress, Rhoda Cornwall, gave the gossips, from Hampshire to Fleet Street, a field day. And brought about the ultimate rift between Sir Mark and Guy.

It had been Sir Mark who had introduced the couple. Sir Mark was besotted by Rhoda Cornwall. Or, to be more precise, by her money. Almost facing ruin through the crippling death taxes, he saw a way out with Rhoda. Guy, on the other hand, was not in the least interested in her money. He liked the tall, lithe, honey-skinned, blonde-haired girl from America. Loved her. On his terms. He would make his own way in the world, he insisted naïvely. And she liked the earnest, straightforward young man. Just the sort of man her father would like too. Just the sort of man who could take over the running of the family oil business when her father wanted to retire.

So they had a mad, carefree romance. One drunken night, when champagne bottles lay strewn about the bed, he proposed and she accepted. It was as simple as that.

Sir Mark was furious. He would not speak to Guy about the marriage and went out of his way to avoid him. Guy was disappointed but at the same time ecstatic over his future life with the vivacious Rhoda.

Plans were made. Rhoda's father's private Boeing would take friends and relatives from Britain to New York. They would have an American Society wedding and a honeymoon in Honolulu. Guy was working for the local paper then, but had just been offered a reporting job on *The Planet*. The world was rosy. No man could ask for more. And then Sir Mark Hattrell screwed up his whole future. And earned the undying hate of Guy Corling.

Five days before the jet was due to leave for New York, Sir Mark, apparently relenting, decided to hold a party for the couple, even though he had not been invited to the wedding.

'It's a small reminder of days gone by,' he told Guy. 'A last fling,' he had added with a charming smile.

Nothing was spared. Champagne poured relentlessly. There were a number of women and men Guy had not seen before; beautiful women, and tough-looking men. A small gambling

saloon had been set up in a back room. A four-piece band played in the ballroom. The night was warm and the party soon moved outside into the garden.

Sir Mark was the perfect host. He went round every guest ensuring their glasses were filled and their needs attended to. He paid particular attention to Rhoda.

‘Now, you can’t get jealous, old boy,’ he chided Guy. ‘After all, if it wasn’t for me, you two wouldn’t know each other,’ he said, his arm round Rhoda’s waist.

Guy smiled sheepishly. Something was wrong, he felt. But the drinks were affecting him. It was as if he was floating above the party. Which was exactly the effect Sir Mark had planned when he had drugged Guy’s drinks.

Guy wandered outside.

‘Feeling all right, honey?’ a soft voice asked behind him.

He nodded without turning. The world was beginning to slide from under his feet. He became aware of a brunette standing in front of him. What was her name? He’d been introduced before, remembering her low-cut dress showing her ample bust to advantage. He remembered her name: Janice. Just the sort of girl he would have wanted to take to bed had he not been engaged.

Just the sort of girl Sir Mark knew Guy would want to take to bed. As in most things, the aristocrat had been thorough. Nothing was left to chance.

Guy focused on the girl. She pushed her chest out. He saw a dark brown nipple, wanted to reach out and push it back in again. But could not. His brain would not function properly.

‘Why don’t you lie down, love?’ she smiled. The mouth perfect, soft and inviting. Her tongue licking her lips slightly, provocatively. He nodded, knowing it was wrong. But he let her place her soft, cool hand in his and lead him away from the noise, the gyrating world.

The bedroom was cool. A standard lamp gave off a restful light. He lay back on a huge double bed.

'There, that's better isn't it?' Janice smiled.

'Thank you, thank you,' he murmured.

'Let's just loosen this tie,' she said. 'It is hot in here.'

She sat down on the bed.

Guy turned his head to look at her. The dress she was wearing had a slit which went to her thigh. He hadn't noticed that before. Underneath she was wearing stockings and a black suspender belt with little red roses sewn on it. Instinctively he laid his hand on her stocking tops. He felt the warmth of her leg. Moved his hand up over the nylon and felt the vibrating heat from her naked flesh.

'Beginning to feel better?' she smiled again.

Guy moaned.

'Well, you'll feel *so* much better if you let your skin breathe,' she said, unzipping his trousers.

Something was wrong, he kept telling himself. It shouldn't be like this. But it was too late to stop it now. His trousers were off, and he was straining for relief. She had not stopped the progress of his hand and it now lay between her legs, her wetness coming through the sheer nylon panties.

He could have stopped then. Could have sat up and pushed her away. But he did not. The drugs, the closeness of sex, the naked desire combined to stop him.

Janice was in fact a call-girl, part of an exclusive ring of girls in London. She had been recommended to Sir Mark by a mutual acquaintance who had used her 'services'. She applied all her expertise to Guy, who lay on the bed, his eyes closed, aware only of the delicious sensations coursing through his body.

He heard what he thought was a door slam and opened his eyes. Rhoda stood framed in the doorway, and behind her was Sir Mark. Guy was to swear later that the baronet was grinning.

Rhoda swayed slightly as she walked across to the couple. 'You . . . You . . . filthy slut!' she yelled, as she grabbed the girl by the shoulders and literally flung her off the bed.

But her words were directed at Guy. She stood over him, he feeling his naked vulnerability and his shame. She snatched the engagement ring from her left hand.

'Stuff your ring!' she cried. 'Stuff you. Go to hell!'

Guy felt the ring hit him in the stomach.

'Rhoda . . .' he said.

She turned and walked away towards Sir Mark who stood just outside the door blocking the entrance. He didn't want anyone else to see. This was his personal treat.

'I don't want to speak to you ever again,' Rhoda said, her eyes bright and unnatural. 'I'm only interested in gentlemen. Go back to your fucking. I'm obviously not good enough for *you*, but I'm good enough for others!' she added, and then flung herself into Sir Mark's waiting arms, her tears staining his mohair-silk tuxedo.

But Sir Mark did not mind. Everything had worked out to plan – everything. Including his marriage to the lovely Rhoda a few weeks later.

The whole episode nearly finished Guy. He hit the bottle like a man demented. Which he was. It was Jack Fraser who pulled him out of it.

'You're acting like a bloody child of two who's had his favourite toy taken from him,' his Editor told him. 'If you don't buck up, lad, you can start looking for another job. My friendship with your father doesn't mean I have to carry dead wood on my paper.'

It worked. Outwardly, Guy was controlled and he returned to the normal, popular man he was. Inwardly, something had died. And was replaced with hatred for Sir Mark.

Guy would not have done anything about his feelings had it not been for one of those chance accidents that can completely



change the direction of a man's life. He was visiting his parents one weekend and had gone into the village to buy some cigarettes. He had not seen or heard from Rhoda or Mark since they married six months earlier. He doubted he ever would.

But there in the village, he saw Rhoda coming out of a shop. He was stunned. Rhoda saw him, but gave no sign of recognition. It was little wonder for she was not the same girl that Guy had laughed and made love with months before. Her skin was sallow, her hair lank and limp. Glazed eyes looked out from blackened hollows. The clothes she was wearing seemed to hang loosely on her once classic figure. She was a walking zombie. She was a junkie.

Guy ran over and stood in front of her.

'Rhoda! What's happened? What's going on?'

A spark of recognition came into her eyes. She frowned, as if trying to remember who Guy was. And then a look of panic crossed her face. She turned and ran to her car without a word. It was the last time he saw her. One week later she was found, half-naked, outside the Folly, her body punctured with needle marks.

The police said she died of an overdose of drugs, probably heroin. The older inhabitants of Frickley, not reconciled to drug addicts in the middle of the rural community, said the marks were the work of the Devil and he was only claiming his own. As he had done so many years before.

For Guy Corling, only two facts were certain. One, Rhoda was dead. Two, he had never stopped loving her. And he was also convinced that she had been murdered indirectly by Sir Mark Hattrell.

Which was why he had decided on revenge through Anne Hattrell. He would do to Sir Mark, through the baronet's second wife, what Hattrell had done to him. Prove his wife an adultress. It was difficult at first, if only because Sir Mark did not want to see Guy. But then he relented when Anne became pregnant.

The two men were openly friendly, but cool. Then Anne aborted and it was as if Sir Mark deliberately drove her away by his cold attitude. Guy was delighted. It was all happening as he had hoped.

At that point the whole scheme went haywire. They fell in love with one another. Guy's feelings towards Sir Mark did not change. It was just that he could not use Anne as a tool of revenge against the man.

Guy moved into Rosemary Cottage on the Saturday morning. Anne came round in the afternoon. They wandered round the cottage, which smelled of paint and paste. They were like two children, hand in hand, smiling often at each other, commenting on the decor, re-adjusting a chair here, a table there.

They stopped in the front room, where a log fire was set ready, Guy put a match to it and the pair watched the flames snake up the chimney. Outside, birds began a twilight chorus. Guy and Anne stood in front of the fire, entwined in each other. It was a perfect moment.

They sank to the floor, to the new sheepskin rug Guy had bought that morning. They made love: slowly and tenderly, each body reacting exactly to the other's. Anne knew that Guy needed her at that moment. And she gave herself completely.

Darkness had fallen by the time they had exhausted themselves. The fire was a glowing pile of red and grey ash. Guy piled on some dry wood and the flames were soon flaring up. They lay, smoking cigarettes in silence for about ten minutes. Words were useless and unnecessary.

'What's wrong with Mark, by the way?' Guy eventually asked, rolling over and kissing Anne's breasts.

Anne pushed him away. He felt her body tense.

'I don't know, Guy. I just don't know,' she said. 'He's been acting so funny lately. He won't eat and looks as if he's not sleeping.'

'You mean you don't know?' Guy teased.

‘We stopped sleeping together after the abortion,’ she said flatly. ‘And one of the stable-boys said he saw Mark coming out of the Folly one morning at dawn.’

‘The Folly? I thought that was locked up. Hadn’t been used for years.’

‘I thought so too. But a few nights ago, after I had checked Mark was in bed, I listened outside his door. You know he has two doors in his room. One going into the hall, and the other down through the kitchen. I heard him get out of bed and dress and then leave through the back way. I watched him from a window.’ She paused. The fire crackled and made them both jump.

‘Yes?’ Guy said. ‘What did he do?’

‘He went across the back garden into the woods at the back. Towards the Folly.’

‘I wonder what’s he up to?’ muttered Guy.

‘I don’t know, but I’m frightened, Guy. The following day, when I knew Mark was at a meeting, I rode past the Folly on my horse. It was rough going and we had to move slowly. About a few hundred yards from the Folly the horse refused to go further. Its nostrils flared and he started to whinny and backtrack. It was frightened,’ she went on, her voice low.

‘I tied him to a branch and went on by foot. The place looked deserted, and the door was locked, so I couldn’t get in. Then I heard it,’ she said, her body shaking suddenly.

‘Heard what, love?’ Guy asked, drawing her close to him. She hesitated before replying.

‘A low moan. A wail that seemed to come from the very earth beneath me, Guy. It had a sort of echo and then it rose in pitch and seemed to be coming from all around me.’

Guy felt her shudder at the memory. Anne was reliving the experience.

‘Darling, darling,’ he murmured. ‘Try and think. The noise.

What was it like? Maybe a dog was trapped in the Folly. It's a large tower. The sound would reverberate.'

'It was no dog, Guy. I promise you that. It was unnatural. Inhuman.'

Guy gazed at the fire for a few minutes. A cold shiver ran down his spine. The image of the polythene bags floated across his mind, but he broke it before it could form properly.

'Anne? Anne? There's something I want to know.'

'Mmmm?'

'Mark. Does he work at the Folly? Does he meet anyone there? Do you know?'

She sat up and drew her knees up to her breasts, resting her chin on them, clasping her hands round her legs. She looked radiantly beautiful, and Guy kissed her gently before she answered.

'I don't think so,' she finally said. 'He spends most of his time with that horrible man James Webber. But that's at the Manor. I haven't heard them mention the Folly.'

'Who's Webber?'

'A scientist. Works at Porton Down. Don't ask me what he does, darling. I've heard them mention genetics, but Guy refuses to talk to me about his discussions with Webber. I'm only a woman, after all,' she commented drily.

'I know, love. I know,' he grinned and his hands began proving the point.

But their love-making lacked some of the passions of earlier on in the evening. Guy's mind kept returning to thoughts of the Folly, its bizarre history and the death of Rhoda, and Pat Donnolly, and his parents.

A strange feeling of dread filled his being. Like standing at the edge of a black abyss at night and listening to the sounds of hell below, while behind the pounding feet of fear grew closer.

Guy Corling felt it. But on that warm, star-filled night in the sleepy village of Frickley, others experienced it.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

‘Well, what do you think of it?’ Bob Norris asked the girl.

‘It’s lovely,’ she nodded.

‘Lovely? Lovely? It’s bloomin’ fantastic, that’s what it is. Wait till I get the bits and pieces on it. It’ll be the finest-looking one in Frickley.’

The girl scratched her nose and sniffed.

‘Are we goin’ to stand here all night lookin’ at it? Or are we goin’ out?’

‘You gotta admit it’s a hell of a looker, Audrey. You gotta admit that.’

She nodded. The last time she’d seen Bob so worked up was when she had put her hand inside his trousers during one of their twice-weekly heavy petting sessions. Which was not a bad comparison, she thought. For there were two things the twenty-year-old engineer loved most in life. Girls and motor bikes.

And on that Saturday, Norris had just picked up his new motor bike, a Kawasaki 250 KH. No father felt prouder of his new baby than Bob Norris over his bike. He’d been down to the showroom in Andover five minutes before opening time, peering through the windows just to make sure it was there.

And it was a fine day to be riding the bike through and around the village, he thought, as he showed it off to his friends, and answered the countless envious questions about horse power, acceleration, cylinders and types of tyres.

He returned home about four o'clock to polish the bike. There were four spots of mud on it. But he polished it from the front mudguard to the back number plate. For he wanted one other person to see it in its gleaming, original condition. His girl friend, Audrey Barrett.

Bob Norris had lived in Frickley all his life, attending secondary school in Andover. The gangling six-footer was popular with young and old alike. He was quite content with his lot at the light engineering factory mid-way between Andover and his home village. His father was an engineer, as was his father before him. He had no great ambitions, no burning desire to hit the bright lights of London, like so many of his friends.

In short, he was a perfect match for many of the girls who lived in the country. Quiet, timid and looking forward to the biggest day of their lives – their weddings.

Which was why it was surprising that he and Audrey Barrett had been going out together for four months. Audrey was not typical of country girls. She had ambitions, this five foot three beauty. She believed her future lay in London. That particular spring she had decided she wanted to be a Bunny girl at the Playboy Club. Come summer time, she was leaving her job at the general haberdashery cum clothes shop cum boutique on Frickley High Street.

She had no doubts that she would be accepted for a job in the Playboy Club. She was sensuous in the way only natural beauty can produce. Her skin was flawless, the country air producing a bloom that women in cities paid fortunes to beauticians to imitate.

She was desired by most of the boys in the village, and quite a few of the men. And she knew how to play games with them, this innocent with the provocative pouting lips, the swaying body and thrusting breasts. She was sexy – and knew it. She was eighteen – she had the world before her and she was a virgin



– and would stay that way until the ‘right moment’, she claimed.

Audrey was attracted by the quiet manners of Bob Norris. He did not paw over her on their first date, he did not even kiss her and she respected this. But as time went on, they began to explore each other as adolescents do. Bob had been taking Audrey out for a month, every Wednesday and Saturday, before he even put a hand on her breasts one evening at the local cinema. After that, there was no stopping him. Bob Norris, it seemed, was a late developer.

The couple found they actually enjoyed being in each other’s company, despite their obvious differences. Audrey would not, under any circumstances, give up her idea of going to London. Bob Norris was desperate. To say he loved her would be claiming too much. But he had spent a lot of time and money on the young lady, and he was a healthy virile young man. He was frustrated.

And so, he decided, that Saturday night was going to be a make-or-break situation between the two of them. He had his bike now, didn’t he? There were plenty of young girls in Andover who would appreciate such a machine. And show their appreciation. True love for Bob Norris, it must be realised, ran in fixed directions.

‘So where we goin’ on it?’ Audrey asked, after the Ritual of Admiration was over.

‘Dunno,’ shrugged Bob, trying to imitate Peter Fonda in *Easy Rider*. ‘Thought we’d go down the pub. See the boys. Have a couple of drinks and then zoom off to the dance.’ He almost drooled over the word ‘zoom’.

‘Great. Bloody great,’ said Audrey, adjusting her bra straps. They were outside her house near the centre of Frickley. Bob sat on the bike, his helmet on the tank before him. A modern-day knight ready to go into battle for his lady’s honour. Which was exactly what he intended to do.

'What do you mean? What do you mean?' Bob asked.

'You just want to show off the bike. I don't fancy listening all night to you gabbing on about motor bikes.'

Bob looked hurt.

'What do you suggest?'

'We could go for a spin on the bike and then go to the flicks. It's Elvis in *Blue Hawaii* tonight. We'd catch the second showing.'

Bob thought. If he could impress Audrey with his handling of the machine, buy her a Dubonnet in the pub, take her to the cinema, get her in the mood, and then take her to the woods just outside Frickley where he knew a little gamekeeper's hut that was always open, his luck could well be in.

'Good idea,' he nodded. 'Let's do that.'

They put their helmets on and roared off. Bob sped through the country lanes, his left foot snaking the bike up and down through the gears. His right hand twisted the throttle back and forth as he banked the bike steeply from side to side, round the twisting corners.

In Bob's mind the 250 became the giant of the range, the magnificent Z1000, one thousand ccs of raw power between his thighs. But the 250, the fastest production model of its size, brought some of the same thrills, the exhilaration of being among the elements, the flow of adrenalin as the ground whizzed by, out of focus, only a few inches from his feet. The bike handled beautifully, and even Audrey felt the excitement.

At first she held the hand grips at the back, letting the wind blow over her face and her body. Then she wound her arms round Bob's waist, pressing close into his back. He felt her breasts flatten against him, through the thin leather jacket he was wearing.

'Shall we stop soon?' he yelled over his shoulder.

'Let's go for a drink first,' she answered.

He nodded and swung back towards Frickley. The night

was drawing in fast. No wind stirred the trees. The full moon was rising in a star-spattered sky. Tonight was definitely going to be a good night, thought Bob as he parked outside the pub.

The warmth inside the pub, brought a flush to Audrey's cheeks. She laughed at the small jokes Bob made. Her flecked green eyes sparkled as she told her friends about the bike ride. They finished their drinks and as their friends prepared to go to the cinema, Bob looked at Audrey.

'What do you say we skip the film?' he whispered. 'Let's go into Andover on the bike and have a Chinese meal.'

She hesitated, but it was a fine night, and she was fed up doing the same thing every week. The cinema or a dance; a dance or the cinema. They were mobile now. Like Bob, she had looked forward to the day when he would pick up his new bike. It had been just before they met, that his previous machine, the one on which he had passed his test, had been run over by a reversing lorry and written off.

'Okay, Bob,' she smiled. The lips pouted. 'But I don't want to be back too late, like,' she added.

They ate in a small, cheap Chinese restaurant. Foolishly, Bob had more to drink than he should have. But he didn't think Audrey had too much. She was becoming delightfully drunk.

On the way back to Frickley, she sang, her hands running up and down the front of Bob's chest. Even though she was wearing gloves, the effect on Bob was the same had they both been naked in a warm bed.

He approached Frickley Woods. He tried to remember exactly where the disused gamekeeper's hut was situated. He looked at the velvet skyline. Somewhere near that bloody silly Folly place, he thought. He saw it to the left. Now the ultimate test. He stopped the bike.

'What's wrong?' Audrey asked, taking her hands away from him, and pulling down her bomber jacket.

'Nothing, nothing, just thought we'd better have a walk.'

You know what your old man's like when you come in half-pissed.'

'S'pose so,' she slurred, lifting her leg off the bike. 'Where to?'

'There's a bit of a path here,' he said pointing at the ground.

'Hang on! I'm not going in there,' she said, pulling back from his grip round her waist. 'That's where that Folly place is, isn't it.'

Bob laughed. 'You don't believe in all that spook stuff, do you?' he asked, glancing quickly at the tower in the distance. It did look strange at night.

'Anyway,' he quickly added. 'We're not going there. We'll walk about a bit and then get you back home. Come on, silly!'

He pulled her into the woods. She followed hesitantly at first, and then pressed into his side, his arm round her shoulders. Bob knew the hut was only about ten minutes away. He had timed it. Had actually put blankets and a torch there for a special occasion. Like tonight.

They never made it to the hut. Audrey stopped suddenly at the foot of a large oak tree and said she was tired and sat down. Cursing inwardly, Bob joined her. She would be all right in a few minutes, he told himself.

They sat side by side, leaning back on the wide trunk. The moon, full and yellow, hung low in the sky, patchworked by the trees in the woods. Nothing stirred, not a twig snapped, not a leaf moved. Bob thought this was odd, but the idea was quickly forgotten as he concentrated on more immediate matters. Like Audrey.

He leant over her, and one hand in readiness at her waist, kissed her. She tasted of wine and lychees. The taste drove Bob wild. His hand moved up over her breasts and up to the zip of her jacket. The wine, the night, the bike ride, made Audrey feel free. But not that free.

'Don't, Bob,' she whimpered. 'Please. You know what I feel about it.'

