

Chapter 1

SUDDENLY THE child began to scream, piercing shrieks of terror that died down to shaking sobs, clutching at his mother so that his tiny ringers pinched her skin agonisingly through her flimsy summer dress.

Veronica Jones grimaced in the deep green gloom of the reptile house, had to check herself from giving her five-year-old son one of her habitual cuffs across his head. She held him to her, closed her eyes momentarily, a human ostrich trying to hide her embarrassment from the ghostly white faces that turned in her direction. Trust the little sod to start playing up. You squandered a sizeable chunk of the weekly family allowance to give him a treat and this was how he repaid you. Outside he had complained of the heat incessantly, and shown more interest in playing with the gravel on the paths than looking at the zoo animals, not that there were many on show because the bloody place was closing down at the end of the week and the owners appeared to have got rid of a lot of the exhibits already. Conning you right up to the end, the money grabbers. And now Ian was frightened of the snakes.

'It's ... all right,' she muttered and forced her eyes open.

'I'm frightened, Mam.'

'There's nothing to be frightened of,' she replied, hoping her tone was reassuring, but she could not keep her annoyance out of it. 'The snakes are all in glass cages. They can't get at you.' At least, I hope they can't.

'That one .. .' the boy pointed to a large glass exhibit case with a shaking hand. 'He wants to kill me.'

'Don't be so stupid,' she hissed, the way an angry snake might hiss, 'it...' her voice died away and she felt the sweat on her body turning cold, a clammy invisible hand stroking her, sliding up and down her the way that creature in the cage might do if it got out, A slimy reptile, revolting in every aspect. And deadly.

Veronica tried to pull herself together. It was the heat that was affecting her just like it had upset Ian. Hell, it was hot outside but it was like a blast furnace in here. No air-conditioning, the lighting just a dim green glow designed to make these reptiles doubly sinister. All part of the creep show, like the spook house at the funfair. An extra quid to go in the snake house, half-price for children and we'll guarantee to scare the shit out of them so that neither you nor they will get any sleep tonight. You'll have to have the little boy in your bed tonight, ma'am, after he's seen what we've got in store for him.

'I want to go home, Mam.'

'You'll get a clip round the ear in a minute,' she breathed. 'I can see that I've wasted my money on you,

but I'm going to have my money's worth. So shut your eyes and hang on to me if you don't want to look.'

She was aware that he was trembling, shaking with sheer terror, afraid to cry out loud in case she hit him. 'You start blarneying and see what you get,' she warned. 'Now, hold on to my hand and let's have no more of this nonsense.'

Veronica Jones wanted to move on, a quick glance at each cage as she passed just to satisfy her own conscience. No more than a cursory glimpse and then back outside into the heat of a summer's day. Except that the crowd in here seemed to have swelled, a crush of bodies hemming her in. You aren't going anywhere, lady. You can't escape as easily as that. You've got to stay and look.

She almost screamed, 'For God's sake let me out,' but she realised the futility of it. Nobody was interested in her, they didn't give a damn whether she lived or died. Just faceless shapes that were supposed to be people, aliens in a reptile den. Everybody just staring, gloating at the hideous things on the other side of the glass. Somebody was tapping on the front of a case, stabbing a finger at the hideous thing only a quarter of an inch away. You can't get at me, you bugger. You'll stop in there till you die. Go on, try and bite me. Go on!

It was the same snake that had scared Ian. Veronica stared at the toad-like head, the large unblinking eyes, features that might have been left unchanged over a million years. Coiled, motionless, you didn't even know if it saw you, knew you were there. It could even have been dead. 'It's a bloody stuffed one,' someone said, but nobody laughed. Veronica felt the watchers move back half a pace; a man trod on her toe and it hurt but she stopped herself from crying out aloud. Don't make a noise, it might hear you. And it might get out.

She found herself reading the illuminated notice below the aquarium-type cage. She read the printed words because for some reason she wanted to know just what kind of creature it was that remained motionless and scared you to hell.

RUSSELL'S VIPER. One of the most feared snakes of India, Burma and Thailand. Its bite is usually fatal, but its venom is sometimes used in medication.

Ugh! Veronica Jones hoped that she had never had any injected into her. You couldn't trust doctors these days, they got up to all sorts of tricks. That snake ought never to have been brought back to England, it should've been left in peace in India or wherever they'd got it. There should be a ban on importing such things. It moved!

At least, she thought it did, although it could have been just her own start of fright. Everybody seemed to move back another half-pace and a clumsy shoe scraped the side of her sandalled foot again. Faces still staring, an entire audience hypnotised by that viper in its pseudo-jungle of no more than a cubic metre. Watching it intently, basking in their terror, though logically it could not get at them. All the same, the finger-poking jibes had stopped, the reptile's tormentor standing well back from the glass. He was scared too.

And then its jaws opened, a reptilian cavern of sheer evil; the watchers felt its hate for them as if a dragon had breathed angry fire. Those glassy eyes fixed them, searched out every single one of them without so much as a blink or a movement of that squat head. A loathsome creature that loathed its captors with a malevolence that even plate glass could not shut in. You felt the sheer power of the viper, felt it turning your lathered sweat to an icy chill, drying out your mouth and weakening your legs, huddling you together; silent mass panic that made you incapable of flight. And if it got out then you wouldn't be able to do a damned thing to protect yourself.

The Russell's viper's spell might have lasted a second or an hour. Veronica was aware of the others pressed up against her, of Ian pinching her flesh in his infantile terror but she made no move to push him away. Greenish silhouettes all around that might have been statues in some underground temple of snake worship. Bow before your lord and master and beg of him forgiveness and mercy.

The snake's eyes were closed and suddenly everybody was moving, just a flexing of cramped limbs, turning one way, then another, as though they had become so disorientated that they had forgotten in which direction the exit lay.

The atmosphere was heavy with the sour smell of human sweat. The tension had built up to a peak; it might have blown but instead it had subsided. You knew it was still there, though, and you wanted to get the hell out of here before something happened.

'Mam, I want to go home.' A distant muffled familiar cry. She didn't want to hit her bastard son any more; suddenly she wanted to protect him, to shield him from this illogical evil. She thought for a moment that she might cry.

'They're nasty things in cages.' She wished her whispers didn't echo, didn't quaver. 'Shut your eyes and think of something else. We'll be outside in a minute.'

The queue had bottlenecked. Nobody seemed to be in a hurry any more. More glass cages, all lit with that same eerie glow. The horror show isn't over yet, folks.

Oh, Jesus Christ, get a move on! Veronica stole a sideways glance, breathed her relief aloud. This case was empty, thank God. The thick glass acted like a mirror, threw her own reflection back at her.

A little more personal care and she could have been attractive. A perm for that shoulder-length blonde hair; she didn't have the money, but a good combing and brushing would have helped to separate those tangled strands. Cosmetics would have masked the lines in her face, knocked five years off her, maybe even made her feel thirty again. The flowered cotton dress, the one she had picked up for 50p at a jumble sale down at the hall, clung wetly to a figure that was still sensuous. An observer could see that she wasn't wearing a bra, that she didn't really care any longer. The hardness was there in her expression, the compressed lips, the lines beneath the eyes, the resentment towards life.

Once, almost six years ago, it seemed an eternity, she had been happy. Her boyfriend was going to rescue her from a life of downtown squalor and hardship, a man of some means was going to spirit her away from all this, take her someplace else where she could forget the past like a bad dream. Which was why she had let him have his way most nights and had not been too bothered about being careful.

The same week that she discovered that she was pregnant Ken wasn't around. No goodbyes, no sudden heart-breaking parting; she was just on her own again, like it always used to be except that this time she was going to have a baby to look after. Ken didn't leave, he just didn't come any more, faded back into the mists of a background which she had not bothered too much to explore. Not a new story, just another one of many thousands. And the kid was a burden on her, a perpetual memory of what might have been if it had not all been a lie.

Oh God, where was that bloody exit? The crowd had slowed, bunched again, not even jostling one another, staring at the glass cages on either side, transfixed, immobile. So hot you could scarcely breathe, drawing the humidity down into your lungs, holding on to strangers, afraid you might faint.

Faces staring back at you, reptilian features seemingly distorted by the heavy glass so that heads and bodies were out of proportion. Evil masks; things that might have been dead, except that you knew they weren't. They fixed you with those awful penetrating evil stares. Wanted to get to you, to coil themselves around you, let you feel the coldness of their supple bodies as they slid over your flesh. Savoured their sadistic delight before they sank their venomous fangs into you. Slid to the floor with you; writhed with you until you died.

Somebody screamed; another child, not Ian this time. Her son clutched her cold sweaty hand and she felt his sobs, his fear. He was shaking violently.

'We'll soon be outside,' she said and her words echoed, hung in the sultry stillness as though to mock her.

Her anger welled up, temporarily overcame that claustrophobic terror that had engulfed her. She wanted to push these stupid people who stood about obstructing her, bang on those glass cages with her puny fists and scream obscenities at their occupants. I hope you die in there!

Instead she spoke loudly and surprisingly calmly. 'The zoo's closing in a couple of days. All the animals will have to go. These snakes will probably be put down, destroyed. Killed. They haven't long to live.'

Silence. People turned, she was aware of them looking at her in the half-darkness, wondering who she was and how she knew. Sensing relief, jubilation; not a trace of pity. Kill the snakes, kill 'em all.

And then her terror came back. A fleeting sensation but she knew she was not mistaken. She heard the rustling of reptilian bodies behind the prison screens, serpent shapes becoming erect, rearing up and seeking out the puny mortal who had voiced her contempt, dared to issue a threat to the deadly killers from the swamps and jungles of the world.

Veronica cowered, wanted to throw up her hands to shield her eyes from them, but Ian was clinging on to her in a panic-stricken determination. Again she had to look, meet their gazes, found herself muttering incoherent apologies for her blasphemy in this temple of serpents.

We shall not die, Human. Our hour is nigh and soon we shall be free and there will be nowhere for Man to hide. Our vengeance will be terrible.

Suddenly everybody was pushing and shoving, a once-dormant crowd that had awoken from a nightmare and was stampeding towards the dim neon exit sign. You went with them because you had no choice, swept along by a tide of panic, away from the evil green fluorescence towards a shaft of sunlight. Euphoria that it had all been a trick of the mind, your imagination succumbing to the mock swamps and forests and their awful reptilian killers. Staggering, gulping in the hot sunlit atmosphere, looking for a bench so that you could rest and allow your trembling legs to recover. A real live scare show but it hadn't hurt you, just made you appreciate living in a safe world.

'Mam, I want to go home.'

'We're going home.' Veronica glanced about her, spotted a blue-painted arrow with the words 'Way Out' painted on it. 'We're going home right now.'

'Mam, what're they doin' over there?'

She stopped, looked where he pointed. A large covered lorry was backed up to the elephant enclosure, its tailboard down. Several men were trying to coax a lumbering elephant up the ramp. The animal

trumpeted once, then shambled up into the trailer. The men hurried to close the doors, bolting them.

'Where are they takin' the elephant, Mam?'

'Away somewhere. The zoo's closing, all the animals have got to go.'

'They goin' to kill the elephant?'

'I ... I shouldn't think so. They're probably taking it to another zoo. A bigger and better place than this scruffy dump where it'll have more room and be better looked after.'

Then why don't they take the snakes there instead of killing them? Like you said they were goin' to.'

'I ... I could've been wrong.' An instinctive mental apology to those serpents that saw into your mind. 'Maybe they'll take the snakes too.'

'But maybe they'll kill 'em after all. I'd like that. Snakes are horrible.'

'Come on.' Veronica grabbed her son's hand and pulled him along with her, almost running until they reached the open gate that led out into the street by the bus-stop.

Veronica Jones felt foolish now. It had been the excessive heat, the eerie lighting in the reptile house which had been responsible. She was just glad that nobody there had recognised her, witnessed her terror. Everything was going to be all right now.

All the same, that night mother and son had a dual nightmare in the cramped bed which they shared in the council flat.

In the darkness the snakes came, condemned creatures that had escaped from their death cells, slithering their way up the steep flights of stairs and across the dingy ill-lit landings until they smelled out flat number 117. Their, serpent bodies shrank and flattened, enabling them to pass beneath the warped door, guided by that sour human body odour emanating from the woman who had scorned and defied them.

Growing again to their full size once they were within, wriggling and sliding up on to the bed, wrapping themselves around the warm-blooded forms of the adult and the boy, delighting in the screams of their victims, entwining them until their death throes ceased.

And then moving on in search of others . . .

'It was only a bad dream.' Veronica comforted the sobbing Ian until the first light of a summer dawn crept through the dirt-stained bedroom window.

'It was real.' he muttered. 'But they've gone now.'

'It's always worse at night.' She held him close and kissed him. 'Tell you what, tonight we'll sleep with the light on.' She wondered how much the meter would take and regretted her rash statement. 'It's always all right in the light.'

But she still had that uneasy feeling and wondered how long it would take to get yesterday out of her system. Even in full daylight she could still see those snakes, the way they glared their hate out of their prisons, desperate hopeless inmates willing to risk death rather than succumb to a life of incarceration.

They would kill if they could, there was no doubt in Veronica's mind about that.

Chapter 2

'HEY.' THERE was a cry of indignation mingled with horror from the fair-haired man in dungarees standing back from the big van. 'This bloody ain't on. No, it bloody ain't and I'm not standing for it.'

The two workmen carrying the large glass case covered with a soiled and torn dust sheet lowered it to the floor of the van and turned to the speaker. 'What bloody ain't on, mate?'

'That.' Ken Wilson's normally pale features had turned deathly white. 'Nobody told me the consignment was ... was fucking snakes?'

'Nothin' to do with you.' One of the workmen drew himself up to his full height and his expression hardened. 'Why should it be? You're just the bleedin' driver.'

'I refuse,' Wilson began to bluster, but deep down he already accepted the futility of his protests. He had been lucky to get this driving job; he might have to wait months, years to get another. 'I can't stand bloody snakes. The very thought of 'em makes me ill.'

'They'll be safely locked up in the back of the van,' the second workman intervened, tried to cool it. The last thing they wanted was a bloody driver refusing to take the snakes up north. He visualised union intervention, maybe an embargo on the transport of all dangerous animals. A little diplomacy was called for. 'You won't even see 'em, mate. They'll all be stacked in the back, covered up, locked up, and when you get to the other end you'll have 'em unloaded for you. AH on a plate and you don't have to do anything except drive from A to B. Can't see what you're complaining about. Christ, yesterday we were moving the elephants and giraffes.'

'All right, all right.' Ken Wilson puckered his lips, hoped the others didn't notice the way his skin goosepimpled and a shudder shook his body. 'I'll take 'em. Just wish somebody had had the common courtesy to tell me first what the load would be. I thought it'd probably be monkeys.'

'They went Wednesday.'

Wilson turned away. There was a cafeteria some fifty yards across the children's playground but he could tell from here that it was closed. You sensed the desolation, the atmosphere of a place that had once been alive with animals and sightseers and was now suddenly dead. A sadness that you couldn't escape even as an onlooker.

Some more men in overalls were struggling out of a narrow doorway with a cage that reminded Ken of a

coffin. It was bigger, in fact, the one side a hinged glass partition. He didn't want to look, tried to turn his head away, but all the same he looked.

Jesus Christ! There were no prizes for guessing that that was a python. As thick as his own arm, with brown and green markings that would have camouflaged it almost anywhere, not moving. Maybe it was dead. No, that was too much to hope for. Even coiled it filled the container and he found himself mentally calculating the constrictor's length; it had to be eighteen, twenty feet, possibly more. Christ only knew what other horrors were down in that underground place waiting to be brought up and loaded into the van. And they would be his travelling companions for the next five or six hours! Do like the man said, forget about 'em, they're just a cargo, units in transit. No, he couldn't shut them out of his mind, that was impossible. Once he got out of here he would go like hell as soon as he hit the motorway, push the old wagon to its limit until he reached his destination. Come on, you buggers, get her loaded up and let's get the job done.

It was hotter today than it had been yesterday, more of a sultry heat with cloud formations building up in the western sky. The driver had listened to the weather forecast on the way down - hot and dry becoming thundery towards mid-afternoon.

He tensed, thought he caught a far-off rumble of thunder. It could have been an aircraft. Thunderstorms always made him uneasy, had done so ever since childhood. And those bleedin' snakes didn't help. He shuddered again.

He glanced about him almost furtively. He knew this area well, and that made him uneasy too. Hold on, you're imagining things, that woman isn't likely to be wandering around a closed-down zoo. Your chances of bumping into her are virtually nil and, anyway, she wouldn't recognise you with this moustache, certainly not in passing. He shaded his eyes with a hand that was unsteady and squinted across to where the conurbation began, or ended, depending on how you looked at it. Tall, unsightly blocks of council flats; there was a rumpus going on about whether they were safe or not. He had read in the papers that they had put glass tell-tales in them to check whether the foundations were shifting or not.

She lived in one of those. Ken Wilson used to go there, sometimes stopping overnight. No. 117. He experienced a twinge of guilt. Maybe Veronica had forgotten all about him, certainly she hadn't made much effort to trace him and she wasn't likely to after all this time. Stop worrying, she's OK, probably shackled up with another guy by now. Nevertheless, Ken Wilson did not like it when his truck driving brought him this way. There was always the awful chance that Fate might have destined him to meet up with Veronica Jones again. And now that he was living with an eighteen-year-old check-out girl from Wiggins superstore the last thing he wanted was a thirty-five-year-old spectre coming out of the past. Forget the woman and the snakes.

'Everything's loaded up, mate.'

Ken Wilson turned slowly, saw that the zoo workmen had even shut the back of the van up for him. All you have to do is to drive it.

A clap of thunder had him starting visibly.

'Looks like we're goin' to get it this time, mate.'

'Yeah, looks like it.' Wilson walked towards the cab, opened the door, felt the heat come out at him like the forerunner of a fireball. He winced, saw the clouds of flies buzzing on the windscreen. This was what you got in flaming June, either pouring wet or too hot to move. No moderation.

He climbed up into the cab, wound the window down; he should have done that as soon as he arrived. He felt in his pockets for cigarettes and matches - his hands were still shaking. Deliberately blowing smoke at the flies. Take that lot, you bastards. They bunched and buzzed their protest but they did not fly off.

Finger on the starter button, he hesitated. Listening, Listening intently, anticipating slitherings and stirrings from the back. They can't get into the cab even if they escape from their containers. Can they?

Then the thunder rolled again, terminating in a reverberating clap almost overhead. The sun was obscured by the advancing clouds which brought with them a gloom that was akin to dusk. Eerie.

He pressed the starter and the engine turned over maybe half a dozen times before it fired. This van was a heap of crap, a 'P'-registered vehicle that had struggled to pass its MOT. Like everything else at Hadleys Transport it was on the way out. But in this day and age a job was a job and you stuck it.

Ken Wilson let in the clutch and the van rolled forward, crunched on the gravel as he turned towards the main gates. A few rain spots smacked on the windscreen, but the expected downpour did not follow. The storm was coming from the south-west, he was travelling north. He might just keep ahead of it. He was going to do his damndest, anyhow.

Motorway - 1 mile. A sense of freedom, no stops until he reached his destination. One last glance in the direction of those hideous council flats. Just thinking about Veronica gave him an arousal. Well, that was all she was good for; get her out of bed and she wasn't much use for anything else. No intelligence, you couldn't take her anywhere, not with that whining complaining voice. Veronica's virtues began and ended between her thighs. All the same, he hoped she was OK. Hell, he was getting a guilt complex.

The motorway was unusually busy, an unending line of trundling trucks in the slow lane, cars cruising in the middle one. He awaited his chance and pulled out, got in behind a Mini Clubman estate that seemed packed with kids and luggage right up to the roof. A gimmicky notice above the rear number plate read: 'If you can read this you're too bloody close.' Silly buggers, what did they expect on the motorway? If you dropped back then somebody overtook you and cut in front so you couldn't make a gap no matter what you did. The roads were dry. All the same, Ken doubted if he could pull up in time if anything happened in front. Very few drivers could.

The sun was shining again. He glanced in his mirror, saw those black and yellow clouds way behind, thought he could make out the rain sheeting down. He'd give the storm a run for its money. He experienced momentary exhilaration.

He was watching those kids in the Clubman quarrelling and fighting when something on the seat beside him moved; something cylindrical, rolling, jerking. Oh God! The van swerved violently and he only just hauled it back into the middle lane in time. Horns blared, somebody flashed his headlights.

Now he could see the offending object lying motionless on the floor; a screwdriver, one he had used to tighten a loose screw on" the dash earlier and had left lying on the seat. Bloody hell, for a moment he had thought it was a ...

Don't think about those snakes. Like the man at the zoo said, you won't even have to unload them at the other end. You can report your arrival, go and get a cup of tea and by the time you get back you'll have an empty van to take home. As simple as that. You're just a driver, Ken Wilson, nothing else.

He would have to break the return journey overnight. That was a bit of a bummer when there was a teenage girl waiting back home, willing to do anything you wanted her to. If it wasn't for these bloody tachometers they fitted in HGVs these days he would have put his foot down and gone all out to get home in one run.

Those bloody kids in front were getting on his nerves. One had climbed over into the boot and was clinging precariously on to a pile of luggage and trying to kick hell out of the other at the same time. Why, for fuck's sake, didn't their bloody parents do something about it! Vandals and muggers in the making, that's how it all started, a lack of discipline in the home.

The sun had gone behind the clouds and it was hotter than ever. That crap cooling system must have packed up altogether. Wilson wondered if he could get his overalls undone whilst he was driving but changed his mind when a police patrol car passed him in the fast lane. The sweat was pouring off him, his trousers were stuck to the seat.

In his mirror he noticed headlights being used, and switched his own on. Those thunder clouds had moved at an unbelievable rate of knots. Now he heard the thunder again, resonant rolls like an angry monster roaring its wrath as it tried to run him down.

The sudden daytime gloom had him thinking about his reptilian passengers in the back again. Man was a daytime creature, scared of the dark no matter how he tried to tell himself he wasn't. Probably the snakes were all asleep. It was bloody cruel imprisoning them in zoos. Just done to make money. Taken out of their natural environment they slept and ate their lives away in sheer boredom. You couldn't blame them if they got nasty and turned on somebody. Man was the cruellest creature of all, there was no getting away from that. Christ, Ken thought, I'm going bloody soft.

He found himself listening again but all he heard was engine noise. If the buggers did manage to escape they couldn't go anywhere. It was the guys the other end who would find them whilst he was somewhere safe having a bite to eat. He'd keep well clear of the van until it was empty.

The rain came without warning, a few heavy spots followed by an instant downpour, the wipers struggling to cope. Ken Wilson cursed under his breath; the most depressing sound of all was that of the monotonous noise of windscreen wipers. Fuck it!

Rain was bouncing up off the tarmac, being whipped into a blinding spray by the tyres of speeding traffic, obliterating from view the vehicles up ahead. The cars and lorries did not seem to be slowing any and those idiot children in the Clubman were still slinging punches at each other. One had found a tennis racket somewhere and was attempting to brain the other, battering him viciously with it.

Ken glanced at his watch. 5.45. Night had come about four hours early; there was driving rain and a lashing gale that was bending newly planted birch saplings on the embankments almost double. Another police car passed, doing a ton for sure. One law for some, another for others.

And then it happened! Ken did not know whether the Clubman estate had failed to see the brake lights of the Ford Transit in front or whether he had simply driven into its back, distracted by those bastards of fighting kids. Suddenly the Clubman crunched, reared like a frisky filly, momentarily upright on its rear wheels. AH in an instant before he hit it; the roof buckled, split and the glass showered out of the windows spilling those children with it.

He saw them for a split second and braked hard, but knew he could not miss them. One was still clutching the racket, swinging it, the other's face a mass of scarlet pulp, a broken rag doll bouncing on the

hard surface. Disappearing.

Please God! He felt the front tyre crushing the infant body, saw in his mind the squashed form like those hedgehogs you saw flattened on the roads every morning. The crunching of frail bones, instant death. The other child was still airborne when he hit it, saw it flatten on the windscreen without breaking the glass, a gnat caught by a speeding vehicle. The wipers would knock it off in a second; they were buffeting it, bouncing back off, swiping it again with mechanical determination.

Then Ken Wilson's van ploughed into the wreckage of the Clubman and the Transit, and seconds later came a shuddering jolt as he was hit from behind. He screamed aloud, gave up trying to do anything positive. The windscreen shattered and that bloody mulch disintegrated, some of it splattering the interior of the cab.

And in that same second his own van appeared to concertina, the rear of the vehicle crushing and coming forward, his seat and harness ripped from their moorings. He was catapulted; blinding pain as the steering column shattered his chest, threw him back and then bounced him down on to the floor of the cab.

Dazed, screaming, tasting his own blood, he lay there in the semi-darkness. He heard the squeal of tortured rubber, smelled its acrid stench, the screech of tearing metal, cries of anguish. Vehicles were still running into one another, he felt the van move again, pushed forward another few yards. Shouting, screams of pain and terror.

Then silence, complete and utter for a few seconds. He did not try to move, just lay there in the bloody half-darkness trying to figure out exactly what had happened. A multi pile-up, they made the television news every so often but everybody forgot and they happened again. Vehicles travelling too close together in adverse weather conditions; people never learned, including himself. It can't happen to me, it's those other silly buggers. And suddenly he was one of those silly buggers.

Don't move, just lie still and somebody will come to help soon. I'm scared to hell to look out there, I'm not badly hurt really, just cut and bruised. His senses swam, came back again. He fought down his rising panic.

It might have been seconds or hours later - he had lost all concept of time - when he sensed rather than heard a movement in the cab. A flicker of hope, raising his head up a few inches off the ground. His eyes hurt, as if somebody was pushing a sharp instrument into them; he gasped, coughed, tasted blood. I'm here, you bloody fool. Help me. He tried to call out but the words would not come, were strangulated into a low moan.

Something moved. His vision blurred, cleared, but only partially. An arm was reaching in through the smashed cab window, feeling inside. Jesus, don't tell me you can't see me! Ken tried to shout, mustered his vocal cords for one supreme effort and managed a wheezing gurgle, experienced a sensation as if he were drowning and tasted blood again.

A fist, clenched. Erect. Some guy's got one helluva long arm, he thought. If they can't get to me why the fuck don't they start cutting into the cab?

That fist was starting to open out. The driver stared, forced his agonised eyes to work with sheer willpower. It did not look right, the arm was elongated like one of those cartoons they fed the kids every afternoon on TV; no fingers, either a malformed hand or else the berk was wearing mittens. Bloody crazy, I'll go mad in a second.

And then everything turned crazy. That hand, if it was a hand, had two tiny eyes, orbs that glinted and flickered, came forward in a sinister supple movement, a kind of mottled greenish-grey. A mouth, opening, and in those eyes Ken Wilson read hate and malevolence. And death.

The worst moment was when realisation dawned, the jig-saw pieces slotted together through a haze of pain and fear, formed a picture which left no doubt in his terror-crazed mind.

Jesus God Almighty, no! A cobra, the most fearsome and deadly of all snakes.

Its face was only a foot away from his own. He tried to press himself back against the crumpled wreckage of the cab but there was nowhere to go. The creature was gloating, prolonging the fatal strike, savouring the mental anguish of Man, its captor for so long and now at its mercy.

No, please, I don't want to hurt you. I'm only the driver.

A trick of the half-light, or did it smile, an evil elongation of that awful mouth, another movement of the hooded head. He wanted to close his eyes and shut it out but his lids appeared to have stuck. Forced to look into those flashing pinpoints, reading death there and praying that it would be quick. I'm dying anyhow, you don't have to bother to kill me. Just leave me alone and I'll be dead before long.

Background noises; engines running, people screaming for help outside in the Stygian blackness. A stench that was overpowering, the smell of burning rubber and heated metal, the smell of death.

Wilson's mind had gone numb, an instinctive anaesthetic that spared him pain at the very last, transcending the limits of human endurance. He saw the cobra, knew that it was going to kill him but suddenly it did not seem so terrible after all. He would have died anyway, maybe lingered for days, perhaps ended up on a life-support machine, clinically dead but the vital organs kept alive. A pointless exercise demonstrating Man's cruelty to Man, the law forbidding euthanasia. They wouldn't let a wounded animal suffer, they'd put it down, yet it was all right for a fellow-human to undergo indescribable agonies. A twisted philosophy. He wanted to laugh because he had beaten the System, cheated them.

The reptile struck, a sharp pain somewhere in the region of his neck, like the prick of an injection; he couldn't make up his mind whether it had bitten him or spat venom because the head was several inches away from his face. Possibly a movement too quick for the eye to follow. It didn't matter because it was all over now.

He felt the movement of its body as it crawled across him like a thick rough hosepipe being dragged over him, and then he wondered where it had gone because he could neither see it nor hear it any longer. Probably out of the opposite window.

A sensation as if he were burning up, as if somebody had injected him with acid and his veins were corroding away, and then the numbness took over again and cut out the pain, left him with a light-headedness as though he were floating weightlessly through the atmosphere. Euphoric because it was all over and it didn't hurt.

Outside the van the cobra dropped silently on to the wet tarmac and slithered away beneath the crumpled wreckage, its victim forgotten. The killing was over and now its instincts turned to survival in an alien world of hard man-made surfaces where the air was filled with pungent smoke and noises beyond its primitive comprehension.

It made it to the hard shoulder, found the long grass of the adjacent embankment and began the ascent, a powerful wary creature that underwent a new experience after a lifetime of boredom in captivity.

It tasted fear for the first time; fear that merged into anger and gave it the killing urge again.

Chapter 3

THE YOUNG police constable in the motorway patrol car felt his stomach churn as the message came over the radio. A weakness engulfed his limbs and he remembered how he used to be carsick as a child every time his parents took him out in the dark blue Maxi which they kept polished in the garage in readiness for a Sunday afternoon spin; an urge to open the door, lean out, leave a trail of vomit in their wake. He wanted to be back at HQ, a desk job, checking traffic reports, anywhere except out here.

He did not speak, turned his head to one side in case Sergeant Bufton saw how white he'd gone. The sergeant had a reputation as a right bastard, both in the station and out on the cars. Just plain nasty and sarcastic, he didn't know any other way, and a young PC was fair game.

'Ever seen a dead body, constable? I don't mean a stiff all neatly laid out in a mortuary, I mean one in a dozen different pieces that you've got to retrieve from the highway, gather 'em up in a sack and try and find out what fits where? Like a kind of jig-saw puzzle and some of them can be real teasers, but when you've been to a dozen or so such accidents you instinctively know what fits where. You'll find out before long.'

That was how Bufton had briefed young Mark Bazeley on the first morning he reported for motorway patrol duty. A week last Monday. Things had been quiet, just two or three smashes, one death but the victim had died in hospital three days later from internal injuries. Now the horror was about to start. The real horror.

'Sounds like a bad 'un, Sarge,' Bazeley tried to keep his voice even, attempted to sound almost casual. Better get in first before the bastard gives me a run-down of what to expect.

'You heard what the radio said,' Bufton shouted to make himself heard above the whine of the siren. 'A multiple pile-up. That could mean a dozen vehicles. Or fifty. We won't know until we get there and as it's only at junction twenty-two we'll be first on the scene. Another minute and a half by my reckoning. I'll count the vehicles, you count the corpses.' A laugh that was devoid of humour,

Bazeley wished there was somewhere he could vomit in private, just a quick throw-up to clear his guts and then he'd face it. His companion wasn't just being sadistic for the sake of it, it was a kind of mental barrier, a shield he was throwing up to protect the two of them. Don't think of them as people, think of them as units, units of work, and when the job's done you can put it all out of your mind. If you don't,

you'll end up in the head farm. But Bufton wouldn't put it into words, you had to read him like a complicated book to see what he was driving at. Just don't let him see you're scared.

'Here we are.' The sergeant eased his foot off the throttle, the speedo needle dropping from 80 to 70. To 60. Braking.

It was difficult to discern details through the deluge, the wet road reflecting the deep red of rear lights interspersed with the flashing blue from the police car. A tail-back of traffic, people out of their vehicles and walking down the lanes oblivious of the thunderstorm or-slowng cars and lorries.

'Idiots!' Bufton slowed, eased off the motorway and on to the hard shoulder, kept his speed down to 30 mph. 'Ghouls. AH they're interested in is gawping at mangled bodies. You get 'em at the scene of every accident. Now, it seems to start here . . .'

The police car came to a halt, warning lights and flashers left on as the two officers got out. Two or three prangs, nothing more; the bad ones would be further along where the first vehicles had collided at speed.

Bazeley's mouth was dry as they put some orange cones out. This was the easy part; take your time and follow the sergeant. He's a bastard but you need him now more than you've ever needed anybody.

The constable glanced back behind them. He could hear wailing sirens. Ambulances, fire engines and more motorway patrols were on the way. Jesus, hurry up.

The rain storm was at its peak. The thunder and lightning had passed on, left the cloudburst to follow, a deluge of water that hit the officers' orange plastic jackets with force.

Then they heard the screams of pain and terror, the hysterical cries for help. Vehicles were crunched up now, these were the ones that had taken the full force of the accident at speeds of up to 70 mph.

A van, it was impossible to recognise the make, was flattened beneath the trailer of an articulated lorry. A sheet of pressed metal; the chassis would have to be prised apart if they were going to find out who was inside. Human silhouettes. Bazeley noticed a pool of scarlet fluid being diluted by the rain and tasted bile at the back of his throat. But at least he didn't have to do anything about it.

The artic had ploughed into a big carrier, which in turn had crunched a small car; it could have been a Clubman estate but the details would be sorted out later. The young officer felt something else besides fear, sheer helplessness. I can't do anything, I can't help anybody. I'm just a bystander like these ghouls the sarge was on about, except that I don't want to be here.

A car was blazing somewhere, the thick black smoke kept low by the thunderstorm, creating a dense black fog that made everything a thousand times more terrifying; shapes that moved and screamed, came at you out of the blackness and you only saw the injuries and the blood when they got close; had you stepping carefully in case you fell headlong over a corpse. There appeared to be bodies everywhere.

Bazeley kicked something, recognised it as a severed arm as it rolled away. That was when he threw up, vomited everything out of his guts in one spouting spew and hoped that the sergeant did not see him in the smoky darkness.

And then he saw the girl. Her piercing screams had his blood running cold and when she came staggering out of the darkness he almost turned and ran. Oh God, she had to be hurt bad, he didn't want to see, didn't want to have her clinging to him and bleeding all over him.

Miraculously she wasn't bleeding, in fact she did not appear to be injured at all. He stared at her with smarting eyes and wondered for a second if his brain was playing tricks on him, if he wasn't up to all this and something inside him had snapped.

She could not have been more than twenty. Long blonde hair that fell below her shoulders and a figure that any model would have been proud of. So beautiful. And naked, except for a shoe on her left foot.

She was screaming hysterically, clutching at her stomach, bent double, straightening up again, but even in her crazed agonised state she recognised a police officer, knew that he might be able to help her.

Police Constable Bazeley stared, mentally recoiled, but there was no blood coming from the girl. Maybe her injuries were internal, in which case it wouldn't be so bad for him. He would help her, stay with her until the ambulances arrived. It was a let-off, not a pleasant one, but better than tending injuries that spouted blood all over you whilst you tried to stem an arterial wound. Coward! OK, I'm a coward but I'll try and calm this bird.

He reached out for her just as she stumbled, slipped through his grasp and fell face down on the tarmac. Immediately her body was convulsing, doubling up, her toes on the unclad foot curling inwards in sheer agony. She was clutching at her abdomen.

Mark Bazeley felt her pain as he grasped her, every nerve and muscle in her lithe body at breaking point as it took the strain of the ultimate in pain, shuddering. Crazed, she tried to fight him as he rolled her over, her white even teeth clenched as though in the throes of a fit, spittle frothing from her soft red lips.

For a split second his mind shut off and he saw her as a young man sees a beautiful naked girl. The shapely thighs parted, legs wide and kicking frantically as though she had just hit a climax. Moans that he wished were orgasmic cries of delight and the two of them anywhere else but here. Her hands came off her stomach, her fists clenched and she pummelled at him crazily, those groans escalating into screams. Back to reality, she was in unbelievable pain, probably dying.

'Take it easy.' What a bloody stupid thing to say. He began to smooth his fingers over her rain washed slippery flesh, probing for an injury of some kind, a swelling maybe. Anything. And all the time she rained blows on him, caught him full in the face and he tasted blood in his mouth.

She was writhing, jerking, sobbing, and in the end he caught her wrists, had to kneel on her to prevent her from twisting out of his grip. What the hell do I do now, slap her across the face? Assaulted by a police officer at the scene of the accident, attempted rape. Christ, Sarge, where the hell are you just when I need you most?

But Bufton had gone off into the rain and smoke, doing what hardened experienced officers do at the scene of motorway carnage. You're on your own, copper.

The girl was desperately trying to tug free of her captor, managed to drag a hand away and those fingers shot back to her belly just above the triangle of pubic hair. The moment she made contact with the flesh her lips parted to emit a piercing shriek of pain.

'What happened?' the policeman had to shout to make himself heard above the screams from around him and the banshee-like noises of the ambulances which were nosing their way down the slip road. 'What happened?'

She muttered something and he bent his head low in an attempt to hear, half thought that she might attempt to bite him. Her lips were moving again, frothy with saliva, grinding her teeth.

'Bitten.' She got the word out and there was no mistaking the sheer terror in her rolling eyes.

He stared at her, let the word sink in. It was nonsense.

'Bitten?' His mouth was close to her ear, shouting. 'Bitten by what, for Christ's sake?'

The expression of terror was back on her pallid features, her eyes rolling. Her head moved from side to side, and the hands which had punched him now clutched at him. Her lips were moving again, fighting the pain to get the word out.

'Snakes?'

She was delirious of course. She had to be. 'Take it easy, I'll try and get you to an ambulance.'

She groaned and her body went as taut as a steel hawser, took the strain and then reached breaking point. She came off the ground like an uncoiling spring, convulsing so that her spine was in terrible danger of snapping, a landed fish desperate to flap its way back to the water. She hit the ground, rolled, came up to her knees in a grotesque, unnatural posture, dug her fingers deep into the flesh of her lower stomach as though she were intent on clawing out some cancerous growth.

Pain and terror, doubled up yet jerking her head from side to side, peering fearfully into the darkness with eyes that bulged unnaturally. Bazeley watched, helpless. Where the fuck were the ambulances? There was one stopped about fifty yards away, some a little further down, stretcher-bearers hardly knowing who to take first.

'Hey!' he called out, but gave up. Even if they heard him, which they weren't likely to in all this din, they wouldn't be taking orders from a rookie copper. You're wasting your time; maybe if you carry her across to them they'll have to put her in one of the ambulances.

He turned back to her, saw that her fit had subsided; she lay slumped on the ground, muscles quivering after the strain. Her eyes were closed but they flickered open as he knelt beside her.

'Relax, I'm going to try and carry you to one of the ambulances.'

'It's no good.' She tried to smile and in her expression he read a resignation to death. 'I'm ... done for. Snakes... lots of them . . . loose on the motorway.'

'We'll round 'em up afterwards,' he said, sliding an arm under her buttocks, another behind her shoulders. 'Now easy does it.'

He lifted her up, stood a moment to get his balance and that was when he felt her go limp. Her head fell back, arms dropped and dangled. Oh God, no! His dilemma arose from his inexperience: should he lay her down again, give her the kiss of life, or should he hurry to one of those ambulances, let the experts in first aid take over? He chose the latter.

God, this had to be hell, it could not be happening anywhere else. Flames were raging where vehicles had caught fire, a thick pall of smoke reduced visibility still further and the rain lashed you mercilessly. And mingled with the choking atmosphere were the screams of the injured, blasphemous curses thrown at

ambulancemen and policemen because they could not be everywhere at the same time. She's dead, a little voice inside PC Bazeley whispered, bitten by a snake, died in excruciating pain. You couldn't have done anything for her. Damn it, she's only passed out, fainted with agony. And one place you won't find snakes is on an English motorway. Get that into your thick skull before you go crazy.

The smoke was becoming thicker, burning tyres scaring your lungs, smarting your eyes. There was an ambulance not too far away, even this evil vapour could not screen its flashing beacon. Head that way. And hurry.

A hose was stretched across the road between some mangled cars; he sensed it rather than saw it, and went to step over it, swore as he stumbled, almost fell and dropped his burden. Damn, it wasn't easy in these conditions, your judgement was impaired. That fucking hose . . .

Something encircled his left leg, tightened. He kicked at it with his right foot, stared down in disbelief, felt the hairs on the back of his neck start to prickle. That hose, it had coiled, had trapped his leg with such pressure that it was already beginning to cut off the circulation. The firemen must be rolling it out and it had become lodged on some obstruction, kicked back.

It moved again, a flexible thing that came alive, whipped upwards and threw itself around his waist; he felt the pressure on his ribs, a constriction that threatened to crush and break them.

An inarticulate cry of terror escaped him as he saw the end of the hose in silhouette, a small slender head with eyes that shone redly in the glow from the burning vehicles. It shifted, secured an even tighter hold that virtually halted his breathing and looped round him again, pinioning his arms.

Mark Bazeley screamed but nobody heard him. His second shriek was merely a wheeze as his supply of air was cut off. The girl fell from his arms, thudded lifelessly on to the tarmac and sprawled full length, death sparing her this fresh horror.

The policeman realised only too well what it was that was swiftly crushing his bones and throttling the life out of him. He'd seen the species at the zoo, watched it in more spectacular settings on the television. He thought, oh my God, the girl was telling the truth! This can't be happening.

His ribs cracked and he knew that it was. Breathless, tasting blood, a roaring in his ears and his vision blurred and streaked with crimson as he felt himself being pulped. Consciousness was slipping from him, he had given up struggling, just wondered with his last thoughts where the sarge was.

The python relaxed its hold the moment it felt its prey go limp, uncoiled itself with amazing rapidity for its eighteen-foot length. Wary but hungry, capable of devouring a waterbuck, it began to swallow the corpse. There were other bodies it could have taken more easily but it was primarily a hunter and only ate its own kill.

The creature was confused, frightened by the noise and the smell of fire and now that its hunger was satisfied its instinct was to find a place of safety. A strange land of artificial surfaces, yet beyond these were grass and trees, and something else which it had never before known and yet had craved for freedom.

Chapter 4

THE TALL police superintendent had all the hallmarks of one who had not slept in 36 hours. His sallow face was etched with lines; there were discoloured puffy patches beneath his red-rimmed eyes. Tight-lipped he consulted a sheaf of papers on the desk before him in the temporary headquarters which had hastily been installed adjoining the small police station in the sleepy little village of Stainforth.

The set-up, the procedure, were all too familiar. Last summer a child had gone missing; it had taken them a week to find her body buried on the extensive moorland. Before that it had been a gunman holding an elderly couple hostage, and it had taken the police three days to talk him into surrendering. Now Stainforth would be in the public eye.

A crisis. You dropped routine work, devoted yourself mentally and physically to it, snatched food and sleep if you got the chance; if not, you drew on every bodily reserve until you dropped. This time it was different, oh Christ it was something you didn't expect ever to come across except in far-fetched movies. Dangerous snakes were on the loose in a countryside which was tailor-made for them - moorlands, woodlands - and there was a heat wave to keep them alive. A snap of cold weather would in all probability finish off the reptiles but according to the Met Office that was unlikely to happen in the near future, and before the snakes were found a number of humans might die. A sudden thunderstorm had been responsible for a motorway pile-up (no, the stupid bloody drivers were to blame for that, but right now that wasn't important), and as a result a vanload of poisonous snakes had crashed and the reptiles were on the loose. Frightened angry killers. A police officer had been crushed to death by an African rock python and a girl had been fatally bitten by a rattler. There might be other victims but there had been fifteen mutilated corpses, three as yet unidentified, out of that carnage and they could not be sure, might never be, if the snakes had got any of them.

Chief Superintendent Burlington glanced up at the others in the room. The clean-shaven PC Ken Aylott, Stainforth's resident bobby; you read resentment on the young copper's face, a chip on his shoulder because he wanted the action of the big city, got the crazy notion in his head that the Stainforth posting was a kind of demotion. Maybe all this would change his mind. It was up to him. It could be the big test.

Colonel Marks from Stainforth Barracks two miles away, a surprisingly mild-mannered man with rimless spectacles; but he wouldn't have got his rank for nothing. The police would need the soldiers and somebody to lead them.

Chief Inspector Watts, he would be in charge of operations outside the organisations room; a good man to have in the field, tough and meticulous, an invaluable blend of qualities.

And the civilian, Price. Burlington wasn't keen on civvy street help, a personal opinion which he was diplomatic enough to keep to himself. He let his gaze rest on the young man for a few seconds. Insignificant, like a lot of others today; he could not be more than twenty-two or twenty-three. A degree in zoology, he would not be here otherwise, with a specialist knowledge of poisonous snakes. A lot of good it had done him, just given him some kind of status on the dole. I'm an expert on snakes but I can't get a job. Might as well be an unemployed labourer. Burlington smiled cynically. Faded jeans and a T-shirt, a roll-your-own-man judging by the packet of Rizlas he was fidgeting with. Uncertain of himself;

could be on drugs too. An upper-class hippy, his dark beard could do with a trim to tidy it up and his hair wouldn't miss a couple of inches shorn off it. Clean, though, so he obviously washed regularly or maybe he had had a spruce-up specially for this meeting, felt important at being called in to help the police. Burlington thought that maybe they'd have to take him down a peg or two to get the balance right but they'd give him a chance to prove himself first. 'Strewth, who else here really knew the enemy they were up against?'

'Right, gentlemen,' the superintendent's voice was low, tired, and it was going to be very hot again today which was a daunting prospect when you had not seen your bed since the night before last. 'We all know what we're up against, killer snakes that have already claimed the lives of two people.' He dropped his spectacles back onto the bridge of his nose and consulted his file once more. 'We have done our best to compile an accurate list of the escaped reptiles. I cannot guarantee it and neither can that Heath Robinson zoo. Apparently, various means of transport were used to take the zoo animals away and nobody really knows which vehicles took which. Consequently, we encountered an additional delay whilst the recipients of species were contacted and our inventory has had to be compiled by a process of elimination. Anyway, to the best of our knowledge we are hunting,' he paused, flipped over a page, 'one African rock python, presumably the one that killed PC Bazeley. A pair of western diamondback rattlesnakes which apparently kill more people in the United States than any other poisonous reptile. One cobra. One African mamba. A pair of coral snakes. And one Russell's viper. Eight in all. They have to be found and destroyed as quickly as possible because until they are,' his eyes closed momentarily, 'nobody in the area surrounding Stainforth village is safe. It will mean meticulous searching of the moors and woods by police and army with shotguns. There is no question of trying to recapture the snakes. They must be shot and we must risk the lives of tracker dogs to find them. Perhaps,' he smiled wryly, trying to exude optimism he did not feel, 'we shall come upon them quickly and blast them before they can do any harm.'

'I doubt it, sir.' John Price spoke softly, an interruption which had the superintendent pushing his heavy rimmed spectacles up on to his forehead and glowering from beneath bushy eyebrows.

'Why do you doubt it, Mr Price?'

'Because these snakes are a variety of species from all over the world. No way is a mixture like this gregarious. Their hatred for one another is as great as their hatred towards Man. I would think that the chances of finding them all in a small area are very remote. I'd like to think I'm wrong, sir, but I very much doubt it.'

'I see.' Superintendent Burlington passed a hand across his forehead. He had not realised until now that he had a headache, a dull throbbing behind the eyes. 'Thank you, Mr Price, for that information. At least we now have no illusions about the size of the task that faces us. Well, I wish you the best of luck, gentlemen. I take it, Colonel, that you have already discussed with Mr Price your plans for searching the area.'

'We are both agreed that in all probability the snakes will head for high ground. The moors are a wild stretch and that is where we shall begin.' The uniformed colonel consulted his watch. 'Fortunately the days are long, and we have ample men at our disposal. I would hope to finish combing the moorland before dark.'

'Good. And now, unfortunately, I must give a press conference. You can imagine how some of the more sensational dailies will blow the whole thing up. An awful lot of people in Britain are not going to sleep easy in their beds until every one of those snakes is dead.'

John Price followed the others outside, pausing in the doorway to glance back at the senior police officer. Burlington's dislike of the zoologist had not gone unnoticed. Whatever happened John knew he was the odd man out. If they were successful the police and army would take the credit; if they failed they had a scapegoat. He accepted his lot with a shrug.

So much for a week's vacation with Aunt Elsie, his mother's sister, his last surviving relative. One came to the countryside for a few days away from it all and found oneself caught up in something too awful to contemplate. They didn't realise, none of them, and there was no way of making them until they met up with the escaped killers. Each and every one of those snakes was a cunning and deadly killer, a master of camouflage, an expert in ambush. They remembered their long incarceration, in an inexplicable way they were seeking revenge.

To begin with they would run.

Then they would turn and fight.

Chapter 5

ELSIE HARRISON was in the twilight of her life; at seventy-six the only thing to look forward to was the visit of her nephew, John Price, the only person in the world she had. Not that the villagers of Stainforth were unkind to her, but when you were getting on the only people who really cared for you were your own kin. The loneliness of old age had closed in on her this last couple of years or so.

Small and frail, her white hair tied up in a bun on the back of her head, Elsie walked with two sticks. She had built her hopes on a replacement hip early last year, had even gone into hospital for the op. and then they had shattered her by telling her that her heart wasn't strong enough to stand it and had sent her home to be a cripple for the rest of her life. In due course she came to accept the fact that she would not be able to dispense with her sticks, and she endured the worsening pain and decreasing mobility because the next step would be a wheelchair and that meant going into a home. And when that happened she wanted to die.

After Bert had passed away (he had lingered on for a whole year following that terrible afternoon when he had suffered a stroke in the garden), she sold the cottage and bought this small bungalow on the edge of the village. She missed Daffodil Cottage with its quaint tumbledown features and the ivy over the front porch, but there was no way she could have kept it on and the garden would have to have gone untended and Bert wouldn't have liked that. Neither, she winced at the thought, would he have approved of what those people from Manchester who bought it had done to it. They had completely destroyed its character, knocked down walls, built a modern extension, one of those pine structures that might have come all the way from Canada, turned it into something that looked like a log-cabin. And they weren't interested in gardening, either. They had landscaped the whole place, built hideous rockeries and made

slab paths; there was not a vegetable in sight, and they had ripped out all the soft fruit bushes too. Vandalism. Perhaps it was as well that her husband was not here to see it. Just thinking of Bert brought tears to her eyes and she hoped her Maker would decide that it was time to send for her, too, before long.

The district nurse had tried to persuade her to have one of those aluminium walking-frames. Certainly not, she had told the rather sharp-tongued woman who always thought she knew best and that you had no right to have an opinion of your own, when she needed that she did not want to be here anymore. Elsie would manage with her sticks, she would defy them all right up to the very end.

But this was no time to indulge in self-pity with John here for a few days. She worried a lot about the boy; all this college education and he finished up no better off than any of the other youths out of work who didn't have a qualification or a skill to their name. Young Doyle out of the village was another example. He'd got five 'A' levels and a lot of good it had done him. Never worked since he left school until in the end he got so fed up with doing nothing that he'd built up a gardening round for himself. All credit to the boy but gardening was a hobby like it had been with Bert, not a way of earning your living. It was just labouring, nothing more.

Elsie hobbled across to the kettle and switched it on. My, how she missed her old Rayburn with the kettle bubbling on top of it all the time, but that was the price you had to pay for growing old.

She wondered how long John was going to be away. He'd said probably most of the day. It wasn't fair, the police dragging him away from her like that to help them look for these escaped snakes. Horrible things snakes, whatever was John thinking about when he elected to study them at university? His mother and father should never have allowed it; they should have taken a firmer line with him. Not enough discipline, but she would probably have been equally soft with him if he had been her son. She missed not having children of her own, that was another cruel twist life had dealt her but she'd make do with her nephew. She wished he would shave that awful beard off, though. And have his hair cut properly. If he didn't like wearing a suit then why on earth couldn't he settle for a nice smart sports jacket and flannels instead of those disreputable jeans? He needed to smarten himself up and then at least he'd stand a chance of getting a job. All the same, she mustn't nag him too much or else he might not come and stay with her again, and that was an unbearable thought.

She poured herself a cup of tea, hobbled back to her chair by the gas-fire with it. At least in this hot weather she didn't need to light the gas and that was a relief. After selling the cottage and buying this bungalow she had to rely solely on her pension.

Her thoughts turned to the snakes again. What a terrible thing to happen. PC Aylott had called round earlier in the day to warn her, warn everybody in Stainforth to stay indoors and keep the doors and windows shut. Well, you couldn't really do that this weather, the heat would suffocate you. Those snakes wouldn't be looking to enter houses, she told herself, they would be heading for the woods and the moors, as far from human habitation as they could get.

She dozed, aware of the flies buzzing on the windows, a kind of soothing summer sound, perhaps the only redeemable feature the filthy little insects had. Later on she would give them a squirt of fly-killer but she couldn't be bothered right now.

Footsteps. She opened her eyes, listened, tried to will them to turn in off the pavement and crunch their way up the short gravel path to the front door. But they carried on, faded away in the direction of the village, sank her hopes.

Goodness, it was almost dusk, she must have fallen asleep. Surely John wouldn't be long now. She began to worry, it was almost half past nine. If he wasn't home by ten then she would go to the fence and shout for the Howarths, ask them to phone the police station for news of her nephew. The Howarths were always very good about phoning for her; she really ought to get a telephone of her own put in before the winter in case of an emergency. She'd give John until ten o'clock, no longer.

The grandfather clock in the corner ticked loudly. Somehow it was out of place in this modern bungalow but she wouldn't get rid of it. You had to cling on to a few things that reminded you of happier days.

Ten to ten. Elsie Harrison sucked her lips, it really was getting quite dark outside now. She listened hard, but there did not seem to be anybody about outside at all. Probably the villagers had taken the policeman's advice literally and were all remaining indoors. She wondered if the Howarths might have their windows shut and be unable to hear her. She must do her best to rouse them.

She reached for her sticks, had to exert considerable effort to haul herself up out of the easy chair, felt a wave of slight dizziness as she came upright. That was her blood pressure but she wasn't going to tell the nurse about her dizzy turns; she knew too much about her already.

She felt for the light switch, pressed it down. The strip light in the ceiling flickered hesitantly, took a second or two before it gave off that dazzling white light that lit up every corner of the room. Elsie Harrison blinked, had to wait for her eyes to adjust. One unsteady step in the direction of the door and then she stopped, gave a little cry of fear.

The snake was lying on the mat just inside the slightly open back door. Motionless, it might have been dead, or a stuffed woollen draught-stopper like those they sold for 75p down at the church rummage sales; except that its eyes moved, glittered and winked evilly in the fluorescent lighting.

The reptile was three feet, maybe four feet long, olive coloured, tapering from the blunt squat snout down to a fine slender tail. Now it moved, almost a lazy stretching of its entire body. See just how long I am and I'm not dead or stuffed. I'm alive!

Elsie Harrison's dizziness returned causing her to sway unsteadily and then it passed. Her heart began to pound as though it were deliberately racing against the ticking of the grandfather clock in the corner, triggering off her fear. She wanted to scream, a piercing cry that would fetch the Howarths round on the run, but her throat had gone dry and a kind of temporary seizure paralysed her vocal cords.

She glanced about her. The snake barred her escape via the door and she could not reach the window without going near the fearsome intruder. Just the corner behind the chair she had vacated, nowhere else. She was trapped.

Keeping her eyes firmly on the reptile she moved awkwardly, unsteadily backwards, until finally she had the chair between herself and her adversary. She was breathing heavily and there was a sharp pain in her chest.

She leaned on the upholstery, clasping a walking stick in either hand, wondering if she had the strength to strike a blow if the thing advanced. She'd darned well have a go if it came any nearer. Oh, please God, send John home soon.

She would have to shout out to warn him when she heard him coming or else he would walk right into it. And all she could manage at the moment was a hoarse whisper.

'Go away, you devil. Go away.'

The snake did not move, just lay there stretched out across the doormat, watching her. Waiting. She wondered what kind it was, some venomous viper from the swamps of somewhere-or-other, no doubt. Her flesh crawled and her heartbeat was speeding up even faster, hurting her with those fast little hammer blows inside her chest that she had felt this past six months but had kept to herself.

The light wasn't as bright as it usually was, quite dim in fact. Perhaps the fitting was going, due for replacement.

Elsie leaned her full weight on the back of the chair. She couldn't stand much longer. The pain in her hip had started up viciously but it wasn't as bad as the one in her chest. Oh Lord, she couldn't stand it much longer. 'Go away, you devil, and let me sit down. D'you hear me, go away?'

And then something inside her seemed to explode, an agonising pain as though she had been delivered a physical blow, throwing her back against the wall behind her. She cried out, a pathetic little shriek of terror and the dimness turned to blackness. She slumped forward and the chair rolled sideways on its flimsy castors, Elsie Harrison pitching headlong, unconscious before she hit the floor.

Even then the snake did not move. Possibly there was a slight change of reptilian expression on its blunt features. One of puzzlement.

It was after nine o'clock before the shotgun-carrying searchers had finished combing the moorland above Stainforth. Hot and weary, their feet painful after the necessity of wearing knee-length protective rubber boots, disillusioned. The dogs lay panting, licking at tufts of grass in the hope of obtaining a droplet of moisture but there was none. A barren wilderness where only the heather and bracken survived, bilberry bushes loaded with red fruit that would ripen in a month or so, the domain of the grouse and the buzzard, even the free-ranging sheep preferring the lower slopes where there were patches of shade to be found.

John Price had had his misgivings from the start, a feeling that one sometimes got that it was all going to be a waste of time. You sensed you were in the wrong place but with no alternative you had to start somewhere.

The snakes were definitely not on the moor unless they had gone to ground somewhere and it was unlikely that every one of the escaped eight reptiles would have done that. Of course, the dogs had no idea what they were hunting, they could not be expected to. They were the sacrificial victims; it was inevitable that should one of them come upon a reptile it would attack in ignorance and get bitten. There was no other way; canine lives were expendable, human lives were not.

They beat out the three-thousand-acre, triangular moorland from its apex, the furthestmost point. John had to agree with Colonel Marks that that was the logical thing to do even though the slight breeze was blowing towards the ragged line of police and army. You knew then, when you finally arrived at the rocky outcrop overlooking Stainforth village, that the poisonous reptiles were not on the moor. A process of elimination. Tomorrow it would be the grassy slopes down to the arable land that would be thrashed out. On day three it would be the barley and oilseed rape fields. And after that...

Nightfall was the snakes' greatest ally. They could have been lying low further down by day and with the coming of darkness they might start to move. Upwards. So tomorrow whilst the searchers toiled down below, their prey could be safely ensconced several hundred feet above them up on the moorland.

But not all of them, John Price was adamant about that. They were not hunting a flock of snakes, rather

six very different species. The pairs would stay together in all probability. But nobody really knew, they could only guess. The killers were in a strange alien environment and there was no way of knowing how they might react. There was no book of rules to consult.

John heard the whine of the helicopters again. The choppers were flying low, sweeping the grassy slopes, determined not to give up until the light was gone altogether. A long shot, but when lives were at stake you played every card you had.

'We'll have to call it a day,' the sweat-grimed colonel was polishing his spectacles, dejection in his tone, head bowed as though their failure to find the snakes was a personal affront to his own rank and status. 'We'll make an early start in the morning. 7 a.m. Everybody assemble at the police station. It's the hillsides and slopes tomorrow, working back towards the village. The choppers will be out before then, scouring. We can only hope.'

Chief Inspector Watts nodded but declined to comment. Everybody knew the position, the colonel had said everything there was to be said. Surely the reptiles had to show up somewhere; the worrying factor was just where.

It was 10.05 when John Price disembarked from the camouflaged army Land Rover and began to walk the length of the village in the direction of Aunt Elsie's bungalow. His feet dragged but mentally he was still alert. On a balmy summer evening such as this he would have expected to see families enjoying the late evening in deck-chairs in their gardens or taking a stroll before going to bed. The main street was deserted, lights showing in some of the houses on either side.

He passed the Rising Sun. The beer-garden at the side was deserted, an air of desolation about the array of white-painted tables and chairs, an empty glass tipped over with insects crawling inside it after the dregs; you had the feeling that it had been like that since yesterday, that nobody had ventured out there. Stay indoors and be safe, never mind the stifling atmosphere, that's a small price to pay for your life.