Bob's hands were away from her in a second.

'Oh, Audrey,' he moaned. 'It's not fair! We've been goin' out long enough, for Heaven's sake!'

She sighed. They had been having the same discussion every time they had been out together over the past three months.

'I just want to save myself for the right man and the right time,' she insisted, saying the words as if they were part of a play script. Which to her, by now, they were.

'Who the heck *is* the right man and the right moment, then?' Bob had asked the question many times before, but always asked it again. One night he hoped she would look into his eyes and say, 'You, darling.' She never did.

'You know,' she said. 'I've told you before.'

True, he thought. True. Too many times.

'I'll know when it happens,' she went on. Deliberately not adding that she pictured some tall, handsome, millionaire at the gaming tables of the Playboy Club falling in love with her. She would know *that* was the moment.

But then she made a mistake.

'I've got to keep myself for the man who marries me,' she said earnestly. She had never quite put it that way before. It was the chance Bob was waiting for.

'Oh, yeah? Oh yeah?' he said casually, trying to sound like Marlon Brando in *On the Waterfront*. He leaned close to her warm, soft cheeks.

'And tell me,' he whispered. 'What would you do if *I* asked you to marry me?' He sat back, a smile playing round his lips. A smile Audrey could not see in the shadows of the trees.

It was the ultimate punch-line in Bob's attack. It took a few seconds for the words to sink in. She felt her heart pound in excitement, but she was still sceptical.

'You know I want to go to London? Would you come with me?'

'Of course. I've been looking in the papers. There's lots of



good jobs for newly-apprenticed engineers in and around London. Good money, too,' he nodded.

'And you wouldn't mind if I became a Bunny Girl at the Playboy Club?'

'Course not. Course not,' he said quickly. Of course he was lying. His natural passion was doing the thinking for him at that point.

'Oh, Bobby,' she sighed. 'Oh, Bobby.'

He knew he had won. She only called him Bobby at moments of high passion, which up until then had been during a heavy petting session.

They kissed passionately. Suddenly she stopped.

'When?' she asked.

'When what?' mumbled Bob.

'When do we get engaged and married?'

'Oh, whenever you like,' he said.

'Oh, Bobby. Oh, Bobby.'

She lay back on the soft grass, dry because of its protection from the oak tree. Bob worked furiously. He undid the zip on her jeans and moaned. She moaned. It was true love about to be consummated.

Audrey took the jacket from Bob's back. He was wearing a woollen jumper beneath. It was getting cold, but the young man would not have noticed if an Arctic gale had sprung up. Kneeling, he slipped his trousers down just far enough.

Audrey lay on her back watching him, and Bob sank to the ground in front of her, he could not help thinking that he had been right all along. Two hundred and fifty cubic centimetres of his Japanese motor bike had made his dream come true. The Eastern promise fulfilled.

He slid her denims over her waist. She wore no stockings and her legs were warm. His heart was pounding – three months of dreams about to become reality!

He lay beside her, pressing closely to her, feeling her warmth.



He glanced at the sky. The moon had risen higher. All around was the black silence of the woods. His head rolled to one side in excitement. His eyes caught sight of the Folly sticking up over the trees.

He rolled over on top of Audrey. Somehow he didn't want to be looking at that evil madness on the night he became a man. This was his moment, the moment all young men think about for years.

He would have been upset, therefore, if he had seen the long heads with unblinking eyes stare out at them from the bushes all around.

Audrey shifted, tugging at her panties. Bob had not brought any contraceptives with him, but in any case had heard it was impossible to make a girl pregnant during her first time. And foolishly he believed it.

And then Audrey stopped again.

'What is it? What's wrong?' Bob asked, his voice worried thinking she had had a relapse of conscience.

'I thought I heard something. A rustling.'

They both listened. Nothing.

'Probably the wind,' he said. For a moment he was worried. He realised there was no wind that night. And he had heard a rustling, scraping noise, too. Nightlife, he reckoned. It couldn't be anything else. No-one would be out here at this time of night. So he returned to view his own present, and he hoped, future night life.

He lifted himself on top of Audrey. Her body was warm. He clasped it tightly to him. She was breathing deeply, her eyes closed. He moaned as he slipped between her thighs.

They did not, could not, hear the rustling once more in the bushes. Nor did they see the pack of huge, rabbit-like animals emerge from the bushes and surround them, watching the couple with dead, glassy eyes.

Audrey opened her legs slightly and Bob slipped down.

Raising his torso, he thrust himself forward. He entered her and gasped as he felt the incredible sensation. Audrey cried out a little in pain and shed a little blood. And then Bob was withdrawing, ready to enter her again.

The pack of silent, staring animals smelt the blood and moved forward . . .

This time Bob consummated his manhood fully. He pulled the panting, crying Audrey up close to him. Their sweat mingled. It was a supreme moment. It was also one of his last.

They both heard it at once: a grunt; a wail. A cry of animal need. Bob did not have time to turn round. Their bodies were locked together. He did not hear Audrey's question as to what the noise was. He was only aware of the agonising, mind-tearing pain that shot through his side. He felt his flesh being ripped off his defenceless body. And felt part of his stomach ooze down his side.

And he heard his own hellish screams of terror cascade through the empty woods, still and silvered in the light of the moon. It was the last thing he did hear. His body was covered with biting, fighting, snarling animals. They tore furiously at him. All he could see was solid red in front of his eyes as his hair was ripped from his skull.

He called for his mother, his father. He called on Audrey. But she was stunned, frozen with terror as she watched the monster rabbits with strange heads and long teeth tear her first lover to shreds. Then she felt his body being dragged off.

Blind instinct made her jump up and run out of the woods. Blind instinct made her grab her jacket on the ground. Before crashing into the woods, she looked round. Bob's body was completely covered by the creatures. A mound of thrashing, evil-smelling, fur. Only a hand stuck out at the bottom. And then that too was gone, sliced in two by the relentless teeth and jaws of the beasts.

Bob Norris never even saw the creatures that killed him.

In a stupor, she ran sobbing through the night, her dishevelled clothes being ripped and torn by bushes. Every sound behind her urged her on. She thought her heart would burst. Her own racked sobs sounded ghost-like in the deserted woods, and put even more fear into her.

She reached the road, saw the bike and ran past it. She did not stop running until she reached Frickley, where she collapsed in the street. She was scratched and torn, she felt someone picking her up, and then putting her in a car. Her eyes were closed. She was too terrified to open them.

And then she felt warmth and was aware of light. She opened her eyes. A policeman stood in front of her. It was Sergeant Brown. He moved towards her and she started to scream. She screamed non-stop for almost five minutes, and suddenly stopped, her mind numb. She stared fixedly ahead, quite silent.

'I reckon she's been raped,' Sergeant Brown said. 'Look at the state of the poor girl.'

'I saw her leave the village with young Norris on his new bike about six o'clock,' another voice said. It was Constable Perkins, a young policeman who had newly joined the force.

'What happened, love,' Sergeant Brown asked in a mellow voice.

Audrey stared.

'We can't help you if you don't tell us,' he went on. Sergeant Brown's wife brought in a cup of tea and offered it to Audrey. She just stared, her green eyes looking wild.

The police looked at one another. One went to telephone her parents as well as Bob Norris's parents. Sergeant Brown and Constable Perkins gazed at the young girl.

And then Audrey spoke. 'Rabbits,' she said in a low, flat, voice. 'Rabbits. He's dead. He's dead. They killed him. Rabbits.' She screamed once more.

The men and woman came across.

'Who's dead, dear?' the Sergeant asked. 'Is it Bob?'

Audrey nodded.

'Bob's dead,' Brown said. 'Where?'

'The woods. In the woods. Rabbits. Big rabbits. They killed him.'

Brown winked at Perkins.

'Shock,' he mouthed at the Constable, who nodded knowingly.

'Which woods, Audrey?' Perkins asked.

'The Folly. The Folly.'

'And you say it was rabbits?' Brown queried.

'Rabbits. Lots of them. They killed him. Ate him. They ate him!' she yelled.

Mrs Brown led Audrey away to another room.

'What do you make of it, Sergeant?' Perkins asked, once Audrey was out of earshot.

'Load of nonsense, of course,' Brown replied. 'Rabbits! Never heard such rubbish in my life. The poor kid's been raped. That's for sure. Probably shocked her into imagining all sorts of things. It does that, you know, lad.'

'What do we do now, then?' Perkins asked, believing every word his superior said. He had been in the force a very short time, after all.

'We'll wait on the parents to arrive,' the Sergeant told him. He scratched the stubble under his chin. 'You know what, lad?' he asked. 'You know what I reckons?'

The Constable shook his head.

'I reckons as how Bob Norris came off that bloody machine of his, trying to show off. He's probably lying out in these woods right now. We don't have no rapists round here. Rabbits!' he said suddenly and laughed. 'Rabbits! You take the Panda lad, and look around the woods for Norris. If you find him, radio us back and we'll get an ambulance out.'

'Should we contact Inspector Hatcher?'

‘Don’t be so bloody daft! He’s too busy on these murders to be bothering with silly young kids on motor bikes. Now get on with you out to the woods.’

The police made two mistakes that night. Firstly, they did not believe Audrey Barrett’s story. Secondly, they sent a policeman out on his own to the woods. Three hours later, when Perkins had not re-appeared or contacted the station, Brown and two auxiliary policemen went to the woods. They found the torn, shredded, hideous body of the Constable a few yards away from that of Bob Norris.

They never knew that the young constable, finding the mutilated corpse of Bob Norris, had foolishly turned it over with the wild hope the teenager might still be alive. In doing so, he had covered his hands with blood, making im the next victim of the creatures. The animals pounced as he was kneeling over the remains of Norris. Like Bob, he never saw what was to kill him.

The horror had finally taken grip. In less than a week Frickley had been transformed into a village of terror. And yet more was to come.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Sunday was a nightmare for Guy Corling. It had started off badly when he woke to find himself alone. On the pillow next to him was a note. 'Had to leave to see about Mark. Love you always. Anne.' Then the telephone rang. It was Jock McGovern with the news about Bob Norris and Perkins.

'What are the police saying?' he asked Jock.

'Nothing. Nothing at all. They want a blanket of silence on this until they can get some more facts together.'

'That's ridiculous!' Guy exploded. 'You can't keep a story like this quiet. We'll have to file copy for Jack. He'll go nuts if we don't give him a story. Have you spoken to Hatcher?'

'It's no go, Guy,' Jock said patiently. 'It's nothing to do with Hatcher. The instructions came down from Scotland Yard. Fraser'll face court and censure if he breaks the silence.'

'Hell! The biggest bloody story I've been on. And right on my own doorstep! And I can do bugger all about it!'

'Calm down lad. Calm down. There's one advantage,' the old reporter claimed.

'Oh, yeah? What's that?' Guy asked sarcastically.

'No-one else knows about it on the Street. Just Jack Fraser, you and me. If the police clear this up soon you'll be sitting on an exclusive. Play your cards right lad, and you can end up being a correspondent for *Newsweek*.'

He thought for a few moments. The old man was right. Guy had to admit that he still had a lot to learn about journalism.

'Okay, Jock,' he sighed. 'We'd better leave it until later.'



He hung up. The telephone rang again almost immediately. 'Yes?' Guy snapped, wondering if he was going to be able to get out of bed that day.

'Fraser here. What's wrong with you this morning?'

'Nothing. I'm sorry, Jack. I didn't mean to chew your ear off. I've just heard from Jock,' he told his Editor. 'He told me that the killings last night are taboo.'

'That's it. Got the message this morning from the top brass at Scotland Yard. There's nothing we can do about it. Well, nothing we can do about printing it, at least,' he added.

'What do you mean?'

'I mean that once you crawl out of your pit you start investigating. If we wait for the police every newshound in Fleet Street'll have the story. Find out what's going on down there.'

'What do you reckon, Jack? Why the sudden interest?'

'Because the police don't slap blankets over murders unless there's something they don't want us to know,' Fraser claimed. 'And this thing about your parents being eaten – it's okay, Jock told me. There hasn't been any more comment about that from the bobbies.'

'You see a connection?'

'I don't see anything – yet. That's why I want you to start sniffing about. Do some grass root investigation, Guy. If you can remember how, that is. It'll make a change from propping up El Vino's,' Fraser joked, referring to the famous bar in Fleet Street.

'I'll get on to it right away, chief,' Guy said, now standing naked by the bed, feeling very much awake.

'I'll see you tomorrow at the funeral,' Fraser said before hanging up.

Guy had a hot followed by a cold shower to waken him completely. He felt the old excitement returning that he used to feel when he was a cub reporter chasing his first stories. The excitement that never leaves true journalists. 'Grass root

investigation,' his Editor had said. That's what it was all right. He would break the story, he knew that instinctively, for apart from professional reasons, he was personally involved.

He was rubbing himself down when the telephone rang again.

'Good God,' he muttered as he picked it up. 'Can a man get no peace?' and then aloud, 'Yes? Guy Corling here.'

'Hello, darling. It's Anne.'

Her voice was quiet, almost as if she was whispering.

'What's wrong? Speak up.'

'I can't. I'm at the Manor. I've got to see you at once.'

Guy smiled.

'Well I'm ready for you. I've just come out of a shower and am stark naked.'

'Guy don't. Please. It's serious. Oh God . . .' she broke off. Guy heard her sob.

'Anne darling! What's wrong, what's the matter?' Guy enquired solicitously, silently cursing himself for his crass insensitivity.

'I can't tell you now. Not over the telephone. Please just stay at the cottage and I'll be with you in ten minutes.'

Without further word, Anne hung up.

By the time Guy had brewed a percolator of coffee, Anne's car had drawn up outside the cottage. She rushed to Guy's arms and he led her gently inside to the front room. She felt cold, and was trembling as she sat down on the large sofa.

'Oh, Guy,' she said, pushing her hair back from her face. 'I'm so frightened.'

Guy poured two coffees, his face grim, and said nothing. She would tell him in her own time. Her hand shook as she held the cup.

'I don't know what's happening to Mark, but it's horrible. Horrible.'

‘What do you mean, love?’ he asked gently, his eyes troubled. She laid the cup down and clasped her hands tightly, rubbing the palms together.

‘After I left you last night just before one, I looked in on Mark’s bedroom to see how he was feeling. It was empty. The bed had never been slept in. And there was a funny smell, a musty smell like mould, or a bit like you get from minks.’ She paused, and ran her long white fingers over her forehead. Guy waited.

‘I noticed the back door of his room was slightly open, the one that leads down the back of the house. Without knowing why, I walked across to the window and looked down into the garden. The moon was full, you remember, and I could see across the back lawn to the woods.’ She shuddered.

Guy laid his hand on her shoulder.

‘I thought I saw a movement at the edge of the woods,’ she went on. ‘And then a figure staggered out onto the lawn. At first I thought it was an old drunk who had lost his way, but as it approached the house and came into the full light of the moon, I saw it was Mark.’ She shuddered again.

‘But not like I’d ever seen him before. His face was like a madman’s. And it seemed bloated, covered with dark patches. He dragged his left leg along. And then he fell in the middle of the lawn. I heard him cry out – oh, it was horrible – and then he looked back at the woods and the Folly and started shaking his fist. He looked up at the moon and did the same. I could hear him cursing, but couldn’t make out exactly what he said. Oh, Guy,’ she started to weep, ‘What’s happening?’

‘I don’t know, love, I don’t know. But I’m going to find out. What an experience,’ he added, trying to comfort her.

‘But that’s not the end,’ she said through her tears. ‘There’s more,’ she paused. Guy nodded encouragement to go on with her story.

‘This morning I went to his room again. It was empty. I tried

his study, and the door was locked,' she continued, her voice almost inaudible.

'I could hear him moving around inside, but he wouldn't answer me. I knocked and knocked but he still would not answer.'

'He's gone mad,' Guy commented, half to himself.

'Let me finish, please,' Anne said, her green eyes looking dark and troubled.

'He finally answered. If you can call it an answer. His voice was hoarse and rasping. I could hardly recognise it. I asked him to let me in. He wouldn't. He told me to go to hell. And then . . . and then . . .,' she faltered, blinking back the tear, ' . . . then he said I could go to you, he called you my lover boy. And he started coughing. And coughing. It seemed to go on forever. I just stood outside the door, terrified.

'When he stopped, he said that he would shoot me, or anyone else, who tried to get into the study. I heard his gun click. I ran. I'm so frightened, Guy. What's happened to him?' she asked again.

'There, there, lovely one,' Guy said. 'You're all right now. You're moving in with me: today. We'll go out to the Manor and collect some clothes and try to get through to Mark again. Okay?'

She managed a weak smile. Her long eyelashes were stuck together with tears. Guy wanted to smother her with kisses, as he would any frightened child. But he knew there was a long day ahead before he could show her how much he loved her.

They drove out to the Manor. The day was overcast, and billowing clouds to the west threatened rain. As they passed the Folly, Anne looked the other way, but Guy could not help glancing across at the monstrosity. He had never believed the stories that went round about the tower. In fact, when a school-boy, he had visited it as part of a dare. Needless to say, he

found nothing. But he knew that Anne was not given to fanciful flights of imagination . . .

They parked in the wide, gravel drive at the front of the great house.

‘Show me his study, Anne, before we go in,’ Guy asked.

She nodded and they walked round to the back, through the conservatory with its grape vines, Venus Flytraps and orchids. There was a warm sense of security, in the glass extension, mingled with the fragrance of ever-blooming flowers.

‘A world apart,’ Guy muttered as he followed behind Anne.

She nodded, knowing exactly what he meant.

‘Up there,’ she pointed when they were in the middle of the back lawn.

Heavy velvet curtains had been drawn over the windows.

‘Looks like he’s still there,’ Guy said. ‘Or else he’s slipped out while you’ve been away. Let’s try his door.’

Once in the house, he suggested that Anne packed while he tried to get through to Mark.

He was about to ascend the wide stairs to the first floor when a screaming figure, dressed in black, came hurtling down towards them. Guy managed to grab Anne just in time, as the crazed being rushed past them. Had he not done so, Anne would have been knocked backwards on to the marble floor.

‘What the hell . . .’ he started, but was interrupted by the figure in black whirling round, a kitchen meat axe in one hand. Screaming foul obscenities, the figure swung at them both.

Guy did not stop to think. His Army training came back to him in an instant. He pushed Anne behind him, and just as he was in striking distance of the axe, he quickly sidestepped, stuck his foot out, and brought both hands clasped together down on the back of their potential murderer.

The figure fell flat on the hard floor. There was a loud crunch as the rib-cage and elbows broke, accompanied by a terrified, agonised scream. Then silence.

Guy leaned down and turned the body over. Anne and he gasped as one. They both looked down on the panting, gasping, broken body of Madge Jensen, the normally prim, efficient and sober housekeeper to the Hattrells. They were speechless.

Madge Jensen blinked and then slowly forced her eyes open. The eyes of a madwoman. She stared at Guy, seeming not to recognise him and then, grimacing with pain, turned her head slightly to look at Anne. Blood mixed with spittle, dribbled from her mouth as she spoke.

'You. You did it,' she slurred. 'You drove him to it. You ruined this house with your fancy ways and sluttish manners. You could not...' She grimaced in pain, her body heaving. But her eyes never flickered, never left Anne's face. The eyes of hatred.

'You could not even give him a child, you filthy whore. It's all because of you. Damn you! Damn you! Damn you!' she spat and then her head rolled to one side.

'Get an ambulance,' ordered Guy. 'She's still breathing.'

Anne was ashen-faced as she went to the telephone at the end of the hall. Guy remained kneeling beside the housekeeper.

'Madge, Madge,' he said gently. 'It's me. Guy. Guy Corling. Can you hear me.'

Her eyes fluttered and then opened. This time the eyes were glazed.

'Madge, where is Sir Mark?'

She stared back at him, unseeing.

'Madge, where is Sir Mark?'

'Gone. Don't know,' she mumbled. 'Three days. Haven't seen him. All her fault. All her fault. All her...' she slipped into unconsciousness.

He stood up. Anne came across and gazed down at Madge.

'Poor woman,' she said quietly. 'What made her do it?'

Guy shook his head. 'Is the ambulance on its way?' he asked. Anne nodded.



‘Good,’ he said. ‘Don’t touch her. She’s got broken bones by the sound of it. We might cause internal bleeding if we shift her. Get a cushion for her head, though.’

Anne was returning with the cushion as Guy started to bound up the stairs.

‘Where are you going?’ Anne asked.

‘To see if there’s any sign of that lunatic husband of yours,’ he told her.

There was none. Though he pounded and pounded on the study door there was no response. As he headed back downstairs, he noticed a crumpled piece of paper near the study door. He picked it up. Spidery, shaky writing covered it.

‘Dear Madge,’ it said. ‘The end has come. I’m afraid you can no longer work for me. Thanks for everything. The bank has instructions to give you £25,000. Buy a house with it. An annual allowance from the estate is made out to you. Again thanks for everything.’

Mark H.’

Guy re-read the note. It made no sense.

The ambulance men were putting Madge Jensen on a stretcher as Guy descended the stairs.

‘Poor woman,’ Anne repeated as Madge was carried out to the waiting vehicle.

Guy nodded his agreement.