There were people in the bar, he heard their voices and the wafting aroma of beer almost tempted him inside. God, he could swallow a pint of lager at one go. But the thought of his aunt all alone dissuaded him. She would doubtless be worrying, probably had been all day and he was later than he had anticipated. The trouble with Elsie Harrison was that she was always so precise - what time will you be home, John? Even when he just popped out for a quick half.

Between ten and half past meant she started looking out for him at five to ten. He had not failed to notice the pack of low-alcohol shandies lined up on the shelf in the fridge, a subtle move on her part to keep him in at nights, depriving him of that one half-hour of freedom down at the Rising Sun. But nobody had bargained for this crisis. And John Price would stay in Stainforth until every one of those poisonous creatures was accounted for.

He noted that the living-room and kitchen lights were on in the bungalow, experienced a fleeting sense of guilt. Like the times he used to come and stay when he was a teenager and he'd been to a disco at the hall which did not finish until the early-hours. And a fatigued Aunt Elsie was waiting up for him. You know I can't possibly go to sleep until you're safe back, John. Emotional blackmail.

He pushed open the gate and his booted feet crunched on the gravel. Next door was in darkness and their car wasn't parked outside where it usually was. Probably they had done what quite a lot of the residents had done, fled Stainforth until it was all over. You couldn't blame anybody for that. John wished there was somewhere his aunt could go in the meantime but he knew only too well that no way would Aunt Elsie be persuaded to vacate her home, not even in the threat of a nuclear war. 'This is the place I'll

die in, John,' she had told him some time ago. 'The only time I'll leave here is when they carry me out feet first.'

He slowed his step, saw the light shafting out through the partly open back door. Now that was naughty of her, hadn't he reminded her before he left that morning to keep all doors and windows shut?

He pushed open the door, saw the empty kitchen, a plate and cup on the draining board. Silence except for the hum of the fridge. Even those over-sweet commercial shandies would be welcome right now.

'Aunt Elsie,' he called. 'I'm back.'

No answer. Still, she was becoming a trifle hard of hearing even if she refused to admit it. She was probably asleep in the armchair in the other room. I didn't hear you come in, John. What time is it?

The clock on the cooker read 10.20. He strode to the door which led through to the living-room; that was open a few inches too. He flung it wide and stood aghast, petrified at the scene which greeted him, his brain struggling to accept what his eyes saw.

The old lady was dead, there was no doubt about that. She lay face downwards on the carpet, her white hair having flipped out of that bun, spraying across her head and shoulders in the manner of a shroud which tried to hide the corpse it covered. The grandfather clock ticked loudly, steadily. Mournfully.

Even as his brain registered shock, he saw the snake. It was on the mat only a few inches from his feet, a long length of serpent that did not move, just saw and was afraid because it had wandered out of its own environment into the domain of Man.

John Price did not hesitate. He stooped and with one lightning movement he grabbed it just below the head, scooped it up and held it out at arm's length, felt its futile struggles begin, its helpless wriggles.

'You bastard,' he hissed, 'of all the land you've got to roam in peace you have to come in here and kill an old lady.'

Swiftly he carried it across the kitchen to the open back door and with one deft movement he hurled it out into the night, watched the shadows swallow up the four-foot-long thrashing creature, heard it thud softly on to the lawn.

He stood there in the doorway, trembling and feeling slightly sick. Then he came to a decision and with feet that dragged he began to retrace his steps down the main street and into the village.

They were still drinking in the Rising Sun. Nobody could blame them for that but when you had a personal tragedy you instinctively resented the way life went on without so much as a hiccup. Only a few lights showed in the houses now. Bed was a good place to be and in your own house with the doors locked you felt safe. You kept your feet under the sheets even on a hot night because that way nothing could come up from under the bed and entwine your ankle, slither up you and bite you.

'You still around!' there was sarcasm and resentment in PC Aylott's voice as John Price entered the office.

The constable was checking out a sheet of 'snake sightings'. Ten of them, inevitable but all figments of the imagination. Maybe some of them were hoaxes but they all had to be checked out. There was a minority of the general public that was a bloody nuisance when any major crisis cropped up. Sensation seekers,

downright bloody liars and a sprinkling of idiots who over-reacted.

'Elsie Harrison's dead.' John thought his voice seemed to come from somewhere a long way away. A whisper that echoed, mocked. Dead . . . dead . . . dead.

The policeman's expression altered, his pale blue eyes narrowing, thin lips barking one word, a question. 'How?'

'A snake.' John's ears were roaring, his tongue felt dry and swollen. 'She . . .'

'A snake.' Aylott stiffened and his expression said, 'You better not be lying, laddie, because I've got a whole sheet of reports here that are downright time-wasting fucking lies.'

'It was only a grass snake,' the other's voice was low but he had got it back under control. 'Got lost, or maybe it was just curious, there could be any one of a dozen reasons. Anyway, it must have wandered into the house and ... and it gave my aunt a heart attack.'

'I see.' Ken Aylott stared at the wall beyond his visitor, tried not to show his disappointment and anger. This was all he needed, a harmless snake adding to his problems. The villagers would panic. He needed to catch some sleep too.

'You killed it?'

'No, I threw it outside.'

'You didn't kill it!'

'There wasn't any point, not even after it had killed my aunt. How the hell was it supposed to know everybody would be scared of it when in all probability it was terrified itself?' 'I'll come back with you and take a look.' Aylott stood up, sighed. And kids like this got degrees for studying bloody snakes, he reflected. So what the hell am I doing working the clock round as a village bobby and can't even get promotion?

Chapter 6

KEITH DOYLE had overcome the depression of the unemployed this last six weeks. No longer did he feel a reject, tossed on to the scrap heap, a leech on society, every week when he collected his benefit. You could sit around for ever waiting for something to crop up but if you had any bottle you got up off your arse and did what Muhammad was eventually forced to do.

The idea of a gardening round appealed to him. It was creative and you could see something for your efforts. With two full-time gardeners already in Stainforth there didn't seem much chance of edging in but Keith had already spotted both their weaknesses. There was a niche awaiting the right man.

Old Fred Stokes was an experienced gardener but he was a stubborn old bugger. You took him on for £2.50 an hour but he was the boss. Some folks liked their lawns cut short and kept that way but Fred maintained that you needed a minimum of half an inch of grass growth at all times so that was what you got whether you liked it or not: he did everything his way. The Evershams preferred their rose beds dug over twice a year but Fred insisted on hoeing them instead because he claimed that digging damaged the roots of the bushes. And if you sacked Fred then you only had one alternative - William. Unless, of course, you decided to look after your own horticulture. Anyway, the Evershams got rid of Fred eventually because Peter Eversham was another guy who liked his own way.

William was big and strong, approaching forty, and as willing a worker as you would find anywhere; a workhorse that toiled eight hours a day for £2 an hour; but he had difficulty in distinguishing weeds from flowers. 'If in doubt, pull it out' was his motto. He weeded laboriously but if he left a tuft or two of unsightly grass sticking up in the border then it didn't really matter. If you wanted some planting done then you had to be sure to instruct William to weed the border first; he had been sacked by the Willetts because he planted the autumn bulbs straight into a weed-covered bed. Neither was he particular about raking where he had trodden, so even if you got your border weeded it looked as if some of Farmer Mason's cows had wandered in off the road and trampled it down for you.

So Keith Doyle struck a middle course. For £2.75 an hour you got the job done as you wanted it and tidily finished. Much to old Fred's chagrin Keith took over up at the Evershams' and the recommendation of the wealthy company director fed to him getting regular weekly gardening jobs at four other executive-style dwellings in Stainforth's 'commuter-belt'.

With the summer at its height, the weeds and hedges growing prolifically, Keith Doyle was grossing £110 per week. It would slow down in the winter months of course, but doubtless the likes of the Evershams would be glad of a general handyman to do odd jobs about the place.

'You're asking for trouble lurking about in weed-covered borders.' PC Aylott had stopped him on his way to the Evershams' that morning, and run a suspicious eye over the old van's tyres. 'The snakes could be anywhere.'

'I'll watch out for 'em,' Keith smiled, ran his fingers through his mop of unruly red hair and mocked the policeman with his clear blue eyes. 'Chop 'em in half with the hoe.'

'On your own head be it,' Aylott turned away, called back over his shoulder, 'Neither a hoe nor five 'A' levels are much of a protection against pythons and rattlesnakes.'

Keith dismissed the policeman from his mind. The other had a chip on his shoulder because he hadn't got sergeant's stripes, and thought the people of Stainforth were a community of country bumpkins. Maybe the Force were just trying to cool Aylott's ardour by leaving him in Stainforth; didn't want him getting officious when promotion finally came his way. And in the meantime he was getting up everybody's nose.

The young man turned in through the stone-pillared gateway that was the entrance to the large black and white timbered residence where Peter Eversham and his wife lived. The Jag wasn't parked in front of the house so maybe the owner had left early for the city. Or else Cynthia, his blonde attractive second wife, had persuaded him to take her to a hotel well away from Stainforth until the snakes had all been shot. That was OK by Keith except that he would not be paid until they returned.

He parked his van, opened up the back to get at his tools. A good gardener always carries his own tools, he told everybody, not like Fred Stokes virtually demanding that his employers carry a full range of implements and that every one bore the Spear and Jackson trademark.

He pulled out a long, three-pronged hoe, held it spear-like. Yes, I'll chop the buggers in half if I sec 'em. Now, what was that ditty they used to recite at school about snakes . . . Oh yes, he remembered it now, chanted aloud.

Old King Nick had a six-foot dick,

He showed it to the lady next door,

She thought it was a snake

And hit it with a rake,

And now it's only two foot four.

Keith laughed. Snakes didn't worry him much because it was most unlikely that they would be hanging around the village. They would be up on the moors. He could hear a helicopter in the distance. Best of luck, mate.

As he started work on the circular border adjacent to the large lush green front lawn, a more serious expression had him pursing his lips. He saw in his mind Kirsten, his twenty-year-old dark-haired girlfriend. Kirsten's father was a bank manager in the city, a real snob, and thought his daughter could do better for herself (the family) than latch on to a jobbing gardener, even one with a string of 'A' levels. They were putting pressure on Kirsten to finish with Keith. And Keith had an additional problem, one that might bring matters to a head, make or break his relationship with the girl. Kirsten's period was a week overdue and last night she had been almost distraught about it.

'I could be pregnant,' she had sobbed on the verge of panic. 'You know how regular I am as a rule.'

'It could be due to a lot of things,' he had replied, but didn't give any reasons because he couldn't think of any. 'You'll probably start tomorrow.' 'And if I don't?' 'Well, the day after then.'

'A lot of help you are. Daddy will murder me, you too. You know how he disapproves of you.'

'Just because I don't have a desk job and I've decided to work rather than just sit around on my bum like thousands of other unemployed youths.'

'He doesn't see it that way. He says you're an embarrassment to him, especially now you're doing the Evershams' garden because the Evershams are important customers at his bank.'

'Big deal.' Keith felt icy fingers clutching at his heart, Kirsten being wrenched from him by parents who had dominated her all her life. 'Maybe your folks would like me to do their garden for them.'

'You're impossible,' she snapped. 'Anyway, I don't think you're pregnant.'

'You don't think!' She almost screamed. 'And what do you know about it? But I'll tell you this, Keith, we continue going out together and if I let you have sex with me again, you're going to wear something every

time. None of this not taking precautions a few days either side of my period. If I have another period!

Keith would have liked to phone Kirsten this morning. Just to put his mind at rest. Or otherwise. He could have gone into the house to make the call, there was a key kept just inside the garage, but he would have to think about it. It was something that would require a certain amount of courage. Kirsten worked at the drapery shop in town and Mrs Holloway, the proprietor, was a peculiar old bird. 'I don't like my staff having private calls during working hours,' Keith decided he would leave it a bit, think about it some more. In the end he would probably wait until tonight, meet Kirsten down by the church, if she came. Lately there were too many bloody ifs to everything.

He attacked the weeds, a legacy from old Fred's days. A marvellous tool the hoe, cutting them all out. You either left them to wither and die in the sun or else you raked them up and carted them away in the barrow. Keith did the latter.

Ten o'clock was 'bait-time'. Bait was a cup of tea out of a flask and a sandwich. Keith ate the rest of his sandwiches at half past twelve, and by six he was ravenous for the cooked meal which his mother had on the table on his return home. He had lived with his mother in Stainforth ever since his schooldays; his father had run off with a young village girl when Keith was ten and they had not heard from Peter Doyle since.

Keith was sweating profusely as he sat on the edge of the lawn sipping his tea. He looked up at the sky, a gun-blue universe with not so much as a wisp of white cloud in sight. The farming weather forecast on Sunday lunchtime had predicted dry and hot for the whole week.

Time to get going again. He peeled off his shirt, dropped it down on the grass. He did not have the inclination to walk back to the van. Just take your time, you've got all day and it's going to get hotter.

The ground was hard-baked, every weed required a good pull to free it, toss it clear of the soil. He wondered again about Kirsten. A lot of girls had had their futures ruined by this kind of class consciousness, sheer bloody snobbery. He would fight for her every inch of the way. Sod it, she was twenty, old enough to please herself, an adult. But when you were brainwashed, indoctrinated, age didn't matter. Some people got into the habit of doing whatever anybody told them throughout their entire lives.

He wondered what would happen if she was pregnant. Her old man would go up the wall but that wouldn't remove the baby from inside her. Unless ... God, he wouldn't make her have an abortion, would he? Legalised murder. The bastard would, Keith knew he would, and it made him angry, had him chopping viciously at a clump of chickweed.

He'd like a baby, a son or a daughter, he didn't care which. One day he would have one. In the meantime he needed the flat hoe on this chickweed. He dropped the one he was using, heard it rattle on the hard ground, picked up the other. The hoe rattled again.

It was some seconds before he looked round, before he realised that the hoe should not have rattled a second time, could not possibly have rolled and clanked again. Even then he did not spot the lurking creature right away and when he made it out amongst a thick growth of weed he could not be absolutely sure what it was. Unsuspecting, he stood there just staring at it.

At first he thought it was a frog or a toad; light coloured with dark markings, giving it a kind of slimy slippery look in the bright sunshine. He peered closer, noticed that it tailed off back into the undergrowth, that what he had mistaken for a frog was only its head, that it had a body attached to it, a long thick one that went on and on, partially screened from his vision so that he could only hazard a guess at its length;

several feet for sure!

Keith's mouth went dry and there seemed to be a constriction in his throat. He met those eyes, felt an inexplicable force boring into him, numbing him. A slight shifting of that lengthy body as it began to uncoil, a noise that reminded him of a football rattle on the terraces when he went along to watch United play at home. The sound broke the spell, brought him back to reality, a jumble of warnings. PC Aylott's curt sarcastic tones, 'The snakes could be anywhere.'

He leapt backwards, landed on the lawn, caught his feet in the shirt which he had thrown carelessly down; fell, extricated himself, burst into headlong flight.

And behind him he heard that rattling, angrier and faster now like far-off bursts of machine-gun fire trying to gun him down. Running blindly, anywhere, his panic like a coronary attack thudding in his chest. He heard his heartbeat (or was it that snake rattling with a deeper tone?), his pulses thudding, a roaring in his ears, sweat lathering his naked torso.

He did not look back, dared not waste a second; off the lawn and on to the drive. The van was too far away, it would have to be the garage; pull the shutter down as you go through. Oh Jesus Christ, I hope it's flush with the floor because if there's a gap then I'm trapped!

The reptile was close behind him. He didn't look, he knew. He felt its vibrations like a sack of loose beads, its malevolence and determination to overtake him. An anticipation of pain as it struck, an agony that would have him writhing and screaming on the tarmac drive, helpless as it struck again and again, its vile body close to his own, those evil eyes watching his death throes.

Almost there. He reached up for the handle of the shutter as he ran beneath it, tugged downwards with all his strength. For one terrible moment he thought it had jammed or that perhaps for some reason Peter Eversham had fitted a locking device to stop kids from playing with it. Keith almost yelled his relief out loud as the shutter began to move almost silently on its oiled mechanism, gathering speed downwards, clattering.

Only then did Keith Doyle look back, had a momentary view of his pursuer before the shutter crashed down to the floor; saw a reptile that was close on six feet in length, light-coloured with distinctive dark diamond markings, looking like the personification of evil in serpent form. It rattled viciously, was still some yards from the garage; Keith's lead had been greater than he had dared to believe. He had won by a clear length. Temporarily, anyway.

One awful thought that the shutter might bounce back up, or not close properly. He anticipated a metallic bang as it hit the floor; instead there was a well-oiled click, a mechanical sound as though levers had slotted into place. The door locked, held, and there was not so much as a sliver of daylight showing beneath it.

He leaned back against the wall, thought that he was going to faint and buckled his knees into a crouching position in anticipation of blacking out. The feeling passed. He closed his eyes, could not shut out a mental picture of that rattlesnake, saw again its anger and its hatred for Man; heard its deathly rattle.

Sweat poured off him. The bloody thing had been lying in wait for him amongst the weeds and if he had not decided to change hoes and thrown the first one behind him, disturbing and frightening the rattlesnake as it waited to strike, then he would not have forced it to give a warning rattle. So close, but he had been given those few vital seconds' grace which was the difference between life and death. Jesus Christ Almighty!

I'll chop 'em in half with the hoe if I see 'em. Like fuck you will, you stupid bugger.

His nerves were calming; his heart was not beating nearly so fast, the roaring in his ears had lessened and he had almost stopped shaking. He began to think logically. That key, it was up on the first shelf inside that tin of nails. He stood up, lifted the tin down and had to put pressure on the lid to force it off. Good, the key was there, a front door one ... oh shitfire and Holy Moses!

Frustration, anger; he closed his hand over the Yale key, would have crushed it to a piece of twisted metal if he had had the strength. He didn't, so he flung it at the wall, watched it bounce on the floor and land in a patch of sticky oil. Far better had there been no key hidden in the garage at all than this one that built his hopes and then destroyed them a few seconds later. For this was a front door key, and to reach the front door it would be necessary to go out across the drive where undoubtedly the snake still lay waiting. The back door, which was in the patio at the rear of the garage and could be reached without going outside, was almost certainly locked. So certain that it was a waste of time even checking it.

You're a cunt, Peter Eversham. Doyle closed his eyes, clenched his fists. You might be rich and clever but you're a stupid prick!

A feeling that he might cry, that he had only to let himself go and he would burst into a flood of unstoppable tears. He nearly did but that, like that key lying in the oil-leaks from Eversham's Jag, was just another waste of time.

Stop panicking and think logically. First, you're safe, no way can that snake get to you. Second, somebody's got to come looking for you eventually. Even if the Evershams have gone to stay overnight somewhere then Mother's going to get anxious come tea-time. She'll give you half an hour then she'll phone PC Aylott. They know you're here and your van's stuck out at the front so when you hear them you've only got to give a shout. The rattlesnake will probably get bored with waiting and slither off somewhere. You just have to sit it out. And my flask and sandwiches are out there in the van.

He settled down on his haunches to wait, wished that he could doze to pass the time, but when there's one of the deadliest snakes in the world sitting guard outside your stifling prison sleep does not come easily. He looked at his watch and groaned. 11.15 a.m. Seven bloody hours before Mother starts to get worried.

It was some time before he noticed the tiny circular hole in the shuttered door, about halfway up and the size of one of those spy-holes which they manufacture for house doors so that the occupants can identify a caller before opening up. A circle of daylight, made to take the hook on the end of the rod standing in the corner, an easy means of pushing up or pulling down the shutter. And also a spy-hole.

He went over to it, put his eye to it; restricted vision, but he could see all he wanted to see, or rather everything that he did not want to. The rattlesnake had not gone away. It had retired to the small low rockery which bordered one side of the drive, and had curled itself up on a flat piece of stone. A casual observer might even have overlooked it - until it was too late! The reptile appeared to be asleep, basking in the warmth of the midday sun. Perhaps it was, but Keith had read enough about snakes to know that this one would be awake and poised to strike a lethal blow in a matter of a second. No way was he prepared to risk making a run for it.

Relax, you've got a long wait ahead of you.

5 p.m. The rattler was still there on the rockery stone. Keith peeped out at it, shuddered. It seemed to

see him, but that was impossible. The piercing eyes glared, met his. I'm in no hurry, man. I can wait a week if I have to. You'll either die of starvation in there or else make a run for it and take your chance with me. Why not give it a try, see if you can make it to your van?

No way. I'm OK in here and if Eversham doesn't come back soon then the police will come looking for me. They'll have guns, they'll blast you to hell. If you've any sense you'll get the fuck out of here whilst there's still time.

We'll see. The long body moved slightly, settled into a more relaxed, coiled position, an air of permanence about it. It might even have been asleep.

Keith's thoughts moved back to Kirsten. Oh Christ, he wanted to see her tonight more than he had done any other night. And that bastard out there was stopping him. His gaze alighted on a shovel propped up in the corner and he wondered if it was any match for a western diamondback. If nobody came then he'd give it a try; use it as a shield to keep the fangs at bay, then a swift chopping movement for the kill.

He wondered what a beheaded snake looked like, did the body keep on squirming like a worm's when you cut it in half? Sever the head, then chop the rest up into little lengths, let them all wriggle together. Whatever, he had to see Kirsten tonight.

He must have slipped into an uneasy doze because suddenly he was sitting bolt upright, eyes darting about the gloom of the stifling garage. What was that, that fucking rattler hadn't managed to find a way in, for Christ's sake, had he?

Fear chilled his sweat, had him cowering back against the wall. He heard the rattle, a steady clicking like slow castanets. Menacing. No, the bugger wasn't in here but it was certainly active outside.

Even as he moved back to his spy-hole in the shutters Keith Doyle heard the sound of an approaching vehicle, the drone of a high-powered engine out on the road, slowing, almost stopping.

Turning into the wide driveway.

And suddenly he wanted to yell his jubilation aloud, they're here, you fucking snake bastard. They've arrived and you've left it too late. You'll be blasted to pulp.

A sudden cooling of Doyle's celebrations, a foreboding that sent a warning chill up and down his spine. Oh my God, they won't know the rattler's there, I've got to warn them. He watched, waited until the approaching vehicle came into his arc of vision, recognised the sleek white Jaguar, Eversham at the wheel, the blonde at his side, puzzled expressions, saying something to each other. The gardener did not need to lip-read to know what they were saying. 'Now who the bloody hell's shut the garage up, and what's Doyle's van doing here at this time of day?'

Keith thought for a moment they were going to swerve and pull up in front of the porch. Instead the car came straight on, eased up to within a foot of the garage shutter and stopped with the engine ticking over. The occupants were talking again, obviously puzzled.

Keith switched his gaze from the car to the large flat rockery stone, the one on which the rattler had lain for the past seven hours. The snake was not there any longer; there was just the lump of rough stone with creeping plants growing all around it. It might never have been, this terrible day might have been just a sweltering, feverish nightmare.

He had to force himself back to reality, thrust away the role of spectator. That Diamondback was cunning, it had slid off into the surrounding cover, was lying there waiting to strike, sensing easy prey.

The car door clicked smoothly open and Keith Doyle saw the powerful figure of Peter Eversham about to emerge.

Chapter 7

PETER EVERSHAM was a stone overweight but disguised it with his height. Well built, the hallmark of the affluent, a slightly flushed complexion which he told everybody was due to his outdoor activities, certainly not blood pressure. Sleek dark hair brushed straight back, a neatly clipped moustache, his suits hand-tailored out of a tweedish cloth to enforce his self-styled country squire role, and strengthen his claim to chairmanship of the Stainforth Parish Council.

He rented the grouse shooting on Stainforth Moor, fished for salmon in Scotland and played golf on Wednesdays and Sundays. He was president of the Stainforth Country Club which was set in its own grounds two miles outside the village and had very little to do with Stainforth.

Eversham owned the Eversham Engineering Company Limited with its three subsidiary companies. He had made his first million in 1979 and doubled that by 1982. Whilst other businesses foundered, Eversham Engineering appeared to flourish during the recession.

Cynthia had insisted on accompanying him down to the sales conference in Sussex. She had her reasons, her suspicions about those overnight stops of her husband's in Brighton. But nothing untoward had occurred; even so Cynthia was not fully convinced. Peter needed an eye kept on him, there were too many rumours, allegations, for her liking, and if they had not been founded on truth then almost certainly Peter Eversham would have sued somebody for slander. He issued writs in the way that many people send greetings cards in the festive season. Cynthia told herself that if Peter could have an extra-marital affair with herself behind his first wife's back then he was equally capable of deceiving her.

They had read about the escaped snakes in the morning paper before leaving Brighton. On the way home they had listened to several bulletins on the car radio.

'Doubtless the media have blown it up out of all proportion.' Eversham was in the fast lane doing 95, watching his mirror in case a police car hove into view; they had experimented using helicopters to trap speeding motorists some time ago and he was on the alert for those also. With two endorsements already on his licence he could not risk a third. 'The devil of it all will be the crowds of sightseers that will converge on Stainforth. The bloody place will look like Butlin's on August Bank Holiday.'

'But there's no getting away from the fact that there are snakes on the loose around Stainforth.' Cynthia

Eversham was tense, more so today than she usually was when sitting in the passenger seat alongside her husband. 'Couldn't we have stopped over in Brighton until next week?'

'Whilst the cat's away the mice will play,' he laughed. 'I don't like leaving my business interests in the care of other people longer than is absolutely necessary.'

You mean you're playing golf tomorrow, she smiled cynically to herself. She was at last beginning to understand the man she had married. Subtle, selfish, and above all ruthless.

They left the motorway, picked up a sign for Stainforth. 3 1/2 miles. Cynthia's mouth was dry, there was a churning in her stomach that was not wholly due to carsickness. If there was one thing that repelled her it was the thought of snakes. Ugh! She recalled that time when she was five and her parents had taken her to the zoo; she had not wanted to go into the reptile house but she'd had no choice. Those snakes, they all looked the same, slimy and squirmy, and when one slithered up to the glass of the case she was staring into she had gone hysterical. Adults didn't understand; her mother had grabbed her, slapped her and told her not to be so stupid. Stupid? Even now she sometimes had nightmares about those vipers, waking up in the middle of the night in cold fear, certain that there were cold slippery serpents wriggling about in the bed.

'Home, sweet home.' Peter slowed, had to take a wide sweep to negotiate their own drive entrance because a shabby old caravanette, hand-painted in a bilious orange colour, was parked on the verge by the stone pillars. Several more vehicles were lining the village street. 'The sightseers have arrived, I see. Hey, what's Doyle still doing here at this time? He finishes at five.'

'Maybe he had a late start,' she replied uninterestedly.

'And the garage shutters are down.' He was annoyed because he wanted to drive straight into the garage. 'As I said, you can't leave other people unsupervised for long.'

The Jaguar rolled to a halt in front of the garage. Eversham felt an urge to blast the horn, fetch that gardener on the run from whatever he was doing, ask him what the bloody hell was going on. Instead, he eased open the driver's door, began to swing himself out. And that was when he heard the banging on the inside of the garage door, the steel shutter vibrating. Somebody was shouting.

'Mr Eversham, Mr Eversham, don't get out of your car. There's a rattlesnake on the rockery!'

Peter Eversham froze, heard the words but their meaning did not sink in. He recognised Keith Doyle's voice but what the blazes was the stupid bugger doing inside the garage with the shutter down? And another thing . . .

What the fucking hell was wrong with the car? A noise as though the exhaust had suddenly come loose, was banging and rattling on the underside. But it couldn't, the car was stationary.

'Peter!' Cynthia Eversham screamed, panicked, and grabbed her husband's arm, overbalanced him back into the seat.

'What the . . .!'

Even as he fell he saw the snake, a thing like a thick painted hosepipe darting out from beneath the Jag, its vicious strike missing him and pinging on the inside of the open door. Cynthia was yelling, shrieking hysterically, and then the car door obeyed the laws of gravity, swung softly shut on the slight incline.

Clicked.

'Jesus God!'

'It was a snake, Peter. It tried to . . .'

'For Christ's sake, shut up,' he pushed her away, and in the same movement eased the handbrake off, felt the car begin to roll slowly backwards. And as it did so the occupants heard something happening beneath them, that frantic rattling sound again, interspersed with lashing noises as if a horse whip was flaying mercilessly on the underside of the car.

Still rolling backwards. Cynthia screamed, clutched at her seat, saw that vile light-coloured reptile with the black diamond markings thrashing frenziedly on the tarmac in front of them. It wriggled, tried to leap, fell back, squirmed and convulsed, turned its repulsive head towards them, as if mouthing insane reptilian curses. But something was wrong with it, even in her state of terror she saw its injury, the lower part of its body crushed and flattened like the hose that time when Doyle had washed the car for them and had left it lying on the drive and she had backed over it.

'Oh, my God!' she was going to be sick any second. 'Peter, you've run over it!'

He jerked the handbrake back on, halted the car, then started the engine, drove forward in a wide sweep that took him to the front of the house alongside Doyle's parked van. He killed the engine, glanced in his mirror. The rattler was thrashing fiercely from side to side, rattling and hissing its pain and fury but it wasn't going anywhere.

'Peter, don't get out!'

'Stay where you bloody well are.' He slammed the car door and ran for the porch, fumbling for his key.

Breathlessly he leapt up the stairs, on to the landing, into the bedroom. Fumbling under the bed, pulling out a dusty leg-o'-mutton leather gun case, his trembling fingers scarcely capable of undoing the straps. Metal clinked as he fitted barrels and stock together, slapped the wooden fore-end into place to hold them together, grabbed some orange-cased 12-bore cartridges out of a carton on top of the wardrobe, spilling the rest on to the carpet.

Back down the stairs, loading the gun as he went, almost slipping on the polished wooden blocks of the hall floor. Outside, seeing Cynthia still sitting in the car, hands pressed to her pallid face in fear and anguish, mouthing something at him. Shut up, you stupid bitch.

The diamondback was still very much alive. It was throwing itself from side to side, manoeuvring a course towards the front door, propelling its awesome body in spite of its terrible injuries, malevolently rattling its hate for the man who had done this to it. Only one thing was uppermost in its pain-crazed mind - to kill!

Peter Eversham was trembling as he lifted the shotgun to his shoulder, a big-game hunter suddenly faced with a charging wounded water buffalo; its life or his, there would only be one survivor. He had his life in his hands.

Ten yards, maybe less. He tried to draw a bead on the head but it darted from one side to the other, dodged away from the shaking twin barrels as though it knew. Oh Christ, so different from driven grouse that couldn't fight back.

Five yards. He swung his sights on to the body, the lower damaged part that dragged behind the rest, took a trigger pressure. A deafening blast, and somewhere in the background he heard his wife screaming, saw the snake jerk and roll, seem to twist back on itself as though it was trying to view the damage.

At that range the concentrated shot charge was still strung together, had cut through skin and tissue, almost severed the lower body. A slimy pulp streaked the tarmac. And in that split second Peter Eversham finally got his bead on the head.

The left barrel, leaden death obliterating the rattlesnake's head, throwing it back into the morass behind, its nerves twitching. And then it was still.

It was dead.

Eversham lowered the smoking gun, opened the breech and the spent cartridge cases were ejected, bounced on the drive. He stood there, experienced a euphoria that was only just beginning to make its heady impact on him. A pose he was reluctant to relinquish, the hunter looking down on his trophy, awaiting the arrival of his bearers.

The garage shutters slid upwards and Keith Doyle emerged, white-faced. Eversham thought the gardener might spew up just to complete the picture. Cynthia still had her face covered; look at it, you two, look at it. It's dead and I killed it. Me, Peter Eversham. They've been hunting the bastards for two days but they didn't do any good until I returned.

'Well done, Mr Eversham.' A cry of relief, the young red-haired man having to hold on to the car, swaying unsteadily on his feet. 'It trapped me in the garage. We better get the police.'

'I think this is them now.' Peter Eversham heard the bee-boraf an approaching siren, anticipated the white Escort turning into the drive. He shifted his pose slightly, cradling the gun beneath his arm, sporting style. Take a good look, you guys, I just did what you've failed to do. Send the press, let's get the record straight, nobody's stealing my thunder.

'I got him,' he told PC Aylott as the constable climbed out of the car. 'It's a rattler, a western diamondback.' I know because I once saw a TV programme about them.

'He's dead, all right.' Aylott approached the shot-blasted mulch with some trepidation.

'He is.' Peter Eversham still stood there holding his gun. Jesus Christ, where were the bloody newshounds? They were quick enough off" the mark when some randy vicar or other ran off with the verger's wife, used rolls of film and gave it front page spread, but when somebody shoots a dangerous reptile in an English village they don't want to know.

'There's two rattlers.' The officer stepped back. 'I'd've thought being a pair they would have stuck together. Search parties have spent two days combing the moors and the slopes without seeing so much as a good old British adder sunning itself in the heather.'

Then they were looking in the wrong place. Eversham just checked himself from speaking his thoughts aloud. The snakes are hanging about the village, right under your bloody noses and you haven't twigged it yet. A man with a gun who knows what he's about might have far more success than hundreds of police and soldiers.

'I'll have to leave this for the experts to come and have a look at.' Aylott turned back towards his vehicle. 'I'll go and let the Super know at once.'

And not a bloody word of 'well done' or 'thank you', Eversham reflected as he stood there watching the constable reverse out into the road. Cynthia was getting out of the Jaguar, trying not to look at the remains of the rattler, Doyle was back in his van.

Eversham glanced down at his gun, a Holland and Holland side lock Royal, the ultimate in English gun-making, a beautifully balanced and efficient weapon. If you knew how to use it, it killed every time, grouse or snakes.

He looked up at the sky. There were a good three hours of daylight left yet, the perfect evening for a quiet mooch round the hedgerows bordering the barley and oilseed rape fields in the hope of a shot at an unwary rabbit.

Or a deadly snake.

Chapter 8

PETER EVERSHAM moved furtively along the straggling hawthorn hedge just inside the field of growing barley that was showing the first signs of ripening. His every movement was that of the accomplished stalker, one who wished to see and yet not be seen. Neither by the snakes he hunted nor his fellowmen.

His gun gave him a new sense of power, one that he had not fully appreciated until now. Man was a hunter by nature but it did not end there. He was a born predator even though civilisation had attempted to eradicate it from the species, all part of a Marxist plot to bring about a revolution; they branded the hunting and shooting fraternity as upper-class barbarians, overlooking the fact that thousands of ordinary working men enjoyed field sports. Use an emotive lever to prise the capitalist clique apart and the masses will join the ranks. Eversham's lips curled into a contemptuous smile. Those opposed to killing ought to be here in Stainforth right now and they'd soon change their minds. He wondered how that fellow Cousins, who lived in the village and was always writing the predictable emotive anti-blood-sports letters to the papers, was feeling at this moment. Cowering indoors, doubtless, listening in to every radio and TV bulletin to find out if the hunters had accounted for any of the snakes yet. Tally-ho, go get 'em, you chaps, and we'll forgive you so long as you don't go back to killing foxes when it's ail over.

Cousins was a convener in one of the factories in the city, a trouble-maker, had instigated a strike only a few weeks back over some petty formality. In his spare time he campaigned against blood sports and was anti anything that people enjoyed doing.

Eversham had had his own brushes with the unions and on a couple of occasions he had dug his heels in and won. If necessary, he would shut his business down and take early retirement. 'It suits me,' he had told a shop steward. 'It's you chaps who'll lose out. I can sell my premises and machinery and put my feet up. Your chaps will just be out of a job. Please yourself.'

Now he was going to make the headlines again. He paused alongside the overgrown hawthorn hedge, took stock of his surroundings. There was too much damned cover, the barley waist high and reaching right up to the hedge. A fox could sit and watch you from a few yards away and you would have no idea it was there. Or a snake.

He thought about moving on up to the grassland beyond but the reptiles were unlikely to be where they could be spotted easily. They would be in the thickest cover. Maybe he should have fetched Kell, the springer spaniel, from the kennels where he had been boarded whilst the Evershams were away. Kell had a keen nose, he was able to scent out a skulking shrew; anything that breathed, he found. It was too late now, Eversham must play a lone hand.

He pondered on a plan of action. Assume that the snakes were in the barley. In all probability they would not be found round the edge but would be deep in the stalky growth. It was no good blundering through it, they would hear him coming and either slink out of the way or else attack, a sudden ambush. Yet there was a way . . . Modern farming methods and the use of poisonous chemicals caused barren patches of ground amidst the crops, destroyed the vital minerals in the soil and created mini-deserts in the seemingly lush growth akin to clearings in a forest. Find one of these and take up a position there. Vision on all sides, no chance of being attacked from behind and ... he trembled with excitement, if he imitated a rabbit squeal from time to time one of those reptiles was sure to come on the run. Easy enough, the same way that you fooled a fox on a summer evening; you sucked the back of your hand noisily and it sounded like a wounded or snared rabbit squealing. Old Kenning, the gamekeeper, had taught him how to do it. Now he would put that knowledge to good use.

Peter Eversham moved forward into the growing barley. It swished loudly as it yielded a passage for him, springing back into place, swaying and rustling. He was decidedly uneasy, the shotgun held at hip-level, safety-catch pushed forward. Christ, you couldn't see to shoot anything in here, you wouldn't see a snake until . . . don't think about it. They'll probably be scared to hell if they hear you, take off in the opposite direction. Or attack.

Something moved to his right, three or four yards away, sent the ears of corn swinging. Oh God, he half-turned, had the gun to his shoulder in readiness, beads of sweat forming on his forehead. All in the imagination, your nerves are stretched. Don't let 'em, you are the hunter out here, Peter Eversham, you have a weapon far more lethal than the deadliest snake in the world.

He took another step forward and the corn rustled again, a sound as if the wind was blowing, yet heavier, a small body crashing through the forest of stalks screened from his view. He almost panicked and fired blindly; I've got a gun, you bastard, don't you come anywhere near me.

Then sudden relief, a releasing of pent-up breath, lowering the gun. Whatever it was, it was darting away in the opposite direction. A rabbit probably. Or a hare.

Now there was a sense of urgency about Peter Eversham's movements, crashing his way through the ripening crop, searching desperately for a clearing somewhere.

He had gone about a hundred yards before he found one to his liking. Not quite as big as he had hoped, possibly five or six yards in diameter, but it would do. He might blunder around all evening without finding

exactly what he was looking for and time was not on his side.

He settled down on his haunches, tried not to notice that he was trembling slightly, and glanced up at the sky. The sun was low in the west, perhaps an hour and a half away from dusk. He'd give it an hour, no more; the last thing he wanted was to be walking back through that barley in the dark.

He waited five minutes, time to let anything that had heard his noisy passage forget about it, then he pressed his lips to the back of his hand and began to suck. It wasn't easy but after several attempts he produced a fair imitation of the squeals of a terrified or injured rabbit. 'Don't overdo it, rabbits don't squeal continually,' Kenning had said. 'Give a call every few minutes.'

Eversham was desperate for a smoke. He resisted the temptation until his keen memory churned out something he had read somewhere, or maybe seen in a TV documentary, something about wildfowl hunters in the Fens during the last century carrying burning peat to mask any scent they gave off. Perhaps, then, a cigarette would be to his advantage and, anyway, didn't most of the old big-game hunters in Africa always smoke a big foul-smelling pipe?

He put a cigarette to his lips, flicked his lighter and inhaled the smoke gratefully. Come on, you buggers, I'm ready for you.

Half an hour passed. The sky was beginning to turn saffron and the only creatures which seemed to have located Peter Eversham's hiding place were swarms of tiny midges; their ploy was to hover incessantly over your head and whilst you were swatting at them, a small detachment would come in from behind, find a patch of exposed flesh and alight on it. He blew smoke at them but it did not deter them. And when finally they did decide to depart they left him scratching a number of itchy swellings on his neck and ears.

He tried the rabbit call again. Much better now, it really sounded something like a distressed coney. Surely a snake in an alien environment wouldn't be able to tell the difference anyway, probably had never seen or heard the good old English bunny in its life.

Peter heard a helicopter coming down off the moor, crouched low and ducked his head. Deafening, the wind from the vanes wafting the corn, flying at no more than twenty feet. The machine passed just to his left and he raised his eyes to follow its departure. It swung round, headed back towards the village. What a bloody waste of time, he thought. If they can't spot me in the barley how the hell can they expect to see the snakes?

Boredom added to the discomfort of his crouched position. He found himself studying the engraving on his gun, marvelled at the intricacies, the workmanship that made English guns the best in the world. In the right hands, with the right cartridge, this gun would kill anything. Snakes were no exception, he had proved that already. And he would prove it a second time.

He had a feeling that he was not going to see the snakes tonight. Another few minutes and he would pack it in, head for home. One more cigarette and I'll go. He sucked his hand once more; now that was the best rabbit call he had done all night, enough to make . . .

A swishing of wings above his head made him start and he was just in time to see a diving sparrow hawk check, jink and change direction. Hard luck, you bugger, Eversham smiled to himself, I must be good to fool you. You thought you heard your supper squealing but you had one helluva shock. The moral of that story is don't take anything for granted.

The tall corn was beginning to cast its shadows across the small clearing, thousands of nodding, swaying heads that were to be given a brief few hours' rest from the labours of ripening, a sun-soaked crop that could be part of Man's winter food store, grain for malting, seed for poultry. A source of life.

And death!

Peter Eversham started, almost dropped his gun. There was a snake directly opposite him, its body partly concealed by the barley forest. Red, black and yellow with white rings, gaudy with all Nature's warning colours blended into its scaly skin. A black snout, eyes that watched unblinking, fearlessly, full of hate.

He had not heard its approach, not so much as the disturbance of a barley stalk, a hunter that had slithered silently in answer to that false cry of pain, perhaps had not even been fooled by it, had come in search of Man,

A length of ash fell from the cigarette between Peter Eversham's lips, powdered on his shirt. Sweaty hands gripped the gun. Bring it up slowly, don't make a sudden movement, don't let it even guess what you're going to do. He wondered what species the snake was, how fast it was capable of moving. Right now it didn't look to be in any hurry, probably thought it had him for the taking anyway.

He was trembling so much that he could scarcely draw a bead on the reptile, the twin barrels quivering, moving from side to side. And still the snake did not move.

The gun bucked, the heel of the stock hammering against his shoulder because he held it too loosely. A vivid flash lit up the tiny clearing, forked lightning that propelled leaden death, a report that shattered the stillness, went rolling across the landscape towards Stainforth, its echoes rumbling and dying when they reached the distant moorland.

The snake slumped forward, a coil of bloodied rope that did not so much as twitch; pulped, unrecognisable. Harmless.

The gun was still at Peter Eversham's shoulder. He was aware of the pain where it had kicked him but he ignored it, just stared in disbelief. The patience of the hunter had paid off; just when you thought nothing was going to show up your prey emerged. You could never be certain of anything, that was the spice of hunting, what drove you on just when you had almost given up.

'COMPANY DIRECTOR KILLS TWO OF THE ESCAPED SNAKES' - he saw tomorrow's newspaper headlines in his imagination, a wad of papers on the desk in his office. The Sun, Mail, Express, Star. Television interviews, describing how he went out and lay in wait, lured it with his calling, his expertise, his knowledge of the ways of the wild. But you'll have to take the dead snake home to prove it!

His flesh crept and pimples, a shudder ran right up his spine and into his scalp beneath the deerstalker hat. Christ, I don't have to touch that thing, do I? Of course you do. I can't. You must, else they won't believe you and if you don't take it now you might not find it again. Foxes might come in the night and eat it. 'COMPANY DIRECTOR KILLS RATTLER, CLAIMS HE SHOT A SECOND' - Oh, yeah!

He drew on his cigarette, glanced around in the shadows, looking for a couple of sticks, wondering if somehow he could make a cradle out of them and carry it at arm's length. Yuk! But you don't often find sticks in the middle of fields of growing corn. He didn't have a piece of string either with which to make a loop to drag over it, pull it along behind him. He didn't fancy the idea, it would be like the creature was

pursuing him in the dark, swishing along behind him. It might not be dead, it might bite!

You're crazy. Just frightened, everybody's entitled to a few fears when it starts to get dark, aren't they?

He stood up, tried to get his bearings. A landscape of silhouettes in the gathering dusk, the village on his left, the moors starkly outlined above them, a mass of deep purple that would merge with the night sky before long and obliterate everything. And all around him a sea of corn, no distinguishing features. Christ on a bike, I've got to get the fucking thing home somehow!

It's dead, it can't hurt you. He steeled himself, called on every bit of logic he could muster in a mind filled with the human revulsion for reptiles, bent forward and stretched out a hand; make sure you don't touch the head.

It wasn't slimy, sort of dry and rough to the touch, a limp thing that might have been a perished length of garden hose. Coils of it, he could not even hazard a guess at its length as he dragged it out of the barley, wondered how long it would take him to reach the village. As soon as he came to the road he would drop his burden, leave it there for some other bugger to fetch.

Gun in one hand, a loop of snake in the other, he set off. His progress was not easy, the corn seeming deliberately to obstruct his passage; once he tripped on a stone and almost fell, cursed profusely.

And then, without warning, the pain hit him, blinding agony that began in the calf of his right leg and travelled up his body, had him arching his back, staggering. Screaming. It was as though every vein were filled with burning acid, his limbs stretched to breaking point, a fiery haze shimmering before his eyes like an electric storm lighting up the night. He dropped the dead snake. It fucking well wasn't dead after all! Oh, Jesus God, it's bitten me!

His brain could not grasp the situation. A lifeless half-coiled reptile thudded to the ground and in its place was a live vicious serpent, a multi-coloured assailant that thrashed and struck, a berserk attacker in the falling darkness, striking, falling back, striking again; pursuing his shambling movements, hissing its fury.

Peter Eversham still had the gun, an unfired cartridge in the left barrel. He tried to bring it round to bear on the snaking shadow but it was too close. Between his flailing feet, wicked fangs darting upwards. His abdomen seemed to contract then expand, airborne with the force of the pain, pulling that trigger in a last gesture of defiance.

He heard the report somewhere beyond the roaring in his agonised brain, the noise receding, rolling away into the distance. Falling.

He braced himself as the ground came up to meet him, frothing through clenched teeth, wide-eyed and sightless. Rolling. Now prone, aware of a constant movement, a sharp needle that injected him repeatedly until his nerves were numbed and he felt no more. Trying to piece everything together but the fragmented logic eluded him. A dead snake, so how could it have bitten him? It was dead all right, he'd seen it, felt it. It didn't make sense. Cynthia ... she wasn't around anywhere, was she? Or Doyle, the gardener? If Doyle was around then why was the garden in such a fucking mess, all overgrown like this?

Then not thinking, lying there stupefied, oblivious to his pain and his injuries, sprawled across the shot-blasted corpse of a coral snake whilst its mate was trying to reach it.

The live snake's anger had subsided, its killing fury gone as quickly as it had come. Now its agitation was caused by grief, a disbelief that its mate was dead, unable to understand. Rubbing itself on the mutilated

body, desperately trying to revive it. Failing.

Peter Eversham's head fell back and the cigarette which had adhered to his lower lip was dislodged, rolling and bouncing away in a shower of sparks, coming to rest against a barley stalk; fizzing, the green growth smouldering, giving off a pungent wisp of smoke that had the bereaved coral snake backing off in alarm.

The sparks were fanned by the faint night breeze, burst into a little yellow flame that almost failed, grew again and licked out at the next piece of undergrowth. Catching again. Spreading; the dead man's clothes singed, ignited, gave off a stench of roasting human flesh. Death and instant cremation.

The surviving snake fled terror-stricken before the advancing flames, its mate forgotten, the strongest instinct of the wild taking over, one that had been passed on to it by its mother in a far-off land across the Atlantic. Survival.

Only after that would its thoughts return to revenge.

Chapter 9

JOHN PRICE had remained in the bungalow after they had taken Aunt Elsie's body away simply because he had nowhere else to go. A little voice inside his head whispered, 'It's your bungalow now, John. You know very well she's left it to you in her will. Quite a nice little nest-egg for you.' Shut up, I'm not interested.

Oh God, what a damnable thing to happen. And he couldn't even hate the escaped snakes for it because it was nothing to do with them, would have happened anyway. Elsie Harrison had left the back door ajar, an inquisitive grass snake had found its way in, and as a result she had suffered a heart attack. What bloody rotten luck!

He knew he would stay on in Stainforth, maybe for quite some time because now he had a home here even if he did not have work. For the moment he had a job; oh yes, help us find these snakes before anybody else gets killed. Now a western diamondback rattler had been shot in the village and that was going to scare an awful lot of people. Up on the moors, even on the grassy slopes, was another world, near enough to be interesting but when a rattler turned up in the village itself then folks really began to mess their pants.

John made himself a cup of coffee, knew he had a lot of thinking to do. Somehow he and the rest of the police and army searchers had got it all wrong. They had settled for the obvious, the most wild and desolate place. OK, the rattler could just be one that had stayed behind - or two, because there was a pair of them according to the inventory. So there was certainly another one not too far away. He found

himself glancing around the kitchen; you're getting jumpy, John Price.

He had just sipped his coffee when he heard the first fire engine go by; a few seconds later another followed in its wake. More traffic, a police car.

John Price opened the door and that was when he smelled the smoke, life-stifling fumes, choking, burning vegetation. The sky was aglow, a deep smoky red, activity everywhere. His eyes smarted; it was surely a heath or woodland fire and this was the last thing they needed in Stainforth with killer snakes on the loose. So much for tomorrow's carefully laid plans; anything could happen now.

He closed the door, went outside. Wherever the fire was the smoke could well drive the reptiles out from their hiding places, disperse them in all directions.

And infuriate them.

Being a single parent in a village like Stainforth was both a source of embarrassment and bitterness as Barbara Brown knew only too well. Tall and lanky, she was 'not bad-looking' as most of the youths in Stainforth agreed, but she wasn't the sort of girl you could get worked up over. Some boasted of having 'had her' after youth club, others kept quiet about it. 'Respectable' parents worried about their sons associating with her, to some she was just a joke, 'the village boot' as they referred to her.

But in reality Barbara was no local whore, merely an unfortunate and misunderstood girl who craved affection and could not find it. She had been desperate for a steady boyfriend from the time she reached fifteen and she had grossly misunderstood the attentions of the teenage boys at youth club; she genuinely thought that when one of them slipped his arm through hers and led her up behind the ramshackle Nissen hut that had served as a youth club since the war ended, it was because he felt for her, loved her. It took her a long time to cotton on to the fact that all the rough element of the local male population were interested in was their own pleasure. And that was how it was for three years, hopes built and dashed, and no chance of a permanent relationship.

Barbara's father had walked out on her mother when Barbara was eleven; he had an affair with a woman in the next town, and he left home to go and live with her. Betty Brown did not seem to care as long as she had enough money to buy forty fags a day; every evening she went down to the pub and usually got-air the free booze she wanted there. Barbara remembered the time her mother brought a boyfriend home. Bill was several years older than her and unemployed, and he used to stop overnight on occasions, sharing Betty's bed. Eventually he moved in permanently.

The young girl felt that she was in the way, the hints that a lot of girls leave home and set up in a flat on their own hurt her. She would have left if she had had the opportunity, but with no money and no job the idea was little more than a pipe dream. She was jealous of her mother, too. How was it that a woman of forty-five got a steady boyfriend whilst she, at seventeen, was still searching for a relationship?

It was on the cards that Barbara would get herself pregnant eventually. Some of Stainforth's youths had standing bets on it; a quid she's got one in the oven before she's eighteen, 50p it's a boy. And a fiver says it's Ted Growson's. But nobody would ever conclusively prove that it was Ted's because there were three or four of the younger men who would be reluctant to help with an inquiry concerning the fathering of the Brown baby, and even if they were willing it was very doubtful if anything could be proved conclusively.

Barbara had her baby three months after her seventeenth birthday and it cost George Rowley a quid. Tom Sproson forked out 50p because it was a boy but that fiver was still unclaimed and Ted Growson's

girlfriend had blacked his eye but that did not prove anything.

Life underwent a drastic change for Barbara Brown after she returned to Stainforth from the maternity hospital. Her own mother didn't want to know the baby. 'If you get doin' them kinda things, Babs, then you gotta take the consequences for it,' Betty mumbled from behind her cigarette. 'You can stop 'ere but don't let that baby get makin' a row in the night, 'cause me and Bill needs our sleep.'

Somehow Barbara muddled through, relied on inborn maternal instincts to help her. In her own way she was happy, she had somebody who loved her even if baby Michael taxed her patience to its limits. Often in the night she nursed him to stop him from crying, sat up in bed with eyes heavy from lack of sleep, because if Michael had a screaming fit Bill would bang on the flimsy adjoining bedroom wall, yelling, 'shuddup'. But usually on fine days she could catch up on her sleep whilst her son slept in his second-hand pram in the garden. Overall, everything worked out, more or less.

Yesterday she had kept him indoors because of the snakes warning. They had kept doors and windows closed in accordance with the policeman's instructions and Michael had been restless, crying for long periods, and Betty had lost her temper. 'Don't know what the bloody place is comin' to,' she had screeched. 'You can't go out 'cause they reckon there's snakes on the loose but I never seen none. So we all stops inside and that flamin' babby 'owls his bleedin' 'ead off. Well, we ain't standin' for this day after day. It makes Bill proper niggly and then 'e gets on at me. You take it from me, Babs, there ain't no snakes in the village, if there are any they're up on the moors. You put the babby out tomorrow, 'e won't come to no 'arm.'

There had been a big fire in the night, Roberta's barley field ablaze, the smoke pall hanging over the village so that the inhabitants of Stainforth had to keep their windows shut anyway. The smoky night air was filled with the demonic howling of fire engine and police sirens, everywhere eerily aglow with an orange hue, vehicles coming and going all night long.

By dawn the fire was out but the stench of burning lingered, would hang around for days, flaked ashes floating in the slight breeze like a black summer snowstorm.

'It won't do Michael no good out there,' Barbara had said as she helped herself to the sawdust-like remains of a packet of cornflakes, her baby held to her bosom with her free arm, seemingly unable to make up his mind which breast he wanted to feed off first. Bill was still upstairs in bed; he rarely put in an appearance before midday.

'It wanna 'urt 'im,' Betty Brown screwed up her face into her usual expression of perpetual discontentment. 'Trouble with babbies today is they're pampered. If 'e lived in the town then he'd have to put up with petrol fumes and the like and learn to like 'em. A bit o' smoke never 'urt nobody. Bill'll go mad if 'e 'as to put up with 'im indoors all day again today.'

So, with some misgivings, Barbara wheeled the pram out on to the square of grass at the rear of the council house, found Michael a patch of shade beside the single struggling lilac bush and secured the pram's rickety brake.

'You go to sleep, darlin', like a good little boy.' She fixed the hood, pulled the stick of beads across for him to play with if he had the inclination, and placed his rattle on the coverlet. He looked like he might just go to sleep. 'You have a nice sleepy-byes, my love, and in a bit mummy will come out and move your pram so that the sun doesn't shine in it. See you in a bit, lovey.'

Michael gurgled, but he did not start to shriek when she tip-toed away. Thank God, for that. After all that

commotion last night she needed to sleep for an hour or two.

She turned back at the doorway for one last look. Silence from the pram, maybe he was asleep already. She coughed; this smoky air wouldn't do anybody any good, worse than smoking fags all day long like her mother did. No good for the lungs.

There was a lot of activity in the surrounding area again today. Two helicopters flying back and forth on the hillside below the moors, a steady drone that could be either soothing or get on your nerves, depending on what sort of mood you were in. Cars up and down all the time. She shrugged her shoulders, went inside and upstairs. There was no sign of her mother, perhaps Betty Brown had decided to go back to bed and keep Bill company. The pair of them must get bored, she decided, with nothing to do all day except moan at somebody whose life was taken up looking after a baby.

Barbara stripped off her clothes and lay on the bed. Christ, it was going to be hot again today; she hoped Michael would be all right out there. In an hour or so she would go out and check him.

She felt sure that the father of her baby was Ted Growson; it could have been Alun Donnison but she thought the odds were in favour of Ted because the time of the month had been right that Sunday afternoon when she had gone up on to the moors with him. It could just be Alun's though. Not that it really mattered which of them had fathered her child because she would not want to be shackled up with Ted or Alun. They were OK for an hour or two on a date but living with them would be like living with Bill in the next room, all booze, fags and sleeping in late.

Barbara wished she could get away from Stainforth, just walk out of the village pushing Michael in his pram and never come back. A fantasy, because she didn't have any money nor anywhere to go. So that was that and she would have to stay put. Bill had threatened to throw her out on occasions and that was something that really worried her, in fact she had almost mentioned it to the health visitor last week but she didn't want to cause a rumpus.

Her eyelids began to droop. Those helicopters up on the moor were soothing, like the distant drone of bees on the heather. The sort of sound that could send you off to sleep whether you were tired or not.

Barbara woke with a start, sat bolt upright, knew instinctively that she had overslept. She fought to focus her bleary eyes, saw that the cheap alarm clock on the dresser said 2.30. And it was always half an hour slow. Oh, Christ! She leaped off the bed, grabbed her crumpled dress and shrugged it over her head. Michael was overdue for his next feed. It was a wonder he hadn't been screaming the place down, with Bill yelling, 'Shaddup, you little bugger,' or, 'Jesus, somebody go and throttle that babby.'

She ran downstairs barefooted. Bill and Betty must still be in bed or else they had gone down to the pub for a lunchtime pint. That was one bit of bonus peace anyway. Michael had obviously slept right through, which was fine except that in all probability he would not want to sleep tonight. You couldn't win, you were backing a loser whichever way you looked at it.

He must have just woken up. As she stepped out of the back door into the hot charred atmosphere she heard his rattle clicking, or it could have been the beads shooting from one end of the rod to the other.

'There's a good boy.' She quickened her pace across the rough unmown grass. 'He's ever such a good boy. He knew his mamma was tired so he's played with his rattle and let his mamma get some sleep. I'm going to feed you now, my darling'

She grasped the handle of the pram, pulled it round so that it was back in the shade of the lilac again.

And then she let out a piercing scream that filled the smoky Stainforth air, dung on to the pram in rigid terror. Michael was up in the far corner and it was quite obvious that he was dead, his tiny pink face bloated and purplish, head back, eyes wide and staring, tongue lolling lifelessly out of his open mouth.

In that instant Barbara Brown's mind snapped. She stopped screaming, failed to wonder why Michael's rattle was still clicking and clinking even though he was dead. She reached across to grab him and at that moment the crumpled coverlet moved and from beneath it a living coil began to unfurl, a light-coloured creature with diamond-shaped markings on its back, a head with fangs bared, rearing up, a killer that had patiently lain in ambush beside the corpse of its fast kill.

It struck; once, twice, thrice. Darting blows, each one finding their mark on arms and face. She screamed again, fell back clutching at the pram, toppled it over so that it threw both baby and snake to the ground.

She was doubled up with pain, her brain unable to cope, staggering blindly away, falling once and picking herself up. Oblivious of her own safety, the thoughts of a mother only for her baby, refusing to accept that he was dead. She ran but the snake did not follow; it moved with amazing speed that could easily have overtaken her had it so wished, turning and slithering away beneath the thick lilac bush; eased its way beneath the hedge and into the undergrowth beyond.

Barbara did not run back into the house. No logical reason except perhaps that she had long ago given up asking her mother for help in any matter relating to baby Michael. Instead, she staggered down the front path, through the open gate and out into the road.

The pain was unbearable, anybody except a distraught mother still clinging to the hope that her offspring might be saved, would have collapsed and succumbed to the writhings and convulsions usually caused by a rattler's bite. Somehow she remained upright, staggering, holding on to parked vehicles for support, yelling insanely, her lips blue and puffed, swelling rapidly so that by the time a group of bystanders rushed towards her she was babbling incoherently.

She tried to wave an arm back the way she had come, attempted to scream, 'My baby, save my baby from the snake,' but she only managed a groan.

And that was when her brain and body gave out and she slumped forward in the road.

In the crowd that had gathered somebody muttered 'I think she's dead.'

Chapter 10

KEITH DOYLE had not been to work for two days, not since his nightmarish experience in the Evershams' garage. But he couldn't just sit at home doing nothing; the snakes might not be caught for

weeks and it could cost him hundreds of pounds in lost earnings.

'Now, don't you get going out gardening.' His mother turned from the sink, fixed him with a disapproving stare, a pleading, frightened look in her eyes. 'We don't want any more trouble. It's a wonder I didn't have a heart attack last time. I'll sit here worrying myself to death if you go out of the house.'

'There's nothing whatever the matter with your heart,' he snapped irritably. 'You're as fit as I am. You're just using emotional blackmail to try and keep me at home.'

'You'll be safe here.' She dried a plate vigorously, sensed that she was fighting a losing battle, decided to change the subject. 'How's Kirsten? You haven't brought her home lately, is everything all right between you?'