What neither of them knew was that the ‘poor woman’ had good cause to be driven mad. Now aged fifty-six, she had been with the Hattrell household practically all her working life. She had seen Mark grow up, watched him as he became a handsome, ambitious, fun-loving young man. Worried for him when the old master had died. Saw him cope with the burdens of a large estate and death duties. And fallen in love with him.

It had been many years since the young Mark had staggered back one Saturday night from a party to find Madge, still in the bloom of womanhood, sitting alone in the kitchen, waiting on

him, in case he should need a hot drink or a snack. Mark's parents were abroad and the other servants had the weekend off.

'Well, well, Miss Jensen,' Mark had drunkenly said as he strutted about the kitchen. 'What does a pretty lady like you do on a fine summer's night like this?'

'Oh, I've got plenty to do, sir,' she replied. 'I've got my knitting, and my sewing, and I've just written a letter to my mum in Bradford. And ...'

'Quite. Quite,' he said. 'But tell me, don't you have a young man. A beau?'

She shook her head.

'Have you ever had a young man?'

'Oh yes, sir, I did. Years ago. But he got killed in the war.'

'I mean have you ever *had* a young man?' he said emphasising his words, so there was no misunderstanding as to his meaning. She blushed. Then slowly nodded, looking down at the sewing on her lap as she did so.

'Have a drink, then,' Mark leered. 'To times past,' he added cruelly. Although Madge thought he really meant it.

One drink led to another and soon the best part of a bottle of brandy was consumed. They moved out of the kitchen into the front parlour with its huge Victorian sofas.

He led her on, coaxed her with words and deliberate brushings of his hand. It was so easy, he reflected later. He took her on the floor in the parlour, on the sheepskin rug. He took her again in his bed. She responded like a virgin, much to Mark's delight.

He took her again in the ensuing years whenever he felt the need. He used her and abused her. And she called it love. She knew they could never marry, but that did not worry her. She firmly believed that whenever Mark came to her bed, it was because he genuinely needed her to protect him from the world of sluts and crooks. And she thanked God for her luck.

And then Mark married the American lady. Little wonder,

Madge thought, he made sure she got the drugs that were eventually to kill her. She was unbearable, with her loud accent and voice and 'un-English' ways.

But the visits to her bed had stopped. Rhoda was Mark's wife, no matter what Madge Jensen thought of her. And that was when the madness had started. Nightly she cursed Rhoda, and later Anne. Outwardly, she was brisk and efficient, if distant, towards them but inwardly she hated them with pathological single-mindedness. The sign of true madness in which the insane person is considered normal until some act proves them otherwise.

The letter from Sir Mark had been that act. It released years of pent-up feelings, years of private hell and torture, years of lunacy. The 'poor woman' had laughed when she had heard of Rhoda's death. And she would have laughed again as she sliced Anne Hattrell to death.

Guy was pouring himself a large whisky in the library when Anne re-appeared with two suitcases. He handed her a brandy he had already poured. She took it with a murmur of thanks and slumped down on a chair. The day's events were taking their toll.

'She seemed so stable,' Anne finally said. 'I know she didn't like me, but I never thought...' her voice trailed off as she remembered the demoniacal figure rushing down the stairs at them.

'Did you know she had just been sacked?' Guy asked, seeing her eyes growing wide at the memory. 'Did Mark mention he was going to get rid of her?'

'Sacked? Madge Jensen?' Anne repeated incredulously. 'It's the first I've heard about it.'

He passed her the note which, like Guy, she read twice.

'And she said she hadn't seen him for three days. Which means apart from you seeing him running from the woods,

*no-one* has seen him for three days. Is that right?' he quizzed Anne.

Her face puckered in concentration. She ran her fingers through her hair, which was suddenly struck by a burst of sunshine through the dark clouds outside, making it look like burnished gold.

'Yes, I think that's right,' she said slowly. 'The last time was dinner on Wednesday or Thursday. I'm not sure which.'

'Now think carefully, Anne. Who else was at dinner? Who else was the last to see him?'

'James Webber,' she said quietly.

Guy was silent as he carried Anne's suitcases to the car—James Webber—the name kept cropping up. It was a long shot, call it journalist's instinct, but he reckoned he should see Webber as soon as possible. He made his mind up to try to find the scientist once he'd dropped Anne at Rosemary Cottage.

But he never made it out to Webber that day. Subsequent events put all thoughts of the man out of his head.

They were just leaving the grounds of the Manor when two men waved at the car. One was Ben Davis, the groom of the Manor, and the man who used to saddle Mark's and Guy's horses when they went riding together in the old days. The other was Victor Henthorne, although Guy had difficulty in recognising the gamekeeper at first, he looked so much older than when he had last seen him a few years before.

Both men looked serious, and as they approached the car, Guy could hardly believe it, but it seemed as if Ben Davis's eyes glistened, as though the tough old horseman had been crying.

'Afternoon, ma'am,' both men said, touching their caps.

'Afternoon Mr Corling,' Ben said.

'What's wrong?' Guy asked.

'We'd like a word with you in private, like,' the groom said, glancing at Anne.

'Stay here, love,' Guy said as he got out of the car. 'I'll see what the trouble is.'

The three men walked out of earshot of the car.

'Well?' said Guy, more curious than anything else.

'Well, Mr Corling, sir,' Ben started, 'We didn't like to say so in front of Lady Hattrell, but there's been an accident.'

'What sort of accident, man? Be more specific, please,' Guy asked, trying to hide his impatience.

Ben Davis shrugged and sniffed.

'It's Pintail, sir.'

'Lady Anne's mare? The one that's about to give birth?' Guy asked, remembering Anne had mentioned her favourite horse had been put out to stud and that the resultant foal should be worth a small fortune.

Both men nodded silently.

'Well, what's happened? Is the horse all right?'

'The horse is fine, sir,' Victor said in a low voice. 'But the foal is dead.' He stressed the word 'dead'.

'I appreciate you not telling Lady Hattrell directly,' Guy said. 'I'll tell her myself,' he added, turning away. Ben grabbed at his elbow.

'That's not all, sir,' the groom said, shaking his head. 'It ain't natural what happened. It ain't natural. That's why we don't want to let Lady Hattrell see.'

Victor Henthorne stared grimly at Guy.

'I think you'd better have a look yourself,' he suggested to Guy.

The men walked to a field nearby. Guy turned and raised his palm at Anne, telling her to stay in the car.

'Over here, sir,' Ben said when they had turned the corner of the field and were out of sight of the car.

'What the hell is that?' Guy asked, as he looked at a pile of bones, skin and blood.

'The foal,' Victor said simply.

Guy walked forward. The foal was on its side, and on closer examination, Guy could make out the shape of the head and the small, matted tail. But its whole side, including many of its ribs, had been eaten away. Parts of its intestine lay scattered around on the ground.

‘God,’ he groaned. ‘Oh my God!’

He looked at the two men. Victor’s face was impassive, his eyes hooded as if in quiet anger. Ben looked pained, and in the light it was obvious that the man had been crying.

‘What do you think happened?’ Guy asked the groom gently.

‘Having seen Pintail, I’ll hazard a good guess,’ Ben replied. ‘She was frightened, very frightened when I put her in her stall this morning. I ain’t seen a horse that frightened for years.’ He paused and shook his head.

Guy reminded himself he was back in the country, where things moved slower, and people took time to tell stories. He took out a pack of cigarettes and offered them to the men. Victor refused but Ben gratefully accepted one with hands that trembled slightly. The old groom was definitely badly shaken.

‘So I reckons that Pintail had some sort of fright last night,’ Ben finally went on, blowing out smoke. ‘And she aborted the foal in this here field.’

‘Hang on, hang on,’ said Guy sensing something was wrong with Ben’s story. ‘Why wasn’t Pintail in her stall as usual?’

‘That’s it, sir, she was,’ replied Ben, looking Guy straight in the eyes. ‘She must’ve been frightened in her stall. She broke out. Burst the door down.’

‘Good grief. And no-one heard anything?’

‘I was in Andover last night and there ain’t no-one else now ’cepting me to look after the horses. It’s not like the old times, Mr Corling.’

Guy nodded. The whole thing was becoming fantastic. He glanced at Victor. The gamekeeper was staring down at the remains of the foal.



‘What do you think, Victor?’

‘It’s been eaten, that’s what I think,’ Victor said. ‘Same as my boy’s rabbit and same as . . .’ He stopped and turned away. ‘I’ve got work to do. I’ll go and get a spade to bury . . .’

‘Same as what, Victor?’ Guy insisted. ‘Have there been others like this?’

The gamekeeper stared at Guy. He liked the look of the young man, but did not know if he could trust him. For despite Sir Mark’s apparent friendliness the other night, Victor had the feeling that the baronet was humouring him. But he decided to take a chance with Guy.

‘And if I have?’ He flung the question at Guy.

Guy looked back at the car and then at Victor again.

‘I’ll have to tell Lady Hattrell the news about her foal now. Why don’t we meet in The Goat tonight?’ Guy suggested. ‘Early – say, about seven o’clock?’

Victor nodded.

Guy tried to tell Anne about the death of the foal as gently as he could. But the result was the same. She was shattered, after Sir Mark and Madge Jensen the news numbed her. Which was, Guy thought later, the best effect it could have. He took her to Rosemary Cottage and called the doctor who put her under sedation. Anne mumbled as she dropped off to sleep.

‘You know what I was going to do with the foal?’ she asked softly, her eyelids heavy.

Guy shook his head.

‘I was going to sell it. Use the money for us to start a new life.’

Guy smiled. He looked at Anne lying in the bed. Her blonde hair was fanned over the pillow. She was beautiful, he thought.

‘I think we can manage on our own, love,’ he said and leaned over and kissed her on the forehead.

'I was hoping you'd say that,' she whispered, before closing her eyes and falling asleep.

Guy then did what any good investigative reporter does when in the middle of a big story. Especially one that did not make any sense. He headed for the nearest pub. Not to drink, but to think. To try to put the pieces together. Try to establish a pattern that would take him to his next lead.

Twenty minutes, and only one half-pint of lager later, he had run over all the events in his mind. And he knew who he had to see next. Returning to Rosemary Cottage, he put a call through to Jack Fraser in London.

'I've seen nearly everyone involved in this mess,' he told the Editor, after filling him in on the latest developments. 'From the police to the groom who found the dead foal. There're only two people I haven't managed to trace so far. Mark Hattrell and James Webber. But I'm going after them—and I'll get them,' he added.

Guy was not able to see Victor Henthorne that night. The police called round to question him about Madge Jensen. Inspector Hatcher himself asked Guy the questions.

'Going a bit out of your scope, aren't you, Inspector?' Guy asked Hatcher. 'I mean, a housekeeper falling down some stairs is hardly going to set the world alight as far as police work is concerned, is it?' He was fishing. He wanted to know why Hatcher had taken an interest.

The Inspector did not rise to the bait.

'Well, as I'm down here the local Sergeant asked me to look into it. I think he's scared out of his mind after what happened last night to Constable Perkins and I can't say I blame him really. They should have called me in the first place,' Hatcher claimed.

'You...you...don't see a connection between all the deaths, do you?' Guy smiled.

‘Are you asking me as a journalist, a bereaved son, or just off the record?’

Guy shrugged and managed a faint smile.

‘You know me, Inspector,’ he said. ‘The very soul of discretion.’

‘Yes, well,’ Hatcher said. ‘But if you so much as quote one word of what I’m going to say, I’ll have your balls stretched from one end of Fleet Street to the other. *And* make sure you’re finished in newspapers.’

‘There are creatures out there, eating and destroying living things. I don’t know what they are, who or what’s controlling them, if they’re intelligent or not or how many of them there are.’ He took a deep breath. ‘But one thing I do know. The deaths and killings are completely unrelated. Random. And that makes it worse. Unless we stop it here, and soon, then I predict that the whole of this area could be in danger.’

Guy was silent. Outside, the trees stirred in a breeze and a car drove past: it was all very normal and terrifying. Guy shivered.

Without doubt, Sunday had been a nightmare.

## CHAPTER NINE

Paul Measures was drunk, very drunk. It was only two-thirty on a Monday afternoon. The thought made him laugh. He didn't give a damn. He looked at the large gin and tonic in front of him, studied it intently, tried to count the rising bubbles in the glass, but gave up.

He chuckled again. He was forty-three years old, a travelling salesman, married with two kids and he lived in London. His fair thinning hair, tight lipless mouth, rimless glasses which partially hid his grey, slightly desperate looking eyes, was the perfect make-up for merging into the background. He was the anonymous man to whom no-one gave a second glance. And he was drunk at two-thirty on a Monday afternoon.

For he had just saved his own life. His future was secure now. To be a travelling salesman in agricultural chemicals forever, Amen. It was chance, nothing else, that had brought Paul Measures the biggest order of his life that morning. Not sophisticated sales techniques, high-powered approaches or personal charm, just sheer chance. And Measures at least had the sense to see that.

But it did not matter. His job was saved. He was looking forward to seeing his Managing Director's face when he told him. The MD, who only a few weeks previously had called him into his office.

'It's no good, Measures,' he said. 'Your track record is hopeless. Something will have to be done about it. Or else...'

The MD was younger than Measures. A new man brought

in from outside by the old-established family firm to give it a shot in the arm. Get rid of the dead wood – like Paul Measures. The salesman was told he had three months.

‘Then we’ll give you a golden handshake – nearly twenty-five years with us, isn’t it? – and time to look for another job.’

Measures had nodded dumbly. He may as well have been asked to find El Dorado, for all the chance he had of bringing in big orders from Hampshire, his particular patch. He never told his wife, did not even start to look in the trade papers for other jobs. After nearly thirty years with the same firm, he did not want to believe that he was being threatened with dismissal.

And then that very morning, as he went round on his routine calls, he visited Agricultural Supplies Limited, one of the largest chains of agricultural distributors in the country. It had a large depot just outside Bicton village, a few miles east of Frickley. By chance Arnold Rancer, one of the directors of the firm, was at the depot. And he was furious.

Their existing suppliers had let them down, for the third time in succession, on delivery of a complete range of vital goods. Paul Measures had walked in just at the moment Rancer had decided to cancel all further orders from their normal suppliers. It was a chance in a million.

Yes, Measures assured the fuming director, his company could deliver what he needed. Certainly, he promised him, the goods would be at the depot within five days.

‘Fine,’ Rancer had said. ‘At least we’ll be dealing with a company that keeps its word – I hope.’

‘We do that, sir. We certainly do that,’ Measures nodded.

Rancer promised to have the papers drawn up that afternoon and could ‘Mr Measures’ come back the following morning to conclude the deal.

‘And remember,’ Rancer had added, ‘if you come up trumps on this one then you’ve got the whole shooting match in the future.’

'We will, sir. We certainly will,' commented Measures as he was being shown out.

He went straight to the Three Feathers Inn, the only pub in Bicton. He bought himself drink after drink; bought everyone else in the pub drinks and tried to get someone to help him celebrate. A few of the locals knew him by sight, but merely thanked him for the drink and went on their way. Paul Measures was not the sort of man you deliberately spent time with.

He chuckled yet again, picturing his MD's face.

'It's a good life, is it not, landlord?' he said to the large man behind the bar.

'So they tell me, sir,' the landlord replied, looking at the clock and wondering how much longer he had to suffer the bore.

'Well, landlord, I want to tell you that this is a great day in my life. D'you hear?'

'Yessir, I'm glad for you.'

'You don't give a monkey's fart, do you?'

The landlord ignored Measures for the remaining half hour the pub was open. And then he showed the grumbling, mumbling, drunken salesman to the door.

'You're not driving, are you, sir?' he asked Measures.

'Of course I'm bloody well driving! What d'you think I've got a car for?' he hiccupped.

The landlord shrugged and let him go on his way.

Measures jabbed the radio on, and sang loudly and out of key to a popular tune that blared from the speakers. He felt good. It was his moment, his day. His greatest day. And why should a man not be allowed to indulge himself on such a day? His hands lay lightly on the steering wheel as he twisted and turned it round the tight bends of the country roads. His body moved in time to the music from the radio. He looked at the trees whizzing by.



‘I’ve made it!’ he shouted to them. ‘I’ve made it!’

And then he crashed into one of the trees he was yelling at.

The front of the car crumpled, but luckily the engine took most of the impact. Measures was flung forward and banged his head on the windscreen, which fragmented into a million cracks but remained intact. The engine was racing, and to kill the noise rather than as a safety precaution, he turned the ignition off.

The only sound was the persistent hissing of the burst radiator as steam poured from the front of the car. He felt his head, it was slightly cut, but nothing a plaster would not cure. He felt around in his pocket and pulled out a half-bottle of gin. Unscrewing the cap, he gulped a mouthful down.

He sat in the car for a few minutes, blinking drunkenly at the tree jutting into the bonnet. He could not fully comprehend what had happened. And then his fuddled brain finally received the message. Stumbling out of the car, cursing loudly, he started to stagger along the road, not quite sure where he was going, but hoping it was back to the village.

‘Hello, bunny,’ he said when a large rabbit hopped out onto the road in front of him. ‘D’ya want a drink?’ he laughed, holding out the bottle.

‘Oh, you got some friends, have you?’ he burped as he watched more rabbits join the others until they blocked the road.

‘Let’s have a bunny party, right?’ he grinned inanely. ‘But don’t tell the Missus, will you. She doesn’t like bunnies. She’s a dragon, y’see.’

The rabbits stared unblinkingly at Measures as he rambled on. By now others had come in from the hedges and he was surrounded.

In a flash of sobriety, Measures suddenly noticed that these creatures in front of him were not like normal rabbits. Their heads were a bit like rats. And they had long teeth sticking out under their jaws.

Measures froze – he blinked, trying to focus on the animals. His mind convinced him they were rats: huge rats. And he couldn't even stand looking at pictures of rats. He clutched at his throat, feeling it tighten with fear. He smelt his own sweat as he whirled round looking for an escape route. There was none. He was encircled.

'Oh, God, help me,' he cried to the Being he had not prayed to since he was a child. 'Help me, please.'

His legs felt numb and useless as he tried to walk. The bottle of gin fell from his hands and smashed on the road, its bitter smell filling his nostrils. He looked ahead as the largest of the creatures raised itself on its hind legs and barked. For a second he thought he was having a drunken nightmare. But the fear that was almost choking him convinced him otherwise.

He saw the animals snarling, baring their teeth. His stomach heaved and he threw up, his head jolting forward. The thick rimless glasses fell to the ground in front of him, and he felt the crunching of glass beneath his feet as he stood on the spectacles.

Measures could hardly see without his glasses and was only aware of blurred grey brown shapes flinging themselves at him. He still refused to believe that the horror was real. All he was aware of was his total fear. A mind-enveloping, body-crippling fear.

He hardly felt the first slash at his legs. But he felt the powerful jaws crack into the bone and bring him crashing to the ground.

Sobbing, he tried to fight the beasts off. He could not see them properly, both because of his tears and the loss of his glasses. But he could smell them – a sickly-sweet smell of putrefying flesh. He tasted the smell, it was so powerful. It reached his stomach and along with the remainder of the gin, it made him vomit once again. Over the animals, over himself and over the bits of his flesh which lay on the ground.

Whether it was the vomit, or whether it was the smell of gin or because they had had enough, the creatures suddenly

stopped attacking him. They loped off into the hedges and across the fields, not even pausing to lick themselves clean.

Making Paul Measures the first victim they had attacked to be left alive.

Measures felt pain everywhere. The pain was so great it ceased to become identifiable. He realised he needed help, and tried to move.

And so the anonymous man that was Paul Measures began to drag his lacerated, bleeding body along the road on the greatest day in his life...

Anne Hattrell lay in bed most of Monday morning. The doctor called round just after ten but she refused to have any more tranquillisers. The sleep had refreshed her and by noon she was ready to get out of bed.

Guy had been out all morning, it was the day of his parents' funeral, and although Anne had pleaded desperately with him to be allowed to go, he refused point-blank.

'I don't want three deaths to mourn about,' he commented bitterly.

Anne understood his anger at his parents' deaths and did not argue further. He returned about one o'clock with Jack Fraser and Jock McGovern. The men were silent and serious. There was none of the good-humoured banter normal among journalists when they get together. Fraser left with McGovern after telling Guy to 'Stick to the story, lad.'

'Was it bad, love?' Anne asked when the other two had gone.

Guy looked tired and drained. He rubbed his eyes with his thick fingers. He looked at Anne before answering. There were no signs of tears round the eyes. Just pain in them.

'It wasn't nice,' was all he would say.

It would be many years before he told her about the polythene bags and the fact that when the twin coffins started rolling towards the furnaces for cremation, he did not see oak boxes.

But mangled, chewed remains, that had once been his parents, inside transparent plastic bags . . .

They ate a light lunch, Guy picking at the food.

'I'm going out to see Victor Henthorne at The Goat later,' he told Anne. 'Will you be all right?'

'Oh, I'm not staying in,' she said with a wave of her head. 'I've had enough lying about. I'm off to see how Pintail is this afternoon.'

'Yes, of course,' Guy mumbled. 'I'd forgotten for a moment. I'm sorry. Yes, that's a good idea.'

The day was dry and a fresh breeze blew balls of white clouds across a blue sky. Anne wound the window down, glad of the cool air on her face. She took the back route to the estate, to give herself some time alone to think and to freshen up after her time in bed.

Which was how she came to be driving on the narrow roads between Bicton and Frickley that Monday afternoon. And how when she swung round a sharp bend she saw the bloody broken figure that had once been Paul Measures lying in the middle of the road.

The shock made her lose control of the car. Almost with a will of its own, the car careered directly towards Measures. She felt the crunch of his bones under the wheels as the car ran over him and thought she heard a terrified gasp.

The car, continuing its mad lurch forward, slid to the side and piled into a thick hedge, the engine cutting itself out. But Anne was not aware of this. She had fainted.

Nor was she aware of the grey-brown figures of lethal fur that moved, in lazy hopping fashion in the field beside her . . .

## CHAPTER TEN

Victor Henthorne was already waiting at The Goat when Guy arrived. The pub was fairly empty and the gamekeeper was sitting in a corner, a pint of Guinness in front of him.

Guy joined him after buying another Guinness and a whisky at the bar.

‘Victor,’ he said, sitting down opposite him.

‘Mr Corling,’ the gamekeeper replied.

They were silent for a few moments.

‘I’m sorry I couldn’t make the funeral this morning,’ Victor said.

‘Don’t mention it,’ Guy smiled weakly and shook his head.

‘These things are best forgotten,’ he added.

Victor nodded slowly.

‘Yes, you’re right, I suppose.’

The two men chatted about this and that until they reached the point where two men from completely different worlds could say no more. Except about the business they had met to discuss.

‘Well, Victor,’ Guy eventually said. ‘Let’s have it. What have you seen that you started to tell me about yesterday out in the field with Ben Davis?’

Victor looked directly at Guy. He thought the young man looked strained. Of course he’s had a shock, he thought. But haven’t we all? Strangely enough, Guy was thinking exactly the same thing about the gamekeeper, noticing the lines of age and worry around the older man’s eyes.

‘I don’t rightly know where to start, sir,’ Victor said, cupping his pint in his hands.

‘Try the beginning,’ Guy suggested, using his journalist’s training. ‘When did you first notice anything unusual?’

It worked.

Victor described the morning when he found Pat Donnolly’s body, and the death of his son’s pet rabbit. Then in great detail he told Guy of his experiences with the fox.

‘It was methodical slaughter, sir, I tell you. Methodical slaughter. And it ain’t natural,’ he concluded.

Guy had sat through Victor’s monologue without comment. He was, in fact, stunned into silence. The way the gamekeeper spoke, in a low flat voice, without emotion or judgement, made the whole story sound not only probable, but terrifying. Guy had not even touched his whisky.

‘Before I go on, sir,’ Victor asked, taking a sip of his Guinness, ‘I’ve got to ask you this. Do you believe me?’

‘Unfortunately, yes,’ Guy answered. ‘And what’s more I think the police have a shrewd idea that there’s some kind of animal or animals responsible for all this mess.’

‘I haven’t spoken to anyone but you and . . .’ his voice trailed off. ‘But why “unfortunately”, Mr Corling?’

‘Because Victor, if you’re right – and I think you are – I don’t have to tell you, of all people, how fast rabbits breed. And unless we stop them now we will be in trouble.’ He paused to let his words sink in. ‘Not just you and I, Victor. Not just Frickley village – but the whole of Britain. Being an island can have its disadvantages, too.’ He leaned forward, his eyes hard and glittering.

‘Can you imagine packs of these brutes roaming the countryside? What they would do to livestock? Let alone people? The whole agricultural and ecological balance could be disturbed. And don’t talk about the Army wiping them out. You know it only takes a back garden and one month to produce a dozen



of the buggers. That Victor,' he sat back, his face grim, 'is why I say "unfortunately".'

Both men were silent. Victor because he had not seen the danger beyond his own limited world. Guy because in putting it into words, finally realised the full horror of the situation they were facing.

'And now Victor,' Guy went on, 'you said you had told someone else. Who? and when?'

Victor outlined the incident with the bullock and Sir Mark's angry reaction on the telephone.

'And then he was as nice as pie to me,' he told Guy. 'Invited me across for a drink. Called me "Old boy" and stuff like that. This was the middle of last week. I haven't seen him since.'

'Didn't he say anything about your theory?'

'At first he said I'd been imagining things, you know. But then he changed his tune and told me not to mention it to anyone. Or else my job would be gone.'

'Why are you telling me, then?'

'I reckons as how the Master has disappeared and what with that terrible business with the foal, I had to tell someone. And I didn't feel like the police would believe me.'

Guy nodded. It made sense from Victor's point of view.

'Victor?' Guy continued his questioning. 'I've noticed that you've only mentioned the rabbits killing animals, even though the police may think different. What do *you* make of my parents' death, young Bob Norris's and Constable Perkins', as well as Pat Donnolly's?'

Victor rubbed his chin and narrowed his eyes. It was a question he hoped Guy would not have asked him.

'Well, Mr Corling,' he replied, avoiding the journalist's eyes. 'The other deaths – the human deaths – are not for me to say anything about. I can only tell you what I've seen myself. It's for others to decide the rest. But...'

Guy smiled. He knew the gamekeeper had a very good idea

of what had caused the spate of horrific murders over the past week and made Frickley a terror-bound village.

‘Victor, why don’t you and I go on a hunting trip?’ he asked. ‘Tonight. A rabbit-shoot.’

The gamekeeper smiled back at Guy and nodded. Guy Corling was the man he thought he was.

They arranged to meet at Victor’s cottage just after eleven that night. Guy had one more visit to make before returning home. He wanted to see Inspector Hatcher to see what progress had been made.

The Inspector had set up his headquarters in the village police station, backed up by two mobile units which sat on the green outside the station, bristling with antennae. Guy was ushered into the Inspector immediately. He noticed Hatcher’s stubble and the lines of weariness under the policeman’s eyes. Everyone’s feeling it, thought Guy. The tension. Wondering when the horror would strike next.

Hatcher looked surprised when Guy walked in. His jaw fell open.

‘Guy! How did you know so soon. I was just going to . . .’ he stopped when he saw the puzzled look on Guy’s face.

‘What is it? What’s happened?’ asked Guy, feeling a sudden stab of panic, knowing instinctively that something was wrong.

Hatcher hesitated for a moment before answering.

‘There’s been an accident. Lady Hattrell . . .’

Guy stared at the Inspector for a few moments, not believing what he had heard.

‘Anne? Anne?’ he repeated as if in a dream, but then quickly pulled himself together. ‘Where is she? Is she all right?’

‘I don’t know, Guy,’ Hatcher answered, rising from the desk. ‘The man who ’phoned in said there was a body covered with blood on the road. But that’s not Anne,’ he added quickly. ‘He said something about her being in a car . . .’

‘Let’s go!’ Guy snapped.

'Let's move. If these hellish creatures have got to her . . .' his voice trailed off.

Hatcher shot Guy a quick glance, his brows furrowed questioningly. A car was waiting and Guy slipped in the back and leaned forward grasping the front seat as they moved off.

As the vehicle, siren blaring, raced toward the scene he could only think of monster flesh-eating rabbits. And what they had done to the foal. He pictured Anne as he had last seen her: smiling, laughing, telling him not to worry about her health.

And again he thought of the fact that his parents had been taken to the mortuary in plastic bags . . .

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Although the journey from Frickley to the scene of the accident only took a few minutes, to Guy it was an age. He was practically demented by the time they arrived. He leapt out of the car, rushed past the three police cars blocking the road and headed straight for two ambulances that stood side by side.

'Which one?' he snapped at Sergeant Brown.

'What . . . what?' Brown stammered.

'Anne! Anne for goodness sake! Which ambulance is she in?'

Brown waved his arm at the nearest one.

The back doors were closed. Guy wrenched at them and hauled them open.

'What the . . . ' a surprised ambulanceman started to say.

'Is she alive?' Guy said, hauling himself into the back of the van with one step.

'Yes, yes, she's alive,' the man assured him. 'She's . . .'

'Thank God,' Guy sighed, and then peered at the unconscious figure lying under the grey blankets. He could only recognise her by her hair. The rest of her face was covered with an oxygen mask. Panic gripped Guy.

He leant forward and ripped the blanket from her body. She lay with her arms folded across her chest: unharmed and whole, not a mark on her body.

Guy let out a deep sigh. He smiled at the ambulanceman.

'Sorry, sorry,' he half-laughed. 'I thought . . . Never mind what I thought.'

'I was going to tell you, sir,' the man looked up. 'She's only

concussed. We're giving her some oxygen to help bring her round quicker. She'll be fine.'

Guy turned and went down the steel steps feeling rather foolish but infinitely relieved. He sat on them and pulled out a cigarette. His hands were shaking. He wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. She was okay, he kept repeating to himself. She was okay.

He almost forgot where he was for a few minutes as he sat and thought of the feelings that the last ten minutes had brought out in him. Love, yes. But he had always known that. Need – he had known that also. But the deep concern, the protective instinct. That went beyond words into the realms of pure feeling.

'Guy?' It was Hatcher.

'Oh, yes, Inspector. She's all right. She's going to be okay,' assuming that was what the policeman wanted to know.

'I've heard,' Hatcher smiled, and then his expression went serious. 'I think you'd better look at this.'

Guy stood up and walked with the Inspector past the other ambulance.

'What's this one for?' he asked.

'The dead man. He ...'

'Dead?' Guy interrupted.

'Did Anne ...?'

The Inspector shook his head. 'There's no way she could have done whatever happened to him, by simply running over him. We know she did by the marks on the front of her car. But whether he was dead or not before is impossible to tell. He was half-eaten, his body torn practically apart.'

Guy was silent.

'Come over here,' the Inspector asked, walking towards Anne's car, which was still partly in the hedge, having been moved back only a few feet.

'Look,' Hatcher said, nodding at the ground in front of the car. A half-eaten carcass lay stretched at the foot of the hedge.

Most of its flesh had been stripped from its bones. Only its head and tail remained. But there was no doubt what it was. A rabbit.

‘Good grief, look at the size of it, it’s not bloody possible,’ Guy gasped. ‘And its teeth. They’re no normal rabbit teeth.’

Hatcher nodded.

‘What a monster,’ Guy went on. ‘Do you reckon this is what’s been causing the blood baths?’

‘Yes. But I don’t want anything printed about this, yet.’

Guy agreed. If the story got out prematurely, panic would spread. He looked at the dead animal again.

‘What a brute,’ he muttered.

‘You should actually be thanking it,’ the Inspector commented.

Guy looked at Hatcher as if he had gone mad.

‘Thanking it? What the hell for? After what they did to...’

‘Yes, yes, I know – your parents,’ Hatcher nodded, and laying his hand on Guy’s arm.

‘But by the looks of things, Anne hit that bastard just before she went into the hedge. If you look closely you’ll see the side of the head is dented. Then the rest of them must have turned on it and finished it off. And saved Anne.’

It was a very subdued Guy Corling who followed the ambulance with Anne in it to the nearest hospital. And he was determined he was going to see Webber and Mark Hattrell as soon as possible. Which, in the event, proved more difficult than he thought...

Tracing Webber was easy. The man was listed in the telephone directory. Webber lived near the Government Research Laboratories in Porton Down. He dialled the number from Rosemary Cottage. A woman answered.

‘Patricia Webber speaking. Whadya want?’

He put the receiver down without speaking. No point in alerting the scientist at this point, he thought.



He put a call through to *The Planet* next. Fraser was at a meeting, but it did not matter. He asked to be put through to the Library.

'Hello, is that you Bert?' he asked when a man's voice answered.

'Speaking. Who's this?' the Head Librarian asked.

'Corling. Guy Corling. I want you to do me a favour, Bert.'

'Fire away.'

'I want all the info you've got on a James Webber, I'll spell that,' he added and slowly spelled out the name using telephone identification names for the letters.

'Got it?' he asked.

'Got it. What'll I do with it.'

'I'll 'phone back in a few hours. Leave it with the night man if you're not there.'

'Will do. Oh Guy,' the librarian's voice dropped. 'All the boys here send their sympathy. We heard about your folks.'

'Thanks, Bert. I'll be in touch,' he said and hung up. He knew that the journalists of *The Planet* meant it when they said they were sorry. They were all part of the same team. It made Guy feel that little bit better.

Before leaving for Porton Down, he made another call to the hospital where Anne had been taken. Yes, he was told she was fine. Just undergoing routine X-rays and check-ups. But she seemed to be completely unharmed.

Porton Down was a village in many ways like Frickley. What the Americans call 'quaint'; but the inhabitants call run-down and lacking in all the amenities modern living has to offer. But Porton Down had one distinction. The surrounding area had been chosen by the Ministry of Defence to build a complex for research which it was thought the public should not know too much about.

Which meant that scientists, technicians and engineers, who normally would have never thought of living in the country,

found themselves surrounded by trees and fields. And needed houses to live in. Which resulted in grey, faceless terraces being built by the Government. Miners' rows filled with some of the best scientific brains in the country. Like James Webber.

Guy pressed the bell-push and noticed that the house badly needed re-decorating. The doors of the garage looked as if they had not been opened since the place was built in the nineteen-forties. Everywhere paint seemed to be peeling—doors, windows, gates and fences.

The door opened slightly. Guy could not make out who was standing in the gloom of the hall behind.

'Is James Webber in, please?' he asked.

The door opened a few inches further, but it was still no wider than a hand span across.

'No, he's not,' a woman said, and the door began to close.

'Mrs Webber?' Guy asked quickly. 'It's quite urgent.'

The door opened a little again. A horrible, rasping cough came from the woman before she answered. Almost a death-rattle.

'Why don't you try the labs, then,' she gasped.

'Porton?'

'Where else do you think? Who are you, anyway?' she croaked, opening the door a little further.

'An old friend from University days. I'm only down here for a very short time. I'd like to see James again.'

There was no answer. Just at that moment a black and white cat came rushing up the weed-filled path, shot between Guy's legs and made straight for the narrow opening of the doorway.

'Get out! Get out!' the woman screamed. 'I don't want you in here! Get out!' She started to cough and the door was flung open as she pushed the cat out with her foot.

Guy stared in amazement. An old woman, whose age was difficult to gauge, stood in the doorway. Her hair, a mixture

of grey and mousey brown, hung limply around her stooped shoulders. A cigarette, ready to drop ash, seemed stuck to her lips. But it was the colour of her skin that shocked Guy. Yellow, greasy and almost transparent. The skin of the dead. She was a sick woman, someone who did not have long to live.

'I'm sorry for disturbing you, Mrs Webber,' he muttered. 'I'll contact James at the labs,' he added, turning and going down the path to his car.

Poor woman, he thought as he headed for the Government complex. And for a moment he felt sorry for Webber, having to face that every night. What Webber must feel seeing his mother like that, day after day. At least, Guy told himself, I was spared the torture of seeing my own mother go through the final ignominies of life.

There was no way Guy was going to be allowed to get inside the research unit. He knew that as soon as he saw the huge notice: 'Ministry of Defence Micro-Biological Unit. Appointment Only.'

He handed the security guard his Press Card.

'I'd like to see James Webber, please,' he said.

'Have you an appointment?'

'Fraid not,' Guy said.

'If you could 'phone him through and tell him I'm here I'm sure he'll see me,' Guy bluffed.

'Hang on a moment, sir.'

Guy lit a cigarette as the guard telephoned. He looked around the complex, seeing low buildings a few hundred yards away. So here it was. A sophisticated factory of destruction. There was probably one like this in the USA, the USSR and China, not to mention other 'civilised' countries. And it all looked so innocent. But then, he thought ironically, so does a rabbit...

'Would you come this way, please,' the guard called from his hut and moved to open a door at the side. 'If you'll go

straight ahead and wait in the office sir. We won't keep you a moment.'

'Is Dr Webber coming down?' he asked.

'No, but someone will see you,' the guard replied blandly, closing the door behind him and leaving Guy in an office which was bare except for a desk, a wooden chair behind it, and two more chairs in front of it.

Damn, he thought, I shouldn't have shown my Press Card. I'm going to be fobbed off with a Public Relations twit.

A door behind the desk opened and a tall man walked in. He wore a black, three-piece suit. His hair was silver, and Guy could see that at one time he had been broad and strong. His hands were large, and his tie perfectly knotted. He looked like an ex-policeman, thought Guy.

Which, in fact, he was.

'I'm Watson, Head of Security at Porton Down,' he said holding out a hand.

Guy shook it, wondering what was going on.

Watson sat behind the desk and indicated one of the chairs in front.

'So you want to see James Webber?' he asked when Guy was seated.

'If that's possible, yes.'

'Why?'

'Why what?'

'Why do you want to see him?'

'We used to be at University together,' he lied again. 'I thought I'd look him up.'

'Which University?'

'Well I wasn't actually at the University with him. I met him while I was at my own. He took part in some of the debates.'

Watson stared at Guy. His large hands lay motionless on the desk.

‘James Webber never took part in a debate in his life. We know. We have to,’ he said finally. ‘Now why don’t you come clean?’

Guy was cornered.

‘Okay, I’m a newspaper reporter – as you know. I’m doing an in-depth story on the recent murders at Frickley and . . .’

‘What makes you think Webber’s got anything to do with them?’

‘I’m not saying that,’ Guy dissembled. ‘It’s just that someone mentioned his name and I thought I would follow the lead up.’

‘I see, Mr Corling,’ Watson said, his face expressionless. The perfect security man.

‘Well, may I see him?’ Guy asked.

Watson looked hard at Guy.

‘I’m afraid not. You see, and this is strictly off the record, he hasn’t turned up for two days. I want to see him as much as you do. When one of our people goes missing, the Ministry wants to know why. We’ve got a lot of secrets here – and Webber is working on some of them. So I’m asking you, Mr Corling, have you any idea where he is?’

‘None. Absolutely none. I wouldn’t be here if I did.’

‘Fair enough. If you do get a lead, let me know would you?’

Guy nodded.

‘Here’s your Press Card back, by the way,’ Watson fished the card out of his pocket and handed it to Guy.

As he was showing Guy out, the reporter turned and faced Watson.

‘Tell me,’ he said, ‘How do you know I’m not a phoney? Just trying to get in and see Webber. I could be working for a foreign agency and trying to find out if you knew where Webber was.’

The security man smiled.

‘That’s why you were asked to wait. Using your Press Card I checked through our computer which is connected to some-

where in London and has details of all *bona fide* journalists. I could even tell you where your birthmark is.'

Guy should have guessed: the perfect security man. Feeling embarrassed, he hurried away from his critical gaze.

Guy's birthmark was on his left buttock...

He drove back to the cottage, feeling frustrated. He was getting nowhere. He knew he had to find Webber before the Security people. Once they had him they would watch him like a hawk, now their suspicions were raised. He poured himself a large whisky and sat down to think. Suddenly he jumped up and rushed to the telephone, and quickly dialled a number.

'Frickley Manor,' a woman's voice answered. It was one of the servants Guy did not know. Which was perfect. 'I'm sorry to trouble you, but I wonder if I could speak to Dr James Webber. This is Salisbury General Hospital. I'm afraid there's been an accident and we need to speak to Dr Webber rather urgently.'

There was an agonising silence at the other end.

'Please hurry,' insisted Guy. 'This is rather urgent. A matter of life and death.'

That did it.

'If you'll wait a few moments, sir, I'll get him for you. He's in the attic. Please hold on.'

The long shot had paid off. Guy had figured that the security people would not have known of Webber's connection with Hattrell. And even if they did, they probably didn't think anything of it. Whatever else Hattrell was, he was not working for overseas powers.

'Hello? Hello?' a mild-mannered voice came through. 'What's happened?'

'Dr James Webber?'

'This is he. What's this about an accident?'

Guy breathed in deeply.

'Don't hang up, Dr Webber,' he said slowly. 'This is not



Salisbury General Hospital. There has not been an accident, but ...'

'Is this some kind of joke? Who are you?'

'Guy Corling of *The Planet*.'

'Newspapers. Well go to ...'

'Hang on,' Guy interrupted firmly. 'I'm also the son of Hubert and Jane Corling. You know, the couple who were eaten alive not so long ago. In the same way as the others.'

There was a pause and then Guy heard the telephone being dropped. He waited until it was picked up again.

'I'm sorry, I'm sorry. The 'phone slipped.' Webber's voice was quiet now, hardly audible.

'I think that you and I should have a talk, Dr Webber. With Mark Hattrell as well, if that's ...'

'That's impossible! That's impossible!' Webber said desperately. 'Sir Mark can't see anyone now. No it's no good. I can't see you either.'

'Okay, Webber, if that's how you're playing it,' Guy said. 'I'll just let Watson come and collect you. You know who he is, don't you? He's pretty anxious to have a talk with you as well.'

'Oh God, oh my God, I knew it would come to this,' Webber moaned. 'Okay, I'll see you,' he said, his voice more firm. 'Where?'

'You suggest the place.'

'Oh God, I knew I should have gone back to the labs,' Webber said, ignoring Guy's question. Even over the telephone, Guy could sense the man's fear.

'Where?' Guy snapped.

'Where? Oh yes. The Folly. You know the Folly, do you?'

'I know the Folly. Tomorrow at ten. You'd better be there. If not, I'm coming to Frickley Manor with Mr Watson and the police. Oh, and two more things,' Guy added.

'What's that?'