He bit his lip, had to stop himself from snapping, 'It's none of your business, Mother.' He had not seen Kirsten for three days now. After his experience with the rattlesnake at the Evershams' he had spent the whole evening being interviewed by reporters eager for the latest snake story, and when he had finally gone to meet Kirsten she wasn't there. She had probably given him up and gone home. He should have gone to her house but he didn't. Diplomacy, or was it just bloody cowardice? The next morning he phoned the drapery shop in town and Mrs Holloway's caustic voice informed him, 'She's not in today.' That was all, no reason, no 'Thank you for calling, she'll be in tomorrow.' Later he had tried to phone Kirsten at home but there had been no reply. And the phone rang unanswered again yesterday.

All sorts of fears crammed his frustrated mind, relegating escaped snakes to incidentals. Maybe the Davis family had left Stainforth for the time being, were keeping clear until it was safe. Kirsten's parents were like that, the kind who would have fled to America at the outbreak of war. They were the bloody cowards, not him.

Today he had to do something positive.

'You two haven't had a tiff, have you?' Oh Christ, Mother was always so persistent, never let anything drop.

'Of course not. She mentioned something about they might be going to stay with relatives until the snakes were all caught.'

'Then you don't have any reason to go out, Keith.'

Oh bloody hell! 'I'm going up to Yardleys'. All I have to do there is to cut the lawns. I don't have to weed overgrown borders where . . . where snakes might be lurking.'

'The lawns don't need cutting.' Joan Doyle was tight-lipped, clutching at straws now. 'Nobody wants their lawns mowing when the sun's scorching up the grass day after day. The lawn will die if you mow it.'

'It'll grow long and straggly if I don't take the top off it very soon.'

'I wanted you to do a job for me today.'

'Like what?'

She hesitated for a second or two. 'The garden shed needs a good tidy out.'

'I tidied it out last week, or hadn't you noticed?'

'Oh ... and the attic's due for a turn out. There's so much lumber up there now that there isn't room to put anything else in it.'

'You'd suffocate up there in weather like this,' he said, walking towards the door. 'I'm going up to the Yardleys'. I could be back mid-afternoon. Depends if she wants me to do anything else apart from mowing the lawns, so don't you get fretting.'

He stepped outside into the hot morning sunlight, slammed the door behind him; end of bloody conversation! 'Strewth, it was going to be a bloody stinker again today, it wasn't nine o'clock yet and you could feel the heat building up. He looked up into the clear blue sky, tried to spot a wisp of fluffy white cloud somewhere but there wasn't one. The weathermen had it easy, they did not even have to rely on satellite pictures. Hot and dry; outlook - continuing.

Keith reversed the van out into the road. He was low on petrol, the needle hovering on the red warning line at the bottom of the gauge; but there was enough to get him up to the Yardleys' and back. Right now he did not have the inclination to go up to the Esso garage on the main road.

As he pulled away he became aware at once of the absence of parked vehicles along the village main street. The police had put road-blocks on the roads leading in and out of Stainforth. You've had your fun, Joe Public, now piss off and let us deal with the snakes. There would doubtless be the usual outcry from those evicted, a police state and all that balls.

The van missed, picked up again. It was due for a service, Keith reminded himself. Maybe tomorrow he would go up to the garage, fill up with petrol and get them to service it. There wasn't going to be much work available in the near future. Jesus Christ, fancy Eversham being stupid enough to go out after the snakes in the barley. The firemen had found his charred corpse after the blaze had been put out. Presumably the snakes had got him. They had certainly killed Barbara Brown and her baby. Now everybody in Stainforth was really looking over their shoulders.

Keith wondered about going to the Evershams' again. Not just yet, anyway. Cynthia Eversham would not want to be bothered with the garden for some time; another regular job gone overboard thanks to these fucking snakes. She would probably sell up and go back down south to her family.

The Yardleys lived in a modern detached house at the very end of the main street. A stark box, 'No taste,' as everybody in the village said - a box and a quarter of an acre of lawn. They had not even got any borders. Suburbia had come to Stainforth with disgusting authenticity.

He pulled his van into the tarmac drive and the engine was only too ready to die. Climbing out, aware of the stillness, the absence of commuter cars backing out into the road, heading east to the town. Wasn't anybody going to work today? Maybe everybody had moved out temporarily; we'll come back when those awful snakes have gone.

Eileen Yardley appeared in the doorway of the house, an expression of mingled disbelief and disapproval on her moonish face. Tall and thin, any grey in her shoulder-length hair obliterated by a jet-black rinse, she had a reputation for complaining. She complained regularly to the council, the electricity board, the post office, and wrote a good many more letters to the local newspaper than they ever published, something else which she complained about. At forty-five she was reasonably attractive but her goal in life was a mystery to everybody who knew her. She was in search of some level of status, obviously, and perhaps with her husband having failed in his attempt to secure promotion at the local council then she

had to draw attention to herself, a constant battle to get her own way against the System. Nobody really knew and perhaps she did not either.

'You're not going to work today, surely, Mr Doyle?' A harsh accent that jarred the nerves of anybody within earshot. 'Not in this terribly hot weather. And I heard you'd had a most frightful experience up at the Evershams.'

'Grossly exaggerated.' Christ, he couldn't tell the whole story all over again. 'But the lawns need cutting, Mrs Yardley, else that spiky grass will grow so that the mower won't take it, I thought I'd raise the blades a bit, just take the top off, tidy it up a bit.'

'If you really want to.' She pulled the door another inch or two towards her; she ought not to have it open at all. 'It's entirely up to you. My husband's stopped over in town, these road blocks waste such a lot of time and in the evening there is a queue almost to the motorway.'

With any other woman I'd take that as an invitation, Doyle smiled wryly. Either George Yardley was staying in town because he had a ready-made excuse to be away from his wife's incessant complaining or else he was scared stiff of the snakes. Eileen wouldn't get up to anything whilst he was away. She would simply brood and write more letters to the paper.

'You do what you think best.' There was only a crack of open door now, the dark-haired woman peering out from behind it. 'Ring the bell when you've finished and I'll pay you your money.'

He walked up to the garage, could not help a shudder as he lifted the up-and-over door; all so reminiscent of the Evershams'. But, like a racing driver who has walked out of a bad pile-up, he had to get right back behind the wheel if he wasn't going to lose his nerve.

The mower was a fifteen-year-old Atco. You tugged your guts out until it fired and then dodged the cloud of pungent fumes. Keith had cleaned the plugs, fiddled with the carburettor on more than one occasion but it made no difference. Age caught up with everything eventually.

The lawn was virtually a patch of uncut hay, it really did not need cutting. An excuse really, the need to be doing something. Anything. But whatever he did he could not get Kirsten off his mind. He had to know today what had become of her, whether their relationship had finally tottered over the brink. He could not stand not knowing any longer.

Up and down that lawn, cutting dead brown swathes that would need weeks of rain to recover. Emptying the grass-box on the pile behind the flowering cherry tree; mowing again, now hurrying because he wanted to get finished. Then he would go up to the Davis household. If they were not at home then perhaps the neighbours might have some idea where they had gone.

In the midst of his thoughts the engine stuttered, cut out in a final puff of two-stroke smoke, an ageing monster that had finally given up its battle with life.

Silence, complete and utter. You could not even hear the cars on the distant motorway. It was like standing in the middle of a ghost village that stank of lawn mower fumes and burned barley. The smell of death.

'Hi, there.'

Keith Doyle turned slowly, saw the dark-bearded young man, roughly his own age, coming up the drive

towards him. He nodded, remembered having seen him around the village but could not quite place him. A visitor, one who had been before.

'You're Keith Doyle.' The stranger extended a hand, 'My name's John Price. I'm staying down at Mrs Harrison's.'

'Of course.' Keith just checked himself from blurting out, 'The old lady who had a heart attack when a grass snake got in the house?' 'You're the zoologist who is helping them hunt the snakes.' It all clicked into place.

'That's right. And not having much luck, I'm afraid. I heard about your own experience, it must have been absolutely terrifying.'

'I had a near scrape.' Keith's legs felt wobbly just recalling that flight from the border with the fattier hard after him; once he reached the garage, though, he wasn't in much danger. He had to keep consoling himself with that fact. 'I had to come out and do some work today, not just for the money but because I'd go bloody crazy if I stayed indoors.'

'Me, too.' John Price began rolling himself a cigarette. 'They don't need me at present.' He waved his free hand vaguely in the direction of the moors. 'We've scoured the moors, acres of barley have been devastated by fire, and yesterday they hunted the remaining fields. Nothing at all. The snakes seem to have disappeared totally.'

'You think they might've moved on?'

'If so there have been no reports of their having been sighted. I have my doubts.'

'Meaning they're still in Stainforth?'

'I reckon so, right under our bloody noses. But where? I was hoping that as a jobbing gardener, knowing the village and the gardens, you might have some idea.'

Keith puckered his lips, scratched his shock of unruly copper hair. 'Couldn't rightly say, there are so many patches of wilderness. I could name several gardens that I go to that could hide a hundred snakes, and a lot more that I don't work in.'

'The authorities are worried now that the reptiles might actually be in the village.' Price drew deeply on a crumpled cigarette, inhaled the strong smoke. 'They're going to search every garden, hedgerow and patch of wasteland in Stainforth today. They just asked me to stand by in case they need me for identifying any species they might be lucky enough to shoot. The inhabitants are scared already but that's nothing to what they're going to be when gangs of armed searchers and dogs start invading their gardens. The media doesn't help. Every morning there's a blown-up picture of some deadly snake on the front page of just about every paper. The police have booted out the sightseers, sent 'em packing in no uncertain terms, and sealed off the road. I'm half expecting them to evacuate the village. It would certainly be the safest thing to do.'

'I'll keep my eyes peeled.' Suddenly Keith felt very cold standing there in the hot sunshine. The last thing he wanted to see right now was another snake. 'Well, I reckon this mower has finally had it, so that's as good an excuse as any to pack it in for today.'

'Fancy a pint? The Rising Sun is remaining open, regardless.'

'I'd like to,' Keith shuffled his feet awkwardly. 'In fact, there's nothing I'd like better, but I haven't seen my girlfriend for three days. She's not at work and maybe her parents have left the village for a time. I've got to go and see what's happened.'

John Price nodded. 'I'll see you around then.' He dropped his gaze, added with a hint of embarrassment, 'I think that maybe two fellers moving quietly and knowing what they're about might stand more chance of finding these snakes than a whole army of searchers beating hell out of the vegetation.'

'Is that an invitation to join you in a snake hunt?'

'Yeah, I guess it is.'

There was a long pause, an uneasy silence before Keith replied. 'Maybe, I can't rightly say at this moment, it all depends on my girl. I got problems, you see. Tell you what, I'll try and get 'em sorted out today and if everything's OK you and me'll take a look around tomorrow, I can't commit myself further then that at this moment.'

'Fair enough,' John Price dropped the butt of his cigarette on to the tarmac, ground it to shreds with his heel. 'You come down to my place, Mrs Harrison's bungalow, early in the morning and we'll see what's doing then.'

Keith watched the other walk back down the drive, slow loping steps, another man who had to be doing something or else he would go crazy.

And as he pulled the clapped-out Atco back up the drive to the garage the gardener was praying that the search parties might find the reptiles today and destroy them. If they did not then he would be as scared as the rest of the villagers. He hadn't promised to go on a snake hunt, though.

But he knew that he would help John Price to seek the killers out all the same.

As he drove out of the Yardleys' gateway he had to wait for a convoy of army Land Rovers to pass, open-backed vehicles packed with men in camouflage clothing, armed with shotguns. Slowing, pulling into the side of the road, beginning to disembark. So sinister in the main street of an English village.

Keith's flesh crept and his mouth was dry, the kind of dryness that even a lager at the Rising Sun would not alleviate. Basic fear, terror because there was no doubt in his mind that the snakes were right here in Stainforth village. Hiding out somewhere.

And nobody would sleep easily in their beds again until every one of those killers was dead.

'I'M GOING to see Kirsten, Mother.'

Not wholly a lie. I'm going to try and see Kirsten, Mother, do my damndest. She wasn't at home earlier and the car wasn't in the garage, and in all probability my guess was correct that they've left Stainforth for the present. Except I've got a feeling that they'll be back soon. Maybe I'm clinging to vain hopes but at least if I go down there and hang around I'm actually doing something. I can't stay here and be interrogated all evening.

'Are you sure it's all right to go out?'

'Well, I've been out most of the day gardening, haven't I, and I'm OK.' Liar, you changed your mind and went for a pint in the Rising Sun after you'd been to the Davis house. A pity you didn't go with that Price feller in the first place. Still, it had helped to fill the day in.

'Like I told you earlier, Keith, the soldiers have been all through the gardens in the village today. Gave me quite a turn, I can tell you, men with guns on the lawns, poking in the shrubs.'

'But they didn't find anything, did they, Mother?'

'No-oo-oo . . . but they might have.'

Jesus Christ, there might be a nuclear war tonight and we'll all be blown to blazes! 'Don't you worry, these snakes have probably high-tailed it out of the area and in a couple of days Stainforth will be declared safe and the roads opened up again.'

'Maybe.' Joan Doyle resigned herself for the second time that day to the fact that there was no way she was going to stop her son from going out. 'What time will you be back?'

'Shouldn't be too late.'

The only way he could end these conversations was by going out and closing the door. She would sit up and wait until he returned; damn it, that was her fault.

He looked at his watch. A quarter past eight. He had not realised that it was as late as that. Nevertheless, he had given the Davis family plenty of time to return home if they were going to. And if they hadn't then he might just go back to the Rising Sun again.

Damnation, he still had not filled up with petrol. It was too late now, the garage would be closed. The needle had dropped into the red sector on the gauge. But that usually meant there was half a gallon left in the tank. Or thereabouts. A mile to the Davis house and a mile back, it should be plenty. There were times when you had to be an optimist.

You're wasting your time, Keith Doyle. What else can I do? I have to do something. It's all part of a parental plan by the Davises. Take Kirsten out of the environment, work on her. You're wasting your time on that Doyle boy, even if he has got a string of qualifications he hasn't got a job. You've been in Stainforth too long, you haven't widened your scope. There are shoals of fish in the sea.

The snakes came in very convenient when you needed a seemingly bona fide excuse to whisk your daughter out of the clutches of a man you did not approve of. Oh yes, they had come just when they

were needed as far as Jack and Mary Davis were concerned.

But if Kirsten is pregnant that really throws a spanner in their connivings, Keith smiled to himself. They would have to let her make the choice then. Or would they? Surely they would not force her to have an abortion?

Army vehicles still lined the village street but there was no sign of the hunters. They would keep at it until darkness fell. He remembered that half-promise about tomorrow. I don't have to go with John Price, I only said I'd give it some thought.

And then he saw Kirsten Davis!

The sudden shock caused him to swerve, bump against the kerb. It can't be, I'm having hallucinations. The right place, just past the church, the time was right too. Except that their meeting had been arranged for three days ago.

The van's brakes squealed their protest, the engine stalled and he was leaning across the passenger seat to pull the door catch down with a hand that shook.

Kirsten was wearing a light blue dress, almost a mini, that showed her shapely legs off to perfection. A low-cut neckline, a cleavage that had you wanting to see the rest. Only her expression worried him; pale-faced, eyes that were red-rimmed from crying, black pouches beneath them from lack of sleep. Distraught, her hair was not as immaculate as it usually was.

As she swung herself into the passenger seat and slammed the door his hopes plummeted, almost had him wishing that he had gone to the Rising Sun instead and kept on kidding himself that everything would be all right; not knowing for sure meant that you still had illusions. But eventually you had to face up to reality.

'We'd better go somewhere where we can talk.' Her voice faltered and she stared straight ahead of her.

'All right.' His stomach was churning. Hell, that wasn't easy, not only was he almost out of petrol but half a mile further on there was a police road block. 'Let me think ... I know, the sandpit.'

She nodded but did not speak. The 'sandpit' was a played-out sand quarry just to the rear of the churchyard. It had not been quarried for twenty years and up until a few years ago the village bikers used to scramble there at weekends. There had been complaints about the noise, a petition, and nowadays nobody went there except teenage courting couples who did not have transport to take them further afield.

A bridle path, just wide enough to take a car, led off from where the wall bordering the cemetery ended. A hundred yards, rutted and dipping sharply, terminating in five acres of overgrown scrubland surrounded by high precarious sandcliffs, thorn bushes and saplings somehow securing a hold and serving to create an atmosphere of dank loneliness. Even in the heat of summer it was cool in here.

It was obvious to Keith that the snake hunters had beaten the place out thoroughly, bracken and grass flattened, even some of the low-growing bushes on the steep face had been ripped out. At least there was no danger here.

He switched the engine off, was aware of the silence, the gathering dusk down in this desolate place, the tension in the van. We'd better go somewhere where we can talk. We're here, so let's talk.

'Well?' Unless he said something they might sit here like this all night.

'I'm pregnant.' She stifled a sob.

'Oh.'

'What d'you mean, 'oh'?'

He didn't reply. What the hell did she expect him to say, what do other guys say when their girlfriends inform them they're in the club?

'You've had it confirmed?'

'No, not yet, it's too early.'

'Then how the hell d'you know?'

'I know,' her voice rose, almost a scream of frustration, 'girls know those sort of things long before they're confirmed.'

Keith fell silent. Mixed feelings, jubilation, you can't walk out on me now, darling. Apprehension because it was too involved even to start to comprehend at this stage.

'I'm not running away.' His tone was low when he spoke at last. 'I'll stand by you, you know that.'

'That's not the point.' Kirsten was back on the verge of tears. 'You haven't run away, but . . . have.'

'What . . . whatever are you talking about?'

'Mum and Dad decided it was best if we left Stainforth for a while, at least until the snakes had been rounded up. They insisted that I went with them. As you know, Dad has a flat in the city and we all squashed into that. They wanted to get me away from you, thought that if I didn't see you for a bit and that if I was introduced to one or two of Dad's eligible bachelor business associates, or their sons, they could persuade me to finish with you. Oh God, Keith, it was awful. The pressure they put on me . . . all snobbery . . .'

She was crying, shaking with constricted sobs, and he slipped an arm around her.

'I walked out on them this morning.' It was a couple of minutes before she was able to continue. 'We had a fearful row at breakfast. Mum must have guessed something because she accused me of being pregnant. So I stormed out, caught a bus and walked the rest of the way. I had a bit of bother at the checkpoint but in the end the police sent an army cadet to escort me home. Now I'm in a fine mess. I've left home, I've nowhere to go, and I've also lost my job. Mrs Holloway has sacked me for not turning in for work. Oh, Keith . . .' Her tears came in a flood, her face buried against his chest. 'Whatever are we going to do?'

'We're going to get married.' He tried to keep the jubilation out of his voice. Sod your folks, they can take a running jump. Then a sudden awful thought occurred to him and he added, 'If you want to get married, that is.'

'Of course, I do.' She squeezed his hand. 'It's just that it all seems such a frightful, awful mess, that's all.'

Silence again. Dusk had merged into near-darkness down in the quarry. Only by craning his neck could Keith see the evening sky up above them, the remnants of a summer sunset. For some reason he remembered the date - 21 June, the Summer Solstice. The longest day. This was one midsummer night he would never forget.

'What's that?' Kirsten's head was suddenly erect, listening.

'What's what?' He didn't want to be in a hurry to go.

Savour every second, you'll remember this night for the rest of your life.

'I heard something.' She was staring into the sandpit darkness, trying to make out shapes and silhouettes that would be gone in a matter of minutes. 'Like something's round the front of the van.'

Probably rats, he thought, but you don't tell emotional girls that. 'A rabbit maybe,' he sighed, 'there are lots of them in here. The sand is full of their burrows.'

'There it is again.' She was tense, holding on to him. 'I can feel it vibrating on the ... Keith!' A piercing scream; she was clutching at him, almost hysterical. 'There, do you see it?'

He saw it all right, felt his stomach heave up, tasted something sharp and sour at the back of his throat, recalled a TV documentary he had once watched about snake-charming, the way the snake came up out of a wicker basket, a wriggling revolting creature mastering a vertical stance with a body that had no backbone. And the snake was doing just that now, rising up from somewhere in the region of the radiator grille, uncoiling, going up and up; aware of the two humans inside the vehicle, its tiny eyes fixed on them, scenting their terror and mocking them with open jaws that seemed to laugh.

'It can't get at us,' Keith Doyle whispered hoarsely. 'No way. We're safe.'

'Let's get away from here,' she pleaded, shuddered and closed her eyes. 'Oh Keith, take me home.'

'No problem.' He laughed but it sounded forced and the fingers that rested on the ignition key trembled. 'No problem at all, we can swing round, drive right back on to the road, and if we don't dislodge this buggler on the way then there are loads of police and soldiers in the village who will be only too delighted to shoot it.'

Seconds later he knew that he did have a problem, a very frightening one. The starter-motor whirred but did not fire, vibrated hollowly beneath the bonnet. He tried it again, much slower this time, they felt it groaning, stopping. A third time; it would not even turn over.

'Keith!' Kirsten was on the verge of panic. He gripped her wrist hard, was not taking any chances on her opening the door and trying to make a run for it. He recalled his own flight three days ago. He had only made it to the garage by the grace of God. Kirsten certainly would not make it back to the road.

'Don't worry.' He tried to sound convincing. 'She'll go in a minute.' But he knew it wouldn't because it had been reluctant to start even on these hot summer mornings. It was the battery, sure enough, possibly the same one that was on this S-registered vehicle from new, now old and tired. Dying, maybe dead already. There was just a faint chance that if they waited a few minutes it might fire. A very faint chance, the kind you only relied on when there was nothing else left. The snake was on the bonnet now, coils of

it. Keith would not even attempt to guess at its length but in the fading daylight he was just able to make out its colouring; a ringed body, red, black and white rings, the fearsome snout jet-black. Colourful, deadly, its head only inches from the glass of the windscreen, staring inside intently. 'Keith, I don't want to look!' 'You don't have to. Close your eyes.' 'I can't, it's like I've 'got to look!'

A thought crossed his mind, one that would have been funny in any other situation except this. You paid a quid or so to go into a reptile house and gawp at snakes through glass but this bugger was getting a close-up of humans in a cage for free! Jesus, that was rich, it kind of put things in perspective, made you realise that when it came down to the law of the jungle Man counted for nothing. 'Keith, I can't stand it any longer!'

'Hang on, I'll try the battery again.' He knew before he turned the key that it wasn't going to be any good. This time the starter-motor didn't even turn over. The engine was as dead as the proverbial dodo, and even if it hadn't been he wondered if there was enough petrol in the tank to get them out of there. You're a stupid prick, Keith Doyle. The snake on the bonnet seemed to be laughing in agreement with him.

'We're stuck.' Kirsten was sobbing again. 'There's no way we're going to get out of here.'

'Don't be stupid, we're only yards from the village, the main street. I've only got to blow the horn and the soldiers will come on the run.'

'Blow it then.'

He pressed the klaxon button, knew even as he did so that it would not even muster up the force of a good fart. Simply because the horn worked off the battery like everything else on a vehicle - lights, flashers - the battery was the heart of a motor car, determined whether it lived or died. And Keith Doyle's van right now was very dead.

'I'll think of something. Don't panic.' He leaned across her and locked the door; as much to prevent her from leaping out as the snake from getting in. 'It can't get to us.'

'It's . . . horrible.'

'I wonder what species it is.' Talking for the sake of talking. 'It certainly isn't a rattler because I know what they look like.' A joke that did not sound funny.

'I don't care what sort it is,' she snapped. 'I just wish it was dead along with all its mates.'

It was dark now, the two people inside the vehicle could barely see each other's silhouettes. Even the dashboard lights were too faint to give off so much as a glow. But there was enough light for them to be able to make out the shape of the snake that held them prisoner. It had coiled itself up again, settled down on the bonnet, head up against the glass windscreen. Watching and waiting.

And the coral snake which had so recently witnessed the death of its mate at the hands of Man was in no hurry. Vengeance was within its grasp and there was no way it was going to allow its prisoners to escape. After it had killed them it would die because there would be nothing left to live for. It would wait.

'We can't stop here.'

Keith was relieved to hear Kirsten speak fairly normally, keeping her face turned away from the windscreen, pushing herself back into the seat.

'At the moment we can't do much else.' he answered. He remembered that the rear doors of the van were not locked but it did not really matter, no snake would be capable of turning the handle, and, in any case, the lock only functioned from the outside. Don't think about it. 'We'll just have to be patient. Somebody is bound to find us soon.'

He did not add that it was unlikely to be before morning. The searchers had called off the hunt for today; it would be seven o'clock before they recommenced. He and Kirsten were almost certainly there for the night.

It was going to be a long one.

Chapter 12

PC KEN AYLOTT stared around the small room that for the past two years had been his office. It bore little resemblance to the neatly arranged room that had contained only a week ago two filing cabinets, a desk with some wire trays on it, telephone, a notice-board with warnings about such relatively harmless creatures as Colorado beetles pinned on it. Dull and boring but at least it had been his. Whatever his resentment about this out-of-the-way posting, he had had the small consolation of knowing that this was his pad and he was the boss. Now, within the space of a few days, all that had been taken from him.

The office was a shambles; piles of untidily heaped papers that would in all probability never be sorted and filed, a mountain of rubber boots in the corner, discarded clothing. If he had been in charge of operations the place would never have been allowed to get into this state. Damn it, he had been relegated to the status of office boy. Stop here and answer the phone, Aylott, radio us if anything important crops up. Your job is to hold the fort. The super made it sound important, like telling a child he was responsible for picking up his scattered toys; do your best and we'll check it over when we get back. You're not getting the chance to skive on outside operations. Not that Aylott particularly wanted to be out there with every chance of a rattler jumping at you out of the undergrowth.

Shirley, his wife, was asleep in the police house adjoining the official office block. She didn't seem to be able to grasp that Stainforth was a dead-end job, said quite calmly that she would be happy to stay here for the rest of her life, buy one of those semis in the village after Ken retired in another fifteen years. Fifteen years, Jesus wept! Ken Aylott could weep if he stopped to think about it too long.

Of course, it was the Raglan case that was the sole reason for his posting to Stainforth, A balls-up, the classical clanger that a copper on a Manchester beat should not have dropped. He'd picked up Raglan, the man who had committed a dozen horrific sex murders and questioned him. He should have held the bastard, but at the time the man's story seemed genuine enough. The policeman had fallen for a false name and address and a volume of lies thrown in, a few scribblings in his notebook that he had not thought worth the paperwork so he'd let it go at that, and Raglan too. Three months and six corpses later

the CID had nailed Raglan and everything came out. You could have saved us millions of pounds and six lives as well, copper, if you had done your job properly on the night of 10 January. Every rookie makes a mistake, some bigger than others. This will go against you.

'It wasn't your fault,' Shirley had said. She had stuck by him as she invariably did in everything. 'They can't blame you, you weren't to know.'

Kick PC Aylott's arse. Hard. If it hadn't been for an acute shortage of manpower due to the police commitment on manning picket lines Ken might well have had his arse kicked even harder, right out of the Force. He spent weeks away from home in the daily turmoil of shoving, yelling crowds, had a week in hospital when he was unfortunate enough to have a half-brick land on his head. And then, within a fortnight of the settlement of the long dispute, he received the Stainforth posting.

They even tried to make a meal out of that, "This is your big chance, copper, your opportunity to prove yourself.' There was the odd case of sheep-worrying by dogs (there weren't even any rustlers around Stainforth), threatening to nick the Rising Sun because one night there were half a dozen in there drinking after eleven. Keeping an eye on one or two suspect vehicles that might not get through their MOTs and could just be used on the roads when their owners were in possession of a failed certificate. Oh, Mother of God, big deal!

It wasn't Ken Aylott's week on nights but he clicked for it just the same. They had taken the two boys from the town off the night shift - they should have covered Stainforth from 8 P.M. to 8 A.M. - because they needed them on 'days' to man the road-blocks. 'It'll help if you'll cover the night shift, Ken. There won't be much happening.' There never bloody well was, that was the trouble. Keep on your toes, copper, this is your big chance.

Ken lit a cigarette, sat looking at this pig-hole of an office, even thought about tidying it up, restoring some semblance of order. He'd get a bollocking from the super for sure if he did that. You seem to think this is your office, Constable.

He half-considered jacking it all in, typing out his notice and leaving it on the desk for Burlington to see when he arrived in the morning. Stick that where the monkey sticks his nuts, I finish on Saturday week. But he didn't, and not just because Shirley was expecting their first baby and the monthly jobless tally, according to the television last Monday, had risen by another 2,000 in the month of May. That alone wouldn't have stopped him, it was his personal pride that did. You failed, copper, so you threw in the sponge, hadn't the guts to see if you could make it all the way back, claw yourself out of demotion and Stainforth. You took the easy way out, didn't you?

But how, for Christ's sake, tell me how? He knew the answer without waiting for it to echo back off those four walls in taunting whispers. You know how, copper, go out and find those snakes. Nobody else has so far. You'll be a national hero, they'll have to give you your stripes then because if they don't the people of Stainforth will petition for your promotion. Like bloody hell they will! The villagers don't petition for anything except against somebody making too much noise on a Sunday.

It'll still count for a lot. Yeah, maybe you're right but I don't stand much chance, not in the dark. You won't get your opportunity in the daytime, you know that; stop here and mind the phone, Constable. Radio us if there's anything really important.

Ken Aylott was sweating just at the thought of going out there. He could smell his own body odours, a sour stench that highlighted his fears, stopped him from kidding even himself that he was not afraid. A good copper's one who does his duty even though he's scared to hell, only fools and liars kid themselves.

He looked at the clock on the wall. Twenty-seven minutes past twelve. He took a swig of lukewarm coffee, lit another cigarette. It was no good just rushing blindly out there into the night, he needed to work out some plan of campaign; look what happened to that clever bastard Eversham. Don't think about him or you won't go. Or Barbara Brown. You're different, Ken Aylott, you've got a tidy mind, you plan.

All the facts pointed to the snakes being somewhere in the village. Well, if the fuckers weren't on the moors or in the fields, and hadn't gone elsewhere (no sightings reported yet apart from scaremongers and those seeking to waste police time), then they had to be still in the vicinity. Every garden in the village had been searched, the sandpit and the churchyard (the old disused cemetery adjacent to the current graveyard included), so logically there wasn't anywhere else left.

It's just a bloody waste of time, you're fooling yourself. Coward! You won't know for sure if you don't go out there and look. And if they're not around you won't be in any danger, will you? You will have been seen to have done something positive, not just sat here all night on your arse as you're perfectly entitled to do. Well done, Constable, you didn't find the snakes but at least you did your best. A fraction of the way towards getting your stripes.

Ken Aylott swallowed the rest of his coffee at one gulp and stood up. He'd better take a pair of those rubber boots off the heap in the corner, size nines, just to make his feet sweat and stink. A torch, too. He thought about a shotgun out of the armoury in the back and decided against it; too many complications if anything went wrong. The police weren't allowed to arm themselves except on written instructions from the Chief Constable. I was hunting snakes, sir. All the other officers carried guns in the daytime. In the daytime, Constable, but you had no right to be prowling about the village in the dead of night with a gun. It amounts to armed trespass for which you will be disciplined. Bloody hell, better leave the gun and play safe. I'm not out to shoot the snakes or enrage them like Eversham obviously did, I'm only going to try and locate them. I've discovered their lair, Superintendent, they're in the ... Ken could not for the life of him think where they might be. It didn't really matter, suffice it that he had had the guts to go out there in the dark, prove himself to himself.

The occasional streetlight broke up the pitch blackness of a summer night, created its own atmosphere of gloom. Eerie, the night was nowhere near so balmy as it had been a short time ago. Insects dive-bombed a lamp, seemed intent on kamikaze attacks. Aylott looked upwards, was aware of a myriad of stars, searched for the moon and detected a silver sliver, barely discernible. A full moon would have been helpful. With a torch you felt so vulnerable, gave your movements and position away.

Further down the main street he had to use his flashlight. Now why the devil hadn't they continued with the street-lighting down here? The houses were more isolated now, modern dwellings erected after the line of stone-built cottages petered out, but the council had not yet got round to providing full amenities for the occupants.

He shone his beam on the towering rickety church lych-gate; it was a wonder that it had not collapsed years ago, rotting and broken timbers, a half-torn notice of church service times hanging on by a single drawing pin. When the winds and rain came again (if ever they did) it would be whipped away to lie rotting in the bottom of the cemetery hedgerow.

He decided to check the church, no real reason except that it seemed the logical place to start. He walked slowly up the weed-covered track, shone his torch from side to side. A wilderness, even the most recent graves that had not yet had their tombstones erected were becoming hidden behind a screen of seeding wild willow herb. There was room for maybe another twenty graves and then the church would have to blow the whistle on burials here unless they obtained permission to dig up the roadside

verge. Full up, book your plot now. He smiled in the darkness at his humourless joke but all the same he wondered where they would go next. Stainforth had filled two graveyards in three centuries. The church authorities would have to find another tract of consecrated ground or else resort to cremation. There were hundreds more people still left to die in the village. The snakes could speed up the death toll considerably.

There was no mistaking the four newly dug graves. He smelled the damp soil that had not yet had time to dry out, sheets of artificial grass vainly trying to hide the morbid excavations. The day after tomorrow was funeral day; four, one after the other. Elsie Harrison, Barbara Brown and her child, Eversham, what was left of him. There'll be more if you don't find the snakes soon, copper. Shut up, don't think about it.

The church doors were locked, as they should have been, but it was second nature to a policeman to try them. The wrought-iron latch rattled like the bones of long-dead skeletons turning restlessly in their coffins, echoed inside the church. Aylott felt uneasy, churches were always disquieting to him, associating them with funerals and with the victims of murderers and road accidents. And snakes.

He would make sure he was confined to his office on the day of the funerals, for once not objecting to being the Force's stooge, the human telephone answering service for operational headquarters. You said I was to stay here and look after things, sir. I don't mind at all.

There would be a big turn-out for the burials, the whole village plus press and TV. The media would make a big thing of it. Get your head down over some paperwork, boy, catch up on all that form-filling, and by the time you've finished it will all be over. Until the snakes strike again.

Perhaps he should have attended church regularly in his youth and then he would not have had this secret disquiet about them. It wasn't just death, that was routine to a policeman whether it was a nice peaceful pensioner's passing or a gory traffic accident. It was what happened afterwards, the unnecessary morbid ritual. Some claimed it was a form of therapy designed to ease the grief of the bereaved. Aylott believed it was a climax to horror, brought those left behind face to face with the grave. This is the end, there's nothing else no matter what they try to tell you. He had never had any time for the Reverend Philip Emsworth, Stainforth's parson. Overweight, pink-faced, a flabby handshake and a condescending voice. A hypocrite if ever there was one, a scrounger of Sunday lunches and afternoon teas, who dodged reality by erecting a pseudo-spiritual barrier, had found his niche in this out-of-the-way village. But comforting words were no defence against killer snakes.

PC Aylott made a slow tour of the cemetery, shone his torch from one moss-covered tombstone to the next. Christ, some bugger even had a serpent engraved on his stone, a depiction of the Garden of Eden. That's all I bloody well need. He shivered, the night air had turned very cold.

Well, the reptiles certainly weren't lying out in this jungle of an unkempt cemetery. The constable reached the furthest boundary, saw a dilapidated wicket gate that leaned over into an adjoining section of rough ground - the original graveyard.

It was no more than a couple of acres at the most, triangular, bounded by a tall straggling hawthorn hedge that had last been pleached in 1963 and had not been touched since. Most of the graves went back to the last century, their indecipherable headstones having either been laid flat or fallen over and left that way because in the days when Stainforth Parochial Church Council was able to afford a full-time verger it made mowing easier. Then came drastic economic cut-backs in the 1970s and both verger and mower were made redundant. Emsworth took it upon himself to let the old graveyard revert to nature; the hedge, untidy as it was, screened the worst of the wilderness and as the majority of those buried in there had no living relatives left few were likely to complain. If you can't clear up a mess, hide it, was one

of the clergyman's many mottoes.

Aylott did not fancy going in there. He stood by the remains of the old gate, swinging his torch beam in a wide arc, noted the flattened, tangled growth where the police and army searchers had trodden it down. There really was not much point in going in there for a second look, now was there? Not really, but if you're going to check out the sandpit at the far end you'll have to; unless you're going to go back and all the way round by road. You don't really want to go and shine your torch in those open graves again, do you?- because if you walk by them you'll be compelled to. The first one's for Elsie Harrison, the second for ...

He negotiated the leaning broken gate, snapped another rotten strut with a loud crack. If those snakes are around they will have heard that for sure. But they surely aren't because they would have been found by now if they were. That was the best piece of logic he had come up with all night and it made him feel an awful lot easier in his disturbed mind.

Through this wilderness that used to be a cemetery, out into the sandpit and back along the road to the station; sorry, operational HQ. I went out on my own and looked, sir, but I'm certain the snakes aren't in Stainforth. They've moved on unseen and we'll just have to wait until they turn up somewhere. And somebody else gets killed.

It was not easy walking in there, the trampled-down grass and weeds screening large stones that you only found when you either stubbed your toe against them or trod on them and wrenched your ankle. A hidden indentation in the ground threw PC Aylott headlong. He cursed, picked himself up, had to retrieve his torch which had rolled away. Now this is bloody stupid, you're not proving anything either to yourself or to anybody else. You're pandering to guilt, trying to convince yourself that you're not the bloody coward you thought you were. And all the time you're shit-scared.

The sandpit could not be far now, the hedges were beginning to angle towards the apex of the graveyard triangle and where they met there would be a broken-down stile and a slope beyond which he would have to negotiate very carefully. Then it was but a hundred yards or so back to the road. And safety.

His foot rested on something flat and smooth beneath the grass; one of those old tombstones lying horizontally, no doubt. He rested his full weight on it and felt it tilt like a paving slab that had been placed on uneven ground. Well, it was hardly likely to have been laid with a spirit-level, was it? It ..

Ken Aylott's brain could not cope with what happened next. A feeling like vertigo, a loss of balance and coordination, a sensation akin to stepping on to a hinged trapdoor, aware of it tilting downwards beneath his feet. His logic screamed at him to jump sideways before it was too late but his body refused to heed the warning.

Falling. A rush of stale cold air came up out of the ground to meet him, and he gave a strangled cry of terror, clinging on to his torch. Instinctively he hunched his body, anticipated the bone-jarring fall, a kaleidoscope of terrors jamming his crazed mind; a childhood fear of the dark was instantly released from that corner of his brain where it had slumbered for three decades, had him screaming in infantile terror.

A cloying stench filled his nostrils, the putrid suffocating smell of an airless place. And then came impact and pain, the agony of breaking bones, gasping for air that was putrid, lying in a crumpled heap on sharp stones and doubting whether he would ever be able to move again. Crying, gasping with sheer terror because he could not manage a second scream.

He lay there, his body crunched up into a tight ball, racked with pain. Subconsciously he knew what had happened; an old crypt, the kind that were popular in the last century when entire families were interred in the same grave - a broken or loose stone that had acted as a trapdoor to catapult him down into its depths. Oh, merciful God, this was a place of the dead, hideous skeletal remains . . .

Somehow he was still clutching his torch but he did not want to look; it was still on, miraculously, but he closed his eyes in case he saw. He tasted blood, not a lot so perhaps he had just bitten his lip or tongue in the fall. But his leg was broken for sure, possibly both of them because he could not move them. He gasped for breath and it hurt like hell. Broken ribs; if he tried to get up he might puncture a lung.

I've got to get out of here! A haze of pain, a red curtain before his eyes. I mustn't faint, if I pass out I could lie here until I die. Somebody will surely come looking for me when the day shift takes over. But they won't know where to look, will they?

He tried to move his head, attempted to look upwards, desperately searching for a glimpse of those glittering stars, or that sliver of moon, anything that meant that there was open sky up above. Please .. just one star. .. but there were only streaks of shimmering red to be seen in the total blackness where there should have been an open square directly above.

You mustn't panic. Rest a bit, try to think. He felt at his legs, bare bleeding skin where his trousers had been ripped and torn asunder. There's broken bones definitely. Oh God!

Suddenly he got an awful feeling that he was not alone, beginning with a prickling of the hairs on the back of his neck. Don't be bloody stupid, if there's anybody else in here they've been dead a very long time. A heap of old bones but they can't move or hurt you.

Something definitely moved, dislodged a trickle of small stones close by. He jumped, wanted to shine his torch in the direction of the noise but he did not dare. If there's anything there then I don't want to see it. Rats, that's what it is, rodents are bound to use these old crypts. Repulsive but not dangerous.

His arms seemed to be virtually unscathed. Perhaps if he could secure a grip on something then he could pull himself up, reach the slab above, open it enough to give him air, a gap through which his shouts for help might be heard.

New hope, desperation breeding determination, groping behind him, feeling with his fingers. And that was when he touched something; it should have been cold rough stone, hard and inanimate. Instead it was rough and soft . . . breathing and moving.'

He snatched his hand away with an inarticulate cry, could not help himself from swinging his torch round, a dazzling white beam that reflected a pair of tiny glittering eyes, a long thick body that ended over in the shadows some yards away. Eyes watching him from every corner, pinpoints of unwavering evil.

Ken Aylott's reason almost snapped, hovered precariously on the brink between sanity and madness. You've found 'em, copper, the snakes everybody's been searching for, holed up in a derelict crypt in a disused churchyard.

No, they weren't real, they were a fevered nightmare brought on by the pain from his injuries. If he closed his eyes, and then opened them a few seconds later, they would be gone, evaporated. If there's anything there it's only rats and I've got snakes on the brain. They bloody well aren't snakes!

He sensed them moving, heard their bodies dragging across the uneven floor, slithering towards him. No,

they don't exist, They don't . . .

Sudden agony in his leg, his whole body jerking up, pain that in no way could have come from his fall; like a heated bradawl had been bored into his flesh, gouged a burning hole right down to the bone.

The policeman managed one long shriek of pain and terror, almost succeeded in standing on his fractured limbs, then fell backwards. The torch bounced from his hold, rolled, and shone its light back on the awful scene, cruelly showed Ken Aylott everything he did not want to see. A 3-D horror show in which he was the principal actor.

They were everywhere, long ones, fat ones, thin ones, dazzling deadly colours shimmering in the harsh artificial light; sliding up to the convulsing human body, striking at the exposed white flesh. Fangs that dug deep and tore mercilessly, drew blood and hungered for more. Darted, flicked, speared him with their poison.

Ken Aylott watched his own flesh swell, bloated veins pulsing with deadly venom, reddening, purpling. The snakes slid over him, obscene attacks, savouring this victim that had dropped obligingly into their lair. He felt their coldness, gave up any thoughts of escape. How long did it take a man to die from a snakebite? It depended upon which species bit you. He didn't have a chance, just wanted the end to be quick.

I found 'em, sir, when everybody else failed. Didn't I? And I won't get promotion, not even a posthumous award. They'll always remember me as the copper who fucked up the Raglan case.

The snakes were backing off him, a sudden withdrawal that puzzled the dying policeman even in his pain-crazed state. The bastards wanted to gloat, to watch him die, listen to his pleadings. They'll get you, make no mistake about that. You've fooled us all for the moment but they'll find you, they'll come with guns and blast hell out of you.

He could barely breathe now, as if his lungs had given out, collapsed; his eyes were swelling, restricting his vision. But he saw enough, enough to topple him down into that abyss of madness, even had him trying to laugh.

He had wondered where the big fucker had got to, the twenty-foot python that should have found it impossible to hide out in any tract of English countryside. Well, it was here now, must have been gorged and sleeping off some feast in the shadows, had missed out on the action. Now it was here, which was why all the others were keeping their distance.

A giant amongst reptiles, a Goliath of evil, driving the others back to skulk in their corners, watching them slink away.

Aylott's eyes were just twin slits now but the fear and the pain were gone. I've been looking for you, feller, there's a warrant out for your arrest. You'd better come quietly without any bloody fuss. Come on, now, no nonsense, I'm a police officer. Damn you, don't you understand? I'm a police officer and I'm placing you under arrest. Anything you say may be taken down and used in evidence against you . . .

The python was angry because its victim was dead but all the same it lashed the corpse mercilessly, struck with an incredible speed for its size, vented its fury on the human body. There was no need to entwine itself around the corpse, encircle the broken body and crush those frail bones, but it did so because that was its nature and it was very angry.

Tightening, squeezing, feeling its prey crunch and begin to pulp, blood oozing out across the dry floor. Finally it relinquished its grip, reared up and looked down on the mangled form. Its fury was vented and now hunger took over, its body expanding so that it might consume the morass, swallowing it whole, almost noiseless. Reptilian gluttony.

The other snakes were forgotten, hidden in their various corners, afraid because circumstances had forced them to share their hideout with a king amongst reptiles. A kind of temporary peace pact because they were the hunted in an alien land, reptilian guerrillas compelled to band together for survival. Man was their common foe and thus they were united in a single cause.

Down here in this dark underground place they felt safe. They would remain here as long as possible for even the keen-scented dogs which had hunted the ground above had not smelled them out. They had food - rats and mice, an abundance of voles. The king, too, had fed

But every one of them was a killer. Tomorrow, or perhaps the next day, their very nature would drive them out again to kill.

Chapter 13

A SUMMER dawn was beginning to infiltrate the night sky by the time sheer exhaustion finally claimed Keith Doyle and Kirsten Davis, brought brief respite from the sheer horror of the past few hours. All around the birds were beginning to twitter and sing but they did not hear them as they slumbered restlessly in a cramped position, bodies entwined, breathing easily.

It was the numbness in his left arm which finally had Keith stirring, wakefulness coming slowly, his brain gently easing him slowly back to reality. He thought at first that they were in a bed together, like the time Kirsten's folks had gone away for a long weekend and the couple had crammed into the girl's single bed, spent a blissful uncomfortable night together, an experience which they would hold dear for the rest of their lives. It had happened again; a thrill began to course through his body then died as quickly as it had begun. Oh Christ!

The horror was back. He stiffened, didn't turn his head to look out of the windscreen because he knew the snake would still be there on the bonnet, a revolting length of colourful coiled death just watching them.

Kirsten was still sleeping, her face pallid, crumpled dress and hair awry, hunched up in a position in which no human could have slept unless totally exhausted. Keith recalled a remark his father had once made, a disparaging reference to his wife. 'Before you marry a girl you want to see what she looks like first thing in the morning. She can tart herself up for the rest of the day but it's when she wakes up you know what she really looks like.' Not that I'm condoning pre-marital sex, though, just a piece of advice.

Kirsten looked beautiful, he decided. A queen amongst young girls. He would always remember her this way. But it did not alter the fact that their priority was to get away from here. All the same he could have stayed here just gazing down at her for ever.

He felt her stir. Her breasts rubbed softly against him, her eyelids began to flicker. Damn it, I've woken her up just when she needs all the sleep she can get.

'What time is it?' She tried to stretch, pushed her feet against the old van heater, the one that had no means of being switched off, roasted you in summer and did not work much at all in cold weather.

'Ten past four,' he murmured, adjusted his embrace. 'No, hurry, sleep on as long as you like.'

'No ... hurry . . . I'll be late for ... Oh, God! 'It's all right.' He kissed her softly. 'We're safe, a bit uncomfortable but everything's all right.' 'Is it ... still there?' 'Don't look.'

She struggled with him, twisted her head round, the terror back in her wide eyes. Then she gave a cry of mingled relief and amazement, euphoria. 'Keith, it's gone!'

He didn't dare to look where Kirsten had looked, barely comprehended her words. It hasn't, it can't, because it won't go away whilst it's got us trapped in here, you could tell that by the look in its eyes.

'Keith, look. I tell you it's gone!'

He turned his head slowly. She was right, the snake was no longer on the bonnet of the van.

'We can go then.' She was half-crying, fumbling for the door catch when he caught her wrist.

'Just hold on. We have to be sure, Kirsten.' 'Of course it's gone.'

'We don't know for certain, and until we are certain you don't get out of this van.'

'How do we find out then?' she was becoming angry. 'I say it's gone and we'd better make a run for the road before it comes back.'

Keith began to ease open the driver's door, just a couple of inches, enough for him to see outside, scrutinise the ground on the offside of the vehicle. Clumps of grass that were dying from lack of moisture, stunted growth that should have been luxuriant towards the end of June. Sparse, hardly room enough for a mouse to hide just here. The drought was beginning to bite.

'Well,' she said, craning her neck, trying to see past him, 'what did I tell you? It's got fed up with waiting and cleared off.'

He did not reply, opened the door another few inches, remembered what had happened outside the Evershams' garage, how the rattlesnake had lain in wait underneath Peter Eversham's Jag.

'What are you doing, Keith?'

He pushed the door and held it at arm's length, lowered his head and shoulders, ready to draw back at the first sign of danger. His long copper hair flopped down, felt below the sill. Almost afraid to look, but he had to.

'God? Keith Doyle's whole body recoiled like a whiplash, slamming the van door in the same motion as he fell back into Kirsten's arms.

'What is it? It ... isn't ...'

'Yes,' he sighed, closing his eyes. 'Our friend of last night is lying stretched full length under the van patiently waiting for us to emerge!'

Kirsten instinctively raised her feet up off the floor, felt physically sick, did not waste her breath asking what they were going to do. That was obvious, they stayed right there, hoped that eventually somebody would come.

'At least we can shout for help,' she said at length.

'We'll try in a bit when people are up and about,' he replied, remembered how this sandpit was virtually soundproof; that was the argument the local bikers had used in the big row a few years ago, claimed that the pit deadened the sound of their motorbikes, had almost convinced the local authorities. But he did not tell Kirsten that because her nerves were already at breaking point.

They sat there, pressed up against each other, watched the first rays of the morning sun turn the vegetation on the top of the quarry a rich golden colour. Anywhere else they could have appreciated the beauty of Nature's splendour. Here it was horribly threatening. And in a few hours it was going to get very hot. The temperature inside the van would rise, become unbearable.

'I ... I'll have to ... go somewhere.' She blushed, had probably fought against the physical urge for some time.

'Well, you can't go outside.' Damn it, this was unnecessarily embarrassing.

'I've got to.'

'There's a gardening bucket somewhere in the back amongst all this clutter.' He turned round, rummaged behind the seat until he found it, pulled it out. 'You can use that.'

'Keith, I ...'

'You'll have to.' He tried to sound sympathetic, knew that he would have to urinate too very shortly. 'I'm going to use it myself in a minute.'

She struggled with her inhibitions, finally crawled over into the back.

'What wouldn't I give for a nice cup of tea,' he said. Keep talking, don't make an issue out of what we'll both have to do several times before somebody finds us. 'Some toast, too.'

'Don't, you make me feel hungry.' She rejoined him in the front: 'Do you think we could try shouting yet?'

'We'd better leave it a bit.' No use exhausting ourselves, every hour from now onwards is going to take it out of us. 'If I know my mum she'll have raised the alarm by now. We can keep the windows open an inch or so and listen. As soon as we think we hear anybody we'll yell our heads off.'

But there was only silence. Just the buzzing of insects in the surrounding undergrowth. They might have

been a thousand miles from civilisation, marooned on a dried-up waterhole in the middle of some vast arid desert.

Keith had dozed. Suddenly he was awoken by a movement, jerking him back to reality; not the restless stirring of his companion, but a sudden surge by Kirsten, the click of the catch on the passenger door, the creaking of rusty hinges.

He moved fast, grabbed her shoulder with one hand, reached across and slammed the door with the other; locked it.

'Stop it!' She let out a scream, struck at him with clenched fists. Her features were screwed up into a mask of panic and desperation, her voice shrill with rising hysteria. 'Let go of me, Keith. You've no right to keep me here against my will. I'm going to jump out, run for the road.'

'You'd maybe get ten yards.' He snatched her wrists, held them in a strong grip. 'If that. You bloody stupid girl, you wouldn't have a chance. Your only hope is to stay here.'

She struggled frantically, tried to bite him, was twisting her body round in order to free her legs so that she could kick him. 'Let go of me, you bastard. You brute, I'll . . .'

That was when he hit her, released his hold on her and in the same movement brought the flat of his hand hard across her face, threw her head back. She screamed but her struggles stopped. And then she began to cry uncontrollably.

'I'm sorry.' He pulled her to him, kissed her tenderly, 'Believe me, Kirsten, I'm so sorry.'

'And I'm sorry too,' she replied after a while, squeezed his hand. 'I must have been mad. I don't know what came over me, only that I felt I'd go crazy if I stayed in here a second longer. I promise I won't do it again.'

'I hope not,' He reached under the seat, came out with a hammer, placed it in the glove-box, stail sticking out. 'See that?'

'What's that for, to hit the snake over the head with?'

'For you to hit me over the head with if I suddenly try to make a break for it. Just hammer me good and hard, lay me out.' There were times when you had to make a joke out of a crisis.

They both laughed.

Then it was back to waiting. And praying.

For once Joan Doyle had not waited up for her son to come in. He'd be all right, he'd only gone down to the Davises and you could not really expect a man (she was repeatedly trying to convince herself these days that Keith was no longer a boy) to be home prompt from courting.

At eleven o'clock she made herself a cup of tea and sat and drank it in the kitchen. It was one of those evenings when she found herself indulging in reflections, a nostalgic mood brought on by her son's courting. She hoped that he would marry Kirsten, in a way it would be like getting married herself all over again, reliving their happiness, remembering how things had once been between herself and Bob.

She knew that she could be very attractive if she took the trouble to make herself up; forty-four was no age, really. There was plenty of time left to find herself a man, start all over again. No, definitely no! It would not be the same the second time round, far better to grow old with the memories she already had, just remember that one chunk of her life from twenty to thirty-two, the best years. All the same, sometimes she despaired at the thought that in all probability she would never ever enjoy a physical relationship with a man again; the thought could age one prematurely, turn you into a kind of maiden aunt. If you let it.

She felt guilty about the things she sometimes did to herself in the solitude and privacy of her own bed on those nights when the urge got too much for her. A flood of guilt just confessing to herself that... whatever would Keith think of her if he ever found out? The shame of it all. But he wasn't likely to, there was no way he was going to know unless she told him and she would never admit to that even with her dying breath.

The mood was coming on her tonight and she knew she could not stop it. That was one reason why she wasn't going to sit up and wait for Keith; she found all kinds of other excuses but she knew the real one and it made her feel guilty.

She left the hallway light on and went upstairs. Keith would be all right.

Joan Doyle studied her nakedness in the full-length wardrobe mirror, experienced a glow of self-satisfaction. Her figure was still passable, her breasts were still firm and had not sagged, just a few wrinkles on her stomach and a couple of stretch marks. She would not be ashamed to let a man see her nude. That in itself was an exciting thought.

Her inhibitions always disappeared when she put the light out, it was as though she stepped into another world.

She tossed the sheets aside and lowered herself on to the bed, smoothed her fingers sensuously up and down the insides of her thighs, escalated her feelings. She was quivering all over, trembling with anticipation, determined to take her time and enjoy every second of it. Goodness, it was ages since she had been in a mood as strong as this; if a man had walked into the bedroom right now she would have let him have his way, pleaded with him to do it if necessary. Seduced him, thrown herself at him.

A thought crossed her mind; she wondered if Keith and Kirsten did . . . no, she didn't want to think about it. Just herself, the time that soldier had dated her, the year before she had met Bob, had walked her across the fields and down to the meadow by the river. She had told him 'no' over and over again but finally she had said 'yes' and they had not got home until well after midnight.

She couldn't hold off much longer, her slender fingers going to places she had been determined to keep them away from for a while yet, moving faster and faster. And faster. Her whole body was caught up in a maelstrom, taut as a bowstring. And then everything seemed to give. She thrashed and writhed, rolled from one side of the bed to the other and back again, over on to her stomach, crying her joy into the pillow.

The aftermath was so relaxing, like floating in a warm bubble bath without a care in the world, savouring the drowsiness, trying to hold off sleep as long as she could. Was that a door closing downstairs? She couldn't be sure but anyway it was a good job that Keith was late home because he might have heard her otherwise. She would have to be careful in future but it would be a long time before she got in a mood as strong as that again.

Her fantasies and memories followed her into sleep. Bob, tall and strong on their wedding night. She had lied and told him she was a virgin. She couldn't have done otherwise without admitting to having gone with Alistair that evening and she'd never do that.

In the darkened council-semi nuptial chamber, she was aware of her new husband alongside her, of his efforts at marital seduction. Secretly she was crying out for him to roll on top of her. Those rough hands of his, a brickie's callouses scraping their way up her legs. She eased her thighs apart, an invitation to him to feel in between them. Go on, Bob, touch me there.

He did, but somehow it was no longer sensuous, his roughness abrasive to her own sensitivity, a cold hard probing finger when it should have been soft and warm. Another movement that hurt her, gouged her soft moist flesh; catapulted her back into wakefulness.

If it was an erotic dream then it did not vanish with waking. The hand feeling her was still there, clumsily manipulating female organs that shut off instantly. She sat up, wanted to push it away.

And at that moment she saw it, a long dark shape like a trailing length of rope starkly outlined against the white background of the under sheet, draped from the foot of the bed right up on to her unclothed body. Moving, wriggling, a squat head erect and looking down at her.

She did not scream, she was incapable of doing anything except lie there and watch with terrified fascination and loathing, its very touch robbing her of all her powers. Her mind was a total blank, clinging to disbelief, seeing it move nearer . . . and nearer.

The reptilian intruder struck with a lightning lunge of its head, buried its fangs into the soft flesh of a breast, the terrified woman arching upwards with sudden pain, her spinal cord cracking under the pressure. Her body was on fire, a burning sensation spreading out in all directions, flaying arms and legs, slapping and kicking and trying to dislodge the creature that was now entwining itself around her. So cold, so strong, so dominant in an obscene simulation of reptilian and human copulation.

Joan Doyle screamed just once before she died, subconsciously tried to check that cry of terror in case it brought Keith rushing into the room. She felt her life being squeezed from her, an expulsion of air and vomit. Bursting like a balloon filled with water might have done.

And after it had feasted for the second time that night the African rock python left by the way it had entered, out through the open window, negotiated the drainpipe with ease, and slunk away in the direction of the old graveyard.

Man was easy prey if you were cunning enough to single out an unsuspecting victim. Now it would sleep the daylight hours away in the safety of that underground lair.

JOHN PRICE was knocking on the door of the Doyles' council house shortly after seven o'clock the next morning, an air of urgency and frustration about him. Where the hell was the guy? His van was not parked in the short drive. Perhaps Keith's mother could give him some information. God, was she bloody well deaf?

In the end he gave up, turned away and headed back towards the police station. Christ alone knew where they were going to search today, there weren't many places left.

He slowed his step, halted. No reason except a kind of premonition, his thoughts going back to the Doyles. Keith was hardly likely to have left for work at this hour of the morning so where had he gone? None of your bloody business, John Price. And his mother? Gone with him probably.

The zoologist stood there, his forehead creased. He felt a nagging concern. In all probability there was a simple, innocuous answer to those questions. At any other time, yes, but with the occupants of Stainforth hiding behind closed doors and windows, nobody went out much at all except for absolute necessities. Mrs Doyle was probably still in bed, and Keith had not actually promised to help him. Hell, he didn't need him. Yes he did, he needed company, somebody to talk to, to pool a few ideas, maybe throw a different angle on the whole thing.

Slowly John began to retrace his steps towards those few council houses, his uneasy feeling growing stronger by the yard. There had been horrific deaths, nobody was safe. You got to believe that almost anything could happen to anybody, including yourself.

He knocked on the door again, louder this time, thumping it so that the woodwork rattled. No answer. He walked round the side of the house; for some reason council-house dwellers seldom opened their front doors, everybody using the rear entrance, a sort of tradition that dated back to wartime days.

He tapped on the glass panel of the back door, did not expect any answer. He could see into the small kitchen, through into the hallway. A light was burning and that was damned odd; he got a peculiar sensation in the pit of his stomach, an apprehension that was manifesting itself. There's something terribly wrong here, John Price.

He tried the door, it was unlocked, swung right back on its hinges. You've no business opening people's doors. Or going inside. But all the same he stepped over the threshold. You could find yourself in an awful lot of trouble, you ought to go and fetch PC Aylott or one of the other policemen.

Mounting the stairs, his feeling that all was not well escalated with each step and then when he was almost at the landing the stench hit him, a vile odour that brought back memories of those hours he had spent in the laboratory at university carrying out experiments on dead creatures, steeling himself to the stink of dissected bodies, intestines, blood. Offal.

God, this place stank. I don't know what the hell's happened, maybe I should go for the police. You might as well check first.