'You'd better be alone and you'd better be prepared to talk.'

'I'll be there to do as you want,' Webber said in a tired voice. 'I've had enough. Enough.'

'Until tomorrow, then,' Guy said and hung up.

He would have desperately liked to have seen Webber that night. But he had other plans. He was going shooting with Victor Henthorne...

Before he started preparing for his night with the game-keeper, he checked Anne's progress at the hospital. She was being kept in overnight for observation and should be released in the morning.

He also called *The Planet* library. Bert was still on.

'Have you got anything, Bert?'

'I've got something, Guy. But it's not much.'

'Give it to me anyway,' Guy asked, reaching over for a notebook and pencil.

'We got some of it from a Porton Down handout – you know when they were trying to make the place sound respectable,' Bert chuckled. 'Here goes. Born 2nd October 1918, Pocklington, East Yorkshire. Educated Leeds Grammar School and Cambridge. Spent the war in the Royal Auxiliary Medical Corps and qualified as a doctor. Worked for the Ministry of Agriculture as a research chemist before Porton Down,' Bert paused.

'That's all the handout gave, Guy. The rest I got from some friends of mine at the Ministry of Defence. See what I do for you?'

'I don't want to know where you get your information from, Bert. That way I won't be an accessory after the crime,' Guy smiled.

'Right. He's an only child. His parents were killed during the war in a bombing raid. He specialised in animal virus work, particularly noted for his researches on the myxoma virus in rabbits. He married twenty years ago. A Patricia Vinemore – there was a bit of a scandal as she was only eighteen, and came from a big stockbroking family. They have two kids, both girls,

aged seventeen and fourteen. And that's about it, Guy. Any good?' Bert concluded.

'Could be, Bert. It's better than nothing. Thanks a lot. And thank your friends for me. I'll stand you a beer when I get back.'

'Bloody cheapskate! That info's worth a bottle of scotch at least.'

'Okay, okay. A half bottle of scotch,' Guy laughed and hung up.

Guy was still smiling as he quickly read over his shorthand notes. The information was scanty. Then he read them again, more slowly. Suddenly he stopped smiling and concentrated on one sentence. 'Parents killed during war in bombing raid.'

The sentence sunk in. So that wasn't Webber's mother he had seen earlier in the day. It was his wife. Whatever work he was engaged on at Porton Down, whatever hell he had created for the people of Frickley, almost paled in comparison to the torture his wife was going through.

Guy remembered the cigarette in her mouth. Probably she was drinking, also. And then he remembered the dead skin. And the haunted look of resignation in her eyes. She was in her thirties and looked in her eighties.

Little wonder she would not open the door fully.

Guy wondered what sort of man Webber was, what kind of beast. Already he despised the man. And he hadn't even met him.

By the time he did meet Webber, Guy's feelings had crystallised. Into cold fury and hate. For a long night lay ahead before the meeting at the Folly...

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Guy dressed in a black Shetland jumper, dark trousers and navy blue ski jacket. He wore a woollen seaman's hat and had slipped on a pair of thin leather gloves. He was just about to leave for Victor's cottage when he remembered the knife.

He went upstairs to his father's old bedroom. Everything had been removed, except an old trunk which stood in the middle of the floor. Childhood memories of the trunk came flooding back and Guy stood gazing at it for a few moments. The wooden box with the heavy brass clasp contained his father's treasured possessions. Guy had never been allowed to look inside the box until he was sixteen. He felt that his father had finally shown him the contents of the box as a sign of his growing-up.

There was nothing special in the box. Just personal bits and pieces going back to when his father was a boy. Memories of an old soldier. A small piece of privacy in the world of the Army where secrets were difficult to keep, where memories were shared.

Guy had listened spellbound as his father described each article and the story behind them. There were photographs of Guy's grandfather, an old watch that had belonged to his great-grandfather. At sixteen, Guy was being given a sense of ancestry, and he understood why he could not see into the trunk before.

In the trunk was a large Bowie knife in a leather sheath. Originally belonging to Guy's grandfather, it had been used

in the Boer War, and then in the First World War Guy's uncle had carried it across France. Hubert had always had it by his side during the Second World War. Guy remembered his father's words as he let him handle the knife for the first time.

'Let's hope to God that you don't have to carry it through another war.'

Guy picked the knife out of the box and buckled it to his belt. The knife that had been through three wars was going to be part of another battle that night, he thought. And the stakes were just as high. He pulled the knife out of its sheath and held it in his hand. It felt heavy and good.

Now he could go out and meet Victor.

The gamekeeper was already waiting at his door when Guy drew up. The night was dry and the full moon had passed, leaving a black sky over which clouds raced.

'We won't be able to see a bloody thing,' Guy commented as he climbed into Victor's Land-Rover.

'You'll get used to it. We know what we're looking for don't forget,' Victor said.

There was a squeaking sound from the back of the estate car. Guy twisted round. The noise came from a potato sack and inside it something was moving.

'What's that?' he asked.

'Something to make sure the bastards come out,' Victor replied, tight-lipped.

They drove through the dark almost in silence. The dark trees of the wood known on the estate as Spion Kop loomed ahead. Guy peered at the skyline, trying to make out the Folly. But it was lost in the dark. Victor stopped the car in front of the woods on a rough dirt track and then reversed it, so that it was facing the way they had come.

'In case we've got to get out of here in a hurry,' he muttered.

'You've thought of everything, haven't you?' Guy asked.

He saw the keeper smile by the light of the dashboard.

'I bloody well hope so, sir.'

'Drop the "sir", would you, please? It's Guy.'

'Okay, Guy. There's a gun in the rack for you, and I've brought a couple of boxes of cartridges for you too'.

Victor turned the lights off, and they were plunged into darkness.

'Sit a while and your eyes'll get used to the gloom, sir, I mean Guy,' the keeper said.

The engine made a few clicking, ticking sounds as it cooled down. Apart from that they were surrounded by silence. Even the creature in the sack at the back of the car was quiet and still. Victor was right. Guy's eyes gradually became accustomed to the dark. He began to make out various shades of black and then the trees themselves.

The men got out of the car. Guy looked at his watch. Eleven-thirty. Almost midnight, he thought. Victor went round to the back of the car and brought the sack out. Opening it, he lifted a lamb out. It started to squeal and struggle but its legs were tied at the front and back. The sounds of the terrified lamb cut through Guy's brain as he stood watching the game-keeper pick it up and try to comfort it.

The irony was not lost on Guy. He followed Victor to the centre of the clearing. A sudden strong breeze made the trees rustle and a few branches creaked. Guy, the twelve-bore crooked in his left arm, felt for the Bowie knife with his right hand. Its chunkiness made him feel better.

All the time he had the strong sensation that they were being watched. He scoured the woods but saw nothing but the branches of the trees sway in the wind. But he still preferred to face Spion Kop. If something was out there, he wanted to see it coming. Not to feel the terror at his back.

Victor was in the centre of the clearing, kneeling on the



ground, the lamb tucked firmly under his left arm. His hand was cupped under its jaw, forcing the lamb's neck back.

The keeper glanced at Guy.

'You don't have to watch this, you know,' he said.

Guy grunted.

'I'm the chief crime reporter on a national newspaper,' he smiled. 'A little blood won't upset me.'

'It's up to you,' Victor muttered as he reached down with his free hand and pulled a sheath knife from his belt

He looked at the lamb for a few seconds before placing the blade against its throat. His face was stony, his eyes dark slits. It was the law of survival, a basic instinct. But Victor was not thinking such sophisticated thoughts. What has to be done, has to be done, he told himself. Which amounted to the same thing.

The lamb became strangely silent when it felt the cold steel against the thin wool of its neck. Its eyes stopped rolling in terror and gazed fixedly at the gamekeeper. Victor focussed on the blade. Guy stood a few feet from them, one hand on his own knife, the other holding the gun. His hair stuck out from the woollen cap, his face looked fresh and young. He was like a little boy watching his father.

And then it was over. Victor slashed the knife so quickly across the lamb's jugular vein that Guy hardly saw the keeper's hand move. Everything was still for a fraction of a second. Then the blood began to spurt, darkly staining the wool.

Victor was on his feet in an instant, his hands grasping the lamb round its body. He laid it down, wiped his knife on the grass and nodded to Guy.

'Over here,' he said pointing his knife at what looked like a thick bush.

Victor *had* been busy that day. In between two fir trees he had made a natural 'hide' using the thick, pliable branches of the trees themselves. He had left two fairly large openings for the men to see out from. Behind the wall of the shelter he had

put a plank across two tree stumps for them to sit on. It was perfect for the job in hand and made all the better because it was on the top of a gentle slope. The men could look down and have an uninterrupted view of the clearing.

Victor and Guy took their places. They looked at the lamb. It was in the last throes of its useless struggle against death. Its mouth opened and closed but of course no sound came out. Only the blood flowed over its neck on to the ground. It was uncanny, thought Guy, watching the animal silently bleed to death. Even the wind had dropped and nothing moved around them.

The two men sat side by side, staring ahead. They said nothing because there was nothing to be said. They were as still as the trunks of the trees around them. It was impossible even to hear them breathe. They were part of nature itself, the country gamekeeper and the high-powered journalist from Fleet Street.

Guy eventually looked at his watch, its luminous glow seeming very bright in the gloom. Midnight. And nothing had happened.

Fifteen minutes passed. Still nothing. Not a movement, not a sound. The lamb's blood spread in a patch, had begun to congeal. Guy shifted uncomfortably, the inactivity starting to affect his muscles. Victor sat stock still, staring ahead, his gun on his lap, his hands resting over his knees. Only his eyes moved, scanning the clearing from side to side. Like a perverse statue of Buddha.

And they heard something. Guy and Victor both stiffened: a howl, a floating wail came from the thick woods in front of them, from the direction of the Folly. Guy grasped his gun, feeling the sweat of his palms against his gloves. His eyes scanned the darkness in front and he leaned forward, his rifle in front of him, slowly moving his head from side to side. Victor did not move.

Guy saw nothing. And the wail was repeated, only this time it seemed nearer. And then the blanket of silence descended again. Guy was about to suggest that they went into the woods when he felt Victor nudge him.

'Over there,' the gamekeeper whispered, his lips hardly moving, his left hand pointing to the side of the clearing.

Guy focussed. At first, all he saw was the black of the bushes. And then the very vegetation seemed to be moving, shadows breaking out of shadows. In lazy, hopping movements towards the centre of the clearing where the lamb lay they moved.

At first one or two, then more until they seemed to be pouring out of the woods. Guy estimated there were between forty and fifty shapes, too many to shoot at the time. They stopped in front of the lamb and Guy could then make them out. The killers had arrived. Huge, rabbit-like creatures, each about two-and-a-half feet long. Except one which was nearly four feet—the size of a seven-year-old child. Guy felt his stomach tighten as he watched, fascinated and horrified at the same time.

And then it came again, the howl from the woods. The largest of the creatures stood on its hind legs and raising its head to the skies, gave a short, hollow bark. It was the signal: the pack rushed on the lamb and began tearing it to shreds. Those that could not get at the corpse scabbled on the backs of others or simply squabbled amongst themselves. In a few seconds the lamb was obliterated from view under a pile of snarling, grunting and growling fur.

Both men watched feeling the same fascinated fear and disgust. It was all over in a matter of minutes. Only part of the lamb's head remained and a few bloodied bones. The creatures hopped about, licking their paws and lips. It was a bizarre parody of a pleasant nocturnal scene in the country.

And then the beasts merged back into the shadows. Guy and Victor watched the empty clearing. After ten minutes, when no further movement had been detected, Victor slowly stood up.

‘Let’s go and have a look’ he whispered, releasing the safety catch on his twelve-bore. Guy did the same to his gun, and the two men moved out of the hide, walking carefully and stealthily round the edges of the clearing, each taking a different side.

It was almost impossible to make out anything in the vegetation as a large bank of black cloud had filled the grey sky from the west. The men were opposite one another, the lamb’s remains between them, when Guy heard Victor swear. He swung round, just as a flash and a bang came from Victor’s direction.

Guy felt a sharp, shooting pain in the back of his calf, and he almost fell. Feeling gingerly around the pained area he touched blood.

‘Are you all right?’ Victor asked, running across the clearing.

‘What happened?’ Guy asked, his teeth clenched.

‘I tripped in a hole. It was so dark I couldn’t see it,’ Victor explained. ‘The gun went off. Bloody stupid thing to happen. I’ve never . . . Your leg! My God, we’d better get to a hospital.’

Guy stood on the shot leg.

‘It’s bleeding like blazes – you must have hit a vein.’

‘God, I’m sorry,’ the gamekeeper said, kneeling down and examining Guy’s calf.

‘It could happen to anyone,’ Guy told him. ‘But we’d better move fast. You know what these creatures do when they scent blood.’

Victor nodded and the men started to move towards the car.

As they passed the hide, a scuffling, barking sound came from behind them. Glancing back, the men saw the beasts hop back into the clearing and begin racing towards them.

‘Move, man, move!’ Guy yelled, as he began to half-run, half-stumble towards the Land-Rover, about a hundred yards away. He knew they would never make it. Swinging round, he aimed his gun at the advancing stream of snarling, snapping creatures. Victor did the same.

They aimed at the centre of the pack and fired almost simultaneously. Without even waiting to see what effect the shots had, they started again towards the car. They heard growling, biting, tearing sounds as the wounded animals were devoured by their mates.

The car was now only fifty yards away, but to Guy and Victor, their bodies stretched to the limit, it seemed miles. The pain in Guy's leg was excruciating, and the blood oozing from it left a trail behind him. He stumbled and fell, tried to lift himself up, and fell again. Victor grabbed him by the shoulders and hauled him to his feet. But they had no chance. The leading creatures were only yards away.

'We're not going to make it!' Victor yelled. 'We've had it!' he half-sobbed.

'The hell we have!' Guy snapped, his face contorted with pain and anger. 'We'll fight them!'

Victor shot a glance at Guy, his eyes wide with disbelief. But when he saw Guy turning to face the maddened beasts, he did the same, without pausing to think.

There was no time to reload their guns, and so they held the twelve-bores by the barrels, ready to use them as clubs.

The first animals were on them. Victor raised his gun and swung it viciously at about five of them.

'You bastards,' Guy heard him mutter as the gun butt hit fur, flesh and bones. 'You filthy, dirty bastards.'

Guy did the same to about four of the animals in front of him. One went flying into the air, squeaking and grunting in fright. Two others rolled over on their sides. The rest of the pack stopped, stunned at this attack.

But they only hesitated for a few seconds. It was enough for the men to turn and run nearer the car, before stopping once more and facing the beasts, side by side.

Guy saw Victor begin to swing the gun once again, but he was too intent on facing the creature that raced towards him



through the grey light, its teeth bared, saliva dripping from its jaws, to notice what happened. Quickly flinging his gun to the ground, he pulled out his Bowie knife. Having been trained in face-to-face combat in the Army, Guy felt happier holding a weapon that could kill without needing to be reloaded.

With a leap, the animal flung itself through the air, as if making for Guy's throat. From the corner of his eye, he noticed two more bounding towards his bleeding leg.

'I'm not that easy,' he roared, stepping quickly to the side, his knife shooting upwards as he did. The beast twisted in mid-flight and landed on Guy's chest, narrowly missing the knife. He grabbed it with his left hand. Almost choking with the fetid smell, he struggled with the bucking, kicking killer.

He gripped the fur tightly, feeling the sinewy muscle beneath, aware of the amazing strength of the animal. He forced its snapping head away from him, was winded when he felt the hind legs punch into his abdomen. And almost dropped it.

Others of the pack were on him, and he felt a searing pain as flesh was ripped from the already wounded calf, as a pair of teeth hit their mark. Using all his reserves, he grabbed the creature and held it away from him, stabbing it in the stomach, twisting the knife as he did. He pulled the knife out and flung the body to the ground.

The other animals paused and looked at their wounded, bleeding fellow creature on the ground for a few moments before attacking it and tearing it limb from limb.

The slaughter gave the men enough time to turn and run to the car, Guy dripping blood from the wound in his leg, and limping painfully. He wrenched the door open and flung himself in. Victor, who had been slightly bitten on the arm, pulled himself behind the wheel, started the engine and put his foot full down on the accelerator, after slamming the car into gear.

The car skidded away, slewing from side to side on the dirt



track. They had not closed the doors which banged back and forward a few times before slamming shut.

Victor looked in his rear mirror. The animals were giving chase, but soon gave up when he raced the car down the track and on to a smooth tarmac surface which led to the main road.

He drove straight to Salisbury General Hospital where they were treated for their injuries. They said that they had been in a hunting accident and one of the dogs went wild.

Guy's wound was not as bad as he originally thought. But it was to leave a slight scar for life at the back of his leg. Which was nothing compared to the scar left on his mind, as he relived that ill-fated hunt time after time in countless future dreams.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Guy was wakened by the telephone ringing the next morning. He felt drowsy as the hospital had given him two tranquillisers to help him sleep, which they had done very effectively.

'Yes?' he yawned into the mouthpiece. 'Who's speaking?'

'You still in your pit, Corling? I don't know what I pay you for?' Jack Fraser joked.

'What time is it?' he asked, trying to fight himself awake.

'Half-past eight. I'm just checking up on what's happening your end. Jock telephoned me last night and said something about Anne being in an accident, but it wasn't serious. Have you managed to uncover anything yet?' Fraser asked.

'Yes. And I've also had an accident. My left leg's bandaged. And . . . aah! It's bloody sore, too,' he said as he tried to move it. 'Jack, can I call you back in about fifteen minutes? I've got to check this leg out. If I can't walk, then you'd better get another man down here as fast as you can. We've got the biggest exclusive since the *Daily Express* traced Ronald Biggs.'

'What is it?'

'I can't talk now, but let's just say it makes *Quatermass* look like Mickey Mouse. I'll call you back,' he said and hung up.

He swung his legs over the bed. The leg throbbed but that was bearable. He stood on his good leg and gingerly placed the other beside it, slowly putting his weight on it. Painful, but not crippling. He took a step forward. A sudden pain shot up his thigh and catching him unawares, made him fall back on the bed.

Gritting his teeth he went through the whole exercise again. This time he did not fall, but by the time he reached the other side of the room he was sweating. But he was becoming accustomed to the pain. He turned and walked back to the bed.

'Come on, come on,' he muttered. 'You can do it. You're not going to let a small bite stop you.'

Two things ensured that Guy was walking or, to be precise, limping about the room by the time he telephoned Fraser back. One, he hated the idea of being bedridden and dependent on other people. He was too active for that sort of thing. Two, he was damned if he was going to turn over the biggest story of his life to someone else. He was aware that he could make his name internationally if Webber levelled with him. He was no fool, this young man with very definite ambitions.

'I'm all right,' he told Fraser a few minutes later, and then described the events of the previous night. 'And I'm seeing Webber in about an hour at the Folly.'

'Good,' Fraser commented. 'I'll send a photographer down right away. Take care, lad.'

'Always do,' Guy managed to chuckle.

He limped, a little more firmly than his first attempts, into the bathroom and glanced at himself in the mirror. His hair was damp and stuck out almost comically. His normally ruddy cheeks were pale and he had shadows under his eyes. I feel like I look, he thought ruefully. He washed his hair under the shower, letting the cold water run over his head, which took away most of the drowsiness.

A quick shave, a few cups of coffee and some toast made him feel more alive. The pain in his leg had subsided to a dull ache and he kept looking at the tight bandage to see if there were signs of blood. There were none, he thankfully noted.

He checked up on Anne and the hospital told him she was being discharged in half-an-hour, there was nothing seriously wrong with her. He scribbled a note to her and left to meet

Webber, taking a pocket tape recorder as well as his notebook and pencils.

Luckily the car was automatic—it had been his parents' Wolseley, which Hubert had refused to sell for some obscure reason—so driving was possible. He glanced at his watch: nine-thirty a.m. He just had time to get across to the police station and see Hatcher and tell him what had happened.

'Good morning. Ah, the walking wounded,' cracked the Inspector as Guy limped in.

'Very funny,' Guy said and told Hatcher about his hunt with Victor.

'If you can hobble through here, I'll show you something,' the Inspector said when Guy had finished.

'Thanks for the sympathy, Inspector,' Guy grimaced as he stood up.

'Well, I could have sent some men up with you if you'd told me,' Hatcher responded, shaking his head and raising his eyebrows. 'But everyone wants to be an amateur detective. Or get the story for himself,' he added astutely.

'What have you got to show me?' Guy asked, ignoring the Inspector's comment.

They walked through to the next room where something lay on a table covered with a piece of plastic sheeting.

'I'm just about to send this up to London,' Hatcher said, removing the cover and exposing the dead animal that had been found in front of Anne's car. 'You might like to see what almost killed you.'

Lying on the table, the creature looked at first glance just like any other rabbit, apart from its size, and its mouth. Long canine teeth protruded from both jaws.

'The local vet's seen it and says it's not possible,' Hatcher commented.

'That's an intelligent and bloody helpful comment I must say,' Guy said cynically.

‘Look at its mouth and you’ll see what we’re up against.’

The jaws had been prised apart and Guy stared in open amazement at the vicious rows of teeth that stretched to the back of the mouth: grinding teeth, meat-eating teeth. This was why the face was longer – no normal rabbit could contain such an armoury.

‘You were lucky, eh?’

Guy nodded and left for the Folly, thinking that the Inspector’s last remark must be one of the understatements of the century . . .

He arrived at the Folly a few minutes after ten. Webber was already there sitting in his car. He got out as Guy drew up beside him.

Webber was not how Guy had imagined him. For a start he was tall and gaunt. Had Guy not known it, it would have been difficult to put an age to the man. For he had a baby face, the sort of face which looked as if it had never sprouted whiskers. It was so smooth, Guy wondered if the man had any pores on it. The face was long but pleasant. A trusting face, the kind politicians long for. Webber wore round, rimless spectacles and his bushy eyebrows met above them. His hair was a sandy colour, beginning to thin at the back. He wore a light green check suit which seemed a little small for him – the only concession to the image Guy had had of the scientist.

For, as he admitted later, he had expected the cliché of a mad scientist figure: small, mousey with a bald egg-head with patches of hair sticking out above the ears. The life of a crime writer can be limiting, he later realised.

Webber put out his hand. His wrists, which stuck out from his shirt and jacket, were knobbly, the hand large and flat.

Guy hesitated before taking it. He had not heard the man’s story yet. Later he was to reflect that had he known it, he would have smashed his fist into his face, instead of accepting the handshake.

'Good morning, Mr Corling,' Webber said, his eyes shifting.

'Dr Webber,' Guy said curtly.

The men were silent for a few moments.

'Well?' asked Guy. 'Are you ready to talk?'

Webber shrugged. 'I suppose so. Let's go inside. It's chilly in this wind.'

'The Folly?' queried Guy.

Webber nodded, again avoiding Guy's stare.

The scientist opened the old door with a large key he had taken from his pocket. The door, solid oak, was warped with age, but it swung open with silent ease.

Inside, the round room resembled any other that had not been looked after for a couple of hundred years: filthy. Cobwebs hung from every jutting piece of brickwork, as well as from the bits of junk that lay about. Mildew stained the lower walls and there was a musty smell. There was no light so Webber kept the door open.

'We'll sit here, if you don't mind,' he said, dusting an old box. It still looked dirty after he had rubbed it.

'I'll stand, thank you,' Guy said loudly, switching on his tape recorder at the same time. Which was why he had raised his voice. There was a two-hour cassette in the machine, an hour each side. But he took out his notebook just in case.

'As you will,' Webber said, sitting on top of the rancid trunk. 'Now, what do you want to know?'

'Something minor, first of all,' Guy said. 'Why do you have a key to the Folly?'

'You're very sharp, Mr Corling. The answer to that is simple. Sir Mark allows me to store stuff here from time to time. There, look,' he pointed to his left. 'There's an old carton of mine. My wife's not too keen on me keeping stuffed specimens of rats, spiders and other creatures around the house. Okay?' he smiled. A smile without warmth or feeling: a calculated smile.



‘Right,’ Guy nodded almost imperceptibly. ‘Let’s get on. I’ll put it to you bluntly, Dr Webber. Are you responsible for these rabbit-like monsters that have been creating hell around here?’

The scientist sighed deeply before answering. The smile was still there.

‘Responsible for the creatures, yes,’ he nodded slowly, looking at the opposite wall. ‘But responsible for what they are doing, no.’

‘Dr Webber, I’m not here to have a debate with you. I want straight answers to straight questions. These creations of yours have killed six people in a week, including my parents,’ Guy said, his eyes narrowing with anger. ‘So I’m in no mood for word games. Do you understand?’

Webber looked Guy straight in the face for the first time. The smile had gone.

‘Your parents . . .?’ he said quietly shaking his head. ‘God, I’d quite forgotten. I’m sorry. Really I’m sorry. I . . .’

‘Yeah, sure. So I’m not just another reporter chasing a story. I’m personally involved.’

‘Of course, of course. I understand,’ Webber said, his large hands rubbing his thighs slowly. He was clearly upset.

‘Just ask me what you want to know.’

‘Let’s start at the beginning,’ Guy said, leaning against the door frame. ‘Just talk and I’ll listen.’

‘Oh God, the beginning. The beginning . . .’ his voice trailed off and he cupped his chin in his hands, thinking of what to say.

Guy stood patiently. He would have stood there all day if necessary.

‘It goes back to my Cambridge days,’ Webber eventually said. ‘When I first met Sir Mark. He was, of course, in the smart set. I was up at Cambridge on a scholarship, had one suit of clothes and so on. He ran around in fancy cars, had

flashy girl-friends and enjoyed life to the full. I was the academic, the one marked out for great things in the field of research. The one who walked away with the prizes and awards when most of the time I wanted to walk away with one of the women who were always hanging around Mark. It seemed as if he had everything, and I had nothing. He would . . .’

‘I get the picture. Go on,’ Guy interrupted.

‘Our paths crossed, naturally,’ Webber went on, shooting a resentful glance at Guy. ‘But never merged. We were both studying science and as far as I was concerned that was where our mutual interest began and ended.’

Guy’s leg began to throb and he shifted uncomfortably. Why didn’t the man get to the point?

‘So nothing happened in those days which had a bearing on what’s going on now?’ he interrupted.

‘Well, I suppose not,’ Webber conceded, his face expressionless. ‘Except one thing. Mark began to talk to me a lot more after our first year. I found in a strange sort of way that he was jealous of me. Of me! He had a burning ambition to be recognised for doing something great, something in science. He knew he didn’t have the academic ability like me – no, Mr Corling, no false modesty – and I think was fascinated by my mind.’

‘He’s no fool himself,’ Guy muttered.

Webber picked it up. ‘Ah, yes. I didn’t say he was. But there’s a great difference between having an idea and actually putting it into practice. Actually seeing it come to life,’ the scientist said, his steely grey eyes sparkling. ‘That’s where the greatness lies, Mr Corling. In creating the reality.’

Cliché or not, thought Guy, he’s mad.

‘Well, there we were. The strangest of friends. Me marked out for the cloistered world of learning and Mark for the big world of people and life. Some even said he should go into politics. It seemed all so clear in those days. Our futures mapped

out with frightening clarity.' He paused, thinking to himself for a few moments.

Guy lit a cigarette and shifted again. The pain had eased up, but he was getting tired of standing.

'Yes,' Webber went on, 'It was all so clear. And then the war came and that put an end to any plans we may have had. I went into the Royal Auxiliary Medical Corps, where I qualified as a doctor. I lost touch with Mark until just after the war when we bumped into one another in London at an Army function. It was all very polite, our meeting. We asked each other what we were going to do, swapped addresses and promised to be in touch, but never were. I had just joined the Ministry of Agriculture as a research chemist, the idea of being a GP not appealing to me in the least, if you see what I mean.'

Guy nodded and sighed. 'I see what you mean.'

'And then out of the blue a few years later I got this invitation from Mark to spend a weekend at Frickley Manor—with partner, I remember it said. I was not long married and my wife and I were thrilled. He was by that time, of course, Sir Mark, and running the estates he had inherited. Along with the death duties, as he was so careful to tell me. The old ambition was still there, as well. Moreover he was going to make Frickley Manor Estate internationally famous in agricultural terms. But how? Quite simply, Mr Corling, he had no idea, over and above intensive production techniques which were common hat. And I told him so.' Webber looked at Guy almost proudly, the smile back on his face.

'Yes. What did he say?'

'He said he had his own techniques which he wasn't going to discuss with me at the time. I pressed him, being in the field myself. I can't remember everything we said, but he did confide that he had managed to rid his farm in Sussex completely of rabbits.'

‘So he did introduce myxomatosis into this country?’ Guy said quickly, his face alert now. This could be a major spin-off story if he was lucky.

Webber kept smiling.

‘Ah, now, Mr Corling, please. I didn’t say that. Not at all. There are plenty of theories as to how the rabbit population of Britain was wiped out in fifty-four. I myself was working on the myxoma virus just before . . .’ his voice faded as he realised what he was saying. The smile vanished and for the first time he looked a little frightened.

‘So *you* let that loathsome disease into the country, you bastard!’ Guy snapped.

Webber looked around, agitated and nervous. He clenched and unclenched his hands.

‘Well, I think I may have, but as I said no-one’s sure of exactly how it got here from the Continent, if that’s where it did come from,’ he said in a low, trembling voice.

Guy had been a boy when the disease spewed its way across Britain. He could remember walking across fields and seeing dead and dying rabbits all over the place. The living victims loping blindly around, their sight taken from them by the festering swelling that enveloped their eyes. He remembered out of morbid curiosity poking the body of a dead rabbit with a stick. It had been soft and as Guy pulled the stick back a yellowish, putrefying liquid had oozed out of the hole, the rest of the body sinking in as the pus and decayed rotting flesh slurped to the ground. Terrified, he had run home to be haunted by nightmares for weeks. The sight had affected him then, and the memory affected him now.

It began to rain outside and Guy turned, watching the drops splash on the trees and grass, wondering as he often did in the course of his job, why Man was called the Superior Being when he created so much death and destruction. Deliberately.

‘Okay,’ he said flatly. ‘Let’s skip it for now. What about the

present monsters? Where does Sir Mark fit in? Why do they look like rabbits when they're not?"

'Mr Corling, if you don't mind,' Webber said firmly. 'I don't think we should skip the myxomatosis aspect. You see, it's all tied in and if you'll allow me I'll answer all your questions.'

'Go on,' Guy said. He was still writing, but inside his pocket he could feel the almost silent motor running smoothly. And he finally succumbed to the ache in his leg. Brushing the dust off an old travelling trunk he sat down.

'Go on,' he repeated. 'I'm still listening.'

'I didn't hear from Mark for nearly a year. I wrote, naturally, got a few polite, but formal replies. I had moved to Porton Down by then where I was working on...' he hesitated. 'No, I can't tell you. Official Secrets Act.'

Guy did not even want to know what the scientist was doing at Porton Down. There was enough hell for him to deal with at the moment, he thought. So he nodded slowly instead.

'I knew I was almost on Mark's doorstep, so I 'phoned him. I couldn't believe it! He greeted me like a long-lost brother. Told me he desperately wanted to see me as he had some exciting projects in mind and would like my opinion – for a fee, of course. He realised that Government scientists are not the best paid people in the world.'

Guy had to smile.

'Mark's projects, as he called them, were the same as he had outlined to me a year before. I was, and showed it, disappointed. But then Mark said he had a particular idea which he wanted to work on with me. As you know, one of the most alarming pests farmers are faced with these days is the so called super-rat, the one that thrives on Warfarin, which is meant to kill it. Rats as well as rabbits can, and do, wipe out untold millions of pounds worth of crops,' Webber pointed out in a low intense voice.



Guy grunted. 'So I've heard.'

'Mark's idea was in essence brilliant,' the scientist went on, almost talking to himself, staring at the floor in front of him, his eyebrows knitted together.

'He pointed out that the common brown rat, which was wreaking havoc among certain farming communities, was immune to myxomatosis. Now why, asked Mark? I told him. There is something in the genetic make-up of the rat which prevents it from contracting myxomatosis. Well, that's fairly obvious, I think, even to anyone who knows nothing about genetics. So what Mark wanted was a single myxoma virus that would be equally lethal to rats and rabbits.

'Of course apart from doing farmers around the world a great favour, it would give Mark the fame he badly wanted. And the idea interested me. For apart from my er . . . other work for the Government, I was still researching myxomatosis. In fact,' his voice took on an edge of pride, 'I had just synthesised a more virulent strain of the disease, which would easily destroy the rabbits that had become immune.'

'My God!' Guy gasped.

'Shocked, Mr Corling?' Webber looked up, the smile playing around his lips. 'Tut, tut, and you a man of the world. Progress, that's what it's called. Progress. Scientists are only given the problems. What you, I mean the Government or big business, do with the solutions is not my business.'

It was a simple, if unethical, logical argument. To which Guy had no answer.

'I was fascinated. Just imagine, Mr Corling, just imagine,' he looked across to Guy, the smile twisted, his eyes gleaming, his hands clenched excitedly. 'What a service to Mankind. No more rats. No more rabbits. Mark and I would go down in history. Win a Nobel Prize, perhaps. Ha!' he laughed. A harsh, bitter laugh. 'And to think we almost had it.'

'Almost?' echoed Guy, leaning forward, listening intently,



trying to remind himself he was sitting in the middle of the Hampshire countryside.

‘Yes, almost,’ Webber said, dejectedly.

‘But more of that later. Mark wanted me to carry out the necessary experiments at Porton Down, but I told him that was impossible, and he knew it. Then he asked me if I would work for – no, with – him if I had my own laboratory, built to my own specifications, with money no object. I laughed, I thought he was crazy. He wasn’t, he had just married that American girl, Rhoda something, and he said she was prepared to put the money up.’

‘She didn’t know what she was doing, that’s why,’ Guy said bitterly.

‘Oh, the drugs you mean? I told Mark not to introduce her to them. But he said it was all fun and grown-ups knew how to control these things.’

Guy stiffened. His mind seethed. Now he knew definitely. Mark had murdered Rhoda. He struggled to stop the thought.

‘Was the lab built?’ he asked, desperate to get the image of Rhoda as he had known her before the marriage, out of his mind.

‘Oh, yes. Cost just over a million. It had practically everything I wanted,’ Webber told him enthusiastically.

‘Where is it?’ Guy asked.

Webber hesitated, his eyes shifting around.

‘It’s...it’s...er, in the basement of Frickley Manor. But you can’t get in. There’s a combination lock on the door. You can see it tomorrow if you like,’ he added.

‘Why not now?’ Guy wanted to know.

Webber sighed.

‘Because it’s getting late. And I’ve decided to go back to Porton Down. Tell them what I’ve told you. And another thing,’ his voice dropped. ‘I’ve got to see my wife. I’ve been away for two days. She’s dying, you know. Cancer.’

Guy's face was expressionless.

'Okay,' he said. 'Tomorrow. But I want the end of the story today. And I want pictures of you and the lab tomorrow. Right?'

Webber looked long and hard at Guy.

'If that's what you want,' he finally said. 'But one thing. Am I going to get paid for telling you all this? I've got my family to think...'

'Yes, yes. I'll talk to my Editor,' Guy said impatiently. 'But the rest of the story, please. The lab.'

'Ah, the lab,' his voice normal again.

'How could I refuse to work with Mark when he offered me that lab? It was a scientist's dream. I was nothing, and knew it. An anonymous member of the Civil Service working for the Government. Working with inadequate facilities, not gaining any recognition for what I was doing. Part of a team, that's all. I had dedicated my life to science. For what? A pension? No, Mr Corling, Mark Hattrell knew what he was doing when he offered me unlimited scope. It was the chance of a lifetime and I grabbed it with both hands.'

'The work. What about the work?'

'I tried to find out why the rat was immune to myxomatosis through its genetic make-up. I thought I had found the answer by isolating a predominant gene group. There was only one way to find out. I introduced the group into the embryo of a rabbit. A mutant was produced, a monster if you like, which soon died. So I carried out some more research, and using molecular biology, finally succeeded in creating a rat-rabbit which was immune to the myxoma virus.'

Webber noticed the puzzled look on Guy's face.

'I had to do that,' he explained, 'to see if the genetic group I had isolated was the right one. It was. Now all I had to do was create the virus which would destroy that group, and hence the rat.'

‘All you had to do?’ Guy asked incredulously. ‘Is genetic engineering that sophisticated now, you can actually dictate patterns?’

Webber laughed, this time a superior, mocking laugh.

‘Oh, Mr Corling. How your newspapers love the simple and sensational! “Genetic engineering,” as you called it, is a phrase introduced by people like you. It’s a nonsense phrase. Engineering is a branch of physics. Molecular genetics, which I was working on, is a branch of biology. Don’t confuse the two.’

‘But you just said you created a new species by the use of genetics,’ Guy retorted, angry at being spoken to like a child. ‘You built it if you like. Engineered it.’

‘Who’s playing with words now?’ Webber smiled. ‘The fact that I managed to cross-fertilise two different types of species is a fluke. Nothing more than chance. The same sort of chance that brought about the discovery of penicillin. It’s still impossible to dictate genetic patterns. Simply because we do not know the complete genetic blueprint of living creatures. We know that there are about eight thousand indispensable gene functions in a mouse, and approximately ten thousand in a rat. No, Mr Corling, it would take a team of scientists, using equipment more elaborate than any at my disposal, a lifetime to catalogue these functions. I was fortunate, I got a lucky break, that’s all.’

Guy’s eyes widened. The man was talking as if he had just discovered a cure for cancer.

‘Lucky? God in heaven, you call what you helped create a stroke of luck?’

‘In scientific terms, of course,’ Webber replied, not even trying to hide his irritation.

‘But why make it a meat-eater, when rabbits are vegetarian?’

‘For God’s sake, man!’ Webber said angrily, jumping to his feet and pacing around. ‘You still haven’t got the point, have you? I didn’t make the rat-rabbits do anything! You’ve been

reading too much science fiction!’ he spat, throwing his head back in disgust.

‘Genetics science cannot at the moment – and God alone knows when or even if, it will – dictate behavioural patterns. Oh yes, I suppose you’re going to say you’ve been reading about DNA and RNA, the “stuff of life” as it’s popularly called,’ Webber sneered. ‘Well, I’m sorry to knock your sensationalist headlines flat, but DNA and RNA have very little, if anything, to do with behavioural patterns. Scores of other aspects determine behaviour in living beings. For example,’ he came over to Guy and pointed his finger at him.

‘In a human being – much more complicated than our rats or rabbits – the percentage of DNA contained in genes is only three per cent of the total DNA in the whole body. So please get it through your head that I did not deliberately create a meat-eating mutant monster. I don’t know why it’s turned out as it has. Now I suppose I’ll never know,’ he added and slumped down on the box.

Guy was speechless. He knew he could not argue with Webber on the scientific front. He sat thinking of what the scientist had said, trying to comprehend the enormity of his work. And then the pain in his leg reminded him for the reality of the horror Webber had unleashed.

‘Is there nothing you can do to reverse the situation?’ he asked softly, as if in a trance. ‘Can’t you alter the genetic pattern of the creatures?’

‘No. That’s impossible. Short of wiping out every rat-rabbit the genetic pattern is fixed forever. And there’s one thing I don’t know.’

‘What’s that?’ Guy asked, alert once more.

‘They could be breeding with normal rabbits.’

‘No, I can tell you that’s not so. Victor Henthorne said the rabbit population has disappeared on the estate. And his boy’s pet rabbit was eaten,’ Guy pointed out.

'That means nothing. They would eat other rabbits when they're starving. Even humans eat each other. And the rabbits could have fled.'

'How long will it take before we know if they're breeding with other rabbits?'

'Two maybe three generations. Perhaps longer. We're shooting in the dark with estimates like that.'

'I've seen and been attacked by your monsters,' Guy said. 'Why are there so many of them when you say you only created one?'

'I didn't say that, Mr Corling,' the scientist said quietly. 'I managed to produce another embryo which I put in a normal rabbit. I've bred about twenty of them up until now.'

'There were more than that last night when I was chased,' Guy commented.

'Oh, God. They're breeding faster than I thought.' Suddenly he looked across at Guy. 'I've just realised what you've said. You've been attacked. Were you bitten?'

'No, I always walk with a limp,' Guy replied sarcastically, realising as he said it that Webber had not met him before and could have thought that was the case.

Webber looked worried.

'Have you been treated? And what with?'

'Anti-tetanus.'

'Good,' Webber sighed.

'Why?'

'Nothing. You might have caught...'

'Myxomatosis?'

'Yes. Don't forget that the rat-rabbits are carrying the new strain of the disease. The virulent one.'

'You mean if they bite a rabbit and it lives, then that's virtually the end of the rabbit population again?'

'That's correct. As well as rats.'

'And humans?'

Webber bit at his lip.

'I . . . I don't know.'

'Christ,' was all that Guy could think of saying.

'Now if you'll excuse me, Mr Corling, I must be going. Until tomorrow, then?'

Guy nodded.

'Ten o'clock at the Manor?' he asked Webber.

'Fine. I'll be there. I'll show you round the lab.'

'There's just one other thing. How did the rat-rabbits manage to get out of the lab?'

'Stupidity. A cage door was left open. We don't know if it was Mark or me. They chewed their way through a ventilation shaft cover and escaped. I still have more in the lab, however.'

'And what's to say they won't escape and kill more people . . . what are you going to do? And Mark – where is he by the way?'

Webber looked down as he answered.

'I have no idea. Absolutely no idea. And that's the truth.'

Guy knew he was lying.

They walked out to the cars.

'I . . . eh, believe that Anne Hattrell has left the Manor.'

'That's right,' Guy said irritably, not wishing to speak to Webber any longer.

'Is she well?'

'Yes, thanks.'

'Are you living together? Sorry, I mean are you going to get married?'

Guy felt like telling him to mind his own business, but thinking that Webber might be seeing Sir Mark, which Guy was convinced he would be, he changed his mind. After the proof about Rhoda, anything Guy could do to hurt Hattrell was fine.

'Yes, as it so happens we are living together. And we will be getting married as soon as the divorce from that bastard Mark Hattrell comes through,' he said vehemently.



Webber was silent as he got into his car.