He recoiled in the bedroom doorway, had to lean against the wall for support, heaved and almost threw up, wanted to turn and flee and would probably have done so had his legs not suddenly weakened until they were scarcely able to support the weight of his body.

The crumpled bed sheets were soaked in blood which had saturated the mattress and dripped right through to form a pool on the carpet beneath. The walls were splashed and streaked with crimson, and a vile slimy matter which he recognised instantly as human intestines, adhered to the flowery wallpaper in places, hanging down in strings. A human intestinal explosion had taken place, whoever had been in this room had been crushed with such force that they had burst. And then disappeared, the remnants of the corpse vanished completely.

It was the python, of course. Even in his state of dazed shock John Price read the scene as others might read a book. The constrictor had entered by the open window - had scented a victim inside and scaled the wall by means of a convenient drainpipe; no trouble at all. Then, having devoured its prey, it had returned whence it had come. And that was what was eluding everybody, the whereabouts of the snakes' lair.

He went back downstairs, holding on to the stair-rail the whole way. Shaken, repulsed, he vomited outside on the drive. If Mrs Doyle was the victim then where was her son?

The operational HQ had an atmosphere of confusion about it; groups of police and soldiers clustered outside around the vehicles; a meeting of some kind was being held in the small office. John recognised Burlington, Colonel Marks, Chief Inspector Watts and several others through the open window, caught a buzz of low voices.

'You can't go in there, sir.' A uniformed sergeant barred his path to the door.

'I ... have to ...'

'I'm sorry, sir.'

'There's been a ... killing. Another death.'

The officer puffed his cheeks out, closed his eyes, opened them again. 'Who? Where?' His voice was low, tired.

'The council houses ... the Doyles ... I'm not sure which one, Mrs Doyle probably. It was the python.'

'We'll get somebody up there right away.' The sergeant gave some instructions to another officer in the doorway, turned back to the zoologist. 'There's problems this morning. PC Aylott vanished during the night shift. We don't think it's the snakes, he just appears to have walked out. His nerve might have cracked, we don't know. Anyway, it's not up to me to say.'

'Where are we going to search today?' John was still shaking from his experience; the last thing he wanted was another day in the burning sun bashing out thick undergrowth.

'We'll be told soon,' the policeman replied. 'Until then you'll just have to hang around like everybody else.'

It was another ten minutes before the superintendent emerged from the building, those lines in his features etched even deeper, his voice husky as though he had done a lot of talking and his vocal cords were on the verge of packing up.

'There is the possibility that we have another snake casualty.' He addressed the crowded driveway, commanded an instant silence. The listeners felt the tension, the sudden change in those around them.

'We cannot be sure at the moment but it seems that way. Also we have one of our officers missing but again we do not know if that is directly linked to the current crisis. We must, therefore, for the safety of this community, assume that the snakes have not left the area. We have searched for them diligently, and for that I thank every one of you, but now the time has come when we must change our tactics. We shall not let up on the offensive but priority has to be given to the defence of this village. We must guard every house 24 hours a day, leaving just a small band to continue the search. No more lives must be lost. Let us hope that we can conclude this terrible business in as short a time as possible.'

John Price moved away back out on to the road. They would not be needing him today, maybe not again. The searches over the last few days had yielded nothing, he had not come up with a magical formula for finding the serpents' hidden lair, so he had not been much use after all. They could dispense with him now. The authorities resented civilian help, you could sense it even if they did not put it into words. They used you just so long as you were useful to them.

He had the rest of the day to kill somehow; the rest of the week, month, year. Except for Aunt Elsie's funeral tomorrow he had no plans. That was when being unemployed hit you; you had no plans, nobody had any for you. Just hang around, John Price. The game of eternal waiting, building up futile hopes.

A police van passed him, It would be going up to the Doyles. He grimaced. He wondered again where Keith had gone. And Aylott. There were a lot of disquieting, unexplained mysteries right now.

Something interrupted his thoughts, a movement breaking into his morbid reverie, a small creature darting across the road, long body, reddish brown fur, streamlined. A half-jar on his nerves, alarm bells starting to ring in his system and then cutting out because it was a false alarm. These days everything that moved had to be a snake until proved otherwise.

He identified the animal just as it was disappearing into the overgrown verge on the opposite side of the road. A stoat, the fiercest of all British mammals for its size. A predator. A killer of...

His brain was beginning to click, a human computer assimilating facts, processing data. A killer of snakes, certainly, but only small ones; grass snakes like die one that had caused his aunt to have a heart attack, adders ..., not big ones like those that had escaped but . . .

. . . family mustelidae, comprising stoats, weasels, otters, pine martens, polecats and . . .

His pulses were beginning to race, his computer was coming up with the answer, had already given it to him but he was barely able to accept it in his excitement. Family mustelidae, the ferret family, and the Big Daddy of them all -the mongoose.

Jesus Christ Almighty, why hadn't he thought of it before, the one creature that was the nemesis of all snakes, at one time imported from India to Latin America to control a plague of reptiles. Rikki-tikki-tavi, the mongoose hero invented by Rudyard Kipling, the creature that fought and overcame a cobra and a krait.

It was the answer, the only solution to the crisis in Stainforth, Juvenile excitement took him over, almost had him sprinting back to the station. Superintendent, I've hit on the answer, all we need is a pair of mongooses. They'd find the snakes, kill 'em too. The whole thing could be over in an hour or two. You're crazy, laddie. We can't go loosing more wild animals into the countryside, contravening the Wildlife and Countryside Act of 1981. Look what happened when a few mink escaped and bred, the scourge of domestic animals, poultry, rivers. And we've never got rid of the rat-like grey squirrel since some bloody idiot thought it would be great to have a few of them in the suburban parks and gardens. It wouldn't

work, we wouldn't allow it.

You wouldn't allow it but it would work as far as the snakes are concerned. Isn't human life more important than ducks and geese and trout in the rivers? It was a matter of conscience, not a decision to be taken at a desk somewhere far removed from the danger. His decision.

He stood beneath the shade of a leafy oak tree, rolled a cigarette with unsteady fingers. He needed a few minutes to calm himself, to think clearly. If you jump in, do it with both feet, no half measures. In other words, don't fuck it up. Go the whole hog and be prepared to take the consequences.

His tidy mind began to put everything in order, formulate a hypothetical plan of action. If it was to be mongooses then they had to be brought here secretly and released under the cover of darkness. Point number two, where in hell do you find a mongoose?

Bill Arkwright might still have one! John Price's pulses pounded again. Bill had been at university with him, had got his degree and gone back to Scotland to work on snakebite serums, had his own private collection of reptiles, had had the necessary licence to keep dangerous animals granted on research grounds. Arkwright had kept a pair of mongooses as pets; John remembered that rumpus with the RSPCA when some busybody had written and claimed that Bill was organising mongoose-snake fights and was taking bets on the outcome. The case was disproved and it had all died down.

John wondered if Bill still had his place up in Edinburgh, if he still had those mongooses, and if he would be prepared to help. All bloody ifs again, but there was only one way to find out.

Aunt Elsie really should have had a telephone installed. She might have been alive now if she had had some means of summoning help. And John Price would have been able to sit down in comfort and privacy and attempt to track down Bill Arkwright. As it was he found himself in the oven-like telephone box on the Green, keeping the door propped open with one foot whilst he tried to persuade a Directory Enquiries operator to locate a Mr W. Arkwright in Edinburgh. No, I'm afraid I don't know his address but I can't tell you how urgent it is. Normally we don't look for numbers without an address, sir, but on this occasion ...

He hoped three pounds' worth of ten-pence pieces would be enough - another few hours and it would have been a lot cheaper. There was a saying that time was money; it was also lives.

'Arkwright speaking.'

'Bill, this is John Price.'

'Who?'

'Bleep . . . bleep . . . bleep . . .'

It took him another ten pence to establish his identity.

'Why, John, of course. How are you? Look, old boy, let me ring you back or we'll never put two words together without that bloody thing interrupting.'

Briefly John told Arkwright the story, most of which the other had read in the newspapers anyway; his own involvement, the death of his aunt.

'What you need is a bloody mongoose to hunt 'em out.' John's hopes soared as Bill came back at him with his own theory. 'Soon sort the buggers out.'

'That's what I'm ringing you about, Bill.'

'You mean have I still got Rick and Tick and can you borrow them? Sure I have, and if you take the responsibility and fetch 'em you're welcome to 'em. I still get the ruddy RSPCA poking round from time to time to check that I'm not snake-fighting with them. You'll have to fetch 'em, though, and if you get caught with 'em they're not mine.'

'Oh sure.' John did some mental calculations, a round trip of something like four hundred miles. Twelve hours in the Mini if she didn't play up. Back in Stainforth before dark.

'I'll see you early afternoon then.' He replaced the receiver, stepped gratefully outside into the hot sunshine.

Twelve hours' driving in this bloody heat! Twelve, twenty-four, thirty-six - he'd do it if it meant death to the killer snakes. And tomorrow afternoon as he sat head bowed in the cool of the church at Aunt Elsie's funeral he would have the secret satisfaction of knowing that he had made the snakes pay for their killings. He would never have believed during those long years of studying for his degree that he would ever come to hate reptiles the way he did now.

Twenty minutes later he was in the old Mini, both windows wound down in the hope of a cool breeze, driving out of Stainforth; down past the church, past the track leading to the old disused quarry where he used to play on his visits here as a boy. He wondered if it was still there. Probably partly filled in by its own avalanches and overgrown with vegetation. He would not have any regrets about that, remembered the time when he had gone there after butterflies for his collection, had scaled one of the steep sand walls in an attempt to catch a Red Admiral and had fallen fifteen feet. Fortunately the soft sand in the bottom had broken his fall otherwise he might have broken a leg, or worse.

It used to be a damned dangerous place.

His thoughts returned to Keith Doyle. Somehow he did not believe that the gardener had left Stainforth and that made it all the more worrying. Because PC Aylott had vanished into thin air also.

John Price filtered on to the motorway, moved into the middle lane and jammed his foot down on the accelerator as far as it would go. Suddenly he was aware that he did not have that 'unemployed feeling' any more.

'WE'RE BALING that sandpit field today no matter what the army, the police or any other bugger says,' Jack Jervis informed his son when he came in to breakfast after doing the early morning round of the stock field. 'You can't waste bloody weather like this and I won't be happy till all that hay is under cover.'

'Blimey, Dad,' said Sam Jervis, splashing milk on to his cereals, knowing that his earlier suspicions were correct and that the old man was in one of his moods. 'It ain't goin' to rain for weeks, if it ever rains again.' Not just a bad mood, a very bad mood.

'We can't chance it.' Jervis senior chewed noisily, took a swallow of tea to help the stringy bacon down. 'We can't just sit around doin' now't, this bloody nonsense could go on for weeks.'

'I don't like the idea o' you and Sam goin' up there.' Dora Jervis shuffled across the room, deposited a plate of toast on the table. 'Them snakes are dangerous.'

Silence, just a smacking of greasy lips as the Jervis family meditated on the perils of snakes.

Jack and Dora had rented their scattered smallholding for the past twenty years, a kind of 'getting-away-from-lorry-driving' move. It had been a messy venture, made all the more disorganised by the fact that their rented land was scattered around Stainforth; fifteen acres of meadowland that Phil Burton was only too pleased to find a tenant for, rough tussocks of unpalatable grazing, two more tracts of eleven and nine acres, and finally the 'sandpit field' leased from the council. All run from their existing tumbledown dwelling and the few acres that they actually owned.

In the beginning Jack had had to rely on casual farm work to make ends meet. Rumour had it that his 'capital investment' had come from equipment stolen from his various employers; nothing serious enough to warrant police investigation, a roll or two of sheep-netting from one place, a few stakes and staples from another. Jack's mechanical knowledge from his haulage days came in handy, enabled him to keep their old 1962 Ferguson tractor going, and, with some very untidy improvisations, they managed to scrape a meagre living. Sam was an accident, set them back a bit, but they got by in their own slovenly fashion. Their shortcomings were many but all were agreed that the one thing they did not shirk was work.

Sam was not at all keen on the idea of lugging the bales off the sandpit field, but if the old man said that that was what they were going to do today then that was what they would do. He had learned many years ago not to argue with his father.

Dora watched the two of them file out of the room, and sighed loudly. Jack worked the boy too hard, never gave him any time off. Sam was a hired labourer on a pittance of a wage, not a son. The boy was bright enough, would in all probability have done well at school if Jack had not persistently kept him at home to help with the harvest, the lambing, every seasonal job as it came round. 'Tell, 'em you've 'ad the 'eadache, boy,' he would say at every period of absenteeism from school. Sometimes it was 'the bellyache' just to ring the changes. Sam might have gone on to sixth-form college if his school attendances had not been so inconsistent, but Jack Jervis wouldn't have stood for that. 'Work is what you do with yer 'ands, boy, not sittin' at a desk thinkin' about it.'

She began to clear the table, Sam would end up an ignorant pig, just like his father. She couldn't change either of them so she might as well go along with them. They would still be scratching for a living in another twenty years' time.

Work was a way of life to Sam Jervis. Seven days a week, 365 days a year, he did not expect anything

else. On a holding like this one you did every job yourselves, spent as little money as possible; a cycle that you began again as soon as the old one ended.

This bloody heat was a bit much, though. He wondered how the old man could stand not just a shirt on but a woollen waistcoat worn over it. Trousers and heavy boots, too. All Sam was wearing was a pair of denim shorts, hacked from his old working jeans when the lower legs became threadbare, and a pair of scuffed pumps.

The routine was always the same. Dad drove the tractor and trailer, Sam rode on the back. Then between them they loaded the trailer with bales, stacked high and precariously, and trundled back home where they unloaded them into the barn. They managed three loads before lunch and estimated that there were probably another five left. They would finish around teatime - a late tea.

The upright exhaust belched black fumes as they drove past the church. Sam glanced idly at the track leading into the quarry. The old sandpit was technically theirs, its acreage included in the rent they paid the council each quarter for the field. Now that was a bloody waste, a piece of ground that you could not plough up, would not hold stock. He wondered if there was any way of filling it in, levelling it up to the field that surrounded it.

The Ferguson struggled up the steep incline, shuddered to a halt by the first stack of eight bales. Jack Jervis leapt down, shouted at Sam to hurry. 'We ain't got all bloody day, boy.'

Eight bales loaded, drawing up to the next pile; another eight layered on top of those. Now it was Sam's job to clamber up on to them, take the bales from his father as the old man hoisted them up to him on the prongs of a pitchfork. Jesus, the old man would have a heart attack if he didn't slow up, working in a near-frenzy in this bloody heat. It had to be ninety in the shade today. One day the silly old fucker would drop in his tracks, just like that. And I'll bloody well load him up on top of the hay and take him down home. And it won't spoil our tea, either.

Hay bales were coming up on to the trailer as though they were on a mechanical conveyor belt. Ease up, you daft bat.

Suddenly Sam Jervis stopped, ignored the bale that had just bounced against those he was trying to stack, toppling them in a heap. Above the drone of pollen-hunting bees he detected the sound of a human voice, a muffled cry. He listened hard and it came again. 'Help!'

It was difficult to discern just where the shout had come from. Either it was muffled or else it was a long way away, even as far as the village. It could, on the other hand, be as close as the sandpit a few hundred yards down at the bottom of this sloping field.

'What the bloody hell's happening up there? You bloody well fallen asleep?' Another bale flew up, bounced off the fallen pile and rolled off the trailer, thudded on to the ground ten feet below.

'Listen,' Sam snapped back, 'just shut up and listen for a second.'

'What the hell are you on about, boy?'

'Just listen a minute, will you, Dad.'

"Help." The cry came again, weaker this time as though the caller was growing tired. But it definitely came from the sandpit.

'There you are, you heard that didn't you, Dad?' Sam peered anxiously over the bales, saw his father retrieving the fallen one, spearing it with the pikle, lifting it up to throw it back up again. 'Don't tell me you didn't hear that.'

'I heard bloody nothin',' Sam Jervis grunted, his red face perspiring freely. 'You're paid to work not to sit about listening for things.'

'I tell you, Dad, somebody's in trouble and it sounds like they're in the . . .' Sam broke off as the flying bale hit him, caught him off balance and sent him staggering back to sprawl amongst the pile of bales. 'You silly old bastard! There's something happened to somebody . . .'

Sam Jervis screamed a shrill cry of pain. That daft old fucker had tossed the pitchfork up at him, caught him on the leg. He bounded up with a roar of rage that turned to a shriek of terror. All around his feet were little black wriggling things like burned sausages, slithering to and fro, and amidst them was a much larger one, somewhere between a foot and eighteen inches long; a furious creature that whipped and lashed him, struck at his legs with its venomous fangs.

'Adders? He tried to flee but a heap of bales prevented him. 'There's fucking adders up here!'

At least Sam thought they were adders, they looked like the ones he'd seen before except that they were much darker in colour. He didn't care what species, just that they were snakes and everybody in Stainforth was hiding from them.

Jack Jervis moved with surprising agility, clawed his way up on to the trailer, clambered over the mountain of bales, a stubby unlit pipe clenched between his teeth, the pitchfork in his hands. His son was lying on a bale, directing a series of futile kicks at the snake which was attempting to wriggle up after him. And down below the smaller snakes were milling in a heap like maggots that had fallen from a piece of putrefying meat. Black bloated worms.

'Get yer fuckin' legs outa the way,' the farmer hissed, poised his pikle as though he was about to hurl a javelin, and struck savagely downwards. His aim was true, a prong speared the enraged reptile, and he held it up. It thrashed furiously but could not dislodge itself. 'Got you, you bugger!'

Sam closed his eyes. The pain in his leg was making him feel faint and he certainly did not wish to be a spectator to a bout of his father's cruelty. Old Jack Jervis was going to have a field day, enjoy every second of this massacre just as he had gloated over that sheep he had killed for the freezer last autumn; he had cut its throat and stood there and watched its life's blood spout all over the yard. 'Come and watch this, boy, or e'll be gone. Waste o' time and effort stunning 'em first.'

With a deft twirl such as an accomplished spaghetti-eater might have used to unfurl a length from his fork, Jack sent the mortally wounded adder flying through the air. 'E's as good as dead.'

He turned to the nest of young, and began jabbing and chopping, piling wrigglers up the prongs of the pitchfork one after another. Seven in all, in as many seconds.

'Look at them lot, boy.' There was a note of pride in his rough voice. 'Black adders. Ain't seen no black ones for years, not since I was your age. But they die just as easy as the brown 'uns.'

Sam sprawled with his back against a bale, his vision darkening, clinging to some taut baling twine in case he blacked out and fell from the trailer. His leg was beginning to swell up, the pain coursing upwards. Oh

Christ, and all that stupid old bugger thought about was killing.

'Ah-ha!' a grunt of triumph from Jervis as he held the spiked snakes aloft. 'Just look at that lot, the little devils never dreamed they'd meet up with old Jack when they got caught up in the baler. That'll teach 'em! A forward motion with the long fork, sending the baby adders hurtling into the air, frantic death wriggles as they hit the ground beyond the tractor. That'll bloody teach 'em!'

'Dad.' Sam was clinging on to that bale, trying not to spew.

'Now, what's the matter with you, son?'

Stupid old fucker. 'I've been bitten . . . my leg.'

Jack Jervis laid the pikle down, turned towards his son, saw the puffy blotched patch just above the ankle on Sam's exposed leg, twin pinpoint pricks that oozed a trickle of blood.

'Old easy.' The farmer dropped on to his knees, felt in his pockets and produced a bone-handled penknife. 'Nowt to worry about. It won't be the first adder bite I've dealt with, took one out o' meself on more than one occasion when I was a boy. There used to be adders aplenty in those days, don't hardly see 'em at all today. Now, let's get this done so's we can get on.'

Sam bit his lip, knew only too well what his father was about to do. Please God, let me faint first.

'Old still then.'

'Dad, take me to the doctor.' It was a long time since he had last pleaded with God or his father and it appeared that neither were prepared to listen to him. In olden times they gave you something to bite on. A swig of rum. You wouldn't get either from Dad, they took time and cost money.

He yelled and writhed as the knife blade made an incision, tried to faint but failed. He guessed what the dirty old bugger would do when he'd cut into the wound. Ugh! Sam threw up but could not shut out the slurping sound his father made as he sucked the venom out of the wound; the same noise he made when he drank his tea. Spitting, that was another of his habits, a blob of phlegm and venom.

'You'll be OK now, boy.'

Sam opened his eyes, stared at the mess of vomit dripping off the bale by his head. It reminded him of the canned potato salad that his mother sometimes bought.

'What's the matter with you now?' Annoyance, a reprimand because he had not leaped straight up and begun re-stacking those hay bales. 'You should be bloody grateful to me, boy, lucky I was here to get the poison out for you.'

'I'm in bloody agony, that's what.' God, he'd've punched the old bugger if he'd had the strength. 'I need to see the doctor, get something put on the bite, maybe an injection.'

'You'll be all right. We got too much work to do without wastin' time goin' to the doctor, and a lot o' bleedin' good 'e is anyway!'

Sam managed to stand, leaning up against the bales. Everything was topsy-turvy, spinning round. But he did not think he would faint now, Unless he looked down at his leg.

'Tell you what.' There was a sarcastic, condescending tone in his father's voice, spittle trickling down his bristly chin. 'I'll stack these bales up and you can have a nice lazy time sitting on 'em on the ride back down. Then by the time we get home you'll be feelin' well enough to off-load 'em.'

Every bone in Sam Jervis's body jarred on the slow ride down the sandpit field and out on to the road. And his leg hurt like hell. It was bleeding quite a lot; he did not dare look but he could feel the sticky warm blood seeping down into his shoe, a cloud of black flies swarming on it, settling to feed, buzzing loudly.

They were in the yard now, reversing up to the bay. Sam opened his eyes. Everything was going dark like dusk had come several hours early. The tractor's engine died and his father was bawling for him to get up and start throwing those bales off. Shaddup, you old goat. 'Come on then, stop playing up.'

I need a doctor. Where's Mum? Something I got to tell her ... oh yes, there's somebody in trouble in the sandpit. Those shouts. Got to let somebody know. He started to struggle up, 'Get slingin' them bales off. Come on, we ain't nowhere near finished yet. There's nowt bloody wrong with you now.'

Sam Jervis had been indoctrinated by his father for far too long to give an outright refusal. He was on his feet, letting go of his support, the barn in front rocking steadily from side to side and then upturning completely.

'Dad ... in the sandpit . . .' a hoarse whisper that took everything he could put into it. 'I'm bleedin' waitin', boy.'

Sam Jervis took a step forward and then everything went black. He fell, rolled off the top of those bales and hit the yard with a sickening thud.

And in the open doorway of the house Dora Jervis began to scream.

Chapter 16

THE SNAKE was back on the bonnet of the van. Keith Doyle had not been aware of its return, only saw that it was there again, coiled up and watching them intently.

He twisted round to look at his watch, noted that it was almost nine o'clock. Christ, what a bloody day. That snake had been the lucky one, it had been able to take advantage of the shade beneath the vehicle during the hottest hours, whilst he and Kirsten had roasted and suffocated inside.

Kirsten was still in an uneasy sleep, moving her head restlessly from side to side; her cracked lips had a

bluish tint and were slightly swollen. Her dress, saturated with sweat, clung wetly to her shapely figure. Any other time or place it would have been a turn-on for him. Right now, though, he just felt weak and ill. But most of all he was worried about her.

No way could either of them last another day. That spell of shouting for help had robbed them of their last reserves of strength, swollen their tongues and brought their thirst to a peak. They had spent hours listening, occasionally caught the faint hum of a passing car back on the road. Kirsten had commented how far away the traffic seemed and eventually it had dawned on her that if they could only just hear vehicles then anybody on the highway stood little chance of hearing them shout. There had been a look of despair in her eyes at this realisation and Keith had attempted to reassure her. He did not think that he had succeeded. Then they had heard a tractor, close but still muffled.

It was no good shouting whilst the farmer - presuming it was a farmer - had his engine running, and so they waited. Eventually there was silence and they had yelled until they were hoarse, until they had spent themselves mentally and vocally. Some time later, it seemed hours, they heard the tractor start up again and drive away. It did not come back.

That was when Kirsten broke down and sobbed again, cried herself to sleep in Keith's arms.

The day wore on and towards evening the atmosphere cooled somewhat. Keith experienced nausea and thirst, a terrible combination that resulted in a desire to vomit, only he did not have anything left to throw up. Neither of them had used the bucket since midday and he knew they were beginning to dehydrate.

He had been tempted to open the door a few inches and take another look beneath the van; perhaps the snake had tired of waiting, had slunk off somewhere. Surely it, too, had to sleep sometime. But even if it was not in sight he would not know exactly where it was; it was cunning enough to try to trick them, lull them into thinking that it had gone away and then, when they emerged, ambush them from the thick cover which grew luxuriantly all along the track leading to safety. There wasn't much point in seeing if it was still beneath the vehicle. It could be anywhere within a few yards of them.

He knew they could not last another day in here. Certainly Kirsten could not. Whatever the outcome he would have to try and go for help. He calculated mentally his weaponry in the back; a spade, a fork, a hoe, a sickle. Possibly the latter was the most suitable. He had honed the blade to a razor sharpness only two or three days ago. It was capable of cutting that monster out there in two, provided it did not get him first.

If nobody had found them by morning he would make the attempt. Just thinking about it sent little shivers up and down his spine, his imagination giving him a frightening preview of what might happen.

No sign of the bastard, getting out slowly, carefully, trying to stop that door from creaking. A quick look round. Now! Running the gauntlet of undergrowth that tore at his legs, tried to bring him down, low branches whipping his face. Always the fear that the next tuft of long grass might suddenly unfurl a coloured serpent, a devil that moved too fast for the eye to follow. Not this one, then maybe the next, nearly crazy with fear. Exhausted, his reflexes slowed down, worried about what would happen to Kirsten if he did not make it.

He wondered again what species it was and how deadly was its bite. Even if it inflicted its venom into his body surely death would not be instantaneous, he would be able to make it to the village and raise the alarm before . . .

There was no way of knowing what might happen until he actually made the attempt. He closed his eyes

and felt his body starting to relax. Sleep if you can, you're going to need all the energy you can muster.

And now the snake was back on the bonnet again.

He looked at it, studied its colourful markings, those red, black and white rings. Through the thick glass of a cage in a reptile house you would find yourself marvelling at its colourings; through the windscreen of an overheated van which you had not been outside of for the last 24 hours your appreciation was somewhat diminished. You just wished the fucking thing did not exist, or else that it was dead. You wanted all snakes extinct.

He marvelled at its motionless posture; there was not so much as a blink from those cold penetrating eyes but you knew that it watched your every movement. Hypnotic in an awesome way. Go on, make a run for it, I'll give you a five-yard start. No way. Not yet.

'It's still around then.' He was amazed at the relaxed tone of Kirsten's voice. Worried, too, because this heat might cause you to react in a number of ways. Hallucinations, disorientation, anything that might put you at risk. You didn't even trust yourself.

'At least we can see it, we know where it is,' he replied.

'Try the starter again,' she said.

'It's just a waste of time. After this length of time the battery will be completely dead.'

'Well, we've nothing to lose. Go on, Keith, give it a go.'

'All right.' He fumbled for the key. 'But don't get raising any hopes because it won't . . .'

The starter-motor shuddered, turned, suddenly had life back in it. And fired!

'Keith, it's going to go? Kirsten yelled. She pulled herself upright, the fatigue, the exhaustion, suddenly falling from her. 'We can leave?'

'Hold on, we're not out of the wood yet.' He pumped the throttle, got the revs and kept them, anticipated the engine fading any second. It didn't, it was running sweetly for one that had nearly 90,000 miles on the clock, the chassis vibrating, rattling the tools in the back. It was a dream, a cruel nightmare, one of those where you found yourself unable to run any further just as you took flight from some unmentionable horror or else you lost your way and never found it again. Maybe it was himself who was having hallucinations, not his companion,

'What are you waiting for?' She had her voice back, yelled at him. 'We can go.'

I'm waiting because I don't believe it. The snake moved, seemed to shift its entire body into a tighter coil, pressed itself up against the windscreen. As though it knew the van was about to move and was settling itself into a secure position so that it would not be dislodged when they bumped their way back down the track.

'Here we go!' he shouted back at her at the top of his voice. 'Full speed ahead for Stainforth.'

Keith crashed the lever into bottom gear, felt the van move forward, bumping over rough ground. There was room enough to swing it around in a circle and drive straight out, much easier than trying to reverse

all the way back through the overhanging trees and undergrowth.

'Two minutes, probably less, and we'll be out on the road.'

This euphoria was an unforgettable experience. Suddenly everything had come right, they did not have any more worries. If the snake stayed on for the whole way then that was fine, the police or the army would soon deal with it.

They bumped their way over more stones and deep ruts, Keith now going into a left-hand circle, hard over on full lock, 180 degrees, and now they were facing in the opposite direction. Gathering speed so that he had to change up to second gear, the exit from this place of terror looming up in front of them. He would take it at speed, go like hell all the way.

And that was when the engine suddenly coughed, lost its momentum, hiccupped again. And petered out.

'Oh no? Kirsten cried, and buried her face in her hands as the van slowed, rolled to a halt.

They sat there, saying nothing because there was nothing to say, staring at the red ignition warning light on the dashboard, hating it, blaming it. Keith reached for the key, switched it off.

'What . . . happened?' Kirsten asked at length. 'We're out of petrol.' An admission of guilt was in his tone, a resignation to their plight. An apology. And the snake on the bonnet seemed to grin at them through the glass. 'I was nearly empty yesterday. I should have filled up but ... I didn't. I'm sorry, Kirsten.'

'Then the battery wasn't fiat after all.' 'I guess not. Probably a dicky lead or some dirt under the terminals.' 'What the fuck does it matter what it was? We're back to square one, in almost exactly the same place except that we're facing in the opposite direction.

'If the battery's working again now then ... then perhaps the horn will work. We can blow it, attract attention.'

The horn did work. A piping squeak rather than the expected klaxon blast. The sound came back at them off the quarry walls, hurtful to the ears, remonstrated with them for breaking the silence. Keith stopped after half a dozen goes; it was futile, no louder than their shouting some hours ago.

He did not look at Kirsten. 'I'm sorry, darling, I wish the engine had never started up, at least then we knew what we were up against. I gave you hope and immediately destroyed it.

'We're going to die, aren't we?' she said at length, her voice steady, not crying, staring out of the side window.