'Until tomorrow, then,' he said and drove off,

Guy was only a few hundred yards from the Folly when he stopped. Something was bothering him, something Webber had said that did not make sense. He would play the tape back when he returned to the cottage. The side would have probably run out but he had his notes.

He glanced at his watch, it was just before midday. He decided to call on Hatcher again and fill him in on his talk with Webber. Hatcher was just leaving to have lunch in a local hotel between Frickley and Salisbury, and asked Guy to join him.

'I'll just 'phone the cottage first and see if Anne's back,' he said after agreeing.

Anne answered the telephone.

'How are you, love?' he asked.

'I'm fine. Just fine. Missing you. But how are you? I met Victor and he told me about last night. Will your leg be okay?'

'I think I'll live,' Guy chuckled. 'It's certainly not going to stop me making a dishonest woman of you.'

She laughed.

'I can tell you're okay. Hurry home, darling.'

'Will do. I'm just going for lunch with Inspector Hatcher. We've got some things to discuss. You take it easy. Have a bath, make yourself more beautiful than you are. I'm taking you out tonight for a meal.'

'Is that all?' she teased.

'Depends if you behave yourself. And on this bloody leg of mine. I'm having the bandage changed this afternoon. I'll go to the hospital immediately after lunch and then home. Okay?'

'Okay. Love you,' she said and hung up.

The lunch dragged on as the two men discussed the recent events and agreed that perhaps the end was in view. It was

nearly three o'clock when Guy started to make his way to the hospital.

He was halfway there when with shocking suddenness he realised what was wrong with Webber's story. He screeched to a halt and sat in the car feeling sick.

Frickley Manor had no basement. It had been completely filled in about five years before when it had been discovered the house was sinking, and the foundations beginning to crumble. It had been filled in with almost solid concrete. All that had been left was a small room for wine.

His stomach tight with panic, Guy raced the car back to Rosemary Cottage.

But he was too late. Anne was gone.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Guy could not think straight. He tore through the house, banging doors and calling Anne's name. It was as he was going downstairs after searching the bedrooms twice that he saw the envelope behind the open front door. His name had been scrawled across it with a ball-point pen. He ripped it open, breathing heavily.

Mr Corling,

I am sorry but I cannot see you again. And I would advise you not to try and find me. I have Anne Hattrell. Don't worry, she is safe – for the moment. She has food, light and heat. She is in a large 'cage' in my lab. Next to her are my creations, the rat-rabbits. It only takes a throw of a switch to connect the two cages and let the creatures into Lady Hattrell's section.

I am so close to completing my work that it would be criminal to stop. I cannot, and will not give up a lifetime's hopes because of a few accidents. I know I can find the virus we spoke about. I can't let your emotions stop me. No matter how much money your paper offered me, it would be nothing compared to the fame I will achieve. Mark and I do share the same ambitions. And you are not going to stop us. Don't try. I will kill Anne if you do. And don't tell the police: I will have finished soon and then I shall release Anne. After that I don't care. My work will be done.

It was simply signed 'Webber'.

Guy slumped down on a chair. He felt tired, his body heavy and his leg hurt. But more than the physical weariness, his mind was numb. Webber had won. Guy knew the scientist meant it when he said he would kill Anne. Had he not called the six deaths already mere 'accidents'?

He had a choice: sit and wait; or go for help. Either way he was gambling with Anne's life, because why should Webber release her after he had finished? There was no telling how long the research would take. He could get tired of her, even use her as a human guinea-pig for his new creatures.

And where the hell was Mark? He might have been able to talk Webber out of the bizarre scheme. He looked at the note again. It said 'Mark and I'. Maybe Mark was in on the whole thing.

No, Guy told himself, he could not sit and wait. He would have to go for help. To Hatcher for a start. And then what? Webber had given no indication where he was, apart from saying 'the lab'.

But Guy had a very good idea where they were ...

'You should have told me you were going in the first place,' Inspector Hatcher said angrily after Guy had shown him the note.

'We could have had him then. Seems everyone's after him. Interpol, MI5 and Watson at Porton Down. When one of their people disappears they all get nervous.'

'How the hell did I know he was going to pull a stunt like this?' Guy flared up. 'I'd have killed the bastard myself if I'd known. Anyway, what are we going to do? Sit around here and argue? I say let's get out to the Folly and tear the place apart.'

'The Folly? Why there?'

'Because that's where I think they are,' Guy replied, his eyes blazing with anger and frustration. 'Yes, yes, I know what you're thinking – I was there myself this morning and it does look as if it hasn't been used for years. But too many things don't add up. Mark's been seen coming from the direction of the Folly, Anne's heard strange noises from the tower and if you think about it most of the deaths are within a clear-cut radius of the Folly.'

The Inspector rubbed his chin.

'Okay,' he nodded. 'I'll get a few men and we'll have a look.'

Guy jumped up and almost fell.

'Ouch – oh damn this leg!' he yelled.

'Have you been to the hospital today?'

Guy shook his head.

'Right. I'll get a car to take you and have the bandage changed. We'll meet up at the Folly in about half-an-hour.'

'I'll be okay,' Guy murmured.

'The hell you will! I've had my fill of amateur detectives. I don't want ruddy war heroes now!'

Guy nodded. 'You're right.'

There were three police cars and Victor Henthorne's Land-Rover outside the Folly when Guy arrived back from the hospital, the bandage changed and the pain in the leg not so bad. A uniformed policeman stood outside the open door. Victor came out just as Guy approached.

'What're you doing here, Victor?'

The gamekeeper shrugged.

'The police asked me to come here. Thought I might know about the lay-out of the Folly. But it's the first time I've ever been in it.'

'How did they get the door open?'

'That was me,' Victor said, taking out his pipe and sticking it in his mouth. 'My father had a key to the place, God

knows what for, but there we are. It's a rum business, Guy, what with Lady Hattrell disappearing and all.'

Guy exploded – 'Good God Victor, don't you know what's really happened?'

Then he realised the police hadn't told Victor the whole terrible story.

'She's being held hostage by that lunatic Webber,' he said.

'Oh God no! Where?' Victor asked, his face serious and his jaws clenched.

'In there, I reckon,' Guy answered and walked into the Folly.

Two policemen were working their way round the room tapping the bricks for hidden passages. Another did the same with the floor. Hatcher was kneeling looking at some boxes. He glanced up at Guy.

'We're getting nowhere fast,' he said. 'This place seems solid.'

'It can't be,' Guy insisted. 'Somewhere here there has to be a passage, a secret room – something.'

The Inspector made no comment. Instead he looked back at the boxes. He pulled out a piece of paper.

'Something positive at last,' he said, standing up. 'An order form. From Golweir Engineering Enterprises, Andover.'

'That's Sir Mark's firm,' Victor said from behind Guy.

Both men swung round.

'Sir Mark's?' Hatcher queried.

'Yes. He bought it over a few years ago when he started putting in all these machines to increase productivity,' the keeper explained, his face stony. 'Said it made more sense economically to build the things yourself.'

Hatcher turned to one of the plain-clothes men who was tapping the wall.

'Turner, get in touch with the Yard and get me a run-down on this company,' he said, handing over the piece of



paper. 'I want everything they can get, the name of directors, shareholders, the lot.'

The detective left to call from the car. Guy strolled outside and looked up at the Folly.

'You still think it's in there?' Hatcher asked quietly, following Guy.

'It's got to be. Look at the size of it. For one room ...'

He broke off, grabbing the Inspector's arm.

'Of course! Have you got one of these long tapes they use at scenes of accidents? The type that rolls out?'

'There should be one in the patrol car. Why?'

'You'll see. Can you get it, please?'

Hatcher sent a constable for the measure.

'Right,' said Guy. 'You hold one end here,' giving Hatcher the free end of the tape. The men were standing to the left of the door, in line with it.

Guy walked back until he had covered the full width of the Folly.

'Forty-two feet,' he called. 'Now let's get inside.'

Inside they measured the diameter of the room from the door to the opposite wall.

'Thirty feet,' Guy said triumphantly. 'I thought so. Where's the other twelve feet? There's got to be a secret passage somewhere.'

'Not bad, not bad,' Hatcher smiled. 'For an amateur that is. I agree, there's something else in here. But goodness knows where.'

The detective returned with a sheet of paper with some pencilled notes on it.

'Golweir Engineering Enterprises was founded ten years ago,' he said. 'Most of the shares are owned by Sir Mark Hattrell, only a few per cent owned by other people who work for the company. It's run by a Leslie Denton, the managing director. A full report is going to the station where you can pick it up later, sir.'

‘Fine. You stay here with a couple of men, Turner, and keep looking. I’m going to see Mr Leslie Denton.’

He glanced at Guy.

‘Want to join me?’

Guy started to limp to the car as an answer.

Leslie Denton looked like a London City businessman. Striped three-piece black suit, white shirt and dark blue tie, shoes polished to a spotless shine and a white handkerchief sticking out of his pocket. He had a narrow, slightly pointed face and well-groomed dark, wavy hair. His eyes were dark brown and always seemed slightly screwed up, as if he was concentrating on everything that he looked at, or listened to.

His office was simple, if expensive. A large mahogany desk, matching bureau and coffee table, two chairs in front of the desk and an executive swivel chair behind, were the only furniture.

Guy and Hatcher sat in the two chairs looking at Denton. They had already told him why they had come.

‘I’m afraid I really can’t help you, gentlemen,’ Denton smiled. It was a professional smile. ‘I don’t know anything about the Folly. And as to any secret laboratory or hide-aways, I have no idea what you’re talking about. I’m sorry,’ he added, putting both hands on the table, and looked as if he was about to rise.

‘Mr Denton,’ Hatcher said in a low, but forceful voice. ‘I’m not *asking* you to tell us what you had to do with the Folly. I’m *ordering* you.’

‘But I’ve told you.’

‘You’ve lied.’

‘You can’t prove that,’ Denton claimed.

‘What’s this, then?’ the Inspector asked, pulling the order form from his pocket. ‘It was found in the Folly.’

Denton looked startled and grabbed the form. Sighing, he smiled.

'This proves nothing. It's an order for an engine. It could be used for anything. Perhaps Sir Mark stored it in the Folly. Really, gentlemen, you've been wasting your time.'

Guy thought they had been beaten. He looked at the Inspector whose face was expressionless. They had agreed beforehand that Hatcher should do the questioning. Now Guy waited, convinced they were back to square one.

Hatcher placed both his hands at the edge of the desk and leaned forward, only about three feet from Denton.

'Mr Denton,' he said quietly. 'I'm going to throw the book at you. And when you're down, I'm going to make sure you stay that way. You look very smart Mr Denton, in that suit. Do you think prison grey would look so good?' He smiled at the businessman, a smile that brought a shiver to Denton.

'What ... what are you talking about? Prison? I haven't done anything wrong,' he stammered.

'Haven't you?' the Inspector went on, the smile still on his face. 'How about accessory after the crime? We have reason to believe that six deaths have been caused by that madman Webber and Sir Mark Hattrell. As a direct result of the lab you built them. And now Webber's holding Anne Hattrell, threatening her with death. Oh, I'll get you, Denton. Don't worry about that.' He sat back, the smile gone, staring directly at Denton.

Of course he was bluffing. Denton could not be held responsible for what the lab was used for, any more than a gun manufacturer can be found guilty if one of his guns is used in a murder. But Hatcher was working to a well-established principle. Namely that most of the public do not know the law. And also when a man is trying to hide something, he has no time to think clearly.

The bluff worked.

'I . . . I had no idea,' Denton said, wiping his brow with his handkerchief. 'No idea at all. Oh God, what a mess. I'm finished now—finished.'

'What are you on about?' Hatcher asked.

'Sir Mark bailed me out about six years ago when I was in serious financial difficulty. I'd put everything into the business. Borrowed against the house, my insurance policies, my wife and children's insurance policies too. Things didn't go well. I was facing ruin. Then Sir Mark heard about it and bought me over. He owns practically everything. My house, the plant, the buildings. He literally saved my life. There were strings, of course,' he added.

'Which were?' Hatcher asked.

'I had to build him certain pieces of equipment if and when he needed them. It was to be kept secret or else he would run down the company and ruin me.'

For a brief moment, Guy felt sorry for the man. Mark had homed in on Denton's troubles and used them to his own advantage. As he did with everyone else.

'What sort of equipment?' the detective wanted to know.

'Oh, automatic feeders and cleaners, built to specific requirements supplied by Sir Mark.'

'Who did the actual construction work?'

'Some American engineers Mark brought across.'

'So who built the lab?'

'The same American company. It was all hush-hush, you see, and with the engineers in the States, there was little chance the secret would leak out. They were here hardly any time, I gather, and stayed at the Manor. I've personally done the maintenance work with Sir Mark, although there've been hardly any problems.'

'And it's at the Folly?' Hatcher asked.

'It's at the Folly. But as you found it's not so easy to guess

that,' Denton said, leaning forward on the desk, his hand on his forehead. 'What a mess, what a bloody awful mess.'

'We're going back. Now. And you're coming with us, Mr Denton,' Hatcher said. 'We've got to save a life.'

Denton nodded and the men went out into the darkening evening.

In the car Hatcher continued his questioning.

'Apart from the lab, is there anything else in the Folly?' he asked.

'Oh, yes. There's a flat at the very top. I've only been in it once. I don't know how you get in. Something to do with a combination on the lift switch mechanism. Only Sir Mark and the American engineers who installed the lift know the secret of getting up there.'

'That'll do for now,' concluded Hatcher. 'I'll need a statement later.'

'Of course,' Denton said dully. 'What difference does it make now?'

It was almost dark by the time they reached the Folly.

Two portable searchlights had been set up on top of the cars and trained on the Folly. The woods around, and the tower itself cast long shadows. Turner approached them as they got out of the car.

'Anything happen, Turner?' Hatcher asked the detective.

'Nothing, sir. And we've been over the room about four times now from top to bottom. We can't find anything.'

Hatcher turned to Denton.

'It's over to you, now. Let's see how we get into this bloody place.'

Denton smiled resignedly.

'Okay. Can I have a torch?' One was handed to him from the boot of a car.

'It's been a while since I did this,' he said walking away



from the Folly. 'You won't need torches inside, by the way,' he added. 'It's fully supplied with electricity.'

He stopped by some small stones, not unlike those used for marking distances on country roads. The Folly, which stood in a rough circle, now overgrown with wild grass, was surrounded by a ring of stones at the edge of the clearing.

Guy had assumed that at one time they had been part of stone posts, and perhaps a gate had stood in between two of them.

Denton looked back at the Folly, and lining himself up with the door, took a few steps to his left, stopping at the third stone he reached.

He shone the torch on it and kneeled in front of it.

'Can someone hold the torch for me?' he asked.

A policeman standing behind him took the torch. Denton grasped the stone with both hands and twisted it twice to the right and once to the left. The whole 'stone' lifted off in his hands and he laid it carefully to the side. Guy and the other men were by now gathered round him, watching with fascination.

'Aluminium,' he muttered by way of an explanation.

Beneath where the dummy stone had lain was a panel, set about six inches into the ground and contained in what looked like a thick steel box. There was a row of six red buttons on the panel and a black one. Denton hesitated for a few moments and then pressed the red buttons in what seemed to be a random pattern.

'Each one triggers the other off,' he said. 'It's a simple, but effective combination system.'

'What's the black button for?' Guy asked.

Denton chuckled.

'In case anyone uncovers the panel by accident. Most people, you see, identify red with danger. They wouldn't press these buttons. Ninety-nine per cent would push the black one. That



immediately cuts off all the circuitry, making it impossible to gain entry. Even if they did press some of the red buttons, the chances are high that the black one would be pushed also, cutting everything off.'

'Jesus,' muttered Hatcher. 'Those Americans knew what they were doing.'

Denton stopped pushing the buttons and stood up.

'And now, gentlemen, as it takes one minute and thirty seconds for the circuitry to operate the locking mechanisms, if you hurry you'll be able to see the true entrance of the Folly opening before you.'

Guy thought there was a certain amount of pride in Denton's voice. He sounded like a tourist guide taking a group around his favourite museum.

The men walked across to the Folly. The searchlights lit the interior sufficiently for them to make out the walls clearly.

'My God,' Hatcher exclaimed, as the wall opposite the door swung out. It was ten feet high and almost four feet wide. Behind it was a solid sheet of grey metal.

They moved forward.

'Are these solid stones?' Hatcher asked, not even trying to hide the amazement in his voice.

'Oh, yes. Attached to a solid steel plate,' Denton said. 'And if you look closely you'll see that it's a double plate. In between is a thick layer of asbestos. No wonder your men couldn't get any hollow sounds, Inspector.'

Hatcher, along with the rest of the men, just stared at the incredible engineering.

'This here is solid lead also,' Denton said, tapping the sheet in the space left by the door.

'But these stones are nearly a foot thick,' Hatcher said, shaking his head, still not believing what he was seeing.

'This is just the beginning,' Denton said and reached up to the side of the 'door frame'. The men noticed another panel

set into the stonework. They watched in silence as Denton pushed two of the twelve buttons, set in four rows of three. There was a second's pause and then they heard a quiet hissing sound and a low hum.

A few moments later the entire lead sheet slid to the side and the men were looking at the inside of a lift, about six feet square by eight feet high.

No-one moved. Denton was the first to walk in, then Hatcher and Guy followed by Victor and a couple of policemen.

'Some of you stay here,' Hatcher said. 'Just in case.'

Denton pushed another button inside the lift and they began to move upwards.

'What were those other buttons for down there?' Guy asked.

'Dummies. Sir Mark took no chances,' Denton said laconically.

Hatcher studied the lift panel.

'What are all these for?' he asked, pointing at the rows of knobs and buttons.

Denton shook his head.

'That I don't know. I think they're to get up to the top, to Sir Mark's private quarters. But as I said before only he knows the combination.'

Before there were any more questions, the lift stopped.

'This is the first level. I haven't been here for some time, but it used to be a storeroom. I'll switch on the lights. There's not ...' his voice trailed off as the room was flooded with light. He took a few steps backwards, bumping into Hatcher who was coming out of the lift. The others, following, stopped in shocked amazement, looking round them, their eyes wide and mouths open.

They were looking at a chamber of horrors, the like of which none of them could have imagined in their wildest, terror-filled nightmares.

The room was not large, about twenty by ten feet, but that somehow made it worse, the feeling of being crowded in the centre of the horror. All round the walls, stretching up to the ceiling were rows of glass specimen jars and cases. Each was a different size to house their contents. Preserved in formalin or vacuum sealed. Tangible nightmares. Aberrations of nature. Monsters. Abominations. Freaks.

A chicken with two heads; another with no head and four legs. What looked like a piglet with a head at either end of its pale pink body. A lamb with a head like a boxer dog and canine teeth sticking out. A bloated, pink and blue creature with a tiny head and flippers.

But none of these compared with the row of large, cylindrical jars that directly faced them. They were human aberrations. Babies, and yet not babies. There was one with a full head of hair and pointed teeth fixed in a perpetual snarl. Another with its head split in two, a pair of eyes on either side. One with a huge head the shape of an egg and huge eyes. Another with an enormous growth coming out of its stomach.

And more. Creatures that were half-human, half-animal. Small and perfectly formed. Two, maybe three-feet-high 'children' covered in fur and having paws instead of hands and feet. Something – there could be no names for these monstrosities – with a long head like a rat and a human body.

And what rooted the men to the spot, making them feel the full weight of the horror, was the fact that the creatures were perfectly preserved. And in every case the eyes stared out, dead and still, yet exactly as in life, if these monsters had ever known life. The men felt they were being watched by the dead.

Guy was the first to break the silence.

'Fucking hell,' he whispered. 'I feel sick.'

He had spoken for them all.

'Let's find Webber,' Hatcher said. He sounded tired, drained of emotion.

They all turned slowly except Denton, who stood looking around him, his face white, mouthing inaudible words. Guy put his hand on the businessman's arm.

'I helped create this,' he heard Denton say. 'Oh my God, oh God forgive me.'

'No, it's not you. It's nothing to do with you,' Guy said, gently tugging at Denton.

They were about to join the others in the lift when it started. A low wail, a howl that ground its way through their brains. Hatcher rushed out of the lift. It seemed to come from somewhere above them, yet at the same time reverberated around the room. Hatcher blanched. Criminals, psychopaths, rapists – he had dealt with them all. They were real. But this sound seemed unreal, inhuman. And then it stopped abruptly.

'What was that?' Guy asked, in a whisper.

'Who knows,' Hatcher said. 'After this,' he glanced at the jars, 'anything could be possible. There's only one way of finding out. Going up there.'

No-one spoke as Denton started the lift on its upward journey to the laboratory where the horrors they were leaving had been spawned . . .

Anne Hattrell sat on a bench stool watching James Webber move around the lab. Her eyes were red with crying and she looked pale and tired. Her hair was unkempt and the normally smooth make-up blotched. In her hands she clasped a handkerchief.

It had been simple for Webber to get Anne out to the lab. He called round at Rosemary Cottage after writing the note for Guy. He told Anne that Mark was seriously ill and wanted to see her at once.

Anne did not hesitate. She was still married to Mark and felt some loyalty towards him. Webber had taken the road to the Manor, but swung off to the Folly.

‘Where is Mark?’ Anne asked.

‘In the Folly. He has a private room at the top,’ Webber replied. ‘Hasn’t he told you about it? He used to bring his last wife here,’ he lied.

‘Oh, yes. I think he did mention it to me,’ Anne said, not wishing to appear foolish in front of Webber. She had never heard of the room.

He parked in front of the Folly and left Anne in the car while he activated the switches. Once in the lift, he closed the wall up behind them and went straight to the lab on the second floor.

‘Through this way,’ he said, standing aside allowing Anne to go ahead.

She stared at the various tanks and cages, shrinking back when she saw the rat-rabbits. But Webber was immediately behind and gently pushed her forward.

‘Through this wire door and to the left. Mark’s in the next room,’ Webber said.

Anne walked in past the wire netting which stretched from floor to ceiling and turned. She faced a blank wall. She whirled round just as Webber slammed the wire door shut and turned a key in the lock.

‘What . . . why . . .’ Anne stammered.

‘I can’t explain now,’ Webber said. ‘I’m going to shift the car. Suffice to say you’re now necessary for the completion of my work.’

Webber left her alone. At first she tried screaming for help, but there was no response. Only a shuffling and squeaking from the rat-rabbits in the lab. Then she sobbed, gradually quietening down. Her fear became desperation and she tried to tear the wire mesh down. But it was useless.

She sat on the stool and looked around, trying to see if there was any way of escape. She was calmer now that she had worked out her initial emotions.



The 'cage' she was in was actually a store-room doubling as an extension cage for the one next to it. Webber had cleared it and put in a camp-bed, a table and a stool. Two sides were solid wall. The other two were thick wire mesh, one side looking into the lab, the other acting as a partition between the room and what looked like another store-room. In the partition was a steel trap at ground level. Electric cable, encased in lead, led from the trap door to the ceiling and out to a switch in the lab.

Anne peered through the wire into the next section. It seemed empty, but as she focussed on the opposite wall of the room, she saw a row of a dozen cages with fine wire mesh in front of them. Shadowy movements came from the cages. She realised with sudden terror that some of the grunts and squeaks she heard were coming from these cages.

She looked into the lab. About a dozen large vats, each with what looked like inflated thin rubber balloons inside, to which tubes were attached, stood in a line in the centre of the room.

Webber was gone about twenty minutes and when he returned took no notice of Anne. He moved about from vat to vat in the lab checking the tubes and reading the dials attached to them. A long bench ran from one end of the lab to the other and a series of small, hermetically sealed specimen jars were connected to oxygen tanks.

'Why am I here?' Anne finally asked.

'I've told you. I need you here,' Webber replied.

'That's no answer. Why do you need me here?'

Webber, still moving around the lab checking jars and vats, told her what he had told Guy and also the contents of the note.

'I can't stop now,' he told her. 'I just can't. I'm on the verge of the final breakthrough.'

'What will happen if Guy brings help?'

Webber ignored the question. Anne repeated it.



‘Don’t misunderstand my motives, please,’ he said looking across at her. ‘I don’t want to kill you. You’re my insurance policy. Surely Corling wouldn’t want to risk your life. In a few minutes I’ll make the final preparations for you,’ he added.

He had not stopped moving. Checking, noting, adjusting all the equipment.

Then he disappeared round the corner and came back carrying a rat-rabbit.

‘What are you doing with that?’ Anne asked, feeling panic rising in her.

He did not answer. Instead, he opened the cage next to her, and placed the creature on the floor before going out and closing the door behind him. He repeated this fourteen times until the area was filled with hopping, sniffing, growling and barking rat-rabbits.

Finally he walked up to Anne.

‘The final clauses of my insurance policy. Even if your boy friend does manage to get in here – which I doubt – then he’ll see I mean business. That trap door is activated by this button,’ he pointed at a small red knob on the lab bench a few feet from him.

‘I’ll know he’s coming by the warning bell which activates itself when the lift passes the first level unless it’s de-activated. And only two people know how to do that – myself and your husband. So when Mr Corling comes in I’ll be ready. He’ll have a choice – get out or see you eaten alive.’

Strangely enough, Anne was able to control her emotions while Webber spoke of her death.

She had read somewhere that you should keep madmen talking. And she was sure Webber was mad. So she concentrated on this trying not to think about what he was actually saying.

‘Why didn’t the rabbits attack you?’

‘They’re harmless really,’ he claimed. ‘The ones that escaped – through a ventilation shaft – were hungry and attacked for

food. But once they had tasted meat they found they needed it. That's what I'm trying to eliminate, as I said before. The genetic grouping which makes the animals want meat.'

'But if they want meat, why didn't they bite you?' she insisted.

'My theory is that the genes are triggered off by the taste of blood in the first place and then their awareness is wakened. I'm not sure. That's why the wild creatures on the loose have been attacking animals and people.' He looked at the large clock on the lab wall.

'It's time for these rabbits next to you to be fed. They won't be. At least for forty-eight hours. By that time I'll know if I've succeeded in my attempts to produce a "safe" rat-rabbit. They're in the cages over there,' he pointed at the rows Anne had been looking at previously.

'And they're also in the vats, in embryonic form.'

Webber sounded so sane, Anne thought. It was absurd. She was trapped in a cage, and he calmly spoke of genetic patterns. And she was listening. The whole situation suddenly came home to her and her psychological theory about dealing with madmen was forgotten as she reacted instinctively and normally. She had hysterics.

Webber ignored her screams. Eventually, she was quiet and sat in a daze watching the scientist move around. The rabbits in the next cage hopped about looking for food. Some pressed themselves against the wire mesh, standing on their hind legs, sniffing hopefully, looking in at Anne. She tried not to look at them.

The lab was warm. The only sounds came from the rabbits, the bubbling of the vats and the tick of the clock on the wall.

Webber walked into the next cage and locked the door behind him. The rabbits jumped about his feet.

'No, I've nothing for you yet,' he said soothingly, bending down and stroking one. 'Soon, soon.'

He went across to the row of cages on the wall. Each was fastened with a simple hook on the wooden frame. He undid one and reached inside.

'These are the new generation,' he said, almost to himself.

'I'm going to dissect one to see how it has developed.'

He headed for the door. Anne watched him, her body and mind numb. Webber was only a few feet from the cage door when the rabbit in his arms suddenly squirmed, kicked its hind legs into the scientist's stomach and jumped on to the floor.

'You cheeky little devil!' he smiled and went to pick it up again.

The rabbit ran round the room. It was slightly larger than the others, but apart from that Anne could see no other difference. The teeth were there, the strong legs and long snout. Finally it stopped in a corner and looked up at Webber.

Its whiskers were quivering and it stood as if it was about to pounce. Webber chuckled as he leant forward.

'Got you, you little so-and-so,' he said, reaching his hands out. But then he stopped as he saw the creature draw back its lips and snarl, the hideous teeth in full display.

'What's wrong?' he asked bending more slowly. 'I'm not going to ...' He stopped as the animal leapt up and snapped at his hand, taking his little finger off in one bite.

Anne watched as the scientist stood looking at his hand in amazement. She saw the other rabbits in the pen stop their frolicking about and look over at the man whose blood was dripping to the floor. She saw them circle him and then the rabbit which had bitten him fling itself at his leg, tearing a large chunk out of his calf. The other creatures waited no longer. They swamped him, and he fell screaming to the ground.

Anne sat, too drained of emotion to move. She watched as the pack of rabbits tore at every available part of Webber's body. She saw him roll over, a mess of blood and broken

bones. The clothes were ripped off him and only a few tatters stuck to his bleeding body. Both his hands tried to protect his genitals, but his fingers were bitten and soon there were only stumps where the hands had been. Then she saw his sex organs being torn off from the root.

The cages against the wall were being pounded by the creatures inside and soon the flimsy doors gave way under the pressure. About a dozen more joined the massacre. A few attacked the scientist's head, the only part of his body still intact. One ripped a chunk from his cheek, taking the eyeball with it. And then the other cheek and eyeball. Webber was blinded and lay quivering as the creatures gnawed into him, pulling intestine and gut from the gaping hole in his side.

Webber felt the life draining out of him. He had passed the point of the body's endurance for pain and seemed to be floating above it all. Everything was black and as the nerves were destroyed it was impossible to feel anything. But he could think. The brain still functioned.

And in the last few moments of his life, his mind continued to work along the same scientific patterns which it had done for years. As if in a dream, he saw what had happened.

Through his experiments he had produced a meat-eating rat-rabbit. Molecular biology, being extremely complex and in its infancy, meant that he could not know exactly the genetic composition of his new creatures. He had not eliminated the flesh-eating instinct in his new breed. In fact the opposite had occurred. The meat-eating, instinctive genetic composition of the rat-rabbits had become the dominant factor in the creature's brain. Webber realised with shocking clarity that it is genes which provide neurons for every living organism. And it is the neurons which control the brain. It was so obvious, he thought. Too obvious. He had not realised it before.

And too late. The blackness was heavy now. There was no

feeling. The thoughts stopped. The brain ceased functioning. He was dead.

And Anne sat and watched the creatures finish off their grisly feast. Soon there was hardly any flesh left on what had been the scientist's body. The animals hopped about licking themselves. A few of the new type tried to get through to Anne. But the wire stopped them. They squatted down and stared at her.

A strange calm came over Anne. She looked at Webber's remains, the rat-rabbits, the lab and her own prison. She felt detached from them all. As if she had been watching a movie on a screen. Uninvolved. Quite simply her mind had refused to take any more of the horror. It had shut out any feeling. It had released its safety valve for the sake of her sanity. In a short while all the implications of what she had seen would come flooding over her. But she was not to know that. She just sat and stared. She was so still it was impossible to tell if she was breathing.

She was in the same position when the wailing, howling sound started. She did not move. And she was still sitting on the stool when the alarm bell rang as the lift passed the first floor.

She did not even look round when Guy and the others burst into the lab.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The men rushed out of the lift and then stopped at the scene of the carnage before them. Guy saw Anne sitting behind the wire.

'Anne,' he muttered, sighing with relief, running across and opening the door.

Still she did not move. He laid a hand on her arm. She slowly turned her head and looked at him. Her eyes were wide and glazed. Guy did not have to guess. He knew, as did Hatcher and Victor who had joined him, what she must have seen.

'Take her downstairs,' Hatcher suggested.

Victor took an arm and helped Guy ease her off the stool. She allowed herself to be led towards the lift. But a few feet away from it, the silence of the lab was broken by a bark. One of the creatures started running around wildly, sensing the presence of so many humans. One of the new breed.

It was as if a switch had been thrown in Anne's mind. She blinked, looked around her, terror in her eyes, shook herself free of Victor and Guy's hold, and screamed. She screamed for a full minute. A piercing, horrible scream.

Hatcher strode across, stood in front of her for a few seconds and then slapped her hard across the face. She stopped screaming, shook her head, blinked and looked around her. Seeing Guy, her body sagged and she flung herself at him, sobbing loudly.

He held her close, gently and firmly.



‘My love, my love,’ he murmured. ‘You’re safe now. You’re safe. I’ll take you away,’ he raised his eyebrows at Victor who took one of her arms and they turned back to the lift. Hatcher and the other men were looking at the creatures in the cage. The Inspector wanted Anne out of the way before he did what he knew was necessary.

Guy’s hand was half-way to the lift button, when with an almost inaudible hum, the lift started moving. Upwards.

‘Inspector!’ Guy gasped.

All eyes were riveted on the disappearing lift. Guy and Hatcher had the same thought.

‘Hattrell!’ they said almost instantaneously.

The next few minutes dragged out. No-one moved. They stared at the space left by the lift, not knowing what to expect. Only Anne’s quiet sobbing broke the silence. And the hellish grunts and squeaks from the cage.

The hum started again. Instinctively, Hatcher reached into his jacket and pulled out a revolver. He moved closer to the lift, standing beside Victor.

Guy felt anger mounting in him. At last he was coming face to face with the man who was indirectly responsible for killing Rhoda as well as putting the woman he loved through hell. And responsible for God knew what else. As the bottom of the lift came into view, his mind was seething. If nothing else, he just wanted to smash his fist into Mark Hattrell’s face as a token of his feelings.

Instead, when the lift came fully into view, he did nothing.

‘My God!’ he said, stepping back as he looked at the figure in the lift.

The others moved backwards also as the figure started to come towards them.

It could not be described as a human being, although at one time it obviously had been. Arms hung down at the side and it shambled on its legs. The remnants of a suit hung to its body,

the cloth caked and filthy with pus stains. The hands were swollen and the fingers covered with green slime, the result of the poison that oozed out of the pores.

But it was the head – or what had been a head – which made the men's stomachs convulse with horror. It was huge, far too big for its body, like one of the freaks they had seen on the first level. But this head was covered with boils. Totally. Not a solitary patch of normal skin was left unmarked. Some oozed pus. There were boils which seemed to be growing out of the others.

On top of the bloated mockery for a head a few strands of matted hair hung from the white, crusted mat that had once been a scalp. The eyes had disappeared in festering folds as had the mouth. Only two partially covered holes in the centre of the bloated, suppurating mass showed where nostrils had been.

It stood for a few seconds in the lift entrance, rocking back and forward slightly. And then it lurched forward blindly. By some bizarre chance it headed straight towards Guy and Anne, raising its arms.

Hatcher did not stop to think. He raised the revolver and shot it, pressing the trigger four times. The monster tottered back as the bullets entered it, spun round and fell to the side. As it did, the head hit the corner of one of the vats and split open before the body slumped to the floor. A yellow pool began to appear around the skull as the whole poisonous lump emptied.

Its left arm came up and the deformed hand was laid over where once the eyes had been. And then the body sagged and lay still, finally dead.

No-one moved for a few moments. Then Victor, his face ashen, his eyes hard, walked across to it and looked down.

'Myxomatosis,' he said simply, and turned away.

Guy was staring at the hand over the monstrous face. Anne's

face was still buried in his chest. He had stopped her from seeing the latest monstrosity.

'The hand,' he whispered. 'Look at the hand.'

On the middle finger was a large, ornate ring which squeezed the bloated flesh in.

'That's the Hattrell coat of arms,' he said.

Now they knew what had happened to Sir Mark.

Guy took Anne down to the waiting cars, where Victor said he would accompany her to the hospital. Guy returned to the lab. Hatcher and the two policemen had already started wiping out the rat-rabbits, which was an easy task. As soon as he shot one, the others rushed it and began tearing it apart.

But the men had seen too much horror that day to stand and watch the creatures slowly destroy themselves. They pumped bullets into the pen until there was not a rat-rabbit left alive.

'What about these?' Guy asked Hatcher, pointing to the vats. 'I think they're the embryonic forms of new rat-rabbits.'

Hatcher did not reply, but walked across to the nearest vat where he viciously pulled the tubes out of the large balloon-shaped skin. Guy helped him with the rest. The skins subsided and sunk into a warm liquid at the bottom of the tanks.

'Now there's only one thing left to do,' the Inspector said. 'Get up to that penthouse. Not that I expect to find anything. But I want any papers that're there.' He shook his head and looked at the body of Hattrell. 'What a mind. What a twisted mind.'

Guy sighed and nodded.

'Well, thank God it's over now.'

And as if in ironic mockery of his words, the tower was filled with the sound of a long, painful howl.

The horrors were not yet ended.

The howl stopped as suddenly as it had started. Hatcher snapped into action.

'Mr Denton, can you figure out how to get up there?' he asked as he reloaded his pistol.

'I'll try, but it might take some time.'

'Thank you.'

Denton found some screwdrivers and a circuit tester on the first level which were kept in a comprehensive tool kit used for servicing. He took the panel from the lift wall and began probing and testing. It took him twenty minutes to eliminate the normal function circuits of the lift and another ten to work out how to get the lift up to the top floor. Basically, he short-circuited the leads.

'Right, let's go,' Hatcher said. 'Guy, I don't know what's up there. We're armed,' he said nodding in the direction of the other policeman. 'I don't want to be held responsible for your death.'

'I'm coming up,' Guy said coldly.

'It's your decision. Let's go.'

Denton operated the lift and in just under a minute they were looking into the room that very few people knew existed, let alone had seen.

It was round and little smaller than the old room on the ground level. There were no windows and a ventilation fan whirred in one of the walls. A camp-bed, a desk and a few chairs made the place minimally habitable. A small electric cooker beside a tiny sink had a couple of pans on it. One area had been partitioned off – to house a chemical lavatory, they later discovered.

But as the men, with the exception of Denton who stayed in the lift on Hatcher's orders, slowly walked into the room they were looking at only one thing, an eight-feet square cage which stood under the ventilation shaft. The bright neon lighting in

the room threw no shadows. And left nothing to the imagination.

All the horrors they had seen that day, including the deformed, obscene body of Sir Mark, could not compare with what was in that cage.

Standing about four feet high, it had some characteristics of a human being: arms and legs. There any similarity ended. The head merged into the neck and two glittering eyes stared out at the men. The mouth was a large gash, and where its lips should have been the area was covered with hair. The whole pinkish body was covered with patches of dark, matted hair. The arms reached almost to the ground and the feet were large, claw-like objects, again covered with hair. The smell was horrendous.

On seeing the men, the monster grabbed the bars of the cage and shook them, its mouth opening in anger. Large, some of them pointed, teeth gnashed in fury. It tried to reach out to the men, but the bars were too narrow. It flung its body back, hanging on to the bars and howled. The same howl they had heard twice already that day. The final touch of disgusting mockery for human dignity came when the hideous creation began to urinate.

Which was when Inspector Hatcher raised his gun, sighted it, and shot the beast through where its brain should have been. With a final howl of agony the creature was flung back against the opposite bars where it slid to the floor, tried to get up and then collapsed. Hatcher walked across to the cage and shot it again through the bars. Until his gun was empty of bullets.

‘What was it?’ Guy asked, his voice shaking.

‘God knows,’ Hatcher replied. ‘Or the Devil.’

It was later, after the various papers in the Folly had been collected together, that they found out. It was Webber’s most bizarre experiment and Hattrell’s cruellest idea. It was a cross-breed of an orang-utang, the most intelligent of the monkey



family apart from Man, and a human being, by the process of artificial insemination. It was a test-tube monster.

But it was not that fact alone which made Guy and Hatcher thankful that Webber and Hattrell were dead. It was the horrifying discovery that the sperm used to create the monster had been supplied by Sir Mark. To create an heir which neither of his wives had given him.

After Guy knew this, he went for a long drive on his own through the countryside, looking at the fields, hills and rivers. There is no horror, he thought, in Nature, worse than Man himself...

After reporting to Scotland Yard, Hatcher received the necessary permission to have the Folly blown up. He also organised a rabbit shoot. Every rabbit within a twenty-mile radius was killed.

*The Planet* had an exclusive which was picked up by almost every other paper in the world. But Guy did not feel the elation he should have. All the men who had taken part in the final scenes in the tower were to be marked for life.

Guy stood beside Hatcher on the day the Folly was blown up. He watched the tower crumble to dust and bricks and the bulldozers started to flatten the rubble.

'Well, that's it,' he commented. 'Nature'll do the rest.'

But it never did. Nothing ever grew where the Folly had stood. No wildlife took over, no birds built their nests in the surrounding trees. The circular patch remained flat and barren.

And no-one ever visited it.



## EPILOGUE

Anne Hattrell stayed in hospital for a month, after which time she was fully recovered. She had no memory of what she had seen in the Folly, and it was to remain a mental blank all her life.

She married Guy Corling, who became an international correspondent for *Newsweek* and a television newsman. They moved into a totally renovated and re-decorated Frickley Manor, which Anne inherited along with the rest of the estate. They had one son.

Victor Henthorne stayed on as gamekeeper, training his son in the family tradition.

Madge Jensen, Sir Mark's former housekeeper, spent the rest of her life in a local mental home.

Leslie Denton continued to run the engineering firm, after Anne and Guy had relinquished any debts owed to Sir Mark.

Audrey Barrett, the girl friend of Bob Norris, finally made it to London. But she never worked in the Playboy Club. Instead, she stayed in a psychiatric institution, where the other inmates and a few of the staff, called her the 'Bunny Girl' because of her constant ramblings about rabbits.

In Frickley, life returned to normal. Rabbits were seen again on Frickley Estate.

But often Guy Corling would wake in the middle of the night, sweating after a nightmare. And remember the words of James Webber: 'Short of wiping out every rat-rabbit, the genetic

pattern is fixed ... And they could be breeding with normal rabbits ... It'll take two, maybe three generations before we know. Perhaps longer.'

Perhaps longer ...



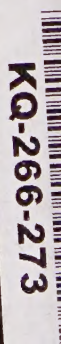


**David Anne** was born in London in 1930, educated at Ampleforth, Yorkshire, and served his national service in the R.A.F. He left London in 1964 to live in a typical Hampshire thatched cottage where he is now surrounded by hordes of wild duck, chickens, pigeons and dogs. He runs a Pine furniture business in Stockbridge, and is an expert on guns.

David Anne's first novel *Rabid – The Day of the Mad Dogs* – was a bestseller. The critics described it as ‘. . . a very gripping novel indeed, vividly written.’ – *Birmingham Post*; ‘The scenario of disaster is convincing and fast-moving.’ – *Times Literary Supplement*; ‘Besides writing an exciting story, Mr Anne has performed a public good.’ – *The Scotsman*.

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