'I don't know.' He could not lie to her. 'Not if I can help it. Look, I'm going to try and make a break for it ...'

'No! Not with that monstrosity perched out there waiting . . .'

'Not immediately,' he smiled. 'Probably in the morning when it gets light. There's a sickle in the back, the blade's like a razor. It would cut that snake in two at one stroke.'

'Unless it bit you first.' She clutched his arm, afraid that he might suddenly decide to make a run for

freedom now.

'That's a chance I'll have to take. Better that than both of us dying in here. And, anyway, even if I do get bitten I probably won't die. It isn't a python, it can't crush me, I'll make it to the village, send help back to rescue you. You can bet your life that Doctor Brennan has at this moment got every available type of snakebite serum handy in his surgery.' Of course, there were certain snake poisons that had no known antidote. He didn't tell Kirsten that, just hoped that the creature on the bonnet was not one of those.

'I want to come with you,' she said.

'Don't be bloody silly, there's no point in us both getting bitten.'

'I suppose you're right,' she sighed. 'But if I'm asleep wake me up before you go.'

'I promise.' He leaned across, kissed her.

'Oh, and there's something else,' she murmured, 'not that I suppose it makes any difference now.'

'What's that?'

'I'm not pregnant.'

A sudden pang of anxiety had him asking, 'But you will marry me, won't you?'

'Of course I will,' she smiled, brushed her lips against his, 'I was always going to anyway. It was just that my folks made everything so difficult for me. I guess it took these last few hours to make me realise that I don't have to do everything they say. So some good has come out of it. Don't spoil it all, Keith, don't let that snake bite you.'

'I'll be OK.' He kissed her again. 'I'd say right now its number's up if it's foolish enough to get too close to me.'

He felt light-headed, euphoric, wanted to open the window, shout out loud that everything was fine, that Kirsten Davis was going to marry him no matter what her folks said.

There was only one thing marring his happiness: that snake coiled up on the bonnet of the van - primed to kill.

THE SNAKES were becoming restless down in their underground lair. They had slept throughout the heat of the day and now with the coming of night they were stirring. They were hungry, they were afraid. But that was not all.

The inborn hatred of different species for each other was beginning to manifest itself. Above all, most hated the huge African rock python that dominated them, ruled over them. Nature's pecking order, it existed in every form of life. I'm the biggest, the boss, so I can kick you. But you can kick the next smallest. And so on.

The python had stolen their prey, the Man that had dropped into their lair; it had driven them from him so that it could feast. It had also made a foray into the open under the cover of darkness and they knew it had eaten again. It was capable of killing them, too.

Throughout the day it had slept, curled up on a worm-eaten coffin in the far corner, the ancient wood creaking beneath its weight. Asleep but alert, aware of every movement the others made.

There were five of them clustered together down in that tomb: a Russell's viper, a cobra, an African mamba, a western diamondback rattlesnake and the python. The coral snake had gone off somewhere and had not returned; possibly it had been killed as its mate had been. None of them were concerned for anything but themselves, for this was a forced uniting. Soon they would all go their different ways, seek out their own territory. They had been too long in this place cooped up together.

They had been cunning enough to fool the hunters. It was the python who had found this place, dislodged the flat stone with its weight, and they had followed it down, entered into a kind of truce which was now coming to an end. Tonight they would all leave, but they would not flee like a defeated army because their anger and their pride would not allow it. They would become individuals again, hunt and kill in their own way.

They knew all about the village. Man was easy prey except that he was not food; except for the python. They would kill before they left, strike in the only manner they knew, swiftly and silently under the cover of darkness, moving from one victim to another, taking their revenge for a lifetime of incarceration, inflicting terror and pain on those who had come to mock them in their prisons.

In the beginning the snakes had been afraid, bewildered at finding unexpected freedom in a land where they became the hunted. But now they had adapted; their terror was gone.

The python was the first to leave, sliding off the coffin and easing its long body up through that hole in the roof, the heavy stone pushed to one side so that the others might follow, the darkness swallowing it up. It was gone, no longer their leader, each one on its own once they were in the open. This was the parting of the ways.

The Russell's viper followed, the mamba close behind it, separating in the overgrowth, their ways diverging. The rattlesnake left some time later and then the cobra which had been sleeping heavily, vacating that place below ground which stank heavily of death and decay.

They took various routes but all headed back towards the village where their Enemy slumbered. They moved silently, barely a rustling of the sun-scorched undergrowth denoted their passing.

Following the hedges, skirting the hard road. Picking up the rancid stench of Man in the warm atmosphere. And becoming angry.

The young corporal had taken up his position in the porch of the Rising Sun at ten o'clock. All the others, policemen and soldiers, envied him, but it would have been more than his stripes were worth to go into the bar. Anyway, he did not need to; there was a pint awaiting him on the step when he arrived, two fill-ups before closing time, and when the doors were locked the landlord left a couple of cans of Export within easy reach.

He was a hero without having done anything to warrant it and probably would not have to do more than sit there until dawn with a double-barrelled 12-bore loaded with BB shot across his knees.

Life was a doddle. An army career was like a lottery, you drew your ticket and took what they gave you. Now take Charlie Ford, he reflected, he'd had a Belfast posting, was currently lying on a hospital bed because a sniper's bullet had chipped his spine, probably would never walk again. You had to take what Lady Luck dished out to you. The money was no great shakes but they fed you, clothed you, gave you a home, and your pay cheque was just spending money.

The snakes were a welcome diversion. A week ago he had been on a commando training course in a remote area of Wales. They put you through it, tried to find your limit of endurance. The corporal had almost broken, but the snakes had saved him. The orders came through and twelve hours later he was sitting on his backside, drinking beer in a village he'd never even heard of before.

They wouldn't find the snakes, of course they bloody well wouldn't, but they had to be seen to be doing something about it or else there would have been a public outcry. The whole business could have turned into a political issue, a squabbling match in Westminster. The snakes would not be seen again. The poor buggers were probably scared to death, lost in a strange land with nothing to eat. OK, so a few people had been killed, there were some funerals tomorrow, but that was because the frightened snakes had panicked. In all probability, the reptiles had now crawled away somewhere to die. People were getting killed all over the world every day of the year and always would be.

A single streetlamp cast a circle of orange light across the road and into the small car park. That was handy, you didn't have to keep straining your eyes in the dark. He was paid to do a job and he would do it, you got lazy if you didn't.

The soldier popped another can of Export, took a long drink and set it down on the stone step beside him. His eyes dropped to the shotgun across his knees. Funny things shotguns, he had never handled one before, let alone fired one. To a professional they seemed amateurish, nothing technically complicated, no range-finders or anything like that. You didn't even have to sight them, just pointed them at your target, pulled the trigger and blasted whatever you wanted to blast. Clumsy, he thought, no marksmanship required, a spread of shot that couldn't miss. That's why these sportsmen used them, because they wouldn't bloody hit anything if they used a rifle.

The company had had a briefing from the CO on the use of shotguns. Swing with your target and keep on swinging even after you've fired. Keep both eyes open. The soldier supposed they had to say something, couldn't just dole out weapons and leave you to find out for yourself how to use them. He'd read somewhere that the RAF used them for clay-pigeon shooting, some kind of training exercise. More like a bit of sport for the toffs.

The corporal checked that the safety catch was on. Don't want the bloody thing going off and demolishing the pub, else I'll be on my way back to Wales tomorrow.

Christ, you could still smell that field that had burned, the stench of charred undergrowth wafting on the faint breeze. Some fire that had been, he wished he had been here to see it. It had been virtually out when

B Company had rolled into Stainforth, just a damping-down operation left for the fire-fighters.

Idly he wondered why the firemen had left that hose lying across the road. Bloody careless of them; it was all right for cars, they could bump over it but it might unseat a cyclist, even a motorcyclist if he was going too fast. The soldier decided he would report it to the major in the morning. There's a hose left lying across the road by the Rising Sun, sir, a potential hazard to motorists and cyclists. See how alert I've been, I haven't been kipping like some of the boys have.

He drank some more beer, checked the time again. 2.35. Another hour and a half and it would be starting to get light. His duty finished at seven and he had the rest of the day off until 8 P.M. 20.00 hours in military terminology. He wondered what the birds were like in this place. Country bumpkins probably; it might be better to take a bus into town. The trouble was with night duty you never stood much chance with birds in the daytime, most of them were at work. See you tonight, soldier boy. Sorry, I'm on duty. But you couldn't have it both ways; he could be lying in a hospital bed, flat on his back with no chance of ever walking again, like Charlie.

Something was wrong, he did not quite know what it was; something his trained senses had picked up and said, 'Hey, boy, that's not quite right.' Check your foreground and background, log every detail in your mind. Listen. Look for something out of place, movable camouflage bushes creeping in on you.

That bloody hose, that was what it was! The bugger was lying on the edge of the car park now and the road was clear. Sorry, sir, I made a mistake, it wasn't on the road after all.

Now how the fuck did that get across there? Somebody must've . . . Oh Jesus on a bike, it's moving!

He stared in horrified fascination as the long length eased itself across the shale as though somebody had an invisible wire attached to it, was pulling it along. Some kind of joke, the local yobbos taking the piss out of the soldiers trying to scare them with make-believe snakes.

It was a snake, a bloody big one!

The corporal instinctively retreated up a step, knocked his beer over, sent the can clinking and rolling across the sloping forecourt leaving a trail of frothy fizzing amber liquid in its wake. And that was when the advancing snake saw him, stopped, reared its fearsome head a foot or so off the ground. It was a boa-constrictor of some kind, you didn't need a university education to know that. God, it had to be all of twenty feet long and as thick as your leg. The corporal went cold, wished to Christ he had his rifle instead of this scatter-gun, But you'll have to shoot else it'll get you, 'cause it was trying to sneak up on you in the first place.

He raised the gun to his shoulder. Never mind what they tell you about keeping both eyes open and all that crap, get a sight on it and blow the fucker to smithereens.

The force of the blast knocked him back against the door. He crouched there trying to see. Oh fuck, the bastard's still coming, how in hell did I miss? On the verge of panic he fired the second barrel, saw the python go down.

It flopped, rolled, squirmed. And came back up. The corporal fumbled to extract the spent cartridge cases from his gun, unfamiliar with manual loading, feeling in the pocket of his combat jacket for live shells.

The snake was moving fast, throwing itself forward in a series of flops like a landed sea-lion, hissing its

fury, oblivious to the pain where a scattering of BB shot had caught it just below the head, pumping blood as it charged.

The corporal pushed fresh shells into the breech, snapped the barrels shut but he was too late. Its vicious lunge, a hurtling forward of its dragging body, sent the gun spinning from his grasp, its fangs fastening in his throat, cutting off his scream as it tore out the flesh, blinded itself temporarily in a fountain of human blood.

Its instinct was to wrap itself around the body of its prey, crush it to a mulch, but it sensed that it no longer had the strength; time was running out. It flopped back, ignored the fallen convulsing human who still jetted scarlet blood from his throat wound, lay there and felt the pain from its own injury, knew that it, the king of the snakes, must flee. Only its supreme strength enabled it to turn, to head back the way it had come, its frantic slithering slowing with every yard. Bright lights blinded it, it heard the roaring of engines, the frantic shouts of men who saw it, knew that it was fatally wounded, yet kept their distance. If it could only get back to that dark hole in the ground it would be safe.

The Land Rover had stopped on the road, the mobile searchlight on the cab focused on the twitching python. Three soldiers ran forward, fanned out into a semicircle, Browning 5-shot automatic shotguns at the ready.

The corporal was dead, the big snake had almost had it, but they were not taking any chances. A volley of gunfire shattered the stillness of the summer night, each soldier emptying his magazine into the African rock python. Dissecting it, decapitating it, cutting it into segments, splattering the reptilian body across the forecourt, reducing it to an unrecognisable mulch. Later the experts would scrape up the remains, cross it off their list. Another one down, five to go.

The King of the Snakes was dead.

Chapter 18

JOHN PRICE had lost valuable time on the A701 just outside Dumfries. The petrol pump was playing up, cutting out every few miles, bringing him to a stop. He pulled into the side of the road, waited a few minutes and the engine started again, a spasmodic fault that would worsen over the miles. Disconcerting on the motorway, always the nagging fear that it might stop you in the middle of the fast lane . . .

In all probability the car would get him back to Stainforth. In stages. There was no time to stop and get it fixed. Sorry, sir, we don't seem to have a pump in stock but we can phone and get one sent out from Glasgow, no more than a couple of hours at the most. He decided to chance it.

The last thing he wanted was attention drawn to that battered suitcase on the back seat with a number of

holes punched in the scuffed leather, some busybody of a mechanic poking his nose into what did not concern him. There's something alive in that case, mister. Yes, it's ferrets, I do a bit of rabbiting now and then. That's odd, I keep ferrets myself, mister, but you can't ferret rabbits at this time of the year. They're breeding, your ferrets will lie up eating the baby rabbits and you'll never get 'em out of the warrens. Mind your own fucking business, I'll ferret whenever I want to.

John could not chance anybody seeing those two animals that were lying asleep in the cramped, suffocating suitcase. Rick and Tick, a pair of mongooses; at first sight the layman might mistake them for ferrets but their size would give the game away. About a metre in length with brownish grey fur, short legs, pointed muzzle and a long bushy tail. Domesticated up to a point - until they scented snakes and then they reverted to their wild instincts. At least, John hoped they would. The safety of the people of Stainforth depended upon it. It was like that experiment that the Forestry Commission were conducting, importing a predatory insect from Sweden in an attempt to eradicate the larch beetle from the forests of Wales. They could not be sure whether or not it would work. A process of trial and error.

Once he hit the motorway he kept to the slow lane, joined a mile-long convoy of heavy transport lorries. Twice the petrol pump faltered and he glided on to the hard shoulder; waited, resumed his journey. As long as some bloody police motorway patrol car doesn't come along trying to be helpful, I'll be all right, he decided. They didn't, they were too busy policing the fast lane.

He estimated that it would be midnight before he reached Stainforth, began to re-think his plan of action. Realistically an hour or two did not make much difference (except that somebody else might get killed in the meantime); so long as he released the creatures under cover of darkness nobody would be any the wiser. He just hoped Rick and Tick would keep clear of soldiers and police, would not get shot by some trigger-happy rookie.

It was 12.15 when he pulled up at the roadblock on the outskirts of the village. Fortunately the soldier on duty recognised him, waved him through. He drove on steadily through the village, noted the Land Rovers and trucks parked at intervals, knew that armed police and soldiers would be stationed nearby in the shadows. Waiting.

He parked outside Aunt Elsie's bungalow, carried the suitcase up the short drive and round the back, laid it down adjacent to the aluminium coal-bunker.

He was trembling, trying to peer into the shadows, expecting an armed figure to emerge at any second. 'What you got there, son? Releasing wild animals into the environment, eh! I'll have to report it. And in the meantime I'll hang on to those creatures.'

But nobody came, there was no sound to be heard anywhere, Stainforth might have been any one of a thousand English villages on a hot summer's night, its inhabitants fast asleep in bed. Except that John Price knew different. He was sweating heavily.

He unfastened the straps, lifted the lid cautiously, made out the silhouettes of two ferret-like bodies, heads upraised enquiringly. Thank Christ they were still alive, it had been stifling in the Mini.

'This is it, Rick and Tick,' He spoke softly, let the lid of the case rest back against the bunker. 'It's up to you now. Go and do your stuff and when you've finished the case will be here for you to come back to.' They don't understand, but you have to talk to animals, gain their confidence. Just let 'em go and roam until they get a sniff of snakes.

The two mongooses just lay there, made no attempt to leave their temporary home. He thought about

lifting them out but decided against it. It was their show, they would have to do it their way without his interference. Just leave them to get on with it.

He tip-toed away, retired to the back door, stood just inside with the door ajar, watching intently. But the snake-killers appeared to be in no hurry. They were confused, they might still be there in the morning. It was asking a lot of them.

He went inside, closed the door, and stretched himself out on the settee. He needed to rest.

A burst of gunfire jerked him out of a deep sleep, a volley of shots that were still echoing across the village by the time he made it to the back door. People were shouting, vehicles were on the move. Something had happened.

And when he checked on that old suitcase outside it was empty. The mongooses had done what he had wanted them to do, slunk off into the darkness of a village that was alive with the threat of reptilian death.

It was the second night in succession that Cynthia Eversham had heard the rattlesnake in her dreams, like a bag of witchdoctor's dried bones being shaken frantically, a sinister background noise that got louder. And louder. Until it woke her up, brought her upright in bed, her naked body shiny with sweat, a scream forming on her lips.

This time she screamed because she knew it was not a nightmarish figment of a bereaved and tortured mind. It was real!

She stared about her in the darkness, feared for one terrible moment that the reptile was in the room. No, it was outside somewhere, down below on the drive.

She didn't want to look, never wanted to see a snake again as long as she lived but she had to check; make sure.

Cynthia climbed out of bed, crossed to the window, parted the curtains. She had taken to leaving the exterior light on all night since Peter's death, a 150-watt bulb which illuminated almost the entire driveway. And now there was no doubt in her mind that it was a snake that was making the noise. Reality, no dream, a six-foot length of diamond-covered death flinging itself insanely at the door.

The thing was mad, crazy with anger, obsessed with a desire to force an entry, throwing itself at the polished oak-panelled woodwork, falling back, trying again, a whiplash of fury that had only one thought in its poisoned mind -to kill, to take revenge on those who had slaughtered its mate. It knew, you could tell, knew that this was the place. Cynical vengeance - it would take the life of the mate of he who had slaughtered its own mate.

But it could not get inside the house. Or could it? Cynthia clutched the window sill, her terror mounting. Not through the door, certainly, but perhaps there was a ventilator somewhere through which it could pass by contracting its vile body. Or a window left open. When your husband was three days dead you could not rely on yourself to attend to detail.

She was safe, though. All she had to do was to ensure that the bedroom door was shut, pick up the bedside phone and call the police. They would come with guns, shoot the snake.

Even as she was turning away to check the door something out on the drive caught her eye, had her peering intently. A cat or something, a creature which travelled in furtive darting movements, crouched

low. The snake will kill it! She wanted to tap the window, shout, warn it before it was too late. But she could not move, just stood transfixed.

It was no cat, it was too large, had a bushy tail like a fox but it certainly was not Reynard. It was chattering, a sound that reminded her of a flock of birds feeding hungrily on a bird-table in winter.

The rattler had stopped hurling itself at the door, had fallen back and there was no mistaking the fear in its posture. To flee or to stay and fight? The serpent body was tense, head raised, looking about it as though seeking an avenue of escape.

It made a move to flee, covered no more than a yard before the furry streamlined creature was upon it, jaws moving with incredible speed, seizing the rattlesnake by the back of its head. The attacker rose up on its hind legs, its prey still gripped in its teeth, shaking it, biting it. Rattling it; death rattles that were frantic at first like a child's marbles box being shaken, dying away to the odd click. And then silence.

Cynthia watched as the ferocious four-legged animal cast the snake to one side, a limp harmless corpse, sniffed at it as though making sure that there was no life there. Then it bounded away, hurrying as though it had an urgent appointment somewhere, a purposefulness about those jerky movements until the shadows beyond the bright artificial light swallowed it up.

Cynthia Eversham was still standing at the window when the eastern sky began to lighten. She had not phoned the police, she had no intention of doing so now because the rattlesnake was dead and she was in no danger.

Today was going to be a severe test for her, as it was for any woman who had to face the ordeal of a husband's funeral.

At first the mongooses had kept together, travelling side by side, picking up the fresh scent in the disused churchyard. Gone was their domestication, they were back in the land of their ancestors where snakes were an everyday prey to be hunted down and killed, had cast off the mantle of captivity.

They found the Russell's viper first, the faint starlight glinting evilly on its greenish scales as it crossed the open tract of land in front of the church. One of the most feared snakes of India and Burma, it instinctively smelled its hated foe in the vicinity, turned its toadish head, showed its half-inch fangs. Fear, but that would not stop it from fighting, giving a good account of itself. Sometimes a viper overcame and killed a mongoose, this could be one of those occasions.

It saw its pursuer, turned and waited. Come and get me, mongoose. The mongoose stopped, began chattering loudly, danced in the manner which stoats sometimes employ in order to create a gathering of curious birds. First one way, then another, always just out of reach of those terrible venomous fangs, a macabre ballet.

The viper's head darted, followed every move. Just a little closer, mongoose, and you will be dead. Intent, oblivious to all else.

Which was why the Russell's viper was unaware of the approach from behind of the second animal, until the fangs of Tick, the female, sunk deep into the back of its head, dragged it flaying and lashing from the fray, allowing Rick to move in for the death blow.

They left the mangled viper's corpse draped across the church steps, moved on with haste for this was to be a rare night of carnage, the like of which they might never see again. They heard gunfire, made a

detour of the Rising Sun even though the night air was heavy with the stench of snake's blood.

And then they split up, each following a different spoor, pointed noses close to the ground where reptile bellies had flattened and soured the dry undergrowth.

Tick came upon the African mamba in a shrubbery, surprised it and struck quickly, hurled the dead greenish body from the branches where it had been curled, heard it slump on to a bed of dead dry leaves, roll once and lie still, not even twitching.

Rick had the longest battle of all for the cobra was a large male, eighteen feet in length, its dark colour a perfect camouflage in the gloom of a silent garden. Only inbred mongoose instincts and reflexes saved him from the lunging bite which is capable of killing an elephant in a few hours. The head, as large as a man's clenched fist, missed by a fraction and for the next few minutes Rick was on the defensive, dancing another ballet of life and death, chattering ferociously, trying to lure his adversary into a headlong rush.

Possibly its lifetime of confinement in a zoo cage had robbed the cobra of that extra bit of cunning which would have swayed the outcome of this battle in its favour. Had it been jungle bred and born it may well have hung back for an extra minute or two, awaited an opening, an Achilles' heel in the bounding, cavorting creature that confronted it. But all it knew was blind hatred and it struck viciously; missed a second time, enabling the mongoose to secure a hold on the underside of its hooded head.

Rick played his foe as a fisherman might play a fifteen-pound salmon, holding on, letting the other tire from its efforts and its wound, keeping his teeth firmly sunk in the reptilian flesh until at length the cobra began to tire.

It took the mongoose twenty minutes to overcome its enemy and when it was all over Rick lay exhausted, panting, chattering softly. He waited, and in due course Tick joined him and the deadly partnership was complete again.

They sniffed at each other, their way of checking to see if either had suffered wounds, asking questions and receiving answers in the manner for which Nature had equipped them.

Then they were lusting again for the blood of their hated foe, disappearing into the darkness.

For this night of snake death was not over yet.

Chapter 19

IT WAS starting to get light. Keith Doyle stretched his aching and cramped limbs, was aware of the knotted fear in the pit of his stomach, his thirst-swollen tongue threatening to make him throw up or

choke him. He was cold, shivering, wondered if he had caught a chill but that was a minor inconvenience when compared with the ordeal that was to come, the gauntlet of death which he had to run. This was it, the moment that could not be put off any longer.

He reached over into the back, picked up the sickle. Sharp as its blade was it felt puny, a mere token weapon against the multi-coloured length of death that was coiled up on the bonnet watching him with unblinking eyes. The bloody thing guessed, knew what he was about to do. You could read the sadistic glint in its baleful glare. Come on, Man, you've kept me waiting long enough. You'll soon be dead, your girl too. Hurry up, I'm bored.

'Keith ... no! I don't want you to go.' Kirsten clutched at his arm, her fingernails gouging his sunburned skin. 'Please, let's give it another try, see if someone comes.'

'We can't, we won't make it through another day.'

She closed her eyes, knew that he had to go, that it was their only chance of survival. And that she had to stay here and wait.

'I'll go through the back doors,' he muttered.

The snake moved, unfurled a foot or so of its coiled length. Damn it, the bloody thing had heard him, understood.

Not only that, it read your thoughts, knew what you were thinking; that he was going to crash the back doors open, jump as far out as he could. Then run like hell. If his legs would move. Ever since they had been trapped in here he had been shifting his position every so often trying to stop his limbs from going to sleep. He wondered if he could even stand. 'Wish me luck.' He kissed her, felt how she trembled. She did not say anything, there wasn't anything to say. Just close your eyes and pray. I daren't watch, Keith.

'See you then.' He eased himself over into the back with some difficulty, his body cumbersome, stiff and weakened. Don't look back or else you won't go.

Sickle in one hand, he felt for the door lever with the other. The catch was stiff, always had been. In fact, he had never operated it from the inside, never had to, He had to force it, a screeching and grinding of metal, a noise that seemed to vibrate on his teeth the way it always had in his boyhood days when some of the kids ran their fingernails along the paintwork of the school bus.

But he did glance backwards, he could not stop himself. He saw Kirsten's pallid, frightened features, switched his gaze to the bonnet. The make was gone, had read his movements and slid away to lie in wait for him!

He crouched, tensed himself for the leap, knew what an ungainly turkey poult perching for the first time felt like, sensed that his leg muscles were flaccid, useless; a parachutist on his first leap, holding on, afraid to let go. Now!

If he had not leapt out then he would never have done, a frog-like hop, a long-jumper striving for length. He hit the ground, staggered, went over, twisting an ankle as he fell awkwardly. A combination of pain and fear swamped him, jerking his head round, trying to see . . .

The snake was underneath the van, seemingly a coloured extension of the exhaust system, stretched full length and poised, about to propel itself at him. And, oh Christ, the van doors were still wide open,

Kirsten staring out after him in shocked horror.

'Close the bloody doors!' he yelled. Because that's your only chance. I'm done for!

The coral snake edged forward a foot or so, mocking him with that same cold merciless reptilian expression. So sure of itself, not hurrying, knowing his terror and wanting to make him suffer the agonies of hell. Damn it, Kirsten had not moved, was just kneeling on the front seats staring at him, wondering why he did not scramble up and run.

Keith saw the strike coming, the raised head, the snake's body tensed for the rush which would take it to him. He closed his eyes, knew there wasn't a jack-damned thing he could do about it. They had suffered the agonies of heat, thirst, hunger, terror, he had planned this do-or-die rush for freedom with such precision and now he was going to die. Kirsten, too. They might as well have given up and died at the very outset. He had failed.

He heard it coming, felt the vibrations of its thrashing body, its hissing. He braced himself in readiness, but nothing touched him, no revolting rough, cold, scaly skin, no agonising stabbing of poisonous fangs. Nothing but the sound of its flayings and hissing, interspersed with a rapid chattering noise which he thought might be distant machine-gun fire.

He forced his eyes open, did not for one moment believe what he saw. His mind had snapped, it was delirium brought on by snake venom. Whatever it was, it could not be happening.

The coral snake was writhing, its lashing tail striking the van doors, pinioned to the ground by two brownish-grey creatures which had a secure hold on it, claspng it by its evil head, biting deep into the tough skin, bleeding it to death like a helpless calf in a slaughterhouse.

The snake was growing weaker, its efforts now only a token resistance, whipping faintly with its tail, its hate and fury spent.

Then going limp.

And dead.

The mongooses backed off, stood there watching Keith inquisitively. Wary. Was it permissible to kill snakes? They did not know, they were not taking any chances. Next second they were gone, diving back into the undergrowth; only the swaying stalks of seeding wild willow herb and bracken fronds marked their exit.

Kirsten was out of the van, struggling to help Keith to his feet, crying, holding on to him. The relief, the sudden turning of the tables was too much for her. 'What were . . . they?' she asked.

'Well, they looked like mongooses to me.' He winced, tried to put his weight on his injured foot and decided against it. 'Can't be sure but I'm not going to argue. The snake's dead but there might be more of 'em around. Come on, let me lean against you and between us we ought to be able to make it down to the road.'

Staggering, holding on to each other, they set off down the track to freedom, their course erratic as they skirted dense clumps of vegetation that could have concealed a lurking snake. Their flesh crawled, their pulses raced and the effort was almost too much for them. But not quite. They made it out on to the road.

Chapter 20

THE PACKED church created an atmosphere that for John Price transcended sadness. More than just the death of a fond relative; a tragedy, a horror, a waste of life. Somebody who was about to embark upon a journey prematurely, had not had a chance to say her farewells.

Every pew was crammed full and outside crowds thronged the driveway from the church doors to the lych-gate, spilled out on to the road and lined the pavement. TV cameras trained on the cortege, the climax to a drama which the whole nation would watch tonight, had been following in instalments for days.

John fought back the tears which welled up behind his eyes, knew that they had the cameras on him in close-up during the slow walk back from the graveside. An interval of fifteen minutes just for respectability (we don't want to be seen to be rushing it), and then it was the turn of Barbara Brown and her child. Then Eversham. Later in the week it would be Joan Doyle (God and the undertakers alone knew what would be in her coffin, a bloodstained bedsheet probably, there wasn't anything else); that corporal's body had been taken south to be buried in his home town. And they still had not found PC Aylott.

The media were highlighting John's role in the whole bloody business. At least Rick and Tick were safe back in that old suitcase now hidden inside the coal-bunker. Tomorrow, or the day after, he would smuggle them back up to Scotland; he must get the petrol pump on the Mini fixed first, though. You had to think of mundane things like that to convince yourself that it was all real.

The mongooses had been seen and recognised, but nobody knew any more than that. Maybe Burlington suspected; John thought he might be questioned later. But what the hell, the snakes were dead, accounted for, they had found the corpses. The mongooses would just disappear, not to be seen again. If people wanted to hunt them, let 'em. They had never found that puma down south and that was all of twenty-five years ago, nor the cat beast that had ravaged flocks of Welsh sheep more recently.

John made it back to the main street, all eyes still on him. That's John Price, he knows all about snakes, got a degree in 'em. Ugh! A news reporter stepped out of the crowd, barred his way, a microphone thrust at him like some threatening weapon.

'Where do you think these mongooses came from, Mr Price?'

'I haven't a clue.'

Liar! You read it in the other's eyes, the implication in his tone of voice.

'Do you think all the snakes are dead?'

The million dollar question. Have we got 'em all?

'Mongoose are pretty thorough hunters.' He chose his words carefully. 'They just live for hunting snakes. If there are any left they'll surely get 'em.' He pushed his way past the reporter, increased his step until he reached the bungalow.

Are all the snakes dead?

Maybe, maybe not. That initial inventory of the escaped reptiles was compiled by a process of elimination from the intended recipients of the reptiles not from that cowboy zoo. Nobody really knew.

Only time would tell.